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

Amber Cat

written by

Hilary McKay

published by

Hachette Children's Books

All text is copyright © Author / Illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Amber Cat



Chapter One

There was chickenpox going round the school.

"Chickenpox in December!" groaned Robin Brogan's mother. "As if December wasn't bad enough!"

"I'm terribly sorry!" said Robin, who caught it straight away.

"Terribly?" asked his mother sceptically.

"Well, quite sorry, anyway," said Robin. "Slightly sorry. But it's got me out of the Christmas play and I feel all right except for my head. I thought chickenpox would feel much worse than this."

"It will," said Mrs Brogan, with the gloom of one who has to do the nursing. "You always have things badly. What were you going to be in the Christmas play?"

"A beastly hobbit," said Robin, "and I'd rather have third-degree chickenpox any day!"

"All very well for you!" said Mrs Brogan (who had a quick temper but a kind heart), "but if there's one thing that I can't bear, it's poorly people kicking around the house. Getting under my feet with their spots and their sore throats. In and out of bed all day and not eating proper meals."

Robin, who heard these unmotherly remarks every time he sneezed, grinned unhelpfully.

"Groaning and moaning and staring out of windows . . ."

Robin made up his mind to put up with chickenpox as quietly and heroically as possible.

"I'm sure they enjoy it!" said his mother. "And you ought to be in bed, not sitting there hugging that dog!"

"Why not? Might he catch chickenpox?" asked Robin looking anxiously at Friday for signs of illness.

"I was thinking of you, not Friday," replied his mother. "He's been on the beach all afternoon and he's still very damp."

"Well, if he does catch chickenpox at least I'll be off school to look after him," said Robin.

"Dogs don't catch chickenpox," replied Mrs Brogan. "Thank goodness! I should be outnumbered! And I couldn't bear two lots of chickenpox chickenpoxing about the house together!"

But, as always, her bark was worse than her bite. When the news came that Robin's best friend Dan had chickenpox too, Mrs Brogan very nobly suggested that he come to Porridge Hall and have them there, partly as company for Robin and partly so that Dan's mother could get back to work. There was room at Porridge Hall for a school full of chickenpox, Mrs Brogan remarked to Dan's mother.

"Heaven forbid!" she replied.

"And it would cheer up Robin," said Mrs Brogan. "We rattle around a bit, when there's only the two of us."

"You must," agreed Dan's mother, who would have hated to live at Porridge Hall. It was a big old house on the Yorkshire coast, overlooking the sea, and she could never understand why Robin's mother, usually so sensible, loved it so much. In the past it had been one house but now it was divided down the middle to make homes for two families. All through the summer and autumn the Brogan half had been full of bed and breakfasters.

("What a way to make your living!" Robin's mother often groaned, although she groaned worse when nobody came and it looked as if no living was going to be made at all.)

Now in December, Porridge Hall held only its usual people, Robin and his mother in their half, and the Robinson family who lived next door. Dan's arrival went a long way towards stopping the rattling around in the Brogan part. Friday, Robin's dog, went mad with delight, and Robin and Dan began to get better immediately, such is the power of friendship. Robin and Dan had been very good friends ever since the summer holidays, and for years before that they had been excellent enemies, so they knew and understood each other very well. Dan, who had no dog, shared Robin's and Robin, who had no father, shared Dan's. They also shared the several miles of beach opposite Porridge Hall, very many private jokes and Sun Dance, who lived next door.

Sun Dance was a nine-year-old mystery to his friends and relations. His name lingered from the days when Perry and Ant, his eleven-year-old twin brother and sister, had played at being Butch and Cassidy and had allowed him to join in as the Sun Dance Kid. The name suited him so well that it stuck; it was years since anyone had called him anything else.

"Something went wrong with the names in our family," remarked Mrs Robinson. The twins had been christened Peregrine and Antoinette after their

grandparents but had sensibly shortened these romantic but frightful names, "As soon as they could speak," admitted their mother.

