The Time of Green Magic

Also by Hilary McKay
from Macmillan Children's Books

The Skylarks' War
The Exiles
The Exiles at Home
The Exiles in Love
Straw into Gold: Fairy Tales Re-Spun

The Time of Green Magic

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For Bella, with love



Salt Spray and Shadows

There were no curtains at the window and the room was bare, except for the sofa and Abi's rocking horse and Abi herself, hunched over her book like a diving bird on the edge of a pool, poised between worlds. The grey late afternoon was cold, but Abi didn't notice because in her book the sun was blazing hot, even in the shade of the big, creaking sail. Judging by the amount left to read, the journey was about halfway through.

Abi turned the pages slowly, not wanting it ever to end. She was crossing the Pacific Ocean on a raft made of logs, rush matting and rope. Out in the ocean, buffeted by the lively wind, everything was moving: the long waves, the glinting reflected light, and the giant, rolling balsa-wood logs. There were no clouds. The enormous sky fitted the enormous ocean like a great blue basin, turned upside down. The basin's rim was the immense circle of the horizon, sky blue against sea blue.

Every now and then Abi looked up, to absorb the perfect roundness of that horizon, squinting to see against the

brightness and salt wind. Everything was salty. Her lips tasted salty. Salt spray had twisted her already curly black hair into tight salty springs. They blew into her eyes and stung. She pushed them aside, hardly noticing, and read deeper and deeper.

Her name was Abigail, but only Granny Grace called her that. Everyone else called her Abi. Reading was Abi's escape. She read while other people cooked meals and loaded dishwashers and swept floors. She read while her father dragged into her life Polly as stepmother, plus two entirely unwanted brothers. She read through the actual wedding ceremony. She read while Granny Grace flew away, back to Jamaica, a trip postponed for ten years while she helped bring up Abi. She had read through the year that followed, squashed with three strangers into a too small house. Most recently she had read through the start of a new school.

But she had never read a book like this.

It was a hardback, with a faded blue cover. *The Kon-Tiki Expedition*, read the tarnished silver letters on the front. It was old-fashioned – she had skipped loads – but the bits she had read were entrancing. Lately, it had begun to have a sound to it, a soft echo when you opened the pages, like the ocean sound in a seashell.

Abi read: '*We were visited by whales many times. Most often they were small porpoises . . .*'

There was a parrot, bright green, always curious, never in the same place. It flew down towards her, swerved away at the last moment . . .

'Abi, Abi, *Abi*!'

Abi jumped so hard she would have fallen if she hadn't put out a hand to save herself. Her book did slip. She grabbed it just in time.

'Abi, I can't see you!'

'Here on the sofa,' said Abi, blinking, half dazzled by Pacific sunlight.

'There was . . . What was that green?'

'What green?'

But Louis had already forgotten. It had been no more than a wing tip, a fan-swirl of green parrot feathers; it had flickered into Louis' vision and left no imprint as it vanished.

Louis vanished too. Abi was alone in the quiet room again. It felt strange to be back, to look around and notice that the light in the room was autumn faded, and the wind had ceased to blow. She rubbed her eyes, and found them stinging, then cautiously tasted a tip of a finger.

Salt.



Chapter One

In the beginning (and ever since her mother's car crash when she was just a year old), Abi had lived with her father, Theo.

Granny Grace, Theo's mother, lived with them too. Granny Grace had been going to take a break from her work teaching and visit Jamaica when the accident happened, but she never did. She said she'd rather look after Abigail instead.

At the same time (and ever since their father had decided he'd rather have no children and live in New Zealand), Max and Louis had lived with their mother, Polly.

Abi and Theo and Granny Grace lived happily in a small sunny flat in one part of the city. Polly and Max and Louis lived just as happily in a small terraced house in another.

These two sets of people didn't know each other.

This all changed one afternoon when Max and his best friend Danny were in a fixing-things mood and took apart their skateboards, cleaned out the gunk from the wheels and the axles, put them together again, and sprayed all the moving

parts with expensive lubricating spray borrowed without asking from one of Danny's big brothers.

