

TLC Showcase

HENRY FRY

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Introduction to 'HackLand'

I remember when my parents first got dial-up broadband. I must have been fifteen or sixteen. The most exciting thing about it, as far as I could see, was now I could tell everyone at school we had it. What with the speed it took to load a Geocities page and the irritation that no one could use the landline at the same time, it took me a while to become addicted to the world wide web. I stuck with books. Then, years later, I find myself Instagramming new running trainers on 1st January with the hashtags #Imacliche #dontcare #newyearnewme. And I wonder: when did it all go wrong?

Teens now have a wildly different experience of the Internet. It's connected to them. It's inside their thoughts, their self-esteem. It pervades everything. This was where *HackLand* was born – somewhere between the squeak and crackle of a dial-up modem, and a sixteen-year-old in Swindon snap-chatting what they had for lunch.

Lucca, the novel's protagonist, sits awkwardly between these worlds. Obsessed with the history books in his bohemian parents' library, and carving out a dream identity online. The whole time he's working out how to appease both selves: the real, and the imagined. Which is really a microcosm of *HackLand*. Which is really a microcosm of our world now.

What is less real than the most secret, inner experiences of individuals?

A theme park.

What is as horribly real as the most secret, inner experiences of individuals?

A theme park that has devoured every excerpt of your digital presence, even the bits you forgot. *Especially* the bits you wished you could forget. But the Internet never forgets.

I started *HackLand* to speak specifically to LGBT+ teens, and TLC's Free Reads is a fantastic opportunity for me to have the space to develop my work and hopefully speak to a new generation of YA readers. I want to show young readers that there is a voice out there that supports them, that understands them, and, hopefully, will inspire them to feel proud and confident in who they are, whatever their differences.

My last novel was a large, sprawling who-dun-it set in 17th century London. Very much a time before even (whisper it) dial-up broadband. With this novel I wanted to do something completely different: not so much uncover a reality passed, but inhabit one we already know, and can't quite name – or don't want to.

HackLand is like the darker recesses of your mind, or of the Internet. It's been there the whole time, only now you're forced to look at it and ask yourself, 'Who would do a thing like this? Who am I really?'

Well, it's sort of like that, only with rollercoasters.

An extract from 'HackLand', by Henry Fry

Chapter 1

Odysseus

I couldn't believe the day was here at last.

My hands were actually shaking as I checked the ticket again. It glowed dimly in the shade of my palm. In the bright light dancing off the Mediterranean it was almost invisible. I tilted my phone towards me, so my full shadow fell across it, making it darker, as I had done like a billion times that morning.

There it was: The green outline of the bird sat atop the crooked castle, its jagged beak in silhouette, its wings held taught, ready to take flight. Around it looped circles in the same verdant pixels.

I touched the gate of the castle. The circles began to rotate, and I felt that same dizzy excitement as when I had first realised they were meant to be rollercoasters, coming to life. My chest swelled. The bird turned its head, and cried a tinny shriek.

'Last warning, Lucky,' Rachel said, and turned back to Ina, who was trying to throw herself overboard.

From a few feet away came the same shrill cry.

'You too, Sim,' Rachel said, less sternly, now wrestling with Ina as she laughed the demented cackle of the under tens. 'Do you *want* to end up in the water, darling? Do you *want* to be eaten by sharks?'

'Yes!' she giggled wildly. 'I am an island!'

The bird's shriek went up from several phones all at once and Rachel rolled her eyes while basically strangling Ina.

I looked around. None of the other parents showed they had even heard it, which didn't surprise me. None of us had said anything when we skidded down the wobbly board onto the bottom deck, but everyone on this flat white tennis court of a boat was minted. They just were. You could tell. Aside from the ladies all having Louis Vuitton

bags and Hermes scarves and things, they just *looked* rich. They sort of glided. Their skin basically glowed. Their kids looked rich too (obviously!), but, especially the younger ones, looked like they just wanted to be kids, and being rich got in the way. I mean, who can have fun in a miniature Armarni suit #amIright? You could feel the bottled up expectation pulsing from them like sound waves. They were just as crazy excited as us.

‘Total make-up counter,’ Sim whispered to me while I was still staring at our fellow travellers. I followed his gaze, to where a middle-aged woman dressed like she was going to some impossibly chic funeral sat with her teenage son in a suit and teenage daughter an exact replica of herself.

