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

The Mystifying Medicine Show

written by

J. C. Bernis

published by

Oxford University Press

All text is copyright of the author and / or the illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

CHAPTER 1

THE ORPHAN TRAIN

The age of trains had come. Caravans of steel and steam—coal-fire-fuelled dragons—roared and ruled over America. On just such a train, every inch painted an elegant, gleaming black, rode a young girl who wondered where her brother had gone. Sally Cobb sat up from the soft, velvet-upholstered cushion to anxiously scan the passenger car. Children filled the seats, and she knew each and every one.

As Sally stepped into the aisle, a hand grabbed the sleeve of her blouse. 'Miss Corey told us not to leave the carriage,' her friend Freda said.

'Ray's gone.'

'Where is he?' Freda asked.

Sally bit at her lip and shrugged. Miss Corey would be furious if she discovered that Ray had left the passenger car, especially after the extensive rules, instructions, and threats she had given the orphans at St Sebastian's Home yesterday morning:

'Mister G. Octavius Grevol is a wealthy gentleman and a highly-respected industrialist,' Miss Corey had said before the seventeen orphans boarded Mister Grevol's exquisite, dark

train. 'That he has offered to transport you is generous beyond measure. You must all be on your best behaviour, as the gentleman himself will be accompanying us on our journey south. He is most likely unaccustomed to the company of . . . children, and I expect you'—Miss Corey had paused to look directly at Ray, the oldest of the seventeen—'to be well-behaved, well-mannered, and to remain at all times in the passenger car designated for our use.'

Ray had lasted nearly a full day. Now he was missing.

Sally hesitated before sitting back down in her seat and chewing on the dingy cuff of her wool sleeve. Something had been bothering her brother, and she could not figure out what it was. He should have been happy—happy to be travelling on such a marvellous train, happy at last to be off to a new home, happy to be away from the horrible city full of grime and danger and sad memories. But he wasn't.

The door to the vestibule at the end of the aisle opened. A coal-smoke wind blew into the car, accompanied by the noisy clatter of the train's wheels.

Ray! Sally jumped from her seat. But it was not her brother who entered.

A tall man walked down the aisle, and Sally shuddered as he passed. The other children grew quiet and still as the hard steps of the man moved through the passenger car. The gentleman wore a silk stovepipe hat with a green and black striped suit, and rested one gloved hand on an ebony walking stick. He moved slowly, his gaze passing from one child's face to the next. With each step, his walking stick beat a low rhythmic dirge against the polished wooden floors.

Where was Ray? Sally wondered.

The gentleman opened the door at the far end of the car, which again carried in the wild wind and clatter and smoke,

and stepped out. The children watched as the door closed behind him and remained silent for several moments before they returned to talking and playing.

This was getting worse, Sally thought. If Miss Corey discovered that Ray had left the passenger car, she would give him a tongue-lashing or take the leather strop to his leg. But if Mister Grevol discovered Ray wandering about his train . . . who knew? They might be thrown off the train. How would they find a new family then?

Ray Cobb had intended to be well-behaved. He had decided as they left St Sebastian's Home that it was time for a new start, a new Ray. However, as he watched the green and gold countryside pass, heavy stormcloud-sized thoughts filled his head. He needed to figure out what he was going to do about Sally. He needed to figure out if he really was going to abandon her.

Ray had come out to the empty vestibule between the orphans' car and the parlour car that followed it to be alone and think. He fidgeted with his lodestone. His father had given him the dark stone eight years ago—before Sally was born, before his father had left. Ray had only been four at the time, but he still remembered it vividly.

'I'm heading down south for a job of work, Ray.' His father had grown up in the Blue Ridge Mountains of eastern Tennessee, and his words sometimes sounded funny compared to the way New Englanders spoke. 'Might be a spell before I'm back.'

Then he had taken out the flannel pouch he always carried in his pocket. He had opened the drawstring and slowly removed a rock.

'What is it?' Ray asked.

'That's a lodestone,' his father said, placing the stone in Ray's hand. 'They're magnetic. Folks use them to make compasses. But this ain't no ordinary lodestone. I want you to keep it safe while I'm gone. It'll guide you when you have a need.' Then he had added with his lopsided smile, 'It'll help me get back home, too.'

But it hadn't. Ray's father had never returned. Eight years had passed. Eight terrible years.

He looked down at his hand, feeling the lodestone pressing against his fingers as if the little stone was struggling to escape from his grasp. For a month now, every time Ray had held the lodestone it moved, pulling inexplicably to the south.

The door to the next car opened. Ray jumped and backed against the far side of the vestibule. Mister Grevol stepped out and gave a slight 'a-hum'. Ray took his woollen apple cap from his pocket and adjusted it tightly over his brow as he headed towards the door.

The tall gentleman clanked his ebony walking stick to the metal floor. 'What do you think of my train?' he asked. His voice was smooth and refined like the purring of a cat, or possibly more like a lion as there was an undertone of strength in that soft growl.

'It's OK. I never cared much for trains,' Ray lied, hoping to put off the gentleman without causing offence.

