

Swinburne

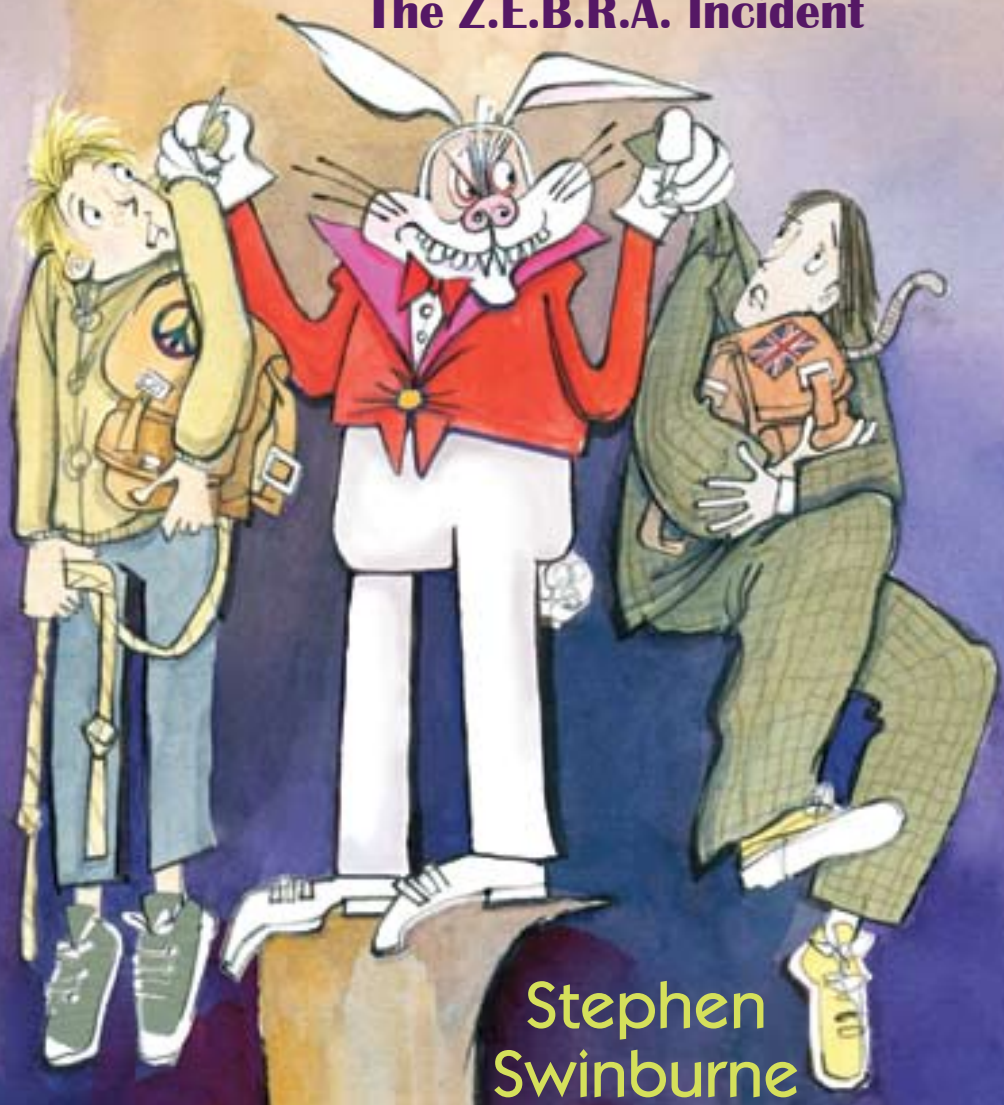
Wiff and Dirty George: The Z.E.B.R.A. Incident

Boyd's Mills Press

Wiff and Dirty George



The Z.E.B.R.A. Incident



Stephen Swinburne

Stephen R. Swinburne was born in London, England, where he spent his early childhood, and had a friend known as Dirty George. He is the author of many acclaimed books of nonfiction, including *Saving Manatees*, a Society of School Librarians International Honor Book; *Turtle Tide: The Ways of Sea Turtles*, winner of the Blue Crab Young Reader Award; and *Wings of Light: The Migration of the Yellow Butterfly*, a Science Books and Films Prize finalist. This is his first novel. Steve lives in South Londonderry, Vermont.

