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 KieranLarwoodAuthor

 @kmlarwood

FREAKS BY KIERAN LARWOOD

SYNOPSIS

Everyone says Sheba has lovely hair – the only problem is it covers the whole of her body! Sheba is The Wolf Girl, the latest attraction in a Victorian sideshow run by the odious Plumpscuttle. Life is unpleasant for Plumpscuttle's Peculiars, who are not only treated badly by their employer, but are called freaks and monsters by the members of the public who come to see their show. There's Sister Moon, who moves faster than the eye can see; Mama Rat, an expert rat-whisperer; Gigantus, a hugely muscled strongman; and Monkeyboy, ace climber and human stink bomb!

At one of the shows, Sheba befriends a poor young girl named Till – a mudlark who spends her days scouring the muddy banks of the Thames for meagre treasures to sell. When Till mysteriously disappears, Sheba takes it upon herself to find out what has happened to her. The Freaks subsequently decide to put their extraordinary talents to use and set about helping Sheba discover Till's whereabouts.

What they uncover is a world of child-snatchers, grave-robbers and dastardly doctors. With no one else seemingly interested in the disappearance of London's poorest children, it falls to the Freaks to solve the mystery. As they begin to piece together the clues that bring them nearer to the truth, they find it is not just the mudlarks who are in danger – their lives too are in peril!



AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Kieran Larwood is the author of *Freaks*, and was the winner of the *Times*/Chicken House Children's Fiction Competition 2011.

Kieran is one of only two male Reception class teachers on the Isle of Wight. His days mainly consist of singing nursery rhymes, tying shoelaces, trying to locate who has had an 'accident' by sense of smell alone, and vast, endless mountains of paperwork.

Kieran graduated from Southampton University with a degree in English, and also did a foundation year at Falmouth College of Art. Ever since he first read *The Hobbit* at age six, he has been passionate about stories and storytelling.

Kieran lives with his family on the Isle of Wight. It is his dream to write full time.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'My approach to writing *Freaks* was to cram in everything the ten-year-old me would have killed to read. So it's full of crumbling Victorian backstreets, sinister villains, explosions, epic swordfights, and jokes about poo. And it's even got a ninja or two.'

When did you start writing?

'I have been writing stories for as long as I can remember, but I started writing seriously just after finishing my teacher training. I joined a writers' group and sent a few short stories off for competitions, and about four years ago decided to have a try at a full novel. I've been working on it ever since.'

What inspires you to write?

'My inspiration to write for children was a desire to recreate the excitement I used to get as a child from being lost in a great book. My ideas come from a lifetime of reading and daydreaming, and an overactive



imagination. I also love history and archaeology and trying to recreate what the past must have been like. Lots of ideas and atmosphere came from walking around East End London and visiting places like Highgate Cemetery.'

Are you an avid reader? What are your favourite books and who are your favourite authors?

'Since I read *The Hobbit* at age six, I have spent as much time as possible with my head in a fantasy or sci-fi book. I love authors who create new and fascinating worlds I can escape into. My favourite authors range from Neil Gaiman, William Gibson, China Mieville and H.P. Lovecraft to Victorian writers like Dickens and Wilkie Collins. My favourite books of all time are *The Crimson Petal and the White* by Michel Faber (because it is so beautifully written), *The Stand* by Steven King and *Good Omens* by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman. I also enjoy reading graphic novels, especially *From Hell* by Alan Moore.'

Tell me about Freaks and its plot. Where did the ideas come from?

'I was originally trying to write a sci-fi novel for children, about the crew of a spaceship. They were all aliens of various species who spent the whole time squabbling. After a few chapters I scrapped the book, but had really enjoyed writing the interactions, and I tried to think of a context where a strange group could come together. I was lying awake in bed one night when "Victorian freak show" popped into my head. I was so excited by the idea that I hardly slept and, by morning, most of the characters had already been formed. It also slotted right into my love of the dark and gothic, and the foggy Victorian streets were the perfect setting for sinister Lovecraftian demons. I threw in everything the ten-year-old me loved reading about - zombies, ninjas and fighting - and added plenty of toilet humour. Basically, it's the book I would have most wanted to read as a child.'

How long did it take to write?

'The first draft took around six months, but it has gone through at least four almost complete rewrites. I have been working on it off and on since 2007.'



Where and when do you write?

‘Having a demanding full-time job and a two-year-old, I actually have very little time to write. By the time I have got my daughter to bed and my preparation for the next day’s teaching done, I have about an hour to myself to write before I collapse into bed. My desk is squeezed into a corner of my bedroom. There is so little space it actually makes me claustrophobic.’

How did you set about getting a publisher?

‘I started by sending sample chapters off to agents. One or two were interested and suggested improvements, but ultimately didn’t want to take it on. One of the agents suggested I send it to Barry Cunningham at Chicken House, and I found out about the annual *Times*/Chicken House Children’s Fiction Competition on the website. I had just missed the deadline, so had to wait another year before entering and, even though I can’t quite believe it, I won.’

Have you had anything published before?

