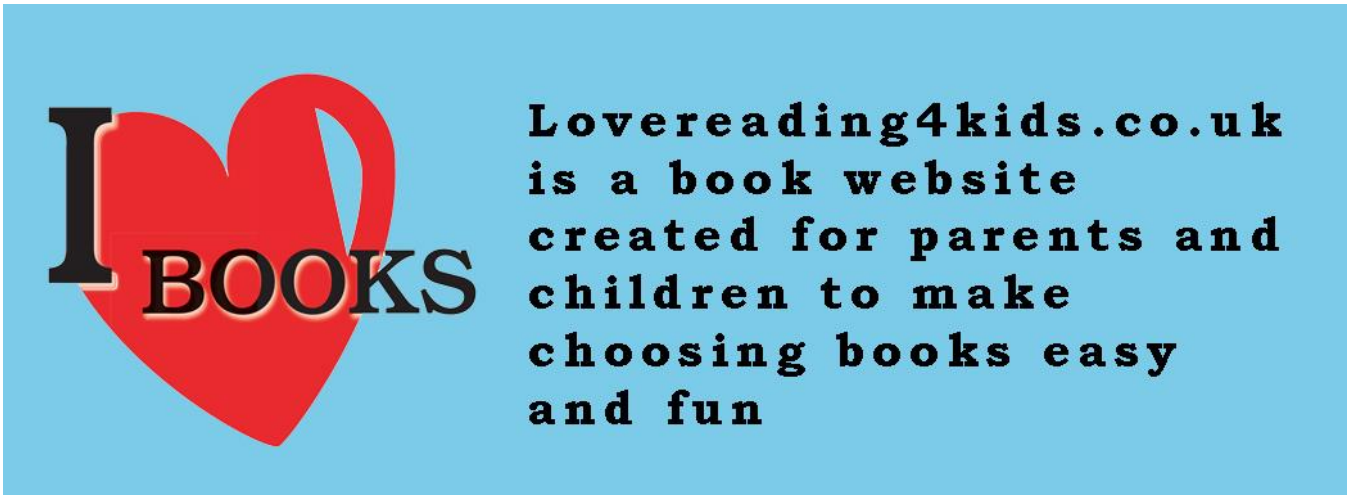


Opening extract from

Who Runs the World?

Written by

Virginia Bergin

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WHO RUNS THE WORLD?

VIRGINIA BERGIN

MACMILLAN



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THE GLOBAL AGREEMENTS

1. The Earth comes first.
2. Every child is our child.
3. We reject all forms of violence.
4. We will all help each other.
5. Knowledge must be shared.
6. We Agree that we need to Agree.
7. Everyone has the right to be listened to.

To these Agreements, we are committed.

Signed on behalf of the people of the former nations of:

Afghanistan
Albania
Algeria
Andorra
Angola
Antigua and Barbuda
Argentina
Armenia
Australia
Austria
Azerbaijan
Bahamas
Bahrain
Bangladesh
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United States of America
Uruguay
Uzbekistan
Vanuatu
Venezuela
Vietnam
Yemen
Zambia
Zimbabwe

She is riding through the woods on what was once a road. The dotted white line that once separated the comings from the goings is crumbling. The tarmac is slowly being destroyed by tree-roots. The small plants don't wait for the trees. They are so strong. They sprout up all over, wherever they can. In another few years there won't be any road left at all.

Too bad, so sad, bye-bye – that's what her Granmumma Kate (who refuses to be called Granmumma) says about all the things that once were and are no more. *Too bad, so sad, bye-bye*.

The horse, a gentle giant of a Shire horse the Granmummas call My Little Pony (Milpy, for short), pulls a cartload of cider apples: small, hard, bitter things that will be fermented into some fun. The girl has a rucksack stuffed with harvest produce on her back; it is easier to carry it than have to clamber off and on the huge horse just for a drink of water.

Her name is River. She is fourteen years old and she is day-dreaming about the exploration of outer space.

It is an autumn evening.

Dark is coming soon.

