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**Opening Extract from...**

# All Teachers Great and Small

Written by Andy Seed

Published by Headline

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# ALL TEACHERS GREAT AND SMALL

A memoir of lessons and life in the Yorkshire Dales

ANDY SEED

headline

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Anyone who thinks they recognise themselves in this book but can't remember the events described need not worry that they're suffering from amnesia. While the events described in this book really happened, the characters are based on amalgamations of real people rather than particular individuals, with the exception of Andy and Barbara Seed.

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# Prologue

## *Sylvia*

They sat together but were worlds apart. The first child, a girl of eight, was prim and demure. Her pleated skirt was crisp, her hair meticulously tied back and her shoes shining. She was called Sylvia Hammond.

The boy next to her was a year older and considerably larger. His face, glowing with perspiration, was a conglomeration of freckles, snot and mud. The torn knee of his trousers bumped involuntarily against his desk and he squirmed with unbridled energy, chewing at black fingernails and frowning powerfully. He could no longer hold his silence.

'Mr Seed, it's too 'ot in here and this book's boring.'

'Barney, will you please put your hand up if you have something to say.'

I couldn't deny it, though. The June sun streaming in through the large windows made the classroom stiflingly warm. I was reading a story but only half of the twenty-four children were listening. All of them looked hot and uncomfortable; a few were yawning. It had been a long day. I closed the book and took pity.

'I tell you what, Class Three, since you all look so tired, shall

we go outside and have a little game?' There was a cheer accompanied by a sudden alertness.

'Can we play rounders?' a voice called out.

'No, not that sort of game – I meant like a thinking game, sitting in a circle.' There was a groan.

'I know!' Barney's hand shot up. 'What about British Bulldog?'

This time I frowned.

A couple of minutes later the class was assembled in a large circle on the cool grass under the chestnut tree outside the classroom. Instinctively, all of them began picking at the grass and daisies.

'Now, who has a sensible suggestion for a quiet game we can play sitting down?' A hand went up right away. It was Sylvia's.

'Can we play "guess the famous person"? And can I go first? I've thought of one already.'

'An excellent idea.' Sylvia had plenty of those. She was a mature girl, and someone I'd found that I could rely on throughout the year.

'Can I whisper it to you, Mr Seed? Then you can help me if you need to.'

'OK, that's a very sensible thought, Sylvia.' I moved a few paces away from the circle of children and leant in her direction. Sylvia cupped her hands, craned towards my ear and spat in it.

'Ooo, sorry Mr Seed.'

'Never mind, Sylvia, I'm sure it was an accident,' I said, applying a hankie, 'Now who's your famous person?'

'It's Hururr Thate.'

'Who's Hururr Thate?'

'What?'

'You said Hururr Thate.'

'I didn't.'

'Sorry Sylvia, you'll have to whisper a bit louder.'

'It's Henry VIII.'

'Oh, right – great idea. The others'll know him from our Tudors topic.' I returned to the circle with Sylvia, relieved that I didn't have to adjudicate on Hururr Thate.

The waiting children were now stretched out on the ground and busy with ants, whistling grass and daisy chains. Fergus had obtained a worm.

'Right, everybody, put everything down and sit up.' They were reluctant, but did so. 'This is how the game works. Sylvia's thought of a famous person and you all have to guess who it is. You can ask her questions, but she can only answer "yes" or "no". We've played this game before, back in the Autumn Term, if you remember.' I certainly remembered it – an endless succession of pop stars. There were a few hazy nods. Sylvia smiled a lot.

'Is it a man?' blurted out Eve.

'Hands up please, or it'll be chaos.' I turned towards Sylvia, who quickly responded.

'Yes, it's a man.'

Nathan's hand went up.

'Is he British?'

'Yes,' said Sylvia, still smiling.

Carol was next.

'Do you know him?'

Sylvia giggled. 'No.'

Malcolm's hand went up.

'Does he play music?'

This time Sylvia looked towards me for guidance. I nodded, recalling that Henry had been very musical, amongst his many other interests.

