Recovery and resilience: Michael Rosen interviewed

plus Books of the Year
Authorgraph interview Nadia Shireen
The BfK Christmas Gift Guide
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 Givelify 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 affect 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 more work for us all to do.

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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. The children themselves are an unfailing source of inspiration for Alex and Steve.


Dr Rebecca Butler writes and lectures on children’s literature.
Coming home: an interview with Michael Rosen


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.’

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 Artic 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
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. 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.
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 Lovlie’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 is perfect for the season and his gorgeous illustrations refer to Christmas but its message of light in the dark, hope and warmth, love and skill by author and illustrator and these little tales are full of magic. Yuval Zommer’s The Lights that Dance in theNight , 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 Tickgle 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 which 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 back 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 Gloriumptious 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 Abîké-íyímídé and *Nen and the Lonely Fisherman*, written by Ian Eagleton and illustrated by James Mayhew.

**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

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**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 blackmailxed 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.

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**Geraldine McCaughrean**

*The Supreme Lie*, written by my wonderful friend and colleague. A story that celebrates strength of spirit under a criminal regime.

**Katya Balen**

*October, October*, a heart-wrenching story that will stay with you long after you’ve finished reading.

**Philip Reeve**

*Utterly Dark and the Face of the Deep*, a thrilling adventure that will keep you on the edge of your seat.

**Catherine Rayner**

*My Pet Goldfish*, a heartwarming story about a girl and her goldfish.
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 enrapuring 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

LGBT+ representations in children's literature continue to grow with slow, but steady, toddler steps. 2021 saw several delightful 'incidental' LGBT+ 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 LGBT+ characters filling out the foreground, a vital positioning given that so much of LGBT+ representation has historically been reduced to inferences and ambiguity. So, 'Hurrah!' for the 2021 picture book LGBT+ 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 children, 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, Michael, who he will be representing the school in China and that he can be an ‘Expert Reporter’ on life in China for his class-mates. His teacher reframes his situation, suggesting that he will miss playing in the forthcoming football match because he 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 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 Zanib 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 Achampong’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
- **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
- **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.
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.’

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.
Ace of Spades
Faridah Abíké-Íyímídé, Usborne, 978-1474067532, £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
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 special 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. Bilellyn, 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! Aimée, 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. Sadey, Year 10

Dog Man: Mothering Heights
Dav Pilkey, Scholastic, 978-0702315149, £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
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
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.
Brian Alderson is founder of the Children’s Books History Society and a former Children’s Books Editor for The Times. Gwyneth 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 Ferelith Hordon is a former children’s librarian and editor of Books for Keeps Anne Horemans is a secondary school librarian. Carey Fulkner Hunt is a writer and children’s book consultant. Matthew Martin is a primary school teacher. Sue McConigle is a Lecturer in Primary Education and Co-Creator of www.lovemybooks.co.uk Neil Philip is a writer and folklorist. Margaret Pemberton is a school library consultant and blogs at margaretpemberton@blogs.org. Vol Rondall 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 Schlienter is the compiler of www.healthyybooks.org.uk Lucy Staines is a primary school teacher. Matt Tobin teaches English and Children’s Literature in Primary ITE at Oxford Brooks 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.

Little Santa

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

How did Santa meet his reindeer? Has he always had a magic sleigh?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 shimming 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-rider 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 the 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 round pre-schooler in a snowsuit than an elderly, weathered gentelman, 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 87514 4 84 6, £6.99 pbk

A 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 where the lost scooter was, ‘but where the last cookie 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 calmly... 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 finds the scooter, Kim 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 Glori’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,
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, £4.99

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 the 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 a whale, 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 smallest, messiest, scarriest place in the WHOLE WORLD, ‘Keep out!’ tackled over the doorway, Charlie creeps up to the monster and she screams, ‘Breakfast time!’ ‘AAAAAAAAARRRGGHHH’ 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 sand to the top 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


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 ‘Charlie’ 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, that says honeycomb is beautiful, but maybe it’s just tasty, and the mouse’s mushroom might better be described as ‘tasty’. 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 visual appeal. The book takes readers across the pages, creating hiding places for creatures of all kinds and framing the text in unusual and visually appealing ways. There’s this book 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. While 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 185 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

The Sofia Tree

Alberto Benevelli. Illustrated by Nicoletta Bertelle; Ragged Bears, 32pp, 9781885714488 £9.99 hbk

Sofia is looking forward to Christmas – and above all to decorating her tree which will be tall and beautiful with candies 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 candies.

