Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

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

opening extract from

Questors

written by

Joan Lennon

published by

Penguin Books Ltd

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

I

Gathering of Strangers

The girl in the back of the car looked shell-shocked. The Courier, a friendly older man, had given up trying to get her to chat, and most of the drive through the afternoon traffic had taken place in silence.

It seemed Trentor children were all like that these days – tight, and scared of putting a foot wrong. Maybe it was always that way, though. Hard to remember.

Poor kid, he thought, checking her white face in his rear-view mirror. *Looks like she doesn't know what's hit her.*

He was right.

Madlen didn't see the London streets, the grey buildings, the hurrying people with their careful clothes and their serious faces. She just sat there, twisting a regulation school handkerchief round and round in her hands, staring at nothing.

Should be in Physics, she thought, but it didn't seem real. Nothing had seemed real, not since she'd been called in to Miss Brack's office first thing this morning.

Only this morning!

In her mind she could hear Miss Brack's whiny, nasal voice going on and on . . .

'. . . Swithin Street School for Girls has been consistently producing successful Echelon candidates for

a very long time indeed – and we are *not* an establishment that is used to having to deal with irregularities or . . . or . . . *surprises*!'

'I don't understand, Miss.'

'Madlen, you are to be removed from school.'

There was a pause. Madlen remembered feeling . . . nothing. Numb.

'I have exams next week, Miss,' she'd said, as if that were the answer to it all.

'I know that!' Miss Brack had snapped. 'But it doesn't change the fact that I have in my hand a letter which states that you are to leave, because your mother requires you. Right here –' and she stabbed at the paper with her finger – '*Her mother wants her.*'

'I'm sorry, Miss Brack. There's been a mistake. I don't have a mother.'

A part of Madlen's mind had noticed even at the time how calm she sounded, how controlled, and had approved.

Miss Brack, on the other hand, was becoming more aggrieved by the moment.

'. . . most irregular and, and, *disappointing*. A car will be coming this afternoon to take you to the London House. The authority is not in question. See for yourself – here is the letter.'

Madlen remembered holding out her hand and trying to focus on the words. Only one sentence was clear to her, and it leapt off the page and into her brain.

'*Her mother wants her.*'

She didn't remember leaving the office.

Bryn found the young man who collected him good company, friendly, happy to make conversation, but

completely uninformative. Every attempt to pump him was cheerfully sidestepped, no hard feelings on either side.

Once it was clear he wasn't going to find out anything about what in the Three Worlds was happening, Bryn settled back to enjoy the novelty of being out of the Castle, out of the mountains, out of the snow – and out from under the Steward's heavy fist. He rubbed his arm where the old man had caught up with him earlier, and grimaced a little. He'd been scared sick when Dane and co. cornered him and Nick in that dead-end corridor, but they'd scattered fast when the Steward appeared. Nick certainly hadn't waited around – he'd probably been the other side of the Castle before Bryn had even finished saying 'I didn't do it, whatever it was!'

And now – all *this*! He shook his head, amazed. The things he'd seen – if only he could get *half* of it down on paper! Bryn kept his drawing things on him all the time – there was no place else safe enough to hide them at the Castle. His fingers itched to get at them now, but he wasn't stupid. The Courier man could too easily see him in the rear-view mirror. He'd just have to remember it all and then, first chance he got to be by himself . . .

Cam shivered.

'Turn the heating up, please.'

A clear, light voice, pitched to be heard, expecting compliance.

Nobody says no much to you, *do they, kiddo!* The Courier smiled to herself tolerantly and bumped up the heat. *Still, no wonder you're cold, in those clothes.*

Dalrodian clothing followed a strict but subtle pattern.

Everyone wore the same loose, long tunic and trousers – it was the most sensible way of dressing in the heat while keeping as much of the body protected from the effects of the sun as possible. It also allowed one Dalrodian to know at a glance exactly where in the social hierarchy any other Dalrodian might stand. They simply had to look at the material the other's clothes were made of. A finely graded progression distinguished a labourer's coarse cotton from the various grades of linen for administrators, and so on, up to the high-caste Holder's fine, flowing silk.

Cam wasn't thinking about any of that. *I'm not going to cry. I'm not going to hit anyone. Keep breathing. Back straight. Do what Ivory would do. Ivory. Ivory.*

A mantra helps sometimes.

As each of the cars pulled into Grenadier Square, they stretched, briefly, and then snapped back into shape, like cars in a cartoon. The Couriers checked their passengers' reactions. Temporal-spatial displacement can have unexpected side effects. But the three children only looked mildly confused. The odd feeling was just one more weird thing in a weird day, and over before they'd really noticed. The Couriers were relieved – they were saved from having to explain how their charges had each started out in their own World and ended up . . . someplace else.

The three cars pulled up to the front steps of an elegant three-storey house. It was, apparently, one of a row, but actually it was utterly and entirely one of a kind. As Madlen, Cam and Bryn climbed out of their cars on to the pavement, however, they barely glanced at it. They

were too busy noticing the strangeness of each other. You could practically see their noses working and their hackles rising, like dogs meeting, or maybe young wolves.

This was a mistake.

Different clothes, different customs, different Worlds – it wasn't much really, whereas the strangeness of the place they were about to enter was off the top of another scale altogether.

2

'Desirable Queen Anne House'

If the London House were ever to go on sale, it might be described in the estate agent's literature like this:



11 Grenadier Square.

Desirable terraced Queen Anne home in quiet street. High-ceilinged, spacious reception rooms on ground floor with original fireplaces, cornicing and central roses intact. First-floor bedrooms and sitting rooms ditto. Attic bedrooms with charming period roof beams and dormer windows. Large basement kitchen. At least 3½ bathrooms. Tastefully decorated throughout. Plumbing and wiring in excellent condition.

The literature would probably *not* go on to say:

Known to be located on a cosmic cusp. Fine Queen Anne staircase equally useful for travel between floors and between points on the Space-Time Continuum. Rooms are liable to contain furniture (and, occasionally, inhabitants) from a variety of known historical periods. A floor plan is available on disk, but will require a computer of hitherto unimagined power to access. Particularly desirable as one of the few houses on the street without a blue plaque. This is due to temporal distortion – a feature reflected in the price. Known as *'The London House'* because, it is thought, in at least one alternate reality, there are no others. On-street parking only.