

# BOOKS FOR KEEPERS

No.250

*the* children's book magazine online September 2021

**Authorgraph interview**  
**Tom Percival**

**Windows into Illustration**  
**John Broadley**

**Power of Pictures**

**Brian Alderson bidding farewell**

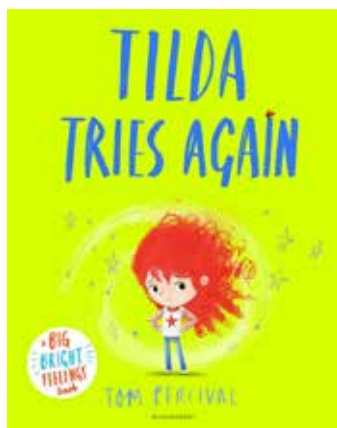


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### COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **Tilda Tries Again**, written and illustrated by **Tom Percival**. Thanks to **Bloomsbury Children's Books** for their help with our 250th cover.



# Guest Editorial: The Power of Pictures

Ed Vere paints a picture of how much visual literacy can achieve in our children's education.



As someone who draws, I've always taken it for granted that pictures say a lot. They always spoke to me. From my earliest years, through teens and into adulthood; picturebooks, comics, fine art. I was also a voracious reader. The two went side by side – both saying a lot, in different ways. I was also a child who struggled hopelessly with writing projects at school. I don't know why but they defeated me. A part of me shut down and inevitably felt stupid. But, I could draw and I could say things with those drawings.

Cut to many years later, as an author (accidentally finding my way there through drawing), and a conversation between me and **CLPE's** wonderful Charlotte Hacking – both talking in raptures about the power of visual literacy and its inexplicable absence from the curriculum. Might there be something we could do?

I'm often struck by how we ask children to approach literacy tasks. How sterile and uncreative they can be and how far away that is from how I and many author/illustrators I know, find and develop our ideas. To create characters, worlds and ideas, we often don't write, but draw.

It seems we're not very realistic when we ask children to write. We need to think creatively.

If a child finds writing difficult (spelling, grammar, etc), any writing task comes front loaded with unpleasant problems. When they're allowed to start a creative writing project by drawing (designing a character, for example), you grow an idea inside that child's head before they've written a single word. Once an idea lives and breathes, a child has a base to write from and the motivation to want to.

Education in this country works well for the academically minded – and badly for those who think in other ways; those who are equally bright, but think visually, or spatially. By opening up visual literacy and allowing drawing into the process of writing, we stop leaving those children behind and the difference to their educational outcomes radically improves.\*

Nearly all children love drawing when they begin primary education, and most have lost confidence in it by the time they leave. They come to believe there's a right and wrong way. There isn't. In losing drawing, they lose a vital form of self-expression. In an age when mental health issues are rife, we cannot afford to squander these innate tools, which, if allowed to develop, help us to understand ourselves as we navigate our complex world.

A huge aspect of the **Power of Pictures** project Charlotte and I consequently developed aims to give teachers the understanding and confidence to use drawing with children, and to (gulp) actually draw themselves. Many haven't drawn since they lost their own confidence in it at 7 or 8. That loss of confidence is often passed on. We try to break that cycle.

Pictures speak to children (older ones included). Understanding this can be the key to discussions you might not have thought possible. **Power of Pictures** teaches that the pictures in good picturebooks carry highly sophisticated messages. Often, the written narrative is the teacher's focus and pictures are bypassed – ignoring a wealth of highly sophisticated narrative information. **PoP** demonstrates how rich layers of pictorial information can be unearthed. How pictures can be open to highly creative interpretation, open to be interrogated, analysed and discussed by a class. Often, children naturally do this for themselves; they're just not often asked about it.

Children are nearly always engaged by the visual world, but we teach them to brush it aside as they get older. It is a huge loss. **Power of Pictures** shows teachers that picturebooks contain incredible visual riches and teaches how to dive into them.

Visual literacy deserves a serious place in our children's education.

\* **The Education Endowment Foundation's** recent evaluation of **PoP** found that the programme had a positive effect on children's writing self-efficacy and writing creativity. The visual element of the programme was also seen to attract learners who may have traditionally struggled to engage with literacy activities.

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# Changing the world, one library at a time

In the second of her articles about **Waterstones Children's Laureate Cressida Cowell's Life-Changing Libraries** project, **Catherine Millar, Reading for Pleasure** consultant, takes a behind the scenes look at their design and creation. The project is designed to monitor pupils' engagement and reading behaviour over the course of the following year as they explore their new libraries.

Design elevates the mundane to the magical. Many schools have tired library spaces with tatty books and despite the best efforts of teachers, children can see them as informal places for fooling around. The six school libraries in **Cressida Cowell's Life-Changing Libraries** project have been transformed from dumping grounds to enlightening sanctuaries, places to pause away from classrooms where Covid catch-up is the focus.

The proposed home for the library was an important factor in selecting schools for the project, so the six schools have very different spaces; from a large, former classroom to a converted cupboard. Some have access to outdoors while others are in a corridor. It will be interesting to see the impact of these different spaces on the pupils as the year progresses.

Children who haven't had access to books can find a library overwhelming. With little prior experience, they may not know which genre they prefer or be able to identify a favourite author and being asked to choose a book can end up as a grab for the closest to hand that doesn't look too 'babyish'.

This is where good library design can come in. By providing a space where children want to be, we enable children to relax and spend time surrounded by books. We replace some negative peer pressure with positives. The corridor library built in Woodchurch CofE Primary ensures that as children walk through the school they can pass children leafing through books, talking to friends about reading and having fun in their beautiful space. According to the [Salford University 'Clever Classrooms' report](#) on the impact design has on learning, differences in the physical characteristics of classrooms explain 16% of the variation in pupils' learning progress over a year. The authors also found that corridor libraries improve reading progress. Could this be because the library and the reading behaviours of older role models are so visible?

Most schools don't have a spare room for a library, so the space needs to be multi-functional. Key components of the furniture provided by **FG Library & Learning** for this project are flexibility and mobility. Skerne Park Primary School's library was initially installed in the central atrium, but after a reshuffle of classes it is now housed in a former classroom. Shelving units on wheels greatly helped this process. In Griffin Primary School, the units are organised to allow a class to browse the books easily, but for the library opening when a group of children enjoyed a visit from HRH The Duchess of Cornwall and Cressida Cowell, the furniture could quickly be wheeled back to create a space large enough for a whole class to sit in.

'Our design service is dictated by the school's brief and we aim to work as collaboratively as possible,' explains Andy Parker, Design Consultant for **FG Library & Learning**. The proposed space is measured and sketched and CAD plans are then drawn up and shared with the school. Schools can make changes and mix and match colours and furniture units. Different themes are available, such as boats or castle tops on the shelves, as well as the woodland theme that complements Cressida's amazing dragons. Once this project's designs were finalised, **Promote Your School** were able to measure up for the wall art stickers installed once the furniture was in place.



Cressida Cowell opening Skerne Park Primary School's library

**FG Library & Learning** and **Promote Your School** have created beautiful, awe-inspiring places, and the book selection from the **BookTrust** team ensured plenty of 'wow' moments when the libraries were opened.

Many of the children in the six schools didn't understand the fundamental concept of a library. As a former teacher, I'm well aware of the discomfort in throwing away books, but sifting stock and removing torn, unloved or outdated books is an important part of organising a library. 'Treating books as rubbish sounds like a modern mentality towards waste, but the quality of the books chosen by **BookTrust** offers a far greater reading experience,' says Andy Parker. 'We often find schools say they will cull 200-300 books out of their collection of 3,000 and then actually get rid of 1,000 titles.' This culling process elevates the remaining books and frees up shelf space for front-facing displays, crucial in encouraging children to browse and discover. Eileen Anderson, headteacher at Saviour CE Primary, agrees that their new library spaces – two small rooms due to restrictions in school layout – allow children to feel a sense of awe, and that this sense of respect for the space and books spills over into a more motivated school of children ready to learn.

All children deserve to love books. Our young people deserve the best library space that we can design for them. As Clare Talbot, Headteacher for Benwick Primary School says, 'Our library will be a different world for our pupils to disappear into, but one that's safe and reliable and always there for them.'

Based on our experience, take these steps when creating a library:

- Where is the best site for it?
- Be sure to cull unloved books
- Display books so children can see front covers and not just spines – rotate the books on display
- Flexibility and mobility of furniture is key
- The Clever Classrooms report found the use of colour has a curvilinear impact – don't have too much or too little colour
- Think about sightlines and routes when placing furniture
- Enjoy the process

To find out more about Cressida Cowell's **Life-changing Libraries** campaign visit the **BookTrust** website [here](#).



**Catherine Millar** is a former assistant head teacher and reading consultant. You can follow her on Twitter [@allicatski](#) and check out her website [here](#).

# Poetry By Heart



**Julie Blake** of **Poetry By Heart** explains how the competition has been re-imagining the children's poetry anthology for the digital age

My lifelong love of children's poetry anthologies started with a treasured, hard-won copy of the **Puffin Book of Children's Verse** when I was about 8 years old but to cut a long story short, since 2012 I have co-directed **Poetry By Heart**. This is a [poetry speaking competition](#) for schoolchildren supported by a website with poems and resources for teaching and learning about poetry. The poems are curated, edited and mediated in the form of digital anthologies. But what does it mean to create a born-digital anthology? In exploring how we have resolved the issues so far, you can freely browse our Timeline Anthologies and other Showcase poetry collections at [poetrybyheart.org.uk](#).

## Digital possibilities

It is perhaps a little obvious to say that the linear sequence, limited content and weighable materiality of the printed book is quite different from the global, weightless mesh of interconnected threads of a website. But it's more complex when you are looking at the practical ramifications for a digital children's poetry anthology.

First, it's almost impossible *not* to include pictures, audio and video. But it's much easier to drop individual pictures into page blocks than it is to create the beautifully illustrated colour pages of traditional children's poetry anthologies. We made the Timeline Anthologies visual through the use of licensed reproductions of paintings, drawings or photographs of the poets. This had pedagogical purposes too: we could represent poetry as the creative work of real people and as an artform connected to other artforms. We added audio through licensed links to Poetry Archive recordings of poets and we added video clips of young people performing poems in the **Poetry By Heart** competitions (with parental consent). The technical ease of adding videos to a carousel enables users to watch one performance after another of the same poem and to see poetry performance as an embodied mode of literary appreciation (an important idea developed in other contexts by Professor David Fuller).

We thought hard about the mesh of interconnection and its double-edged potential for deepening reading and distracting reading. We erred on the side of deepening. The poems link to each other simply through their position on the digital timeline and a small set of thematic tags. The poems can link outwards too: through links licensed by Oxford University Press to the Dictionary of National Biography, word histories in the **Oxford English Dictionary**, and original spelling versions of Shakespeare's Sonnets. The latter are also supported by licensed links to British Library facsimiles of the 1609 first edition. The contextual links offer greater depth without distracting from the encounter with the poem. Parsimonious linkage also works in a mundane way, saving some of the inevitable work of fixing broken links.

## The anthology as genre

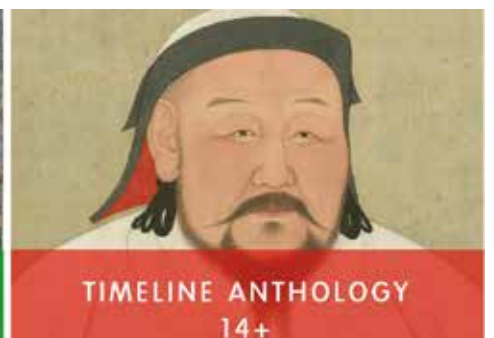
The second issue is what happens to a historic print genre that has been evolving [since 1557](#) when it is remediated for digital use. How do you navigate an environment in which web users expect *everything* to be available? The accessibility of the digital domain makes it possible for everyone to be an anthology editor, commonly in the form of personal poetry blogs, and no-one, as when multiple users source and upload poems to vast ungated repositories. But while these are interesting phenomena, they are not the same as anthologies carefully curated by poets and educators with deep knowledge of poetry, curriculum and children and young people.

The **Poetry By Heart** Timeline Anthologies and showcase collections have benefited from the editorial expertise of poets Andrew Motion and Jean Sprackland, children's poetry experts at Cambridge University, Professor Morag Styles and David Whitley, and my encyclopaedic knowledge of [poetry in the school curriculum](#) and school anthologies. Teachers value that curation for different reasons – not having to wade through infinite possibilities, not having to worry about copyright and accuracy issues, and being able to trust that the poems are broadly suitable for their pupils. They also value having the pedagogical framing they are used to from printed school anthologies in the form of notes about poets and poems, and activities to build on in developing lessons. To see a poem with all this framing, in the 11+ Timeline Anthology, Mary Coleridge's ['The Witch'](#) is a useful example. What is not visible is the amount of staff time in digital content management, very precise editorial writing and the (very nice) work developing and maintaining external content partnerships. It's certainly not easier to produce a digital anthology.

## Choosing children's poetry

Poetry anthologies are often derided by literary purists as being substandard by comparison with single author volumes, though they are perennially popular with publishers and readers. As well as supporting readers with a broad, general and perhaps untutored interest in poetry, the anthology has its own pleasures - unexpected juxtapositions, finding old friends and discovering new treasures. But anthologists tend to follow anthologists and it's very easy for the same few poems by the same poets to dominate. In creating the [7+](#) and [11+](#) Timeline Anthologies for **Poetry By Heart** we set out to re-stock the gene pool of children's poetry anthologies. With no time to go back to original sources ourselves, we drew on the work of three pioneering anthologists of children's poetry.

The first two anthologists are Karen L. Kilcup and Angela Sorby, Literature professors at universities in the United States. Their





**FREE**  
Free curated collections of poems for young people 7+, 11+, 14+, 16+



**FREE**  
Free resources for teaching and learning about poetry

**FREE**  
Free-to-enter national poetry speaking competition with a chance to perform at Shakespeare's Globe, London



phenomenal work of literary recovery, *Over the River and Through the Wood*, is an anthology of 19th-century poems for American children that appeared in magazines and collections that are little known today. From this we sourced new poems by poets we already knew such as Laura Richards' *'Howl about an Owl'* and Ella Wheeler Wilcox's *'The Story of Grumble Tone'*. We sourced poems by poets that were new to us – Gertrude Heath's *'What the Fly Thinks'*, Margaret McBride Hoss's *'The Land where the Taffy Birds Grow'* and E. Pauline Johnson's *'Lullaby of the Iroquois'*. Many of these poems were immediately chosen by children for the competition and spoken with great relish.

The second source we used was **The Golden Slippers**, an anthology edited for black children in the United States by Harlem Renaissance poet, author and friend of Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps. We included simple fun poems like *'Bats'* by Mary Effie Lee Newsome, editor of the children's section of the hugely influential *The Crisis* magazine; Georgia Douglas Johnson's *'I've learned to sing a song of hope'* became a lockdown anthem as we taught PGCE trainees to recite it in our workshop program last year, and we would gladly include Langston Hughes's entire oeuvre. Teachers and young people tell us of their surprise and a delight it is to find historic black poets – though the sepia photographs don't always make those identities evident.

When we started **Poetry By Heart** we asked our American counterparts at **Poetry Out Loud** to give us one piece of advice. They said "don't do a print anthology" on the basis that once it's

printed, you can't change it. We love the capacity of the digital anthology for change but our next challenge is to think about what the born-digital anthology might mean for new kinds of printed anthology.

If you would like to know more about anything mentioned in this article, please get in touch via [info@poetrybyheart.org.uk](mailto:info@poetrybyheart.org.uk) or @poetrybyheart.



**Dr Julie Blake** is Director of **Poetry By Heart** which she founded with Sir Andrew Motion in 2012. In this role she curates digital poetry anthologies and resources for children and young people to choose poems, learn them by heart and perform them aloud, and she organises the annual **Poetry By Heart** poetry speaking competition for schools.

# The Power of Pictures

An **Education Endowment Foundation** evaluation of **CLPE's Power of Pictures** project has revealed that using picture books in primary schools, and allowing drawing into the learning process, improves writing and reading skills in primary age children. **Charlotte Hacking** describes the project and its results.

As a class teacher, school leader and lover of children's literature, I've always been aware of the transformative nature of picture books on children of all ages. In too many instances these are seen by adults as a step up into reading novels, but they are a sophisticated genre of literature in their own right.

Far from being the easy option, visual texts challenge readers in more and different ways than print alone. Reading pictures is just as complex, perhaps more complex, than reading print. In a world that relies increasingly on visual means of communication, it's vital that children of all ages are able to use a wide variety of reading skills and strategies to construct meaning from a combination of words and images; and that texts and reading approaches equip them with the skills necessary to be visually and critically literate, and to navigate such a world successfully. Work with picture books paves the way for this, and allows children of all ages to gain a greater sense of satisfaction, enjoyment and stimulation from reading.

Six years ago, I was lucky enough to meet award-winning children's author and illustrator Ed Vere. We realised we had a shared passion for the importance and value of visual literacy for children; understanding the meaning that is held, and being able to create meaning, in illustrations and images. From this conversation came **The Power of Pictures**, a training programme designed to help teachers use picture books to understand the value of illustration to communicate and shape ideas for writing, and to develop meaningful relationships between authors and schools. With support from Arts Council England, the programme grew over time and now involves ten other authors including [Benji Davies](#), [Alexis Deacon](#), [Mini Grey](#), [Chris Haughton](#), [Tim Hopgood](#), and [Viviane Schwarz](#).

Over 7,000 children from 318 schools across the UK have taken part in the training since it began. They have learnt how to become more visually literate and to analyse the messages communicated in texts and images in picture books, and how to create and shape their own narratives in words and pictures, in ways that they can easily replicate in the classroom.

The results have been remarkable. Dr Sue Horner and Dr Janet White were our first external evaluators and helped us to shape the programme, and in 2017 the programme was chosen to be part of the **Education Endowment Foundation** and **Royal Society of Arts Learning About Culture** trial, focussing on the impact on Year 5



Illustrating a spread

teachers and children. The evaluation found that the visual element of this programme particularly attracted learners who traditionally have difficulties engaging in literacy activities. Teachers noted the high levels of engagement with a picture book and the depth of discussion children had around them.

Texts such as [Alexis Deacon's Croc and Bird](#) have allowed children to have rich and nuanced discussions around complex themes such as nature and nurture, what it means to be brothers, being forced to make choices and what it feels like to be depressed, anxious or lonely. With older children, their extended life experiences meant that they could make connections based on personal experiences that they would not have done when they were younger.

[Benji Davies' Grandad's Island](#) also provided some incredible insights into how children's depth of comprehension changes as they grow older and gain life experience. When studied across the primary years, the younger children of 3-6 years old took the story at face value, thinking that Grandad went on a magical adventure with his grandson Syd, relocating to a tropical island. As children from 7-11 engaged with the book, more of them made the connections with the possibility of Grandad suffering from dementia, an illness many of the children had direct experience of, and that the story was, in fact, a metaphor for Grandad's death.

Teachers noted the impact on children's language, vocabulary and comprehension skills when they actively taught the skills of reading pictures and opened up time for talking about picture books. Children were able to make connections, draw comparisons within and between texts and could evidence higher order reading skills such as inference, deduction and justifying opinions with evidence from the text and real life. This was true for all children, no matter how their previous ability had been judged.

Simon Smith, headteacher at East Whitby Primary Academy observed: 'The developing understanding of how picture books work and how illustrators actively make decisions has led to children digging much more deeply into the story. The increasing understanding that the illustrator is an author has led to in-depth discussions around authorial intent. Pupils' increased confidence in expressing



Creating and editing text



Storyboard creation



Impact of close reading

understanding and a willingness to challenge ideas has impacted in ways we did not imagine. They have an increasing vocabulary and language to share their ideas.'

What's more, children's reading also had impact on their writing. The complete and easily accessible narratives in picture books gave them a real understanding of story structure, and incorporating illustration into the writing process supported children's writing self-efficacy and creativity.

During the training programme, the teachers and pupils worked directly with the author/illustrators, learning how they create meaning in their illustration and talking about specific techniques that help them imbue an extra layer of storytelling in the images, such as how they decide on layout, composition, colour palette and perspective and how this works beyond the words on the page. As Ed Vere reflects, 'Drawing is thinking. Drawing allows ideas to start growing inside a child's head before they've written a single word.'

Children were able to use illustration to create characters, settings and explore story ideas and to plot the big shapes of a narrative before pacing and adding detail, drawing on the ideas they had seen in published picture books. They were able to storyboard their ideas, just as a real picture book writer would do, and gain response to their writer along the way, as an author/illustrator would do with an art director or editor.

By the end of the project, every child had made their own unique picture book narrative, being able to follow the process a real author/illustrator would do, with all its challenges and successes. As one child remarked, 'I thought that it was very interesting to actually make a picture book myself and some of the challenges were getting the right amount of pages and planning what to draw on those pages, but overall I really enjoyed it.'

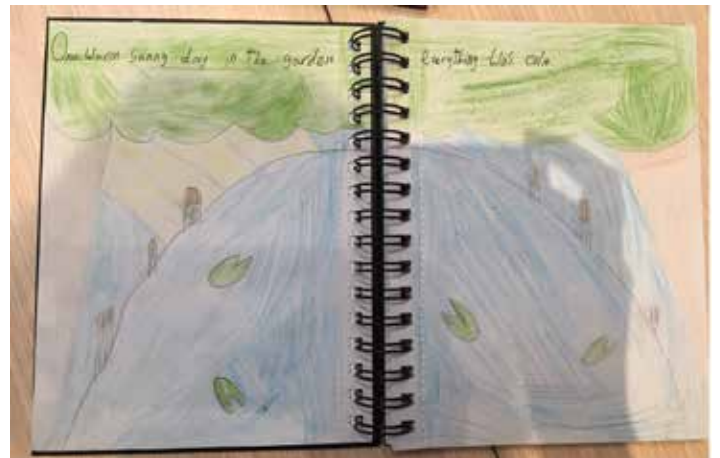


Impact of illustration



Impact of making picturebooks

Vinny Dawson, a project teacher at Harrow Gate Academy commented, '**The Power of Pictures** has not only developed my career immensely, but the effect it has on pupils is immeasurable. Even the most reluctant pupils began to find writing and reading pleasurable and rewarding. Examples of the most beautiful, thought-provoking and astonishing pieces of learning were produced as a result of the programme. I highly recommend the programme and its benefits to anyone and any school looking for an effective way to enhance their English curriculum.'



Finished book

Browse the **Power of Pictures** books, author videos and teaching resources on [CLPE's website](#).

Join project co-creators Ed Vere and Charlotte Hacking for training in the **Power of Pictures at CLPE** in January.

[Summary of key findings from the Power of Pictures Evaluation Report, EEF 2021:](#)

- Pupils who received the **Power of Pictures** (PoP) programme had, on average, higher writing scores (equivalent to one month of additional progress) as compared to children in the control group. Children eligible for free school meals (FSM) also made one additional month's progress.
- Children had higher writing self-efficacy and writing creativity (ideation) scores than those from schools in which the programme was not taught.
- The visual element of this programme attracted learners who traditionally have difficulties engaging in literacy activities.
- Teachers reported high levels of engagement with the programme, not only from the pupils and themselves, but also from the senior leadership team (SLT) at their schools.



