

# BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.255

*the* children's book magazine online

July 2022



Authorgraph interview  
**Katherine Rundell**

Windows into Illustration  
**Roozeboos**



plus **Ruta Sepetys**,  
new **Beyond the Secret Garden** and  
**Joseph Coelho**, Waterstones Children's Laureate

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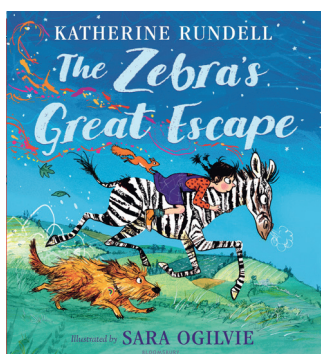
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### COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **The Zebra's Great Escape** by **Katherine Rundell** illustrated by **Sara Ogilvie**. Thanks to **Bloomsbury Children's Books** for their help with our July cover.



# Guest Editorial

## Frank Cottrell-Boyce

I've just finished a book tour. After years of Zooms and Teams it felt good to be going through the old routine of eye-wateringly early trains, of walking up to school gates unsure whether you were going to be treated like a rock god or someone selling brushes. It felt like things were finally getting back to normal. No masks. No testing. No one even talking about the pandemic any more. But things are not normal. And we should be talking about this. About what has changed. Because it seems to me that for our children, everything has changed.

I first began to think about it for a fairly happy reason. I read out a passage from my new book – **Noah's Gold** – about a not-very-socially-distanced encounter with a basking shark. The kids' questions at the end are not the usual prepared ones – not where do you get your ideas? Not how many books have you written? Not even the standard – pineapple on pizza yes or no? Instead they were all questions about basking sharks. I admit to be under-prepared but that was great. I felt the kids were really engaging with the book, with something new, instead of with the Visit. This happened time and time again. In the staff room between sessions I'd mention this and every time it ignited a conversation about how different these children were. How the experience of the pandemic had changed them. Some of it is obvious. Obvious but not discussed. For instance obviously a lot more of these children have experienced the loss of an older relative or even a parent than you would normally expect. They've also had a lot less contact with those older relatives. Obviously these children have missed some of the punctuation marks – the birthdays, weddings, first communions, bar mitzvahs, prize days, leavers' balls – that help define who they are. Some of the smaller things are the most telling. One teacher said she found it really upsetting that her children were embarrassed to sing in class. That led to a conversation about how these children relate to each other. On the one hand, many said that the children were able to take real joy in small pleasures – for instance a description of a basking shark – and were kinder and more patient with each other. At the same time they many had lost the ability to resolve issues between themselves, were turning to teachers for the most trivial reasons. One said, 'They're like coiled springs, reacting much more quickly and aggressively when challenged.' Above all there was concern about children arriving in reception with very poor language skills.

I'm an entertainer not an education professional. And of course when I visit a school I am myself a distortion field. The school will be on its best behaviour. Though it's interesting to see what different schools regard as 'best behaviour' – that ranges from a joyful engagement to a regimented respect. But I see a LOT of schools and I always come back from these tours reeling at just how



unequal our society is. In a thousand ways the pandemic has accelerated those inequalities. Sometimes to breaking point.

The other thing that has accelerated of course is children's dependency on screens. Of course it was thanks to the internet that they were able to carry on their relationships with friends, far away relatives and with school. And it's noticeable that their digital skills have improved. But we have no idea what that increased dependence will do to them in the future.

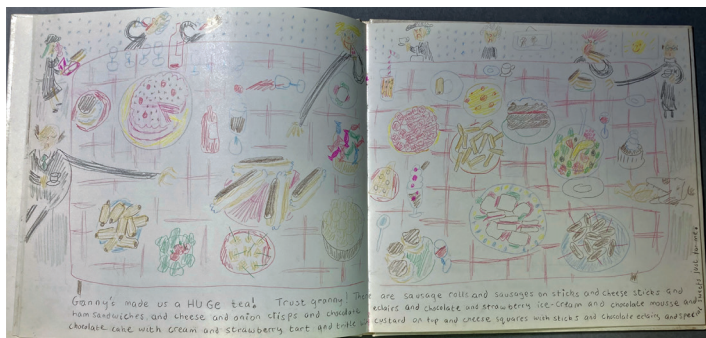
Everything has changed. The nature of the relationship between school and home, between real life and the digital world, the nature of friendship, the definition of study, all changed utterly. This is not all negative. I don't think it's even an entirely bad thing that these children have had to think about mortality a bit more. It may well make them more conscious of their environment, of the important things in life. Which brings me to another stark truth that the tour rammed home. In a reverse of the natural order of things we asked our children to bear the brunt of the pandemic – to make sacrifices – in order to protect the grown-ups, the economy and the NHS. Now that they've done that, what is their reward. As I'm typing this I'm listening to the candidates for the Conservative party leadership describe their visions for the country. The most remarkable thing is the absence of any conversation about children. To the extent that they are mentioned at all it's about catching up. What does catching up mean? It means erasing this experience. Getting to a point where we can act like it never happened. Why? Teachers, parents and children have done things differently. What worked? What didn't? These children are emerging from a massive experience which in which no one is interested. They are stepping into a world in which huge things are happening – war, environmental disaster, catastrophic inequalities – but in which the adult political conversation is entirely taken up with trivia. What are children to make of that? There has never been a better opportunity to begin afresh. There has never been a worse time to ignore our children.

# A Story from the Archives: The Queen's Knickers and Other Stories

**Sarah Lawrance** returns to the Seven Stories archives to examine **The Queen's Knickers**.

Amid the tidal wave of press coverage of the Platinum Jubilee, a curious snippet put me in mind of Nicholas Allan's 1993 picturebook **The Queen's Knickers**: apparently, the committee tasked with approving official memorabilia for the Coronation 'unanimously agreed to reject an application for crown-embroidered knickers' ([theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jun/02/70-things-we-know-about-the-queen-from-corgis-and-cornflakes-to-hmy-britannia-and-bond](https://theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jun/02/70-things-we-know-about-the-queen-from-corgis-and-cornflakes-to-hmy-britannia-and-bond)). Elsewhere I read that, in 2015, a pair of Queen Victoria's cotton knickers with a 45" waistband fetched £12,090 at auction. Clearly the public fascination with royalty and underwear has quite a history.

Yet this was not in fact the genesis of Nicholas Allan's story. A dummy book in Allan's archive at **Seven Stories** which pre-dates **The Queen's Knickers** tells a rather more complicated tale. **Granny's Longest Holiday** is a 32-page picturebook draft with text and full-sized illustrations drawn in coloured pencil. At the beginning (Tuesday) we see Granny sitting up in bed, welcoming her affectionate granddaughter with open arms; but on the next page Granny has disappeared – in her place is a pink coffin on a wooden stand, with the text 'here she is on Friday, all packed up for her longest holiday'. The granddaughter throws herself enthusiastically into the whole process of 'saying goodbye': dressing up smartly (she wants to wear her flowery dress but has to compromise with flower knickers under a sober black outfit); riding in the funeral cortège ('Granny gets the longest car because she's going the furthest'), singing loudly at the service ('so Granny can hear me in her box'), and peering curiously into the grave ('It's funny Granny's going down when heaven is up. She must be going by tube.') The climax is a magnificent tea back at Granny's house – a double page spread of sausages, sandwiches, crisps and cake, as in all the best children's



'Granny's made a HUGE tea!' from **Granny's Longest Holiday**

stories. At bedtime, the little girl asks her mother when Granny will be coming back and is told 'Granny's gone on her longest holiday, dear, so she won't be back;' yet the girl has the last laugh because that very night Granny appears beside her bed to say thank you for seeing her off, for singing so nicely, dancing so well, and most of all for wearing her flower knickers.

Clearly Allan (who has lived from birth with a serious heart condition and has spent long periods in hospital) wanted to make a point about the need for adults to talk honestly with children about death. There are some successful visual jokes – like the huge hearse which stretches across the double page spread – but overall the story doesn't quite work as a book for children. However, it was the beginning of something: as Allan's editor said to him at the time 'What you really want to do is write a book about knickers...'

**The Queen's Knickers** came next in order of composition, but at first there seemed little hope of the book ever being published,



'I've got no knickers for the ball' pps 4&5 from **The Princess's Knickers**

on account of the lead character being so recognisably not just any queen but HM Queen Elizabeth II. In an attempt to circumvent this issue, Allan drafted **The Princess's Knickers**, with a generic fussy princess character in place of the Queen. The Princess has the largest collection of knickers in the world, kept in a huge wardrobe, under the watchful eye of her maid Dilys – motifs which will be familiar to readers of **The Queen's Knickers**. Then the story takes another turn – an invitation to the Prince's Birthday Ball throws the Princess into a fit of despair when she is quite unable to find a pair of knickers that she is happy to wear. In the end, she passes the invitation on to Dilys, who has no such qualms; Dilys has a wonderful time at the ball and ends up marrying the prince and having three children. Meanwhile the fussy princess continues to dress more elegantly than anyone else, and, when she dies, is laid out in her coffin wearing the most exquisite pair of jewel-encrusted white satin knickers ever made, though of course nobody ever sees them: a sorry end for a decidedly unsympathetic character. Not surprisingly, this version was abandoned when **The Queen's Knickers** was finally – happily – published.

In another, later, unpublished story, **The Queen's Mustache**, we meet the Queen again, but this time there are no knickers. The Queen gets tired of always being recognised and likes to go about in disguise – as a horse, as a postman, and as a lavatory attendant (the lavatory being another signature Allan motif). She foils a horse theft, is nearly locked out of the palace, and enters a Queen Lookalike competition in which she wins only third prize; after this she decides it's probably best just to be herself, even if she is the Queen.

Nicholas Allan's scatological humour may be more universally appreciated by children than adults, but – as his archive shows – striking the right balance between pushing the boundaries and being un-funnily crass – or downright bizarre – is a hard act to pull off. **The Queen's Knickers**, first published in 1993, works because its juxtaposition of HM the Queen and Knickers feels just a little naughty, without being actually rude; its portrayal of the Queen is affectionate, relatable and joyful – and she even gets to dive out of a plane long before her famous meeting with James Bond at London 2012.

In 2020 the Society of Authors launched **The Queen's Knickers Award**, generously endowed by Nicholas Allan, for an illustrated book 'that strikes a quirky, new note and grabs the attention of a child, whether this be in the form of curiosity, amusement, horror or excitement'. The 2022 award, announced in June, was to **Inch and Grub, a Story about Cavemen**, written by Alastair Chisholm and illustrated by David Roberts. Nominations for the 2023 award open in August.



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

# Powered by poetry: an interview with our new Children's Laureate Joseph Coelho

Joseph Coelho has been announced as the new **Waterstones Children's Laureate**. He is the twelfth incumbent and takes over from Cressida Cowell. Coelho has written picture books and fiction and has a YA novel scheduled for publication in the autumn but was first and is probably best known for his poetry. Unsurprisingly, poetry is at the heart of his plans for his laureateship. **Andrea Reece** interviewed Joseph about his ambitions for the years ahead.

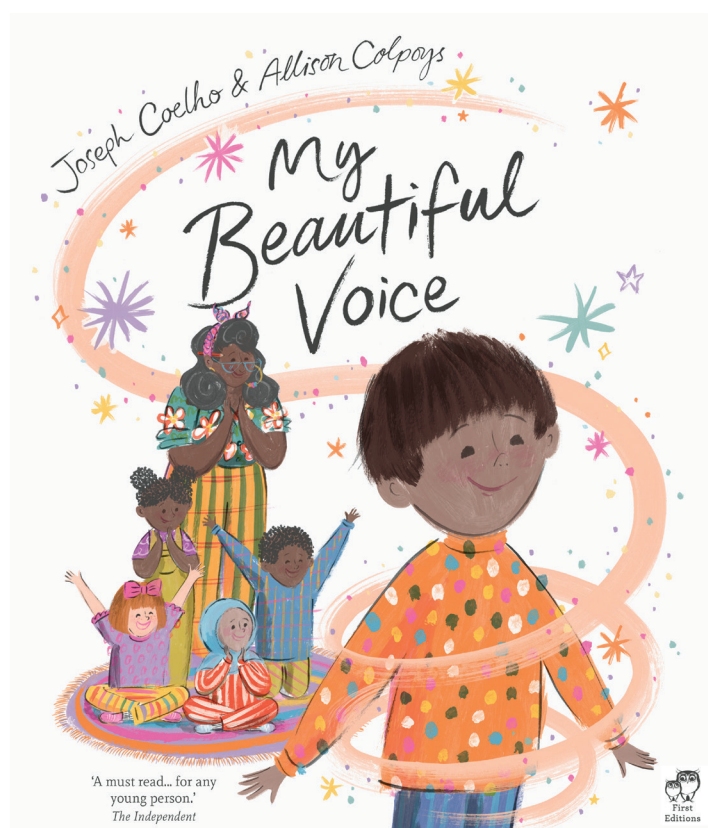
The **Waterstones Children's Laureate** is the 'foremost representative of children's literature' according to the press release sent out by **BookTrust**. Certainly, recent occupants of the role worked tirelessly over their two-year terms to promote the vital importance of reading and children's literature – who can forget Cressida Cowell's Laureate Charter or Jacqueline Wilson's **Great Books to Read Aloud?** Like his predecessors, Joe is ready to hit the ground running. 'When the call came through with the good news, I was awed and honoured. I had a little cry, then I got excited and started planning... It's such a privileged position, an opportunity to highlight things that are really important to you.' He identifies those things as poetry – and getting the nation, young and old writing poetry; libraries; and encouraging new talent. It's an ambitious list, but energy has never been a problem – as Joe says he's always been busy, there's his library marathon for example, of which more later – the difference now is that he has a team behind him to help.

'I wanted to work to my strengths, and I know a lot about poetry and about getting young people to write poetry. I've been going into schools week after week after all, and running poetry workshops, but now I can do that on a much bigger scale.' Central to Joe's plans for poetry will be his **'Poetry Prompts'**, a regular programme of activity – much of it delivered online – to get everyone, young and old, geared up about writing poetry. 'I'll be drawing on my experiences of performance poetry', he says, 'and making it really accessible. I want the nation to feel we can write and share poems.' He was a little cagey about plans, details are scheduled to be revealed in the months ahead, but partners are in place to help deliver the project.

His own experience of poetry feeds into another of the three pillars of his Laureateship, called **Bookmaker Like You**. This is intended to showcase new talent within the industry and spotlight their work, ensuring that every child can see themselves as a bookmaker. His own interest in poetry began at school when he wrote a poem for a competition. He'd seen a documentary about the cruel treatment of bears, and that became the subject of the poem, which was called *Unbearable*. 'It didn't win the competition,' he says, 'but I enjoyed the process so much that I carried on.' He didn't seem himself as a writer however until he was in sixth form. A visit from the late, great Jean Binta Breeze changed everything. 'She sat on the stage and read a brilliant poem about the softest touch. It just blew me and my classmates away. That was the first time that it occurred to me that poetry could be a job, not just something I wrote, but a career. It was also the first time that I'd seen someone who looked a bit like me in the publishing world.' As a poet in schools, he has himself seen the particular effect poetry has on children, 'I've seen now a handful of times where there has been a child in the class who doesn't speak and they have chosen the poetry session as the moment to share their voice – it's a huge inspiration for [his picture book] **My Beautiful Voice**. Poetry opens up a space where a child can grow in confidence. It is a natural space to share your voice.'

Poetry was his gateway into the world of publishing, and it's his firm belief that it will open up the world of writing and creativity for all young people. 'With poetry I feel like you're dealing with the units of language, it's all about honing a skill to use a few words to pack a punch. And that's what all good writing does. I remember watching a documentary about Toni Morrison in which she said, "Poets write good prose they just cut it up." That's so true! If you want to define what makes a poem when you really boil it down, it's line breaks – we know what a poem looks like, and we know when it's not a poem and is prose because of how it looks on the page.'

**Bookmaker Like You** embraces all aspects of the creative process, and is designed to encourage not just authors but illustrators,





storytellers, editors, publishers, agents. 'I want to allow every young person to see themselves as a bookmaker. It's so important to encourage more writers, more talent into the industry.' Does he feel a particular responsibility to children like him? 'I do feel there's a responsibility to help diversify bookshelves because of my lived experience, and there is an opportunity there. I get that. When I'm in schools, other kids of colour look at me and I can see their eyes light up. Even as an adult, I was surprised at how impactful that can be. Watching **Black Panther** for example, a blockbuster movie filled with black and brown faces – I wasn't expecting to be so moved by it.' He adds, 'It's so important not only that we see ourselves, but that we get to see and experience other lives. It helps up learn and grow and be kind, all these things we take for granted but which I believe will change the world, if we get it right.'

Changing the world would have been a good place to end, but there's still the third tenet of his laureateship: libraries. Pre-pandemic, Joe undertook to visit and join every library authority in the country and – without the backing of any team – managed to tick off 140! Then came COVID and an enforced break, leaving 70 to go, plus a few special ones. He's determined to bag them all during the course of the next two years. 'The laureates have had a great tradition of supporting libraries so it feels a very natural part of the job but especially as I'd already started my library marathon. Having been

scuppered by the pandemic, it's a silver lining that I get to complete it now as laureate, a chance to shine an even brighter light on libraries I visit.' He will be borrowing books, highlight children's authors and illustrators, the plan to get even more people through the doors of their local libraries and enthuse local communities about this amazing, free resource on their doorstep.

What does he hope to see at the end of his two-year reign? 'People sharing poems widely, a greater awareness of new children's authors and illustrators, libraries celebrated. This means so much to me, it's an honour beyond my wildest dreams, beyond anything my younger self could have imagined. I want to give, grow and learn through the process, and I'm so excited about what's to come.'

We should be too.

Keep up with Joseph Coelho on the [BookTrust website](https://www.booktrust.org.uk/).



**Andrea Reece** is managing editor of **Books for Keeps**.

# Authorgraph No.255

**Katherine Rundell**  
interviewed by  
**Imogen Russell Williams**

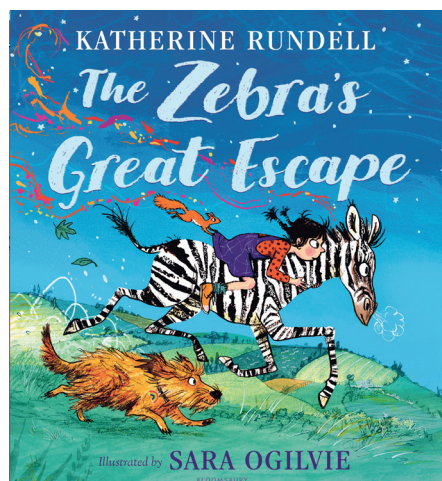
The tightrope-walker, scholar and writer Katherine Rundell is the author of bestselling books for children including **Rooftoppers**, **The Wolf Wilder**, **The Explorer** and **The Good Thieves**, as well as two works of non-fiction for adults, **Why You Should Read Children's Books, Even Though You Are So Old and Wise**, and **Super-Infinite**, a biography of John Donne. Her work has won the Costa Children's Book Award, the Waterstones Children's Book Prize and the Blue Peter Book Award, among others, and has been translated into thirty languages. Her new picture book, **The Zebra's Great Escape**, illustrated by Sara Ogilvie, is published in September 2022. Imogen Russell Williams interviewed Katherine for **Books for Keeps**.

**You have written passionately in defence of adults reading books for children, but you come from a studious background of reading very grown-up books yourself. How did you first find yourself shaping a story for children?**

It seems to me that children's books at their best need a lot of the same skills as those of a scholar; it's always an act of imaginative casting yourself into another self. When I write for children, I write both for myself, aged now, with all the desires that I have, the things in life that I want, and an acknowledgement of human frailty and cruelty and chaos; and I also want all the things that I wanted as a child, a sense of glee, delight, food, texture, atmosphere. I think that the ideal children's book feels like an act of both enormous imaginative work – you're imagining what it was to be a child, what might please a child – and also enormous intellectual work, because you are trying to tell the truth to children about the world in a way that they will find workable. That sounds slightly grand, but I mean it in the way that things like **The Tiger Who Came to Tea** tells the truth about the comedy of the world, and its surrealism. My academic work doesn't feel that different to me from writing for children. Obviously it involves vastly more footnotes, but I think the best academic work also uses a huge amount of imagination. To me, even though obviously they are worlds apart, Latin satire and picture books often feel like they're on the same continuum: of trying to find a way to explain something fascinatingly important.

**Your child protagonists are permitted a great deal of wildness, peril and secrets. Do you ever worry about offering too much dangerous freedom on the page?**

I very, very truly don't. I think children are themselves often very good at doing dangerous things carefully, and I think a life devoid of danger in childhood is a life which in adulthood risks feeling a little bit thwarted and smaller than it might otherwise have been.



So much of my books deal with fear – I think it's quite explicitly stated in **The Explorer** – 'You're right to be afraid – do it anyway'. And often we're really more interested in emotional danger, but that isn't a plot. So often things like 'drive an aeroplane out of the Amazon rainforest' are also standing in for the idea of other kinds of challenge that children face. There's a bit in the book where it says 'He flew towards fear, and towards hope' – and that's very literal, he is in an aeroplane. But I'm hoping that as children get older they might look back on that book and realise that it's also attempting to offer them some kind of metaphorical map. I love the way that Frank Cottrell-Boyce says 'What are children's books for? They're to teach you how to be happy.' – and I think one of the ways to be happy is to be able to embrace a certain amount of risk. (I should also admit that I have been held responsible for a fractured ankle and a badly sprained wrist from children who went rooftopping, but you know, that is genuinely my hit rate in thirteen years of writing children's books, and I just don't think that's that bad!)

**There is also a lot of blood, snot, wolf pee and sloth poo in your books. Are you deliberately unsanitary?**

Yes, very much so! I think there is so much joy in a certain amount of untrammelledness. But also, anyone who's ever met a child knows that children are just quite *grubby*, and constantly attracted to things that will be sticky, that will be mildly disgusting; and I don't know why exactly, but I do know that I felt it myself as a child – the longing to be up close with things, and feel the mark of the world, with scraped and muddy knees. I took pleasure in having slightly grubby feet most of the time. I think there's a kind of delight in not being afraid to get messy, because in getting a little bit messy, you have crossed a boundary away from the interdictions of perfection, the imperative of perfection. And I think that keeping dirt at bay would take so long, and it would be such an overwhelming focus, that just letting a little bit in, letting kids be a little bit filthy, opens up so much space for more exciting adventures.

**You've addressed many 'classic' tropes in your books – being sent away to school, orphans in search of parents, survival and exploration, circuses and heists. What challenges have you faced in updating these tropes?**

I am so grateful for the sense that when we write now, we have a duty of care to present the world as it is, and not only the upper middle class white society that dominated children's fiction for the first half of the twentieth century. In practical terms, it's been a conscious process of self-assessing, and trying to do at every stage everything you can to ensure that you are respecting a diverse world, that has different colour, and children with visible differences. I really appreciate and cherish the use of a sensitivity reader, because you're being offered valuable information about a [context] around which you did not grow up. For instance, in **The Good Thieves**, I wanted to write about American racism – in passing. I didn't want it to be a book in which only my Black character experiences a trauma that the other characters are not exposed to. But of course you can't write about America in the 1920s without acknowledging how dangerous and cruel it was for children in racialised bodies. And I had two different sensitivity readers, and the things they pointed out were really, really valuable. For instance, one of them was that my Black character was the tallest of the children, because I had imagined him as a trapeze artist, flying through the air, and she said 'you won't necessarily think it, but there's a real trope about the strong, muscular



Black child – and so maybe he could just not be the tallest? Maybe he could be the small, lithe, darting one?’ And so that is what Samuel is, in **The Good Thieves**. And I really appreciated just being given these insights that I otherwise would not have known. I have been dismayed by the clamour that it is a muzzling of artistic freedom. It’s just extra information; and if you’re in any way scholarly inclined, it’s an incredibly valuable thing to have.