'Yes,' she said. Suddenly, about fifteen hands shot in the air. I pointed to Barney.

'George Michael!' He looked at Sylvia expectantly. She had her hand in front of her mouth, but her eyes were clearly laughing.

'Er, no.' I pointed at a succession of other hopefuls.

'Elton John?'

'No.'

'David Bowie?'

'No.'

'Michael Jackson?'

'No – he's American anyway, you div.'

After another five similar names, I intervened. 'I think you need to stop guessing who it is, and ask some questions to find out something about the person.' Barney's hand went up.

'Is he in the charts at the moment?' Well, at least it was a start. More hands were raised.

'Does he play guitar?'

'No.'

'Drums?'

'No.'

'I know – synthesiser!'

'No.'

Barney had another try. 'Is he a hairy heavy metal dude, then?'

Even Sylvia had stopped smiling by this point, and my patience was definitely beginning to ebb.

'Look, you haven't learnt anything about him at all,' I said. 'You don't even know if he's alive.' George lifted his arm.

'Is he alive?'

'No.'

There was an undercurrent of muttering at this point, then Jack proffered an answer.

'John Lennon?'

Sylvia's shake of the head brought more grumbling from the children, who had by now slouched back on to the grass. Eve spoke again.

'Can't we 'ave a clue – we're getting nowhere.' It was a very good suggestion: I looked at Sylvia, who responded right away.

'Forget about the music and find out when he was alive.' Good clue. Anita was the first to act on it.

'Did he die this year?'

'No.'

Terry followed up quickly.

'Did he die last year?'

'No.'

I coughed; Isaac raised a hand very slowly, his face creased with thought.

'Did he 'ave glasses?'

'No.'

I stepped in again.

'Think much further back in time, and try to find out what his job was.'

There was a pause and then Hugh signalled to speak.

'Was he a Victorian?' Ah, this was better, and Sylvia tried to

make her 'no' sound encouraging. Barney, clearly frustrated, had another go.

'Was he a footballer?'

'No.'

'Was he a politician?' said Rose.

'Errr, not quite.' Sylvia was beginning to get enthusiastic again. I looked at the ragged ring of children. Most of them had given up long ago, but my eyes landed on Hugh. I could see that his mind was working hard on this, and he looked like he was clearly on the scent. Biting his lip, he raised a hand once more.

'Was . . . was he a member of the royal family?'

'Yes! Yes!' Sylvia began to jiggle with excitement. Hugh kept his hand in the air and continued.

'Was he a king?'

'Yes, yes, he was!'

Suddenly, from nowhere, Barney exploded forward from the ground, lifting his whole body with a leap of revelation, and thrust a finger towards Sylvia.

'I've got, I've got it – Elvis!'

Sylvia's patience ran out soon after this and she told them the answer, which produced groans of disappointment. Several children turned around, expecting me to tell them what to do next. They had to wait: I was hiding behind my hankie, wiping my eyes and picturing Bluff King Hal wooing Anne Boleyn at Hampton Court with 'You Ain't Nothing but a Hound Dog'.

This was what I faced every day as a new teacher with my own class: a society of extraordinary individuals who were by turns crazy,

inspired, alarming, inert, dynamic, unaware and wonderful. Their capacity for misunderstanding was only exceeded by their enthusiasm and ability to leave me incredulous. No college training, manual, advice or indeed anything could have prepared me for moments like this. I loved it.

# Chapter One

## *Jack*

Mrs Fawcett's brown Mini bobbed between the skewed limestone walls along another bend in the little road, and disappeared from view.

'She's not hanging about,' I said to Barbara, my wife, who wasn't listening.

'Oh Andy, just look at the views. It's so beautiful.'

'I can't really – I'll lose her. She might turn off.' Despite my words I couldn't help stealing glances at the flickering green panoramas that appeared in each gateway in the roadside wall. Like a travelling slideshow, every gap presented a tantalising vista of the glorious wide green valley, Swinnerdale, which was to be our new home.

