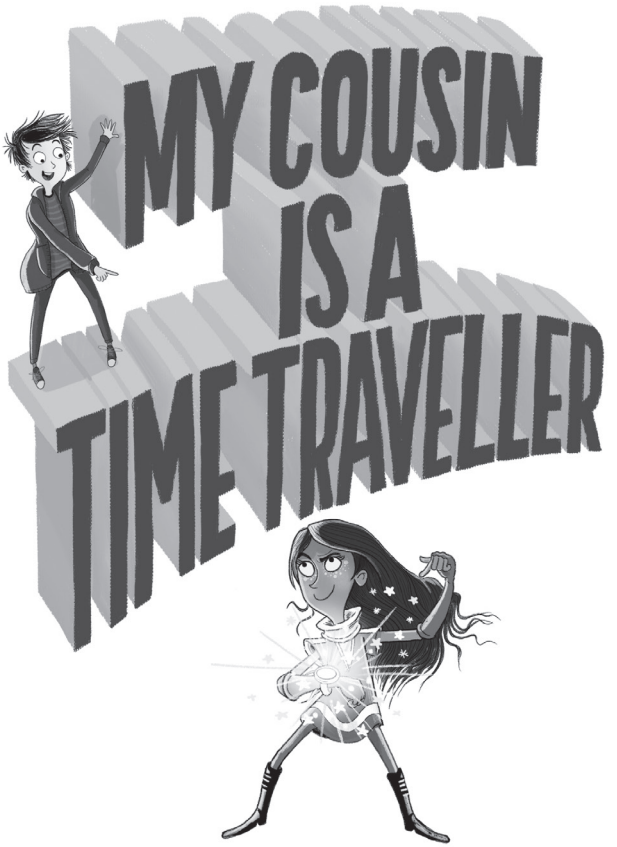
DAVID SOLOMONS

MY COUSIN IS A TIME TRAVELLER

AND MY TOASTER IS TAKING OVER THE WORLD...

BY THE WINNER OF THE WATERSTONES CHILDREN'S BOOK PRIZE

nosy crow


MY COUSIN
IS A
TIME TRAVELLER

OUT OF THIS WORLD REVIEWS FOR
MY BROTHER IS A SUPERHERO

"I even think my dad would like reading this book!"
David, The Book Squad, The Beano

"Cosmic! Amazing! Outstanding! Probably the funniest book I have read for a long time."
Alison A. Maxwell-Cox, The School Librarian

"I was so addicted to it that my mum had to make me put it down."
Calum, aged 11

"Funny, fast moving and deftly plotted, it's the best thing to hit the superhero world since sliced kryptonite."
Damian Kelleher, Dad Info

"You know a book is going to be good when you're giggling after five minutes… Ideal for comic readers and superhero experts."
Nicola Lee, The Independent

"An excellent adventure story with real heart that's also properly funny."
Andrea Reece, Lovereading4Kids

"You'll laugh until you fall out of your tree house!"
Steve Coogan

"A brilliantly funny adventure with twists, turns, crazy characters and a really hilarious ending. Fantastic!"
Sam, aged 11

"Brilliantly funny."
The Bookseller

MY COUSIN IS A TIME TRAVELLER

DAVID SOLOMONS



First published in the UK in 2019 by Nosy Crow Ltd
The Crow's Nest, 14 Baden Place
Crosby Row, London, SE1 1YW, UK

www.nosycrow.com

ISBN: 978 0 85763 992 9

Nosy Crow and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Nosy Crow Ltd

Text copyright © David Solomons, 2019
Cover and inside illustrations copyright © Robin Boyden, 2019

The right of David Solomons to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted.

All rights reserved

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of Nosy Crow Ltd.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A
Typeset by Tiger Media

Papers used by Nosy Crow are made from wood grown in sustainable forests

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

For Luke and Lara

and their cousins Daniel and Ridley.



1
THAT'S THE WAY THE WOOKIE CRUMBLES



I leaned on my bedroom windowsill and gazed out at the searchlight's vivid beam reaching up from the roof of the Civic Centre, illuminating the underside of the clouds with the letters "SL". They stood for Star Lad. To the wider world he was a superhero, but I knew him as Zack Parker, my big brother. So far, during his short career, he'd saved Earth from, in order: a giant asteroid and a comic-book-store-owning supervillain; alien invaders disguised as my gym teacher; a world-eating Top Trump card; my Evil Twin; and a particularly annoying brain-in-a-jar and her sister. Those were his big, end-of-the-world missions, but in his role as



Earth's saviour he also carried out a host of lesser duties in between. He was out there now, no doubt rescuing some small child from a rampaging robot, or catching a falling plane, or rounding up some criminal kingpin and his henchmen.

