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 It Girl

Written by

Katy Birchall

Published by

Egmont Books Ltd

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

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

For Mum, Dad, Robert and Charles

First published in paperback in Great Britain 2015
by Egmont UK Limited
The Yellow Building, 1 Nicholas Road, London W11 4AN

Text copyright © 2015 Katy Birchall

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

ISBN 978 1 4052 7817 1

www.egmont.co.uk

60701/1

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

Typeset by Avon DataSet Ltd, Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by the CPI Group

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher and copyright owner.

Stay safe online. Any website addresses listed in this book are correct at the time of going to print. However, Egmont is not responsible for content hosted by third parties. Please be aware that online content can be subject to change and websites can contain content that is unsuitable for children. We advise that all children are supervised when using the internet.





I set Josie Graham on fire.

And, OK, yes it was bad but it was an accident and not *entirely* my fault. Everyone thinks I did it on purpose. They think Mrs Ginnwell is a hero.

If you ask me, Mrs Ginnwell made the whole thing worse. A little bit of water would have sorted everything out just fine. It was only the ends of her hair and a fire extinguisher was a very dramatic plan of action. I mean, Josie was already having a pretty bad day considering I'd just set her on fire and everything, and the next thing she knew she was covered head to toe in that white foamy stuff that always looks like it might be fun to play in but probably isn't. (I think Josie looked more in shock – and a little bit itchy – than like she was having fun.)

I was kind of in shock myself. I'd never set fire to anyone before so the whole incident came as a bit of a surprise. The closest I've been to any kind of arson was when I was little and I put my dad's wallet on the log fire to see what would happen. I mean, who leaves their

wallet laying around in the same room as a toddler? Not my father any more that's for sure. But I still think he looks at me a little bit suspiciously on cold nights.

Oh, and there *was* that time I almost burnt down Dad's study. But those two times are IT.

And you know what? This is partly Josie Graham's fault too. Because really, she should not have been (a) leaning on her hand so close to a Bunsen burner and (b) wearing so much hairspray to school.

I'm just jealous because I don't have the time, let alone the skills, for hairspray. Once Dad has eventually wrestled the duvet cover away from me, I have about ten minutes tops to get ready.

My dad would never buy me hairspray anyway. He's so old fashioned, especially when it comes to his fourteen-year-old daughter. I remember one time in a pharmacy I asked him if he would buy me eyeliner. He burst out laughing and made me go fetch some Lemsip. I think this is VERY hypocritical as some of the women my dad has dated have worn a LOT of dark eyeliner. How would he feel if, when he introduced them, I laughed in their face and gave them a mug of hot lemon paracetamol instead?

Hmm . . . I might consider this for the really annoying ones that get brought home.

A wobbling Mrs Ginnwell definitely wasn't laughing

as she marched me into Miss Duke's office mumbling something incoherent about fire in the classroom and pyromaniac tendencies.

'Sorry, Mrs Ginnwell, I didn't quite understand that. What did you say?' Miss Duke asked, rising from her desk with a look of concern.

Miss Duke really suits her office. Which sounds strange when I say it out loud but it just goes with her overall vibe. She's new to the school too. We were both new in September, although obviously she's a bit more senior being headmistress and everything. I just came into Year 10. Everything considered, I think she has managed to set the better impression out of the two of us so far. This is not great considering she gives out detentions and makes people pick up rubbish from behind the bike shed.

So even though she's only been in that office for a term and I'm not entirely sure what it looked like before she arrived, it matches her. For example, it's all very neat. Miss Duke is very formal and smartly dressed. She looks more like those businesswomen who are always on their hands-free mobiles in train stations barking things like, 'That's just damn well not good enough, Jeffrey,' than a headmistress at a co-ed school.

I like the way she can pull off a trouser suit though. I think if ever I was going to work in an office I would

like to wear a trouser suit and look authoritative like Miss Duke does. And her dark hair is always so neatly pinned and her make-up never smudged. She is very intimidating.

Even more so when you've just set your classmate's hair on fire.