Jacket illustration by Liz Callen

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Out of the darkness above, the boys watched two giant glass eggs, as large as hot-air balloons, slowly descend on steel cables.

“Crikey, Wiff, what in blue blazes?”

The Bubbles touched down on a rubber pad in the center of the wooden platform.

“Behold the Bubbles, my little darlings!” exclaimed Basil over the chamber’s loudspeaker. “One ton of polished glass, four inches thick, waterproof, fireproof, energy efficient, self-sustaining, climate-controlled with all the amenities of home. You should be cozy, boys. But we made them out of glass so . . .”

Basil handed the microphone to Daphne.

“We can watch you like you were bugs!”

—FROM THE BOOK

“The adventures of Wiff and Dirty George are like a hilarious hallucination!”

—Dan Gutman, author of *Honus & Me*
and *My Weird School* series

“Like jumping down the rabbit hole, complete with mad scientists, a princess, and a crazy mastermind, not to mention rabbits. The fate of the Queen and all of England is in the hands of two unlikely heroes, Wiff and Dirty George, and their three-foot-long Madagascan worm. Buckle up and turn the pages!”

—Kathi Appelt, Newbery Honor Award winner
and National Book Award finalist

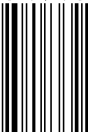
“What fun to spend time in the world of Wiff and Dirty George! Set in the 1960s, the story has a retro feel to it, almost trippy, with men dressed in rabbit suits, quirky characters, glass-bubble prisons, and Tom Swift technology.”

—Karen Hesse, Newbery Award winner

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Blimey! It's the Zipper Extraction Button Removal Atom-Smasher!

Something bizarre is happening on a train pulling into London's Paddington Station. A weird gravitational force has taken control of the passengers, causing zippers to unzip, buckles to unbuckle, and trousers to fall down, revealing more polka-dotted underwear than ever imagined. Among the victims are best friends Wiff and Dirty George.

When a man disguised as a rabbit snaps a photo of the mayhem and jumps from the passenger car, Wiff and Dirty George give chase. Little do they know that they are about to battle the notorious Basil King, a criminal genius and master of disguise bent on taking over Great Britain.

Soon the lads are prisoners in Basil's laboratory of crime, run by rabbit-suited thugs and mad scientists. Meanwhile, the Queen and all of England are preparing to celebrate National Bangers and Mash Day—perhaps for the last time.

Wiff and Dirty George were two lads larking about London. Now they are swept up in one of the most dastardly plots ever unleashed on England, and it's up to them to stop it. Set in the Beatlemania 1960s, Stephen R. Swinburne's smashing adventure is super fab.

Wiff and Dirty George

The Z.E.B.R.A. Incident

Stephen R. Swinburne

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Nan, you loved reading a good adventure. You would have liked this one.

To Heather, always—you said “Yes” and it has made all the difference in my life.

And to my girls, Hayley and Devon—I'll always remember your voices calling from the back seat of the car, “Tell us another Wiff and Dirty George story, Dad!”

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Oi, mate, congratulations!
You've found the address for *Wiff and Dirty George*!
Come visit us at www.wiffanddirtygeorge.com.
And don't forget to stop by www.steveswinburne.com.

1

Where and When

Early train to London, June 1969

Who

William (“Wiff”) King,
George (“Dirty George”) Potts,
and other passengers

Sound

Clickety-clack, clickety-clack, clickety-clack

“Me trousers are falling down!” cried Dirty George.

