



WORLD OF WARRIORS

-A NEW HERO-

CURTIS JOBLING



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



CURTIS JOBLING

The designer of *Bob the Builder*, creator of *Frankenstein's Cat* and *Raa Raa the Noisy Lion*, and the author/illustrator of numerous children's books, Curtis Jobling lives with his family in Cheshire, England.

Early work on Aardman's *Wallace & Gromit* and Tim Burton's *Mars Attacks* led to him picking up his crayons in 1997 to design the BAFTA-winning Bob. The animated series of *Frankenstein's Cat*, based on Curtis's book of the same name, picked up the Pulcinella award for Best Children's Show at the 2008 International Cartoons On The Bay festival in Salerno, Italy. His noisy new pre-school show, *Raa Raa the Noisy Lion*, can be seen on CBeebies, while his original paintings and prints sell in galleries the world over.

Although well known for his work in TV and picture books, Curtis's other love has always been horror and fantasy for an older audience. The Wereworld series of acclaimed middle-grade novels was published internationally by Penguin, with the first book, *Rise of the Wolf*, being shortlisted for the Waterstones Book Prize. The first of his Haunt novels for young adults was published in 2014, while 2015 will see the worldwide launch of *The Thirteenth Curse*, the first in Curtis's new Max Helsing series.

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Other Puffin titles by Curtis Jobling

The Wereworld series

RISE OF THE WOLF

RAGE OF LIONS

SHADOW OF THE HAWK

NEST OF SERPENTS

STORM OF SHARKS

WAR OF THE WERELORDS

For Evie, my Shield Maiden, with love





CHAPTER ONE

‘Get a blooming move on!’

Dad’s voice echoed round the tiny flat, sending shockwaves resonating through Trick Hope’s body. The thirteen-year-old lay for a moment longer, thinking about the day ahead, before swinging his legs out from beneath the covers. He shambled to his feet, scratched and stretched. Hooking the vertical blinds aside, he peered out of the window. London sprawled before him.

Trick lifted the lucky pendant round his neck to his lips, giving it a swift ritual kiss before letting it fall back on to his chest. He sifted through the clothes on his bedroom floor for his school shirt and drainpipes. After squeezing into the jeans, he tugged on the shirt – still buttoned from the night before – and slipped the knotted tie over his head like a noose.

He stepped into his once-white trainers, then he walked over to the shelves beside the door. They were loaded with his comic collection, weeklies bought religiously from Super Freaks in Soho.

Trick wasn’t looking at the comics, though. His focus was on the terrarium nestled between the piles of back issues. There was no movement within the glass tank; the foliage and webs were motionless. Shelob had clearly been hungry in the night, polishing off the last of her crickets.

‘You’ll be late!’

Trick rolled his eyes, making no attempt to quicken his pace. He shrugged his blazer on, the maroon sleeves threadbare from the various scrapes he’d got himself into

over the years. Lifting the flap on his backpack, he checked the contents: a half-empty box of Tic Tacs, a tatty exercise book and a couple of biros. Hardly the ingredients for academic success. Trick shrugged. What had school ever really taught him, apart from how to run and hide? He swung the bag over his shoulder and headed out of his bedroom.

In the kitchen, Dad was still in his boxers, open dressing gown flapping about him as he dashed from sink to fridge to bread bin, doing a hundred things at once. Malcolm Hope was a one-man parenting machine. The sight wasn't pretty.

'Would it have killed you to wash the pots?' asked Mr Hope, as a growing mass of bubbles frothed in the filling sink. 'You live here too, Richard. This isn't a hotel.'

Trick winced at the sound of his full name. Only his father and other adults used it. He far preferred Trick. Richard sounded like the name of a kid from some posh suburb, a world away from Trick's existence. His thumb tapped the remote, flicking away from the morning news. Mr Hope was over the bread board now, hastily preparing a sandwich.

'You need some discipline in your life, Richard. You need rules.'

'Yeah,' replied Trick, his voice expressionless.

'And would you put the news back on, please? I was watching that!'

Trick turned at last. 'All you ever do is moan. And look at yourself, standing there in your pants. Close your robe, Dad!'

