Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

opening extract from

A Kestrel for a Knave

written by

Barry Hines

published by

Penguin Books

All text is copyright of the author

please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

THERE WERE no curtains up. The window was a hard edged block the colour of the night sky. Inside the bedroom the darkness was of a gritty texture. The wardrobe and bed were blurred shapes in the darkness. Silence.

Billy moved over, towards the outside of the bed. Jud moved with him, leaving one half of the bed empty. He snorted and rubbed his nose. Billy whimpered. They settled. Wind whipped the window and swept along the wall outside.

Billy turned over. Jud followed him and cough – coughed into his neck. Billy pulled the blankets up round his ears and wiped his neck with them. Most of the bed was now empty, and the unoccupied space quickly cooled. Silence. Then the alarm rang. The noise brought Billy upright, feeling for it in the darkness, eyes shut tight. Jud groaned and hutched back across the cold sheet. He reached down the side of the bed and knocked the clock over, grabbed for it, and knocked it further away.

'Come here, you bloody thing.'

He stretched down and grabbed it with both hands. The glass lay curved in one palm, while the fingers of his other hand fumbled amongst the knobs and levers at the back. He found the lever and the noise stopped. Then he coiled

back into bed and left the clock lying on its back.

'The bloody thing.'

He stayed in his own half of the bed, groaning and turning over every few minutes. Billy lay with his back to him, listening. Then he turned his cheek slightly from the pillow.

'Jud?'

'What?'

'Tha'd better get up.'

No answer.

'Alarm's gone off tha knows.'

'Think I don't know?'

He pulled the blankets tighter and drilled his head into the pillow. They both lay still.

'Jud?'

'What?'

'Tha'll be late.'

'O, shut it.'

'Clock's not fast tha knows.'

'I said SHUT IT.'

He swung his fist under the blankets and thumped Billy in the kidneys.

'Gi'o'er! That hurts!'

'Well shut it then.'

'I'll tell my mam on thi.'

Jud swung again. Billy scuffled away into the cold at the edge of the bed, sobbing. Jud got out, sat on the edge of the bed for a moment, then stood up and felt his way across the room to the light switch. Billy worked his way back to the centre and disappeared under the blankets.

'Set t'alarm for me, Jud. For seven.'

'Set it thi sen.'

'Go on, thar up.'

Jud parted Billy's sweater and shirt, and used the sweater for a vest. Billy snuggled down in Jud's place, making the springs creak. Jud looked at the humped blankets, then walked across and pulled them back, stripping the bed completely.

'Hands off cocks; on socks.'

For an instant Billy lay curled up, his hands wafered between his thighs. Then he sat up and crawled to the bottom of the bed to retrieve the blankets.

'You rotten sod, just because tha's to get up.'

'Another few weeks lad, an' tha'll be getting up wi' me.'

He walked out on to the landing. Billy propped himself up on one elbow.

'Switch t'light out, then!'

Jud went downstairs. Billy sat on the edge of the bed and re-set the alarm, then ran across the lino and switched the light off. When he got back into bed most of the warmth had gone. He shivered and scuffled around the sheet, seeking a warm place.

It was still dark outside when he got up and went downstairs. The living-room curtains were drawn, and when he switched the light on it was gloomy and cold without the help of the fire. He placed the clock on the mantelpiece, then picked up his mother's sweater from the settee and pulled it on over his shirt.

The alarm rang as he was emptying the ashes in the dustbin. Dust clouded up into his face as he dropped the lid back on and ran inside, but the noise stopped before he could reach it. He knelt down in front of the empty grate and scrunched sheets of newspaper into loose balls, arrang-

ing them in the grate like a bouquet of hydrangea flowers. Then he picked up the hatchet, stood a nog of wood on the hearth and struck it down the centre. The blade bit and held. He lifted the hatchet with the nog attached and smashed it down, splitting the nog in half and chipping the tile with the blade. He split the halves into quarters, down through eighths to sixteenths, then arranged these sticks over the paper like the struts of a wigwam. He completed the construction with lumps of coal, building them into a loose shell, so that sticks and paper showed through the chinks. The paper caught with the first match, and the flames spread quickly underneath, making the chinks smoke and the sticks crack. He waited for the first burst of flames up the back of the construction, then stood up and walked into the kitchen, and opened the pantry door. There were a packet of dried peas and a half bottle of vinegar on the shelves. The bread bin was empty. Just inside the doorway, the disc of the electricity meter circled slowly in its glass case. The red arrow appeared, and disappeared. Billy closed the door and opened the outside door. On the step stood two empty milk bottles. He thumped the jamb with the side of his fist.

