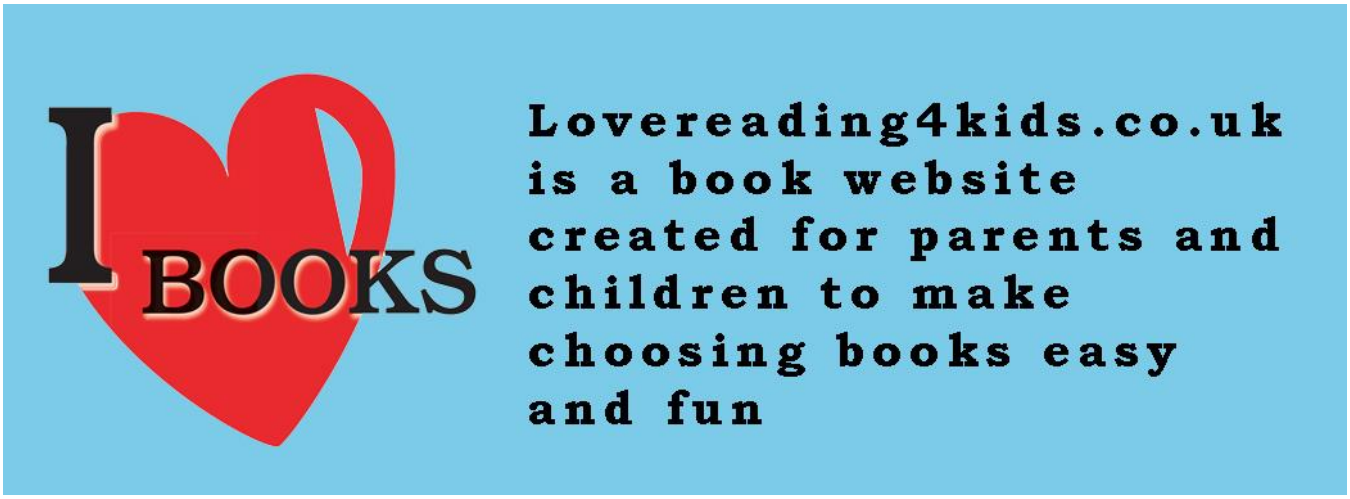


Opening extract from

Encounters

Written by

Jason Wallace

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Encounters

Jason Wallace

Inspired by true events

Andersen Press

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‘The aliens came just after the children had gone to the playground for their breaktime. There was much screaming and noise, and at first I did not know why it was so, but later some of the children said they did see something land in the trees. It lands in the trees, and there was this person there, and after it leaves there were some burn marks in the ground.’

ELIJAH ‘BABA’ NYAMUNDA
Head Groundsman, Leda School

‘I’m fully aware of how children love a tall tale, but I’ve seen the pictures those kids drew. I’ve heard them talk about it, and looked into their eyes. And I’ll tell you this for nothing: after over twenty years of living in this school I know kids, and they saw something. They did. I don’t know what it was, but they saw something that day and it really got under their skins.’

PATRICIA HYDE
Member of Staff, Leda School

FROM THE AUTHOR

Where I grew up you could really see the stars. Layer upon layer, so thick and so rich you felt you could just reach out and make ripples in the night. Like the night sky was this living veil that emerged at the end of each day, and if you didn't hold on tightly enough you just might fall in.

But then, it is alive. Right? The universe. A vast ocean of hundreds of billions of galaxies, each galaxy a seemingly frozen whirlpool of hundreds of billions of burning dots that we call stars. Suns. Being born. Being unborn. New suns from old. New light. And warmth. Whole solar systems, perhaps much like our own and playing home to countless planets and moons that have been spinning and orbiting for a time longer than our brains can grasp.

The universe is the stuff of life. A far-flung expanse of mystery and wonder, a mind-blowing wilderness of both creation and destruction on an unimaginable scale that they say exploded out from a single point no bigger than an atom, so abundant with energy that it's still accelerating some fourteen billion years later. Today, we are seeing and discovering more and more about the universe, which is pretty impressive considering how insignificant our place in it is, and yet the more we know the less we understand.

What we don't know, and what we'll never know, is what the *full* story of Out There is, and why Out There exists. Or, for that matter, if there is a *why*, so if you're expecting to find it in this book I'm afraid you'll be disappointed.

So what is this book about?

That, I can tell you.

It's a story about life, inspired by actual reports of an extraterrestrial encounter at Ariel School in Ruwa, Zimbabwe, in September 1994 – when sixty-two kids aged between five and twelve ran screaming back to their teachers because of a craft they claimed to have witnessed landing beyond the playground, from which alien creatures emerged.