**Charlotte Hacking** is Central Learning Programmes Leader at **CLPE**. Prior to that she was a teacher and senior leader and taught across the primary years. Charlotte led and developed the **CLPE's Power of Poetry** project, designed to highlight the importance of poetry as a vehicle for improving children's engagement in and enjoyment of reading and creative writing in schools.

# Windows into illustration: John Broadley

John Broadley was one of five debut picture book illustrators shortlisted for the **2021 Klaus Flugge Prize** for most exciting newcomer to picturebook illustration. He uses intricate, detailed pen and ink illustrations, alive with texture and detail and with echoes of Eric Ravilious. In this article, John describes his approach and his overnight success.

I got into children's illustration quite recently, having originally graduated from university in the 1990s. I'd been illustrating in my spare time whilst holding down a full-time job working a nightshift for a media monitoring company. When I left the job in 2019, after over twenty years, the same week Pavilion contacted me to enquire if I would be interested in illustrating a book about people who worked nights – a happy coincidence which seemed fated!

When I saw Mick Jackson's manuscript for the book which would become **While You're Sleeping**, I was instantly inspired. It reminded me of WH Auden's commentary on the GPO documentary, *Night Mail*, and I was already seeing images in my head of people at work in the sorting office, or baking bread, or delivering items.

My work is very detailed and also quite naive in its style. I deliberately flatten perspectives or use exaggerated viewpoints. Looking back on books I used to enjoy as a child, I remembered staring into drawings by Tolkien, following the roads he drew into the distance and observing the detail, and I wanted to bring some of the same appeal into my own drawings.

I work almost exclusively in black and white ink on paper. I use cheap A4 lined paper which I glue together to form bigger sheets, rather than buying drawing paper. There are many advantages of working like this; being thinner, I like the way the paper absorbs the ink, and the lines provide a guide which helps with both scale and keeping the horizontal constant. I use a dip pen but only after I have drawn out straight lines and curves with rulers and stencils



using a sharpie or rollerball. I like the contrast between hand-made marks and straight edges or industrially created pattern. There is a lot of pattern in my drawings which is mixed between being hand-rendered and collaged. For collage elements, such as brickwork, foliage in trees, tarmac, I create sheets of texture by 'sampling' marks found in newspapers and magazines (like rows of dots, woodgrain etc) and repeating them onto A4 pages which are printed out and then cut into the drawings. If I'm really in a rush to complete a job I can do this digitally, but I prefer to have a physical original drawing, even though the end result becomes digitised.

My original drawings are usually too big to fit on my A3 scanner, meaning that they have to be scanned in several pieces and be painstakingly fitted together in Photoshop, a very awkward task especially on detailed drawings. From the scan I make a completely black line art file and I then add layers of colour underneath. I sometimes cut out elements of the line and colour the drawing itself if I want to create a softer effect for trees or water.





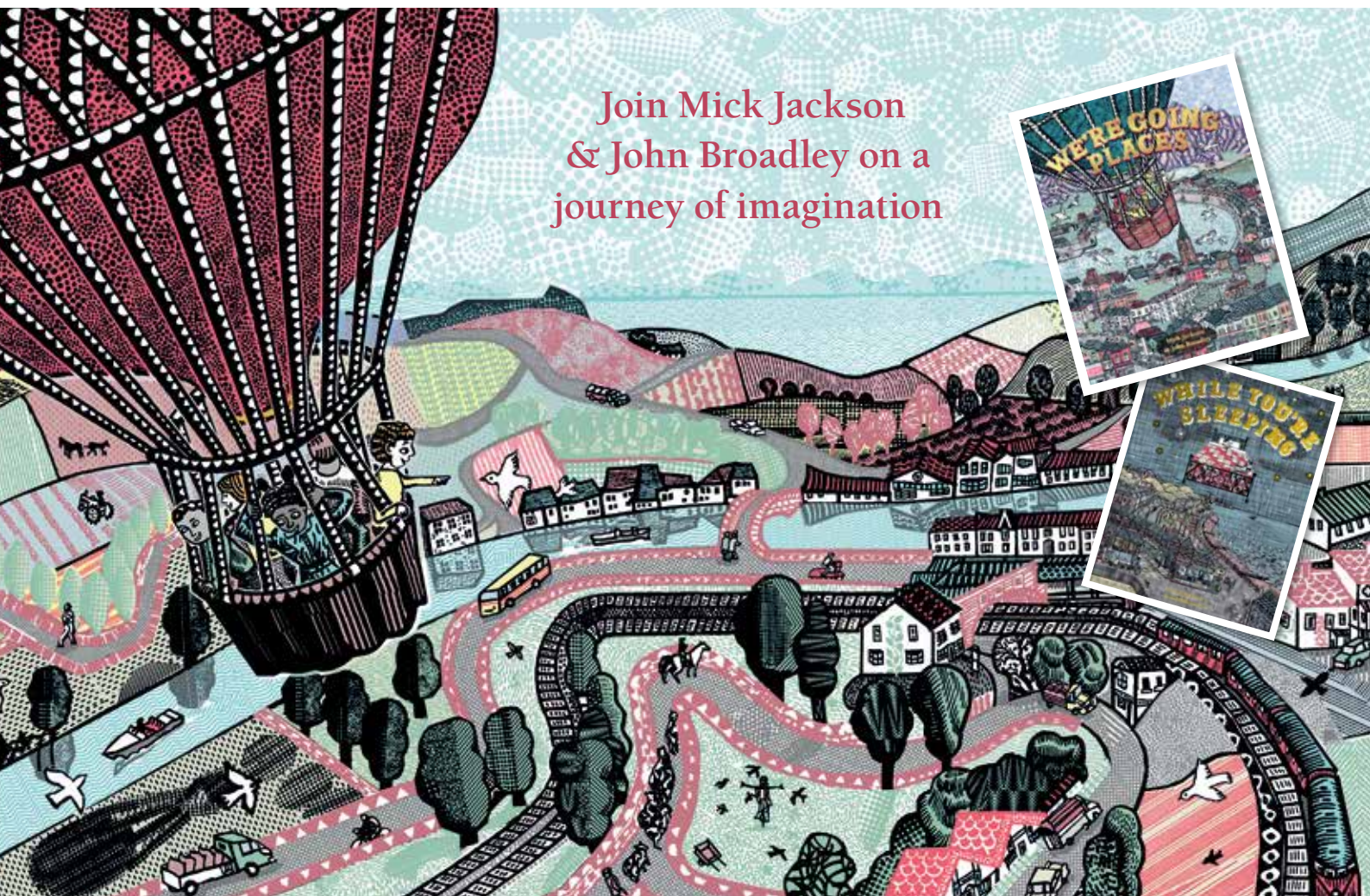


I worked closely with the team at Pavilion Books throughout the process, particularly on the covers of the two books. The first book featured a boy asleep in his bed as it flies over a night-time town. For the second book, we decided to keep an aerial view, but this time, there are children in a hot air balloon who are looking all around at the view around them. I'd learned a few tricks since doing the first cover, which required quite a lot of re-drawing to get the layout correct, so for this image I drew the balloon with the children separately to the landscape, to allow me to reposition it as needed. The publishers liked the way I had disguised the barcode on the first book (by putting it on the side of a delivery truck) and so

this time I incorporated both the code and logo on the side of a lighthouse which appears in the foreground on the back cover.

One of the nicest things about making books for children has been in seeing a positive response online, especially when people have posted photographs of their children copying my pictures – high praise indeed!

**While You're Sleeping** and **We're Going Places** are both written by Mick Jackson and illustrated by John Broadley and published by Pavilion Children's Books, £12.99 hbk.



Join Mick Jackson  
& John Broadley on a  
journey of imagination

# Authorgraph

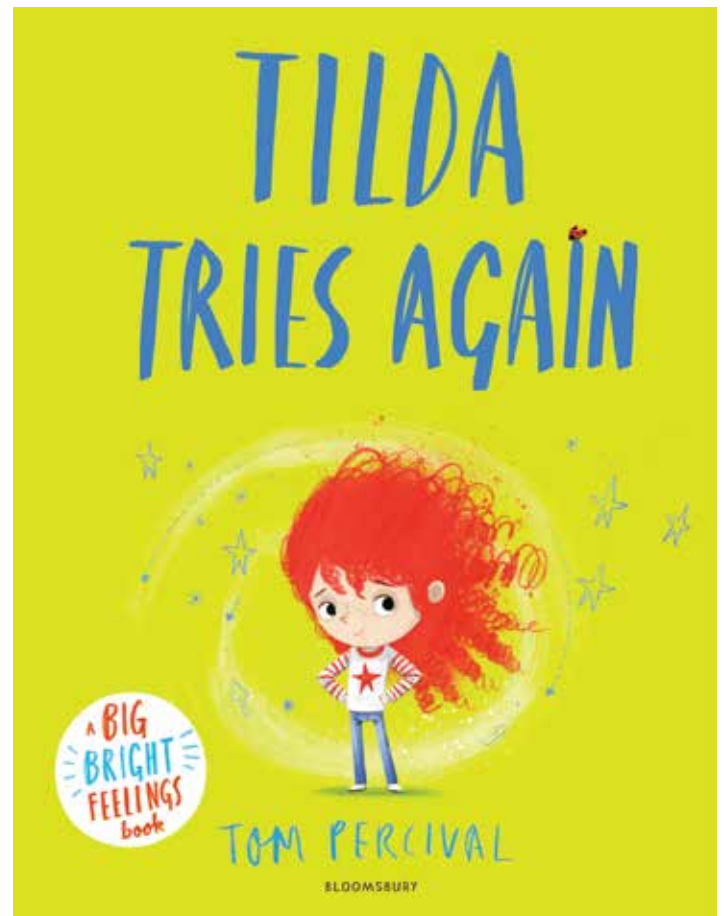
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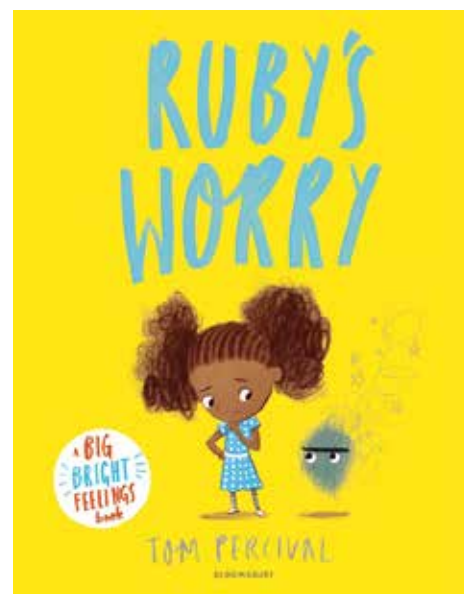
**Tom Percival**  
interviewed by  
Ferelith Hordon

*'I don't consider myself an illustrator and I don't consider myself a writer. I make things, I have ideas and then I work out what I think is the best medium to communicate that idea...'*

I am talking to Tom Percival, author and illustrator of the **Big Bright Feelings** series published by Bloomsbury, the latest of which is **Tilda Tries Again**, as well as about his picture books, including **The Invisible** and longer texts such as **The Dream Team: A Case of the Jitters**. Tom has been making books for long time now, working out what he wants, taking time in the creation. The result – well crafted, enjoyable books that make their mark.

Growing up in Mid-Wales in the shadow of the Stiperstones ridge, friends lived some distance away. Left to his own devices, Tom made the most of a considerable freedom to wander but also books, making many visits to the mobile library. Perhaps not surprisingly, the stories he was drawn to were those that captured the wildness and slight danger of life, reflecting the landscape around him. In fact, the first books he remembers loving was the **Tim and Tobias** series created by Sheila McCullagh; he was able to relate to the characters and there was that whiff of danger in the stories that he loved. He also drew. 'I was happiest when I was making things', he says. Though he did do a GNVQ in art, he quickly realised that would not lead to a career so turned to Graphic Design working for an advertising company where he became interested in video work, computer animation and also music production. Does the energy and sense of design that are part of these disciplines now inform his work in picture books? He agrees, 'It all feeds into itself. Principles of narrative apply whether you are talking about song structure ... or a picture book. It's all storytelling and you work with whatever tools there are.'





After leaving the world of advertising, he became attracted to the world of the graphic novel. It was where he saw himself going. Joining the HarperCollins design team, he had the chance to create the cover design for Derek Landy's first **Skulduggery Pleasant** novel. It was a success, and he went on to create the cover designs for the whole series. This success led to interest in his work. He had an idea for a picture book character and so **Tobias and the Super Spooky Ghost Book** appeared; a picture book for which he wrote the text as well as creating the illustration. He still writes his own picture books. How does this work? Which comes first – the story or the illustration? It depends he says, sometimes it will be an image, sometimes the story he tells me. Each book has its own beginning.

Does he find the restrictions of the picture book format difficult? 'I am used to writing songs so used to trying to tell a story in three minutes', he explains. However, he has always written longer stories designed for a middle grade audience though as yet unpublished. He confesses that at the present writing is fun while drawing seems like work – he can feel frustrated in trying to get his vision onto the page – perhaps because for a long time illustration has been his career. He is deprecating about his work but the care he takes is very apparent.

Where did the **Big Bright Feelings** series come from with their very particular design? He agrees they have become a 'brand' and as such have a certain framework. This he feels makes them reassuring and accessible to those who need them and look for them. 'Essentially I identify a challenge that a child or indeed an adult might face and then explore that challenge hopefully in an interesting and engaging way.' This results in the enjoyably fantastical element in these stories – Tilda's upside-down world, the real worry in **Ruby's Worry**, Norman's wings. His latest **Tilda Tries Again** is a direct response to the pandemic. He wanted to reflect how for children their world changed radically through no fault and desire of their own; how difficult change like that can be. However he is very keen not to be too literal. It is interesting to learn that he did not intend to create a series: 'Generally, I don't want to pigeonhole myself'. It was after the

appearance of **Perfect Norman**, that it gradually became clear his approach could be the basis for similar topics and he has number of ideas for future titles. 'I will keep creating these books as long as I feel there is a use for them.' Tom's concern for the child and their world is evident in his other books too, **The Invisible** for example, is quite different but still at its centre there is Tom's emphasis on children's understanding. 'I wanted to make the books reflective of the society in which we live. I want everyone to see themselves in the stories I make.'

Looking across the range of his titles it is clear how successful he has been in this aim.

#### Books mentioned

The **Big Bright Feelings** series is published by Bloomsbury Children's Books, £6.99 pbk each:

**Tilda Tries Again**, 978-1526612991

**Ruby's Worry**, 978-1408892152

**Meesha Makes Friends** 978-1526612953

**Perfectly Norman** 978-1408880975

**Ravi's Roar** 978-1408892183

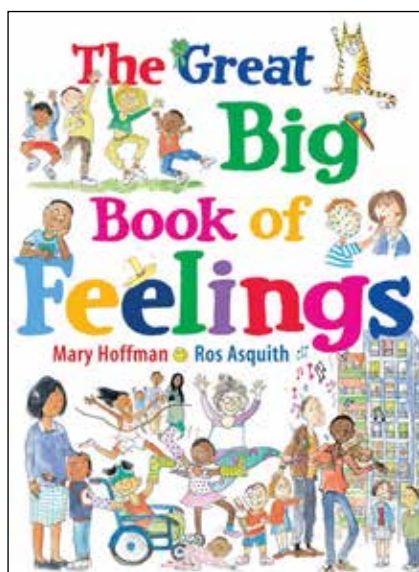
**The Invisible**, Simon and Schuster, 978-1471191305, £6.99 pbk



Ferelith Hordon is editor of **Books for Keeps**.

# Ten of the Best Books About Emotions

*How do you feel?* **Books for Keeps** expert reviewer and founder of the website *Healthy Books*, **Elizabeth Schlenker** introduces ten of the best books about emotions, the good and the bad.



## **The Great Big Book of Feelings**

Mary Hoffman and Ros Asquith, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1847807588, £9.99 pbk

Literally a 'big book', this A4 size production has jolly pictures and integrated text covering seventeen different emotions, with the busy illustrations providing plenty of scope for discussion. Everyone is represented too with lots of children of colour as well as disabled kids. Great for schools where the large size will be useful in reading circles.



## **Say Goodbye ... Say Hello**

Cori Doerrfeld, Scallywag Press, 978-1912650439, £12.99 hbk

There are pluses and minuses to friendships, and best friends, Stella and Charlie learn all about the good and the bad bits. When Stella's goldfish dies, it is Charlie who provides comfort, and when

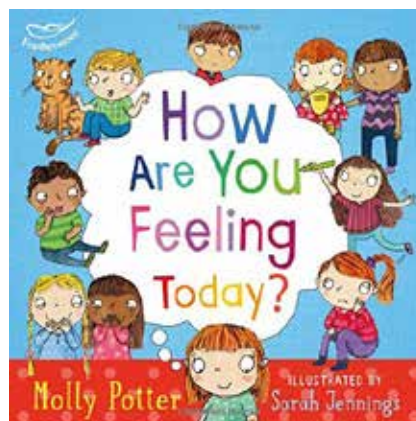
Charlie and his family must move far away, Stella learns that saying a sad goodbye can lead eventually to new friendships. Wonderful soft, chalky pictures full of bliss and fun as well as sorrow are a treat.



## **How Do YOU Feel?**

Anthony Browne, Walker, 978-1406347913, £5.99 hbk

A very special book for the very young about a small monkey and his feelings. Both text and illustration reflect the mood, the text by use of font size, boldness or italics, and the pictures in the use of colour. Some of the feelings are physical – hunger, etc. – and others are emotional – anger or guilt, for instance. Superb, as to be expected by this author/illustrator.



## **How Are You Feeling Today?**

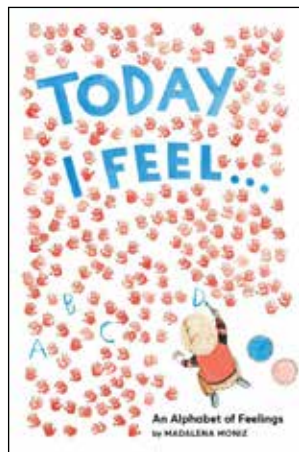
Molly Potter and Sarah Jennings, Featherstone Education, 978-1472906090, £10.99 hbk

Twelve different short chapters about twelve different emotions, both positive and negative, suggest coping strategies for each one, and the bright, double-page spreads show

children doing each of the activities suggested – walking in the park or running in place, for instance, might help those with anger issues. These suggestions are easily do-able and practical, and the book is both well-produced and realistic. I enjoyed the lovable cat on each page, who 'explains' what each feeling is like physically. Good information for parents is welcome as an addition.

**Elizabeth Schlenker** is a retired hospital librarian and school librarian. She runs the [Healthy Books](http://HealthyBooks.com) website which highlights books to help children deal with problems. It features 2,600 books in over 100 categories and sub-categories for children up to age 12.

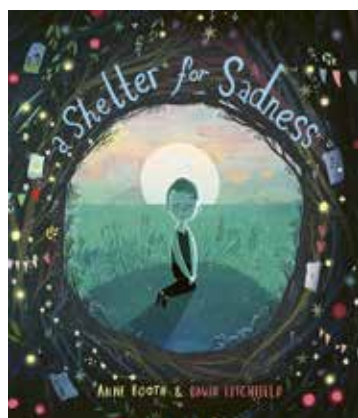
# 10



## Today I Feel... An Alphabet of Feelings

Madalena Moniz, Abrams,  
978-1419723247, £9.99 hbk

A nicely original idea for learning about both the alphabet and emotions at the same time. As there are twenty-six letters to be used, there are some 'unusual' emotions – Y for 'yucky', for instance, and Z for 'zzzzz', but this seems fair enough. Each two-page spread shows a beautifully illustrated letter on the left, with an equally beautiful picture of a child performing a task or emotion that reflects the given word – P for 'patience' and the child working on a puzzle. A very effective learning tool as well as a joy to behold.

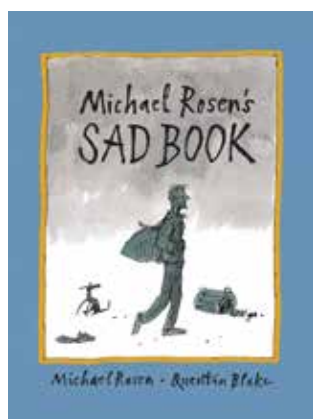


## A Shelter for Sadness

Anne Booth and David  
Litchfield, Templar,  
978-1787417212, £12.99 hbk

A lyrical and moving picture book wherein Sadness is a character in its own right, and, at the same time, is within the young lad who tells the story. He is seriously sad - about what we are not told - but he decides that the only way of handling his distress is to build a shelter for his sadness with specific requirements, where it will be safe.

Inspired by Etty Hillesum, a Holocaust survivor who coped with her grief in her writing, the intense emotions in both text and illustration make this a poignant book for everyone over nine or ten. Outstanding in every way.

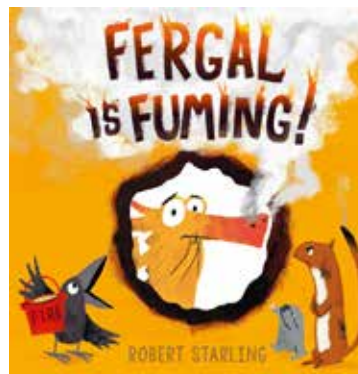


## Michael Rosen's Sad Book

Michael Rosen and Quentin Blake,  
Walker, 978-0744598988,  
£11.32 hbk

While this book has been in print since 2004, it never loses its impact and tenderness. Having lost both his nineteen-year-old son and his mother, Rosen writes about sadness with the perfect words that only a poet can summon to express himself. His coping strategies are here as well as his memories, and while one

may cry with him, one will also rejoice at his skill. Quentin Blake's illustrations are perfectly in context too, and this is a book that will appeal to everyone over about ten. Timeless.

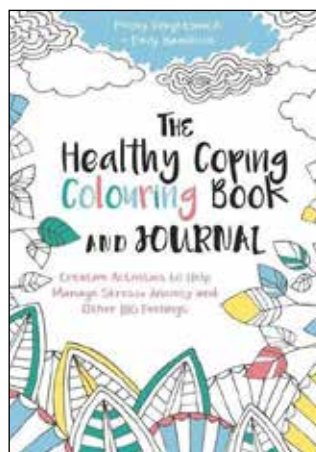


## Fergal is Fuming

Robert Starling, Andersen  
Press, 978-1783445905,  
£6.99 pbk

When Fergal fumes, dire things happen because Fergal is a dragon – a dragon with anger management issues, and whether he is melting the greens on his plate or burning down the goal posts in a match, the results are spectacular! Friends make themselves

scarce, and only his Mum can tell him he must learn control. Coping strategies are here, and the illustrations, full of colour, movement, and integrated text are huge fun. A funny story with a good moral that doesn't seem moral at all.

