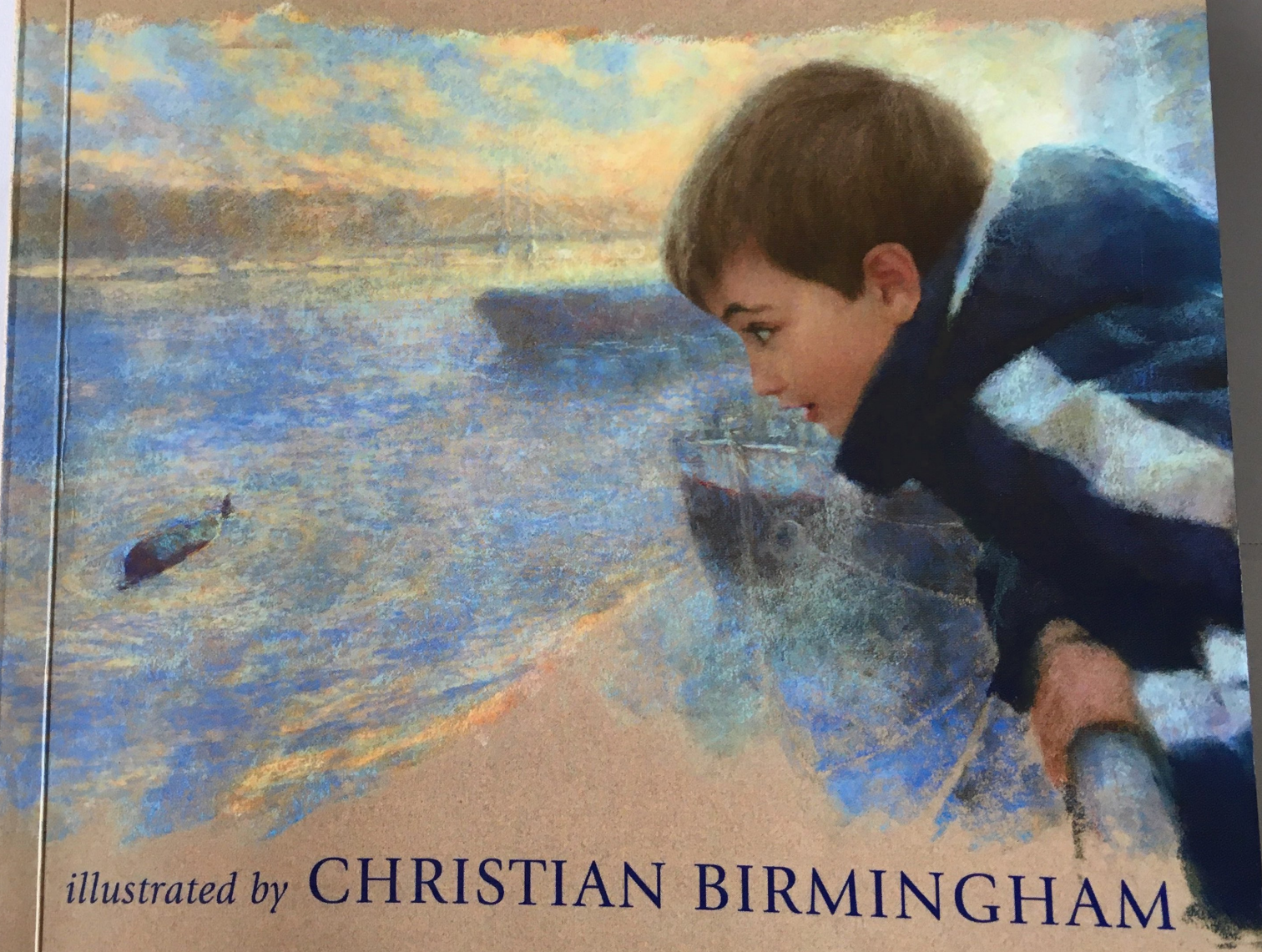


MICHAEL MORPURGO

THIS MORNING I MET A WHALE



illustrated by CHRISTIAN BIRMINGHAM



This morning I met a whale. It was just after five o'clock and I was down by the river. Sometimes, when my alarm clock works, and when I feel like it, I get up early, because I like to go bird-watching, because bird-watching is my favourite hobby. I usually go just before first light. Mum doesn't mind, just so long as I don't wake her up, just so long as I'm back for breakfast.

It's the best time. You get to hear the dawn chorus. You get to see the sunrise and the whole world waking up around you. That's when the birds come flying down to the river to feed, and I can watch them landing in the water. I love that.



If you're already there when they come, they hardly notice you, and then you don't bother them. Hardly anyone else is down by the river at five o'clock, sometimes no one at all, just the birds and me. The rest of London is asleep. Well, mostly anyway.

From our flat in Battersea it takes about five minutes to walk down to the river. The first bird I saw this morning was a heron. I love herons because they stand so still in the shallows. They're looking for fish, waiting to strike. When they strike they do it so fast, it's like lightning, and when they catch something they look so surprised and so pleased with themselves, as if they've never done it before. When they walk they walk in slow motion. When they take off and fly they look prehistoric, like pteradactyls almost. Herons are my best. But soon enough they all came, all the other birds, the moorhens and coots, the crested grebes and the swans,

the cormorants and the ducks. This morning I saw an egret too, perched on a buoy out in the river, and you don't see many of those. They're quite like herons, only much smaller, and white, snow-white. He was so beautiful. I couldn't take my eyes off him.

I was watching him through my binoculars, and he was looking right back at me. It was like he was asking me, "Hey you, what are you doing here? This is my river, don't you know?" Suddenly, without any warning, he lifted off. Then they all lifted off, all the birds on the shore, all the birds in the river. It was really strange. It was just as if I'd fired a gun or something, but I hadn't. I looked around. There wasn't a single bird anywhere. They'd all disappeared. For a while the river was completely still and empty and silent, like it was holding its breath almost, waiting for something that was about to happen. I was doing the same.