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 Cry of the Wolf

Written by

Melvin Burgess

Published by

Andersen Press Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

MELVIN BURGESS

The Cry of the Wolf

ANDERSEN PRESS • LONDON

This edition published in 2011 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

First published by Andersen Press Ltd 1990

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of Melvin Burgess to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Copyright © Melvin Burgess, 1990

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 84939 375 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Bookmarque, Croydon CR0 4TD

For Owen

1

Ben Tilley lay on the banks of the River Mole keeping very quiet. It was a still, hot day. The river moved silently below him, and around him in the grass there were tiny rustlings and scratches from insects about their business. A robin was singing nearby and the sun beat down, baking into his back, pressing him into the dry mud. Ben could quite easily have fallen asleep if he had not been so excited.

Today was a bad and special day.

Ben was holding a gun in his hands. It had a wooden handle with a criss-cross pattern carved into it and bolted on with a thick, dull screw. The stiff little barrel was black and it was so heavy it hurt your wrist. He had found it in his father's garden shed and stolen it. It was not a real gun, only an air pistol, but it was still dangerous. It could shoot right through the shed door if

you were close enough, and Ben thought you could kill someone with it if you got them in the eye. Certainly you could kill little animals and birds with it, and that was why he was lying so quietly on the river bank. Ben was hunting water rats.

Ben was only ten and he had a lot of trouble keeping still. His breath seemed to clamour in the air around him. The drowsy river bank was dangerous, and he was frightened and excited. When at last he spotted a little brown face he let off a long, quiet sigh – he had already scared two off – and carefully moved the gun round until it was pointing at the little animal. It sat there, wiping its whiskers in its perfect tiny paws, combing the neat fur on its face, rubbing its eyes and peeping this way and that. Ben had it right in his sights now, but before he shot he couldn't help checking that no one was watching. He was lying there so quiet that it seemed impossible that anyone could creep up without him hearing, but even so he peered quickly over his shoulder. When he looked back, the water rat was gone.

'Oh . . . ' he moaned quietly. The ordeal of being still again was too much when he was so excited.

The sun had pushed its way through his thick blond hair and was burning the back of his neck. When he half closed his eyes, the gun seemed to disappear and only the heat, the river, the robin singing hidden in the willows

and the tiny rustlings of little insects remained – a peaceful sunny day.

Ben opened his eyes. A water rat was sitting on a ledge of mud opposite, a perfect target. It was cleaning its head like the first one, sitting up like a squirrel, busy and clean and neat, a little packet bursting with life. He did not make the mistake of looking round twice. This time he thought of nothing but hitting the little thing dead. The water rat sensed danger, put its front paws onto the mud – too late. Ben fired – *phhhussst – plop!* – water rings crossed the river towards him; the water rat was gone.

'Not a very good shot, are you?' said a man's voice behind him.

Ben spun round as if he had been shot himself. There was a little man standing there. He smiled slightly; his limp face made dimples. He had a neat moustache cut level and straight above his thin lip and his smooth skin and still face were damp and shiny. There was a small white dog with a lopsided face and crooked legs sitting next to his shoes. It sat crookedly, too, as if it was injured.

'It's my gun,' lied Ben. The man looked down at him and smiled and said nothing. Ben swallowed and wondered if he could just walk away. Nothing in the man's expression told him what was going to happen.

The silence was worse than being told off. 'Where did you come from?' pleaded Ben. And that was another thing. The day had been so quiet you could hear the beetles creeping in the grass. How had the man come up to him like that?

The man held out his hand. 'Give me the gun.' Ben handed it over. 'And the pellets.'

He loaded the weapon and looked down the sight. Then he fired it off into the bushes. 'It shoots to the left,' he remarked.

At the sight of the gun in her master's hand the little dog stood half up, and Ben saw that one of her front legs was shorter than the other.

'She's got the best nose of any dog there is,' the stranger told him. As he spoke he peered into the bushes opposite, moving his head this way and that like a cat. 'A hyena did that to her. She was following his scent and got so wrapped up she ran smack into the back of him. If I hadn't been right behind her, she'd have been dead meat.'