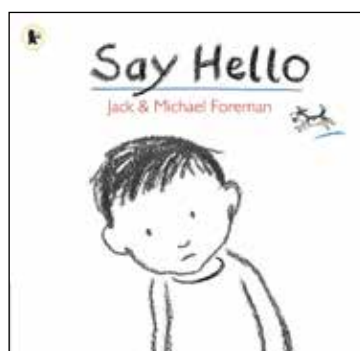


## The Healthy Coping Colouring Book and Journal

Pooky Knightsmith and  
Emily Hamilton, Jessica Kingsley,  
978-1785921391, £9.99 pbk

A self-help book for older kids, this nicely produced, fat paperback volume full of poems, aphorisms, suggestions of things to do when feeling low, and intricate line drawings to paint or crayon in, also includes lots of space for writing down one's thoughts and concerns. It should appeal to teenagers who

suffer from low self-esteem, mental health issues, or the kind of angst only they can experience; plus, it will give many hours of solitary pleasure.



## Say Hello

Jack and Michael Foreman,  
Walker, 978-1406313598,  
£10.99 hbk

In simple chalky line drawings in blue and black with the odd touch of red, this artless picture book tells of a boy and his dog who have been excluded by their friends and are lonely and sad. Written by Jack Foreman at the age of nine and his father,

Michael, both text and illustrations make the sadness palpable, but thankfully, there is a happy ending. Outstanding in its simplicity.

# Beyond the Secret Garden: On Values, Knowledge and the Imagination

For the latest in their **Beyond the Secret Garden** series and in the light of recent discussions, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** explore the notion of 'policing the imagination'.

The recent Twitter discussion relating to Kate Clanchy's **Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me** has had ramifications for writers, publishers, and readers of children's literature. As more and more people saw the examples of language used in the book to describe racially minoritised students, working class students and students with additional educational needs many people voiced concerns and criticisms of Clanchy's use of such language and how it reinforced racist, classist and ableist stereotypes.

**Some Kids** was afforded value in the publishing world. Not only was it published by prestigious publisher Picador, but the book was awarded **The Orwell Prize for Political Writing** in 2020. How does a book in which a writer frequently employs controversial and denigratory language come to be championed as a work of political acumen? What does this suggest about how writing is valued? Why did it take numerous criticisms voiced on Twitter for the author and the publisher to consider revising the language in the book?

**Some Kids** has a ringing endorsement from Philip Pullman on the cover. And Pullman was one of the most strident defenders of Clanchy on Twitter, at one point appearing to compare the women of colour who had tweeted criticisms of the book to ISIS and the Taliban. After Professor Sunny Singh, (organizer the **Jhalak Children's & YA Prize** for books by British/British resident BAME writers) shared a series of questions that writers might ask themselves about their writing, Pullman expressed a concern for 'policing the imagination'.

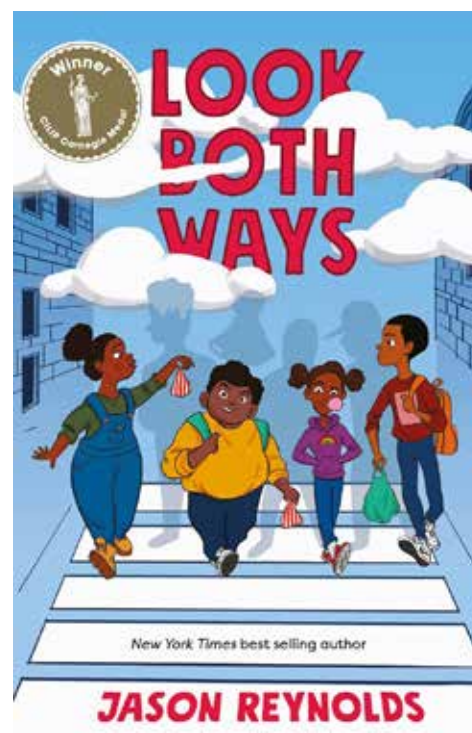
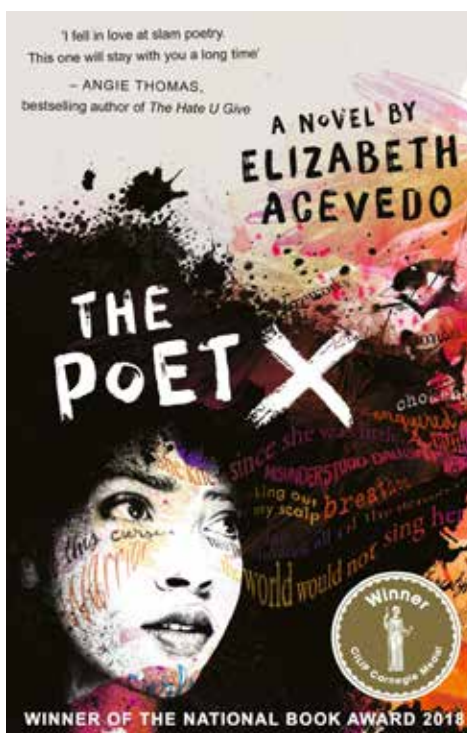
The notion of 'policing the imagination' is one worth exploring. This column regularly seeks to examine how the 'secret garden of children's literature' has so often been a space of exclusion as well as a space of nurture and adventure. Humphrey Carpenter begins **Secret Gardens – The Golden Age of Children's Literature** with the claim that 'Adult fiction sets out to portray and explain the world as it really is; books for children present it as it should be.' Whilst we may take issue with such a bold generalisation, many would see this

as a useful distinction. Yet it does raise questions about how rare it has been for writers of children's literature in Britain to imagine a world where people of colour exist in their own right. Why are so many of these ideal worlds devoid of people of colour? What does this suggest about the imagination of their creators? How does it limit the imagination of readers? Might they, like the child in Darren's essay in **The Good Immigrant**, conclude that 'stories have to be about white people?' Is this a form of 'policing the imagination'?

The depiction of racially minoritised people in British children's literature could be said to fall roughly into three historical stages. In the first, racially minoritised people are presented as sub-humans and primitives, counter-points to white protagonists. In the second, they appear as marginal characters or in allegorical form, or are written out of the narrative completely. In the third stage, racially minoritised people are presented as fully human characters with agency.

Roald Dahl's **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory** (1964) featured Oompa Loompas who are described and illustrated as African Pygmies. Later editions removed this reference to the Oompa Loompas being African. They were illustrated as white. In effect Dahl's re-write moved the book from an example of stage 1 to an example of stage 2 – references to 'tribe' and 'jungle' remained as racial connotations, but the characters were no longer overtly racialised as Black. Significantly, it came as a response to critiques and protests from the **NAACP** in the United States. Hugh Lofting, creator of the **Doctor Dolittle** books, faced similar criticism about racist stereotypes from the (again, American) **Council on Interracial Books for Children**; eventually, Lofting's son produced a revised version that attempted to remove stereotypes.

In 2017, the **CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals** launched a Diversity Review, chaired by Dr Margaret Casely-Hayford. **CILIP** stated that the review followed 'criticism of the 2017 Carnegie Medal Longlist as it included no Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME)



authors.' Dr Casely-Hayford made ten clear recommendations in the final report. Both of us were invited to join an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion panel chaired by Jake Hope, along with poet Nyandovah Foday, writer Peter Kalu and academic Dr Melanie Ramdarshan Bold. The report of the review was published in 2018. Amongst other things **CILIP** considered how the judging panel, the award criteria, and children's publishing itself could be improved by further developing the knowledge and understanding required to make the best possible judgements about children's literature in all its diversity.

Since then, two of the three winners of the Carnegie Medal - Elizabeth Acevedo (for **The Poet X**) and Jason Reynolds (for **Look Both Ways**) - have been writers of colour. This is in contrast to the previous eighty-three years of the award where no writer of colour was ever awarded the prize. One way to make sense of this change would be to view the review and subsequent work as expanding the knowledge and understanding of how we make sense of, and attribute value to, literature - and in doing so, expanding the imagination.

Criticisms from the reading public have influenced other changes in children's publishing - the results may not always have been huge improvements. After years of criticism of Enid Blyton's use of golliwog characters, Hodder Children's Books published an updated version of **Noddy Goes To School** in 2016. The golliwog on the cover was no longer shown, suggesting that the publisher now understood the long history of golliwogs as racist caricatures of Black people. However, the decision to replace it with a monkey did raise questions as to whether anyone in a decision-making position at Hodder Children's Books was aware of the long history of invoking monkeys as racist abuse of Black people. Either they did not know this widespread racist trope, or they did not see it as relevant to what they were doing.

Pullman appears anxious that advocating for a more thoughtful engagement with our storytelling practices - including asking ourselves if we have the requisite knowledge - amounts to 'policing the imagination'. We think this anxiety is misplaced. Context matters. This debate comes at a time when two of the highest profile writers for children - David Baddiel and David Walliams - are former television celebrities who saw no problem with blacking up for laughs, or in the case of Walliams in leaning heavily on racist and ableist tropes in his writing for children.

Our imaginations will not be limited by an increase in knowledge. Indeed, knowledge is the very thing the imagination requires in order to grow creatively and ethically. The latest **Reflecting Realities** report (2020) argues that both lived experience and careful research on behalf of writers, editors and publishers matter, because 'attention to detail also provides the reader with beautiful representations of everyday, genuine, intimate moments' (13) and 'well researched, carefully considered and creative [writing] provides a valuable counter-narrative to either reductive, problematic, fetishised portrayals or outright erasure of ethnic minorities' (14).

A.M. Dassu's **Boy Everywhere**, winner of the **2021 Little Rebels Award**, is a recent example of a story that takes the reader on an imaginative journey that was made possible by Dassu's meticulous research as well as her carefully crafted prose. In his essay *Magic Carpets* included in **Daemon Voices**, Pullman argues persuasively that it is a writer's responsibility to be attentive to the language they use. He suggests we should 'take pride in getting things right' (p10). It would be an ethically curious position to consider this important when considering the difference between 'may' and 'might' but not when considering whether our language choices are drawn from long-established racist discourses.

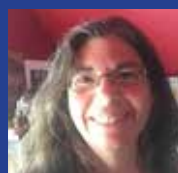
In **Reading into Racism**, written in 1985, Gillian Klein argues that charges of racism continue to raise defensiveness in white people because, 'change is uncomfortable and may appear threatening to their dominant position. The media offer reassurance that the campaign for greater social equality is marshalled by a few 'extremists' or is the province of one small political group' (142). The media may have since expanded to include Twitter, but little else has changed in



this regard. Indeed, social critique continues to be characterised in much of the traditional media as a 'mob' of people of colour (again, the denial of individual agency) being antagonistic towards writers and publishers. Few pause to consider why this dynamic seems to repeat itself. Why do so many of the main protagonists in publishing lack the knowledge and imagination required for a literature where people of colour are held in dignity?

#### Further Reading

- Carpenter, H (1985) **Secret Gardens: The Golden Age of Children's Literature**. Houghton Mifflin.
- CILIP Diversity Review**, Final Report
- Chetty, D (2016) 'You Can't Say That! Stories Have To Be About White People' in Shukla, N (ed) **The Good Immigrant**. Unbound
- CLPE Reflecting Realities Reports**
- Dassu, A.M. (2020) **Boy Everywhere**. Old Barn Books.
- Klein, G (1985) **Reading Into Racism: Bias In Children's Literature and Learning Materials**. Routledge.
- Pullman, P (2017) **Daemon Voices: Essays On Storytelling**. David Fickling Books



**Karen Sands-O'Connor** is the British Academy Global Professor for Children's Literature at **Newcastle University**. Her books include **Children's Publishing and Black Britain 1965-2015** (Palgrave Macmillan 2017).



**Darren Chetty** is a teacher, doctoral researcher and writer with research interests in education, philosophy, racism, children's literature and hip hop culture. He is a contributor to **The Good Immigrant**, edited by Nikesh Shukla and the author, with Jeffrey Boakye, of **What Is Masculinity? Why Does It Matter? And Other Big Questions**. He tweets at @rapclassroom.

# Bookbird: A Flight through Time

Valerie Coghlan

**Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature** is the quarterly journal of **IBBY** (The **International Board on Books for Young People**). Over a period of almost 70 years it has evolved from a modest bulletin promoting **IBBY**'s overseas activities into a substantial journal containing a mix of peer reviewed articles, articles about authors, illustrators, translators, publishers, features on reading promotion activities around the world, **IBBY** news, reviews of scholarly literature and reading recommendations for young readers, and much more.

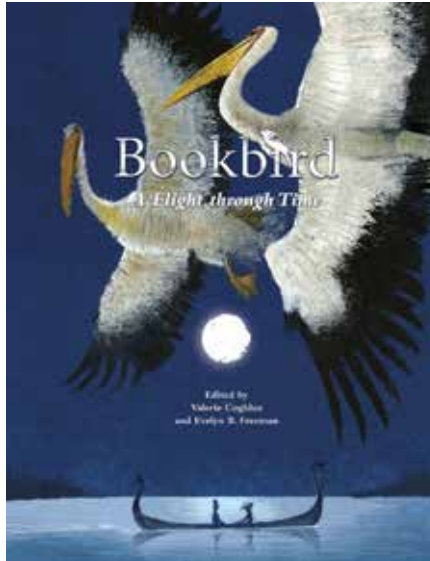
In 2017 the **Bookbird, Inc. Board** invited Evelyn Freeman and me to compile and edit a publication about the history of **Bookbird**. We set to work, deciding that a chronological approach would make most sense, and that the contributors would mainly be drawn from those who had been involved with the journal's development since its founding in 1957. These included past editors, **Bookbird** presidents, members of the **Bookbird** board and **IBBY**'s former and current Executive Directors. Initially the publication was to be 100 pages long, in A4 format and with a high level of visual content. However, as the contributions arrived it was soon clear that there was even more to the story of **Bookbird** than initially realised and the final publication has grown to 146 pages.

While our focus would be on **Bookbird**, the book would also be a medium through which to tell the story of **IBBY** itself and other organizations which operate under the **IBBY** umbrella, such as the **Hans Christian Andersen Awards** and other **IBBY** awards and projects, and the International Youth Library in Munich where **Bookbird** was first published.

The International Youth Library was the first institution founded by Jella Lepman, a German Jewish woman who returned to Germany in 1945 with the American troops to help with reparation work following World War Two. Lepman was immediately struck by the desperate plight of Germany's children, many of whom had lost their families, their homes and childhood itself. She resolved to make helping these children her priority—already they were receiving food and clothing from aid organizations, so what could she do? She observed that 'colour and beauty' were two things missing from their lives, and drawing on her background as journalist and author, she determined to make books accessible to these children. Using her contacts, she got in touch with a number of countries, soliciting books for an international exhibition. The resulting contributions formed a series of exhibitions which toured German cities and were visited by children and adults in great numbers. Eventually a permanent home for the ever increasing stock of books was found in an old mansion in Munich. This became the renowned International Youth Library (now in Schloss Blutenburg on the outskirts of Munich).

Lepman was determined, and she enlisted others, many prominent in the world of children's books. Together they formed **IBBY**, and as **IBBY** activities grew, **UNESCO** asked Lepman to work with developing countries to promote reading and libraries. She responded positively, and **Bookbird** was first published in 1957 to record these international reading projects.

**Bookbird: A Flight through Time** opens with an article chronicling Lepman's return to Germany and her activities until her death in Zurich in 1970. In interviews, both Anne Pellowski from the USA, a Fulbright Scholar in Munich in the 1950s, and Leena Maissen, **IBBY**'s



first Executive Director, recall their memories of Jella Lepman, depicting her as a forceful personality who got things done.

This is evident in an article about the early days of **Bookbird**, and the struggles to keep it going. The story is picked up by successive **Bookbird** editors, who tease out the growth of the journal, its success in attracting an international audience, and some tussles that ensued when finance became a big problem, and the management of the journal moved from direct control by **IBBY** to governance by an independent management board. This also gave the editors more autonomy, while remaining true to the ideals of **IBBY**.

Successive **Bookbird** board presidents also had a role in **Bookbird**'s production, ensuring that professional publishing houses managed the logistics, giving certainty to a regular

publication cycle. Currently Johns Hopkins University Press in Baltimore, USA manages the production aspects of **Bookbird**.

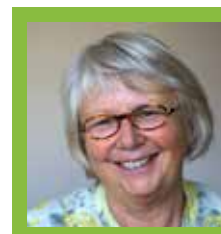
As articles from our 22 contributors arrived, it became evident that **Bookbird**'s independence was respected by those involved with **IBBY**. The journal was able to stand apart from political skirmishes which arose as **IBBY** expanded, including the controversy arising in the 1960s Cold War period when there was a bid for the Soviet Union to join **IBBY**. British **IBBY** withdrew its membership, concerned that **IBBY** would become embroiled in international tensions, but subsequently fears were allayed and Britain rejoined.

How to contain all of this, and in a way that would make interesting reading, was a conundrum at first. Eventually we settled on a plan of dividing the book into five sections, each introduced by an 'Overview' giving a synopsis of events in words and a photomontage, and concluding with a poem by an **Andersen Award** winner from the period.

An article about changing styles in **Bookbird** covers highlights fashions in print and design, emphasising the importance given to **Bookbird**'s visual presentation as well as its content. We followed by working with a skilful designer, giving our book high production values. Others contributed too, including Andersen winners Igor Oleynikov who provided a stunning cover and Katherine Paterson who wrote a generous foreword.

The many photographs throughout the publication, along with the articles, provide insights into the history of children's literature internationally. The volume concludes with a visual round-up of **IBBY**'s many reading promotion activities throughout the world, often in challenging areas, reminding us that the work of **IBBY** and **Bookbird** in bringing children and books together is needed just as much today as it was when Jella Lepman returned to Germany in 1945.

Copies of **Bookbird: A Flight through Time** may be purchased at the **IBBY** website: [www.ibby.org](http://www.ibby.org)



Valerie Coghlan, with Evelyn B. Freeman, is editor of **Bookbird: A Flight through Time**. Bookbird, Inc., 2021.



## 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.

**Diana Barnes** was a librarian for 20 years, mostly as a children's specialist, working in Kent, Herts, Portsmouth and Hampshire, and Lusaka (Zambia) with the British Council.

**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.

**Jane Churchill** is a children's book consultant.

**Stuart Dyer** is headteacher of a primary school in East Devon.

**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.

**Sarah Gallagher** is a headteacher and director of **Storyshack.org** [www.storyshack.org](http://www.storyshack.org)

**Ferelith Hordon** is a former children's librarian and editor of **Books for Keeps**

**Anne Horemans** is a secondary school librarian.

**Carey Fluker Hunt** is a writer and children's book consultant.

**Matthew Martin** is a primary school teacher.

**Sue McGonigle** is a Lecturer in Primary Education and Co-Creator of [www.lovelybooks.co.uk](http://www.lovelybooks.co.uk)

**Neil Philip** is a writer and folklorist.

**Margaret Pemberton** is a school library consultant and blogs at [margaretpemberton.edublogs.org](http://margaretpemberton.edublogs.org).

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

**Andrea Reece** is Managing Editor of **Books for Keeps**.

**Sue Roe** is a children's librarian.

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## Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant



**Grumpy Hat**

★★★★

Nicola Kent, Andersen Press, 26pp, 978 1 83913 036 6, £12.99 hbk

This story starts with a bang! Right on the title page, we see Ravi and his little sister having a fight over a toy truck, and Ravi breaking it with his foot in anger. Little sister cries, and Ravi stalks away saying, 'Everyone knows little sisters can be AN-NOY-ING.' Neither of them sleeps well, and the next morning Ravi finds that he is wearing a red Grumpy Hat. It won't come off, no matter how hard he pulls, and Dad, who does everything in the house, sweeping, cooking, and washing, has all sorts of ideas to help. Breakfast is good when people are grumpy, a warm bath can help too, and perhaps playing outside will do the trick. All these ideas help a bit, but indoors again, Ravi feels that the grumpy hat has now turned into a sad hat, and it still won't come off. In fact, it covers him completely, and he sits inside full of woe. When little sister starts using the hat as a road for her car, now repaired with string, Ravi realises that an apology is in order and the two of them are friends again. Out in the garden we see Ravi and little sister turning somersaults with 'happy socks' on. Charming story about anger and the sadness it can bring on, and the chalky, super-expressive pictures of the dog family do are very appealing. **ES**

**The Day Fin Flooded the World**

★★★★

Adam Stower, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978 17834 4654 4, £12.99 hbk

You'll likely find yourself giggling from the very first spread of this book. Fin is a forgetful character, of that there's no doubt. He forgets to brush his wild hair, leaves his school lunch box at home and even forgets to put his trousers on again when he comes home (presumably after PE). None of those make much difference to the big picture but one night, despite

having remembered to wash his face, brush his entire set of teeth and feed his fish, Fin forgets to unplug the basin and even worse, to turn off the tap. You can see pretty soon where this is going ... By morning the world is under water and no it's nothing to do with the climate crisis. Strangely though, following a knock on his door, Fin is hailed as a hero, certainly by all the fish that are now able to go anywhere and do all manner of new and exciting fun things.

Not so however by the birds and other land-dwelling animals and humans. For them things have taken a decided turn for the worse: they see the boy as anything but heroic. Now Fin is faced with a massive challenge: is this something he can fix?

To get the most from this story, young audiences will need to start right from the front endpapers and study them carefully all the way through to the final ones, both of which are assemblages of photographs - a before and after the flood. Each of Adam Stoker's spreads, be that a single scene or a sequence of small ones, invites contemplation and conjecture and all the while children will be rooting for a final positive outcome for the protagonist when he takes that deep breath and dives back into the water.

If you're ready for an action-packed adventure just grab your snorkel, don your flippers and plunge in. **JB**



**Mister Boo!**

★★★★

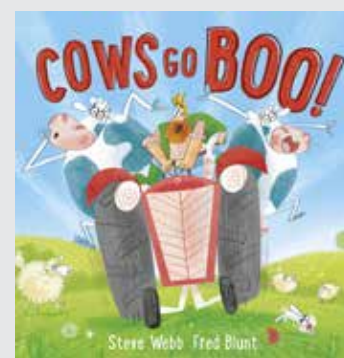
Joyce Dunbar, ill. Petr Horáček, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 4063 9568 6, £12.99 hbk

From the moment the mischievous black moggy pops his head from the box at his new home with Rosie, there's been nothing he likes more than to tease and surprise anything and anyone he encounters. He startles the mouse with a single pounce, flips the goldfish out of and back into their bowl with his over enthusiastic playing, and no matter the season, he finds something outdoors to enjoy.

Spring finds him at his most playful: he terrifies the fledglings as they learn to fly, sends the baby rabbits dashing this way and that and his frolicking causes the baby owls to need rescuing by their mother. Time passes until one winter the cat's sleeps become longer and when birdsong finally wakes him from his slumbers, Boo feels lethargic and completely lacking in his usual zest for life. Eventually managing to drag himself outside through the catflap, any attempts at startling the other animals are met with little or no response until he receives an unwelcome payback from a mother owl.