I stifled a snort and Sim looked back to his phone. His thumb swiped. The bird screeched again.

He was talking about the online questionnaire we had to fill in a couple of days after we got the tickets. It was pretty detailed and included stuff Rachel took immediate exception to: age, gender, that sort of thing. But then weird questions like, ‘If you were a raven, where would you live?’ and ‘As a shop mannequin, you stand in {BLANK} department’. This lady was definitely in the make-up department.

Rachel didn’t like it, but Sim said it was obviously all part of Atticus Spiel’s mystique. I loved it when he used words like that, and made a mental note to say it next time I was talking to someone and he wasn’t around. *Mystique*. Ooh yeah.

If one man had it in spades, it was Atticus Spiel.

Atticus Spiel.

‘Do you think Atticus likes red beans?’ Ina chirped, from Rachel’s arms.

‘He’s too busy running the park to eat beans,’ I said.

‘When do we say hello to him?’

‘He’s too busy running the park to say hello.’

Atticus Spiel.

The name alone made me shiver.

Inside one year he had become Sweden's highest paid tech baron. Inside two, Europe's. Three, and he had transformed into this sort of Willy Wonka figure, a mysterious Richard Branson ruling over an empire and with the park as its citadel.

Sim had scoured Google, but couldn't find anything very interesting. Either Atticus Spiel was the most loving, philanthropic multi-billionaire the world had ever known, or his Wikipedia page was all lies.

'They pay people to edit it,' Sim said, as we pawed over his laptop. 'All the good shit's hidden.'

This was not something I would have ever considered, and, as usual when Sim would come stay for the weekend, I suddenly felt stupid and provincial. *Of course they do*, I thought, feeling small. *Of course they do that*. To keep up their *mystique*.

As the ferry continued its slow progress across the languid surface of the Med, the white scoops of foam flecking the endless haze of deep blue, someone on the top deck screamed 'There it is! There it is!'

Sheeple being sheeple, we all legged it to the prow of the stupid thing. And, honestly, it could have been anything: a freight ship or the effing iceberg that sunk the Titanic. But Rachel asked and the deckhand nodded, confirming what we all hoped it would be.

HackLand – The Most Amazing Theme Park in the World.

Sim read that it had been an old sea fort from the Napoleonic era, which they'd expanded. I had looked it up in Rachel's maritime history books, but couldn't find it. Yet, there it was; rising out of the ocean like Atlantis, glistening in the intense white sunlight.

Ina virtually lost her mind, jumping up and down, her red wedding sari going everywhere. Of course all the rich makeup counter mums looked at this. We'd tried to get her to stop wearing it, Rachel even attempting to explain the finer points of cultural appropriation and the British Raj, but Ina would just scream 'NEESHA GAVE IT TO ME! NEESHA GAVE IT TO ME!' Neesha's older sister had got married three weeks ago and, presumably, hadn't yet worked out where her wedding dress had gone.

On this occasion, I didn't even feel embarrassed, despite the scene she was causing, shouting 'WE'RE GOING TO MEET ATTICUS!' as the top of her lungs, dressed as a Bollywood bride. I was too excited tell her off. Even Rachel looked out across the waves, gripping the railings so hard her knuckles went pale greeny-yellow. Her dark hair blew back in the sea spray and I could see all her nerves about the trip were gone for moment, and she was just as excited as us.

As we drew nearer to the island, I started to get a weird *déjà vu* feeling in my stomach and that disorientating dizziness around my eyes like I was going to faint. I get *déjà vu* a lot, and usually I assume it's because of one of my past lives. I read this article online about past lives and, I know it sounds stupid, but I really think I can remember when I was a lady in Queen Elizabeth I's court. Like, I pretty much feel like I'm there sometimes. Obviously I have never told Sim about this. He'd tell me *déjà vu* happens because one eye takes in information a split second before the other, so when you feel like you've seen something before, it's because you have, only less than a moment ago, or something like that, and I just didn't want to feel silly and superstitious again.

Something caught the light for an instant, just left of the island, and I heard myself gasp.

'Pegasus,' Sim said.

