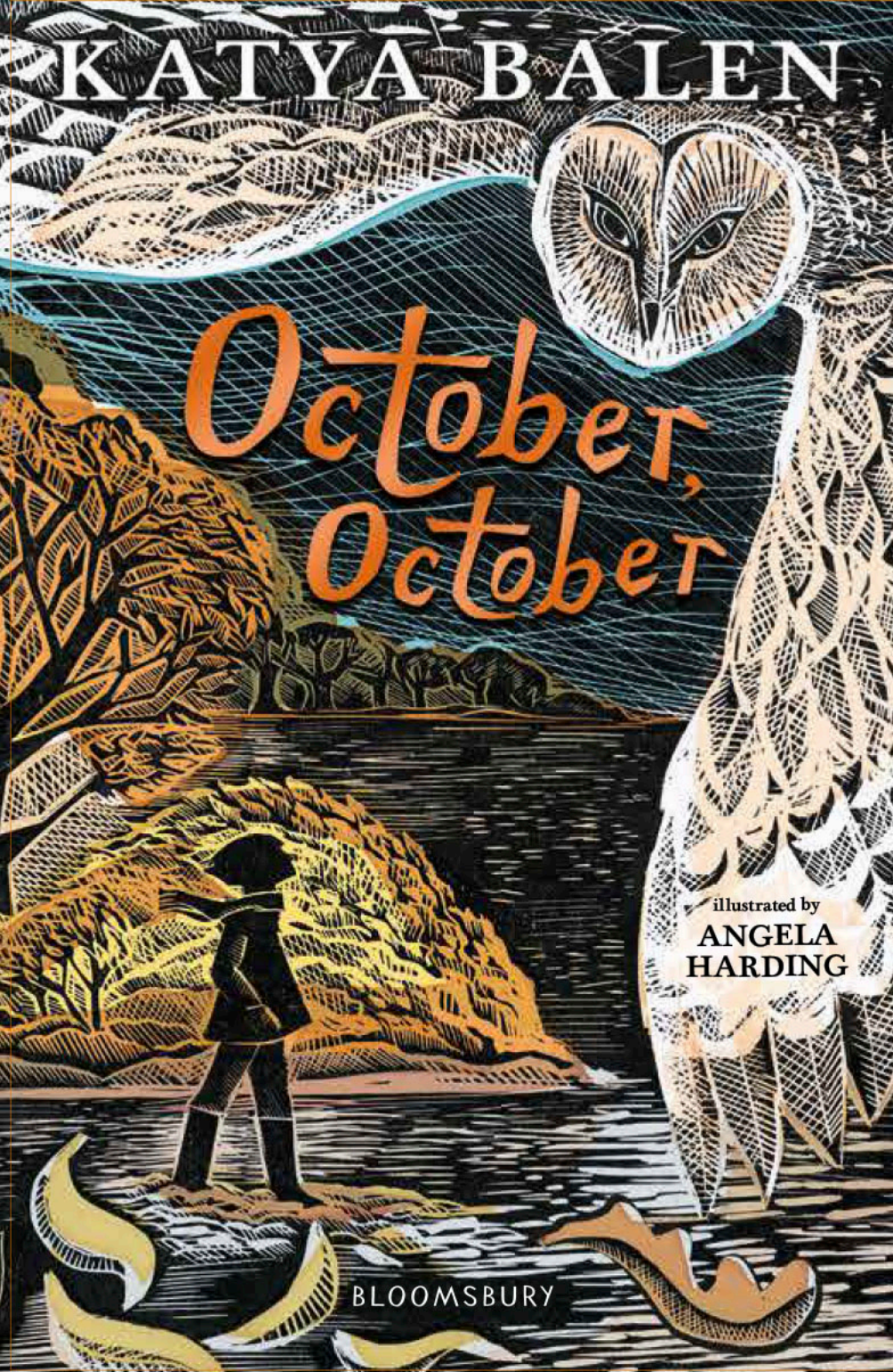
KATYA BALEN
October, October
illustrated by
ANGELA HARDING
BLOOMSBURY

October, October

Books by Katya Balen

The Space We're In

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ANGELA HARDING

BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK

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First published in Great Britain in 2020 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5266-0190-2; TPB: 978-1-5266-2049-1;
eBook: 978-1-5266-0191-9

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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Ruby Lambert, this one's for you

We find the owl at the very edge of our woods the morning after the storm. Wind-blasted and wings flight-frozen and round eyes glassy. I touch its feathers lightly with my fingertip and I'm surprised because they still feel real even though the owl has slipped away somewhere else and Dad is already digging a hole for it in the rain-soaked earth.

