

# BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.254

*the* children's book magazine online

May 2022

**Authorgraph interview**  
**Sita Brahmachari**

**Windows into Illustration**  
**Jane Ray**



*plus* **EmpathyLab, Ruth Brown,**  
**A. F. Steadman and Mini Grey**

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### 2 Editorial

**3 Empathy in action:**  
get ready for Empathy Day  
Thursday 9 June

**4 Celebrating CLIPPA 2022:** Charlotte Hacking of CLPE introduces the poetry books on the shortlist for the 2022 Centre for Literacy in Primary Education Poetry Award

**6 Authorgraph 254:**  
Sita Brahmachari interviewed  
by Damian Kelleher

**8 Windows into Illustration:** Jane Ray describes how a training in ceramics influenced her illustrations for *The Story of Babur*

**10 Ten of the Best:**  
Ann Lazim chooses ten of the best children's books written by Commonwealth writers

**12 Life, comfort and Joy:**  
Ruth Brown interviewed by Ferelith Hordon

**14 Beyond the Secret Garden:** All About Hair by Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O'Connor

**16 Very Short Introductions for Curious Young Minds:**  
an introduction

**18 A Story from the Archives:** Sarah Lawrance on a little-known collaboration between Kaye Webb and Ronald Searle

**20 A.F. Steadman** talks to Michelle Pauli about *Skandar and the Unicorn Thief*

**21 Roll up!** Mini Grey presents *The Greatest Show on Earth*

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

**36 Valediction No 4:**  
Jan and George by Brian Alderson.

### COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from *Skandar and the Unicorn Thief* by **A.F. Steadman**. Thanks to **Simon and Schuster Children's Books** for their help with our May cover.



# Editorial 254

## What future for Inclusive Minds?



A Place at the Table delegates including author Catherine Johnson



Following nearly ten years of successful growth, **Inclusive Minds**, the agency dedicated to ensuring authentic representation in books, is looking for interested parties to get in touch to discuss the next stage in its evolution.

**Inclusive Minds** was founded in January 2013 by Alexandra Strick and Beth Cox as a collective, bringing together all those passionate about inclusion, diversity, equality and accessibility in children's literature, and committed to changing the face of children's books. Originally best known for its 'A Place at the Table' events and 'Everybody In' charter and campaign, Inclusive Minds has continued to make its mark on the children's book landscape, evolving with the needs of the industry, and effecting real change. At **Books for Keeps** we have always been supporters of the work **Inclusive Minds** has been doing and very aware of the positive impact the organisation has had.

Since 2020, it has operated as a Community Interest Company, led by A M Dassu, with support from her co-directors Heather Lacey and Jessi Parrott. Despite the external challenges of the last two years, it has thrived, with clients including many leading publishers regularly approaching **Inclusive Minds** as their first point of call for support with authentic inclusion.

**Inclusive Minds'** primary mission is its groundbreaking Inclusion Ambassador network which enables book creators to be connected to individuals with lived experience of a particular facet or facets of diversity to help them ensure

authenticity. This vital service supports book creators in building authentic characters and plots whilst giving marginalised people a voice in the book world and exposure to the publishing industry.

However, with demand for its services having increased, **Inclusive Minds** now needs to restructure and is on the hunt for possible solutions, one of which may be identifying an established organisation to provide a suitable new home

The founders of **Inclusive Minds** together with the directors of the CIC are looking for a new way that **Inclusive Minds'** activity can be managed into the future. Ideally the solution would allow the current directors to fully step back, with a view to the initiative being referred to as '**Inclusive Minds** administered by X'. The organisation that takes on **Inclusive Minds** would have full responsibility for the running and the assets of the venture. Although the directors/founders are prioritising interest from structured and impartial organisations in a position to take on the entity as a whole, they are open to suggestions of other solutions that may enable **Inclusive Minds** to thrive.

We hope very much that a solution will be found and that the vital work carried out by **Inclusive Minds** will continue. To find out more and to get involved visit the **Inclusive Minds** [website](https://www.inclusiveminds.co.uk).



## Inclusive Minds

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# Empathy in Action

Ahead of **Empathy Day** on 9 June, a report into the impact of one school's work with **EmpathyLab**, plus ways to get involved.



It's **Empathy Day** on Thursday 9 June, a chance for everyone to support **EmpathyLab**'s mission to raise an empathy-educated generation through the powerful tool of reading. 'Every child deserves the chance to be surrounded by empathy, and to develop strong empathy skills, which will play a pivotal role in their life chances, as well as being vital for successful relationships, collaboration, and learning,' says founder Miranda McKearney. Empathy is now recognised as a force for social change, as pupils are inspired to put empathy into action.

In January 2020 a cluster of schools in a deprived part of west Wales began work with **EmpathyLab** on their in-depth empathy education programme. Teacher Kate Clarke, the school's Health and Wellbeing lead, led the work for her primary school, Pembroke Dock Community School. The cluster was responding to the way empathy features in the new Curriculum for Wales, where it appears 35 times. The schools involved also wanted to find ways of embedding better behaviours in pupils, and to build self-esteem and a sense of responsibility to others.



As they embarked on their journey with **EmpathyLab**, they were immediately able to see the need for pupils to form strong empathy skills in order to build the strong relationships that are required in an ever-changing world. Kate describes it as a lightbulb moment for the group, who were able to see how books could be used both to develop empathy skills and a feeling of security in the pupils.

Kate and the team bought the recommended texts in the **Read for Empathy** collections – one set for each class. They began using these with classes at the end of each day. A virtual assembly was held which explained for all the children involved that empathy is different from sympathy and reinforced the fact that empathy was important in developing a positive school ethos. Each year group based their empathy learning on a text, and teachers focused on reading for pleasure whilst reading the stories recommended by **EmpathyLab**. They were delighted at the discussion the texts sparked amongst year 5 and year 6 pupils about the differences and similarities between individuals.

As part of the school's empathy work, they developed a topic titled 'Don't hate, educate'. A local MOD site was being used as a refugee camp, and some members of the schools' own community were taking part in demonstrations against the refugees. A part of Kate's mission was to give pupils the skills to question what they were seeing around them.

The empathy-focused work also helped hugely during the return from the pandemic, as a high proportion of the pupils were suffering from emotional and mental health difficulties ranging from separation anxiety to loss, bereavement and trauma. Pupils were frustrated

and anxious and the reading of empathy texts and the learning of empathy skills were a huge support. Relationships deepened. The texts helped children question the racism that they were seeing in their own community, to deepen their own sense of empathy and to build pupils' solidarity with people facing inequality daily. The learning and reflection were greatly helped by visits from Rashmi Sirdeshpande and Onjali Rauf.

**Empathy Day** itself was a huge celebration in Kate's school as well as the others in the Pembroke cluster. Kwame Alexander was inspirational and opened up pupils' eyes to the writing process. There were author videos and masses of activity and Kate describes 'a buzz like electricity' around the school.

The effects in the school have been long-lasting and tangible as empathy is put into action. For example, the children have created a food share in reception for members of the community in need and this initiative, led by 5 and 6 year olds, will have a lasting effect on the school's wider community.

In Kate's words, 'Our pupils in Pembroke Dock Community School have had access to texts that have helped them understand and value others' lives and perspectives. **EmpathyLab** have helped us to harness this power and I believe that every school and organisation should take the opportunity to harness the true power of empathy.'

The strategy for all of **EmpathyLab**'s work is built on two key areas of scientific research from neuroscientists and psychologists: 1. empathy is learnable – and 2. reading is a powerful tool to develop it.

This year's **Empathy Day** theme is **Empathy, Our Human Superpower**, and there are a range of powerful activities available for use in schools, libraries and at home. The activities are broken into three main themes – read, connect, and act. At the heart of the campaign is a Superpower Challenge, which will help children and young people develop their empathy muscles. There are nine fun, creative empathy-boosting activities to do throughout May and June. Children can chart their progress on downloadable record cards, earning a digital badge if they complete three activities or a certificate signed by Michael Rosen if they do all nine. Find out more about the challenge.

If you're looking to discover great books to inspire your **Empathy Day** activity, look no further. The **Read for Empathy Collection** is a diverse list of 60 expertly selected titles for children and young people aged 4-16, building empathy by giving insight into the lives of others.

Furthermore, **EmpathyLab** are harnessing the powerful kinetic energy of authors and illustrators, through **Empathy Day Live!** an online festival on Thursday 9 June, streaming a full morning of fun and engaging video content, which brings the challenge to life in the classroom and library. Authors and illustrators including Children's Laureate Cressida Cowell, Jacqueline Wilson, Michael Morpurgo, Rob Biddulph, Elle McNicoll and Bali Rai will be modelling the Challenge activities for children.

In the run-up to the day, watch the flagship debate, the **Empathy Conversation**, online on Wednesday 25 May, where top psychologists and award-winning authors, Lemn Sissay, Katherine Rundell and Manjeet Mann will be sharing their views and expertise, free for all to join.

**EmpathyLab** also offer a range of expert CPD training for teachers and authors.

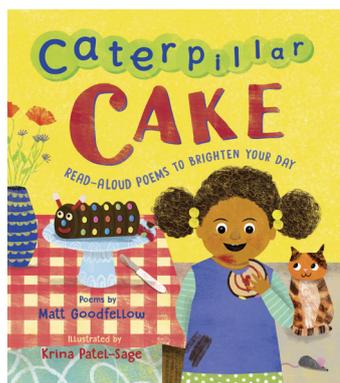
Join the movement! Sign up for a [free toolkit](#) for inspiration and ideas for early years, schools, libraries and families.

# Celebrating CLIPPA 2022

Charlotte Hacking provides an insight into the collections shortlisted for this year's Centre for Literacy in Primary Education Poetry Award.



At the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, we are proud to be the National Poetry Centre for Primary Schools, and our **Centre for Literacy in Primary Education Poetry Award (CLIPPA)** is the only national award set up solely to celebrate poetry published for children. This year's shortlist, announced in association with the Manchester Poetry Library on 4 May, offers a rich picture of the quality of poetry currently being published for children of all ages.



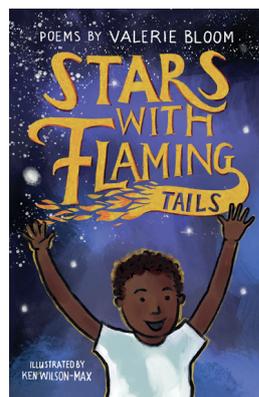
**Caterpillar Cake** by Matt Goodfellow, illustrated by Krina Patel-Sage, is a wonderful introduction to poetry for children at the earliest stages of reading. The book contains an expertly curated selection of the perfect ingredients to set children off on a journey to a lifelong love of poetry. Delicious rhymes such as the title poem, *Caterpillar Cake* and *Let's Go!* that children won't be able to resist joining in with and acting out; counting rhymes

that also invite children to tune into the sounds of words through rhyme and alliteration like *Skim* and *Zany Zoo*; calming poems like *Here it Comes* and *River Lullaby* show that poetry can have different moods and feelings for different times and poems related to children's everyday experiences like *When I Swing* and *My Shell*, offer the perfect invitation for children to see that they could have a voice to express their own thoughts and feelings and to write poetry of their own.

It feels like Matt really does know his childhood audience – the humour is genuinely funny, the language is expertly crafted and thoughtfully placed, allowing the poems to sing on and off the page, the content is never patronising and enables children to see

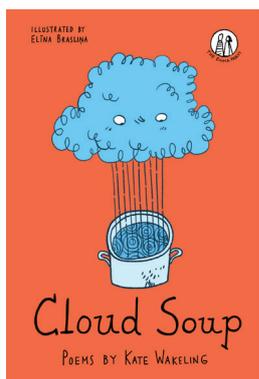


themselves in poetry and to be stretched to connect with it at a much deeper level. Krina Patel-Sage's bold and bright illustrations work in harmony with the text, providing children with the opportunity to become immersed in the world of each poem.



**Stars With Flaming Tails** by Valerie Bloom, illustrated by Ken Wilson-Max, is a veritable feast of poetry from one of the country's best known and highly regarded children's poets. Valerie's experience and knowledge about both children and poetry sing from every page of this book, offering the reader a multitude of opportunities to be engaged, curious, and imaginative.

Specific sections on *Friends and Family*, *Our World* and *Animals* allow children to bring personal experiences and interests to children's reading and interpretation of poems like *Mum Says She Loves Me*, *Forest* and *Poison Dart Frog*; encouraging them to think and engage more deeply with the ideas and messages behind the words. A specific section titled *Fun With Forms* invites children to become aware of specific forms of poetry, from the familiar riddles, *Behind a White Wall* and *Twins* to the lesser-known *elfje*, *Green*; offering an invitation for children to have a go at exploring the patterns of the form and perhaps to craft their own. The final section, *Unbelievable*, is a playful exploration of language and wordplay, sharing how playful and performative language can be, in poems such as *The Isle of Negatyves* and *The Zimbats*. Ken Wilson-Max's monochrome illustrations are perfectly paired with the words; what he sees and brings out in the poems he has chosen to illustrate take the reader beyond the words on the page, encouraging them to consider themes and ideas at greater depth.



**Cloud Soup** by Kate Wakeling, illustrated by Elina Braslina, is a joyous celebration of language, creative thinking and poetic form. Every poem in this collection is perfectly placed, nothing seems extraneous and there is a superb range of themes to allow children to gain a sense of awe and wonder, to explore and investigate and to think creatively and critically about the world around them.

Kate's love of language sings in every poem and her expertise in the craft of poetry writing allows her to play with form



Matt Goodfellow



Valerie Bloom



Kate Wakeling



Liz Brownlee

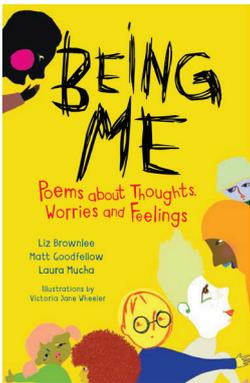


Laura Mucha



Manjeet Mann

appropriate to the subject matter. The poems range from the deftly humorous *Mr Mangle's Beard* to the deeply emotive *Grandma and the Sea*. So many poems share a genuine curiosity and delight with the world around us. In such poems as the ode to the *Stick Insect* to an exploration of the water cycle in *The water in the glass you are holding right now*, children are encouraged to observe closely and invited to question and find out more. Poems such as *Weird Cake* and *Paeon (or Eleven Uses for a Garden Pea)* encourage the reader to think differently and creatively. There will be a poem to engage and delight every child. Once again, as in her previous collection **Moon Juice** (CLIPPA winner 2017), Elina Braslina's illustrations are created with great insight; she sees beyond the words, offering the child reader a place to both consolidate and extend their thoughts around poems they have read.

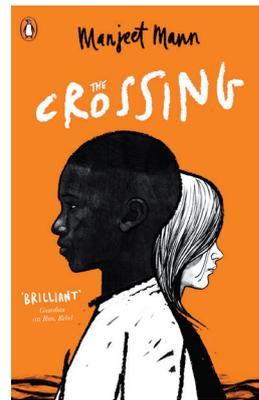


**Being Me**, by Liz Brownlee, Matt Goodfellow and Laura Mucha, illustrated by Victoria Jane Wheeler, is such an important collection of poetry for our time, bearing witness to children's thoughts, feelings, experiences and emotions in a way that genuinely offers recognition, affirmation and hope. The three poets have worked in perfect harmony to create a collection that shows their child readers that their emotions and experiences matter, as well as demonstrating how writing about such things can help them make sense of their thoughts and feelings.

Specific experiences of individual children, explored in poems such as *Michael*, *Find Me* and *Bobby*, will support children in recognising and empathising with the experiences of others around them. Poems like *A Thought*, *Argument* and *Albatross* help children to be aware of experiences that affect children's lives beyond the walls of school and those like *Thought Machine*, *The Land of Blue*, *Free* and *I Believe in Me* explore the feelings and emotions we all go through in our lives in a way that will open up wider conversations around recognising, affirming the importance of and working through emotions. Victoria Jane Wheeler's illustrations offer a special kind of insight to the words on the page, playing with line, media and style to engage the reader in deep and meaningful ways.

**The Crossing** by Manjeet Mann is a superbly well-researched, rich and emotive narrative, bravely highlighting and providing rich insights into complex topics and offering an opportunity for young people to critique the kind of incendiary rhetoric they will experience through the mainstream media. A lot of intensive research went into pulling the story together.

Covering complex themes and issues, and events that remain so real for many people in the world, carries a weight of responsibility to make the characters and events authentic and to ensure that the book represented those affected truthfully. The skill in Manjeet's writing is that she does exactly this. Over the course of three or four



years she worked diligently to research and collect the stories that helped her to shape the narrative; Sammy's story is pieced together from the very real stories of child and adult refugees, who have made the same journey for the same reasons. Lead protagonist Nat's brother Ryan also features heavily in the storyline, as Nat watches him drawn into a far-right group, still grieving the loss of his mother and becoming more and more disaffected by his inability to get a job, with the family about to lose their home due to their lack of income; as part of

the ongoing research, she sat in on workshops and took on the experiences of people in similar situations.

The fact that the story is told in verse brings a sharpness and intensity that engages the reader in the narrative in a completely different way from a novel. The voices and stories of the two characters are cleverly linked, with the last word of one character's voice in each verse being the first of the next character as a metaphor of their interconnectedness, before they even come into each other's lives. Judicious use of language focusses the reader and what's left in the white space between lines and verses challenges them to think about what has been presented at a deeper level.

You might be deciding now who you think might be the winner, but you'll need to wait until the 8 July to find out which one of those five collections will take home the prize. The award ceremony will be hosted live at the Southbank Centre's Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, but you'll be able to watch the show and see the poets perform as the show will be livestreamed. Details of how to watch will be advertised via **CLPE's** website and social media channels.

A wide range of resources including videos of all the shortlisted poets, teaching notes and information about poetic forms and devices can be found free on [CLPE's website](#).

Schools wishing to shadow this year's award and enter the shadowing competition for a chance to perform on the stage at the award ceremony at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank Centre on 8 July alongside the shortlisted poets can find information about the shadowing scheme [online](#).



All photos at the CLIPPA shortlist show by Mike Frisbee.



**Charlotte Hacking** is the Learning and Programme Director and member of the **CLIPPA** judging panel at **CLPE**, an independent UK charity dedicated to helping schools develop literacy learning that transforms lives.

# Authorgraph

## No.254

**Sita Brahmachari**  
interviewed by  
Damian Kelleher

As the critically acclaimed **When Shadows Fall** comes out in paperback, **Damian Kelleher** meets author **Sita Brahmachari** to discover how her work is inspiring others.

It's a bright spring day when I meet Sita Brahmachari at Waterlow Park in north London to talk about her latest book **When Shadows Fall**. We've not met before, but as soon as we sit on a park bench perched beside the beautiful gardens, Sita takes out a small box and passes me a package.

'I've got a present for you.'

It's a piece of charcoal, a few centimetres long. And for anyone who has read **When Shadows Fall** and admired Natalie's Sirett's vivid and expressive art, the significance of the charcoal is not wasted.

'When I go into schools to talk about the book, I start by talking about Natalie's work,' Sita explains. 'I get them to hold the charcoal in their hands, and see it start to rub off.'

As the charcoal makes it mark on her audience's hands, the creative magic begins to happen.

'I get them to write individual poems, starting with "I'm holding charcoal in my hands",' explains Sita. 'And then we see what comes.'

The launch for the hardback edition of **When Shadows Fall** was held in the library of Kensington Aldridge Academy, a school that stands metres from Grenfell Tower in west London. Several pupils from the school were victims of the blaze that engulfed the block in June 2017.



'It was spine-tingling. The young people there completely understood what holding the charcoal in their hands meant.'

In the poem that prefaces her book, Sita writes about 'the passing of a pen and charcoal to make art from scorched earth.'

'Without any explanation, they knew what it meant. There we were in the shadow of Grenfell, and as soon as I started speaking about the themes of the book, they just knew what I was talking about.'

**When Shadows Fall** focuses on the struggles of teenage Kai and his group of friends as they hang out together on a threatened patch of wilderness in a dangerous city scape. When Kai struggles with grief, the story begins to grow in all kinds of directions. But always at its heart are the many young people in society who 'walk this earth in the shadows', the disadvantaged kids who grow up on the edges of society. Facing mental health challenges, exclusion from school, and social injustice, the story is relayed through a mixture of narrative, free verse and Natalie Sirett's arresting imagery.

'The threads of this story go back so far,' explains Sita. 'I worked in community and youth theatre for a long time before I started writing novels. That's why this book is a big, emotional novel for me. I did shed quite a few tears at my desk over writing this book.'

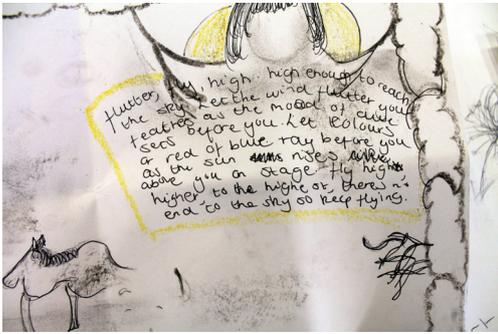
Fresh out of university, Sita started her career as a community theatre worker for the Royal Court Youth Theatre in west London.

'I loved that title! One of the places I was asked to work in was a pupil referral unit underneath Trellick Tower, not far from Grenfell. What I saw was the damage that a lack of trust can bring about; the feeling that nobody really has your back, and the impact that can have on young people.'

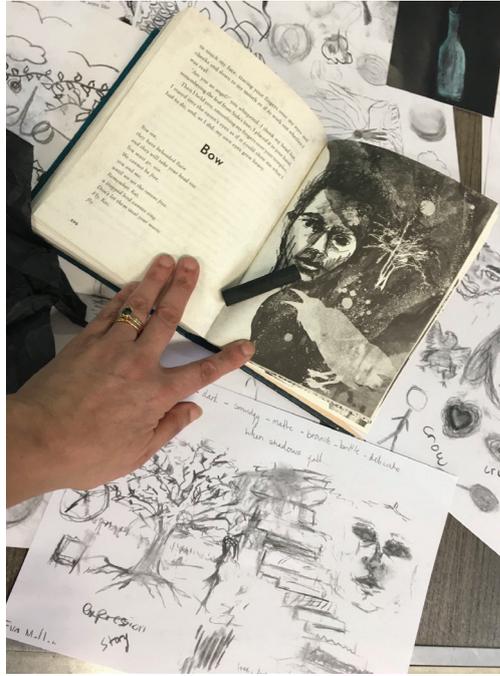
These then are the beginnings of the book which Sita has described as 'a life's journey'. 'It's been written in many phases over many years. In a funny sort of way, the fragmentation of the story opened something up. For me as a writer, there's a lot of space in the story; there's space for image.'

What that space allowed was an opportunity for Sita to work with Sirett whom she had first met many years earlier when their children were at nursery school together.

'We've been wanting to work together and waiting for the right project. We were talking about creativity and education and sketching out the ideas of it way back. I said then, 'if I ever get this



Students' work inspired by **When Shadows Fall**



book published it will be image, and it will be word, and it will be poetry, it will be prose, song – however these young people need to express themselves.'

Publishers Little Tiger also understood the unique origins of the book. 'They have done an amazing job,' says Sita. 'Mattie Whitehead and Ruth Bennett, the editors, met Natalie and said "we're going to leave the dramatic form of the book to you." For example, the section where we see Kai moving through London and over the bridges – it was written like a stage instruction. Natalie took that and brought so much more to the work as so many illustrators do, working closely with the designer Charlie Moyler.'

Once the book was written, illustrated and published, the story continued to grow in all sorts of creative directions – beyond even Sita's imagination.

'Natalie is now working on a beautiful exhibition called the Raven Treasure which we're taking up to the Edinburgh festival. It's going to be a kind of performance – there's a raven treasure box made by her father-in-law Burt who's a carpenter in his late 90s and it's based on the box in the Rijksmuseum. It unfolds and she's going to paint it, and as we open up the drawers we're going to talk not just about the creation of the book, but also the creative process. She's making it at the moment and I can't wait to see it.'

The ravens reference an integral part of the story. Not the best-loved birds in the animal kingdom, they are often seen as a nuisance and a threat. 'I've actually always loved them,' says Sita. 'I was obsessed with ravens growing up. I always noticed their iridescence – like a rainbow – and I loved that. One of the themes of the book is also the number of Black and mixed-race young people who are excluded from the education system in our country. The young people in this story feel as if they're on the outside, and ravens are often shooed out of places.'

Throughout Sita's body of work – and there are award-winning novels, short stories and plays – humanity and the natural world are recurrent themes skilfully woven throughout the plot. Green spaces are not just picturesque backdrops but provide her protagonists with vital room to breathe and grow. I ask Sita if this is inspired by her own childhood.

'We moved around a lot but the countryside that really got under my author skin is the Lake District. The Lake District that I grew up in – I wrote about it in **Kite Spirit** – fed me completely. I was free in nature, able to make up stories. But when you grow up in a landscape that's as awesome as the Lake District and you see the weather go across the fells – it changes so quickly. You are so connected with

that internal Wordsworthian idea – "emotion recollected in tranquillity" – and I seek that for my city dwelling characters.

'One in three young people in cities, and of that the most disenfranchised young people, has no access to nature. For me, mental health and the natural world have been recurrent themes in my stories. But this landscape that these young people are on, this Rec, it's just become very real. It could be anywhere – in the banlieues of Paris for example, or in any cosmopolitan, multi-cultural city that is experiencing the massive frictions of the world and the refugee crises of many different countries.'

Working with refugees is something that Sita understands only too well. As writer in residence at the **Islington Centre for Refugees and Migrants**, she has direct experience of the treatment refugees receive when they arrive in the UK. She is particularly

concerned about the latest announcements that the government intends to send refugees to Rwanda.

'Everybody who is displaced – and particularly the children – needs to be treated respectfully. I've always wanted my stories with refugee character representation to show a journey – a journey of integration and one of opportunity. To hear now about this Rwandan...' She pauses to try and find the right word. 'I can't even call it a plan. I think it's a stunt. To use people in that way is inhumane and shameful.'

'There's a big refrain in this book. Omid says, "when shadows fall, you stand beside." I do think we are living in that time when it is for all of us to decide who we stand beside.'

There's so much to talk about with this book, I say, it is so rich in themes. It takes us off in so many new directions and down so many paths. Sita agrees.

'I said what this book doesn't need is me talking about it!' She laughs. 'This is the book that spans the arc of my writing for children. The artwork that is coming through, inspired by the book, is unbelievable. There's going to be an exhibition organised by Counterpoint Arts. I also met Love Ssega [the musician/artist] through an event I did with the **National Literacy Trust**, and he read my book and came back saying how much it links to his own work, campaigning for access to green spaces for young people. He's going to be at the paperback launch and is talking about writing a song for Omid. And now we have the audiobook read by Baba Oyejide, one of the actors in **Top Boy**. When I listen to the audiobook I'm never tempted to read the book in my own voice – I just want to hear it read by Baba.'

'There's even film interest, too. But I just want to see **When Shadows Fall** in the hands of young artists now. It's inspiring poetry, art and song. It's a creative catalyst.'

**When Shadows Fall** by Sita Brahmachari, illustrated by Natalie Sirett, is published by Little Tiger.



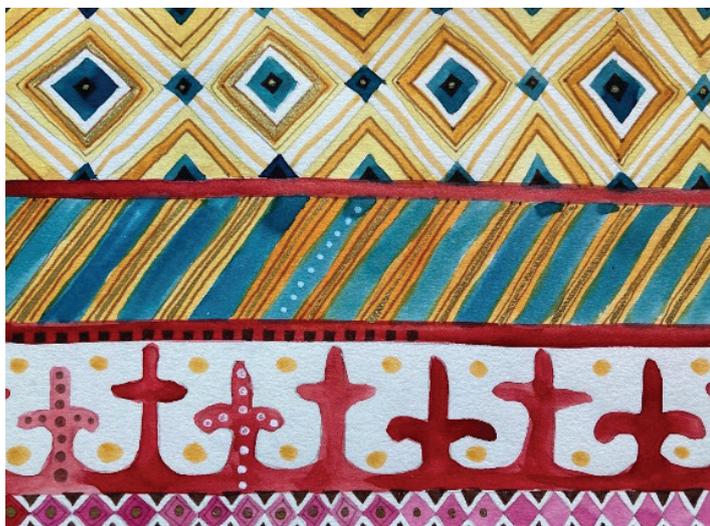
**Damian Kelleher** is a writer and journalist specialising in children's books.

