

# BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.251

*the* children's book magazine online

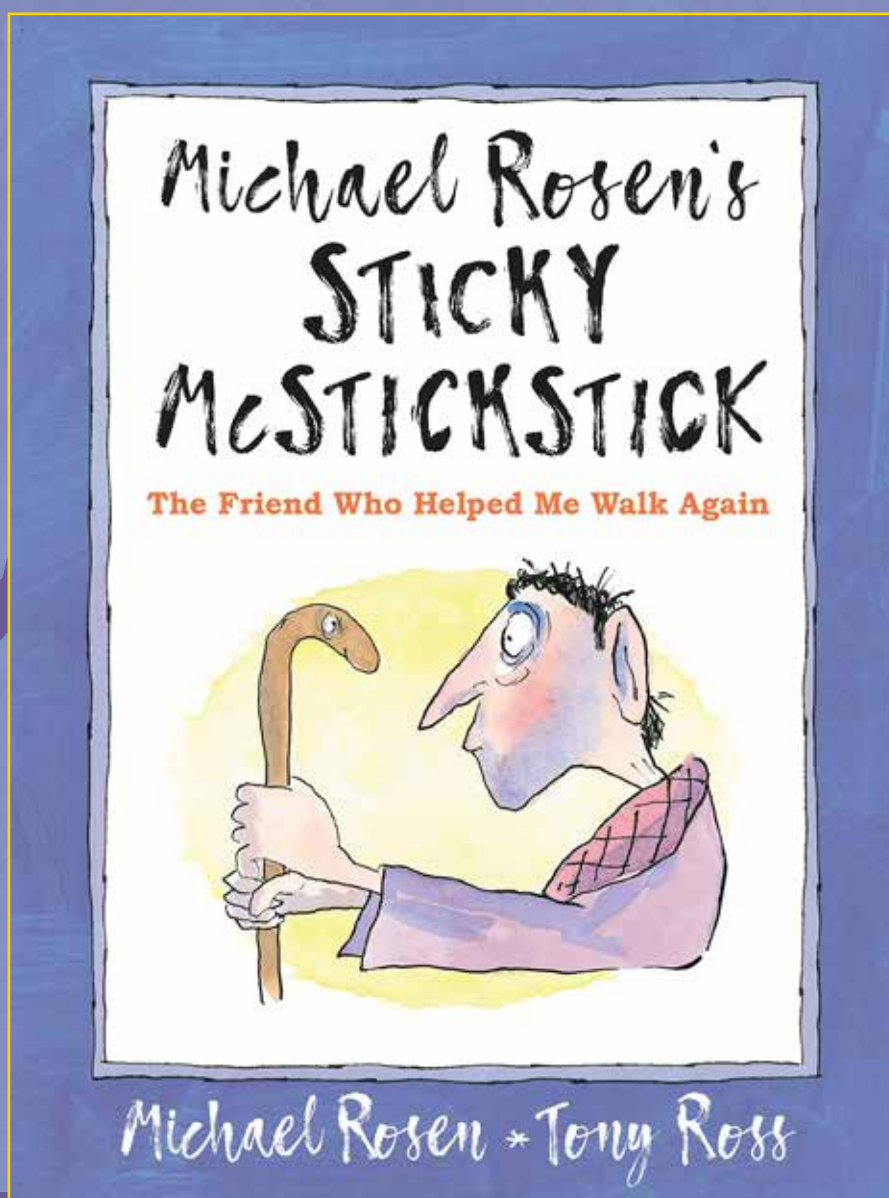
November 2021

**Recovery and resilience:  
Michael Rosen interviewed**

*plus* **Books of the Year**

Authorgraph interview **Nadia Shireen**

**The BfK Christmas Gift Guide**



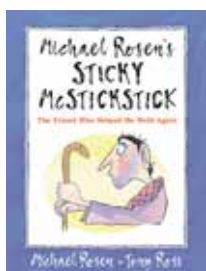
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### COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **Sticky McStickstick**, written by Michael Rosen and illustrated by Tony Ross. Thanks to Walker Books for their help with our 251st cover.



# Editorial 251

## out with the old, in with the new



Welcome to the November **Books for Keeps**, the last of 2021. It's the end of a significant year for **BfK**; we published our 250th issue and launched a new website after a concerted fund-raising effort. We are still not quite at our target, so if you would like to make a donation, you can do so either via our [Givey](#) site or [Paypal](#). Thank you to everyone who has contributed. We hope all our readers appreciate the new website and find it easier to navigate, and quicker to search.

2021 has been another challenging year. In the UK, it began in lockdown, restrictions only lifting in July. Year two of the pandemic has been particularly difficult for teachers, librarians, booksellers and for parents and children too. For many authors and artists, the absence of school visits, marketing tours and literary festivals has had a significant effect on their income and indeed the **Society of Authors** reports that it supported more than 900 authors in grants through its Authors' Contingency Fund in 2020, giving out more than £1.3m.

Publishers have had a good year, however. After sales of physical books rose strongly in 2020 passing the 200 million mark for the first time since 2012, the invigoration of the book buying habit appears to have continued into 2021. A good time to address the 'chronic' lack of investment in school libraries then and not one but two campaigns have launched urging change. The **National Literacy Trust** has joined with **Penguin Random House** to call for large-scale public and private funding in order to equip 1,000 primary school libraries with training, new books and resources by 2025, supporting 500,000 pupils over the next four years. The alliance is backed by **Arts Council England** and retail bank **Chase** has also pledged its support. Meanwhile, as reported in [BfK](#), Cressida Cowell together with the UK's previous Children's Laureates is leading an effort to renovate libraries, arranging for six primary

schools to receive publisher donations of 1,000 books each, plus training for staff in librarianship, new furniture and audiobook technology, and wall art to make the spaces feel more appealing to children. The libraries opened in June and **BfK** will report on the impact and progress of both campaigns.

The publication of **CLPE's Reflecting Realities** report has become a key event in the children's literature calendar. Published earlier this month, the fourth [Survey of Ethnic Representation within UK Children's Literature](#) reveals positive changes: 15% of children's books published in 2020 feature a minority ethnic character. This is a significant increase from 4% in 2017. The survey also reports that 8% of the books published in 2020 featured an ethnic minority main character, up from 1% in 2017.

The figures are to be welcomed but, as **Louise Johns-Shepherd**, CEO of **CLPE** says, 'we are not yet at the point where children of colour have the same experience of literature as their white peers'. There is still room for improvement and the next stage in making a change to what actually gets into bookshops, libraries, classrooms and homes, is to look at who gets to write and illustrate the books; where the opportunities in the publishing industry are; who chooses what gets published, marketed, publicised, stocked and sold. There is more work for us all to do.

But finally, after a year in which we said goodbye to some of the greats of children's literature, including Victor Ambrus, Eric Carle, Jill Murphy, Gary Paulsen, Beverly Cleary and Jerry Pinkney, how good it is to be able to celebrate two remarkable lives in this issue: **John Agard**, newly presented with a **BookTrust Lifetime Achievement Award**, and **Michael Rosen**, 2021 recipient of the **J M Barrie Award** and back performing live for huge audiences of children despite contracting COVID in 2020.

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# Yes You Can!

**You Can!**, by Alexandra Strick and Steve Antony, uses real children's voices in a genuinely inclusive picture book that reminds all children that they are individuals with the power to decide their own futures. **Rebecca Butler** interviews Alex Strick about the book.

My first question to Alex Strick is why the message in **You Can!** was important to her and her readers. She explains it's because she wanted to empower young readers to believe that it was OK to be themselves and to have the confidence that they can achieve their dreams. Her illustrator Steve espoused the same message.

In the text Alex includes a message that readers can enjoy a picture book at any age. While consulting children for this book she discovered that many had internalised the message that to enjoy a picture book after the age of seven was seen as negative. By then they should be reading text only. Some children mentioned that they actually hid their picture books from the adults because they felt ashamed of reading them. Alex and Steve were determined to counter this message as strongly as possible.

I next asked Alex about the process of creating the book. I heard that the process was lengthy – in fact it took seven years – and could be described as ground-breaking. Alex does not remember when the first idea of the book germinated but the first draft of the book took shape four years ago. The essential idea of the book was that it should be rooted in the experience of children the same age as the intended readers, starting with how those children think and feel. It is designed to feed back to them their own experience, with guidance on how to handle that experience. To achieve sufficient depth it was not enough to base the research on just one cohort of children. There was an iterative process by which the results of one set of children were tested against another's. In total a hundred children contributed to the eventual outcome.

The text of Alex's book is sparse in relation to the imagery, especially since the book deals with complex issues. I asked Alex why the text was so slender. The idea of the book from the very beginning was that of a dual narrative, pictures and text going together to form a powerful whole. The illustrator, Steve Antony, led Alex to an understanding of the sheer power of visual imagery to convey

significant messages to young readers. The balance between prose and imagery in the book was intended both to convey to young readers the urgency and immediacy of a visual narrative and to avoid the danger that readers unused to lengthy narratives would suffer from what Alex terms prose fatigue.

Although some of the images in the book depict disabled characters, the word disability never appears in the text. I asked why. Her answer is that the book is not about disability. It is about all children, in whatever categories society may place them. The same principle holds not only for children but for adults. The book is designed to stress that all people have a common heritage, not to identify issues that split society into categories that easily become divisive.

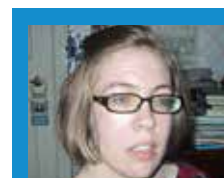
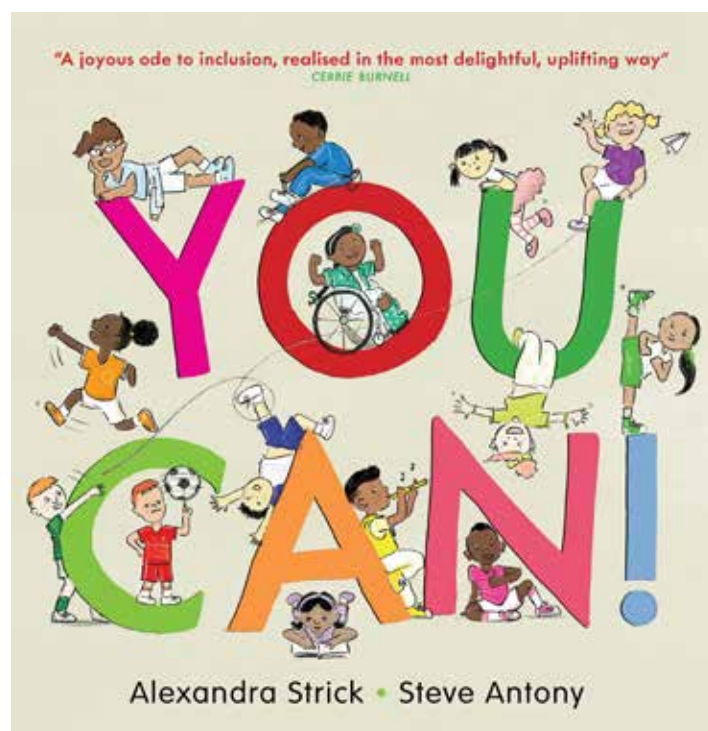
Were there themes omitted from the book which in retrospect Alex wished she had included? A significant array of ideas arose during the gestation of the book. One concern had the potential to overwhelm all others, namely the children's desire to save the planet. This idea does appear in the visual narrative but it had to be kept in balance. When ideas were rejected it was often because they were too specific – don't eat this kind of food. The aim of the book was to help young readers develop their own principles, not to deliver adult to child injunctions. Alex has no regrets about what is included and what is not.

In the illustration that refers to Gay Pride there is a character in a blue shirt bearing a symbol which I failed to recognise. Alex informed me it was the symbol for transgender identity, namely the gender symbols for male and female together.

My next question followed on. At the end of the book symbols appeared connected with Gay Pride. A teacher, especially in church schools, might comment that children of the age the book is designed for are too young to be introduced to the complex questions of gender and sexual identity. Alex stated that most children would simply enjoy the display of flags and symbols without examining the issues they represent. If some children understand the significance of certain flags, this means that they beginning to become aware of issues that have a powerful reality in the world where they are growing up. Alex does not recognise a controversial element in this educative process.

Finally I asked Alex what was her next project. She replied that the current book has generated ideas stimulating further research and perhaps a further volume. For example, **You Can!** emphasises that it is OK for children to feel angry or sad. They would benefit from guidance on how to handle anger or sadness. There is also a website on which the children record their thoughts, available at [www.theyoucanbook.com](http://www.theyoucanbook.com). The children themselves are an unfailing source of inspiration for Alex and Steve.

**You Can!** is published by Otter-Barry Books, 978-1913074609, £12.99 hbk.



**Dr Rebecca Butler** writes and lectures on children's literature.

# Coming home: an interview with Michael Rosen

After being admitted to hospital in 2020 with coronavirus, **Michael Rosen** had to learn to walk again. The story is told for children in his new picture book, **Sticky McStickstick: The Friend Who Helped Me Walk Again**.

**Nicolette Jones** interviewed Michael about the book for **Books for Keeps**.



The last two public events I chaired before lockdown in 2020 were with Michael Rosen. These were not his last events – he went on to take part in more, including school visits, was out and about, and, as we all know, contracted Covid and then spent 40 days in a coma. So the first Zoom event we shared this year, when he was well enough again, involved bunting and a trumpet fanfare. And I am still so delighted to see him on Zoom, after all the dangers he has passed, that I find myself grinning inappropriately even as he talks about the legacy of his illness: the sight he has lost in one eye, the hearing in one ear and the feeling in his toes. And his occasional episodes of feeling ‘weak and feeble’. Though obviously none of this is a smiling matter. But he joins in, by joking about his lapses of memory: some part of his brain has been affected, he says, that houses names of people he knows very well, and extremely famous film stars. Tom Cruise, George Clooney and Meryl Streep have been suddenly irretrievable.

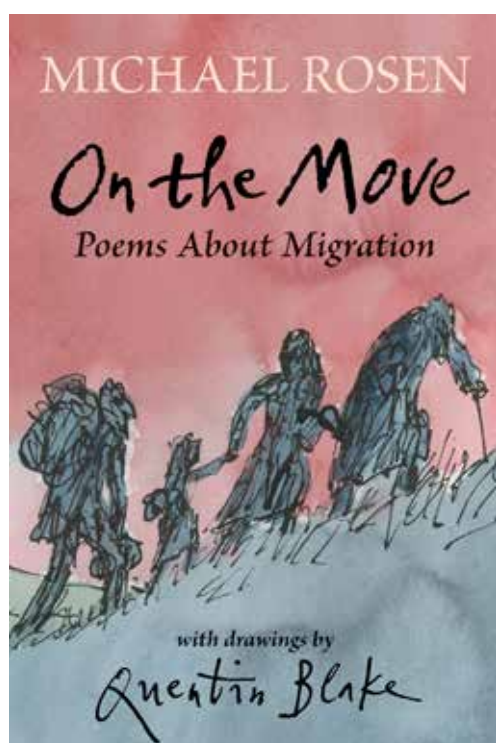
This astonishing capacity to address pain with humour is what gave rise to his new book, **Sticky McStickstick: The Friend Who Helped Me Walk Again**, a picturebook written with levity that nevertheless prompts a lump in the throat. It is about the people (and the personified walking stick) that helped him regain the use of his legs. Tony Ross’s pictures also introduce laughs to this distressing experience, just as Rosen did when he made the physios in the rehabilitation centre smile by naming his walking aid, and then Tweeted about it, to make his wider audience of anxious followers smile too. Some suggested this sounded like material for a book, and the idea was born.

Wherever George Clooney has been hiding in his head, Rosen seems as sharp and fluent as ever. Extraordinarily, he is also now back on the live performing circuit. He has given hour-long shows back-to-back for hundreds of children at the **Children’s Book Show**, and signed books at the Muswell Hill Children’s Bookshop. He was in Cheltenham to receive his **CLIPPA** award for **On the Move**, his collection of Poems about Migration, assembled before the pandemic but published in October 2020. He is being given this year’s **J M Barrie Award** in person. Besides, he has appeared in the ITV documentary **The Story of Us**, and been a vocal presence on social media and in the papers. This interview is the latest of many, for print and online. (He finds sitting and talking to people, he says, easier than going up and down stairs.)

He has also been astonishingly prolific since he came home in June 2020. He wrote a story in his head while he was still in hospital, which comes out in April: **Rigatoni, the Pasta Cat**. He wrote his bestselling chronicle of having Covid, including the parts he never knew about, pieced together from medics’ accounts and the nurses’ diary: **Many Different Kinds of Love**. In the pipeline are more picturebooks, as well as a collaboration with Michael Foreman about a correspondence between an English boy and a Polish boy during the Second World War.

But just out is **Sticky**, which, he says, ‘breaks the major rule of picturebooks, that the protagonist should be a child or a surrogate child. Walker Books, though, said ‘That’s alright’. I think they themselves had created the path that made that possible, with the **The Sad Book**, in which Quentin Blake represented adult me.’ Rosen has a theory that ‘most children’s books are in actual fact part of the conversation that we have in society about nurture and education’. And **Sticky McStickstick** has a place in that conversation about how any of us might be cared for.

Once the idea arose out of the joshing of rehab and a few daft Tweets (a picture of Sticky asleep in bed, for instance) that the stick might become a picturebook character, Rosen thought: ‘What’s the story?’ And then, of course, I realised. The story is that this grown-up has had to learn how to walk. Which is of itself quite odd, and almost funny. Because we think of two-year-olds learning how to walk, or baby animals. And then I thought well it’s got these phases as well: trying to stand up, the frame, the wheelchair, the stick, and there’s even the positive ending of coming home. And so it grew.’







In that way that is characteristic of Rosen, his thoughts open out quickly from quite simple to very sophisticated. Suddenly we are discussing the healing power of tragedy and comedy, as a way of exploring the human condition, in Shakespeare in particular. Although tragedy is reputed to be the cathartic one, Rosen finds comedy 'more portable and more comforting'.

I am impressed not only by the humorous approach to Rosen's trauma, but by his positivity, as he has kept out of the story his grief and loss – and rage. Because it is clear from his social media posts that he feels rage at the government for its callous and incompetent handling of the pandemic.

'I think it's because I compartmentalize it. So I've got the rage bit, I've got the grief bit and I've got the compassion bit and I try not to let one affect the other. I don't want the anger to affect how much I feel grateful for the people who did so much to keep me alive. And the grief bit: I don't want to dump on people and say "take my grief from me". My grief is mine and I must own that.'

Grief, Rosen thinks, is best shared with those who have gone through something similar, otherwise 'it's too much for people'. After his son Eddie died, he addressed groups of parents who had lost children. 'They might think "I feel helpless and hopeless and so does Michael Rosen".' And now he is part of an online group of sufferers of long Covid. 'That's not dumping, it's sharing.'

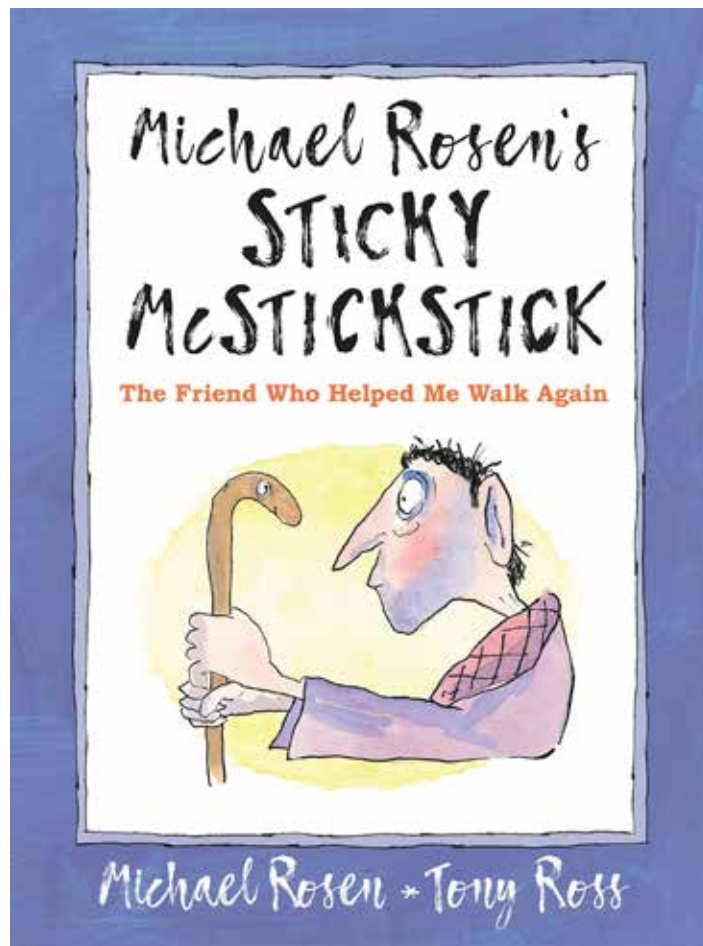
I wondered if Rosen, who had processed grief before, and written **The Sad Book**, found it helpful now. 'Yes. I think it did help me. The bit about making sure I do something I am proud of every day.'

Unlike Quentin Blake's images in **The Sad Book**, Tony Ross's pictures in **Sticky** are not portraits of Rosen and his family. Did they discuss this? 'My guess is Tony wanted to universalize it. We don't have conversations; Tony gets on and does it. Whereas Quentin did want to make it my personal experience. Tony has widened it out and it's given him leeway to have fun and not be tied to exactly what happened.'

'And I suppose the text does tend a bit towards the folkloric, the emblematic. It's not a characterful text. It's more as we tell folk stories: this happened and then this happened.' Rosen universalizes it too by talking in a coda about the general experience of illness and getting better and being helped. 'Maybe you've been ill. Or maybe you know someone who's been ill,' he writes.

We discuss finding 'chiming moments' in books as a way for young people to connect with them. 'Everything I know about good teachers is that they do that,' he says, so literature opens up conversations – 'in your head or in class'.

'One of the images that informed me is the fact that when you have a major illness – and this happens to everybody so it's not just me – is that all the apparatus of everyday life, everything from shopping to family relationships to clothes, all sort of falls away. And you become the thing that Lear talks about, a 'poor forked creature'. Just your body. My world when I came out of the coma was no bigger than my body in the bedclothes.'



'In the rehab hospital it got a bit bigger because there is the wheelchair, the stick, the zimmer and these people saying, you could do this, you could do that. But it's so tiny really. It's insulated. I would talk to Emma [his wife] and the kids; Emma was allowed into the rehab hospital a couple of times, but then they disappeared and so even when they said 'we're in the middle of lockdown', I wasn't really listening because I was being busy being a poor forked creature.'

Rosen agrees that there is a connection with **On the Move**, because being just the poor, forked creature is akin to being in exile, stripped of family and home and habits and possessions.

He is hopeful that the **CLiPPA** win will mean the book is used in teaching migration, the Holocaust, the Second World War, family life ... And 'show that poems can be about things that matter, but that may not be funny'. 'In a sense I'm a victim of my own success and of course they want me to be more funny. But no one person is 100% funny. Just as no one person is 100% anything. That's important to pass on to children because they're all going through various forms of labelling. They're being told they are of this ability, they're naughty or they're good. And the kids are all labelling each other. I'm hoping there will also be a sort of Unlabelling. So that that bloke who does 'Chocolate Cake' is also that bloke who has these kinds of experiences in his family.'

**Sticky McStickstick: The Friend Who Helped Me Walk Again** by Michael Rosen and Tony Ross is published by Walker Books, 978-1529502404, £12.99 hbk.



**Nicolette Jones**, writer, literary critic and broadcaster, has been the children's books reviewer of the **Sunday Times** for more than two decades. Her latest book, **The American Art Tapes: Voices of Twentieth-Century Art** by John Jones and Nicolette Jones is out now.



# Windows into illustration: Yuval Zommer

**Yuval Zommer** graduated from the Royal College of Art with an MA in Illustration. He worked for many years as a creative director at leading advertising agencies before becoming the author and illustrator of highly acclaimed non-fiction titles including the **Big Book of...** series which has won and been shortlisted for numerous awards, including the UKLA Book Awards. Here he describes his approach to his latest book **The Lights that Dance in the Night** and the techniques used.

In this book, **The Lights that Dance in the Night**, which is all about the wonder of the Northern Lights, the text is often quite lyrical, sometimes even sparse, as I am trying to say a lot with only a few words. One of my favourite spreads has the seemingly simple line: 'Through clouds and winds and storms we came.' When it came to the artwork, in order to create the feeling of a journey as we read across the page, I decided to stagger this sentence into three sections as follows: 'Through clouds... and wind and storms... we came.'



Although this is one continuous scene, I needed to emphasise the three sections visually as well as lyrically. I therefore introduced white borders to create the effect of three panels that all belong together, a bit like the ones you see in a graphic novel. I also always like to introduce a bit of playfulness into the layouts, so if you look closely you'll notice the tail of a reindeer protruding onto the border in the left panel, a shepherd's stick extending onto the border in the middle panel and a tree's branches sticking out of the third panel. I believe these are the kind of details kids love to discover as they read/look at the book again and again.

The skies in the initial artwork were also worked on in photoshop to slightly differ in tone and contrast, so as to help differentiate the three sections.

Once the white borders were added, as a final touch I placed four pine 'leaves' as decorative elements in each corner of the page.

Another favourite spread from the book has the line 'We lit the skies for forest birds, we sparkled over reindeer herds'. I wrote this line specifically as I had a particular festive image in mind which I had wanted to use for a while but could not find the right story for it until now. This image of a reindeer with a choir of birds on its horns was originally drawn as a Xmas card for friends!







For this spread I created a snowy white forest background and added some flying birds to the 'dancing' lights to highlight the motion. The book is a joyous celebration of the magic of the Lights and I enjoyed creating the 'winter wonderland' scenarios of the Arctic and its inhabitants. Happy Reading and early season's greetings from me!