Mr Hope wrapped the sandwich in foil and turned. 'I work every hour God sends to keep a roof over our heads.'

'I never asked you to,' mumbled Trick, and his father caught it.

‘You don’t get to ask, Richard. When your grandparents arrived here from Antigua, they grafted – hard. They worked like dogs. They went without so I didn’t have to. It’s what parents do. That’s my *job*. I pull a night shift and steal a few hours’ sleep. You think you can tell me how I should be, how I should conduct myself? In my own house?’

‘This isn’t a house. It’s a flat!’

His father held the foil-wrapped sandwich out, gesturing for Trick to take it. ‘Your lunch.’

‘What’s in it? Ham for a change?’

Mr Hope tossed it across and Trick snatched it from the air. He shoved it in his bag.

‘Straight home after school; no hanging about on street corners. And stay away from any troublemakers. They’re bad news, you hear me?’

Trick opened the door and shifted the bag on his shoulder. He didn’t plan to go to school today. But that didn’t mean he was interested in hanging around on street corners. If his relationship with his dad hadn’t been such a mess, his old man would have known that. But he didn’t. Trick couldn’t remember a time when things *hadn’t* been this way. How could a father get his own son so wrong? Trick briefly shot his dad a look, but he was back at the sink, up to his elbows in suds.

‘You don’t know me at all,’ Trick whispered.

Slamming the front door behind him, he danced down the stairwell, not stopping to look back.



CHAPTER TWO

'Why you antagonize your father, I'll never know,' said Grandpa from atop his stepladder, gingerly pushing a book on to a high shelf. The bookshop was one of Trick's favourite places. It was like kryptonite to morons - the bullies from school never came here.

'You're tripping,' said Trick, his foot on the bottom rung of the ladder, holding it steady for the old man. 'It's *him* who's the wind-up merchant.'

'Tripping, am I?' chuckled Grandpa, as he retreated down the rickety steps. He patted his grandson on the head in a jokey, patronizing fashion as he stepped by. If Trick's dad had done that, Trick would have kicked off for sure. But this was Grandpa: funny, a bit of a dude, and full of interesting stories. He even used Trick's nickname. Grandpa was cool.

'I got this for you,' said Grandpa, lifting a book out from beneath his counter. It was a hardback, featuring the image of a blue-skinned giant battling two heroes. Trick turned his nose up.

'Role-playing games? They're for kids, aren't they?' asked Trick as he popped a Tic Tac into his mouth.

Grandpa laughed. 'They're for anyone, you ignoramus.' He tapped his brow. 'It's all about using your imagination, Trick. The brain's a powerful thing; it can unlock new worlds and let you experience the impossible. You're a smart boy. This should be perfect for you. That's the player's book you've got there. I have the dungeon master's guide. We'll give it a go the next time you stay over.'

‘Just wasn’t sure it was for me,’ said Trick as he slid the book into his schoolbag. ‘I know you dig them, but I’ve never been mad on books.’

‘Why ever not?’

‘They’re boring.’

Grandpa staggered as if he’d been shot by an elephant gun. ‘I hear you describe books that way again, and you’re out of the will.’ The old man winked and smiled. ‘That book’s perfect for you. Fantasy, battles, myths and monsters. It’s all in there. It’s in *all* these books!’

Grandpa waved his hands around the stacked walls of his second-hand bookshop, his blue eyes twinkling. It was hard to believe that the old chap had left school aged twelve. He was the most educated person Trick knew. In addition to English, he also spoke French and German, and was mastering Mandarin. Everything learned from books.

‘I’ve told you before, books are magic. They can save souls, raise spirits and provide companionship. They can set prisoners free. Books can save your life, my boy.’

‘Did Mum like to read?’

Grandpa stopped what he was doing, thrown by the sudden question. When he looked back to his grandson, his blue eyes seemed a little dewy. Trick’s fingers had found the pendant round his throat, hanging from the bootlace beneath his shirt.

‘You still wear it?’ asked Grandpa.

‘Always.’

The strange black stone was the shape of a crescent moon, the outer edge smooth and polished, the inner sharp and jagged. Grandpa reckoned it was a volcanic rock, but Trick wasn’t convinced by the old man’s self-taught geology.

