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BEYOND *the* STARS
Twelve Tales of Adventure, Magic and Wonder
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From bestselling, award-winning Irish authors and illustrators

Compiled by Sarah Webb
Featuring John Boyne, Eoin Colfer,

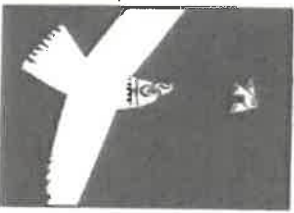
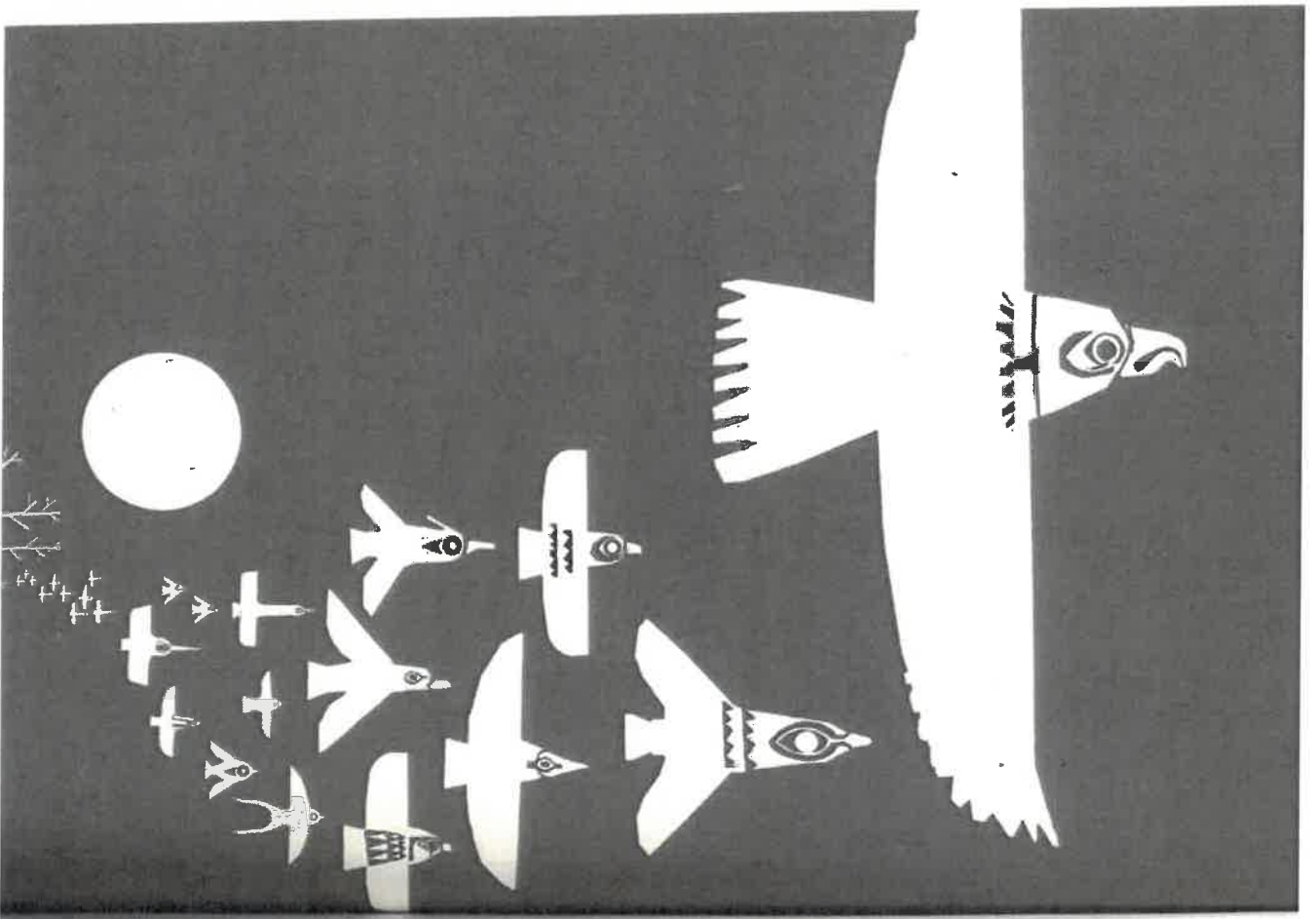
The King of the Birds

MICHAEL SCOTT

Illustrated by
Chris Haughton

Michael Scott writes for both adults and young adults. He is considered one of the authorities on Celtic folklore and his collections, *Irish Folk & Fairy Tales*, *Irish Myths & Legends* and *Irish Ghosts & Hauntings*, have been in print for the past twenty years. His *New York Times* bestselling YA series, *The Secrets of the Immortal Nicholas Flamel*, is available in over twenty languages and thirty-eight countries.

