



Lia's
Guide to
Winning
the
Lottery



Keren
David

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

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CONTENTS

July 2011

2 Editorial

3 BfK's Brilliant Bookshops

Marilyn Brocklehurst on the Norfolk Children's Book Centre

4 Children's and Young Adult Fiction and the 'war on terror'

Alan Gibbons on how children's writers have responded.

6 The Impact of Reading on Career Prospects

Mark Taylor explains his research findings.

8 The New Children's Laureate: Julia Donaldson

Nicholas Tucker finds out her plans.

10 Ten of the Best: Children's Books about Disability

Rebecca Butler chooses her top ten.

12 Windows into Illustration

Nicola Killen on how she went about illustrating *Not Me!*

14 Authorgraph No.189

Beatrix Potter is assessed by Judy Taylor.

16 Briefing

Awards, news; obituary

17 Hal's Reading Diary

Roger Mills on soporific bedtime reading.

17 I Wish I'd Written...

Siobhán Parkinson chooses Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls*.

18 Good Reads

Reviews from the Carnegie Shadowing Group, Fortismere School, London.

19 REVIEWS

Index of Titles and Star Ratings 19

Under 5s (Pre-School/Nursery/Infant) 20

+ Editor's Choice 21

5-8 (Infant/Junior) 21

8-10 (Junior/Middle 23

10-14 (Middle/Secondary) 26

14+ (Secondary/Adult) 29

+ New Talent 29

32 Classics in Short No. 88

Brian Alderson on Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*.

COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from *Lia's Guide to Winning the Lottery* by Keren David. Thanks to Frances Lincoln for their support for this July cover. www.liasguidetowinningthelottery.co.uk



editorial

In his rousing acceptance speech for the CILIP Carnegie Medal 2011, Patrick Ness pointed out the breathtaking hypocrisy of a government whose Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries, Ed Vaizey, can talk at the inauguration ceremony for the new Children's Laureate of his passion for libraries and concern at their closures even as libraries around the country are being closed and 'where they're not being closed, their hours are being shortened, their staffs reduced, their services limited...Libraries are not facing crisis, they are in crisis.' Ness continued: 'If Ed Vaizey is passionate about libraries and his government is working behind the scenes to save them then that must be the best kept secret in the country.'

Ness also pointed out that our Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, while stating that children should be reading 50 books a year and bemoaning the fact that three out of every 10 children don't own a book 'yet fails utterly to see the irony of how closing libraries will affect not only the three who don't, but the seven who do and who would like to read more and more and more'.

Meanwhile, yet more research evidence for the importance of storytelling, of early intervention to help children who struggle with reading and of the benefits of reading for pleasure has recently been published.

The Institute for Social and Economic Research researched the impact of sharing stories with pre-school children and found that daily storytime sessions significantly improve children's cognitive skills and reduce socio-emotional difficulties by the age of five. Researcher Yvonne Kelly found that 'the strongest predictor of childhood development was reading to children on a daily basis'.

Research undertaken by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) in collaboration with the National Centre for Social Research assessed the impact of the Every Child a Reader programme and found that it 'significantly improved' reading and writing skills. The programme targeted low-attaining six and seven-year-olds, providing compulsory one-to-one tuition to boost literacy among

struggling pupils. (Michael Gove removed the ringfencing around Every Child a Reader funding last year provoking fears that such tuition will now be a 'lottery'.)

Ofsted's latest report Excellence in English found that schools need to encourage reading for fun to achieve high standards in English. It states: 'Schools that take the business of reading for pleasure seriously, where teachers read, talk with enthusiasm and recommend books, and where provision for reading is planned carefully, are more likely to succeed with their pupils' reading.'

And in this issue of **BfK**, Mark Taylor of Nuffield College, Oxford, explains his innovative research on the link between reading books and better career prospects. He found that the 16-year-olds who read books at least once a month were significantly more likely to be in a managerial or professional job at 33 than those who did not read books at all.

But where, as Patrick Ness also pointed out in his Carnegie Medal acceptance speech, will children (and their parents) obtain the books that they need when libraries and library services are being decimated. As he says, 'Here is a government that shouts so loudly that it wants young people to read, while at the same time cutting the very things that have proven, time and time again, to do just that.'

The CILIP Carnegie Shadowing Scheme

'Good Reads' in this issue of **BfK** are from the Carnegie Shadowing Group at Fortismere School, one of the hundreds of Carnegie Shadowing Groups round the country – evidence in themselves of young readers' enthusiasm for and pleasure in reading.

Rosemary

Rosemary Stones,
Editor



Books for Keeps

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BfK's Brilliant Children's Bookshops



How do children's bookshops help to make children into keen readers? Lots of wonderful books and friendly, knowledgeable staff are of course essential but the best children's bookshops also offer something different and special. In the first of a new series on these very individual emporiums, **Books for Keeps** invited **Marilyn Brocklehurst** to describe a day in the life of the Norfolk Children's Book Centre which she set up in her garden in rural North Norfolk nearly 25 years ago.



Last night there were six young stags outside the Norfolk Children's Book Centre. No kidding! Of course children don't come here for the stags, or the cats curled up on the lumpy settee, or the biscuit tin on the table, or the array of messages written on the walls by the likes of Jacqueline Wilson, Darren Shan and Susan Cooper, but these elements all make for a wonderful experience.

Once children have persuaded grannies, mums and dads, teachers, librarians to bring them down the lane to our secluded shop built in our North Norfolk garden what do they look for? There are the usual queries 'You haven't got..?', 'I don't suppose you have...' and we usually do. The popular books are all there shelved alongside a wealth of lesser known titles we hope our customers will discover.

The familiar is pounced on - Wally, Dahl, Horrid Henry, Charlie and Lola, Harry, Mr Gum and Percy Jackson - and then WE pounce (a subtle pounce of course!). 'Have you seen this?' (The latest Emily Gravett.) 'This is REALLY good!' (**The Knife of Never Letting Go**.) 'We love these brilliant books, but ignore the cover - it might put you off!' (**The 10pm Question; The Worry Tree; Lob; Tuck Everlasting; Charlotte Sometimes**). 'If you like funny stuff you MIGHT want to try...' (**Cosmic**; David Walliams.) 'Only read this if you like a really good weep.' (**Secret Friends; A Monster Calls**.)

Meanwhile parents are hunting out and rediscovering their old favourites - Teddy Robinson, **My Naughty Little Sister**, Uncle - and 'that one where the rabbit dies - might have had a yellow cover'!

A 20 mile drive for Sharon Creech

Here's what happened yesterday. A London dad drove 20 miles from his holiday cottage in Winterton with his daughter. 'You gave her Sharon Creech last time - are there more?' I oblige and add Hilary McKay and **Journey to the River Sea**. A parent arrives MINUS 14-year-old son whom she had described during their visit the previous day as non-reading. 'He couldn't put

that book down you gave him yesterday. He read all night (**Iboy**). He'll only take your advice now.' She goes away with **Henry Tumour**, **Being** and **Bloodtide**. I cross my fingers!

A pony-mad girl trots in through the door. What relief - we have some excellent new pony books. I give her **Nobody's Horse** and **Paradise House** and tell her about **Samphire Song**.

A distraught Alex Rider fan shambles in - it CAN'T be the end of the series! We give him **Timeriders**, **Hive** and **Boy Soldier** and a couple of Jimmy Coates..

A desperate Mr Gum fan - any more Gum? We tell him about **Mr Gum in the Hound of Lamonic Bibber** coming soon with masses of David Tazzyman illustrations and he goes off with **Muncle Trogg** and a clutch of other giggly stuff.

A parent comes in: 'His teacher sent us. He's not much of a reader. He struggles. He hates books.' We sit down for a chat and a coffee. While the boy eats the entire contents of the biscuit tin and strokes Cato until a paw-swipe tells him enough is enough, I hunt out some Pete Johnson thrillers, **The Chicken Gave it to Me**, a variety of Barrington Stokes, a Tony Bradman horror. I chat to the mum about sharing, reading aloud until they are at least 14, pleasure, positive encouragement and praise.

And the best customer: 'Recommend me something - I haven't a clue!' Here's a chance to introduce wonderful stuff - **One Dog and his Boy**, **Love Aubrey**, **Powder Monkey**, **Gatty's Tale**, **Goggle Eyes**, **The London Eye Mystery**, **How I Live Now** - bliss!

Our bookshop, along with many other independents like us, doesn't focus on new titles - they are simply assimilated into the stock. We have no tables with this month's best-sellers, special offers or piles of the latest Cherub. Our customers aren't looking for the latest and they rarely ask us for series titles - they can pick those up in supermarkets and in the High Street. They come to us for good advice, and they trust us.

Asked about trends, passions, classics etc, I think it's difficult to say. The child who drops in for the latest 'Skulduggery Pleasant' might discover **Bartimaeus**. The ageing Harry Potter fan leaves with **A Wizard of Earthsea**. Yes, we sell our share of Wimpy Kids, Jacqueline Wilson, Michael Morpurgo, Gruffalos and **The Very Hungry Caterpillar**, but we are determined that our visitors should have the opportunity to discover treasures while they are here. Children are very author/series loyal, but you're not a child for very long. It would be sad to grow up without discovering Shaun Tan, Diana Wynne Jones, Sharon Creech, Kevin Brooks, Philip Reeve and the rest. We're doing our bit! ■



Marilyn Brocklehurst is a qualified children's and schools' librarian.

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website: www.ncbc.co.uk

A complete list of the books recommended by Marilyn can be found on the website.

Children's and Young Adult Fiction and the 'war on terror'

In response to the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001, US President George Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair launched their 'war on terror'. Ten years on, how have children's novelists responded to these political events and the climate they have created? **Alan Gibbons** explores.

In a recent article in **The Observer** novelist Graham Swift argued that 'the proper medium for what is of now is not the novel but journalism'. Few would argue. A novel that tries too hard to be 'up to date' and 'relevant' is likely to fail. Particularly in the age of 24-hour news a novel can never capture day-to-day reality in the same way, nor should it attempt to do so. As Swift himself comments, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* was written some fifty years after the conflict it describes. A novel is not reportage. Swift then goes on to qualify his comments:

'(Novels are) there to take the long view, to show change and evolution, human behaviour worked on by time. But none of this means that novels, which can never be strictly of now, cannot have their own kind of "nowness" or have something which actually out-thrills the thrill of the merely contemporary. They can have immediacy.'

This immediacy is what I intend to explore in my examination of recent responses in children's literature to the background of the 'war on terror' launched by George Bush and Tony Blair in response to the attacks on the Twin Towers on September 11th, 2001.

Dealing directly with terror

Every novelist has a different 'take' on the relationship between their narratives and characters and the social and historical context in which they unfold. The echoes of the Napoleonic Wars barely feature in the work of Jane Austen whereas the Luddites form an important part of the backdrop of Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*. Neither approach is of itself superior, merely different and difference is one of the positive aspects of literature, the almost limitless interpretations individual writers make of the world around them.

In common with most of my work, my latest novel **An Act of Love** deals very directly with the events of the war on terror. It opens with eighteen-year-old soldier Chris Hook standing on a parade ground in his native Yorkshire. His phone buzzes and there is a text from his childhood friend Imran Hussain. The message is as simple as it is chilling:

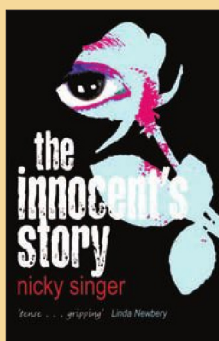
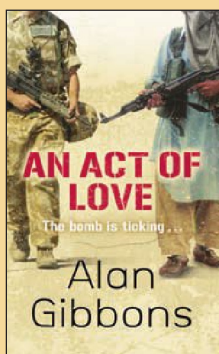
'There's a bomb.'

The novel then alternates between the pair's present



(Photo by Neil Kendall)

Twice shortlisted for the **Carnegie Medal**, Alan Gibbons is the winner of **The Blue Peter Book Award 2000** 'the book I couldn't put down' for **Shadow of the Minotaur**. He is the founder of the **Campaign for the Book**.



day attempts to thwart the suicide bomber who is waiting somewhere in the barracks to detonate an explosive vest and the events from the start of the millennium onwards which brought the two boys to this moment. I hope I have steered well clear of the danger of writing reportage, but the characters do develop in an organic relationship with the epochal events changing the world around them. The events of 9/11, the street riots at the start of the decade, the emergence of far right populism, the appearance of extremist groups on the fringe of the Muslim community and the great march against the war in Iraq all feature prominently as does Chris's almost accidental decision to join the Army and serve in Afghanistan.

The novel is firmly set in a realistic tradition. There are elements of the thriller and liberal use of flashbacks. The action ranges from Yorkshire to Helmand and back. I employ both the first and third person and I have multiple narrators. Whether by choice or by instinct – and I suspect it was a mixture of the two – I found myself reflecting the almost kaleidoscopic way most of us develop our understanding of the social and political events that contextualise the smaller dramas of our everyday lives. That interrelationship is at the heart of my book.

If the personal dramas of Chris and Imran were to be authentic, the detail had to be accurate. I conducted interviews with young British Muslims, serving soldiers and read numerous books about terrorism, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the development of what some people called 'political Islam'. But, remembering Swift's warning about reportage, the research had to supplement the narrative and give it authenticity, not overwhelm it. Every writer has their own way of achieving artistic distance from the material with which they are working.

First responses to the 'war on terror'

Nicky Singer does it with what she calls: 'maximum suspension of disbelief'. In one of the first responses to the war on terror, **The Innocent's Story**, her protagonist Cassina is blown to pieces in a suicide bombing. Singer told me: 'I thought I was more likely to find a "truth" in a highly fictionalised world than in a naturalistic one.' This led to another choice – to invent the religion followed by the bombers in the story. Singer said: 'The other advantage of an invented religion is that you can draw parallels. My religion has an equivalent of "jihad" but only to make it clear that, far from being exclusively associated with "holy war"...the predominant meaning...(is to)...get closer to god by overcoming bad desires.'

The Innocent's Story was originally judged 'too political' for publication in America, but won well-deserved acclaim for, in one critic's words: 'raising questions of faith, loyalty and responsibility'. Singer's treatment of the raw material of the war on terror is about as different to mine as it is possible to imagine. It is also triumphantly successful. She has achieved 'nowness',

eschewing the naturalistic and concentrating on universal themes.

Mixing it by Rosemary Hayes introduces us to Fatimah, a 'good girl', a devout Muslim who is caught in an explosion that kills her best friend Aisha. The second central character Steve is caught up in the same explosion. Hayes tempts the reader with the idea of a Romeo and Juliet treatment that has appeared in several YA treatments of conflict, but does not make it the major focus. It remains no more than a teasing possibility.

After the bombing the press frames the story in a way that makes it look as if Fatimah had a white, non Muslim boyfriend and tended to him in preference to her Muslim friend, Aisha. This leads to both Fatimah and Steve finding themselves the victims of verbal abuse and worse. The novel, more naturalistic in its treatment of the material than Singer's, is a convincing, honest and satisfying read. It is very carefully plotted, driving towards a conclusion that genuinely takes the reader by surprise.

Annabel Pitcher's first novel **My sister lives on the mantelpiece** has been longlisted for the **Guardian Children's Book Prize**. It has a stunning opening: 'My sister Rose lives on the mantelpiece. Well, some of her does. Three of her fingers, her right elbow and her kneecap are buried in a graveyard in London.'

Pitcher told me that the subject matter, a child killed in a bombing reminiscent of July 7th, caused the first agent to call the novel 'commercially disastrous'. Fortunately, the second agent showed a better appreciation of the book's value. Pitcher's main character Jamie starts a new school where he has to sit next to Sunya, a Muslim girl. Because of what happened to his sister he feels very uncomfortable.

I asked Pitcher why she set the book in the Lake District. She told me: 'I wanted to create the sense that Jamie is cut off from any source of support, both physically and emotionally. Second, I wanted to create a sense of irony: the father leaves London to get away from Muslims but ends up more personally affected by a Muslim family in an area that has one of the smallest Islamic populations in the UK. Finally, it was essential that Sunya and her family were different and individual. I didn't want to create a stereotype. That's why Sunya's mother is a vet and the family owns a dog. Both are traditionally frowned upon in the Islamic faith.'

This is a story on an intimate human scale, affected by the war on terror but not trying to delineate it in any historical form. What attracts Pitcher is the detail of every day life and she communicates it beautifully.

The impact of wider forces

Anna Perera's **Guantanamo Boy** is faster-paced and more directly concerned with the impact of wider forces on her protagonist Khalid's life. Perera told me: 'After 9/11 the world seemed out of control.' She drew on her own mixed-race background to understand Khalid: 'The fact he's a Muslim is both relevant and irrelevant at the same time', relevant in that he is drawn into the nightmare of Guantanamo in spite of his innocence, irrelevant in that he is an everyman character with whom we can easily empathise. In dealing with such controversial material Perera found that 'the artistic pressure came first. I did masses of research but my main objective was to create believable characters and dramatic scenes'. She manages it with panache, exposing great injustice through the prism of one young

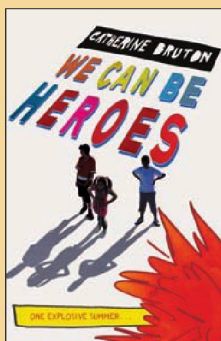
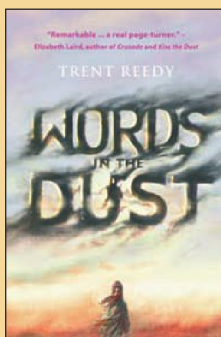
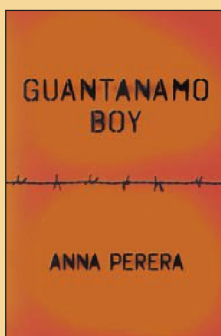
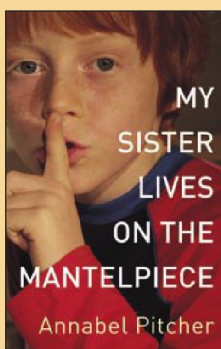
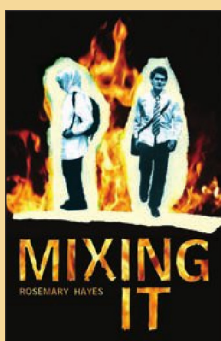
man's experiences.

Two debut novels complete my selection. Trent Reedy's **Words in the Dust**, published in the UK this autumn, tells the story of Zulaikha growing up in Afghanistan. She has a cleft lip. The village boys mock her cruelly and call her Donkeyface. Her mother is dead, executed by the Taliban for possessing books. Her beloved sister is married off with catastrophic consequences. This is a harrowing tale of adversity and aspiration.

Trent Reedy found himself in Afghanistan as a member of the Iowa National Guard and the novel emerged from his experiences guarding reconstruction efforts. This is a very accomplished piece of work, poetic and emotive, with a considerable empathy for the female characters who are realised with great delicacy.

Catherine Bruton's **We Can Be Heroes** is an astonishing, inventive, almost playful treatment of a blizzard of issues: honour killing, terrorism, far right extremism, racism, forced marriage, a race riot, a child disappearance. It is a mark of the author's skill that they never become a morass of issues. They never overwhelm the story. The protagonist Ben's father was killed in the 9/11 attacks. He meets Priti, a Muslim girl with a Hindu name. Employing a faux naïf tone, Bruton tells a big story with astonishing gusto and control. It is structured around a series of questions posed by Ben at the end of each section, reflecting on what has happened. In a way Bruton uses some of the techniques you might expect from a Paula Danziger or a Louise Rennison to frame her responses to a frightening world. I felt there was occasional inconsistency in the narrative voice, but that is a very minor criticism. This is a book that deals with serious issues in an endearing, humorous way. It is a remarkable piece of work.

All the writers discussed have tried to give imaginative coherence to the swirling unrealities and deceptions of the war on terror. It is for our readers to decide whether we have succeeded. ■



Books discussed

An Act of Love

by Alan Gibbons
(Orion, 978 1 8425 5782 2, £8.99 pbk)

The Innocent's Story

by Nicky Singer
(Oxford, 978 0 1927 2617 9, £5.99 pbk)

Mixing it by Rosemary Hayes

(Frances Lincoln, 978 1 8450 7495 1, £5.99 pbk)

My sister lives on the mantelpiece

by Annabel Pitcher
(Indigo, 978 1 7806 2029 9, £6.99 pbk)

Guantanamo Boy by Anna Perera

(Puffin, 978 0 1413 2607 8, £6.99 pbk)

Words in the Dust

by Trent Reedy
(Frances Lincoln, 978 1 8478 0271 2, £6.99 pbk)

We Can Be Heroes

by Catherine Bruton
(Egmont, 978 1 4052 5652 0, £6.99 pbk)

The **IMPACT** of Reading on Career Prospects

Reading books is the only out-of-school activity for 16-year-olds linked to better career prospects, discovered sociologist Mark Taylor. Taylor analysed 17,200 questionnaire responses from people born in 1970 who gave details of their extra-curricular activities at the age of 16 and their careers at the age of 33 and found that the 16-year-olds who read books at least once a month were significantly more likely to be in a managerial or professional job at 33 than those who did not read books at all. **Mark Taylor** explains.

Sociologists have been thinking about reading for pleasure for years and years. We're interested in the extent to which parents reading to their kids contributes to the children's development: not only what it means for their vocabulary and their confidence in speaking, but also their social development. We're interested in kids who are capable readers, who read voraciously when they're younger but often stop by the time they become teenagers - and why this disproportionately affects boys. We're interested in whether it makes more sense to think about reading for pleasure in terms of how much time people spend reading, or how many books they have in their household, or how often they go to the library, or how much they talk to their friends about what they've been reading, or something else. And we're interested in what we actually think of as reading for pleasure: novels, sure, but poetry? Drama? Newspapers? Magazines? Whatever they can pick up online? And so on.

The impact of reading for pleasure

My research, which is firmly in this tradition, didn't fall out of the sky - I couldn't have investigated reading for pleasure without this sort of background. But most of the research I've alluded to followed the normal pattern of academia: people spent time working on different projects, presented it at academic conferences, published it in academic journals, hopefully as many people as possible would take it in and take action based on it. When I presented my research, which forms part of my PhD thesis, at the British Sociological Association's conference in London in April, I had a couple of journalists ring me up, which turned into coverage in five national papers, a slot on the Today Programme and the World Service, and eventually various international newspapers and agencies, reporting, variously, that if you don't read books when you're a teenager, you might as well give up on ever getting a job.

