Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

Chicken School

written by

Jeremy Strong

published by

Penguin Books Ltd

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

Ask Jeremy



Of all the books you have written, which one is your favourite?

I loved writing both **KRAZY KOW SAVES THE WORLD – WELL, ALMOST** and **STUFF**, my first book for teenagers. Both these made me laugh out loud while I was writing and I was pleased with the overall result in each case. I also love writing the stories about Nicholas and his daft family – **MY DAD**, **MY MUM**, **MY BROTHER** and so on.

If you couldn't be a writer what would you be?

Well, I'd be pretty fed up for a start, because writing was the one thing I knew I wanted to do from the age of nine onward. But if I DID have to do something else, I would love to be either an accomplished pianist or an artist of some sort. Music and art have played a big part in my whole life and I would love to be involved in them in some way.

What's the best thing about writing stories?

Oh dear – so many things to say here! Getting paid for making things up is pretty high on the list! It's also something you do on your own, inside your own head – nobody can interfere with that. The only boss you have is yourself. And you are creating something that nobody else has made before you. I also love making my readers laugh and want to read more and more.

Did you ever have a nightmare teacher? (And who was your best ever?)

My nightmare at primary school was Mrs Chappell, long since dead. I knew her secret – she was not actually human. She was a Tyrannosaurus rex in disguise. She taught me for two years when I was in Y5 and Y6, and we didn't like each other at all. My best ever was when I was in Y3 and Y4. Her name was Miss Cox, and she was the one who first encouraged me to write stories. She was brilliant. Sadly, she is long dead too.

When you were a kid you used to play kiss-chase. Did you always do the chasing or did anyone ever chase you?!

I usually did the chasing, but when I got chased, I didn't bother to run very fast! Maybe I shouldn't admit to that! We didn't play kiss-chase at school – it was usually played during holidays. If we had tried playing it at school we would have been in serious trouble. Mind you, I seemed to spend most of my time in trouble of one sort or another, so maybe it wouldn't have mattered that much.

14½ Things You Didn't Know About

Jeremy Strong

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

1. He loves eating liquorice.
2. He used to like diving. He once dived from the high board and his trunks came off!
3. He used to play electric violin in a rock band called THE INEDIBLE CHEESE SANDWICH.
4. He got a 100-metre swimming certificate when he couldn't even swim.
5. When he was five, he sat on a heater and burnt his bottom.
6. Jeremy used to look after a dog that kept eating his underpants. (No – NOT while he was wearing them!)
7. When he was five, he left a basin tap running with the plug in and flooded the bathroom.
8. He can make his ears waggle.
9. He has visited over a thousand schools.
10. He once scored minus ten in an exam! That's ten less than nothing!
11. His hair has gone grey, but his mind hasn't.
12. He'd like to have a pet tiger.
13. He'd like to learn the piano.
14. He has dreadful handwriting.

And a half . . . His favourite hobby is sleeping. He's very good at it.

1 Introducing . . .

And the winner of the Most Boring Family in the World award is . . . wait for it . . .

THE WITKINSONS OF WIDDLINGWALL!!!

Coming up on to the stage now we have Mr Thomas Witkinson, father of one, and current holder of the title, 'Most Uninteresting Father in Britain'. Mr Witkinson is forty-one and married to his wife – who else, ha ha ha! – married to his wife, Rachel.



Rachel, thirty-seven, is the proud champion of the My Hobby Is More Boring Than Yours Competition, 2004.

And finally, coming on to the stage now is their son, Tim, known to all his schoolmates – not that he has any – as Waste of Space. Tim has absolutely nothing at all of interest to tell you.

*

So there you are. It's true. We are a boring family. Do you know what my dad does? He has such an exciting job. He works for the Food Standards Agency. See – I knew you'd be impressed. I said to him one day: 'Dad, what do you actually *do*?'

And he said: 'It depends on what day it is. Monday is usually a fish day. I look at fish and see if they're fit for eating or not. Then on Tuesdays I look at beef and see if that's fit for eating or not.'

'Oh. That sounds fascinating, Dad. What do you do if it isn't fit for eating?'

'I throw it away.'

