

Praise for



The
Skylarks'
War

The title 'The Skylarks' War' is written in a large, elegant, black cursive script. The word 'The' is smaller and positioned above 'Skylarks'. The word 'War' is written in a similar style below 'Skylarks'. Three small, grey silhouettes of birds in flight are scattered around the text: one above the 'l' in 'Skylarks', one to the left of the 'W' in 'War', and one in the upper right corner of the page.

‘Beautifully written, witty, observant . . . Merits a place in the canon of children’s classics’ *Sunday Times* Children’s Book of the Year

‘Chime, resonance and sparkle – a truly great read’ Costa Children’s Book Award judges

‘McKay is at her best in this poignant family drama’ *Guardian*

‘Picking up a book by Hilary McKay is like slipping on warm bed socks on a chilly night . . . McKay’s cleverness is that she makes this well-worn subject feel fresh and the characters feel like old friends’ *The Times*, Children’s Book of the Year

‘This belongs among the classics of children’s literature . . . Funny, sad, warm, it is about growing up and finding what you love, intellectually and emotionally’ *The Sunday Times*, Children’s Book of the Week

‘*The Skylarks’ War* by Hilary McKay rivals *Testament of Youth* for delicacy and heart-wringing clarity in its portrayal of the home front during the First World War’ *Independent*

‘A funny, moving and emotionally insightful book that could, and should, be read by all ages’ *Daily Mail*

‘The kind of classic that rings with beauty and conviction and heart-stopping emotion’ Amanda Craig

‘This book is agony and ecstasy, and never have I read such a human and accessible account of World War I. Vivid, hilarious, and heartbreaking, Hilary McKay’s radiant characters touch my heart like real people, friends and loved ones I know well. Possibly the finest writer of our time’ Elizabeth Wein, author of *Code Name Verity*

‘This is McKay at her finest, all the heart and warmth of the Casson family books – with a touch of the Cazalets. It’s both a thrilling family adventure and a truthful, heart-breaking examination of the impact of war . . . [an] exceptional historical novel’ Fiona Noble, *The Bookseller*, Children’s Book of the Month

‘Wise and kind and utterly heart-wrenching and full of characters you will give your whole heart to’ Anna James, author of *Pages & Co*

‘Hilary McKay is surely the heir to Mary Wesley. *The Skylarks’ War* is just lovely’ Charlotte Eyre, *The Bookseller*

‘Hilary McKay is a genius. This beautiful book is so many things simultaneously: complex and subtle, beautiful and raw, timely and timeless. I never wanted it to end’ Bonnie-Sue Hitchcock, author of *The Smell of Other People’s Houses*

‘I laughed, I cried and I wanted all the characters to be my best friend’ Natasha Farrant

‘Winning as ever, with an overall *Secret Garden* feel’ *Kirkus Reviews*

‘A moving family story’ *The Week Junior*

‘The best children’s book I’ve read this year’ Katherine Rundell

‘I thoroughly loved *The Skylarks’ War*. The story is at once intimate and sweeping, with Clarry the shining heart of it all’ Kimberly Brubaker Bradley, author of *The War That Saved My Life*

‘Hilary McKay’s novel is about love as much as war: the effect on children of being deprived of it and the beneficial results on adults of its persistence. McKay is incapable of writing an uninteresting character or a dull scene . . . I loved it’ Mary Hoffman

‘. . . a family book, like those of Noel Streatfeild or R F Delderfield . . . I find it hard to imagine anyone not enjoying it. You will smile, and you will cry . . . You will recognise yourself and your friends’ Adele Geras

‘Quite simply, *The Skylarks’ War* is close to perfect. Wise, kind, witty and incredibly moving it will break your heart and remake it again a few times over’ *Scoop* magazine

‘Hilary McKay has a rare gift for novels about families and their interplay. Here, she weaves her story round one of the most powerful backdrops in history. And she does so with the lightest of touch which makes her history come alive’ LoveReading4Kids.co.uk – November Book of the Month



Also published by Macmillan Children's Books

Straw into Gold: Fairy Tales Re-Spun

(Previously published in hardback as
Hilary McKay's Fairy Tales)

HILARY MCKAY



The
Skylark's
War

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS



First published 2018 by Macmillan Children's Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-5098-9494-9

Copyright © Hilary McKay 2018

The right of Hilary McKay to be identified as the
author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

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 written permission of the publisher.

Pan Macmillan does not have any control over, or any responsibility for,
any author or third party websites referred to in or on this book.

