

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.256

the children's book magazine online

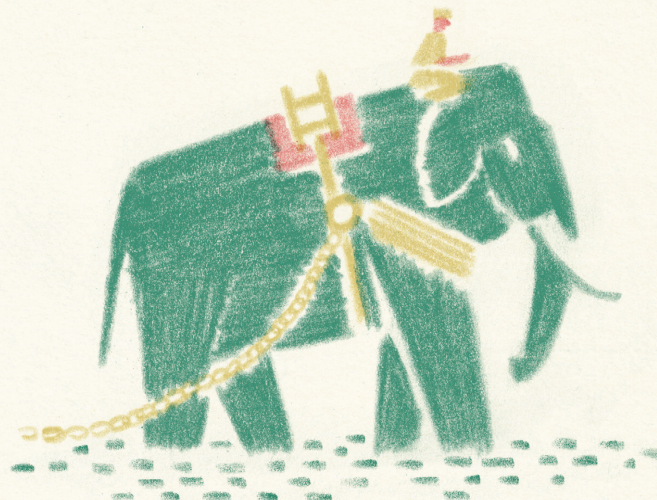
September 2022



Authorgraph interview
William Grill

Windows into Illustration
Chris Judge

**Neil Philip on
the poetry of myth**



new **Beyond the Secret Garden**
and **the best verse novels**

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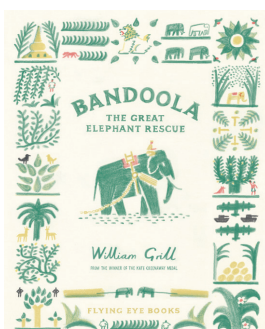
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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **Bandoola: The Great Elephant Rescue** by William Grill.

Thanks to **Flying Eye Books** for their help with our September cover.



Editorial 256

New term, new challenges

The new term has begun, and thoughts turn to means of encouraging reading for pleasure. This is particularly challenging as, according to [a recent report by the National Literacy Trust](#), almost one in five (18.6%) children in England between the ages of five and eight do not have access to books at home.

According to the NLT, the percentage of children in this age group who do not have a book of their own at home has risen since before the pandemic by 1.9%, taking it to its highest point since 2019.

The rising cost of living is cited as a key reason for this increase, with 87% of parents saying they have less disposable income and 64% saying that the amount of money they have to spend on books for their child has decreased. Just over half (51%) say that books are simply too expensive.

With libraries under increased pressure, things are looking gloomy, though in **Joseph Coelho** we have a Children's Laureate with the energy and determination to follow up the work of his predecessor **Cressida Cowell** and tackle this head on.

The Children's Bookshow

This month sees the launch of the 2022 **Children's Bookshow** and indeed celebrations for its 20th birthday. Over the past 20 years, the **Children's Bookshow** has organised theatre performances by some of the world's best loved and most highly respected writers and illustrators of children's literature, giving young people access to the very best stories, poems and illustrations, from across the world.

Amongst the authors taking part this year are **Valerie Bloom**, **Daniel Morden**, **Jon Agee**, **Kwame Alexander** and **François Place**. They are performing in towns across England, the artists taking part giving free workshops in local schools for the children who attended. In their 20 years, the **Children's Bookshow** has provided more than 700 free workshops and given away approaching 10,000 books. In gloomy times, it's good to have something to celebrate.

[Find out more and book tickets.](#)

THE STORY MUSEUM

KA-Boom! Make your way to Oxford, says Nicholas Tucker

Oxford's lively **Story Museum**, situated in the heart of the city, is always worth a visit and particularly so now it is hosting its latest exhibition **KA-Boom! The Art of Creating Comics**. Running until March 2023, it breaks new ground with its emphasis on how comic strips are actually made. Older visitors are still allowed a nostalgic sight of once much-loved pre and immediately post-war comics, but for younger fans here is an opportunity to develop their own characters, think about likely plots and learn about drawing, colouring and lettering all on the big interactive screens laid out at every corner. Pen and paper is available too, with opportunities to fill in your own speech bubbles. On the walls, famous characters starting from **Dennis the Menace** and **Minnie the Minx** are shown in the early stages of their own creation. First met at the entrance to the exhibition, **Octoboom the Octopus**, created by nine-year-old Eddie Tilling at the Museum's thriving monthly Comic Club, appears at the head of all these processes with his own take on what is below.

Keeping children interested and entertained at museums is never easy, but there is a real buzz at this exhibition, given even within a comparatively small space there is so much for them to try out for themselves in a medium always so ultimately child-pleasing in itself. Comic artist Neill Cameron, who helped devise the exhibition, is regularly there along with other artists and writers handing on their own tips. A range of master classes and interactive workshops are also on offer, from retelling traditional folk and fairy tales for younger visitors to writing your own story sessions for older ones.

[The Story Museum also puts on a busy programme for schools and groups.](#)

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

Editorial correspondence should be sent to Books for Keeps,
30 Winton Avenue
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All eyes on a new prize: the Adrien Prize

Author **Elle McNicoll** is setting up a new prize, the **Adrien Prize**, for novels with a positive portrayal of a character with a disability. She talks to **Rebecca Butler** about her aims and why she felt the need to establish a new prize.

Can you tell us more about why you set up the Adrien Prize?

In quick succession, the **Blue Peter Book Awards** and the **Costa Children's Book Award** both closed, which I found incredibly sad. With my first novel, **A Kind of Spark** which has an autistic protagonist, I had won a US prize sponsored by a Dr. Schneider. The **Schneider Family Book Award** is awarded to a writer who is disabled or neuro divergent for a book which depicts these conditions in a positive way. I realised there wasn't a similar prize in the UK. I began talking to some of the Librarians with whom I work and an idea formed. Could I sponsor a similar prize to the Schneider?

So, can you tell us more specifically about the Adrien Prize?

Yes, I came up with specific criteria. The first **Adrien Prize** must be for a novel published in either 2020 or 2021 which has a positive portrayal of a character with a disability who is a protagonist, not a subordinate character, who does not die and does not get cured of the disabling condition. I also decided it should be for middle grade or YA novels, not picture books as I know less about them as a genre. An important difference between the **Schneider** and the **Adrien Prize** is that the Adrien is open to all authors not just the neuro divergent. I don't want to be exclusionist. We agreed non-disabled authors can write good portrayals of disability.

What is the inspiration for the prize's name?

One of my characters is called Adrien. He deals with his disability. He has agency and autonomy and is not cured. I named the prize for him.

BfK readers will know that you are autistic. Would you mind telling us how receiving that diagnosis made you feel?

No, I don't mind. I was diagnosed first with dyspraxia and then with autism or, as it was then called, Asperger's syndrome. I felt some relief but also pain in dealing with my new label as Addie does in **A Kind of Spark**. I had many struggles educationally and a lot of Addie's experiences are based on my own experience. Many other portrayals I had seen were largely negative and also mostly male. I tried to balance that with my work.

What would you really like the prize to achieve?

More equality for disabled and neuro divergent authors and for characters with a disability to be included in other genres of books such as fantasy or comedy. There are almost none at present. One of my least favourite questions is 'if magic exists in a fantasy world, why doesn't it cure a disability?' This is based on the idea that a disability is always negative so I dislike the assumption behind the question. I would also like publishers to begin to think about books with multiple disabled characters in them. At the moment, one disabled character per book is often seen as enough.

Is there anything you want to avoid happening with this prize?

I do not want publishers to submit tragic narratives about disability because I think that is what the wider public is most familiar with. I want any author to be able to enter whether or not they are disabled. Those who are disabled need not feel exposed and do not have to disclose their disability in order to enter. This prize is about the quality of the writing and the characters, not how the author identifies. No writer will be excluded.



What is the judging process for this prize?

We have already created a long list from nominations from publishers. I will soon be asking for a panel of adult judges. These will be expected to whittle down the longlist to form a shortlist which will then be sent to groups of children and their librarians to judge the overall winner. The aim is that the winner will be announced around March next year.

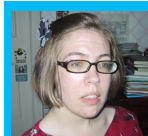
How do you feel about the explosion of online working and what it has done for disabled people?

Personally, I find online working difficult, however, I feel the pandemic and the proliferation of online working has opened many opportunities for disabled people and has given them access that they have never had before particularly to live events and live streaming. I think it would be sad if publishers removed online events totally.

Can you tell us what you are working on right now?

I am working on two things, the sequel to my last book **Like a Charm** and the TV script for **A Kind of Spark** which has been commissioned. As a final comment, I will say that everyone in publishing I have approached about the prize has been really helpful and willing to do anything they can to help.

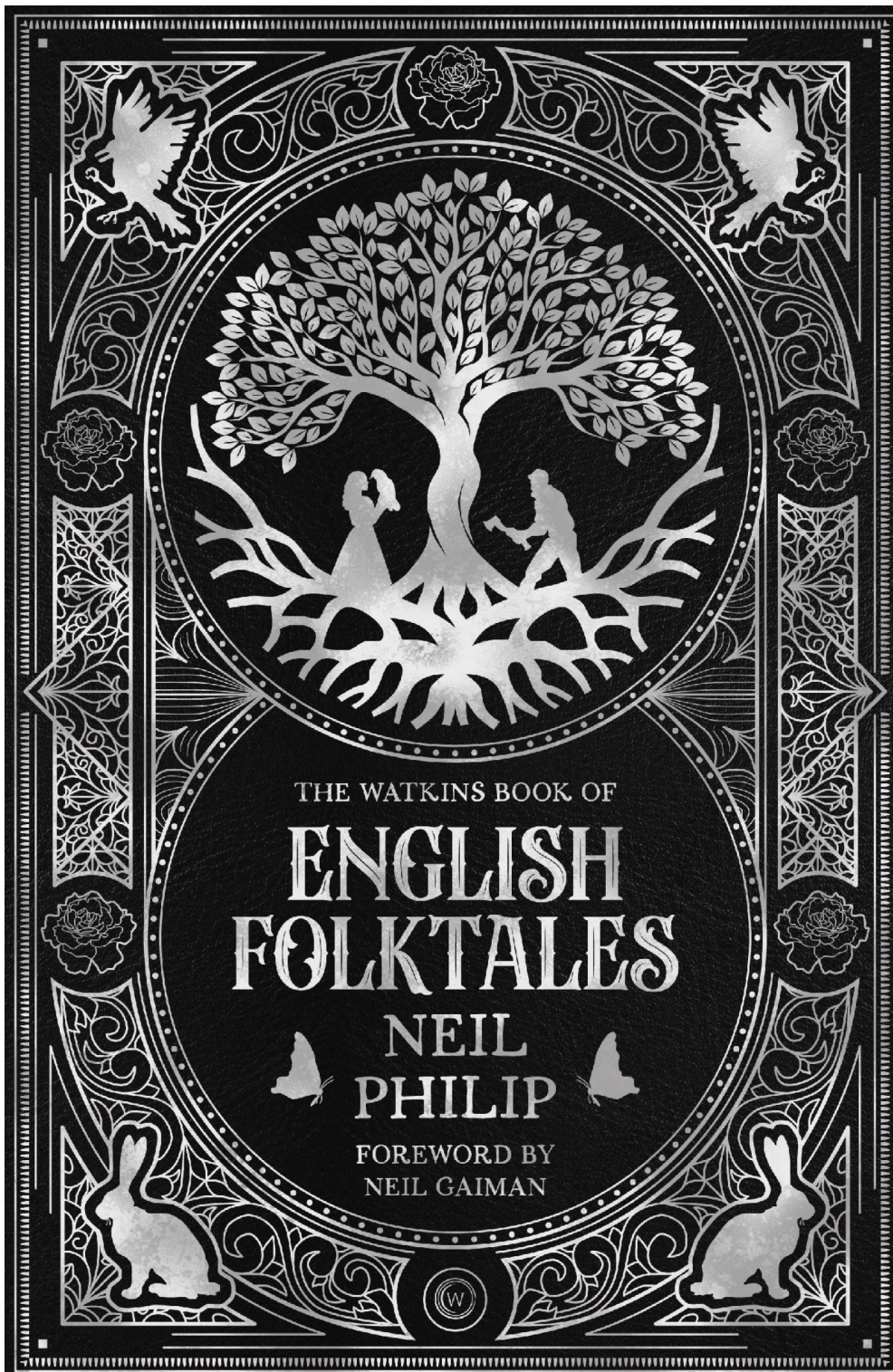
Keep up with the **Adrien Prize** on Twitter @AdrienPrize.



