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 Hanged Man Rises

Written by

Sarah Naughton

Published by

Simon & Schuster Children's Books

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

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

1. Shells

The boy sat on the end of the jetty, skimming oyster shells across the water. It was too choppy to get many bounces but occasionally a shell would strike the dredger, moored further out, with a satisfying clang. He didn't even bother to prise open the next one before he threw it. The thought of slurping out its slick grey innards, still quivering, made him queasy. A person could get heartily sick of oysters, and Sammy often wished his father had been a cattle-drover or a cheesemonger. Anything but an oyster farmer.

Now that he was eight he'd been given more responsibilities, including this afternoon's task of checking the size of the oysters seeded the previous week. He was taking as long as possible about it, to put off the moment he had to return to the shed to carry on de-barnacling with his brother. He'd been at it all morning and the icy water had made his hands too numb to feel when the knife slipped. It had taken this long for his fingers to warm up and now that the feeling had returned they were throbbing. He lowered them into the green water and threads of blood drifted out from them to coil around the oyster ropes. Like hair. Sammy shivered. He wished he hadn't thought of that: not now, not while he was out here all alone. The one who was killing all the children liked to take bits of their hair as a souvenir. That's why they called him the Wigman.

To try and drive the thought from his mind Sammy started whistling, a cheerful music-hall tune, but the sound drifted mournfully out over the dark water and he soon stopped.

The low sun burned crimson, glinting off the tips of the waves, and making the river appear to flow with blood. A few wisps of fog drifted in. If he waited a little longer he could say he'd got lost in it.

He realised he'd been too long when the water turned black. The fog had become so dense he couldn't see further than his own legs dangling over the jetty's edge, but if the sun had gone down it must be nearly five o'clock. His father would be furious. He'd probably have taken the cart and gone home, leaving Sammy to walk all the way back to Lambeth.

He scrambled to his feet and ran a little way along the slimy boards. Then skidded to a halt.

His father was waiting for him further down the jetty: he could just make out his blurred shape.

'I'm sorry,' Sammy called, 'I didn't know it was so late.'

He set off again, quicker. The fog enclosed him in a little bubble that contained only his scared breaths and the clatter of his footsteps along the boards.

'Tomorrow I'll start early and…'

He stopped. The shape had not moved, either to turn away in disgust or to raise a fist. It merely stood watching him, close now, but still veiled in smog. Perhaps it was a policeman.

'Excuse me, Sir,' he said as he hurried up alongside the figure, 'But my father is waiting for me.'

The figure moved sharply and Sammy went sprawling.

'Hey!' he cried as he was roughly turned over, but the cry was cut short as rags were thrust into his mouth and a cord tied around his head to keep them in place.

Then the man was gone. Sammy lay there a moment in bewilderment, then sat up. The rags were packed so tightly he could hardly breathe. They tasted of honey.

Too late he heard the crunch of pebbles below. The man had merely jumped off the pier onto the beach. Hands reached up and yanked him over. Throwing out his arms to save himself he landed heavily on his wrist, and it gave an audible crack. His scream was muffled by the rags.

As pain overwhelmed him he was dimly aware of being dragged up the beach and laid down. Then something heavy and smelling of sweat was thrown over him and he was left in darkness.

He knew immediately what was happening. The Wigman had got him. Over the thumping of his heart he could hear the man chanting, a little way off.

Biting his lip to suppress the cries of pain and terror, Sammy used his good hand to lift the coat off. Everything was grey. The smog would shield him from sight and muffle the sounds of his escape. He rolled onto his stomach, then pushed himself up onto all fours. The wall swung into view beside him, wet and black with algae. There were some steps fifty or so yards east of the pier. He began to crawl towards them.

The sand beneath his knees was stinking and black, with tar and muck from the tanner's yard and slaughterhouse.

There was a splash some way behind him and the voice intoned, *'Accept this gift.'* Sammy moved quicker, his left wrist flapping uselessly. A moment later, another splash, more distant now. *'Accept this gift.'* Closer and clearer were the booms of Big Ben striking a quarter past the hour. Would his father have gone home or was he on his way here now, his fists rolled and ready? Sammy hoped it was the

latter, and was momentarily glad that the Wigman had taken him: at least it was an acceptable excuse.

