

Origins

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Also by Kate Thompson

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About the Book

Dreadful events are about to strike Fourth World . . .

In the secret community where, through genetic experiments, animals can talk and children can carry animal genes, an unimaginable alien presence makes its appearance. Vividly described by Christie in his diary, this creature raises terrifying questions. Is it a threat to all civilized life? Can it be destroyed or contained . . .?

Alternating with the diary is the extraordinary story of Nessa and Farral. Will their dangerous journey heal the rift that exists between their two communities?

In the final exciting novel of *The Missing Link* trilogy, Kate Thompson, twice winner of the Irish Children's Book of the Year, Bisto Ward raises startling and relevant questions for the twenty-first century.

Origins



Kate Thompson

RHCP DIGITAL

For Sophie

PART ONE

Nessa



There wasn't a breath of wind. In the woods a perfect stillness governed the gathering darkness. If there were other hunters abroad in the night, they were lying as low as Nessa was. Like her, they were no strangers to patience. She waited.

High above her in the colossal oak two fat pigeons were sleeping. Nessa could neither see them nor hear them, but she had located them as they flew in to roost at dusk. Their position in the tree was fixed clearly in her mind. She would have no trouble finding them.

A leaf dropped from the branches above and landed on her foot. Another fell nearby, and then another, as though the tree had sensed the sudden end of summer and had begun to withdraw its energy back into its ancient heart, abandoning its extremities to their annual death. For an instant Nessa wished she could do something similar; retreat to some warm, safe place and go into hibernation. Through the foliage a few bright stars were glinting. There would be long, cold nights ahead and long, cold, lonely days.

Nessa stood up, warding off the chilling thoughts with action.

No Cat need ever fear to walk alone . . .

Before she began to climb, she collected herself, as she had been taught.

I come to you, father, as clean as on the day I was born.

*These four things I ask of you.
Clear sight, to win the friendship of darkness.
Patience, to win the friendship of time.
Stillness, to win the friendship of action.
Courage, to win the friendship of death.
These four skills Atticus, our father, has given us.
Praise him.*

Christie's Diary

2009

~~Tuesday~~ ~~Thursday~~: February 5

This diary was a brilliant birthday present from Maggie. My birthday was three months ago, but she could hardly give it to me then, so she saved it for when I got back from Tibet. It's years out of date, but I don't care. I'd say it's almost impossible to get hold of a current one, and as long as I can get the day right I don't care about the year.

Maggie said I should write down all our adventures in it. Trouble is, it would take me too long. So many things have happened since Darling the starling arrived on my windowsill to escort me and my goofy stepbrother, Danny, here to Fourth world in the north of Scotland. Where would I start?

It's funny, the way your mind works. When Darling first spoke to me, I thought it was a dream or something, and then when we met up with Oggy the dog, and he talked too, I thought it was some kind of magic. It never occurred to me that it could have a scientific basis, but that's what it turned out to be. It wasn't until we got here to Fourth World that I found out about the 'missing link' - the gene for language which Bernard and Maggie had isolated and put into various animal and birds. Before that, they were involved in some other, more dubious experiments which involved putting animal genes into their own children. That was why Danny's behaviour had seemed so weird. He has dolphin genes. His half-sister, Sandy, has frog genes, which make her incredibly strong, and Colin, the youngest of the kids here at Fourth world, has the anti-freeze gene from the salmon, which means he can survive sub-zero temperatures. Lucky for him, as it turned out, since he got buried in an avalanche in Tibet and wouldn't be here at all if it wasn't for his DNA.

That was during another recent adventure, when some of us went off in search of the yeti because Bernard wanted to find out if it really existed and, if it did, whether or not it had the missing link gene.

(Decided to use a loose sheet of paper and stick it in, instead of spilling over into tomorrow. Klaus, the pink mouse, has gone tearing off to find me a paper-clip).

I don't think any of us really expected to find a yeti, but we did. She was the last of her kind, living alone up there at the top of the world. She told us the story of her race, how they were the original intelligent species and how one

branch of her ancient ancestors took to the sea and became merfolk, and how our own species, mankind, developed when some of them came back from the sea and recolonised the land. We have every reason to believe that it's true, because Danny met the merfolk - got kidnapped by them, in fact, when we were on our sea voyage to the Bay of Bengal.

But nobody, not even the yeti, has been able to answer the fundamental question that underlies all Bernard and Maggie's experiments and research. Where did the missing link gene originate?

It seems now as if there isn't anywhere else for us to look. And if that's the case, then the chances are that nobody will ever know.