So what am I claiming? In brief, I'm saying that not only is reading for pleasure associated with a significantly improved probability of going to university, it's also associated with a higher probability of entering a professional or managerial job.

Firstly, I should explain how I've done this. In Britain, we're very lucky to have a few excellent cohort studies. What this means is that, for a given week, every parent giving birth in a British hospital is asked if they'd be happy for their child to be part of a study. We find out a number of things about them - birth weight, where they live, some facts and figures about their parents. We then come back and find out some things about the kids, their families, and their schools,

when they're 5, 11, and 16, but we keep following them into adulthood: we learn about their medical history, whether they've got married, what kind of job they're doing, whether they've got kids, and so on.

Significant results?

Using a cohort born in 1970, I've investigated whether reading at 16 is associated with more education at 23, and a managerial or professional job at 33. It turns out, in both cases, it is. For readers with an otherwise average profile, the probability of attending university rises from 23% to 32% for men and from 19% to 28% for women, and the probability of getting a professional or managerial job rises from 48% to 58% for men and from 26% to 39% for women.

How significant are these results? We can compare them to other things we think are important, such as their parents' class position. In the previous example, the kids' parents did what we call routine non-manual jobs - so they might have been shop assistants, administrators, and so on. We can compare them to kids whose parents were professional or managerial - a doctor or a CEO - and we find that the probability of a non-reader going to university rises from 0.24 to 0.40 for men, and from 0.19 to 0.38 for women.

I'm not just comparing groups of readers with non-readers, though. It's no surprise that readers are more likely to have rich parents than non-readers, nor is it a surprise that rich parents end up having rich kids. So we control for a variety of things that we think are relevant: parents' jobs, reading ability (measured by the people running the study, not by teachers), school type, and sex. For job type, we also control for education.

Taking the long view

What's interesting about this research? At the start of this article is a list of things that sociologists have investigated with reference to reading for pleasure: this sort of research isn't brand new. What I've been able to do, though, is look at a longer view. Normally, you can only look at people's reading habits and other aspects of their lives at about the same time, or with only a few years between measurement; here, you're able to see what the effects of reading for pleasure are much further down the line. However, we're also very lucky in terms of being able to compare reading for pleasure with other activities. We've also got information on some of the other things that these kids are doing for fun when they were 16, and how they affect these same outcomes. We're interested in this because we often hear that reading for pleasure is special: that the effects of reading for pleasure are substantively different from the effects of other teenage leisure activities.

I broke down the other teenage activities in two different ways. The first was to think about activities in terms of genre: this involved breaking things down into sports, computers and gaming, craft, reading, high culture, and media at home (watching TV, listening to records, and so on). Doing this demonstrated some interesting results: we found that participating in lots of high culture, rather than just a bit, made the biggest difference in educational attainment, but didn't make any difference in what kind of job people ended up in. Playing sport was a similar story, although the effect wasn't as big.

When we broke things down differently, we compared directed and undirected activity. A directed activity is something you have to make an effort to participate in: this might be going to a dance class, or going to the theatre, or going to a craft group after school. By contrast, an undirected activity you can think of as killing time: hanging out on the street came up particularly frequently. The results from this were similar: doing highbrow directed activity was associated with more education, doing more undirected activity was associated with less (but only for women), but only reading had effects that persisted beyond educational attainment.

One way to think about this is to consider what education actually gets you. Maybe kids who go to the theatre, or play a musical instrument, are more likely to look impressive when they're applying to university. When you look at people with degrees, though, you might not be interested in what they did beforehand: once you get to the level playing field of having a degree, what got you there wasn't important. Kids who read for pleasure, though, might have got something that wasn't only superficially attractive. Alternatively, maybe reading for pleasure is superficially attractive in the longer term: what you get from reading that impresses people doesn't only impress university admissions officers.

What is 'reading for pleasure'?

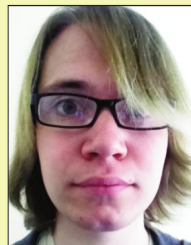
That's the content of the original research paper, but it obviously raises a number of questions. Firstly, what does 'reading for pleasure' mean, and how is it different from 'reading'? I'm talking about books, not magazines or newspapers or comics, but not limiting 'books' to fiction. I'm also excluding any reading that might be required by school, even if the kids happen to enjoy the books on the syllabus. This is particularly important for boys, as a number of boys might be good at reading, and even enjoy it, but wouldn't do it out of choice.

The kind of books the kids are reading seems like it should be important. Not all books are the same: you'd assume that the kids reading Tolstoy are going to have different outcomes from those of the kids reading Mills & Boon (they're reading books in 1986, remember!). The data we have on this isn't the best: kids weren't asked what the most recent book was they'd read for pleasure, just the last book they'd read, so there's a disproportionate number of GCSE set texts. However, we do find out a bit about their favourite genre. It turns out, actually, the so-maligned teenage sci-fi readers have almost identical outcomes to those who self-identify as preferring non-genre fiction. Those are the biggest two groups; non-fiction readers are slightly more likely to end up at university, but it's not a big difference. In fact, the only group appearing to do worse are those who read romance literature: all but one of those are

girls, though, and we already know that girls were less likely to go to university in the eighties. (It turns out they're also much more likely to get divorced, but I'm not down that rabbit hole yet.)

Of course, we know from our own experience that talking about readers and non-readers isn't always a helpful distinction. For some of the kids who aren't reading at 16, it might just be a temporary blip. While reading behaviour is certainly volatile, there are big differences between genders: 29% of those girls who said they only read 'sometimes' when they were 10 were reading several times a week by age 16; only 7% of boys said the same. However, 70% of those who said they never read as teenagers were reading at least once a month by the time they were 33. While reading behaviour at 16 is a very strong predictor of reading later on in life compared to things like parents' social class, having children oneself is a much better predictor. It's no surprise that those people with kids and a full-time job have less time to read than those people with neither.

What should we take away from this data? The original report says that there's something special about reading for pleasure, compared with both formal reading environments and other leisure activities, and all our results bear this out, for all groups in society. We should be careful about concluding too much: a straightforward account assumes that explicitly highbrow reading has greater advantages than other types, which doesn't turn out to be the case. However, we should ensure that whenever children and teenagers want to read, they should have the opportunity to do so. ■



Mark Taylor is a PhD candidate in Sociology at Nuffield College, Oxford.



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The New Children's Laureate, Julia Donaldson

'One day in as the new **Children's Laureate**, and **Julia Donaldson** could be forgiven for looking somewhat pole-axed,' said **Nicholas Tucker** who interviewed her just after the announcement of her appointment as the 7th Children's Laureate. Her predecessors in this illustrious post, Quentin Blake, Anne Fine, Michael Morpurgo, Jacqueline Wilson, Michael Rosen and Anthony Browne all championed different causes. What is to be the focus of Julia Donaldson's Laureateship?

The volume of publicity Julia Donaldson's appointment had engendered was already vast well before we met on the morning of June 8 in Macmillan's swanky new building behind King's Cross. But the notices have all been positive, as befits an author of 160 books and twenty plays, many of them written in infectiously memorable rhyming texts.

Expert at getting through to pre-school children in live events, often accompanied by her husband Malcolm, this is a very popular as well as successful author. So did she think the Children's Laureate should have a special uniform, possibly based on the sort of thing the Pied Piper may once have worn?

'No, I don't think so! I don't mind dressing up as part of an event, but not as the person I am going to have to be for the next two years.'

So what are her plans?

'Well, as a song-writer, which is how I started, I am most used to working with young audiences, acting out songs and stories myself and getting lots of audience participation. So I would like to do more of this, encouraging children, mums, dads, even criminals when I have worked in prisons to improvise from texts themselves and then join in the choruses. And I would also love to get more children into the writing process, and would support any project that encourages them to do this. And this approach wouldn't just be with my books – I would like to use other writers' work as well. But it's not all about improvising and acting out. I have also worked for years with infants using easy to read play scripts, making sure that the main parts always get swapped around so everyone ultimately has a go. And some of the children involved, who weren't particularly good readers, had by the end learned all the words,

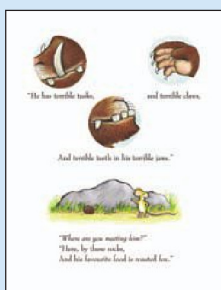
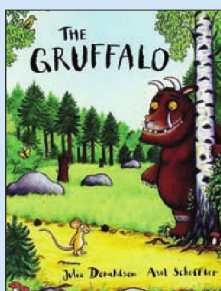


which brought on their reading confidence no end. I would love it now if I could work with an educational publisher and produce more of these little scripts as a genuine aid to reading ability.'

Are there plans then for trying to widen out her involvement from single occasions to mass events involving children all over the country, possibly through radio or television?

'I have already been in talks about creating a new show for children on television. What I would like

would be a series where I or someone else could tell a story and then work with children who had already heard it before and who could then act it out. This would show schools how to do it. And it would be nice to round up all this work with something like a national Act out a story day. Radio would be lovely too, if we could get any broadcasting organization interested. When I was a child I used to love the BBC programme Listen with Mother. People moan today about children no longer knowing nursery rhymes, but the reason we all once knew them was this wonderful programme. I used to sing "Ding Dong Bell" so often that my mother would beg me to stop. But I would simply reply "More ding dong!"



What about nursery rhymes?

Nursery rhymes are such a rich source for children. How about a campaign to bring them to the fore once again, possibly persuading a chain of shops to mount window displays featuring a nursery rhyme of the month?

'Yes, but children still wouldn't be getting the tunes as well, which are so important in the memory process. Perhaps we could persuade CBeebies to have something like a nursery rhyme of the week. Possibly in the morning before children go to school. But something certainly should be done. Malcolm, my husband, often gets children singing while they are queuing up to have their books signed at one of our events. And he finds that most of them only know two rhymes now, "Baa Baa Black Sheep" and "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star"'

Is Malcolm going to play a big part in what you will be doing?

'He's been grooming me for the post ever since it was first announced! I always used to say I couldn't possibly think of doing it. But I feel differently now. And it has come at a good time, since Malcolm is going to retire as a pediatrician half way through my term. After that I am

sure we will do lots together; we always have.'

And will he be wearing the Gruffalo costume?

'I think we would both like to concentrate on other things now. I do get rather tired of being called Mrs Gruffalo or whatever.'

Any plans for threatened public libraries?

'I don't think many people realise that even under the boom years libraries were still contracting. I have done so many library events and have seen evidence of this lack of investment. So when people ask whether the money needed to keep them all open should come from education or health spending, my answer is simply 'Yes!' Because if you sell a library, you're never going to get that building back. And some of those buildings are so lovely; they have been specifically designed as libraries, and wouldn't be suitable for any other use. There is nothing wrong with keeping open buildings that other people sometimes describe as currently old-fashioned – look at St Pancras Station, once about to be torn down and now once again a fantastic attraction. I personally think it was a mistake for libraries to have gone so far down the computer path. I was once writer in residence at a library where the children's section had been given over to computer use. Working with children when other users wanted to get on with screen card games or whatever was no fun.'

It is now time for Julia to go to another event before catching a train back to Glasgow, her home for many years, making her the first ever Children's Laureate to be based in Scotland. More about her future plans can be found on www.childrenslaureate.org.uk. There you can read about all her ideas for encouraging drama, music and story creation in schools. She also wants to help with producing more signed stories for deaf children, knowing some of their problems from her own experience of minor hearing loss. Aged 62, and last year the most borrowed author in children's libraries, Julia – for many years right at the top of her particular game – is an excellent choice for the job. With her genius for getting through to children and then getting the same children to get through to her in return, her tenure promises to be excitingly creative as well as very productive. ■



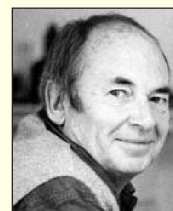
Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

The Children's Laureates

1999-2001

Quentin Blake

This inaugural laureateship focused on the importance of illustration. Quentin Blake's articles for BfK included Children's Book Illustration: a Separate Story (No. 121, March 2000) on the links between illustrating for adult and child audiences and *A Sailboat in the Sky* (No. 127, March 2001) on involving 1,800 French schoolchildren in producing a book about humanitarian issues.



2001-2003

Anne Fine

As well as working on picture books for the blind, Anne Fine's focus was on the importance of libraries, both school and public, but also on the value of children having their own 'home library' with books that they own. Anne explained her thinking in *Everyone's Home Library* in BfK No 133, March 2002.

2003-2005

Michael Morpurgo

Michael Morpurgo, who, with Ted Hughes, had come up with the idea of a Children's Laureateship and helped to bring it about, emphasized the importance of storytelling during his tenure.



2005-2007

Jacqueline Wilson

The importance of reading aloud to children – and not just small children – was the focus of Jacqueline Wilson's laureateship which also brought about the publication of *Great Books to Read Aloud* compiled by Julia Eccleshare. Jacqueline Wilson reflected on her laureateship in *On Being the Children's Laureate* (BfK No 162, 2007).

2007-2009

Michael Rosen

Among the highlights of Michael Rosen's laureateship were the launch of 'The Roald Dahl Funny Prize' and 'The Poetry Friendly Classroom' webpage devised to enable teachers to feel more confident in introducing children to poetry. Michael Rosen chronicled his energetic laureateship in his 'Laureate Log' in the pages of BfK from No. 167, July 2007 to No. 177, November 2009.



2009-2011

Anthony Browne

Anthony Browne campaigned for more recognition for children's illustration and illustrators. His articles on aspects of picture book illustration appeared in BfK No 180, 2010 (on sources of inspiration) and No 182, May 2010 (on Chris Van Allsburg's *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*).

The Waterstone's Children's Laureate 2011-2013 is managed by literature charity Booktrust www.childrenslaureate.org.uk

Ten of the Best

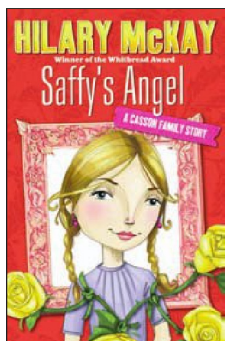
Children's Novels with Disabled Characters

'The depiction of disabled characters in books for young readers has changed in the most fundamental way in the past century and a half,' says Rebecca Butler. 'In nineteenth century texts disabled characters were sometimes being justly punished for their misdeeds "in God's school of pain" or being prepared solely for a graceful exit from life. Today, thanks to writers such as those listed below, disabled characters are presented as people who can live useful and productive lives, whatever the nature of their impairments. The change in the way disability is handled in texts is as fundamental and significant as the change in the way women were traditionally depicted.' Here **Rebecca Butler** chooses her top ten children's novels with disabled characters.

Saffy's Angel

Hilary McKay, Hodder,
978 0 34085080 0, £5.99 pbk

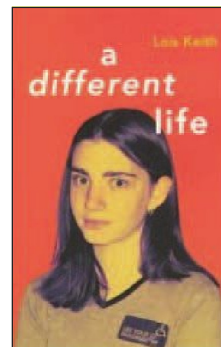
In her eccentric and dysfunctional family, Saffy learns that she is an adopted child. She recollects a plaster statuette of an angel, symbolic of her lost identity. Sarah, presented initially just as 'the girl in the wheelchair', is determined to help Saffy rediscover her angel. Sarah becomes a living, vibrant and tenacious character who will not give up until the angel is found. 11+



A Different Life

Lois Keith, Livewire,
978 0704349469, £5.99 pbk

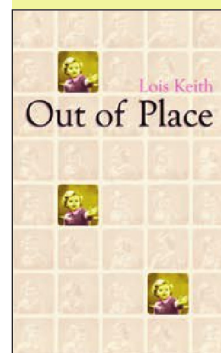
Libby Starling lives a perfectly ordinary teenage life, worrying about her looks and romantic dreams. She contracts a mysterious illness which leaves her paralysed below the waist. The book charts Libby's journey and that of her family, through accurately recorded periods of rage and despondency, to the point of equilibrium. Her new identity is accepted as the basis for her different life. 13+



Out of Place

Lois Keith, Crocus,
978 0946745470, £7.99 pbk

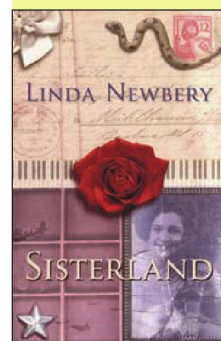
Eva, a disabled girl in Nazi-dominated Austria is classified by the medical authorities as 'a useless eater', a candidate for 'euthanasia'. Her family's Jewish housekeeper finds her a place on a refugee ship by pretending Eva is Jewish. In London she grows up believing herself to be a Jewish girl, until the truth about her racial origins is revealed with shocking consequences. In this ironic book it is the kind people who tell lies and the cruel people who tell the truth. 13+



Sisterland

Linda Newbery,
David Fickling Books,
978 0099 472827, £6.99 pbk

Newbery's book is a striking portrayal of the impact of Alzheimer's syndrome on an individual and her family. The story links the historical period of the Holocaust with the modern day. The link between the time periods is dramatically revealed through dementia. Racial conflict in the contemporary world evinces echoes of the Third Reich. The young sisters of the title witness history reified



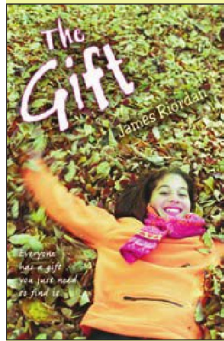
10

in their grandmother's erratic memory. 14+

The Gift

James Riordan,
Oxford, 978 0192 753601,
£5.99 pbk

One twin is able-bodied, the other a wheelchair user. One twin is a gifted athlete, the other a poet. They also reveal other and more surprising skills. This book is memorable inter alia for the portrayal of a selfish and dishonest mother who exploits her children to cheat the benefit system and steal from shops, and for a rare positive portrayal of a special school. 11+

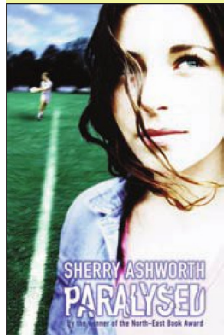


“The book charts Libby’s journey and that of her family, through accurately recorded periods of rage and despondency, to the point of equilibrium.”

Paralysed

Sherry Ashworth,
Simon & Schuster,
978 1416900948, £6.99 pbk

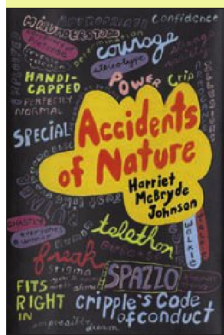
A teenage boy suffers a disabling accident on the rugby pitch. His girlfriend is determined to stand by him. His friend regards himself as responsible for the accident. The narrative is accurate and harrowing. 13+



Accidents of Nature

Harriet McBryde Johnson,
Andersen,
978 1842707418, £5.99 pbk

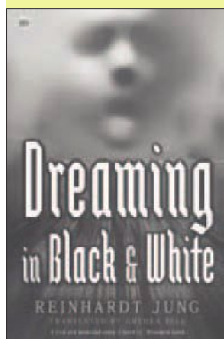
Along with many other issues, this book deals with the sensitive area of disability and sexuality. A seventeen year old girl with cerebral palsy goes to summer camp. She is challenged to transform herself over the summer. It’s a painful read in parts but uplifting. 13+



Dreaming in Black and White

Reinhardt Jung, trans. Anthea Bell, Mammoth,
978 0749741570 pbk. OP but available from Amazon.

A young physically disabled boy has dreams that tell him what his life would have been

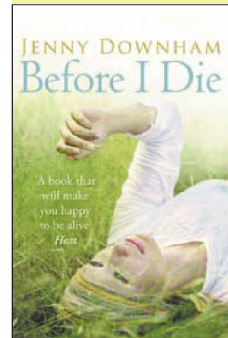


in Nazi Germany. He is a candidate for the T4 programme, whereby Germany was to eradicate the disabled members of the population. While many children know of the Holocaust, few know that Hitler targeted the disabled as well as Jews, homosexuals and political opponents. 11+

Before I Die

Jenny Downham, David Fickling Books,
978 1862304871, £6.99 pbk

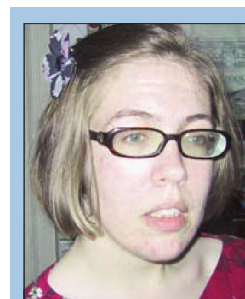
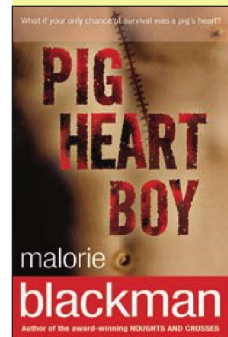
This is a rite of passage book. The journey is undertaken by Tess, a young woman informed that she is terminally ill. She is far from a stereotypical victim of illness. Contrary to expectation, the book becomes a celebration of life as well as a prelude to death. 13+



Pig Heart Boy

Malorie Blackman, Corgi,
978 0552559799, £5.99 pbk

Thirteen year old Cameron needs a heart transplant if he is to live long enough to see his brother born. No human donor is on hand. He is given the heart of an animal. This book tells how he comes to terms with his new identity. His relationship with his over-protective mother is depicted in credible terms. 11+ ■



Rebecca Butler writes and lectures on children’s literature. She is currently in the fourth year of a doctorate researching how children’s literature featuring wheelchair users can be used in the field of primary education.

Windows into Illustration:

Nicola Killen

One of Books for Keeps 'Rising Talents 2011', Nicola Killen's illustrations for her first picture book *Not Me!* are notable for their stylish minimalism, patterned and textured use of colour and well thought out design. Here **Nicola Killen** explains the genesis of *Not Me!* and discusses her technique and approach.

Not *Me!* started as a university project while I was studying for an MA in Children's Book Illustration at Cambridge School of Art. Most of the ideas for my stories come from life experiences and this was no exception. A group of us were at the fair and one of my friends bought a toffee apple. She was struggling to eat it so decided to throw it in a bin. The apple flew off the stick and hit a man on the leg. He turned round to see her still holding the toffee apple stick and looking very guilty. 'It wasn't me!' she blurted out. This got me thinking about the antics a group of children could get up to while denying their involvement and *Not Me!* was born.

I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to show the project to some publishers on a class trip to the Bologna Book Fair in 2008, and was surprised that a couple of them were really interested!

After graduation in February 2009, I went straight into working on the art work and, four months later, it was finished. *Not Me!* was published by Egmont UK in May 2010. The artwork was made using a combination of stencils, collage, rubber stamps, an occasional potato print and monoprinted line over the top.

