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Opening Extract from...

ORPHAN MONSTER SPY

Written by Matt Killen

Published by Usborne

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ORPHAN

BLONDE-HAIRED, BLUE-EYED, FIFTEEN AND ALONE

MONSTER

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT AMONG HER ENEMIES

SPY

HER MISSION: TO DESTROY THEM ALL

FOR ALL THE OTHER BEATEN, BULLIED AND ABUSED CHILDREN.

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MATT KILLEEN

ORPHAN MONSTER SPY

USBORNE

CHAPTER ONE

28th August 1939

Finally, the car came to a stop. With difficulty, Sarah opened her eyes, blinked to clear her vision and looked up from her hiding place in the footwell. Her mother was slumped in the driver's seat, her head against the top of the steering wheel. She was gazing through the spokes to where Sarah crouched. Her mother's eyes were *almost* the same, wide and pretty. Her pupils were so big Sarah could nearly see herself in them. But now they seemed dull. Her mother was no longer in there.

Sarah reached out, but something hot dripped onto her hand and she snatched it back. Her palm was bright red next to her white fingers.

Laufen, dumme Schlampe!

Sarah could hear the voice in her head, but her mother's lips weren't moving. Her nose was blocked and her eyes hurt. The pain was a fog across her thinking. Again she heard it.

Laufen! Run! She looked at her mother's face once more, in time to see her forehead slide off the top of the wheel. The eyes, still staring, now regarded the floor. *Laufen. Just run.* Sarah thought the voice was her own.

The door handle turned, but the door didn't open. She tried again. It opened a crack, but she was pushing against the whole weight of the door, as if up a hill. Her hand was slick with blood, so she rubbed it on her coat and tried again. By sticking her shoulder against the door panel she managed to heave it wide open, spilling the cold light of evening into the car. She scrambled up and out. The Mercedes had come to rest in the ditch by the roadside, its nose buried in a warehouse fence.

Sarah looked into the car and saw what the bullet had done to the back of her mother's head. She fought a wave of nausea as the door swung shut, but she felt nothing else. Not yet.

Her heart was beating fast and loud in her ears, the air stinging her nose. Her neck felt hot. Behind her, the soldiers from the checkpoint were just rounding the distant corner that she and her mother had careened around moments ago, just before the shot. There were voices, shouts, running feet on the asphalt. Dogs began to bark. They were closing. Where now? What now?

Laufen.

Sarah flung herself onto the warm bonnet and crawled across it towards the break the car had made in the warehouse fence. The shards of broken windscreen tore at her hands and knees. She slid off into the brambles and then pushed through them on all fours, picking up splinters of wood, thorns and broken glass.

Don't look back. Keep going. Ignore the pain in your hands and knees. Laufen.

She let the voice run riot in her head as she broke through the fence. Her voice? Her mother's? It didn't matter.

Onto your feet now. That's it. Laufen, laufen, run, run.

She sprinted into an alley between two old buildings, kicking up the sludge deposited by overflowing gutters. Looking up, she could see the rusting gutters hanging from the roof edges, the leaf litter that blocked the drains. About two metres high. Too high. Too precarious. But this claustrophobic corridor continued into the distance and she could hear the dogs closing.

Get up there, dumme Schlampe.

Don't call me that.

Well, you're being one. What kind of a gymnast are you?

A Jewish gymnast. Not permitted to compete.

You're a dead *Jewish gymnast if you don't move. Are you hardy? Pious? Cheerful? Free?*

Sarah found herself laughing at the old saying. What would Jahn, the father of gymnastics, think of a Jew – *Deutschlands Unglück*, Germany's misfortune – using his words as inspiration? So she put a skip into her step, ignoring the tightness in her calves, the pain in her neck, the chance of slipping, repeating, *"Frisch, fromm, fröhlich, frei,* hardy, pious, cheerful, free," with her eyes on the gutter all the way. She launched herself into the air, caught the troughs neatly on either side and swung herself up and to the right, the metal creaking and complaining as she went. She hit the corrugated iron roof with a crash, slid for a second and stopped just shy of the roof's edge.

Beat that, Trudi Meyer. I'll have your gold medal now, danke.

She lay unmoving, staring into the vast and darkening silver sky, the sense of triumph slowly ebbing away like the light in the west. It was leaving a cold sensation in her stomach. If she couldn't calm her breathing they would hear her. She thought about that last look back into the Mercedes, then pushed the memory away. She put it in a special box and closed the lid. She looked at the emptiness above and listened.

