

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

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DISCOVER *Emma Shevah*



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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from Dara Palmer's *Major Drama* by Emma Shevah. Thanks to *Chicken House* for their help with this May cover, and 15th birthday congratulations!



editorial

At the 35th IBBY Congress in Mexico City last year, delegates were introduced to Mardonio Carballo, the Mexican actor, journalist, writer and poet. He writes his poems not just in Spanish but in Náhuatl, one of the indigenous languages of Central America. He read some of his poems, short, to the point and often humorous, but with adult themes, because Carballo does not write for children primarily. However, as he commented, his poetry seems to cause a problem for librarians and booksellers; it regularly gets shelved either in the Anthropological section (because it is written in Náhuatl), or in the Children's section, because his poems are short. In either case, he is rendered invisible.

Invisibility seems to be the fate of much poetry, but of children's poetry in particular. While there has long been a popular perception that poetry is elitist and only for the few, the awareness and enjoyment of poetry used to be widespread. When Field Marshall Wavell compiled his anthology *Other Men's Flowers*, he drew on the poems he knew and could recite by heart. Many of these poems he first encountered at school under a system where learning by rote was the accepted method of learning anything. This is no longer the case and though in general a good move, it seems to have had the sad effect that young people are not being introduced to our poetry heritage. I believe that children can enjoy poems that haven't specifically been written for them; to say otherwise seems to be dismissive of young people.

Recently Chrissie Gittins, herself a poet for both adults and children, commented on the reasons for poetry's invisibility: poetry does not sell so publishers do not publish it, and if poetry is published it does not get the market exposure so it does not sell. This is similar to what I was told as a children's librarian: 'Poetry does not issue.' I then conducted an experiment over the summer months in my library whereby I recorded all poetry books borrowed, and found that at least one went out every day.

The apparent invisibility of poetry is strange

because even the youngest children love rhyme and rhythm; indeed some of the most successful picture books, like those by Julia Donaldson, are in effect poems. However, publishers like Faber are beginning to produce picture book editions of poems by Eliot and de la Mare. There are also some novels written in verse, such as Sarah Crossan's *The Weight of Water*, which blur the artificial divide between fiction and poetry.

Young people need to be introduced to poetry regularly, in order to develop a love or even awareness of it. They usually respond enthusiastically when a poet visits the school; poets are often great performers, especially when engaging with children. Children should also be encouraged to write poetry themselves. Initiatives such as the **Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award** organised by the Poetry Society or, more challenging, the Stephen Spender Prize for poetry in translation, are very welcome.

Poetry has never been excluded from the major children's literary prizes such as the Carnegie and the Costa, but it rarely seems to feature on the shortlists. Congratulations to the **CLPE (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education) Poetry Award**, now in its thirteenth year. Championing the publication of children's poetry since 2003, it has just issued the shortlist for the 2015 award. What's more, CLPE has launched a shadowing scheme aimed at primary schools, a very exciting development with a very exciting reward for participation. We must do our best to bring poetry back into mainstream children's literature where it belongs.



Ferelith Hordon, Editor

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Books that Go Bump in the Night

Point Horror dominated the bestseller lists in the early nineties, sending thrills down the spine of a generation of readers. **Imogen Russell Williams**, former **Point Horror** devotee, appraises the new wave of horror stalking the bookshelves.

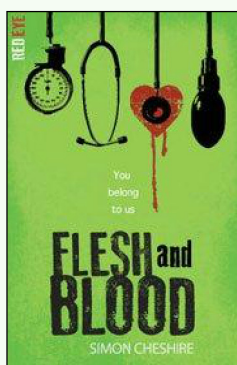
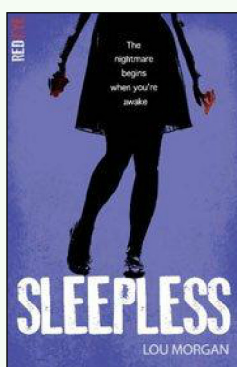
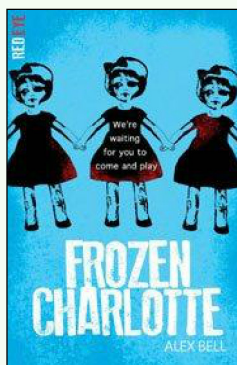
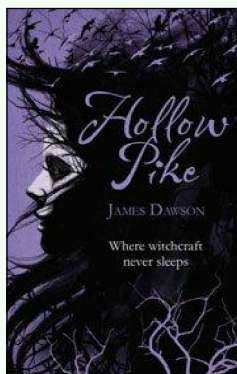
The *Babysitter*, *The Perfume*, *The Girlfriend*; most Point Horror titles of the early nineties sounded thoroughly unwholesome, and along with red-dripping fingernails on the covers, and portentous taglines, there was a general sense that within their pages, everything that could was about to go seriously awry. Like most of my contemporaries though, I was queasily addicted to these stories – usually involving teen crushes, doomed dates or previous misbehaviour coming home to roost, with horrific consequences – when I was about nine or ten.

Teen horror was then considered a debased, junk-food reading genre. English teachers' lips curled in disapproval as we huddled round our Points; and in retrospect, I can see why. The books' interchangeable, often cataclysmically stupid female characters, formulaic plots and repetitive scare-devices don't usually stand up to close scrutiny (although they remained required reading for us until we graduated to the stronger meat of Stephen King and George Herbert).

Today, though, there's a wealth of better horror options available for young teens – well written, nuanced, and drawing on deeper adolescent preoccupations to give them more satisfying heft and subtlety than their fore-runners.

The king of this resurgence is James Dawson, himself a Point Horror fan who's drawn on years of teaching experience to create wholly believable teen voices in titles from *Hollow Pike* to *Say Her Name*. His latest, *Under My Skin*, is the story of Sally, a good girl who breaks out; when Sally gets an outrageous tattoo of an American pin-up girl, it begins, terrifyingly, to talk to her, pushing her to act on her darkest impulses. 2013's *Cruel Summer* features a cast of student friends, reunited for a group holiday a year after one of their number, Janey, committed suicide. But when a gatecrasher turns up, insisting that Janey was murdered, and then winds up floating face-down in the pool herself, things take an increasingly sinister turn ... Careful character development, biting humour, diverse casts, and a mastery of scary suspense and misdirection make Dawson's new brand of horror look like Kobe beef next to battery chicken.

Also tapping into this trend is the **Red Eye** series from Stripes Publishing, a group of YA horror stand-alones featuring both new and established authors. For me, Alex Bell's *Frozen Charlotte* is the pick of the crop: when recently bereaved Sophie is sent to stay with family in an old Scottish girls' school, she finds a strange, alarming set-up



awaiting her. One of her cousins, little Lillias, is pathologically terrified of bones; and scarred, brooding Cameron barely speaks. Piper is over-friendly – and there seems to be another girl, who shouldn't be there at all ... Throughout the book, the superlatively creepy Frozen Charlotte figures are used to great effect, guaranteed to terrify anyone who (like me) suffers from pediophobia (fear of dolls).

Another **Red Eye**, Lou Morgan's *Sleepless*, follows a cast of kids at a pressurised, prestigious school, who knock back a mysterious pill to help them focus on their studies – and find that the side effects are more than they bargained for. And there's a chilling Stepford resonance to Simon Cheshire's *Flesh and Blood*, in which the new boy in town discovers the stuff of nightmares behind his new home's sleek, respectable façade.

Renowned film-maker Guillermo del Toro has also recently collaborated with author Daniel Kraus on a first YA novel, *Trollhunters*, coming out in July – a darkly comic fantasy, with definite elements of the horrific. Jim Sturges's uncle was abducted when his dad was a small boy. Now Jim lives behind a battery of locks, and his dad calls the police if he's home one minute after dark. But it's starting to look as though Jim's dad had a point – there's something out there that likes nothing better than to eat human meat ...

I might still get a nostalgic thrill from the covers of old Points (and feel a sneaking urge to reread them), but I'm jealous of the superior fare on offer to today's teens. Rather than throwaway, schlocky terror, this is the sort of stuff that keeps the reader up all night – and resonates intriguingly long after it's been finished. ■

Books mentioned:

Hollow Pike, James Dawson, Orion Children's Books, 978-1-78062-128-9, £6.99

Say Her Name, James Dawson, Hot Key Books, 978-1-47140-244-9, £5.99

Under My Skin, James Dawson, Hot Key Books, 978-1-47140-296-8, £6.99

Cruel Summer, James Dawson, Orion Children's Books, 978-1-78062-175-3, £7.99

Frozen Charlotte (Red Eye), Alex Bell, Stripes Publishing, 978-1-84715-453-8, £6.99

Sleepless (Red Eye), Lou Morgan, Stripes Publishing, 978-1-84715-455-2, £6.99

Flesh and Blood (Red Eye), Simon Cheshire, Stripes Publishing, 978-1-84715-456-9, £6.99

Trollhunters, Guillermo del Toro and Daniel Kraus, Hot Key Books, 978-1-47140-519-8, £12.99



Imogen Russell Williams is a journalist and editorial consultant specialising in children's literature and YA. She writes a trend-spotting biog for the *Guardian Online*, and seasonal round-ups for *The Metro*.

Accelerated Reader in East Lothian Libraries

East Lothian library service has completed a project funded by the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) to implement Accelerated Reader (AR) in all public libraries; the first public library authority to do so. This means that AR quizzed titles are identified on the shelves and can be searched by level on the catalogue. In addition each library has at least one member of staff trained by Renaissance Learning who produce AR. **Susan Boylan**, East Lothian's Young People's Services Librarian, explains how the scheme is working.

AR is a progress monitoring software tool. Each book is computer analysed to assign a level of difficulty, taking into account factors such as length of words and sentences. A Star Reading Assessment, establishes a reading level for each individual pupil, and quizzes test their understanding of the books. AR has been used by some of the secondary schools in East Lothian since 2000 and is now used in more than 90% of our primary schools.

Implementing AR in schools creates a huge demand for books. As the requests and the number of interested parties increased, it became apparent that a more systematic, proactive approach was needed. We had the product, skills and expertise to do so. It was an opportunity to highlight and make better use of our existing stock, increase our issues, attract a greater number of children, families and schools to the public libraries and promote the library service in general. It was also a means by which to expand our role in the community and develop or enhance our links with schools.

However, during the implementation process, we became concerned that instead of encouraging reading for pleasure, the way AR was used in some schools may become prescriptive. We wanted to avoid the situation where children read books solely for points rather than enjoyment. We wanted them to borrow both AR and non-AR books. That is why we did not want to indicate the level of the book on the spine – AR books were solely identified with a small logo and the level was indicated inside the front cover. We also refused to shelve the AR stock separately, to encourage children to browse the whole stock. Staff were trained in AR levels, which was just another tool to allow them to help children choose another non-AR book at a similar level.

Potential problems with schools can be mitigated by our close links with colleagues in Education. We have, and will continue to emphasise, the potential motivational aspect of AR in encouraging reading for pleasure.

In addition, the reading levels assigned to titles are automatically generated, which can result in inconsistencies in age and book levels. The involvement of librarians can alleviate some of these problems due to our knowledge and experience of children's literature.

New quizzes are often added retrospectively which means that our implementation of AR in public libraries will always be a work in progress. The retrospective and open-ended element of AR is an area for caution. The continued success of the programme depends on the long-term commitment from and involvement of staff, establishing ways of working to identify quizzed material, and regular updating of catalogue records. Every month, we provide each local library with a list of titles in their stock, which have had quizzes added.

Despite these concerns, the overall impact has been very positive. The number of class visits to libraries has increased. Some schools have introduced regular and more frequent visits to their local library, while other schools, which had never visited the library before brought their entire upper school! Local librarians have been invited to their local primary schools at parents evening to talk to, and show, parents how to find accelerated books for their children on the catalogue. A parent's guide to Accelerated Reader produced by schools highlighted the role of their local library.



Finally, with all local libraries having at least one member of staff trained by Renaissance Learning and confident in their knowledge of AR, the credibility of librarians amongst teachers was raised. We can see that reading engagement in school has improved and it is heart-warming to receive emails such as this one from a primary school teacher: 'Thank you so much for the great range of books sent. The pupil who the books were meant for has actually surpassed his AR reading range recently and has found a love of reading which he didn't have before!'

There were a few factors contributing to the success of this project. First, we were responding to a need. Second, we are a small authority, and so library services to schools and public library services to young people are overlapping functions within the same department. And third, we work very closely with colleagues in Education and with our six secondary school librarians, sharing the same library management system and catalogue.

AR is not a panacea; it is just one of the many tools that libraries can use to get children reading, but librarians have the skills and knowledge to ensure that this tool is used in effectively. ■

Susan Boylan is Young People's Services Librarian East Lothian Council.

Radicals and readers: The Little Rebels Children's Book Award

The winner of the 2015 **Little Rebels Children's Book Award** was announced at the London Radical Book Fair on 9 May. Judge **Kimberley Reynolds** explains the background to this important award.

Despite its name, the **Little Rebels Children's Book Award**, now in its third year, is not concerned with rebellious characters in children's literature; it celebrates books that inspire readers to question the status quo and to become socially and politically engaged. In other words, books that may turn young readers into rebels. At a time when many young people feel peripheral to public debates and uncertain about what kind of future lies in store for them, the challenge of inspiring them to believe that change is possible and that they can help bring it about has never been greater. This prize identifies well-informed and high-quality books that can help children understand that the way the world is currently organised is not inevitable and that even the youngest members of society can help to change it.

Britain has a long but unsung tradition of publishing politically, socially and environmentally engaged books for young readers. Thomas Day's **Sandford and Merton** (1783, 1786, 1789), for instance, questions, among other things, the foundations of class, privilege and slavery, while Charles Kingsley's **The Water-Babies** exposes the abuses arising from inadequate controls on child labour. The end of the nineteenth century saw a whole subgenre of 'street Arab' stories that dramatized the plight of the poor children that filled London's slums. In the twentieth century Geoffrey Trease's **Bows Against the Barons** (1934) retold the Robin Hood story from the point of view of the serfs and outlaws. At a time when Britain was witnessing hunger marches and high levels of unemployment in some parts of the country and unprecedented affluence in others, his radical novel both debunked the fantasy of 'merrie England' that had grown up around the ballads and stories about those who were forced to flee to the forest to escape the brutal arm of the law, and commented on the inequities of the 1930s.

Trease and his set were among the first to recognise that children's books were involved in perpetuating and normalising socially divisive attitudes and policies including racism, sexism, classism, jingoism, nationalism and imperialism. From the 1930s to the present there has been a small but significant strand of socially committed publishing for the young. The **Little Rebels Children's Book Award** casts a spotlight on the impressive range and creativity of such books for children from 0-12. The award is the brainchild of the **Alliance of Radical Booksellers**. It is administered by Letterbox Library, the independent, not-for-profit bookseller. To be eligible books must encourage children to question the status quo. They may do this by raising concerns about injustice, inequality or discrimination, by promoting equality and peace, discrediting stereotypes, or encouraging children to become aware of the many challenges facing the wellbeing of peoples in all parts of the world and the health of the planet. All the shortlisted books show children that problems can be rectified and that they can make a difference if they become informed and learn how to take action.

The first **Little Rebels Award** (2013) went to Sarah Garland's **Azzi in Between** (Frances Lincoln); last year's winner was Gillian Cross's **After Tomorrow** (Oxford University Press). The 2015 shortlist

consisted of four picture books and four works of fiction by both established writers and illustrators, and newcomers.

This year Gill Lewis's **Scarlet Ibis** (Oxford University Press) received the award. It tells the gripping story of Scarlet, who looks after her mentally ill mother and a younger brother who loves birds but struggles with people. Eventually Scarlet is placed with a foster family that understands she is still the lynchpin of her family. Birds weave the book's multiple storylines together and provide a moving backdrop for a story that focuses attention on the courage, loyalty and competence of children. As **Scarlet Ibis** shows, some children are already changing their worlds.

The other shortlisted books:

Girl with a White Dog (Catnip) by Anne Booth uses animals and fairy tales to tell a story about the Holocaust. Booth makes the story relevant to young readers by setting it in present-day England and placing a pet dog at its centre. One aspect of the story involves the failing faculties of a much-loved grandmother, while a subplot deals with hostility to migrant workers that has obvious but unstated links to the rise of fascism under the Nazis.

Grandma, written and illustrated by Jessica Shepherd (Child's Play) is a picture book that does important work in helping children understand dementia and the unfamiliar world of care homes. The illustrations are reminiscent of John Burningham's **Grandpa** (1984) but the issues here are confronted more overtly and didactically, perhaps reflecting both changing social attitudes and Britain's aging population.

Made by Raffi (Frances Lincoln) by Craig Pomranz with illustrations by Margaret Chamberlain is a delightful picture book about a boy who likes to knit and design clothes – and whose family and classmates think that's great.

Nadine Dreams of Home (Barrington Stoke) by Bernard Ashley features a refugee girl who has recently arrived in Britain. Ashley's text is well supported by Ollie Cuthbertson's illustrations. Together they enable this short book to convey some of the sense of strangeness, fear and unhappiness children like Nadine experience.

Pearl Power (I Love Mel), a feminist picture book written and illustrated by Mel Elliott follows a girl and her single-parent mother as they make their way in a new job and a new school.

Shhh! We have a Plan (Walker) is author-illustrator Chris Haughton's handsome picture book about peace. Told with both humour and drama, the story avoids being obvious or sanctimonious.

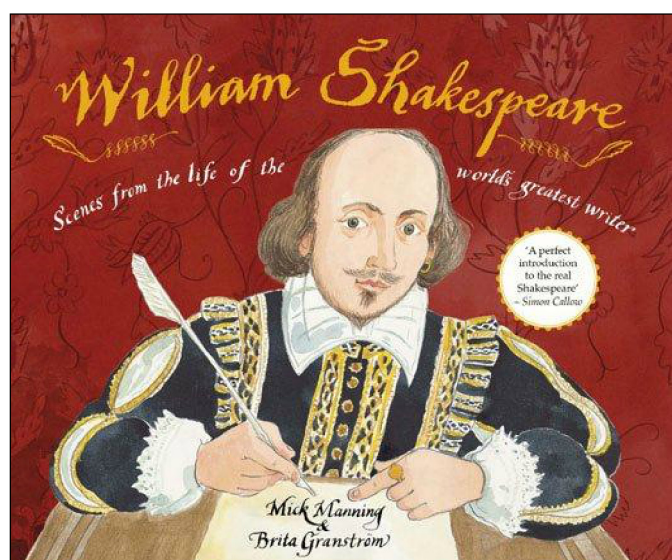
Trouble on Cable Street (Catnip) by Joan Lingard provides a portrait of London during the Spanish Civil War. Tellingly, many of the conflicts, tensions and divided loyalties at the centre of this story set in the multicultural world of London's East End in the 1930s continue to be felt today. ■



Kimberley Reynolds is Professor of Children's Literature, School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics, Newcastle University and **Little Rebels Children's Book Award** judge 2014, 2015.

Windows into Illustration: Mick Manning & Brita Granström

Mick Manning and **Brita Granström** have been creating books together for over twenty years, and their innovative way of presenting information revolutionized non-fiction. In this article they explain their approach.

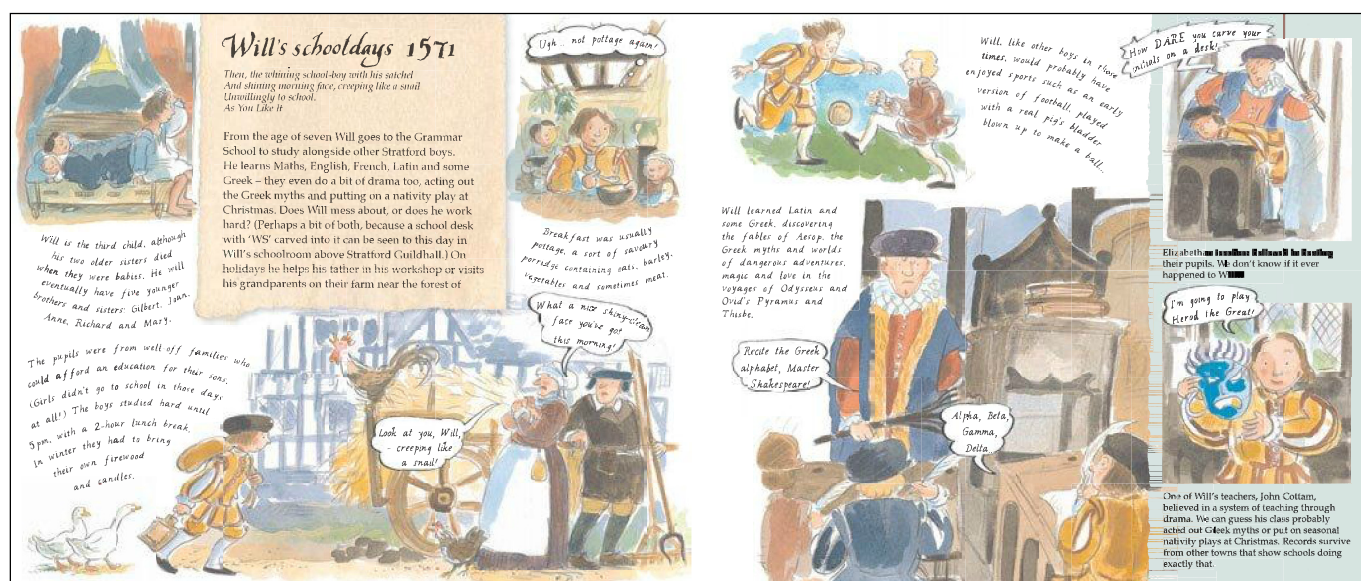


Mick: We have championed a picture-book approach to non-fiction for the last 22 years. We collaborate from the earliest stages of research, through the design of the rough layouts, and we often even share in creating the final illustrations. However, Brita drew most of the lovely artwork for **William Shakespeare**. She used coloured pencil and watercolour, with dip pen and ink at times, and for the hand lettering. We make the illustrations do a lot of the talking in our books. With four

children of our own we appreciate that there is a wide spectrum of reading and learning abilities – both at home and in the classroom – so we combine a variety of approaches to try to make a biography a ‘page-turner’. To achieve this we do thorough research (the biggest part of any book, but often under appreciated) and we use a combination of visual formats. It’s a bit like storyboarding a film: establishing narrative order, having long shots and close ups, alternating between being LARGE, small, NOISY!, quiet.