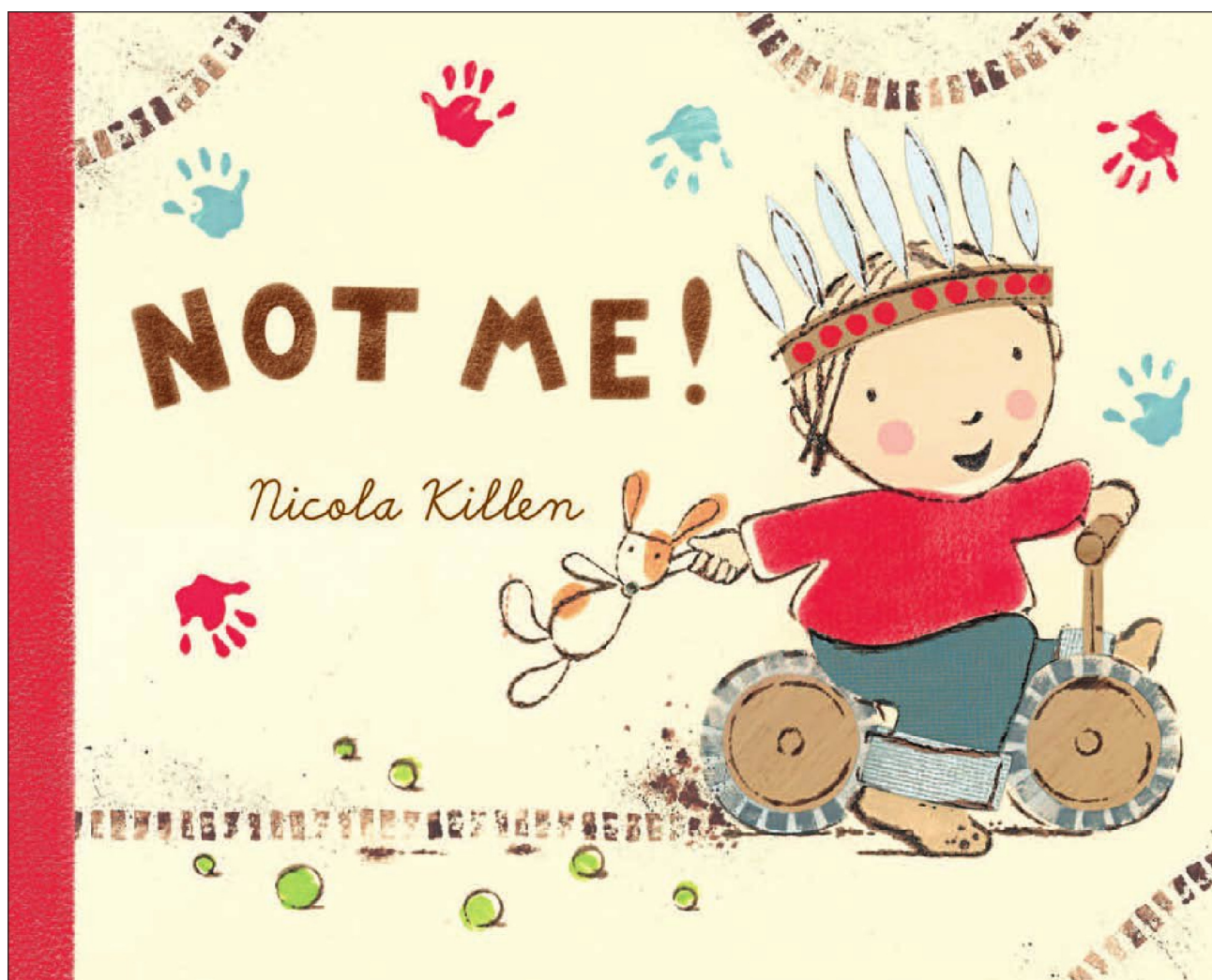
Nicola Killen was the winner of The Best New Talent Award 2009, a prize given to the most promising prospect on Cambridge School of Art's MA course in Children's Illustration. *Not Me!* was shortlisted for the Heart of Hawick Children's Book Award, the Coventry Inspiration Book Award, the Nottingham Children's Book Award and the 'Read it Again' Cambridgeshire Children's Picture Book Award.



The scenario of dropping so many peas was inspired by a friend's little girl who was around 18 months old when I was developing the story. She was going through a phase of throwing her dinner on the floor and she would finish meal times completely surrounded by food. I enjoyed making this spread the most as, although the overall shape of the pea pile was planned, I could have fun cramming as many green circles as possible into the available space. I started by printing the floor tiles then moved on to stamping the pea shapes. The monoprinted line over the peas was done by eye - and as you may notice, I wasn't entirely successful at working out where the lines should go. I think this adds to the sense of chaos though!

Following the question, "Who's been dropping all these peas?" comes the reply, "Not Me!" said Louise'. I wanted to exaggerate the length of the table in this spread so that the reader could imagine all the children sitting at it.





I used a dry brush to stencil the table cloth - this picked up the texture of the paper I was working on. I used much smaller hand-cut rubber stamps for the peas on this page but was much more restrained with the quantity - maybe someone waiting under the table has been wolfing them down! Jess the Pup is made from pieces of old envelopes and the chairs are collaged in wood veneer. And I still had trouble outlining the peas

despite all my practice on the previous spread! ■

Not Me! is published by Egmont
in hardback (978 1 4052 4829 7) at £10.99 and
in paperback (9781 4052 4830 3) at £5.99.

Nicola Killen's next book **Fluff and Billy do everything together** will be published in the Autumn.



Authorgraph

No.189

Beatrix Potter

Beatrix PotterTM

assessed by Judy Taylor

I don't know what to write to you, so I shall tell you a story about four little rabbits whose names were – Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail and Peter.

So begins the letter sent from Scotland by thirty-five-year-old Beatrix Potter in 1901 to a frequently ailing five-year-old boy, Noel Moore, the oldest of the eight children of her once-governess and companion, Annie Carter Moore. With the substitution of 'Once upon a time there were' for the first sixteen words above, this must surely be the most well-known and most loved opening of all children's books. The rest of the letter, until Beatrix expresses her wish to visit young Noel on her return to London, is word-for-word the text of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.

Like so many of the letters Beatrix Potter sent to children, Noel's was filled with sketches, these ones instantly identifiable with the finished black-and-white pictures she drew that same year for her own privately published edition of the book, the ones she later redrew and painted in colour as illustrations for the first Warne edition in 1902.

Beatrix Potter's life story has been told many times, and for each version a further myth is added. One current on-line version states that Beatrix kept small animals 'taking them from the wild and contributing to their deaths by disregarding their needs'. Another says that she didn't like children – but then that was a story told by one of the children who used to 'scrumpt' the apples from her orchard!

The facts are that Helen Beatrix Potter was born on 28 July 1866, the first child of Rupert and Helen Potter, then living in a newly built terraced house in London, No. 2 Bolton Gardens, South Kensington, having moved there from fashionable Harley Street. In 1854 Rupert Potter had come to London to study law at Lincoln's Inn. Although his Unitarian family owned a flourishing calico printing works in Glossop, near Manchester, and Rupert had been expected to join the family business, he had set his heart on becoming a barrister and was called to the Bar in 1857. Six years later he married Helen Leech, who was also from the North, from a ship-building, Unitarian family, and now the couple were making a considerable effort to lose their Northern accents and to be accepted into the social life of London. To avoid confusion with her mother, their first child was known as Beatrix, or sometimes just as 'B'. She was looked after by servants and later taught by governesses, only seeing her parents to say goodnight or on special occasions.

Beatrix was a lonely child, having to rely on her own creative talents for entertainment, but she was kept well supplied with books and encouraged in her art by her parents, who both painted and drew a little themselves. When Beatrix was nearly six her brother, Walter Bertram, was born and was also called by his second name, this time to avoid confusion with his uncle.

As Bertram grew up he became a close companion to his sister and also developed a talent for painting and drawing. Together they kept a series of pets in the schoolroom or in hutches in the garden – a rabbit, a hedgehog, a mouse, a white rat, and some bats – all

smuggled home from local pet shops. During the long family summer holidays in Scotland both children painted and drew all aspects of the flora and fauna they encountered on their countryside expeditions.

When Bertram was eleven he was sent away to boarding school but Beatrix remained in London with yet another governess. However, she was now regularly visiting the South Kensington Museum and there she discovered not only the paintings of great artists such as Constable, Gainsborough and Hogarth but the preserved skeletons of animals and samples of insects, all of which she copied and drew. She was acquiring the detailed knowledge that would later mark her as a distinguished and knowledgeable naturalist, even having a paper 'On the Germination of the Spores of Agaricineae' accepted in 1897 by The Linnean Society – although she could not read it, as ladies were not allowed to attend the Society's meetings.

Between the ages of fifteen and thirty-one Beatrix kept a journal (written in a code that was not deciphered until 1958) and it is *The Journal* that has provided us with much of our knowledge about her life in those early years. In 1882, when the family holidays moved from Scotland to the Lake District, Beatrix fell in love with that part of the world where she would live thirty years later and with which she is identified today.

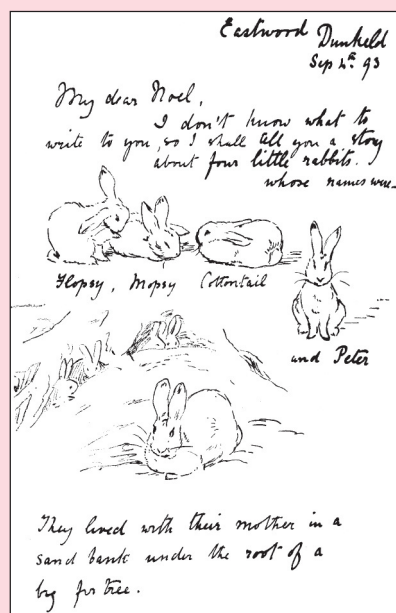
It was Beatrix's last governess, Annie Moore, who had suggested that the stories she had told in her pictures letters to the children 'might make good books' and in 1901 Beatrix published privately her own edition of **The Tale of Peter Rabbit**. When she finally found a commercial publisher for it in 1902 (after at least six attempts), it was Frederick Warne who requested that she redo her illustrations in colour. The following year Warne published **The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin** and **The Tailor of Gloucester**, both of which Beatrix had first told in letters to the Moore children. And so the publication of her stories continued, two – and sometimes three – little books a year, until there was a grand total of twenty-three.

As early as 1903 Beatrix had made a Peter Rabbit doll and registered it herself at the Patent Office. It would be the first of a whole host of ensuing 'spin-offs', from painting books to board games, from hot-water-bottles to china tea-sets.

In July 1905 Beatrix received an offer of marriage from her publisher, Norman Warne, and against her parents' wishes – for he was 'in trade' – she accepted his proposal, but sadly the wedding was not to be, for Norman died of leukaemia only four weeks later, at the age of only thirty-seven.



Illustration from
The Tale of Peter Rabbit
by Beatrix Potter
Copyright © Frederick
Warne & Co 1902, 2002



First page of picture letter from Beatrix Potter to Noel Moore sent 4th September 1893.
Copyright © Frederick Warne & Co, 1946



Portrait of Beatrix Potter at Camfield Place, August 1886.
Photograph by R. Potter.

“As early as 1903 Beatrix had made a Peter Rabbit doll and registered it herself at the Patent Office.”

It was in November of that same year that Beatrix bought a small working farm in Near Sawrey in the place she had come to love so much, the Lake District. She converted the farmhouse at Hill Top to provide accommodation for herself and for her farm manager and his family and she went there whenever she could get away from London. Turning forty, a whole new life was opening up before her, a situation reflected in her books, many of which are set in the area, **The Tale of Tom Kitten**, **The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck** and **The Tale of Samuel Whiskers** specifically at Hill Top.

In 1909 Beatrix bought a second farm in Near Sawrey, Castle Cottage, taking the advice of local solicitor, William Heelis, and three years later she would accept his proposal of marriage. They chose Castle Cottage to be their home and in October 1912 Beatrix Potter, author and artist, became also Mrs William Heelis, farmer and countrywoman.

Following the death of her father only a few months after her marriage and with the royalties from her books and the merchandise, Beatrix was a considerably wealthy woman. In 1919 she bought a house in nearby Windermere for her mother and that same year set up a Nursing Trust for the local villages. In 1923 she bought a vast nearby sheep farm, Troutbeck Park, and in 1930 she became one of the major supporters of the National Trust and their campaign to save the Lake District from developers. She was a prize-winner with her sheep at local agricultural shows where she was later a judge, and she was would be President-elect of The Herdwick Sheepbreeders' Association.

And Beatrix continued to write. The last of the 'little' books published in the Peter Rabbit format was **Cecily Parsley's Nursery Rhymes** in 1922, a collection of her

favourites that she had always wanted to see in print. But it was not her last book. In 1926 **The Fairy Caravan** was published for her many fans in the USA, but feeling that it was too autobiographical she forbade its publication in the UK during her lifetime, and British readers had to wait for their edition until nine years after her death.

In 1932 her American readers again had an exclusive edition of a book by Beatrix Potter, **Sister Anne**, her version of the story of **Bluebeard**. For the first time she was unable to see well enough to provide her own illustrations and they were drawn by the American artist, Katharine Sturges.

Beatrix's farming life continued throughout the Second World War. Out on the fells in all weathers, she was managing vast areas of her own farmland, as well as a large estate for the National Trust, but her health was starting to fail. In a letter in September 1943 she wrote, 'If an old person of 77 continues to play these games – well it can be done too often. I have plenty to do indoors and the little dogs are great company – most efficient foot warmers.' She died on the evening of 22 December 1943.

It is remarkable to contemplate Beatrix Potter's gift to the world. She left her sixteen farms and her land of over 4,000 acres to the National Trust, thus ensuring that vast tracts of the Lake District are accessible today. To children throughout the world she left her little books, now so familiar to us all.

In 1980 the Beatrix Potter Society was formed to continue to research and to study the life of this extraordinary woman (beatrixpottersociety@tiscali.co.uk). Her letters and her watercolours still emerge from attics or are sold from private collections, and each one adds a little more to Beatrix Potter's fascinating story. The Society now has members all over the world. International Conferences are held in the UK and the USA, with talks by specialist speakers that are published in book form as part of a considerable publishing programme.

The Society also has two important projects, Reading Beatrix Potter, where Members visit libraries and schools to read the Tales and talk about her life and work, and Introducing Beatrix Potter for book clubs, adult classes and other interested groups.

Beatrix Potter was a woman ahead of her time, intelligent, outspoken and extraordinarily talented. Her books will be read and her work appreciated for many years to come. ■

Judy Taylor was for many years Children's Books Editor at The Bodley Head. She is now an authority on Beatrix Potter and the author of a number of books about her including **Beatrix Potter: Artist, Storyteller & Countrywoman** (Warne, 978 0 7232 4175 1, £20).

The Books

A selection of Beatrix Potter's books, all published by Warne at £5.99

The Tale of Peter Rabbit (978-0723247708)
The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin (978-0723247715)
The Tailor of Gloucester (978-0723247722)
The Tale of Tom Kitten (978-0723247777)
The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck (978-0723247784)
The Tale of Samuel Whiskers (978-0723247852)
Cecily Parsley's Nursery Rhymes (978-0723247920)

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AWARDS

Red House children's book award 2011

Michael Morpurgo's novel **Shadow** is the winner of this Award which is voted for entirely by young readers. Shadow won both the category for younger readers and the overall prize which is co-ordinated by the **Federation of Children's Book Groups**. Morpurgo has now won the Award three times, the only author to do so in the award's 31-year history.

Shadow tells the story of boy who is befriended by an army sniffer dog in Afghanistan. It is partly set at a detention centre for asylum seekers in the UK. 'It was a difficult book to write because I was writing about a contemporary conflict,' Morpurgo said. Morpurgo's previous wins were for **Kensuke's Kingdom** and **Private Peaceful**.

Other winners were Angela McAllister and Alison Edgson's **Yuck! That's not a Monster** (Little Tiger Press, 978-1848950290, £5.99 pbk) in the category for younger children, and Alex Scarrow's **TimeRiders** (Puffin, 978-0141336336, £6.99 pbk) in the older readers' category.

The Guardian Children's Fiction Prize 2011

The longlist for this year's prize is:

- My Name is Mina** by David Almond (Hodder, £12.99) 9+
Small Change for Stuart by Lissa Evans (Doubleday, £10.99) 8+
Twilight Robbery by Frances Hardinge (Macmillan £9.99)
Momentum by Sacci Loyd (Hodder, £6.99) 12+
Moon Pie by Simon Mason (David Fickling Books, £10.99)
Return to Ribblestrop by Andy Mulligan (Simon & Shuster, £10.99)
My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece by Annabel Pitcher (Orion, £9.99)
Mt Gum and the Secret Hideout by Andy Stanton (Egmont £5.99)

The CLIP Carnegie Medal 2011

The winner is **Monsters of Men** by Patrick Ness (Walker, 9780385617031) 14+.

The other shortlisted books are:

- Prisoner of the Inquisition** by Theresa Breslin (Doubleday, 9781406310276) 12
The Death Defying Pepper Roux by Geraldine McCaughrean (Oxford Children's Books, 9780192756022) 10+
The Bride's Farewell by Meg Rosoff (Puffin, 9780141383934) 12+
White Crow by Marcus Sedgwick (Orion, 9781842551875) 12+
Out of Shadows by Jason Wallace (Andersen Press, 9781849390484) 14+

CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal 2011

The Winner is **Farther** by Grahame Baker-Smith (Templar, 97848771260) 8+.

Shortlisted books are:

- Me and You** by Anthony Browne (Doubleday, 9780385614894) 4+
April Underhill Tooth Fairy by Bob Graham (Walker, 9781406321555) 5+
Jim by Hilaire Belloc, ill Mini Grey (Cape, 9780224083676) 6+
The Heart and the Bottle by Oliver Jeffers (HarperCollins, 9780007182305) 5+
Big Bear, Little Brother by Kristin Oftedal (Macmillan, 9781405051989) 3+



Ernest by Catherine Rayner (Macmillan, 9780230529199) 3+

Cloud Tea Monkeys by Mal Peet & Elspeth Graham, ill Juan Wijngaard (Walker, 9781406300925) 8+

2011 Frances Lincoln Diverse Voices Children's Book Award



The winner is Helen Limon for **Om Shanti, Babe**, a story about growing up, family and friendships that the judges described as 'Fabulous . . . laugh-out-loud funny'. Helen is the founder of Zed Said publisher in Newcastle-upon-Tyne which publishes local authors and illustrators; she is also celebrating her recent PhD in creative writing from Newcastle University.

The Highly Commended award went to Karon Alderman, who teaches literacy skills to adults in Newcastle. Her story, **For Keeps**, was inspired by the real-life campaign in the city to save asylum seeker Leonie Mendo and her daughter from deportation to Cameroon.

The judges were Trevor Phillips (Chair of The Equality and Human Rights Commission); Jake Hope (Children's Librarian for Lancashire Libraries); Geraldine Brennan (Journalist and former Books Editor at The TES); Mary Briggs (Co-Founder of Seven Stories, the Centre for Children's Books) and Janetta Otter-Barry (Janetta Otter-Barry Books at Frances Lincoln Children's Books).

Now in its third year, the Award was founded jointly by Frances Lincoln Limited and Seven Stories, the national centre for children's books, in memory of Frances Lincoln (1945-2001) to encourage and promote diversity in children's fiction. The prize of £1,500 plus the option for Janetta Otter-Barry at Frances Lincoln Children's Books to publish the novel is awarded to the best manuscript for eight to 12-year-olds that celebrates diversity in the widest possible sense. The closing date for the next award is 31st December 2012. For entry forms contact Helena McConnell; E: helena@sevenstories.org.uk or diversevoices@sevenstories.org.uk T: 0845 271 0777 x706

CLPE Poetry Award 2011



The winner is **Off Road to Everywhere**

by Philip Gross, ill. Jonathan Gross (Salt Publishing). It was described by Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy, last year's winner of the prize and a judge as, 'an outstanding winner for this Award' while fellow judge Fiona Waters who is also a previous winner said, 'This is wonderful stuff. Here are real, proper poems which are full of beauty and imagination. I loved it!'

If You Could See Laughter by Mandy Coe (Salt Publishing) was Highly Commended. The other shortlisted titles are:

Everybody Was a Baby Once and other poems by Allan Ahlberg, ill. Bruce Ingman (Walker Books)

Cuckoo Rock by Phil Bowen, ill. Fred James (Salt Publishing)

A Million Brilliant Poems (part one) compiled by Roger Stevens, ill. Jessie Ford (A & C Black)

The judges were Carol Ann Duffy, Andrew Lambirth and Fiona Waters and the judging panel was chaired by Julia Eccleshare. For further information contact Ann Lazim: ann@clpe.co.uk; 020 7902 2287.

NEWS

Life, Above All

Originally published in 2005 as *Chanda's Secret* (and reviewed in BfK No. 155), Allan Stratton's powerful novel for teens set in an imaginary sub-Saharan African country is both a convincing human story and a documentary novel about the problem of AIDS. 16 year-old Chanda has to care for her sick mother while also coping with living in a prejudiced community. Now republished as *Life, Above All*, a film version will be opening this year. See <http://www.lifeaboveall.co.uk> for more details.

OBITUARY

Ann McPherson
1945 - 2011

Dr Ann McPherson, co-author of the **'Diary of a Teenage Health Freak'** series of books in 1980s, written with Aidan Macfarlane, has died at the age of 65 of pancreatic cancer. The **'Teenage Health Freak'** books were translated into 25 languages and sold more than 1m copies. Ann McPherson also founded the website www.teenagehealthfreak.org.

An Oxford GP for 35 years, Ann McPherson was also a champion of patients' rights and a campaigner to change the law on assisted suicide.



Hal's Reading Diary

10 year-old Hal didn't fall asleep easily – that is until his mother discovered the soporific effect of the 18th century language in *Robinson Crusoe*. Hal's father, psychodynamic counsellor **Roger Mills**, explains.

Imagine that anyone who has had the experience of being a parent will be aware of the way in which you slip into habits with your children. Often you barely notice the habit is forming, and then if you try to undo it later it has become part of routine and difficult to abandon as a consequence.

One of our, baddish, habits is that we have got into a pattern of sitting with Hal while he falls asleep. He claims he gets frightened if he's on his own, and though there's a strong element of putting it on, what is true is that if we leave him to it, 15 minutes later a small head is peering round the kitchen door and Hal is wondering if he can come and sit with us rather than be all alone upstairs.

