

# Paddlefeet

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## ***About the Book***

*Darting through the water, the tiny creature feels a vast shadow and sees gigantic thrashing limbs: a Paddlefoot! Peering into the depths from up above, the girl glimpses a flash of blue and a sequined tail. Surely she must be dreaming?*

Little does Jo know that she has spotted one of the Waterfolk who live behind the waterfall. Soon the destinies of Paddlefeet and Waterfolk are entwined as Jo and her friends battle to save the vulnerable river-dwellers before it's too late.

# Paddlefeet

CHRISTINE PURKIS

**RHCP DIGITAL**

*For Mopsa, Kate, Peter, Alex, Matthew,  
Hannah, Joanna and Henry*

# 1

*Behind the waterfall where the Waterfolk dream their dreams, Anno, the Keeper of the Circle, stirs. Sensing the paling dawn light, he uncurls his limbs and stretches awake. The spangles on his tail catch the light filtering through the curtain of water. Anno reaches out to the stone shelf above his head and takes his grey shale comb. First he must coax any tangles from his long hair until it gleams with a soft radiance.*

*It is time to prepare the chamber for the day.*

*As the new sun rises, so the other Waterfolk will come from their dreaming and congregate in the chamber for their grooming and their circle time. It must be made ready for their coming and this is Anno's task.*

*The pebbles must be arranged in a small circle on the rock floor. They glow as white as chalk and sparkle with delicate seams of crystal. Collected from the river-bed by the Waterfolk and their ancestors, they now sit magically defining the truth, the space which is within, the O.*

*It is Anno who, in each new morning's light, must fill the stone bowl with fresh water from the waterfall. He must sprinkle this water with his shaker of river-weed over the face of the circle he has made until it glistens darkly.*

*He moves back, draws a long sweet breath, and allows the film of skin to close over his eye.*

*All is prepared.*

'Indian summer. They said so on the news,' Jo declared, licking the dripping edges of her ice-cream, trying to stop it from ruining her white T-shirt. Her fine brown hair was

pulled back from her face and secured in a stubby pony tail by a fluorescent-pink scrunchie band. Tendrils of loose hair wisped round her cheeks and caught in the ice-cream. Jo sucked them, then pushed them back behind her ears with irritation.

'This is brilliant!' She waved her arms at the blue sky, the sun, the ice-cream, her bare legs, her roller-blades. A pair of mirrored sunglasses dangled from a rainbow string round her neck. She could see better without them anyway, her wide hazel eyes absorbing the light, not puckered and squinting like her friend Tash's.

'Usually pouring down in September.' Fizz skidded his skateboard to a halt, jumped on the back end and caught it as it leapt to his hand like a well-trained dog. As ever, he wore a baseball cap with green and blue stripes and the logo of a team he'd never heard of. It was round the wrong way so the long peak shaded his neck and a small tuft of brown hair stuck out of the arch above the plastic strap across his forehead.

The children were standing under a thirsty-looking horse chestnut tree, its large hands already yellow and curling. The tree was near the estate where they all lived, and the road beneath was littered with sticks and broken branches and the occasional empty conker case.

'I told you there weren't any conkers - we looked last week,' Tash told Fizz, not that she minded stopping for a moment. It gave her a chance to save the last melting fragments of her ice lolly. Tash had pale and blotchy skin. She hated the heat, which brought her out in a rash and made her irritable and snappy. A white visor shaded her eyes, but her hair stuck up above it, orange curls refusing to be tamed. Her cycling shorts were Lycra and lime green. She should have worn a long-sleeved top, but today she had risked a T-shirt with 'I love Pandas' splashed over it.

'There's one right up there,' Fizz pointed out.

'You'll never reach it,' Tash told him without looking up, but Jo was already selecting missiles from the litter of broken branches at her feet.

'It's always boiling hot soon as school starts,' Tash continued, lobbing her lolly stick over the wall into the park.

'Fifty-pound fine!' Jo called out. 'I saw! That's rubbish you're chucking about.'

'Come off it! Bio-degradable, wood. Anyway, you're throwing wood around - same difference. And you're just being vandals,' Tash replied.

'That conker's going to come down anyway, isn't it?' Jo pointed out.

'We're just helping!' put in Fizz, grinning.

'Oh yeah? Just smashing up all the branches - great help! How would you like it?'

There was no answer to that but it didn't stop Fizz and Jo.

'Yeah! Got it!' Jo shouted.

'Bull's eye!' shouted Fizz at exactly the same time.

They were so busy arguing about whose stick had struck the winning blow, it was actually Tash who squeezed through the broken railings, shaped like spears, to pick up the fallen trophy. Before the others realised what was happening, she was waving it in triumph in front of their noses.

'Finders keepers!' she taunted them.

'Give us it!' said Fizz.

'No way, José!'