Then they went outside to try them, and Louis went with them to watch.

'They should go much faster,' said Danny, and he dropped his board on to the pavement and gave a mighty launching-off kick, and the front wheels could not have been fixed back on properly because Danny went hurtling down on to concrete paving slabs just as Max got into action. Max's wheels stayed on, and his board was now spectacularly fast. Max mowed down Louis and went straight over Danny before he too hit the ground.

Then Polly, hearing the roars, came rushing out of the house, and when she saw the boys all bleeding and wailing and blocking the pavement, she unhesitatingly took them to hospital in the old blue car she had painted herself, with the tiger cushions in the back. Louis had two skinned knees and a lump on his head like a great dark purple plum. Danny and Max had a broken arm each and various lesser injuries, but the chief thing that happened at the hospital was that Polly met Theo. Theo was the nurse in the Accident and Emergency department who oversaw the management of the skateboarding calamity. He did it with such admirable cheerfulness and calm that very soon the injured ones stopped feeling like woeful victims, and became instead very pleased with themselves, fine adventurers and heroes all.

'Thank you so much for popping in,' Theo said at last, six or seven hours later and pitch dark outside, when all the

bandages, slings, plasters, and stickers saying how brave people had been, were finally in place.

'It's been lovely,' said Polly. 'I've enjoyed every moment.'

Then Theo's smiling eyes gazed into Polly's sparkling ones, gazed and gazed and gazed.

'Do you believe in love at first sight?' asked Theo (unprofessionally).

'Yes,' said Polly. 'I do.'

That was how the two families met, and a few months later, when Abi was eleven, Theo and Polly married each other.

'Oh, my!' said Granny Grace. Not at the start, though. When she'd first met Polly, she'd been awful about the thought of a stepmother coming into Abi's life, but by the time of the wedding things were different. 'A little bird has told me your Polly is a wonder,' said Granny Grace. Granny Grace's network of little birds stretched all around London, and even back into the past. They knew everything and were infallible. She trusted them completely, so she'd finally come round.

'Oh, my!' said Granny Grace, after much communication with many little birds. 'Can it be that my work here is done at last?'

Never once, throughout the whole ten years that Granny Grace had lived with them, had she mentioned that long-postponed trip back to Jamaica. Suddenly she couldn't hide her joy.

'Did you know she wanted to write a cookbook with her sister?' demanded Abi of Theo. 'That she owns quarter-shares in

a beach cafe and they are going to rebuild and relaunch with a whole new menu? Did you know she has so many nieces and nephews, and that they all have children she's never seen? Did you know she inherited a cat that lives with her friend? Or how much she has missed Jamaican flowers? She'll never come back!' lamented Abi.

'Then we'll visit her,' said Theo. 'And meet the cat and eat at the cafe and learn the names of the flowers and admire all the babies.'

'Just me and you?'

'And Polly and the boys – they'll love it. Don't gaze up at the sky like that!'

'Well!' said Abi.

'Abi, Abi,' said Theo gently. 'You know, and I know, that Granny Grace deserves every happy moment.'

The next great change was that Theo and Abi moved into Polly and Louis and Max's house.

Then there were difficulties. The way that thirteen-year-old Max suddenly found himself sharing a bedroom with six-year-old Louis, which meant he entirely stopped inviting friends home and spent endless hours at their houses instead. The eye-rolling awfulness for Max and Abi (Louis didn't care) when Theo and Polly, for instance, held hands. Also Abi's problem with Louis, who had assumed little-brother rights much too fast. Louis continually forgot that his old room was now Abi's. He wandered in unannounced whether Abi was there or not, and he always seemed surprised to find himself unwelcome.

'I'm getting *dressed*!' Abi complained one morning.

'I know,' said Louis, unmoved.

He was a fragile, bony, pale little boy, with sticky hands always eager to reach and grab, or hug or hold. Baths and showers made little impact on the permanent grubbiness of Louis. His clothes never fitted, his mouth never quite closed, his blond tattered curls dangled over his eyes and as often as not housed nits. Nits! Abi had caught them and the treatment had been terrible and, afterwards, her hair! Polly had helped, and Theo had helped, but the person who could have helped most was thousands of miles away: Granny Grace, whose deft, quick fingers had for ten years twisted Abi's hair into woven braids and topknots with no apparent effort at all.

