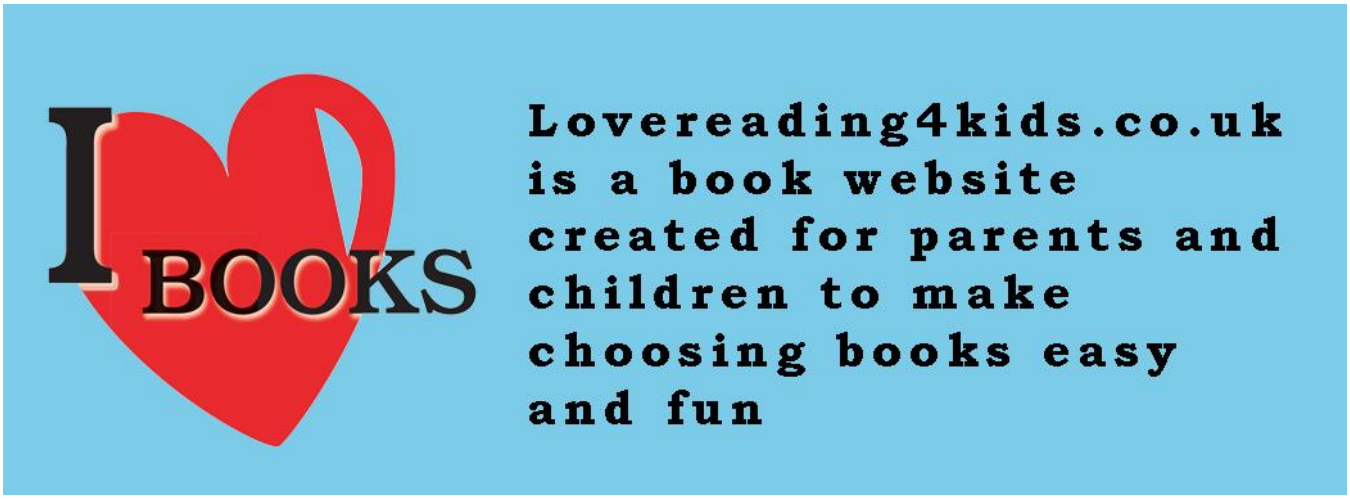


Opening extract from

Aubrey and the Terrible Ladybirds

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For Aubrey, Robin and Rebecca,
with love to the moon and stars
(and back again).

Aubrey and the Terrible Ladybirds

Starring:

Aubrey – Our hero. Works hard at school, sometimes. Adores but does not always listen to his parents. Believes in Living Life to the Full. He is able to talk to animals, and to understand what they say. Animals know him as AUBREY RAMBUNCTIOUS WOLF.





Jim – Aubrey's father, an English teacher at Aubrey's school. Loves his family, books and walking, and sometimes gets into trouble.



The Ladybirdz Family – Rosso, Rodina, Zenya, Bronko and Pikola, a travelling family. They love each other, and aphids.

Suzanne – Aubrey's mother, a nurse, a runner. Loves Aubrey and Jim and sometimes has to rescue them, which she is very good at.





Ariadne – An extremely large house spider. Loves flies and travel, hates baths.

Hirundo – A swallow, a traveller, a talker. Loves lady swallows, hates bat hawks and traffic.





Mr Ferraby – A retired gentleman, a good neighbour, a maker of mobiles, observer of animals and birds, friend of Aubrey and his family.

Mrs Ferraby – Retraining as a psychologist since she retired. Loves hard work and Mr Ferraby, whose ideas about animals and birds she thinks are batty.





The Unfriendly Ladybird, also known as the **Historian Ladybird** – A native of Rushing Wood and guardian of the Ferrabys' garden. Loves aphids, suspicious of strangers.



Aloysius Wolf von Wolf – An eccentric German wolf spider, efficient, loves time-travel.

The Terrible Cockerel – An Italian cockerel. Eats whatever he can, hates the British.





Bernardo – An Italian honey bee. Loves nectar, vines and roses, conversation and Ariadne.

Eric – A French worm. Loves soil, hates fertiliser, hates birds, friend of Ariadne, suspicious of the English.





Pascale – A schoolgirl, clever, passionate and friend to animals and insects. Hates pesticides and prejudice.



Hoppy – A grey squirrel, a famous character in Rushing Wood. Loves pranks, action and teasing; hates buzzards and goshawks.

Other parts are played by members of the Great Family of the Creatures of Rushing Wood.

CHAPTER 1

The Newcomers, and Trouble on Woodside Terrace

One bright morning of wind and surging waves, a white ship came into port. All night the waves had been big bucking thumpers which had made the ship sway and roll. It had been a rough crossing for the family who now stood on the top deck. Rodina, the mother, felt seasick. Pikola, the youngest child, had been seasick. The two older children were tired. Their father, Rosso, tried to cheer everyone up.

