

# Operation Nativity

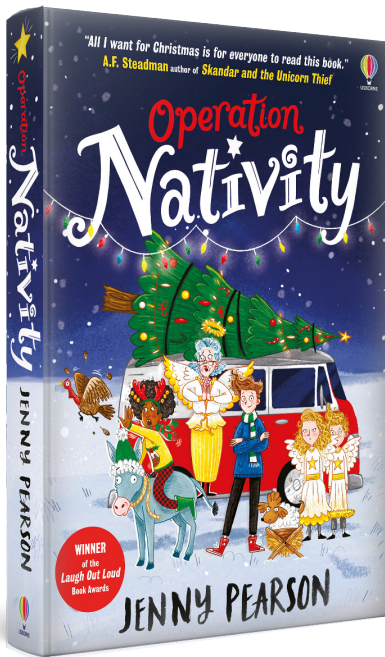
JENNY PEARSON

THE ULTIMATE CHRISTMAS FAMILY ADVENTURE!

**"All I want for Christmas is for everyone to read this book."  
A.F. Steadman, author of *Skandar and the Unicorn Thief***

When Oscar and Molly rush outside to investigate a crash in the night, they're not expecting to find a dazed Angel Gabriel wandering around their grandparents' back garden. And they're certainly not expecting to find themselves in a race to save Christmas.

But if they don't track down a missing shepherd, wise man, donkey and the actual Mary and Joseph, who've all crash-landed in Chipping Bottom, not only will Christmas cease to exist, but they will too. Operation Nativity is on.

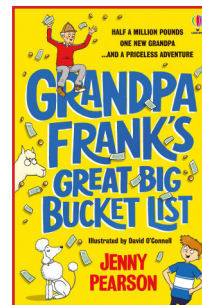
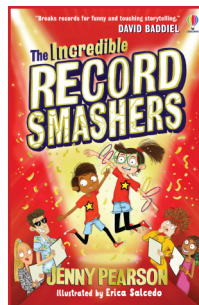
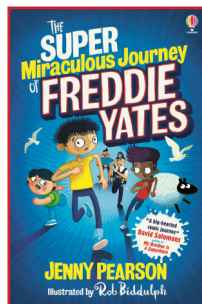


**This pack includes an extract from the book along with discussion notes and activities to help you explore the story.**

**JENNY PEARSON** has been awarded six mugs, one fridge magnet, one wall plaque and numerous cards for her role as Best Teacher in the World. When she is not busy being inspirational in the classroom, she would like nothing more than to relax with her two young boys, but she can't as they view her as a human climbing frame.



Her debut novel, *The Super Miraculous Journey of Freddie Yates*, was shortlisted for the Costa Children's Book Award and selected as a Waterstones Book of the Month.





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## CHAPTER 18: AWAY IN A SHEEPIES' FIELD (P. 198-211)

**In this extract, Oscar's family are practising their lines for the nativity play, and Oscar, Molly and the Angel Gabriel search for the missing Shepherd, Steve.**

All of Margaret's pastries had already been eaten, so Molly and I grabbed a couple of our magnificent mince pies from the kitchen – not exactly breakfast food, but there are different rules around eating during the Christmas holidays – then made our way to the drawing room. All the family were there, waiting to rehearse. Aunt Camilla was lying on the sofa, rubbing her baby bump in circles – I'd be surprised if that baby didn't come out spinning. Uncle Patryk was sitting beside her, quietly repeating his lines and looking thoughtful. Fenella and Hugo were sitting on footstools, showing off their very neat hair and very straight backs. I bet Aunt Marigold had never told either of them they have the posture of a prawn.

Uncle James and Aunt Marigold were on the sofa next to Mum, who looked like she wanted to be anywhere else. Dad was in an armchair, looking through his script, and Geoffrey the gardener and Margaret were loitering at the back of the room, looking slightly anxious – until Grandfather told them to sit on a sofa, and that anyone who was in the Cuthbert-Anderson nativity was officially part of the family.

"I say," Grandfather said as Geoffrey and Margaret sat down. "I don't suppose either of you have seen anything of that turkey young Molly took a shine to?"

Molly and I gave each other a wide-eyed look.

"Not a feather," Geoffrey said, which was a relief. "Probably escaped out of the stable and long gone."

I struggled to pay attention to much of the rehearsal because I kept thinking about all the other stuff I had to do – like finding that shepherd and quick. I considered if it would be possible to construct some kind of shepherd-trap, but I couldn't really think what to use as bait. Or, in fact, how to build it. Or where to even put it. So it was a bit of a rubbish idea.

