

Review Excerpt of So What! Stories or Whatever!

By G J Griffiths

Chapter 3

‘Please, sir, what are those animals called with eight testicles?’

Mr Jeffrey could not help blinking, open-mouthed, at the two girls standing at his desk. His long, slow intake of breath gave him a chance to think. His first thought was *This is a put-up job!* But when he reminded himself they were only just out of Year Seven, and that two of the cleverest but most naive pupils in the year group were Claire and Samantha, then he told himself *No, this has to be a genuine question.* They were always so keen; they were always asking or answering questions in their own enthusiastic way; they were so artless. The artlessness that he often witnessed in the children he taught worried him greatly at times, while, at the same time, it was one of the main attractions for him as a teacher. It was one of the things that helped to counter-balance the unpleasant events often experienced by teachers in the course of their duties. Girls like these two were so vulnerable and occasionally he felt concern for the children he might have as a future parent himself. But for now he was both concerned and amused by Claire and Samantha.

With exercise books in hand and pens at the ready, they looked up at him in wide-eyed innocence. And he did not know the answer. Mr Jeffrey mentally rejected hydra, sea horses and anemones then replied, ‘Is this for your poster?’ They nodded vigorously. ‘I’m not sure what you mean, girls. Can you tell me anything else about these animals? Do they have fur or feathers? Do they lay eggs in water or on land? Don’t forget our new topic is called Classification. So you should be able to narrow it down a bit more. Don’t you agree?’

‘Well’, Claire said wistfully, ‘I’m not sure. It is quite unusual. It lives in the water. In the sea, I think’.

‘And it can grip things with its testicles. It can squeeze you to death with them! Or squirt stuff at you to escape!’ said Sam, triumphantly.

Now Mr Jeffrey’s mind went into a spin...

OK, he thought, *My subject isn’t Biology but I’ve always been interested in the natural world and I’m sure I would have read about a sea creature that can grip things with its testicles.*

The thunder of a hundred pennies dropping in his silent brain made him exclaim, ‘Oh! You mean an octopus, girls! An octopus has eight arms - or tentacles - but not testicles!’ Mr Jeffrey tried not to collapse with tears of suppressed laughter. ‘It’s an octopus that has eight tentacles, girls. They have suckers on them. And, yes, it does live in the sea. You’ll find more details on it in the blue text book over there.’

He waved his left hand vaguely in the direction of the bookcase, and drew their attention towards the correct spelling, which he wrote on the board for them with his right. Then he fished for a paper tissue from the box on his desk. Mr Jeffrey now regularly kept a box for small emergencies with the children: runny noses, cut knees and quite often for tears of sadness. He thought that he should stuff some in his mouth to suppress his laughter. But of course he could not easily do that in front of the class, so he coughed loudly, blew his nose even louder and wiped his eyes, trying hard to recover his composure.

As they went over to the bookcase Mr Jeffrey saw the two innocents put their heads close together. He heard Claire mutter, 'Well, what are testicles for then? I know I've heard of them.'

Mr Jeffrey wanted to bottle the moment and save it for their parents' amusement on Open Night... *But that wouldn't work. Claire's mum and dad have just split up. She had already needed some of those tissues. Why was it that kids always seemed to feel it was their fault when their parents decided to live apart?*

He came back down to earth with a heartfelt bump. The two girls were the closest of friends, luckily for Claire since she missed her father a lot. He had moved out of the family home and into their Chinese fish and chip shop for the time being. Claire was quite small for her age, pretty, with a shock of straight, jet-black hair. She had warm, deep brown eyes that twinkled with harmless mischief. All of the teaching staff thought that Claire was *just so cute*. Samantha was a typical English rose; long blonde hair, blue eyes, strawberries and cream complexion. Sam was about six inches taller than her *very best friend*. The loyalty between the two girls was fierce and often caused problems with their peers, although they each had time for Bobby.

'Here's a picture of an octopus', said Claire, triumphantly holding the blue book in the air. When she arrived back at her desk there was a crumpled note on top of her exercise book. As Claire read it Samantha demanded, 'What does it say? Who's it from? Let me read it! Please, Claire!'

Claire started to weep silently. Sam became quiet and put her arm round her best friend's shoulder.

'Are you alright? What does it say?' she whispered.

'What does it say?' asked Bobby, who was also in their group. A couple of boys glanced across at the girls in a very shifty way. Lyle watched for a reaction but Carl looked innocently to the ceiling while silently whistling to himself. Sam took the note from Claire and waved it in Lyle's face, aggressively demanding, 'Did you write this? I s'pose you think it's funny. You're pathetic, Pickman! I'm going to tell sir!'

