

FIRE BOY



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HODDER

HODDER CHILDREN'S BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2020
by Hodder and Stoughton

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 44495 468 5

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The paper and board used in this book are made from wood from responsible sources.



Hodder Children's Books
An imprint of
Hachette Children's Group
Part of Hodder and Stoughton
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company

www.hachette.co.uk
www.hachettechildrens.co.uk

a quiz



1. You are handed a box marked **TOP SECRET**. The box is addressed to you. Do you:

A) Rip it open rip it?

Or

B) Wait for your parents to come home before unwrapping it?

If you have answered A, proceed to the next question.

If you have answered B, start again. The correct answer is A.

2. Inside the box you find a jar of sweets and an information booklet. The sweets are labelled **NATURE'S OWN** and smell of peppermint. The information booklet is 48 pages long. Do you:

A) Open the jar of sweets?

Or

B) Read page after boring page from the booklet?

If you have answered A, proceed to the final question.

If you have answered B, take a deep breath and read question two again. Then answer A.

3. You discover the sweets unleash a molecular chain reaction. It results in you developing EXTRAORDINARY POWERS. Do you:

A) Run amok, cause havoc at school and join the circus?

Or

B) Master your power, dedicate yourself to a life of public service and become the warrior-hero our world so desperately needs?

If you have answered A, read on.

If you have answered B . . . seriously? B again? It seems you haven't yet twigged how this quiz works. The correct answer is A. NO ONE masters a power from the off. But do not worry, my friend! Help is

waiting for you within these very pages. So carry on, and pay close attention.

My name is Aidan Sweeney and I am FIRE BOY.

special delivery



It began with a doorbell.

I was not long in from school. Lemon was curled beside me on the sofa, one white paw tucked under her chin, her tail flung lazily over a cushion. The two of us had the room to ourselves. Mum wouldn't be home for ages and Granny was in her room snoring like a bear.

That was when the doorbell buzzed.

Lemon yawned and rolled over. I sat up.

It buzzed again. This time, a voice from the intercom followed it. 'I have a special delivery for an A. Sweeney.'

A. Sweeney?

A special delivery FOR ME?

The voice spoke again. 'I need you to sign for it.'

I bolted off the sofa, hurdled a stool and skidded to a halt at the doorway. 'I'll be right down!' I yelled into the speaker.

Fizzing with excitement, I ran into the hall and pressed the button for the lift.

And yet . . . it was hard not to be suspicious. Who could have sent me a parcel? No one had mentioned a present to me and my birthday wasn't until May. As I rode down to the ground floor, I mulled over the possibilities and weighed their odds.

Mum

Unlikely. Mum believed in rewards, not surprises. None of my most recent accomplishments – coming third in a Longest Spit contest or beating Hussein not once, but twice at *FIFA* on his own Xbox, fell into her 'Achievement' category.

Granny

Hardly. Granny didn't do presents. Granny gave orders. She issued threats and restricted privileges. She handed out punishments like they were fairy cakes at a party. Granny buy *me* a present? Not a chance.

Mitchell Mulch

The favourite. This fell into the 'It's a trick' category. Could Mitchell Mulch be hiding in the

bushes with a Super Soaker Double-Pump AK-47 Attack Gun? Very possibly. This 'delivery person' and the surrounding area must be approached with great caution.

It was my lucky day.

The longshot. Fingers crossed.

I burst into the lobby and spotted a thin man in cycling shorts outside the glass partition. He had a Deliver-O box strapped to his back and smallish parcel in one hand. A bicycle leaned against the wall behind him.

My heart went pitter-patter, pitter-patter. This was no trick. This was real.

I rushed to the door and opened it.

'I'm Aidan Sweeney! We just spoke on the intercom.'

The delivery man frowned. Instead of handing me the parcel, he pulled it away. 'I was expecting someone older.'

I made myself as tall as I could – which, in fairness, wasn't that tall. 'I happen to be much older than I look, my good man,' I said in a deep voice. 'If you check the box, you will discover that is my

name on the label.'

'I don't know,' he said, scratching his chin uncertainly. 'Do you have any ID?'

'Just this,' I said. Removing one of my trainers, I showed him its heel, where the name *A. Sweeney* was written in a black marker. He held the trainer gingerly, his nose wrinkling.


