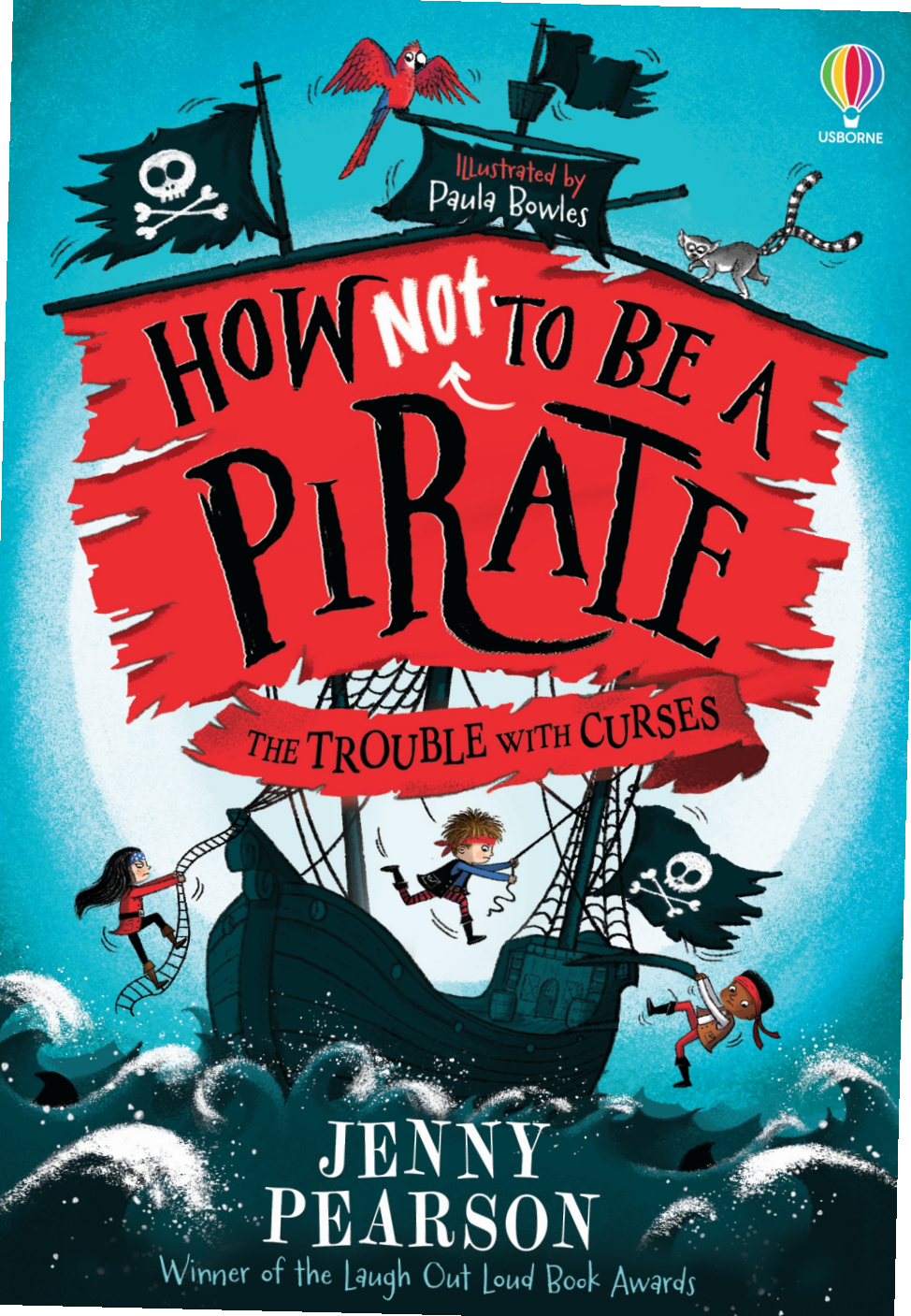
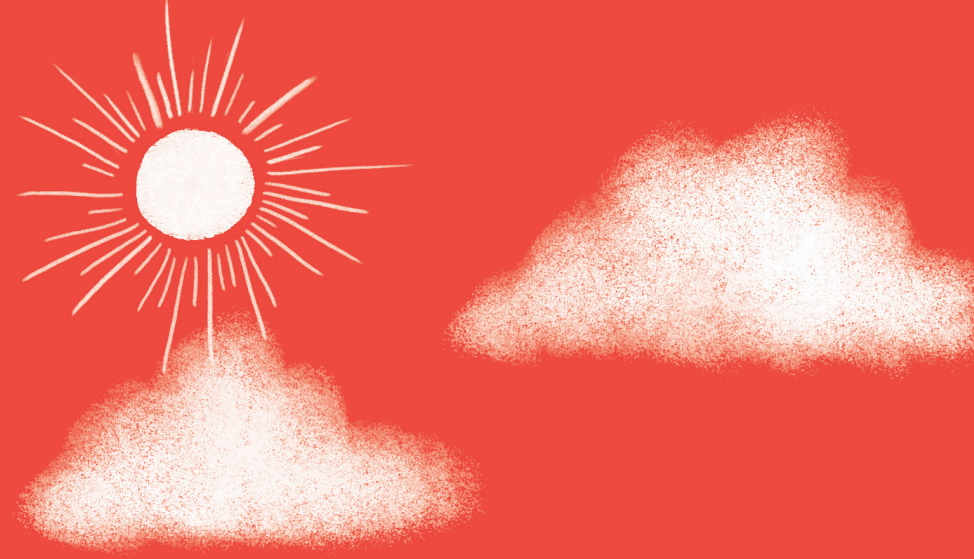