Lyle Pickman tried to look innocent but he could not stop himself from giggling and glanced, mockingly at Claire. Meanwhile, the rest of the previously busy class had all stopped their work, and their discussions about fur, scales, number of legs and so on, came to an end. They needed all of their attentive faculties in order to focus on the dispute.

'Mr Jeffrey,' said Samantha, as she glanced first at Claire and then at Lyle. But by now Mr Jeffrey had become aware of the events around Claire's desk. He was annoyed.

What on earth is going on now? Just when the whole class has started to focus properly on their project work a row has to start. He looked irritated and demanded, 'What is going on over there? Bring me that note, immediately!'

They could see from his expression that Mr Jeffrey was not going to change his mind. Claire and Lyle looked horrified as Samantha slowly advanced towards Mr Jeffrey. Her head was down and her arm outstretched, clutching the note. Mr Jeffrey took it from her and read it, but not before snapping at the children, 'Get on with your work, everyone!'

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Many years later, when Mr Jeffrey was sat alone in his classroom, contemplating his resignation or retirement, he remembered Claire. She had become one of the special children that remained stuck in his memory. Some were special for positive reasons and some had negative connotations. Many memories would make him smile but too many squeezed a tear and a strangled gulp from the strong disciplinarian that he became. He remembered many of the children that he had met and taught, even comforted and guided at times. He mused on

how many pupils came into a teacher's life and then a few years later they were gone; they had left the school; they had left and rarely did the teacher know what became of them. The stories of so many of the children crowded his memory for attention: Claire, Tracy, Darren, Kyle, so many stories had unfolded briefly before him and, inevitably, would become unfinished.

His four or five years at Walnut Grove were hard for him. He never had his own tutor group but was described as a *sub* (substitute form tutor) the whole time. This meant that day after day he had to check the Cover list displayed on the staffroom notice board, early each morning, to register forms for absent teachers. Often he had to race to register classes in rooms in parts of the large school site that he rarely frequented. Mr Jeffrey quickly learned the geography of the campus.

The major complication for anyone working at Walnut Grove High was the split site situation. *Lower School* was in a different building entirely to *Upper School* and located almost two miles away. He often had to register Year Nine (Lower) in the morning and Year Ten (Upper) in the afternoon. He could have been teaching in the other building immediately after registration. While the teachers would be paid travel expenses if they used their own vehicle, instead of the ready-booked local taxi service, the stress this created for new staff was extreme. Lessons were always expected to start on time!

Mr Jeffrey took great pride in being well-organised for his personal and work life. But even he found being a *sub* too much after a couple of years; the absent teachers were very often form tutors for the most unpleasant and badly behaved children; an obvious connection. He desperately wanted his own form to relate to, and to bond with, and to help - without having to drive between buildings to register them! That would have to wait until he moved schools.

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'I understand, Mr Hennessy. Naturally Mrs Cheng feels upset about the note. Unfortunately, as I said before, I know nothing about the incident. It is a pity Claire's Science teacher did not bring it to my attention before now.'

Gripping the telephone between the side of her head and her shoulder, Sue Stewart, the new Head of Year, reached for a pencil from her desk-tidy and was annoyed to find, yet again, they had all been *borrowed* by her form tutors. She searched frantically through the desk drawer and discovered a confiscated Transformer Pen. It looked like a robot and she scribbled its head on an old timetable, trying to make it write. The robot's head snapped off and Sue felt like screaming. Then she noticed that one of the arms had a ball-point for a hand. Success! it worked but unfortunately in a Day-Glo orange!

Never mind, she thought, It writes.

Sue glanced longingly at her partially eaten sandwich and her cold cup of tea, while writing down the details.

'And you say that you are Claire Cheng's step father? We don't have any of your details on our files, Mr Hennessy, so, naturally, I can only discuss this in depth with Claire's parents. I'm sure you understand that. Yes indeed, what you are saying is very disturbing, if it is true. No - I am not saying that I don't believe you, Mr Hennessy. But, if I heard you correctly, you said the note passed to Claire, by Carl, implied they would rape her on the way home from school... Mm... Shocking, yes... And now Claire is refusing to come to school because she is too scared.'

Now Sue was silently cursing Mr Jeffrey for not telling her any of the previous day's events in his Science lesson.