Chris Haughton is an Irish designer and illustrator. His first book, *A Bit Lost*, is available in nineteen languages and has won many awards including the Dutch Picture Book of the Year. Chris's latest and third Picture Book is *Shm! We Have a Plan* and was published in 2014. Chris's aim is to create children's books that can be read without words, so that children from across the world can understand everything just by looking at them.



In Ireland, December 26th is called Wren Day (La-an Dreoilín), and the tiny bird has always occupied a special place in Irish mythology. Although the wren is the smallest of birds, it is sometimes called the King of the Birds.

There is a song that begins,
"The wren, the wren, the king
of all birds..."
But how did such a tiny

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creature become the ruler of all the birds of the air?

In the still pre-dawn air, the bare frost-speckled winter trees were lined with birds.

Every glittering branch bowed beneath the weight of flocks that had gathered from all across Ireland, and the trees were alive with the whispering rasp of their feathers. The birds had kept to their own kin: the blackbirds and cuckoos clustered together, while the smaller birds – the sparrows, robins and thrushes, starlings and swallows – swarmed the upper branches. The lower branches groaned beneath the



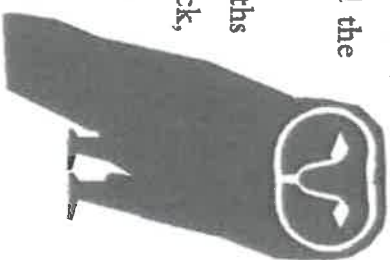
weight of some of the bigger birds – the falcons and ospreys – while gulls, cormorants and the other seabirds moved across the hard-frozen earth, feet rasping on the thin covering of ice.

It was the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, and the birds of Ireland had assembled to choose their ruler.

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Boar, oxen, cats and dogs and even the deer had their rulers, but no one had claimed kingship over the birds, and for generations they had been ruled by a squabbling Parliament, mostly composed of black-eyed crows and nervous irritable robins. They could never agree on anything. Finally, the Parliament had turned to Relige, the ancient barn owl, for advice. No one knew how old he was. It was rumoured he had actually seen the birth of the world when it was pushed up from the ocean floor and that he had carried the first seeds to plant the great forests of oak, ash and yew that now blanketed the land. Even the fearsome two-legged humani acknowledged the owl's wisdom.

Relige had spent months flying from flock to flock, listening as each one claimed the right to rule. He knew if he simply picked a ruler it



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would solve nothing: the other bird flocks would not acknowledge them as their leader. Finally, he decided that the only way to choose a king would be by a trial of flight that would be open to all.

Thousands of sparrow messengers had flitted across the country carrying the news: the king would be chosen on the day of the winter solstice. Any birds interested in challenging for the leadership were to gather at Eo Mugna, the Great Oak at the mouth of the River Shannon and one of the Five Sacred Trees of Ireland.

“Only a few will contest the kingship,” Eala, one of the two snow-white swans, said to Relige. “A lot of the smaller birds will not even bother trying.”

The swans, like the owl, had no interest in the kingship, and would act as judges.

“No, there will be more,” Aela, her mate, said.



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“Everyone believes they can be the king.”

“All the birds of Ireland will come,” Relige said with a solemn nod. “If not to take part, then *1000* observe and simply *1000* be able to say that they were there when the king was chosen. Thousands will come,” he hooted.



The day of the solstice dawned bitterly cold, the air from the ice lands at the top of the world carrying flecks of ice and the promise of snow. The birds started to gather just before the dawn. They arrived singly and in pairs, in long trailing V's across the grey sky or in huge wheeling flocks that moved as one.

Relige sat in the heart of the ancient Eo Mugna with all the flocks around, above and below him. He opened his huge eyes and blinked at the gathered birds. He had been right:

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there were thousands – no, there were tens of thousands gathered in the vast and ancient tree. The owl would referee the race and make sure that everyone observed the rule: to fly high and outlast all the others. But Relige, Eala and Aela were looking for more than strength and endurance. The king of the birds would have to be cunning and wise and, more importantly, would have to be respected by all the others.

Relige flapped his wings a few times, and gradually the muttering, chattering and twittering died down. Thousands of pairs of eyes – small, hard and black or big, bright and luminous – turned to look at him.

“Now, *youuu* all know the rules,” he hooted. “Whoever outlasts all others and flies the highest will be crowned the king of the birds. We are looking for courage and heart. We want a king who is both clever and strong. We are looking for a leader.”