I lift its body and it's huge in my hands but the hollow bones do most of the work for me and I almost think the owl might shake the stiffness from its feathers and fly away. I sometimes see flashes of owls dipping through the trees. I hear them calling softly

like they're singing night songs to each other and they're beautiful, and like secrets wrapped up in the darkness. I really don't think this one should go into a hole in the ground. I say that to Dad and he says that it's the *circle of life* and that now the owl will *become part of nature again*. Rotting down to bones and feeding the soil with its flesh and growing the roots of plants from its feathers. I almost want to see it happening. Once I found the skeleton of a fox swirled into a circle of bones and scraps of fur. The sweep of its skull and the harp of its ribs were bone-white and beautiful.

Dad shifts the last of the dirt with his spade and sits down at the base of a tree with a huff of air that smokes around him. I put the bird in the hole and mark the grave with a smooth pebble so I'll always know.

After we've buried the owl we walk all around the woods and clear the worst of the damage from the winds and the rain and a little tongue of lightning that has licked the old oak with the branches

that spread out like the tentacles of a giant squid. The damage isn't as bad as it's been before and it feels like the storm has cleaned everything back to being new and fresh. I use my hawk eyes and search the ground in flicks and sweeps and I find treasures in the rain-raked earth just like always. Slivers of pottery and something that could be a Roman coin. Gems of smooth blue-green glass. I slip them into my pocket and they bump against each other and clamour to tell their stories to me, but I'll listen later. Now we scrape and chop and rake and tug until half-cracked branches and split trunks are neatened and the raggedy edges of the woods start to look a little bit better.

I help Dad load the best of the fallen branches on to the trailer so we can chop them for firewood or maybe a bonfire, and then we drive the quad over the muddy paths and back to the house so we can unload it into the woodstore. This is my least favourite job because it makes my muscles ache and no matter how much wood I move from the trailer into the

store the pile never seems to get any smaller. But I think about the stories hiding in my pocket and I can already feel the beginnings and the middles and the ends start to stitch themselves together in my brain and my muscles work on their own. I reach again and again until my hands touch air and the trailer is empty. Dad and I climb on to the quad bike so we can drive it round the woods for one final check.

Dad lets me drive, although my legs aren't long enough to flick the gears with my feet so he does that bit while he's sitting behind me. We wind through the woods in a circle back to the owl.

Dad says *hang on slow down a second* but I'm already going so slowly that I just have to stop completely and he climbs off the back of the quad. He pushes back a matted curtain of sedge and stoops down. *Come and see this* he says and I hop down and peer into the dark because maybe he's found more treasures stirred from the soil.

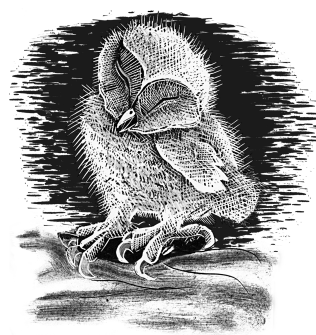
It's an owl. A tiny feathered speck of baby owl.

A white heart shape just starting to print on its face. Wide eyes. A minuscule flick of a beak. Fat fragile chest. Dipped in a quiver of soft puffs from its head to the tips of its folded wings.

I reach out my fingers towards it but Dad catches my hand gently and shakes his head. *We have to leave it. Another owl might come back for it and if we take an owl this little …*

His voice fades off and I want to snatch the unspoken words out of his mouth and throw them into the darkening sky because I don't want to leave this owl hidden in bruised leaves and all alone.

He tells me to pop inside while he puts the quad away so I can get a hot drink and warm up a bit before we go back out and sort some supper.