But how to get him to drop off quickly? This had been a difficult one until, a few months ago, Jo discovered the anaesthetic properties of parts of Defoe's **Robinson Crusoe**. Here's a passage in which Crusoe, finding that barley has grown from some husks he emptied out of a bag, begins to feel God is on his side:

'But after I saw barley grow there, in a climate which I know was not proper for corn, and especially that I knew not how it came there, it startled me strangely, and I began to suggest that God had miraculously caused this grain to grow without any help or seed sown, and that is was so directed purely for my sustenance on that wild miserable place.'

Jo tells me that it takes two to three pages of this kind of writing to produce a sleeping boy and it isn't hard to see why. Partly it is Defoe's early 18th century use of language – phrases like 'it

startled me strangely'. What's described is another important factor. Though there are shipwrecks and cannibals (these bits tend to produce a livelier listener in Hal) there's also a lot about God and lengthy descriptions of boats and nautical matters which bore him and make him sleepy.

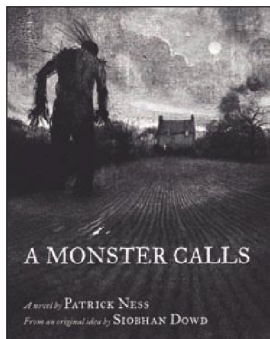
But what saps Hal's wakefulness more than anything is, I think, the syntax. Defoe's writing was deeply influenced by his classical education and by the language and style of the King James Bible, itself heavily influenced by Latin forms. According to Microsoft wordcount the passage I quoted, which is just one sentence, is 67 words long. Compare that to the average **'Horrid Henry'** sentence. 18th century language, packed with subordinate clauses, is very, very unfamiliar to modern ears and so wears them down rather easily. If Hal's education involved reading a lot of Latin and a lot of the King James Bible I expect his attention span for Defoe would be a bit longer. And it's interesting to think about what more complex syntax does for your thinking abilities too. But saturated as Hal is in the idioms of today, Defoe is always going to be soporific for the average 10 year-old-boy. Sad, but at least it gets him to sleep. ■

Daniel Defoe's **Robinson Crusoe**, first published in 1719, is available in Penguin Classics as well as in other editions.



I wish I'd written...

Siobhán Parkinson on a book would make a stone doorstep weep ...



Children often tell me they like sad books. Perhaps they enjoy a tear-jerker in the same way they enjoy being scared by a ghost story, but there is much, much more to **A Monster Calls** than the fact that it would make a stone doorstep weep.

The mother of Conor, the boy in the story, is dying of cancer. We are never told either that she has cancer or that it is terminal, but from about a third of the way in, we know. We just do. Conor doesn't know, however, and what is most impressive about this heartbreaking tour de force of a book

is how the dying woman leads him, and the author leads us, to accept the truth and to let her go, so that on the last page, with Conor, we hold her in our arms and give her permission to breathe her last. The monster of the title is both the illness and a querulous storytelling yew tree that comes to Conor at night and gradually compels him to recognize the truth.

A book that will be of immense value for bereaved children, **A Monster Calls** is about the human condition itself, but it does not contain a single didactic syllable.



A Monster Calls (978 1 4063 1152 5) by Patrick Ness is published by Walker at £12.99. A paperback edition (978 1 4063 3651 1) will be published in October at £6.99. Siobhán Parkinson is Irish Children's Literature Laureate. Her latest book **Bruised** (978 1 4449 0359 1), a novel for young teenagers, is published by Hodder at £6.99.

Good Reads

Chosen by Year 8 and 9 (13 year-old) pupils from the Carnegie Shadowing Group, Fortismere School, Muswell Hill, London.

White Crow

Marcus Sedgwick, Orion, 978 1 4440 0149 5, £6.99 pbk

White Crow is one of the best books I've ever read. I thought it was beautifully written but at times I found the language of the man in the 18th century a little difficult to read but I thought Marcus Sedgwick got into the head of two teenage girls extremely well - the characters were very convincing, even though they had a strange relationship. I think the best part of the book is that it opens up different aspects and ideas of life after death. I was very unsure of what I believed about it but it's really got me thinking in a whole new way about the theory. I would recommend this book to anyone no matter what genre they like. (I also really enjoyed meeting the author when we went on a Carnegie trip to another school where he was talking).

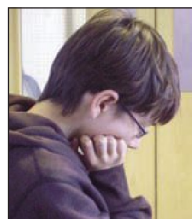
Lily Millar



Lily Millar



Shakira Dyer



Benjamin Gardner



Hannah Arnaud



Caitlin Napleton

Prisoner of the Inquisition

Theresa Breslin, Corgi, 978 0 5525 6074 0, £6.99 pbk

I very much enjoyed Prisoner of the Inquisition. I was keen to read it as I have read and loved other books by Theresa Breslin. It was a very emotional book - I cried at the end and at other points throughout. It is written in first person but the narrative swaps between two equally

strong characters; at the beginning and the end it is in the third person - giving an overview rather than a personal view. The twists throughout keep you guessing, you never know what is going to happen next, and that means that it is very hard to put down. There is an introduction at the beginning which I strongly advise you read otherwise you might be slightly confused by the history. The first couple of paragraphs are the same as the first couple of paragraphs of the last chapter completing a circle and tying all the ends together. The ending again is so unexpected. You think you know what's going to happen and you're nearly right yet it is a traditional ending turned on its head. A brilliant book.

Hannah Arnaud

Monsters of Men

Patrick Ness, Walker Books, 978 1 4063 2612 3, £7.99 pbk

I'm halfway through this huge, wonderful book and I LOVE IT! Readers: don't be put off by its size, or the fact that it's the last book of the 'Chaos Walking' series and you haven't read any of them (ditto!). I didn't really understand it either in the first few pages. Since you are expected to already know all the characters (ie, Mayor Prentiss, the bad President; Viola, Todd's best friend; Todd, the main character you meet at the start of the book), I found it like going into a party that had been on for three days and you just stepped in on the third day and didn't know anyone or what was going on. But as you decided to stay at that party you

ended up having the time of your life - and all that cake...

Shakira Dyer

Out of Shadows

Jason Wallace, Andersen Press, 978 1 8493 9048 4, £6.99 pbk

Out of Shadows is an interesting book that takes an almost sympathetic view to racism, because most of the main characters are racist. It reads very fast and punchy and eggs you on to read more until you finish it. It doesn't require much knowledge about Zimbabwe/Rhodesia to understand and it does certainly makes you think of the morality of actions and the motif of a question keeps popping up all the way through the book. Overall, a good fast-paced book that's hard to put down.

Benjamin Gardner

A Bride's Farewell

Meg Rosoff, Puffin, 978 0 1413 2340 4, £6.99 pbk

In this book, a young farm girl named Pell runs away on the day of her wedding, and soon events start to unfold, showing more about the past and future of her family. I found this book surprisingly a good read and enjoyed it. This has not been my favourite book, but it certainly has not been the worst. A fun read that gets your blood pumping and I would highly recommend it.

Caitlin Napleton

Thanks to Gill Ward,
Senior Librarian.

Reviews (of both hardback and paperback fiction and non-fiction) are grouped for convenience into both age categories and under teaching range. Within each section, you will find reviews for younger children at the beginning. Books and children being varied and adaptable, we suggest that you look either side of your area. More detailed recommendations for use can often be found within the review.

REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

Clive Barnes has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian, and is now a freelance researcher and writer.

David Bennett was Senior Teacher and Head of an English Faculty in Nottinghamshire. He now works as an English consultant and supply teacher.

Jill Bennett is the author of **Learning to Read with Picture Books**. She is currently heading up a nursery unit and also does freelance and consultancy work.

Rebecca Butler writes and lectures on children's literature.

Valerie Coghlan is Librarian at the Church of Ireland College of Education, Dublin.

Robert Dunbar is a commentator on children's books and reading.

Janet Fisher is a children's literature consultant.

Geoff Fox has now retired as Co-Editor (UK) of **Children's Literature in Education**, but continues to work on the board and as an occasional teller of traditional tales.

Dorne Fraser is Young People's Reading and Learning Librarian for Norfolk Library and Information Service.

Annabel Gibb lives in York and is a Learning Support Tutor.

Ferelith Hordon has been a Children's Librarian for over 30 years and works in Wandsworth. She is currently Chair Elect of the Youth Libraries Group and Chair of the 2011 Carnegie Greenaway judging panel.

George Hunt is lecturer in Education at the University of Edinburgh.

Jana Novotny Hunter is an author and editor.

Rudolf Loewenstein is a Dominican friar based in a London parish. He also works full time in a primary school.

Margaret Mallett is a researcher and writer on Primary School English and a member of the **English 4-11** editorial team.

Ted Percy has now retired to Kirkcudbrightshire after working as a children's librarian in Lancashire, Ross & Cromarty, and North Buckinghamshire.

Val Randall is Head of English and Literacy Co-ordinator at a Pupil Referral Unit in Blackburn, Lancashire.

Andrea Reece worked for children's publishers for 16 years and is now a freelance marketing consultant.

Vincent Reid is a lecturer in developmental psychology at Durham University.

Caroline Sanderson is a freelance writer, reviewer and editor. She is the author of **Kiss Chase & Conkers**, a book about traditional children's games.

Elizabeth Schlenther is Editor, English children's books for **gwales.com**, The Welsh Books Council's website.

Judith Sharman, former Primary Head Teacher, leads Well Tree Learning Ltd as consultant and presenter of 'The Nurturing Way'.

Rosemary Stones is Editor of **Books for Keeps**.

Ruth Taylor has recently completed an MPhil in Children's Literature from Cambridge University.

Huw Thomas is Headteacher of Emmaus School, Sheffield.

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

Sue Unstead was a publisher of children's non-fiction for 25 years and is now a freelance editorial consultant and writer.

RATING

Unmissable ★★★★★ / Very Good ★★★★ / Good ★★★ / Fair ★★ / Poor ★

TITLES REVIEWED IN THIS ISSUE

	Page		Page
Aesop's Fables	★★★ 22	Naughty Toes	★★★ 23
Ashes	★★★ 27	No Passengers Beyond this Point	★★★★ 26
Aurora	★★★★ 30	Not me	★★★★★ 20
Beowulf the Hero	★★★ 22	Oliver	★★★★★ 20
Bubble Trouble	★★★★★ 21	One Dog and his Boy	★★★★★ 25
Casper Candlewicks in Death by Pigeon	★★★ 25	Pillywiggins and the Tree Witch	★★★★ 24
Cat's Cradle	★★★ 25	Pip and Posy	★★★ 20
Crowfield Demon, The	★★★ 26	Pirate House Swap	★★★★ 21
Department 19	★★★ 31	Polly and the Wolf Again	★★★ 22
Don't Panic, Annika!	★★★ 20	Rabbit Girl, The	★★★ 26
Dragon Whisperer, The	★★★★★ 26	Roman Rescue, A	★★★ 24
Duty Calls: Dunkirk	★★★★★ 28	Saving SS Shannon	★★★★ 24
Fall, The	★★★ 29	Sita, Daughter of the Earth	★★★ 26
Flip	★★★★★ 30	Six Days	★★★★ 28
Forgotten	★★★★ 27	Skullduggery Pleasant: Mortal Coil	★★★ 31
Grasshopper's Run, The	★★★★ 29	Sky Hawk	★★★★★ 25
Gravenhunger	★★★ 26	Small Change for Stewart	★★★ 25
Girl who Leapt Through Fire, The	★★★ 29	Small Free Kiss in the Dark, A	★★★★ 29
Grubtown Tales:		Solomon Crocodile	★★★ 20
When Bunnies Turn Bad	★★★ 24	Sterling and the Canary	★★★★ 24
Hooey Higgins and the Big Boat Race	★★★ 22	Superfrog	★★★★ 21
Hullabaloo!	★★ 20	Swim the Fly	★★★ 31
Iraq War, The	★★★★ 29	When the World was Waiting for you	★★★ 20
Kidnap in the Caribbean	★★★★ 24	Tales from Witchway Wood:	
Killing Honour	★★★★ 30	Crash 'n' Bang	★★★★ 25
Kissing Game, The	★★★★★ 30	Thief!	★★★★★ 27
Language of Cat and Other Poems, The	★★★★★ 24	Thin Ice	★★★★ 30
Little Rex and the Big Roar	★★★★★ 20	Thirteen Secrets, The	★★★★ 28
Little White Sprite, The	★★★ 21	This Book Totally Makes Stuff Grow	★ 23
Linger	★★★★ 31	This Little Teddy	★★★★ 21
Lula does the Hula	★★★★★ 28	Wasim and the Champ	★★★ 24
Magnus Fin and the Moonlight Mission	★★★ 25	Western Mysteries, The:	
Marshall Armstrong is new to our School	★★★ 22	The Case of the Deadly Desperadoes	★★★ 27
Meerkat Madness	★★★ 25	Wintercraft: Blackwatch	★★★ 27
Mega Mash up	★★★ 22	Wish me Dead	★★★ 28
Monacello: The Little Monk	★★★★ 23	Where She Went	★★★★ 27
My Ballet Dream	★★★★ 23	Wrong Pong, The	★★★ 22
Mysteries of Harris Burdick, The	★★★★★ 23	Zoo Girl	★★★★★ 21
Nature Adventures	★★★★★ 22	100 Things	★★★★ 20
Naughty Nina	★★★ 22		

Under 5s **Pre – School/Nursery/Infant****Oliver**

★★★★★

Christopher Franceschelli,
Bloomsbury, 16 pp,
978 1 4088 1439 0, £9.99 board

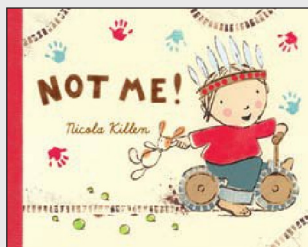
Oliver can roll from one side to the other and stand on his head 'but he was simply an egg and that was that'. And yet, limited as the movement of an egg is, this book shows how its shape and smooth texture give it a special aesthetic appeal. This is achieved by using shading and shadow and interesting positioning of the object in space, an approach to images evident in many a gallery and on many an art postcard. This artist has brought scrutiny of an everyday object – a hen's egg – within the reach of young children by combining a minimalist style with the choice of a board book format. The images and succinct text make this little information story compelling for child and sharing adult and it springs a lovely and satisfying surprise at the end. There is a startling contrast between the black and white pictures of the egg and the picture of the vibrantly yellow new chick that Oliver has become. What better way could there be to start a conversation about transformation and metamorphosis! The link can be made with other transformations, caterpillar into butterfly and tadpole into frog perhaps. This most original book is the result of a simple idea brilliantly realised. **MM**

Not me

★★★★★

Nicola Killen,
Egmont, 978 140524 830 3, 32pp,
pbk £5.99

Nicola Killen's debut picture book is a delight: clever characterisation, colour, page design and narrative structure perfectly realising a simple idea which engages its young readers at every level. The title page spread introduces us to five children and a dog who are each subsequently responsible for their own double page of childhood mess.



The reader is given lots of clues to each culprit, including a rhyme which points to their name, as they each charmingly but unavailing deny their guilt. It's great fun and there are, incidentally, some good ideas for making a mess, if children haven't realised them already. Inevitably, too, on the last page, there is encouragement to clear up afterwards. **CB**

Solomon Crocodile

★★★★

Catherine Rayner, Macmillan, 32pp,
978 0 230 52922 9, £10.99 hbk

Small children love to tease and Solomon the playful crocodile is no exception. He wants to have fun, but only by annoying those who refuse to play with him. When his bugging of the dragonflies and stalking of the storks gets him nowhere, naughty Solomon charges at the biggest creature, the hippo. But the hippo's open mouth almost engulfs the mischievous crocodile, and Solomon is forced to retreat until he hears a noise... This is a picture book with great page turning drama and suspense and with a surprising ending sure to make toddlers chortle with glee, especially when naughtiness wins out. The language is fresh and poetic and the deftly handled watercolour illustrations satisfyingly combine colour, pattern and texture. **JNH**

Hullabaloo!

★★

Gordon Volke, ill. Fenix,
Top That, 32pp,
978 1 84956 305 5, £5.99 pbk

Not so much a story, more a rhyming, cumulative concatenation, is this picture book tale of a zany and increasingly noisy zoo. The hullabaloo begins with a donkey called Drew and it is not long before ten different kinds of animals including a cockatoo, two chimps, bouncing bunnies and many more are adding to the cacophony. And yet there is still one more missing character – who can it be?

No individual is credited as the artist of the incident packed oil pastel illustrations. Produced by The Fenix Factory, they have more than a hint of the animator's art about them and Drew reminded me very much of Shrek's asinine travelling companion. A good opportunity for the very young to participate in some movement and noise making activity. **JB**

**Pip and Posy:
The Little Puddle**

978 0 85763 004 9

**Pip and Posy:
The Super Scooter**

978 0 85763 005 6

★★★★

Axel Scheffler, Nosy Crow, 32pp,
£7.99 each padded hbk

The world of Pip and Posy is an autonomous one where independent toddlers care for one another whilst remaining essentially child-like. Despite lack of adult intervention it is safe too, because in this enclosed world even toddlers can be sensible, non-judgemental friends and the support they give one another is deeply

reassuring. Part of the growing up process is the need to sift through experiences, mastering regulations to build confidence and repeating routines to feel grounded. It's a necessary progression as well as a way of understanding the world and these books provide reinforcement to the child's need to comprehend systems.

Axel Scheffler really knows about telling stories in pictures and much is enlarged upon in his bold, playful illustrations, adding humour, interest and delight. However, although the slow pace of the stories matches the pace of the very young, incidents and drama are rather too drawn out, and perhaps a 24 page format would have worked better for this series. In The Super Scooter, for example, two double pages are given to the moment when Pip falls off the scooter and the ensuing resolution takes four spreads. Partly this is due to the formula that binds the pair of titles together, as once the story is finished a denouement occurs where the friends have a bath or go home adding a final spread where the pair exclaim 'Hooray!' This works in terms of sheer fun, so in the final analysis perhaps the pleasure of tots joining in to shout is enough. **JNH**

**When the World Was
Waiting for You**

★★★★

Gillian Shields, ill. Anna Currey,
Bloomsbury,
32pp, 978 1 4088 0630 2,
£10.99 padded hbk

This picture book with its soft padded cover and cosily nostalgic illustrations is a delightful exploration of the joy of anticipation before the arrival of a new addition to the rabbit family. It is romanticised and explores none of the downsides of the advent of a new sibling but it is charming nevertheless! With its gentle, lilting rhythmic text; this book will make an ideal gift and one which may also help a new big sister or brother counteract the frustrations inevitably associated with a new baby when shared one to one with a loving and understanding parent. **JS**

Little Rex and the Big Roar

★★★★★

Ruth Symes, ill. Sean Julian,
Piccadilly, 32pp,
978 1 84812 088 4, £6.99 pbk

The young dinosaur hero of Little Rex is back in this engagingly illustrated new picture book story. Little Rex's ROAR is popular with everyone except his parents but his ability to roar saves the day when a distinctly frightening pterodactyl swoops down on his brothers and sister. This writer and illustrator really understand their young target audience who will identify with Little Rex, his frustrations and triumphs. **JS**

100 Things

★★★★★

Masayuki Sebe, Gecko Press,
24 pp, 978 1 877467 81 3,
£10.99 hbk

Most number books for young children stop at the number 10 but this one leads toward the concept of 100 and the understanding that ten 10s make 100. The large format and effective use of colour make possible some wonderful double spreads and children learn something about the creatures depicted as well as about number while being entertained by the wit and humour that light up the pages. The book starts off with a hundred mice organised in sets of ten and with quirky comments 'Don't chase me', and questions 'What are you eating?' to keep things dynamic. The 100 moles are underground of course and we get a sense of what this earthy world smells and looks like. The 100 ants are shown moving and twirling across the double spread in a purposeful way. Each page is full of questions and comments and little tasks and activities that add greatly to the pleasure of reading and looking. Can you find the one rabbit amongst the 100 sheep? There are extra suggestions for activities and questions on the final page. Where is the mouse with the yellow ribbon? Where is this sleeping ant? The book has the details young children love and there are likely to be lots of observations and questions. So yes – this lively, interactive book with lots of potential for sharing, thinking and learning deserves a place on the book shelf at home or in the nursery. **MM**

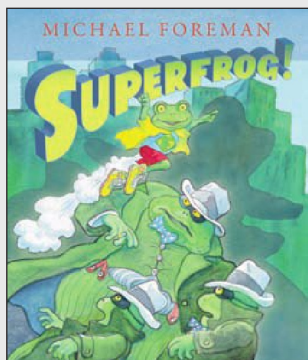
Don't Panic, Annika!

★★★★

Juliet Clare Bell, ill. Jennifer E
Morris, Piccadilly, 32pp,
978 1 84812 112 6, £5.99 pbk

Children often get into tricky situations that make them feel panicky and so it is with Annika. Her understanding family help her to calm down and find a solution when her toy Moose falls into the pond, and also when her zip gets stuck and she's sure she's going to miss the party. But when Annika is involved in a real emergency, she is the one who thinks things through and sorts them out on her own. Lots of repetition makes this a fun read aloud, and the illustrations are jolly and full of life. **ES**

reviews



Superfrog!

★★★★

Michael Foreman, Andersen, 32pp, 978 1 84939 209 9, £10.99 hbk

Foreman's familiar blue and green palette and liking for wide-angle depiction of scenes are to the fore in creating atmosphere for this spoof superhero tale of Little Frank, a frog

from Pond City who turns into Superfrog when a gang of toads steal frog spawn that his granny was babysitting. Quickly responding, Little Frank transforms himself into his alter ego, Superfrog, by breathing in great mouthfuls of air. Duly superendowed, he dives into the depths of the underwater underworld where he vanquishes the horny toad who is the leader of the gang, and liberates tadpoles, tiddlers and frog spawn all packed into his big, fat belly. There are delightful visual and verbal plays on the superhero and crime noir genres here, but none that are above the heads of young readers – a characteristic of Foreman's work is the huge respect he always shows to his audience. Of course, a young princess appears at the end, but she doesn't kiss our Superhero in case 'he turned into a boring prince'. And how superheroes are propelled is also revealed here, no doubt to the delight of gas and bottom-obsessed youngsters. Beautifully paced and great fun for all.

