



THE BOOKSHOP GIRL

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ILLUSTRATED BY
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For my nephew Theo: Welcome!

Scholastic Children's Books

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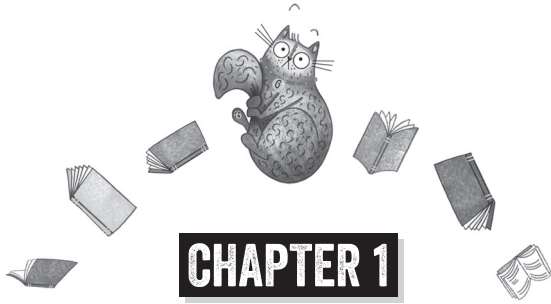
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AN OBJECT OF WONDER

Property was eleven years old when our story begins. She had been living with the Joneses for six years. She loved them very much, and she was almost entirely happy there. But she was never *completely* happy, because she was keeping a secret from them, and it was a whopper:

Property Jones couldn't read.

Every evening, Netty and Michael would

take two copies of the same book, and read them side by side, turning the pages at the same time and laughing and sighing at all the same parts. When it had become clear that Property was staying, Netty had given her a third copy each night without a word.

She was trying to be kind. It never occurred to her that the five-year-old newcomer might not be able to read. And it was a long time before it occurred to Property that the others weren't just admiring the books, and enjoying the weight and smell of them and the way the pages rustled. So at first she just copied what they were doing, and didn't know that anything was wrong.

Once she realized that she had

misunderstood, she was too scared to say anything, in case they threw her out. Of course when she was older she realized that this was silly, but by then she had pretended to read for so long that it seemed very dishonest, and she was ashamed to tell them. And as she got older and older this went on longer and longer and it got more and more awkward, and now she had pretended to be able to read for six whole years.

And that is why, when Netty read something in the paper that made her raise her eyebrows in surprise, and then passed it to Michael who fell out of his chair in surprise, and then passed it to Property, Property didn't know what it

said. She plumped for a reaction somewhere in-between eyebrow-raising and falling-off-chair, and said, “Oh!” This seemed to satisfy them.

“It’s a miracle,” said Michael, from underneath the counter.

“Not a miracle, Michael,” said Netty. “Just – wonderful.”

Michael explained that this was exactly what he meant, and that the word “miracle” comes from the Latin “miraculum” which means “object of wonder”. This was quite clever, but the others weren’t particularly impressed. Firstly, Michael always knew that kind of thing. Secondly, he was still sitting foolishly under the counter

“The real miraculum,” said Netty, “is



that I ever run a shop with you two for help. Out from under the counter, Michael; it's two minutes to nine."

So Michael came out, still beaming about the mysterious Object of Wonder in the newspaper, and they all took up their places. They always worked the same way. Netty sat at the counter to serve the customers. She used it as a desk as well, to do all the difficult things like finances and ordering stock. Michael took care of the books, lovingly arranging them on the shelves, and recommending his favourites to people, whether or not they wanted him to. There weren't that many books in the shop, and a lot of them were yellow or wrinkly with age, but Michael loved them anyway.

Property served tea and cake to anyone who wanted to sit in an armchair and read awhile, and she kept the shop smart and tidy. Or she tried to. It didn't help that everything in the shop was falling apart.

Netty was at the counter, Michael was hovering by the dictionaries, and Property had put the kettle on. The White Hart opened at nine o'clock sharp. (If you are thinking, *But the White Hart is the wrong sort of name for a bookshop*, then you are quite right, but also quite impatient. I was going to explain. The bookshop used to be the White Hart pub, and it had a very beautiful picture of a white stag hanging outside. When Netty bought the pub and filled it with books, she couldn't see any

good reason to change the name when there was such a nice sign already there.)

It was a slow day. Whenever the shop was quiet, Netty and Michael would talk about the Object of Wonder, and Property would try and figure out what it was.

“Of course,” said Netty, wrapping her hands tightly around her mug of tea, “it will never be us. The chance is so slim.”

“Of course,” agreed Michael. “We shouldn’t even think about it.” But then he put out a batch of thriller books upside down, so either he thought they looked better that way, or he was still thinking about it. (Property could tell that they were thrillers easily; it was just a matter of paying attention. They had dark moody covers,

and they were the right sort of fatness, with thin-ish paper. Whenever Netty and Michael read books that looked like that, their breathing was very tense.)

Michael finally noticed what he was doing, and turned all the books the right way up. Then he said, “It would be amazing though. I’ve heard it’s huge! We’d have every book in the world.” And his face lit up at this beautiful thought.

“And no trouble paying the gas bill,” said Netty, looking sadly at her hot cup of tea. The White Hart was always a *little* bit too cold.