**The Lights that Dance in the Night** is published by Oxford University Press, £12.99

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# Authorgraph No.251

**Nadia Shireen**  
interviewed by  
**Charlotte Hacking**

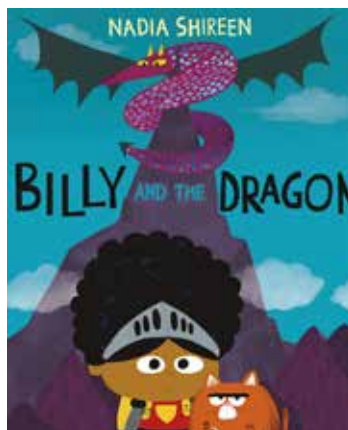
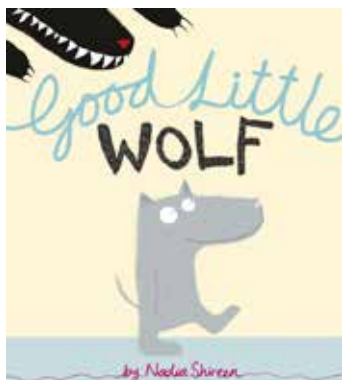
Nadia Shireen's deft ability to create compelling characters and engaging narratives in words and pictures has been apparent from the very start of her career. Her debut **Good Little Wolf** received a mention in the Bologna Ragazzi Opera Prima Award, and went on to win the **UKLA Book Award**. She's been shortlisted for the **Roald Dahl Funny Prize** and the **Waterstones Children's Book Prize** and, at the time of writing, her latest picturebook **Barbara Throws a Wobbler** has just been nominated for the Greenaway Medal 2022.

She came to the world of picturebooks via a law degree and a career in journalism, most notably at teen favourite, **Smash Hits**. It was through being asked to create doodles for the front of the notebooks and Filofaxes given away as free gifts by the magazine that her childhood love of drawing returned to her, and led her to join the MA course in Children's Book Illustration at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge.

Although her final piece for the MA was the work that became the successful **Good Little Wolf**, it wasn't an easy journey. She found it difficult to see her playful way of illustrating amongst the observational drawings others on the course were doing. 'I felt absolutely out of my depth', she tells me, 'I was one of maybe a dozen part-timers on the course. The full-timers terrified me because, whereas I was 30 and coming at this from a career in journalism, they had just done their degrees and had gone on to the MA. It seemed like they knew everything about art and I'd never gone to art school. No one had taught me about perspective. People would say things like, I love the quality of your line. And I remember actually saying to someone, "what does that mean?" I felt massively on the back foot for most of that MA.'

A pivotal moment came through illustrator and wood engraver John Lawrence, who saw the talent and passion that had inspired her to apply in the first place. 'I remember him going through my sketchbook and looking at the doodles that I'd just been doing for me, when I was just watching TV; deranged animals and crazy characters. And he told me, "This is the stuff"'. He questioned why she was keeping these things separate from the course, making her reflect on the way she'd approached the work. 'I'd just seen that as my naughty doodling, but he showed me that was what I was meant to do and that it was valid.'

She made the decision to take the last three months of the MA off from her job in journalism, and threw herself into the work around **Good Little Wolf**, in preparation for the final show. Her life changed, very suddenly from there. 'I couldn't believe what had happened. I'd spent the whole course just hoping to pass, then suddenly people wanted to publish my book. It was unbelievable.'



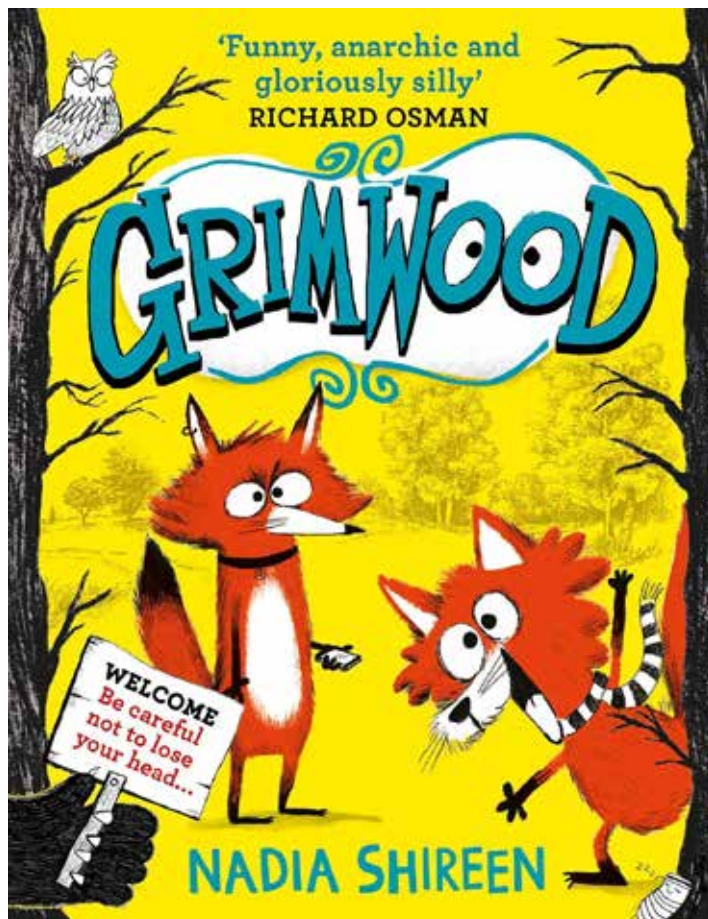
Her wonderfully wicked sense of humour pervades the book, and everything she's published since. We discuss the ending of **Good Little Wolf**, a delightful twist on the tale, which provides surprise and delight to older readers who understand the fact that the story doesn't end happily ever after. 'That's the magic of picture books, isn't it?' she explains, 'It's the text, the image and then there's that magic bit that hopefully the reader does. You know when they're ready to see it when they want to conjure up the ideas in their own imagination and try to work out what's happened.'

Her characters and stories almost always start from an illustration. 'It's really old-fashioned in that I'll start with just pen and paper, a really simple, subconscious doodling, trying to get my brain into a state of play. And while I'm playing, maybe someone will turn up, who I can ask questions to or who will be interesting enough to want to find out more about their story. Or maybe I'll put someone next to them. So then that interaction becomes immediately interesting.'

In every character, she tells me, there is always a small piece of herself, or her personality. This is particularly apparent in Billy, the star of **Billy and the Beast**, **Billy and the Dragon** and the upcoming **Billy and the Pirates**. 'I've never been confident about my hair', she explains, 'I felt massively self-conscious about it. Still do really. I always wanted straight, lovely, easy hair, like the rest of my family. When I was drawing Billy, I thought that I wanted her to be me but braver. Me but more confident and completely physically confident. That's so important for kids to see.'

It's her sense of playfulness, her ongoing connectedness to childhood and the innate understanding of children that shines through in her books. Every child will relate to being overwhelmed by their emotions and, in **Barbara Throws a Wobbler**, the story reflects this, offering children the chance to consider and empathise with





the difficulties of self-regulation. 'What I think we need to recognise, is that kids have emotions that are as valid and as big and as real as ours. I don't know why collectively, we sort of diminish that. I don't want to shy away from emotional truth. And I don't think emotional truth is always straightforward.'

She took the task of telling Barbara's story seriously, considering the care that would need to go into depicting her journey in a way that was both engaging, resonant and respectful. 'When I was writing, I was very careful. When Barbara has her wobbler, it was very tempting to get her friends to come in or to get her parents to come and pick her up. I had to fight that and not let anybody else help her get out of there. Because this has to be helpful; it is about a child understanding their own big emotions, they're the only one who's going to be able to get themselves out of it. What if a kid is reading this, they don't have any friends, or anybody to come and scoop them up? It had to be about her power. And that was a really challenging thing.'

Her latest book, **Grimwood**, is Shireen's first foray into middle-grade fiction. It's another hilariously funny but also deeply resonant tale, with friendship, family and belonging at its heart. 'I was worried when I was writing it, it'd be too wacky', she reflects. 'I wanted it to be really crazy and funny, but I want it to be a good story. And I wanted there to be heart and to put some real feeling in there. I feel warmly towards Ted and Nancy; they're looking for a home, whether that home means a place or it means people or their parents. I feel quite attached to them and protective of them.'

The art direction, led by David McDougall, emphasises the two elements perfectly and takes Shireen back to what got her into illustration in the first place; the playfulness of her childhood drawings and the annotation and doodling of her days at **Smash Hits**. 'What I really enjoyed was having the story laid out and then being able to go over it and draw all over it. We agreed it needed to look like you've got a copy of **The Wind in the Willows** from the library, and someone's just ruined it'

The world of **Grimwood** is closely related to the landscapes she grew up in as a child; a mix of urban environment and countryside.



But as with her characters, she was keen to instil a sense of reality in the setting. 'As soon as I thought about the countryside, I very quickly related to my experience, going for a lovely country walk and then seeing an upturned shopping trolley, and I was poking fun at things. You know, we've got **The Wind in the Willows** and **Winnie the Pooh**, and it's such an idealised, beautiful vision of the English countryside; absolutely idyllic and wonderful. But we don't talk about the dead duck floating in the pond, or the Wellington boots or pile of tyres that someone's set fire to. And that's real. And that's kind of funny.'

With two more **Grimwood** stories to come, as well as the bonus of a World Book Day title in between, there's plenty more to hook young readers in. And it's her understanding of and responsibility towards her readers that spurs her on and keeps her focussed. 'What I worry about is making sure that I can sustain the humour and the energy. I always want it to be rich, exciting and fun for the kids. The child, and making them laugh is always going to be my focus, because their time is precious. They could be on the iPad, or watching a movie; but the fact that they're reading a book is amazing. And we want them to do more of that. So I take it quite seriously. I try not to take myself seriously. But I take that responsibility very seriously.'

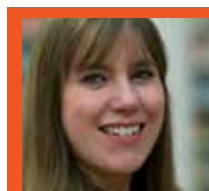
**Grimwood**, Simon and Schuster Children's Books, 978-1471199301, £12.99 hbk

**Barbara Throws a Wobbler**, Jonathan Cape, 978-1780081366, £6.99 pbk

**Good Little Wolf**, Jonathan Cape, 978-1780080017, £6.99 pbk

**Billy and the Beast**, Jonathan Cape, 978-1780080680, £6.99 pbk

**Billy and the Dragon**, Jonathan Cape, 978-0857551351, £6.99 pbk



**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.

# BfK Christmas Gift Guide 2021

Father Christmas is spoiled for choice this year. The BfK reviewing elves have scarcely seen such a dazzling array of new books for children, perfect for seasonal giving. What follows is a selection of favourites, but use our review section, **Books of the Year** and **Book of the Week** reviews too to draw up your Christmas lists and you'll be sure of a very happy Christmas.

## Books for the very young

Father Christmas stars in two of our choices, though not as you know him. *'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house, not a creature was stirring ... except for one mouse.'* In **The Mouse Before Christmas** Tracey Turner takes Clement C Moore's Christmas classic and reimagines it with a cheerful, red-suited mouse taking Santa's part. As the other little mice doze, he takes to the skies in a sleigh pulled by beetles, distributing gifts of toys, crackers and plenty of cheese. The poetry stands up and Jenny Løvlie's illustrations are thoroughly charming. Ever wondered what Santa Claus was like as a child? **Little Santa** by Jon Agee gives us the back story as only he can, a story full of humour and inventiveness, told with impeccable timing. Jane Ray's folklorish illustrations with their sumptuous colours invite readers into the worlds she depicts and that is the case in **Grace and the Christmas Angel**, written by Lucinda Riley and Harry Whitaker, a heart-warming story set in a little fishing village and featuring a real Christmas miracle. **Lo and Behold! Mouse and Mole** by Joyce Dunbar and James Mayhew also concludes on Christmas Day. Mouse and Mole are getting ready for the big day, and for Mole it can't come soon enough. Their relationship is depicted with such warmth, love and skill by author and illustrator and these little tales are full of magic. Yuval Zommer's **The Lights that Dance in the Night**, a tribute to the beauty of the Northern Lights, does not refer to Christmas but its message of light in the dark, hope and togetherness is perfect for the season and his gorgeous illustrations dazzle. We're also recommending **Tiny Reindeer** by Chris Naylor-Ballesteros, **Evie's Christmas Wishes** by Siobhan Parkinson and Shannon Bergin, and **An Odd Dog Christmas** by Rob Biddulph.

For the very, very youngest, Andersen Press have a Christmas-tree-shaped board book Elmer adventure, **My First Elmer Christmas**, which is very appealing, and **Don't Tickle the Polar Bear**, in Usborne's touchy-feely sounds series, concludes with a wonderful chorus of polar animals. **Bizzy Bear Snow Fun** by Benji Davies features Bizzy Bear and friends enjoying wintery adventures and a push up ski-jump that will have everyone giggling. Two novelty books caught our eyes, a pop-up edition of **The Snow Queen** with exquisite illustrations by Lesley Barnes, and **Inside the Suitcase**, new from Clotilde Perrin. Lift flaps beneath flaps and follow a young boy on an amazing adventure, that takes him over

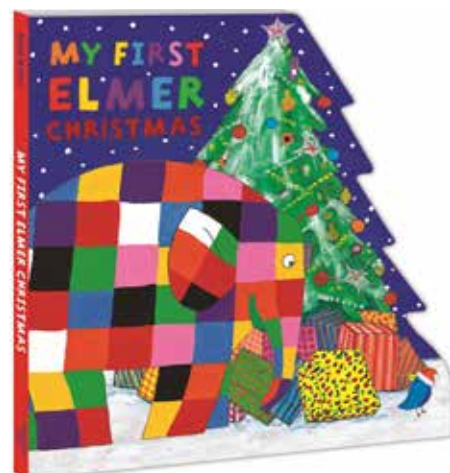
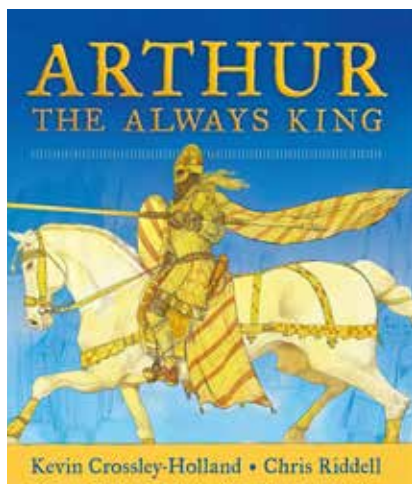
mountains and forests, deep-sea swimming with jellyfish and safely back home. Quirky and mischievous it's full of surprises.

## Poetry and anthologies

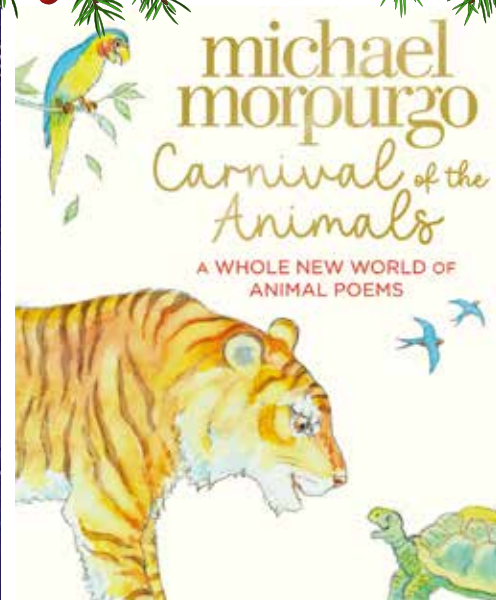
CLiPPA winner Zaro Weil's collection **When Poems Fall from the Sky** will bring a burst of colour into the darkest winter day. A mix of poems, rhymes, haiku, raps, and short plays, inspired by Kew Gardens and, more widely, the natural world, it offers memorable, vivid snapshots of nature, and is beautifully illustrated in full colour by Junli Song. **Wonder** meanwhile is an anthology of poems inspired by the Natural History Museum collection and features poems on everything from dodos to diamonds, mammals to meteorites. Curated by Ana Sampson, and featuring a diverse array of poets, the book is a wonder indeed, the poetry giving a genuine sense of the magnificence of the museum's collections; it's surprising, inspiring, eye-opening. Another celebration of the natural world, **Carnival of the Animals** is Michael Morpurgo's Christmas album if you like, a series of sparkling new animal poems, all first-person narratives newly written by Morpurgo and inspired by the Saint-Saëns classic. Illustrated by Michael Foreman it's a tour de force, marked by the author's brio and zest for life. William Sieghart, of Poetry Pharmacy fame, has now compiled an anthology for children, **Everyone Sang**. Here are poems to calm, move, inspire, or just make the heart feel lighter. Featuring poets old and new, and gloriously illustrated by Emily Sutton, it will be lovely to share with children, and is a book to turn poetry into a friend for life, as Sieghart intends. Finally, Allie Esiri provides readers – of all ages – with **A Poet for Every Day of the Year**, a collection of infinite variety and the perfect way to bring poetry into your daily routine.

## Story Collections

This is the perfect time of year for story collections. From Scholastic, **Bedtime Stories Beautiful Black Tales from the Past** is a celebratory and joyful collection of tales from Black history, based on important figures and events from around the world. Perfect for any child wanting to learn more about history's untold stories, and bedtime reading with a difference. **Costa Book Award** winner Natasha Farrant's **The Girl Who Talked to Trees** is a magical collection of interlinked tales in each of which a young girl encounters a talking







tree and listens to their stories. Farrant successfully combines magic with a conservation message and natural science in a book that genuinely enchants. Crime stories continue to grip young readers, and **The Very Merry Murder Club**, edited by Serena Patel and Robin Stevens will satisfy all junior Marples and Poirots. Contributors include criminal masterminds Patrice Lawrence, Roopa Farooki and Sharna Jackson as well as Elle McNicoll and Maisie Chan. We also recommend Catherine Fisher's eerie collection **The Red Gloves and Other Stories** and **Magical Tales** by Quentin Blake and John Yeoman, newly reissued by Pavilion. **Arthur the Always King** written by Kevin Crossley-Holland and illustrated by Chris Riddell is simply unmissable. Stories of Arthur have been enthralling readers for eight hundred years, and who better than this author and this illustrator to convey their subtlety and power. Arthur and his court emerge as real, living people, glorious and flawed, and this is a book to treasure.

### Books for young readers

Fans of Lauren Child are in for a treat this year: Oxford have published a gift edition of **Pippi Longstocking** with her sublime colour illustrations and there is a also new story starring Clarice Bean, **Clarice Bean Think Like an Elf**. Readers first met Clarice in 1999 believe it or not, but she's lost none of her sharpness. Clarice is concerned that her parents are planning a quietish festive season, with just their immediate family; mostly undeterred, she sets out to change that and, by thinking like an elf, bring goodwill to all peoplekind. Fiction for young people doesn't come more witty, stylish, or innovative; how could anyone turn down Christmas with the Beans? There's a return too for another favourite character, Winston, Alex T Smith's intrepid mouse. With just five days to go until Christmas, Winston sets out to bring home a very special mouse... will he be able to spend Christmas with Oliver? As with **How Winston Delivered Christmas** (now available in paperback), **How Winston Came Home for Christmas** is an Advent story in a book, designed to be read one chapter a night from 1 December, each entry accompanied by a festive craft activity. It's good enough to entertain readers all year round however, and Winston is a warm-hearted, immensely lovable companion.

### Non-fiction

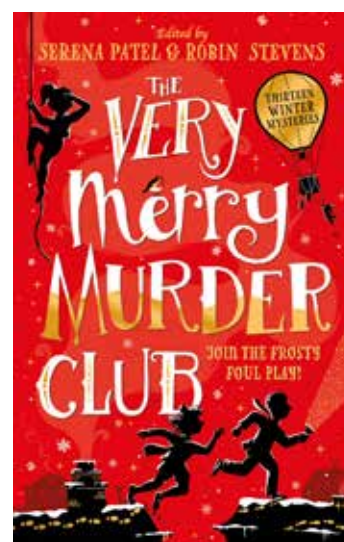
You'll need to keep a space for non-fiction books under the tree too. Imogen Russell Williams neatly and succinctly introduces fifty Great Britons in her book of the same name. From Paul McCartney to Stormzy, Florence Nightingale to Aneurin Bevan, Mary Shelley to Judith Kerr, she tells their stories and describes the ways they have changed Britain – and the world beyond it – for the better. The introduction explains our complicated past, and how some people

in history achieved or created amazing things, but also held harmful beliefs. Roald Dahl's genius is celebrated in **The Glorumpitious Worlds of Roald Dahl**, a full colour companion to the stories packed with newspaper clippings, letters, diary entries and even recipes plus a bonus envelope of activities to inspire budding writers. If you love the books, you'll love this. Natural history lovers have much to enjoy too: **Journey to the Last River**, ostensibly the journal of an Amazon explorer is an enticing fusion of fiction and facts, and will make readers feel they are experiencing the jungle first-hand. Botanist Dr Chris Thorogood does for plants what many have done for dinosaurs and **When Plants Took Over the Planet** emphasises their amazing diversity and evolutionary history. **Inside In**, published by Greystone Press, uses X-Ray photographs to wonderful effect, a beautiful and different way of understanding the creatures featured, each image accompanied by revealing text. For kids who ask questions, we recommend **The Britannica First Big Book of Why** and **The Encyclopedia of Unbelievable Facts** from Frances Lincoln.

### Stocking fillers

Just room to squeeze in three stocking filler recommendations: the crayons sum up Christmas in **Green is for Christmas** by Drew Daywalt and Oliver Jeffers; Isadora Moon spreads her magic in **Isadora Moon and the Shooting Star**; and **The Christmas Carrolls** by Mel Taylor-Bessent is fresh, funny and festive with a capital F.

Print out our Xmas book list [here](#).





# Books of the Year 2021

2021 has been another year of disruption, stops and restarts, and even as we approach the last weeks of the year, no-one is quite sure what might happen next. Thank heavens for children's literature! Has it been a golden year though? We asked a panel of regular contributors to choose the best books of 2021.

## Nicholas Tucker, honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University

Geraldine McCaughrean and Hilary McKay, the two grandes dames of contemporary children's books, were both in good form this year – Geraldine with **The Supreme Lie**, celebrating strength of spirit under a criminal regime, and Hilary with **The Swallows' Flight**, set in World War Two and including German as well as British characters. These two irreplaceable writers continue to uphold the highest standards of children's literature and long may their reign continue. Also of this elevated company, Marcus Sedgwick goes on writing his clever, teasing and ultimately philosophical stories, with **Dark Peak** constantly exciting as well as super-readable. Coming up fast on the inside however, William Sutcliffe combines excellent one-liners with a powerful social message in **The Summer We Turned Green**, even more pressingly topical now than when it first appeared in July.

## Miranda McKearney, EmpathyLab

Michael Rosen has an extraordinary ability to turn his life experiences into powerful books. I've long admired **The Sad Book**, and **Sticky McStickStick**, illustrated by Tony Ross, is surely destined to become a picture book classic in a similar vein. It tells the story of Michael's recovery from Covid, and his struggle to learn to walk again – helped by doctors and nurses and his trusty NHS stick – 'the friend who helped me walk again'. The clarity of the language, and superb Tony Ross illustrations take the reader on a journey to the heart of Michael's experience, which ends with a sense of great relief and hope. It's been a huge privilege to work with Michael on empathy themes in 2021. Sticky's publication was the springboard for an Empathy Check-In Month, led by Michael who's asked children to revisit the Empathy Walks and Resolutions they made for Empathy Day. Who better than him to explore the importance of empathy, and help us all reflect on the empathetic doctors and nurses who've got us through this grim pandemic. And thank god he made it through.

## Zoey Dixon, Chair of YLG (Youth Libraries Group) London

I've read a lot of amazing books this year, but two that really stood out for me were **Ace of Spades** by Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé and **Nen and the Lonely Fisherman**, written by Ian Eagleton and illustrated by James Mayhew.

**Ace of Spades** definitely lived up to the hype and is one of the best debuts I have ever read. Set in a prestigious school, Devon, a gay Black scholarship boy, and Chiamaka, a queer girl with mixed Nigerian and Italian heritage, both find themselves being blackmailed by a mysterious group. The novel explores themes of race, sexuality, class and tackles the topic of white supremacy within a thrilling plot with lots of twists and turns. I'm pretty sure I'll still be gushing about it next year.

**Nen and the Lonely Fisherman** is a heart-warming story inspired by the Little Mermaid that will melt your heart. Beautifully drawn, you can really see the love and affection between Nen (the merman) and Ernest (the fisherman). A powerful story of love and acceptance, I hope this book is in every school and public library and read throughout the year, not just for LGBTQ+ History Month or Pride.