# Windows into Illustration: Jane Ray

**Jane Ray's** illustrations are distinctive, sumptuous and jewel bright. In a special Windows into Illustration feature, she describes how her training in ceramics influenced her approach to illustrating **The Story of Babur: Prince, Emperor, Sage**.

I have been illustrating books for 30 years now, but my original training was in 3D design – ceramics, glass and metal – and during my time at art school I spent many hours in the V&A delighting in the art and the craftsmanship I found there. Pottery, tiles, enamels, textiles and above all, the exquisite Mughal miniature paintings all influenced my work and my thinking – the colour, pattern and beauty was astounding.

After graduating, I moved towards illustration and these same influences fed into the books I was commissioned to work on – collections of fairy tales, myths and legends from all over the world, bible stories, and the ancient tale of **Lugalbanda, from Sumer or Ancient Iraq** (Kathy Henderson/Walker Books). I illustrated collections of myths and legends of the Near East, and **The Arabian Nights** for The Folio Society.



So it was a pleasure, and an honour, to be asked to illustrate **The Story of Babur: Prince, Emperor, Sage** retold for children by the Nepalese children's author, Anuradha.

This, of course, is a true story, not myth or fable, based on Babur's own writings of his rule in the 1520s, and a detailed account of his life and epic achievements.

Babur was a fascinating character – on the one hand, an invader, a conqueror, capable of brutality and destruction. On the other hand, here was a scholar who loved nature, art, science and music. Babur was a son, a husband, a father, and a friend, often revealing great vulnerability and humanity in his writings.

Anuradha's writing leapt across continents, from Nepal to the UK, vividly retelling Babur's story. We worked together on this book against the backdrop of both the Pandemic, and the tragedy in Afghanistan.

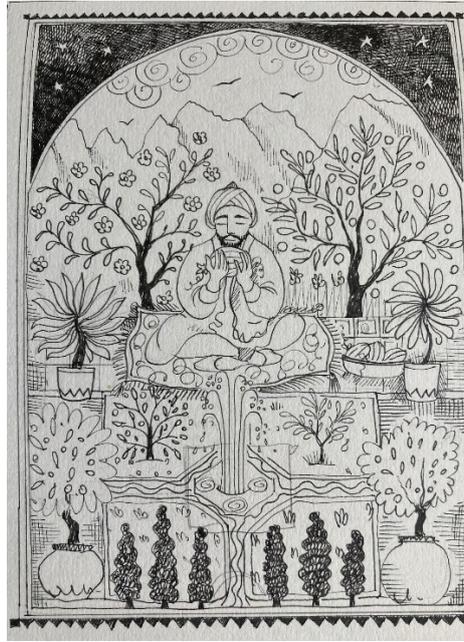
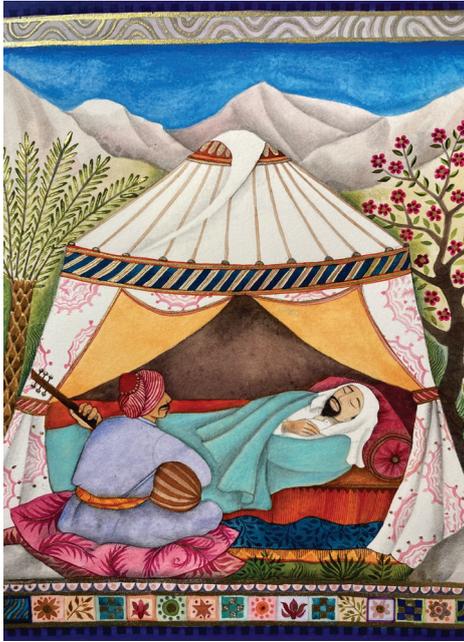
I sat in the studio painting scenes from 16th-century Kabul, while listening to news reports of 21st-century Kabul...

I started the project, as I start every project, with a sketchbook, drawing faces, clothes, trees, and buildings, and generally getting a feel for the stories. I loved getting to know Babur, from childhood, to young warrior, to husband and father.

Because we were working on this book during Lockdown, I wasn't able to access the glorious Mughal miniature paintings at the V&A as frequently as I usually would, and the one or two visits I made were frustrating as I juggled mask and steamed up glasses!

But I managed to find plenty of imagery via the internet, and I also found a copy of **The Illustrated Baburnama** by Som Prakash Verma (Routledge), a full translation of Babur's writings, accompanied by the most exquisite contemporary manuscript paintings, which was invaluable.

From my research I was able to get a sense of the people in the story, their clothes, buildings, and the landscape they inhabited. It was never my intention to be a slave to historic detail – that is



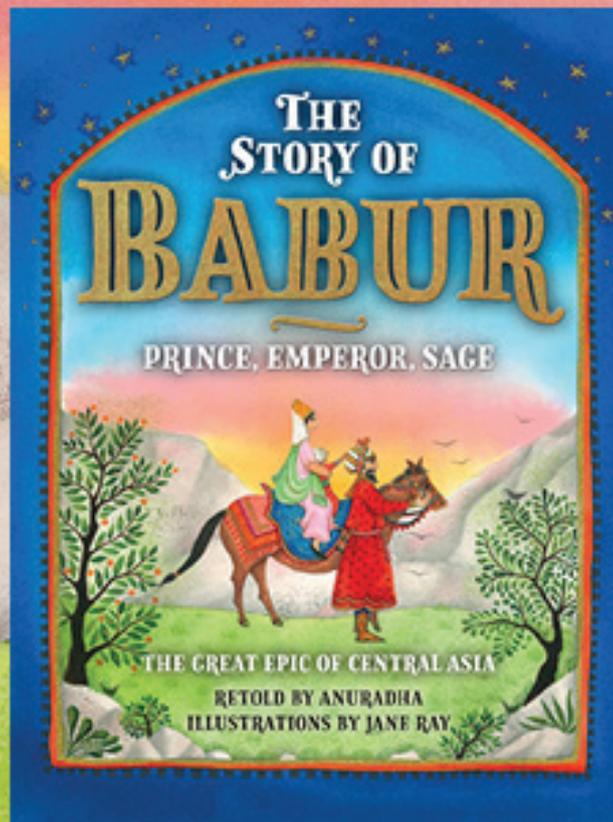
not my style. But I wanted to have a sense of colour, pattern and structure that would ring true. Common to just about every culture of the time, women didn't feature much in the stories, and so I deliberately sought to make them visible where possible. Scala, the publisher of the book, commissioned me to provide one illustration for each of the 12 chapters of the book, and I decided to create an opening painting, not necessarily illustrating an actual incident in the story (though some do), but rather creating an impression of the story, something of the atmosphere of what was happening.

I used my usual materials – watercolour, ink and a liquid gold that subtly lights up the images, on a heavy watercolour paper, and I treated each image as a little icon of colour and richness. This was one of those projects that, as an illustrator, you don't want to end. But now that the writing and the illustrations are complete, Babur is setting out on his epic journeying once again.

**The Story of Babur: Prince, Emperor, Sage** is published by Scala Arts & Heritage Publishers, 978-1785513947, £12.95 hbk.

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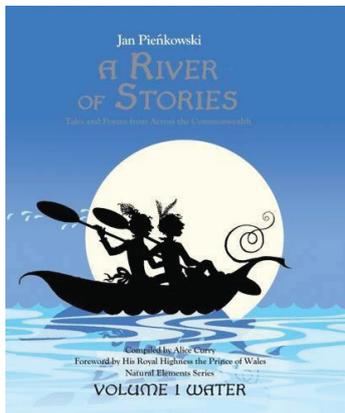
A classic of world literature retold for a new generation

[scalapublishers.com/the-story-of-babur/](https://scalapublishers.com/the-story-of-babur/)

# Ten of the Best books from the Commonwealth

**Ann Lazim** chooses ten of the best children's books written by Commonwealth writers.

Created in the twilight of the British Empire, the Commonwealth is a means of co-operation between its fifty-four member countries. It's not possible to represent them all equally in a short list, especially as few have an extensive children's publishing industry. Here is a selection of picture books, traditional stories, poetry and fiction, some with classic status and some very new, to start readers off on journeys of exploration where indigenous cultures are respected and valued.

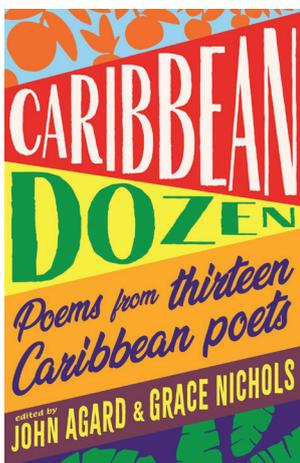


## A River of Stories

Alice Curry (compiler), Commonwealth Education Trust, volume 1 **Water**, illus. Jan Pieńkowski, 978-0992991074, volume 2 **Earth**, illus. Poonam Mistry, 978-0992991005, volume 3 **Air**, illus. Julie Flett, 978-0992991012, volume 4 **Fire**, illus. Emma Butler, 978-0992991029, £12.99 each pbk

Each of these four volumes includes a cornucopia of poems and stories from the fifty-four

countries that make up the Commonwealth. The arrangement is thematic, ranging around different aspects of the four elements. Travel across the exquisitely designed and illustrated pages and swing *After the Rain* (a poem from Pakistan), find out *Why People Have to Die* (a tale from Vanuatu), smell the scent of *Chrysanthemums* (a poem from Singapore), tremble before *The Ghostly Wife* (a tale from Bangladesh), call out an *Invocation to the Rainbow* (a chant from Cameroon) and become immersed in seas of story.

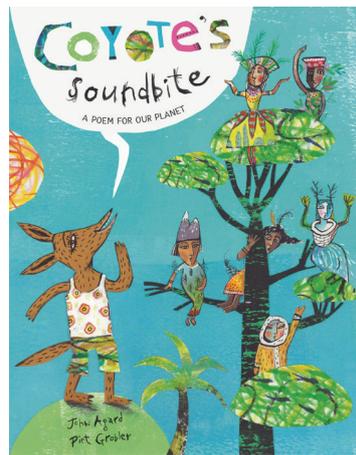


## Caribbean Dozen

John Agard and Grace Nichols (editors), illus. Cathie Felstead, Walker, 978-1406392852, £5.99 pbk

This rich collection is comprised of work from thirteen poets born in the islands and countries of the Caribbean. Each poet shares a childhood experience with the reader as an introduction to their poems and there are biographical notes on each of them. Some names may be more familiar such as James Berry, Valerie Bloom and the editors themselves and reading this collection will entice readers into seeking out more of

the poetry written by all of the contributors. The original edition with Cathie Felstead's illustrations in glorious colour is OP but this affordable edition means that more copies can be bought!

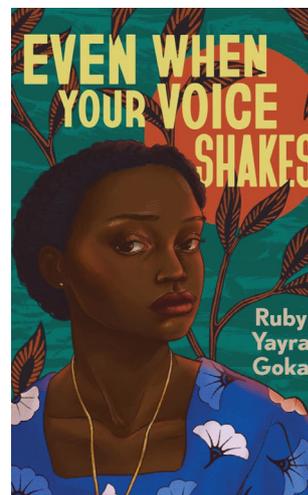


## Coyote's Soundbite. A Poem for Our Planet

John Agard, illus. Piet Grobler, Lantana Publishing, 978-1911373735, £12.99 hbk

Trickster Coyote hears that the earth-goddesses are planning a conference to discuss the way humans are mistreating the planet. Only female creatures are allowed so Coyote dons his wife's blue dress and attends in disguise, listening to what the earth-goddesses from all around

the world are saying and offering a suggestion of a soundbite that could unite. Returning home, he finds that his wife had the same idea and has just returned from the males-only gathering of earth-gods. Most of Lantana's books combine the talents of an author and an illustrator from different countries and cultures – here they are John Agard from Guyana and Piet Grobler from South Africa.



## Even When Your Voice Shakes

Ruby Yayra Goka, Norton Young Readers (Accord Books), 978-1324017110, £14.76 hbk

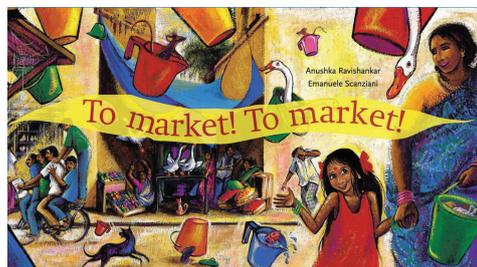
This YA novel from Ghana is published in a recent initiative bringing contemporary African literature for young people to a wider audience. Readers will warm to narrator Amerley, keeping her family together in a run-down neighbourhood of Accra. An offer of employment from a rich distant relative seems to offer a way out of poverty and the possibility of fulfilling her dream to attend college

but Amerley is exploited by her employer and raped by her aunt's stepson. How she eventually finds the strength and courage from within and from friends to overcome this is an inspiration to those looking to discover their own voice.



**Ann Lazim** was Librarian at the **Centre for Literacy in Primary Education** for 29 years. Since 'retirement' she remains involved in several children's books organisations including **IBBY**.

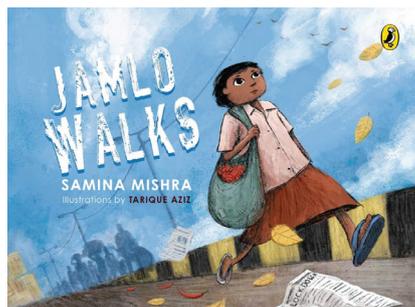
# 10



## To Market! To Market!

Anushka Ravishankar, illus. Emanuele Scanziani, Tara Books, 978-8192317137, £6.99 pbk

In this eye-catching unusually shaped picture book, a small Indian girl explores her vibrant local market deciding what to buy with the money her mother has given her. She tries on various identities as she does so and finds that this is the real fun rather than actually purchasing anything. The rhythms of the rhyming text are emphasised by imaginative typography. Anushka Ravishankar is known for the humorous wordplay of her verse. Several of her books are published by Tara, noted for their innovative bookmaking incorporating illustrative styles from across India.

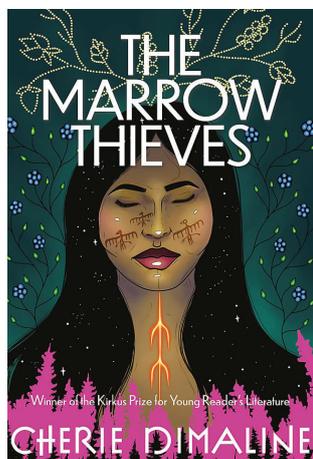


## Jamlo Walks

Samina Mishra, illus. Tarique Aziz, Puffin India, 978-0143453178, £9.40 pbk

A picture book based on the true story of a child in India carrying the chillies she earned harvesting to her home village far away. Like other migrant workers

she had to return on foot when a lockdown was suddenly imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Jamlo's journey is interspersed with glimpses of the lives of other Indian children, for example attending a school lesson via Zoom. A significant story simply told with strong themes about injustice, the importance of sharing resources more equally and the impact on children in particular.

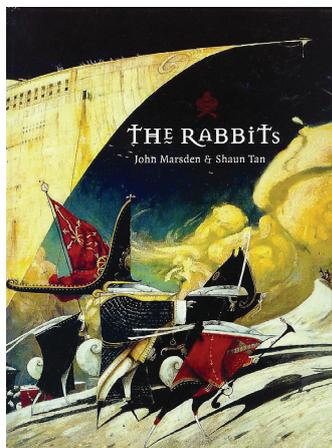


## The Marrow Thieves

Cherie Dimaline, Jacaranda, 978-1913090012, £8.99 pbk

A Canadian YA novel by a Métis author nominated to the **IBBY Honour List 2020**, set in the near future when climate change has wreaked destruction. 'Recruiters' hunt the indigenous people of North America, taking them to schools to harvest their bone marrow, the source of the ability to dream only retained by Native peoples. Groups from a variety of tribal nations are in hiding or on the run. The presence of residential schools refers back to

when children sent to these were deprived of their language and culture. Rebecca Thomas's picture book **I'm Finding My Talk**, illustrated by Pauline Young (Nimbus Publishing, 978-1771088114) is a powerful evocation of this.

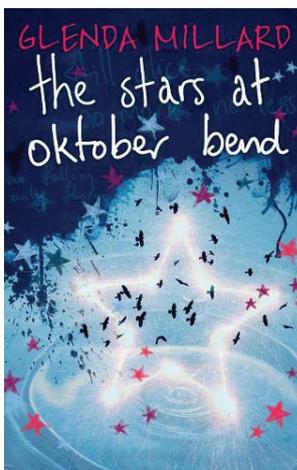


## The Rabbits

John Marsden, illus. Shaun Tan, Hodder, 978-0734411365, £9.99 pbk

This powerful allegory depicting the devastating effects of colonialism was one of the earliest picture books illustrated by internationally award-winning Australian Shaun Tan and demonstrates his surreal style. John Marsden is author of novels for young people, notably the series starting with **Tomorrow, When the War Began**. The language used here is deceptively

simple, evoking a strong response as the reader comes to a gradual realisation of the situation and the implications. The Australian setting becomes apparent near the end through the vocabulary 'billabong' and 'gum trees' but the message is universal and the circumstances could apply to a number of places, past and present.

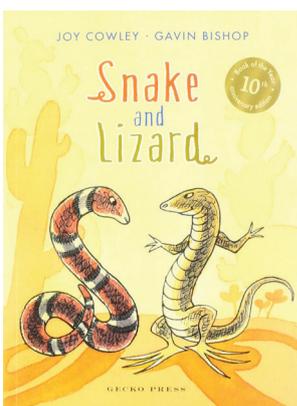


## The Stars at Oktober Bend

Glenda Millard, Old Barn Books, 978-1910646151, £7.99 pbk

This YA novel from Australia was shortlisted for the 2017 **CILIP Carnegie Medal** and gives voice to two young people, Alice and Manny, damaged by circumstances not of their making and their developing relationship. Alice's speech is slurred but her writing is lyrical and includes poems that 'mean whatever you want them to'. Manny was a child soldier who saw his family die in war torn Sierra Leone. A brave and beautiful

book in terms of themes and linguistic expression. Glenda Millard is also the author of the heartwarming **Kingdom of Silk** series for a younger age group.



## Snake and Lizard

Joy Cowley, illus. Gavin Bishop, Gecko Press, 978-1776571994, £7.99 pbk

The author of these stories featuring an unlikely friendship is one of the most loved and prolific authors in New Zealand (many young readers and their teachers are familiar with her character Mrs Wishy-Washy!) and the illustrator is also one of their most highly regarded. This classic collection of humorous tales comes from the publisher of 'curiously good books' both from New Zealand and in translation.

# Life, comfort and joy.

## An interview with Ruth Brown

A new picture book from **Ruth Brown** is always a treat and her latest **Eye Spy** is certainly that combining, as it does Ruth's art and her expertise with picture book text. **Ferelith Hordon** interviews Ruth about her long and distinguished career.

I caught up with Ruth Brown in her London flat. It is spacious and welcoming with a studio room where the large windows allow plenty of light. There are pictures on the walls; none by her though several by both of her sons who are practising artists and by her grandson who looks to follow in the family tradition. But what about Ruth? What was her background? Her early childhood was spent first in Devon, in Silverton where she was born, then Bournemouth. The family moved to Germany in 1947 to Frankfurt after her father took up an administrative post there. 'We came from a cottage in Devon to a council flat in Bournemouth then to a huge requisitioned house in Germany.' They later moved to Cologne where she went to school. It was a very relaxed, inclusive upbringing with a 'progressive' education. The shock of coming back to Bournemouth School for Girls when the family returned to England was considerable. 'That was more of a culture shock than going to Germany when I was six.'

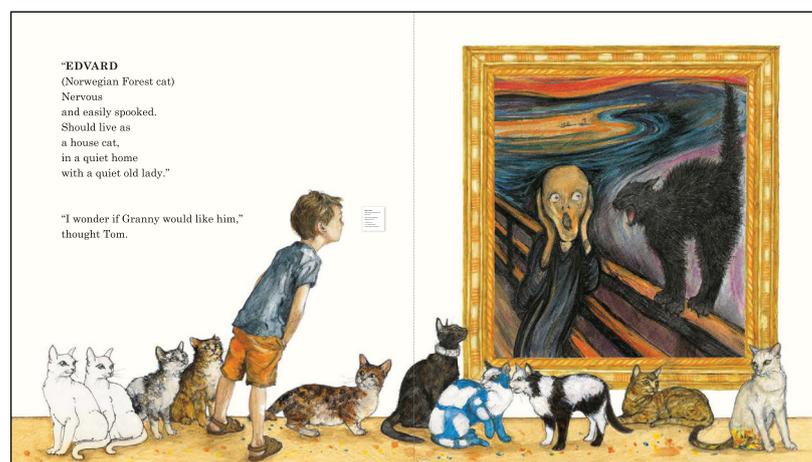
At school the only place she felt any comfort or freedom was the art room with a very good art teacher. She hadn't grown up surrounded by picture books, only had **Rupert Annuals** in the cottage and in Germany they had made puppet shows to illustrate history. 'I didn't draw much,' says Ruth, 'but what I remember vividly most of all is being small in the cottage in Devon ... I was more or less confined to the front garden and used to spend most of my days leaning on the wall watching our neighbour dig up worms.'

She left school at 16 to go to Bournemouth Art College for a very traditional course. From this she moved to Birmingham Art School where she was directed to illustration – then called Graphic Design. It was here she met her husband, Ken. Then came a move to the Royal College in London in 1961, 'a bit of an eye opener' she comments. Students might be asked to design a dashboard for a car or a digital typeface. 'I think it taught me to see and to think about things in a different sort of way and gave me confidence – they treated you as an adult.' The good thing was that it was very structured. She cites the Pre-Raphaelites as an inspiration not just for the painting but for the sound drawing that underlies all their work. She feels this discipline is vital for any artist:

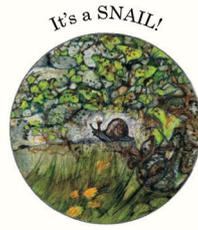
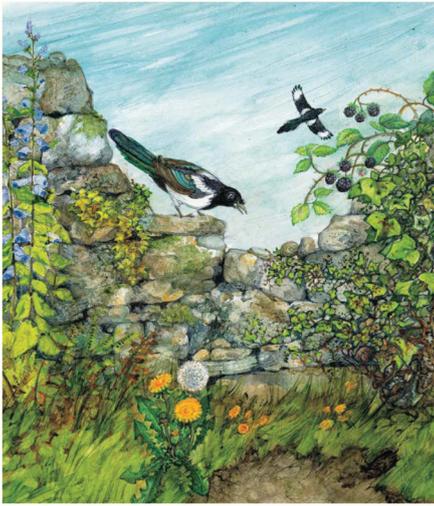


'You can do anything at all if you can draw, but it is not always recognised.' What does she use to create the rich landscapes and vibrant images that populate her books? Acrylic is always the base – occasionally concentrated watercolour. 'I use anything I can work with but always acrylic.' It is fascinating to learn her late husband Ken only worked with watercolour. 'I can't,' she says – nor does she use the computer in the creation of her books. The images are drawn meticulously on transparent paper then transferred to art paper. They are made to size. It will take about six months to bring a picture book to fruition.

Her first picture book appeared in 1979, **Crazy Charlie** published by Klaus Flugge at Andersen Press. It was a response to the birth of her second son and the success of Pat Hutchins' **Rosie's Walk**. She had been working as a freelance illustrator for the BBC on **Playschool**, **Jackanory**, **Words with Pictures**. Now she was reading to two children every night, 'I found the picture books available very traditional. I ended up quite tired reading to a 6-year-old and a baby, dreading them pulling out a long story ... I always have in mind me as a rather tired mother with one child who can read and one child that can't read. It's got to be a story that interests me ... short, succinct and to the point and not talking down. Maybe the older child can read it themselves later on but there is enough in the pictures to interest the non reader – that has always been my principle.' Though she has illustrated for other authors and sometimes feels that her drawings for them are better, she likes to write her own text. It gives her complete control. She particularly likes to create double page spreads that spill off the edges, 'I am always curious about what is slightly out of the page.' Animals feature prominently in her work, especially cats and dogs. 'You can get over any emotion using animals' she says. For her it allows a certain freedom.



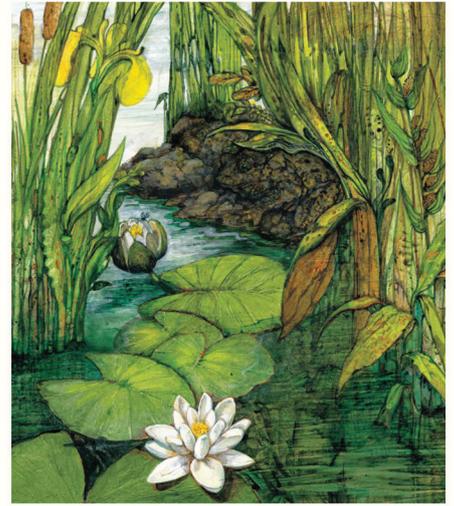
Spread from **A Gallery of Cats**.



I spy with my little eye,  
something beginning with

**T**

It squats, all warty, by the water,  
catching flies and croaking.  
It rhymes with road . . .



Pages from **Eye Spy**.

'In a way it is limitless what you can do – I don't think there is anything I can't draw.' She uses photographs, models and draws from life, her grandson for example is the child in **A Gallery of Cats**. This was the book that brought her back to illustrating after the death of Ken when for a time it was difficult. It was fun to make. 'I am quite a positive person' she comments, 'but I am interested in dark things, like **The Dark Dark Tale** with its traditional text.' She wrote this immediately after the death of her mother perhaps reflecting a particular childhood nightmare and it is extremely different from her first book. But even here the ending reverses the fear. Life, comfort and joy are never far from any book by Ruth.

So what next? Is there another picture book to come? The spreads were already there waiting for the colour – so **Knock, Knock, Who's There?** Ruth Brown, of course.