'And what do you do if it is fit for eating?'

'I write a report that says, "This beef is fit for human consumption". It's not a very demanding job.'

'Dad, Gary Jarvis's father is a wrestler. He gets into a ring with another wrestler and they throw each other about and try to pull each other's legs off and grunt and scream a lot.'

'Really?'

'Yes. And Sophie Goodsole's dad makes jet skis and he has to test them.'

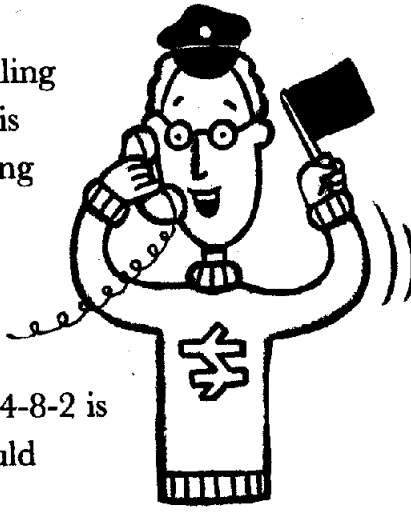
And what does my dad do when he gets home from his boring job? Does he go extreme ironing? I think not. Does he swim with sharks? Not likely.

My dad plays choo-choos. He does. He's got a train set and he gets it out every night, along with his friend, Mr Smith.

It's true. They have a massive layout upstairs in our house. The track starts from a little model station in Mum and Dad's bedroom, travels across the room, out through a hole Dad knocked in the wall, across the staircase, through another hole in the wall and into the spare bedroom, right the way across until it reaches another model station at the end of the line.

And that's not all. There is a telephone link between them. If you stand anywhere upstairs you can hear the other person quite clearly without the phone, but Dad says it wouldn't be right if they didn't do it like they do at real stations.

Almost every evening Mr Smith comes round to our house and plays trains with my dad. They go upstairs. Dad sets up one of the engines on the track. He rings up his friend and it goes something like this:



My dad: Hello? Hello? Calling Appleton Station. This is Snowberry Station calling Appleton . . .

Mr Smith: I'm here, Snowberry. Is there a train due?

My dad: The eight fifteen 4-8-2 is about to leave and should arrive shortly.

Mr Smith: Message received, Snowberry. Goodbye.

My dad: Goodbye, Appleton.



And that's about it. What an exciting time they have. Every night! They follow a timetable. It's all written out. First one train, then another, then another. In between they make each other cups of tea and dip biscuits in their mugs and chat about steam locomotives and so on. The trains trundle

from one room to another, crossing the staircase (or the Grand Canyon, as Dad likes to refer to it) and then they come back again. Excitement! Thrills! Adventure!

??????

I DON'T THINK SO.

Then there's my mum. She has an incredibly exciting job – she's a librarian! Sometimes when she comes in from work she's all a-flutter because something amazing has happened. 'You'll never guess what – Mrs Tuttle brought back her books and, do you know, there was a fly squashed inside one. She said, "I can't read this, it's got a dead fly inside." So she brought it back.'

Gosh.

Sometimes I don't know how I cope with the level of excitement in our house. But wait for it, I haven't told you what my mum does while Dad is upstairs being an engine driver. She sticks seashells on flowerpots. She does! I bet you thought nobody actually does that, not for real!

Well, meet my mum, champion shell-sticker.

The rooms in our house are floor-to-ceiling with things that have shells stuck on them. If it doesn't move, it's probably got shells stuck on it. The TV? Covered with them (apart from the screen, of course). The downstairs toilet? Oh yes, encrusted with shells. Mum would have put them on the *seat* if I hadn't stopped her. Imagine that! Ouch!



Mum keeps her shell supply in the back room downstairs. It's as if an entire tropical-shell beach has been bulldozed into that room. If you open the door, shells come cascading out across the floor. We even got a crab once, which is probably why the garden's full of gulls. They line up on the roof. They queue in the garden, hoping the shells have still got something edible inside.

Just think of the exciting conversations my mum must have when she goes to a party.

Hostess: And what do you do for excitement, Mrs Witkinson?

My mum: I get lots of shells and I stick them on things.

