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

Secrets According to Humphrey

Written by

Betty G Birney

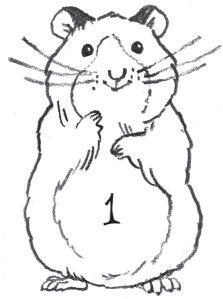
Published by

Faber Children's Books

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

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk



Secrets of the Nile

If I've learned one thing in my job as a classroom hamster, it's that there is no such thing as an ordinary day at school. But the day the secrets started, I couldn't have guessed what was in store for us in Room 26.

The holidays were over and I was HAPPY-HAPPY-HAPPY to catch up on my sleep. I followed along with the morning lessons, but I also took time to get a little rest.

After my friends left for mid-morning break, I settled down in my nice, soft bedding and closed my eyes. When I opened them again, I was unsqueakably shocked to look up and see our teacher, Mrs Brisbane, writing our new vocabulary words on the board.

There was nothing strange about that.

But there was something very strange about what she was writing.

Instead of writing words like 'marsh', 'journey' and 'approach', our teacher was writing odd strings of letters that didn't look like any words I'd ever seen.

pharaoh
papyrus
pyramid
hieroglyphics

I think 'journey' is a difficult word to spell. But 'pharaoh' and 'hieroglyphics'? How can those letters work together at all?

Of course, Mrs Brisbane doesn't normally put nonsense words on the board.

Another thing I've learned in my classroom job is that just when you think you understand everything about how humans think and act, you learn something completely new.

Since I was the only one there to notice what was happening and I am a good classroom hamster, I felt I had to squeak up.

‘Mrs Brisbane? Are you sure those are words?’ I asked.

All right, I know that all she heard was SQUEAK-SQUEAK-SQUEAK, but I wanted to make my point.

‘Quiet, Humphrey,’ Mrs Brisbane said. ‘You’ll find out what’s happening soon enough.’

‘BOING-BOING!’ my neighbour Og commented.

He lives in a tank right next to my cage.

He makes a strange sound like a broken guitar string, because he’s a strange frog.

I don’t speak frog, but I think he was as confused as I was.

‘Og, what is she doing?’ I squeaked to him.

‘BOING-BOING-BOING!’ He leaped into the water and made a lot of loud splashing sounds.

Mrs Brisbane stopped writing and looked in our direction.

‘Sometimes, I think you two actually understand everything that’s going on in Room Twenty-six.’ She chuckled and went on writing.

‘Of course we do!’ I replied. ‘We’re your

classroom pets! We know everything that's going on – except what you are doing right now.'

Og splashed and splashed and splashed some more, while I hopped on my wheel and went for a spin.

When I'm worried or excited, spinning helps me think.

Soon, my friends all returned to Room 26.

After they'd hung up their coats and put away their hats and gloves and scarves, they were back in their seats and looking at the board.

Slow-Down-Simon's hand went up right away.

'Mrs Brisbane, are we supposed to learn those words?' he asked. 'Because they look really hard!'

'YES-YES-YES!' I agreed, but Mrs Brisbane just smiled and nodded.

'Yes, they are, class, but you're going to be learning a lot about these words in the next few weeks,' she explained. 'Now, what do you think we're going to be studying?'

Small-Paul raised his hand. (We have two boys named Paul in our class. Since Paul F. is

shorter than Paul G., I call him Small-Paul.)

'Something to do with Egypt?' he answered when Mrs Brisbane called on him.

'Yes!' Mrs Brisbane said. 'We're going to be studying ancient Egypt.'

Then she added the words 'ancient' and 'Egypt' to the list on the board.

Most of my classmates looked excited, but I have to admit I still had no idea what Mrs Brisbane meant.

'What other words can I write on the board to go along with these?' she asked.

'I know!' Be-Careful-Kelsey waved her hand. 'Mummy!'

Mrs Brisbane added the word to the board.

Now, I know what a mummy is. I know what a daddy is, too. But I still didn't know anything about ancient Egypt.

Tell-the-Truth-Thomas waved his hand high in the air and Mrs Brisbane called on him.

'I read this book where a mummy came back to life and escaped from its tomb,' he said. 'It was a great book!'

I felt a shiver and a quiver but some of my friends said, 'Ooh' and 'Ahh!'

Thomas continued. 'Then, I read a true book about the pyramids and that King Toot!'

All my classmates giggled.

'I mean King Tut!' Thomas looked very pleased with himself. 'He was a pharaoh, which is like a king.'

'King . . . Tut?' I repeated. Because I know what a king is – sort of – but what's a tut?

'Very good, Thomas,' Mrs Brisbane said. 'You know quite a bit about ancient Egypt already.'

But she didn't write 'King Tut' on the board. Instead she wrote another string of nonsense letters: *Tutankhamen*.

'Tutankhamen was only a boy when he became a pharaoh. In the 1920s, his tomb was discovered and it was full of beautiful treasures,' Mrs Brisbane explained.

'I'm surprised she could figure out how to say that word,' I squeaked to my neighbour. 'Do you know what she's talking about?'

'BOING-BOING!' Og replied.

At least I wasn't the only one in the dark.

'To start our Egypt unit, we're going to the library now. Mr Fitch will be showing us a film

that shows some of the wonders of King Tut's tomb. It's called *Secrets of the Nile*.'

She wrote 'Nile' on the board.

I had no idea what that meant, either, but at least it was short and easy to spell.

Soon, my fellow students lined up to go to the library.

'Can Humphrey come, too?' Rolling-Rosie asked as she rolled her wheelchair past my cage.

'Thanks, Rosie!' I squeaked.

My hopes were dashed when Mrs Brisbane said, 'I think Humphrey would probably rather take a little nap.'

But I wasn't the least bit tired!