Mister Grevol smirked and removed his stovepipe hat. He propped his gloved hands together on the silver cap of his walking stick, letting his gaze settle on the ribbon of black smoke from the locomotive that was drifting off into the clear summer sky.

Ray eyed the gold chain dangling between Mister

Grevol's waistcoat pockets. If Ray had encountered this gentleman a few months earlier on the streets of Manhattan, he might have excused himself, squeezed past the gentleman with a polite apology, and walked away with the gentleman's gold watch. But this was not Manhattan. And he no longer needed to steal in order to keep Sally warm and fed.

'See, my parents were killed by a train,' Ray told Mister Grevol. He flicked his eyes towards the towering gentleman. A curious expression showed in Mister Grevol's crooked black eyebrows.

'How terrible,' Mister Grevol replied, his eyes wandering to the lodestone in Ray's hand, then following the several feet of twine attaching it to Ray's belt. 'Growing up alone can be a challenging prospect. Dangerous, I'm certain. But a boy like you is full of resources. I deduced right away that you are clever and, might I add, daring. I bet you've done all manner of doughty deeds. For example, may I ask, have you ever jumped from a moving train?'

Ray frowned. He had tried to rattle the old gentleman with his lie about how he had become an orphan, and now Mister Grevol was turning the trick on him.

'Lots of times, dozens of times,' Ray answered, which was in fact true. 'Back in the city, I could get on a moving train and off again better than any of the other kids. They called me Spark 'cause I could jump on and off trains and streetcars like a spark jumps from flint.'

Mister Grevol chuckled. 'Isn't that impressive!' He brushed at his sleeves with his black leather gloves. 'And refreshing.'

'Refreshing?' Puzzlement flickered on Ray's brow.

'Your honesty,' Mister Grevol said. 'At last.'

Ray felt like a deflated balloon. Somehow Mister Grevol

had seen through his lies. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to . . . I know I shouldn't have left the passenger car . . . '

Mister Grevol cocked his head, narrowing his black eyes.

Ray looked down, running his thumb across the knot of twine, wrapped over and over the lodestone's surface. 'I just needed a place to think, and I thought I could come out here and—'

'And then I so rudely interrupted you.' Before Ray could argue, Mister Grevol shook his head in polite disagreement. 'No, I did. What's worrying you, if I may ask?'

'It's my sister,' Ray said. 'We've had such a hard life, you see? And now we're supposed to get adopted . . . by someone. A nice farm family, I'm sure. But families almost adopted us lots of times in the city, and they always changed their minds. Because of me . . . I'm just too old, I guess. I'm not so sure if she's to get a good family that I should stay with her.' Ray gave a deep sigh, feeling the tightness in his throat.

Mister Grevol nodded sympathetically. 'You're a considerate and wise young man. And you're right to be concerned for your sister. But I'm wondering about you. I'm wondering what *you* will do.'

'What do you mean?' Ray asked.

Mister Grevol brought his hand to his cravat. 'Look at me. I've built a career in locomotives and engineering. And how? By disdaining the easy, comfortable life. I've avoided attachments, do you see?'

Ray began to mumble, but Mister Grevol pointed a finger at him and continued. 'Attachments are vicious betrayers. They lead to all sorts of unsettling feelings: jealousy, loneliness, dependence, the need for acceptance. The sooner you unchain yourself from others, the sooner you'll find your true

strength. And the sooner you do that, the sooner you'll find your true destiny.'

He looked down at Ray, drawing his eyes across him and then the lodestone, before a smile returned to his wide mouth. 'You most clearly have pluck and gumption, as they like to say. You have gumption. Let me ask you: is this train really going to bring you to your destiny? Are you going to leave your fate to . . . ' Mister Grevol waved his hand towards the car with the orphans. ' . . . that Corey woman?' He shook his head and lowered his voice. 'No. Find your own way in this world.'

The door from the next car opened, and a man wearing a dark plain-cut suit and a round bowler hat leaned out. He grinned sourly at Ray, flashing a gold tooth, before turning to Mister Grevol. 'Excuse me, sir. Mister Horne wanted to see you.'

'Thank you, Mister McDevitt.' Grevol looked back at Ray. 'I've enjoyed meeting you . . . ' He paused, gesturing with his walking stick.

'Oh! Uh, Ray. Ray Fleming,' he said.

'Yes, Ray Fleming.' Mister Grevol tipped his head at Ray before following the man with the gold tooth.

Ray watched them depart through the door; wondered if the gentleman had realized that Ray had once again lied when he gave his last name.

Sally was making a cat's cradle, alone in their velvet seat in the passenger car, when Ray returned and sat down next to her. She didn't look up, but simply scowled down at her game. 'You weren't supposed to leave the car.' Her small fingers spread wide as Ray moved the string into the tangled design.

'Why? Was Miss Corey looking for me?'

'No, but she said we're not—'

'*Supposed to leave the car*. I know,' Ray said.

Shedding her anger and glancing up at her brother with deep pools of worry in her eyes, Sally said, 'Something's bothering you.'

Ray continued to thread the cat's cradle with her. 'No there's not,' he murmured.

'I can tell. You get . . . that certain look when you fret.'

'What would I be fretting about?' He tried to resume the cat's cradle, but Sally slipped her fingers from the string.

