

THE BOOKS THAT SIGHED AND SPIED

CLAUD
REGNARD



WILLOW OAK

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Names and characters are products of the author's imagination

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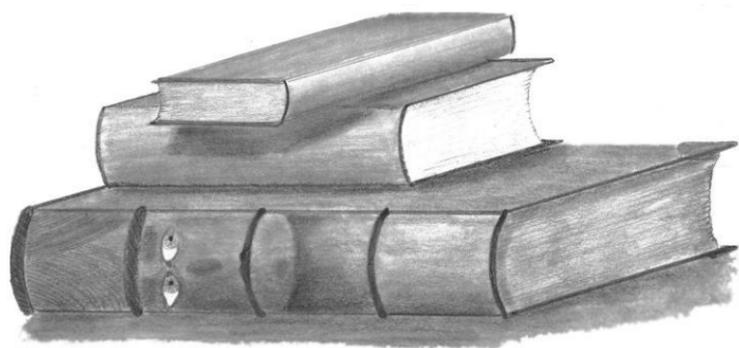
Born in London of French parents, his first career ambition, aged five, was to be an astronaut. Two years later he changed his mind and decided to be a doctor. Despite that sensible choice and studying medicine in Scotland his subsequent career decisions were questionable. His first choice of surgery was based solely on his ability to rebuild the engine and gearbox on a Morris 1100. It was not his best career choice. Whilst training in general practice he came across a hospice but was advised that there was little to learn from such places. Consequently, four decades working in hospices and hospitals as a palliative care medicine consultant came as something of a surprise. He continues to learn, which means that either there is a great deal more to life, hospice, and palliative care than his advisors thought, or that Claud Regnard is an awfully slow learner.

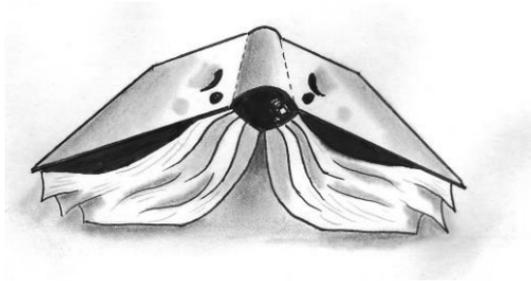


This Book

The original book, *The Book That Sighed* was a collection of stories that included the start of the Library stories. These stories have been updated and extended into a much wider adventure now collected under a new book, *The Books That Sighed and Spied*.

Each chapter of both books are being released for free at weekly intervals on the St. Oswald's Hospice website on <https://www.stoswaldsuk.org/shop/online-shop/the-book-that-sighed-claud-regnard-paperback-book>





1: THE BOOK THAT SIGHED

Toby was bored with the stretching dullness that only a 15-year-old understands. He walked past the drifting greyness of the village, irritated by its self-satisfied quaintness. For some it offered rural reassurance but to Toby it was a throttled, suffocating blandness. He shuffled past the murky school that had nurtured his boredom into a blank pretence of joy. He hurried past the damp play area that had offered little play, wet swings, and scant shelter for furtive experiments into cigarettes and cider. He drifted on towards the railway station that had no trains, a memorial to lives that had stalled. After

the war it had been converted into a library by stout and stalwart women determined to rebuild lives with knowledge, but they had failed to anticipate the deflation of village life into a rosy retreat from the city. Travellers had been replaced by maps, green-painted benches by rows of shelves, and any steam now hissed through hot radiators. For once the old station waiting room door was open. Toby meandered in, partly out of bored curiosity but mainly for the warmth. Sleepers were no more on the railway line, but one was snoring quietly at her desk.

Miss Mary gently woke on hearing him enter. ‘Hello,’ she said softly. Toby grunted in response, partly thrown by Mary’s smiling welcome but mainly so as not to give the impression that he was interested in anything at all.

‘Can I help you find something?’ asked Mary.

Toby decided this needed a response that was sufficiently vague as to have no answer. ‘What you got?’