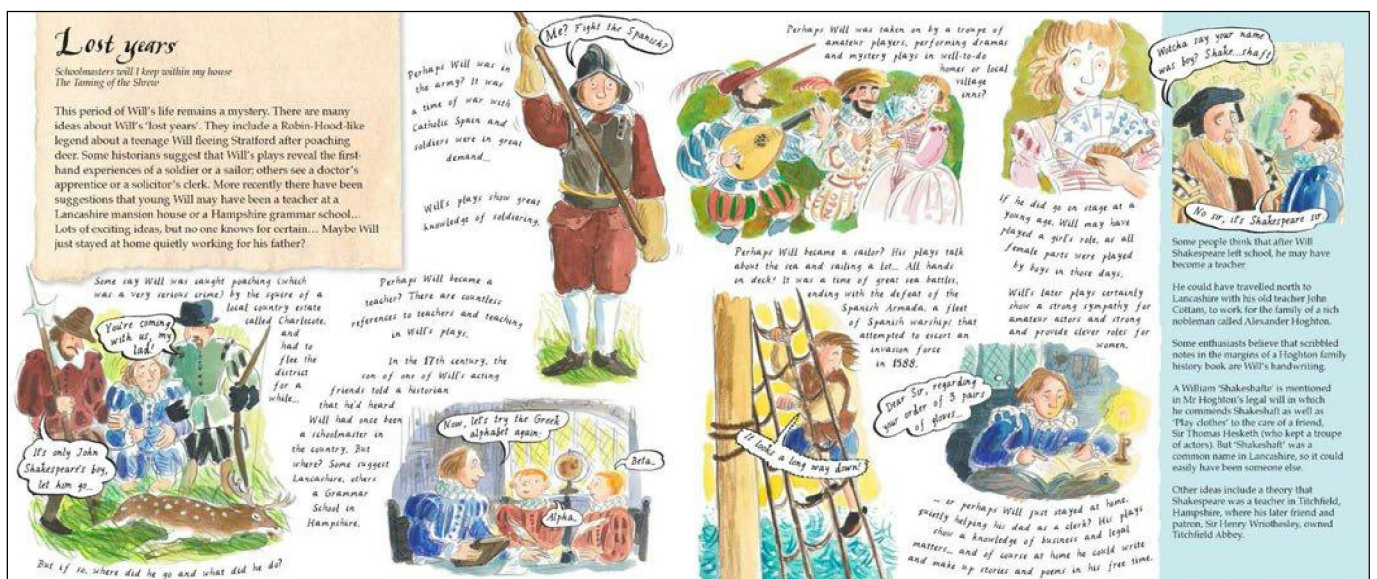
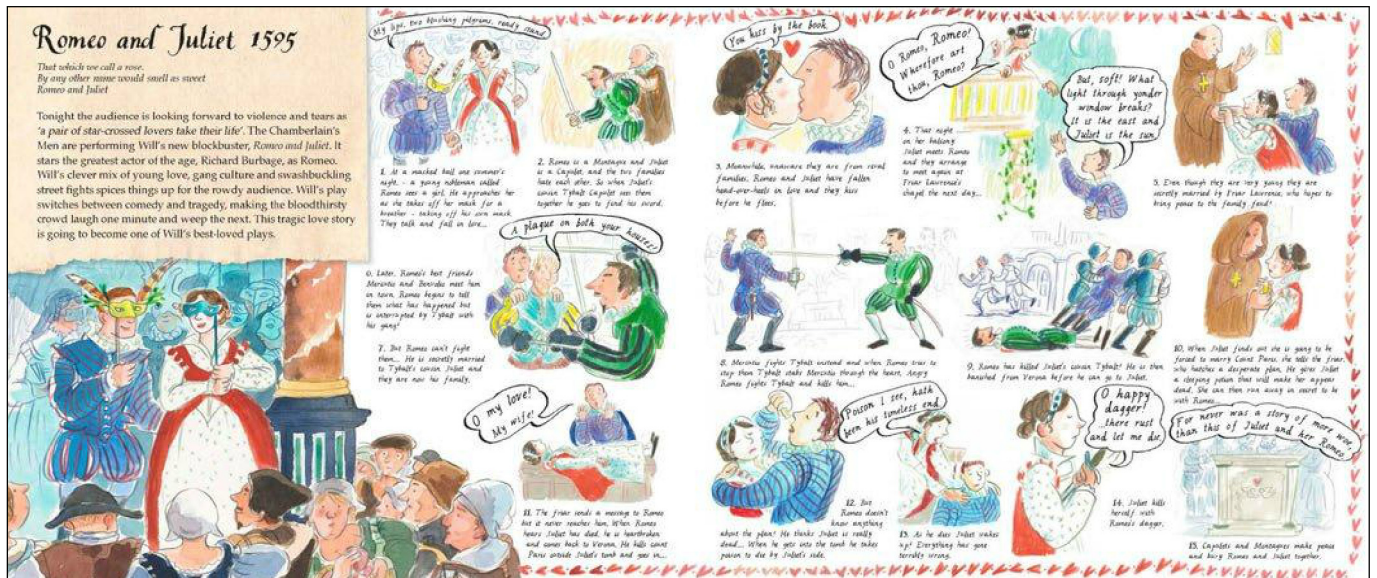
Brita: The life of William Shakespeare (which we took on in association with the **Shakespeare Birthplace Trust**) is the latest title in our biographical series that includes **What Mr Darwin Saw** and **The Beatles**. One thing we soon learned when making biographies is the importance of childhood. Wordsworth famously said, ‘The child is father of the man’ and recently I heard Floella Benjamin say, ‘Childhood lasts forever’. Will’s childhood was the keystone for who he later became. It was very important to convey this. One spread shows Will waking up at home on a school day. Children the world over can relate to that – reluctantly getting up, having breakfast and walking to school with his bag, ready for sports and lessons: *‘And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel/And shining morning face, creeping like snail/Unwillingly to school.’* What’s changed in 500 years? There are countless references in his plays to things he would have encountered in his youth, from glove making (his father’s trade) and the life of country people (which included many of his relatives) to lawyers, teachers and soldiers.

Mick: Later we encounter the ‘lost years’ where no firm record of what he did exists, only theories. So we show these theories and so children realise that there are not always clear-cut answers. We want to encourage them to appreciate his plays in the context of his biography. Our boys go to a great comprehensive school where every year the Year Nines put on a Shakespeare play in the local theatre (our son played Bottom). We chose to show all of Will’s main plays and poetry (quite a task) and we used sequential images for this – a sort of comic strip. **Romeo and Juliet** is a good example. Throughout the book we have sought to bring Will’s world to life with ‘sound’ by using speech bubbles. The book exists on different levels. Some children may choose to only read the bubbles at first,



but there is a more lyrical main text and also hand lettered fact labels. There are also information strips as a back up for more detailed reference. Children can pore over the book on their own, with mates, or with a teacher in the classroom. Needless to say, there is also a lot of gentle visual humour, provided by Brita. We were delighted that Simon Callow loved our book – not only did he write to us to say so, but he kindly allowed us to use a quote from him on the front cover. ■

William Shakespeare: Scenes from the life of the world's greatest writer is published by Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1847803450, £12.99 hbk



Ten of the Best to Introduce Children to their Human Rights

As we prepare to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta, **Margaret Mallett** chooses ten books to start children thinking and talking about their human rights.

Although children's human rights are a serious issue, books introducing them to children need not be solemn. I have looked out for books which are invitingly illustrated, have a touch of humour and those which offer promising starting points for discussion.

We Are All Born Free: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Pictures

Forewords by David Tennant and John Boyne, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, in association with Amnesty International, 978-1-84507-650-4, £12.99 hbk, 7+ (All royalties from the sale of this book are donated to Amnesty International)

In this large and life affirming book, each of 30 human rights declarations is given a double spread illustration by a different illustrator. Many of the illustrations are by artists who have specialised in artwork for children's books, for example John Burningham, Brita Granström and Satoshi Kitamura. They vary tremendously in style and approach and, while often amusing, each one would be a good focus for children and teacher to talk about important issues. The book reinforces the powerful aim that these rights – including those to do with being protected by the law, believing in what we wish and living in freedom and safety – should 'belong to everybody, whatever our differences'.

King John and Magna Carta: A Ladybird Adventures from History book

L Du Garde Peach, Ladybird, 978-0-72329-402-3, £5.99 hbk, 7+

This new edition, brought out to mark 800 years since the Magna Carta was signed, tells the story from King John's point of view through a concise text and dramatic illustrations. The group of citizens, who

challenged the absolute power of the monarch and demanded some rights, brought about a turning point in our history. A main point to emphasise is that this event led to our principles of liberty, democracy and the rule of law.

Welcome to the Family

Mary Hoffman and Ros Asquith (ill.), Frances Lincoln, 978-1-84780-461-7, £11.99 hbk, 4+

Writers and illustrators of children's books have tended to show us life in a traditional family. This book helps redress the balance by showing nuclear families, families with same sex parents, foster families and 'blended' families. This book helps children feel comfortable with whatever kind of family they belong to. The important thing is that they are happy and well cared for.

I Have the Right to Be a Child

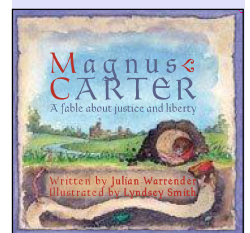
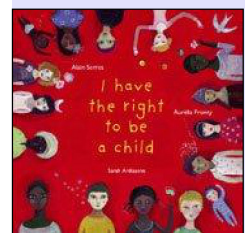
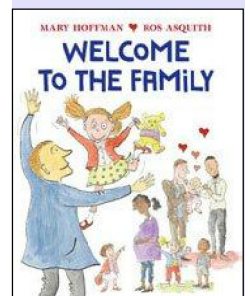
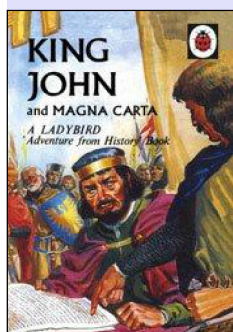
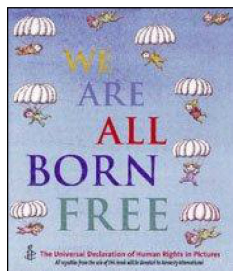
Alain Serres & Aurelia Fronty (ill.) & Sarah Ardizzone (translator), Phoenix Yard Books, 978-1-90791-211-3, £7.99 pbk, 9+

Fifty-four articles were drawn up by the **United Nations** at the **Convention on the Rights of the Child** in 1989 and signed by 193 nations. But many children across the world still lack basic entitlements, for example nourishing food, shelter, education and safety from conflict. This book, endorsed by Amnesty, aims to be constructive and positive and explains what we should aspire to. Its global reach, encompassing children from many parts of the world, is evident in the imaginative illustrations. Any adult reading this with children would have a significant role in clarifying issues and orchestrating discussion.

Magnus Carter: A Fable About Justice and Liberty

Julian Warrender & Lyndsey Smith (ill.), Hare and Heron Press, 978-0-95747-302-7, £6.99 pbk, 5+

There are a number of good books introducing children to the story of the Magna Carta and the issues it raises. But I think this story about the efforts of a hard working little mole, Magnus Carter, to lead his fellow workers in a rebellion against unjust King Moldewarp is ideal for the very



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youngest children. It helps them begin to understand what being fair to everyone means, and they will be entertained by the little mole peeping out through a hole in the book cover.

The Magna Carta Chronicle: A Young Person's Guide to 800 Years in the Fight for Freedom

Christopher Lloyd & Patrick Skipworth and Andy Forshaw (ill.), What on Earth Publishers, 978-0-99301-991-3, £8.99 pbk, 9+

This comprehensive and imaginative book has great visual appeal with a range of illustrations including many that are hand drawn. The scope is wide: after beginning with King John's sealing of the Magna Carta, it charts key points in the fight for important freedoms to the present day. It includes newspaper articles, a wall chart and a timeline and would be a splendid resource for teachers and children to use at the upper end of the primary school and the lower end of the secondary school.

What Are You Playing At?

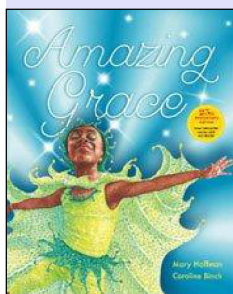
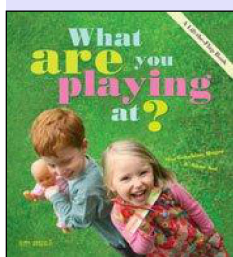
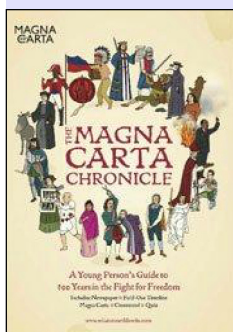
Marie-Sabine Roger and Anne Sol (ill.), Alanna Books, 978-1-90782-502-6, £12.99 hbk, 7+

Here is a playful book that makes the point that your gender shouldn't limit what you do. Each double spread has a large print statement, for example 'Boys don't play in kitchens' and 'Girls do not play with cars' and then a large flap opens to show a picture that contradicts the statement: we see a male chef in the kitchen and a female driver in a crash helmet racing a car. This would be a good starting point for projects looking at the mismatch between toys and clothes assumed to be appropriate for each gender (often fed by marketing) and what individual children actually prefer.

Amazing Grace

Mary Hoffman & Caroline Binch (ill.), Frances Lincoln, 978-1-84507-749-5, £5.99 pbk, 6+

When the other children say Grace cannot be Peter Pan in the school performance because she is a girl and black she determines to prove them wrong. Her mother and grandmother, both good role



models, help her challenge gender and racial stereotyping. This book reminds us that a story is sometimes the best way to reflect on important issues.

Made by Raffi

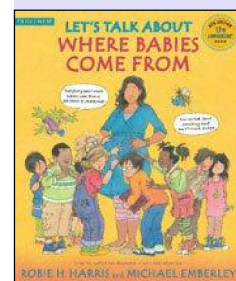
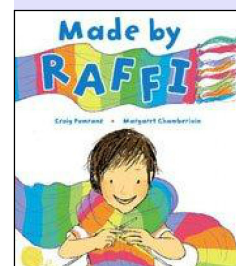
Craig Pomranz & Margaret Chamberlain (ill.), Frances Lincoln, 978-1-84780-596-6, £12.99 hbk, 5+

Raffi is shy and does not like noisy games. He is a kind boy and makes a scarf for his father's birthday. But he is teased about his liking for sewing and knitting. Things improve dramatically when he makes a cloak for the prince in the school pageant. The other children now perceive him in a positive light and everyone wants something 'made by Raffi'. The book has a light touch but it emphasises the right to be different. And it encourages children to put themselves in someone else's shoes and to understand how teasing, which can be a form of bullying, can make someone sad.

Let's Talk About Where Babies Come From

Robie H Harris and Michael Emberley (ill.), Walker Books, 978-1-40635-786-8, £11.99 pbk, 8+

This non judgemental book is a family resource to be shared, and perhaps used in response to children's questions. Children have a right to know about their bodies and about reproduction and this book provides detailed information. Some of the topics covered may not be suitable for children at the younger end of the recommended age range to read on their own. There is a valuable chapter, chapter 19, entitled 'OK Touches' – 'Not OK Touches' which could be a helpful starting point for discussion about keeping safe. ■



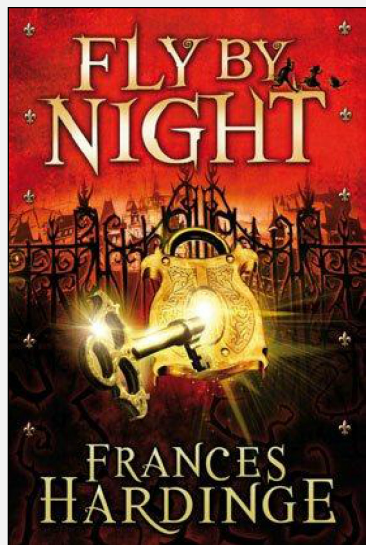
Margaret Mallett taught in primary schools and in the Education Department of Goldsmiths College. She writes books on all aspects of Primary English and is Emeritus Fellow of **The English Association**.

Authorgraph No.212

Frances Hardinge

Frances Hardinge
Interviewed by **Philip Womack**

In a liminal place near a train station, in a gastro-pub where you can order duck hearts on toast, I pour tea for the novelist Frances Hardinge. We had met earlier under the clock at Waterloo – ‘in time-honoured fashion,’ as she punningly remarked – and were now settling into a shady corner, whilst my lurcher puppy chewed on a bone under the table.



Hardinge is an author whose work gloriously defies convention and categories – much like her heroines. From her debut, **Fly By Night**, to her most recent work, **The Lie Tree**, her books have treated difficult subjects through the usage of highly distinctive language, and through rebellious, awkward protagonists who bristle and stretch against the worlds into which they are shoehorned. Last year's **Cuckoo Song**, for example, saw an architect's daughter up against fairies in an askew 1920s Britain complete with suffragettes riding motorbikes. 2015's

The Lie Tree is set in an alternative Victorian world, and follows Faith, the young daughter of a discredited natural scientist, as she discovers a tree which is fed by lies – a typically Hardinge-ian conception, in which the world is not quite as we know it.

Hardinge is an author whose work gloriously defies convention and categories – much like her heroines

In person, Hardinge exudes amiability, a black hat perched on top of a long, kindly face. As I turn on my dictaphone, she remarks, self-deprecatingly: ‘If it doesn't record and you can think of something more intelligent and eloquent than I actually said, feel free to put that instead, that's fine.’

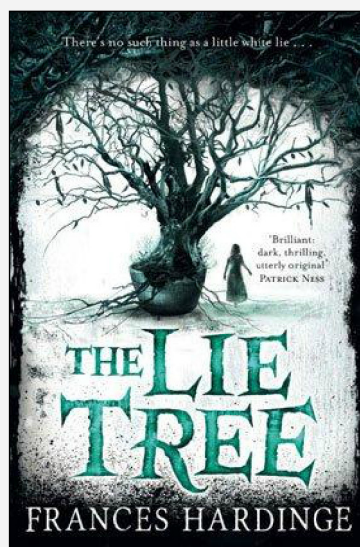
Since folklore is such an important strand in her work, I ask her how she came to it: ‘I was always fascinated by the fantastic and the macabre. I blame this partly on the fact that I spent part of my childhood living in a really weird grey gothic implausible house [in Penshurst, Kent] up on a hilltop, which actually did make the proper moaning wuthering sound when the wind blew. My imagination never stood a chance. A fascination with the macabre was pretty much inevitable.’ Her life there was full of imagination: intricate games she played with her little sister, to whom she also told stories. She wrote, always: ‘I think pretty much from the point when I could hold a pencil I was scribbling something.’

Roald Dahl was the first author to take her ‘by storm ... because of the rule breaking. **James and the Giant Peach** – I started reading it, very young, and read this lovely description of this happy little boy with a happy little family in a happy house by the sea, and then

his parents getting killed by a runaway rhinoceros, and there was this lovely feeling of gearshift, and a sense that this is not going to be the

same kind of book. It was just very liberating.’ She reels off a list of classics, including Susan Cooper and John Masefield, that her parents read to her, all of which have left their mark on her writing mind. But it is that sense of bending the limits which is most pertinent to Hardinge's body of work.

Hardinge's fiction deftly interweaves the fantastical and the real. How did she deal with the concept of evolution, which plays a big part in **The Lie Tree**? ‘At first I was considering playing it completely straight – having some fantasy world and actually not having the

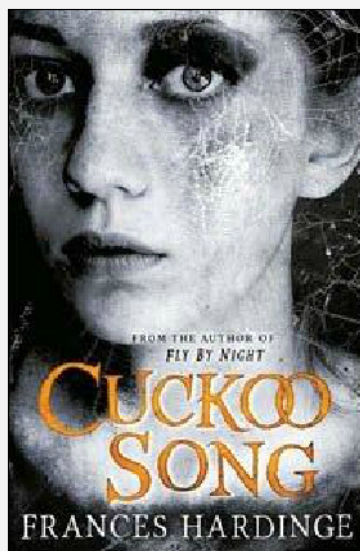


degree of ambiguity that you do end up having with this tree. I started thinking about it in a different way: where could I set it? What is the time when the Lie Tree would be particularly powerful? When there will be people who are desperately emotionally invested in being deceived, in clinging to something that is not true? When is there going to be a time when subterfuge is going to be natural or more easy or more socially condemned? And then I started thinking about a time where botany itself and associated natural science has elements of controversy. It just fitted much better. What had begun as quite a simple concept, but one I could definitely build an adventure off, became something with a lot more complexity or resonances.’

Family relationships are often at the core of her novels. ‘They are one of the mechanisms by which we understand ourselves,’ she says. ‘And certainly for the age group I'm writing for, that is quite a transitional period, it is a point where it's not Rupert Bear any more.

It's not “Rupert leaves happy safe little home, goes off has an adventure, comes back, happy safe home is there, and so is his tea” ... Middle grade – and particularly middle grade – (if these definitions even really work, and I'm not convinced they do), you're moving away from that. You can't quite come back like that because even if happy home hasn't changed, you have. Your dynamic has changed ... It does become more natural to actually question and challenge.’

There is always a tension, in her books, between the





rational and the mysterious. 'In many respects I have a similar sort of conflict,' she says, sipping her tea. 'I have always found the fantastical, the folkloric, the magical, the supernatural, etc, extremely attractive and fascinating, though I am also extremely intrigued by people's reasons for believing, and the symbolism behind them, and social uses of different forms of folklore.'

‘I spent part of my childhood living in a really weird grey gothic implausible house up on a hilltop, which actually did make the proper moaning wuthering sound when the wind blew. My imagination never stood a chance’

The story of the changeling is the source for **Cuckoo Song**. What is the social use for that, I wonder? 'Ooh that's quite nasty ... I was expecting to find the folktales fairly chilling. What I hadn't expected was that I felt far more chilled by the anti-changeling strategies ... Because good grief, they're horrible! You have all these babies being thrown in the fire, or put on spades and held over the fire, or thrown into running water, or left on dung heaps to scream and ignored until – it's either to force the changeling to go or to force the fairy parents to reclaim it ... And sometimes they are switched back and sometimes they're not, but they do get rid of the changeling. And there's this little chilling silence after that. And the horrible thing is there is every evidence that this happened.'

It doesn't bear thinking about. 'If you look at some of the ways that some of the changelings are described,' she continues, 'it tallies with descriptions of mental and physical disabilities. And if you have a family that's on the breadline ... and then you have one person who is not only not pulling their weight, but has to be supervised all the time ... What is noticeable is that an awful lot of the changeling tales describe the changeling as voraciously hungry. So it looks like they were a mechanism to psychologically justify infanticide. The families don't just act – they get somebody else from outside saying, you've got a changeling, this is what you need to do. Shared responsibility. Again it's a displacement of blame, and it's a way that the family can psychologically cope with it and a way that the community can cope with it and continue to accept the family. Pretty chilling stuff!'

‘I am always fascinated and horrified by people’s ability to demonise each other’

This darkness is prevalent in her work: 'I am always fascinated and horrified by people's ability to demonise each other, and to see each other as other than human, less than human, etc ... So where there is prejudice, where there is confusion, where there is alienation, I like to try and handle it in a two-handed way. I like to show where the prejudices are on both sides. I like to show where the communication failures are on both sides.'

So what drives her fiction, ultimately? She pauses, uncharacteristically, and thinks, her sensitive face alive with movement. Then she speaks, all at once. 'Anger, humour, the desire to overturn things.' It's looking underneath things, I say. She nods, enthusiastically. 'And sometimes what's underneath actually looks a little better than what's on top.' This upturning, though, does not confuse; rather, it seeks to understand and explore the nuanced, strange world that we live in. And that goes for all of Hardinge's books. Hers is an extraordinary talent, and her place in the roster of literature is assured. ■

Books mentioned:

Fly By Night, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-0330418263, £7.99

Cuckoo Song, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-0330519731, £7.99

The Lie Tree, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1447264101 £6.99



Philip Womack is a literary critic for the **Guardian**, **Telegraph** and a Contributing Editor to **Literary Review**. He is also a children's author, and his latest book **The King's Shadow**, is just out.

Values and themes in the CILIP Carnegie Medal shortlist 2015

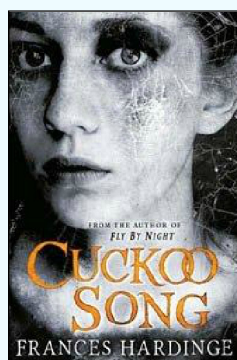
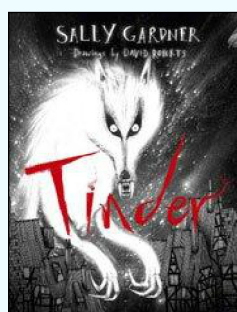
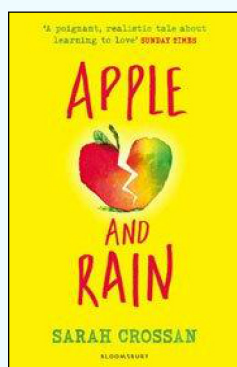
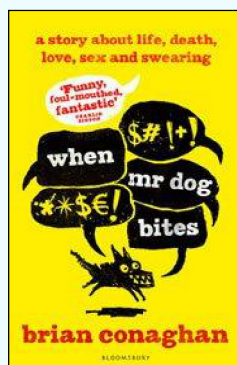
Nicholas Tucker appraises the shortlist for the prestigious award.