'Look!' said Rosso in his jolly way. 'Look – a new country! A new adventure!'

Rosso was a bulky, happy father. 'Isn't this exciting?' he cried. 'Hello, new world!'

He waved at a man on the dock who was hooking the ship's ropes over bollards. The man did not see him or hear him.

Rosso's family stared down at the new world. They saw metal cargo containers and they saw cranes. They saw cars, roads, a cold sky and a freezing grey sea.

'It's disgustick!' said Pikola. Disgustick was her favourite word at the moment. 'I don't want to go on holiday here.'

'Ah-ha!' said her father. 'It's time I told you about the next part of our Great Adventure. We're not just on holiday. We're coming here to live. We're going to start a new life in this new world and it will be wonderful!'

The second oldest child was called Bronko. Because his big sister Zenya often took charge of him, or tried to, and because his little sister Pikola was very good at getting what she wanted, Bronko would shout and roar when he wanted to make a point. 'OH NO! I HATE EVERYTHING!' he howled.

Pikola burst into tears. ‘I don’t want to live in a disgustick place!’ she wailed. ‘I want to go home!’

‘Calm down please, children,’ said their mother, Rodina. ‘This is a famous country. It is one of the most beautiful places in the world and one of the kindest places in the world. Everyone knows it is a safe and special land. We will meet lots of friends. We will make our home here – a happy home, I promise you.’

She gathered her children around her. ‘You’ve done so well,’ she told them. ‘Dad is proud of you and I am proud of you. So keep your spirits up for the next bit – it’s not far now, and then we can all relax, OK?’

The children saw that their parents had made up their minds. Zenya quite liked the thought of new places and new friends.

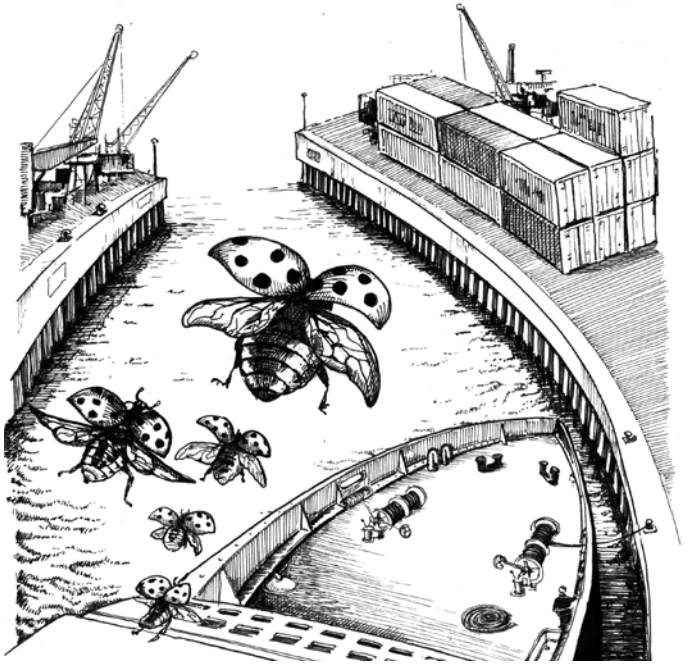
‘You guys are unbelievable,’ she said. ‘At least it can’t be worse than this.’

‘It isn’t worse – it’s magical!’ said Rosso. ‘Are we ready, everybody? Ready, Rodina my love?’

‘Yes we are!’ said Rodina. ‘We’re always ready, aren’t we, kids?’

‘Come on then!’ hollered Rosso. ‘Forward, to the New World!’

Rosso opened his wing covers, took off and flew over the ship’s rail. Rodina and the three children took off too. The family flew in a tight formation. They headed west, on a course for Woodside Terrace.



At Number 6 Woodside Terrace, up in his attic room, Aubrey was celebrating the start of the Easter holidays. Having built a battleship out of Lego he was now using his catapult to fire Lego bricks at it. Every time he hit it, bits of Lego blasted around the room and Aubrey cheered.

Perhaps he was adding a bit more force to his shots than necessary, and cheering a bit more loudly than he needed to – and there was a reason for this. He was trying to take his mind off the Start of the Holidays Argument which his parents, Jim and Suzanne, had been having downstairs.

Jim and Suzanne seemed to be having a lot of arguments at the moment. Sometimes they were little, about Suzanne not doing the washing up when Jim thought it was her turn, and sometimes they were larger arguments, like Suzanne saying the house was too small and they ought to move somewhere bigger, and Jim saying she was wrong. Aubrey knew they loved each other

really, and he knew arguments were part of life, but he hated the dark look that came over Jim's face, and the tight look that came over Suzanne's sometimes.

