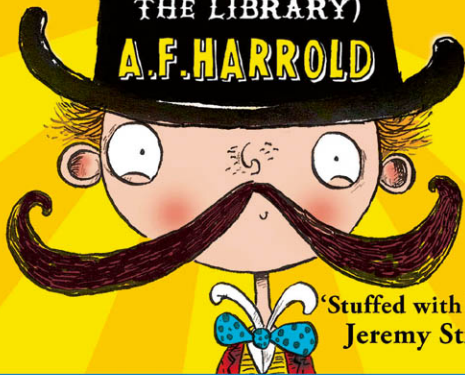


BLOOMSBURY

FIZZLEBERT STUMP

THE BOY
WHO RAN
AWAY
FROM THE
CIRCUS
(AND JOINED
THE LIBRARY)

A.F. HARROLD



'Stuffed with laughs'
Jeremy Strong

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READERS SAY...

“It’s funny, fantastic and ridiculous. I would put it in my top five books of all time, and I’ve read a lot of books – probably at least three thousand.”

Milo, age 8

“Evil old people, a sea lion in a sparkly jacket and a lion called Charles with false teeth! What more could you want? I laughed my socks off.”

Florence, age 9

“This book is like the 100 best books in the world put together!”

Hugo, age 10

“A great story that made me fizz with laughter!”

Felix, age 12

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CHAPTER ONE

in which the hero is introduced
and in which he is described

There are many boys in the world, all slightly different from one another, and most of them are referred to by names. These are often John or Jack or Desmond, but sometimes they are James or Philip or Simon. Once, and once only, there was a boy whose name was Fizzlebert. (In actual fact, because, like most boys, he had a surname that came



after the Fizzlebert bit, he was known in full (for example, when someone was cross with him) as Fizzlebert Stump.) Most often he was just called Fizz.

So that you can get an idea of what this particular boy looked like, I'll tell you that he had unruly red hair. (To be fair, most boys have unruly hair, but only the especially brilliant ones have red hair.) He wasn't short for his height, and he knew how to juggle four balls at once, though not for very long. Usually he wore jeans and a t-shirt like most kids, but over the top he pulled on an old coat that the circus Ringmaster had outgrown. (Did I mention Fizz lived in a circus?) It was red with brass buttons, unpolished now, and in the rear it dangled down to the backs of his knees. It fitted pretty well because his



mother had taken it in at the waist and shortened the sleeves, but the shoulders with their gold brocade epaulettes were still a bit broad on him. To my mind (and to Fizzlebert's) it made him look dashing, but to most people it looked a bit . . . well, shall we say, silly?



Fizzlebert's mother was a clown. That's not to say she messed about and made jokes



all the time (although she did), but rather that her job, the thing she was paid to do, was being a clown. The sort with a painted face, big trousers, long shoes, a bucket of white-wash, a ladder and an unfortunate sense of timing.

It was because his mother was a clown that Fizz lived in a circus. And also probably why he was called Fizzlebert, which is the sort of name only a clown would think of.

His father, on the other hand, was the circus strongman. A strongman is a chap who dresses up in a little leopardskin off-the-shoulder loincloth outfit, twirls his pointy oiled black moustache and lifts things up above his head to the marvelling applause of the audience. These things are usually awfully heavy things (the heavier the better), such as



great weights or huge boulders or bemused sea lions or particularly fat children from out of the audience who have been volunteered by their parents who believe such experiences are ‘character building’. Occasionally he tried doing the act while lifting up smaller things, such as bunches of flowers, handkerchiefs or imaginary balloons, but the audience’s reaction on those nights was never quite the same as when he picked up a child in one hand and a cannonball in the other, and started juggling them while whistling and dancing the cancan. (The cancan is a dance from France that involves kicking each of your legs up in the air one after the other. The best way to get the idea is to ask your parents or some other suitable grownup to demonstrate. There, see? Got it now? Super. I’ll continue.)





Where have we got to?

There's a boy and he lives in a circus. What could possibly be wrong with this life?

Wrong? Why should something be wrong? Aha, well, here's something interesting about a story: if everything is alright, then *there is* no story: it's just a happy boy with happy parents. It's a good thing, for sure, of course, without

doubt, but it's not particularly exciting. So, let me share a secret with you . . .