It was late August in the mid-1980s, and we were on our way to the holiday cottage that was to provide temporary lodging, and were following the owner, Mrs Fawcett, up the dale to see it for the first time. As we sped past stone farms, steep fields of brilliant buttercups and dark rising fells, I bubbled with excitement: not only had I just been given my first job as a primary school teacher, but it was in the Yorkshire Dales – a place so overwhelmingly

magnificent that the contrast between this setting and our previous home in a town-centre terrace seemed almost too much to take in. To Barbara and me, both twenty-two years old and recently married, it was a real adventure.

We caught a glimpse of a gaunt, square castle on the hillside to our right before a clump of trees secreted it swiftly. Then the Mini's brake lights blinked and Mrs Fawcett shimmied up a narrow road rising in that direction. I could hear Barbara giggling with anticipation as our noisy Alfasud veered after it and climbed the valley side, opening up yet more sweeping views. The cowpat-spattered road steadily increased in gradient, causing me to change gear several times, before bringing the great stone fortress back into view. Next to the castle was a row of dark cottages that seemed absurdly small. Just as we expected to top the road's crest and enter the little village, the Mini disappeared again, this time to the left. Mrs Fawcett swung it round like a rally driver and vanished as if she had gone down a hole. A fat millstone marked the spot where she had turned off; it bore a sign saying *Castle Heywood*. I slowed virtually to a stop and peered at a steep track that plunged back down the hillside between thick trees and high banks before curving away out of sight. There was no sign of the Mini or Mrs Fawcett, but it was the only way she could have gone.

'Be careful,' said Barbara. Braking, however, was never one of the Alfasud's foremost capabilities, and I squeezed extra hard on the middle pedal as the car juddered over the track's rocky surface and pointed down the one in four drop, causing us to slide forward in our seats, and think, 'Where on earth are we going?'

* * *

Brenda Fawcett was married to Arthur Fawcett, who was a governor at Cragthwaite School where I was to start work in a week's time. I remember meeting him after the interview in June, a short leathery-faced man with a genuine smile and a crushing handshake.

''Ow do, I'm Arthur Fawcett – I understand you've got t'job. Aye, well done lad, well done: we're pleased to 'ave you.' I took to him right away, and he sensed that I needed to relax after the tension of the interview. He told me a little about himself: he was a builder in Cragthwaite, down from the school; born and bred in the dale, and now living in the next village along the road at Castle Heywood with Brenda and teenage son, Jimmy.

'You'll be looking for a place to live, lad. Do you 'ave a family?'

'No kids, but I got married last year.'

'Aye, I thought you looked a bit on t'young side to be sproggin' yet. Do you know it in't easy to buy a 'ouse round 'ere so if you need some accommodation, I've a holiday cottage I'm puttin' up, which you can 'ave for a good rent. Here's my number.' He tore the corner off a magazine on the staffroom table and licked on a pencil produced from the breast pocket of his weatherbeaten jacket before scribbling down a number.

'Thanks, Mr Fawcett, that's really kind.' I was amazed.

'No bother at all, lad – you'll be wanting it for the end of August, I reckon, ready to get stuck in t'classroom in September. Aye, it's a nice spot, aye.'

I recalled those words as the car edged down the tumbling lane, guarded by skeletal elms and stout ashes on mossy banks painted

with pink dabs of herb robert. And suddenly we were there. The Mini was parked up ahead, and it was indeed a nice spot.

We stepped out of the car and into a new life. Sheltered on a tree-backed ledge on the hillside there was a stout, slate-topped stone house, which looked like it had once been a Victorian railway cottage, accompanied by a jumble of sheds. In the impossibly green field next to it, a little circle of rabbits scuttled in panic at our arrival and fled into the knot of hazels on the bank beside the house. Barbara let out a squeal of delight. To our left, a great picture of Swinnerdale opened up from our elevated position, with the huge bulk of Spout Fell dominating everything.