‘Good question!’ responded Mary, cutting off Toby’s prepared reply to the usual demand to being told to get out. ‘We’ve got fiction, literature, mystery, poetry, romance, sci-fi, thrillers, biographies, history, geography....’

‘Nah,’ interrupted Toby, realising she would have kept going indefinitely. ‘Anything interesting?’

‘Ah! It’s interesting you want, is it?’ Mary looked carefully at Toby with a quizzical look, then made her decision. ‘You want Talking Books.’

‘On vinyl records, are they?’ which was Toby’s best attempt at an insult.

‘No, they’re just around a few corners at the back,’ pointed Mary without a hint of sarcasm.

With nothing better to do Toby decided to follow her pointing finger. After five corners he was getting the feeling the librarian was fibbing or he had lost count of a few corners. He arrived in a warm crook of a room that smelt of dry dust. The books were all asleep in neat, parched, rows. The air had dried like a brittle hydrangea in a warm autumn shed. The gentle creaks of the worn wooden floor mingled with the slow echo of the wall clock. A little light crept past the heavy curtains, occasionally daring to spear through the faded air to produce scattered sharp flashes of light on the dust motes.

There was no other sound except for a quiet sigh behind him. Toby turned but saw only books on the old desk, its wood smoothed and polished by countless elbows. It was glowing from the light shuffling past the curtains. He was about to leave and be bored somewhere

else when one of the books opened by itself. If that was insufficient to disturb his boredom, what happened next grabbed his interest.

‘Have not seen one for some time.’

‘Who said that?’

‘One did, naturally,’ explained the book. ‘Here on the desk.’

Essential to being a teenager is the ability to look stone-bored regardless of events unfolding. This implies a certain *sang-froid* that goes down well with fellow lads, although the girls thought it looked stupid. Toby put on his best marble face whose rigid pallor was doing a poor job of hiding his terror.

‘What are you supposed to be?’ Toby had thought about this reply. It had the right mixture of disdain and belligerence.

‘One is a talking book. And an exceedingly good one if one is permitted to espouse. Did the *bibliothécaire* not explain?’

This was not the way it was supposed to work. Barbed questions were supposed to get simple angry responses that gave the excuse to be rude and, if necessary, run. Smart answers using strange words were not in the rule book, even if they came from a book.

‘A book can’t talk. You’re a disguised iPhone, that’s what you are,’ Toby said in desperation, trying to see where the electronics were hidden.

‘I can assure you, sir, that if I am anything, I am a Book,’ the voice replied, making sure each ‘I’ was clearly enunciated.

‘Alright, then what are you?’

‘Sir, therein lies a tale. Could I suggest that sir sits down for a while?’

This was said in such a kindly tone that Toby felt he had no option but to obey. He sagged into a dusty wicker chair that creaked complaints as he settled into its comfort.

‘No matter what is written, by whom or by what method, misprints, misspellings and mistakes occur. The authors assume these are erased before being corrected, but the reality is that they never disappear. They gather, accumulate and coalesce like star dust draws itself together to form stars and planets.’

Toby felt a stirring of curiosity. ‘So where do they go?’

‘Why here, of course,’ said the book, flicking a page to clear some errant dust off a page corner.

‘But you’d end up with a jumble of wrong words. They’d make no sense.’

‘Ah, but time is on their side, you see. Words from the same author tend to find each other and some order returns.’

‘So, who wrote you?’

‘That sir is a good question... with an embarrassing answer.’

Toby wondered if the sun was setting or had the book’s pages reddened slightly?

‘You may remember that the words are not quite right. The words may collect around the right authors but are a little diverted from their original meanings. For example, I was written by a Charles Dickens who was writing *Oliver Twist*. Unfortunately, he had terrible handwriting so I have become... and I must offer sir my profuse apologies... *A Twist of Olive* by Carl Chickens.’

Toby thought this was hilarious and the wicker chair creaked with each laugh.

The book curled its pages in disapproval. ‘It was the best the words could do, considering the state of some. You may mock, sir, but we have worked hard to retain something of our proud origins.’ The book managed to look so forlorn that Toby stopped laughing, but he was struggling to clear the smile on his face.

‘So, there are others?’

