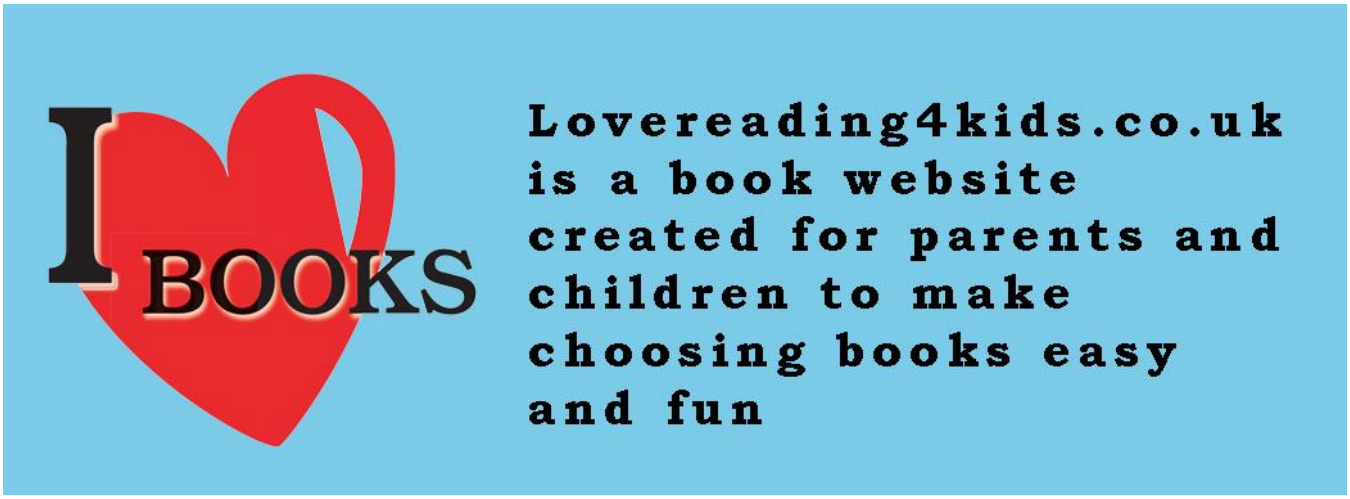


Opening extract from

The City of Secret Rivers

Written by

Jacob Sager Weinstein

Illustrated by

Euan Cook

Published by

Walker Books Ltd

Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

THE CITY OF SECRET RIVERS





JACOB SAGER WEINSTEIN

Illustrations by Euan Cook



WALKER
BOOKS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated as they may result in injury.

First published in Great Britain 2017 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2017 Jacob Sager Weinstein
Cover art and illustrations © 2017 Euan Cook
Photograph credits: The Print Collector/Alamy Stock Photo (p.339);
Tim Whitby/London GVs/Alamy Stock Photo (p.340);
Jacek Wojnarowski/Shutterstock (p.341 left);
Tupungato/Shutterstock (p.341 right);
Eric Nathan/Alamy Stock Photo (p.342)

The right of Jacob Sager Weinstein to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book has been typeset in Goudy Old Style

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-6885-7

www.walker.co.uk

FOR
ERIN AND J




PART
ONE

CHAPTER 1



In 1848, London smelled awful. I'm not sure why this surprised anybody. If I had been around then and somebody had said, "Hyacinth, if every toilet in town flows directly into the river Thames, will the city smell like a rose garden in a chocolate factory?" I'm pretty sure I would have said, "Um, no."

But apparently it was a big surprise to the Victorians. They called it the Great Stink, and at first, all the members of Parliament ignored it. Then the stink reached the Parliament building, and when everybody finished running gagging out of the building, they figured maybe they should do something about it.

They dug up half the city and built a massive underground sewer. They spent huge amounts of money,

and they ripped up the road and tore down houses, but they did it in the name of good health and breathable air. It was just a big engineering project, and it had *absolutely nothing* to do with a terrifying magical power that could destroy London and possibly the whole planet if it got into the wrong hands.

At least, that's what the history books told me. But you know what?

History is a big fat liar.

And you know who else is a liar? My mom.

OK, that's not fair. It's only lying if you're clued in enough to know you're not telling the truth. I honestly think Mom believes everything she says, even if it completely contradicts something she said thirty seconds before.

Consider the following Mom Monologue, which I heard as our black cab pulled away from London Heathrow Airport:

"Now, honey, I know you're scared about moving to a new country, and maybe you're a little angry at me, but you're going to fall in love with London, I just *know*. It's a wonderful big city full of exciting things. It'll be totally different from what you're used to, and that will help you grow! Also, Aunt Polly's flat is in Hampstead, which is the part of London where she and I and all your aunts grew up, and it's just beautiful.

There are sheep wandering through fields, and springs welling up between the trees. It'll be like you never left Grandma's farm back in Illinois, and that will help you feel right at home!"

