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Opening extract from
Millions

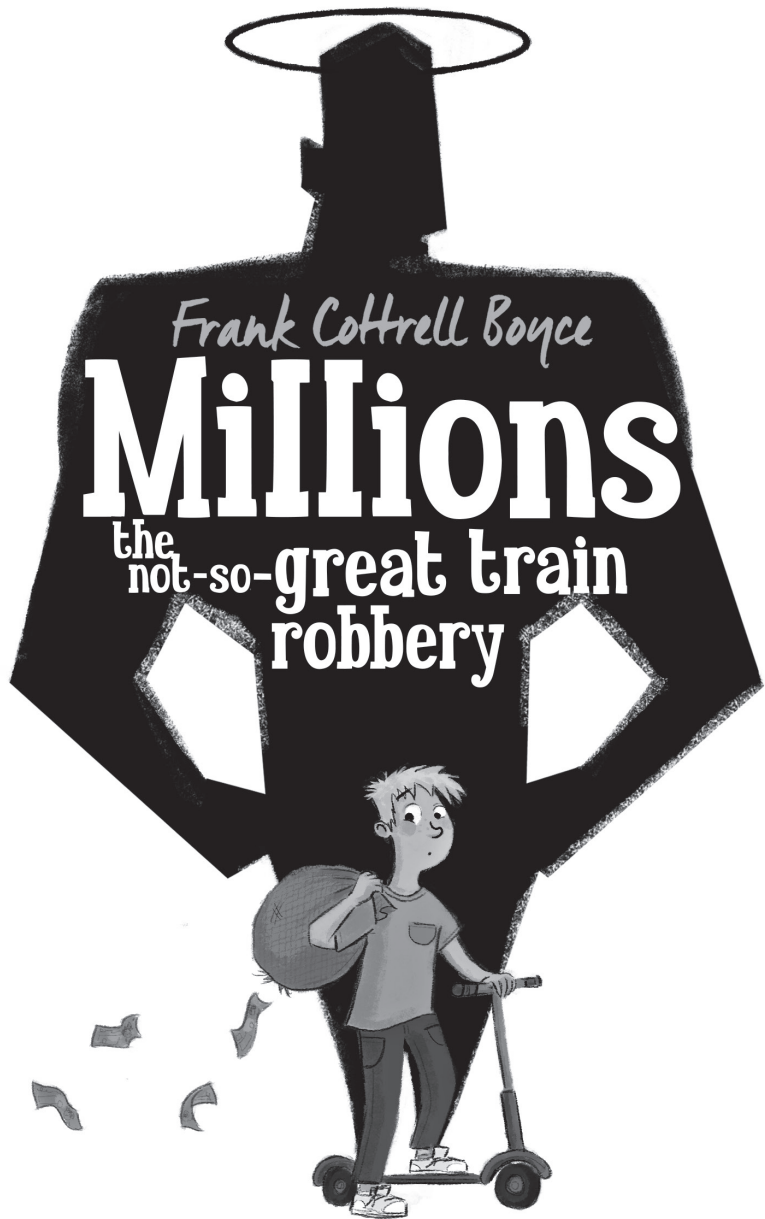
Written by
Frank Cottrell Boyce

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Illustrated by Steven Lenton

MACMILLAN

Foreword

How do you make the world a better place? This is the question that confronts the young heroes of Frank Cottrell Boyce's *Millions*. And little do they know that this question is something that will bother them for years to come.

But never mind all that adult stuff, how can they make the world better *today*? Today being the day that a suitcase stuffed with unimaginable riches (in pounds sterling) drops into their laps. Actually, it drops into the lap of the youngest of them, Damian, and he turns to his older brother, Anthony, for help. Mmmm. Understandable when you're eight, but, being that little bit older (and wiser, he thinks), Anthony, aged ten, warns him about adults ruining the joy of their discovery with taxes and what-have-you and instead wants to show Damian how they can make their own world startlingly better – and quickly. A little knowledge tries to go a long way, but the adult world is strewn with many traps just as complicated as taxes. And charity is not as easy a solution as you'd first think.