**A Gallery of Cats** and Ruth Brown's new picture book **Eye Spy** are published by Scallywag Press.

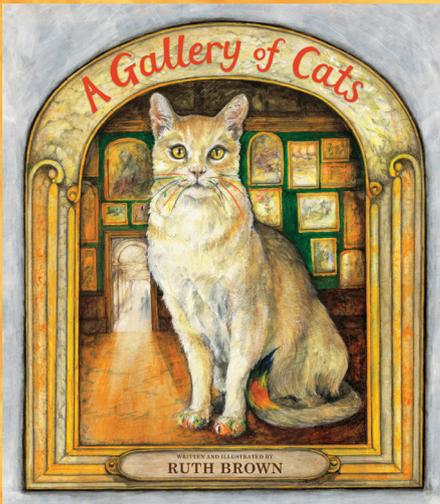


**Ferialith Hordon** is editor of **Books for Keeps**.

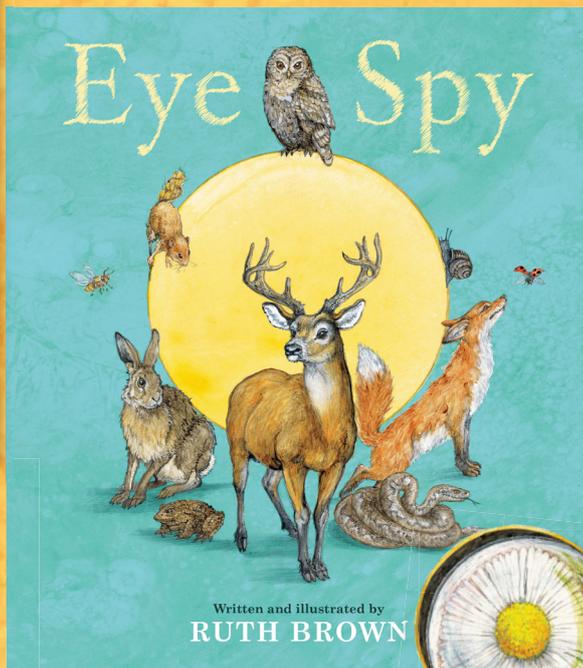
## Books that invite the reader to play

*'Exceptional draughtsmanship makes all Ruth Brown's books a feast'* Sunday Times

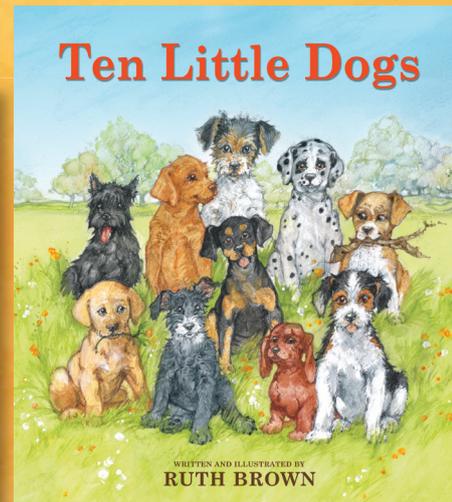
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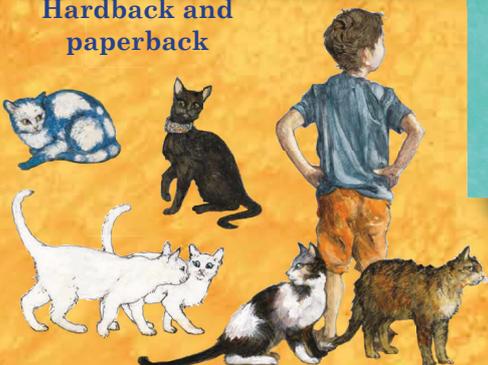


Written and illustrated by  
**RUTH BROWN**

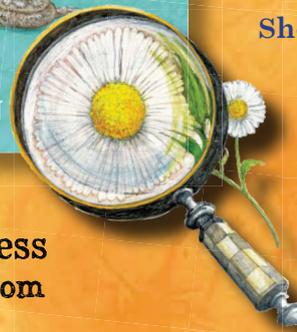


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# Beyond the Secret Garden: All About Hair

In the latest in the **Beyond the Secret Garden** series, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** examine depictions of Black people's hair in children's books.

It is not uncommon for children's books, in Britain and beyond, to feature characters who are identified by their hair or stories their hair plays a significant role in events. Descriptions and depictions of long, flowing hair have often been part of stories about princesses and contributed to dominant notions of womanhood and beauty.

For centuries, where Black people's hair has been described in British children's fiction it has often been in dismissive terms, whether as 'woolly' as in Anna Laetitia-Barbauld's **Evenings at Home** (1791-6), G.A. Henty's **A Roving Commission; or, Through the Black Insurrection in Hayti** (1900), Nina Bawden's **On the Run** (1964); or 'frizzy' as in Michael Morpurgo's **A Medal for Leroy** (2012).

The politics of Black British hair and clothing gained increased attention in the 1970s with the rise of Rastafari and Black Power movements. Paul Gilroy, in **There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack** quotes from the 1981 Scarman report. Lord Scarman led the inquiry into the 1981 Brixton riots; Scarman suggested that 'young hooligans' (Gilroy 135) had appropriated the symbols of the Rastafarian religion, 'the dreadlocks, the headgear and the colours' (135) to excuse their destructive behaviour. Scarman was not the only one to believe that dreadlocks were associated with criminality; Sally Tomlinson, in **Race and Education**, points out that schools debated whether or not to ban dreadlocks (49) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A young person's hair and dress were a political and particularly anti-authoritarian statement, one that faced censure from official government institutions such as the police and the schools.

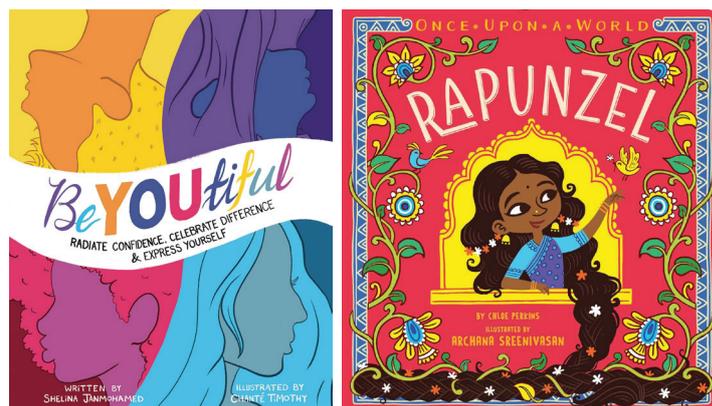
Sympathetic children's authors took note of the tension between Black British young people and the police, and often this included depictions of Rastafari hair and head coverings. Dan Jones's illustrations for **Inky Pinky Ponky** (edited by Mike Rosen and Susannah Steele in 1982), for example, showcases several children with Rastafari tams of green, gold and red, and Black children with locs. These children often are shown interacting with the police, and although the same is true for white people in the book, the end result is different for Black children. A double-page spread in the middle of the book demonstrates this clearly. On the left-hand side is the poem, Don't go to granny's (n.p.); the reason not to go to granny's is that 'There's a great big copper' waiting there. The picture by Jones shows a white child in a cowboy outfit being held by a policeman. On the right-hand side of the page is I'm a little bumper car (n.p.); the accompanying illustration has a child with dreadlocks riding in a bumper car and being confronted by the police. However, whereas the white child, according to the rhyme, will get off with a fine (or possibly a bribe) – the policeman will 'charge you half a dollar' (n.p.) – the Black child is jailed for drinking 'a small ginger ale' (n.p.). Jones uses the texts chosen by Rosen and Steele to portray the unequal treatment by the police toward Black youth, particularly Rastafari youth. Lorraine Simeon, in her book **Marcellus** (originally published in 1984), shows how the fear and suspicion of dreadlocks can filter down to younger children as well, when the title character covers his hair with a baseball cap because he worries that his hair might be the cause of his being bullied or beaten up.

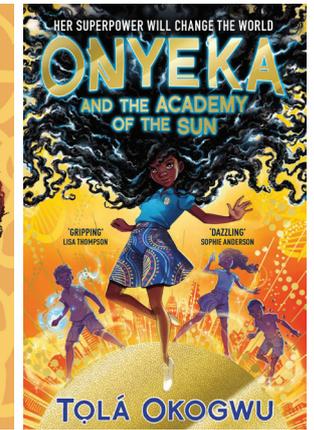
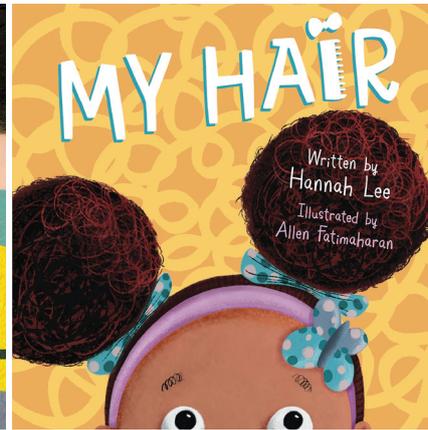
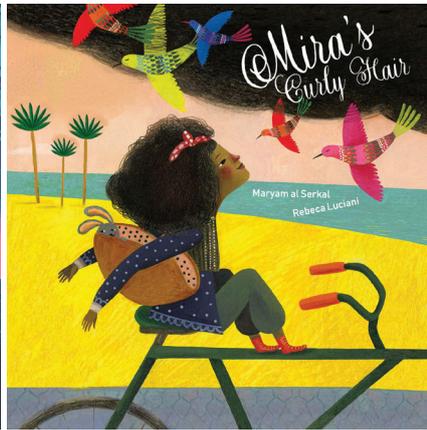
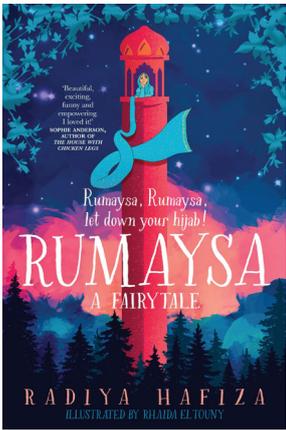
Medeia Cohan's **Hats of Faith** (2017) includes the 'Rasta Hat' as a religious, rather than a political, symbol; the book also features Sikh turbans and patkas, and Muslim hijabs. Denene Milner's biography of Sarah Breedlove Walker for the Rebel Girls franchise, **Madam C. J. Walker Builds a Business** (2019), is tellingly titled. Although Walker built her business on creating and marketing hair care products for Black women, the biography focuses on Walker as a businesswoman

rather than on hair. The front cover illustration, by Salina Perera, also de-emphasises hair, showing a woman standing over a washtub with a wooden spoon, stirring.

**The Story of Afro Hair**, written by KN Chimбири and illustrated by Joelle Avelino, was published by Scholastic in 2021, (eight years after Chimбири's **Secrets of the Afro Comb**, which she published through her own company, Golden Destiny). In a beautifully presented book, Chimбири takes the reader through 5,000 Years of History, Fashion and Styles from Ancient Africa, to medieval Africa to European colonization to the emergence of Afro hair care entrepreneurship. Chimбири also looks at Walker as a businesswoman, but her much shorter biographical sketch includes two pieces of information that Milner's story does not. First, that Walker visited several Caribbean nations in order 'to expand her business to other countries where people had Afro hair' (40); this detail gives Walker a wider global significance than Milner, an American author, provided. Second, Chimбири points out that Walker's original difficulties with hair loss were partly due to stress. Stress is also the cause of Marietta's hair loss in Patrice Lawrence's short story *A Bob and a Weave*, written as part of **New Class at Malory Towers**, an update of the Enid Blyton stories. Marietta is worried about her mother, a boxer, who has been having mental and emotional difficulties since being knocked out in a fight. 'I couldn't stop thinking about it,' Marietta tells another character, 'That's when my hair started falling out' (37). While she initially tries to hide her hair loss with a wig, she is found out by the other girls and, eventually, encouraged to be open about her story and the physical effect it has on her.

Another recent non-fiction book, **BeYOUtiful** (Welbeck, 2022), written by Shelina Janmohamed and illustrated by Chanté Timothy devotes twenty pages to hair and explores how it can be personal, cultural, political and religious. The book includes discussion of the Hijab, headwraps, racism and texturism, facial hair, and shaved heads. It features Halima Aden (the first hijabi Muslim woman on the front of **Vogue** magazine), Marsha Hunt (the first Black woman on the cover of England's high fashion magazine **Queen**) CJ Walker, Annie Malone, Frida Kahlo, and Harnaam Kaur. **Laxmi's Mooch** by Shelly Anand, illustrated by Nabi H. Ali (Kokila 2021) is a picture book published in the USA, with a multicultural cast of characters that features a young girl who is teased for having hair on her top lip. Her father tells her about Frida Kahlo and her mother explains that hair doesn't just grow on top of our heads. Laxmi's journey of self-acceptance impacts her school peers and the story ends with them queuing up for her to draw a 'mooch' on them. In **Hana and The Hairy Bod Rapper** (2022), written





and self-published by Dr Leema Jabbar and illustrated by Pearly L, Hana studies her arm hair in the mirror. Her exclamation that 'It's not fair!' is given additional resonance by the inclusion of a book about Snow White in the spread.

In **I Am Not My Hair** (Black Jac 2021), Malika-Zaynah Grants illustrates six-year-old Delena Thompson's account of being diagnosed with alopecia areata, her subsequent hair loss and her coming to terms with this with the help of the love and support of her parents. The book ends with Delena being featured in *Cocoa Girl* magazine.

Recently one of the traditional tales most closely associated with hair has been subject to retellings. The picture book **Rapunzel** (Simon and Schuster 2017) by Chloe Perkins is set in India and illustrated in a vivid style that combines traditional and contemporary aesthetics by Archana Sreenivasen, herself based in Bangalore. Rapunzel wears a sari and a long plait. **Rumaysa** (Macmillan 2021) by Radiya Hafiza, illustrated by Rhaida El Touny retells Rapunzel, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty connecting the three narratives in the process. In a twist on the Rapunzel story, Rumaysa lets down her hijab. The story can thus be read as reinterpreting a European traditional tale; however, Kate Forsyth notes in **The Rebirth of Rapunzel: A Mythic Biography of the Maiden in the Tower** (2016) that the earliest surviving reference to a story of a maiden in a tower comes in Shahnameh by the Persian poet Ferdowsi, where Rudaba lets down her hair.

There have been a number of stories in picture book form of late that celebrate Black hair. **Mira's Curly Hair** by Maryam al Serkal and Rebeca Luciani was published in the US and UK in (2019 by Lantana). **My Hair**, written by Hannah Lee, illustrated by Allen Fatimaharan (2019 Faber and Faber) involves a visit to the hairdressers and explores a range of Black hairstyles and hair coverings. **Sofia the Dreamer and her Magical Afro** written by Jessica Wilson, illustrated by Tom Rawles (2020 Tallawah) explores the African diaspora through hair, taking in Rastas, Black Panthers and Ethiopia. **Your Hair is your Crown** written by Jessica Dunrod, illustrated by Alexandra Tungusova (Lili Translates 2020) features a protagonist racialized as mixed, living in Wales.

Other recent picture books look at why some people choose to cover their hair. **What is a Patka?** (2019,) written Tajinder Kaur Kalia and illustrated by Yuribelle is a self-published picture book that explains in narrative form practices of hair covering in Sikhism and ends with instructions on how to tie a patka. In **The Proudest Blue** by Olympic medallist Ibtihaj Muhammed with S.K. Ali, art by Hatem Aly (Andersen 2020), we are offered a window into Asiya's first day wearing a hijab, narrated by her little sister Faizah. She encounters stares, questions and taunts, but remains strong, recalling her mother's words, 'Don't carry around the hurtful words that others say. Drop them. They are not yours to keep.'

Like K.N. Chimbiri, Tolá Okogwu began her writing career by self-publishing. The first of her **Daddy Do My Hair?** picture book series appeared in 2016. In **Beth's Twists**, black hair is not described in dismissive language nor depicted as a challenge or something to be 'managed' or 'tamed' (with all the racialized connotations such language holds). Instead, hairstyling is showing to be fun-filled and loving. In Okogwu's highly anticipated debut novel **Onyeka** (Simon and Schuster,

2022), the title character's hair is a source of power, strength and magic. Onyeka is a British-Nigerian girl who discovers her curls have psychokinetic abilities and is sent to the Academy of the Sun, a school in Nigeria where Solari – children with superpowers – are trained. Okugwu offers us a vision of a school where Black hair is not policed or merely tolerated – it is celebrated.

*Books mentioned:*

- Evenings at Home** Anna Laetitia-Barbauld (1791-6)
- A Roving Commission; or, Through the Black Insurrection** in Hayti G.A. Henty (1900)
- On the Run** Nina Bawden (1964)
- A Medal for Leroy** Michael Morpurgo (2012)
- Inky Pinky Ponky** illustrated by Dan Jones (edited by Mike Rosen and Susannah Steele in 1982)
- Marcellus** Lorraine Simeon (originally published in 1984)
- Hats of Faith** Medeia Cohan (2017)
- Madam C. J. Walker Builds a Business** Denene Milner (2019)
- The Story of Afro Hair** KN Chimbiri, illustrated by Joelle Avelino (2021)
- New Class at Malory Towers** Patrice Lawrence
- BeYOUTiful** Shelina Janmohamed, illustrated by Chanté Timothy (Welbeck, 2022),
- Laxmi's Mooch** Shelly Anand, illustrated by Nabi H. Ali (Kokila 2021)
- I Am Not My Hair** Malika-Zaynah Grants (Black Jac 2021),
- Rapunzel** Chloe Perkins, illustrated Archana Sreenivasen (Simon and Schuster 2017)
- Rumaysa** Radiya Hafiza, illustrated by Rhaida El Touny (Macmillan 2021)
- Mira's Curly Hair** Maryam al Serkal and Rebeca Luciani (2019 Lantana).
- My Hair** Hannah Lee, illustrated by Allen Fatimaharan (2019 Faber)
- Sofia the Dreamer and her Magical Afro** Jessica Wilson, illustrated by Tom Rawles (2020 Tallawah)
- Your Hair is your Crown** written - Jessica Dunrod, illustrated by Alexandra Tungusova (Lili Translates 2020)
- What is a Patka?** Tajinder Kaur Kalia, illustrated by Yuribelle, self-published (2019).
- The Proudest Blue** Ibtihaj Muhammed with S.K. Ali, illustrated by Hatem Aly (Andersen 2020)
- Daddy Do My Hair: Beth's Twists** Tola Okugwu (2018)
- Onyeka** Tola Okugwu (Simon and Schuster, 2022),



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



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

# The new **Very Short Introductions for Curious Young Minds** series

**Samantha Armstrong**, Senior Publisher, **Oxford Children's Books**, introduces a series designed to enrich children's lives and vocabularies.

In a recent magazine article I discovered a xenobot, a wobbecong, and a new phrase for travel, 'air mobility'. Whilst driving, I heard the word 'axiomatically' on the radio and repeated it until I could safely look up its meaning. Words are fascinating, not least because there are so many that we've not heard before, and while that might not happen every day to us as adults, it's a reminder that we all have our own word gap.

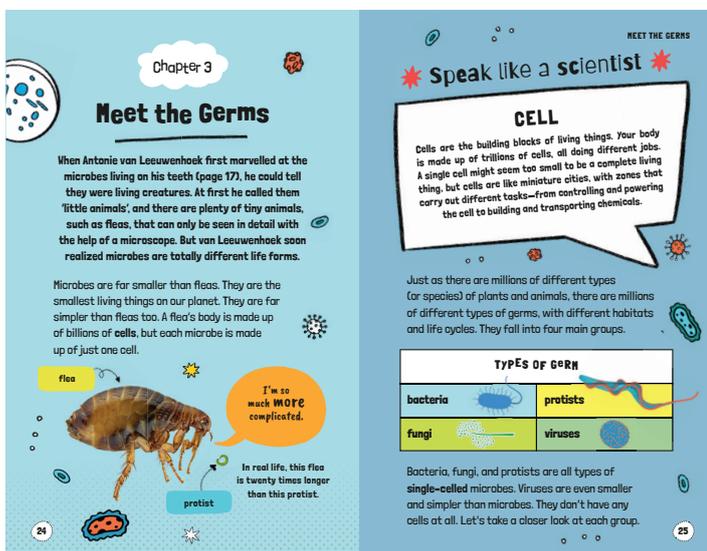
For children in UK schools, as discovered in the first Oxford Language Report [Why Closing the Word Gap Matters](#) (2018), a much more significant word gap exists, and it not only holds back children's learning but limits their enjoyment of school and their success beyond. On average, secondary school teachers who took part in the survey reported that 43% of Year 7 pupils have a limited vocabulary to the extent that it affects their learning and 95% of secondary school teachers believe a lack of time spent reading for pleasure is a root cause of the word gap. More recently, the follow up report, [Bridging the Word Gap at Transition](#) (2020), found that 87% agree that increasing academic requirements as pupils move from primary to secondary education, highlight pupils' struggles with vocabulary and that pupils may have read less widely for pleasure during lockdown.

Language gives children the capacity to enjoy new subjects and releases their potential to learn and grow. It also underpins progress at school and in life. If we know that young people need exposure to different types of language, perhaps from discovering what a xenobot is (a synthetic lifeform) and seeing a picture of a wobbecong (a type of carpet shark), to the abstract language of exam question rubric such as 'analyze' or 'discuss', the question for us is how best to support children with both these types of language, and at an age-appropriate level. Reading for pleasure means different things to different children. For some, adventures and characters in fiction are the way in. And for others they discover the wonder of inventions and experiments, of scientists and spaceships, of real-life individuals who lead us to a better understanding of the world, through non-fiction. Sometimes non-fiction feels like fiction when the information is fascinating and is written in a way that pulls the reader in, making them eager to find the next piece of the jigsaw. When we are reading about a subject we are interested in, we all have an appetite for new words. It is this magical link between subjects that children want

to explore and learning that we aimed to capture with the **Very Short Introductions for Curious Young Minds** series.

Standing on the shoulders of the OUP series, **Very Short Introductions** which has over 700 titles written for undergraduates and general adult readers, this new series is designed to inspire young people aged 9–12 years to understand the who, why, how (and what next) of a diverse range of big topics – and to get confident with the vocabulary used in them. Four titles are to be published every year, each one as a small paperback (perfect for reading under the duvet by the light of a torch app). Importantly the titles are designed to foster a passion for complex subjects – ones which are tailored to support GCSE preparation – and with bright, often humorous illustrations and comic strips, they will give readers the chance to understand challenging concepts and vocabulary from across humanities, technology, social sciences, arts, earth sciences, computing, physics, engineering, and more.

Alongside the curriculum, analysis of the Oxford Children's Corpus, a unique database of writing for and by children, helps tailor titles to the interests of young readers. The Corpus contains writing for children, as well as over a million stories written by children over the last few years for **Radio 2's 500 Words** children's writing competition. As part of ongoing language and lexical research, the Children's Language department analyzes the Corpus using a team of lexicographers, editors, teachers, academics, and computational linguists who research the language and vocabulary and track how it changes and evolves. Each year the [findings](#) show how children's writing reflects not only perennial interests such as football and space, but the changing national and global preoccupations and events of the year. The young writers, especially in the 9–13-year age bracket, explore the same stories that are in the news – the global concerns, tragedies, and political events – with the writers becoming problem solvers and solution finders. This topicality is reflected in the choice of the Oxford Children's Word of the Year – from refugee to Brexit and plastic, to Coronavirus in 2020 and anxiety in 2021. Fitting, then, that the first of the **Very Short Introductions for Curious Young Minds** tap into these concerns and interests – **The Invisible World of Germs** and how they have impact on our lives and **The Secrets of the Universe** and our place in space.



While children entering the **500 Words** competition may have been encouraged to take part by schools, the stories they submitted were written with the aim of winning the competition rather than as part of marked assessment, and this allows us to track the words and language that children choose to use themselves when they write creatively. We see that some young writers are fearless in their choice of words. They are happy to use words such as parliamentary and chameleon and weave them in amongst vocabulary such as dinosaur names (e.g. 'velociraptor') or words like 'intergalactic' or 'holographic'. Taking the same approach, the authors of our **Very Short Introductions for Curious Young Minds**, themselves passionate about their subjects and with the support of academic subject consultants, sprinkle technical terms and explanations into the books. It is inevitable that for example, when finding out how gravity works in **The Secrets of the Universe**, there is some ambitious vocabulary to encounter – phrases such as quadruple quasars and deep depressions; in **Germ**s that microbes, protists, genomics, and zoonosis will come up; and in **Artificial Intelligence** readers will navigate terms such as deepfake, effectors, and algorithms. To encourage readers to 'Speak like a Scientist', or like an expert in the field, the terminology they need is contained in a speech bubble, as though chipping in with a short clear explanation of the trickier terms. Our hope is that readers feel empowered to use these words with confidence both in their writing and when talking about the subject to others. Expect to discover some new terms because we all know how hard it is to keep it in when you know some important stuff. The Corpus has also shown us that building this confidence with vocabulary releases creativity and develops the ability to play with root forms, prefixes, and suffixes to make up new words. For example, one Children's Corpus story written by a 13-year-old features the term 'cyberocracy' – used to describe a political system which governed the earth in a story in which a technophobe granny complained about not getting a vote in the new world which was run by robots.

The skills needed to read and process sometimes challenging non-fiction content are valuable and transferable. Critical thinking and curiosity are required across all secondary school subjects and getting an insight into how our knowledge of the world is built encourages an engagement with learning. **The Very Short Introductions** style is engaging, with friendly reminders and asides, and teasers acting almost like clickbait to tempt the reader to the next chapter. Along the way we meet the key contributors to the field – including historically underrepresented characters such as Williamina Fleming, Annie Jump Cannon, Antonia Maury, and Florence Cushman who collectively devised a system using spectra to classify stars in the Universe which is still used today. These books require some concentration but bring with it the reward of understanding that sometimes we must be prepared to get things wrong and to have a go to learn and grow. The ambition is that young people apply this to their own learning journey and take up their roles as inventors, scientists, musicians, or activists.

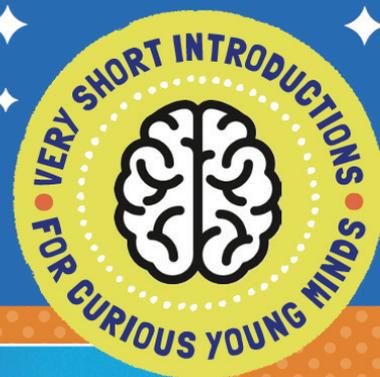
The topics are endless, so this series has potential to grow exponentially. Twelve titles are already planned, and the hope is that young readers will develop their non-fiction reading skills, build their confidence with unfamiliar vocabulary, move onto the next title in the series, and collect a set. Such a set would enrich children's lives by inspiring a lifelong love of reading, writing, and language, boosting their immunity against the inhibiting effects of the word gap, and help to create confident writers and communicators.

**The Very Short Introductions for Curious Young Minds: The Invisible World of Germs** (978-0-19-277923-6) and **The Very Short Introductions for Curious Young Minds: The Secrets of the Universe** (978-0-19-277921-2) are published by Oxford, £7.99 pbk.

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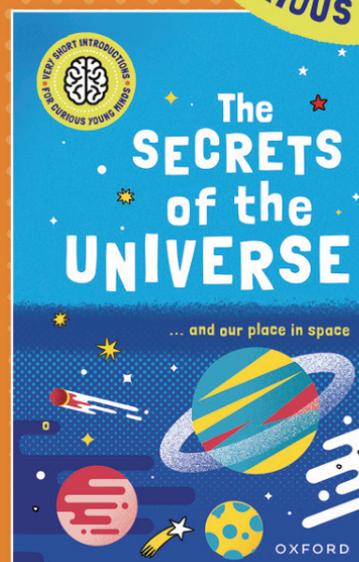
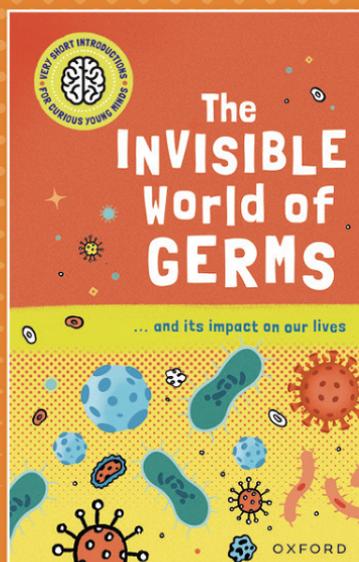
# VERY SHORT INTRODUCTIONS FOR CURIOUS YOUNG MINDS

by Oxford University Press (oup.com)



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absorbing range  
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# A Story from the Archives: Refugees 1960, a report in words and pictures by Kaye Webb and Ronald Searle

**Sarah Lawrance** delves into the Seven Stories archives to reveal a little-known collaboration between Kaye Webb and Ronald Searle.

Press and media reportage of refugees fleeing Ukraine over the last few months, including the remarkable drawings of illustrator George Butler, has put me in mind of an unusual collaboration between Kaye Webb – in her pre-Puffin, journalist days – and her then husband Ronald Searle.

In autumn 1959 the couple were invited by the **United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)** to make a tour of refugee camps in Europe, in the hope that ‘first-hand reporting might stir pity, open pocket-books and even relax restrictions more effectively than speeches or statistics.’ The Kaye Webb archive at **Seven Stories** contains briefings, background information, drafts and correspondence, providing insights into the whole project and its reception.

