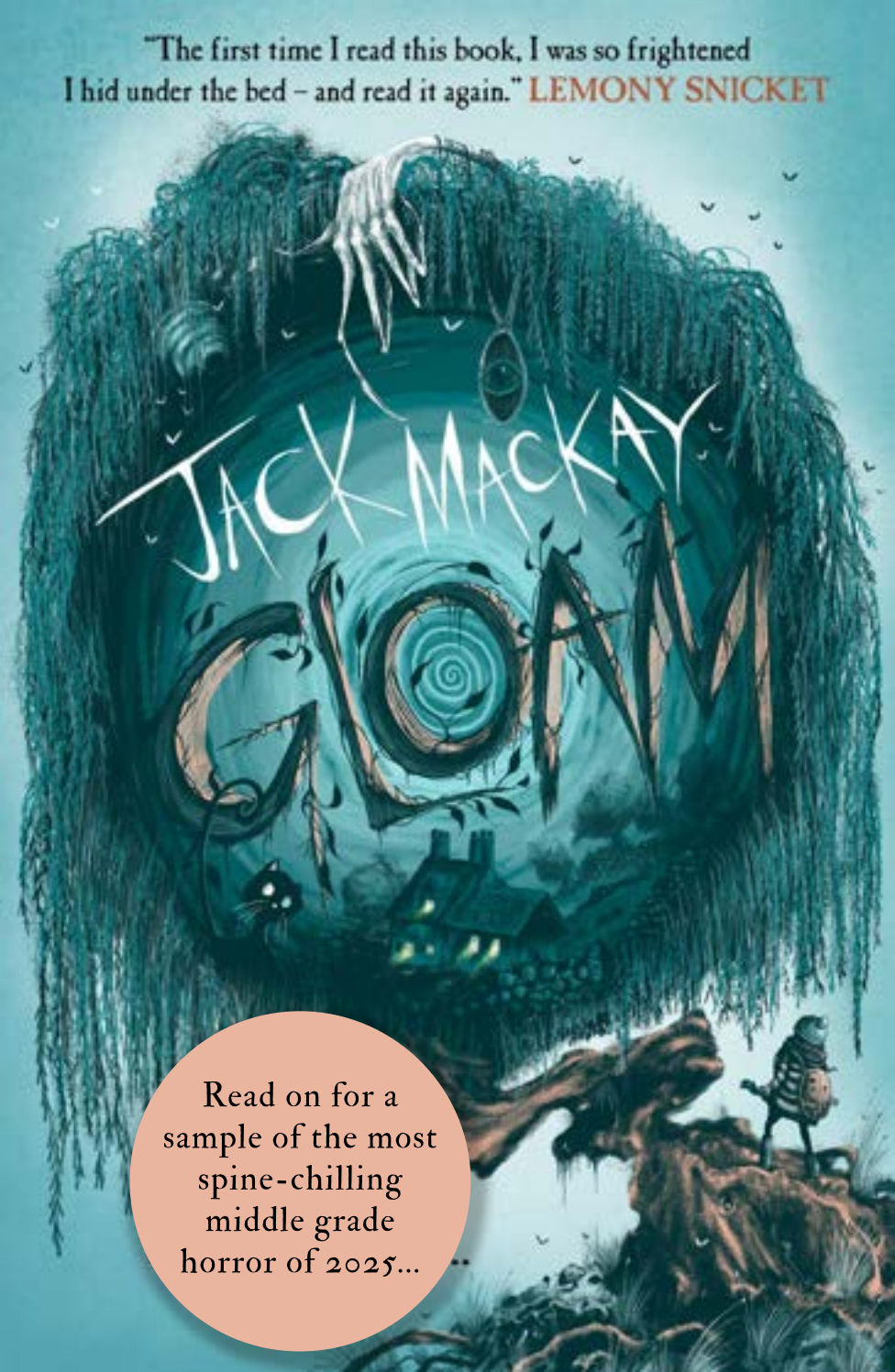


"The first time I read this book, I was so frightened
I hid under the bed – and read it again." **LEMONY SNICKET**

JACK MACKAY

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middle grade
horror of 2025...