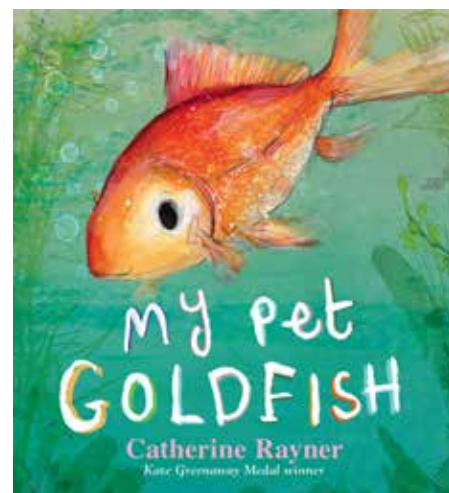
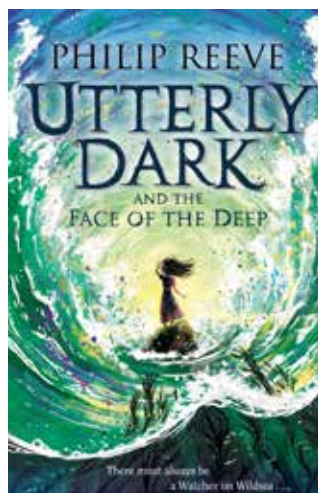
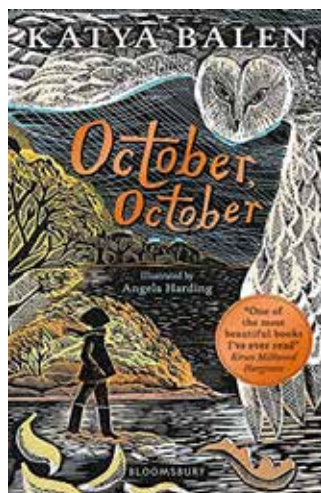
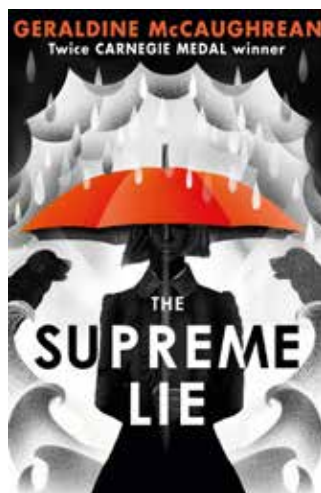
## Martin Salisbury, Professor of Illustration, Director, The Centre for Children's Book Studies, Cambridge School of Art

I've chosen **Lost** by Alexandra Mîrzac. This exceptional debut picturebook by Romanian artist, Mîrzac follows Cat's growing suspicion that he is invisible as his attempts to engage his increasingly work-preoccupied householders meet with growing indifference. Cat decides to strike out into the big city to seek some more attentive playmates, only to find himself lost, lonely and even less visible in the uncaring metropolis.

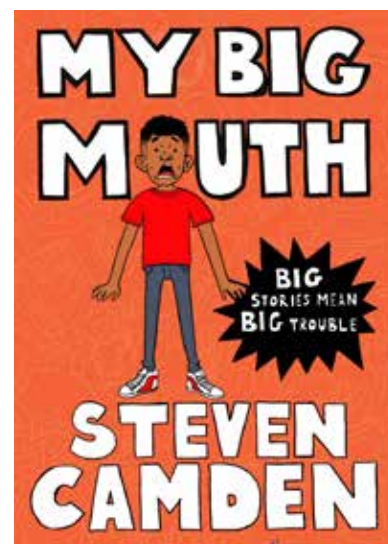
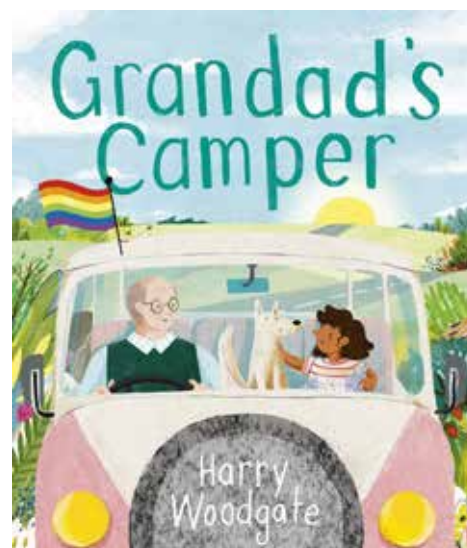
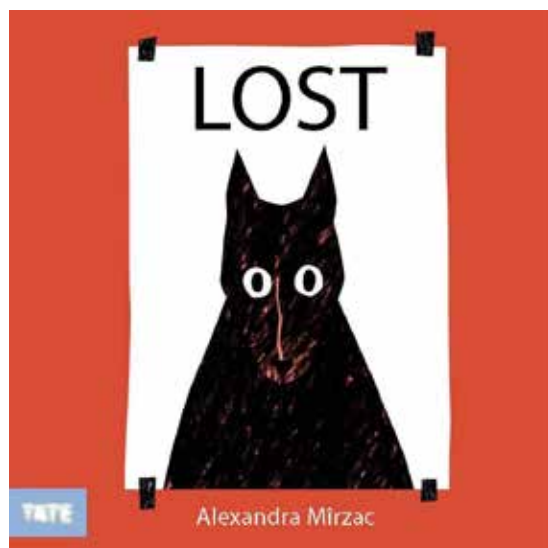
Employing an exquisite balance of delicate line drawing with large areas of flat colour, limited to black, red and blue, Mîrzac takes us on a Cat's eye-level journey into the unforgiving nocturnal metropolis. We find ourselves dwarfed by the monumental figures that step over and around us as they look at their phones, carry their deliveries and grapple with their children. Cat's realisation that he is lost is described in a stunning panoramic centrefold of night-time city traffic, with a glimpse of Cat's desperately searching owners. Narrative graphic art at its best!

## Jane Churchill, Fiction Advisor, Gallimard Jeunesse

This is a vintage year for rip-roaring tales. My first choice is the wonderful Jonathan Stroud's **The Outlaws Scarlett & Browne**. The eponymous protagonists are two of the most arresting







characters to be found in children's literature and the alternative future Britain they inhabit is superbly imagined. The humour is black and the dialogue – so quick and clever! **Pony** by RJ Palacio is no less an astonishing story of outlaws and a courageous boy travelling across America to solve a mystery accompanied by a strange pony and an enigmatic ghost. The writing is sublime. My final choice is very much a crossover book – **Crushing** by Sophie Burrows. This wordless graphic novel is a masterpiece. It captures exactly the loneliness and alienation of two young people living in a large metropolis and yearning for friendship and love with such amazing tenderness, delicacy and humour. The artwork in a limited palette of reds and bluey greys and blacks is glorious.

#### Charlotte Hacking, CLPE Learning Programmes Leader

An enchanting personal narrative shares the story of a young child's experience of getting their first ever pet, a goldfish named Richard, accompanied by sumptuous and lifelike illustrations in Catherine Rayner's distinctively enrapturing style. The text of **My Pet Goldfish** also contains a range of fascinating information about goldfish, allowing children to hear the voice of different styles of writing as well as learning new vocabulary and knowledge. A delight for children aged 3-7.

Steven Camden is an author who knows children. He speaks to them in a way that engages, reflects and never patronises, and creates and shapes characters and situations that every child can relate to. The story of **My Big Mouth** is told from the first-person perspective of Jason (Jay) Gardener and revolves around the familiar experiences of school, friends and family. Illustrated fiction is incredibly popular with older children and Chanté Timothy's carefully chosen and crafted illustrations take us deeper into Jay's world. An absolute must-have for children aged 8-11.

#### Teresa Cremin, Professor of Education (Literacy) at The Open University in the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies.

My choice is **October October** by Katya Balen. I adored **The Space We're In** and was completely captured by the sparse, lyrical prose here, the pain and October's journey. A soul song of the wild, this remarkable book reaches deep and lingers long. Free-spirited October lives in the woods with her dad, and they are wild. Until that is their world turns on its axis and they are obliged to leave their forest haven, separately. Katya Balen's poetic prose captures a sense of place so evocatively that we smell the woodsmoke, hear the city roar, feel the sucking of the mud on the foreshore and see Stig's feathers in flight. October's displacement, raw anger, loss, confusion and pain are conveyed with such conviction that when tendrils of hope begin to emerge, we reach for them greedily, wildly. This is stunning storytelling – a book to treasure, re-live and share.

#### Ferelith Hordon, editor, Books for Keeps

Looking back over a year studded with books what has stood out for me? The gorgeous colour saturated illustrations by Grahame Baker-Smith for his picture book **Wild is the Wind** – such a perfect match for the text. Here information is presented vividly and simply to make an invisible element visible. Elements are also central to my other two books of the year. **Utterly Dark and the Face of the Deep** – Philip Reeve's latest novel – took me to the depths of the sea to face...what? A goddess? A monster? Or the sea itself? I was captivated by Utterly herself in this immersive coming-of-age narrative. Finally there is Geraldine McCaughrean's **The Supreme Lie**. When the world is flooded, you must believe the newspapers. Here serious issues are handled with wit, imagination, and brilliant writing. No preaching, but questions – some very clever puzzles and characters who step off the page.

#### Fen Coles for Letterbox Library

Lgbtq+ representations in children's literature continue to grow with slow, but steady, toddler steps. 2021 saw several delightful 'incidental' lgbtq+ characters: Mini Mart owner, Mr Potempa, in **Danny Chung Does Not Do Maths**; Tam in **The Boys**; two mums-to-be in **Hey You!**; teacher Mr Ellory-Jones in **Omar, The Bees and Me**; the gay and non-binary character in **You Can!** But we have also seen lgbtq+ characters filling out the foreground, a vital positioning given that so much of lgbtq+ representation has historically been reduced to inferences and ambiguity. So, 'Hurrah!' for the 2021 picture book lgbtq+ leading characters (often also characters of colour): Dad and Daddy who head up the superbly-silly family in the technicolour spectacle, **Bathe the Cat**; Mum and Mama, utterly overwhelmed by their sourdough pet in **The Bread Pet**; endlessly patient Dad Toby and Dad Greg, troubled by laundry challenges in **Covered in Adventures**; Zari and Jina, aunties to the irrepressible **Lulu**; Grandad, Gramps and their unstoppable camper van; Nen the Merman and Ernest the Fisherman; and the two actual stars – surely – of **Julian at the Wedding**... the two brides who lead this 'party of love'.

#### Tony Bradman, author, reviewer and Chair of ALCS

My book of the year has to be **Cane Warriors** by the brilliant Alex Wheatle. Yes, I know it was first published in 2020, but that was in hardback and the paperback was definitely 2021! This gripping story of a slave uprising in 18th-century Jamaica has resonated with me ever since I read it, because it's so brilliantly written. The characters are so well drawn and you really feel as if you're there with them. It's also an important book because it shows that enslaved people in Jamaica weren't passive and always down-trodden - they really did fight back. I heartily recommend it to all and sundry, and I think it should be on every curriculum reading list - this year and in any year!

Click on this [link](#) for the full booklist.

# Beyond the Secret Garden: Home from Home?

In the latest in the **Beyond the Secret Garden** series, which looks at the representation of black, Asian and minority ethnic voices in British children's literature, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** examine ideas of home.

As the year draws to a close and families start making plans to get together for the holidays, home takes centre-stage. The idea of home is even more important this year than most, between the ongoing pandemic and the recent gathering of world leaders at COP26 in Glasgow to discuss our global home. But for many British people of colour, the issue of home is complicated by history. The question, 'But where are you really from?' was a constant reminder for many Caribbean, Asian and African migrants from the (former) colonial empire after World War II that the colour of their skin excluded them from full acceptance as British by some white Britons. The Britishness of racially minoritised people continued and continues to be questioned even beyond the first generation of post-war immigrants, publicly (as in the 'Tebbit Test' of 1990, questioning the loyalty of cricket supporters with family ties overseas) and in everyday interactions.

Children's literature exploring this question in depth often involves a visit to the countries where one or more parents grew up, allowing the character (and reader) to examine questions of identity and belonging.

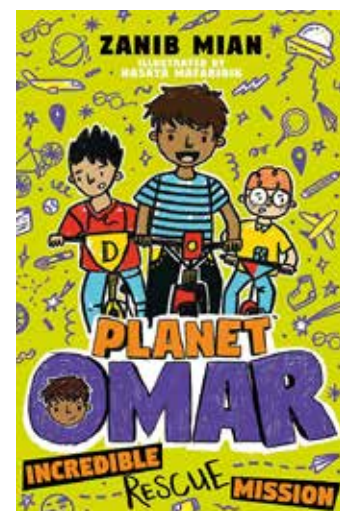
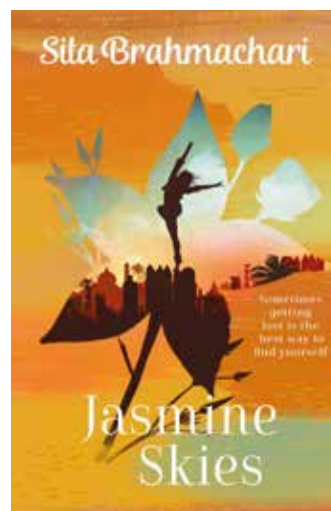
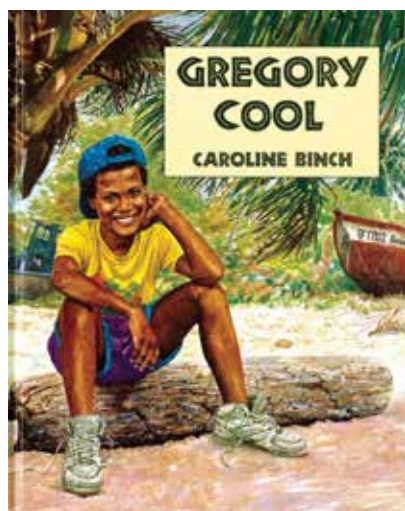
Some of these books are focused on the interaction between a family member from Britain interacting with another family member in the 'heritage country'. For example, Caroline Binch's **Gregory Cool** (1994), Patrice Lawrence's **Granny Ting-Ting** (2009), and Sita Brahmachari's **Jasmine Skies** (2012) all centre on children from England visiting their cousins and grandparents in the country where one of their parents came from. These books, which are designed for different ages, all set up a 'which country is better?' dichotomy in at least part of the book. **Gregory Cool**, for the picture book age, features a sullen boy who wonders 'Why did he have to come to Tobago?' to visit his grandparents. The enthusiasm of his cousin for the natural world of the Caribbean, from dips in the river to skinnying up coconut trees to swimming in the sea, finally convinces Gregory that 'Maybe these next four weeks wouldn't be so bad after all'. But although he decides to enjoy himself, there is no sense that Gregory sees Tobago as anything more than a holiday.

This is true also for Jehvon's trip in Natasha N Brown's **Jehvon Goes to Jamaica** (2020), illustrated by Shiela Alejandro, where Jehvon

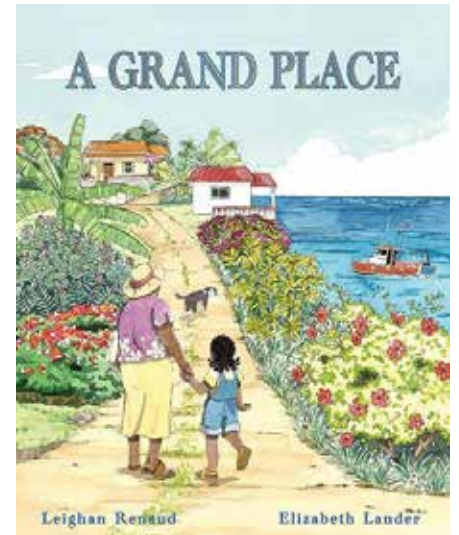
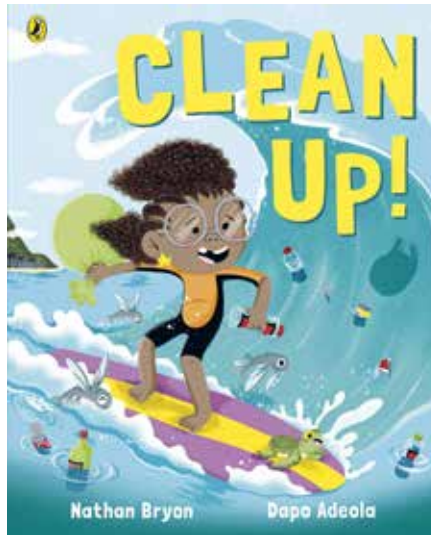
is shown enjoying a range of activities including eating, shopping, playing dominoes, swimming and listening to reggae music. Rocket's trip to Jamaica in **Clean Up!** (2020) written by Nathan Bryon and illustrated by Dapo Adeola, begins as a holiday, but develops into environmental activism involving 'everyone on the island'. In **A Grand Place** (2021), written by Leigha Renaud, Zora takes a bus ride to town to meet Grandma. Elizabeth Lander depicts the lush beauty of Grenada, a country Zora is visiting, but also 'a grand place she can call home'.

The cousins, Michael and Shayla, in beginning chapter book **Granny Ting-Ting** compete over which is better, London or Trinidad, but it is a lopsided comparison because Shayla has never been to London and must believe what Michael says about it. She worries she is 'not clever enough' (p69) to be a Londoner, while Michael has an easy time being 'a real Trinidadian' (p62). The idea that Michael belongs to Trinidad as well as to London causes envy in Shayla. Mira Levenson, in Brahmachari's book for older readers, however, has a more complicated relationship with her grandfather's home country of India. A visit to her cousin at first just brings Mira 'closer to the stories Grandad used to tell me' (p61), stories which Mira thinks 'help you to see where you stand in the world' (p62). However, after several weeks in India, Mira understands 'what Grandad meant about being "suspended between homelands", because right now I feel as if my heart's being torn in two' (p333). Unlike Binch's and Lawrence's stories, Brahmachari's ends with uncertainty for Mira about where ultimately she will decide to belong.

In **I Won't Go to China** (2009, O'Brien) written by Enda Wyley and illustrated by Marie Thorhauge, Chang-ming is disappointed that he will miss playing in the forthcoming football match because he will be making his first trip to China. This provokes him to reject noodles for pizza and to complain about how his name differs from his class-mates'. His teacher reframes his situation, suggesting that he will be representing the school in China and that he can be an 'Expert Reporter' on life in China for his class-mates in Ireland. Observing the hustle and bustle of preparations for the New Year, Chang-ming observes that 'It's like Christmas back in Ireland' (p21). However not everything he encounters can be compared to his life







in Ireland, 'Chang-ming had never seen anything like Beijing' (p22). When his grandmother hugs him on meeting him for the first time, he feels 'strange and happy' (p25). The story concludes with Chang-ming declaring that he is both an 'Expert Reporter and a footballer', suggesting a realisation that one can hold multiple identities and resist having to choose one. It is possible to question the educational approach of his teacher and the extent to which his Expert Reporter role situates his Chinese identity as valuable to the extent that it benefits his classmates in Ireland. However, the story ends with Chang-ming declaring that he is 'glad to be Chinese', suggesting that his trip has had a transformational effect on him.

In **Incredible Rescue Mission** (2020), the third book in Zani Mian's **Planet Omar** series, Omar visits Pakistan for the first time. He knows little about Pakistan apart from his cousin's opinion that 'the pizza is yuck'. On arrival, he instantly falls in love with the country: 'It was noisy and dirty, but it was amaaaaazing!' (p172). He is captivated by the traffic, the tastes and the colours on display at the wedding he attends. Omar's teacher in England refers to him as Pakistani; when he sees himself dressed for a wedding in Pakistan, he describes himself as looking 'like a different kid. Like my own Pakistani twin' (p188). For all the fun he has, on returning to England he tells us 'There's no place like your own home' (p234).

Sophia Acheampong's **Ipods in Accra** (2009) is a YA tale of Makeeda, who lives in Harrow, London and travels with her family to Ghana. Makeeda agrees to a bragoro, a puberty ceremony, and describes the discussions that take place in the planning for this. Whilst her cousin Tanisha is against the ceremony on feminist grounds, Makeeda has a feeling of wanting 'a connection with my Ghanaian heritage... beyond the words on a page of a textbook' (pp113-114). The place of tradition is explored in the story both in terms of Makeeda's Ghanaian family but also in a sub-plot of a relationship between a Hindu friend and her Muslim boyfriend that meets with strong parental disapproval.

Makeeda observes the differences not only between England and Ghana, but between the cities of Kumasi and Accra. She visits a museum to learn more about the history of the Asante kingdom. Finding herself referred to as 'English girl' by family in Ghana, Makeeda reflects how 'in London, I sometimes felt like an outsider. I couldn't believe that here in Ghana, people still considered me different. So where did I actually belong?' Towards the end of the story, it is her parents who tell her that she and her sister are 'British Ghanaians'. This could be interpreted as her identity being explained to her rather than claimed by her; alternatively, that her parents show empathy in understanding how their migration impacts their daughter's identity. Makeeda is able to use this insight to empathise with her new boyfriend, Nick who sees himself as Ghanaian, Polish and British.

Acheampong's Makeeda and Mian's Omar both have moments during their trip of reflecting on their own position of relative privilege in

the countries they visit. Omar, the younger of the two characters, appears excited to discover his family has a maid, though he is concerned about the welfare of the people who approach his father on the street asking for money. Makeeda's concerns are broader, and centre around the educational opportunities for domestic staff; however, they don't go as far as interrogating the relative wealth of the two countries she finds herself in. This is perhaps unsurprising. Both stories, as with the others discussed here, feature young people making sense of their place in the world, often discovering that the everyday ways we talk about home fail to do justice to their own experiences.

#### *Books mentioned:*

- Gregory Cool** Caroline Binch, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1847802583, £6.99 pbk
- Granny Ting-Ting**, Patrice Lawrence, Bloomsbury Education, 978-1472967718, £6.99 pbk
- Jasmine Skies** Sita Brahmachari, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1509855353, £7.99 pbk
- Jehvon Goes to Jamaica**, Natasha Brown, illustrated by Shiela Alejandro, Independent Publishing Network, 978-1838539962, £6.99 pbk
- I Won't Go to China**, Enda Wiley, illustrated by Marie Thorhauge, O'Brien Press, 978-1847171597, £6.99 pbk
- A Grand Place**, Leighan Renaud, Elizabeth Lander, Formy Books, 978-1838395919
- Clean Up!**, Nathan Bryon, illustrated by Dapo Adeola, Puffin Books, 978-0241345894, £6.99 pbk
- Planet Omar: Incredible Rescue Mission**, Zani Mian, illustrated by Nasaya Mafaridik, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444951295, £6.99 pbk
- Ipods in Accra**, Sophia Acheampong, Piccadilly Press, 978-1848120174, £6.99 pbk



**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.



# A Treasure Trove of Reading

**Julia Eccleshare** interviews **Eoin Colfer** as he signs off on **The Fowl Twins** and looks back at twenty years of reading adventures.

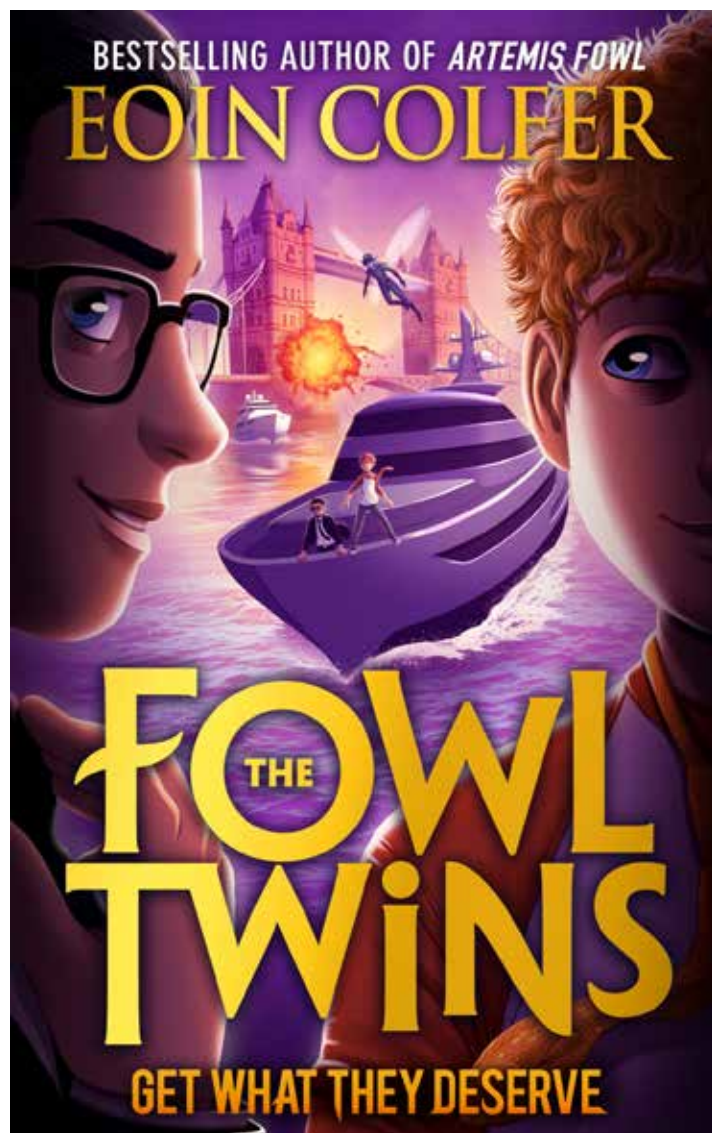
Twenty years ago Eoin Colfer was a young school teacher in Ireland with three very short novels to his name. Now, as the third in his latest mind-blowing trilogy capturing the headlong adventures of **The Fowl Twins** is published, he is a multi-award-winning writer with a string of major trophies under his belt, a former Laureate na nÓg and the author of the book voted as the all time best Puffin title by young readers.

Although **Artemis Fowl** was identified as a winner from the beginning by Eoin's agent Sophie Hicks and by Penguin Random House who were willing to bid big for the rights to it, Eoin could never have imagined that it would change his life entirely. Published with a loud and well-deserved fanfare, including being given the tag line 'Die Hard with fairies' which was eye-catching everywhere and especially on London buses, **Artemis Fowl** is a pacy story of a smart kid – Artemis Fowl – who moves easily through a riot of a story set in a world that is an original blend of mythology, magic and fantasy.