‘I was the “runner-up” in a short story competition back in 2002. My story appeared in a magazine anthology of entries. I won ten pounds.’

Do you find writing hard work?

‘I try to spend as much time during the day thinking about the next segment of writing I am going to do, so when I sit down to actually write I know pretty much what I want to say. I find it quite easy to slip into ‘writing mode’, but the hard part is the bigger picture. Going from short stories to novel writing has been a massive leap, and there is so much more to worry about: plot strands, back stories, character progression ... It’s almost as hard as keeping a class of 25 four-year-olds entertained for the day.’

How can we find out more about you?

‘I am on Twitter (@kmlarwood) and have a website (www.kmlarwood.com).’



THEMES

- Appearance
- Exclusion
- Friendship
- Teamwork

WRITING STYLE

Freaks is a fantasy novel set against the backdrop of Victorian London. The historical setting is an important element in the novel, with the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the London poor featuring significantly in the plot. The novel is fast-paced, exciting and darkly funny; the language rich and multi-layered. The characters are meticulously drawn, many with intriguing lexical names (such as Grunchgirdle, Sneepsnood, and Plumpscuttle). 19 chapters, 243 pages, age 10+.

PUPIL ACTIVITIES

1: 'The Peculiars' and the 'The Normals': Mix and Match Game

The descriptions of the various characters in *Freaks* are rich and colourful, with the language used to describe the characters' physical appearance being particularly lucid. Here are a couple of examples:

'Her eyes were a deep amber colour', 'She had a pink, hairless nose - like a puppy', 'Small, sharp, white teeth', 'Her hands were tipped with nails that looked more than a little like claws', 'Her nose puckered into a snout', 'Her skin bristled'.

A full sheet of descriptives (with a note of to whom each descriptive relates) can be found at the back of these notes. With these (and other) descriptive terms printed onto separate pieces of paper or card, pupils could be encouraged to work in groups to categorise the descriptions. Pupils could be left to categorise them



as they see fit, or they could be given certain prompts – such as ‘which descriptions go together?’, ‘which could be thought ‘peculiar’ or ‘normal’?’ In many cases, it is difficult to tell which descriptions relate to the ‘Peculiars’ and which relate to the ‘Normals’. An additional task would be to challenge pupils to pick out the descriptions that relate to a particular character. Group or class discussions could follow these activities, challenging pupils to define the concepts of normality and abnormality.

2: Quote, unquote

Perhaps using the descriptions from the previous activity as a starting point, pupils could be encouraged to pick a character from *Freaks* to illustrate. Ideally, these illustrations will be made based on the descriptions of the character in the novel, with quotations being taken directly from the text and used to label the various parts of the illustration (using quotation marks). The ‘accuracy’ of the illustration is a useful way of gauging pupils’ understanding of a direct quotation, as opposed to a general impression gleaned from the novel as a whole. An extension exercise would be to challenge pupils to create new composite characters from any of the descriptive passages found in the novel. These again could be illustrated and labelled with quotations. It would also be fun for pupils to find a name for their new character, using those already chosen by the author (e.g. Gigantus, Sister Moon, Mama Rat) as guidance.

3: Odd one out

The theme of exclusion and being ‘the odd one out’ is a prominent one in *Freaks*. In a drama lesson, pupils could work in groups to explore this theme. Pupils could be asked to take some time to think about different situations in which a person may appear the odd one out. Groups could be set a challenge of acting out as many different ‘odd one out’ scenarios as they can in two minutes - each pupil in the group taking it in turns to be the odd one out. The intention in asking pupils to think of a number of different scenarios is to help develop the idea that being the odd one out can be both a negative and a positive experience. Pupils can be reminded of Sheba’s initial thoughts about her strangeness when she appears in Grunchgirdle’s World of Curiosities, and the idea the mudlarks have of the



Freaks being 'special' later on in the novel. An extension of this activity could be to ask groups to devise a short drama that reveals different attitudes to 'oddness'; demonstrating how being the odd one out can be regarded as both a blessing and a curse.

4: Super senses

In *Freaks*, Sheba's nose helps get her out of trouble – she can smell danger long before it arrives! In this activity, pupils could explore their senses and be encouraged to write about things they can feel, hear, smell and taste – as opposed to writing only about what they see. Working in small groups or pairs, pupils could take it in turns to be blindfolded and given various objects to feel, hear, smell and taste. Pupils would then be tasked with finding the words to describe their experiences. Later, pupils could be asked to describe their day so far, drawing on each of their five senses. An extension activity would be to ask pupils to write a story in which a character uses their senses to great effect; perhaps a blind superhero who has highly developed hearing abilities, or maybe a character with a range of super-senses!

5: Read all about it!