'Guess that'll do.' He shrugged. 'Here.'

I scratched my name across his electronic pad and he handed me the package.

It was an odd-shaped lump wrapped in brown paper. Postmarks blotted one corner and rows of blue airmail stickers crowded another. One stamp showed a llama in profile. The second, two ponies on a grassy mountain top. The handwriting I didn't recognise – a scrawl of loops in purple biro – but the address was mine: Alexandria Apartments, London, N1.

'Do you know who sent this?' I asked the Deliver-O man, but when I looked up, he had already cycled away. In his place was a girl in a maroon blazer and straw boater.

Sadie was home.



ultra-secret

‘You never told me you had family in South America, Aidan.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Then who sent you this?’

Sadie and I were sitting on the sofa back in my flat. Lemon, the traitor, was stretched across Sadie’s lap, one eye on the parcel wedged between us.

Four phrases (in no particular order) that best describe Sadie Laurel-Hewitt, aged twelve:

- Tall, long-haired, quick to smile, skilled at football, piano, dance and kick-boxing
- Youngest daughter of the film and television actor, Alice Laurel
- Speaks four languages, unrivalled in board games involving planning, word skills or precision

– Day student at Lady Pandora’s School for Girls
and fellow resident of Alexandria Apartments

Sadie pointed to the llama stamp. ‘This was posted in Peru. How curious. Are you going to open it or wait until your mum comes home?’

Waiting had never crossed my mind. My only worry was Granny. At any minute, the She-Bear might stumble out of her bed-cave. If she did, I could kiss this parcel goodbye. Granny would snatch it away and what would I be left with? A stiff wallop over the head for daring to answer the door.

I picked up the parcel. ‘Trust me. Mum would want me to open it.’ Carefully, I tore around the stamps and postmarks – those I wanted to keep. The rest I ripped apart.

Underneath the brown paper was a cocoon of tape. There was no way I could unravel that.

‘Do you have any scissors?’

‘No,’ Sadie said. ‘Though this might be useful.’ She undid her satchel and pulled out a small bundle of cloth, unknotting it to reveal an arrowhead with a tip as sharp as an eagle’s talon. ‘Mummy got it for

me in America. What do you think?’

‘Think?’ I stared into her satchel. ‘I think you Lady Pandora’s girls know how to pack a school bag. What else do you keep in there? Pistols? Grenades?’

‘I meant, is it too sharp? I don’t want to damage what’s inside.’

‘It’s perfect,’ I said, handing her the package. ‘You do it.’ There was only one person in the room who could be trusted with an object that sharp and it wasn’t me. ‘I like my fingers as they are – attached to my palms.’

Sadie shifted over. Nudged awake, Lemon took one look at the arrowhead poised over her head and sprang off the sofa, retreating to the armchair where she could watch us in safety.

Gripping the parcel tight, Sadie cut through the tape in one go. She peeled the clumps away. Underneath was a layer of bubble wrap, which she tore off, leaving a small square box with two words stamped in scarlet letters across its top: *ultra-secreto*.

Sadie gasped.

‘*Ultra-secreto* means “top-secret”!’ Sadie turned to me, her brown eyes burning with curiosity.

‘Aidan, who sent you this?’

That was a very good question. I didn’t know anyone who lived in South America. I turned the box over. On its back was another stamp: *Propiedad del Laboratorio Cambio*.

My heart sank. ‘This must be a mistake. No one would ever send me anything important.’ Groaning, I threw myself face-first on to the sofa and began to sob.

By my standards, I was masking my disappointment well.

‘Who says it’s not for you?’ Sadie asked.

I removed my face from the sofa cushion and rolled over. ‘What do you mean?’

She shot me a smile and arched her eyebrow. ‘It has your name on it, doesn’t it? So it’s for you. Why worry over who sent it? Let’s see what’s inside.’

Tips on how to get along with others #1:

It is often helpful to tell your friends exactly what they want to hear.

Who was I to argue? Sitting up, I gripped the box by its lid. ‘Ready?’ I asked.

‘Ready.’ Sadie snapped her fingers flamenco-style and clicked her heels. ‘*¡Abre la caja!*’ she cried.

‘Tacos! Nachos! Tapas!’ I replied in my best Spanish.

And then the doorbell rang. Again.