Authorgraph interview
Sita Brahmachari
Windows into Illustration
Jane Ray

plus EmpathyLab, Ruth Brown, A. F. Steadman and Mini Grey
www.booksforkeeps.co.uk
Editorial 254
What future for Inclusive Minds?

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 ground-breaking 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.
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 McKearey. 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 Shim and Zany Zoo; calming poems 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...
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 Paean (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.

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.

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.
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 its 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 cityscape. 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 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
across the fells – it changes so quickly. You are so connected with that's as awesome as the Lake District and you see the weather go nature, able to make up stories. But when you grow up in a landscape I wrote about it in 'We moved around a lot but the countryside that really got under own childhood. vital room to breathe and grow. I ask Sita if this is inspired by her are not just picturesque backdrops but provide her protagonists with recurrent themes skilfully woven throughout the plot. Green spaces novels, short stories and plays – humanity and the natural world are Throughout Sita's body of work – and there are award-winning 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 shoeed 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’ve 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.
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.

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

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

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!

10 Books for Keeps
No.254 May 2022

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.
**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.

**To Market! To Market!**
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 identitites 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 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**
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.

“EDVARD (Norwegian Forest cat) Nervous and easily spooked. Should live as a house cat, in a quiet home with a quiet old lady.”

“I wonder if Granny would like him,” thought Tom.

“EDVARD (Norwegian Forest cat) Nervous and easily spooked. Should live as a house cat, in a quiet home with a quiet old lady.”

Spread from A Gallery of Cats.

Ten Little Dogs

12 Books for Keeps No.254 May 2022
Ferelith 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

New in hardback May 2022

Ten Little Dogs

New smaller size with card pages June 2022

Shortlisted for the Teach Early Years Awards

‘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.


Ferelith Hordon is editor of Books for Keeps.

Pages from Eye Spy.
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 jilted 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 Chimbiri and illustrated by Joelle Avelino, was published by Scholastic in 2021, (eight years after Chimbiri’s *Secrets of the Afro Comb*, which she published through her own company, Golden Destiny). In a beautifully presented book, Chimbiri 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. Chimbiri 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 ‘expands 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, Chimbiri 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 Jammohmed 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 Harmaam 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...
Okugwu's highly anticipated debut novel (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)
- *Inky Pinky Ponky* illustrated by Dan Jones (edited by Mike Rosen and Susannah Steele in 1982)
- *Marcellus Lorraine Simeon* (originally published in 1984)
- *The Story of Afro Hair* KN Chimibiri, illustrated by Joelle Avelino (2021)
- *New Class at Malory Towers* Patrice Lawrence
- *BeYOUtiful* Shelina Jannamohamed, illustrated by Chanté Timothy (Welbeck, 2022),
- *I Am Not My Hair* Malika-Zaynah Grants (Black Jac 2021)
- *Rapunzel* Chloe Perkins, illustrated Archana Sreenivasan (Simon and Schuster 2017)
- *Rumaysa* Radja 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 medalist Ibtihaj Muhammad 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 stances, 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. Chimibiri, 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), 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 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 Sreenivasan, 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 medalist Ibtihaj Muhammad 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 stances, 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. Chimibiri, 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. Okogwu 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)
- *Inky Pinky Ponky* illustrated by Dan Jones (edited by Mike Rosen and Susannah Steele in 1982)
- *Marcellus Lorraine Simeon* (originally published in 1984)
- *The Story of Afro Hair* KN Chimibiri, illustrated by Joelle Avelino (2021)
- *New Class at Malory Towers* Patrice Lawrence
- *BeYOUtiful* Shelina Jannamohamed, illustrated by Chanté Timothy (Welbeck, 2022),
- *I Am Not My Hair* Malika-Zaynah Grants (Black Jac 2021)
- *Rapunzel* Chloe Perkins, illustrated Archana Sreenivasan (Simon and Schuster 2017)
- *Rumaysa* Radya 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)
- *Daddy Do My Hair: Beth’s Twists* Tola Okogwu (2018)
- *Onyeka* Tola Okogwu (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.
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 wobbegong, 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 wobbegong (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 Germs 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.

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 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 Walsy Meledin, 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...
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.
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 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’re magical but rejected by multiple publishers so Steadman returned to 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.
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 become ‘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 Theatre 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
**Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant**

**A Little Bit of Hush**

Paul Stewart, ill. Jane Porter, Otter-Barry, 32pp, 9781913074744, £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 refil 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.

