

# Bone Music



David Almond

  
Hodder  
Children's  
Books

HODDER CHILDREN'S BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Hodder and Stoughton

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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

ISBN 978 1 444 95291 9

Typeset in Bembo by Avon DataSet Ltd, Arden Court, Alcester, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The paper and board used in this book  
are made from wood from responsible sources.



Hodder Children's Books  
An imprint of Hachette Children's Group  
Part of Hodder and Stoughton  
Carmelite House  
50 Victoria Embankment  
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company  
[www.hachette.co.uk](http://www.hachette.co.uk)

[www.hachettechildrens.co.uk](http://www.hachettechildrens.co.uk)

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Counting Stars

Secret Heart

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Jackdaw Summer

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Skellig – A Play

A Song for Ella Grey

The Colour of the Sun

For Freya

She felt like a ghost. She woke in the night. What was that music? Some troubled beast? Some strange bird of the night? Some lost soul wandering on the moors? Just her dreams?

What wild and weird things existed here?

Sylvia got up from her narrow bed, went to the window, held open her thin curtains, dared to peep.

Nothing. Darkness everywhere.

Darkened street below, darkness of the undulating land, blackness of the forest at the village's edge, light of a farmhouse far, far off, pale glow on the southern horizon, immensity of stars above.

The noise softened, became more lyrical. Whistle-like, flute-like, bird-like. Her head reeled as the

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music came into her. She narrowed her eyes and tried to see.

Nothing.

It was like something she'd dreamed before, like something coming from inside her as well as from outside her, like something she'd heard before. But how could she have? She couldn't have.

*Stop being stupid, Sylvia*, she whispered to herself.  
*Stop being so weird.*

She widened her eyes again, looked at the stars, the galaxies, the great spirals and clusters of light. The universe, spinning and dancing through time. Why was it all so huge? Why was she so small?

What the hell was she doing out here in this empty ancient place?

The music faltered, became jagged again, a series of groans and squeaks, as if it couldn't maintain the sweetness in itself. Was that a dark swaying human shape, there against the darkness of the forest's edge? Was it moving back into the forest? Or was it just her dreams, continuing?

The music ended, left its weird rhythms in her. Some tiny star-thing drifted gently through the black and glittering heavens.

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Why had her bliddy mother brought her here?  
What weird stuff went on out here? What weird  
things existed here?

No answers.

She left the window, went back to her bed.

Checked her phone. No signal.

She yearned for the city again, she yearned for  
a signal.

*Stop it, Sylvia, she told herself. Calm down. It's only  
for a bliddy week or two.*

She closed her eyes.

The dancing in her mind faltered and slowed.

She slept.



‘Good morning, my lovely! Sleep well, my love?’

Next morning. Her mum, in the little kitchen,  
pouring muesli into bowls. Yoghurt and a bowl of  
berries on the table, a pot of coffee. She stirred the  
coffee then poured, then made a swirl of white milk on  
top. Steam and the delicious scent rose.

‘Ah, it’s sulky Sylvia today, is it?’ she said.

She came to Sylvia and put her arms around her.

Sylvia shrugged. ‘Aye,’ she muttered.

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She pushed the grains and berries round and round her bowl.

On the floor were the boxes of food they'd brought with them, a case of red wine. And her mum's sketchbooks and pencils and paints and brushes and knives and palettes and canvases. A couple of easels against the wall. A half-finished painting of a desert scene. A scattering of photographs.

'Hear anything?' Sylvia said.

'Anything?'

'In the night. Like music or something.'

'Nope. Slept like a babe, thank goodness.'

'Like a babe?'

'Maybe it's the darkness, maybe it's the silence.'

'Any news of Dad?'

'Nope. He'll be fine. He always liked a bit of silence, didn't he? He's probably drinking in some five-star hotel with his mates. Hold still a minute, will you?'

'What? *Mum!*'

Mum had a pencil and sketchbook in her hands. She was sketching, drawing.

'Chin up a bit,' she said.

'No!'



*Bone Music*

‘I’ve got to get back into it, haven’t I? Turn to the left a bit, eh?’

Sylvia scowled.

‘Yes, that’s a good expression,’ said her mum. ‘Hold that a moment.’

‘*Mum!*’

‘Oh Sylvia, calm down. If there’s news, it’ll get to us. It’s not like we’re in Outer Mongolia, is it?’

‘Might as well be.’

‘We’re not even fifty miles from Newcastle! Anyway, what kind of music?’

Sylvia shrugged. ‘Dunno. Probably nowt. Must have been dreaming.’

