

BECK

**Mal Peet**'s first novel, *Keeper*, won the Branford Boase Award and the Bronze Nestlé Children's Book Prize. His other novels include *The Penalty*, *Life: An Exploded Diagram*, *Tamar* (winner of the Carnegie Medal) and *Exposure* (winner of the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize). A writer and illustrator, Mal created many books for children throughout his lifetime, most of them in collaboration with his wife, Elspeth Graham-Peet. He also wrote a critically acclaimed adult novel, *The Murdstone Trilogy*.

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# BECK

**MAL PEET**

WITH MEG ROSOFF

WALKER  
BOOKS

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# **PART 1: WATER**





**AN ACCIDENTAL CHILD**

**H**IS MOTHER MET his father in Liverpool on a frigid night in 1907. She was not a prostitute but in times of need, short of other forms of employment, she would sell herself to men. She never spent the proceeds frivolously. Every last farthing of the five shillings she charged would be spent on rent and on food for her family, which consisted of her frail parents, who were addicted to patent medicines, and an older brother who was wrong in the head. Thus she made financial expiation for her sin. Spiritual expiation took the form of full and frank confession through the grille of a curtained box in Saint Ignatius, a church distant from her neighbourhood. She was a devout Catholic and performed her penances scrupulously. She would promise to sin no more, and meant it every time. Her name was Anne Beck.

His father happened to be standing outside a pub when Anne happened to be passing on her way home. Twenty minutes earlier she had been sacked from her job

as a chambermaid at the Imperial Hotel for slapping the undermanager who was groping her in the linen room. Beck's father was on the street because the pub operated a colour bar, and he was African, from a country called in those days the Gold Coast. The landlord had refused to serve him. This often happened when his ship docked in England, and he accepted it more or less philosophically.

His white shipmates had protested but instead of moving on had brought him a pint and a baked potato to enjoy with his magazine serial in the drizzle. He'd perched the pint on the pub's window ledge, gripping the pulpy pages of his ha'penny dreadfuler in one hand while he gingerly conveyed the hot crumbly flesh of the potato to his mouth with the other. That's when Anne came by.

He was handsome and she was impressed that he could read. She was also hungry.

"Wan' some?" Smiling at her, showing his beautiful teeth, looking infinitely sad. Even sadder than she.

Anne shared his potato and his beer while he haltingly read her the adventures of Sexton Blake, and then she took him home. She was perfectly honest with him, telling him that it would cost money. He showed her the various coins he had in his pockets and she picked out British ones that added up to more or less five bob. She led him up the backs, lifting her skirt and alerting him to dog mess. They entered her house by the scullery door. Inside, it was quiet because her parents had passed out downstairs and her brother was locked in his room. She lit a bit of candle she found next to

the sink and took him up to her room, where, despite her rudimentary precautions, he got her pregnant.

She never knew his name. Or, rather, never mastered the trick of pronouncing it in the short time she knew him. His ship departed for Belfast the following day.

A month before Beck's eleventh birthday, his great-grandparents and his mother and his daft kindly uncle all died in the flu epidemic. Anne was the last to go.

Just before the fever stilled her heart she tightened her clasp on the boy's hand and whispered, "There's three pound and seven shillin' put away. It's in..."

He was an odd-looking kid with his mother's green-flecked hazel eyes and a deep shade of his father's colouring and hair that stuck out all ways. He was taken to the Catholic orphanage run by the methodically cruel Sisters of Mercy. The shame of his mixed race meant that he was also victimized by the other orphans. He lived in that dire and loveless establishment for three and a half years; at the end of that time he had become a hard little bastard who had learned to cry silently and dry-eyed.

Christian names were not used in the orphanage and eventually Beck forgot that he had one.

## 1.2

### THE LEAVING OF LIVERPOOL

ON A CHILL March morning in 1922, twelve of the boys, Beck among them, were led to the wash house where they had their hair cut off by Sister Francis Xavier, assisted by Mr Joyce, the caretaker. Then they were made to strip naked and wash themselves at the long zinc trough, paying particular attention to their private parts. Still naked, and shivering, they were next intimately examined by a man who wore a white coat over his suit. The press of his stethoscope was like the kiss of a cold-water fish.

The boys assumed that these humiliations were a punishment for some as yet undisclosed sin; so they were surprised when they were then led to the laundry and issued with sets of clothes far less wretched than those they had discarded, and boots that were almost new. Even more surprisingly, they were then taken, in their new finery, to the refectory and given a mug of beef tea and a hunk of bread apiece, which they eagerly and anxiously consumed

with bald heads lowered. Twelve heads pale as suet puddings, one brown as a potato.

While they were chewing and slurping, Sister Thomas Aquinas came into the room with a clergyman they had never seen before. He had a face the colour of canned meat separated from his black suit by a white dog collar that looked as hard and cold as the rim of a pisspot. He spoke to the boys at some length. Beck understood few of the words used. He had a vague idea what “adventure” and “opportunity” meant, but had no idea what “Canada” was.

