

BOOKS FOR KEEPS



No.252

January 2022

the children's book magazine online

Authorgraph interview
Roger Mello

**The children's books
to read in 2022**



plus
**Beyond the
Secret Garden
and
Anne Fine
interviewed**



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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **João by a Thread** by **Roger Mello**, translated by Daniel Hahn.

Thanks to **Elsewhere Editions** for their help with our January cover.



Editorial 252

out with the old, in with the new



Hello and welcome to the first issue of **Books for Keeps** in 2022. At times we didn't think we'd reach this milestone – our 42nd year – so thank you again to everyone who contributed to our fundraising in 2021 and helped us create our new website.

We're not in any position to relax yet however, but then tension and uncertainty remain the prevailing emotion nationally. Indeed, only this week, Oxford University Press revealed that *anxiety* is the Children's Word of the Year 2021. Over 8,000 children from across 85 schools in the UK, spanning Year 3 to Year 9, were surveyed and asked to choose the top words they would use when talking about health and wellbeing and almost a quarter of all surveyed plumped for *anxiety* (21%) as their number one word, closely followed by *challenging* (19%) and *isolate* (14%). It's not all doom and gloom however, *wellbeing* (13%) and *resilience* (12%) closely followed as their top words.

When teachers from the 85 schools were asked the same question, perhaps unsurprisingly *resilience* came in as their number one choice (31%) 'reflecting the importance of providing their pupils with positive direction in the face of difficult times' according to the creators of the report *Challenging* was the teachers' second choice (19%).

What do you think of our new website?

Launched in July 2021, our new website is bedded in and we'd very much like to know what you think of it. Please take a few minutes to [complete this short survey](#) and if there's extra information you'd like to share, please email us enquiries@booksforkeeps.co.uk.

If you're a teacher and would like to contribute to our Good Reads feature, we'd love to hear from you too – use the same email address, enquiries@booksforkeeps.co.uk.

And finally, if you appreciate what we do, please make a contribution via [PayPal](#)

Happy reading, 2022!

With everyone in need of a boost it's no wonder that joy will be a dominant theme for books in 2022, at least according to agents questioned by **The Bookseller**. As has become a tradition in our first issue of the new year, we asked publishers to tell us about the books they are most excited to be publishing, and a quick 'control find' reveals that the word joy appears nine times, which would bear this out.

This time last year, we drew up a list of our reasons to be cheerful and highlighted the growth in the number of independent bookshops. That number continued to grow throughout 2021, and there are now 1,027 in the UK, while the profit-sharing platform [Bookshop.org](#) meanwhile, is about to reach £2m of profit generated for indies. It's cheering too that book sales continued to climb last year, with more than 212m print books sold in 2021 – the highest figure of the last decade. With the help of our team of reviewers, we will continue to read and appraise as many of those published for children as we can (over 400 in 2021) and to introduce our readers to new authors, illustrators and publishers and aim to continue for as long as you want us to.



Books for Keeps

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A half-story from the archives

Readers of Judith Kerr's **When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit** series will be familiar with Heimpi, the Kerr family's much-loved Housekeeper. A fascinating letter discovered in Judith Kerr's papers reveals more about Alice Heimpl, as **Sarah Lawrance**, former Collection and Exhibitions Director at Seven Stories, explains.

Included with the boxes and papers transferred to **Seven Stories** after Judith Kerr's death in May 2019 was a worn, green leatherette writing case, with her initials printed in gold on the front. Inside it were nearly a hundred letters, cards and other documents, dating mostly from the late 1940s. Among these were two letters from Alice Heimpl – or Heimpi as she is known to readers of **When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit**. As Nanny/Cook/Housekeeper to the Kerr family in Berlin, it is Heimpi who greets Anna and Max when they come home from school, bakes cakes and cooks meals, mends their socks, and plays games before bedtime.

When the family leave home in a hurry to escape the Nazis, Heimpi stays behind to help pack up the house and – at least to begin with – there is some hope that she will be able to join them in Switzerland, bringing the famous Pink Rabbit with her. However, within a few weeks it becomes clear that the family will never again be able to afford a housekeeper, and so Heimpi never comes. Instead, Anna's mother – a pianist and composer until they left Germany – struggles to master the arts of cooking and sewing, never very happily or with much success, and this sense of domestic unease becomes a recurring theme through the rest of the book.

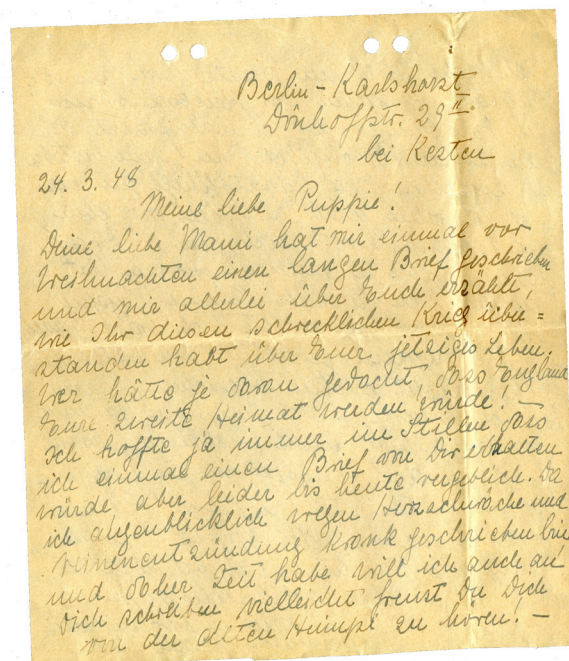
In the third of Judith's semi-autobiographical novels, **A Small Person Far Away**, Anna – now grown-up – returns to Berlin to see her mother, now working as an interpreter – who is seriously ill in hospital after taking an overdose. As Anna struggles with the emotions of the situation she recalls Heimpi, and wonders what happened to her. The question goes unanswered and Heimpi – so far as the novels are concerned – remains a lost figure from a distant past.

So it was a surprise to find that the real Alice Heimpl had stayed in touch with the Kerr family. The first of the two letters, dated 3 September 1947, is addressed to Judith's parents. It appears to be the first contact that they have had since the end of the war but Alice refers to a visit she made to London in 1939, to see her sisters in Beckenham, during which she had spent a happy day with '*meine geliebte Puppie*' as she calls Judith, using her childhood nickname.

Alice's life in 1947 is very different from the happy days in which she worked for the Kerrs. She describes herself as one of the '*übrig-geblieben*' ('left behind'). Having survived the horrors of the war she nevertheless wonders whether it would be better to be lying in peace under the wreckage. She is living in the Russian sector of Berlin ('Kleine Moskau') and doing hard labour as a '*Trümmerfrau*' – a rubble woman – and as a coal worker through the winter. Despite the fact that as a *Trümmerfrau* she would have received a slightly increased ration she has become very thin: '*Hinten nichts und vorne nichts, im Magen auch nicht viel, also rein nichts mehr in der Blouse mehr drin!*' ('Nothing at the back and nothing in front, not much in the stomach either, and nothing more in the blouse either!'). The diet ('*Hungerkur*') that she used to go on when she worked for the Kerrs is nothing by comparison!

The second letter, dated 24 March 1948, is addressed to Judith herself. In the meantime, Alice had received a long letter from Judith's mother, with news of how the family survived the war and what they have been doing since. She is ill and unable to work, so has time to spare and hopes that Judith will be happy to hear from 'old Heimpi'. Judith must have grown up so much since Alice last saw her that she wonders if she can still address her with the familiar pronoun '*Du*'. Has she managed to visit her sisters in Beckenham? Perhaps she has lost their address? Did Michael receive the birthday card she sent? She writes about the terrible suffering of the refugees from the East who have lost absolutely everything and the black market without which nobody could survive because the rations are so bad. She will return to work 'in the construction industry' on 1 April: without the rubble women Berlin will never be rebuilt.

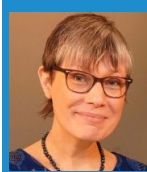
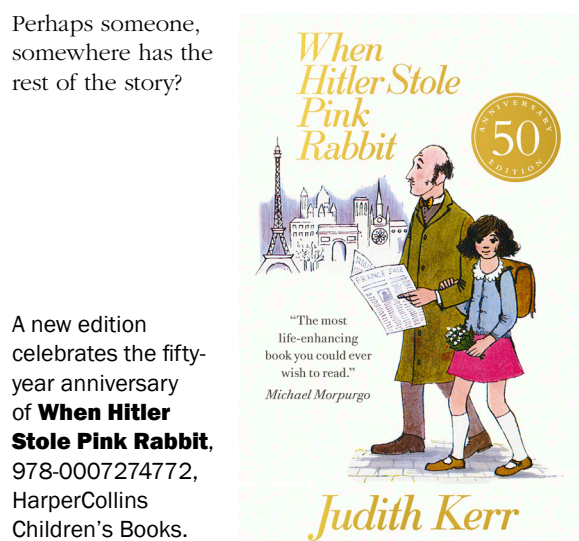
After this, there are no more letters and no hint of whether there was any further contact between Judith and Alice – or what happened to her in the end. According to Judith's son Matthew Kneale, his mother always spoke of Heimpi with enormous affection; the decision to leave her London visit out of the novels



Letter from Alice Heimpl to Judith Kerr, dated 24 March 1948. Copyright estate of Alice Heimpl (presumed). Photo courtesy of Seven Stories the National Centre for Children's Books

was probably for narrative reasons – leaving her behind in Berlin amplified the sense of acute loss. In the books Heimpi is given her real name – unlike the other main characters – which again suggests that Judith wanted to underline the significance of her part in the family's life; and the fact that Judith kept the letters safe for all these years is a testament to her value.

Perhaps someone, somewhere has the rest of the story?



Sarah Lawrance was formerly the Collection and Exhibitions Director at **Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books** and is now a freelance curator.

The Must-Reads of 2022

The books of the year, chosen by their editors

Which are the children's books we'll all be talking about in 2022? We asked leading editors to tell us about the book (one only) they are most excited to be publishing in the year ahead.

Dadaji's Paintbrush by Rashmi Sirdeshpande, illustrated by Ruchi Mhasane, is a deceptively simple story about the relationship between a boy and his grandfather, their life in a small village in India and their shared love of art. They only have each other, so when the grandfather dies, it takes his grandson a while to understand that the people you love will always be with you. More than this, the book explores how art allows us the freedom to play, express ourselves and create. It's a deeply personal book to the author and illustrator, and very personal to me too. **Sue Buswell, Editorial Director Picture Books, Andersen Press**

I'm really excited to be publishing **While the Storm Rages** – the perfect follow-up to Phil Earle's phenomenally successful **When the Sky Falls**. Again inspired by real events in World War II, this is a book about the mass culling of pets advised by the British government in 1939. As a result 750,000 pets were killed in just one week. Earle tells the story of a boy who refuses to let that happen to his beloved dog and sets off on a mission to save her and many others. Expect page-turning adventure, unforgettable characters and a few tears to be shed! **Charlie Sheppard, Publishing Director Fiction, Andersen Press**

One of the books I'm really looking forward to this year is **Crookhaven**, coming in July from exciting new children's author J. J. Arcaño. **Crookhaven** is about Gabriel, a young pickpocket who is recruited to a secret school for thieves in rural South-West England – but it's a school for thieves who are committed to using their talents for good rather than bad. With loads of high stakes thievery and classes like criministics and forgery, the book is filled with fun, while also exploring the theme of what it really means to do good. **Lena McCauley, Senior Commissioning Editor, Hachette Children's Books**

From Kat Patrick, creator of the **Doodle Cat** series, and illustrated by rising star Hayley Wells, **The Spectacular Suit** tells the story of a young girl Frankie, who doesn't want to wear a dress to her birthday. Instead she dreams of wearing an amazing suit covered in stars and lightning bolts. Bursting with bold, vivid illustrations, this is a buoyant and heart-warming celebration of individuality and identity, that reminds us that clothes have no gender, and invites children to wear what makes them feel joy. There's nothing else quite like this book out there at the moment, and we're incredibly proud to be publishing it. **Aoife Datta, Scribe UK**

In our fast-paced world, it is a rare thing to have an author who only graces us with one of their masterpieces once a decade. S F Said is just such an author, his hugely bestselling **Varjak Paw** remains a firm favourite, and **Tyger** (October 2022) is about to light up a whole new generation of readers. A young boy and girl, a huge mystical beast, a strange and backwards London, powerful magic, adventure – it's got just about everything one could want from a book and to top it off, the insanely talented Dave McKean is illustrating the pages. **Rosie Fickling, Commissioning Editor, David Fickling Books**

I'm excited to see **Xtinct!: T-Rex Terror** by Ash Stone publish this year. This new 7+ adventure series is packed full of page-turning action and exciting extinct animals. When a freak accident at his mum's fossil lab brings a deadly T-Rex to life in a forest full of dangerous hunters, it's up to Jeevan Singh – and his new neanderthal friend and pet dodo – to save the dinosaur. Beyond the non-stop

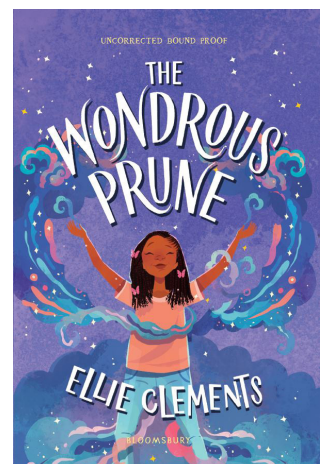
action, the pacy plot and the humour, there's also a powerful and timely message around conservation which will resound with young readers. **Gurnaik Johal, Assistant Editor, Orchard Books**

Harry Potter thinks he is an ordinary boy – until he is rescued by a beetle-eyed giant, enrolls at Hogwarts, learns to play Quidditch and does battle in a deadly duel. The reason ... Harry is a wizard! J.K. Rowling's spellbinding tale of the **Boy Who Lived** has inspired countless children to discover the magic of reading ever since it was first published 25 years ago. During a year of fun and celebrations, June will see the release of a gorgeous commemorative edition of **Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone** featuring Thomas Taylor's much-loved original cover illustration and exclusive bonus content. **Mandy Archer, Editorial Director, Bloomsbury Children's Books**

As Long as The Lemon Trees Grow is a breath-taking story of love and loss set amid the Syrian revolution, from stellar new talent Zoufka Katouh. Zoufka's motivation for writing will tell you why we are so excited to be publishing it: 'It is my love letter to Syria, Syrians and hijabi girls who rule their own lives. It's also a written testimony to a bewildered world on what is actually happening there. I wanted to give a voice to the voiceless, to talk about our love for our country and how no one wants to be a refugee.' **Hannah Sandford, Senior Commissioning Editor, Bloomsbury Children's Books**

I am hugely excited about **The Wondrous Prune**, a commercial magical adventure for 9+, with a main character that all readers will fall in love with and feel empowered by. Prune is a seemingly ordinary girl who has just moved to a new town with her single mum and older brother. But her life changes forever when she discovers she has a unique and remarkable magical power. It's the first of a series about extraordinary children and is poignant, surprising and filled with wish fulfilment. It's perfect for fans of **Amari and The Night Brothers** and Sharna Jackson. **Zoe Griffiths, Editorial Director, Bloomsbury Children's Books**

Rosie Raja: Churchill's Spy (July) is set during the Second World War. When Rosie's mother's passes away, she moves from her home in India to England with her father. She discovers that he is actually a spy for the British government and can't bear to be left behind so she stows away in his plane. In occupied France, Rosie is drawn into the struggle against the Nazis. This exciting spy thriller by Sufiya



Ahmed has an engaging, instantly likeable heroine and is perfect for fans of Michael Morpurgo and Emma Carroll. **Hannah Rolls, Commissioning Editor, Bloomsbury Children's Books**

From bestselling author Katherine Rundell comes **The Zebra's Great Escape**, a timeless picture book about a girl called Mink and a zebra called Gabriel, as they set out to rescue a whole menagerie of animals from an evil collector. Written with generous helpings of warmth and humour, this unmissable story of friendship and courage is packed with glorious, funny, irresistible illustrations by the award-winning Sara Ogilvie, illustrator of **The Detective Dog**. **Ellen Holgate, Commissioning Editor, Bloomsbury Children's Books**

In this important new book, **Brilliant Black British History**, author and storyteller Atinuke takes us on an illuminating journey that celebrates the history of Black people in Britain, from the very first inhabitants on these islands to the present day. A fascinating chronological narrative, this captivating book also shines a light on figures from the past whose stories are inspiring and often surprising. Nigerian artist, Kingsley Nebechi, brings the story vividly to life, with illustrations that are detailed, rich and strikingly contemporary. **Lara Hancock, Head of Illustrated Publishing, Bloomsbury Children's Books**

The book that I am most excited about publishing in 2022 is **Big Ideas from History**. A sequel to **Big Ideas for Curious Minds**, it is an alternative romp through history, illustrated by the wonderful Anna Doherty. The book encourages children to think about how and why they experience the world as they do, within the context of our history and evolution. It also looks to the future and importantly asks them to imagine a world that they would like to live in. An extremely useful tool for engaging with children on history, their thoughts and feelings. **Phoebe Adler, Associate Publisher, The School of Life**

Translated from the French by Alyson Waters, **Our Fort** by Marie Dorléans is the perfect book to welcome in spring! **Our Fort** (May 2022) is about three friends on an outing to their secret fort when a big storm takes them by surprise. From sweeping green vistas to dark-blue rain-pelting skies, Dorléans' verdant and luminous illustrations capture the drama of the elements and the joy of friendship. Her previous book **The Night Walk** made this year's **New York Times/New York Public Library** best illustrated book list, and I can easily imagine **Our Fort** making it next year. **Susan Barba, New York Review Books**

I'm so excited that Campbell is publishing its 50th **Busy Book** this year, the celebratory **Busy Party**. Forming part of a wider series relaunch with a brand-new look, it retains all the hallmarks of a classic **Busy Book** with appealing scenes to explore, a delightful rhyme to share, and fun push, pull and slide mechanisms to help develop toddler motor skills. With its special-edition shimmery gold foil cover, this book has become my new instant favourite and I'm hoping that little ones will find it as irresistible as I do. **Deborah Kespert, Editorial Director, Campbell Books**

Author-illustrator Dapo Adeola has swiftly become known as a change-maker within the world of children's books, and we at Two Hoots are so excited to be publishing the new anthology that he has curated, **Joyful, Joyful: Stories Celebrating Black Voices**. This ambitious collection showcases 40 of the most talented Black writers and artists from across the world, including bestsellers like Malorie Blackman and rising stars like Denzell Dankwah, with new stories, poems, essays and even recipes, alongside a rich array of colour illustrations. **Helen Weir, Senior Editor, Two Hoots**

In June, we are publishing the eighth title in the **Tales from Acorn Wood** series, **Badger's Band**. Axel Scheffler's illustrations bring alive the humorous characters who join Badger's musical ensemble: Pig with his personalised drum kit, Sheep, the harpist, and Bear the concert pianist amongst others. Julia Donaldson's rhyming text is a joy to read and this book is brimming with fun for pre-schoolers who will enjoy lifting the flaps to discover the musical instruments underneath. We have been delighted by the reception to 2021 bestsellers **Cat's**

Cookbook and **Squirrel's Snowman** and hope that **Badger's Band** will be as beloved. **Nicole Pearson, Publishing Director, Brands and Media, Macmillan Children's Books**

I'm thrilled to be publishing **The Macmillan Collection of Myths and Legends**, our second book based on material from the Macmillan archive, following our **Fairy Tales** collection. This time we've gathered tales from familiar mythologies such as Norse and Greek, and also from other cultures around the world, including North and South America, Africa, Asia and Oceania. With a foreword by Michael Morpurgo, and illustrations throughout by artists such as Walter Crane and Arthur Rackham, plus additional images by Peter Bailey, this book is a wonderful way to introduce these fabulous and timeless stories to a new generation of readers. **Penny Morris, Associate Publisher, Macmillan Children's Books**

I am so excited for children to discover **Where Has All the Cake Gone?**, written and illustrated by brilliant newcomers Andrew Sanders and Aysha Awwad. It's the story of a missing cake, a hoard of hungry penguins and a crumb-covered little boy who swears he's telling the truth: he did NOT eat the cake! Surely his tall tale can't be true ... Can it? It's an action-packed, fabulously funny book that's full of witty moments, with a wonderfully warm relationship between a boy and his dad at its heart. A story to delight young readers, it will have them laughing from start to finish. **Hannah Ray, Publishing Director, Macmillan Children's Books**

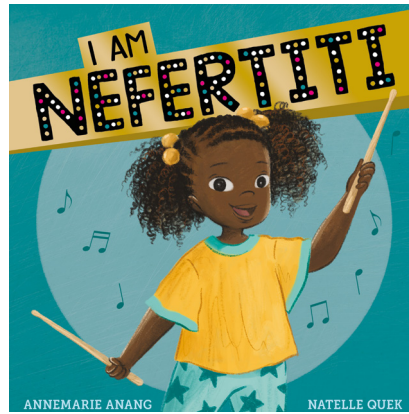
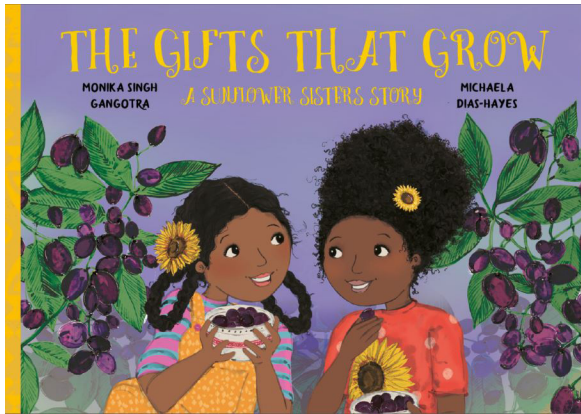
The book I am most excited to be publishing in the first half of 2022 is **Like A Charm** by award-winning author Elle McNicoll. From the very first draft, I was absolutely floored by the world Elle has created; an Edinburgh of hidden magic and lost witches. It's Elle's first foray into contemporary fantasy middle-grade, and her first duology too. Ramya is an irrepressible heroine who I hope many young readers will see themselves reflected in – it's an added joy that readers can stay with her for more than one book! **Eishar Brar, Editorial Director, Knights Of**



There's one bad trickster kicking off 2022 at Walker Books: Louie Stowell's **Loki: A Bad God's Guide to Being Good** storms onto the scene in February, bringing mischief and mayhem. After one prank too many, Norse god Loki is banished to Earth to live as a weedy eleven-year-old schoolboy for 'moral improvement'. Loki charts his progress in a magical diary in which he's forced to write the truth. To make it worse, he has to put up with Thor tagging along and making him look bad. Action-packed and full of hilarious illustrations by the author, this is the start of a brilliant new series for 8+ readers. **Jane Winterbotham, Walker Books Publishing Director**

We are thrilled to be publishing two new novelty finger-tap books by Jo Lodge in June. **Snap! Snap! I'm a Crocodile** and **Crunch! Crunch! I'm a Shark**. These follow on from the hugely successful **Roar! Roar! I'm a Dinosaur** which has sold over 150,000 copies! Jo Lodge is the master of simple, interactive, fun, novelty books with great child appeal: bright colours, actions to copy, simple extra value information and plenty of onomatopoeia. **Leilani Sparrow, Boxer Books**

It's so hard to choose from such a diverse list, but our book of 2022, would be **The Gifts That Grow** by Monika Singh Gangotra and Michaela Dias-Hayes. This second book in our **Sunflower Sisters** series is an inspiring true story of the author's grandmother carrying a Jamun tree seedling in her lap, all the way from India to Australia, to plant in celebration on the birth of her granddaughter. Jamun trees take several generations to bear fruit, so the person that plants it rarely lives to see or taste the fruit but provides a gift for future generations. **Sam Langley-Swain, Owlet Press**

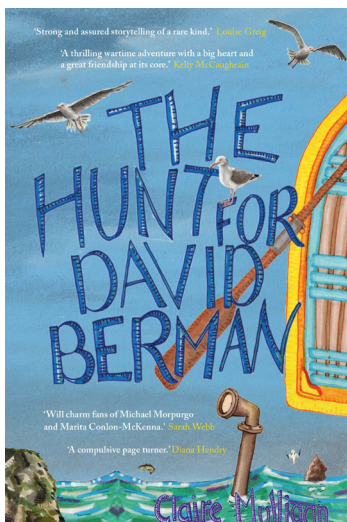


The legendary Anne Fine will publish **Aftershocks** with Old Barn Books (February). **Aftershocks** is a sensitive exploration of the subject of grief, a topic Fine has never previously tackled in such depth, couched in a heart-stopping adventure. The novel unflinchingly confronts the brutality of sudden bereavement and shows the many different ways in which individuals and wider communities attempt to cope with such events. Teenager Louie's emotional journey from anger to empowerment is beautifully drawn and will resonate with many. Dystopian adventure, coming-of-age story, ghostly tale, modern family fable – **Aftershocks** is hard to categorise, empathetic, and gripping. **Ruth Huddleston, Old Barn Books**

I am very excited about **I Am Nefertiti** (June), the debut picture book by Annemarie Anang and rising-star illustration talent Natelle Quek, an empowering and uplifting celebration of every child's uniqueness. When Nefertiti plays the drums, the band plays as one. But when the new music teacher shortens her name to 'Nef', Nefertiti begins to shrink... Undeterred, she stands up tall until everyone chants her beautiful name and once again she is queen of the beat. Packed inside this joyous, rhythmical read-aloud is a heart-warming message about the importance of being you. **Natascha Biebow, editor, Five Quills**

From the outset, we were sure that this middle-grade novel about David, a Kindertransport child, and his wartime adventure with his new friend, Robert, an evacuee from London, was something really special. Featuring murderous Nazis, enigma codebooks and wild sea adventures, **The Hunt for David Berman** (May) is a thrilling page-turner set in the wilds of Scotland. **Rebecca O'Connor, editor and founder at The Moth**

Epic Adventures is the first solo outing by award-winning Sam Sedgman. Sam invites all of us to join him on twelve iconic train journeys and adventure across the globe to experience the sights, sounds and smells of amazing places the trains visit. Evocatively illustrated by Sam Brewster, Sam's exciting and enticing text explores cultures, natural wonders, engineering feats and scrumptious treats to eat, as well as fascinating facts about the trains themselves.