The reports of that encounter are well-documented through interviews and video footage, taken by investigators and experts around and after that time, and you will have no problem finding these and a great deal more about this intriguing event online. However, although I have studied this material during my research, and even looked to contact some of those former pupils of Ariel School, you will not find any real person in these pages – not the children, not their teachers, and not the investigators who visited the school. Nor the school itself, for that matter. None of the people in my story is real. If I have somehow ended up using someone's real name – someone who was at the school, or associated with it, or even near it at the time – I can promise you this is purely coincidental. While those reports of an alien encounter did trigger this writer's imagination and form the bare bones of this story, my book is complete fiction from beginning to end.

Or rather, it is six separate fictions. A tale of six lonely young people, aged between eight and eighteen, who discover they are in fact far more connected than they could ever have thought possible.

Six *extraordinary* lives, because if you believe we are alone in the universe then you must believe all lives are extraordinary. Because when you think about it – when you really think about it – we must live on an extraordinarily lucky little planet.

If, on the other hand, you believe the universe is shared, then this book will mean a whole lot more.

Do I believe intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe? Emphatically, yes. I find it impossible to consider that it doesn't, because the universe *is* life.

Did those children actually see an extraterrestrial craft descend into the trees on that September day in 1994, and two strange figures emerge from it? I don't know. I would like to think they did. I do, however, believe they saw something, because why would they lie – about the same thing – so convincingly, and for so long?

And if that's the case – for me, at least – the question that remains isn't simply, *What did they see?* but also, *Why did they see it?*

Jason Wallace

'When did you first realise something was there?'

'When the wind started to blow. It was blowing really hard.'

'And what did you see?'

'I saw an object hovering over the trees. It was silver and had lights all around it.'

'Tell me what happened next.'

'The object started to come down, closer and closer to the ground.'

'Were you scared?'

'Yes.'

'Of what, exactly? Scared that it was going to land?'

'No.'

'Because of the noise it was making?'

'Because there wasn't any noise. That's why I was scared.'

GARY

When those sad-sacks at my school started screaming and yelling about bright lights and creatures in the trees, I was in the tuck shop. So I didn't see any of that stuff. Not that I would have seen any aliens or their dumb spaceship even if I *had* been out there because those kids made it up, so as far as I'm concerned these ET-hunters are wasting their time. And to think they came all the way from America for this . . . ? Nuts.

On Mondays we get tomato sandwiches at breaktime, and who the hell likes tomato sandwiches? So I'm in the tuck shop again, trying to get something decent to eat, when everyone starts rushing out to catch a glimpse of the Yanks. Personally, I don't see what's so special about a bunch of cowboys in our school, but little Chloe Pryor keeps staring and making me feel guilty, so I give her a shove and head out too.

And I'm right. Big bloody deal. I was kind of expecting to see the *Ghostbusters* crew marching across the grass with a load of cool hi-tech stuff, but instead it's this tall skinny guy, his OK-wife (if she weren't so bloody old), and this pale chick who I guess must be their daughter, who's completely gross with this bright ginger hair and a pair of bug-eye sunglasses that cover half her face. There is one guy with a camera on his shoulder, but only one, and he's got this floppy eighties fringe

and looks like a complete chop to me. Plus he must be cooking in those trousers. Why do Americans always come to Africa dressed like they're on safari?

'Check these jokers out.' I slap the person nearest to me on the arm, and it happens to be Tendai. Just my luck. 'Your UFO crazies are here. Happy now?'

Tendai gives me this face like I've offered him shit on a plate. Or one of the tomato sandwiches from the break tray. Same diff.

Old Man Hyde is leading the visitors across the grass with his stiffest I'm-the-headmaster rod up his arse. He's pissing me off so much without even trying that I almost don't notice who's tailing at the back like a cabbage-fart. Only Karl Hyde. Karl bloody Hyde. Equally as pathetic as his old man. He was head boy here when I was too small to reach my dick over the toilet seat and now he's head boy down at Edelvalk, not to mention captain of wet-wipe cricket firsts. *Edelvalk*. That school's right down at the arse-end of the bloody country, so Christ on a sinking ship knows what he's doing here in the middle of term.

My name is Charmaine.
I come from Spain.
I eat sugar cane.
What sugar? Brown sugar.
What brown? Sand brown.
What sand? Sea sand.
What sea? Blue sea.
What blue? Sky blue.
What sky? Up high.

Girls' games are so gay, so *thank you, God* when they stop to look up. The little kids quit screeching too. Everything's gone quiet.

