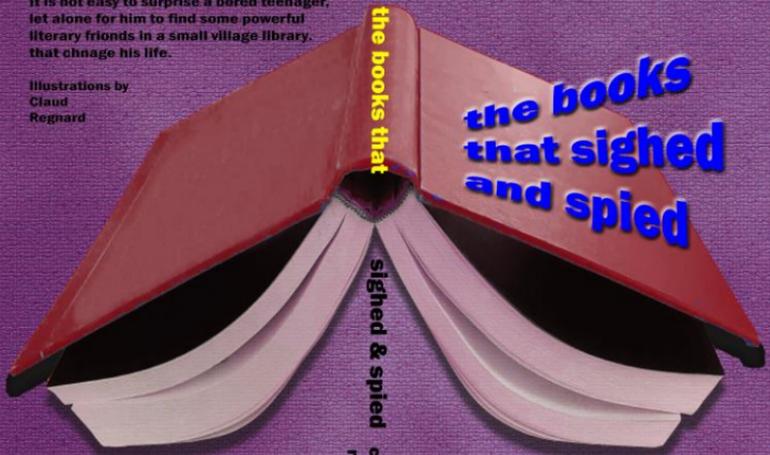


It is not easy to surprise a bored teenager,
let alone for him to find some powerful
literary friends in a small village library,
that change his life.

Illustrations by
Claud
Regnard



This edition sold in aid of
St. Oswald's Hospice
(Newcastle-upon-Tyne)
and Miral Hospice St.
Johns (Wirral)



THE BOOKS THAT SIGHED AND SPIED

CLAUD
REGNARD



WILLOW OAK

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Names and characters are products of the author's imagination

Previous book: *The Book That Sighed*

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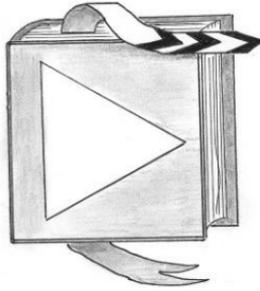
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This Book

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>





6: THE BOOKS THAT GUIDE

The dry wooden shelves sucked up the flames, sending up a black cloud of dust and smoke that rolled across the ceiling and started to sink to the floor. Amelia shrank away from the flames and smoke. Her wide eyes oscillated between both, trying to ignore the book approaching her. Amelia dropped onto the floor in fear.

‘Amelia! We have to get out now,’ shouted Merrily, reaching across to try to pull Amelia’s hand. Amelia hit out and knocked Merrily into the flames. Merrily shrieked and fell onto the floor, pages smouldering. She

groaned with pain but reached out once more, pleading, 'Please!'

Amelia kicked Merrily across the floor and slapped her hands around her ears.

'Leave me alone! I've lived with the memory of these voices all my life and I want them gone.'

As a 10-year-old, Amelia's conversations had been enjoyable make-believe fun. They had felt real but over time it had become a fear that the voices could return at any time. She had coped by seeking out facts through journalism which had filled her time and mind. That was until she spotted her 6-year-old daughter Callie standing in front of the mirror, hand on hip, having an animated conversation. All the fears of her library voices came flooding back and she had been determined to ensure Callie was never exposed to them. When Crumble had called her, she quickly realised he was trying to forestall bad publicity from the library closure. She was always wary of his machinations, but the memories of the library were too strong to resist. Facing your fears was easy to say but hard to do, and she had not been sure what she would find. Now she knew.

She was on her own and it was getting hotter by the second. All she could see around her were walls dancing with flames. Crawling to where the smoke was higher, she spotted a window. Standing up she could see Crumble outside. Banging on the window's metal bars she shouted, 'Help! I'm trapped!' Crumble saw her, nodded and, with a faint smile, turned around and walked away, ignoring her shouts and the flickering flames. He stopped at the corner to speak to someone, probably Jeff, but to her dismay Crumble waved his hand in a 'Nothing there' gesture and walked out of sight. Her hate for that man was only matched by her hate of herself. Amelia hit the wall with frustration. How could she think she could return here and exorcise her fears? On the contrary, she must be deteriorating – she had only heard voices as a child but now she was seeing talking books.