VC

Editor's Choice

This Little Teddy

★★★★

Lucy Lyes, ill. Emily Bolam, Ladybird, 12pp, 978 1 40930 842 3, £5.99 novelty board

This satisfyingly robust 'touch-and-feel' board book has five double page spreads each featuring a different teddy bear. On the verso, a friendly rhyme introduces the bear's name and invites the very young reader to stroke the furry tummy/touch the

fuzzy ears/feel the smooth paw pads/touch the shiny raincoat. The final spread invites greater participation as baby is invited to choose a name for the bear with the silky blue bow. Emily Bolam's cheerful illustrations have just the right amount of detail.

This unpretentious publication with its combination of tactile, language and illustrative elements is ideal for parents and other carers to enjoy sharing with small children. How wonderful it is that early developmental needs are being met with well pitched and accessible titles such as this. There is a companion volume, This Little Pirate.

RS

5 – 8 Infant/Junior

Pirate House Swap

★★★★

Abie Longstaff, ill. Mark Chambers, Picture Corgi, 24pp, 978 0 552 56081 8, £5.99 pbk novelty

After years of spending their summer holidays on DIY and other mundane activities, the Clark family are determined to do something different. So, a house swap seems the ideal thing especially one advertised like this: 'Lovely timber home. Picturesque views. Right on the sea – fish, swim and sail! Sleeps four.' Armed with a map, they set off but as we know – even if the Clarks don't – adverts can be more than a little deceptive and their holiday home is unexpected to say the least for this family of landlubbers. Their city house tenants meanwhile are making the most of the facilities the Clarks have left behind. Thus, we have two holidays unfolding in parallel as each group becomes more and more settled in until, all too soon, it's time to head home once more. However, the surprises don't end there. For the Clark family certainly, things are not quite as they left them.

Told in comic strip style with gatefold pages, this is essentially a picture book for young readers to explore for themselves or for sharing one to one or with a small group of listeners. It certainly merits close attention.

JB

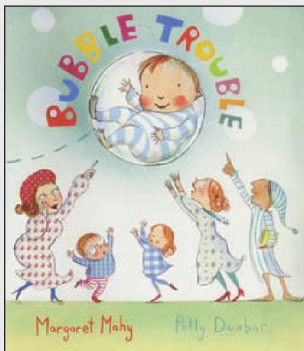
Bubble Trouble

★★★★★

Margot Mahy, ill. Polly Dunbar, Frances Lincoln, 40pp, 978 1 84780 186 9, £6.99 pbk

Told in Mahy's exuberant style, this frolicking, rollicking rhyming story tells of a baby who, when his sister blows a bubble, accidentally becomes trapped

inside and is blown away. Said baby is pursued by an assortment of zany characters who become involved in his attempted rescue. Full of suspense, in more ways than one, Mahy's hilarious text will challenge even the most experienced storyteller not to mention young listeners, but with its amalgam of rich, deliciously mind-stretching vocabulary ('nefarious intentions'), alliterative phrases ('calculated catchwork'; 'Coppie couple came cavorting'), glorious nonsense words ('flum-a'diddle') and more. It is well worth the effort; almost every conceivable language lesson is painlessly embedded therein.



Young audiences can follow the baby-bearing bubble as it loops and swoops on its perilous path by tracing the line of blue dashes across the pages. Polly Dunbar captures the mood quite brilliantly with her soft water colour illustrations. The portrayal of baby seemingly in blissful repose and loving every minute until disaster strikes, is a splendid counterpoint to the anguished expressions of her pursuers. The tender expressions of his mother and sister as they hug the babe

safely in their arms are heart-warming indeed.

JB

Zoo Girl

★★★★★

Rebecca Elliott, Lion, 32pp, 978 0 7459 6270 2, £5.99 pbk

Using a minimum of words (only 19) and a riot of pattern and colour, this lively picture book introduces us to a lonely little girl who has no family and lives in a children's home. While the home is seen to be forbidding and institutional, the carer who looks after the children is loving and caring and the other children are happy. But this one child is not. During a zoo visit she is inadvertently left behind but finds friends galore. The animals love her, and after a joyous play time with them all, she falls asleep cuddled amongst the tigers. Discovered by the zoo keepers who are a childless couple, the little girl finds her home and her family with them – and lots of friends. She is a child with special needs who has found those needs fulfilled in a special way. You don't need to accept that a child would hardly be playing with polar bears and tigers to understand that each child is different and each family is different and that the important thing is matching one with the other.

It is the pictures that tell this story. Absolutely full of detail, with even the grass, the walls and the sky full of distinct and subtle pattern, the expressive faces of the people and animals, the richness of colour, and the poignancy of the story add up to an outstanding picture book. While it will be very useful for children with unusual families, particularly those adopted, all children will respond to the need for love and acceptance and be happy that the little girl has found her special place.

Rebecca Elliott has already written about her own two children in two earlier books, and this story goes further to prove she is a new talent to be reckoned with.

ES

The Little White Sprite

★★★★

Gillian McClure, Plaister Press, 32pp, 978 0 9565108 1 5, £5.99 pbk

The Warty Tree that stands apart seems to whisper and beckon as the young narrator walks in the park. When he, or possibly she (gender is ambiguous like much in this story), approaches, the 'cold, hard hands' of the little sprite who lives in the Warty Tree reach out to drag him in. They climb to the top of the tree where the sight of his dog waiting on the ground breaks the hold of the Sprite, and the narrator chooses to return to the dog, the adults who accompany him and their young baby whose appearance resembles that of the Sprite. The adults look quite different from the older child – he is blond while they are dark and possibly Asian – and they seem more concerned with the baby. This gives the story layers of possible meaning. Are the adults not his parents? And is the encounter with the Sprite an imaginative journey, possibly triggered by jealous feelings towards the baby? These are complex questions and may be bewildering for a young audience, but then, children are often much better than adults at constructing meaning in narrative.

The illustrations' somewhat tremulous line and pastel tones also heighten the sense of the uncanny in this rather unsettling story that demands several readings, and even then, leaves questions looking for answers.

VC

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

Naughty Nina

★★★★

Juliet Mickelburgh, ill. Anna Laura Cantone, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 978 1 4088 0039 3, £5.99 pbk

Labels, spoken or unspoken, have the power to shape a child's life as people temper their responses when a child is categorised as 'a bully' or as 'an angel'. 'Naughty' Nina of the title is tired of being nice all the time and switches from barf-making goodness to extravagant naughtiness in a transition that is a tiny journey of discovery.

The lively illustrations show adult characters treated to some particularly tight lipped and determined expressions as Nina transmogrifies. Pages almost shake with the chaos she wreaks. But being naughty all the time can lose its appeal just as being nice did. What should Nina do? Her dilemma is amusingly resolved in a way that young readers will respond to. **HTH**

Marshall Armstrong is New to Our School

★★★★

David Mackintosh, HarperCollins, 32pp, 978 0 00 736141 0, £10.99 hbk

New boy Marshall Armstrong is anything but your average pupil; he is rich, eccentric and a bit of a boffin with his slide rule, protractor and fancy drawing equipment, not to mention his freckles, spots and allergies. Consequently, the little girl narrator is less than impressed when Miss Wright insists he sits beside her at the front of the class. So, as far as she is concerned his birthday party is the last straw; but her mum says she has to go. Much to her surprise however, she finds that inside Marshall's house, there's a wealth of opportunities for exciting party play and pastimes.

The detailed cartoon style illustrations and the variation and manipulation of lettering size, styles and layout give added visual appeal to this droll tale of the acceptance of an outsider. **JB**

Aesop's Fables

★★★★

Beverley Naidoo, ill. Piet Grobler, Frances Lincoln, 48pp, 978 1 84780 007 7, £12.99 hbk

Beverley Naidoo places 20 of Aesop's fables in an African setting and gives them a lyrical retelling that allows the humour to ripple through. She expresses the punch lines of tales in a way that opens up their wisdom rather than their morality. Naidoo's retelling also has the virtue of total brevity. A world is evoked, a situation unfolded in the space of a page or two. The illustrations are beautiful and reflect Naidoo's African location of the tales. **HTH**

Beowulf the Hero

★★★★

Tony Bradman, ill. Tony Ross, Orchard, 48pp, 978 1 40830 574 4, £3.99 pbk

Did you ever wish for a version of Beowulf that younger children could read on their own? Bradman and Ross have provided just that in a book that is short enough to hold and keep children's attention and with illustrations that help children appreciate the characters involved in this story. Two pages at the back of the book provide additional information



about the epic poem on which this adaptation is based. The book is part of a series, 'greatest adventures in the world' and if the standard of this book is anything to go by, the other titles will certainly merit attention too. **RL**

Mega Mash-Up: Robots v Gorillas in the Desert

978 0 85763 008 7

Mega Mash-Up: Romans v Dinosaurs on Mars

978 0 85763 001 8

★★★★

Nikolas Catlow and Tim Wesson, Nosy Crow, 96pp, £4.99 each pbk

The innovative 'Mega Mash-Up' series of books engage the reader actively in the process of storytelling. In both books, clearly demarcated groups of characters belonging to rival factions attempt to outdo each other. In Robots v Gorillas, two nations trading in bananas and oil respectively settle a spat through a race in the Desert of Doom. In Romans v Dinosaurs, ancient Romans and dinosaurs have a bigger problem than resolving their differences when an asteroid hurtles towards their planet, Mars.

Each book offers just enough madcap storyline and graphics to hook the reader. Every spread has plenty of blank spaces, prompts and instructions for the reader to fill in the plot, add dialogue and create new illustrations.

Attractively produced, the books should appeal to readers reluctant to read a full story but eager to use their imagination and participate in the storytelling. **AF**

Polly and the Wolf Again

★★★★

Catherine Storr, ill. Marjorie-Ann Watts, Jane Nissen Books, 96pp, 978 1 903252 38 3, £6.99 pbk

Catherine Storr was a prolific author, continuing to write books for both children and adults until just before her death in 2001 at the age of 87. A psychotherapist, she also loved writing and her output includes plays and an opera libretto as well as novels. The Polly series was written for her own daughters and was intended for children who have just started reading independently. Many of her books, including her children's novels, explore the relationship between reality and fantasy. In the case of Polly, the reality of home and family life exists alongside her potentially fatal friendship with the sentient, but usually stupid, Wolf in a reversal of the traditional fairy tale.

In this second book of the series, Wolf decides that Polly is the stupid one as he determines to outwit and eat her. Each chapter recounts a different episode in Wolf's attempts to achieve his objective – each time he is outmanoeuvred by Polly's quick thinking. His attempt to disguise himself as a fox fails dismally when the dye washes off in a rainstorm, then he fails to answer three of Polly's riddles and runs away when she turns the tables and promises to eat him. In the final denouement, Polly's little sister, Lucy, unwittingly outsmarts him during a game of 'I'm a wolf and I'm going to eat you all up', in which he forgets that his intention is actually to eat her. The book ends with him pleading with Polly to take her sister away.

Whilst the plot lines may capture interest, there are questions to be asked about the relevance to contemporary readers of a book so firmly contextualised in the 1950s. Polly lives in a bygone age in which hypnotism is described as new and fashionable, her mother stays at home, cooks lunch, shops in Woolworths and teaches her daughter to read cherry stones to work out who her husband is going to be. Polly wears frocks, buys 'two penn'orth' of red hair ribbon, sweets by the quarter pound and uses threepenny bits to buy ice creams. Her world is still clearly gender defined with boys requesting guns and girls playing with dolls – not a world that today's child would readily understand.

Additionally, the language is quite complex – readers will encounter vocabulary such as 'hypnotism', 'dextrously' and 'aggrieved'. Are these words which form the staple lexicon of young readers? Much as I enjoyed reading this book for nostalgic reasons, I cannot but wonder whether today's children expect a more sophisticated treatment of fantasy and a much faster pace of narrative. **GR**

Hooley Higgins and the Big Boat Race

★★★★

Steve Voake, ill. Emma Dodson, Walker, 128pp, 978 1 4063 2240 8, £4.99 pbk

Hooley Higgins and his friends are back again, ready to be involved with whatever mayhem is happening – and if it isn't happening yet, they will cause it. Unintentionally. Of course. Starting with a search for treasure on the beach, where Twig is attached to too many magnets for his own good, they segue into the Shrimpton-on-Sea Home-Made Boat Race... but not before a class swimming lesson at the local pool has gone thoroughly and chaotically wrong. Does this herald potential calamity at the Boat Race? Absolutely, and existing fans of Hooley will not be disappointed. New fans will welcome the continued slapstick which permeates the book at every twist and turn – and will be rolling around with laughter as things continue in that vein. Reluctant readers will find that this book is worth picking up for a good laugh. A welcome addition to the class library. **RL**

The Wrong Pong

★★★★

Steven Butler, ill. Chris Fisher, Puffin, 144pp, 978 0 14 133390 8, £5.99 pbk

One night, Neville Brisket is woken by a sour-smelling finger being stuck up his nose. Minutes later, he stumbles upon a most disgusting creature called Pong, picking its nose and creating messes. Soon after, he finds himself dragged down the toilet and flushed into a foul-smelling world where he comes face to face with a most disgusting troll family. At first, they look upon him as a tasty snack, then as the replacement for their own son Pong gone missing in the upper world. At first, Neville's disgusted by his new sewer family, but gradually he adapts and takes the place of their missing son. It seems he may never get back to his own world. The story abounds in all things grotty and snotty, and the vividly disgusting imagery and lively dialogue will have children chortling. **AF**

Nature Adventures

★★★★★

Mick Manning and Brita Granström, Frances Lincoln, 48pp, 978 1 84780 088 6, £12.99 hbk

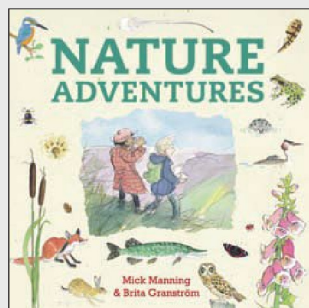
In the house, window-box, garden, street, park, cemetery or along the canal bank, nature is all around us, and, of course, we're part of it. In this book the author/illustrators take us through various settings – Town, Fresh Water, Woodland, Field and Hedgerow, out into Wild Country and down to the Seashore. Each excursion shows us plants and animals – and other signs – that we might well find, all beautifully and accurately drawn to show (but not over-emphasise) their separate

reviews

identi-features. A final chapter puts all in a seasonal context, showing, valuably, that winter is not just the end of this year but the start of next.

The whole concept and design of this book is a triumph. Brita's hand-lettered captions draw the eye to each of Mick's highly naturalistic pictures – many to a page – and her young explorers are sympathetic and real. The text is poetic in its expressive sparseness.

It's a remarkable thing that, although sharp and accurate colour photography has never been done better than now, the essence of a living thing – animal or vegetable – is always captured more completely by an expert wildlife artist. This is why, when trying to identify a find we always end up consulting Thorborn, Tunncliffe, Keble Martin, Bernard Venables or Edmund Sandars after finding ambiguous photos on Google. The Manningströms are fit company to join this firmament as this delightful book – all done by hand – shows. No growing family should go without it, for with it you can have a nature adventure every day. **TP**



Naughty Toes

★★★

Ann Bonwill, ill. Teresa Murfin, Oxford, 32pp, 978 0 1927 2852 4, 5.99 pbk

Trixie and her sister Belinda both attend ballet classes but while Belinda is a prima ballerina in the making, Trixie definitely is not. When Madame Mina gives the command 'point' everyone's toes turn out – except for Trixie whose naughty toes persist in going in the opposite direction – and when everyone is floating like graceful clouds, Trixie spins like a dust storm.

Trixie has her own style, it just isn't that of a ballerina and vibrant illustrations capture her character and inability to conform. Delightful collage and scratchy-style depictions of characters provide a note of quirkiness suited to Trixie and her mishaps as she bounces around well-designed pages.

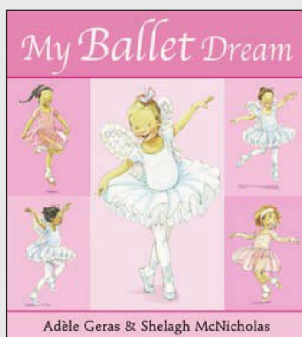
It does seem hard that Trixie is cast as a rock in the ballet show. However, Madame Mina, who no doubt needed to keep her out of harm's way, makes up for Trixie's inactive role by presenting her with the right shoes for her naughty toes – and Trixie discovers she is really a tap dancer. An entertaining look at not fitting in but eventually finding where talent and inclination lies. **VC**

My Ballet Dream

★★★★

Adèle Geras, ill. Shelagh McNicholas, Orchard, 32pp, 978 1 4083 0981 0, £10.99 hbk

Little Tilly Tutu – so called because she 'loves ballet SO much' – is getting ready for her ballet studio's annual show. Her class are all baby swans –



we are left to guess the ballet, but since this book is definitely, and only, for ballet-mad little girls, that shouldn't be difficult. The lead-up to the big performance is charted: practising the steps, learning to keep time with everyone else, getting ready for the dress rehearsal, watching the big girls who are also in the recital. The only dramas are minor: the costumes that arrive for the show are found to be blue instead of pink and after the performance Tilly forgets to take her curtsy. But of course, all is well; the girls look just as cute in blue and Tutu Tilly has a curtsy all to herself.

The illustrations are realistic and true to the textual narrative, picking up on Geras's words and embellishing them – a touch of the Helen Oxenbury's here. Plenty of page space is given to the young performers, and there is a lovely sense of being in a ballet studio during rehearsals. The spread depicting Tilly's dream of swans is the only one in the book that doesn't ring true and why the book is titled *My Ballet Dream* is a bit baffling. Its strength is the realism of the little girls, their enthusiasm, and reactions to the various very minor

mishaps during the dress rehearsal. This book will be loved by little ballerinas. Previous Tilly Tutu titles are *Little Ballet Star* and *The Ballet Class*. **VC**

This Book Totally Makes Stuff Grow

NON-FICTION

★

Maggie Bolger, ill. Nik Afia, Walker, 32pp, 978 1 4063 2678 9, £5.99 pbk

This 'activity' picture book appears to be a by-product of the 'hugely successful' Maggie & Rose club which, to quote the publishers 'now has over 500 families on their member books'. Such careless grammar makes me suspect the soundness of the work, which attempts to interest young folks in the practice and ecology of horticulture. Maggie, Rose and Oscar learn that you can make compost in three months – and this without activator and no inkling of what it's like when it's ready. That takes some believing.

The author – rightly too modest to be named either on title page or in bibliographical details – is very, and rightly, reverent of soil but then proceeds to call it 'dirt'; this Americanism is not only confusing, it sounds disrespectful.

And those creatures which, 40 years ago, we all learned to call 'mini-beasts', are here called 'bugs'. This is not helpful when the United Kingdom is experiencing a huge increase in its bedbug population... **TP**

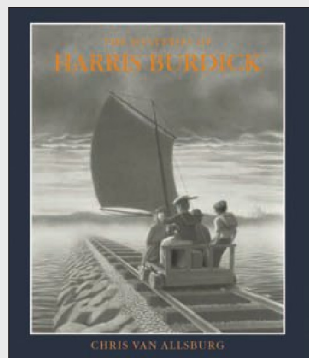
8 – 10 Junior/Middle

The Mysteries of Harris Burdick

★★★★★

Chris Van Allsburg, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978 1 84939 279 2, £5.99 pbk

The brief introduction to this unique picture book explains that Harris Burdick vanished, taking a sheaf of



stories with him but leaving behind one illustration from each tagged with an elusive caption. Sure enough, the chemistry of Chris Van Allsburg's writing and illustration make it impossible not to get drawn into imagining the tales behind these rich double page spreads. Story stimuli can be written and illustrations can engage – witness the work of James Carter sparking the creative thinking of young writers. However, it's the nature of these fourteen powerful black and white pencil illustrations that unsettle the reader into entering into what might be their back story. The scenarios are amazing, but, within them, it is the contortions of face, the play of light and dark, the details that require a closer look – these are what stimulate in a book that will be viewed again and again. Beautiful, inspiring, disturbing and stimulating – a masterpiece of engaging literature. **HTH**

Monacello: The Little Monk

★★★★

Geraldine McCaughrean, ill. Jana Diemberger, Phoenix Yard, 64pp,

978 1 90799912 03 0, £7.99, pbk

Monacello: The Little Monk brings together the only author to have won the Whitbread/Costa three times, an illustrator whose work for the book was her graduate show piece, and an innovative publisher of children's books founded in 2009. Phoenix Yard claim they are 'not afraid of pushing boundaries, particularly in design and illustrative style'. Their press release also tells us, for good measure, that Jana Diemberger is a tattoo enthusiast and a medal winning boxer.

Monacello is a founding, abandoned in a straw-filled crate at the door of a convent in Naples, perhaps in medieval times. Only Sister Clementa offers him any compassion. For the other nuns, the tiny 'snuffling, scuttling, scuffling little creature', wrapped in his oversized monk's habit, is an ugly pest, a goblin, a devil, a gremlin. When Monacello hears stories of Mary and Jesus, another who started life in 'a box of straw', he longs to find his own mother. His search takes him into the streets and around the stalls of the city. At first the Neapolitans see him as an

omen, the Bad Luck Boy. Their curses and blows drive Monacello into the labyrinthine Undercity, where the 'centuries have piled one city on top of the one before'. Here, he sets up his own kingdom with his friends, the hundreds of cats which range the watery passageways beneath the streets. Before long, he shares his new domain with the homeless Napolina, a girl whose ragged clothes include a patch of sky blue over her heart. Through an impulsive act of kindness towards Napolina and the strong spirit which beats beneath her wretchedness, Monacello's fortunes change. In time, he becomes the citizens' Good Luck Boy.

McCaughrean's reworking of a classic Italian folk story reads aloud wonderfully with its tale-teller's seeming simplicity and its frequent alliterations and internal rhymes. The menacing illustrations of Jana Diemberger, an artist of Italian/Austrian upbringing, will also invite shared talk between listener and reader. Her choice of viewpoint is often startling and dramatic. The dark, crater-eyes set in the pale moon of the

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

foundling's face haunt the pages. Only once is that face lit by a wan smile when Monacello has reached out to warm Napolina's icy sadness. No doubt financial constraints required the book to be backed in stiff card rather than the board covers it deserves, since it is designed with such care and this layered tale will demand to be revisited many times.