'Chemistry class . . . Anna . . . Anna set . . . hair . . . Josie Graham on fire!' Mrs Ginnwell finally spluttered.

Mrs Ginnwell is neither authoritative nor intimidating. She kind of reminds me of a parrot. But not a cool one that would chill with a pirate. An overzealous one that swoops around your head, squawking and whacking you unexpectedly in the face with its wings.

'Is Josie all right?' Miss Duke asked in alarm.

Mrs Ginnwell nodded, her curled strawberry blonde hair frizzing around her sweaty forehead. 'Fine. Although her hair is quite singed and covered in foam.'

'I see,' Miss Duke replied and I swear I saw her smirk for a second. If she did it was gone in an instant when she caught my eye. 'And no one else was hurt in this incident?'

'No.' Mrs Ginwell shook her head.

'Well in that case, Anna, you can have a seat and, Jenny, why don't you pop into the teachers' lounge and ask someone to cover your lesson for a bit while you get a cup of tea.'

Mrs Ginnwell nodded and slowly released her grip

on me. She gave me a very pointed look, as if when let loose I would pull out a flamethrower from my locker and burn the school to the ground. Which is a completely ridiculous thought for her to entertain because last term I did an excellent essay on penguins. No one who puts that much effort and emotional maturity into a Year 10 essay about penguins would be spending their free time plotting to destroy their school.

I sat down slowly into the leather chair opposite Miss Duke, who was settling into her chair behind the desk. The heavy wooden door closed loudly as Mrs Ginnwell escaped, still glaring at me, and there was a moment of silence as Miss Duke straightened the forms she had been filling in before we interrupted her afternoon.

'So, why don't you explain to me exactly what happened?'

I took a deep breath and told her how we had been in our Chemistry lesson and Josie and I had been partnered together, which, by the way, neither of us were too happy about. I didn't tell Miss Duke that part though.

I assumed she would know that it had been an unhappy arrangement. Josie is one of the most popular girls in our year. She's best friends with Queen Bee, Sophie Parker, and they're always hanging out with the popular boys in our year like Brendan Dakers and James Tyndale. Josie

spends her weekends partying and comes to school wearing a full face of make-up and her hair sprayed perfectly into place.

I spend my weekends reading comics, watching *CSI* with my dad and complaining about my life to my yellow Labrador, called Dog, who is the only creature on this planet who listens to me. And I can only get him to listen if I'm holding a bit of bacon.

So I skipped out the part of the story where Josie looked miserably at Brendan, who she was clearly hoping to be partnered with, and then came to sit next to me with a big sigh and no greeting. She didn't even look at me when I went, 'Howdy, partner,' in a courageous attempt to lighten the atmosphere.

I really don't know why that was the greeting I went with.

She couldn't be bothered to do the experiment so I just got on with it. Now, technically, Mrs Ginnwell had not explained the Bunsen burner part of the experiment yet as everyone was putting on their lab coats and goggles. But some people were taking their time and Josie, leaning on her hand, kept glancing at Brendan, laughing at whatever he was saying to her and flicking her hair dramatically.

I guess this is where it kind of becomes my fault. I should have waited until we were told to start up the

Bunsen burners but I went ahead and turned ours on.

There are a few very important things to remember here:

1. I did not realise it was on the highest flame setting.
2. I did not realise that, just as I turned it on, Josie would flick her hairspray-laden locks in the direction that she did.
3. I did not realise that her hair was quite so flammable.
4. I did not realise that she would run around screaming rather than stay still so that throwing water at her became increasingly difficult and my aim isn't that good anyway so I actually ended up just soaking myself.
5. I did not expect Mrs Ginnwell to use so much foam that Josie resembled a poodle.
6. It should also be remembered that I have never been in any real trouble at school before this incident.
7. Apart from that time when I was six and Ben Metton ate my Hula Hoops so I locked him in the stationary cupboard.
8. The whole fire incident is in fact very upsetting

for me too as I didn't mean to do it, I feel awful and now no one will want to stay friends with me, just like at my last school.

