



Independence day

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[220](#) [2]

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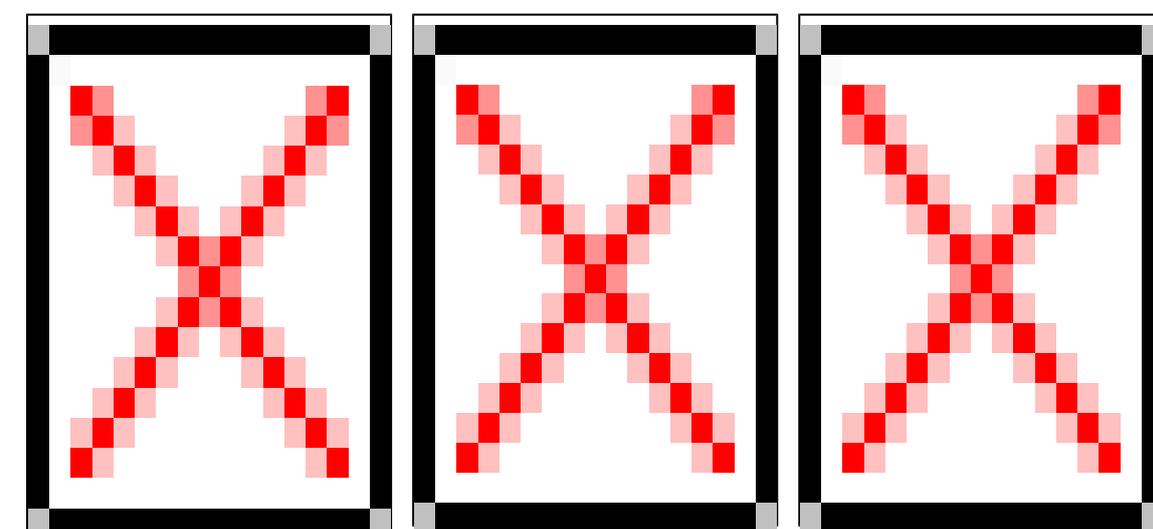
Imogen Russell Williams on books for independent readers

Imogen Russell Williams on the best new books for independent readers.

I have distinct and powerful memories of the first books I chose and read independently; in fact, I think they are all buried somewhere strata-deep in my brain ? waiting, like King Arthur, for the moment when their time comes again.

There is a LOT of Enid Blyton inhumed there. I was especially fond of the **Mystery** books, starring the Five Find-Outers (and Dog) ? Fatty, in particular, with his limitless pocket-money, inflated sense of self-worth, kind heart and unbounded cheek, was a proto-crush from an early age. I also appreciated Blyton?s plethora of how-tos: how to walk out of a locked room, write in invisible ink, send a coded message at short notice, train a dog, annoy an officious policeman. The strongest message I picked up from these books, though, was that children were *competent* ? they possessed agency, sharp eyes and wit, and, given sufficient freedom (in a never-never world of absent parents, camping trips and all-day bike rides to neighbouring towns), they could deploy all of these to solve cases which had the grown-ups foxed. They don?t necessarily leap to my mind as recommendations for today ? snobbery, casual racism and a pervasive idea of girls as second-best all stand out sharply to me as an adult re-reader ? but I still value the sense of possibility and excitement they imparted, and their page-turning, welcoming ease of reading.

For magic, mishaps and boarding school stories, I also remember Jill Murphy ? [The Worst Witch](#) [3] books, with Murphy?s own superb pen-and-ink illustrations, all trailing bootlaces and untidy plaits, gave me a window onto a black and-white world of awkwardness, failure and enchantment (and also led me to steal the garden broom and tie a toy cat to it, determined that one day I, too, would fly.) And, for surreal, strange, amoral and grisly wildness, there were, of course, the books of Roald Dahl.



Today?s newly independent readers, however, are pretty spoilt, too. A new dawn for illustration has allowed sophisticated images, like those in Chris Riddell?s phenomenally popular **Ottoline** series, to become par for the course, even for the youngest readers. And, as in the Blytons and Dahls I remember, there is no shortage of resourceful and

independent child protagonists. Ottoline herself, in the absence of her explorer parents, is tended to by a Cousin It-ish little creature called Mr Munroe, and a plethora of outside agencies, such as McBean's Cleaning Service and The Home-cooked Meal Co. Her mother communicates via terse but affectionate postcards; her father only via her mother; but Ottoline is never presented as lonely or pitiable. Instead, she applies herself intently to the solution of mysteries, from burglarious lapdogs to school-haunting ghosts, with the help of her Diploma in Disguise and facility for eavesdropping. I'm very much looking forward to the fourth book, **Ottoline and the Purple Fox**.

