



HELEN
DONOHOE

BIRDY
FLYNN

'Birdy is a complex, compelling
creation . . . a terrific debut.'

Sarah Waters

WHEN THE TOUGHEST FIGHT IS TO BE YOURSELF

Birdy Flynn fights harder than any boy at school.
And Birdy Flynn carries secrets.

There is the secret of Birdy's dead grandmother's cat. How the boys tortured her and Birdy Flynn had to drown her in the river to stop her suffering. There's the secret of Mrs. Cope, the popular teacher, who took advantage of Birdy. And the secret of Gypsy Girl at school who Birdy likes, but can't mention. Because Birdy's greatest secret could change everything . . .

In this luminescent, sad and funny portrayal of a young person growing up in an imperfect family, Helen Donohoe has created a beautifully nuanced and deeply felt novel. Whatever their story, every reader will recognize in Birdy their own struggle to find their place in the world.

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THE
DON'T
STOP



BIRDY FLYNN

HELEN
DONOHUE



A Rock the Boat Book

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Helen Donohoe studied politics at Manchester University and the LSE and has dedicated her career to speaking up for the powerless and invisible as a campaigner, lobbyist, volunteer and writer. She recently completed an MA in Creative Writing (Novels) at City University, London, winning the PFD Novel Writing Prize for *Birdy Flynn*, her first novel. She lives in London.

For my mum

1

Innocence Drowned

I am not vicious. Was not my idea, the whole cat murder. Kicking a cat half to death is wrong, out of order. Proper disturbed behaviour. *Hammer House of Horror*. But all for one, and all that stuff. Boys stick together. We always stuck together. Dad blamed it on hormones, the changing of the blood. Boys' bodies growing so fast their brains can't keep up.

I held the cat's collar between my finger and thumb. The scruffy, manky, dirty cat with eyes that looked shiny in the evening sun. She was black and white, with bright green eyes the colour of Nan's brooch. The one she found on the strand as a girl, when life was all laughter and the fun was superb.

The cat should have gone home.

When I reached for her name tag she shook me off. *Please yourself then*, I thought.

The boys laughed, so did I, but I didn't know why.

'Get lost then,' I said and I stepped away.

She followed me. She recognised me, smelt my clothes.

Martin threw a stick at her.

'Please go home,' I knelt down and said.

I thought that cats were clever, but she just tilted her head.

Every day after school we stood on that bridge, staring at the brook, looking for fish. A pound note was promised to whoever spotted life, but nothing in there was ever found alive. The water stank and had a grumpy, stuttery flow. If you were lucky, the oil on the surface sometimes made a rainbow.

When we were little we played pooh sticks on that bridge, back and forth, back and forth. We loved it. But the road got dead busy and the reeds got too thick. We played every day and we never hurt a thing. The only bad we did was a little bit of nicking. Easy pickings: open car windows, catalogue deliveries sitting on doorsteps. Joe did Woolworths because his dad worked there. For Mum's birthday he got me a UB40 cassette and a stack of Tupperware.

'There'll be milk at home,' I said to the cat. 'Creamy milk. Go on, off you go.'

But she looked straight at me, like I was doing her wrong. Martin threw a stone.

I looked at Liam, but he looked away.

'Go home. I know where you're from.' I spoke to her like a teacher. 'Go home where you belong.'

'Come on.' Liam started walking. 'That cat don't look normal.'

'What?'

'Yeah,' Joe laughed, 'it's diseased and disgusting.'

'Liam,' I shouted.

'It stinks,' he said, and then he was gone.

They climbed under the rusty railings and jumped down from the bridge. For a second I couldn't see them, so I climbed

down quick. I landed in soft, soggy mud. The cat did too. It stuck to my ankles like fluff on a broom.

‘You please yourself,’ I shouted, ‘you mad moggie idiot.’

The boys looked around and laughed like baboons.

We squelched and slapped along the boggy edge of the brook. Above us, the air was dry and warm and still. ‘A bloody drought,’ Dad called it that lunchtime when I’d gone home to check on Mum. He was in the garden, chatting with his wilting vegetables. Inside, all the curtains were closed to keep out the sun. At school all the windows were open, wedged with old books, so the taste of the motorway coated the back of my throat. I wore my short-sleeved shirt, tank top and did my best Windsor knot. Dad said I looked like a prison guard. He didn’t mean to, but that cheered me up.

In our heads, me and the boys were soldiers on patrol, marking our territory, ready to fight, to save the world. The cat strutted along like she was guarding us, like a dog. Then, *zoom*, she darted up the bank. Martin went after her. We all followed, from wet mud to the crusty pathway at the top. The cat walked on. We marched behind her. The cat stopped to lick its paws. We stopped to watch.

‘My dad got a medal from the army,’ Martin said.

Four of us stood watching the cat.

‘Did you hear?’ he went on.

We looked up. That was Martin’s hobby, bigging up his dad. We let him do it whenever he wanted – his dad was a ferocious man. His dad would look at you with two fingers shaped like a gun. Even though I wasn’t a relative, he said, ‘Bang bang, you’re dead, my son.’ He was barred from every

pub, even Dad's ones. Mum gave Martin my brother Noely's blue Farahs, the ones that I was after. Plus some socks, denim shirts, polo-neck sweaters, boxer shorts and a jumper that was fake Lyle and Scott. I couldn't stop being jealous, until his dad set fire to the lot. My sister Eileen said there were rats in Martin's house, druggies and hippies, and it was like a gypsy camp. I told her to get lost. I told her that one day me and Martin were going to run a pub. She said no way was I clever enough. I said I was.