“Mine, too!” said Wiff.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s mad!” said Wiff.

Wiff checked his wristwatch. 7:25 a.m. Exactly. The train to Paddington Station had just crawled to a stop when every zipper unzipped, every buckle unbuckled, every button unbuttoned.

The railway car burst into bedlam. Handbags yawned wide. Briefcases sprung open. Fountain pens zoomed by Wiff's nose. Passengers shoved and struggled to grab their trousers and skirts. Dirty George had never seen so many pairs of pink polka-dot undies. Eyeglasses, cuff links, hairpins, and brooches hurtled to the floor. Belts curled around ankles like snakes.

A weird energy force had invaded the train, pulling everything downward.

Dirty George tried to yank up his trousers.

"Here, use this!" Wiff dug out some rope from his rucksack and tossed it to Dirty George. Then he wrenched the rope that held up his own trousers.

"What's that whirring noise?"

"It's coming from over there," said Wiff, pointing to the luggage rack five rows ahead.

At that moment, the door to car number 3 swung open and in stepped a large rabbit. The rabbit straddled a seat and blew a silver whistle dangling from its neck. The passengers looked up.

"Say *cheese!*"

A white flash filled car number 3 as the man in the rabbit suit snapped a photo. Then he reached above the luggage rack, grabbed a small silver disk, and dashed through the train's open door. The speakers filled the railroad car with the sound of a maniacal laugh.

"Crikey, who was *that!*" said Dirty George.

"I don't know, but c'mon," said Wiff. "Let's chase that rabbit!"

"Wiff, do we have to?"

"C'mon, mate, let's see what he's up to." Wiff squeezed through the crowded car to the exit.

If there was one thing Wiff and Dirty George could do, it was run. They excelled at running. If they took a class in running, they'd get A's. When school bullies threatened to pummel you because you had no parents (Wiff) or wallop you because you were poor and smelled of socks and old fish (Dirty George), you found your legs.

The boys ducked through the passenger-car door. They spotted the rabbit escaping along a deserted part of the platform. Wiff dug out a length of rope. The boys tugged the straps on their rucksacks and took off like sprinters.

Wiff tied a slipknot on the run. He'd practiced tying knots while running a hundred times before. Ever since his hands could grasp, Wiff had messed about with rope. Wiff grew up believing that when your parents are tragically killed while watching a lasso demonstration at a Texas rodeo, you never—*ever*—want to find yourself trapped by a rope. He practiced tying and untying knots every day, every spare moment. He was the best.

The boys caught up with the rabbit at the end of the platform. Wiff flung the noose. The knot snagged the rabbit's arm, and the boys planted their feet and tugged. The rabbit jerked to a halt. He spun to face his pursuers and, gripping the rope with one hand, pulled both boys toward him.

"Crikey, Wiff! It's *Super-Rabbit*. Now what?"

It wasn't the first time Wiff had landed in a sticky situation. Nan, Wiff's grandmother, pleaded with him to think before he leaped. But Wiff kept leaping. And

his run-ins with neighborhood ruffians and school thugs earned him black eyes and a thin white scar above his upper lip.

For an instant, Wiff thought how easy it would be to release the rope and run. But he'd saved his pennies to buy this good strand of double-braided nylon rope, and he wasn't about to lose it.

Wiff and Dirty George leaned back on their heels and tugged with everything they had, but the rabbit dragged them closer. When they'd reached arm's length, the rabbit flashed a smile of daggerlike teeth.

"Looks like the rabbit's outsmarted the foxes, eh, lads?"

"Mister, we only wanted to have a look at that . . . that silver disk," said Wiff.

"Shut up, you cheeky tykes," said the rabbit. "You're lucky I'm in a good humor, 'cause if I ever see the likes of you two again . . ."

The man whipped off his rabbit mask. Wiff and Dirty George stared into a pair of menacing eyes. Gray-black whiskers and an untamable mass of greasy black hair framed the man's twisted smile. The boys recoiled at the villain's teeth and vile breath.