Over her heaving chest she could hear the dogs. The shouting grew closer. Then there were muffled footsteps – a soldier was walking between the buildings. The noise was too indistinct to work out how far away he was and her breathing was too loud, much too loud. She counted two seconds, took one last long breath and clamped her mouth shut. She realized she could just make out a star where the sky was darkest. She also discovered she couldn't breathe through her nose, so all she had to do was keep her lips together.

Footsteps, right below her.

A star. Or a planet. Was it Venus? The feet stopped. Planet. *Star.*

There was movement, the sound of material scraping against the brickwork. The gutter creaked. Her chest began to throb as the pressure grew. There was loud breathing and the sound of boots against the wall. More pressure, more pain, the urge to spring to her feet and run away. She turned her head very slowly to see thick, dirty fingers gripping the lip of the gutter. Inside her head she started to scream. She wanted to open her mouth and let it out. So, so much.

At that moment there was a snap, a tearing and a shriek.

The gutter, the dirty fingers and heavy breathing vanished in a cascading crash. There was swearing. Shouting. Catcalls. Laughter. Footsteps receding. Quiet. Distant barking.

Sarah opened her mouth and let the breath explode out of her lungs. She gulped down the cool air. Her shoulders rose and fell and rose again because she couldn't stop them. She began, quietly, to sob.

Sarah was good at hide-and-seek. In better days, when she could still play with other children, she was always the last one to be found, long after the others had grown bored and moved on.

She lay there watching the stars emerge and brighten, listening to the sounds of the docks. She could still hear the dogs, soldiers and shouting, far-off but ever present, like the other children running round the house calling out for her.

So, you're just going to lie there? the voice hectored her.

I'm waiting for it to get dark.

No, you just don't know what to do, it crowed.

Sarah turned her head. She could see a crane and the funnel of a ship. In the background, the vast lake, the Bodensee, was vanishing into the coming night. In the other direction, the rooftops of Friedrichshafen spread out below her, too far away for her to be seen from its distant church spires. Beyond her feet, a crumbling old warehouse regarded her with derelict eyes, dark and deserted. Safe. This was as good a hiding place as any for now.

Then what? A Jew with no papers, stuck in a German port with no money.

Sarah ignored herself. Or her mother, whoever it was. There was no future, just the now. Her mother had driven them here, so she must have had a plan to cross the Bodensee by the ferry or private boat to Switzerland and safety, away from the beatings and starvation and abuse. But all that was gone. That was, if she'd had a plan at all. That level of organization had been beyond her mother for years. It was no wonder that it had ended in disaster, in her death…

Sarah pushed the thought away, into her box. It was all too raw, like the aching in her nose.

That special box deep within Sarah had started out tiny, like something her mother would keep expensive jewellery in. There had rarely been time to be frightened or cross in the past six years, since the National Socialists had come to power, so Sarah had locked each humiliation and injustice carefully inside. That way she was free of the dread and anger. But now the box was like a travelling trunk, varnish blistered and swollen, the wood turning green and the brass tarnished. The contents oozed under the lid and dripped down the sides. Worse still, she had begun to imagine herself *becoming* the box, with everything it contained, everything she had hidden, free to slosh about inside her, ready to take shape and eat her alive.

Her heart was racing again. She calmed herself by imagining she really was playing hide-and-seek. She was deep in a cupboard under the stairs, covered in a hanging winter coat, the open door inviting the other children to take just a swift and cursory look inside. Invisible, waiting, invulnerable.

Exhaustion spotted its chance and wrapped its arms around her. In the twilight, on the mossy metal ridges, Sarah dozed.

She is walking next to her father. He was tall, but now he seems huge. She must be very small. She looks up along her red-coated arm to where his enormous hand cradles hers. The ground is soft underfoot and the bright sun, too intense to look at, is bathing everything in a golden glow.

"Can you see*, Sarahchen*?"

"See what, *Vati*?"

He laughs and stoops to scoop her up into his arms. She is a long way up but feels safe, strapped into position by limbs like tree trunks.

"Can you see it now?"

Sarah screws up her eyes and peers into the dazzling sky. It hurts and she has to shade them with her hand. A low buzzing is beginning to fill the air.

"What is it?"

Another laugh. "Wait and see."