You see what I mean? I counted four contradictory statements in about ten seconds. You would think that one of them, at least, would turn out to be right, but Mom has a rare knack for missing the truth on all sides.

And when we finally got to Hampstead, I realized she'd done it again. It wasn't bustling and exciting, but it wasn't full of sheep and springs, either. It was just an ordinary neighbourhood with some trees and some buses. Aunt Polly's building was on a busy four-lane road, and I'm pretty sure any sheep that tried to wander across it would have ended up as lamb chops. So maybe things had changed since my mom was a little girl … except the buildings looked like they were at least a hundred years old, which means that my mom couldn't have grown up among open fields unless she was much, much older than she looked.

Still, I was excited about seeing Aunt Polly. A long time before I was born, my mom and her eight sisters had left England and moved to a little town in Illinois, where my grandmother had bought a farm. I had grown up surrounded by family, and since Aunt Polly had moved back to London last year, I'd missed her

terribly. Spending time with her was the only part of this whole crazy move that I expected to actually enjoy.

Mom let us into the building with the key Aunt Polly had mailed her, and we lugged our bags up two flights of steps. Then we had to lug them up another flight. "I thought Aunt Polly's flat was on the second floor," I said.

"Oh, here in England, they call… No, I should say, here in England, *we* call the first floor the ground floor. So when we say 'the first floor', that's actually the second floor, and when we say 'the second floor', that's actually the third floor."

Great, I thought. *It's not just Mom. The whole country is lying to me.*

Mom unlocked Aunt Polly's door and swung it open. "Hello, Polly! We're here," she called. There was no answer.

I spotted a note on a nearby table and read it out loud:

Dear Cleo and Hyacinth,

So sorry I can't be there to meet you. One of my companies in Tokyo is on the verge of collapsing, and I've had to fly over there to fix it.

I'll be back in a month or two.
Until then, please make yourselves at home.

Love, (Aunt) Polly.

That was strange, because when it came to being organized, Aunt Polly was kind of the anti-Mom. Even when she had a million different things going on at once (which was usually), Aunt Polly never missed a single detail. Flying off at the last minute was totally unlike her.

It looked like it was going to be just me and Mom for most of the summer. Whoopee.

"That's disappointing," Mom said. "I was really hoping Polly would be around to help me sort out my life. But I was worried we'd be too dependent on her, so I'm glad we have some time to ourselves. I'm sure she'll be back soon, unless she takes a long time to fix her company, which she might, so it will probably be ages. Oh, did I tell you Grandma gave me a present to give you when we arrived? I've got it here somewhere."

I had kind of tuned Mom out, like I usually did when she started on one of her monologues, but that last bit caught my attention. Despite everything, I felt

a little tingle of excitement. Grandma always gave the best presents.

I waited impatiently while Mom opened up her suitcase and sorted through all the junk she had packed. Finally, she emerged victorious and handed me a gift-wrapped package.

I ripped open the wrapping and found a book inside: *A History of the Sewers of London*.

Huh. Well, I guess it kind of made sense. Grandma knew I liked history. She knew I was good at plumbing and stuff like that. She knew I was moving to London. I wasn't sure I'd put all those facts together in quite the same way she had, but she'd never given me a bad present, so I was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt.

I opened it up and found she had written something on the front page:

My dearest Hyacinth,
I write this with heavy heart, for you and your mother are heading into

terrible danger you cannot possibly anticipate. I wish I could guide you through it, but you must face it on your own. All I can do is tell you this: your aunts and I have done what we can to prepare you. Remember, my child. As long as you remember, I will always be with you.

With eternal love,
Grandma

Wait, WHAT??? If Grandma knew about real danger, why wouldn't she do something about it? And how had she and my aunts prepared me? They had told me a million random stories, and they had taught me a million random skills, but if I was heading towards

terrible danger, knowing how to milk a cow or fix a harpsichord wasn't going to do me much good.

I showed the note to Mom and said, "What does *that* mean?"

Mom shrugged. "I think she meant what she said, sweetie. She just wants you to have fun in London."

Puzzled, I looked back down at the page. Grandma's note now said something completely different:

Dear Hyacinth,
Have fun in London!
Love,
Grandma

CHAPTER 2



The first few weeks, the only danger I encountered was the danger of Mom driving me crazy. She tried to show me around, but she kept getting lost, and when we did find a place, whatever she had to tell me was wrong. We spent two hours wandering around the Tower of London, looking for the live lions Mom insisted were kept there, before she finally believed the guards who kept telling her she was thinking of the London Zoo.

Also – and I know it sounds like a small thing, but it drove me crazy – the taps in Aunt Polly's flat made no sense. Back home, every sink had a mixer tap, so that the hot and cold water flowed together and came out at just the right temperature. For some

reason, every sink in Aunt Polly's flat had one tap for hot water and another one for cold, so you either burned your skin or froze it.