**“Wolves, like children, are not born to lead calm lives”.**

**How much in need of ‘wilding’ do you think today’s children are, especially given the toll of the pandemic?**

I think the pandemic is the key thing here. Children made such a huge sacrifice for the good of the nation, and I salute the grace and patience of so many of the children I know, who met that need with real generosity. But it has been so hard for them, and to have to be afraid of the kind of clumsy wild running about that’s so key to childhood – we urgently need now to offer them recompense, and I despair slightly of that being forthcoming. But I think children deserve – not just deserve, but urgently need – that feeling of wildness, of not being constantly hemmed in by restrictions and regulations – and I really really hope that we can find a way to get those spaces for them.

**You’ve written mainly for readers of (roughly) eight to twelve – but you have a picture book coming out soon, *The Zebra’s Great Escape*, illustrated by Sara Ogilvie.**

**What’s it like, writing for much younger readers?**

I loved writing Zebra! It was such a huge delight. A picture book is shorter, it’s easier to keep the entirety of it – structure and character and pace – in your head. I could ‘read’ Zebra to myself in memory, page by page, in a way that I couldn’t for any of my novels. The pictures do half the storytelling! And with a good picture book, the pictures are always narratively active; they always are telling not just the story on the page that I’ve written, but also more than that. For instance, Zebra is about a girl who discovers a zebra whose parents were kidnapped. She’s playing on a swing in the play park, and he startles her and she flies off and bumps her head, [and then] when he breathes on her, she can understand what he’s saying. And presenting that concept, that a swirl of colours becomes a form of storytelling – many illustrators might well have told me to f\*\*\* off, but Sara was just so brilliant in the way she rose to it. And then there were all these little things that I wouldn’t have thought of; like when

all the animals are ranged in fury around [the villain] Mr Spit, a lot of the very small animals are riding on the foreheads of a lot of the very large animals, and it makes a fabulous battleground scene. It’s not in the text – that’s just Sara being brilliant!

**You’ve been writing very successful children’s books for thirteen years now. How do you think the landscape of children’s literature has changed in that time?**

It’s very trite, but people often say this is a golden age of children’s literature, and I think there is a huge amount of truth in that. I think there is real focus and ambition in the children’s books that are being produced today; there’s such a glorious range of ideas and imagination. I think that we have finally realised that of course we urgently need diversity of people from different racial backgrounds – and I think we have so far to go. I’m so grateful though that we’ve made a beginning. But we also need so much more diversity of stories, of people coming from different traditions, of people from different classes... We are still a very middle-class profession, children’s writing – I think that’s to do with money, and the fact that it doesn’t make very much, unless you happen to be very fortunate. But I do think it has got so much better. There’s just so much more – we have a flood of children’s books at the moment, and that has been a real joy to see. And I know some think it’s a saturated market, but if you think of it not in terms of the marketplace, but just in terms of the cornucopia being offered to kids, that’s a real, formidable delight.

**You recently published *Super-Infinite*, a biography of John Donne for adults. It sparkles with your characteristic fervent, evident delight in your subject, but it is definitely a Grown-Up Book. How differently did you have to operate when writing it?**

The main thing is that I have loved John Donne ever since I was myself a child, and it really did feel like if I’d got it wrong, I would be doing harm to a great man; to a great person, who had seen a great deal about the world. But also, I had one shot. No one’s going to read two books about John Donne from me. So I had one shot to make people fall in love. He both thought we were this kind of appalling disaster – that we were cruel and mean and spiteful, and... in the terms of the seventeenth century, sinful. But he also thought we were staggeringly sexy, funny, wildly capable of intelligence, imagination, boldness – and he also thought that we were infinite. He had a sense of us as miraculous, and I love that, and it is also something I believe utterly about people, and I think that’s why I’ve loved him ever since I was very young – he shaped and matched my sense of what people are. And that’s the sense that I want to offer kids. ‘You’re right to be afraid – do it anyway’ has its colloquy in a sense of ‘the world is miraculous and very difficult’. It is the most difficult thing in the world to be alive, and it is also so staggeringly astonishing that it really behoves us to be astonished daily. I want to offer kids that; that sense that yes, we are chaos and confusion, but greater than the chaos is the miracle.

*Books mentioned*

**The Zebra’s Great Escape**, illustrated by Sara Ogilvie,

Bloomsbury Children’s Books, 978-1408885758, £14.99hbk

**The Explorer**, Bloomsbury Children’s Books,

978-1408882191, £7.99 pbk

**The Good Thieves**, Bloomsbury Children’s Books,

978-1408882658, £7.99 pbk

**Super-Infinite: The Transformations of John Donne**,

Faber & Faber, 978-0571345915, £16.99 hbk



**Imogen Russell Williams** is an author and a journalist and editorial consultant specialising in children’s literature and YA.

# Windows into Illustration: Roozeboos

Roozeboos, or Anne Roos Kleiss as you might know her in daily life, is one of the six debut picture book illustrators shortlisted for the **2022 Klaus Flugge Prize**. This year's judges for the **Klaus Flugge Prize** are multi-award-winning illustrator Emily Gravett, Professor Martin Salisbury of Anglia Ruskin University, Flavia Z Drago, 2021 winner, and Nikki Bi, the Beyond Books Lead at Civic Square in Birmingham.

They describe Roozeboos' book **Choices** as dynamic, full of energy with a freewheeling, unruly chaos that feels genuine. The colours she uses conjure the summer. They felt the message about the importance of choice is subtly delivered and feel that Roozeboos is a great observer of humanity. Her book made them laugh.

Here Roozeboos describes the approach she took and the techniques used in creating her picture book.



This is an image from **Choices**, which is my first picture book. As the title suggests, the book is all about making choices. From small choices to big choices, easy ones or the ones that take more time. In the book, we follow a little girl who sees people making different decisions by the poolside. The story leads up to her making a choice whether to jump off the very high diving board. She puts her toes over the edge, takes a deep breath and then just follows her heart! Sometimes new things are scary, but it gives you a big sense of relief when you believe in yourself and it goes well.

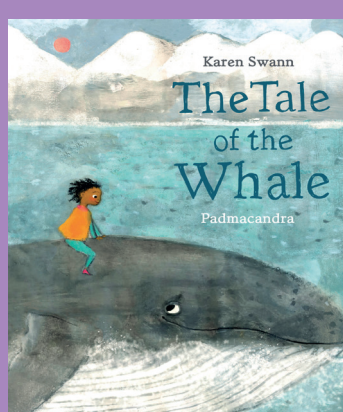
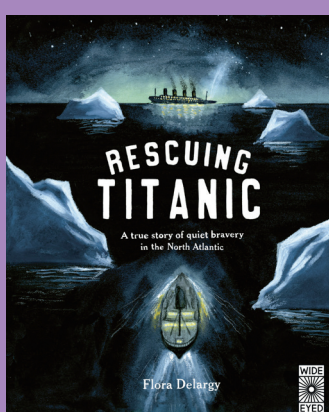
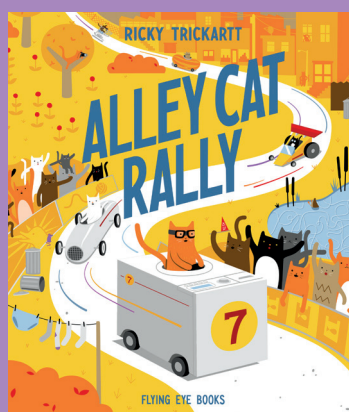
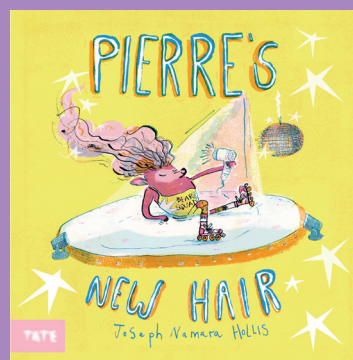
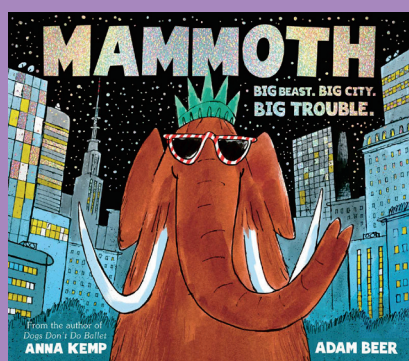
In this image, I really tried to show this feeling, and the energy and confidence of her jump. It's also the only spread of the book that doesn't have any words. I think this resonates with the confident feeling I want to give with the image; no words are needed. Also, it matches the feeling of suddenly being in a different world, the underwater world.

I made the illustration using crayons, markers, coloured pencil and little bits of white gouache on blue paper. I love how the crayons give so much fun and energy to every drawing, and the coloured pencil lets me put in little details. When I was working on the book, I had to look carefully at how water flows, how the lights move underwater, and what this does to the perspective. I did a lot of drawing at the pool in my sketchbook to capture these things, and to also get inspiration for all the cool swimsuits the people wear in a lido! I love the funky colours and patterns they all seem to have. I also wanted the book to be as inclusive as possible. If you look at this image you can see lots of different skin colours and body types, which I think is so important to show. The book is a big mix of lots of characters which was a joy to draw. I really loved working on it and I hope that as a reader you can also feel this!

**Choices** is published by Child's Play, 978-1786285645, £7.99 pbk.



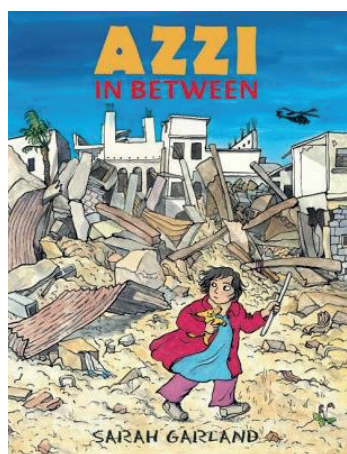
Discover the books on the shortlist for the 2022 Klaus Flugge Prize, awarded to the most promising and exciting newcomer to children's picture book illustration.



[klausfluggeprize.co.uk](http://klausfluggeprize.co.uk)

# Ten of the Best Books for Little Rebels

2022 marks 10 years of the **The Little Rebels Children's Book Award** is run by booksellers **Housmans Bookshop** and **Letterbox Library** and is awarded by the **Alliance of Radical Booksellers (ARB)**. Full details of the award can be found at [littlerebels.org](http://littlerebels.org). So here is a special Ten of the Best, ten books that social justice and political issues for children (ages 0-12) and which won the award! In order from 2012 to 2022 and pepped up with commentary from **Little Rebels Award** Judges and Organisers, here are the Biggest Rebels of Them All.

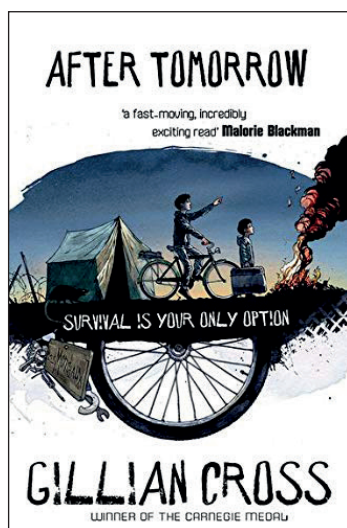


## Azzi in Between

Sarah Garland, Frances Lincoln

An **Amnesty**-endorsed story, told in graphic format, of a family's escape from war, their journey and their subsequent adjustment to a strange new nameless country (but which reads easily as the UK). Best known for her fuzzy-warm stories of everyday family life, this marked quite a departure – and a very successful one – for Garland. It was referred to by **The Observer** at the time as a 'masterpiece'. 'Azzi tells a simple and powerful story, one

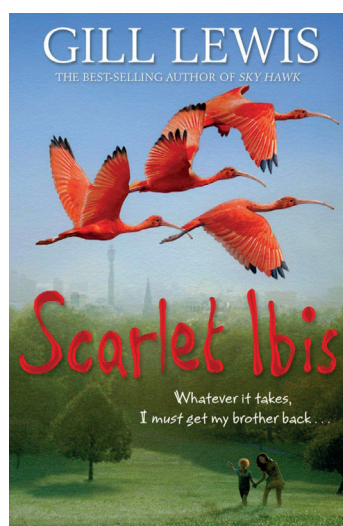
with which we should all be tragically familiar' said **Little Rebels** judge Elizabeth Laird. (Age 7+)



## After Tomorrow

Gillian Cross, Oxford University Press, 978-0192756268, £6.99 pbk

An apocalyptic vision of the UK. The major banks collapse and a full-scale economic crash threatens, bringing with it civil disorder and food shortages. Matt and his family's only option is to flee, embarking on a dangerous escape to a refugee camp in France. This is sharp dystopian fiction which unsettles and flips assumptions about who refugees are and where refugees come from. Described by **Little Rebels** judge, Wendy Cooling as a 'frighteningly believable page-turner.' (Ages 9+)

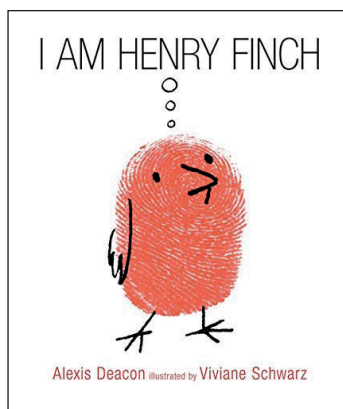


## Scarlet Ibis

Gill Lewis, Oxford University Press, 978-0192793560, £6.99 pbk

A novel which explores the fallout faced by a family in which a parent's struggles with their mental health leads to their children being sent to different foster placements. Told from the point of view of the older sibling, this offers a skilful and balanced critique of our care system which, even at its best, so often fails to nurture young people, especially young carers. 'A story that celebrates the often overlooked courage, loyalty and

competence of children' said judge Kim Reynolds. A four times shortlistee, Gill Lewis was given a special commendation in 2018 for her contribution to radical children's fiction. (Ages 9+)



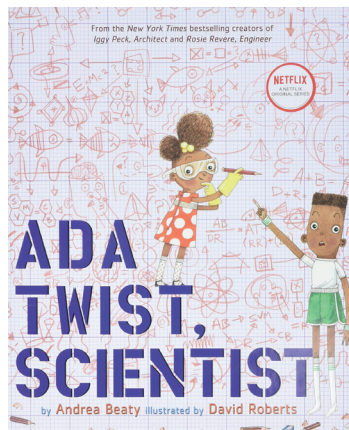
## I Am Henry Finch

Alexis Deacon and Viviane Schwarz, Walker Books, 978-1406365481, £7.99 pbk

A treat for budding de Beauvoirs from an award-winning picture book team. The sparest of texts and most minimal of colour palettes playfully tease out some of the vastest ideas imaginable: identity, existence, thought, humanity. 'This is a book which respects and honours the youngest of readers, believing

them capable of and thirsty for philosophical thought' said award co-organisers **Letterbox Library**. Schwarz's blood red thumbprint finches will have young artists reaching for the paint pot. (Ages 3+)

# 10

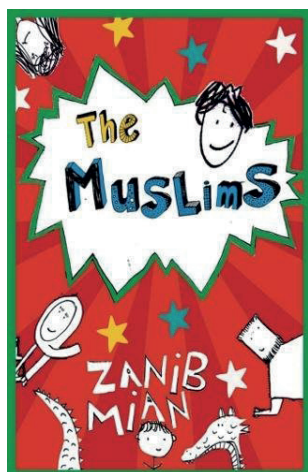


## Ada Twist, Scientist

Andrea Beaty and David Roberts, Abrams & Chronicle, 978-1419721373, £12.99 hbk

This was not the first, nor the last, time a book from **The Questioner** picture book series, was highlighted by the **Little Rebels Award: Rosie Revere** was shortlisted in 2014; **Sofia Valdez, Future Prez** in 2020. But the ever-questioning, ever-quizzing, thrilled-by-all-things-STEM Ada Twist is the one who sailed up on to the pedestal.

Pulsing rhythms are matched by pictures which busy themselves with scattered symbols and equations. 'Ada is a true little rebel and, like the pioneering scientists she is named after (Marie Curie and Ada Lovelace), a fantastic feminist role model' said Housmans Bookshop, award co-organisers. (Ages 4+)



## The Muslims

Zany Mian, Sweet Apple Books, 978-0993564420

The 2018 win marked a milestone in the history of the **Little Rebels Award**. A fantastically fresh middle grade comedy, **The Muslims** bounced along through the rowdy, scatty, upbeat, voice of 9-year-old Omar. In amongst the laughs were perfectly pointed swipes at Islamophobia as well as gags which imploded stereotypes about Muslim lives. **The Muslims** won the award and the rest is history: a series deal with Hachette UK and Penguin US and a World Book Day deal. The book

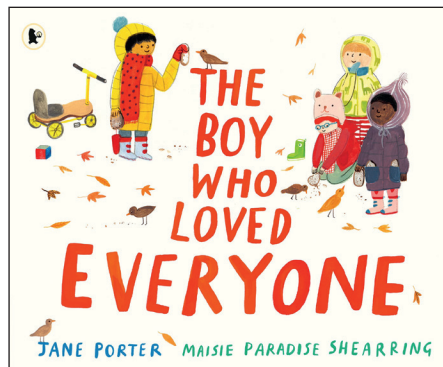
may be more familiar to you as the **Planet Omar** series! 'A fantastic book full of humour and eccentricity, **The Muslims** finds a way to explore racism and Islamophobia without allowing the characters to be defined by these things' said judge Darren Chetty. (Age 7+).



## Freedom

Catherine Johnson, Scholastic UK, 978-1407185484, £5.99.pbk

A novella from one of our most accomplished writers of middle grade historical fiction. Set in 1783, this story follows Nat as he's removed from a Jamaican plantation and forced to accompany his mistress to the UK. What follows is an exposé of the pivotal role the UK played in enslavement and how its 'empire' was built on the profits of chattel slavery. 'Johnson brings the horrific history of slavery to life in this important piece of historical fiction' said judge Emily Drabble. (Age 8+)



## The Boy Who Loved Everyone

Jane Porter, illus Maisie Paradise-Shearing, Walker Books, 978-1406392876, £7.99 pbk

A picture book for the very young, starring Dimitri, a boy who bubbles and brims with the need to tell

everyone anywhere and always that he loves them, however startled or surprised their response. The 'radical' component? 'In these challenging and divisive times, the most radical act of all is surely to love' explains judge Shaun Dellenty. 'The story's sincerity, and its willingness to embrace uncertainty, make it a quietly radical book' adds judge Darren Chetty. (Age 4+).



## Boy, Everywhere

A.M. Dassu, Old Barn Books, 978-1910646649, £7.99 pbk

The third **Little Rebels Award** winner to humanise the refugee experience, this is also a remarkable debut novel. It tracks the fraught journey of teenage Sami and his family from Syria to the UK, exposing the unyielding and dehumanising bureaucracies refugees face in their flight to sanctuary. The centring of a middle class, professional and privileged family as asylum seekers, also shreds stereotypes. 'A wonderful book with heart, passion and depth, with a very ordinary child narrating the story, it shows the reader that this could be them' said judge Patrice Lawrence. (9+)



The winner of the 10th **Little Rebels Award** will be revealed on the evening of Thursday 21 July. Seven books are in the running. The featured books present powerful indictments of homophobia, racism, disablism and colorism. Dystopic novels highlight all-too-relatable challenges to civil society, including fake news, dictatorships, authoritarian ideologies, fuel and food shortages and the extremes of corporate capitalism and the encroachment of eugenics. [Discover the shortlist in full](#) and join us as we reveal the winner on 21 July.

# Learning lessons from hidden history

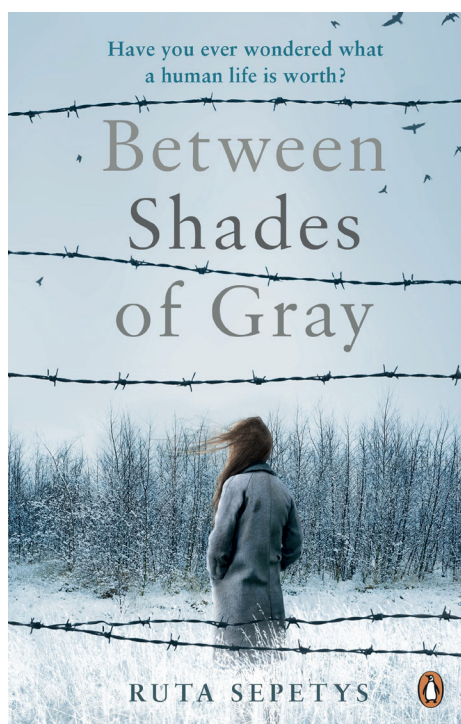
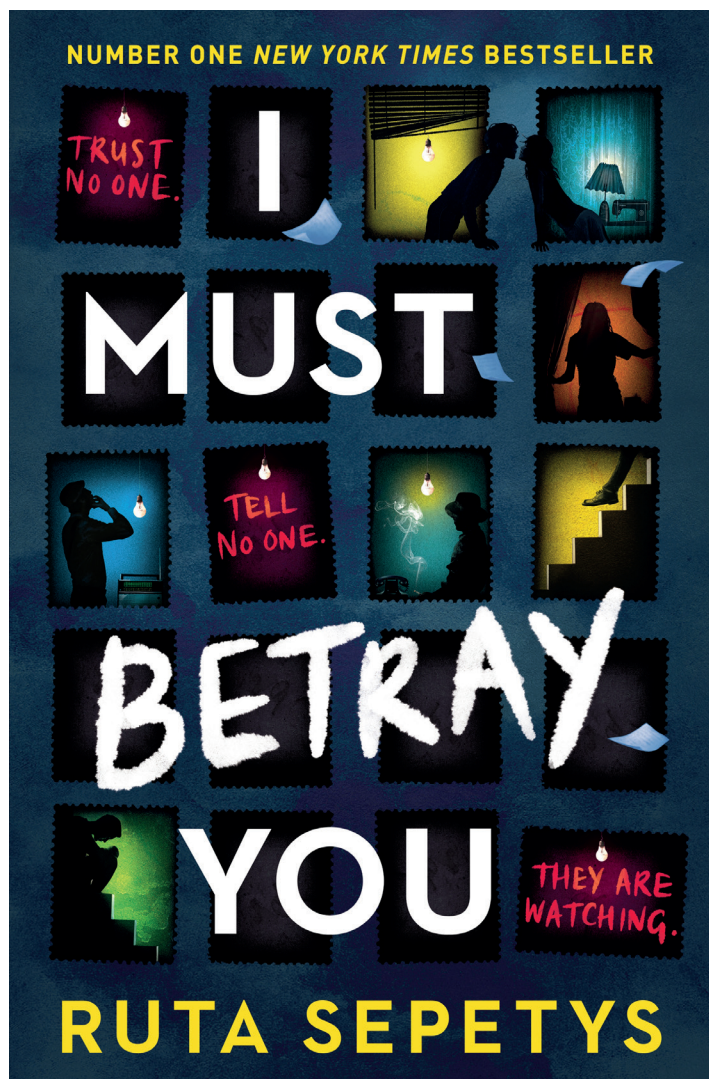
## Joy Court interviews Ruta Sepetys

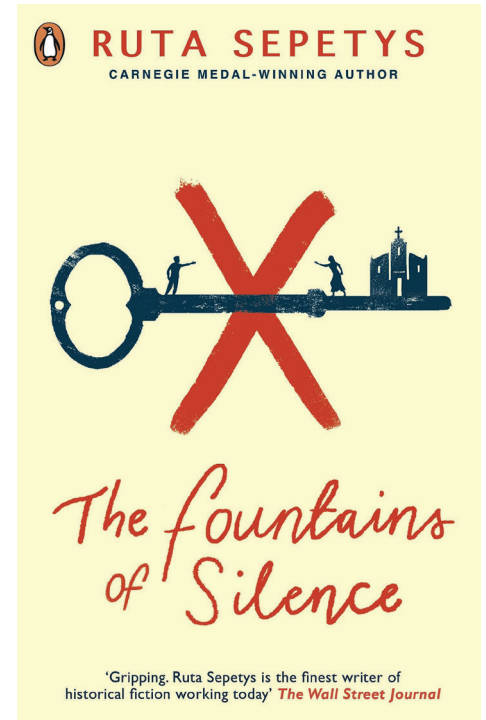
The arrival of a new novel by Ruta Sepetys is an event for any reader who has encountered her extraordinary works of historical fiction. Yet, if it were not for the words of a perspicacious agent, it might all have been so different. Ruta had a Middle Grade, humorous detective novel 'good to go,' and just three pages written of what was to become her debut, **Between Shades of Gray**, only to be told that, while the first may sell, he could tell that her heart and passion were in Lithuania and that was the story she needed to tell. In fact, the seeds of her latest book, **I Must Betray You**, were sown on the promotional tour for **Between Shades of Gray**, when she first met and talked to people from Romania realising just how ignorant she was about the true story of the totalitarian regime under Ceausescu and the rebellion which ended it. On a second visit, less than a year, later a young man asked if she would ever tell their story. She took that as a 'vote of confidence' from the Romanian people, 'They had suffered so much, and nobody was talking about it.'