There's emotional heft in Philip Reeve and Sarah McIntyre's fruitful partnership, too. Notwithstanding the surreal, madcap quality of their set-ups – sea-wig contests, carnivorous cakes about spaceships, and sled-dog races involving 66 pugs – these books are clever, artistic, moving and original, always putting children at the centre of the action. Their latest, **Jinks and O'Hare Funfair Repair**, features Emily, another strong-willed heroine, who is determined to be allowed to help fix rides on her home satellite, Funfair Moon; funny and fast-paced as ever, it should satisfy long-standing fans and newcomers alike.

More high-faluting and dreamy, for the child reader who likes hypnotic, transporting magic, [Harper and the Scarlet Umbrella](#) [4] is the first in a series by dynamite duo Cerrie Burnell (of CBeebies fame) and illustrator Laura Ellen Anderson. Set in the City of Clouds, a magical city full of music in which cats are mysteriously vanishing, it features Harper and her brave, talented gang of friends as they head to the rescue (including visually impaired Nate and his beautiful, dangerous-seeming wolf.) Claire Barker's [Knitbone Pepper, Ghost Dog](#) [5] is also the first in an intriguing series, brought to sumptuous life by Ross Collins' delicate blue-tinged illustrations. The undying love between a girl and her dog will bring a lump to the throat – while the lunatic cavortings of the aristocratic hat-obsessed senior Peppers will bring on undignified snorts of laughter.

For young readers who need a little less text to get them started, Alex Milway's [Pigsticks and Harold](#) [6] books are irresistibly crammed with comic-book speech-bubble elements and outrageous visual puns, ideal for those who like their humour raucous and deliciously silly. Similarly, the **Stinkbomb and Ketchupface** books, by John Dougherty and David Tazzyman, are a sheer delight; on the island of Great Kerfuffle, badgers are bad, porcupines prickly and pizzas problematic, and it's up to the eponymous brother and sister team to set them right. And Chris Mould's Borrower-sized **Pocket Pirates** should induce considerable chortling, not just among the young – when cabin-boy Button falls into a sewer in **The Great Drain Escape**, his realisation that the 'big brown *pirate ship*' bearing down on him is in fact a giant poo caused me to splutter coffee down my sweater.

If you prefer your humour a little less slapdash and scatological, though, Clara Vulliamy's gentle, perky, utterly enticing illustration stands out in two animal-focused series – the **Dixie O'Day** books, written by Clara's mother, the superlative Shirley Hughes, and **Mango and Bambang**, about one girl and her tapir best friend in the Very Big City, authored with aplomb by Polly Faber. Dixie and his pal Percy race their beloved car from Didsworth to Dodsworth, take to the skies, encounter a gently creepy hauntedhouse, and dodge the annoyances of Louella, their next-door-neighbour, who likes new cars, sneery comments and cheating – a perfect series of first chapter books. Clever Mango, meanwhile, has her work cut out helping Bambang avoid the pitfalls of urban life, despite his gently rotund bulk and his propensity to panic at inopportune moments.

When my daughter is reading independently, I'll try not to proffer my old favourites too vigorously. I'd like her to enjoy the haplessness of Mildred Hubble, and I'm sure she'll happen across Matilda, Charlie, George and the rest. But she and her peers deserve to sift happily through the newest riches on offer – many of which are more diverse, appealing and suited to today's kids than the late greats who consistently top nostalgic opinion polls.

Imogen Russell Williams is a journalist and editorial consultant specialising in children's literature and YA.

Ottoline and the Purple Fox, Chris Riddell, Macmillan Children's Books, 978- 1-4472-7792-7, £10.99 hbk

Jinks and O'Hare Funfair Repair, Philip Reeve and Sarah McIntyre, Oxford Children's Books, 978-0-1927-3458-7, £8.99 hbk

Harper and the Scarlet Umbrella, Cerrie Burnell, illus Laura Ellen Anderson, Scholastic, 978-1-4071-6217-1, £5.99 pbk

Knitbone Pepper, Ghost Dog series, Claire Barker, illus Ross Collins, Usborne Publishing Ltd

Pigsticks and Harold series, Alex Milway, Walker Books

Stinkbomb and Ketchupface series, John Dougherty, illus David Tazzyman, Oxford Children's Books

Pocket Pirates series Chris Mould, Hodder Children's Books,

Mango and Bambang series, Polly Faber, illus Clara Vulliamy, Walker Books

Dixie O'Day series, Shirley Hughes, illus Clara Vulliamy, Red Fox Books

Page Number:

15

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[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/imogen-russell-williams>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/220>

[3] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/136/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-no136-jill-murphy>

[4] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/215/childrens-books/reviews/harper-and-the-scarlet-umbrella>

[5] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/218/childrens-books/reviews/knitbone-pepper-ghost-dog-and-the-last-circus-tiger>

[6] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/206/childrens-books/reviews/pigsticks-and-harold-and-the-incredible-journey>