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A feathery rustle of excitement rang through the trees.

“Aela, Eala and I will crown the king when the race has run its course,” Relige continued. “Anyone found cheating will immediately be disqualified,” he added sternly. Although his body remained still, his huge head spun to look over at the magpies and rooks. They shuffled back and forth on a branch, suddenly deciding to preen their blue-black feathers as they tried, and failed, to look innocent. The two huge swans on the ground beneath Relige turned to glare threateningly at them. The spectacularly plumaged black-and-white birds were extremely unreliable and notorious thieves.

“Now, are *youuu* all ready?”
Wings opened and closed and for a moment it looked as if the Great Oak and the surrounding trees had come alive with splashes of colour as a multitude of feathers shone and glistened in the grey morning light.

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"Any last questions?" Relige asked, head swivelling left to right and back again.

There was a sudden cracking snap above and a twig, heavy with acorns, dropped through the higher branches of the ancient oak to the ground below. The assembled birds gasped: it was forbidden to break any leaves or branches from the sacred tree. Silence fell over the forest. Then, bronze feathers appeared through the leaves above and a sharp-beaked head thrust forward. Bright golden eyes looked down on the assembled birds, before finally turning to fix on Relige.

"I have a question."

"The assembly recognises Iolar," Eala honked loudly.

"What is your question?" Relige asked.

Iolar the Golden Eagle ruffled his magnificent feathers and spread his wings to their fullest extent. "Why are we even having this contest? Everyone knows I am the king of the birds.

"Why not just crown me now?" he demanded. For such a big bird, he had a high and shrill voice, and it made him sound rather petulant.

"We will crown you if you win," Relige said patiently. He knew that the Golden Eagle already considered himself the king of the birds, and that he had bullied some of the smaller flocks into acknowledging him as their ruler.

Snag, the one-eyed Lord of the Magpies, hopped to the end of a branch and glared upwards, his single black eye fixing on the huge eagle. "How do you know you'll win?" he demanded.

A murmur of agreement ran through the flocks.

Iolar's laugh was a discordant squawk. He spread his wings wide again and they stretched almost the length of the branch he was perched on. "I am a Golden Eagle," he said. "I am the largest, the most powerful and the most beautiful bird here. I deserve to win." He closed

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his wings with a cracking snap and the wind buffeted a few of the smaller birds from the branches above his head, sending them spinning to the ground.

"Being big, powerful and beautiful does not give you the right to win." The owl raised one smoothly feathered wing. "Remember, Iolar, a king must be kind and considerate: speed, power and beauty alone do not make a ruler."

"But I will still win," Iolar insisted defiantly. His big head turned, eyes darting at the smaller birds as if defying them to race against him. "There are none here who can compete with me. And none who *should* compete against me," he added threateningly.

"You are a bully," a tiny voice chirruped from the shadows.

"A challenger?" Iolar glared into the thicket of leaves. "Show yourself, if you dare."

A leaf twisted and a tiny brown wren appeared. Iolar's beak opened and closed in astonishment,

but no sounds came out.

"I am Dreolin the Wren, and I challenge you."

A few of the smaller birds cackled in amusement, but the rest remained silent. The tiny and mysterious wrens swarmed unnoticed across many lands, absorbing customs, myth and lore. They got into places off limits to larger birds and animals and were reputed to know the language of the humani.

"Enough!" Relige hooted long and loud, the sound echoing like a horn in the dawn air.

"Now, *youuu* must all remember," the barn owl said, "this is not a race. Yes, flying high is important, but we are also looking for strength, skill, endurance and strategy. *Soo*, take *youuur* time." He paused and raised his wings again.

"Are you almost ready...?"

The flocks shuffled and settled on the branches.

"Are you nearly ready...?"

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They fell silent and the forest grew hushed.

“Are you ready...?”

A sparrow suddenly darted up in a flurry of wings, realised its mistake and fell back with an embarrassed cheep.

“Fly!”

With the sound of thunder, the huge flock of birds took off in an enormous cloud, rising up into the chill solstice morning sky. Branches shook and rattled as if in a storm and leaves twisted loose and swirled away. Some of the smaller trees around the ancient oak were stripped bare.

Relige and the swans, Eala and Aela, stared up at the flock of birds winging its way upwards.

“The Golden Eagle will win,” Eala said. “He will be insufferable.”

“He hasn’t won yet,” Relige said. Settling on to the branch, he wrapped his wings tightly round his body and closed his eyes.

“I will be king.” Iolar’s huge wings beat smoothly

and strongly, pulling him upwards. He chanted in time with the beating of his wings. “I will be king. I will be king.”