'It's t' same every morning. I'm going to start hiding some at nights.'

He started to turn inside, then stopped, and looked out again. The garage door was open. He ran across the concrete strip and used the light from the kitchen to look inside.

'Well, of all the rotten tricks!'

He kicked a can of oil the length of the garage and ran back into the house. The coal had caught fire, and the yellow flames were now emitting a slight warmth. Billy pulled his pumps on without unfastening the laces and grabbed his windcheater. The zip was broken and the

material draped out behind him as he vaulted the front wall and raced up the avenue.

The sky was a grey wash; pale grey over the fields behind the estate, but darkening overhead, to charcoal away over the City. The street lamps were still on and a few lighted windows glowed the colours of their curtains. Billy passed two miners returning silently from the night shift. A man in overalls cycled by, treading the pedals slowly. The four of them converged, and parted, pursuing their various destinations at various speeds.

Billy reached the recreation ground. The gate was locked, so he stepped back and sprang on to the interlaced wire fence, scaled it and placed one foot on top ready for the descent. The whole section between the concrete posts shuddered beneath his weight. He rode it, with one hand and one foot on top, the other arm fighting for balance; but the more he fought, the more it shook, until finally it shook him off, over the other side into the long grass. He stood up. His pumps and jeans were saturated, and there was dog shit on one hand. He wiped it in the grass, smelled his fingers, then ran across the football pitch. Behind the top goal, the rows of children's swings had all been wrapped round their horizontal supporting bars. He found a dog-hole in the fence at the other side of the pitch and crept through on to the City Road. A double-decker bus passed, followed closely by two cars. Their engines faded and no other vehicles approached. The road lamps went out, and for a few moments the only sound in the dark morning was the squelch of Billy's pumps as he crossed the road.

A bell tinkled as he entered the shop. Mr Porter glanced up, then continued to arrange newspapers into overlapping rows on the counter.

'I thought you weren't coming.'

'Why, I'm not late, am I?'

Porter pulled a watch out of his waistcoat pocket and held it in his palm like a stopwatch. He considered it, then tucked it away. Billy picked up the canvas bag from the front of the counter and ducked under the strap as he slipped it over his head and shoulder. The bag sagged at his hip. He straightened a twist in the strap, then lifted the flap and looked inside at the wad of newspapers and magazines.

'I nearly wa' though.'

'What do you mean?'

'Late. Our Jud went to t'pit on my bike.'

Porter stopped sorting and looked across the counter.

'What you going to do, then?'

'Walk it.'

'Walk it! And how long do you think that's going to take you?'

'It'll not take me long.'

'Some folks like to read their papers t'day they come out, you know.'

'It's not my fault. I didn't ask him to take it, did I?'

'No, and I didn't ask for any cheek from you! Do you hear?'

Billy heard.

' 'Cos there's a waiting list a mile long for your job, you know. Grand lads an' all, some of 'em. Lads from up Firs Hill and round there.'

Billy shuffled his feet and glanced down into the bag, as though one of the grand lads might be waiting in there.

'It'll not take me that much longer. I've done it before.'

Porter shook his head and squared off a pile of magazines by tapping their four edges on the counter. Billy

sidled across to the convector heater and stood before it, feet apart, hands behind his back. Porter looked up at him and Billy let his hands fall to his sides.

'I don't know, it's typical.'

'What's up, I haven't let you down yet, have I?'

The bell tinkled. Porter straightened up, smiling.

'Morning, Sir. Not very promising again.'

'Twenty Players.'

'Right, Sir.'

He turned round and ran one finger along a shelf stacked with cigarettes. His finger reached the Players and climbed the packets. Billy reached out and lifted two bars of chocolate from a display table at the side of the counter. He dropped them into his bag as Porter turned round. Porter traded the cigarettes and sprang the till open.

'Than-kyou,' his last syllable rising, in time to the ring of the bell.

'Good morning, Sir.'

He watched the man out of the shop, then turned back to Billy.

'You know what they said when I took you on, don't you?'