'There you are, dears.' Mrs Fawcett strode over and woke us up out of our awestruck reverie. She was pointing at a building site about fifty yards from the house, next to the lane. There were piles of stones, wheelbarrows, long pieces of timber and heaps of sand. In amongst the rubble, a small bungalow was emerging. 'Did Arthur tell you that the cottage wasn't quite finished?'

I looked at Barbara.

'Er, no, I don't think he did,' I said.

'How "not finished" is it?' asked Barbara, gingerly stepping between the debris near the door.

'Oh, don't worry, dear – it's fine inside. Arthur's been busy as I don't know what, but he'll have it sorted for you soon.'

It was a relief to discover that the inside of the little bungalow was indeed more or less ready for us to move in. It was spartan – the walls and floors were bare but everything was new and the place smelled clean. Our furniture was following on the next day, although it would be a miracle if the van could negotiate the fearful

slopes and narrow track. In the meantime we organised the things we had brought with us in the car, and spent several hours making plans for this temporary home before finding something to eat.

Barbara stood up and stretched. 'I'd better call my mother and tell her we're here – you know how she worries.'

'Oh, I forgot to tell you that there's no phone.'

'No phone. Are you serious?'

'Arthur did mention it to me, sorry. He said they don't put them in holiday cottages and it'd be very expensive to have a new line installed. There's a call box in the village, though.'

'But that's right up the hill. And what if my parents want to call us?'

'I hadn't really thought of that.'

We finished the washing-up in silence.

Barbara scribbled a couple of things on a list then looked up. 'How far are we from the shops in Ingleburn?'

'I'm not sure – hang on, I'll get the road atlas from the car.' The time since our arrival at Castle Heywood had evaporated quickly with the welter of carrying and sorting, and night had fallen without either of us really noticing. When I opened the front door I received a severe shock. It wasn't just dark, it was black. It hadn't occurred to me that there would be no lighting outside, and the vast nothingness beyond the entrance made me realise that I had never really experienced proper darkness before. It was like being locked in a cupboard. Well, I thought, the car was out there somewhere; I remembered parking it just a few yards from the house. I stepped out and in a split second my chest nearly burst with fright as I felt myself falling. Had we rented a

bungalow on the edge of a cliff? Then I hit the gravel of the drive with a jolt, which caused me to remember that the outside of the house was not as finished as the inside, and this included Mr Fawcett not yet having managed to put in a set of steps up to the raised front door.

I slid my foot forward carefully in case there were any obstacles, and waggled my hands out in front. I couldn't see my fingers. We really were in the middle of nowhere. Eventually I found the car and the road atlas. A faint grey light from behind the curtains of the bungalow helped me to grope my way back a little quicker. It had taken ten minutes to travel twelve yards. Well, I mused, the Fawcetts had warned us that we would find the pace of life slower in the Dales.

Back inside, the bare rooms hemmed in by the thick darkness suddenly looked less cheerful. I watched Barbara for a moment. She was unpacking the bundles of craft materials she used for making Christmas decorations – something we hoped would bring in valuable extra income until she found a job. I checked how far we were from the shops in Ingleburn. Eight miles. It looked like there was nothing in the tiny village up the hill, and Barbara couldn't yet drive. Was there a bus service? Would there be anyone to make friends with in this lonely spot? I didn't even want to think about the job situation. All the excitement of the early part of the day seemed to drain out of me. Had we made a rash choice?

My mind drifted back to the excitement of first finding the post advertised at college. There were so few teaching vacancies around, especially in North Yorkshire, that I'd simply had to apply, especially as the details made it clear that the school wanted a man. We'd

only been married a year too, and were desperate to escape student poverty. To secure any teaching job was an achievement, surely? And there just wasn't anywhere else to live locally, certainly not at the bargain rent that Mr Fawcett was offering. I convinced myself that we'd had no option than to move here.