The 2015 Carnegie Medal shortlist of eight novels provides an interesting snap-shot of current literary taste in the children's and young adult books world. Those chosen are not necessarily representative of all the books published in that year, but their particular selection does give a glimpse of how the experienced adult readers who selected them are thinking about contemporary children's literature. So let's look for some common themes in this selection, wondering as we go how much may have changed and also how much may have stayed constant since the first Carnegie Medal judges assembled in 1936.

What stands out in all of them is the continuing faith their authors have in the essential resilience of their young heroes and heroines

First, the books themselves. Sarah Crossan's **Apple and Rain** (Bloomsbury) is a contemporary story involving a daughter's dysfunctional relationship with a delinquent mother. Brian Conaghan's **When Mr Dog Bites** (Bloomsbury) features a sixteen-year-old boy with Tourette's Syndrome wrongly convinced that he is about to die. Sally Gardner's **Tinder** (Orion), luminously illustrated by David Roberts, is a re-imagining of the traditional fairy tale **The Tinderbox**. Frances Hardinge's **Cuckoo Song** (Macmillan) describes a girl whose body has become temporarily occupied by someone else. Tanya Landman's **Buffalo Soldiers** (Walker) is about the life of a freed young woman slave who, dressed as a man, joins up with the American army to finally put down the remaining tribes of indigenous Indians. Elizabeth Laird's **The Fastest Boy in the World** (Macmillan) features an eleven-year-old contemporary Ethiopian boy on a first troubled visit to Addis Ababa with his grandfather. Geraldine McCaughrean's **The Middle of Nowhere** (Usborne) is set in 19th century Australia, with a young girl in the outback trying to keep things going after her mother dies and her father goes into deep depression. And finally Patrick Ness's **More Than This** (Walker) involves an adolescent boy transported to a dystopian future after apparently drowning.

What stands out in all of them is the continuing faith their authors have in the essential resilience of their young heroes and heroines, up to and including acts of enormous physical and/or psychological courage. Parents may let them down, teachers may not always understand them, other children may gang up against



them, but these main characters are still telling their readers that obstacles, however threatening, can be overcome. There is also the message that even in the bleakest times it is worth hanging in there for that special friendship – not necessarily a love interest – that can finally make all the difference. Life may be grim, and indeed in all these novels it mostly is. But there is always hope.

This may seem an obvious point to make, but last year's winner, Kevin Brooks's disturbing **The Bunker Diary**, is a novel devoid of any hope or good feeling at all. So while previous Carnegie Medal author winners of not so long ago may have blinked at some of the swearing and frank sexual content on show this year, particularly evident in Brian Conaghan's novel, they would still surely recognise and respect the positive image of childhood evident in each young hero and heroine here if not always in the other young people in their lives at home or school.

This brings me to a second common theme this year: a hatred of violence. For while the world of computer games continues to shower young people with violent images, children's authors see things very differently. There is no room in any of these novels for the idea that receiving or inflicting pain and suffering is good for the soul, let alone in any way also exciting or praiseworthy. Nor is there any confident feeling that violence in itself is ever going to make things better. Sally Gardner adds sad and telling detail to the quick deaths familiar in fairy tales in order to show what life as an 18th century mercenary in lawless times could really be like. Tanya Landman describes the deadening effect on the personality once killing becomes a way of life. Given the current disillusion with Britain's military involvement first with Iraq and then Afghanistan, this anti-war writing seems closer to current thinking than do the casual mega-deaths found in screen games. Children's authors could once get away with a far more gung-ho attitude to violence in their novels. But not any more, at least on the evidence of these eight stories.

there is a feeling for all young people, of whatever background, who do not fit in

Selected time spans meanwhile remain various, with only Sarah Crossan and Brian Conaghan placing their stories in contemporary times. Young readers therefore searching for an accurate reflection of what they are seeing around them will have to look elsewhere. Writing a would-be state of the nation novel for young readers is becoming increasingly hard, given that developments in technology are so rapid that the latest thing for a writer could quickly seem yesterday's news even before publication. Composing a novel reflecting young people's evolving interactions in the social media is also a considerable challenge, given that each

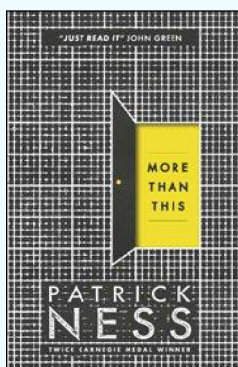
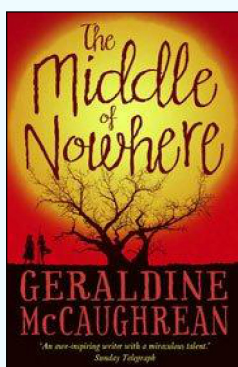
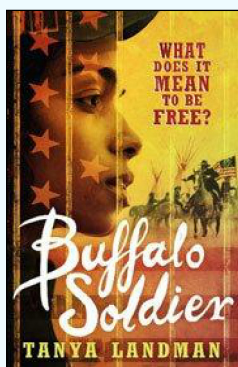
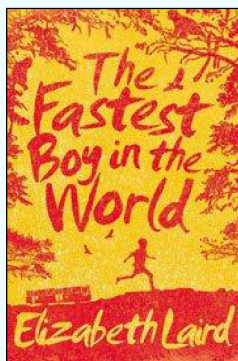
generation now tends to live within in its own technological world often with little idea of what is going on elsewhere. The continuity that once ran through all writing, with references to standard and largely unchanging 20th century technology of the type represented by phones, radio and later television, has now disappeared for ever.

Issues of gender hardly arise, so taken for granted is it now that girls are not only the equal of boys but often their superior

These stories also have no common sense of place. Readers can instead learn a lot about life in America, Australia and mid-Europe at various times in history. Elizabeth Laird, who has done so much to make the Third World come alive in her fiction, paints a picture of Afghanistan in her novel that is both particular while also relevant to other undeveloped parts of the contemporary world. But there is less about life in everyday Britain here. Novels that once took on contemporary social issues like class or racial prejudice do not appear, save for historical moments in Tanya Landman's and Geraldine McCaughrean's novels. Instead, there is more of a feeling for all young people, of whatever background, who do not fit in mainly for psychological reasons. Frances Hardinge transforms this feeling of psychological dislocation into physical form in her novel. Patrick Ness explains his main character's problems in terms of him failing to survive the break-up of an intense gay relationship. Sarah Crossan writes about the agony of being friendless at school. Main young characters in all these novels tend to be under-dogs in some way. Literature of all sorts has been identifying with the dispossessed and lonely ever since the story of Cinderella. How ironic then that the only psychologically sound hero throughout in this present selection is an eleven-year-old boy from the poorest part of Afghanistan. Perhaps he will only develop psychological problems when, as the international runner he is going to become, he too has the time, money and leisure to take his mind off more immediate problems like poverty and starvation.

Writing a would-be state of the nation novel for young readers is becoming increasingly hard

Love remains a preoccupation in most of these novels, either when it comes to loving or being loved by someone else, or when it is a matter of not receiving the love that is normally the due from parent to child. Issues of gender hardly arise, so taken for granted is it now that girls are not only the equal of boys but often their



superior. Endings, while not always happy, are at least resolved in most cases. Patrick Ness's young hero although facing an uncertain future still feels reasonably optimistic about his survival, and Frances Hardinge's heroine Trista ends by glorying in life's exciting uncertainty. So while the going in all these stories is certainly tough, sometimes very much so, there are rewards for those who stick it out. The moral nihilism found in Robert Cormier's novels and a few others seems at the moment to be on the back foot.

Seven of these novels could be worthy winners. The exception, for me, is Sarah Crossan's promising but ultimately light-weight **Apple and Rain**, increasingly marred by plotting deficiencies and stock characters. Patrick Ness, Sally Gardner, Frances Hardinge and Elizabeth Laird are all fine writers but none exceed their previous triumphs here. I would therefore choose as my winner either Geraldine McCaughrean, for her effortless skill in evoking atmosphere, Tanya Landman, for her passionate insight into one of American history's darkest corners, or Brian Conaghan for his verbal exuberance while never selling his subject short. But we will have to wait till June 22 to see what the judges make of such a fascinating diversity. ■

The CILIP Carnegie Medal 2015 shortlist

When Mr Dog Bites, Brian Conaghan, Bloomsbury, 978-1-40883-836-5, £7.99

Apple and Rain, Sarah Crossan, Bloomsbury, 978-1-40882-713-0, £6.99

Tinder, Sally Gardner (author) and David Roberts (illustrator), Orion Children's Books, 978-1-78062-149-4, £11.99

Cuckoo Song, Frances Hardinge, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-0-33051-973-1, £7.99

The Fastest Boy in the World, Elizabeth Laird, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1-44726-717-1, £6.99

Buffalo Soldier, Tanya Landman, Walker Books, 978-1-40631-459-5, £7.99

The Middle of Nowhere, Geraldine McCaughrean, Usborne Books, 978-1-40957-051-6, £6.99

More Than This, Patrick Ness, Walker Books, 978-0-76367-620-9, £7.99



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

On **First Light**, an anthology in celebration of the work of Alan Garner

Described by Philip Pullman as ‘the most important British writer of fantasy since Tolkien’, Alan Garner has enraptured generations of readers with novels like **The Weirdstone of Brisingamen, The Moon of Gomrath, Elidor, The Owl Service, Red Shift** and **The Stone Book Quartet**. He turned 80 last year and in celebration many of the writers, artists, archaeologists and historians he has inspired are contributing pieces to a special anthology called **First Light**. Its editor, **Erica Wagner** introduces the project.

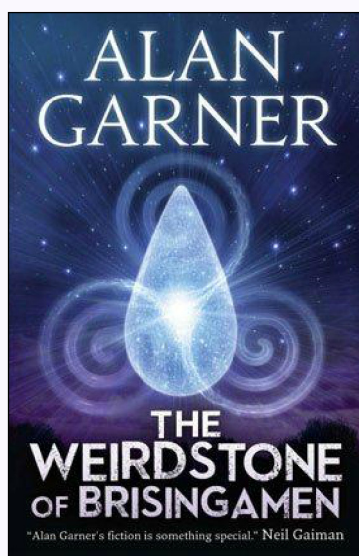
I was eight years old. It was the summer of 1976, that sweltering English summer, and I was driving with my parents through the Cheshire countryside. Nothing so unusual about that, you might think, but for the fact that we were by no means locals, but had come to Cheshire from an ocean away – New York City, where we lived, where I grew up. But my mother was a passionate Anglophile, avid for ‘Upstairs, Downstairs’ and with a stack of memoirs by ex-RAF pilots by her bed. My father was compliant; and so here we were, on an English adventure. I don’t know where we were driving from; I don’t know where we were driving to. I do know – I remember vividly – that suddenly, right by the side of the narrow lane on which my dad was driving, there loomed the great dish of the Lovell Telescope.

I didn’t know it was the Lovell Telescope. I know my dad nearly ran off the road – and he was a very good driver. Here in this ancient landscape (when I look back, I’m sure I could feel its antiquity in those high hedges and twisting roads) was the future. The future and the past right next to each other, co-existing – how was that possible? We drove around for a little while until we found the entrance to Jodrell Bank Observatory; in those days the visitor centre was pretty rickety, hardly a visitor centre at all, but it didn’t matter. You were in the shadow of the Lovell’s great dish, a giant ear set to listen to the universe, to map the stars which tell us so much about ourselves.

I had absolutely no idea that a little over a mile away lived a writer whose work I would not discover until over 20 years later. Growing up in the United States I didn’t read the works of Alan Garner, but books by E B White, Madeleine L’Engle, Beverly Cleary; American writers in an American childhood. But when I did discover Alan’s work as an adult, I found that his connection to the ancient universe was no less strong than that of the Lovell Telescope and all the work that goes on at Jodrell Bank. Here is a photograph of Alan Garner, walking up the track of the house which has been his home for many decades – as many decades as the telescope has been in the next field. On the site of Alan’s home in Blackden there is evidence of human habitation going back 10,000 years. On one side of the image is the house, with its medieval timber beams; on the other side of the image, the telescope.



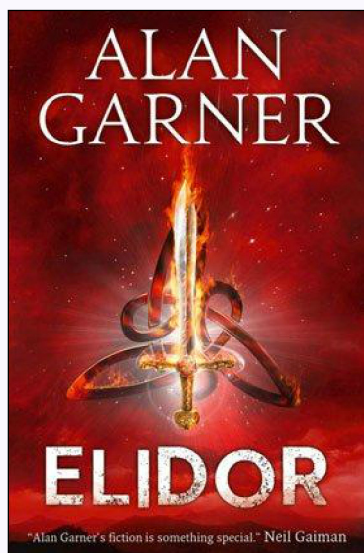
The connection is more than coincidence. **The Weirdstone of Brisingamen, The Moon of Gomrath, The Owl Service, Elidor, Strandloper, Thursbitch, Boneland** ... These are books that enable readers, young and old alike, to slip into the other worlds that exist alongside our own if we only know to look: a book is a kind of telescope, too. So, here am I, all these years later, assembling a collection of essays in praise of Alan Garner’s work. Alan turned 80 last



year; it seemed a good enough excuse for a celebration for a writer whose influence extends far beyond the world of fantasy, or of children’s books. (I’d rather write: ‘books published for children’ as that seems more accurate to me; all of our writers, and all of Alan’s readers, have found in his work nourishment to keep them going all along the road of life.) When we were about to launch the book on the Unbound crowdfunding website – because this is a book which won’t exist without Alan’s devoted readers jumping aboard and supporting our endeavour by

subscribing to it – we were missing one crucial element: a title. Yes, Margaret Atwood would send us a piece. Sure, we had Philip Pullman writing for us, and Neil Gaiman, and Stephen Fry, and David Almond – and many, many more great names as you’ll see on the site. But what we didn’t have was a title – until Alan himself suggested **First Light** as a ‘neat nod’ to Jodrell Bank.

For just last March, Alan inaugurated a new series of public lectures at Jodrell: the Garner Lectures, which will explore the connections between science and culture. ‘At Jodrell Bank, the boundary between science and culture barely exists. In fact, it’s hard to find someone who works here who recognises the two as separate areas.’ Those are the

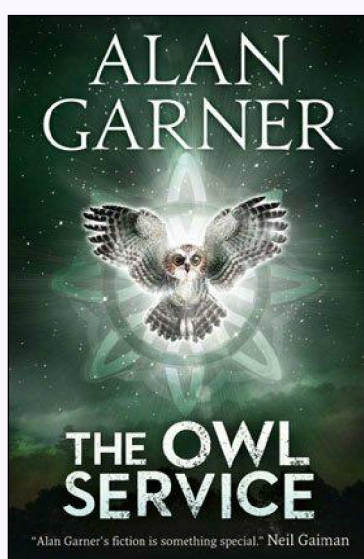


million years ago, thereabouts, a hominin forerunner took the pebble and struck flakes from it with another rock, shaping it to sit in the hand, with one edge and a point sharpened to cut meat.' Lovell, as much a cultured and spiritual man as he was a scientist, understood what Alan was getting at. 'The hand-axe was the step we made towards the telescope,' Alan said in the Wolfson Auditorium of the observatory's Star Pavilion. 'Without the axe, Jodrell would not be here. Both are functional, both works of art.'

What makes Alan's work extraordinary is its ability to break through many boundaries – not just those that apparently exist between science and culture. There are boundaries too, we're told, between history and fiction, between the oral and the written, between books that adults read and books that children read. There are books we like to think of

words of Dr Teresa Anderson, Director of the Discovery Centre at Jodrell. She is one of our contributors too; and it's in no small part thanks to her efforts that the shabby visitor centre I visited decades ago has vanished to make room for a brilliant place of public engagement.

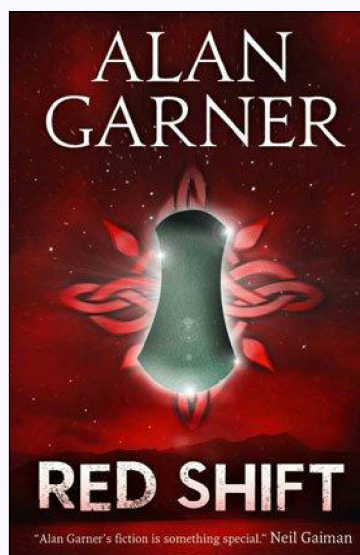
In his lecture (which you can read in its entirety in **The New Statesman**) Alan Garner told a story about meeting the late Sir Bernard Lovell, who constructed the telescope. He felt a connection, Alan said, between his work and Lovell's; he brought to Lovell's desk a hand-axe. 'Half a



Thunders; it's a piece that, with both humour and sensitivity, despairs of an educational system that would set literature on a single track of meaning – while recognising the gift that real education can be.

I'm still awaiting most of the pieces which **First Light**'s wonderful, eclectic crew of contributors will file. We've got novelists,

archaeologists, historians, storytellers, poets: what they will have in common is – of course – their love for Alan Garner's work. But I'm betting there'll be something else too: a sense of horizons broadened, divisions bridged, no matter what discipline each of our writers works in. I will never forget an email exchange I had with Alan, not long after



we first met, just before the turn of the century. I asked him something about his creative process, and he replied in no uncertain terms. 'I don't INVENT,' he wrote to me, 'I FIND.' His was a kind of discovery I had never encountered before; but it changed how I saw the world, and that change has stayed with me ever since. 'The old man lifted his staff and lightly touched the rock, and it split with the noise of thunder,' runs a line in the legend of Alderley, set out by Alan as a prologue to **The Weirdstone**. The farmer from Mobberley sees wonders of which he could never have dreamt

before the wizard revealed them; Alan's readers learned, from the very first pages of his very first book, what they could expect from him, and over more than half a century now they have not been disappointed.

It's an honour and a joy to be editing a book which will sing the praises of Alan Garner – we'll make a chorale which, I hope, will do him justice. But it won't just be my book, or a book by the authors who are writing for me – your name can be in it too, and for as little as a tenner! **First Light** will shine: thanks to Alan, to our authors – and thanks to you.

You can contribute to **First Light** via Unbound www.unbound.co.uk ■

Alan Garner's books are published by HarperCollins

The Weirdstone of Brisingamen, 978-0-00735-521-1, £6.99

The Moon of Gomrath, 978-0-00712-787-0, £6.99

Elidor, 978-0-00727-478-9, £6.99

The Owl Service, 978-0-00712-789-4, £6.99

Red Shift, 978-0-00712-786-3, £6.99

The Stone Book Quartet, 978-0-00720-494-6, £11.99



Erica Wagner is an author and critic, former literary editor of **The Times**.

I wish I'd written...

Phil Earle finds it hard to choose one book, but plumps for 'the perfect' Roald Dahl.



Phil Earle's new novel, **Demolition Dad** (978-1444013863), is published by Orion Children's Books, £6.99 pbk.

You want me to list all the books I wish I'd written? In 200 words? Give me 200 pages and you might have a chance ... but OK, here's a few crackers I could only aspire to emulate.

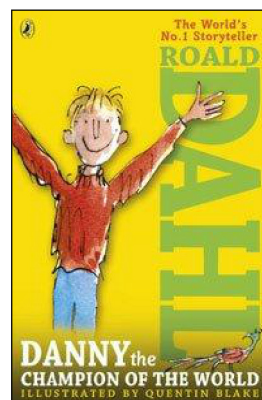
Louis Sachar's **Holes**, because it's as close to perfection as is humanly possible, Lemony Snicket's **A Bad Beginning** for showing how funny and subversive a narrator can be and Jack Gantos's **Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key** for creating a character with the heart of a lion.

Shall I go on?

OK, add to the list Kevin Brooks's **iBoy** for pure concept brilliance, Keith Gray's **Ostrich Boys** for being

the book my 15 year old self would have killed for, and Don Calame's **Swim the Fly**, for being downright naughty and brilliant with it.

But if I had to choose one book, at this moment in my life, that is wish I'd written, it'd be Dahl's **Danny the Champion of the World**. People talk about the craziness of Willy Wonka's factory, or the fantabulous language the BFG utters, but for me, **Danny** is the perfect book. Warm, funny and with a father/son relationship to die for. Without this book I'd never have written **Demolition Dad**, and for that simple fact, I feel profoundly lucky to have read it.'



Danny the Champion of the World (978-0141346434) by Roald Dahl is published by Puffin at £6.99 pbk.

Good Reads

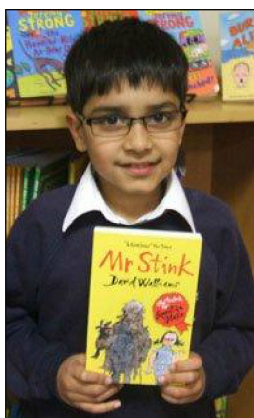
Chosen by pupils at **Hexthorpe Primary School, Doncaster.**

Mr Stink

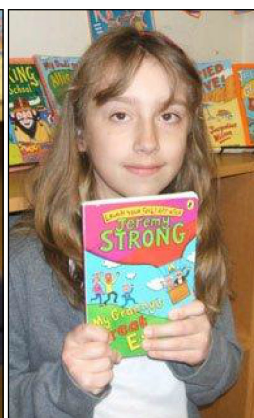
David Walliams, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0007279067, £6.99

I thought Mr Stink was really funny! It is about a girl named Chloe who invites a tramp called Mr Stink into her home. But little does she know that offering a tramp your garden shed and going behind your family would put you on TV! My favourite character is Raj who runs the local shop. He is funny because he keeps trying to make Chloe buy things on special offer like gone-off chocolate and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle stationery. David Walliams is clever because he puts Raj into all of his books so it makes me want to read more!

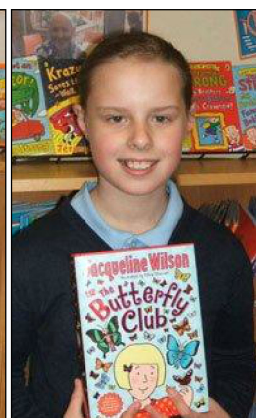
Momin Khan



Momin



Keira



Rebecca



Jessica

because Lancelot was a hell's angel! This book is funny, full of adventure and superb illustrations. I would recommend this book to everybody and give it a ten out of ten!!!

Keira Basingthwaite

The Butterfly Club

Jacqueline Wilson, Doubleday Children's Books, 978-0857533173, £12.99

Tina is smaller than Phil and Maddie, she had to be in an incubator when she was younger. When Tina was older she had to have a life changing operation. They put a box in her heart to pump it properly. When they were older gran gave these triplets a china doll. Tina's doll held a small

doll. Tina took it to school every day until Selma found it... My favourite bit was when Selma and Tina grew a butterfly garden and when Tina and Selma decided to be friends. I love this story! It is the best book I've read. The characters are special. The tale is so unique and it draws you in.

Rebecca Eades

A Tiny Bit Lucky Tom Gates

Liz Pichon, Scholastic, 978-1407148748, £6.99

It's about a boy called Tom who likes watching TV but his mum and dad want him to go outside and play. When his dad Finally stops nagging him to go out, he suggests that June, his next door

neighbour, comes round to play... I would give this book 5 stars.

