

BOOKS FOR KEEPS



No.253
March 2022

the children's book magazine online
www.booksforkeeps.co.uk

Authorgraph interview
Joanna Nadin

Windows into Illustration
Kate Read

plus
Winnie the Witch
anniversary
Lissa Evans
and new
Beyond the
Secret Garden

2 Editorial

3 A story from the archives: curator Sarah Lawrance reveals a campaigning side to Jan Pieńkowski

4 Happy Birthday, Winnie and Wilbur: Clive Barnes celebrate the lasting appeal of Winnie the Witch

6 Authorgraph 253: Joanna Nadin interviewed by Joy Court

11 Windows into Illustration: Kate Read describes the joys and challenges of collage

10 Ten of the Best: Neil Philip chooses ten of the best books by the inimitable Joan Aiken

12 Wishing Well: Lissa Evans interviewed by Michelle Pauli

13 Five Go to France: Emma Page on translating the adventures of the *Club de Cinq* in the new graphic novel versions

14 Beyond the Secret Garden: It Starts in Wales by Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O'Connor

17 Shirley Hughes remembered by Nicholas Tucker

18 Good Reads chosen by pupils at University of Birmingham School

19 Introducing Neon Squid, an inspiring, accessible new non-fiction list

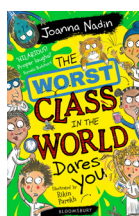
20 I Wish I'd Written: Derek Keilty on the work of genius that inspired him to write

20 Reviews
Under 5s (Pre-School/Nursery/Infant) + Ed's Choice
5-8 (Infant/Junior)
8-10 (Junior/Middle)
10-14 (Middle/Secondary)
+ New Talent
14+ (Secondary/Adult)

32 Valediction No 4: Oxus and After by Brian Alderson.

COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **The Worst Class in the World Dares You!** by Joanna Nadin, illustrated by **Rikin Parekh**. Thanks to **Bloomsbury Children's Books** for their help with our March cover.



Editorial 253

March is World Book Day month. It's a major event on the calendar now, whether you are a reader of children's books or not, all those dressed up children are hard to miss.

Yet what's going on behind the scenes?

The **CLPE Reading for Pleasure 2022** report highlights a number of urgent challenges schools are facing in helping children discover a love for reading, which is the biggest indicator of a child's future success – more than their family circumstances, their parents' educational background or their income (**OECD**)¹. The **CLPE** research reveals that a 25% of schools have fewer books now than before the pandemic, while more than 60% of classrooms have no access to a budget for new books.

It is falling to teachers to plug the gap themselves, with almost two in five (38%) of teachers in England providing new books for their pupils out of their own pocket, as historically small school budgets continue to be constrained post-pandemic. 17% of teachers rely on donations in order to update their book stock, while 8% say they never get new books at all in their classrooms.

Nearly half the teachers (48%) questioned said they are unable to change the books in their classroom during the school year, meaning the opportunity for children to discover new books and explore their tastes and interests is severely limited.

While the majority of primary school teachers questioned (95%) said they have a book corner in their classrooms, over half of these (57%) contain fewer than 100 books. This rises to 84% of classrooms in early years foundation stage (pre-school and Reception) and 73% of classrooms in Year 1.

This is particularly damaging for children whose circumstances mean that they do not have access to books at home and whose reading progress is likely to have been affected adversely by lockdowns. Schools need a wide selection of books to support children to discover and develop a love of reading.

This comes at a time when **The Department for Education's** own data shows that over a quarter of 11-year-olds were not reaching the expected standard in reading before the pandemic, and **The Centre for Education and Youth's** research – alongside that of other organisations – shows that the pandemic has likely made this worse.

With reading for pleasure among children still at

concerning levels – only half of children (51%) say they enjoy reading (**National Literary Trust Annual Literacy Report, 2021**) – access to a range of reading books is essential for a number of reasons:

- Pupils who fail to learn to read early on start to dislike reading (**The Reading Framework**, DfE, January 2022)
- Children need to see themselves in the books they read – over a third (34%) of primary school age children in the UK are of an ethnic minority, but in 2020, only 8% of children's books featured a main character that wasn't white (**CLPE, Reflecting Realities 2020**)
- Children who are the most engaged with literacy are three times more likely to have higher levels of mental wellbeing than children who are the least engaged (39.4 per cent vs 11.8 per cent, **National Literary Trust**, 2018)
- Reading to children often is important and encourages independent reading. However, only one third of children 0-13s were read to daily or nearly every day by parents in 2019. This is in long term decline; in 2012 the figure was 41%, meaning that access to reading books in schools is more important than ever (**Learnings from Lockdown**, Farshore, 2021)

Louise Johns-Shepherd, Chief Executive of **CLPE** says, 'To encourage reading for pleasure, classrooms need a wide range of books that encourage engagement whoever you are and whatever your starting point. A stagnant and never-changing book stock is not going to support children to develop this life-changing habit. This is even more important for children who may have less access to books at home – and these children are likely to be those who found it difficult to get hold of books during the lockdowns. Our report shows that teachers know and understand this, resorting to resourcing their classrooms themselves to ensure their children have choice in their reading material.'

There's an urgent need to prioritise reading for pleasure and give children access to a wider range of books, following the universal disruption to education by the Covid-19 pandemic. At **Books for Keeps** we will continue to highlight this and to promote the best new books published for young readers.

¹ OECD (2002) Reading For Change Performance And Engagement Across Countries - Results From PISA 2000.

Books for Keeps March 2022 No.253

ISSN 0143-909X

© Books for Keeps CIC 2016

Managing Editor: Andrea Reece
Editorial advisor: Ferelith Hordon
Design: Louise Millar

Editorial correspondence should be sent to Books for Keeps,
30 Winton Avenue
London N11 2AT.

Books for Keeps is available online at

www.booksforkeeps.co.uk

A regular BfK Newsletter can also be sent by email.

To sign up for the Newsletter, go to

www.booksforkeeps.co.uk and follow the Newsletter link.

If any difficulty is experienced, email addresses can also be sent to enquiries@booksforkeeps.co.uk*

Email: enquiries@booksforkeeps.co.uk

Website: www.booksforkeeps.co.uk

*Email addresses will be used by **Books for Keeps** only for the purpose of emailing the Newsletter and will not be disclosed to third parties.

A Story from the Archives: Pieńkowski, Puffins and PLR

In the second in her Stories from the Archives, **Sarah Lawrance** reveals a campaigning side to **Jan Pieńkowski**.

On his 'Puffin Passport' (c.1980) Jan Pieńkowski declared a special phobia for frogs, a preference for the colour red, the smell of hay and the sound of leaves in the wind; his preferred song was *Danny Boy* and poem 'If'; he said that if he couldn't write (or, presumably, draw) he would like to sing, and that if he 'suddenly had £1,000' he would 'fly to Rio with a (very!) few friends and have a picnic on the beach'. In his passport photo he is pictured cheek-to-cheek with a fine-looking horse, smiling.

In those far distant days before YouTube and TikTok, the Puffin Passport was a clever way of creating connections between Puffin authors and their readers; the Puffin Club, launched by Kaye Webb in 1967 is still fondly remembered by former members for its quarterly magazines, quirky merchandise and joyous annual exhibitions thronged with children eager for a chance to meet their favourite Puffin authors and illustrators in person.



Jan with his giant cake design for Puffin's 50th Birthday Exhibition; photo (unnamed photographer) from the Kaye Webb archive at Seven Stories

By the time he was issued with his passport, Jan was already a Puffin veteran, with thirteen Puffin titles to his name. From 1978-1980 he had been responsible for design of *The Egg*, the magazine of the Junior Puffin Club (for 4-7 year-olds), edited by **Meg and Mog** author Helen Nicoll; a decade later, when Puffin turned fifty, Jan was enlisted to help with the celebrations, designing an exhibition set in the shape of a giant walk-through birthday cake.



Double page spread from *The Egg*, the magazine of the Junior Puffin Club, Spring 1979

The Puffin treatment boosted the careers of many authors and illustrators in the middle decades of the twentieth century and helped to raise the status of children's publishing more widely. Yet in other respects achieving proper recognition and reward for illustrators, in particular, could be difficult. When Public Lending Right was introduced in 1979, illustrators were initially excluded from the scheme, which entitled authors to receive a payment when their books were borrowed from public libraries. Vigorous protests

ensued and the scheme was duly amended; however, since titles with fewer than 48 pages were deemed ineligible, this was no help so far as picturebooks were concerned. In 1981, a further change was made to include books of 32 pages, but only if they carried half a page of printed text on each page; since this meant that the majority of books for young children remained ineligible, the fight for a fair deal for illustrators continued.

In the vanguard was the illustrator and tireless letter-writer Faith Jaques, whose archive at **Seven Stories** documents every twist and turn in the campaign. Faith successfully mobilised a host of authors and illustrators, and Jan was one of those who took up the cause: in October 1983 he had just succeeded in securing PLR on his **Fairy Tale Library**, but was deeply dissatisfied that his twenty or so shorter titles were ineligible. These would have included the **Meg and Mog** books, his **Nursery Tales** (with as few as 12 words per title), and his early pop-ups including the **Kate Greenaway Award-winning Haunted House** (1979) and **Robot** (1981). In a letter dated 11 October 1983 he told Faith, 'I am just working [on] a very ambitious work of twenty-four pages, with an awful lot of work in it, and hoping that you can help us win this particular battle.'

The following month Jan wrote to Lord Gowrie, Minister for the Arts, summarising the position: 'You may not be aware of the paradoxical plight of illustrators of picture books for very young children. The interests of their readers demand very short books, whereas in order to be eligible for PLR the authors should stretch the books to thirty-two pages or more.'

I have twenty titles which are of less than thirty-two pages in extent, and some of them are parts of series which I intend to continue. Many of my colleagues are in a similar, or worse situation.

I hope you will agree that this restriction, when applied to people in my profession is as unfair as it is arbitrary.'

Jan sent copies of his letters, together with the responses he received, to Faith, who filed them with the rest of her correspondence. Some of her own letters ran to several pages of densely handwritten and closely argued text, and while I admire her tenacity, I can't help feeling that it must have been a relief for the Minister to hear from an illustrator who was able to express himself effectively with so few words.

At any rate, the campaign was effective, and by August 1984 Jan was able to write to Faith again:

'Thank you very much for your note and the proposed PLR changes. Congratulations! All your hard work has been crowned with success, and now many of our fellow illustrators will reap the rewards.'

Sadly Faith Jaques's work is little known today, but the Public Lending Right provision for illustrators, which she and Jan and so many others campaigned for remains in place, now administered by the British Library bl.uk/plr/about-us with a good sprinkling of children's books people involved in its administration to keep things right.

All photos courtesy of **Seven Stories The National Centre for Children's Books**.



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.

Happy birthday, Winnie and Wilbur

As she approaches her 35th birthday, **Clive Barnes** celebrates the lasting appeal of **Winnie the Witch**.



It's Winnie the Witch's 35th birthday, or at least it's thirty-five years since Winnie and Wilbur, her long-suffering black cat, first appeared in a picture book. Should there be a birthday party for Winnie and Wilbur, and surely there should be, then the proud parents ought certainly to be there: Valerie Thomas, the author, and Korky Paul, the illustrator. There should also be someone from the publisher, Oxford University Press. They all have their proper credits on the pages of that first brilliant book, but there is someone who is not acknowledged there, who had perhaps the greatest responsibility for that auspicious birth. This was Ron Heapy, who died in 2017, the late lamented and far-sighted editor at OUP who gave the original text to Korky Paul to illustrate.

Valerie was a teacher and **Winnie the Witch** first came to Ron for possible inclusion in the inaugural **Oxford Reading Tree**, a graded reading scheme which will now be familiar to teachers across the country. The first books in the scheme were published in 1986, just the year before Winnie and Wilbur's debut, and, if you look closely at the text of that first book, with its carefully controlled vocabulary and repeated words and phrases, you can see how it might have become just one more rung on Oxford's reading ladder. However, Ron's choice of Korky Paul as possible illustrator changed the story's fate. Korky was yet to make his name and Winnie gave him his first major opportunity to introduce a style that was bold, inventive, busy, characterful, funny and anarchic, and perfectly suited to filling a double page spread. Whether Korky's ideas were what Ron had expected, we don't know, but presented with them, Ron saw that he had a proper picture book in the making.

What was it that made that first book so exciting and beguiling? Well, some of it came from the original text and some from what Korky made of it. Winnie is more a female wizard than the kind of witch we might

recognise from the tales of the Brothers Grimm. She has a magic wand and is an inveterate spell caster, **ABRACADABRA** in bold is splashed across the pages of every book. And, inevitably the spells go wrong or turn out unexpectedly. She is engagingly well-meaning but often does not think things through, to put it politely. This is established from the beginning of that first story, when the solution to the problem of a black cat in a black house, when you are in possession of a magic wand, should be obvious to most child readers. Yet it takes Winnie the entire book to get to the answer. The enjoyment for the reader, but certainly not Wilbur, is what happens in between.

So Korky had something to work with and what he made of it is remarkable. Against type, Winnie is a young, tall, slim witch. She may have a stereotypical long nose but it's very red at the end as if she has a permanent cold. She has a relaxed and eccentric fashion taste, and definitely nothing in black. You might wonder, does her dress have a white lacy frill or has she not pulled up her petticoat? And what about those shocking orange and yellow striped tights? Korky gives her a wizard's cone to wear, decorated with stars and a sliver of a moon but it's bent at the tip, and stays like that at various angles and twists through every adventure for the next thirty-five years. And her house is no ordinary house. Apart from being black, it's a baroque stately pile that Citizen Kane might envy and which seems to change shape from book to book and, wouldn't you know it, returns to monochrome for every book after the first. If the first book had a very small cast of characters, then Korky made up for that by filling the house with odd utensils and curious creatures, including some very odd-looking birds. When later books took Winnie and Wilbur away from the domestic scene, Korky peopled them with a cast of other eccentrics, some of whom had wandered in from the other picture books that he was by then busy creating.



Valerie Thomas



The greatest gift that Valerie gave to Korky is probably Winnie's relationship with the long-suffering Wilbur. Wilbur doesn't speak in the first story and he hasn't spoken since, except a strangled 'Meeooooow' and, occasionally, a more comfortable 'Purr, purr, purr', but Korky has provided him with a range of expressions from exasperation, through forbearance to fur-electrocuted shock and fear. But he's not always on the worst end of Winnie's spells; sometimes he's more than a little amused by the scrapes that Winnie gets herself into, sometimes a fully signed up partner in crime, and sometimes a bit of a mischief himself. Creating an invisible trip hazard by lying across the black hall in the first book, he is surely hoping to get his revenge for Winnie sitting on him the page before.

There were nine years between that first book and the appearance of the second Winnie book, but that long a gap was never to be repeated, as adventure has followed adventure. More than twenty years after Winnie and Wilbur first appeared, and almost as many picture books, as testimony to their enduring popularity, Oxford released a series of novels for younger readers featuring the pair, written by Laura Owen, with Korky's illustrations.

Although the first book was simply **Winnie the Witch**, and Winnie continued to have star billing in their many adventures, Wilbur has always been by her side, whether she was at the seaside or in space. Belatedly, in 2016, the series was rebranded as **Winnie and Wilbur** and only last year, the story of their first meeting, **Winnie's Best Friend**, was published. In this Wilbur gets to 'Purr, purr, purr' more often than he has ever done before (or after), marking the beginning of a friendship whose mad escapades have delighted parents and children ever since.



Korky Paul



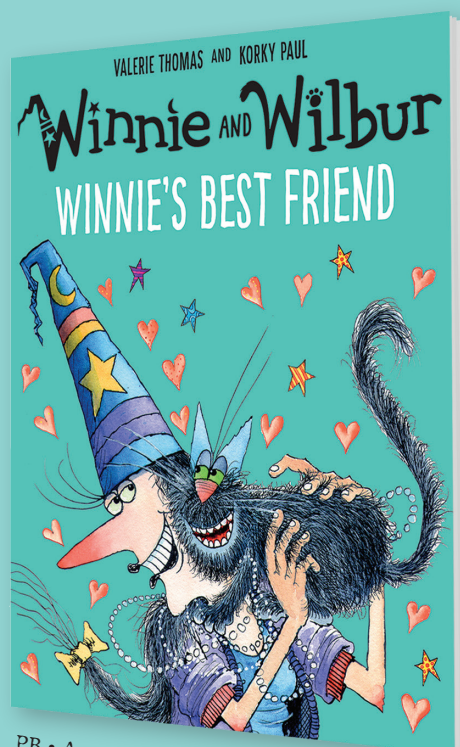
Clive Barnes has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian and is now a freelance researcher and writer.

Oxford
Children's
Books

Winnie AND Wilbur

THIS IS THE STORY OF WHEN WINNIE MET WILBUR.

When Winnie moves in to her big house, it's much too quiet. Winnie invites her sisters to stay, then some unusual companions - and chaos ensues! Winnie wonders if she'll be alone forever - until she spots a scruffy black cat...



PB • Age 2+ • RRP £6.99
978 019 277813 0

Artwork © Korky Paul



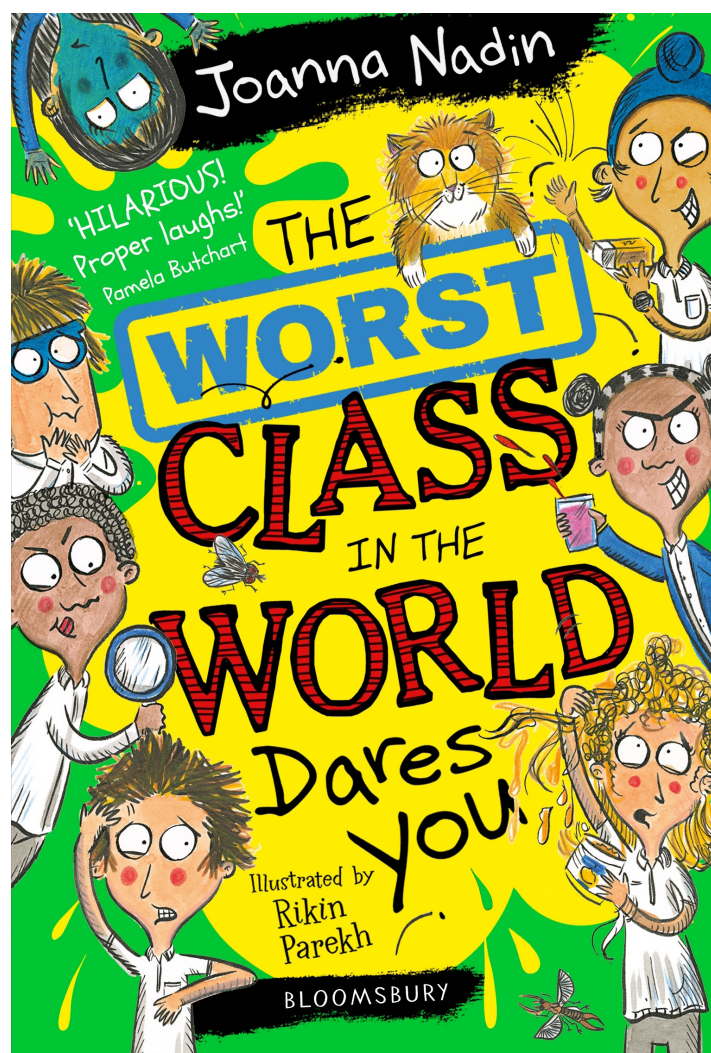
Authorgraph

No.253

Joanna Nadin

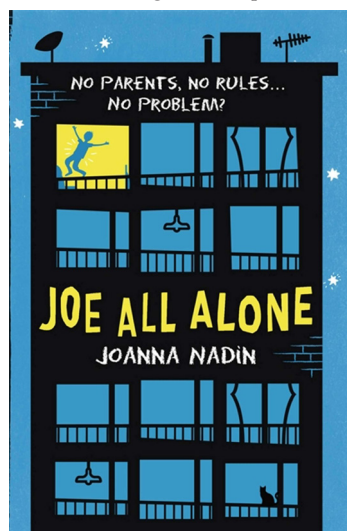
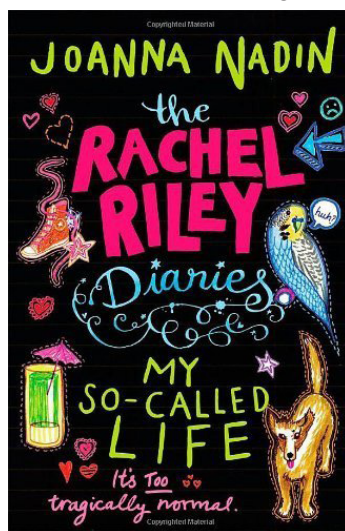
interviewed by
Joy Court

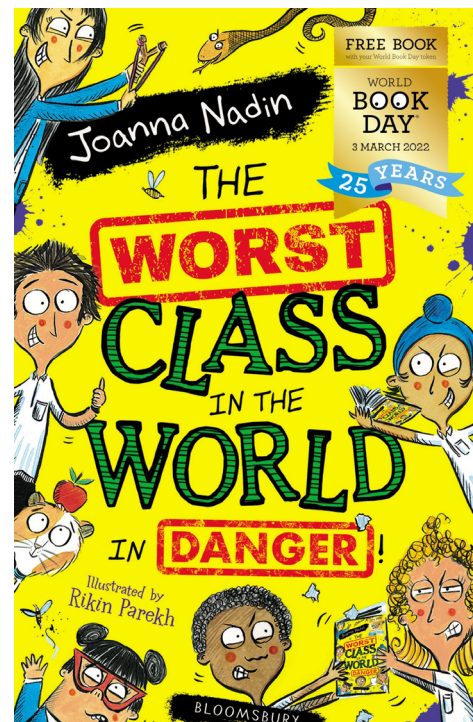
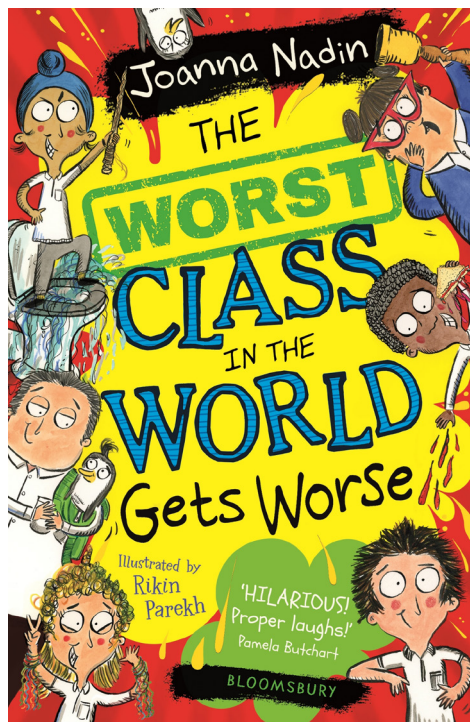
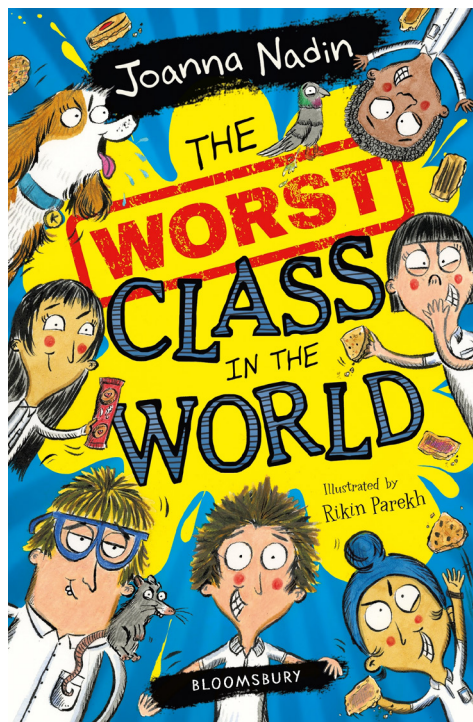
Who would have thought that a career as a political speech writer would be such a good preparation for writing for children and young people? It would not have occurred to me before my delightful conversation with Joanna Nadin, currently riding high on having a World Book Day book this year, something she describes as, 'one of the things that, as an author, you dream of, like getting a Blue Peter badge!' **The Worst Class in the World in Danger** is the fourth title in this highly successful series, with a further title in the pipeline, because she loves 'to come up with more mayhem for Manjit and Stanley to get involved in'. As a series these books are particularly successful with new or struggling readers and not just because they are so funny. We discussed how they shared with her earlier **Penny Dreadful** series, the structure of short stories within a single volume, each story able to stand alone and be read in any sequence. Each story is the perfect length for bedtime reading too, and she has learnt not to use long sentences which are tricky to read aloud. Every **Worst Class** series book begins with the same introductory jokes and character description and dialogue catchphrases are repeated throughout. Little did I know that these are not just good strategies for emerging readers, they are speechwriting tricks. Skilful rhetoric often involves repeating phrases and the use of alliteration and anaphora, where sentences begin with the same set of words, are all aids to comprehension and retention in fiction or politics.