The Start of the Holidays Argument was about the garden – Suzanne wanted Jim to clear it up, and Jim said he had his marking to do and no time for the garden. He said Suzanne should clear it up. Suzanne said she had done the shopping and the laundry and the clearing up inside and why didn't Jim do something for a change?

The argument had gone quiet now, but Aubrey was still making himself feel better by firing bricks at the battleship.

Downstairs, Jim was reading the newspaper. He stopped and read closely.

'The little monsters!' he cried. 'We'll have to look out for them!'

Suzanne had just put the fish pie in the oven.

'What monsters?' she asked.

'Killer Ladybirds!' Jim cried. 'It says we have to patrol the garden and if we see any, to get rid of them.'

Suzanne made a face. She was fond of animals, plants, insects and all living things except spiders. Whenever Jim got excited like this and talked about getting rid of the jackdaws which roosted on the chimney, or the mice who lived under the stairs, or the swallows nesting in the eaves, or the starlings which sat about on the roof all day whistling at the runners as they went up the lane, Suzanne argued with him.

'Why can't you just live and let live? You know Aubrey loves animals, and I do. It really annoys me when men go on about getting rid of things and shooting things.'

'You don't like spiders,' Jim returned. 'I don't like killer ladybirds. What's the difference?'

'No, I don't like spiders, but I don't go around shooting them or getting rid of them,' Suzanne said. 'Nurses believe in

saving lives, not taking them away.'

'No one's talking about shooting Killer Ladybirds,' said Jim. 'But the newspaper says we have to get rid of them.'

'Stuff the newspaper,' said Suzanne.

'Stuff the Ladybirds! The Official Advice is to get rid of them,' said Jim.

'Stuff the Official Advice,' said Suzanne.

In the house next door, Number 5 Woodside Terrace, Mr and Mrs Ferraby had finished their supper.

'They can't be that bad, dear,' said Mrs Ferraby. 'They're only little insects! Newspapers exaggerate, don't they? Who are these ladybirds going to kill?'

Mr Ferraby pointed at the map in the newspaper. 'They've even invaded America, Eunice. Imagine that – America. If they can invade America they can invade anywhere. They could invade Britain like that.' Mr Ferraby snapped his fingers dramatically.

Mrs Ferraby said, 'Britain invaded America

once upon a time, didn't it?'

In his most important voice Mr Ferraby said, 'We're not talking about history, we're talking about Right Now. These ladybirds have got to be stopped. Or they will scoff all the aphids and our ladybirds won't have enough aphids to eat.'

'Do you like aphids?'

'You know I don't, Eunice. They eat my plants,' Mr Ferraby said.

On the windowsill of the Ferrabys' house, behind the plant pot, Rodina turned to her husband and their three children.

'Did you hear that? They think we are invading,' said Rodina. 'The man says we have to be stopped.'

'We must hide,' said Rosso. 'We must not be seen.'

'Are we invading, Mum?' asked Pikola, the smallest large ladybird child.

'Don't be silly,' said Rodina. 'Five of us! We couldn't invade a puddle of water. We'll get down low and keep still.'

Jim went into the garden. Mr Ferraby came out of his back door. After discussing the weather, which was lovely and warm, and their gardens, Jim asked if Mr Ferraby had heard about these Killer Ladybirds.

'I have indeed!' Mr Ferraby cried. The men agreed these creatures were a serious threat which Mrs Ferraby and Suzanne did not understand. Their wives would be no help to them: they would have to keep watch and mount patrols themselves. They were both delighted to have the other's help.

'I think we should do our first patrol right now!' Jim cried.

Mr Ferraby agreed. 'What sort of equipment will we need if we find the blighters, do you think?'

'A fly whisk or something would do it,' Jim said. 'I'll just see what I have.'

The men went back into their houses. A minute later Mr Ferraby had a rolled-up magazine and a bottle of anti-mosquito spray. Jim was armed with the spatula

Suzanne had used for the fish pie, and a wooden spoon.

They set off.

'Any sign your side?' Jim called.

'Nothing yet,' Mr Ferraby answered. 'How about you?'

'Plenty of earwigs and spiders,' Jim said, 'but no Killer Ladybirds.'

He swatted the air with his spatula, practising.

'It gets very thick at the top here,' Mr Ferraby called, panting a bit. 'Wait a minute! I think there is something up here! Yes! My goodness – there are ladybirds – big ones! But I can't get to them!'

