Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

---

**Opening Extract from...**

# Billy and Me

Written by Giovanna Fletcher

Published by Penguin Books Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

# Billy and Me

GIOVANNA FLETCHER



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario,
Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre,
Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park,
181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published 2012
001

Copyright © Giovanna Fletcher 2012

The moral right of the author has been asserted

All rights reserved
Without limiting the rights under copyright
reserved above, no part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system,
or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior
written permission of both the copyright owner and
the above publisher of this book

Set in 12.5/14.75pt Garamond MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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

ISBN: 978–1–405–90995–2

www.greenpenguin.co.uk




Penguin Books is committed to a sustainable
future for our business, our readers and our planet.
This book is made from Forest Stewardship
Council™ certified paper.

ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

# Me

*When I was four years old, all I ever wanted was to have a weeing Tiny Tears doll. I'd never been into dolls really, but when my best friend was given one for her birthday I decided that a doll that cries actual tears and wets itself was exactly what my life lacked. After hassling my parents for a few weeks they eventually caved in – although, if I'm honest, it captured my attention for about a week and then the poor thing was left in a puddle of her own mess (oops!). I have no idea what became of her, but I'm guessing my mum sold her at a car boot sale or something similar.*

*When I was eight years old all I ever wanted was to appear on* Live and Kicking *and dance with Mr Blobby. There was something about that big dopey pink and yellow spotted blob that had me entranced for hours. Sadly, my desire never came true – but I still hold my Mr Blobby cuddly toy as one of my most treasured possessions and he happily accompanies me to bed every night (despite his missing eye).*

*When I was ten years old all I ever wanted was to be a Spice Girl. I used to drive my mum and dad crazy, running around the house, shouting out the lyrics to* Wannabe *whilst performing a little dance routine I'd made up. I was constantly putting my hand on my hip and swinging it out to the side, making a peace sign with my other hand and shouting 'Girl power!' as loud as I could. I loved them so much that I even named my goldfish Ginger after*

*Geri – my favourite Spice. I was devastated when she decided to leave. The Spice Girls with no Ginger just wasn't the same, and so my passion to become one of them simply ended (after crying my eyes out for hours, of course).*

*At some point that extrovert little girl who used to sing to anyone, who would listen and dance without a care in the world, became painfully shy and bashful. I suddenly became less confident at school and around other people – preferring the company of a good book to an actual human. It's bizarre how everything changed; at primary school I was the girl everyone wanted to befriend, but by secondary school I had become awkward and tried my best to avoid everyone. I hated attention, people asking me questions or putting me in the spotlight; I preferred to blend into the background unnoticed. I felt safer that way. On the odd occasion that anyone would attempt to hold eye contact with me I'd usually end up shaking like a leaf or turning bright red, causing me to stare at the floor for the rest of the day. Actually, I did have one friend, Mary Lance, who was equally as socially inept as I was. I say we were friends – but in reality we hardly ever talked to each other, so I guess she was more like a silent partner. It was just nice to have someone by my side at lunchtimes or in class, someone who wouldn't pry into my life. I think we took comfort in the fact that we weren't alone.*

*At the end of my A levels, when the rest of my year had either secured a place at university (Mary went off to study dentistry at Sheffield) or planned to take a gap year so that they could travel the world, I was still unsure of what I wanted from life. I decided to join those taking a gap year, although not to travel. Wandering aimlessly around the globe and experiencing what the world had to offer did have its appeal, but I just wasn't quite ready to leave*

*my home or my mum at that point. I was simply going to stay in my home village of Rosefont Hill, deep in the Kent countryside, and get a little job to tide me over until I decided what I wanted to do with my days.*

*I started my job hunt by dropping off my CV in the village shops – there weren't and aren't that many to target. We have a bank, a library, a post office, Budgens, a florist, a few clothes shops, a hardware store, a café and a teashop . . . hardly the most riveting high street ever! The last place I entered was Tea-on-the-Hill, perched on the hill's peak, with great views over the rest of the village.*

*As I entered the teashop, my eyes wandered over the seven tables covered in mismatched floral print tablecloths, each surrounded by two or three chairs – all different shapes and designs. The cups, saucers and teapots being used by the customers were also contrasting in their patterns. Absolutely nothing matched, but bizarrely it all fitted together perfectly. The smell of freshly baked scones filled my nostrils and 1950s jazz played softly in the background. I was staring at a secret little den for women – why had I never been in here before?*