Property leaned closer to her own mug of tea, feeling the warmth on her face. She was used to playing detective, but this was

a tough case. What could hold every book in the world and heat up their shop? Was there some sort of infinity shelf fitted with its own radiator system? She got a bit lost imagining what this would look like, and accidentally leaned right into the tea and scalded her chin. A woman browsing the cookery section gave her a very strange look. Property quickly put the tea down and hurried off to look busy with a Hoover.

As she was Hoovering, she eavesdropped some more. "Have you entered us yet?" Michael was saying.

"Of course," said Netty. "I did it right away."

"I wonder if there are runner-up prizes," said Michael. "I'd love to just *meet* him."

Michael had a face shaped like a pear drop, mostly taken up with eyes, and those eyes were now getting bigger and bigger and bigger. Whatever was going on, it must be good. The only thing that normally made Michael this excited was a really good dictionary full of especially interesting words. (Property could tell that a book was a dictionary from the paper – so thin that she could trace with it – and the tiny writing, and the boring covers without any pictures.)

Netty smiled at him. “You do choose odd heroes, love. The great Albert H. Montgomery himself, eh? Sure, it would be nice.”

This was more intriguing by the

minute. Albert H. Montgomery owned the greatest bookshop in Britain. Probably in the world. Property didn't know anyone who had actually seen the Montgomery Book Emporium, which was miles away in London, but everybody had heard of it. There was a rumour that the Queen herself bought all her books from Montgomery's.

But what did the Book Emporium have to do with their heating bill? Property casually hoovered the same spot for ten minutes while she thought this one over, and didn't notice that she was hoovering her own foot. The cookery-book woman was now looking at Property as if she was quite worried about her.

That afternoon it rained, so the shop was rammed full. Something about a good hard downpour makes everybody suddenly remember how much they'd like to buy a book, especially if they happen to have forgotten their umbrella. The three



armchairs at the front of the shop were full, and the window seat in the fantasy section was full, and every possible nook and cranny had someone huddled in it.

Property was not used to the shop being this full, and she didn't like it. It was difficult to move anywhere without knocking something or someone over. Worse still, it meant that there were too many customers for Netty and Michael to deal with, so some people would try and ask Property questions that she couldn't possibly answer.

"Excuse me," said a fiercely eyebrowed woman, catching Property's elbow through the crowd. She was a regular at the White Hart, and she was the least fun person

ever. “Do you have any books on quadratic equations with complex roots?”

“Er,” said Property, wondering what a quadratic equation was, and how to avoid meeting one, “I’ll just check.” And she tried to push through the throng to ask Michael, but someone in the crowd stumbled into her and knocked her into the umbrella stand, which spilt its umbrellas all over the floor. While she was picking them up, a solemn young man tapped her on the shoulder.

“Little girl,” he said, “do you have anything by Wordsworth? It’s rather urgent.” He clasped his hands together and stared at her sadly. “His poetry is medicine for the heart, little girl. I must find some. My heart is very heavy.”

“Right – er – sorry to hear it,” said Property. “Poetry’s over there.” And before he could ask her to look for a specific book, she hurried off to sit on top of the Art and Photography shelf. Netty had fixed this shelf to the wall especially, so that it wouldn’t topple over when they sat on it, and had put some cushions on top. It was one of Property’s favourite places. She tucked herself into the corner and made herself as small as possible, so that she wouldn’t have to deal with any more heavy hearts or complex roots or umbrella stands. She took the newspaper up there with her to see if she could find any clues in it.

When Michael joined her a few minutes

later, she tried her most desperate trick, which she only used on special occasions. She handed him the newspaper. “Read it out, Michael,” she said. “I want to hear it out loud.” And she tried to look full of wonder, which is difficult when you are concentrating on not falling off a bookcase.

So Michael pushed his glasses up his nose, and *aherrmed* a bit, and began:

CALLING ALL BOOK LOVERS **Could YOU be the next owner of the great** **Montgomery Book Emporium?**

Albert H. Montgomery is retiring, and has chosen to offer his world-famous bookshop

as a once-in-a-lifetime prize!

To be in with a chance of winning,

simply enter

THE GRAND MONTGOMERY RAFFLE!

The lucky winner will be drawn on

Saturday 31st October.

Hurry – enter now for your chance to win

yourself a book emporium!

Visit www.montgomerybooks.com

There are literally no terms and conditions.

While he was reading, Netty had climbed up the ladder with two more mugs of tea – which is quite clever, if you stop and think about it. She set down one for each of them.

“Listen to you two nattering! We all need to stop jittering about it. We’re so unlikely to win.” She ran a finger along the top row of books. They coughed up a cloud of dust, and a paperback on the end fell apart. “We’ve got our own emporium right here, anyway,” she said. But she didn’t sound like she believed it.

Property didn’t know what to feel. It was certainly a wonderful prize, but the thought of leaving home was surprisingly painful. “So if we won,” she said, “would we leave the White Hart?”

Michael looked at her properly. He was the kind of person who often looked without *really* looking, because he was busy thinking about a puzzle or a really

interesting word. But he could tell when somebody actually needed his attention.