Luckily, it didn't matter that I was paying zero interest to the rehearsal, because we never got to my part.

Grandmother has very high standards. Fenella and Hugo obviously said their lines perfectly. Dad spoke too fast and was a "trifle too monotone" in his delivery. Margaret was too quiet. Molly added her own special spin. She said, "And so Mary and Joseph travelled to Bethlehem because if they didn't the angels would smite them with hailstones."

Grandmother said, "Gracious, Molly, an angel wouldn't say that!"

Molly said, "That's exactly what an angel would say if he wanted his own way," which was true, but there was no point telling Grandmother that.





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Aunty Camilla, despite being nine months pregnant, wasn't doing a very good job of acting like a pregnant lady apparently.

"I just don't think the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ Our Lord, would waddle with quite so little grace, Camilla," Grandmother said, a look of displeasure creasing her face as she watched Aunty Camilla walking across the room with Uncle Patryk, who was actually doing a very convincing job of pretending to lead an invisible donkey.

Aunty Camilla didn't seem happy about being told she waddled without grace, but I could see Dad and Uncle James giggling behind their scripts.

"Mummy, I can't see my feet, I can't really fit behind the steering wheel of a car, but one thing I can do at the moment is act exactly like a pregnant woman!"

"A pregnant woman, yes. But the sacred vessel of our Lord? I think that requires you to dig a little deeper, darling."

"Deeper? How do I do deeper?" Aunty Camilla snapped.

Before Grandmother could answer, Patryk said, "Perhaps I could demonstrate?"

Patryk then did the best impression of Mary I have ever seen. If it was grace Grandmother wanted, Patryk was doing it.

I think everyone was a little stunned, but mainly Grandmother.

"How? How did you do that?" she said, wafting her script around.

"I acted a little, when I was younger," Patryk explained.

"Read your lines," she demanded, as if asking for proof.

Patryk took Aunty Camilla's hand, looked into her eyes and said, "Do not worry, my love. Though the road may be long, I am here with you, every step of the way."

He was amazing! I think even Aunty Camilla had a tear in her eye, which she wiped away, saying something about pregnancy hormones.

Molly stood up and started clapping and said, "Uncle Patryk, take a bow! You're the best actor I have ever seen ever!" which made Grandmother flinch.

"Wonderful, Patryk!" Grandfather said. "What a thing! A real actor in the family."

Grandmother made this sharp coughing noise.

"Another real actor," Grandfather corrected himself. "Wasn't he good, Minty?"





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“Yes, he was,” Grandmother admitted. “Everyone, take note of how Patryk put real emotion into his performance. Camilla, you’ve seen how it should be done. Perhaps when you are atop of the donkey it will help you bring some more elegance and authenticity to the role.”

“The donkey? What donkey?” Aunty Camilla yelped.

The rehearsal kind of came to a stop then while Grandmother explained about Donald. I don’t think Aunty Camilla was very pleased about riding a donkey into church and we left them to what Grandfather called a “heated discussion”, but looked more like a full-blown row to me.

I gave Molly a piggyback ride down the corridor and, thinking we were alone, I said, “Let’s get the others and go find that shepherd!”

“What shepherd?” came two voices behind us.

I swung round to see Fenella and Hugo, their arms crossed and identical hard looks on their faces.

“Erm. . .the shepherd inside me. . .the one that I’m trying to tap into for the performance,” I said, a little uncertainly.

“What others? What are you two up to?” Fenella continued.

“Nothing,” I said, trying to arrange my face to look as innocent as possible.

“HmMMM,” Hugo hmMMMmed. “We’re watching you. Fenella told me about your early-morning walk and we think you’re up to something. Don’t we, Nellers?”

“We do. Don’t we, Hugo?”

“Yes, we do, I literally just said that.”

“Watch all you like,” I said and then I just stood there, letting them watch us. For quite some time. While we did nothing. But stand there. Being watched. Eventually, they either got bored or felt too awkward or realized it had got a bit weird, because they both huffed at the exact same time, then spun on their heels and waltzed off down the corridor, Hugo’s quiff and Fenella’s ringlets bouncing in time.

“If you’re up to something, we’ll find out,” Fenella called over her shoulder in an airy yet still somehow very menacing tone.

That was all I needed, those two on my case. As if things weren’t stressful enough! But with them gone, for the moment at least, I had a chance to do some investigating into our missing shepherd. I figured that Geoffrey, the gardener, might be the person to ask about this “sheep poacher”. So I piggybacked Molly out to the front garden to have a word with him.