There can be no doubt that the depth and quality of the research Ruta undertakes and the skill with which she deploys it, lifts her

novels to Carnegie medal winning heights. Both **Between Shades of Gray** and **Fountains of Silence** were shortlisted and **Salt to the Sea** won the award in 2017. I learned that it was the seven long years of research into Spain under Franco for **Fountains of Silence**, that explains why **I Must Betray You** is only just appearing. Unlike the other novels set in Baltic regions, where she felt a closer connection to the culture and how the society worked, she had to start from scratch in Spain and she had to get it right. Her process always begins with extensive reading before she begins to speak to witnesses, 'It would be inappropriate for me to expect them to educate me', and her books always scrupulously list her sources and the reading she has done. But it is the witness accounts which are so crucial. She has to partner with true witnesses, 'what right have I, to write a history that is not my own?' What she is so passionate about is giving a voice to and telling the stories of those who have had no chance to do so. She was about to embark on a final trip to Romania for more witness interviews when COVID struck and sadly these last crucial interviews had to be conducted over Zoom.

What I found fascinating was learning how she creates the story from all these multiple sources and how she comes up with the characters who will tell the stories she has discovered. It was clear that **I Must Betray You** was always going to be young person's story, because it was the brave Romanian students, to whom the book is dedicated, that sparked the rebellion. What is unusual for her is the first person, male perspective. But this felt almost inevitable after she had talked to so many adult males who described how helpless they felt at the time and how foolish afterwards, when they realised that the world in the smuggled American movies they watched, was not make-believe! The novel's writing style is also markedly different. She wanted it to be sparse, reflecting being told that 'even





in young people's dreams and even in private', they did not feel able to express themselves freely and had a complete lack of trust. As she says in the author's note 'thoughts were rarely voiced aloud. Instead, they were imprisoned within an internal mental landscape'.

Christian is seventeen and this book reveals how he told his story, which is found in a metal box beside a grave. He is already a bit of a rebel, with his spiky hair and love of poetry. He is full of questions, encouraged by his grandfather, Bunu. The role of grandparents was another common thread from the interviews, that they were the brave generation who knew the world beyond the borders and tried to overcome the brainwashing. Christian is blackmailed by an agent of the feared Securitate into spying on the American diplomat's family, where his mother cleans, in return for medicine for Bunu's leukaemia. He thinks he can do this while secretly betraying the regime in his hidden journal, but as Securitate reports interspersed into the text reveal, they are watching his every step. The tension and danger rapidly mounts as the Iron Curtain crumbles everywhere, except Romania, until young people take to the streets 'armed with nothing but courage'.

It is certainly sobering to realise the incidents which these fictional characters experience and the deprivations of daily life under the regime are all true. When you come to read the banana shampoo incident, try to remember that this was related to Ruta by an adult, male, diplomat! But more heartbreakingly, 'some stories were simply too horrific to use'. There seems an almost alchemical skill in the way she can weave so many personal stories into an unforgettable narrative, without ever resorting to the dreaded 'info dump'. If there is information the reader needs, she writes a scene to reveal it naturally. She often sketches out scenes and snippets of dialogue after an interview has concluded, which will be used later the writing process. What she also does superbly is juxtapose the light with the dark, in the same way perhaps that the whispered jokes they told helped the Romanian people endure the hardships. She is apparently classed as a Romance author in Italy and whilst this may seem bizarre, in all her novels there are nuanced relationships, there

is love and humour and the full spectrum of the human condition. Christian and his friends are teenagers falling in love, even if they have to turn on taps to hide their conversations and carry out their illicit Coca Cola drinking in dark alleys.

Another truth she felt compelled to convey is that Romania had no clear or satisfying ending to this traumatic period. Questions still remain and she has tried to reflect this in the epilogue. Ruta acknowledges this may feel frustrating to the reader, but remarks that not getting answers is far worse for the people who lived through these events. The witnesses she spoke to were adamant, 'You cannot tie this up in a bow'.

While a war rages in Eastern Europe and a regime is trying to control the news story its citizens receive, it seems all the more important to read novels like this which 'shine a light in dark corners of the past.' Discovering the horrors of Ceausescu's fertility tyranny while women's reproductive autonomy is currently threatened by the potential removal of the Roe vs Wade judgement in the USA, does make one think that, as Ruta says 'If history remains forgotten then lessons are never learnt'.

This compulsively readable, insightful and unmissable novel is available now in ebook and audio but publishing in print here in the UK in August.

**I Must Betray You** is published by Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444967616, £6.99 pbk



**Joy Court** is a trustee of **The United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA)**, co-founder of **All Around Reading** and Conference Manager for **CILIP Youth Libraries Group**. She is a Past Chair of the **CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals**.

# Beyond the Secret Garden: Talking About Racism in Children's Books

New in **Karen Sands-O'Connor** and **Darren Chetty's** series examining the representation of black, Asian and minority ethnic voices in British children's literature.

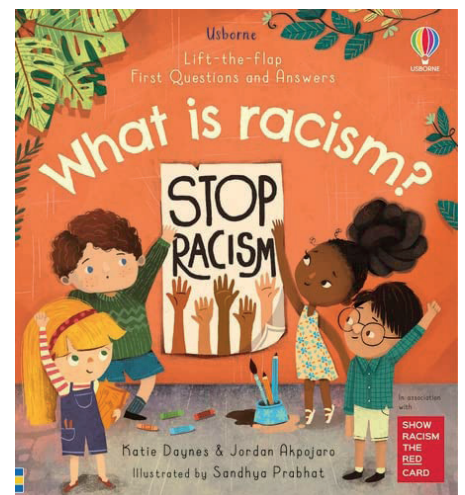
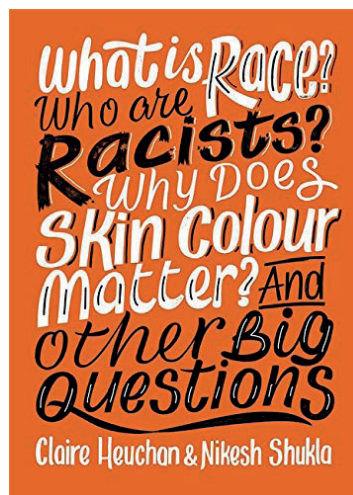
For many years, the idea of talking about racism in children's books was controversial. It was one thing to discuss whether a children's book was racist, although that in itself was controversial and certainly only something to be done by adults. It was quite another thing for children's books to directly address racism in society. Those authors that did, such as Farrukh Dhondy in **The Siege of Babylon** (1979) faced criticism from anti-racist publications such as **The Children's Book Bulletin** for bringing 'into the open the unpleasant face of a multi-racial society. He takes us across a minefield where everyone ends up bloodied' (Maggie Hewitt, 'Review: **The Siege of Babylon**'; **Children's Book Bulletin** 2, Autumn 1979: 25). The reviewer suggested that a teacher read the book before allowing young people to do so. Even a group such as the **Afro-Caribbean Education Resource Project (ACER)**, led by **Black Cultural Archives** founder Len Garrison, approached anti-racist reading materials indirectly. Ruth Grindrod, the Schools Liaison Officer for **ACER**, described their approach in **Dragon's Teeth: The Anti-Racist Children's Book Magazine** as aiming 'to develop and increase a child's concept of self—self-awareness, race awareness, self-esteem and self-confidence' (Grindrod, 'Anti-racist Initiatives in Early Childhood Education', **Dragon's Teeth** 25, 1986, 11-12). Despite research into racism such as David Milner's **Children and Race**, appearing in 1975, which suggested that children formed attitudes about race and racial groups before reaching primary school, many adults felt that talking about racism would, in essence, put ideas into their heads.

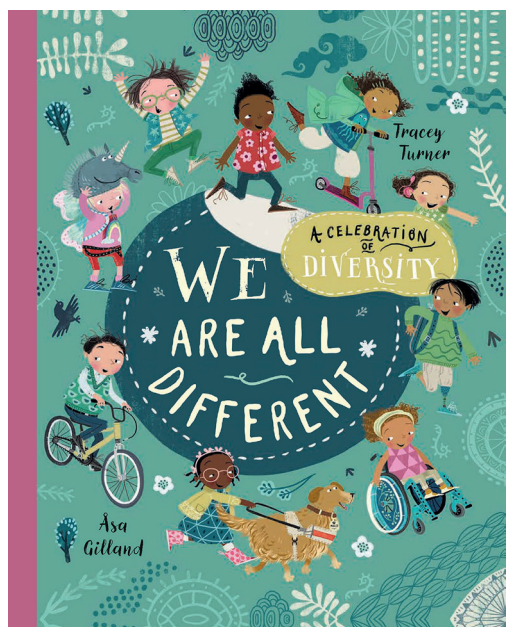
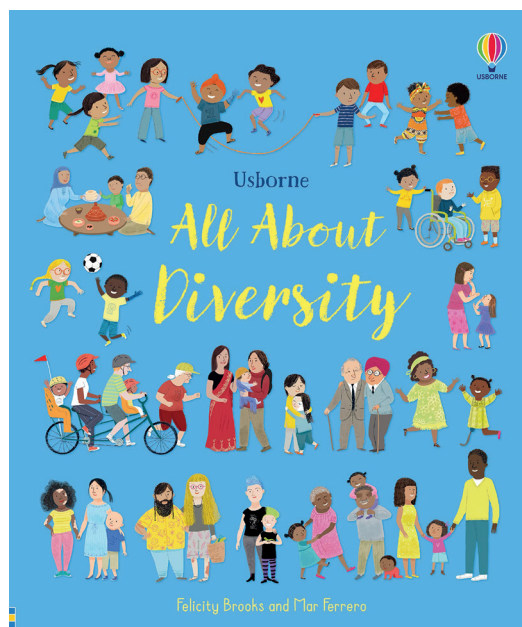
Many Black authors knew, however, that the ideas were already there. Grace Nichols in **Leslyn in London** (1984), Floella Benjamin in **Coming to England** (1995), and Errol Lloyd in **Many Rivers to Cross** (1995) wrote for different age groups, but all chronicled racist name-calling and the threat of violence that often accompanied it. Nichols' novel, about eight-year-old Guyanese-born Leslyn, describes her surprise at being called a 'nig-nog' by 'a biggish looking boy as

he ran past her, nearly knocking her over' (23). No adult notices this or the other racist taunts that Leslyn experiences, and she does not tell anyone; the issue is resolved as the white children in her school get to know her. Benjamin, whose **Coming to England** is a memoir and not a novel, recalls using the threat of violence herself in response to racist taunts. And Lloyd's Sandra tries to tell a white teacher, but he tells her to 'ignore them' (96) and they will give up—something Sandra knows not to be true. These books all confront racism in England directly, but they focus on individual acts of racism rather than societal racism.

Educational texts for children were more likely than nonfiction from mainstream publishers to directly address racism in the 1980s and 1990s. An early example, Nigel File's and Chris Power's **Black Settlers in Britain 1555-1958** (Heinemann Educational 1981), is not exclusively about racism. However, it does include stories of individuals, such as Learie Constantine, who experienced racism in Britain and took action against it. In Constantine's case, the authors note that 'Learie was able to demonstrate to the country that racial discrimination was taking place. He was able to use the courts in his fight for civil rights' (82). The language here is critical; racism is not a private or individual matter, but something that Britain *as a country* should care about, and it sometimes requires national institutions to stop it.

File's and Power's text was followed in the 1990s by educational nonfiction specifically about racism. Books such as Angela Grunsell's **Let's Talk About Racism** (Franklin Watts 1995) or Jagdish Gundara and Roger Hewitt's **Life Files: Racism** (Evans 1999) were part of nonfiction series that dealt with a variety of social issues, including gangs, homelessness, disability and bullying. These books appeared after several racist murders of young people of colour in the 1990s; Gundara and Hewitt's, for example, mentions the MacDonald Inquiry into racism, noting 'It followed the murder of 13-year-old Ahmed





Iqbal Ullah who was knifed in his school playground by a white pupil' (25). One feature of this type of books, which continue to be published today, is that they tend to end with advice for readers about how they can address the issues. But while in the 1990s, this advice tended to be limited to a paragraph or two, the sections in books published after 2000 are longer. Anne Rooney's **Race Hate** (Evans 2006) has two pages on 'Is there a way forward?' (42-43) and a separate page of resources, including websites. Claire Heuchan's and Nikesh Shukla's **What is Race? Who are Racists? Why Does Skin Colour Matter? And Other Big Questions** (Wayland 2018) has two pages on 'How can you challenge racism?' (42-43) and two more on 'Unlearning racism' (44-45), in addition to the resource list. Further, Heuchan and Shukla's text asks white readers to think about their own racism, including 'being willing to give up the perks that come with white skin' because 'it's an important step towards building a fairer world for everyone to live in' (45).

Following the publication of **CLPE's Reflecting Realities** reports, the first of which appeared in 2018, many mainstream publishers began to change their publishing practices around race and racism. There is a marked difference among these books, in that while all address the concept of physical difference, not all discuss racism directly or in depth. Usborne, for example, has produced three separate books in the last two years. Jordan Akpojaró, a philosopher and author, worked on both of Usborne's "lift-the-flap" books, **What is Racism?** (2021), written with Katie Daynes for younger readers, and **Questions and Answers about Racism** (2022) for slightly older readers. However, Usborne's **All About Diversity** (2021) by Felicity Brooks and Mar Ferrero, depicts people of many racial and ethnic groups, but never mentions the word race or racism. Titles that focus on diversity tend to say less about racism; Asa Gillard and Tracey Turner produced a similar book to Usborne's for Macmillan entitled **We are all Different: A Celebration of Diversity** (also 2021); however, although most of the book focuses on the "positive" aspects of diversity, it does give two pages (30-31) to racism.

While recent nonfiction, when it discusses racism at all, has become more direct, recent fiction has become less so. Racism is not, as it was in books like **Leslyn in London**, a single event; it is present on a daily basis at varying levels for young people of colour. In Patrice Lawrence's **Needle** (Barrington Stoke, 2022), for example, the main character Charlene experiences racism and microaggressions regularly, from the security guards that follow her in the shop to white friends who pretend not to know her when she gets in trouble. These incidents hurt and frustrate Charlene, causing her to act out. Eventually she stabs her foster brother with a knitting needle, and what could have been a dispute handled at home becomes a police matter that exposes the widespread racism in the

police and prison system, from arresting officers to duty lawyers to judges who compare her to her foster brother, a 'Nice, neat white boy' (78). Lawrence's book suggests that racism is more complex than name-calling, and that systemic racism causes minor incidents to have major consequences for racially-minoritised children..

#### Books mentioned:

**The Siege of Babylon**, Farrukh Dhondy, Nelson Thornes, 978-0333471791 £5.25

**Leslyn in London**, Grace Nichols, O/P

**Coming to England: An Inspiring True Story Celebrating the Windrush Generation**, Floella Benjamin, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1529045444, £6.99 pbk

**Many Rivers to Cross**, Errol Lloyd, O/P

**Black Settlers in Britain 1555-1958**, Heinemann Library, 978-0431071060, O/P

**Let's Talk About Racism**, Angela Grunsell, O/P

**Life Files: Racism**, Jagdish Gundara and Roger Hewitt, O/P

**What is Race? Who are Racists? Why Does Skin Colour Matter? And Other Big Questions**, Claire Heuchan and Nikesh Shukla, Wayland, 978-1526303998, £9.99 pbk

**What is Racism?** Katie Daynes, Jordan Akpojaró, illus Sandhya Prabbhat, Usborne, 978-1474995795, £9.99 board

**Questions and Answers about Racism**, Usborne, 978-1474995825, £9.99, Jordan Akpojaró illus Vici Leyhane

**All About Diversity**, Felicity Brooks, illus Mar Ferrero, Usborne, 978-1474986649, £9.99 hbk

**We are all Different: A Celebration of Diversity**, Tracey Turner, illus Asa Gillard, Kingfisher, 978-0753477090, £14.99

**Needle**, Patrice Lawrence, Barrington Stoke, 978-1800901018, £7.99 pbk



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



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

# Adapting Wind in The Willows

**Wilton's Music Hall** has become known for its Winter productions and this year is playing home to Mole, Rat, Toad and Badger in a world premiere of a modern-day adaptation of Kenneth Grahame's classic **The Wind in the Willows**. The adaptation has been written by **Piers Torday** who explains why the original means so much to him, and how **The Wind in the Willows** became **The Wind in the Willows Wilton's**.

Wilton's Music Hall is the oldest surviving music hall in Britain, in London's East End. A venue of extraordinary history and atmosphere, where the creaking wooden floorboards and faded, peeling walls set the scene before the show has even begun. And for the past five years (sparing one missed for Covid) it's been a privilege to adapt some extraordinary books for the stage there – from John Masefield's entrancingly singular **Box of Delights** to this Christmas – when we hope to conjure the charm, joy and beauty of Kenneth Grahame's **The Wind in the Willows** – or rather, **The Wind in the Willows Wilton's**...

I began the adaptation as I always do, reading the original text several times, highlighting the passages I believed diehard fans would be disappointed not to see in some form; whether it was Rat and Mole messing about in a boat or Toad on a racing spree. But then what works on the page must stay there, and it's time to construct a fresh dramatic story inspired by the book that will hold both children and adults' attention afresh on the stage.

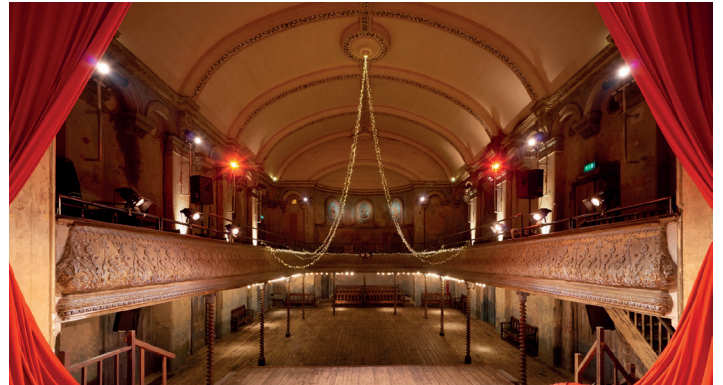
It took, as it always does, a treatment, several drafts and a workshop to find, though. The book meanders around from season to season, subplot to subplot...we decided to build ours around two central strands from the book. One is the exquisitely rendered changing of the seasons on the river, which gave us our four acts, and the other is the shifting meaning of home for all the animals, from homebody Mole to wanderer Rat, hermit Badger to the playboy Toad – which gave them each their arc.

Alongside producer Holly Kendrick, executive director of Wilton's, director Elizabeth Freestone, and designer Tom Piper, we agreed that we also did not want to indulge in pure nostalgia about an already nostalgic book. As the UK Environment Agency's latest report revealed that 41% of our native flora and fauna species have considerably decreased since 1970, with 15% at serious risk of extinction – it felt imperative to touch on the genuine peril the real water rats, moles, toads and badgers of this country face. Yes, even in a feel-good Christmas show!

For such an iconic London venue, I also decided to relocate the action from the Berkshire stretch of the Thames downstream to the river as it runs through the capital. Wildlife in the city is often overlooked and ignored, but we have moles and badgers too! Our characters would be contemporary versions of the same immortal friendship group, with Mole making his home in a park and Toad living in a luxury riverside mansion. And ones who represent diverse modern London...just maybe with added fur and a tail or two.

**The Wind in the Willows** is one of the most enduring children's books ever written – still in print since 1908, currently available in over fifty different editions, from picture books to pop up versions. Kenneth Grahame's charming tale has instilled a love for British wildlife in generations of readers (including this one). It was foundational to my imaginative development, read to me by my parents at bedtime. The idea of such vulnerable mammals with such forthright characters, living out a permanent summer holiday existence was an appealing fantasy that spoke to me then and still does now – inspiring my own fiction.

Yet few animals in fiction are as far from nature as these picnicking, smoking, motor racing characters. The book breaks every rule of modern children's literature – it is episodic, with no overarching plot,



literally meandering in places, written in a quixotic blend of pastiche styles. And what child in their right mind wants to read a story where Rat tells Mole never to explore the Wide World, where Mole in turn dissuades Rat from foreign travel, and where Badger, Mole and Rat all intervene to stop Toad having adventures of any kind? Not so much middle grade as middle age!

So why is this eccentric, contradictory, dated book so often adapted?

One word: friendship. The shy, homebody Mole, brought out of his hole by the relentlessly chipper but perennially wistful Rat, the solitary, curmudgeon Badger with a heart of gold, and the appalling, careless, narcissist Toad who it is impossible not to feel affection for despite his reckless behaviour. Loosely inspired by Grahame's own friends and family, this quartet seem to embody some of the most delightful and infuriating qualities of true friendship. That to me, is the central message of the book – nothing about picnics or motor cars – but rather that true friends stand by each other, through thick and thin, even when they drive each other up the wall (or into the river).

It's these central dramatic relationships which makes **Willows** so suited to adaptation – despite the lack of a driving central narrative. A.A. Milne was the first to do the honours, Alan Bennett created a legendary version for the National Theatre in the 1990's, and Julian Fellowes recently turned the story into a musical. (Not to mention the TV series, the animations, the Disney ride...)

And as someone who spends most of their time locked in a study with a computer and their own thoughts, trying to be (like many novelists) director, set designer, lighting designer, composer and actors simultaneously, I feel liberated by stage adaptations. Like Mole emerging from his hole into bright spring sunshine, I am suddenly a bit freer and unburdened. Some fiction writers struggle with theatre because of what can present as a loss of control over the process – but I prefer to see it as a gaining of trust, with some unbelievably talented people.

What never fails to feel, truly magical is that in January, I can write anything I want on the page – from flying cars and golden phoenixes in **Box of Delights** to boats rowing down rivers and battles for Toad Hall – knowing that in just a few months, somehow – a brilliant combined effort of creatives and cast will have made them real. (But for a strictly limited seasonal period only!) I do hope you can join us on the river this Christmas.

## **The Wind in the Willows Wilton's**

24 November – 31 December at 7.30pm with matinees at 2.30pm on Tuesdays (from 06 Dec), Thursdays and Saturdays. Recommended for 5+ [wiltons.org.uk](http://wiltons.org.uk) (Box Office: 02077022789).



**Piers Torday** is an award-winning author whose work has been translated into 14 languages and adapted for the stage. Books include **The Last Wild** trilogy, **There May Be a Castle** and **The Lost Magician** series. Plays include **The Box of Delights** and **Christmas Carol** (Wilton's Music Hall). His latest book is **The Wild Before**.

# Good Reads: the CLIPPA shortlist

We have a special Good Reads in this issue and a focus on the **CLIPPA (CLPE Children's Poetry Prize)**. The participation of children and young people is integral to the **CLIPPA** with its Shadowing Scheme prompting poetry performances in hundreds of schools across the UK. This year, in a first, CLPE worked with the Manchester Poetry Library at Manchester Metropolitan University and local schools, to stage a special **CLIPPA** Poetry Show to publicly announce the shortlist. In advance of the

event, pupils from **Lily Lane Primary School**, **Sacred Heart Primary School** and **Levenshulme High School** were given copies of books on the shortlist to read. They picked favourite poems from the books which they performed live at the event alongside passionate arguments as to why their favourite should be named winner of the **CLIPPA 2022**. We're pleased to feature some of their reviews here.