At the end of his speech, the stranger ordered the boys to close their eyes and clasp their hands together. He recited a prayer. The boys said “Amen” into their empty cups.

The man regarded them for a long moment and said, “I envy you. Sincerely. Good luck, and may God be your guide.”

At a gesture from Sister Thomas the boys stood. Very soon afterwards – too soon for goodbyes to friends, if they had any – the eleven Chosen Ones filed through the orphanage gates onto the street where, astonishingly, a green and black motor coach stood awaiting them. It trembled to the stumbling thump of its engine. The driver, a stout little man in a long brown coat, was loading kitbags into the boot. When he was done, he opened the coach’s door, officiously, and the boys climbed in, followed by Sister Thomas. Beck had never before been in a vehicle of any kind. He sat near the front gripping his seat against the noise and grinding

rattle of the engine and watched with fascination the way the driver worked the wheel, the levers, the pedals.

After a short journey that took the boys beyond the perimeter of familiar territory, the coach stopped at a building very similar to the one they had just left. It was the Christian Brotherhood Home for Boys, although no sign confessed the fact. Eight more boys with shaven heads boarded the coach, silently. One took the seat alongside Beck's. He smelled of fear and camphor mothballs and sat staring straight ahead with his hands knotted on his crotch. A priest followed the boys in and sat down next to Sister Thomas, who greeted him with a stiff little nod.

The coach set off again and after a mysterious passage of time joined the jerking melee of mechanical, animal and human traffic that flowed and counterflowed alongside the River Mersey. The bald boys stared aghast from the coach's windows at a slow parade of massive buildings the colour of congealed blood. In the gaps between them, stone-rimmed lakes crammed with ships, some masted, some funnelled, webbed together with ropes. Rust-red cranes swivelled, their little cabins farting smoke. Man-high coils of chain. Carts and wheelbarrows and people. People everywhere.

Beck, uncomprehending, understood that this must always have been so, that this was normal, that this was what had been going on while he'd been slummed, bullied, confined. His heart, like his clothes and boots, felt too big for him. For most of the journey, he'd been gripping a metal

thing next to a window of the coach. Now he realized that it was a latch that might allow the window to be opened. So he tried it and admitted a filthy spectrum of smells: dung, coal smoke, tar, brewery malt, tidal mud, fried fish, putrescent garbage.

“Boy! You, boy! Darkie!”

Beck looked back at the irate priest. “Yeah, Father?”

“Shut that fecking window, for the love of God!”

A huge building pale as early sunlight passed by and then there was the low expanse of the river itself, shimmering behind the dark filigree of cranes, glittering below a frown of cloud.

Soon after, they arrived at Husskinson Dock. The driver stilled the engine, used both hands to haul the brake up, and opened the door. At the priest’s impatient urging, the children disembarked. While the driver unloaded the kitbags the boys clustered between two enormous metal bollards and gawped up at the vast ship that loomed above them.

The priest stood aside and lit a cigarette. The ship’s towering black flank was capped by a curving white superstructure full of small rectangular windows. Chains stretched landwards from its nostrils. Halfway along the quay, a group of richly dressed women and men looked up at a car, a Rolls-Royce, being gently hoisted by a crane towards the upper deck.

It was not, of course, their ship. A uniformed man with a clipboard bustled along the dock and spoke to the priest.

Then he approached the boys and said, "Foller me, if you please, lads. Pick up your bags. Any one'll do."

He marched them along the pitted flagstones until they came to a hard-used vessel called the *Duke of Argyll* tethered to the dockside by thick hairy ropes. Jocular cursing stevedores were ushering complaining sheep into a wide door at its stern. A ribbed and roped gangway led up to a smaller aperture amidships. At the foot of it, Sister Thomas led the boys in a recitation of the Lord's Prayer. At the words "those who trespass against us" (which Beck could never say without slurping), a hard rain began to fall.

"Amen."

Then the nun and the priest scuttled off, the nun raising her skirts clear of splash. Baffled and alarmed, some of the boys made as if to follow, but the clipboard man spread his arms to block their way.

"No, no, boys. Here. This way." He shepherded them onto the gangway. "Up we go. Single file, please. Hold the rope. That's it."

They all survived the slippery swaying ascent and were led along a metal colonnade, its white uprights lumpy with rust blisters, up a flight of narrow metal steps, across an oil-stained wooden deck, down two more flights of steps and through a steel door two inches thick. They found themselves in a penned-off and dimly lit section of the steerage deck. The panicky bleating of sheep was audible through the bulkhead. The space was minimally furnished with lockers and narrow high-sided iron bunks bolted to the



floor. On and around these beds another forty or so bald shivering boys were clustered.

For a moment, Beck was reassured; apart from the lowness of the ceiling, he might have been back in the orphanage dormitory. The clipboard man told them, more or less kindly, to make themselves comfortable, and that they would be fed and watered in due course.