*Flying around the room was a woman who I guessed was in her sixties. Her grey hair was set in a big rollered quiff at the front, with the rest of her curls held in underneath a net. I watched her dart between customers – taking orders, bringing out food and stopping briefly for a little natter here and there. She continued to keep a calm smile on her face, even though it was clear that she was running the shop alone.*

*I stood at the counter and waited for her to come over, which she eventually did whilst wiping her hands clean on her pink floral apron, which covered a glamorous light blue dress underneath.*

*'Hello there, deary. Sorry about the wait. What can I get you?' she asked, with a broad smile and kind blue eyes.*

*In the previous shops I'd walked into I had just wanted to throw my CV into the manager's hands and then bolt for the door, instantly feeling uncomfortable as panic started to consume me, but there was something about this woman that had me rooted to the spot. I even held her eye contact for a few brief moments and almost felt comfortable doing so.*

*'Actually, I came to drop off my* CV*,' I said, as I fumbled through my bag and pulled out a freshly printed one. The lady took it from my hands and casually glanced over it.*

*'Have you ever worked in a shop before?' she asked, squinting at the paper.*

*'Yes, a florist's,' I said quietly.*

*'So you already know how to greet customers with a friendly smile?'*

*I nodded politely as I felt her scrutinize me from head to toe, the smile still plastered on her heavily wrinkled face.*

*Perhaps I should have told her at this point that I'd spent most of my time there washing dirty buckets in the back room out of sight and not with the customers at all; but before I could speak up she'd moved on.*

*'How many hours are you looking for?' she asked.*

*I hadn't thought this far ahead, but one glimpse around the room told me that I'd gladly spend a lot of time here. 'As many as you can give me.'*

*'And – one last thing – do you like cake?'*

*'I love it,' I said, giving her a nervous smile.*

*'Good to hear! You're hired. You've come in at a very good*

*time actually, my last waitress unexpectedly quit yesterday – with no explanation!'*

*'Really?'*

*'Sadly, yes . . . although she was a grumpy chops so I'm not too bothered. I'm Molly by the way.'*

*'I'm Sophie.' I offered my hand out for her to shake but she looked at the hand, grabbed it and pulled me in for a warm hug instead. I can remember actually gasping at the intimacy, as it wasn't something I was used to. At first I felt rigid and stiff but once the shock had subsided it became strangely calming and pleasant.*

*'Now, do you have any plans for the rest of the day?' she asked softly, releasing me from her embrace.*

*I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders.*

*'Great, let's class this as your first day, then.' She slid a tray with a pot of tea and a cup and saucer in my direction. 'Go take that to Mrs Williams, the lady in the cream blouse with the purple rinse to the left – the one with her nose buried in* Bella. *I'll go dig you out an apron.'*

*Picking up the tray I made my way over to Mrs Williams and carefully placed the pot of boiling tea in front of her. She lowered her magazine and peered up at me over the top of her glasses; I instantly recognized her from out and about in the village.*

*'You're new here,' she stated.*

*'Yes, I've just started. Literally.'*

*'You live in Willows Mews don't you? Your mum's that lovely lady at the library.'*

*'That's right,' I nodded, shyly.*

*'Aw, she's ever so kind – always helps me take my books*

*home. I've got greedy eyes when it comes to books, you see!' She let out a childlike chuckle and screwed her eyes shut. 'Send her my love then, won't you darling,' she said, whilst pouring out a cup of tea and stirring in two sugars.*

*'Will do, Mrs Williams,' I said, as I walked back to Molly at the counter.*

*'You're Lilly May's daughter?' Molly asked.*

*'That's right,' I said, with a slight nod.*

*'I thought so. Well if you're anything like her then I'm lucky to have you on board,' she said with a kind smile as she held out her hand and gave me an apron.*

*My first day working in the teashop whizzed by in a blur – there was one hairy moment when a plate managed to slip out of my hand, fly through the air and smash rather loudly into a billion pieces, causing me to blub dramatically – but other than that it went quite smoothly.*