Nessa

When Nessa had eaten, she went to the mossy spring nearby, washed herself scrupulously, and offered a short prayer of thanks for the meal. Afterwards, free of the taint of pigeon blood, she stood quietly and made a thorough scenting of the night. There was a badger nearby; aware of her presence and keeping as still as she was. There were faint traces of grunt as well, but not recent; it was probably two or three days since they had passed this way. Another smell, of freshly opened acorns, caught her attention and she followed it to its origin in a tiny hollow beneath the roots of a hawthorn.

She kneeled down and peered in. There were mice in there; she could smell their fear as they huddled in the darkness, smelling her too, and listening to her soft breathing. On another night she might have hunted them for sport, exercising her patience and testing the speed of her reactions. But tonight she had no heart for it. There was no point, since there would be no returning to the village and offering the tiny gifts to her young cousins.

The thought produced a jolt of dread. Nessa left the mice in peace and moved rapidly through the darkness until she came to a pile of jumbled stones at the bottom of a scrubby slope. Before she left she had promised to visit that spot each morning at dawn. If and when it was considered safe for her to return to the village someone would come and meet her there.

It was much too early, she knew. She also knew that she should spend as little time as possible there, in case the place began to take on her scent. If anyone was out hunting for her they might come to suspect her movements and lay a trap. A short distance away she stopped and took another reading of the night air. Her nose and her ears told her it was safe. There were no enemies there. No friends, either.

Perhaps someone would come at dawn. Surely they would. How many nights had it been, now? Six? Seven? More? They wouldn't leave her much longer, would they? It had to be safe by now. Unless . . .

Nessa crouched among the stones and listened to the night. A few trees away an owl called, and a second one answered from across the forest.

No Cat need ever fear the moon's dominion.

Atticus has told us this.

Praise him.

No Cat need ever fear to walk alone.

Atticus has told us this.

Praise him.

No enemy shall overcome the spirit of the fighting Cat.

Atticus protects his own.

Praise him.

But if Atticus had protected his children in Nessa's village, where were they? Why had no one come to fetch her back?

The thought was sacrilegious. Nessa clutched the icon around her neck and raised her eyes to the black sky. This time she spoke the words aloud:

'No Cat need ever fear the moon's dominion . . .'

Wary of staying in one place for too long, Nessa left the stones and wandered through the woods. She wasn't hungry. Under normal circumstances that would not have stopped her from hunting, but this night was different. She had no heart for the chase.

As dawn began to break she washed again, then returned to the stones. No one was there. No one had been there.

Nessa didn't wait. She walked away, climbing the escarpment above the rockfall, looking for a safe place to sleep. On previous days she had gone for several miles before choosing a tree with branches stout enough to make

a reasonable bed, but that morning her spirits were too low. She had no energy for more walking. She knew it was risky and, worse than that, she knew that lack of interest in her own welfare was a dangerous sign. Any creature that loses sight of the value of its own life will soon become an easy target for hunters.

Halfway up the slope was a sheer wall of rock; not high, but well above the reach of a hound. To get onto it Nessa shinned up a tree and leaped from its reaching branches onto the top of the rock. There was a nice grassy perch up there, unsheltered from any rain that might fall, but offering an excellent view of the forest floor below. Nessa turned around in it a few times and closed her eyes experimentally. It felt safe.

She lay down, wrapped her sheepskin around her shoulders and tucked her hands beneath her armpits. Before long her limbs were warm, but not even the cherished skin could keep the growing chill from her heart. What had happened? Why had no one come? To begin with Nessa had been anxious, but no more than that. She had been sure that the troubles in the village would be resolved. The wise uncles and aunts would sort it out. The troublemakers would be brought to book; might even be handed over to the other side to face the consequences of their crime. Everything would be all right. But with each day that passed it looked worse.

Nessa turned over, trying to move her attention away from the gloomy thoughts. If she hadn't been forbidden to return, she would have faced any danger rather than stay in that unknown place, alone. She fingered the carved icon on its leather thong.

Atticus preserve me and all who belong to me.

All who belonged to her had been in the village. Had he preserved them?

Nessa turned back to face the trees again. A blackbird was singing heartily in a branch a few feet away from her face.

Every morning of her life she had drifted off to sleep in the village trees, surrounded by birdsong. It was her lullaby. But now, her peace of mind disturbed by worry, she found the blackbird's song an irritation.