There was – and is – something arresting about **Artemis Fowl** that made it stand out in the midst of the welter of fantasy that was published around the same time as all publishers searched for a successor to **Harry Potter**. Comparisons to J K Rowling abounded; Eoin brushed them off deftly complimenting Rowling but pointing out that he never wanted to emulate her. Reactions from critics varied with most captivated by its wit and invention but none initially predicting just how successful it would be. Interviewing Eoin for the **Observer** in May 2001 Kate Kellaway praised the book for its originality and revelled in Eoin's sense of humour but she was cautious, too, describing Artemis Fowl as 'a smart, amusing one-off. It flashes with high-tech invention – as if Colfer were as much an inspired boffin as a writer.'



photo by Mary Browne



And now, here we are twenty years on. And Eoin says he is signing off on the world of **Artemis Fowl**. That's something he has done before. Fans grieved at the ending of the eight book Artemis Fowl sequence, but Eoin added companion volumes, including graphic novels, to enrich the main stories. Then he wrote another series and some standalone titles before returning to the world of Artemis with **The Fowl Twins** in 2019 quickly followed by **The Fowl Twins Deny All Charges** a year later. And this year it is **The Fowl Twins Get What They Deserve**. 'I always knew the Fowl Twins would only be three books,' Eoin says. So this time it feels for real.

Having followed Eoin's career since his very first books, through the success of **Artemis Fowl** which took him to another place entirely, an experience he summed up at the time in an interview with **Publisher's Weekly** as 'It's just like a dream. A fellow from a small town gets a big break. You never think it's going to happen to you', it is a pleasure to be talking to Eoin now about **The Fowl Twins Get What They Deserve** and his writing during the past twenty years.

We started by going back to the beginning. Despite all the starry success, the massive sales and the international reputation, Eoin has a habit of batting away praise about his work – although he certainly knows its worth. When I ask him now about what is so special about Artemis he makes it sound very simple. 'Artemis is really the retelling of an Irish story about a naughty boy stealing a crock of gold. I just





wrote it in a new way. And it's not just an Irish story. Ireland is a melting pot so we have a lot of stories from around the world. I incorporated a lot of them too.' A massive fan of traditional stories, Eoin credits his easy access to all of them, and particularly the ones from Irish mythology and history, to his years as a primary school teacher where they were something he taught every day. His characters, too, owe something to his years as a teacher but more perhaps to his own feelings as a child. 'You see all the types as a teacher but I wanted a "hero" character – not a jock. The jocks are in the books but they are not the main characters. Artemis is a very smart kid. I wanted him to be a hero with a super power of cleverness.'

With Artemis as a big brother it's no surprise that the Fowl Twins are also super smart. Nor is it surprising that both the fairy magic and the high tech that explode around them have blossomed and frothed up over the twenty years. Myles and Beckett operate at the same levels of smart thinking and high physical energy that propelled their big brother. Having two of them gives Eoin the gift of being able to give what is essentially one character a much wider range of skills and tricks. And he makes brilliant use of it. 'The adventures for the Twins are more quirky than in Artemis Fowl,' he says. 'You get more confidence as a writer partly from talking to readers. You get to realise that they will follow you so you can take more risks and write more unconventionally. I made the inventions more magical. They were no longer even close to something that might be invented. Apart from anything else you have to keep yourself interested as a writer.' Although Eoin describes his inventions as 'alternative science' he also says he keeps abreast of science and technology 'as much as I need it'. For example, needing to know about how to keep a brain alive, he looked up cryogenics to make sure that what he was proposing was not too far-fetched.

As with everything else about his writing, Eoin wears his science lightly but there is certainly still much of the inspired boffin that Kate Kellaway identified at the beginning of his career. Swirled around with Eoin's humour, the science pervades the corkscrew plot as Myles and Beckett deal with their major enemy, Lord Teddy Bleedham-Drye. Eoin loves his baddy. He enjoys creating these arch villains while also being quick to say, 'The baddies are baddies but there is no moralising in my books. The Fowl stories are like fairy stories. I don't intend them to have a deep meaning.'

It's a theme Eoin believes in passionately. 'In **The Fowl Twins** and all my books, the adventures are very heightened because I want the reader to have a grand time reading. My only agenda is that I want people to read more books. It's fun and I want kids to know they can have this amount of fun reading a book. I want them to become the kind of fanatical reader I was.'

With his millions of fans around the world Eoin has done exactly that. With his invention, his humour and his deeply held view learnt, he says, from Douglas Adams, that 'you can write convoluted sentences into which I occasionally throw a humdinger of a word because I think working out new and difficult words makes you know you are in a special club of readers'. Eoin has created a couple of generations of readers. The final title in **The Fowl Twins** trilogy closes a twenty-year long chapter of writing for Eoin and leaves a treasure trove of reading for future generations of children.

**The Fowl Twins** series is published by HarperCollins Children's Books

**The Fowl Twins**, 978-0008324858, £7.99 pbk.

**The Fowl Twins Deny All Charges**, 978-0008324902, £7.99 pbk

**The Fowl Twins Get What They Deserve**, 978-0008475246, £12.99 hbk.



**Julia Eccleshare** is chair of **PLR** and director of the **Hay Festival** children's programme.



# Good Reads

Our Good Reads were chosen by young people at **Addey and Stanhope School**, Deptford, London. Thanks to these young critics and thanks and congratulations to **LRC Manager/ Librarian Kristabelle Williams**, School Librarian of the Year 2021.

## Ace of Spades

Faridah Abíké-Íyímídé, Usborne, 978-1474967532, £8.99 pbk

This book is extremely fun and thrilling throughout, all while exploring themes of racism, homophobia, white supremacy and misguided racial stereotypes. I personally enjoyed the alternating point of view of the two protagonists providing somewhat differing perspectives on this intriguing, mysterious world that the author has created. My favourite part of the book was when, after finally discovering herself and overcoming the naivety riddled throughout her past, main character Chimaka is able to confront racial discrimination head on. The message I received from this book was to remain true to yourself no matter the situation you find yourself in. This book is shocking, suspenseful and tense and I would 100% recommend it if you like thrillers or simply want a great emotionally driven book to read. *Dana, Year 10*

## Slime

David Walliams, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0008342586, £12.99 hbk

**Slime** is my favourite book out of all the astounding books Walliams has written. It is set on the Isle of Mulch (a fictional Island). It is home to no more or less than 900 people, whom a boy named Ned and his family are amongst. Later on in this comical tale, you are introduced to the one and only fascinating glob – Slime. Slime looks and is identical to its name. It is a gargantuan, green shapeless

mass, who has stolen the spot as my favourite character in the book named after itself. Slime's name itself is a prime example of Walliams' unique writing style and choice of words. His choice of words includes humorous words from the Walliamsictionary. An example of one of the many especial words from Walliams' Walliamsictionary is 'sloop'. I, personally, would recommend this book to anyone who has read any of Walliams' books; ranging from **The Boy in the Dress** all the way to **The Creature Choir**. I would also recommend this book to anyone aged 8 and above and/or anyone interested in books with laughable illustrations and choice of words. *Bilwilyn, Year 7*

## Frozen Charlotte

Alex Bell, Stripes, 978-1847154538, £7.99 pbk

This book is the best book I have ever read! **Frozen Charlotte** is about two kids called Sophie and Jay who do a Ouija board in a cafe and Sophie recommends they try talk to her dead cousin Rebecca. They make contact with her and Jay asks her 'when is he going to die' and she says 'today' and on the way home Jay dies.... Sophie goes to Rebecca's old house and tries to ask her other cousin how she died and tries to understand why she killed him. When Sophie arrives at her cousins' house her bedroom is right next to Rebecca's... Let's not spoil anymore — if you like horror books I would 100% recommend this book. You need to make sure you get right in the book and really enjoy it to get the full experience! *Aimee, Year 8*

## The Upper World

Femi Fadugba, Penguin, 978-0241505618, £7.99 pbk

**The Upper World** is very different to most stories – it starts out realistic and turns into a sci-fi thriller. The main characters are a boy who while trying to save a child gets hit by a bus and taken to 'the Upper World' where he can see the future, and a girl 15 years later whose life crosses with his own past and present. I liked the book because it was exciting and I didn't want to put it down; the characters all had their own personalities and different identities. The story was also set in Peckham and most books I read are always in made up places, but this one was set local to our school so it was familiar. If you like realistic stories with lots of drama like those by Alex Wheatle, as well as time travel and action you will love this book. *Saskya, Year 10*

## Dog Man: Mothering Heights

Dav Pilkey, Scholastic, 978-0702313493, £8.99 pbk

This is the adventures of Dogman and all of his other friends as they go on adventures and wreck havoc anywhere they go. This adventure is when a cat in jail accidentally makes two gigantic cups and they destroy the city as people are in danger. I highly recommend this book for all ages and for people who really want to laugh. *Brandon, Year 7*

## A Monster Calls

Patrick Ness, illus Jim Kay, Walker Books, 978-1406339345, £9.99 pbk

This book is about a twelve-year-old boy, called Conor who has

the same dream every night, ever since his mother first fell ill, ever since she started the treatments that don't quite seem to be working. Tonight, when he wakes, there's a visitor at his window. It's ancient, elemental, a force of nature. He walks on during the dream, sweaty and agitated. The monster being the yew tree planted in the graveyard besides his house, and it wants the most dangerous thing of all from Conor. It wants the truth. That monster had been awoken from his years and years of slumber, to seek help with all that has been happening with his school life and home life; all of that told with tales that have happened years ago. He woke up to help Conor with what was happening, and the reason he started walking on Earth once more, is just to tell Conor tales. The moral of those stories says that the greedy may not always be bad or the witch has done nothing wrong, making an allusion that Connor wasn't in the wrong for what had happened in his dream. This is an amazing book that I would recommend to people who love horror or fantasy. I really enjoyed the illustrations of this book and the plots of every tale the Yew tree monster foretold. It is a wonderful book and I have bought one of my own that I will treasure forever. The whole book was accurate; my favourite quotes would have to be 'There is not always a good guy. Nor is there always a bad one. Most people are somewhere in between.' and 'Your mind will believe comforting lies while also knowing the painful truths that make those lies necessary. And your mind will punish you for believing both.' *Jennifer, Year 7*



Addey and Stanhope School Library



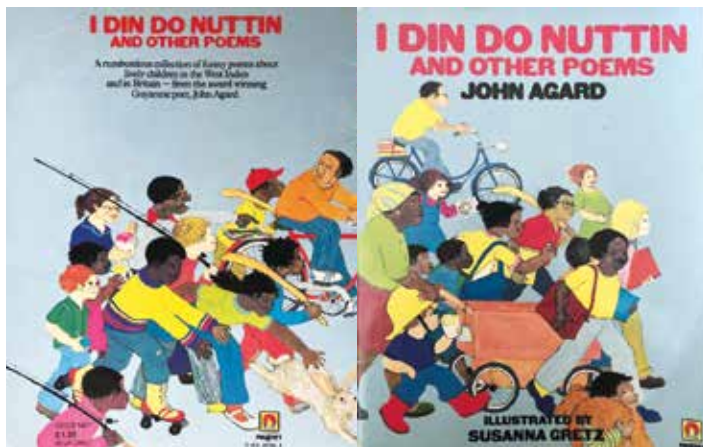
# John Agard's Lifetime Achievement

**John Agard** has been presented with the **BookTrust Lifetime Achievement Award** for his outstanding contribution to children's literature. The judges highlighted John's persistence and creativity in championing and challenging the language norms that too often dominate literature and the curriculum and we reproduce here **Darren Chetty's** tribute to John and the impact of his poetry.

It's an absolute honour to be asked to give a short speech in tribute of John Agard this afternoon. I have two minutes – and I couldn't possibly do justice to the breadth, depth and dazzling originality of the work John has produced, in so short a time.

So instead let me focus my comments on one book, **I Din Do Nuttin and Other Poems**. This was John's first UK-published book in 1983.

The book's title captures the Guyanese patois that John regularly draws on in his work. More than that, it puts it centre-stage from the start, making the book as relevant now – at a time when some schools are listing words banned for classroom usage - as it was at the time of publication.



For many of my twenty years as a primary school teacher it was one of the only books to show Black, brown and white children – and a rabbit – together on the cover. In other words, it was one of the only covers to resemble the classes I was teaching in East London. But inside the covers, John's poetry delves deeper than depictions of casual multiculturalism.

For instance, Dilroy's eighth birthday is a happy occasion, he's got a pair of skates he wanted for a long, long time.

Yet the final verse poses a question for young readers (and their parents and teachers):

*My birthday cards say,  
appy Birthday, Dilroy!  
But, Mummy, tell me why  
They don't put a little boy  
That looks a bit like me.  
Why the boy on the card so white?*

It is a question that can only truly be answered if we check out our history – and in some quarters at least, there are signs of schools and publishers beginning to step up to that responsibility.



And this issue is being raised – and indeed addressed by John – almost thirty-five years before the **Centre for Literacy in Primary Education** launched the **Reflecting Realities** research.

John demonstrates how employing accessible language need not mean a lack of depth to literary work. In *My Telly*, the final poem in the book, 'My Telly eats people especially on the news,' might be read by some young readers as a surreal, comic verse, by others as commentary on the famines in Ethiopia happening at the time the book was written.

The back cover of **I Din Do Nuttin** describes it as a collection about 'lively children in the West Indies and Britain'. But John offers us a collection of poems that cannot be neatly categorised as from 'here' or 'there'. As he has gone on to show, we can make ourselves at home anywhere - in the world of Dante or Shakespeare; in the languages of our friends on the street, and our distant ancestors. The writing is not framed as tales from a faraway exotic land nor are we implicitly told that Black children in Britain should focus on their Britishness above all. Indeed, John's poetry pushes against boundaries, sometimes it just dances over them as if they were not there in the first place – at other times it mocks their very construction as in the case of 'Half-caste' which remains popular despite its inclusion in GCSEs examinations.

Its inclusion is due to its literary merits, not any sense of compromise in the work. And, of course, the same is true for John's award today. Today he becomes the first poet and also the first Caribbean born writer, the first Black writer, the first writer of colour to win this award.

But not, I hope, the last. Indeed, I'm struck by how many of the new generation of writers whose family came from faraway lands who have spoken of the enormous impact of encountering John's work, and in some cases of receiving advice and support from him. Dean Atta, Raymond Antrobus, and Sita Brahmachari, all of them prize-winning writers in their own right, are just a few examples that come to mind.

Like the child in the title poem, over the past forty-odd years John Agard really has done something - something remarkable as a writer, performer, poet, storyteller, mentor and an inspiration to so many of us.

It is my pleasure to present him with the **BookTrust Lifetime Achievement Award**.



**Darren Chetty** is Teaching Fellow at UCL Institute of Education and writes the **Beyond the Secret Garden** features for **Books for Keeps** with **Karen Sands-O'Connor**.



## 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.lovemybooks.co.uk](http://www.lovemybooks.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.

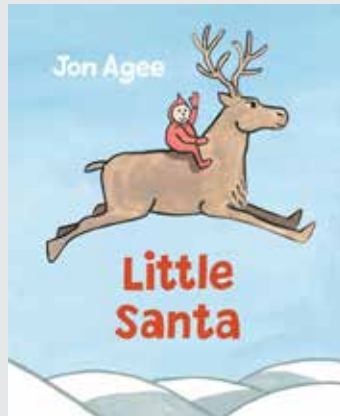
**Elizabeth Schlenker** is the compiler of [www.healthybooks.org.uk](http://www.healthybooks.org.uk)

**Lucy Staines** is a primary school teacher

**Mat Tobin** teaches English and Children's Literature in Primary ITE at **Oxford Brookes University**. He also leads and teaches several modules at Masters level on Children's Literature.

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

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



**Little Santa**

★★★★★

Written and ill. Jon Agee,  
Sallywag Press, 40pp,  
978-1-912650-78-1, £12.99 hbk

How did Santa meet his reindeer? Has he always had a magic sleigh? Who were his parents, and what kind of childhood did he have? This engaging fictional account explores Santa's backstory to discover how and why some of our most beloved Christmas beliefs and customs came about.

As Agee tells it, Santa was a lively boy. The youngest of seven children in the Claus family, he really enjoyed their North Pole life - particularly sliding down the chimney. But everyone else was fed up with the hard work and endless cold, and a move to Florida was announced. When a huge blizzard prevented their departure, even Santa was dismayed. Their house was almost completely buried. How would they survive?

Reversing his usual approach and shimmying up the chimney, Santa sets off alone to seek help. What appears to be a treetop emerging from the snowy wastes turns out to be an antler belonging to a reindeer with a very special talent. One sky-ride later, Santa and the reindeer land on the roof of an isolated house. Entering via his usual route, Santa discovers an unexpected community of elves. With their help (and a brand-new sleigh) Santa's family is rescued. Life becomes easier, but in the end, the warm south still holds its appeal. The family migrates to Florida - all except Santa, who chooses to stay. And as the final page observes, 'you know the rest...'

Santa's story is well conceived and told, with just the right amount of detail to provide a convincing context without overwhelming younger readers, and the page-turns keep the suspense at perfect pitch. Agee's palette creates a chilly, northern feel, allowing Santa's red suit to pop

against the snowy backdrops, and his expressive characters enact key moments in the narrative in ways that enable audiences to connect more closely with the text.

Children will enjoy being 'in the know' as familiar tropes are revealed, and meeting Santa at such a young age only adds to the fun. It's easier to identify with a rotund preschooler in a snowsuit than an elderly whiskered gentleman, and making this connection may prompt intergenerational questioning and reminiscing in children's real lives, too.

Little Santa is the kind of book around which traditions can be built - a classic in the making - and will be read and enjoyed in many families for years to come. **CFH**

### Grandpa Forgets

★★★★★

Suzi Lewis-Barned, ill. Sophie Elliot, Ragged Bears, 32pp, 978 1 85714 484 0, £6.99 pbk

This unusual picture book for the young is told from a little girl's perspective as to how she sees her Grandpa with dementia. She tells us he forgets things like what he had for breakfast, who has visited today, where to find the coffee, and the fact that he 'has already had a banana'. But he still enjoys singing and loves dogs and smelling flowers - and even remembers some of his 'funny old stories'. Best of all, he hasn't forgotten how to hold the little girl's hand. The illustrations are unexpected: life-like faces of the little girl, her mother and Grandpa are surrounded by line drawings of their home, with occasional brightly coloured pictures of the dogs and the flowers that Grandpa loves. And always, always, a little pink elephant on every page! Beautifully planned and executed, the story is moving, but with some humour too, and Grandpa seems to enjoy life just as much as his granddaughter. Wonderfully evocative. **ES**

### How Can You Lose an Elephant?

★★★★★

Jan Fearnley, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 978 1 4711 9167 1, £12.99 hbk

Who doesn't know an Oscar, the small child featured in this tale? Whilst the hero of this tale is 'as brave as a cave full of lions, as funny as a basket of kittens and as silly as a bucket of frogs,' he is also an expert at losing his belongings. His skilfully portrayed parents each show their exasperation as Oscar mislays his football boots, his scooter, his flippers. But when he finds a lonely looking elephant in the park, and brings him home, the

newcomer rapidly settles in as one of the family. Hugo the elephant is loved by them all. And elephants have a great capacity for memory, and one amazing day, after many games together, Oscar's memory too starts improving. Life seems... easier. 'But one day, as is always the way, something happens.' Whilst playing a game of cards, Oscar really wants to win, and not sometimes, but every time, all the time. Failing to do so, he loses something very important. He loses his temper. He tells Hugo he doesn't want to play with him anymore, and to GO AWAY. And, quietly, that is just what Hugo does. His parents miss Hugo. Mum asks, 'How could you lose an elephant?' Oscar says he doesn't know, but of course, he does. Fearnley's illustrations are full of humour, happy pictures full of the tiniest details, from all the different varieties of trees in the park, to the heartfelt expressions on the three humans' faces. Extra story is told in the pictures; e.g. as readers we know where the lost scooter went. The ducks took it! We feel the Mum's exasperation as Oscar interrupts her meditation. She sits cross-legged in lotus position, candles glowing calm...but look at her hand nearer Oscar! And it is Kim's game that Hugo plays with Oscar that helps the boy's memory to develop... not mentioned in the text but illustrated so well. In the resolution Oscar remembers where he originally found Hugo, in the park, and that is where a happy reunion eventually takes place. Big apologies from Oscar to Hugo, and they become once more the best of friends. Such a useful book for helping to deal with tantrums, and it gently emphasises the need to make up if a friendship is broken. Brilliant text, brilliant illustrations. **GB**

### A Cat Called Waverley

★★★★★

Debi Gliori, Otter-Barry Books, 40pp, 9781913074630, £12.99 hbk  
Waverley was a cat with no home - but he has one special friend, Donald. Then his life changes; Donald leaves - he has enlisted and been posted abroad to a war zone. At first it is not too bad - but as familiar faces leave and familiar places disappear, Waverley is truly homeless. The only place that remains familiar is Waverley Station in Edinburgh so that is where he stays. But what has happened to Donald? Will Waverley ever find his best friend? Illustrated in Gliori's distinctive style but here eschewing her usual bold colour palette, the images follow the written text closely. Monochrome line drawings occasionally highlighted with a single colour, yellow,



# reviews

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

emphasise Waverley's peripatetic and solitary existence. Meanwhile, Donald's story is told in bold crayon wash overlaid with the yellow of the desert sand while expansive double page spreads create a real sense of distance and dislocation. The final moment of reunion combines the soft crayon with a mellow orange; Donald may be homeless - but home does not always mean four walls. Gliori tells us that her inspiration came from a real-life situation, one which she has used to create a story that can encourage thought, reflection and open the door to empathy among its young readers. There is no attempt to point out a moral or lesson, the story, warm and engaging, is left to speak for itself. **FH**



### Constance in Peril

★★★★

Ben Manley, illus Emma Chichester Clark, Two Hoots, 32pp, 9781509839735, £12.99 hbk

Constance may only be a doll, but her life is adventurous, indeed perilous, in the extreme. Becoming the constant companion of her young owner after she has been rescued from a rubbish bin, she meets a hazard every day whether being tossed to the top of a tree, abandoned by the roadside, or grabbed by a dog. Luckily big sister is there to sort every problem out. But will Constance meet one disaster too many?

Ben Manley's minimal text sets the scene, describing each incident with no fuss. The drama lies in the illustrations by Emma Chichester Clark who moves from snapshots to the climax of a double page spread. Her images are bold and clear, her colour palette vibrant, picking up the emotion and mood of each event. Though we learn the name of the little boy who so loves Constance, surely his big sister must be Lily, now much older and responsible - Lily who so loved Blue Kangaroo she can understand the importance of rescuing Constance. Warm-hearted, humorous as the catalogue of disasters grows and full of that special relationship between siblings, this is a picture book to enjoy to the full. **FH**

### We're Going to Find the Monster

★★★★★

Malorie Blackman, ill. Dapo Adeola, Puffin, 32pp, 978 0 241 40130 9, £6.99 pbk

Malorie Blackman, past Children's Laureate and award-winning author, has updated the text from her 1999 publication, **Marty Monster**, and with imaginative illustrations from Dapo Adeola, has created a book which will find its place in many environments. One of the two main characters has the skin condition vitiligo, which may well go unnoticed in the drawings until closer examination. The skin around Charlie's eye, lips, ears and arms shows the white patches indicative of this skin condition. Charlie and Eddie set off on a highly imaginative hunt, seeking a monster. Dad says they have just 10 minutes before breakfast is ready.... plenty of time! 'Over the shimmering ocean... up the huge, high mountain...through the deep, dark jungle...' They meet whales, a hungry wolf, a fearsome, fierce tiger en route for their target... the MONSTER. And then the monster is found. What happens next? In the smelliest, messiest, scariest place in the WHOLE WIDE WORLD, 'Keep out!' tacked over the doorway, Charlie creeps up to the monster and she screams, 'Breakfast time!' 'RAAAAAAARRGGHH!' roars the monster, 'Tickle time!' as he chases Charlie and Eddie out of his lair. An adventure about the magic of the imagination, beautifully illustrated in zinging colours, from the shiny saucepan atop Charlie's head to the stripey tiger to the scary monster. Reminiscent of Michael Rosen's classic **We're Going on a Bear Hunt**, this book is going to be fun for all who lay hands on it. **GB**

### How Beautiful

★★★★★

Antonella Capetti, trans. Lisa Topi, ill. Melissa Castrillon, Greystone Kids, 32pp, 978-1-77164-853-0, £12.99 hbk

The process of seeking knowledge may not always be comfortable, but it is necessary and brings unexpected benefits, as our tiny hero discovers in this decorative and richly coloured picturebook.

Deep in the forest, a caterpillar lives a simple life. Every day is exactly the same: he eats, sleeps and crawls around, and is perfectly content until a chance encounter awakens his curiosity. One day, a little girl picks him up, calls him 'beautiful' and places him gently on the forest floor.

But what is beautiful? What does this word mean? Unable to make up his mind, the caterpillar embarks on a mission to find out. But all the forest creatures have very different answers, and there always are other words that could be used. Bear says that honeycomb is beautiful, but maybe it's just tasty, and the

mouse's mushroom might better be described as useful.

One little question becomes a bothersome puzzle that won't give Caterpillar any peace, until a persistent blackbird demonstrates that beauty is definitely in the eye of the beholder - it will always be personal and therefore subjective, but there may be things we all agree are beautiful. As night falls, the creatures stare at the sky, and everyone concurs. "How beautiful", they exclaim, and the caterpillar finds that his curiosity has been satisfied.

With gentle humour and insight, this story touches on some complex ideas. We all experience the world in different ways, and must consider other points of view if we are to gain a better understanding of it - and ourselves. And sometimes we must be content without an answer.

Melissa Castrillon's intricate, layered illustrations resemble screenprints and evoke memories of mid-century children's picturebooks, but are created digitally and have a contemporary eye for detail and design. Organic forms twine luxuriantly across the pages, creating hiding places for creatures of all kinds and framing the text in unusual and visually appealing ways. There's a lot going on in these spreads, but the use of blank space is always carefully considered and the layout works hard to keep young readers focused and informed.