Hostess: Really? How fascinating. Just hold still for a moment while I pour this bucket of cold custard over your head.

I ask you! What am I to do? Do you see how colourless my life is? It was all right when I was little. I liked whopping shells all over pots with my mum when I was five or six. I liked playing trains with my dad when I was seven or eight. But I'm eleven now. Where's the excitement? Where's the fun?

WHERE'S MY LIFE?!

It's no better at school. I'm in Mrs Dove's class. I like Mrs Dove, even though she's extremely old and grey. She's OK and occasionally, if there's time, she gives us great things to do. Sometimes we're allowed to write a whole story – not just bits – and I like that. Or she might read us a book or tell us about something really exciting from the past, like ancient Egyptians pulling brains out of people's noses, or baddies

being stuck in the stocks and having mouldy tomatoes thrown at them.

It hardly ever happens though because usually there *isn't* enough time because we have to follow THE TIMETABLE.

The timetable was set up by our head teacher, Mr Dedman, and he insists that everyone follows it. We have fifteen minutes for multiplication tables, and half an hour for literacy activities, and twelve and a half minutes for playing, and one minute twenty seconds to go to the loo, and a whole hour for sport (because Mr Dedman likes sport) and three minutes for creative writing, and absolutely no time at all for thinking or dreaming or just living.

I don't think Mrs Dove likes it any more than we do, so every once in a while she squeezes out some extra time so we can do something we like. Even so, she has to post a guard at the door to keep an eye out for Mr Dedman because he snoops around, checking up.

I don't exactly fit in at school anyhow. I listen to the others in my class talking about what they did at the weekend and it's all about going on the dry ski slope or visiting a theme park and

things like that. All I have to talk about is train sets and different kinds of seashell.

I do have one friend, and that's Pete Smith. We get on pretty well, largely because it's Pete's dad who plays trains with my dad. In other words we share the same problem. Pete usually comes to my house with his dad and we sit up in my bedroom and we try and outdo each other by imagining ourselves as different beings. It's the only way to escape from the fact that we're really deadly dull.

I'll give you an example. One of my favourites is a horrible, blubbery monster called ***The Thing From Thingummy***. Don't laugh! Stop it. I can hear you sniggering and you shouldn't because ***The Thing from Thingummy*** is pretty awesome. I become all green and lumpy and fat, like some big blubber monster. My skin is bubbly all over with giant warts. I get a fat, bloated face with flubbery lips and sharp white teeth. My eyes go all poppy and I have no hair left, no hair at all. Instead, all over the top of my skull, there are little horns, about twenty or thirty of them – little blunt-ended horns, like upside-down ice-cream cones.

I stepped out and crashed through the locked door. One big blow from one big fist was all it took. SMASH! I was out! I headed downstairs, my feet making every step on the stairs squeak and squeal.

POW! I smashed through the door of the front room, where Mum and Dad were watching TV. They turned and stared at me in horror.

'Oh, my God!' yelled Dad. 'What is it? What kind of creature is this?'

'We're going to die!' screamed Mum. 'What do you want from us, Big Green Blubber Monster?'

I scowled hideously at them and curled my lips. 'I have come to obliterate all manner of shelly pot things and all kinds of puff-puff trainy things,' I bellowed. 'Get rid of these at once or you will feel the full force of my wrath, for I am The Thing from Thingummy and woe betide those who do not obey.'

Mum and Dad threw themselves at my feet. They clutched at my warty green ankles and pleaded with me, snivelling like little babies who've just had their lollies taken away.

'No, no! We will do anything but that! Please let us play with choo-choos and shelly pots!'



'No! Never!' I roared. 'You must forsake such things and become Interesting and Exciting Parents! Do this and I shall be well pleased and leave you in peace.'

Mum and Dad moaned and groaned and eventually agreed to be interesting for the rest of their lives. I pounded back upstairs . . .

. . . and lo and behold! I'm me again – Tim Witkinson.

So that's what Pete and I play at to stop ourselves from dying of boredom.

Then one morning we went to school and my

life changed, because there, on the school wall, in big Day-Glo green spray-paint, was a message:

