The Black Amulet
by J R Wallis

It was easy enough to spot the Vampire at the far end of the alleyway. As she peered round the corner of the last building in the street, Ruby spied the creature standing inside a yellow cone of light thrown down by the single street lamp, staring into a shop window.

She tiptoed round the corner, keeping close to the wall, and slid into a deep dark doorway to hide. As she moved closer to the Vampire, the old-fashioned revolver Ruby was holding tutted, then swore quietly for good measure. To be fair, the gun had been grumbling for the last ten minutes, making sure Ruby knew exactly how it felt about her hunting such a dangerous creature, urging her to turn back. A speaking gun, let alone one that could curse so well, would have scrambled the brains of most people – as would seeing a Vampire in a small market town in the middle of the night – but to Ruby none of it seemed exceptional now.

Up until a few months ago, she'd been living a regular life. But she lived in the Badlands now, a place on the fringes of the everyday world that most ordinary people knew nothing about. Not only was magic possible there, but the Badlands was also inhabited by strange and vicious monsters, making it very dangerous. But, in spite of all the extraordinary creatures that could be found there, Ruby was by far the strangest living thing of all because she was the only girl.

As far as she knew, the Badlands had only ever been a place where men and their boy apprentices had worked, tackling monsters and other nasties to keep ordinary people safe. Ruby always glowed with pride whenever she remembered she was the first girl Badlander. Even if it was still a secret for now.

'Keep it down, will you?' she hissed as the gun tutted again, before stringing together another collection of rather fruity-sounding words that would have embarrassed anyone who knew what they meant.

'Ruby, for the last time, go home,' it whispered. 'You might be brave, but you're too stubborn for your own good. You're out of your depth with this one.'

'I know what I'm doing.'

'Tackling a Vampire is almost impossible without magic. Why you've insisted on hunting it down is beyond me.'

'Why do you think?' hissed Ruby. 'All Victor Brynn makes me do is read books. It's like being back at school. We never go hunting like proper Badlanders.'

'That's because you've got a lot to learn under the circumstances.'

'You mean because I'm a girl.'

Words in Context

Find and highlight the following words in the text.

- inhabited
- apprentices
- stubborn

What do you think they mean?
What words could you replace them with?

Retrieval questions

1. What was extraordinary about Ruby?
2. What is unusual about the gun?
3. Who spoke first?

Inference questions.

1. What time of day is it – support your answer with clues from the text?

2. What does the verb 'hissed' suggest about the way Ruby spoke to the gun?

Choice questions

1. What phrase does the author use to describe how Ruby felt about being the only female Bandlander?

2. What sentence does the author use to inform the reader that Ruby is new to the job?

3. What genre do you think this extract is from?

Challenge question

Draw a picture of how you think Ruby looks.

Mucking About
by John Chambers

It was a fine sunny day, and the only dark cloud around was Manchán's face, scowling at his family. For a week now his mother had been hinting at a surprise and at last he had found out what it was. Her brother, the abbot from the monastery across the lake, had come to collect him, for Manchán was going to be sent to become a monk. A *monk* for heaven's sake!

'Don't say that,' said Brother Abstemius.

'Say what?' said Manchán.

'You know what,' said Brother Abstemius, and Manchán sighed.

'Right,' he said. 'Sorry.'

'For your penance,' added Brother Abstemius, 'you shall peel two bushels of turnips for Brother Cook. He needs them for breakfast in the morning.'



Turnips! For breakfast, moaned Manchán, though not out loud. Brother Abstemius was watching him much too closely for that. Was this how being a monk was going to be?

'There's nothing wrong with monking,' said Manchán's mother, glaring at him. 'It's a very respectable profession. People will look up to you.'

Great, thought Manchán, his mind still reeling from the turnips.

'Is "monking" really a word?' asked Manchán's sister Méabh. 'It doesn't sound like a word to me.'

'Of course it's a word,' said Manchán's father, who couldn't read. 'It's a word like fishing, or hurling, or singing.' He listed off the three things in life that were the most important to him. Now monking was added to the list. 'Good man, Manchán,' he said. 'You'll bring honour to the family.'

Manchán frowned. 'Why can't I bring honour to the family by fishing or hurling or singing?' he asked. 'Like you do.'

His father scratched his head but couldn't come up with an answer. He gave up and waited for Manchán's mother to explain.

Words in Context

Find and highlight the following words in the text.

Penance
Profession
Reeling
Monastery

What do you think they mean?
What words could you replace them with?

Retrieval questions

1. What was the only dark cloud?
2. What was the surprise?
3. What were the turnips for?
4. How is Brother Abstemius related to Manchán?
5. Where was the monastery

Inference questions.

1. What clues can you find in the text which suggest this is not a modern day tale?

2. Why does the phrase 'A monk for heaven's sake' make Brother Abstemius angry?

3. Why did Manchán's mother want him to be a monk? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

Choice questions

1. How does the author portray the father's character? What makes you think this?

2. List three verbs which the author uses to show how Manchán feels about becoming a monk.

3. Skim and scan for the word '*Great*' – why is it in an italic font?

My heart is thumping so fast, I feel like it wants to jump right out of my chest. My shoulder muscles are aching and my hands burn as they pull the oars. Behind me, I can hear Jim counting the strokes – two hundred and ten, two hundred and eleven ... As I lean backwards on each stroke, I can sense my ponytail brushing the floor of the boat – swish, swish, swish. The boat is rocking like crazy, and I wonder if I'm going to be thrown out. A sudden rush of ice-cold water hits me in the face, and drips down my cheeks, but I don't even blink. I have to keep going, no matter what. A small silvery fish flies past my face, just missing my nose. I want to give up, but I can hear Beth's voice from what feels like a million miles away.

'Keep going, Molly. You can do it. Don't stop now – you can't let the team down. We're almost there.'

It seems like a million years have passed before I hear the most beautiful sound in the world – the bell announcing the end of the race. I let go of the oars, and before I have time to check my hands for blisters, Beth is hugging me.

'We did it!' she shrieks. 'We did it!'

My legs are a bit wobbly as I climb out of the boat so I quickly sit down on the grass next to the washing line. Mum hands me a glass of water.

'Well done, darling,' she says. 'All you needed were three hundred strokes in your ten minutes, and you even went over that! You and Beth have beaten Jim and me in the Saturday challenge – again!'

I don't know what it feels like to row the whole way across the Atlantic, but I wonder if it feels a bit like this?

Even though I was rowing a battered old dinghy that Jim found in a skip somewhere.

Even though the boat was on the grass, and Mum had been rocking it from side to side while I rowed.

Even though the spray of water came from the garden hose that Jim was holding.

Even though the only fish in the garden came from an old fishing game Beth had found in the shed.

Even though the finishing bell was a saucepan and a wooden spoon.

Beth was dancing around the garden, singing 'We are the champions.' Mum and Jim were laughing like little kids. I lay back on the grass and tried to catch my breath.

My best friend Beth and her dad moved in with Mum and me ages ago. At first that was really weird, but now I was getting used to it, and sometimes I can hardly remember a time when they didn't live with us. Like all dads, Jim can be a bit annoying sometimes, but he comes up with the craziest and best ideas. The Saturday challenge was in its third week, and it was always Mum and Jim against Beth and me. The rules were a bit vague, but no one cared – mostly we were all too busy laughing for anything else to matter.

The first week, Jim set up a very complicated obstacle course in the garden, where you had to run the first half in odd wellies, and the second half with a glass of water in your pocket. The second week, we all had to pretend to be horses, jumping over bamboo canes propped up on kitchen chairs, with extra points for the best horsey sound effects. These things might sound a bit lame and stupid, but as long as you know there's no one planning to make a video and post it on YouTube, they are really, really fun.

After a while, everyone calmed down.

'That was so brilliant, Jim,' I said. 'I think that was the best challenge ever.'

'Thanks, Molly,' he said. 'I do my best – and wait till you see what I've got planned for next week.'

'Tell us, please, Dad!' said Beth. 'I don't think I can wait a whole week to find out.'

'Sorry, sweetie-pie,' he said as he put his arm around her. 'You're just going to have to be patient. Now let's go inside, I think it's time we ordered that takeaway you've been promised. How about we get a big pot of Irish stew?'

You've Got a Friend
by Judi Curtin

Words in Context

Find and highlight the following words in the text.

- wobbly
- vague
- propped

What do you think they mean?
What words could you replace them with?

Retrieval questions

1. Where is Molly?
2. What created the spray from the ocean?
3. What events were involved in the obstacle race?

Inference questions

1. Does Molly have long or short hair? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
2. What clues in the first paragraph shows how determined Molly is?.
3. How do you think Molly would feel if a video was posted on YouTube? Explain why you think this.
4. Why do you think Jim has designed all these silly activities?

Choice questions

1. Why does the author repeat 'Even though' at the start of several sentences.

Challenge question

What effect does the first paragraph have on the reader?

Pages & Co. Tilly and the Bookwanderers by Anna James

Matilda Pages pushed open the door of Pages & Co. and breathed in deeply, taking in the familiar scent of just-blown-out candles, dark chocolate and, of course, books. For a second she forgot that she was splattered with muddy water and simply relished the week's holiday that stretched out in front of her like the view from the gate of a fairground. But the bubble of calm popped as the damp seeped through her tights, making her shiver, and she marched through the door connecting the bookshop to the narrow house she lived in with her grandparents. She let the door crash behind her, tossed her school bag on the table – accidentally sending a pile of potatoes flying – and flopped dramatically into a chair.