What on earth was going on in his lesson? Where is the note? If I speak to Robert first, then I expect Anthony, will probably take offence since he feels he can deal with any behaviour problems in his department. What a mess! This is probably a child protection issue anyway. Should I tell Gary? she thought. After all Gary is the senior teacher with responsibility for child protection issues... Sue continued with her telephone conversation with these thoughts racing through her mind.

‘I don’t think I should discuss it any further Mr. Hennessy,’ she said. ‘Not until I have more information. It is likely that the Science teacher has sent in an incident report with the details. No, I do not think it’s possible for you to have the note... Well, first of all, I do not have it. Secondly, you are not Claire’s parent or guardian, officially... I’m sorry but we don’t have your details on file... And... And... Thirdly, it is very likely that the teacher has thrown the note away.’ There was a kind of strangled verbal convulsion from the other end of the telephone.

Oh no! Now what have I said? He sounds as if he is going to explode, thought Sue. *This is a bit weird. Some man, who claims he is her stepfather, showing a bit too much interest in a worrying note passed round the class. I’d better speak to Anthony before registration this afternoon...*

She continued, ‘Mr. Hennessy, you have every right to go to the police. But I suggest that Mrs. Cheng comes in to see me about things first of all. Of course you can be in the meeting. My main concern is to get Claire back into school. You said that three other boys were also involved. So that is... Lyle Pickman, Carl Southey, Ben Povey and Trevor Somebody-or-other. Right... Yes... Thank you for calling. Yes, I’ll see you when you come in with Mrs. Cheng. No, it’s quite all right, Mr. Hennessy. I understand why you were angry. I suspect it is just a few boys being very silly and cruel to Claire.’ There was a repeat of the strangled detonation.

Oops! Here we go again. Shouldn’t have said that, she thought. Using her most diplomatic tone Sue continued, ‘Well I don’t know the details yet. But I certainly will find out more before I see Mrs. Cheng. Hopefully, yes, within the next few days. Thank you. I will see you then. Bye, bye.’

Feeling annoyed with Robert, Sue considered, *Have I got time to finish my lunch? Right where’s Anthony?*

Ten minutes later Sue had walked across to the other side of the school, still chewing her apple and wondering whether it would be better for her stress levels to put her telephone on *Do not disturb*.

After all, she thought, I backed out of staff dinner duties to give myself more time to catch up on things. It doesn’t help if the damn phone keeps ringing all through my lunch break with parents demanding to speak to me. I haven’t started on the paperwork from my pigeonhole yet. Oh well, c’est la vie!

Anthony was coming to the end of one of his naughty children anecdotes when Sue appeared in the Science department staffroom. They were both aware that the afternoon registration bell would ring in about ten minutes.

‘Anthony, have you got a couple of minutes? I need to ask you about an incident; in private’

‘Sure, Sue. Come into my office.’

Anthony led the way into his *office*, the Chemistry laboratory next door. They sat on tall lab stools to talk. She winced as she sat down and thought, *How do the kids cope with these horrible, hard, wooden stools for fifty minutes each lesson?*

Sue took her scribbled Day-Glo orange notes out and noted Anthony’s raised eyebrows and amused expression.

‘I couldn’t find a pen! Anyway, I’ve had a parent on the phone demanding a note that the kids were passing round in one of Robert’s lessons. Do you know about it?’

‘Robert did mention some disturbance about a note - yesterday I think. But what’s the problem? Kids are always passing notes around class. We don’t usually give the notes to parents. Anyway, Robert knows what he’s doing. I’m sure he’s dealt with it properly and the note has probably been binned.’

Sue explained the situation and then the bell rang.

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Mrs Cheng was a very small and inoffensive-looking woman, from China, who spoke little English. Sue Stewart looked her in the eye and repeated, ‘I am very sorry, Mrs Cheng, but you do not have a right to keep the note that you say Claire got from Lyle. And as far as I can tell more than one boy wrote offensive comments in it anyway.’

‘Now hang on, Mrs Stevens, the police said it was a pity we didn’t have it as it was good evidence! So they said we could have it and we want it as evidence. OK?’

Mr Hennessy appeared to be acting as translator and unofficial legal *advisor* to his Chinese partner. At least he spoke as if this was so but Sue regarded him very much as a would-be barrack room lawyer.

‘Well if the police need the note,’ said Sue, ‘The school will have no objections at all to handing it over to them. By the way, it’s Mrs Stewart, not Mrs Stevens.’

Mr Hennessy looked blankly at Sue for a moment or two, unsure about which statement to react to. Before he could say anything Claire, who had been sitting quietly in between him and her mother, suddenly spoke rapidly to her mum and her mum replied, then fixed Sue with a glare that needed no translation. She was not going to be fobbed off!