Sheba is a secret reader, having 'taught herself to read from scraps of newspaper and chalk billboards.' At the beginning of the novel, Sheba learns about an event called the 'Great Exhibition' in an edition of *The London Examiner*, a newspaper she finds in a bin:

'She flicked to the last thing she had been reading, an article about the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations. As far as she could make out between the old coffee stains, it was a magical collection of the most implausible and incredible creations of man, gathered together in London, in a fairytale palace made of crystal. There were giant diamonds, stuffed elephants, machines that tipped you out of bed, pictures made of hair (she found that particularly intriguing), knives with thousands of blades, some revolutionary new engine for creating 'electrical impulses' (whatever they were), and machines that did everything from making envelopes to harvesting crops. If it hadn't been written in a newspaper, she wouldn't have believed it.' (p.6)



As the historical context of the novel is important, pupils may benefit from doing some research on the Great Exhibition of 1851, and Victorian London in general. Pupils could be asked to produce a newspaper front page, such as the one Sheba finds, based on the research they have conducted. There is plenty of opportunity here for articles relating to the exhibits at the Great Exhibition, but also about the conditions many Londoners experienced in their daily lives. Of course, it would also be fun for pupils to include a story about incidences of mudlarks going missing from the banks of the Thames! These newspaper front pages would perhaps make an excellent wall display and act as a visual reminder of the Victorian environment as pupils progress through the novel.

PUPIL ACTIVITIES

1. Read Till's thoughts about the Freaks at the top of page 39, and also what Till's parents talk about on pages 48 and 49. What do you think the mudlarks think of the Freaks? Why do you think they have these opinions? Are these opinions different to the other 'normal' people in Victorian London? Why?
2. Read pages 214 to 217. Why do you think Sheba refuses to help Mrs Crowley with her plan? Do you think she does the right thing? What would you do? Why?
3. Why do you think Gigantus doesn't want anyone to read his book? Does this surprise you? Do you think the story he has written is the sort of story you would expect him to write? Does this story tell us anything about Gigantus? If so, what?
4. Think about the qualities you think are important for a friend to have. Do any of the characters in *Freaks* have these qualities? If so, which ones? How would you feel about having these characters as friends?



TABLE OF DESCRIPTIVES FOR USE IN ACTIVITY 1: 'THE PECILIARS' AND THE 'THE NORMALS' MIX AND MATCH GAME

DESCRIPTIVE	CHARACTER
Her hands were tipped with nails that looked more than a little like claws	Sheba
Her nose puckered into a snout	Sheba
Her skin bristled	Sheba
A rheumy, skinny old man	Grunchgirdle
The bony old goat	Grunchgirdle
Sweat forming on his pasty brow	Grunchgirdle
A drop of dribble escaping from his thin lips	Grunchgirdle
His nose was bulbous and scarlet	Plumpscuttle
A wild tangle of orange hair stuck out all around the edges of his stovepipe hat	Plumpscuttle
He was wearing a scowl that could have curdled milk	Plumpscuttle
The scrawny man	Grunchgirdle
A bony hand	Grunchgirdle
A hulking giant	Gigantus
A shaved head	Gigantus
A craggy face scratched with criss-cross patterns of old scars	Gigantus
A broad-striped woollen jersey that looked as though it would pop its seams at any second	Gigantus
Squished into a curled ball	Gigantus
Meaty fingers	Gigantus
Her eyes were delicately almond-shaped	Sister Moon
Vivid green eyes	Mama Rat
Soft, greying curls	Mama Rat
Goggle eyes	Monkeyboy
A face like the rear end of a bristly pig	Monkeyboy
He gurned and gaped as if his face was made out of putty	Monkeyboy
Every visible centimetre of skin was covered in smears of grime	Monkeyboy
Trailing thin strings of dribble from his mouth	Monkeyboy
Colossal shoulders	Gigantus



DESCRIPTIVE	CHARACTER
Bony, shaking fingers	Grunchgirdle
Watery, spiteful eyes	Grunchgirdle
Stick-thin	Till
Pale as a dead fish	Till
The bones of her skull pushing through her skin	Till
Dark shadows around her huge eyes	Till
Her feet were bare and covered with angry-looking welts and scratches	Till
Dozy, round face	Plumpscuttle
Purple, blotchy face	Plumpscuttle
Their backs were bent	Till's Mum and Dad
Their shaking limbs were stick-thin	Till's Mum and Dad
Shaggy grey hair	Large 'Arry
A grizzly beard, turned yellow around his mouth from tobacco smoke	Large 'Arry
The only bits of her skin visible were the tips of her white fingers where they poked from the end of her black lace gloves	Mrs Crowley
Eyes that looked much too old for his face	Barnabus Bilge
Fluff on his cheeks	Barnabus Bilge
Olive skin and quick, dark eyes	Farellini
Matted locks of hair trailed down his back from beneath his hat	Baba Anish
Her black hair was pulled back in a tight bun	Mrs Crowley
His jaw was oddly lopsided	Baba Anish
Young eyes, elegantly shaped	Mrs Crowley
Her nose was small, slightly upturned, but perfectly proportioned	Mrs Crowley
The features were withered and shrunken	Mrs Crowley
A mummified corpse's mouth	Mrs Crowley
His nose was squashed and crooked	Baba Anish
Jagged teeth hanging by threads in leathery gums	Mrs Crowley