"I'll have your throats!" said the rabbit, with a wicked grin. He held Wiff's rope up to his mouth. He sliced it cleanly in one bite, sprang from the platform, scuttled across the tracks, and vanished down a dark tunnel, like a rat racing to its hole.

2

Where

The kitchen at 7 Wolsey Road, London

Who

Wiff, Dirty George, and Nan (Maisey) King

Sounds

Kettle boiling, sizzling eggs, panting boys

“Blimey, listen to this,” said Wiff, slamming himself into a chair and reading from the morning paper, the *Daily Chatter*. “TROUSERS, SKIRTS DROP ON LONDON TRAIN! British Underwear Revealed! Mystery Rabbit Takes Photo! Police Caught with Trousers Down!

“Mrs. Mustard, of East Crumpet on Thames, said she heard a strange whirring sound before her skirt fell. ‘It was like some ruddy big magnet pulling everything to

the floor,' said Mrs. Mustard. 'It happened so fast. One minute I was having a sip of tea; the next, I was standing in my bloomers for all the world to see.'

"Every channel on the telly is on about it, boys," said Nan, Wiff's grandmother and chief architect of the best fried eggs on Wolsey Road. "Some nutter's invented a gadget that makes trousers fall and buttons pop."

"Blimey," said Wiff.

"Crikey," said Dirty George.

"Here are some nice eggs and chips." Nan was Wiff's only family. He remembered nothing about his parents. Nan said they died on vacation when he was just a baby. She had looked after him ever since. Nan and Wiff lived at 7 Wolsey Road in North London. At 9 Wolsey Road lived Dirty George. Wiff loved number 7's kitchen almost as much as he loved his clubhouse, Diggs. When Nan fried eggs and boiled the kettle for tea, the tiny room turned as cozy as an oven.

William (everyone called him Wiff) King was twelve years old. Wiff's best friend, George (everyone called him Dirty George) Potts was twelve, too. The boys looked like any other boys their age. Wiff had a shock of shaggy, dirty-blond hair, blue eyes, long legs, and nose freckles. A single sprig of a cowlick poked above his head. Wiff's face was open and rosy; his friend's countenance was brooding and pale. Dirty George had a thin build, long dark hair, thoughtful eyes, and a shy mouth. And like any other two boys at the end of the school year, they were giddy about the long summer days ahead.

"I've made your tea extra strong, dear."

"Ta, Nan, cheers," said Dirty George.

Dirty George elbowed Wiff.

Wiff hesitated.

Dirty George nudged him again.

"Nan, we've got something to tell you. We . . . we didn't say anything yesterday because we didn't want to worry you," said Wiff, fiddling with the tablecloth. He could invent tales for anyone but couldn't stand it if he didn't tell Nan the whole truth. "We were on the train yesterday, coming back from the zoo where we took Worm for a checkup. We stopped at Paddington Station and that *thing* went off."

"The 7:25 into Paddington Station?" asked Nan.

"Yes," said Wiff.

"On track 10?" Nan inquired.

"Yes, Nan."

"Cor," said Nan. "That's an Edison 627 diesel, built in 1938 in Sheffield. She pulls twenty-two passenger cars and five freight cars and—"

"Nan," said Wiff.

"She's seven ton and capable of seventy-seven miles per hour while—"

"NAN!"

"Oh, sorry, loves," said Nan. "You know me. Get me going on trains and I don't stop. Right. You were on the 7:25 into Paddington and something went off. Blimey! Are you all right?"

"We're okay, we're okay. We chased after the bloke who did it. He was dressed as a rabbit." Wiff proceeded to tell Nan how he and Dirty George had caught up

with the man and how the rabbit had threatened them. He left out the part about the knifelike teeth.

“Did you say he was dressed in a rabbit suit?” Nan’s head leaned in, and Wiff noticed she was trying to absorb this particular bit of information.