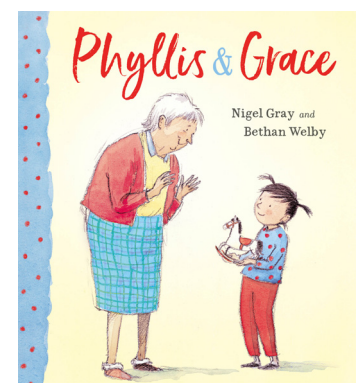
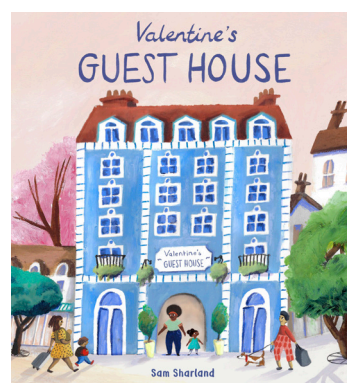
A gorgeous book for train fans... and anyone who loves animals, history, travel, adventures and anything else you can imagine. **Lizzie Yeates, Senior Editor, Kingfisher**

In autumn 2022 Little Island will publish a sequel to our acclaimed 2021 middle-grade fantasy **Wolfstongue** by Sam Thompson. **Wolfstongue** received rave reviews, with Anthony McGowan calling it 'one of the most extraordinary children's books I've ever read' and **The Times** saying '**Wolfstongue** has all the makings of a modern classic ... not since **Watership Down** have animal dynamics felt so true'. **The Fox's Tower** takes place 30 years after the events of **Wolfstongue**. Willow must enter the Forest and rescue Silas, her father, from his fox captors. It is a stunning achievement of fantasy worldbuilding, at once thrilling and thought-provoking. Like **Wolfstongue** the book will be enriched with illustrations by Anna Tromp. **Matthew Parkinson, Little Island**

When you're a dyed-in-the-wool dog lover in an office full of dog lovers and a book like **Bork** lands on your desk...well, you pretty much have to publish it! Written and illustrated by Rhys Kitson (May), this deceptively simple, limited-colour-palette, not-quite-wordless picture book brings a smile to our faces every time we look at it. The premise: do dogs from different countries bark differently, and if so, how do they communicate with each other? The takeaway: children learn the onomatopoeia for barking in different languages, and more importantly, that there's more that unites us than pulls us apart. **Susie Brooke, Associate Publisher, Sunbird Books**

We are delighted to welcome in the New Year with author/illustrator Sam Sharland's debut picture book, **Valentine's Guest House**. With a policy of everyone is welcome, Elsie and her mother soon discover that the arrival of each new guest leads to some small and not quite so small changes to accommodate their specific requirements. Considerate, funny and inventive, this story shows how we can all open our minds and our lives as we try to be more inclusive. **Sue Baker, Child's Play (International) Ltd**

Of all the engaging titles miraculously brought to fruition by authors, illustrators and designers, this year one book stands out for me for personal reasons. It is a book about a friendship between a small girl and an elderly neighbour who has Alzheimer's. **Phyllis and Grace**, written by Nigel Gray, is a moving – never maudlin – tale of rapport between two people of vastly differing age, but who delight



in each other's company. Written without sentimentality, exquisitely illustrated by Bethan Welby and brilliantly art directed and designed, I think it a book to treasure for all ages – children and adults alike.

Sarah Pakenham, Scallywag Press

2022 sees our first anniversary as Farshore and we have some incredible publishing that showcases all the strengths and values that we are proud to stand for. Laura Ellen Anderson's **Rainbow Grey** is sure to hit the top spot after its top 20 debut last year and **Amari and the Great Game** is a massive moment in the children's publishing calendar as the sequel to B.B. Alston's bestselling debut **Amari and the Night Brothers**, as is, of course, Holly Jackson's as yet to be revealed brand new YA thriller! But one to watch is the new middle grade chiller from **Crater Lake** star, Jennifer Killick, **Dreadwood**. It'll send shivers down your spine in all the best ways!

Lindsey Heaven, Farshore's Fiction Publishing Director

I'm thrilled to be publishing **Ellie Pillai Is Brown** by Christine Pillainayagam, a stunningly talented UKYA debut author. We all fell in love with Ellie, the girl next door, who feels utterly invisible but also dares to dream. This book is what everyone needs, to make you fall in love, laugh, (cry a bit), get nostalgic and cheer for the most gorgeous, quirky, captivating heroine you'll meet in years. Christine, a singer/songwriter, is also releasing an album of songs composed by Ellie alongside publication – so if you're a fan of **Daisy Jones and the Six** do hunt it down! You won't be disappointed.

Leah Thaxton, Publisher, Faber Children's Books

Patrice Lawrence's **The Elemental Detectives** is the first book in a major new fantasy adventure series for middle grade: page-turning, empowering, future classic storytelling, starring Black kids solving magical mysteries. **Lauren Fortune, Fiction Publisher, Scholastic**

It's a real thrill to publish Benjamin Zephaniah's **We Sang Across the Sea: The Empire Windrush and Me** in which he expresses the courage and dreams of the Windrush generation beautifully in this vivid rhyme about the real-life experiences of Trinidadian musician, Mona Baptiste, with stunning illustrations from Onyinye Iwu. **Elizabeth Scoggins, Publisher Non-Fiction, Brands and Licensing, Scholastic**

We are so excited to publish **I Definitely Don't Like Winter** (October). Written by Fiona Barker and illustrated by Christine Pym, this story has friendship and empathy at its heart, all wrapped up in a lot of humour and fun. It's absolutely beautiful! Children will love it, and so will parents, teachers and librarians. It's a classic in the making. **Fiz Osborne, Editorial Director Illustrated Books, Scholastic**

You'd never guess that **I'm Not Scary** is Raahat Kaduji's debut picture book. It's just the most perfect, reassuring, snuggle-up bedtime story, full of warmth and fabulous, glowing illustrations. Lonely little Bat loves to bake, but the other animals are scared of him, and think he's a monster. How can Bat show them that he just wants to share some cake? I love the world that Raahat creates, with its atmospheric landscapes, and endearing animals. Mix in some lovely themes of friendship, courage and not judging by appearances, and I defy anyone not to fall in love with this gorgeous, gentle book!

Alison Green, Publisher, Alison Green Books

Marv and the Mega Robot is the first in a thrilling new series about young superhero Marvin who discovers his grandfather's superhero suit, which only works when powered by kindness and imagination. Not only is it an exciting adventure story but one with a powerful message. Author Alex Falase-Koya decided to write Marv after struggling to find any superheroes in fiction who looked like him. And so, by writing about Marv, Alex aims to create a character to which all children can relate – a superhero who discovers that his real strengths are kindness and self-belief. **Gillian Sore, Editor, Oxford University Press**

We are delighted to be publishing Joe Todd-Stanton's exquisite and heartfelt new picture book, **The Comet** this March. Touching on the bewildering experience of moving house, this beautiful story explores how this can affect a child's sense of belonging, but also



how it can open them up to new and wonderful experiences. Inspired by life changes as a result of the pandemic, this story carries themes of creativity and communication through art and the coming together of community and will resonate with many children (and their parents) and features some of the most stunning illustrations we think we've ever seen! **Harriet Birkinshaw, Nobrow**

This year marks our first foray into fiction for older readers and we're thrilled to kick off our middle grade list with **Starlet Rivals**, book one of the **Bollywood Academy** series, by talented debut author Puneet Bhandal. A former Bollywood journalist who rubbed shoulders with some of the biggest actors and film producers, Puneet has channelled her love of all things Bollywood into an incredibly charming school story that follows shy newcomer Bela as she wins a scholarship to the Bollywood Academy, a stage school for stars-in-the-making. Not to be missed! Out July 2022.

Alice Curry, Publisher, Lantana

Our 2022 list is set to be our biggest and boldest yet. I'm especially excited to be publishing a new MG novel from **Carnegie Medal** winning author Anthony McGowan, illustrated by Keith Robinson. As soon as I read **Dogs of the Deadlands**, I could see it being an instant classic – a book to capture the imagination of children in much the same way as **Watership Down** and **The Call of the Wild**. Inspired by true events, this is the thrilling story of the dogs left behind following the Chernobyl disaster and their struggle to survive in this new wilderness. **Katie Jennings, Senior Commissioning Editor, Rock the Boat**



If I have to pick one Guppy highlight, it is YA novel **The Cats We Meet Along the Way** by Nadia Mikail. When the pandemic hit in 2020, we ran our first (now annual) online competition for unpublished writers and Nadia's debut set in Malaysia was the extraordinary winner. The juxtaposition of a cruelly inevitable world event against a moving portrait of the tangles of family life is so sensitively rendered – as Patrice Lawrence said: 'It's beautiful – original, emotionally truthful and infused with love and hope.' I can't wait for everyone to read it! **Bella Pearson, Guppy Books**

I'm really proud to be publishing Natasha Devon's fiction debut in June this year. **Toxic** is an important book, but not one just for the YA market. I certainly learnt a thing or two whilst reading and I really wish this book had been about when I was navigating those relationships that didn't seem quite right... When Natasha's manuscript landed in my inbox I was beyond excited. I can't think of a better book more suited to our developing list, especially as our own students will be involved. A book that speaks directly to them. **Hazel Holmes, Uclan**

Authorgraph

No.252

Roger Mello
interviewed by
Pam Dix

What a lovely escape from a cold January evening, to chat with the fascinating Roger Mello in the sunshine and brilliant light of a Brazilian afternoon. A conversation with Roger ranges through Brazilian and world cultures and his thinking, like his books, takes you on a journey of cultural and artistic connections. Normally a great traveller, Roger has spent most of the pandemic between his homes in Brasilia and Rio, except for the occasional conference. He has kept up his international contacts through events and talks, one of which is a marvellous interview with him and Peter Sís hosted by the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art which can be found [here on YouTube](#).

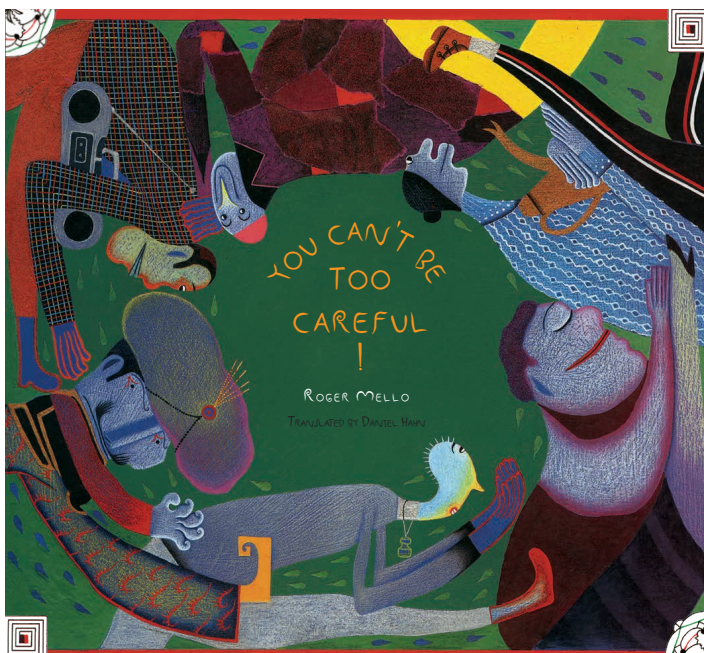
Roger is an eminent writer and illustrator whose work is celebrated not only in Brazil and South America but internationally, where he has a huge presence in the children's book world. He is not so well known in the UK and it is a great privilege to bring him to wider attention here.

Roger was born in 1965 in Brasilia, with a military regime in power for the first 21 years of his life – a time, he says, when the utopian ideals for Brazil, in architecture and the arts, collided with despair and restriction. He is sad that times are once again difficult in Brazil, with such a very authoritarian regime, but is optimistic about the next elections. After school, Roger moved to Rio to study design and decided to work on children's picture books. He now has 100 books to his name, 22 of which he has written as well as illustrated. In 2014, he received the **Hans Christian Andersen Award**, Latin America's first illustrator to win this. He has won Brazil's literary award, the **Prêmio Jabuti**, ten times and many other awards around the world, including an early success with **Meninos do Mangue (Children of the Mangrove)** which won the **Best Children's Book International Award** in 2002. He has had major solo exhibitions, notably at the International Youth Library in Munich, in France and in South Korea. Currently only four of his titles are available in English, three published by New York based Elsewhere Editions and one by Reycraft, with a fourth Elsewhere title due later this year.

Roger thinks of himself as a person of books, a visual author. He is passionate about this, describing books as 'always the oldest and always the newest', a concept which I think describes the role of books in society very well. He loves the idea that very early books



were all illustrated, for example **The Book of the Dead** or the Mayan codices, and that we are now back in a time when illustrated books are very much in vogue. His own books are for him objects or artefacts, with all aspects of text, illustration, design and layout carefully thought through to create an integrated whole. Roger says they can't be separated, that there is a physical symbiosis between content and form. His Brazilian publisher, Companhia das Letras, has skilfully supported this process with often complex research on inks, colours and paper engineering. For each he produces a dummy book so that this can be carefully realised. This fascination with the dialogue between image, text and design leads to very innovative books where there is notably always a gap, a breathing space, for the reader to fill whether in response to the narrative or the illustration. He wants his readers to work, to think, to find their own answers, to be stimulated to their own storytelling and art. Roger's mission is to help readers and teachers become confident when talking about the visual, to develop a language to discuss colour, pattern, emotional response, with the same confidence they have discussing text.



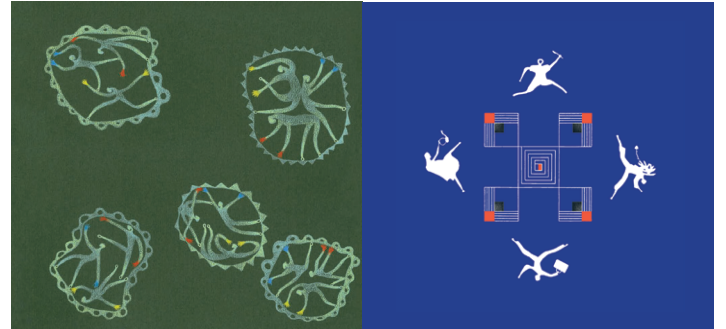


Charcoal Boys

Using examples from the books published in English, I talked to Roger about his illustrative style and the stories he is interested in telling. Colour is always the first talking point about Roger's work. He uses colour in skilful and striking ways. This reflects his belief that colour is a character and must be exactly right in each story. Colours relate to human emotions and provoke responses that can vary from reader to reader, but always engages the emotions.

In **Charcoal Boys** the subtle colour palette of greys and blacks demonstrating the work of the boys in the charcoal pits is counterbalanced by the bursts of red of the fire and flames, with a final page of dramatic fire shown with a page of cut out tongues of flames in black, orange, red and neon pink.

Pattern is equally important, linking to maths and philosophy. He loves exploring ideas of repetition and difference. Looking at the endpapers and back cover of [You can't be too careful!](#), the reader is drawn into the patterns and then notices the subtle variations within the image. This brings a real sense of excitement. These differences reference the characters encountered in the story and the patterns reference its circular nature.

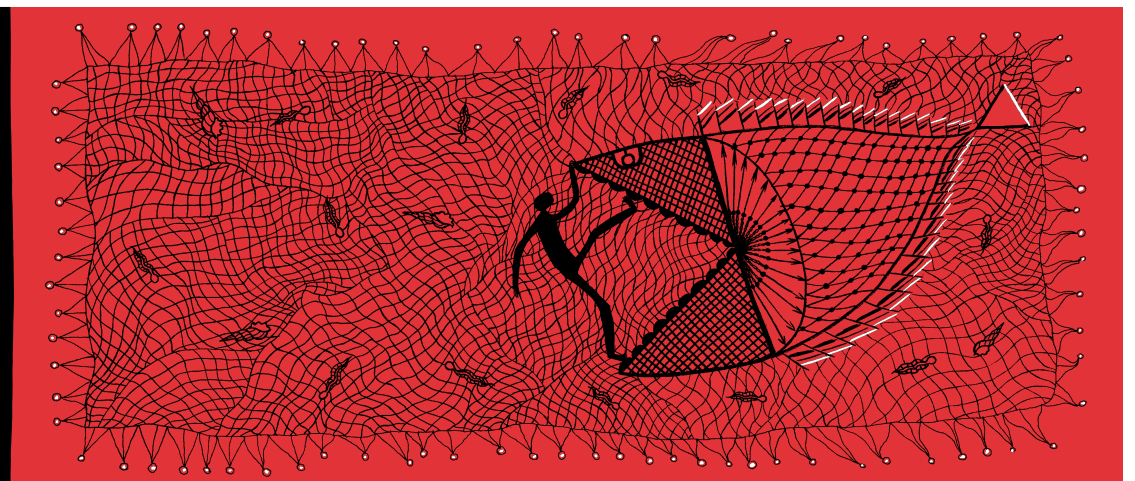


You can't be too careful!

Pattern is core to the illustrations of **João by a thread** (soon to be published in English), an almost surreal dream story set in a fishing community. The net used for fishing becomes the bedspread, the sea, the place of adventure and its filigree design forms the framework within which the narrative takes place. These designs are influenced by traditional Brazilian embroidery, and it is indeed a rich visual treat within a colour palette of black, red and white.



JOÃO LETS A LAKE
OF FEAR POUR OUT,
OVER TADPOLES AND SEASHELLS.
A CIRCULAR LAKE,
FLOODING THE BLANKET.
FISH MORE SLIPPERY THAN SOAP.
WHAT NET COULD EVER HOLD
A FISH THAT'S BIGGER THAN US?



João by a thread

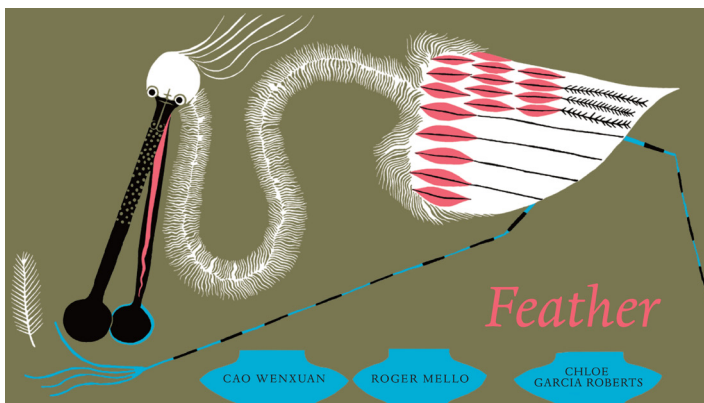


You can't be too careful!

Roger's use of perspective, particularly in representing and placing individual characters challenges all expectations. Figures often stride the page and are viewed from strange angles. On the opening page of **You can't be too careful!**, the gardener is shown tenderly caring for White Rose, his body exquisitely and sensitively wrapped around the flower at the heart of the story. The figure is scarcely separated from his garden as the whole image is green, with clever use of shades and tones and a collage effect to create the difference between body and landscape.

Illustration for Roger always starts with what he calls the trace, the drawing of the line. He works out his ideas with his pen. His wonderful imaginings of people, creatures, plants and places are underpinned by research and accuracy. He spent hours observing and drawing nature for his illustrations for **Desertos** and **Jardines**, both written by Roseana Murray.

In 2017, Roger began an exciting cross-cultural collaboration with the Chinese author and 2016 **Hans Christian Andersen Award** winner, Cao Wenxuan. Their two joint books, **Feather** and **Lemon Butterfly**, are rooted in the ideals of the founder of **IBBY** (**International Board of Books for Young People**), Jella Lepman. Indeed the concept was developed at an **IBBY** meeting on Nami Island in South Korea – the idea that two **HCA** winners from opposite sides of the world could collaborate to develop a book that would have international appeal. Roger works extensively with **IBBY** promoting the ideas of international collaboration through children's books. Cao Wenxuan, novelist and professor, says that for him the picture book is a base for exploring his philosophical thinking. **Feather**, an imaginative take on the 'Are you my mother?' story, features a feather's quest for its origin, for the bird that it belongs to.



Feather

The feather encounters various birds, asking 'Am I yours?' Each bird is beautifully realised with strange and interesting perspectives and angles making full use of the page format which is non-standard, long in width and narrow in height, squashing some of the larger birds, or making parts of their body fly off the page. Some birds are referenced through Chinese ceramic vases, making cultural references to the writer and also to clay as the material of the first human creation. The outside back cover has a small flap which folds into the book and provides a consistent half of the feather, the 'fingerprint' of the story, which is matched with the other half feather shown in different colours on each page. This is a very exciting use of book design, referencing movement and stasis.

Though not a didactic author, social commentary underpins many of Roger's books. Notable is his focus on highlighting child labour and child exploitation. This is core to both **Children of the Mangrove** and **Charcoal Boys**, stories of the marginalised, those outside mainstream society. Whilst the specifics here are Brazil, the issues are not exclusively a Brazilian problem. The world benefits from the charcoal burners' contribution to the pig iron process, used in buildings around the world – and indeed children all over the world are often exploited and denied their childhood. Brazil itself is an enormous country with a huge range of landscapes and a history that has seen the merging of many cultures from earliest times to before and after the Portuguese conquest. This is the backdrop to Roger's world and fills every part of his thinking. His current project is a book set in the Amazon.

Roger has worked with Daniel Hahn as his English translator which he has found creative and rewarding, describing his joy at having a poetical correspondence with your translator. Daniel has worked to promote Roger's work and we must hope that more books will become available in English. For now I urge you to seek out his books in Portuguese or one of the many languages into which they are translated. The illustrations will guide your understanding of the narratives and will thrill and excite you.