He waited, as though expecting Billy to supply the answer.

'They said, you'll have to keep your eyes open now, you know, 'cos they're all alike off that estate. They'll take your breath if you're not careful.'

'I've never taken owt o' yours, have I?'

'I've never given you chance, that's why.'

'You don't have to. I've stopped getting into trouble now.'

Porter opened his mouth, blinked, then pulled his watch out and studied the time.

'Are you going to stand there all day, then?'

He shook the watch and placed it to one ear.

'Next thing I know, everybody 'll be ringing me up and asking why I can't deliver on time.'

Billy left the shop. The traffic was now continuous along the City Road, and there were queues at all the bus stops for buses into town. Billy passed them as he headed away from the City. He started to deliver at a row of detached houses and bungalows: pebble dash and stone, and leaded windows. The row ended and he turned off the main road, up Firs Hill. The hill was steep. Trees had been planted at regular intervals along a cropped verge and the houses stood well back, shielded from the road, and from each other by trees and high wicker fences. Billy stopped before a wrought-iron gate with spikes at the top. On one of the gate posts was a notice: NO HAWKERS NO CALLERS. Billy looked down the drive and popped two squares of chocolate into his mouth. He left one half of the gate wide open and set off towards the house. Rhododendron shrubs crowded both sides of the drive, right up to the front door. He pushed the flap. It was stiff and the spring creaked. He looked towards the corners of the house, then eased the paper through and slowly lowered the flap until it clamped the paper. The curtains in all the front windows were drawn. The garden was wild, and moss and grass were replacing the asphalt on the drive. Billy used the moss and the grass like stepping stones until the last few yards, then he sprinted out, slamming the gate shut behind him. He unwrapped the last two squares of chocolate and looked back. A thrush ran out from under a rhododendron shrub and started to tug a worm from the soil between the loose asphalt chips. It stood over the worm and tugged vertically, exposing its speckled throat and pointing its beak to the

sky. The worm stretched, but held. The thrush lowered its head and backed off, pulling at a more acute angle. The worm still held, so the thrush stepped in and jerked at the slack. The worm ripped out of the ground and the thrush ran away with it, back under the shrubs. Billy flicked the chocolate wrapper through the gate and passed on.

A milk dray whined up the hill, close to the kerb. Every time the near wheels dipped into a grate, the bottles rattled in their crates. It stopped and the driver jumped out of the cab whistling. He slid a crate off the back and carried it across the road. Billy glanced round as he approached the dray. There was no one else on the hill. He lifted a bottle of orange juice and a carton of eggs and popped them into his bag. When the driver returned, Billy was delivering papers at the next house. The dray passed him again further up. It stopped and the driver lit a cigarette, waiting for Billy to draw level.

'How's it going then, young un?'

Billy stopped and lolled back against the dray.

'O, not so bad.'

'Tha could do wi' some transport.'

He grinned and patted the dray.

'This is better than walking, tha knows.'

'Ar, only just, though.'

Billy kicked the back tyre.

'They only go about five miles an hour, these things.'

'It's still better than walking, isn't it?'

'I could go faster on a kid's scooter.'

The milkman nipped his cigarette out and blew on the end.

'You know what I always say?'

'What?'

'Third class riding's better than first class walking, anyday.'

He tucked the tab into the breast pocket of his overalls and crossed the road, carrying two bottles in each hand. Billy watched him across the open back of the dray, then dipped into his bag for the orange. He held the bottle horizontally between thumb and little finger, then tilted it to make the air bubble travel the length of the bottle, and back again. Top to bottom, top bottom tobottom, until the flakes raged like a glass snow storm. He punched his thumb through the cap, and downed the contents in two gulps, dropped the bottle back into a crate, and passed on up the hill.

A lane cut across the top of Firs Hill, forming a T junction. Billy turned left along it. There was no pavement, and whenever a car approached he either crossed the lane or stepped into the long grass at the side and waited for it to pass. Fields, and a few hedgerow trees sloped down into the valley. Toy traffic travelled along the City Road, and across the road, in the valley bottom, was the sprawl of the estate. Towards the City, a pit chimney and the pit-head winding gear showed above the rooftops, and at the back of the estate was a patchwork of fields, black, and grey, and pale winter green; giving way to a wood, which stood out on the far slope as clear as an ink blot.