USBORNE
Illustrated by
Paula Bowles
HOW NOT TO BE A PIRATE
THE TROUBLE WITH CURSES
JENNY PEARSON
Winner of the Laugh Out Loud Book Awards



First published in the UK in 2026 by Usborne Publishing Ltd., Usborne House, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. usborne.com

Usborne Verlag, Usborne Publishing Ltd., Prüfeninger Str. 20, 93049 Regensburg, Deutschland VK Nr. 17560

Text copyright © Jenny Pearson, 2026
The right of Jenny Pearson to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Cover and inside illustrations by Paula Bowles© Usborne Publishing Ltd., 2026

The name Usborne and the Balloon logo are Trade Marks of Usborne Publishing Ltd.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781835400968





HOW NOT TO BE A PIRATE

THE TROUBLE WITH CURSES



JENNY PEARSON

Illustrated by Paula Bowles

USBORNE

Ahoy, there, you scraggly sea dog!

You made it to your tenth birthday, and as a member of one of the great pirating clans and according to pirate custom, you must commence your Level One training.

So, I Odessa Stormhart, summons you, Wilbur Woodblack, to the Rogue's Maiden, where you will be tested on all the skills of a pirate.

These include, but are not limited to:

spitting
hoisting sails
climbing the rigging
sword fighting
cannon firing
management of your companion
general fierceness (including, how terrifying your ARRRGH is)
pirate talk
pirate history.

To pass your Level One and earn the right to sail aboard a pirate ship as a crew member, you will need to be proficient in all the above and complete a Level One adventure quest of a mild to moderate terror level.

A reminder - pirate lore dictates that all who fail to advance through the three levels of the pirate grading within five attempts will not:

- be permitted to call themselves a pirate

- be allowed to work aboard any pirate ship

- receive protection from the pirate clans

- be permitted to ARRRGH

- be a member of the ScurvyShield™ pirate health insurance plan.





Wilbur kept his head down and his eyes fixed to the floor of the tavern as Timbers the doctor-come-tavern-owner circled him, tutting and sighing and shaking his head.

Eventually, he came to a stop. “This be quite a predicament we have ’ere.” Timbers rubbed his beard, and a little shower of cracker crumbs sprayed onto the floorboards.

Captain Woodblack nodded solemnly. “It certainly is.”

With his big shovel-like hand Dr. Timbers tilted Wilbur’s face towards him and examined him closely. He pulled apart Wilbur’s lips. “Got a good set of gnashers on him.”

The doctor let go of Wilbur’s face, leaned against the cupboard behind him and folded his arms across his broad belly. A tattoo in the shape of a compass — the mark of the

pirate — was faded but still visible in his weathered, leathery skin.

"Seasickness, you say?"

Wilbur's cheeks flushed red. It never got any less humiliating.

"A terrible case of it. The lad sometimes struggles if his bath water gets too choppy."

Troubadour, the scarlet macaw that Captain Woodblack had picked to be Wilbur's companion, fluttered down from the captain's shoulder and began pecking at the cracker crumbs, while repeating, **"WEAK STOMACH, WEAK HEART."**



"You'd do well to keep that beak of yours shut, tweety," Wilbur snapped.