Antonella Capetti is a primary school teacher as well as a writer, and her text takes a friendly, whimsical approach to a subject that could have become too challenging in less experienced hands. There's room here for children to share Caterpillar's bafflement without being overwhelmed, and the consensus at

the end will reassure as well as please.

Visually this book is a winner, and the concept and story will satisfy readers and prompt plenty of thinking and discussion. The text has been translated from the original Italian and reads well enough, but there are moments that feel less fluent. Given the importance and impact of a picturebook text, it's a shame that this one doesn't 'sing'. **CFH**

### What's in the Box?

★★★★★

Isabel Otter, ill. Joaquin Camp, Little Tiger, 12pp, 978 1 83891 183 6, £9.99 board book

This interactive lift-the-flap book is created with chunky tactile board pages. 'A pile of boxes has arrived... Can you guess what hides inside?' From the beginning, the reader is encouraged to guess the contents of each box from the rhyming clues given. There's a smoke-ring blowing dragon, a jiggling monster (in ballet dress), a knitting dinosaur and a disco-dancing unicorn with pink hair, all hidden under thick flaps. The vibrant colours and tactile patches will hold the attention of young readers, and reading it again will encourage prediction and further conversation. The colours are vibrant throughout, and there are tactile clues incorporated on each spread to engage further interaction. The indentation for finger grips on each flap should endure lots of repeated exploration. The final page is a treat: 'But best of all, just take a look. A treasure trove of brilliant books!' A great book for sharing with the youngest of readers, and for their subsequent independent exploration. **GB**

## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior

### The Sofia Tree

★★★★★

Alberto Benevelli. Illustrated by Nicoletta Bertelle, Ragged Bears, 32pp, 9781857144888 £9.99 hbk

Sofia is looking forward to Christmas - and above all to decorating her tree which will be tall and beautiful with candles to form a halo of light. She is sure everyone will come to admire and enjoy it. However, when an angel takes her on a journey to a dark, cold hut where a family with a new-born baby are sheltering, Sofia realises that there is a better use for her candles

It is always a pleasure to have a new addition to the stock of Christmas books, especially one with a different voice to many. **The Sofia Tree** comes from Italy - sadly no translator is credited - but both illustrations and text place the story outside the real world. Rather this is the world of folk tradition - the world of the Presepio where woodcutters work the forest and candles are used. The soft textured artwork enhances

and captures the warm, gentle tone of the narrative. While the story would be particularly welcome in church-based schools, it would not be out of place in more secular settings - caring, sharing and celebration are universal and are central to Sofia's story. **FH**

### Rock and Roll

★★★★★

Hazel Terry, Tiny Owl, 32pp, 978 1 9103 2875 0, £7.99 pbk

In the mountains, Rock and Roll are two boulders: Rock is the flat one, Roll in contrast stands tall. For untold years thus they've stood, proud of their stature and endurance, and wondering by day and by night and through all the seasons, at the incredible beauty of the world.

But then things change: humans come to visit and with them they bring such adornments as flags and bunting as well as small stones. It's not long however before the two boulders begin to begrudge each other's new look. Roll grumbles to the wind about Rock's flags while Rock in turn comments most unfavourably to a cloud about



Roll's crown, the consequence being a fracas between the recipients of the grumbles. A vicious storm ensues with thunder and lightning that strikes both boulders, sending them hurtling down the mountainside and rending them asunder until finally there's nothing remaining of them save small fragments. The disharmony has dissipated and instead there is contentment and a willingness to share those things that caused all the ado.

With themes of jealousy and the consequences thereof, and of being comfortable within yourself, Hazel Terry has created a thought-provoking modern fable. So beautiful are her illustrations that it's hard to believe that this is her debut picture book: her scenes truly celebrate the natural world in all its glory, and with fossil prints on every page, it's a book to read over and over, and one that will make you stop and savour each awesome tableau. **JB**

### The Bear and her Book

★★★★★

Frances Tosdevin, ill. Sophia O'Connor, 32pp, uclanpublishing, 978 1 912979 60 8, £7.99 pbk

This is a book for any youngster who has a lively imagination and has become a lover of books. It features a big brown bear who 'loved her home, but wanted more.' The refrain, 'The world is big and there's much to see, and a bear must go where she wants to be,' is repeated throughout the story, as Bear sets off looking for adventure, whilst around her neck hangs her special prize, her Bear's Big Book of Being Wise. She sets off, meeting a wide variety of creatures, each one suffering: a poorly claw, a cold, a swollen eye. Bear shows great sympathy for each creature and refers to her special book. 'Dodgy eyeballs...page one-oh-three- here are some tips to help you see...' There is huge empathy between Bear and each malingering creature, both in the bouncy rhyming text and the illustrator's delightful pictures. But despite each friendship secured, the Bear still seeks... more. The resolution is beautifully crafted, involving Bear as a stowaway, and finally reaching shore again and discovering a welcoming bookshop. What does she spot, highlighted in the window display, but Bear's Big Book of Being Wise, volume two! Great delight...Bear sits surrounded by piles of books and murmurs, 'I don't need more.' The artwork supports each fresh adventure and environment with great sympathy; there is a starlit shore, a green, cool jungle, a sandy desert, each glowing with its own characteristics. Bear enthuses over each encounter but.... she still wants more. So the ending is fitting, for it is in the bookshop that she finds the greatest satisfaction. Readers feel she has found home. There are many

moments of awe and wonder, in both the sensitive text and the splendid illustrations. **GB**



### A Song in the Mist

★★★★★

Corrinne Averiss, ill. Fiona Woodcock, Oxford Children's Books, 32pp. 978 0 1927 7207 7, £11.99 hbk

Chi is an attentive panda, shy but never feeling alone, for her silence means that her ears are constantly ready to receive all kinds of sounds: the bamboos swishing, the birds all a-chitter in the forest and more. One day, floating in the breeze she hears a wonderful new sound: it's the sound of sweet, gentle music but what can it be. Chi follows the sound as it takes her close enough to a small house to discover a small boy with a length of bamboo: it's from this that the lovely sound comes.

The boy pauses his playing and looks towards Chi but the panda turns and makes for cover in her own tree in the forest. There all is still and quiet. But then SNAP! a twig breaks and soon after she hears something that makes her heart race: it's a voice.

With the evening descending, the panda stays in the treetops tracking the boy through the forest till the mist causes him to trip and drop his flute. 'Grandpa, help! I'm lost!' comes the cry. Chi picks up the bamboo flute, and drawing on her inner strength, summons up sufficient strength to transcend her reserve and bring the boy back safely home. Thus begins an unlikely friendship forged by kindness and love, and sustained through the power of gentle music. That one almost feels and hears drifting on the breeze through the stunningly beautiful scenes conjured up in Corrinne Averiss' poetic telling and Fiona Woodcock's almost magical soft-focus illustrations of the story's setting. **JB**

### The Most Important Animal of All

★★★★★

Penny Worms, ill. Hannah Bailey, Mama Makes Books, 40pp 978 1 8381 3813 4, £12.99

'What is the most important animal of them all?' Now that is something

really difficult to decide but it's what a primary teacher asks her class to bear in mind at the start of their new term, a term during which the children are going to be learning 'all about animals'. To that end the classroom has been refashioned with the book corner now a jungle, there's a small world ocean on the floor replacing the mat and large butterflies dangle from the ceiling. Just as their teacher had said, the children do learn many amazing things about the animal kingdom including what happens during the life-cycle of a butterfly, how fish breathe, why penguins are classed as birds yet cannot fly.

As the term draws to a close seven children are asked to nominate the animal they would give the 'most important animal' title to and to justify their choice to the other class members.

The choices range from George's elephants, the biggest of Earth's land creatures, shapers of their landscapes and spreaders of seeds, through to Grace's tiny krill, the crucial food for whales in Antarctica as well as other sea animals. Might it though be one of the other nominees: Nimmie's bees, the key pollinators of multitudes of flora, with some being creators of honey too. Or perhaps sharks for their role in maintaining the balance of ocean populations, beavers creators of watery habitats and dam builders extraordinaire. Then what about bats, nocturnal pollinators and predators that have a vital role in eating insects that would feed on cocoa beans for example? And what about tigers? Each child sets out a powerful case but which would you choose?

There's such a wealth of information in this highly engaging book, be it in the main narrative, the fact boxes around the illustrations and photographs, or the visuals themselves. Scientific topics such as interconnectedness, ecosystems, food webs, and a life-cycle, deforestation, threatened animals and extinction are presented using appropriate vocabulary be it in labels to illustrations, in the main text, the penultimate spread explaining 'keystone species', or the 'find out more' page.

Endorsed by the **British Ecological Society**, this narrative non-fiction book would be excellent both as part of a primary class topic and for an individual with a burgeoning interest in ecology. **JB**

### The Wall and the Wild

★★★★★

Christina Dendy, ill. Katie Rewse, Lantana Publishing, 32pp. 978 1 9137 4743 5, £11.99

Young Ana grows a garden, a perfect, tidy garden, the complete opposite of the adjacent wild into which she throws her excess seeds. Between the wild and her burgeoning garden she creates a boundary against the disorder beyond. It's not long before her garden with its wonderful scented flowers, fruit and vegetables and trees, is home to birds and insects aplenty, as well as being much

admired by all the people who stop and look at it.

Ana however, is displeased by the unfamiliar plants invading her pristine territory; these along with more rejected seeds she throws over into the wild. She also builds up her boundary wall. This tossing of unwanted plant material into the wild continues and at the same time her own area becomes seriously depleted. Despite this Ana keeps adding to her barrier until it has become an enormous wall.

Time to stop and take stock of things, thinks Ana looking at her own side of the wall. Then however, she decides to look beyond so up the wall she climbs. The sight that meets her eyes is truly amazing: her discarded seeds have grown apace helping to contribute to an unexpectedly beautiful wildlife community – the wilderness – that Ana and her friends can tend, in tandem with her garden.

Christina Dendy's fable and Katie Rewse's vibrant scenes show so well how important biodiversity is, as well as making the case for leaving a part of our own gardens where nature is allowed to take its course. Observant readers will notice that the protagonist in the story is wearing hearing aids. **JB**

### The Giant Conker

★★★★★

Emma Beswetherick, ill. Anna Woodbine, Rock the Boat, 112pp, 978 1 78607 896 4, £5.99, pbk

Classmates Katie, Cassie and Zia are best friends who enjoy playdates outside school. But these are no ordinary playdates, for the three friends, together with Katy's cat Thunder, are the Playdate Adventure Club. This story, fourth in the Playdate Adventure Club series, begins when the friends meet in the wonderful den Cassie has created under a horse chestnut tree in her garden. It is the tree that inspires their next adventure when a conker lands on their tea set. After a short discussion they decide to go in search of a magical forest containing a conker the size of a house.

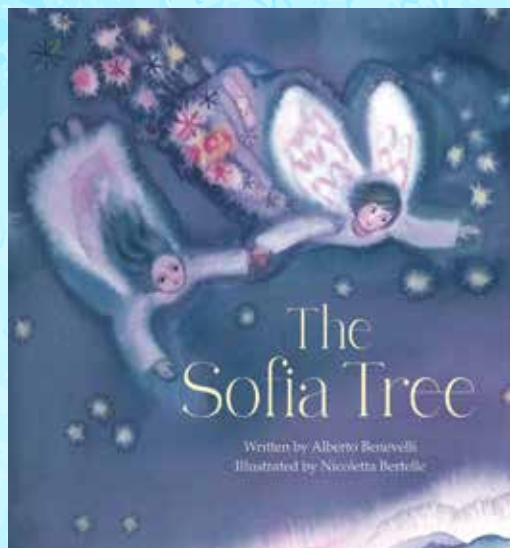
The girls hold hands, make a wish and the story begins, with more than a little magic, gigantic trees and talking animals. There is also a strong environmental message about the importance of forests and trees including their contribution to our food, shelter and the air we breathe.

The book includes some beautifully descriptive passages with a rich evocation of the woodland setting; a real celebration of autumn colour and light.

This is a story which may inspire children to build their own den or plan their own playdate. It may also lead them to find out more about forests and deforestation and what they can do to make a difference, for example reusing paper and carrier bags. The back of the book includes key information.

The members of the playdate adventure club are introduced at the beginning of the book for those

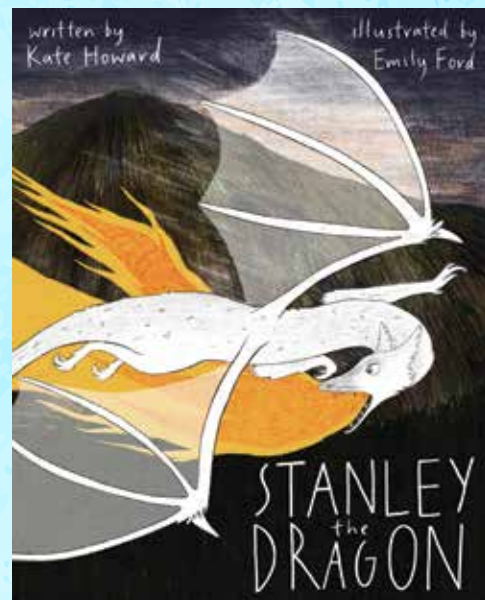




Sofia is so excited about her beautiful Christmas tree which she has chosen especially. When Sofia has decorated it, to her surprise she is visited by an angel and taken on a very special journey ... this is a magical Christmas story for people of all ages.

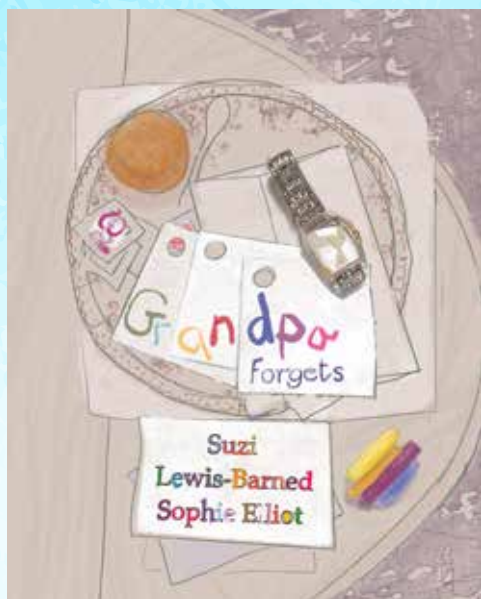
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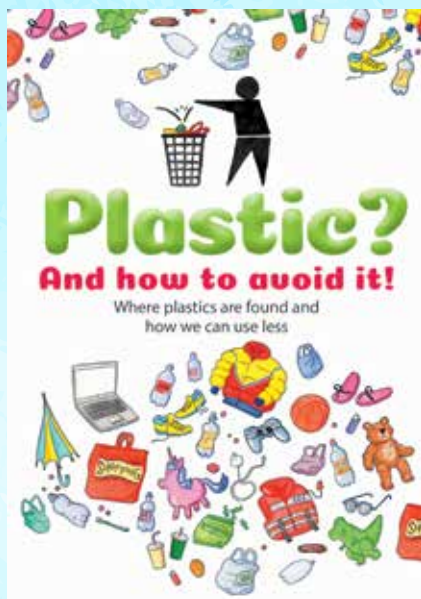
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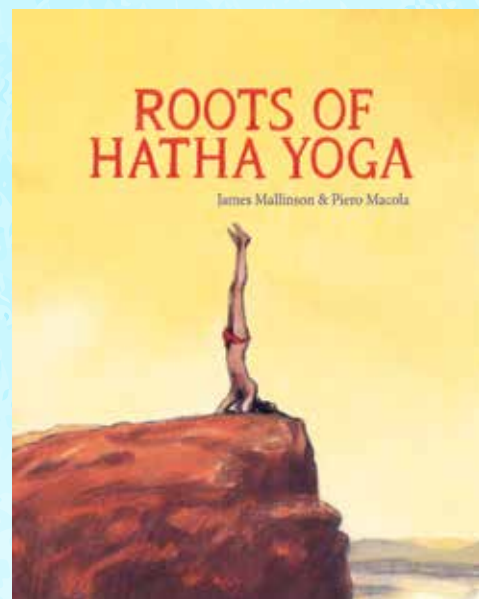
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## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

who haven't met them before. Any young readers who enjoyed this story could seek out the other three environmental adventure stories in the series. **SMC**

### A World Full of Wildlife

★★★★★

Written and ill. Neal Layton, Wren and Rook, 32pp, 978-1-5263-6323-7, £12.99 hbk

Written in the form of a conversation between a kindly adult and a concerned child, this book introduces complex topics such as biodiversity, habitats and endangered species in simple, direct language that young readers will enjoy and understand. Ideas are developed from first principles, and common-sense connections are made between new ideas and those that have already been explained. Some spreads include second-tier text for readers who want more information, but the lead text explains and uses correct vocabulary, and is robust and satisfying.

Subjects such as pollution and extinction are presented accurately, in a matter-of-fact way, and the potential for readers to be shocked or upset is met head-on.

'But I don't want this! I don't want there to be fewer plants and animals!' protests our young narrator, as the conversation makes it impact. Layton's reply – 'I'm glad you said that... there are lots of things we can do to help look after the wonderful web of life' – is characteristically kind, direct, and full of hope. Rather than bland exhortations to reduce and recycle, specific details follow. We are told about a no-fishing zone off the Isle of Arran, and a forest city being created in China. The final spreads explore what needs to be done, what is already underway and how young readers can get involved. And on the final page, three young activists and entrepreneurs are introduced, as the door is opened wide for new ideas.

The clarity and appeal of the text is more than matched by Layton's bold, distinctive artwork, giving this book a fun and informative appearance, too. Friendly graphics sit alongside – and interact with – scanned photographs in a way that emphasizes the immediacy and relevance of the subject, and bright colours enliven but do not dominate the pages.

**A World Full of Wildlife** is a companion to Layton's **A Climate in Chaos** and **A Planet Full of Plastic**. Like its predecessors, this book will motivate readers to take action and make a difference. **CFH**

### I Saw a Beautiful Woodpecker

★★★★★

Michal Skibinski, ill. Ala Bankroft, Prestel, 128pp, 978-3-7913-7486-4, £11.99 hbk

When eight-year-old Michal is given a holiday task to improve his handwriting, he writes his daily sentences with care. But Michal lives in Warsaw, and

it's the summer of 1939. By the time autumn comes, there are planes flying over his house, and his observations about football games and caterpillars have been replaced by comments of a different kind.

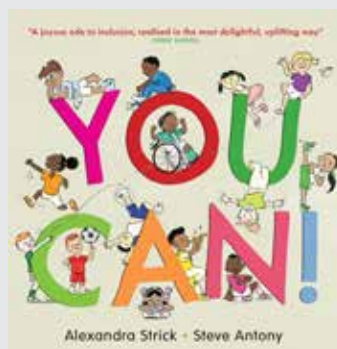
'There's going to be a terrible fight', he says, on September 10th. And although 'Warsaw is defending itself bravely,' we know that war has been declared, and Michal's life will never be the same again.

Michal's journal had become a witness to history in the making, and although he stopped writing it on September 15th, he kept it safe for more than eighty years. Now it has been published as a chunky, notebook-sized hardback, and is finding a new audience. Illustrated in full colour throughout with atmospheric paintings by Polish artist, photographer and film animator Helena Stiasny (working under the pseudonym of Ala Bankroft), the book also includes photographs of Michal's original handwritten text.

Stiasny's artwork – superficially inviting, yet imbued with an increasing sense of dislocation and foreboding – provides imagery for Michal's headline text in a way that adds significantly to its impact. As time passes, sun-dappled landscapes and paintings of wildlife give way to darker, more brooding spreads. At no point does any character appear, allowing readers to enter Michal's world and place themselves centre-stage, while creating a sense of unease that is amplified by the choice of subject on each spread. Paths lead into bushes, benches wait for occupants and simple observations are accompanied by pictures that can be read in many ways. Train tracks converge in the distance as clouds gather, a sunny game of football in the park is bordered by prison-style railings, and doors and windows hint at things unseen. But the visual references are subtle: this is the journal of an eight-year-old, and the tragedies that will unfold are suggested, not shown.

There is no title page. Instead, four sentences set the scene for Michal's holiday task. A little more biographical and historical information is provided on the final page – Michal's father was a pilot who lost his life six days before Michal's final diary entry, on the day for which he wrote 'planes keep flying overhead' – so the book does provide some context for the text and artwork, but younger children will benefit from adult help.

The simplicity of Michal's text will strike a chord with readers everywhere, and Stiasny's stunning illustrations add depth and impact. Read this book alongside fictional stories about the war and use the experience to inspire factual research. Or let it unfold like a poem or half-remembered dream, and respond to it with creative activities of all kinds. **CFH**



### You Can!

★★★★★

Alexandra Strick, illus Steve Antony, Otter-Barry Books, 32pp, 978-1913074609, £12.99 hbk

This is a large format hard cover picture book. As a reader this reviewer felt that the narrative had two distinctive features. First the text is very sparse, serving mostly as a commentary on the numerous illustrations, sometimes seven or eight to the page. The second feature is that this deceptively simple book nevertheless manages to address some truly fundamental issues. Disability is a theme, though the word disability never appears in the text, instead foregrounded in the visual narrative. The whole intent of the book is put forward with strong self-confidence and positivity. It is perhaps a failing of the book that although dark moods associated with impairments are mentioned, there is no discussion of how such moods should be dealt with. The book also discusses different sexualities. Some teachers in primary schools might feel (contrary to this reviewer's opinion) that such discussions are inappropriate for their young pupils. The way in which this book was created is ground-breaking. It

mobilised the collected opinions of children with disabilities. **RB**

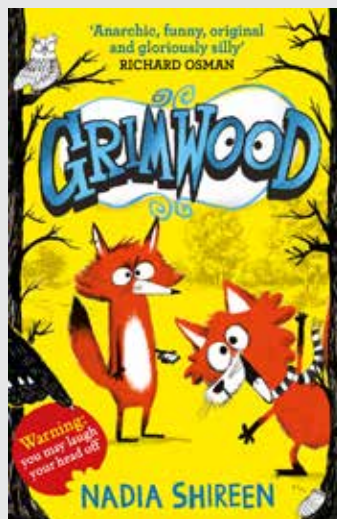
### Nook

★★★★★

Sally Anne Garland, Sunbird Books, 32pp, 978 1 5037 5848 3, £12.99 hbk

This gentle, lovely story about intense shyness and friendship is a beautiful description of the feelings involved when one is unsure of oneself. Nook is a very shy small dog, who is perfectly happy at school and in the park, watching her friends play whilst finding for herself a 'nook' to sit in – a box, or a corner or under a table where she can press her back against the wall and feel safe. She smiles happily and draws pictures and rarely speaks. The others know she is there and accept her quiet nature without question. In the park, her nook is in the 'deep hollow of an old elm tree', and the other little animals are so used to her sitting there that they call it 'Nook's place'. Occasionally they try to get her to join them in play, but she always stays where she feels safest. Then one day when she comes to the park, there is a fierce badger sitting in her place. She is quite upset, but the Badger shouts, 'Mine! Go away!' She feels panic and starts to cry when she realises that all her friends are standing behind her and telling the badger that it is Nook's place and he must let her have it. He refuses, so the animals surround Nook and take her out to the field where she sits and draws while they play around her. After this, the badger doesn't return, but Nook is happy to be out in the open with her friends 'who she knew had her back'. This is a child with serious problems with shyness and sensory needs, who must have love and support and understanding, which her friends supply in quantity. Acceptance of differences is a major theme subtly portrayed. Outstanding. **ES**

## 8 – 10 Junior/Middle



### Grimwood

★★★★★

Nadia Shireen, Simon and Schuster, 205pp, 9781471199301, £12.99 hbk

This children's comedy is about friendship and family and is completely, and utterly, bonkers.

Grimwood is a paradise for animals (or so it seems) which offers the perfect protection for the young fox, Ted, and his protective sister, Nancy. Lifelong city dwellers, the siblings are forced to escape to the country after a rather unfortunate incident by the bins outside Speedy Chicken results in the violent mobster cat, Princess Buttons, swearing her revenge upon Ted. She is a frightful villain with a steely determination, and offers a sense of peril throughout the book that is only just observable amidst all the silliness.

Arriving in Grimwood, Ted and

# reviews

## 8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

Nancy have to adapt to a new way of life - one where it is perfectly normal for hordes of warring squirrels to swing through the skies screaming 'Treebonk' as they wallop into tree trunks. Under the stewardship of the kindly mayor (Titus, the cardigan-wearing deer), the pair soon settle in and, when Ted realises that he is just the talent that The Grimwood Players need for their upcoming performance, he begins to believe that there may be more to life than fishing food from big bins. However, some things really are too good to be true, and it might be that Grimwood isn't a fullproof hiding place from vengeful felines after all.

The book is genuinely hilarious and will have children giggling to themselves and sharing their favourite pages with friends. The primary source of the comedy is the large cast of very original (and totally ridiculous) animals, each of whom seem to arrive just when readers might think things couldn't get any funnier. Some particular highlights include the happy-go-lucky rat, Binky Snuffhausen, the sometimes-good-sometimes-evil genius mouse, Dr Fairybeast, and Pamela - a frightening raptor with a penchant for podcasting and a paranoia about aliens. The enigmatic Eric Dynamite (a woodlouse) helps to keep the story on track by way of occasional commentary and explanation, and there are plenty of charming, cartoon illustrations that add much to the carnival atmosphere, too.