She sat up. A spear of light from the rising sun pierced the branches and caught her full in the eye. She felt the sharp, almost painful contraction as her pupils narrowed rapidly. Instinctively she turned to look into the shadows. Her gaze rested more comfortably there, but she could not ignore the unpleasant reminder of why she was there; isolated by the thing that set her apart from the other members of her community. She was the special one; one of the Watchers. Whatever happened to the rest of her community, she must be kept safe. And as every Cat knew, the safest place in the world was in the forest, alone. In the loving, protecting arms of Atticus.

Christie's Diary

2009

~~Wednesday~~ **Friday: February 6**

I had an awful dream last night. I dreamed I was up on top of the world with the yeti, except that the top of the world wasn't the Himalayas, it was the side of the glen here, up above the windmills. We were looking down at the whole planet, somehow, and it was completely silent. There was nobody alive down there at all, and I had this thought - that the missing link gene had never existed. It was a dream that me and the yeti had dreamed together.

It doesn't sound too bad now I've written it down, but it frightened me witless. I was rigid with fear when I woke up.

The latest news is that Electra, one of the first of the talking cats, has had four kittens. The father, she tells us, was a gentleman from the village. He didn't talk, of course, but the kittens will, because they'll get the ability from their mother. It's great when the young animals first start talking. I can't wait.

There will be more soon, as well. Loki is not far off having her pups.

I don't know why I'm writing all this. I should be sleeping. I'm useless in the mornings these days because I can't sleep when I go to bed at night, no matter how late it is. I'm uneasy the whole time. I have this awful feeling that something's going to happen. It could be the fear that we'll get invaded again. Those guys were really brutal; they did terrible things to the animals and they wrecked the place. So I am nervous about it happening again, but I don't think that's the reason I can't sleep. I think it's because of the stone the yeti gave me up in her cave in the Himalayas. I haven't shown it to anybody yet. It's a kind of guilty secret. I don't know why I don't want to tell anyone. I don't even want to take it out and look at it myself. But I'm always aware of it there under my mattress. It's always on my mind when I'm trying to get to sleep. It's just an old stone, an axe-head or something, but it meant such a lot to the yeti. She trusted me with it. I don't feel worthy of that trust.

I wish I knew what to do.

Nessa

The roots of the conflict went too far back in time to be understood. All Nessa knew was that Cats and Dogs were different. Always had been. Always would be. Dogs, she had been taught, were dirty and cowardly. They did not wash. They hunted in daylight, in groups, with packs of hounds, and they feared the night. They worshipped a false god, whose name was Ogden. They were deaf and blind to the truth of the one and only true god, whose name was Atticus.

Her bile rose and the hairs on the back of her neck stiffened. She had always known that Dogs were the enemy. How was it that she and all of her kin had become blind to the fact?

Throughout her life the two communities had been at peace, side by side. The eldest residents remembered the last war, but they had succeeded in putting their grievances behind them and lived in peaceful co-existence. Even the smallest cousin knew the dreadful history of the ancient rivalry, but it seemed to be a thing of the past. There was plenty of room for everyone. The Dogs were herders: they kept cattle and sheep, preferring the open spaces of meadow and farmland to the dark forests where the Cats hunted and gathered and followed their less regimented lifestyles. In the marketplace there were no ethnic divides. Cats traded their forest products – firewood, pelts and game – for the farm produce of the Dogs. Each community had its own skills. Some of the specialisation was bizarre. Cats didn't use much in the way of furniture, but their gifted carpenters made tables, chairs and cupboards for the Dog community. And the Dogs, though they never cut their own hair, produced the fine tools needed to keep the Cats' hair and beards neatly trimmed, as well as the barbers who used them.

The current conflict had small, almost insignificant beginnings. A scrubby area on the edge of some Cat-controlled woodland was cleared by a party of Dogs during daylight hours, when there were no Cats around to see what they were doing. The Cats complained, claiming that the land was part of the forest and not, as the farmers contended, meadowland that had become overgrown due to neglect. A meeting was held by a pair of respected elders from each community, and the verdict that was reached went in favour of the Cats. If the Dogs had neglected their land long enough for the forest to encroach upon it, they could not be deemed to have real need of it. The guilty parties were ordered to replant the trees they had felled and to protect them from their cattle. To all intents and purposes, the dispute was settled.

But it didn't end there. The wall that was built around the woodland proved inadequate. The cattle broke in again and destroyed the young trees.