At this point I started crying.

Miss Duke, who had been staring at me in shock, passed me a tissue. 'Well, it sounds to me like it was an accident –' she began.

'Of course it was an accident!' I wailed, interrupting her. 'I would never do that on purpose!'

There was a knock on the door and I turned in my seat to see the school nurse slowly pop her head round. Miss Duke beckoned her in and she came forwards happily. 'I wanted to let you know, Miss Duke, and you, Anna, that Josie is perfectly fine. Her hair is singed at the end and she'll have to have a haircut but apart from that she is right as rain.'

'She must hate me,' I said glumly, staring at the damp, crumpled tissue in my hand.

'I'm sure she doesn't. She'll get over it,' the nurse said jovially. 'Her hair was so long and straggly anyway, a cut will probably improve things.'

'Er, *thank* you, Tricia,' Miss Duke said pointedly. The nurse gave a cheerful shrug and left.

'There you go, that's something,' Miss Duke

announced. 'It was clearly an accident but one that could have had nasty consequences. We've been lucky, Anna.'

I nodded gravely.

'I hope that from now on you won't begin any kind of experiment without instruction.'

'I'm never going to do another experiment again.'

'I hope you will. Chemistry is a fascinating subject and I imagine you've learnt an important lesson with regards to safety.' She looked at me sternly. 'Right, well, while we've established this wasn't intentional, I'm going to have to give you detention lasting the remainder of this term so that you can reflect on the importance of caution. It starts tomorrow. And since it is the end of the day in about ten minutes, you can return to your classroom, gather your things and go home.'

'I'd rather not go back, to be honest.'

'You don't need anything?'

'It's just my pencil case and books. People have probably thrown them in the dump by now.'

'I'm sure that's not true.' Miss Duke gave a thin smile. 'They all know it was an accident and no harm done. By tomorrow they'll have forgotten the whole thing.'

It's worrying how clueless adults are sometimes.



When my dad gets concerned his eyebrows become very distracting.

I mean, he was *really concerned* about the situation. He made me sit down and everything. Dad and I rarely have conversations where we sit each other down. We both become very awkward.

The only other times that he's had to 'sit me down to talk' about something was when I signed him up to a dating website because I didn't like his girlfriend at the time and he got all these suspicious emails that made her cry, and when I threw a pork pie at his head because he gave my Marvel comic book encyclopedia to a second hand bookshop and I happened to be holding a pork pie when he told me.

Dog later ate the pork pie, which had been cleaned up and put on a plate, because neither Dad nor I were keeping an eye on him during our 'sitting down and talking' moment. This just made the whole situation worse because (a) Dad had apparently been looking

forward to eating that pork pie and (b) Dog decided to rub his pork-pie victory in Dad's face by vomiting it back up over Dad's trainers.

I don't know why Dad was so cross. The only reason he owns trainers is so that he can leave them by the door in the hope that women might think he works out.

Anyway, both those times that he 'sat me down' his eyebrows were uncontrollable and I knew, as soon as he asked me to sit to discuss the fire incident and his eyebrows immediately sprung into irrepressible motion, that he was having one of those moments when he wonders whether there is actually something genuinely wrong with me.

Like I don't question that every single day.

And honestly, I really was trying to concentrate on what he was saying but his eyebrows were jumping around all over the place. It really is fascinating how they have such agility.

Sadly, he has not passed this impressive talent down to me.

'Are you even listening?'

'Of course!' I lied, unlocking my facial muscles from their state of concentration on this intricate eyebrow dance. I patted Dog absent-mindedly as he lay next to me, clearly hoping for a treat after this act of

loyalty in the face of a Dad Inquisition.

Dad's eyebrows furrowed. 'Anastasia,' he prompted, leaning forwards and clasping his hands together in what I guessed was an attempt at giving an air of understanding.

'Nicholas.' Two of us could play the I'm So Serious I'm Going to Use Your Full Name game.

Dad took a deep breath.