When I'm inside I put the kettle on the stove and sit in my favourite chair. It's squashy and patched up and it looks like it might be a hundred years old.

The stuffing is starting to fall out of one side again and it puffs out like a storm cloud.

I settle in and look up how long it takes for a buried bird to become nothing but those hollow bones that felt like air in my hands, and all the books say six months. So by March the buried owl will be snow-white in the dark beneath me. I don't think about where the baby will be but I cross my fingers so hard that the bones pop bright in my knuckles and I wish that a parent comes back for it.

I read about owls and how they eat mice and voles and shrews. They eat every last scrap and all the stuff they can't digest is regurgitated back out in a pellet. You can see the skin and bones and fur of everything they've eaten. I read about how the first thing they see that brings them food is the thing they will always think of as their parent, even if that's a hand puppet with a mouse in its paw.

I finish reading and wash my sweaty hair in the kitchen sink. I shake the droplets loose like pearls that burst in the air around me.

* * *

We live in the woods and we are wild.

Tonight we howl at the star-dusted sky. We throw our voices and shape them and mix them and mould them like clay. We can stretch our sounds so that they reach the very tops of our tallest trees and down to the secret-filled earth and so that they tangle in the brambles and skim across the pond because this world is ours and we are alone.

Just us.

A pocket of people in a pocket of a world that's small as a marble. We are tiny and we are everything and we are wild.

We live in the woods.

We live in the woods and we are wild.

Our house sits in the woods and it's made from the trees that frame it. They've been chopped and planed and smoothed into a house, and so it's not the same as looking at the twisted reaches of the branches but

I like to be inside the woods. It feels like a secret because we are hidden away and forgotten about in the best way, even though people know we're here. We have to go into the village every year or so and buy the food we can't grow or the clothes we can't make, which is nearly all clothes except for socks and even those aren't very good when I try. Dad can turn a ball of wool into a foot shape with a click-clack of needles and half an eye on the stove but I can't manage more than a tangle. We get all the things we need for another year and slip back into the woods while the village forgets us again.

The house was built by Dad before I was born. I wasn't born here though, because at the last minute the woman who is my mother said *no way* and she was whisked off to the hospital and she was pushed down corridors that were white and bright and treeless and blank and like nothing she remembered. But then she did remember. She remembered all the things like microwaves and internet and heating that happens at the push of a button and not from the roar

of a stove that makes your clothes smell smoky and sweet. She remembered, and when she had her baby wrapped in a white blanket that matched the walls and the sheets and the pillows she said to Dad that she *couldn't go back*.

She did, for a bit. But she was floating off into the world that fringes ours, and when I was four she was gone. In my head I think I remember the day she left but the memory is like trying to hold water in my cupped hands and it trickles away before my eyes. There are wisps of a woman holding on to my hand and I feel my whole body being pulled along by the tide of another person running and my legs can't keep up. There's crying and I know that I let out a shriek so loud it pierced the sky and the birds scattered.

I wouldn't let her leave with me. I wouldn't leave the woods.

When I try and remember her now it's like she's been sliced out of the memory and all that's left is a black person-shaped shadow where she should be, or sometimes she's there but then her edges

fuzz and curl into smoke and nothing's left. I hate her for leaving the wild and I hate her for leaving us and I hate her for leaving our perfect little pocket of the world.

She writes all the time but I don't ever read the letters. I don't know why Dad even bothers collecting them from the wooden letter box at the very edge of the track that leads out into the whole wide world. She's the only person who ever posts us anything. Once Dad opened one of the letters and laid it out on the kitchen table for me to read, but I scrunched up the paper into a scribbled ball and watched it turn to ash in the fire and the inky words fade into the embers. When I was five she came to the woods and I hid up a tree and didn't come down until it was night, even when Dad climbed up to try to coax me out. She did it again when I was seven and then again when I was nine, and every time I scrambled into the safety of branches. Dad says she's not too far away and I should see her and see where she lives and talk to her and be her daughter again, but I stop

scavenging and climb up to the top of a tree whenever he talks about her and he doesn't do it so much now. Everything is far away from here and that's exactly how I want it to stay.