Jessica

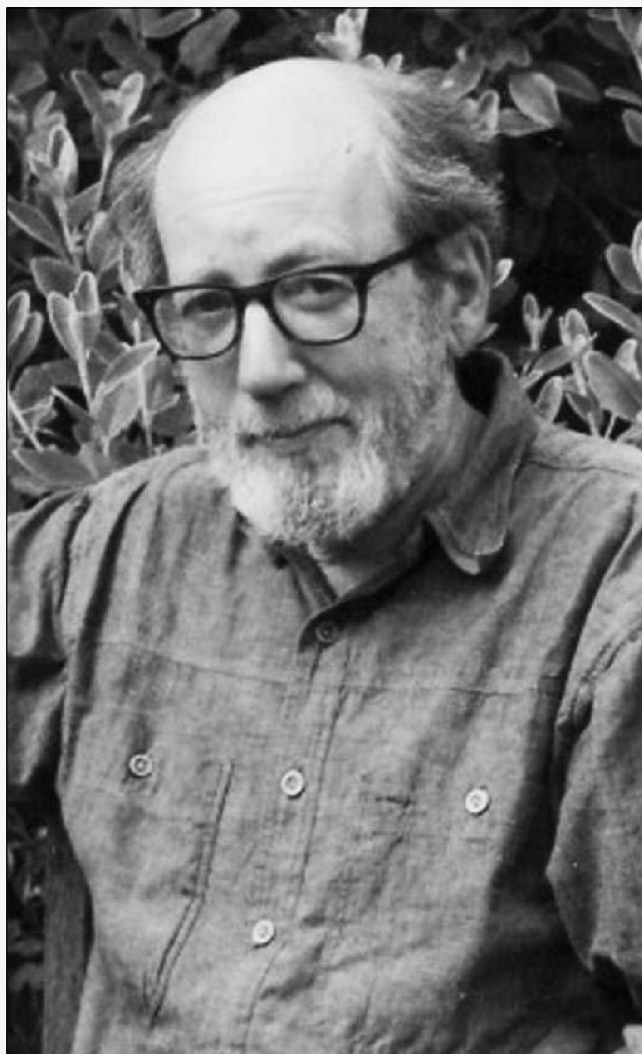
Hexthorpe Primary School won the inaugural World Book Day Award

(WoBoD) receiving £10,000 from author James Patterson to spend on books for its school library. **Philip Sheppard**, Year 5 teacher, and his class created the winning entry, a stop motion animation featuring a host of children's characters and books set to an original soundtrack sung by the children.

OBITUARY

Fritz Wegner

Born Vienna September 15th 1924 –
died London March 15th 2015



Ian Beck writes...

Fritz Wegner was in a class of his own as an illustrator. That is the top class. There was no one to touch him for wit, warmth, and above all fine draughtsmanship – a quality perhaps best appreciated and understood by his fellow illustrators. Few could approach him in this regard. He was a virtuoso practitioner with what Edward Ardizzone described as, 'that most intractable medium, a dip pen and a bottle of indian ink'. His was a very long career. From the original dust jacket for J D Salinger's **The Catcher in The Rye**, through a myriad drawings for **The Radio Times** and other journals to his numerous books. These included the classic **Fattypuffs and Thinifers** by André Maurois, up to his

later astonishing and lavish novelty book of Astrological lore, **Heaven on Earth** which he made in collaboration with his close friend and companion Emma Curzon. His pen has delighted the generations. Well, generations of readers that is. For his fellow illustrators there can only have been despair at seeing such a fluent ability flourished in their collective faces, like red rags to so many bulls.

Fritz was a modest man and was in fact incapable of flourishing any red rags. He was born into an enlightened Jewish family in Vienna in 1924. After the Anschluss his parents worried for his safety and sent him to England as a refugee. He was taken in to the household of a lettering artist and designer named George Mansell. He, together with his French wife more or less adopted the 13 year old Fritz who remained living with them for several years. Mansell recognised Fritz's precocious drawing ability and enrolled him at St Martin's Art School where he himself taught design. After the war Fritz started on his long career as a freelance illustrator. On the way he ended up teaching a whole generation of illustrators at his old alma mater St Martins, including the likes of Nicola Bayley, George Hardie, Glynn Boyd Harte, Sara Midda, among many others.

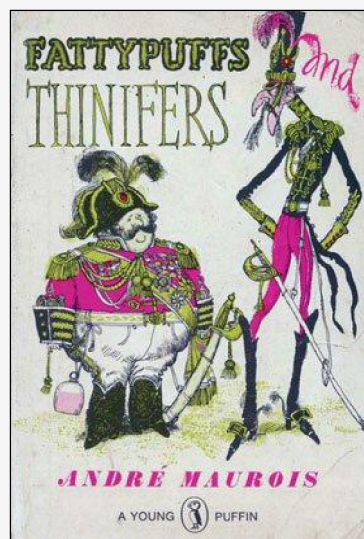
Fritz was a modest and self-effacing man to an almost ridiculous degree. He once tried to back out of a party thrown to celebrate his long membership of the Art Workers Guild. He was clearly horrified that such a thing should have been put on in his honour. Anyone who knew anything about drawing admired and revered Fritz's work. His talent revealed itself in so many ways, especially somehow in the seemingly simple and humble things; a bicycle for instance. Like the one ridden by Master Bun the baker's son in one of the Allan Ahlberg's **Happy Families** series of books. It is freely and fluidly drawn and yet accurate without being slavishly technical; a thing solidly seen and understood and seemingly drawn at speed and with all the necessary effort to get it right hidden from view.

He has left an enormous body of work all characterised by the joyous passage of his hand and pen which have seemed to dance together across all the pages he drew.

Fritz reached the great age of ninety, despite his constant refrain that 'we would never see him again', which was repeated at every meeting. His beautiful witty work remains for us all to share and delight in.

Ian Beck

Adapted from a recent piece Ian Beck wrote to celebrate Fritz's 90th birthday, published as a Festschrift by the **Double Crown Club** of which Fritz was a member.



Two Children Tell: Miffy, the Giraffe and Rebecca

In the latest of her regular series describing children's early responses to stories and language, **Virginia Lowe** observes her daughter's different responses to animals in her favourite stories.

Rebbecca had lived with our cat, Pinkle Purr, all her life. This may have been why, in Bruna's **B is for Bear**, the lion was consistently her favourite, from about three to nine months (judged by her happy arm waving and vocalisations on that page). I thought at first it was the yellow colour and spiky outline, assuming that Bruna's highly stylised figures would not be related to their counterparts in life – but now I am sure I was wrong. If it were the colour or the outline it would be consistent across infants, but her younger brother Nicholas, not living with a cat (Pinkle had died in the interim) showed no interest in the lion picture at all.

Rebecca knew that Pinkle didn't answer when adults addressed him. No doubt anthropomorphism was only an extension of adults pretending that cats could speak. She knew other animals quite well too – none of them spoke, or wore clothes. But animals often did in books, and she seemed to just accept this – what happened in books was in the story world, and that clearly had different rules to life. Not only Miffy, but Tom Kitten, Peter Rabbit, Little Bear, Frog and Toad, and various nursery rhyme animals could all speak. Her literary diet was full of articulate animals.

She had known Miffy for a year, when she first heard **Miffy at the Zoo** (3y7m). In this, the zoo animals speak to Miffy, asking her to come and play. Rebecca laughed and said 'Animals can't talk' on each page. At 'The tall giraffes bent down their long necks. "Hullo little Miffy" they said', she added, 'And giraffes don't make any noise at all!' I presume that it was the contrast between the clothed little girl-rabbit Miffy and her father, and the unclothed zoo animals, which had foregrounded the dichotomy for her, and also made it funny. She probably expected, as an adult would, that the zoo animals would behave as animals in the zoo, and it was funny when they didn't. This laughter became ritualised at each reading for the next year. She never bothered to remark on the animal characters speaking in any subsequent title however. It was as if once she'd stated it in this book she had established her understanding, and there was no need to point out the obvious anywhere else.

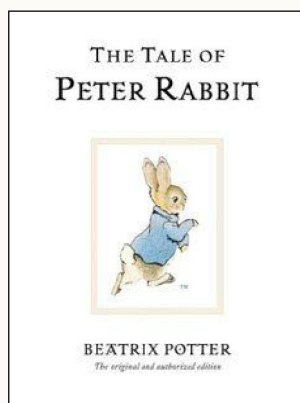
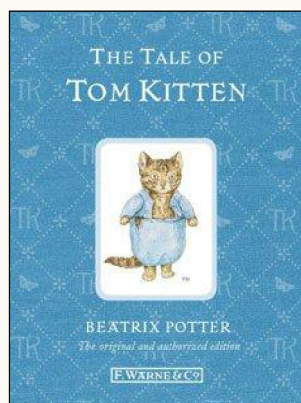
She had first articulated the idea two weeks before (3y6m) in her perennial favourite **The Hare and the Tortoise** (Wildsmith) where she had remarked to the wise owl, 'Owls can't talk' – but without amusement.

Animals wearing clothing was another matter however. She never bothered to state that animals don't wear clothes, but clearly recognised the importance of clothes in Beatrix Potter's oeuvre. 'Shoes in Mr McGregor's garden' she used as a byname for **The Tale**

of Peter Rabbit for some time, beginning at 2y3m. She enjoyed Potter's arcane words for garments. 'I'm putting on my tucker' she said draping herself in a towel (2y9m), adding, as in **Tom Kitten**, 'it does up at the back'.

The Tale of Tom Kitten was her favourite Potter story. Sometimes playing dress-ups she would announce (for instance at 3y3m), 'I'm wearing elegant uncomfortable clothes' just as Tabitha Twitchett insisted her children did (before unwisely sending them out into the garden to await a visitor). Rebecca would always eschew elegance for comfort in her own choice of clothing, wearing her grandmother's beautiful hand-made dresses only for Christmas or other times when Mamma was actually expected.

Potter often draws attention to her conceit of dressing her characters. In **Tom Kitten** she remarks at the beginning that the kittens had 'dear little fur coats of their own' and Mr Drake Puddleduck speaks urbanely, gentlemanly, once he has donned Tom Kitten's discarded clothes. Her characters often lose clothes or shoes, or tear or dirty them or leave them behind. Clothes matter, to the characters and to the story world, showing it is different to the real world. The one human protagonist in her oeuvre, Lucie, encounters Mrs Tiggy-Winkle – and **The Tale of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle** is all about the work that went into caring for clothes – washing, airing, ironing, goffering (some of it still very familiar). Rebecca was 'washing' outside with a basin and a hose when I asked if she were Mrs Tiggy-Winkle. 'No, because I'm not a hedgehog' she replied (4y1m). But she came inside later, covered with mud. When I remarked on her legs she said, 'That's because I'm Mrs Tiggy-Winkle. She was brown all over.' ■



The Books

Miffy at the Zoo, Dick Bruna, Simon and Schuster, 978-1-47112-082-4, £4.99

The Hare and the Tortoise, Brian Wildsmith, Oxford, 978-0-19272-708-4, £6.99

The Tale of Tom Kitten, Beatrix Potter, Frederick Warne & Co, 978-0-72326-777-5, £5.99

The Tale of Peter Rabbit, Beatrix Potter, Frederick Warne & Co, 978-0-72324-770-8, £5.99

The Tale of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, Beatrix Potter, Frederick Warne & Co, 978-0-72324-775-3, £5.99



Dr Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. She is the proprietor of **Create a Kids' Book**, a manuscript assessment agency, which also runs regular workshops, interactive writing e-courses, mentorships and produces a regular free e-bulletin on writing for children and children's literature generally. See www.createakidsbook.com.au for further details. Her book, **Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two children Tell** (2007) is published by Routledge (978 0 415 39724 7, £29.99 pbk).

Chicken House – 15 years on and still clucking!

Chicken House is a small, independent-minded publishing team of nine based in the West Country. Founded by Publisher Barry Cunningham with his deputy Rachel Hickman and joined by Rights Director Elinor Bagenal and Editorial Director Rachel Leyshon it's celebrating its fifteenth anniversary this year. **Barry Cunningham** tells the **Chicken House** story for **Books for Keeps**.

Michael Rosen gave me a hug and told me not to do it. He said starting a publishing company was different to finding good books – and the business was big, bossy and, well, too brassy for us.

He was right. We had to do things differently.

Readers First

We'd learnt our craft in different parts of the great ships of publishing and seen enough in bookshops, libraries, classrooms and overseas rights to know that a list that was purely literary wouldn't survive. We had to put readers first: entertained by authors who could inspire and enthral, and work hard to build readerships not only in the UK but around the world too. If we were to survive, we had to find new talent and show our worth to publishing partners who could offer our authors mass distribution and international success.

Chicken Coops

Our first home in 2000 was with Egmont UK and we soon hit our international stride with an approach from Scholastic Inc. in the US to be our partner there. From the beginning, we were working on our list as an individual part of a bigger picture, enabling us to launch brand new writers like Kevin Brooks worldwide.

We knew too that there was foreign-language talent ready for a wider stage, so by acquiring and translating Cornelia Funke's novels for the World English market we delivered the first of our five New York Times bestsellers. Our success also prompted Carlsen Verlag in Germany to join us with Chicken House Deutschland, which has just enjoyed its best ever year with James Dashner's **Maze Runner** topping the German bestseller list, as **Numbers** by Rachel Ward had done previously.

Chicken House was also an early follower of the self-publishing source, signing Gordon/Williams' **Tunnels** series from its underground origins and creating a super-successful series, selling in

over forty countries.

In 2005, the Chickens became part of Scholastic Inc., the largest children's publisher in the world with an extraordinary reach into schools, but with the brilliantly kept proviso that the coop would maintain its independent identity.

The Colour of our Feathers

What makes our books special? We know why we want to publish them. We have a clear vision; we seek out new work, strong central ideas, and we accept that risk – and failure – is part of the journey to success. Our previous careers in marketing made us super-aware that any prerequisite for success is knowing who a book is for; how we intend to reach its readers; what it looks like; and how it sounds when we pitch it around the world.

Brilliant core design and identity is integral: individual covers that intrigue the reader, together with direct clues as to what's inside with our 'This book in three words', 'Try it' page suggestions and notes from the publisher. All this is worked on at the same time as the editorial process, our small in-house team crossing disciplines and fully involving authors in the process. Above all, we are clear. We only publish books we believe in and can find readers for. Simple!

Multimedia

Embrace it! Chicken House Entertainment, our own media production company is thriving, providing successful film and TV representation to our authors. Recent signings have included Veronica Cossantelli's **The Extincts** to **Moonbot**, the exciting new Hollywood animation studio, and Janet Foxley's **Muncle Trogg** to Bristol-based Aardman. And our latest initiative includes the Big Idea Competition with Ingenious Media and the Blair Partnership.

What have we learnt?

That talent begins at home. The **Times/Chicken House Children's Fiction Competition** for unpublished novels is now in its

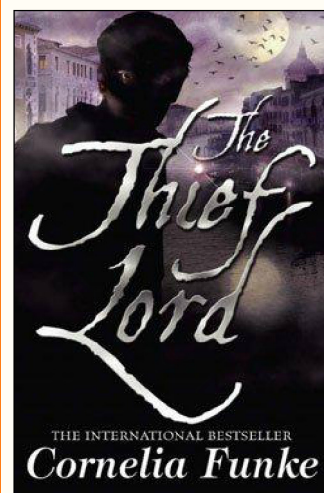
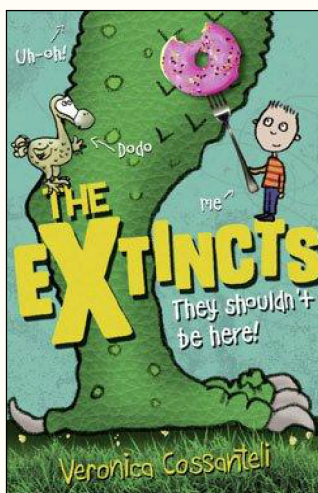
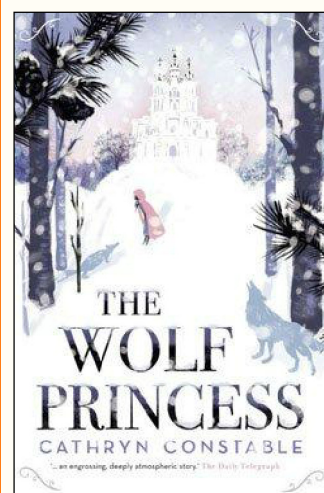
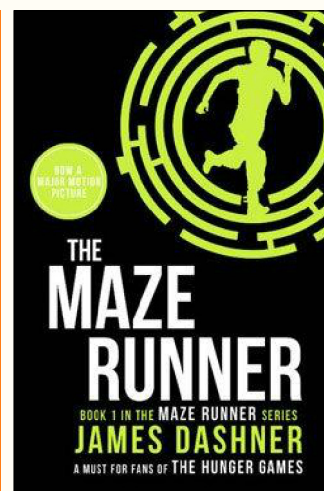
ninth year. We run frequent **Open Coops**, one-day amnesties for unpublished writers. We have an association with **Golden Egg**, a writing academy. And finally we celebrate publishing development deals with film companies such as Altitude.

We originate books from film and TV scripts such as Melvin Burgess's **Billy Elliot** or more recently Dan Smith's **Big Game**. We match ideas inspired by classics with bestselling authors, such as **A Little in Love** by Susan Fletcher, inspired by **Les Misérables**. We connect with and buy rights from clever publishers and agents from around the globe.

Above all, we're never afraid to work with creative talent wherever we can find it, giving it the closest publishing support. Chicken House is proud of our achievements; signing James Dashner before the **Hunger Games** was born; launching Kevin Brooks and Lucy Christopher's groundbreaking YA novels, as well as Cathryn Constable's **The Wolf Princess**, a diamond in the snow. Next year, we look forward to the brilliant debut, **Beetle Boy** by M G Leonard and **The Fever Code**, the next in James Dashner's world-conquering **Maze Runner** series.

The Last Egg

I learnt everything from Kaye Webb and Peter Mayer. The Puffin editor's advice was 'Whatever happens, tell them what's for tea – children love food.' And from the Penguin Chief Executive: 'OK, that was a bad financial year – let's publish our way out.'



Barry Cunningham OBE

For further publicity information contact Sales & Publicity Assistant Jasmine Bartlett (jasmine@doublecluck.com). Follow us on Twitter @chickenhsebooks

REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

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

Gwynneth Bailey is a freelance education and children's book consultant.

Clive Barnes, formerly Principal Children's Librarian, Southampton City is a freelance researcher and writer.

Jill Bennett is the author of **Learning to Read with Picture Books** and heads up a nursery unit.

Rebecca Butler writes and lectures on children's literature.

Katie Clapham runs specialist children's bookshop Storytellers, Inc. in Lancaster.

Bethany Clark is a UK Sales Assistant at Quadrille Publishing and helps run a children's library.

Caroline Downie has been a Children's Librarian for over 20 years, working in a variety of settings.

Stuart Dyer is an Assistant Head Teacher in a Bristol primary school.

Anne Faundez is a freelance education and children's book consultant.

Janet Fisher is a children's literature consultant.

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

Laura Fraine is a freelance journalist based in the North East.

Hazel Holmes is a Children's Book Buyer for a leading library supplier and runs children's book clubs.

Ferelith Hordon is a former children's librarian and Chair Elect of the Youth Libraries Group, and editor of **Books for Keeps**.

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

Margaret Mallett is a team editor for the English Association's journal *English 4-11* and author of **What Shall We Do Next?: A Creative Play and Story Guide**. **Matthew Martin** is a primary school teacher.

Sue McGonigle is a Lecturer in Primary Education.

Margaret Pemberton is a school library consultant and blogs at margaretpemberton.edublogs.org.

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

Andrea Rayner is an editor and has an MA in children's literature.

Andrea Reece is a marketing consultant and Managing Editor of **Books for Keeps**.

Gill Robins is a Junior School Deputy Head and Editorial Chair of the *English Association publication English 4-11*.

Lucy Russell is a primary school teacher.

Elizabeth Schlenker is the compiler of www.healthbooks.org.uk

Lucy Staines is a primary school teacher.

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

Sue Unstead is a writer and publishing consultant.

Ruth Williams is a children's book editor and publishing consultant.

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant

Editor's Choice

The Wizardling

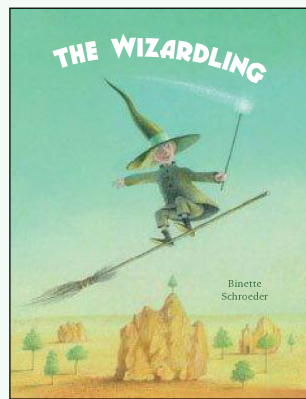
★★★★★

Binette Schroeder, trans Siobhán Parkinson, Little Island, 32pp, 978-1-91041-100-1, £11.99 hbk

Wizzo has been warned: keep away from Dragon Rock. Of course he doesn't and meets Dradru, the little dragon-girl and Little Red Riding Hood. It is fun showing off but what about the Big Bad Wolf?

Binette Schroeder's colour rich illustrations are perfect for this gentle, enjoyable take on **The Sorcerer's Apprentice**. Luminous mauves and blues emphasise the magical landscape that is Wizzo's world, while the bright greens of the countryside create the perfect setting for a picnic. Of course there is danger – once again emphasised by the drama of red and gold – but the final spread provides a reassuring conclusion complete with cake and

lemonade. The text, cleverly translated by Siobhán Parkinson, has a satisfying rhythm with plenty of enjoyable vocabulary – lovely onomatopoeic words to roll off the tongue. This is an ideal book to share at bedtime, just that little bit longer than the youngest picture book and so providing a satisfying story that is also visually rich and engaging from the end papers and on through every page. Beautiful. **FH**



Where, Oh Where Is Rosie's Chick?

★★★

Pat Hutchins, Hodder Children's Books, 32pp, 978-1-44491-828-1, £11.99 hbk

Published over forty years ago, **Rosie's Walk** is a classic picture book in the true sense of the word. This long-awaited sequel sees our heroine hen take another walk but this time she's looking for something very special. Rosie's egg has hatched, but her baby chick is nowhere to be seen. Rosie has to search high and low for her little one – under the hen-house, in a basket and through the fields. Where is the little baby chick?

The sixties palette manages to look bright and appealing and Hutchins's illustrations still look really stylish. The story is, again, super simple and tries to re-capture the clever dual narrative of the first walk's brilliant illustrated story. It's a fool-proof formula but admittedly lacks the magical purity of the original. **KC**

The Giant of Jum

★★★★★

Elli Woollard & Benji Davies, 32pp, 978-1-44725-473-7, £11.99 hbk

This is a delightful warm hearted twist on a classic fairy tale. The Giant of Jum is a very grumpy fellow, and extremely keen on eating a boy known as Jack who his brother once told him about. So off he goes in search of Jack feeling certain that children will make

the very best meal. However, he unwittingly ends up helping the children he meets overcome all sorts of problems. They deem him a lovely kind giant who couldn't possibly intend to gobble them up. Elli Woollard's clever rhyming verse makes this an absolute pleasure to read aloud and is perfectly accompanied by Benji Davies's bright illustrations. I'm excited to see more from this unique picture book duo. **HH**

Nobody's Perfect

★★★★★

David Elliott, ill. Sam Zuppardi, Walker Books, 32pp, 978-1-40635-944-2, £11.99 hbk

Mum has put her little boy on the 'naughty step', and he is having time out to reflect about perfection in people. Gigi, his baby sister, isn't perfect because she can be very loud when she wants something she can't have; his best friend Jack can be a show off; Mum is stubborn when she thinks she has a good reason for putting him on the naughty step; and he knows he isn't great about tidying his room. But Gigi's loudness can be fun when they are being loud together, and Jack's showing off can be fun too. Even Mum's stubbornness can be acceptable when she is agreeing with him about something, and he himself knows there are times when he really has to be messy. The comic-style illustrations with their child-like faces and bodies fit the text beautifully, and even the extra pencil lines that surround many of the details in the

pictures have the look of a child having drawn lines first before filling in the colour. It is as though the little boy has thought through his ideas of perfection in people and has then made a book of drawings to reflect those ideas. Understanding that people aren't perfect is an important part of growing up, and this picture book will help explain that concept in easy to grasp terms. **ES**

Pat-a-Cake Baby

★★★★★

Joyce Dunbar, ill. Polly Dunbar, Walker Books, 978-1-40632-363-4, £11.99 hbk

'I'm a cookie baby/a pat-a-cake baby'; a jaunty jingle picks up the traditional nursery rhyme familiar to many. It sets the tone for this latest collaboration between mother and daughter, Joyce and Polly Dunbar. It is a lovely confection designed to be read aloud. Joyce Dunbar is one of the best creators of picture book text; here she is on top form with rhyming, rhythmic words that are full of wonderful alliteration and onomatopoeia – 'glitzy', 'mutter mutter', 'flitter flatter'. Picture books are a route through which the youngest can be exposed to the richest vocabulary, where a sense of poetry can be awakened, and this is a picture book that delivers. But a picture book is – or should be – a partnership; the illustrations must also work. Polly Dunbar rises to the challenge filling the spacious double-page spreads with colour, not dramatic tones, but rich mellow washes that emphasise the nursery appeal. Her jolly babies bounce across the pages with not a tantrum in sight, but like Mickey in Sendak's **Night Kitchen**, ensure that there is cake at the end. This is a book that demands to be picked up, the glitter on the cover – just a little – attracting the attention, but not used for anything else; texture is all in the colour, the design, the marriage of text and image. A very satisfying dish that should be in classrooms and nurseries everywhere. **FH**

Lily and Bear

★★★

Lisa Stubbs, Boxer Books, 32pp, 978-1-91012-605-9, £11.99 hbk

Tutu-clad Lily – who seems to be ambidextrous – loves drawing. She draws all sorts of things including a bear, which comes to life. Bear happily joins in with Lily's games, like sailing on carpet seas, attending royal tea parties and racing around on tricycles. Then Bear decides it's time to do Bear things instead, so they have a lovely time together picking huckleberries, catching slippery fish and scratching their backs on trees. This is a charming, simple story about the give and take of friendship, and the power of imagination. The childlike illustrations would surely inspire budding young artists – and as the

reviews

jacket blurb explains, some of Lily's crayon drawings are actually by Lisa Stubbs's own children. **RW**

Ready, Steady, Jump!