In a far cry from the usual scenario of an author with childhood dreams of being a writer, this former broadcast journalist's career as a children's author began when she was a special adviser to the Prime Minister and, on a boring day in her basement office at Number 10, came across a BBC competition for children's story writing. Tellingly she had never considered that being an author was an actual job she could do. Authors were 'old posh men' like the Roald Dahl she had met in her Puffin Club youth. But, having completed her story, she then sent the manuscript out to every publisher and agent listed in the **Writers and Artists Yearbook** and subsequently watched the rejections pile up. But one agent, Sarah Molloy, and one publisher, Walker Books, invited her in for a chat and her highly successful and varied writing career took flight.

She has since won the **Fantastic Book Award** and the **Surrey Book Award**, been shortlisted for the **Hearst Big Book Awards**, the **Roald Dahl Funny Prize**, a **BookTrust Best Book Award** and **Queen of Teen**, and twice been nominated for the **CILIP Carnegie Medal**. Nonetheless, she took to heart the advice of her agent and has never given up the day job. After taking her PhD at Bath Spa, she now has her dream job of lecturing in Creative Writing at Bristol University, but nevertheless has been able to publish over 70 titles for children, teenagers and adults, writing in her 'spare time'.





Perhaps the only suggestion from her agent that she did not pursue, was to 'write something with vampires' for teens. Given that this was in pre-**Twilight** days, it might have paid off, but she has never been tempted into fantasy. 'Why spend all that time and energy conjuring up a different world when there is so much to say about this one?' Instead, inspired by the way **The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole** had reflected her own teen experience, she thought she could write a female version for a new generation and so another very successful series was born. The seven **Rachel Riley Diaries** follow the comedic narrator's tragically normal teen life in small-town Essex. These are based upon Jo's own home town (Saffron Walden), her friends, and her own family. 'I didn't even change my brother's name!' she confesses. Hilarious, but with an unmistakable honesty, the stories deal with issues including bullying, based on her own experiences. She is very touched by the feedback from readers whose mental health has been helped by being able to laugh and it annoys her (and me) that 'people think funny books are not clever... or not as nourishing as literary books... it is hard to write funny.'

She considers herself fortunate to be considered a 'safe pair of hands' and to attract commissions from publishers. Her reputation for delivering manuscripts on time, for being willing to be edited, all stem from her earlier career; 'when you have had the Prime Minister's red pen on your work, you lose your ego!'

She has written for reading schemes published by Bloomsbury, Oxford Reading Tree, Pearson and Collins and relishes the challenge of a 'carefully crafted sentence'. She would love to do more nonfiction like her recent biography of **Alan Turing** because 'You don't have to come up with a plot.' Qualifying that, she adds 'It's not easy. You do have to do loads of research and you've still got to make it readable and thrilling and find the right voice.' Finding the right voice and research (into cycling) was also key to co-writing the **Flying Fergus** series with Sir Chris Hoy and again, there are parallels with her speech writing. 'Ghost writing is essentially what I had been doing for years in writing speeches - pretending to be someone else.' But she loves the process of writing in partnership, because writing 'is usually such a solitary activity'. So, although the experience could not have been more different, the joint authorship with Anthony McGowan of the Carnegie nominated **Everybody Hurts**, where they each narrated a character in a funny and touching romance, was 'an absolute joy' as well as a technique she had always wanted to try.

She is also very grateful that all her contracted series and titles, along with her day jobs, have given her the freedom to write books like the Carnegie nominated **Joe All Alone** and her latest full-length novel, **No**

Man's Land, books she felt compelled to write. The first draft of **Joe All Alone** was completed in just over two weeks, inspired by seeing 'a kid in his mid-teens with a sleeping bag on his back, just like a snail, and realising he was homeless and wondering how you end up like that.' Similarly, **No Man's Land** was fuelled by anger and a sense of urgency arising from the Brexit fallout and the rise of Trump and from frustration at no longer being involved in politics. Technically the dystopian novel she vowed never to write, it powerfully imagines our world as it could be in just a few years, with the UK (Albion) now in the grip of the far right and on the brink of war. She believes words 'can and do change the world' and that hopefully stories like these will form 'part of the consciousness of young readers so that when they are older, they will do things differently.'

Joe's story went on to be turned into a Bafta award winning children's TV serial, which was a 'wonderful and amazing experience to actually see the people who lived in your head'. Currently Joanna is working on a historical YA novel, 'a 1920s Bridget Jones Diary', working on a TV script and planning a middle grade novel about climate change, all of which demonstrates that the supply of creative, thoughtful, stimulating and funny books from this highly talented and enviably productive author, thankfully shows no sign of diminishing.

Books

The Worst Class in the World series, ill. Rikin Parekh, Bloomsbury
Penny Dreadful series, ill. Jess Mikhail, Usborne
Rachel Riley Diaries, Oxford
Alan Turing: A Life Story, Scholastic, 978-1407193199, £5.99 pbk
Flying Fergus series, with Sir Chris Hoy, ill. Clare Elsom, Piccadilly Press
Everybody Hurts, with Anthony McGowan, Atom, 978-0349002910, £7.99 pbk
Joe All Alone, Little Brown, 978-0349124551, £6.99 pbk
No Man's Land, UCLan Publishing, 978-1912979615, £7.99 pbk



Joy Court is Reviews Editor for The School Librarian and Past Chair of the CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals.

Windows into illustration: Kate Read



Kate Read originally trained as a Theatre Designer at Wimbledon School of Art and says she has always loved cutting up paper and splashing paint around. She graduated from the renowned MA in Children's Book Illustration course at Anglia Ruskin University in 2018. Her first book **One Fox, A Counting Book Thriller**, published by Two Hoots, Macmillan, was shortlisted for the **Waterstones Children's Book Prize**, the **Klaus Flugge Prize** and was awarded an **Ezra Jack Keats Honour**. Kate has continued to enjoy working with Two Hoots on **BOO! A Fishy Mystery** and now **The Littlest Elephant** which is published on 17 March 2022.

The Littlest Elephant is the story of an excitable young Elephant called Ellie who has just learnt to swim. She's in a huge hurry to get to the pool and doesn't notice the chaos she causes on her way. Ellie is typical of many little children, who don't mean to walk their way through everything but are so excited and focused on their own pursuits that they don't realise they might be crashing through someone else's precious things. I like using animals as characters in books as a way to explore human emotions. **The Littlest Elephant** raises questions about empathy and awareness of others; Ellie certainly can't help crashing through the jungle, she is an elephant after all, and she doesn't mean any harm. She just needs a gentle reminder to remember to look, listen and think about what's around her.

I like to spend time getting to know the world of my characters; as with all my work, this involves drawing first, choosing the palette, painting and printing papers to create the right textures, then hours of cutting and sticking to cut the right shapes for the setting and characters. I really enjoyed researching all the different creatures in this book and visited Colchester Zoo to see the animals first-hand. I marvelled at the bright orange of the tigers' fur and the elephants' incredible textured skin, which was even more wrinkled and beautiful than I had imagined. After my visit I re-made my original character studies making Ellie's skin much more interesting using crayons, dyes and inks.

One of the trickier pages had the tiger roaring in agony 'Argh! My tail!' which I thought would be simple. I found it easy to sketch her with the right expression of shocked pain in my roughs but she was





a lot harder to collage with the same body language and feeling. Sometimes collage can lack the subtlety of drawing as one little snip of the paper can change a character completely. My editor, designer and I agreed that a close-up of the tiger's fur has to be really fur-like so I worked back into the collaged paper with paint to gain a really soft textured look. It is often a fine balance between showing the hard edges of the cut paper and making something look 'real'. I love the naivety and accessibility of collage but I also aim for a rich, multi layered illustration that children will enjoy coming back to.

I know a book really works when children are asking to read it again and again. So it was an amazing feeling when my little two-year-old nephew ran around the house copying the monkeys from the book shouting 'Watch out! Mind our mangoes!' That, for me is the true measure of success.

Find out more about Kate on her website kateread.co.uk or on Instagram - @kateread28.

The Littlest Elephant is published by Two Hoots, 978-1529085389, £12.99 hbk.

Axel Scheffler • Frantz Wittkamp • David Henry Wilson

All About Cats

Fantastically funny rhymes



A collection of
hilarious rhymes ...
all about cats!
Short, funny rhymes
brought to life by
Axel Scheffler,
the bestselling
illustrator of
The Gruffalo.



MACMILLAN
Children's Books

Ten of the Best books by Joan Aiken

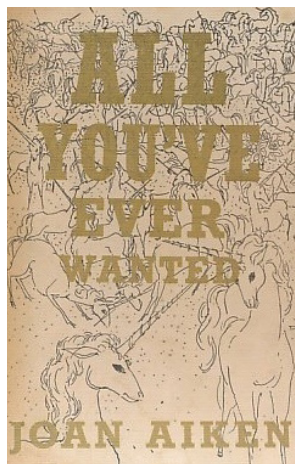
Neil Philip chooses ten of the best books by one of our finest writers for children, Joan Aiken

Few writers have the range, invention, and sheer productivity of Joan Aiken. Born into a writing family (her father was the poet Conrad Aiken) she published over 100 books, many though not all for children. She also published a helpful guide full of wise advice for would-be writers, **The Way to Write for Children** (1982). She wrote, 'I don't really think there is such a thing as 'a born storyteller', especially when it is applied to me! Storytellers aren't born, they have to learn. It is a craft.'

She believed that 'children's reading needs richness and mystery, and a sense of intense pleasure, and dedication, and powerful emotion, and an intricate story, and fine language, and humour', and this is exactly

what she provides. Aiken is one of the most original and enjoyable, inexhaustibly inventive children's authors – accidental inventor, for instance, of the whole steampunk genre.

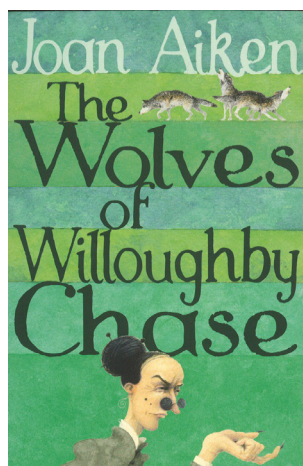
By the 1960s, the Dickensian idea of the novel, rejected by writers for adults, had filtered down to the children's list. Both Leon Garfield and Joan Aiken revelled in the Dickensian model of pin-sharp characters with expressive dialogue, twist-and-turning stories that encompass the whole of society, and intertwining comedy and tragedy.



All You've Ever Wanted (1953) O/P

This was Aiken's first published book, a collection of short stories, later combined with its 1955 successor **More Than You Bargain For** as **All and More** (1971). What a sparkling, confident debut! The first line of the title story has the reader hooked: 'Matilda, you will agree, was a most unfortunate child.' Besieged by well-meaning but interfering aunts, poor Matilda gets birthday gifts from her seventh aunt Gertie of wishes that always come true, with unintended consequences. When she grows up,

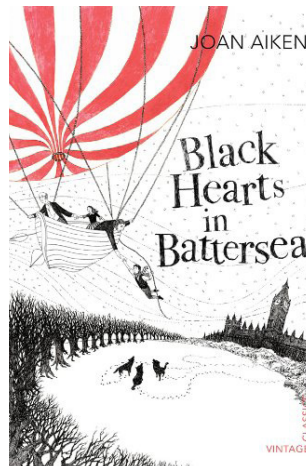
Matilda takes a job at the Ministry of Alarm and Despondency, but the unwanted wishes pursue her even there. Many of Aiken's best stories are now collected in **The Gift Giving** (2016).



The Wolves of Willoughby Chase (1962)

Puffin, 978-0099456636, £6.99 pbk

A kind of parody of Victorian Gothic novels such as **Uncle Silas**, this is the first book in the **Wolves Chronicles**, a loose-limbed series of twelve books. Though it takes place 'in a period of English history that never happened' this opener is less fully-immersed in the helter-skelter alternative history of the others, but it has every element to keep the reader gripped - ravaging wolves, persecuted orphans, a wicked governess, and a beguiling saviour in the gooseboy Simon.

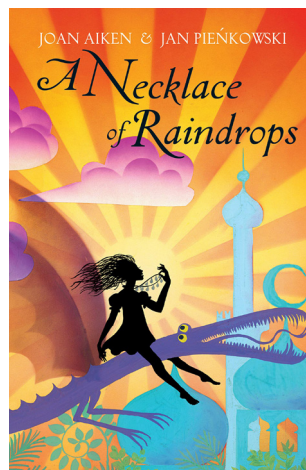


Black Hearts in Battersea (1965)

Vintage Children's Classics, 978-0099573661, £6.99 pbk

Simon reappears in **Black Hearts**, but Aiken may have decided her Wolves heroines Bonnie and Sylvia were too goody-goody, because they are replaced in this and many subsequent books by the effervescent, irrepressible Dido Twite, and her family of eccentrics. Croopus! Dido is a one-off creation of comic genius. This is how we first make her acquaintance: 'She was a shrewish-looking little creature of

perhaps eight or nine, with sharp eyes of a pale washed-out blue and no eyebrows or eyelashes to speak of. Her straw-coloured hair was stringy and sticky with jam and she wore a dirty satin dress two sizes too small for her.' Written in 'one happy rush', **Black Hearts** is a whirlwind of dastardly Hanoverian plots. It's Dido who captivates, and she comes even more into her own in later books such as **Nightbirds on Nantucket**, **The Cuckoo Tree**, and **Dido and Pa..**



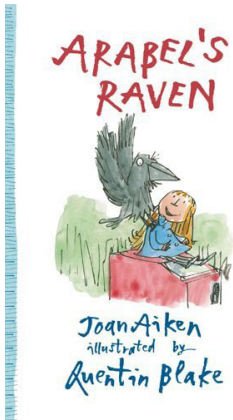
A Necklace of Raindrops (1968)

Illus Jan Pienkowski, Jonathan Cape, 978-0224083805, £12.99 hbk

The first in a series of magical collaborations with the artist Jan Pienkowski, this collection of fairy tales shows how Joan Aiken used this form, like Hans Christian Andersen before her, to express the poetry that naturally flowed through her. Written for younger readers than most of her work, these stories, perfect for bedtime as titles such as 'A Bed for the Night' and 'The Patchwork Quilt' suggest, still thrum with imagination and joy in language.

Neil Philip is a writer and folklorist.

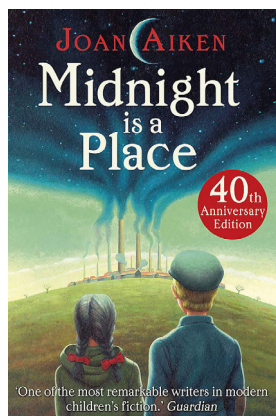
10



Arabel's Raven (1972)

Illus Quentin Blake, Puffin, 978-0241386576, £6.99pbk

The **Arabel and Mortimer** stories, originally written for Jackanory, and illustrated with characteristic sparkle by Quentin Blake, show Joan Aiken at her wittiest and sprightliest. The raucously accident-prone raven Mortimer is a wonderful character, and both plot and language share a wild slapstick verve. All the stories are now collected in two volumes, **Arabel and Mortimer Stories** (2019) and **More Arabel and Mortimer** (2019).

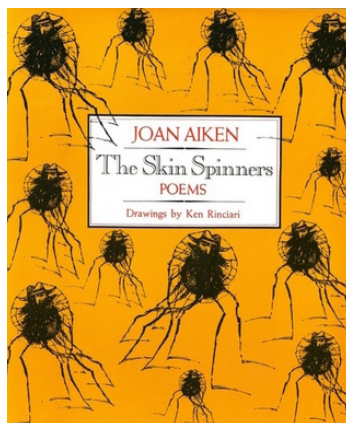


Midnight Is a Place (1974)

Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444919028

Midnight revisits some of the themes of **Wolves**, with maltreated orphans and child labour, but also the industrial setting of Blastburn, described in **Wolves** as 'a hideous town, all coal tips and ugly mills'. In **Midnight** this Victorian dystopia, distilled from Frances Trollope's **Michael Armstrong** and Dickens' **Hard Times**, brings the cruelties of child exploitation into the sharpest focus. Like Jill Paton Walsh's

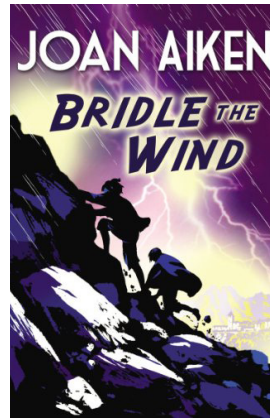
A Chance Child it doesn't shy away from the hardest truths. This book is truly midnight black, and unlike **Wolves**, there is no easy happy-ever-after ending. The hellish setting of Blastburn (based on Kingston-upon-Hull) reappears in **Is** (aka **Is Underground**), one of the **Wolves Chronicles** featuring Dido's sister Is Twite.



The Skin Spinners (1976)

O/P

There are fine poems scattered through Aiken's novels, but this is her only poetry collection. By turns lyrical, reflective, daft, and horrific, they reveal a finely-tuned poetic gift. Perhaps my favourite is 'Palace Cook's Tale' about two princesses who have everything they need except love and human contact: 'their smiles are like/thin thin slices of lemon.' The palace cook's parting words are heartbreaking: 'Poor little things/when they grow up they will marry foreign kings.'

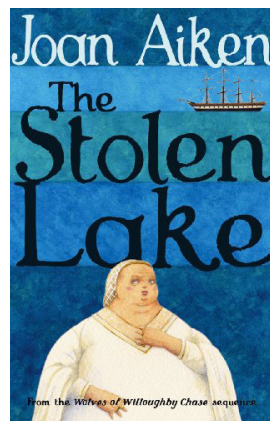


The Felix Trilogy (1978-1988)

Red Fox, 978-1849418294, £8.99 pbk

Go Saddle the Sea, **Bridle the Wind**, and **The Teeth of the Gale** are three edge-of-the-seat thrillers featuring Felix Brooke, half-English but brought up among his mother's Spanish family. All three are riveting reads, but **Bridle the Wind** is exceptional for the fearsome depiction of the monstrous Father Vespasian, and the touching figure of Felix's Basque companion Juan, whose dream is to perform in one of the Basque bertsulari – oral poetry – contests. The

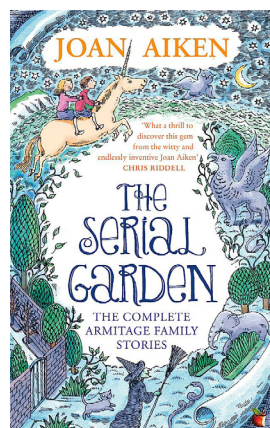
climax when Felix and Juan confront the brigand Plumet, now inhabited by Father Vespasian's unquiet spirit, is chilling: 'The face, dead-white, was seared and scarred, as if the flesh and bone which formed it had been compressed, frozen, buried in quicklime, or subjected to other terrifyingly powerful forces.'



The Stolen Lake (1981)

Red Fox, 978-0099477396, £7.99 pbk

As they progressed, the **Wolves Chronicles** got wilder and stranger, with more supernatural elements, as in the mélange of Welsh mythology in **The Whispering Mountain** (1968) but most especially in the mock-Arthurian extravaganza **The Stolen Lake**, which finds Queen Guinevere (Ginevra) still alive in the South American colony of New Cumbria, awaiting her husband's return. The thirteen-hundred-year-old cannibal queen, with skin 'like white bread-dough', is a marvellous grotesque. Particularly hilarious for those versed in Arthurian lore, it is 'a fine skimble-skamble tale' in which the true hero is the English language..



The Serial Garden (2015)

Virago, 978-0349005850, £9.99 pbk

Her stories about the Armitage family, based on her own childhood but with a bucketload of magic thrown over it, was Joan Aiken's longest fictional enterprise, but the tales were only collected posthumously in this volume. Unicorns, griffins, sea serpents, fairy godmothers, ghostly governesses, are all in a day's play for the happy Armitages. The spirit of E. Nesbit can be detected in these stories in which the magical is everyday, and the everyday is magical.

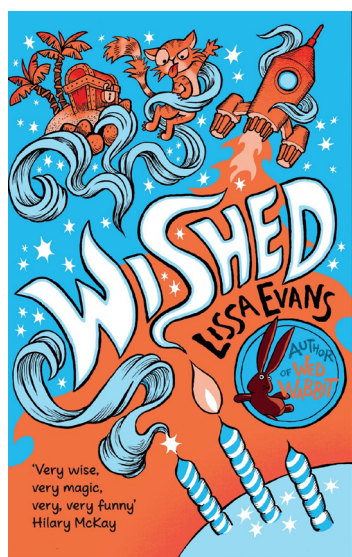
Two excellent online resources tell more: the official [Wonderful World of Joan Aiken](#) website, and Chris Lovegrove's [Calmgrove](#) blog – both well worth exploring.

Wishing Well

Michelle Pauli talks to Lissa Evans about her new book, **Wished**.

'I wanted to know what a generation raised on instant magic on screens would do with wishes,' says Lissa Evans of **Wished**, her fourth book for children.

It follows three children – 10-year-old Ed, his nine-year-old sister Roo and their new friend Willard – who are forced to spend the half-term holidays with a neighbour, Miss Filey. She is 'very, very old' (actually in her mid-60s) thinks 'wifi' is a type of biscuit and lives in a time warp bungalow with a smelly, cantankerous old cat, Attlee, and a fridge-sized TV that takes minutes to 'warm up' enough to show its two black and white channels. Prospects for fun look remote. Until, that is, the trio discover a small tin of magical birthday cake candles.



'I write the kind of books I loved reading at that age,' explains Evans. 'I very much write for the nine-year-old me, a child who had recently moved house. I hated where I was living, but I was five minutes away from a library for the first time in my life. So I installed myself in Lichfield library and read everything. I particularly loved books about ordinary children stumbling across magic. The books I reread always had some element of escapism that took me out of the life I was in.'

The escapism in **Wished** is provided by the brilliant conceit of a series of four-minute-long adventures inspired by a list Miss Filey had written in the back of a childhood book, *Adventure Stories for Girls*. These are truly fabulous, ranging from travelling to outer space in a rocket to

unexpectedly appearing in a film and catching a major international criminal.

There are flashes of **Five Children and It**, particularly in a couple of the earlier wishes, but **Wished** is very much its own book. As you'd expect from a Lissa Evans novel, it's shot through with humour, whether in the form of Ed's sarcasm, Willard's more slapstick and often unwitting comedy and, unusually, Attlee's cynical asides (yes, he finds he can talk).

'Attlee has no obvious charm at all,' says Evans, laughing. Despite this, he's a total scene stealer with a voice Evans describes as 'a combination of Kenneth Williams and Eeyore'. Though, she also muses, 'when I was reading it for audio book, I was trying to channel Simon Russell Beale for him...'

There's also humour in the sheer ridiculousness of the adventure stories she pastiches, full of jolly capable girls called Veronica and Belinda. Marvellously, Belinda is given the chance to go to Jupiter with the American space mission as the school prize (instead of the usual silver cup) for being terribly good at sums – and so Ed, Roo and Willard follow in her footsteps.

But while the magic and the humour make **Wished** pure laugh-out-loud delight, it is the children who are at the heart of the novel and give it its wonderful warmth. As in her first two children's books, **Small Change for Stuart** and **Big Change for Stuart**, Evans draws on her experience of change at that age to bring out the different ways children adapt to new situations.

Smart, sarcastic Ed is a relatively recent wheelchair user, due to an unnamed progressive muscle wasting disease, and struggles with the visibility it has forced on him. He suffers particularly from the sense that he is 'public property' after the local fundraising campaign his parents have had to run in order to pay for building work to make the house wheelchair accessible. Meanwhile, his gentle sister Roo, who worries about him enormously, grows in confidence through the course of the adventures as Evans tackles, with a light touch, the complexity of a sibling relationship with a disabled person.



