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 Black North

Written by

Nigel McDowell

Published by

Hot Key Books

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

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Hot Key Books
Northburgh House, 10 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0AT

Copyright © Nigel McDowell 2014

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

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

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-0067-4

1

This book is typeset in 10.5 Berling LT Std using Atomik ePublisher

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc

Hot Key Books supports the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation, and is committed to printing only on Greenpeace-approved FSC-certified paper.

www.hotkeybooks.com

Hot Key Books is part of the Bonnier Publishing Group
www.bonnierpublishing.com

I

'Would you snap-shut your trap and listen – I can hear something.'

'I hear nothing. Imagining things, so you are.'

'Not. Tell the lads to be ready. They're close now.'

'The lads are ready enough – we all are. Ready to die for the Cause!'

'Not gonna die.'

'Don't be frighted now, sister dearest.'

'Not.'

'Dying in battle isn't a thing to be worried about. Remember – it's how Da and Granda went.'

'I know that. Can't forget, can I?'

'Da and Granda – pair of them would be proud of us now!'

'Give over, would you?'

'I'm sure they're watching down over us, in the company of the Sorrowful Lady Herself!'

'I'm sure they've got better things to be doing, wherever they are. Now *shush*.'

'Don't tell me to –'

'*Quiet*! I can hear something.'

'It's near enough night now anyway – they'll not come. Cowards.'

'Well, you better be ready, brother dearest – this is it. Things are about to begin.'

2

Then Oona cried, '*There they are, lads!*' and Morris cried, '*Attack!*' and blood-red ran the river where the battle broke. The banks of the Torrid were whited by winter then dashed with crimson. Crimson too across many mouths: rags were knotted to hide tell-tale breath, boys of the Cause on bellies and knees behind trees and rushes, all firing, mouths bellowing – ' !'

(Too much gunfire to hear anything but gunfire.)

When Invaders fell on the opposite shore others came rushing to take over. When boys fell on the side of the Cause, no one came to replace.

Oona ordered, '*Keep your heads down!*' and Morris ordered, '*Keep firing, don't give in!*' Not one was thinking surrender.

Morris roared, '*Don't let them cross! Don't let them into Drumbroken!*'

Look closely – Morris was on his front among reeds, small, skinny as a sally-rod and soot-haired, chilled to the soul but with heart blazing. He took aim with his granda's rifle, slowly and carefully and patient. But too slow – the thing jammed and his hearing rang with a long thin note as a shot went out

from another rifle. The Invader he'd been eyeing fell.

Look closer – see Oona, the twin sister, on her belly too and only feet from Morris, same coloured head of hair on her.

'That was my shot to take!' Morris told her.

'Not my fault you're too slow,' said Oona. 'Is it my fault that gun's too heavy for your wee hands?'

'*One down doesn't win a war!*' said Morris. (Old bit of preaching from their da's mouth.)

'Thanks for reminding me,' said Oona. She rolled her eyes.

So Morris had to prove: his finger tugged the trigger and there was a blue-white flash and the gun bucked against his collarbone and another Invader fell into the River Torrid.

'Good shot, boy Kavanagh!' one of the Cause boys shouted.

'Notice no one is so quick to thank me,' said Oona.

'Now now,' said Morris, 'none of them bitter words. Very unappealing from a lady.' Oona used words to reply that definitely weren't lady-likely.

'Turf-mouth,' he told her.

'Clod-head,' she told him.

Both kept firing like it was their own private game. But how did they get there, these two? Beside the River Torrid, bickering?

Morris's first meeting with the Cause had gone like this: in a tin hut on the edge of Drumbroken with flags rippling on all walls, whiskey bottles were lined up along the rim of a tin bath and the Cause had said, 'Show how good you are with that gun of your granda's!' He'd done well enough, exploded all of the bottles except one. The boys of the Cause had all cheered and hailed him, 'A legend in the making!' Then they'd waved their crimson flags, sunk enamel cups into the bath, drunk the

whiskey that had collected there and all gotten wildly drunk as they sang their anthem, *The Song of the Divided Isle*.

Back by the river and Morris aimed once more. Fired – another Invader down. Again the call of congratulation: 'Good one, boy Kavanagh!'

Oona held her breath and one-two-three quick shots = three Invaders falling.

No one acknowledged.

Oona's first meeting with the Cause: she turned up at the tin hut the night after Morris had, but was told she wasn't wanted. But she wouldn't be told, kept coming back and back every night, and in the end they said that if Oona wanted to try to act like a man and fight then that was her burial, but they wouldn't be there to pick her up or look after her. Then she'd done the same shooting trick as Morris, but destroyed every single bottle on the bath. Nothing was said. The gun Oona had used was one she'd found in a ditch on the way there.

Now Oona ducked low in the reeds by the River Torrid – suddenly so much gunfire was her way, Invaders knowing she'd be a good one to take out.

'Watch yourself there, girl! Shouldn't be here at all, should be at home keeping house!'

This was Davy, near by. Fifteen years old, so only had two years on the twins, but he was their self-appointed leader. But Davy couldn't (Oona thought) have hit a cow in a cattle-mart. She showed him the tip of her tongue. Then she watched Davy's shoulder jerk, saw blood dash his cheek and any scowl slipped from his face. He collapsed.

