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Opening extract from

What's Up with Jody Barton?

Written by

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Published by

Macmillan Children's Books

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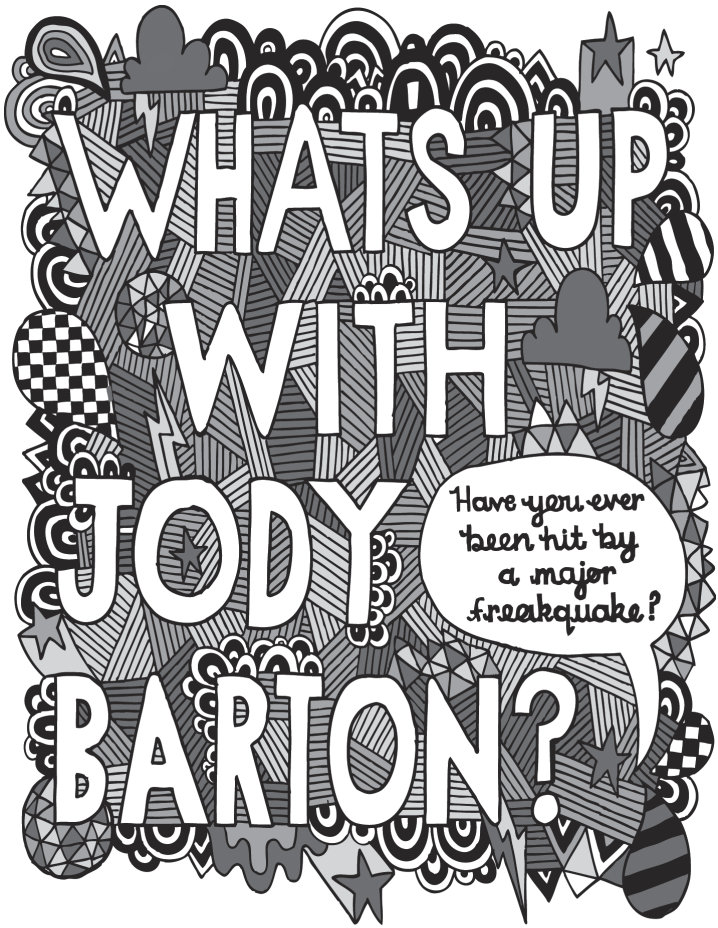


Hayley Long

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

It seriously can.

Sometimes, just when you think you're rocking along nicely and minding your own business, life throws you a complete curveball and leaves you feeling totally and utterly freaked-out.

And when that happens the important thing is to stay calm and not do anything stupid.

So far in my life, I've had to cope with three of these curveballs and they've all been thrown at me within the past year. The first came just before the end of Year 10, when Chatty Chong gave me his phone number. Chatty Chong never gives his phone number to anyone. Usually, he doesn't even *speak* to anyone. That's why everyone calls him Chatty Chong. But then, one day, at the end of a maths

lesson, he walked over to my desk, dumped his massive Gola bag down on it and said, 'Do you want to pair up with me on this next maths project, yeah?'

And I shrugged my shoulders and said, 'OK then.' Because Chatty Chong is brilliant at maths. He's even better at it than I am and I got 96% in my last test. And Mrs Hamood, my maths teacher, said I would have got top marks if I'd spent more time on improper fractions and less time doodling in the answer book.

Chatty Chong sort of smiled and said, 'I'll give you my number so we can talk about maths on the phone, yeah?'

And I shrugged my shoulders and said, 'OK then.'

So he unzipped his bag, took out his pencil tin and scribbled down his phone number on a piece of graph paper. And then he pushed the paper towards me, sort of smiled again and said, 'See you tomorrow, yeah?' And without another word to anyone he picked up his Gola bag and walked out of the classroom.

But here's the really weird bit.

When I looked down at that piece of paper, my heart nearly stopped. Chatty Chong's phone number was almost exactly the same as mine. Apart from one single digit. All the other digits matched completely. They were even in the same order! When I saw this, it flipped me out so much that, at first, I thought it must have been some sort of weird joke. And then, because I really *couldn't* believe it and needed to check, I took my phone out of my bag and punched in Chatty's number.

After half a ring, I heard Chatty say, 'Yeah?'

I said, 'It's me already. I wanted to tell you that our phone numbers are practically identical. Apart from one digit.'

Chatty Chong went silent on the line for a few seconds and, even though there was loads of background noise from the corridor, I swear to God I could hear his brain ticking over. Then he said, 'You're joking with me, yeah?'

And I said, 'No. I'm deadly serious.'

Chatty Chong whistled loudly down the phone.

I said, 'OI,' and ripped the phone away from my ear. Then, after a second or two, I put it back and said, 'ARE YOU TRYING TO TRASH MY EARDRUM OR WHAT?'

Chatty Chong said, 'Sorry.' And, to be fair, he did sound genuinely apologetic. Then he said, 'It's just that the probability of that happening is one in a *billion*. And that's without even counting the zero at the beginning. Otherwise, it would have been one in *ten* billion. But it's still a big coincidence, yeah?' And then the line went dead and I realized he'd ended the call. Like I said before, Chatty Chong is brilliant at maths. He's a bit bad at chatting though.