'You need a professional,' Granny Grace had dictated from Jamaica and commanded a trip to a hairdresser. That had solved the problem, and Polly had remarked, 'Next time, we'll know what to do.'

'There won't be a next time,' Abi vowed, and she had had to become very stern with Louis. 'Knock on the bedroom door, and then wait! . . . Put my bag down *now*! . . . No, I won't look at your horrible knee! And you shouldn't kiss people with your mouth full!'

On top of Abi's Louis problem, there was her intruder-feeling problem.

'A new, ready-made family for us, Abi,' said Theo. 'I always worried that you were an only child.'

'I still am an only child!' protested Abi, although silently, in her head. (She found herself doing a lot of silent protesting

in her head these days.) 'But now I'm an only child in someone else's house!'

Abi had felt like that from the start, in the kitchen with its cupboards full of other people's food and mugs and plates, and in the living room where she never knew where to sit. Even more, in her new tiny bedroom where she could not even escape with books without feeling guilty, because she was the only one with a room of her own.

'Thank you,' said Abi stiffly, when she first heard that Max and Louis were going to double up and share.

'Mum made us,' said Max grimly. 'I suppose we'll get used to it,' he added, sounding like he didn't believe it for a moment.

Abi didn't believe it either. Great quarrels came erupting from behind that bedroom door. Louis, although utterly messy in his appearance, was obsessively tidy in his room. Max was the opposite. Max lived in a great heap of Max-junk. He and Louis stuck a line of tape across their bedroom floor, dividing the enormous Max-mess from the extreme neatness of Louis. Nothing could stop Louis seeing over the line, though, just as nothing could save Max from having to listen to Louis droning himself to sleep at night, like an out-of-tune mosquito.

The rocking horse was yet another problem. He was no ordinary rocking horse; he was one of the full-sized, galloping sort, capable of catapulting a child some distance over his head when going at full speed, and foot-crushing and shin-rapping on an almost daily basis. Before Abi, he had belonged

to Abi's mother. Abi, who had parted with so much – her bedroom, her home, Granny Grace and nearly all her past life – had become silent when it came to what to do with Rocky. Not stubbornly silent, just plain miserable silent. And in the end Rocky had moved too.

Louis had been delighted.

'Rocky isn't a toy – he's an antique!' Abi protested, finding his saddle smeared all over with chocolate. 'What have you pushed in his mouth?'

'Banana for his breakfast,' said Louis unrepentantly. 'Can I glue a horn on his head so that he can be a unicorn?'

'No you CANNOT!' said Abi. 'Leave him alone! Why do I have to share *everything*?'

'You don't share anything!' said astonished Louis, and Abi, equally astonished, had only just managed not to growl, *What about my dad?*

There was no space for Rocky in Abi's new tiny bedroom, so he lived a wandering life until he ended up in the hall, squashed against the coats, taking people by surprise (and once knocking out a tooth). After the tooth problem (which had happened with one of Louis' friends) Theo said, 'Abi, don't you think . . . ?'

Polly rescued her. Polly said it was only a first tooth that would have had to come out anyway very soon, and that she, personally, had organized extra compensation from the tooth fairy, and had paid in advance.

'Thank you,' said Abi, and Max, inspired, stuck a notice on

the front door: BEWARE OF THE ROCKING HORSE, it said.

It was the first joke anyone had made for some time.

After that, very gradually, all of them living together began to be more bearable. Louis was just as grubby, Abi was still very quiet, but Max stayed at home slightly more, and the quarrels and negotiations became less frequent and noisy. And then, one March morning, a letter arrived in a long white envelope.

Polly read it and handed it to Theo, and their eyes met again, very worried this time. Polly said, 'I'm sure it's nothing to worry about, but . . .'

(At the word 'but' Louis, who was a worrier, felt an invisible line trace down his spine, as if drawn with gritty chalk.)

'. . . this house is rented and the owner wants it back . . .'