Oona looked at Morris. They both did a deep swallow, and

continued to fire. But night was determined to darken the scene, and each moment meant it was harder to see what was approaching. And maybe-minutes-maybe-moments and more of the Cause were felled.

Somebody else made a feeble cry, 'They're going to cross into Drumbroken!'

But said too late: Invaders had entered the river and begun to wade across, their uniforms quickly shifting colour from winter-white and blood-red to just blood, matching the colour of the river.

'See!' Morris told Oona. 'It's true they have some North magic to make them blend into things, so they'll not be easy seen!'

'It's just the river staining their clothes,' said Oona. 'We're not winning this. We need to move into the forest – we know the trees and these Invaders don't. We'd be better off.'

Morris said, 'No! You said you weren't frighted.'

Oona nudged him and said, 'Not. Also said I wasn't going to die.'

Morris said, 'You go. I'm staying.'

And then came the call from other boys fleeing: 'Boys of the Cause retreat! Back into the trees! Run for it!'

Said Morris again, 'I'm not going anywhere, sister dearest.'

'Morris,' said Oona, 'I know it's hard for you, but try not to be the usual stubborn eejit!'

Morris didn't speak.

Invaders arrived on the shore and were shouting, 'After them! Pursue into the forest! We need them alive!'

Oona took her brother by the wrist and said only, '*Morris*.'

He swallowed. 'I can't,' he said. 'For Da and Granda, and for the Cause and for our county of Drumbroken, for all the Divided Isle I have to –'

'Don't give me that chat,' said Oona. '"*All the Divided Isle*"? You think they care up North about what you do here? And what about Granny? Going to leave her alone in the Kavanagh cottage and us pair dead in the Torrid? We're Kavanaghs, remember? And what did Da always say? *Kavanaghs don't do as expected*.'

Morris looked at her.

'We run,' she said. 'We live. We fight tomorrow.'

A moment. Then Oona's brother gave her something close to a nod and they were both up and off.

An Invader saw and shouted, 'Get him!'

Just *him?* thought Oona. Am I bloody invisible or just not worth bothering with or –? Morris turned and fired one-two shots and one-two Invaders dropped.

Gunfire was returned but the same Invader cried, 'No! I said don't shoot them. Remember the Captain's orders!'

Oona and Morris hurried on through the trees and deepening dusk, across snow on bare soles, shouts and calls and commands all flying and more boys of the Cause being brought down. Shot down? Not a bit – *dragged down*. Oona heard another shout from one of their own: 'They've got Briar-Witches with them!'

'What chat's this?' said Oona, to herself, and she had to stop to see . . .

A low rise was racing along underground, a hump that moved fast, weaving between trees, burrowing. A rabbit wouldn't do that, Oona thought. Nor a badger neither. Her look went to

one of the Cause boys standing: he was backed up to a tree, his gaze on the ground. The boy was Eamon O'Riley. Oona watched. She saw Eamon's last expression: terror and some tears, and then he was gone, pulled into the ground.

Some other in the Cause announced, 'Beware that ground beneath your feet!'

Oona said to Morris, 'Quick – up and climb.'

Oona leapt from the spot she stood on and caught a branch but Morris was too slow . . .

Her brother cried out, swore as he was taken by the ankles and yanked down, falling into the earth to his armpits. Still he held tight his granda's gun, and with the other hand he snatched for what little was there – grass, root, weakened weed, all snow-soaked and slipping.

'Hell's bells,' said Oona.

She returned to the ground and dropped her gun so she could take her brother's hand with both her own. Oona tried to drag him back, but already he was telling her, 'Leave me be. Run on. Go!'

'Shut up,' she told him. 'Stop trying to be a bloody martyr. And let go of that gun, will you?'

'Not a chance,' said Morris.

Then whatever held her brother snapped out at Oona – a rough, clubbed claw flew and a sharp spur like a cockerel's entered her hand at the fatty bulge below her thumb. She had to recoil and Morris slipped further into the ground, almost gone. But Oona Kavanagh wasn't being beaten – from the pocket of her dress she took a kitchen knife she'd brought from their cottage and slashed at the claw. It was quick to retreat.

But still something held Morris and wouldn't relinquish. And Oona wouldn't let go of him either.

'Don't be so bloody stubborn,' said Morris, teeth gritted. 'You're gonna have me in two halves!'

'Stubborn?' said Oona, teeth gritted too. 'You should talk!'

But she knew she was losing him to this creature underground, this Briar-Witch. A call of an Invader: 'Over there! They're having trouble with one!'

'Let me go,' said Morris. 'Like you said – think of Granny, her being alone . . .'

Invader: 'It's only a girl. Do we bother capturing her?'

And this was the thing that made Oona lose strength and lose her brother – *It's only a girl* . . .

Suddenly she had only a hole in the ground to stare into, and nothing in her hands but the crimson rag Morris had shed on his way down. She heard another Invader asking, 'What girl are you talking about? I can't see no one.'

Didn't see because Oona was already gone. She ran alone, the only member of the Cause in Drumbroken left standing.