★★★★★

Jeanne Willis & Adrian Reynolds, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978-1-78344-039-9, £11.99 hbk

All the other baby animals can jump, but not elephant. He tries all different ways but he just can't manage it. Even running really fast and not eating for five days doesn't help. Yet, after feeling very fed up he soon discovers he has a talent for something else: a talent that turns him into a hero! A gentle read that celebrates individuality. **HH**

Ice in the Jungle

★★★★★

Ariane Hofmann-Maniyar, Child's Play, 32pp, 978-1-84643-730-4, £5.99 pbk

Ice is very much less than thrilled when her mum says they are to move from the North Pole to a different country far away. She will miss her friends, and she really doesn't want to go. The trip is long and difficult, and the new country is hot and full of strange animals very unlike polar bears – hippos and elephants and giraffes. At school, Ice cannot understand anything the other children say to her, and when they give her a banana as a sign of trying to make friends, she tastes it and finds it very unlike fish. Will Ice adjust to her new surroundings? Of course she will, and the expected happy ending makes everything all right. It is the pictures that make this book highly memorable. Full of imaginative illustrations such as Ice and her mum taking a whale as a mode of transport to the new country and an elephant on roller skates becoming a bus, the cold blues and whites of the North Pole turn into the bright oranges, yellows and reds of the jungle country. Ice has a toy fish that she carries everywhere with her, and this provides comfort and solace when she is unhappy. We can well understand why her mum's hug is the only familiar thing she feels in this new place, but we also find there is hope in new friends. Hofmann-Maniyar is a new talent to enjoy. **ES**

Daddy's Sandwich

★★★★★

Pip Jones, ill. Laura Hughes, Faber and Faber, 978-0-57131-182-8, £12.99 hbk

No ordinary sandwich here, and what small child would not love this amazing picture book to bits! We watch, seeing that this little girl knows exactly how to manage her daddy. Her eyes speak volumes! But now she does want to please, by making him a sandwich using all his favourite ingredients. She is an observant child, so in go cheese, tomato, and biscuits dunked in tea. Adding other favourite ingredients, including his cosy old slippers, his TV remote, she delights in showing us in

the pictures just how easy it really is! In goes his tool-belt, followed by his deckchair! She begins to think of all HER things her dad loves ... her drawings go in, her pop-up books, her paddling pool. Here comes the pause whilst we hold our breath and study the detailed, intriguing illustrations. The pictures keep up with each addition to the sandwich, but we don't see the final edifice until the final page when Daddy is called in, for his sandwich is ready. The little girl sits atop, holding a slice of bread on top of her head, a cheeky smile on her face. Full of energy, this is a delightful tale, and will encourage lots of small people to try building fantasy – and real! – sandwiches in their own home or nursery. It would make an apt Father's Day gift! **GB**

Slug Needs a Hug!

★★★★★

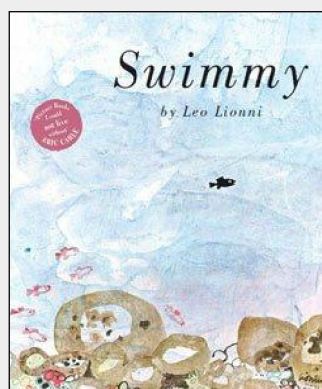
Jeanne Willis & Tony Ross, 32pp, 978-1-78344-119-8, £11.99 hbk

Slug needs to make himself more huggable; perhaps if he's more cuddly his mummy will hug him. He sets off to gain valuable advice from his animal friends ... He needs to be fluffier, he needs feathers and he needs a 'handsome goatee beard'. Full of comical illustrations this is a fun rhyming read with quite an important message. Of course his mummy loves him just as he is; he doesn't need to change. She might not be able to physically hug him but she can show her love in other ways. Very sweet. **HH**

Swimmy

★★★★★

Leo Lionni, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978-1-78344-175-4, £6.99 pbk



I'm absolutely thrilled to see this book, first published in the early 1960s, back in print, particularly as it's by one of my all time favourite creators of picture books.

Swimmy is the only small black fish living among a school of red ones. He's very happy until the other fish are consumed in one gulp by a large and very hungry tuna fish, and he's left by himself. Off swims a sad, lonely little Swimmy into the ocean where he encounters all kinds of wonderful marine life such as medusoid jellyfish,

mechanical-like lobsters, all manner of strange fish, magical-seeming seaweed and much more, all of which serve to make him happy once again.

But then he comes upon another school of little red fish hidden away, and hears that they too fear for their lives. So, it's down to the tiny Swimmy to become the driving force behind – or should that be 'in front of'? – a whole new way of being and seeing; a way that enables him and all his new-found friends to move together as one and get the better of the marauding black monster fish whose lunch they might otherwise become.

Wonderful figurative language ('A lobster, who walked about like a water-moving machine ...') and glorious paint/print undersea scenes (immediately recognizable as such by members of one group of 4s to 6s I shared this with) grace the pages of this enchanting book, which is also a celebration of teamwork and the imagination. This is a book (in a now very worn, previous incarnation) that I've read year in year out for longer than I care to remember; and can now continue to do so, for as long as I continue sharing books with young listeners and readers, thanks to Andersen Press. **JB**

Follow That Car

★★★

Lucy Feather, illustrated by Stephan Lomp, Nosy Crow, 32pp, 978-0-85763-384-2, £10.99 hbk

Big, bold and bright, this fun car chase adventure is a visual feast for the eyes with a transport theme that will impress young motor enthusiasts. Mouse is on his motorbike and he's trying to catch up Gorilla in his car. Each spread shows a tangle of roads that are busy with traffic. Children must work out Mouse's route and avoid getting stuck behind snowfalls, pedestrians and clusters of sheep along the way. How will Mouse ever catch Gorilla, and what is it he wants him for anyway? This interactive picture book has instant appeal; it's particularly impressive in its larger hardback format, and with all the detail inside and the inevitable hours of fun, it is really good value. **KC**

This Is My Rock

★★★★★

David Lucas, Flying Eye Books, 32pp, 978-1-90926-350-5, £11.99, hbk

This Is My Rock is a very personal book for the author. Telling the story of a goat who likes to play King of the Castle at the top of his rock all day long, it was inspired both by the sibling rivalry that David Lucas experienced as one of six brothers and also his childhood love of the Ladybird book **Three Billy Goats Gruff**. The book is dedicated to one of his brothers who died last year.

The goat refuses to share the top of his rock with any of his three fellow goats. Various animals try to join him, but each one is met with the same repeating refrain: 'This is my rock. Not

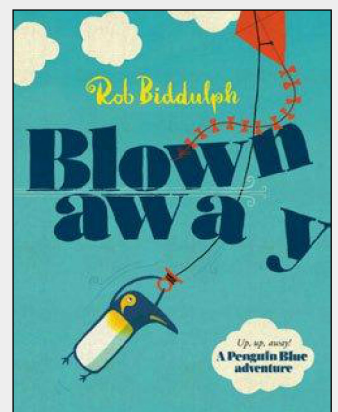
your rock'. Then, when the rocks and skies are finally empty, he yodels and dances on the top of his rock to celebrate his ownership. But as night falls, he realises that he is tired, hungry and very much alone. So the next day, he decides to share his rock and goes off to find his three fellow goats, only to discover on his return that the mountaintop has been claimed by a new occupant.

This book is great fun for young children, as the refrain is repetitive, allowing pre-readers to quickly join in with the words. The colourful images are detailed and offer plenty of potential prompts for young children to retell the story for themselves. It's also a powerful and timeless story about the power of sharing and the meaning of friendship. **GR**

Blown Away

★★★★★

Rob Biddulph, HarperCollins Children's Books, 32pp, 978-0-00759-382-8, £6.99 pbk



Everyone knows penguins don't fly. Or do they? Well you're a penguin with a red kite and there's a strong wind, perhaps you do. And Penguin Blue does, flying around the world making friends on the way.

From the cleverly designed end pages to the moment of lift off and on through Penguin's journey, the reader is carried away to join the flight. It is not just the movement created by the way Penguin Blue flies across the pages clinging on to his red kite that pulls the reader on. Biddulph carries us along through his clever use of colour and page spreads. Thus we move from the white cold of Penguin's home through the blue of the sky to the lush greens of the tropical jungle and back again. The text is simple and direct; no unnecessary description, the illustrations provide all the background – not to mention the joke. The design is straightforward, eschewing tricks to ensure maximum effect. This is an accomplished debut that deserves to be recommended to all. **FH**

5 – 8 Infant/Junior

Where's the Elephant?

★★★★★

Barroux, Egmont, 32pp,
978-1-40527-648-1, £10.99 hbk

This superb visual narrative is both a game of hide and seek and a subtly clever portrayal of the destruction of the Amazon rainforest. Surprisingly, **Where's Wally** was the inspiration for his startling and alarming depiction says the books creator, Barroux, who is passionate about the topic.

At the outset, three friends, Elephant, Parrot and Snake, are hiding in a lush, gloriously coloured forest landscape – just a portion of each visible. But then a corner of the forest begins to disappear and as you turn the pages, that cleared space gets bigger and bigger – and, as a dwelling appears in the clearing, we know the loggers have definitely arrived. Then the fallen logs give way to more houses and the hiding space for our three friends gets ever smaller. Roads are made to take the increasing number of cars until, horror of horrors, there are just three trees to accommodate the animals. Finally they are surrounded by a concrete jungle and worse is to follow; but there is, happily, a way out, for the three pals at least.

This highly thought-provoking sequence tells its alarming story about wholesale deforestation and its consequences, in a manner that will surely, one hopes, make even the youngest children stop and take notice. Embedded as it is in a game of hide and seek in such a subtle fashion, the book is anything but preachy though it delivers its message with a powerful punch nonetheless.

A must read for all ages say I, and a springboard for discussion on a vital topic. **JB**

The First Slodge

★★★★★

Jeanne Willis, ill. Jenni Desmond,
Little Tiger, 32pp,
978-1-84869-039-4, £6.99 pbk

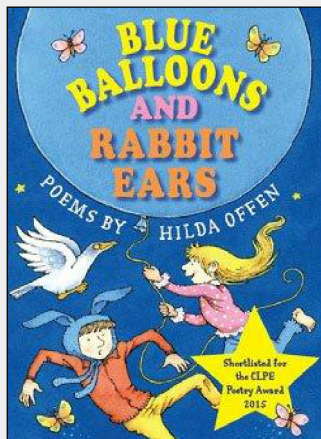
A new text from Jeanne Willis is always a cause for celebration and this pairing with new illustration talent Jenni Desmond could introduce her fabulous writing to a style-savvy audience. 'Once upon a slime, there was a Slodge'. In fact, this is the first Slodge in the universe. Slodge enjoys having the world to herself; she sees the first thunder and the first sunrise, 'Mine, all mine'. Slodge goes to sleep with her delicious fruit and is horrified to wake up and find it has been eaten by another. The other Slodge had thought they were the only one too and soon the two Slodges are fighting the first fight. The Slodges must work out how to share the world, and not just with each other!

Willis manages to capture huge ideas in impressively pared down texts that are always witty and warm. Desmond's adorable illustrations are

fresh and appealing. It is a gentle story that will capture the imagination and create conversation. A brilliant book, recommended for all! **KC**

Blue Balloons and Rabbit Ears

★★★★★

Hilda Offen, Troika Books, 64pp,
978-1-90999-103-3, £5.99 pbk

Shortlisted for the **2015 CLPE Poetry Award** (CLIPPA), Hilda Offen's first collection of poems for children is full of appeal. Divided into four thematic sections – Wild Things, That's Ridiculous, Out and About, and Home Again – these inviting poems celebrate the wonder, variety and possibility of a young child's world. Some feel like newly minted nursery rhymes, while there are thoughtful poems about nature and history too, and more about school and family life. Full of rhythm and rhyme and using a variety of verse forms, the poems will appeal to a wide age range, making this a particularly useful collection for schools. Each poem is accompanied by Hilda Offen's lively, fluid black and white illustrations. **LS**

You Can't Take an Elephant on the Bus

★★★★★

Patricia Cleveland-Peck, ill. David
Tazzyman, Bloomsbury, 32pp,
978-1-40884-982-8, £6.99 pbk

David Tazzyman's scatchy style is a great match to this scatty, surprising picture book. There are ridiculous rhymes and daft ideas aplenty in this chaotic series of animals in transit – don't put a whale on a bike, a pig on a skateboard ... There's lots of sage advice here and no one will guess the wacky conclusion. Tazzyman's illustrations are a joy so it's great to see him have fun with these silly situations. The text could be stronger so might not stand up to as many repeat readings as Kes Gray's similar but superior texts in **Oi Frog!** and **How Many Legs?**, but this is bound to get a

few laughs and highlights what a great illustrative talent Tazzyman is. Let's hope he picks up a few more picture book deals as a result! **KC**

Miss Hazeltine's Home for Shy and Fearful Cats

★★★★★

Alicia Potter, ill. Birgitta Sif, Walker
Books, 32pp, 978-1-40636-238-1,
£11.99 hbk

This wonderfully gothic, Hansel-and-Gretel-type fairy tale will have children roaring with laughter as well as getting the message that fears can be conquered with love and understanding. Miss Hazeltine's cottage is full of fearful cats. They are afraid of lots of things: mice, birds, pouncing, purring, jumping, and playing with wool. But only Crumb is afraid of simply everything. When he arrives, he immediately hides under the carpet. Miss Hazeltine herself is afraid of mushrooms and owls and of the dark, which she admits to Crumb; she is also a witch, which seems a tad counter-intuitive! The cats have lessons in birds, in climbing up (and, importantly climbing down), scary noises, and how to pounce. Hardest of all is learning not to be afraid of Miss Hazeltine's broom. But what will happen when Miss H has an accident in the woods when bringing the milk home? Will the animals overcome their fears in order to rescue her? What will Crumb do? The illustrations are a tremendous treat. The gothic theme includes all the details in Miss Hazeltine's cosy cottage and the woods around it, her pointed hat, her too-large feet, and the huge eyes of all the cats. Very expressive cats they are too, and their fears are shown clearly in how they react to everything that scares or worries them. This story puts fears into perspective and will prove great fun as well as a lesson learned. **ES**

The Clever Mouse

★★★★★

Anahita Teymorian, trans. Azita
Rassi, Tiny Owl, 32pp,
978-1-91032-801-9, £11.99 hbk

This translated Iranian folk tale is rather old fashioned in layout, with richly coloured illustration on one side of a double page and text set on an opposing white page. It's a fable about Mr Koochi, an ordinary, hard working and eminently deserving mouse (very much like the voter all the parties were pitching for in the late general election) who takes it into his head to marry the King's daughter (how's that for aspiration). Luckily the King is able to consider his request because the mouse princess is rather plain and plump, and previous suitors have been more interested in her money than her. Our mouse just wants a wife with a kind heart, and the princess agrees to marry him on condition that he promises never to leave her on her

own. However, on the way back to his house, Mr Koochi has second thoughts, and abandons his new wife while she is sleeping. She is then attacked by robbers; but, thank goodness, Mr Koochi's better instincts kick in and he returns in time to take on the band of robbers single-handed. So he proves his valour, his love and his ability to learn from his mistakes. All of which makes him a proper heir to the Kingdom. It's a pleasant story with a down-to-earth view of marriage and some wonderful illustrations, themselves darkly earthy and appropriately folksy with modernist touches. There is, unfortunately, a proof reading error on page 15 ('own my own' should read 'on my own'), something for this new publisher to watch out for in future books. This year Tiny Owl is publishing eight picture books from Iran in translation. **CB**

The Boy Who Cried Wolf

★★★★★

Mahni Tazhibi, Tiny Owl, 24pp,
978-1-91032-804-0, £11.99 hbk

This is an unusual visual slant – literally – on a well-known Aesop's fable, although the story itself is one that goes back much further and has many cultural variants around the world. Indeed the global nature of the story is reflected in the illustrative perspective Mahni Tazhibi uses.

Bored with looking after his father's sheep on the hillside, a young boy decides to create a diversion by claiming that a wolf has designs on the sheep. Greatly amused at the worried response of family and neighbours, he does the same thing over and over. Then one day there really is a wolf looming large over the hill – a wonderfully menacing one as depicted by Mahni Tazhibi – and then of course, nobody responds to his cries for help. Inevitably, the sheep become a tasty meal for the wolf leaving a foolish boy to face the wrath of his father no doubt and, one hopes, learn a lesson from his folly.

It's good to see a new independent publisher emerging and bringing some exciting new talents such as the Iranian artist who has illustrated this book so wonderfully in a fresh, three-dimensional fashion. I particularly like the textured nature of the scenes built up through the use of patterns, swirls, lines and hatching within the dense blocks of colour, and the use of shadows to enhance the stand-out effect, making the whole thing an exciting pictorial experience. I look forward to seeing more from this artist and from **Tiny Owl**. **JB**

The King and the Sea

★★★★★

Heinz Janisch, ill. Wolf Erlbruch,
trans. Sally-Ann Spencer, Gecko
Press, 48pp, 978-1-87757-994-3,
£9.99 hbk

Originally published in German, by an

reviews

award-winning Austrian author and the German winner of the 2006 **Hans Andersen Medal** for illustration, this, as you might expect, is a highly accomplished and thought provoking picture book. In twenty-one double page spreads the King of the title enters into poetic conversation, one by one, with a variety of interlocutors. Some are inanimate objects, like a trumpet and a fishing net; some are phenomena and creatures of the natural world, for instance the sea, night, a dog, a tree, and a squirrel; and others are more nebulous, like a ghost and sleep. The result is an extended eccentric and quasi-philosophical meditation, reminiscent in some ways of **The Little Prince**, as the King gradually explores the world and his place in it. Funny and enigmatic, it's a book in which childlike simplicity (wax crayon plays a large role in the naïve figure of the King), is used to puncture hubris. It can be read with wonder, enjoyment and profit by adults as well as children. **CB**

Thank you, Jackson

★★★★

Niki and Jude Daly, Frances Lincoln, 32pp, 978-1-84780-4846, £11.99 hbk

Most children recognise the donkey trait of stubbornness, and in this tale we learn that South African donkeys are stubborn too. Every page gives us an impression of the wide open terrain, the colour palette being bright and hot, with a brilliant, shiny sun on the cover. For years Jackson the donkey has worked for the farmer, daily toiling up the hill to market, carrying baskets overflowing with vegetables to be sold. One morning old Jackson just stops halfway, refusing to move further. The farmer tries pushing him, pulling him, but Jackson has had enough of his thankless task of daily slog. The farmer's irritation gets the better of him, and when he shouts 'BAD DONKEY,' Jackson just sits down, spilling the precious veg down the hill. Furious, the farmer threatens to BEAT him if he doesn't get up before he counts to ten. Fortunately, Beauty, his wife is watching from below and she sends their son, Goodwill, to help the situation. But what could he do? The small boy whispers in the donkey's ear, and Jackson immediately rises. In explanation, the son says to his amazed father, 'Mama says it's the little things, like saying please and thank you, that make a big difference in the world.' A charming book with a heart-felt message, by an award-winning husband and wife team. **GB**

Black and White

★★★★

Dahlov Ipcar, Flying Eye Books, 40pp, 978-1-90926-363-5, £11.99 hbk

Written by the American author, artist and illustrator Dahlov Ipcar, **Black and White** was originally published in 1963 by Alfred A Knopf. This edition has been re-mastered from the original

and traditionally printed using the same bold spot colour.

It tells the story, in rhyming couplets, of two dogs; one black, one white. They play together all day, chasing cats, diving in snow banks, sniffing at rats and barking at bats. Then they go home to dream of adventures in far off lands, from the jungles of the Congo with towering ebony elephants to the frozen white wastes of the arctic, populated by polar bears.

The strength of this book is the highly stylised illustrations – classic Ipcar with the rich patterns, sharp edges and bright colour that typify her art. The retro feel of **Black and White** is very current and sits well within contemporary children's books.

Beyond the rhyming narrative, the book is also a celebration of the diversity of our natural world and the wonder and curiosity that it can evoke. It's a book for sharing or to browse alone and would make a unique addition to any KS1 bookshelf. **GR**

The Seeds of Friendship

★★★★★

Michael Foreman, Walker Books, 32pp, 978-1-40635-650-2, £11.99 hbk

It must be tremendously hard for children who have lived their lives in a country full of colour and warmth to find themselves in a high-rise flat in the middle of a dull grey city. So it is for Adam. He loves his flat high in the sky, but when he looks out, all he sees is other tower blocks, all similar to his own. His parents tell him stories of his homeland and in particular of all the animals there, and he draws wonderful pictures of elephants and lions and exotic birds. When he sees snow for the first time, he is amazed and when he goes out to see what it is all about, he meets other children from the estate. Together they make snow animal sculptures, and Adam begins to make friends. At his new school, he finds a small garden, and an understanding teacher gives him seeds to take home and grow. He and his mum plant their garden in a window box, and this is the start of making the whole estate glow with colour and light. The children work together on every piece of land they can find, together with old baths, pots and tin cans that are soon overflowing with colour. Adam's seeds are 'seeds of friendship' and these seeds will come back and back over the seasons. Foreman's illustrations are, as always, an absolute delight, full of glowing warmth and colour that gradually, bit by bit, brightens Adam's grey world. A sensitive book with true understanding of what it must be like to find oneself in a strange place. **ES**

Higgledy Piggledy: The Hen who Loved to Dance

★★★★★

Francesca Simon, ill. Elisabeth Moseng, HarperCollins, 32pp, 978-0-00664-422-4, £6.99 pbk

All chicken lovers everywhere will warm to this story! Here, each

farmyard creature shows its own character and usefulness, and certainly hens are essential to a happy and successful farm. But whilst others dutifully lay eggs daily, Higgledy Piggledy just dances, twirling and whirling across the farmyard. The other animals tell her she is lazy, and they list all their own usefulness: catching mice, giving milk, providing wool. H Piggledy is unconcerned and continues to practise her pirouettes. When Max the kitten mewls, stuck high in an oak tree, all the creatures want and try to help, but it is H P who saves the day. The kitten has been too terrified to move, but H P's elegant dancing gives it the courage to make the steep descent alone, dancing his way delicately down the trunk. So, of course, everyone then wants to dance, and H P teaches them. The pictures perfectly match this charming story, from the title page, when H P's dancing feet emerge first from the egg, right to the final page where all the animals are so enjoying their dance. This is a celebratory book, full of life and energy, which will be especially loved by all families who have the fun of keeping chickens. **GB**

Mr Mistoffelees

★★★★★

T S Eliot, ill. Arthur Robins, Faber & Faber, 978-0-57132-222-0, £6.99 pbk

'Presto! Away we go ...' and we are invited to marvel at the tricks of the magical Mr Mistoffeles the conjuring cat. We have already met Macavity the mystery cat, now it is the turn of another performer; and what a performer. His acts range from sawing his assistant in half to charming the lovely tabby on the roof. He is a smooth operator. This is how we may remember him from the original illustrations by Nicholas Bentley. Arthur Robins presents us with a rather different character. His Mr Mistoffelees is an engagingly raffish cat, a regular showman with a twinkle in his eye, a way with the ladies – and the audience – adept at misdirection and legerdemain. These are illustrations for today, capturing the light hearted vigour of Eliot's verse, removing any hint of pomposity and placing the poem – and the character – firmly where it belongs, in the hands of young readers. **FH**

Creature Teacher

★★★

Sam Watkins, ill. David O'Connell, Oxford University Press, 192pp, 978-0-19274-266-7, £5.99 pbk

Creature Teacher is first in a new series that chronicles the schooldays of Jake and his classmates. Their new teacher, Mr Hyde, is rather different to what they are used to. His lessons are fun and exciting and he is quite prepared to spontaneously burst into song and dance whenever his students need enlivening. This strikes a stark contrast to the ferocious headteacher, Mrs Blunt, and her utter obsession with tiresome rules.