There was a distant rumble and the horizon burst into light, the explosion sending bright-orange flames into the sky to silhouette the rooftops of our home town of Bromley.

Had to be Zack.

I might learn the details of tonight's adventure when he returned later, but in all likelihood the only thing I'd get from him would be a grunt as he pushed past me to the fridge for a snack. He was always hungry after a mission. That was his style: peckish after, and reluctant before. He'd never wanted the responsibility of being a superhero, not from that first moment when a purple-caped, egg-headed alien called Zorbon the Decider had chosen him to save the world. Zack couldn't see the point of having powers and it was never far from his thoughts. Earlier that evening he'd brought it up for the gazillionth time.

"And another thing," he'd said as we washed up the dinner dishes together. "Superheroes are expensive."

"But you don't get paid," I reminded him. "You're a

free service. Like that antivirus software Dad uses."

"Yes, but there are costs associated with my exploits. Have you read the council's latest annual report?"

"Is this a trick question?"

He scrubbed vigorously at the bottom of a pot. "It's all in there. Itemised. The clean-up bill from just one interdimensional monster attack means they've had to find savings elsewhere in the budget. Did you know we're down to a fortnightly bin collection?"

I did not. And I didn't care.

"That's not all." He was getting into his stride. "I am just one hero, which means I can only deal with one incident at a time."

"But you're not alone. You've got Dark Flutter." That was the superhero identity of our neighbour Lara Lee. She too had been turned into a superhero by Zorbon, but her powers were rather more limited than Zack's. Essentially, she could talk to fluffy animals.

"Fine, so there are two of us. Great." He shrugged. "So let's take firefighting, just as an example. Think how many more fires twenty new firemen could deal with compared with just two superheroes. See, we're expensive and inefficient."

Studying the blaze on the horizon I caught a whiff of burning in the night air and I thought about what



Zack had said. Were superheroes a waste of money? But without Star Lad, Earth would've been flattened by a giant asteroid, invaded by aliens, swallowed whole, or ripped apart by quantum forces. That stuff was more important than a weekly bin collection. And anyway, I liked living in a world with superheroes.

I yawned. My best friend, Serge, says that I sound like an exhausted Wookie when I yawn. It had been a long day; I'd expended a great deal of effort in avoiding a significant amount of maths and English homework. Before I went to bed I made sure to leave the window wide open for Zack to fly through when he did eventually come home. In that regard he was a bit like Peter Pan, but without the green tights and the curious attachment to fairies. Like the rest of the world, I felt safe with him out there. But unlike them, I realised as I rested my head on my Spider-Man pillow, I felt safe with him in here too. And as I drifted off into a superhero dream-filled sleep it struck me, not for the first time, that I liked living in a world with Zack. Not that I'd ever admit it to his face.

"Wake up."

I was flying in my dreams when Zack's voice brought me down to earth like a well-aimed kryptonite-tipped

arrow. I sat up in bed, startled by the urgency of his tone. My eyes slowly adjusted to the fuzzy dark. The streetlight outside my still-open window splashed an orange glow across the bedroom floor where I saw Zack pacing anxiously. He was wearing his Star Lad costume and his cape flicked out as he turned. His mask was pushed off his face and rested against his forehead. I glanced at my Green Lantern alarm clock on the bedside table. Three a.m.

"Must have been some night," I said. "You want to tell me about it?"

He peeled off the cape and folded it neatly into a square, tucking it under one arm. "False alarm. They didn't need me."

"But what about the explosion and the fire?"

"Someone was burning rubbish in their garden and it got out of control." He removed his mask. "The fire brigade dealt with it."

I propped myself up on my elbows. "So what have you been doing all this time?"

"Thinking," he said. I didn't like the way he said it. "I sent a message to Zorbon using my telepathic power. I've asked him to come over tomorrow."

That was weird. Usually Zorbon showed up unannounced with a dire prophecy about the end of the



world, which inevitably led to a mission for Star Lad and the rest of us. To my knowledge this was the first time that Zack had called him. I felt a creeping sense of unease.

"Luke, I've made a decision." Zack paused, and by the light of the streetlamp I could see his face knot up with concern. "I'm getting rid of my superpowers."

2
AVENGERS ASSEMBLY



"Are they transferable?"

That was the first question Serge asked me at school the next morning when I told him about Zack's terrible decision.

I shook my head sadly. It had been my question too when Zack informed me of his intention. If my brother didn't want his powers, then I was happy to take them on. But when I'd said that last night he had shown only irritation, and then he'd stormed out of my bedroom. Though not before pausing in the doorway to drop another bombshell.