GLOAM

Jack Mackay



A ROCK THE BOAT BOOK

First published in the United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland and Australia
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A CIP record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-86154-952-8

ISBN 978-0-86154-953-5

Text designed and set in LTC Cloister by Tetragon, London
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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*To Grandma and Grandad,
whose House is never that scary
as long as they are in it.*

Death is nothing at all.
I have only slipped away to the next room.
I am I and you are you.
Whatever we were to each other,
That, we still are.

HENRY SCOTT HOLLAND



I

The House on Gloam Island

AT the bleakest edge of the world, crammed into a car that was much too small for five people, Gwen watched as Gloam Island loomed closer and closer. If she had been told a few months ago that this place would one day be her home, she would have laughed, then cried, then she probably would have punched a wall.

“I’m squashed,” said Hazel.

“I’m hungry,” said Hester.

Hazel and Hester Clayton-Fenn were twins, six years old and identical to the pore, dark-haired and freckled with matching button noses. They writhed against their seatbelts.

Gwen was sitting in the passenger seat with her suitcase in the footwell. She was both squashed *and* hungry, but she was thirteen, which meant she was old enough to keep her complaints to herself. She returned her attention to her notebook, where she was writing her latest story. This one was going to be a bestseller and she couldn't afford to get distracted.

"How much longer?" muttered Roger.

Roger was ten. His full name was Roger Clayton-Fenn Junior, after their grandfather, Roger Senior, although he had died soon after the twins were born, so there wasn't much need for the distinction now. With his elbows wedged between the twins' car seats, Roger Junior glowered through his curly fringe.

"Nearly there, kids," said Henry, who was driving. It was the fifth time he'd said it in the last hour. "Nearly there now."

The sea was beginning to tickle the edges of the causeway as Henry's absurd little car raced towards land. By night, the road would be underwater, erasing the only way on or off the island. Not that it mattered – Gloam didn't get much traffic. One visitor in late autumn was uncommon. A family was a phenomenon.

Hazel peered out of the window. "The sea's almost touching the road," she said.

“Don’t be silly,” said Henry, with a nervous glance at the lapping water. “We’ve got plenty of time.”

But he sped up, all the same. Henry became much cheerier when they left the causeway behind for the tiny village of Gloaming. Gwen was privately relieved that his poor time management hadn’t led to their drowning.

The children’s surname – Clayton-Fenn – was a combination of their father’s and their mother’s names. Henry Oakworth was neither a Clayton nor a Fenn. The children had met him over an awkward breakfast just two years ago. Gwen had thought he looked quite silly in his shabby houndstooth jumper and Oxford shoes, but she said her “hello”s and her “nice-to-meet-you”s, and wondered privately how quickly her mum would get tired of the boring old accountant from boring old Norfolk. The last thing Gwen expected her mum to do was marry him.

Henry turned at the sign marked “SMALLMARSH ROAD” onto a lane that took them far away from the village. There was no marsh to be seen, not even a small one. Instead, it was just grey, undulating fields as far as Gwen could see. The road ended on a hill surrounded by patches of purple heather. Henry’s car pulled into a driveway and the younger children’s whinging quieted with the engine.

The sight of The House was almost a surprise. It seemed strange to Gwen that The House could still exist without Grandma, yet here it remained, languishing on its hill like a forgotten toy. Windswept. Forlorn. Empty of life.

Henry was the first out of the car. "Here we are," he said. He clapped his hands together. It was a habit of his.

The children did not get out. They just stared up at The House.

"It looks different," Roger said.

The beds in the herb garden were strangled by weeds. The sundial had been toppled by the wind. The old millstone was half hidden in the overgrowth. It was as if the ground was trying to swallow the place up and hide it somewhere dark and deep below.

"C'mon, then!" Henry tapped the passenger window. "Out you get."

Gwen tucked her notebook into her pocket and slid out of the car. Following her lead, the others clambered out one by one. They glanced again at The House.