There is something else unusual about Mr Hyde though, and when an

interactive science lesson gets out of hand the pupils are introduced to a very different (and disgusting) side to their new teacher. This 'creature' must be kept secret from Mrs Blunt and her menacing followers or else Mr Hyde might not be allowed to carry on with his outstanding teaching.

As the classmates struggle to hide their new mischievous friend, readers are introduced to a cast of curious characters, including a slug-obsessed boffin and an evil, snooty-faced bully. Though the narrative features few moments of genuine drama or excitement, a silly (and snotty) tone is established that is sure to be maintained throughout the series. **SD**

Nature Explorer: Nature Sticker & Activity Book

★★★

Alice Lickens, The National Trust, 24pp, 978-1-90988-140-2, £4.99 pbk

Here is a sticker book which is fun and likely to encourage young readers to observe and think. Double spreads cover the size, the shape and leaves of five well known trees – the chestnut, sycamore, holly, oak and hazelnut – and the animals that inhabit them at different times of the day and night. The book is hugely interactive and there are exciting ideas for activities on every spread. So, for example, children are invited to use the stickers to put the new leaves on a summer tree and to stick appropriate fruits on cherry, pear and plum trees. They are also encouraged to use what they have learnt in the book when they are out on nature walks.

I learnt something interesting myself: birds that lay eggs in trees are more likely to have blue or green eggs whilst those that nest near the ground have brown or speckled eggs. Could this be something to do with the need for camouflage? The book got me thinking and speculating too! There is a chance to build a tree house using the stickers and to try some entertaining games on the tree theme including Sudoku and a Wordsearch. This would be a lovely book to take on holiday in the countryside or for a walk in the park to observe trees. Some tasks are more suited to the over 5s, but many pre-schoolers would enjoy the detailed pictures and placing the stickers. **MM**

Who Is King?

★★★★★

Beverley Naidoo, ill. Piet Grobler, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 72pp, 978-1-84780-514-0, £14.99 hbk

Africa, we hear from Beverly Naidoo in the foreword to her delicious collection, may have been the first home of stories. Whether or not this is so, the African continent is her source for the ten stories herein.

Featuring all manner of animals and varying in length from two amusing and extremely brief Amharic tales from Ethiopia, **Who Is King?** in which we hear what happens when Lion issues the question to the animals and discovers who really reigns supreme,

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and **The Ox and The Donkey**, to a South African Zulu tale **Unanana and One Tusk** and **The Miller's Daughter**. The latter, a Moroccan tale wherein the girl of the title (with the help of a jinni), uses her intelligence to outwit a story-hearted sultan, is fascinatingly akin to the European **Rumpelstiltskin**.

We also have a Yenda pourquoi tale **How Elephant Got his Trunk** (he doesn't use it as a spanking device

like Kipling's **Elephant's Child** though, but for ease of eating and drinking). An elephant features large in the Unanana story too. This one is a child-swallowing pachyderm that meets his match in the young widow girl whose children he gobbles up, even though she has to get the better of him from inside. Another pourquoi tale, **Why Hippo Has No Hair** comes from Kenya and tells not only what the

title says but also how Water replaces Fire as Hippo's best friend.

Every one of the vivaciously told stories reads aloud beautifully – one would expect no less from Naidoo – and all are wonderfully animated by Grobler (not that animation is really needed, so strong are the verbal renderings). His visuals vividly capture the various moods of the characters – animal and human. The latter he clothes in traditional garments from the various regions and the former are often beautifully adorned with

patterns, stripes or spots: all radiate the humour inherent in the tellings.

A superb volume, essentially for reading aloud (although it could also be enjoyed by individual readers) that can be enjoyed in many settings – home or school, around a camp fire even. Find some appropriate background music, read, dance, sing, play and above all, enjoy. **JB**

8 – 10 Junior/Middle

Hercufleas

★★★★★

Sam Gayton, ill. Peter Cottrill, Andersen Press, 978-1-84939-636-3, 272pp, £6.99 pbk

Heroes can come in many sizes. Of course, we expect them to be tall, well built and good looking. We don't expect them to be tiny, the size of a flea. But even a flea can be a hero and Hercufleas is definitely that. Will he be able to prove this to Greta as she searches for a way to defeat the giant, Yuk?

Sam Gayton has already made a name for himself as an author with a lively and original imagination. This, his latest book, will confirm this reputation. It is no mean feat to make a flea attractive, but Hercufleas is a real character and the reader is drawn to him from the moment he hatches. Greta also steps off the page; brave, determined and individual. The somewhat spikey relationship between the two adds realism to the fantastic setting of the narrative. It is the confidence with which Gayton weaves his tale, the consistency of details – Hercufleas is never anything but a flea and his world is seen from that perspective. As with all the best fairy tales there is a quest, there are choices to be made, battles to be fought, and there is a 'happy ever after'. Gayton is going from strength to strength; definitely an author to follow. **FH**

Henry V

978-1-78493-004-2

Julius Caesar

978-1-78493-006-6

★★★★★

Timothy Knapman, ill. Yaniv Shimony, Tales from Shakespeare series, QED Publishing, 48pp, £8.99 hbk

If retellings of Shakespeare's stories should both offer immediate entertainment and prepare young learners for enjoying the plays later on these books succeed. They each tell an interesting but complicated Shakespeare story well, partly by using quite a lot of lively direct speech, which enlightens about motives and personality.

The design of the books makes them inviting; they are pleasant to handle

and the pages uncluttered. The print style gives a sense of antiquity while being easy to read. The pen and ink drawings, sometimes coloured in a restricted palette, are splendidly detailed; as well as informing about clothes, armour, events and emotions they often communicate a sense of drama. In **Henry V** there is a full-page picture of Henry leading his troops through the breach of Honfleur and, in **Julius Caesar**, the horror of Caesar's assassination is dramatically shown.

I like the way the author brings in apt quotations from Shakespeare's plays, presented on scrolls throughout the books. But these are short and perhaps some longer speeches might have been included to introduce children more fulsomely to the unique power and rhythms of Shakespeare's language. For example there might usefully have been a longer extract from Henry's rousing pre-battle speech and from Mark Antony's tribute to the dead Julius Caesar. Nevertheless I find these two stories are told with life and pace and explain convincingly the motivations of the characters. The reasons for Henry's seemingly harsh decisions – to abandon Falstaff the friend of his carefree, youthful days and not to pardon looters are made clear. Well explained also is the way Cassius and his friends justified the brutal murder of Caesar. These stories would have a well-deserved place in the upper primary school collection. **MM**

Demolition Dad

★★★★★

Phil Earle, ill. Sara Oglivie, Orion Children's Books, 192pp, 978-1-44401-386-3, £6.99 pbk

This nice little story features George Biggs, a huge and amiably strong dad, and his adoring son Jake. A famously effective demolition man and master of the wrecking ball, George is finding work increasingly hard to get in the decaying town of Seacross. But Jake has plans for him to become a wrestler, in which sweaty sport he soon excels. But a disastrous trip to America and a humiliating defeat at the hands of the home-grown Tsunami Terror leaves George a shadow of his former self. It takes a return home and a heroic rescue of his son from a collapsing building to restore him to his former confident self, except he

has now decided to re-train as an architect.

Contemporary stories involving long-term loving relations between father and son other than Roald Dahl's **Danny the Champion of the World** are not always easy to find, and Phil Earle plugs this gap to the full. Sometimes he tries a little too hard, but this is essentially a heart-warming story with a very happy ending. The multiple award-winning Sara Oglivie, and her scratchy comic drawings make a perfect foil for this lively and affectionate story. **NT**

Fennymore and the Brumela

★★★★★

Kirsten Reinhardt, trans. Siobhán Parkinson, ill. David Roberts, Little Island, 978-1-90819-585-2, 130pp, £6.99 pbk

What, you ask, is a brumela? You will have to read this book to find out. On the way you will meet Fennymore who has lost his parents. He does have a bicycle called Monbijou, who thinks he is a horse and an Aunt Elsie who eats salt-baked daschund (don't worry this doesn't happen here), and the evil Dr Hourgood. Will Fennymore find the answer to the mystery of the lost invention before the doctor gets there?

This is a wonderfully surreal story that successfully mixes humour with the slightly gruesome, to create an imaginative romp that carries the reader along. There is no need for Fennymore or Fizzy to be rounded characters. It is, after all, a fairy tale and we are happy to accompany them on their quest to foil the villainous doctor and his mind-modification. There is no hesitation as the narrative moves smartly along in this lively translation by Siobhán Parkinson, while David Roberts's illustrations capture the flavour of the text perfectly. For confident young readers who enjoy the unusual. **FH**

Fuzz McFlops

★★★★★

Eva Furnari, trans. Alison Entrekin, Pushkin Press, 56pp, 978-1-78269-075-7, £6.99 pbk

This is a book whose textually playful tale of an anxious scatter-brained

poetic rabbit hero ends up revealing a rather didactic purpose. At first sight this tale, translated from the Portuguese and winner of Brazil's Jabuti Prize, seems to have the stamp of more familiar work by Scieszka or the Ahlbergs, with instruction manuals, poems and letters, stories, a recipe, a musical score and a postcard all helping to relate the tale of the love of a persistent fan of our reclusive lop-sided rabbit poet and how she frees him from his anxiety of being different and brings a more cheerful aspect to his life. However, after the story itself comes a fourteen page 'post script' in which the nature and usual purpose of each of these elements is explained as particular forms of textual communication, rather as if the story had become part of an implied lesson plan, a form of textual communication which the book does not explain. The book's production leaves something to be desired, too. It's in a format that seems too small for the content and some of the text, particularly in a few of the 'inserts', is not comfortable to read. It's all a bit cramped and poorly designed. **CB**

Secrets and Dreams

★★★★★

Jean Ure, HarperCollins Children's Books, 248pp, 978-0-00755-395-2, £6.99 pbk

What would you wish for if your family won the lottery? Zoe's sister chooses a pet dog and a pony, Zoe has always dreamed of boarding school. She's read all the books; she knows what it will like. When she arrives she is met by another new girl Rachel. Rachel is sweet but a little immature, a little strange and convinced that life is exactly like the Chalet School.

As usual from Jean Ure, this is not a simple bubbly confection. Negotiating around school politics is an art and Zoe struggles with being friends with Rachel, who obviously needs some form of protection, and being part of the popular crowd. What we find is that Rachel has had an unusual upbringing which explains much of her behaviour and allows Zoe loyalty and understanding to pay off.

The characters are well drawn and clichés are avoided. Although there is rivalry and emotional bullying none of the girls are truly bad. The final moral of the story is that we are all different.

reviews

We should be tolerant of those differences as we can never be sure what brought those differences about. A strong theme hidden within an excellent school romp. **CD**

The Disappearing Children: Prime Minister Father and Son 1

★★★★★

Lars Joachim Grimstad, trans. Don Bartlett and Siân Mackie, Phoenix Yard Books, 978-1-90791-238-2, 304pp, £12.99 hbk

Can humour travel? There is a perception that what we may find funny is incomprehensible abroad, and vice versa. However, it seems this does not have to be the case as this Norwegian novel proves.

From the moment we meet Finn Popp, we are giggling. Finn is the son of Teddy Popp, a taxi driver – but a taxi driver who has become Prime Minister of Norway as leader of the More Party. However, his popularity is threatened; children are disappearing. What is going on? And who can be trusted? It is up to Finn and his friends to sort it out.

As is to be expected, it is the children who take centre stage to show up the

inherent ridiculousness of adults. However, Grimstad doesn't rely on slapstick alone, there is plenty of action as Finn, Sunniva and Camomile work to foil the villains while hoping to win the National School Quiz. Fast paced, lively, funny, this is a very welcome – and excellent – translation for young readers who want a bit more than sound bites with their laughs. Recommended. **FH**

My Brother Is a Superhero

★★★★★

David Solomons, Nosy Crow, 320pp, 978-0-85763-479-5, £6.99, pbk

'My brother is a superhero, and I could have been one too, except that I needed to go for a wee.' It's a wonderful opening line and sets the tone for this hilarious, engaging story. While Luke's in the loo, Zorbon the Decider arrives. In need of a superhero, and finding Luke's older brother Zack, Zorbon bestows a few superpowers on him, tells him his mission is to save two universes, and warns him that 'Nemesis is coming'. It's really unfair: Luke is the comic fanatic and he should rightfully be the superhero, not someone who barely knows what telekinesis is.

Zack calls himself Star Lad, due to the stars he finds glowing on his chest. (He'd rather have been Starman, or Star Boy, but as Luke tells him, those names are already taken.) Zak just won't behave as superheroes should – he has a hoodie not a mask, refuses to wear the curtain-cape Luke spent ages making, and doesn't even try to fly. In fact, Zack would rather be doing his homework. But he knows his duties and he's soon stopping bus crashes and bridges from collapsing and rescuing babies from burning buildings, in true superhero fashion. Meanwhile Luke's left trying to protect Star Lad's identity, and growing more and more jealous of him. He reckons he'd be very happy if his brother came to a sticky end – but then Zack's taken hostage. Luke needs all his superhero knowledge to rescue him, not just because he's his brother, but because Star Lad still has his mission to fulfil. After all, the future of two universes is at stake.

Narrated in the first person by Luke, it's full of brilliant one-liners and funny dialogue. There's also a wonderful array of characters: Cara, Zack's love interest; her sister Lara with her entertaining malapropisms (going on a 'wild moose chase'; Christopher Talbot who owns the comic shop and loves

inventions; best friend Serge who's French and a total Star Lad obsessive; and Mum and Dad who remain oblivious to Zak's new role.

At over 300 pages, I found it a tad drawn-out at times, but it's a very enjoyable read and I'm sure the target market will be left begging for more.

RW

The Accidental Prime Minister

★★★★★

Tom McLaughlin, ill. Tom McLaughlin, Oxford University Press, 226pp, 978-0-19273-774-8, £6.99 pbk

Joe is so upset that his favourite park is being shut down that he finds himself doing something rather strange: he stands up to the grown-ups. Not just any grown-ups, but his headteacher and even the Prime Minister himself! Before he knows it, his rant has gone viral and he finds himself surfing a wave of popular support all the way to 10 Downing Street.

Guided skilfully by his media agent, lifestyle guru and best mate, Ajay, Joe endeavours to lead his nation to a happier and much more fun future. A

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8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

future with 'hats for cats' and 'swimming pools on trains'; a future where pupils swap with teachers and everyone is forced to dress up on a Friday. Initially, such hilarious schemes are lapped up by an adoring public but 'behind every good leader there is someone waiting in the wings to crush them', and Violetta Crump will stop at nothing to nab Joe's job!

In his debut novel for children, Tom McLaughlin conducts a well-crafted attack on adults who take themselves too seriously. The Anti-Silliness League is established to oppose Joe and contains the sorts of people, 'who sit twitching behind net curtains ... and pop balloons just for the hell of it'. There is a Chancellor who is utterly stumped when asked where all the money is ('... it's in the bank, probably, somewhere'), and a Queen with little better to do than shoot squirrels with her catapult.

Thankfully the children, led by Joe, are on hand to teach everyone the importance of simple things like being honest, being kind and being silly. When Joe prevents World War Three by insisting that two angry heads of state should play nicely or go without, it is easy to imagine that perhaps we would all be better off with children in charge!

SD

The Leaky Battery Sets Sail: Adventures of the Steampunk Pirates

★★★★

Gareth P Jones, Stripes Publishing, 160pp, 978-1-84715-593-1, £5.99 pbk

As the pirate vessel, the Leaky Battery, scours the oceans in search of booty, it comes across Admiral Fussington's ship, forcing it to surrender. The pirate crew, with Captain Clockheart in charge, are after gold – as much as they can plunder. But these are no ordinary pirates: the only human among them is Pendle, the cabin boy, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Fussington's runaway daughter. They are robots – fashioned from scraps of metal, nuts, bolts and clockwork bits – whose body parts, now rusting, need replacing. On hearing their predicament, Fussington suggests they visit the famous alchemist on Snake Island, who can turn scrap metal into gold. Just then, the Iron Duke comes to Fussington's rescue with his towering battleships, so triggering an adventure of attack and counterattack, complicity and treachery, as Captain Clockheart battles the joint forces of Fussington and the Iron Duke – and sets off for Snake Island.

The story – the first in a series – has many threads, weaving dialogue and flashbacks, puns and author interjections into the telling. The characters are entertaining and well developed, and much of the story focuses on their interactions and ambitions, their origins and the mechanisms by which they function.

Lively and action-packed, with an original take on the pirate theme, the story also provides the inspiration for work on STEM subjects.

AF

The Unlikely Adventures of Mabel Jones

★★★★

Will Mabbitt, ill. Ross Collins, Puffin Books, 290pp, 978-0-14135-514-6, £6.99 pbk

When Mabel Jones went to bed one fateful night and performed 'The Deed' (nose picking and eating the results) she did not expect to find herself immediately 'bagged' by a child catcher and taken on board *The Feroshus Maggot*, a pirate ship, to join the crew. There she has to prove herself; for what use is a mere girl, a 'female human snuglet' to a band of desperate pirates even if she has passed the nose picking initiation test with flying colours? Mabel survives the greasy pole of certain death and most importantly uses her skills in reading and deduction to reveal a secret list of pirates holding a piece of the missing cross, key to finding and unlocking untold treasure. This is what Idriss Ebenezer Split, captain of the pirate ship (a fearsome wolf with a false leg) has been seeking.

Thus begins a quest story with our heroine Mabel Jones right at the centre of it. Equipped with a cutlass and the assurance that 'she is Mabel Jones and not scared of anything' her adventure takes her from the wild western sea to the haunted seventh sea, to caverns, castles and crypts along the way and even inside the belly of a whale.

This is a fast paced adventure story with witty language. I love the name of the silent loris child catcher Omynus Hushh. There is bathos in the description of this character who becomes an unlikely friend for Mabel and there is lots of humour throughout the writing. Asides to the reader and the excellent drawings by Ross Collins add to the fun.

Children will enjoy poring over the treasure map and may be inspired to make one too, write messages in invisible ink or create their own who's who of pirates.

SMc

The Imagination Box

★★★★

Martyn Ford, Faber & Faber, 288pp, 978-0-57131-165-1, £6.99 pbk

Ten-year-old Tim Hart lives in The Dawn Star Hotel with his adoptive parents, Elisa and Chris Green. However, Elisa and Chris are always very busy or away. Tim feels lonely, until one day, whilst he is stealing brownies from an empty function room, he meets a strange and very interesting man. This man turns out to be Professor Eisenstone. Professor Eisenstone has just invented a very clever machine. It is called TDACD, but Tim likes to call it 'The Imagination Box', because it can create anything you think of. It is nearly

finished. However, the professor is very worried that someone is trying to steal it, and that is why he is staying in the hotel.

Tim and the professor become friends, and Tim helps the professor with some very interesting experiments – one of which produces Phil, a friendly, well-spoken finger monkey. But then the professor suddenly disappears. Tim finds the professor's treasured watch and realises that the professor has been kidnapped. So Tim, Phil and Dee (the professor's granddaughter) start trying to find out what has happened to the professor.

During their investigation, they come across Chris Crowfield, the new chef and Kane, a policeman, but no one believes that the professor has really been kidnapped. Who can they trust, and what really happened to Professor Eisenstone's partner, Professor Whitelock?

The Imagination Box is an exciting and fun book. The idea of 'The Imagination Box' itself is unusual and intriguing, and the consequences of using it are funny and clever. Tim is a very engaging protagonist whom many children will identify with. His boldness in embarking on a dangerous adventure to save the professor is appealing to children and adults alike. Finally, some of the more fantastical elements in the plot are hilarious and extremely enjoyable. This comic story will appeal to both boys and girls and will definitely make readers laugh.

ARa

Balaclava Boy

★★★★★

Jenny Robson, ill. Sandy Mitchell, Little Island, 80pp, 978-1-90819-591-3, £4.99 pbk

Balaclava Boy is a fresh, contemporary and very engaging read from award winning author, Jenny Robson. Life is progressing much as expected for the Doo Dudes, Damisani and Doogal (aka the Big Ds). Boring lessons are mitigated by the occasional joke and football at lunch time is the best part of each day.

But one day Tommy arrives at the school. Tommy is unusual, because he always wears a balaclava. On the first day, this is red-and-orange striped, but each day brings a new colour of balaclava. Because the children at Colliery Primary School are mostly kind, caring and thoughtful, they plan various ways to discover who Balaclava Boy really is and why he wears a balaclava all the time, without actually asking him outright. When they do finally ask, the only answer they are given is 'Because'.

Every single theory turns out to be wrong and as the book rushes headlong towards its final denouement, the reader is swept along at a rapid pace. When the reason is finally revealed, readers will quickly realise that in the course of the narrative, they have learned profound lessons about identity, self-esteem, bullying, solidarity and the right to be who we are no matter what anyone else thinks.

The narrative is amusing and intriguing. The short text and regular line drawings will appeal to reluctant readers and experienced readers alike. But behind the humour and the clearly drawn characters lie truths that would form the basis of a range of PSHE issues and circle time discussions. It is a must for all KS2 classrooms and libraries.

GR

How to Speak Spook (and stay alive)

★★★★

Ally Kennen, Scholastic, 240pp, 978-1-40714-875-5, £6.99 pbk

Donald Memphis is a frequently tongue-tied misfit who has only ever been awarded one certificate, and that was for successfully tying his shoelaces. However he does have 'The Gift' – he can see, hear and communicate with ghosts, predict the future and sometimes even read people's minds. He inherited this gift from his mother (a medium) and it comes in handy when he sees his father (a ghost!).

In **How to Speak Spook** Donald helps his mother exorcise ghosts. In fact he is actually much better at it than she is, often solving a problem by talking to the ghost. One day though, he finds himself on a mission which challenges all his skills. He has to try to stop a powerful spirit which is causing mayhem along the south coast. Donald finds himself crossing swords with Estella Gray (also a medium) who is suspicious of his talents and, he discovers, closely involved in the mystery surrounding this troublesome spirit herself and, it transpires, not acting in a lawful way.

There are lots of ghosts or 'Nothings' in this story including that of Mary Anning the nineteenth century palaeontologist. Donald is helped by his friend Merry (who is *definitely* not his girlfriend!) and 'sort of friend' Danny Olini (the most annoying person Merry has ever known) and protected by a guardian angel – the ghost of a dog called Bear who appears at times of mortal danger.

The narrative moves at a fast pace in this ghost-busting adventure story. Tension builds as the danger increases and the mystery deepens. There is warmth and sensitivity in Danny's relationship with his ghostly father and more than a touch of playground humour.