Photo: Mike Frisbee

## The Crossing

Manjeet Mann, Penguin  
978-0241411445, £7.99 pbk

We're all built from the same dust,' Sammy: fleeing from a corrupt government into an unknown future- though all future is unknown. Nat: A promising future in swimming, but a promising future havocked by grief.

Escaping the classic banality of the saviour and asylum seeker, Manjeet Mann had spun her words into gold, encapsulating the stars and seas into her writing, do you think the stars and seas can be in favour of someone? And different lives, different backgrounds, different families, can they be met in the seas, or in the stars? Or does longevity give hope in seemingly hopeless situations?

Like falling face-down into a flourishing forest, but in a good way, because even though the insects are probably eating you alive, you can still feel a sense of serenity (be it from the lush smell, be it from the near death experience of falling into a forest); in this novel, it wasn't serenity, it was a sort of hope that long lingered between the lines of a refugee and sanguine swimmer. And, it wasn't the insects eating you alive, it was the paranoia that

your favourite character would meet their end before you finished the novel.

What is mesmerising is the way that Mann unravels the character, the way she addresses them with warmth, how she has their desires and motivations in her hands, and how their dead dreams lay at her feet. Not only had this novel evoked so much emotion within us, but it had also provided us with a greater knowledge: the corruption of Eritrea, the damages of extremism, the importance of liberation. As well as that, we had been allowed to witness everlasting brotherhood, friendships lost, and families made. What could've been stereotypical and done, has been turned into so much more, served to us in the beautiful form of a verse novel.

Mann's surreal language coexists with the brutal nature of the book, forming a tactile story of innocence lost, something that is so ethereal and unique. Her humorous and lucid novel lets us step foot into the world of Sammy and Nat, and the story of their paths intertwining to create the beautiful novel we were honoured to read: **The Crossing**.  
*Review by Maryam Khan, Fiza Shab, Emaan Hashmi, Levenshulme High School*

## Being Me

Liz Brownlee, Matt Goodfellow, Laura Mucha, illus Victoria Jane Wheeler, Otter-Barry Books,  
978-1913074654, £7.99 pbk

I think this book should get an award because it is thought-inducing and it opens your eyes to the people around you. This book gives a voice to the people who don't have a voice. *Review by Pyoyvaz, Lily Lane Primary School*

In my opinion, this book should get an award because it tells you what to do with feelings. For example, in one of the poems it says you can shout worries out into the ocean. It makes you aware of different issues such as racism or struggling in school and makes you think 'this person might need a friend.' *Review by Tobias, Lily Lane Primary School*

## Caterpillar Cake

Matt Goodfellow, illus Krina Patel-Sage, Otter-Barry Books,  
978-1913074661, £12.99 hbk

I like this book because it is funny. *Mystura, Lily Lane Primary School*  
You learn about different things like space and the sea. *Abdul-malik, Lily Lane Primary School*

Our favourite poem is *School Photo*. It has all the things in that we do. *Class 2 E, Lily Lane Primary School*

Photo: **CLIPPA** shortlist celebration May 2022

## Cloud Soup

Kate Wakeling, illus Elina Braslina, The Emma Press, 978-1912915743, £8.99 pbk

Children from *Lily Lane Primary School* also argued that **Cloud Soup** by Kate Wakeling should win because it will entertain everyone and highly recommend her poem *The Flibbit*.

## Stars with Flaming Tails

Valerie Bloom, illus Ken Wilson-Max, Otter-Barry Books,  
978-1913074678, £7.99 pbk

I enjoy *Poison Dart Frog* by Valerie Bloom because it's funny, it rhymes and it has true meaning. I think everyone will enjoy this rollercoaster of fun, it's quick to read due to it being not that big and the words are easy to understand. Valerie Bloom is the best poet. *Isaac H. Sacred Heart Primary School*

The judges agreed with Isaac, and Valerie Bloom was awarded the **CLIPPA 2022** for **Stars with Flaming Tails**.

Find out more about the Shadowing on the [CLPE website](https://www.clpe.org.uk/).

# I wish I'd written...



**Puneet Bhandal, The author of the *Starlet Rivals* series chooses *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, a Roald Dahl epic that transcends time and generations.**

Firstly, why wouldn't I want to be the author of a work of commercial fiction that translates as wonderfully to the big screen as it reads on the page? This Roald Dahl epic, written in 1964, transcends time and generations.

Charlie Bucket's simple and disadvantaged background strikes a chord with so many people. Who can't relate to the wonderful energy he gives his Grandpa Joe and the unconditional love he receives from his family despite their struggles?

And who can't relate to the hope he sees in that golden ticket!

Willy Wonka is a character for the ages while Augustus Gloop, Violet Beauregarde, Veruca Salt and Mike Teevee – the privileged yet bratty children who get selected to visit the mysterious chocolate factory alongside Charlie – remain in the memory.

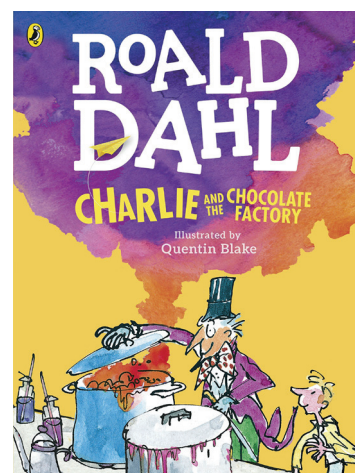
As for the Oompa-Loompas – a stroke of genius!

The book allows the imagination to run riot and the mouth to salivate at the descriptions of all those delicious treats in the factory.

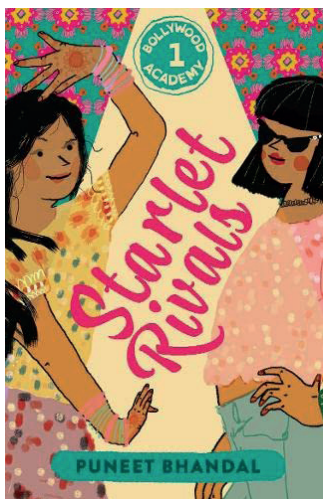
The only thing it lacks is diverse characters... Roald Dahl's widow said Charlie was originally written as a Black boy but his agent advised he change that to give the book wider appeal.

Regardless, they say simple ideas are often the best and I'd say this applies to this classic tale.

Book one in **The Starlet Rivals series, The Bollywood Academy** is out now, published by Lantana Publishing, 978-1915244000, £7.99 pbk



**Charlie and the Chocolate Factory** (colour edition) by Roald Dahl, illus Quentin Blake, is published by Puffin, 978-0141369372, £10.99 pbk.



# BfK

# reviews

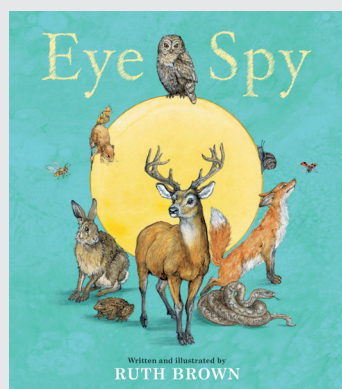
## Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant

### Eye Spy

★★★★★

Ruth Brown, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 9781912650903, £12.99 hbk  
Who doesn't enjoy playing Eye Spy, a simple game that can fill those blank moments? Here, it can be played within the pages of a book – a lovely picture book. Ruth Brown takes her young readers for a walk through the countryside across a day. Each double page spread provides the clue to guide the search of the accompanying image; turn the page and the answer is there – and then the next clue, the next puzzle. She does not make it completely easy – nor does she cheat. The reader is encouraged to really scrutinise the pictures. In so doing they will learn how brilliantly animals are able to camouflage themselves – and, maybe, be inspired to explore the world around with new eyes; to play eye spy for real.

Ruth Brown is a consummate artist. Her colour saturated images draw the reader in to experience



the natural world she is depicting. The journey starts and ends with the wider landscape, then moves to details as we focus on the things nearest to us – the edge of the cornfield where the harvest mouse nests, the corner of the pond where the toad shelters, the toadstools under the bracken, resting place for the ladybird. While her vision is very much directed to the countryside, the concept of the hide-and-seek aspect

of a walk would be easy to replicate in a more urban setting. It is a game that can be played anywhere. This is a book that could be shared – parent and child, teacher and group – or just provide the opportunity for intense exploration by an individual. The rich visual experience that encourages the viewer to not just look for the hidden but to be aware of the surroundings combines with a simple direct text describing the hidden animal ending with a rhyme. The production is excellent with clear attractive font and well-placed images; a book to really enjoy. FH

### Ready for Spaghetti

★★★★★

Michael Rosen, ill. Polly Dunbar, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 4063 7764 4, £14.99, hbk  
The little poodle is like a toddler. These poems, in an inviting picture book format, are for the youngest children. They follow a child's day from waking in the morning through play by themselves and with friends to bath time and bedtime. The children

are curious and exuberant, wondering at the mystery of the mirror, what tale a snail might tell, or where a balloon might go and why when you have left it tethered to a stone with instructions to stay. They relish the experiences that come their way: rain, an itch or a sneeze. And they ponder on the nature of the universe, including the thoughts and feelings of soft toys and what it would be like if the sun came out at night. This is all about discovery, play, enjoying life and, above all, enjoying language. The poems riff on sound, repetition and rhymes. A tummy rumble sets off a chain of associated umbling and ummy words: "Timmy, tummy, tumbly tumbles, now my tummy rumblly rumbles." The joy and fun is captured perfectly by Polly Dunbar's illustrations, where the children's moods range from thoughtful to madcap, and they often look out at the reader as if to invite us to the party, which Michael Rosen already has, in a thoughtful and encouraging forward. Mainly it's the children's world. The adults appear only once, towards the end when the

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

children stand on their shoulders to look at the stars, gently reminding us, and the child readers sharing the book with their own adult, that the child's world, like language, is shared and inherited, but open to endless discovery and new expression. **CB**

### On My Papa's Shoulders

★★★★

Niki Daly, Otter-Barry Books, 32pp, 978 1 9130 7445 6, £12.99 hbk  
During his first weeks at school the little boy narrator has members of his extended family who are willing and able to walk with him through the bustling town, right to the school gate. There's speedy walking Mama making sure that there's plenty of time for a kiss before the bell rings; wise Gogo who likes to leave early so they can take the quiet route and look at things of interest without needing to hurry. She gives her grandson some words of wisdom as they walk, "We must hold our friends gently in both hands," she says after Gogo tells her about his best pals. Tata chooses the rainy days to accompany the narrator to school; they take the shortcuts and have lots of fun splish-splashing in puddles, though Tata's legs aren't what they were so he needs to rest and have a bit if a whistle before completing the walk, which he always concludes with a special great big hug.

The very best days of all though says the little boy 'are when Papa takes me to school.' This he announces from high up on his father's shoulders, a place where he'd like to stay for ever; but all too soon they reach the school door, exchange a parting "I love you," and then off goes Papa to his job on the building site while his son goes into the classroom where they too set to work constructing something special that we see on the final page.

Told from a young child's viewpoint, this presentation of an everyday routine is a lovely warm, joyful, sometimes poignant celebration of family love, especially the bond between father and son. It's just right for sharing with anyone of starting school age wherever they live. **JB**

### Max: a tale of food and friendship

★★★★

Written and ill. Marc Martin, Templar Books 40pp, 9781787419612, £6.99 pbk

Max is a seagull, and of course, much as he loves fish, he also loves chips. He befriends Bob, owner of a fish and chip shop in a seaside town, and, if he behaves himself welcoming the customers, he is rewarded with chips. He and Bob then go fishing together in the evenings. One summer the seaside town is very quiet, the Funfair is being dismantled and shops are closing to make way for a Mega Mall. Max finds Bob's shop closed, and flies off in search of him. Amazingly, he tracks a familiar smell, and finds

Bob in his new shop. Bob is delighted to see Max, who goes back to being on his best behaviour, greeting the customers, and is rewarded with a chip (one chip?!). We then see that the 'Closed sign' says Bob & Max's, as off they go fishing together.

Marc Martin's beautifully composed illustrations for his own story are bold and richly colourful: he has won an award for illustration in his native Australia. This will be suitable for younger readers to enjoy, before they start questioning the basic concept, and the difficulties of finding one particular fish and chip shop. It is an unlikely story, but a nice idea! **DB**

### Solo

★★★★

Written and ill. Adam Beer, Simon and Schuster, 32pp, 978-1-4711-9164-0, £6.99 pbk

Solo lives on an island where he knows everyone and everything. He considers himself a VERY important dog, but his isolated world offers few surprises until the arrival of a boatload of daytrippers and their hounds, who race around the island upending the natural order and making free with all that Solo holds dear, including his dinner, ball and stick.

"This is MY island!" barks Solo. "And those are my SPECIAL things...."

Luckily, dogs don't hold grudges, and as Solo learns that sharing is worth the effort, his change of heart brings friendship, fun and games.

Adam Beer's observations of doggy behaviour are spot-on in this enjoyable and well-crafted picturebook, and young readers will enjoy the spectacle of dogs inventing their own rules, far from human eyes and ears. Stories exploring the ups and downs of friendship are important for young children, and the message in Solo is clear without being overdone: friends are fun, and it's worth making an effort to make and keep them. However, there's no suggestion that the company of others is always preferable to individual pursuits - Solo remains willing and able to enjoy time spent alone, and this is a welcome aspect of the story.

Solo's expressive features and body language give children plenty to decode and enjoy in these pictures. Adam's experience as a storyboard artist in the animation, TV and games industries is evident in the narrative energy, physicality and strong characterization throughout, and much is happening in the artwork that isn't mentioned in the text. Adam's dogs are stylized, but capture the essence of real life, and his cheerful illustrations and friendly, minimal text will appeal to families who are less confident around books, as well as those that share them regularly.

Adam Beer previously illustrated **Mammoth** by Anna Kemp (published by Simon and Schuster in 2021) but **Solo** is his author-illustrator debut. **CFH**

## Bork

★★★★★

Rhys Kitson, Sunbird Books, 32pp, 978 15037 637 8, £12.99 hdbk

If you're looking for a really good laugh then look no further than this noisy read aloud presentation of an increasing assembly of dogs from around the globe each of which shares in its home language, its own particular 'bark', or Bork as the title says.

We hear in turn a woof, a 'Ouaf Ouaf' - French I think, the Spanish 'Guau Guau', 'Wau, Wau' - German, the dog from Japan goes 'Wan-Wan', that from Belgium greets fellow pooches with 'Waf Waf' and finally, the Chinese Mandarin barking canine says 'Wāng Wāng'. All of these are responded to by the titular 'BORK' together with a degree of bemusement or frustration. And you can guess what the blue cat says, which gives the entire dog assortment a wonderful excuse for a canine cacophony chorus in response, though that isn't quite the grand finale. So now you know, as the penultimate page reminds us, 'Not all dogs say WOOF.'

Along with the onomatopoeic sequence that young children will relish the opportunity to participate in, the other thing that comes from this vociferous presentation is the important truth that it can be challenging to communicate with a speaker of a language different from one's own, and even more importantly that, 'there's more that unites us than pulls us apart.'

A clever premise, a great opportunity for some raucous classroom fun and an important life-lesson delightfully delivered by ten dogs and one bit-part moggy, all courtesy of one playful human author/illustrator. **JB**

## Super Daisy

★★★★★

Rebecca Smith, ill. Zoe Waring, HarperCollins, 32pp, 978 0 00 847068 5, £6.99 pbk

Daisy would love to be a princess, with curly locks and beautiful dresses and a crown, and she feels she is one when she wears clothes from her dressing-up box. Playing princess helps her forget some serious unhappiness in her life. She has cancer and must often stay in hospital far from home to have medicine that makes her feel weak and sick. Worst of all, it makes her lose her hair. But then she finds a forgotten very pink, sparkly wig in the dressing up box that whenever she puts it on, turns her into a Superhero! During these imaginative daydreams, she confronts a boy being unkind to animals, a bear who has had a tree fall on him, and a seagull who makes a little girl drop her ice cream. In the hospital, wearing her wig, she knows she has discovered how to be kind, and this is something that supports her through her treatment and gives her hope. Her hair grows back, and all goes well. The wig has done its job, and this story, a true one evidently, is

## REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

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

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

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

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

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

**Rebecca Butler** writes and lectures on children's literature.

**Jane Churchill** is a children's book consultant.

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

**Janet Fisher** is a children's literature consultant.

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

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

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

**Anne Horemans** is a secondary school librarian.

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

**Matthew Martin** is a primary school teacher.

**Sue McGonigle** is a Lecturer in Primary Education and Co-Creator of [www.lovemybooks.co.uk](http://www.lovemybooks.co.uk)

**Neil Philip** is a writer and folklorist.

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

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

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

**Sue Roe** is a children's librarian.

**Elizabeth Schlenker** is the compiler of [www.healthybooks.org.uk](http://www.healthybooks.org.uk)

**Lucy Staines** is a primary school teacher

**Mat Tobin** teaches English and Children's Literature in Primary ITE at **Oxford Brookes University**. He also leads and teaches several modules at Masters level on Children's Literature.

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

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

the basis of the **Little Princess Trust**, a charity that funds and produces wigs for children with cancer and also supports research. It is quite rare to find a book about cancer for young children, and this is a wonderful and positive story with a good outcome. Lots of sugar-pink illustrations will be beloved by little girls. **ES**

**No More Peas**

★★★★

Madeleine Cook, ill. Erika Meza, OUP, 32pp, 9780192776136, £6.99 pbk

Oliver does not like vegetables. His choice of dinner would be pizza, or burgers or meatballs, but his Daddy keeps giving him carrots, or broccoli or, worst of all, peas! The family dog is being very well fed, as Oliver makes it clear he does not want to eat any of the healthy offerings. Will Daddy's plan to take Oliver to a garden to see where the vegetables are grown encourage him to be less fussy?

I thought I would test this book out on a group of Reception children in our school library, as of course they are the intended target market and they all loved it.

Erika Meza's eye-catching and humorous illustrations excellently convey Oliver's disgust at being forced to eat vegetables and there is ample chance to join in with the chant of "No More Peas!" There is also lots to talk about on every page, from how vegetables are grown from seeds, to who likes which vegetable best and ultimately about being brave enough to try new things, that might not actually be as bad as you think. A wonderful, light-hearted and funny picture book to encourage fussy eaters to eat more vegetables, whilst having fun. **AH**

**Nature is an Artist**

★★★

Jennifer Lavalley, ill. Natalia Colombo, Greystone Kids, 36pp, 9781771646499 £12.99 hbk

In a time when we are witnessing funding for the arts being constricted, it is good to know that literature for children will always be there to provide that rich connection. A dedication from Lavalley 'To Terry and Fred, with love - for showing me there is wonder in all places if you only remember to look' provides an insight into the main theme of this rhyming picture book.

Personified through a weaving of shades of green with rounded, rolling, grassy hair, Nature leads a small group of children of different skin colours from the title page into a richly-coloured landscape of rivers, mountains, forests and an underground cross-section. As Nature displays and plays with its creations so the children find themselves inspired to create too. This structure of Nature encouraging and modelling followed by a spread of a child creating something of their own based upon this inspiration continues throughout.

When Nature shows a landscape rich in colours, the following spread shows a young child finger-painting and thumb printing with the same colours. Another spread displays Nature playing with 'a fine collage' of leaves and the following shows a different child cutting out and making shapes inspired by the display.

This pattern repeats throughout with Nature modelling and revealing the secrets within the landscape: a muse for the children. When, at nighttime, they finally arrive in their treehouse home all their creations can be seen on display above the mantelpiece: a nice touch. I especially liked Nature revealing the 'fossilised impressions hidden underground'. The spread displayed beetles, seeds and shells hidden within soily depths whilst the following spread showed a child using same-shaped painted stamps to pattern some squared: a gentle invitation to use the natural resources that can lie at your feet.

This is a lovely book to share and I hope it inspires families and educators to try these ideas and thoughts with young children too. I would have liked to see, at the back of the book, some instructions on how the adult and child could make the same art as the children did throughout the book. Whatever the case, I have no doubt it will encourage young readers to see that they can all play at creating their own art. **MT**

**There Is More Than One Way to be Strong**

★★★★★

Clara Anganuzzi, Caterpillar Books, 32pp, 978 1 83891 5, £11.99 hbk

Dragons are 'tough and ferocious and powerful' aren't they? Well, not all of them. In this charming picture book, we meet Maurice, who is anything but. He loves flowers and is 'small, gentle and quiet'. Reminiscent of Ferdinand the Bull in a picture book of old, he wants always to be around colour and beauty and is usually found arranging flowers into wonderful patterns. His friends – and particularly his brother, Gruff – love having contests to see who is strongest of them all. Gruff often wins, and can't understand why his young brother fails. This makes Maurice very sad as he does try, but knows he is different from the others. In a yearly competition, where the other dragons compete in fire-breathing, scaring each other, and having a gold treasure hunt, Gruff, in his over-confident way, insists that the treasure hunt should go ahead in spite of a storm, and when he doesn't return, it is Maurice who decides that they must look for him even in the bad weather. Flying in a daisy-chain formation, Maurice leading, they swoop and search until Gruff is found with a hurt wing. Once again it is Maurice who knows exactly what to do. He finds a willow tree, and with his florist knowledge weaves a harness, so the stronger dragons can

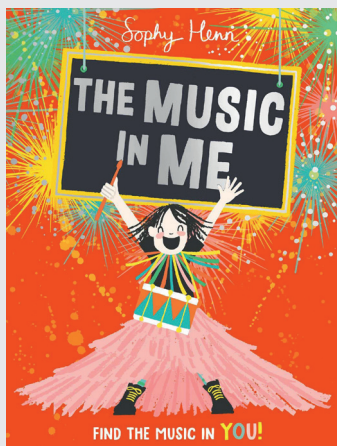
carry Gruff home. Everyone cheers the hero, and a much-chastened Gruff presents his brother with flowers and admits that Maurice's 'strength comes from his being true to himself'. 'Sometimes dragons breathe flames, but sometimes they breathe flowers.' Delightful, and beautifully illustrated. **ES**

**Four Bad Unicorns**

★★★★★

Rebecca Patterson, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978 1 83913 103 5, £12.99 hbk

Connie tells this story about her big sister Frankie and herself and their obsession with unicorns. They play unicorns all the time, even at breakfast and when Connie, who uses a wheelchair, is being dressed by Frankie and their Dad. One Saturday they are playing farmer unicorns when the doorbell rings. It is Ada and Colin from next door, and they want to play. This is not entirely welcome to the girls because they know all about Ada's bossiness – which she proceeds to display. First, she tells everyone that they must make a unicorn palace of wonder, and she insists that Connie be part of the wall while sitting in her wheelchair. Hardly pleasant for Connie! Then she announces that she will be queen of the unicorns and Connie and Colin must be sleeping unicorns. Soon there is rebellion amongst the ranks, and the other three 'bash down the walls' and become a 'bad unicorn train' out of the door and away. This produces angry tears in bossy Ada, but her little brother tells her, 'You were a bad queen', and Frankie tells everyone, 'We have all been bad unicorns'. 'Let's be good unicorns together!' adds Connie, so they are, and have a big unicorn party. Great fun with its diverse cast of characters and a comic-style approach. **ES**

**The Music in Me**

★★★★★

Sophy Henn, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 9781471194252 £6.99 pbk

This bold and bright picture book, from award-winning author/illustrator Sophy Henn, is a wonderful journey through a little girl's emotions, showing how the music inside you is

what really makes you, you.

There are happy tunes where you feel bursting with life, slow tunes when everything feels heavy and sad, marching stomps and sleepy swoons – a rhythm for every mood.

The glorious colour illustrations perfectly portray the different emotions, with the inspiring rhyming text just shouting to be read out loud and enjoyed in a classroom or between parent and child.

Although aimed at nursery and above, I feel this book would work best for slightly older children in opening discussions about feelings and emotions and how we all feel different or out of sorts sometimes. Like the little girl in the book, to be true to ourselves, we all need to find our own music and rhythm and march to our very own beat. **AH**

**The Friendly Mammoth**

★★★★

Written and ill. Anna Terreros-Martin, David Fickling Books, 32pp, 978-1-78845-231-1, £6.99 pbk

Mansi loves going to the museum, but she's the only visitor without a friend and can't shake off her loneliness. In a gallery she notices a solitary mammoth on a plinth. "Shall I draw you a friend?" she asks, and as her picture takes shape, Mansi imagines whirling snow. Before she knows what's happening, she's riding the mammoth straight back into the Ice Age!