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“Still at large, I believe,” Geoffrey said, turning off the leaf blower. “Last I heard, someone had been spotted in the fields at the back of Mrs Tadworth’s cottage, but could have just been a rambler. Why are you so interested anyway?”

“No reason,” I said. It might have just been a rambler, but, with no other clues, it was the best chance we had.

“We’re not up to anything,” Molly said out of nowhere, which made it sound like we were definitely up to something.

“Hmmm,” Geoffrey said, so we quickly left him to his leaf-blowing and headed back inside. It was time to go and find out how things were in the bathroom.

As soon as I opened the door, two things instantly became clear:

Grandma Turkey had not listened to a word I said about using the bin if she had some business to do.

The Angel Gabriel and Balthazar were not huge fans of turkeys. I pulled the shower curtain back and found them cowering in the muesli-filled bath while Grandma strutted about the room like she owned the place.

“Come on,” I said. “We’re heading out for Steve again. There was a sighting, near the Tadworths’ place, not too far from here, which is good because I don’t think we can risk another ride on the mower in the daylight.”

They sidled past Grandma Turkey and we snuck down the corridor and out the back door.

Soon, an angel (who was still making a lot of fuss about the chaffage from his Just Jeans), a wise man, an astronaut in a tutu and I were trudging up the hill round the back of Mrs Tadworth’s, hoping that no one would notice us.

“I think we’re going to find Steve,” Molly announced. “It feels like a Steve-finding kind of day, don’t you think?”

“I sure hope so, Molls,” I said, but from the top of the hill I could see so much countryside spreading out around us, I felt our chances of stumbling across a holy shepherd were fading.

We stopped to take in the view for a moment and get our breath back.

“Just think, Mary and Joseph and a shepherd named Steve are out there somewhere,” Molly said.

Balthazar shook his head. “But how ever are we going to find them?”



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Looking across at field after field, it did suddenly seem like we were on an impossible mission, and my heart felt heavy. Sure, Christmas isn't always perfect. Families argue and people eat too much and sometimes they get disappointed when they ask for a computer game and get another set of pyjamas, but I think it's what's under all that that counts. Just being together and celebrating a magical time of the year when us kids can believe in the impossible is what it's really about. And as Molly would say, the feeling that you get when you go to bed on Christmas Eve. . .well, that's really quite majestic. Christmas was something worth saving. And so was I. I just had to believe in the impossible too.

"I know!" Molly shouted. "I'll ask those sheep snuggled together over by that tree if they've seen anything."

And off she marched towards them. While Molly went off to not talk to sheep, the Angel Gabriel, Balthazar and I continued to scan the fields around us. There was so much land. It all felt a bit hopeless. There was no sign of Steve anywhere. But then Molly shouted, "Well, that's a bit rude!"

"What's that, Molls?" I called over.

"This sheep is a bit rude," she said, pointing to one.

"I think there's something wrong with it."

I started walking over. "Molls, we don't really have time for this."

"It told me to go away! That's rude!"

"Molly." I flipped up her astronaut helmet and said as kindly as I could, "You can't really talk to animals."

"Well, I don't want to talk to this one any more because it's a great big fluffy-meany-pants."

I was a little puzzled as to why Molly had taken against that particular sheep so much. It looked like a pretty standard sheep to me.

"All I did was ask about Steve!"

"Go away!"

"See? Rude!"

I paused. I frowned. Had it. . .? No - that would be mad. . . I shook my head. It couldn't have spoken. Sheep don't speak. They certainly don't tell people to go away.

"Leave me be."

"Say please!" Molly said.

"WHAAAAA!" I shouted, because what else do you shout when you hear a sheep talk?



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Anyway, my WHAAAA! spooked the sheep and it darted off to the back of the huddle, revealing a man, who was curled up in a tight ball behind it.

“Look!” Molly shouted. “There was a man hiding behind that talking sheep!”

The man was wearing very muddy clothes, sandals and, he looked quite, well, shepherdy.

“Steve?” I said. “Steve. . .is that you?”

Steve didn’t answer.

I crouched down. “Are you okay?”

Steve still didn’t answer, but started rocking backwards and forwards, which made me think that perhaps the answer to that question was no.

Balthazar and the Angel Gabriel appeared by my side.

“Ah, it is Steve the Shepherd, what wondrous news! It is I, the Angel Gabriel!” the Angel Gabriel boomed.