The youngest of the Robinson family had been named Elizabeth.

"A nice plain name," said Mrs Robinson, who by this time was beginning to learn. "Not that it made any difference."

"When I grow up," announced Elizabeth at the age of three, "I shall be a bean. A bean in a pod."

"We should have called you Beany," said Ant.

"Oh no, we shouldn't!" said Mrs Robinson, but already it was too late and four years later, even at school, they called her Beany.

The Robinson children owned a dog. Fat, beloved, scruffy and smelly, he was known as Old Blanket.

"I am tired of explaining the names in our family," said Mrs Robinson. "People must take us as they find us!"

"They are perfect names," said Robin's mother. Mrs Brogan and Mrs Robinson were best friends.

"I shall have chickenpox too," announced Sun Dance when he heard the news from next door. "Especially if Dan is there." Sun Dance, although two years younger

than Robin and Dan, adored Robin and considered he had once saved Dan's life and would have endured far worse than chickenpox than be left out of anything they did.

"Let's all have it," suggested Robin cheerfully.

"You can't have chickenpox twice," said Mrs Robinson when she heard this bright idea. "You four had it all together that dreadful Christmas when we kept getting power cuts. I haven't forgotten, if you have! Never again!"

However, the Robinson children were not ones to give up hope so easily. School was becoming tedious. Robin was not the only one destined to be a hobbit in the school play; Perry and Ant were threatened with a similar fate, and chickenpox, they remembered, had been most enjoyable, what with candlelit bedrooms and unlimited ice cream. Perry paid a secret visit to Robin and Dan next door.

"Four dirty jumpers?" repeated Robin in astonishment, on hearing Perry's request.

"What do you want to borrow four dirty jumpers for?" asked Dan.

"I'd better not tell you," said Perry virtuously.

"Oh," said Robin, as understanding suddenly dawned. "Well, anyway, I haven't got four dirty

jumpers. I haven't got any at all, I don't think."

"What about the one you're wearing?" said Perry. "And Dan's? That's two!"

Robin and Dan looked doubtfully at each other.

"How would *you* like to be a hobbit?" asked Perry.

"Oh all right!" said Robin. "Come on, Dan!"

But Dan was already pulling off his jumper. Chickenpox had arrived just in time to save him from a terrible fate. For a few horrifying days he had been cast as a singing dwarf and he knew what Perry felt like.

"It isn't fair!" said Beany, happening to notice what the twins were wearing in bed that night.

"You can have one tomorrow if you like," Perry told her.

"You'll have used up all the germs by then! Mrs Brogan *needs* me to get chickenpox. I could help with her bed and breakfasters."

"She hasn't got any. There's nobody staying there but Dan."

"I could help her get some, then."

"I borrowed them and it was Ant's idea so you'll just have to wait," said Perry heartlessly. Ant, however, was more sympathetic and when she woke up in the middle of the night, stifled from the effects of Dan's

Aran jumper, she thoughtfully roused Beany and handed it over.

"It must be stiff with germs," she whispered happily. "It's worked on me already. I'm sure I've got a temperature."

There was great disappointment the next morning when the three jumper-wearers awoke perfectly healthy. The disappointment was made much worse when Sun Dance appeared. His chest and stomach were covered with spots and he was extremely pleased with himself.

"I bet they wash off!" said Beany, who had contemplated felt-tipping a rash on herself, but the spots did not wash off.

"However did you do it?" asked Ant.

"Easy," replied Sun Dance. "I just said, 'Please God give me chickenpox' before I went to sleep."

"Please God give me chickenpox," repeated Beany immediately, and gazed hopefully at her stomach.

"Really, Beany!" exclaimed Mrs Robinson. "Sun Dance, get back into bed! Beany, get ready for school!"

"It's *not* fair!" wailed Beany. "After I slept all night in Dan's smelly jumper! And I bet they're only flea-bites from Old Blanket!"