During their whistle-stop time-travel tour, Mansi and the Friendly Mammoth meet a cave girl, admire cave paintings (and add to them) and observe amazing prehistoric wildlife. In the course of their adventures, they discover Mammoth's long-lost herd, and on their return to the museum, Mansi's excited chatter brings her a real-life, wheelchair-using friend. The book ends with a gentle call to action: Mansi and Benny join protests against further loss of wildlife, and the final spread presents information about the 'mega-beasts' that Mansi encountered in the Ice Age but that are now extinct.

Anna Terreros-Martin uses a blend of watercolours, inks, soft pastels and coloured pencils in an autumnal palette to conjure the soft textures of mammoth fur, cavelight and a snow-bound world, and her thoughtful debut sets out to raise awareness of endangered species and teach children that "sharing what you love is a great way of making new friends". In tackling these subjects, she has created a warm-hearted picturebook that will please readers who like sincere stories with a mission and a moral.

**The Friendly Mammoth** is a satisfying book to share at any time of day and makes a good starting point for discussions about the topics raised, but the treatment of one of its key themes – being alone vs. being lonely – could have been a little more nuanced. It's lovely to know that Mansi has found a friend, but 'shyness' doesn't always need fixing, and solitary activities can be fun, too. **CFH**

## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior



### Martha Maps it Out

★★★★★

Leigh Hodgkinson, Oxford University Press, 32pp, 978-0192777782, £6.99 pbk

Meet Martha, a little girl with a big vision. We're invited into her world through the maps she draws, each one carefully labelled, full of interesting facts and quirky Martha-chosen insights. Her book opens with a map of the universe, followed by a map of Earth, 'a planet full of land and sea', zooming in closer and closer to focus on the city where Martha lives, her street, her tower block (you'll need to turn the book sideways at this point) until we're in her room. At this point, everything opens out again with a wonderful map of Martha's thoughts, all the BIG things she thinks about and her dreams for the future, where anything is possible. Every page is a treat with so much for young readers to explore and it's delightfully positive, celebrating all the opportunities Martha has for adventure and discovery. Children will love it and it will inspire much map-making and daydreaming. Highly recommended for home and school. **LS**

### Blob Fish

★★★

Olaf Falafel, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781406397659 £12.99 hbk

Part touching tribute to friendship and part raising awareness of pollution in our oceans, Blob Fish follows the eponymous protagonist on his quest to find someone to share in his quirky sense of humour. The picture book opens, after a lovely playful hint of Blobfish through the use of endpapers, with a gull's-eye view of a coastal town (Scottish flags in sand-castles and trains crossing impressive viaducts allude, perhaps, to the home of Falafel's comedic success). Several humans are on the shorefront 'splashing', 'walking', 'chasing' and 'whistling' but, most importantly perhaps, a small group can be seen clearing up litter that has collected around the rockpools.

With the above-water landscape

set, the narrative returns back to Blob Fish and his melancholic lifestyle (it's difficult for a blobfish to look anything but melancholic). We find him leading an empty life upon an ocean floor devoid of any other life signs. Ascending, in the hope of finding company and someone to practise his jokes on, he passes aquatic lifeforms all paired up in friendship (based on species) – but there's no one who looks like or wants to be with him. A well-planned weaving of both surface and underwater stories begins as Blob Fish swims across a double-page spread in a watery, rolling tunnel whilst vignettes of the people above continue with one particular human purposefully tossing a plastic bag over the side of the promenade.

In an ironic twist for the reader, the bag descends into the sea, the design on its cover, once upturned, mimicking that of a smiley face. When Blob Fish spies it on the other side of the spread, he instantly connects with it – falling for what appears to be a welcome grin. Another series of vignettes ensue as Blob Fish and the plastic bag dance through the sunlit sea, until disaster strikes and our protagonist finds himself trapped within the bag's belly. Fortunately, a sharp-eyed beach-cleaning human spots the bag and claws it out leaving space for a curious little hermit crab (subtly introduced at the start) to come over and revive this blobby-nosed newcomer. A swift friendship is reached when both find that they have the same sense of humour.

Falafel's illustrations are a treat, rich in colour and design and reminiscent of Scheffler's work with those thick, dark lines that edge character and landscape. I particularly liked the pacing throughout and use of frames and although the friendship at the end felt a little rushed, the implicit ecocritical message is nicely done and opens doors for further discussion and, possibly, action. Comedic timing abounds. **MT**

### The Vanishing Lake

★★★★

Paddy Donnelly, O'Brien Press,

32pp, 9781788493291 £8.99 pbk  
There is a little bit of magic associated with the lake near the home of Meara's grandfather. Without any warning, its waters simply disappear and then reappear days later. To satiate Meara's curiosity about this phenomenon, her grandfather gently teases her with stories of mermaids unplugging the lake and sheep soaking up the waters with their wool. But these fantastical answers to this riddle are not enough for his resourceful granddaughter, instead, Meara decides to solve the mystery through science and investigation. The answer though might not be what Meara is expecting...

Digitally illustrated with rich, warm swathes of green and blues, Donnelly makes the most of the double-page spreads to celebrate this idyllic, Irish locale. As Meara explores the lake floor with a magnifying glass, Donnelly presents lush, green vistas with deep clouds and expansive spaces. Animals, both fantastical and real dot the frame and landscape and children will be drawn in by these visitors to mythical scenes.

What is especially lovely though is granddad's fanciful yarns about why the water has vanished and whether the truth of the story lands on the magic of granddad's side or Meara's science. A narrative play that will keep young readers hooked until the end.

I particularly liked the information text at the back in which Donnelly shares the story's origin based around a real lake he visited as a child in his home county in Ireland in which the water really did drain away. A fantastical delight and one that will be better shared. **MT**

### The Friendship Bench

★★★★★

Wendy Meddour, ill. Daniel Egneus, OUP, 33pp, 978 0 19 277733 1, £6.99 pbk

'Tilly and Shadow had found a new home by the splash and curl of the sea.' So begins this lovely and sophisticated picture book. We never know why Mummy and Tilly and Shadow, their dog, have moved to the seaside, but we do understand very well that Tilly and Shadow are very close, and that Tilly is feeling lonely without friends. When she starts her new school, she would like to take Shadow with her, but Mummy explains that dogs must stay outside.

Tilly finds the school difficult in the beginning, particularly when there is no one for her to play with. Her nice teacher, a burly man with a big white beard, is helpful and suggests she tries the Friendship Bench, but when she does so, she finds a sad boy already there. When she reports this to the teacher, he suggests that she try again. This time she sits on the bench with the boy, but they are both shy and don't know what to say. Finally, Tilly says she thinks the bench may be broken, so the boy suggests they fix it, and they do so with twigs and leaves and all sorts of things. The shared activity, is what is important here. They become friends quickly, and by the time Mummy and Shadow arrive to collect her, Tilly has found out much about Flint and his dog. The text is simple but beautifully written, and the pictures show us a great deal about the story. The sadness comes through, and we feel that possibly Tilly has been sad for some time – hence her dependence on Shadow. Her school mates mostly wear the most wonderful Fair Isle type sweaters and

hats with bobbles, even the teacher follows this trend. In fact, the setting may well be on an island as the cliffs and abundant trees, as well as the many, many seagulls in residence would seem to make it so. It will take an older child to appreciate the nuances of both text and illustration, but younger children will enjoy the basic story and the wonderful colouration. **ES**

### Flooded

★★★★★

Written and ill. Mariajo Ilustrajo, Frances Lincoln First Editions, 40pp, 978-0-7112-7676-5, £12.99 hbk

A town with all the usual facilities (lamp-posts, escalators, galleries, restaurants...) is being slowly inundated, but it's business as usual for the animal inhabitants. Preoccupied by their own concerns, they ignore the rising water or deal with its practical inconveniences in humorous and inventive ways. Amidst a constant chatter of questions, theories and complaints, those offering valuable ideas are drowned out by the noise until the situation becomes critical. Finally, the animals decide to listen to a quieter voice – but it's going to take everyone to pull that plug!

Drawn and washed in tones of grey, then flooded with a deep turquoise overlay, this striking and sophisticated picturebook by Spanish newcomer Mariajo Ilustrajo shows what happens when a problem is ignored, and sends powerful messages about the importance of teamwork. The animals are depicted in all manner of intriguing situations as they interact (gleefully, resignedly, humorously, anxiously, to the best of their ability or otherwise...) in ways that engage and reward our attention, and every spread invites exploration and response.

The story is told in capitals and is pleasingly understated, but some of the jokes and references may need to be explained to younger audiences. Direct speech appears in lower-case text: lines rather than speech bubbles attribute comments to each speaker, and once talking underwater becomes impossible the characters hold placards. The font is visually appealing, but hand-lettered capitals and hidden punctuation on darker backgrounds could impede accuracy and fluency for some readers.

Flooded was created as part of Mariajo's MA in Children's Books Illustration at Anglia Ruskin University, and it won the New Talent category at 2020's **World Illustration Awards**. Her chosen subject could have weighed the story down, but it doesn't: humour lightens every page, and the takeaway message ("the only way to fix a problem was together") delivers an upbeat, can-do sense of possibility and hope. **CFH**

**The Boy Who Sailed the World**

★★★★★

Julia Green, ill. Alex Latimer, David Fickling Books, 978 1 78845 233 5 28pp, £6.99 pbk

In this story we meet a little boy who is captivated by the sea and stories about the sea. He dreams of having a ship and sailing off to have adventures of his own. With the magic of storytelling in no time at all he does just that, building himself a boat to sail the seven seas.

He experiences amazing sunrises and sunsets, and fabulous sea creatures keep him company. However, it isn't all smooth sailing (!) he has to negotiate busy shipping lanes and stormy seas. Bravely, he becomes attuned to the sea and his ship, drawing on the resources at his disposal. Using sea charts, a compass and the stars to guide him, he continues with his adventure until eventually he hears a voice from home calling him, and he returns to tell his tale.

This is a delightful picturebook, beautifully written with a pleasing and varied rhythm which would make it great to read aloud to young children. The illustrations are full of warmth and complement the story perfectly, conveying the magic and wonder of the sea and the drama of the story.

The book ends with a message for the reader to prompt conversation and imagination – where in the world will you go? What is your dream?

A celebration of adventure, childhood ambition and determination; daring to dream and not giving up, this is a perfect story for young explorers everywhere. **SMC**

**Elephant Island**

★★★★★

Written and ill. Leo Timmers, English text by James Brown, Gecko Press, 32pp, 978-1-776574-34-6, £11.99 hbk

A new book by Leo Timmers is something to celebrate and his latest, an eccentric seafaring extravaganza with a big heart, has all the makings of a classic. The storyline is simple: as other vessels and their crews join a shipwrecked elephant on a tiny rock, bigger and more elaborate constructions must be created to house the island's growing population, but Timmers' illustrations are so full of narrative detail that even the youngest audiences will soon be creating their own augmented versions of the tale.

Timmers' artwork grabs our attention with bright, punchy images, but there's depth here, too, fueling immersive contemplation and return visits. The animals and their diverse vessels are depicted in a bright palette, but the sea has more complex (and often darker) moods. Tactile and evocative seascapes are accompanied by anthropomorphic descriptions: introduced as a 'friend',

the sea becomes 'boisterous' and eventually 'loses its temper', with disastrous results for the island's residents, and much use is made of white space, allowing the characters and their actions to take centre stage.

James Brown's text is described as an English version of the original rather than a translation, and does a stylish job of cueing and supporting the story unfolding in Timmers' artwork. Printed in a large, clear font, it includes rich vocabulary – ancient mariner, catastrophic equipment failure, built-in snorkel – that will engage and stretch young children who enjoy words (and whose families are not deterred by them). Understated text accompanies artwork telling a slightly different tale: "Arnold stepped aboard gently. Oops! He had put his foot in it again" is accompanied by images showing Arnold sinking the old sea dog's boat by going straight through the bottom, and there are other intentional mismatches between words and pictures for children to notice and enjoy.

Alongside the fantasy and slapstick humour runs a current of something more serious. In a perilous watery world, diverse animals survive and thrive by working together for the common good – and if this sounds like a climate-themed fable, those ideas are, by implication, present. But although there are lessons to be learned from the animals' constructive teamwork and optimism, there's no moralizing in this book. Timmers encourages his audience to develop caring, problem-solving attitudes by focusing on high spirits, humour and communal enterprise, rather than delivering instructions.

Although **Elephant Island** is marketed at children aged 2-5 years, those in Key Stage One (5-7 years) will enjoy it, too. It would also make an interesting starting point for discussions with older readers about problem-solving, leadership and teamwork. **CFH**

**I am Nefertiti**

★★★★★

Annemarie Anang, ill. Natelle Quek, Five Quills, 32pp, 978 1 912923 31 1, £7.99 pbk

Named by her grandmother, for the Egyptian queen, Nefertiti has played the drums since she was very small. Setting off to her first rehearsal with a band, she is reminded by her Dad that she is, indeed, Nefertiti. That's what her Dad always reminds her, when she is nervous, and it makes her feel ten feet tall. She is introduced to the band players, and the teacher decides her name Nefertiti is too tricky to say, so she tells her she will call her NEF. The band begins to play, the recorder squeaks, the kalimba clangs, the piano plonks, the marimba plinks, the violin screeches and the ukulele twangs! Frustrated, Miss Potts the teacher decides they need a drum

beat to pull them all together and she shouts, "Nef, give us a beat!" Nefertiti feels her skin tighten and her body shrink, but she does give a beat, "cu cu cha cha, cuc cuc cha." This time the instruments soar, rock, glide and groove. However, Nefertiti has had her confidence smashed, and it takes a while for the teacher and her band to realise her upset, and to recognise the importance of honouring Nefertiti's full name. The band of eclectic instruments resumes its rehearsal with a steady drum beat, "and the music sounds so sweet." A book to treasure, for children to understand the importance of embracing their name and identity, whilst plainly seeing illustrated the joy of playing musical instruments together. **GB**

**Pantemonium!**

★★★★★

Peter Bently, ill. Becka Moor, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978 1 83913 059 5, £12.99 hbk

Youngsters may not be familiar with the word pandemonium, but will soon catch on to the idea once introduced to Fred's hilarious fishing trip. Unknowingly, Fred hooks his best, favourite pair of pants from the washing line as he sets off for the beach, line over his shoulder. The cover picture gives the clues that the pants are indeed of the very stretchiest variety, as one after another, Fred unwittingly scoops up dogs and cats, the baker and his pastries, indeed taking in Constable Kelly with her criminal, appalled, in the back of her patrol car. In they all tumble as Fred wonders at the increasing weight of his fishing line. Turn each page and, "Oh, Pantemonium!" Passing the zoo, he catches a giraffe and an elephant too! The rhymes help the text bundle along, as he hears his destination, when, suddenly, the whole contents in his undies go free. There is a lovely twist to the tale at the end of the story, and readers will enjoy returning to the beginning, taking in all the illustrations, and laughing at the impossibility of all the happenings. The pictures add much to the tale; those with keenest eyes will spot on the first spread the block of shops where Fred later collects his cakes and a couple of page-turns on, there is the Constable catching the thief at the bank! Lots of fun in both text and pictures to enjoy in a read-aloud, and subsequent read-alones by a child. **GB**

**The Marvellous Granny Jinks and Me**

★★★★★

Serena Holly, ill. Selom Sunu, Simon & Schuster, 128pp, 9781398503038, £6.99 pbk

This is the first title in an appealing series aimed at newly confident readers and focussing on Jada and her beloved Granny Jinks. When Jada finds a box of magic tricks in her Granny's flat, she discovers her Granny's secret dream of becoming a magician. With the help of new friend Tilda, and Luna the cat, Jada and

Granny work on their magic routines and are accepted into the Dalton Green Magic Society.

This book is full of magic and mayhem, told in a light-hearted style and enhanced throughout by the vivacious illustrations of Selom Sunu. Themes of friendship, family, self-belief and following your dreams combine with fun and warmth to make this an attractive series for newly independent readers. Interestingly, the book is inspired by Jenny Mayers, the first Caribbean female member of the Magic Circle, and, as a bonus, there are some pages of how-to magic tricks at the end for young readers to try at home. **SR**

**Just Like Grandpa Jazz**

★★★★★

Tarah.L, ill. Mirna Imamovic, Owllet Press, 32pp, 978 1 913339 10 4, £7.99, pbk

Grandpa Jazz is getting ready to go to the airport to visit the tropical island where he was born – clues suggest the island is Mauritius although this is not directly stated. His grandson Frank is helping him pack. Frank finds some interesting things in Grandpa's suitcase, each prompting a recollection of island life – including the small piece of rock which leads Grandpa to tell the story of falling into a volcanic crater. Grandpa is a master storyteller; even a bar of soap brings back memories of his own grandma washing clothes in the river. The journey to the airport becomes an imaginary adventure when Grandpa recalls the giant snails and their silvery trails and Frank pictures them as he looks out of the window.

Although these are mostly fond memories, the discovery of a badge with his name causes Grandpa to recollect his arrival, the segregation imposed on people of colour on board ship, and the experience of finding a job with people changing his name as they couldn't pronounce it.

This is a warm and appealing story with an unexpected and very satisfying ending. The illustrations are delightful, with lots to ponder. There are additional stories waiting to be imagined by young readers, particularly of the fun Frank and Grandpa have together at the end of the story. The love between Grandpa, Frank and his mother is clear.

This is a story about family love, particularly between grandparents and grandchildren, and the special connections which stories can make between generations as they share memories and build them together too. **SMC**

**Granny Came Here on the Empire Windrush**

★★★★★

Patrice Lawrence, ill. Camilla Sucre, Nosy Crow, 32pp, 978 1 83994 231 0, £7.99, pbk

Ava and Granny enjoy spending time together, singing songs from Trinidad where Granny was born. When Ava needs to dress up as

# reviews

## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

someone she admires for an event at school, Granny is just the person to help. She has a special trunk full of old clothes 'you could dive inside and emerge as someone else.' Granny finds accessories to suggest several significant black women, but Ava is not sure. Then she finds a small cardboard suitcase with some intriguing objects inside. It was the case Granny brought with her from Trinidad when she travelled on the Empire Windrush.

With the help of an empty jar, a pebble, a blue hat, and some lace gloves Granny begins relating her own story. A long journey on a big old boat, the cold 'wrapping itself' around her, her hard life working in a clothing factory and homesickness for the warmth of her island home and her family, eventually finding someone special to love in her new home. Granny's story helps Ava reach a moving decision about the person she really admires and who to dress up as for the school event.

Beautifully written with bold, colourful illustrations, this picturebook brings a sense of the experience of the Windrush generation to young readers. The story context with Granny's wonderful trunk, is a clever device allowing several significant historical figures to be introduced; notably Mary Seacole, Rosa Parks and less well-known Winifred Atwell. Full of the warmth of family love, it also includes an important insight, that the people we admire most may not those we encounter in history books but may be much closer to home and the people we love are more precious than all the gold in the world. **SMC**

### The Boy with Flowers in His Hair

★★★★★

Jarvis, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 4063 9251 7, £12.99 hbk  
Delightfully whimsical is Jarvis' story with its small boy narrator. This boy is best friends with David the boy whose hair is gloriously adorned with flowers of all colours and kinds. Both children are in Mrs Jones' class and this kind-hearted woman tolerates the sneeze-inducing flowers worn by the sweet gentle member of her group. His classmates too are fond of David and take little notice of his unusual tonsorial style until a family of birds take up residence in his hair.

One day however, as the narrator waters David's hair, one of the petals comes off in his hand. The result is that David is quiet for the rest of that afternoon, eschewing opportunities to join in the play of his friends.

The following day for the first time, David comes to class wearing a hat and is uncharacteristically quiet. When as his teacher's behest, David like the others removes his outer garments including the hat, what is revealed is a 'twiggy, skinny and

brittle' growth, with petals cascading down like butterflies. Now during class the other children are physically distant but not so the narrator who receives the occasional accidental scratch. He is also struck by a creative idea and amassing the appropriate materials he initiates operation 'give David his colour back'. Fellow class members are happy to join in and it's not long before in addition to a new floral head adornment, David regains his former spirit.

Then, comes a day when the narrator notices a different flower, not made by human hands but one of David's, a real new beautiful bloom, soon to be followed by more flowers, not to mention all the buzzy bees. As for all the coloured paper, the narrator has that safely stored - just in case - because as he tells us, "he's my best friend and I am his."

There's a pleasing circularity to this tale of supportiveness and kindness so beautifully illustrated in Jarvis's warm-hearted illustrations that show the ups and downs of David's emotions along with those of his best pal. With important themes of friendship and acceptance of difference, this book is one to share and discuss both in school and at home. **JB**

### The Robber Raccoon

★★★★★

Lou Kuenzler, ill. Julia Woolf, Faber, 32pp, 978 0 571 36182 3, £6.99 pbk  
With a topical environmental theme, this rhyming book will charm its readers. Rosie Raccoon sets off one dark night with a sack on her back. At the first big house, in she goes, and immediately sees a glittering prize. "Blaahh!" goes the burglar alarm, but Rosie scoots off safely across the lawn. On to the next house, and she baffles the infra-red beams as she fills her swag bag. Hot on her trail come the police, Officer Skunk eventually making the arrest as Rosie is caught red handed. But the contents of her swag bag astound all. Whilst the houses Rosie visited are being taped off ...CRIME SCENE DO NOT ENTER... she explains to the bewildered police that she hasn't robbed jewels or artwork worth millions. All she has taken is litter, and things from bins! She still gets a scolding for breaking into houses and taking things without permission, but Rosie is delighted. She is ready for her day of upcycling - just LOOK what she has made! The bouncing rhymes make this an excellent book for reading aloud, and it is imperative that readers go back to the first page to examine the illustrations in detail... yes, there is a bin with a glittering honey jar poking out! The partnership of author and illustrator already has a successful clutch of picture books to their credit and Rosie the Raccoon Robber/Upcycler is a great addition to their collection. **GB**

## 8 – 10 Junior/Middle

### Ed's Choice

#### The Greatest Show on Earth

★★★★★

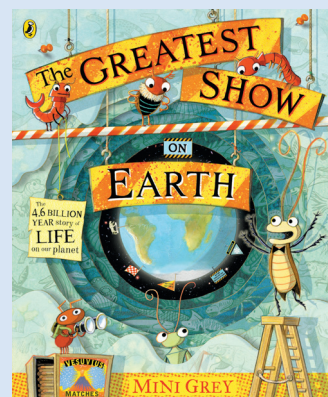
Mini Grey, Puffin Books, 48pp, 978 0 241 48083 0, £14.99 hbk

Setting out to tell the 4.6-billion-year story of life on Earth in one picturebook is a tall order but one in which Mini Grey, its creator has been incredibly successful.

The story is presented as if a theatrical performance by Rod the Roach and his international troupe of insect performers in the world-famous shoe box theatre. Each double page spread represents a key moment in the evolution of life on earth and we find ourselves jumping a mere billion years or so as the pages turn.

The layout is clear and very well thought out but there is useful guidance on how to read the book at the beginning. Readers are advised to focus on what is happening on the stage first - this is where the main action happens with additional information in the wings on each side of the page. The orchestra pit at the foot of each page includes a timeline which helps track key events in the Earth's story so far; one centimetre representing one million years. Humans arriving a mere 200 thousand years ago, so in the context of life on earth - it's a case of blink and you miss it.

Readers will gain an insight into how special our world is - conditions just right to support life. Key events in evolution are described, including the early explosion of life forms under the sea and the rise of mammals 50 million years ago. The catastrophic effects of major planetary disasters add drama to the tale and emphasise the fragility of life on earth. Key features of successful species are featured including dinosaurs, mammals and humans with our ability to imagine highlighted as a superpower.



The book ends with a look into the far future and the inevitable end of our planet as the sun grows into a red giant. Possibilities for the near future are suggested with one desirable scenario being humans and wildlife living in harmony. As we pan out for a longshot at the end of the book and the performance ends, we see the audience surrounded by rubbish, a reminder that the human race has a long way to go before we can claim to be living in harmony with nature.