Evans has a particular soft spot for Willard who, like her at that age, finds himself in a new place, trying to make new friends. 'It's a big, big thing for a child, going somewhere new and learning to cope, and Willard copes by fitting himself into an existing niche – there's always a place for a class clown. I automatically moved into class swot territory and it made me think about roles in schools and how, once you are in a role, it's very difficult to move out of it,' explains Evans.

Her own 'class swot' niche led to science A levels and medical school at Newcastle University where she qualified, worked as a junior doctor and 'was scared all the time, every single second, every single shift'. One day, on a train, she had 'the epiphany of my life' and realised she could just give it up. A short stint as a stand-up was swiftly followed by a successful career in radio and TV comedy production, including directing series such as **Father Ted** and **Have I Got News for You**. Her writing career began in 2003 with the publication of her first adult novel, **Spencer's List**, and includes an acclaimed trilogy of wartime novels, **Crooked Heart**, **Old Baggage** and **V for Victory**.

But it is her middle grade children's books – the **Stuart** books, **Wed Wabbit** and now **Wished** – where she revels in the joy of upending reality and weaving magic.

'It does feel different. I once made some remark about writing adult books in the morning and children's books in the afternoon, which made me sound like Margaret Thatcher – "I waste not a second of the day!" But all I meant was it does feel like I'm using a different part of my brain. If I've been struggling all morning with a scene in an adult book, starting a children's book feels lighter, faster. Children feel the same emotions as adults but I don't think they brood about them so much. There are fewer interior monologues. They get on with stuff,' she says, approvingly.

Wished is published by David Fickling Books, 978-1788452021, £12.99 hbk



Michelle Pauli is a freelance writer and editor specialising in books and education. She created and edited the **Guardian** children's books site.

Five Go to France

Emma Page describes the *plaisir* of translating the French graphic novel adaptations of Enid Blyton's **Famous Five**.



Blyton is a household name in the UK, where a fourth generation of young readers are now discovering her beloved **Famous Five** stories. The adventures of Julian, Dick and Anne, their cousin George and her dog Timmy at Kirrin Cottage in Dorset have long captured the imagination of British children, with their wholesome hijinks, endless school holidays and sumptuous picnics washed down with lashings of ginger beer. UK audiences might be surprised to learn that for nearly as long as the Famous Five have been visiting Kirrin Cottage in Dorset, a set of doppelgangers known as the **Club des Cinq** have been spending their holidays at the *Villa des Mouettes* in Brittany, France. In the 1950s George(ina), Julian, Dick and Anne crossed the Channel to become Claude(ine), Francois, Mick, and Annie, where they starred in hugely popular French translations of Blyton's books published by Hachette Livre.

In this post-**Harry Potter** era, global children's book phenomena are not unheard of. What makes Blyton in France unusual is the extent to which the Club des Cinq have been integrated into French children's book culture. The original French translations heavily adapted both the text and the visual identity of the **Famous Five** books. Settings, character names and food and drink, all iconic elements of Blyton's writing, were given a French feel. Where Julian and Dick were digging into ham and boiled eggs, Francois and Mick were salivating over crepes and brioches. More abstract cover designs emphasized the mystery and adventure elements of the story, steering away from the bright, busy look of the original British covers. When Blyton died in 1968, Claude Voilier, one of her French translators, continued the **Club des Cinq** series directly in French. These later stories were eventually translated into English by iconic Asterix translator Anthea Bell, making the **Famous Five** that we know and love today a genuine cross-Channel cultural creation.

Recently, I was lucky enough to experience the French love of Blyton first-hand when I was asked to translate graphic novel adaptations of the first two **Famous Five** books, **Five on a Treasure Island** and **Five Go Adventuring Again**. The adaptations, originally produced in French by father-and-son duo Béja and Nataël and published by Hachette Livre in 2017, are the first graphic novel versions of Blyton stories to appear in English. To anyone familiar with Tintin or Asterix, it should come as no surprise that graphic versions of classic children's novels are relatively common in France. In the UK, Hachette was initially unsure whether they would appeal to a market where comics are a less-established element of children's mainstream reading culture. The massive popularity in recent years of graphic-driven series like **Diary of a Wimpy Kid** and imported

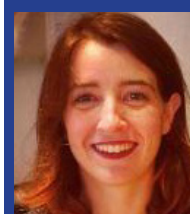
genres such as Japanese manga, as well as an increasing awareness among parents and teachers of the importance of visual literacy and expanding the accessibility of literature, eventually convinced them that the time was right to bring the **Club des Cinq** home to the UK in graphic novel format.

As a translator, this was an exciting and unusual project with plenty of unique challenges. I had to balance replacing the **Club des Cinq** elements with the familiar, British world of the **Famous Five** while also respecting the various plot and prose adaptations that had to do more with the graphic format than with the French setting. Blyton's prose is heavy on description, while the graphic format is almost all dialogue. Certain plot elements from each book had disappeared, while others had been expanded or even created from scratch. Ultimately, my aim was to produce a translation that would both appeal to the nostalgic parents and grandparents who are part of Blyton's British audience, while preserving the exciting, contemporary feel of Béja and Nataël's sparkling adaptations of these familiar stories.

Beyond the names of people and places, certain French plot elements had to be changed back to reflect the originals. The French version explains that the children's wealthy ancestor, who once owned all the land around Kirrin Island, lost his fortune 'in the Revolution'. That detail doesn't make sense in a British setting, so I translated it with Blyton's less-exciting original explanation for the family's reduced circumstances (just bad luck). The **Treasure Island** graphic novel includes an extended historical flashback about pirates and the trans-Atlantic bean trade that turns on a French pun about haricot beans and gold ingots. This doesn't feature at all in the original books, and the pun sadly dissolves when translated into English, so my translation of that section is quite different in content (although not in spirit) from the French version. A local farmer couple who have a strong dialect and use a colourful variety of religious exclamations in the French gain a traditional West Country accent. Crepes and brioches became pancakes and muffins, although astute readers may notice the illustrations feature distinctly un-British bowls of coffee. The illustrations in general are quintessentially French, strongly echoing the bold outlines and bright colours of Tintin and featuring clothing, food and architecture that would be found in Brittany rather than Dorset. Rather than try to explain or change this, the editors at Hachette and I chose to let it speak for itself. Like a film or TV adaptation, these joyful graphic representations of deeply familiar characters will be just one more element contributing to the images of George, Timmy, Aunt Fanny, Uncle Quentin and all the rest that exist in the mind's eye of so many readers around the world, young and old alike.

Five on a Treasure Island: Book 1 (Famous Five Graphic Novel), 978-1444963670, Hodder Children's Books, £7.99 pbk

Five Go Adventuring Again: Book 2 (Famous Five Graphic Novel), 978-1444963687, Hodder Children's Books, £7.99 pbk



Emma Page is a translator of French and Spanish, and currently researching a PhD on translated children's literature at the University of Reading's Centre for Book Cultures and Publishing.

Beyond the Secret Garden: 'It Starts in Wales'

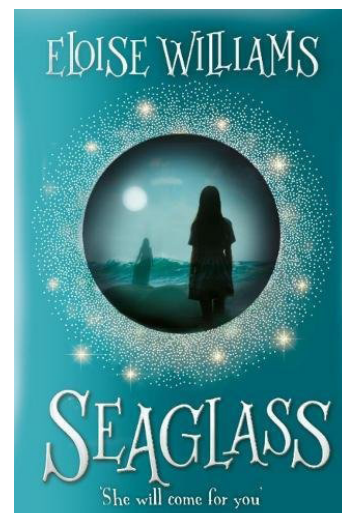
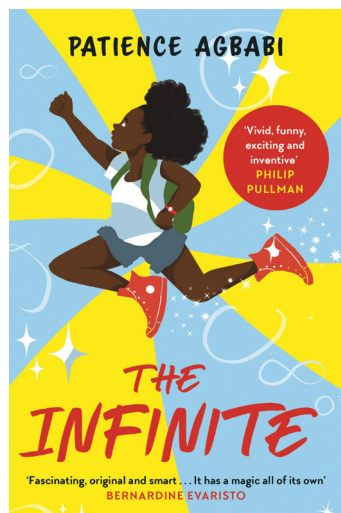
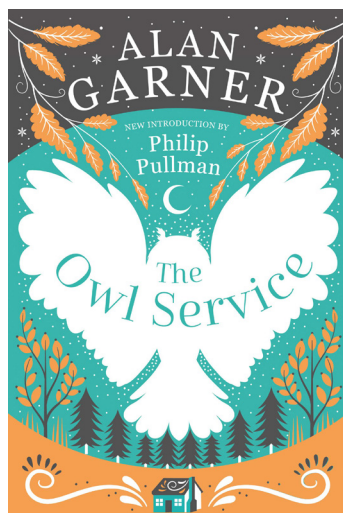
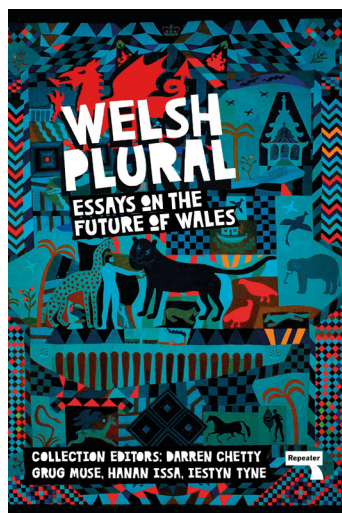
In the latest in the **Beyond the Secret Garden** series, which looks at the representation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic voices in British children's literature, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** explore the works of Welsh authors.

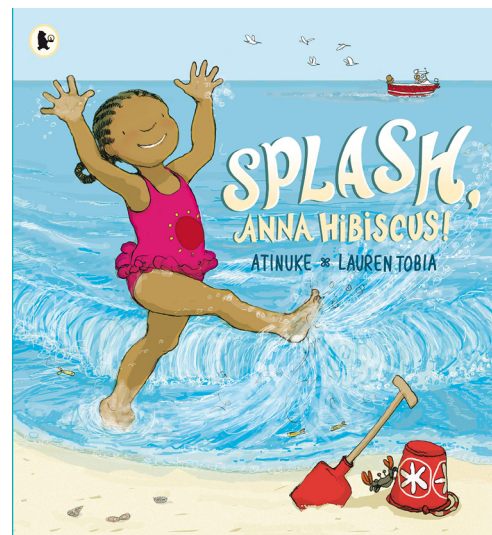
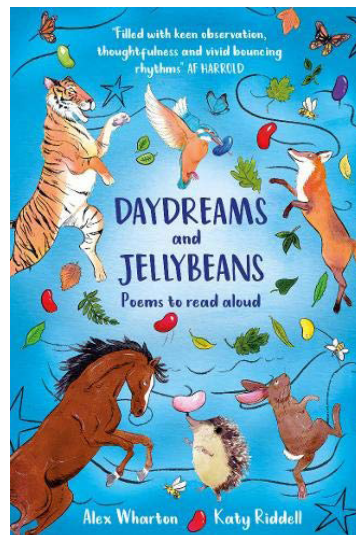
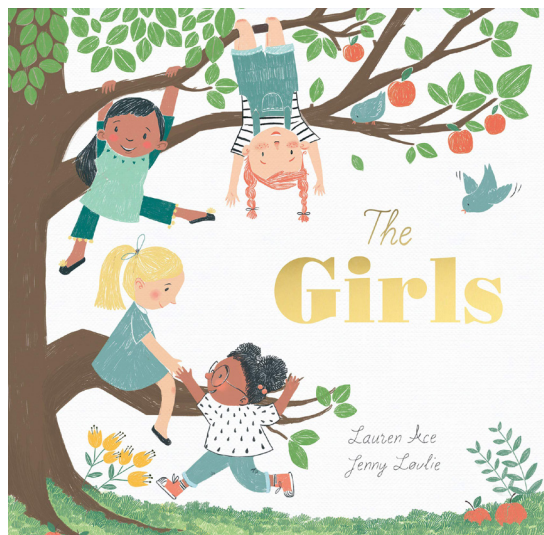
In March 2022, Repeater Books publishes **Welsh (Plural): Essays on the Future of Wales** edited by Darren Chetty, Hanan Issa, Grug Muse and Iestyn Tyne. Eight of the nineteen essayists are people of colour and a number of them refer to their childhood in Wales. Children's literature set in Wales and featuring racially minoritised people is still rare. Darren has been told by a number of literary agents that British children's stories that feature a Black or brown main character continue to be a harder thing to sell to publishers. At the same time, best-selling Welsh author Sophie Anderson reports having been told by publishing professionals that books with a strong Welsh subject matter might be considered niche and potentially have a more limited market, especially internationally. Books set in Wales and featuring characters of colour potentially face both obstacles, and very few writers can afford not to take such commercial pressures into account, when writing books.

Many children's and young adult novels written before the nineties centred on the difference between Welshness and Englishness, or on the connection to British myth and legend – from King Arthur to the Mabinogi – or both, as in Alan Garner's **The Owl Service** (1967) or Susan Cooper's **The Dark is Rising** sequence (1965-77). Cooper's **Silver on the Tree** won the 1978 **Tir na n-Og Award** and includes Manny Singh, a Sikh boy from an Indian family who could be read as a plot device to allow Cooper to build connections between real-world racism and the magical world of the Dark. Wales, both colonized by the English and a place of legend and magic, continued to be a particularly useful setting for English authors as they began to think about broadening the definition of Britishness. Philip Pullman's young adult novel, **The Broken Bridge** (1990), about a girl with an English father and a Haitian mother, living in Wales, is one of Gothic fear over mixed-race liaisons. Ginny (the main protagonist) is haunted by the ghosts of colonialism and racism. She tries to use Voodoo to solve her problems, but only ends up in danger. In the end, she takes it upon herself to 'heal' her family, but can only do this once she rejects her Haitian mother: 'I've never had her, so I can't miss her really,' (207) she says. Ginny stops trying to connect with her mother in any way, including through Voodoo. She ends the novel by embracing the beauty of the land around her and the Welsh language of the people of the town, calling "Bore da" to her as she passes by (218).

But the idea of a character having to reject aspects of their racialised or cultural background is resisted by other writers. Catherine Johnson, of Welsh and Jamaican heritage, grew up in London but had a deep connection to Wales and set several of her early novels there, including **The Last Welsh Summer** (1993). Like Pullman's novel, Johnson's protagonist Suki sometimes feels like an outsider in Wales because of her Guyanese heritage. But despite overhearing one of her cousin's friends ask, 'how can she be black and Welsh, she's foreign isn't she?' (16), Suki knows her connection to Wales is real. 'Even if I don't belong,' she concludes the novel by saying, 'this belongs to me' (116). The land itself welcomes Suki even if the people don't always. Similarly, Louise, Johnson's protagonist in **Other Colours** (1993) runs away from Wales to London because she is the only brown-skinned girl in her town and people 'stare at me in Safeway' (17). But through her positive interaction with an art teacher in London and negative interaction with skinheads, Louise comes to realise that she doesn't belong in London simply because she is Black. But she brings back images of multiracial London, 'the woman in a sari with a pattern of gold and blue . . . the dark-brown man with the scars on his face . . . the two black girls with sculpted hairdos hard like shells' (135) to 'keep in my head for the long white Welsh summer up ahead' (135). 'There is a future, even if it starts in Wales' (137), she thinks, but it is a future she has to create herself in order to belong.

Louise's pronouncement at the end of **Other Colours** could have been the opening line of Patience Agbabi's **The Infinite** (2020). In fact, in the opening chapter, the protagonist Elle says, 'Today I got a text from the future!' (11). Agbabi spent her teenage years in North Wales, and the setting of her novel about twelve-year-old Elle shows a multiracial town of Italians, Nigerians, Poles and British people who don't always get along (windows of the Polish deli are smashed and graffitied). But Elle, autistic, Nigerian-British, and one of the best sprinters in her school, goes to the future to make the world better. And when she returns home to her grandmother's pepper soup, she can see how her own town's future, and own world's future, might change if people like her decide to do something: 'Today is a special day . . . I can help save the planet . . . Maybe one day there'll be no more fish in the sea. Or maybe human beings will fall in love with Planet Earth. The future needs the past to become itself' (233-4).





Inaugural Children's Laureate Wales Eloise Williams has included characters of colour in two of her middle grade novel set in Wales published by Firefly, **Seaglass** (2018) and **Wilde** (2020). From the same publisher, **Daydreams and Jellybeans** is a book of poetry written by Alex Wharton and illustrated by Katy Riddell (Firefly 2021). Throughout the book, illustrations of children accompany the poems, including Black children and another child wearing a hijab. The poems are mostly about common childhood experiences and animals. However, *Trapper Boy* is about the children, 'as young as four', who were employed in coal mines in the first half of the nineteenth century.

A number of picture books with Welsh connections have been published in the past decade. **The Girls** and its sequel **The Boys** (2018 & 2021, Little Tiger) by Swansea-born Lauren Ace and Cardiff-based Jenny Løvlie feature a number of characters of colour. Author Atinuke was born in Nigeria and lives in Wales. Books such as **Splash, Anna Hibiscus!** illustrated by Lauren Tobia (Walker, 2013) are set in Africa. **Your Hair is Your Crown** by Jessica Dunrod (2020) is published by Dunrod's own company Lily Translates. We see Hope with her white mother from Cardiff and her Black father from St Kitts. The story involves Hope encountering Dewi the Dragon and Afrodite, a Black mermaid, before flying over Cardiff. Hope learns that there is magic to be found in the curls of her hair. As such it is the only fiction picture book that features a person of colour and is explicitly set in Wales.

Recent non-fiction books about Wales indicate a broadening of perspectives. Published just five years ago, **Horrible Histories – Wales** by Terry Deary and illustrated by Martin Brown (Scholastic 2017) does not mention racially minoritised people at all save for the unsubstantiated story of Madog ab Owain leading a group that travelled to North America and intermarried with Native Americans in the twelfth century. Patagonia is also mentioned, but only to say Welsh people moving there 'do well' and set up tea houses (p104). However, following the 2021 report of the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities, Contributions and Cynefin in the New Curriculum Working Group chaired by Professor Charlotte Williams OBE, a number of non-fiction books have been published by Welsh publishers that do pay some attention to people of colour.

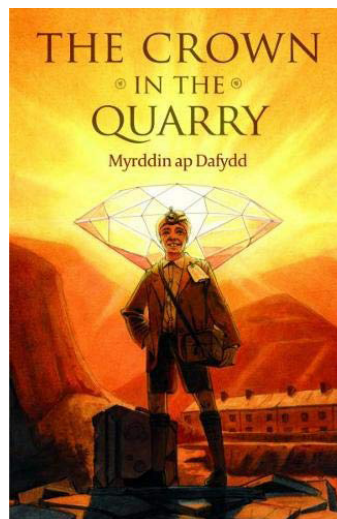
The cover of **History Grounded** by Elin Jones (Carreg Gwalch, 2021) features a bilingual Black Lives Matter banner next to Coal not Dole, Votes for Women and Cofiwch Dryweryn (remember Trywern). Jones includes a two-page spread on Wales' part in the slave trade, including a map showing the location of slaver families who were compensated by the British government after abolition. Less is said about the long-standing Black and Asian communities in Wales, though a page is devoted to Betty Campbell, the first Black headteacher in Wales whose statue was unveiled in Cardiff in 2021. **10 Stories From Welsh History**, written by Ifan Morgan Jones and illustrated by Telor Gwyn (Rily, 2021) also mentions Campbell, along with diplomat Abdulrahim Abby Farrah and, Colin Charvis, the first Black man to captain the Welsh rugby union team, in a section entitled 'multiculturalism' that also refers to Yemeni,

Romani, Italian, and Jewish communities. Again, Welsh involvement in the slave trade is acknowledged. The 1919 'Race Riots' are given a double-page spread, concluding that 'it's important that we remember this history so that we never face such a situation again' (p27).

Fighting for Fairness – Righting Wrongs and Battling Prejudice by Greg Lewis (Magic Rat 2021) is a sixty-eight page non-fiction book, with short sections organised around significant figures in Welsh history. Eddie Parries, the first Black footballer to play for Wales, Clive Sullivan who captained the Great Britain rugby league team, Billy Boston, one of a number of Black players overlooked by Welsh rugby union clubs, whose record of most tries for Wigan has stood for over forty years, Cameroon-born writer Eric Ngalle Charles, Frances Batty Shand Jamaican-born child of a John Shand a Scottish slaver and Frances Brown an enslaved woman (described as 'a plantation owner' and 'a slave'). Frances Batty Shand founded Cardiff's oldest charity, the Association for Improving the Social and Working Conditions of the Blind, which became known as the Cardiff Institute for the Blind. Lewis' book is noteworthy for not skipping over Crimean War nurse Betsi Cadwaladr's time in the Caribbean, as other accounts of her life have often done. Indeed, a final section entitled 'Slavery and Wales' mentions Welsh abolitionists as well as slaver Thomas Picton and Henry Morton Stanley, who worked for Leopold II, and the recent conversations in Wales about statues erected to honour them.

The picture book **Shirley – The Dazzling Life of Shirley Bassey** written by Bethan Gwanas and illustrated by Hanna Harris (Broga 2021) is part of the Welsh Wonders picture book series. Bassey's journey from Tiger Bay, Cardiff to Monaco, via London and Las Vegas is chronicled; challenges and successes are included. In a spread where Bassey, her siblings and her parents are depicted, the text reads, 'Shirley's father was a sailor from West Africa. Her mother had moved to Tiger Bay to avoid people who didn't like her children because of the colour of the skin.' (p3) Bassey is also included in **Great Britons 50 Amazing People Who Have Called Britain Home** by Welsh writer and regular **Books for Keeps** contributor Imogen Russell Williams. The book is illustrated by Sara Mulvanny (Nosy Crow, 2021).

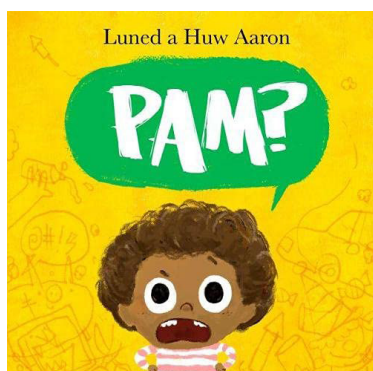
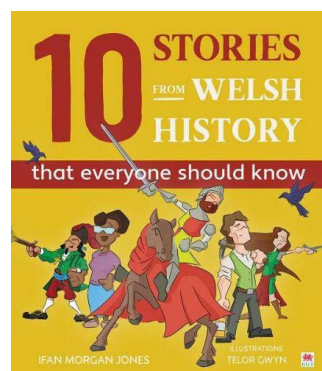
It is important to acknowledge that Wales has two official languages, and indeed some of the most interesting children's and YA fiction in recent times has come out of Welsh language publishing. Welsh language publisher Y Olfa has recently published a number of books featuring people of colour in Welsh settings. **Sw Sara Mai** by Casia Wiliam (2020), a middle grade novel featuring a young Sara Mai who lives in South Wales with her Zoo-owning parents, and describes herself as 'dark brown, somewhere between mum's skin colour and Dad's skin colour'. **Pam?** by Luned and Huw Aaron (2021) features a young boy of colour who is forever asking his parents 'Why?'. **The Crown in the Quarry** (Carreg Gwalch 2019) first published in Welsh as **Y Goron yn y Chwarel** and translated by Susan Walton is one of a number of historical novels written by poet and Archdruid of Wales Myrddin ap Dafydd. Sardar arrives in Blaenau Ffestiniog as a wartime evacuee from Liverpool



having migrated with his family from the Punjab. The book describes the racism Sardar encounters, but also the friendship and solidarity offered by his new friends as he settles in and learns a third language. An image of his vocabulary book is shown where he translates Welsh into Punjabi. As well as racism, colonialism and class exploitation emerge as central themes of the book, which includes references to the Amritsar massacre as well as English landlords who exploited Welsh workers. As such it provides an important space to talk about the complexities of Welsh history in relation to race and nationhood.