Troubadour blew a long loud raspberry, then flew back to Captain Woodblack's shoulder and nuzzled into his ear.

Troubadour was supposed to be Wilbur's bird — his companion — but the parrot wouldn't leave his father's side.

Wilbur scowled as his dad tickled the bird's neck.

"Don't be taking this out on Troubadour, son. 'Tis your affliction not his."

Troubadour grinned, turned his back to Wilbur and waggled his tail feathers.

"I've got a recipe for plum sauce that would be delicious with roasted parrot," Wilbur snapped.



Captain Woodblack stamped his foot on the floor. "You've got the blood of the world's best pirates flowing through your veins, Wilbur Woodblack. Your place is steering the ship's wheel not stirring a soufflé. Don't you forget that."

Wilbur gulped and looked at the floor. "Aye, aye, Dad, I mean, Captain." Wilbur knew he didn't have it in him to become a pirate captain like his dad. Instead, he thought maybe he could be the ship's cook, like his mum. But he wouldn't even be able to do that if he didn't get rid of his blasted seasickness and pass his Level One pirating test.

Captain Woodblack's shoulders drooped. "Must be somethin' you can do, Doctor? We take him for his first pirate grading tomorrow."

The summons had been delivered by pigeon two days earlier on Wilbur's tenth birthday. The bird had given him a pitiful look as Wilbur had taken the scroll from his leg.

After reading it, Wilbur knew with absolute certainty that he was doomed to fail. How could a seasick pirate ever pass even the Level One pirate's exam?



Unless, perhaps, Dr. Timbers did have some miraculous remedy...

Wilbur watched hopefully as Timbers turned to the shelf behind him where an array of glass bottles and containers were stacked haphazardly. He picked up a sapphire blue jar containing some glistening white orbs. "And you've tried octopus eyeballs?"

Wilbur's stomach flipped at the reminder. The last "doctor" they'd seen – a hunched old woman with one yellow tooth that jutted out of her gums like a tombstone – had sworn that four ground eyeballs dissolved into a dram of seawater would sort him out. All it had sorted out for him was a very severe case of vomiting and diarrhoea.

Captain Woodblack removed his tricorn hat, sat down on the bar-stool and sighed. Wilbur could feel the disappointment in his breath.



"The boy's tried everything. You're our last hope, Doctor Timbers, so you are. He's had his feet massaged with puréed frogfish lungs, he's been injected with puffer-fish spines, he's licked the tongues of eleven trigger fish—"

"All right, Dad—" Wilbur didn't really want *that* particular attempt becoming public knowledge.

"And he's slept naked on deck under the light of the full moon with a sea-slug in his belly button—"

"*Dad!*"

"But nothing has worked. I've spent a fortune tryin' to help him. I'm at my wits' end, Timbers. How's it gonna look when word gets out that I, Captain Woodblack, have a seasick son?"

Timbers put the jar of eyeballs back on the shelf, looked at Wilbur and shook his head mournfully. "'Tis a sorry state of affairs."



"Aye, that it is," the captain said.

"WASTE OF SPACE, WASTE OF SPACE," Troubadour flapped his wings in Wilbur's direction.

Wilbur shot him his deadliest look, but Wilbur's looks were never that deadly and the parrot cocked

his head and blew another raspberry in reply.

"I've got just the thing." Dr. Timbers uncorked a large bottle and poured a brown liquid into a metal tumbler.

"Will that cure him?" Captain Woodblack leaned forward on his stool.



Wilbur felt the hope balloon in his chest.

"This? No – there's nowt that can help him."

And then he felt it deflate again.

"This 'ere is for you. A quart of Seadog's Swig – just the thing for coping with a disappointment of this magnitude."

Captain Woodblack chugged it back, cast his eyes over Wilbur again and shook his head sorrowfully. "You'd think I'd been cursed."

Timbers leaned forward, lowered his voice to a whisper. "You don't think it's got owt to do with what happened when he was a wee nipper? You know that terrible business down at the Williwaw Isles…the night his mother…well, that could affect a lad."

The captain slammed his fists on the bar making all the glasses and Wilbur jump. "I thought I made it clear that

night should never be mentioned."

Wilbur knew very little about the night Timbers was referring to, other than the ship had been attacked. But by who or what, Wilbur didn't know. His mother had disappeared without a trace and his father always refused to sail anywhere near the Williwaw Isles.

