



THE BLUE BOOK OF NEBO

Extracts

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This extract comes from the beginning of the novel. The narrator, Dylan, is fourteen.

What questions does this passage raise in the mind of the reader, and what deductions and inferences can be made about the characters of Dylan and Rowenna and their situation? Which image are you left with in your mind's eye?

DYLAN

Mam says that it's best to write like this now. Because she can't be bothered to teach me, I think, can't be bothered, or can't find the energy. I'm not sure which it is, or if there's any difference.

She used to sit with me for an hour each morning, the hour when Mona sleeps. We did stuff like adding and reading, not like we used to do at school, no graphs or times tables or anything like that. She got me to read books and then I had to write about them, and she marked them with a red biro, telling me where I'd spelled something wrong or said something stupid. And then after doing adding up and taking away, there was no more maths. She started to worry. About the bios too, because we don't want them running out.

'I don't have anything else to teach you, Dylan,' she said yesterday. She'd just read through something I'd written about a romantic novel about a man and a woman who meet on a train, and I think something clicked in her. 'There's no point carrying on like this.' So she said that, as long as I spend an hour writing every day, she wasn't going to bother me with schoolwork anymore.

She got this book from a house we broke into in Nebo. It was in one of the small drawers of a little desk in the corner of someone's living room. Usually we only steal the really important stuff, like matches or rat poison or books. But she held this notebook in her hands and turned it over a few times before putting it in her bag.

'You have that,' she said later, when we got home. 'To write your story.'

'The Blue Book of Nebo,' I smiled, taking the book from her. The pages were blank and wide, like a new day.

'Eh?' asked Mam. 'Like The Black Book of Carmarthen, or The Red Book of Hergest. That's how they did it in the olden days.' I'd read about them in a book about Welsh history. 'Important books that said something about our history. And now is a part of history, isn't it?'

The book's jacket is a lovely rich dark blue, almost black. Bible-black, Dylan Thomas said. But you can tell when a book is a Bible, without even looking at the spine for the title. You just know. My book doesn't look like an important book, but all books are just words strung together.



Below extract contains spoilers

This extract comes from later in the novel.

How do your thoughts and feelings develop as you read through this extract? Give reasons for what you say and remember to support your answers with words and phrases from the text.

DYLAN

On the last day, I put her in the sling, but in the way that I used to, so that she was tightly bound to my chest, not my back. She had hardly slept, and so I lifted her from Mam's arms in the morning.

'Go to bed,' I said to Mam.

'I shouldn't.'

'Yeah, you should. You have to.'

Mona looked at me as I changed her clothes, stared at my face in a way she'd never done before. Not examining, but letting her eyes rest on my face. I put her coat on, and placed her in the sling, and then I wore the big coat and closed the zip over both of us. She could still see, but she was safe and warm.

I took her to our old places.

Round the garden, and to the back field, the polytunnels, the conservatories. This is where the potato flowers come up, isn't it Mona? And this is where we grow the turnips. And that's where you fell and cut your knee...

To the garden of Sunningdale, where she liked to rub her hands in the herbs and then sniffing them deeply. I lifted a sprig of rosemary to her nose, and my sister took a small breath, searching for the trace of her summers in that smell.

Over the fields to Nebo, where we'd found a buggy for her, and blankets and tiny clothes. The kitchen where we'd eaten that marzipan a few weeks ago.

And then, Llyn Cwm Dulyn, the huge black lake, still and cold. It wasn't the right weather for paddling, but I put my arms around her and sung into her hair, and thought about the night that she was born. Her little mouth on Mam's breast, and all that she brought with her when she slipped into the world. Hope. Newness. And that something, that huge, wonderous nameless thing that made Mona unique.

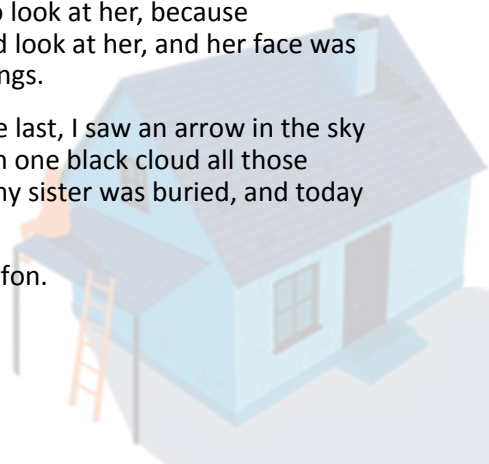
She looked up for a moment, and turned her eyes to the lake, then the mountains, and then over to Caernarfon and Anglesey and the endless sea. Then she rested her head on my chest again, and fell asleep.

I'll never forget that noise that Mam made. Howled, wolflike, as if she was a creature that knew no words. Out in the garden, the day drew to a close, and Mona was dead.

Mona Greta was buried today, under the apple tree on the lawn, wrapped warmly in her pajamas and her favourite blanket. Having to cover my sister in soil was the worst thing in the world, and Mam was halfyell-ing, half-crying as she kneeled down in the grass. I was trying not to look at her, because something inside me felt as if it was churning with hot, thick blood. But I did look at her, and her face was wet and red and ugly, and a horrible guttural sigh came straight from my lungs.

As I shovelled soil into the grave, each load of earth feeling heavier than the last, I saw an arrow in the sky shooting over our house. I hadn't seen a single bird since they all escaped in one black cloud all those years ago, and here they were, silent, graceful, returned. Today is the day my sister was buried, and today is the day the birds came home.

'Canada geese,' I said quietly, watching them disappearing towards Caernarfon.



Below extract contains spoilers

This extract is the final entry in the Blue Book. How do you think Rowenna and Dylan feel about the imminent changes? Give reasons for what you say, and remember to support your answers with words and phrases from the extract.

DYLAN

‘Do you think we’ll be saved?’ asked Mam tonight as we were sitting on the lean-to. She’s been very quiet since we heard the police cars.

‘We don’t need saving, for God’s sake,’ I replied without pausing for thought. Mam reached out and held my hand.

‘I’m bloody proud of you, Dyl.’

I smiled in the darkness. Her words made it feel as if there was another End in sight.

We were silent for a while, and then she said, ‘I wasn’t really me before, you know.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Before The End. I was scared of everything. I always thought I was bound to mess everything up. But we’ve done okay, haven’t we? You and me. And I had Mona, and I do my best.’

‘Yeah,’ I agreed. ‘This is who you really are, Mam. You do your best, and we’re okay. You’re strong. Like a warrior.’

We sat in silence. I don’t know what Mam was thinking about, but I was remembering all the brilliant things, like the polytunnels, and the first plants, and Pwyll, and Mona splashing in Llyn Cwm Dulyn, and all the stories in all the books. And our book, The Blue Book of Nebo, living amongst them on the shelf.

And Anglesey lit up.

A wave of light, like close-up stars, lighting one after the other, orange and white. Houses and streetlights blinking and waking up, as if they’d fallen asleep ten years ago. Civility and civilisation returning boldly after a long, long time away.

The lights of Anglesey grinned at us like a fiend.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked, and Mam squeezed my hand, her wet eyes sparkling in the new lights.