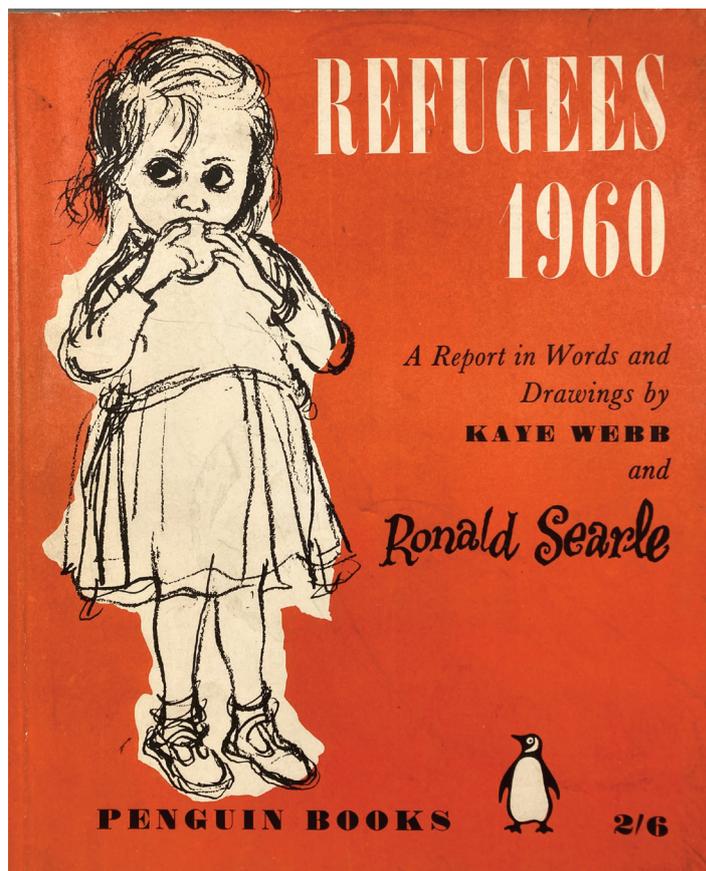
The initiative was part of World Refugee Year, a concerted attempt to focus international attention on the plight of the 110,000 or so refugees in Europe (40 million worldwide); many had been displaced since the end of the Second World War in 1945, others having fled Hungary in 1956. The majority of these were considered to be ‘hard cases’ – people who for health or other reasons had been denied entry by countries such as the United Kingdom.

The Searles’ main contact in the PR department at **UNHCR** was the literary-minded Roland Huntford (later a journalist and biographer); in a letter dated 19 October 1959 he set out a tentative itinerary, beginning in Vienna and ending near Athens, with a smattering of picturesque detail clearly designed to pique Ronald’s interest. Huntford planned to meet them on arrival in Vienna for a full briefing, with the enticing offer of tickets for the opera – he hoped for *The Magic Flute* ‘a perfectly delightful production this year’ (there is no mention of the opera elsewhere in the archive, and I suspect this either didn’t appeal, or was squeezed out of the schedule).

The couple travelled to camps in Austria, Italy and Greece over a period of two and a half weeks in November 1959, Ronald sketching the places and people, and Kaye gathering the stories. Their first reports appeared in **Punch** and **Life** magazines in December of that year, with the full and final version published by Penguin Books in April 1960; there would also be a travelling exhibition of the drawings, to be sold off afterwards in a charity auction.

For the article in **Life**, Kaye reflected on her own experience of the trip: ‘Three countries, sixteen camps and one hundred refugees’ life stories in seventeen days with time off for travelling and sleeping; a disturbed sleep filled with anxious eyes and quite sorrowful voices.’ She also wrote a piece for **The Elizabethan**, the magazine for younger readers which she had edited from 1955-58 and to which she was still a contributor. For this she focused on the story of nineteen-year old Halim Gashi (‘the nicest refugee I met’) and his family, living in a camp in Trieste. Her description highlights the emptiness of their life, with ‘nothing at all to do’ between dinner and bedtime; ‘there were some books in the YMCA, but Halim said they had read all of them’.

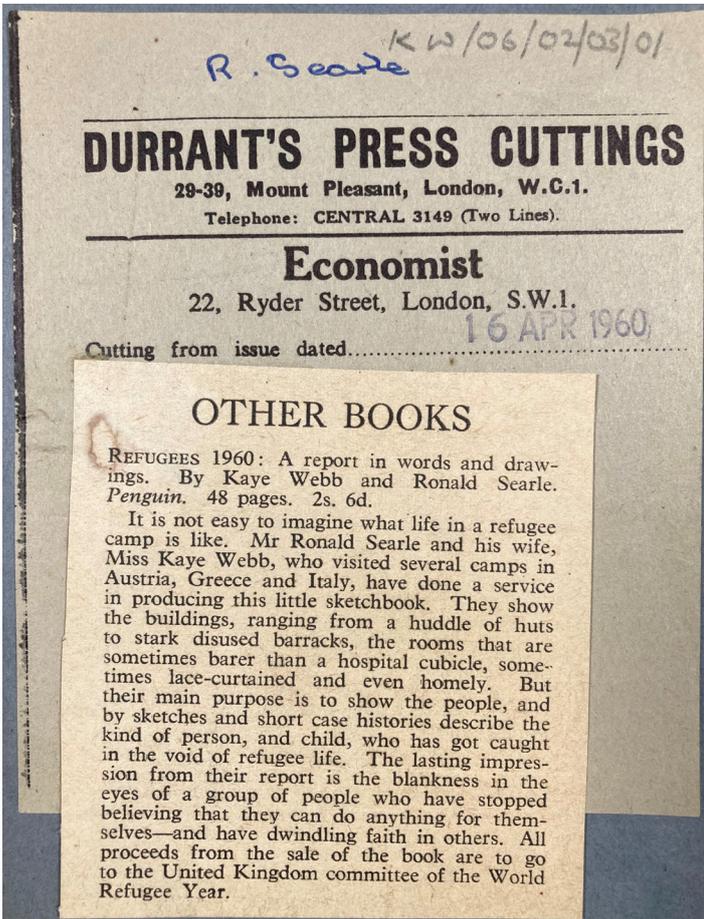
The reports drew high praise from officials at **UNHCR** and other refugee organisations. In February 1960 A.R. Lindt wrote to Ronald from the United Nations in Geneva: ‘my colleagues and I were deeply



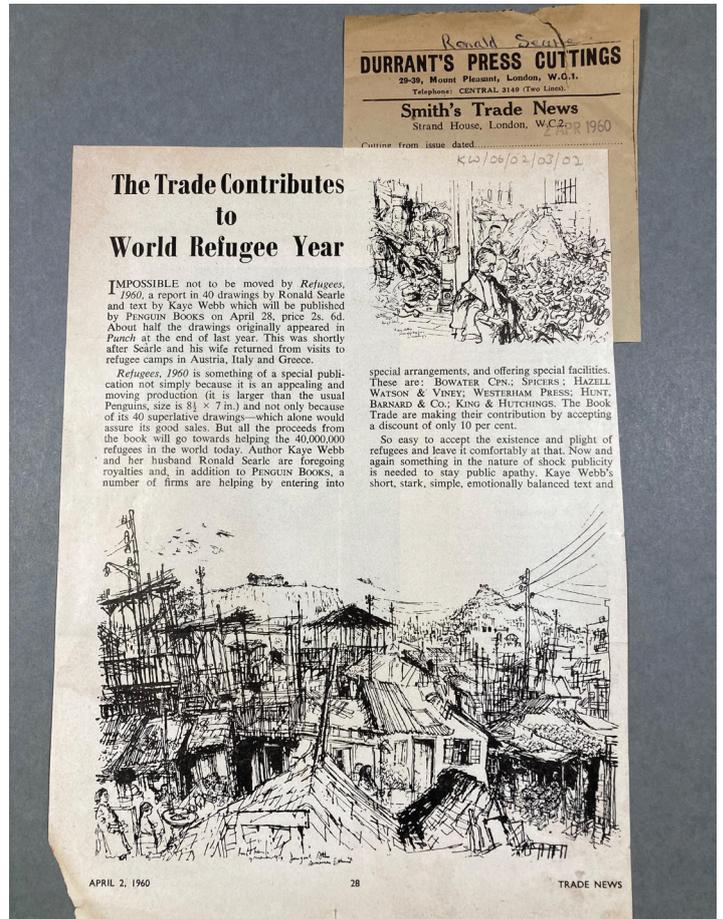
**Refugees 1960** – a report in words and drawings by Kaye Webb and Ronald Searle, published by Penguin Books, 1960 (front cover)

moved by the depth of human understanding and the sincerity of your drawings. At the same time I would like to convey to Mrs Searle my appreciation of the excellent text that accompanied the drawings. She succeeded in explaining a very complex problem in a sympathetic and lucid manner.’ Meanwhile, the British Council for Aid to Refugees also wrote to Ronald, c/o **Punch**, asking for information about the whereabouts of a number of the people named in the report, ahead of a Home Office Mission to the Continent ‘to select candidates for the new intake of refugees to this country’.

While the close focus on individual stories was key to the reports’ success, it also meant that both Searles found themselves fielding a number of well-meaning if sometimes inappropriate offers of help. The story of Wasily Mehedin, who had been totally deaf for eight years, prompted one reader in Beverly Hills to donate a hearing aid, while someone else offered to pay for a new set of teeth for Anna Barth, from Yugoslavia. In the immediate aftermath of the trip Kaye had disclosed to the editor at **Life** her frustrations with the slow-moving **UNHCR** bureaucracy, so she was happy to short-circuit the system where possible, even though it involved so much effort on her part. On 28 March she wrote to Herr Loch, one of their



Press cutting – **The Economist** 16 April 1960



Press cutting – **Smith's Trade News** 2 April 1960



Extract from the interim report in **Punch**, 30 December 1959, showing Ronald Searle's drawing of refugees at San Sabba in Trieste, with Kaye Webb's captions.

Austrian aid worker contacts, to enlist his help: 'Since I got back and Ronald's drawings have been published in **Punch**, there have been a great many inquiries from people who wish to help individuals. While we have tried where possible to persuade them just to offer general help, some of them are particularly keen to do something for individual families.'

The final report, with all 40 of Ronald's drawings and updated text by Kaye, was elegantly designed by Penguin's influential typographer Hans Schmoller. Ronald was pleased – 'I think on the whole that the reproduction is very successful' (17 March 1960) – but he wished they had not used his 'cartoony signature' on the front. Hans explained that he too would have preferred a typeset signature, but the cartoon style was chosen deliberately to boost sales – 'This is the price you have to pay for fame!' (18 March 1960).

Hailed by critics, the book sold well, and within a few weeks of publication Kaye was writing to Sir Allen Lane at Penguin: 'we are both very glad that this has proved so extraordinarily successful, both in the realisation of the idea from your end, and financially for World Refugee Year.' Months later, Kaye would join Sir Allen's team at Penguin, as she took on a new career defining challenge as 'Outside Editor' at Puffin Books. I can't help wondering whether, when she founded the Puffin Club, Kaye remembered the story of Halim Gashi who had nothing to read and nothing at all to do between dinner and bedtime.

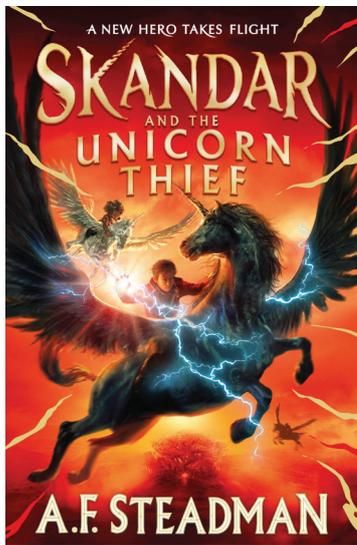
Pictures – all from the Kaye Webb archive at **Seven Stories**



**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.

# 'Skandar was always the book of my heart' An interview with A. F. Steadman

By Michelle Pauli



It's probably not unusual to stand in a bookshop, flicking through the pages of a book, reading the blurbs and longing to be the one writing the stories as well as reading them. What's probably less usual is to go straight home, ditch a well-paid career as a lawyer, take an internship answering phones at a literary agency and sign up to a two-year MA in creative writing. Oh, and then get a record-breaking seven figure three-book contract, along with a film deal with Sony.

'It was a kind of epiphany, I guess,' explains AF Steadman of 'that moment' in the bookshop that led, eventually, to **Skandar**

and the Unicorn Thief, the first in her epic middle grade adventure fantasy series featuring bloodthirsty unicorns. 'I'd always wanted to be a writer – I wrote my first novel, about pirates and spies, when I was 13 and I've still got the numbered notebooks. I was also a practical child and decided I needed a job that would be secure and pay me money. But I was quite miserable as a lawyer.'

Law's loss is children's fiction's gain, with Steadman set to captivate with Skandar's world through a five-book series. The first couldn't be pacier as she introduces Skandar Smith, a lonely thirteen-year-old boy who has always wanted to be a unicorn rider and gains a coveted place at the elite island training camp for those who have passed the Hatchery exam. The apprentice riders hatch their unicorns, bond with them, discover which of the elements they belong to and learn to ride and channel the unicorn's elemental magic, all with the goal of taking part in the annual Chaos Cup sky battle. But everything changes when a cloaked figure steals the most powerful unicorn and threatens to disrupt the fragile balance between unicorn and human, magic and earthliness.

Forget any notions of loveable fluffy creatures with glittery fur and rainbow poo. These unicorns are powerful, independent and prone to unfortunately timed bouts of flatulence, possibly as a result of the quantities of raw meat they rip into. And those are just the bonded unicorns – the wild ones are murderous, red-eyed skeletal ghouls, marked by 'rancid breath, rotting flesh, the stench of immortal death'. As the prologue warns, 'unicorns don't belong in fairytales; they belong in nightmares.'

For Steadman, this seems a much more likely state of affairs: 'I've always been quite suspicious of the idea that unicorns were friendly. Take rhinos – they're not friendly and they have a similar kind of weapon on their heads,' says Steadman. 'And unicorns haven't always been friendly in history – sometimes they are described as vicious and can only be tamed by particular people. I was always more of a dragon fan when I was younger and I liked the danger in mythical creatures rather than them being like a pet.'

And so, eight years ago, when she was walking along the street and suddenly had an image of a boy riding a unicorn, she 'turned the unicorn into the kind I would have wanted to see rather than the fluffy kind'. She also started noting down possible unicorn names in a notebook (think Scoundrel's Luck, Falcon's Wrath, New-Age Frost and Silver Blade).

And then, nothing. The idea percolated away in Steadman's mind while she unhappily trained and practised as a lawyer, and even while she did her MA and produced a short story collection and a book for adults. The adult novel was snapped up by an agent but rejected by multiple publishers so Steadman returned to the adventure that had captured her imagination years earlier.

'I think **Skandar** was always the book of my heart. Whereas the other one was a little bit cathartic to write because it was about lawyers,' she says, laughing. 'I had to write it and I learned a lot from the experience. But it also meant that when **Skandar** sold, I didn't take it for granted because I'd experienced the opposite. It felt almost even more magical after having had so many rejections for the other book.'

It's not hard to see what caused the 'really, really wild' bidding war for the book. **Skandar** weaves in so many of the classic tropes of children's fiction, whether the 'chosen one outsider' character, boarding school and house system of **Harry Potter**, the bond with a magical creature of Pullman's daemons or the mythical creature training of the **How to Train Your Dragon** series.

Steadman namechecks some of the books she loved as a child, vividly remembering the feeling of escaping into those worlds.

'I tapped into who I remember being at that age. I read a lot of the books again, that I'd read at 11, 12, to understand why did I like this so much? Why did it transport me? I've always loved books like **Narnia** where they go through the wardrobe – the number of times as a child, I went to a back of a wardrobe to see if it would really work! I also remember imagining a daemon following me around. I love those rich imaginative worlds for children to play in. I escaped into multiple worlds when I was growing up.'

Perhaps it's a lingering remnant of the lawyer in her but she's also keen on clearly establishing the rules of her magical world – what can and can't happen and making sure the system holds up not only to the scrutiny of her editors but also the ranks of children who will, no doubt, read the books as obsessively as she once read **Eragon** and the **Chronicles of Narnia**.

'I didn't want at any point to feel like it was 'just magic'. It was really important for me that the magic is in the island and the unicorns are magical beings but the riders aren't innately magical. They're only magical because they share in their unicorn's power. It's really tempting when you get into plot problems to make things happen magically but now I've got into the swing of it, I know when things feel wrong.'

Steadman has created an enchanting, action-packed world and, with four more books on the way, plus the movie (with a screenplay written by **Paddington 2** writer Jon Croker), children who have gobbled up the first book will be delighted to know there is much, much more still to come.

**Skandar and the Unicorn Thief** by A. F. Steadman is published by Simon and Schuster, 978-1398502710, £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.

# Roll up! Mini Grey presents The Greatest Show on Earth

Mini Grey describes how she turned 4.5 billion years of life on Earth into a stage show in a picture book.



'This book has taken longer to make than any other book of mine,' says Mini Grey. Opening **The Greatest Show on Earth**, out now from Puffin, and you can see just what a challenge she set herself. The book tells the story of life on Earth, all 4.5 billion years of it, from its fiery birth to the present day, measuring all the changes, evolution, and extinctions along the way. Ingeniously, the action is presented as a puppet show, staged by a troupe of insects in a shoebox theatre – who better to tell this story after all than creatures who have already been around for 300 million years? As they act out the story of Life on Earth on the main stage (with wonderful homemade costumes and props), details are presented in the wings while in the orchestra pit, ants unroll the Tape Measure of Time, one cm to one million years, little placards highlighting major changes. 'I wanted to be able to tell the story fast enough that you could see the whole shebang,' says Mini. 'Usually you're just given a slice of it but I wanted the whole thing so that next time you go into a museum and find a new prehistoric animal, you'll know whereabouts it fits on that timeline.'

Visiting museums is clearly one of Mini's passions and she admits to having becoming 'obsessed with pre-historic earth'. She is hugely knowledgeable and fascinated by all that scientists are discovering, 'You find out about these creatures and just think "I don't want to draw it because it's so weird!" For example, there were these Pteranodon flying reptiles in the Triassic period, and they were enormous, a bit batlike but with massive heads – it's just amazing that they could zoom around, some of them were 10 metres in wingspan. I was listening to a talk by Professor Michael Benton today on feathered dinosaurs, the more we find out about them, the more you realise that dinosaurs had every innovation that birds then used to be birds – light bones, feathers, incredibly efficient air breathing – dinosaurs had already done that.' These discoveries delight her: 'The joy in finding things out is that the more you find out, the more confused you get. It's a bit like blowing up a balloon. As you blow it up, you've got more air in your balloon but the edge of the balloon – the edge of what you don't know – has got bigger. You become aware of what you don't know.' She adds, 'And that is exciting - to know that you don't know something.'

As well as reading, her research included hours of listening to podcasts, while working. 'When you're making picture books, there are whole stages where you're just colouring in, so a whole section of

your brain is open for entertainment; for six months of the year, I can basically just listen to anything.' She started listening to everything about prehistoric earth and has particular praise for Melvyn Bragg's **In Our Time**. 'I'd never heard of the Ediacaran Biota before I heard the In Our Time programme about it; the one about the geology of the earth is mind blowing. I owe a debt of gratitude to Melvyn Bragg!' She also found that scientists were very approachable to check questions, 'If your scientist works at a university, you can always find an email address for them and they were really kind. For example, I wanted to know if the drawings I'd done of a sauropod's lung were OK – I couldn't find a picture of one anywhere.' She contacted Professor Steve Brusatte, of **The Rise and Fall of the Dinosaurs** fame, and 'He said yes it's fine'. The director of the Natural History Museum in Oxford offered to fact check her story board.

Getting it right, and distilling the information down to be as accessible as possible to the widest band of readers was vital, which is why she was so pleased to hit on the format for the book. She spent a lot of time trying to work out if it was publishable as a zigzag book, but then in 2019 a friend asked her to be part of an exhibition at Pollock's Toy Museum for which artists were making their own version of a toy theatre. 'I love making things out of card and working out how to make a Pollocks Toy Theatre was my dream job.' She made the theatre and realised that format was just right for what she wanted to do. 'It gives you these different areas in which to simultaneously tell the story, but main section is what you see first, centre stage. I get distracted sometimes reading non-fiction when everything is the same size on the page and you don't know where to start. I wanted to make it really clear so that you know what to look at first. Actually, if you want to, you can ignore everything else and just read that middle section, where the main action is.'

She still feels she's only grazed the surface of what there is to tell, so maybe there'll be more Mini non-fiction to come? 'When you have science meeting art, picture books meeting science, that's a fantastic area and really exciting for making things.' And, she adds, 'I want to go back to university – I'd love to do evolutionary biology but through the power of puppetry – can you do a degree in that?' If you can't, **The Greatest Show on Earth** proves that you really should!

**The Greatest Show on Earth** is published by Puffin, 978-0241480830, £14.99 hbk

## 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**.

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**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.

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**A Little Bit of Hush**

★★★★

Paul Stewart, ill. Jane Porter, Otter-Barry, 32pp, 9781913074494, £12.99 hbk

Squirrel is trying to get her babies to take a nap, but they just can't get to sleep, because the other residents of their tree are SO NOISY! Squirrel sets off to visit Owl in the hope that he can offer some help for the problem and there, from amongst his various pots and jars, he offers Squirrel "A Little Bit of Hush". Owl and Squirrel set off into the wood to see if they can find what they need to refill the jar; *the holes in the hubbub*. *The bubbles of silence*. *The pockets of hush...*

In this noisy and busy world we live in, it is becoming ever more difficult to remember to stop and find a moment of peace. Paul Stewart's gentle story beautifully explores the magic of silence and encourages us to be more aware of these moments within the nature around us.

Jane Porter's bright and appealing collage-style drawings create a magical woodland for Owl and Squirrel to walk through, as together they capture the moments of peace and hush they find within the woods.

This is the perfect story for sharing at bedtime, when hopefully the stillness and silence captured by Owl and Squirrel will have the same effect on other sleepy heads, who will finally join the squirrel babies in their sweet dreams and hushhhh. **AH**

**Punk Rocker Poodle**

★★★★

Laura Dockrill, ill Sandhya Pradhat, Faber Children's Books, 32pp., 9780571335091, £6.99 pbk

The little poodle is like a toddler, saying 'No!' to absolutely everything: 'No socks! No frocks! Don't think so - and none of you lot at soft play'. The illustrations, using some collage, are amazing - very mixed punk clothing, hair in shades of pink, cool sunglasses, and a terrible scowl. There is lots of vibrant colour, and the rebellion is in huge capital letters. She doesn't even want to go on the swings, but wants to be left alone. No bath, no 'cutesie-wutsie', but maybe 'a cuddle, a scratch on the belly, those lovely new jim-jams, a cartoon on the telly?' Soon she is asleep, and we'll see what tomorrow brings...but in the morning 'No!' starts all over again! This may help 'difficult' toddlers to see themselves as others see them, or possibly to find out what might be soothing for them, or it could be shared just for fun... **DB**

**Cheesed Off**

★★★★

Jake Hope, illus Genevieve Aspinall, Uclan Publishing, 32pp, 978191297974, £7.99 pbk

The mice love cheese so their ears prick up when from 'UP Above' they hear the word... but there is no cheese! Did someone say 'Cheese' again? But where is the cheese? It is a puzzle and a disappointment...or is it?

This is a charming debut picture book where the concept and the illustrations work together to create an engaging whole. Taking the idea of cheese - a delicious food for the mice, here portrayed as a dapper crew - the author introduces the metaphorical and colloquial use that the human family employ. The result is, of course, confusion. This is a clever way of introducing word play and how we use language that brings colour to our conversations - but can have a potential for misunderstanding. The minimal text would suggest a very young audience - and certainly the illustrations with their solid shapes, clear outlines and direct colours would attract attention. However, it is older children who will be able to appreciate the joke and enjoy the juxtaposition of the tiny mice and the partying humans (only seen from a mouse point view as enormous legs and feet); children will recognise this perspective themselves and, indeed, similar situations in their own experience. There is no overt lesson - no preaching - just a celebration where a particular eavesdropped word finally leads to an unambiguous object about which no one, mice or humans, can argue. From the opening warning that 'mowes' love cheese to the final thank you, the party is cleverly and consistently imagined by the artist to bring the ideas presented by the author to visual life. This is a thoroughly enjoyable book that would be great fun to use whether in class and at home. Definitely one for the bookshelf. **FH**

**A Best Friend for Bear**

★★★★★

Written and ill. Petr Horacek, Walker Books, 32pp, 978-1-4063-9754-3, £12.99 hbk

In this standout picturebook that zings with spring colours, kindness and fun, two lonely bears join forces on a friendship hunt. Gentle challenges ensue, and the bears support each other with a well-timed paw or shove, but their goal - finding a friend for each of them - remains elusive.

A joyful game of hide-and-seek hones their skills, but just as they're congratulating themselves on their achievements, Black Bear realizes that his companion has disappeared. Scratching his head against the only unwelcoming backdrop in the book, Black Bear considers the unthinkable. What if Brown Bear has gone forever? A simple page turn reveals him sitting in a tree above, but Black Bear must wait until Brown Bear shouts BOO! to

join him on the branch. 'I was getting worried that I would never find my friend,' says Black Bear, happily, 'Isn't it amazing how you can find a friend where you least expect it,' agrees Brown Bear, as the two head back into the forest, holding paws.

Surrounded by new green leaves and dappled shadows, Horacek's bears move and interact like nursery teddies gone wild - they lumber and stretch in a naturalistic way, but their concern for each other and general good humour bring them closer to home.

Luminous, engaging and assured, **A Best Friend for Bear** delivers an appealing blend of in-the-know humour, affection and sincerity, and its cheerful readability and upbeat message will ensure a warm welcome from young readers and their adults. **CFH**

**Mum, Me and the Mulberry Tree**

★★★★★

Tanya Rosie, ill. Chuck Groenink, Walker Books, 32pp, 978-1-4063-8980-7, £12.99 hbk

Full of light and love, and infused with the warmth of a special day in the countryside, this beautiful and uplifting picturebook reminds us to be present in the moment and value time with those we love.

"There's juice on our hands and stains down our shirts..."

Early one morning, a mother and her daughter get up early to catch a bus. The child narrates, and although she is very young, she knows exactly what to expect: this is an annual and much-anticipated trip. They're off to visit a mulberry tree in a field near a picture-postcard village, and as the rituals unfold - walking up the hill, greeting the tree, gathering the berries, taking them home, baking a pie - we observe family bonds being strengthened and memories being made.

As a commissioning editor at Walker Books, Tanya Rosie knows her audience, and her debut text is well written and a pleasure to read aloud. Imbued with the soft colours of an English countryside, Chuck Groenink's artwork captures and elevates the mood, bringing an epic feel to the childhood memories that inspired this book. A loving, attentive regard between mother and child is the focal point for many of these spreads: the duo's tender absorption in each other is notable, and is reinforced by a lack of other characters (although the mulberry tree gently welcomes and shelters its visitors, and also takes a leading role).

This is a book with much to offer young audiences, not least the warmth and reassurance that comes from a 'strong and steady' loving adult, but it will resonate with parents and carers, too. Time well spent with

# reviews

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

family and friends is irreplaceable, and giving status to a simple activity and allowing it the time and space to fully unfold can be more memorable and exciting than expensive treats.

Gentle, evocative and important, **Mum, Me and the Mulberry Tree** makes a satisfying bedtime story, and will be welcomed in schools as a starting point for talking about days out, families and food. **CFH**

### The Name Game

★★★★

Elizabeth Laird, ill. Olivia Holden, **Tiny Owl Publishing**, 32pp, 9781910328859 £7.99 pbk

Laird and Holden's richly-coloured and busy picture book tells the story of a young girl who is bored with being inside her house all the time until the natural world and its denizens tempt her to step outside.