'So?' said Max.

'So we're not going to be able to live here much longer . . .'

Abi, with whom the being-silent habit had stuck, drew in her breath very suddenly, and they all noticed, the way people notice when leaves begin to move after a stillness in the air.

'Not live here any more?' Louis asked in such a doomed voice that Max explained, 'Mum means we're going to have to move house.'

Louis, after glancing from face to face, checking he was hearing right, exclaimed, 'But it's stuck to the ground!'

*

‘Moving house doesn’t mean you move the house!’ said Polly. ‘*We* will move, to another house.’

Louis couldn’t imagine how this could possibly be achieved. Did you one day just walk home from school to a different place? And then, did a new door open, and that was home? Did you take your stuff, or was that cheating?

They hurried to reassure him. You took your stuff.

‘Everything in the house,’ said Polly. ‘Nearly. Not the carpets. Or the fridge. The washing machine, but not the cooker. It’ll be fun! An adventure!’

An adventure, but not the cooker.

‘The taps?’ asked Louis.

‘There’ll be new taps,’ said Theo.

Louis sighed with relief and asked, ‘Where?’

Where became everything. They house-hunted on the internet, and on the streets and in estate agents’ windows, and they asked people-who-might-know, and nobody ever did. They lost track of the number of places they visited, where the neighbours looked scary, or the traffic was endless, or the garden (if there was a garden) was a rubbish heap. The local schools to those houses were either much too posh or looked like prisons.

Weekend after weekend, with more and more urgency, they searched. They stood in strange hallways and glanced uneasily at each other and the air smelt alien. Packing had already begun at home, and Louis wondered aloud about the possibility of packing air. Home smelt of toast, Polly’s lemony

perfume, damp coats and the fern on the windowsill. After some thought Louis fetched a shoebox and carried it from room to room, scooping it full. Then he took it outside, lifted a corner of the lid and sniffed, taking care not to let much escape.

It didn't work. It smelt of shoebox.

'Not of home,' said Louis. 'Not a bit.'

'No,' agreed Abi, for whom home had smelt quite differently, of cooking and coffee mostly, drying laundry and running shoes.

'What'll we do?'

'You'll have to put up with it,' said Abi.

'Put up with it?'

'Bear it,' said Abi. 'Bear everything different. Like I did.'

Bear it, wondered Louis. First the cooker, and the taps (although there would be new ones), now this new worry. He had grown accustomed to Abi not talking, the way he was accustomed to trees not talking. Now suddenly the words were back. Very startling words too. *Everything different.* What next would Abi announce in her hardly used, slightly husky voice?

'I've found a house,' said Abi.

They were in yet another estate agent's, and it was late in the day. Polly was in charge. She had marched in, determined, saying, 'A house is a house. We are being far too fussy.'

Then she had been far too fussy herself, instructing them,

'We're renting, not buying, so we don't need to bother with places for sale. Louis!'

Louis, who had begun running in small circles, changed to jogging on the spot.

'Please, Louis!'

Louis sighed, and slumped down beside Max, who had found himself a sticky, squashy, plastic-covered seat and taken out his mobile phone.

'Can I play a game on it?' asked Louis, without much hope.

'No,' said Max, so Louis allowed his spine to become boneless, and trickled down the gap in the back of the chair.

Abi looked at the FOR SALE displays that they didn't need to bother with, and found a house half built of leaves under a pointed roof.

'I've found a house!' she said again, and this time very much louder. 'Here!'

'Nope,' said Theo after a single glance. 'Not possible! It's not for rent. Besides, look at all that ivy!'

The estate agent (who knew, by the condition of their shoes and the hunch of their shoulders, the exact income and state of mind of everyone who arrived through his door) now came over too. As a matter of fact, he said, the house was actually for sale *or* to rent, and the ivy made it a wonderful bargain. 'Insulation,' he explained (he had been trying to get rid of the house for a long time, and what with the ivy and other things, it was proving a very hard job). 'Insulation,' he repeated. 'And – of course – green!' Then he pressed a house brochure into Polly's hand.