There's a word in German that I read about. German has all these strange and magical words that have a million feelings curled up in the letters, like being happy when someone else is sad or longing to be somewhere where you're not right now. I only get that when we go to the village. My favourite one means *forest solitude*, and it's the feeling of being alone in the woods and being calm and happy and safe, and she didn't want that. She wanted me to go to school and spend my weekends with her far away, but then when would I ever be wild and free and climb trees and scavenge for treasure and tell stories by a fire?

I don't want her.

She's not wild like we are.

We finish howling and we let our breath run milky into the night. We gather twigs and the driest of the leaves and the green blush of moss that sinks into tree stumps and we make a fire. Dad produces potatoes from his pocket and we push them into the flames until they sing. I use a stick to pierce them and pull them from the fire when they're cooked, and they smell so delicious that I want to bite into mine straightaway. I don't do it though, not since the last time and the taste of fire and then the hours of swirling ice in my red-raw mouth. I blow on my potato-on-a-stick and just like always Dad shows me the constellations peeping

through the tree canopy, even though I can find them all myself. *Orion the Hunter, three stars for a belt. The bears, Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. Lupus the wolf, diamond teeth.* A wild sky.

We head towards our little house when the fire has died and the air freezes the ends of my hair. When I lift my hand to feel them I find crunches of frost like jagged stars. We tramp past the pond and the surface is already pulling tight with ice and I wonder if Dad will let me skate this year with the brown lace-up skates he had when he was my age. He always says it's too dangerous and that the smooth glass will crack and I'll plunge through to the bottom and get trapped under the ice. I just want to glide across the surface like a girl I read about in one of my books and for it to feel a bit like flying.

The house is cold too. I can see my breath inside as well as outside but there's no point lighting the stove now. Dad piles wood up for tomorrow morning and pokes the grey embers inside the belly of the stove to shake any last warmth free. He puts his hand

on my head and I lean into him and I can hear the beat of his heart and I am small and warm and safe. He flips the lights on for a second so I can see my way to my room, even though I could do it in the pitch-black dark. Sometimes I take a candle, even though I know the way and even though we have electricity, because it makes me feel like I'm living in the pages of one of my books about children who lived before light bulbs.

My bedroom is little and the roof slopes towards the floor, but I like how that makes it cosy. I have a bedside shelf with a fox whittled from a piece of wood so light it almost floats in the air and a jar of bright shattered scraps of glass and plastic and metal, and Dad gave them both to me, I think. I have two whole walls of books and I like to put them in colour order so that they make a rainbow of spines. I never get rid of them and I can pull one off at random and remember the story all over again and how it felt the first time I read it and what was happening.

I have a patchwork quilt on my bed made from

triangles of material that used to belong to my old dresses and shirts and jumpers and trousers. The shapes slot together into something new and I love it because it's stories from the past sewn together and curled around me. I like to snuggle up under it at night and look out of my window and see the woods dissolving in the dark and listen to the nightbirds starting their songs. But tonight when I hear them all I can think of is the dead owl and the baby owl. I squeeze my eyes tight shut and the images of the blackening woods turn to dust.

But my heart won't stop bruising my ribs, so I wriggle out of bed and open my treasure chest. It's like something a real pirate would have on their ship but instead of gold coins it has the scraps of stories from the woods. It's made from the woods too. Dad pieced it together and smoothed it and shaped it and wrapped it up for Christmas when I was six. Inside is magic. A jigsaw of pottery pieces that must have belonged to a family of ancient woodspeople who lived wild and cooked only on fires and slept under

the stars. There are bright bones from the skeleton of a dragon that used to guard the woods with his fierce fire breath, and the feathers of a bird that could mend burns with its song. Whenever I find a new secret in the earth I put it in my treasure chest and it's like my head is full of other lives.