“Yes, Nan, a rabbit suit,” Wiff replied.

“Hmmm,” she mumbled distractedly, cradling Walrus and stroking the cat as if she were intent on removing the fur. Nan straightened up, scooted Walrus to the floor, and looked both boys in the eyes. “You two will be the death of me.”

“Don’t worry, Nan,” said Wiff. “We’re the fastest runners in school.”

“Yeah, like the wind,” said Dirty George.

Wiff peered at Nan, wringing the dry dish towel as if she were hoping to squeeze water from it. She stepped up to the sink and finished the dishes. *I hope I haven’t said something to upset her, Wiff thought. I’m glad I didn’t mention that bloke’s teeth.*

Nan’s house was a railway museum. Train memorabilia covered every inch of wall. Her passion for trains began as a little girl when her father took the family on exotic journeys by rail. Her train adventures enthralled Wiff. Midnight bandits on a crossing through India. Steaming locomotives through snowy mountain passes in Austria. Going to sleep in Switzerland and waking up in Italy. Nan never tired of telling train tales, and Wiff never tired of listening.

Nan’s official double-sided train station clock, which was presented to her by British Rail when she retired as an engineer, struck 7:00 a.m. Dirty George wolfed down

his second helping of eggs and chips. The telly in the corner droned on with stories of eyewitnesses from the Paddington train.

Wiff dragged out a piece of rope and tied a clove hitch around the leg of the table. Tying knots helped him focus when thoughts were going off in his head like fireworks.

“Nan, I was just thinking,” said Wiff. “We were the only ones to see the rabbit bloke, the guy who made that gadget. We know what he looks like.”

“Go on, love,” said Nan.

“Well, we could go to the police and have one of those artists draw a picture like they do in the movies and then they would make copies and send the picture to everyone and then they could catch him,” said Wiff in one breath as if stopping for a pause would invite doubt.

“C’mon, Wiff, that’s daft,” said Dirty George. “There must be hundreds of blokes in London walking around with scruffy hair and nasty scars. Besides, I bet you he’s not the one who made that gadget.”

“Bet you he is,” said Wiff.

“Bet you he’s not,” said Dirty George.

“Bet you . . .”

“Boys, boys!” Nan threw the dish towel over her shoulder and plunked down between them. “Maybe you’re both right. Wiff, an artist’s sketch might lead to something. And Dirty George, I agree. I don’t think this rabbit bloke is the mastermind. Someone else is behind all this.”

Nan stood up quickly and went to the hall closet.

She opened the door and reached in to get something. Wiff heard Nan turn a key to unlock a small metal box. He watched her stuff an envelope in her apron pocket.

“Does the newspaper say anything at all? Do they have a clue who is doing this?” asked Nan, moving abruptly to the sink, turning her back to the boys. She pulled the envelope from her apron and read the letter that was inside.

“Hang on, Nan, I’ll have a look,” said Wiff. He peeked over the edge of the paper and saw Nan clutching the letter. Was she shaking? He turned his attention back to the *Daily Chatter*. Under the headlines ran a full-page photo of dozens of astonished travelers in their underwear. It was the photo the rabbit took in the railway car.

“Hey! Too bad we’re not in the picture!” said Dirty George, pointing to the front page.

“No one wants to see your underpants, mate,” said Wiff.

“Stop larking about, you two,” said Nan. “This is serious.” Nan jammed the letter into the pocket of her apron and turned to the boys. Her face appeared twisted with worry.

3

What Nan Read

All in good time

Who Wrote It

Nan’s brother, Basil Walter King

Is He a Good or Vile Character

Read on

Nan poured more tea. A hot cup of tea was always in reach in the King kitchen. As a matter of fact, of the 100 million cups of tea drunk each day in the United Kingdom, Nan, Wiff, and Dirty George made quite a contribution to the national consumption.