Theo had been busy. Tea from a teapot instead of a samovar was not his, well, cup of tea, let alone bicarbonate-tasting scones and the frivolous arguments over the correct order of scones, cream and jam. This was war and preparations were essential. He had spent his time gathering a host of items, positioning them at key

points and making plans with the Library. He was in his element and this was his moment. He raced along the shelves towards the smoke and flames, dropping lower until he was sliding across the floor. He grabbed two items he had placed there overnight. The heat was getting stronger. He had discarded his dust cover and his leather cover was going to give him some protection, although his constant engineering and tinkering had stained the cover with oil which was not the best protection against fire. It was bad enough to feel his title page getting warm, but the idea that his frontispiece might come to harm was not a pleasant thought. The smoke obscured his vision, and the flames were close enough to risk igniting his oil-soaked cover. He pulled out the two objects from under his pages and got to work.

Amelia was coughing, crawling and scratching a way out, cursing that creep Crumble. But as she realised her reality, revenge was replaced by regret. The siren call to face her voices was a selfish action that could now cost her life and her daughter Callie. It was at that moment that her world changed. The black smoke was replaced by a thick white cloud and the roaring flames were overcome by a loud, continuous hissing and spluttering. Something gripped her hand and pulled her into

breathable air. On the floor she noticed a line of lights leading away from the smoke.

‘Follow me,’ said a deep voice.

She hesitated. The library voices had haunted her all her life and here was another one.

A different voice begged her, ‘Please, rebenok. Child, Amelia, I’m here to help, not hurt.’

In the haze she could see a shape ahead and followed on her hands and knees. Her eyes were streaming from the smoke and fear. Through her tears the walls seemed to blur and change shape. The floor became cooler and the air clearer. Eventually she knew she was safe and lay on the floor coughing and sobbing in relief. Mary knelt and helped Amelia sit up. What faced Amelia made her want to return to the floor. Next to Toby and Geoffrey were a multitude of books, each busy moving around the library and, most disconcerting of all, *talking*.

She looked pleadingly at Mary who took Amelia’s head in her hands and looked into her eyes. ‘Yes, they are real, we can all see and hear them. In fact, it was Theo who saved your life. That and his sensible idea of setting up extra fire extinguishers throughout the Library. We all owe him a great thanks.’

Theo peeped around Mary, his cover steaming but fortunately not burning. He shrugged his pages. ‘It seemed sensible. Good to see you safe, rebenok.’

Trembling with incredulous emotion, Amelia managed a tremulous ‘Thank you’ and then remembered kicking a book into the flames. ‘But I think I may have hurt one of you, or worse.’ She held her head in her hands, sobbing.

Merrily limped out from behind Toby, her cover and pages singed and blackened. ‘Amelia, I am safe – sore, but safe.’

‘I’m so sorry, but your voice was so frightening. I remembered our conversations, but I had convinced myself they were all in my head. I don’t know how to thank you.’

A cough came from ceiling.

‘We all played our part. I quite liked the emergency lights in the floor. I wanted to have exit signs front, middle and rear, but Theo thought that was going too far.’

A humph came from Theo. ‘We’re a library. With foundations. Not an airplane.’

‘Still, I liked the idea.’

Mary interrupted, ‘All the ideas were good, and they worked. But Crumble and Jeff are still outside, and we need to plan our next steps.’

Amelia stood up, clenching her fists. ‘Crumble saw me at the window. He walked away! He was prepared to let me burn! He’s not going to get away with this.’

Together they sat down to plan, to the background accompaniment of more scones and biscuits being cooked.

Crumble had walked round from the back of the Library. ‘Nothing there, we’ll just have to wait for them to come out. I don’t think they’ll be long.’

Jeff looked at Crumble, then at the flickering glow at the side of the library. ‘What have you done?’

Crumble shrugged and sat on a wall. It was irrelevant how the fire had started; what mattered was that the library would be his now. As he looked up, the flames were beginning to take hold and creep under the roof tiles. All that dry, tedious monotony made good fuel and

the flames would do their job faster and, more importantly, cheaper, than that jelly, Jeff.

