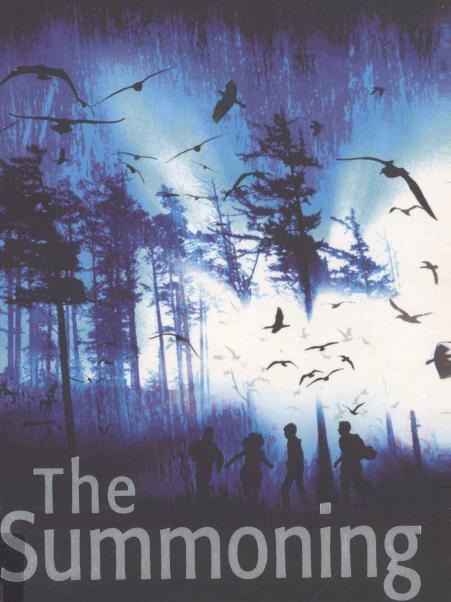
E. E. RICHARDSON



IF YOU BRING A SPIRIT TO LIFE, PREPARE TO BE SCARED TO DEATH . . .

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The Sumphile National Summer Summer

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Trevor's voice had been growing steadily higher as he got more and more agitated. 'We'll never make it over there and back in time. And what if they ask to see our passes when we get back? Justin . . .'

'Trevor, relax.' Justin couldn't help but roll his eyes. 'It's not like we're bunking. How is it any of their business if we go out at lunch? We'll be back before last lesson. It's only geography, anyway. Who cares if we miss a few minutes?'

Nobody but Trevor. Justin had been friends with him since infant school, but even he had to admit

that Trevor Somerville could be a wet blanket sometimes. It wasn't exactly his fault, he just worried — all the time, and about everything. He had panic attacks if he forgot to do his homework or bring his trainers for PE, never mind anything more daring. Justin was doing his best to teach him to live dangerously, but it was an uphill struggle.

'Couldn't we do this after school?' Trevor continued plaintively. 'Or at the weekend? We don't have to go today . . .'

'Yes we do.' Justin sighed in exasperation. 'I've got to get the key back before my parents get home, remember? My dad'll kill me if he knows I've been over to Grandpa's house while he's still in California.'

Not that his father would be any happier if he went there while Grandpa Blake was home. As far as Thomas Blake was concerned, his father was a crazy old man who needed to be stopped from filling the children's heads with weird ideas.

Which, of course, was exactly why Justin and his sister found him so interesting. After all, how many people could say they had a grandfather who studied the occult?

'I'm not sure this is such a good idea,' Trevor repeated miserably, already out of breath as he hurried to keep up with Justin's bike. He was really only a little bit overweight, but there was no telling him that; he was his own worst enemy, hiding in baggy clothes that made him look twice the size, and not even trying to exercise because he was too embarrassed.

In fact Trevor tried hard to avoid doing anything that was not part of his usual routine, which was why Justin had pushed so hard when he'd admitted to being interested in Grandpa Blake's strange hobbies. 'Hey, you were the one who said you wanted to see his collection,' Justin reminded him.

'Yeah, but you didn't say anything about sneaking out of school,' he protested.

'Look, this is the only chance we're going to get to do it. My dad doesn't like me and Joy going round there at all – and even when we do go, Grandpa Blake never lets us look at the cool stuff.'

Justin didn't really believe that the things his grandfather collected had mystical powers, but that didn't make them any less fascinating. There was

one particular book his grandpa kept locked up: he'd only managed to take the quickest skim through it, but the contents had been jaw-dropping. A genuine book of magic! It almost didn't matter that the things in it had to be made up. It was cool just to imagine how many people had pored over its pages before him, prepared to do all sorts of strange and terrible things.

Trevor was still finding reasons to whine, but Justin tuned him out and pedalled faster. He'd been waiting for the chance to have a better look at that spellbook for ages. This was a golden opportunity, and he wasn't going to waste it.

'See, what did I tell you?' he said as he jumped off his bike outside Grandpa Blake's house. 'It's only just gone half one. We've got plenty of time. Now come on.' He unlocked the front door and they went inside.

Grandpa Blake had been gone only days, but the air inside already had a stale flavour. Letters and a newspaper were piled on the mat, and Justin stepped over them carefully.

Trevor hung back in the doorway. 'Maybe I should . . .'

'Oh, come on.' Justin groaned in disbelief. 'At least come in and see it.'

It was a collection, after all. Collections were meant to be looked at. It was only Dad who had stupid objections – if it was up to Grandpa, he surely wouldn't have minded Justin bringing a friend round.

Justin squashed the feeling of guilt that was trying to rear its head and led the way.

Grandpa Blake's private study was more like a back room in a museum than an office or a cosy den. The shelves were loaded with weird objects, from stone carvings to animal skulls to something that looked like a mummified hand. Instead of letters or reminder notes, the pinboard above the desk was covered with carefully inked drawings: star charts, odd anatomical diagrams and geometric patterns, often labelled in strange alphabets.

Compared to all that, the stacks of books were rather a let-down. They covered some interesting topics – witchcraft, Egyptian gods, fortune-telling – but they were, after all, just books. Some of them were pretty old, but most looked like you could

have bought them in any high-street bookshop.

Justin had always suspected that in a room like this there should be . . . other books. And one day last year, when they'd dropped by a little earlier than Grandpa was expecting, he'd found what he was looking for.

Now he went to the cupboard in the corner of the room and hauled out the chest from the bottom of it. As he carried it over to the desk, he couldn't help but smile at the wide-eyed way Trevor was gazing around.

'All this stuff is actually *real*?' his friend asked in amazement.