Beck assumed they had been brought to live here in this unconventional heaving dormitory, perhaps because their previous accommodation was needed by a new flood of the parentless or unwanted. He was thrilled by the possibility of escaping into the nearby mad busy flux he had glimpsed from the motor coach's window. And by the absence of nuns. He was fairly sure that he could find his way back to the ramp and freedom. He chucked his kitbag onto the nearest cot, sat and waited for what he thought was the right amount of time, and went to the massive door. It was locked.

"Shit," he said, kicking the steel. "*Shit!*"

And when, two hours later, a mournful horn sounded and the room shuddered and an awful sense of motion transmitted itself through the unimaginable architecture of the ship, his cries of dismay blended with those of the other cold and hungry boys and the neighbouring sheep. By the time the formidable door was opened from the outside and a voice summoned the children to supper, the tilting floor was slick with vomit.

### 1.3

## THE LIFE OF THE WORLD TO COME

BECK STOOD CONFUSED and astonished by the huge discrepancy between the solidity beneath his feet and the vast liquidity of everything else. The ship stood weirdly still upon a limitless range of green-grey hills of sea that slipped and bellied in all directions, leaving white skeins of foam in their valleys. Valleys slowly swelled into new hills to have their crests whipped by the wind into flying gobbets of spume. The sky was a grey parade ground across which stately formations of plumed clouds marched back towards Europe and home.

He stood in a loose crescent of boys alongside those members of the ship's crew who could be spared for the occasion. By peering over the shoulder of the boy in front of him Beck could see that a sort of trough, a chute made of polished planks, had been angled down from the deck towards the restless water far below. It swayed slightly, upsetting his stomach. He looked away from it, to his right,

and studied the man he now knew to be the captain of the *Duke of Argyll*, a man with a fancy jacket and cap, slightly soiled trousers and a red beard like a rusty chisel. He had a small black book and a scrap of paper in his hand and was conferring with a younger officer, Mr Mitchell, a man with a kind face.

The captain nodded impatiently and made corrections on the scrap of paper with a stub of pencil.

“So, it’s *James* Riley and *Joseph* McAvoy. Not vice versa. Very well. Not that they’d give a damn now. Let’s get on with it, shall we?”

Jimmy Riley and Joe McAvoy lay on the deck close to the chute. They were sewn into canvas sacks with their cold feet resting on lumps of pig iron.

The captain opened his book and began to read. “‘Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live...’”

That’s for damn sure, Mitchell thought. Jimmy had been eight, little Joe seven. They’d died, stewed in their thin faeces, quarantined in a spare cabin in the crew’s quarters. Keech, the steward, had opened the door yesterday morning and recoiled from the stench. The boys had died holding hands. Mitchell’s imagination refused to picture how and when that clasp had been formed, declined the question of which of them had died first and which of them had died alone. Quite properly fearing the spread of contagion, Captain Rennick had ordered the bedding to be burned in the ship’s boiler along with the victims’ belongings. The death cabin and the boys’ quarters had been purged with

Lysol. In a few moments, there would be no material evidence that these two boys had ever existed.

Mitchell tracked his gaze over the shorn children. They looked, as usual, numb and lost but none showed obvious signs of illness. The half-caste boy, Beck, met his eyes and Mitchell offered him a small encouraging smile.

“O holy and most merciful Saviour, thou most worthy Judge eternal, suffer us not, at our last hour, for any pains of death, to fall from thee.”

Rennick paused, riffling through the pages of his prayer book. He glanced at his watch, then at the two seamen standing at the head of the chute. They stooped and lifted the limp bundle that was Jimmy or possibly Joe onto the boards and held it there. Beck, at last, understood what was going to happen. He sucked back a swear word. His legs went unsteady, as if the deck had lurched.

“Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of his great mercy to take unto himself the souls of our dear brothers, James Riley and Joseph McAvoy, here departed; we therefore commit their bodies to the deep...”

Here Rennick nodded without taking his eyes from the page. The men at the chute released their grip. With a slight rasp and remarkable swiftness, the bagged and weighted boy slithered down and away and was gone. No splash was heard, perhaps because the sound was lost among the susurrations of gasps and faint cries from the congregation of children.

“... to be turned into corruption, looking for the

resurrection of the body, when the sea shall give up her dead, and the life of the world to come...’”

The second corpse was now hoisted onto the chute. It offered some slight resistance; the mariners had to give it a little heave to speed its plunge into eternity.

Beck felt the press of something hard against his left arm. It was the head of the small boy beside him. He eased his arm free and tucked the boy’s head into his armpit, cupping the wet chin in his hand like a football.

Rennick came to the end of his reading. He and his crew removed their caps and bowed their heads. The *Argyll’s* horn emitted a long, bovine moan. The stiff breeze keened and rattled through the halyards.

“Let us pray. ‘Our Father, which art in heaven...’”

The words choked in Beck’s throat long before the tricky bit about trespasses. A voice in his head said, *Yer don’ fookin deserve this*, but he wasn’t sure to whom it spoke.