*My gap year flew by before I'd even had a chance to think about what I wanted to do next, and so I extended it to two years . . . then three years . . . then four, until I suddenly realized that I had no desire to go to university at all; I was happy where I was, and am still just as happy eight years later.*

*Although I'd started as a waitress, Molly put a lot of faith in me and taught me all she knew about baking cakes and service with a smile. Every day we bake fresh scones, muffins and cakes, and experiment with new recipes, whilst putting the world to rights. At sixty-six years old Molly is continuously told by her doctor that she should be slowing down and starting to take things easy – but she's not one to listen.*

*I didn't just find a passion and career path when I stumbled*

*upon Tea-on-the-Hill that day; I also found a best friend. Looking back now, I know Molly had an inkling of who I was as soon as I walked into the shop. I also believe that, knowing who I was, there was no way she would turn me away without helping me, because it's in her nature to help those in need of healing; and I certainly needed some of that.*

# PART ONE

# I

It's now the beginning of April and after a dreary winter the village has started to come back to life with wild daffodils, tulips and other bright flowers coming into bloom. Different colours burst from the ground, bringing with them a sense of hope and optimism. Rabbits gaily hop across the path in the distance, happy to have the sun shining on their backs once again, and the birds in the trees seem to be chirping louder than usual.

I pull my red woollen coat in around me to keep out the crisp spring air that threatens to chill my bones. My cold button nose is buried deep inside a battered copy of *Wuthering Heights* as I make my way down the tree-lined alleyway that leads to the quiet High Street. Yes, I admit – I'm one of those annoying people who walk through life oblivious to my surroundings, while spying any impending dangers in my peripheral vision, thanks to my literary obsession! I still manage to keep up the obligatory nod of the head or polite 'Good Morning' to the people I pass, whilst continuing to stay in the world of Cathy and Heathcliff, although saying that, at this time of the morning on a Wednesday, there are only a few other people milling around, mostly preoccupied shop owners, so I can allow myself to sink deeper into their tragic love story.

Taking strong strides as I make my way up the hill, I spot Molly in the shop, on the phone with her nose pressed up against the window. She gives me a slight wink and a wave, and then continues with whatever she's up to.

'Are you sure she's heading this way?' she quizzes the person on the phone as I come in the front door, putting my book in my bag. 'I can't see her yet . . .' Molly squints her eyes to the point where they're almost shut and then widens them in surprise. 'Oooh, June,' she coos, excitement making her voice go squeaky. 'There she is now! Gosh, what on earth is she wearing that for? She looks like she's in a banana suit!'

I follow Molly's gaze and find that she's looking at Mrs Tayler, who has decided to venture outside today wearing a tight, bright yellow two-piece. Oh the scandal! I roll my eyes and walk over to the oven to start baking. I can still hear Molly wittering away on the phone while I tie on my red and pink spotted apron.

'You know what it is, don't you? It's her birthday next week – her son phoned up and ordered a cake. I suspect she's having a meltdown over that . . . Sixty-five! Hmmmm . . . Yes . . . Well yes, June – she never got over Robert leaving her like that. What an awful thing to happen to her . . . Ooh June, I'd better go – she's heading this way . . . Yes, yes! Call you later.'

Molly hops away from the window, pops the phone back on the counter top and manages to look preoccupied with rearranging the counter display before Mrs Tayler enters the shop. I find myself rolling my

eyes once again as Molly turns to welcome her with a beaming smile.

'Hello, Mrs Tayler! Ooh, I must say, you're looking rather colourful today . . . yellow really suits you!' Ahh, the friendly two-facedness of village life, I think to myself. I block out the conversation and concentrate on the Victoria sponge I'm whisking up.

A short while later, once Mrs Tayler leaves, Molly joins me by the oven.

'Come on,' she quips.

'What?'

'Out with it!'

'Huh?'

'You've been banging around for the last fifteen minutes. Why?'

This is news to me as I thought I was hiding my frustration quite well, so I can't help but look a tad sheepish (old habits and all that).

'I'm sorry, it's just . . .' I'm at a loss for words.

