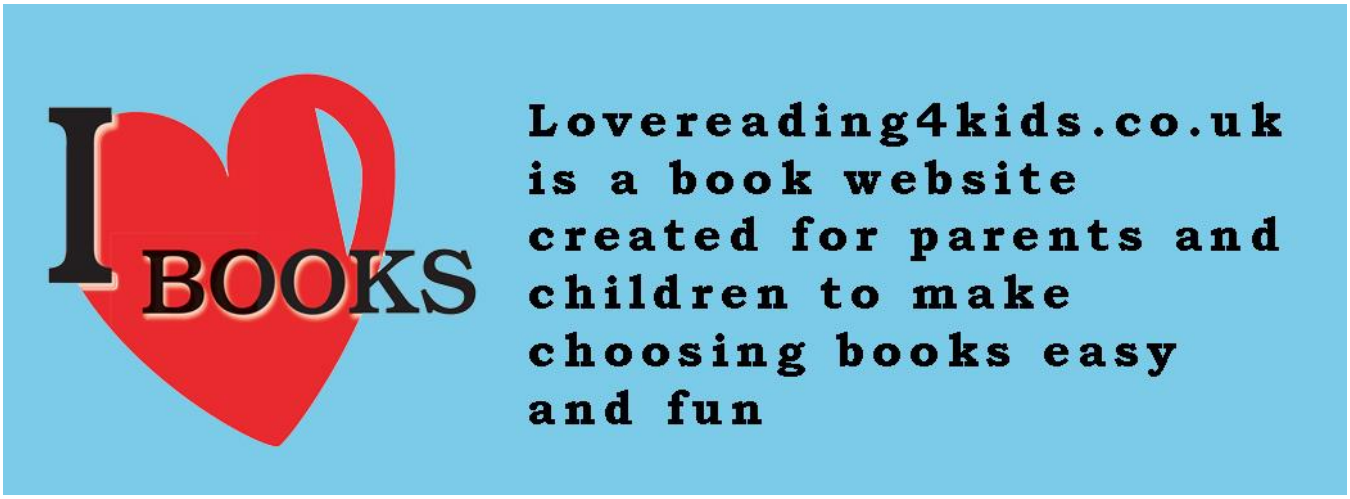


Opening extract from

Where the World Ends

Written by

Geraldine McCaughrean

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FOR AILSA AND ANDY,
WHO INTRODUCED ME TO KILDA.

GERALDINE McCAUGHREAN

WHERE THE WORLD ENDS



USBORNE



CONTENTS

St Kilda 1727: A map

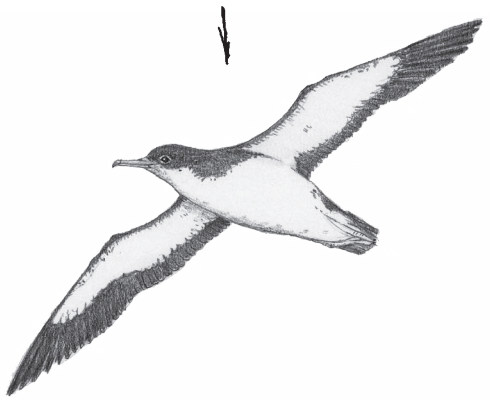
1 Crossing Over 9
2 King Gannet 18
3 Two Months Earlier on Hirta 28
4 A Lateness 35
5 Doubts and Fears 57
6 Confessions 77
7 Miracles 98
8 Outcast 110
9 The Keepers 127
10 A Welcome Return 146
11 King Saul's Trews 156
12 The Crossing 162
13 Words and Silence 178
14 Haunted 190
15 Light 205
16 Storm 222
17 Rite 240
18 Spring Fever 253
19 Monsters 266
20 Witch Hunt 279
21 The White Ship 290
22 Music and Love 309

Afterword

Birds of St Kilda

Glossary


ST KILDA, 1727
LEWIS
ST KILDA
SCOTLAND
HARRIS
SKYE
WARRIOR STAC
STAC LEE
BORERAY
ST KILDA ARCHIPELAGO
SOAY
GLEN BAY
CONACHAIR
GLEN MOR
MULLACH MOR
VILLAGE BAY
OISEVAL HILL
MULLACH SGAR
RUAIVAL
HIRTA
DUN
ATLANTIC OCEAN
N
W
E
S



CROSSING OVER

His mother gave him a new pair of socks, a puffin to eat on the voyage and a kiss on the cheek. "God will keep you safe, Quilliam, but he'll not keep you clean. You must do that for yourself." Happily, she did not try to hug him close.