Pondering the loss of his playful pounce, Boo slinks miserably home, where a joyful Rosie greets him with a surprise. Perhaps this could offer just what Boo needs to help restore his spirits: without a doubt things are going to be different henceforward ...

Full of playful language, Joyce Dunbar's text, in combination with Petr Horáček's trademark mixed media, hugely expressive illustrations makes a captivating story that even this ailurophobic reviewer thoroughly enjoyed. **JB**



**Cows Go Boo!**

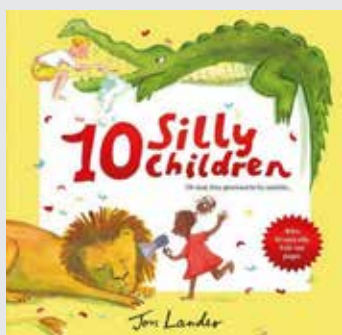
★★★★

Steve Webb, ill. Fred Blunt, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978 1 83913 023 6, £6-99, pbk

Surely, here comes another winner from the author of the highly successful picture book, the brilliant read-aloud-book, **Tanka Tanka Skunk**. **Cows Go Boo!** should become a hot favourite with this age group, being full of giggles from start right through to the surprise ending. The text is hilarious, and the amusement is heightened by truly whacky illustrations. The author/illustrator partnership is just right, with lots of instances when listeners need to pause to peruse the happenings in the pictures. Farmer George becomes more and more exasperated by his cows...where do they go? For unlike his pigs who go oink, and his sheep who go baa, his cows go.... where? Lost and then found, his cows should

## Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant continued

certainly not go 'BOO!' which is what they do, causing such a shock that Farmer George jumps right out of his wellies. The perfectly timed page turns create lots of opportunities for a young audience to predict and join in the farmyard noises, least of all with those of the illusive cows. The whole tale is highly entertaining and will be best when read loudly and repeated often, until all youngsters can join in throughout. Keep it in the car, in the kitchen, at Grandma's - but maybe a little noisy for the bedside table! **GB**



### 10 Silly Children

★★★

Jon Lander, Pavilion Children's Books, 24pp, 978 1 84365 495 7, £7.99, pbk

**10 Silly Children** is a counting book with lots of silliness thrown in from debut picturebook maker Jon Lander. Before opening the book, readers are instructed to be exceedingly sensible and on no account to open the pull-out flaps - an exhortation guaranteed to invite rebellion!

Each double page spread shows a 'sensible' child or children doing 'sensible' things such as drawing, washing, cooking or gardening. Open the flap and a different scene is revealed - we find the two children bathing in a mud bath spraying mud all over the bathroom, the eight children sensibly brushing their teeth are actually cleaning a crocodile's teeth. We are told that even their dreams are silly, or perhaps they are simply delightfully inventive? One dreams about swimming with dolphins and another about sitting on the moon.

Children will enjoy imagining what might lurk behind each flap before opening them. Read the book again and observant readers will find clues as to what might be behind the flaps, for example the first child has her hands behind her back, what might she be holding? Why is there a blob of mud on the floor in image two?

The illustrations are very appealing and efforts have been made to be representative. The humour suggests a slightly older readership than the basic 1-10 counting framework would indicate. There are elements to engage adults too, for example with witty book titles on the shelves in one double page spread for example *Ladders - a Long History*. **SMc**



### Little Echo

★★★★★

Written and ill. Al Rodin, Puffin, 32pp, 978-0-241-45087-1, £12.99 hbk Little Echo lives in a cave. She's bright yellow, has big ears so she can listen to the smallest sound and spends her time hiding. She'd like to play with the other creatures, but she's too shy.

One day Max arrives and announces his intention to find treasure. Entranced by the idea, Little Echo follows him. Max isn't too sure which way to hold his map (and doesn't know where to dig) so Little Echo tries to help, but all she can do is echo Max's voice. It takes danger in the shape of an angry bear to prompt change.

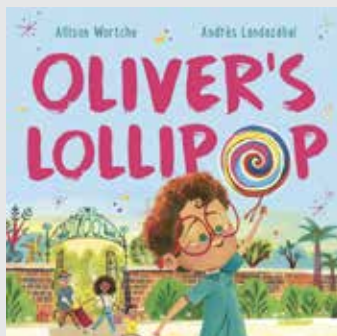
Little Echo's anxiety for Max overcomes her fear. For the very first time she speaks for herself - 'RUN!' - and so begins a partnership between two unlikely comrades. Saturated oranges and yellows stand out against the deep blues and greys of the cave, and light from Max's torch or fire directs our gaze. A big X on the map leads to all sorts of adventures, but it isn't until friendship seems more important than anything that the two of them find treasure.

Little Echo is an unusual and highly appealing character, and the messages in this story are well framed and explored. We all need courage to speak up, and true friendship is worth more than gold. But it's Al Rodin's striking artwork that takes this book to another level. Full of joie de vivre and painted with bold, expressive brushstrokes and a strong eye for shape and heft, his illustrations have a confidence and freshness that feel completely new. In keeping with the subject, though, they also evoke memories - of the games we've played, the books we've read - in a way that draws us close and suggests that Little Echo will be loved. **CFH**

### Oliver's Lollipop

★★★★★

Allison Wortche, ill. Andres Landazabal, Andersen, 32pp, 978 1 83913 188 2, £7.99 pbk It's Oliver's birthday, and a trip to the zoo is on hand. Right at the entrance,



the family see a lollipop stand, and Oliver, as the birthday boy, is allowed to have one. He is entranced with his lollipop, its rainbow colours, its size, how good it will taste, and he is so busy looking at it that he doesn't see the animals at all, even though little brother Louis is very excited by them. Tragedy strikes when a giraffe snaffles the lollipop and Oliver is bereft. It is Louis who saves the day by helping Oliver to see all the wonderful animals around him, and he is able to fully enjoy his special day out. A lovely story about seeing the world around us in all its glory and not being so intent on our possessions. The pictures are brilliant, full of life and colour and family love, and the whole is a delight. **ES**



### Gloria's Porridge

★★★★★

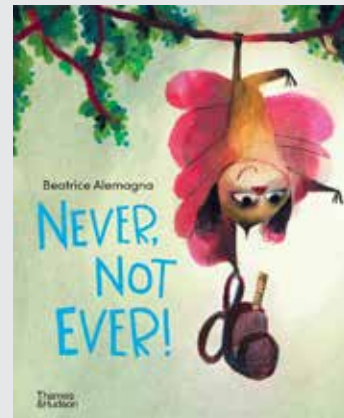
Elizabeth Laird, ill. Toby Newsome, Tiny Owl, 32pp, 978 1 910328 68 2, £7.99, pbk

Gloria has made a pot of porridge and her cat wants some too, but Gloria doesn't want to share, because she is just too hungry. When she goes out to get more water - you can guess what happens next, Cat decides to just have a lick and then another and in no time, he has eaten the whole pot of porridge. Gloria, not surprisingly, is very cross and waves her spoon at Cat frightening him.

This leads to a chain of events as the alarmed cat startles a sleeping donkey, who unsettles a hive of bees, who upsets a hen. In no time at all there is an awful rumpus, and everyone is noisily complaining. A very sensible and clever Fox hears the rumpus as she walks by. She helps them sort out the problem dismissing their complaints and encouraging

them to think about what they will do about it. The fuss is soon over, peace is restored and Gloria and her cat apologise to each other before sharing a fresh pot of porridge.

This is a very satisfying game of consequences story. Beautifully told by acclaimed writer Elizabeth Laird it is based on a traditional Ethiopian folk tale. Toby Newsome's illustrations are perfectly pitched helping to make this a very engaging picturebook for young children. **SMc**



### Never, Not Ever!

★★★★★

Written and ill. Beatrice Alemagna, Thames and Hudson, 48pp, 978-0-500-65272-5, £12.99 hbk

Pascaline may be a bat, but like most five-year olds she knows exactly what she likes - and school is NOT on her list.

'Never, not ever!' she tells her parents when the big day arrives. The other animals may be going, but Pascaline refuses point blank to consider learning anything or making friends. In fact, her NO! is so loud that it makes her parents shrivel up. What fun! Pascaline can tuck them under her wing and take them somewhere surprising - Bat School, where Pascaline's parents proceed to get in the way and cause mayhem. Maybe Pascaline would be happier without Mum and Dad clinging to her and getting in the way?

By the end of the day, Pascaline has had enough, but Mum and Dad are keen for more. Will Pascaline take them back to school tomorrow? 'Never, not ever,' she tells them, with a smile.

Parents and carers may shudder at the thought of being at the mercy of their offspring, albeit for a good cause, but Beatrice Alemagna's take on role-reversal is particularly enjoyable and will provoke much satisfaction and hilarity. Mum and Dad have grown-up expectations about lunch, won't go for a nap and weigh Pascaline down when she wants to take a break-time flight. Worst of all, there's no-one to collect her when school finishes. As Alemagna shrewdly points out, your parents can't be waiting outside with the others when they're already clinging to you. **CFH**

# reviews

## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior

### Caterpillar Cake. Read-aloud Poems to Brighten Your Day

★★★★

Matt Goodfellow, ill. Krina Patel-Sage, Otter-Barry Books, 32p, 9781913074661, £12.99 hbk

'Caterpillar/caterpillar/caterpillar cake/It's the only thing that my mum can make...' This jaunty rhyme sets the tone for this fun collection of poems designed to be read aloud to, or with, young children whether in a class or alone. Matt Goodfellow is expert at capturing the everyday world of the child in verse. He takes us to the beach to skim pebbles and watch a paper boat sail away. We fly helterskelter to space, count animals in the zoo, play hide and seek, snuggle down because the snow is in town enjoy bath time before falling asleep to the lullaby of the river. None of the poems are long, making use of short lines and strong rhythms with plenty of repetition and alliteration; they demand to be spoken, the vocabulary direct, creating poetry out of the ordinary. Aiding and abetting him, the illustrations by Krina Patel-Sage burst off the page in joyful colour. A vibrant palette and strong images complement the words bringing them to life before they are spoken. The whole design of this book is a delight from the bright cover to the contents page providing quick access to favourites and a text presented in a clear bold font that is never obscured by the background. A book to really enjoy and one that should not be hidden but easily found among the picture books ready for storytime. **FH**

### The Rapping Princess

★★★★

Hannah Lee, ill. Allen Fatimaharan, Faber & Faber, 32pp, 978 0 571 36115 1, £6.99, pbk

Everyone knows that picture book Princesses live in great splendour, in magnificent palaces with the King and Queen of the land as their parents. And so everything in the world of Princess Shiloh should have been peachy. But she has a problem, a big problem, for, unlike all of her family, and the rest of their kingdom, she just cannot sing. When visiting Princes can all sing like stars, Shiloh sounds like...a goat. The rhyming text bounces along as Shiloh tries to come to terms with her lack of talent. Ancient remedies and no amount of practice make not one scrap of difference. But then... Eureka! She finds her talent. 'I love to rap, it's when I have most fun, I've had a talent, though I thought I had none.' Jubilation fills not just the palace with her brothers and sisters, but her newly realised talent becomes hot news around the world, as admirers arrive by carriage, canoe, balloon, by car. Shiloh is encouraged to see that

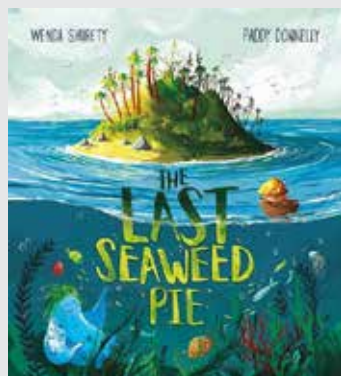
whilst it is true, she has no voice for singing, in fact she does have a real talent for rapping. A tale to encourage youngsters to seek their own talent, and to persevere when faced with disappointment. The illustrations empathise greatly with the young princess; from the world's best vocal coach's seeming indifference to the palace doctor checking Shiloh's voice box, the book glows in colours throughout. **GB**

### Babies, Babies Everywhere!

★★★★

Mary Hoffman, ill. Ros Asquith, Otter-Barry Books, 40pp, 978 1 91307 470 8, £12.99, hbk

The first end papers fill readers with both curiosity and amusement. Here are babies in all sorts of situations - giggling, bawling, sitting inside a cardboard box, throwing food high in the air, reading a book solo... be it upside down!... and savouring the joy of at last standing upright. Then begins a year in six different families, each with a newborn babe, or two. Every page is packed with happenings, all small activities, but each building into a babe learning to roll over, to sit unaided, then to crawl, and 'Beware, beware, there are babies everywhere!' With different ethnic families to identify, and parents celebrating each new achievement, every spread is packed with happenings. 'Babies start as sleepy, cuddly bundles and soon they are walking, talking little people.' What joy is portrayed here, from Hoffman's direct and sensitive text to the delightful pictures throughout by Ros Asquith. Both author and illustrator have banks of highly acclaimed work in the world of children's books, and this new publication will be welcomed in families, nurseries and libraries everywhere. **GB**



### The Last Seaweed Pie

★★★★

Wenda Shurety, ill. Paddy Donnelly, Storyhouse Publishing, 32pp, 978 1 9162818 3 7, £6.99 pbk

The Treeple, who live high up in the trees, building houses of sticks, climb with the lemurs and they bake papaya pies. But most of all, the Treeple love

to make things. Turn the page... and now we meet the Seaple. The Seaple live deep down in the ocean; they like to build houses of shells, swim with the fishes, and bake seaweed pie. But most of all, the Seaple love to watch nature. So, the Treeple up in the canopy sew and saw, bang and tap, creating more and more and when something new is made, out go the old things, broken or not. And where do they go? Down to the ground, where they pile up and up until the Treeple realise the ground is full up... so they move the old things into the ocean. Meanwhile, the Seaple gaze at the increasing amount of things that float by their homes. But increasingly the things grow larger and darker. Fish get dangled in the mass of old things. Creatures and plants begin to disappear. After eating their last seaweed pie, the Seaple decide they must leave, find somewhere new to live. Washing up on a shore they see different creatures living up in the trees and climb up to meet them. But they are not welcomed by the Treeple who say there is no room for them up aloft. A resolution is found, and the two communities learn to live together, as the biggest of recycling adventures begins. This wonderful book ends with a page entitled, 'Be an ocean hero!' Targetting even those of us who live far from an ocean, it explains that litter dropped in the street can easily make its way through streams and rivers and drains, eventually ending up in the ocean. There follows a list of small changes families can undertake to help, ranging from taking reusable bags for shopping, to turning off the tap when cleaning teeth. Its last suggestion is Keep Learning. Knowledge is power! This book takes a different perspective from the increasing number of books for children on the importance of marine conservation and should be widely acknowledged. It should be in every classroom, and library, and the more homes that can take a little from it, the better our world could be. Its theme of people working together is paramount, and young readers will love the imaginative portrayal of the very different two societies linked together in this story, and the colourful pages of brightness... and the dark threatening blackness of the polluted ocean. May this book get the widest of audiences. **GB**

### We're Going Places

★★★★

Mick Jackson, ill. John Broadley, Pavilion Books, 40pp, 978 1 8436 5497 1, £12.99 hbk

Following their exciting debut picture book *While You're Sleeping*, author and illustrator, Mick Jackson and John Broadley have collaborated again creating another highly unusual and engrossing book. Herein, using travel and journeying Jackson's poetic text

and Broadley's exquisite, detailed scenes, enable readers to follow the development of a young child right from those first unsure steps to confident walking out and about, onto bikes, skateboards and skates.

Then come the possibilities of becoming airborne; perhaps going to distant parts by train or plane when speed is important. At other times though, the journey is best taken slowly allowing time to pause and to ponder and to watch creatures undertaking their own journeys on foot, or on the wing like birds and bumblebees.

Some journeys are dependent on the weather or the season and even inanimate things like raindrops and clouds can be considered to have a journey.

There are choices to make and an almost infinite number of possible ways to go as well as ever changing means of travelling: who knows what the future might bring. One thing is certain though; as people age, their journeys are likely to become slower and might need support but those they've taken will remain with them throughout life.

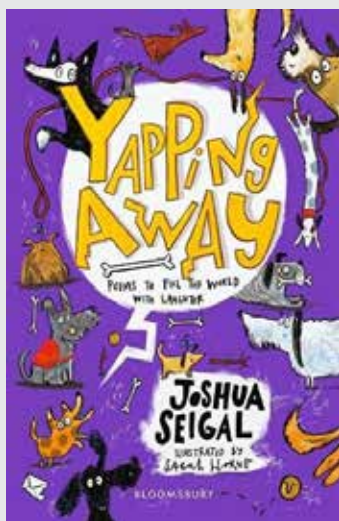
Every spread invites readers to pause their journey through the book for contemplation and consideration of their personal paths, sometimes those past, sometimes present, and possible future ones too. With a final portrayal of a grandmother reflecting on her life, there's such wealth of pattern, texture and stories aplenty at each page turn, this is a book to return to over and over with new understanding and perhaps different questions emerging from each read. **JB**

### Yapping Away

★★★★

Joshua Seigal, ill. Sarah Horne, Bloomsbury Education, 96pp, 978-1472972743, £6.99 pbk

In his *Authorgraph* interview for *Books for Keeps*, Joshua Seigal explains how the '3 Rs' - rhythm, rhyme and repetition - are key to hooking young children into poetry. It's true, and he uses them all to excellent effect in his collection *Yapping Away*; indeed, the poems are so playful, gleefully heading off in unexpected directions, and so full of surprises, that it sometimes feels that it's only the rhythm and the rhyme that is holding them on the page. It makes reading them both an exhilarating, liberating experience, and reassuring too. *Did I Ever Tell You* for example, seems to be straying dangerously into areas of true love, even passion, until the final line pulls us back to earth with laughter (the hitherto unnamed object of the poet's passion revealed as pizza! Pheh!). There is much delicious and entirely successful wordplay too, of the sort that will strike just the right note with its audience, alongside some very good shape poems which again play with expectations to keep



readers in a state of happy surprise. And talking of surprises, although the book is subtitled *Poems to Fill the World with Laughter*, Seigal sneaks in the occasional hint of melancholy, if not sadness. *Inside* for example, hints at whispered depths, emotions readers won't yet know; *Drawing My Grandma* is properly moving; and *Sad*, sharing a spread with *Happy*, will resonate with all sorts of readers. What is certain too is that the poems will inspire readers, individuals or whole classes, to pick up their pencils and start writing their own poetry. Aware of this, Seigal provides some very good poetry starters at the end of the collection, an added treat in a book that is full of them. **LS**

### Lottie Loves Nature: Bird Alert ★★★★

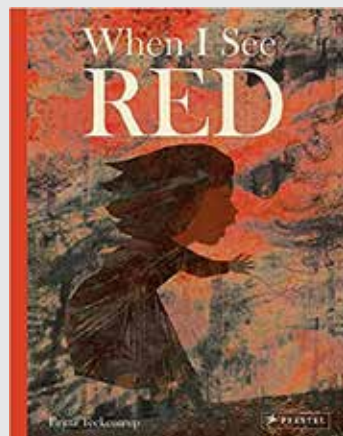
Jane Clarke, ill. James Brown, Five Quills, 128pp, 978-1912923090, £6.99 pbk

Jane Clarke's series, prettily illustrated by James Brown, is an effective mix of fiction and facts. Young Lottie is inspired by TV wildlife presenter Samira Breeze to find out everything she can about wildlife and care for the creatures that visit her garden. In this episode, she's bird spotting, parrot



Nacho on her shoulder. She has to contend with next-door neighbour Mr Parfitt, who is the story's figure of fun, but spots lots of wild birds, amongst them some fledgling sparrows. Her friend Noah helps and her brother Al, who incidentally stars in his own series, and there's more than enough plot and comedy to keep children reading. Every so often too, we are presented with an illustrated page from Lottie's nature notebook and these are full of information about birds and also about things that children can do to attract them into their own gardens. It's a book to encourage learning and curiosity and to prompt fun and possible lifetime interests too. **LS**

Read our [Q&A interview](#) with Jane Clarke.



### When I See Red ★★★★★

Written and ill. Britta Teckentrup, Prestel, 40pp, 978-3791374949, £10.99 pbk

*'I am furious. I'm seeing RED. I'm filled with rage. A storm's ahead.'* Arms on hips. Defiant. Looking on with furrowed brows against a backdrop of heavy red cloud and sky. So begins one young child's venting of emotion in a picturebook that explores anger, when harnessed, as an energising, emboldening asset.

Although we never know exactly what it is that enrages our young protagonist, Teckentrup provides them with words and a backdrop of visual, visceral red-hot imaginings as they become a 'furious dragon you cannot ignore', and a 'hurricane, whirlwind, twister, typhoon': a perfect storm that results in a sense of long-awaited freedom after having 'been silent too long'.

Starting with a series of double-spreads, figuratively abstract in picture and poetic style when illustrating the child's anger, Teckentrup's visual frame gradually narrows as the protagonist's rage subsides. Mimicking a sense of meditative breathing, both frame and typography gradually contract and reduce in size. At the same time, hard colour-washes of anger - reds and greys - make way for long stretches of blue sky and open

grasslands. Having used her anger to clear the path of potential obstacles, the child is able to move on.

Much like Oram and Kitamura's *Angry Arthur* and Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, books that validate a child's right to be angry have been met with some resistance but this is a picturebook about using these emotions for positive change. It is a story about power and control. At the close of the book, Teckentrup looks to the human rights activist, Anni Lanz, for inspiration, quoting her statement, 'Use your anger to transform the world around you' and that's exactly what our young protagonist does.

Teckentrup's story is about fighting a resistance to change and acknowledging that we can call on anger when we find our paths blocked by injustice. More often than not, and understandably, anger is seen in a negative light, what Teckentrup is inviting is for us to contemplate is how anger can motivate, fuel inspiration and become a force for change. A potent, powerful storm of a book. **MT**

### Nikhil and Jay Save the Day ★★★

978-1-91307-462-3  
Nikhil and Jay: the Star Birthday  
978-1-91307-461-6

Chitra Soundar, ill. Soofiya, Otter-Barry Books, 96pp £7.99 each, pbk  
These two little books actually contain 4 stories each, so the titles only refer to one of them. Jay is 5 and wants to do what his older brother Nikhil does, but he is often too small, too young or not strong enough. He has his own skills though, and though they spar, the brothers are close and mostly mutually supportive. Together they visit their paternal grandparents in a village far from the city, enjoy dosas and chutney, and even save the library threatened with closure when a local councillor comes to their protest. (If only it were that easy to save a library...) It's good to note Jay's assertion that boys can read pink fairy books if they want to! In the second book, the mixed race family expands temporarily as maternal grandparents visit from Chennai, and they work out the best place to eat mangoes without getting messy, celebrate Nikhil's star birthday on the Tamil calendar, have a picnic on banana leaves in the park with all four grandparents, and work out how to keep in touch when their Indian grandparents have to return home. They are a modern family: Uncle Siva helps with the clearing up after the dosa feast, and Mum is sometimes working at weekends, or reading a book.