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

Sorrow and Love: The Poetry of the English Folktale

Neil Philip's superb collection of English folktales, **The Watkins Book of English Folktales** contains over one hundred stories captured in the form they were first collected in past centuries. As he reveals in this article, these stories have a poetry all of their own.



On 26 September 1914, an English Romany named Gus Gray told a story called 'Sorrow and Love'. It's an English version of an international folktale type, known as 'The Search for the Lost Husband', or sometimes after its first known incarnation in the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius, as 'Cupid and Psyche'. It was a Scottish story of this type, 'The Black Bull of Norrway' that gave Tolkien his idea of the eucatastrophe, the happy ending achieved after much sorrow and hardship.

Gus Gray told the collector T. W. Thompson nine stories in this one storytelling session. Thompson regarded his narrative skills very highly, describing him as 'even in ordinary conversation... a man of beautiful speech', who was capable in his storytelling of rising to heights of poetry. Thompson writes, 'I remember particularly (who could forget it?) his description of Squire King Kaley's mare in 'Sorrow and Love' as the rider reined her in to keep pace with the old farmer's cob. "The bit was hard back in her mouth, and the foam flying like big flakes o' snow; the veins on her neck was standing out like rope; the sweat dripping off her like a hail o' bullets; her chestnut coat black wi' sweat, and shiny like jet. She was all of a dither; at a touch she'd ha' jumped out'n her skin."

This is an example of one of the kinds of poetry that is evident in the English folktale, the poetry of verbal dexterity and daring, the creation of a vivid picture or a dramatic scene on the wings of the moment. Another kind of poetry can be found in the way the stories unfold in what Joseph Jacobs called 'bright trains of images'. A Derbyshire version of 'Beauty and the Beast', 'The Small-Tooth Dog' demonstrates this well. When the dog rescues a merchant who has been beset by thieves, the merchant offers him anything he wants in return. A fish that can speak twelve languages;

a goose that lays golden eggs; a mirror in which you can see what anybody is thinking about. But the small-tooth dog refuses them all; what he wants is the merchant's daughter.

These bright trains of images can be expressed in vivid language that is highly personal to the individual storyteller, which will vary according to the context and audience for each particular narration. But they can also be told in a language of inherited phrases and formulae. This is particularly obvious in the formal openings and closures of many tales. Here, for instance, is the opening of a version of 'Jack the Giant Killer', collected in Herefordshire in 1909 from W. Colcombe.

'Once upon a time—a very good time it was—when pigs were swine and dogs ate lime, and monkeys chewed tobacco, when houses were thatched with pancakes, streets paved with plum puddings, and roasted pigs ran up and down the streets with knives and forks on their backs crying "Come and eat me!" That was a good time for travellers.'

'Then it was I went over hills, dales, and lofty mountains, far farther than I can tell you tonight, tomorrow night, or any other night in this new year. The cocks never crew, the winds never blew, and the devil has never sounded his bugle horn to this day yet.

'Then I came to a giant castle; a lady came out of the door with a nose as long as my arm. She said to me, she says, "What do you want here? If you don't be off from my door I'll take you up for a pinch of snuff." But Jack said "Will you?" and he drew his sword and cut off her head.'

One of the things that interests me about this opening is the way it works its way by means of formulae into the fairy tale proper, the moment when 'I' becomes 'Jack'.

So there is verbal creativity involved in folktale narration, but also verbal memory, and these two elements are differently balanced in every single telling.

Some may be surprised to learn of the existence of a whole range of English folk narrative, including jokes, anecdotes, local legends, stories of ghosts, fairies, mermaids and witches, as well as fairy tales with all their magic and wonder. In his Foreword to **The Watkins Book of English Folktales**, Neil Gaiman recalls how when he was a child, he thought that 'folk stories and fairy tales came from somewhere else, not England'. When he read the book in its first incarnation thirty years ago, 'it changed the inside of my head'. Reverberations from this can be felt in Gaiman's Sandman, in his novella **Snow, Glass, Apples** (inspired by Traient Lovell's version of 'Snow-White'), and in **Coraline**, in which Coraline's scary 'other mother' with her big black button eyes has her roots in 'The Pear-Drum', with its ghastly new mother 'with glass eyes and a wooden tail'.

'The Pear-Drum' is an interesting example of how stories dip in and out of the oral and written traditions, from mouth to page and back again. It started out as a literary fairy tale, 'The New Mother', published by Lucy Clifford in 1899. It haunted the imagination of the historian of children's literature, F. J. Harvey Darton, who wrote that, 'Getting on for fifty years after I met her first, I still cannot rid my mind of that fearful creation'. J. Y. Bell contributed an orally transmitted version of the story, now called 'The Pear-Drum', to the journal *Folklore* in 1955. Since then it has turned into Alan Garner's 'Iram, Biram' as well as morphing into an elemental strand of **Coraline**.

The poet John Clare provides another example of this cross-fertilization. Clare knew folktales both from oral narration (his father had a store of them) and from chapbook retellings. When he writes about Cinderella in *The Shepherd's Calendar*, he mixes details derived from Perrault's 'Cendrillon', such as the pumpkin carriage and rat coachmen, with elements from a different, local, version, in which it is a 'golden glove' that Cinderella loses at the ball, not a glass slipper.



The imaginations of writers such as Clare, Thomas Hardy, and Charles Dickens were suffused with English folktales - *The Watkins Book of English Folktales* contains two stories from Hardy, and two from Dickens, 'Captain Murderer' and 'Chips'. Both of these gruesome stories were told to him by his childhood nurse, Mary Weller, who seems to have specialised in 'frighteners'. Dickens recalled how she told him 'Captain Murderer' hundreds of times, with 'a fiendish enjoyment of my terrors, and used to begin, I remember—as a sort of introductory overture—by clawing the air with both hands, and uttering a long low hollow groan'. This reminds us, of course, that oral storytelling is not solely about words, but that it incorporates gestural and performative elements too.

Shakespeare knew and referred to English folktales, often in an obliquely allusive way that suggests he expected his audience to be familiar with them too. So a throwaway line in *Hamlet*, 'They say the owl was a baker's daughter', turns up as a folktale in both Gloucestershire, in which the mean baker's daughter is transformed into an owl by 'Our Saviour' himself, and in Herefordshire, when the punishment is inflicted by a fairy.

In Gus Gray's 'Sorrow and Love', the strong and resourceful heroine goes through terrible trials, but at the end, 'Squire took bride in his arms and kissed her. "You've had your sorrow; now you are going to have love."'

And there is Tolkien's eucatastrophe, 'the sudden joyous "turn"' at the end of a fairy tale, yielding 'a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief'. Both sorrow and love.

Be bow bend it,
My tale's ended.
If you don't like it,
You may mend it.

Neil Philip is a writer, folklorist and poet and a longtime contributor to *Books for Keeps*. He is the author of *The Watkins Book of English Folktales*.

The Watkins Book of English Folktales is published by Watkins Publishing, 978-1786787095, £14.99 hbk.

Authorgraph

No.256

William Grill

interviewed by
Clive Barnes

I am sitting with William Grill in his office in Bristol. He has only just moved in to the Jamaica Street Studios, which houses more than twenty other artists. We are talking about his latest published title, **Bandoola: The Great Elephant Rescue**, and the table between us is spread with examples of his work towards the finished book: pocket sketch books, an early dummy of the book, and drawings, many drawings. It is not a large table, and it can hold so much because Will works small. Even the large atmospheric double page spreads in his books, often dominated by landscape or skyscape, are finished as drawings not much bigger than A5 and then enlarged for the final book. Will says that working small and loose is particularly important in the early stages: 'It's not about the quality of the drawing. It's more about the generation of ideas.' Even in the finished work, he believes 'less is more', focusing only on what he wants the illustration to convey.

Will only thought of working in art when he visited his elder brother, who was an art student at Falmouth college. Previously he had thought that he might make a career of his love of the outdoors, maybe as a mountaineering guide. And then, what his brother was doing at Falmouth seemed more exciting than art classes at school and he set off in a new, and now very successful, direction.

Bandoola is the latest of the three large format documentary narratives that he has published, each relying mainly on illustration rather than text, mixing information and story and characterised by carefully orchestrated pages of images. There might be a mosaic of small uniform panels, each carrying the story forward, followed by a double page spread which invites the reader to linger over a scene. A William Grill book is instantly recognisable yet, in contrast to a title

in a publisher-driven non-fiction series, feels personal and almost hand-crafted; and, for this, Will is happy to give some of the credit to his publisher, **Flying Eye Books**.

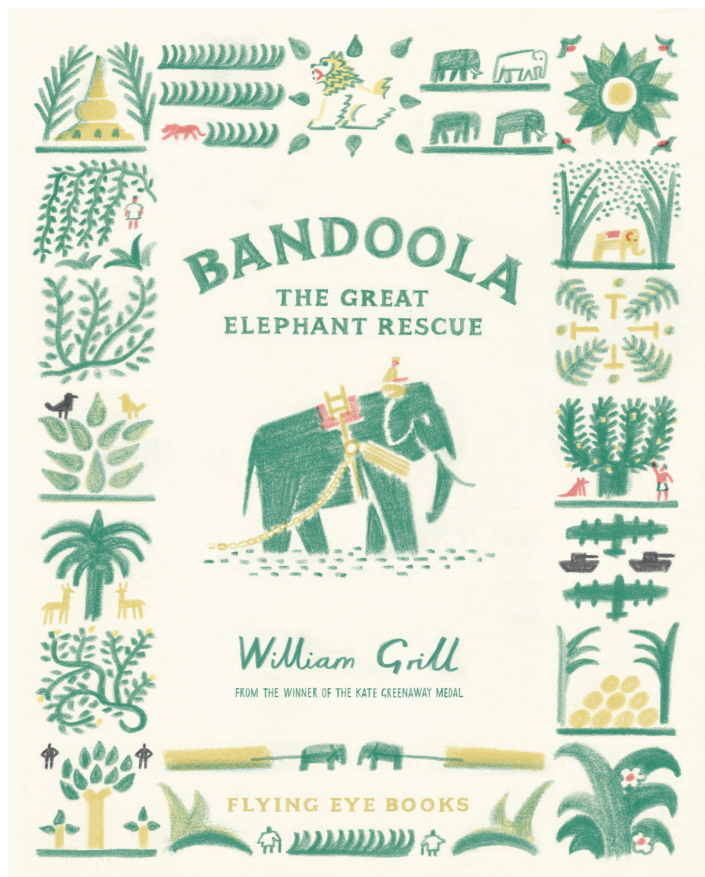
Will's first book, **Shackleton's Journey**, was picked up by Flying Eye from a graduate exhibition. It was a dummy with some finished illustrations, and Will was surprised that a publisher might be interested, and really surprised when the published book went on to win international acclaim, including the **CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal**. Will is pleased by the way that Flying Eye have produced the books with attention to details like the binding and the paper, which is uncoated and has 'a tooth', much like the paper he uses for his original drawings: 'They are books that are good to handle, and made to last and to hand down, don't you think?'