What unfolds is a fable, but told with a wit and knowingness about how the real world works and how people really think, good and bad, that are hugely entertaining and never pious or superior.

And that's Frank Cottrell Boyce down to a T. Like his central character, on the one hand he's generous – almost foolishly so – and yet there are no flies on him. ('Just the marks where they've been,' goes the typical Scouser-got-

to-have-the-last-word response.) And Frank *is* a Scouser, so the sense of humour here is enough to make the world a better place on its own. Simultaneously world-wary and suffering from the best intentions possible is quite a one-two comedy act – like Damian and Anthony.

So Damian tries to share all this with his dad (and his dad's new girlfriend), but his dad is full of all the adult stuff – taxes, mortgages and what-have-yous – and that makes it impossible for him to concentrate properly on just how to help Damian make the world a better place. And finally Damian tries to share it with his mum, who can't help him spend it right now but can make him richer than any king or football club owner. Typical Mum.

Working with Frank on a film of this story reminded me that the first place you have to look when intent on improving the world is at yourself. And not just generally, but today, right now. Whether you've won the lottery or not. Whether you're eight or ten or really ancient like Frank and me – have you got the time of day for everyone *today*? If you have, then that's where real riches lie. That's quite a religious idea (and there are a lot of saints in *Millions*, funny ones too), but the idea is older than all those religions and will outlast them too. It's illustrated in this story with a couple of ordinary kids from the north-west of England, and yet it accompanies men and women across all regions and boundaries.

So how do you make the world a better place? It's complicated. Where to even begin? For now, you couldn't start in a better place than reading Frank Cottrell Boyce's *Millions*.

Danny Boyle

1

If our Anthony was telling this story, he'd start with the money. It always comes down to money, he says, so you might as well start there. He'd probably put, 'Once upon a time there were 229,370 little pounds sterling,' and go on till he got to, 'and they all lived happily ever after in a high-interest bank account.' But he's not telling this story. I am. Personally, I like to start with the patron saint of whatever it is. For instance, when we had to write about moving house for Literacy Hour, I put:



Moving House
by
Damian Cunningham, Year Five

We have just moved house to 7 Cromarty Close. The patron saint of moving house is St Anne (1st century). She was the Mother of Our Lady. Our Lady did not die but floated up into Heaven while still fairly young. St Anne was upset. To cheer her up, four angels picked up her house and took it to the seaside in Italy, where it can be seen to this day. You can pray to St Anne for help with moving house. She will watch over you, but not do actual removals. Anne is also the patron saint of miners, horse-riding, cabinetmakers and the city of Norwich. While alive, she performed many wonders.

The patron saint of this story is St Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), because it all sort of started with a robbery and the first saintish thing he ever did was a robbery. He stole some cloth from his father and gave it to the poor. There is a patron saint of actual robbers – Dismas (1st century) – but I'm not an actual robber. I was only trying to be good.

*

It was our first day at Great Ditton Primary. The sign outside says, ‘Great Ditton Primary – Creating Excellence for a New Community’.

‘See that?’ said Dad as he left us at the gates. ‘Good isn’t good enough here. Excellence, that’s what they’re after. My instruction for the day is, “Be excellent.” The instructions for supper I’ll leave on the fridge door.’

One thing about me is that I always really try to do whatever Dad tells me. It’s not that I think he’ll go off and leave us if we’re a problem, but why take that risk? So I was excellent first lesson. Mr Quinn was doing ‘People We Admire’ for Art. A huge boy with a freckly neck nominated Sir Alex Ferguson and listed all the trophies United had won under his stewardship. A boy called Jake said players were more important than managers and nominated Wayne Rooney for individual flair. Mr Quinn was looking around the room. To be educational about it, football was not taking him where he wanted to go. I put my hand up. He asked a girl.

