



The Starman and Me

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The Starman and Me is not short on invention. There's a small alien (or is he?) with powers so astonishing that, through thought alone, he's able to 'delete' anything from a person to a garage ? in an instant. He's called Rorty Thrutch, and we first meet him lurking on roundabouts in Bradborough - 'an unexceptional village?', though it does have a Tesco and a secondary school. There's even a university and a Good Prof/Bad Prof conflict is central to the plot. The Good Prof is our hero Kofi's Dad, originally from Ghana and inventor of MINDLINK, 'a brain implant for people who can't use their arms or legs?'. Bad Prof Quix ('Call me Nigel?') combines traits of a mad scientist and a James Bond super-villain, lusting for power and yelling at his goons whom Kofi privately nick-names 'Scowler?', 'Hefty?' and 'Fists?'. Good Prof is a great Dad ? a playful listener to his son's flights of fantasy, understanding Kofi's need to wear a hat made of silver foil, even in bed, because 'it reduces radio-frequency electromagnetic radiation and blocks brain scanning and mind-reading possibilities from paranormal sources?'. In other words, the hat 'stops aliens getting into my head?'. Mum is nice too ? she's a GP, liberal middle-class, health food fixated but tease-able about it. Kofi's best friend, Janie, is as bright as he is and, to put it mildly, equally articulate.

Kofi and Janie are in Year 8 and have a Science teacher called Miss Ndiaye. The whole class is in love with her ('She's lovely. Just Perfect.?). They call her Breeze. As Kofi says, she's 'a real breath of fresh air?'. She only has to ask her mixed-ability class, 'Who has some astonishing facts about genes??' to elicit a stream of high-powered responses. Kofi's takes in Watson and Crick, DNA, and the Nobel Prize judges' outrageous neglect of Rosalind Franklin. There are inevitably some class bullies - all boys, I'm afraid; the nastiest are Stealth, Hammer and the dreaded, aptly nick-named Sumo. They speak in a kind of period lower-class idiom which might have been borrowed from **The Beano** ('Not gorrit yet?? 'Them pesky toothies, intit??'), but as time goes by, Sumo turns out to be a gentle soul at heart, frequent victim of a violent step-father.

This cast plays out a fast-paced, quite old-fashioned adventure; good guys, bad guys, crises and dangers punctuated by quick-fire, often funny dialogue, with no doubt at all that Kofi & Co will win through in the end. Their task is to get to know Rorty and then to find and rescue Rorty's endangered partner Pogy Blue and her new-born baby. Then they must keep the little family out of the clutches of the evil Quix and somehow return them to the remote forest on 'a tiny island in a topaz sea' from which they have been abducted. Literal-minded ? or merely attentive - readers may feel there are some gaps in the plot. *Exactly how* did Rorty learn to speak his engaging brand of child-like English ('I's in

roundabout hedge. Soon I?s be Bad Dead?)? How can Sumo (aged c.13) be so badly beaten up (again) by his step-dad that his forearm needs a plaster cast and then, within a page or two, be able to nick a motorbike crucial to the daring plan to rescue Rorty and family and *then*, ?still astride the bike, Sumo stood up and landed a heavy punch on the side of Scowler?s jaw?? Though it?s clear Kofi is very fond of Janie, it?s still surprising to find our 12 year old narrator lyrically recording that ?Sunlight dappled her hair?.

Responses will depend on what a developing reader is currently looking for. If s/he is eager for crackling (if improbable) dialogue, sparky (if improbable) characters acting out an exciting and comic (if improbable) plot featuring a kind of scientific (if cheerfully implausible) magic.... then this should generate the kind of headlong reading which is so enjoyable for many readers of around 10 to 13.

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