'I appreciate that moving schools is an upheaval, especially for a teenager. I'm not mad at you – I know it was an accident. But if there's anything you want to, I don't know, *discuss*?'

'Like what?'

'I don't know. Teenage things?'

Oh lord. I bet he wanted *feelings*. This was ambitious. I wasn't going to talk about that with my *dad*. It was embarrassing enough telling my two new and only friends, Jess and Danny, about each of the latest ways I had managed to embarrass myself and, by association, them too. I'd be lucky if I managed to hold on to those two for much longer the way things were going. Either way, there definitely wasn't any sharing happening with my dad.

'What teenage things?'

'I don't know!' His eyebrows leapt frenziedly towards the ceiling. 'Learning to be responsible?'

'Don't bother. I wouldn't listen anyway.'

He narrowed his eyes. 'Are you taking this seriously?'

'Yes I am taking this seriously. I set someone's hair on fire; it was dangerous and embarrassing. I will not be touching a Bunsen burner ever again without supervision. The whole school is going to hate me. I'm going to be a bigger loser than I was before. I hate my life.'

'Well that's what I mean,' he said gently. Seriously, I do one tiny thing like set someone on fire and suddenly my dad feels the need to subject me to weird parental counselling. 'It's just . . . at the last school . . . you weren't . . .' He trailed off.

'Miss Popular?'

'That's not what I was going to say,' Dad said, slumping back into the armchair where he usually sits on a Sunday afternoon with his Irish whiskey. 'You weren't . . . settled. I just want to make sure that you're more confident with this new place.'

I had to start a new school when we moved to London last year after Dad became a lot more in demand as a freelance journalist and he needed to be where everything was happening. Weirdly this happened after he wrote a really boring book about tanks used in the war or something which actually sold quite well. The book is dedicated to me but I've never read it, which really bugs

him. If you ask me I should be the insulted one – yeah Dad, it's every girl's dream to have a book about TANKS dedicated to them.

Incredibly, somehow the serious tank book led to serious articles on famous people – and they all seem to live in London or come here a lot. But it means he is at home a lot more than he used to be which is good, although he does sometimes go to a celebrity party or whatever. Celebrities like Dad now because he writes big glossy features about them in trendy magazines rather than reporting on their sweat patches in a tiny column of a tabloid.

I think he felt pretty guilty about making me move but I didn't mind. I didn't really have any friends at my old school and even though I was a bit nervous about Dog settling down in London at first, he quickly made friends with a Pomeranian called Hamish down the road.

'Thanks, Dad. I appreciate your concern. But really? You can stop worrying.'

He sighed, it being clear that I wasn't going to divulge any of the teenage angst he was looking for. 'Fine. Well, be more careful in future Chemistry lessons?'

'If they let me enter a science lab again in my lifetime, yes I'll be more careful. No Bunsen burners.'

'I'm not going to ground you. It's not like you ever really go out anyway.'

'Great, good chat, Dad, thanks.'

He gave a last concerned eyebrow rise and then finally pulled himself up from his chair and left the room. I relaxed and traitorous Dog immediately followed him just in case he was going in the direction of the kitchen.

Sadly for Dog, Dad went to his bedroom to get ready for his big date. Recently Dad has been seeing someone new who he still hasn't introduced me to. Not that I'm insulted.

Usually he's never with them long enough for me to meet them. I just pick up the phone every now and then and hear a different woman go, 'Oh hi, sweetheart, is Nick there please?' and he makes a wild 'say I'm not at home' gesture in the background as I explain that he's actually gone to Slovenia to find himself. I like to mix it up and throw in some pretty inspired reasons for his disappearance, such as he's modelling his new line of swimming trunks in Beirut, or he's in Peru training to be a Sherpa.

This can be risky however because if Dad overhears he throws things at me.

He's been seeing this girlfriend for a few months now though. He's really been quite disgusting about the whole thing. Combing his hair, wearing aftershave and dancing – *dancing* – as he goes around the house. Honestly, I had to

ring Mum and tell her how embarrassed I was.

