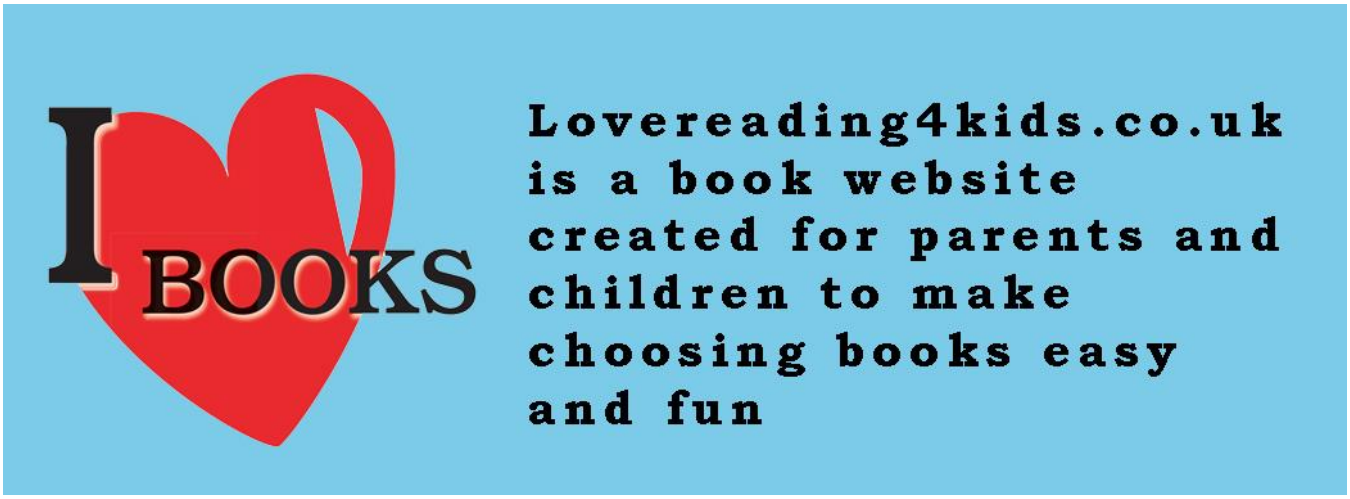


Opening extract from

Steve & Frandan Take on the World

Written by

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Published by

Birlinn Ltd an imprint of Birlinn General

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Lovereading4kids.co.uk

First published in 2017 by
BC Books, an imprint of
Birlinn Limited
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.bcbooksforkids.co.uk

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ISBN 978 1 78027 439 3
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Designed by James Hutcheson
Typeset by Initial Typesetting Services, Edinburgh
Printed and bound by Grafica Veneta

1

Steve's in a hurry – a real hurry. But halfway down the street he's stopped by his next-door neighbour. Mr Connor's sounding off as usual. Talk-talk-talk – same old, same old, and spit-spraying like a monsoon. If Steve was in charge there'd be no Connors allowed on his street, on the planet even.

He stares up at the spittle-wet lips, the mile-long nose hairs waving in the breeze, the stuck-on eyes. What kind of a kid grows up into a *Connor*?

Steve tunes in for a moment –

'. . . can't fool me, nobody in this town can, so let me tell you . . .'

– and tunes out again.

How long's this going to go on for? He needs to move-move-move. Fran's been texting him every five minutes to get his ass in gear.

But wait up – the monsoon's eased, and Connor's wandering off to find someone else to hassle.



Steve texts back to Fran – *See u in 5* ☺ – then blasts off down the street.

Taking every backstreet and shortcut in town, clambering over walls, dodging between parked cars behind the supermarket and sprinting through the graveyard at full speed, Steve keeps his head down. For the last fortnight he and Dan have had to stay off the main streets. School's been a nightmare, and out of school even worse. The sooner they get away from here the better.

The river looks calm, not a ripple in sight. No one about, thank goodness. Here's hoping it stays that way. A few ducks are paddling around in circles and someone's walking their dog on the opposite bank, and that's it. Couldn't be better.

He pulls off his trainers and Simpsons socks and stacks them under the bush next to where they've hidden their stores. For the last week they've been sneaking tins of meat, baked beans and spaghetti hoops from their homes, as well as biscuits, chocolate and large bottles of cola. A little at a time so no one will notice, said Fran. They'll need all they can get because there'll be no

McDonald's where they're going, no Burger Kings – with any luck, no civilisation at all.

The reeds have grown so tall at this bend that a kind of secret harbour's been formed. It's completely hidden, which is exactly what they needed.

Steve shouts across, 'How's it going?'

'Be a lot faster now you're here,' Fran's voice comes back to him from behind the reeds.

'Too right,' adds Dan.

Steve steps down into the river, sinking into the muddy ooze at the bottom. It's like brown smoke curling up between his toes and clouding over his feet. *Splash! Splash! Splash!* He pushes through the screen of reeds to where the FranDan twins are securing an oil drum into position. The two of them are standing knee-deep in the water; Fran's rolled up her jeans, Dan hasn't bothered or else forgot. The drum's bright red, but it can't be helped.

