

Helping you choose books for children



opening extract from

Children of Winter

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published by

Catnip Publishers

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1. The Old Cruck Barn

It seemed to Catherine that from the moment they set out on their journey she knew that it was going to be a very special one. The bus climbed slowly away from Sheffield and up into the hills of Derbyshire, stopping here and there to let on hikers and villagers and people from the remote farms, and every time it lurched forward again on its familiar journey she felt a strange thrill of excitement and dread. She pressed her face against the cold glass and stared out at the green valley now lying far below, at the little clusters of grey buildings that showed only by their smoking chimneys that people lived in them. What was it like, she thought, before they had buses out here? Before the roads were built? People must have spent weeks and weeks in their own homes and fields, never seeing another soul. . . .

‘Catherine, we’re getting off soon.’

Patsy and Andrew were in the seat behind her, and behind them, Mum and Dad, struggling to fold up the Ordnance Survey map. Catherine loved that map. She loved to read the names of the villages and rivers and the hills. Even the fields had names sometimes, like people. Lawrence Field. That sounded rolling

and tummocky, with high grasses like fringes round the edges. Howard's Field. That would have huge boulders in it, and the wind would sigh like a long whisper round them. And Catherine Field. That was where they were making for today. Her field.

Andrew forgot his little blue rucksack, and Dad had to run after the bus and thump on the side of it to get it back for him. There was hardly anything in it anyway, only a small torch and his cagoule, but it had always been a family rule that everyone carried their own belongings, in case they got separated on the walk. Except for the map, of course. Dad always carried the map. It wasn't fair.

He pushed it into his own rucksack now, and zipped up his cagoule. 'It shouldn't take us more than an hour to get down to Gran's house,' he said. 'I don't think we want to dawdle today, kids. It's a bit fresh up here.'

'What about my field, Dad? Aren't we going there?'

'We'll pass it on the way. It's only a field, love. I'll tell you something else your mum and I noticed on the map, Cath, and we never knew it before. See this hill that we have to go down? It's called Tebbutt Hill.'

'Does it belong to Grannie Tebutt? Does it belong to us?' It made up to Andrew for the fact that they hadn't found a field with his name on it.

'No. There's lots of Tebbutts round here. It's a local

name. But it could have belonged to an ancestor of ours, I suppose. Way back in the past.'

He swung his rucksack on to his back and took Andrew's hand. 'Over the stile!' he pointed. 'And follow the path. We can't get lost today.'

Patsy ran on after them. Catherine stood with her mother at the wall, watching the way the path twisted before it plunged out of sight into a dense copse, down and down towards the river in the valley bottom, and Grannie Tebbutt's house.

'Mum, do you think the Catherine of Catherine Field was a Catherine Tebbutt?'

'She might have been,' Mum said. 'It would be nice to think that she was, and that you're named after her. What do you think?'

'I think she was Catherine Tebbutt,' said Catherine, but more to herself now, because her mother was over the stile already and picking her way down the path on the windy hill. 'But what was she like?' And even as she thought that she felt again the strange surge of excitement and dread.

'Come on,' Mum called. 'Over the stile and down the path.'

'I'm coming.'

Over the stile, she thought. And into the past.

By the time she caught up with the others they had all put their cagoules on. The sun when it came out

was low and brilliant on the September leaves, but clouds that looked heavy with rain soon covered it and brought a bitter chill to the wind.

'We're going to get soaked,' Dad warned. 'We'd better go straight down.'

'I want to do up Andrew's shoe-laces,' Mum said. 'I'll catch you up.'

Dad strode on into the thickness of the woods. Patsy dawdled to pick blackberries, though they were hardly sweet enough yet for eating.

Catherine had found a bush with berries on it as bright as blood. She tried to break off a branch, but the wood was too young and refused to snap.

'What is it?' asked Patsy.

'Don't know,' Catherine said. 'But it's poisonous, I think.'

'What d'you want it for, then?'

'People put it outside their houses to keep away the evil spirits.'

'Do they heck!' scorned Patsy. 'I've never seen them.'