The noise grows, one drone overlapping with another like a beehive, the sound of a million insects at work.

"Daddy, I'm scared."

"Don't be."

The drones become a throbbing that begins to pound at her chest. She clings to her father's black jacket out of fear or excitement, unable to decide which. Then she sees it.

Huge, silver, shining in the sunlight, filling the sky, bigger than the biggest thing she's ever seen. In its shadow, boys are running, pointing, trailing streamers. Sarah cranes her neck back to watch this giant rippled cigar block out the sun and rumble overhead.

She starts to giggle and then laugh. She looks into her father's eyes and he into hers. He starts to laugh too. Everyone is laughing…

Sarah's eyes opened. With a jolt she remembered where she was and understood what was happening. The moon had risen and everything was illuminated with a rime of silver light. The metal roof was shaking and the nose of the Zeppelin was already overhead. She had nowhere to hide. Instead she lay there and let the massive airship roll past, a Jewish girl on a rooftop, a glittering outline just a few metres from prying eyes.

They aren't looking for you, they're doing something else, they'll look right at you and it won't mean anything, because they aren't looking for you. *You're just a winter coat in the cupboard*.

She was close enough to see the windows in the Zeppelin's fabric and the dim light from within. She could see the roughly stitched repairs, the name hidden underneath the hastily reapplied dope and the shafts of yellow light extending along the curve of the balloon from the control car's windows. She gripped her vibrating bed. *I am a winter coat*, she repeated to herself, as the gondola slid past.

Windows covered the whole front end of the observation car and the electric light was almost blinding. Inside, two figures stood watching. It was impossible to believe that they couldn't see her and yet, as they drifted past, they remained static. The droning rose in volume until the power cars roared past on their spindly pylons, their propellers a blur. The body started to thin out, leaving only the vast tailfins to pass. They had been painted black, but the swastikas were still visible in their white circles, a wolf in a poorly made set of woollen robes, fooling no one.

Finally, the airship had passed. Sarah exhaled loudly. It was as if the other children had opened the cupboard door and seen nothing out of the ordinary. She sat up, the muscles in her legs and back complaining. The swarm of bees receded as the Zeppelin sailed away and the rooftop settled. As it passed over the deserted warehouse opposite, she spotted a figure on the building's flat roof, visible in the moonlight. Someone was standing and watching the airship through a pair of binoculars, like he was looking for a rare bird.

She watched him follow the curve of the Zeppelin until he was looking at the tail. He was all in black, silhouetted against the bright darkness of the sky, barely visible but absolutely there. So lost in her curiosity was she that she didn't move from her sitting position, even when he lowered his glasses and stared off past the end of the airship into space. Why was he there? It couldn't be anything official, the airfield must have been three kilometres away.

Then he started and pulled the binoculars back to his face. Deep in her belly something dropped away and she had to suck her next breath in.

She was not invisible and he was looking right at her.

The man slowly let the glasses fall and, after a second, he waved.

Go, just go, she ranted at herself as she exploded into life, rolling over towards the edge of the roof and pushing herself off. It was dark down there out of the moonlight, just two little windows of silver at either end of the alley. To one side, the larger warehouse and the man with the binoculars. To her left, the way she came: the fence, the ditch, the car. So she pushed herself right, driving her stiff legs forward, her fingers trailing against the brickwork on either side to keep her balance. Through the fog of dull ache in her face, she was conscious of a growing stabbing pain deep in her head. She was desperately thirsty. She ran her tongue over her lips. They were broken and chapped. Her tongue made a noise like a cat's, rough and dry. It had been more than a day since she had drunk anything. Her mother hadn't wanted to stop on the way from Vienna, but had brought nothing to eat or drink. A terrifying 630 kilometres under the eyes of the whole Fatherland, through the birthplace of National Socialism itself. It seemed inconceivable that they'd made it so far.

The waterfront to her left was poorly lit but looked small, not vast and anonymous like she had imagined. She pushed straight on into the maze of buildings in front of her.

Just keep moving.

Where?

Always with the why and the where. Concentrate. It's like an accent, a gymnastic routine, a piano piece. Fix your mind on the task at hand.

I'm tired. I don't know what to do.

So now you're going to cry like a little baby?

No.

Indeed not. Did I raise you by myself so you could just give up?

Sarah swallowed down a sob. Had it been her mother's voice all along? *Oh, Mutti*, she murmured to herself, *oh, Mutti*.