The raft's looking good. It'll get them out of here, which it has to ASAP – another week like the last two and they're likely to crack up. Dan will for sure. Helping build the raft and stealing food for their hoard is all that's

kept him going. That, and knowing that they'll soon be far away from Thor and his Vikings.

It's taken them a week to construct the raft. Floorboards from their soon-to-be-demolished old primary school, empty oil drums from the forecourt of the FranDan garage (for a school project, they told their dad), and a clothes line somebody donated without even needing asked. Mrs Connor, in fact. Mr Connor might be a seriously weird piece of broken-down clockwork, but his wife's cool – she lives on Planet Happy and you can often hear her rhyming and singsong-ing herself up and down the street.

Steve clambers on board in time to help with securing the oil drum. Fran gives her twin brother, Dan, one end of a length of rope to loop round and round the nail he's hammered into the end of a plank. Dan then passes the rope back to Steve. Even though the deck still dips into the water now and again, depending on how they shift about on it, the three of them are agreed that every oil drum lashed into position makes the raft feel that bit more stable. It's going to be top of the range. A real eco-craft – no engine, powered by paddles and

river current only. Totally silent, like *they*'ll be. Invisible, a stealth raft travelling by night, under everyone's radar. When all the drums are fixed in place, the wooden planks won't be getting wet any more, but riding high above the waterline – and with the three of them on top!

'Almost done,' says Fran. She's the leader of the twins – popped out first and never lets Dan forget it. She takes the rope end from Steve and pulls it tight before hitching it firmly to the underside of the plank. There's enough room for their stores and to let them all lie down at the same time, though they'll be taking turns to keep watch as they drift through the darkness. As well as a clothes pole (thanks again to Mrs Connor) for shoving themselves away from the bank, they're bringing a tent for when it rains. This time tomorrow they'll be sailing downstream on their very own state-of-the-art, all-weather raft.

Then Fran says the magic words. 'We managed to get another couple of drums this afternoon. And so . . . we can leave *tonight*!'

Big grins, whoops all round, cries of 'YES!' and high fives.

Work on the extra drums takes them another hour. The raft's looking awesome! The deck's now a good three inches above the waterline and they'd have to be really stupid to capsize it. Which they're not, so they won't. They'll cast off at midnight, and Steve's to bring his dad's wind-up torch. More grins and more high fives. YES! YES! YES!

Once Steve get's home, he'll have his dinner – Tuesday means pizza – and hang around to watch some crap on TV with his mum and dad so everything looks normal. At the usual time he'll say goodnight and go up to his room. Making no noise, he'll get himself packed. Then, just before midnight, he'll tiptoe down the stairs and slip out the back door. He can hardly wait.

'See you soon!' he calls back to FranDan and shoots off up the road. A few minutes later, he's about to take the shortcut through the cemetery when he hears someone shouting behind him.

'There's one of them!'

He starts to run. If he goes fast enough he'll reach home in ten. Just as well Nessie's not with him or she'd

be hanging back hoping for biscuits or chocolate. They're bullies, but if they ever try to touch Nessie he'll stomp them.

'Picking out your gravestone, are you?' shouts one of them.

'Maybe you and Dan can share a grave?' yells another.

'Cheaper all round!' a third joins in.

He recognises their voices. Half-Pint, a squashed elf who stopped growing before ever getting started, with Big Robo and Pizza McBride.

Maybe he should let them catch up, then thump the three of them? Half-Pint'll be the same as swatting a fly and Big Robo's got so few brain cells he'll be on the ground before he notices he's been knocked down. And as for Pizza McBride, he's all dough with nothing on top.

Steve's about to turn round and deal with them when he hears more voices. A lot more. Half a dozen at least.

So no turning back to thump anyone. He picks up speed and races for home.

Steve is Mr Perfect all evening. They eat pizza and salad, plates on their laps, his mum and dad on the couch and



him on the floor with his back against the armchair and his legs stretched full out. Nessie keeps herself beside him – with a dog like her you never eat alone. It's a double-cheese meat feast, two for one because today's Tuesday. On his planet every day would be a Tuesday. Tomorrow night they might be eating fish out the river, or maybe rabbits – and no salad. Definitely no salad.

He's put his phone on silent, so if FranDan call his parents won't start asking questions – parents need to be protected.

'Don't bolt your food, Steve, there's plenty more,' says his mother, not taking her eyes from the television. A dozen muscled policemen, the writing on their jerseys and helmets in a foreign language Steve doesn't recognise, are shouting at hundreds and hundreds of people, some of them carrying kids and rucksacks, some of them plastic supermarket bags, and some carrying nothing at all, like they're out for a walk. The people are shouting back. A woman lifts up her wee toddler into a cop's face. They're dressed the same as anyone from round here; and they look the same as anyone from round here. The cop's eyes go like Connor's and you can see he'd like to stomp her

with all he's got, but knows he's on camera. The world's looking at him; Steve and his parents are looking at him. The boy's started to cry, he's so far from his home and so lost that he—

Steve's mobile vibrates. A text. He sneaks a quick peek. Fran: *More food. Tin opener?*

'That's just along from where we were on holiday a couple of years back – had a great beach and everything,' says his dad before upending his can for a couple of last chugs. 'What's the world coming to?'