But Fizz would fight - even Tash, his best friend, and even for a measly conker - and Tash knew it.

'I've got loads at home.' She handed it over. 'Anyway, come on, you lot - I've got to get back. My mum'll kill me!'

It was a possibility; unlikely, but she'd come reasonably close in the past. Tash could be a 'right royal pain' as Jo's mum put it, and even Tash had to agree this was fair. It was not worth getting into a fight this evening, of all evenings. Tash was off the next day to live with her dad and his new

girlfriend on a farm in Wales somewhere. Well, Tash had *said* it was a farm but Jo's mum had looked doubtful when Jo told her. Her mum remembered Shaun, Tash's father, before he moved away - laid back to the point of falling over.

A central point between their three houses, the chestnut tree was the place where the kids usually met. They often lingered there, hoping to find excuses to stay 'hanging out' together, but there were usually more pressing reasons to split them up. Today, Tash had to get back to her mother, and though Fizz never had to get anywhere, Jo rarely stayed long without Tash. And there were always her mother and brother at home.

Jo left her roller-blades at the side of the house and went in through the back door.

'You're late,' her mother remarked.

'Saying goodbye to Tash,' Jo reminded her lightly.

'Oh sorry. Poor Jo!' She gave her daughter a concerned look and would have given her a big hug too, but the shovelling of food into the Blob's open mouth could not be interrupted.

The Blob had been called the Blob ever since he had been just that, a blob, when Jo had first seen him on the scan in the hospital. Not such a little blob now, oh no! His legs were so fat his knees had disappeared and he was so heavy to carry around that Jo's mum had developed backache, requiring expensive visits to the osteopath.

Most evenings now, since Jo's mum had strained her back, they bathed the Blob together. Jo lifted him out, wrapped him in his alphabet towel and handed him, like a parcel, to her mother.

Jo's mum sat on the lavatory and patted him dry while Jo trawled the bath for ducks, yoghurt pots, boats and the odd flannel.

'You hungry, Jo?' she asked, forcing the Blob's legs into a pair of blue and red pyjamas.

Jo nodded.

'I'll get some tea soon - or shall we have fish and chips?'

Jo shrugged.

'My purse is on the side.'

'Why should I get it?'

Normally her mother would have said, 'Why should I?', but as she didn't, Jo was hardly surprised when, halfway through her battered cod, eaten on their laps in front of the television, her mother said, 'I'm just going next door for a bit, Jo - I won't be long.'

'Why?'

'For a natter - come and get me if Blob wakes up.'

Jo slumped back in the chair, staring grumpily at the screen.

'Don't make a fuss, Jo - having a chat with my friends is the only way I can be such an understanding, level-headed, easy-going parent to you!'

'Huh!'

'Bye!' Her mum blew a kiss, then stopped in front of the mirror in the hall to pull a comb through her black curly hair.

Jo's mum always said not to answer the phone if she wasn't there, but how could Jo be expected to let it ring and ring like that? Anyway, it might be burglars finding out if there was anyone at home or the call might even be for Jo herself. It was.

'You took your time.'

'Tash!'

'Where were you?'

'On the loo.'

They both giggled.

'Dad's not coming till the evening. Let's go somewhere.'

'Tomorrow?'

'Yeah.'

'What about school?'

'What about it?'

'Tomorrow's your last day!'

'Wrong - today was my last day! Be at the tree at eight-thirty. We can go to the brook.'

'Bikes, then.'

'Bikes - and tell Fizz.'

'Why are you whispering?'

'Why do you think?'

'Oh, OK.'

'Got to go. Be there!'

## 2

*The Waterfolk are dreaming in their smooth caverns behind the waterfall. They feel the light around them glowing and pink. At this time of day, it is the habit of the Waterelders to meet together in the larger chamber to comb each other's hair.*

*They sit round the pebble circle which Anno has formed, their silver-scaled limbs tucked to the outside, while each attends to the tresses of the one in front: pale, silvery-pink, waist-length. Their hair, though slow-growing, is never cut from the day they are born bald except for a suspicion of finest down. And in this circle, smoothing hair till it shines pink in the morning light, they chatter in their silent way, for they have no ears, no mouths. They send out thoughts on invisible waves: images, words, ideas, which travel instantly from one to all. A thought forms in one mind and immediately it is received in the minds of all the others, received and responded to, perhaps, or received and dwelt upon.*

*Twice a day they form their circle, in the morning light and as the sun sets. And it is in this evening time that they tell their stories, Dreams of the Past, told by the elders to the youngers so they may keep them in their hearts and their memories as treasure.*

*The morning time, for the Waterurchins with their spiky hair, is one of play. Eager to be active, they slip sideways through the curtain of water and out into the strange and thrilling light which momentarily dries the skin until it tightens. The first game is to see who dares stay out in the air before diving deep into the cooler waters, turning,*