'Look like a bunch of poofs to me,' I tune. 'What do they know about anything? They're not even from here.'

The Yank chick with the Fanta-head looks up like she heard. I don't care. She gives me the finger. I mimic crying then catch it like a kiss, arsehole my mouth, and blow it straight back.

I fake a sigh.

'Our love is like a red, red rose, and I am a little thorny.'

I hope she can read lips. That's Jim Carrey, that is, from *The Mask*. My brother Brad recks *The Mask* is one of the best movies ever, and that Cameron Diaz is a hottie, man. Like, seriously worth it. That Yank chick doesn't even come close. She might not be so bad if she didn't have the bushfire on her head, but she does, so she is. Cameron Diaz, though . . . Brad recks she's a one-out-of-ten chick, man, as in, *I'd give her one*. He says it all the time. He's such a gas, I wish I could be as funny as him.

Out on the grass, Old Man Hyde leads the Yanks all the way down to the line of rocks. Their feet kick up clouds as they go because there's no rain in winter and the playground's turned to dust.

That's the place, he points. *In those trees. There. That's where they saw it*.

We can't hear him but I can tell it's what he's saying, even though he doesn't believe it any more than I do, because Old Man Hyde isn't stupid. I could have explained what *really* happened that day on a torn-out page of my exercise book, spat on a fifty-cent stamp and saved the Yanks a trip. That is, explained what *they say* happened, because nothing did really. It didn't. I swear.

The tall Yank gazes out, the Yank woman makes notes on a pad, the Yank girl glares. I bet she fancies me. The Yank with the boy-band hairdo just films. Check the way he rolls his jacket sleeves up – so gay. Tendai starts showing off and tuning to me about the snazzy camera that guy's got like we're still friends, and how he's got one just like it, and about this tech guy his dad knows from overseas who works for Sony who's inventing a video camera that's so small it can fit into a mobile phone.

'If a camera's that small then where's the tape going to go, *stupid*?' I tell him.

Brad says you can always tell when a black's spouting shit because his lips move. He'd also call Tendai something else, but you're not allowed to say names like *kaffir* out loud. Mum used to really shout at him for saying racist stuff like that, but she's not around any more, so now, as I watch Tendai's big African face flaps flop up and down, Brad's voice is all I can hear. Besides, Tendai's one of the idiots who recks he saw the spaceship so I guess he must be a liar about everything else. I wish he'd get the hint that I'm not his friend any more.

Brad's taught me loads of ways to wind a black up without getting in trouble. I throw a Korn Kurl at Tendai's hair springs and laugh at the way it bounces off, but he completely ignores me, and now little Chloe Pryor's giving me ice stares across the grass. I tell myself it's just because she's pissed off with me for pushing her in the tuck shop but maybe it's not. Maybe I should have helped her – back then, on that day. But how could I have helped her? I couldn't.

I turn so I can't see her looking. I wish she'd disappear and stop making me feel so guilty.

'I think your girlfriend wants to beat me up.' I slap Tendai again, though harder this time.

Tendai looks angry. Good.

'Stop calling her my girlfriend,' he says. 'She's not my girlfriend. OK?'

But then he turns and huffs off, and teasing's no fun when the other person won't let you do it. Jeez, I can't wait until the end of term when I can finally leave this place for ever. So long Leda School. *Adios* Tendai – luckily for me he's going to St John's next year, while I'm heading to Churchill. Goodbye the lot of you, it hasn't been a pleasure. Give me senior school over this dump any day because this is a dead-hole full of dead-beats. I hate it. Churchill's right in the middle of town, it'll be a gas being there. It will.

Old Man Hyde and the Yanks and Karl are heading back now. Woman Yank and Camera Poof peel off to collect Chloe and the rest of the Year Threes from in front of their classroom and let them lead them down the slope to the shady tree between us and the rocks. Old Man Hyde is heading back to his study on his own, and Aren't-I-So-Bloody-Perfect Karl escorts Tall Yank to the empty classroom opposite so I guess that's where the interviews are going to take place.

'If you need anything, Mr Jefferson, if I can help in any way at all, please let me know,' he tunes, and kind of bows his head like a Nip.

If you need anything else, Mr Jefferson. Can I put my tongue down your trousers, Mr Jefferson.

Such a sloosh. They sure as hell don't teach that at Edelvalk, because Edelvalk's a good school, they beat you up just for putting a parting in your hair. Brad says. Maybe there's a cricket match in town or something because, seriously, how does Karl get to be here? Edelvalk's eight hours away and teachers there are Nazis, so how?