Charcoal Boys, translated from Portuguese by Daniel Hahn, Elsewhere Editions, 2019

João by a thread, 2022, translated from Portuguese by Daniel Hahn, Elsewhere Editions, 2022

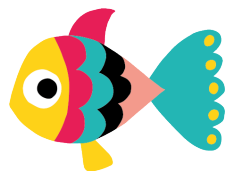
You can't be too careful!, 2017, translated from Portuguese by Daniel Hahn, Elsewhere Editions, 2017

Feather, Cao Wenxuan, illustrated by Roger Mello, translated from Chinese by Chloe Garcia Roberts, Elsewhere Editions, 2017

Lemon Butterfly, Cao Wenxuan, illustrated by Roger Mello, translator from Chinese unknown, Reyecraft Books, 2020



Pam Dix is a former librarian and chair of **IBBY UK**.



Diving in: Bella Pearson introduces her publishing house Guppy Books

During the balmy summer of 2018, I was invited to a **Golden Egg Academy** conference in Bath; I had recently left my job as publishing director at **David Fickling Books** and at lunch, someone asked what I was thinking of doing next. When I tentatively mentioned that I was contemplating setting up an indie publisher, the enthusiasm and positivity from those around blew me away. Did they really think I could do it? I talked further to authors and colleagues – and before I knew it, in September 2019 **Guppy Books** published its first book. (Let's not talk about the pandemic or timing now...) But why did I want to do it in the first place?

Having worked with David helping to set up his list in 2001 firstly with Random House and then as an independent company, I acquired some extraordinary books and edited some amazing authors. But it had long been a dream to have the creative freedom to publish a balanced, varied, diverse and eclectic list of my own, producing the most entertaining books to encourage and captivate children from all backgrounds and reading capabilities, from young emerging readers to older teenagers.

And lo, Guppy was born. We're in our third year of publishing and produce 10 books a year, most originated in the UK but one or two a year bought in from other countries. We don't stick with any particular genre – indeed I want to publish as many different genres as possible – and my aim is that in a few years' time, every child of any age and background, with any interest or ability, should be able to swim through the Guppy porthole and find something that reflects themselves in the books we produce.

It's also important to me that we don't only acquire books in the traditional way (author finds agent, agent finds publisher). So in the spring of 2020, we launched an Open Submissions Competition for unpublished/unagented writers, casting the net as far and wide as possible. What a response – and what finds! The two authors from our first two competitions are stunning additions to the Guppy list, true writers of the future, and I feel so very lucky to be publishing them. (More on these below.)

So what kind of stories do we publish? A look at the eclectic mix here:

Gloves Off by Louisa Reid is a page-turning and immersive verse novel for young adults, tackling difficult subjects yet conveying acres of love and tenderness to its characters and readers. Contrast its intense power with the anarchic **Ghost Scouts** series – a wickedly funny, diverse illustrated series about a human girl who accidentally ends up in an unusual scout summer camp... Lexie makes friends with a werewolf, a zombie and a ghost, all unique and different in their own ways but difference is simply a part of the zany, warm storytelling of Taylor Dolan – not obviously signposted but simply there. **Maggie Blue and the Dark World** by Anna Goodall,



recently shortlisted for the **Costa Children's Book Award 2021** is 'awash in sinister villains and perplexing plights' (*Financial Times*) – perfect for Year 6/7/8 children to get their teeth into.

Or **Tsunami Girl**, a part-prose, part-manga book for young adults by Julian Sedgwick and Chie Kutsuwada which absorbs you in the ghostly world of Japan and post-catastrophe trauma, an intense story told in the most original and emotionally astute way. Contrast it with the quirky **Bronte Mettlestone** series by Jaclyn Moriarty for readers who love intricately-drawn adventures that meander through a magical world and tie up events in the most satisfying way. **Saving Winslow** by Sharon Creech (yes, *the* Sharon Creech!) tells the moving story of a 10-year-old boy and a baby donkey, indirectly dealing with loss and friendships (check out **Moo** as well). Or escape with the absurdly funny **Knight Sir Louis** series by the Brothers McLeod – witty and highly illustrated with jokes on every page, perfect for readers with post-Tom-Gatesitis or those who struggle with books containing solid text. So what about the young adult who is passionate about history, their place in the world and injustice? Try **Song Beneath the Tides** by Beverley Birch, a thriller set in Africa, with an extraordinary sense of place.

And how does 2022 look? Three exciting debut titles to launch: the beautiful **The Cats We Meet Along the Way** by Nadia Mikail (winner of the first Guppy Open Submissions Competition), which tells of a teenager's road trip around Malaysia in search of her sister, a story full of family angst, love and kindness set against the background of an apocalyptic event; Anthony Burt's **The Animal Lighthouse**, illustrated by Ciara Flood is a hugely fun and inventive adventure story bringing together **The Jungle Book** and **Treasure Island**; and James Dixon's David Almond-esque evocative selkie tale, **The Billow Maiden** (our second competition winner)... As well as an excoriating new verse novel from Louisa Reid, more from our adventurous middle-grade series and a terrifying YA thriller from acclaimed Canadian author, Kenneth Oppel.

We are only at the start of our journey to build the balanced, varied, diverse and eclectic list I want Guppy to be, where every child can find themselves – but what a start it has been! I'm so incredibly grateful to all the Guppy authors, illustrators, colleagues and most of all readers who have made it possible – thank you all.



Windows into illustration: Armin Greder

Armin Greder is well-known for his thought-provoking, challenging and highly impactful picture books for older readers and adults. His book **The Mediterranean** was an Honour Book in the 2019 **CBCA Picture Book of the Year Awards**. Born in Switzerland, he migrated to Australia in 1971, but now lives in Lima, Peru. In this article he introduces a key character in his haunting picture book **The Island**.

One difference between a novel and a stage script is that the novel is complete in itself while the stage script is dependent on others – the actors – to be given its final form. The playwright accordingly leaves room in the text for the actors to fill – the writer leaves the adjectives to the actors, as Helen Garner once put it.

Now if I replace actors with illustrators, I have the exact same situation for picture books: if all is to turn out well, the text must allow room for the illustrations to do their part. Some authors don't understand this and consequently propose texts so descriptive that illustrations become superfluous. But if they know what they are doing an apparent loss becomes a gain: words and pictures multiply each other.

In **The Island** a refugee arrives on an island. The xenophobic inhabitants put him in an isolated place far from their village and leave him there. Then one day he appears in town. That scene occupies a double spread with a single line of text, 'Then one morning the man appeared in town', and an image of a woman.

The text is explicit – it leaves no doubt whatsoever about what is happening but it is prosaic, even dull. The image, on the other hand, is expressive enough: a woman of a certain age, panicking. But if the picture says plainly what is happening, it doesn't say why. It is only when the reader creates a bridge between the picture and the words – an exercise in creativity that demands joining two apparently unrelated elements – that the story explodes: the banal words are suddenly infused with emotion and the whole extent of what 'the man appeared in town' means is revealed.

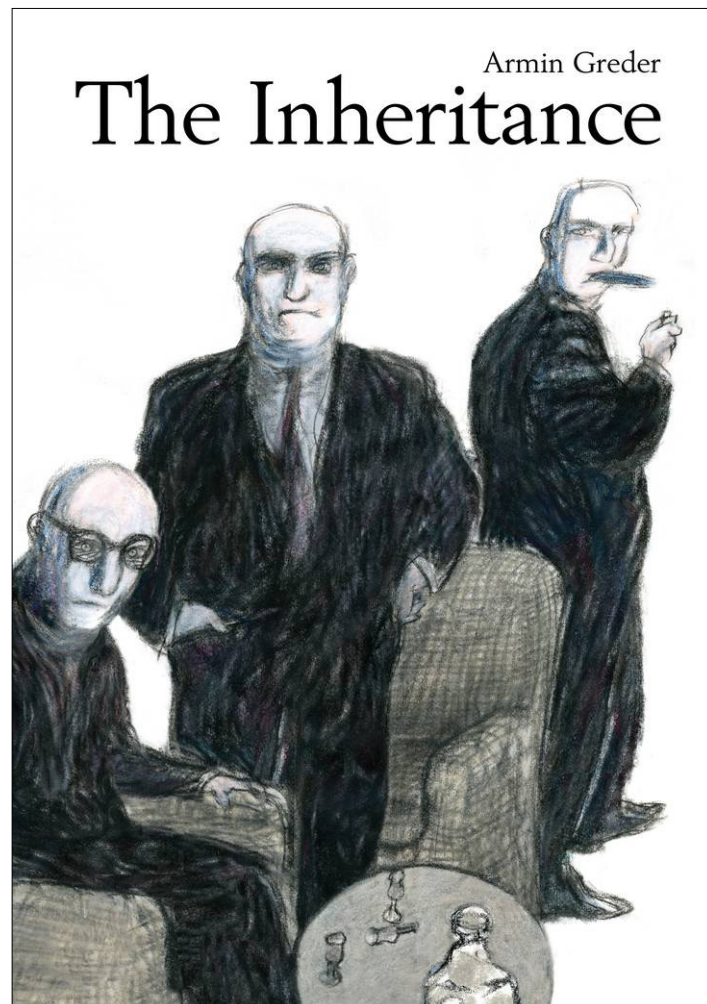
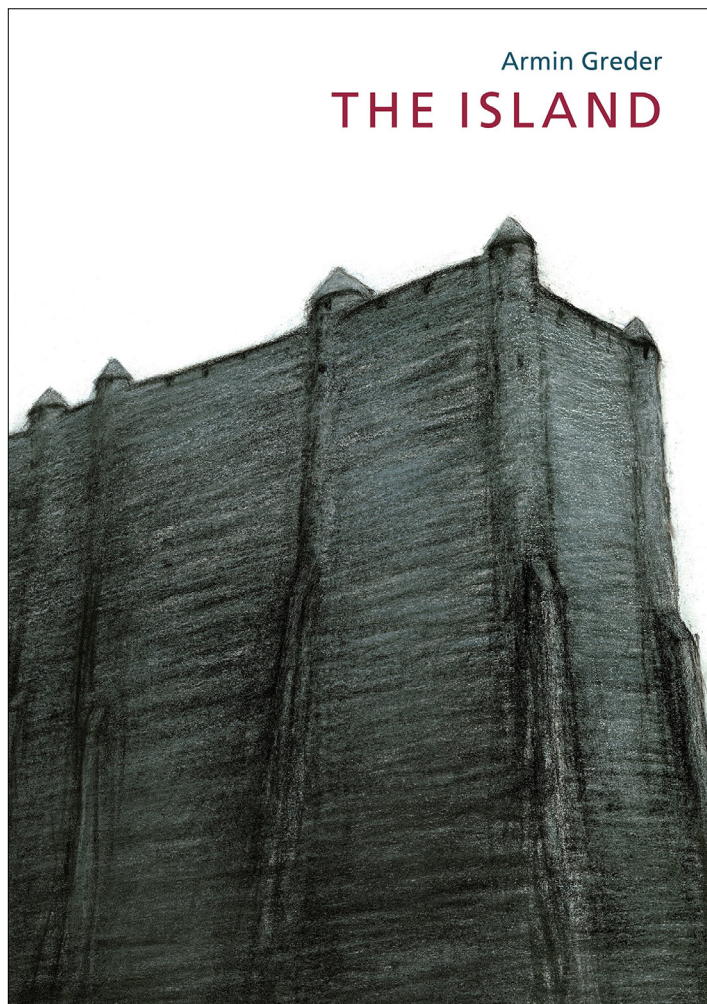
Readers will see in the image of the woman *The Scream* by Edvard Munch. They are not wrong: after all, if Munch drew his character in this attitude and not in another it was because he couldn't conceive of a more effective way to express bottomless anxiety. Neither could I. One difference, though: Munch's character is deathly serious; mine is a caricature and as such can't be taken seriously. Which is precisely the point: the panic of the woman is unreasonable.

In **The Inheritance** the technique I used is compressed charcoal and pastel. The compressed charcoal allows me the necessary control to get my pictures to do what I want them to do without killing the expressive quality of the drawing. And the pastel because it is a cousin of the charcoal.

The Island by Armin Greder is published by Allen & Unwin, 978-1741752663, £11.99 hbk

The Inheritance by Armin Greder is published by Allen & Unwin, 978-1911679219, £12.99 hbk



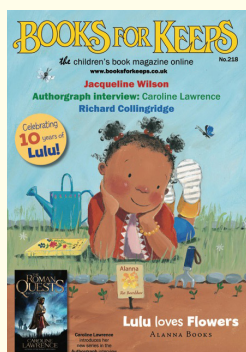


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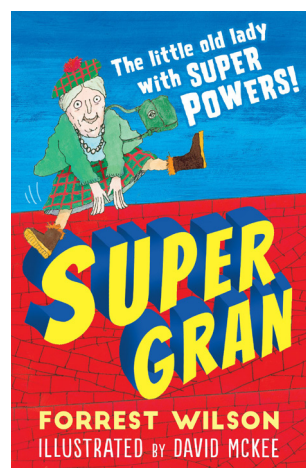
"The most important periodical in children's books."

PHILIP PULLMAN

Ten of the Best Superhero books

Imogen Russell Williams dons the cape and chooses ten of the best superhero stories.

Superheroes can pose problems for writers: given powers that transcend human limitation, it's tricky to ensure a protagonist faces enough adversity and challenge to serve the story. To young readers who lack agency, strength and size, however, the idea of superpowers has obvious appeal – and the tension between super and civilian, heroic and mundane is full of rich narrative potential (especially in a family of superheroes – or a family in which only some members have powers).

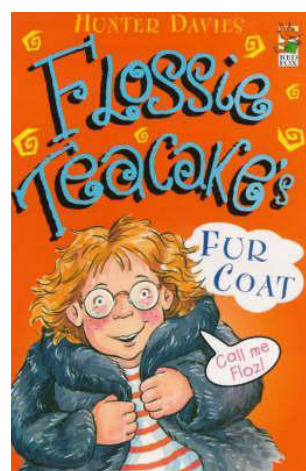


Supergran

Forrest Wilson, illustrated by David McKee, Andersen Press, 978-1783444588, £6.99 pbk

When tartan-clad, tammy-wearing Granny Smith is accidentally zapped by rays from a super machine, she acquires a whole raft of unexpected powers. But the indomitable pensioner will need all her strength, speed and X-ray vision – not to mention her grandson Willie and his eccentric friend Edison – to defeat the machinations of the Inventor and his deadly devices. Illustrated with characteristically flat, round-eyed,

expressive appeal by **Elmer** creator McKee, she first appeared in 1978, and became a runaway bestseller and TV show star, reissued in 2019 to delight a new cohort of 7+ readers with her crime-foiling escapades and her Scots invective ('Scunners!').



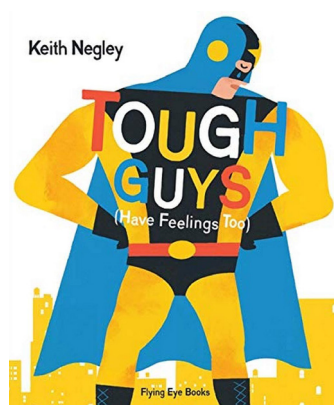
Flossie Teacake's Fur Coat

Hunter Davies, Red Fox (O/P)

If superhero stories usually involve an element of transformation and a secret identity, Flossie Teacake qualifies – perhaps. This awkward, plump, put-upon nine-year-old is emphatically more of an antihero, however – when she pinches her big sister Bella's fur coat and transforms into glamorous eighteen-year-old alter ego Floz, she's not out to save the day but only for what she can get, whether that's waitressing tips, free chips or having an ill-fated go at

driving. Workshy, ruthless, miraculously prone to coming out on top, Floz/Flossie is an unlikely but compelling hero, and this hilarious wish-fulfilment fantasy may still resonate with contemporary children as much as it did with those who first read it in the 80s. (That stolen fur coat is ethically dubious now in more ways than one, but the description of the rich, lustrous weight of it and the transformative buttons very slowly fastening, bottom to top, is astonishingly memorable.)

Although they're an obvious source of inspiration for many of the characters and ideas here, I've steered clear of comics and graphic novels featuring famous characters from the Marvel and DC universes, focusing more on the domestic, quirky and unusual superheroes who've appeared in (mostly) recent children's picture books and fiction: super robots, potatoes, grannies, and protagonists who may not have powers at all, but are nonetheless heroic.



Tough Guys (Have Feelings Too)

Keith Negley, Flying Eye Books, 978-1912497157, £7.99 pbk

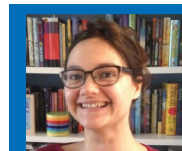
This gorgeous picture book has a caped superhero on the cover, but not a cheesy grin or 'attitude smirk' in sight. In his eye-catching yellow, blue and black, Negley's hero is downcast, with a single tear on his mask – and the pages of the book, light on text but heavy on impact, are filled with wrestlers, astronauts and ninjas overwhelmed by anger, sadness or frustration. The subtle framing narrative involves a boy playing at each of the characters in turn – but it's the way in which each image confers quiet permission to express sorrow or rage, or to cry openly in situations and outfits associated with macho endurance, that makes it so understatedly special.



Supertato (and sequels)

Paul Linnet and Sue Hendra, Simon & Schuster, £6.99 pbk

Tubers can be heroes, too! A marvellously unlikely picture-book superhero, the hugely popular Supertato is called upon constantly to defend the hapless vegetables of the kitchen from the wily planning of the Evil Pea, escaped from the freezer on a mission of destruction. Supertato's few, boiled-down attributes – a broad belt, a black eye mask, and a dazzling smile – are a splendid comic send-up of the superhero paradigm – and the tools at his disposal ('his super strength...his super speed...a flannel and some soapy water') a delicious mixture of the sublime and the ridiculous.



Imogen Russell Williams is a journalist and editorial consultant specialising in children's literature and YA.

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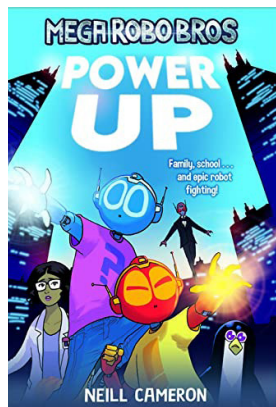


Pizzazz (and sequels)

Sophy Henn, Simon & Schuster, £6.99 pbk

This highly illustrated book for readers of about 6 or 7+ features a delightfully dysfunctional superhero family – and a protagonist who hates her embarrassing power, waiting until the last possible moment to reveal it. Pizzazz's Mum (hero name Atomic), Dad (Ore) and little sister (Red Dragon) are always out there doing what heroes do, slinging meteorites

away from Earth or demanding Pizzazz participate as they put a stop to archvillains' evil plans. But it's not till Pizzazz becomes an eco-monitor at her new school, and discovers a plan to build a car park over a community green space, that she discovers the confidence to step up and protest – and to deploy her mysterious power, to great effect. A lovely, warm-hearted look at family dynamics and self-esteem, with engaging and often hilarious artwork.

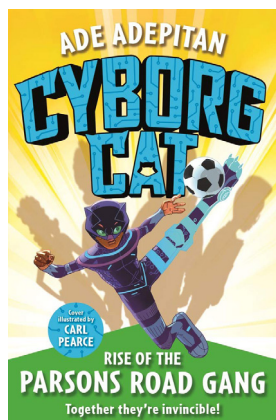


Mega Robo Bros: Power Up (and sequels)

Neill Cameron, David Fickling Books, £8.99 pbk

Freddy and Alex are brothers like any others – they fight over comics, wind each other up with fart jokes and songs about butts, and compete to drive their parents crazy. They also happen to be the world's most powerful robots, engineered by their genius scientist mum. When another super-powered mech appears, intent on causing mayhem and destruction, it's up to Freddy and Alex

to stop the evil Robot 23 – but what's his connection to them? And will they be able to control their powers long enough to defeat him? Atmospheric, transporting artwork, acutely observed sibling dynamics and thought-provoking ideas about society, ethics and identity interweave brilliantly in this outstanding graphic novel series.

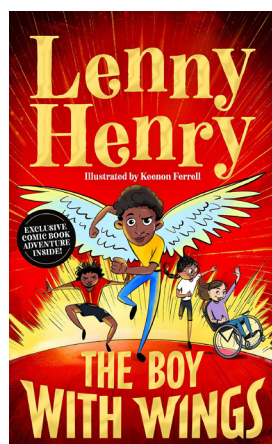


Cyborg Cat: The Rise of the Parsons Road Gang (and sequels)

Ade Adepitan, illustrated by Carl Pearce, Piccadilly Press, £5.99 pbk

Moving to London from Nigeria is tough for Ade – especially because he has to wear a caliper on his leg. When ignorant people in his new neighbourhood comment rudely on his skin colour and his disability, he feels as though he'll never fit in – but Ade loves to play football, and when his teammates discover how well he plays, they realise he must actually be

a superpowered cyborg – half human, half machine! This series by the Paralympian wheelchair basketball star, drawing on his own childhood experience, focuses on friendship, acceptance and wild adventure, and challenges preconceptions of disability and powerlessness throughout.

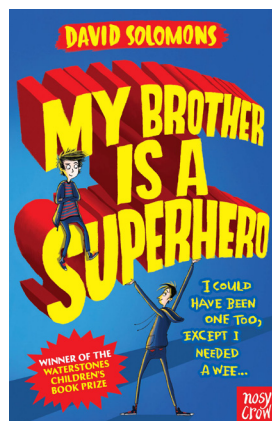


The Boy With Wings

Lenny Henry, illus Keenon Ferrell, comic-book elements by Mark Buckingham, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1529067835, £12.99 hbk

Tunde is picked on by school bullies, but otherwise he's just an average kid – except that his parents won't ever let him run. One day, defying them, he leaps for the ball in a football match and rises into the air on a huge, newly-sprouted pair of wings. As Tunde discovers the truth about his parentage, a terrifying threat to Earth materialises – one that only the boy with wings might be able

to prevent... Henry's first book for children is as funny as might be expected, but it's also quietly thoughtful and poignant, examining ideas of heritage, family, love and belonging in a way that lifts the Chosen One trope out of the territory of cliché.

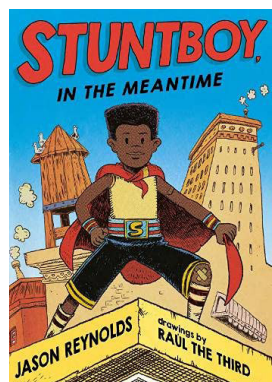


My Brother is a Superhero (and sequels)

David Solomons, Nosy Crow, £7.99 pbk

Eleven-year-old Luke is comics-mad, so it's horribly unfair that his older brother Zack – whose comics knowledge is precisely zero – should be given superpowers by a visiting alien while Luke's having an ill-timed wee. When Zack's kidnapped by his arch-nemesis, though, Luke's forced to slough off his sulk and enlist his friends to try and rescue his brother – with only five days

to save both Zack and the world...Peppered with perfectly-judged pop culture references and glorious, silly-clever humour of the most addictive kind, Solomons' book and its sequels slyly investigate the complex bonds between siblings and friends, sometimes strained by jealousy and misunderstanding, but strong enough to withstand even the most determined attack.



Stuntboy, in the Meantime

Jason Reynolds and Raul the Third, Knights Of, 978-1913311247, £7.99 pbk

Ten-year-old Portico Reeves has a secret hero identity: Stuntboy, keeping those around him safe by taking their falls. There's a lot of people in his apartment block, aka castle, and Stuntboy looks after them all, hindered somewhat by his nemesis, Herbert Singletary the Worst. Even as himself, Portico doesn't have it easy – his parents are separating, and he's plagued by anxiety (aka 'the

worry wriggles') every time a voice is raised and they enter the Mean Time. But with the help of his ebullient best friend Zola, he'll find a way to win out in the end...A mixture of highly illustrated chapter book and graphic novel, this funny, sweet, humane take on a child's overdeveloped sense of responsibility and need to protect those dear to him will resonate particularly with anxious, overthinking kids.

Beyond the Secret Garden: New Editions

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 abridgements made when books are revised for younger readers..