"Old Blanket hasn't got fleas," said Sun Dance.

"Oh yes he has," said Beany. "He got them from that hedgehog that died under the shed and they've been living behind his ears ever since!"

"WELL, YOU MIGHT HAVE TOLD ME BEFORE!" exclaimed her outraged mother, and she remained outraged until Perry and Beany and Ant had been packed off to school and Sun Dance had been hauled to the doctor's.

"Chickenpox!" announced the doctor. "Yes, definitely."

"He's had them once," protested Mrs Robinson.

"Jolly well done!" said the doctor to Sun Dance and Sun Dance smirked. He did not feel the least bit ill but his spots were undeniable. As soon as he could, he showed them to Mrs Brogan next door and asked if he did not qualify as a chickenpoxer and she very kindly agreed that he did.

"Come and join the chickenpox club at once!" she said, shooing him into the living room. "You're just what it needs! It can't be bothered to read and it hates daytime television. It sits beside the fire all day and dreams of school! It's bored!"

"We're not!" protested Robin and Dan, but all the same they were very glad to see Sun Dance, having guiltily spent the day wondering if their jumpers had been as infectious as Perry had hoped.

"Where are the others?" asked Robin.

"School," replied Sun Dance with satisfaction. "And Mum's doing Old Blanket with flea powder. Beany will be fed up, she was keeping those fleas for your mother. She thought they'd be useful for horrible bed and breakfasters. To put in their beds. To get rid of them."

"Good grief!" exclaimed Robin.

"What have you been doing?" asked Dan. "Have we missed anything? Has anything exciting happened?"

"No," said Sun Dance.

"Not even ghosts?" asked Robin, because Sun Dance was famous for seeing ghosts and always very pleased to describe them to his friends.

"Oh well, there's always ghosts," said Sun Dance. "More than ever, lately."

"It's the time of year," agreed Mrs Brogan, coming in to join them. "December is perfect for ghost stories!"

"My ghosts aren't stories," said Sun Dance, and it was true that his ghosts were certainly not at all like the ones that appeared in books.

"Tell us about them," suggested Robin, so Sun Dance told them about the Swim Man who lived in the sea and came out in the dark, all dripping and foaming, to take people swimming, and about Ningsy who lived in the shed.

"She eats grass," said Sun Dance, "and she's very thin."

"I'm not surprised," remarked Mrs Brogan. "Grass is cheap but not nourishing."

"And she has a cat," said Robin who had heard of Ningsy before, "called Dead Cat. Black."

"Of course," said Mrs Brogan.

"Greenish-black," corrected Sun Dance. "Like oil on the road. Like The Lady's hair."

"Who is The Lady?" asked Mrs Brogan.

"She's another," explained Robin.

"She breathes very quietly down the telephone at me," said Sun Dance.

"Which telephone?" asked Mrs Brogan.

"All the Porridge Hall's telephones," said Sun Dance complacently.

"Porridge Hall is obviously a much more haunted house than I ever imagined," Mrs Brogan observed.

"There's more than that," said Sun Dance. "There's whatever-lives-under-the-stairs, I'm still finding out what it is, and Milko."

"Milko?" asked Mrs Brogan.

"He's the ghost of a milkman," explained Sun Dance. "He sits on the doorsteps and cries in the night. Into an empty milk bottle."

"How terribly sad!" said Mrs Brogan. "I do hope you're wrong. Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," Sun Dance told her earnestly.

"You make them up!" said Dan. "Admit it!"

"Make them up?" asked Sun Dance, astonished. "How could anyone make anybody up?"

"Well, I don't know where they come from," said Mrs Brogan, "but you'd be an asset to any club, chickenpox or not!"

"Can I stay the night, then?" asked Sun Dance.

"I'm afraid you can't," said Mrs Brogan. "Sorry, but I'm under orders to send you home in time for tea! I promised I would. Besides, you've got such healthy, strengthening chickenpox that I'm afraid you will wear out Robin and Dan!"