'I'm coming!' Jim shouted, and he charged at the fence and began to struggle over it, fighting his way through a hawthorn tree. 'Ow!' he shouted. 'Oof!' he cried, as he tumbled through it into Mr Ferraby's garden.

'Do you see? Up there?' Mr Ferraby pointed into the thick bushes. 'There's a herd of them under that!'

'Charge!' shouted Jim, and he did, plunging forward and striking wildly ahead of him with the spoon and spatula.

'Killer coming this way!' shouted Bronko.

'Help!' screamed Pikola. 'A DISGUSTICK MAN!'

'Come to me, children!' yelled Rosso.

'A mad brute!' yelled Zenya. 'A monster!'

'Don't panic,' said Rodina, calmly. She



was very good in an emergency. 'Follow me, children: this way, Rosso. It's only one silly man. We'll escape easily – this way.'

The little family scuttled around a mass of ivy, trundled over some rocks and nipped under a rotten branch where they stopped, hidden from Mr Ferraby and Jim.

'Are they trying to kill us, Dad?' Bronko whispered.

'Why did he chase us, Mum?' wailed Pikola.

'Hush,' said Rodina. 'He's just silly – he charged into that bush and got stuck, didn't he? We don't have to worry about either of them!'

'Your mother is right,' Rosso said. 'They're much too slow and clumsy to be dangerous. We will keep an eye out for them and we won't worry. Besides, you always have an adventure when you discover a new place!'

They could hear voices in the garden, a woman's voice they did not recognise and the voice of the man who had tried to swat

them, but they could not work out what was being said. The voices were arguing.

Up in his attic Aubrey could also hear the argument, and he could hear what his parents said. These rows put a miserable feeling in the middle of his tummy.

'You silly man!' Suzanne shouted. 'What on earth do you think you're doing? Smashing about in the Ferrabys' garden with a wooden spoon. Have you lost your mind?'

'I was protecting us from these weirdo ladybirds!' Jim retorted.

'You're the weirdo,' Suzanne replied. 'Why can't you just leave the creatures in peace?'

'It's easy for you to criticise when you don't know the facts,' Jim said. 'The newspaper said that these ladybirds are dangerous!'

'Oh, rubbish. Charging around with a spoon, acting like a maniac! Those ladybirds have as much right to be here as you do.'

'Well I don't want to be here if you're going to shout at me for trying to do the right thing.'

'Good! I don't want you here if you're going to behave like a delinquent.'

'Right! Well I'm going to go to town and have my supper there.'

'Fine! You do that. And don't come back until you're ready to behave like a responsible man, and set a good example to Aubrey.'

'I set a fine example!' shouted Jim.

In the attic Aubrey wiped his eyes. They got wet again and he dabbed them with a piece of tissue paper until they stopped. He threw himself on his bed and covered his head with his pillow. He felt as though his stomach was slowly tightening in a horrible way. 'Make them stop,' he said to himself.

'Hey,' said a small tinkling voice, a beautiful, musical voice like tiny silver bells. 'Hey. Cheer up.'

Aubrey sat up. Where had that come from?

If you have come across Aubrey before, you

will know that he is an unusual boy. Like any child he can talk to animals; unlike most children he can also understand what they say. Animals are very fond of children. Children notice more of the world than adults do, and so animals talk to them often.

Pigeons are interested in what you are wearing and they comment on it: 'Nice shoes! Got any crumbs?'

Blue tits know everything. News travels between blue tits much faster than it does on the Internet.

Swallows are always telling anyone who will listen about their travels.

Cats think aloud and they are quite sarcastic, and everybody knows dogs tend to talk about food and love, love and food, walks and cats, food, love and other dogs.

When any animal talks to Aubrey he hears them in his head, the same way you are hearing these words as you read them.

'Who's there?' he said, aloud.

'I'm Ariadne,' said the voice. 'I'm over here.'

You would not have thought that Aubrey's day could get much worse. He looked over at the table where he did his homework, and there, crouched on the corner, waving one long spindly leg at him, was a gigantic house spider.

Seeing the spider gave him a fright. Then he groaned. He let his head flop back on the pillow.



CHAPTER 2

More Trouble

'Bad day?' Ariadne asked, gently.

Being able to talk to animals doesn't mean Aubrey likes all of them. He has little time for slugs, which are quite morose creatures, always complaining that lettuce is not as nice as cat food, and cat food is not as nice as steak – and why doesn't anyone ever leave them any steak?

As for spiders, Aubrey has never spoken to one. They give him the creeps. Nothing he knows about them suggests they are the kind of insect it would be fun to know. Lots of eyes. Eight scuttly legs. Sticky webs. Sucking the juice out of prey...

He avoided spiders and they avoided him. But having someone to talk to was better than crying into his pillow, and Ariadne had