A range of approaches are used to present key concepts and life forms including the culinary device of mixing ingredients to create the perfect recipe for a planet and a variety of puppetry and collage to introduce life forms on earth. There is lots of wry humour, for example the asteroid which wiped out the dinosaurs is introduced with 'Here's one for all you mass extinction fans!'

Drawing on her extensive skills in picturebook creation, knowledge and fascination with the animal world and environmental awareness Mini Grey's book is a tour de force, introducing a complex topic in an accessible and engaging way. There is plenty of food for thought too, with the importance of looking after our fragile planet an underlying theme.

This show is definitely going to receive rave reviews - with cries of 'Bravo!' for its creator. **SMC**

### The Baker by the Sea

★★★★★

Paula White, Bonnier Books, 32pp, 9781787419186 £6.99 pbk

Written in homage to her grandad, Percy, and as a poetic reflection on a time and place lost to the sea, White's debut picture book is a beautiful dream-like ode to her hometown. Set against a seaside fishing village on the East Coast of Suffolk, **The Baker by the Sea** sweeps over hill and dale until it anchors on the sandy shores of Lowestoft in a period prior to the 1950s.

'This is my home. Our home, our beach village by the sea.'

The gentle rhythm of the words rolls with the tide as White's

illustrations pan over blacksmiths and basketmakers, sail-makers and boatbuilders as well as coopers and net-makers. We are witness to trades and ways of living that, for the most part, may feel lost to time and, quite literally in this story, tide yet which White is passionate about preserving.

For me, the real success comes in White's ability to bring this period and community to life through her gentle, pencil, pen and ink illustrations. Relying upon a limited palette of greys and tonal blues for the most part (except for the warm yellow glow of the baker's oven), her visual and written narrative crosses over the village, passing over the bustle

of residents' hard-working day-to-day lives and its centring around the fishing trade. Sharp-eyed readers will find joy in spotting the picture book narrator throughout: a young baker's boy who understands that 'the sea is the beating heart' of all they do. He delivers his father's bread, buns and biscuits to the different residents, gently inviting the viewer along until he settles on his bed after a hard day's work, the gentle soothing of the sea drawing him to sleep.

From here, the panelling and pace of the picture book shifts from double-page spreads to something more constrained. The boy imagines the fishermen out in the windy weather, fishing beneath inky-black skies. Blankets of fog heighten the anticipation and risk yet there is a curious draw for the young boy to be a part of it in some way. In contrast, the boy's father toils in the warmth of his bakery, making food for the fisherman upon their return. A fisherman's life, he shares with his son later, was not for him.

Central to this picturebook is White's recognition that everyone has a part to play in this community and no one role is paramount above others. Although the young boy considers the excitement of fishing, he shares with his father that joy comes from providing for his people by making bread alongside him: something that White's own grandfather, who was the village's baker, struggled to accept. The story closes with a beautiful, double-page spread depicting father and son contentedly kneading dough together.

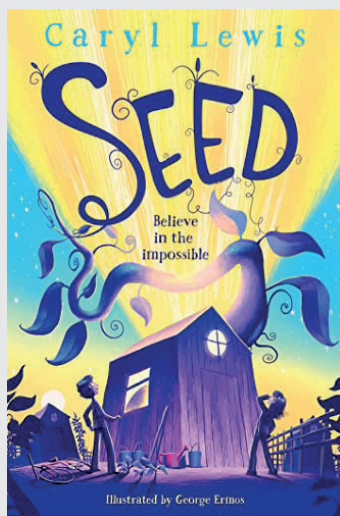
**The Baker by the Sea** celebrates those small-village communities in which everyone worked hard together and looked after each other. It is quite poignant that the village then has been lost to the elements but perhaps readers can take something from the idea that something special happens when communities come together. A lovely book for reading aloud and sharing. **MT**

## Seed

★★★★

Caryl Lewis, illus George Ermos, Macmillan Children's Books, 288pp, 978-1529077667, £7.99 pbk All sorts of things grow in the most unexpected ways in Caryl Lewis's story, and if readers don't see gardening as something slightly magical when they pick up the book, they will by the time they reach the end.

Marty values the evenings he spends with his grandad on his allotment. Since his father left, when Marty was just four, his mother has struggled with her mental health. She now doesn't leave the house, and her hoarding disorder means that their home is filled with bags of rubbish, broken appliances, and piles of old papers. Marty is the target of school bullies who recognise his misery and privation. A birthday present from his



grandad of a seed changes everything. Magic-bean like, it grows and grows until it's big enough for Grandad and Marty to sail away in it to Paris, and back (almost). Lewis manages the switch from reality to fairy story with conviction and skill and readers will have no trouble in accepting the turn the story takes. Also with them in that Channel crossing is Gracie, Marty's newly acquired friend and a girl with family problems of her own. Their friendship grows almost as quickly and magically as the seed, and so do other things: Marty's confidence, his hope for the future, even his mum's ability to make changes in their life. Caryl Lewis has said that she wants her book to uplift children who are feeling world-weary, reminding them that the world is full of wonders and that they themselves are capable of achieving anything. Beautifully written, daring in its ambition, I'd say her book does just that. **LS**

Read our [Q&A interview with Caryl Lewis](#).

## Action Dude

★★★★★

Andy Riley, Welbeck Publishing, 144pp, 9781801300155, £7.99 pbk First name... ACTION. Second name... DUDE! When I saw the author/illustrator of this book was Andy Riley, of **King Flashypants** fame, I knew I was in for a treat and I was not disappointed. This laugh-out loud graphic novel is packed full of adventure, explosions and an array of hilarious characters.

Action Dude (formerly known as Charlie) lives for danger and excitement, if only his Mum would understand that being nine years old won't stop him from saving the world.

When a theme park is overtaken by crazed robots, Action Dude springs into action to save the day and uncover the baddie at the helm of the malfunctioning robots.

There is so much happening on every page of this book, with jokes and puns galore, that it's almost like watching a comic action-movie unfold

and although the drawings are fairly simple, they perfectly convey the jam-packed adventure and the friendship between the main characters.

With a further two books in the series promised, this is sure to become a classic for younger graphic novel fans (and those of us who are slightly older too!) I loved it. **AH**

## The Shop of Impossible Ice Creams

★★★★

Shane Heggarty, ill. Jeff Crowther, Hodder, 201pp, 9781444962499, £6.99 pbk

This charming comedy is the story of Liam (known to everyone as 'Limpet'), who is - to put it mildly - a bit of a worrier! When his mum announces that she is to open a brand new ice cream parlour, Limpet's head is immediately filled with worry: will a chocolate flake get stuck up my nose? Will strawberry sauce on my lip attract wasps? Will sprinkles cause me to sneeze out my wobbly tooth? Much bigger worries are just around the corner, though, as Mr Fluffy (and his Mega Emporium of Amazing and Spectacular Ice Creams) are determined to put Limpet's mother out of business before the Shop of Impossible Ice Creams even opens.

Limpet's new home of Splottpool plays host to lots of curious, enigmatic people, one of whom - Norman - is quick to offer his friendship (and that of his pet chicken!). Norman introduces Limpet to Mrs Cricket and her mysterious garden that is looked after by fairies (apparently) and yields ankle-biting daisies and lemons that can bring good luck! Limpet hopes that the lemons will help him outwit Mr Fluffy for the sake of his mum's new parlour but, naturally, he's very worried that things won't work out. Moreover, he's not convinced that his mum's ice cream flavours (tuna, cheese, spaghetti bolognese etc) will catch on...he's more of a vanilla fan.

**The Shop of Impossible Ice Creams** is a joyful celebration of friendship. With the exception of the villainous Mr Fluffy, everyone Limpet meets is kind and friendly, even when they are laughing at his nickname or fleeing from the aftermath of one of his episodes of bad luck (Limpet suffers a catalogue of hilarious mishaps). When he is helped beyond his anxiety, Limpet learns to see the best in people, which gives him the clarity he needs to redouble his efforts against Mr Fluffy!

There are no intense moments of drama or peril in Heggarty's new story but, like his previous series - **Boot** - **The Shop of Impossible Ice Creams** is a gentle comedy with a warm and peaceful feeling, throughout. **SD**

## Birdsong

★★★★

Katya Balen, Barrington Stoke, 104pp, 9781800900981, £6.99pbk Annie and her mother are moving, leaving their comfortable little house for a drab flat. Life has not been

the same since the accident; the car crash that has left Annie with a scarred arm and fingers that do not want to work. And it was Mum who had been driving the car. Before, Anna's world was full of music - the music she could hear all around her, the music she could create for herself on the flute. Now it has all gone and with it the ambition to apply for that prestigious music school. It is easier not to try - indeed as Noah, the boy who is befriending a pair of nesting blackbirds, says, 'It is always easier not to try'. But is that the answer? Has Anna's life with music really come to an end?

Designed for young people who have a reading age around 8 this is an attractive package. The font is clear - and as is the policy of the publisher, dyslexia friendly, the chapters are short, the plot moves easily, the vocabulary sophisticated without being abstruse or difficult. Here there is no talking down to the audience. Annie is a believable girl whose reactions to her situation is understandable, natural, but she is also a young person who relates to the world through her music and who has talent - something that is not treated as extraordinary but to be nurtured and treasured. The story itself, though firmly rooted in the contemporary world, has the satisfying feel of the fairy tale - indeed there is a hint of *The Secret Garden* both through the character of Noah and the central theme around the healing to be found through the natural world. As is to be expected, descriptive passages are few, dialogue, action and feelings immediate. However, the author ensures that music is central to her narrative through a conscious choice of language that references sound in a way that is unforced and appropriate. This is an excellent example of a narrative that is accessible to a wide age range without sacrificing characterisation or emotional appeal, engaging the young reader and encouraging empathy and sympathy. **FH**

## Where Seagulls Dare

★★★★

Anthony Horowitz, ill. Mark Beech, Walker Books, 252pp, 9781529501179, £7.99 pbk

The sixth outing for Horowitz's **Diamond Brothers** delivers everything that fans would expect: it's a funny, farcical take on the crime genre with plenty of action and excitement.

After months without a case, Tim and Nick Diamond are debating how to share the last corn flake, when a glamorous stranger arrives with a delicious new mystery. Naturally, the stranger is not all she seems (because very few characters are in this series) but her case is irresistible and the siblings agree to take it up.

Despite their trademark lacklustre, back-to-front and utterly incompetent approach to detection, the brothers learn that the kidnapping of a powerful hacker is linked to a frightening far-right group of motorcycle-riding

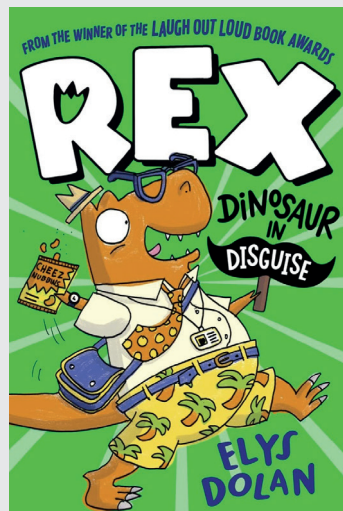
# reviews

## 8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

ingoists, and that MI6 and the Police are also involved for not entirely obvious reasons.

As in previous **Diamond Brothers** stories, the adventure takes many twists and turns and the slightly-more-sensible Nick is constantly required to bail out and save the life of his older brother, Tim. Some old favourites make an appearance, too, including over-aggressive law enforcers and powerful politicians who are very willing to throw Nick and Tim into harm's way.

Horowitz has filled this story even more than previous episodes with 'dad jokes' and witty one-liners, to the extent that parents may enjoy reading this even more than their children! The charming, slapstick comedy is sustained throughout and so is the pace of the action, and a new twist near the end will offer fans hope that there are still more **Diamond Brothers** adventures to come. **SD**



### Rex Dinosaur in Disguise

★★★★★

Elys Dolan, Walker Books, 240pp, 978-1406397703, £6.99 pbk

Rex is a dinosaur in New York. Happily roaming swamps hunting stegosauruses one moment, frozen in a block of ice-age ice the next, then defrosting and washing up in the Big Apple. How will a T Rex navigate modern life? With difficulty basically, although he is lucky enough to be found and taken in by a yeti – Brian Bigfoot – who has found a way to blend in. Other refugees in the city include Nessy and the last remaining dodo family. They've all found jobs – Nessy is a lifeguard at the local pool, while the dodo is a successful local businessman. Rex finds it harder, and he has a few false (and wonderfully comic) starts before finding the perfect job, with the help of a couple of sharp-eyed children, Sandra and Anish, who've noticed he's not like their other neighbours. There's a sub-plot around Sandra, whose best friend Maddie has recently ditched her for 'the Hannahs' (there's two

of them), tempted away by ponies and dance routines. When Maddie accidentally discovers the truth about Rex, by then their school's hugely popular PE teacher, she immediately rats him out to the authorities. Maddie has been convinced by stuff she's read on the internet, that there are dangers everywhere, monsters threatening human beings and Sandra can't convince her otherwise. Dolan's book is brilliantly funny, full of absurd and delightful situations and Rex is an irresistible character. Like that other series about animals in disguise, **The Bolds** by Julian Clary and David Roberts, there's much more than just comedy and the story successfully slips in messages about tolerance, allowing people to live their own way, and the importance of thinking for yourself. Laugh out loud and thoughtful. **MMA**

### Xtinct!

★★★

Ash Stone, Orchard, 176pp, 9781408365694, £6.99 pbk

This new action series from Ash Stone throws extinct creatures from history and prehistory into the present day, with exciting and dramatic consequences.

Jeevan is angry that his mother – a dedicated scientist and fossil finder – has moved them out of the city and into the countryside away from all of his friends. His only solace is in exploring the huge forest behind his mum's lab, and looking for fossils and dinosaur bones of his own.

Hanging out in your parent's laboratory and helping to classify old rocks is a pretty boring after-school activity, and Jeevan certainly thinks so. That is until he suddenly finds himself pedalling furiously through the forest to rescue a dodo and a Neanderthal girl from a marauding T-rex, in an adrenaline-filled chapter that is the standout scene of the book by some distance. The book would benefit from one or two more moments of excitement, like this.

There is also an atmosphere of intrigue and mystery, provided by Mum's wealthy benefactor (a secretive bearded man who owns the lab and the surrounding forest) and also by the enigmatic billionaire with a passion for big game hunting, who wants to buy the forest for reasons unknown. However, young readers may feel slightly frustrated that so much is left unanswered, as the book is evidently a curtain-raiser for new stories to come.

The prospect of new adventures for Jeevan and his unusual band of resurrected species is exciting, and this series opener leaves plenty of room for them to find new adventures. **SD**

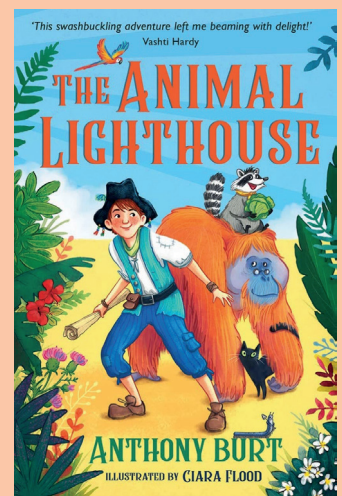
## New Talent

### The Animal Lighthouse

★★★★★

Anthony Burt, illus Ciara Flood, Guppy Books, 256pp, 978-1913101527, £6.99 pbk

Anthony Burt puts a refreshing spin on the adventure island story in his debut children's novel. Our hero Jim (of course), was washed up on a tropical island in a barrel of rum as a baby and has grown up there under the care of the island's animals. It's no ordinary island though, and the animals are distinctly unusual too from Oskar the wise old orangutan, to Rafi the greedy raccoon and Maximus the millipede. They can speak to Jim, and they all have jobs to do maintaining the island's lighthouse which not only keeps ships off the rocks but magically hides their home from prying eyes. The island's inhabitants have their work cut out for them however when unscrupulous pirates arrive. There's a reward out for Jim's recovery and they're determined to take him away,



by fair means or foul. Despite the temptation of finding out more about his human family, Jim decides to stay with the animals and who can blame him as you couldn't ask for a kinder, more tolerant, and supportive family. It makes for perfect escapist summer reading – great illustrations by Ciara Flood too. **MMA**

### Hope on the Horizon

★★★★★

Onjali Rauf, ill. Isobel Lundie, Wren & Rook, 288pp, 978 1 526 36441 8, £9.99 pbk

**Hope on the Horizon**, a nonfiction book, represents a departure for the award-winning author of **The Boy at the Back of the Class** and several other highly acclaimed children's novels. Drawing extensively on her own experiences and work as an activist, this is intended as a children's handbook on empathy, kindness and making a better world.

The book is structured into ten chapters, each sharing a 'secret' for creating change and making the world a kinder place to live in. Themes include hope, friendship and kindness with encouragement to grow your empathy muscle. The tone is reassuring and encouraging throughout; if you feel worried about what is happening in the world it means you care. The suggestion is to deflect negative feelings away and use worries to fire positive action. There are lots of simple suggestions for this, acknowledging that no one way will suit everyone.

Fictional characters have a central role in the book, reflecting the importance of story both in the form of books and film in the author's life. They are used as exemplars of key characteristics. Characters featured range from Frodo's friend Sam in the **Lord of the Rings** to super heroine She Ra of the eighties TV series. The specific qualities of characters are highlighted as something to aspire to, for example trying to be more 'Charlie Bucket' (**Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**) by showing humility or more 'TinTin' by asking questions.

Famous people who embody these

characteristics are introduced and their contribution described. For example, Greta Thunberg, is shown to display courage, passion, perseverance and hope. There are also links to less well-known heroes. These are often drawn from the author's real-life friends and colleagues, including those who have worked with her to help refugees in Calais.

Key terms and concepts such as 'activist' and 'feminist' are defined within the text and there is a fuller glossary at the back of the book as well as links to resources and organisations mentioned in each chapter.

Throughout the book there are pauses for the reader to reflect on their own concerns and aspirations together with a call to action – simple things they can do to make a difference, ranging from writing letters to those in power to simply being aware when a friend needs help.

A warm hearted and encouraging book about hope, change and making a difference. Perfect to share and likely to prompt conversations whether you dip in or read cover to cover. It celebrates many individuals, famous, historical, fictional and unsung and also provides an insight into Onjali Rauf's own work and passions – including her love of chocolate! **SMC**

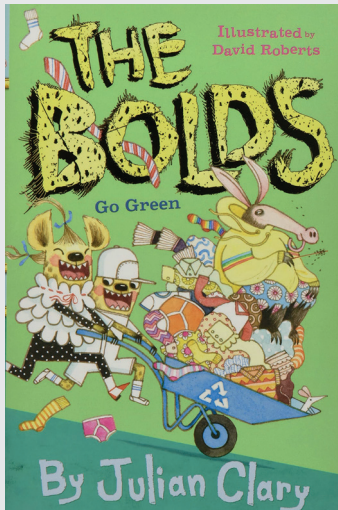
### Looking for Emily

★★★★★

Fiona Longmuir, Nosy Crow, 265pp, 9781839942754, £7.99 pbk  
This debut novel by Fiona Longmuir has a very enticing set up premise in the idea of a secret museum with a mysterious collection of items belonging to a child who has vanished. The story centres on Lily, who is not impressed by her new home, the

seemingly dull, quiet seaside town of Edge. But when she stumbles into an ordinary looking cottage and discovers a hidden museum Lily realises that her new home has more secrets and excitement than she thought. The Museum of Emily is filled with the belongings of a girl who disappeared without trace many years before. Lily is determined to solve the puzzle and enlists new friends Sam and Jay to help her investigate the mystery of who Emily was, why she vanished and who has created the strange museum.

This is an enjoyable, intriguing book which will entice young readers with its atmosphere of intrigue and adventure. The chapters are short and pacy, alternating between Lily's present and Emily's past, and drawing the reader in with clever plot twists and plenty of action and tension. Lily and her friends are appealing characters, and the dialogue and descriptions are full of humour. The seaside setting is evocative enabling links to pirates, smugglers, and lighthouses. Friendship, courage, and determination win the day in a gripping adventure story full of twists and turns which will make readers as eager to solve the mystery of missing Emily as the characters are. **SR**



### The Bolds Go Green

★★★★

Julian Clary, illus David Roberts, Andersen Press, 304pp, 978-1839132070, £7.99 pbk

If you haven't come across the Bolds yet, you're missing out. This is the sixth, and possibly final book in the series about this family of hyenas who live happily in Teddington, disguised as humans. It's just as glorious as the previous instalments, full of joy and jokes and ridiculous adventures, all underpinned by lightly delivered messages of kindness and tolerance and perfectly illustrated by David Roberts. The Bolds twins Bobby and Betty have been made school Green Monitors and are embracing the challenge of sustainable living when a

recycling trip to the charity shop leads to a new rescue mission. They come across an aardvark called Annika, recently escaped from a zoo, who explains that her fellow escapees, a skunk called Charlie and a fruit bat named Fergie, are also in need of aid. Delightfully, Charlie and Fergie turn out to be sharing a tent in Parliament Square with a group of eco-warriors. All this and there's a surprise return from an old friend of the Bolds too. The different plot strands are tied up neatly by the end of the story which culminates in the twins' birthday party, cake and laughter all round. If this is the last outing for the Bolds, they'll still have delivered more happiness and satisfaction than most characters do in three times that many outings.??

### Neon's Secret Universe

★★★★

Sibéal Pounder, ill. Sarah Warburton, Bloomsbury, 214pp., 9781408894149, £6.99 pbk

It seems to be a popular idea to reinvent unicorns. A.F. Steadman in *Skandar and the Unicorn Thief* has them as fierce carnivores, but in this book Sibéal Pounder has them looking just like you and me, and the cute horses with horns are a distraction invented by a man called Greg. Neon Gallup, who is almost 10, moves into a new house and finds an old green lipstick that just happens to be a portal into the UNiverse. She is drawn into this parallel world by Moya, who becomes a friend, (though her favourite group is the Mice Gurls) and, in order to return to her parents, she has to undergo tests and become a unicorn herself in the three remaining days before her tenth birthday. There are many different kinds of magic goo that she can use in the test, but some have unexpected results. There are some great characters: Alaric the giant ghost rat, and the villain, Scarlett Night, as well as her other friends, Geldie and Filly Spangle. The ever-inventive Filly does make an appearance, and causes more mayhem. Neon is a resourceful girl, and this story is original and hilarious.

This reviewer enjoyed *Tinsel* by Sibéal Pounder – she has a talent for taking another point of view about a topic we think we know. As this story ends, Neon is trusted to return to her own world, but finds that she has moved to a town where there is a group of Unicorn Hunters, conveniently wearing 'UH' T-shirts, and they include the girl next door, Priscilla, who turns up to invite her to a sleepover at exactly the wrong moment. It becomes clear that there will be further adventures to come, and that is something to look forward to. **DB**

### Unicorn Seekers, the Map of Lost Unicorns

★★★★★

Cerrie Burnell, ill. Lucy Fleming, Dave Williams, Scholastic, 128pp, 978 0 702306 96 9, £6.99 pbk

This enchanting story begins with an extract from the diary of Araminta Lang, Rome, in May 1918, in which we learn of the birth of the first unicorns. It is well illustrated throughout with black and white drawings of the characters and events. Readers are then introduced to Elodie Lightfoot a feisty, roller-skating expert of a girl who roams freely around Crystal Palace Park in London, opposite the flats in which her family lives. Her father runs a vegan coffee van and Elodie has grown up helping him prep and cook croissant and cakes at dawn each morning before school. A gang of four friends frequent the park, and but it is Elodie who first spots something other worldly. Is it a horse? Is it a horn on its head? Here begins the mystery. Slowly, Elodie befriends the unicorn, describing its horn as "transparent as rain yet strangely luminous, it looks as if it could cut through the fabric of the world." But there is danger, for the baddy, Camille de Scelerat, a high fashion French woman, is after capturing the unicorn for herself, to harness its magical powers. Elodie's Dad packs up the coffee van with the unicorn safely within, and with Elodie and BFF Marne-Mae heads off pronto for safety...first to Edinburgh in Scotland. Their adventures then take them to Holland, to Barcelona and then Prague, all the time with Madame Baddy on their heels. It is an exciting, gripping mystery, with help from a couple of brothers assisting in the thrilling finale; one of these has featured throughout, an autistic boy, of great use in their adventures for his close connection with animals. The author, Cerrie Burnell, is remembered for her sterling work on *CBeebies*, breaking barriers, challenging stereotypes and overcoming discrimination. She is currently BBC's ambassador for disability. Great fun for readers who love a bit of magic and have seen a unicorn...maybe. **GB**

### A Flash of Fireflies

★★★★★

Aisha Bushby, Farshore, 220pp, 9780755500642, £7.99 pbk

This magical, insightful new novel by Aisha Bushby tells the story of Hazel, who has just moved from Kuwait to England and is staying with her great aunt in a fairy tale cottage until her parents arrive to join her. The anxiety and stress of change and separation trigger the return of the ominous fireflies that plagued Hazel as a younger child, taunting her with demands and challenges and leading her into repetitive and compulsive behaviours.