Reading this debut by Nadia Shireen is like taking a walk through the woods with a clown - never more than a few paces away from another stupidly silly joke or slapstick gag. Children will love it. **SD**

### The Great Food Bank Heist

★★★★★

Onjali Q. Rauf, ill. Elisa Paganelli, Barrington Stoke, 104pp, 9781781129623, £6.99 pbk

This short powerful story combines an empathetic depiction of the realities of food poverty with humour and an exciting adventure plot. Nelson and his little sister Ashley often feel hungry, despite attending the school Breakfast Club and despite the best efforts of their hardworking Mum and the imaginative family games she invents to make the best of the meals they have. The highlight of the week for Nelson is the family trip to the bank, not an ordinary bank but the amazing Food Bank where vouchers are swapped for food and everyone who helps is kind and friendly. But, to Nelson's dismay, the shelves of the Food Bank seem to be getting emptier leaving people hungry. Could someone be stealing from the Food Bank? Nelson and his friends set out to catch the thieves and make sure everyone has the food they need.

The author succeeds brilliantly in raising awareness of food poverty by

mingling contemporary social issues, appealing characters and a pacy plot. Through the character of Nelson, she makes readers feel the effects of being hungry and struggling to eke out food supplies in a completely empathetic and non-judgemental way. So many issues converge in this short book, but it never feels preachy and always manages to show not tell, keeping the child's viewpoint foremost throughout.

The characters are likeable and positive, the robbery plot has a satisfying conclusion, friends and adults help rather than judge and kindness, generosity and resourcefulness are celebrated. The lively, expressive illustrations add to the appeal of the book and Barrington Stoke's characteristic dyslexia-friendly font and layout ensure accessibility. There are FAQs at the end and short explanations of food banks, breakfast clubs and ways to help. Sales will benefit Food Bank and Breakfast Club charities. This is a must-read book on many levels, funny, relatable, empathetic, and informative. **SR**

### The Bear who Sailed the Ocean on an Iceberg

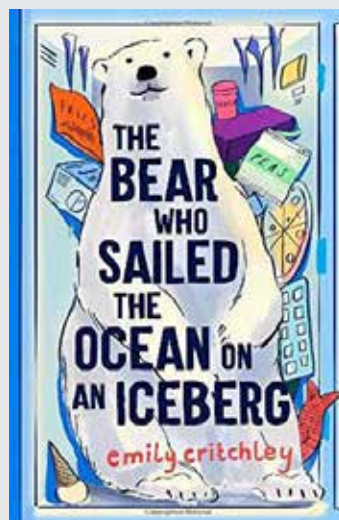
★★★★★

Emily Critchley, *Everything with Words*, 288pp, 978-1911427216, £7.99 pbk

Patrick Jolly is having a difficult time. His mother is severely depressed following the death of his baby sister and spends most of her time asleep. His father, a wildlife photographer, is away in Scotland on a project and Patrick suspects he took the job to escape home. School is no better. Year seven is proving miserable as Patrick, for no reason he can discern, has become the target for Jake Sutherland and his friends and is bullied daily.

As if all this isn't enough, he discovers a polar bear asleep in the freezer in their garage.

The polar bear, Monty, is polite, avuncular, prone to quoting Oscar Wilde and relaxed about being so far from home. He is a source of entertaining anecdotes about animals he has known (and on occasion, eaten). While his arrival doesn't alter the problems Patrick is facing, knowing him brings about a shift. The bear, Patrick muses, always knows what to say, and his relaxed, take things one step at a time outlook is infectious and healing. When Monty strikes up a friendship with Patrick's grumpy next-door neighbour, who has his own grief to deal with, the three work out a plan to return Monty to the sea and home. Critchley's book is both funny and touching. It leaves us in no doubt as to the weight of the issues Patrick is facing, but does so lightly, and any messages about recovery or the importance of friendship are delivered in an equally understated way. What's more, at



no point will readers question the plausibility of a talking polar bear climbing out of his fridge; how's that for an achievement? **LS**

### Polly Pecorino: The Girl Who Rescues Animals

★★★★★

Emma Chichester Clark, Walker Books, 224pp, 9781406369076, £10.99 hbk

Polly is an ordinary girl or so it seems. However, Polly is extraordinary; not only is she a real rescuer of animals however small and unexpected, but she can talk to animals. So when the horrible Mr and Mrs Snell buy the local Zoo and capture a bear cub to be the top attraction, it is up to Polly to save Booboo.

This is a charming story from an author who is well established as a picture book creator. Polly is an engaging character and her companion Crow adds humour. The Snells are suitably nasty and to ensure balance, PoodyWoo, the beloved cat of Mr Snell is just as horrible. However, the feared Bears who live in the Wild Bear Wood whose terrible growls can be heard every night as they seek their cub provide that element of tension - and surprise. Attractively produced with the author's own pen and ink illustrations throughout, the longer format is handled well and the plot moves forward at a satisfying pace, each chapter ending on that little hook that will encourage the reader to want more. This would be ideal for the confident younger KS1 reader as well as for sharing with children who want a more substantial story but would appreciate the decorative visual elements that go with it. **FH**

### The Story of Afro Hair

★★★★★

K.N. Chimbiri, ill. Joelle Avelino, Scholastic, 120pp, 978 0 702307 41 6, £9.99 hbk

The book begins with a scientific look at what is distinctive about Afro hair.

After this we are taken back 5000 years to Ancient Egypt and later to

Benin in West Africa and find out by studying artefacts such as bronze statues how the wealthy wore and decorated their hair. Interesting details are included such as the use of castor oil and palm oil to soften the hair, charcoal to darken it and make it grow and combs and shells for decoration.

The historical context continues with mention of the slave trade from the sixteenth century and from the nineteenth century Imperial rule in African countries. This led to a loss of traditional styles; we find out that head shaving was used as a punishment and African house slaves were made to wear wigs in the style of their European masters.

During the twentieth century, as black people moved to big cities in America looking for a better life, they rejected the corn rows of their ancestors seeking a modern look which in effect meant adopting European hairstyles. The story comes to the UK with the arrival of the Windrush generation.

It wasn't until the second half of the twentieth century that natural hairstyles such as 'the Afro' emerged reflecting a sense of pride in a shared African heritage with the drive for political power. Over time more variety in styling emerged and a rise in the natural hair movement.

We learn about the influence of icons of popular culture such as Josephine Baker in the 1920s, Diana Ross, Cicely Tyson and later Bob Marley with the distinctive dreadlock hairstyle of the Rasta social and religious movement.

Key individuals who had a significant impact on the development of the modern Afro hair industry are highlighted, including Madam C.J. Walker, Dyke, Dryden and Wade who became self-made millionaires with the products and treatments they developed.

Although the focus of the book is on fashion and hairstyles this is set within a historical context giving it another dimension as we learn about slavery, imperialism, migration, fight for equality. A sense of pride imbues the whole book which is a beautiful artefact in itself.

The compact format and striking design with coloured pages is illustrated with attractive artwork together with some photographs of individuals and artefacts. There are references for further reading and a useful glossary of terminology. **SMC**

### The Christmas Pig

★★★★★

J K Rowling, illus. Jim Field, Little Brown, 320pp, 978 1 444 96491 2, £20 hbk

Dur Pig otherwise known as DP is a small cuddly and rather grubby pig and is Jack's most treasured possession. DP always understands everything and is always there when Jack needs him most such as when his mother remarries and when his older step-sister Holly comes to stay. But when the unthinkable happens



and DP is lost on Christmas Eve Jack is inconsolable.

The family try to help by giving him a new pig – Christmas Pig - but he is not DP and doesn't smell right. Luckily it is Christmas Eve; the night where magic and miracles happen. Jack wakes up to find Christmas Pig and his other toys along with much of his furniture talking amongst themselves. They tell him it is a special night and the only time he has a chance to get DP back. To do this he will have to enter The Land of the Lost. So begins a page-turning magical adventure through the Land of the Lost, where Christmas Pig and Jack will have to dodge Loss Adjusters and escape the clutches of the fearsome Loser who is known to eat toys. Along the way Jack is helped by a talking lunchbox and an early draft of a poem among other brilliantly imagined mislaid objects. And as in all the best stories by the end Jack come to realise that perhaps Christmas Pig is far more than a replacement after all.

This satisfying Christmas tale is reminiscent of classic stories such as **The Velveteen Rabbit**. It is a story to share with all the family, full of quirky details, and witty observations of human foibles and contradictions. The lively illustrations from Jim Field add a light touch too. **JC**

### Count

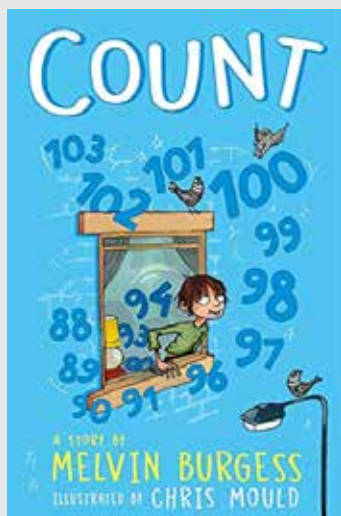
★★★★★

Melvin Burgess, ill. Chris Mould, Andersen Press, 168pp, 978 1 78344 988 0, £6.99 pbk

Brandon Wright says he's the best in his class at football, the best at maths, the best at singing, the best at drawing; what's more, he's the strongest, he's got the best bike, the fastest skates. Except he isn't and he hasn't. He's rubbish at everything - except, obviously, boasting. Until, that is, Brandon says he could count to ten million. No-one believes him, except his little sister Elle and she believes everything Brandon says. It turns out he really is great at counting.

For the rest of the book (well, almost) Brandon utters nothing but numbers. Even though he keeps counting when he's asleep, it's going to take him just short of a year to get there. We know that's true because Mr Wyke, Brandon's teacher, does the Maths on the board while Brandon goes on counting all through every lesson. He still goes on counting even when Miss Hexx, his truly terrifying headteacher, yells at him to stop. Though Brandon's being a pain, Mr Wyke can't help loving the way those numbers just keep going up and up. 'It's...well, it's rather beautiful,' he says.

Miss Hexx doesn't agree: 'Beauty is not a curriculum subject. It passes no exams and it cannot be measured.' This is one of those books which is for children and for grown-ups. It's a great read-aloud for kids, driven by a single comic idea – a gift which goes



on giving; but there's also embedded satire, largely at the expense of the wisdom informing our current Education system. Miss Hexx takes over as Brandon's manager, devising a written contract ensnaring Brandon and his family when his count goes viral, enabling her to grab shedloads of money as Brandon's fame spreads across the globe. Miss Hexx is soon heading up The Big-Count Schools PLC for Talented Children, a profit-making chain of schools (sound familiar?). With Brandon's target in sight, Miss Hexx hires Wembley Stadium – tickets at £1000 a time to hear him hit that final mark. The whole world is pulsing to the count, until – well, that'd be telling.

It's tricky for an author when his novel's hero speaks only in numbers, but Burgess ensures that it's what goes on around Brandon that builds the comedy. Great mathematicians such as Dame Mildred Gosling stop by to admire the music of Brandon's counting. To their astonished delight, these scholars see the numbers discovering lives of their own and, with no human help, performing astounding feats such as coming up with a proof for Riemann's hypothesis. The numbers become visible, adopting their own choice of colour and, if they feel like it, they'll pass the time queuing all the way to the moon and back, waiting for Brandon to call out each number. Chris Mould's illustrations are integral to the narrative. Brandon, his family, his classmates and the assorted teachers and mathematicians are skinny as sticks, but with extra-large heads wearing startled or furious or anxious or amused expressions. As for those numbers, they're soon leaping and dancing in sequences across the double pages, riding lines of music, above and among the words and images, up to whatever mischief they fancy. Throughout the book, illustrations deftly interplay with words.

This is not the Melvin Burgess who won the **Carnegie Medal** and the **Guardian Fiction Award** with his

uncompromising 1996 YA novel, **Junk**, though this story also leaves you wanting to find live readers to share it with – in this instance, I'd guess, to enjoy what they make of the anarchic wit, skill and comic invention. **GF**

### Lion Above the Door

★★★★★

Onjali Q Raúf, Orion, 366pp, 978 1 510 106758, £7.99 pbk

Leo and Sangeeta are best friends as they are the 'different' ones in their class. They are very excited to be going on a school trip to Rochester Cathedral and to the RAF museum to find information for a school project on WW2.

Leo is especially thrilled to discover his own name carved above the door in Rochester cathedral alongside names commemorating soldiers from all over the world who fought in WW2. This sparks an intense curiosity to find out who Leo was and why his name was there with a lion carved above it. Back at school the children not only find that their project will be the next assembly but also that the school has been chosen to take part in the Real Kidz Rule Remembrance Day competition.

Leo's idea on forgotten heroes is chosen alongside family histories but the friends soon discover that there is virtually no information on heroes from the colonies or the wider world and begin to discover for themselves the impact of historical racism and whitewashing as they do not find anyone that looks like them in their history books. They also find very little information on women's contribution to the war – something Sangeeta is particularly passionate about.

The children work incredibly hard to produce a fantastic display which is then marred by an unpleasant racist incident. With help from their families the display is repaired and the assembly a triumph as Leo and Sangeeta show the school that everyone's history matters and should be told.

This is a timely account of the injustices and historical racism that has permeated our culture and WW2 history. There are plenty of pointers here for discussion in the classroom and at home and for making sure the curriculum is more inclusive. The stories of bravery during WW2 came from all corners of the earth. There is a helpful list of some of these forgotten heroes at the back of the book. Above all though this is a story of friendship and sticking up for what you believe in - all told with Raúf's signature humour and charm. **JC**

### Once Upon a Tune – Stories from the Orchestra

★★★★★

James Mayhew, Otter-Barry Books, 96pp, 978 1 91307 403 6, £16.99, hbk

This is a simply stunning book crafted with love and skill. It contains six carefully selected stories which have inspired great pieces of Classical music. The music is drawn from the work of a range of composers - Greig,

Rimsky Korsakov, Dukas, Pushkin and Rossini. The introduction sets the scene as we are encouraged to imagine an orchestra tuning up before the curtain is raised and the performance begins.

The collection includes stories from Europe and Asia, some likely to be familiar to many readers such as *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* and *In the Hall of the Mountain King* as well as the less familiar *Swan of Tuonela*. We meet Scheherazade the girl who bewitches the bitter sultan into saving her life by telling stories collected in the classic text *The Thousand and One Nights*. As well as Scheherazade's own story we hear a taste of the tales of adventure and love which she told.

The text is very well written, the stories skillfully unfold with some lovely descriptive passages. Through the stories readers will encounter an array of characters, both heroes and villains including sorcerers, trolls and sea monsters, princesses and sultans.

Mayhew is a highly accomplished artist and he has created fabulous multilayered illustrations depicting the story worlds. Printed papers, rubbings, fabric, lace and music manuscript are collaged to create texture, pattern and depth. The book design is lovely with end papers full of lino cut images representing each of the stories and there is a beautiful compilation of images from each story on the cover.

The back of the book provides information about the composers and the writers whose stories inspired them. There is also a suggested playlist so that children can explore the music inspired by the stories.

Music, art and storytelling come together beautifully in this wonderful picturebook. A perfect gift book likely to be treasured and pored over by adults and children alike. **SMc**

### Rescuing Titanic

★★★★★

Flora Delargy, Wide Eyed Editions, 80pp, 0 780711 262768, £14.99, hbk

This book tells the fascinating and true story of a ship, the RMS Carpathia who changed course mid voyage to help rescue survivors of the Titanic disaster, successfully rescuing 705 passengers and crew. The story is unfolded skillfully as we find out about the sequence of events on the night of 14th April 1912.

Individual contributions of members of the crew are highlighted, including wireless operator Harold Cottam who received the SOS from the Titanic at the end of a long shift and Captain Rostron whose decisive action and bravery saved so many lives leading to him receiving awards and commendations. Also, we meet a young passenger, 18-year-old Bernice Palmer, who recorded the Titanic survivors and the iceberg which is likely to have sunk the ill-fated ship with her new box camera.

There are pauses in the narrative to introduce other information giving us a fuller picture of life on board ship. We meet the crew and find out how they prepared for the voyage,

# reviews

## 8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

we find out the background to Trans-Atlantic steam travel, navigation at sea and the importance of morse code for communication. The excitement surrounding the launch of the Titanic is described and the methods used by the Carpathia to find Titanic survivors.

Using watercolour images different ways to illustrate information are employed on each double page spread – a cross section reveals life on board ship, we can spot the engine room, sleeping accommodation and the bridge. A map shows shipping routes across the Atlantic. Small pictures are used to introduce the crew. Images of the telegrams sent to families of those lost at sea and the survivors reveal the human stories of loss and joy behind the tragedy. Large full page images emphasise the drama of the sinking and the desperate efforts of the rescuers.

This is an excellent information book with a good balance of general information and detail using varied layouts to convey information and tell the story in an accessible and interesting way. The back of the book includes a glossary, sources and further reading.

A useful contribution to those interested in this dramatic event or marine history in general as we approach the 110th anniversary of the sinking. **SMc**

### Sisters of the Lost Marsh

★★★★★

Lucy Strange, *Chicken House*, 272pp, 9781913322373, £7.99 pbk  
Lucy Strange's mesmerising new novel will draw readers deep into its dream-like landscape until they emerge at the end, feeling as though they too have just escaped from the mires of the Lost Marsh. It tells the story of the Fernsby girls, six motherless sisters, who lead a harsh life on a marshland farm, living in fear of their selfish, heartless father who is ruled by superstition and obsessed with 'The Curse of the Six Daughters.' When Grace, the eldest, is promised in marriage to a rich, unkind landowner by her father in exchange for a horse, she cannot bear the prospect and vanishes, soon after visiting a magical puppet show at the mysterious Full Moon Fayre. Willa, the headstrong, defiant middle sister, sets off on the brave horse Flint to find Grace. Her journey takes her into the dangerous Lost Marsh where will-o'-the-wisps lure lost souls into the dark waters of the mire. Willa encounters danger, kindness, disease, and death. She unravels family secrets, battles the sinister Marsh King, brings Grace home and solves the mystery of her own deep loneliness. The poignant resolution mingles loss, triumph, and the breaking of the curse.

Lucy Strange has written a beautiful, haunting novel, an eerie and luminous mix of gothic mystery, folklore and fairy tale inspired by the

landscape of Romney Marsh. This isolated setting of mist, salt marsh, ditches and lost villages is brilliantly and atmospherically evoked. The characters are vivid, Willa's narrative voice is compelling, and the story is moving and empowering, ending with the family reunited, even after loss, held firm by their mantra 'we won't be druv.' The sense of time shifting and merging after the defeat of the Marsh King is beautifully depicted as the girls feel the strength and power of the beloved women they have lost 'in the bones of us.' A haunting, magical read, highly recommended. **SR**

### Blossom

★★★★★

Laura Dockrill, ill. Sarah Ogilvie, *Barrington Stoke*, 96pp, 9781800900233 £6.99 pbk  
Blossom loves plants and flowers. She has grown up surrounded by them both at home and on her parents' family market stall, passed down by her much-loved, dearly departed grandparents, Tutu and Pops.

Blossom's favourite plant is Tutu Plant, her special aloe vera, given into her care by her grandmother shortly before she passed away and Blossom likes to talk to the plant as she would have previously done to her Grandma Tutu. During the school holidays, Blossom gets to help her parents run the stall and every day she takes Tutu Plant along with her.

Since her grandparents died there have been many changes to her family's daily lives, but Blossom is becoming more aware of the growing tension between her parents over keeping the stall going and the toll it is taking on their relationship since they inherited the stall. Blossom's Mum is trying to complete her university course, while her Dad needs her help to keep things going.

Will Blossom be able to come up with a solution to keep the market stall in the family and still ensure her parents' happiness?

This latest title for young readers from acclaimed author Laura Dockrill is another heart-warming and charming tale, immediately drawing you into the warm community of the market, with its array of vibrant and colourful characters as seen through the eyes of young Blossom. You can feel the love and affection that the stallholders have for Blossom and the sense of family amongst them.

Laura Dockrill has the enviable talent of being able to turn her hand to pretty much any form of writing, as her variety of titles show, switching easily between her picture books, poetry and prose.

As always Barrington Stoke's dyslexia-friendly layout and font, with inspired illustrations from Sarah Ogilvie, makes it accessible for most readers.

Although not a long tale, Blossom's story left this reader with a warm glow and a smile on my face. **AH**

## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

### Ed's Choice

#### The Chime Seekers

★★★★★

Ross Montgomery, illus David Dean, *Walker Books* 384p, 9781406391190 £7.99 pbk

Yanni hates his new home – stuck out in the middle of nowhere, and he hates his baby sister – the cuckoo in the nest as far as he is concerned. He just wants things to go back as they were. Out of his anger he makes a wish – and it happens. It is All Hallows Eve, the fabric between the world and the faerie world is thin. Baby Ari is taken by the faerie Lord Renwin and a Changeling left in her place. Is this what Yanni really wants? How can he rescue Ari and return the changeling Lari before the faerie gate closes?

This is a true quest and coming-of-age narrative that makes use of all the traditional elements – the wager, the journey, the riddling element, the glimmers – but there are touches that ensure it also belongs to the contemporary world of its readers; the computer game that Yanni's cousin Amy plays provides Yanni with a useful guide. And it is very necessary. This faery world is full of danger and deception. The adventure is fast paced and immersive; this is a book where you want to keep turning the pages – and not just for the excitement and jeopardy. The characters themselves – Yanni, Amy even Larry – step off the page



and become true companions. This may be seen as a fantasy but at its heart the author is looking at family relationships, friendships, displacement, identity, self-belief, choice and the emotions that can govern and overwhelm. The result is a very satisfying package where the contemporary meets the traditional (the river of blood that runs through the faery world, the tombstones that come alive, a nod to Dr Who, perhaps). Montgomery's prose is well paced and lively. Dialogue, just enough description to inspire the imagination and a varied vocabulary make this a pleasure to read ensuring the plot moves swiftly and consistently. An extremely satisfying addition to any shelf and one to recommend. **FH**

### Locked Out Lily

★★★★★

Nick Lake, illustrated by Emily Gravett, *Simon & Schuster*, 240pp, 978147119483-2, £12.99 hbk

This ambitious generously illustrated story has a heroine younger than her intended readership. But although Lily still sleeps with a favourite stuffed toy at her side she is older and sadder in other ways, given that she is undergoing regular dialysis for a possibly fatal illness. This puts her apart from her school friends and also her parents, who are trying to balance their joy in the imminent arrival of a new baby with their justifiable fear that Lily is going to react jealously – as she does.

This is just the start; what happens after that is grippingly unexpected when Lily enters into a fantasy land where her illness takes on physical shape in the guise of two horrible semi-recognisable figures whom she calls parent-things. Their black coal eyes sucking out the light make them reminiscent of the equally unpleasant

phantoms in Neil Gaiman's classic **Coraline**. They want her dead, but on Lily's side there is a small parliament of talking animals fighting her corner. And so the battle rages, rather more darkly at times than is hinted at on the book's cover promising a 'most entertaining adventure.' Nick Lake is always good, never writing down to his audience, and Emily Gravett is in brilliant, black and white form, providing plenty of appropriately spooky pictures. Designer David McDougall keeps up the pressure with dark borders and occasionally completely blackened pages.

All is fine until the last twenty pages, when the pervasive sense of fear is replaced by events and outcomes now reflecting an over-insistent and finally unconvincing sense of optimism. Catherine Storr's epic story **Marianne Dreams** also personifies childhood illness and recovery but without a single false note. This present novel stands good comparison with her story before stumbling at the last fence after a hitherto excellent run. **NT**



**The Beatryce Prophecy**

★★★★

Kate Dicamillo, illus Sophie Blackall, Walker, 256pp, 9781529500899, £10.99 hbk

With writer and illustrator both double major prizewinners, this magical fantasy story set somewhere in the middle ages promises much. And indeed, Dicamillo does come up with a strikingly original story and Blackall's delicate drawings, surrounded by immaculately illustrated borders, ably maintain the fairy tale mood throughout. So how to assess a story so out of time with young readers' experiences of the world today?

There are darker moments involving bandits, prison cells, murder and war. But Beatryce, the young heroine of the main action, is impervious to threats and her happy outcome is a foregone conclusion. She is accompanied on her journey from the monastery giving her shelter by Answelica, a goat given to regular butting and biting. There is also Brother Edik, a monk one of whose eyes permanently wanders out of focus – a detail much repeated. Their destination is a king who has done wrong, with Beatryce following a prophecy promising all would eventually be well.

Beautifully produced, with chapters opening with a single illuminated letter, this book is a pleasure to handle. As a story it will surely please some but others may find it a bit tame. The actual writing could seem arch to those not immediately carried away by it and Beatryce herself strains credulity by being so innocently perfect. The goat is earthier, smelling high and in a state of permanent aggression, but she is given a very easy ride by those she torments, as if goat bites don't really hurt either at the time or afterwards. Dicamillo has written that this tale had been lodged in her imagination for over ten years, and Blackall has attested how much it came to mean to her while she was illustrating it. Their views should be taken seriously; whether the eventual story quite bears the weight of so much personal commitment is another matter. NT

**Following Frankenstein**

★★★★

Catherine Bruton, Nosy Crow, 258pp, 9781788008440, £7.99 pbk

Catherine Bruton brings her literary knowledge to bear in this fast-paced historical adventure story, moving from the Dickensian setting of her previous novel, **Another Twist in the Tale**, to the landscapes of the Arctic and North America, and drawing inspiration from American literature and Mary Shelley's **Frankenstein**. The book is 'following Frankenstein' in many ways as it imagines events following the famous novel and depicts the obsessive pursuit of Victor Frankenstein's creature.

Maggie, the tale's narrator, has always felt that she takes second place in her father's thoughts and feelings, subsumed as they are by his obsessive desire to find the creature, first encountered years before. When her father sets off on one final voyage in search of Frankenstein's monster Maggie stows away, determined to protect her father at any cost. In the icy, Arctic lands a shocking discovery is made: Frankenstein's monster had a son, Kata, shunned by all who encounter him, but befriended by Maggie and her heroic pet mouse Victor.