“Cor, look at the time!” said Nan, springing up and gulping the last drop. “They’ve asked me if I want to watch while they inspect some new Kirkaldy diesels at Paddington Station this morning. They’re my favorite, you know. Got to run.”

Nan walked to the closet, returned the letter, and locked the box. She dropped the key in her handbag, hung her apron, and yanked on her train jacket. Before she pulled on her engineer's cap, she leaned over and gave both boys a kiss on the forehead.

"You lads finish your breakfast. I'll see you tonight." Nan stepped out the front door. "And don't get up to any mischief, you two."

"Cheerio, Nan," said Wiff.

"Cheerio, Nan," said Dirty George.

Before the sound of Nan's footsteps faded up Wolsley Road, Wiff dashed over and flung open the closet door. He grabbed the metal box and plunked it on the table.

"Oi, what are you doing, Wiff? That's Nan's!" said Dirty George.

"I know, mate. But did you see the way Nan took the letter out of the box and how she tried to hide it from us?"

"No."

"Well, I did," said Wiff. "I couldn't believe it when she finished reading. She was shaking. I thought she was going to faint."

"Lots of old people shake," said Dirty George. "My gramps had the shakes."

"I know, but Nan was definitely upset by whatever was in that letter," said Wiff. "I wonder if Nan is off to Paddington to poke around the station for clues. Maybe her story about inspecting new diesels was a bit of a dodge."

"C'mon, Wiff, you're taking this too far. You've got to trust Nan."

"I do, mate, but I wouldn't be surprised if Nan

knows more about this train business than she's letting on. That letter might be the answer. It might give us a clue why Nan seemed so upset. We need to read it," said Wiff, staring at the box as if his eyes would bore a hole into the locked safe.

"Well, how are you going to open the lock, Houdini?" asked Dirty George.

"Hmmm," said Wiff. "What would Houdini do?" Wiff picked up the box and inspected the front and back. He fiddled with the lock. "Hang on," he said.

Wiff jumped up and rummaged through a kitchen drawer. He sat down with two safety pins and tweezers. He stuck the first safety pin into the lock and held the pin firm with the tweezers. He inserted the second safety pin all the way into the lock. Wiff twisted and wiggled the pins for five minutes.

"Give up, mate, it's not going to—"

"Open?" said Wiff, popping the latch and lifting up the top of the strongbox.

"How'd you—"

"All in a book by Houdini," said Wiff.

Wiff pulled out the envelope, unfolded the letter, and read aloud:

May 1964

Maisey,

You of all people know what they have done to me. How they destroyed me and took away everything I loved. Nadia was everything to me. Boff rots in prison. I dedicated

my life to Father's work and now my career lies in ruins. I've nothing left.

From the ashes of this broken man, a new life rises. Nothing can stand in my way, including you, especially you. The agony of my loss feeds my revenge. They will pay. I will crush them, I swear.

Your visit here was perilous. I'm a fugitive. Never mention me to anyone. You must never come again, or your life will be in danger. I am not the brother you knew.

Basil

"Crikey," said Dirty George. "Who's Basil?"

"He's Nan's brother. My great-uncle."

"Who's Boff?" asked Dirty George.

"Mate, I don't know," said Wiff. "I don't know why he's in prison. I don't know any of this stuff. Nan never talks about Basil. Only that some bad things happened to him and she doesn't see him anymore."

"Where's he live, then?"

"I don't know that either," said Wiff. "Hang on." Wiff picked up the envelope and checked the postmark. "Brighton. He sent it from Brighton."

"When did he send it?"

"It says May 1964," said Wiff. "That's five years ago. It's an old letter. Why is Nan reading it now?"

"Is Nadia Basil's wife?"

"I don't know," said Wiff. "Maybe."

"Could Boff be his friend? His business partner?"

"Don't know."

"And what was his father's work?" asked Dirty George, pressing Wiff like a prosecutor cross-examining a crucial witness.