‘Where did she get it from?’

Trick's grandfather shrugged. 'Who knows? But she clearly wanted you to have it. To remember her by, I suppose ...'

The boy sensed Grandpa's sadness. 'So Mum read a lot?'

'She always had her head in a book as a child,' he smiled. 'That's why we nicknamed her Edna. *'Ead-in-a-book.'*' He laughed. 'Morning, noon and night, we'd find her reading. Especially at night. She got some tellings-off for reading by torchlight beneath her sheets, I can assure you!'

Trick snapped his fingers gleefully. 'I do that with my comics!'

Grandpa's laughter slowly faded. 'I thought she was going to come and help me in the shop when she left school, work alongside me and Grandma. Nobody was more surprised than us when she joined the army. When she came home after that, she was changed.'

'Changed?'

'Smiles grew scarce. Things she'd seen overseas, I guess. Fighting.' He shrugged. 'Meeting your dad was the best thing that could've happened to her. He's a good soul, and he helped her through some dark times. And then they had you!'

Grandpa pulled Trick close for a quick hug. He was already nearly as tall as the old man, having inherited his gangly frame from his mother, but he allowed the white-haired bookseller to kiss his head.

'You were a blessing, Trick.'

'Then why did she leave us?'

'Your mum wasn't a happy person, Trick. Things just got too much for her. Your poor father worries it was his doing, that he drove her away.'

'Did he?'

'No! He looked after your mum. And you, for that matter.'

Trick considered his grandfather's words. Hanging around the old man was a way for him to get closer to his mum. Grandpa shared tales about her that only a father could have known. Trick and his dad rarely spoke about her. Cassie Hope's disappearance had cast a shadow over her family which seemed impossible to shift.

'Haven't you got somewhere to be?' said Grandpa finally.
'Nope.'

The old man pointed at the clock behind the counter. 'Ten thirty-five. I don't know much about schools but I'm pretty sure that means you're late.'

Trick laughed. 'Yeah, I was thinking of maybe heading in at lunchtime.'

Grandpa wasn't laughing. 'You keep skipping school, you'll wind up in trouble.'

'You sound like Dad now.'

'So what if I do? Your father speaks sense. What do you think's going to happen if you keep bunking off?'

'Dunno. Maybe they'll give up on me. And that's cool. Means I can spend more time here.'

Trick grinned, but Grandpa shook his head.

'That won't happen, Trick. Someone will file a report on you. That's how it begins. They'll come to your flat, snoop around. Next thing you know, you'll end up in a home somewhere, far away from those who love you. Change the record, Trick. Turn over a new leaf, starting today. Get yourself *back* into school. Work hard and be *kind* to your dad. He's an amazing, loving man, and you just don't see it. He's the real hero.'

Trick stared at the clock. Maybe the old chap was talking sense. Trick knew he could be difficult – when people *thought* that's what you were, it was easy to act like that – but maybe he didn't have to be that way ...

Trick hopped down off the stool and threw his grandfather a wave.

‘Laters, Grandpa,’ he said as the old man saluted him.

‘I love you, Trick.’

The bell chimed as Trick opened the door. The day outside looked a little bit brighter all of a sudden.

‘Love you too.’



CHAPTER THREE

Trick stood in the comic shop, admiring the mint-inbox action figure in his hands. A character from one of his favourite comics in all her plastic glory, dreadlocks flowing, katana strapped across her back. Trick had a ragtag collection of action figures at home, members of various superhero franchises standing awkwardly alongside one another, with the occasional King Kong thrown in for good measure.

If he had a job – say, working for Grandpa – he knew *exactly* where he’d blow his wages. He’d been known to shoplift on occasion when cash was hard to come by, but he had never taken anything from this particular shop. It meant too much to him and, besides, that new leaf had been turned over not an hour earlier. Reluctantly, he popped the katana-wielding zombie-killer back on the counter.

‘You not buying that?’ asked Kinnon, the bald-headed, bespectacled owner of Super Freaks.

‘Not today. Haven’t got the dough.’

‘Want me to put it to one side? She’s a rare one, and she *will* sell.’