He was watching too, but more intently than me. He got this solid, factual look about his face when he was trying to understand something, which made me feel even more like my head was in the clouds. I was going to ask him what he meant, when I realised: it was the roller coaster!

Atticus Spiel's company, Atlas, had tried to keep everything about HackLand under wraps. Even during construction they had this big security firm patrolling the ocean in high-tech dinghies to see off reporters. It was meant to be this whole big mystery to get us riled up and willing to pay like three hundred smaccaroons for a ticket two years from now.

But the Internet exists, so info spilled out immediately, and, just as quickly, turned into memes that were all over Facebook and Twitter. Sim's favourite was the Swedish PM on a winged horse flying off the roller coaster track with SWEDISH ECONOMY BE LIKE typed underneath it in blocky white capitals. He said these had been leaked

deliberately. I said 'Yeah, obv!', as if it really was obvious, but again, I didn't realise this was the sort of thing people actually did.

I looked at the ticket on my phone again, at the spirals spinning around the castle on the island, then looked back at the real thing. It was all starting to look so similar – that's why I'd felt the *déjà vu*. Sim was right, I could see it now we were closer; metal loops spilled out of the dark edges of the old fortress, and I realised it must be Pegasus – the fastest roller coaster in the world.

It went out across the sea around the island like the rings of Saturn only with waaaaay more loops. TechSnoop.net said Atlas claimed in leaked dossiers that the rider would, 'not only feel they are flying, but *actually* fly!'. That bubbling sense of excitement filled my chest again as I imagined racing out above the ocean, the warm sea breeze turned cold from the velocity.

Stupidly, I looked around the battlements of the fort, to see if a giant hawk or raven sculpture stood proudly over Atticus Spiel's kingdom, but everything was hidden by line upon line of blue and yellow flag. I recognised them as the Swedish flag, which sort of made me laugh, because it was the most un-Swedish thing you've ever seen in your life: a tall, jagged fort appearing to float on the azure waters of southern Europe, with bits of roller coaster sticking out of it.

I just couldn't believe that we were *actually going to be there*. In like twenty minutes. We were doing something the whole world wanted to do, but couldn't – not yet. Us. The Lancasters from Dorset. We had beaten them all to it.

The bird screech went up again.

'Lucky!' Rachel snapped, but this time with a smile.

Chapter Two

Ganymede

OK, I just want to set a few things "straight". I'm trying this new thing where I'm super direct with everyone because I read some 6th century Greek philosophy over summer and if you aren't speaking your truth you aren't being your authentic self. I also saw that on Tumblr.

I'm gay. I'm a gay guy.

That's the first thing.

Rachel and Mike were all like 'OMG our precious Lucky we love you so much we're so proud of you thank you for telling us our precious little boy MWAH MWAH MWAH' and I honestly wish I hadn't told them anything and just continued moping around the house feeling miserable and alone like a normal teenager. Except I didn't feel like that; I felt fine when I was home. It was just going into the rest of the world that was an issue.

The second thing is that, for the record, my name is not 'Lucky'. It's Lucca. Which is not much better, granted, unless of course you're an Italian toddler. But we're 100% small town Brit, so names like mine don't go down well in school.

Almost from birth I had gone from Lucca to Lukey to Lucky. Mike calls me Lucas most of the time, (or sometimes *George Lucas*), but Rachel is a fan of Lucky. Mother's priority I suppose, even if it does make me feel like a Scottish terrier most of the time. Funny names were sort of their thing. ANICIENT CIVILISATION ALERT! Our actual dog is called Lamanai, after the Mayan temple in the north of Belize.

You might be thinking Ina got off lucky (as it were), but think again! Ina is short for Inaliqu, the native name for the Diomedede Islands, two volcanic isles between Siberia and Alaska. So she was sort of right: she wasn't an island, but she *was* two. (2,000 words)

While less than three miles apart, Big Diomedede is Russian, and Little Diomedede is Alaskan. Rachel freaking loved this. She always went on about how it's an amazing metaphor for international relations with special reference to the Cold War *etcetera etcetera*. I'm not super into modern history, but I did like to think about the people who had lived there many thousands of years ago, the families growing up there, what they would have done, what they would have thought.

