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Here is a new set of short, quick read stories designed to notch up serial, confidence-boosting titles on reluctant teens' reading gun belts. Appealing packaging, accessible language and no patronising illustrations ought to make them easy to promote.

There are two historical titles. **Plague** takes us back to the Great Plague of 1665, when medicine was in its infancy and relied as much on superstition as science. Henry is an apothecary's apprentice in the forefront of the fight against the fatal disease that is striking down his family and neighbours. Then, even for him, escape from the city seems like the only answer. The tale is full of historical detail but doesn't become weighed down by it and Henry's plight is central. The final Author's note is most helpful.

Treachery by Night lays out the basic facts about the bloody Glencoe massacre, focusing on Conn Macdonald who has a deformed arm. Conn overcomes clan prejudice, teaches himself to handle a sword and so takes his full place in the struggle against the perceived aggressors. He emerges a local hero, of course! Difficult history to simplify, but a flavour of the struggle and times is ably conveyed within the strictures of house style and intended audience.

There are two mystery and suspense titles. 'Always be kind to strangers, because you might be in the presence of angels' is the core theme in **The Messenger**. Around Christmas time our hero Chris sets out on his motorbike on an eventful journey across a snowbound moor of 100 years ago. The people he thinks he is meeting are all dead, formerly good people who seem to be offering lots of prescient advice in order to help him to ward off death. No wonder he gets very confused. The intriguing layers and slow revelations, packaged in shameless symbolism, make this an engaging read that transcends into reading for style and meaning as well as story.

Nightmare Park is a reworking of the 'sell your soul to the devil' story. Bullied Ben has a miserable life and a chance encounter at a fairground sideshow leads him to believe that his dreams could come true, his life the reverse of the reality. There is a price of course and not until too late does he realise the implications of what he has agreed to on not only himself but also his family. Here's a nightmare he hadn't bargained for. There's a good sense of menace and threatening atmosphere to this tale, which well serves the climactic ending and moral outcome. A good platform for exploring similar stories.

The next three will appeal mainly to girls. In **Tears of a Friend**, in the joined-at-the-hip, girlie partnership of Cassie and Claire, the former is the one in the shadow of Miss Perfect. Then the frump turns. Of course the impact on their friendship is seismic and bitter. However, the real trauma comes when Claire is near raped and needs her former, plain little friend to administer the metaphorical smelling salts. Modern teen life with its angst and insecurities is realistically explored. For many young ladies this'll be as good as reality TV.

Charlie in **Cry Baby** isn't exactly raped, more taken advantage of whilst intoxicated at a party. The fear and emotional toll of deciding how to deal with her predicament and with the reactions of parents, family and friends is told in a diary form that serves the theme well. There is a level-headed and unpreachy informativeness about this title, which I admire.

Fighting Back is a thought provoking tale, exploring aspects of prejudice against others in various forms and the grief and hurt that always come in its wake. Amita and her family have moved to live with an uncle in Southampton after a racist attack on their shop by football hooligans. The racism in and out of school hasn't ceased however, and, worse still, her father is now more racist himself, which restricts his daughter's free association with her new white friends. 'Whatever you think, it's not just about race. It's being different. Some people just can't cope with that.' This one would serve a good turn in PHSE lessons.

Doing the Double is a mainly for boys' title. Twins Dale and Joe are the sons of a footballing hero, who has fallen from grace, mainly through booze. They have inherited their father's skill with a ball and have that twin telepathy thing but Joe's in total denial since his dad walked out of their lives. Then Dale desperately needs Joe to be his double for an important match. They've played that trick for fun but this time it's for real and Joe isn't sure he can go through with the deception. The outcome is a bit too convenient, but as a basic study of duty and fair play this is worth promoting. The match descriptions might need a bit of teacher intervention to make the fullest impact with hesitant readers.

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