‘Don’t know any footballers, sir.’

‘It doesn’t have to be a footballer.’

‘Oh. Don’t know, then, sir.’

I used my other hand to hoist my hand up higher.

‘Damian, who do you admire?’

By now, most of the others were into players versus managers.

I said, ‘St Roch, sir.’

The others stopped talking.

‘Who does he play for?’

‘No one, sir. He’s a saint.’

The others went back to football.

‘He caught the plague and hid in the woods so he wouldn’t infect anyone, and a dog came and fed him every day. Then he started to do miraculous cures and people came to see him – hundreds of people – in his hut in the woods. He was so worried about saying the wrong thing to someone that he didn’t say a word for the last ten years of his life.’

‘We could do with a few like him in this class. Thank you, Damian.’

‘He’s the patron saint of plague, cholera and skin complaints. While alive, he performed many wonders.’

‘Well, you learn something new.’

He was looking for someone else now, but I was enjoying being excellent. Catherine of Alexandria

(4th century) came to mind. ‘They wanted her to marry a king, but she said she was married to Christ. So they tried to crush her on a big wooden wheel, but it shattered into a thousand splinters – huge sharp splinters – which flew into the crowd, killing and blinding many bystanders.’

‘That’s a bit harsh. Collateral damage, eh? Well, thank you, Damian.’

By now everyone had stopped debating players versus managers. They were all listening to me.

‘After that they chopped her head off. Which did kill her, but instead of blood, milk came spurting out of her neck. That was one of her wonders.’

‘Thank you, Damian.’

‘She’s the patron saint of nurses, fireworks, wheel-makers and the town of Dunstable (Bedfordshire). The Catherine wheel is named after her. She’s a virgin martyr. There are other great virgin martyrs. For instance, St Sexburga of Ely (670–700).’

Everyone started laughing. Everyone always laughs at that name. They probably laughed at it in 670–700 too.

‘Sexburga was Queen of Kent. She had four sisters, who all became saints. They were called—’

Before I could say Ethelburga and Withburga,



Mr Quinn said, ‘Damian, I did say thank you.’

He actually said thank you three times. If that doesn’t make me excellent, I don’t know what does.

I was also an artistic inspiration, as nearly all the boys painted pictures of the collateral damage at the execution of St Catherine. There were a lot of fatal flying splinters and milk spurting out of necks. Jake painted Wayne Rooney, but he was the only one.

In the dining hall, a boy on Hot Dinners came and waggled his burger under my nose and said, ‘Sexyburger, sexyburger.’ All the people round the table laughed.

I found this very unenlightening and was about to say so when Anthony came and sat by me and they all stopped.

We had ham and tomato sandwiches and two small tubes of Pringles. I said, ‘I’ve been excellent. What about you?’

He whispered, ‘You are making yourself conspicuous. You need to blend in more. People are laughing at you.’

‘I don’t mind being laughed at. Persecution is good for you. They laughed at Joseph of Copertino

until he learned to levitate.’

The huge boy with the freckly neck came and sat down. His belly caught the end of the table and tipped it up. My tube of Pringles rolled towards him. He picked it up and opened it.

‘They’re his,’ said Anthony, pointing at me.

‘And who are you?’ asked Freckle Neck.

‘I’m his big brother.’

‘You’re not that big. All Pringles belong to me.’ A dandruff of crumbs fell from his mouth. ‘School policy.’

‘You can’t take his Pringles. He’s got no mum.’

‘How can he have no mum? Everyone’s got a mum. Even people who’ve got no dad have got a mum. I’m enjoying these, by the way.’

‘She’s dead,’ said Anthony.

Freckle Neck stopped crunching and handed my Pringles back. He said his name was Barry.

‘Nice to meet you, Barry.’ Anthony offered him his hand to shake. Anthony believed in making friends. ‘Where do you live?’ he asked.

‘Over the bridge, next to the twenty-four hour.’

‘Now that,’ said Anthony, ‘is a very sought-after area. Very sought-after.’