Despite the names she and Mike chose for us, she was not a good traveller (SEE: quadruple-checking the passports, waking us up SIX HOURS EARLY for a flight from Bournemouth Airport, which is 45 mins drive away). They had always wanted to travel, but never really had the money, so recounted their few trips to France and Mallorca as if they were great voyages across the Caspian Sea or whatever. That's

why they called us our weird names; to conjure up distant lands. And, I suspected, in the hope that one day we would go there and take them.

In reality, Rachel was really too scared to go anywhere outside of Europe. She worried about all sorts of things. Most recently it was terrorism. To listen to her, you might think any Brits automatically imploded as soon as they crossed the line on the map between Europe and THE REST OF THE WORLD. I'm like, 'Rachel, this is what *Donald Trump* wants,' and next thing I knew we were packing our bags to HackLand.

Third thing: I am NOT popular. I'm sure this will come as a surprise to you.

I know this isn't an American teen romcom/thrasher, but this sort of thing is still important when you're sixteen.

I'm weird. I'm the weird kid, and everybody knows it. Even I know it. In films people never seem to know how they come across to others, and this always strikes me as incorrect and a bit insulting.

Yes, I am aware that I wear unfashionable clothes, all different shades of corduroy, and have funny dark, flat hair like an onion. I like it that way because it makes me look sort of like Henry V, who I think is unfairly remembered by history when sources reveal he was actually a very capable and compassionate monarch.

The thing with Thing 3 is: I don't want to be popular. At least, that's what I tell myself. I pretty much hate hanging out with kids my own age. They don't say anything very edifying. All they talk about TV and each other and none of them do anything very fascinating. It's not like they came to the throne at two years and ten months like Puyi, the last emperor of China. *That* would be interesting to hear about.

This is where Sim comes in.

Sim was basically like no one I had ever met before.

To begin with, he's black. He says I can say that not because we're mates but because it's accurate. He says 'white people hate talking about race LOLLOL'.

I'm not going to lie; this made me pretty uncomfortable, being one of the aforementioned white people. But I also effing loved it, because it made me feel like I now knew something no one else in my town knew – there being no other

people of colour around for about 100 miles in any direction (SIDE NOTE: actually not accurate. I'm using hyperbole to make the point that this is what most people in the area probably think).

It also helped that he is about six foot four and 100% the cleverest person I know (this is not hyperbole, but FACT). Intellect and knowledge are two separate things. Anyone can remember a lot of information, but only those truly intelligent individuals know how best to apply it.

Sim was this said individual. He is also one year older than me, which means he's started at sixth form already. I'm starting next month, and already getting excited to not pretend I don't know the answer in lessons any more. Sim said in his sixth form everyone gets really into economics and the Berlin Wall and things and you don't have to pretend to be thick AF just to not get punched. I am, however, sceptical of actually broadening my friendship circle, which he said was 'infinitely likely'.

To be honest, it couldn't get any smaller.

My friendship "circle" is: Rachel, Mike, Ina, Lamanai, Mike and Rachel's library, and Sim every two or three months when he comes down with his mum or stays at ours. Less of a circle, more of a line.

It's a genuine toss-up between the library or Sim, but I think I will have to say that Sim is my 'best' friend, on account of the fact that he is a living mammal with the ability to process and produce speech. Rachel, Mike and Ina don't really count because they are chained to me by biology. I suppose Lamanai could leave, but I always give him dinner, so.

Thing about Sim is he's not the sort of best friend I see a lot. As in, we don't live in the same town. As in, he lives in London and I live 196 miles away in a shitty little town near the south coast. (I'm not going to tell you where exactly because then you'll just Google it and try and find my house or whatever. It's just a normal, kinda cruddy English town. You don't need to know any more, take my word for it.)

So, really, the library is more of a stable friend. It's literally *always there for me*.

But I digress. We're getting to a key bit. More on that later.

About the Writer

Henry Fry has written since he could hold a wax crayon, although now prefers to use the Notes app on his phone instead. He has had almost as many unrelated jobs as he has written unfinished novels: waiter, editor, journalist, copywriter and briefly manager of a crystal shop (ask him about chakras; he knows everything).

In 2016, his first novel, 'Jinks Padlock', was shortlisted for the Penguin Random House WriteNow scheme for BAME, LGBT+, disabled and lower income writers. HackLand is his second novel. He is currently seeking representation for them both.

