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 Badness of Ballydog

written by

Garrett Carr

published by

Simon & Schuster Children's

All Text is Copyright © of the Author / Illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk



They smelled the town before they saw it. It was a bad smell, damp, fishy and miserable, hanging like fog over the road. They heard the town before they saw it, the shrill calls of thousands of seagulls circling above. At the top of the hill the car paused. The car looked official, like it might belong to the government, unmarked and neutrally coloured. It had never travelled this road before, it was a stranger's car. Below, the road sharply descended into the town. There were two people in the back seat, a boy named Ewan and his mother, a frail, worried-looking woman.

'This is it,' said their driver, 'the end of the road.'

The driver was a plain-clothed policeman. He placed his arm over the front passenger seat and looked at the two in the back. His suit was the same colour as the car. 'I'm going to be honest with you,' he said, 'this town has a bad reputation, but nobody will find you here, that's for sure.'

Ewan's mother looked at her son for some sign of approval. He stared out of the window.

'Ever seen the Atlantic before?' the driver asked the boy.

'No,' then silence.

'Doesn't say much your lad, does he?' said the driver.

'No, not lately.'

'I don't want to be here,' said Ewan, to show he could talk if he wanted to.

Ewan pretended not to look, but he surveyed the view through the window. The town was in a bay. Ewan could see its rocky mouth, half as far away as the horizon. Beyond was the grey Atlantic, brooding and big. To the right and left, on the hilltops, were a handful of small farms. Below was the town. The driver released the handbrake and they descended into it.

This was Ballydog.

The town square was at the water's edge, it was mainly just used for car parking. From there a few streets curved up the hillsides. There was a church, a school, a small housing estate. In the middle of the town was a huge square building, it stood like a god above everything else. A chimney in its roof pumped black fumes. This was the fish finger factory. It was a bad factory and the main source of the stink pervading the town. Any seagull that accidentally flew into the fume cloud would fall out of the sky dead. The factory had a janitor and one of his duties was to sweep up the dead seagulls piled at the foot of the chimney by the end of each day.

Some said the seagulls went into the fish fingers.

A pier jutted from the square two hundred metres out over the water. It stood on concrete piles set into the floor

of the bay. The Ballydog fishing fleet was tied up there, more than a dozen trawlers of iron and fibreglass painted blue, green, black, red and yellow. These boats were the brightest splash of colour in Ballydog, Ewan could not hide his interest in them as they drove through the square, but it was a bad fleet. There was not a skipper on any of those boats who would not slash the nets of the others if he thought he would get away with it.

On one side of the square was the Ballydog Hotel, it was a bad hotel and always empty. Next door was the Lobster's Cage pub, a bad pub, but always full. Past the pub a street quickly narrowed and headed towards the lighthouse. The stranger's car did not travel this way, no car could. The road turned into a narrow track that ran between the rocky shore and rushy slopes. The lighthouse was out of sight of Ballydog, except at night when the pulse of its light could be seen in the air. It was painted purest white and seemed all the whiter because it was one of the few buildings in Ballydog that was painted at all. Mr Weir, the lighthouse keeper, proudly did the job himself, twice a year.

Between the lighthouse and the town square was the old pier, not used any more by fishermen since they got the new pier in the town centre. The old pier was made of rough blocks of stone. Rusted ladders and rings were bolted to its sides. Weeds grew from the gaps and at water-level generations of barnacles were clamped on top of one another. There was only one boat tied up at the old pier, a small fishing trawler called the *Sunny Buoy*. It had not moved in years.

A young girl, barefoot despite the cold, stepped out

of the wheelhouse. She walked over to the railing and peered down into the water. Her name was May and the *Sunny Buoy* was her home.

'Good morning!' she said brightly, although no one else could be seen. 'A bit of breakfast?'

Under the grill in the wheelhouse over two dozen fish fingers were cooking. There was never a shortage of fish fingers in Ballydog. May went back inside to fetch a few, cupping them carefully in her hand so as not to get burned.

TERRRRR!

A seagull dive-bombed out of the sky and tried to steal the food.

'GET AWAY!' May yelled, leaning over to protect the feast. The seagull bounced off her back and spun away, shedding feathers. It circled her twice. She hissed at it. It gave up and went to join the flock wheeling above the town centre.

'That's right, scram,' said May, 'all ye think about is food.'

The squawking and screeching of seagulls was the constant soundtrack of Ballydog. They lived mainly off the fish spilling from trucks or left lying on decks at the end of each day. They squabbled over these pickings, two seagulls could often be seen pulling at the opposite ends of the same dead fish. If Ballydog seagulls heard that normal seagulls, from other parts of the coast, actually went out to sea and hunted fish for themselves they would not have believed it. They would have thought it was the craziest idea they had ever heard in their lives.

'Here ye go, Old Man,' May said and dropped a fish

finger into the water. Two small fish darted towards the offering and nibbled at it.

'That's not for ye fellas, either,' she said.

The *Sunny Buoy* shifted in the water. Disturbed, the fish darted away. The car tyres hanging from the boat's side, to protect its woodwork from the rough stone, were pressed against the pier and squealed harshly. The old boards of the *Sunny Buoy* creaked. Underneath the hull something was waking up and beginning to move.