It had always been acknowledged that cattle which wandered into the forest were fair game for Cats, but under normal conditions, in expression of goodwill for their neighbours, the Cat practice was to return straying beasts to safe enclosures. But on this occasion there was no goodwill on offer. The Cats who came across those cattle slaughtered them and, as an expression of contempt, left the carcasses where they lay.

The disputed woodland was a short distance from Nessa's home. She had been among the first to see the carcasses, on her return from a satisfying night's hunting in the forest nearby. The image remained with her and still filled her with dread. She lived on fresh meat and a night rarely passed without her hunting down and killing some creature or other, but she had never seen wanton slaughter before. The strewn carcasses seemed like a representation of something much more sinister; a reminder of the ancient animosities between the communities. A portent.

She knew that she was not the only one who thought so. Throughout the following days an anxious mood infected the atmosphere. Though no one said it aloud, it was well known to her and everyone else in the village who had killed those beasts. Every community has its warriors, whether they are required or not.

Passions became inflamed. It was possible that the cattle had broken down the wall themselves, but no one chose to believe that. The Cats accused the Dogs of knocking it down, and the Dogs accused the Cats of doing it themselves. Neither side was prepared to dispose of the carcasses. The Cats said it was the responsibility of the Dogs who owned them. The Dogs said that since they were straying and therefore legitimate game, it was up to the hunters to remove the kill. The dead cattle rotted where they lay. Before long the stench of decay reached the village and made life even more miserable for the anxious inhabitants. Tensions between the communities increased. Encounters in the market and on the common footpaths often turned into arguments, quarrels, even scuffles. Trade relations began to break down. And, as had happened countless times in the past, the few reckless self-appointed warriors on each side began to gather recruits.

Grand-aunts and grand-uncles from Nessa's village met with elders from the Dogs, and a peace plan was formulated. A party composed of members of both communities would gather on the disputed land and bury the cattle. After that, to prevent further incursions, guards would be posted along both sides of the wall until the situation settled down.

But the plan was stillborn. Before it could be put into action, extremist elements of the Cat community carried out a plan of their own. In the dead of night, while she was returning home, her pocket full of wriggling mice so the young cousins could practise their hunting skills, Nessa encountered a gang from her village holding a meeting in a

tree. She could tell by the scent of them that they were all recently washed, which in itself was suspicious. They were also highly excited, whispering and posturing among themselves. There was no doubt in Nessa's mind about what it meant. Trouble.

She joined them in the tree, even though they made it clear that she was not in the least bit welcome. She knew that they had been trying to stir up trouble ever since the cattle first broke into the forest. Some of the uncles had already taken them aside and talked to them about the need for calm, but it had clearly had no effect. They had been taught, after all, that the Dogs were their enemy, even though there had never been any evidence of it within their lifetimes. Now it was as though there was a heat in their blood that they couldn't contain. All the wise words in the world could not subdue their desire for action. Perhaps for blood. It should have been enough for them to have slaughtered the cattle. Clearly it wasn't.

'What are you doing here?' Nessa asked them. 'What have you done?'

'What's it to you?' said Conan. He was inevitably in the thick of the trouble; probably the main instigator of it. Nessa had tried to like him for most of her life, but had never succeeded. He seemed to believe that he had got a raw deal from life, though no one could work out why, and was forever on the look-out for anything that he could construe as a personal injustice. He exuded resentment wherever he went.

'That's a really stupid question,' said Nessa. 'You know as well as I do that we're all in trouble if you've gone and messed things up again.'

'Again?' said Conan.

Nessa didn't bother to answer. Conan giggled and one or two of the other cousins joined in. It was Ardy who blurted it out, so bursting with excitement that he couldn't contain himself.

‘We took the heads off the cows,’ he said. ‘We dumped them in their stupid well, didn’t we?’

‘Oh, no.’ Nessa found her imagination leaping forward, through unseen, unimagined steps of escalation, to a state of all-out war. She knew that it always began like this. Small arguments kindled tiny flames. Provocative idiots like Conan and Ardy fanned them into ferocious fires. ‘I hope Atticus forgives you,’ Nessa went on. ‘Because no one else will.’

‘Oh, Atticus,’ said Conan. ‘He’s thrilled to bits. Delighted with us. It was his idea in the first place.’

‘How do you work that out?’ said Nessa.

‘He spoke to me,’ said Ardy. ‘He came to me in a dream.’

When Nessa didn’t answer, he sneered and went on, ‘Oops. Sorry, O Hallowed One. That’s supposed to be your department, isn’t it?’