I've been 'that talked about someone', and there's nothing worse than seeing those curtains twitch as you walk past someone's house or hearing conversations stop as you walk into a room. I could tell her that it annoys me the way everyone in this village thinks they have a right to gossip about everyone else's business. I could tell her I dislike it when she's mean about others. And I could tell her that there's got to be more to life than her constant gassing over the downfall of the locals. But I don't. Because I know that in truth Molly doesn't have a bad bone in her body. Surely she's allowed

to vent every now and then? Especially if it's only over something as insignificant as the colour of someone's outfit?

'I'm sorry,' I say, shaking my head and letting out a sigh and rubbing my head. 'I didn't sleep a wink last night. I've got a bit of a headache.'

'Oh, deary,' she coos, feeling my forehead to check my temperature. 'Do you want to go home? Try and catch up on that sleep? I'll be fine here on my own.'

See? She might have a loose tongue occasionally, but that will never overshadow her kind heart.

'No, don't be silly. I'm probably just dehydrated,' I say, as I pour a glass of water and down the lot in front of her. 'I'll be feeling better in no time.'

She looks at me like I've lost my marbles, but eventually my beaming smile wins her over and we both start icing cupcakes she baked earlier which have been left to cool.

At the end of my shift I drop in on Mum at the village library, which is several doors down from the shop, towards the bottom of the hill. Being council funded, and only small, it's not the most luxurious library you've ever seen. It has ten rows of battered books, two old computers (which both take about five minutes to get online), a working area with wooden tables and chairs and a chill-out area with multi-coloured beanbags scattered around. It could be a little on the depressing side, but Mum takes great pride in the place and makes sure the rows of books gleam to perfection, that her wall

displays are always fun and inviting, and that she is quick to order in anything requested that they don't have in stock.

I find her on her knees restacking magazines, which I've never seen in here before.

'Hello, you!' Mum says as she gives me a tired smile and lets the magazine she's holding rest on her lap. It's clearly been a long day. Her hazel eyes have dark circles beneath them and they look as though they're struggling
to stay open. Her hands go up to her chestnut-coloured hair, which is pulled back into a tight, high bun. She slides her palms along it to check that it's still neat – she hates it when wispy bits fly into her face or get into her eyes.

'Hello, Mum,' I say, bending down and giving her a kiss on the cheek. 'What's this?' I say, gesturing at the magazines in front of her.

'Oh, we thought it might encourage more youngsters to come in here.'

'By providing them with gossip about their favourite celebs?'

'Why not?' she asks, frowning at me. 'I've already spotted some very interesting articles while I've been unpacking them.'

I pick up one of the glossy titles from the shelf and flick through it, scanning the images of flawless men and women on red carpets being compared to their more natural-looking bodies while semi-naked on holiday. 'Do you really think you're going to encourage

people to read books by showing them pictures of celebrities looking fat or thin on beaches?'

'Keep your voice down,' she whispers, glancing over her shoulder. 'Reading is reading – no matter what the material. It's all about getting them in here – they might pick up a book or two while they're at it.'

I can't help but think she's being too optimistic as I put the magazine back on the shelf but, looking at Mum's hopeful face, I instantly feel guilty for slamming her idea.

'We've also had some new books delivered,' she continues, as she picks herself up from the floor, brushes dust off of her knee-length black skirt and removes bits of fluff from her black shirt. 'Including a brand new copy of *Jane Eyre*,' she continues. 'So you no longer have to battle with those loose or missing pages!'

'Brilliant! Although to be honest it's probably my fault they've fallen out – I must've read that book about a hundred times.'

'Well, yes. That and the schoolgirls who leave it in their bags to be bashed around . . .'

'True.'

'I also heard a little bit of news today.'

'Mum, I don't want to hear any gossip!'

'Oh, Soph, it's not gossip! Anyway, you'll like this. Mrs Woodman from Cavalier Hall came in this afternoon. She's been visited by a location scout or something from a film company. They want to use the hall as the setting for one of their films.' She grins at

me, knowing that I'll want to hear more despite my protesting.

'What film?' I quiz.

'This is the bit I think you'll like . . .' She pushes her glasses up her nose with one finger and pauses for dramatic effect. '*Pride and Prejudice!*'

'No!'

'Yep!'

'Another one?' I cry in disgust. Mum looks at me bewildered.

'I thought you'd be pleased. You love that book.'

'Yeah I love the book – it doesn't mean I enjoy it when film companies come along and butcher it.'