"Things are about to change," he'd said.

"Well, *duh*," I'd snapped.

"I'm not just talking about the superpowers," he'd said. "Other stuff too. Big stuff."

What could possibly be bigger than giving up being Star Lad?

"Listen to me," Zack had said. "As much as you want it to, the world can't stay the same forever."

He was speaking in riddles. "Is this about another invasion? Is Earth about to fall off its axis? What did Zorbon tell you?"

For a moment I'd thought he was about to say more, but he stopped himself. His expression softened and he fixed me with a kindly smile.

"G'night, Luke."

The door clicked as he closed it behind him.

I was no clearer about his puzzling words the following day, as Serge and I filed into the gym alongside the rest of our year group for a special assembly. We sat cross-legged on the floor while teachers patrolled the lines, watching beadily and calling for silence whenever it was broken.

"Is Zack certain that Zorbon *can* remove his powers?" Serge pondered.

"He bestowed them in the first place," I said. In comics, superpowers were always "bestowed" not simply "given".

"*Oui*, but it is not like receiving a gift of, for example…" Serge hummed as he contemplated the most fitting comparison. "A pineapple. You cannot simply say: please now remove my pineapple."

Serge was right – Zack's powers weren't like a pineapple. They were as much a part of him now as his love for algebra and dislike of comics. Leaving aside the finer points of superpower removal, there was still time before Zorbon arrived at the weekend for me to do something. Between now and then I had to persuade Zack to change his mind.

"I'm calling an emergency S.C.A.R.F. meeting," I whispered. S.C.A.R.F. was the Superhero Covert Alliance Reaction Force, an organisation set up by Serge and me to work alongside Star Lad and Dark Flutter. This might very well be its most important mission yet. "Today, after school, in the tree house. Zack will listen to all of us if we put on a united front."

Serge glanced along the line of seated classmates. I followed his gaze to a girl with short dark hair and a lightly freckled face. Her hands were folded neatly in her lap and her bright, intelligent eyes peered straight ahead at the stage. She was Lara Lee – friend, neighbour and Dark Flutter.



"I am not sure how united we will be," Serge said quietly.

I understood what he meant. During our latest adventure, on a fateful minibreak to Great Minds Leisure Park, we had encountered an evil brain-in-a-jar with incredible mind powers. There had been a lot of body-swap shenanigans, in the course of which Serge and Lara had briefly occupied one another's bodies. That wouldn't have been so bad, but they were boyfriend and girlfriend at the time. Their relationship hadn't survived the switcheroo, and now things between them were awkward, to say the least.

"C'mon, Serge, pull yourself together. This is more important than all that lovey-dovey stuff, this is about something deep and meaningful." I laid a hand on his shoulder and fixed him in the eye. "*Superheroes*."

He offered me a faltering smile and then looked down at the floor with a sigh.

Our headteacher, Mr Hines, took to the stage and clapped for our attention. Lingering conversations dwindled into silence. Standing beside Mr Hines was a man I didn't recognise. He had thick dark hair with a white streak down the middle of his head, as if he was wearing a badger. He was dressed in a stripy shirt and jeans and slung over one shoulder was a canvas bag with

the words "Books Are My Bag" on the front. Even from where I was sitting near the back of the hall I could tell that he was sweating.

"Who's this guy?" I asked Serge.

"You do not know?" He sounded surprised. "The posters have been up all over school for some time. Did you not receive the letter to take home to your parents? And the two subsequent reminder letters?"

Now that he mentioned it I vaguely remembered tucking a series of correspondence from the school office in my bag. I was fairly confident the letters were still in there, possibly next to a month-old banana.

"He is Arthur Veezat," said Serge, lowering his voice so as not to attract the attention of a nearby teacher.

"Is he French then?"

"Hmm?" Serge gave me a strange look. "*Non*, I said that he is our *author visit*."

Now I understood. The school occasionally drafted in children's authors in an effort to inspire us with their stirring personal stories of how they came to write a book none of us had ever heard of. Mr Hines introduced him and I listened for about five minutes as the author jumped about the stage, gesticulating wildly and shouting out words like "plot", "character" and "royalties". But I was too busy thinking about Zack



and our important S.C.A.R.F. business to take in much of what he was saying. After a while he calmed down and read a chapter from his book. I felt myself lulled to sleep as his monotonous voice drifted over the hall.

When the reading was finally over Serge turned to me and said, "Our adventures are far more interesting than his. Per'aps we should write them down also."

He was forgetting one thing. "But then everyone who reads them would discover Star Lad and Dark Flutter's true identities." I still cared about that stuff, even if Zack was ready to throw it all away.

