The Bookshop Girl is the tale of a girl who can’t read. But even though she can’t read the stories inside books, she likes the stories of the books themselves — how they were made, and where they have been.

At the other end of the scale, her brother likes the smaller stories that you can find inside words. (He would be excellent in a spelling bee.) For example, when his sister is sad about saying goodbye, he tells her that “goodbye” is just short for “God be with you” — which is not so bad.

Once you start to learn about these stories-in-words, you see them everywhere. Take “disaster”: aster is Latin for stars, so in a disaster the stars have gone Very Wrong. Or “nightmare”: a mare is the Germanic word for an evil spirit, sitting on your chest as you sleep. Creepy.

“Muscle” comes from the Latin for little mouse, because of muscles looking like little mice under the skin. Maybe don’t think too hard about that image. It’s not as bad as “decimate,” which comes from the Roman custom of killing one in every ten people in a rebel group to really show them who was boss — decem is Latin for ten. Look, I said there were stories inside words; I didn’t promise they would be nice ones.

Ok, fine, here’s a more cheerful one: “helicopter” is from the Greek for spiral (helix) and wing (pteron). When a noisy helicopter is juddering overhead, I like to think of it as a spiral-wing. It sounds like something from a fantasy novel. Much less annoying.

So next time you’re reading a story made up of words, don’t forget that there are even more stories inside the words. It can make you feel a bit overwhelmed. (Whelmen is Old English for “to turn upside down”. So now I’m thoroughly over-upside-downed thinking about that. See what I mean?).

Happy reading,
Sylvia Bishop