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Opening extract from

Earwig and the Witch

Written by

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Published by

HarperCollins Children's Books

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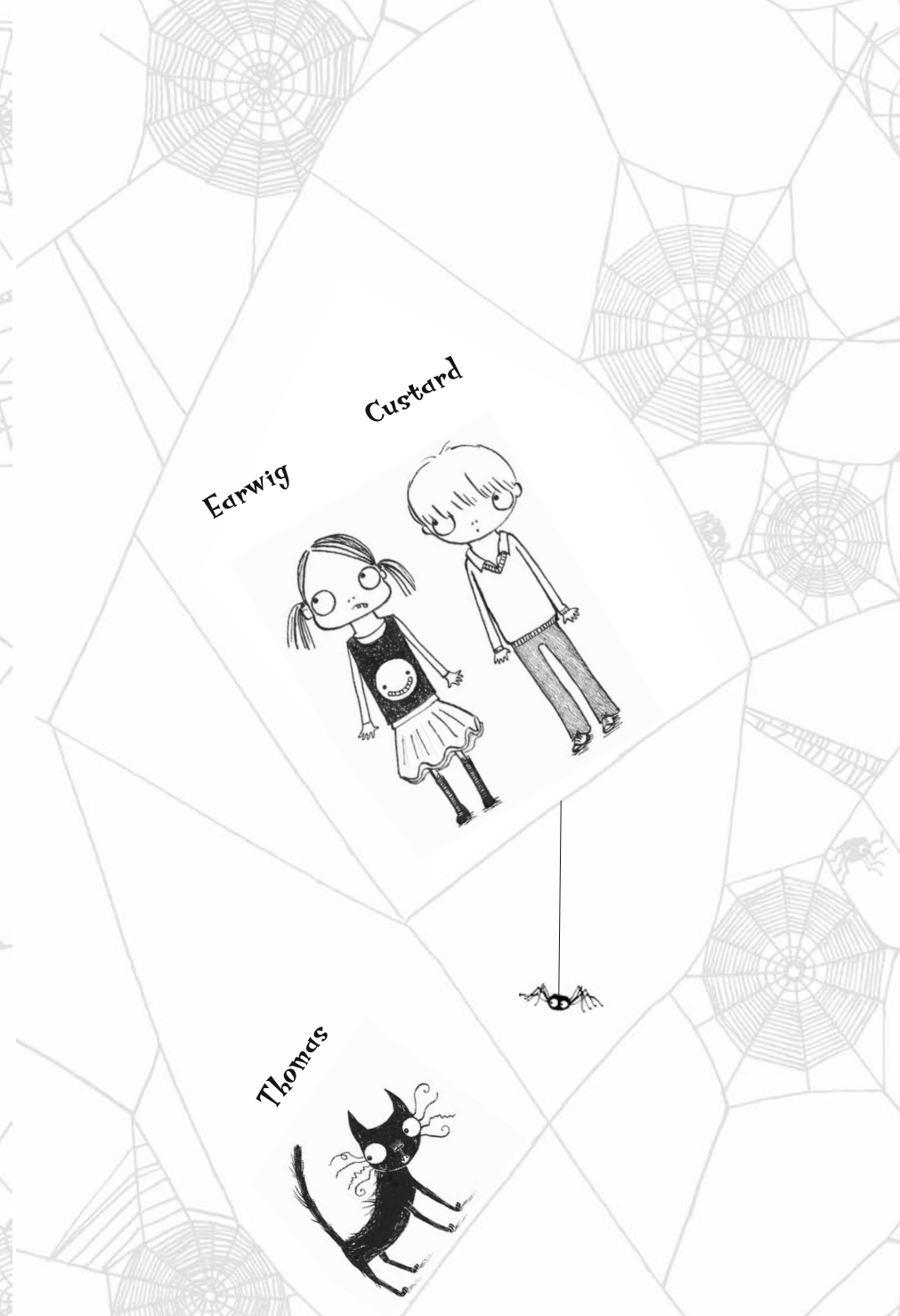
Diana Wynne Jones

Earwig and the Witch

Illustrated by Marion Lindsay

HarperCollins *Children's Books*

Bella Yaga
Mandrake


Earwig
Custard
Thomas

Chapter One

At St Morwald's Home for Children it was the day when people who wanted to be foster parents came to see which children they might want to take home with them.

Chapter One

"How *boring*!" Earwig said to her friend Custard. The two of them were lined up in the dining room with the bigger children. Earwig thought this whole afternoon was an utter waste of time. She was perfectly happy at St Morwald's. She liked the clean smell of polish everywhere and the bright sunny rooms. She liked the people there. This was because everyone, from Mrs Briggs the Matron to the newest and smallest children, did exactly what Earwig wanted. If Earwig fancied shepherd's pie for lunch, she could get the cook to make

it for her. If she wanted a new red sweater, Mrs Briggs hurried out and bought it for her. If she wanted to play Hide-and-Seek in the dark, all the children played even though some of them were frightened. Earwig was never frightened. She had a very strong personality.