She is miles from home.

She feels no fear.

Why would she? There are no predators. No such thing as ghosts.

Fear belongs to another time. It lives on only in the memories of others.

She feels no fear at all.

Not even when she sees it: the body lying in the middle of the road.

She feels surprised. The surprise finds its way into her hands and she pulls back on the reins the second she spots it, the body in the road. Then there's alarm. A jolt of it. She knows right away it isn't anyone from the village. She's known them, all of them, her whole life, and this person is not one of them. But the jolt of alarm isn't about that instant seeing, it's about whether the person is hurt.

She slips off the horse and runs to the body.

And stops.

It *is* breathing, this body. A stranger in strange clothes. Under a filthy *white* T-shirt, an enormous black 'tick' shape on it, a flat chest without even the tiniest of breasts rises and falls. One arm has a horrible gash on it, an open, oozing wound on which flies are feasting. Long, skinny-but-muscly legs in skin-tight shiny red leggings end in cloven hooves: weird, rubbery, black shoes with pockets for big toes. She looks back up to the place her gaze skimmed. There is lumpiness in the crotch. And

she looks at the face of the stranger: smudged with dirt, beaded with sweat, and hairy – a substantial crop of wispy facial hair, *more than any person she has ever seen*. And she looks at the throat . . . where there is also lumpiness.

It snaps into her head: *Adam's apple*. That's what Kate calls that lump in your throat. Because . . . The why of it she can't exactly remember. *Too bad, so sad, bye-bye*.

In the few astonished seconds she spends staring at that body, River imagines the most extraordinary thing: that this is an XY, a person born genetically male.

But that cannot be. It simply cannot be.

Seconds of astonishment. Seconds of extraordinary. Then River, who nearly always tries to do the right thing, and not just because that's what her Mumma would expect, does the right thing: FIRST AID.

1: She checks for hazards. Nothing dangerous lying about – not even a sun-basking adder – and the power lines that followed this road hang broken and long dead, so no threat of electrocution. There is only a bad stink in the air – from diarrhoea and vomit spattered nearby.

2: She checks for consciousness:

'WAKE UP!' she yells, clapping her hands. 'WAKE UP!'

A single puffy eyelid rises. A bloodshot eyeball rolls. A pupil pinpricks against the pretty red and gold of dappled autumn light, focuses and –

A BEGINNING

CHAPTER 1

CONSCIOUSNESS

The hand is across my mouth before I can even scream, the other arm wrapped tight around me and my brain is exploding – instantly – with shock and horror and fear and anger and *confusion* **CONFUSION CONFUSION** because who would just ATTACK another person and –

'*Who's with you? Huh?!*'

The voice! Growling and sick and deep and broken and stinking.

MAN
MEN
MURDER
GUNS
WAR
KILL

Every strange and scary thing I've ever half heard said about XYs comes bursting into my head, but it *cannot* be. It **cannot** be.

'*Don't make me hurt you, junior!*' vile breath threatens.

The grip tightens. The grip HURTS.

WHY would this person be doing this?!

WHY WOULD ANY PERSON DO THIS?!

So maybe this person is crazy, so maybe this person

has taken drugs, so maybe whatever sickness this person has got is causing this madness –

'***STOP IT!***' My cry muffled wordless by a stinking, sweaty palm.

'*Shuddup!*'

I get shaken. I get squeezed. It HURTS. So who cares who this is and why? So NO WAY. So I kick. Kick, kick, kick. Boot against shin. Boot against shin. I get another shake and squeeze, then dragged back so fast my boots can't get to shins, but I stamp down hard on a cloven hoof and the stinking breath lets out a growl that ends in a moan of pain.

'*DON'T–MAKE–ME–HURT–YOU.*'

Who would say a thing like that?!

I plant another kick back hard. SHIN!

There is a roar of pain. And words that roar louder:

'*Stop-or-I-swear-to-God-I'll-kill-you.*'

I go limp. It's not that no one swears 'to God' – some of the Granmummas still do. It's that no one, *no one* . . . *Who would threaten to KILL a person?*

'You on your own?'