"I miss Grandma," muttered Hazel.

"I want to go home!" Hester shouted.

"This *is* home," Henry said. "At least, it is now. Your grandma left it to you. It must be nice to be back."

Hester kicked a rock.

The House was ringed by a narrow wall of stacked stone. When Gwen pushed open the iron gate, the hinges screamed. Her fingertips came away brown with rust.

The House had many names. To the people in the village, it was simply “the White House on the Hill”, and it sat lonely enough on its heather-furred slope that everyone knew just which house you were talking about.

In the olden times, The House had been a coaching inn called “The Golden Harp”. Gwen didn’t know exactly when “the olden times” were, but she knew it was a time when a “coach” was a carriage pulled by horses, not a single-deck bus, nor a sweaty middle-aged gymnastics teacher. Grandma Fenn had always boasted that the highwayman called Dick Turpin had stayed in The House, and that the rusted flintlock pistol on the living-room mantelpiece had been a gift to a beautiful barmaid working at the inn, as a token of his affection. Gwen had loved that story as a child, but now that she was older, Gwen doubted that Dick Turpin or any other traveller would have bothered visiting a miserable island in the North Sea.

It had been a whole year since Grandma died. Nobody called it the “The Golden Harp” anymore.

The House’s real name – the name scratched into the slate plaque over the front door – was Somnolent Hall,

but Gwen didn't know what "somnolent" meant, and she'd never tried to pronounce it, so she and her siblings just called the house "The House".

Now, The House was theirs. Gwen had hoped it would feel right, but it didn't. As she passed beneath them, The House's high windows looked down at her like a stranger's eyes: dark and inscrutable.

"You're quiet," Henry said when she joined him at the door. He still hadn't found the right key.

"I'm thinking," Gwen replied.

"Ah," he said. "I shan't disturb you, then."

And that was the end of that.

Yellow Eyes That Glow in the Dark

ONCE Henry located the right key, it took them the evening to unpack their bags. Henry kept calling it “our new house”, but it wasn’t that at all. It was *The House*. Even when Grandma and Grandad were alive, The House had belonged to no one but itself.

The downstairs hall was wide and windowless. Henry flicked the light switch. Nothing happened.

“Oh,” he said.

“Power cut,” Hester said with authority.

Fortunately, Gwen had charged her mobile in the car, so she switched on the torch. “There’s no service,” she remarked, more to herself than anyone else.

“Do they deliver pizza here?” Roger asked Henry.

Gwen cast the light around the room. There was a grandfather clock in the corner. Tweed jackets and waterproof coats still hung on a line of hooks. A row of stuffed seagulls gathered dust on a chest of drawers. Icons of the Clayton-Fenns’ childhood, they now stood ominous and silent in the black belly of The House.

“Where does this go?” Henry asked. He was standing beside the door under the stairs. He tugged the handle. It was locked.

“The cellar,” Roger said with a note of trepidation. “Grandma never let us in there.”

“Well, we’re all explorers today, aren’t we?” Henry fumbled with the keys. “Shall we take a look?” He tried a key. Then another. Then another. “Ah,” he said, disappointed. Gwen was starting to suspect that keys were a challenge for Henry.

“There’s a box of keys somewhere,” Roger said, looking around.

“What’s that?” said Gwen. Her torch had illuminated an amulet hanging beside the staircase: a pebble dangling from a string, painted with a wide eye. All five of them peered at it.

“I have no idea,” Henry admitted after a long pause.

Gwen helped everyone else ferry their luggage to their

rooms. The distant causeway was underwater now, cutting the island off from the world. The wind was coming in strong. Dwindling light bled through wounds in the evening clouds.

Hazel and Hester had the guest room on the first floor, because it was the only room with twin beds. A passage led to their grandparents' bedroom, which nobody was prepared to sleep in. There were no light fittings along that passage, so it was always shrouded in darkness. Looking down it, Gwen had a hollow feeling in her stomach: the kind of tingling discomfort triggered by dark pits and forests at midnight, a toe-curling foreboding that comes with the knowledge that *something* could be lurking there in the shadows. Watching.