He shook hands with his father, who remarked, quite amicably, "The floor needs digging out. You can give me a hand when you get back." Then Quill walked down to the boat. His parents followed on behind, of course, but the goodbyes were done and out of the way. Besides, he would

be back in a week or three. They were only going out to one of the stacs to harvest the summer plenty: bird-meat, eggs, feathers, oil…

It was a blade-sharp August day, the sea burned black by the sun's brightness. And no, there were no omens hinting at trouble ahead. Hirta people notice such things. The clouds did not split open and let fall drops of blood: someone would have remembered that. No sinister bird settled on anyone's roof. A gull flew over and dropped its mess on Mr Cane – but that was nothing out of the ordinary. (Who wouldn't, if they could?) But no signs, no dread omens.

All the men and women of Hirta helped carry the boat down the beach. Three men and nine boys climbed aboard it, and a few people on shore raised their hands: not to wave, exactly, but to check that the wind had not swerved unkindly off course. Quill did not know if the maiden from the mainland was there, among the crowd – didn't look to see. To be seen looking would have had every other boy on the boat mocking him. So he didn't look. Well, maybe out of the corner of his eye. Once or twice.

The fathers and uncles, wives and aunts shoved them off. And no, the pebbles did not claw at the boat's keel. No lugworms squirmed out of their holes to lug it back ashore.

Nothing out-of-the-ordinary shouted in their faces, *Don't go! Stay home!* It was a good launch.

Or maybe, if there were bad omens, Quilliam missed them, trying to glimpse Murdina one last time.

A journey out to the big stacs can take an age, even with a sail. Warrior Stac is so big that it looks close to, but there are four miles of open water to cross before you get there – water that folds itself into hills and valleys and doubles the distance. It was little Davie's first time out, and Quill could see the seasickness rising in him, as well as the fear. One day, if the years made him cruel, Quill might feel inclined to make fun of a first-timer and elbow him in the chest, as the bully Kenneth was doing now. But Quill remembered all too well his own first voyage – how he had expected every upward lurch of the bow to tumble the boat over, every trough between the waves to take them to the bottom. He remembered waves higher than a boat's gunwales; the spray soaking him to the skin. He remembered fretting about getting ashore without making a fool of himself, and then having to prove, day after day, that he could catch fowl as well as the rest; and having no

bed to sleep on, and never a mother about for comfort at night… Poor little Davie: not the biggest birdie in the nest. And bless him, look, thought Quill, he has on his socks already, in place of his boots. All ready to climb.

Davie looked too green – in every sense of the word – to stand up to Kenneth and his bullying. But when he puked, he chose to do it in Kenneth's lap – an inspired revenge, thought Quill appreciatively.

They passed Stac Lee and got their first unhindered view of the place where they would be living for the next few weeks. John began to drum on the boards with his feet and the rest joined in, until Mr Cane (a reliable killjoy) told them to stop their noise or they would "wake every dead sailor from his resting place". The clatter died away, and Quill saw the youngest boys cast little superstitious glances over the side, in case dead sailors were a serious possibility.

Warrior Stac grows bigger the closer you get. You would swear it was pushing its way upwards – a rock whale pitching its whole bulk into the sky, covered in barnacles, aiming to swallow the moon. Nearby Boreray has big patches of green grass on it, but Warrior Stac is so big and so dark that all the fowl of the air since Creation haven't

been able to stain it. It looms there, as black and fearful as one horn of the Devil himself. And it teems with birds.

To reach the landing place, the skipper had to round the base of the sea stac, passing right underneath the bulging shelf called "the Overhang" where a never-ending sleet of bird droppings pours down. The boat fell silent as each man and boy (except Kenneth) shut his mouth tight. "Look, look up there, Davie!" said Kenneth, pointing urgently upwards, but Davie had the wit not to fall for that one. No one looks up while he is under the Overhang. So only Kenneth caught a faceful.