‘You’d do that?’

‘As it’s you.’

Kinnon took the toy off the counter and placed it on a shelf beneath the old-style till. Trick raised his knuckles, and he and the comics guru did an elaborate fist bump known to customers as the Vulcan Hand Grenade.

‘This is me saying goodbye, by the way,’ Trick said, passing Kinnon a handful of coins that covered his comics

bill for that week.

‘You taking your business elsewhere?’ asked Kinnon, depositing the cash in the till. ‘You’re killing me, man!’

‘Dry your eyes. You just won’t see me in the day any more. I’m done playing hooky. Going to get myself back in school and stay there. See what all the fuss is about.’

‘What next? Comets striking the Earth and the dead up and walking?’

Trick laughed. ‘Figured I owe it to my old man. You’ll still see me at weekends.’

‘Music to my ears,’ said Kinnon as Trick made his way to the door. ‘Take care, Trick. And enjoy school!’

‘Miracles may happen!’ Trick replied as he waved goodbye.

Before he’d taken three steps, Trick was pulling out his stash to rifle through them. All were regular orders for him, his standing order of comic goodness. Sharp-shooting, web-slinging, shape-shifting and walker-hacking – all quarters were covered. With his head down and immersed in the comics, Trick didn’t see his foes until it was too late.

‘If it ain’t Hopeless!’

Trick looked up. There were two of them, and it was the smaller one who had spoken: Danny Yeo, aka Youngblood. A career truant, Danny was the diminutive chief bully from school, and although a foot shorter than Trick he was a comfortable two years his senior. At Youngblood’s shoulder stood his chief henchman, a spotty streak known as Dogbreath. He sported a badly cultivated moustache that rippled across the length of his snarling lip.

Trick felt someone bump into him from behind. It was Honey, Youngblood’s girlfriend, as tough and mean as any bully he’d ever encountered. She wore a long black parka

coat and her big mop of golden hair obscured her eyes from view.

Youngblood. Dogbreath. Honey. Triple trouble. Trick hadn't been expecting to see them in town, their usual haunt being the estate where Trick had grown up. The trio had always made his life a misery. What rotten luck to bump into them! He glanced around for an escape route, but they had him trapped. To his right, beyond a railing, the traffic rolled by.

'What you been buying, Hopeless?' said Youngblood.

'Nothing,' replied Trick, trying to shove his comics back into his bag, but it was already too late. Dogbreath reached forward and snatched them from his grasp. Obediently he handed them over to Youngblood.

'Sick,' said the shorter youth. 'Been donkey's since I read *Spider-Man*. I didn't even know they still did this comic. Cheers, brah!'

Laughing, Youngblood rolled the comics up and shoved them inside his jacket.

Trick bit his lip. Fighting back would do no good at all. He'd only ever done it once in his life, and the jury was still out on whether he'd won then. That had been in middle school when the bully who'd tormented him throughout infants had pushed him once too often. He'd been known as Big Ben Barker. He'd had the beginnings of a moustache and he'd been still in short pants. For three years that brute had nicked his lunch, until Trick had finally reached breaking point. He'd gone berserk and lost it completely, beating the bully in a frenzied, uncoordinated assault. Hair-pulling, kicking, biting - it had been ugly - and it had taken the intervention of teachers to bring it to an end.

Trick broke a thumb and lost a tooth that day, but he was never bullied by Big Ben Barker again. All that said, there were three of them here now, and going loco wouldn't solve

anything. There was only one way out of this, and it would be dangerous. Youngblood's laughter subsided.

'What else you got, Hopeless?'

Trick shook his head. 'I've got nothing.'

A lie. And as his hand drifted instinctively towards the wallet in his jeans pocket Honey seized it, causing Trick to wince.

'What you hidin' from us?' said Youngblood, reaching for the younger boy's pocket as he struggled.

It was now or never.

Trick stamped down hard, flattening Honey's foot beneath his heel. Somewhere inside her trainers he heard toes crunch. She cried out, letting go of his wrist as Trick brought his knee forward. It caught Youngblood in the sweet spot between the legs, and the bully tumbled back into Dogbreath's arms with a yell of agony as Trick hurdled the railings and leapt out into the road.