SMc

reviews

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

New Talent

Other Girl

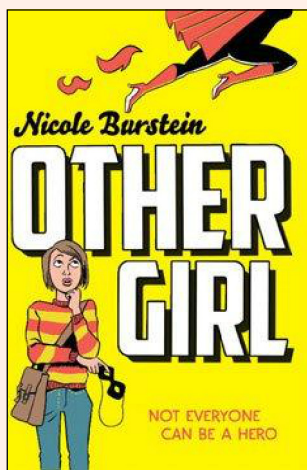
★★★★★

Nicole Burstein, Andersen Press, 272pp, 978-1-78344-061-0, £7.99 pbk

Louise has a task in life: it is up to her to train and develop the superhero skills of her best friend Erica. The goal is to engineer Erica's discovery by the Vigilants. In the meantime there are exams – and the gorgeous Jay – to cope with. And what about Toby?

This is an extraordinarily assured debut that presents its narrative with supreme confidence. Both girls are very real with recognisable aspirations and concerns. Or are they? We are presented with a world (21st century without a doubt) in which superheroes (think the Avengers) exist and people discover extraordinary talents which will then be put into the service of more ordinary mortals. Can we believe this? The author presents her scenario in a way that allows no doubt; this world is real and

consistent. However, this is also a very convincing story about teenage friendship, aspiration, ambition, hopes and dilemmas. Indeed one might be tempted to see the superhero scenario as a sustained metaphor, an intriguing undercurrent to a novel that carries off its imaginative premise without apology and with total conviction. The whole is presented with a freshness of voice that cannot but attract. Burstein is clearly a talent to welcome. **FH**



An Island of Our Own

★★★★★

Sally Nicholls, Scholastic, 216pp, 978-1-40712-433-9, £6.99 pbk

Holly Theresa Kennet is going to be a climate scientist. At the moment, she's still only thirteen but in recent months she's hunted for buried treasure in the Orkneys, confronted an exploding dish-washer, saved a seriously sick rabbit, learned a lot about picking locks and made friends with several interesting grown-ups. Before that, life was not only less interesting, it was tough going. She lives with half-brother Jonathan and full-brother Davy (aged 7) in a flat over Ranjit's chip shop in a part of London famous 'for being – I dunno – fabulously diverse and cultural and having lots of great food shops or something'. Both of Holly's parents have died and Jonathan has given up a place at uni to care for Holly and Davy. He works in Cath's Caff, barely making enough, even with benefits, for them all to scrape by. No treats, no cash for much needed new school shoes. Cheese sandwiches three suppers running says it all. Against all of that, the three are invincible in their care and love for each other.

However, their eccentric, not to say batty, Aunt Irene is loaded. She's been a brilliant, well-rewarded inventor/engineer, travelling far and wide. Her daughter Jo is friendly

enough, but overwhelmed with kids and a business to run. When Irene dies, it turns out she's left valuable jewellery to Holly and her brothers – the proceeds from selling it would make all the difference. But Irene became almost paranoid in her final weeks and documents, ID numbers and the jewels have all vanished. It seems they may be scattered about the globe in safes that look like silver metal briefcases. On her deathbed, Irene anxiously presses into Holly's hands a small photograph album. Holly is convinced the album is a clue to the whereabouts of those briefcases.

So begins the treasure hunt in which the family journeys the length of the British Isles, with helping hands from friendly adults such as the geeky types at the London Makers Space, home to 'about a hundred real, mad-scientist, evil genius type inventors'; they'll knock up a metal detector in a jiffy or two for the family to use. Their search takes them to the Orkneys and along the way they are joined by Jonathan's internet girlfriend Kate, finishing her degree in Aberdeen. It's not long before Kate helps Jonathan to remember there's more to life than wiping tables at the Caff. Meanwhile Irene's husband, Evan, emerges as the original Wicked Uncle, scheming to get his grasping hands on the briefcases for himself.

Holly is an avid reader with

old-fashioned tastes: Sherlock Holmes (in the original, not the Cumberbatch edition), Agatha Christie, Lord Peter Wimsey, **The Chalet School**, Narnia, **The Family From One End Street** and Tolkien balanced only by a liking for **Hunger Games** super-heroine, Katniss Everdeen. When Holly decides to write a book about her family's adventures, and call it *An Island of Our Own*, Jonathan says readers will think it's going to be **'Swallows and Amazons** for rich people'. He's wrong about the rich people, but the Walkers and the Blacketts would have loved solving a trail of clues, messing about on islands and boats, mostly free from adults except when a spot of help is needed. So here's a kind of pre-war adventure which begins in the mean city streets of the present. Even Sally Nicholls seems anxious that literal credibility might be stretched a bit. She allows a thoughtful Orkney crofter to reflect, 'I can't quite picture [Irene] as the sort of storybook aunt who wants you to crack a code before she lets you inherit her money'. Maybe, he says, the photos were a reminder to herself, a consequence of muddled old age. I'm more persuaded by the storybook aunt line myself, but I doubt that many young readers will be troubled by mere implausibility, given the attractions of the characters and the pace of the telling. **GF**

If You Find This

★★★★★

Matthew Baker, Hot Key Books, 317pp, 978-1-47140-452-8, £6.99 pbk

When Nicholas's grandfather comes to stay he has just left prison and he is suffering from dementia. Added to this, the family home is up for sale and Nicholas is determined to save it and the tree that commemorates his dead brother. Can he find the family heirlooms that his grandfather buried, or are they just a figment of a rather uncertain imagination.

This is a really complex book that takes a bit of getting into, but when it grabs you, it won't let go. The hero is weird, even by his own description. He is fascinated by maths and music and often sees things in terms of prime numbers or musical descriptions. However, he is a very strong character and absolutely central to the plot. He teams up with two other boys from his school, both of whom have issues, so we end up with a very unusual and quirky group.

Perhaps one of the most noticeable things in the text is the addition of musical terms at different points of the action; so we have 'forte' or 'pianissimo' to describe the feelings and the feel of the situations on the page. This is a book with several intertwining stories, some starting in the past and others definitely set in the here and now. The author brings them together and leads us through some disturbing moments until we reach the finale. Above all this is a book about family and the different

forms this can take. It is also about accepting people for who they really are rather than an idealized view and it is about knowing when to let go.

This story really surprised me by the way it has stayed in my mind; it is a very strong plot. Definitely something that repays effort when reading it. **MP**

Joe All Alone

★★★★★

Joanna Nadin, Little, Brown Books, 240pp, 978-0-34912-455-1, £5.99 pbk

Joe's mum's boyfriend Dean is a drunken slob, but she's too needy to do without him. Perry Fletcher makes life at school a misery, especially since Joe's best friend Bradley now hangs out with Perry and won't talk to Joe. Then there are the Dooleys, who know too much about Dean's shady dealings around Peckham; and they want a share of the £2000 Joe knows Dean's hidden in the toilet cistern. Things couldn't get much worse for 13-year-old Joe. Except they do. He's been longing for the May half-term holiday but Mum and Dean announce they're off to Spain. Joe's not invited. Twenty quid to cover the leccy and everything else. In the fridge is what's left of a decaying lamb tikka masala. He mustn't answer the phone or the door or talk to the neighbours, since they'd guess he was on his own and then Mum and Dean would be in trouble. Not that he would, since they're not that friendly, except for Otis from the flat opposite, a bus conductor down Camberwell Garage. So, Joe tells himself (and us, since we're listening in to his story), 'I'm on my own now. I'm Joe Holt and I'm all alone.'

To begin with, it's brilliant. Dean's not there to hog the sofa and the Xbox, but as the days pass, things go downhill, and then downhill some more. The loneliness gives Joe space to wonder if he's still got a nan in Cornwall he could go and see; and how Carl, the only one of Mum's boyfriends he liked, is getting on in prison. And he wonders about girls and stuff like that.

Suddenly he meets one. Literally on his doorstep. She's not only good looking, she's funny, and she likes magazines and horoscopes and stories. And she's got X-Ray eyes that see what Joe's feeling. She's Asha, and Otis is her sort-of grandpa. After a bit, Joe even tells her he's on his own, and she doesn't tell Otis. While things with Asha get better and better, the money, the food and the electricity are running out. And Joe knows what Dean will do when he gets back and finds he's made friends with a black girl. When it's time to go back to school and Dean and Mum still haven't come home, things get worse. Perry's seen Joe and Asha down the park; he wants a pound a day to keep quiet. Joe's run out of cash and gets badly beaten up behind the Chicken Hut.

What stops all of this being as desolate and joyless as it might sound

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

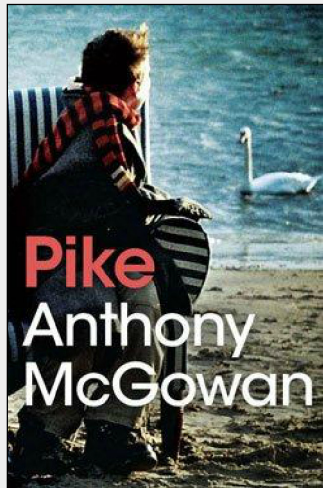
is Joe's resilience, his touching determination to be grown-up about things. He's no whinger, and though the reader will blame his mum from page 1, Joe doesn't; she's the only mum he's got and if it weren't for Dean, things would be okay. There's Joe's growing friendship with Asha to enjoy – first love, really – since it's tender yet unsentimental; and Asha (who has parent troubles of her own) is so witty, optimistic and resourceful. She thinks Joe's good at seeing her too and she's not afraid to tell him so.

You wouldn't expect a fairy tale ending. When Mum finally makes it back from Spain, she's maybe begun to sort out what really matters, and it helps that the law catches up with Dean and he's locked up for ten years or so. Joe's still very self-aware, but he's grown tougher and knows he's not the freak he thought he was. Narrow horizons, small cast, tight focus; and so Joanna Nadin ensures we care about Joe finding Asha and Otis, and his mum, and even himself. **GF**

Pike

★★★★★

Anthony McGowan, Barrington Stoke Teen, 126pp, 978-1-78112-486-6, £6.99



This story is an object lesson in the art of compression. In only 128 pages it touches on natural history, sibling relationships, living with mental disability, split families, fear of outsiders, dealing with bullies and coping with guilt. There is also an exciting adventure quest which stays credible by eschewing any silly improbabilities. The pair of brothers in the thick of all this describe themselves so well in their dialogue there is no need to add anything else. Best of all, the 'dyslexia friendly' vocabulary employed, as always in Barrington Stoke books, is embodied in good, clear prose which is a model for any sort of writing for young readers. One or two descriptions of imaginary violence feel out of place in such an otherwise warm and affectionate story. It also seems a bit

hard on pikes for Nicky, who tells this story, to describe them as 'evil' when all they are doing is angling for their next meal. Anthony McGowan's **Brock**, his last story about these two brothers, was long-listed for the **Carnegie Medal**. This one deserves to be too. **NT**

We Are All Made of Molecules

★★★★★

Susin Nielsen, Andersen Press, 336pp, 978-1-78344-232-4, £12.99 hbk

The setting is conventional and contemporary: Vancouver, with what's left of a couple of damaged families coming together to forge a new one. Within that framework, though, we're offered a sitcom of a novel, with the exaggeration of character, dialogue and events which is the staple of the genre. As so often in teenlit, there are alternating narrators and the comedy is embedded in their differing voices. The partial perspectives of Stewart and Ashley leave the reader in a slightly removed position, well aware of their limited reading of characters and situations. That perspective is the source of much of the pleasure this novel will surely provide.

13-year-old Stewart is the first to admit he is a Genius, especially in maths. Two or three years after his mum died of cancer, his dad is moving in with Caroline, a colleague from work. The enforced move across the bay from Stewart's old home in North Vancouver is one reason for leaving Little Genius Academy for the gifted; he's also keen to attend the local High School, because Caroline's daughter Ashley (just one year older) goes there, and he's earnestly determined to bond with his new sister. Stewart is well aware his giftedness does not extend to social skills, but armed with the best of intentions and a 7-point TO DO list about getting involved in his new school ('Try not to make those grunting sounds you've been told you make when you get bored or stressed'), he arrives with his cat Schrödinger at his new home to find it has five bathrooms ('Every single human member of this household could go at the same time and there would still be a bathroom left over'). He's '89.9 per cent happy' with the new arrangements.

Ashley is like totally 110 per cent horrified. She's not actually lost her dad; it's worse than that. He's come out and what's more he's living in a house at the bottom of the garden. What's even more, he's found a partner, Michael, though even in her despair, Ashley can't help but notice Michael's flawless dark skin and his faultless dress sense. All of this, if it gets out, will like totally wreck her status as the school's top fashionista. And now there's this 'midget-egghead-freakazoid' Stewart, who actually talks to her when she's with her friends at school. This will do nothing for her burgeoning relationship with basketball star Jared, the hottest

guy around, recently arrived on campus, trailing clouds of mystery. 'Rumour has it he was kicked out [from a private school], which makes him even more intriguing; according to this article I read in one of my magazines, women like a hint of mystery and possible danger in their men.' Ashley's narration is colourful, if uncertain. Her first chapter begins: 'My family is FUBAR' which unpacks as 'Effed Up Beyond All Recognition'. She's a High School Mrs Malaprop – her 'constipated' is everyone else's 'emancipated'; and on a good day, she's full of joie de beaver.

As Stewart finally tells her, Ashley lives in magazine-land. She's all about Appearances – from clothes to cars to girlfriends. As for boyfriends, her first concern is how they'll look together in the wedding photographs, followed by the trophy children they might breed. The plot races through crises at home and school, where Stewart becomes the furry-suited bulldog mascot for the basketball squad. The crunch comes – as it rather frequently does in suburban teenlit – at a drunken adult-free party where everything goes wrong. Stewart only just thwarts Jared's predatory web-posting of revealing pix of a wasted Ashley. Little by little, the narrators see beyond each other's surfaces. As Ashley becomes less 'gayist', she and her dad get on much better. Stewart's making progress too; Phoebe, a sane, perceptive girl from the Mathletes club, likes him for what he is. She even kisses him. And, 'every now and then, Ashley and I have moments when we genuinely connect.' **GF**

Lost on Mars

★★★★★

Paul Magrs, Firefly, 352pp, 978-1-91008-022-1, £7.99 pbk

Paul Magrs has some **Doctor Who** novelisations on his cv, and while, as far as I can see, he hasn't been responsible for any of the recent TV scripts, readers of this account of life on Mars will find themselves in a very similar world of knowing literary reference and manipulation of audience expectations, in which nothing is as it seems. The tale begins with a Martian dust storm which engulfs a homestead of second or third generation pioneer earth settlers. The hopes for life on Mars of the first settlers have long ago disappeared and these homesteaders are grubbing a living on the Red Planet in exactly the way that homesteaders did in the Old West; except that their beasts of burden are large lizards and their robot servant is a customised sun-bed. At first I thought we might be in a Martian **Grapes of Wrath** but I should have realised that, since the narrator's name is Lora, it's **Little House on the Prairie** in space. But here it's not Native Americans the family have to worry about, along with bad weather and crop failure. Lora and her family are driven from their home by the encroachment of ghost insect-like indigenous Martians who are 'disappearing' humans and according to a young Martian who befriends Lora, eating them; because, well,

times are hard for the Martians too and there's a lot of meat on even a skinny human. After Grandma's disappearance and Pa's death, Lora sets off with the remains of her family and a motley group of townsfolk to find other humans on the planet, following the signals of broadcast weather forecasts whose mysterious incantations are reminiscent of our own shipping forecasts. Adventures and encounters with more strange creatures later, and separated from the rest of her party, Lora, her brother and the sun-bed find themselves in what appears to be a Victorian city. Yet, as I may have said, nothing is what it seems, and they are mysteriously reunited with Grandma and Pa. Disappointingly, for this reader at least, many of the questions that are raised during the novel's 300+ pages, will have to remain unanswered until further on in the projected trilogy. In fact, this didn't seem to me to be enough of a satisfying read in itself. It was more intriguing than exciting and rather too much of what intrigued me was left unresolved. **CB**

The Wordsmith

★★★★★

Patricia Forde, Little Island, 286pp, 978-1-90819-599-9, £7.99 pbk

The world has suffered a great disaster and only those within Ark are safe. They are ruled by Jon Noa, who sees luxury and frippery as the reason for the world's collapse. Everything should be restricted to what is necessary, and that includes words. Letta is an apprentice wordsmith, she and her master collect words and their meaning. The rest of Ark only use words from the List; there are only 500 soon to be reduced to 100.

Outside of Ark there are scavengers who live on what little waste there is and what they can find from the old days. There are also the Desecrators – outlaws who fight against Ark using music and art.

Letta is drawn into the conflict when one of the Desecrators arrives at her house hunted and wounded and she falls in love with him. She begins to learn her family's history and the true nature of John Noa's vision.

This is an exciting adventure set in a dystopian future and I am sure that any reader would be horrified at a world without words. Where the true tension comes is from the vision of a world without art and imagination and the frightening logic of how such a world can be arrived at from the best of intentions. A fascinating read. **CD**

The Territory

★★★★★

Sarah Govett, Firefly, 208pp, 978-1-91008-018-4, £7.99, pbk

It's 2059 and following the Great Floods half the world's land is under water. Only the central part of Old Britain, the Territory, is fit for human habitation, and there's just not enough room there. As the Ministry says, 'limited space requires limited numbers' so all children have to sit an

reviews

exam in their fifteenth year. Those who fail this Territorial Allocation Assessment (TAA) are sent to almost-certain death in the disease-infested Wetlands. The brightest people must survive so they can solve all the problems.

One problem that has been solved is how to ensure children pass the TAA. Those who are rich or well connected enough now breed Childe in womb pods. These Childe have Nodes that, from the age of 9, they plug into Ports to upload information directly into their brains. With the TAA heavily weighted towards factual knowledge, they have a huge advantage over Norms like Noa and her friends who have to study the old-fashioned way. Exams have never been so stressful! Noa's mother works for the Ministry so her parents could have had a Childe but they chose not to. They were obviously aware of the downsides – uploading stifles creativity and individualism. Luckily Noa is super bright and studious so she's likely to pass the TAA anyway, but that's not the case with her best friends, the artistic Jack and boy-mad Daisy. The Childe look down on the Norms and the Norms look down on the 'freakoids' as they call them. But then Raf arrives at school. He's a freakoid, but he doesn't behave like one, and Noa soon falls for him – which upsets the intensely jealous Jack. But Noa is a robust girl, and nothing gets her down for long, whether it's the demise of a friend, finding out the truth about her mother, or behaving in ways that have fairly dire consequences for other people.

The book's told in the first person by Noa, whose language is very much that of a contemporary teenager. The winner of The Times/Chicken House Children's Fiction Prize, it's an enjoyable, fast-paced read, and raises some interesting questions about how you would behave in difficult situations, as well as being a clear indictment of the UK education system. It's the first in a trilogy and I'll be interested to see how the story progresses. **RW**

The Endless Trials of Tabitha Baird

★★★★

Arabella Weir, Piccadilly Press, 978-1-84812-436-3, 208pp, £6.99 pbk

Tabitha Baird is the Queen Bee of her gang – her 'bezzies'. She is the one they expect to be outrageous (never malicious, just outrageous). She is determined to keep her position – but the arrival of Alexandra with her striking goth appearance and her supercilious air is a serious threat.

There is nothing serious about this book. From the teenage preoccupations to the arrival of a litter of puppies, we see the world through Tabitha's breathless voice and self-centred eyes. Yes, there is the possible – probable – divorce of the parents; there is the problem of Sam and of course, Alexandra. But the narrative fizzles along with all the verve of an elderflower spritzer (strictly non-alcoholic) bringing a smile to the

face and skip to the step. If the result is slightly exhausting for the adult reader, this is just the book to recommend to lively younger teens who will recognise Tabitha and her world – and enjoy it. **FH**

Completely Cassidy: Accidental Genius

★★★★

Tamsyn Murray, illustrated by Antonia Miller, Usborne, 208pp, 978-1-40956-271-9, £5.99 pbk

Cassidy is about to start Year 7 in her new secondary school, complete with her brother's too big blazer, and her shoes with the kittens on them as her dog has chewed one of her new pair. This sentence really sums up Cassidy's worries about starting a new school, even though her best friends Molly and Shenice will be there. In fact things go quite well and when her parents are called in to see Mr Bearman, and Cassidy learns she has come top of the CATs test and is invited to join the quiz team to compete against other schools, life feels pretty good. But then Molly begins to fancy her older brother Liam who has a rock band, and the dog chews her knickers in front of the boy Cassidy fancies who leads the quiz team and things go downhill. Cassidy then finds out that the other C Bond in her year is in fact the one who came first in the CATs test not her and she decides to leave the quiz team. Nathan persuades her that she is needed and she is instrumental in winning the regional quiz round, Molly comes third in the school's Got Talent competition and her brother's band comes second and the twins are born, making way for a sequel!

This is great fun, capturing perfectly the difficult transition to secondary school, especially wearing a too-large blazer, hand-me-down or new. It is good that Cassidy is thrilled to be top of the tests instead of being the most sought-after girl – it makes being a bit clever the thing to be which is a good role model for girls, and the jokey style, with inputs from Cassidy's lists, does not mask the picture of her normal home life, especially when her dad pays for the rectifying of her disastrous experiment with highlights for her hair! The angst of falling out with a friend is not hidden and the difficulty of making it up rings very true. Girls from 9+ will enjoy this and be looking out for the sequel. **JF**

The Yelling Stones

★★★★

Oskar Jensen, Hot Key Books, 240pp, 978-1-47140-411-5, £5.99 pbk

This is the story of Norse Gods, legends, magic and humans trying to deal with a time of great change. Astrid is the daughter of the Danish king and, whilst riding out one day, she is attacked by wolves. Luckily she is saved by a young poet, Leif, who is on the way to her father's court. He has a vision in which he warns of dark dangers that are threatening the kingdom. Can Leif and Astrid stop the danger or will the Danes be

overwhelmed by the unknown threat, and what is the importance of the three standing stones, called the yelling stones, which dominate the area around the palace?

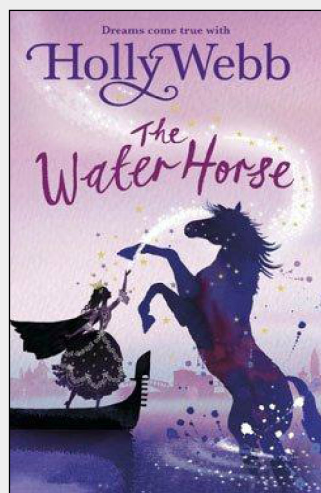
This is a strong story which is absolutely steeped in Norse mythology. The characters are very much of their time and have a firm belief in the magic that surrounds them. However, this is also a time of great change across northern Europe as Christianity moves across the lands. What does stand out with this book are the great similarities with the modern world, where several religions have groups who believe in an aggressive form of conversion. This book would make an excellent starting point for a discussion or for research because it combines action, strong characters and a plot that is complex, yet in some ways is simply the clash of two opposing belief systems.

It is very much a book that grows on you and which repays the effort of reading. Norse mythology has seen a resurgence of interest from authors over the last few years, but this has a feel of reality and darkness that is often missing from other interpretations. This will be a great read for the KS2 pupils it is intended for. **MP**

The Water Horse

★★★★

Holly Webb, Orchard Books, 250pp, 978-1-40832-762-3, £6.99 pbk



Princess Olivia is the only daughter of the ruler of a magical version of Venice. The waters of the lagoon are kept at bay by the rulers of the city and the rituals surrounding the gift for the spirits of the water. But the waters are rising, Olivia's father is seriously ill and her aunt is plotting to put her own son on the throne. Our heroine knows that she has to be the one who leads the effort to save the city, but this seems an impossible task, that is until she meets one of the supposedly mythical Water Horses that are said to control the waters.