For Quilliam, though, the Overhang was not the worst part of the voyage. That was the landing stage. The sea-swell slops up and over a bumpy jut of tilting rock. Getting ashore is a game you don't even try unless the wind is square-on from the north-east.

The old men back home talked about the stacs as if they were just larders, crammed with fowl put there by God expressly to feed the people on Hirta. But had *they* not been afraid? In their young days? When they went fowling on the Warrior? Had they never feared the jump from boat to cliff? The bow rises and falls so fast that the rock face seems to rush up and down in front of your eyes,

the spray flies fit to blind you, and there's maybe a piece of kelp you'll land on, slippery as soap, and you'll lose your footing and go down between the boat and the rocks. There again, maybe Quill, like Davie, was just a scaredy-mouse.

Mr Don, barefoot and with a rope tied round his body (to fetch him back aboard if he fell) and the boat's mooring rope wrapped around his wrist, balanced precariously on the bow, and steeled himself for the jump. The Stac rose sheer in front of them, looking like the impregnable wall of a castle keep. And yet Domhnall Don made stepping ashore look easy. The fowling party formed a line in the boat: Mr Farriss and Mr Cane at the front, then Murdo, then Quilliam, then Kenneth, and so on in order of height: Calum, Lachlan, John, Euan, Niall and Davie. They had not only themselves to get ashore, but sacks, nets, coils of rope and wicks, baskets, clubs and a battered saddle…

A small, cold hand took a grip on Quill's wrist.

"Get back in line," he hissed, but Davie clung on, saying nothing, just looking from Quill to the cliff, Quill to the heaving waves, shaking his head. Quill threw his half-eaten puffin over the side, looped a coil of rope across his body, and when it came his turn, took a hold on the little lad's arm

– so tight that Davie squealed – and jumped ashore with him. A great shining wave washed over the landing place a moment later, but Quill had hopped out of its reach by then. "Easy, see? …Only *pick your feet up quicker next time!*" he called, as Davie scrambled away up the rock face, new socks all wet and flapping like a duck's flippers. It made Quill laugh to see them.

Looking back down at the boat, he could see the row of boys still aboard, left hands clenched white round their bundles, right hands just clenched, jaws set, all hoping to get ashore with their pride intact and without breaking any bones. (So maybe there was a touch of the scaredy-mouse in them all.)

Lachlan came past Quill, clambering ashore, nimble despite an armful of sacks and a bulky rope round his body. He was shabby as a moulting sheep, and twice as cheerful as he ever looked back home on Hirta. You would have thought he preferred the Stac to home. Why, thought Quill, when one wrong step, and the place will kill you?

But having thought it, he felt a sudden superstitious need *not* to think ill of the Stac. It did not mean anyone any harm. It was not a living thing, only a slab of rock in a big, cold ocean at the edge of the world.



Once the fowling party reached Lower Bothy, they stood about, drying in the wind, like cormorants, and watched the boat tacking away into the wind: homeward. Calum waved: the boatman was his father. Lachlan uttered a yelp of joy. Davie bit his lip. No going back now, till Calum's father returned to get them.

"Back soon," Quill told Davie, remembering that first time the sea had separated him from his mother.

No one wanted to be first inside the cave. Who knew what might be dead in there or – worse still – living? This close to the water, crabs and dying birds found their way in. Calling it "Bothy" made the place sound homely, like a hut or a cottage, when it was only really a dark, dank chink in the great wall of rock. Just twelve people, a heap of fowling nets, a cooking pot, six long ropes, an old saddle, egg baskets, bundles and boots. Cosy. In a few days they would move higher up the Stac, but in the meantime it was somewhere to dump the gear, and a good base for plundering the Overhang of its numberless gannets. So what if this was a stinky wet cave? Most of the time they would be outside, plucking riches from the kingdom of birds.

And every time a lad came fowling on the stacs, he went home less of a boy and more of a man.

(If he went home at all, that is.)

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