Steve yelped and scurried backwards. “Leave me be! Leave me be!”

“Steve’s scared,” Molly said.

Steve looked Molly up and down and then said, in a voice that was mostly breath, “What are you?”

“Today I am a ballerina-ing astronaut,” she said.

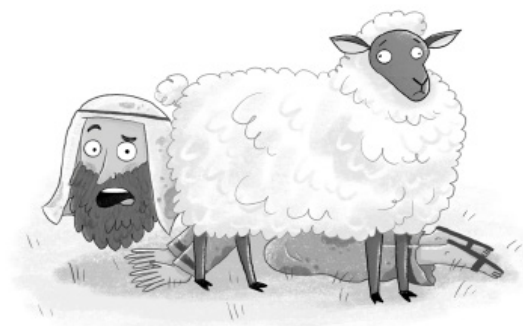
“That’s Molly, my sister,” I explained.

“Don’t worry, Steve,” Balthazar said brightly. “We’re here to help.”

“You must come with us. You have a very important job to do!” the Angel Gabriel said.

“That’s what you said last time and I ended up here!”

And then, before anyone could stop him, Steve was up and running, his dirty clothes and beard streaming out behind him. He couldn’t just sit there and watch and wait and stay seated like shepherds are supposed to, could he? Why did saving Christmas have to be quite so difficult?



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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**The questions here can be used to discuss the extract included**

- Oscar mentions “there are different rules around eating during the Christmas holidays.” Is that the case for you? Have you ever had a mince pie for breakfast?
- Do you have any family traditions at Christmas? What do you like about them?
- Have you ever been in a nativity play or watched one? Talk about the role you played, or any stories you have from the show. Did anything go wrong?
- What’s the best or worst Christmas present you’ve ever received?
- Oscar says Christmas is all about “being together and celebrating a magical time of the year when us kids can believe in the impossible.” Discuss what you think Christmas is about.

**Use the questions below to guide your discussion on the book as a whole**

- From the cover of the book and the blurb, discuss what you think this book will be about.
- Oscar says, “people will always believe different things and I actually think that’s okay.” (p. 8) Can you think of anything your friends believe that you don’t? Do you agree with Oscar?
- At the beginning of the story, Oscar thinks presents are the most important thing about Christmas, how does this change throughout the book?
- Oscar has a lot of fun memories of his grandad. Talk about your favourite memories with loved ones.
- There are a lot of fun characters in the story. Who is your favourite and why? Can you think of fun traits or traditions that your family have?
- When Mum greets Grandad, she can’t “keep the sadness out of her voice”. Why is this? Can you think of a time when you felt this way?
- When Oscar first finds Angel Gabriel, he struggles to believe he’s an angel because, “once you’ve made up your mind that something isn’t real, it’s easy to dismiss the evidence” (p. 56). How do you think you would react if you found an angel in your back garden?
- How does Molly help Oscar realise the truth about the angel? Discuss how people’s different perspectives can help us see things differently.





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- Oscar doesn't tell any of the adults about Angel Gabriel as he says, "Grown-ups are very short-sighted about that sort of thing." (p. 83). What do you think he means here?
- Why do you think the nativity play is so important to Grandmother?
- Fenella tries to act as if she isn't upset about Grandfather being ill – what other ways do people disguise their emotions?
- Is the advice that Balthazaar gives Gabriel good advice? (p. 164)
- Oscar's mum says that making the biscuits together made them taste better. Do you think she's right? Can you think of activities that are better when done with friends and family?
- Balthazaar and Gabriel do not fit in in Chipping Bottom. What things do they do that would stand out? How do they add to the humour of the book?
- Grandfather helps to reassure Oscar when he says, "I can tell you are the type of person who can achieve anything if they put their mind to it." (p. 196) How does this help Oscar?
- Grandfather says he does the nativity because it is important to Grandmother. What does this show about his feelings towards her?
- When Oscar thinks about life being good, he thinks about his family practising for the nativity together. (p. 283) Discuss memories you have that make you believe life is good.
- Gabriel says that sadness and joy cannot exist without each other. (p. 284) Do you agree with this?
- Oscar asks Gabriel for a favour. (p. 282-285) How does this scene make you feel?
- Grandfather tells his grandchildren that each of them will "carry a little part of me inside. No one is ever truly gone, when there are people around to remember them" (p. 313) Think about people you might have lost, share a happy memory of them.
- The story ends with a mixture of joy and sadness. Discuss how the book made you feel.