Ben looked up at him. 'Are you a hunter?' he asked.

For an answer the man fired the pistol into the bushes again. The little dog huffed and shuffled. 'Fetch it, Jenny,' he commanded, and she rushed off, dashed through the water into the bushes and came back a moment later with a dead sparrow in her mouth, which she laid across his shoes.

'That was a good shot!' said Ben grudgingly. 'And she must be a real hunting dog!' Ben didn't like this man, but he was very impressed. Anyway, there had been no mention of the police or his father, and he felt he ought to say something nice.

Now he wanted to see more. 'Do it again, get another one,' he pleaded.

The man reloaded and looked around him. He gestured to a clump of blackthorn bushes slightly downstream. 'See anything there?' he asked. Ben saw nothing. Again the man fired the pistol, again the little dog dashed crookedly off into the water and to the thicket. She returned with another little bird and laid it neatly next to the last one. The man nodded.

Ben looked down at the bird. Its beak was open and stained with blood. The feathers were untidy on the neck where the pellet had gone in, a little mess of bloody fibres. Its breast was red too, but not with blood.

'But it's a robin,' he said. As he spoke he realised that the birdsong bursting from the bushes nearby was now dead.

The man shrugged. 'Why should you feel sorry for a robin and not for a sparrow?' he asked. Ben shrugged. 'Because they're prettier?' asked the man with the hint of a sneer in his voice. 'That makes them more worth killing.'

'Did you really kill a hyena?' demanded Ben. 'Was it in Africa? Have you hunted lions?'

The man nodded again. 'I've killed lions, elephants, hyenas, hippos . . . '

'Rhinos?'

'Rhinos . . . tigers . . . '

'Tigers?' exclaimed Ben, out of breath with admiration. 'You've really killed tigers? How many?'

'More than anyone else I know of,' smiled the man.

'It's not true.' Ben started doubting the man again. He didn't know whether he was to be admired or hated. 'Tigers are protected, it's against the law to shoot them.'

'So are robins,' replied the Hunter.

'Are you going to hunt animals in this country?' demanded Ben.

The man waved his hand carelessly. 'There aren't any animals left worth killing over here.'

'You can't even hunt foxes any more,' said Ben.

The man sneered.

'You could hunt the wolves,' exclaimed Ben, suddenly.

The man looked at him in surprise. Everyone knew there were no wolves left in England. The last one had been chased and beaten to death five hundred years before.

'Who told you there were wolves here?' he asked.

The boy looked guilty, but just babbled on. 'My dad showed them to me. It's a secret. They come past our farm. Dad leaves out scraps for them sometimes but they never touch anything . . . There's lots of them . . .'

'Show me one,' said the man. 'And I'll kill it for you.'

Ben's face dropped. He looked shocked. The Hunter was amused. The child really did seem to believe in these wolves.

'If I find any wolves, I'll kill them. All of them,' he said, just to make it worse.

Ben shuffled. He looked close to tears. 'I've got to go now.' He stepped away but the man called him back.

'Aren't you going to take this?' He held out the gun and the pellets. The little dog at his feet yawned. Ben looked at the gun and said nothing.

'Shall I throw it away?' asked the Hunter.

There was a silence. Ben did not want to take anything from him – especially the gun.

'If it's yours,' went on the man in an unpleasant voice, 'I expect your parents will wonder what you've done with it.'

Ben shuffled forward and took back the gun and pellets. The man handed him the weapon but didn't let go. He raised his eyebrows expectantly. Ben could see his teeth shining dully, like the big screw in the gun handle.

'Thank you,' he said.

The Hunter let go of the gun. Without a word he turned and walked away, the crooked little dog at his heel, leaving the boy standing behind with the gun.

'Don't shoot any wolves with it, now!' he called over his shoulder.

Before he went home, Ben kicked the dead robin and sparrow into the water.