The story's opening spread sees a frustrated young girl with arms folded, upside down on a sofa, surrounded by art and craft materials and a large open window beyond looking out upon flats and glimpses of the natural world. But she's lonely; there's no one to interact with! Then comes a tap at the window' and a confident magpie alights drawing the girl's attention to himself and the colourful, richly-flowered outdoors. Together they play at naming the magpie (the girl settles on 'Diamond Dodger') and so begins a lovely back-and-forth play between the girl and various living things such as a tree, a butterfly and cat each who are gifted with a name invented by the girl.

As she continues to name and notice the natural world outside, she realises that she is no longer bored and that there is plenty to interact with: 'My new friends are outside and they love the names I've given them.' Realising that the outdoors is far more appealing and lively than indoors, she descends the stairs and heads outside. Turning the page, we find her dragging her mum along the community's stone walkway, pointing out the wildlife and exclaiming how excited she is to see and name each thing.

In a time when many are still tentative about rejoining the world as it was before Covid-19, **The Name Game** is a gentle yet wise investment in the joy of being outdoors and using your imagination. Together, Laird and Holden invite the young, female protagonist and her readers to look closely at what the outdoors has to offer and notice the beautiful world around us so that we can gradually begin to reconnect with the natural world. **MT**

### Gretel the Wonder Mammoth

★★★★★

Kim Hillyard, **Ladybird**, 32pp, 978 0 241 48856 0, £6.99

When Gretel bursts forth from her icy cage, having slept for 'a very long time', she shouts, 'Hello World,' and is greeted by a flock of white birds

who welcome her happily. They are so excited and surprised and full of admiration because she is the very last mammoth on earth, and everyone loves her because she's strong and gentle and kind – and she tells 'the best bedtime stories'! But all is not well in Gretel's new world. She finds it very noisy and confusing, and very unlike the world she was used to. This makes her unhappy, worried and frightened 'all at the same time' – not like a 'wonder mammoth' at all – even though she is loved and made much of. Her bird friends are great, but she is afraid that if she explains her problems, it might make them sad too. So she acts like all is well, when she really only wants to be alone. Being alone helps for a little, but things get much worse, and when her friends come to find her, she must admit that all is not well; this is the bravest and only thing she can do, and they rally round. They listen carefully to all she has to say, and they find ways to help her so that soon she is beginning to ask questions about this place she finds herself in and discovers there are interesting things to do there. She becomes her real self and is interested, enthusiastic, and cheerful 'all at the same time'. The illustrations show us a sad and lonely mammoth, who becomes a brightly-dressed rock drummer ready to take on this new world. Delightful and full of surprises. **ES**

### Wellington's Big Day Out

★★★★

Steve Small, **Simon & Schuster**, 32pp, 978 1 47119237 1, £12.99 hbk

It's little elephant Wellington's fifth birthday and he's excited when he receives a jacket exactly like his Dad's. However his delight is short-lived for when he tries it on, it's far too big. Mum steps in with a suggestion to make the day a good one nonetheless, and off go Dad and the birthday elephant first to visit the tailor for a jacket alteration and then on to see Grandad. On boarding the bus Wellington is happy to discover he now needs to pay for a ticket but when they reach the city, the tailor's shop is temporarily closed so they go instead into the music shop where Wellington tries his trunk at tuba playing, though not very successfully. Never mind, Dad suggests passing some time in the ice-cream parlour, but there Wellington finds his super-sized sundae a tad too big. Even then the tailor isn't there when they return to the shop so it's off to Grandad's.

Grandad gives Wellington a hearty welcome but when Dad mentions that new jacket, his son decides that rather than it being too big, it's he that's too small. Or is he? Thanks to Grandad's wise words and revelations, the little elephant learns that just like his Dad did, he is growing up exactly as fast as he should be.

Encouraging young children to

appreciate growing up just a little at a time and enjoying the moment, this lovely story portraying the warmth of the bond between family members, particularly father and son, is illustrated with gentle humour and some wonderfully quirky details, not least the mouse bit part players. **JB**

### The Smile

★★★★★

Written and ill. Marie Voigt, **Oxford University Press** 32pp, 978-0-19-278300-4, £11.99 hbk

It's easy to feel cheerful when you're reading this book, which follows the progress of a smile – 'a beautiful gift from one face to another' – as it is passed from person to person in ways that engage and surprise young readers, and bring much satisfaction. Visibly diverse characters give and receive the smile, whose journey is marked by a ribbon of stardust dancing its way across the pages. Close inspection reveals how ingeniously the starry smile-trail has been constructed, taking it far from the family that started it before returning it to them via a lost dog in the park, and there's plenty for observant eyes to spot.

Marie Voigt is a rising talent whose first picturebook, **Red and the City**, was nominated for the Kate Greenaway Medal and shortlisted for the **Klaus Flugge Prize**. In **The Smile**, a strong concept has been well executed, and Marie's use of bold, glowing colours and crisp white backgrounds adds to the upbeat feel.

Families will enjoy sharing this satisfying and optimistic story, which also makes a good starting point for organized group discussions about caring for others and how we should behave. **CFH**

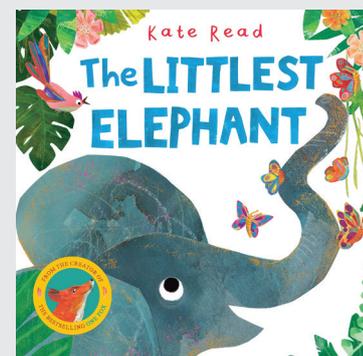
### One Tiny Dot

★★★★★

Lucy Rowland, ill. Gwen Millward, **Templar**, 40pp, 978 1 78741 886 8, £6.99 pbk

Kindness is an actual character in this remarkable and very beautiful picture book. He comes in the form of a tiny blue dot, who takes a ride on a little boy's new trainer and is welcomed happily. The tiny blue dot becomes bigger, and this is the theme of the story. The kindness continues to happen, and as it does, the dot becomes bigger and bigger until it is larger than the children following in Pied Piper style. There is a man whose kitten has got stuck in a tree, and a little girl who becomes very angry because she hasn't been invited to the party (anger again personified as a huge black cloud that becomes a red and yellow flame) and both of these are helped by Kindness and his followers. There are lots of small kindnesses too, and when the mayor of the town sees all the happiness, he offers to take everyone to the seaside for ice cream, which they joyfully accept. Off they go and spend a happy afternoon enjoying themselves and the ice cream, and at the end of the

story, there remains only a tiny blue dot, sitting contentedly on the shore. The text is in lovely rhyming couplets, and the illustrations literally glow in the pleasure of sunshine and all the kindness that is going on. This is a superb picture book which presents the theme in wonderfully positive terms. Outstanding. **ES**



### The Littlest Elephant

★★★★★

Kate Read, **Two Hoots**, 32pp, 978 1 5290 85338 9, £12.99 hbk

Having just learned to swim and over-excited at the prospect of getting to the pool first, the littlest elephant Ellie, rushes through the jungle oblivious to the effect she's having on the other animals in so doing. We however see the trouble she's causing, unintentional though it is, as she bounds and bounces on her merry way until eventually one tiny animal makes her stop and take notice. Then after pondering upon what she's been told, she understands the importance of taking more care, apologises, invites the other animals to come too, then, contrite she slows down and takes care until the pool comes into view. Finally, it's a friendly mutually supportive team that takes the plunge, all together.

On her journey, this little pachyderm learns one of the life lessons that is so important for little humans to learn: to be mindful of how their actions impact on others and that they need to slow down and take notice of their surroundings, something they might find hard to grasp at first.

With occasional/ judicious use of speech bubbles, Kate Read's bold, mixed media illustrations capture splendidly the feelings of the other creatures alongside the littlest elephant's impulsiveness as she leaves a trail of havoc in her wake dashing through the lush vegetation and almost all the book's pages to that wonderful final spread. **JB**

### One World: 24 Hours on Planet Earth

★★★★★

Nicola Davies ill. Jenni Desmond, **Walker**, 40pp, 9781406394771, £12.99 hbk

*Where on Earth are you, right now? It's late where I am and almost everyone's asleep, but I'm awake, looking out into the night...*

As the clock strikes midnight in London, where two little girls are usually

tucked up asleep in bed, across the globe a myriad of animals & birds are carrying out their daily business. For some it is time to wake up and go hunting for food, while others, like the humpback whales, are beginning their long journey north for the summer. This is a fascinating book, exploring the same hour across the globe in 12 different time zones through the eyes of the two young girls.

Author Nicola Davies' experience in zoology and her love of the natural world are evident in the messages she conveys in this fantastic 24-hour journey across the planet. This is Nicola's first collaboration with illustrator Jenni Desmond, but it hopefully won't be the last, as the beautiful and intricate artwork perfectly portrays the feelings behind the words.

For each place we visit, the accompanying commentary presents us with a subtle reminder of the potential harm being done to the world and its native inhabitants by humans, but as the girls arrive back in their room, the message we are left with is that if we all pull together, it is not too late to save our beautiful Planet Earth.

The rear end pages also provide a message from the author and illustrator with more information on how we are affecting the planet and what we can do to help.

A gorgeous book to inspire important conversations both at home and in the classroom. **AH**

### Rainbow Hands

★★★★

Mamta Nainy, ill. Jo Loring-Fisher, Lantana Publishing, 978 1 913747 83 1, £11.99 hbk  
Childhood is evoked on the first page; 'Playtime, studytime naptime, snacktime, storytime...The days stretch on for ever and ever.' And doing just what he sees his mother do, this little boy paints his fingernails. For his favourite time is painting-my-nails-time. The boy selects different colours for his many different moods, e.g. a perfect purple for mystery; an infinite white for possibilities; the brightest yellow for the blinding colour of the sun. He chooses smiling blues, mossy greens, glowing oranges. Although questioned by his father, 'Why not paint on paper instead?' his nail-painting is accepted, just as he is. And when on some crazy days he feels sad, happy, angry and dreamy all at once, then he paints each nail a different colour...he catches a rainbow in his hands! This quiet tale of family life unfolds gently, each mood sympathetically illustrated in soft, fuzzy colours, every page turn bringing a new colour palette. A positive body story about celebrating an individual's identity. **GB**

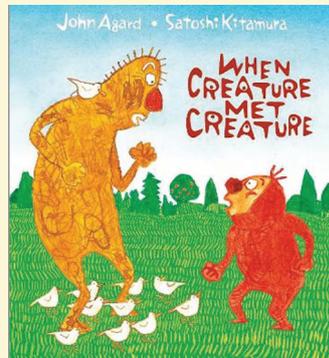
### Ed's Choice

#### When Creature Met Creature

★★★★★

John Agard, illus Satoshi Kitamura, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978-1912650507, £12.99 hbk

A new collaboration between John Agard and Satoshi Kitamura this superb picture book celebrates communication, the power of language and how love can even sometimes supersede it. Creature-Of-No-Words is happy, happy to be furry, and never in a hurry. In fact, though he doesn't know how to say it, living in a world of no-words, he's mostly always happy. Similarly, he can appreciate the benefits of feeling warm and snug without knowing how to say fire. But there are some feelings that leave Creature-Of-No-Words frustrated and in pain, feelings that he can sense 'un-making his day'. Luckily, Creature-Of-Words sees him groaning and understands his sadness, with no words said. She is able to teach him just the right word for the moment, and from that day



on the two of them live together in a house full of words. The final spread reminds us that sometimes still, there's nothing better than no-words, and 'listening to sweet silence after a long rain.' The simplicity and clarity of the message is enough to leave one speechless.

This will be a wonderful book to read with children – of all ages – and will prompt appreciation of the power of language and the importance of being able to share how we feel with others. **MMa**

### Shelly Hen Lays Eggs

★★★★★

Deborah Chancellor, ill. Julia Groves, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978 1 9126 5089 7, £11.99 hbk

In this, the third of the picture book series Follow My Food, that aims to help younger children understand where their food comes from, we join a little boy who presents a day in the life of free range hen, Shelly. First she takes a dust bath that helps her get rid of mites and generally keeps her feathers clean; then she hunts around in the grass for bugs and herbs to eat. Much of Shelly's time is spent with her flock and that she's the one in charge is shown clearly in Julia Groves' bold, bright cut paper scenes of them pecking in the grass and dashing up the ramp in front of her. Both activities make Shelly sleepy so an afternoon nap is on her agenda before lots more food finding and then at sunset, it's time to return to the safety of the coop and her top spot therein. It's at dawn that she and the other hens move to their nesting boxes to lay their eggs. These will be collected a bit later by the boy narrator who accompanies the farmer when she comes with food and water for the flock; and you never know that brown-shelled egg he has on his plate at teatime might just be one Shelly produced.

Julia Chancellor uses lively, chatty language for the main narrative, after which is double-spread trail-type quiz based on facts from the story, where youngsters match words and pictures. Then come two further

information pages with paragraphs on 'Happy hens', 'Tasty eggs' and 'Chatty chickens'.

Food is a popular focus for foundation stage and KS1 learners so like others in the series this would be a useful one to add to school collections. **JB**

### Be Wild, Little One

★★★★★

Olivia Hope, illustrated by Daniel Egnéus, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 978140888480 £6.99 pbk

'Wake up early, don't be shy/This bright world can make you fly' – the opening couplet sets the tone as author and illustrator join to encourage the young reader to enjoy the world imaginatively – and as the title page image suggests – in reality. This is not a story narrative though the reader is taken on a journey. Rather it is a poem – indeed the text could feature in an anthology very successfully without any imagery, the words direct, vivid, rhythmical, the rhymes unforced and natural. However, here they have Daniel Egnéus to add another dimension – the visual, enhancing and expanding the image created by the verbal. His bold, unsaturated colours sing off the page, each spread carefully linking into the world created by the poet's words – the greens of the jungle, the yellow of the desert sands, the snow filled landscape where wolves roam. There are surprises – there are no ships crossing the seas, instead we fly with the geese and are tossed in a basket under a dandelion clock in

the face of a storm. The child could be any child – young readers whoever they are able to see themselves in these pages – the final spread a triumphant exhortation in words and picture – 'Be Wild, Little One'. **FH**

### Small's Big Dream

★★★★★

Manjeet Mann, ill. Amanda Quartey, Harper Collins, 32pp, 978 0 00 850109 9, £6.99 pbk

While there is nothing in this brilliant picture book that wouldn't be enjoyed by younger children, to get the most out of it, a little more maturity will be necessary. The theme is of a small girl, literally small in every way, her house, her bed, her feet, her blanket, all are small – even her shoes – but she has big dreams. Here lies the crux of the problem. She loves all things big, the sea, mountains, tall buildings, big parks, space, but she is constantly being told that she dreams too much, and that daydreaming about the big things she wants to do with her life are impossible to such a small, insignificant person, not to mention the fact that they may be dangerous: 'Head down, feet on the ground, Small'. So she would 'sit on them, stamp on them and swallow them back down'. But one night, her dreams take her up to the moon where she sees lots of other small people like her doing exciting things, and her dreams take on a new reality. The very last picture shows us an adult Small in the uniform of an astronaut, and we know her big dreams have come true. Wonderfully evocative illustrations add greatly to the whole. **ES**

### Human Town

★★★★★

Alan Durant, ill. Anna Doherty, Tiny Owl, 32pp, 978 1 910328 83 5, £7.99 pbk

An important story about pollution, consumerism and the dangers of extinction, this picture book turns the usual plot about the extinction of animals into one about humans being the ones who may disappear from earth. As such, it is chilling at the end, but very thought-provoking for older children. The elephant family is enjoying spraying each other with water on a hot afternoon, when the children ask if they can visit Human Town. This is a zoo in reverse, wherein all the occupants are humans, but we learn there are fewer of them now. When the family arrive, they are greeted at the gates with a set of rules, the usual sorts of things at zoos, but with a twist – no touching or feeding the humans, keep to paths, no trampling of structures, and – last – 'the hunting and eating of human beings is strictly prohibited.' The last is a rule the big cats don't keep to, which is why the humans

# reviews

## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

are disappearing. Dad also warns Junior and Lulu that they mustn't get close to humans because they can be 'dangerous and unpredictable'. Inside the zoo, they find shops where humans are buying far more than they need, including meat, which the family finds disgusting. Dad says, 'They're wild animals' so we shouldn't 'judge them'. They find a stream full of smelly rubbish, and a car with 'smoke coming out of its bottom', they see a church, a cinema, and a school with no one in them, and the people look unhappy and sometimes fight in the streets. Peeking through a window, they see a little girl with far too many things around her on the floor, watching TV. Altogether, it's rather a sad afternoon, and the family come home chastened. The final two pages show a sign on the gate of Human Town saying, Permanently Closed Due to Extinction, and we see a bleak Junior saying, 'I hope that doesn't happen to us' The illustrations are super, and the reversal of roles all to be believable. An original and significant story. **ES**

### The Boy who grew a Tree ★★★★★

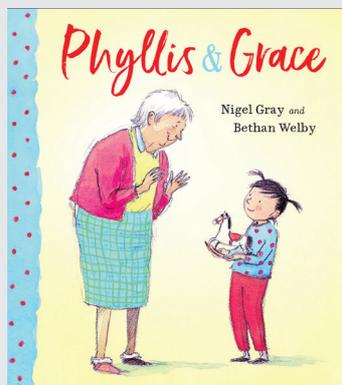
Polly Ho-Yen, ill. Sojung Kim-McCarthy, Knights of, 112pp, 978 1 133113 0 8, £5.99pbk

This book begins with a framing story which sets the scene. After their regular trip to the library a young girl asks her grandfather to retell her favourite story – the one about the boy who grew a tree.

And so the story of a young boy called Timi unfolds. Timi loves the natural world; he nurtures plants and protects wildlife. Lonely and feeling abandoned because his mother's focus is on his new baby sister, Timi discovers a plant growing unexpectedly in a derelict library. Returning regularly to look after it, Timi quickly finds this is no ordinary plant. It responds incredibly rapidly to care and attention growing so quickly it soon fills the library. However, the plants days may be numbered as the library is due to be demolished, can Timi his friends and family find a way to save it?

This is a story with just a hint of magic which celebrates the natural world, the importance of libraries and the power of community activism. It also sensitively explores a child's unsettled feelings and the inevitably changing family dynamics when a new baby is born particularly in a case like this where there are initial health concerns.

The soft black and white illustrations perfectly match the warmth of the story which would be great to read aloud to young children and would also be an accessible and engaging read for newly independent readers. **SMC**



### Phyllis and Grace ★★★★★

Nigel Gray, illus Bethan Welby, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978-1912650514, £12.99 hbk

This is a story of best friends, but so much more besides. Little Grace is often sent round to see her elderly next-door neighbour, with cake, a bowl of stew, some biscuits she has baked herself. They chat and Grace doesn't mind how forgetful Phyllis is, or that she repeats herself and sometimes gets confused. The two have lots in common including a taste for jelly, a love of horses and that joy in small things that often unites the very young and the very old. When Phyllis has to move into an old people's home, Grace continues to visit, the final spread showing them together, Grace's head on Phyllis' arm, under the lines, 'Phyllis and Grace, best friends.'

The text is very sensitive, capturing all the warmth of the friendship while gently depicting the progression of Phyllis' dementia. Bethan Welby's illustrations match it perfectly, so that we see Phyllis through Grace's eyes, sometimes laughing, sometimes quiet, sometimes sad, but always a true friend. It's a book that will help children understand the realities of dementia and provide opportunities for discussion, but it's also the story of two individuals and their relationship. **LS**

Read Bethan Welby's interview in which she answers our questions about illustrating *Phyllis and Grace*.

### Mouse's Wood ★★★★★

Alice Melvin, Thames & Hudson, 32pp, 97810500652701, £14.99 hbk Author/illustrator Alice Melvin has produced an exquisite piece of work with her *Mouse's Wood*. The opening page shows 'A Map of the Wood' which I enjoyed revisiting as I read the story to see where we were headed next!

We join Mouse on his journey through his beloved wood and experience all four seasons of the year as he moves from friend to friend; with chilly winter walks, April showers and summertime riverbank picnics, plus much more.

As we lift-the-flap to peep inside each of the animal's houses, I was struck by the attention to detail of Alice's beautiful hand-drawn and painted illustrations and the fascinating glimpses of the lives within. You are sure to spot something new each time you revisit the page.

The accompanying rhyming text adds a gentle narrative, reflecting Mouse's slow and rambling journey along the woodland path.

This will be a wonderful book to enjoy snuggled up together, exploring the different areas of the wood and discovering the birds, insects, animals and birds who share it. The last few pages of the book looks in more detail at each month of the year, advising what you should look out for while you're out & about in nature and which animals live in the woods around the country.

Definitely a book to be treasured and shared. **AH**

### Saving the Butterfly ★★★★★

Helen Cooper, ill. Gill Smith, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781406397208 £12.99 hbk

Nestled between endpapers that open with barbed-wire fencing overcast by heavy clouds and close with the same fencing framed by a sky clear and a butterfly ascending, Cooper and Smith's collaboration tells the story of two refugee siblings who adapt and grow together as they come to terms with the trauma of loss and change.

Past the title page, we find both children arriving upon foreign shores having been 'lost in the dark sea'. Save for those items and people in their immediacy, their world is grey and colourless. We never hear of what they have lost or left behind only that they have some meagre possessions and one another. Soon, the boy - too young to remember the past - acclimatises to life in the barbed-wire-bound refugee camp and makes friends with other children. The older sister, though, remembers much of who and what has been lost and becomes distant, physically and emotionally closed, choosing to never leave their 'broken house'.

It is the weight of the past, and perhaps her responsibilities as the sole carer for her little brother, that stops the girl from leaving. Instead, she wraps herself in a patterned quilt that she had with her when disembarking from the boat: its rich, colourful patterning a reminder, perhaps, of her home and short history. Yet as colourful as it is, it remains in shadow throughout the narrative until her brother, wanting to tempt his sister outside, brings something similarly colourful and beautiful in: a butterfly trapped within a jar.

Together they release the creature yet it also remains trapped within the home, unable to fly towards the exit. With patience and love, the young boy encourages the butterfly and his sister to settle and relax. Yet when

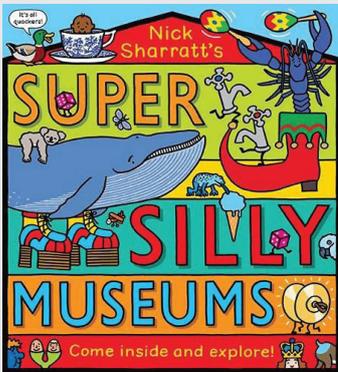
the insect furiously turns and flutters against the shadows, he runs out leaving the butterfly to descend and settle upon his exhausted sister. She finds the time and space to study it, take in its colours and beauty - so similar to those in her quilt - and eventually finds the strength within to usher it outside. When she does, she is startled by the butterfly's radiance and the brightness of the world and life around her. Before she has time to retreat inside, her little brother embraces her and guides her toward other children and families just like them. Perhaps now she can allow herself to heal.

Cooper's work has been translated in many languages and sold across the globe and this collaboration with Smith, who graduated from The Cambridge School of Art in 2019, is excellent. Both value the power of allowing the pictures and written narrative to invite layers of meaning. It is a hopeful story but, like Sanna's *The Journey*, does not steer away from the reality and trauma of being displaced from your home into a foreign land. Smith's excellent use of colour and positioning does much to affect the mood of the reader and the rich interplay between words and pictures means that there is plenty to discuss and revisit here; it is a story that invites discussion. I particularly enjoyed the concept of two siblings caring and healing each other; this is a bond built upon tragedy yet blooming with hope and growth. **MT**

### A Bear's Guide to Beekeeping ★★★★★

Pip Cornell, ill. Alex G Griffiths, 32pp, Andersen Press, 978 1 83913 026 7, £12.99 hbk

Readers will love the humour dancing through this wonderful picture book. To begin, capturing some bees must be the first target. Look out for the would-be beekeeper bear's rehearsal of the waggle dance! Each spread has speech bubble comments from a pigeon, who finds the bear's bumbling quite incomprehensible. Page after page there are explanations of the basic practicalities of beekeeping for beginners. The artwork brilliantly explores every nuance of the text, each bee having character, whilst the misguided optimism of Bear is plain to see. Pigeon tries to warn Bear as he falls into one trap after another. At Harvest time, and on opening the hive, there is no honey! The humour continues as it is realized that for honey to be produced there must be a queen! Otherwise, as we see in the pictures, the bees just laze about, watching TV, reading, snacking, snoozing... or playing computer games! Readers will enjoy studying the illustrations throughout, a humorous must for any beekeeping family, and of course for every library shelf. **GB**



## Super Silly Museums

★★★★★

Nick Sharratt, Scholastic, 24pp,  
978 1 407198 47 7, £8.99 pbk

This is a wonderful, original, fold-out flap picture book giggle-fest from the remarkably talented Nick Sharratt. There are eight museums within, and the first is the SHOE-SEUM. Open out the flap and wonder at the A-Z of shoes, from Ankle boot to Zip-up shoe, with Kitten heel, Roller skate and Trainer on the way. Second stop is TWO-SEUM. Open out, and all sorts of twos and pairs excite the eyes. 'Life's a grind,' shouts the Salt and Pepper set. 'We should pull ourselves together!' giggle the running along curtains. Then there's a queue at the Q-SEUM. See a quokka, quartet, quoll and quaff, and hear a quirky quack! Can readers think of 28 items beginning with Q? Each museum has silhouetted visitors running along both sides and the bottom of each museum page, with LOTS to say, e.g. 'Why doesn't cucumber start with a Q?' The POOSEUM comes next, a fold-out which will delight most readers as they examine each labelled picture. There's the Wee-search Centre, and the Loo-boratory.... And don't forget to keep searching for the recurring TAP jokes! The SNOOZeum is full of wildlife which surely will be a favourite visit for many youngsters, with lots of play on words. Enter the BLUE-SEUM. What an opportunity for a class to list as many blue connections as they can, before opening the flap. Did they find Peacock blue? Once in a blue moon? Bolt from the blue? The penultimate visit is to the CONFUSEUM, with optical illusions to put you in a tizz. THE END. JUST KIDDING, greets us on the following page, claiming to have one more museum to visit; unique, and amazing. It's the ALL-ABOUT-YOU-SEUM, with lots of targeted questions, from 'How old are you?' to 'Record the next thing you see beginning with Q' to 'What will you look like when you are grown up?' This book creation is an absolute sensation from beginning to end. Its sturdy thick paper construction should survive the umpteenth time it is enjoyed by fascinated readers. **GB**

## We Sang across the Sea, The Empire Windrush and Me

★★★★★

Benjamin Zephaniah, ill. Onyinye Iwu, Scholastic, 24pp, 978 07023 1116 1, £6.99 pbk

The internationally acclaimed Benjamin Zephaniah has written a powerful, moving picture book about the voyage from the West Indies of HMT Empire Windrush. In his bouncy, poetic style, Zephaniah introduces Mona Baptiste, one of five sisters born in Trinidad in 1928. On this island of sunshine, her passion is to sing. 'Joy is what I bring/ So, I just want to sing.' Alerted by posters advertising opportunities for passage to the UK, (cabin class, £48, troop deck £28,) Mona sets sail on the Empire Windrush at the age of 20. Her career flourishes as she works extremely hard in the UK, singing at wide venues, then becoming hugely famous in Europe. She lives for many years in Germany, then retires to Ireland where she dies in 1993. The illustrator for this historic epic tale is Onyinye Iwu, born to Nigerian parents, she is passionate about celebrating diversity and culture. And she illustrates with that passion, every spread full of joyous characters; many singing, playing various instruments, or providing an audience. 'Joy is what I bring/ So, I just want to sing,' sums up this delightful book about an important historic event. **GB**

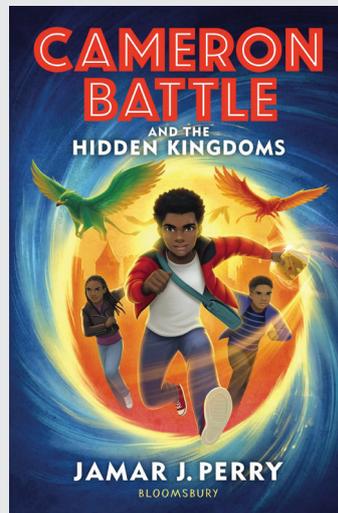
## A New Adventure (The Magic Faraway Tree)

★★★★★

Jacqueline Wilson, illus Mark Beech, Hodder Children's Books, 304pp, 978-1444963373, £12.99 hbk

Jacqueline Wilson has written a new adventure in the world of the magic faraway tree, as originally created by Enid Blyton. A reader turns to this book with some apprehension, many readers have treasured memories of Blyton's text. This reviewer is among their number. Could Wilson create a text that would do justice to its original? There was also a potentially controversial question. Blyton's text manifests attitudes towards gender that were commonplace in her own era of the 1950s, but which would look outdated and offensive to a contemporary reader. How would Wilson handle this issue?