Justin shrugged. 'Supposedly. And this' – he tapped the chest – 'is *definitely* the real deal.' He tried to tug it open, but wasn't surprised when the lid wouldn't budge.

'It's locked?' said Trevor, sounding disappointed.

'Yeah, it was last time. Don't worry, I know where he keeps the key.' Justin pulled out the desk drawer and was relieved to see the key in the tray full of odds and ends where he'd found it before. He was about to push it shut again when something at the back caught his eye. 'Oh, wow. Check this out.'

He reached in and withdrew a dagger in a hard scabbard, its blade about the length of his hand. The handle was made of something like brass or bronze, icy cold to the touch but still comfortable to hold. He faced away from Trevor as he drew it, certain even before he saw it that the blade would be wickedly sharp.

'Cool.' Trevor admired it as he held it up to the light. 'Is that supposed to be magical too?'

'It's got to be.' Justin sheathed the blade again and impulsively tucked it into his bag while Trevor wasn't looking. Then he knelt down and unlocked the chest.

'This is it.' He dug through the folds of pale blue material that lined the box and unveiled the book. Trevor leaned forward curiously.

This book bore no resemblance to even the oldest volumes up on the shelves. The dark leather binding was cracked with age and bore no author's name or title; the inside page read simply, 'An account of secrets gathered'. The whole thing was handwritten, brownish ink on brittle, rough-textured paper.

It practically *exuded* hidden knowledge, as if you could absorb it through your fingertips just by having the thing in your hands.

'Wow,' Trevor breathed reverently, and Justin mentally echoed the sentiment.

He resisted the urge to flick through it, knowing that if he did, he'd never tear himself away. The day he'd first discovered it he'd almost been caught, and he'd spent every subsequent visit to his grandpa's just itching to get a second look.

And now it was his . . .

Justin quickly clamped the covers closed and stood, clearing his throat. 'OK. We'd better get back to school.'

Justin had told himself that he wouldn't even glance at the book until the school day was over, but it didn't take long for his resolution to fade. Geography was boring, and Mr Payne had made him and Trevor sit at separate desks because they'd come in late. Before the first ten minutes had passed, he'd eased the book out of his bag and opened it up on his lap.

When he'd first managed to find it, he hadn't had the time to get a real look at his prize: just a few tantalizing glimpses of cramped, spidery handwriting and disturbing images. Now that he could actually

sit down and read it, he was disappointed to find that a lot of it wasn't even in English.

In fact it seemed to be written in a whole mess of different languages. Some, like Latin and German, he could at least vaguely recognize; others were completely alien, even the scribbled shapes of the letters unfamiliar. All the same, he found it hard to wrench his gaze away.

The brittle pages whispered as he turned them, and the air felt thick with secrets. He was sure that if he could only block the rest of the world out, shut himself away with the book and no distractions, then he would begin to understand.

Understand everything. Be able to do everything. Be all-powerful . . .

Justin turned another page and finally found a section that was written in English. A section that made the hairs on the backs of his arms stand up as he began to read.

'Oh, wow,' he breathed softly, completely forgetting about his surroundings.

The page was headed in sweeping calligraphic script with the words: The Summoning and Binding of

Major Spirits. Half the page was taken up by a complex circular design, with places marked out at points for four people to stand or sit. Below that, numbered with Roman numerals, were detailed directions and the words of ritual invocations.

The words of an actual spirit-raising ritual that people had once tried to do. How awesome was that?

It didn't even look like it was all that complicated. Chalk, candles, a few bits to read out . . . they could do it themselves. Justin smirked at the thought of what Trevor would say if he suggested it.

He was about to turn the page when a harsh ringing sound interrupted. It took a moment for him to realize that it was the end-of-school bell. Three thirty already? Where had the rest of the lesson gone? He hadn't even started the work.

Not that he really cared. Justin closed his untouched geography book. He glanced round and saw that Mr Payne had already left.

'Justin? Are you coming?'

'Yeah, in a minute.' He pushed past the waiting Trevor to get to the front of the class. They still had blackboards in the classrooms in this part of the

school. Justin pocketed a stick of chalk from the shelf beneath.

'Justin!' Trevor looked alarmed.

'Don't worry, it's just *chalk*.' He held up his hands and rolled his eyes. 'It's not like it's a TV or anything.'

'What do you want chalk for?'

'I'll show you. I was looking through that book and I found this really cool— Hey!' As he turned back to his desk, Justin saw that the book was gone.



he book was gone because Daniel Eilersen had picked it up and was standing there casually leafing through it. Justin charged over, indignant. 'Hey, Eilersen! Get your thieving hands off! Did I say you could touch that?'

He snatched the book back and inspected it for damage.

Eilersen gave him a flat stare. 'Oh, right. I'm the one who's thieving. And that chalk just fell into your pocket, I'm sure.' He gave an exaggerated eye-roll that made Justin want to punch him. 'What do you think you're going to use that for? Don't tell me

you actually expect to be able to cast spells. Where did you get the book from – Gullible Idiots dot com?'

Daniel Eilersen had always been the worst kind of know-it-all – the kind who thought everyone else was just dying to hear his opinion. He might be top of the class in everything, but even the teachers didn't like him. He was the sort of person who'd rather complain about the wording of the questions than answer them.

'For your *information*,' Justin said icily, 'it's a one-ofa-kind priceless artefact from my grandfather's occult collection. So you can keep your slimy hands off it.'

'Your grandfather? Wow. Stupidity really is down to genetics. The only reason people believe in magic,' Eilersen said pompously, 'is because they're too pathetic to cope with living in the real world. Why actually try and solve your problems when you can ask the pixies to take them away?'

'You just don't want to believe in anything you can't understand,' Justin accused.

'I believe in lots of things I don't understand. I believe in the theory of relativity. I believe in space