Initially, the smaller lighter birds had risen first, little wings flapping furiously, but they were soon overtaken by the bigger birds, their larger wings carrying them up with slow powerful strokes. The small birds were careful not to fly beneath them – the downdraught from their wings could send them spinning out of the air.

“I will be king. I will be king.”

Already, Iolar had left most of the smaller birds behind and, as he looked down, he could see that some of them were beginning to spiral back to the earth. They were exhausted with the effort and they knew it was useless to go any further.

The eagle’s wings snapped wide, catching the wind, feeling it smooth and liquid beneath his feathers. Opening his beak, he called in triumph as he soared upwards. “I will be king.”

He was going to win. He was going to be the

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king of all the birds in Ireland.

Iolar continued climbing. Beneath him the ground curved away smoothly at the edges, the green and silver of the frost-covered land turning into the sharp blue of the sea. The eagle could make out the tiny patchwork squares of fields and the thin white threads of the roads cutting across the landscape. In the distance, on the coast, he could see a dirty smudge that was a collection of wood and mud huts -- a human village. Soon, even they would have to acknowledge him as king.

"I will be king."

Iolar flew through clouds. The white fluffy balls looked so warm and soft, but were always damp and cold. A dusting of water droplets dappled his wings like jewels.

He rose higher still.

Soon, there was no one beneath him. A seagull had hung on for a surprisingly long time, but had given up as the sun began to rise on this, the

shortest day of the year. The seagull had slowly drifted back to the ground leaving Iolar alone in the sky: he was the king of the birds.

"I am the king," he said. "I am the king of the birds."

On the ground Relige and the two swans watched the distant black dot rising high, high, higher into the sky. All around Eo Mugna, the Great Oak, birds were resting, lining the branches and bushes, gathered in small groups on the hard ground. They too were looking up, watching the eagle soar into the heavens. And, as the last solitary black-headed seagull fell back to earth, leaving the Golden Eagle alone in the skies, it was clear that Iolar would be king.

There was no point in going any further. He had won. Tilting to one side, Iolar began to fall back towards the earth. When he was closer to the earth, he would close his wings and plummet shockingly fast, frightening the smaller birds. At

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the very last minute he would open his great wings and stop, hang in the air and then drop lightly on to a branch. It would be a dramatic demonstration of his power.

The eagle twitched.

Something moved in the feathers on his back.

He shrugged. It would blow off as he fell through the icy air.

He felt it move again. And then a familiar tiny voice said cheekily, "Thank you."

Iolar twisted his head in time to see Dreolin the wren take flight off his back, wings beating furiously as it rose up into the sky. It began to sing, a delicate triumphant sound.

Iolar shouted and opened his wings, beating them furiously to catch the wind. But he was exhausted and had already dropped quite far, while the wren, who had hitched the ride on his back, was far, far above him, and rising fast on fresh wings.

"Come back," Iolar shouted. "Come back.

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"That's not fair. I've won."

Dreolin peered down, eyes twinkling mischievously.

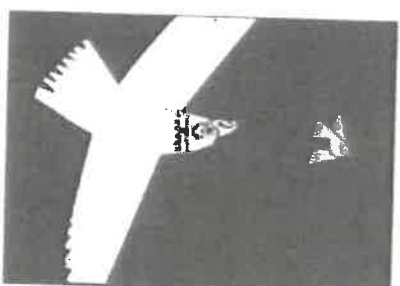
"Not yet you haven't. Catch me if you can."

The wren continued rising higher and higher. The eagle desperately attempted to catch up, but its wings were tired, each flap becoming more of an effort. He began to drop lower, slipping further away from the still-rising wren.

"Just you wait," he whined.

The wren flew higher, singing, singing, singing.

Furious, Iolar plummeted towards the ground, only opening his wings a few feet above the soil. They snapped him to a stop and he slid to a halt before the barn owl, long talons digging grooves into the frost-speckled earth.



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“Not fair. Not fair,” he attempted to shout, but it came out as a shrill shriek. “That’s not fair. He cheated.”

Relige smiled and looked from the furious eagle up to the tiny bird flying far above their heads. The wren dipped and spun in an intricate dance, snatches of its song carried down on the wind.

The barn owl looked at the two swans on either side of them and they whispered together for a few moments.

“Well?” Iolar demanded.

“Being a king means not only being big and strong and powerful, it also means being clever and thinking ahead and planning,” Relige said.

“The wren did that.” The barn owl drew in a deep breath, puffing out his chest. “From this day forth,” Relige announced loudly, voice echoing and re-echoing through the ancient forests, “Dreolin the wren is the king of the

birds of Ireland.”

And abruptly the ancient forest came alive to the vast flock singing, “*The wren, the wren, the king of all birds...*”