My brother is very, very interested in real estate.

On the way to the playground, Anthony said, 'Works every time. Tell them your mum's dead and they give you stuff.'

In the afternoon, for some reason, I decided to do a St Roch. I forbore all temptation to speak during Numeracy Hour – didn't put my hand up, didn't answer a tables question even when pointed at. When Mr Quinn asked me if I was OK, I was tempted to reply, but I just nodded my head instead. I wasn't contributing to the class, but I was being excellent in a different, less obvious way.

I kept this up all the way home. Dad had left instructions fixed to the fridge door with a *Clangers* magnet:

Dear Boys

Chicken and asparagus pie. The pie is in the top drawer of the freezer. Put the oven on to 190°. Go and watch Countdown. When Countdown is over, the oven will be warm enough. Put the pie in. Take your uniforms off and put them over the end of your bed. Put your tracksuits on. Then put some oven chips in. I will be home before they're cooked.

D

I enjoyed being called dear.

When Dad came home, we had the pie, followed by five pieces of fruit and a pint of water each to hydrate our livers. When they were completely hydrated, we did our homework and he sat with us. I still didn't say a word, but then the phone rang and I accidentally answered it. I don't know how St Roch kept it up for ten years, although admittedly he had it easier living in a time before phones. Anyway, it was Mr Quinn. My teacher actually rang our actual house. How excellent is that!

Later Dad came and sat on the end of the bed and said, 'You're a bit quiet today. Cat got your tongue?'

I shook my head.

'I heard you were quiet in school too.'

I nodded.

'Anything you want to tell me?'

Shook again.

'Right. Well, time for bed.'

He'd nearly closed the door when the temptation to speak finally overwhelmed me. I said, 'What did Mr Quinn want?'

‘Well you know, a chat really. It was him who was telling me about how quiet you were.’

‘He said thank you to me three times, so I must have been fairly excellent. Did he say I was excellent?’

‘He said . . . Yes, he said you were excellent.’ He ruffled my hair. ‘One of the customers was telling me about this place today. It’s called the Snowdrome. You can toboggan or have a go at skiing. Fancy it?’

I wasn’t sure.

‘For being excellent. As a reward.’

‘OK, then.’

‘OK. So we’ll go straight from school tomorrow, because you’re excellent.’

The Snowdrome was quality completely. It’s real snow inside, made of ice crystals from a big blower. They give you a special snowsuit to wear when you’re in there. You’re not supposed to have two people on a toboggan, but Anthony explained to the man that our mum was dead and he let us do what we liked. We went down twice two together, once on our bellies and three times backwards.

*

In school next morning, everyone was interested to hear all about it. I explained how the ice blower worked and was giving a demonstration of backward-tobogganing when I smashed into Mr Quinn, who was coming in through the door.

‘Watch it! Watch it!’ he yelled as he dropped all our workbooks.

I helped him pick them up. I saw my own, the one about St Anne. It had a note stuck inside, which he took out and pocketed as he gave me back the book.

‘What d’you think you’re playing at, lad?’

‘The Snowdrome, sir. We went. It was good.’

He suddenly looked all cheery. He said, ‘Well, you could write about that for today’s Literacy Hour, couldn’t you? Give an exciting description of all the fun you had. No patron saint of Snowdromes, I bet.’

Speke Snowdrome

by

Damian Cunningham, Mr Quinn’s Class

Speke Snowdrome is quality. You can skate or toboggan. The patron saint of skating is

Lidwina (Virgin martyr, 1380–1433), who was injured in a skating accident and spent the rest of her life in bed. She bore her mortification with forbearance and performed several wonders: for instance, eating nothing but Holy Communion wafers for seven years. You can read more about her at www.totallysaints.com/lidwina.html

The truth is, there is always a patron saint. As St Clare of Assisi (1194–1253) once said to me, ‘Saints are like television. They’re everywhere. But you need an aerial.’