'Oh no!' she exclaimed after one startled look. 'Too tall. Too narrow. Too many stairs. Rooms stacked like boxes on top of each other. And much too much money!'

'Hear, hear!' said Theo.

'Oh dear,' said the estate agent, and he gazed at them as if they were a problem family, so that Polly, feeling judged and guilty, looked at the brochure again and said, 'Of course it would be perfect, in a way, but the cost! And anyway that ivy must be full of spiders!'

'Not at all,' said the estate agent, suddenly sounding as confident as David Attenborough, 'because of facing north.'

Theo and Polly looked at each other with the faces of people who know nothing about spiders or facing north but are damned if they will admit it.

Louis demanded, 'Are we staying here all day?' from his carpet-smelling cave, and Theo said, 'Absolutely not,' so they went and looked at other places.

The other places were all so awful that by evening they deliberately drove home by way of Abi's house to prove that it really was impossible.

It was at the bottom of a street that ended in a dark bank of yew trees and it was like no other house they had ever seen. It had coloured glass in the windows and an arched front door.

'We might as well get out for a minute,' said Theo, so they did, and stood with their heads tipped back, straining to see the peak of the pointy roof. The house was so tall and narrow that this was difficult.

Ivy covered the house, right up to the top. The front and

the visible side were entirely green. Louis pushed his hand deep into the leaves to feel the warm brick underneath.

Beside the front door was a lantern straight out of Narnia: wrought iron and glass panels. Abi found a light switch, half hidden amongst leaves.

'The electricity will be off,' said Polly, but Abi tried it anyway, and suddenly the lamp glowed golden, like a promise or a blessing, shining down on their upturned faces, melting all their hearts.

There was a thin new moon in a pale green sky. Traffic whizzed past at the end of the road but the street itself was quiet.

'It's beyond us completely,' said Theo and Polly sadly, and turned off the lamp, herded everyone into the car, and drove away.

There was nothing on the internet, nothing. They searched all evening, going mad. Then they went back to the estate agent and got the key to the ivy house.

'How can we rule it out completely if we don't look inside?' asked Theo, excusing this insanity.

Inside, the air smelt of long ago. The stairs were the sort you fly down in dreams. The coloured glass in the hall windows seemed full of accumulated sunlight. In this house, thought Abi, it felt that nothing could be impossible.

Eventually, one by one, they drifted apart, exploring, opening doors, pausing by windows.

'There'd be room,' said Polly, 'for Abi's rocking horse.' And she spoke like a very tired person seeing the end of a journey.

'Room here,' said Theo, 'for half a dozen rocking horses! A flock! A herd! What's the word for a lot of rocking horses?'

'A rocketing,' said Polly, and then she and Theo sat down on the stairs and began working out how much they could afford if they worked much harder and kept it up till they were ancient and never had any emergencies, holidays or extra children.

Abi went to count the rooms. The kitchen was the biggest, with old-fashioned cupboards and a huge battered table. There was also a sitting room with wooden panels right up to the cobwebby ceiling, and an instant waiting silence when she opened the door. She discovered the boys in the attic bedrooms, which were up two flights of stairs. Louis had spotted a wooden box in a corner. It was locked, but Max found a key on the windowsill.

'Treasure,' wondered Louis hopefully.

'Books,' Max said, disappointed, when he got it open. 'This can be Abi's room, because of the books.'

Abi's room, Abi heard. A room of her own again, where she had a perfect right to be. Hers, because she liked books. 'Yes, this can be my room,' she said aloud. She turned the books over, one by one. They were old, faded hardbacks with mottled pages, about half a dozen, perhaps.

'Nobody reads stuff like that any more,' said Max.

'I will,' said Abi. 'If we move here. I wish I could help.'

'Help?' asked Max.

'With money,' said Abi, and she began collecting together her treasures in her thoughts. How much were they worth,

and could she part with them? Not Rocky, of course, but her silver charm bracelet (no, NO! But yes, if necessary). Her Lego pirate ship that had taken a whole year to assemble, her signed Harry Potter book, her collection of Jamaican seashells, her book token and her very small pine tree that she had grown herself from a pine-cone seed.