It is always a pleasure to have a new addition to the stock of Christmas books, especially one with a charming voice to add to the catalogue. ‘The Sofia Tree’ comes from Italy – sadly no translator is credited – but both illustrations and text place the story in a contemporary setting that is accessible to readers of all ages. The inclusion of the living traditions in the world of folk tradition – the world of the Presepio where woodcutters work the forest and candies are used. The soft textured artwork enhances the warm, gentle tone of the narrative. Sofia is 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 by and visit with them and 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 flimsy creature comments most unfavourably to a cloud about...
A Song in the Mist


Chi is an attentive panda, shy but never feeling alone, for her silence means that her ears are constantly tuned to the sounds of the bamboo 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 sits in the tree tops tracking the boy through the forest till the mist causes him to trip and drop his flute. ‘Grandpa, help! I’m lost!’ cries 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. Music that one almost feels and hears drifting on the breeze through the stunningly beautiful scenes conjured up in Corinne Averiss’ poetic telling and Fiona Woodcock’s almost magical soft-focus illustrations of the story’s setting. J.B

The Most Important Animal of All

Penny Worms, ill. Hannah Bailey, Mama Makes Books, 40pp 978 1 8581 3814 4, £12.99

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 trees including their contribution to our food, shelter and the air we breathe.

The book includes some beautifully detailed watercolour illustrations and a rich evocation of the woodland setting; a real celebration of autumn colour and light.

A Giant Conker

Emma Bawserthick, ill. Anna Watson, Walker Books, 32pp. 978 1 78607 896 4, £5.99, phk

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 and part of the Playdate Adventure Club series, begins when the friends meet in the wonderland 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 fruit that contains 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 detailed illustrations and a rich evocation of the woodland setting; a real celebration of autumn colour and light.
NEW TITLES from Ragged Bears

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.
9781857144888  4+ years  HB £9.99

Grandpa Forgets explores the life of a grandparent living with dementia from a young child’s perspective. It is a story of love and hope that gently highlights what’s really important in this unique relationship.
9781857144871  3+ years  PB £6.99

A book that focuses on practical suggestions on how to avoid things made of plastic in daily life. It is packed with useful information, helpful tips and super-fun illustrations!
9781857144871  6+ years  PB £6.99

Stanley is a typical dragon and he causes all sorts of mayhem and distress wherever he goes, until a new friendship helps him resolve to change his ways …
9781857144864  3+ years  PB £6.99

Plastic? And how to avoid it!

“The firm intention to achieve a purpose. This is Hatha.” Dr James Mallinson is one of the western world’s leading experts on Hatha Yoga and Piero Macola has captured the spirit of his fascinating experience in this stunning graphic novel for teenagers and young adults.
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ragged-bears.com
A World Full of Wildlife


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’ve got news for you! 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 Irish coast, the 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, Pavilion, 32pp, 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 15th. 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 depth and resonance 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

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You Can!


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 collective 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 Nook’s presence 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 difference is a major theme subtly portrayed. Outstanding. ES

Grimwood

Nadia Shireen, Simon and Schuster, 205pp, 9784711995901, £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 unexpected 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 amongst all the silliness. Arriving in Grimwood, Ted and...
8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

Nancy have to adapt to a new way of life - one where it is perfectly normal for hordes of warning squirrels to swing through the skies screaming, ‘Treebonk’ as they walloped into tree trunks. Under the stewardship of the kindly mayor (Titus, the cardigan-wearing deer), the town 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 woodhouse) helps to keep the story moving 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 pages away from a quaff of stupidly joke or slapstick gag. Children will love it.

The Great Food Bank Heist

Onjali Q. Rauf, ill. Elisa Paganelli, Barrington Stoke, 104pp, 9781711926025, £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 comes 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 combine in this short book, but it never feels preachy and always manages to show not telling, the child’s viewpoint food hardship.

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.