Each of Will's books have been drawn from passionate interests. He first came across the story of Bill Williamson and Bandoola, the elephant, in a book that he found in a second-hand bookshop in Falmouth when he was a student. It's the story of Bandoola, his Oozie (or trainer), Po Toke, and Williamson, a logging company manager, who together led a group of elephants and refugees out of Japanese occupied Burma (now Myanmar) during the Second World War. It shares themes with both **Shackleton's Journey** and Will's intervening book, **The Wolves of Currumpaw**. Each explores the human relationship with a specific environment: Antarctica, the American south west, and the Myanmar jungle. They are all carefully researched information books set in the past and are also stories of heroism, adventure and endurance. Will says that he was drawn back to the photographs of elephants lifting logs in his dog-eared Penguin Classic because they also promised something different from his first two books: a story that would be more 'animal focused'. Yes, it is a story of humans using the elephants for their own purposes, but it is also a story of elephants trained with kindness; a story of 'trust and companionship'. And 'Bandoola is a great central character'.

Research for the two latest books have included visits to New Mexico and Myanmar. Will accepts that he might have done the books without that, but 'there would be a lot missing.' In Myanmar, he talked to present-day Oozies and experienced the heat, smells and noises of the jungle for himself. 'I like to get deep into what I'm doing' and, perhaps, although he does not say so exactly, the story was going deeper into him. These were his own adventures, providing a sense of first-hand excitement for the books that he could never have found 'sitting behind a desk'.

Returning to what is on the table in front of us, we talk about the development of **Bandoola**. Will tries to set the basic structure, or 'the breakdown of the story' early on: what will be included and how the spreads will work within themselves and in relation to one another. For instance, Will decided that the spread about elephant facts would work best as a central elephant image surrounded by vignettes, while he saw that the elephant logging scene would work best as a double page spread, 'and that never really changed and I made the text fit in'.

Some of Will's illustration technique resembles storyboarding a film, and he says that, while he doesn't look at many illustrated books, he does watch a lot of movies. He generates a lot of practice drawings, some of which may rework the same scene in slightly different ways, from different angles or placing elements differently. The example he shows me is a grid of small drawings, no two exactly the same, portraying a line of elephants traversing the jungle. A note next to the image that is finally chosen reads, 'mysterious and adventurous'.



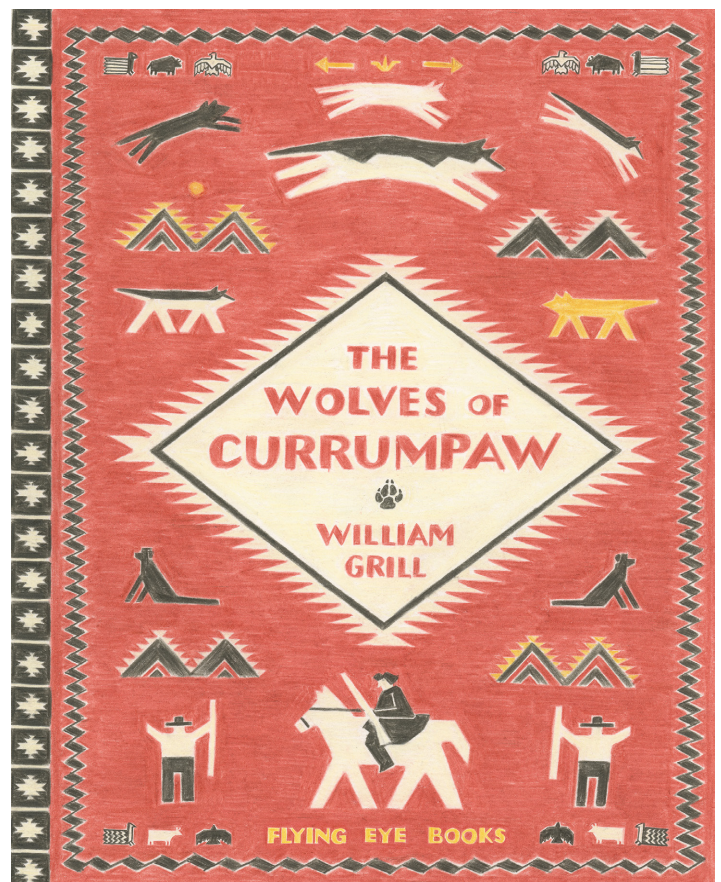
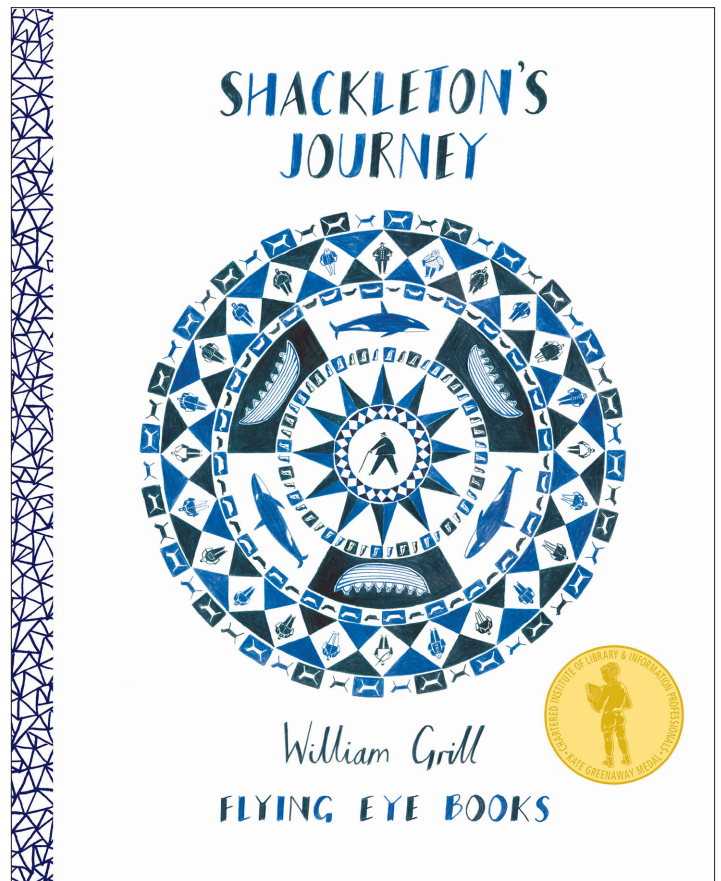


In each of the books, Will has worked with a particular colour palette. For **Bandoola**, it is essentially the colours of the Myanmar flag, gold and green, with red as an accent. Red sometimes highlights details and sometimes, in other spreads, creates 'a dreamier more emotional atmosphere'. In his first two titles, Will worked with coloured pencil drawings which were then enlarged and printed. For **Bandoola**, however, he used Photoshop to recreate something that was very like the lithography that would have been used for the original **Elephant Bill**. He drew in black and white, creating 'tonal roughs', and used these as colour separations, principally in blue and yellow, overlaying them to produce variegated shades of jungle green. It was, he says, 'a learning curve', but he was pleased with the result: 'Some things worked really well. Night time scenes came through with a clearer colour gradient than if I'd used coloured pencil'.

Will accepts that he is drawn to male adventure stories, but not that he is 'glorifying men too much'. **Shackleton's Journey** is partly about the hubris that put Shackleton in danger in the first place. **The Wolves of Currumpaw** shows how the encounter with a wolf changes Ernest Thompson Seton from hunter to early conservationist; and, in **Bandoola**, Po Toke and Bill show what sympathy and friendship with animals can achieve. Will thinks that these kinds of stories, that are "tough and real", should engage boy readers in particular.

He is working on something different at the moment, and not for Flying Eye. It is a book about clouds, and there is already a sheaf of drawings of many evocative, but carefully differentiated, cloudscapes. No narrative this time, but a poetic approach from Gavin Pretor Pinney, the founder of the **Cloud Appreciation Society**, and the author of **The Cloudspotters Guide** and **The Wavewatcher's Companion**. It will be different from the previous books, but Will has returned to working with coloured pencils, and, as he says, making his own connection to his previous work, 'the sky is, after all, the last great wilderness'. Something to look forward to, from a unique talent.

Bandoola: The Great Elephant Rescue, **Shackleton's Journey** and **The Wolves of Currumpaw** are all published by Flying Eye Books, hbk.



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

Windows into Illustration: Chris Judge

Chris Judge won the **Irish Children's Book of the Year Award** with first picture book, **The Lonely Beast**. It was followed by more best-selling picture books, his vibrant illustrations and comic-book-style layout and transitions becoming immediately recognisable. He takes a very different approach in this latest book, as he explains.

Cloud Babies is a very special book for me. I am so thrilled I got to collaborate with the incredible Eoin Colfer in its creation.

My daughter Juno was diagnosed with leukaemia in January 2020 just before Covid arrived and it was a monumentally tough two years of treatment for her during this terrifying time. Happily she finished treatment in April 2022 and is doing brilliantly.

To keep myself busy (and sane!) during the first lockdown in the Summer of 2020, I started a project called 'A Daily Cloud' where every day I would take a photo of a cloud and draw a few lines to turn it into an animal or object. I post them on Twitter and Instagram and have built up a lovely community of followers. Amazingly Eoin Colfer spotted the project and approached me with an idea for a book called *The Cloud Factory* that by chance he had been working on simultaneously.

In my mind I thought I could never create a book about the overwhelming events of my daughter's illness but Eoin's delicate story about a little girl who sees things in clouds and becomes ill just blew me away.



We felt very lucky that we got to work with Walker books who guided us both brilliantly with regard to the story and illustration style.

The image for the book that I have chosen to talk about here is the first spread in the book where we are introduced to Erin and her dad. This was the first illustration I worked on, and we went through multiple versions of this and the following two pages as we tried to find the right style for it. I had the cloud illustrations established which are essentially minimal pencil lines on photographic backgrounds. We struggled for several weeks to find the right balance of line work and colours overlayed on photographic elements and collage that would complement the cloud drawings.



Finally we had a breakthrough and suddenly the entire book fell into place. The style we arrived at was a very detailed coloured pencil style that I created digitally in Procreate. Each element has 3-4 layers of textures that I built up gradually. I trawled through my 80,000 digital photos from the last 20 years to find suitable backgrounds and elements that we could use to create the photographic collage backgrounds. It was a bit of a departure from the more graphic style that I use in my other picture books. I am thrilled with the results and learned a lot along the way.

It was a very emotional book to work on as we were still going through treatment and living through parallel events in the book which was difficult at times. Luckily, I had an incredibly patient and talented team in Walker books, Deirdre McDermott, Maria Tunney and Marty Cleary, working with me on the entire journey. It is an incredibly precious book to me and I really hope readers will engage with it as much as I do.

Cloud Babies by Eoin Colfer, illustrated by Chris Judge, is published by Walker Books, 978-1529502671, £12.99 hbk.

From Eoin Colfer, author of *Artemis Fowl*, comes a truly compelling, empathy-building book based on real life events in illustrator Chris Judge's own life.



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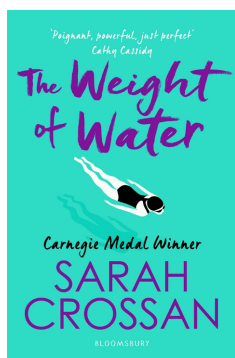
walker.co.uk/cloud-babies/



Ten of the Best Verse Novels

Over the past ten years, the verse novel has increased in publishing popularity. The sharpness of a story told in verse provides an immediacy which engages the reader into the narrative, heightens emotion and hooks them into reading. Although often described as an easier read, the white space on the page challenges the reader to fill the space and think more deeply, connecting with the story in new and exciting ways. **Charlotte Hacking** chooses ten of the best.