I take the three objects I scavenged earlier and lay them out on my bed. They rattle with stories. The thin black maybe-coins that are bent and twisted and were the last few pennies of a boy thrown to the wolves for being strange and powerful. He could make potions to cure infected wounds and rib-cracking coughs and sweat-drenching fevers, though the villagers didn't trust him. But with a deep whistle and a flick of his wrists the snarling wolves belonged to him and he rode through the trees on their broad backs and they brought him food and he healed their wounds. The slivers of pottery were from the pots that he used to mix up food from the wild world around him. Scraps of vegetables and bright berry spheres cooked over a hungry fire. The smooth

blue-green pieces of glass were his magic stones, the ones that gave him the power to fix and heal things that were broken and wrong. I rub my thumb along their time-softened edges and put them carefully into my treasure chest.

Two days later it is my month because it's October. October is the best month when you live in the woods and maybe when you don't, but I wouldn't know. It's when the trees are starting to shake leaves on to a patchwork floor and the ground is bright as fire. The air is crisp with a whisper of frost and the sky smells like smoke. Everything feels new and exciting.

I was born in October in that clean white hospital far away from here. There's a picture of me as a baby all wrapped up in a rainbow blanket and impossibly tiny. It was taken on an ancient camera from Dad's childhood that spits the picture out straightaway. There's no film left any more, but I don't need photographs to remember stuff.

Dad said he and the woman who is my mother

threw names for me around the room, but they bounced off the walls and hit the floor with a thud because nothing felt quite right. They brought me back to the woods and the fire-bellied stove and the birds and the badgers and the falling leaves and Dad said *October* and that name flew.

So this is my month. And we always begin it the same way.

Even when it's freezing.

I wriggle off my yellow wellies and stick my feet into the pond water to test it. The cool silk of mud slips between my toes. I pull off my clothes quicker than a quick thing until I'm wearing just my underpants. They're the ones with the elastic fraying in white tendrils like an octopus. I can see shards of ice glinting on the glassy pond surface. For a split second I can't do it. I'm as frozen as the ground and the ice and the grass. I'm trapped in the air and I can't move a muscle. And then a bird shrieks in delight and I see it swoop down to the horizon towards some sort of prey and I look at Dad and in three two one

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The water crashes around my ears and the frozen moment shatters into a thousand tiny splinters. The pond is so cold that I feel like my bones are burning. I think my heart might have stopped. Underneath the surface the world is murky and green and I am suddenly a mermaid escaping from a seaweed prison run by sharks and I'm swimming my way to freedom. I kick my legs in the sharp cold and I am lightning under the water. I roll and push away from the grasping weeds that transform into hands wanting to tug me to the bottom. I tumble and weave and the sharks are swirling in the water and they're closing in on me and they're so near that I can feel the heat of their fish breath on my neck and their teeth are grazing my skin, but at the very last second I grab on

to the tentacle of a passing giant squid and he sweeps me to safety just as my head breaks the surface.

Dad is next to me shaking the water from his hair and gasping. *It's colder than ever* he says and he rubs his shoulders with purple hands. We turn and look at each other and we grin through chattering teeth because this firework explosion of cold and shock is brilliant and I whoop into the October sky.

Dad helps me out of the water and we lie on the edge of the pond and look up at a sky filled with lazy stretching clouds. Every year we wait and see who cracks first, and this year it's Dad and he scurries inside to fetch a thermos and the warm dry clothes we hung on the stove, and we sit and sip tea that plumes its steam like the last breaths of the dragon whose bones are nestled in my treasure chest. I pull on thick socks and a bright blue jumper that must be Dad's because it hangs down past my knees but it's so warm that I don't care one little bit. Dad points out different cloud types to me. The altocumulus and the cirrus and the stratus and the altostratus. I point out

different cloud shapes to him, the allosaurus eating a fish and the warrior girl on horseback galloping across the blue abyss to save her home from a flint-eyed smoke-filled dragon. Then I tell him the story of the boy with his magic green-glass stones and I wrap us up in his world.

Dad always listens properly to my stories and I stretch this one out until the magic boy and his wolves cure the village of a deadly plague and they know he is good and kind and they want him to come home. But he still chooses to live in his howling pack deep in the forest. Then shivers lick our muscles and so Dad lights another fire in a circle of stones and in his soft green notebook we make a long list of all the things we have to do to get the woods ready for winter.

And that's how we start every October.