‘My mum wants to know if you have destroyed the note. Sorry, Mrs Stewart. But has it been destroyed?’

Claire was obviously very embarrassed by the whole situation. She did not want to be there, translating, explaining, listening to the grown-ups arguing or, as she saw it, *grassing* on her fellow pupils.

‘Oh!’ Mr Hennessy had suddenly found his voice. ‘Sorry about that. It’s always happening to me. They keep calling me Mr Cheng! Heh! Heh! Can you believe that?’

Sue could not believe that because he had blue eyes and light brown hair, but she thought, once again, that it was probably better not to speak her thoughts. She ignored the implication in Claire’s question and continued, ‘The Head of Science has the note and I have read it out to the parents of each of the boys involved, over the telephone.’ She waited for that to sink in for Mr Hennessy and a translation to pass amongst all three of them. The trio all turned simultaneously to face Sue so that she could continue. Mr Hennessy turned to Claire and said kindly, ‘Claire, duck, could you just go outside for a mo’?’ Claire looked at her mother, who nodded to her. Claire left the room and he made sure that the door was firmly closed. Sue was a little surprised at this but waited as she could see he had something difficult to say.

‘Claire’s older sister, Gemma, was abused when she was little. And that’s why we’re so upset. She went to Walnut Grove as well, but left last year,’ he said, almost whispering. ‘So you can see why we want the note. Claire doesn’t know about Gemma.’

‘I understand,’ said Sue. Questions about Claire’s sister raced through her mind but she kept silent, unable to deal with the probable answers. ‘I don’t think I taught Gemma. She wasn’t in any of my classes.’ They shook their heads. ‘I have phoned all the boys’ parents.’ She paused. Then, approaching the door asked, ‘Can we get Claire back in now?’ They both

noded and Sue noted that Mrs Cheng seemed to understand more English than she at first assumed.

‘As you can imagine none of the parents were pleased to get such a phone call from me. In fact one mother was quite tearful and she wanted me to tell you just how sorry she is on behalf of her son. She could not believe that he would say such a hurtful and thoughtless thing to another person, let alone a girl he was very fond of. Did you know about that, Claire? It was Lyle’s mum’

Poor Claire was now acutely embarrassed and Sue was already regretting asking her. However, Claire took a deep breath and said, ‘Well, he was my boyfriend once. And when I tried to finish with him he wouldn’t leave me alone’

Now a new trio focused their attention, this time it was on Claire who was quite unaware as she was staring at the floor. Sue was thinking, *I will never understand this business of boyfriend and girlfriend when the kids are only twelve.*

‘Well,’ mused Claire slowly, ‘We just went around school together. And he bought me a present on my birthday and...’

‘Is that where that bracelet and mirror came from?’ asked Mrs Cheng. At least that is what her partner translated to Sue, but he missed out her quizzical exclamation of *Boyfriend!* - that needed no interpretation.

‘Yes and I would have given them back but he was doing my head in and ... and...’

‘Claire,’ said Sue, as kindly and as firmly as she could, ‘Did you say a very unkind thing to Lyle?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, when I asked all four boys about the reasons for being so nasty to you, Carl told me that you were *right out of order* to his mate.’

‘Now hang on,’ demanded Mr Hennessy. ‘Don’t try and blame Claire. She’s done nothing wrong here!’

‘I am not trying to excuse what they put in the note, Mr Hennessy. But I believe Claire might have said something before the Science lesson that they used as a reason to be so cruel. There is usually another side to a story after all.’

He explained Sue’s statement to Mrs Cheng, who pursed her lips and nodded sagely. On seeing this Mr Hennessy reluctantly said, ‘Well, I suppose so.’

Still looking at the scuff marks on the floor Claire said quietly, ‘I told him I would rather eat dog dirt than go out with him. But I didn’t mean it. He’s dead cute really but he was getting on my nerves!’ She had started to cry.

‘I think he had just said something like: *Please, please, please, Claire can we go to the pictures. But not with your friends, especially Sam. She’s a drippy geek!*’ said Sue.

‘Yes, and Sam’s my best friend. I hate him!’

‘I think a lot of people are probably very sorry about what has been said or written lately,’ said Sue in her most sympathetic tone. Mr Hennessy translated and Mrs Cheng nodded again and hugged her weeping daughter.

‘All the boys concerned are writing you and your parents apologies, Claire.’