With so many incredible offerings and more on the horizon, including the second verse novel from Waterstone's Children's Laureate Joseph Coelho, **The Boy Lost in the Maze** (Otter-Barry, £12.99), releasing next month, it was hard to narrow this list to just ten, but here is a selection that have stayed with me since first reading.

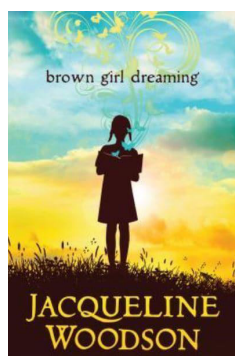


The Weight of Water

Sarah Crossan, Bloomsbury, 9781526606907, £7.99 pbk

AI had to start with Sarah Crossan, not only because she's an incredible writer, but also because she opened up the genre in the UK. The success she achieved with this book and subsequent titles paved the way for many of the UK writers now writing in verse. I could have picked any of her verse novels, but chose this one as I remember the excitement of reading this for the

first time and the feeling of it being fresh and innovative. Sarah's characterisation is incredible. She knows her characters inside out and the voice is always so incredibly authentic, be it a 13-year-old Polish girl like Kasienska in this story or the American brother of a Death Row inmate in Moonrise. You live every moment of the journey Kasienska goes through because of the authenticity of Sarah's writing, which comes from the research and emotional pull that is woven into the story.

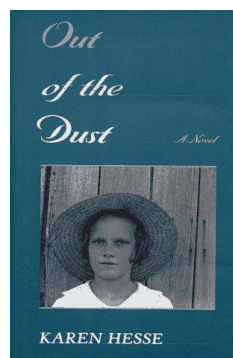


Brown Girl Dreaming

Jacqueline Woodson, paperback released 27/04/23, Hachette, 9781510111738, £7.99

I first became aware of Jacqueline Woodson's writing after reading **Locomotion** with the Year 5 class I was teaching at the time. The children adored her voice and style and were gripped by the emotive narrative and the chance to see familiar lives reflected in their reading. I find it incredible that more of her work isn't published in the UK, but

am delighted to see Hachette are releasing **Brown Girl Dreaming** in paperback in April 2023. This is the story of Woodson's life, impeccably crafted in rich verse, full of imagery, information and inspiration. It's not only about her family and life growing up in the 1960's and 70's, it's a rich lesson in History from a particular time and place, far wider than children will experience in school.

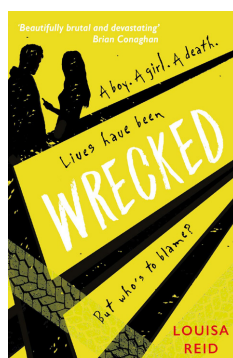


Out of the Dust

Karen Hesse, Frances Lincoln, 9781845076085, £5.99 pbk

I'll never forget reading this book for the first time – I can only describe the reading experience as visceral. The narrative tells the story of Billie-Joe and her family, living in the harsh reality of the Oklahoma Dust Bowl during the Great Depression. The writing is so real, so evocative, that you literally feel dry and parched as you read it. Story events took me inside the reality facing the family

at the time in ways that no writing had ever done before – some hit you like a literal punch in the guts. Sadly, the book is now out of print, but I was reminded of it again recently as I read C.G. Moore's **Gut Feelings** (UCLAN, £7.99) – an very different narrative, but with the same visceral quality in the writing and another incredible read



Wrecked

Louisa Reid, Guppy, 9781913101367, £7.99 pbk

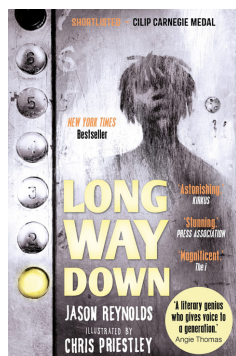
This compelling narrative gripped me from start to finish. Structured around a dramatic court case, and centred on the character of Joe, caught up in a situation that has spun out of control, the story explores themes pertinent to its young adult audience; the grip of first love, manipulation in a relationship and social class. The heartfelt narrative is formed of beautifully crafted verse full of imagery, emotion and honesty. Louisa Reid has carefully considered

the way that words can be laid out through the form to enhance the storytelling. A difficult read at times, as you watch events unfold in raw and real detail, but the narrative is handled with such sensitivity and skill, making it an enriching and ultimately enjoyable read.



Charlotte Hacking is Central Learning Programmes Director at **CLPE**. She is also a judge on the **CLPE Poetry Award**, the **CLIPPA**. Prior to that, she was a teacher and senior leader and taught across the primary years.

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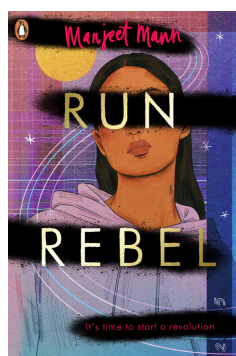


Long Way Down

Jason Reynolds, illustrated by Chris Priestley, Faber, 9781913101367, £7.99 pbk also as a Graphic Novel, illustrated by Danica Novgorodoff, Faber 9780571366019 £12.99 hdbk

Jason Reynolds is a master of lyrical storytelling. The first-person narrative is delivered in sharply written verse, drawing the reader in to the life of the main character, Will, and the dilemma he faces after his brother is killed. The continuous

aspect of the narrative means that it's an unputdownable read and the simplicity of the writing pulls no punches in delivering a narrative that opens discussion and debate around the themes raised in the book. I was lucky enough to see Jason speak recently and the humanity, strength and vulnerability that pervades in his writing and that he embodies is much needed in the current climate. The evocative illustrations by Chris Priestley in the original paperback pair perfectly with the text; the more recent graphic novel illustrated by Danica Novgorodoff brings the text to life for a new group of readers. For the same reasons I'd also draw attention to **Punching the Air** by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam, HarperCollins £7.99 pbk.

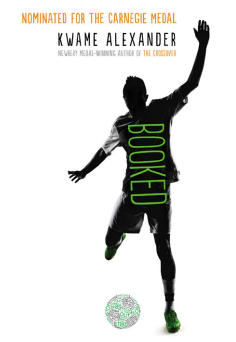


Run, Rebel

Manjeet Mann, Penguin, 9780241411421, £8.99 pbk

This, the first of Manjeet's verse novels, won the **Carnegie Medal Shadows' Choice Award**, a UKLA Book Award and the **YA Sheffield Book Award** and was shortlisted for the **Branford Boase** and the **CLIPPA**. The list of accolades is testament to the strength of the writing. A powerful, coming of age story about discovering your identity and individuality and the power of rebellion.

The narrative explores the difficult and very real experience of being faced with intergenerational differences and the clashes that can occur when children grow up in a society and culture vastly different from that which their parents experienced. Covering complex themes and issues which are so real for many people carries a weight of responsibility to make the characters and events authentic and ensure that the book truthfully represented those affected. Mann achieves this incredibly well in a compelling, honest, heartbreaking and inspirational narrative.



Booked

Kwame Alexander. Andersen Press, 9781783444656, £7.99 pbk also as a Graphic Novel, illustrated by Dawud Anyabwile, Andersen Press, £9.99 pbk

I remember reading this verse novel for the first time when it was submitted for the **CLIPPA** in 2017. Straight away I thought of so many children who would be hooked reading this. The story covers so many themes that resonate with its middle grade audience – the power of friendship, getting on and falling out, family separation and a

love of a particular pastime, in this case football. Young readers will engage and empathise with the main character Nick, throughout the

highs and lows of his journey. Kwame Alexander explores such a range of poetic forms and devices in his writing, all deftly chosen to enhance the storytelling in each particular verse. An absolute masterclass in verse novel writing. As with **Long Way Down**, the novel has been re-published in graphic novel form, brilliantly captured by Dawud Anyabwile.

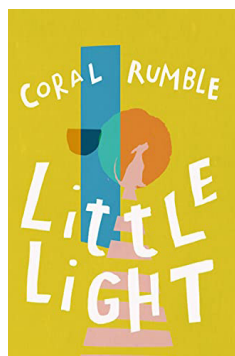


The Poet X

Elizabeth Acevedo, HarperCollins, 9781405291460, £8.99 pbk

When I read this book, I wanted to pass it on to every young woman I knew, and in fact, this year, I gave a copy to my daughter on her 16th birthday. Xiomara's story encourages young people to be confident in their own skin, define their own path and to explore their own journey. The intense and lyrical narrative explores issues of family, race, faith, femininity and growing into womanhood with confidence and control. It

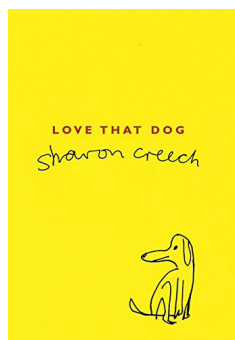
also highlights the power of language as a vehicle for finding your voice and speaking your truth, specifically through the medium of slam poet



Little Light

Coral Rumble, Troika, 9781912745166, £7.99 pbk

Little Light is a fantastic example of a verse novel targeted at a 9-13 audience, which tends to be the younger end of the verse novel spectrum. Coral Rumble tells the story of Ava, forced to navigate a new home and a life after her mum leaves her father. Teased at school and tormented at home by her young twin siblings, Ava finds peace in the kindness of strangers and companionship in an abandoned dog, Tracker. The book doesn't shy away from some difficult themes and ideas, but handles these realistically and compassionately, allowing the reader to empathise with and take strength from Ava's journey. Coral has thought carefully about the way she uses form and layout to enhance the storytelling, making the most of the verse novel medium.



Love that Dog

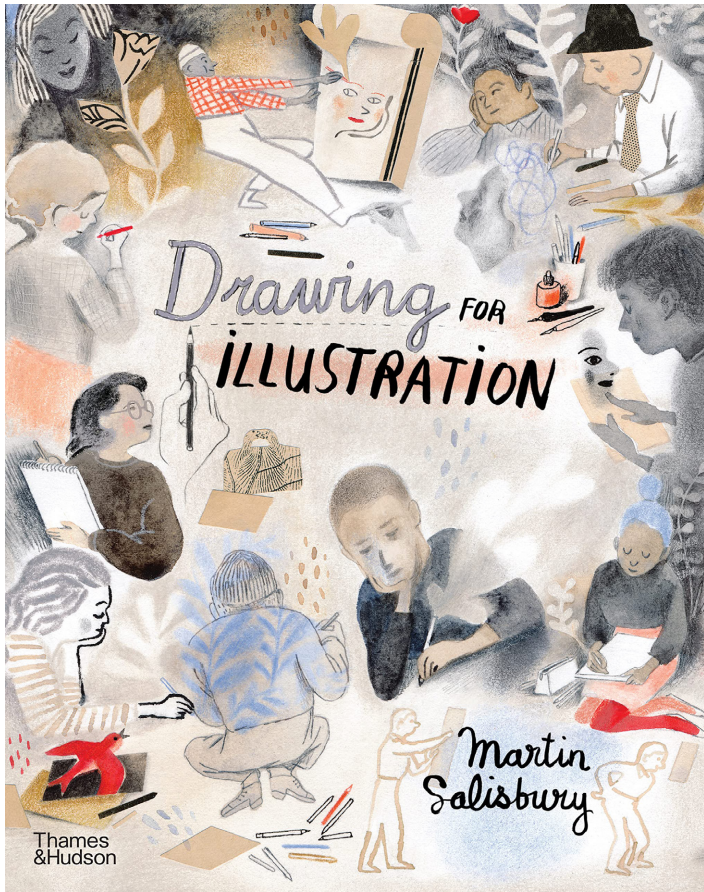
Sharon Creech, Bloomsbury, 9780747557494, £6.99 pbk

This is a verse novel that will stay with me always as it embodies exactly why poetry is so important for young people. It allows them to speak their truth and express their emotions about matters and experiences that are important to them, in their own voices. It also highlights the power of an excellent teacher in bringing the best out of their children by knowing them and what

motivates them, including well-chosen poetry. Miss Stretchberry is a teacher who is passionate about poetry and, through her deftly targeted homework assignments, opens up Jack's interest in poetry, enabling him to realise what it can do to help him express himself and make sense of the world around him. This short, but deeply compelling story will have you hooked and you'll want to revisit it often, as I have on so many occasions.