The Bear who Sailed the Ocean on an Iceberg

Emily Critchley, Everything with Words, 288pp, 978-1911127216, £7.99 pbk

Patrick Jolly is having a difficult time. His mother is severely depressed and Patrick is away in Scotland on a project and Patrick suspects he took the job to escape his home. This 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 issues 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 you with hope as to who might be behind the issues the 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 Clachan Clark, Walker Books, 224pp, 9781006560976, £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 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.

The Story of Afro Hair

K.N. Chimbi, ill. Joelle Avellino, Scholastic, 120pp, 978 0 72307 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 mummified statues how the wealthy styled 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 the pressure to 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 style emerged and a rise in the natural hair movement.

We learn about the influence of icons of popular culture such as Josephine Baker and 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: Agathe 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, ill. Jim Field, Little Brown, 320pp, 978 1 444 90491 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 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 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 comes 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 characters, and wonderful illustrations 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 phk

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 counting. That’s Brandon, says County 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 Miss Hex, 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 Hex 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 Hex 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 Hex 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 Hex 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 around 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 live reader to share it with – in this instance, I’d guess, to enjoy what they make of the anarcho-wit, skill and comic invention. GF

Lion Above the Door

Onjali Q Raúf, Orion, 366pp, 978 1 78295 879 9, £7.99

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 wonder if there is a story behind that. They recount their own experiences to each other and discover lives of their own and, with Leo’s help, they decide to do something about them._bh

Leo’s idea on forgotten heroes is chosen alongside family histories but the friends soon discover that there is a lot more information. They travel to the colonies from the former colonies or the wider world and begin to discover for themselves the impact of historical racism and what this means as they do not find anyone who 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 marred by an unpleasant racist incident. With help from their families the display is repaired and the assembly a triumph as Leo and Sangeeta begin to discover 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.

Onjali Q Raúf, Orion, 366pp, 978 1 78295 879 9, £7.99

Once Upon a Tune – Stories from the Orchestra

James Mayhew, Otter-Barry Books, 90pp, 978 1 91307 405 6, £16.99, hbk

This is a simply stunning book created 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, Rimsy Korsakov, Dukas, Pushkin and Rossini. The introduction sets the scene for the reader 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 writes the better suitors into 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 skilfully unfolded 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, precious jewels, precious objects and priceless paintings. Mayhew is a highly accomplished artist and he has created fabulous multilayered illustrations depicting the stories worlds which include pages, competition, fabric, lace and music manuscript are collaged to create texture, pattern and depth. The book design is lovely with each illustration representing each of the stories and there is a beautiful compilation of images from each story on the cover. There are also wonderful spreads providing 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 pore 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.

In our contribution 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 OBE. Also onboard was a young passenger, 18-year-old Bernice Palmer, who recorded the Titanic survivors on the iceberg which is likely to have served as a lifeline to her new 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.
Sisters of the Lost Marsh

Lucy Strange, Chicken House, 272pp, 9781915322275, £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 decides to run away. Her younger sister, set off on the brave horse Flint to find Grace. Their journey takes them through the dreamscape of Romney Marsh. This is an isolated setting of marsh mazes, 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 drawn into the bones of us.’ A haunting, magical read, highly recommended. **SR**

Blossom

Laura Dockrill, ill. Sarah Ogilvie, Barrington Stoke, 96pp, 9781910009023 £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 determined to complete a gardening 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 dysexia-friendly layout and font, with inspired illustrations from Sarah Ogilvie, makes it accessible for post readers. Although not a long tale, Blossom’s story leaves this reader with a warm glow and a smile on my face. **AH**

Locked Out Lily

Nick Lake, illustrated by Emily Gravett, Simon & Schuster, 240pp, 9781471194853-2, £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 possible 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 violently – as she does.

This is 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 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-instant and finally unconvincing sense of optimism. Catherine Storr’s epic story Marianne Dreams also personifies childhood illness and recovery into a single title. This present novel stands good comparison with her story before stumbling at the last fence after a hitherto excellent run. **NT**

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 Changeling, left in her place. Is this what Yanni 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 glamours – but without there are touches that ensure it also belongs to the contemporary world. As readers, by the end of the 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 never-ending 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 tomstones 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**
The Beatryce Prophecy

Kate DiCamillo, illus Sophie Blackall, Walker, 252pp, 9781529008899, £10.99 hbk
With writer and illustrator both double major winners of the Newbery medal, 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, almost transport 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 danger as she sets out on 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 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 credibility by being so innocent and perfect. The goat is earthen, smelly and in a state of permanent aggression, but she is given a very easy ride by those she torments, as aggression, but she is given a very high and in a state of permanent perfect. The goat is earthier, smelling credulity by being so innocently those not immediately carried away.