Mum and Andrew had caught them up by now and they hurried on along the twists of the narrow path. Rain spattered down on them through the thinning trees. When they came to the edge of the copse they met with a wind that seemed to come from nowhere and to bring the rain stinging like the lashes of a whip across their faces. They huddled together in the poor

shelter that the bare trees gave. Dad was nowhere to be seen.

‘Let’s go back,’ moaned Andrew.

‘Don’t be daft,’ said Patsy. ‘I think we should make a dash for it.’

‘Down the hill! But it’s miles!’ said Mum.

‘Well, we can’t stay here,’ said Patsy. ‘We’ll drown.’

‘We can break away from the path and go over to the left, and down that slope,’ said Catherine slowly. ‘There’s an old barn. We could shelter in that.’

Mum pressed a dripping branch aside to peer down that way. ‘Are you sure, Cath? I can’t see one.’

‘I know you can’t. But it’s there, I’m sure.’ The strange thing was that Catherine had never been so sure of anything in her life, and the thought of it was terrifying. With a sudden increased intensity the rain plunged down between the branches, making their minds up for them, and they all pushed out together, slithering and gasping and half laughing, till Catherine veered away from the path and took them scrambling down a slope of moorland, through dense wet patches of fern and gorse, and, at last, up a steep bank to a low stone wall. Beyond it the grass was short and cropped, and the wall enclosed its small space.

‘Catherine Field,’ she thought.

And they could all see it now, snug in the hollow of the little field. An old stone and timber barn, and the wooden door was swinging open.



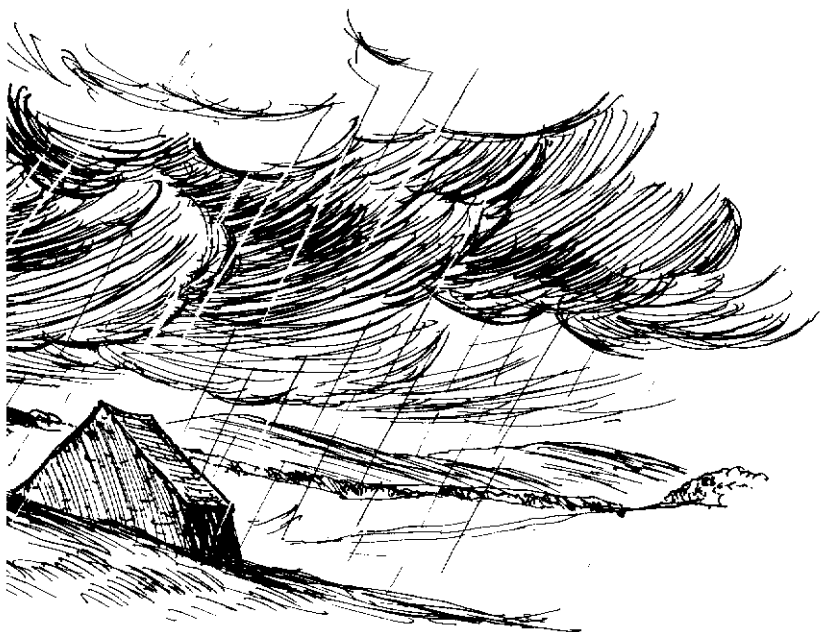
Catherine was first in. Triumphant, she held back the door for Patsy and Andrew and their mother. They gasped for breath as they ran in, and tried with clumsy fingers to peel off their wet clothing.

‘Well done, Catherine!’ her mother said. ‘I don’t know how you found this place but it’s saved us from drowning, all right.’

‘What about Dad?’ asked Andrew.

‘Serves him right for running on in front,’ Mum said; then, seeing his anxious face, ‘Don’t worry about Dad. He can look after himself.’

She helped Andrew off with his cagoule, shook it, and hung it over a low beam. ‘Get your little torch out, Andrew. Let’s see what we’re doing.’



Catherine had pushed the door of the barn to, so that the only light that came to them trickled through tiny chinks and holes in the roof. Andrew found his torch and flashed it at Mum, who took it from him and played its soft light slowly up and round the roof and the walls, like an exploring finger. She showed the huge oak beams that were sandwiched together with layers of small stones.

‘It’s an old cruck barn, this,’ she said. ‘Very, very old. Look at those cobwebs! They look as if they’ve been here a few centuries!’