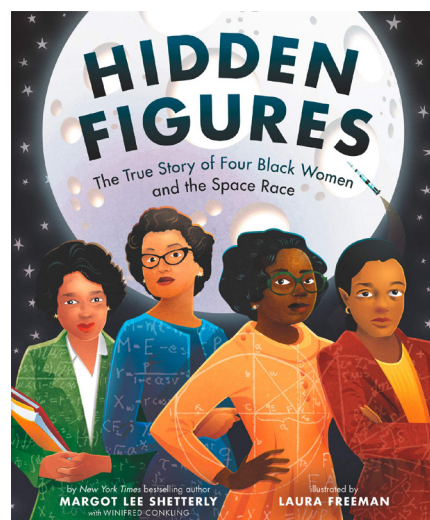
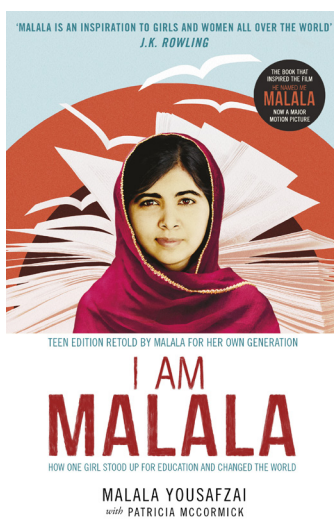
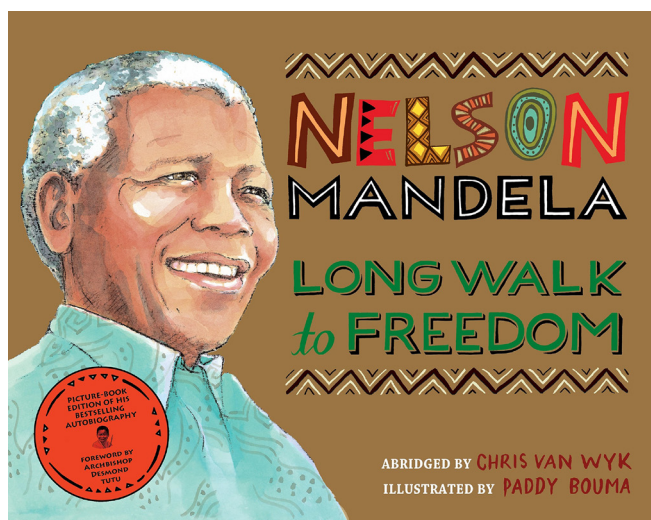
In 1800, an edition of Daniel Defoe's **Robinson Crusoe**, originally published in 1719, was published as a chapbook. The publishers noted that the story was so well-known, they didn't need to tell it; instead, 'only the illustrations are shown', eight woodcut highlights from Defoe's lengthy novel, including one captioned 'Advent of Friday' and another, 'Arrival of Savages with Christian Prisoner'. For many young readers, the stick-figure naked Black people, mostly without facial features, contrasted with clothed white people with facial expressions (and guns) were the first depictions they saw of people of colour in books. By creating illustrated editions of books for older readers and adults, publishers could increase their profits by selling the same story multiple times. But these editions, because they are shortened, often also relied on shorthand stereotypes ('savages' for example, and the nakedness of the Black figures) to convey information quickly. Abridged and adapted books can ensure a book has a greater cultural presence. There is, we think, an interesting question of whether books that are simplified for children distort the original text in some way, or actually bring important aspects of it more sharply into focus.

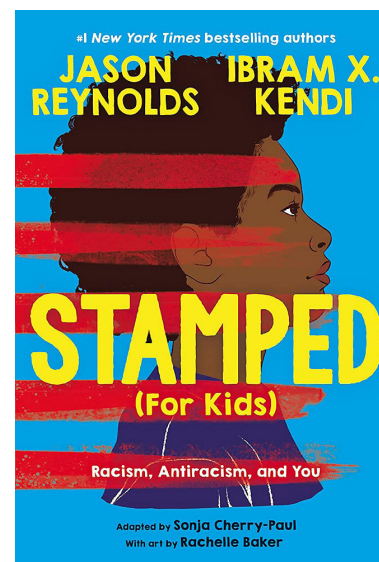
New editions of books that are designed to appeal to younger readers remain popular and may even be experiencing a resurgence of late. Recent examples of books revised for younger readers include a number of memoirs and autobiographies. Nelson Mandela's **Long Walk to Freedom** (Little, Brown, 1994), was followed in 2014 by Macmillan's children's edition, abridged by Chris Van Wyk and illustrated by Paddy Bouma. The 2014 teen edition of **I am Malala: The Story of the Girl Who Stood Up for Education and was Shot by the Taliban** by Malala Yousafzai and Christina Lamb (Weidenfeld and Nicolson 2013) was written by Malala Yousafzai and Patricia McCormick and given the new, and more upbeat, title of **I am Malala: How One Girl Stood Up for Education and Changed the World**. **Hidden Figures: The Story of the African-American Women Who Helped Win the Space Race** (William Morrow, 2016) by Margot Lee Shetterly was followed by **Hidden Figures: The True Story of Four Black Women and the Space Race**, a 2018 picture book by Margot Lee Shetterly with Winifred Conkling, illustrated by Laura Freeman.

Freeman won the **Coretta Scott King Illustration Honor** for her work on the book. Both Trevor Noah's **Born a Crime** (2016) and Michelle Obama's **Becoming** (2018) have also been published in abridged editions aimed at younger readers.

A number of books that offer fresh perspectives on the world have also been published as editions for younger readers. **Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America** (Nation Books 2016) by Ibram X Kendi was followed by **Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You** – described as 'a remix' – by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi and **Stamped (for Kids)** by the same authors in 2021. Winner of the 2015 **American Book Award**, **An Indigenous People's History of The United States** written by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz was adapted by Jean Mendoza and Debbie Reece for a younger audience in 2019. **Prisoners of Geography** (2015) by Tim Marshall was followed in 2019 by a fully illustrated version by Grace Easton and Jessica Smith, adapted with Emily Hawkins and Pippa Crane. The section on Africa entitled 'Carving Up A Continent' (p48) offers some brief historical information to complexify the book's broader theme that the wealth of a continent is largely dependent on its physical geography. Peter Frankopan's **The Silk Roads: A New History of the World** (2015) was followed by a large version illustrated by Neil Packer (2018). Frankopan offers a considerably less Eurocentric history of the world than many young readers will have encountered in their reading and school curricula.

It is instructive to examine what is left in, what is added (usually, though not always, in terms of illustration), and what is changed or removed in editions for younger readers. One of the most obvious recent examples of this is David Olusoga's **Black and British**, first published by Macmillan in 2016 as a nearly 600-page history aimed at adults, and in the last year published in two new editions: one, a standard-sized children's paperback for ages twelve and over, published in 2020; and in November 2021, an illustrated version aimed (according to the website) at ages six to eight. All three editions (including the adult edition) are illustrated with maps, photographs, and reproductions of paintings, but the book for older children has only black-and-white illustrations, which is presumably a cost issue (there is a ten pound





difference in price between the older and younger children's editions). The lower price might mean that readers would choose the book themselves, rather than having it purchased for them, making it more likely that they might read it. But the illustrations in Olusoga's book for younger readers by Jake Alexander and Melleny Taylor are so bright and appealing that many twelve-year-olds might be attracted by it too. This would not be a disaster by any means – Olusoga includes most of the same topics in both books (although considerably shortened in the illustrated version). But one example of the omissions between the editions suggests the material deemed inappropriate for younger readers: the discussion of the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865 and the debate that ensued in Britain over the right way for Britain to govern colonial people is well-covered in the older readers' version, but not mentioned in the illustrated version. All three versions focus heavily on the Stuart and Georgian periods, which – although not typically part of the school history curriculum – are critical for Olusoga because Britain's expanding involvement in colonialism and the enslavement of Africans built up wealth and global standing which still benefit Britain today. All of these books provide an excellent starting point for understanding how Britain's history was shaped by Black people.

One part of that history is, of course, the Windrush generation. Floella Benjamin, whose family came from Trinidad in the 1960s and who is now a baroness in the House of Lords, wrote a version of her life story, **Coming to England**, in 1995 for a middle grade (key stage two) audience. Twenty-five years later, and after a successful television adaptation, Benjamin rewrote her story for a picture book audience with illustrations by Diane Ewen. The two versions are very different, and not just in terms of length, reading level, and number of pictures. The descriptive blurb on the Puffin paperback version from 1997 positions it as a story of overcoming adversity: 'Floella was shocked and upset by the taunting and rejection she faced. She soon realized that the only way to survive was to be twice as good as anyone else.' But the picture book version is described as 'An inspiring true story celebrating the Windrush generation' on the front cover of the book. These descriptions accurately delineate the difference between them. The novel version includes much more direct depictions of racism when 'boys came up and spat strange words at me, words I had never heard before but from their faces I knew they were not nice' (p81). In the picture book version, white children 'called us names' (n.p.) but on the very next page 'after a while, we became friends' (n.p.). Conquering racism is a much simpler task in the picture book version. Additionally, the picture book version focuses throughout on the idea of Floella meeting the queen, a childhood desire which is eventually fulfilled. The novel, on the other hand, contains much more about the things that Floella and her family had to change or accept in Britain: Benjamin describes discarding her Trinidadian accent for 'the Queen's English' in order 'to get the best education' (p101). She also discusses people from the Caribbean opening their own churches because white people made

them feel unwelcome, and having to pay high prices for foods from the Caribbean. None of this is in the picture book version, which leaves the Caribbean food in the Caribbean section of the book, and never mentions patois at all.

We see that in revising editions for younger readers writers and publishers make decisions not only about the language used and the level of detail required, but also about the balance between social reality and hopefulness, between safety and initiation into the wider world. As ever, both commercial and educational interests are likely to inform their decisions.

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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).



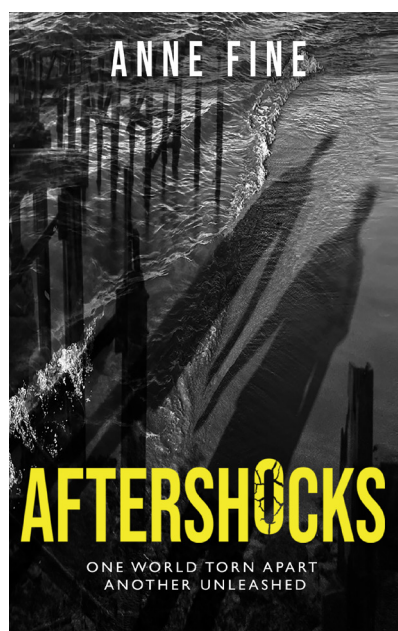
Darren Chetty is a teacher, doctoral researcher and writer with research interests in education, philosophy, racism, children's literature and hip hop culture. He is a contributor to **The Good Immigrant**, edited by Nikesh Shukla and the author, with Jeffrey Boakye, of **What Is Masculinity? Why Does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

Aftershocks

Nicholas Tucker interviews
Anne Fine about her latest novel,
Aftershocks.

Now aged 74, ex-Children's Laureate and multi-award winner Anne Fine is writing as well as ever, with her latest novel **Aftershocks** coming out in February. This will be at least her seventieth publication, and as usual is nothing like anything she has written before. Interviewing her over the phone, I ask her how come she constantly breaks her own mould when writing for older children.

Well, I only write a book when it absolutely insists on being heard. Writing them takes such a long time and so much effort; you really must feel you have to do it. Simply repeating myself just wouldn't work.



In **Aftershocks** Louie, a teenage boy, accompanies his engineer-father to a scene of utter devastation. This is in a non-existent Northern area whose colonised and highly secret inhabitants known as Endlanders have always been a law unto themselves. Louie himself has recently lost a much-loved older brother in a road accident. Unable to share his grief with his nice but ultra-defensive father and with his mother recently quitting the family home, Louie is very much on his own. How he comes through to a better conclusion for all concerned is what the rest of this fine novel is all about.

Was this story prompted by anything particular in your life?

*There had been some recent bereavement and grief in my wider family, and that was in the back of my mind. Then I read this article in **The London Review of Books** about the dreadful 2011 Tsunami in Japan and some of the strange things, including experience of ghostly visions, all dripping wet, reportedly seen after the event. And these two themes meshed; all of a sudden you get this nudge, 'Write me! Write me!'*

Louie is far away from home and a phone signal is unobtainable. Anne is not the only children's author finding ingenious ways of separating her main young characters from constant internet chatter. He is also without any teenage company, male or female. Might this be a problem for girl readers seeking someone of their own sex with whom to identify?

I don't think so. The two sexes are often very similar psychologically, and boys and men can be just as feeling as girls, even if less prone to showing it. Sometimes I have changed a main character's gender after starting a new book and it really seems to make very little difference.

When plain-speaking Mum comes on in this story, I can't help but see you immediately she starts talking!

I just can't write about wet Mums! I see them all around me, too afraid ever to snatch the phone from their children's grasp for a moment, and I simply can't understand why. Jan Mark once said that you start with a finger of somebody then work them up into a



whole character. But in my case, when it comes to Mums I always seem to be starting out from my own finger!

Have you ever had anything approaching a ghostly experience?

No. And if I ever did that would absolutely slay my view of the universe so badly it would be even more terrifying than whatever was happening. Because I am such a realist, such a rationalist, I really don't want an experience that would in any way seriously challenge any of those assumptions.

And yet Louie does several times actually hear his dead brother giving him invaluable advice at crucial moments in the plot.

I'm not saying that other people can't have such experiences, as I have known some who certainly claim they have. I don't look down on them or Louie at all – I just don't want anything like that happening to me.

You have been writing for children now since 1978. Has the experience of doing this changed over the years?

I used to think that the most important thing for any author was to work within the parameters of your own talent. But I am beginning to think now that the greatest skill is to work within other people's penchant for taking offence, usually on someone else's behalf.

So given these new constraints, do you think our Third Golden Age of children's literature is showing signs of coming to an end?

Things move on, and it certainly becomes more difficult for me to write a book when in the process I am forced to bear in mind everyone who might choose to be offended and yet still manage to come up with something worth reading.

It's always fun talking to Anne. Fiercely intelligent, passionate but able to laugh at herself, opinionated but ever open to argument, both she and her books have provided fearless and often exuberant company over many years. Any new story by her is an event, with young readers soon realising that she will always tell them things as she thinks they truly are. Long may she continue to enjoy as much as is still possible the literary freedom she has previously put to such memorable use.

Aftershocks is published by Old Barn Books, 978-1910646779, £11.99 hbk.



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

I wish I'd written...



Mayor Bunny's Chocolate Town, the sequel to Elys Dolan's LOLLIES prize-winning **Mr Bunny's Chocolate Factory**, publishes on 3 February 2022, 978-0192782700, £12.99 hbk

Elys Dolan is inspired by a masterwork of detail.

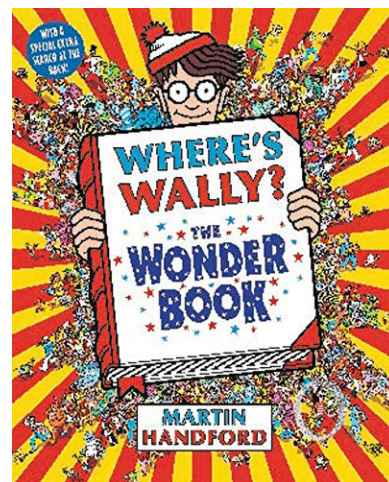
This is a tricky question, because there are many books I wish I'd written. Just a few include Nadia Shireen's hilarious **Grimwood**, Pam Smy's terrifying **Thornhill**, and the pure joy that is Foges and Murphy's **Kitchen Disco**. Why have I been spending my time writing my own books when I could have written these?

But you're going to make me pick just one, aren't you? If I must, I'll choose one that speaks to both the writer and the illustrator in me, Martin Handford's **Where's Wally? The Wonder Book**.

One thing I crave in my work is detail. I love a book where you can go back and spot something new each read, and the **Wally** books are king of this. **The Wonder Book** though, is a law unto itself. The **Wally** books started modestly, showing places like busy train stations and beaches, but here Handford is off the hook.

Instead, he gives us places to explore like a sea of lighthouses in the dead of night where a mighty battle is occurring between sea monsters and dragons and lasers and lots and lots of sailors. Who cares about the beach after you've experienced that tableau? If you look closely, you can even spot Father Christmas, because, well, why not?

This book is freedom, anarchy, and, when you get to that spread with ALL the Wallys, it's actually quite philosophical. It's a masterwork of detail with a sprinkling of madness.



Where's Wally? The Wonder Book is published by Walker Books, 978-1406305906, £7.99 pbk

BfK reviews

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant

Moose's Book Bus

★★★★

Inga Moore, Walker Books, 48pp, 9781406385694, £12.99 hbk

Moose loves telling stories to his family. But what happens when he has told them all the stories he knows? 'Read us a story' suggests Mrs Moose. This entails a visit to the local library and the borrowing of not just one book but several. The story reading is such a success the news spreads like wildfire and the Moose front room is soon packed - too packed. Moose, resourceful as ever has a solution, a Book Bus with books for everyone. But what if you cannot read? Moose has the answer. Soon the woodland community can enjoy books whether alone - or sharing a Storytime.

Inga Moore is likely to be remembered by adults sharing this book for the much-loved **Six Dinner Sid** - another picture book involving community and cooperation. Here a similar atmosphere of warmth and neighbourhood spreads off the page as the animals - each different, are drawn together in a shared experience; listening to a story - the key to the activity, a book and the best, easiest way to get hold of books

is through the local library. There is a very straightforward link between learning to read here seen not as a solitary task but an activity that involves others. Then the access to books and stories - democratic, nonjudgmental, this is, of course, the local library whether a building in the town centre - or truly accessible to a disparate community, the book bus (the mobile library). Inga Moore spells out a very simple connection between access to a library and its contents and local neighbourhoods. Fox might not be the best animal to teach Hare to read - but both can share the story. But how to illustrate the diversity of audience? Inga Moore has chosen to use a woodland setting where the creatures are very clearly different, but (and for some this may not work), they are distinctly anthropomorphic. A very young reader will make connections. The gentle positive message is enhanced by the artwork where soft textures and outlines combine with a rich but pastel palette. The images fill the pages to create an immersive and imaginative sense of place. Written as a tribute to libraries and librarians this cosy story about community and cooperation would be an ideal addition to any storytime. **FH**



Group Hug

★★★★★

Jean Reidy, ill. Joey Chou, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978 1 912650 84 2, £7.99 pbk

This wonderfully clever and inventive story about needing hugs all round is the perfect answer, both during the current pandemic and the soon (hopefully) end of such, because everyone needs hugs, it doesn't matter how young or old we are. The rhymes are very skilful and funny, and the illustrations huggable; the inclusivity ticks lots of boxes too. But

it is the whole that is so impressive. First of all comes a slug in need of a hug: 'Along came a beetle, a lonely ol' bug. You need a hug? I have one said Slug, to keep your heart snug.' And so it goes. A mouse, a squirrel, a skunk (not the happiest of huggers), a beaver, a porcupine (quill-less), a groundhog, a goose, a fox and a moose - and after each addition there is a bigger and bigger group hug until it becomes huge. 'Then along lumbered Bear needing someone to care. Not to snack on, I swear... yet they shouted, BEWARE!' But the others are too scared to add him to the mixture, and they scatter to the four winds. Only the Slug is left because he understands that those who give hugs 'find happy as much as the hugged'. On the final page we see the whole crew reunited in one humongous hug. Brilliantly executed and full of the repetition and colour that appeals so to the young. **ES**

Inside Cat

★★★★★

Written and ill. Brendan Wenzel, Chronicle Books, 32pp, 978-1-4521-7319-1, £12.99 hbk 'Inside Cat knows many windows, finds a view wherever it goes. Wanders. Wonders. Gazes. Gapes. Sees the world through many shapes...'

REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

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

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

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

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

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

Rebecca Butler writes and lectures on children's literature.

Jane Churchill is a children's book consultant.

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

Janet Fisher is a children's literature consultant.

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

Sarah Gallagher is a headteacher and director of **Storyshack.org**

www.storyshack.org

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

Anne Horemans is a secondary school librarian.

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

Matthew Martin is a primary school teacher.

Sue McGonigle is a Lecturer in Primary Education and Co-Creator of www.lovemybooks.co.uk

Neil Philip is a writer and folklorist.

Margaret Pemberton is a school library consultant and blogs at <https://margaretpemberton.edublogs.org/>

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

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

Sue Roe is a children's librarian.

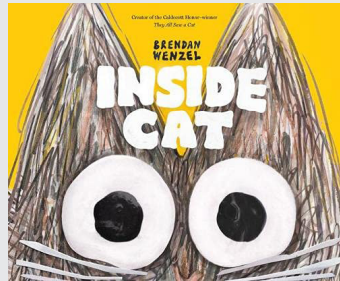
Elizabeth Schlenker is the compiler of www.healthybooks.org.uk

Lucy Staines is a primary school teacher **Mat Tobin** teaches English and Children's Literature in Primary ITE at **Oxford**

Brookes University. He also leads and teaches several modules at Masters level on Children's Literature.

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

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant continued



What's inside and what is not? What exists and what does not? Prepare to have your perceptions challenged in this intriguing picturebook, and keep your eyes open for visual and verbal clues to help you observe – or invent – the answers.

True to its name, the cat in this story lives indoors. Home is a rambling mansion with endless windows offering tantalizing glimpses of a city it doesn't understand, and as Cat wanders from room to room, it records its strange experiences on the pages of this book.

Naturally, things get a bit mixed up. Cat doesn't have the right words for everything it sees, and there are many questions to be answered. But it makes sense to call a helicopter a roaring fly, and that child on the seesaw really could be playing with a dragon. Besides, with an imagination like Cat's, who needs the facts?

Just as we're wondering whether Cat might know it ALL comes a delightful final page-reveal. The doors to the mansion have been left open. The cat is faced with a city that is bigger and brighter than anything it has imagined – and we are challenged, too, with a view that sends us back to earlier spreads to spot what's going on.

Drawn with loose, flowing lines that capture feelings as well as movements, Cat is an appealingly eccentric character, and Wenzel's artwork cues readers to observe and deduce, too. Monochromatic doodles show us what is in Cat's mind, whereas brighter colours are reserved for what is 'real': the walls of the house, glimpses of the city through a pane of glass. The resulting multi-image spreads are visually busy and convey a sense of energy and joy, and Wenzel's rhythmic text has a jaunty energy to match. This provides a good framework for the action, but be prepared for some half-rhymes that rely on U.S. pronunciation. Wenzel's choices lead to some wonderfully inventive images, but could feel a little off key if you're reading aloud and have been enjoying the flow.

Inside Cat will be particularly enjoyed in contexts where confident, enthusiastic adults engage with children as they read. The visual literacy needed to connect with and interpret these spreads may discourage some families, though.

CFH

Grandad's Camper

★★★★

Written and ill. Harry Woodgate, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978-1-78344-983-5, £12.99 hbk

When they were young, Gramps and Grandad travelled the world in a cosy pink camper van, a 'little home on wheels' that brought adventures to their door. These days, Grandad lives all alone in a cottage, but his stories about Gramps bring him to life for their grandchild, who likes listening to tales of days gone by and notices that Grandad seems a little sad.

'Do you still have your camper van?' the child asks, one summer, and Grandad admits that yes, he does, although it's looking rather sad and lonely in the garage. 'Let's fix it up and go to the seaside,' suggests the child. 'Together!' And so begins a restoration project with a truly satisfying goal – a beach campout with hot chocolate, marshmallows and a singalong. It's just what Gramps would have wanted!

Grandad and Gramps are a visibly diverse couple whose relationship glows with love, respect and happy memories, and their kind and inclusive story is told from the child's perspective, in a way that feels as though they're talking to young readers.

Harry Woodgate's text delivers an important message but it's his artwork that makes this book stand out. Expansive, textured spreads depicting landscapes, gardens and the van interior are interspersed with busier 'action' layouts as Grandad describes his memories, and Woodgate's subtle rainbow palette creates warmth on every page. The endpapers are particularly beautiful, bookending the camper van's adventures in a way that invites imaginative discussions and makes us want to climb on board and share the fun.