She looked through the window. Pale houses across the narrow roadway, sunlight, the forest’s edge, a far dark hillside. A black bird, flapping past, then another, then another. Other birds, dozens of them, much higher up, swirling and spiralling. And sky, sky, bliddy endless sky.

‘There’s lots of music out this way,’ her mother said. ‘Pipers, fiddlers. Mebbe there was a dance going on somewhere.’

Sylvia sighed.

A dance? What kind of dance took place out here?

‘Think I’ll . . .’ she started.

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‘Think you’ll what?’

Sylvia scowled again. Aye, exactly. What *did* she think she’d do out here? Set off walking back to the town? She stood up and got her coat from the back of the door. Got her scarf. Held her hands out wide. Her mum went on sketching.

‘I’ll do what there is to do here, Mum. I’ll open the door, go out into the emptiness and then I’ll turn round and come back in again.’

‘That’s a good idea, love. You have a nice walk. You should put your boots on.’

The boots? No way. She pulled her pale blue canvas shoes on.

Mum put her arms around Sylvia again. Sylvia let her do so.

‘It’ll do us good,’ said her mum. ‘A few days away in a beautiful place. And God, to get away from those kids for a while!’

‘You love those kids.’

‘Aye, but I need a holiday from all of it!’

Sylvia clenched her fists and stood dead still.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I know you need it, Mum.’

‘Thanks, love. Now go on, off you go.’

Sylvia pulled the door open.

There was a chill breeze. There was sky, going on forever.

She sighed and stepped out.

‘Don’t get lost,’ her mum said gently.

She put her hand to Sylvia’s back and guided her away.



This was it, the village. Two rows of narrow timber houses, most of them faded white, some of them painted in would-be jolly shades: yellow, orange, an incredibly ugly purple one. Each had a patch of garden, a low wicket fence. Some flowers dancing in the breeze. A few cars, a couple of pick-ups, a couple of white transit vans. A long-abandoned telephone box. A long, low timber shack with BLACKWOOD COMMUNITY CLUB painted on it. A fading poster with a crude picture of a fiddle and some pipes. Another poster headed:

**REWILDING THE NORTH**  
**Should the Lynx Come Back?**

There was an artist’s impression of a lynx on a forest

path, its ears pointed, its fur spotted, its head turned to look out at the observer.

She grinned at the graffiti that was scribbled across it: **YES! And Lions and Tigers and Bears as well.**

‘And wildebeest,’ she muttered. ‘And elephants and anteaters and kangaroos.’

She walked on along the single potholed roadway.

Came to a grey timber chapel with slipped slates, boards on its windows and padlocks on its doors. There was an ancient crucifix on the gable end. A battered Jesus dangled from a single nail through his hand. He swayed awkwardly in the breeze. A message was painted on the wall below.

### **He Died So That We Might Live**

At one end of the village, the roadway narrowed, turned into a track that led towards the dark forest. At the other end, it led to yawning light-filled spaces. She turned around and headed for the light. A few folk about. A frail-looking pale and ancient man in a white flat-cap sat in a deckchair outside his front door. He raised a hand in greeting.

She nodded back at him.

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‘You will be the Allens, I would say,’ he said.

His voice was accented, not from this place. European.

‘The Allens?’ she said.

‘Yes, I think so.’

And yes, of course, it was true. That was her mother’s maiden name.

‘Aye,’ she said. ‘We are, I suppose.’

He lifted a striped mug of something from the little table beside him and swigged.

There was a row of stones arranged neatly on his window frame.

‘I am Andreas Muller,’ he said. His eyes were kind and watery. ‘Welcome back to you.’

She didn’t linger. She didn’t want to talk. She didn’t think to tell him what her name was.

She walked on. There was a little swings park on a fenced-off cindery patch behind the houses. A boy or a girl was there, and an ancient rusty swing squeak-squeak-squeaked as they swung on it.

She thought of Maxine. She said she’d call. She looked at her phone. No signal. Of course no bliddy signal.

Some high birds whirled and screeched.

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She walked on. The roadway veered away through the empty turf and bracken across the moors. No traffic on it. At the village's edge a footpath sign pointed north into the emptiness. It bore a cartoon of a jolly walker striding on. She stopped. This was the furthest north she'd been, the furthest-flung she'd ever been. Heather, bracken, yellow gorse, a million scattered sheep. Stone walls, streams. A handful of ruined cottages that must once have been part of the village. A derelict farmhouse with herd of hardly-moving stocky cattle by it. The moors, the fells, or whatever the damn things were called, and black rocks and jagged crags, and all of them mounting higher, turning to dark lumps and bulges on the impossibly far horizon.