"I don't know," said Wiff. "I told you. I don't know. What do you want me to do? Run after Nan and ask her?"

"Yeah, mate, that would go over well," said Dirty George. "Er, Nan, we just happened to be reading your private letters and wondered if you could fill us in on a few names.' Wiff, think," he continued. "You must remember something Nan told you about your uncle Basil."

"She hasn't mentioned his name in years," said Wiff, staring at the letter as if it would reveal forgotten memories. A full minute passed. "There was something. . . ."

"C'mon," said Dirty George.

"It had to do with . . ." Wiff tapped his forehead as if to jiggle loose a recollection.

"C'mon!"

"I know!" said Wiff. "Nan said he was some sort of cracking-good artist or accountant . . . no, inventor. That's right, he was an inventor, and he worked for the government."

"Nice one, Wiff."

"But there was another thing she had told me about her brother that I wish I could remember. I think it was something to do with when Basil was a kid."

"Well, mate, I can't sit around here all day and wait for your brain to engage. I've got to walk me dog."

"Diggs in twenty minutes?" said Wiff.

"Diggs in twenty," mumbled Dirty George, stuffing a last piece of toast into his mouth and leaping up for the front door.

Wiff stood and switched off the television. He was glad Dirty George had left. He wanted to think. As much as Wiff loved Nan and his best friend, he sometimes needed to be alone.

He retrieved Nan's letter from the kitchen table and sat down in the old armchair beside the tall window overlooking the backyard. Walrus jumped up and plopped in Wiff's lap. The early June sun poured into the kitchen and lit up the room as if it were a greenhouse. Wiff leaned back, propped his feet on the windowsill, and gazed out the window.

Nan was clearly worried about what was in Basil's letter. I could see that. Basil said Nan's life could be in danger. But why? And why was he a fugitive? What had he done? And I don't understand why she would read it now. It's an old letter. Does Nan think the letter from Basil has some connection to what happened on the train?

Wiff's mind was baffled by these unanswerable questions. Maybe he was jumping to all the wrong conclusions. Just because Basil invented things didn't mean he invented the gadget in the railway car.

Wiff wanted fresh air. The sun was now shining squarely in his face, and for a moment, he held Basil's letter up to shade his eyes. In the light of the sun, an image took shape in the stationery. It was a watermark of a rabbit.

"Blimey, that's it!" said Wiff, springing up and sending Walrus scattering across the room. "I remember! Nan said Basil was obsessed with rabbits when he was a kid."

Wiff folded the letter, replaced it in the envelope

and carefully tucked it back into the box. He locked the box and returned it to the closet.

Wiff tore out the back door, over the mounds of dirt, and through a hole in the backyard fence. His mind was reeling. In the time it took to cross the abandoned lot to meet up with Dirty George, his mind had jelled around a tantalizing set of deductions: *Basil is an inventor; Basil loved rabbits; a guy in a rabbit suit triggered some kind of gadget on the train, causing chaos; the rabbit turns out to be nasty; Basil wants revenge on someone and sounds desperate; he even threatened Nan. Basil's got to be behind this! He must be the one that invented the thing on the train, and I bet you he's planning future havoc or worse!*

Wiff's Favorite Knots

Parts of a Rope

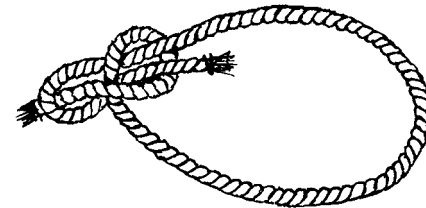
Working end: The tip or end of your rope that you're tying your knot

Standing part: The other end of your rope that you're not tying

Bight: The middle part of your rope

Knots

Bowline: A widely used loop knot



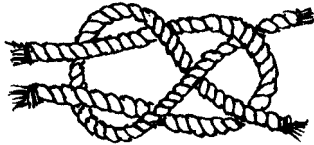
1. Take a long piece of working end and cross over the standing part to form a loop.
2. Pass the working end up through the loop, around the standing end, and back down the loop.
3. Pull the standing part with one hand and the two working ends with the other hand to tighten.