The Language of Drawing

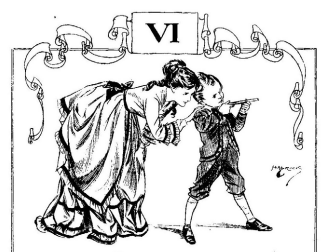
Martin Salisbury is Professor of Illustration at the **Cambridge School of Art**, where he founded the renowned MA Children's Book Illustration programme. One of the world's foremost experts on the subject of illustration, his new book **Drawing for Illustration** examines the ways in which the process and activity of drawing underpins, directs and supports the work of illustrators, including – of course – picture book and children's book illustrators. In this extract, he discusses definitions of illustration and some of the functions of those making use of it.



Cézanne cannot be *described*, if it could there would have been no need for it to have been painted ...’ The language of drawing goes beyond description. T. S. Eliot, writing about poetry rather than drawing, speculated that the chief use of ‘meaning’ in this context is often “... *to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a nice piece of meat for the house-dog*” It was an idea that Marshall McLuhan was famously to develop later – “*For the ‘content’ of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind*” – popularly condensed into the phrase ‘the medium is the message’. There are clear parallels between the languages of poetry and drawing, each being formally subject to certain underlying mechanics or ‘grammar’, but (with the exception of purely technical or informational drawing) with ‘meaning’ being readable in a variety of ways.

When Lamb wrote **Drawing for Illustration**, the relationship between drawing and illustration was perhaps more straightforward. In many ways illustration *was* drawing. Certainly, most published illustration was executed originally in the form of ink on paper. Drawing formed the basis of teaching in the art schools of the day, in all fields of the 'Fine' and applied arts. For the illustrator, these acquired skills were largely employed in making visual the writer's text, at a time when illustration was generally seen as entirely subordinate to the written word. Now, sixty years on, illustration's connection to both formal drawing and the written word have changed considerably. Illustrators are increasingly creating their own content, as graphic novelists, picturebook-makers, documentary artists... 'picture-writers' if you will. The teaching of drawing in the most formal, academic sense is, however, increasingly rare. Until relatively recently it had been seen as the foundation stone of learning across all of the visual arts. Now, in the absence of such formal training, the relationship between drawing and the activity of illustration varies greatly between one illustrator and another.

The relationship between Fine Art and Illustration has itself long been a prickly one. Lamb quoted John Berger's famous observation, 'drawing without searching equals illustration'. Berger was referring to the most literal definition of the word 'illustration'. But illustration has always been easy game for such put-downs, possibly more so in recent times as the fine arts have moved away from any direct relationship with formal drawing skills and has perhaps needed to find other ways to identify itself as of a higher purpose. The vacuum in drawing-based expressive art needed to be filled and this is happening through the growth in authorial visual narrative



rough and finished illustration: H M Brock

Drawing remains the fundamental language of the illustrator and an equally fundamental aspect of its research and preparation. In its many guises and meanings, 'drawing' continues to feed and underpin the output of the successful illustrative artist, even if it is not the actual method used to create the work. It is drawing, and the understanding or 'knowing' that it nurtures, that informs convincing illustrative image-making in all its forms.

In 1962, the illustrator and painter Lynton Lamb published **Drawing for Illustration** with Oxford University Press. It was an important contribution to understanding of the illustrator's art and craft at the time. Analysis of the various print processes through which illustrators' original artworks found their way to the printed page inevitably formed a significant proportion of Lamb's text, as did the need to be able to work to a particular scale. The requirement for illustrators of the time to have a full understanding of these processes had been of paramount importance from the invention of printing up until around the time when Lamb wrote his text. In shamelessly stealing the title of Lamb's excellent book, I hope to further illuminate the subject in the context of today's publishing industries, in a world much changed.

One of the difficulties inherent in using words to write or speak about drawing is the fact that, ultimately, drawing is itself a language. As the illustrator and painter John Minton pointed out: 'For a



E H Shepard

texts as practiced by a generation of expressive artist-authors such as Isabelle Arsenault, Jillian Tamaki, Shaun Tan, Isabel Greenberg, John Broadly, Jon McNaught and Brian Selznick. And, of course, the great works by children's picturebook-makers are becoming increasingly recognised within literature and the arts.

Book illustration

The use of illustration for adult fiction, as distinct from young adult fiction, children's book illustration or picturebook-making, is perhaps less common than it was in the past and tends to be confined primarily to the fine presses, publishers of lavishly designed and produced collectable editions such as the Folio Society in the UK and the Limited Editions Club in the US and of course young adult fiction. That said, in recent years book design and production generally has seen a noticeable surge in print and production quality, with commercial books of all categories needing to become much more desirable as tactile objects to be held and owned in order to compete with screen-based reading. Non-fiction hardback books in particular have made increasing use of illustration, especially in fields such as nature writing, lifestyle and travel where book cover and jacket design especially have once again become boom areas for illustrators.

Illustration for fiction can be a contentious area. Commissioning an artist to add pictorial interpretations to a text that was originally conceived and written as a stand-alone experience is not always welcome. Writers and readers can sometimes feel that illustration intrudes on the reader's imagination. But the best illustration in this field is careful to avoid duplicating or visualising literally the writer's words. Often a more tangential approach is required, suggesting mood, background or atmosphere, creating a counterpoint to the reading of words and augmenting the overall aesthetic experience. Explicit visual depictions of moments of drama are rarely successful. Ardizzone, touched on these issues in another rare excursion into analysis in *ARK*, the iconic *Journal of the Royal College of Art*, in 1954:

The Function of an Illustrator: The illustrator has to add to the work of the author. He has to explain something to the reader which the author cannot say in words or has not the space to do so. His illustrations should form an evocative visual background to the story, a background which the reader can people with the characters of the author. The suggestion and the hint are often more important than the clear-cut statement. Don't do too much of the reader's work for him; rather, help him to use his imagination. Be careful of the dramatic scenes in a book. Violence and drama are often better expressed in words. It is easy to fall into the trap of being literary. The approach to illustration should be purely visual.

Character development

For illustrators working in the field of children's books, especially picturebook-making, the creation of convincing and consistent characters is particularly important. To create characters that are absolutely believable normally demands a great deal of time spent testing them out in the sketchbook or on endless sheets of paper. Sometimes the artist may have a very clear idea in mind as to the key personality traits of the character(s). Sometimes the characters may only really assert themselves (and perhaps surprise their creator) through the process of drawing, coming to life on paper as the drawing grows in confidence.



Whichever way round the process works, it is often only when two or more characters are drawn interacting with each other that they really begin to assert their respective identities and eventually start to dictate the development of a narrative. This is a process that I liken to the gradual maturing of a TV drama series or situation comedy. Many writers for television series have spoken of how early episodes come to be looked back on as somewhat stilted and forced as the actors try to make sense of their roles. After a period of time, they begin to better know their characters' identities and start to 'add on' various mannerisms and idiosyncrasies to their roles. The writers in turn find themselves 'writing for the characters' as the actors increasingly contribute to establishing their identities. Consequently, the nature of the 'situations' that are written into the situation comedy are increasingly led by the dramatic possibilities that interactions between the contrasting personalities present.

Atmosphere and fantasy

The last decades of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth were a 'Golden Age' for illustration. New possibilities in full-colour printing emerged, precipitating an explosion of voluptuous and imaginative watercolour illustration from the likes of Arthur Rackham, Kay Nielsen and Edmund Dulac in Europe, while in America the growth in popular magazines saw many respected figurative artists including John Sloan and William Glackens become regular and greatly admired contributors to popular publications. The richly illustrated 'gift book' fantasies from the likes of Rackham and Dulac during the late Victorian period have exerted a lasting influence on imaginative book illustration.

The world of fairies and wonderlands continues to engage and enthral, and is kept alive today through the combined vision and watercolour craftsmanship of artists such as Alan Lee and P. J. Lynch. It is perhaps true to say that the convincing visualisation of fantastic worlds and mystical, mythical creatures can be at its most effective when represented in an essentially realist, idiomatic manner. Making the unreal real (if you will) demands great technical skill as well as vision.

Drawing for Illustration is published by Thames & Hudson, 978-0500023310, £30.00 hbk.

Beyond the Secret Garden: Lessons from School Books

In the latest in their series examining the representation of black, Asian and minority ethnic voices in British children's literature, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** go back to school.

For many children school is their first encounter with society beyond their own family. So it is no surprise that children's books are often set in schools. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, at least some of these schools were multiracial, from the one in Charles and Mary Lamb's poem 'Conquest of Prejudice' (1809) to Bessie Marchant's **The Two New Girls** (1927) at boarding school. Nonetheless, it was not until the 1970s that children in British school stories regularly included racially minoritized characters. Petronella Breinburg and Errol Lloyd normalized the experience of being new to school for Black children (and other readers as well) in their landmark picture book **Sean Goes to School** (1973). Middle grade readers were often about finding friends, including Grace Nichols' seven-year-old Leslyn navigating a new country and a new school at the same time in **Leslyn in London** (1984) or Gillian Cross's Clipper in the humorous **Save Our School** series (1981-91). White teachers in books for older readers were often well-meaning, like Wordsy in Farrukh Dhondy's short story 'Two Kinda Truth' (**Come to Mecca** 1978) or Mr. Johnson in Andrew Salkey's **Danny Jones** (1980), but they rarely understood the dreams and struggles of their Black students.

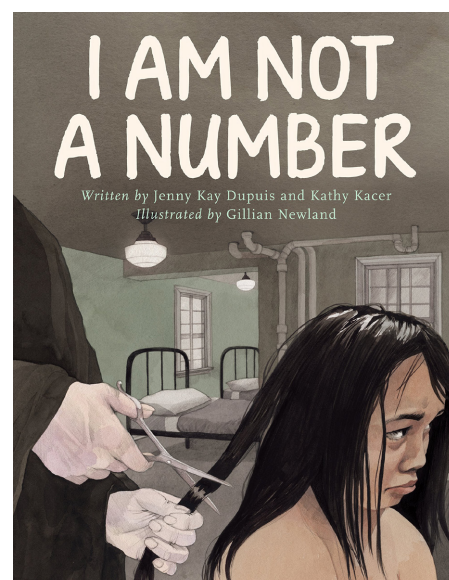
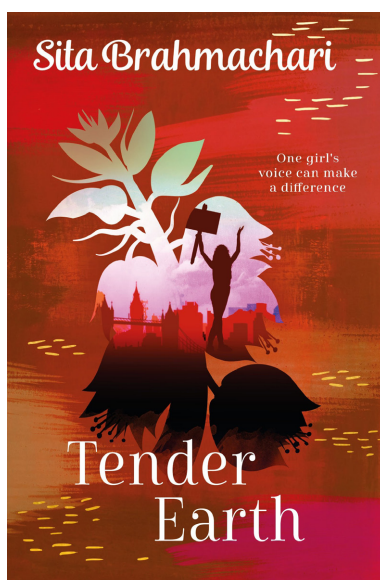
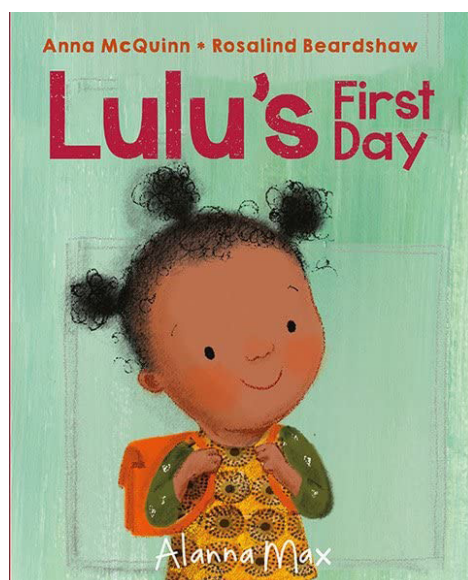
In **Hal** by Jean MacGibbon (Heinemann 1974) a mixed Black girl helps a white boy to overcome his fear of school with the help of her teacher, whose progressive approach is contrasted with some of her more traditional colleagues. The story holds interest for its celebration of a multiculturalism that is very much of its time. In one episode, the children spontaneously burst into song together. A Kenyan child drums while 'Pakistanis, Cypriots – the lot' join in. 'Mary Malone was dancing a jig... Only the English stood about, envious, embarrassed.' The use of cultural stereotypes – including that of the English as repressed or lacking a culture of their own – captures the limitations of a form of multicultural education that Barry Troyna was to criticise as the 3s of 'saris, steelpans, and samosas'. Tony Drake subtly critiques stereotypes in **Playing It Right** (Puffin