Youngblood's curses followed him across the street, as Dogbreath jumped the barrier and pursued Trick out into the traffic. The rabbit looked back at the chasing pack as he reached the pavement on the other side of the road. Dogbreath was six metres behind, with his boss following. Of Honey there was no sign, her crushed toes having apparently taken her out of the game.

One down, two to go ...

Trick turned into an alleyway, dashing past fire doors and bin bags as the walls closed in on either side of him. He saw the dead end fast approaching but felt no alarm. He was more than used to thinking on his feet. These were *his* streets. This was *his* world. As he neared the end of the alley, he aimed straight for a large green waste bin that was parked against the wall.

His trainers pounded the uneven tarmac as he launched himself up on to its broad lid with a bang. Without breaking his stride, Trick leapt high, his fingertips catching the edge of a flat roof, toes scraping at the bricks as he scampered up the wall. Dogbreath bounced into the big green bin behind him, scrambling on to the top while Youngblood tried in vain to follow, his shortness scotching his chances.

And then there was one ...

Trick ran along a flat roof, dashing up a fire escape to a second floor. As he reached the top, he saw that Dogbreath was still on his tail. He was a big guy but he was nimble. Trick ran along the roof, passing a skylight that looked down into a shop below, the occupants oblivious to the game of cat and mouse being played out above their heads.

Ahead, Trick saw a gap between the buildings, a chasm yawning before him. He didn't slow, trusting his parkour skills to help him escape the danger. They didn't fail him. He sailed three metres forward through the air, another street whipping by beneath him. He landed on a lower roof, tucking into a roll that scattered a gathering of pigeons into flight. Then he was running once more. He looked back.

The bully followed Trick's lead, not slowing but opening his stride to leap the space between the buildings. He landed with a *crunch* and a curse, but quickly regained his feet.

Big, nimble and not afraid of heights. Terrific.

'Stop running, you little grunt!' shouted Dogbreath. 'You ain't gettin' away!'

Another street loomed into view ahead, but this time there was no gap to leap, no alley to hurdle. It was a main road. Trick swallowed hard. He was two floors up and there was nowhere to run. But if he was caught now it would be game over. There was no choice. His trainers tore over the stony roof as he increased his speed towards the edge.

‘You nutter!’ screamed Dogbreath, as Trick’s foot hit the stone parapet and launched him out into the busy street.

As he hit the red metal roof of the double-decker bus, Trick thought for a moment it might propel him back into the air like a trampoline. Instead it buckled with the impact as Trick threw his arms out, momentum carrying his body forward. As his fingers gripped desperately, steel squealing beneath him, Trick caught sight of the tall bully, left behind on the building. Just as Trick slid over the edge of the bus roof, a black cab pulled up beside it.

That’ll do the trick ...

Trick let go.

He bounced off the roof of the taxi and slid down the windscreen and over the bonnet. Followed by a torrent of profanities from the cabbie, Trick cut through another dingy side street that took him past noodle bars, pubs and swanky shops until he emerged, dishevelled, out into sunlight again. His heart hammering in his chest, slowly finding its regular rhythm again, Trick took a moment to get his bearings.

Across the street stood the British Museum. Huge banners exalted the museum’s new show: *Warriors of the World*. Trick’s attention was focused elsewhere, though. If he headed east along Great Russell Street, he’d soon be back on track. He might even make it to school before the bell went for the end of the lunch hour. An afternoon in class was the first baby step towards Trick’s reformation, and that journey would begin today. He started along the pavement.

‘Oi!’

Trick turned, along with everyone else in the street. It was Honey, hopping along the pavement, barging pedestrians aside as she made straight for Trick. She had her mobile phone in hand, and was no doubt relaying his whereabouts to her boyfriend.

Trick didn't hang about. He cut across the road, horns blaring as he dodged cars and vans, and dashed between a pair of great black iron gates. In seconds he was sprinting up a broad flight of stone steps, flanked by towering columns and crowds of gaping tourists. A heartbeat later he was swallowed by the cold shadows and labyrinthine halls of the British Museum.