Welsh children's literature scholar Siwan Rosser informs us that three Welsh translations of **Uncle Tom's Cabin** had been published by 1853. However, **Y Castell Siwgr** (Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2020) by Angharad Tomos is, according to Rosser, the first Welsh children's novel to deal directly with Wales and the slave trade. The stories of two teenage girls are offered; Dorcas, who is forced to serve at Penrhyn Castle in Gwynedd and Eboni, an enslaved person on the Penrhyn family plantation in Jamaica. The two stories are told separately; the reader is invited to observe the similarities and differences between class oppression and enslavement whilst gaining insight into one of the Welsh families who made a fortune as slavers.

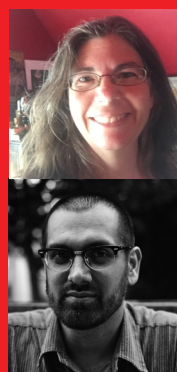
The recent publication of **Y Pump (The Five)** a series of five interlocking YA narratives set in North Wales and each written as collaborations between authors and co-authors, is a fascinating development in publishing, Welsh and beyond. Series editor Elgan Rhys drew on his theatre background to develop a project that has both collaborative storytelling and young writer development at its heart. The series writers were mentored by Manon Steffan Ros. Both **Aniq** by Marged Elin Wiliam and Mahum Umer and **Cat** by Megan Angharad Hunter and Maisie Awen include young people of colour as protagonists who feature in the other three books about Year 11 students at a school on the North Wales coast. The books' co-authors are roughly the same age as the characters portrayed and played integral roles in the writing process. As Elgan Rhys writes in **Two Rivers in a Common Spring**, a book celebrating 60 years of the Books Council of Wales, 'The authors are there, but we need to go beyond our habits, in order to uncover and invite in the new, contemporary and authentic voices in today's Wales.' (p224)



Thanks to Dr Siwan Rosser, Jo Bowers, Marvin Thompson, Jessica Dunrod, Penny Thomas, Sian Chapman & LLeucu Siencyn for their time and support with this column.

Books mentioned

- Welsh (Plural): Essay on the Future of Wales**, Darren Chetty, Grug Muse, Hanan Issa, Iestyn Tyne (eds).
- The Owl Service**, Alan Garner, HarperCollins Children's Books
- The Silver on the Tree**, Susan Cooper, Puffin
- The Broken Bridge**, Philip Pullman, Macmillan Children's Books
- The Last Welsh Summer**, Catherine Johnson, O/P
- Other Colours**, Catherine Johnson, O/P
- The Infinite**, Patience Agbabi, Canongate
- Seaglass**, Eloise Williams, Firefly Press
- Wilde**, Eloise Williams, Firefly Press
- Daydream and Jellybeans**, Alex Wharton, illus Katy Riddell, Firefly Press
- The Girls**, Lauren Ace, illus Jenny Løvlie, Little Tiger
- The Boys**, Lauren Ace, illus Jenny Løvlie, Little Tiger
- Splash**, Anna Hibiscus!, Atinuke, illus Lauren Tobia, Walker Books
- Your Hair is Your Crown**, Jessica Dunrod, Lily Translates
- Horrible Histories Wales**, Terry Deary, illus Martin Brown, Scholastic
- History Grounded**, Elin Jones, Gwasg Carreg Gwalch
- 10 Stories From Welsh History**, Ifan Morgan Jones illus Telor Gwyn, Rily Publications Ltd
- Fighting for Fairness: Righting Wrongs and Battling Prejudice**, Greg Lewis, Magic Rat
- The Dazzling Life of Shirley Bassey**, Bethan Gwanas, illus Hanna Harris, Llyfrau Broga Books
- 50 Amazing People Who Have Called Britain Home**, Imogen Russell Williams, illus Sara Mulvanny, Nosy Crow
- Sw Sara Mai**, Casia Wiliam, Y Lolfa
- Pam?** Luned and Huw Aaron, Y Lolfa
- The Crown in the Quarry / Y Goron yn y Chwarel**, Myrddin ap Dafydd, Gwasg Carreg Gwalch
- Y Castell Siwgr**, Angharad Tomos, Gwasg Carreg Gwalch
- Y Pump** – Elgan Rhys (creative editor), Y Lolfa
- Aniq**, Marged Elin Wiliam and Mahum Umer, Y Lolfa
- Cat**, Megan Angharad Hunter and Maisie Awen, Y Lolfa
- Final recommendations on the teaching of themes related to Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities and experiences within the curriculum.**
gov.wales/final-report-black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-communities-contributions-and-cynefin-new-curriculum



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 Nikeshe Shukla and the author, with Jeffrey Boakye, of **What Is Masculinity? Why Does It Matter? And Other Big Questions**. He tweets at @rapclassroom.

Obituary: Shirley Hughes

6 July 1927 - 25 February 2022

Nicholas Tucker remembers Shirley Hughes.

Shirley Hughes, who has died aged 94, always brought joyous energy to her work. Sole creator of over fifty picture books, and the jobbing illustrator to innumerable other titles, she excelled at creating infant characters as bouncy as the real thing. Selling over twelve million copies of her books, she was a greatly respected figure in the publishing world and immensely popular outside it.

The youngest of three sisters, Shirley grew up in the comfortable suburbs of Liverpool. Her Welsh Methodist father Thomas J Hughes, a man of formidable energy, owned the largest departmental store in town. Subsequently raised by her widowed mother after his early death, Shirley experienced what she later described as a 'rather buttoned-down childhood', with much time spent reading, drawing and playing intensely imaginative games with her sisters.

In 1946 she transferred to the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford, where she briefly lived next door to J R R Tolkien. She eventually turned to book illustration with commissions soon following, most notably illustrations for later editions of Dorothy Edwards' series **My Naughty Little Sister**. Making use of skills she had developed through the habit of sketching when and wherever she could, Shirley was the ideal choice for giving shape to the fictional little sister and her friend Bad Harry. Having observed how 'small children move, squat down when absorbed in a game, roll about or curl up in sleep', she provided line drawings that perfectly matched the affectionate realism of the stories.

Shirley's breakthrough as author-illustrator arrived with **Lucy and Tom's Day** (1960). Now she could control every aspect of a book, sharing the story line between text and illustration. Designing the whole work with her characteristically filmic imagination, she drew her characters from every possible angle, switching between wide tracking shots, aerial views and close-ups. Starting off from rough drawings done quickly to preserve spontaneity, her illustrations describe the domestic highs and lows in one day of the lives of two small children. These young characters with their stumpy legs, creased clothes and untidy hair were realistic to a level seldom seen before in picture books. With their mums pushing buggies loaded with shopping and wearing baggy jumpers and jeans or leggings, the inhabitants of this new, urban world also represented a conscious break from the former dominance of home county settings in children's illustrations, largely peopled by leisured middle-class characters. Children were now pictured in ordinary domestic mode, getting up

in the morning, consuming meals, accompanying their parents shopping or to the park and, above all, playing.

Tom and Lucy went on to star in numbers of other picture books. But Shirley's biggest success came with **Dogger** (1977) winning her the **Kate Greenaway Medal** for the outstanding picture book of the year. Drawing on her knowledge of her local London surroundings, this book satisfied at every level. In 2007, thirty years later, **Dogger** won another award,

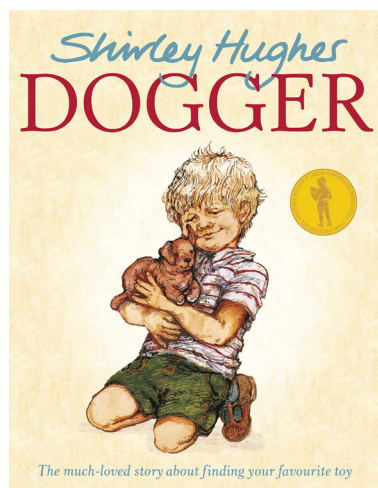


Photo © Lizzie Mayson

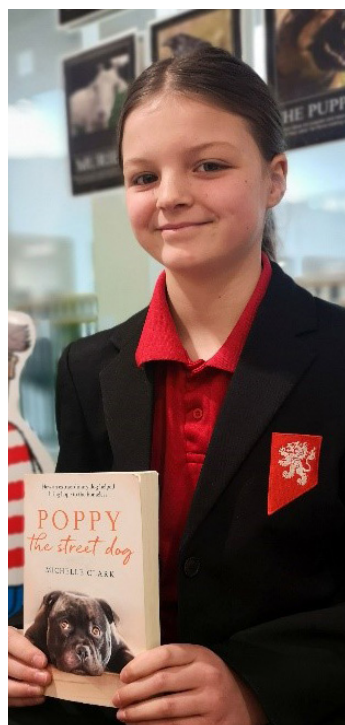
this time for the best book ever to have won that much-coveted Medal. Another great success was **Alfie Gets in First** (1981), within which four-year-old Alfie accidentally locks himself into the family home. Much pleading through the letter box follows, with Alfie's increasingly distressed mother backed up by growing numbers of passing tradesmen. Shirley ingeniously converted the 'gutter' running down the centre of a two page spread into the wall separating the little boy from all the activity on the other side. Tousle-haired Alfie and his toddler sister Annie Rose went on to have many more mini-adventures, often involving their kindly neighbours Mr and Mrs MacNally and their baby-sitting daughter Maureen.

Married to the architect John Hale in 1952 and living in London's Notting Hill Gate in a Victorian terraced house overlooking a large communal square, Shirley preferred not to use her own three children as models. Instead she drew the kids she saw playing outside her window, eventually creating characters made up from innumerable individual sketches. In 2003, **Ella's Big Chance**, an ingenious re-working of the Cinderella story set in the 1920s, provided Shirley with her second **Kate Greenaway Award**.

Stately in appearance, continuing for years to make her own clothes on a hand-cranked Singer, Shirley spoke with the well-rounded vowels of someone required to take elocution lessons when young. Her high intelligence and wide range of interests are both on show in her generously illustrated autobiography **A Life Drawing; Recollections of an Illustrator** (2002). She continued to live a busy life after the death of her beloved husband in 2007, illustrating the Prime Minister's Christmas card for that year with a beaming group of cheerfully untidy youngsters. Preferring realism to fantasy and happy to reassure young readers rather than scare them, she remained loved as well as popular during all her working life, and will be much missed.

Good Reads

Our Good Reads were chosen by young people at **University of Birmingham School**. Thanks to these young critics and to their teacher **Kevin Cobane**



Ivy



Malae



Jhanavi



Amarah

Poppy The Street Dog

Michelle Clark, Seven Dials, 978-1409195436, £8.99 pbk

This is an amazing book and I was shocked to find out that it was a true story. This book showed me how to have more empathy for people who are less fortunate than me. This story also includes a dog named Poppy and the miraculous journey of Poppy and Michelle (her new owner). I would recommend this book to children who like animals and anyone who wants to learn more about people living on the streets and how Michelle has helped them. Thank you so much for reading this review and I hope you will read Poppy the Street Dog as your next book.
Review by Ivy

The Sad Ghost Club 2

Lize Meddings, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444957549, £10.99 pbk
If you have ever felt anxious or alone or that you have no friends, then this is the book for you. This book is about two strangers who meet at a party and because they are not like other people and are full of anxiety. They are surprised because they both feel like they don't belong or fit in as they feel different to everybody else. This meeting changes their lives and they start a secret club

for anyone who feels like them. However, when a third person want to join the Sad Ghost Club they don't know whether to let them in. This is a brilliant book with great illustrations that makes you feel you are not alone. Everybody should read this book.
Review by Lydia

When Life gives you Mangoes

Kereen Getten, Pushkin Press, 978-1782692645, £7.99 pbk

This is an amazing book with a beautiful front cover that makes you want to dive into the story. The story is about a girl called Clara and her friendship with Gaynah but there is a mystery as she can't remember what happened last summer and is really afraid of the water. It has really good descriptions of Sycamore and the island that make you feel like you are in Jamaica. I really liked the characters and how the mystery is revealed and the story shows how everybody needs the support of their friends and family at some time in their life. The ending is shocking but also perfect. It was twist that I didn't expect. I would recommend this book to everybody who enjoys a good mystery
Review by Malae

Ella on the Outside

Cath Howe, Nosy Crow, 978-1788000338, £6.99 pbk

This is an interesting and really good book about a girl called Ella and her big secret. I felt really sad for Ella as she has to keep a big secret and can't tell anyone. Ella, Jack and Mum have to move away and make a new life. Ella has to start a new school and meets lots of different people on her journey but has lots of worries. Ella tries hard to fit in but is worried people will find out her secret. It is a book about friendship and bullies and has short chapters which make it good to read. I loved this book and would recommend it to all my friends.
Review by Jhanavi

InvestiGators

John Patrick Green, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1529054378, £7.99 pbk

This is a marvellous book that is perfect for comic lovers. It's a book about two Crocodiles called Mango and Brash who are Investigators and agents in an organisation called S.U.I.T. (Special Undercover Investigation Teams). When Gustavo Mustachio goes missing they have to go to his restaurant which is called Batter Down to investigate and find out what happened. With lots of action

and brilliant humour and jokes this book is a great read and is part of a series. I would highly recommend this to anyone who likes **Captain Underpants** or **Dog Man**.
Review by Colton

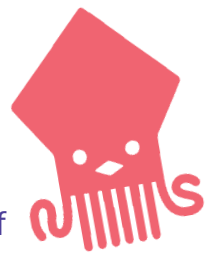
Mr Gum and the Power Crystals

Andy Stanton, illus David Tazzyman, Egmont, 978-1405228176, £5.99 pbk

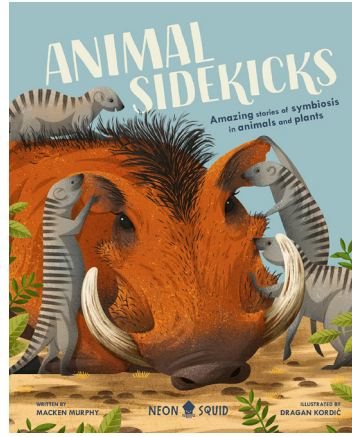
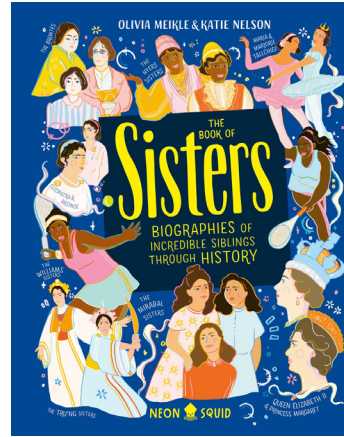
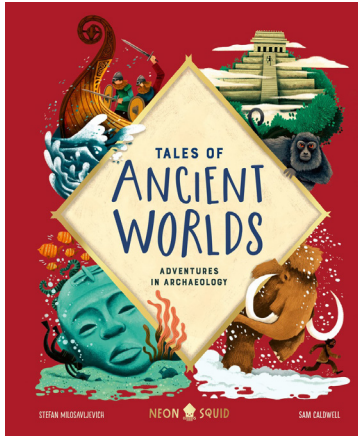
I love the Mr Gum series as they are full of joy and fun. This book is about a girl called Polly who finds two magic crystals in an old Windmill. This is where the story starts to get interesting as Polly and her friends, Friday and the Gingerbread Man Alan Taylor, discover that the crystals were made to destroy their beloved small town of Lamonic Bibber and that Mr Gum and his trusty sidekick Billy William the Third are up to their old tricks. I loved the humour and jokes in this book and would recommend this book and the series to anyone who is need of a laugh.

Review by Amarah

Introducing Neon Squid



Macmillan Children's Books will dive into new waters next spring with the launch of **Neon Squid Books**, an imprint dedicated to publishing gift nonfiction books that make complex topics – such as archaeology and medicine – accessible and intriguing to young readers. Co-publishers, **Joanne Clark**, **Fiona Macdonald**, and **Sam Priddy**, who all joined from Dorling Kindersley, introduce their new list.



Neon flying squid sound like made-up animals. Mysterious underwater beasts that glow in the dark and can even fly through the air – sometimes startling sailors when they end up on the decks of their ships. Well, as the sailors will attest, these are very much real animals. We named our imprint after these intriguing creatures because they support our belief that the best stories – and animals, and people, and adventures – are the real ones, even if they're not the ones you've heard of before.

Children's non-fiction has been having a boom for a few years now, but we feel like it has barely scratched the surface of the stories that could be told. We set up **Neon Squid** because we wanted to create books that could be placed alongside the very best fiction books for kids and not look out of place. Books that could thrill, entertain and (of course) educate. Most importantly books those kids find in a bookshop and plead with their parents to buy so they can run home, curl up on a sofa and be whisked away to foreign lands full of unbelievable things.

In **Tales of Ancient Worlds** they will get to dive deep beneath the waves to discover a sunken Egyptian city several miles off the coast; in **Animal Sidekicks** they will trek into the jungles of South America to come face to face with a tiny frog that is flatmates with a fearsome tarantula; and in **The Book of Sisters** they will be inspired by Native American sisters Maria and Marjorie Tallchief of the Osage Nation, who became ballet superstars.

One of the best things about non-fiction is it's always changing. From a publishing perspective, it can be frustrating (They've just discovered Jupiter has another moon?! *slams head on desk*) – but it is also one of the immense joys of working on these books. A dinosaur book we do today will be unrecognisable from one we do in a decade. Just like it would have been unthinkable a few years ago that T. rex would have feathers, or that Velociraptor was actually the size of a turkey.

To make these books we have to stay on our toes, and we know that the best way of doing that is by working with experts. Our authors come from a variety of interesting backgrounds – from archaeology YouTuber Stefan Milosavljevic to insect expert Dr Jessica L. Ware, who has been awarded a Presidential Medal for her work on bug evolution. Our book about sisters is written by Katie Nelson and Olivia Meikle, a history professor and a women's studies professor. Oh – and they're sisters! For our book **The Hospital** we wanted someone who is working in one right now, so we were thrilled to

team up with Dr Christle Nwora, who wrote the book in between shifts. All of our authors have one thing in common: an ability to take complicated subjects and explain them in a fun and accessible way.

We know that not all kids are the same: they don't all learn at the same rate and they're not all interested in the same things. As a result we create books that will appeal to all sorts of readers, from fact fans and visual learners to those who just want to read gripping stories. Kids are the most discerning readers going, so we use whatever we can to hook them in – whether that's intriguing topics, humour, or brilliant illustrations. On each page there should be something that piques the interest of even the most reluctant reader.

Our books have been illustrated by award-winning illustrators from around the world. Indian artist Chaaya Prabhat is responsible for our **A Day in the Life** series, which profiles different animals in the style of a nature documentary, while American Ginnie Hsu's soft, picture book style is perfect for demystifying a trip to the hospital for kids who might be anxious. For **The Book of Sisters** we worked with 35 different illustrators – each handpicked to suit the area of history each page covered, from the courts of imperial China to the French Revolution.

Our motto at **Neon Squid** is 'spark an interest that could last a lifetime', and we think it pretty much sums up what we're all about. We want to gently guide kids to areas they might not be overly familiar with, just to see if it takes their fancy. They won't necessarily be interested in scientists searching the universe for aliens, or how humpback whale poo is super important for the health of our oceans (I mean, how could they not be interested in that...) – but if they are, we'll provide them with everything they need to nurture their passion.

Our dream is that one day, maybe 20 or 30 years from now, a young archaeologist unearths a priceless Roman artefact, undisturbed for 2,000 years, and as they do so, they remember the time they read about the excavations in **Tales of Ancient Worlds** that set them off on their journey of discovery.

The **Neon Squid** list will launch in April.

Tales of Ancient Worlds: Adventures in Archaeology, Stefan Milosavljevic illus Sam Cardwell, 978-1838991562, £14.99

The Book of Sisters, Katie Nelson and Olivia Meikle, 978-1838991487, £12.99

Animal Sidekicks: Amazing Stories of Symbiosis in Animals and Plants, Macken Murphy, illus Dragan Kordic 9781838991531, £12.99

I wish I'd written...



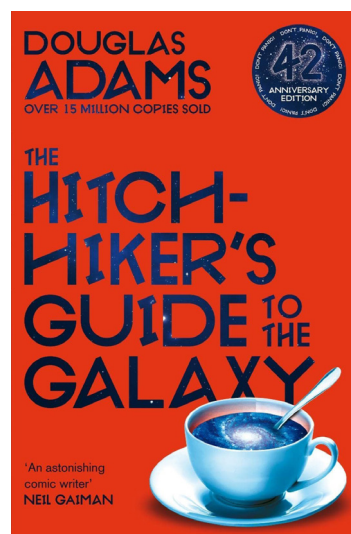
The Ghost of Scarletbeard, book 3 in Derek Keilty's **Flytlock Bones** series, is published by Scallywag Press, 978-1912650774, £6.99 pbk.

Derek Keilty, the author of the **Flytlock Bones** series on a work of genius that inspired him to write.

The book I wish I had written is **The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy** by Douglas Adams because it is genius. It has all the ingredients to make it one of my favourite books of all time. I love the sci-fi/humour blend, anarchic style and even the Vogan poetry. Not to mention all the wacky ideas: The Guide itself, the improbability drive, babel fish, Marvin the paranoid android – all funny, mind-blowing stuff. And then there are the quotes, and my favourite, 'The ships hung in the sky in much the same way that bricks don't.'

The characters are clever, ridiculous, witty, weird and all add to the nonsensical brilliance of the settings and plot, reminding us of our place in the universe. The names like Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz (a civil servant like myself) were an inspiration to a young me in striving to think up good character names for my own stories. In fact, it was probably **Hitchhiker's** that got me into writing as the year it was published, while still at school, I wrote my first sci-fi novel at 40k words called **Hyperdrive**.

So for many reasons, not just the royalties, I wish I'd written not just the first book, but all 4 in the series, as they are all out of this world.



The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams is published by Macmillan, 978-1529034523, £9.99 pbk.

BfK reviews

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant

The Think-Ups!

★★★★

Claire Alexander, Walker Books
38pp 978 1 4063 9595 1, £12.99 hbk
It's pouring with rain and stuck indoors two small girls Anna and Kiki soon tire of their usual inside activities. Suddenly Kiki has an idea: 'We could play the Think-Ups!' she says. 'All you have to do is think up a Think-Up and it will appear!' Anna isn't sure about this but Kiki demonstrates conjuring forth lots of lively bunnies. Then in turn the girls call into being a large moose, a tangle of octopuses and hungry koalas that sink their teeth into anything and everything. Eventually things spiral out of control with the mad menagerie taking over the entire house and the girls about to come to blows.

Luckily Kiki is as adept at getting out of trouble as she is getting into it so she comes up with what Anna deems her 'best Think-Up yet.' Then with order duly restored and the rain over, the girls sally forth into the garden. 'Great idea,' says Anna; but is it?...

Lively language together with pastel-coloured scenes of the domestic chaos, and the ebullient energy and rapidly changing moods so typical of preschoolers, make for a super read aloud that is made even more fun

by the use of half pages and a huge amount of detail to pore over. Hurrah for the power of children's imagination, creativity and quick thinking. **JB**

I Love You, Blue

★★★★

Barroux, Otter-Barry Books, 40pp,
9781913074500, £12.99 hbk

Barroux is no stranger to creating sensitive stories that touch upon the global, environmental problems and this sweet friendship story between a lighthouse-keeper and a whale sails similar seas. Our picturebook opens to reveal a calm ocean where we find Jonas, upon his red and white sailboat, enjoying the smell of the wind and the gentle rolling of the waves. With the turning of a page, a violent storm suddenly picks up and Jonas finds himself tossed from his boat; stranded in dark, choppy seas. Fortunately, a huge, kindly-looking whale saves the day by securing Jonas and his boat safely atop its grey head. With a beautiful friendship struck, it becomes Jonas' turn to do the saving when Blue goes missing. Eventually, the lighthouse keeper finds his friend on the ocean floor, anchored by sadness and bad health. Upon examination, Jonas finds that Blue has inadvertently swallowed hundreds of plastic bags, mistaking them for jellyfish. In mirroring his namesake, Jonas enters the whale's

belly and dutifully removes all the waste. Safe and secure on his boat once more and with a pile of rubbish, Jonas schools his companion on the difference between jellyfish and plastic bags. Together, as they head back to the lighthouse, they celebrate life, freedom and the essentiality of clean oceans.