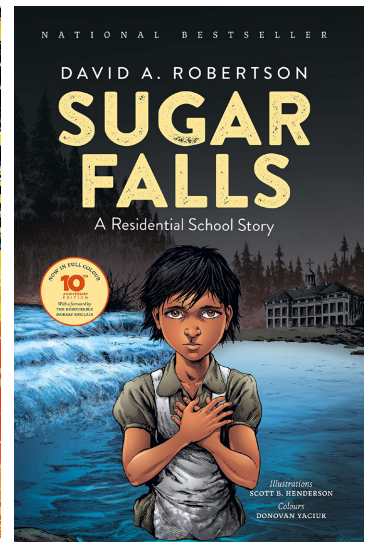
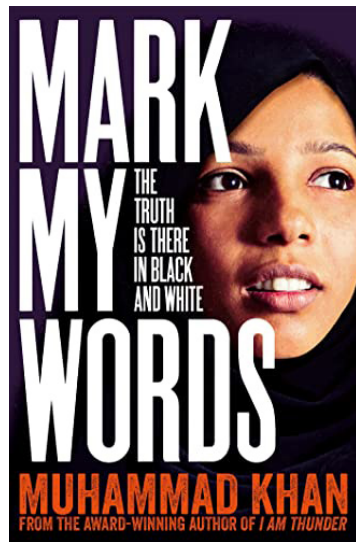
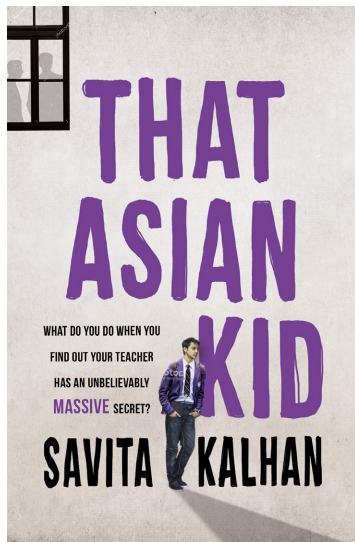
1979) when cricket coach Mr Bunting observes Nirmal bowl 'dead slow and dead straight' only to hear the headteacher from another school comment 'Crafty spinners these Indians, you know' (68).

The schools portrayed in these books were generally urban, non-fee-paying, and realistically portrayed. Only the occasional school story with characters from racially minoritized backgrounds includes fantastic elements; Robert Leeson's **Third Class Genie** (1975), for example, uses the Black characters, a genie and a bully, to force the white protagonist to see things from others' perspectives.

While many contemporary school stories include similar themes, the range of stories and mix of genres in more recent books marks a noticeable change. For the youngest readers, focus has shifted away from first day fears and toward achievement and activity. Books like Pamela Venus's **Let's Go to Playgroup** (Firetree 2016) or Anna McQuinn and Rosalind Beardshaw's **Lulu's First Day** (Alanna Max 2019) depict happy, confident children enjoying school and taking charge of choosing their activities. In **Tender Earth** by Sita Brahmachari (Macmillan 2017), Mrs Latif, who is described as wearing a headscarf, leads her multiracial class in philosophical conversation that informs some of protagonist Laila's decision making.

While stories of racism continue to appear, we detect a shift towards emphasizing the agency of racially minoritised students as they resist hostility and institutional racism. In the opening of **That Asian Kid** by Savita Kalhan (Troika 2019), Jeevan hears his teacher describe a complaint against her as 'one of the boys... playing the race cards because he doesn't like his grades.' (p7) Jeevan's journey is one of self-discovery and self-assertion. In Muhammad Khan's **Mark My Words** (Macmillan 2022), school student Dua Iqbal's investigative journalism uncovers the class and race-based scapegoating at her school. In **Fight Back** (Scholastic 2022), A.M Dassu shows school as a potentially hostile environment for many students, while also portraying school students as having independence of mind and a commitment to change things for the better. Aaliyah leads a broad





coalition of students (as seen on the book's cover) to protest the banning of religious symbols in the school.

The traditional British boarding school story has only occasionally included children of racially-minoritised backgrounds, and the most famous recent example of the genre, J. K. Rowling's **Harry Potter**, has faced both criticism and fan reinvention. Sarah Park Dahlen and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas have called for critics, scholars and readers to 'assess Rowling's record on race, justice, and difference and . . . come to an informed decision about what diversity in the wizarding world of Harry Potter will mean going forward' (*Harry Potter and the Other 8*). **Harry Potter** is not the only series that has undergone fan and author revision. Enid Blyton's **Mallory Towers**, first published in the 1940s and 1950s, were reissued by Hachette with revisions for 'sensitivity reasons', according to their website; Hachette also commissioned new stories with Black and Asian characters in **New Class at Mallory Towers** (2019). Patrice Lawrence, who wrote one of the new **Mallory Towers** stories, said she did it to make the books 'relevant for a whole new audience' (['I want to write books that have hope in them': Patrice Lawrence on tackling heavy themes with light | BookTrust](#)). Beyond rewrites, the boarding school story continues to be reinvented—perhaps because it provides readers in the 9-14 age group a way to 'grow up' through books, using familiar devices and plots to keep readers comfortable as they experience new aspects of the school story. Robin Stevens' **Murder Most Unladylike** series (Puffin 2014-2021) has Hong Kong-born character, Hazel Wong, solving crimes at an English boarding school in the 1930s with white British Daisy Wells.

Schools feature in a number of recent books set in countries beyond the UK. Shiko Nguru's **Mwikali and the Forbidden Mask** (Lantana 2022) uses tropes of the school story-outsider character trying to fit into a new school and find friends - to introduce readers both to Kenyan traditions, language and culture (the story is set in an exclusive Nairobi school) and to time- and space-travel fantasy. The school in Nguru's story both anchors the reader in the familiar and provides the source of danger, as the teachers are not all they seem, and Mwikali must learn to harness her power to defeat them and make school safe for everyone. Puneet Bhandal's **Starlet Rivals** (Lantana 2022) is the first in the **Bollywood Academy** stories, taking a familiar plot (young ingenue scholarship student experiences rivalry with character representing the establishment) but setting it in India's exciting Bollywood atmosphere. In **Onyeka and The Academy of the Sun** by Tolá Okogwu, The Academy is not only described in terms of the powers of the Solari who train there; it is well-resourced with elite standard sports facilities, and with an emphasis on sustainability, such as food production.

Canada has recently seen the publication of a number of stories based on historical events concerning 'Residential Schools' and their devastating impact on First Nation peoples. Picture books such as **When We Were Alone** by David A. Robertson and Julie Flett (Highwater

2016) and **I Am Not a Number**, written by Jenny Kay Dupais and Kathy Kacer, and illustrated by Gillian Newland (2016 Second Story) offer age-appropriate accounts of the inhumanity inflicted on First Nation people by the Canadian school system. **Sugar Falls** by David A. Robertson and Scott B. Henderson (Highwater 2012/ 2021) is a graphic novel telling the true story of Betty Ross, Elder from Cross Lake First Nation. While many fictional stories depict schools as the site where a new, better society is created, these historical stories remind us that in reality schools have often been sites of social division and inequality..

Books mentioned:

Two New Girls Bessie Marchant (1927)
Sean Goes to School Petronella Breinburg and Errol Lloyd (1973)
Leslyn in London Grace Nichols (1984)
Save Our School Gillian Cross (1981)
Come to Mecca Farrukh Dhondy (1978)
Danny Jones Andrew Salkey (1980)
Hal Jean MacGibbon (1974)
Playing it Right Tony Drake (1979)
Third Class Genie Robert Leeson (1975)
Let's Go to Playgroup Pamela Venus (2016)
Lulu's First Day Anna McQuinn and Rosalind Beardshaw (2019)
Tender Earth Sita Brahmachari (2017)
That Asian Kid Savita Kalhan (2019)
Mark My Words Muhammad Khan (2022)
Fight Back A.M. Dassu (2022)
Murder Most Unladylike Robin Stevens (2014)
Mwikali and the Forbidden Mask Shiko Nguru (2022)
Starlet Rivals Puneet Bhandal (2022)
Onyeka and The Academy of the Sun Tolá Okogwu (2022)
When We Were Alone David A. Robertson and Julie Flett (2016)
I Am Not a Number Jenny Kay Dupais & Kathy Kacer, Gillian Newland (2016)
Sugar Falls David A. Robertson & Scott B. Henderson (2012/2021)

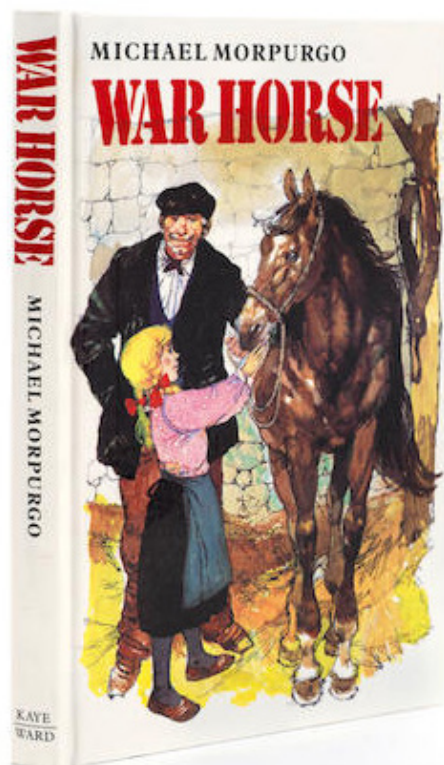


Karen Sands-O'Connor is the British Academy Global Professor for Children's Literature at **Newcastle University**. Her books include **Children's Publishing and Black Britain 1965-2015** (Palgrave Macmillan 2017).

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.

A Story from the Archives: the writing of War Horse

It's one of the best-loved children's books of today, read by millions, watched on stage and screen by millions more. Delving into the **Seven Stories** archives, **Sarah Lawrance** reveals details of how the story came its present form.