Fizzlebert wasn't happy.

What? Living in a circus, getting to join in with the acts when they needed help? Hanging out backstage with clowns and acrobats and jugglers, with conjurors and fire-eaters and trapeze artistes, with escapologists and magicians and beautiful girls in sequins who ride the white horses with dazzling feathered head-dresses, with performing parrots and dancing dogs and prancing ponies all jumping through flaming hoops at the poot of their trainer's whistle? Getting to travel from place to place with the whole gang, waking up in a different town each day? How could he not enjoy that? The excitement! The thrills! The magic! The thrills! The excitement! (And so on!)





Well, truth be told, he wasn't very happy because there weren't any other kids living in his circus. He was the only one. His best friend was a sea lion. And not only are sea lions unable to play cards (instead of hands they have flippers, which are rubbish at picking things up) and are even worse at playing catch (they never throw the ball back, just balance it on their nose), but they're also lousy conversationalists. And they smell of fish.

And so this introduction opens (eventually) with Fizzlebert Stump sat out the back of the Big Top late one evening looking dolefully (which means sadly, miserably, gloomily and also slightly boredly) at a sea lion who has just burped a tuna-flavoured burp in poor Fizzlebert's face. And that's also where the





introduction closes, now that you've met the hero.

Let's hope the rest of the story gets more exciting.





CHAPTER TWO

in which a lion eats a child's
head and in which an audience
applauds tremendously

Fizzlebert Stump sat out the back of the Big Top late one evening, feeling sorry for himself. That evening's big performance had just finished. He'd put his head in the lion's mouth and it had gone brilliantly. The crowd were amazed. At first there was a lot of clapping when the lion sat down and growled. Normal people didn't often get to

see lions and so they were excited, but then when, at Captain Fox-Dingle's command, the lion leant forward and opened his mouth as wide as it would go the audience hushed down a bit. To a careful ear the noise they made was a bit confused. They were thinking 'this isn't much of a trick' and were wondering what was going to happen next. And then Fizzlebert stepped into the lion's cage. Some people shouted out warnings, because it's well known that lions and children shouldn't mix; some women fainted simply because they imagined what gruesome scene might happen next; and a small boy wet himself, with uncontrollable excitement.

By the time Fizzlebert knelt down beside the lion's vast open mouth and placed his head inside it, the audience had fallen as quiet as a





brick wrapped in cotton wool sat on a table in a sound-proof booth with all the lights out. As the seconds ticked by the circus band played a drum roll that wound the tension even tighter. (You know how when something's really tense people often say, 'Oh, I was on the edge of my seat'? Well, usually they don't actually mean it, it's just a figure of speech. This evening, however, as Fizz's head was stuffed between the lion's toothy jaws, two people in the audience were perched so close to the edge of their seats that they actually fell off and had to be given refunds. The Ringmaster didn't mind doing this when the tent was so full and the show so good. In fact, people falling off their seats was a sign that everything was going well, so long as they didn't *all* fall off, because that would have led to financial disaster.)



With his head in the lion's mouth all Fizzlebert could hear was the wafting wet wheezing of the lion's hot breath in his ears. It was damp and clammy and Fizz held his breath because it smelt of . . . well, whatever it smelt of was rather unpleasant. (Have you ever smelt a cat's breath just after it's eaten? A lion's breath smells much worse (for a



start, there's much more of it). My advice is: keep away from lions' mouths if at all possible.) Fizz had to keep his head in there for thirty seconds at least, until he felt the lion tamer's hand tap him on the shoulder. Then he stepped back, held his head up high and breathed deeply of the ever so slightly fresher air of the Big Top. He held his arms aloft (which just means up in the air, as if pointing toward the loft, except since the Big Top was a tent it didn't have a loft, but all the same he pointed to where a loft would've been had he been somewhere else) and listened as the crowd went wild.

The roaring and yelling and cheering and clapping went on for several minutes, so thrilling was the show. People had loved it.

Fizzlebert bowed forwards, then to the





right and then to the left. Everyone in the audience got a bow (those were the circus rules). He was tingling and buzzing all over. This was the best bit of the show. It more than made up for the lion's breath.

Charles, the lion, padded out of the circus ring and Fizzlebert followed him.