The twins had always hated that corridor.

"Can't we have a different room?" Hester pleaded, while Hazel huddled behind the doorframe. "Please, Gwen? Please?"

"It looks worse in the dark," Gwen promised. "It'll be fine once the landing lights are working again."

She helped the girls move their clothes from their suitcases into the wardrobe, then replaced the musty linens on their beds with the new ones Henry had brought. After that, she went upstairs to help Roger set up his

easel, only to cause an argument when she dropped his paints by accident.

Roger was in the room next to Gwen's, up on the second floor. It was their mum's childhood bedroom and it was also the home of a glassy-eyed doll who sat, doubled over, on an old rocking chair. It had long dark hair and wore a polka-dot dress, but it frightened the twins so much that it spent its days confined to the bedroom. Gwen didn't mind the doll at all. She asked Roger if she could keep it in her room instead and he agreed. He'd brought a whole box of stuffed toys, anyway.

Gwen's room had belonged to their Aunt Jan who now lived in Florida. Everything in it was pink. The walls were salmon, the duvet was fuchsia, and the fluffy rug looked like a polar bear that had been drowned in a vat of pink dye. Just like in the dining room, the living room, and even the bathroom, there was a painted-eye talisman hanging above Gwen's bed. Gwen felt as if The House was looking inside itself, all the better to inspect its new inhabitants.

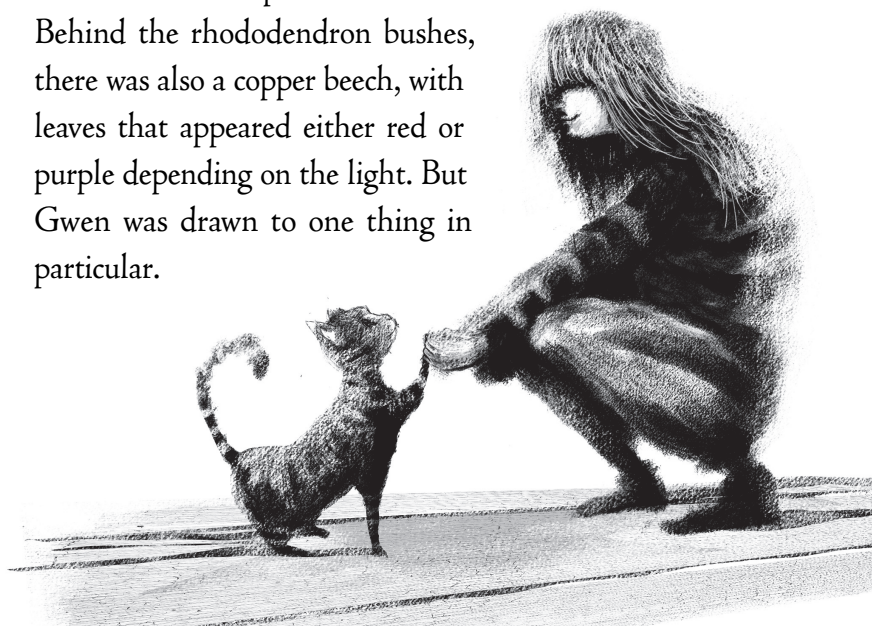
Henry was left with the attic room, above the second-floor landing. Casting his phone torch over the cobwebbed beams that held up the roof, Henry said "Oh yes, I can work with this," in the tone of a man who had no idea what he was doing.

At seven o'clock, while Roger was reading a book by torchlight and Henry was wrangling the resisting twins into their pyjamas, Gwen found a tabby cat in the hallway. His eyes were different colours: one blue, one green. He coiled round her legs in a figure of eight, purring, and when she knelt to tickle his head, she noticed he was missing his left ear.

“Hello, you,” she said. “How did you get in?”

The back door was in the kitchen. Gwen opened it for the stray and he slunk out into the garden. He didn't meow once. He just walked straight out of the door.