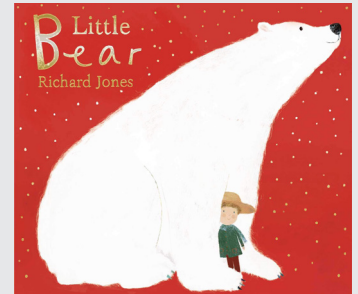
Parents and carers will appreciate this book's positive approach to inclusivity and sense of calm contentment (especially at bedtime!), but it would also make a good starting point for reminiscence work and intergenerational projects in schools and libraries. CFH

Little Bear

★★★★

Richard Jones, Simon and Schuster, 32pp, 978 1 3985 0248 2, £12.99 hbk

On Monday, a boy finds a polar bear in his garden. A bear so small he will sit in the palm of the boy's hand. And in the picture we see this bear, quite enormously huge, filling the whole of the glowing red page. Turn over, and we see the boy and bear in reality, the boy small, the bear tiny. 'Are you lost, little bear? Can I help you?' asks the boy. By Tuesday, the bear is too big to fit on his hand, so the boy pops him in his pocket. Together they play, all afternoon. When Wednesday reveals the bear was too big for his pocket, the boy plops him into his hat, and decides it is time to take the



bear home. Down at the coast, where we see a small boat; small boy, small hat plus bear and a bag (of supplies?) 'Raise the anchor! Set the sail! Away we go!' But by Thursday the bear is too big for the bag, so curls up warm and safe on the bag. On and on they sail, through the night, the boy clutching the bag close. Come Friday and Saturday the boat looks in imminent danger of sinking as the bear is now enormous. On Sunday the small boy climbs onto the back of the huge bear, and shouts, 'Land ahoy, little bear!' Turning the page slowly we find a wordless page. Two huge, grinning polar bears greet each other, nose to nose, with three small bears, boy-size, bounding below their legs. Fun and games all day long for the family and the boy until the skies grow dark and the silver stars shine. The little boy wants to stay there for ever. The next picture is quite wonderful. The little boy stands centre page, holding in one hand the boat's mooring rope, whilst in its mouth a young polar bear holds the other end, the boy between them looking, longingly. The tug is measurable. For it is time to go home. A fond goodbye is said, and the final page shows back views of the bears watching the tiny boat way out on the ocean. (Take a magnifying glass to the image of the boat and one can see the boy has both arms raised in farewell...) The illustrations are soft throughout and provide an intimacy and belief in the growing friendship, as the simple text and the days of the week furnish each page. A touching book about friendship, and saying fond goodbyes. GB

SuperJoe Does NOT Do Cuddles

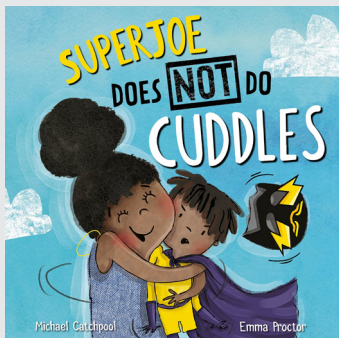
★★★★

Michael Catchpool, ill. Emma Proctor, Lantana, 32pp, 978 1 913747 65 7, £11.99 hbk

Joe is a superhero *par excellence*. In spite of a Mum who insists that he wears his scarf or his vest or his belt, he rescues people from tigers, from runaway trains, and from a broken bridge over a river, muttering to himself that he sees the person behind these terrible happenings to be his nemesis, Grey Shadow. We see Grey Shadow too, going about her nefarious business while Joe does all the rescuing. But Joe hates cuddles because Superheroes don't need them. Or do they? One night when he can't sleep, he discovers

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

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that sometimes superheroes do need just that. But Mum mustn't tell anyone, particularly the Grey Shadow. There's a lovely little twist at the end when we see Grey Shadow herself having a cuddle with her Mum. The illustrations are huge fun, and Joe's imagination couldn't be portrayed better. The battle of the sexes has just begun! **ES**

Bathe the Cat

★★★★

Alice B. McGinty, ill. David Roberts, Abrams & Chronicle Books, 48pp, 9781452142708 £12.99 hbk

With a visit from Grandma imminent, our interracial family have a lot to do to get the house in order. From cleaning the floor to tidying up the living room and cleaning the pets, Dad presents a list of jobs on the fridge using magnetic letters. However, when the family cat spots a task that sets their hair on end - what cat wants to be bathed - chaos ensues as our cunning feline begins to mix up all the letters and present hilarious new jobs instead.

Soon the family are scrubbing fishes, rocking rugs and feeding the floor and each time Dad rearranges the letters again, the cat returns and causes more mischief. Will our little family get everything in order in time or will the home be left in chaos?

Roberts' digitally-enhanced pencil and watercolours provide the images and strong use of white space allows us to enjoy each character and their expressions of utter confusion when tasked with odd jobs that don't make sense thanks to our mischievous marmalade moggy. Alongside this is McGinty's assured, bouncy, rhyming verse that carries the narrative flow and bumps and jolts at all the right moments: this is a picturebook that should be read aloud.

I especially loved the addition of same-sex parents which is not central to the narrative but has been normalised and, alongside the light and dark skin tones of their children, is far richer for it. This is a book that is sure to invite repeated rereadings and giggles - the cat's crafty expressions alone are worth the ride. **MT**

New talent

The More Monster

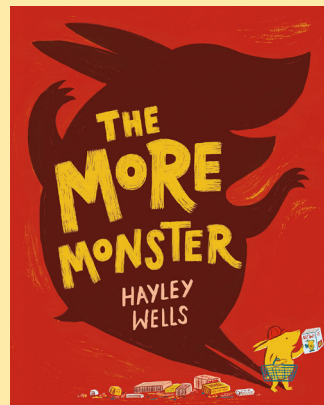
★★★★

Written and ill. Hayley Wells, Pavilion, 32pp, 978-1-84365-469-8, £6.99, pbk

Are there too many things in your life? Do you ever feel overwhelmed by stuff? Be prepared to reassess the status quo with a smile on your face as Hayley Wells addresses over-consumption and corporate greed with insight, style and charm in this wryly-humorous allegory. A fairer world is possible, we just need curious little creatures to ask awkward questions.

On an island ruled by a huge monster, hundreds of dutiful inhabitants labour night and day to create more things for it to consume. New things, improved things, the latest, most fashionable must-have things: as fast as the little islanders produce the goods, the monster gobbles them up. It's a never-ending job, but it has to be done, otherwise - to quote the measured and perceptive text - there would be consequences. And that's enough to keep everyone in line, until one small and rather independent-minded islander starts asking questions. In a delightful spread highlighting their individuality, her co-workers attempt to answer them, but somehow nothing sounds quite right. So the small islander goes in search of knowledge, and it's a search that takes her somewhere very scary - the monster's tummy, where she discovers an amazing secret. The greedy giant is a machine!

The small islander attempts to deal with the monster from within, but it's too much for her to handle. The monster goes on a rampage, eating everything in its path, including the other islanders. Happily, they're expert mechanics,



and once inside the beast they're able to mount a joint re-programming campaign. Eventually the monster is tamed and the objects in its tummy are redistributed. The islanders are free to create a world that works for them - one in which everyone has time for the things that matter most in life, and the community centre is always open.

Despite its charm and gentle demeanour, Wells' debut picturebook addresses serious issues in a way that may prompt some soul-searching, and makes an effective starting point for discussion and debate with older children as well as younger ones. Text and images work seamlessly to engage readers and promote insight and understanding, creating a lively, thought-provoking and visually exciting experience. Wells' stylish three-tone prints evoke the golden age of children's publishing, but layout and content are thoroughly modern, and visual and conceptual playfulness are evident throughout. Note what happens when the delete button is pressed, and keep your eyes open for the red-capped islander in the final scene. Despite being overthrown in the gentilest of revolutions, capitalism is making a quiet comeback! **CFH**

There's a Ghost in This House

★★★★

Oliver Jeffers, Harper Collins, 96pp, 978 000 829835 7, £20.00, hbk

A girl with green skin and green hair invites us into her old house, with the slightly worrying admission that 'I haven't had visitors for quite a while', and an invitation to help her find a ghost. As soon as we enter the house, Oliver Jeffers interleaves a semi-transparent almost blank sheet between the left-hand picture and the right-hand text, and eagle-eyed children will notice that once the sheet is overlaid on the left-hand picture, ghosts are revealed. If the technique is very different, Jeffers

is using the same joke as in Jan Pienkowski's **Haunted House**, where the child reader sees so much more in the illustration than the narration in the text ever admits. Much of the fun here is the anticipation of how many ghosts will turn up, where they will be, and what they will get up to. Small white sheeted figures with button eyes, they are not at all frightening. Rather, they are would-be playmates enjoying the game of hide-and-seek, sometimes disguising themselves in friendly shapes like a draped towel or a domed mantelpiece clock. On the left-hand page, Jeffers uses grey photographs of the empty rooms of an eighteenth-century

townhouse, as if from an old guidebook or sale catalogue, their intimidatingly empty grandeur transformed by the busy playful ghosts. It's a simple and enjoyable idea, brilliantly sustained. **CB**

My Beautiful Voice

★★★★

Joseph Coelho, ill. Allison Colpoys, Frances Lincoln First Edition, 32pp, 978-0-7112-4830-4, £11.99 hbk

This bright, uplifting book is full of things that really matter - stories to fire the heart, quiet moments of empathy and perception, the power of poetry to express our feelings and the joy of finding one's own voice. 'We all have songs to sing and we will sing them when we choose...'

When you're small and anxious, like the narrator of this story, sometimes your voice completely disappears. The start of a new school year, for example, can be particularly daunting. How wonderful, then, to discover the excitement - and challenge - of a teacher like Miss Flotsam!

Exploding into the classroom in a 'flutter of fabric filled / with the spice of colour', Miss Flotsam commands every child's attention. But it isn't all larger-than-life performances and razzmatazz - there's a reflective side to Miss Flotsam, who notices what individual children need and delivers it quietly and effectively. The magic she sets in motion doesn't happen all at once - there are stories involved, and a poem that emerges, cautiously. But with time and bravery, the door unlocks.

'The words of my poem / are streaming out of me, / riding my voice, / filling the classroom...'

Like other artforms, poetry has the power to reach children whose voices are rarely (or never) heard, and this book captures something of that excitement. The challenge of speaking out in public for the first time is given the space it needs - from an image of the child realising that her voice is getting ready to be heard, through spreads showing her battling against winds and up mountains until she's standing on a cliff-edge, to the triumphant image where she finally speaks out.

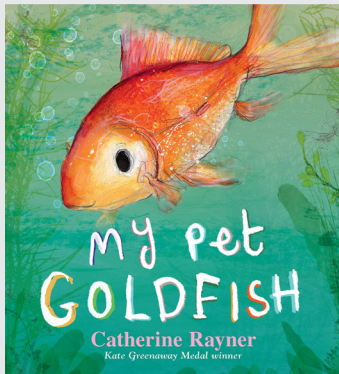
Allison Colpoys' expressive artwork flows across the pages, drawing us into Miss Flotsam's warm-hearted (and wonderfully diverse) classroom, and helping us to feel at home. Her summery palette captures the vitality and allure of Miss Flotsam's stories and works with the text to create a mounting sense of optimism - look for the peachy line and watch it become a pastel rainbow as our narrator finds her voice!

Joseph Coelho's blank verse text has an appealing sense of immediacy and invites its own performance. In keeping with a book about the power of words (and a story told by a budding poet) events and feelings are described in ways that create pictures in our minds. When she's angry, for example,

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

Miss Flotsam's eyes 'turn thunder into summer rain' and when invited to read her poem, our narrator's awakening voice reminds her of 'the first chirp of morning birdsong, like a key clicking in a lock...'

My Beautiful Voice is a nuanced, perceptive and a realistic story about feelings and experiences that children will recognize and to which they will relate, and reflects Coelho's extensive experience of working as a poet in schools. It will strike a chord with those who struggle to speak out as well as prompting insight and empathy in those who don't, and offers a rich source of inspiration for creative writing activities with a wide age-range. **CFH**



My Pet Goldfish

★★★★★

Catherine Rayner, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 4063 8578 6, £12.99 hbk

Undoubtedly this is one of the very best non-fiction picture books I've seen this year; it's based on Catherine Rayner's own goldfish, Richard; the very same name the young narrator chooses for the gift received herein.

Little by little, through careful observation of this very first pet, the child learns a lot about goldfish, sharing these observations with readers. In addition in a smaller font, throughout the book we read fascinating facts about goldfish: They have good memories perhaps remembering things for as much as 5 months; they lack eyelids and breathe by means of gills; they use their very good eyesight and sense of smell to locate food; with their acute vision they can detect more colours than humans; the collective name for them is a 'troubling'.

Richard's owner has an older friend, Sandy who is a fish expert. He has a backyard pond full of assorted goldfish which he shows to the narrator, offering said pond as a home for Richard should he ever grow too large for his home aquarium. Richard grows and grows and when he turns 4½ years old, Sandy's offer is accepted and Richard's new home is perfect for the friends to continue their regular meetings.

The delicate mixed-media illustrations are absolutely stunning;

each one is a place to pause and delight in the gorgeous fish in their watery, often bubble filled environment wherein the aquatic plants drift gently to and fro.

There's a final author's note that includes a few tips for fish care, and an index. An absolute delight. **JB**

Crock o' Clock

★★★★★

Huw Lewis Jones, ill. Ben Sanders, Happy Yak, 32pp, 978 0 7112 6437 3, £6.99, pbk

No wonder the big Croc is getting bigger and bigger. In this accumulating tale, keepers at the zoo feed Croc an astonishing amount, on the hour, from one through till twelve o'clock, all foods which will be recognizable to any small reader. One o'clock begins with a mountain of macaroni, and follows swiftly with three French Fries at three o'clock, four pumpkin pies at four o'clock. But the fun is in that not only is a new food added at each hour, but the preceding foods are given too! By the time five o'clock comes round, readers realise that the tale can be sung to the tune of the twelve days of Christmas, the clue being '5 doughnut riiiiings!' Whilst the clock ticks, Croc is still hungry for more. Most of the tempting foods are alliterative, so the text is great fun to read – and sing – aloud. The illustrator has enjoyed adding each and all of those tempting treats, and there is the little bird we met on page one, who has watched as Croc gets bigger and bigger on each spread. How does this cautionary tale end? Cunningly, with a very small vegetable offering after a very large POP! With engaging illustrations and the text enlarging with each added eat treat, early reading is a real possibility for participating youngsters. This would be an amazing song to sing out from the back of the holidaying/shopping car, the coach taking the class on an outing, or when tidying the classroom in preparation for lunch! It would be a delightful jumping off point for individual written variations, along with great opportunities for collaborative artwork. Well worth seeking out. **GB**

Choices

★★★★

Roozeboos, Child's Play, 32pp, 978 1 78628 564 5, £6.99 pbk

This brightly coloured picture book is literally just what it says in the title. It's about choices: little ones (like which ice cream to have) big ones, (such as whether to go on the super-duper giant slide), whether to stand out from the crowd or become part of it, whether to be always active or to take things easy, whether to be careful or to do silly things, whether to eat all the sandwiches oneself or to share, and whether to dive into the swimming pool, even though you are afraid the first time. Set in the context

of a little black girl and her mother having a lovely time at the local park, the story shows us the little girl's choices as she makes her way through all the possibilities of fun things to do. The text is minimal, but the very busy pictures reflect the choices she makes. I had some doubts about the viability of encouraging kids to make choices that might not be wise, and one of the sentences near the end, 'just follow you heart' could be a recipe for disaster! However, it is certainly true that 'with every choice you grow', and that must go for the bad ones as well as the good ones. **ES**

No One is Angry Today

★★★★★

Toon Tellegen, ill. Marc Boutavant, trans. David Colmer, Gecko Press, 70pp, 9781776573455 £12.99 hbk

In a return to the same world as Tellegen and Boutavant's **The Day No One Was Angry** comes ten interconnected, anthropomorphic tales in which powerful and unexplained emotions are exhibited with the surrounding cast there to pick up the pieces and wonder why. From a Firebelly Toad who seeks to cause pain and misery to his fellow creatures in order to see if they experience the same anger he does to a solitary scarab who pens a letter to a dung beetle that leaves him feeling ill and enraged, this collection of tales invites the reader to reflect on the complexity of our feelings and how emotions are as diverse and multifarious as the person feeling them.

Each of these stories interweave in some way, often only fleetingly with a familiar character passing through, but they are all connected through the powerful concept that feelings, even those of anger, are often unpredictable and unexplainable. Free of any stern moralising, something that Dutch children's literature like this steers clear of, **No One is Angry Today** invites a deeper, philosophical reading about the nature of our emotions. Much like the animals in the story, some young readers will be able to connect to the different shades of anger performed here whilst others will watch or read on with fascination and curiosity. There are no answers here, only contemplations and reflections.

On their own, the written narratives may have been a cognitive step too far for the younger reader but Boutavant's dark yet humorous illustrations shine a light on the complex emotions with rich caricatures throughout. Strong palettes of yellows, pinks and greens evoke French illustrators such as Grée and Beuville: this is a richly depicted and oddly real world that Boutavant has imagined; I found my smiling at the Elephant energetically dancing with Squirrel and Bear frolicking joyously through the forest heading towards a party that he ignorantly ruins on an annual basis.

This is a challenging illustrated book that invites questions and philosophical debate rather than preaching and providing simplistic

answers. At a time when we are all trying to make sense of the world around us during these trying times, stories that refuse to offer clear answers but rather bravely own up to the fact that our feelings are complex, messy and often difficult to understand makes for a refreshingly welcome reading experience. Tellegen's tales invite such a journey through multiple, complex narratives and I suspect that with each re-reading, new meanings will arise. This is a welcome and worthy collection of tales that are as funny as they are wry and reflective. **MT**

Big Dance

★★★★★

Aoife Greenham, Child's Play, 32pp, 978 1 78628 568 3, £6.99 pbk

Poppa tells Pippa that everyone 'has a dance inside them' even Pippa, and she must find her dance before the Big Dance takes place. Pippa is a bit perturbed at this idea because she has not danced before. Poppa shows her what all the other animals are doing in their dances, and each one is different. There are the chickens, who stomp when they dance, the rabbits who do a Ribbon Dance because one of them uses a wheelchair, and she waves the ribbon for the others to dance between. The cow trots for her dance, and a kitten dances with leaves. Each of them is different, and yet they all love dancing together. When Pippa tries to find a dance for herself, she keeps falling over and in disgust, she announces that the 'Big Dance is nonsense'. Well, the others say, perhaps it is, but it's fun to do because we do it all together, and if everyone doesn't participate, then it can't be the Big Dance at all. Pippa isn't convinced, but when the music starts, she can't help herself; she begins to move all of her own accord, and becomes happily involved. This parable about how the inhabitants of our world must find themselves in a big dance whether they want to be in it or not, and that each individual has to find their own way in, may not be apparent on first reading, which is why this story should be used in a school context or with a carer who can help understanding along. Of course, it can be read as a straightforward book about dancing with others. Your choice. The swirly pictures of pastel animals are fun and engaging. **ES**

A Tale of Two Dragons

★★★★★

Geraldine McCaughrean, ill. Peter Malone, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978 1 8391 3028 1, £12.99, hbk

Separated by a hedge of thorns, two wealthy kingdoms stand back-to-back. Arbor has lush green woods, orchards and plenty of birds whereas Pomosa has rich farmland, crops and grazing cows. There's a problem though, for the people of Arbor require wheat and rice for baking; those of Pomosa are unable to cook without firewood to heat their ovens. If only the two kingdoms would share their resources with one another all would be well.

reviews

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued



Despite the hedge the children from both sides sneak through at night and help themselves to what their families need: only thus can the peoples of both realms be fed and warm.

The kings however are far from happy so in order to protect what they consider their property, they each hire a dragon from China to act as guard, thus leaving Arbor without bread and milk, Pomosa without firewood. The kings order the dragons to fight to the death declaring that the one with the winning dragon will rule over both lands, much to the distress of their citizens who love their respective dragons.

Can peace ever prevail? With its dramatic watercolour illustrations, this fable has much to say about our 21st-century world and the way in which leaders operate. One hopes that what child readers will take from it is that co-operation results in a far better way of life than does warfare. **JB**

The Queen in the Cave

★★★★★

Júlia Sardà, Walker Studio, 64pp, 9781406367430, £14.99 hbk

From the illustrator who gave us the acclaimed **The Liszts** and **Mary Who Wrote Frankenstein** comes an authorial debut rich with otherworldly delights and a strong sense of childness. With a brief narrative prologue in which our protagonist, Franca, is found creating collages from richly-illustrated magazines, we espy a floating arm tapping her on the shoulder. This touch evokes a peculiar feeling in Franca that tempts her to leave her home comforts and explore the world beyond. So begins her journey to meet The Queen in the Cave.

This is a calling that will take her towards the forest beyond her house, beyond the walls of nettles and thickets to a cave and a world that will both shock and delight her and her two younger sisters who accompany her. Does Franca have the courage to step beyond security's veil and discover another side and possibility to her personality that she has yet to face?

In a sumptuously designed picture book, extended to a grand 64 pages, Sardà explores those memories and feelings we get as children that we cannot ignore: the innate compulsion

to step out of adult control into new realms of possibilities that can only be navigated through self-will and independence. In this story, Franca and her sisters, Carmela and Tomasina, travel to a realm full of rich imaginings and wondrous secrets. For the younger sisters, this new world is often overwhelming but for Franca, it is a place that has lain deep within her and one she has finally allowed to germinate.

Readers will be enthralled and beguiled by Sardà's Wonderland-like world where sun-masked fairies light the path to the cave whilst coiled serpents hide in branches. Great parades of insects and flying fish dwarf the sisters as they journey to meet the queen of this other realm. Past hanging bats and ghoulish giantesses, they travel until they finally arrive at the queen's abode only to find that she bears a startling resemblance to Franca herself. This is as much a psychological journey as it is transitional.

The Queen in the Cave is an ode to Sardà's own childhood in which she was nervous and curious about discovering that world outside: that liminal space between dependence and independence, control and freedom. The story's odd, quirky realm will raise many questions with its voyage and return narrative but I, for one, am happy that its ambiguous meaning mirrors our own initial, trepidatious steps into the realm of youthhood and beyond. Like the very best children's books, this is a rare treasure that carries interpretations, readings and re-readings beyond the recommended age range. **MT**

A Mouse called Miika

★★★★★

Matt Haig, ill. Chris Mould, Canongate, 208pp, 978 1 83885 368 6, £12.99, hbk

A Mouse called Miika is the fourth in Haig's popular Christmas series which began with **The Boy Called Christmas** recently released as a feature film. This volume tells the tale of a tiny mouse who leaves his home in search of cheese and adventure in 'The World Outside'.

The story is set in the magical world of Elfheim, with elves, trolls, flying reindeer, a truth pixie and of course Nikolas (the boy called Christmas). Miika has a series of scrapes and adventures particularly with his friend fellow mouse Bridget the Brave. With her Miika finds himself in the biggest scrape of all when they steal a lump of cheese from some fearsome trolls, incurring their wrath and putting themselves in great danger.

The text is engaging and includes some delicious, invented words such as 'mudfungie' an insult and drimwick – being touched with a magical spell and 'urga burga' seemingly irresistible cheese.

Chris Mould's delightful lively and comic black and white illustrations

perfectly complement the text. The hard back edition includes attractive colour end papers.

This is a fast-paced engaging story with a magical cast and themes of friendship, bravery, jealousy, telling

the truth and being yourself. It would be particularly enjoyable for young readers familiar with the storyworld and characters and perfect for independent readers gaining confidence with longer texts. **SMC**

8 – 10 Junior/Middle



Frindleswyde

★★★★★

Natalia and Lauren O'Hara, Walker, 32pp, 978 1 4063 8896 1, £14.99, hbk

The story opens with Cora's Granny telling her the story of Frindleswyde, who steals into houses bringing the cold with him and snatching those he finds within. The reader is immediately hooked with the opening lines 'Can you feel a tremble in the wind? Frindleswyde is coming.' She warns her granddaughter to be wary and never let him put out the lamp. As you may guess, Frindleswyde succeeds in entering Cora's house and snatching the light, but she is determined to get it back - and so her quest begins.

Cora is fearless and undeterred when Frindleswyde sets her three seemingly impossible challenges intending to keep her in his frozen world. Cora achieves all of these tasks, deploying some of Frindleswyde's own possessions to help her. Unfortunately, in the process Cora's heart begins to freeze. Is she destined to be trapped forever in this frozen land?