Clove hitch: A good knot for tying rope to a pole, post, ring, or branch



1. Pass the working end of rope around the pole and cross under the standing part.
2. Pass the working end around the pole again to make a second turn.
3. Tuck the working end underneath the second turn.
4. Pull the working end and standing part to tighten.

Sheet bend: The most widely used knot for joining two ropes



1. Take the rope on the left and make a loop.
2. Pass the working end of the rope on the right up through the loop, around the back of the loop rope, and back down the loop.
3. Tuck the working end under itself.
4. Pull the rope on the left and the working end of the right-hand rope to tighten.

Loop knot: This knot is also known as the slip noose or poacher's noose.



1. Form a loop by taking a long piece of working end back over the standing part.
2. Bring the working end under, over, and around the loop.
3. Pass the working end over the lower section of the loop created in step 2.
4. Pull the standing part to tighten.

Dirty George's Dictionary

Bangers and mash—sausages and mashed potatoes
Barmy—foolish
Bleedin'—an expression for something that is frustrating or bothersome
Blighter—an insignificant or objectionable person
Blimey—a mild exclamation
Blinking—an expression for something that is frustrating or bothersome
Bloke—man
Bloody—an expression for something that is frustrating or bothersome
Bonkers—crazy
Chap—man or boy
Cheeky—rude or sassy
Cheerio—good-bye
Cheers—good wishes or thanks
Chips—French fries
Cor—a mild exclamation
Crackers—crazy
Cracking—extremely or outstanding
Crikey—an exclamation expressing surprise
Daft—crazy
Diggs—lodgings
Dodge—a cunning trick
Dodgy—a dubious manner
Dole—unemployment money from the government
D.U.M.—Department of Underground Mischief
Dustbin—garbage can

Fab—fabulous or wonderful
Git—a silly or nasty person
Gobsmacked—utterly astonished or astounded
Gold Stick in Waiting—the Queen's assistant and protector
H.B.B.—His Basil's Barge
Kippers—a small salty fish
Knummers—no idea what this means because Wiff made it up
Larking—playing around or messing about
Loo—toilet
Lift—elevator
Mad—completely crazy
Menders—a repair shop
Me old cocker—term of endearment
Nick—to steal
Nutter—crazy
Oi—hey!
Pastie—a folded pastry filled with meat and vegetables
Plimsoles—sneakers
Pub—tavern or bar
Quid—pounds
Rucksack—backpack
Ruddy—an expression for something that is frustrating or bothersome
Smashing—excellent
Sweets—candy
Ta—thank you
Torchlight—flashlight
Twit—a silly or foolish person
Tyke—small child
Z.E.B.R.A.—Zipper Extraction Button Removal Atom-Smasher

About the Author

It took my mother, Lily, ten minutes to walk from 7 Wolsey Road to Marleyborne Hospital in North London. At eleven o'clock in the morning, on November 8, 1952, I came into the world.

My father worked on trains that delivered mail to distant places all over England. He wasn't there when I arrived. But that's where I get my love of trains.

We lived in a poor neighborhood of attached brick houses, narrow streets, and endless chimneys poking the sky. During World War II, a bomb from a German plane made a direct hit on the only pub on our street. One person was killed. They rebuilt the pub and called it The Lady Mildmay.

My best friend on Wolsey Road was an untidy boy named George. Mum called him Dirty George; she nicknamed me Wiff. It seems that neither of us cared much for soap and water. When I was almost eight, our family moved to the United States. We boarded the *Queen Elizabeth* in Southampton in southern England on April 21, 1960. We landed in New York City five days later.

I lost track of my English friend, went to college, married my sweetheart from New York, moved to Vermont, and grew up to write books. If you meet someone named George with a scruffy past, let me know.