The new version of the story features three characters, Milo who is aged ten, Mia who is around nine years old and Bethany, known as Birdie, who is aged four or five. The children reach the enchanted wood because their family is staying for a holiday in a nearby cottage. They encounter characters all drawn from the original text, a fairy named Silky, her friend Moonface, the Saucepan Man who now sells his saucepans



online instead of travelling round, his friend Mister Whatshisname and Dame Washalot the laundress.

If people climb to the top of the faraway tree, it is capable of transporting them to different lands they might wish to visit. The new lands created by Wilson are the land of unicorns, the land of bouncy castles, the land of princes and princesses where there is nearly a feminist disaster and the fearsome land of dragons. Modern readers will easily relate to the lands Wilson invents.

Wilson has taken a work known to generations of parents and children. She has kept a strong sense of the original world in tone and content while at the same time eliminating the stereotypes particularly of female characters. Overall the accomplishment is what readers expect of this accomplished writer. This reviewer has only one misgiving. The story ends very abruptly, a feature which some readers will find jarring. **RB**

## Women who led the way: Great Explorers and Adventurers

★★★★★

Mick Manning and Brita Granström, Otter-Barry, 48pp., 9781913074432 £12.99 hbk

Starting from Aud the Deep-minded from C9th Ireland, who travelled to Iceland, and coming right up to 2019 with Arunima Sinha, the first female amputee to climb Mount Everest, this excellent book covers 21 female pioneers in double page spreads, and 12 more in text boxes. Many of them are women of colour, and sometimes they are the first black female to achieve something special. Some are well-known, like Mary Anning, but many, like Mae Jemison, the first black woman in space, are less familiar. This is certainly diverse and inclusive, and Mick Manning and Brita Granström are well-known for producing many good quality illustrated books for children. There are now, thankfully, quite a few

books celebrating the achievements of women and of people of colour, but this one is definitely recommended. **DB**

## Cameron Battle and the Hidden Kingdoms

★★★★★

Jamar J. Perry, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 320pp, 978-1526646859, £6.99 pbk

Twelve-year-old Cameron Battle is an orphan living with his grandma in Atlanta. The thing that connects him most closely to his dead mother is a book, a family treasure, part myth, part history, the story of his Igbo ancestors and a hidden, magical kingdom, Chidani. But his grandmother has the book locked away, with strict instructions to Cameron not to go into the loft where she keeps it. Of course, with his friends Aliyah and Zion over for a sleepover, Cameron does venture into the attic, and somehow through the book the three of them open a portal into Chidani itself. There, Cameron discovers that he is the realm's only Descendant, charged to protect it from the queen's sister and threats of new slavery. Supported by his friends, Cameron finds the courage he needs though, amongst all the action and adventure, the burden of what he is asked to do feels always very real and weighty too. If the story has echoes of traditional fantasy adventure, the way it draws on Igbo mythology gives it a particular power and this is a heartfelt story of legacy, loss and the power of perseverance with a strong cast of characters. **MMa**

## Wished

★★★★★

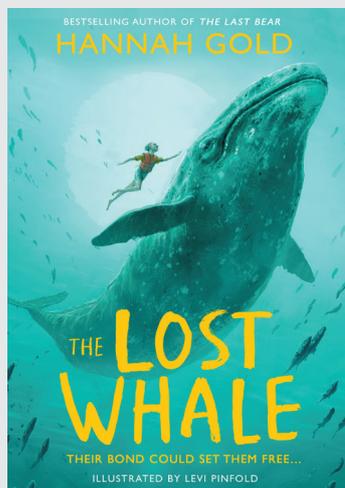
Lissa Evans, illus Bec Barnes, 255pp, David Fickling Books, 9781788452021, £12.99 hbk

This sprightly and continuously inventive story never lets up, at times almost risking joke inflation as it charges from one fantastic and usually ludicrous plot development to another. It features a young brother and sister staying for a week in the house of Miss Filey while their parents are away. She is an exceptionally game old lady whose childhood wish-fulfillment fantasies, garnered from her now ancient but once favourite volume **Adventure Stories for Girls**, have an alarming way of actually becoming true once magic candles are lit. At times reminiscent of E. Nesbit's time-shift stories, although without her concerns with social issues, this is high-octane story-telling from start to finish.

There are also overtones of Philippa Pearce's classic story **Tom's Midnight Garden**, where young and old meet on equal terms at night in their respective dreamlands. But Lissa Evans is so determinedly

# reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued



being funny there is less room in her writing for those moments of pathos and understanding intrinsic to Pearce's writing. One exception here is provided by how she writes about young Ed, who is a wheelchair user and initially suspicious of anything that looks like pity from outside. His growing relationship with same-age Willard from next door, the third of the trio, is sensitively portrayed while also providing temporary breaks from otherwise hectic comic activity.

There is so much to enjoy and also to wonder at here from a writer with an extraordinary imagination linked to a never-failing sense of fun. Written in large print, with short chapters accompanied by jolly black and white illustrations from Bec Barnes, this story deserves large sales. It would be nice too if it could be stocked in as many libraries, school or public, that still exist. NT

## The Riddle of The Sea

★★★★★

Jonne Kramer, translator Laura Watkinson, ill. Karl J. Mountford, Piccadilly, 297pp, 9781800780378, £7.99 pbk

This beautifully illustrated book contains a rip-roaring adventure on the high seas, complete with pirates, a cursed ship, monsters and a battle with the sea itself.

Ravian's father, Lasse, is a sailor and though he is often away from home for long periods he always returns for Ravian's birthday. However, on his twelfth birthday Ravian waits in vain for his father to come home. Realising that his father must be in trouble, he sets off to find him, accompanied by his best friend, Marvin the seagull.

He is lured onto a cursed pirate ship, the Night Raider by what appears to be his father's voice calling him. He is warned not to board the ship by another young boy, Kars, as once he is aboard a curse means that he cannot leave, but his urge to find his father is too strong and he steps onto the deck. The two boys form a strong

friendship and are worked hard by the Captain Banks, a fearsome-looking pirate too fond of his rum.

Marvin flies away in search of Lasse, who he finds on a remote but beautiful island, held captive by the former crew of the ship, thrown overboard by Banks who bore the curse as a result. When Marvin returns, Banks agrees to sail to the island and the ship is beset by many dangers, thrillingly described by Kramer. These hardships unite the boys and Banks and he proves to have finer emotions and a sense of honour.

All ends well, but as the story unfolds it has much to say about the power of love and friendship, the sometimes almost overwhelming thrill of adventure and the might and majesty of the sea. VR

## The Lost Whale

★★★★★

Hannah Gold, illus Levi Pinfold, HarperCollins Children's Books, 320pp, 978-0008412944, £12.99 hbk

Hannah Gold's book *The Last Bear* was well received critically and indeed, has just been awarded the **Waterstone's Children's Book Prize**. Her follow-up, *The Lost Whale*, is another beautifully written adventure detailing a deep, almost magical connection between a child and a wild animal, in this instance a grey whale. Once again, Gold delivers a strong environmental message, describing the threats to whales from shipping, plastic in the oceans and deadly fishing nets dumped from trawlers; however, the whale is as much a saviour to central character Leo, as he is to her.

Leo, eleven years old, has been sent to California to stay with the grandmother he has never met while his mother is in hospital. It's clear to adult readers, and probably will be to many young readers, that his mother is in a mental health crisis and that he has been trying to care for her, alone, for some time. Leo is angry, lonely, desperate to see his mother well again. There is some respite for him, thanks to a friendship with a local girl, Marina, and her father. They run whale watching trips on their boat and Leo is fascinated by the whales. He's amazed to recognise one female grey whale – could it be White Beak, the whale his mother sketched when she was his age? As the story unfolds, there are close encounters with White Beak – illustrated with drama and tenderness by Levi Pinfold – and an extraordinary relationship develops between the two. When White Beak needs his help, Leo is able to save her, but his actions open up possibilities of change for him and his mother too. The story acknowledges the weight of the problems we face, but allows for hope and recovery through bravery, love and harmony with nature. Leo's distress is balanced by the descriptions of the whales and porpoises, while the boom of the sea

rolls throughout, a dazzling unifying theme. MMA

## Maya and her Friends

★★★

Larysa Denysenko (trans Burshtyna Tereschenko), ill. Masha Foya, Studio Press, 64pp, 978 1 80078 414 7, £12.99, hbk

This picture book was originally published in Ukraine in 2017 and is now published in translation in the UK, with all the profits from its sale going to charities working with children in that country. It offers portraits of Maya and her classmates in a school in Kyiv. Each child or family has two pages of description, with striking illustrations by Masha Foya. The book's original aim is to explain and validate the variety of the children's family arrangements, which include sperm donation, adoption, step families, gay parents and absent parents. And the message is spelled out on the last page: 'It doesn't matter...if you are related by blood, or even how many mums and dads you have. The most important thing is to love and respect one another.' This sentiment, and the experiences that it recognises, ought to be already familiar to children here. The relevance of the book now, of course, is the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the suffering of families like these in a brutal war. There are references in the book to the conflicts that were already taking place when it was first published. Rayis and his Tatar family have been displaced from their home in the Crimea by the Russians and Sophiya's dad is missing in the fighting in Luhansk in the Donbas, places that have become very familiar to us in the last few months. The original text simply touches on these experiences, with footnotes to the English translation adding more detail for readers here. It seems to me that the book would be most useful to parents and teachers who want to have an opening for a discussion about how children in Ukraine might be suffering now, although they would probably require some supplementary information in support. CB

## Where do Wishes Go?

★★★★★

Debra Bertulis, ill. Jess Mason, Otter Barry, 96pp, 9781913074395, £7.99, pbk

This is Debra Bertulis's first collection of children's poems, some of which have already appeared in anthologies. For the most part these are not poems that describe the physical world, use striking images, or make unexpected connections to encourage us to see our surroundings anew. Rather, Bertulis is most interested in exploring people and relationships, which she does in an enviably spare and straightforward way, finding an approach, often with a gentle humour, that subtly evokes a response in the reader. In *Grandad's Leaving Home*, for instance, the narrator wonders what Grandad might

need when he goes to heaven and the poem's enquiries tell us a great deal, not only about Grandad's own personality, but about the love and concern of the worrying grandchild. Sometimes Bertulis leaves something to the reader. What are we to make of *Lily*, who lives with her grandma, but says her parents live in Hollywood, or of the narrator, her friend, who says, 'I've never seen Lily's mansion, / Or her dad's luxury jet, / Sometimes I think I'll ask to, / But then, I just forget.' My own favourite is *Blackberry Picking*, which reminds me of my childhood and Sunday family outings for the filling for pies and the making of jam. I too remember the challenge and pleasure of searching between nettles and brambles to reach the most difficult fruit: 'For those which prove the hardest to grasp/ Are the sweetest tasting by far.' CB

## Smile Out Loud

★★★★★

Joseph Coelho, illus. Daniel Gray-Barnett, Wide Eyed Editions, 40pp, 9780711271791 £12.99 hbk

Poetry – poems – are still often seen as esoteric, to be handled with care, presented in hushed tones. Joseph Coelho has a mission to dismiss this stereotype and in partnership with the illustrator, Daniel Gray-Barnett, he sets about this with vigour. These are not 'serious' poems – the title alerts one immediately; these are poems designed to make the reader smile – laugh- waddle- play – and finally quietly reflect. Nor are they meant to be read alone (unless you want to); many suggest group participation. They are to be shared. With each poem Joseph supplies suggestions and ideas for performance – and creativity. The poems themselves are not overwhelming or long – never more than a two-page spread, but their forms are varied, even traditional (an ode perhaps – or a villanelle) – but all invite playful engagement and enjoyment. This is helped by Daniel Gray-Barnett's vigorous illustrations allowing young readers to have a visual experience of the text, encouraging them to take that next step and roar like the child on the page, imagine having tree trunk legs or leap into space. A bold unsaturated palette and well-defined images match the words to create a truly immersive experience. Open this well designed, robust hardback and *Wake up with a Smile, Have a Brush with Danger* or try that *Recipe for This Boy*. Go on. FH

## The Extraordinary Adventures of Alice Tonks

★★★★★

Emily Kenny, illus Flavia Sorrentino, Rock the Boat, 352pp, 9780861542055, £7.99 pbk

Alice Tonks is an eleven-year-old autistic British schoolgirl. She is about to join an elite boarding school colloquially known as Pebbles. Alice's deceased mother and her living grandmother (who acts as her

parent) are both former pupils of the school. Alice is nervous about going away to school. She knows that she doesn't easily make friends. She has a ritual that she uses to calm herself down when she needs to – she calls it 'stimming' – but she knows it will look weird to casual onlookers.

On the day Tonks joins the school she has a strange experience, a conversation with a seagull. The bird recognises her as Alice Tonks and informs her that the animal community around the school needs her help. It seems that animals are going missing. Not only can Alice completely understand what the seagull is telling her, but she can also communicate with any animal in that creature's own language. This rare talent marks Alice out as a 'switcher'. The novel now asks whether Tonks can learn to make full use of this exceptional talent and manage to survive the difficulties it entails.

Emily Kenny, who is herself autistic, has managed to blend a number of different elements into this novel. It is of course a boarding school adventure like Malory Towers. But its dramatis personae include not only schoolchildren and teachers but also animals. The everyday drama of the school is shot through with magical events. And the protagonist of the story has a disability. A disabled figure in a fantasy is in itself something of a rarity.

The skill with which Kenny draws together these diverse threads is truly impressive, making a book not easily to be forgotten. **RB**

### Please Write Soon

★★★★★

Michael Rosen, ill. Michael Foreman, Scholastic, 80pp, 9780702303180, £12.99, hbk

It is 1946, the beginning of the new school year, and a teacher invites her class to share their projects. Solly's project is about his Polish cousin Bernie and the letters they exchanged throughout the war. As he shares these letters with his classmates, we are taken back to 1939, the beginning of the second world war, and the different wartime experiences of the two cousins unfold.

Solly, a city child, finds himself evacuated to a farm spending his time collecting eggs and learning to milk a cow. Later returning to London he witnesses the bomb damage and experiences rationing. Bernie lives in West Poland. He is also sent away at the beginning of the war to escape the Nazi invasion in the Russian occupied East of the country. But he is soon sent to a harsh labour camp. Later he finds himself fighting with the Polish armed forces against the Nazi invaders.

The cousins' letters include key wartime events, for example The Battle of Britain and The Battle of Monte Cassino. On the home front Solly describes news of the Bethnal

Green underground station disaster. The closeness of the cousins, their concern for each other and need to share their experiences shines through the letters. Tension mounts as Bernie is in constant danger and his worries about his family increase.

This book is based on the true story of Michael Rosen's cousin Michael Rechin. Although the reality of war is present, including the appalling fate of Jewish people and others in Nazi death camps there are lighter touches too for example, the adoption of a bear called Wotjek by the Polish troops (a true story). There is unsurprisingly sadness in the cousins' stories but the book ends on a positive note and readers can be hopeful that they might once again be able to go to football matches together.

This is a poignant and engaging book which could provide an interesting introduction to the experiences of young people across Europe during the last world war. Michael Foreman's beautiful illustrations complement the text perfectly. He deftly uses soft line and wash - monochrome with just a hint of colour - significantly poppy red.

The back of the book includes an afterword from Lt General James Bashall. He links the stories and experiences with Remembrance Day throughout the world and this would indeed be a perfect time to share this book with children. A contribution goes to the Royal British Legion poppy appeal with each sale of the book. **SMC**

### Bugs (A Day in the Life)

★★★★★

Dr Jessica L. Ware, ill. Chaaya Prabhat, Neon Squid Books, 48pp, 978 1 83899 155 5, £7.99 hbk

Ever wondered what bees, ants and dragonflies get up to all day? Well, this is a book which explores just that. We are taken through a day with vignettes describing scenes playing out across the globe; from 7 am when we find a dragonfly basking in the sun in North America to 10pm where a comet moth is launching itself into the night in Madagascar. We are encouraged to zoom in to witness the everyday drama of the insect world including a moth emerging from a cocoon and a standoff between two praying mantises.

Each scene is described on a double page spread which also include additional information such as the fact that all the bees in a colony are sisters and their mother is the queen.

The narrative is interspersed with explorations of relevant themes including metamorphosis, camouflage and migration. A sense of wonder is evoked as we are introduced to the sheer variety of bugs living not only in the countryside but in our cities too and the amazing ways different bugs use their wings.

This is a book written by a self-confessed lover of insects; an entomologist who has made a career of her passion. It is full of information presented in an engaging and interesting way.

The layout and design are attractive and clear with full colour artwork. There is a useful glossary which lists most of the specific terminology used and an index which is particularly useful in terms of the creatures included in the book and their geographical locations. Bold text is used inconsistently – these are mainly for words listed in the glossary but not exclusively – why is 'sisters' emboldened in the text and not scientific terms such as 'antennae' for example?

This title is one of a new series of 'day in the life' books by wildlife experts from new imprint Neon Squid Books. **SMC**

### The Luckiest Kid in the World

★★★★★

Danny Wallace, ill. Gemma Correll, Simon and Schuster, 231pp, 9781471196898, £7.99 pbk

This is a hilarious family drama about Joe Smith, who is – officially – the world's most average child.

Joe finds out about this rather sad claim to fame when a TV crew shows up early one morning and begins rifling through all the distinctly average things in his house. It is brilliant news for Joe. It means that, over night, he has become the world's most valuable market research asset. Everyone wants to know what the 'average child' thinks, so that they can target their merchandise and maximise profit. Joe doesn't understand any of this, of course. All he knows is that a big multinational needs someone to test out roller coasters, and water slides, and supercars, and cheeseburgers, and games, and bikes, and chocolate and countless other unbelievably cool things.

Joe is brilliant company. He is adorably naive and his uncomplicated view of the world is endearing. Meaty pasta for tea each night? Why not? He is more than happy with his one close friend (Joe 2) and isn't worried that his bike is a bit older than some other kids' or that he never gets picked first for football (he never gets picked last, either... he's average!). As he revels in all his awesome new stuff, Joe feels like the luckiest child in the world and, to begin with, he can't understand why his parents, sister and friend are rather less enamoured by the label of 'average'.

After a while, the responsibility of espousing views about absolutely everything begins to weigh heavily on Joe, and starts to harm the people who are most important to him. He begins to question what is valuable and, simultaneously, other characters reconsider their own lives: was Mum too quick to abandon her dream of owning a fast-food van selling meaty pasta? Should Dad ditch his usual Friday night curry for something more

spicy (no... he really shouldn't!)?

Wallace describes family relationships very effectively, sharing with readers the little details that keep families close. He is also adept at gently poking fun at everyday life, and witty observations will keep readers chuckling all the way through; especially Joe's take on 'street humour', where neighbours find it hilarious to say things like, 'You can wash my car when you've finished,' or, 'You can mow my lawn next!'

**The Luckiest Kid in the World** is a funny and charming exploration of what we value in our lives, and what it means to be average, to be special, or to just be yourself! **SD**

### Frankie Best Hates Quests: the accidental adventure of a lifetime

★★★★★

Chris Smith, ill. Kenneth Anderson, Puffin, 385pp, 9780241522110, £7.99 pbk

Chris Smith's new adventure story is a fun and light-hearted addition to the epic fantasy genre. Frankie Best is a relatable hero for young readers. She knows that there is nothing more important in life than being connected to your friends with WiFi and a smartphone, and she knows that little brothers who talk about orcs and goblins all the time are totally lame. She is rather disappointed, therefore, when she finds herself stuck at her boring old grandfather's house for the summer with her annoying little brother, Joel.

Within hours of their arrival the siblings discover that their grandfather is actually the custodian of a magical realm called Parralelia. This is unbearable news for Frankie, who is forced to accept – when Grandad is kidnapped – that she is just going to have to go on a big quest with lots of silly fantasy creatures. Very soon, she has unwittingly joined the Fellowship of the Bacon Roll and is surrounded by the brave warriors, noble sidekicks, mysterious double-crossers and conflicted villains that one would expect to see in any generic fantasy story.

Parralelia is a complex realm with a fully developed history that Smith revels in describing. To have any chance of rescuing her grandfather, Frankie has to get up to speed, quickly, with all the rules and lore of the genre (luckily, Joel is usually on hand to help, in a very annoying way). As the true nature of her quest is revealed, Frankie begins to question her priorities: perhaps there is room in her life for a little magic, after all.

**Frankie Best Hates Quests** is a love letter to the great sci-fi/fantasy epic novels, especially Tolkien. Heroes perpetually leap from frying pan to fire and there is even a chapter entitled 'There and Back Again'. Smith even cites the rules of the genre explicitly to readers, reminding them, for example, that every villain has a whole in their plan. What is original, however, is the voice of Frankie. She provides a running commentary

# reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle  
continued

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

in the form of snide comments and scornful remarks that remind readers just how silly all this fantasy stuff is. It is an effective device that adds humour and occasional respite from a thrilling pace but, at times, it feels unnecessary and somewhat undermines the story – which is genuinely tense and dramatic.

Parallelia is a land full of imaginative details and engaging, original characters (notwithstanding the disappointingly stereotypical Princess Prince). Even if readers hate quests as much as Frankie does, they will find the page-turning excitement on offer very hard to resist. **SD**

## Magicborn

★★★★★

Peter Bunzl, Usborne, 365pp,  
9781474964395, £7.99 pbk

Peter Bunzl, author of the popular **Cogheart** series, has written a new magical adventure story that will draw readers into an enthralling world where history and fairy tale fantasy entwine. The setting is an alternative eighteenth century where Fairyland lies across an enchanted bone bridge and the Royal Sorcerer of England hunts down those who are magicborn to enslave them and use their magic for his own ends. When Tempest, the Storm Girl, and Peter, the Wolf Boy, are captured by the Sorcerer, Lord Hawthorn, they begin to discover their lost memories, the secrets of their past and to grow into their magic powers. Aided by Kwesi, an enslaved magicborn boy, and Coriel, Tempest's enchanted robin companion, the children discover that they are twins, the long-lost prince and princess of Fairyland, cursed by their own family to exile and forgetfulness. Together the friends find the strength to battle both their royal captors and Fairyland treachery to discover their own place in the world.

This imaginative, compelling story skillfully entwines alternating narratives, one taking the fast-moving plot forward in the present and the other drawing in memories from the past so that the reader learns important narrative threads as the characters do. The plot developments are conveyed with a lightness of touch and an imaginative and witty use of language and rhyme so that the pace never falters, and the action builds to a gripping, magical climax. The narrative twists and turns, secrets, curses, and magic are revealed, the main characters grow in strength and confidence, and friendship, courage and kindness prevail in a satisfying denouement. The author's accomplished storytelling is entrancing and readers who enjoy a mix of fantasy, magic and adventure will love this book. **SR**

## Needle

★★★★★

Patrice Lawrence, Barrington  
Stoke, 122pp, 9781800901018,  
£7.99 pbk

Charlene is angry; angry with her mum who died, angry at the way she is dismissed by adults, and most of all angry that she has been completely separated from her little sister whom she adores. She hasn't seen her for two years and she herself is now in foster care. Her rage bubbles inside her and sometimes erupts. Knitting helps her to keep calm. When her foster son destroys the knitting she is creating for Kandi, Charlene loses it. Now the consequences are serious – can Charlene say sorry? Should she?

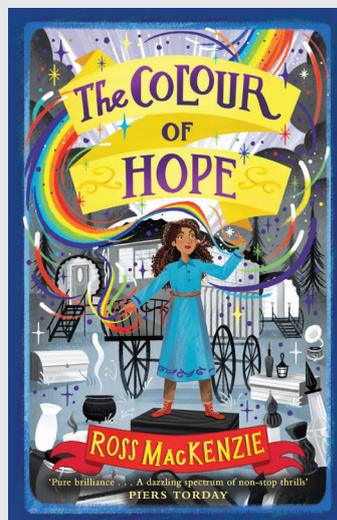
The writing is direct, immediate and colloquial as Charlene narrates her own story. This is no more than we expect from this publisher or from this author. Here the novella format is taken by Patrice Lawrence to create a concise, charged narrative that immediately engages the reader. Charlene steps off the page and many will recognise her. Her anger and rage is not a device; it is very real – an emotion felt by all – especially in their teens. It is compounded by her situation – sadly one that many experience. The questions Lawrence presents as the narrative unfolds are also real, as are the consequences Charlene faces for her actions. Though we see the world through Charlene's eyes and assumptions, there is no sense that it is simple or the answers easy – even unexpected people can be sympathetic. However, this is not a depressing story and though there is no fairy-tale ending the reader leaves hopeful that Charlene will achieve her greatest wish – perhaps the simplest – contact with her little sister, Kandi. Length is often seen as an indication of depth; this is not necessarily true as Lawrence demonstrates; powerful writing with immediate impact. A novel for today. **FH**

## The Colour of Hope

★★★★★

Ross MacKenzie, Andersen 357pp.,  
9781839132025, £7.99 pbk

Award-winning author Ross MacKenzie has come up with a terrific story here, and the title is very clever, too. In the Dominion, most of the world is in shades of grey, as the Emperor, or rather his evil aunt, a Necromancer, has stolen all the colour, and they keep it for themselves, enjoying its life-giving power. On a magically protected farm, an artistic boy called Darroch wishes on a shooting star that somebody would bring the colour back, and, on that very evening, a light brown baby girl is born. Whatever is touching her takes on colour – her blanket, her mother's skin – and her parents know that she is grave danger, so they try to take her far from



the city, but the Emperor's Ripper Dogs and the Black Coats are soon in pursuit. Her parents are killed, but she is rescued by the mage Sandy Burns and his talking dog, Oliver, and they become her family. Sandy gives the baby, whom he names Hope, a potion to hide her colour, but as she grows up she realises that she must bring colour back to the world.

This is very inventive – there is a wonderful wyvern, Elmo, a wicked Baba who keeps animals in cages in her chicken shack, and a patchwork boy, Odd, as her slave, until Hope thinks of a rescue plan. Death is an eccentric female character ruling over the desert of bones, with the Ferryman, and she tries to understand humans. Living people may accompany their loved ones a little way as they cross to the other side, which is a rather nice idea.

We follow Darroch, 6 years after The Wish, 8 years after The Wish, and so on, and finally he joins the Rainbow League, a resistance movement. Both he and Hope have lots of adventures before they meet in the final battle to overcome the Emperor and the Necromancer. There are surprises, and some people die, before colour is of course, restored. It's a very Scottish story, with some use of dialect, but everything is made perfectly clear. Ross MacKenzie has written many and varied excellent books, and your reviewer enjoyed this one tremendously. **DB**

## Every Cloud

★★★★★

Ros Roberts, Little Tiger, 334pp,  
978 1 78895 346 7, £6.99 pbk

It's all here in **Every Cloud**, as you'd know if you were in Year 6; sleepovers, besties, dance classes, Area Sports Days, nail painting, parties-and-what-to-wear, parties-and-who's-not-been-invited, and so on.

Then there are also a couple of questions everyone in Year 6 faces.