We learn a few words in Tamil in a *Guide to New Words* at the end, and each book also includes a recipe, one for making dosas and chutney, and another for *sago payasam*, a milky drink.

The illustrations by Soofiya, who describes herself as a visual artist and design educator, are simple but effective. One little niggle: as this is a book intended for younger readers, a font using the round  $\alpha$  might be more appropriate. **DB**



### The Queen On Our Corner ★★★★★

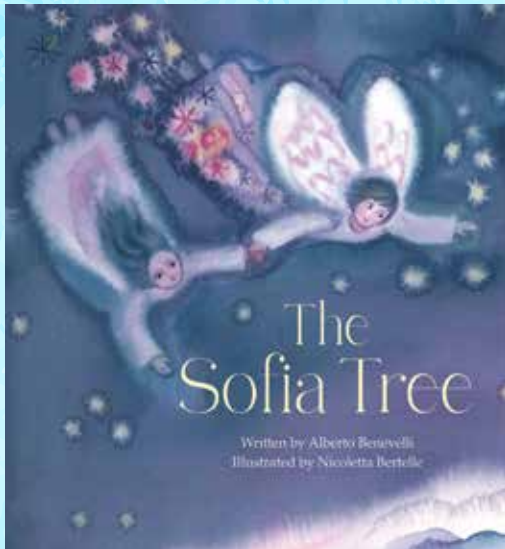
Lucy Christopher, ill. Nia Tudor, Lantana Publishing, 32pp, 978 1 9113 7388 9, £11.99

Inspired by the author's real life encounters with displaced and homeless people this story is presented from the viewpoint of a child narrator. This little girl seems, as the story opens, to be the only person who has noticed the lone woman sitting with her dog although she too admits having walked past initially. The child calls her a Queen and contemplates the possible battles she's participated in, the journeys she's made, the dragons she's fought and her countless adventures the world over. Having won her mother round, there are still all the other locals to convince that this woman deserves their attention and their kindness.

When she and her mother stop, they sometimes hear tales about other places she's visited, this woman on the corner who keeps a protective watch over the area and looks out for possible dangers.

Then one hot windy night danger does come; it takes the form of a fire that grows and spreads, the alarm being sounded by the Queen and her 'royal hound' Now it's time for the young narrator to speak out in support of 'our Queen' as she calls the woman for it's thanks to her that their homes were saved. Finally the people stop, take notice and thank the woman offering her warm blankets and water. Then, at little girl's suggestion, everybody works together to build their saviour her very own home - a place on the corner from which she still keeps watch, but also entertains those who stop by for tea and a chat.

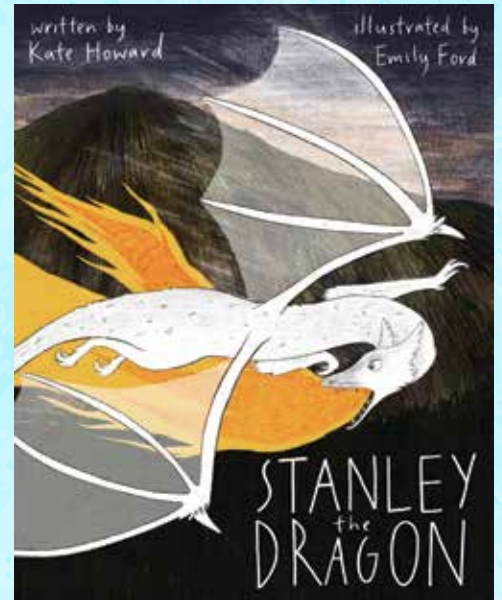
This is a tale of looking for the inherent worth of everybody, in particular homeless people, and trying one's best to understand and support them. It should help youngsters realise that everybody's story contains both ups and downs. It also shows one shouldn't judge by appearances, demonstrates the power of community and highlights the importance of having somewhere you can call home. Nia Tudor makes dramatic use of light and dark in her powerful scenes that capture the feelings and emotions of 'the Queen', the narrator and other members of the local community. **JB**



Sofia is so excited about her beautiful Christmas tree which she has chosen especially. When Sofia has decorated it, to her surprise she is visited by an angel and taken on a very special journey ... this is a magical Christmas story for people of all ages.

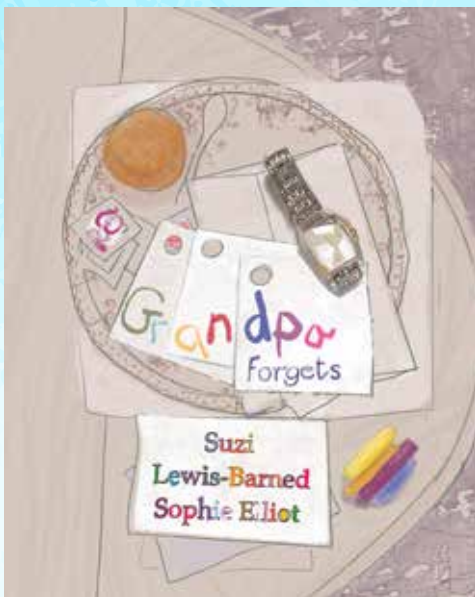
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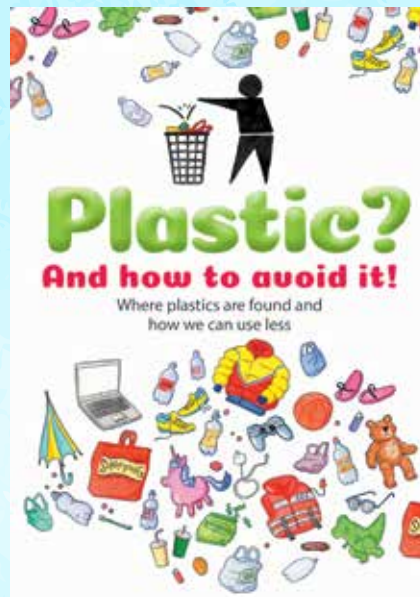
Stanley is a typical dragon and he causes all sorts of mayhem and distress wherever he goes, until a new friendship helps him resolve to change his ways ...

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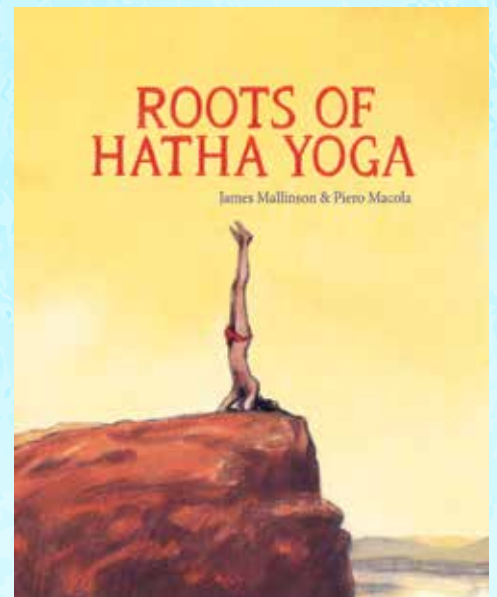
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### Ed's Choice

#### When Poems Fall From the Sky

★★★★

Zaro Weil. ill. by Junli Song, ZaZaKids Books/Troika, 160pp, 9781909991958, £15.00 hbk  
Published in association with The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

Junli Song's cover art instantly attracts attention. We see a landscape, a mountain glowing in the background, trees their branches covered in blooms, squirrels scurried through them, blossoms fill the air and people, many with parasols and wearing flowery kimonos, wander; it is a scene that speaks of wonder. The reader is drawn to hold the book, keen to open it to find what is inside.

Here we find ourselves taking a journey through the seasons in the company of Zaro Weil whose poems and playlets guide us picking up details, drawing attention to them. We meet butterflies, plants, birds, colours – even a wizard – brought to life through a variety of poetical forms from free verse to nursery rhyme rhythms, raps and haikus; these are particularly effective in capturing the four elements that make up our world. Running through the whole is the message of care and attention we, as part of it, need to extend to this natural world from the most insignificant insect



to the mighty oak and beyond. The language is engaging, immediate. The poet invites the young reader to a conversation, directing the gaze beyond the page with her accessible, child like vocabulary that never talks down but respects her audience. Enhancing this experience are Junli Song's prints which spread over the pages and draw on her artistic heritage. Sometimes a particular aspect is placed in exquisite detail, other occasions she will fill the spreads with a landscape, trees – or even the roots, her palette though purposely limited, vibrant and immersive.

A lovely anthology that should find its place both in the classroom and home, providing as it does opportunities for quiet contemplation and lively interaction – there are the little plays demanding to be performed. **FH**

#### Nell and the Cave Bear

★★★★

Written and ill. Martin Brown. Piccadilly, 172pp, 978-1-84812-968-9, £6.99 pbk

TNell lives with her tribe in a cave, and, as she has no parents, a little bear is her constant companion. She has to work hard, helping with chores, and the bear is her comfort when life is tough, so, when she accidentally overhears the elders planning to give the bear away as a present when the tribes meet to celebrate the arrival of Spring, she and Cave Bear run away. Together they follow the stream, encountering mighty mammoths and acquiring a wildcat kitten, dodging fierce members of another tribe who want to eat the bear until, hungry and bedraggled, they find a safe haven. One sub-plot tells of a hilariously inept group of hunters from the Cave tribe, trying unsuccessfully to catch a mammoth, and another describes the journey of two of the women who set off to find Nell. All is well in the end, as an alternative present is very acceptable, so Cave Bear can stay with Nell. The names of the Cave tribe are fun - the elder in charge of

everything is Mayv, and we have Soo, Porl, Daev and Kehn, among others – young readers may enjoy working these out.

Martin Brown is the illustrator of the phenomenally successful **Horrible Histories** series, with all its associated spin-offs, and he has chosen to illustrate this, his first novel, in shades of blue, which works very well considering that this story is set in a prehistoric world. This will be fun for **Horrible Histories** fans, and those who enjoy humour with fanciful history. **DB**

#### The Royal Rebel

★★★★

Bali Rai, Barrington Stoke, ill. Rachael Dean, 136pp, 978 1 78112 942 5, £6.99, pbk

This book tells the little known and extraordinary true story of Princess Sophia Duleep Singh; a Suffragette princess. Born in India in 1876 she was the daughter of the last Sikh Maharajah. After the British stole her father's kingdom her family were exiled to England where she spent her childhood. Intriguingly (perhaps suggesting an element

of guilt?) Queen Victoria became Sophia's godmother and took responsibility for the family, ensuring they had a guardian to support them, accommodation and education.

The first part of the book describes Sophia's experiences and her upbringing – in effect as a young princess in Victorian Britain. Despite this apparent privilege she experienced great difficulties and sadness including illness, the death of her mother and younger brother, loss of her first home and her father's abandonment of the family.

The second part of the book describes Sophia's return to India where discontent against British rule was developing. She noticed the poverty of many of the people, and the incongruity of British architecture and statuary juxtaposed against Indian culture. Sophia decides to return to England to do what she can for the fight for independence.

The final part of the book is set in England where Sophia's determination to make a difference develops. She is firstly drawn to help the Lascars, Indian sailors who have been stranded in England. Using her contacts, she raises money to build them a new home. After this Sophia becomes involved in the Suffragette movement attending meetings of the WSPU (The Women's Social and Political Union). She was keen to join in and made a significant contribution to the cause working with famous names including Emmeline Pankhurst.

**The Royal Rebel** foregrounds the complex and significant life of a little known figure, providing a broader view of British and World history and the contribution of individuals of colour to the fight for votes for women and the buildup to Indian independence.

With publisher Barrington Stoke's trademark cream paper and clear and carefully spaced font the format is highly accessible. Illustrated page borders defining the three parts of the story add to the attractive design. **SMc**

#### Monster Hunting for Beginners

★★★★

Ian Mark, ill. Louis Ghibault, Farshore Books, 290pp, 9780755501946, £12.99, hbk

This comedy adventure story tells the tale of a monster-hunter called Jack and his epic efforts to prevent the entire human race being gobbled up by ugly ogres.

Jack lives with his dad who, since the tragic passing of Mum, is over-protective and mind-numbingly boring. He never lets Jack have anything even remotely close to an adventure and says things like, 'You mustn't sit there, Jack, you'll get piles.' It's somewhat surprising, therefore, when, out of nowhere, his dad disappears and Jack is suddenly joined in the garden by a massive

ogre and a miniature bearded warrior holding a book called **Monster Hunting for Beginners**.

Jack is catapulted onto a journey to find his dad and to uncover the reasons why so many ogres are marauding about the village of King's Nooze... and whether or not they're likely to eat everybody! It's an exciting adventure. Jack picks up a few friends along the way (including a kind and talkative bear) and leaps repeatedly from frying pan to fire to frying pan again as they try to avoid being eaten up.

Though the action is engaging enough, it is somewhat lost within a total barrage of jokes and silliness. Jack constantly talks to his audience with comic quips, asides and one-liners that are often funny and occasionally hilarious. Most of these are delivered through the medium of the footnote, which feels fun and original to begin with but grows somewhat irritating after hundreds of them.

Despite the book's promise of lots of monster hunting, the story really focuses upon one particular type of monster - the ogre. Though there are occasional inclusions from a monster-hunting journal that describe some brilliantly silly beasts (such as the crusted hairy snot nibbler) these are used sparingly as the characters are always too busy hunting down (and escaping from) a whole horde of marauding ogres. It seems feasible that a few monsters are being held back for Jack's next adventure, which lots of young readers would be very eager to hear about after having such a laugh with his first book. **SD**

#### Little Horror

★★★★

Daniel Peak, Firefly, 210pp, 9781913102517, £6.99 pbk

This exciting story combines the thriller and comedy genres by placing a baby genius at centre stage. Rita is not quite two years-old but can already read, write, solve complex problems and narrate her own story. She can also talk like an adult - but she's not telling anyone that because she doesn't want people to think she's weird.

When her family disappears and she is left all alone, Rita discovers that she isn't the only baby with amazing intellectual powers. There are more special children out there and they are being hunted by a terrifying, ice cream van-driving clown called Mr Close. Jack has no choice but to go on the run: to avoid the attention of Mr Close and somehow try to find out what has happened to her parents and brother.

Rita is incredibly resourceful, taking advantage of an empty soft play centre to hide in and borrowing a mobility scooter to make her escape. However, even super babies need help, so she press-gangs her teenage babysitter, James, to help her with some of the

# reviews

## 8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

leg work, and the pair's arguments are a good source of comedy. Together they hatch plans and eat cold pizza in James' bedroom, all-the-while listening out for the hypnotic jingle jangle of Mr Close's Greensleeves.

**Little Horror** is genuinely gripping and evokes grown-up thrillers like *The Bourne Identity* or *The Fugitive*. The villain is just scary enough to have children's toes curling, and Rita's voice is strong enough to maintain the narrative throughout... despite only having two years' worth of experiences to draw upon! She's much more than just a *Little Horror* and so is this debut novel. **SD**



### Aarti and the Blue Gods

★★★★★

Jasbinder Bilan, *Chicken House*, 242pp, 9781913322595, £7.99 pbk  
Award-winning author Jasbinder Bilan's third novel combines the magical atmosphere of a fairy tale with the realistic setting of a remote Scottish island. Here, Aarti and her forbidding Aunt, whose volatile moods Aarti struggles to predict, live a solitary, hand-to-mouth existence. Aarti has only her beloved companion Chand, a wild fox, and a treasured book of Indian myths to comfort her. Aarti has been told that Aunt adopted her when she was orphaned as a child, but, gradually, mysterious clues emerge to suggest that all is not as it seems. Why does Aunt have blonde hair when Aarti is of Indian heritage? Why has Aarti named her fox companion Chand, and why does she feel such an affinity with Krishna, the blue god of her storybook, and with the natural world around her? When Aarti finds a tatty toy rabbit hidden in a locked room buried memories begin to surface. The cliff fall death of Aunt and the arrival of a shipwrecked boy with a strange resemblance to Krishna lead to Aarti's dramatic return to a lost life.

Jasbinder Bilan has written a haunting story of loneliness and mystery, with themes of identity, heritage, belief, family, friendship and belonging. The atmosphere of

the book is one of secrets and grief and Aarti's happy ending is hard won. Sensitive readers will find the story of her search for answers about who she is a compelling one. Links between Eastern and Western mythologies are skilfully woven into the story and the remote island setting is beautifully described. This evocative, mystical story with a startling twist will appeal to readers who enjoy adventure with a hint of magic and mystery. **SR**

### Lightning Falls

★★★★★

Amy Wilson, *Macmillan*, 240pp, 9781529037876, £7.99 pbk

Amy Wilson's latest fantasy adventure story again showcases her skill in creating magical worlds and memorable characters. The atmospheric setting grips the reader from the very first sentence. *Lightning Falls* is a Ghost House, built by a looming viaduct over a thundering waterfall and next to a cemetery. The house has both living and ghostly inhabitants whose job it is to provide a haunting experience for the guests who come to stay. Valerie has been living at Lightning Falls since she was found abandoned by the crypt as a tiny child by the owner of the Ghost House. She happily helps her ghost family with their haunting escapades, but there is something different about Valerie. Her ghost family call her a 'Hallowed Ghost', but why can she taste and feel and grow older when the other ghosts cannot? When Valerie meets a mysterious boy, Joe, who claims to be from another world, she begins a dangerous journey of discovery into the truth behind her past and identity. Together with Joe and her ghost sister Meg, Valerie crosses the rainbow bridge under the river to another world, Orbis, a world under threat from disappearing magic, and Valerie's true home. As Valerie's two world worlds begin to collide and collapse into sparkling star showers, she must battle to save both her birth and adopted families.

This skilfully written novel is gripping and enchanting from the start and succeeds brilliantly in combining the elements of ghost, fantasy, and adventure stories together with themes of family, friendship, identity and belonging. Valerie is a strong and appealing character who gradually grows into her power and solves the mystery of her past. Her love for her found ghost family, as well as her lost birth family, is beautifully conveyed. This is a heart-warming, captivating story, sparkling with magic and mystery, that will enthral readers. **SR**

### Not If I Can Help It

★★★★★

Carolyn Mackler, *Scholastic*, 230pp, 9780702310911, £6.99 pbk  
Willa has Sensory Processing Disorder, which means she likes things to be and feel a certain way –

her socks, her clothes, her room, even her food – and she hates change. She already has to face the fact that she will be moving to Middle School very soon, but she is extremely upset to find out her Dad's big news...that he has been secretly dating her best friend Ruby's Mum! This is going to mean a huge change to her life, both at home & at school and Willa is determined not to let this happen.

**Not If I Can Help It** sensitively deals with many of the issues that children face at this time in their lives, with a warm & humorous slant.

Although set in an American school and talking of the move from Elementary to Middle School, it is easily identifiable as being at a similar age to when British children move from Primary to Secondary schools & so covers the same feelings of unease & anxiety that occur for children across the world at the thought of moving on from familiar environments into the unknown.

Willa loves her best friend, Ruby, but also doesn't want her to know how much her SPD affects her home life and she is worried that if things progress with their parents, then all of her carefully hidden secrets will be out.

Carolyn Mackler cleverly weaves many other concerns that children of this age often face today – divorce, blended families, friendship issues – within a story that will appeal to readers of all ages. Her own experiences of a child with Sensory Processing Disorder enables her to authentically & empathetically share Willa's thoughts with us, as she has to come to terms with the changes happening in her life and ultimately decide how she will accept her new situation. **AH**

### Efrén Divided

★★★★★

Ernesto Cisneros, *Quill Tree Books*, 272pp, 9780062881694, £7.99 pbk

Efrén might not have many of the things other children enjoy. He has to share a mattress with his younger brother and sister, his clothes are definitely second-hand – but he does have a father and mother who love him – a mother who can make the best sopas ever – and he is able to find solace in the books he reads. Then one day his mother, his Amá disappears. She has been deported. Though Efrén is American born, his parents are Mexican and are in the States without documentation. Now Efrén must step up to help his Apá support the family. He is determined it is up to him to get his mother back; he will not just be a Muro boy, a child whose only contact with their parent is to stand at the "wall" separating the States from Mexico to reach through the fence to hold hands.

This is a welcome addition to any library shelf, opening as it does a door onto an experience that for many will have had the unreality of a newsflash – though 3; some may, sadly, recognise a similar scenario. We see this world through the eyes of Efrén and Cisneros' style reflects this. It is direct, very childlike in its

attention to detail and description. In some respects it can seem a little worthy – almost didactic – however, it is also immediate and accessible. The reader shadows Efrén as he struggles to manage his siblings, as he copes with school and as he travels to the border in his attempt to help his mother. The realism of Efrén's world is emphasised by the Spanish that is woven into the narrative (there is a helpful glossary at the end of the book should one want it) and the young reader is made aware of the politics of the situation when Efrén decides to stand for election as school president. Cisneros states that his aim is to present young readers with an honest reflection of the world we live in. In this he certainly succeeds. Young readers will find themselves engaged by the narrative to emerge more aware and able to empathise more readily when faced with news stories that might have been dismissed as unreal. **FH**

### The Unexpected Tale of Bastien Bonlivre

★★★★★

Clare Povey, *Usborne*, 352pp, 978 147986489, £7.99 pbk

Set in 1920s Paris this bookish tale is a delight.

Bastien Bonlivre, the son of well-known French writers, has been shipped off to an orphanage after his parent's death in suspicious circumstances. All he has left to remember them by is a notebook which he has been entrusted to keep safe by his father.

The orphanage is a miserable place run by Xavier Odioux who takes particular pleasure in tormenting Bastien. Bastien has a talent for storytelling and is soon in demand by the boys in the orphanage to tell them stories about themselves. This enrages Xavier further as he does his best to squash any imagination or creative thought.

But it is not until several other well-known authors begin to go missing that Bastien realises that there might be a connection to the death of his parents. And why is Xavier so interested in finding Bastien's precious notebook? When the notebook is stolen Bastien enlists the help of his friend Alice from the bookshop *Le Chat Curieux*, and along with his orphanage friends Theo and Sami they embark on a madcap race against time across Paris and down the catacombs to retrieve the notebook and find the missing writers. The children soon find themselves in a plot far worse than anything they could have imagined.

Although this adventure treads familiar ground there is plenty here to satisfy the curious reader with a fast-paced plot, heart-stopping danger, plus colourful characters, and dastardly villains aplenty. Along the way the children's bravery is tested to the full and their friendship strengthened. At the core this is a brilliant novel about how stories shape and enrich the lives of all who encounter them. **JC**

### New talent

#### Fireborn: Twelve and the Frozen Forest

★★★★★

Aisling Fowler, HarperCollins, 410pp, 9780008394158, £12.99 hbk  
Set in the magical and dangerous kingdom of Ember, this is the story of 'Twelve' and some of her fellow trainee warriors, who have taken a pledge to guard the country and to fight on behalf of all of the clans, not to take the part of any one of them. All of the young people have hidden pasts, which have brought them to the 'Hunting Lodge' and which will affect how they cope with the dangers that are about to overtake them. When the Lodge is attacked and one of their number, called 'Seven' is captured, the trainees decide to go on a mission to try and find her. They are accompanied by the Guardian of the Lodge, a giant stone dog that comes to life when he is needed most. What follows, tests them to the limit, makes them question everything they believe in and gives them the strength to make new alliances and friends.