There were noises from the playroom next door where the babies and toddlers were lined up too. Earwig could hear people crying out, “Oh, isn’t she sweet!” and “Oh, just look at this little one’s *eyes*!”

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"Disgusting!" Earwig muttered. "What cheek!" Earwig liked most of the babies and all the toddlers, but she did not think they were made to be admired. They were people, not dolls.

"It's all right for you," her friend Custard said. "Nobody ever chooses you."

Earwig liked Custard best out of everyone at St Morwald's. He always did

exactly what she said. His only fault was that he got scared rather too often. She said soothingly, "You never get chosen either. Don't worry."

"But people hover over me," Custard said. "Sometimes they *almost* choose me." Then he added, very daringly, "Don't you ever want to be chosen and go to live somewhere else, Earwig?"

"No," Earwig said firmly. But she wondered about it. Might it just be fun to go and live in an ordinary house the way other children did? Then she thought of all the numbers of people in

St Morwald's who all did exactly what she wanted, and she realised that in an ordinary house there would only be two or three people, or six at the most. That was far too few to be interesting. "No," she said. "Anyone who chose me would have to be very unusual."

Just then, Mrs Briggs came hurrying through from the playroom, looking flustered. "The bigger ones are in here," she said. "If you'd like to follow me, I'll tell you the names and a little bit about each child."

Earwig had only time to whisper

warningly to Custard, “Remember to cross your eyes like I taught you!” before a very strange couple followed Mrs Briggs into the dining room. Earwig could see they had tried to make themselves look ordinary, but she knew they were not. Not in the least. The woman had one brown eye and one

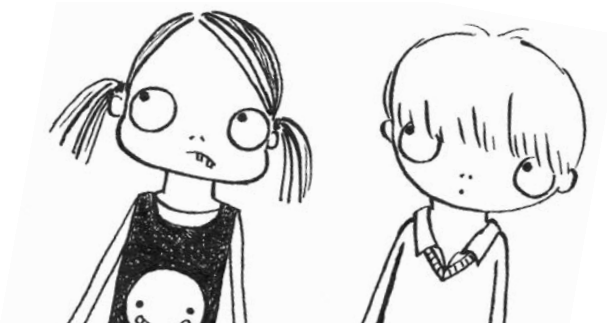
blue one, and a raggety, ribby look to her face. It was not a nice face. The woman had tried to make it nicer by doing her hair in blue-rinsed curls and putting on a lot of purple lipstick. This did not go with her brown tweed suit or her bright green sweater. And none of it went with her big red hat or her sky-blue high-heeled boots.

As for the man – the first time Earwig looked at him, he looked like anyone you might pass in the street. The second time she looked, she could hardly see him at all. He was like a long, black

streak in the air. After that, every time she looked at the man, he seemed taller, and taller still, and his face seemed grimmer and more frowning. And he seemed to have long ears. By

the time the man and the woman were standing in front of Custard, Earwig was almost sure that the man was nine feet tall and that he *did* have two somethings sticking up from his head. The somethings could have been ears, but Earwig rather thought they were horns.

"This little boy is John Coster," Mrs Briggs was saying. Earwig was glad she was not Custard. "His parents were both killed in a fire," Mrs Briggs explained. "So sad!"



Custard usually scowled when Mrs Briggs said this kind of thing. He hated people saying his life was sad. But Earwig could see he was so frightened of the strange couple that he could not even frown. And he had quite forgotten to cross his eyes.

Before Earwig could nudge Custard to remind him to cross his eyes, the strange couple lost interest in him. They moved on to stand in front of Earwig. Custard went white with relief.

Mrs Briggs sighed. "And this is Erica Wigg," she said hopelessly. Mrs Briggs

never could quite pin down just why it was that nobody ever wanted to take Earwig home with them. Earwig was skinny. Her front teeth and her elbows stuck out rather, and she insisted on doing her hair in two bunches that stuck out too, just like her elbows and her teeth. But Mrs Briggs had known far worse-looking children who seemed to be wanted by everyone. What Mrs Briggs did not know was that Earwig was very good at making herself look unlovable. It was something that she did quite quietly, on the inside of her face, and she

always did it, because she was quite happy to stay at St Morwald's.

She made herself look unlovable now. She thought these two people were the most awful she had ever seen. They stared at her grimly.

"Erica has been with us since she was a baby," Mrs Briggs said brightly, seeing the way they were looking. She did not say, because she always thought it was so peculiar,

that Earwig had been left on the doorstep of St Morwald's early one morning with a note pinned to her shawl. The note said:

GOT THE OTHER TWELVE WITCHES ALL CHASING ME. I'LL BE BACK FOR HER WHEN I'VE SHOOK THEM OFF. IT MAY TAKE YEARS. HER NAME IS EARWIG.

Mrs Briggs and the Assistant Matron had scratched their heads over this. The Assistant Matron said, "If this mother's one of thirteen, she must be a witch who has annoyed the rest of her coven."

"Nonsense!" said Mrs Briggs.

"But," said the Assistant Matron, "this means that the baby could be a witch as well."