Jeff started towards the door. Crumble pulled him back, mumbling, 'Any minute now.'

Sure enough, the front door opened and out came the prim librarian and that traitor Apple, both carrying boxes full of redundant books. Crumble turned and walked away; his job done. What he failed to see was Amelia following behind clutching two books and boring her eyes into Crumble's cowardly back. He did not see Mary and Geoffrey holding Jeff back and reassuring him that no-one else was in the building.

The Library fire continued to devour the roof timbers and flames soared into the sky accompanied by the sound of crashing tiles, timbers and walls. The speed of the fire was remarkable, and Jeff directed them all to safety behind the grey hoarding. By the time blue lights were flickering on the other side of the village the Library had collapsed and no fire could be seen, not even a glowing ember.

Jeff was stunned by the disaster and gently laid a hand on Mary's arm. 'I'm so sorry. I know what it meant to you. It was a lovely building.'

‘It still is,’ said Mary facing the Library.

Jeff turned around to find the Library was unchanged, intact, with not a single or burn in sight. ‘How did you manage that?’

Mary and Geoffrey looked blank, but Toby jumped in with an explanation. ‘It’s amazing what you can do with special effects, lighting, projected images, fireworks, sound effects and some smoke.’ None of them was going to explain how the Library had just played the performance of its life.

‘Well, it fooled me and certainly fooled Crumble. I can’t wait to tell him.’

‘Could you wait until morning?’ asked Amelia. ‘I’d like to see his reaction in person.’

Geoffrey added, ‘And I have something that will interest your readers.’

In the council offices the next morning, Crumble was rocking back and forth on his leather padded, ergonomically designed office chair with five pre-set positions, lumbar support and unique patented ‘Posterior-Fit’ feature. It had been a profitable day’s work. Now the

Echo wanted to see him, no doubt to talk about his development plans for the site, but he blanched as Amelia walked in.

‘Surprised to see me, Crumble? Last time I saw you I was about to burn to death behind a locked window. You actually smiled as you walked away.’

‘N-n-no, you’re mistaken, I never saw you,’ stumbled Crumble.

‘You were always a bad liar.’ She was interrupted by Crumble’s mobile phone ringing. It was Jeff, on cue.

‘What do you mean, it’s still there? I saw it burn down! I heard it crash! You’re lying to me, you toad.’ Crumble cut him off, but his phone rang again. This time Jeff sent a video link. Amelia heard Jeff say, ‘You need to see this.’ Crumble watched in silence, flopping down into his posterior fitted chair.

Crumble saw Amelia smile and reacted. ‘Don’t be smug with me! If I’ve been tricked it makes no difference. That library is still coming down. Now get out. I have developers to meet.’

‘Before doing that you might like to read this morning’s *Echo*,’ said Amelia, throwing a copy on his desk with the headline *Crook Crumble crumbles*.

Crumble's face became an angry beetroot. 'This is slander! You come in here with false accusations and fake news. You have no right to call yourself a journalist. I'll make sure you don't work on the *Echo* or any other paper. How dare you print such lies. You have no proof!'

Geoffrey walked in. 'I think you'll find that this is all the proof we need.' He held up a rather tattered notebook. 'Filed under "S" I believe. It contains some fascinating accounting to which you and some friends are key beneficiaries. There are some colleagues from the local constabulary who are waiting for you in the office.'

All Crumble could say was, 'Apple....'

Back in the Library, Cordon and Gamey were hidden behind piles of scones and biscuits. The jam/cream battle had been resolved by relinquishing the decision to the consumer who did not seem to mind either way. Mary and Geoffrey sat between the shelves sharing scones, books and looks. Toby was listening to Theo tell his tales of engineering and firefighting, with typically modest tales of daring-do from the Library. And in the wicker

chair sat Amelia with Callie on her lap. Callie was deep in an animated conversation with Merrily and Theo.

Amelia smiled at the books that had been her guide.