



# *the* BIRD SINGERS

EVE WERSOCKI MORRIS

## *Extracts and activities*

*Suitable for age 8+*

*Explores themes of:*

- ✓ *Mystery*
- ✓ *Friendship*
- ✓ *Family*
- ✓ *Sisterhood*
- ✓ *Polish Folklore*



Strange things have been happening to Layah and her younger sister, Izzie, ever since their mother dragged them to a rain-soaked cottage miles from anywhere in the Lake District: there is a peculiar whistling at night, a handful of unusual feathers appear on their doorstep and there are murmurings of a shadowed woman in the forest. And their mother is behaving very oddly. Layah is mourning the loss of her dear grandmother in Poland - and can almost hear her Babcia's voice telling her the old myths and fairy tales from that magical place.

And as the holiday takes on a dark twist, Layah begins to wonder if the myths might just be real.



# Challenge 1

## CHAPTER ONE

It wasn't the first night Layah had heard the whistling – but it was the first time she had followed it. She had been sleeping badly ever since they had arrived at the cottage by the lake. Perhaps it was the echoing silence of the countryside, nothing like the familiar hum of London at night. Perhaps it was sharing a room with her younger sister, Izzie, who snuffled in her sleep. Or maybe she was still sore at her mum for changing their holiday plans and dragging them to this soggy corner of nowhere.

It always started at midnight. At first, Layah thought it was birdsong – a high, thin sound that became a melody, rising and falling. And each night, it returned. Layah hadn't mentioned the whistling to her mum or Izzie. It made her shiver under the duvet but she would roll her pillow over her ears and eventually drift off to sleep.

Tonight, though – their third night in the cottage –

the whistling was different.

Layah's eyes were open but she couldn't remember waking or falling asleep. She lay in bed, her muscles tensed, listening. When the whistling came, it was more confident than before, wild and tuneful all at once. Her skin prickled, the way it used to during Babcia's bedtime stories about ghouls and witches. But Layah had stopped believing in monsters long ago. She refused to let her imagination run away with itself; fanciful daydreaming was Izzie's talent. Layah was going to find out where the whistling was coming from and silence her irrational fears.

She padded across the floorboards and unhooked the latch on the bedroom door. Out in the corridor, she peered into the pool of darkness below. The whistling was louder now, seeping through the house from somewhere outside. Layah creaked down the stairs, squinting against the patchy gloom. It sounded like it was coming from the back garden. As Layah pushed open the kitchen door, it squeaked.

The whistling stopped.

Her heart was thumping as she gazed across the murky kitchen towards the window. The garden was a mess of overgrown rose bushes and the sky was grey, offering little light, but she was certain there was a

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shape in the middle of the lawn. She moved closer to the window. There was something out there and it was human in outline, Layah was sure of it. Her fingers reached for the switch to the outdoor lamp – light sprang into the garden and there, staring straight back at Layah, was an old woman with blank, yellow eyes and a hungry, twisted smile. Layah screamed.

'Layah!' The kitchen light burst on and her mum came skidding into the room. 'Layah, what's wrong?'

Layah stumbled back to the window. The outdoor lamp flooded the back lawn. There was no one there.

'Mum, I – I thought I saw someone – just there.' Layah was breathing too fast to speak.

Her mum scanned the garden.

'I'm sure it was nothing,' she whispered.

'I thought – I thought I heard whistling—'

'Whistling?' Her mum seized Layah's shoulders. 'What did she look like? Layah, tell me what you saw.'

'It was a woman – she had these huge yellow eyes and long white hair,' stammered Layah, alarmed by the panic in her mum's face. Her mum released her and checked the lock on the back door.

'Mum, what's wrong?' Layah demanded. 'Was she real?'

Layah's mum turned and smiled, her bright eyes sombre.



'There's no one there, Layah. It was just a dream. Nothing to worry about.'

Layah wanted to argue but her head felt woolly with tiredness. Her mum placed an arm around her shoulders and shushed her upstairs and back into bed.

The whistling did not return. As Layah curled up under the covers, she heard only the hushing of the rose bushes and the lone cawing of a bird.



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## Challenge 1

# Using sounds in creative writing

### Discussion questions:

- How many sounds can you find in this extract?
- What do the sounds add to the story?
- What time is it? How does this set the scene?
- How does the writer create suspense in this opening chapter?
- How does the writer introduce the characters and what do we already know about them?