'Oh I 'm sure they won't do that,' she says dismissively. 'According to Mrs Woodman the film's got a huge budget and cast. They wouldn't tell her who was involved, but – '

I interrupt her with a huge gasp. 'I wonder who'll be playing Darcy!' My mind ponders all sorts of possibilities, but only one man stands out to me as the one I'd love to have here in Rosefont Hill – Jude Law.

Unsurprisingly, Mum isn't the only person Mrs Woodman has decided to share her exciting news with. The next day when I get to work Molly is again on the phone to June, this time speculating over how much Mr and Mrs Woodman would've been paid for the use of their home. The news doesn't stop spreading there. In fact, it seems to be the hot topic with everybody in the village

as I overhear snippets of different conversations throughout the day.

The shop has slowly become the 'cool' place to hang out, attracting grannies and mums in the daytime and then schoolgirls from four o'clock onwards. There are a few different groups of girls that come in on a regular basis, but this afternoon we are joined by Janet, Ella and Charlotte – three fifteen-year-olds who simply love talking boys, make-up and gossip whilst sipping their pot of peppermint tea and picking at their skinny blueberry muffins.

As I sort through the cake orders for the next day, I can't help but listen in on their chatter as they mull over the rumours of who might be attached to the film.

Janet, a feisty brunette who's clearly the leader of the group with her bossy ways, is the first to divulge.

'I saw on *getcluedup.com* that Bobby Green is going to be playing that Mr Darcy guy.'

'Who's that?' asks Ella with a confused expression on her pretty face, her wild curly blonde hair sticking out all over the place uncontrollably.

'You know,' sighs Janet. 'That dude from this year's *Big Brother.*'

'The one who peed in the pool?' Ella squeals. 'And had a threesome in the garden?'

I chuckle quietly to myself at hearing the young girls talk so candidly about sex – a topic I'd never have been able to talk so openly about at their age.

'That's the one!' nods Janet.

Ella lets out a huge groan at the confirmation.

'But he's not even an actor! That would be crap!'

I vaguely remember hearing the girls talk of this Bobby Green character over the summer. To say I'd be disappointed if this 'lad' were to turn up instead of a serious actor would be an understatement. In fact, it would turn something that could be incredibly exciting into something decidedly naff!

'That's what I read, though,' sulks Janet. Looking deflated that her findings hadn't impressed her friends more.

'Yeah well you can't believe anything you read . . .'

Charlotte, the quiet redhead who seems to quiver in the very existence of these two girls she calls her BFFs, pauses for a moment before deciding to speak. 'Actually, I heard that Billy Buskin might be doing it.'

I watch as Janet and Ella whip their heads around in disbelief and just stare at their friend.

'OMG!' squeals Janet. 'I would like, love that! Where did you read that?'

Charlotte instantly becomes introverted, the attention of her friends making her look uncomfortable, a feeling I can easily relate to. She slowly continues to share her knowledge in a quiet voice that I struggle to hear.

'I didn't read it. I was told it,' she mutters.

'By who?' says Ella, who already seems sceptical.

'Lauren Davenport.' Before the other two can query the source she continues swiftly. 'Her mum is going to be giving horse-riding lessons to the cast, you know – the ones who have to ride. She said his name was on a

list she was given. Although Lauren told me not to tell anyone –'

'You're so gullible Char! I can't believe you fell for that,' says Ella interrupting her in a belittling tone, chilling my insides. 'As if Billy Buskin would bother with doing a film about some old book. He has just done blockbusters. Why would he bother?'

'But he has just done that war film,' argues Charlotte.

I've no idea who they're talking about and so zone out and think about Jude. Imagine walking through the village and bumping into him every day! That would be absolute heaven! Of course, he'd obviously bring lots to the role too . . . charm and charisma. I don't just want him here to ogle at – honest!

I'm not entirely sure where my Jude obsession has come from, but I think it started when Mum brought home a copy of *The Holiday* for us to watch one night a couple of years ago. One look at his playful smile, smouldering eyes and dashing good looks and I'd fallen under his spell. Embarrassingly, I actually feel myself smile back at him onscreen sometimes, as though his romantic words are meant for my ears only. Yes, sad I know, but he just sucks me in. I'm not a big film buff, not by any means, but quiz me on a film that Jude's been in and I'll be able to give you the right answer!