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

Reckoning
The Silver Blackthorn Trilogy
Book 1

Written by

Kerry Wilkinson

Published by

Pan Books

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

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

1

It's difficult to describe the sensation when you walk out of your front door and there are thousands of people there. I have lived here all of my sixteen years and know almost every part of the cobbled streets that criss-cross Martindale. All the years of playing hide and seek, rushing in between the houses, exploring and generally getting into trouble means that I could close my eyes and still find my way from one side of the village to the other.

Not today though. Now the streets feel as if they belong to other people.

I'm not sure what it is that unnerves me the most: the sheer number of bodies I can see, or the noise. It vibrates everywhere around me, footsteps clipping loose stones along the crumbling paths and excited chattering voices bouncing around our usually quiet streets. There is a nervous hum too – an indefinable energy that you can feel in the air.

In the murky, dirtied window of our house, I catch my own reflection and push the light streak of long silver hair hanging across my face over the top of my head, where it settles with the rest of my straight, dark locks.

I look more tired than I feel, the weight of the day already upon me.

My family left a little while ago, wanting to give me time to think and get ready for my big day. My mother kissed me on the forehead, telling me to do my best and that she believed in me. Now they are somewhere among the crowd; individual parts of a single throbbing mass of humanity. Sat alone in my room, staring at my own reflection in the mirror, I could hear the atmosphere building but it didn't prepare me for this. It is almost overwhelming.

I find myself glancing down at the dull white-grey thinkwatch on my wrist. It is almost like a morning reflex, to check my alerts. Today, there is only one word – 'RECKONING' – followed by the time and place. On so many occasions, I have scrolled forward through the days to stare at that one word that now it feels a tiny bit underwhelming to see it there. Reckoning day and the Offering that follows only comes once a year and everyone has been waiting twelve months for this. For me, the Reckoning is something I have spent my whole life anticipating as each year's has become a progressively larger event. Even though we will only spend a few hours inside the village hall, the build-up has grown into a whole morning for everyone – a time for people to celebrate the end of war, although it isn't as if we have prosperity to enjoy. Perhaps that is why this is something to look forward to?

The time when us children become adults and go out to help rebuild the nation.

Our battered school with its leaking roof and mouldy, damp corners is too small to be suitable for the enormity of the day. Others may talk of the repairs that need to be done to the old building but I like the fact we get to use an item as modern as a thinkpad against the backdrop of something that comes from a different age. I am fond of my creaky, slightly soft wooden chair too. I suppose that is somebody else's now that I will no longer be going back.

I turn and step into the crowd, heading in the vague direction of the hall but not wanting to get there too quickly. The atmosphere is friendly, parents holding onto their children's hands as we all bob through the streets, unable to move too fast because of the sheer weight of people.

Most of the residents of Martindale know me by name. They have seen me grow up; many of them have told me off at various times for not looking where I am going when I am running through the streets. As I look from person to person, I cannot see a face that I recognise. Feeling a stranger in my own village, I manage to reach the edge of the street, out of everyone's way, where I stand on tiptoes and glance towards the far reaches of the village.

Over the tops of the bobbing heads, I see a train with a long row of carriages behind it, stretching into the distance,

rusty and battered. It becomes apparent where all the people have come from. Although some sixteen-year-olds would have been brought in for their Reckoning anyway, it seems like everyone they've ever known has come too.

I'm still not sure why – it wasn't like this last year.

After another glance at my thinkwatch, I slide into the crowd again. At first it is easy to move between the people but the numbers soon thicken. By the time I am within sight of the hall, people are standing four or five deep along the edge of the road, packed tightly, buzzing with excitement.

When I finally reach the main square, it isn't simply the number of people disorientating me. There is colour everywhere, baskets of flowers hanging from buildings – scattering yellows, pinks, reds, purples and everything in between as far as I can see. Decorations which have sprung up overnight.

Around me, every other person seems to be waving a flag with the cross of St George on it, the white corners glowing bright in the morning sun against the blazing blue sky.

I try to think where they might have come from but then I see a man walking along a space that has been cleared at the back of the square, handing them out from a box. It's not hard to realise he is different to us. His suit fits perfectly and his shoes are shinier than most of the coins we use. We make do with items of clothing which have been passed

down that don't fit, are ripped and permanently stained. He walks tall and without pain, a clear sign he has not had to undergo the manual labour most of the people in Martindale endure.

