

The Demon Headmaster

The Demon Headmaster is a novel by Gillian Cross. It tells the story of Dinah Glass and her foster brothers, Lloyd and Harvey. In this extract, Dinah attends her new school for the first time, but there's something strange about the way the other children are behaving...

It was a big playground, full of groups of strange children. No one so much as glanced at Dinah and she felt very awkward. But she was not a person who showed her feelings. Her pinched mouth did not relax for a moment. She looked round, wondering if there were any games she could join in. She thought there would be football, skipping, and Tig*. And lots of people shouting and telling the latest crazy jokes from Friday night's Eddy Hair Show.

But it was not like that at all. All the children were standing in small neat circles in different parts of the playground, muttering. Carefully Dinah sidled up to* the first circle, trying to catch what the voices were saying. When she heard, she could hardly believe it.

‘Nine twenty-ones are a hundred and eighty-nine,
Ten twenty-ones are two hundred and ten,
Eleven twenty-ones are two hundred and thirty-one...’

Extraordinary! She left them to it and moved across to another group, wondering if they were doing something more interesting. But they seemed to be reciting too. Only what they were saying was different.

‘William the First 1066 to 1087,
William the Second 1087 to 1100,
Henry the First 1100 to 1135...’

She stood beside them for some time, but they did not waver or look round at her. They just went on chanting, their faces earnest. Behind her she could hear a third group. There, the children were muttering the names of the capitals of different countries.

‘The capital of France is Paris,
The capital of Spain is Madrid,
The capital of the United States is—’

‘New York,’ said a little girl’s voice.

‘Lucy!’ A bigger girl took her by the shoulder and shook her. ‘You know that’s not right. Come on, quickly. What is it?’

‘I can’t—I can’t remember,’ Lucy said in a scared voice. ‘You know I’ve been away. Tell me. Please, Julie.’

Glossary

Tig — a chasing game

sidled up to — went up to

An extract from
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