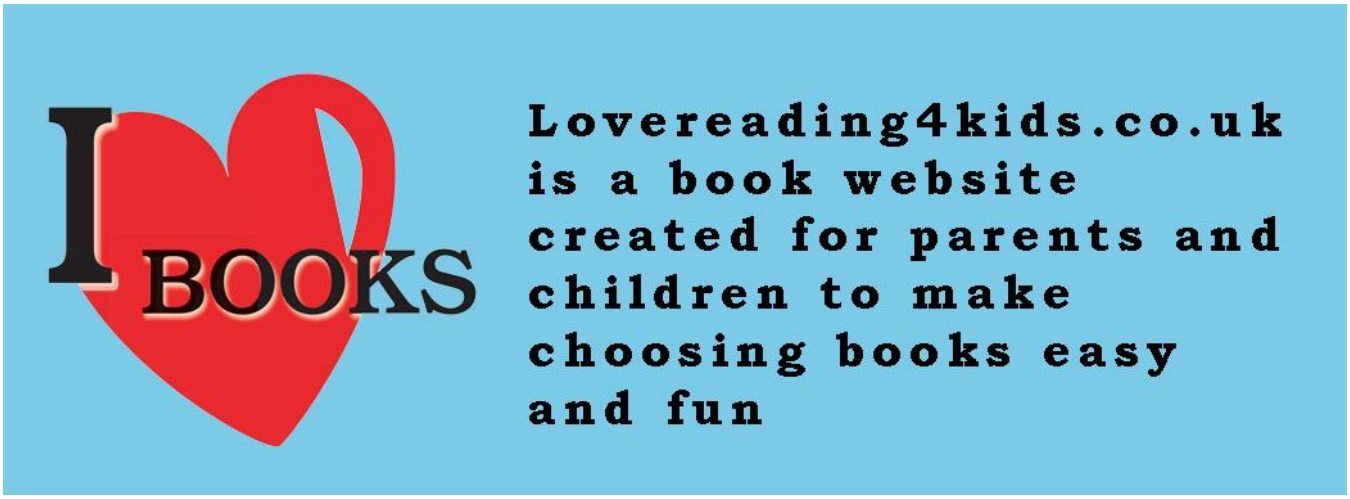


Opening extract from

Rook

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This book has dyslexia-friendly features





For Phil Earle: friend and inspiration



One



It was a day of hard graft. The fields sparkled with frost, which delighted his dark eye. But the hard crust meant that he had to peck and scratch to get at the worms and grubs lurking in the cold earth below.

But he was happy.

Happy because he was with his mob, a loose flock of rooks and jackdaws, his brothers, his sisters, his friends.

Happy because the wide fields and woods and sky belonged to him.

Happy because he was young in his world, and had tasted little of pain and hunger in the six months since he had first hopped from the nest of twigs and stretched his black wings.

The rooks squawked and the jackdaws chattered and clacked as they plodded up and down the furrows. The light was failing, and soon they'd fly off together in a ragged cloud to roost for the night.

Earlier that day they'd had some sport with a male sparrowhawk. A gang of them surrounded the raptor in a copse of oak and willow and their harsh cries rang like laughter as they poured scorn on it. The sparrowhawk was smaller than the rooks, about the same size as the jackdaws. Under the blue-grey of its back and wings, there was a creamy breast, with black bars, but also a blush of orange, the colour of an autumn sunset.

Pretty or not, the mob hated it, and drove it deeper into the trees. Then they became bored with their game and went back to the endless search for food.

But, oddly, the sparrowhawk had appeared again later. He watched them from the naked branches at the top of an ash tree. This time they ignored him.

And yet, somewhere in the back of the rook's mind was a twisting worm of doubt, a shadow on his mind.

And, if he had seen it, a shadow on the ground …

As the rook pecked and scratched and worried, he sensed that the flock was ready to fly.

But this wasn't the usual lazy flurry, with stragglers still pulling at worms as the leaders flew off. This time there was a sudden electric energy. And then the cries came, the shrieks of terror.

Now the rook caught the fear, opened his wings and sprang into the air. One beat, two. The earth was three metres below him, and the safety of the trees only a few seconds away.

And then a force hit him, like nothing he had ever felt before. It seemed to melt his bones and turn his flesh to vapour. And in the bone-crushing impact there was a sharper pain, searing into him like hot needles.

The hit took the rook down, and he felt the frosted earth rise up to crush his face and breast.

And then, jab, jab, two more stabs of agony. And he knew. He had been taken. He had made the great change, from hunter to hunted, from eater to eaten. He felt the claws dig deeper into his back, felt the curved beak gouge into his flesh, felt meat – his own meat, the meat of him – being torn away.

But rooks are never an easy meal. He flapped wildly with his wings, trying to shake off the predator on his back. He reached around to find something he could peck at with his own strong beak, and pecked only at air.

But he saw.

Not, as he'd thought, the dark and pretty male sparrowhawk. This was a pale brown female. She was much larger and more powerful than her mate – a killer of pigeons and magpies, not sparrows. Even so, he knew it was rare for her to take on something as big as a rook.

But she had done it, and now she was relentless. She stabbed again with her hooked beak, like an artist painting with a fine brush. And what she painted was death.

The rook twisted in agony, and she let go with one set of talons, so she could get a better grip. The talons were her killing tools, and she needed a soft place to insert them, a chink under the skull where she could pierce the brain, or a narrow gap between the ribs, where she could feel for his frantic heart.

But now the rook had a split second of release and the chance to turn to face her. Now he could see where to stab his own beak. He managed to

reach the hawk's breast feathers, but he drew no blood.

And now both her sets of claws were on him again, in him, slicing into the flesh of his breast.

She opened her wings around him, like a tent, as if to hide the final horror. Because, yes, she would eat him while he still lived. He would watch her pluck the short feathers on his breast, tear out strips of dark flesh, throw back her head and swallow …

NO!

He had fight in him yet. He kicked out, strong. His talons were not razor-sharp like hers, but they were tough as iron, and they scratched and raked at her. And at last he landed a good hard peck in the face of the hawk, which made her pull back, and flap her wings. But still, two talons were locked in the breast of the rook. She screeched, and aimed two savage pecks at the rook's eyes.

He knew he only had one last effort in him, one last chance. He kicked again, and pecked, and it was enough to loosen her grip. With a frenzied flapping, he broke away and took to the air.

He was too weak, too hurt – he skimmed just above the frozen field. But he was free. He was alive.