'He showed me the medal last night,' Martin said.

I tried to look him in the eye, but orange sunbeams were slicing like lasers through the thick trees and burnt into my sight. It was daytime turning to dark. Fuzzy air and echoey sounds, like you get in the gardens behind pubs. The buzzing from insects you never get to see. The coo of pigeons that Dad said were doves.

Martin dipped his hand in his pocket and bent down. 'Here you go,' he said, holding out his palm with dusty biscuit crumbs.

The cat flicked her tongue. It was swirly red, like an aniseed twist, and Martin's shoulders twitched and turned like he was fighting off a tickle. He stroked her dirty chin and smoothed down her messy fur.

'You turned soft?' I said to him.

'I'm going to kill it,' he said, without looking up.

'Anyone for fishing?' I asked. I wanted Martin to shut up.

'Yeah, fishing,' Joe said, and Liam tried to laugh.

Martin stood up.

The cat scratched herself.

Somewhere a Flymo whirred up.

'Beetles are real clever,' Joe said. 'I like them a lot.'

We watched one digging in the dust. I remembered the dead stag beetle under my bed, wrapped in cotton wool in one of Mum's old Nivea pots.

'My dad's got a new job,' Martin said, staring at the cat.

We looked at him.

The cat watched him.

'He's going to be a bodyguard.'

'Cool,' Liam said with a huge smile.

'Brilliant.' Joe punched the air like he'd won a new bike.

'For who?' I said.

'The Pope.'

'What?'

'The Pope.'

'You're joking us.'

'He's coming to London.' Joe pulled at my arm. 'He is – my mum said he is.'

'It's the truth, Birdy,' Martin said to me. In the dirt he used his foot to mark a cross.

'Your dad's going to work up London?' I said.

'Yes.'

'Kiss these.' I gave him two fingers.

'He is.'

'Yeah, yeah.' I didn't like his dad working when mine couldn't get a job. Joe started swinging a stick at weeds like he was cutting down crops.

'He is,' Martin carried on.

'OK.' I put my hands up.

HELEN DONOHOE

Joe whacked dandelion heads into the air.

'Stop it,' I snapped, 'or you'll get a wallop.'

'You and whose army?' He poked me.

'I'll break it round your neck.' My fists clenched in my pockets.

'Dream on, you little Irish leper.'

'It's leprechaun, you berk.'

'Oh God,' Liam interrupted us. He was looking at the cat, trying to get more words out.

'Shut up,' Martin shouted.

The Flymo stopped.

'He has,' Martin spat the words at us. 'He has got a job.'

'OK, mate,' I said and stood in surrender, my arms stretched out like Jesus on the cross.

Martin stepped towards me. He took each of my arms. First my left and then my right. He folded each one down, flat against my sides, like closing the blades on a Swiss army knife.

'He has,' he repeated and his eyes got bigger.

'We know,' I said. I wanted the cat to run off.

'What do you know?' Martin spurted.

I looked up at the sky.

'Bloody Catholics.' Martin went inside his thoughts. 'That's what Dad says.'

Joe muttered something under his breath that made Martin shout louder.

'What do you know, Worzel?' Martin tapped his finger on his head like he was hammering in a nail.

Liam pretended he found it funny.

BIRDY FLYNN

Do something, I begged Liam inside my head.

Joe's leg began to shake.

The cat licked her paws.

Martin jabbed her with his toe. 'Let's kill it, now.'

'What?' I said. 'No.'

'Or frighten its head off.' He turned and grabbed Joe by the throat. Then after letting him go, Martin looked up to the clouds and let out a roar that was half laugh, half burp.

Joe held his own throat, forcing out a cough to make it seem worse.

'Leave it, Martin,' I said.

He turned his hand into a gun and pointed it towards my eyes.

'Don't,' I said.

Martin looked confused. Like he'd forgotten his own name. His face was greasy but speckled with brown dust and one of his cheekbones was still bruisey yellow.

'Don't what?' he said.

'I'm going home.' I waved my hand at the cat, hoping she would come.

'Don't what?' Martin repeated.

'You going?' Liam asked me.

'Got to.'

'I've gotta shoot too.' Liam grabbed my arm.

'What you looking at?' Martin said to the cat, and we froze.

Her crystalline eyes looked up.

'What you smiling at?' Martin leant down, like a giant standing over her.

Shut it, Martin, I thought. Every word was getting to me. He sounded like Dad tanked up.

'Leave it, Mart,' I said and looked at Joe. He was looking at the cat.

I looked at Liam and he looked at me.

'What you looking at?' Martin repeated, slowly and surely. He crouched down to her. 'You staring at me?'

The cat didn't move. Martin took his right hand out of his pocket and reached for her. I thought he might lift her for a hold and a stroke, but he snatched at her collar, yanking her up. He held her like a scrag of meat on a hook, letting her legs dangle and flap. Her little mouth fell open, trying to get air. She had teeth as white as Tic Tacs, but the green of her eyes was gone, rolled back inside her head. Martin stepped down the bank towards the brook. He swung the cat over the water like a hypnotist swings a watch.

'Martin, cats don't like water,' I said. 'They can't swim.' I thought he'd stop.

'Aren't they meant to be clever?' He dunked the cat under.

My heart began to thump. The cat squealed a high-pitch sound, like a frightened child.

'Come on, Mart.'

He carried on, holding the cat in the water longer. 'Not so clever now,' he said. 'Not such pretty eyes.'

The cat looked like an oily rag, and twisted and squealed and squirmed and spun her legs and paws, trying to punch him with her claws.

I went down the slope, careful not to fall.