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 hushhhhh. 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, 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, 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 refil 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.

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 hushhhhh. AH

**Cheesed Off**

Jake Hope, ill Genevieve Aspinall, Uclan Publishing, 32pp, 9781912979794, £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? Is it a puzzle and a disappearance...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 – a delicious food for the mice, here portrayed as a dapper crew - 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. It 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**


In this standout picturebook that zings with spring colours, kindness and fun, two lovely 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 delightful picture book that turns reveal after reveal into an absurd-yet-peaceful life 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.  

A liminous, 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

**Torys Milk and the Mulberry Tree**


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 their 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 with a return to simple, long and steady, love, but it will resonate with parents and carers, too. Time well spent with
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


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 door, and a knock, knock…’ As the pretty, magpie drawings alighting the girl’s attention to himself and the colourful, richly-flowered outdoors. Together they play at nothing 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 ‘how excited she is to see and name each thing.’ Not only does she find there is plenty to interact with: ‘My new friends are outside and they love the names I’ve given them.’ Realising that the world is just as interesting and is living, not only than indoors, she descends the stair to this place she finds herself in and discovers there are interesting things to do there. She becomes her real self and is ‘careful, enterprising, and cheerful ‘at the same time’. The illustrations show us a sad and lonely, mammal 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 47191257 1, £12.99 hbk. Illustrated with gentle humour and some wonderfully quirky details, this is a superb picture book which presents the theme in wonderfully positive terms. Outstanding. ES

The Little Elephant

Kate Read, Two Hoots, 32pp, 978 1 5209 85358 9, £12.99 hbk

Having just learned to swim and over-exited 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, apologies, 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 impulsive nature 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.

One Tiny Dot

Lucy Rowland, ill. Gunn 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 train 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 changes to a red and yellow flame) and both of these are helped by Kindness and his followers. There are lots of small kindness acts 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 an 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 Little Elephant

Kate Read, Two Hoots, 32pp, 978 1 5209 85358 9, £12.99 hbk
**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 promote appreciation of the power of language and the importance of being able to share how we feel with others. MMo

**Shelly Hen Lays Eggs**

Deborah Chancellor, illus Julia Groves, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978-1 9126 5089 9, £11.99 hbk

In this, the third of the picture book series Follow My Food, things happen to help younger children understand where their food comes from, we join a little boy who presents a day in the life of a free range hen. 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 tea might just be one Shelly provided.

Julia Chancellor uses lively, chaty language for main narrative, after which is a double-page spread with a simple 6-armed tra- 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 stories here and in this one, writer 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 – and will prompt appreciation of the power of language and the importance of being able to share how we feel with others. MMo

**Be Wild, Little One**

Oliiva Hope, illustrated by Daniel Eggnus, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 9781408884806 £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, rhythmic, the rhymes unforced and natural. However, here they have Daniel Eggnus to in another visual story – the visual, enhancing and expanding the image created by the verbal. His bold, unsaturated colours sing off the page, each spread perfectly 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, as 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, illus Amanda Quatery, 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 all big things is not a good thing. She wants to do with her life is 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, these illustrations add greatly to the whole. ES

**Human Town**

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

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, 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

**Rainbow Hands**


Childhood is evoked on the first page: ‘Playtime, studytime, naptime, snicktime, 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 symbolised delightfully illustrated in soft, fuzzy colours, every page turn bringing a new colour palette. A positive body story about celebrating an individual’s identity. GB

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

tucked up asleep in bed, across the globe a multitude 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, however, 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

**Books for Keeps**

No.254 May 2022
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 fall 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


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 colorless. We hear of what they have lost or left behind only that they have some meagre possessions and one another. Soon, they are 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 patterns a reminder, perhaps, of her home and short history. Yet as colourful as it is, it remains in shadow when compared to the narrow thread of her brother, wanting to tempt his sister outside, brings something similarly colourful and beautiful in: a butterfly trapped in a jar.

Together they release the creature yet it also remains trapped within the home, unable to fly towards the exit. 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, in takes 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 their new 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 layout serves 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 still blooming with hope and growth.