The grip releases just a little – and I feel it: I feel how *weak* this person really is. One glance down at the bicep on the arm of the hand that's pinned across my face tells me this body is used to hard work – but sickness trembles in those gripping arms.

'Are ya? Well, are ya?!'

I nod my head. My ribs hurt. My face hurts. My mouth

is dry with fear and shock – but my eyes and nose? They're running. With ***anger***. I feel **angry**.

The strange, sick, nasty mad person hesitates . . . then releases me.

I wipe the trail of tears and snot from my face.

'I do a mile in six-point-eight. I press sixty.'

I have no idea what this means. I have no idea how to respond.

'So don't you bother trying to run, and you should def-initely not bother trying to fight me. You *will* lose.'

The *creature* wipes my snot off the back of its hand, looking up and down the forest road. Then it looks at me. 'Wait a second – have you got a transmitter in?! Your tag –'

It lurches forward, grabbing my upper arms and squeezing them about.

'What – did they stick it in your leg? They did that to me once –'

'*Get off me!*' I pull away as it grabs at my thighs.

'Shut up! God – you little screecher! No wonder you're not tagged – you ain't even on T-jabs, are you? How old are you, kid? Hey! You're OK now! OK?'

The mad question settles it. This person is an *unknown* kind of person. A person who hurts and scares and then asks how you are. A person I must get away from. I nod at it, sniffing hard.

'Then quit with the blubbing, kid.'

No one, not even Granmumma Kate, would tell

another person to stop crying. Anyone who doesn't know that is definitely an unknown kind of person. Maybe not even a person at all.

'Name's Mason,' the creature says, holding out a hand.

Courtesy dictates a hand held out is a hand to be shaken, that the cheek of the person holding out that hand is to be kissed. I take the hand, and – swallowing revulsion with my own snot – lean in to kiss.

'What the *hell* are you doing?!' ***it*** says, shoving me away.

It. That's what this is. No human being I have ever met would behave like this.

'Where did you 'scape from anyway? You weren't Hell-bound, was you? Come on! What Unit you from? What d'you call yourself? I'm not gonna tell anyone, am I? Who'd I tell?! *Why'd* I tell?! How long you been out for? You don't look that sick – did you get proper sick yet? Where'd you get that horse from? . . . I mean, that is an actual *horse*, right?'

I . . . nod. I have to get away from it. I have to think. I have to stay calm – *and keep it calm*, that's what I decide – because something in its ranting, in its questions asked with no wait for an answer, reminds me of my own Granmumma, whose temper can feed like a fire on any sort of disagreement.

'An actual horse . . . I thought they'd be smaller . . .' it says – almost to itself, contemplating in amazement. 'How'd you even steal that?!'

I just smile, politely. The smile feels wonky on my face.

'God's sake . . .' It grins at me. 'How are you alive, li'l thief? Hah. How'd you manage it? You're a walkin' freakin' miracle, ain't you? You got anything to eat and drink in that bag, have you? You got water?' It holds out its filthy paw, its hand making 'Gimme!' baby grabs in the air. 'Come on now, little brother. Don't hold out on me.'

Little brother. *Brother* . . . I slide the rucksack from my shoulders and it snatches it. 'Siddown, bro,' it tells me.

Bro? I crumple to the ground where I stand. It plonks itself down too – close; grabbing-distance close.

'See now, we gotta share and share alike, ain't we?' it says, ripping open the rucksack. 'Us 'scaped ones, that's what we gotta do. We're brothers in the face of death now, brothers in the face of death . . . Oh . . . do NOT tell me you've been eating this stuff,' it says, holding up a bunch of freshly dug carrots. 'KID! This is goddamn filthy jungle poison, that's what. You eat this stuff, you're dead in two seconds, not ten – get me?!'