“I know that wouldn’t be easy, Prop,” he said. He hugged his knees up to his chest, and lowered his voice. “But we might have to do it anyway, raffle or no raffle. This place has been in a bad way for a while. Mum’s not letting on. I only know ’cause I go over the accounts when she’s not looking and correct a few of the sums – I’ve always done it, she never notices. Anyway. You might not have realized, Prop, but the bookshop isn’t making nearly enough money.”

Property looked at her brother, who blinked earnestly back at her. Michael could be very stupid for a very clever person. The White Hart was cold, broken and badly

stocked. Property was wearing Michael's old clothes, and Michael was in clothes that were much too small. Netty's nice jewellery had disappeared piece by piece until she had nothing left to sell, and she kept ramming her pen fiercely into the page whenever she did their accounts, and making endless tea to calm herself down. But Michael only knew that they were in trouble because he had done some maths. Sometimes, Property felt she was the only Jones that paid any attention.

It was difficult to think how to reply. Luckily, Netty appeared over the top of the bookcase with two more steaming mugs. "More tea?"

Her children looked at their full mugs.

“All right up here, thanks, Mum,” said Property. And she decided to want the Book Emporium, for Netty’s sake.

Of course, however much any of them wanted it, there was nothing to do but wait. There were two nights until the draw. That first night, none of them slept very well: as Property fidgeted in



her hammock, she could hear the others faffing about in their own hammocks in their own corners of the shop. Netty Jones slept in the second-hand section, because she liked the musty smell of the old books. Michael slept by the dictionaries, because he liked things to say exactly what they meant. Property slept in the travel section, because travel books have pictures.

The next day it didn't rain, and so nobody remembered that they wanted to buy a book. While the Joneses waited to find out if they had won the world's largest book emporium, they sold a grand total of three novels. Netty made record amounts of tea and accidentally snapped her biro in half.

They *did* have people in the shop – lots of

people – but they only came in to talk with Netty about the Grand Montgomery Raffle, and swap rumours about the Emporium. None of them had been to London, so they were really just guessing. Some people had heard it was a hundred storeys high, and some had heard it was built entirely of marble, and one rather excitable man had heard that it was staffed by highly trained leopards. The least-fun-woman-ever had heard that all of its books were in Latin, and none of them had pictures. But all of these people had one thing in common: they had entered the raffle, and they wanted to win.

The morning of the raffle draw was overbrimming with that glad sort of wintry sunlight that you only see a few times a

year. The street glowed outside the shop window. It was such hopeful weather that they couldn't help feeling like they just might win.

"Of course," said Netty sensibly, "the weather is the same for everyone." And they all nodded. But Property's heart didn't slow down. She wondered how the winner would be chosen. Was Albert H. Montgomery himself pulling names out of a hat this very minute?

There was a sharp trill.

The Joneses looked about the shop in confusion, before they realized that this was what their telephone sounded like. Property tried to remember if anyone had ever called it before. Netty picked it up, and Property

noticed that her hand was shaking slightly.

“Hello?” she said.

A plummy sort of warble came from the phone.

“Yes, speaking,” said Netty.

There was more plummy warbling. Netty sat down heavily on the counter.

“Oh!” she said. Property’s heart went into overdrive. “I – oh! I can’t believe it!”

Warblewarbleplumplummywarble.

“Yes, of course! Thank you so much!”

Netty Jones put down the phone, and looked up at her two children. “An Object of Wonder,” she said faintly. And then suddenly Michael was hugging Property, and Property was hugging Netty, and Netty was hugging Michael, until they all got

tangled up into one big hug that was just hugging itself.

From somewhere in the middle of the hug, Netty's voice broke free. "Come on, come on, enough nonsense." And she laughed, even though nothing was funny. "We've got a lot to do, there's no time to lose. Albert H. Montgomery himself wants to meet us *tomorrow*."

By noon the next day, the White Hart was empty. The first things to go had been the books, which the Joneses pushed for free into the arms of willing customers and unwilling customers and startled passers-by. The second thing to go was the smell of books. Some cleaners came and

replaced it with the smell of hoovering and lemon-scented sprays. Then, finally, the Joneses went too.

Netty marched out happily, without a pause.

“Goodbye, White Hart,” Michael said, turning back at the door. And Property suddenly wanted to crawl right back inside her cupboard, and never say goodbye. Goodbye seemed very final. It meant that they really weren’t going to return.

When she said this, though, Michael just told her firmly that “goodbye” is short for “God be with ye” – so it doesn’t mean anything about not returning. This was not even a little bit useful, but it cheered Property up anyway. It was good to know

that, whatever happened, Michael would carry on being Michael. So Property took a deep breath, got a lung full of the lemon smell, coughed, picked up her suitcase, and followed her brother out of their shop.

The three of them caught a fast train to London. At six o'clock, while the White Hart stood in darkness with nobody to turn on the lights, the Joneses arrived at the Montgomery Book Emporium.