And over everything the empty massive sky.

And back beyond the village, the dark and endless-looking forest.

This is where her mum had been a baby. They'd told Sylvia about the place when she was a tot. She'd seen the photographs, she'd seen the paintings. She'd known exactly what it would be like. They hadn't brought her then. She was a city girl. Why bring her here now?

She closed her eyes against it all. She kept back tears.

*Bone Music*

*Don't be stupid, Sylvia, she told herself. You'll soon be back at home.*

'Will you be my sister?'

She flinched, she turned.

A boy, in jeans and a white shirt, long flaxen hair. She looked past him, saw the swing swinging empty now.

'Will you?' he said. 'I haven't got one yet.'

'I don't even know you.'

What was she doing even answering him?

'That doesn't matter,' he said. 'I wouldn't know a sister if she'd just been born, would I? And she wouldn't know me.'

'Go away.'

He didn't move.

'No,' she said. 'I won't be. Go away. Go away.'

He laughed.

His eyes were big, blue, shining.

'I've got a brother,' he said, 'so he could be yours and all.'

'I don't want a brother. I don't want you. Why would I?'

'He's called Gabriel,' he said. 'It would be like in the olden days.'

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The olden days? What the hell was he on about?

‘When all the children were here,’ he said.

She turned away, took the track of the cartoon striding man.

‘My name’s Colin!’ he called after her.

She walked on.

‘I know you’re Sylvia Carr!’ he called.

‘Thanks for letting me know,’ she whispered.

She didn’t turn. She walked. The path climbed gently. She headed higher, seeking a signal. She tugged her collar up against her throat. The breezes swirled around her, blew her hair about her head. The ground was soft, moist. Sometimes dark water seeped around her feet. Something scuttled in the grass. A single hawk hovered above a crag.

And far far off, a black jet flew fast and low above the horizon. So beautiful, so elegant, so swift, so silent, as if it couldn’t hurt a fly.



Her dad used to laugh and call her mum a child of the forest. A wild child. He said she was a fellow of the deer and the fox.

‘Or even of the bear,’ he said. ‘Weren’t there bears



up there when you were a bairn?’

‘Yes!’ her mum would say. ‘And wolves and antelopes as well.’

For a while, as an infant, Sylvia had believed all this. She’d giggle and grin when he held her chin in his hand and looked deep into her eyes.

‘You’re another one,’ he said. ‘Feral kid of a feral mum. There’s a bit of fox in you, I think, a dose of the eagle. Looks like I’m the only civilised one among us.’

In truth, her mum had spent just the first months of her life here. The village had been built for the forest workers, which was what her mum’s dad, her grandfather, had been. They planted the forest, helped it to grow, harvested it. It became one of the great forests of the north. But times changed. There were more machines. Fewer humans were needed. Her family, and lots of other families, moved away to find new work, new lives. Her grandfather opened the little sweet shop on Heaton Road. He never went back again.

And her mother had never gone back either. Till now, when she’d come to do some art, to get away, to bring her daughter with her.

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Sylvia pulled her collar close. No signal. Maxine would be with Francesca today. They'd be going to jazz at Live tonight. Mickey was doing drums. His first proper gig.

There were scuttlings and scratchings all around her. The wind cried in the grass. She should have worn the walking boots her mum had bought for her and made her bring. The seeping water had soaked and darkened her pale canvas shoes. Her feet were wet. Water everywhere. It glistened in little pools on the path, it trickled, it sparkled in streams that ran down the hillsides. And as she got higher, she saw the flat dark surface of Kielder Water in the distance. Its dark dense forest rose from its banks.

Footsteps behind her.

That kid again. Colin. He was panting. He'd been walking fast.

'Got to show you something,' he said.

She groaned.

'You want to see?' he said.

He reached down and tugged at a blade of grass. Tore off a short piece of it. Put it between his thumbs, lifted his thumbs to his lips and blew.

A squeak. Of course there was a squeak. All kids

*Bone Music*

did it. She'd done it in the garden with Maxine when she was a little girl.

'Hear?' he said.

She said nothing.

'You want a go?'

She said nothing.

'My brother showed me how to do it.'

*Just go away*, she wanted to say.

'Listen again,' he said.

He blew again. He tilted his head back and made a longer, louder, more undulating note. He stopped and held his arms out in the empty air.

'Listen,' he said. 'Hear it?'