It shakes the carrots in my face, then flings them aside. Soil still on them, but Milpy doesn't care . . . comes plodding up to munch, cart trundling behind – and the creature jumps back to its hoof feet. It looks around, then it darts to grab a branch – a poor choice, so rotten-looking it'll probably crumble immediately, but still . . . Milpy, munching . . . no one hits her, not even Lenny. She just gets shouted at. She doesn't often listen. I have no idea

what Milpy would do if someone struck her – only that she would NOT like it.

'No!' I can't help myself. 'She won't hurt you!'

The creature eyes the huge power of Milpy, chomping.

'She's just hungry!'

'That so?' it says, watching Milpy crunch.

Painful seconds tick.

'That's a *she* horse?' it asks.

I nod, and watch the creature watch Milpy – Milpy watching it right back: her nostrils flared, scenting, her ears unable to decide between laying back cross (because – really! – what is this nonsense on the way home?!) and pricked, twitching, listening (strange *it*, strange smell, general strangeness) . . . Still: fresh carrots?! Too good!

'What's that you got in that wagon anyway?' it asks, pointing at the cart.

'. . . Apples?'

It picks up an apple. It examines the apple. It bites it. It spits it out.

'Brother, these ain't apples!' it says, shaking its head at me, wiping its mouth. A convincingly human look of disgust and pity on its face.

With watchful eyes on Milpy, it sits back down. Places that branch down on the road – and I can see, for sure, that it is rotten. Orange and white fungus all over it; woodlice tumbling out, escaping from its broken ends. I've been hit by kisses harder than that.

It rummages again, trying the next compartment in

the rucksack. Pulls out a cloth-wrapped package, unwraps it.

'And what is this?' it asks.

How could anyone not know these things?! It's sniffing the loaf of bread. My cousins' gorgeous sour-dough. Fresh-baked.

'Bread.'

'Don't look like bread.'

It sniffs some more, bites down slowly, tears away a mouthful. It chews, eyes on me.

''S' disgustin',' it mumbles, but it keeps on chewing, biting off more, like it's ravenous, while the other greedy hand searches, finds my water bottle and . . . suddenly it tosses the loaf at me – and I catch it.

Regret that immediately: shows so clearly I am watching, alert.

It eyes me.

'Why doncha take a little bite of that yourself?'

Terror alone would stop me. I have also been stuffed full of cake at my cousins' house, but I have got to get out of here, so I pull a chunk of bread off – away from the creature's bread-mauling area – and take a bite.

It, Milpy and I chew.

Me and Milpy are watching it.

It is watching us.

It unscrews my water bottle, sniffs . . .

'Water,' I whisper.

It glugs – and glugs.

‘Don’t taste right neither,’ it mutters – and my heart skips a beat as it pulls my knife out of the rucksack. My good knife, my favourite super-sharp blade that was given to me by Kate. Belonged to my great Granpappa.

It releases the blade – seems to know just how – and holds it up. The blade of the knife shines true in the late, dying Sun.

I feel my whole body tense up so hard any fearful shaking stops.

‘Was you thinking to stab someone, little brother? That what you was thinkin’ of?’

That’s a thing men did, isn’t it? That’s what I’ve heard. Kate says women did too, but Mumma says there are *statistics*. Men stabbed people, shot people, killed anyone. Prisons rammed full of them and still they did not stop.

‘’Spect you’d like to stab me right now, eh?’

It makes a tutting sound and waggles the knife at me.

‘It ain’t the way, li’l brother. It ain’t the way. I mean . . . I guess sometimes it maybe has to be the way, right? We’ve all seen that. But –’

Something in the rucksack catches its eye. It pulls it out, the jar of honey, holds it up with a puzzled look.

‘Honey.’

‘Think so?! I’ve heard of that!’

It drops the knife – blade open – the other side of its body, and manages to get the jar open. Scoops out a fingerful and sniffs it. Looks suspiciously at me.

‘You first,’ it says, offering the fingerful.

Its hands . . . They are so filthy.

It grunts. 'Brother, we are both gonna die anyways,' it says, honey running down its finger. 'Welcome to the jungle.'