"Aye, that you did. Accept my apologies. 'Ere, I think you be in need of another." The doctor uncorked the bottle and topped up the captain's drink.

Wilbur couldn't be near his dad's disappointment any longer, so he slipped out of the old ramshackle tavern and onto the cobbled street. The *Dark Whisper* had arrived in the middle of the night and as he'd been below deck with his head over a bucket, cursing his belly for being so weak, Wilbur didn't even know the country — let alone the name of the port — they'd docked in. All he did know was that for tonight, he would be sleeping on dry land. And that meant a whole evening where his world didn't rock, and the contents of his stomach remained in his stomach.

Wilbur pulled Odessa Stormhart's summons from his pocket and read it again. There was no way out of it — he'd

just have to try his best and hope that the sea was calm for him. He sighed. Who was he kidding? Even the gentlest of waves set his stomach gurgling like a gulper eel. He was about to let himself descend into a truly deep sulk, but someone suddenly slammed into him and landed on top of him with an **OOOF**.

"Oi! Watch it!" he yelled.

He couldn't make out who or what had pinned him to the ground. Most of their face was hidden under the hood of a huge black cloak.

"*Me* watch it? ME?! You were the one standing in the street looking like some stupid…stupid…papaya tree."

"*Papaya tree*?" Wilbur had been called a lot of things before, chunder-guts, the human vomit-comet, young pirate puke-a-lot, but never *papaya tree*.

"Yeah, a big, dumb, stupid papaya tree — standing right in the way with your big, dumb, stupid papaya head." Their hood tipped back to reveal a pair of angry eyes glaring at him from under even angrier eyebrows. Wilbur quickly scrambled to his feet. Somehow, he'd been floored by a kid almost half his size. That was not a very pirately thing to

have happened at all. At least his dad hadn't seen.

Wilbur raised himself to full height. "I do *not* look like a papaya tree."

The girl, for Wilbur had realized it was a girl, grabbed hold of the leather scabbard that hung round Wilbur's waist and pulled herself up until she was at nose level with his collar bones. She then stood up on her tiptoes, so she was staring him in the eyes. Then she bared her teeth and snarled. Wilbur noticed a scattering of freckles across her nose that looked a bit like the night sky. He almost pointed them out, but she prodded him in the chest and said, "Yeah, you do. You look more like a papaya tree than anyone else I've ever met. What with your long skinny legs and that funny sprout of hair on the top of your head."



Wilbur pointed to his hair. "This is not a sprout, it's a *style*."

"Not a good one. You can't tell me you've grown it like that on purpose…!"

"Well, we don't exactly have a hairdresser on the *Dark Whisper*."

She gasped, and with misty eyes, looked off into the distance. "**The Dark Whisper?**"

Before he could answer, she'd grabbed hold of the lapels of his long coat and pulling him towards her, her eyes now as wide as two silver coins.

"You're a pirate? You don't *look* like a pirate."

"I most certainly am a—"

Wilbur noticed her forehead crumple into a frown. He really needed to work on his pirate accent. He really needed to work on a lot of things.

"I mean, aye, I be a pirate," he corrected.

She raised an eyebrow. "You don't look like a pirate, you don't sound like pirate," she stuck her nose forward and sniffed twice, "cinnamon, I thought so – you don't even smell like a pirate. I'm thinking you ain't no pirate."

"Fine, I'm not an *actual* pirate, but tomorrow, I take my Level One pirate grading, and then I'll be on my way to

becoming a proper pirate." He didn't think he'd be on his way at all, but this girl didn't need to know that. Wilbur took Odessa Stormhart's summons from his pocket and held it out as proof.

The girl let go of his coat and snatched up the yellowing paper. Her eyebrows lowered as she read it, then her mouth opened as wide as a cannon. For quite a while, she didn't move, and Wilbur wondered if he had petrified her. That would be quite a pirately thing to do — turning someone to stone. He'd heard tales of men who'd been stunned into paralysis by the sight of something terrifying emerging through the waves.

He waved his hand in front of her face. "Coo-ee. Anybody there?"

Slowly her lips stretched their way into a smile, and she clasped her hands together. **"This. Is. The. Best. Day. Ever!"**

"What do you mean?" Wilbur asked.

"I've always wanted to be a pirate and you, Papaya Head, have shown me how to make it happen!"