Maggie, the tale’s narrator, has always felt that she takes second place in her father’s thoughts and feelings, submerged as they are by his obsessive desire to find the creature, first encountered years before. When her father sets off on a 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, befriended by Maggie and her heroic pet mouse Vidico.

The epic adventure that ensues sees Maggie and Kata race across the North American continent in blowing freedom, encountering flamboyant circus, Native American peoples, and the Underground Railroad. Characters from such iconic American novels as Mark Twain’s Last of the Mohicans and Uncle Tom’s Cabin appear throughout the narrative in an exhilarating mash up. Readers are invited to join the 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 fast-moving gothic adventure that will enthral readers 9+.

Tabitha Plimstock and the Edge of the World

Erika McGann, illus Philip Cullen, O’Brien, 288pp, 9781788492492, £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 Plimstocks are perhaps the most reasonable family that you are ever likely to come across, even Roald Dahl would shudder at some of their behaviour. Tabitha is treated as little more than a pet; every day she has to collect all of their food, do the cooking and cleaning and generally clean up after her grandparents 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 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 a more opportune lesson to be learnt. The author is Irish and has won a number of awards, but she definitely deserves a more

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 would 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 Guadalupe, AH
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 live 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 unsetting, original and absorbing reading.

Read our Q&A interview with Philip Womack

When Fishes Flew: The Story of Elena’s War

Michael Morpurgo, HarperCollins, 214 pp, 978 0 00 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 Elie) 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 Elie is nowhere to be found. The flying fish, the god Proteus in another form, has had a role already in encouraging Nandi to look after 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 underlined 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 ‘This is dedicated 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 simultaneous emotions and experiences of teenage years. Feeling unsure of your identity, even considering yourself an impostor in Cypriot Pigeon. 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 things of 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.’ The image of a butterfly, mentioned again in the poem, 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 sonnet, from the rhythm. They are full of delight and pleasure in words and language more generally (one poem is entitled Punctuation and its correction). 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.

The Little Bee Charmer of Henrietta Street


The Kane family having lost their home and mother, have to move from a house in a leafy suburb of Dublin in 1911 to a tenement flat in the Henrietta Street area 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 and there is a strong sense of family 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 operated on their father’s 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, lack of basic food, and families 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 irresistible 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.

| 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 not enough 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 interfused with the stories. Many are designs that might be seen in a kaleidoscope. Others are evocations of the stories that follow. In the tales themselves, characters and places recur but are changed...
When two private jets, each carrying one of these executives, came down by 40,000 feet over the Pacific, the formula plummeted Oceanwards with them. Catastrophe. Production stops. The world gasps in an avalanche of thirst. Demand rockets through the stratosphere. Crates of the last available bottles are going at auction for millions each.

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 squallid house on a squallid 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 everyone in the Funks. Queenie is soon on the run, pursued by Mac-TonicTM’s Corporate Suits brandishing megabucks, 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 for Queenie and Scott; are they captive by the bad guys aboard a small boat, themselves under attack from three black Mac-TonicTM helicopters. The bad guys capture the 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 manufacturing agent surges up from the depths and swiftly swallows his man.

Mitch Johnson shows his hand in his Afterword. He begins 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 and intricate, this is a call to arms. Whatever their ages, readers’ responses will depend on their mental agility and readiness to be shaped. No one may be a rightful recipient. However, the Sorters make it their purpose to try and retrieve ‘Sorter’ and this group of creatures 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 resists but uneasily realises that this is the only way he can prove his allegiance to the humans. He wins the contest and understands 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 humans.