MT

A Bear’s Guide to Beekeeping


Bee-autiful! Join the author dancing through this wonderful picture book. To begin, capturing some bees must be the first target. Look out for the honey bee to be collected. This page has speech bubble comments from a pigeon, who finds the bee’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, sneezing, playing computer games! Readers will enjoy studying the illustrations throughout, a humorous must for any beekeeping fans. You’d be hard pressed to find a book more suitable 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 Kittens 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 QUE-SEUM. See a quokka, quartz, 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 C? It’s a P’OSEUM! it doesn’t have as many blue connections as they can, 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 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 start singing. ‘I just want to sing,’ Alerted by posters advertising opportunities for passage to the UK, (cabin class, £48, troop decks £20) 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 venues, then becoming famous in Europe. She lives for many years in Germany, then retires to Ireland where she dies in 1993. The illustrations for this historic epic by 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.

A New Adventure (The Magic Faraway Tree)

Jacqueline Wilson, illus Mark Beekch, Hodder Children’s Books, 304pp, 978-1444965375, £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 them, 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, Mao who is around nine years old and Bethany, known as Birdie, who is aged four or five. The children reach their enchaneted 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.

Women who led the way: Great Explorers and Adventurers

Mick Manning and Brita Granström, Otter-Barry, 48pp, 9781913074452 £12.99 hbk

Starting from Aud the Deep-minded from C6th 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 pages spread, 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.

Cameron Battle and the Hidden Kingdoms


Twelve-year-old Cameron Battle is an orphan living with his grandma in Atlanta. He receives a letter that claims he is the most closely to his dead mother is a book, a family treasure, part myth, part history, the story of a hidden, magical kingdom. His grandmother has the book locked away, with strict instructions to Cameron not to go into the pages where she keeps it. Of course, with his friends Alyiah and Zion over for a sleepover, Cameron does venture into the book the three of them open a portal into Chidani itself. There, Cameron discovers that he is the realm’s only hope, having pledged to protect it from the queen’s sister and threats of new slavery. Supported by his friends, Cameron finds the courage he needs through, amongst all the actions and adventures, 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.

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 mother and sister staying for a week in the house of Miss Filey while their parents are away. She is an exceptionally good old lady whose 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 cakes 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

28 Books for Keeps No.254 May 2022
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 Leo, as he is to her, 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 otherwise hectic comic activity.

The Riddle of The Sea


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.

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.

The Last Whale


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, indeed, has just been awarded the Waterstone’s Children’s Book Prize.

Leaving Home

Emily Kenny, illus Flavia Sorrentino, Rock the Boat, 52pp, 9781913024055, £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; they use surreal images, or make unexpected connections to encourage us to see our surroundings anew. Rather, Bertulis is most interested in exploring the subtler and more intimate relationships, which she does in an enviably spare and straightforward way. Finding an approach, often with surprising, often with surprising, that is wholly fitting the response in the reader. What are we to make of Lily, who lives with her grandma, but says her parents live in Hollywood, or of the little girl who, ‘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.’

The Lost Whale

Larysa Dennyshenko (trans Burhstrychna Tereschenko), ill. Masha Foya, Studio Press, 64pp, 978-180078414 7, £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 alludes 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 creative responses. The poems themselves are not overwhelming or long – never more than a two-page spread, but their forms are varied, even experimental (ode perhaps – or a villanelle) – but all invite playful engagement and enjoyment. This is helped by Daniel Gray-Barnett’s illustrations showing 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, 52pp, 9781913024055, £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 nervously 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 the other kinds.

On the day Tonks joins the school she has a strange experience, a conversation with a seagull. The bird 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 to survive the difficulties it entails.

Emily Kenny, who is herself autistic, has managed to blend a number of disparate elements together in this novel. It is of course a boarding school adventure like Malory Towers. But its dramatic persona include not only schoolgirls and schoolmasters 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

Dr Jessica L. Ware, ill. Chaoy Prabhat, Neon Squid Books, 48pp, 9781471179088, £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 riffling through his totally 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 really care about any of this, except that he knows is a big multinational needs someone to test out roller coasters, and water slides, and supercars, and chocolate, and cheeseburgers, and games, and bikes, and water slides, 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 being the world’s most average child 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 pasta? Should Dad ditch his usual Friday night curry for something more spicy (no… he really shouldn’t)?

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 shadowy world of bugs living not only in the countryside but in our cities too and the amazing ways different bugs use their wings.
in the form of snide comments and sarcastic remarks that will drive 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.

This imaginative, compelling story offers a perfect way for today.

