Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

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

Opening extract from

Amazing Maurice

Written by

Terry Pratchett

Published by

Random House

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Rats!

They chased the dogs and bit the cats, they--

But there was more to it than that. As the amazing Maurice said, it was just a story about people and rats. And the difficult part of it was deciding who the people were, and who were the rats.

But Malicia Grim said it was a story about stories.

It began - part of it began - on the mail coach that came over the mountains from the distant cities of the plain.

This was the part of the journey that the driver didn't like. The way wound through forests and around mountains on crumbling roads. There were deep shadows between the trees. Sometimes he thought things were following the coach, keeping just out of sight. It gave him the willies.

And on this journey, the really big willie was that he could hear voices. He was sure of it. They were coming from behind him, from the top of the coach, and there was nothing there but the big oilcloth mail-sacks and the young man's luggage. There was certainly nothing big enough for a person to hide inside. But occasionally he was sure he heard squeaky voices, whispering.

There was only one passenger at this point. He was a fair-haired young man, sitting all by himself inside the rocking coach, reading a book. He was reading slowly, and aloud, moving his finger over the words.

'Ubberwald,' he read out.

'That's "Überwald",' said a small, squeaky but very clear voice. 'The dots make it a sort of long "ooo" sound. But you're doing well.'

'Ooooooberwald?'

'There's such a thing as too much pronunciation, kid,' said another voice, which sounded half asleep. 'But you know the best thing about Überwald? It's a long, long way from Sto Lat. It's a long way from Pseudopolis. It's a long way from anywhere where the Commander of the Watch says he'll have us boiled alive if he ever sees us again. And it's not very modern. Bad roads. Lots of mountains in the way. People don't move about much up here. So news doesn't travel very fast, see? And they probably don't have policemen. Kid, we can make a fortune here!'

'Maurice?' said the boy, carefully.

'Yes, kid?'

'You don't think what we're doing is, you know . . . dishonest, do you?'

There was a pause before the voice said, 'How do you mean, dishonest?'

'Well . . . we take their money, Maurice.' The coach rocked and bounced over a pot-hole.

'All right,' said the unseen Maurice, 'but what you've got to ask yourself is: who do we take the money from, actually?'

'Well . . . it's generally the mayor or the city council or someone like that.'

'Right! And that means it's . . . what? I've told you this bit before.'

'Er . . .'

'It is gov-ern-ment money, kid,' said Maurice patiently. 'Say it? Gov-ern-ment money.'

'Gov-ern-ment money,' said the boy obediently.

'Right! And what do governments do with money?'

'Er, they . . .'

'They pay soldiers,' said Maurice. 'They have wars. In fact, we've prob'ly stopped a lot of wars by taking the money and putting it where it can't do any harm. They'd put up stachoos to us, if they thought about it.'

'Some of those towns looked pretty poor, Maurice,' said the kid doubtfully.

'Hey, just the kind of places that don't need wars, then.'

'Dangerous Beans says it's . . .' The boy concentrated, and his lips moved before he said the word, as if he was trying out the pronunciation to himself, '. . . It's un-eth-ickle.'

'That's right, Maurice,' said the squeaky voice. 'Dangerous Beans says we shouldn't live by trickery.'

'Listen, Peaches, trickery is what humans are all about,' said the voice of Maurice. 'They're so keen on tricking one another all the time that they elect governments to do it for them. We give them value for money. They get a horrible plague of rats, they pay a rat piper, the rats all follow the kid out of town, hoppity-skip, end of plague, everyone's happy that no-one's widdling in the flour any more, the government gets re-elected by a grateful population, general celebration all round. Money well spent, in my opinion.'

'But there's only a plague because we make them think there is,' said the voice of Peaches.

'Well, my dear, another thing all those little governments spend their money on is rat-catchers, see? I don't know why I bother with the lot of you, I really don't.'

'Yes, but we--'

They realized that the coach had stopped. Outside, in the rain, there was the jingle of harness. Then the coach rocked a little, and there was the sound of running feet.

A voice from out of the darkness said, 'Are there any wizards in there?'

The occupants looked at one another in puzzlement.

'No?' said the kid, the kind of 'no' that means 'why are you asking?'

'How about any witches?' said the voice.

'No, no witches,' said the kid.

'Right. Are there any heavily-armed trolls employed by the mail-coach company in there?'

'I doubt it,' said Maurice.

There was a moment's pause, filled with the sound of the rain.

'OK, how about werewolves?' said the voice eventually.

'What do they look like?' asked the kid.

'Ah, well, they look perfectly normal right up to the point where they grow all, like, hair and teeth and giant paws and leap through the window at you,' said the voice. The speaker sounded as though he was working through a list.

'We've all got hair and teeth,' said the kid.

'So you are werewolves, then?'

'No.'

'Fine, fine.' There was another pause filled with rain. 'OK, vampires,' said the voice. 'It's a wet night, you wouldn't want to be flying in weather like this. Any vampires in there?'

'No!' said the kid. 'We're all perfectly harmless!'

'Oh boy,' muttered Maurice, and crawled under the seat.

© Terry Pratchett 2002, published by Corgi Children's, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a Random House Group company