She was in India at the time so it was a bit crackly but I think I managed to convey my disgust. Mum is a travel journalist which means she's away a lot but I don't mind. Sometimes she takes me with her to these amazing places and then when she's in England and hasn't seen me in a while she comes to stay with us too.

Mum and Dad were never married – or even together for very long. They met when they were both junior reporters and in Dad's words 'Rebecca was totally in love' with him and in Mum's words she was 'either very drunk, honey, or suffering from some kind of tropical disease that causes hallucinations'. Either way, I was the outcome, and luckily they're really good friends which makes things a lot easier.

When I was younger I kept hoping they would get back together, like in *The Parent Trap* or whatever, but now I see that it's actually a lot better this way. Mum says they could never be together because Dad is too opinionated and the way he sneezes creeps her out. Dad says they could never be together because Mum never washes up and once mocked John Wayne's hat. I reckon it's actually because they're best friends, but hey, you've got to let adults believe what they want to believe.

'It sounds like he's in love, darling,' Mum laughed down the phone as I explained Dad's recent antics. 'Be

nice to him.' I'm not sure what other advice she gave me because as she spoke there was a lot of background noise at her end and I think I could hear someone trying to sell cabbages for twenty rupees a kilogram. India seems like a very noisy place.

As Dad rummaged around in his bedroom he decided to start lecturing me from upstairs. 'I don't want any problems this evening. You're to stay home and behave,' he instructed.

I found this comment unjustified considering I am very well behaved the majority of the time. I am hardly a troublemaker and I don't get invited to any parties so I don't really know what he was getting so anxious about.

The most recent time that I guess I wasn't the model of good behaviour was when he had a house-warming party for our new place in London and all these people invaded, sauntering in with their wafts of expensive perfume and bottles of Chardonnay. I had to take their coats and walk around for the evening with trays of nibbles, listening to them tell Dad how adorable I was as they ignored me and picked up mini bruschettas from the tray.

Anyway there was this actor there who I overheard saying that he couldn't understand why Nick had that *dog* over there that looked like he would slobber all over the place and probably, by the look of the boy, wasn't even a

good pedigree. I accidentally let Dog chew his hat.

Dad didn't make me sit down that time and have a talk about respecting my elders or anything, but he talked to me for about five billion hours the next day on the difference between fighter aircrafts and bomber aircrafts in the war.

I'm not sure if that was intended to be a punishment but it sure felt like one.

'I'm just going to sit and watch movies with Dog. Have a little trust, Father.'

'Not vampire movies?' He snorted with laughter at his own 'joke'.

This is not only unfunny but also grossly unfair considering he was the one who last week recommended the stupid people-slaying child-vampire movie to his fourteen-year-old daughter, alone in the house with only a Labrador for company.

It's not as if Dog could protect me. He's afraid of salad spoons for crying out loud. Whenever we get out the big wooden salad spoon he goes round in circles manically and barks his head off in fear. What would he do if a vampire strolled into the building? I'd had to disturb Dad on his date and make him come home and check there were no vampires around.

'When do I get to meet this girlfriend of yours?' I

asked, ignoring the vampire movie comment and trying to change the subject.

'Soon enough,' he said breezily, coming back into the room. 'She's dying to meet you.'

'I bet.'

Dad did a last mirror-check in the hall. 'Not bad for an old man, eh? I reckon I could pass for early thirties.'

'Don't get ahead of yourself, Gramps. Anyone who talks about Eric Clapton with as much passion as you do could never be a day under forty.'

'That's enough from you.' He stood over me. 'Are you going to be all right? No fires, yes?'

'No fires. No vampires.'

'Call me if you need me.' He gave my hair a ruffle and then he shot me a long, hard look as though he was trying to read my face.

'Anna . . .' He hesitated. 'You do . . . you do *like* it here in London don't you?'

'Yes?'

'And you . . . well . . . never mind. Have a nice evening. Bye, Dog.'

As the door shut, I got a very distinct feeling that my father wasn't telling me something.