Jacket design for the first **War Horse** (Kaye & Ward 1982) illustrated by Victor Ambrus

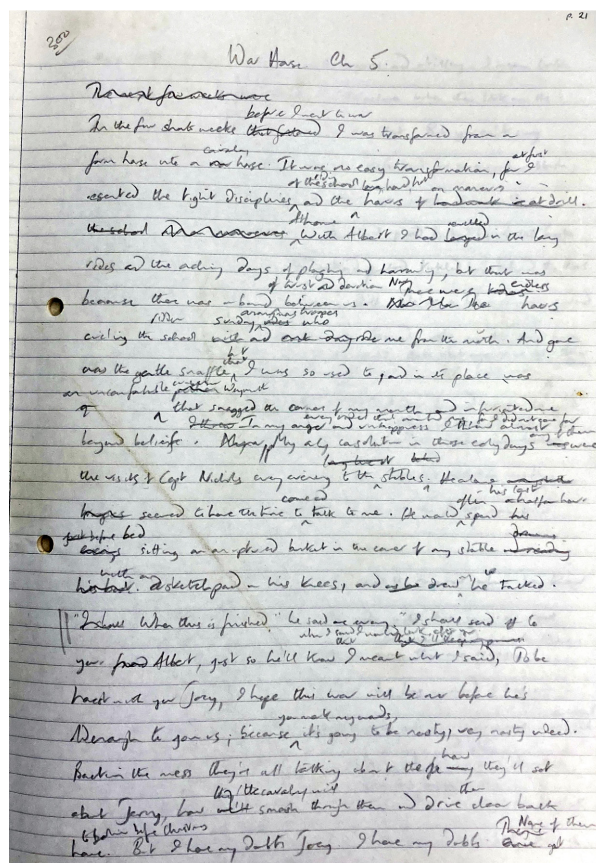
There is an almost folkloric quality to Michael Morpurgo's accounts of how **War Horse** came to be written, forty years ago: paintings of first world war cavalry battles discovered in the attic; conversations with aged veterans in the village pub; the magical experience of witnessing a young boy, who had a severe stammer and was barely able to talk in company, deep in conversation with a horse. It was this last event which, Michael claims, emboldened him to cast Joey, a 'splendid red bay' with four white socks and a white cross on his forehead, as both protagonist and narrator of the story.

As in all oft repeated tales there are details that get lost in the retelling, and the story of the writing of **War Horse** is no exception, as a close inspection of the papers in Michael's archive at Seven Stories shows.

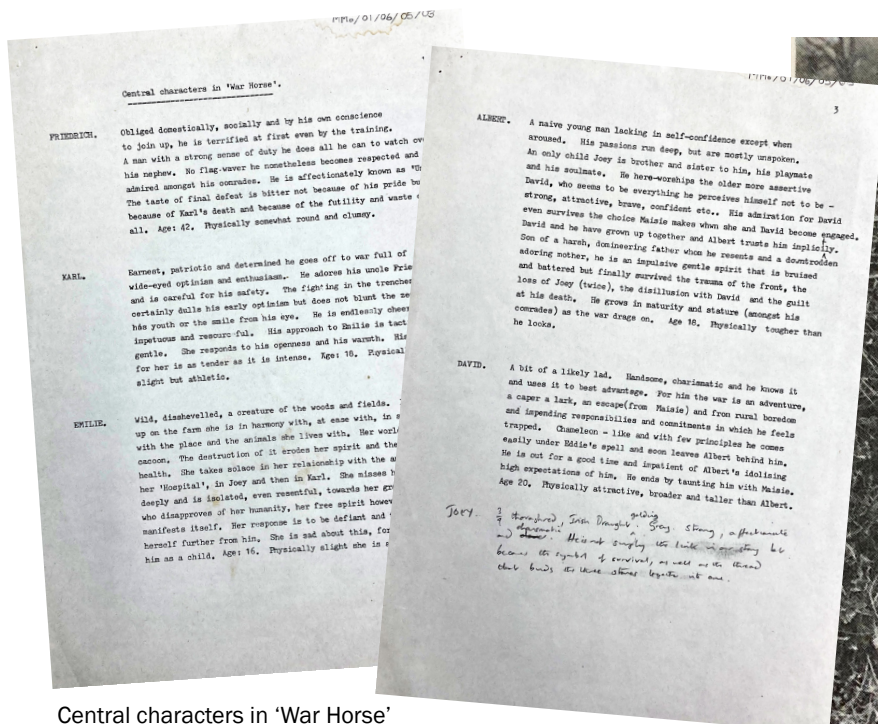
An undated three-page typescript includes descriptions of the principal characters – German, French and English, in that order. Their names will be familiar to readers of the book but in other respects they are quite different, and it seems that Michael began with a more romantic/tragic story in mind. Karl, for example, who is little more than a name in the final book, has a whole back story; he falls in love with Emilie who instead of being barely thirteen and a 'tiny, frail creature', is sixteen and 'wild, dishevelled, a creature of the woods and fields'. Perhaps most surprising is the fact that Joey appears at the very end, in a handwritten addition to the list, and he is not a red bay but 'thoroughbred, Irish Draught, gelding. Grey. Strong, affectionate and charismatic. He is not simply the link in our story but becomes the symbol of survival, as well as the thread that binds the three stories together into one.' So, while Michael knew from the

beginning that he wanted to weave together German, French and English perspectives on the war, with a horse as the central figure that would bring the threads together, he was still 'fumbling my way into a story, until it takes control and creates itself somehow.'

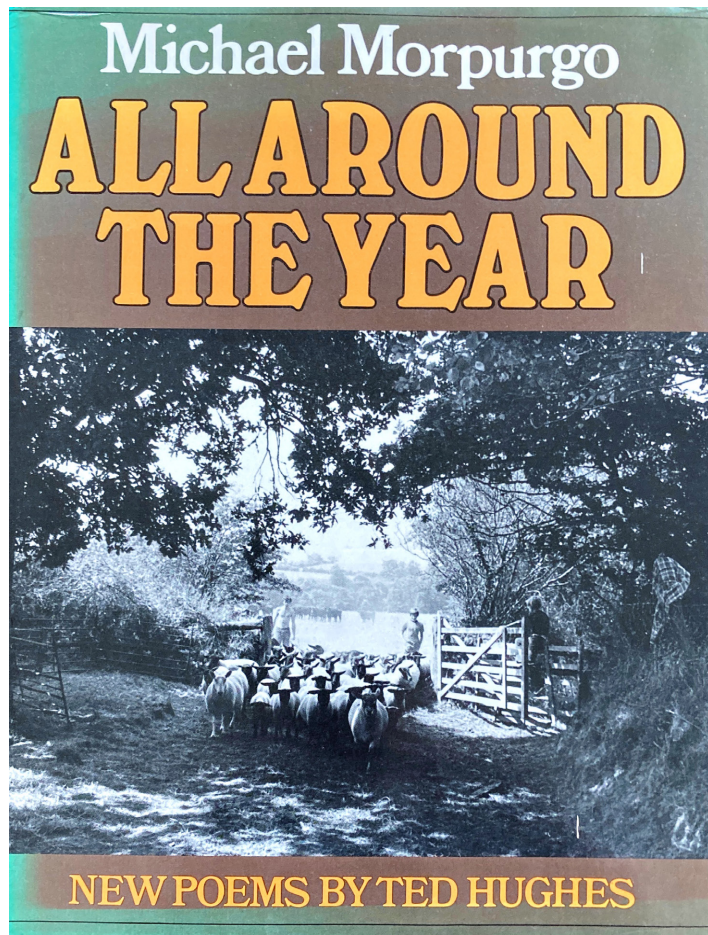
Unfortunately, the first four chapters of the earliest continuous draft of the story are missing, but judging by the rest of the manuscript, it took some time before the writing flowed smoothly: the pages are littered with alterations and in at least one place the narration slips between first and third person, suggesting that Michael felt some hesitation about telling the whole story from Joey's point of view. Nevertheless, the main building blocks of the story are in place, until Chapter 16, where there are two different versions of the episode in which Joey, trapped in No-Man's Land is rescued and brought back behind the lines to be treated for his injuries. In the first, considerably shorter, version the soldier who comes out to retrieve Joey turns out to be Albert; "I knew it was you, Joey" he says, and in the same moment the horse recognises his first owner. However, this is immediately followed by a re-write, much closer to the final version, in which a Welsh and a German soldier meet in No Man's Land, to bargain for the horse. They have a friendly conversation before the matter is decided by the toss of a coin, highlighting the senselessness of the whole situation, and Joey follows the Welshman back behind the lines where the reunion with Albert eventually takes place.



First draft manuscript, chapter 5



Michael has said that he never read Anna Sewall's **Black Beauty** until after completing **War Horse**, but he had drawn encouragement from knowing that another writer before him had successfully managed to tell a story in the voice of a horse. In order for the narration to be convincing, he obviously had to find out as much as he could about the terrible experience of the horses who served in the First World War. Also important, however, was the fact that he was able to draw on his own lived experience of farming: for at the time he was writing **War Horse**, Michael's day job, with his wife Clare, was the running of **Farms for City Children**.



Michael and Clare Morpurgo - author portrait photograph from the jacket cover of **All Around the Year**

the charity which they had established near the village of Iddesleigh in North Devon, in 1976. This meant not only looking after the visiting children and their teachers, but hard physical work, day and night; in the lambing sheds and the milking parlour; buying and selling sheep and cattle at market; toiling outside in all weathers; harvesting corn and kale; constantly watching out for animal illnesses of all kinds.

Michael's friend and neighbour Ted Hughes suggested that he keep a diary, documenting a year on the farm. If he managed to keep it up, Ted would write some poems to go with them. The result was **All Around the Year**, published by Faber & Faber in 1979, in which Michael's diary entries are complemented by twelve Hughes poems – one for each month – and illustrated with black and white photographs by James Ravilious (another neighbour, son of painter Eric Ravilious) and line drawings by his wife Robin Ravilious.

Each diary entry in **All Around the Year** is a story in miniature; there is tragedy and joy on every page, but no gloss or sentimentality. Though farming is in many ways the opposite of war, I can't help thinking that the relentless cycle of work, the harshness of the conditions and the closeness that exists between farmer and animals were as good a preparation for Michael's writing of **War Horse** as all his historical research in museums and archives. Sadly this wonderful anthology has been out of print for many years, but it's well worth tracking down second-hand.

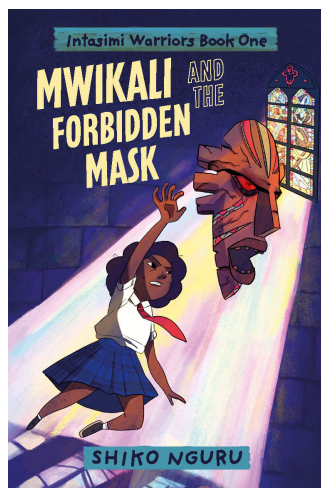
Follow [this link](#) to find out more about Michael Morpurgo's archive at Seven Stories



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

Make way for the Instasimi Warriors

Mwikali and the Forbidden Mask by **Shiko Nguro**, book one in the **Instasimi Warriors** series, is a Kenyan fantasy series inspired by East African mythology. Nguro's debut, it is published by Lantana, and launches their new fiction list. **Sue McGonigle** spoke to Shiko Nguro for **Books for Keeps** to find out more about the book and its background.



Can you introduce Mwikali and the Forbidden Mask to our readers?

Mwikali and the Forbidden Mask follows a twelve-year-old girl Mwikali, who has never quite fitted in anywhere. She moves back to her mother's home country Kenya, a country that she has never lived in, and joins a new school. She meets up with three other kids and discovers that she is part of an ancient bloodline of legendary Kenyan warriors, and she finds out about her history and her powers. It is a journey of self-discovery to understand who she is in order to

better understand and use her superpower. It is ok to be different, it is ok to be unique - in the context of fighting an evil superpower!

Mwikali is centre stage in this first volume, is she based on anyone you know or on yourself?

Like Mwikali I moved schools quite a bit, I felt a misfit. I lived in the US for ten years and had to move back to Kenya. All these elements - which culture do I belong to, where do I fit in, am I a fraud because I don't know that much about my own culture, were pulled into the character of Mwikali.

Which books were important to you as a child?