On their way out of the room, I heard Simon ask Thomas what the name of the mummy book was.

'I can't remember,' Thomas said. 'I'll show it to you in the library.'

'Great, because I want to check it out,' Simon said.

'I want to learn those secrets of the Nile,' Rosie said as she rolled her wheelchair out the door.

'I want to see King Tut's treasure,' Holly said.

Before I knew it, Og and I were all alone in the room.

'Og, I want to know the secrets of the Nile, too, don't you?' I squeaked.

'BOING-BOING-BOING!' my friend replied.

'Whatever the Nile is,' I added.

I scurried over to the corner of my cage. There's a mirror there and behind the mirror is a secret: my tiny notebook and pencil that Ms Mac gave me.

I started to write down all of the weird words. I have to say, my paw was aching by the time I got to 'hieroglyphics'. It was the longest, strangest word I'd ever seen.

I tucked my notebook back into its hiding place just seconds before my friends returned, full of energy.

'Hi, Humphrey,' Stop-Talking-Sophie said as she passed by my cage. 'You should have seen what was in that pyramid. There was a—'

She didn't finish because just then Slow-Down-Simon tapped her on the shoulder and said, 'Don't tell Humphrey! They're supposed

to be *secrets*!'

'I guess he wouldn't understand anyway,' she said.

'Yes, I would!' I squeaked. 'Please tell me! I'm in your class, too.'

Sophie smiled and said, 'Sorry, Humphrey. I can't tell you.'

Then Tall-Paul staggered to his seat with his arms up and said, 'I want my mummy!'

Everybody giggled.

Everybody except Og . . . and me.

I HOPED-HOPED-HOPED that Mrs Brisbane would talk about those secrets after lunch, but she moved on to other subjects instead.

Just before the bell rang at the end of the day, she had Helpful-Holly hand out the homework sheets.

'Class, as you'll see on the instructions, you need to unscramble the words and label some of the items we learned about today,' she said.

'When is it due?' Do-It-Now-Daniel asked.

'Tomorrow, Daniel,' Mrs Brisbane said. 'You'll have to do it tonight.'

Daniel sighed.

He liked to put things off as long as possible, if he could.

It only took a few moments for the room to empty after the bell rang.

Mrs Brisbane tidied her desk, as usual.

'Can you tell us about the secrets of the Nile?' I squeaked.

'What's that, Humphrey? Are you interested in ancient Egypt?' she asked.

'YES-YES-YES!' I answered.

'As if you know what I'm saying,' she said with a chuckle. 'Well, you'll find out what's going on soon enough.'

'But I'd like to know *now*!' I squeaked.

'BOING-BOING!' Og agreed.

'I might as well put the map up before I go,' she said.

She took a large, rolled-up paper from the cupboard and then tacked it to the noticeboard.

'There's ancient Egypt and there's the Nile.' She pointed at the map. 'You two will have to wait to learn the rest.'

Just then, the door opened and Mr Morales came in. He's the headmaster and the Most Important Person at Longfellow School.

‘I’m glad you’re still here, Sue,’ he said.

Our teacher’s first name is Sue, but I *always* call her Mrs Brisbane.

‘I have some bad news,’ Mr Morales said. ‘And I have some good news, as well.’

‘What’s the bad news?’ Mrs Brisbane asked.

‘You’re going to be losing one of your students in a few weeks,’ he told her.

‘Oh, no!’ she replied. ‘Who?’

‘NO-NO-NO!’ I shouted as I scrambled up to the top of my cage for a better look. ‘WHO-WHO-WHO?’

To my surprise, Mr Morales smiled. ‘This letter will explain. This is the good news,’ he said as he handed Mrs Brisbane a piece of paper.

She read it and smiled. ‘This is wonderful! I couldn’t be happier,’ she said.

Happy? Happy to be losing one of my classmates? I like every single one of my friends and I thought Mrs Brisbane did, too.

‘As you can see, we want to keep the whole thing secret. No one else should know until the big day,’ he said.

‘I agree,’ she said. ‘I won’t tell a soul. Oh, but can I tell Bert?’

Bert is Mr Brisbane's first name.

'Yes, but only Bert,' he said.

Og splashed around in his tank.

'What about us?' I squeaked.

'What about Humphrey and Og?' Mrs Brisbane asked Mr Morales.

The head looked our way and laughed. 'No, not even Humphrey and Og.'

And I thought Mr Morales liked us!

Soon, he was gone.

I crossed my toes and hoped Mrs Brisbane would leave the letter on her desk so I could read it later that night. But as she was gathering up papers to take home, she put the piece of paper in her handbag.

'NO-NO-NO!!!' I squeaked at the top of my small lungs.

'BOING!!!!!' Og twanged as he splashed around in the water side of his tank.

I guess she didn't hear us, because she said good night and closed the door behind her.

When the car park was empty (I can see it from my window), I jiggled the lock-that-doesn't-lock on my cage and it opened. Thank

goodness I have a secret way of getting out of my cage!

I scampered over to Og's tank. 'Someone's leaving!' I said.

'BOING-BOING-BOING!' He sounded unsqueakably upset.

'Who could it be?' I asked.

Og didn't answer. He just stared straight ahead.

He has a very wide mouth that usually looks like a smile, but that night, he wasn't smiling at all.

He was the saddest frog I've ever seen.

(Yes, he's the only frog I've ever seen up close, but he did look sad.)

'What can we do?' I asked.

Og just sat there, as still and silent as the rock he was sitting on.

After a while, I went back to my cage and closed the door behind me.

Then I took out my notebook and began to write.

'Secrets can be VERY-VERY-VERY bad,' I wrote.

And I meant every single 'very'.

Humphrey's Top Secret Scribbles

There's just one thing I want to know:
Which of my friends is about to go?