As with all of Barroux's work, this is a story that may seem simple on the surface but invites richer discussion if you should choose to plumb its depths. Each double-page spread plays with size and space well, using Blue's huge form to humorous effect. From a visual perspective, I particularly enjoyed the whale's celebratory leap over Jonas' little boat and the lighthouse man's adventure into the whale's tummy. Using pen and watercolour, Barroux's landscapes – both above and beneath the sea – are gently engaging with light, choppy clouds complementing Blue's presence throughout. The simple character design makes it charming and easy to return to for younger readers as does the sparsity of the text: the story could almost be told without any words. Finally, keen-eyed readers will enjoy spotting the repeated appearance of a little sea-bird who watches on with concern and interest.

A sweet, ecocritical picturebook that invites consideration and reflection. A brief message from the author at

the back offers advice to readers on making positive changes to save oceans and the lives they contain. **MT**

The Window

★★★★

Laura Gehl, ill. Udayana Lugo,
Bonnier Books, 32pp,
978 1 78741 983 4, £6.99 pbk

This tender and lovely story, perfect for the quite young, tells us about Daria and her Grandpa, and his last days. Grandpa is in hospital, and his window looks out onto the beach and the sea, and when Daria visits, she talks to him about the view and all the things they will do together 'when you get better'. Grandpa's getting better is a consistent theme, and it is only when Daria must see her Grandpa in bed needing oxygen and unable to talk, that it is apparent that he will not get better, and on a stormy day, she must be told by her loving parents that he has died. She is bereft, and it is only when she goes with her dad to collect his things from the hospital that we realise the beach and the sea they have shared in happy memories are pictures she has drawn for Grandpa that have been put on his window to mask his gloomy view. Immensely touching illustrations of this very special relationship, the gentle telling about what has happened by her

reviews

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant continued

kind parents, and the repetition of phrases that the very young enjoy will make this book one to be treasured and read over and over again to help the grieving process. An afterward for parents by Dr Shari Coombes, a family psychotherapist, on supporting grieving children will prove a real plus too. **ES**

Frank and Bert

★★★★

Chris Naylor-Ballesteros, Nosy Crow, 32pp, 978 1 78800 841 9, £6.99 pbk
Frank, a small red fox, and Bert, a large brown bear are best friends, and they love playing hide and seek. The only problem is that Bert seems to be short of a plank or two because Frank always finds him without any difficulty, hiding in full sight. Bert says it's because counting to ten isn't long enough for him to find good places, so Frank agrees to count to one hundred instead. Off Bert goes over hill and vale, across rivers and streams, page after page on the chase. What Bert doesn't know is that he has given away his route, and Frank finds him yet again. But wily Frank, who really is a good friend, decides to 'give up', making Bert very happy: 'even though I love winning, I love my best friend more'. In a super twist ending, Bert shows that he isn't quite as stupid as he appears and we enjoy his triumph. Great imagination, good empathy, and very funny pictures make for a winner. **ES**

Baby, Sleepy Baby

★★★★★

Atinuke, ill. Angela Brooksbank, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 4063 8957 9, £12.99 hbk
There's an abundance of tenderness and warmth in this latest Atinuke/Angela Brooksbank collaboration.

Drawing upon a Nigerian lullaby sung to her by her father, Atinuke begins each sentence of her magical sounding text with the title refrain or similar, 'Baby, happy baby, / I'll sing down the stars // till they dance / right into your room.' This probably comes from the infant's mother who is shown holding the infant at that point whereas Dad is apparently addressing the baby he lifts skywards with, 'Baby, lovely baby, / I'll pull down the black sky // to wrap you in night's / soft blankets.'

The title page introduces all the family and then on subsequent stunningly gorgeous spreads we see the baby being passed from mother to a young girl sibling and then a grandmother before all the family gathers lovingly around, after which Dad has his turn to hold the little one, beneath the stars.

Every spread is suffused with love and in addition to human embraces we understand that the wind, clouds, stars and moon also bestow their blessings upon the sleepy little one. Finally, with a sense of inner peace and surrounding calm, it's time to drift

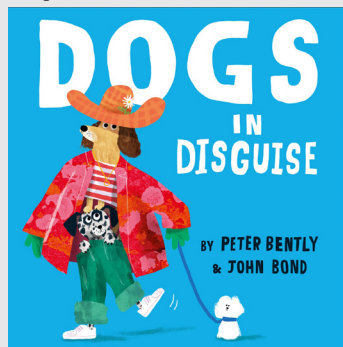
gently off into the land of dreams.

This is the perfect book to give a family with a new baby. **JB**

Dogs in Disguise

★★★★★

Peter Bently, illus John Bond, HarperCollins Children's Books,



32pp, 978-0008469177, £6.99 pbk
'Dogs come in all kinds of colours and sizes', states this book's opening line, then, 'but when no-one's looking, they put on disguises.' And we're off, gloriously costumed canines parade across the pages – bright blocks of colour highlighting them superbly – in a variety of eye-catching outfits. As if the joy of gazing on John Bond's illustrations of dogs styling jackets, waistcoats and silk spotty blouses wasn't enough in itself, Peter Bently's text features rhymes that simply feel like they were meant to be: schnauzers in trousers and shih-tzu and jujitsu just some of the examples. The story grows more and more absurd, dogs casually strolling into top restaurants, splashing in the swimming pool and, particularly lovely, lining up as Grenadier guards – the final image is of cockapoo cosmonauts heading for Mars. A visual treat, a joy to read aloud, and a doggy delight! **LS**

Snowy White

★★★★★

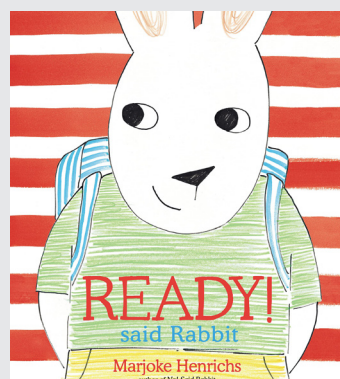
Gareth P Jones, illus Loretta Schauer, Farshore, 32pp, 978-0755503407, £7.99 pbk

Here's the story of Snow White, but not as we know it. Snow White herself is Snowy White, a gorgeous, fluffy cat (with a social conscience), the seven dwarves are seven mice, and the jealous queen is a 'purringly perfect puss' called Kingsley. As for the mirror – suffice to say, there's a clever twist there too and it would spoil readers' enjoyment to give it away here.

The rest of the plot unfolds in ways we expect, and ways we don't. Kingsley's efforts to shoo away his rival come to nothing, and Snowy White immediately wins the hearts of the little mice as she helps them clean up the mess left by the other cats. In this version though, everyone lives tidily, happily and considerably ever after, having learned that beauty begins on the inside. It's exactly the message we need right now. Loretta

Schauer's illustrations are full of the details that youngster will love – it's particularly enjoyable to watch Snowy get very, very grubby – while cats and mice alike are full of character. Gareth P. Jones' text is made to read aloud, slipping smoothly into rhyme when the story calls for it, and he elegantly, and apparently effortlessly finds a new approach to what is probably the best-known fairy story of all. **LS**

For National Tell A Fairy Tale Day (Saturday 26th February 2022) Gareth P Jones ponders the long-lasting appeal of fairy tales.



Ready! Said Rabbit

★★★★★

Marjoke Henrichs, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978-1912650798, £12.99 hbk
We first met this little rabbit in *No! Said Rabbit*, Marjoke Henrichs debut picture book, now on the longlist for the 2022 Klaus Flugge Prize. In this new outing, he's in a much more agreeable mood, excited for a trip to the park with Dad. Getting ready though, as anyone with experience of little children will know, is not the simple task it sounds. First, what to take, then what to wear? A series of different outfits are presented and prompt the same response: "Ready!" said Rabbit. "Not in that!" said Dad. Next there's the challenge of choosing snacks, the whole process drawn out even more as a new series of distractions waylay Rabbit. Adult readers will notice from the bright red clock on the wall that by now, two hours have passed since Dad first sent Rabbit to get ready. In fact, it'll be a lot longer before the two finally step outside, under the attentive eye of the black and white cat who has been watching it all, a call from Grandma and the matter of Dad's lost keys holding them up again.

Henrichs again perfectly depicts the joyful chaos and confusion that make up so much of a toddler's life, alongside the delight they find in the simplest of things, and her representation of the adult-child relationship is also beautifully observed and tender. Adults will laugh at the truth of it all, including the lost keys, while clever use of repetitive language and the bright, scribbly illustrations full of familiar objects, make this another perfect book for the very young. **LS**

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*.

How to be a Real Ballerina

★★★

Davina Bell, ill. Jenny Løvlie,
Andersen Press, 32pp,
978 1 83913 212 4, £7.99, pbk

This girl thinks of herself as a ballerina despite her energetic dancing, with ballet shoes' ribbons streaming. She has difficulty getting her hair into a bun as she has recently given herself a haircut, but as she starts dance classes she sees herself already as a star. She causes mischief and mayhem, and we suspect, time in the Thinking Corner! Together we learn 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th positions, sympathising with the long-suffering teacher. As the children prepare for the annual concert, the illustrations portray joyous enchantment and we see what ballet dancing really means to our star, as well as to the other boys and girls and the graceful child in a wheelchair. There are lots of examples in the illustrations of humour created for the readers, e.g the one-legged seagull observing a class. This book will resonate with the families of would-be ballerinas as well as the dancing child him/herself. **GB**

My Mum is a Lioness

★★★★★

Swapna Haddow, ill. Dapo Adeola,
32pp, Macmillan, 978 1 5290 1399
3, £7.99, pbk

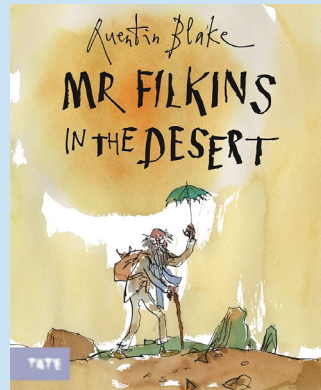
A brilliant follow-up to **My Dad Is a Grizzly Bear** by this author/illustrator partnership, this book should also become a hit with young families. It is full of creative wit in the perfectly pitched text. Family life is chaotic but centred around the Mum who is indeed a LIONESS (down to her long swinging tail?) She loves nothing more than smothering all her family with cuddles and kisses—smackers for Dad, (the Grizzly Bear) squeezes and kisses for the small son, (the narrator), and the toddling sister. No-one can escape Mum when she is on a hunt. The boy imagines his Mum spending her days considering how to serve up her prey, once caught. Tossed in a wrap? Seasoned, roasted or toasted? This tireless Mum Lioness teaches her son to chase, pounce and leap so that he can star in a football match. But what pain when he is tripped and skins his knee! No-one else can comfort him, and 'her strong, warm lioness hugs make everything better.' Every page has illustrations to support the text, ensuring readers know just how much love there is in this family. With high rise flats in the background to the "park run," a clutch of Mums all race along with offspring in buggies, a multicultural mix. We spot one park runner who knows to avoid this crowd! What a perfect book for a family to share. Maybe the perfect gift on Mothering Sunday for any mother who is a lioness, or just to celebrate all mothers, all families. **GB**

Ed's Choice**Mr Filkins in the Desert**

★★★★★

Quentin Blake, Tate Publishing, 32pp, 9781849767507, £12.99 hbk
Mr Filkins is walking across the desert to visit his family. He has his walking stick, his umbrella and cream cheese sandwiches – necessary for the journey – and most importantly a small amount of sparkling water in a bottle. The journey will not be easy; there are strange monstrous beings to avoid; the worst, of course, the Zagobert with its seven legs. But what will happen when Mr Filkins does meet a Zagobert....?

This has all the energy, imagination and humour that are such features of any picture book by Quentin Blake. Mr Filkins steps off the page as he marches resolutely across the desert. The monsters – extraordinary in their depiction, as extraordinary as their names – are the sorts of monsters a child could imagine, all legs, spikes and teeth. But even monsters might need help. And Mr Filkins, a true fairy tale hero, responds, offering his life-saving water – and is rewarded with friendship; a fable for our times, perhaps. Quentin Blake has had a long career and here his figures



are as assured and as full of life as ever. Mr Filkins joins other creations by Blake – Mrs Armitage, Angelica Sprocket, Patrick and Mr Magnolia – as a real character. The desert is a real desert full of rocks, sand and spiky plants, the Zagobert, from being an alien creature of nightmare, becomes a joyous companion and the birthday party at the end is as inclusive and enjoyable as such a party – Mr Filkins 90th birthday – should be; all conveyed through Blake's dynamic pen and ink lines and watercolour wash. This is picture book that demands to be shared, a gift for the storyteller and for its audience bringing to a traditional narrative creativity and imagination. **FH**

Mike Falls Up

★★★★★

Candy Gourlay, ill. Carles
Ballesteros, Little Tiger, 85pp,
978 1 78895 165 4, £5.99, pbk

Mike lives in a land full of banana trees, rice paddies and brown, sun-scorched hills the colour of chocolate – it is very hot. One day he is out walking when suddenly there is an earthquake, a crack appears in the earth and Mike's dog Bowwow falls into it. Immediately afterwards a birthday invitation flies out – mysteriously telling Mike to just fall up! Mike jumps, falls asleep and wakes up in a living room in London, the other side of the world, complete with a fireplace and snowflakes falling outside the window. He meets another dog and a girl called Kaneisha. The adventure continues when another mysterious invitation arrives, via the chimney this time. Kaneisha's dog swiftly followed by Mike and Kaneisha, 'fall up' the chimney.

They arrive in a strange land where they meet a very excited monster keen to celebrate his birthday. Party games including monster's footsteps follow, before the children remember they need to go back. At home everything is normal – Mike wonders if this was all a dream, but then he finds another note....

This is a surreal story which plays with the idea of what and who might be on the other side of the world and includes a novel means of getting there and finding out. A suggested message is that although people may live far away, possibly in very different environments, we may still have lots in common and new friendships may be waiting for us. The story also explores the perennial fun of an edible fantasy world, chocolate cake boulders anyone?!

With an attractive layout, and full colour illustrations, this is an accessible and enjoyable read for newly independent readers. **SMc**

Don't Ask the Dragon

★★★★★

Lemn Sissay, ill. Greg Stobbs,
Canongate, 40pp, 978 1 83885 398 3,
£12.99, hbk

The focus of this rhyming story is Alem, a small boy all alone. It is his birthday but he doesn't know where he can call home. Greg Stobbs pictures him carrying a small town like a rucksack on his back. One after another, Alem meets a number of animals – a bear, a fox, a meerkat, a treefrog, a fruitbat and a bulldog – and asks them 'where shall I go?' They all reply 'I don't know' and warn him, 'Just don't ask the dragon. He will eat you.' Of course, he

meets the dragon, a vegetarian from the sea, who doesn't eat him but invites him in for tea. The dragon introduces himself as 'the dragon of words' and says Alem means 'The World'. He also tells him 'There is a town/ where the bravest go/and I have named it I DON'T KNOW'. Alem then celebrates his birthday with all the animals, now his friends, having learnt that 'Home was always inside him.' This is a picture book that already has some heavyweight endorsements, from Jacqueline Wilson, Michael Rosen, Michael Morpurgo and Cerrie Burnell, all of which you can find on the Waterstones website. For myself, much as I admire the author and illustrator (and this is a really attractive, boldly composed book), I find the story somewhat baffling. At the beginning Alem is lonely, so when and how do the animals become his friends? Why do they mislead him about the dragon? When they answer 'I don't know' to his request for a place to go are they merely teasing him and the reader? After all, it turns out to be the place where the bravest go. This is clearly a story with a message but what is the message? It seems to me less about friendship and kindness (see the Waterstone reviews) than the reality of living with doubt and uncertainty – "I don't know" – and being brave and self-reliant. Not a bad message in the world as it is and one that may well be drawn from the author's own experience. **CB**

Leonora Bolt Secret Inventor

★★★★★

Lucy Brandt, ill. Gladys Rose, Puffin
Books, 198 pp, 978 0 241 43676 9
£6.99, pbk

Leonora is an orphan, who lives an isolated life on remote Crabby remote island in the dubious care of her Uncle Luther with only her otter Twitchy and housekeeper Mildred for company. Mildred is kindly but possibly the world's worst cook—sludge brownies are a speciality!

Leonora spends her time in her laboratory dreaming up and building the most amazing inventions. These range from an electric, sock-sorting octopus, to the X Lox which can crack any door code. But most impressive of all is her latest top-secret invention 'The Switcheroo', a teleporting machine.

Life changes dramatically for Leonora when a castaway, a boy called Jack, is washed up on the shore. From him she discovers that her uncle has been stealing her inventions and making a fortune from them. He has lied to her, not only by telling her that sweets are illegal, but also, she suspects about what happened to her parents. She decides to do all she can to find out what her uncle is up to, try and prevent him getting his hands on the Switcheroo and investigate what has happened to her parents. Luckily, she has help, her new friend Jack, a kindly but hapless sea Captain (possibly the world's worst

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

sailor), and her old friends Mildred and Twitchy.

Unsurprisingly things don't go totally to plan. However, after a series of dramatic scenes, including a shipwreck, the discovery of a hoard of treasure, the loss of The Switcheroo and a daring escape in an improvised balloon, the story ends happily with Leonora safely living with Mildred and Captain Spang on the mainland and her villainous uncle thwarted in his plans.

With lots of humour in both the story and the perfectly pitched illustrations, whacky inventions, a brave and inventive heroine, an evil villain and an unlikely cast of likeable supporting characters, this is an enjoyable and fast paced adventure story.

For readers who enjoy this story more adventures await in book two **Leonora Bolt: Deep Sea Calamity** due to be published in June 2022, as she continues the search to find her missing parents. **SMc**

Stop the clock!

★★★★

Pippa Goodhart, illus. Maria Christiana, Tiny Owl, 32pp., 978-1-010328-81-1 £7.99, pbk

As this picture book story begins, Joe is being told to hurry up. Mum has to put the bin out before she can strap Poppy into her buggy and take Joe to school, and they rush, rush through the streets with a crying Poppy, and just make it in time. At school, Mr Khan tells the class they don't have much time to paint a picture of what they saw on the way to school, and when the bell rings for break, Joe hasn't had time to put Poppy into his picture, so he shouts, 'STOP THE CLOCK!', and everyone is frozen except Joe. Why was Poppy crying? He gets off his chair, and, possibly in another dimension (he is shown as a bit misty), goes back over their journey. He sees that the sky is not just one blue, but light blue, grey, and white; there were weeds, and small creatures and lots of shops and buildings, people catching the bus, posting letters- and he picks up Poppy's blue teddy! His picture pleases his Mum, once he has put himself in it, and Poppy is delighted to have her teddy back. The endpapers show the 2 versions: at the beginning we see the very basic picture, and, at the end, the much more detailed version, with Poppy smiling. It's a lovely idea- wouldn't we all like to be able to stop the clock sometimes? But the message is that we should take time to look, and enjoy what is around us.

Pippa Goodhart is a very experienced author, with over a hundred children's books to her name, and this partnership with the relatively new illustrator works well. Maria's two pictures supposedly by Joe are very credible, but then she does work part-time in childcare, so she knows children's art. This

will be fun to read, and a starting point for some potentially interesting conversations with children. **DB**

John Agard's Windrush Child

★★★★

John Agard, ill. Sophie Bass, Walker Books, 32pp., 9781529501124, £12.99 hbk

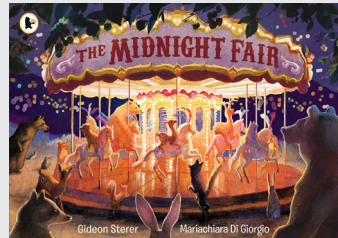
First published in his anthology, *Under the Moon & Over the Sea*, John Agard's poem has been delightfully brought to the picture book format by debut children's book illustrator, Sophie Bass. Gifted with the space for his words and rhythm to stretch and roll, Agard's poem about a child's journey to England on board *Empire Windrush* becomes beautifully embellished and enriched through Bass's traditional, gouache and pen illustrations.

With the gentle, insistent refrain of 'Windrush child', Agard's poem uses the pattern of prepositional phrases to evoke scenes of the child's past life on the shores of his Caribbean home ('Behind you, Windrush child, palm trees wave goodbye'), the journey across seas and rolling waters, until the family arrive at his new home. Memories of his grandmother, who remains behind, accompany him and, through letters, he shares his life in England with her and the new horizons that he dreams of. *Windrush Child* opens with sun and sand and closes with sun and snow; this is a new adventure but some things remain the same.

What Bass brings to the poem is something subtle and clever, reaching beyond the literal. With bright and engaging spreads, rich in cultural connections to the child's Caribbean heritage (especially in his new English home), the illustrator invites a close reading of the child's parents and white people on the fringes of their lives. The child themselves may seem comforted and happy by being a part of this new community but his father shows, at times, concern and longing for what they have left behind. In other spreads, on both the ship, the arrival at Tilbury Docks and the family's time in parks, some white men and women are seen carrying stern, disapproving looks inferring heated displeasure and racist antagonism towards these new arrivals. The other, more racially diverse children, though, are far more accepting. This ironic interplay between the child's story told through the poem and those moments captured through Bass' illustrations, invite the reader to look beyond the child-like innocence and reflect upon the unspoken racial tensions: this is picturebook play at its finest.

The poem, written for *Blue Peter*, originates from Agard's time as poet in residence at the BBC during the late nineties. Used to celebrate 50 years since the *Windrush* had arrived on English shores (1998), it was written from the perspective

of Vince Reid (1935-2001), the youngest passenger on the ship at the age of 13. Sadly, Vince has passed away but the legacy of his time here, his journey and heritage have been lyrically captured in both word and picture. **MT**



The Midnight Fair

★★★★★

Gideon Sterer, ill. Mariachiara Di Giorgio, Walker Books, 32pp., 9781406394658, £7.99 pbk

There is always something liberating and exciting about wordless picturebooks. The gap between what is represented and the meaning-making process opens up just enough for readers to invite a richness of interpretation. Transforming Sterer's narrative into a wordless tale, Di Giorgio, creator of the highly acclaimed *Professional Crocodile*, presents us with the story of a troupe of animals and their night-time excursions into an empty fairground.

With a beautiful pairing of endpapers to open and close the narrative, the story begins with the arrival of a travelling funfair and ends with its departure. In the foreground, sheltered by the shadows of trees, is a small gathering of animals who seem concerned with other matters save for a curious bear cub intrigued by the arrival of humans and their contraptions. Like a slow-rolling camera, the dedication and title page reveal people erecting tents and rides in preparation for eventual attendees. More animals watch on. Why is it that we are positioned alongside these animals and not with our fellow humans? The answer comes when, at the end of the evening's amusement, a lone attendant closes down the fair, locks the gates and heads for home. A gathering of animals tentatively approach.

With the help of a pair of crafty racoons, the funfair is suddenly brought to life. As if casting off their 'wildness' for one magical evening, the animals, now anthropomorphised, do everything the humans did earlier: buy popcorn, doughnuts, sweets and take part in the games and attractions, chase sugar-addled cubs and win huge cuddly versions of themselves. A young wolf cub, who looks slightly befuddled when it wins a goldfish, is particularly humorous, and a bearer of a poignant message for later.

As the evening continues, wild boar and wolves spin joyously in teacup rides, hares and deer rush around on roller-coasters. From carousels (animals riding animals comes

across as delightfully funny) to chair-o-planes, big wheels to shooting galleries, the animals delight in the activities. There's much for the observant reader to notice and an invitation for new stories to be discovered with repeated readings. With the arrival of dawn, the animals quickly shut down the rides, clean up their mess and leave just before the owner returns: the only sign of activity is a curious collection of nuts and seeds; the animal's payment for the night's fun. As the animal guests return to the wild and their previous nature, a solitary wolf cub releases their bagged goldfish into a river that leads out into the sea.

This is a witty, wordless escapade. Di Giorgio perfectly captures the dizzy, bright joy of being at the funfair, exquisitely portrayed through the animals' movement and expressions: a remarkable feat in and of itself. Children will love to return to the evening's dreamy sense of mystery and fun, and enjoy spotting recurring animals and humorous moments that occur throughout. For me, it was a family of stoats laughing uncontrollably at a grunting wolf who has stuck its head through a wooden Sproftacchel. A book perfect for sharing. **MT**

Me in the Middle

★★★★★

Annette Demetriou, ill. Angela Mayers, Owllett Press, 32pp., 978 1 913339 35 7, £7.99, pbk

Georgie is at school and a special lesson begins – Miss Clark has drawn a map of the world on the playground and asks the children to find where they live now (England) and then find the country their parents come from. This causes problems for Georgie whose parents come from two different countries; she doesn't know where to go. She is teased by the children and disappointingly her teacher doesn't seem to be very understanding either. She ends up in the middle feeling she doesn't belong anywhere.

