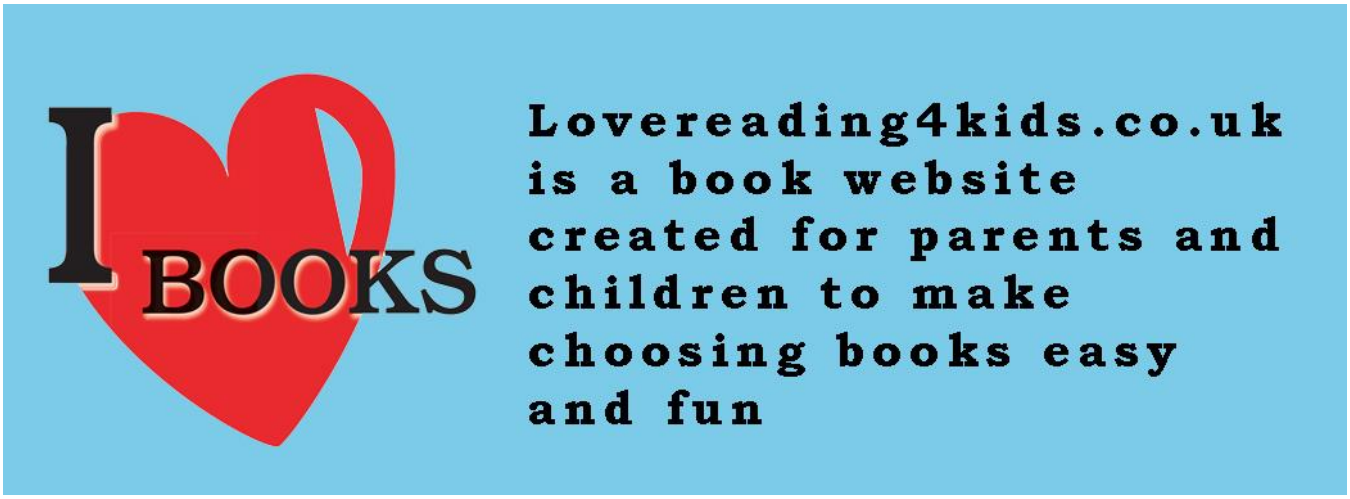


Opening extract from

Dear Olly

Written by

Michael Morpurgo

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Dear Olly,

I have often thought of writing a story in movements rather than chapters – like a symphony. But for this I needed a story with three distinct yet linked themes, each with a different mood. Perhaps it was the moods and rhythms of the seasons that suggested this to me. And for me, it is swallows that are the magical conductors of the seasons.

I came across two stories that enabled me to compose my symphony story: one movement here, at home on the farm in Devon, one in Africa – and the two themes linked by a third, the swallow's flight from home to Africa.

I heard of a young Frenchman, so moved by the misery and horror of war and suffering in Rwanda that he gave up everything, and left at once to help in the only way he knew how.

Then, a good friend of mine suffered a dreadful car accident. Full of admiration, I watched how he coped with the pain, with the change it brought to his life. I charted his recovery, his rebuilding of himself.

Dear Olly, is a story about nobility and courage, courage against all the odds – the young Frenchman's, the swallow's and my friend's.

I hope you love reading it as much as I loved writing it.

MICHAEL MORPURGO
September 2000

Olly was painting her toenails, light blue with silver glitter. She stretched out her legs and wriggled her toes. “What d’you think?” she said. She answered herself, because no-one else did. “Amazing, Olly, I think they’re just amazing.” But her mother and Matt had not even heard her. She saw they were both deeply engrossed in the television. So Olly looked too.

It was the news. Africa. Soldiers in trucks. A smoky sprawling city of tents and ramshackle huts. A child standing alone and naked by an open drain, stick-like legs, distended stomach, and crying, crying. A tented hospital. An emaciated mother sitting on a bed clutching her

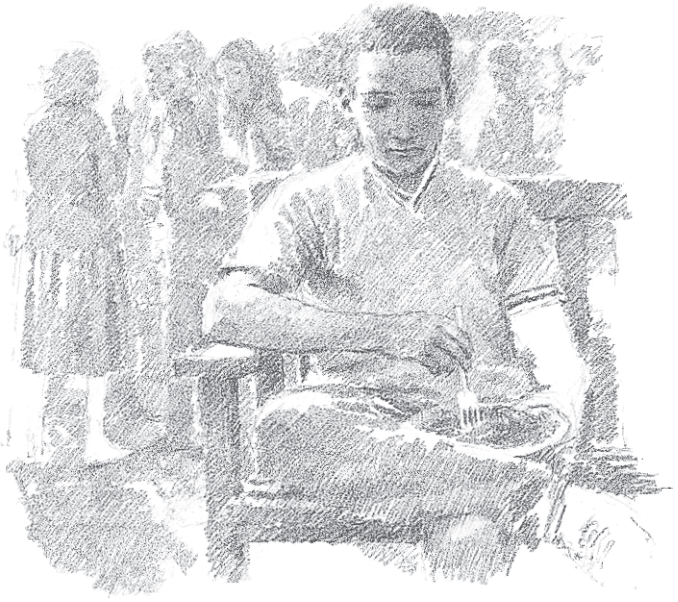
child to her shrivelled breast. A girl, about Olly's age perhaps, squatting under a tree, her eyes empty of all life, eyes that had never known happiness. Flies clustered and crawled all over her face. She seemed to have neither the strength nor the will to brush them off. Olly felt overwhelmed by a terrible sadness. "It's horrible," she muttered.

Suddenly, without a word, Matt got up from the sofa and stormed out, banging the door.

"What's the matter with him?" Olly asked. But she could see her mother was as mystified and as surprised as she was.

For some days now, she had known something was wrong with Matt. No jokes, no teasing, no clowning. He should have been on top of the world. Just a week or so before, his exam results had

come in. Straight ‘A’s – he could go to veterinary college at Bristol just as he had planned. Olly’s mother had been ecstatic. She had rung up and invited everyone to a celebration barbecue in the garden, spare ribs and sausages and chicken. They all expected, as Olly had, that sooner or later Matt would get into his clown gear and do his party act. But he didn’t. He hardly said a word to anyone all evening.



Great Aunt Bethel, "Gaunty Bethel" as everyone called her, made a speech that took a long time coming to an end. "I just want to say well done, Matt," she said. "I know that if your father had been here, he'd have been as proud of you as we all are."

Olly never liked it when people talked of her father. Everyone else, it seemed, had known him, except her. To her, he was the man in the photo on the mantelpiece who had died in a car accident on his way to work one morning. She had no memories of him at all.

Gaunty Bethel had still not quite finished. "Now you can go off to college, Matt, and become a vet just like he was, just like your mother is."

Everyone had cheered and whooped and clapped, Olly as loudly as anyone,

until she saw the look on Matt's face. He was hating every moment of it. It was true that just occasionally Matt could seem very far away and serious, lost in some deep thought. Olly knew well enough to leave him alone when he was like that. But this was quite different. He'd gone out in a fury, slamming the door behind him, and Olly wanted to know why. She went out after him.