Outside the wind lunged at the barn so that its beams seemed to creak like old bones. Straw and dry leaves lifted and scuttled across the floor.

'I wish Dad was here,' said Andrew. 'Or that we were down at Gran's house.'

Catherine looked across at him quickly, as if he shouldn't have said that. She couldn't explain the odd feelings that were rushing through her now that they were all standing in the barn that only she had known about. Why did the old place give her such a strange feeling of security, and such a terrible feeling of loss? Why did none of the others seem to feel this too? She took the torch from her mother and began to wander round the barn, picking out here and there things that she felt she could name even before the light came to them.

At the far end of the barn was a mound of straw, left there to dry over the winter. 'Straw, for sleeping on,' she said. 'Bins for the food.' Her torch found four old tubs leaning, empty, against a wall, and then moved over to a large, flat-topped boulder. 'The table,' she said.

Andrew stared at her. He had caught her odd mood before the others, but had no idea what to make of it. 'Mum, what's the matter with Catherine?' he asked.

'She's play-acting,' said Patsy. 'Just ignore her.'

Catherine didn't seem to have heard her. She moved over to the other wall and felt along it till she came to a window.

'That's it,' she said. 'The window. But these shutters should open. I know they should.'

She dropped the torch as she struggled to push open the shutters, and the light dimmed quickly. Mum picked up the torch and shook it.

‘For goodness sake, Catherine, you’ve nearly broken this thing. What *is* up with you?’

‘Let’s go, Mum,’ said Andrew. ‘Let’s find Dad. He’ll think we’re lost.’

‘If he’s got any sense he’ll have gone straight on down to Gran’s,’ Mum told him. ‘He’ll be tucking into her ham sandwiches any minute. . . .’

‘He mustn’t go to Gran’s!’

‘Catherine . . .!’ Her mother’s voice was warning. ‘You’ve gone far enough,’ it said. ‘I’ve had enough of this.’

Catherine swung away from her. How could she expect her mother to understand, when she herself didn’t? ‘He shouldn’t go there, Mum,’ she muttered.

‘He wouldn’t leave us all behind,’ Andrew reminded her. ‘He might be looking for us . . . and he’ll be all wet.’

Their mum knew when she was beaten. She picked up her wet cagoule and slid it back on. ‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘Kids!’ She handed the torch back to Catherine. ‘Careful with this,’ she said. ‘It’s nearly broken as it is with your messing about. If I don’t see him up in the woods, I’m coming straight back. And don’t let any strangers in. . . .’

The wind rushed in to meet her as she opened the

door, and, as if she was taking the sound and the chill of it with her, softened again.

Catherine wanted to run after her mother. She struggled to pull herself out of the strange feeling of sadness that those last words had brought to her.

‘I wish she hadn’t gone, Patsy,’ she said.

Patsy, although she was younger than Catherine, was far more practical. She was like her mum. Catherine’s dreaminess was beginning to annoy her. Dopiness, she would have called it. She could see, however, that it was beginning to alarm Andrew. She led him to the mound of straw that was heaped up, higher than their heads, across the back of the barn, knowing that he would obligingly tumble about in it, like a young dog.

‘It’s lovely and warm in here,’ she said. ‘Like a house.’

‘You ought to try spending a winter here,’ said Catherine.

‘I don’t like it much,’ said Andrew.

‘It makes a good shelter, anyway,’ said Patsy.

And the word ‘shelter’ clutched at Catherine again. It was almost as if she was remembering. . . . ‘People did shelter here. About three hundred years ago . . . people . . . children . . . lived here.’

‘It’s got ghosts,’ whispered Andrew doubtfully.

‘Yes,’ agreed Catherine. ‘It has got ghosts.’

‘Don’t, Cathy,’ sighed Patsy. ‘You’ll frighten him.’

‘It’s only pretend,’ Andrew said, to comfort her.

Suddenly Catherine knew how she could bring out these strange thoughts that were lurking half in her mind, half, it seemed, in her memory, and that were struggling like trapped fishes to be allowed to float free.

‘Pretend!’ she said. ‘Let’s pretend!’

‘Hooray!’ shouted Andrew.

Patsy scowled. Pretend! ‘Pretend what?’ she asked in spite of herself.