Max was not going to be outdone by Abi. He thought of his savings: nearly a hundred pounds in pocket money, birthday presents and uneaten school lunches. He'd known they would need it one day. And it would be worth a hundred pounds not to have to share with Louis.

Louis said urgently, 'Listen!'

'What?'

'No, listen!'

The house with its ivy sighed and creaked around them.

'Gone,' said Louis at last.

'What was it?'

Louis shook his head, not wanting to say, so Max finished giving out the bedrooms. Book room for Abi, and the one next door for himself. Square bedroom on the floor below for Polly and Theo, and smallest room next to it for Louis. The window of that room was particularly deep in ivy, and when Louis pushed it open to admire his view he heard a sound like a question: 'To-who? To-who?'

'There!' breathed Louis. 'That's what I heard before! A nowl.'

Theo and Polly heard the owl too.

'Is this house what you might call . . . eerie?' asked Polly.

'Yes,' said Theo.

'Yes,' agreed Polly. 'I'm glad it's not just me.'

'Bound to be,' said Theo. 'So old. The ivy. Nothing wrong with a bit of eer! It's not like there's poltergeists throwing things at your head.'

Polly shivered, and then got up from the stairs and went to peer at the garden. 'It's been let go wild. What's behind those yews? Oh . . .'

'Quiet neighbours,' said Theo, who had already worked out that the churchyard was next door, and hadn't known whether to mention it.

'What?' asked Abi, suddenly appearing, and Theo told her, 'Just seen, behind the yew hedge . . .'

'Oh,' said Abi. 'The old churchyard.'

'Doesn't it put you off, Abi?' said Theo, raising his eyebrows.

Abi shook her head. 'Could we move here?' she asked.

'We've got to move somewhere,' said Polly, clutching her ears, as she did in times of stress.

'I can help. There's my signed Harry Potter. We could sell it.'

'Oh, Abi,' said Theo.

'You can use my hundred pounds if you need it,' said Max, who had followed Abi down.

'There was a nowl,' said Louis, from the landing above. 'A nowl,' he repeated, pushing past them all, and tugging open the front door. 'Listen!'

'To-who?' came the question again, faintly from beyond the yew trees, and Louis on the doorstep whispered, 'To me! To me!'

Abi came to stand beside him. She heard the huff and whine of traffic at the top of the road, a faint radio from the noodle shop on the corner, the rattle of an empty crisp packet blown in a gust of wind, car doors, her own heart, a rustle from the base of the yew hedge and the slam of a door.

No owls (or nowls), but, once, a wheezy croak.

'Would you like to live here?' she asked Louis.

'Not on my own,' said Louis, alarmed.

'No, no, with all of us.'

'All right,' agreed Louis, and then, without warning, took off and ran inside.

Abi lingered after he had gone, listening. The owl called again. The Narnia lamp shone on the breathing ivy leaves. There was a smell of flowers. Abi hunted in the half-light until she found them, white bells on thin wiry stems amongst spear-shaped leaves. She took a stem inside.

'Lily-of-the-valley!' exclaimed Polly when she saw them. 'When I was little . . . Oh, let's try for this house, Theo! I could work much longer hours! I've been longing to get back to it, ever since Louis started school!'

Polly worked for a charity. Before Max and Louis, she'd travelled a lot. She was wonderful at organizing people in crisis. Wonderful. Brilliantly bossy, resourceful and kind.

'I loved it,' said Polly, 'and I'd be mostly in the offices here. It needn't be lots of travelling. A week or two perhaps, now and then.'

'OK. Listen,' said Theo. 'If I didn't run a car. No petrol bills. No parking. Cycle lanes nearly all the way to the hospital.'

‘Could you really manage?’ asked Polly.

‘Course I could. Easy. I’d like a bike again. Pizza on the way home?’

Pizza was a celebration food. They bought it on the way back, with extra olives, mushrooms and chillis, and they parted with as many things as they could bear to let go, including Abi’s signed Harry Potter and half of Max’s savings, and they rented the house with the coloured glass in the windows, and the ivy and the arched front door.