One frustration, though. The driving pulse of the story has been Monacello's search for his mother. Turning the closing pages in expectation of a meeting, we discover only the publisher's promise of Book II: 'Amid the strangers and dangers of Naples, lies the secret Monacello longs to find.' But readers have known that since page 10. They'll want to know about his mother now. **GF**

Sterling and the Canary

★★★★

Andy Stanton, Barrington Stoke, 72pp, 978 1842990059, £5.99 pbk

The moment Sterling Thaxton sets eyes on new girl Lizzie Harris he falls in love. But despite the fact that he is tall and strong and amazing at sports, the girl of his dreams is not easily won. She makes demands that he cannot achieve on his own but asking his best friend Doctor Edward Macintosh for help would be just to embarrassing. A talking canary may be the answer to all his problems, but even that has a secret of its own. This is a good addition to Barrington Stoke books aimed at reading age 8, interest age 9-12. As you'd expect from the author of the 'Mr Gum' books, it is also funny with likeable characters and a lovely final twist to the plot. **DF**

A Roman Rescue

★★★★

KA Gerrard, ill. Emma Dodd, Templar, 88pp, 978 1 84877 191 8, £6.99 pbk

This is the first in a new series of graphic time-travel adventures, in which once again the poor old Romans are subjected to a young visitor from the 21st century, who is instantly accepted and quickly helps his young Roman counterpart to win the chariot race with a bit of modern know-how and a skateboard.

I found the manga style illustrations heavy and crude in line and colour although I'm sure plenty of young readers will find both story and pictures to their liking. The text, mostly in speech bubbles, is clear and easy to read. And if some real information about Roman life is wanted, there is a bit-at-the-back with some facts. **AG**

The Language of Cat and Other Poems

POETRY

★★★★★

Rachel Rooney, ill. Ellie Jenkins, Frances Lincoln, 96pp, 978 1 84780 167 8, £5.99 pbk

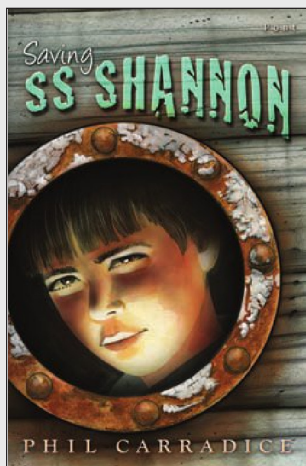
It is always good to come across a new name in children's poetry and Rachel Rooney is one to note. Having had more than 60 of her poems accepted for anthologies, Rooney has served her apprenticeship and deserves to have her first collection published in Janetta Otter-Barry's new poetry list for Frances Lincoln. Rooney also knows her young audience well, as she is a teacher and experienced at running writing workshops. The title of the book, *The Language of Cat*, could be misleading as, apart from one lovely poem, the subject matter has little to do with animals. But it's certainly got a lot to do with language, including the special way poets use words. Indeed, poetry itself is her most popular subject and Rooney writes persuasively, and often amusingly, about the 'P' word: 'Then who plucked the T from a thorn/ carved an ivory pen out of a horn/ and dipped it in ink...' Other poems are thoughtful, quirky, sensitive, amusing, occasionally edgy. Hers is a welcome new voice; she has a lot of talent and has earned the Poet Laureate's positive recommendation on the back cover. **MST**

Saving SS Shannon

★★★★

Phil Carradice, Pont, 112pp, 978 1 84851 164 4, £5.99 pbk

This exciting and energetic narrative works at several levels, against a backdrop of the 'preservation versus



modernisation' debate. William Johnstone, the hesitant son of the local newspaper editor, discovers that an old shipwreck in his local harbour is a significant historic vessel. The plot unfolds through rapid action as William, with the help of a local librarian, tries to save the ship and wharf buildings from developers. He is eventually successful in getting protected status for the area, but not before finding himself in several threatening situations with the school bully, whose father happens to be the thwarted developer.

The issue of bullying forms a core theme to this novel as both William and his father Ted are bullied by the father

and son team of Danny and Dylan Mills. With the help of his friends, William eventually finds the courage to fight back – on one occasion quite literally. Gradually, Danny and his gang are revealed as cowards. By standing up to the bullies, Ted's newspaper is saved from bankruptcy and William's school life becomes more settled. After attempting to set fire to the SS Shannon so that the development can't go ahead, Danny is arrested and his father's plans come to nothing, thus proving that bullying doesn't pay. **GR**

Wasim and the Champ

★★★★

Chris Ashley, ill. Kate Pankhurst, Frances Lincoln, 112pp, 978 1 84780 057 2, £5.99 pbk

This is the fourth story about football mad Wasim, his family and friends. Here racial tensions threaten to ruin the local football competition when the teams become split between white and Asian boys. Wasim learns from others about 'them and us' situations and helps, with the aid of a surprise star celebrity, to diffuse the situation and focus the attention once again on football. There is enough football content to maintain the interest of sports fans whilst dealing with racial tensions, bullying and friends taking sides against each other. **DF**

Pillywiggins and the Tree Witch

★★★★

Julia Jarman, Andersen Press, 128pp, 978-1849390187, £4.99

When Natasha moves to a new house she finds the statue of a fairy in the garden beneath the shadow of a huge and menacing tree that must surely be a witch. With the help of local boy Jamie, Natasha unravels an ancient mystery that involves the witch's baby and a fairy turned to stone. Natasha must visit fairy land to solve the mystery and save her own brother, but will she ever return home? This is a charming, gentle story which those who enjoy 'fairy' stories will love. It is also the story of a little girl making new friends but staying true to herself. **DF**



Grubtown Tales: When Bunnies Turn Bad

★★★★

Philip Ardagh, ill. Jim Paillot, Faber, 160pp, 978 0 571 27236 5, £4.99 pbk

Philip Ardagh's reputation for humour and slapstick is already well established not only in the Grubtown series (of which this is the eighth volume) but also in many of his other novels. How the arrival of lots of rabbits adds to the general chaos and mayhem that feature in the everyday life of Grubtown is only made more unbelievable by the appearance of Rumpus Corncrake, the Sun-Ripe Raisin man... Fans of the series will need no further encouragement to pick up this book and enjoy. Adults should be warned that this is not a book for a quiet reading session – the jokes and funny situations are just asking to be shared by children and whoever else is around! (P.S. As a beardy myself, I enjoy reviewing books by other beardies!!!) **RL**

Kidnap in the Caribbean

★★★★

Lauren St John, Orion, 208pp, 978 1 4440 0021 4, £9.99 hbk

In this second Laura Marlin mystery, the action moves to Antigua. After mysteriously winning a free holiday for herself and her Uncle (on which Tariq and her beloved three-legged husky Skye accidentally accompany her), Laura encounters puzzling problems as soon as the ship casts off – problems which culminate in the kidnap of her Uncle by the Straight A gang. Following a hunch, Laura and Tariq fly to Montserrat only to get drawn into a deadly game with Marine Concern, a front for an illegal global fishing industry. They escape to face a further menace – an erupting volcano. Eventually, Laura is able to enjoy her dream holiday, but only after defeating the sinister threat from the Straight A gang with the help of Jimmy Garnett, a boy who is transformed from awkward child to reliable friend in the course of the narrative.

The settings of Antigua and Montserrat are brought to life through vivid descriptions, while the scientific information provided by the volcanologist Rupert has been meticulously researched. Tension is sustained as threatening events follow in quick succession and Laura proves herself more than a match for the challenges.

Written in brief, fast-paced chapters, most of which end with a cliff hanger, this book lends itself to reading aloud to upper Junior school pupils. It would also provide exciting independent reading for any 8-11 year olds who enjoy detective novels or who are concerned about the oceans' endangered marine species. Laura Marlin fans who loved *Dead Man's Cove* and who have eagerly awaited the sequel will not be disappointed. **GR**

reviews

Meerkat Madness

★★★

Ian Whybrow, ill. Sam Hearn,
HarperCollins, 208pp,
978 0 00 741153 5, £4.99 pbk

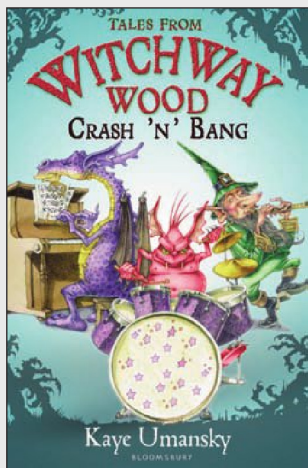
Uncle is bringing up three young Meerkat kits in a burrow. A born raconteur who cannot resist the chance to tell his charges a story, the kits are devoted to him. But how about the rest of the family? How will they react when the kits are brought out to meet them? Not very well, as it happens... and is their faith in their Uncle intact? Well, let's say an element of doubt creeps in – but throughout the adventures that befall them, the stronger elements of affection and trust keep them together. And that's not to mention the appearance of a squeaky toy and various other mysterious items, one of which even releases a foul stream of brown liquid into the atmosphere. Never at a loss for interpreting the world through Meerkat eyes, the Meerkat kits and their uncle bumble through a succession of adventures some amusing and some dangerous until they find an ideal place to live and Uncle's stories are finally put to the test. An amusing but overlong book which will appeal to readers who have developed reading stamina but still retain a taste for simple but unsophisticated humour. **RL**

Tales from Witchway Wood: Crash 'n' Bang

★★★★

Kaye Umansky, ill. Nick Price,
Bloomsbury, 224pp,
978 1 4088 0188 8, £5.99 pbk

Kaye Umansky has started this new series featuring minor characters from the popular Pongwiffy series, their previous adventures being referred to in footnotes. The premise here is that an ill-assorted bunch of trolls, fiends,



dragons and leprechauns have formed a band, specialising in their own special brand of 'crash 'n' bang' music. Usually hired for tamer stuff, they decide to enter the Battle of the Bands and bring the joys of their music to a bigger audience. Joined by werewolf Tallulah who, despite her provenance

and her ghastly dress sense, has a terrific voice, they set off for certain glory. All of course comes to grief when a thunderstorm drives their audience away, but they realise that they don't care anyway, they've enjoyed it so much.

Unlike most contemporary books for this age group and of similar readability, the swashbuckling humour here masks some deeply felt but lightly conveyed values relating to the trappings of celebrity and wealth, the importance of friendship and having fun, the ease with which one can be deceived by appearances or the promise of a good deal and the value of living for the moment rather than holding to tradition. A lot more meat than is usual, slipped in incidentally by an experienced, confident writer. **AG**

Casper Candlewacks in Death by Pigeon

★★★

Ivan Brett, HarperCollins, 224pp,
978 0 00 741155 9, £5.99 pbk

Casper Candlewacks is the only person living in the village of Corne-on-the-Kobb who is not stupid; even his teacher can't read. When a visit by the famous magician, The Great Tiramisu, ends in disaster Casper's father is blamed and sentenced to death by pigeon. Can Casper and his friend Lamp Flannigan and their washing-up liquid buggy save the day? This is a first novel by Ivan Brett and would probably appeal to all those children to enjoy Andy Stanton and Roald Dahl type stories. It moves along at a fast pace with plenty of silliness and jokes along the way. **DF**

Magnus Fin and the Moonlight Mission

★★★

Janis Mackay, Kelpies, 224pp,
978 0 86315 796 7, £5.99 pbk

This is the second story about Magnus Fin and his friends. Magnus is half selkie, part human and part seal, and in this story he discovers illegal rubbish dumping in the sea is killing his seal family and polluting the ocean. This is a gentle story which will be enjoyed by children who want a straightforward adventure tale where fantasy and environmental issues provide the young protagonists with the chance to outwit evil adults. There are also elements of accepting and enjoying being different and how families work together. **DF**

Sky Hawk

★★★★★

Gill Lewis, Oxford, 240pp,
978 0 19 275623 7, £8.99 pbk

'Nothing prepared me for seeing her right in front of me. It was as if the lochs and the mountains and the sky were folded deep inside her, as if she was a small piece of this vast landscape and none of it could exist without her.'

'She' is a rare osprey who has nested in a pine tree on the loch. The loch is above the farm belonging to Callum's family in the Scottish Highlands, but it

is fey, gypsyish Iona who has discovered the osprey and then reveals her whereabouts as a precious secret to Callum. Iona is an outsider in village society, left with her eccentric grandfather by a 'feckless' mother. But Lewis reveals that sometimes it is the 'outsider' who sees most. In this moving story, Iona is the one who is deeply in tune with the natural environment, able to stalk a red deer to within a hand's breadth and catch trout with her bare hands. She leads the already sensitive Callum to see his own world more vividly, but the initial price is his friendship with his old laddish gang.

The two children name the osprey, Iris, after the Goddess of the wind and sky, and Iona's watchfulness helps to save her when Iris is caught by fishing wire. This involves revealing Iris' existence to Callum's parents and Hamish at the local nature reserve. As part of a project to monitor ospreys, Hamish tags the bird with a transmitter so that her migration pattern can be tracked. Then events take a tragic turn and Iona falls victim to meningitis...

In dealing with his grief, Callum has to re-evaluate his friendships and let others share his secret, while in mourning Iona's death, the villagers are also confronted with their attitudes to others.

In an audacious narrative twist, Gill Lewis now widens the scope of her book, as Callum and friends track Iris' perilous journey to overwinter in the Gambia via her satellite position on Google Earth. On arrival, the bird falls ill from her old foot injury, anxiously monitored long distance by Callum and his friends. In desperation, Callum appeals to as many organisations as he can in the Gambia and receives an unexpected reply from a young Gambian girl, Jeneba who is lying sick in hospital.

Lewis now draws the threads of her story tightly together, as co-operation between the widely distant communities of the Scottish Highlands and the Gambia work to transform the life, first of wounded Iris and then of Jeneba herself. In helping Jeneba, Callum both brings his community together and finds a resolution to his own grief for Iona.

A bare outline of Sky Hawk makes it sound schematic, but Gill Lewis' beautifully understated writing gently sweeps her reader along and the story, itself, quietly and lyrically conveys her moving and timely message of the interconnectedness of people with nature and people with people – whether within one village or across the earth. This is a beautiful book which will have resonance for many readers beyond its target readership. **CH**

Small Change for Stuart

★★★

Lissa Evans, Doubleday, 288pp,
978 0 385 61800 7, £10.99 hbk

Things change for ten year old Stuart Horten who is unwillingly spending his summer holidays in his father's home town when he starts looking into his family history and discovers he comes from a long line of stage magicians.

Further research aided by Alice, one of the triplets living next door, makes it clear that the spirit of his great uncle, once the most famous magician of his age, is willing him on to discover the whereabouts of a long lost collection of stage tricks. Beating off some adult rivals also looking for the same thing, Stuart finally wins through after some extraordinary adventures. This bright, action-packed novel is Lissa Evans' first for children, and perhaps more time could have been spent on character where she can be very witty, and less on ever-escalating plot developments. Even so, this is a promising debut with much both to excite and amuse. **NT**

One Dog and his Boy

★★★★★

Eva Ibbotson, ill. Sharon Rentta,
Marion Lloyd Books, 288pp,
978 1 4071 2423 0, £10.99 hbk

Incredibly funny and touching, this is the last story by a much-loved author whose books show extraordinary insight into the mind of a child. All Hal has ever wanted is a dog. But his wealthy parents refuse, throwing at him instead all sorts of fancy, expensive toys. When his disappointment gives way to listlessness, his father has a brainwave – he'll let Hal choose a dog from Easy Pets, a dog agency that hires out pets for special occasions. Of course, he doesn't tell Hal that the animal is only for the weekend. Overjoyed, Hal chooses a scruffy little mongrel called Fleck. Life is blissful – until, a few days later, he discovers that he's been tricked and that Fleck has been returned to the Agency in his absence. Outraged, Hal runs away.

The story is deeply understanding of child readers of this age group. Every obstacle – and there are many – that Hal's runaway adventure throws up is successfully – and happily – resolved so that the story is suspenseful yet gently reassuring. Acutely observant, the book is brimming with humour – affectionate towards the children and dogs, and biting towards the adults who treat them as possessions and accessories. Characters both human and animal are real and sharply defined. Adding further enjoyment to this richly entertaining story are Sharon Rentta's expressive line drawings capturing the flavour of each chapter. **AF**

Cat's Cradle

★★★★

Julia Golding, Egmont, 400pp,
978 1 4052 4305 6, £5.99 pbk

Cat is back in London after her adventures in America and the Caribbean. Awaiting her is a letter that may provide her with information about the mother who left her as an infant on the steps of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane. Unfortunately, the writer lives in Scotland. Undaunted Cat sets off to find the truth and in so doing is once again catapulted into situations that call upon all her resourcefulness and courage.

This is the seventh in the Cat Royal series and follows a similar pattern to

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

its predecessors. Picking up on Cat's background, theatrical allusions abound from the organisation of the chapters (Acts and scenes) to the content with its strong element of melodrama and even pantomime. Cat is a lively protagonist whose exuberant approach to life will attract young readers. By giving her orphan status and a bohemian background, she can move across all barriers with friends ranging from the aristocracy to criminals from the London slums. This allows Golding to introduce a wealth of colourful historical detail and characters. However, this background is applied with a broad brush, in no way impeding the non-stop action of the plot which moves briskly along carrying the reader with it. A lively, undemanding but extended read for readers aged 8 and up. And Cat Royal fans can look forward to more. **FH**

The Crowfield Demon

★★★★

Pat Walsh, Chicken House, 400pp, 978 1 906427 63 4, £6.99 pbk

This sequel to Pat Walsh's *The Crowfield Curse* returns us to Crowfield barely three months later, and if orphan Will thought that evil had been vanquished from his adopted home, he soon has to wake up and smell the cauldre. A stomach-turning encounter with the Dark King in disguise shows that danger lurks once more in those parts. The Abbey building has begun mysteriously to crumble, and as the monks try desperately to repair the damage, Will finds a truly terrifying object buried under the floor of a side chapel that could spell the end of Crowfield for ever.

Once again Pat Walsh brings the cloistered world of Crowfield vividly to life and we learn more absorbing snippets about medieval life along the way. Will is an engaging hero, and the concept of ancient pagan spirits which lie trapped and bent on revenge beneath the foundations of the Christian abbey is a compelling one. There's even a nice nod to Dan Brown in the feverish speculation about the mysterious bowl that Will unearths. If it were a little shorter, *The Crowfield*

Demon would better sustain a sense of real peril. The demon itself is somehow not as frightening as it might be, such that I began to wonder if it had a genuine grievance about a great big abbey being built without planning permission, smack on top of its spiritual home. But there's still plenty to enjoy here. And I love now knowing what cauldre is. **CS**

The Dragon Whisperer

★★★★★

Lucinda Hare, Corgi, 416pp, 978 0 552 56022 1, £5.99 pbk

Quenelda is passionate about dragons. She also has a special ability to communicate with them, an innate gift the importance of which only her father and the elderly dragon master know. Her father, commander of the most feared battle-dragon regiment in Dragonsdome, allows her to spend her days in the company of dragons, honing her riding skills and learning to care for them. Dreading the day when she must swap her boots and breeches for lace and silk and join the other young girls at court, she begs her father to allow her to continue her dragon education a while longer. Her ambition is to

accompany him into battle, swooping through the skies on her scaly mount. He agrees to postpone her court debut, provided she trains seriously by taking on young Root as apprentice. Root is her opposite: newly orphaned, he's fearful, timid and inept, with no enthusiasm for dragons. But gradually, from their relationship grow friendship and loyalty – and also self-awareness – traits essential to combating the gathering storm of treachery, sorcery and evil that is encircling the realm.

The story skilfully weaves a fantasy world that is utterly convincing, peopled with humans, gnomes, hobgoblins and many-hued dragons. The writing is energetic, poetic at times, with vivid descriptions of landscape adding atmosphere and mood. By the end of the book, many of the story threads remain unresolved so whetting the reader's appetite and leaving room for a sequel, which is due to be published shortly. David Wyatt's finely hatched drawings echo the richness of the story. **AF**

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

Sita, Daughter of the Earth

★★★★

Saraswati Nagpal, ill. R Mandikandan, Campfire, 96pp, 978 93 80028 37 8, £7.99 pbk

The epic of the Ramayana is here presented as a very colourful graphic novel, with Sita as a Bollywood beauty and Rama and Lakshmana as well-ripped Hollywood hunks. The format is well-suited to this tale of struggles between demons and demigods, though I was a little disappointed at the restraint practised by artist and writer in eschewing the possibilities afforded by full and double page spreads for depicting the epic's many scenes of spectacular miracle and carnage.

The emphasis here is firmly on the subtler details of the story; in particular, the incessant conflicts between the iron code of Kshatriya honour and the passion of the lovers at the centre of the story. As the title signifies, the authorial voice is Sita's, giving prominence to aspects sometimes marginalized by those retellings which culminate in a triumphant Diwali: the trial by fire when her chastity is doubted, her second exile to the forest to bear her children alone, her eventual abandonment of Rama, after a life of defiantly patient devotion, for reunion with her mother Budhevi, the goddess of the Earth. A quiet poignancy counterpoints the fiery graphics of these pages, giving readers yet another perspective on an inexhaustibly retellable tale. **GH**

Gravenhunger

★★★★

Harriet Goodwin, Stripes, 192pp, 978 1 84715 154 4, £5.99 pbk

12-year-old Phoenix goes to stay at the mysterious house his mother (who has recently died) has left his father – a house they knew nothing about, which exists in its own stormy micro climate, defying the summer heat in which the surrounding countryside is basking. Warned not to visit the burial mound just beyond the garden, Phoenix and his cousin Rose stumble upon the reason for his mother's silence about the house and discern what took place there in her childhood. Their attempts to set things right succeed after encountering the spirits which haunt the place.