Needle

Patrice Lawrence, Barrington Stoke, 124pp, 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. The novel’s format is taken by Patrice Lawrence to create a concise, charged narrative that immediately engages the reader. “What is it off the magic and many will recognise her. Her anger and rage is not a device; it is very real — an emotion felt by all — especially in young people. It is central to 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 can hope that Charlene will achieve her greatest wish — perhaps the simplest — contact with her little sister, Kandi.

1. Length is often seen as an indication of depth, 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 gargoyle, 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 wonderful books, and your reviewer enjoyed this one tremendously. DB

Every Cloud

Ros Roberts, Little Tiger, 354pp, 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.
their own experiences - that readers will come to care about where Amy ends up in September. It takes subtle managing to develop that kind of relationship.

Wrath

Marcus Sedgwick, Barrington Stoke, 311pp, 978180090 089 9, £9.99 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 northerly 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 while the police hunt is directed at the unfolding mystery.

As the story progresses the time frame switches between the quest to find Cassie and her new life being built 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 Cassie’s mother’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? 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 having seen more.

Budding scientists might wish to find out more about ‘The Schumann Resonance,’ low frequency, resonance, ‘low frequency as a way of staving off a continual state of debilitating anxiety. Not a cheerful scene, but Katya Balan alternates 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. It is a wild, independent person, 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 - Iridis 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 past, as Orla is obsessed with, it is as a way of staving off a continual state of debilitating anxiety. Not a cheerful scene, but Katya Balan alternates 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. It is a wild, independent person, 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 - Iridis 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

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 everything and everyone. 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 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 debut. With just one life left, they have 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’s is well drawn, and the mysteries surrounding the eel man Lenny, Uncle Gordon Audrey and Terry her fiancé, keep the reader guessing until the very end. The last chapter ties things up very neatly if a bit hastily, but all ends well.

The repeated emphasis on how much each child continues to struggle with the effects of past trauma does at times threaten to become somewhat tiresome, but Balen is a skillful 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 back. In back cover showing readers how they can create their own paper cranes. Good luck with that! NT

Sharon Creech, Guppy Books, 230pp., 9781913101964, £6.99 pbk

The new homeroom and English teacher, Miss Lightstone, writes intriguing messages and questions on the black board: Am I your em? Miss Lightstone. Who are you? Gina Filomena and her classmates wonder how they should respond to it. Gina is top of the class, and she bonds with Miss Lightstone, mainly about her occasional lack of attention in class, and this forms the first chapter of Sharon Creech’s novel. Indeed, by the time
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, Antiono, 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 Gina bring. I do have some misgivings about novelists whose narratives turn out to be budding writers, but there are some fine precedents and perhaps this is too an exception. It is elegantly written in short chapters, funny, and sharply and warmly observed. It delights in individuality and peculiarity 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, £7.99 pbk

Ellie Clements wrote this book, her debut novel, so that children of colour could find themselves represented, understood and affirmed. 11-year-old Prune, her 15 year-old brother Jesse and their Mum have moved from a flat in an urban tower block to a house in the countryside, 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 bunging 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 obvious wrong, this continues. Three girls are mean to her and her new friend Doug, and one day, after being called ‘a coloured’ 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 her colours have followed. 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 drug dealing, and the police are able to warn him.

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. There’s room for more from this new author. DB

Onyeka and the Academy of the Sun


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’s ‘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 a bracelet in the Sun, a magical bracelet that her mother found when she was a child in Nigeria, and she finds that she has superpowers and is part of a group called the Solaris. She is to attend a school called ‘The Academy of the Sun’, which is run by her mother. She learns from other Solaris 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 Solaris 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, it 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 ‘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, 9781912147785, £7.00 pbk

Azari’s 15-year-old sister Sharnaz was killed by male family members after refusing to marry a man four times her 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. Squall, 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 impossible 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. Rebecca is a white Irish girl, a kindred spirit, 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 look up 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 of the Centre 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 reality for refugees is far from ideal. It is 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 had been placed in Direct Provision in Ireland and over 2,000 of those were children. The story of Azari and her mother, graphically and vividly, tells the story of those who 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 Saamun 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 browser named Adi, 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 Adi both manage to leave the forest?