Mrs Briggs said, "Nonsense!" again. "There are no such things as witches."

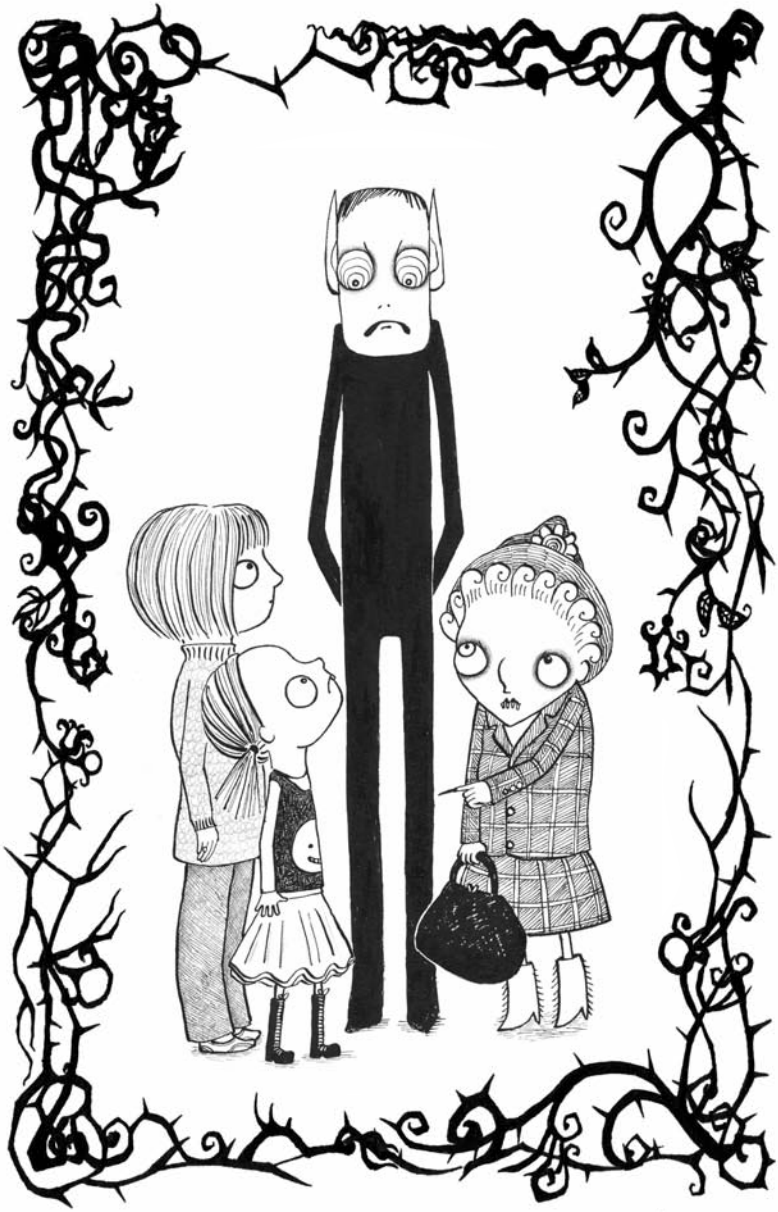
Mrs Briggs had never told Earwig about the note, nor that her name really *was* Earwig. She thought it was probably a bad joke. Earwig was not a real name. So Mrs Briggs had written "Erica Wigg" firmly on Earwig's birth certificate and kept her mouth shut about the rest.

Meanwhile Earwig was making

herself look as unlovable as she could. Custard was edging away from her and even Mrs Briggs was thinking what a pity it was that Earwig's charming nature never seemed to show when it mattered. And the strange couple were looking as if they thought Earwig was quite hateful.

The woman turned to the nine-foot man and looked up at him from under her red hat. "Well?" she said. "What does the Mandrake think?"

"I think probably," he answered in a deep, angry voice.



The woman turned to Mrs Briggs. "We'll take this one," she said, just as if Earwig was a melon or a joint of meat on the market.

Mrs Briggs was so surprised that she rocked back on her feet. Before she could recover, Earwig said, "No she won't. I want to stay here."

"Don't be silly, dear," said Mrs Briggs. "You know how much everyone here wants to see you living with a real family, just like other children."

"I don't want to," said Earwig. "I want to stay with Custard."

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"Now, dear," said Mrs Briggs. "These kind people live quite near, in Lime Avenue. I'm sure they'll let you come back to see your friends whenever you want to, and when school starts again you'll be able to see Custard every day."

After that, there seemed nothing Earwig could do but go and help one of the trainee girls pack her things in a bag, while Mrs Briggs took the strange couple to her office to sign forms. Then she had to say goodbye to Custard and hurry after the woman in the red hat and the nine-foot man. The things on his

head *were* horns, Earwig was sure. She was surprised nobody else noticed. But mostly she was angry and amazed that, for the first time in her life, somebody was making her do something she didn't want to do. She could not understand it.

"I suppose I'd better think of it as a challenge," she said to herself as they turned into Lime Avenue.