‘Pretend it’s three hundred years ago. Sixteen—sixteen hundred and something. And we’re three children who’ve come up here to spend the winter.’

The wind came with a slam against the side of the barn, and then hushed into silence.

‘All on their own?’ said Patsy, scornfully.

‘They wouldn’t,’ said Andrew. ‘Not without their mum and dad.’

‘But they had to,’ Catherine insisted. ‘Or they would die.’

Again, the wind shrieked round.

‘I know!’ Patsy entered at last into the game as she remembered a recent history lesson at school. It had been about a tiny village in Derbyshire that had cut itself off from the rest of England in 1666. ‘It was because of the plague.’

‘Oh Patsy,’ whispered Catherine, suddenly more

frightened than she had ever been before. 'It was. It was because of the plague.'

She moved away from them, and as she did so the light of the torch faltered and dimmed. Andrew felt for the comfort of Patsy's hand.

'A long time ago,' began Catherine, just as if she was telling them a story, as indeed she was, at first. 'On a day just like this, in autumn, three children came up from the village to spend the winter in this barn.'

'But they wouldn't. . .' began Andrew.

'They had to,' Patsy reminded him.

Catherine stopped. Was it a story she was telling? She seemed to know, and yet not to know. She seemed to picture that walk as if in her memory, struggling against the wind with bundles of clothing and sacks of food. Over three hundred years ago.

'Let's pretend . . .' Patsy prompted her. A game of any sort would be better than seeing Catherine in this odd mood.

'Right. We're three children who've just come up from the village. I've put all our food and clothing over in this corner for the time being. Our mother and father will be coming soon.'

'But you said we'd be on our own,' Andrew reminded her.

Catherine frowned. She didn't understand that part herself yet. Surely the children's mother and father

would come? She decided to leave that bit for the moment.

'Andrew, you're very excited about coming here.'

'Am I?'

'Pretend you are, anyway. You've been here lots of times before, on your own, because you know the shepherd who sometimes stays over here when the ewes are lambing. You come to see him.'

'What can he be called?'

'He can be called . . .' Catherine frowned. 'I know what he's called! It's Clem.'

'Clem!' shouted Andrew, delighted. He could imagine Clem now. He could imagine running in to the barn to find Clem crouched over a ewe in the straw pile, in the low light of a lantern swinging from one of the beams. Clem would have looked up, pleased to see him. 'Tha's come in good time, boy,' he would have said. 'See the lamb, in the hay there?' Andrew would have picked up the little thing and cuddled it in his arms. 'T'is for thee to nurse,' Clem would have said to him. 'Give it milk from the bowl on the tip of thy finger. And gentle, mind!'

'And you're not called Andrew,' said Catherine, breaking into his daydream. 'You're Dan. You're Dan, now.'

'Dan. Am I six?'

'Yes. And your leg is hurt because you fell over on the way up the hill.'

'Pretend I stopped to look after him,' broke in Patsy, because that's exactly what she would have done.

'But she's not called Patsy, is she? Give her a name,' insisted Andrew.

'She's Tessa.'

'Tessa!' Patsy tried the name, and liked it. 'All right. I'm Tessa. And what will you be called?'

'I think . . . I think I'm still called Catherine.'

It was then that Catherine knew for sure that she wasn't making up stories, or pretending. She was remembering. She was remembering the day when another Catherine Tebbutt of her own family had stood in this very barn with the wind howling round and the rain hammering down in just the same way as it did today. 'Catherine Tebbutt.' Her brother and sister were again awed by the strange tone in her voice. They could see her face lit up oddly in the last light of the dying torch, and they saw how tense she was, and how far away was the look in her eyes, as though she was already moving in a different time. But they were drawn in now, trapped. They wanted to be there, too.

And then the torch light died.

'Catherine, the light's gone out!' said Patsy, alarmed, but this time it was Andrew who reassured her.

'It doesn't matter,' he said. 'It's time for the game to start. We'll go outside, shall we?'

He dragged Patsy towards the door and ran out, too

excited to worry about wrapping himself up against the weather.

Catherine stared at the door that slammed shut behind her brother and sister.

‘Aye,’ she said. ‘ ’Tis time.’