"We could change the names. Instead of Luke and Serge, we will be Lionel and Steve. And instead of Star Lad and Dark Flutter…" He frowned in silence. Superhero names were tricky, all the good ones having been taken. "I will get back to you on that."

In fact, recording our adventures was something that had occurred to me some time ago. A lot had happened since Zorbon's first visit to the tree house and I would hate to forget a single detail, so I had been writing down our missions in a series of superhero-themed notebooks that Serge had given me for my last birthday. I'd already covered our first adventure with the Nemesis asteroid, the invasion by alien gym teachers, Gordon the World-Eater, and my trip to a parallel Earth to confront my Evil

Twin. One day I would be as ancient and forgetful as my dad, so it would be nice to have a record.

The author didn't exactly finish his presentation with a bang. It sort of just fizzled out and then the teachers realised it was over and we clapped a bit and the assembly came to an end. As the classes filed out in their usual disorderly fashion, the author took a seat at a table piled high with his books. He uncapped a pen and watched the departing children with an expression of sad resignation. The hall emptied until there was just me and a handful of others, including Serge and Lara. We trickled over to his table, forming a short queue, and a minute and a half later I was at the front, face-to-face with Arthur Veezat, or whatever his name was.

His features creased into a question. "Have we met before?"

"I don't think so."

"You look familiar. Maybe when I visited your school last year?"

I shook my head. "You're the first author I've ever met."

"That's not true," Lara interjected. "You've met my aunt Farah."

"I thought she was a dentist."

"She's an author-dontist. She says there's no money



in books, so she fixes people's teeth for cash and writes stories for fun."

I could see a confused expression appear on Arthur's face. Lara had that effect on people. But there was no point arguing with her. He plucked one of his books from the top of a pile, opened it and hovered his pen above the page.

"So what's your name, young man?" he enquired.

"Luke," I said.

He beamed up at me. "That's my son's name too." He began to write it in the book. "To Luke," he said as he scribbled.

Standing in front of a real author, even one as lame as Arthur, got me thinking about my own writing. Maybe Arthur could offer me some tips.

"I'm writing a book," I said. "Any advice?"

"You mean apart from all that insightful writing advice I imparted during my fun-filled presentation?"

"Exactly." I leaned in. "I want the good stuff. The under-the-counter advice. The *secret* to writing."

"I don't think there's a secret, but one thing I would say – know how it ends." He gestured to the stack of books. "This is the last in my series. I knew how it would end way back when I began the first one." He paused. "I wrote them for my children. For my Luke, and my

little girl, Lara."

"That's my name," said Lara delightedly, and then she caught Serge's eye and they scowled at each other.

"My kids are grown up now," Arthur said with a deep sigh, "so it's time to bring these stories to a conclusion." He laid a hand on the cover and a glazed expression came over his face. Not glazed like a doughnut – the other kind where you stare unfixed into the distance. Either he'd forgotten what he was about to say again, or he was lost in thought.

Serge cleared his throat. "Do you *per'aps* have a third child whose name is Serge?"

Arthur laughed. "Sorry, Serge." He slid the book he'd been writing in across the table to me. "Six ninety-nine."

"Excuse me?"

"For the book." He tapped the price, which was clearly labelled on the back cover.

"Why would I want a book?"

He looked baffled. "You're in the signing queue."

Serge stepped in front of me, unzipping a small leather wallet and producing a wad of notes from inside. "Please forgive my friend. I should like to purchase your complete *oeuvre*." He handed over the cash and we waited while Arthur happily signed each of the five books in the series.



"Here," Arthur said, pushing the same book into my hands. "It's already signed to you – you might as well have it."

I hesitated, staring suspiciously at it. "Does the main character's dad have a silver filigree pocket-watch that's been handed down through the generations?"

Arthur looked puzzled. "Is that important?"

I nodded. "It's a sure sign that the dad's going to die. And I can't be doing with any of that."

"Just take the book, Luke," he said through gritted teeth.

After that, Lara bought the latest one, saying they were her favourites, which I knew was a lie because I'd seen her bookshelves and they're full of miserable novels about growing up, which, to give him credit, Arthur's were not. We thanked him and headed out. I could feel his eyes on us as we crossed the gym, and when we reached the door he called out.

"Goodbye, Luke, Lara and Serge. It was lovely meeting you all. And remember, we are all the heroes of our own stories."

He smiled at us and we waved back.

"He's a bit strange," I muttered to the others. "Probably all that time spent alone in a room talking to imaginary people."

We left the gym and made our way along the corridor to our next class. Know the ending, Arthur had advised. Useless. I was writing down real life, so there was no way of knowing. But at that moment, not in my wildest imagination, could I have pictured how my own story would end.