Fortunately, her parents do understand and help Georgie create a glorious family tree complete with photographs showing how her amazing family tree stretches from England to East Africa.

The book attempts to cover a lot of ground. Firstly, that families may have many or few 'branches' and stretch geographically over a large or small area and also that you shouldn't make assumptions based on the colour of someone's skin or the shape of their features. In addition to this the idea that families can have different structures is also included (two parents, single parent, same sex couples, families with adopted children). The overall message however, is the importance of each individual feeling they belong, acceptance and celebrating our differences.

This is a story which might inspire children to find out more about their own families, dig out globes and atlases and pore over family photo

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

albums. It is an interesting idea to directly compare the shape of real trees in the park to family trees emphasising the variety.

The illustrations are warm, colourful and attractive, the end papers are especially lovely with a host of children of different ethnicities perched on a tree each clutching a flag to show their family's country of origin. SMC

We Feel Happy

★★★★

Katie Abey, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 978 1 5266 1991 4, £12.99 hbk

This picture book chock-a-block full of small animals and bugs, doing and saying things to show us how they are feeling, is somewhat reminiscent of the Richard Scarry 'busy books' and none the worse for that. We are told there is a 'rainbow' of emotions to find out about, and there is certainly a full rainbow of bright colours and activity going on here. In double-page spreads we learn about ten different emotions: being Happy, Worried, Calm, Excited, Shy, Scared, Curious, Sad, Grumpy, and Sorry. Many points to discuss, lots of detail to look at and enjoy, and – importantly – humour too will make the book good for schools as well as home, and there are worthwhile suggestions given for helping us get out of the more negative emotions. It's a good thing when we can see animals, even those pictured in comic style, acting out the ways we feel and how we deal with those feelings. ES

Sometimes I Feel...

★★★★★

Sarah Maycock, Big Picture Press, 40pp, 978 1 80078 128 3, £5.99 hbk Full of similes like, 'strong as an ox' or 'curious as a cat', this small, square beautifully illustrated hardback book is a treat to the eye as well as the ear with its poetic text. The feelings – many of them – are gloriously illuminated: 'Sometimes I feel as brave as a lion. But when the roar of the storm seems frightening... I know it will pass, and so will my fear.' It's circular organisation is an interesting approach – it begins with feeling as big as a bear and ends with feeling 'as timid as a mouse', who knows that if he 'stands tall' he can 'find his inner courage and come to feel as big as a bear'. This author/illustrator's ink and watercolour illustrations are sophisticated and quite remarkable, showing both empathy and courage. A very special small book. ES

The Comet

★★★★

Joe Todd-Stanton, Flying Eye Books, 32pp, 9781838740658, £12.99 hbk

Dad has lost his job. Now he and his little daughter, Nyla, must leave their lovely home surrounded by fields and trees, where at night Nyla can

see the stars – and occasionally a comet. They move to the city. Houses and tower blocks surround them, the streets are crowded, everywhere – even the classroom – is full of noise and Nyla can only see seven stars. Then one night she sees a comet... magic.

This is a charming sensitive picture book that reflects a situation that young readers will recognise in many aspects. It is a theme that is not new, but here the presentation is fresh and engaging, providing opportunities for reflection even for the youngest. While the text is minimal it is the illustrations that fill the gaps. They do not merely replicate the words, they add to the narrative extending and enriching. We see Nyla's world, experience her imaginative responses – not because she tells us she loves drawing and stories but because we see her surrounded by her work. We know her. The emptiness and constraint of their new home is emphasised by the way the empty packing boxes mirror the cityscape outside. Then comes the magic of the comet. Todd-Stanton provides a visual metaphor to show how imagination and creativity can change an unhappy circumstance to something very different – a home? A community? Hope?

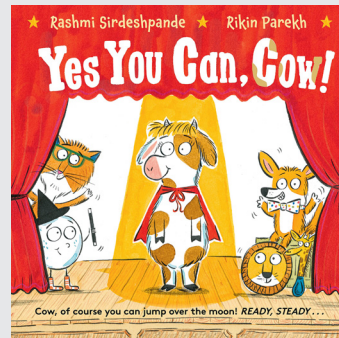
The illustrations fill the pages with saturated colours and immediately engaging characters. They move between full double spreads that bring a sense of space to single spreads and vignettes creating movement and rhythm for the storytelling. The ending, where the presentation changes dramatically from horizontal to vertical, only serves to emphasise the transformation that has taken place – but it is not an unbelievable or impossible transformation, rather a positive possibility. The whole production from the eye-catching covers, the endpapers – again reflecting change – to the well placed, attractive text and the immersive illustrations is a joy. A lovely addition to any shelves. FH

Yes You Can, Cow!

★★★★★

Rashmi Sirdeshpande, ill. Rikin Parekh, Faber, 978 0 571 35966 0, £6.99, pbk

This gorgeous heart-warming story is about learning to believe in ourselves. We must not be afraid of making mistakes, and understand that sometimes we can't do something... YET! The book is a re-working of the nursery rhyme, *Hey Diddle Diddle, the Cat and The Fiddle*, one we hope is still familiar with young children today. The front cover alerts us to a performance about to begin, bright red curtains being drawn back to reveal a motley crew of characters on stage. The rehearsal begins. All the characters have been introduced, the Moon, the Cat, Dog, Dish and Spoon. But where is Cow? Something is not



right, for Cow is hiding. Mooooo! She says she can't do it. Couldn't they cut the bit where she jumps over the moon? All the characters gang up on her, stating they can think of a hundred cows who'd JUMP at the chance to star in Hey Diddle Diddle! Pages later, the supporting cast suggest Cow could try just one brave thing... jump over the Dish? HURRAY! Onward and upward, till only the Moon remains to be conquered. 'Can someone lower the Moon down a notch?' asks Cow. Lovely. Off you go, Cow. Yes, you can, Cow! 'We believe in you! Ready, steady...' The pacing is perfect. Read it aloud, share with just one, or a classful, to discover just how the performance goes. Illustrated throughout in bright colours, with huge characterisation of all the supporting actors, and always great attention to detail, and lots of humour to support the players. A wonderful book for the nursery, school, every library and the home. GB

Isabelle and the Crooks

★★★★★

Michelle Robinson, ill. Chris Mould, Walker Books, 40pp, 978 1 4063 9594 5, £12.99, hbk

'They are sneaky, they are stealthy. They are cunning. They're the Crooks!' This is how this wonderfully quirky book opens, all supposing the reader gets past the endpapers, simply littered with objects ranging from ruby rings to swag bags, crowbars, pocket watches, gold cups and flashlights. Fans of Chris Mould's characteristic style of illustration will revel in the book as page after page his stunningly artistic skills are revealed. Isabelle is a very good little girl who would never dream of breaking the law. Every time she is asked to join her extended family's stealthy night-time burglarising, Isabelle replies in the negative. So, on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday her family tiptoe out, despite Isabelle's protesting, bringing home big booty. But on Friday they return home with the Crown Jewels from the Tower of London! Isabelle feels sure the Queen will be very sad to be missing Her precious jewels. Alone, she attempts to return them all, but is caught, arrested, interviewed by the Queen, then locked in jail. The Crooks to the rescue? The tension is built up beautifully with both text and Mould's humorous, highly detailed illustrations. And the final sting in the tail is just perfect. A book to make the reader smile all the way through, before returning to page one to study again the superb pictures on every spread. Highly recommended. GB

8 – 10 Junior/Middle

The Universal Zoo

★★★★★

Neal Zetter, ill. Will Hughes, Otter Barry, 96pp, 978 1 91307 440 1, £7.99, pbk

Come on down to the Universal Zoo! Want to see amazing animals? Buy a ticket join the queue.

This poetry book is jam packed with the fantastical creatures you might meet if you were to visit the Universal Zoo at the end of the universe.

The poems describe an amazing variety of creatures. The shy Shimmerreen, The Tickleix who is always laughing, The Snoralotz who unsurprisingly does nothing but snore and the shape shifting Morph. As well as these original inventions there is a touch of the more familiar and if you have ever wondered whether dragons exist you will soon find out if you visit the Universal Zoo.

The whole book is playful and packed with inventive explorations of ideas such as what a wordy bird might eat (anagrams of course!) To find out about the Upside Downer, readers have to turn the book - upside down! The poems are full of word play with a variety of forms and styles including

repeated choruses, rhyme, similes, kennings and limericks.

There are directions in case you might like to visit the zoo and instructions too, visitors are advised not to feed the animals, 'Never Feed the Gronk' is just one of the poems which invite performance in its call and response format. The layout is attractive and the illustrations are great fun too though young readers might also have fun visualising some of these creatures themselves before seeing the artist's interpretation.

As well as being an enjoyable read, the book has a more serious message too – The Universal Zoo is the 'conservation place' at the far end of space aiming at saving species. The inclusion of an extinct animal (the dodo) serves as a reminder of what we have lost in the past and the imaginary Grizzard, the last of its species, its habitat disappearing, hunted to near extinction, represents endangered animals in our world today. The end of the book includes an invitation to young readers to try their hand at being a universal zoo poet with helpful tips.

A highly entertaining and thought-provoking poetry book for young readers. SMC

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

Yesterday Crumb and the Storm in a Teacup

★★★★

Andy Sagar, illus Beatrice Blue, Orion, 346pp, 9781510109483, £6.99 pbk

Abandoned as a baby outside a circus because she was born with fox ears, Yesterday Crumb has spent her life so far in a cage as a sideshow attraction along with her only possession, a book about magical creatures. That is until the day a grumpy talking raven named Madrigal suddenly appears to tell her she is really a witch and that she is to become an apprentice to Tea-witch extraordinaire, Miss Dumpling. But on the way there, passing through woods, Yesterday is drawn toward a strange gentleman Mr Weep who bewitches her and promises to remove the fox ears she so despises. But he tricks her, placing a splinter of ice in her heart, and tells her that in a month she will die, and lose not only her fox ears but her individuality and become grey and boring like everyone else.

When Yesterday arrives at the teashop, Dwimmerley End, she finds it is no ordinary teashop but a travelling magical teashop on legs complete with flying teapots and mythical creatures straight out of her beloved faerie book who are the customers. Under Miss Dumpling's tutelage Yesterday must not only enter into a race against time to find the means to break the curse but also to find her own brand of magic and discover who she really is.

This is a really enjoyable magical adventure, full of joie de vivre, imagination and quirky characters and with a good dose of humour too. There seems to be no problem that can't be sorted out with a cup of tea, a slice of cake and talking to a trusted friend! Caramels for courage anyone? Above all it is a tale of learning how to accept who you are and rejoicing in individuality. Children will love it. **JC**

The Provensen Book of Fairy Tales

★★★★

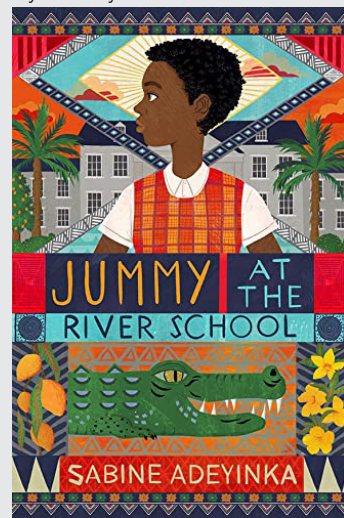
Compiled [from stories by twelve authors] and illustrated by Alice and Martin Provensen. New York: New York Review Children's Collection, 136pp, 978-1-68137-682-3, £19.99 hbk

On behalf of the two artists, the Canadian folklorist, Joan Bodger, explains in a Foreword that the 'fairy tales' being presented to the reader are not of the traditional variety with no definitive text. As 'literary fairy tales' they are authorial creations, influenced by the imaginative licence found in Tradition but with words not to be tampered with.

The best-known examples here are such as Andersen's 'Nightingale' or 'The Happy Prince' by that follower of Andersen, Oscar Wilde. But you will have to google up lesser-known storytellers such as the Irish-American

Seumas Macmanus (for 'Feather o' my Wing') or the forgotten but intriguing novelist Elinor Mordaunt (for 'The Prince and the Goose Girl' – unrelated to the Brothers Grimm) and it is a failing in the book which was first published in 1971 that no guidance is given to the original collections from which the tales are taken.

The book is planned as an artistic unit with its decorative prelims, its emblematic titling and tailpieces, and colour illustrations that mostly occupy full pages or two-thirds of a page-opening, across the gutter (curiously 'The Nightingale' is unadorned). It is not easy to differentiate a separate personality behind the husband-and-wife illustrators who have abandoned line-drawing in favour of a full-colour coverage with colour-work distinguishing the images. Much of this takes place in gloomy shades of brown and dark green with character and action emerging in lighter tints. The consistency with which this occurs takes some getting used to but imposes a uniformity on the varied storytelling not least through the vernacular cartooning adopted in portraying all and sundry: magicians, royals and yokels alike. **BA**



Jummy at the River School

★★★★

Sabine Adeyinka, ill. Hanako Clulow, Chicken House, 302pp, 9781913696047, £6.99 pbk

This brilliant addition to a familiar genre gives a vibrant new setting and atmosphere to the boarding school story, whilst also retaining many traditional elements. This school adventure story, based on the author's own experience, is set in 1990s Nigeria and features Jumo Afolabi, Jummy, who has won a place at the prestigious River School, the finest girls' boarding school in Nigeria. Readers follow Jummy through her first term as she leaves her home and family for a new life at the school by the Shine-Shine River and a world of strict lessons, dorms, houses, schoolfriends, rivals,

midnight feasts, sporting challenges, debates, and drama. Jummy's only sadness is that her clever friend from home, Caro, cannot join her as her family cannot afford the school fees. When Caro does arrive, not as a pupil but as a maid to rich, spoilt new girl, Bolagi Oni, Jummy determines to question the status quo and fight for education for all. Jummy's first term is an eventful one as she makes new friends, hatches a plot to help her old friend, foils a dishonest Matron and even escapes a crocodile.

This is a lively, joyous book with a likeable, empathetic central character who grows in confidence, understanding and self-awareness throughout. The African setting springs to life through evocative and colourful descriptions of sounds, scents, food, clothes, music and dancing and a rich use of language, all enhanced by Hanako Clulow's bright, enticing front cover. Themes of fairness, equal opportunity and social justice are raised without overwhelming the story or detracting from the warmth, humour, and vitality of this very welcome new boarding school story. **SR**

Song of the River

★★★★

Gill Lewis, ill. Zanna Goldhawk, Barrington Stoke, 98pp., 978-1-80090-061-5, £6.99 pbk

After Cari's Dad's sudden death after an accident on his bike, Mum decides to move to the countryside and set up a café on a lovely riverbank. Cari feels that it is very much Mum's dream, and misses her Dad and their old life in the city, but helps, reluctantly, in the café. It is a great success, until the river overflows, washes away their tables and chairs, and makes a dreadful mess on the ground floor of their house. They are both in great distress the next day, and Cari misses Dad so much that she puts on his red jumper and picks up his camera, a professional model. Looking at her Mum, weeping, through the lens makes her see Mum in a different way, as a woman, and she starts taking photos of wildlife and gets interested. Friends from the local wildlife reserve help restore the café, and persuade Mum not to give up- what they need is beavers to reduce the power of the river. Local landowners are resistant, as they think the beavers would escape, but Cari gets stuck in, and, with her friend, Alfie, produces a project that helps to change minds of influential councillors when it goes on display. The beaver project is passed, Gracie and Harold arrive, and settle in well. They have delightful beaver babies, and Cari's photos of them, made into postcards, sell well in the café. The next time there is a flood, although Cari and Mum are better prepared, the water doesn't come so far up the garden, and the song of the river is no longer scary. Cari has made friends, found a new hobby and finally feels happy.

Gill Lewis always excels when writing about animals and wildlife,

and this Barrington Stoke story will make her story accessible to readers who might struggle with a longer book. There is, of course, a message about working with wildlife to reduce the damage we have done, and improve the natural world. Zanna Goldhawk's drawings at the bottom of every page help to break up the text, and the cover is lovely. **DB**

Meg and Merlin – Making Friends

★★★★

Tanya Landman ill. Sonia Albert, Barrington Stoke, 64pp, 9781800900851, £6.99 pbk

Meg is pony mad! She desperately longs for a pony of her own, but knows that her parents could never afford to buy her one; they are already struggling to afford her riding lessons at the local stables, which she can now only have once a month. This doesn't stop Meg from still wishing for a pony every Christmas, birthday and even from the Tooth Fairy.

On the morning of her tenth birthday, Meg can't believe her eyes when spies a pony on her front lawn and dares to think that all of her dreams have finally come true, even if just for a moment. But what is the pony really doing there?

This is a sweet, short story from award-winning author Tanya Landman, which will be a huge hit with all pony-loving little girls across the land. It's the perfect length for introducing children to the chapter format, whilst still being long enough for you to feel you're reading a proper story.

Publishers Barrington Stoke have, as always, pitched it at just the right level of interest, while the book's dyslexia-friendly layout and font make it accessible to a wide range of readers.

Sonia Albert's charming illustrations perfectly complement what promises to be a very popular series, especially for the many horse loving readers out there. **AH**

Talking History: 150 years of Speakers and Speeches

★★★★

Joan Haig and Joan Lennon, ill. André Ducci, Templar Books, 75pp, 978 1 78741 732 8, £15.99, hbk

At the heart of this book are sixteen historic speeches which have helped shape the world included in chronological order.

The speeches are drawn from across the world North America, Europe, Asia and Africa. Themes include racial equality, the rights of women and climate change. They are by political leaders, campaigners, activists and figureheads.

A few of the speeches are very well-known, including Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address during the Civil War, on the principle that all men are created equal and Churchill's 'Their finest Hour' rallying cry before the Battle of Britain. But there are also a number of lesser-known speeches made at pivotal historical moments such as Jawaharal Nehru's 'A Tryst

with Destiny' on the eve of the partition of India and Helen Keller's speech acknowledging the legacy of Louis Braille. Several contemporary speakers feature including Malala Yousafzai at the United Nations on the importance of education and Barack Obama on the significance of the Selma marches in the fight for equality. He quotes Martin Luther King whose hugely significant 'I have a Dream' speech is a surprising omission.

Other speeches are by activists fighting for women's rights including Emmeline Pankhurst and Funmilayo Ransome – Kuti from Nigeria, likely to be less well known in the UK. Climate change activist Greta Thunberg features alongside Severn Cullis-Suzukin 1992, both of their speeches calls to action. There is contemporary resonance also in Angela Merkel's speech on the need for global response to health crises in the wake of the Covid pandemic.

An interesting feature is the analysis of each speech in terms of the speakers' strategies such as the use of repetition, what they did and did not include and how they prepared.

Each speechmaker is allotted two double page spreads. Extracts, sometimes surprisingly short, from each speech are included. A historical context, often quite extensive is also given for example Yuri Gagarin's patriotic speech after the first human space flight after during the Cold War. Links are included to encourage readers to explore more on each theme.

There is a glossary with key terms at the back of the book. A graphic format has been used with varied layout. The amount of information included in many sections, together with design choices such as background and text colour and font size make some sections quite hard to read. One or two of the speeches are hard to locate on the very busy pages.

This is a great idea for a book and very interesting to dip into. It would be even more successful if the speech extracts were sometimes slightly longer and always centre stage. In addition, the historical contextualisation could be slightly abridged at times and the design less dominant. **SM**

Meowsterpieces: A cat's guide to art ... and life!

★★★

Jen Bailey, ill. Nyangsongi, Magic Cat Publishing, 32pp
978 1 9135 2039 7, £14.99 hbk

What if some of the great masters of art had cats as their muses.... Could this, I wonder, have been the possibility envisaged by Meowsterpieces' creators?

To populate well known works of art with images of cats fills this ailurophobic reviewer with horror but that is what the author and illustrator of this large format book

have done. I'm not sure who would be more horrified, people like myself or art connoisseurs, as they turn the pages and encounter the thirteen transmogrified masterpieces including Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, George Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, Pieter Bruegel's *Children's Games* and Katsushika Hokusai's *Under the Wave off Kanagawa*.

All this, so we are led to believe by the rhyming narrative, in order that a mother cat can educate her offspring in the 'Feline Arts' while at the same time, celebrating their wealth of feline qualities – curiosity, bravery, gracefulness for example.

For me the pastiche paintings and occasional photographs demean not only the originals but often the substitute animals themselves, especially that of Degas' *The Dancing Class* wherein one of the dancers is wearing a pink tutu and ballet shoes.

The final pages provide small reproductions of the original artworks with notes about the artists and their creations. Children, if they are the intended audience for the book, would need to be familiar with some of these famous works to fully appreciate what is going on herein, but it isn't one I'd really want to share with them even if that were the case. **JB**

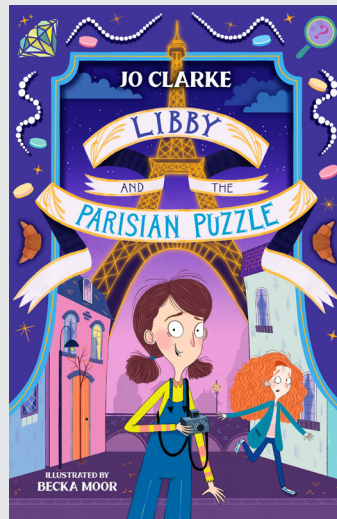
Libby and the Parisian Puzzle

★★★★★

Jo Clarke, ill. Becka Moor, Firefly Press, 224pp, 9781913102708, £7.99 pbk

When her journalist mum has to fly to South America on an assignment, Libby is sent to stay with her aunt, Agatha Mousedale, who runs a 'travelling school' and is currently in Paris. Despite her aunt getting stuck in traffic, Libby and the new teacher Miss Browne (who she met on the train) make their way to the school and are soon settled in. Things appear to be going well and Libby is able to make friends, especially with her new roommate Connie. However, Aunt Agatha finds herself accused of stealing a valuable brooch from a jeweller's shop, so Libby and Connie start investigating the crime. Soon, these two amateur sleuths find themselves caught up with an international conspiracy and a master criminal who seems to be avoiding all attempts at capturing them. Will the girls prove Agatha's innocence, and can they find the true criminal and bring them to justice?

What a fabulous concept; I think many children would relish the thought of changing the location of their school every term or so. Learning becomes more exciting and you get to actually see places in real life, rather than on a screen or in a book. Libby is a fantastic young character, who has ambitions to be a detective, following in the footsteps of her favourite literary heroine 'Isabel Investigates'.



So, when a real-life crime takes place and threatens her aunt, she does what any self-respecting detective would do; thankfully, she has the more 'grounded' Connie to help her and point out when she needs to check her information. This is a brilliant and fast paced detective story that is going to appeal to all lovers of this genre. It also has elements of humour, especially with the twin brothers Seb and Noah, who are a pair of tricksters but who manage to help, just by being themselves. The author has given us a superb new series for the middle grade reader and I can't wait to find out what Libby and her friends get up to next. **MP**

Harley Hitch and the Missing Moon

★★★

Vashti Hardy, ill. George Ermos, Scholastic, 216pp, 9780702302565, £6.99 pbk

Harley Hitch lives in Inventia – an exciting world full of science and technology where robots and machines live alongside humans. With her trusty robo-dog companion, Sprocket, Harley has already impressed in one adventure, and, in *The Missing Moon*, she has an even bigger mission on her hands.

Harley is absolutely determined that, this year, she is going to win Pupil of the Year. This means she has to focus completely upon her lessons and follow all her teachers' instructions closely; she also has to stop colouring her hair and chasing after adventures on a whim!

Her best friend and two grandfathers are a little concerned that she's starting to lose the things that make her special and unique and, when a visit from a famous circus coincides with the catastrophic disappearance of the moon (along with a number of other important Inventia items), they urge her to follow her impulse for excitement.

Harley is an endearing protagonist, whose enthusiasm and curiosity are infectious. Her series is a celebration of STEM, especially for girls, but this sequel is less focused upon STEM themes. Inventia is an interesting

setting full of machines and scientists, but the story itself is less original, and rarely requires Harley to draw upon her impressive skills.