Billy pulled his jacket together as the wind murmured over the top of the moor, and across into the lane. But the zip was broken and the jacket fell open again. He crossed the lane and crouched down with his back against the wall. The stones were wet, and shone different shades of brown and green, like polished leather. Billy opened his bag and flicked through the contents. He pulled out the *Dandy* and turned immediately to *Desperate Dan.*

Dan is going to a wedding. His nephew and niece are helping him to get ready. His niece puts his top hat on the chair. *Crunch*! goes the hat as Dan sits on it. He goes to buy a new hat, but they are all FAR TOO SMALL. This is the biggest in the shop, the assistant tells him. Dan tries it on. It's almost big enough he says, but when he tries to pull it down a bit, he rips the brim off and it comes down over his face. *OH, NO!* he says, looking over the brim. Outside the shop he has an idea, and points to something not shown in the picture. *Ah! That's the very thing!* he says, but first he has to clear the City Square so that no one will see what he is going to do. Round the corner, he bends over a water hydrant and blows. Water explodes out of the fountain in the square, drenching everybody, and they all have to go home, leaving the square deserted. Good, now I can get what I want, Dan says. In the next picture, Dan is trying on a big grey topper. He looks pleased and says, *That's it! And it fits a treat.* He attends the wedding, and at the Reception Hall he hands his hat to the cloakroom attendant. The attendant can't hold it and the hat goes *Crunch*! on his foot. *Ooyah*! goes the attendant. He tries to pick it up, saying, *Help! What a hat! It's made of solid stone!* The last picture shows where the hat came from: from the head of the statue in the City Square: WILLIAM SMITH, MAYOR OF CACTUSVILLE 1865–86. SHOT AT HIGH NOON BY BLACK JAKE.

Billy stood up into the wind and flexed his knees as he stepped back on to the lane. He started to run, holding the bag under one arm to stop it slapping and dragging at his hip. He delivered the *Dandy* with a newspaper and several magazines at a farmhouse. A collie barked at his heels all the way through the yard, and back out again. It followed him along the lane, then stopped and barked

him out of sight over a rise. Billy started to run again. He rolled a newspaper into a telescope and spied through it as he ran. Until he spied a stone house, standing back from the lane. Then he slowed to a walk, smoothing out the newspaper and rolling it the other way to neutralize the first curve.

At the side of the house, a grey Bentley was parked before an open garage. Billy never took his eyes off it as he walked up the drive, and when he reached the top, he veered across and looked in at the dashboard. The front door of the house opened, making him step back quickly from the car and turn round. A man in a dark suit came out, followed by two little girls in school uniform. They all climbed into the front of the car, and the little girls waved to a woman in a dressing gown standing at the door. Billy handed her the newspaper and looked past her into the house. The hall and stairs were carpeted. A radiator with a glass shelf ran along one wall, and on the shelf stood a vase of fresh daffodils. The car freewheeled down the drive and turned into the lane. The woman waved with the newspaper and closed the door. Billy walked back, pushed the letter box up and peeped through. There was the sound of running bath water. A radio was playing. The woman was walking up the stairs, carrying a transistor. Billy lowered the flap and walked away. On the drive, the tyres of the car had imprinted two patterned bands, reminiscent of markings on a snake's back.

Outside the shop, Billy transferred the carton of eggs from the delivery bag to a large pocket, sewn into the lining of his jacket. The pocket pouched under the weight, but when he closed his jacket, there was no bulge on the outside.

Porter looked round at the sound of the bell. He was up a step ladder behind the counter, re-lining shelves with fresh paper.

'Evening.'

'I told you it wouldn't take me long, didn't I?'

'What did you do, throw half of 'em over a hedge?'

'No need. I know some short cuts coming back.'

'I'll bet you do, over people's property, no doubt.'

'No, across some fields. It cuts miles off.'

'It's a good job t'farmer didn't see you, else you might have got a barrel of shotspread up your arse.'

'What for? There was only grass in 'em.'

Billy folded the bag in half and placed it on the counter.

'Not on there. You know where it goes.'

Billy walked round the counter and squeezed past the step ladder. Porter hung on until he had passed, then he watched him open a drawer at the back of the counter and stuff the bag inside.

'You'll be wanting me to take 'em round for you next.'