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 with the sacred forest of the Healer, the Gaileach, whose connections to Nature and healing are an antidote to war. The Funks 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 to modify the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel; their latest draft includes the every night. His admen are planning work. VR

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
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 not easy to ascertain which boy is the narrator. 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 impersonal school? The setting 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.

empire & aniya

Candice Carty-Williams, Knights Of, 144pp, 9781913511100-0 £7.99 pbk

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Ghost Boys

Jewell Parker Rhodes, ill. Serena Malyon, Orion, 256pp., 978-1-510-10985-8, £7.99 pbk

A young girl in the USA has been selected to go on a summer 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 who had abandoned them, and her. disadvantages, and for many, death. 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 case?

The power of this novel is that it is a first-person narrative which begins in medias res. The narrative moves at breakneck speed 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.
The Forevers

Chris Whitaker, Hot Key Books, 352pp, 978-1-4714-0961-5, £12.99 bkb

Ever since Mae was seven years old, she’s had her twin asteroi (a.k.a. ‘Selena’ or ‘8050FX11’) 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 to take her love for her younger sister, blind from that premature birth. Stella is articulate, funny and perceptive to an extraordinary degree.

Countdown dwells on 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, the constellations 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 stages, we meet no 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-crow; her boyfriend is a sportman, much fancied by many of the girls; another girl practices the piano for her Duke of Edinburgh’s award-craving crime writer for adults. Mae is well-placed to solve some of those mysteries since her disregard for convention allows her to enter other people’s lives after dark, sometimes taking valuable she decides the owners no longer need, pawn 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 another child 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 Abi is urgently desired. Mae could be the only one to realise that what might have been can surely never be.

Poison for Breakfast


‘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 better than most. ‘Upon the table in front of them, 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 baffled and his account rambles around his childhood, libraries, books he has read (references at the end), swimming, philosophies and death and funerals. It’s not a biopsy, but musings and thoughts, which frequently go off on tangential routes. Fans who have grown up with his novels would have the opportunity to explore his mind, but anyone expecting a murder mystery will be disappointed. Nevertheless, the solution is rather unsatisfactory.

Kissing Emma

Shappi Khorsandi, Orion, 320pp., 978-1-51010099-4, £7.99 pbk.

At the age of eight Emma frequently witnesses domestic violence, seeing her stepfather 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 are now in a new place for her and her mother to begin again. The grandmother is a quiet boy is modest and kind to the others. They neither respect nor listen to their grandmother. The aunt’s two daughters, all crowded into a cramped flat. Emma and her mother are now in a new place for her and her mother to begin again. The grandmother is a character. The interplay between Mae, Felix and Abi is urgently desired. Mae could be the only one to realise that what might have been can surely never be.

Gilded

Marissa Meyer, Faber, 502pp., 978-0-571-27587-1, £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.

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Her tongue gets the better of her when she encounters the feared Eriking 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 golden spinner, completes the task for her and slowly they begin to fall in love. Fearing another kidnapping on the next Hunger Moon hunt neither can she evade the law that will keep readers wanting to know what happens next. Sylvia Bishop also wrote Erica’s Elephant, and The Books of Gold. It was 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

HHHH
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 cleveritude offers to counteract the evils of the Erlking.

Gilded is a rich, long book, full of twists and turns, brutality, loss and unpredictable existence. This is 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 as a balance of power. There is to be a sequel and the end of Gilded sees Gild, Serilda and their unborn child.

Defy the Night

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

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

Gabriele, 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 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 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 scheme.

This is a fast-paced story with plenty of twists and turns to satisfy ambitious and committed readers. Intervened into this story are numerous reports and interactions between the protesters in order to educate readers about the current climate change crisis, the way nature, agriculture and the political and business machinations and a real sense that working together can save this planet we live on and solves problems.

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The Sister Who Ate Her Brothers

Jen Campell, illus Adam de Souza, Thames and Hudson, 120pp, 978-0506052589, £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 is 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 hero善 from 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.

Take Me With You When You Go

David Levithan and Jennifer Niven, Penguin, 336pp, 978-0241550869

Bea and Ezra are brother and sister. Their story opens with Ezra sending a note to his older sister Bea asking where she has gone. Throughout this epistolary narrative it emerges that both siblings are seeking escape from their unhappy home life. 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 somewhat hidden from the young reader so that 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 by their parents. However, 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.
Of Portmeirion in North Wales. He and his wife, Amabel, were contributors but the substance of the text comes from 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 (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 trumper 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 55 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 Oval included.

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 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 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 architec creator of the Italianate village of

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### 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.

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.**