

Flappy Duck – the Sequel

Afterwards

Grandpa listened carefully to everything Belle told him about Flappy Duck's long journey. Then he wrote it all down in a book, so that Belle would never forget – even when she got older – that loved toys could, given just a little magic dust, wake up and come to life for a young child.

True to his word, Grandpa worked very hard on Flappy's story before setting out to get it published so that other children could read about the adventure. Once the story was published as a proper book, he knew that Belle would remember Flappy Duck all her life.

And almost as important, once other children knew about him, Flappy would be a celebrity!

Grandpa decided that the best place to begin would be the London Book Fair. He bought his pass on-line for the bargain price of £25 because of his “day job” helping an American publisher find authors for their astronomy and astrophysics books. He arrived in London in good time for the Fair.

The Book Fair was on two huge floors at Olympia. The ground floor was filled with publishers of every kind, exhibiting books of every shape and size – novels, cookery books, children's books, religious books, science books – just about everything. The first floor was filled with nothing but Literary Agents – scores of them! One of them would be sure to represent Flappy Duck's adventure for Grandpa.

Grandpa set off up the long escalator to the first floor and Flappy's fame. At the top of the escalator were two big men in black suits. They looked just like night club

bouncers, which is probably what they were when the Book Fair wasn't on.

'Letter.'

Grandpa held up his Exhibitor's Pass.

'Not that. Appointment letter.'

Grandpa didn't quite know what the man was asking for. 'Appointment letter?' he asked.

The big man sighed at such ignorance. 'You need a letter from a participating agent to get onto this floor,' he said.

'But I'm an exhibitor,' said Grandpa, 'and I don't know which agent I need to speak to yet. Which one would be the best for my book.'

The big man exchanged knowing grins with his colleague. 'No appointment letter, no entry,' he said. 'Agents are busy people, you know. If just anyone who thinks he can write could get in here, they wouldn't have time to meet their clients, would they?'

Grandpa tried one more time. 'Look, I'm a published author. Not just one book but several. The last one was co-written with Sir Patrick Moore!'

But he might well have argued with the escalator. No letter, no entry.

Grandpa disconsolately rode the stairs back down, passing a Chelsea footballer (in his strip) going the other way, no doubt to discuss his autobiography with the agent of his choice. Grandpa wondered if they would turn away Mick Jagger at the top of the escalator if he hadn't got an appointment letter. He looked up at the receding bouncers. Quite probably, he thought.

Later that day, Grandpa chanced across someone he knew to be an Agent (code name: Catherine. Real names are to be avoided – you never know when someone might try to forge an Appointment Letter). They skirted round each other for a few minutes.

Catherine eventually asked, 'No hard feelings?'

'Not really. Still agenting?'

'Yes, but specialising. I only work with celebrities these days. And their ghost writers, of course.'

'I've written a book for children.'

‘Oh. Bad luck.’

‘I’m looking for an agent. General publishers won’t deal direct with authors any more.’

‘I know. Publishers are very busy people, you know. Have you got it with you?’

‘I might have.’

‘You won’t find anyone to look at it in here. Except me. Buy me a coffee and I’ll skim through it for you.’

‘The reading age doesn’t match the story age,’ she said at last. ‘And the title doesn’t say what the book’s message is.’

Grandpa finished his coffee in one gulp. ‘I thought maybe it was like *Winnie the Pooh*? I sort of modelled the style after that. It’s a moral tale.’

‘Milne would never have got published today – although David Benedictus has just written a sequel, come to think of it. But that’s only because it’ll be a dead cert best-seller. And as for Lewis Carroll, the legal department would probably have stopped it altogether – God, that hallucinogenic mushroom, and the caterpillar *smoking*? Come on, I’ll show you what’s out there by way of moral tales. The standard you should aim at.’

The first stand had lots of brightly coloured children’s books, and a lot of point-of-sale material.