The three challenges provide a traditional structure to a tale with a feminist twist as a brave heroine thwarts a cunning foe. The story is a metaphor for the changing of the seasons; Frindleswyde personifies the coming of winter and parallels are drawn between the winter freeze and human warmth or coldness. **Frindleswyde** is steeped in Nordic tales of the coming of winter and has echoes of 'Starjök' in Robert Swindell's **The Ice Palace** and Andersen's **The Snow Queen**.

The text is beautifully written, rich with similes and rhythmic language which would be a delight to read aloud:

'If you open the door, he'll bring in the cold, if he brings in the cold, he'll

put out the lamp and if he puts out the lamp, I cannot come home to save you.'

The illustrations are perfectly pitched, evoking Frindleswyde's mysterious icy world 'where summer waits frozen for winter's end' with a cool palette of blues, greens and purples. The hardback version contains a sparkling dust jacket over a haunting cover of the eponymous Frindleswyde.

This is a stunning picturebook for fearless lovers of fairy tales perfect for sharing on chilly winter's evenings. **SMC**

Black and British: an illustrated history

★★★★★

David Olusoga, ill. Jake Alexander and Melleny Taylor, Macmillan, 80pp, 9781529052954, £16.99 hbk Professor David Olusoga, OBE, is well known as a historian, broadcaster and presenter, writer, and champion of diversity. His book for adults **Black and British: a short, essential history** was so well-received that he has written this excellent version for children, remembering that, in his own schooldays, black people did not feature at all in British history. He sets the record straight by telling his readers about the Roman African soldiers who patrolled Hadrian's Wall, and the African Emperor Septimius Severus, then the black trumpeter, John Blanke, who is shown on a painting as a member of an elite group of musicians playing at the court of Henry VIII. He goes on to point out the black children who appear in Georgian portraits as servants, or adopted children e.g. Dido Belle; includes in the agitation against slavery those who wrote or spoke about their own experiences and helped to achieve its abolition, and brings the story up to date with the world wars, the Windrush generation, and the many significant black people who are role models today, e.g. Dame Malorie Blackman and Sir Lewis Hamilton. These are only some of the many examples he gives of the contribution that black people have made to our lives and our history.

This book is, as you might expect, very well written and fascinating to read, and it is lavishly illustrated on good quality paper, including some photographs. The two illustrators and the designers are all black: they are pictured on the final page. David Olusoga wishes that he had had something like this book when he was at school, and your reviewer agrees that every school should have copies! **DB**

Nina: A story of Nina Simone

★★★★

Traci N. Todd, ill. Christian Robinson, Scribble Kids Books, 48pp, 978 1 914484 16 2, £12.99, hbk

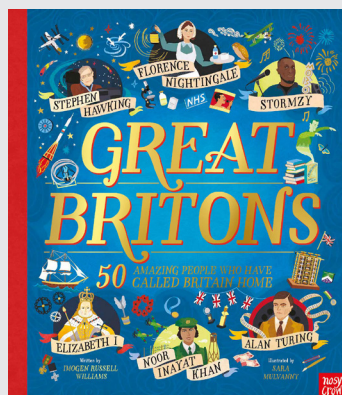
This is a biography of the legendary Nina Simone in picturebook form. Young readers will find out about Nina's early experiences, her development as a performer and the social and historical context of her life. She was born Eunice Waymon in North Carolina into a musical household. Her mother sang in church and her father played the piano - Eunice was inspired by his love of jazz. Music was all around her, but Eunice had innate ability too, 'She sang before she could talk and found rhythm before she could walk.'

We read about the music lessons and opportunities offered to her at an early age but also how, despite her talents, racism and prejudice had an impact on her progress as a musician. One notable event was rejection by the prestigious Curtis institute, who despite a flawless audition, turned her away because of the colour of her skin. We hear how Eunice (now calling herself Nina) gradually found a route to fame and success via the bars of New York, playing the prestigious Carnegie Hall and making increasingly popular records.

The book sets Nina's story against the backdrop of the racism in mid twentieth century USA and we learn how she became involved in the Civil Rights movement though her music. She felt pressure to add her voice to the growing unrest but received death threats when she did respond through her music. Her bravery is clear, undeterred by threats she continued to sing songs of Black America and offer hope for the black children of the future.

Nina's story is fascinating, and the author's lively conversational style and choice of detail brings it vividly to life. For example, when describing young Eunice switching from playing 'good time jazz' to church music when mama comes home or describing the lemon drops and sunlight in the ceiling at her piano teacher's house. The collaged textured illustrations are bold and attractive adding additional detail to the storytelling, the 'Whites Only' posters on the wall are particularly powerful.

This is a well written and strikingly illustrated book about a fascinating, talented and significant individual. It provides insight into the Civil Rights Movement. It may encourage young readers to find out more about the historical and social context and to seek out Nina Simone's music. A songlist would have been a wonderful addition. **SMc**

**Great Britons**

★★★★★

Imogen Russell Williams, ill. Sara Mulvanny, Nosy Crow, 112pp, 9781839940156, £16.99 hbk

Great Britons presents the biographical stories of fifty key figures from Britain's history in a large-format, attractive hardback volume with lively, colourful illustrations. Subtitled **50 Amazing People who have called Britain Home**, the collection emphasises the importance of the history of immigration, integration and innovation that has shaped Britain. Each double page spread celebrates the story and achievements of a different figure from British history and the range is diverse, including such key and varied figures as Boudicca, David Attenborough, Olaudah Equiano, Noor Inayat Khan, Tim Berners Lee, Owain Glyndwr, Alan Turing, Lemn Sissay, Stormzy, Emmeline Pankhurst to name a few. The book moves from early Britons through leaders, writers, inventors, activists, athletes, rappers, and campaigners. Children's authors also make their mark with pages on Beatrix Potter, Roald Dahl, Judith Kerr and Malorie Blackman.

The text is written in an engaging, accessible style full of fascinating facts and quirky details and the illustrations complement the text and enhance the double page spreads. The life stories are presented in alphabetical order by subject surname rather than chronologically and focus on character and achievements. There is a useful illustrated timeline at the end of the book to help place subjects in historical context. The subjects have been carefully chosen to emphasise diversity and the contribution of those who moved to Britain and made it home as well as those born in the country. A thoughtful introduction is useful in explaining that tough choices in selection were necessary, and in giving context to complex issues such as the history of Empire and the importance of acknowledging past faults and harmful behaviour and views.

This book will be an excellent resource for classrooms, libraries and home collections, a volume to study, dip into and revisit. **SR**

Beetles for Breakfast

★★★★

Madeleine Finlay, ill. Jisu Choi, Flying Eye Books, 88pp, 9781838740221, £14.99 hbk

The title tells readers the gist of the information here: insects are eaten and enjoyed by many nations in the world, and we are close to using them in many more countries, as long as they can be suitably disguised. Dog food is likely to include crushed larvae sooner than food for humans, but we're getting there. This book goes on to describe the many possibilities for using plants, and fungi and mosses seem to have huge potential. Young readers will surely appreciate the many possible uses of poo, when suitably treated, e.g. as a fertilizer, or dog poo could fuel streetlights! Our health could be monitored in many other ways, e.g. analyzing our breath, and the mucus of a certain slug could be used as a natural form of healing instead of plasters. Inventors are working on removing plastic from the oceans, and on building houses with bottles made of bricks - we can already buy jackets made of recycled plastic. It's all fascinating, and of course there is plenty of encouragement, as well as a double page spread at the end, on what we can all be doing now, like using less plastic in the home and buying biodegradable products; wasting less: upcycling, clothes swapping - there are lots of good ideas.

The Contents include food, the home and particularly the bathroom, and innovations coming for various settings e.g. farming, the park, at school, on the beach, and Future Thinking, which speculates on transport. The layout is very approachable: each chapter has a line across the bottom detailing what's coming, so that the reader can turn to any particularly interesting topic, or continue to browse as each is covered in more depth, and it's all in boxes, with lots of very colourful illustrations. The paper is, of course, FSC certified. Madeleine Finlay is a writer, journalist and presenter specializing in science, and this is her first book, but it is certainly going to be useful, and Korean illustrator Jisu Choi packs her pictures with detail. This will be fun to browse through, and there is a well-constructed Glossary and Index for those young readers with particular interests. Definitely recommended. **DB**

Little Horror

★★★★

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

This hilarious debut tale by Daniel Peak, is narrated by Rita, a toddler with the brains, speech and attitude of a super-smart teenager! She takes us back to her earliest memories, where she soon discovers that not all children her age can talk and understand as much as she can ... in fact she has yet to meet another child that can. She also soon realises that her abilities are best kept under wraps, other than from her slightly

older brother, whom her parents, assuming her exploits are his, think is a child genius and never believe his stories about Rita anyway.

Whilst at nursery one day, a strange meeting with Tiptoes (the worst clown in the world), followed by the disappearance of her family, starts an adventure that takes Rita on a hunt for answers, through soft-play centres, cat-flaps, mobility scooters and a very unusual ice cream van.

There are a host of twists and turns to this story, plus many laugh out loud moments. I'd like to think that a toddler walking around on their own as much as Rita does would cause more alarm than it does in the story, but frankly it all just adds to the silliness and fun of her quest for the truth.

Although this is his first novel for children, Daniel Peak also writes comedy for television and his experience in entertaining definitely shines through. This is a unique and clever story, with madcap, mystery and danger thrown in. I'm sure we will see more from him very soon. **AH**

Loki: a bad god's guide to being good

★★★★

Louie Stowell, author and illustrator, Walker Books, 240pp., 9781406399752, £6.99 pbk

Your reviewer wonders whether Louie Stowell has come across the hilarious series of books by Jamie Thompson about a Dark Lord who accidentally comes to earth and, becoming a weedy schoolboy known as Dirk Lloyd, attempts to cope with life on Earth before returning to his true form? There are indeed some similarities, as the powerful god Loki, known on Earth as Liam, is disgusted with his human physical appearance, especially his 'noodle' arms, has trouble understanding Earth life, and thinks he should absolutely under no circumstances be made to fold his own undergarments, but the difference is that Loki has been sent by Odin as a punishment, and he has to try to be good. Being Loki, this is exceedingly difficult, and his -3000 points, rather than being converted into plusses, just increase and increase to -2 million, until he discovers his conscience and finds someone whose happiness he puts before his own. He has to record his actions and thoughts in a Diary, which contradicts him if he lies - what a great idea! A big drawback is that Thor, alias Thomas, has come to Earth with him, likes to sit on his face and fart, and is generally regarded as 'the handsome one' and far more popular. Their 'parents', minor Norse gods in disguise, don't really know much about parenting or life on Earth, but they do all have some fun, and crisps turn out to be a great discovery. Both boys are 11 in their earthly form, and are also dealing with secondary school teachers and bullies like Fierce Boy. Loki has difficulty knowing who to trust, and makes mistakes, which he then has to try and rectify. In view of

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

the films that are now popular, this may well attract young readers.

Louie Stowell's own illustrations are in a childlike cartoon style which works well, and readers may well want to draw the characters and doodles themselves. **DB**

Greta and the Ghost Hunters

★★★★

Sam Copeland, ill. Sarah Horne, Puffin, 238pp, 9780241446386, £6.99 pbk

Greta's story is simultaneously spine-chilling, heart-warming ... and hilarious. Her family are a charming, quirky group. Dad is a pipe-smoking poet and mum is a chakra-chanting yogi with a giant purple bouffant. Her little brother is a little less exciting, unless you share his obsession for lorries, and her adorable old Grandma lives in the loft where she is able to converse with her dearly departed ghost of a husband. Except she can't not really.

Despite Grandma's claims, Greta is fairly confident that there aren't any ghostly grandpas haunting her attic. That is until a nasty accident opens her mind to the spiritual realm and, all of a sudden, she can communicate with ghosts. This opens the door for three new characters to enter the story, all of whom have much to offer in the way of laughs. The plague-victim, Percy, is a particular treat, especially when trying to tempt Greta into a friendly game of 'stick-a-push-a-poo'!

Fans of Copeland's very popular **Charlie Changes into a Chicken** will be delighted to see that this new story has plenty of silliness and gross-out humour (orangutan wee, anyone?). However, **Greta and the Ghost Hunters** also has a great deal of heart and sentiment. Greta and her ghosts have to work together to stop Grandma being sent to a residential home, coming up against villainous exorcists and spirit-fighters. To have any chance of success, the group have to put aside their own prejudices and learn to trust one another. Maybe old people aren't so useless after all... and maybe the elderly, independent thinking woman is not a witch!

The story also handles themes of old age and death in a sensitive but not overly sentimental way. The ghost characters are not just cartoon joke machines: they are fully developed with a past, present and future to really believe in.

Copeland's new novel has all the makings of a family favourite and is bound to be a hit in classrooms and playgrounds everywhere. **SD**

Tripwrecked! Tempest Terror

★★★★

Ross Montgomery, ill. Mark Beech, Barrington Stoke, 88pp, 9 781781 129616, £6.99, pbk

In Ross Montgomery's ingenious light-hearted fantasy, a school party

is shipwrecked on a desert island, where the children gradually realise that their situation has uncanny parallels with Shakespeare's **The Tempest**. Frank, the narrator, and Rianna, the quiet ones who are used to being ignored, form an alliance; and their sensible ideas, even if appropriated by the more overbearing among the castaways, help them all to survive. Yet Frank and Rianna, too, are convinced that there is a Caliban-like monster loose on the island; and adults will notice Montgomery's nod to another desert island classic, **Lord of the Flies**, in the proposal that one of the party should be sacrificed to appease the monster. However, unlike Golding's grim examination of child social dynamics, Montgomery consistently plays it for laughs, aided and abetted by Mark Beech's cartoon illustrations. The resolution of the tale offers an explanation that, deflating the children's fantasy, is nevertheless as cheerfully implausible as the rest of the plot. **CB**

Stuntboy: In the meantime

★★★★

Jason Reynolds, ill. Raul the Third, Knights Of, 263pp, 978913311247

This is no fantasy novel, nor is it a generic superhero comic book. Stuntboy's true identity is Portico Reeves - a young boy who lives in a high-rise block of flats with his parents and his Gran Gran. His best friend, Zola, lives next door and he has lots of quirky neighbours, including Herbert Singletary The Worst (Portico's nemesis bully). Portico suffers with anxiety ('the frets') and in his high rise 'castle', adopting his superhero persona helps him make sense of the world.

There is much to make sense of. His parents are fighting a lot, failing to notice Portico's worries from their position in the 'mean time'. And then there is the menacing Herbert who seems determined to ruin everything for Portico, no matter how many stunts Stuntboy can use for protection. Portico loves his friends and his neighbours but is worried that 'the frets' will mean he will ruin things for them.

It's incredibly easy to empathise with Portico. Reynolds' writing is typically simple yet powerful, telling Portico's story in a series of comic book-like chapters that are all staged in different apartments and corridors of Portico's 'castle'. The writing is subversive at times and is full of imaginative analogies that will help young readers understand what it must be like to live with anxiety, and will draw their attention to the fact that, almost certainly, one or two of their own friends will be living with anxiety.

With hidden depths, lots of fun characters and dramatic, original illustrations, the **Stuntboy** series should be a very successful one **SD**

Daydreams and Jellybeans. Poems to Read Aloud

★★★★

Alex Wharton, ill. Katy Riddell, Firefly, 64pp, 9 78193 102432, £6.99, pbk

The subtitle of Alex Wharton's first collection of poetry suggests that these are poems to read aloud. But if you thought that this means they might be loud and insistent, you would be wrong. In fact, it is the quietest poems that I find most impressive, poems that have a dreamy, bated breath quality. The poet seems to spend much of his time in quiet contemplation, perhaps waiting for the leaves of a weeping willow to touch the grass or listening to the silence of clocks in the night. And I love the poem *Quiet Things*, which describes the placid concentration with which a particular child goes about enjoying her life, just perfectly. This kind of quietness that never reaches for obvious poetic effect is worth listening to. Mystery is never far away, sometimes in the familiar big poetic subjects like *The Sea* or the moon of a *Midnight Wish*, but equally in the ambivalent feelings of an old football, worn out and missing free kicks and penalties. And sometimes the mystery can break out in a kind of craziness. What about the *Bubble Man*? "He is quiet on his feet, /like a fox, and he only/ever wears purple clothing. / 'Bubbles react better to purple'./ he says." These poems are expertly pitched for junior children and ably supported by sympathetic illustrations from Katy Riddell. **CB**

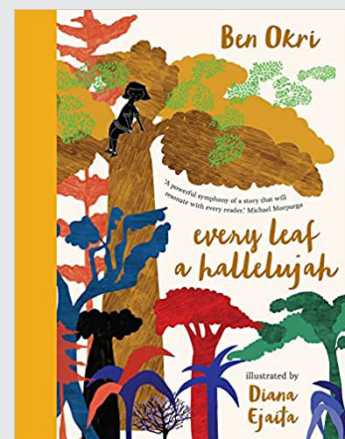
Every Leaf a Hallelujah

★★★★★

Ben Okri, ill. Diana Ejaita, Head of Zeus, 112pp, 9781899241626, £14.99 hbk

Mangoshi is on a quest - her mother is ill, she needs a special flower from the forest to heal her. But this flower is not easily found. Indeed, her first attempt is a failure - fear and duty intervene. However, as time passes the village finds itself facing a crisis - illness stalks through the houses. It is up to Mangoshi to find a way to help; only Mangoshi can hear the trees talk - now she must listen to them.

Ben Okri will be a name recognised by many an adult reader. Here he turns to a younger audience, but there is no sense of 'dumbing down' in an effort to engage the child. Rather he turns his considerable talent to creating a fable or folktale for our time. Using the trope familiar from Dickens' **A Christmas Carol**, Okri invites us to journey with Mangoshi as a variety of trees transport her to different environments and through time where she can see for herself what used to be, what is now - and their importance for the future. It is a simple, effective device and provides Okri with the opportunity to inform as well as enchant. We learn about the interconnectivity of trees through the web of roots, we see the vulnerability - and also the strength of trees. He



suggests the possibility of action that can start with one voice. Okri's words and story are then given vibrant life by the illustrations and decorations from the artist, Diana Ejaita. Her images - contemporary, vivid - draw on her African heritage in their use of design and pattern adding weight and a sense of tradition that, like the trees, draws from the past to meet the present and look to the future. This is powerful book that should be available in classrooms, homes and libraries. It does not provide a quick fix, rather a memory that will remain with its audience - an inspiration for thought and action. It is also beautiful strengthening the effect of Okri's storytelling - a folktale to resonate with its audience. **FH**

Maggie and the Moonbird

★★★★★

Katya Balen, ill. Pham Quang Phuc, Bloomsbury, 80pp, 978 1 4729 9419 6, £6.99, pbk

Sixteen short chapters furnish this book from **Bloomsbury Readers**. Ten-year-old Maggie sits on the stairs, boots on, binoculars round her neck, a scowl on her face. Her father had pinkie promised to take her out birdwatching that day, and now he says he is too busy. (**Not Now, Bernard?**) Her father explains that today he **MUST** spend in his garden tending the soil and the many thousands of strange plants that creep and twist and blossom there. People pay a lot of money for them, Maggie knows, but she resents the attention her father lavishes upon them. Then Dad taps his phone, arranging for Maggie to join Aunt Polly and two cousins on a trip to the zoo. Does Maggie want to go? NO. This is the sixth time her dad has cancelled their plans at the last minute because of his stupid plants. It is so unfair! At the zoo, Maggie is sad to see so many wild animals caged. She only becomes interested when they arrive at the aviaries where the birds constantly strive to reach the skies above. For Maggie knows a great deal about birds; their hollow bones, wing spans, feather tips and bird songs. Her attention is immediately caught by an amazing bird huddled in the corner of a cage. It has silvery sparkling feathers, a curved pearl beak and glittering opal

eyes. Maggie's heart beats faster and faster. The bird flaps its wings and a single feather spirals gently to the ground, glowing moon-bright. Maggie lifts the feather gently. She discovers it makes her fingers tingle, and her arms itch. Chapter five begins with strange happenings, Maggie having placed the feather under her pillow. Developing great feathery wings, she is soon test-flying across the garden, which is glowing with her father's luminous fragrant flowers that bloom only at night. Very strange adventures follow as Maggie and her new-found wild bird friends help her release the caged birds at the zoo, and it is discovered that the moonflowers, favourites of her Father's, are the magic food needed by the fabulous moonbird to sustain its health and beauty. 'Wowzers trousers!' whispers Maggie as she realises she has a magic feather which enables her to join the moonbird on nightly flights of adventure. The book is littered with pictures, of Maggie, her Dad and their garden, but mostly of birds and the wonders of flight. The book ends with three pages of quiz questions about book content (eg what is the name of Maggie's cat?) and activities to get the sparky reader tracing back through the book to find answers. Just right for the emerging reader who loves a fantasy. **GB**

The Hunt for the Nightingale

★★★★★

Sarah Ann Juckes, ill. Sharon King-Chai, 272pp, Simon & Schuster, 272pp, 978-1-3985-1092-0, £7.99 pbk
Sarah Ann Juckes walks a fine line between high emotion and sentimentality but never wavers in this intense and entertaining story. Jasper is 9 years old and his twin passions are birds – especially nightingales – and his 18-year-old sister Rosie, with whom he listens to and watches them. They are always together and the Book of Birds is not only their co-authored record of what they have seen and learned but Jasper's anchor when anxiety and panic attacks threaten to disrupt his life. Their parents do not share their interest in birds – indeed, they are so focused on developing their new business that they often seem to have no time at all for Jasper, despite their many promises to him.

It is Rosie who takes their place and her departure for university is leavened by her assertions that she will come home to see Jasper and continue bird watching with him to find the nightingale which has recently disappeared from their favourite tree. When she fails to arrive on the designated weekend, his parents' preoccupations, frantic activities and references to funeral arrangements tell a story to the reader which Jasper is denied. His father manages to tell him that Rosie has gone to 'a better place' but the euphemism simply

confuses him and he decides that she has gone to search for the missing nightingale in the copse next to the motorway services, several miles away, where she had last heard it.

He resolves to find both his sister and the bird and, after what he is sure are careful preparations, he undertakes a journey which becomes a metaphorical pilgrimage, signposted by the people who offer him both practical and emotional support, the support which his parents, absorbed firstly in their business and latterly in their grief, failed to see that he needed. When his journey ends with both the discovery of the bird and the realisation that he has lost his sister forever, Jukes writes with such clarity and honesty that there is no sense of the maudlin or the too easily resolved in the eventual reconciliation with his parents, but instead a heart-wrenching and humble acceptance from them that their self-absorption in their own financial problems and worries almost cost them something infinitely more precious.

There are additional treasures in this fearless book: Sharon King-Chai's characterful illustrations and snippets of information about the birds which Jasper and Rosie loved so much draw the reader visually and intellectually into their precious Book of Birds, their lives and their love for each other. **VR**

The Mermaid in the Millpond

★★★★★

Lucy Strange, ill. Pam Smy, Barrington Stoke, 120pp, 9781800900493, £6.99 pbk

Lucy Strange combines historical fiction with mysterious folklore in this tale of a young mill worker's encounter with a mermaid. The language is sparse and compelling and immediately seizes the reader's attention with its powerful description of the titular mermaid, not the sort of mermaid that sits on a rock but rather 'a monster – half-human, half-fish' with 'teeth like a pike and hands like a frog.' But is the mermaid a monster, or a creature as trapped and exploited as the mill workers. As Bess tells her story of a move from London workhouse to northern cotton mill after the death of her mother, the reader will realise that the true monsters are the adults who run the mill and treat their young workers with violence and cruelty.

Following her mother's death, caused by tending a sick, homeless child, Bess sees kindness as a weakness and determines to have a heart of stone and help only herself. Brave, cheerful Dot, a fellow mill girl, breaks through this hard shell to Bess's kind, fearless heart and the two girls escape the mill, release the mermaid from her millpond prison and end the book facing a future that is uncertain, but free.