The man disappears out of sight along an alleyway and then returns moments later with another box of flags. I wonder what it is all for, then I see heads turning to look behind me. I spin to see a man with a camera pointing in my direction and realise why there are so many people here. Ours is one of the villages that will be featured on this evening's Reckoning round-up. I suppose it is our turn. The cheers of the crowd suddenly increase and I turn to see the flag-man waving his arms around encouragingly.

Now I am closer to the centre, I notice a handful of familiar faces among the sea of bodies, neighbours and parents of people I go to school with. Then I look up to see the other teenagers taking the Reckoning standing on the steps of the hall. I am early for the test itself, but somehow late to the celebrations. I want to stay away from the attention, so sink into the crowd, a few rows back from the steps.

Behind me, the man in the suit is urging everyone forward towards the base of the stone steps that lead up to the hall. My friend Opie is in the centre at the top, bouncing awkwardly from one foot to the other and probably wondering where I am. I want to stop to watch them for a

few moments but, behind me, I feel hands on my back as a woman who lives on our street pushes me towards the stage. 'Go on, love,' she says with a friendly grin, 'it's your day.'

Given the number of other people who seem to be enjoying themselves, I'm not sure the day is much to do with me any longer.

As I stumble forward, others notice and urge me on, delighted someone who is taking the Reckoning is actually among them.

Gradually, I nudge my way through, avoiding the stamping feet and manic, flailing arms. Over the voices and footsteps, I can hear the sound of someone playing a flute towards the back of the square. The beautiful melody catches on the breeze, carrying over the crowd before somebody else joins in. Within moments, it sounds as if there is a whole band playing: trumpets, recorders, a drum, perhaps even a violin? I have only ever seen one once, when a travelling show came through the village. I want to stand on tiptoes again to see if I can find out where the music is coming from but the crowd is too tight and I am being pressed forwards.

I have never seen or heard anything like this.

As I get to the front, I edge up the steps, trying not to attract too much attention. Kingsmen stand at either end of the line, their black uniforms in stark contrast to the white of the flags being waved around them. They aren't exactly

unknown on the streets of Martindale but as I reach the top, I can see more of the dark colours that signify the country's combined army and police force massing along the back of the crowd, out of sight of the cameras.

Everything they wear is made of a thin, flexible metal called borodron that no one else seems to have access to. They have black tunics, matching trousers and shiny boots, as well as helmets that arch over their head and ears. Even their thinkwatches are made of the same black material, in contrast to the silver metal everyone else's is created from. Two of the Kingsmen at the top of the stairs stand motionless, their slick appearance somewhat jarring with the solid shining metal swords that are wedged into their belts.

I slide behind one of the people I don't know and glance sideways towards Opie, who hasn't noticed me yet. It looks as if his mum has made an effort to tidy his hair, as the blonde tufts that would usually be naturally tousled have been flattened. He has a bristle of dark hair on his chin. I remember the day two years ago when he excitedly showed me the first few wisps under his mouth, telling me he was on the road to becoming a man. I laughed then but he seems like one now with his larger, stronger shoulders.

He is looking at his own thinkwatch, a constant reminder of how different we can be. The devices remind us of what we need to do each day and when each night's curfew is. He accepts everyone has to use their thinkwatches to enter and

exit buildings and pick up the weekly rations; I think about who decides what those limits are. He accepts that they work; I wonder why nobody can take the lifetime batteries inside and use them to make sure no one has to freeze to death during the winter.

Opie glances away from his wrist and, although I don't think he means to, he is so pleased to see a familiar face that he says my name. I smile awkwardly, attempting to ignore the camera now skimming along the line.

It is only from the top of the steps that I am able to take in the true scale of how different the square looks. Bunting, flags and the flower baskets are attached to every roof and the layer of grime which would usually greet us has been washed from the bricks and stone. It is so unfamiliar and I wonder how much it has all cost – probably enough to feed everyone who actually lives here for weeks. The effort to make this happen overnight is beyond my comprehension.

I try to look for the band but they have gone silent. The Kingsmen have now spread out, encircling everyone. From ground level, where another camera is, nothing is visible except for excited villagers waving their flags. It's not hard to picture how it is going to appear on everyone's screens at home tonight but then this is the biggest day of the year. Now I am a child but after a few hours in the hall, I will be expected to leave an adult.

It is a reckoning in every sense of the word.