Very readable, with shades of William Mayne's *Earthfasts*, the story shows how Phoenix's desperation to understand his mother's past helps him begin his own journey to acceptance, helped by his developing friendship with Rose. I found the ending somewhat abrupt and a little unsatisfying, but it doesn't detract unduly from this enjoyable if undemanding read. **AG**

The Rabbit Girl

★★★★

Mary Arrigan, Frances Lincoln, 224pp, 978 1 84780 156 2, £6.99 pbk

Three different places: three different times. Mary Arrigan's novel deals with a variety of settings and, occasionally with the help of some handy coincidences, succeeds in linking them

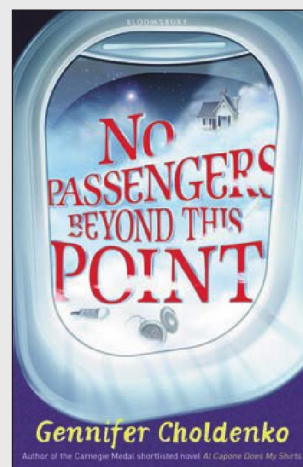
into a story of some charm and originality. An opening chapter resurrects the Ireland of 1934,

with five-year-old Tony seeing his mother die, the prelude to his subsequent emigration with his father to London. The arrival of war brings further dislodgement for the boy in the form of evacuation to a farm in the Lake District, where he is befriended by another London evacuee, Alice, staying on a neighbouring farm owned by the mysterious 'Mrs H'. London bombing raids seem far away from the two children's new surroundings which, while never particularly harsh, demand hard work and application, alleviated by Mrs H's kind concern. She, it turns out, is an artist of considerable distinction and it is one of her paintings, featuring a girl and a rabbit, which links the wartime dimension of Arrigan's story with 'England, the present day', to quote the title of her second chapter. In this setting, some seventy years on from the Lake District chapters, we encounter best friends Mallie and Jamila, both young teenagers: the former, in choosing a birthday present for her aspiring artist mother, happens to come across an old painting...The various worlds of Arrigan's novel are brought together with a fair balance of poignancy, sentimentality and humour, the last of these evident mainly in the 'present day' chatter between Mallie and Jamila. And, by way of an extra bonus, there is a closing revelation about the precise identity of Mrs H. Older readers, drawing on their knowledge of the Lake District, literary rabbits and artistic ladies, may possibly have had their suspicions sometime before all is made clear. **RD**

No Passengers Beyond This Point

★★★★★

Gennifer Choldenko, Bloomsbury, 256pp, 978 1 4088 1572 4, £6.99 pbk



Here for a change is a teenage novel unlike any other. Starting with that most recurring of current clichés, whereby young characters are shown having to cope with a sudden and initially unwanted relocation to somewhere remote in the country, things then take a wholly unexpected turn. Half way through the journey to their new home, the flight that the three American siblings are on makes an unscheduled stop at a strange place which initially looks like some sort of

reviews

paradise. Each child is welcomed as if they were a very special sort of star, with everyone apparently knowing about all their particular strengths and ambitions. But there is something not quite right about the new society they are moving into, whose smiling outer face takes on a different and more sinister complexion should it ever be challenged. Teenage India, aged 14, still accepts everything there at face value, but her younger brother and clever infant sister soon smell a rat and try to make their escape. At this stage, every reader will realise that what is really happening here is a battle between life and giving in to easeful death in the intervening moments between the plane crashing and the children concerned struggling to survive in real life. Well written, sometimes eccentric, this strange story is not always easy to follow but is certainly worth the effort. **NT**

Where She Went

★★★★

Gayle Forman, Doubleday, 272pp, 978 0857530288, £10.99 pbk

This is the sequel to Forman's hugely successful (at least in the States) *If I Stay*, the story of teenager Mia Hall in a coma, deciding whether to choose life. And, from this next book, we learn that the lives that she and her boy friend Adam have chosen have turned out in some ways rather well. Adam is now a disillusioned, moody rock star; his band's epoch making album based on the emotional devastation caused by his break up with Mia. She is a rising classical music star. After years of being out of touch but still in each other's minds, they meet when he goes to her concert at Carnegie Hall. They spend the night and early morning going to ordinary places and doing ordinary things in New York, rake over the ashes of their love and rekindle it. So far, so predictable: but this is just the glossy packaging for an engrossing journey, switching back and forth in time and between Adam and Mia, through the emotional tangles of a relationship complicated by tragedy and the misunderstandings, resentments, jealousies, betrayals, unlooked-for sacrifices, and the rest of the baggage that every relationship can carry with it. Forman writes with conviction; and, if the milieu is glamorous, it is believable, even down to the calluses on Mia's cello playing fingers. These are two extraordinarily talented and successful young people, as screwed-up as the rest of us. It could be a winning combination with young readers. **CB**

Forgotten

★★★★

Cat Patrick, Egmont, 288pp, 978 1 4052 5361 1, £6.99 pbk

London Lane cannot remember the past. A near-fatal car crash after which she died and was revived causes her memory to reset itself daily at the time of her 'death'. In addition to this problem she is also able to see into the future and it is the combination of these two states which provides the tension at the centre of a story which is

as much psychological drama as romance.

Memory can be both a blessing and a burden but to lose it is to lose a large part of what makes us who we are, what connects us to those around us. London is compelled to make copious and exhaustive notes at the end of each day in order to be able to bring some sense of order and progression to her life, especially her most intimate relationships, with her rather shallow best friend Jamie and her utterly perfect boyfriend, Luke.

She is troubled by the fact that she cannot see Luke in her future and is she is repeatedly visited by a disturbingly grim vision of a funeral which she cannot decipher. This takes her on a quest to find the father who disappeared when she was very young and to solve the mystery of the funeral. The end of the book is its weakest part – she unties the knot of the funeral too soon and too easily for readers to be convinced: the writing feels rushed, with a strained urgency.

However, the characters are credible, as are London's relationships with her friends and family and the narrative cracks along, taking the reader with it. The film rights for the book have just been sold where it will come up against such movies as *50 First Dates*, *The Time-Traveler's Wife* and *Memento*. **VR**

Wintercraft: Blackwatch

★★★★

Jenna Burtenshaw, Headline, 288pp, 978 0 7553 7122 8, £6.99 pbk

Fans of Jenna Burtenshaw's debut novel *Wintercraft* will now be able to renew their acquaintance with its fantasy landscapes and characters in her follow-up, *Blackwatch*. Once again, in terrains that are increasingly dark and macabre, we have the opportunity to pursue, in particular, two destinies, those of Kate Winters and Silas Dane, and to penetrate the many mazes (moral and otherwise) of the world known as Albion. The narrative is, for most of the time, quite gripping, though very close reading is necessary if all the subtleties of the twists and turns of friendship and loyalty are to be grasped: watch out for what develops in the relationship between Kate and her always trustworthy friend Edgar. With both of the main characters on the run from forces determined to capture them, the plot proceeds at a lively pace and the introduction of new characters, especially the enigmatic Dallah Grey, ensures the reader's continuing involvement. It must be said, though, that at times the novel's depiction of the intricacies of its many power struggles becomes repetitive, as does its emphasis on the quasi-mystical 'veil' which separates the worlds of the living and the worlds of the dead. There is a denouement of sorts but by the novel's end many outcomes have still to be clarified. As we leave Kate 'completely and powerlessly alone' on a ship 'carrying her towards a fate laid down for her by her ancestors long ago' we know that a third, concluding volume of Burtenshaw's trilogy is on its way. **RD**

The Western Mysteries: The Case of the Deadly Desperadoes

★★★

Caroline Lawrence, ill. Richard Russell Lawrence, Orion, 288pp, 978 1 4440 0169 3, £9.99 hbk

This novel set in the 1860s begins with 12-year-old P K Pinkerton finding his foster father dead with an axe in his chest and his foster mother alive only long enough to whisper some instructions into his ear. Our hero shows little of the emotion one would normally expect from a child of 12 who encounters such a scenario. PK is guided by his belief in God but he has trouble telling whether people are genuine or not. His story is supposedly written on some ledger books found in Caroline Lawrence's great-grandmother's attic in California.

The reader readily enters the life of this resourceful and engaging young man as he goes on the run from Whittlin Walt who is in search of a letter which gives the bearer ownership of some land near Pleasant Town. This land is evidently worth a dollar or two as PK is chased to Virginia City, encountering Belle, the 'Soiled Dove' and the newspaper reporter Sam Clemens, aka Mark Twain. Helped by a Chinese boy and a professional gambler who teaches him how to read people by watching their feet, PK evades Walt until the final pages when he is trapped down a mineshaft and writes his story on the ledger to be found later which is where we came in.

The text is full of clever jokes like PK's description of the prostitute Belle as a 'Soiled Dove', or the exchanges on p.205 about the meaning of Mark Twain and the many misspellings of words like 'hore' for whore. These may appeal to an adult but would I fear pass over a child's head. The story moves along at a pace, is very exciting and full of twists and turns and, if the reader can suspend the picture in his/her mind of the foster father with an axe in his chest, then it is a good read. To enjoy this Western genre reality has to take a back seat. This novel would read aloud very well and also probably make a good film. **JFI**

Ashes

★★★

Kathryn Lasky, Puffin, 320pp, 978 0 14 241112 4, £5.99 pbk

The burning of books in Berlin in the 1930s is perhaps one of the lesser known atrocities of the Nazis. Many of the greatest writers in the world were considered not pure German and their works, therefore, were burnt in a great pyre in a square in Berlin. Today one can visit the site where it occurred, and see a glass window in the paving which is a memorial to this act of vandalism.

Kathryn Lasky takes the rise of Adolf Hitler and the increasing power of the Nazi Party leading to the book burning, as the background to the story of 13 year-old Gaby, second daughter of an eminent professor of astronomy and a music teacher. Her father is a friend of Albert Einstein. This novel is Gaby's

witness to the events of the 1930s which involve even her beloved elder sister, Ulla.

Gaby is a great reader and each chapter is prefaced with extracts from some of her favourite books. The *Call of the Wild* by Jack London is one, and Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* another. There are also quotations from Erich Kastner, Ernest Hemingway, Heinrich Heine, and Schiller. Together with her friend Rosa, Gaby moves to the gymnasium (secondary) school and encounters Frau Hofstadt, a charismatic teacher of literature. The two girls slavish fans of this elegant woman, only becoming disillusioned when she asks them to join the girls' division of the Hitler Youth Movement. Gaby then discovers that Frau Hofstadt is in fact Goebbel's mistress. Around the same time Ulla becomes pregnant by Karl her boyfriend whom Gaby mistrusts but cannot pinpoint why. Slowly she holds that Hitler has on the German population becomes evident, with Jewish friends disappearing and some like Albert Einstein leaving for America, until in the end Gaby's parents decide to leave Germany too. Even though they are not Jewish, but they have been marked as 'white Jews' and are therefore vulnerable.

The story starts slowly and there are some annoying Americanisms in the text which detract from its historical feel, but after this slow start it does build inexorably to the climax of the book burning. The extracts from the works of literature which preface every chapter do not entirely fulfil their purpose in that they are too long in some cases and spoil the flow of the narrative. This is, however, a story which will shine a light on a dark period of history and it should provoke some heated discussions about censorship. **JFI**

Thief!

★★★★★

Malorie Blackman, Corgi, 360 pp, 978 055255 56 23, £5.99 pbk

This taut and exciting story, first published in 1995, successfully combines insight and imagination with a strong moral message. Twelve-year-old Lydia Henson has recently moved with her family from London to a small Yorkshire town. Already an outsider, she is victimised after being framed for the theft of a school cup. The story then takes an unexpected turn as she is transported 37 years into the future, and sees the far reaching consequences of this situation and the resentment that it causes. But can Lydia get back to her own time, and change the future?

Blackman portrays the unpleasant processes of social ostracism with painful realism, before launching into a science-fiction adventure with echoes of Orwell's 1984 and Wells's *The Shape of Things to Come*. Here, a local tyrant rules with the aid of visored guards, while a resistance movement operates through underground passages. This dystopian future, with flying cars and synthetic-meat sandwiches, is also close enough to the present to be populated by the

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

adult versions of Lydia's fellow-pupils, now approaching 50. This enables an immediate link to be established between the realism of the first few chapters and the science-fiction that follows.

Although not all the elements from the future are resolved (is Britain still going to break up into rival principalities?), the corrosive and destructive effects of 'bitterness and pain and overwhelming hatred' are graphically demonstrated. This is the real core of the book, presented with an ingenious combination of school-story and science-fiction which makes it a meaningful and salutary read. **RT**

Lula does the Hula

★★★★★

Samantha Macintosh, Egmont, 384pp, 978 1 4052 5653 7, £5.99, pbk

Tallulah Bird is as off-beat a character as her name suggests. Her ex-alcoholic musician father, deceased white-witch grandmother and eccentric sisters provide a vivid backdrop for her energetic adventures. Add to this eclectic collection a delectable boyfriend and a motley crew of larger than life friends and you have...the Georgia Nicholson diaries? Commendably, Macintosh makes the mix very much her own, nodding to Louise Rennison's hugely popular series but standing very firmly on her own narrative feet.

Humour resonates throughout, generated both by plot and character. There is a healthy portion of laugh-out-loud farce, substantiated by a lively wit and sharp comic timing. This is skilful writing, poised on the edge of cheerful chaos but never falling into it and it provides an excellent foil for the darker moments in the book. Rumours dog Tallulah, generated by the legacy she has supposedly inherited from her witch grandmother and are fuelled by the sort of coincidences which can add up to a superficially convincing jinx on any unfortunate male who gets too close to her. In addition, Tallulah's journalist boyfriend Jack, unfortunately aided by the manipulative and conveniently gorgeous Jazz, are investigating a mystery at Frey's Dam, a local beauty spot and when Tallulah and her friends step in to help, they get much more than they bargained for.

Lula does the Hula is an intriguing and engaging tapestry of sub plots, entertaining characters and thoughtful asides about the problems that beset teenage girls. It's fresh, without pretension and thoroughly entertaining. The break-neck pace of the narrative carries the reader along but is never used as an excuse to trivialise the story. The jacket conveys perfectly the frivolous elements of the narrative but doesn't suggest the more serious intricacies and tension which are expertly woven in to the narrative. **VR**

Six Days

★★★★★

Philip Webb, Chicken House, 384pp, 978 1 906427 62 7, £6.99 pbk

Post-apocalyptic fiction for young adults has now been with us in sufficient quantity for it to have acquired its own stock of recurring themes and stereotypes: the challenge for a new entrant to the genre is to avoid the formulaic and, in the process, to express a futuristic vision which, to some credible extent, bears some relevance to the world which its readers actually inhabit. Judged by these criteria, Philip Webb's debut novel deserves high praise. The setting is an often scarifying London of the future, at a period when 'The Empire of New Russia' has become 'the conquerors of the world', the 'Empire' having its public face in the form of 'the Vlds', the 'lords and masters' of what remains of ordinary humanity. The latter is largely represented in the novel by a group of young people, principally sister and brother Cass and Wilbur, subsequently joined by two others, Peyto and Erin, who have arrived from a far distant world: it has taken them a billion years to reach London. The enterprise in which all of these become engaged revolves around their urgent necessity to discover a long buried 'artefact' which, when found, may stave off a final catastrophe. The characterisation of the four young people is strong and attractive, the opposing forces supplying quite a gallery of the sinister and sadistic. Once battle is joined, Webb exploits every opportunity of twist and turn to create a narrative which will keep a young audience involved. His insights into parental-child relationships, explored at several levels in various contexts, results in an additional, rich dimension. **RD**

The Thirteen Secrets

★★★★★

Michelle Harrison, Simon & Schuster, 400pp, 978 0 85707 089 0, £6.99 pbk

This is the third and final volume in 'The Thirteen' trilogy, following on from The Thirteen Treasures and The Thirteen Curses and it has teenage Rowan living a conventional life. But she has a secret. Under the name of Red she used to be an agent whose job was to rescue changelings. A girl named Suki starts reminding Rowan of her past, calling her by her trade name Red.

Rowan has made an enemy. While rescuing her brother James she was once imprisoned in a cellar with a man named Eldritch. She learned that Eldritch knew where James was, but chose not to tell her. When she escaped from the cellar she left Eldritch to die. Not unnaturally Eldritch is now in search of revenge.

An undercover agent who is desperate to retire but who is persuaded to undertake just one last mission is not a new theme. The last mission always

turns out to be the most complex and dangerous. Now Rowan must undertake one last case, but finds that in this instance it is the mother who has been stolen and substituted. Her friends Fabian and Tanya are her helpmates.

Although The Thirteen Secrets can be read alone, it is a definite advantage to be familiar with its substantial back story. The characters of Rowan, Fabian and Tanya are lively and convincing. The sympathy and enthusiasm of the reader are mobilised by their plans and actions. But the show is stolen (at least for me) by Tanya's dog Oberon. His closeness to and understanding of his human partner remind us of Pullman's daemons. In the course of the book Oberon's loyalty is put to a severe test. But he is named after the king of the fairies and he survives intact.

There is a symbolic weakness in the characterisations. Critics such as Pinsent and Keith have pointed out that in traditional children's literature, disabled characters were too often depicted as predestined victims or sinister stereotypical villains. Contemporary authors have moved away from these unreflective tropes. But a fairy who has had polio starts filling a useful function – and then dies. And Eldritch loses a hand escaping from his cellar, becoming the archetypal malformed figure. It is a pity that this otherwise uniformly excellent book is marred in a way that could have been easily avoided. **RBu**

Duty Calls: Dunkirk

★★★★★

James Holland, Puffin, 416pp, 978 0 14 133219 2, £6.99 pbk

This chunky novel is the first for young readers by the well-known historian James Holland. He convincingly and evocatively describes life for the troops, rather than that of the High Command and politicians, in the days leading up to the evacuation from Dunkirk. Through the eyes of Private Hawke, who faked his age to join up, we learn how he had 'thought only of excitement and Glory... No one mentioned how exhausting it was fighting a war, or how filthy a soldier became. Or that it wasn't really very glamorous at all.'

As you might expect, Holland achieves a high level of realism in the many battle scenes and the degree of fine detail is impressive, even if gory. So too is the depiction of the close bonds between the Tommies and with their Sergeant, who happens to be Hawke's future brother-in-law. Even amidst the appalling carnage these young men look to a future and to realise their dreams. Notably the enemy is not vilified and Holland portrays them as being essentially the same as the Brits, only on the other side.

This may be about WWII but it has a lot to say about any war at any time, which conveys much that is relevant for our young men in the 21st century. Good for any competent reader, especially if they are into war and army, or, better still, studying the 1940s. **DB**

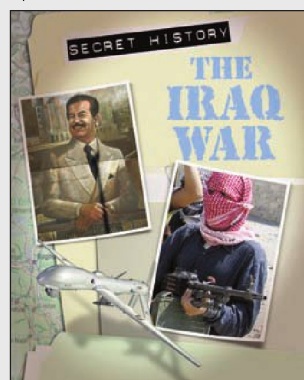
The Iraq War

NON-FICTION

★★★★★

Simon Adams, Franklin Watts 'Secret History', 48pp, 978 0 7496 8228 6, £12.99 hbk

The man I feel sorry for is Hans Blix – sweating like a pig in his shiny grey suit, he bent over backwards to try to convince the arrogant Bush/Blair axis that Iraq had no Weapons of Mass Destruction. The total disregard of his professional expertise led to one of the most shocking and awful states of unrest in today's world. Simon Adams' admirable objectivity, however, makes his book a very interesting study of this lamentable – and still continuing – episode.



We see that the US was gunning for Iraq long before 9/11 (and possibly provoking that event) – spy planes and satellites, secret air bases were all at it. After the unhorsing of the Saddam regime (hatred of which had united the country) it became open season on any one faction for any of the others – multifaceted civil war. And G W Bush announced 'Mission Accomplished'. Now, after years of accident and insurgency, Iraq appears to be returning to self-control, albeit with American forces still on the ground. But is Iraq at peace? Is the war over? Remains (and there are lots of them) to be seen. Adams wisely skirts round the issue of oil but you have to ask yourself whether, if Iraq were the world's beetroot capital, would anyone give a toss? **TP**

Wish Me Dead

★★★★★

Helen Grant, Penguin, 448pp, 978 0 14 133770 8, £7.99 pbk

Echoes of Germanic folklore and fairy tale abound in Helen Grant's novel, the third in a series which focuses on the historical and mythical past of Germany's Eifel region and, in particular, on the town of Bad Munstereifel. The contemporary setting, centering on a bakery business owned by the Nett family, is conveyed in attractive and mouth-watering detail, even to the extent that many readers may end up feeling that they have more knowledge of German bread and pastries than they will probably ever require. It is on teenager Steffi Nett and five of her friends that the novel concentrates: how, by the time the

reviews

action has been played out has this apparently shy young woman come to feel herself responsible for, as she expresses it, 'three deaths, a disappearance and a serial killer with a crush on me'? There are some extremely murky goings-on, some extremely repellent characters and friendship is shown to take some

extremely devious turns, though perceptive young readers will almost certainly have identified the villain of the piece long before the final moment of revelation. The best of Grant's writing is to be found in her depiction of atmosphere, especially evident in the way in which contemporary events are always shown to be occurring in the

shadow of ancient bigotries and bloodshed. At times, however, the tone becomes too self-consciously melodramatic, displayed in an over-fondness for simile and metaphor. There is, for example, a sequence where Steffi finds herself having to fend off the predatory intentions of the ghastly Achim: within a few lines, 'He

reeled me in like a fish'... 'the slobbery kiss that was being aimed at me with the soggy gracelessness of a water bomb'... 'I felt as though I had walked through the back room in a butcher's shop and a whole side of beef had fallen off its hook and landed on me'... And there is a lot more like this to come. **RD**

14+ Secondary/Adult

The Fall

★★★★

Anthony McGowan, Barrington Stoke, 72pp, 978 1 84299 486 3, £6.99 pbk

A teenage boy, Mog, reflects on his schooldays and gang relationships following news of the death of a classmate. The story is one of hero worship, wanting to belong, of pride and jealousy. It shows too how actions have consequences and they are seldom the ones we expected. McGowan, who is an award winner for teen fiction, tells it with an authentic, uncompromising teen voice and with a tone of well-tuned regret that doesn't veer into the maudlin.

Designed to be dyslexia friendly, this short novel is billed as for reading age 8+ and interest age 14+. Readers who struggle with reading will find the narrative sensitive to their needs but might be a bit perplexed at the slightly enigmatic ending. It'll certainly give them something to reflect on and demonstrates that good stories aren't all about plot alone. **DB**

The Girl Who Leapt Through Time

★★★★

Yasutaka Tsutsui, trans. David Karashima, Alma Books, 200pp, 978 1 84688 134 3, £7.99 pbk

Kazuko, Goro and Kazuo are in their last year in Junior High School. Strange goings-on in the Science Lab lead Kazuko into a series of replayed but slightly different experiences as she leaps backwards and forwards over just a few days; Groundhog Day without the laughs. She'll find herself in a Maths lesson asked to solve a problem she believes she had dealt with the day before, only to find her class-mates have no memory of it. Notes she wrote in her exercise book one day have disappeared because she has slipped back 24 hours. One night, she sees a fire near Goro's house and even talks with Kazuo as they watch the blaze. But in the morning, the others know nothing of the fire or the conversation. So the three friends go to their science teacher who tells them of mysterious instances of teleportation. The explanation of Kazuko's bewildering experiences, when it comes, belongs at once to teenage romance and science fiction.