With my mouth, I take the honey from its finger.

The touching of it, the creature, makes me shudder.

'That good, huh?' it says, and delves another filthy finger into the jar, shoves it into its mouth and sucks it.

Its eyeballs roll back. 'Sweet!' it says. 'That IS good, ain't it? . . . So, kid, you gonna talk to me?'

I can see huge beads of sweat popping out on its forehead. I am sweating too. My sweat is fear, its sweat is sickness – pouring out of it. It keeps eating though, grabbing the bread back, dipping chunks into the honey jar, swigging at the water – and all the while mumbling talk and questions at me . . . I don't answer. I see streaks of blood in the bready mix of chewed-up food in its mouth and it winces when it swallows, rubbing at its throat. And its stomach? I hear loud gurgling and churning, smell the stink of vile farts.

'So how come you ain't sick? I been loose FIVE WHOLE DAYS – got sick DAY ONE. Had to drink goddamn filthy water got green stuff growing in it. Green stuff! Veg-et-able material *growing* in the freaking water! Brother, come on, might as well name your Unit – and don't go telling me you're Alpha material, because I know a Beta-boy when I see one . . . but how come you ain't on the T-jabs? You oughtta be by now! Kid, you got X-S body fat. X-S!

Round the ass – and your pecs! Serious!' it says, jabbing my left breast.

I flinch and shrink and twitch to run.

'Whoa! Don't get all like that! Them flabby pecs is probably what's keepin' you alive! You're probably digestin' yourself!' it laughs, ripping off bread and dunking it into the honey.

It raises its eyes from the jar, studying me as it chews.

'Hey, it doesn't matter at all now, does it?'

I study it right back. I . . . say nothing. My mind has landed in a bad place. My mind has landed in a place where the thought that *cannot be* **is**.

'D'you even know where you are, Beta-boy? Cos I sure as hell don't! Bloody jungle, brother! Bloody in-fin-it-y of it! Know what that means? Endless, my brother. This goddamn jungle goes on forever.'

It doesn't. It goes to the village. I'm no great runner, but I think, if I can remain calm, I can out-run this sick thing.

'Yup, we is lost . . . lost and damned and done for. So this is just great, ain't it? This is juuuuuuuust ber-illiant. Two runnin' dead men sharing a last supper and only one of us got anything to say.'

'I just want to go home,' I whisper. I am telling it to myself. I am willing it to happen.

'Yeah, I'll bet you do. Ah, ***HELL*** – it ain't me you're scared of at all, is it? It's the wimmin, ain't it? Oh God!

You seen them? Have you seen wimmin?!'

I nod the tiniest of nods. I feel physically sick – but not as sick as the creature; it's rubbing its belly, sweat popping, hairy face grimmer than grim.

'You seen wimmin . . . around here?'

I nod an even tinier nod.

'Je-sus.' It wipes a shaking hand across its filthy hair; eyes darting. 'They'll kill you quicker than the jungle, if they don't – Kid! Oh God, oh brother-mine . . . did they . . . mess with you? No shame here, brother. If them wimmin touched you it ain't your fault. We all know that. We all been told what wimmin'll do to any 'scaped male they find – and if they done it to you, IT AIN'T YOUR FAULT. No shame on you, no blame on you. IT AIN'T YOUR FAULT. You listen to Mason now.'

I shut my eyes, just to make it STOP for one moment, but the sound of the thing retching makes me open them again – it's doubled over, gripping its belly, head-sweat falling like raindrops.

'Get out of here,' it says, voice twisted with pain.

I edge myself up, on to my knees, then one foot to the ground, knuckles to the tarmac, willing power into my legs. It looks up at me, fighting whatever agonies I can hear battling in its guts.

'D'you hear me? Don't let the wimmin get you!'

It doubles up again with a horrific groan. My legs tense with sprint-intention.

It vomits – bread and honey and water and . . . blood? I should run. I should run – but, even in a nightmare, who leaves a sick person?

'Go,' it says, wiping its mouth. 'Brother: die free.'