The wall suddenly zigzagged up away from him. He had reached the steps.

Climbing onto the first tread he allowed himself a moment's relief. Very few had escaped the Wigman to tell the tale, and most of those had wriggled out of his arms before he could do any tying up and chanting. But here Sammy was, nearly free, and with a story that would bask him in adulation for years to come.

Then he heard voices from above, the first deep and gravelly:

'Can't see him. Fog's too deep.'

The second a bad-tempered whine:

'Probly home by the fire, eating bread and dripping.'

It was his father and brother. He tried to call out to them but his muffled squeak from beneath the gag was drowned by the tidewash.

'He might have fallen asleep on the pier. We shouldn't leave him.'

His father again.

'He deserves it. He never does his fair share. I have to work twice as hard to make up for him.'

'He aint as old as you.'

'Aint far off. You're too soft on him.'

Sammy wasted a few seconds fumbling at the knot round the back of his head, then continued to climb. It was hard, with only one good hand and the steps so slippery.

'Come on, Pa,' his brother said, 'Let's get on. If he is asleep it'll teach him a lesson.'

'I'm not sure. Not with this Wigman feller about.'

Sucking in as much air as he could through soot-coated nostrils Sammy shouted ‘Dad! Fred!’

It came out as ‘Ahhhg! Ehhhh!’ but would have been audible, had a barge not come by at just that moment and given several long honks on its horn.

‘Asleep?’ Fred sniggered, ‘On a night like this, with the boats sounding their warnings every five minutes? I tell you, he’s home with Ma. Let’s go.’

Sammy hauled himself up the next few steps. He was more than halfway now, but could hear his father’s heavy footsteps retreating.

He shouted for him to wait.

‘Aiighhh!’

The footsteps were growing fainter, but it was alright. He could still catch up with them and bring his father back to the beach. The Wigman wouldn’t know what had hit him.

A blow sent Sammy reeling sideways and he crashed down onto the sand, too winded even to scream.

He looked up mutely at his assailant. The Wigman was younger than they said, not more than twenty or so. His face was utterly colourless, like a grub dug up from the soil, and glistened like sweaty lard as the man knelt down beside him. His hands were massive, red and scarred, and Sammy watched in horror as he slipped one of them into his pocket and drew out a knife. He brought it towards Sammy’s face. Sammy screwed up his eyes and moaned, but with a flick of the wrist all the man took was a hank of hair.

As the Wigman was tucking the lock into his pocket, Sammy brought his knee up sharply and the knife skittered across the sand. Sammy flipped himself over and

went after it, grunting as his wrist collapsed and he lurched sideways, but righting himself and clawing onwards.

The knife glimmered on the black sand and Sammy's fingers were almost touching it when he was hauled into the air. With his good arm he clawed at the Wigman's eyes and throat but the arm was clamped down and his face was pressed into a chest that stank of tallow and sweat. Sammy sank his teeth into the soft flesh until a fist descended on his head.

The blow and the lack of air were making him dizzy and he began to see strange things in the darkness: shadowy figures gathered at the edges of his vision, murmuring to one another. Or was that just the shush of the river on the beach?

The murmuring grew louder and the cold air slapped him alert as he landed on the sand. Water lapped around him, filling his ears, seeping into his clothes. The Wigman knelt down next to him, cut the cord around his head and pulled the rags from his mouth.

'Let me go, please,' Sammy gasped, 'My father's rich, he'll pay you whatever you ask, I won't say who you are I swear…'

But the man wasn't listening. He reached into his pocket again, took out an object and pushed it into Sammy's open mouth. The slick congealed thing slipped straight to the back of his throat, its end fitting snugly into the opening of the airway. Then the hands launched him out into the dark water.

Escape was still possible. He could swim well. He would simply roll onto his stomach, cough out the thing, whatever it was, and make for the other shore.

Then something heavy fell across his abdomen and he went under.

As the water surged into his nostrils he looked up to see the shadow of the Wigman step back, leaving just the fog, now endless green stretching all the way to the sky.