She paused, waiting for her grandmother to react, and when Grandma finally turned, Tilly flung her head theatrically on to her arms on the table.

'Happy half-term, Tilly,' Grandma said, looking around in confusion. 'What on earth is the matter? And why are you taking it out on the potatoes?'

Tilly blushed and sheepishly started picking them up.

'And you're soaking – it's not still raining, is it?' Grandma said, peering out of the kitchen window. She gave her granddaughter's head an affectionate rub as Tilly kneeled to rescue a stray potato that had rolled into the cat basket. Tilly sighed and leaned against Grandma's legs.

'Grace went through a puddle on her bike and it splashed all over me.'

'Surely she didn't do it on purpose?' Grandma asked gently.

Tilly harrumphed in disagreement.

'Aren't you two as thick as thieves?' Grandma said.

'That was before, when we were just little. She has new friends now,' Tilly said. 'She got on to the netball team, and only wants to be with those girls now. She sits with Ammara and Poppy every day.'

'Have I met Ammara and Poppy?' Grandma asked.

'No, they went to St Enid's, and they stick together all the time.'

Retrieval questions

1. What was the name of the shop?
2. Who is Grace?
3. What pet did grandma own?

Inference questions.

1. What does the sentence 'Tilly blushed and sheepishly started picking them up' suggest about how Matilda then felt?

2. Why do you think the shop had 'just-blown-out-candles'? What might this suggest?

3. What kind of shop did Matilda's grandparents own?

Choice questions

1. What does the phrase 'as thick as thieves' mean?

2. What does the author mean by 'the bubble of calm popped'?

3. What does the word 'harrumphed' mean?

4. The author uses a simile in paragraph one – why is it effective?.

5. What does the word 'seeped' mean? Can you think of another word which could replace it?

6. Can you identify the verbs the author uses to show that Matilda was in a bad mood in paragraph one?

We See Everything
by William Sutcliffe

I don't know if I can go through with it.

Pressed against a shrapnel-pitted wall, I stare out over the expanse of collapsed brick, crumpled tarmac, crushed concrete and twisted steel at the blackberry bush I spotted yesterday, a short distance into the exclusion zone.

I could run there in a few seconds. Anywhere else it would be so easy. But anywhere else, the berries would be gone.

A woman with grey-streaked hair, wearing a thick winter coat despite the bright September warmth, emerges from the apartment block behind me. She eyes me warily before shuffling away.

You don't see many people on the streets round here, at the outer edge of London. That's why I come, to look out at the exclusion zone and feel briefly alone, away from the noise and crowds of the city. I don't do it often – it's an eerie place – but there's nowhere else to catch a breath of wind or look at anything further away than the other side of the street.

All night I've been turning over whether I dare risk going out into this lethal, barren area between me and the fence, wavering one way then the other, but even now, having returned with bags to collect the berries, I still can't decide.

Is it really likely that someone is watching this desolate space all the time, alert enough to spot one teenager breaking cover for a few seconds? If they did see me, would they really shoot?

I look beyond the wasteland towards the nearest watch-tower, attempting to gauge the distance, scanning for a flicker of movement or a flash of reflected sunlight, but the concrete and tinted glass give nothing away.

When my eyes fall back to the bush, picking out the glisten of dark, ripe berries, my mouth begins to water, and all the dire warnings I've heard about entering the exclusion zone evaporate from my mind. After a whole night of anxious wavering, my legs rather than my brain seem to make the final decision.

I crouch low and sprint, scurrying like a cockroach out into the troughs and hillocks of rubble, my knees almost knocking my chin with each step. As soon as I'm in motion the distance to the bush seems to stretch. I barely breathe, feeling utterly exposed, braced for the impact of a bullet I wouldn't even hear until it had ripped through my flesh.

While every cell of my body drives me on over the angular, dusty surface, a disembodied voice drifts through my skull, asking, *Why are you doing this? When did you get so dumb? Why would you risk your life for something so small?*

I fling myself to the ground in the shelter of the bush, cutting my knee on a jut of broken concrete, but I feel only a dull echo of pain, even as blood pearls through my jeans. I can barely believe I have come out here, into this vast flattened rectangle of land that surrounds what's left of London.

Words in Context

Find and highlight the following words in the text.

Exclusion
Warily
Barren
Desolate
Gauge
Braced

What do you think they mean?
What words could you replace them with?

Retrieval questions

1. Why is the narrator desperate to cross the exclusion zone?
2. Why was the narrator surprised by what the woman was wearing?
3. What city is the story set?

Inference questions.

1. How old is the narrator? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
2. What phrase tells the reader that the narrator likes blackberries?
3. What has happened in the city? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
4. What kind of person is the narrator? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

Choice questions

1. The author uses a simile to show how the narrator moves – what is it?
2. Who is the disembodied voice?.
3. The author uses a number of questions in the extract – why do you think this is?