The back garden stretched down the hill into wilderness, fringed by patches of collapsed stone wall like a grassy tongue surrounded by broken grey teeth. The cat ran off towards the foot of the garden, where a willow tree drooped over the lake. Behind the rhododendron bushes, there was also a copper beech, with leaves that appeared either red or purple depending on the light. But Gwen was drawn to one thing in particular.



Children are easily scared. Their imaginations have yet to be squashed by grown-up things like taxes and mortgages and politics. Sometimes, when something scares a child, that fear will take root in their mind, and the branches of terror will grow all the way into their adulthood. Some try to forget the monster under the bed. However, many human beings, as they grow older, come to fixate upon it. It was just so with Gwen.

Where the twins had been afraid of the pitch-black corridor to Grandma's room, Gwendolyn Clayton-Fenn was terrified of The Well.

It was a simple thing: a circular pit, bored into the ground halfway down the slope of the garden. There was a low stone wall around it, only two bricks in height. When Gwen was five, she'd gone running out into the garden and tripped on the edge of The Well. Mum grabbed her by the arm and kept her from falling in and Grandad nailed wooden boards over the opening to stop it happening again.

Thirteen-year-old Gwen still tiptoed towards it as if it was the open gullet of hell. She remembered the turning feeling in her stomach, the sudden breathlessness of the fall. She'd felt it in her nightmares since she was very little and still dreamed of terrible things crawling out of the darkness: things with glowing eyes and too many legs.

It was still boarded up. That was good. Anything lurking in there would be trapped.

Her eyes found the willow tree. Grandma used to take the children down to the lakeside, under the web of branches that formed a wide green dome around them. It felt like a safe place, hidden from view. Grandma would tell them to lie down on the grass and listen.

“Trees are always talking,” she would say. “If you listen closely, you can hear what they’re saying.”

When the wind blew, the leaves rustled like whispers. The children would lie there for a long time, straining their ears, but they couldn’t hear any words. Only the wind.

“That’s because you’re not listening properly,” was Grandma’s reply. “You ought to listen, you know. One day, a tree might tell you something important.”

Now, the grass around the willow’s roots had turned to hard soil. When she was little, Gwen always thought The Tree looked like a hairy old troll admiring its reflection in the water. Now all she saw was a chunk of wood with a crook in its back. She looked away before she could become too sad. It was a silly thing to be sad about.

There was a shout from the doorway.

“RICKETY DEN! RICKETY DEN!”

The noise shook Gwen out of her thoughts. She turned and saw the twins pelting into the garden. They were

wearing their onesies. Hazel's had ponies on it because horses were her favourite animals. Hester's had lobsters on it. (Gwen wasn't sure why.) Henry stood in the doorway, rubbing his forehead.

"Back inside, please, girls!" he called, but they were too busy running.

High up in the copper beech was an old treehouse that Grandad had built for the children. Even when it was new, the children called it the Rickety Den. Its walls were painted white, and its door was painted red. As the children grew up, it had been a hunter's lodge, a wizard's tower, a spy's headquarters, a dragon's mountain lair, the lookout of a pirate galley. A wasp's nest had grown slowly in the corner near the window, but it hadn't stopped the children playing. Then, when he was seven, Roger had accidentally put his foot through the nest. He hadn't gone near the Rickety Den since.

"We want to play in the Rickety Den!" the twins sang. They repeated it over and over until Henry came out to drag them inside.

"Not a chance," he said. "It looks ready to collapse. How about we make it one of our projects? We could fix it up again." He swallowed glumly. "Add it to the list," he added under his breath.

Gwen looked over at the Rickety Den. It was too dark

right now to see much more than its shape, but Gwen could see enough to know that it had changed, too. Its peeling paint revealed the timbers beneath. Several rungs on the ladder were broken. Whole roof tiles lay on the grass. All that remained of its former glory was its red door, which hung ajar in a way that was half-inviting, half-threatening, like a tree-creature beckoning prey into its scarlet mouth.