Stop it.

I can't. What I saw in the car…all too much…

No, STOP.

She froze. Over the distant hum and noise, she could hear running water.

She followed the sound to an old and peeling door. It was ajar, revealing a dark interior. Sarah needed to use her shoulder, and as it scraped open she was hit by the smell of ammonia and sewage. She took an uncertain step inside, but the blackness was absolute. Closing her eyes to let her night vision improve and using the slimy wall as a guide, she crept into the room towards the sound of water. She opened her eyes but couldn't pick out any details. The room couldn't have been that big, but it felt like a cavern, or the giant mouth of some stinking beast. *The dark is your friend*, she told herself. *Big arms to hide you. Love the darkness.*

Her fingers brushed up against something that moved. She wanted to snatch her hand back, but resisted and reached out again. She touched the thing and it vanished once more. She waited and it returned to her. It was a thin chain, with a knot at one end, the other disappearing upwards. She grasped the knot and pulled down.

There was a click and then a light so blinding that Sarah lost her balance. She was in a squalid bathroom with a broken toilet bowl in the corner behind a rotting wooden partition. A long trough ran the length of the far wall at floor level. Everything was filthy, but next to Sarah a rusting tap spat brown water into a low, long basin.

She grabbed the edge of the sink and thrust her mouth under the tap, opening it up to full. The liquid tasted warm and rusty, but it was wet and it didn't stop. Sarah gulped and swallowed, gulped and swallowed, ignoring the sense of smothering when it went up her nose. After a minute, she stopped and stretched out her back, letting the water drip down her chin, feeling the life seeping back into her body.

"Oh, look, it's the little girl from the roof."

A man's voice. Sarah froze. *Dumme Schlampe! You left the door open.* The man was between her and the doorway. There was nowhere to go and nothing to do. That helplessness took the weight from her shoulders. She felt oddly calm and light. So light that she felt herself rise above the sea of panic. She grunted an affirmative noise and bent down to drink again, trying not to imagine the next few hours.

CHAPTER TWO

"What are you doing here?" said the man.

"Drinking," she replied between gulps.

"What were you doing on the roof?" His delivery was flat, almost emotionless.

Don't be fooled. That just means you can't read him.

"Looking for someone." She stood up and wiped her chin. It seemed to be covered in brown dirt. She purposely avoided looking straight at him, buying time to think of something without her eyes giving anything away.

"On the roof?"

Trap.

"Yes." She was just delaying the inevitable. It didn't matter what she said and this made her feel free. Bold. "What were you doing watching the airship?"

"I'm asking the questions." The merest hint of tension. Not anger.

"Yes, you are." She cocked her head to one side and waited.

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If it takes a village to raise a child, it appears that it takes a cohort, a university, a society and a family to write a book – let alone get it published. It's a possibility that this work could have existed without their contribution and their deadlines, but you probably wouldn't be reading it right now.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

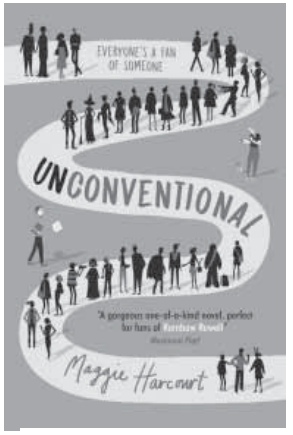
Matt Killeen was born in Birmingham and, like many of his generation, was absorbed by tales of the war and obsessed with football from an early age. Guitars arrived at fourteen, wrecking any hopes of so-called normality.

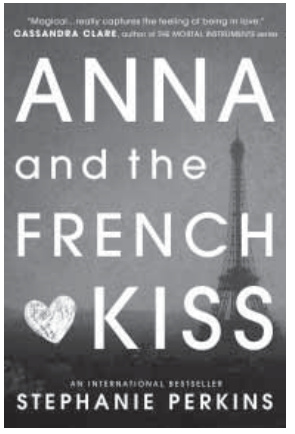
He has had a great many careers – some creative, some involving laser guns – and has made a living as an advertising copywriter and largely ignored music and sports journalist. He fulfilled a childhood ambition and became a writer for the world's best-loved toy company in 2010.

He lives near London with his soulmate, children, dog and musical instruments, looking wistfully north at a hometown that has been largely demolished and rebuilt in his lengthy absence.

Orphan Monster Spy is his first novel.

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