Lucy Strange's skilful storytelling and Pam Smy's atmospheric

illustrations combine to create a gripping story of courage, kindness, and friendship full of supernatural overtones and with a convincing Industrial Revolution setting. This is a Barrington Stoke title, presented with the characteristic dyslexia-friendly features that make this dark, eerie tale of hope and freedom accessible to young readers. **SR**

The Girl Who Talked To Trees

★★★★★

Natasha Farrant, ill. Lydia Corry, Zephyr, 240pp, 9781800242234, £12.99 hbk

Natasha Farrant follows her acclaimed fairy tale collection **Eight Princesses and a Magic Mirror** with this companion volume of magical, intertwined stories about trees. The stories are framed by the character of Olive, a shy eleven-year-old girl whose best friend is a four-hundred-year-old oak tree. When Olive tries to defend the parkland trees of her family home from her father's destructive 'New Plans', she is given seven hours to come up with an 'impressive' reason to save them. Thus begins Olive's magical adventures into the world of trees as she is transported from tree to tree, back in time, and from story to story, one story for each hour she has to keep her promise, all the while learning more and more about the intricate nature and historical importance of trees.

Each tree that Olive meets, Oak, Linden, Alder, Plane, Wild Apple, Tulip and Box, has an enchanting tale to tell and Olive discovers the secrets of an ancient oak, helps to rescue a boy from a hunt, learns the mysteries of kelp forests and meets mermaids, explorers, runaway apple blossom brides, musicians, and storytellers. As her magical journey continues Olive learns about the longevity and ecological importance of trees and can keep her promise and persuade her father to plant trees rather than chop them down.

This is a completely spellbinding and beautiful book, a joy to read and look at. It is full of fascinating facts and information about trees, all interspersed with the stories. Lydia Corry's vivid, colourful illustrations complement the text perfectly, filling the pages with trees, forests, leaves, tendrils, branches, seeds, flowers, and creatures, creating a magical green world. This is a book to treasure as a gift or to discover in a library or classroom, an enticing celebration of the world of trees and the vital role they play, highly recommended. **SR**

The Ship of Cloud and Stars

★★★★★

Amy Raphael ill. George Ermos, Orion, 336pp, 9781510108417, £7.99 pbk

Nico Cloud is fascinated by science and fossils much like her famous explorer aunt Ruth. But this is 1832 when girls are supposed to stay at home doing embroidery and remain uneducated. When Nico's natural curiosity leads her



father to confiscate her natural history books she decides to run away to see if she can find the ship her aunt has embarked on for her next expedition. Nico follows a calico kitten on board the ship but the stowaways are soon discovered by Matteo and Etienne, sons of the crew. After their initial horror at finding a girl on board (it was considered unlucky for a girl to be on a ship) they soon take her under their wings and show her how the ship runs. Nico finds her aunt dressed as a man to spare the crew the embarrassment of having a woman on board and she manages to persuade aunt Ruth not to send her home as she might be a useful asset after all.

So begins a lively and page-turning adventure involving pirates, a plot to steal fossilized seeds from a supposedly Mythical Tree of Hope from the botanical gardens in Sicily and the difficulties involved in not only being taken seriously as a female scientist in a man's world during that period but getting any sort of education as a woman at all.

The characters are really engaging – the resourceful Nico and her stalwart Aunt Ruth in particular – but the friendship that develops between Nico and the boys is delightful too. It does perhaps stretch incredulity a little far at times, but it is such a warm, open and feelgood story that children will be carried away by the exuberance of the heroine and the captivating adventure. The black and white illustrations were unseen at the time but look promising. There are plenty of interesting facts and observations sprinkled throughout the story that the eager fact collector will enjoy too. **JC**

The Runaways of Haddington Hall

★★★★★

Vivian French, Walker Books, 256pp, 9781406387537 £6.99 pbk
Author Vivian French is well-known for her fantastic characterisation and this book is certainly no exception. As the book begins, we are immediately thrown into the hot and steamy Victorian home of Minnie O'Sullivan,

reviews

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as she “helps” her mother with her laundry business. Minnie’s life, along with her family, is a tough one, with money scarce and not always enough food to feed them all. After an incident with an item of laundry, Minnie’s fiery temper gets her into further trouble and she finds herself whisked away to Haddington Hall, a hideous place posing as a home for wayward girls, run by the heartless Mrs Haddington. Poor Minnie is tricked into leaving her home and forced to work in terrible conditions, but she never loses her spark (or her temper!) and with the help of her loyal friends, manages to get away from the hall, plus eventually solve a crime that has affected many hapless victims across the country. The social gap between the haves and have-nots is always apparent, but is bridged wonderfully as friendships flourish thanks to Minnie’s bravery and warm personality.

If this book was a pantomime, we would be booing and hissing at

both the ruthless, self-serving Mrs Haddington and the evil trickster Reverend Obediah Marpike. I found myself eagerly anticipating their hopeful demise, but was kept guessing right up to the end, with the many plot twists and turns.

The wonderfully named characters in this book simply leap off the page and pull you into their fast-paced world to cheer them on.

This would be a fantastically fun book to read as a class, who can relish its array of colourful characters, but it is also a very enjoyable solo read, with a comfortably satisfying ending for Minnie and her friends. **AH**

The Biggest Footprint

★★★★

Rob & Tom Sears, Canongate, 94pp, 978 183885 349 5, £14.99, hbk

This is a book based on a very unusual premise - imagine if the eight billion people on earth could be

combined to create one giant being - a mega human. Enter the smooshing machine which squishes together the people of the world (conveniently for this purpose made of plasticine) to make a giant human. This device is intended as a way of understanding the scale of our species - other living things are put into the smooshing machine too, creating for example a mega tiger which would be big enough to leap over the Taj Mahal. The aim is to understand our scale in relation to all life on earth and to explore our impact. Comparisons are made - so if all endangered animals were fitted together, they would only be as big as one mega human thumb. The concept is extended with all life on Earth (referred to as ALOE) put into the smooshing machine compared to the human made world - now more massive than the living one.

The writers highlight the devastating effect of human action including our obsession with fast food such as burgers, the resulting food waste and land clearance involved in its production.

A big challenge is presented to the reader, how can we fix the mega mess we are in? What if we treated the planet with care, cleared the oceans of plastic and found new ways to make power.

There are references to research throughout the book with lots of key data and fun facts, for example a mega human would be 8 billion times heavier than the average human and 2000 times taller and all the people on earth would fit into Greater London. For those intrigued to find out more about the data behind the book there is a website to refer to (thebiggestfootprint.com).

The design is clear, colourful and varied with charts and illustrations, often amusing images to bring home important messages.

This is a first collaboration from brothers Rob and Tom Sears likely to capture the imagination of many young readers and contribute to the conversation about human responsibility for our planet and life on Earth. **SMC**

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

Ed’s Choice

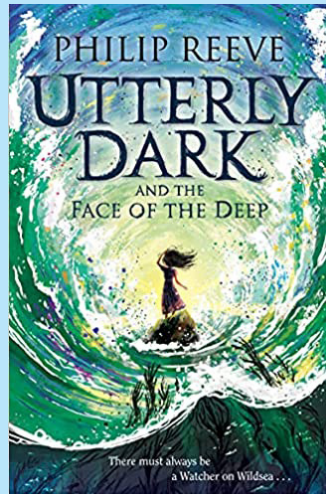
Utterly Dark and the Face of the Deep

★★★★★

Philip Reeve, illus Paddy Donnelly, David Fickling Books, 288pp, 9781788452373, £7.99 pbk

Utterly Dark has never been afraid of the sea, unlike the rest of the population of Wildsea. For them, the sea is where the Gorm comes from, and why there should always be a Watcher. But who - or what is the Gorm? And who is Utterly, found washed up on the beach as a baby and raised by Andrew Dark, the Watcher? When Mr Dark is found drowned, can Utterly take his place? Can she keep Wildsea safe from the sea?

The worlds created by Philip Reeve are real whether set in the past, or a dystopian landscape, or space traversed by singing trains. Here, Wildsea seems to be firmly rooted in a recognisable reality - a Hebridean island, perhaps - and yet the magic of imagination is embedded. As a result there are sea dragons, men made of kelp, a witch whose magic is tied to the land - and Utterly born of the sea and a mortal father. However, this coming-of-age narrative takes fantasy seriously, exploring as it does identity and relationships, both between people and the natural world as well as between rational thinking and the imagination. The result is a richly immersive story that engages the reader from the first sentence to the final words in the company



of captivating, resourceful young protagonists. The adult characters are more than ciphers too, but it is the sea that is the most important presence throughout; not a person, not a god, not even a monster - an element that can give and as easily take and should be ignored at one’s peril. Reeve’s prose style is fluent, beautifully crafted and unpretentious, his descriptions apt and vivid, ‘Moonlight trickled over the sharp edges of the stone blade’, the dialogue natural and immediate. In this novel with its subtle nod to the Selkie tales, Reeves once again takes his readers on a journey that provides enjoyment but also much food for thought, a very contemporary fantasy to be highly recommended to adventurous readers. **FH**

Bandoola: The Great Elephant Rescue

★★★★★

William Grill, Flying Eye Books, 84pp, 9781838740238, £15.99, hbk

The latest of William Grill’s big book explorations of environmental stories from the past is about the exploits of a remarkable elephant in Myanmar in the early twentieth century. This was a time when logging companies used thousands of elephants to drag teak logs from the felling sites to the rivers to be carried downstream to sawmills: work that captive elephants continue to do today. Each elephant is trained, cared for, and ridden at work by an ‘Oozie’, in a relationship that lasts a lifetime. Bandoola’s Oozie was Po Toke and they achieved fame through the writings of James Howard Williams, an Englishman who became a manager for the Bombay Burma Trading Corporation, supervising logging in the teak forests and working with teams of elephants and their oozies. Williams and Po Toke introduced a new, more compassionate, way of training elephants and, during the Second World War, were at work with their elephants in aiding the British military effort in Myanmar. This culminated in a heroic trek across the border into India as the Japanese advanced and Williams became widely known as Elephant Bill for these exploits, a name that perhaps echoed that of Buffalo Bill, although Williams was concerned with the capture and useful employment of wild animals rather than his forerunner’s indiscriminate slaughter. In a now familiar mix of text and illustration, varying from small

vignettes to atmospheric double-page spreads, Grill not only tells Bandoola’s and Williams’s stories but uses them as the focus of a discussion about elephant conservation and the effects of deforestation. Once again, Grill is interested in the complex relationship of humankind and nature, which, while it has been undoubtedly exploitative, also carries the possibility of a mutually beneficial partnership. Once again, Grill has immersed himself in his subject and conveys both the detail and the big picture with knowledge, enthusiasm and thoughtfulness. **CBT**

Breaking News. How to tell what’s Real from what’s Rubbish

★★★★★

Nick Sheridan, illus David O’Connell, Simon & Schuster, 168pp, 9781398506787, £9.99 pbk In this lively, enthusiastic and informative paperback with illustrations to match the energy and humour of the text, Nick Sheridan sets out to inspire his readers to consider whether a career in journalism might be for them. He avoids a bureaucratic and staid approach. He wants to capture the curiosity of a young person, to give them something to consider. Above all he is keen to remind the reader that behind the news item there will have been a journalist. What does that mean? Nick asks questions of his audience, he presents them with examples that involve them - some would make excellent party games, he invites them to work out real from rubbish and he emphasises the responsibilities

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

involved. The approach is fast moving and humorous, the text and illustrations capturing the drama of the newsflash. Embedded are the facts – we find out about the different types of reporters, how a news story is built up, how to write a newsworthy story, the tools that reporters may want to use, he emphasises potential dangers. He introduces some real journalists to follow – and he provides a concise list of websites and blogs to explore. Books about potential careers are all too often worthy in their approach. Not here – a fun engaging introduction to journalism that would be both enjoyable and instructive for many whether would-be journalists or not. Definitely one for the school library where it could open the way to interesting discussion about aspects of contemporary life that are increasingly important. **FH**

Grandpa Frank's Great Big Bucket List

★★★★

Jenny Pearson, ill. David O'Connell, Usborne, 336pp, 9781474974066, £6.99pbk

Like Pearson's very successful debut *The Super Miraculous Journey of Freddie Yates* this story describes a series of silly and humorous events, but it also explores themes of family, friendship and forgiveness.

Frank's dad is called Frank, and so is his grandfather. Yet, apart from their names, the three members of the Davenport family share very little. Frank's dad and grandpa are not on speaking terms and, as a result, Frank has never met his grandpa, who lives nearby in a residential home (so Frank discovers). It is somewhat surprising to everyone, therefore, when Grandpa Frank's late partner leaves Frank Junior Junior nearly half a million pounds in her will and instructs him to spend it on caring for his grandpa.

Frank's parents are furious and demand he hand the money over to them, but Frank is determined. He is sick and tired of having to move house and school all the time because of his dad's debts and accepts the challenge to find his grandpa and make the rest of his life an exciting and memorable one.

Rather predictably, Grandpa Frank turns out to be less than grateful of his grandson's attentions to begin with, and adopts a grumpy and curmudgeonly persona. However, Frank's idea for a great big bucket list eventually wins him round.

Frank comes up with all sorts of weird and unusual activities for his grandpa to do, and all of them provide drama and heart-stopping moments for his grandpa, and hilarious moments for the reader. Unfortunately, even half a million pounds will only buy so many hot air balloon rides and parkour lessons, though, and it becomes clear in the

third act that it is going to take more than money to mend the rift in the relationship between his father and grandpa, and even more again to get his dad out of financial trouble!

Frank is a warm-hearted and loveable hero whose resilience in the face of his greedy parents is impressive, and the relationship he builds with his grandpa is very rewarding, emotionally. Some of the other characters in the book are a little less than original (Frank's father is a salesman straight from the school of Derek 'Del Boy' Trotter, for example) but this detracts little from what is a lively and action-filled adventure story. **SD**

When the War Came Home

★★★★

Lesley Parr, Bloomsbury, 294pp, 9781526621009, £6.95 pbk

In only her second novel Lesley Parr comes over as a born writer but with still some way to go as an author. Her sentences, shorn of unnecessary decoration, are finely balanced, following their own natural rhythm. She is good at place and character, and unafraid to take on big topics, in this case soldiers suffering from shell-shock after the First World War. All that's left for her therefore is an ability to think up a good story, and this account of Natty, a 12-year-old girl forced to change from one Welsh village for another, starts well. If it doesn't quite make it to the end, there is still plenty to enjoy in between.

Natty lives alone with her mother, whose militancy over factory working conditions is the reason they lose their home and have to move in with kindly relatives. Her new school has a vicious headmaster, universally known as Mad Dog. While some nearby Educational Boards provide free meals this one does not, and Natty has to witness pupils too hungry to concentrate getting caned across the palm of the hand. Her recourse is a nearby convalescent home for injured soldiers, and she makes particular friends with one who has lost all memory. At school, meanwhile, pupils pushed too far finally organise a strike, with Natty who up to now has been embarrassed by any show of militancy happy to join in.

Things eventually work out, but at this late stage over-contrived happy endings start trumping the everyday reality previously so well described. Her soldier's memories begin coming back and Natty and her mother find a new bond together. The school strike is shown to peter out, as it had to, but readers are never told whether Mad Dog stays as horrible as he was before or even worse. An otherwise compelling storybook villain surely deserves more follow-up than that. But these caveats apart, this is still good writing from an exciting new talent. Let her third novel come soon! **NT**



Rita Wong and the Jade Mask

★★★★

Mark Jones, illus Seamus Jennings, Everything with Words, 304pp, £7.99 pbk

Here's a surprising and original take on the classic detective story. Young Rita Wong, newly-arrived from Hong Kong, is settled in Morecambe and living a quiet, lonely but normal life, until the day she spots a mysterious green-headed figure staring out across the bay. On closer inspection, it turns out to be a dragon and the two strike up a friendship. Rita accompanies the dragon, whose name is Lester Thyme, into Neon City, a very strange alternative world, full of magic and magical creatures, but plagued by the kind of corruption that Raymond Chandler made his stock in trade. When the previously unemployed Lester sets up as a private detective, Rita becomes his partner and soon the two have their first case, on the trail of missing antiques and a clever thief. Their relationship feels very real, and they are a truly effective couple of sleuths. The surreal setting takes nothing away from the hard-boiled nature of the action, and despite regular pauses to give readers a heady sense of the sights, sounds and smells of Neon City, it's page-turning stuff. Cool illustrations too by Seamus Jennings. **MMA**

Frankie's World

★★★★

Aoife Dooley, Scholastic, 272pp, 978-0702307355, £8.99 pbk

In this graphic novel Frankie is a girl aged eleven. She feels out of place, partly because she is unusually small for her age and is obliged to take remedial growth hormones. Sometimes she also says the wrong thing. Frankie lives with her mother, her stepfather and her younger sister. Frankie's father has been missing from her life. She is desperate to find him. But it is not certain that she will find him, or if she does what the outcome of their meeting might be.

Frankie's best friend is a girl named Sam who is a wheelchair user. Although Sam's mobility is

referred to in the novel, it never becomes a dominant issue. The book concentrates its energy on the quest that Frankie undertakes to find her father. However, two subsidiary issues deserve comment. As far as this reviewer is aware, Dooley is the first children's author to deal explicitly with the issue of treatment for a lack of physical growth. In general disability is treated throughout the book as an issue that has to be handled and managed. At no point is disability allowed to loom large enough to define the whole of someone's character or potential. Such attitudes towards disability and disabled people are increasingly common in books by thoughtful authors. Nevertheless it is still pleasant to encounter such a treatment. **RB**

Escape Room

★★★★

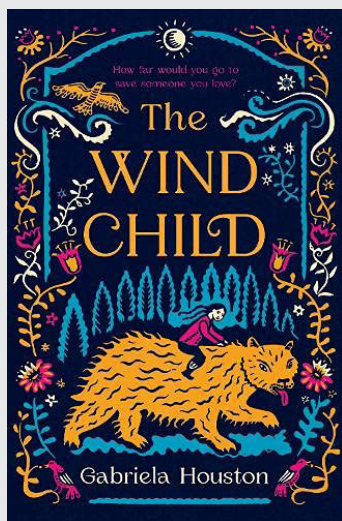
Christopher Edge, Nosy Crow, 194pp, 9781788007962, 304pp, £6.99 pbk

Booking in to a large but silent property for what is advertised as the ultimate in an Escape Room experience, teenagers Ami and four others soon find themselves in real and present danger. Moving from space to space, trying to work out cryptic clues against a background of ever-increasing peril, their journey reads like a fictional version of a particularly menacing video game. Things are not helped by one of the group behaving badly with monotonous regularity. Eventually Ami is left on her own with still more surprises to come.

This is a rich stew of a story, gripping enough at first but ultimately with too much going on too quickly. Characters are sketchy, with Ami's father's late appearance insufficiently integrated with all that had gone on before. Repeated references to practices in Ancient Mayan civilisations help Ami find her way from one enclosure to another. But they also constitute one more puzzling out of time excursion on a journey already packed with other throw-backs from the past, including encounters with sabre-tooth tigers and a puzzled Neanderthal man. The final pages touch on no less than the world's survival. Yet by this time even this otherwise gifted author's prose is beginning to buckle under the weight of so much happening, with those tired old couplings, 'unquenchable optimism' and 'boundless energy' making an unwelcome appearance on the final page.

Christopher Edge has done fine work in the past, and his ambition in this latest novel is admirable. But this time he seems to have forgotten that less is so often more when it comes to maintaining a sustainable pitch of literary excitement and engagement. There is still much in this story to live on in the imagination. If ultimately it doesn't quite come off, its scope and energy remain impressive. **NT**

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued



The Wind Child

★★★★★

Gabriela Houston, ill. Alexis Snell, Uclan publishing, 172pp, 9781912979783, £7.99 pbk

Mara is the granddaughter of Striborg, the Slavic god of winter winds and has grown up in his castle, but when her human father falls ill, the family are sent back to the human world. After her father's death Mara finds it impossible to accept and decides to rescue his spirit before it is caught in the underworld called Navia. Together with her friend Torniv she sets out on a dangerous journey that will test them beyond their limits and with no certainty that they will be successful in the end. They meet an array of magical and mystical creatures and have a large number of challenges throughout their journey, but whilst some of the creatures try to stop them, others prove to be more helpful.

This is a heart-breaking story of family and loss, but with the added twist that Mara is only half human and her mother's family of gods lack the feelings that we associate with human families. The author has called on her Polish roots to bring a real feel of Eastern European folklore and myths to this tale. The background description gives a strong sense of place to the story and you begin to understand the reasons why people hold the beliefs that they do. The friendship between Mara and Torniv is so strong that the latter is magically changed into a bear during the day, because he would not stop helping Mara in her quest; showing the difference between human relationship and the more distanced feelings of the gods. This makes a wonderful introduction to a mythology that is not well known to many children and it also links in very well with stories such as 'Baba Yaga', which are found in Russia and other Slavic nations. Above all, this is a fast paced and enthralling adventure story, with a huge amount of action and some strong and likeable characters. **MP**

Ghostcloud

★★★★★

Michael Mann, Hachette Childrens Books, 334pp, 9781444959291 £12.99 hbk

London, but not as we know it, is the setting for this debut novel from Michael Mann. This is a dystopian world, with most of the city in ruins and people hiding from the terrible smog that appears from nowhere.

A bombed and battered Battersea Power Station is alive and producing power, through the efforts of hundreds of children shovelling coal from dawn to dusk. Not that they know what time of day it is, as they have been kidnapped from their homes and forced to work underground in terrible conditions, with punishments meted out for the slightest infringements of the impossible rules.

Luke, the hero of the story, is keeping his head down and working hard to obtain his promised 'amber ticket' to freedom. When one of the other children, new girl Jess, looks like she will spoil his chances, Luke steps in to try to help, but the pair end up locked in a dirty room in the secret East Wing, tasked with cleaning the sewage that has seeped in. It is here that Luke meets Alma, a ghost who has become trapped in one of the pipes and learns that he is not like other children, but is actually a half-ghost and can see and do much more than he ever dreamed of. Whilst searching for a means of escape from the power station, Luke and his friends uncover a sinister plot hatched by the evil owner of the power station, Tabatha Margate, and Luke determines to uncover the truth and ensure his freedom.

There are some wonderful characters in this fast-paced adventure and the descriptions of this new dystopian London as Luke flies high above it on his special cloud, are brought vividly to life. I won't spoil the ending, but I found myself trying to read faster and faster to see what happened to Luke and his friends and willing them on to succeed.

Whilst quite dark in places, it is nevertheless a lovely heart-warming tale as Luke and his friends discover more about themselves and what they are capable of to find out the truth and defeat the evil plot.

A fantastic debut from Michael Mann and I can't wait to see what he does next. **AH**

Arthur, The Always King

★★★★★

Kevin Crossley-Holland and Chris Riddell, Walker Books, 240pp, 9781406378436, £20.00 hbk

How to tell the stories of King Arthur? What of the stories to tell? Most people will know the story of the sword in the stone, of how Arthur received the sword Excalibur and of his death – but what about the stories in between? There doesn't seem to be an easy narrative path. Indeed, Arthur is not necessarily a main character for

these are the stories about individual knights who made up the Company of the Round Table. They are stories full of tensions, magic, monsters, violence, love and loyalties. They are not children's stories – though children will always thrill to the excitement of each quest without worrying about the more complicated emotions involved. Indeed, there are excellent retellings that are aimed at a younger audience. Kevin Crossley-Holland, however, takes the medieval originals in all their complicated splendour and retells them with his poet's ear for language, capturing the character of that chivalric past while being contemporary and immediate. He also organises the stories to follow a consistent path, each quest reflecting the ideals of the Round Table; ideals that have to be proved through trials which may fail for the protagonists are fallible. In this way he is able to include the narrative of the Fisher King – a story that resonates powerfully today. The author makes sure we meet real people with real emotions, passions, hopes and fears. Perhaps, this is the reason the Arthurian cycle has such a powerful hold on the imagination; this is not a world peopled by gods.

The world conjured by Crossley-

Holland is then brought to vivid, visual life by the illustrations from Chris Riddell, images which appear on every page, sometimes as marginalia – pen portraits of the characters, sometimes as coloured borders surrounding the text, frequently vibrant single page or double page spreads. Contemporary in style, full of character capturing without apology both the violence and the tenderness they enhance and extend the narratives for a modern audience. The colour palette ranges from simple line drawings to spreads where a single colour dominates – gold, green, blue, red – picking up and emphasising the emotion or action of the event illustrated and spreads where the palette is diverse to capture the atmosphere of the scene. The marriage between text and image is a dynamic one and the tales burst off the page.

