

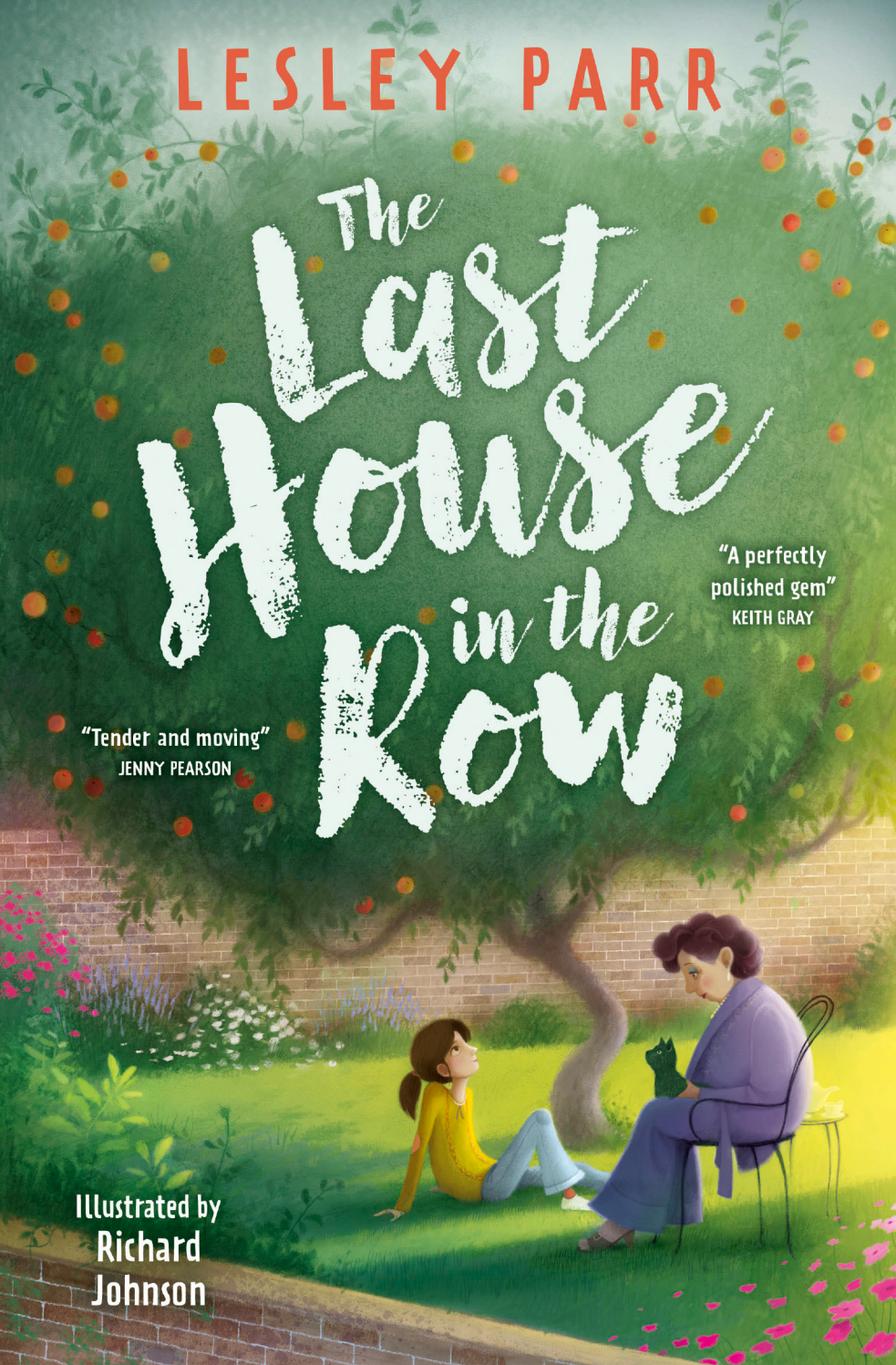
LESLEY PARR

The Last House in the Row

"Tender and moving"
JENNY PEARSON

"A perfectly
polished gem"
KEITH GRAY

Illustrated by
Richard
Johnson



“Told with equal amounts of humour and heart, this wonderful story of unexpected understanding and new-found friendship leaves the reader glowing and grinning inside. A perfectly polished gem of a story and a feel-good hit”

KEITH GRAY

“A beautifully told story that explores the power of genuine, cross-generational friendship. It is both tender and moving”

JENNY PEARSON

“Lesley Parr’s family and small community settings always have such a timeless, classic feel ... an accessible and appealing story of mutual understanding and kindness between generations”

HILARY McKAY

“A tender, moving story that really touches the heart. Absolutely beautiful”

ELOISE WILLIAMS

“This is a story that will stay with you”

HELEN PETERS

“A perfect slice of Lesley Parr brilliance. She’s managed to condense a *huge* depth of emotion into just a few perfectly formed chapters”

TOM PERCIVAL

The Last House in the Row

LESLEY PARR

Illustrated by
Richard Johnson

Barrington  Stoke

For Katherine Richards

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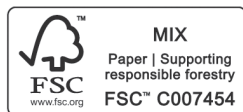
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WALES, 1979

Chapter 1

Red Salmon

It's not easy trying to persuade Judy Garland to come out of someone else's garden with a bit of tinned salmon. But here I am, kneeling on the ground, shoving my hand into a gap in the wall, calling my stubborn cat.