### Activity:

#### Step 1:

In pairs, think of as many sounds as you can and write them down.

#### Step 2:

What's your favourite sound? Think about how you could use this to write a story and answer these three questions:

- Where might you be if you heard that sound?
- What do you think could have made the sound?
- How does the sound make you feel?

#### Step 3:

Finally, write an opening paragraph for your own story where the main character hears a sound and goes to investigate. Think about the setting and what the character might find.





# Challenge 2



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Layah and her dad set up the picnic site without speaking. The hampers were full of china crockery, silver cutlery and parcels of cold meats, sausage rolls, cheese scones, vegetable tarts and salad with strips of chicken. The smallest hamper contained the desserts: apple and cinnamon muffins and fruit salad and cream.


Layah sat on a corner of the mat, laying out the cups and saucers. Her dad seemed a little nervous around her and Layah felt a pang of regret. She missed how they used to be together.

'Oh, he didn't spare any expense, did he?' sighed Dad, peering into the basket. 'Is that cold pheasant? Blimey! I see Henry's the same arrogant guy he was at school.'

'Mum seems to like him,' said Layah quietly.

She saw her dad's face drop and felt instantly guilty. Why was her instinct always to push people away?

She looked out at the empty lake. The village was



out of sight around the bend but she could still see the peak of the Lowesdale Giant dark against the sky.

'Um, Dad,' Layah began awkwardly, 'you know that poem . . . "King Vukasin and Mandalina"?'

He nodded, pushing his glasses up his nose. 'Your babcia's most famous translation,' he said. 'I wanted to read it at the funeral but the youngest brother's job is to arrange the flowers. And I do know a lot about flowers but . . . it would have been nice.'

'Well, um . . .' Layah couldn't believe she was asking this! 'Could a shapeshifting fiend with black wings and blazing eyes actually exist? A kind of bird-woman? Could they be real?'

'Real?' Her dad chuckled. 'Oh no! Well, technically some hybrid species are possible – ever heard of a liger? Or was it a tion . . .? Anyway! A tiger-lion hybrid has been created but not a human-bird hybrid; that would be too complicated. The "shapeshifting fiend" in the poem will be a metaphor for something, I expect. Ask your mum about that, she's much cleverer than me. She's smart and funny and radiant . . .' His voice faded away sadly.

'Right,' Layah ploughed on. 'Dad, have you ever heard Mum talk about anyone called L. Bellford? Apart from me, I mean, or has she ever said anything about



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any of her Bellford family?’

But her dad didn't seem to be listening any more; he was staring out over the silvery lake.

'You know, it was all because of Henry that your mum and I met,' he sighed. 'If he hadn't thrown that party . . . it was a celebration for the rugby team – I was only there because Henry wanted to copy my biology homework – but then, I met your mum in the queue for the toilet. I was too nervous to speak, but she suddenly looked at me and said, "Looks like we're stuck here, we might as well get to know each other,"' he said, with a faint smile.

Layah knew the story better than the poem, her dad had told them so many times. Her parents had met when they were fifteen. Layah couldn't imagine her parents as teenagers!

'She was so beautiful,' Dad mumbled, 'cleverest person I'd ever met, besides your babcia, of course.'

'So why are you messing everything up now? Why are you never around any more?' The words burst from her. 'Since Babcia died – you've just given up on us!'

Her dad stared down at his cup. 'I'm a disappointment, aren't I?' he said.

'You don't need to be,' sighed Layah.

Her dad looked at her, his eyes hopeful. 'Layah, my



work isn't simple. It's difficult to get time off and—'

A scream pierced through the air.

They both twisted around to see Izzie pelting down the hillside, calling something which was lost in the wind. Layah sprang to her feet and, as Izzie sprinted closer, she made out the word she was shouting:

'RUN!'

Layah looked up into the sky and saw them.

For a second, she might have called them bats. They had the twirling movement of bats, but she knew what they were: crows. Forty or fifty of them. Sharp-beaked and with powerful wings, they whirled through the air like a tornado, swooping over the island; they began to corkscrew towards them.

'Layah! Dad! Run!' Izzie screamed again, her amber necklace swinging violently as she thundered towards them.