Readers of this sensitive, imaginative story will gradually realise that the fantasy elements, with dark forests and fireflies that torment with their never-ending tasks, are the author's clever way of exploring and explaining the reality of living with anxiety and OCD and showing what it must feel like to struggle with compulsions and despair. Hazel makes a new friend, Ruby, at summer school where the project they work on is based on fairy tales. The author skilfully uses the fairy tale tropes of impossible tasks and repetition to explain what it is like to live with OCD and to give strategies to deal with the disorder.

This is a magical story which mingles reality and fantasy to show a girl struggling to control the terrifying creatures that lie in the shadows. Hazel is supported throughout by adults, including her teacher and her great aunt, who has her own way of dealing with similar issues, and by her new friend Ruby. The use of fairy tale imagery is highly effective, and the plot expertly maintains tension to keep readers guessing. This book is thought-provoking and shows great empathy and imagination in portraying mental health issues; it presents a positive focus on the importance of family and friends and on Hazel's own strength in taking back control of her life. **SR**

## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

### The Unmorrow Curse

★★★★

Jasmine Richards, Uclan Publishing, 305pp, 978915235114, £7.99 pbk

Buzz has quite enough problems in his life, with bullying at school, his mother (on an expedition in South America) has gone missing and his father seems somewhat disconnected from what is going on. When a new pupil, Mari starts at his school, things start to get a bit weird. Firstly, a local reporter goes missing, only to turn up tied to a tree in the nearby wood and saying that she is the Norse goddess

Sunna and has been kidnapped by Loki. Then the two children begin to experience the modern equivalent of Groundhog Day, where events keep repeating themselves, in this instance it is a repetition of their Saturday; it seems that they have managed to trigger something called the 'Unmorrow Curse' and if they cannot find a way of breaking the curse, it could mean the end of the world, or Ragnarok in Norse mythology. Buzz and Mari need to find items called the Runes of Valhalla and then wake the Day Guardians, so that they can stop Loki from creating chaos and start the world again.

# reviews

## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

Stories with a background in ancient mythologies have become very popular over the last decade or so, possible due to the influence of the **Percy Jackson** novels and their follow-ons. The trend for Norse stories may be partly due to the fact that they are set closer to home than some of the other series and the character of Loki (the trickster God) makes a perfect villain for the heroes to fight. In this story we have the added issues around family relationships and also the effects of bullying. Whilst Buzz's father is a professor of mythology, Buzz is not interested in the subject, so all of this is very irritating to begin with. This is a fast-moving adventure story, where the two heroes find themselves on a quest to save the world. They might be young, but they are full of determination and they make many surprising discoveries about themselves and others around them as they follow their quest. **MP**

### Starlet Rivals (Bollywood Academy 1)

★★★★

Puneet Bhandal, ill. Jen Khatun, Lantana Publishing, 264pp, 978 1 915244 00 0 £7.99 pbk

12-year-old Bela's Mum is a teacher of Bharatanatyam, the oldest traditional dance form in India, and, since Bela has been training since she was small, she is very good at it, but she also loves to add some modern Bollywood or Western dance steps. It's no spoiler to say that when she gets the opportunity to compete in *Dance Starz* on TV, she wins, and goes to the Bollywood Academy, as the story is really about what happens when she gets there. Nepotism is a strong theme – most of the other students are related to, or close to, other people in the film industry, and boast about their possessions and holidays. Much is made of Bela's ordinary family and supportive friends: she is treated like an outsider, and feels it. Monica, the mean girl obligatory in many school stories, is the daughter of the producer of *Dance Starz* and a famous film star Mum, and, with her friends backing her, Monica takes every opportunity to make snide comments and play cruel tricks on Bela, but Bela's kind heart eventually gets Monica out of a tricky situation, and it looks as if all will be well.

Puneet Bhandal wrote this book because, as a young girl, she wasn't finding stories that would connect her to her country of origin. She is a former Bollywood film journalist, so she knows all about the glamorous world she is describing: the costumes, the sequins, the make-up, as well as the dancing. We find out about the auditions, the struggles for parts on TV and in film, and the staff who help the students to achieve their goals. The Academy is fictional, but many places mentioned are real, and there

is a lot of lovely Indian food around. The cover is attractive, and, since this debut novel is labelled No 1, it looks as if there will be more stories from the **Bollywood Academy**, and very popular they will be too. **DB**

### Magicborn

★★★★★

Peter Bunzl, ill. Maxine Lee-Mackie, Usborne, 364pp, 9781474964395, £7.99 pbk

Tempest lives with her two fathers who are ferrymen on the river and who saved her from drowning as a small child. They live in an alternative version of our world, where the year is 1726 and there is still magic to be found if you look. When the evil Royal Sorcerer of England persuades Tempest to take him across the river during a storm, she unleashes a magic that she did not know she had. The Sorcerer is searching for a wild boy reputed to live in the woods and who may be full of magic; when he is captured, the boy, Thomas, and Tempest build a friendship and discover that they are actually brother and sister. Not only that, they are the lost children of the Queen of Fairyland. How they are taken to Kensington Palace and manage to escape and then try and break a curse that they have discovered will kill one of them, makes for an exciting and quite chilling story.

There are elements of this story that seem to hark back to the world created by Joan Aiken, although we do have the Hanoverian king George on the throne, rather than James III. This mixture of history and magic helps add to the sense of reality, even when we 'know' that fairyland cannot exist. This is very much a story of relationships, from the stifling interactions of the human royal family and the court to the fairy court and the fairy queen and her sister. The similarities are quite stark as neither group appears to have any sense of humanity and empathy. Thomas and Tempest are seen as pawns to be manipulated to meet the needs of those in authority. The only people who show any feelings for the children are the two ferrymen, which brings into contrast the attitudes of the rich and privileged compared to the common working population. Peter Bunzl has gained a well-deserved reputation as an author who can construct worlds that we believe in and he has certainly fulfilled this aim with **Magicborn**. It definitely deserves its five-star rating. **MP**

### The Reluctant Vampire Queen

★★★★★

Jo Simmons, Hot Key Books, 346pp, 9781471411786, £6.99 pbk

Mo Merrydew is a serious and hardworking teenager with a life plan stretching ahead of her. Imagine her surprise when she is accosted on her

way home from her best friend Lou's house by a stranger who materialises out of nowhere and tells her she has been chosen to become The Vampire Queen of Britain. Bogdan explains he has been sent by the King of the Vampires of the East and he is eager to meet her. Just one bite will transform her and give her immortality. Mo asks for some time to think this over. Her conundrum is that she is a vegetarian and doesn't drink blood, she does not believe in undemocratically elected leaders and vampire traditions are definitely not feminist. Plus vampires don't exist, do they? On the plus side a female leader would be a good proposition and Mo might hold some power over the annoying school bully, Tracey.

At first Mo refuses Bogdan's offer but when Bogdan's familiar, who turns out to be a dreamy and gorgeous floppy-haired boy called Luca, knocks at the door to tell her Bogdan must have her decision soon, Mo has a change of heart. She decides she might be able to get away with faking being a vampire after all.

The voice is pitch perfect in this hilarious comedy of errors. It's a great twist on the familiar vampire genre for slightly younger teens with a rom-com element thrown in. There is action and suspense aplenty and some suitably blood-thirsty descriptions without there being any dreadful danger or peril, even though there are a few nearly fatal misses. Bogdan is a particularly hilarious character, desperate to retire to the Bahamas and trying hard to blend in, wearing joggers and relaxing in the local Premier Inn. The plot does get a bit far-fetched in places and the ending is a little hasty but for sheer laugh-out-loud fun this is a brilliant read for young teenagers. **JC**

### The Fire Cats of London

★★★

Anna Fargher, ill. Sam Usher, Macmillan Children's Books, 284pp, 9781529046878 £7.99 pbk

Asta and Ash are young wildcat kittens living happily in the countryside, and learning how to hunt, until their mother is killed and they are captured, to be sold to be an apothecary in the London of 1666. They are put into cages with other animals, although a kind woman called Miriam, a Jew with her own problems, tried to buy them to rescue them. They are regularly drugged so that the apothecary can take their blood and whiskers, but the house cat, called Beauty, convinces Ash that they are serving a noble purpose, and he becomes besotted by her. Asta is more sceptical though, and she escapes to Miriam's house. At the time, bear baiting was a popular spectacle, and some of Miriam's friends rescue a bear and her cub, Lipa, but the mother bear sacrifices herself to save her cub. The plot gets complicated, as the kind rescuers try to protect the animals from the bad men who are searching for them, and

the Great Fire of London has begun as the animals are fleeing.

The title is somewhat misleading, but it puts the story in a historical context. There is quite a lot of background explanation and description of the times, particularly the cruelty of humans towards animals, and some of the vocabulary is over the top: e.g. some dogs circling the apothecary's house report that they saw Beauty in this much detail on the other side of a window: "Its pupils dilated with pleasure to see us suffer". Asta's transformation from a scared kitten to a resourceful escapee and rescuer is suspiciously fast, but, although not an easy read, this is a good story. **DB**



### While the Storm Rages

★★★★★

Phil Earle, Andersen Press, 382pp, 9781839132056, £7.99, pbk

This new novel follows the success of Phil Earle's *When the Sky Falls*. Not exactly a sequel, it is also set in the Second World War and like his earlier novel, has at its heart the relationship of children and animals. It is a tale of the period before the blitz: the 'phony war' when neither government nor people knew exactly what to expect from the coming conflict. Children were being evacuated out of the major cities and, at the same time, the government advised families to have their pets destroyed. Our hero Noah has no intention of allowing himself to be sent out of London or having his dog Winn put down. He recruits distraught children and bewildered animals from the death queue outside the vet's surgery, and, pressing his father's clapped-out motor boat into use, he and his companions set off up the Thames to Windsor. They are in search of an eccentric countess who they believe may provide a safe country home for their beloved pets. It is a desperate adventure that begins badly when many of the pets, hidden overnight on the boat, make their own disorganised escape. Nor is Noah too happy with some of the passengers who remain on the small boat as they are cast off, particularly bully boy

Big Col and his python, and Samson, an unaccompanied donkey in a straw hat. Plenty of adventures follow, perhaps too many for credibility, including a crashed Spitfire, but Earle grounds the tale in the very believable relationships between the three children who remain on board: impulsive, brave and sometimes reckless Noah, sensible and resourceful Clem, and Big Col, whose belligerence and discontent is balanced by his touching concern for his python Delilah, and who proves to have at least one useful talent. There is both humour and pathos in Earle's story. The children and their animals, as in any war, endure violence and tragedy. And not every one of the companions survives to enjoy the happy ending. **CB**

### The Lizzie and Belle Mysteries: Drama and Danger

★★★★

J. T. Williams, illus. Simone Douglas, Farshore, 335pp., 9780008485252, £7.99 pbk

J. T. Williams has taken two real black young people who lived in Georgian London and woven an exciting tale of mystery and danger around them. Elizabeth Sancho's and Dido Belle's eyes meet across the crowds at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, where Lizzie's father was about to be the first black man to play Shakespeare's Othello in a production by David Garrick. Both girls see a shadowy figure appear to make a chandelier fall and nearly kill Ignatius Sancho. The girls meet up and decide to track down this mysterious figure, becoming involved in the abolitionist movement and the unlawful seizure of black people from the streets of London to be sent to the Caribbean as slaves.

This is told at pace and the reader is totally caught up in the story, told sometimes in letters, with occasional notes as to where the two are in their deductions. The background of Georgian London is skilfully depicted, with its coffee houses, dirty streets, and areas now populated but then, like Hampstead Heath, real country. There is also the added drama of the theatrical background, with jealous actresses, and a disappearing stagehand. The girls' background is skilfully portrayed, with Lizzie in particular slowly becoming aware of the part her mother, father and sister Frances are playing in the underground movement the Sons and Daughters of Africa. Belle's lonely existence in the big house with her grandparents is in great contrast to Lizzie's busy home where her parents run a tea house, full of noise and political discussion. There are one or two things which do not fit: for example daffodils and roses rarely flower at the same time, and at one point Lizzie is 'standing as if about to give birth', which seemed an odd

phrase to use.

Lizzie and Belle are very different characters but become firm friends and the story ends on a cliff-hanger as their two families' joint portrait is stolen on the night of celebration of their victory. A sequel is obviously coming! **JF**

### Nura and the Immortal Palace

★★★★

M.T.Khan, ill. Hazem Asif, Walker, 272pp, 9781529503494, £7.99 pbk

This is a story that combines the modern world of Mica mining in Pakistan with the mystical and magical world of the Jinn. The heroine, Nura struggles to make a living working in the mines, in order to support her mother and brother. She has no time for things such as education and can only envisage a life of danger and hard work. When she digs too far into the mine one day, she sets off a rockfall, trapping her best friend Faisal and several other children. In her attempt to rescue them she finds herself crossing into the realm of the Jinn, from which there seems to be little chance of escape. What follows, tests her to the limit and helps her understand that she has an inner strength that will help her if she ever manages to return to the world she knows.

The author has given us a fantastic story based on the mythologies found in Islam and which emphasize the conflicts between good and evil. She has also given us a window into the horrific work and living conditions suffered by the workers in the mines. It is a reminder that across the world there are young people who's only option seems to be working in these terrible environments. In this story we see how Nura has to expand her knowledge of the world and to begin to understand that she does not need to be limited by her circumstances. Her interaction with characters such as 'the Craftsman' shows her that you cannot judge people solely on their background and heritage and that there are good and bad to be found everywhere. This is a story that is full of action and adventure and which features a really strong and feisty female lead; it is also a story about friendship, family and finding that working together is the way to make things happen. **MP**

### Running With Horses

★★★★

Jason Cockcroft, Andersen Press, 223pp, 9781839132087, £12.99 hbk

Johnny – or rather, Rabbit, a nickname he has acquired, has moved with his mother to the coast. They need a fresh start after the death of his father – a violent death that Johnny witnessed which has left him struggling to cope mentally. Things seem to be getting better, not least his new friendship with Joe Fludde. Then the dreams start again – dreams of a white horse.

And there is violent, dangerous Billy, Joe's elder brother. As the summer sun beats down the two boys find themselves drawn into a situation where anger, violence, even death, are the norm. Will Rabbit find the strength to confront his own demons as well as the very real demons he now faces?

This is the sequel to **We Were Wolves**, but the author provides enough information about this past to ensure that it is possible to read **Running with Horses** without having read the first book. He does this quite lightly; there are no long digressive sections filling in the back story. Rather we learn about it through Rabbit's thoughts and comments as he, the narrator, draws us into this new episode in his life. It is a very immediate narrative; Rabbit speaks directly to each reader as if to an individual. The effect is immersive.

This is not an action-packed adventure but it is full of drama. Short chapters, direct simple sentences, unaffected vocabulary ensure that the plot moves forward unhindered by unnecessary description. Cockcroft's artist's eye informs his prose and his immersive illustrations throughout provide a dramatic counterpoint to the narrative where the boundary between the world and that of the imagination and dream can be thin but is not to be denied. Rabbit's connection with the natural world, a spirit world, established in the first book, is once again central to the plot. It is an integral part of his character and psychology – it is not a magical talent. There is no fantasy here – just tough reality. While there may be few cliff hangers, the whole is charged with tension and indeed violence, both inferred and at the end, very real. Even the weather contributes to this; a familiar trope but no less effective; the reader can feel the oppressive heat of the sun. Atmosphere and a real sense of environment pervade the whole. At the heart of the novel is the theme of relationships, between family members – father and son, brothers. Friendship and the importance of friendship is a parallel theme. The result is powerful. This is a writer following in the footsteps of writers such as Westall, Brookes and Almond. I hope he will continue on this path bringing to it his own unique style, marrying his art to his words. **FH**

### The Notorious Scarlett & Browne

★★★

Jonathan Stroud, Walker Books, 400pp, 9781406394825, £7.99 pbk

One of the wittiest authors in the business and an expert plot-deviser, Jonathan Stroud's stories have given huge pleasure to thousands for well over twenty years. But this second instalment of his latest trilogy is a disappointment. In place of humour there is a relentless concentration on danger, death and yet more danger. Only once is the doctrine of killing as the only response to evil questioned,

and that very hurriedly and to no lasting effect. Describing towns suddenly razed to the ground with their uniformly unpleasant occupants dying in their hundreds would seem more at home in a violent video game than in the pages of an otherwise brilliant writer published by one of Britain's leading houses.

As before, earnest young Albert Browne and his fiery teenage companion Scarlett McCain find themselves adrift in a decayed, post-industrial Britain. This is ruled over by ruthless Mentors ruling from a chain of Pullmanesque Faith Houses. Regularly looting their hidden wealth, the two children use the proceeds to help finance a weak national opposition. But their exploits put them into a series of almost impossible situations only escaped from at the last moment. Before that they must suffer blows, dismal imprisonment and occasional torture.

Albert remains stoical through all this, with Scarlett ever-sarcastic at his general unworldliness. But the humour here is muted, with both children also haunted by something truly terrible that had happened to them in the past. Stroud as always writes well, occasionally dropping odd unfamiliar words like 'tektilite', 'caldera', 'glyphs' and 'karst' to keep readers on their toes. Teeing-up the final instalment still to come in the last few pages, it seems as if it is going to be all very much as before. How nice if he could then return to something altogether lighter and less gruelling. **NT**



### The Misunderstandings of Charity Brown

★★★★

Elizabeth Laird, Macmillan, 352pp, 9781529075632, £12.99 hbk

Elizabeth Laird has written numbers of excellent stories for children, but she has never done anything better than this present title. Strongly autobiographical, it describes a year in the life of Charity Brown, a brave, funny and outspoken thirteen-year-old constantly trying to balance

## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

family loyalty with her own vision of a richer life elsewhere. Her otherwise kind and caring parents belong to an extreme religious sect that has little time for any of the 'worldly' pleasures that Charity is just beginning to glimpse outside the home. The arrival of Rachel, a highly civilised and intelligent Jewish girl living next door, at last provides her with the friend she was looking for after her older brother and sisters have left home.

Set around 1950 at a time in London where thick fogs still cause peak hospital admission, Charity, recently recovering from polio, also has a tough time at her state school. This is mainly because her previous loyal attempts at evangelising other pupils have fallen on very stony ground. But like a young Jane Eyre, she has no time for self-pity. Increasingly doubting her faith she bounces back and forth in her mind quotations from the Bible, rare in children's books these days, against other insights that no longer quite fit. Eventually she fights her way through to a conclusion that just about manages to please everybody in a narrative that is always asking questions rather than going for easy assurances. Narrated as if in the voice of Charity, this delightful story is a total pleasure, written with affection as well as art and never for a moment outstaying its welcome. Now something of a veteran children's author herself, Elizabeth Laird has once again come up with something truly rather special. **NT**

### The Shark and the Scar

★★★★

Sarah Moore Fitzgerald, Orion, 262pp, 978 1 510 10416 7, £7.99 pbk  
"I shouldn't have said it. I should have stayed calm and kept Jay's secrets to myself like I'd promised...But I could feel it coming like a wave, as if I had no choice. 'He's recovering from a SHARK BITE. Before he came to Ireland, Jay Danagher was attacked by a shark.'"

Sharing other people's confidences has got Jess into trouble before. There was the time she'd told Nick that Bonnie liked him when "as far as Bonnie was concerned, the whole thing was a deadly secret". That one led to everyone falling out with her because, as Bonnie told her, "It's about you and your blabbermouth". In a small town like Cloncannon on the West Coast of Ireland, as Jess tells us, she "was automatically banished by that whole crowd, and abandoned to the cheerless fate of solitude".

Alternating chapters carry the titles Jess and Jay; the latter focus initially on the accident which sent Jay to hospital in South-East France where he lived with his father on the coast. Over several months, he recovers; but he will always carry a scar the length of the right side of his body, which he believes to be the consequence of an encounter with a Great White Shark

as his father confirms. He senses his father has not told him the whole truth; somehow, Jay's convinced his mother was involved, though she had left the family when he was only six months old. His father won't talk about the incident and insists Jay must not mention it to anyone. Jay's Dad is so keen to make a fresh start that, with little warning, he decamps with Jay to his native Ireland, leaving behind the childhood and friends Jay has enjoyed in France, and the beaches where he had discovered his passion and skills as a surfer.

It's in Ireland that Jess meets Jay, finding in him a friend who can complement her acute emotional intelligence and her impulse to tell the truth as she sees it. Those alternating chapters differ from the familiar YA structure employing two protagonists as narrators. Jess tells her own story, but Jay's experiences are described in the third person, enabling a reader to see Jay and other characters (especially his father and Jess) with a perspective free from Jay's post-accident confusion. In Jess's chapters, given our access to her thoughts and feelings, we may empathise strongly with her loneliness in the small community, her sense of being misunderstood and her response to Jay.

So, alongside the revelations about the accident, we're caught up in the growing friendship between the two. Both are 13, both very self-aware; and in Jess's case, unusually articulate for her age. Their mutual affection is rooted in an almost immediate recognition of the other's less overt qualities, underpinned by their shared passion for surfing and the ocean itself – a shaping presence throughout the novel. Clues to the true nature of Jay's accident may seem to be planted a little obviously to some readers; and if the melodrama surrounding the accident might stretch credulity, many adult readers would surely confirm that there are few limits to the nature of events that families sometimes choose to conceal. And here, readers may well be more absorbed by the subtly drawn relationship developing between Jess and Jay and the testing of trust within their families. **GF**

### Fake

★★★★

Ele Fountain, Pushkin Press, 256pp, 9781782692904, £7.99 pbk  
Here digital dystopia meets boarding school story. Jess, like every other child, receives her education online until the age of fourteen, when she sets off for boarding school and "live-learning". The usual problems of settling in at a new school and finding who your friends are is complicated by the fact that Jess and her family have not been playing by society's rules. Small breaches you might think: keeping a pet, having a

friend to meet in person rather than virtually, and living a simple family life of self-sufficiency, rather than buying into the online consumerism which grips everyone else. But there is another secret that it would be even more dangerous to share. Jess is a budding computer hacker, with a mentor that she has never met, and this leads to some unforeseen consequences. When her family back home are finding it difficult to pay for the expensive medicine that her sister Chloe needs, Jess puts her skills to use in a way that puts them in even more danger. Ele Fountain has imagined a world, not too far removed from our own, where consumer preferences have been harnessed completely to the maximisation of profit with no regard to personal growth or social welfare. She does not over complicate the social criticism and marries it surprisingly successfully with the conventions of the boarding school story. The story moves swiftly and largely stays within spheres where a fourteen-year-old (with extraordinary computer skills) might realistically have influence. As Jess tells the reader at the conclusion, "I guess change doesn't have to start big. Because small things grow." A tale that encourages social awareness and personal integrity whether in the dormitory, the classroom or on the web. **CB**

### The Pearl Whisperer

★★★

Karin Erlandsson, trans. Annie Prime, Dedalus, 249pp, 978 1 912868 73 5, £7.99 pbk

Once in a generation, the Queen proclaims, "Whosoever finds the eye stone shall be paid seven-fold its worth in gold." There's not a pearl fisher in the Queendom who can resist that challenge and, as Miranda is quick to tell us, she is the best of them all. Fathers leave – and forget – their families in their longing for that pearl. Its finder will want for nothing throughout a lifetime. Like many others, Miranda's mother left home to look for her husband. She never returned.