"You're supposed to put in the plug and then mix the hot and cold water in the sink, sweetie," Mom said when I complained.

"But then gunk from the last person who washed their hands gets in the water."

"It's like Grandma always said," Mom told me. "When your home is in a new place, you have to learn how to wash your face."

I had managed to be patient with Mom the whole time we were in London, but as silly as I knew it was, this was the last straw. I lost it. "OK, first of all, this is *not* my home. Second, Grandma never said anything remotely like that. Third, it doesn't even make sense. And fourth, I'm not five years old. Putting something in rhyme is not going to make me believe it."

"It's not supposed to make you believe it, sweetie. It's supposed to help you remember it."

"Mom, that's not the point. Focus."

Mom took my hand. "I know it's hard for you. But wherever we're together, it's home."

"I'm glad you're holding my hand, Mom. Feel how chapped it is? That's because of the taps."



If I just could have gotten some time with somebody other than Mom, it wouldn't have been so bad. But apparently summer vacation starts later in England, because all the kids my age were still in school. Mom told me I should just hang out near a school and start up conversations with kids as they left, but I'm not exactly the walk-up-to-a-stranger-and-start-talking type.

So the only other person I ended up seeing regularly was our elderly downstairs neighbor. She never introduced herself to me – she just looked at me suspiciously when I passed her in the stairwell. Once, we got some of her mail by accident, and I saw from the address that her name was Lady Roslyn Hill-Haverstock, which seemed impressive. It was a little less impressive when I went downstairs to slip it through her mail slot and she yanked the door open to glare at me and I could smell the alcohol on her breath.

"Have you been stealing my post?" she said.

My grandmother taught me to always be polite to my elders, even when they're drunk and paranoid, so I smiled sweetly and said, "Have a lovely day." She slammed the door on me.

But I must have made a good impression on her, because after that, she was friendlier. She'd stop by and

ask if there was anything we needed, and occasionally when Mom and I went out, I'd open our front door and find her there, as if she was just about to knock. (Or as if she was eavesdropping, but I couldn't imagine anybody dying to hear our conversations, unless they were doing some kind of secret documentary on Crazy Things Moms Say.)

Having Lady Roslyn around made the building seem a little less lonely, but I wished it weren't the closest I had come to making a friend since we had moved. Mostly, I sat around our flat, reading and rereading *A History of the Sewers of London*. Maybe the letters would rearrange themselves and I'd learn something about the terrible danger I was in, but they were in the same order every time. I started to think I had just imagined Grandma's warning. It must just have been the stress of the move.



I will give Mom credit for one thing: although she never made much sense on a minute-by-minute basis, things did have a way of working out in the end. One night, she tried to make macaroni and cheese for dinner, but she accidentally flipped over to another recipe halfway through, and she ended up making

macaroni and cheese pancakes. I was *not* going to eat those. I sent her out to the grocery store but then decided I'd better go with her, to make sure she bought something sensible. Then she managed to get us lost, plus it turned out that instead of her wallet, she had filled her purse with pancakes.

All of which should have been a disaster, except that we ended up in a huge park called Hampstead Heath, which really was full of those rolling hills and leafy trees she had promised me. And it turns out that when it's summer in London, the sun stays up for ever, which meant that as late as it was, we could sit on a hill and watch the sun set, eating the pancakes she had conveniently brought along. And you know what? Macaroni and cheese pancakes are really good. It ended up being the best night we'd had since we moved.



After a few weeks, things settled into a pattern. I still missed home – no matter what Mom said, I was *not* going to fall in love with London. But at least I was learning to tolerate it.

And maybe Mom was learning to listen to me, because one morning, when she had gone out shopping, a plumber showed up to replace our tap. It was a pretty

simple process. He took out the old taps, connected the hot and cold water pipes with one long pipe, and put a new mixer tap on it. Voilà. Done. Easy.

When he had gone, I stood in front of the bathroom sink, turned on the hot and cold taps, took a deep breath, and put my hands in the water.

I stood there, my mouth open, unable to believe what I was feeling. It was true that hot and cold water were both coming out of the same place. But somehow they stayed completely separate. One side of the stream was way too hot, and the other side was way too cold. British engineering had achieved the impossible: it was chapping my hands in two different ways at the same time.

If I had known what the day had in store for me, I would have stood there all morning, no matter how uncomfortable it was. But I didn't know, so I jerked my hands back.

At that moment, the phone rang. It was Dad.

"Hi, my love," he said.

"Hi, Dad! I'm so glad you called. Mom's driving me—" I stopped, because he had taken the kind of deep breath he only takes when he's about to make a big announcement.

For just a moment, my imagination ran wild. He was going to tell me I could come live with him, and

we'd both move back to Illinois, and my mom could stay in London! No, even better – he and Mom had realized they made a huge mistake, and they were getting back together, and we were all moving home!

But what he actually said was "Jessica and I are getting married."