What the audience didn't know, and what you won't know until I tell you, is that this circus's lion was a particularly old one. Because Captain Fox-Dingle loved him very much, for years and years he had shared his after-dinner sweets with Charles. But because a lion is rubbish at brushing his teeth, after a few years they all fell out, and now the lion wore dentures. In fact it owned two sets. One set was hard and pointy and made for ripping and tearing, and Charles wore these when



ripping and tearing his dinner. The other set looked just as fierce, but were actually made of rubber and so were completely harmless.

After the rest of the show had finished and the audience had started going home, Fizz was sat just minding his own business on the steps of his parents' caravan. He was reading a book about dinosaurs in the light that spilt from the doorway. It was a warm night, summer was lazily oozing by, and he was getting a last breath of fresh air before bed, when suddenly he heard a voice shouting at him.

‘Hey you!’ it said. ‘You were the one with the lion, weren’t you?’

He turned around to see a gang of children running his way. There were five or six of them, some a bit older and taller





than him, some a bit younger and shorter. What he noticed immediately though was that they all seemed to be excited about something.

‘You did that thing with the lion, didn’t you?’ asked the tallest of the bunch when they stopped just in front of him.

‘Um, yes,’ Fizz answered.

‘You were brilliant, mate. Absolutely brilliant.’

‘Oh. Thanks.’

‘I thought you was gonna get your head ripped off. I reckon you must be really brave, eh?’

‘It was very scary,’ said one of the girls quietly.

‘Yeah, I was so scared I wet myself,’ said the smallest boy with obvious pride.

‘Oh, I’m sorry about that,’ said Fizz. He



certainly hadn't meant to spoil anyone's evening, let alone their trousers.

'No, it's alright. I don't care. It was amazing.'

'Yeah,' added one of the girls. 'Mum always brings a spare pair of pants for Billy. He wets himself at everything. Well, not everything, but anything he enjoys. I told her he's not really my brother. But Mum says he is and it's only polite that we keep him. But you . . . oh, you were wonderful.'

'Really?'

'Oh yeah. You were better than the clowns and the mind reader and the acrobats . . .'

She was interrupted by the girl who'd spoken quietly before. She spoke a little bit louder this time. 'I liked the dancing dogs best. They had pink tutus. I go to ballet.'





The other kids turned to look at her with open mouths.

‘But I liked you a lot, too,’ she added, turning quiet once again.

Fizzlebert had never spent a lot of time with kids his own age, because, as mentioned before, he was the only boy who travelled with the circus. He wasn’t lonely, not really, because he had lots of friends among all the acts, but they were all grownups and some of them spent a lot of time being awfully serious. These kids were excited and exciting and they kept moving around as if they were nervous about something. And they liked Fizz. They’d said so. Maybe they could be his friends.

‘I’m glad you liked the show,’ Fizz said. ‘Captain Fox-Dingle, he’s the lion tamer, he’ll



be dead happy when I tell him you thought our act was the best.'

One of the boys prodded one of the others with his elbow and the one who'd been prodded stepped forward (rubbing his side) and said, 'Hey, yeah? Well, we're having a game of football tomorrow afternoon. Um, do you . . .? Well, I mean . . . How'd you like to come and play? It's just a little kick around after school. You know?'

Wow! Fizz had never been invited to play football before. (He'd tried playing at the circus, but Fish, his sea lion friend, always balanced the ball on his nose, which was unhelpful at best.)

'Yeah,' he said excitedly, 'I'd love to! That'd be brilliant!'

'Smashing, we'll come and find you tomorrow, after school.'



‘That’s cool. When you get here just ask anyone where I am, they’ll be able to find me.’

‘What’s your name then?’

‘Oh yes! Sorry, I didn’t say. I’m Fizzlebert, but everyone just calls me Fizz.’

Fizz held out his hand to shake, but the kids just looked at him.

‘Fizzlebert?!’

The children, who a moment before had been in awe of Fizz, amazed at his stunt with the lion and hanging on his every word, now burst out laughing.

‘What is it?’ he asked, surprised at the sudden jollity. He wondered if there was a joke he had missed.

‘Your name is *Fizzlebert*?’ the tallest boy asked. ‘Really? *Fizz*? *All*? *Bert*?’

‘Ye-e-es,’ said Fizzlebert, cautiously.