'It's your world,' Steve says, before he can stop himself. His mobile vibrates again.

'Don't start all that again.' There's the hiss of another can being opened. His dad does it one-handed, which is cool if you like that kind of thing. Dan and Steve tried some beer once – tasted like battery fluid, fizzed up. Steve takes a sip of coke and reaches for another slice. Still three left. He's going to miss Tuesdays. Soon his dad'll be snoring through Celebrity Big Brother like a whale on steroids. But by then he'll be upstairs packing the last of his things.

One slice left now – his. Well, his and Nessie's. Then he's out of here.

Standing in the hall, Steve checks his texts to make sure no one's bottled out at the last minute. 'No one' meaning Dan.

It's from Fran. *Remember – no mobile. No mobile = no Thor. See u soon :-)*

No Thor sounds good. A cold sweat runs down Steve's back. Ice-sweat, but the rest of him's burning. Burning angry.

Not so sure about leaving his mobile at home though. He can see why, of course, but . . .

He texts back: *OK. See u at 00.00.*

Nearly quarter to midnight. Spare socks and underwear, sweater and jeans, sleeping bag in his backpack and Steve's good to go. He reads through the letter he's leaving his parents. It's taken him ages, like writing something for school but much harder. Having written it again and again to get it right means it's really late now and he has to leave. Lucky there's plenty of phrases he hears them say all the time, and he's used them. It sounds good – the best he can do, anyway. He's not said how bad everything is. Just couldn't.

Dear Mum and Dad,

Everything's fine. I am fine. Really. Me and FranDan are taking time out for a few days. We need to. Some R&R. Feeling stressed and need some space. Too much pressure. I will be back. I promise. DON'T WORRY. Everything's fine. Really.

Love, Steve

Then he texts FranDan: *On my way.*

One part of him's already out of the front door, through the town and down the river, paddling the raft at full speed and making it skim over the water like a hoverboard. The other part's still standing there, like he's taking in his room for the very first time, the outline of his bed that he's slept in every night of his life, apart from holidays.

His room equals his life equals *him*.

Is that what he'll be closing the door on? Himself? And for good? He wants to go, and he doesn't want to go. Thor – that cyber-slimebag!

Phone's vibrating: Fran texting *Move it!* But she added a ☺.

OK.

How could he leave his mobile? Easy said, not so easy done. His mobile's like his room, it's *him*.

Next moment, it's like he's watching his hand all by itself, sliding his mobile into his pocket.

He pulls on his backpack, eases his bedroom door slowly-slowly shut and tiptoes past his mum and dad's room. Their snoring's started. His like a backwards fart and hers like a bird that's not quite making it into song.

He creeps downstairs, keeping clear of every step that's got even the slightest creak-squeak. Waiting at the bottom is Nessie. She raises her head and looks him right in the eye. *Where are you going? Because I'm coming too.*

No way, he shakes his head, then lifts up the flap of her ear and whispers the magic word – *biscuits!* She follows him into the kitchen. When she's giving her full attention to a handful of crackers, he places his letter on the table for them to find in the morning then grabs some more tins out the cupboard. Tin opener? In the big drawer maybe? A rattle of ladles, big spoons, carving

knife, bread knife, cheese grater, things and more things – everything but a tin opener and it's getting later and later. The other drawer? No tin opener there either. Tins and no opener? Fran'll have found one, bound to. She's Fran, isn't she? He slips out the back door.

Except that once he reaches the street, he sees Nessie has slipped out with him. She's looking up at him, eyes bright and tail wagging: *Now what?*

If he goes back and tries shoving her indoors again, she'll start barking. Nessie doesn't argue – she barks. Which means she always wins. And if he runs fast, trying to leave her behind, she'll run faster. So that's that. Nessie's coming along too.

2

After switching off her mobile and sticking it at the back of her T-shirt and jersey drawer, Fran leaves her room. She closes the door quietly then goes along to the kitchen where Dan's waiting for her, backpack on.

'We won't be able to lock up properly after we—'

She puts her fingers to her lips. 'Shh! Got to be quiet.'

Dan nods. 'Sorry.'

'Shh, I said!'

They pass through the small shop at the side of the house, feeling their way as best they can by the hazy light from a faraway streetlamp and making sure not to bump into the counter and the revolving magazine stand immediately inside the shop entrance. Finally they step outside. As they pull the door behind them they hear the Yale lock click shut. The after-hours garage is in darkness: the line of petrol pumps unlit, the street silent and deserted.

That's it. They've left home now. No going back.