"I suppose I might," agreed Sun Dance, getting up to go home and cheerfully looking down at Robin and Dan slumped feebly across the sofa. There had been days in the past when he would have loved to find Dan so limp and helpless and he sounded rather regretful as he added, "I could fight Dan easily now!"

"Don't even think of it!" exclaimed Mrs Brogan.

"No," said Sun Dance kindly, "but I could. What would you do if I did?"

"Nothing," Dan told him. "Just lie down and let you kill me."

"Thought so," said Sun Dance, and he went home looking pleased.

"Gone to look for more ghosts," remarked Dan. "I don't know why he doesn't frighten himself."

"Sun Dance's ghosts aren't very ghostly," replied Robin. "He talks about them as if they were ordinary people. Ghosts like his wouldn't frighten anyone."

"Dan," said Mrs Brogan, interrupting and changing the subject, "I think you ought to go and phone your mother. She'll be back from work by now and she's bound to be wondering how you are. She'll be glad to know you're a bit better."

"Am I?" asked Dan.

"Of course you are," said Mrs Brogan. "You're on the mend already and so is Robin. I'll have no malingerers here. Sun Dance is the sort of invalid I like. He's flourishing on his chickenpox!"

"Tell your mum about Sun Dance's ghosts," suggested Robin.

"Not likely!" said Dan. "She doesn't believe in them and she already thinks Sun Dance is a bit . . ."

"He's not," protested Robin.

"I know he's not," agreed Dan, "but try telling my mum!"

"It's no good trying to tell Dan's mum anything," said Robin, when Dan was out of earshot.

"No," agreed Mrs Brogan. "I do like a person who knows their own mind and Dan's mother is certainly that."

"Do you believe in them?" asked Robin.

"Ghosts?"

"Yes," said Robin.

"Yes," his mother replied, and laughed at his startled face.

"What sort?"

"Sun Dance's sort."

"Swim Man and Ningsy and Dead Cat and The Lady?"

"Not quite," said Mrs Brogan, "but I do believe there are occasionally people who stray from their own time into another."

"What for?" asked Robin.

"I don't know," said his mother to herself as much as to Robin. "Company perhaps. Curiosity. Why would anyone? Why would you?"

"I wouldn't," said Robin, "unless I had friends there."

"Perhaps they have friends there," said Mrs Brogan

and she and Robin stared thoughtfully into the fire for a while. When Dan returned a minute later he felt fleetingly and uncomfortably that he had interrupted a private conversation, although he had heard no voices. The feeling only lasted a moment, however. Mrs Brogan's smile was as warm as the fire and Robin's grin was a gleam of welcome.

"How's your mother?" asked Mrs Brogan.

"All right, I think," Dan told her. "She's coming round this evening to have a look at me. And she says Sun Dance can't have proper chickenpox because nobody has them twice."

"The doctor said they were proper chickenpox," said Robin.

"I told her that," replied Dan.

"What did she say?"

"She said she expected it was that silly young chap with long hair and the three-legged dog, who'd rather sit and talk than write out a prescription because he never was very bright at school and he only went into medicine because he liked play-acting."

"How on earth did she know that?" demanded Mrs Brogan, laughing.

"She knows a woman who knew his mum," Dan explained.

"Well, I suppose that settles Sun Dance's chickenpox then," said Mrs Brogan cheerfully, "because as a matter of fact she's quite right. It was that doctor."

"Poor old Sun Dance!" said Robin.

"Sun Dance!" said Dan. "Him and his ghosts and his chickenpox! Where do you think he gets it all from?"

But nobody knew where Sun Dance found his ghosts, or his stories, or his remarkably convenient chickenpox. Sun Dance had been puzzling his family and friends for years. They were not convinced by his ghosts and they laughed at his stories and they were often baffled by Sun Dance himself. They would never have believed in his chickenpox if they hadn't seen the spots.