They had a candlelit supper of squashed, lukewarm egg sandwiches from the car. The twins finished the carton of milk they had brought. Henry repeated several times in a tone of relief that they had been “cutting it fine” on their arrival. Adults liked talking about journeys, even ones they’d only just been on.

Before the children were sent to bed, Henry gathered them on the stairs and looked at them all in turn.

“I know it’s strange, being back here without... without everyone.” He still wasn’t mentioning Mum by name, Gwen noticed. “But Grandma wanted you to have this house. She left it in trust especially for you. We’ll make things work. I’ll find some way to get hold of the electrician, we’ll get the lights and the fridge working again, and we’ll have a good tidy up. The removal van will come with the rest of our things and very soon this will be just like home. We’re all going to be just fine. Okay?”

None of them answered him, so he just nodded and answered himself. “Okay. Goodnight then, kids.”

Gwen settled the twins in their room, promising them that if they got too scared in the night, they could come upstairs to find her. As she went up to her own bed, Gwen glanced at the photographs that hung on the wall above the staircase. Distant relatives, all in black and white, most of whom Gwen had never met. Gwen took her time looking over them by the light of her phone torch. The photos had faded with age and the lighter parts were bleached out like milk stains, making the people in them pale and stark. It was like looking at ghosts.

On the landing, there was a colour photograph that had been taken in the back garden before the twins were born. Grandma and Grandad sat at a trestle table, their fingers folded together. Gwen could remember the feeling of Grandma’s hand in hers, and how she would squeeze it briefly, as if reminding her she was still there. At Grandma’s feet, a younger Gwen was sitting on the grass, picking flowers, not looking at the camera. Beside her, Roger was sucking his thumb, and his other hand clutched at the dress of a pregnant woman with long dark hair. Gwen recognised her by the dimple in her cheek. It was Mum, though she looked quite different to how Gwen remembered. She was wearing a summer dress instead of a hospital gown, and her

cheeks were flushed instead of grey. It was strange to see her how she *really* was, before the illness – how pretty she had been, how her long dark hair curled a little at the ends, and how her smile glittered even when frozen in time. Gwen wished her own memories were as clear as the photographs. It was hard to keep a whole picture in her head.

She lay awake in her aunt's old bed, looking up at the crooked beams on the ceiling. The wind howled across the island and rattled the windowpanes. There was no central heating, so Gwen went looking through the airing cupboard for blankets before piling one after the other on top of her duvet. When she was little, Gwen's mum told her a fairytale about a princess who slept on twenty heavy mattresses piled on top of a pea. Gwen felt like the pea.

At first, when Henry told her that they were going back to Gloam, Gwen had been almost relieved. If they had to move, then at least it was somewhere she knew, rather than some sterile apartment. This was the family home. There were pieces of all their lives here. But lying in bed, listening to the wind, Gwen realised that she had been wrong. Everything was different. She could hear no echoes of her childhood in the halls. Mum and her grandparents were well and truly gone, and Henry was a stranger in this place. Everything was greyer, and stiller, than it had ever been. Life had left The House.

Cre-ee-ak.

Something had made a sound. Gwen sat slowly upright. Without the landing light to illuminate the room, there was only pure, impenetrable darkness.

And a pair of bright yellow eyes staring back at her.

Gwen scrambled for her phone, switched on the torch and flailed wildly, kicking herself up against the headboard. When she stopped, she realised that the only eye in the room – other than her own – was painted on a pebble, dangling from a loop of string hung from a little hook on an overhead beam. Gwen watched the eye, her heart racing. Nothing moved.

She switched off her phone. The yellow eyes had gone. Grandma collected all sorts of horrible things – paintings that looked like they were melting, bizarre plaster casts of hands and feet, stuffed weasels snarling at stuffed sparrows – so why was Gwen so unsettled by a harmless stone amulet? She nestled herself back under the covers and, once her body untensed, the night lulled her racing mind to sleep.

That night, she dreamed of The House in happier times. She didn't think to question why, when there was only one amulet in the room, there had been two eyes glowing in the dark.