The book hits a peak of interest in an episode which candidly took this reviewer by surprise. The two children are caught between two devious characters, one English and the other Dutch. The strange episode succeeds in driving the narrative with greater power and immediacy than other episodes, which is a children’s story. Zo seems to be a product of threatened disasters. Late in the book the reader learns that the boy Adi 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, 9781914496470, £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 follow them. The realisation that 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 concentration camp and they hope they can reach neutral territory. Mixed with this heart wrenching story we have the relationship that Kara forms with her mother, 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

Reviews

Books for Keeps No.254 May 2022 31
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 story, we have the importance of the individuals. At the heart of this from different problems, they are very brave and have excellent computer skills…and one of them can drive unbelievably well.

The Village is suspicious of 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 has little notion of the old books. She somehow knows about boats, creatures never settled down into a relationship. Leather, millionaire baddies, vulnerable skin colours, faiths, ages, shapes and sizes is as tolerant, patient and accepting of Bubble 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 fact that the three heroes are older books.

We often like to imagine, but medieval reservoirs. Ash has little notion of the climate issues which Johnson invites us to gradually, albeit reluctantly, accept this new generation of settlers. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency there lies the author's call-to-arms to rescue the planet. The same urgency
than a nice line in irony from Bronwyn. When she and Ash realise that all the Last Villagers have disappeared and the Prestress is lying drowned in the ponded pool at the foot of the valley, they head off in search of The Princess, but 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 accepting differences. However, she is also about class and the way that it looks after people, whether it treats the trader as a citizen or as slaves. The contrast between the two, the technological and the magical world really brings the idea of a steampunk society to mind, but with the added concept of community and beautiful scenery. Tommy follows her lead, bewitched by her but unable to find out about 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 won’t say that 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 appealing 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*
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, Orion, was knocked down by a car and is now living with his grandparents. Tara is an artist and writes found poetry and diaries. She is described as a racist insult and also the lack of opportunity for her to pursue her dreams. She seeks to unravel what lies behind her feelings of alienation and dislocation.

The narrative into the poetic. Orion’s feelings are powerful and beautifully described. Orion is a failing athlete and begins to explore the unwelcome feelings of himself and his surroundings. He is a young woman, with all the uncertainties, pressures and fun that this involves. Orion will find it hard 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


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 and fun that this involves. Orion and 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


Muddy People

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 mother 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. ‘good girls don’t wear bikinis’ and ‘no moving out without a husband.’ Lots of things are ‘haram’ or forbidden. A series of rules are described to illustrate each of the rules.

These chapters are interspersed with shorter chapters focused on her cousin. The time moves from past to present as she seeks to unravel what lies behind her parents’ divorce and at the same time explores her own sense of self. Orion’s father, his struggle to fit in and lead his life obeying the rules of his religion and his sense of duty for his wife and grandmother shine through.

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

Kelix Rowe, Walker, 352pp, 9781290066390, £7.99 pbk.

Finding Jupiter

Kelis Rowe, Walker, 352pp, 9781290066390, £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. Then she meets Orion, who falls in love with her but finds that she is someone who is always obstacles-Jupiter’s mother’s fear that her daughter will get hurt, Orion’s father’s dogged insistence that she must obey the rules of his religion and must attempt to integrate herself into a different society. Readers who come from communities who do not fit neatly into the categories of the book may 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 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 her to be 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 requests an art 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 entering for drama? This novel is abildungsroman 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 communities who do not fit neatly into the categories of the book may 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


Flora died of neuroblastoma at the age of fifteen, her brother Amis has just turned into a bully and a malicious fiddler to Minnie on the running track. Lena sees it as a chance to shine - a young woman, with all the uncertainties, pressures 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
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 dead 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 modern technology. The technologists deal 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, overwhelmed by the scale and nature of the astonishing technology – which succeeds in nearly but not quite mirroring the character of the deceased twin princess, Esah. Aisha and Una is depicted with honesty and respect. There is 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 together and that of the present day, their journey leads Aisha in particular to discover more about herself and her family. The intergenerational relationships and the novel’s exploration of 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

Julia Rabirnowicz, trans. Claire Robertson
Red Fox 28th February 2021
9781839131240, £7.99 pbk

Madina is 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 emotional 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 no way do they rule the 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, her 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 an amalgamation of contrasts 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, a medic whose only-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 squallid, 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 during the War there were two further unused sheets? came out from the Sylvan Press and Nicholson & Watson. (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.

Bibliography:

Correction: The note on Gallianz’s Junior Week-End Book (Bffk 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.