Foods, he was thinking.

One by one, May dropped more fish fingers into the water.

On the other side of town the stranger's car cruised up Main Street and turned into the estate. The estate was spread over a hillside. There were about fifty grey houses in it.

'We've found you a place in here . . . somewhere,' said the driver.

It was a bad estate.

Every house was indistinguishable from every other. Every garden untended, every wall unpainted. Ewan saw people twitching their curtains to watch them go by. All day these people sought gossip, but very little ever happened to reward their spying. The stranger's car was the most interesting thing that had happened in weeks. The spies mostly spied on each other, then reported the information to someone who knew it already.

Ewan observed a group of boys about his age skulking along a street. They were kicking cans as they walked and they all had exactly the same haircut. This was Andrew

and his pack. They were making their way home from school.

'Wait here,' Andrew said outside Kilfeather's grocery shop, 'I gotta get a cabbage for my ma.'

'Aren't you a good little boy getting the shopping?' said Mushroom, laughing. Andrew shot him a look that was enough to make him shut it.

'Only one of you boys at a time,' warned Mr Kilfeather, standing by the door in his brown shopkeeper's coat. 'Don't think I don't know who steals cigarettes on me.'

Andrew went in while the rest of the pack loitered outside, annoying Kilfeather by kicking at the coal bags stacked by the door.

'In my day you'd have been put to work in the fields,' said Kilfeather. He always said that.

'Come on, Kilfooler,' said Mushroom, 'we're products of society.'

Andrew dug through the cabbage display looking for one that was even half decent. Kilfeather was known to try and sell anything he could get away with. The joke in school was that he dyed Rice Krispies with mucky water and sold them as Coco Pops.

He heaved out one cabbage and shook the soil from it. A tiny centipede emerged from the leaves and ran across his finger. Andrew was no wimp but the sight of it caused him to jump with fright. He flung his hand away from him and the creepy-crawly hit the ground. Andrew glanced around to make sure nobody had seen him react like that.

He was relieved to see that nobody had.

The centipede started to straighten itself out. Andrew looked down at it. Then he stepped on it, grinding down

with the sole of his shoe until the centipede was nothing but a stain on the floor.

The stranger's car moved to the far end of the estate, to the very last house, and stopped. The driver stepped out. He walked over to the 'For Rent' sign that stood in the front yard and pulled it out carefully, so as not to get dirt on his shoes.

'Here it is,' he said, smiling. He was trying to put a brave face on it.

Ewan and his mother pulled themselves from the back seat of the car. They were not happy about the house. They looked at it as if it was a gift they did not want. The driver pointed up to a large house overlooking the estate, its tall windows glinting. 'Your landlord's place,' he informed them. He glanced around to make sure nobody else was listening before saying, 'but you won't have to deal with him, we've already paid everything up.'

He went inside and Ewan's mother trailed in behind him.

Ewan stayed outside and looked back over the town. One word sprang to mind as he surveyed it. That word was *bad*.

Ewan's instincts were sharp. Ballydog was the baddest town in the country, possibly the world. There were no other towns within forty kilometres of Ballydog because nobody wanted to live within forty kilometres of it. It huddled in its harbour meanly, like a miser guarding his hoard. Even the weather seemed to dislike this town. Rain lashed down on it while the sun was shining everywhere else up and down the coast. Wind tried to blow its roofs

off. Clouds hung low and sealed in the dampness. The town, as if attempting to have revenge on nature, used its fish finger factory to poison the sky. The farms grew nothing but discontent.

The people of Ballydog embodied the Seven Deadly Sins, and a few extra sins they had invented themselves. There was Manipulation, Grabbiness, Excessive Bossiness, Slimy Slipperiness, Aggressive Schemingness and Plain Dishonesty happening on every street everyday. But above all, there was Badness. Anybody who wanted to be different in Ballydog needed to be careful. The town would work on them until they were broken and persuaded to see the world its way. Or it would just eat them for breakfast.

May was thirteen and small for her age. Her hair was mousy and unconsidered. She almost always wore a flower-print dress and a pair of wellington boots. Mostly she daydreamed. She had a secret friend who made her life bearable, but she kept secrets far greater than that.

Andrew was thirteen and the second tallest in his class. He was good at many things but not the kind of things you got homework in. He was good with spanners and drills. He understood pistons, rack and pinion and fuel injection. He was good at laying schemes and drawing diagrams. He rarely got into fights but had power. Most boys in Ballydog either feared him or were in his pack. Or both.

Ewan was also thirteen. His head was shaved. When standing still, he held his hands together in front of him, in the manner of a Buddhist monk. He moved quietly. Intelligent eyes watched everything from his inscrutable

face. He had grown up in a city and knew nothing about fishing, milking cows, or other small-town things. His father was still back there, in detention and awaiting trial. Ewan and his mother had been sent across the border and hidden by the police in a witness protection programme. Ewan did not want to be in Ballydog. He had wanted to be left at home so he could visit his father every day. That was a whole other story, to be told another time. Ewan was important in Ballydog for different reasons.

Ewan, Andrew and May. All three were going to be important.