‘Here,’ said Christine, ‘how about these? The “*Yes, I Can...*” series. See, you have to say in the title exactly what it is you’re teaching them.’

Grandpa looked down the list with a deepening sense of horror. The first five were: *Yes I Can be Happy*, *Yes I Can be Healthy and Strong*, *Yes I Can Help Save Animals*, and *Yes I Can Save the Planet*.

‘There you go,’ said Christine brightly.

‘Not quite what I had in mind,’ said Grandpa. ‘This isn’t literature, it’s indoctrination. Propaganda. A child can’t save a planet. He thought about some of his astronomy books. I’m not sure it needs saving anyway. It’ll probably be okay on its

own, give or take the odd asteroid impact. They don't mean "planet", they mean "status quo".'

'Doesn't that come under "music"? No? Well what about the "*All Kinds of...*" series?' Christine wasn't easily deflected. 'Look here.'

Grandpa looked: *All Kinds of People, All Kinds of Feelings, All Kinds of Bodies, All Kinds of Cultures, and All Kinds of Beliefs.*

Christine said, 'It's to make children understand that –'

'Yes, I can see what it's for. What's that one about, *Milly and Molly*? The woman on the left of the cover looks a bit dodgy.'

'Oh, yes. That's a new initiative from this publisher. It's called *The Acceptance of Diversity Series*. Milly and Molly are partners.'

Grandpa felt he was out of his depth and sinking fast. 'I had in mind something that was a more of an adventure but with a moral message.'

'You should have said. There's plenty of those. Over here.' Christine was striding across to the stand opposite. 'There; *Michael Recycle, No-Bath Bob, and Litterbug Len*. These ones are readers.'

'Readers?'

'Yes, pitched at the kids' average reading age so they can read them themselves. Carefully graded for reading, language and approved social development.'

But Grandpa wasn't listening to her any more. He had just noticed *Junk Food Hero*, a story in which a fat boy becomes an athletic school heart-throb, basically by stopping eating hamburgers and chips.

'I've think I've probably seen enough,' he said.

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Ten years pass. Belle is finally clearing out one of her junk cupboards, after weeks of nagging and with no particular enthusiasm.

Right at the back sits a careworn wooden toy duck with flappy feet, bright eyes and an orange painted beak. After all this time, a little bit of magic dust still adheres to his back. Belle hauls him out. At the touch of her hand the magic dust begins to twinkle and Flappy Duck comes dimly back to awareness after his long, long sleep. He has no idea how long it has been. He tries to ask Belle, but the magic has faded badly over the years and Belle is no longer a little girl. He can't move so much as a wheel.

She sets him on the top of the cupboard and looks at him thoughtfully.

'I remember you,' she says, 'you were my flappy duck. Grandpa was going to do a book or something, wasn't he? I used to make up stories about you... at least I *think* I made them up... didn't I?'

Flappy tries to reply, to move, make a sound, anything... please pick me up, he thinks desperately. If you held me for a while it would make me stronger. Then I could help you remember.

Belle's mother suddenly bursts into the room. 'That boy's on the phone again.'

Flappy makes a huge effort to face Belle. If she could only see him move – and to his delight he manages to inch forward on his wheels!

'What boy?' asks Belle.

'The one with the brummie accent.'

'Oh *him*.'

Slowly, Flappy Duck turns his head. Slowly, slowly – but getting easier...

‘Well?’ asks Belle’s mother.

‘I’ll talk to him, I *suppose*. Which phone’s he on?’

‘Video, in the front room.’

Belle leaves without even glancing at Flappy Duck, but she checks in the mirror to make sure her hair is okay on the way out.

‘What do you want me to do with this wooden duck?’ Belle’s mother shouts after her.

‘Oh, just bin it,’ calls Belle from the front room.

Grandpa’s trip to the London Book Fair is more or less as it really happened. The books and series titles he encountered are real ones.

JW. Carvoeiro, September 2009