

Shona, WORD DETECTIVE





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Barrington Stoke

For Father Stanley Maxwell

Maxy to us boys of Saint Stanislaus College, Georgetown, Guyana

A teacher who made the dictionary an adventure

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Contents

1	To be a maverick	1
2	Parrots speak a dead language	7
3	Our own little language-nest	10
4	You're all word-detectives	15
5	You still haven't told us the name, Granny	23
6	Did the French really pinch our roast beef?	28
7	Can't wait, can't wait	37
8	Bamboozled, betwattled and bumbazed	46

Chapter 1
To be a maverick

Shona loved words. For as long as she could remember, Shona had written down strange words in a special little notebook.

One night, Shona's mum and dad were watching the news on the telly. Granny was having her usual doze in her rocking chair. Shona was curled up with a book on the sofa. She perked up her ears when the news reader said something about languages dying.



"... According to the latest report from UNESCO, by the end of the 21st century some 600 languages will have become extinct ..."

Shona knew the Dodo was sadly already extinct. But she'd never imagined a language could become extinct like that odd bird that is no more.

On the screen appeared a photo of a wise-looking man with feathers in his hair and a tattoo on his chin. The news reader said the man was an Elder of the Maori people and the last speaker of his native language. Then there was a comment from a woman, who looked very sunburned under her straw hat. Shona spotted 'LOL' written in big bold letters across her T-shirt.

"LOL?" Granny asked, as she jumped out of her snooze. "What on earth is LOL?"

"Laugh Out Loud," Shona said. "Teen talk, Granny. You know ... like text talk."

But this time Shona hadn't got it quite right. The 'LOL' on the woman's T-shirt meant *Language Our Lifeline*.

The LOL woman stared at the camera and spoke with a fire in her eyes. "With every bone in this body," she said, "I'll fight to help protect dying languages before I myself pass on ... or

pop my clogs … whichever you prefer. Mind you, I have no plans to push daisies or catch Charon's ferry just yet …"

Shona started to giggle.



"What's so funny?" Shona's dad asked.

Well, to Shona's ears it sounded funny when the woman said she hadn't planned to *catch Charon's ferry just yet*. She made it sound as if she was catching a ferry across the English Channel. But Shona knew Charon was the guy who took the dead in his ferry across the River Styx. She had learned this from her book on Greek myths.

The news reader said that the 'LOL' woman was Professor Divina Crystal-Bloomer, known in certain circles as the 'maverick lexicographer'.

"She must be from Maverick," Shona said. She had heard of Limerick in Ireland but never of a place called Maverick.

Her mum laughed and explained, "It's not a town. People who think outside the box are often called 'maverick'."

"Like your Miss Bates, Shona," her dad added with that dry laugh of his. "The winner of last year's *Teacher of the Year Award*!"

"You're right, Dad," Shona said. "*Think outside the box*. That's what Miss Bates always says."

And that night Shona went to bed with one thought buzzing in her head. To be a maverick when she grew up.