3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

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

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of
trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without
the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than
that in which it is published and without a similar condition including
this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

1902–1908

ONE
Clarry and Peter



More than one hundred years ago, in the time of gas lamps and candlelight, when shops had wooden counters and the streets were full of horses, a baby girl was born. Nobody was pleased about this except the baby's mother. The baby's father did not like children, not even his own, and Peter, the baby's brother, was only three years old and did not understand the need for any extra people in his world.

But the baby's mother *was* pleased. She named the baby Clarissa, after her own lost mother. '*Clear and bright,*' she whispered to her brand-new baby. 'That's what your name means: *Clear and bright.* Clarry.'

Clarry was three days old when her mother died. Many things were said about this great calamity, and some of them were regretted later, when people had calmed down and there were fewer tears and more worried frowns in the narrow stone house where the baby had so inconsiderately arrived and her mother had so inconveniently departed. For it was, as the baby's father remarked (in no one's presence, unless a

week-old baby counted), a blasted nuisance. And if it had to happen, and she had to die, the father added bitterly, then it was a pity that the baby had not also . . .

Luckily, at this point three-year-old Peter stamped into the room, and stopped the awful words that might have come next. Peter was kinder than his father. He merely gripped the bars of the baby's cot and screamed.

'Go away, go away,' he screamed at the quiet baby. 'Mumma, Mumma, Mumma, Mumma, Mumma!'

Poor Peter's voice was hoarse with shrieking; he had been protesting in this way for what seemed to him a lifetime, but he did not give up. Long after his fingers had been unpeeled one by one from the cot's bars, and he had been hauled downstairs and handed to his grandmother, he kept up his lament.

'It is all completely beyond me,' said Peter's father truthfully to his own mother, the children's grandmother, when she arrived at the house. After Clarry's birth, he took refuge in his office in town as often as possible. There, he did who-knew-what in blissful peace for as long as he could make the hours stretch. He never came home willingly.

The children's grandmother was not there willingly either. The house in Plymouth where Peter and Clarry lived was a long and inconvenient distance from her own Cornish home. Also, she already had one unrequested child living with her, her not-quite-seven-year-old grandson Rupert, whose parents were in India. Rupert had been left behind with his grandfather when she had hurried to take charge at Peter and Clarry's home.

‘Which is not an arrangement that can continue for long,’ she told her son sternly, ‘Rupert being such a handful! I didn’t like leaving him at all!’

‘I expect the best thing would be to take Peter and the . . . er . . . the other one . . . back with you when you leave,’ said the children’s father hopefully as he sidled towards the door. ‘And then all three cousins could be brought up together. Nicer,’ he added, although he did not say for whom.

The children’s grandmother had been expecting this proposal and had prepared a reply. She said very decisively that she would not dream of depriving Clarry and Peter of their father’s company. ‘Even if,’ she added, ‘at my age, I felt able to cope with bringing up three such very young children—’

‘Sixty-five is nothing these days,’ protested her panic-stricken son.

‘I have my heart and my knees,’ his mother said firmly. ‘Your poor father has his chest. However,’ she added (since a look of imminent orphanages was appearing in the panicking one’s eyes), ‘for the present I will stay here and help as best I can.’

To make it possible for Clarry and Peter’s grandmother to stay with them, Rupert in Cornwall was packed off to boarding school. Then, for the next year or so, the children’s grandmother juggled the interviewing of servants, the demands of her abandoned husband, Peter’s rages, Clarry’s teething and their father’s total lack of interest.

‘He’s grieving,’ suggested Miss Vane, who lived across the road.

‘No, he isn’t,’ said the children’s grandmother robustly.

‘Then the poor man is still in shock.’

‘Selfish,’ said the children’s grandmother. ‘Also spoiled. I spoiled both my boys and now I suffer the consequences.’

‘Mrs Penrose!’ exclaimed Miss Vane.

‘Spoiled, selfish, immature and irresponsible,’ continued the children’s grandmother.

Miss Vane laughed nervously and said that dear Mrs Penrose had a very droll sense of humour.

‘If you insist,’ said the children’s grandmother as she wiped Clarry’s chin for the hundredth time that afternoon and removed Peter from the coal scuttle. She considered it a great relief when a few days later she heard that her abandoned husband had caught pneumonia.

‘There’s no one in Cornwall that I trust to be capable of nursing him,’ she told the children’s father. ‘Clarry is walking and almost talking. Peter is quite able to manage by himself. I have found you an excellent general servant who is fond of children, and I absolutely must go home!’

Then, despite Clarry’s startled eyes, Peter’s wails of ‘Come back! Come back! Gramma, Gramma, Gramma, Gramma!’ and their father’s outraged disbelief, she hurried off to Cornwall, by way of horse-drawn cab, steam train and pony trap.