Nevertheless, Harley has much to teach readers. She is not willing to let prejudice bias her judgment, even when everyone else is blaming outsiders for Inventia's problems, and her story reminds children to celebrate whatever it is that makes them special...even if it means not being pupil of the term. **SD**

Razzmatazz

★★★★

Roger Stevens, ill. Mike Smith, Otter-Barry, 112pp,
978 1 91307 441 8, £7.99, pbk

Roger Stevens has been writing poetry for children for many years and performing it at schools, libraries and festivals, and on TV and radio. This is a collection of previously published poems from his very productive career, accompanied by cheerful illustrations from Mike Smith. Most of these poems are meant to be performed and the poet sometimes provides encouraging tips to readers who would like to step into his shoes, not only in performing his poems but in writing their own. As you would expect, there is plenty of humour here; familiar subjects like school life, family and pets; enthusiastic word play; and some carefully worked punchlines. There are sad and thoughtful poems too, empathetic poems on the deaths of parents and pets, and children are encouraged to see poetry as a way of expressing emotions that are otherwise hard to bear. Roger Stevens' own notes, which are attached to many of the poems, go a little way to substituting for having the poet in person in front of your class and some way to encouraging you to go ahead and book him. **CB**

Rock Star Detectives

★★★★

Adam Hills, ill. Luna Valentine, Puffin, 320pp, 978-0241505977, £6.99 pbk

Charley Parker and her friend George, a wheelchair user, are on a tour of Europe. Charley is a musician. George manages her social media. Both are aged just twelve. Their itinerary takes them to Amsterdam, Rome, Tours and London. In each city by a strange coincidence whenever the duo are present a valuable work of art disappears from a museum. Of course Charley and George become the prime suspects for the robberies. Their best way of escaping suspicion is to find the true culprits. Then perhaps they will be allowed to finish the tour in peace.

As a wheelchair user herself, this reviewer had to suspend disbelief as soon as she read. In his wheelchair George can board and leave aircraft, enter any kind of public area and (at one point of the story) get up in the middle of the night, get in his wheelchair, leave the apartment and venture forth into the night.

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

The nearest this narrative comes to mentioning the barriers and delays that are the inevitable concomitants of life in a wheelchair is when the cobblestones on a Rome street provide George with a momentary irritation. Readers who are intent only on an exciting fantasy will find this novel rewarding. Readers who prefer books rooted in reality may enjoy the book if they can manage the massive suspension of disbelief required to ignore its improbabilities. **RB**

Ollie Spark and the Accidental Adventure

★★★★★

Gillian Cross, ill. Alan Snow, David Fickling, 228pp, 9781788452397, pbk, £6.99

This is a brilliant new series from the author of *The Demon Headmaster*, introducing a loveable and unlikely hero. Ollie Spark is obsessed with engineering and is constantly employed by various members of his huge family to fix things around the over-crowded house. When his zany Aunt Caz brings home a beat-up old library van and quad bike, and declares her intentions to tour the world in search of inspiration for her unique blend of recipe-based detective novels, Ollie is tasked with working his usual magic to get everything road-worthy. A slight misunderstanding leads to Ollie accidentally accompanying Aunt Caz on her travels, which take the pair to an unnamed, smog-ridden city where tower blocks stretch up through black clouds of smoke. The residents speak no English and eat nothing but turnips, which, because she is adorably open-minded and positive, makes Aunt Caz very excited. When his aunt goes missing, Ollie is forced to discover more and more about this mysterious, barren land. Armed with nothing but his tool belt and his intuition, he powers up the quad bike and follows every clue he can find. Eventually, after adopting a helpful sidekick in the form of a hungry dog – Gasket – Ollie learns that he is in the setting of a longstanding conflict between two opposing ideologies. In remarkably accessible prose, Cross grants children entrance into debates around huge, vital themes like environmentalism and individual liberty. Ollie's actions teach us that there is rarely a simple solution to such complex themes, while reminding us of the importance of standing up for what we feel is right. With such an enormous family, and such an appetite for adventure, it's clear that Ollie Spark and Aunt Caz are in line for plenty of sequels. **SD**

Sleep-Over Take-Over

★★★★★

Simon James Green, ill. Aleksei Bitskoff, Scholastic, 304pp, 9780702303630, £6.99 pbk

When dorky, unpopular 11-year-olds Otis and Jagger, a team of two against the world, are unexpectedly invited

to cool rich boy Rocco's extravagant birthday party, little do they expect the mayhem that ensues. Otis wakes up on the morning after the sleepover to discover that Jagger is missing and that the party marquee is a scene of carnage. There is a donkey drinking from the chocolate fountain as doves fly everywhere and a giant inflatable helium sausage floats overhead. Rocco has 'loser' tattooed on his forehead and Otis is wearing a wedding dress. No one can remember anything that happened the night before, apart from having to go on stage with a hypnotist. All of Rocco's cool friends disappear at the first sight of the chaos, so Otis and Rocco team up, aided by Tiana and Chloe, to solve the mystery and make amends.

Simon James Green's latest title is a skilfully written, hilarious, anarchic, and fast-paced middle-grade story that will have the reader laughing out loud from start to finish. One madcap episode follows another to build to an action-packed crime-busting finale. The action is interspersed with sparkling dialogue, hilarious quips, and repartee while Aleksei Bitskoff's vivid, humorous cartoon-style illustrations complement the text perfectly. Beneath all the madcap mayhem lies a warm-hearted, empathetic story of insecurities, self-discovery, and the joy of finding true friendship. This is a joyous, must-read book that will lift the spirits of anyone who reads it. **SR**

The Secret Signs of Nature

★★★

Craig Caudill, ill. Carrie Shryock, Magic Cat Publishing, 64pp, 9781913520380, £14.99, hbk

This is a very attractive introduction to looking at the natural world around us and finding practical information – direction, potential weather, what the appearance of a particular species may indicate. The author and illustrator take us round the world. From the Arctic to the Galapagos, from though there is no talking down – the author is not afraid to introduce terms such as photosynthesis, actinomycetes, gibbous. The freshness of the illustrations by Carrie Shryock and the enthusiasm (and knowledge) of the author make this both attractive and immediately accessible. Certainly the presentation of the text attracts attention – and could provide the basis for an enjoyable observational walk round the park. It was good to see that a session in an English garden has been included – might there be a danger of only thinking some of the interesting techniques only belong to the far away? The introduction, however, suggests not, urging young readers to go out and explore. And there are plenty of unexpected facts to surprise and enjoy. While there is no index, there is an extensive and useful glossary and a concise

bibliography directing the reader to websites where further information and inspiration can be found. There might be a slight reservation over the production of the book – an elegant, attractive hardback picture book format, perhaps not ideal for taking with one when exploring; might a sturdy paperback to fit easily in a backpack be more practical? This is a quibble – the author and illustrator together provide the opportunity for learning that is undemanding and fun. **FH**

The Last Firefox

★★★★★

Lee Newbery, ill. Laura Catalan, Puffin, 303pp, 9780241493533, £7.99 pbk

Well, I just loved this book! Debut author, Lee Newbery, is a very welcome addition to the middle-grade bookshelf, with his heart-warming story that has so much to say for itself. Charlie already has lots going on his life. He's coping with the unwanted attention from bullies at school, concerned with moving on to secondary school as he comes to the end of Year 6 and at home, his two Dads have just told him that they would like to adopt another child into their family unit.

Whilst visiting the local castle, Charlie suddenly finds himself swept into a magical adventure, when he

becomes the temporary guardian of a firefox, the last of its kind who, to make matters worse, is being hunted by a sinister creature from another world.

What follows is a real mixture of laugh out loud moments, as Charlie tries to keep Cadno the firefox hidden from his Dads and school friends, plus heart stopping twists and turns as the two worlds collide and Charlie has to find his inner fire to save the important things in his life.

The illustrations from Laura Catalan perfectly accompany the story; I think my favourite is the one of Cadno swinging from a scorched washing line of clothes, after his game becomes slightly more fiery than intended.

The book handles the issues within Charlie's life in a beautifully natural way and the author's desire to provide representation for children who have same-sex parents and/or are adopted definitely fulfils his self-appointed brief. I think that any reader will find much to enjoy in this book; it is a fun, magical adventure with mystical creatures both good and evil, there's a group of best friends that we would all like to have and, without giving anything away, a very satisfying outcome for all, showing that bravery comes in many shapes and forms.

Now, where can I get myself a firefox? **AH**

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

Saving Celeste

★★★★★

Timothée de Fombelle, trans Sarah Ardizzone, Walker Books, 128pp, 9781406397192, £6.99 pbk

Celeste – at school only one day – has gone missing. What has happened to her? So begins a search across a futuristic city to find a girl whose connection with a dying planet means that she is dying as well. Can our young hero who refuses to take “No” for an answer save her? Can he send a message to his world that will shatter complacency and start the healing?

Timothée de Fombelle is already known to British readers for his thoughtful and thought provoking novels and novellas, the most recent *Captain Rosalie*. In *Saving Celeste*, seamlessly translated by Sarah Ardizzone, these qualities are very much in evidence. Here is a story that absorbs the reader's attention as the boy, his name is never known, searches for Celeste. It is also a fable for our time, its message subtly presented, the moral quietly drawn – and hope offered at the conclusion. The very anonymity of the boy invites the reader to identify with him and his quest; Celeste, whose very name means ‘heavenly’ reminds us of our connection to this planet – that the actions of the corporate world in which everyone and everything is involved – have consequences,

human consequences. And yet it only takes one step – one shout aloud – to attract attention and create the ripple that can become a wave – a wave for change. And it is the young readers of today who will make that change. By providing a positive ending to his novella, de Fombelle encourages his audience to be the authors of that change – to be the boy. Ardizzone's translation provides an accessible entry to this world – contemporary, literate without being literary, immediate. This would be an excellent foundation for discussion in a classroom or family, for mindful readers of all ages. **FH**

The Thief who Sang Storms

★★★★★

Sophie Anderson, ill. Joanna Lisowiec, Usborne, 400pp, 9781474979061, £7.99 pbk

Sophie Anderson's latest novel again has its source in Slavic folklore as she re-imagines the Russian folk poem 'Nightingale the Robber'. Here, though, she creates an entirely new fantasy world in the floating island of Morovia, where humans live on one side of the island and alkonosts, the bird-people, live on the other. The two peoples once lived in harmony until the singing magic of the alkonosts was blamed for the tragedy that divided the island. Linnet, a thirteen-

New Talent

The Secret of Splint Hall

★★★★

Katie Cotton, Andersen Press, 320pp, 978-1839131967, £7.99 pbk

Katie Cotton's novel is a wartime story with a difference. For one thing, it takes place in the years after the war, when the civilian population were hoping for better things but still scarred by the brutality of what they'd lived through, represented here by a constant fear of unexploded bombs; for another, the secret of Splint Hall is much bigger than the black-market smuggling being carried out there, it's the dragons that live underneath. Isobel, her big sister Flora and their mother move into Splint Hall after their own home has been destroyed in a bomb blast. It's their mum's childhood home but following the death of her father, now owned by her sister, the girls' aunt, and her racketeering, bullying husband, Mr Godfrey. The atmosphere in the house is dark and oppressive, and there's a new tension too between the people of the village and Isobel's family. As the girls explore the house and discover its secrets for themselves, they learn that the dragons protect the world above from splints, terrifying creatures, always a danger but strengthened by warfare, as though fed by the evil and destruction unleashed. The



girls team up with a couple of the local boys, whose family are dragon keepers, to defeat the creatures. Superb adventure scenes follow in deep, dark tunnels under the house, where all sorts of dangers have to be faced. The dragons too when we meet them are awe-inspiring and properly magical. Though the story makes clear that any victory over the splints is temporary, there's huge satisfaction to be had in Aunt Bea's total victory over the awful Mr Godfrey, as she throws him out of her house. Adventure, new friendships, magic, there is much for readers to enjoy, and for all the fantasy elements Cotton creates a vivid sense of post-war life. **LS**

year-old alkonost, longs to be able to sing magic and to unite the land and return her people from banishment. Linnet's quest for unity and understanding sees her embark on a dangerous journey, braving treacherous swamps, alligator pools and a dank fortress prison. Linnet is brave, persistent, and kind and learns that friendship and understanding are more important than magic in uniting her broken island and its divided peoples.

Sophie Anderson succeeds in creating a captivating fantasy world of floating islands, swamp homes, shipwrecks, and magical bird people. Fans of the author's previous books will also welcome the surprise appearance of the house with chicken legs. In addition to its evocative setting and strong characters, this book provides a timely portrayal of the destructive effects of conflict, division, and misunderstanding on a society. Themes of grief, hope, tolerance, empathy, friendship, and self-belief are effectively explored. The whole book builds into a powerful plea for unity and understanding in a world of division and fear, conveying an important message in current times, heartfelt and full of hope. **SR**

A Single Shard

★★★★

Linda Sue Park, Rock the Boat (Oneworld Publications), 166pp, 978 0 86154 186 7, £6.99 pbk

Tree-ear isn't too sure how old he is; but Crane-man says he's around twelve or thirteen, and he should know. Crane-man has cared for Tree-ear since the day the monks from the temple on the hillside – ravaged by fever at the time – had entrusted the orphaned child to him. Their names reflect their stories. Tree-ear is called after the forest mushroom that grows from rotting wood without any parent-seed. Much like the feeding bird, Crane-man stands on one leg, the other shrivelled and twisted from birth. In the warmer summer months, the boy and the old man have shared a space together under a bridge for several years.

This 20th Anniversary Edition from Oneworld Publications celebrates the 2002 winner of the prestigious Newbery Medal in the United States. The novel has the deceptive simplicity of a folk-tale; readers accustomed to the frenetic pace and fickle relationships of much contemporary YA fiction will find themselves in a very different narrative world. Most of the action is set on the West Coast of Korea in the

mid- to late twelfth century in Ch'ulp'o, a village famed for its pottery, especially its celadon ware. The cast is small; its main players are Tree-ear, Crane-man, the irascible but inventive old potter Min, his kindly wife Ajima and, briefly, the king's emissary Kim, charged with finding craftsmen whose work will enhance the exquisite collection of pottery in the royal palace. Minor roles include rival potters, a pair of violent robbers, government officers, villagers and farmers.

The young Tree-ear regularly hides in the shadow of a paulownia tree, watching in fascination as Min works on his pots. Often, the old man explores new techniques of decoration; each process is described in patient detail. When Tree-ear accidentally breaks a pot, he repays Min by working long shifts, chopping and carting wood from the mountain forest for the kiln or digging clay from the river estuary; his only payment is a daily bowl of food, prepared by Ajima, which he carries back to the bridge to share with Crane-man. Much of the satisfaction on offer here is for the reader who enjoys discovering the slow crafting of the pots and the inventive nature of the process. Though Min shows no sign of teaching the boy to pot, despite his desperation to learn, there are moments of revelation for Tree-ear. Suddenly, he realises what it is to see something familiar in a different way. Just as, in the woods, he once felt that his eyes had known a deer with a new understanding, he now learns to see with his hands, finding and feeling a shape in the clay between his fingers.

Then there are Tree-ear's relationships with Crane-man, Ajima and the gruff old potter himself. Hence that sense of a folk-tale – the older people remain constant, drawn with a few strong characteristics, while young Tree-ear grows through his experiences. Dramatic physical action is limited to events during a journey which Tree-ear makes to the capital city. For the most part Linda Sue Park describes Tree-ear's development through simple interactions and dialogues. It's a measure of her skill that these exchanges suggest wise insight, not banality.

Reflective readers who surrender to the quiet rhythms of the prose and the plot will surely find pleasure both in the crafting of the pots and in the receptive awareness of Tree-ear as he begins a life absorbed in the potter's arts. One day, the story implies, this will lead to the making of one of the most famous pieces of Korean celadon ware which, in our own time, is displayed in the Kansong Museum of Art in Seoul, an institution so distinguished that it opens its doors for just two periods of a few weeks each year. **GF**

Furthermoor

★★★★

Darren Simpson, Usborne, 288pp, 9781474976701, £7.99 pbk.

Bren is 12 years old and his world has fallen apart. His sister Evie is dead, Shaun, the school bully, makes his days at school utterly miserable

and his parents are so closed in with grief that they rarely speak or spend time with him. However, he has one means of escape – the beautiful world of Furthermoor, which he has created from his imagination using the cogs and dials of Evie's watch and where she is still alive.

This is his bolt hole, being alone with his sister where everything is exquisite, no-one can hurt him and he can spend every second of his spare time there. This piece of magic realism is beautifully wrought by Simpson, but he has woven danger signals through it: Bren is turning his back on the real world, avoiding his friends and family and accepting the vicious and humiliating bullying which Shaun metes out to him. Worst of all, Furthermoor is being systematically and repeatedly damaged by Featherly, a fearsome hooded crow who berates Bren for his cowardice. Then along comes Cary, the new boy in school, who fearlessly stands up to Shaun and humiliates him in public, with the predictable result that his bullying of Bren escalates, becoming life-threatening so that he can no longer avoid dealing with it.

The narrative is absorbing, tense and poignant, with real life challenges and concerns cleverly echoed in the magical world of Furthermoor. When Bren finds the courage to confront Featherly and pulls down his hood there is a palpable shock for the reader.

Furthermoor is a powerful book which addresses issues common to us all in a memorable way. The fiercely poignant ending rings true, even though at times it is not quite as meticulously crafted as the rest of the narrative. This book would be a valuable addition to a school library, for both private reading and class discussion. **VR**

Like A Charm

★★★★

Elle McNicoll, Knights Of, 328pp, 978 1 913 3112 7 8, £6.99 pbk

When Ramya was five, living with her parents in London, there was a moment at a Christmas Drinks party she would never forget. She was the only child there, commanded to be on her best behaviour as she took round a silver tray of food. She knew just one of the guests – her Grandpa. She was by the piano when a woman asked – almost ordered – her to play a song for her. Ramya just stared at her, defiantly. Her Grandpa came to her rescue and played himself. The woman, whose name was Portia, sang. The room fell silent, listening, 'like a dog watching its master,' thought Ramya. Everyone seemed to find this intense attention normal. Except Ramya. Who dropped her tray – mid-song – with a shattering crash. She sensed 'something horrifying'. Later, Grandpa asked her what happened. She couldn't explain. Far from criticising her, Grandpa praised her reaction, telling her she has unusual powers of perception, which

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

she will need. After that evening, her furious mother ensured Ramya never saw her Grandpa again.

We pick things up seven years later. Ramya's family has moved to Edinburgh, home to her mother's extended family. When Ramya learns that her Grandpa has died, nothing will stop her attending his funeral in the city. Though a few people speak to her, including relatives she has never met before, she feels alone, alien. She slips away and when she is passing the bronze statue of Scotland's most famous dog, Greyfriars Bobby, he steps off his plinth and trots about like any other dog. Ramya sees this clearly, but no-one else seems to notice. Later, Ramya's Aunt Leanna, who has some limited powers herself, explains that Ramya 'can see through Glamour' with a clarity no-one else can match. Her cousin Marley, who is to become Ramya's ally in her adventures, has no powers himself; but he has scoured local libraries and learned that Glamour is 'a shield. A magical shield. One that supernatural beings use to disguise themselves. They glamour themselves. So that humans cannot see they are different.' McNicoll is exploring deep roots here; my Shorter Oxford cites this from 1840: 'Glamour, "A magical or fictitious beauty attaching to any person or.....a delusive or alluring charm"'. That could be Portia; beautiful but cold, Ramya had thought.

Ramya is dyspraxic; an Author's Note has told us that McNicoll herself was diagnosed when she was nine. Dyspraxia affects Ramya's motor skills, including her use of a pen, so she's assigned by well-meaning teachers to tedious and trivial workshops which take no account of her acutely perceptive mind. She's also articulate and endlessly resilient. In his will, her Grandfather left Ramya a book whose pages seem empty to others. Only she can read the messages it sends, which then disappear. The most consequential warns, 'Beware the Sirens'. She soon encounters those Sirens and learns how dangerous they can be. Their leader, it emerges, is none other than Portia. To protect the vulnerable Hidden People, the peaceable dwellers in the magical underworld, Ramya first brings together her disunited family to use their neglected supernatural powers as her Grandpa had so longed to see.

The stakes are high, the pace is headlong; there are revelations and dangers, loyalties and betrayals. The fact that magic lies barely hidden beneath the everyday life of school corridors and city streets somehow makes the supernatural all the more credible, so readers won't so much as blink when they meet a herd of Kelpies in the waters of Loch Lomond or an informative vampire among the shelves of several Edinburgh

bookshops, apparently working or browsing, but actually there to meet Ramya.

And the struggle is not over yet. Portia may have suffered a setback this time around, but that will no doubt leave her all the more determined on final victory. The Sirens will return, we are promised, in Spring 2023. **GF**

The Rollercoaster Boy

★★★★

Lisa Thompson, ill. Gemma Correll, Scholastic, 348pp., 9780702301599, £6.99 pbk

Twelve-year old Todd is a worrier, (his friends call him Panic Button), but he does have a lot to worry about: his parents are divorced, Mum is a charity worker and living abroad, his Dad has been in bed for 15 days, and his aunt is trying her best to shop, cook, and look after him and 6 year-old Laurie as well as working in a care home. Aunt Lexie says that living with Dad is like being on a rollercoaster, and we soon see why. Dad gets up, and seems to be better: Todd notices that he is taking the pills in the bathroom cabinet, and stops checking. Sure enough, Dad becomes hyperactive, as he had stopped taking his medication, so, when Aunt Lexie tells them that she is going away on holiday, he decides to take the children on holiday too, to the Paradise Hotel where he and Mum had a lovely time soon after their marriage.

The Paradise Hotel is no longer such a glamorous place, very run-down, and the owner, single Mum Marianne, is struggling to keep going at all. Her young daughter Scout helps out when not at school, but she is often dressed in a long dark coat and aviator goggles, the better to Investigate, and soon brings Todd and Laurie, and Patrick, son of another guest who has lots of business deals in the area and ignores him, into her secrets. Her great, great-grandmother Edwina Patterson, a crime author who had bought the hotel, had disappeared mysteriously from Room 42, which was locked, and she feels sure that a sinister man who lives in Room 13 is a werewolf and up to no good. There is also a creepy businessman who wants to buy the hotel at a knock-down price, and puts a lot of pressure on Marianne, so there is a lot going on. Dad just stays in bed, so all the children are free to roam about. In the story the point is made that that sometimes children have to take on more responsibility than they should. Todd almost asks for help several times, but when a bleary-eyed Dad finally emerges from their family room and asks where his children are, it is absolutely clear that all is not well, and Todd is relieved when the adults take over and start to sort things out. Of course, the old man is not a werewolf, the children find out

how the famous author disappeared, and the hotel is not only saved, but takes on a new lease of life.

It's a very exciting story from best-selling author Lisa Thompson, author of *The Goldfish Boy*, and *The Day I was Erased*, and Gemma Correll's cover, full of cartoons of things found in the story, will be enticing. **DB**

Fledgling

★★★★

Lucy Hope, Nosy Crow, 286pp, 978 1 83994 188 7, £7.99 pbk

Lucy Hope sets her debut novel in a house that 'stretches precariously to the sky' on top of a tall rock in the Bavarian Mountains. Munich is just visible beyond the forests; at the city's Opera House, the mother of our heroine Cassie reigns as Principal Soprano. The house is a 'monument to the dreams of five generations of the Engel family', as though each of its five storeys has been balanced – rather than built – one upon the other. Access to the house used to be by way of a mechanical contraption which winched up its terrified passengers, bumping against the rock walls en route. It was Cassie's grandfather who dynamited a helter-skelter of a road around and around the rock up to the top.

Indoors, a quirky library reflects the esoteric interests of previous Engels. There's a room crowded with stuffed owls, a lethally dangerous open-sided lift running through the centre of the building, and numerous stores crammed with obsolescent machinery. Several of the occupants are many times larger than life. Cassie's melodramatic Mother is cold and distant towards her daughter, indifferent towards her husband and a snob towards everyone else. Papa came home from the war a broken man – which war exactly we're never sure, but we know we're in an era of horses and carriages. Papa drinks heavily to drown his memories, though his energies return when indulging his passion for taxidermy; unfortunately, he is no use at stuffing animals. Somewhere up on the third floor, Cassie's Grandma is slowly dying, her pain relieved only by an antiquated brass morphine pump. Every now and again, two local nurses, known to everyone as Frau Crunch and Frau Grind, drop in to check on her, bringing with them some lively knockabout humour and chat. Though, it turns out, there's more to them than that... Then there's the enigmatic maid, Emaline, who's been with the family for ever, but nobody knows anything about her. There's more to her too...