Now she addressed just the adults, ‘Quite honestly I don’t think any of them had any idea just how serious the implications were to what was written. But have no doubt they do know now and their parents understand completely how angry and upset you feel. As I say if the police contact us for the note we will pass it on to them. But I have a feeling they may view it as a stupid prank that went wrong.’

‘Well, we’ll see,’ said Mr Hennessy.

‘I hope to see you in school soon, Claire.’

‘Yes, Sam told me in Food Tech we’re making lasagne tomorrow,’ said Claire, all smiles and now very cheerful again.

‘But I still think that it’s a good idea to stay away from Lyle, Carl, Trevor and Ben for the time being. They have all been told the same thing. Their apologies will be brought to me and I will see they get posted on. OK?’ Sue was looking at Claire but speaking in effect to her mother, who seemed to be reasonably happy with the outcome, after her bubbly daughter had explained again.

A couple of handshakes later and Sue was entering a suitable absence code for the benefit of her educational welfare officer, *or the wag lady*, as she was known to the students. Claire’s absences on the form register were not really explained by the official codes available but the last thing Sue wanted at the moment was an irate Mrs Cheng after a visit from *the wag lady* accusing Claire of truancy.

Phew! she thought, *Where’s that cup of tea? Right you owe me Mr Jeffrey!*

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‘You can’t seriously believe that Lyle and his mates would have attacked Claire on the way home from school!’ Robert demanded. He was in Sue’s office with Anthony and Sue. The crumpled note was lying on the desk and their discussion about the possibility of it being used as evidence had not gone well with Robert.

‘Kids threaten each other all the time in school and most of the time we just let them get on with it. They sort it out amongst themselves. I doubt very much whether Lyle, Carl or any of that lot know what to do with their willy, apart from pee with it.’

‘You cannot say that!’ Sue demanded. Standing at around five feet nothing tall, a little overweight and with a look that could freeze waterfalls, she was a formidable opponent. Her dander was definitely up!

Anthony tried to calm things down quickly when he saw Sue gasp in exasperation. ‘Robert, come on, what have we been teaching Year Eights for the last four weeks? Human Reproduction.’

‘All that I am trying to say,’ interjected Sue, ‘Is that this was not your *normal* note between kids, about who loves who, or how rubbish their footy team is. It was a threat of assault, sexual assault and with all the recent publicity about bullying in schools you cannot just screw the note up, throw it away and forget it. OK?’

‘Yeah! OK,’ admitted Robert, ‘Perhaps I should have treated it more seriously. But when I was at school you just coped with things and accepted that sometimes life wasn’t fair. We seem to be constantly spoon-feeding kids for their exams, molly-coddling them if they bend a fingernail. Or should I say *counselling* them. Sometimes I just want to tell them *Why all the fuss? Just grow up, kid! Life’s like that sometimes.*

‘And you think how you were treated at school was all right do you?’ asked Sue.

But Robert was remembering his promise to himself when he had qualified for teaching. It was the same promise that most teachers (and parents) make: *I won’t be like that. I’m going to care more about doing the right things for the children. I’m sure there’s a better way. I want to make a difference.*

‘I’m sorry if it made things difficult for you, Sue’ said Robert. ‘It was a lucky thing I had second thoughts about the note and retrieved it from the litter bin to show to Anthony.’

‘Yeah! I really appreciated a note smelling of orange peel and stale yoghurt, while I was having my lunch,’ laughed Anthony. ‘Ah well, it seems to be sorted now. And you’re expecting a call from the police are you Sue?’

‘No, not really. I hope not,’ replied Sue, ‘But I’ll write everything up and put a photocopy of the note in the kids’ files just in case.’ she concluded.

The telephone rang at that point and they all nodded in silent agreement as Sue answered it. Anthony and Robert left the room to head back to the Science department.

‘Sorry about that,’ said Robert.

‘I wouldn’t do the Head of Year job for a gold clock!’ said Anthony; ‘I’m glad I went down the subject path for promotion and not the pastoral one.’ But Robert was lost in thought about the unfairness of life when he was at school.

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BOOK TITLE: **So What! Stories or Whatever!**

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BOOK SYNOPSIS: So What! Stories or Whatever! is a collection of stories about the people who are found in a contemporary High School in England; tales that will make the reader laugh, cry, think deeply or differently, and maybe even be inspired or impressed. It generally follows the early and subsequent career of Robert Jeffrey, as he attempts to prove to himself that he can motivate the children he teaches to want to learn about Science – and maybe become scientists one day. All through the book we are made aware of the joys and disappointments experienced by pupils and their teachers.

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