Fortunately for Peter and Clarry, and their despairing parent, in those days almost everybody was either a servant, or employed servants themselves. They were a part of life. Over

the next few years the children were cared for by one after another of a long stream of grumbling, hurrying, short-tempered, tired and underpaid women, who trundled, stomped, tiptoed and bustled through the house. They swept carpets with brooms, boiled puddings in saucepans, washed their charges' hands with hard yellow soap and their faces with the corners of aprons, carried coals, cleared ashes, fried chops, mopped tiles, polished shoes, chased away cats and pigeons, jerked hairbrushes through tangles, made stale-bread-and-milk suppers, shook dust from rugs, sat down with sighs and rose with groans, irritated the children's father with every breath they took, and left as soon as they possibly could to find work that wasn't so hard.

Inside the narrow house, the wallpaper faded and the furniture became shabby but the children grew and grew. Peter became such a nuisance that he was sent to a day school. There, he was discovered to be extremely clever, which Miss Vane said probably accounted for his often shocking temper. Clarry was not a nuisance; she was brown-haired and round-faced, and more or less happy. Miss Vane popped over the road to invite her to join her Sunday School class.

'She doesn't believe in God,' said nine-year-old Peter, who had answered the door. 'I've told her he's not true, haven't I, Clarry?'

Clarry, who had pushed under Peter's arm to smile at Miss Vane, nodded in agreement.

'I think I would prefer to talk about this with your father,' said Miss Vane.

‘Father wouldn’t listen,’ said Peter, and then Mrs Morgan, by far the most long-lasting servant, came hurrying over, dislodged Peter from the doorknob with a bat from a damp dishcloth, removed Clarry’s thumb from her mouth, ordered, ‘Upstairs, the pair of you. You’re forever where you’re not wanted!’ and told Miss Vane that she was sure Mr Penrose would be very pleased to have Clarry out of mischief for an hour or so on Sundays, and they’d send her across in something clean or as best as could be managed.

And this was the beginning of Miss Vane’s Good Deed and Christian Duty of Keeping an Eye on the Family, which was sometimes helpful, and sometimes not, and often made Peter growl.

‘I dare say she’s one of those people who need to make themselves feel useful,’ said the children’s father to Mrs Morgan. ‘She’s offered to help sort out whatever it is the . . . Clarry wears. Her grandmother can’t be relied on, since she still insists on living in Cornwall. Miss Vane is harmless enough. I can’t see why anyone should find the arrangement a problem.’

‘She stands too close and she smells of cats,’ said Peter, after a particularly dreary Miss Vane afternoon.

‘Cat *food*,’ said Clarry fairly. ‘Liver. She boils it. She was boiling it when I went there for her to pin up the hem on my dress.’ Clarry sighed. Already she was suffering far more than Peter from their neighbour’s helpfulness. Miss Vane took her for long, chilly walks, murmuring instructions about pleasant behaviour. She had knitted her an itchy striped scarf. And

when Clarry's winter dress was scorched beyond repair by Mrs Morgan drying it over the kitchen fire, Miss Vane had made a brand-new one in hideous green-and-mustard tartan. Clarry had had to stand on a chair while Miss Vane jerked and pulled and stuck in dozens of pins.

'The joins don't match and those brown buttons look awful,' Peter had remarked the first time she'd worn it. 'But I don't suppose anyone will care.'

'She's knitting you a scarf too,' Clarry told him.

'Let her,' said Peter. 'I'll drop it in the river.'

'You couldn't drop a scarf that a poor old lady has knitted for you into the river,' said Clarry, very shocked.

'I could. She's not poor either. She's not even that old.'

But to six-year-old Clarry, Miss Vane was very ancient indeed, and so were all Miss Vane's friends. Two of them ran a school for girls at the top of yet another tall, bare house. They were called the Miss Pinkses.

'The what?' asked Clarry's father.

'The Miss Pinkses,' repeated Miss Vane earnestly. 'I do agree, it *is* quaint. As is the school. Old-fashioned values. I mention it because it is just round the corner. I believe the girls start at about Clarry's age.'

'Her grandmother was saying that it was time I found her a school,' admitted Clarry's father, and the next thing Clarry knew, she was climbing the three flights of stairs to the Miss Pinkses' schoolrooms.

The first of many climbs, year after year.

At the Miss Pinkses', the light was dim, the street felt very

far away and there were always dead bluebottles lying upside down on the windowsills. By mid-afternoon the suffocating fumes from the oil stoves that warmed the rooms made heads ache and eyes blur, so that it was hard to stay awake.

But at least, as her father said, even if she didn't learn anything, she was out of the house.