Which school are you going to in the Autumn? And which of your friends will be there with you? It's almost the end of the Summer term and Amy still hasn't got answers. Her Dad's a builder, but he's not been able to work since he was injured in a car crash a few months ago. Mum's taken a job in a Science Lab to make ends meet, but money's still so tight they've had to move to a house which needs a lot of work. Amy hates it – she loved her old home. What's more, they're now in a different catchment area. She'd expected to go to Valley High with all her friends. Now she's heading for Thornberry High where she'll know no-one except Dana from her dance class, and Amy knows Dana doesn't like her.

Amy and her family are at the centre of this everyday story of mostly middle-class folk. Amy's Mum and Dad listen to her, talk to her honestly. When they get it wrong, they try harder. When they moved, they promised they'd get her into Valley High and they meant it; but Amy's still only Number 7 on the waiting list. She's got two younger brothers; Sam who's crazy about wildlife and Maxi, who's a normal hyper-active, sticky infant. Gran and Pops, an hour's drive away, need Mum's support too, especially since Gran had a fall and sprained her ankle. Now Gran can't look after Pops, whose memory is wandering more and more. At times, he's a domestic Health and Safety hazard; except when his memory is crystal clear and he's excellent company.

While she's staying with her grandparents, Amy meets Jay, whose shyness stems partially from his stammer – or, at least, the way others react to it. Jay's an excellent sportsman and, it turns out, he's also headed for Thornberry. Amy likes him. For a start, he's sensible and, like Amy, he's interested in other people – so he asks Sam about his trap cam for recording visiting wildlife and he enjoys playing with Maxi. When he meets Pops, he's quick to manage the old man's memory lapses during their chats when Jay's learning to play shove ha'penny on Pops' much-loved old board.

For a while, it might seem to young readers – possibly daunted by the book's length – that the plot isn't going anywhere. Ros Roberts does not indulge in the over-excited, over-witty dialogue or soap-opera melodramatics sometimes employed to energise plots in novels for this age group. Her story may seem to rely on a series of episodes rather than a developing narrative, but the different experiences of this long summer are changing the way Amy, and Jay, and Amy's old primary school friends, see each other and themselves. **Every Cloud** offers a relationship between text and reader that builds slowly. It will be because they feel close to the everyday lives of Amy and her family – perhaps echoing

their own experiences - that readers will come to care about where Amy ends up in September. It takes subtle storytelling to develop that kind of relationship. **GF**

### Wrath

★★★★★

Marcus Sedgwick, Barrington Stoke, 131pp, 978 1 80090 089 9, £7.99 pbk

We are immersed in the drama from the opening line of this gripping novella; a teenage girl, Cassie, is missing.

The story takes place in Scotland, moving from Perth to the most north westerly tip of the British Isles, the significantly named Cape Wrath. It is set in the recent past, as worries about the climate emergency intensify and the nation emerges from Lockdown. Emotions are high during this unsettling period creating a tense atmosphere perfectly pitched for the unfolding mystery.

As the story progresses the time frame switches between the quest to find Cassie and the events leading up to her disappearance. It is told through the eyes of Fitz who gradually pieces together what he remembers in the weeks leading up to his bandmate's disappearance and clues to what might have happened to the strange girl he has come to care so much about.

Cassie (Cassandra) has been hearing humming sounds, which seem to be coming from the Earth itself, but Fitz and her other friends cannot hear them, just like her mythical namesake she is destined not to be believed.

Has she linked up with others who like her can hear the strange sounds the Earth is making? Or has she run away because of her parents' arguments? What has happened to her?

While the police investigation includes the now ubiquitous CCTV footage and lengthy interviews, Fitz pieces his own jigsaw of clues together from text messages, web searches and his own recollections, all the while berating himself for not foreseeing this might happen.

Budding scientists might wish to find out more about 'The Schumann resonance,' low frequency vibrations between the Earth and its atmosphere and the various electrical lights in the sky.

This is a multi-layered story with lots to engage teenage readers. As well as the unfolding mystery there is the insecurity of young love; the difficulties of living with warring parents; low-level bullying at school and the importance of being believed. The fact that the young protagonists and their friends are bandmates exploring innovative ways to create a new musical sound is appealing too.

The title 'Wrath' derives from a Nordic word meaning turning point. Reaching a turning point is key to the story, not only for the characters and



their personal relationships but, it is implied, potentially for all of us in our relationship with the Earth and our attitudes to climate change.

**Wrath** is a powerful and thought-provoking mystery drama from a skilful storyteller, with a satisfying and hopeful ending. This would be an engaging book for all young readers, and as with all Barrington Stoke titles, aims to be accessible and achievable for those who are less confident too. Highly recommended. **SMC**

### The Map of Leaves

★★★★★

Yarrow Townsend, Chicken House, 310pp, 9781913696481, £7.99 pbk

Orla is trying to make the best of her life since the death of her mother. She blames the Haulers for this - the riverboat people, men who hire out their services to transport goods up and down the river. They are a wild, independent people. Orla is independent too. Her mother was a healer, a woman wise in the properties of plants and Orla has a gift - she can talk to plants, and the natural world is her natural home. But now her world is threatened by a sickness and it is claimed that nature itself is to blame. There is a poison in the water and infecting plants and people. Orla is sure that her mother knew this and knew a cure. But can she work it out? It is a race against time.

Orla is a lively, independent character far from perfect but all the more believable for her faults. Young readers will warm to her independence and empathise with her efforts and decisions, while recognising that these decisions may be flawed. They will sympathise with her in her situation. Other characters also attract attention - Idris the Hauler boy passionately seeking a cure for his bother, Ariana trying to escape from her uncle's house. They are not a comfortable trio but it is their journey to understanding and cooperation that is central to the story. Inevitably, as a fantasy, the

narrative confirms to many of those familiar tropes - the fanatical villain, the time-constrained quest, the central message - here very much an ecological one; the destruction of the environment caused by human greed. If there is magic, it is plant based and an attractive feature of the book are the chapter headings introducing plants and their properties. Indeed, young readers will be able to find them in their own gardens - especially Honesty. If the cure for the sickness is a little pat, this is in keeping with the genre and the expectations of its readers. Townend has an attractive style that avoids overlong descriptive passages or too many details, concentrating rather on action and dialogue to create an engaging and satisfying narrative. A very enjoyable addition to any library shelf from a debut author with more to offer. **FH**

### The Light in Everything

★★★★★

Katya Balen, illus Sydney Smith, Bloomsbury, 320pp, 9871526622990, £12.99 hbk

This story is told in alternating short chapters by Zofia and Tom, two warring eleven-year-olds forced into a newly reconstructed family. Initially Zofia wants to keep her Polish doctor father all to herself in their cottage by the sea. Tom meanwhile, recovering from his own horribly abusive father, only wants to continue making those paper birds he has so long been obsessed with as a way of staving off a continual state of debilitating anxiety. Not a cheerful scene, but Katya Balen alternates wit with flashes of poetic phrasing. And then into the mix comes a new baby born two months too early and with potentially life-ending health problems.

Yet this still remains a hopeful story, with Tom much to his surprise at last popular with fellow pupils in his new school while his mother and stepfather constantly come up with support rather than irritation at their children's inability to get on. In return, both slowly grow to understand each other, working together on finishing a small boat which their father had left half-completed. During this process they reach a level of therapeutic insight and self-discovery rarely found in those so young. But this also means that readers can follow their otherwise hidden thought processes with ease, while also possibly learning something useful themselves.

The repeated emphasis on how each child continues to struggle with the effects of past trauma does at times threaten to become somewhat wearisome, but Balen is a skilful writer, expert at mixing entertainment with strong plot developments. Two brightly coloured loose sheets of origami paper are included, along with illustrated instructions on the inside and back covers showing readers how they can create their own paper cranes. Good luck with that! **NT**

### The Secret of the Treasure Keepers

★★★★★

A.M Howell, Usborne, 323pp., 9781474991117, £7.99, pbk

Set in 1948 with the aftermath of the Second World War still affecting everyone's lives, Ruth and her mother are trying to make sure she has a job to pay the rent after the divorce. While she is waiting for her mother at the British Museum where her mother is being interviewed for an archaeology post by Mr. Knight, Ruth answers a telephone call in his empty office. This leads to a farm in Norfolk where a mysterious archaeological discovery has been made and Ruth and her mother travel to the farm where things are not quite as they may seem, particularly as the silver discovered leaves questions unanswered. Ruth stays on at the farm and begins to unravel the secrets of the family and the land girl who helps them.

The wetness and cold of a fenland winter steals into every page of this exciting story, filled with the war just finished, leaving people with power cuts, rationing, and bomb sites. Ruth, 12, is upset about her parents' divorce but finds Joe too has lost his father and is about to lose the farm as a loan cannot be paid. Their growing friendship allows them to trust each other is well drawn, and the mysteries surrounding the eel man Lenny, Uncle Gordon Audrey and Terry her fiancée, keep the reader guessing until the very end. The last chapter ties things up very neatly if a bit hastily, but all ends well.

Books about the Second World War are many nowadays but the years immediately afterwards are in many ways just as interesting and this story paints a good picture of how difficult life was for so many people, not least those returning from many years away to a family from whom they have grown apart. The position of women, many of whom had worked throughout the war in men's jobs, in these post war years is clearly pictured in Mr. Knight's attitude, and the archaeological background adds an unusual aspect to the story. There is a map and small illustrations by Rachel Corcoran which add interest throughout the story. This book enhances A.M. Howell's growing reputation as a writer of stories with an historical background. **JF**

### One Time

★★★★★

Sharon Creech, Guppy Books, 239pp, 9781913101664, £6.99 pbk

The new homeroom and English teacher, Miss Lightstone, writes intriguing messages and questions on the board, beginning with: '[I am] Miss Lightstone. Who are you?' Gina Filomena and her classmates wonder how they should respond to it. Gina writes a short pen portrait of herself, mainly about her occasional lack of attention in class, and this forms the first chapter of Sharon Creech's novel. Indeed, by the time

# reviews

## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

we meet Miss Lightstone herself, we have already learnt a lot about Gina in her own words and she remains our guide throughout the novel. She has a mischievous guardian angel, Lucia, who is the star of Gina's Italian grandmother's stories, but who steps decisively into Gina's life. And Gina tells us about her fascination with her smiling new neighbour, Antonio, a fascination which is quickly shared by her classmates. Through Gina, we observe life in her neighbourhood and her classroom; we come to know herself, her family, and her friends and neighbours; and we gradually learn some answers to that first question posed by Miss Lightstone: who are these people and, for the children, what might they become? Most of all, the novel is about the power of the imagination to shape lives and this is the gift that both Miss Lightstone and Antonio bring. I do have some misgivings about novels whose narrators turn out to be budding writers, but there are some fine precedents and perhaps this too is an exception. It is elegantly written in short chapters, funny, and sharply and warmly observed. It delights in individuality and idiosyncrasy and encourages its readers both to follow their own dreams and to treasure the rich variety of the lives and dreams of others. **CB**

### The Wondrous Prune

★★★★

Ellie Clements, Bloomsbury 275pp., 9781526638328 £6.99 pbk  
Ellie Clements wrote this book, her debut novel, so that children of colour could find themselves represented, unlike her own childhood experience.

11-year-old Prune, her 15-year-old brother Jesse and their Mum have moved from a flat in an urban tower block into Grandma Jean's house, after she died. (Dad had disappeared some time ago.) Tall Jesse wants to be a basketball player, and doesn't see why he needs to go to school, so he has been bunking off, encouraged by his unsavoury friend Bryce, and they have been in trouble: this is a worry for Mum and Prune. Prune is a talented artist, but troubled by the fact that colourful clouds sometimes swirl around her, and although an eye test reveals nothing obviously wrong, this continues. Three girls are mean to her and her new friend Doug, and one day, after being called 'alienhead', she shuts herself in the toilet and cries that she wants to be taken away from the school, drawing a hot-air balloon in her sketchbook with her colours around her. When this comes to life in the playground, it's a tremendous shock, as the drawing in her book has disappeared, though she knows it's identical. She tries bringing other things to life, like popcorn, but finds that it can be difficult to control what she comes to realise is a superpower. She tries

drawing Dad, but the person she brings to life is not really him, and, after she has slimed the bullies and got into trouble herself, Mum tells her not to use her power unless it's for a very good reason. She sums up the courage to report the bullies' behaviour, and the school staff take action. When it seems that Jesse is going to get into serious criminal trouble, she is able to help with her drawing, and Jesse settles down.

The relationships are lovely – Jesse and Prune may annoy each other and tease each other, but it's clear that there is genuine love and support there. Mum has to work long hours and has lots of worries, but the family unit is solid, and this is well described. We can hope for more from this new author. **DB**

### Onyeka and the Academy of the Sun

★★★★

Tola Okogwu, ill. Brittany Jackson, Simon & Schuster, 298pp, 9781398505087, £7.99 pbk

Onyeka and her mother live in London, having moved from Nigeria some years before. Her mother is concerned that Onyeka keeps a low profile as she says she is 'different'. When her very long and strong hair seems to take on a life of its own, Onyeka begins to understand what her mother means. After an incident where she saves her best friend, Cheyenne, at the swimming pool, life takes a dramatic turn. Onyeka finds herself returning to Nigeria, where she finds that she has superpowers and is part of a group called the Solari. She is to attend a school called 'The Academy of the Sun', where she and other Solari learn how to control the powers that they have been born with. However, all is not as straightforward as it seems and Onyeka and her new friends soon find themselves at the centre of danger, as powerful people try to manipulate the way the Solari use their powers.

What an amazing concept for a book. The world building is strong and the idea of a society that has been able to harness the power of the sun and equalize society is something that we would all love to see; however, is everything as good as it seems? But it is the characters who really are the most important part of the story. This is brilliant for anyone looking to realize their own potential and to accept that being different is not a bad thing. It is about self-belief, living with difference and the power of friendship. This is just the beginning for Onyeka as she comes to terms with more danger than she could have imagined. She has had to learn that not all people have your best interests at heart and that good friends are not always immediately obvious. A gorgeous addition to any school or home library. **MP**

### Run For Your Life

★★★★

Jane Mitchell, Little Island Books, 251pp, 9781912417858, £7.99 pbk

Azari's 15-year-old sister Sharnaz was killed by male family members after refusing to marry a man four times her own age in order to pay off her father's debts. When it became clear that Azari would replace her as the bride or in turn be murdered, she and her mother fled their country to save their lives. They found themselves in Ireland and were placed in Direct Provision, intended as a short term supportive initial placement in a refugee centre but the reality was a far cry from compassion or comfort. Squalor, overcrowding, poor food and racist threats from school and the local community were the nub of their experiences. Azari's mother took to her bed but Azari found consolation in the running she had loved and excelled at in her home country. Since Azari's mother refuses to speak to men it is Azari who must tackle the interviews, forms and regulations required by the authorities dealing with their request for international aid. The story is particularly powerful since Azari is the narrator and the reader therefore sees the privations and difficulties first hand.

Azari begins to make friends – Robert, the white Irish boy who runs with her, Emer who invites her to a book club at school and Fiza Farooq who teaches her to read English. Each of these friendships opens a door for her and allows her to make progress in her quest to become a part of this strange and often hostile country in which she finds herself. She must also overcome her mother's fears about losing her cultural and national identity by not adhering to the old ways. Whilst things begin to improve for Azari the mood of some of the residents of the nearby town tenses and darkens, culminating in an arson attack on the Centre. The residents are split up and sent to various bed and breakfast establishments, more comfortable and with the privacy they had never had at the Centre but with a degree of loneliness and isolation from their new friends.

When the move to a new centre comes it is yet another new beginning for Azari and her mother. The difference this time is that they have hope – new friends and new skills to aid them in their search for integration. Azari's optimism is clear when she echoes Robert's assertion that she is capable of going, 'To the moon and back.' However, Mitchell makes clear in her explanation of Direct Provision at the end of the book that the situation for refugees is too often too difficult to bear, with stays in centres ranging from 2 to 12 years. The sobering fact is that in 2021 more than 7,000 people lived in Direct Provision in Ireland and over 2,000 of those were children. The story of Azari and her mother, graphically presented as it is here, makes clear the plight of these people. **VR**

### Zo and the Forest of Secrets

★★★★

Alake Pilgrim, Knights Of, 200pp, 9781913311292, £7.99 pbk

Zo and her mother, stepfather Jake and their baby Tayo have moved home to Saaman Bay in Trinidad. Zo's beloved father, with whom she often used to set out on exploratory walks, has stayed in New York where the family used to live. Zo has decided she will run away into the local forest where her father told her there is an abandoned research centre named the Zoo. She believes that by escaping to the forest she will force her father to fly from New York and find her.

In the forest Zo encounters more than she bargained for. She meets a boy who is lost, a boy named Adri. Zo is puzzled. Who is this lost boy? Does he have any connection to the mysterious zoo supposedly hidden in the forest? If so, what is that connection? What dangers confront them in the mysterious forest? Will Zo and Adri both manage to leave the forest alive?

The book hits a peak of interest in an episode which candidly took this reviewer by surprise. The two children meet a mechanical spider named Captain Peg. The relationship between the two children and this robotic arachnid is depicted with unusual skill and delicacy. This strange episode succeeds in driving the narrative with greater power and immediacy than other episodes, which amount to a ceaseless litany of threatened disasters. Late in the book the reader learns that the boy Adri has a secret – not to be divulged in this review. The revelation is guaranteed to revive flagging interest. But it comes too late in the book to deliver its full impact. **RB**

### The Sky over Rebecca

★★★★

Matthew Fox, ill. Ben Mantle, Quercus Books, 288pp, 9781444964707, £7.99 pbk

This is a haunting tale, both literally and metaphorically about a young Swedish girl Kara and what happens when she discovers mysterious footprints and then a snow angel in pristine snow, near a lake. She sees these as she is going home on the bus and decides to investigate. What she discovers is an impossibility, or so she thought. Kara finds a young girl called Rebecca and her brother Samuel, who seem to be living on a small island, but they are in desperate straits and very scared. It seems that Kara has managed to go back in time to the 1940s and is also in Denmark, rather than Sweden. The children are Jewish and survivors of a German attack on their home and they hope they can reach neutral territory. Mixed with this heart wrenching story we have the relationship that Kara has with her mother and grandfather, as well as the disagreeable Lars, from her school. How she is able to negotiate all of these issues and hopefully do something positive for

Rebecca and Samuel provides a tale that remain with you for a long time. Occasionally a book comes along that really gets through to your heart as well as your head and I think that this is one of those books for me. Whilst the groups of children suffer from different problems, they are none the less, just as upsetting to the individuals. At the heart of this story, we have the importance of family, regardless of what that might look like. It is also about the amazing strength and empathy that people can display in their hour of need. This really is one of those books that gives us a slightly different slant on the experience of war, dealing as it does, with those who suffered occupation and this makes it even more poignant. This is highly recommended. **MP**

### I Got This

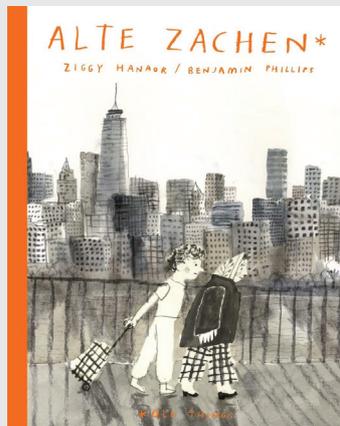
★★★★★

Cara Mailey and Chrissie Sains, Scholastic, 320pp, 978-0702314988, £6.99 pbk

Erin Woods is aged almost twelve. She has achondroplasia, a form of dwarfism. Her younger brother Joe also has the same condition. Erin runs the risk of making promises to Joe that she may find difficult to keep. Erin's stature however is not the only focus of the story. A well-known band named Fusion want to form a junior group starring teenage girls. Erin's friend Aimee persuades Erin to audition as a singer since she has an amazing voice. But will Erin find the confidence to face an audition without fearing her own judgement or that of others? Can she at the same time navigate joining secondary school for the first time, with all the challenges that transition involves for her?

One of the manifest strengths of this novel is the way telling details about achondroplasia are mentioned in the most natural and unforced way. Erin's grandmother for example has to try several different sizes of school blazer before she can find the one she can adapt to fit her granddaughter. The book also describes (for the first time as far as this reviewer is aware) the role of the Learning Support Assistant in schools. The book highlights the problems posed by the well-meaning intervention of the LSA when Erin is seeking to form classroom friendships.

Many factors combine to make Erin feel uncomfortably different from the other pupils. For example when they take the bus to school Erin must use a taxi, a difference that can easily form a barrier. It is an impressive accomplishment for these two authors (Mailey herself has achondroplasia) to have produced a work of seamless integrity, a work which leaves the reader aching for Erin to find her place as a singer in the band. **RB**



### Alte Zachen (Old Things)

★★★★★

Ziggy Hanaor, ill. Benjamin Phillips, Cicada Books, 72pp, 9781800660229 £16.99 hbk

Established in 2009, **Cicada Books** set out to publish and celebrate beautiful books and new talent. In **Alte Zachen** (Yiddish for Old Things), founder and publisher, Ziggy Hanaor, takes the leap from penning picture books to writing graphic novels with Benjamin Phillips providing the poetic charcoal, pen and watercolour illustrations. This intergenerational story follows Benji and his grandmother, Rosa, as they journey through modern-day Brooklyn and Manhattan to collect ingredients for dinner. It becomes a multilayered, journey that juxtaposes the new with the old and sees Benji gently and lovingly guide his Bubbe as she reveals her memories of growing up and falling in love.

As we begin our own journey into the story, we encounter the Yiddish proverb: 'A person's heart is like a sausage, no one knows exactly what's inside'. It is a touching precursor to our encounter with the rather cantankerous Bubbe Rosa who may seem sharp-tongued and acerbic to her grandson and fellow Americans but whose memories show her to be brimming with love and kindness.

As the ever-patient Benji aids and guides her through the city, whose residents and buildings, much to Bubbe Rosa's annoyance, rapidly change and shift with the changing of culture and societal norms, he finds his grandmother revealing memories of relationships, journeys, childhoods and, poignantly, unrequited love. In a beautiful twist on form, illustrator Phillips flips the colour codes of time through pictures for Bubbe setting her modern-day landscape in sepia and greys and revealing her past time to be full of colour and life: this is a time that she prefers and pines for. Even the size of the panels, expanding into full-page bleeds, outgrow and tower over the narrowly-framed images set in the current time period. Frustrated with how her city has

changed over the years, Bubbe lashes out at those around her and constantly berates her grandson. Yet the community, in its range of skin colours, faiths, ages, shapes and sizes is as tolerant, patient and accepting of Bubbe Rosa as her grandson is (a lovely touch) and a touching bond grows as she begins to gradually, albeit reluctantly, accept this new generation of settlers.

The story culminates in Bubbe's desire to find the bakery of her first crush, Gershon, 'a very rude man' who never settled down into a relationship. By now, author and illustrator have thrown seeds of doubt into the reader as to whether Bubbe's memories are intact and whether the baker's shop still remains. Locations are not always where and when she remembers them and Benji finds himself troubled over her cognitive decline. But the ending is beautiful and full of hope. Generations and love reconnect in a touching, memorable way.

For a first graphic novel, **Alte Zachen** is a true success. As Bubbe and Benji head home over the Williamsburg Bridge for their dinner, you realise that both author and illustrator have gifted us with a story rich in evocative memories in which older generations and new begin to understand one another. And Bubbe, whose personality, no matter how sharp and dated, is difficult to not love once you see what's inside her heart. This is award-winning storytelling. **MT**

### S.T.E.A.L.T.H: Access Denied

★★★★★

Jason Rohan, Nosy Crow, 296pp, 978839943386, £7.99 pbk

This adrenaline-rush of a book is the first in an action series for young fans of thrillers and spy novels. Arun Lal knows that his father is a genius – but he does not know that he has been secretly working on the most powerful piece of technology the world has ever seen: M.A.N.D.R.O.I.D. Other people are aware, though and they want to weaponise it.

Very quickly, Arun's father is kidnapped and, as custodians of the laptop that controls M.A.N.D.R.O.I.D, Arun and his friends (Donna and Sam) suddenly find themselves on the run from all sorts of villains and MI5 too. The rest of the story is a race against time, as Arun and his friends try to avoid capture and rescue his father.

The fact that the three heroes are only 12 years old is quickly forgotten, as they outwit criminal masterminds, hack high-security software and take part in a genuinely nail-biting car chase. For the most part, it's believable. There are no superpowers or magic here, just three children who are very brave and have excellent computer skills...and one of them can drive unbelievably well.

Rohan delivers great excitement and tension. All the genre-favourites are there: dangerous stunts, guns for hire, millionaire baddies, vulnerable loved ones, and stakes that are end-of-the-world high. Yet there is an

original feel. Arun is a more 'everyday' hero than other adolescent spies in fiction, and scenes about torture and violence (which almost go too far, at times) give the book a grown-up feel that readers will welcome. **SD**

### Spark

★★★★★

Mitch Johnson, Orion Children's Books, 293pp, 978 1 51010 763 2, £7.99 pbk

Readers of Mitch Johnson's **Pop!**, with its satirical critique of Big Business, know that beneath its all-action plot there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency drives several questions in Johnson's Afterword to **Spark**, including 'What if the future is not a high-tech utopia as we often like to imagine, but medieval and meagre and monstrous?'

**Spark** is set in a sparsely populated land where small communities depend upon foraging and a few sheep. Water is scarce, intense heat is punctuated by occasional storms, and there are no seasons. Male elders run the villages, with violence a first recourse in keeping control. In Last Village, religion fuses oppression with superstition, based on obedience to The Ancients – the Four Fathers – seemingly intent on inflicting suffering upon their descendants. The harshness of this Faith is mediated by the wisdom of its Priestess. Her servant Ash – 'almost of age' – is hated by most of the villagers as the son of a man once admired as a hero, now loathed as a traitor; his mother died long ago from 'the blood sickness'. Readers might be uncertain whether or not this land is intended to portray our own world in the future, perhaps after an apocalyptic devastation prompted by the climate. No disused railways or roads criss-cross the landscape. No derelict cities, no aftermath of warfare. The only buildings which might remain from our own times are ruined churches; but there's no trace of the beliefs or lives of those who built them. If young readers are to make the kind of active response to climate issues which Johnson invites in his Afterword, perhaps an overt link with our present is needed.

The Village is suspicious of strangers, so when a terrified girl, Bronwyn, turns up claiming she'd found her own village deserted on her return from a foraging trip, only the Priestess makes her welcome. Ash is wary when the Priestess entrusts Bronwyn to his care, but events soon draw them together. Bronwyn has some knowledge of 'The Olden Days'; she somehow knows about boats, for example, or the construction of reservoirs. Ash has little notion of past or future, other than a childlike image of a kind of Heaven on Earth – 'The Kingdom', somewhere away to the North - which he'd seen in the crinkled pages of the Priestess's few old books.

There is little space for comedy among the dangers of this plot, other

# reviews

## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

than a nice line in irony from Bronwyn. When she and Ash realise that all the Last Villagers have disappeared and the Priestess is lying drowned in the parched pool at the foot of the valley, they head off in search of The Kingdom. **Spark** becomes a quest, with a series of adventures along the way. Sometimes these move the plot forwards, sometimes they are digressions, exciting in themselves. One encounter crucial to shaping the novel's finale is with Sam, a small boy, who soon joyfully claims Bronwyn and Ash as substitute parents. Sam is an engaging character, though readers might think that his language and skill (at 'around seven years old') in devising and implementing a complicated plan requiring sustained deception stretch belief.

Enough here to reveal that the closing chapters feature large numbers of enslaved villagers, malice and cruelty confronted by ingenuity and heroism, and a huge explosion – all narrated with graphic energy and skills characteristic of Johnson's impressive strengths. **GF**

### Rebel Skies

★★★★

Ann Sei Lin, Walker, 339pp, 9781406399592, £7.99 pbk

This is a wonderful rendition of a world that has a resonance towards ancient Japan; however, it is very different, having sky ships, flying cities and also a belief in what we would call origami. Kurara is a servant girl on board an airship called the Midori, but she has a secret skill, in that she can make paper models, that seem to come to life; wild versions of these are called shikigami and they are causing havoc within the empire. When Kurara and her brother Haru are captured by a rebel vessel, their lives are in danger, but the 'crafter' Himura realizes how useful she could be and they find their lives taking a different path. As they become accustomed to this new life, they become more involved with others that they find on the airship; each of the main characters has a reason to try and win the favour of the imperial princess, but she also has her own agenda as she battles her brother for power. As the plot thickens, we begin to wonder who are the aggressors and who are the victims?