It didn’t take the Dogs long to respond. Nessa was still awake when they came through the village at mid-morning. Even if she hadn’t been, she would have woken soon enough. No one in the village was able to sleep through the noise and the smell of the fifteen or so young Dogs, most of them on horseback, and their pack of hounds.

Nessa watched them pass from the safety of her little tree house. Their leader was a young Dog she knew well; a butcher by the name of Gowran. Not one of the party, not even the talking hounds who were renowned for their hatred of Cats, showed the slightest hint of aggression. They were even courteous, exchanging polite greetings with the older uncles and aunts. But there could be no doubt in any Cat’s mind about their underlying intentions. Their passage through the village was an undisguised display of force. And their return, at dusk the same day, was an undisguised act of terrorism.

They had hunted down and killed two grunts. The carcasses, severely mangled by the hounds, were dragged along behind the horses, their long, matted hair entangled

with leaves and bramble vines. The Dogs were as civil as they had been earlier, but there was only one possible interpretation of their actions. The day's sport had been by way of a practice run. If the hounds could kill grunts, they could just as easily kill defenceless Cats.

As soon as they were gone, the villagers held a meeting. It was short and to the point. They were left with no option but to begin to muster arms.

Christie's Diary

2009

7 February: ~~Saturday~~ Thursday

On top of all the work we're already doing in the garden, Bernard has embarked on a new scheme to turn the lab complex into a bunker. It was built to keep the genetic experiments here a secret from any authorities which might not have approved of them, and unless you knew it was there you'd never find it. When the armed gang took over Fourth World, Maggie and Tina were on their own and they were able to hide out down there until the men frightened themselves off and went away. It was OK, they said, but it could have been a lot better. Since there's every chance the same thing might happen again, we are going to make proper living quarters down there.

It was snowing hard when we got up, so the garden was abandoned for the day. Tina has all kinds of stuff to catch up on with the animals, and Maggie was ordered by everyone to take a day's rest. Colin volunteered to have a go at fixing the wheat grinder, which had been broken for months. He's a bit of a mechanical whizz kid, that one. He's been tinkering with engines and things since he was old enough to turn a screwdriver, and Bernard just leaves a lot of that kind of stuff to him.

Danny was sleeping all morning as usual, because he goes fishing during the night, so that left three of us - Bernard and Sandy and me - to start the work on Project Bunker.

Bernard and Sandy are working hard at rebuilding their damaged relationship. All her life Sandy has lived with a huge chip on her shoulder about her frog genes. She loves her strength and speed and power, but the downside of having the muscle tissue of a frog is that she looks very strange and has to take care that she doesn't get seen by anyone outside the community, in case it raises suspicions. When she met with the yeti, who also lives in hiding, the two of them developed an instant affinity. So when Bernard told us that he had brought back some of the yeti's hair and intended, against her express wishes, to make a clone of her, Sandy blew a fuse. All her pent-up anger and resentment emerged, and Bernard was forced to confront the effects of messing about with people's genes. It has pretty much blown over now, and most of the time the two of them get on like a bomb. Most of the day it was fun working with them.

We began by moving one of the freezers down there and putting all the fish in it. We froze some carrots as well, and a few rotis - the round, flat bread that Maggie makes on top of the range now that we can't get yeast anymore. We set up a couple of plastic bins for oats but we're a bit behind with the business of porridge production so there's only a few pounds in the bottom of one of them. Another task for the winter evenings. Bernard dug an old electric cooker out of the corner of the garage and, to everyone's amazement, two out of the four rings are working and so is the oven. The plan is to set it up in the room that's now the main lab, but before we do that we have to clear the equipment out and move it into the room that's used as an operating theatre. There's space for all of it in there, so if Bernard and Maggie want to carry on experimenting they can, even though it might be a bit cramped. But the old lab will make a good kitchen/living room. There's already a clean water supply, from a spring they came across when they were digging out the cavity. It's better to drink than the water from the house, which comes down from the little hydro-electric dam. So, in theory at least, we could hole up there for weeks if we had to. Animals and all.

Klaus agrees with me that there's something weird about the yeti's stone. I was on the point of telling Bernard about it today. We were chatting about Tibet and just getting round nice and naturally to the yeti, and I could see my opportunity just around the next bend. But I hadn't reckoned on all that emotional stuff coming back up between Bernard and Sandy. The first mention of the yeti struck a nerve, and the air was suddenly full of awkwardness and tension, and Bernard started whistling and Sandy looked everywhere except at him, so the moment passed and the subject was changed and my chance was lost. It'll come again, I suppose.