This story can be read a variety of levels, but at its heart we have the conflict that a young girl feels when her whole reason for living and revenge is put to the test. We also begin to understand the importance of trust; most importantly that this is a two-way process and that it is not something that is given lightly.



Once we understand the horrors that Twelve has lived through, we can begin to understand her need for revenge, but we also can see that you cannot blame everyone from a group (clan) for the misdeeds of one part of the group. There is also the question on whether we can trust the evidence which points towards a culprit, as we know in real life, it is only too easy to plant the blame on people, using a range of methods. This is a story that really grows on you and I loved some of the characters, but especially the Stone Guardian. It is a fabulous middle grade read and I look forward to further adventures for this enterprising group. **MP**

#### The Hideaway

★★★★★

Written and ill. Pam Smy, Pavilion Books, 248pp, 978-1-8436-5479-7, £14.99 hbk

Thirteen-year-old Billy lives with his mum and her boyfriend, Jeff, who is controlling and aggressive. Just before Halloween, Jeff picks yet another fight with Grace. Billy has finally had enough and seeks refuge in a graveyard, where he hopes to remain unnoticed long enough to sort things out.

But disappearing isn't easy, and people are getting worried. When Izzie from Billy's maths class finds him she has a difficult decision to make, and the old man clearing the graveyard turns out to have an even more important role to play. All Soul's Night is approaching. Will the ghostly reunions spur change in Billy's world? And who will help Grace find the necessary courage?

Atmospheric greyscale illustrations on every page of Billy's story extend our understanding and deepen the emotional impact of the text. Ivy twines around bare branches, light plays across gravestones and we

smell damp soil beneath our feet. It may be dark, but we read these characters in the tilt of a head or the placing of a hand, and we care. The emotional arc of the story is well paced and judged, and when the ghosts emerge from their graves in a wordless sequence of reunions, we are deeply moved but not surprised.

Alongside the story of Billy's disappearance is an account of the ensuing search. These chapters are written in a different style and voice, and are text-only. In both stories, change is brought about by asking for (and accepting) help, and although challenging themes are addressed (domestic abuse, coercive control, consent) the framing of Billy's real-world experiences within an illustrated ghost-story enables complex ideas and emotions to be explored in a sensitive and age-appropriate way. **CFH**

#### Pony

★★★★★

R. J. Palacio, Puffin, 292pp, 978 0 141 37705 6, £12.99 hbk  
For those fans looking for another **Wonder** this is a completely different and yet utterly astonishing story.

Twelve-year old Silas Bird bears an imprint of an oak tree on his back from a lightning strike. He lives with his father, a boot-maker who has a keen interest in early photography and has made quite a name for himself taking portraits of people from far and wide. Also living in the house is Silas's ghostly companion Mittenwool who has been with them since Silas was a baby and their dog, Argos.

One night, Mittenwool wakes Silas and tells him to stay inside as three men on horseback have arrived, demanding his father goes with them. Promising he will be back a week later, Silas's father is taken away by the men leaving Silas distraught. But when one of the ponies returns riderless Silas knows in his bones it is sign for him to follow his father and find out what has happened to him. So begins one of the most extraordinary journeys I have ever read, across the wilds of mid-west America in the 1800s. The descriptions of nature and landscape are beautiful – this slows the story down a little – but the storytelling is so compelling that it is impossible to put the book down.

The main character Silas is magnificently realised. Although entirely different from Auggie in **Wonder**, Silas is also an extraordinary boy. He is extremely sensitive and sees ghosts yet has an inner strength and resilience to call on. He is almost not of this world himself. The symbiotic and yet very understated relationship between Silas and Pony is wonderful too. Pony comes into Silas' life just when he needs him most and is a faithful and intrepid companion helping Silas face many dangers.

The bit part characters are excellent too. The ghosts are particularly superb; scary in places but not there to trouble anyone. They just exist alongside everyone else. There is a real sense of history in this story of lives lived and cut short and of love and loss across time and space.

The language is rich and vibrant and might perhaps speak more to adults than children at times but as with Philip Pullman's novels this is book that would resonate with both adults and children. And there is also an intriguing mystery to solve. Who really is Mac Boat? **JC**

#### The Primrose Railway Children

★★★★★

Jacqueline Wilson, ill. Rachel Dean, Puffin, 978-0241517765, £12.99 hbk

This book is a modern retelling of E. Nesbit's famous story. The narrator is ten-year-old Phoebe. She has a brother Perry who is on the autistic spectrum and who is obsessed with trains. She also has a sister Becks who is aged fourteen. The children live with their mother and their script-writer father whom Phoebe idolises.

Shortly after the novel opens the children's father mysteriously disappears. Phoebe is distraught. Somehow she invents a story to explain her father's disappearance. He was once the scriptwriter of a much-loved children's TV show. Phoebe believes he has gone to a lonely island to attempt to reboot that show. The more sinister truth will be revealed far later in the book.

The disappearance of the father has financial repercussions. The children and their mother are obliged to move to a dilapidated cottage in the English countryside. The cottage stands very near to the Primrose Railway line, a heritage railway staffed by volunteers. The children become heavily involved in the community centred on the railway. In this community they find solace to comfort them for their absent father.

The book has strengths that readers of countless earlier volumes have learned to expect from Dame Jacqueline. The character of Perry and the way he responds to his autism are carefully researched and sympathetically depicted. Wilson also gives a touching account of the relationship between Phoebe and Mr Thomas Brown, who is the leading figure at the railway. She also gives a convincing account of the way a family responds to the revelation of a dark secret – in this case touching upon the fate of the children's father. Dean's illustrations often spill across the page and vividly bring to life the heritage railway. There is however one uncharacteristic weakness in the narrative. The build up to the revelation about the father's movements is too protracted. The reader must get almost to the end of an exceptionally long novel before the truth is disclosed.

For young readers who find themselves enmeshed in complex family situations the book will provide a valuable guide. Teachers at KS2 will find the book a means to open the eyes of pupils to difficult and demanding family situations, as well as an example of how to retell a classic children's novel. **RB**

#### Our Beautiful Game

★★★★★

Lou Kuenzler, Faber and Faber, 393pp, 9780571365005, £7.99, pbk  
It is a hundred years this year since the **Football Association** banned women from playing football on their pitches, an exclusion which was only lifted in 1951. Hence this is the third book I have reviewed recently about women playing football in the era of the Great War! The two most recent have been based on the **Dick, Kerr Ladies** team in Preston, formed by the girls who worked at the munitions factory in place of the men who had gone to fight. Polly from a large family



# reviews

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

living hand to mouth by selling coal is football mad, but it is very hard to get a proper game partly for lack of a ball. Sent for an interview for a scullery maid after a chance encounter, she instead finds herself on the factory floor and part of a football team called the Ruffians. She is soon headhunted for a better and more organised team and leaves home finding a different world but one that is full of girls playing football and being taken seriously for so doing.

Polly is a rough diamond, obsessed with the beautiful game of the title, and has to learn some hard lessons, one being that she is part of a team, not the main attraction. Her friendship with both Daph, (her brother's girlfriend who works in the ammunition part of the factory and whose skin has turned yellow because of it), and her complete opposite, Clara who has learned ballet but who also loves football, neatly point out the small class differences but also their strong bond with the shared love of football. Polly's brother Joe is 'Missing, believed killed', and the sad sending to the story does not hide from the reader the danger both he and Daph faced.

Lou Kuenzler has taken the story of Lily Parr, a player for **Dick, Kerr Ladies** and fictionalised it with Polly being based on Lily. This is a fast paced read, with much to digest. The picture of life in the back-to-back houses and extreme poverty of life for families during the war is clearly portrayed as is the difficulties women faced playing football, with many men just coming to see their legs! But also more seriously it shows the way that women stepped up to take over from the men at the Front doing dangerous jobs, but not hiding the fact that this was to be for most a temporary emancipation as they would be sent back to the kitchen. **JF**

## The Perfect Shot

★★★★

Eve Ainsworth, uclanpublishing, 247pp, 978191297530, £7.99, pbk  
Dick, Kerr and Co. are famous not for what they produced but for their Ladies football team.

In this Eve Ainsworth's second novel about the team, their progression to international matches is told alongside the story of Freddie, brother of one of the factory workers, Hettie who is heavily involved in the team. Freddie has returned from the trenches of the First World War in 1917 wounded, not just in his leg resulting in a limp, but more difficult to explain to his parents, what we would now call PTSD. He finds it hard to sleep waking up with nightmares. He also had a head wound which resulted in bad headaches and worse than all this is his guilt over the death of a friend. His new skill with a camera eventually offers him a way out, along with his friendship with a new member of the team, Jessie, who

finds him the opportunity for a job and also a way to deal with his experiences during the war.

This is not then a story just about women's football in its pioneering days, but has the added depth given to it by Freddie's story. Freddie's relationship with his father who has pain of his own but struggles on with his job, is difficult as neither man understands the other as they do not talk to each other, but gradually Freddie learns to talk and also stand up for himself in the newsroom at the paper where he starts work, so the reader sees him visibly progress towards not being defined by his traumatic war experience. Beside this, the reader follows the excitement of each game with enough detail given to satisfy those who know about football and not bore those who are not desperately interested!

It is perhaps difficult now to grasp how ground-breaking this team and others like it were, demonstrating so clearly how the role of women changed for ever during the Great War. Eve Ainsworth, an under-rated writer I feel, has written much more than a football story for girls in a story with real depth but also broad appeal. **JF**

## Striking Out

★★★

Ian Wright and Musa Okwonga, Scholastic, 247pp, 9780702306860, £12.99 hbk

This coming-of-age drama tells the story of Jerome Jackson, a thirteen-year-old, seriously talented footballer who is desperate to reach the highest level.

The story is about struggling to grow up. Even being a gifted footballer is no escape route from the adversity that some young people face. Jerome is a victim of racism and domestic violence, and he also has to choose whether or not to follow his friends into dangerous and illegal situations. For Jerome, this means putting a football career on the line for the sake of his friends. The adversity Jerome faces is well-described, and is believable and dramatic.

Jerome's story is less about football and more about the importance of staying connected to one's community. The joy and pleasure in Jerome's life come from sharing food and listening to music with other members of his neighbourhood, from visiting the barber shop and making time for his mother.

At every stage of Jerome's journey, he is shepherded by an unlikely hero – Ian Wright. Wright's presence in the story is overwhelming. He is impressed by Jerome on the Hackney Marshes and soon bumps into him again when DJ-ing in a local barber shop! He becomes a guiding light for Jerome, helping him overcome the problems he faces at home and at school, using his connections to give Jerome the opportunity to

showcase his undoubted talents. If young readers aren't already aware of Wright's impressive accomplishments, they will be by the end of the book.

It would be easy to criticise this book as a vanity project but that would be unfair to a story that is genuinely engaging throughout, with real moments of drama. Readers will want to find out whether or not Jerome is able to find his own path to the big time, whether they are football fans or not. **SD**

## How to be Human

★★★★

Karen McCombie, Little Tiger, 241pp, 9781788951098 £6.99 pbk

**How to be Human** is a heart-warming story about friendships and finding yourself, with an added sci-fi twist!

Kiki has started senior school and is flattered to be befriended by the popular girls, leaving her old friends behind, until a humiliating incident at a party makes her a laughing stock and the new 'friends' quickly drop her from their gang.

Quirky Wes has never been popular at school and is an easy target for the school bullies. His home life has been unsettled since his Mum left and he spends much of his time alone.

The unlikely duo stumble across an alien spaceship, which has crash landed in the school playground, following unusual electrical storms and flooding in the local area. They are then surprised to meet Star Boy, the owner of the spaceship, who has been hiding out in the school basement and observing them from afar.

The alien is keen to immerse himself fully in human life and, with the help of his new friends, 'Stan Boyd' gets to experience proper human activities, including a school classroom, visiting a carpet shop and riding on a bus for the first time!

Karen McCombie weaves an insightful tale with situations that all readers will identify with; new schools, choosing the right friends and social media nightmares, to name but a few. There are some full 'laugh out loud' scenarios too, as Kiki and Wes try to explain the human world to their new friend, alongside touching moments, while they discover what is most important to them, in both home and school relationships.

Ultimately, their alien encounter encourages Kiki and Wes to gain the confidence needed to stand up for themselves and their true friends, with the ending indicating potential future adventures for them and Star Boy. I, for one, can't wait to read more! **AH**

## The Raven Heir

★★★★

Stephanie Burgis, Bloomsbury, 978152661445, 272pp, £6.99 pbk  
Stephanie Burgis' new fantasy adventure features transformation scenes T H White would be proud of. Cordelia, her central character, has the ability – more than that, an



almost constant urge – to transform into animals – swift, mouse, wolf, bear, any and all. The descriptions will fill readers with a real sense of wild creatures and their wild natures, though any joy in this for Cordelia is quickly replaced by desperate necessity as she and her triplet brother and sister are forced to flee from the enchanted forest castle that has been their home since they were born. One of them is the heir to the Raven Crown and rival factions in a generations-long civil war are keen to put whichever it is on the throne as a puppet ruler, or to prevent that possibility, permanently. As they leave the forest for the first time, thanks to her special relationship with nature, Cordelia can physically feel the agony of hills and fields that have been the setting for so many bloody battles. As with the best quests, the ability to make things right rests with her, but it will come at huge cost. The presence on the quest of Giles, always ready to break into song, and Rosalind, equally ready to go into battle, lightens what might have been a sombre adventure, and the triplet's relationship is one of the joys of the book, their frequent exasperation with Cordelia, whatever form she happens to be in, is very well observed. Fantasy adventures generally tell us a lot about our own world and while Burgis has said the Wars of the Roses were the inspiration for her story, it will leave readers with a sense of the urgency of protecting nature and the overwhelming importance of love and unity that is very powerful. **MMA**

## The Dream House

★★★★★

Laura Dockrill, ill.Gwen Millward, Piccadilly, 110pp, 978 1 84812 945 0, £9.99

Information from the publisher calls this book a 'sketchbook novella', an excellent description of a short-ish story with lots of black and white pictures, supposedly drawn by the main character himself. Rex is a very sensitive lad, who has just lost his father to cancer, and it has affected him very badly. He is living inside his head these days, not eating much,

nor sleeping, and not talking either, unable to express his feelings to his Godfather, Sparky, another highly sensitive person with whom he is staying. Sparky tries his best to bring Rex out of his misery, but he also understands that Rex must take his own time. The text, written by a poet in a very beautiful and vivid style, is matched by the delicate illustrations. At Sparky's house, where Rex has often visited, there is a little shed in the garden that has always been his special place, built by his Dad and Sparky, always best friends, and filled with Rex's favourite things. He often sits in the house and dreams and is able to be himself, but this visit he must wait until he is ready before going in. Having met local boy, Sidney, a rather rough and ready character, the two of them finally go into the Dream House, and Sidney comes to represent the Dad he has lost, who also had a similar personality. The two of them become wary friends. In the end, there is a poignant scene where Rex reads a letter written to him from his Dad, an intensely moving letter that finally brings him relief and the ability to cry. The entire book is moving in the extreme, and we see Rex beginning the process of moving through intense grief to acceptance. Not an easy read, but a beautifully written and drawn description of one boy's journey. **ES**

### The Memory Thieves

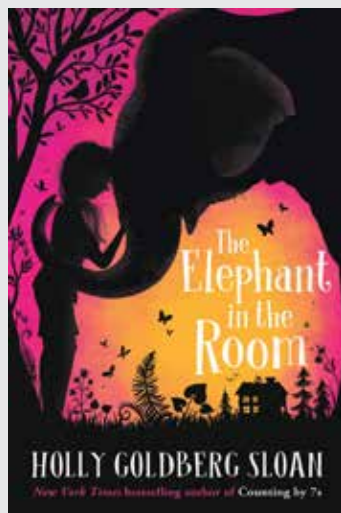
★★★★

Darren Simpson, ill. Matt Saunders, Usborne, 297pp, £7.99 pbk

Cyan can't remember a time when he did not live at the Elsewhere Sanctuary. He knows he was sent there as a small child in order to be treated for a traumatic experience, the idea being that the Sanctuary provides treatment that helps you forget and then lead a happy and carefree life. However Cyan begins to wonder about his past when he discovers some mysterious quotes on some whale bones; then there is a new resident at the facility, called Jonquil, who still has memories and questions whether she wants to forget everything that has happened. When Jonquil disappears and Cyan starts to have strange memories, after he stops taking his medication, things begin to take a very sinister turn. The young people are left wondering what is really going on and whether they are getting the treatment that they really need.

The plot of this story leads us to ask so many questions about how children are treated, what support and treatment do people need after traumatic experiences and most importantly does anyone have the right to virtually imprison young people and wipe out their memories? We live in a world where mental health is very important and questions about how patients are treated is of vital

importance. The world that has been created here, uses the children as guinea pigs (or lab rats, as Cyan calls them) which is horrendous in the lack of real concern that the director of the facility shows for the patients. He sees them as a step towards producing a treatment for adults that will bring in a lot of money. This is a story that will hopefully lead to open and wide-ranging discussions about the plot and how it relates to the real world. This is something that we all need to think about and the books needs a wide audience, to bring the issues into the open. It is a great read for KS3 pupils. **MP**



### The Elephant in the Room

★★★★★

Holly Goldberg Sloan, Piccadilly Press, 256pp, 978-1800780002, £6.99 pbk

Fans of Holly Goldberg Sloan's heart-warming, life-affirming novels will find many of her favourite themes in her new book. Here are families remade and reunited, and outsiders finding new friends. Sila Tekin lives with her dad in Oregon, both of them longing for the day when her mum can return from Turkey. Mum has had to go back to her old home to sort out problems with her immigration status. A trip that was meant to take eight days has turned into one of 200+ and there's no end in sight. Sila's school knows nothing of this, but her teachers can see that something is wrong. Their solution is to put her into a special peer programme pairing her with another silent child. Mateo is autistic and has decided that not speaking is the only way to blend in at school. Their relationship develops thanks to more unexpected and very unusual friendships, those between Sila and Gio Gardino, a widower in his sixties; and Gio's recently acquired elephant, Veda. Yes, as well as the metaphorical ones, there is an actual elephant in the room (or more accurately on Gio's large, walled estate - he won a fortune in a lottery syndicate at the factory where he used to work).

A screenwriter, Goldberg Sloan is not afraid to create bold cinematic situations like this, but she's equally good at depicting the small things that tell us so much about her characters and their inner lives and the story is a beautifully sensitive portrayal of family love and the power of friendship to transform lives. The book's final lines spell out how important it is to keep going, to keep hoping and to believe in the possibility of change. That's the reward she gives her characters, and their happiness will spread to her readers too. **LS**

### The Red Gloves and Other Stories

★★★★

Catherine Fisher, Firefly, 192pp, 9781913102685, £12.99 hbk

Catherine Fisher remains supremely able at injecting her own particular brand of menacing fantasy even into the shortest of stories. Her protagonists are always children, conscious where others are not of shadows that don't quite make sense, mirrors that reflect more than they should and ancient myths intent on re-emerging in contemporary backgrounds. The nine stories in this collection do not have the same force of her longer novels but they are still highly readable and engaging. There is no set formula; one tale features a pair of haunted gloves, another goes into dream territory and a third features a white hare that is rather more than she seems. Some stories are set in the past, others come from today where characters still travel on the school bus and parents worry about homework not completed. In every case, she creates a fictional world like ours in many ways but also capable of suddenly seeming alarmingly different at the turn of a page. Black and white illustrations at the start of each story from an unattributed artist add to the overall spooky effect.

The author was appointed the first **Wales Young People's Laureate** from 2011 for two years. Before that she won the Cardiff International Poetry Competition. Her first of many novels was published in 1990, and many have since been widely translated. On this showing there seem bound to be many more equally high-quality titles still to come. **NT**

### The Book of Stolen Dreams

★★★★★

David Farr, ill. Kristina Kister, Usborne, 400pp, 9781801310840, £12.99 hbk

Rachel and Robert Klein live with their parents and live normal lives; that is, until the dictator Charles Malstain invades their homeland and bans children from going to school and even going out. When their librarian father is sent to a prison camp, for not handing over a very special book to the secret police, their lives change dramatically. Firstly, their mother dies and then they are sent to an orphanage. It is Robert, who is two years older than his sister, who decides to try and find their father and help him escape.

Before he knows it, he is involved in a plot to kill Charles Malstain and in a search for the mysterious 'Book of Stolen Dreams'; the very book that his father would not hand over to the authorities. Meanwhile, Rachel has escaped from the home and is on the trail of her brother. Through a series of adventures and times of real danger the children must attempt to find each other, solve the mystery of the book and perhaps even save their homeland.

This is a truly magnificent story, which although it has elements of magic and make-believe, also brings to mind the brutal dictatorships in Germany and Russia during the 1930s. There is a real sense of horror at the gradual changes that are made to society and the way that most of the population is drawn into accepting the inevitable. The two children are remarkable in their desire to solve the mystery of the book and find their father. They face up to a massive range of challenges and gradually learn who they can trust and who is a possible danger. This is one of my favourite books of the year so far; it combines a real sense of danger and horror, with just the right amount of fantasy and hope. The target audience of KS2 and KS3 will find it exhilarating and challenging at the same time. **MP**

### This Book is Cruelty-Free

★★★★★

Linda Newbery, ill. Josephine Skapare. Pavilion 208pp, 978-1-84365-490-2 £7.99 pbk

Linda Newbery is well known as a writer of YA and adult fiction, but now she turns to a subject close to her heart for her first foray into non-fiction. She says that anyone who follows her on social media will know that she is fervently against hunting and cruel animal sports, is a long-term supporter of several welfare and environmental charities, and, having been a vegetarian most of her life, is now vegan. So this is a guide for any reader who is concerned about how we treat animals and wildlife, and gives practical hints on how we can change the way we live.

We should look carefully at what we eat, wear, and use, to make sure that it has no adverse effect on animals, and get to know the brands we can trust. She points out that there are no penalties for getting it wrong by mistake, but any little effort will help to make difference. We can, though, decide to buy fewer clothes, however ethically sourced, wear each item as many times as we can, and dispose of them thoughtfully when they're worn out. We all know 3 'R's: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, but there are others: Refuse, Repurpose, Repair, Rethink. On and around 'Black Friday', when we are bombarded with special offers and encouragement to buy, we can Refuse: ethical groups in some countries call this 'Buy Nothing Day'. We can't ever throw things away - there is no 'Away': it all goes somewhere, and landfill is not a good solution.

## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

Ecosystems are covered, and the importance of maintaining a balance of species may mean that predators are sometimes needed. Here is a fascinating fact: earthworms, who help break down the soil, may be more important than giant pandas! The presentation is good: there are double-page spreads where important facts are written in a large font, or in boxes, or speech bubbles, and other sections where an issue is described in more depth – a young person can either dip in or read solidly.

This is an important book, which will be very interesting and useful to the increasing number of young people who seriously care for the future of wildlife and our planet. **DB**

### Torn Apart: The partition of India, 1947

★★★★★

Swapna Haddow, Scholastic, 119pp, 978 0 702300 41 7, £4.99, pbk

Set in Delhi in October 1947 as India gains independence from Britain, this book shows the impact of partition and the ensuing unprecedented mass movement of people by providing an insight into the impact on individual lives through the fictional stories of two boys.

We meet Ibrahim first of all; he is from a wealthy Muslim family who are about to flee Delhi for Pakistan. Ibrahim very quickly becomes separated from his parents and sister and thrust into a volatile, perilous situation. Finding himself at the train station he tries to join others escaping the city and, while there, witnesses the horror of a trainload of murdered Hindus spilling onto the platform. This incident provokes understandable rage from Hindu onlookers meaning Ibrahim, an unprotected Muslim child, is now in even greater danger. Meanwhile he is being watched by Amar, a Hindu Street child, armed with a catapult and on the lookout for a suitable wealthy Muslim victim for reasons of his own.

Ibrahim appeals to Amar for help and a connection gradually forms between them. Amar protects Ibrahim, helps him hide, feeds and disguises him, and although he is unable to take him to Pakistan he helps him find safety at a refugee camp.

The story moves on with chapters narrated alternately by the two protagonists. The reason for Amar's anger is gradually revealed as we find out about the friend he lost.

There are glimpses of happier times before partition as well with shared memories of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs living peacefully as neighbours and enjoying each other's festivals.

Although a serious subject, there are touches of humour, for example where Ibrahim tries to get into role as a Hindu beggar and overacts, adopting an unnecessary and rather conspicuous limp.

This book tells an important story

in an accessible way, describing a key event in world history with which many children in UK will have direct family links. It may lead to a broader look at the impact of British Imperialism and its aftermath and could also lead to consideration of the ways people with different backgrounds and beliefs still have much in common.

The back of the book includes a brief timeline and useful glossary of Indian vocabulary. The cover artwork by 'Two Dots' Creative studio is very striking and perfectly matched to the story. **SMc**

### Happy Here

★★★★

Sharna Jackson et al., Knights Of, 304 pp, 978 1 9133111 6 2, £6.99, pbk

This short story collection by young black writers is the result of a joint project between **BookTrust**, the **Centre for Literacy in Primary Education**, and the publishers **Knights Of**. There are ten writers and ten illustrators represented, some have been published before and some have not. The title of the collection does not so much establish happiness as a common theme as perhaps alert the reader to themes that might be expected from black writers that are deliberately not explored here, like racial discrimination and protest. As Sharna Jackson puts it in her foreword, thinking about stories in her own reading as a child: 'Where were the stories about how funny and fascinating 'normal' life could be?... Where was the love, where was the joy?' And, 'There is way more to being Black than just the colour of our skin and the struggles that come with it.' The collection is a varied one. There is a detective story that takes place on a cruise ship. A school sci-fi resurrects the choose-your-own-adventure format. Another features black super-heroes based on Caribbean culture; and Anansi turns up in a fantasy comedy about an agency which offers real life experiences to fairy tale characters. There are stories and poems, too, dealing with more everyday themes of friendship, separated families and young love. It's an enjoyable read. However, I am not sure about the use of an illustrator for each story. The opportunity is welcome but it is so restricted in space and format that there is little possibility of the illustrator developing a real contribution to their story, and the mixture of styles throughout the book seems awkward. **CB**

### The Song that Sings Us

★★★★★

Nicola Davies, ill. Jackie Morris, Firefly, 416pp, 978 1 913102 77 7, £14.99, hbk

This is a dystopia with a difference. Like many authors, Nicola Davies offers a warning of where our present

might lead us in the future, but she also suggests a time that never was. Back then, even if we could not talk to the animals like Dr Dolittle, some of us could at least listen to them. By the time the story begins, however, that time is long past. The Automators are in power and, bent on the ruthless destruction and exploitation of natural resources, are hunting down the last vestige of the 'listeners' and erasing their powers. At just under 400 pages, this is a novel of epic proportions, and, if the topography and politics of its alternative world is sketched in, it is packed with incident and character, and driven along at roaring pace, fuelled by authorial rage at the way we have treated the natural world and a heartfelt longing for reunion. It begins with an assault on an isolated cottage defended by a mother and her three children: Ma, Harlon, Ash and Xenon. The children are separated as they flee, leaving Ma alone to fight off the attackers, and the length of the novel is explained and mitigated by the four narratives that subsequently unwind and interweave. These take us to remote locations to meet the resistance, and into the urban heart of the Automator empire. The resistance is made up of indigenous peoples and some of the animals themselves. For animals can not only talk to those humans who can listen but can crew the ships that fetch ice from the polar regions. There is, as you might expect, flight, capture, battle, loyalty and treachery, eloquence and cunning, hidden pasts, ancient grudges, sibling rivalry, an Armageddon weapon and even a version of a treasure map. And some poetry. And Jackie Morris illustrations. Altogether, a very heady mix. **CB**

### The Amazing Edie Eckhart

★★★★★

Rosie Jones, Hodder Children's Books, 240pp, 978-1444958348, £6.99 pbk

Edie Eckhart is eleven years old. She and her best friend Oscar, from whom she is inseparable – or so she thinks – are due to start secondary school very soon. Edie also has cerebral palsy. She can walk but her gait is described by the author as a bit wobbly. When she and Oscar reach school she discovers to her horror that the two of them have been placed in different forms. Can Edie cope? How will this new situation change their friendship? What new interest will the two of them discover?

As a character Edie jumps off the page. She will grab the reader's attention from the first page of Jones's book to the last. Disability plays a central part in this novel. However, the emphasis on disability, though pronounced, is carefully restrained from blocking out other aspects of the schoolchildren's lives. Jones for example includes a Lesbian relationship in her novel. There is also among the characters a disabled adult.

Jones uses Edie's disability to make two important points rarely

covered in children's literature. She introduces the idea of what she calls 'the disability card'. When Edie wants to escape from some task or other, she can advance her disability as an argument for avoiding the task, however unjustifiably. On one occasion Edie does play this card dishonestly, an incident which this reviewer found distasteful. Later Jones has Edie regret this action. Jones poses a question which is most intriguing. One of the children asks Edie if she were not disabled what sort of person would she be. Any disabled reader will ponder that question. **RB**

### No Man's Land

★★★★★

Joanna Nadin, uclanpublishing, 288pp, 978 1 912979 61 5, £7.99 pbk

Mrs King has a job on her hands. She's teaching Year 6 (including Alan) about the terrors of World War I – from soldiers' rotten feet and rats as big as cats in the trenches to Franz Ferdinand and how it all started. 'Wars don't come from nowhere,' she says. That's important to Year 6 since, as Alan knows, his own country is on the edge of war. He lives in the UK, except this UK is now called Albion and the coming conflict is Albion versus The Rest of the World. Especially Mainland Europe. He's not sure whose side he's meant to be on. Next morning, Mrs King is gone. No explanation. And she's not the first to be disappeared.

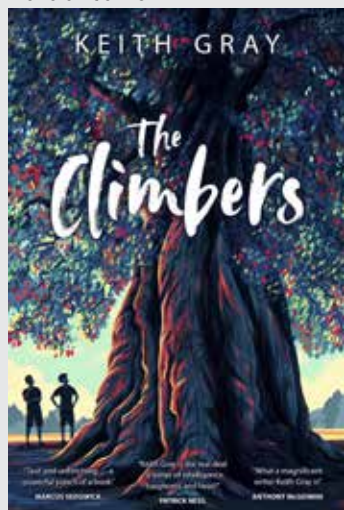
Alan was named after Alan Turing – his Dad's job is something to do with secrets and codes, which also fascinate Alan. The build-up to war began before Alan was born, when 'England decided it didn't like Europe any more'. England turned into Albion, Scotland and Cornwall left the Union and became Caledonia and Kernow. People whisper about the Resistance, or mutter that so-and-so is a Traitor. Laws dictate that women and girls must be chaperoned at all times. Cities have adopted names from older times – the capital is now Londinium while Alan lives in Brigstowe, which once was Bristol.

Any adult reader will see that all this began with something very like Brexit – though the word is never used. It is doubtful whether readers of 9+, the age the publishers suggest for the novel, will know much of the Referendum promises of politicians and the complex consequences of the vote. Maybe they will simply read the novel as a fictional dystopia.

Alan's Mum died in giving birth to Sam, now aged 5. As war approaches, Dad decides it's time to take his boys to safety with friends in Kernow. They head for a rural commune, largely made up of women and girls, just across the Tamar, in an area known as No Man's Land. Dad delivers the boys and then he's gone – back to whatever it is he does. Much of the rest of the novel plays out against the routines and relationships of life in the commune. Some of the women believe that it's males – all

males – who caused the war, and only females will get the country out of it; the novel's title echoes their belief. The women meet in private – perhaps to plot. The few males are often confused, even aggressive. Alan finds the tension between the genders uncomfortable – he is lonely, but as the days pass, he's gently welcomed by some of the women, and 12-year-old Poppy becomes a strong friend. Brother Sam takes some looking after too – he's unusually articulate and aware of others for his years. Alan soon enjoys working around the farm, milking the goats, swimming in the river and learning to row. But he fears for his Dad's safety and when coded messages no longer arrive from Albion, Alan and Sam slip away from the commune one night to search for their father.

That's the set-up for a climax which largely avoids any direct action in a war zone. The story is told in short chapters, often through readily accessible dialogue. Serious issues underlie the narrative: racism, immigration, gender stereotyping, the deceptions of arrogant and autocratic government; and what being a hero might entail for a young person. Michael Rosen's poem, *Fascism*; I sometimes fear... is set as a warning Foreword. 'Fascism arrives as your friend,' – but one who brings 'militias, mass imprisonments, transportations, war and persecution'. This is strong stuff for readers of 9+. **BfK** teachers and parents will need to decide what their children might make of it all. **GF**



### The Climbers

★★★★

Keith Gray, Barrington Stoke, 132pp, 978 1 78112 999 9, £7.99 pbk

Here's another classy novel from Barrington Stoke, continuing to prove that a short novel in brief chapters and a stripped-down vocabulary, in the hands of novelists at the top of their game, can serve up an exciting and thought provoking read. Keith

Gray has history in the portrayal of how young men think and act: the bravado and the vulnerability. This tale of teenage rivalry is told by Sully, who finds his claim to be the best climber in the village challenged by an incomer known only by the name of the town he has come from, Nottingham. Perfectly put together in six chapters that move from tree to tree across the recreation ground, it features both the climbing contests themselves, the way that Sully deals with the challenge to his self-esteem and his place in the hierarchy of the village kids, and his developing understanding of himself and Nottingham that comes at a cost to both of them. A thrilling mix of suspense and psycho-drama, all in just over a hundred pages. **CB**

### Shadow Town

★★★★

Richard Lambert, *Everything With Words*, 381pp, 978 1 911427 22 3, £7.99 pbk

Toby Parker is loathed by his classmates. It's not hard to see why; he makes unfunny jokes at their expense in class, he hates everything about his school, he longs to make a friend yet when he's reached out and tried 'to use some words they came out wrong'. 13-year-old Toby is desperate for his Dad's approval, but his efforts to impress are met with indifference or sarcasm. 'Life isn't fair' is his father's only encouragement. Dad is a writer specialising in 'curses and put-downs' for TV and Radio; recently he's become a speech-writer for the government. (Any Downing Street model come to mind?) When he's not writing professionally, he's working obsessively on a fantasy novel about a land called Balthasar.

Dad's favourite domestic put-down is 'Are you deliberately being stupid?' used as cruelly to his wife as to Toby. Mum is drained of life, struggling to offer Toby loving support, finding escape only in her climate change activism. She glues herself to a bank during a demo, leading to her arrest, a marital showdown and a decision to divorce. So Toby's fragile world is close to demolition. His only friend is Alfred, a cat belonging to the family's lodger, Mrs Papadopoulos, a Greek opera singer.

Toby and his Mum move to a new location; Alfred chooses to come along as well. One night, Toby is out for a walk with Alfred, when the cat disappears down some road works – a trench with an entrance to a tunnel at the end. Toby goes in pursuit, and before he knows it, he's slipped through the tunnel from our world into another. Readers have already met a being from this otherworld in the shifting shape of a mysterious shadow, seemingly driven by hatred in all its actions. That shadow is soon to reappear in the plot, which plays out throughout the remainder of the novel in the land Toby has just entered. The country's name is – Balthasar.

Toby is in immediate danger. He's found himself in a raging wildfire on a forested mountainside where he witnesses a brutal stabbing with the corpse hurled over a cliff edge. The murderer catches sight of Toby – so now he's a potential victim himself. The people of this otherworld all speak contemporary English. Yet they've never heard of mobile phones or buses or electricity and, despite the modern idiom, this seems to be a medieval society, governed with absolute power by rulers who think nothing of chopping off the hand of a starving child when her father steals food. Soon, Toby meets Tamurlaine, a girl some three years older than himself; she too seems lost, with no memory of her past. The pair, along with the intrepid Alfred, are caught up in a series of adventures as they make their way to the city and its castle, the seat of power. Toby has learned that the only way he can return to his own world is through the city's Dreamers, who might use their skills to dream him home. Tamurlaine is hunting for her own history, which in due course reveals a role for her which could shape the lives of everyone in her troubled homeland.

In effect, both are searching for their own identities – to become the people they need to be. Toby and Tamurlaine change and grow through the challenges they endure. Toby now looks beyond himself, not least through his concern for Tamurlaine and for her country's persecuted underclass. He is ready to return home with a more perceptive love for his mother – and even an increased understanding of the bitterness which consumes his father. In no way does Lambert suggest a glib expectation of living happily ever after.

The novel's length may test the stamina of some readers in the publishers' suggested 9+ age range, but there is page-turning excitement in the narrative; and, as readers of Lambert's debut novel, *The Wolf Road*, will anticipate, this wandering tale often surprises in its poetic exploration of language. **GF**

### A Different Sort of Normal

★★★★

Abigail Balfe, *Puffin*, 978-0241508794, 240pp, £8.99 pbk

This book is a semi-autobiographical non-fiction story about living with autism and about the realisation on the part of the protagonist Abi that she is not only autistic but also gay. The journey that the reader undertakes with Abi is gloriously non-linear. The narrative follows the somewhat erratic course of Abi's thoughts as one line of recollection or reasoning is suddenly abandoned in favour of another. This effect is somewhat disjointed but wholly natural and convincing. One of Abi's novel terminologies is to call people who are not autistic 'allistic'.

Balfe's most remarkable achievement is that in her book she uses clear, unpretentious and colloquial language to describe

phenomena that are anything but congenial, such as bullying, a debilitating fear of using public toilets (a characteristic of autistic people that is all too common but which is rarely acknowledged let alone discussed), the menstrual cycle and the suitability of various associated products (another topic rarely discussed in detail for this age group), gender identity and sexuality. The author also freely admits that as a teenager she made various mistakes. She also admits with disarming honesty that even as an adult she finds certain situations challenging and has to resort to various strategies to deal with them. Her cartoons are vivid and memorable and help in the explanation of some difficult themes.

In this reviewer's opinion this book will be useful to teachers of children at any stage from upper KS2, whether those children are autistic or allistic. **RB**

### Julia and the Shark

★★★★

Kiran Millwood Hargrave, *ill.* Tom de Freston, *Orion*, 224pp, 9781510107786, £12.99 hbk

Almost ten-year old Julia is uprooted from Cornwall to a lighthouse in the Shetlands. Once there she establishes a relationship with Kin, a lone bullied boy her own age. Her father repairs the lighthouse and her equally adoring mother continues with her work as a gifted marine biologist. So far, so agreeable, but Hargrave wants to do more than merely provide a pleasantly escapist story. Julia gradually becomes aware that her mother's alarmingly 'dazzlebright' voice and general over-the-top behavior is entering into dangerous bi-polar territory. Hostile local children also make her friendship with Kin, who has Indiana heritage, increasingly fraught. And her mother's search for the very special Greenland shark, that can live up to four hundred years, is getting progressively unhinged.

This story is narrated as if by Julia herself and reads well. The powerful half-abstract black and white illustration by Hargrave's artist husband working alongside his wife for the first time add to the generally unsettling effect, coming to a climax towards the end with pictures at one stage outnumbering text. Yet this also happens at the weakest part of an otherwise expertly told story, with the author going for unconvincing melodrama at sea better suited to the end of an Enid Byton adventures story than to anything closer to the real life. While *Moby Dick* always demands the brooding presence of the whale, Hargrave could easily have left the Greenland Shark behind and simply concentrated on what she is so good at here and in her previous novels: telling a story where all the characters ring true while coping with some of the inevitable ups and downs experienced by contemporary parents and children on their mutual journey together. **NT**

## 14+ Secondary/Adult

### The Upper World

★★★★

Femi Fadugba, Penguin, 348pp, 9780241505618 £7.99 pbk

Fadugba has said in interview that he wants his writing both to entertain and to educate. **The Upper World** is his attempt to do both those things: quantum physics and London street life collide in a quest to travel to the future and change one single moment.

The book has dual narrators - Esso in the present day and Rhia, 15 years in the future. Esso is struggling both to avoid being swallowed by the gang warfare which rages around him and to deal with his love for his classmate Nadia. Rhia, rebellious, bitter, institutionalised in a care system which neither sees nor understands her, longs to know about the parents she has never met. When their timelines bisect each other, both in the present day, the now Dr.Esso tutors her in physics to educate her about the possibilities of time travel and they must both make decisions about how they can change the trajectory of a single, fateful bullet.

This is a complex and challenging read and not for the faint-hearted: street slang is authentic and contributes significantly to the vividly threatening yet often humorous rendition of teenage life in challenging inner city areas. Characters are well realised and life in care is exposed with its flaws and burdens, its lack of fine-tuning to recognise and develop exceptional talent like Rhia's. The narrative line moves at a fast tempo and readers must be aware of small details and the scientific and mathematical content, which Fadugba is at great pains to elucidate, even including Appendices at the end of the story. **The Upper World** is a fast-paced thriller with its roots in gangland but its reach extending beyond the dimension we know and understand. As the book progresses the focus narrows to the single moment which Esso seeks to change and this is a major suspension of disbelief for the reader, supported by Fadugba's talents.

Little wonder that Netflix have snapped up the film rights - this is an intensely - and deliberately? -cinematic book which twists and turns away from everyday life to one in which new capabilities are born. **VR**

### The Sound Of Everything

★★★★

Rebecca Henry, *Everything With Words*, 372pp, 978-1-911427-15-5, £8.99 pbk

Kadie Hunte is, by her own admission, a difficult character - but then she has every reason to be. She has lived in a succession of foster homes since her mother died and her father vanished from her life and she has learned that

trust is a risky commodity, likely to bring with it a significant amount of betrayal. And so she acts, refusing to accept support or conciliation, destroying relationships before they can destroy her. She has her inviolate rules and to abandon them is to suffer and be destroyed.

Rebecca Henry has created a complex, explosive character and taken us to live inside her head. The intensity of the confrontations she immerses us in is ceaseless, the angry drip of a leaking tap, the wrench of a mundane exchange into a high velocity verbal weapon. Music- listened to and written -stops the barrage. All the things which her head refuses to let her feel seep into her raps and songs. Her other coping mechanism is Emerson, her knife, her route to self-harming.

Then her self-imposed isolation from all that could nurture her is put under severe strain as a result of a compassionate and caring foster mother, Charmaine, a group of boys at school who love her music and invite her into their clique in order to work with her and, finally, Dayan, who she finally accepts as a friend. Her path is still paved with difficulty - her behaviour marks her out and she is relentlessly and viciously bullied on social media, which Henry portrays with complete veracity. But when Dayan is beaten up she supports him and, in turn, when she is expelled for her desperate use of Emerson to escape her tormentors but forgiven by Charmaine she realises that it is time to take the first very tentative steps towards abandoning her internal emotional rules.

This is a keenly observed and high-octane narrative in which Henry engages both our sympathy and our frustrations with Kadie. At times the patois in which the characters converse is somewhat mystifying but it gives a further ring of authenticity to what is a compelling and thought-provoking literary debut. **VR**

### In The Wild Light

★★★★

Jeff Zentner, *Andersen Press*, 432pp, 978-1839130847, £7.99 pbk

Cash and Delaney are best friends. Cash's mother has died some years before the story opens as a result of a drug overdose. Cash is haunted by the memory of his mother's death. The mother of Delaney is currently addicted to drugs. Cash lives with his maternal grandparents, whom he adores. His father is notably absent from the plot.

Delaney makes a remarkable discovery. In a cave she finds a fungus from which it is possible to synthesise a new form of penicillin. On the basis of her discovery she is offered a scholarship to Middleford Academy, an elite American high school. Delaney accepts the scholarship on

one condition, that the Academy also offers a funded scholarship to Cash, a condition which this reviewer found to strain the boundaries of credibility. When the Academy makes the offer, the question is whether Cash will accept it? And if he does, what lessons will he learn at this elite place of education?

Zentner's novel delivers a powerful exploration of the feeling of grief, and just how raw that sentiment can become. The book also delivers a memorable demonstration of the power that words can have to stir and to heal. The book is also a rarity in that it does not deride or mock teenagers who nurture ambitions in academic fields. Finally Zentner must be applauded for creating some convincing relationships between different generations. At times this book is genuinely painful to read. But it will unfailingly uplift the reader as it reaches its conclusions. **RB**

### The Trial

★★★

Laura Bates, *Simon and Schuster*, 272pp, 978-1471187575, £7.99 pbk

Oak Ridge High School is an elite American institution with a touring basketball team and a squad of cheerleaders. The basketball team is male, the cheerleaders are all female. On the way back from a countryside tour on the private jet belonging to the rich family of one of the players the aircraft crashes. By sheer good luck the plane crashes on a desert isle. All those aboard the aircraft survive, with the exception of the pilot of the plane and the team coach, both of course figures of authority. It now remains to be seen how the young castaways can survive and what secrets the island may reveal concerning its inhabitants. It will also be necessary to determine exactly what happened at the party staged to celebrate the end of the basketball tour.