‘Certainly,’ came a chorus of replies from all the shelves, accompanied by much coughing and clearing of pages.

The released dust caused the sunlight to ripple through the air and tickle the books which squirmed contentedly in the warmth. Toby thought it looked like being underwater and was surprised to find it rather beautiful. He half expected to float gently around the shelves, but his puzzlement kept him grounded.

‘How can the words find each other?’

‘Quantum entanglement,’ sang a duet of voices from an upper shelf.

Two books peeked over the Sci-fi shelf, enthusiastically shaking their pages. Without any sign of awkwardness, the books introduced themselves:

‘Ilack Azimuth of *I Reboot*.’

‘Luckless Atoms of *An Itch Biker’s Ride to the Galaxy*.’

They each bent their spines towards Toby and proceeded to explain in tandem.

‘It started with Schrödinger’s cat.’

‘Could be alive or dead at the same time.’

‘Particles can be linked.’

‘Entangled, even.’

‘No matter what the distance.’¹

‘Presumably, our words too.’

‘Yes, but speaking is more difficult to explain.’

‘Have to have some mysteries.’

‘Or a new theory waiting to be tested.’

Toby smiled, ‘You’re making this up.’

‘It is what authors do.’

‘If you prefer that explanation.’

‘But we push the boundaries.’

‘Rather well.’

‘We think.’

Whatever they were talking about, Toby thought they were looking a little too smug for their own good. He thought he could catch them out. ‘But computers check spelling now.’

‘Ha!’

‘Have you ever used a spell-check program?’

‘Generates more words for us than ever.’

‘I suspect the excess is driving our speech.’

‘Like a word safety valve?’ suggested Toby.

Ilack and Luckless stared at each other.

‘That’s rubbish.’

‘You’re rubbish.’

¹ See note 1

The two books disappeared into the Sci-fi section to have a very unscientific page-turning fight accompanied by scuffles, rustles and puffs of dust.

Toby turned back to Carl, ‘You’re a sort of recycling centre for words.’

‘That, sir, is a better explanation than the nonsense I have just heard from those two.’ Carl raised his eyes in exasperation at the dust clouds above.

Those two stopped arguing, looked down peevishly and started discussing the virtues of recycling versus quantum theory.

A quiet female voice gently interrupted, ‘You seem somewhat overwhelmed, master Toby.’

‘What do you expect? I’m having conversations with books. I’m supposed to read you, not the other way around.’

‘Yes, it can be disconcerting for a young gentleman such as yourself.’

‘And how come you know my name?’

‘Mary the librarian mentioned you, so we knew about you before you arrived.’

Now that was disconcerting. What else did they know? Teenagers always had some awkward secrets that went with awkward legs and spots.

‘Fear not, master Toby. I can assure you we know nothing more. Let me introduce myself. I’m Elaine.’

‘Not sure I can place the book.’

‘Elaine Frosting of *Bride Perfectionist*.’

Seeing Toby’s persisting puzzlement, she added, ‘Jane Austen? *Pride and Prejudice*?’

‘Wasn’t that a TV series with some bloke getting wet in a lake?’

‘I think you will find it was a book first. And Mr Darcy never did anything so vulgar in our book,’ said Elaine rather primly.²

‘Perhaps the TV writers used some of your lost words?’ suggested Toby.

‘Certainly not.’ If a book could give a haughty look, the straight, stiff spine had the same effect. ‘Once we are written, we take no responsibility for how others choose to adulterate our prose.’

‘Do TV and film writers have similar problems with their words?’ wondered Toby out loud.

Ilack and Luckless peeked over the top shelf again.

‘Not when they leave out half the story.’³

‘And change the rest.’

‘Such that it doesn’t make sense.’

² See note 2

³ See note 3

‘And leaves nothing to the imagination.’

The last was said in all innocence, but it meant something different to a teenager. ‘What do you mean?’ whispered Toby, hoping to hear a juicy secret.

‘Words create sparks.’

‘Sparks create light.’

‘That let you see a world.’

‘Your world.’

‘No-one else’s.’

‘That makes words more real than any picture.’