These are not for the very young; these are (as they would have been in their original telling) for an older audience – adult even. They are stories that have stood the test of time and have inspired many others. It is not the adventures; it is the characters and above all it is Arthur, the flawed ideal, the Always King. Kevin Crossley-Holland and Chris Riddell bring them to life for today. **FH**

14+ Secondary/Adult



When Shadows Fall

★★★★★

Sita Brahmachari, ill. Natalie Sirett, Little Tiger, 288pp, 978 1 78895-316-0, £14.99, hbk

In this ambitious and passionate novel, Sita Brahmachari charts the course of the friendship of four London teenagers. Kai is the main focus of the novel. His desperation and grief at his sister's death and his father's depression result in behaviour that gets him excluded from school and involved in drug taking and petty crime. Orla and Zak are his childhood friends who find themselves estranged from Kai when he needs them most; and Om is a Syrian refugee who recognises Kai's pain and reaches out to him. We first meet all four at what will be

their happy ending as Kai begins to write his story down and to take the reader back through his traumatic last few years. The story is taken up at intervals by Orla and Om, who provide their own points of view. They are joined, in Kai's disorientation, by the voices of two ravens that have adopted him. Despite the early reassurance given to the reader that everything will come right in the end, Brahmachari writes so convincingly as Kai, interspersing her prose with free verse for the most dramatic and reflective moments, that we are drawn right into the shadows of his mind. Natalie Sirett's black and white illustrations are an integral part of the book. They are often paragraph dividers in the shape of a black feather. Otherwise, they appear at the corner of pages or as watermarks, moving into the centre of the page as Kai reaches his lowest point. They support and develop the book's themes, particularly Brahmachari's conviction that self-expression, in Kai's writing or Om's drawing, are ways to understanding, healing and liberation. Little Tiger have done the author and illustrator proud, in design and production. There are developments in the novel I did not find quite so convincing. The campaign to defend the local recreation ground, and the final revelation that seems likely to save the rec seems to belong to a different novel. But the way in which passion, poetry, prose and illustration work together is marvellous. **CB**

The Blue Book of Nebo

★★★★★

Manon Steffan Ros, Firefly Press, 160pp, 978-1913102784, £7.99, pbk

As the COVID pandemic goes on and warnings from climate scientists become ever starker, it can feel that we are indeed facing the end of the world, which makes **The Blue Book of Nebo** timely. Dylan and his mother Rowenna have survived The End, an apocalyptic event involving the dropping of bombs and nuclear plant meltdown. They're living alone in a small cottage above the Welsh town of Nebo, sustained by the vegetables they grow, by books (in English and Welsh) collected from the town's deserted library, and by distant views of Caernarfon and the island of Anglesey. Readers are privy to their thoughts, which they record as diary entries in a notebook, the blue book of the title, a format that provides distinctly personal and raw viewpoints of the end of civilisation. Yet it's not what you might expect. The absence of 'the old world, the grey days of technicolour screens' gives each of them the chance to be different people. Eight years since the event, Dylan has grown up and become a young man, loving and cheerful despite everything and proud of his ability to grow and build things. Rowenna has found herself too, no longer the hesitant, anxious young woman but strong, 'like a warrior' in Dylan's words. Fundamental to their development is their reading. Dylan in particular is moved by books, memorising passages from favourite Welsh authors including T H Parry-Williams, while Rowenna has reclaimed her mother tongue from her teacher Miss Ellis's criticisms of her 'lived-in street Welsh'. They speak English to each other as, despite their closeness, each has secrets: Rowenna resorting to cruel sharpness to conceal the identity of Dylan's father, Dylan turning a mutated hare into a pet unbeknownst to his mother. It's a book that celebrates resilience, rebirth and the possibilities offered by returning to

our roots and, as the lights come back on, we are confident that Rowenna and Dylan will do more than survive as civilisation returns. Subtle, powerful, frequently unsettling, this is an original and memorable read. **MMA**



Kemoshia of the Caribbean

★★★★★

Alex Wheatle, Andersen, 320pp, 9781839131219, £7.99 pbk

'Weary of all the **Pirates of the Caribbean** films where no black characters play a significant role, and outraged by the depiction of Friday in Daniel Defoe's **Robinson Crusoe**, I set to work creating a black heroine fit for modern times.' And in this story Alex Wheatle triumphantly does just that. His heroine Kemoshia is only 15, but despite starting out as a slave in Jamaica in 1698 still manages to escape to a new freedom, eliminating a number of brutish white would-be jailors in the process. Beautiful as well as brave, she is constantly threatened by men out to rape her. Compared to descriptions of routine plantation barbarism, the sexual abuse accompanying slavery has always been less commented on in fiction. Wheatle brings this shameful aspect into full focus, and although Kemoshia just manages to escape this particular torture, she comes across other black young women who do not.

But while the prevailing spirit in this story is justifiable fury about past black suffering there are lighter moments. Kemoshia can be bitingly funny, and thinks and talks in an attractive Jamaican-style patois. At other times she calls upon the black Gods of her own religion for comfort and support. On the run from her vile owners, she hikes a voyage with the infamous pirate captain, Sir Henry Morgan. Conditions on his ship are vividly brought to life, as is her horror on discovering how vicious the crew could be to anyone in their way, old or young, once on the mainland and hunting for Spanish gold. The pirates who drink and whore while waiting for the next looting expedition are not the stuff of popular heroes, with the lethal

sword-fighting skills Kemoshia has picked up coming in very useful here on several occasions. Finally opting for a relationship with another woman her own age makes sense after so much experience of male viciousness.

Wheatle is a born entertainer as well as a black writer with a mission. This latest story is not just a splendid read; it would also make a stirring film. **NT**

Roxy

★★★★★

Neal Shusterman and Jarrod Shusterman, Walker Books, 400pp, 978-1406392128, £8.99 pbk

Isaac and Ivy Ramey are American brother and sister, late teenagers. Isaac has the ambition to enter aeronautical engineering and aircraft design. He is also a gifted soccer player. Ivy is a troubled soul who may have set out on the wrong path. Her ambition is simply to graduate from high school and to escape from the problems that currently vex her. Not least of Ivy's problems is that her boyfriend, Craig, is addicted to and deals in legal and illegal drugs. The novel poses the question which of the siblings is more likely to achieve his or her ambition.

This novel deploys a narrative technique which is unusual and overwhelmingly effective. The varied voices in which the story is recounted belong not only to the different characters who appear in the pages of the book but also to the various drugs abused by those characters. Phineas for example is morphine. Roxy and Nalo are the voices of other drugs. The portrait of addiction presented by Shusterman and Shusterman shrinks from no relevant detail, however painful. The voices of the drugs draw the reader much further into this world than human voices alone could manage. The only serious flaw in this otherwise outstanding novel is that the introduction of the hallucinatory voices at the start is somewhat mishandled, leaving the reader uncertain about what is happening. Some readers might be led to abandon the book at this early stage, thereby depriving themselves of a precious lesson about contemporary life and its pitfalls. Parents and teachers should pay serious attention to the age recommendation for this book. **RB**

Big Boned

★★★★★

Jo Watson, Penguin, 384pp, 978-0241460689, £7.99 pbk

Lori Palmer is seventeen years old. She has just moved from Johannesburg to Cape Town, South Africa. Lori is a very talented artist. Back home she was enrolled in a school for arts. In Cape Town however she is enrolled at Baywater High School, where Lori who is plus sized and insecure feels as out of place as she could possibly feel. She lives with her Mum, who is still dealing with a very acrimonious divorce, and with her brother aged nine, Zac, who is autistic.

Lori's mother is suffering from severe emotional stress. She discovered her husband's adulterous behaviour with a much younger woman in highly disturbing circumstances, with which she has not yet come to terms. As a result the burden of care for young Zac has fallen almost exclusively on Lori. The task is burdensome, despite the strong affection Lori feels for her little brother. The novel poses two questions. How will Lori find her true place in her new environment, both educationally and personally? And what kind of Lori will emerge from these harrowing experiences?

The development of this novel is marked by two noticeable traits. The first is the serious discussion of Lori's mental health and the journey she has undertaken to find the place where she now finds herself. The description of this journey is recounted with immense sensitivity. This reviewer can easily imagine the account coming as a comfort to readers placed in similar situations. The second impressive feature of this book is the author's command of characterisation. Zac is portrayed as a fully three-dimensional person whose relationship with his sister is convincing.

The book however begins on a note that falls below the standard it later achieves, starting off as if it were nothing but a conventional high school romance. Readers must persist to discover that the book is something far more significant. **RB**

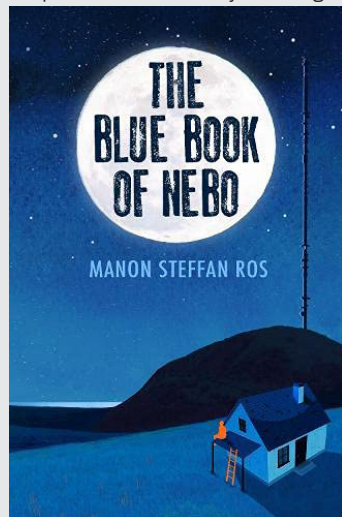
The Revelry

★★★★★

Katherine Webber, ill. Leo Nickolls, Walker, 272pp, 978406388442, £7.99 pbk

Growing up in the small town of Ember Grove is ordinary but, there is something very special to be anticipated on finally leaving school, the traditional, but secret, ceremony called the Revelry. For Bitsy Clark it is part of her family history and she is looking forward to discovering its secret when her turn comes. When her friend Amy, who is an incomer to the town, persuades her to gate crash the event, held in the local wood, before their own year, they have little idea of the results. They find that they cannot remember what actually happened, but Bitsy discovers that she seems to be having a run of bad luck, which is difficult to explain. Her attempts to find out what went on at the Revelry leads to the uncovering of dark secrets and the acknowledgement that there are strange forces at play in the local woods.

This is a wonderful tale of friendship and the strains that can be placed on it, but it is also a dark and somewhat spooky tale which suggests it is not a good idea to visit the woods at night. There is an underlying sense of fear and a feeling that the events of the Revelry are not as lighthearted and celebratory as the younger inhabitants think. Katherine Webber



reviews

14+ Secondary/Adult continued

is well known for her **Dragon Realm** series, co-written with her husband, but she is also a writer of several YA novels that really speak to the reader and this book definitely does that. There is a gradual build-up of tension as Bitsy discovers some of the dark truths from previous generations, as well as finding the strange, even weird character of Skyler who appears to control the events of the 'celebration'. I think this is going to be one of the high spots of early 2022 and a great hit with teen readers. **MP**

The Ivory Key

★★★★

Akshaya Raman, Hot Key Books, 372pp, 9781471410734, £8.99 pbk
This story is set in the mythical and magical country of Ashoka, which has strong elements of Indian culture and life. It is the tale of four siblings, two sisters and two brothers who belong to the ruling family. Their mother, the previous maharani has been killed and Kaleb, her stepson is accused of complicity in the crime. His sister Vira is the new ruler but she is struggling to keep control as the magic that supports the country is gradually disappearing. The other siblings, Ronak and Riya each have their own demons to overcome, and have distanced themselves from the family. When it appears that the only way to save their people is to find the mythical 'Ivory Key', Vira and her family must join forces in the search. They face challenges that are reminiscent of Indiana Jones, as they follow their quest. But this is a country at war with itself and the royal authority is not something that can be taken for granted. In such a situation, who can the siblings trust? Not everyone is open about their views and there can often be enemies pretending to be friends. As the story develops, we begin to understand the complexities they face and wonder how they will cope. Book two will hopefully be as exciting as this first part.

This is the story of a very dysfunctional family, weighed down by the pressures placed upon them. They have been brought up to focus on serving their country, usually at the cost of putting duty before their personal lives. The plot beautifully brings out their differing characters and shows how they react to the challenges they face. The story is a brilliant fantasy that positively oozes with the atmosphere and environment of India; but it is also a fast paced and exciting adventure which will fascinate a wide-ranging audience. It is definitely a read for older teens, but I can imagine dramatizations, TV or film, could work well with all of the action. **MP**

Bitter

★★★★

Akwaeke Emezi, Faber, 260pp, 9780571371198, £7.99 pbk

This is the companion book to **Pet** but it can be read as a free-standing

story, too. Bitter has had a wretched childhood, passed from one foster home to another, deprived of love and support and perpetually hiding to escape the next punishment or abuse. Little wonder, then, that she craves a safe, quiet environment where she can paint and see only those people she regards as friends.

Thus she finds herself in Eucalyptus school, with the kind but enigmatic Miss Virtue as its Head. She may stay there always to paint, if she wishes, as when she has graduated she can take up a teaching position to pass on her skills. With her friends Blessing, Alex and Eddie around her and the attentions of her boyfriend Aloe all seems to be well, but things are not always what they appear to be on the surface – a theme which recurs in the narrative.

Bitter has immersed herself wholly in her studies and her art but beyond the school boundaries the city of Lucille is in turmoil. Corruption is rife and the response of the police to the protesters is murderous. Bitter is riven by guilt: her deep-seated need for safety and seclusion sits uneasily with her desire to help her friends in their struggles against the current regime. She begins to realise that art can be a powerful medium for change and, after a close friend loses her eye to a police bullet she channels all the strength of her emotions into a terrifying monster which she brings to life with drops of her blood.

In doing this she has acted as a gate for other beings – who all have the title angel – to bring vengeance for the woundings and deaths among the protesters and to kill corrupt officials. Here Emezi unfolds the crux of his intention: is murder ever justified and are there other ways to protest which are equally effective? Readers are asked to judge their own responses as well as those of the protagonists.

This is a powerful book with emotions often running high and language is often graphic. As readers we are invited to observe the struggle from close quarters, rather than from the safe distance of TV, radio, newspapers and social media. We are introduced to characters who Emezi has brought alive and we know them, care about them – and so, most of all, we must decide where we stand in this struggle, symbolic of the many which rage on our planet. **RB**

Ghost Bird

★★★★

Lisa Fuller, Old Barn Books, 280pp, 978 1 9106 4680 9, £7.99 pbk

Fuller has won several awards for her work, both in Australia and elsewhere, including the David Unaipon Award for an Unpublished Indigenous Writer with **Ghost Bird** in 2017. The book has at its centre the 5-day disappearance of Laney – the mirror twin of Stacey – and the frantic race to find her. Fuller has set the story in her hometown

of Eidsvold, which contributes to the story's undeniable authenticity.

Fuller makes clear that only the indigenous community joined in the search for Laney and that they were unflinching and united in their support. Racism is threaded through Eidsvold, for example in the focus on white communities in the local History Society archives, with no information about the injustices perpetrated on the indigenous peoples in their midst and the refusal of the police to take Laney's disappearance seriously. The solidarity of Stacey's 'mob' is organic-family ties and friends who have the community at the centre of their lives. There is no sense of a sentimental indulgence by Fuller here – this is the real thing.

The binding ties of the world of indigenous culture walk hand in hand with the harsh reality of life within a largely hostile white community. Stacey holds science close to her heart and yet she is constantly aware of the wisdom and folklore passed on through the generations and when she begins to have frighteningly vivid dreams about Laney she knows that her twin is still alive, but in great danger. She begins to piece together the clues in her nightmares and realises that an ancient evil force is at the root of Laney's disappearance and she must break cultural taboos in order to save her twin's life.

Fuller excels at creating tension and the narrative is often poised on a knife-edge of terror to which the reader is inexorably drawn in. The mysterious beings which have abducted and imprisoned Laney are intent on the destruction of all those who try to thwart them. Help comes from an unexpected source – the Millers, a family who the Thomsons have long avoided – and it is the apparent madness of May, the oldest member, which transforms into the advice and support which Stacey needs to summon in order to defy cultural taboos and act on the prompts in her clairvoyant dreams to rescue Laney. The scenes inside the mountain caves where she discovers Laney are cinematically horrific.

The characters in **Ghost Bird** come alive on the page: Fuller's upbringing gives them rich detail and they find a place in the reader's heart. We see both their difficult way of life within a white community and the strength of their indigenous culture in holding on to what is important. Language is often ripe but never offensive: often drawn from a shared colloquial idiom which sings with veracity.

This is a remarkable book – a window into an unfamiliar culture, a critique of racism and a story which bites hard and refuses to let go. **VR**

Blue Running

★★★★

Lori Ann Stephens, Moonflower, 334pp, 9781838237486, £16.99 hbk
Prepare for socks to be well and truly knocked off long before reaching the end of this explosive novel. Set



in a gun-toting future Texas that has broken away from the rest of the USA, this dystopian vision often feels too uncomfortably close to the current real thing. Carrying a weapon is compulsory for all ages, with teachers facing down recalcitrant junior pupils with the threat of superior fire power. The closely guarded wall that separates this toxic state from a saner America is patrolled by volunteer vigilantes taking pot-shots at would-be escapees, otherwise known as 'scalpers'.

Left behind after her mother also went over to the other side, fourteen-year-old Blue, short for Bluebonnet, lives unhappily with her drunken policeman father. Money is short and poverty puts her apart from luckier pupils at school. Eventually she runs away after her only friend dies of wounds while attempting to clean Blue's ancient pistol. Now a fugitive suspect herself, Blue teams up with Jet, an abused older girl in the early stages of pregnancy. This came about after she was raped by her brutal uncle who is also a leading player in a criminal gang roaming the countryside. Intent on crossing the wall, the two girls travel across the state, staying for some time at a hippy-style commune before that becomes too hot for them. What follows finally breaks away from the violence and moral disruption implicit in all that has come before.

Lori Ann Stephens is an award-winning American author who has now brought her talents to the Young Adult literary market. She writes urgently and well, keeping up the pace while never descending to horror for its own sake. She is also unafraid of potential critics who might object for her having Jet opting for an abortion to rid herself of a baby she never planned for or wanted. The author's implied criticisms of adult ignorance, prejudice and dishonesty at a political as well as personal level never let up. If there is one teenage novel this year that readers will surely never forget, it must be this one. **NT**

Valediction: No.3 Book Ends

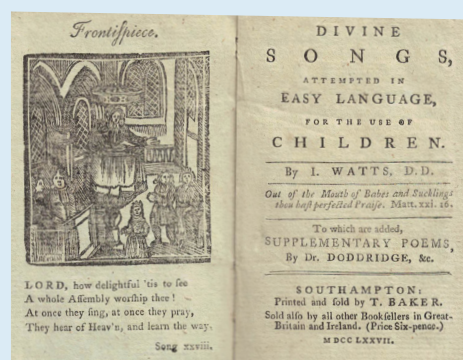
Brian Alderson is bidding a fond farewell to the books that make up his extraordinary collection, which is being presented to Seven Stories. Here he packs up copies of Isaac Watts' **Divine Songs**.

In 1964 I commenced as editor of **The Juvenile Library**, a (predictably unsuccessful) series of facsimiles of some notable early children's books that were much written about but difficult to come by outside special libraries.

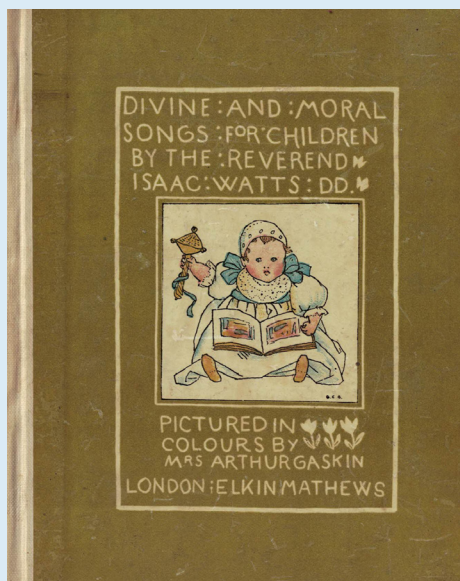
I got the idea from Mary Thwaite, former County Librarian of Hertfordshire and children's book historian. She would give talks on the subject and had made for her own use a typescript copy (which she had had neatly bound)¹ of one of the most famous of children's literature's incunabula, John Newbery's **Little Pretty Pocket-Book** (1744). She lent me the copy which I showed to Mabel George, the famed children's books editor at Oxford's London office and the series was founded with Mary editing the Newbery for it.

As we devised it, the facsimiles were sandwiched between an Introduction setting out the circumstances of the book's production and concluding bibliographies which would trace subsequent editions and similar matter. It was not perhaps a good idea and the TLS reviewer, who was surely Sydney Roscoe, the great Newbery (and Bewick) authority, wrote of it as 'breaking a butterfly on the wheel'.

One scholar at least liked the idea and he wrote in to suggest that we might include in the series the immensely rare first edition of Isaac Watts's **Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children**, published in 1715 and never out of print as a children's book until the beginning of the twentieth century. Our correspondent was J.H.P. (Jack) Pafford who was at that time Goldsmith's Librarian at the University of London and his suggestion stemmed in part from the fact that both he and his wife knew the book from their own childhoods.



There was, of course, no alternative but to ask Jack to take on the job (the book was on our list anyway) but he was horrified to learn that he would have to include a bibliography. As you may guess, a book of simple verses by a renowned hymnologist, appealing to no



particular class or party, had all the ingredients for commercial success and for more than a hundred years beyond the ending of its copyright the book made for easy sales for publishers throughout the land (evidence for its popularity is now frequently cited through the two parodies that Carroll put into **Alice's Adventures in Wonderland**).

In the event, Jack bent his back to the task and as both scholar and bibliographer honoured our book with a near definitive analysis dependent on the sight of as many copies and variants as possible. From then on, indeed, I have collected over seventy examples both 'in' and 'not in' Pafford which amount to an exhibition of examples of nineteenth century book production: textual variants, formats, illustrations, plain and coloured, bindings etc.

I shall be sorry to say good-bye to the lot since much remains to be done to assess the not overly joyous texts as they passed through the hands of provincial and London publishers and especially their illustrators.

Foremost among these is Georgie Gaskin's unique and charming 'arts and crafts' presentation with all the divine songs but, despite its title, none of the moral ones. The book was a complex job with its many inset plates and their almost child-like artistry whose set design are a tribute to Evans's colour printing in the new age of half-tone colour. (Elkin Mathews, be it noted, would soon also be one of the first of Ezra Pound's publishers.)

If this pretty book can be seen as the last of the illustrated editions then the first, which boasts only a frontispiece, must not only be labelled 'not in Pafford' but is known perhaps in only two or three copies. Its Southampton publisher may

have produced it since Watts was a native of that city (where its former owner, Gerry Bell, a notable collector of children's books, was Professor of Chemistry). In view of its eventual destination we should also record that another former owner, J.Cresswell, was a Newcastle man whose book-plate derives from the Bewick workshop.

Isaac Watts Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children...to which are added supplementary poems by Dr Doddridge &c. Southampton: Printed and sold by T.Baker. Sold also by all the Booksellers in Great Britain and Ireland. (Price Six-pence) MDCCLXXVII. 12mo.100x75mm. unsigned frontis.,xii, 13-90pp. Dutch flowered paper over boards. Provenance: J.Cresswell (typographic slug in woodcut from the Bewick workshop; see Tattersfield Bookplates pp.105 & 182); Denning Coll.; Ella Dagger Robson from her grand Pa 1908; Gerry Bell; John Windle. (Cotsen A11243; Oppenheimer 2650. Not in Pafford; not in ESTC)



ibid DIVINE AND MORAL SONGS FOR CHILDREN BY THE REVEREND ISAAC WATTS [framed col. illus of a child praying] ELKIN MATHEWS, VIGO ST. LONDON [1896]. sq.12mo. 147x120mm. Frontis, 64pp.+ 12 insets (p.1 half-title: Divine and Moral Songs by the Rev. Isaac Watts D.D. with coloured pictures by Mrs Arthur Gaskin; p.3 dedication: These little pictures are dedicated to MY HUSBAND by his pupil and wife; p.64 imprint: London. Engraved and printed at the Racquet Court Press by Edmund Evans.)

1. The copy is now in the Philip Robinson Library at Newcastle University Library.



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