She loves this garden. I often see her sprawled on the lawn under the big apple tree, her black tail flicking. I don't mind Judy Garland wandering – *she is* a cat, and they think they own the world. But I do mind that this garden is her favourite.

Because it belongs to Boo, and that gives me the creeps.

As I hold out the salmon, Judy Garland stares at me in that way cats do. If she could, she'd raise her eyebrows to say, *You've got no chance.*

"Suit yourself," I mutter, stuffing the salmon in my mouth and getting up. I wipe my hand on my jeans and cross the waste ground to go back home.

I see Mam's face in the kitchen window, and I try to keep walking. But she opens the back door and shouts, "Hayley, I know what you've done. Get in here – now!"

I slope back.

Mam's pointing at the open salmon tin with a look on her face that's not totally different to Judy Garland's. It says, *I'm in charge.* To be fair, both mother and cat are right.

"Sorry," I say. "But she's in Boo's garden again and—"

“Please don’t call Lillian that. You know her name.”

I stare at the floor – lino made to look like real tiles. “OK then,” I mumble. “She’s in *Lillian’s* garden.”

“Don’t take that tone with me,” Mam says. “You know better than to make up an unkind name for an old lady.” She scrapes the rest of the salmon into a plastic container and snaps on the lid. “We’ll have to eat this tonight now. I was saving it for Sunday tea.” Mam huffs. “*And it’s red.*”

She’s annoyed because red salmon is the more expensive kind and we don’t have it very often.

“I prefer pink anyway,” I say.

Mam puts the container in the fridge. “So that makes it all right to feed it to the cat, does it?”

“I didn’t!”

“Only because she didn’t want it!” Mam splutters. “Honestly, Hayley, I could do without the backchat.”

I shove my hands deep into my jeans pockets. “Sorry.”

I go to my bedroom and crawl over the end of the bed to sit on the wide windowsill. I put my back against the wall, feet up, to look at the mountain and the rows of houses on it. So many houses – all the way down to the flat part of the valley where we live. And there’s the lane, the waste ground, the church and the graveyard. I can even see some of the tallest headstones and crosses.

And I can see her house – Boo’s house. I don’t care what Mam says, I’m not calling her Lillian, not when she’s trying to steal my cat. I bet she lures Judy Garland in there. I bet my cat didn’t want salmon because she’s full of

whatever Boo has been feeding her. I can't see into the garden from here, but I can imagine it all.

I pick up my script and go over the lines again. My youth club, the Urdd, is putting on a production of *Little Women*, and I have to get the part of Jo March. It's the lead role. The auditions are in half term, so less than a month away. It's a pity I don't go to secondary school till next year because I'll have proper drama lessons then. I like the idea of being an actress. Dad reckons I'd be great as I already love creating drama.

I look at the script. But it's hard to concentrate, knowing my cat is over there with that witchy old woman.

Boo's house is the last one in the row. What's left of the row anyway. There used to be fifteen houses, Dad says. I can just about remember that – fifteen houses all facing the lane next to St David's Church. I always thought

they must be posh because no other houses round here have three storeys.

Now there's only Boo's house left, and there's nothing posh about that one. The council managed to knock down the rest without making her house collapse with them. Now the wall that faces where I live is a strange sight. It belonged to the house next door to Boo, and it's sort of an inside on the outside, with old wallpaper peeling off it. Like a wrecked house in the war, or a broken-down dolls' house.

I walk past it every day on my way to school and back, and there's Boo, always staring out of the window like a white-faced ghost, with her face covered in powder. Her eyeshadow is so bright, so blue I can see it from the lane. Like she's always ready to go out.

But Boo never goes anywhere.

Not ever.



She's like a character in an old film I saw. He was called Boo, and he never went out either. This Boo, the one I named, just lives there – exists there – every day the same. Watching from the window. Luring cats. Never going out.

Mari who owns the paper shop reckons it started after the first council letter came. The letter told Boo about their plans to demolish the row and build sheltered housing – flats and bungalows for pensioners.

Boo never answers those letters, even though they offer her compensation money if she leaves. She puts the phone down if the council ring, and they stopped knocking the door after she threw dirty dishwater over two of them from an upstairs window. So people say. Mam tells me not to listen to rumours, but Mari says it's true – and running the paper shop means she knows everything.

In the last three years, the only person Boo's let into her house is Dr Shelby. Even the

ladies who deliver her meals have to stay on the doorstep. She has a gardener – a man from up the valley – but he never goes inside either.

Dad wonders if Boo is lonely, but I don't think she is. She could let people in if she wanted to.

My bedroom door opens just a bit, then Judy Garland's beautiful furry face appears as she pushes further and pads in. She jumps onto the bed and rubs against my arm, looking up at me, all innocent.

Little madam.

I pick her up, cwttch* her into my jumper and whisper, "Bet you know all the secrets in that house, don't you?"

*cwttch – a Welsh word for a cuddle or hug