‘I must say, I agree,’ proffered a book surrounded by a soft haze. A long clay pipe was sticking out and gently wafting out a sweet cloud. The book was leaning back casually and, to complete the image, a couple of bookmarks slid out like a pair of comfortable wool slippers.

‘I have seen the power of words build kingdoms of past and future, good and evil, more easily than my pipe smoke rises to the ceiling. A stream of words becomes a sea of invention; a lattice of sentences becomes an ocean; a matrix of tales becomes a universe....’

‘And too much smoke makes us giddy,’ chastened Elaine, coughing demurely by curling a page over herself.⁴

Elaine turned to Toby. ‘This is Jarr Talkin whose surname is very apt since his loquaciousness is presumably an attempt to counterbalance the title of his book, *Bored of the Things*.’

‘Wait,’ said Toby. ‘I’m getting the hang of this. I’ve seen your films, *Lord of the Rings*. Hobbits, wizards and orcs.’

‘I can assure you they are not *my* films. Anyway, my version has Dobbits and Auks, quite different.’

‘And the wizards?’ asked Toby.

‘Well, my wizards are the sort that do card tricks at dinner tables. Less impressive but less likely to get you killed.’

Toby did not feel that Talkin’s version would have the same impact as the original but, uncharacteristically, he decided that he looked so at peace with the world that he did not want to upset him.

Toby noticed that the section marked Economics contained some shifty looking books. It was difficult to

⁴ See note 4

know why they looked so furtive, except they avoided Toby's gaze and twitched their spines while trying to retreat into the shadows.

'Why are they looking like that?' Toby asked Elaine.

'It's not their fault. They were meant for other sections, but they were caught out by Economics. Until their words finally get together, this is where they have to stay.' She introduced each one in turn.

'Forge Allwell's *Nineteen and Fourpence* has become a dark tale of a sales strategy wherein nothing sells for more than one pound. Belfry Chancer's *Canterbury Sales* is a morality play of post-Christmas shopping and Danny L. Tofu's *Robins on Cruises* compares travel costs. It could take a while before they get closer to their originals.'

Each book briefly bent a spine and looked at Toby, before disappearing as furtively as they had arrived.

Toby was puzzled. 'Elaine, how come you're looking at me with your pages open and those books were looking at me despite being closed?'

Elaine smiled coyly, 'We have several faces that are read: our spines, our covers and our pages. You could say we have very expressive faces.'

Toby thought about this. ‘So, when you tell children you have eyes at the back of your heads, you really mean it.’

‘Yes, there’s no going behind our backs.’

Toby sank down into the wicker chair which crackled contentedly. His visit to this Library should have been disturbing and distressing, or at least just a bit disquieting. Much to Toby’s surprise he had enjoyed this trip into literature’s recycling centre. In between the chair creaks, tranquil clock ticks and fluttering pages there was a placid feel to the gently floating dust that could have lasted forever.

But as the dusk crept into the room, Toby realised there was only so much a teenage brain can take in at one time. He rose to leave, muttered goodbye, and turned away. As he rounded the first corner the books sighed. It was always like this. The few that came, looked, decided it was all an illusion and never came back. Toby stopped and returned to the warm corner. All the books turned their pages towards him, surprised at his return.

Toby looked at the books and surprised himself by saying, ‘Can I come back?’

‘You would be more than welcome, but may I presume to ask why?’ asked Elaine.

‘Your words are more interesting than most I’ve read.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

As Toby left, the sigh that followed him was one of contentment.

Notes

1. Entanglement of particles is part of quantum field theory and proposes that two particles can share a single physical state no matter how far apart they are.
2. The lake scene with Mr Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* was an invention of the TV writers and never appeared in the book.
3. The films *2001 A Space Odyssey* and *I Robot* are different to the stories written by Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov, respectively.
4. J.R. Tolkien smoked a pipe and in his *Lord of the Rings* the hobbits smoke ‘pipe weed’. The culture of the 1960s and the later films hinted that more than nicotine was being smoked, but there is no evidence that Tolkien smoked anything other than tobacco.