Three days before the start of term I was back at Cragthwaite School for the first time since my interview. The head, Howard Raven, had suggested that we should meet in order to sort out my classroom for the beginning of the new school year. I felt both apprehensive and energised by the responsibility and size of the task ahead: this was, after all, my first proper job and came on top of the weight of having to move to a new area and find a home.

Cragthwaite was one of the dale's larger villages, possessing a fine wide church, two pubs, a grocery store and, of course, a school. Cragthwaite CE Primary had been built fifteen years earlier to replace both a cramped Victorian building and three other tiny schools in surrounding villages, one of which had just five pupils when it closed. There had been considerable resentment that children from other communities had to be bussed into Cragthwaite, I later learned, although parents soon came to appreciate the advantages of a modern airy building with both a hall and kitchen; facilities that had been unknown in Swinnerdale up to that point.

The school was tucked away at the back of the village so that an adjacent meadow could be used for a sports field. The top of the field rose up the valley's side and commanded a splendid view over the stone rooftops of the village towards the fells. The school

had four classes that catered for children of ages four to eleven; mine was to be Class 3, for eight- to nine-year-olds.

Howard Raven emerged from his office when I arrived. He was in his mid-fifties, I guessed, slight and with a stern grey moustache.

'Settled in to the bungalow? I hear that the removal van had trouble bringing your furniture.' His mouth suggested a smile, which didn't appear in his eyes.

'Er, yes – how did you know about that?'

'You'll soon appreciate how small the dale is, Andrew. Now, we've a lot to organise for your new class, so we'd better not waste time.' He held up a neat bundle of papers between thumb and forefinger then flicked through them efficiently. 'Class list, register, contact details, policies, dates for the year, record book and rules.' I was a little taken aback – I thought school rules only existed in Bash Street.

'Is there a planning book? And I need to know which topics I'm timetabled to do this term.' He looked rather bemused.

'Topics?'

'Yes, do you have a set list of themes for the year, like "The Romans" or "Transport", or do we choose our own?'

He surveyed me for a moment. 'I realise that you're straight out of college, Andrew, and that you'll have new ideas, but you need to understand very quickly that we run a traditional school here. We teach the basics very well and other things come second, or not at all.'

He began to march down the corridor that led away from the entrance hall. I followed, feeling more like a pupil than a member

of staff. I thought about the exciting child-centred, progressive approaches we'd learnt about on teacher training. Mr Raven seemed to sum up everything that primary education had been moving away from for decades. He produced an enormous bundle of keys from his suit pocket and unlocked a plain wooden door. He opened it a little and, keeping one foot outside, leant in so that his body blocked my view.

'This is the stockroom.' He handed me a small green notebook then locked the door. 'Write down what you need each week – pencils, paper and so on – and give it to Eileen the secretary, on Wednesdays.' He then walked over to the school office and pointed to a small photocopier. 'Please give any copying to Eileen, preferably a day in advance. Staff are not to use the copier or telephone without permission.' The anticipation I'd felt whilst driving into the car park just a few minutes earlier had rapidly dissipated. 'Now, there are a lot more things I need to tell you but I expect you'll be wanting to get into your classroom, so the rest can wait a while. Valerie the deputy head will be along shortly; I'm sure she'll drop in to say hello.' His manner was very terse and I wondered if my face had betrayed too much disappointment when he'd outlined the school's approach to learning. It was a relief to escape the tour and explore my room.

The classroom was outside the main building – a 'mobile' of an early vintage, and showing its age. It was a square grey box, propped up on concrete blocks and sagging in the middle. Inside, it was light and more spacious than I'd expected, however – tatty but reasonably clean, and smelling of floor polish. A little excitement returned as I scanned the bare shelves and thought about the

possibilities of what I could do with this, my very own room. I spied a pile of exercise books and picked one up. It was full of English exercises, neatly scribed with a fountain pen. The other books were much the same. Next to them was a small painted bookshelf containing archaic reading books. They were hardback editions, crusty and greyed. Inside, the text was in the jolly lilt of a bygone era; a line drawing of a Brylcreemed boy in shorts confirmed my fears.