The epic adventure that ensues sees Maggie and Kata race across the North American continent in a bid for freedom, encountering a flamboyant circus, Native American peoples, and the Underground Railroad. Characters from such iconic American novels as **Moby Dick**, **The Last of the Mohicans** and **Uncle Tom's Cabin** appear throughout the narrative in an exhilarating mash up that carries readers along without too much questioning of the chronology, geography, and literary anachronisms.

Although knowledge of Mary Shelley's original novel is required to follow the fast-moving plot, the other literary characters fit in to the story without the need for prior knowledge and may serve to introduce young readers to a wide range of books. The treatment of Kata is harsh and cruel at times and the book raises important questions about the treatment of otherness and disability. Themes of mental illness, family breakdown, exclusion and loneliness are set against depictions of kindness, empathy, resilience, and love, all bound up in a fastmoving gothic adventure that will enthrall readers of 9+. SR

**Tabitha Plimtock and the Edge of the World**

★★★★

Erika McGann, ill. Phillip Cullen, O'Brien, 288pp, 978788492492, £11.99 hbk

Tabitha lives with her 'family' at the edge of the world; however, they are only family because she was left on their doorstep as a baby. The Plimtocks are perhaps the most revolting family that you are ever likely to come across, even Roald Dahl would shudder at some of their behaviour. Tabitha is treated as a servant and every day she has to collect all of their food, do the cooking and cleaning and generally clear up after grandmother Bertha and the three cousins Gower, Gristle and Wilbur. In order to get their food Tabitha has to climb down the cliff at the edge of the world and collect plants, eggs and other items from the people who live in a variety of caves down there. Life is tough but then it starts to get even worse. Something is on the move, gradually climbing from

**New talent****The Ice Whisperers**

★★★★

Helenka Stachera, Puffin, 368pp, 9780241491287, £7.99, pbk

Bela has grown up under the care of her Great Aunt Olga in Poland, but has always felt that she doesn't belong there and that there is more to her family history than she has been told. On learning of her mother's death, Bela is sent to live with her uncle in deepest Siberia, where she soon discovers that there is even more mystery surrounding her parentage and that all is not as it seems.

With help from within the household, Bela bravely takes steps to find out more about her history and finds herself transported to a magical fantasy spirit-world, where she meets her half-sister Ren-ya, born 40,000 years before her!

Despite initial mistrust on both sides, Bela and Ren-ya will need to join forces to save the existence of their people and the spirit world they are in, with help from the spirit creatures they encounter along the way.

There are strong themes of family and identity running throughout the book, as the two girls gradually grow to understand each other and learn what is important to them. Young readers will enjoy the fast-paced adventure and thrill of the fantasy world, with plenty of suspense and



a good sprinkling of unexpected twists to the tale.

There were also more darker moments than I was expecting, but these are in keeping with the 'Ice Age' element of the world they are in and how inhabitants of this world have had to survive. I enjoyed the inclusion of the prehistoric animals, alongside the collection of fantastical spirit creatures, plus the mix of historical fact and fantasy throughout this new world. Author Helenka Stachera uses beautifully descriptive language throughout to fully immerse the reader in her frozen world, with simple but effective illustrations from Marco Guadalupi. AH

the bottom of the cliff and starting to eat the plants and animals as they go. Can Tabitha and her friends prevent this catastrophe, or is their life about to be destroyed?

This is a truly amazing story, with a heroine that deserves all of the support that we can give her. The environment that the author has created is very bleak, but she leaves us with the thought that if we don't look after our world, then things will inevitably get even worse. Given the situation that we all find ourselves in at the moment this seems a very opportune lesson to be learnt. The author is Irish and has won a number of awards, but she definitely deserves to be better known on this side of the Irish Sea. In this book she has taken fantasy to an extreme, but it works beautifully and makes you want to read more about the inhabitants of this amazing place. It is a funny and exciting read for those in KS2. MP

**Wildlord**

★★★★

Philip Womack, Little Island, 232pp, 978-1912417971, £7.99 pbk

Philip Womack's new fantasy novel opens in a world that will seem strange and alien to many of his readers: a public school, the morning after the night of the Summer Ball, 'White Quad Bell' ringing out into the mid-morning air, pupils staggering

back to their rooms after the revelries, black ties undone. The other-worldly air thickens as the story unfolds, and gets considerably darker. Tom is gloomily anticipating spending the long weeks of the summer holidays at school. His parents died in a boating accident and there's no family, just a distant guardian overseas. So when a strange boy arrives to deliver an even stranger invitation to visit the uncle Tom never knew he had, Tom is determined to go, against his headmaster's orders and despite a rather frightening run-in with another peculiar visitor.

Mundham Farm, his newly discovered family home, has its own atmosphere of heady timelessness and, somewhat like Tom's school, is inhabited by people whose way of life seems hardly to have changed in a hundred years. At first Uncle James (Jack) appears welcoming and his companions, beguiling young housekeeper Zita and taciturn handyman Kit, striking with his silver eyes and hair, equally charming; but the more Tom discovers about the house and its inhabitants, the more his understanding shifts. Jack is not the benign uncle he makes himself out to be, he is cruel, corrupt and the two young people are his prisoners. But Jack is holding someone else captive too, one of the Samdhya or Folk, and her people surround

# reviews

## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued



the house, effectively imprisoning everyone inside.

The depth of his uncle's corruption and betrayal is breath-taking and there's a very real chance that Tom too will be trapped for ever. The sense of danger is as palpable and enveloping as the sense of old magic, the two tightly interwoven, and it's easy to believe in the Samdhya and lives that stretch and shape nature and even time. Womack is a fine writer who knows just how to spin tales of myth and magic and this is unsettling, original and absorbing reading. **MMA**

Read our [Q&A interview](#) with Philip Womack

### When Fishes Flew: The Story of Elena's War

★★★

Michael Morpurgo, HarperCollins, 214 pp, 978 000 8352 189, £12.99 hbk

It is a measure of Michael Morpurgo's storytelling skill that, in a relatively short tale, beginning in Australia, he can tie together Greek gods and heroes, a talking fish, and a story of Second World War heroism. His Australian narrator is Nandi, short for Amanda. Her great aunt Elena (Aunt Ellie) visits often from Greece and introduces her niece to the country's language, myths and legends. When eventually Elena feels too old to make the long journey south, Nandi decides to visit her aunt at home in Ithaca, the home of Nandi's grandfather and the island of Odysseus and Penelope. However, when Nandi makes her surprise visit, Aunt Ellie is nowhere to be found. The flying fish, the god Proteus in another form, has had a role already in encouraging Nandi to make the trip to Greece. Now he takes over as narrator, introducing Nandi to Elena's backstory. Elena's war takes up most of the second half of the book. Whatever the skill of the author, it might tax some readers' patience to wait until page seventy-five for the adventure to begin, especially as the

narrator makes frequent promises that something exciting will happen soon. But Nandi's love of Greece and her heartfelt relationship with her aunt are well portrayed; and Ellie's return to Ithaca holds a surprise for Nandi that is entirely in keeping with what she has learnt of her great aunt's life. **CB**

### Hey Girl!

★★★★★

Rachel Rooney, ill. Milo Hartnoll, Otter Barry Books, 96pp, 978 1 91307 458 6, £8.99, pbk

As the writer explains in her introduction, this is a collection in which she reflects back on her younger self, inspired by rediscovering a poem written when she was thirteen. This is a very special four-line poem evoking the vulnerability of a young girl and her sense of wonder at the beauty of the sky at night, themes which are developed and echoed in the collection as a whole.

The poetry successfully captures the feelings and experiences of a teenage girl – from simple pleasures such as hiding a book under your pillow, owning a special handwriting pen or ending your address with 'The Universe' to the schoolgirl craze described in *Yawn*.

There is an emphasis on the liminal; a child on the threshold of adolescence and adulthood, an experience described in *Suburbia* as 'bursting through childhood' in search of freedom. Physical changes are suggested in *Blood*. The beauty and power of the metamorphoses is conveyed in *Girl to Woman*.

Many of the poems explore the tumultuous emotions and experiences of teenage years. Feeling unsure of your identity, even considering yourself an imposter in *Doppelgänger*. *Break-time* explores the common feeling of not fitting in with the 'in' crowd discussing the latest gossip. *Five Fingered Salute* shows it is possible to rise above the cruelty of life in the playground. There are poems about young love and dating – compared to a game of chess in *64 Squares*. Feelings of grief at the loss of a close relative are addressed in *Ghosted* as a loved one slowly seems to disappear, through we assume, dementia.

In *Get Over it* the writer advises her younger self not to dwell on the thoughts in her head. And there is useful advice to be found throughout the book. XX, at the beginning of the collection, points out 'No body is perfect but you are perfectly yours' and *Advice from a Caterpillar* offers hope for the future 'For who you are has only just begun.' There is an acknowledgement that growing up is likely to be hard and an encouragement to keep going, be brave and focus on the positive, looking for the 'golden moments' in the darkness.

The poems are varied in style and form, from prose to nursery rhyme rhythm. They are full of delight and pleasure in words and language more generally (one poem is entitled *Punctuation*). There are poems about writing poems, which may inspire young readers to write their own.

The layout and overall design is varied and very attractive with striking black and white illustrations.

This is a special collection, skillfully written and imbued with insight, warmth, encouragement and reassurance which should be in the hands of teenage girls everywhere. **SMc**

### Roar Like a Lion

★★★★★

Carlie Sorosiak, ill. Katie Walker, David Fickling, 160pp, 978 1 78845 235 9, £9.99 pbk

This positive book about how to become the best person you can be by following ways that animals act and react, is full of positive ideas that will appeal, particularly to animal lovers who may perhaps be feeling less than positive about all the stresses of life. It's full of humour too, and wonderful soft-colour illustrations on every page. The chapters cover things like being yourself, finding confidence, finding the right friends for you, being kind, being brave, finding resilience and joy, and there are some 67 animals throughout who show just how to do this, from a racoon who gets his head stuck in a storm drain and has to be rescued (we all have to be rescued sometimes) to Meerkats who know how to stop bullying and stand up for each other. The book is packed with ideas and interesting, unusual facts about animals, and an index leads to every one of them. An excellent choice for stressed kids because of its positive and entertaining approach; it should help them feel hope for the future: 'This is my tail-wagging, frog-leaping, lion-hearted self. Never be afraid to ROAR!' **ES**

### The Little Bee Charmer of Henrietta Street

★★★★★

Sarah Webb, O'Brien Press, 320pp., 9781788492478, £11.99, pbk

The Kane family having lost their wife and mother, have to move from a house in a leafy suburb of Dublin in 1911 to a tenement flat in the Henrietta Street of the title. Eliza has to give up her art classes to look after her father who is losing his sight because of cataracts, and her little brother Jonty. She takes on some of the work he can no longer do illuminating manuscripts in the small workshop. Life in the tenements is hard but there is a strong community, and there is also the excitement of the circus coming to town and the opportunity for Eliza and Jonty to earn some money for the operation their father needs. When a tenement crumbles to the ground and lives are lost, the community and the circus family rally round.



Despite the outlines of the story above this is a warm story of community, although the horrors of rats, communal toilets, not enough food or money, and fathers who drink what money they have away, are depicted clearly for the reader. But somehow the overwhelming feeling when reading this story, is that of hope as families come together to deal with what life has given them. Eliza is still mourning her mother but finds the courage not only to accept the awful conditions, which are somewhat alleviated by her father's friendship with the Pennefeathers, but also to assimilate herself into the life that her new friend Annie experiences. There is an air of magic about Aunt Ada's bee charming abilities which Eliza also seems to have acquired from her mother. Jonty is an irrepressible character able to find fun in most things but also is shown to have a soft side when he looks after the small siblings of Tall Joe when he is badly hurt in the tenement accident. Yes, a lot is glossed over but for the discerning reader the truth is there to see.

In the notes at the end of the book Sarah Webb discloses that Dublin had the worst housing of any city in Britain or Ireland at the time which is truly horrifying. **JF**

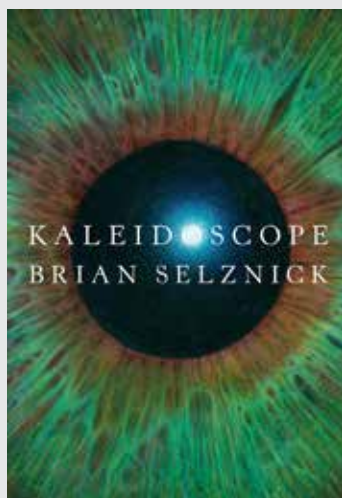
### Kaleidoscope

★★★★★

Brian Selznick, Scholastic Press, 212pp, 978 1 338 77724 6, £14.99, hbk

This is a remarkable book from author and illustrator Brian Selznick. Just as a kaleidoscope rearranges the same elements into different patterns through the use of mirrors and reflections, so Selznick offers twenty or so short episodes, arranged as morning, afternoon and evening, which are complete in themselves and also have a perceptible but mysterious relationship with one another. Selznick's illustrations are interfiled with the stories. Many are designs that might be seen in a kaleidoscope. Others are evocations of the stories that follow. All are in black and white. In the tales themselves, characters and places recur but are changed





and reordered, relationships are seen from different angles; situations echo and re-echo as memory and dream; there are tangles of reality and possibility, realised and interpreted in familiar story forms that are made unfamiliar by their juxtaposition. It might be possible to solve the book like a puzzle, to rearrange its strange shapes so that they lock together like a jigsaw. The ache of loneliness, the wonder of the world, the comfort of friendship and the pain of loss are all to be found; and deeply felt. Yet it is perhaps best to enjoy each story as it comes, to let the tales dazzle you with their changing forms, and to let the novel work its magic as it will. **CB**

### Adam-2

★★★★★

Alastair Chisholm, Nosy Crow, 294pp, 978 1 78800 610 1, £7.99 pbk

There is poignancy in the opening of **Adam-2** as Chisholm gives us Adam alone in a stark basement, obediently carrying out his daily routines of food, homework, play, conversation, story time and bed. The plain, clear font used here emphasises Adam's boyishness and innocence. However, when two children, Linden and Runa, break into the basement whilst they are exploring the area, what they-and we-see is a robot who has been waiting patiently for almost 250 years for the return of Father, his creator. Chisholm, then, has given us an uncorrupted child.

Adam does his best to communicate with them, to be 'a good boy' as Father had instructed him and while he meets with excited curiosity from Runa, he gets nothing but hostility from Linden, who tries to destroy him with a potent electrical charge. When a dangerous robot also penetrates the basement, following the children, Adam saves them from attack and joins them as they go up into the world, a world which he does not recognise, as it has been almost totally destroyed. Funks robots with functional intelligence and humans

have been at war for centuries and there seems no end to the hostilities.

When Adam is taken to the human encampment he is greeted with suspicion and dislike and forced to undergo a gladiatorial contest against an immense and aggressive robot. He initially refuses but uneasily realises that this is the only way he can prove his allegiance to the humans. He wins the contest and uses his skills to repair and renew the technology damaged by war, but is also used to unknowingly complete a deadly weapon to be used against the Funks.

The story is full of manipulation and betrayal, made all the more horrific when seen through Adam's initially uncomprehending eyes. When he meets his dying predecessor, Adam 6 he sees the same determination to destroy but becomes aware that robots have been maltreated by humans, used as slaves and that therefore there are wrongs on both sides. He arranges a peace council in the sacred forest of the healer, the Cailleach, whose connections to Nature and healing are an antidote to war.

This Council, too, is corrupted by the threat of a plague-spreading virus which the humans are threatening to unleash. Adam outwits both sides by tricking them into believing he has control over both weapons and a fragile peace begins to grow. In **Adam-2** Chisholm has given us an allegory which hits hard in the current climate and a thought-provoking solution to the ills of the world. **VR**

### Pop!

★★★★★

Mitch Johnson, Orion Children's Books, 352pp, 9781510107618, £7.99 pbk

Dwight Eagleman, CEO of Mac-TonicTM, stops at nothing to maintain his Company's No.1 World Ranking. His technicians project Mac-TonicTM's logo onto the surface of the moon every night. His admen are planning to modify the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel; their latest draft includes the skilful insertion of 'a bottle of Mac-TonicTM into Adam's outstretched hand and a waiting glass into God's'. When his own son shows a hint of humane concern, not to say compassion, Eagleman incarcerates him in the Company's private prison. He could readily take his place in the 007 School of Villainy alongside Goldfinger or Blofeld.

Inevitably, Mac-TonicTM is also ranked No.1 among the World's polluters, chief contributor to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (three times the size of France). Eagleman has Senators and even a golf-obsessed President in his pocket. BUT. There's a problem. Two of his executives are the guardians of Mac-TonicTM's secret formula (they hold half each) for the fizzy nectar itself.

When two private jets, each carrying one of these executives, collide at 40,000 feet over the Pacific, the formula plummets Oceanwards with them. Catastrophe. Production stops. The world gasps in an agony of thirst. Demand rockets through the stratosphere. Crates of the last available bottles are going at auction for \$billions.

Woven through this story of the jealousies, ambitions, and double dealings of Big Business, there is a very different plot. Queenie (maybe about 12) lives with her obnoxious younger brother and her empty, defeated Mom (Queenie's drunken Dad is long gone) in a squalid house on a squalid litter-strewn beach in, of all places, California. Alone among the detritus on that beach one day, Queenie (a Mac-TonicTM addict herself) finds a washed-up Mac-TonicTM bottle containing a faded list of the drink's secret ingredients. The news leaks all over everywhere and Queenie is soon on the run, pursued by Mac-TonicTM's Corporate Suits brandishing mega-bucks, as well as bad guys hunting the bounty now on her head. She's joined by Scott, a boy around her own age. A friend in need; or is he? Things don't look promising when Queenie and Scott are held captive by the bad guys aboard a small boat, themselves under attack from three black Mac-TonicTM helicopters. The bad guys shoot down two of the aircraft before one of the thugs is taken out by a sniper and the other, though wounded, decides to kill the kids first and then himself. How to get out of this one? No worries for our ever-inventive author. A passing man-eating alligator surges up from the depths and swiftly swallows his man.

BfK reviewers are asked to suggest reading ages for a book. This one is tricky. Is it just a crazy comic chase with children as quarries where a death isn't worth a dime except to speed the plot along? Maybe it's for readers around Queenie's age; but what would she make of language (chosen where the pages fell) such as 'with the pain of being ostracised' or 'this joyride to Armageddon'? Or is it a sophisticated satire about Big Business more accessible for 14-18 year olds, ready to face serious real-world questions deep within the quickfire action?

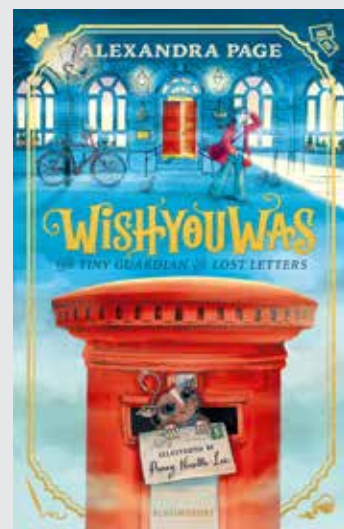
Mitch Johnson shows his hand in his Afterword. He begs his readers to take on the threat of climate change. He writes, 'If you are a child reading this, you are too young to vote (or stand for election)'; but he urges readers to 'speak and fight back' because 'it's your world too' and adults are leaving it in a critically dangerous state. This and much more; for all the entertaining narrative, this is a call to arms. Whatever their ages, readers' responses will depend on their mental agility and readiness to reflect. There may be a risk that the challenging message of **Pop!** is lost amongst the excitement, duplicity, laughter and anarchy that crowd its pages. **GF**

### Wishyouwas

★★★★★

Alexandra Page, illus. Penny Neville-Lee, Bloomsbury, 270pp, 9781526641212, £12.99 hbk

It is the lead up to Christmas 1952 and Penny Black has been sent to stay with her Uncle Frank, who runs a small post office in central London. Penny's mother is a pilot for the Royal Mail and flies post to Europe and back; but Penny is hoping that she will be back home in time to celebrate Christmas. What Penny does not expect, is to discover what she initially thinks is a rat, but turns out to be something very special indeed. This small creature speaks English and says his name is 'Wishyouwas'; he is a 'Sorter' and this group of creatures have made it their purpose to try and retrieve lost post and make sure it finds its rightful recipient. However, the Sorters are under threat from the Royal Mail Rat Catcher and Penny finds herself trying to save them and prove how useful they would be to the service.



This is one of those magical stories that just wraps itself around your heart and gives you a warm glow. Penny is a bright and adventurous young girl, who wants a real Christmas, but that is beginning to look most unlikely. Her relationship with the Sorters gives her a purpose and to her surprise it brings new friendships, with the most unexpected of creatures. The author has given us a real sense of the time and the bleakness that there was, so soon after the war and with rationing still happening. What we also have is a brilliant and precise description of the environment that the sorters have created. Their names are based on phrases they find in letters and parcels, whilst many of their utensils have been fashioned from human implements. For those who have read other stories about anthropomorphic animals and small humans this will seem quite normal.

This is a wonderful story about friendship, family and also being open to new ideas and accepting others who are very different. Alexandra Page has created a new Christmas classic and I know it will be a firm favourite for children in KS2, although it would be great to read out loud to younger children. **MP**

# reviews

## 14+ Secondary/Adult

### The Boy Behind the Wall

★★★★★

Maximillian Jones, Welbeck Flame, 304pp, 9781801300001, £6.99, pbk  
The Berlin we know today is not the city of this story set in 1967. The Wall separates East from West Berlin and escape from the East is fraught with danger and for many, death. Life behind the Wall is a dangerous existence with the dreaded secret police, the Stasi, inducing many to spy on their neighbours. Harry, a teenage American has arrived with his parents to live in West Berlin where his father now works. Harry's first introduction to the Wall is the shooting of a boy trying to escape. The story tells, in alternate chapters, the relationship between Harry and Jakob, an East German teenager living with adopted parents, a relationship which starts with postcards attached to a balloon which floats over the Wall. Quickly it escalates into a plot to escape through a tunnel and Harry crossing into East Berlin to try to help.

The book is actually written by three people under the name of Maximillian Jones, and certainly at the start Harry's voice is written in short staccato sentences, whereas Jakob's story flows more easily. Gradually however, Harry's and Jakob's chapters merge so it is sometimes not easy to ascertain which boy is the narrator. Whether this is deliberate or not is difficult to say, but the first chapter with its shocking killing does give the reader the feeling of a young man totally out of his depth in a strange land, unable to speak the language and whose parents seem to be drifting apart. The merging of styles sets the tone as it brings the two boys closer until they meet. It is at times a very bleak story, which ends with considerable violence and terror.

The reader does not get much sense of what it was like to live in West Berlin, which is a pity as the

contrast between the two cities would have helped, and would Harry, who seemed a gregarious sort of boy, really have been so alone in an expatriate school? The events set in East Berlin however, do give the reader a proper understanding of what it must have been like to live in such a time and place. Hans, Jakob's 'father', works at a high level in the Stasi and the fear he engenders in Jakob is clear to see. There are one or two places where the reader's credibility is stretched, for example, Harry seems to know a great deal about recording equipment and for someone with very little German his codebreaking skills are impressive. There are many American references in the first few chapters about Harry which might confuse British readers, for example, ground beef, but most of these will be skipped over in the excitement of a very good story. A sequel is already announced. **JF**

### Torn

★★★★★

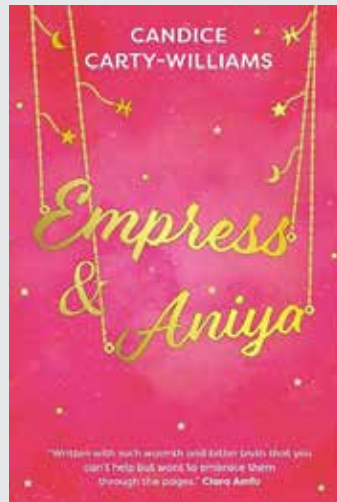
David Massey, Chicken House, 304pp, 978 1 908435 1 70 £6.99 pbk  
Rescued from the slush pile, this novel set in the current Afghanistan war proves indeed to be well worth publishing. Seen through the eyes of new British Army medic Elinor Nielson, it brings to vivid life the everyday detail of patrolling a country where few of the inhabitants actually want you to be. The opening chapters are particularly tense, and it is hard to think that any teenage reader would ever want to enlist in such an absurd war after reading them. The addition of a warning ghost plus Elinor's growing feelings for a handsome American lieutenant bring things down a bit, but at its best this is excellent war writing, truthful, authoritative and utterly compelling. **NT**

### Empress & Aniya

★★★★★

Candice Carty-Williams, Knights Of, 144pp, 978 9133111-0-0 £7.99 pbk  
In this first YA book by award-winning author Candice Carty-Williams, Empress, a bright girl of Nigerian origin, starts her scholarship at the private Chancellor School for Girls, among rich girls, trying to outdo each other in accounts of lavish holidays over the summer, and many pupils and some teachers are deviously racist. Her scholarship does not cover school uniform, so she has an obviously second-hand blazer, nor does it cover expensive school lunches, and she survives on chips or pretends not to be hungry, but Aniya realizes that she is not getting enough to eat and takes her home to her relatively palatial home, meeting her lovely Dad Abib and her cool Mum, Dawn.