This novel is a story about survival, with more than an echo of *Lost* and *The Lord of the Flies*, a reference being explicitly made to Golding's masterpiece. When the answers to the relevant questions emerge, they make for a stunning denouement. However, the progress towards this resolution is too slow. The pace is not likely to sustain a reader's unflagging interest. The lack of narrative impetus came as a special disappointment to one who has read Bates's first YA novel, where the pace was admirably sustained. The characterisation of the present book is strong, especially the depiction of Haley Larkin the narrator, a prospective journalist. Haley is a participant in the trip only for a somewhat artificial reason. Her guidance counsellor has told her that being one of the cheerleading squad would enhance her Ivy League application. For her part Haley would have opted for the debating team. **RB**



### Splinters of Sunshine

★★★★

Patrice Lawrence, *Hodder Children's Books*, 321pp, 978 1 4449 6523 0, £7.99 pbk

Spey and his Mum have always been a self-sufficient unit with no father figure on the horizon. Lawrence creates their close relationship beautifully, walking the fine line between love and sentimentality in fine style. There's arch humour, openness and an awareness of Black issues which is rooted in Spey but which succeeds in avoiding dogma. Therefore, it comes as a huge shock when Spey comes downstairs on Christmas morning to find a strange man asleep on the sofa. The shock level ramps up even further when Spey's mother tells him that the man is Benni, his father, out of jail after serving several sentences during the years that Spey has been growing up.

Spey is understandably shocked at this secret his mother has been keeping and, initially wants nothing to do with Benni, until he receives a mysterious letter from Dee, a childhood friend, who has sent him half of the collage they made together when they were children. When he begins to look for her and runs into her with a notorious local drug dealer he begins to worry that she has been drawn into the world of county lines and reluctantly enlists his father's support to try to find out where she is living and get her away from the world of drugs, which her mother succumbed to and consequently became an addict.

The narrative follows their search through the milestones of Social Care, to whom Dee was consigned after the death of her beloved grandmother, who had brought Dee up in her mother's absence. The bleakness of Dee's existence in the charge of the authorities is made clear and is paralleled with Benni's experiences in prison. Lawrence takes care to show that neither of them are bad people, but rather victims of their

circumstances and vulnerabilities. This is done with a clear eye—there is no exemption from blame where it is due. Their stories are harrowing—there are too many nets for them to slip through.

The construction of the book is largely done through a dual narration, shared between Dee and Spey. Dee's love of flowers runs through her sections, which are beautifully illustrated and it is these illustrations which finally help Spey to track her down, trapped in a squalid cellar and compelled to deal drugs, treated as the property of a county lines cartel. His contact with his father enables some small level of trust to be developed, which is shattered when Benni uses Spey to deflect a gangster's wrath against him.

**Splinters of Sunshine** is difficult to put down. It is not only a thriller and a dangerous road trip but also an indictment of the authorities' failure to control what harms young people who have no reliable family support. It is, despite its trawl through the worst detritus of society, a story of hope—hence the title. Dee is rescued, several villains are brought to justice and Spey's relationship with his mother remains the touchstone of his life. The book ends with a letter from Benni to Spey in which he promises he will always leave the door open on their relationship in case Spey ever wants to see him again—and somehow, the reader is left with the hope that he will. **VR**

### The Outrage

★★★★

William Hussey, *Usborne*, 413pp, 978 1 4749 6618 4, £7.99 pbk  
Chapter One. We're in a Grammar School classroom of 17-year-olds, 30 years on from our present. Most young people in this world 'graduate' at 13, and if they get work at all it will be in a job so punishing that their bodies, and their minds, are worn out by their early 20s. The students in that classroom may be an elite, but their reading, their viewing, their words, their appearance down to the length of their hair—all are dictated and monitored by the Protectorate. The classroom is being routinely searched by a new Green Jacket (aka Filth-Finder) a monster who punches one of Gabriel's friends, June, in the stomach for what he sees as a moment's lack of due respect. Gabe is anxious; he's hiding a disc of a banned film made way back in more liberal times—our times, in fact—and he needs to get rid of it before the constable reaches his desk. If the disc is found, Gabe will end up in a Re-Purification camp for degenerates.

Gabe's England may well remind readers of Orwell's **1984**. It's a waste land. Deserted cities lie in ruins, there's poverty, sickness (and no medicines), astronomic inflation and food rationing. Only those who serve the Protectorate prosper—

their reward for rescuing the nation from decadence at the time of **The Outrage**. Within this political context, William Hussey's sustained focus is on the suppression of sexual freedom. In his Afterword, he regrets his own childhood, growing up gay in the 80s and 90s, 'my life consumed with needless misery and self-loathing'. **The Outrage** is his passionate contribution to the ongoing fight: 'We stand with all LGBTQ+ people who live under oppressive regimes. We call for their liberation and while doing so, we must be vigilant about the fragility of those rights we have won.'

His central characters—four classmates of Gabe—form the Rebels, a neatly representative group in that they comprise a lesbian couple, a hetero couple, and Gabe and Eric, a newcomer to the school. Their relationship develops throughout the novel, despite Eric's father's position as a chief inspector at Degenerate Investigations. Then there's Albert, who stands somewhat apart struggling, we learn, with a decision to transgender.

Gabe tells the story, with an energy which, he knows, reflects the personality of his father when he was Gabe's age; 'Sensitive, reckless and just a bit too hot-headed for my own good'. His narrative is charged with excitement, violence, surprise, betrayal, deception, incarceration, escape. There's hope and despair—and always the shadow of discovery and retribution. The book's Trigger Warning (homophobia, ethnic cleansing, self-harm and more) is deserved.

There is a difficult tension in the novel. The excitement and pace of an absorbing thriller are tempered by Hussey's message about sexual oppression. So when the Rebels have been watching old movies (readers will recognise the titles) Gabe has discovered hidden in an abandoned library, they talk about our own age with its freedoms they can hardly credit. After they have viewed *Disclosure*, they speak of what they have seen in well-organised arguments, one developing from another. Their dialogue reads like a considered didactic presentation, rather than the exploratory words of bright 17-year-olds—or adults, for that matter—discovering what they think through what they see they have said.

Ironically, in such passages, Hussey's message risks being at its least convincing. I'm unsure also of his repeated narrative technique in leaving readers cliff-hanging at a frustratingly exciting moment in the present adventure, asking us to backtrack—again—to learn more of the growing love between Eric and Gabe during the preceding months. And then there's the ending in which Gabe and Albert make a discovery which they believe will rapidly bring down the Protectorate. Established fascist regimes are surely too clever in the real world to be so swiftly defeated. It only takes a few more enticing lies

of the kind which brought them to power, especially if there's no effective opposition with the resources to make use of such information.

Despite these reservations, **The Outrage** makes for provocative, page-turning reading. It's no surprise that *Usborne* claims that 'This is **The Handmaid's Tale** for LGBTQ+ YA'. **GF**

### Shades of Scarlet

★★★★

Anne Fine, *David Fickling Books*, 273pp, 9781788451352, £12.99 hbk  
Long gone are the days where young people set out from home on adventures supremely confident that the same domestic structures will necessarily remain intact while they are away. In this story the family itself and its survival has now become the focus for the main action. Its main character, the ferociously outspoken teenage Scarlet, is determined to discover why her 43-year-old mother has left her dull but sweet-natured husband. Although at least half her class at school have already experienced family break-up 'sometimes twice over', nothing has prepared her for this change in her own domestic life.

Anne Fine is merciless in pointing out how painful such separations can prove to everyone, particularly offspring. But she also makes it clear that there can usually be no way of going back. Scarlet eventually has to accept that parents have rights to their own lives just as their children do. Looking for blame is tempting, but ultimately gets no-one anywhere. Scarlet's parents are human, not monsters. They both love her and even each other yet still their marriage has ultimately come unstuck beyond repair.

Fine is an old hand at describing different variations of family mayhem, and this novel is well up to her past high standards. The blackly comic mind-games played between Scarlet and her mother, each determined to have the last word, are truly something to behold. Sub-plots involving a best friend, a baby and a potential boyfriend offer temporary respite from their epic battles, but ultimately this is a story about mother and daughter fighting it out each in their own way as one climactic row follows hard on the next. Sometimes exhausting but more often exhilarating, this is a brilliant as well as a timely novel. **NT**

### Nevertheless She Persisted

★★★★

Jon Walter, *David Fickling Books*, 327pp, 9781788450263, £8.99, pbk  
From the first chapter where Nancy has a baby, which is then taken by her sister Clara and given away, to the final reversal of fortune for the two sisters, the reader is taken on a journey through the fight for women's suffrage and the choices young women had to make.

Clara works at Holloway Prison, where many suffragettes, the more militant of the movements for votes for women, are taken and when on hunger strike force fed. Her sister

Nancy, raped by her own father, is taken by Clara to join her as a warder, after the birth of the baby. On the suffragette wing, Nancy becomes fascinated, indeed obsessed, by Daisy Divine, an actress, witnessing her courage as she is force fed, and is slowly drawn into the movement, which ultimately culminates in her own arrest for a bombing. Clara wrestles with her desire for a career but chooses another path.

The courage of the suffragettes and the 'cat and mouse' techniques where they are released until they are well enough to be re-arrested grips the reader. The scenes of force feeding are hard to read, but at the heart of the story are the choices women had to make and the lives they led as a result. Clara who also suffered at the hands of her father, has made her move out of the family home and started a seemingly successful career, but is torn by her love for Ted, and the knowledge of what marriage would mean, the loss of all her dreams, even that of owning a bicycle. For today's young women these choices are spelled out all too clearly. Nancy starts as a girl who feels she has been weak and manipulated learns she has courage to strike out on her own.

This book is a tour de force and a must read for all young women, telling them of the courage and conviction of those women who fought for their vote, and ultimately the lives they can lead now. It would have been good to have some suggestions for further reading but this is a small point. **JF**



### Guard Your Heart

★★★★

Sue Divin, *Macmillan Children's Books*, 416pp, 978 1 5290 4167 5, £7.99 pbk

In her Author's Note, Sue Divin suggests her novel is 'a Romeo and Juliet, a love story across divides'. Readers might well think Iona and Aidan faced more intractable problems in contemporary Londonderry than those which cropped up in fair Verona. The summer of 2016 is charged with a violence whose roots lie a hundred years deep in Dublin's Easter Rising.

# reviews

## 14+ Secondary/Adult continued

Divin tells her story through a series of parallels. Iona and Aidan share a memorable date of birth: that of the Good Friday Agreement, 10th April, 1998. Both are now completing their A-levels and leaving school. After a couple of dramatic chapters narrated by Aidan, the following 41 chapters are told alternately by Aidan and Iona, enabling readers to share in the pair's different perspectives on events and their discovery of each other, alongside their private emotional journeys within their respective families which, on the surface could not be more different, yet at deeper levels have strong echoes of each other.

Aidan shares a small house in the Catholic Creggan district with his older brother Sean. His sister Saoirse, upon whom both boys depended, is travelling abroad. His mother has died, though she remained unbroken in spirit to the end despite a husband active in the IRA throughout The Troubles, an alcoholic and a brutal domestic abuser who eventually quit the family home. Sean now seems to be following his Da's footsteps, as the New IRA gathers impetus and recruits. On his mother's death when he was still only fifteen, Aidan had spiralled into drink and drugs. Against the odds, with the support of a couple of far-sighted teachers, he'd discovered an interest in his school subjects, including Politics, and made it through to A-levels.

Protestant Iona's voyage through her late teens seems far calmer. But she too has a controlling father; an ex-police officer, veteran of The Troubles, leaving him with PTSD and unresolved prejudices, despite his professed belief in tolerance and community. Now, Iona's elder brother has recently completed his police training. Younger brother Andy is in a Loyalist band. In this male household, Mother plays a subservient, peace-keeping role. Her hope is that Iona will graduate from Queen's in Belfast with a good degree and a nice fiancé from the Christian Union.

Not unlike R & J, things kick off within the opening pages with a savage street brawl, leaving Aidan broken and bleeding on the ground, assaulted by Loyalist thugs. By chance, Iona and Andy witness the incident but can do nothing to stop it. Iona picks up Aidan's fallen phone and, on an impulse, films the attack. Her decision to return the phone to Aidan the next day brings the two together, and their unlikely journey begins.

From their first meeting, Divin traces their relationship with insight and respect for the complex intensity of early adult feelings. Aidan, with his confusions and his honesty, is unlike any male Iona has ever met. It is through their relationship, and what she is learning about herself, that she challenges her family's assumptions about male dominance – there's a fine scene in which she asserts her 18 year old's independence from her

father. She is not without conflict; her longing to make love with Aidan has to be balanced against her quiet certainty, stemming from her faith, that she wants to wait for marriage to the one with whom she will share her life. She is so lost in Aidan at times ('Aidan was clueless to how he melted me') that she hardly knows the part she plays in releasing Aidan's search to find ways into a future which, constrained by culture, money and religion, had seemed to offer nothing. At the same time, he finds himself pushing towards a spirituality which transcends his childhood experience of Catholicism ('all bells and incense').

In those alternating chapters, Divin skillfully maintains two attractively distinct voices – they have different idioms tempered by different senses of humour. Importantly, Divin also sets her story with an insider's knowledge of the dynamics of Derry itself. All of which will surely prove absorbing to potential readers for whom much of the novel's territory will be unfamiliar as well as to those within the island of Ireland. **GF**

### All American Boys

★★★★★

Jason Reynolds & Brendan Kiely, Faber, 330pp, 978 0 571 36675 0, £7.99 pbk

Rashad and Quinn share the narrative. Jason Reynolds, who is black, writes the chapters told by sixteen-year-old Rashad, while Brendan Kiely, who is white, writes those contributed by Quinn, a senior at the same high school as Rashad. Reynolds and Kiely are educators as well as writers; Kiely is an experienced high school English teacher, while Reynolds is currently a National Ambassador for Young People's Literature in the States. Following publication in 2015 in the US, **All American Boys** made a considerable impact, winning the **Coretta Scott King Author Honor Award**; the writers visited many schools, listening and talking to students who had read the book, fulfilling their hope that it would 'start conversations'. In publishing the novel six years after its initial appearance, Faber presumably decided the UK was also ready to talk.

Within a few pages, Rashad is in Jerry's Corner Mart, taking time selecting chips (aka crisps) to buy before he heads off to a Friday night party. He's glad to be out of school, and out of military uniform, since Fridays include ROTC drill (Reserve Officer Training Corps), and he has to wear full kit all day. He loathes the Corps - he joined only to satisfy his ex-soldier, ex-cop father, who sees the army as the way forward for a young black American male. A woman is also scanning Jerry's shelves – until she stumbles and trips over Rashad, just behind her. He offers his help. After shouts and accusations – and no time for answers - the cop on duty in the store, watching out for shoplifters, grabs Rashad, slams him down outside on the sidewalk, cuffs and beats him, 'a fist in the kidney,

a knee in the back'. Each blow is an earthquake to Rashad. All this is witnessed by Quinn, standing twenty feet away. To his horror, he realises he knows this cop – it's Paul Galluzzo, older brother of his closest friend. Paul has been a trusted mentor to Quinn since the death of Quinn's father, blown up by an IED in Afghanistan and now revered throughout the town.

That's how it all kicks off. Rashad's hospitalised, with a broken nose and fractured ribs, facing police charges; and also facing his father, who assumes his son's guilt, while Rashad's activist older brother Spooky never doubts his innocence. Quinn keeps his head down. He's made it onto the school basketball team, tipped for State honours; soon there will be visits from scouts from universities with lucrative sports scholarships to be won.

The two plots, driven by the incident, follow separate paths through Rashad's recovery in hospital with numerous visitors and Quinn's life at home, in basketball training, in lunchtime cafeteria arguments, dialogues in and out of lessons and at parties and barbecues. Video evidence of the arrest explodes onto social media, attracting national news channels. The whole town takes sides. Everything culminates in a mass demo organised by the students. All those conversations lay things out for Quinn – and readers - to consider. This is not a simplistic anti police story, but it is anti police brutality and racism. Quinn sees that he cannot hide for ever – he has to work out where he stands.

There may be some blind spots for UK readers. The values, language and dynamics of the basketball squad and their dictatorial coach – and those of the ROTC - may well seem alien. Likewise the bad-ass banter of the overwhelmingly male cast, in contrast to the occasional voices of reasoned protest of just two significant young women. Readers might not recognise the names and stories of real world victims of police shootings such as Michael Brown and Freddie Gray, which are read out at that final demo; but the web offers instant information. However, they will surely realise the book was written before the restraint and death of George Floyd and the subsequent impact through Black Lives Matter. They might also think Rashad's experience was not so different from the frequently reported instances of Stop & Search on the streets of South London and elsewhere. **GF**

### Bone Music

★★★★★

David Almond, Hodder, 212pp, 978 1 444 95291 9, £12.99, hbk.

From the beginning of his writing for young people, David Almond has been concerned with the malleability of time and perception: the way in which the past and present are twisted within us and shape us; and how our nature, for better and worse, remains elemental despite all the trappings of the modern world that we wear and carry with

us. In his work, the visionary and the ordinary are inseparable. Perhaps not as in earlier ages of signs and miracles but never too far away, particularly in childhood and adolescence. In this new novel, his protagonist Sylvia, has moved from Newcastle to the wilds of Northumbria. At first, she hates it, cut off from friends and all she has ever known, even her mobile phone is near useless. But gradually she is drawn into an understanding of the place and of herself. Music, reaching back through the Northumbrian folk tradition (clog dancing and all) into prehistory, plays a big part; particularly through the bone flute of the title, fashioned from the wing of a dead buzzard. And there are new friends, too: Gabriel, a boy of her own age, who makes the flute with her; and old Andreas, a former prisoner of war from Germany with a troubling past. Yet, perhaps more than any of Almond's other novels, it is what Sylvia herself experiences that is important. Among the plains peoples of the Native Americans, a young man would go on a vision quest into the wilderness, where he would find the name by which he would be known for the rest of his life. Sylvia, too, goes out into the dark Northumbrian wilderness (passing a fallen 'totem pole') to find her own way from the past into the future. **CB**

### Felix Ever After

★★★★★

Kacen Callender, Faber, 368pp, 978-0571368013, £7.99 pbk

Felix Love is seventeen, a talented artist attending a selective New York art school. His main ambition is to secure admission to Brown University, Rhode Island, by winning a scholarship. Felix was born a girl, though he is now known to everyone as a boy. In fact his former female life is something he carefully conceals. He has never been in love. The book describes Felix's struggle to find love in whatever form it may take. He must also learn to command acceptance, not least by defining his own gender identity.

Callender's novel is unusual, mounting an examination in depth of the emotions an individual may experience during the process of gender transition. The author himself has made just this transition. Accordingly he is in a position to provide a detailed account of the transitional process and its attendant complications. He also shines a revealing light on the question of family acceptance during transition, and on the danger of receiving abusive mail.

Felix is in fact part of three minorities in the USA, also being black and gay. Callender's book will stimulate a range of active discussion, not only because of its central theme but also because it features profane language and drug taking, giving the impression that both are a normal part of art school life. It is persuasive to argue that the inclusion of these features is no more than realistic. But teachers and parents should be aware of these features before handing the book to an impressionable young reader. The 14+ categorisation should also be strictly respected. **RB**

# Valediction: No.1

## Forbidding mourning

Say farewell to **Classics in Short**, says **Brian Alderson**. They are over; let them go.

They arrived in the printed **BfK** 102 of January 1997 when Helen Levene visited **Treasure Island** and set up the paragraph form that has continued over the last twenty-five years with myself taking over at no.13 after Helen had bagged all the most fruity titles. I can't say that the continuation will be missed since not one of my 136 efforts has generated any praise or, more surprisingly, blame. One asks if Jack Hawkins and co. have anything to say today that is relevant to twenty-first century social and intellectual persuasions.

But the back page does not get rid of me that easily and the Valediction entered upon here is of an altogether personal nature. It so happens that a year or two ago I offered my collection of children's books to Newcastle upon Tyne (of which fair city I am a Freeman) with the post-1920 copies going to **Seven Stories** and the earlier books to the Children's Literature Unit of the University where they are housed in the Philip Robinson Library.

It makes for a grievous parting – books no more for keeps. I love them greatly (well, some of them) and in saying goodbye to them I have decided to write some notes not on the Classics but on obscure titles which few these days will have heard of but which deserve a glance if anyone happens by.

So let's talk about Golf.

Bernard Darwin (1876-1961) was the grandson of the great Charles and was brought up at Down House after the death of his mother two days after he was born. He did not follow his grandpa into beetles however but showed an early proclivity for golf and became a famous amateur and an even more famous writer on the subject.

He had, however, married Elinor Monsell from Ireland, a wood engraver and artist some of whose work was done for W.B.Yeats at the Abbey Theatre. (After coming to England she also did the two colour plates for De la Mare's **Three Mulla-Mulgars** which the publisher forgot to acknowledge.)

The Darwin family was though a tribe of geniuses (Elinor would later introduce Bernard's cousin Gwen to the craft of wood engraving of which, as Gwen Raverat, she was to become one of the greatest practitioners.) And Gwen's sister Margaret



was to become the wife of Geoffrey Keynes: surgeon, medical historian, book collector, authority on William Blake, and editor, especially associated with Francis Meynell's private publishing venture, the Nonesuch Press.

It is not known if Keynes or Meynell were keen on golf and it may well have been Margaret who suggested to Bernard that he might take a holiday from the subject and write a book for children that Elinor might illustrate and the Nonesuch Press publish, and thus it was that **Mr Tootleoo** came sailing into the Christmas market of 1925. (He was not much of a sailor, being shipwrecked at the start of his story when he is found drifting among the waves sitting in his own hat.)

Bernard engages his readers in ballad form:  
*Now listen while I tell to you  
The tale of Mr Tootleoo...*

and the twenty-two pages of his text are faced by Elinor's handsomely printed full-page colour lithographs.

The whole thing is an exercise in absurdity with Mr T being saved by a family of Cockyollybirds. With ballad-maker's devices they are transformed to a mother and her six children and all ends happily

with everyone dancing on a hospitable desert island. (Mr T's proposal to the lady cockollybird, now transformed and in a crinoline, having been accepted.)

The book – very elaborate for its time – was a success and reprinted the following January and a sequel, **Tootleoo Two**, came out in 1927 (the children did not care for schooling and return to Cockyolly form.) The stories flickered on when Nonesuch produced the two together in a cheap edition of upright format with the drawings remodelled in black and white. In 1935 the burgeoning Faber & Faber persuaded Mr T to take to the sea again with **Mr Tootleoo and Co.** but despite printing from the Curwen Press the journey was less successful. Nor can much be said of Bernard's three vaguely oriental fairy tales **Oboli, Boboli, and Little Joboli** (1938). This was published by Country Life where Bernard was Golf Correspondent and he may have been persuaded to do it by their children's books editor, Noel Carrington who put out a soft-back edition in 1942.

Description: **The Tale of Mr Tootleoo.**

By Bernard and Elinor Darwin. London: The Nonesuch Press [1925]. 195x260mm. [92]pp. incl. 22 lithographs in four colours. Dec Simili vellum over boards with an imitation circular wax medallion to front centre with an embossed image after the illustration on p.5, plain white endpapers. Pale green dj, with circular excision to show medallion Ref. McKitterick History 43

Titles printed bold, here and in successor valedictions, are part of the gift to Seven Stories.



**Brian Alderson** is a long-time and much-valued contributor to **Books for Keeps**, founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for The Times. His book, **The 100 Best Children's Books**, is published by Galileo Publishing, 978-1903385982, £14.99 hbk..