'Yes, nineteen-bloody-fifties.'

I jumped, before spinning round to see a stocky female figure by the door. It was Val Croker, the deputy, and teacher of the oldest children. 'Sorry about that, Andy, didn't mean to give you the willies – you do like to be called Andy, don't you?' She flicked a cigarette butt out of the doorway and came into the room. 'This wreck should have been replaced years ago,' she said, peering at the leaning floor and pillars holding up the yellowed ceiling. I regarded her for a moment. She was broad and fierce-looking with tightly curled red hair and cool green eyes. 'Has the Beak given you the tour then?'

'You mean Howard?'

She chuckled. 'No one calls him Howard. We call him Mr Raven and the kids call him "the Beak" . . . or worse. Anyway, don't worry about him – you've got to get ready for your class. Is there anything you need?'

'Lots. I can't seem to find any backing paper for the display boards, and there's no sign of art materials.'

'Don't worry, I've got some stuff hidden away in my room you can have, and I'll lend you a few of my own easier reading books.' She shook her head at the painted bookshelf.

'Did you see inside the infamous main stock cupboard then?'

'Not really – what's he got in there?'

'What *hasn't* he got in there, more like . . .? Mind you, I've not been inside it for ten years or so.'

'Ten years?' I nearly screamed. 'How long have you been at this school, Val?'

'Eighteen. Started out at the old place down the village – now that was a dive. Raven's been here twenty-six years and I daren't tell you about Hilda.'

It occurred to me that I wasn't even born when Raven had started.

'Are all the other staff in today preparing as well?' I asked.

'They'll be in soon but I don't think they'll get a right lot done – they've got all their yacking about summer to do first. Anyway, I'll catch you later.'

After two hours of going through every cupboard and shelf in the classroom I was ready to stretch my legs a little, so I decided to have a nose around the rest of the school. I wandered into the hall first and was immediately struck by its newly polished floor glinting in the August sun. It was quite a large space for a school with only four full-time teachers, and served as a canteen at lunch-times; dining tables and chairs were wedged into a storage area at one end next to a few baskets of tired-looking PE equipment.

On my way to say hello to the two infant teachers I passed a door I hadn't noticed before. It was half-open, allowing a broad Swinnerdale accent to echo into the corridor.

'You useless damn stupid mop.' A bang and metallic rattle followed. I tentatively pushed the door inwards. A plump backside of checked green nylon greeted me. Its owner was wrestling with

a bucket by the look of things. I said hello in a quiet voice so as not to give her a fright. It didn't work.

'Eurrrrghh!' She shot upwards and around with surprising speed, grasping a broom handle ready for defence. 'You gave me a right flamin' shock there!' She put a hand over her imposing bosom.

'I'm sorry, I just wanted to introduce myself.'

'Funny way of doin' it. Any road, you must be the new junior teacher. You're very young.' I was to hear that a lot over the following months.

'Yes, my name's Andy. You must be the, er, caretaker?'

'Caretaker, cleaner, dogsbody . . . the only thing I refuse to do is get footballs down off the roof, not with my ankles, but I reckon you're perfect f'job. I'm Pat Rudds, by the way.'

Pat told me that she wasn't fussy about the state of the classrooms as long as the sinks were empty and the chairs were up on desks at the end of the day. 'If you want yer floor swept it's up to you.' She poked her head round the doorway. 'I think Eileen's just arrived if you want to go and frighten her too.'

I recalled that Eileen Marsett was the school secretary. Looking down the corridor I could see a woman, hands full, attempting to push open the office door with her back. I hurried down to help.

'Oh thank you, Andy. What a gentleman.' Eileen was old-school: a slim, demure person with dowdy clothes and delicate hands. She smiled and placed a small posy of garden flowers into a vase on her desk. 'There, I'm ready to work now. How are you settling in? Is your wife well?'

'Yes, we're both finding Arthur Fawcett's cottage quite an adventure.'