She said in a quieter voice, 'You've been telling me how, when we get on the train, we're going to make a fresh start and find a new home, a new family. But you don't think we'll find a good home or a good family.'

'Sal, why would I think that?' Ray said, his cheeks turning pink.

'Because of you.'

'Because of me! What's that supposed to mean?'

'You know.' She gave a sad smile. 'You think something bad is going to happen to us. You think you're going to bring bad luck to us.'

Ray glared at her with surprise, but couldn't argue. Sally's pouting mouth curled into a smile.

'It's silly to believe in bad luck, Ray.' She leaned forward and nestled herself into his arms. 'So quit worrying. We'll find a good family, one that will want both of us. We'll be together, just like you promised. Stop worrying and read me some of my book.'

Ray picked the book up from the velvet seat and opened it. It had been their father's book, the *Incunabula of Wandering*. Their mother had never liked them reading it, though Ray had

never known why. Their father had scribbled notes in the margins, covering any blank space. Ray had tried over the years to understand the book, to learn something more about his father from the notes. But he could barely decipher his father's cursive script, and the bits he could read were too bizarre to gather their meaning. He wasn't even sure what the book was about; it seemed to be composed of random and unrelated chapters. It was full of poems and articles on animals, wild herbs, topography, and more complicated subjects.

As he read, Ray thought about their father. After eight years, after all they had gone through, Ray had to assume that his father was dead. Why else wouldn't he have come back?

In the night, the only noises on the train were the rumbling of the metal wheels on the track and the soft breathing of the children. The lights had been dimmed, but Ray couldn't sleep. Sally's head was in his lap, and he watched the moon race behind the trees. His thoughts drifted to Mister Grevol's strange advice. What had he meant by attachments being bad?

Ray knew Sally was the only bit of good luck in his life, and that he was the worst bit of bad luck in hers. Was his attachment to Sally keeping her from the happiness he so desperately wanted for her? If he could let go of her, would she then find a good and happy family to love her as she deserved?

Ray's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the door opening behind him. Footsteps thumped down the aisle, and Ray quickly feigned sleep. A figure passed him, the crisp knocks of leather boots alternating against the clunk of a walking stick on the wooden floor. Ray peered up in time to see the black and reptilian-green suit disappear through the

door. Out of the window, the vestibule was dark but for an orange glow that illuminated Mister Grevol's face as he lit a cigarillo.

Mister Grevol had left his car at the back of the train. Sally and Miss Corey and the orphans were all asleep. If Ray wanted to leave, he would never have a better opportunity.

Ray's heart felt mashed; his throat constricted. He reached for Sally's coat and bundled it. Sliding to the edge of the seat, he tucked the coat under Sally's head and stood up. Her nose twitched, but she did not wake. He glanced out at the vestibule. Mister Grevol was drawing on his cigarillo, causing a red glow like a phantom eye to form at the tip.

Ray turned away from Sally and Mister Grevol and headed down the aisle. He opened the door and crossed into the next car. Ray was momentarily stunned by the luxury of Mister Grevol's parlour, with its silk upholstered furnishings, thickly carpeted floor, and crystal decanters of wine secured on an ebony dresser. The man with the gold tooth was sleeping in a chair, his head propped on one cupped hand.

Ray tiptoed through to the next door, and went down the corridor of a sleeper car; the walls were panelled with detailed marquetry and brass lamps cast warm yellow light down the expanse. When he reached the caboose, Ray peered through the bevelled glass of the door and spied the brakemen up in the cupola, watching out of the high windows above the train.

Ray entered quietly, backing against the caboose's wall out of the brakemen's line of sight. The two were idly chatting above, smoking cigars and sipping coffee. Moving carefully as close to the walls as possible, Ray made his way out to the balcony at the end of the train. He stepped into the rushing night air, hoping that the wind would blow away the

tears in his eyes—if he was going to jump from the train, he needed to be able to see clearly.

He tried to steady his shaking hands by clamping them to the railing. The caboose's balcony was dimly illuminated by a single electric bulb. Beyond the rail was little more than the swirl of moving darkness. At what point had the train entered a forest? Towering trees curled over the tracks, blocking any moonlight that would have helped him see where he was going to leap.

Ray removed his wool cap, folded it, and stuck it into the pocket of his tattered coat. He had jumped off a moving train before, but those had only been street cars and omnibuses. They were never going this fast.

Ray swung a leg over the railing to the side of the train. The wind intensified as he eased his other leg across and tightened his hand onto a beam overhead. He tried to gauge what lay to the side of the tracks—bushes or boulders, grass or tree trunks? He wiped a hand across his eyes, but it was no use. There was no telling what was out there.

Ray touched his hand to the lodestone in his pocket. The lodestone would guide him—to what, he did not know. But Ray was certain his father had meant it to help him.

He leapt into the dark.

His mind went blank. By the time he reached the ground, Ray had spun completely round. The heels of his brogans touched for a moment on the loose earth and then he tumbled, somersaulting over and over until he landed on his stomach with a gasp.

For a brief moment, he was conscious enough to look up and watch the sooty orange glow of the train as it disappeared into the night.