The second freaky curveball got chucked at me just after that while I was on holiday in Spain. We'd only been there a few days when my sister started getting really intense stomach pains. To begin with, we all just laughed at her for pigging out on paella. My sister does tend to exaggerate rather a lot and she *had* queued up for third helpings of the

main course the night before. But pretty soon I realized she was in proper crippling agony and I told my parents she needed to see a doctor fast. Then, after she'd seen a doctor, we realized she needed an emergency operation to have her appendix removed. The entire experience was freaky and horrible because I felt about as much use as a chocolate teapot. I don't speak a word of Spanish so I couldn't even organize a top-up for her phone. Even though she gets on my nerves, we're as close as two freckles and seeing her look so manky and ill was horrible. To make matters worse, neither of us had any phone credit for almost three weeks. I never want to go through an experience like that ever again.

But the most head-spinning moment of my entire life happened in February, a few weeks before my birthday. And although what I'm about to tell you may seem a helluva lot less dramatic than my sister nearly popping her clogs in a Spanish hospital it still felt massively dramatic to me. In fact, it felt as if I'd been hit by a major freakquake of a magnitude of 8.35 – and, for your information, that's as powerful as the blast from a nuclear bomb! So I'm talking about one seriously intense curveball.

Or, to put it more precisely . . .

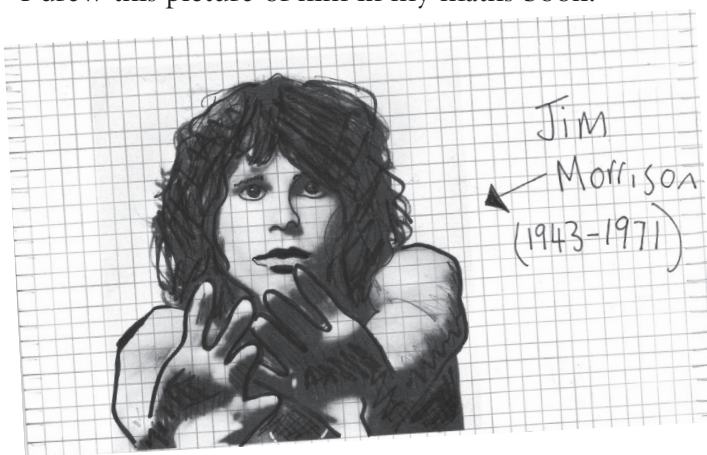
I'm talking about the very first time I looked over and saw Liam Mackie's face.

And although I managed to stay calm and didn't do anything stupid on that *particular* occasion it was really only a matter of time before I *would*. But I'll come to all of that later.

Because there's a lot to tell you and I need to start at the beginning.

And in the beginning I was in the cafe and The Doors were playing at top volume. I should just explain that I love The Doors. They're my favourite band. And Jim Morrison, their lead singer, is my favourite singer.

I drew this picture of him in my maths book.



Sadly, pictures and posters are pretty much all that's left because he died the exact same year that both my parents were born. This means that he never owned an Xbox, never planted his feet into a fresh pair of K-Swiss trainers and didn't even know what a status update was. But none of that matters to me.

I still think he's amazing.

And, while I'm on the subject, River Phoenix was amazing too.

River was an American actor and he died even younger than Jim did. In

my opinion, River and Jim are two of the most incredible people who have ever existed. I've got pictures of both of them on my bedroom walls and I sit and look at them a lot. And quite frankly, until I saw Liam Mackie, I was never remotely interested in looking at anybody else.

But I was telling you about The Doors. My favourite track of all is a song called 'Light My Fire'. When it begins, it sounds just like any other cheery pop song, but pretty quickly it becomes clear that things aren't always what they seem. Because, instead of being a few minutes long like most songs, this one just keeps on going and going. And all the time it's getting louder and louder and faster and faster, and Jim just keeps on singing in this really intense and dark and hypnotic way for almost eight minutes. I get goose bumps every time I hear it. But the reason I'm talking about all this now is because it was this exact song that was playing in the cafe when I first looked at Liam Mackie. If I believed in superstitious spooky stuff, I'd say that Jim Morrison was trying to tell me something.

And when I close my eyes I can take myself right back to that very second. The Doors are turned up as loud as they'll go and Liam Mackie is sitting on his own at a table by the window. In front of him is an untouched strawberry and banana smoothie. He has one foot resting on the empty chair opposite him and the other is tapping against the floor tiles to the beat of 'Light My Fire'. His head is gently nodding along too. It's the most effortlessly cool hipster head bop I've ever seen. And even from the other side of the cafe I

can see that this boy is incredibly good-looking. I'd have to be blind not to see it. And it's almost like I'm looking at River Phoenix. Only this time I'm not a saddo staring at a poster on my bedroom wall – I'm a saddo in an embarrassing orange apron staring at an actual proper person.

But only for a second.

Because as soon as I realize that I'm staring at him I quickly look down and frown at the floor.

But it's too late. Something has sparked inside me. It actually feels like there's a firework trapped in my body. Or as if I've been struck by forked lightning or something. And, suddenly, I know that something utterly weird has happened. And it's the kind of weird thing that I thought only ever happens in drippy books or romantic movies. I never thought it would ever happen to me. Not like this anyway. Never like this.

In the space of a single second, I've fallen hopelessly and helplessly and head-over-hi-tops in love with the boy who looks like River Phoenix.

And then my sister nudges my arm, nods her head in his direction and says, 'See that fit guy over there? I totally intend to go out with him.'