The book has dated over the forty-odd years it has waited for a translation into English. Some of the sense of time gone by lies in the detail – a teacher

New Talent

The Grasshopper's Run

★★★★

Siddhartha Sarma, Bloomsbury, 208pp, 978 1 4088 0940 2, £6.99 pbk

After many decades when Ruskin Bond was the only well known writer in the field, Indian children's fiction written in English is beginning to attract attention. Penguin India and Scholastic India alongside smaller publishers are publishing more titles for young readers and now one of India's most important literary prizes, the Vodafone Crossword Book Awards has instigated a new prize category for children's literature. Siddhartha Sarma's debut novel, *The Grasshopper's Run*, was its first winner.

Set in North East India in 1944, this

powerful historical novel starts with a gruesome massacre when an ambitious Japanese colonel, convinced that British troops are hiding in a village of an Ao Naga tribe, orders an attack. No British are found but all the villagers are killed, including Uti, the chief's grandson who has bravely resisted the invaders. The narrative moves to Calcutta where Uti's best friend Gojen is at school. Gojen vows revenge and as the war continues, takes an active role in fighting the enemy as part of his mission to seek out the colonel responsible.

The novel is densely written and perhaps a little overloaded with the weight of the historical research its author has conducted although there are some nail-biting battle scenes. Sarma's emphasis is on action rather than characterisation but Gojen is a stalwart hero. What fascinated this reader is the insight this novel provides from an Indian perspective on an area that was to become a major theatre of WW11. **RS**

lighting up a cigarette, the decorum of the young people's friendships, a narrative style innocent of the streetwise idiom which now marks most YA writing. Some of this otherness may stem from a cultural difference, but the distancing also comes from slight oddities in the translation: 'Together they jumped for joy at Goro's lucky escape' or 'Mr Fukushima ran off the pavement and shouted, "Run! There's a steel beam falling!"'

The novella may well seem rather naïve to readers used to the computer-generated, wise-cracking universe of Doctor Who. The publishers' note that this is one of Tsutsui's 'most popular works in his native Japan', but their claim that Kazuko must 'push the boundaries of space and time, and challenge the notions of dream and reality' seems inflated. There is certainly an attractive playfulness at times in the plotting, but this translation may have reached us too late in the day to be more than a literary curiosity.

A second novella, suited to rather younger readers, *The Stuff that Nightmares are made of*, completes the book. Here, Masuko, just started at secondary school, makes use of everyday experiences to explore memories which lie beneath anxieties suffered by herself and her little brother, Yoshio. It is a kindly series of

stories, but over-keen to contemporary eyes. 1967 seems another country where, indeed, they do things differently. Yoshio's mother tells him, 'You're a boy, Yoshio! You need to start acting like one....You know they pick on you because you're always playing with girls. Why don't you join in with the boys and play their games?' **GF**

A Small Free Kiss in the Dark

★★★★

Glenda Millard, Templar, 216pp, 978 1 84877 027 0, £6.99 pbk

What happens to a 12-year-old boy who hates his school and who is lodged with the latest in a series of unsatisfactory foster parents? The answer is – run away from both. Skip becomes a street urchin.

So far so realistic: but Millard now slips her characters into a world that is subtly but decisively alien. Skip meets a war veteran named Billy: we are not told which war. A pseudo-paternal relationship springs up between Skip and Billy. Skip is a gifted painter, whom Billy encourages to study art history in the books of a handy library.

Somehow this world comes under aerial bombardment. Billy, Skip and an orphaned six year old named Max Montgomery end up living in the ruins of the bombed library. Their next residence is an abandoned funfair,

which has more than a passing resemblance to Luna Park in Melbourne, the capital of Millard's home state. There they meet a 15-year-old unmarried mother Tia and her child, whom they name Sixpence.

This dramatic narrative serves to illustrate a number of themes including the importance of family ties, the futility of war, the psychological trauma of conflict, and the powerful driving force of dire necessity. The survivors steal their food and Tia prostitutes herself to feed her child. Millard's intent is clearly to emphasise how close to the surface of civilized life we find the primeval instincts necessary to survive, and how swiftly issues about survival and humanity are linked when society begins to feel itself menaced.

Glenda Millard's narrative technique is tight and meticulous, reminding this reviewer of her fellow-Australian Maurice Gleitzman's style in the trilogy *Once, Then and Now*. She recounts momentous changes through the eyes of an impressionable child, noting the apparently tiny details that mark epochal events. By coincidence, but significantly, this review was written on the anniversary of Victory in Europe Day. **RBu**

The Kissing Game

★★★★★

Aidan Chambers, Bodley Head, 224pp, 978 0 370 33197 3, £10.99 hbk

In a BfK Authorgraph (September 2001), Aidan Chambers says, 'You have to risk dealing with the material inside yourself you'd rather not face or, certainly, not have other people face. Only in the act of writing do I declare myself.' That comment is exemplified, you might well think, in this collection of short stories and brief dramatic dialogues. Some are published for the first time, others are gathered from anthologies or magazines over the last 20 or more years. The last piece in the book, begun when Chambers was 15 and two more years in the crafting, reflects a mind already using the experience of his grandfather's death to search himself: 'There was nothing about me at that moment that I did not know. And the knowledge was an unbearable pain.'

Such self-awareness and the pain that goes with it recur in this collection, even on the rare occasions when the register is comic – a tale told by a girl doing a summer job in a kangaroo suit at an amusement park, for example, or in some of the park-bench conversation playlets. It is because Chambers has

14+ Secondary/Adult continued

never lost that adolescent vulnerability and openness that, now in his seventies, he still writes stories in which reflective adolescents will surely discover themselves. He is not concerned with the surface stuff of some teenage fiction – the aps and i-pods and wha'ev'ers – though he is happy enough to have one female narrator record a lengthy spell in the cosmetics section of a department store having her first make-up make-over. He has always been concerned with outside-of-time matters; with tentative relationships, emerging sexuality, lack of confidence, trust and betrayal, violence and tenderness. Any of these might provoke sudden insights about the mess of living which disturb but move you on to somewhere else whether you like it or not. His publisher says that the experiences explored here are 'unique to the teenage years'. But for Chambers, one may feel, that is not so. For him, ironically, such continuing awareness is itself evidence of a kind of maturity, of still being alive; and thus, 'only in the act of writing do I declare myself'

GF

Thin Ice

★★★★

Mikael Engström, trans. Susan Beard, Little Island, 288pp, 978 1 908195 00 5, £7.99 pbk

Little Island, a new entrant to the world of Irish children's publishing, has as one of its intentions, the provision of an outlet for children's and young adult fiction in translation, thus allowing young Irish readers access to places beyond their own green fields or post-Celtic Tiger deprivation. It is to this initiative that we owe Thin Ice, translated from the Swedish by Susan Beard into English which is at once colloquial and fluid and always engaging. In essence, this is the story of 12-year-old Mik and how, with his mother dead, his father an alcoholic and an older brother concerned with making his own occasionally dubious way in the world, he finds himself very much a child of passage. He moves between social services, a benignly eccentric aunt and a far from benign family of dog breeders, with the last of whom he is made to suffer unspeakable degradation. Summarised in this way, it might seem that Engström's novel takes its readers into the blackest recesses of the Scandinavian psyche and there are certainly moments when the wintry landscapes and darkening forests assume the role of moral wilderness, almost Beckettian in its bleakness. But there are some marvellously heart-warming moments also, most apparent in the book's picturesque assortment of minor characters, not least the totally delightful girl called Pi, with whom Mik is to experience the first very tender intimations of pre-adolescent love. But what finally sustains Mik as he precariously makes his way across the literal and metaphorical patches of 'thin ice' in his life is the picture he has in his head of the 'home' he feels he has always been

denied. How touching, then, it should be that 'home' is the word with which this captivating novel ends. RD

Flip

★★★★

Martyn Bedford, Walker, 304pp, 978 1 4063 2989 6, £7.99 pbk

14-year-old Alex wakes up to find himself in a different body, with a different home and a different life to which he must get accustomed. Furthermore, he has 'lost' six months. He finds the process of adaptation painful and difficult. How can he reconcile his mind with the body and social scene belonging to Philip, or Flip, as he is significantly nick-named? Is there any way back? Eventually, Alex realises that his own 'self' is in a long-term coma, following a hit-and-run accident, and his psyche is now lodged in the body of a boy who was born on the same day as him, and in the same hospital.

Bedford has written a profound and moving novel on these themes. Far from being a body-swap comedy, this book is an examination, from Alex's point of view, of the pain and anguish arising from a disconnection between mind and body. We get a penetrating study of what it is like to be a studious, thoughtful boy who suddenly finds that he has greater muscular strength and can attract the best-looking (but not the most intelligent) girls. On the way, the book subtly suggests the class and social differences between Alex and Flip's families and confronts the issue of being true to oneself. Yet clearly Alex's mind is the stronger of the two, despite Flip's physicality and popularity. These themes are supported by the use of some arresting descriptions: school-work becomes 'a foothold on the scary, insurmountable cliff-face of what had happened to him', while the windows of the hospital where he was born resemble 'rows of eyes whose make-up had streaked from too much weeping'. In addition, however, there are some Americanisms such as 'snuck' which seem anomalous in this English scene.

The book should appeal alike to boys and girls of 14 or over, who will appreciate its insights into the difficulties of finding one's true self. The section which considers the relationship between the soul, psyche and mind requires some maturity, but the scene where Alex tracks down his condition on the Internet will seem familiar to many readers. This is an absorbing book which makes you think a little differently. RT

Aurora

★★★★

Julie Bertagna, Macmillan, 320pp, 978 0330435642, £6.99 pbk

The third and final instalment in the trilogy that includes Exodus and Zenith, Aurora moves on in time fifteen years and centres on headstrong Lily – the daughter of the fearless Mara who led

her people from the drowned islands of a flooded Earth to the high lands of the north where they now live. Like most teenagers, Lily feels trapped and when she learns that her real father, Fox, lives across the ocean, she determines to have her own adventure and find him. The journey takes her through dangerous lands visited in previous books by her mother, but these territories have developed and changed from when she – and the reader – last heard about them. Now new people are in charge, with power struggles and challenges that threaten to prevent Lily finding Fox. Lily cannot know that Fox is about to begin a revolution he's planned nearly all his life against the empire in the sky towers of people who live in luxury and ignores the plight of the other flood survivors. This revolution will change the way of life for everyone on the planet.

Lyrical narration switches between the new generation of children such as Lily and characters familiar from the previous books but now grown-up, deftly weaving their personal grudges, ambitions and perspectives together. The ambitious scope of the revolution spreads across a remarkable breadth of brilliantly imagined places and people – from the netherworld of the drowned earth with its new sea-adapted species, across the deceptive fjordlands and mountains of the north full of people desperate to survive to the imperious empire of the sky cities towering over the oceans – let alone the virtual planes of the Weave and Noos where trade takes place and rebels hide behind their avatars.

This fantasy's brisk pace and short chapters are exciting and interesting, if not always completely engaging, but it never loses itself in frivolous action, remaining focused on characters caught in fragile moments of great change, reminding us that history and futures are always created by people and the choices they make. MH

Killing Honour

★★★★

Bali Rai, Corgi, 336pp, 978 0 552 56211 9, £6.99, pbk

Racially complicated Leicester here seethes with drugs, status cars, booze, bars and clubs, lust, wife-beating and murder. Not the easiest place for fifteen-year-old Satinder Kooner to grow up, especially as his Sikh family is scarred by contradictions and denials. When wealthy, shop-owning dad suspects his daughter Jaswinder of 'seeing some Asian lad' at college, his version of family honour prompts a swiftly arranged marriage to a rich club owner. Duty done, he ignores his daughter's evident suffering, preferring the consolations of Chivas Regal. Sat isn't buying into this hypocrisy and empty tradition. When Jas suddenly disappears, accused by his sadistic brother-in-law of running off with a lover, he knows he must search for her. Danger crowds on danger for Sat, distancing him from the normal adolescent pleasures and pains of the inter-racial world of his school friends. Instead, he is adrift in a vicious underworld which ranges from seedy Leicester back rooms to the fields of

the Punjab where a discarded woman is raped and slaughtered. Though there is to be no easy ending to his search, Sat eventually finds others willing to take on his murdering in-laws. Sat tells a journalist he meets to talk about the fate of abused wives: 'The media call it "honour killing" or "honour-related abuse", which is a joke. Those murders aren't about honour – more like killing honour.'

Bali Rai mostly works with actions and surfaces. He's strong on uncompromising violence and language. A machete killing is prefaced by multiple rape. As she quits a hated employer, a woman leaves on her screen, GOODBYE NEEDLE DICK. Sentences are clipped and urgent. BfK readers with long memories might worry that some episodes come close to gratuitous excitement, maybe remembering the salacious Skinhead or Boot Boys of the seventies. But the integrity of the writing here is very different. Leicester is Bali Rai's home town, and there is an anger and directness driving the excitement which I think Young Adult readers will respect and trust. GF

Linger

★★★★

Maggie Stiefvater, Scholastic, 432pp, 978 1 407121 08 6, £7.99 pbk

This is the second book in an eventual trilogy and follows Grace and Sam (he cured of werewolfism and she slowly succumbing to it) and Isabel and Cole (she brittle and brutally intelligent, he the ex-lead singer of Narcotika, desperate to lose himself in the body and mind of a wolf).

The stories skilfully interweave and say just as much about the human condition as they do about the world of the supernatural. Characters avoid stereotypical dialogue and responses as the emphasis is firmly on the human world rather than what lies beyond. The werewolf narrative illuminates the human story simply because it is not all-encompassing but a constant, subtle threat which enhances the reality of Sam and Grace's relationship by foreshadowing its end.

Similarly, its physical and metaphorical elusiveness keeps Cole on the edge of what he most desires – an extinguishing of the misdemeanours of his past, an absolution from responsibility and damage. That's not to say that the two worlds do not collide-sometimes elliptically, sometimes head-on – but hey do so in a way which reminds the reader of the struggle to make sense of the world around us, to establish identity and take emotional risks.

The story is compellingly readable, has its market clearly and consistently targeted and leaves the reader wanting more. VR

Department 19

★★★★

Will Hill, HarperCollins, 496pp, 978 0 00 735445 0, £12.99 hbk

So you thought vampires were on their way out? You thought wrong. Will Hill's

reviews

gore-soaked debut novel imagines that everything Bram Stoker wrote is true. Though Dracula is now dead (or is he?), his ruthless, original, Transylvanian associates still stalk the earth, preying on the innocent and gathering an increasing number of deadly acolytes. Unbeknownst to the ordinary people of the world, Department 19 has been waging a fierce, high-tech, global war against this deadly force of the undead for over one hundred years, led by the descendants of the original vampire hunters. 16-year-old Jamie Carpenter has no idea that he is one of them, until his father – secretly a Department 19 operative – is shot dead, and his mother kidnapped by the most merciless vampire of all. Soon he has joined the struggle, and is fighting for both their lives.

There's a clever concept at work here, and for the most part this gripping novel is extremely well executed. It's the quantity and nature of the executions themselves that leaves me a little squeamish. It's not that I mind blood, and I know that many teenage novels hook readers with more than a passing nod to the fast-paced world of computer games. But the sheer quantity of ripped-out throats, exposed entrails, exploding vampires and fountains of gore paraded in scene

after scene deadened the effect of the terror for me in a way that detracted from the otherwise high quality of this novel. Instead of seeking to replicate the level of on-screen carnage, I personally prefer to see writers working on the imagination with a subtlety that creators of computer games cannot employ. Otherwise, what next? Black Ops meets Nosferatu? **CS**

Skulduggery Pleasant: Mortal Coil

★★★

Derek Landy, HarperCollins, 604 pages, 978 0 00 732601 3, £6.99

This substantial volume is the fifth book in a continuing saga and presents the problems one might expect when taken in isolation: characters and story are already well established, there are inevitable references to earlier incidents, and we have yet to see the story's conclusion. There is the added complication that many of the huge cast of characters exist in an unsettling state of duality: the main protagonist, a 15-year-old sorcerer called Valkyrie Cain, is also Stephanie Edgley, who spends a gloomy Christmas at her parents' house in a Dublin suburb. But Valkyrie is also destined to become Darquesse, the sorcerer who will

destroy the world. A different type of duality is demonstrated by her unusual companion, Skulduggery Pleasant, the 'Skeleton Detective', who can produce various faces to hide his skull by tapping symbols etched into his collar-bones.

At one point, Valkyrie expresses her surprise at 'just how close the weird and the wonderful, and the fierce and the frightening, lived to the rest of the non-magical, mortal, world'. Ireland is a 'Cradle of Magic' governed by sorcerers through the 'Sanctuary', which has recently moved from Dublin to Roarhaven - 'a town of prejudice and bigotry, of bitter sorcerers and magical malcontents'. The worry is that if the ostensibly friendly Americans perceive there to be a crisis in Ireland, they will 'swoop in' – and stay. Damage also comes at a more personal level: in an attempt to prevent herself from changing into Darquesse, Valkyrie has to undergo a gruesome and vividly described dissection of which she is fully aware, leaving afterwards with her heart and spleen in a bag. In addition, there are repeated and detailed accounts of fights complete with grunts, screams, curses and shouts as heads are kicked, ribs crushed and skulls split, while brains go flying. Often, it's the girls doing the damage

('she crushed the skull of a handsome man and tossed him away from her'). Meanwhile, dark forces try to ensure that Darquesse does make an appearance.

The persistent grimness of everyday life and the decay and mistrust of the magical world are leavened by Landy's dry and ironic wit which laconically draws attention to the banality of the sorcerers' shabby lives. 'Nobody likes zombies,' we are told, and shortly afterwards we meet a pair 'living out of a refrigerated truck (with) two flat tyres'. The rapid succession of incidents ensures that the book is consistently entertaining, provided the new reader is not over-concerned with identifying all the characters. Clearly, however, many readers are intimately aware of who they are – the book ends with a separate short story written for a reader who created a new character to appear in the novel. The violence and gruesome detail make this book more suitable for those aged over 14, but the evident popularity of the series will probably be the main factor in determining who reads it. **RT**



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Classics in Short

No.88 Brian Alderson



What happened at Miss Minchin's to... A Little Princess

My mum

was a late Victorian child. When I asked her what had been her favourite reading at that time she named a book by Frances Hodgson Burnett called **Editha's Burglar**, pronouncing the name with a long 'i' as she must have done when first she read it.

But was it a book all on its own?

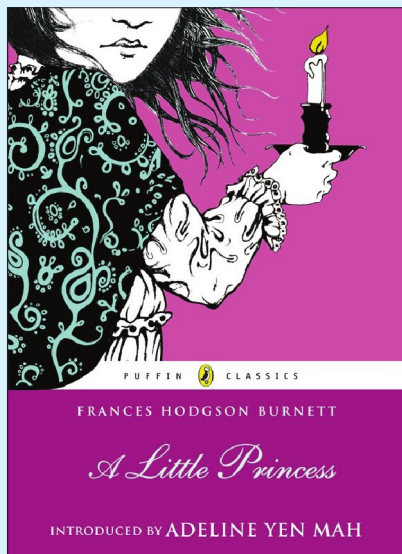
The story, about a little girl who persuades a burglar to do his work very quietly so as not to disturb Mama, is quite short and was first published in that peerless American children's magazine, **St Nicholas**. There was hardly enough of it for an independent existence and when it did appear as a book it was joined by a longer Hodgson Burnett story, also from **St Nicholas**: **Sara Crewe**; or what happened at Miss Minchin's.

This dramatic tale

(I'm surprised my mum didn't prefer it to **Editha**) brings Sara Crewe from India to London with her widowed father, who places her in Miss M's 'Select Seminary for Young



Ladies' as a posh 'parlour boarder' before returning to the sub-continent where, alas, some time later, he is bilked by a friend and dies penniless. Thus Sara Crewe is removed from her comfortable suite and, from being star pupil, is reduced to maid-of-all-work, banished to the attic with its fireless grate and iron bedstead. Miss Minchin, who is perforce her guardian, for there is no one else, works her to the bone, although Sara, a child of much character, survives by persuading herself that she is a lost princess who will one day come into her own – and that indeed happens. An invalid, back in England from India, with his Lascar servant (and a monkey) takes the house next door and proves (of course) to be Papa's



old friend – recovered financially but racked by guilt over the latter's death and the disappearance of his daughter.

Burnett was good at this sort of drama

as witness **Little Lord Fauntleroy** and **The Secret Garden**, the centenary of whose publication we are celebrating this year. It's not surprising therefore to find that **Sara Crewe** came to be converted into a play, as **The Little Princess**, running with acclaim in both New York and London. Both the author and her publisher thought this an opportunity too good to miss, and Burnett – a pro if ever there was one – set about reconstructing **Sara Crewe** as a full-dress fiction. And it was published in superior style, begirt with colour plates, as **A Little Princess** in 1905.

The story tells itself so well,

she wrote to her son, speaking of the 'lightning rapidity' of its composition, that it proved no hack job, no mere bulking out of a superannuated text. In a chummy preface to her readers she expressed one of the great thrills of fiction, that 'between the lines of every story there is another story, and that is one that is never heard and can only be guessed at by those who are good at guessing'. With the conversion of **Sara Crewe** into a play she had discovered more about the goings-on in Miss M's seminary than she had formerly known and she felt it very blameworthy of the new characters who had appeared on the scene, such as spoiled Lottie, and the half-starved scullery-maid, Becky, and grey-whiskered Mr Melchisedec (who lived behind the wainscot) for their 'slouching idle ways' in not presenting themselves to her earlier.

These narrative extensions

effect radical changes to the nature of the

story. To begin with, Sara's traumatic reduction from riches to rags occurs only after some ninety pages in which her privileged status and her relationship with her admiring or jealous classmates is dwelt on with a degree of detail impossible in the five introductory pages of **Sara Crewe**. The same applies to her life in the garret through whose skylight begins her friendship with her neighbour's Lascar servant which will lead to her happy end. But this time, the gentleman's illness and its cause are revealed long before the denouement so that the reader (who may well have guessed it in the shorter book) is now constrained to watch how the storyteller will bring the two together over a longer time-span.

Such changes,

to which may be added a rather less credible treatment of the transformation scene, where the Lascar secretly converts Sara's attic into what she at first believes to be a room in Fairyland, give a depth to the story which has held readers continuously from the time of its



first publication. (The Puffin edition, which dates back to 1961 is especially commendable for its sensitive line drawings by Margery Gill – or 'Hill' as a recent printing called this disgracefully forgotten illustrator.) Nevertheless, there remains much to be said for the earlier **Sara Crewe**, whose comparative brevity sharpens the intensity of the tale. Before long, it seems, you will be able to Google it up and do some comparative criticism on your own account.

The illustration by Margery Gill are taken from the 2008 Puffin Classics edition (978 0 141 32112 7, £6.99 pbk).

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**.