Billy shut the drawer with his knee and looked up at him.

'What time is it?'

'It's time you were at school.'

'It's not that late, is it?'

Porter turned back to the shelves, shaking his head slowly.

'I shouldn't like to think it wa' my job trying to learn you owt.'

As Billy squeezed past, he shook the steps and grabbed Porter's legs.

'Look out, Mr Porter!'

Porter sprawled forward into the shelving, his arms spread wide, his fingers scratching for a hold.

'You're all right, I've got you!'

Billy held Porter's legs while he pushed himself off the shelves and regained his balance. His face and bald patch were greasy with sweat.

'You clumsy young bugger. What you trying to do, kill me?'

'I lost my balance.'

'I wouldn't put it past you, either.'

He descended the steps backwards, holding on with both hands.

'I fair felt my heart go then.'

He reached the bottom of the steps and placed one hand over the breast pocket of his jacket. Reassured, he sat down on the stool behind the counter and exhaled noisily.

'Are you all right now, Mr Porter?'

'All right! Ar, I'm bloody champion!'

'I'll be off then.'

He crossed the shop to the door.

'And don't be late tonight.'

The estate was teeming with children: tots hand in hand with their mothers, tots on their own, and with other tots, groups of tots and Primary School children; Secondary School children, on their own, in pairs and in threes, in gangs and on bikes. Walking silently, walking on walls, walking and talking, quietly, loudly, laughing; running, chasing, playing, swearing, smoking, ringing bells and calling names: all on their way to school.

When Billy arrived home, the curtains were still drawn in all the front windows, but the light was on in the living-room. As he crossed the front garden, a man appeared from round the side of the house and walked up the path

to the gate. Billy watched him walk away down the avenue, then ran round to the back door and into the kitchen.

'Is that you, Reg?'

Billy banged the door and walked through into the living-room. His mother was standing in her underslip, a lipstick poised at her mouth, watching the doorway through the mirror. When she saw Billy, she started to apply the lipstick.

'O, it's you, Billy. Haven't you gone to school yet?'

'Who's that bloke?'

His mother pressed her lips together and stood the capsule, like a bullet, on the mantelpiece.

'That's Reg. You know Reg, don't you?'

She took a cigarette packet from the mantelpiece and shook it.

'Hell! I forgot to ask him for one.'

She dropped the packet into the hearth and turned to Billy.

'You haven't got a fag on you, have you, love?'

Billy moved across to the table and placed both hands round the teapot. His mother pulled her skirt on and tried to zip it on the hip. The zip would only close half-way, so she secured the waistband with a safety pin. The zip slipped as soon as she moved, and the slit expanded to the shape of a rugby ball. Billy shoved a finger down the spout of the teapot.

'Is that him you come home wi' last night?'

'There's some tea mashed if you want a cup, but I don't know if t'milk's come or not.'

'Was it?'

'Oh, stop pestering me! I'm late enough as it is.'

She crumpled her sweater into a tyre and eased her head through the hole, trying to prevent her hair from touching the sides.

'Do me a favour, love, and run up to t'shop for some fags.'

'They'll not be open yet.'

'You can go to t'back door. Mr Hardy'll not mind.'

'I can't, I'll be late.'

'Go on, love, and bring a few things back wi' you; a loaf and some butter, and a few eggs, summat like that.'

'Go your sen.'

'I've no time. Just tell him to put it in t'book and I'll pay him at t'week-end.'

'He says you can't have owt else 'til you've paid up.'

'He always says that. I'll give you a tanner if you go.'

'I don't want a tanner. I'm off now.'

He moved towards the door, but his mother stepped across and blocked his way.

'Billy, get up to that shop and do as you're telled.'

He shook his head. His mother stepped forward, but he backed off, keeping the same distance between them. Although she was too far away, she still swiped at him, and although he saw her hand coming, and going, well clear of his face, he still flicked his head back instinctively.

'I'm not going.'

He moved behind the table.

'Aren't you? We'll see about that.'

They faced each other across the table, their fingers spread on the cloth, like two pianists ready to begin.

'We'll see whether you're going or not, you cheeky young bugger.'

Billy moved to his right. His mother to her left. He stood out from the corner, so that only the length of one side separated them. His mother grabbed for him. Billy shot across the back of the table and round the other corner, but his mother was back in position, waiting. She lunged