Layah reacted first and was already bolting towards the boat, calling back to her dad, who had frozen in horror.

'Dad! Come on!' Layah shrieked.

Izzie rammed into him, grabbing his sleeve, and dragged him along the jetty after Layah. The sunny afternoon had been broken by a sudden violent storm; rain sliced down in shards as her dad and Izzie trampled



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towards the boat.

'Dad. Let's go!' Layah cried, scrabbling to untie the mooring rope.

Leaping on to the Vellamo, her dad grabbed the wheel, fumbling with the keys.

'The key! The engine! It's not starting!' he yelled, thumping the dashboard.

'Dad! Come on! Just make it work!' demanded Layah, jumping down into the boat and turning the keys with him.

*Don't look round. Don't look round.* The words were thudding in Layah's head. Then Izzie screamed again and Layah turned. The crows were seconds from them, cruel claws arched as their feathers were tossed up in the whirlwind which seemed to be carrying them forward.

'We've got to move!' shouted Izzie.

'Izzie, get down! Now!'

Layah darted to her sister, grabbed her shoulder, trying to pull her on to the deck.

'We've got to move!' Izzie cried again, hitting the edge of the boat with her fist.

A tremendous wave suddenly rolled below the Vellamo and the boat shot forward, propelled by the water. Spray cascaded over the sides, as if two white hands of foam



were pushing the boat away from the island. Both sisters slipped and fell, clutching each other. Layah sat up and stared back.

The lake was furious beneath them; giant waves crashed in their slipstream, pushing the boat further out. A great wind seemed to rise from the lake itself. Layah's hair scattered across her face as she looked up into the sky, dark with feathers. The crows seemed to have lost their formation; their shrieks were hair-raisingly human. The birds were being battered about by a new rush of wind, weaving helplessly in the spray from the waves.

The Vellamo howled as the engine vibrated and the boat forged through the water. The birds were wheeling back to the island.

Layah staggered towards her sister and wrapped an arm around her.

'You're soaked,' Layah shouted above the engine. 'Here! Get this on.' She tugged the picnic blanket around Izzie's shoulders.

'I'm all right, Layah,' panted Izzie, 'you need to get warm too!'

They both looked back at the island. It was shrinking in the distance, a gloomy silhouette with the crows circling above it like flies. Layah was struggling to



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accept it but she knew that wasn't normal bird behaviour. Something unnatural was going on. And if the birds weren't normal, then – she hated to admit it – perhaps neither was their mystery.



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## Challenge 2

# Mythical creatures in creative writing

### Discussion questions:

- How does the author describe the birds?
- What words does she use to make them seem mysterious and unusual?
- Can you think of other hybrid species in myths and literature?

### Activity:

#### Step 1:

In pairs or small groups, discuss what animal you would like to be if you were half-human and half-animal?

#### Step 2:

Write a paragraph describing your mythical hybrid creature. You should think about what special powers they might have and how they might look.

#### Step 3:

Write a plan for a story including your mythical creature. Think about what happens at the beginning, middle and end. You could start with your opening paragraph from Challenge 1.





# Can you find all these words?

A	A	M	B	E	R	G	I	I	A	C	A	I	C
A	O	H	A	F	T	A	B	A	H	O	R	R	H
C	A	L	V	R	E	E	I	C	S	E	T	O	I
S	L	A	I	I	V	A	T	I	S	A	K	R	W
D	H	K	L	I	U	I	T	R	V	I	H	L	M
N	E	E	S	D	W	S	O	H	I	B	A	S	G
E	T	D	E	I	T	F	G	S	E	E	O	N	S
W	S	I	S	O	S	S	C	T	S	R	I	H	S
B	G	S	T	S	T	H	W	G	I	L	S	E	C
S	I	T	R	H	A	I	H	B	T	S	K	T	B
O	L	R	A	M	F	O	I	S	C	S	D	V	T
A	I	I	D	O	U	G	I	I	H	R	B	G	I
T	R	C	D	L	S	H	A	I	C	B	A	B	L
L	A	T	S	L	W	L	E	C	E	T	F	I	E

Whistling

Bird

Witch

Amber

Crow

Ghouls

Babcia

Vilsestra

Lake District

Feathers



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