The initial account of the house and its occupants already suggests that there will be an edge of comedy and caricature throughout this story, no matter how frightening Cassie's subsequent adventures turn out to be. Her friend, the very likeable Raphael, is involved in just about all those adventures, which are triggered as early as Page 5 when a

cherub (rarely encountered in fiction or life outside the frame of a painting) suddenly hurtles through Cassie's bedroom window. It's that sort of plot. Expect the Unexpected, which here involves ferocious clashes between hosts of angels and flocks of repulsive Stormfalken (yes, Storm Falcons) notable for their overwhelming stench and slashing talons (Ms Hope is very good at violent action). Adventure piles on adventure, with the pace maintained by a narrative told in the storyteller's dramatic present throughout. In passing, we learn some surprising truths about why and how angels need to visit Earth; sometimes, indeed, they assume mortal form without the knowledge of the bodies' original owners, who are naturally disconcerted when two lumps appear in their backs and burgeon into huge wings.

It may be that all this inventive action lacks a larger context other than the knowledge that generations of Engels have had similar problems. A brief comparison might clarify my point. Readers of Ged's personal conflict at the climax of Ursula le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* are keenly aware that the outcome is critical – the balance of the world itself is at stake. In *Fledgling*, everything seems local. Readers might well be left wondering whether greater powers drive those evil Stormfalken, or inspire the hosts of angels. Is this an episode within a greater struggle between mighty powers, or is it some self-contained skirmish? Even so, the novel's attractive strengths suggest that this author's next book will be awaited with eager interest. **GF**

Northwind

★★★★

Gary Paulsen, Macmillan, 258pp, 976 1529069327, £7.99, pbk

Gary Paulsen died in October last year, aged 82. Fans of the American author will be instantly at home in this posthumously published novel. At home may not be quite the right phrase: for, like *Hatchet*, Paulsen's best-known novel for teenagers, this is about lonely survival in the wilderness. Set somewhere in the misty history or legend of early Viking exploration of North America, it's the tale of Leif, a neglected and abused boy who finds a home amongst the crew of a seal-hunting boat, only to be left alone as the marooned crew die around him from a mysterious sickness. He sets off in a canoe, first in the company of Little Carl, another ill-treated younger boy, and then, when Little Carl dies, Leif navigates unknown waters, entirely alone, always moving north. It's a tale of physical survival: how Leif learns to find food and shelter and avoid the dangers of bears and unpredictable weather and currents. But there's so much more than this. The skillfully sustained tale is as much an elegy for the wonder and multifariousness of the natural world, whether kind or cruel, as it is a praise song to human ingenuity and endurance. And, even

more, it is a subtle portrayal of a child who has little reason to love humankind and who draws comfort from the company of creatures who barely acknowledge him, from the memories of the little thoughtfulness and friendship he has known, and from what he is learning about the world around him and about himself. When he does eventually find evidence of the presence of other people towards the end of the novel, he does not rule out seeking them out, but that might come later, much later. For now, he has learnt to be at home, alone in the wilderness. **CB**

Into the Sideways World

★★★★

Ross Welford, Harper Collins, 370pp, 978 0 00 833384 3, £6.99, pbk

At the time he wrote this book Ross Welford could hardly have known how much more topical it might become by the time it was published. When the story begins, the world is on the brink of World War Three. Willa and new friend Manny, living in a seaside town in north east England, find their way into a parallel dimension, where they and their families live in a world that has been free of war since the 1960s. In the 'sideways world', this freedom has given humankind the opportunity to tackle some of the other problems that beset us, including climate change, pollution and global economic inequality. It's an interesting and challenging idea, not only for the reader to think about how things might have worked out differently but for the author to work out all the narrative possibilities and problems that this scenario presents. There's quite a lot of scope at the domestic level for how things might be different at home and at school for Willa and Manny, although it might only be in a fantasy that the absence of war would somehow work through to bullies being nicer or your parents not arguing so much. Nor are readers likely to be convinced that wars can be stopped by the conversation of a well-meaning ordinary citizen with the President of the United States. However, considering it's potentially such a weighty subject, Ross Welford keeps it light, with plenty of plot twists, humour and thrills. And, although both Manny and Willa commendably decide to face up to life in their own imperfect world, it all ends spectacularly well for everyone. If only wishing made it so. **CB**

Has Anyone Seen Archie Ebbs?

★★★★

Simon Packham, Firefly, 220pp, 9781913102722, £7.99 pbk

Ten-year-old Archie Ebbs is the non-stop class joker, popular with all and happy with it. But one day his single mother and her two children have to leave their rented house after the landlord decides to sell. Unable to find any affordable alternative, they end up

living in temporary accommodation. This provides them with a roof over their heads but little else. Their tiny room in a run-down house is miles from school, has bed bugs, quarrelling next door neighbours and a communal bath and toilet. Overcome by shame, Archie's older sister makes him swear never to tell anyone how low the family has sunk. Exhausted by the long bus journeys, and aware he sometimes brings the pungent smell of his new accommodation with him, Archie sinks into depression. No longer cracking jokes, he loses his friends and is unable to tell his kind and concerned teacher what is happening to him.

The author then takes a bold step that only half comes off, with Archie gradually turning invisible to all but his immediate family. He is inducted into this new life by Zophia, a Polish girl once in his class also no longer visible given that no-one previously ever took any notice of her. This works well as a metaphor, although continuity becomes something of a problem and literal-minded readers may wonder why no-one seems to notice he has gone from school. But the point is well made; wishing that once popular but now silent and unhappy fellow-pupils would simply disappear is always easier than trying to find out why they have become so before offering sympathy and understanding. Well up in the intricacies of social media and writing at a good pace, Simon Packham has written a good and moving story that still manages to end happily. What a pity that the housing problems he describes so well seem to be getting worse year on year. **NT**

Dread Wood

★★★★★

Jennifer Killick, Harper Collins, 295pp, 9780755503711, £7.99 pbk. This horror story delivers real scares and the perfect amount of gory detail for its young audience.

Angelo is not impressed to be called to detention on a Saturday, especially when he sees who the other students are that he will be spending the day with. He likes to keep himself to himself. He has secrets about his family that make life hard and he would rather keep them hidden.

Joining him in detention are Gus, Hallie and Naira, who each have their own private reasons for being there. Like *The Breakfast Club*, the children are totally individual and have no intention of getting along...until their lives depend upon it.

The children's unbelievably positive headteacher is set on making their detention a learning experience but, when he unexpectedly (and terrifyingly) disappears, Angelo and his reluctant classmates are thrust together to try and uncover the deadly secrets of whatever it is that lurks below the school.

Killick's horror story is joyously generic. Monsters remain hidden until absolutely necessary and, when they are finally revealed, are just the right mix of original and familiar. Moreover, the intensely creepy husband and wife caretaker team are a perfect introduction to the famous psychopaths of classic horror stories.

Dread Wood is more than just a fright fest, though. Its young characters are very good company. Despite each one carrying his/her own emotional baggage, they are able to see the good in one another. As they grow familiar with one another, the insults and quips they exchange are hilarious, and Killick manages to make the conversation feel natural and easy, and never cringeworthy, like so many grown-up authors do when writing with a teenage voice.

With a fast pace, frequent shocks and moments of genuine terror, **Dread Wood** is a real treat for readers looking to step into a new genre. **SD**

The Great Fox Illusion

★★★★

Justyn Edwards, Walker Books, 279pp, 9781529501940, £7.99 pbk

This fun adventure story revels in the awe and wonder of magic tricks and the showpeople who perform them. It's an original and engaging idea that is told through the eyes of Flick Lions, a young pretender with a point to prove and a grudge to bear.

The Great Fox was a celebrity magician, who chose to leave his legacy in the form of a sensational game show, in which young magicians compete to win ownership of his famous back catalogue. Flick is one of only three children talented enough to solve the secrets of a complex trick and earn a place on the show - and she is the only one whose father is another famous magician, who has recently disappeared under mysterious circumstances.

Flick is a fierce protagonist and she is determined to bring glory to her family name, but her competitors are talented magicians and some of them are cruel and unkind - quick to ridicule Flick about her disability. Her response is to double-down in her efforts to win, and she still finds energy to show compassion and friendship.

The reality TV show takes place inside the Great Fox's magical mansion, where Flick and her fellow contestants are under 24-hour surveillance and have to compete against one another while tackling tricks and traps set by the Fox himself. It soon becomes clear that Flick is not the only contestant with an ulterior motive for winning, and the children's back stories are a rich vein of intrigue that offer as much mystery as any of the Fox's tricks.

It's a very clever format: the whole book feels like a stage trick slowly unraveling, giving just enough away to make the audience feel they have spotted the secret, just before unveiling yet another twist. Like all magicians, Edwards never reveals all the story's secrets, leaving a number of loose

ends (which can frustrate, at times) and plenty of room for sequels. **SD**

The Ship of Doom

★★★★★

M. A. Bennett, Welbeck Flame, 362pp., 9781801300049, £6.99 pbk. The Ship of Doom is R.M.S. Titanic, which sailed from Southampton where your reviewer lives, so this book held a special interest!

It's 1894, in Greenwich, London. Luna's father had disappeared, and is said to be 'on another plane' by which she presumes adults are trying to tell her that he has died. She is expecting an afternoon of boredom when she has to accompany her Aunt Grace to her Butterfly Club, but they turn out to be a group of time travellers, including explorers and artists, and the authors Arthur Conan Doyle and H.G. Wells. They go into the future and 'borrow' useful inventions, but are careful not to anticipate developments by too much. They have successfully introduced the Kodak box camera, the gramophone and the electric lightbulb, and now they want a Marconi radio set. Their guide, a clockwork bird, advises a trip to Southampton Docks about 18 years ahead, on any White Star ship except...and his clockwork fades.

Luna is teamed up with the elegant Konstantin, son of another member of the group, and young Aidan, a mechanic, who has been trained by his father to manage the Time Train. Of course, the ship they travel to turns out to be the Titanic, and they almost experience the sinking, but manage to return to the Time Train to escape, and then realise they can go back a little in time, (but still ahead of their own time, so that is possible according to the rules of the Time Train) and change the things that went wrong. They borrow clothes from the laundry and infiltrate First Class, the crew and the engineers.

It is well documented that many small things contributed to the loss of the huge ship on her maiden voyage: the owner, Bruce Ismay, wanted to show off the speed of his ship, iceberg warnings were ignored, and binoculars that might have helped the lookouts to spot the iceberg ahead were locked in a cupboard. They find that fixing one thing can lead to other complications, and there is a stoker, Arthur Priest, who seems to be trying to stop them, but they are helped by a mysterious stranger who turns out to be Luna's father. They also realise, by checking the newspapers of the future, that their actions would have consequences e.g. stealing the radio would mean that no appeals for help could be sent out, and the ship might have gone down with all hands. Can they save the inventor Marconi, who is on board?

Arthur Priest, a real stoker, had survived more than one sinking - so, in this scenario, he might be a time traveller. He will be appearing in the next book, set in Egypt around the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb, to

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

be published in October. M A Bennett is a historian, female of course (are boys really fooled by the use of initials?) and already a successful author of adult thrillers – this is her first YA book. It's a very clever account of the story, and very enjoyable to read. **DB**

The Boy Whose Wishes Came True

★★★★★

Helen Rutter, Scholastic, 368pp, 978-0702300868, £6.99 pbk

Helen Rutter has followed up her **Costa Book Award** shortlisted debut **The Boy Who Made Everyone Laugh** with another charming, feel-good story certain to win a place in readers' hearts. Eleven-year-old Archie Crumb does his best to stay positive, but life isn't easy: his mum is suffering from depression and rarely gets out of bed for more than minutes at a time; his father seems to care more for his new wife and daughter than his son; and at school, not only does Archie feel worst at everything, but year six

queens Bella and Bea are always ready to belittle him. He keeps all this secret, and not even his best friend Mouse knows how bad things are at home. It all changes when he falls off his bike and comes round to the vision of his favourite footballer Lucas Bailey standing over him. Lucas, a man prone to sharing inspirational quotes, offers him 'a bit of luck' to make Archie 'see what's possible'. This takes the form of nine wishes, though they come with a warning to be smart about how he uses them. The wishes certainly come true, with varying degrees of success/embarrassment – but it's other, tangential developments that really change Archie's life for the better. Rutter treads the finest line between tragedy and comedy, and keeps everything feeling very real and true, while allowing for the possibility of miracles. Archie's story will leave readers feeling cheered and reassured that pretty much anything possible with the help of family and friends, no matter how dark the situation. **MMA**

14+ Secondary/Adult

Baby Love

★★★★★

Jacqueline Wilson, illus Rachael Dean (illus.), Penguin, 496pp, 978-0241567104, £12.99 bhk

The year is 1960. Laura Peterson is aged fourteen. She attends a grammar school. Her parents are hard up but proud and self-reliant. Laura meets a young French boy named Léon. In a deserted cricket pavilion the two young people have full and unprotected sex. Laura is hardly aware of what is happening. She is certainly not able to give informed consent. Of course she becomes pregnant. She conceals her pregnancy from her parents until a point where termination would no longer have been possible, even if it had not been illegal in 1960.

Before her parents learn Laura's deadly secret, the family take a holiday. Her father is a coach driver, so their holiday takes place in a coach. Completely by chance they encounter Aunt Suzanna, the estranged younger sister of Laura's mother. The estranged aunt will play a significant role later in the story.

Of course once the pregnancy is known no more is heard of Léon. Laura's parents are outraged. She has betrayed the moral standards of the family. There is no question of Laura giving birth at home. Instead her parents send her to live for the remainder of her pregnancy and to give birth at a mother and baby home called Heathcote House, where Wilson unfolds the rest of her narrative.

The book will pose certain questions. What sort of life was on offer in a mother and baby home

of the 1960s? How will the birth of the child be handled? And what prejudices will be faced by Laura and the other young mothers? Will Laura wish to keep her baby? If so will she be encouraged or even allowed to do so?

This novel is of course appropriate for the oldest of Wilson's huge readership. The book discusses sex and sexual abuse. It describes in detail the process of childbirth. It depicts with clarity the distress of young mothers deprived of the chance to keep their babies, and the wall of social condemnation confronting these women. Once Laura becomes pregnant, society decides that she has deprived herself of every civil right. Of all the varied themes Wilson has addressed in her huge oeuvre, none goes so directly to the heart of a corrupt and merciless society in the recent past. What traces of this prejudice survive today? More than we think. Given Wilson's immense talent to amuse, she deserves great credit for undertaking this much more sombre task. **RB**

The Balloon Thief

★★★★★

Aneesa Marufu, Chicken House, 442pp, 978-1-913696-07-8, £7.99 pbk

This debut novel explores the themes of prejudice and confinement, woven into a fantasy world full of action and drama. Khadija, a high caste Ghadaean, is kept within the confines of her bedroom by her father until he finds a suitable match for her. She spends her time drawing the many hot-air balloons she can see from her window and

dreaming of escaping into the skies in one of them. Her chance arrives when, appalled at her father's latest attempt to find her a husband, she sees a balloon which has been carelessly tethered and makes her escape.

When she lands it is in a village populated by Hari, those born to serve, oppressed by the Ghadaeans. Despite their social differences she finds help in relaunching the balloon from Joseph, a maltreated glass-blower's apprentice and the two are liberated by their release from the earth, only to become involved in the insurrection which the Hari have planned in order to overthrow the Ghadaeans.

Marufu creates a glittering fantasy world in which the two sides battle for supremacy, drawing in jinn, angels and a rich box of supernatural tricks to assist their endeavours. The descriptions of both characters and places are detailed and credible, as are the fracturing of loyalties, the betrayals and counter-betrayals. The action is frantic and success in battle shifts from one set of protagonists to another, keeping tension and drama at fever pitch. Khadija discovers her strengths and Joseph loses his timidity and subservience. They fight not for personal gain but for the triumph of good against evil.

During the course of the conflict Khadija and Darian, a Hari, fall in love and here, briefly, Marufu's sure grasp of narrative falters as romantic cliché occasionally grates against the power of the action and the uniqueness of their alliance. That aside, fluent readers who are lovers of fantasy will enjoy *The Balloon Thief*, for its spectacle and for its thought-provoking exploration of racism, social hierarchy and the place of women in society. **VR**

The Girl with no Soul

★★★★★

Morgan Owen, ill. James Gregory, Scholastic, 407pp, 9780702314636, £7.99 pbk

Iris is a young woman who is hiding a secret. She is one of the 'hollow' and has no soul. The fact that she lives in a society that judges people by the 'purity' of their souls and where the Order check on them using a lantern that can project your soul for all to see, means that she is in constant danger from the authorities and survives by finding and selling artefacts to the Countess Cavendish, a con artist and female Fagin. However, when Iris is tasked with retrieving a ring from a noble house, she is amazed to discover that it somehow gives her back her 'Spark', one part of her soul. This means that she can suddenly be tracked by the authorities and leads to all kinds of dangers. As Iris starts to remember vague memories from her past, she starts to question where she comes from and why her memories and soul were blanked out. Together with a young man called Evander and other members of the resistance against the Order, Iris begins to understand the past and

works towards bringing down the Order and the all-powerful Chancellor, who runs it. The question is, will they succeed in their task?

This story was something of a revelation, I absolutely loved the characters and the overall plot. It is full of action, adventure and some romance, but above all, it is about what it means to be a human being and the various aspects of the 'Soul' that we often take for granted. The author has created a world where no one feels safe and there is a constant fear that they will be found wanting in at least one of their five parts of the soul. The concept of a society that is governed by fear and an all-powerful dictator has become a regular feature of many books for the Teen market, however it could be said to reflect the realities of life that young people are presented with in the world around them. This is one of those books that fully deserves to be considered a five-star rating and I look forward to reading more by this author. **MP**

I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter

★★★★★

Erika L. Sánchez, 368pp, Rock the Boat, 978-0861543496, £8.99 pbk

Julia Reyes is an American girl of Mexican origin approaching her sixteenth birthday. A few months before the story opens her older sister Olga died aged only twenty-three. She was run down by a truck. The whole family is grieving. But for Julia the situation is worse. Her deceased sister was, in the strict terms favoured by her parents, a perfect daughter. Her ambition stretched no further than being at home, cooking and cleaning and looking after her parents. Julia has no such limited aims. Her ambition is to become a writer.

Julia develops a desire to get to know her sister just when her sister has gone beyond her reach. Then she convinces herself that Olga must have had a secret that she took with her to the grave. The novel now poses three questions. Did Olga really have any such closely guarded secret? And if she did will her surviving sister manage to reveal it? And finally how will Julia's quest tend to narrow or widen the gap between her parents' view of Mexican national culture and her own much more modern view?

The novel deals effectively with Julia's mental and emotional stress, the book's most impressive accomplishment. But the impact of this successful portrayal is weakened because Julia herself comes across as a spiky character certain to alienate any sensitive reader. At no point beside the mental health narrative does a reader warm to this young woman.

Julia's worst moment comes when she emerges from a psychological clinic and can think of no more graphic way of describing her depressed appearance than to say she looks like a quadriplegic. There could be no more effective way of alienating thousands of potential readers and their families. **RB**

Valediction: No.4 Oxus and After

Brian Alderson is saying goodbye to his books as he donates his remarkable collection to Seven Stories. Here he bids farewell to **The Far-Distant Oxus**.

I suppose the story is still remembered.

Our authors, aged 14 and 15, were pupils at St Mary's Convent boarding school, Berkshire, in 1936. They were not in the same form and did not know each other well but one day, sheltering together in a rainstorm, they found that they were both keen readers of Arthur Ransome's **Swallows and Amazons** books.

This led them to think up the idea of writing their own version of just such a holiday adventure story but with ponies instead of sailing-boats and set on Exmoor rather than in the Lakes. Such was the nature of schooling in those far-distant days they had both been reading Matthew Arnold's Persian epic *Sohrab and Rustum* and that became a thematic element in the story whose child characters choose names from it in their adventures (hence Oxus, Peran-Wisa – although Sohrab, the hero, hardly seems suitable for a piglet won at a coconut shy.) Each chapter is also headed by a quotation chosen from the epic's 892 verses.

The recasting of a story in Ransome mode but wholly original in its telling is one thing but to sustain the effort over twenty-five chapters is an altogether remarkable achievement recognised by Arthur Ransome himself. For when it was finished, hand-written on both sides of an assemblage of paper such as the girls had been able to gather secretly from school sources (400 sheets!) they sent it to him seeking his advice on what must be done to make it publishable. He was astonished by its storytelling qualities for, as well as a practitioner, he was an authority on storytelling as a craft, and he took it to Jonathan Cape and became midwife to its publication, writing an illuminating Introduction that singled out the history of its making.

While not having the integrated plotting of, say, **Swallows and Amazons**, the episodic structure of Oxus carries the reader along through its successful blending of the characters with their credible speech patterns and the landscape and its indigenous ponies. An air of mystery presides too over Maurice, a loner of their age but of unknown provenance and richly experienced in country living.

As a child-reader of the story and its successors: **Escape to Persia** (1938) and **Oxus in Summer** (1939), borrowed from the Enfield Public Library, I can bear out the generally accepted belief that the attraction of stories in series lies in a friendship



that the reader finds with their fictional participants. Although no pony fancier (nor yet a yachtsman) I found that they and the Ransome crowd were good people to have around. (When, as an undergraduate, I first met Valerie I found that she had a like enjoyment in the books but had had them all as presents and had laboured to garnish them faithfully with colour pencils. That is an activity practised on *Swallowdale* by one of the characters in **Oxus**.)

By the time that **Oxus in Summer** was published the War was upon us. The girls had left school and while I know not what became of Kathleen during those fraught years Pamela served in the WAAF. But in 1947, with both now in their twenties, they published a fourth book with Cape: **Crowns**, dedicated to their old mentor. Its opening chapters introduce us to the children in three families, two in London and one farming just outside, of upper middle-class status the depiction of whose social life would have amused John Betjeman. However, having given us a character reading of four children in particular, our authors take them to a Boxing Day party ('Indoor Games near Newbury!') and then, in the midst of a game of 'Sardines' deposit them suddenly in an unknown, subtropical land where, though still teenagers, they have become royal rulers; two kings and two queens (did C.S.Lewis ever read this book?).

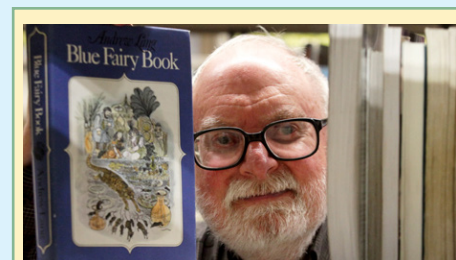
No explanation is given as to how they came to be rulers in the first place or what sort of history their land may have had and this long central part of the story is

devoted to bringing out how the children's independent royal status enables them to fulfil a future that they had earlier adumbrated for themselves 'in real life'.

Crowns had no successors and after its publication Katharine Hull disappears from the record but a year after its publication Pamela Whitlock was appointed first editor of *Collins' Magazine for Boys and Girls*, giving brief life to what was the last notable periodical for children in a genre that had lasted more than a hundred years. Collins also published her **The Open Book** (1956) an unusual anthology 'for boys and girls and members of all Christian families' with fine drawings by the now forgotten illustrator Marcia Lane Foster. More significant though in more ways than one was **All Day Long** (1954) an extensive and sensitively edited anthology much praised by Ransome with whom Pamela maintained a regular correspondence. She had sent it to the Oxford University Press whose children's books editor at that time, the great John Bell, was building a post-war list that was to develop as the most famed of the period. He did the book proud with four full-page colour wood engravings by Joan Hassall. He also fell in love with his author and, reader, he married her.

Katharine Hull & Pamela Whitlock **The Far-Distant Oxus**. Illustrations by Pamela Whitlock. Introduction by Arthur Ransome. London, Toronto: Jonathan Cape, 1937. 200x130mm. 351pp. incl. 24 full-page line drawings, that on p.307 repeated as frontis, and numerous spot drawings throughout; red inked top. Red linen over boards, separate hand-drawn and coloured maps on front and back endpapers. Dust jacket with front and spine 3-colour drawing by PW.

For this article, Brian acknowledges help from **Hazel Sheeky Bird**, authority on the Whitlock papers at **Seven Stories**.



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