Holly Webb has an amazing ability to weave together history and magic and with this, the first in a new series, she

has taken us to a world that is at once both known and yet magical. The character of Olivia develops well as she begins to understand the realities behind the privileged life that she leads. She shows an inner strength that augurs well for the future, when she will eventually become ruler of the city. The story itself is fast paced and full of action, yet at a level that remains believable. There are true villains in the characters of Lady Sofia and her son Zuan and we long for them to be brought to justice. The author has managed to give us a real feel for the city of Venice; we can almost smell the water and hear it lapping against the foundations of the houses and we can understand the connection that the people feel with the water that is actually the lifeblood of their home. This would make a great series for younger readers who can then move to series such as the **Stravaganza** books. **MP**

Dog Ears

★★★★

Anne Booth, Catnip, 978-1-84647-188-9, 216pp, £6.99 pbk

Anna confides in her dog Timmy as her home life is somewhat chaotic. She has a new baby brother, born prematurely, and all her mother's time is taken up looking after him. Her father travels for his job so relies on Anna to keep things going at home. Gradually things go downhill and come to a head when Anna can never get her school uniform and PE kit washed: the machine is permanently full of nappies, and washing them seems to be Anna's job according to Gran.

At school Anna, her two best friends and another girl, Lauren, are practising for the talent competition as one of the school's old girls, now a pop star is coming to record a charity single. Not daunted in any way by the fact that Anna has only been playing the violin for two months and is finding it difficult to practise because of waking the baby, the four girls form a band, although Lauren is absent from most of their practice sessions. Anna discovers the reason for this when she meets Lauren in the launderette where she has gone to wash her clothes in desperation (her two friends have told her she has started to smell): Lauren is a carer for her siblings as her mother has died. The arrival of a monster internet shop, ordered because Anna thought it would prove to be useful to buy two months' worth of food, is the final straw for her and she runs off with Timmy.

Well written in a confiding tone, this sad tale tugs at the heart strings. Hopefully readers will notice the change of confidant at the end when Anna writes to Jack the baby, rather than Timmy. The school do not appear to have noticed Anna's somewhat dishevelled appearance and inability to turn up with the correct ingredients for her cookery classes which is a little worrying and perhaps not quite true to life – and would her mother and Gran really not notice her smelly uniform, or expect her to do an internet shop unaided? In the main, however, this is a story that convinces. Anna is a

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

plucky character and her situation well described. There are notes about young carers at the end of the story. **JF**

If You Were Me

★★★★★

Sam Hepburn, Chicken House, 352pp, 978-1-90948-980-6, £6.99 pbk

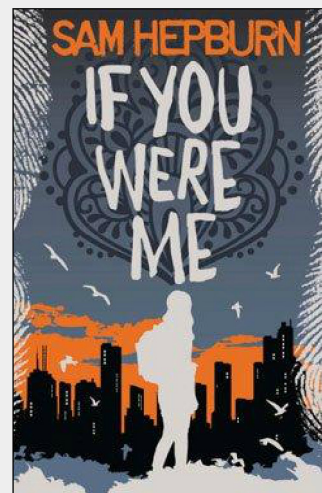
Sam Hepburn established a reputation for taut, tightly plotted thrillers for young readers with **Chasing the Dark**. **If You Were Me**, Hepburn's latest novel, is another truly thrilling read and will reinforce that reputation.

The action begins in Afghanistan. Aliya, her mother and little sister are forced to flee their home in the middle of the

night to escape the Taliban, who are after Aliya's brother Behrouz, a translator for the British army. Vividly described, it's a nail-biting opening chapter. Life as refugees in England is not easy, and no safer for the family either: they've only been there a few weeks when Behrouz is badly injured in an explosion and accused by the authorities of terrorist activity. Aliya knows that her brother would never do such a thing and is determined to prove his innocence. Plumber's son Dan feels compelled to help Aliya: he has evidence that could clear Behrouz's name but is too ashamed to share it with her, and unable to go to the police either, because it implicates his own father in a very serious criminal operation.

Together these two very different young people work to uncover the truth, untangling a web of deceit and corruption, and putting both their lives in danger in the process. The plot unfolds through dual first person narratives from Aliya and Dan in alternating chapters. It is credit to Hepburn's skill as a thriller writer that no matter how complex the plot becomes, all remains clear and readers will be kept right on the edge of their seats from beginning to end. Her two central characters ring very true as intelligent, determined and courageous young people, and their various escapades as they track down some decidedly nasty and frightening villains are always credible.

This is a very well-plotted, intriguing and involving contemporary thriller that gives equal respect to its central characters and its readers. **MMA**



14+ Secondary/Adult

What Was Never Said

★★★★★

Emma Craigie, Short Books, 208pp, 978-1-78072-179-8, £7.99 pbk

Two girls are dancing outside their grandmother's house in Somalia. They go into the house and find a young woman, Ramah, dead as a result of a failed operation for female circumcision (FGM). Years later the action moves to Bristol, where the Somali family now live. Zarah is fifteen and Samsam is six.

Some women come to the house of Zarah's mother. Zarah recognises one of them as 'the cutter', the same woman who performed the fatal FGM on the deceased Ramah. She decides that she and her sister will run away to London to escape the deadly operation. Fortunately their cousin Yasmin is studying in London so they have some support in the capital.

The book narrates the story of the sisters' flight and their struggle to reconcile their aspirations in a modern multi-cultural state with the traditions of their homeland.

It is a brave and worthy endeavour on the part of Craigie to tackle this subject. She does her best to explain why some people favour FGM: women are considered purer if they are incapable of experiencing sexual pleasure. For contemporary readers in a modern society, irrespective of age, explaining this phenomenon is a tricky and thankless task.

However my main criticism of this otherwise praiseworthy novel is that it employs a nakedly obvious narrative device. Zarah is resolved whatever the cost not to return to her family home: the reader can see exactly why. Her father goes to seek guidance from an Imam in a mosque. While there he suffers serious injuries in a fire. Loyalty to her father induces Zarah to go home, taking her younger sister with her. The profound conflict of values is thus resolved not by a rational or emotional process, but by a

chance accident. The book ends with a revelation about the identity of the young woman who died in Somalia. **RB**

Conversion

★★★★★

Katherine Howe, Oneworld Publications, 402pp, 978-1-78074-773-6, £8.99 pbk

Colleen Rowley is a high school senior student at an elite Catholic girls' school in Danvers, Massachusetts. She is a gifted student who believes she has a chance of being appointed the Valedictorian, the departing student chosen to give a farewell address at the graduation ceremony, a huge honour. On top of this competition to be recognised, the girls are striving to win a place at prestigious Ivy League colleges. The competitive aura is potent. Another student, Fabiana, has a slender lead over Colleen in her academic ratings. Colleen knows she must overtake Fabiana if she is to achieve her goal. One day, in the middle of a tutorial, the school's glamour girl Clara Rutherford has an unexplained seizure. Hers is the first case in a mysterious epidemic. Dozens of girls start to experience the same severe symptoms: hair loss, seizures and inability to walk. The rest of Howe's book describes the search for the reasons underlying this strange phenomenon and its causes, alongside the reactions of the sufferers and those around them.

Without revealing too much about this compelling narrative, Howe ties the mysterious trials of these contemporary teenagers to famous but alarming events in American history. The author achieves a notable success because she manages so deftly and convincingly to place herself in the shoes of these teenage girls experiencing ordeals with which they are poorly equipped to cope.

As the story advances, it rings bell after bell with any reader who can

recall her high-school days. The story depicts ambitious middle class parents who sincerely believe that by exerting pressure on their children to perform at all costs they are actually rendering those children a service, ignoring the penalties that such pressure also demands of the child. Teenage fiction is full of characters whose indifference to material and social advancement is dramatized. Here we have girls at the opposite end of the spectrum of ambition. It is the terror of failure that paralyses them.

It is hard to say whether the author is more to be praised for the technical expertise of her presentation or for her naked courage in daring to tackle this theme. Five stars from this reviewer. **RB**

Remix

★★★

Non Pratt, Walker Books, 304pp, 978-1-40634-770-8, £7.99 pbk

Ruby and Kaz are sixteen-year-old girls who have just finished their GCSE exams. They are fervent fans of a band named Goldentone, and dedicated admirers of the band's lead singer, Adam Wexler. The band is to perform at a festival called Remix. Ruby and Kaz are granted permission to attend, only because Ruby's elder brother Lee promises to accompany the girls. Along with them is Owen, Lee's boyfriend, in whose van they will all travel.

Kaz is excited because at the festival she hopes to run into her ex-boyfriend Tom Selkirk, for whom she is still hankering. Ruby also has an ex, Stuart Garside, who is also (to Ruby's displeasure) likely to put in an appearance at Remix.

Two questions now pose themselves: which teenager will end up with whom, and whether fame is always a blessing or sometimes a curse?

Up to a point Pratt's book is a very typical – one might almost say stereotypical – novel of teenage

entanglement. The world of children's literature probably has enough of such works. However the issue raised alongside the main theme, whether celebrity breeds indifference to human values, narrowly saves the book from an otherwise inevitable fate. **RB**

Playlist for the Dead

★★★

Michelle Falkoff, HarperCollins Children's Books, 356pp, 978-0-00811-066-6, £7.99 pbk

Sam has only ever had one friend, Hayden; he doesn't need anyone else. Then Hayden kills himself and leaves Sam a playlist instead of a note. Sam cannot make sense of the playlist and its meaning and the strangeness escalates when he starts getting messages from his dead friend's avatar on the gaming site they both played.

Gradually the story begins to unfold and Sam finds that he wasn't enough for his friend and Hayden had secrets of his own. As he begins to take in the world around him he sees things differently, and challenges his perceptions of people and his relationships.

This is an engrossing story that peels back layers to reveal the complexity of Hayden's life. It also reveals the different levels of guilt the people around him feel, including Sam. Everywhere there are secrets and lies that give people motives for their behaviour and guilt surrounding Hayden's death.

The book neatly sidesteps cliché at many points, and the revelation of who is the voice from beyond is a surprise, but I was a little disappointed at times that the plot didn't always hold together. Each chapter was headed by the title and artist of songs from the playlist. I guess the combination of my age and the American setting meant I didn't get the relevance and that annoyed me a bit, but I still enjoyed most of the journey. **CD**

reviews

Liberty's Fire

★★★★★

Lydia Syson, Hot Key, 368pp,
978-1-47140-367-5, £7.99 pbk

The Franco-Prussian War has left France, and Paris, exhausted, demoralised; another revolution is in the air. When events come to a head Zéphyrine, Anatole, Jules and Marie are faced with difficult decisions and dilemmas; decisions that will profoundly affect their lives and relationships.

This is Lydia Syson's third novel. All are historical, none are placed in an obvious or popular period. Here it is a few weeks after the Franco-Prussian War, not a time that many young people (or indeed adults) will know much about though there is a sad and uncanny resemblance to events that are often in the news today.

But this is not a dry history lesson, it is a dramatic story filled with tragedy and heroism. Syson's protagonists are very real, not least in their fallibilities. Jules and Antoine, Zéphyrine and Marie are young people we recognise and understand – even when their actions may be less than heroic, for history is never black or white. The Parisian setting is vivid and immediate. The reader is there on the barricades cheering for the Commune. While the Tudors and Victorians may hold a continuing fascination, it is novels like this that open the eyes and imagination to a wider history. Highly recommended. **FH**

Nobody Saw No One

★★★★★

Steve Tasane, Walker Books, 310pp,
978-1-40635-076-0, £6.99, pbk

Nobody Saw No One is a modern-day retelling of *Oliver Twist*, mainly set in the gritty surroundings of North London's Seven Sisters Road. Byron, aka Citizen Digit, escaped to London from his secure care home, the inappropriately named Tenderness House, and is now 'liberating goods' for a man they call Virus, in return for food and shelter. On one of Digit's shoplifting expeditions, he sees Alfi Spar, a fellow Tenderness House runaway who's now living on the streets. Digit has always felt very protective towards the infuriatingly naïve, honest Alfi, and scoops him up and brings him home to Virus. We soon find out why they escaped: Tenderness House, led by the odious governor 'Call-Me Norman' is a centre of paedophile activity.

Alfi's not cut out for a life of crime with Virus. (Given how cherubic and well-behaved Alfi is, I kept wondering why he hadn't been adopted years ago, and why his previous foster parents were so quick to believe he'd stolen from them.) It's not long before he's caught by the police and placed with foster parents. But there's no chance he can stay in this happy home: Virus and the money-obsessed Jackson Banks both need him for their own purposes, and it seems not even Digit can protect him. Blood, bodies, kidnapping, car chases, explosions

and grim revelations follow before this action-packed book reaches a pleasing conclusion.

In Steve Tasane's impressive debut, **Blood Donors**, the protagonist tells the story in a very convincing street voice. This time Digit and Alfi tell the story alternately, and their voices too are always convincing and distinctive. Digit's narrative is littered with made-up but easy-to-understand words, like 'diminimising' and 'snarkastically', and his descriptions are particularly evocative: of the governor he says, 'Pubey brown hairs were sticking out of his ears and chin and cheeks, and protruding like spiders' legs out of both nostrils'; a fellow thief is 'more irritating than an eye-ful of Vindaloo'; and Alfi 'would be terrified of his own bad breath'.

It's a gripping, fast-paced, satisfying and highly topical read, with some great characters – especially Digit, who becomes more and more appealing as his own background is revealed. I look forward to reading more from this author. **RW**

Oxford Illustrated Shakespeare Dictionary

★★★★★

David & Ben Crystal, Oxford University Press, 352pp,
978-0-19273-750-2, £12.99 pbk

My immediate response when I picked up this book was that I wished I had been able to use it when I was studying Shakespeare's plays in secondary school. It is not only scholarly and comprehensive, it is hugely enjoyable whether you are browsing or seeking to increase your knowledge about something specific. The Dictionary explains words taken from what the authors, and probably most of us, would consider to be Shakespeare's most well liked and studied plays. These are: **Hamlet, Henry V, Julius Caesar, King Lear, Macbeth, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Merchant of Venice, Much Ado About Nothing, Othello, Romeo and Juliet, The Tempest and Twelfth Night**. It is an excellent resource for anyone aged about 10 or 11 upwards who wants to know more about Shakespeare's language. Even readers at the younger end of the age range will be fascinated by the definitions of unusual words – for example 'lass-lorn' (forsaken by a sweetheart), 'belly pinched' (starving) and 'zir' (a dialect word meaning sir). Together, these authors make an impressive team: Professor David Crystal is a leading figure in English language studies and Ben Crystal is an actor as well as a writer and able to bring to the book his knowledge of Shakespeare's time and the performance of the plays. The design of the Dictionary's pages makes them clear and inviting: the headwords stand out and print colour and style is varied according to the status of the information. Three helpful symbols pepper the book: a 'warning note' flagging that Shakespeare's use of a word differs from modern usage; a 'usage note' explaining in more detail the contexts

in which Shakespeare used the word; and a 'theatre note' which will be invaluable to those putting on one of the plays. Language panels highlight things of special interest, for example words to do with stage directions, use of exclamations and family names; interestingly names for members of the family – brother, mother and so on – have changed little. Kate Bellamy's illustrations of such things as clothes, music, recreations and armour – many of which are in a picture section in the middle of the book – are full of visual information and colour. They add to our sense of the atmosphere of Shakespeare's times and contribute considerably to the pleasure the book affords the reader. **MM**

The Alex Crow

★★★★★

Andrew Smith, Electric Monkey,
368pp, 978-1-40527-342-8, £7.99 pbk

Andrew Smith's novel **Grasshopper Jungle**, a wildly original sci-fi adventure about sexually-confused teen boys fighting a plague of giant killer bugs, was one of my favourite books of last year. It was long-listed for the Carnegie Medal though sadly didn't make the shortlist.

Adolescent boys are also at the centre of **The Alex Crow**, which is equally wild, weird and profound. The central character is fifteen-year-old Ariel, whose story begins as he escapes death in his unnamed country's civil war, by hiding in a refrigerator. He describes his journey from refrigerator to the US, via a wretched refugee camp where he is abused by fellow inmates, to his adopted American brother Max, apologising all the while for burdening him with such dark life stories. The two become friends and allies at the more than slightly sinister Camp Merrie-Seymour for boys, a place teens are sent to detox from technology. The Camp is owned by the company that employs Max and Ariel's father as a genetic scientist, and his Alex division are involved in very strange activities indeed, including bringing extinct creatures back to life. Ariel suspects that he and Max too might be subjects of the division's experiments.

Other stories run in parallel: one involves the survivors of a nineteenth century expedition to the Arctic where, we discover, the de-extinction programme began; another describes

a truly bizarre road-trip taken by Lenny, aka the 'melting man'. Lenny is an early creation of Max's dad, a bio-drone now quite literally falling apart, and hallucinating wildly: Joseph Stalin is a constant presence urging him to commit crimes. All the stories combine as the book reaches its conclusion.

Technology is changing our world in ways we could never have predicted but, Smith seems to say, human nature remains obsessed with violence and, despite our all-encompassing desire to reproduce, mankind is careering recklessly towards extinction. Original, entertaining and thought provoking, this is one of the best YA novels you will read this year. **MMa**

It's About Love

★★★

Steven Camden, HarperCollins,
448pp, 978-0-00751-124-2, £7.99 pbk

There were high hopes for this story, from the author of the previous excellent **Tape**. This current novel is also cleverly crafted, written partly as if it is a film script produced by troubled sixteen-year-old Luke. But has there ever been such a determinedly self-defeating young hero in a teenage novel? Luke hates himself and most other people. Given the chance every now and then to improve his life he generally goes the other way. It is a near miracle that beautiful and lively Leia, a fellow pupil on their shared film course, manages not only to put up with him but also offer much-needed love and ability. But even after finding the perfect girl-friend Luke's problems still get worse, now having to deal with a charismatic older brother released from prison and still in danger from a previous enemy. With more upsets to come, this story would certainly win any award for the glummiest novel of the year. There is much in it that is also good and original, such as the skilful weaving in of references to old films and the exciting moment when the young couple's screen story seems to be coming together. But Luke, already socially crippled by a long facial scar, is always too wearily close to personal disaster. Dark, depressing and finally melodramatic, this story might well appeal to young readers should they be feeling the same way. Others may prefer something less gloomy. **NT**

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Classics in Short

No.111 Brian Alderson

The Adventures of Uncle Lubin and the first sighting of Heath Robinson Contraptions

Sick

with some childish ailment, I was lent a book by a neighbour. He knew my predilection for railways – the real ones, with steam engines, and guards, and posh dining cars – and thought I might enjoy this picture book celebrating the 1935 centenary of the old Great Western.

He was lucky to get it back.

For here were railway activities from Madland, all the madder for taking themselves absolutely seriously: the clerk sitting on the front of an engine, with notebook and a suspended alarm clock, checking the entries for the first timetable; a whole pageful of nineteen employees and charladies cleaning all the parts of a dismembered locomotive – one later finishing it off with a powder-puff. This was **Railway Ribaldry** by the (unknown to me) W Heath Robinson.

Ten years or so later,

I discovered that this man, who had given an adjectival phrase to the English language for his designs of fantastic gadgets, had done many book illustrations before those were ever thought of. A favourite bookstall in Exeter's covered market charged me all of three shillings for a fat and slightly wobbly copy of **Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales** printed, surprisingly, for Boots Pure Drug Company. This turned out to be, according to Geoffrey Beare's richly informative book on WHR's illustrations (1983), the sixth edition (1927) of a very stylish gift-book edition first published by Constable in 1913. (Andersen seems to have been a Robinson speciality. His very first book commission was for an edition of the stories in 1897, followed by a more elaborate affair, done with his brothers Thomas and Charles in 1902, which went through some thirteen reprints.)

By 1902 however

Robinson claimed that he was being trailed by a homunculus in a tall hat and a buttoned-up long coat whose story he was being prevailed upon to write and illustrate. So it was that in 1903 **The Adventures of Uncle Lubin** was published as Robinson's first authorial work, and was one of marked originality in a period by no means lacking in that quality. Uncle Lubin, now as a pictorial manifestation of Robinson's down-at-heels Good Genius, reaches us in Episode One, carelessly allowing his nephew Peter to be stolen by a wicked Bag-bird, and only after twelve adventures is a triumphant recovery effected. (That happens entirely by accident. Uncle Lubin has suffered a bombardment of coconuts from a very tall tree which it takes him two days and a night to ascend, but there at the top is Peter in the Bag-bird nest among all the little Bag-chicks.)

It must be said

that the book is inconsequential from beginning to end – as is a successor volume, **Bill the Minder** (1912). The reason may well be that, when young, WHR used to write stories on a school-slate with the result that no story could exceed the scribal area of the slate. Brevity was needful and continuity difficult once the slate was filled, so that progress occurred only through semi-connected passages. What mattered, however, was not the continuities (unfortunately the beady-eyed bird is almost entirely eased out of the story by Uncle Lubin's separate adventures) but the crazy events of his hunt, and the brilliant graphic construction of their presentation.

Each story

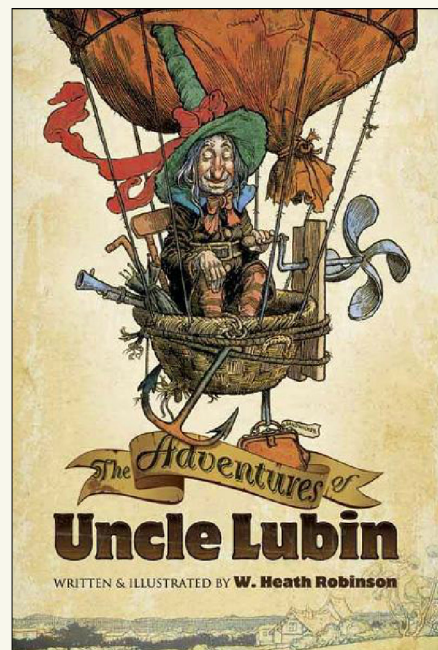
follows the same pattern. At the start of each one there is a full-page chapter title lettered in red (blue in a later edition) with a single black and white drawing emblematic of the coming adventure; that adventure is then told in anything from seven to thirteen double page spreads. On the left-hand page of each spread is a red (later blue) pictorial initial and a single drawing, followed by black text. (The story-texts are very short and are amusingly arranged in different typographic shapes, often dwindling to a string of lines of one word each.) The page opposite consists of a full-page monochrome drawing (in three



instances there are drawings across the spread). Each story ends with a pictorial conclusion.

The random wanderings

that Peter's enthusiastic but hapless Uncle undertakes may be seen as the essence of Heath Robinson. He constructs a balloon (filled from the domestic gas supply) and goes



to the moon, which fortunately is in its crescent phase so he can hang his belongings on it; he visits mer-children in a home-made submarine (having cunningly despatched a sea-serpent in the previous story); he successfully melts a stalagmite with a candle but it falls on his head and knocks him over ... Every drawing is not only full of comic detail but a wonder of graphic organisation on the page.

Although there are hints

throughout **Uncle Lubin** of incipient Heath Robinson contraptions, it was only after the book's publication that a man from the Lamson Paragon Company, concerned with commercial products, recognised in the illustrator the makings of an advertising draftsman and the way was opened for the inventiveness that was to produce **Railway Ribaldry** and so much else. Far from fading with the period in which it was rooted, Heath Robinsonism has come to be increasingly revered; in recent years an HR Trust has been formed through whose vigorous sponsorship a **Heath Robinson Museum** is to be sited at Pinner, where he and his family lived for a few years after 1909. Much is to be learned of this venture via Google and readers are urged to check its progress – if only to reassure themselves that the building is not likely to follow any designs based on Heath Robinsonian principles; it will not depend upon hairy string.

The Adventures of Uncle Lubin by W Heath Robinson, 978-0-48649-821-8, Dover Children's Books, £10.99

Railway Ribaldry by W Heath Robinson, 978-1-90840-294-3, Old House, £10.00

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His book **The Ladybird Story: Children's Books for Everyone**, The British Library, 978-0-71235-728-9, £25.00 hbk, is out now.