The friendship grows, and the girls, discovering that they share the same birthday, experiment with a body-swap



spell. To their surprise, when they wake up at Aniya's on their sixteenth birthday, it has worked. Aniya, as Empress, experiences racial prejudice in a café and life in an untidy flat with single mum Pauline, who is failing to look after toddler Leo, and resents Empress for her resemblance to her father, who had abandoned them, and her brains. Empress, as Aniya, discovers the parental pressure put on Aniya to be perfect and to follow her father into a career as a barrister, and both are relieved when, after trying to get help from the public librarian (but the relevant books are in another branch!), they are relieved when they wake up again in their own bodies. Aniya takes action to rescue Empress, and two years later, as the girls approach their eighteenth birthday, they seem set to follow their own paths, and we discover what has been happening to Pauline and Leo. It is a feel-good story, even if a bit far-fetched, and not as well paced as 'Queenie', as it all seems rather rushed towards the end, but it has a lot to say about prejudice and expectations, without overdoing it. **DB**

### Paradise On Fire

★★★★★

Jewell Parker Rhodes, ill. Serena Malyon, Orion, 256pp., 978-1-510-10985-8, £7.99 pbk  
Adaugo, a girl known as Addy, is one of a group of six teenagers of colour from cities in the USA who have been selected to go on a summer wilderness programme. The students learn new skills: hiking, camping and cooking outdoors, climbing and surviving. Some are reluctant (DeShon rarely takes his headphones off), and distrust their white team leaders, college students with vacation work, but the owner, Leo, who 'looks as if he dresses up as Santa at Christmas', charms them, and he and his dog, Ryder, get on especially well with Addy. Over the summer, the teenagers build up their stamina and increase their knowledge, especially

the responsibilities of putting out a campfire properly and looking after each other. Eventually we realise why Addy loves mapping – she likes to know that she has an escape route. Her parents had died in a fire, and she has been brought up by her grandmother Bibi, who had to come over from Ghana to care for her. Bibi's wisdom and Leo's knowledge and teaching help Addy to become more confident in the natural environment, and when wildfire strikes while the whole group is on their final three-day camping trip, she is able to lead some of her new friends to safety.

The setting is American, and some words will be unfamiliar to British readers (your reviewer looked up 's'mores' which look like a delicious snack of biscuits with melted marshmallows on top) but nothing is too difficult to understand.

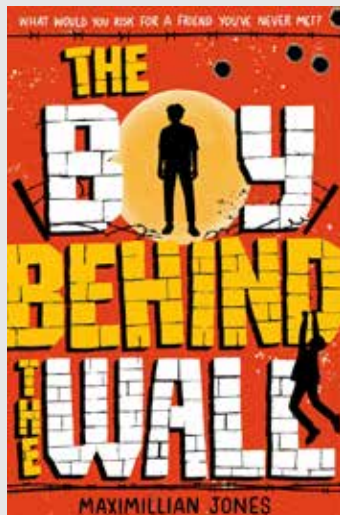
Jewell Parker Rhodes' previous book, **Ghost Boys** was well received. It told of a studious boy shot dead by police when playing with a toy gun, and his discovery of other ghost boys with similar backgrounds: disadvantaged children are given a voice in both these books. She writes well, and this is a real page-tuner as wildfire threatens the group. This is definitely recommended. **DB**

### Know My Place

★★★★★

Eve Ainsworth, Barrington Stoke, 120pp, 978-1781129807, £7.99 pbk  
Amy is aged thirteen. She has been in foster care since she was six years old. It has not been easy for Amy to find a permanent residence. As the story starts in fact Amy is entering her sixth foster placement. Amy had thought that her last placement would be her forever home. But the arrangement broke down, for reasons which Amy did not understand but which are later in the novel explained. In consequence she now finds it difficult to trust anyone. The question posed by Ainsworth's novel is whether with the Dawson family Amy has any chance at all of finding a permanent home. Will she ever feel that she is loved for herself, as opposed to just being a charity case?

The power of this novel is that it is a first-person narrative which begins in medias res. The narrative moves with enough initial momentum to oblige the reader to see matters from Amy's viewpoint, without mobilising any prejudices the reader might hold about foster parents and the children they care for. The situation in which Amy finds herself provokes a series of strong feelings and powerful reactions. Ainsworth does not shrink from describing them all in convincing detail. The book will serve to comfort anyone who has been in a similar situation to Amy's, and to enlighten the many who have not. **RB**





## The Forevers

★★★

Chris Whitaker, Hot Key Books, 352pp, 978 1 4714 0961 5, £12.99 hbk  
Ever since Mae was seven years old, she's known that an asteroid (a.k.a. 'Selena' or 8050XF11) was on course to collide with Earth. Attempts to avert catastrophe, led by NASA's finest, have failed. Now Mae is seventeen, there are 30 days to go, and one last effort is planned to escape mass destruction and death. Her life has been scarred by tragedy. Both parents were killed in a car crash, her mother pregnant with a child who had to be cut from her body. Mae's driving force is her love for her younger sister, blind from that premature birth. Stella is articulate, funny and perceptive to an extraordinary degree.

Counting down to the apocalypse, laws, conventions and morality itself become irrelevant. Yet buses still run, churches draw increasing congregations, shops and schools still open. Teachers teach and students attend classes though Authority is challenged more and more openly. Order on the streets of West-on-Sea is upheld by a young policeman in the temporary absence of his father, the town's senior officer.

In the early chapters, we meet more than a dozen sixth formers from Sacred Heart. At this stage, most are characterised by one or two broad brush strokes. One boy sings with haunting beauty; the arrogant daughter of the Headmaster leads the in-crowd; her boyfriend is a sportsman, much fancied by many of the girls; another girl practises the piano for hours on end – she's recently taken to prodigious over-eating; while this quiet boy is modest and kind to the point of invisibility. Three characters are drawn very differently; Mae herself, her amusing friend Felix, and a newcomer to the town, Jack Sail. Whitaker gives all of them depth and complexity. By contrast, the parents of these sixth formers, especially the fathers, are stereotypes: authoritarian, often abusive and even predatory. They neither respect nor listen to their children. They live lies.

In the early stages, readers might well be confused since so much is carried by dialogue which is often cryptic, charged with intensity but not always ascribed to its speaker. Even on a second reading, it proved useful to keep track by charting names, characteristics and relationships. When she was fifteen, Mae chose to call herself a 'Forever'. In this, she was joined by her then best friend, Abi. They accept themselves for who they are: one is content to see herself as a 'creep' and the other a 'weirdo'. Mae determines to see Selena as an opportunity, not a curse. She'll say: 'I am. Not I might be. Not I could be.' To be true to herself, not to the expectations of others. The two stick to their word and others join them

increasingly as time goes by. It is Abi's broken body that Mae finds on the seashore in the first sentence of the first chapter. Did Abi jump or was she pushed? That question drives through the entire narrative.

There's a change of pace in the latter two thirds of the novel. Events follow one another rapidly, triggering revelations and new mysteries (Whitaker handles this admirably – he is an award-winning crime writer for adults). Mae is well-placed to solve some of those mysteries since her disregard for convention allows her to enter the homes of wealthy people after dark, sometimes taking valuables she decides the owners no longer need, pawning them to fund her sister's care. During one of her nocturnal visits, she discovers that the town's young policeman is hiding the sickly-smelling, decaying corpse of his father in his home.

No more spoilers here. If the early stages of the book at times seem opaque, the later chapters have all the tension of a thriller. If the secrets finally revealed about those sixth formers are possibly too numerous, the interplay between Mae, Felix and Sail is poignantly described as they realise that what might have been can surely never be. **GF**

## Poison for Breakfast

★★★

Lemony Snicket, ill. Margaux Kent, Rock the boat, 160pp., 978-0-86154-261-1, £10.99 hbk

'This book is about bewilderment, a word which here means... "you don't know what's happening"'. We are in familiar Snicket territory, but this is stranger than most. Lemony Snicket finds a note on the floor by the door, stating, 'You had poison for breakfast'. Since he had fixed his own breakfast, as usual, this is startling news. He sets off in search of the sources of all the items of his breakfast: 'Tea, with honey, a piece of toast with cheese, one sliced pear, and an egg perfectly prepared.' It all comes from specialist shops, and the people he challenges are equally bewildered. His account rambles around his childhood, libraries, books he has read (references at the end), swimming, philosophy, and death and funerals. It's not a story, but musings and thoughts, which frequently go off on tangential routes. Fans who have grown up with his novels may appreciate the opportunity to explore his mind, but anyone expecting a murder mystery will be disappointed, as the solution is rather unsatisfactory. **DB**

## Kissing Emma

★★★

Shappi Khorsandi, Orion, 320pp, 978-1510106994, £7.99 pbk

At the age of eight Emma frequently witnesses domestic violence, seeing her father attack her mother. One night

Emma's father comes home drunk. Her parents fight on the balcony of their high-rise flat. Her father falls from the balcony to his death.

Emma's mother stands accused of her husband's murder. She denies her guilt. The police cannot find much by way of evidence. Emma is potentially a witness but on account of her age cannot be regarded as reliable. The case against Emma's mother never comes to trial. Nevertheless public pressure on the mother is so violent that she and Emma are forced to leave their home.

The story resumes eight years later. Emma moved school when she moved home. She and her mother are now living with her maternal grandmother and her mother's sister, plus the aunt's two daughters, all crowded into a cramped flat. Emma and her mother sleep in the flat's only living room. Emma becomes desperate to get her hands on enough money to find a new place for her and her mother to live. The rest of the book narrates the various stratagems Emma pursues in the quest for that money and the trials and tribulations she endures as a result.

Khorsandi's book features pornography, sexual abuse and rape, teenage pregnancy and miscarriage. The story also describes phobia directed at a trans person. At times Emma's ordeals are somewhat unrelenting. One problem, one source of misery, seems to follow another without relief. Emma's complete inability to foresee trouble and take action to mitigate her suffering may also irritate readers. These misgivings aside however, I have no hesitation in recognising this as a book of marked significance. It is remarkable that a woman celebrated for her ability to make people laugh should write a book calculated to reduce readers to tears. **RB**

## The Midnight Thief

★★★★

Sylvia Bishop, ill. Flavia Sorrentino, Scholastic, 250pp., 978-0-702301-48-3, 250pp., £6.99 pbk

When Freya, who has had a rather unconventional upbringing with her father, an archaeologist, starts at Throgmorton's School for Girls, she does not fit in well, and soon gets into a lot of trouble, not always of her own making, but the many Rules of the school are complicated and difficult. She is in the Headmistress's office being told off for being in the attic and releasing a bat, when the wildlife conservation expert arrives, with his twin children, to rescue the bat, and Freya soon finds that these two equally unconventional children are kindred spirits. They encourage her to break even more rules by meeting them out of the school at midnight, and together they discover a plot to steal seven priceless statues of dragons that belong to the school, and when the dragons do disappear, of course they manage to retrieve them and sort it out. Bats become very important, too...

This is a rather old-fashioned school story: all the teachers are Miss Something, and each has a special characteristic, e.g. Miss Featherly is always quoting poetry, but it's a very exciting adventure that will keep readers wanting to know what happens next. Sylvia Bishop also wrote *Erica's Elephant*, and *The Bookshop Girl*, which were variously described as 'charmingly old-fashioned' and 'charmingly retro' and that's a good description of this book, too. That said, it's a thoroughly enjoyable book, recommended for younger secondary students. **DB**



## Gilded

★★★★

Marissa Meyer, Faber, 502pp, 978-0-571-37158-7, £8.99 pbk

Meyer expertly evokes a cold and bitter landscape in this novel retelling of Rumpelstiltskin. It was on a bleak winter's night that a young miller saved a god's life and was granted a single wish. That wish was for marriage and a child and it was granted. When the miller's daughter Serilda was born, she was marked with the shapes of gilded wheels around her irises which those who saw her knew was old magic. She was a storyteller, a weaver of truth and enchanting lies: tall tales with sometimes dangerous outcomes.

Her tongue gets the better of her when she encounters the feared Erlking on the night of the Hunger Moon hunt and, in order to save her life, she claims to be able to spin straw into gold. When she is locked in a dungeon and told to spin gold or she and her father will die she sinks into despair until Gild, the goldspinner, completes the task for her and slowly they begin to fall in love. Fearing another kidnap on the next Hunger Moon she and her father attempt to flee but are caught by the Erlking and her father is killed, as was her mother before him.

Serilda's adventures now begin in earnest and she must use all her storytelling skills to save herself. Meyer creates imaginative and grotesque creatures, some ghosts,

# reviews

## 14+ Secondary/Adult continued

some possessed of half-lives and all under the Erlking's power in his castle which appears only on nights when the hunt rides. Those who attempt to resist him are woodland creatures, headed up by the Shrub Grandmother, a redoubtable matriarch, who must use what nature offers to counteract the evils of the Erlking.

**Gilded** is a rich, long book, full of twists and turns, brutality, loss and terror but, most of all, ingenuity and the strength of the human mind. Just when the game seems up Serilda finds a fresh move, a new ally, a clever and compelling story which shifts the balance of power. There is to be a sequel and the end of **Gilded** sees Gild, Serilda and their unborn child taking the next step in their perilous and unpredictable existence. This is ambitious writing which a confident reader with stamina and a love of fantasy will enjoy. **VR**

### The Wanderer

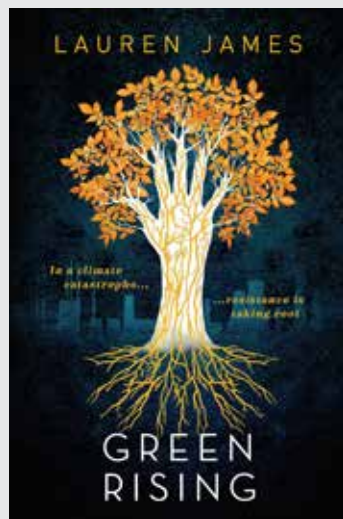
★★★★

Josie Williams, Firefly Press, 352pp, 9781913102661, £7.99 pbk  
This is a teenage romance with a difference. Ryder seems destined to wander the world he left behind, but as an invisible soul, after he chose not to follow the light when he died in a boating accident five years ago. After becoming increasingly intrigued and captivated by Maggie, a 15-year-old girl he first 'met' at the hospital, he breaks the Wanderers' rules in order to save her life, when she walks into the path of a bus. Once Ryder has made this initial contact, he finds the idea of not doing it again hard to give up, even though he knows that what he is doing is wrong and that it's unlikely to end well.

Maggie has already not had the easiest start to her life. Her mother died of cancer when she was younger and her father has never been around, leaving her to be brought up by her elderly grandmother. When she is affected by Alzheimer's and taken into a nursing home, Maggie becomes part of the social care system, refusing to get too attached to any of her foster families as, after all, 'who wants a 15-year-old child?'

My heart ached for poor Maggie, struggling to negotiate the already tricky teenage school years, without a support network of family and friends. I couldn't see how the story could end happily for either of them, nor how Maggie would cope when she learned the truth about her new love interest, but I don't mind admitting that the sudden twist at the end had me both in tears and with a warm and fuzzy glow. If you've ever wondered what might happen when you die, then this lovely YA novel offers an interesting and credible theory. Maggie and Ryder's story, while potentially doomed from the start, is a thought provoking and warm love story spanning the normal boundaries of the universe. This is the

debut novel from author Josie Williams and I will certainly look out for more work from her in the future. **AH**



### Green Rising

★★★★

Lauren James, Walker, 370pp, 978 1 4063 8467 3, £7.99 pbk

This is a powerful polemic on the pressing subject of climate change. James gives us the stories of Hester, Theo and Gabrielle, all involved in change – personal and political – and all in very different ways.

Gabrielle, protesting with Climate rebellion at a Fuel Summit, gains illegal access to the conference building, smashes a fire alarm and so brings the delegates out into the centre of the protest. To her amazement, after her actions, vines begin to grow on her body and in her hair.

Theo's father is a fisherman, but as fish stocks diminish in polluted seas and his father's boat is destroyed in a collision with an unmarked oil well drilling head belonging to the unscrupulous Dalex company he must try to earn money to support his struggling family. His father almost drowns as the boat sinks but a shocked Theo finds himself involuntarily growing strands of seaweed from his body and saving him.

Hester, moulded by her father to take over the Dalex empire after his retirement, is encouraged by him to exploit her gift for growing plants from her body as a way to secure a contract for the planned biospheres on Mars, to be used when the Earth's resources for supporting life have been exhausted.

When the three are brought together they make a powerful team, reinforced by the other Greenfingers who Hester has been encouraged by her father to recruit. When she finally realises that he has deceived her and that he and his new business partner are interested only in draining Earth dry of its resources by accelerating climate change so that they can sell living units on Mars for people to flee to – if they can afford it – she decides

the time has come to reverse his schemes.

This is a fast-paced story with plenty of twists and turns to satisfy ambitious and committed readers. Interwoven into the story are news bulletins, reports and interactions between the protesters in order to educate readers about the current climate change crisis. There is romance, camaraderie, political and business machinations and a real sense that working together can save this planet we live on and seem hell bent on destroying. James writes imaginatively and utterly convincingly – here we have a story which must be read. **VR**

### Defy the Night

★★★★

Brigid Kemmerer, Bloomsbury, 496pp, 9781526632807, £7.99 pbk

This is the first in a new series from this well-loved author. It is a fantasy set in a world where disease is rampaging among the population, but medicine is in limited supply and the quantities are controlled by the ruling elite. Tessa is an apothecary who tries to help as many people as possible, as she has previously lost both of her parents to the disease. She has a hidden life as an outlaw, working with a shadowy masked person known as Weston; their purpose is to retrieve as much medicine as possible and get it out to the ordinary population who cannot afford the exorbitant prices usually charged by the authorities. However, Weston and Tessa are hiding their own personal secrets and when they are found out, it creates huge new challenges and dangers for them and those around them.

The story is told from two perspectives, the first is Tess herself and the second is Corrick, the king's younger brother, who also holds the post of 'King's Justice', which means he administers the law in any way possible in order to maintain the king's rule and prevent anarchy. We see how a country can be reduced to an autocratic tyranny when the people are threatened and find their lives at risk from circumstances outside their control. This can also lead to the manipulation of the system by the unscrupulous, which in turn leads to a call for revolution. Alongside this part of the story, we have the growing relationship between Tessa and Weston, as they gradually unravel the secrets they are keeping. It is true to say that this story brings lots of surprises and most of the characters have sides that we don't expect; basically, it does not always pay to think you know someone, even if they are close to you. In her notes at the end, the author has acknowledged that the book came out during the current pandemic, but it was initially written prior to these events, so we can see that life often imitates art. Thankfully we have not seen a total breakdown of law and order, but there have been tensions. The intended audience with love this story with its romance, adventure, intrigue and sense of fantasy. **MP**

### The Sister Who Ate Her Brothers

★★★★

Jen Campbell, illus Adam de Souza, Thames and Hudson, 120pp, 978-0500652589, £14.99 pbk

This book contains retellings of traditional fairy tales from many countries including Korea, Japan, China, Ireland, South Africa and India. The book's most striking features are its lavish presentation and full colour illustrations, which might give a reader the impression that it is aimed at a younger and less literate readership. In fact the book fully deserves classification for older readers. It contains instances of cannibalism and of children murdering their parents, as well as of the theft of human organs.

The author tells us that she herself is missing some fingers. Perhaps as a result of her own experience she employs the fairy tale trope of disfigurement. Unusually perhaps the particular physical attributes do not distinguish the sinister or evil characters. One of the author's princesses is hairless. The book also experiments significantly with the gender roles of its characters.

It is easy to imagine this book being employed in secondary classrooms alongside more conventional versions of classic fairy tales. **RB**

### Take Me With You When You Go

★★★★

David Levithan and Jennifer Niven, Penguin, 336pp, 978-0241550809

Bea and Ezra are brother and sister. Their story opens with Ezra sending a secret email to his older sister Bea asking where she has gone. Throughout this epistolary narrative it emerges that both siblings are seeking escape from their abusive mother and stepfather. Their father left the family when Bea was aged three, before the birth of Ezra. The novel does not initially explain what has become of the absent father. To what lengths will the children go to escape mistreatment? Is it possible that they will find a new family and a source of genuine affection? Is it possible for children from such a damaging background to learn to trust others?

The book is marked by a limitation imposed by the authors. The narrative unfolds through the medium of emails exchanged between the siblings. As in real life, the context underlying emails remains unstated. In this instance the reader is often left with questions prompted by a message – questions destined to remain unasked and for the present at least unanswered.

The authors handle difficult themes with considerable skill, themes such as the abuse of defenceless children and the abduction of the young. The overall message of the book however is positive and uplifting. Even in the most adverse and intimidating circumstances these children maintain their aspiration towards a more stable and rewarding existence. They prove to be uncrushable. **RB**



# Valediction: No.2

## Essential reading for the Hols

**Brian Alderson** is bidding a fond farewell to books from his collection, which is being presented to Seven Stories. Here he packs up some essential reading for the hols.

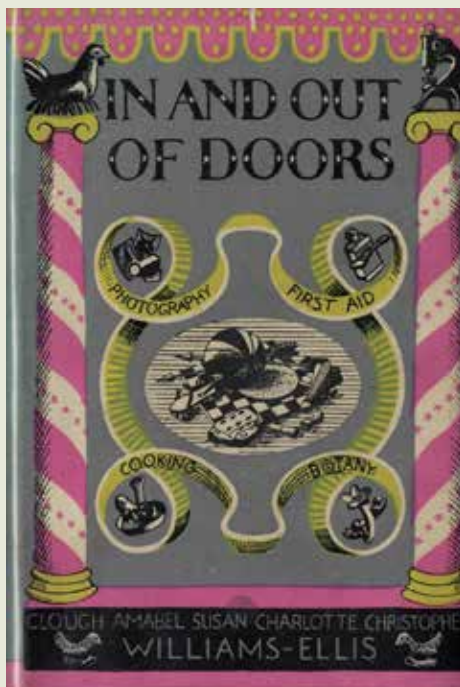
**Mr Tootleoo**, (see **BfK** 250) was not the only Nonesuch book that was issued in an unnumbered edition. A year earlier there had been published the first of what was to be the company's most successful venture **The Week-End Book**. That would eventually run to eight main editions, plus spin-offs, including one from the revived firm in 1955. One effect of its success was to inspire a host of near-imitations, ostensibly catering for those readers who followed the metropolitan fashion of escaping from office-life on a Saturday morning to 'Sussex-by-the-Sea' or other such watering places. The single volume would provide a sufficiency of entertainment – poetry, songs, games, recipes for eating and drinking etc all fitted in the (by our standards) very short week-end break.

It started a fashion which in the case of children's books extended to a more varied and didactic miscellany for those who had no office from which to flee but schools of one sort or another with term – rather than week-endings ('No more Latin, no more French / No more sitting on the old school bench' ran the probably now forgotten chant).

In both title and textual references Gollancz's **Junior Week-End Book** of 1937 makes an instant example. Its 576<sup>1</sup> pages were edited by one J.R. Evans – perhaps Victor's workhorse, Jon Evans – with numerous helpers (Tony and Bob...Kathleen and Jocelyn...etc).

It was a cross between an anthology and something of a variegated Pear's Cyclopaedia with articles first on outdoor and second on indoor 'week-ends'. The dozen or so snippety excerpts from children's fiction that start the book are mere tokens that do not bear repeated reading unlike the poetry, songs and anonymous rhymes that intersperse all sections. These have an unexpected originality with the surprising presence of the MacSpaundays (bar WH Auden) reminding us that Gollancz was the first to publish (disastrously) Louis MacNeice.

Much of the editorial tone is that of a friendly schoolmaster (a Fabian?) which contrasts strikingly with that of a competing miscellany published in the same year by George Routledge, **In and Out of Doors** – 500 pages which with a few exceptions, were the product of the Williams-Ellis family, Clough, the father (1883-1974), being the architect creator of the Italianate village



of Portmeirion in North Wales. He and his wife, Amabel, were contributors but the substance of the text comes from their three children, Susan, Charlotte, and Christopher, two of whom were still at school. Thus, as they say in their blurb, 'it is written by the young for the young' so that the text becomes almost a conversation among contemporaries: 'Our advice [on looking after animals] is not to keep most kinds of wild birds. Again and again we have tried to look after wounded birds or lost fledglings. They have only survived for a few weeks and have always seemed unhappy. By the way, in a family it is wise to come to an understanding about pets...'

The air of learned experience gives character to much of the book which is both handsome and remarkable in its production. Susan is responsible for black and white decorations and drawings of exceptional quality<sup>2</sup> (though she does acknowledge help from Graham Sutherland and Brian Rob [sic] while, most unusually, the back board of its yellow cloth binding has been slit to form a pocket which takes folded sheets for use in two of the games that are described – one has pencil drawings by Clough for colouring.

Contemporary child readers of both books would have found the literary and advisory matter complementary to the extent that the 'week-end' camper or tramper would be justified in lumbering a double weight of

literature in their knapsacks.

For today's reader though both compendia cannot help bringing alive a vanished world. It's not just that you find that feeding yourself economically on your hike should cost about 9½d. a day or buying a reliable new bicycle that need not cost more than £5 but rather that siblings, friends, and family were offered resources for developing an individual lifestyle. Applicable though many of the practical considerations and suggestions still remain, one wonders what advice Mr Evans and the Williams-Ellis family would have to offer readers now blessed with not just a week-end opportunity but an all-day one sitting beside their laptop or iPad.

**Description: In and Out of Doors.** By Susan, Charlotte and Christopher and their Parents, Amabel and Clough Williams-Ellis [within a stage setting] [London] George Routledge and Sons, Ltd 1937. 185x130mm, 492pp. Incl. 15 dec. headpieces and two tailpieces by Susan with many drawings in text by her and others, including Edward Lear's drawings for his story of 'How Four Little Children Went around the World'. Smooth yellow cloth over boards, the back board slit as described; front endpaper col. design for use in a game, rear a col. map of England and Scotland with a description of games etc. Dust jacket richly dec. all round in four colours incorporating two drawings from the text.

1. My well-used copy lacks its title-page but was an updated 1938 edition with Hutton's 364 at the Oval included.

2. She would later become foundress of the famous range of 'Botanic Garden' ceramics.



**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..