'Hear what?'

'It makes them sing.'

'Makes what sing?'

'The birds. When I do it, the birds sing back. Listen, that's a curlew.'

'They were singing anyway.'

'Some of them were. But not that one. Hear it? It heard me and it's calling back to me. That's what music does out here.'

She sighed.

'OK,' she said.

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'My brother does it. He can get anything singing. He can call foxes out, and badgers, and deer. How old are you?'

'What?'

'You must be fifteen or something. That's what he is too. I'm only nine. I go to school in Hexham. He doesn't go to school.'

'Why aren't you at school today?'

'Bad belly. Anyway, school just makes you stupid, doesn't it?'

'Does it?'

'Yes. Fills you up with rotten rubbish. Bet you go to school, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'Poor you.'

He blew the grass again.

'That's what you should learn in school,' he said.

She groaned. Kids, what were they like?

'He says if you get really good at it,' he said, 'you can call any animal you want to call and it'll come to you.'

She rolled her eyes.

'With a blade of grass?' she said.

'No, not just with grass. With other things.'

He blew again.

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The birds sang and the wind cried.

And far away, another swift and silent jet streaked above the fells.

‘He says,’ he said, ‘that if you get really *really* good at it, you can see ghosts in the forest and call bodies out of the ground.’

She shook her head. Why was she standing here talking to him?

‘Go away, Colin,’ she groaned.

‘Where’s he this time?’

‘Where’s who?’

‘Your dad. He’s always off somewhere, taking pictures, isn’t he?’

‘What’s it got to do with you? He’s nowhere.’

‘He’s got to be somewhere. Stands to reason, doesn’t it?’

She said nothing, just stared back at him.

‘Do you think he might get killed?’ he asked.

She shook her head, she closed her eyes.

‘I don’t think he will,’ he said.

When she looked again, he was walking back down the hill towards the village. His pale hair shone in the sun, and he swung his arms as if dancing or flying.

She watched him go.

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She shook her head at the thought of having him as a brother. She'd never wanted such a thing. A sister, maybe. That'd be different. She didn't miss such a thing, she'd always been a happy child, but she'd toyed with the notion as a little girl. She'd even imagined a girl turning up one day just as Colin had, and taking her hand and asking, Can I be your sister? And the two of them walking through Heaton Park together, hand in hand.

She laughed at the memory. Kids. What it was to be a child.

She walked on. She went higher.



No signal. She cursed the air. What was a signal, anyway? When there was a signal and she heard Maxine's voice, how did the voice get into the phone? Was the voice somehow in the air around her? Was it like the birdsong, like the wind? How did it squeeze into something like a phone? Was it only a phone that could catch such things? Mickey said once that a phone was like a wand. You held it in the air and it drew voices to it. You used it to wave messages away from it. Magic. Could her ear be a wand? Could her head?

*Bone Music*

She closed her eyes and tilted her head and listened.

*Maxine, she whispered. I'm calling to you. Maxine, I'm listening for you.*

She cursed again. *A week out here and I'll be bliddy mental*, she thought.

But she listened again. She whispered into the air again. She looked at the air and realised you couldn't look at the air. It was just space and nothingness. But it wasn't empty. You couldn't see, but it was full of stuff. Wind and light and noises and messages and . . .

*You will, Sylvia, she said. You'll turn bliddy barmy.*

She stood dead still with her arms held high above her head with her fingers reaching into the empty air – a mast, a receiver, a wand.

'Let me receive you!' she said.

'Speak to me,' she whispered.

'Come to me,' she sighed. 'Please come to me.'

The air seemed to shudder a moment. There came a muffled boom, like a distant explosion. Then another. Then silence. She scanned the horizons. Nothing to see.

She abandoned the search for a signal.

She listened to the birdsong, to the breeze in the grass.

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She breathed in deeply, breathed out.

Smiled.

‘Now, Sylvia,’ she said to herself in the tone of voice that Maxine would use, ‘calm down. Just try thinking of it all in a different way.’

‘OK,’ she said to herself and to Maxine. ‘I will do that.’

She looked around.

She relaxed. She had to admit that yes, it really was beautiful.

She took a blade of grass.

Put it between her thumbs and blew.

A curlew cried.

She blew again.

Another cry.

‘Thank you, curlew,’ she said.

She breathed in the air, gazed at the beauty, then went down the hill again.



Her mother was with Andreas Muller, sitting on his bench with him before his little table.

‘Come and see, Sylvia!’ she called.

Sylvia went through the little gate. There was a