Kurara has to face many challenges and discovers many secrets that have been wiped from her memory. Her skills might make her a prize that the imperial family want, but maybe the price to be paid is too great. This story is about understanding who we are and accepting differences. However, it is also about society and the way that it looks after people, whether it treats them as citizens or as slaves. The contrast between the technology and the magical world really brings the idea of a steampunk society to mind, but with the added concept of feudalism and empire. We really find

a lot of sympathy with Kurara as she navigates her new world, so there are some great shocks to be had as the story develops. The next book is bound to hook us even deeper into this world and readers will be longing for the next adventure. **MP**

### The Upside Down River: Tomek's Journey

★★★★

Jean-Claude Mourlevat, trans. Ros Schwartz, Andersen Press, 168pp, 978 1 83913 198 1, £6.99 pbk

Tomek sells everything essential in his village grocery shop, from rubber hot-water bottles to bear knives. The essential worth of a bear knife will be confirmed before long in this novel first published in France in 2000, where it has sold more than a million copies. Andersen are making it available in English through Ros Schwartz's translation, with its conversational narrative voice suggesting gentle comedy even when danger threatens on every side.

Tomek may be only 13, but he runs his always-open store with both confidence and modesty. He is an orphan, but very much at home in the community; secretly, though, he has an increasing hunger to see more of the world. One day, a girl calls at the shop. She asks if Tomek sells barley sugars (of course he does). While trading a single sweet for a farthing, Tomek is helplessly entranced by "this little scrap of a girl. It was love at first sight". She seems to like him too, and his shop. Does he sell hat elastic? Yes. Pictures of kangaroos? Yes. Does he have some water from the River Qjar? Because that's what she really wants. No, he doesn't, and indeed he's never heard of it. The River Qjar, she tells him, flows backwards and upside down and a single drop of water from that river can stop any living thing from dying.

The girl sets off in search of the River Qjar. Before long, Tomek can't help himself; he shuts up shop and sets off in search of the girl who's in search of the River Qjar. So the tale becomes a quest, soon leading Tomek into the Forest of Oblivion. Here, alarming tricks invade the memory; as if that were not enough, Oblivion is home to enormous and terrifying bears, which Tomek duly encounters. Fortunately he's also met the life-embracing Marie, who happens by in her creaking cart pulled by a freely-farting donkey. They make it through the woods to a vast Meadow, populated by mysterious plants whose scent induces the oddest hallucinations. Next, Tomek finds himself in a village of cheery, albeit overweight, perfume-makers. Tomek's search must continue, so he sets sail with the grizzled seafarer, Captain Bastibalagom, to The Island-That-Isn't which, thanks to Tomek's wit and bravery becomes The Island-That-Is. And that's far from the end

of the story, since he's still in search of the River Qjar. And the girl whose name, he has learned, is Hannah.

M. Mourlevat is very good at creating magical places, ingenious situations promising risk and excitement, and characters with strong qualities such as merriment or courage or thoughtful empathy. By way of evil, though, when Tomek continues his quest in his small boat, he suddenly finds there's a hag of a witch riding to and fro above him on a swing suspended from a black rainbow, challenging him to solve her riddle. The price of failure is eternal drowning.

It might be that this tale could divide young readers according to their expectations. Those who thrive on the kind of blood-letting violence they might find on a screen, might think those situations promising danger and action are resolved rather tamely; the bear in Oblivion, for example, simply turned its back and shambled off in the opposite direction. On the other hand, readers who enjoy exploring a magical adventure through comic telling and reflection will surely relish an unusual and memorable experience. **GF**

### Cuckoo Summer

★★★★

Jonathan Tulloch, Andersen, 247pp., 9781839132094, £7.99 pbk

In the summer of 1940 Tommy is living with his aunts on their farm in the Lake District, and has befriended an evacuee girl living on the next farm called Sally Smith. A German plane has come down and the pair find the navigator hanging in a tree. He is not dead however, and Sally determines to rescue him from the cruel farmer who took her in and treats her abominably, but is also a leading light

in the Home Guard, as he wants to kill all Nazis. Hidden in a group of bushes they feed him and bring him water in empty whisky bottles. However Farmer Scarcross's cruelty to Sally comes to light which brings matters to a head, and Sally's past is revealed.

Sally bounces out of every page of this exciting and lively story. It is not a new ploy for children to hide downed airmen, but Jonathan Tulloch has given it a freshness amid the incomparable background of the Lake District, with its tight farming community and beautiful scenery. Tommy follows her lead, bewitched by her but unable to find out the horrifying past she conceals so well, but he is aware of the cruelty inflicted on her by Scarcross, and does his best to help with food and her chores. He himself works hard on the farm while worrying about his Dad who is missing in action, but with the love and support of the aunts.

Sally speaks in broad Geordie which does make this a slightly difficult read and might put some children off which would be a great shame. I wondered why the author had not found another way of making her so Geordie without the sometimes difficult spelling. It can be sounded out of course and as an adult that can be done, but even so it is at times quite difficult to get the whole meaning of what she is saying.

It is great fun but amidst the adventure the appalling conditions faced by a very small minority of evacuees, and the relentless work on a small hill farm, including the shearing of the sheep are not glossed over, and all of this makes for a very satisfying read for both boys and girls. **JF**

## 14+ Secondary/Adult

### Truth Be Told

★★★★

Sue Divin, Macmillan Children's Books, 304pp, 978 1529040982, £7.99 pbk

Sue Divin's book is set in Northern Ireland during the second half of 2019, a time of significance and tension for the region and its people. But, as in her highly regarded previous novel *Guard Your Heart*, she also uses the story of contemporary young people to shine light on the history of the Troubles and the impact they have to this day.

Tara is Catholic, living in Derry with her single parent mum and single parent granny, and something of a rebel. Faith has grown up in rural Armagh, the only child of devout Protestant parents, church going and obedient. Could they be more different? And yet when the two meet on a 'cross-community peace-building residential' they have an extraordinary physical resemblance, 'The same wavy black hair. Same fair skin. Same nose. Cheek bones.



Stance. Everything.' Surely, they must be related. An initially combative relationship turns into friendship, which is just as well because as the truth about their shared parentage

## New Talent

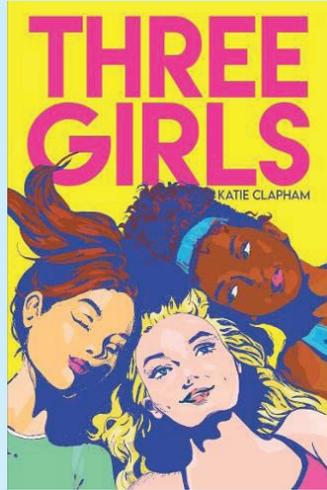
### Three Girls

★★★★★

Katie Clapham, Uclan Publishing, 224pp, 978-1-912979-80-6, £7.99 pbk

This hugely enjoyable read features Alice (The Really Tall One), Minnie (The Athlete) and Lena (The Princess) who are brought together by a photographer hired by their school to create a brochure. They are asked to pretend to be friends for a cover shot, even though they have nothing in common and barely know one another. Yet at the conclusion of the book their friendship is genuine as Clapham takes both reader and girls on emotional journeys which lead to this end.

All the girls are compelling - wholly present on the page - and each has her affiliations: Alice her highly intelligent, over-achieving friends, Minnie her boyfriend Daniel and Lena her childhood friend Aimee. However, change is coming for all three girls. When Minnie, the school's star athlete is injured in a road accident Lena sees it as a chance to shine - now she doesn't have to play second fiddle to Minnie on the running track. Lena realises that Aimee is no longer the girl she's always known but has turned into a bully and a malicious gossip. After being unpleasantly kerb-crawled, Alice decides she is going to run - in secret, to avoid the humiliation of possible failure.



As the three girls work their way through big changes in their lives their trajectories come close together and they begin to discover true bonds forged through trust and support. Clapham invites us to understand what it is like to be a young woman, with all the uncertainties, pressures, anxieties and fun that this involves. Young adult readers will find much to relate to-dealing with crushes, moving on from friendships which are toxic, coming to terms with thwarted ambitions. What we see at the end of the book is three young women who have found friendships which nourish and sustain them and who are ready to move forward, knowing what they really want to achieve. **VR**

emerges, with it come stories of past grief, violence, and long-buried family secrets.

Nor is it just the older generation who are suffering: Tara's boyfriend Oran was kneecapped by the New IRA and, forced to leave hometown and family, takes his own life. Faith's uncle is scarred by his own past and her cousin is left to cope with his alcoholism and suicide attempts. Faith herself is struggling to hide her sexuality from her parents knowing that their church, one of the mainstays of all their lives, will not accept it.

Like most young people born after 1998, Tara knows little about the Troubles and her introduction to them - reading headlines on crumpled old newspapers used to wrap her grandma's unused wedding presents, a litany of murder and cruelty - will serve as an education to many readers. Divin is a peace worker and reconciliation is a huge theme throughout her book, with emphasis on the importance of talking, honestly and openly, and the ability of people to heal when truths are finally told. It's proof of her skill as a writer that the story seldom feels didactic, despite the weight of the issues it describes. Tara and Faith are credible

characters, Tara's sense of humour in particular providing a lightness amongst the heartbreak, and both offer us a sense of hope for the future. **MMA**

### Muddy People

★★★★★

Sara El Sayed, Greystone Books, 247pp, 978177164997 1, £12.99 pbk

A memoir of the author, **Muddy People** tells Sara's story, as a young Muslim girl growing up in Brisbane Australia, having emigrated from Alexandria in Egypt at the age of six.

She recounts her experiences at school and at home. The title refers both to the use of the word 'muddy' as a racist insult and also the lack of clarity or 'muddiness' around her family's feelings, motivations and behaviour which throughout the course of the book she tries to unravel.

At school Sara struggles to fit in, make friends and later boyfriends. She quickly realises she is different, not only in appearance but also in terms of what she is culturally permitted to do. The reader lives these feelings and the coping mechanisms she develops with her. For example,

at the age of seven she finds herself under scrutiny when she undresses for a swimming gala and makes excuses for her different appearance. Years later she decides to assume her friend Carly is being ironic when she chooses 'Australia should not allow Muslims into the country' as her topic in a class debate.

The book is cleverly organised around 23 rules related to culture and religion which her mother, grandmother and in particular her father expect her to keep. They include 'good girls don't wear bikinis' and 'no moving out without a husband.' Lots of things are 'haram' or forbidden. Anecdotes are described to illustrate each of the rules.

These chapters are interspersed with shorter chapters focused on her Mama and Baba. The time scale moves from past to present as she seeks to unravel what lies behind her parents' divorce and at the same time explore her own identity and sense of self. Her love for her father, his struggle to fit in and lead his life obeying the rules of his religion and her respect for her mother and grandmother shine through.

Imbued with warmth and humour, this is an honest, moving and skilfully written coming of age memoir. **SMc**

### Finding Jupiter

★★★★★

Kelis Rowe, Walker, 352pp, 978 129500639, £7.99 pbk

Jupiter Moon Ray has a wall around her heart. Her father was killed just before she was born and her mother has never recovered from his death. Jupiter is determined to have nothing to do with love, this emotion which ruins lives. And then she meets Orion, who falls in love with her on sight and begins to patiently wear down the defences she has spent all her life erecting.

From their first inauspicious meeting at a roller rink Rowe glides the narrative into the poetic. Orion's feelings are powerful and beautifully described. Jupiter is casual and contained on the surface but she is an artist and writes found poetry and it is through these two mediums that she begins to explore the unwelcome feelings she is beginning to have for Orion.

Their slowly growing relationship is a verbal and physical dance for each of them a series of moves forwards and back. The rhythm is subtle but ever-present, pulsing through the narrative with a lyrical flow. There are always obstacles-Jupiter's mother's fear that her daughter will get hurt, Orion's father's dogged insistence that his competitive swimming must always come first.

When Jupiter finally realises that she can no longer ignore the love she feels for Orion and summons all her courage to let him into her heart, the story takes a Romeo and Juliet twist and all seems lost. Their families are tragically linked, as Orion's father ran into the car in which Jupiter's pregnant mother and father were driving when her father fell asleep

at the wheel. Jupiter, erroneously assuming that Orion knew of this, felt betrayed and the lovers were forced apart.

Finding Jupiter is a journey of discovery for both protagonists and a journey to forgiveness for the two families. The eventual happy ending never feels inevitable and emotional tensions are handled with impressive credibility. It has much to say about first love but never drifts into cliché-a must read. **VR**

### Ellie Pillai Is Brown

★★★★★

Christine Pillainayagam, Faber, 464pp, 978-0571366910, £8.99 pbk

The eponymous Ellie Pillai is aged fifteen, a British Indian girl from a sleepy English village. Her mother and father are extremely over-protective, having lost her younger brother Amis to leukaemia at the age of twelve. For her GCSE examinations her parents want Ellie to take computer science. They want Ellie to be qualified for a good job when she is grown up. They also believe that since she is not particularly good-looking she needs to demonstrate her intelligence.

Ellie has a secret, hidden from her parents. She is a gifted musician and potential dramatist. For this reason she opts for drama as her exam subject instead of computer science. She has not yet told her parents of this choice. What will be the consequences when they learn that she is entered for drama?

This novel is a bildungsroman about Ellie's voyage of self-discovery, relying on two compelling themes. Ellie comes from a different social order and must attempt to integrate herself into a different society. Readers who come from such backgrounds will find the subject central to their own preoccupations. The subject also has relevance for those who come from more typically British backgrounds, since we all inhabit one world. The second theme is the essential nature of the individual's quest for self-fulfilment, which operates despite the obstacles often placed in its path by an obstructive society and its rulebook. Ellie is a commanding character and for those who take the girl to heart the story will command interest. At 456 pages however this reviewer found the book, targeted as it is for a YA readership, too long to deliver its message with the maximum impact. **RB**

### Our Sister Again

★★★★★

Sophie Cameron, Stripes Publishing, 304pp, 978-1788953917, £7.99 pbk

Flora died of neuroblastoma at the age of fifteen. Three years have passed. Her sisters Isla now aged thirteen and Una now aged ten miss their deceased sister terribly, as do their parents. Their grief persists until they encounter Project Homecoming. This is a highly secret undertaking whereby a technological company promises to deliver what they term a returnee, someone who

# reviews

## 14+ Secondary/Adult continued

has died. The technologists gather a huge array of information about the deceased person from social media and from those who knew the subject best. Then they produce a robot which is as far as possible a faithful copy of the dear departed. There are some differences between the deceased person and the robot. The robot needs no sleep. And it cannot be fully immersed in water, disappointingly enough since Flora was a competitive swimmer. The family are warned that the project is deadly secret. If word gets out that a simulacrum of Flora has been delivered, it will instantly be confiscated.

The resurrection of the dead plays a significant part in the evolution of mythology and religion. This book deals with issues of grief, bereavement and renewed hope – all in the context of a science fiction setting. The book deals directly with a range of harrowing ideas basic to the nature of human life – so much so in fact that this reviewer felt at times obliged to take a break from reading. Outside the context of the astonishing technology – which succeeds in nearly but not quite mirroring the character of the deceased target – the relationship between Isla and Una is depicted with honesty and effect.

There is however a serious question the reader is obliged to ask, a question the author would do well to consider. Would this be a better book without the supposed technological miracle? In the real world after all the dead revisit us in memories and dreams. The powerful themes the book addresses would be even more powerful without the embellishment of a barely credible technological thread. **RB**

### Ready Or Not

★★★★

Tracy Darnton, *Little Tiger*, 269pp, 9781788953313, £8.99 pbk

This tense YA psychological thriller will draw readers in straight away with its gripping opening premise of a game of hide and seek that goes horribly wrong. A group of teenage friends have spent shared summer holidays at Creek House with their families for years and Millie, the youngest of the group at 15, insists on a final game of hide and seek. By the time Millie has finished counting Kat has vanished. But people don't just disappear, do they?

After this taut opening the narrative splits into two different timelines, each told from Millie's point of view, switching back and forth between the hours and days after Kat's disappearance and a year later, when the group re-gathers at Creek House for a final attempt to put the past to rest. Readers will be kept guessing as an unreliable narrator reveals a succession of clues, red herrings, secrets and lies. An atmosphere of unease builds, and tension slowly rises as more truths about toxic

relationships, family breakdown, blackmail, manipulative behaviour, and false friendship come to light. The characters are all flawed and unlikeable, ambiguities abound, and the end reveal is shocking. Fans of dark, enigmatic, psychological mysteries will be drawn into a complex web by this skilfully written story of secrets, lies and deception. **SR**

### Twin Crowns

★★★★

Katherine Webber and Catherine Doyle, *Electric Monkey*, 512pp, 9780755503063, £8.99 pbk

This light-hearted romantic adventure is the first title in a new YA fantasy series, *Crown of Eana*, jointly written by established authors Catherine Doyle and Katherine Webber. Set in the kingdom of Eana the story of twin princesses, separated at birth after the murder of their parents, is told in chapters that alternate between the narrative voices of the two girls, each character presumably written by a different author. The scene is set just before the twins' eighteenth birthday as Rose, who has been raised in the palace as a princess, is about to be crowned Queen of Eana, or so she thinks. Her twin, Wren, raised among the witches who claim Eana as their own, has other ideas. The novel begins with kidnap, spells, impersonation, plotting and a dramatic journey across a treacherous desert, and carries on from there at a breakneck pace with intrigue, action, treachery, and romance along the way.

This is traditional fantasy fare, but the writing style is light and accomplished with convincing world building and two appealing main protagonists with distinctive voices and characters. The fast pace and the constant switching between serious emotion, romantic encounters, magic, action, and humour should keep readers enthralled. The main characters develop throughout and learn about the importance of walking in other people's shoes and not always believing what you are told. The ending is satisfying whilst keeping plenty of threads open for further titles. This is a skilfully written fantasy romance that does not take itself too seriously and succeeds in creating an enticing world of witches, warriors, royalty and adventure. **SR**

### The Cats We Meet Along the Way

★★★★

Nadia Mikail, illus Nate Ng, *Guppy Books*, 9781913101596, 250pp, £7.99 pbk

After the catastrophic news that the end of the world is predicted, Aisha and her mother, Esah, are forced to reassess their lives. Aisha's mother wants to go and find her older estranged daughter, June who had left three years previously to travel and has not contacted them since.

The sisters were very close and Aisha still feels conflicted.

Aisha has a thoughtful, kind boyfriend Walter who loves her – she muses they might have got married if the world wasn't ending. She wants Walter to come with her to find June and Walter wants his parents to be with them as they had already been planning a last trip through Malaysia to visit old haunts. The five of them set off together in Walter's parent's gaudy old campervan along with a mangey orange stray cat named Fleabag that had entered their lives a few weeks before and refused to leave.

June had always loved the house her grandparents lived in but when they died Esah was too sad to spend any time there. It is Aisha who has a hunch June might be there and that is where they are headed. Moving seamlessly from past to present with snippets of the sisters' past life together and that of the present day their journey leads Aisha in particular to discover more about herself and her family. The intergenerational family relationships are beautifully observed and the relationship between Walter and Aisha is tender and sweet.

This is an unusual and special book – one of those quieter yet uplifting stories that really get under your skin. I was so enthralled I dropped it in the bath – only the best books get that treatment!

In the midst of potential catastrophe it is life-affirming and full of love and hope. **JC**

### Me, In Between

★★★★

Julya Rabinowich, trans. Claire Storey, *Andersen Press*, 282pp, 978 1 83913 124 0, £7.99 pbk

Madina is fifteen, attending school in Germany. In history, her class is learning about the Second World War. The teacher shows photos of 'mountains of corpses and hanging bodies'. She talks of prisoners herded like cattle into gas chambers. Madina puts her hand up: 'I've also seen how people are killed. Back home.' Far away, day after day, she'd gone out after 'a torrent of bombs' to help gather bodies for burial, 'so they could finally depart this world'. One of her classmates tells her to 'Save your horror stories', but another says, 'Madina's right'. That moment foreshadows many others throughout this powerful story; so often, it's **Me, In Between**.

Her family are refugees. Where they're from, she tells us in the novel's first paragraph, 'doesn't matter. It could be anywhere.' There's a single mention of the hijab and the traditional values of Madina's family are important; but in many ways this award-winning book is universal, of even greater relevance now than when it was first published in Germany in 2016. We meet the family in an overcrowded boarding house, waiting anxiously for news of their application

for asylum; 'family' means Dad, Mum, Madina, seven-year-old brother Rami, and silent, hostile Aunt Amina.

Only Madina has a growing competence in German, so she must translate for everyone – from shopping to form-filling. Only Madina makes friends, including best friend Laura and, tentatively, Laura's brother Markus. Only Madina begins to enjoy the possible freedoms of Western European life. Laura's friendly Mum gives Madina a diary, and through frequent entries Madina explores her shifting relationship with Laura. Madina's self-awareness is acute and serious, beyond the humour or clichés of some school-set YA plots. The contrasts between past and present, between the cultures of home and school, are profound. The insights she offers may well reflect those of many Madinas who now find themselves in Western Europe.

There is no melodrama. Day-to-day life is enough to throw up clashes between the values of Madina's family (especially her father's) and the society they have struggled so hard to join. Dad's a proud man, a medic whose even-handed attempts back home to treat friend or foe left him on the Wanted List – hence the imperative to escape. His commitment to his culture's traditional notion of fatherhood means that when Madina is desperate to go to Laura's 15th birthday party, he insists that 7-year-old Rami, as the family's second male, is also invited to protect her in such a dangerous environment. Trapped and bewildered between old and new, Dad's frustrations erupt in violence at the school gate and social workers and counsellors become involved. The family's asylum application is in jeopardy.

It may well be that translator Claire Storey's skilful idiom plays a considerable part in making this challenging story readily accessible to UK readers. Unless they have direct knowledge of immigrant experience, they will surely learn much about what 'not belonging' feels like for someone around their own age; living in confined, even squalid circumstances, with very limited cash, no support from an extended family, maybe with the threat of being returned to the chaos of a war zone. Perhaps, like Madina, it may even mean watching the parents they have loved and trusted disintegrating in front of them.

The novel's ending offers hope but, at the same time, anxiety and loss. **GF**

*Maybe well worth considering for a School Book Group, and certainly for recommendation to individual readers.*

# Valediction: No.5 Jan and George

**Brian Alderson** is saying goodbye to his books as he donates his remarkable collection to Seven Stories. Here he bids farewell to two little treasures.

I bought these little treasures in February 1962 as my collecting activities were taking off. They came from a North London book dealer from whose catalogues I had previously bought interesting books but I have forgotten his name and I never saw another catalogue after this.

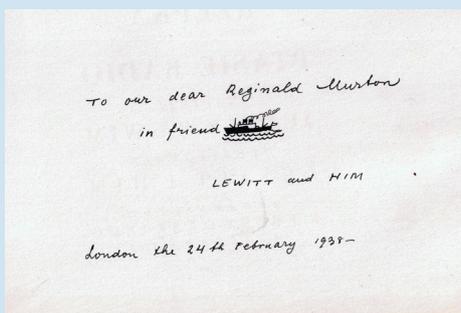
The Jan Lewitt and George Him whose books this dealer had come by had something of a growing fame, as Lewitt-Him, among the advertisers of the thirties, working from their office in Warsaw and their illustrations for the three rhymes by Julian Tuwim were a departure for them. They must have been aware of the writing on the wall at the Polish/German border and in 1938 they moved their business to London, setting in train a Polish printing of what was to be the English edition of **Lokomotywa**. Its imprint from the Minerva Publishing Co. of 36 Great Russell Street seems not to appear in the British Book Trade Index and may have been an 'outside office' of Faber & Faber. As advertising designers, Lewitt-Him were feted by Lund Humphries at this time too with an exhibition that included many of their takes on pharmaceutical products and also twelve original drawings from **Locomotive**.

So far as the text of that book is concerned, I have no idea how it reads in Polish, but the English adaptation consists of first an off-the-cuff jog-trot version of a cross-country train trip with a mixed bag of passengers, second the traditional tale of pulling up the turnip, and third an imagined conversation of the birds of the air via the comparatively new medium of radio. What was so striking was the kaleidoscope of layout, design and brilliant colour which brought to Britain a graphic originality native to the designers of Eastern Europe. Indeed we had to wait for Mabel George to carry Brian Wildsmith's work to the Brüder Rosenbaum in Vienna in 1960 to find its like.

PS. Tuwim was to have a curious afterlife after the war. His texts in Polish and German were reissued with colour illustrations by the Polish artist Jan Lenica who clearly knew of the work of his predecessors now in the wicked West. Later his work was reproduced in France and in 1970 the first story was published in London as **The Train** by Messrs Macdonald.

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Our London dealer was not done with Lewitt-Him and those two now rare books. As children's books editor at **Country Life**, Noel Carrington had already shown great interest in graphic work from the east and it is unsurprising to find in 1939 him taking



up with a story both written and illustrated by the couple: **The Football's Revolt**. It is an entertaining farce where a football, fed up with being kicked in the air refuses to come down (could Carrington have had a hand in the writing?). The folio format gives further opportunity to the artists' versatility which was to be a forerunner of the experimentation later in the forties in the picture books of such as Peter Lunn – also of European origin. (In 1944 an almost exact replica [probably unused sheets?] came out from the Sylvan Press and Nicholson & Watson.)

During the War there were two further picture books where the text was by

Jan Lewitt's wife, Alida but these were disappointing both as to narrative and unexciting illustration: **Five Silly Cats** from Faber (1943) and **Blue Peter**, an apparent late arrival from the Minerva company (1944). Before those, however, a war-time best-seller materialized when Faber brought the boys together with Diana Ross for **The Little Red Engine Gets a Name** (1942). She was a gifted storyteller (is anything of hers still in print?) and just as all the whistling and puffing noises make the engine's journey, carrying the King to London a good thing to read aloud so the narrative illustrations in black and white and colour bring a more direct accompaniment than occurred in the earlier colour books. It was the start of a successful series in which the foundation style of Lewitt-Him was brilliantly replicated by Leslie Wood.

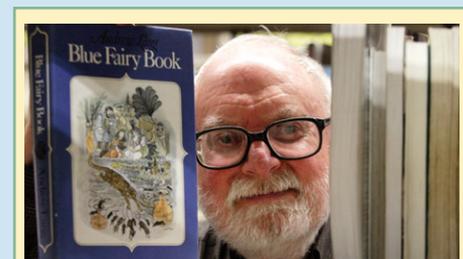
#### Biblio:

Julian Tuwim **Lokomotywa: Rzepka** (Według Starej Bajeczki): Ptasia Radio. Ilustrowali Levitt i Him. Warszawa: J.Przeworskiego, 1938. 180x360mm. [46]pp. Full-page and in-text colour lithographs throughout. Paper overboard with colour title illus. to front, full colour endpaper drawings repeated front and back. Original transparent wrapper. Provenance: Presentation inscription on p.[2] from the illustrators to Reginald Murton [?]

with

Julian Tuwim **Locomotive: The Turnip: The Birds' Broadcast**. Adapted from the Polish by Bernard J. Gutteridge and William J. Peace. Drawings by Lewitt and Him. Binding as above but with dust jacket as above with a drawing to rear. London: Minerva Publishing Co. Ltd. 36 Great Russell Street, W.C.n.d. [1938]. Printed in Poland

**Correction:** The note on Gollancz's **Junior Week-End Book** (BfK 251) was made (as noted) from a reprint, lacking a title-page. The (wrongly-filed) first edition has now turned up – a smarter job – and confirms J.R. Evans as the book's editor.



**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.