Since her early childhood, Miranda travelled with her father every pearl fishing season from their home in the Northern forests to the Southern ports, learning and even surpassing his skills on the sea bed. Now, as a young single woman, she still heads South each year to resume her search for the white, red, blue, green and yellow pearls. For her, it's not the money, though her skills are always well rewarded by the merchants in the market place. It's that moment of discovery as she finds and gathers a pearl – it is hers. That's enough. When she was 11, she had paid a price. She met the pearl fisher's most feared enemy – the yellow-eyed rose-shark, which sees pearls as its own treasure, to be guarded jealously. Pearl fishers are thieves. The shark had taken Miranda's arm with a single bite.

Miranda is preparing to search for the eye stone when Marko, the

boatman who sailed with her and her father for years, calls at her lodging, bringing his niece with him. Young Syrsa is talkative, boasting that she's the best pearl fisher, or she soon will be. As if to prove her claim, she tells how she too lost an arm to a rose-shark. Marko is a man of few words. He's never seen a child with such talent, he says. He wants Miranda to teach her everything she knows. Then he leaves.

So begins a series of adventures on sea and on shore, taking the young woman and the girl far and wide throughout the Queendom in pursuit of the eye stone. Several of their encounters involve powerful women, often hiding surprising secrets. In truth, men and boys play little part in this first of **The Song of the Eye Stone** quartet, an award-winning text by a Swedish-speaking writer from Finland. Dedalus promise all four titles in English by 2023.

Syrsa learns that she has even greater gifts than she had thought, since she is one of the very few legendary pearl whisperers, able to hear pearls and summon them from their resting places. Throughout their travels, they are shadowed by Iberis, a sinister merchant with penetrating eyes as dazzlingly white as her hair. Iberis demands that Miranda and Syrsa find the eye stone and at once hand it over to her. Or there will be consequences. As the story develops, Iberis' virtual enslavement of Syrsa and her ruthless cruelty are explicit.

There are trains in the Queendom, but few other signs of contemporary life. The land seems almost medieval; its rural and maritime ways are strong presences in the story. In its convincing detail, the underwater world of pearl harvesting may well fascinate readers. Critical moments in the plot may test belief in their reliance on coincidence, but the focus of the action shifts as Miranda comes to realise – perhaps later than her readers – that finding the eye stone is less important than her concern for Syrsa. Her life-time's assumptions – obsessions, even – are called into question. **GF**

### The Good Turn

★★★★

Sharna Jackson, Puffin, 398pp, 978 0 241 52359 9, £7.99, pbk

This story has an excellent starting premise. Josephine has some positive thoughts about doing something meaningful and some negative thoughts about the impending arrival of a baby brother. Her parents haven't decided on a name for him yet and this sets Josephine off googling her own name, looking for a namesake to inspire her. She finds some black heroines: Josephine Baker naturally, but Josie doesn't fancy the banana skirt; and also, Josephine Holloway, the founder of a black Girl Scout troop in Tennessee in the 1930s, a woman who overcame many obstacles to make a contribution to society. Josephine, from Luton,

decides to do something similar, and so *The Copseys* is born, named after the close in which she lives: a group with its own aims to be helpful and upstanding, and with “pledges, badges, our code”. Josie quickly enlists new friend Margot and a rather more reluctant Wesley and they soon find a real opportunity to do a good deed when they discover an old couple hiding out in the local derelict car factory. There is so much to enjoy in this tale. Josephine herself is believable, likeable and just too much sometimes. Margot and Wesley are much more than supporting acts, with Wesley, in particular, having something important and challenging to say to Josephine at one point. The interplay between the friends is perceptive, witty and warm, the dialogue fizzles, and Jackson manages to work in some history of unionism in the car industry and the Windrush scandal without missing a beat. Perhaps most of the adults are a little too forbearing and understanding but that's balanced by a devious and vicious villain, who must be the English cousin of Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons*. **CB**

### The Drowning Day

★★★★★

Anne Cassidy, ill. Jake Alexander, Uclan, 228pp, 978-1-912979-75-2, £7.99 pbk

This dystopian novel takes readers to a world which could all too easily be our own if we pay no heed to global warming. Jade and her terminally ill granddaddy live in the Wetlands where the inhabitants dread the next flood, as it will destroy their homes. Their only escape is a long journey over rough, high ground to the walled town of North-Hampton, where Wetlanders are despised and badly treated. When Jade's granddaddy dies she and her friend Bates set off on that journey, alerted by the flood warnings and anxious to cross the pontoon bridge and reach the gates of North-Hampton before they are closed.

During their travels Jade is robbed by ferals, outcasts from society because they succumbed to smallpox, now no longer dormant. Bates takes her to the feral community's boats on the river where his friend Samson retrieves Jade's money and joins them on their journey to collect medicines for his friends. Prejudice is in the bones of this book as each group mistrusts the other and wants or genuinely needs what they have. Divisions in a society weaken it, set it at odds with itself and all this is only too familiar to readers. In truth, this story has so many resonances with our own that the characters are familiar to us almost already known. Each of them carries a secret, a sorrow, a loss: a sister; a family; a friend.

Jade has to summon all her courage to try to track down her sister, sold to the notorious Duke, a

gangster who uses girls to entertain his guests. Samson wants to contact his estranged father, Bates to help Jade, whose tiny family he became a part of when he had none of his own. Although they have nothing, their courage and loyalty are what help them to survive where they are not wanted, in towns whose inhabitants are fearful of anyone different.

**The Drowning Day** has a fast-paced, edge-of-your seat plot whose characters are easily strong enough to carry it. It creates unease and promotes awareness of what we must work to avoid in the future and what a thought-provoking class reader it could become. **VR**

### Zachary Yang and the Dragon Emperor

★★★★★

Xiran Jay Zhao, ill. Velinxi, Rock the Boat, 340pp, 9780861545483, £7.99 pbk

Zachary Ying always feels somewhat of an outsider. He and his mother escaped to America from China, after his father was killed as a Uyghur activist; but being a Muslim, his mother has never taught him about mainstream Chinese culture. When a new boy, Simon Li, joins the school, he tries to talk about his heritage with Zach and is horrified that he knows so little. Their one common interest is a gaming platform called 'Mythrealm' and Zach discovers that Simon is actually one of the best players in the world. He also discovers that he is a descendent of the first emperor of China and that the spirit of the emperor wants to link with him in order to find ancient artifacts and seal the entrance to the underworld. Unfortunately, the linking does not go to plan and the emperor is only linked to Zach's AR headset. Together with the spirits of two other major emperors and their hosts, Zach must follow his quest to save the world.

This is a truly amazing and exciting quest story for middle grade children. The combination of Chinese history, myths and modern gaming really works well and will attract a wide range of readers. At the core of this we have the relationship between Zach and his mother; because of their background their relationship is very strong, so throughout the story we find that Zach's decisions are based on whether he thinks he can help his mother (who is in hospital with a mysterious condition). We also have the relationship between Zach and the spirit emperors; after all they are some of the strongest and most feared rulers in history and they have a very direct way of dealing with those who get in their way. Given these circumstances, can Zach trust the supposed 'good guys', or do they all have something that they are hiding from him? The story leaves us on something of a cliff-hanger and I can't wait to find out what happens in the follow up. **MP**

## 14+ Secondary/Adult

### Love Radio

★★★★★

Ebony LaDelle, Usborne, 352pp, 978 1 801 31345 2, £8.99 pbk

Danielle Ford narrates the first chapter. She's in her senior year of high school in Detroit. It's one of those YA fictional schools where teachers, lessons and actual work rarely intrude upon the main business of the day – Relationships. Dani thought she'd got everything sorted. She already thinks of herself as a writer, and that's what she wants to be. She aims high. Her heroines – her mentors – are Black women writers; the likes of Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison or Zora Neale Hurston. Her next step is to write her application for college in New York City.

Dani is the only child of a couple who still treat each other like young lovers. Mom is entranced by Black romantic movies, Dad enjoys his successful army career. All should be secure for Dani – but it isn't. She's got writer's block and can't get anywhere with the essay she has to submit along with her application. She's supposed to write about some experience which “sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself and others”. She's even tried writing – but not mailing – letters to those mentors to clear her mind; but the block won't shift. Something traumatic has happened, but as yet she can't face thinking it through. It will take three lengthy flashbacks, spaced throughout the novel, for her to do that. She'll only be ready to revisit the episode through getting to know her co-narrator, DJ LoveJones, whom she's about to meet in Chapter Three.

Prince Jones has been trying to talk to Dani for years. She was “the girl my homies have been clowning me about since middle-school,” he admits. “The crush I could never shake.” For all his quick-tongued wit and his popularity as a teenage radio DJ whose passion for Black music is coupled with advice to callers troubled in love, his own romantic track record isn't too hot. Prince's home life doesn't leave him much space. His Pops is not around; he tries to support his Mom, who was diagnosed with MS when he was nine; and his kid brother, Mook, has ADHD and needs loads of Prince's loving attention. Prince has no plans for life after school until a perceptive guidance counsellor prompts him into action; that and a chance meeting with Dani Ford in a bookstore when he was looking for picture books with Black characters, hoping Mook will find echoes there of his own culture.

His conversation with Dani triggers everything. At first, he stumbles for words but after a couple of subsequent low-key meetings, Prince risks a half-flippant challenge; if Dani will allow him three dates, he guarantees that she'll fall for him. By now, Dani has sensed a more serious, searching self

in Prince, and so she warily agrees. Those ingeniously planned dates and her growing trust in Prince enable her to face that traumatic moment in her past. Together, Dani and Prince find far more than those three dates seemed to promise.

There could also be an unusual challenge for UK readers of this book. The narrators' idiom is that of smart Black teenagers in contemporary Detroit. For some fifty pages, I confess to being derailed by unknown vocabulary or references which expected to be taken as read. But initial alienation gave way to enjoyment as language became familiar through context or repetition. There are cultural differences – for example, the main event in the closing chapters is an evening showcasing hair and all things hair-related when one of Dani's friends stages a Black and Beautiful celebration – Hair Wars – a hair-styling parade, emceed by Prince with Dani proudly walking the runway as top model. For UK readers much will depend upon their own flexibilities and curiosity. They may well find two engaging young people whose sensitive exploration of each other and themselves is often cautious and respectful – even fearful – yet also exciting and overwhelming in what is revealed. By the final page, Dani ought to find that application essay has almost written itself. **GF**

### Fight Back

★★★★★

A.M.Dassu, Scholastic, 389pp, 978-0-702315886, £7.99 pbk.

Aaliyah is bullied in school as a result of her Muslim faith and deals with it by ignoring the racist comments. But when she and a group of friends attend a pop concert which becomes the target for a terrorist bomber her life – and that of her family and community – becomes intolerable. Local anger at the injuries and deaths caused by the bomb finds its outlet in racist abuse and acts of violence against the Muslim community. Dassu writes simply and honestly about the shock and fear generated by the abuse, which sounds all too familiar because it reminds readers that it has, shockingly, become the common parlance of our everyday lives.

Aaliyah decides that running away or hiding who she is will do nothing to stem the racist tide. She resolves to wear a hijab, to declare her faith openly, to ‘empower me to be true to myself and be an ambassador.’ She meets nothing but opposition from the Head Teacher, who bans her from wearing it. Her best friend Lisa turns on her at the prompting of her brother Darren, a member of a white supremacist group planning a huge rally. When Aaliyah discovers that her brother Yusuf intends to break up the

# reviews

## 14+ Secondary/Adult continued

rally with the aid of friends she knows she must come up with an idea to unite her own community and so defuse the violence.

The end-of-year School Fete presents her with an ideal opportunity and she and her multi-racial group of friends prepare speeches about the lack of freedom in school and society to be themselves, true to their religious faiths. When the Fete is disrupted and Darren tries to attack Yusuf and is arrested, the tide of local opinion turns against the supremacist group. There are many positive outcomes to the brave stance of Aliyah and her friends, along with an awareness that there are many battles against racism to be fought and they are best fought together. The quality of Dassu's writing is superb in conveying entrenched attitudes and the power of truth against them. Helpfully, at the back of the book she has included a glossary, a section about how to come together and speak for others and an exploration of the themes in 'Fight Back.' This is a wonderful classroom resource-we can only hope that it will be widely used. **VR**

### When Our Worlds Collided

★★★★

Danielle Jawando, Simon & Schuster, 368pp, 978 1 4711 7879 5, £7.99, pbk

Three young people's lives are changed when they witness the fatal stabbing of a teenager in a Manchester shopping centre. They are all black, as is the victim of the murder, and two of them recognise him from school; otherwise, they are very different. Jackson comes from a middle-class family and goes to a private school; Marc is a boy in care who has been passed from foster carer to foster carer; and Chantelle is a girl always in trouble at school, who lives with her gran and her sister, has never known her dad and isn't in contact with her mum. As I have described them, you may feel that you know them already and what kind of novel this might be. But part of the import of Danielle Jawando's story is that such assumptions can be misleading and damaging. A constant theme in the book is the misreading of people and situations because of race, particularly in the treatment of young black people by the police and the media, but there is more here. Each of the three protagonists is an individual with their own way of looking at the world. Each tells their own story in their own voice and, while they gradually form a bond, they also misread each other and misunderstand what they themselves want and need. The point is made right at the start that these are young people with heart and courage; after all, they are the only people who stop to offer help to the dying Shaq. Then, understandably, they feel powerless to offer any real help. But

in their subsequent story, despite the problems and prejudice they face, there is hope, as they gradually begin to understand what they can do to make an everyday difference, for themselves and for other people. **CB**

### Our Crooked Hearts

★★★★

Melissa Albert, Penguin, 342pp 9780241592540, £7.99 pbk

The story opens with a drunk diving incident in which Ivy's soon-to-be-ex boyfriend crashes the car into woods. A mysterious woman is standing in the middle of the road, naked. Ivy chases after her and gives the girl her flannel shirt but strangely the girl appears to know Ivy's name. From then on, the story becomes darker and twistier and creepier by the minute.

Told from the alternating perspectives of Ivy in the present day and her mother Dana as a teenager in the 90s this is a richly layered and compelling read.

Ivy's mother appears distant, moody and unavailable to her daughter but as their stories unfold and gradually converge, we realise they both have secrets to hide. Why is her mother behaving so weirdly in the garden and who is leaving dead rabbits in their driveway. And why can't Ivy remember anything about her neighbour Billy yet is convinced she knows him somehow and that their kiss is not the first time it has happened.

It turns out Ivy displayed powerful magical talents from an early age but in bid to protect her young daughter her mother had placed her memories in a forgetting box. Dana herself was heavily involved with the occult as a teenager with her friend Fee and another girl Marion but they found themselves too dangerously involved and made some bad choices. This has haunted Dana ever since and she does not want her daughter to make similar mistakes. As Ivy begins to unravel the mystery surrounding her mother and the danger they are in, she realises she has powers of her own and her own choices to make.

This is an atmospheric, sophisticated and genuinely creepy

story. It is well-crafted and beautifully written although occasionally there are a touch too many witchy details. Both mother and daughter as teenagers are realistically portrayed with a visceral and headstrong nature that is terrifying yet endearing. The novel says a lot about mother/daughter relationships and how the decisions we make impact our lives and can have consequences that carry on down through families. Young adults will adore it. **JC**

### Spin Me Right Round

★★★★

David Valdes, Bloomsbury, 352pp, 978-1526642196, £7.99 pbk

Seventeen year old Luis is a homosexual in America of the 2020s. He is extremely annoyed that the principle of his school will not allow two boys to date each other at the Prom. There is a freak accident with a piece of theatrical stage material during which Luis suffers a head injury. As a result of the accident Luis is transported back in time to 1985. He is now a student at an ultra-Christian and ultra-conservative version of his High School - together with the two people who are destined to become his parents.

In this timeline even admitting to being gay could result in expulsion. Can Luis find his way back to his own time and place and somehow save his future while improving the attitudes of people he encounters in the past?

As a character Luis is vibrant enough to fly off the page. Of course the most enlightening element of the novel is to contrast the rights that Luis enjoys in his own time, limited as he sometimes feels them to be, in contrast to the restrictions imposed on him in the past. For adults borne in the 1980s there are many cultural references they will remember. This reviewer's main criticism is that the text describes a boy as dancing like a spastic robot. Even though the use of such terminology was probably common at that time, it strikes a jarring note in a modern text. In light of the current debate about women's reproductive right in the USA, there is a strand relating to sexual abuse of young women with the risk of unwanted pregnancies. **RB**

### The Stranded

★★★★

Sarah Daniels, Penguin Books, 436pp, 9780241507964, £7.99 pbk

The Arcadia is an entire state, a place of extremes ranging from the living places of the privileged elite to those of the gangs of its underworld. But it is not a state with borders; it is a vast sea-going liner, once designed for luxury cruises. Now it is the home of the abandoned. Forty years earlier a pandemic raged across the world. Arcadia together with other ships promised escape but become a prison, only the privileged able to leave. Esther is one of those, training to be a medic and almost engaged to the wealthy Alex. Nik is a rebel fighting an undercover war to free The Arcadia from the repressive regime in control. Hadley also wants to escape. His aim is to destroy the rebels and The Arcadia; promotion, wealth, success beckon.

Placing her story on board a ship, an ideal closed world, is a clever choice for this debut novel allowing the plot to take the reader on a battle to escape and free the world and the final denouement sets readers up to want to find out what will happen next. Indeed, cliffhangers abound as each of the three main protagonists have a voice. Nik and Esther speak in their own words, we see Hadley from the outside. While this makes for a certain immediacy it also tends to slow the action as each episode is jigsawed together. The language is contemporary and while sentences are commendably short, the author's desire to fill in the history and emphasise emotions results in a very long book. There is plenty of action, violence, jeopardy, betrayal and tragedy as well as the burgeoning relationship between Ester and Nik. These two young people are recognisable young adults full of ideals, Hadley, thwarted ambition, represents all that is bad. It is a bleak dystopian world and the landscape of The Arcadia, all long corridors, metal walkways, grim engine rooms, reflects this. A dystopian narrative that should appeal to committed YA readers. **FH**

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# Valediction: No.6 Genius among the Genies

**Brian Alderson** is saying goodbye to his books as he donates his remarkable collection to **Seven Stories**. Next to be carefully packaged up is **The Child's Arabian Nights** published by Grant Richards and featuring illustrations by the incomparable W Heath Robinson.

It seems as though much of my childhood reading occurred thanks to books or comics lent by friends and neighbours. Thus it is that, while ill, round about 1938, someone loaned me a copy of Heath Robinson's celebration of the centenary of the Great Western Railway: **Railway Ribaldry**. No curative could have been better and I was loth to return this masterpiece and looked out from then on to WHR's inventive aids to good living.

I did not realise then that these drawings, the foundations of his fame, had emerged alongside regular work as a book illustrator and that by the time that his unique inventions had got underway he had illustrated at least thirty books, many of classic texts, and, later, work in the 'gift-book' fashion before the First World War. There would also be books of his own including the long-seller **Uncle Lubin** (1902).

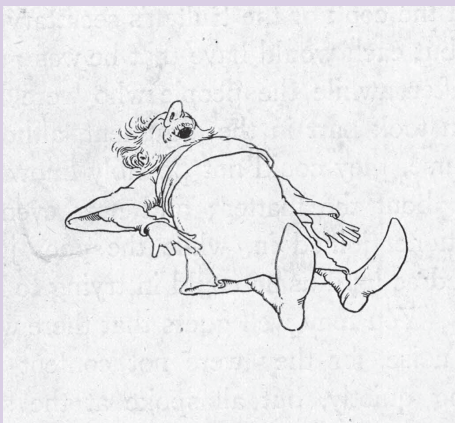
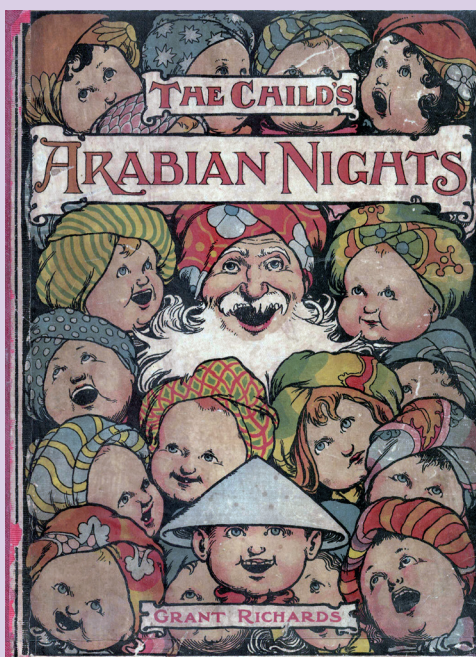
This was published by Grant Richards, a 'new man', who had been publishing only since 1897 (the year of WHR's first book) and was making a name for himself with Housman's **A Shropshire Lad**, with Shaw's plays, pleasant and unpleasant, and with the series of **World's Classics** which continues to this day.

He had also established a remarkable list of original children's picture books ranging from the huge albums such as **Rag, Tag and Bobtail** by Edith Farmiloe to the many small 'Dumpy Books' whose third number was the nefarious **Little Black Sambo** (Nefarious not only for contemporary reasons but for his having bought the copyright for five pounds.)

For a children's book as a successor to **Uncle Lubin** he may well have liked the idea of turning to some familiar Arabian territory for he had been one of the five illustrators of the sprawling **Nights** that had been issued as a 20-part serial in 1899. (Beare has him contributing 18 full-page drawings and 189 in-text.) Now though Scheherazade's thousand and one storytelling sessions with the Shah are drawn upon to furnish only twelve chapters, two of which tell of Aladdin and three are from the voyages of Sindbad

The tales are set in a uniform pattern however in whose planning Grant Richards may have had a hand. After WHR's two-page Preface each of the twelve chapters consists of a colour plate with its blank verso and four pages of text, all but one of which have an amusing pencil sketch on the first and a final tailpiece.

It must be said that, while WHR's Preface, addressed to good or bad boys and girls

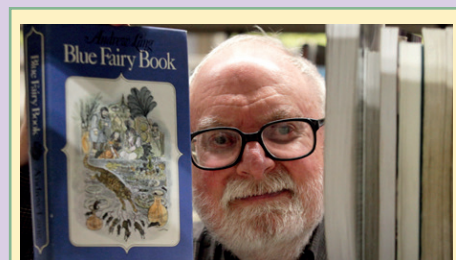


at their bedtime, is a delight, there is a falling-off in the vastly abbreviated stories with barely a touch of the author's comic or slightly satiric address to the reader that is found in the Preface. The plates however are a gaudily splendid exhibition of chromo printing in startling contrast to the genteel three-colour illustrations that would soon follow from such gift-book masters as Rackham and Dulac.

Sad to relate there was to be no later edition, whether deserved or not, since its publication coincided with the first of Richards's two bankruptcies. As with many a publisher with a taste for classy production, ambition outran capital resources and, indeed, the success of such series as the **Dumpy Books** and the **World's Classics** led to a strain on the reprint programme. At the same time the enthusiasm of WHR and his publisher for an elaborate two-volume edition of **Gargantua and Pantagruel** (gravure frontispieces, a hundred full-page plates, well over a hundred drawings in text, a special edition de luxe) was well beyond prudence.

Always happy-go-lucky in his career, Richards may have taken his sorrows on a trip to his much-loved Paris while WHR and many another were left to enjoy an eventual settlement of their debts at two shillings in the pound.

W. Heath Robinson Author of **Uncle Lubin**. **The Child's Arabian Nights**. Illustrated in Colour [Vignette of child reading] London: Grant Richards, 48 Leicester Square, W.C. 1903. Crown 4to. 240x190mm. 84pp.incl. frontis. + 11 full-page chromolithographed plates, versos blank + 12 line drawings in text and 13 chapter tailpieces. Imprint: T.N.Storer and Sons & Co., Nottingham & London, Cheapside. Cloth-backed paper over boards, full colour pictorial titling to front, rebacked with new endpapers. [Beare 30]



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