When I was growing up, I loved adventure and mystery with the discovery of hidden elements - adventure has always been my thing. I read **The Famous Five**, **The Hardy Boys**, **Nancy Drew** and **The Chronicles of Narnia**. There was very little literature written by Kenyan authors or African authors that I was interested in as a child that I found fun or exciting. Now I almost exclusively read and watch sci fi fantasy, I am a huge fan.

This is your debut as an author. What prompted you to write a book for children?

Growing up I was always a reader, but I never ever imagined myself as a writer. I went onto Uni and studied History and Political Science. Then when I came home to Kenya, I wrote as a hobby and I started a blog. It was only when I had my own children, and my daughter grew up that I realised the books she reads and the books I read as a child have zero representation. There are no kids that look like her. Looking at the books she was reading I thought that isn't right. That was one element. I wanted my kids to see themselves in the books they read.

I started home schooling my daughter around two to three years ago and I had her whole curriculum planned out - Maths, English, Science, but when it came to history, I couldn't find any exciting, engaging and informative books. She knew more about Zeus and Poseidon than legendary characters in our own history. I had no idea about it in school either. We are basically taught about our colonial history and fighting for independence, we are rarely taught about our precolonial history, which is so rich. I decided to write a series of short stories that would teach my daughter and other Kenyan kids about their history in a way that was exciting and interesting - and I thought I am really enjoying this!

Can you tell us about your writing process how you research and whether you have a routine.

For the book I did a lot of talking to family especially my dad - he was a huge resource. He grew up in a village so I asked him what he would do on a typical day, what would the boys do, what would the girls do. I carried out a lot of interviews with my dad and his peers. A lot of our literature is passed down through oral stories, which is very poetic and imaginative but so much of it gets lost. Several collections of stories have now been written to convert that oral literature into written - I read a lot of these books. The research is difficult but it's like a treasure hunt, you find gems. It wasn't easy but it was a joy to do and has given me ideas for more stories to come. My creative juices are most concentrated and free flowing in the morning, so I am a morning writer. If I can wake up and start writing straight away that's best. I have daily targets of about 1000 words. From noon onwards my brain is flat but that is when I like to do my outlining or brainstorm different ideas with sci fi or fantasy on in the background.

What do you hope readers will gain from your book?

Mwikali is definitely about self-acceptance and that it's ok to be different. For Kenyan children I wanted them to learn about our history and culture and for it to be relatable to modern kids too, I wanted them to see themselves in everyday life in modern Kenya.

My whole thing I think, is encouraging all children everywhere to explore the world and different cultures through reading, especially the parts that don't get enough representation. Literature from different parts of the world helps everybody. I love sharing both our past and our present because I enjoy reading about other people's culture and history. When I was young, I used books to explore the world and I would like kids from other parts of the world to explore Kenya through my books.

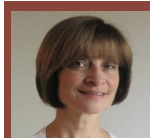
I think there is a space in literature for children in Japan or in the UK to learn about what life is like in Kenya through books, and I would hope that is something that my book can do. To find out what a kid in Kenya does, what kind of pop music they listen to, the snacks they eat, to go home and wonder what a mandazi tastes like or to say, 'Oh they like flavoured milk!'

My publisher, Lantana was the perfect fit for me as a writer, their whole thing is diversity and inclusion, having them eager to look for these stories from all over the world is such a blessing.

This is book one in an Instasimi Warriors series - are the other books already planned out?

There are going to be four books - I know which main character will come next. I have a clear idea of which legendary character I wanted to base each of them on - and I've thought about what their superpower would look like and how it would manifest itself in a 12-year-old kid. I don't know the exact story yet but the one thing I know for sure is what the main characters are going to be like and what their superpowers are based on. I hope kids can't wait to read about the Instasimi warriors!

Mwikali and the Forbidden Mask by Shiko Nguro is published by Lantana, 978-1915244031, £7.99 pbk.



Sue McGonigle is an independent consultant and co-creator of **Lovemybooks**
www.lovemybooks.co.uk

Obituary: Joan Lingard

Joan Lingard 8 April 1932 – 12 July 2022

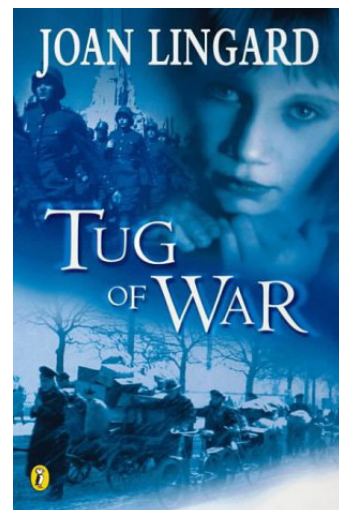
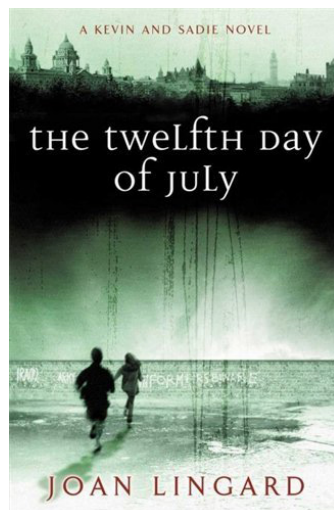
Nicholas Tucker remembers Joan Lingard.



Joan Lingard, who has died aged ninety, was a writer who always entertained while changing minds too. Author of around sixty books, mostly for children, she was best known for her **Kevin and Sadie** quintet, set in Belfast during the worst of the 1970 Troubles. A modern version of *Romeo and Juliet*, it describes how a 13-year-old Protestant girl and a Catholic boy one year older eventually find each other despite huge opposition from all quarters. Life for them as a couple remains hard, but Joan was never one for easy answers. Marrying young, she brought up three children at a time when money was tight. But things improved with her literary success, with the quintet soon adopted as an examination text and widely translated. These supremely readable books remain in print fifty years later and were also successfully dramatised.

Born in a taxi on the way to hospital in Edinburgh, Joan moved to Belfast aged two. At eleven she wrote her first novel, and as a member of a committed Christian Science family observed the sectarian violence going on around her with some degree of detachment. But losing her mother to cancer when she was sixteen, she left Belfast and Christian Science behind to start a new life in Edinburgh, where she trained as a primary school teacher and married early. Her first novel came out in 1963 to be followed by many more. Her first novel was published in 1963, to be followed by many more. Divorce followed, but almost immediately after she married Martin Birkhans, a Latvian-Canadian architect and university teacher. A much-loved husband and father, he featured in in Joan's 1983 novel **Tug of War**, describing his experience of fleeing from Latvia in 1944. This fine novel was shortlisted for the **Carnegie Medal**.

Always politically engaged, she founded the **Scottish Writers Against the Bomb** group. Her 1987 novel **The Guilty Party** was based on her daughter's experience of protesting against nuclear weapons at Greenham Common. Presented with an MBE in 1998 for services to children's literature, she continued to get the most out of life, enjoying her wide circle of friends while also reveling in five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Moving into a nursing home in 2017 close to Edinburgh Castle, she died on July 12, the same much-contested date that was also the setting for the opening novel in her **Kevin and Sadie** quintet, **The Twelfth of July**.



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.

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

Anne Horemans is a secondary school librarian.

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

Matthew Martin is a primary school teacher.

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

Neil Philip is a writer and folklorist.

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

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

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

Sue Roe is a children's librarian.

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

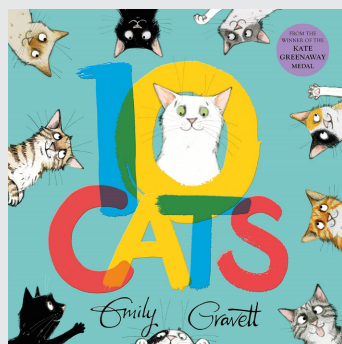
Lucy Staines is a primary school teacher

Janet Syme is a former school librarian and current member of the FCBG.

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



10 Cats

★★★★

Emily Gravett, Two Hoots, 32pp, 978 1 5098 5736 4, £12.99 hbk

This is a counting book and more for it also introduces the primary colours and colour mixing as well as being ideal for beginning readers.

On the opening spread we meet a mother cat and her ten little ones. The remaining spreads show what happens when the mother cat falls fast asleep leaving her mischievous kittens free to play by themselves. This involves investigating three cans of paint, one red, one yellow and one blue, getting the lids off and creating increasing chaos as they spatter first red, then yellow and finally blue splodges all over each other, the floor and end up turning their entire surroundings into a playground where they mix the three primary colours to make orange and green, until there are ten multicoloured cats. Eventually the mother moggy wakes from her blissful slumbers, sees the messy mayhem and decides her little ones need a jolly good bath.

Highly entertaining and an absolute delight: there's plenty of detail and Emily Gravett has created ten distinctly different, utterly charming feline characters in this seemingly simple book. **JB**

Sometimes I'm a Baby Bear, Sometimes I'm a Snail

★★★★

Moira Butterfield, ill. Gwen Millward, Welbeck Editions, 32pp, 978 1 80338 025 4, £12.99 hbk

Comparing specific feelings to animals is an unusual approach for explaining to children that it is okay to feel different at different times in life. Advised by a child psychotherapist, the story consists of a number of two-page spreads, each containing a child feeling like a puppy when he or she wants to have active fun, or a snail when quiet and peace is needed, a blowfish when hugs are not wanted but a blown kiss may be okay, a lion feeling brave, and a mouse who is shy and scared. Many others are included, and sometimes we meet a friend who is feeling the very opposite of us, and that is okay too. Being

cross is like a 'grumpy gorilla' and sad resembles a 'dog with droopy ears'. The suggestion is made in two pages of information for parents, that suggesting children use the animal terms when feeling a particular way, such as 'I feel like a snail today - or a lion, or a small mouse will help people understand their needs more easily. Children should respond positively with the idea of animals and feelings going together, and this is convincingly shown by the illustrations, often humorous and always expressive. There is clever partial rhyming throughout which will appeal too. A fun way to share with one's child the importance of being able to express feelings, both positive and negative. **ES**

Together With You

★★★★

Patricia Toht, ill. Jarvis, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 4066 8584 7, £12.99 hbk

Come rain or shine, be it spring, summer, autumn or winter the small child in this story makes the most of every minute spent with his much-loved grandmother. Her huge umbrella keeps them dry during a sudden spring downpour and hot summer days are for wearing shorts, keeping cool 'neath the hose-sprinkler and cooling down in the shade of a large tree. Autumn brings stronger winds, when suitably dressed against the gusts - Gran in a cosy hat and sweater, the boy in snugly scarf and fleece - decide it's perfect weather for kite flying. Chilly winter days are when the two wrap themselves in soft quilts, don their furry slippers, snuggle close and share a story, or several, followed by a cup of peppermint tea for Gran and cocoa with marshmallows for her grandson.

Essentially though whatever the weather, as the child's words in Patricia Toht's rhyming text asserts, 'every day spent with you is the very best thing.' These two characters assuredly know how to turn their shared everyday happenings into memorable adventures they will both cherish. Jarvis' jewel-like colours are perfect for capturing their delight in togetherness with its warmth and intergenerational love in his illustrations. Every grandmother will surely want to spend together time pouring over the details as they read this book, not once but so often that it too becomes a shared memorable adventure. **JB**

The Perfect Present

★★★★

Petr Horáček, Otter-Barry Books, 40pp, 9781913074326, £12.99 hbk

Tom and Mot are the best of friends. They share a birthday and each gives the other a present that though small can inspire the imagination. And imagination is something they have

in abundance. Not even the rain can dampen their enjoyment as they play together - and then there is cake. The perfect present does not have to be an expensive gift; it can be a day with a friend.

A picture book from Petr Horáček is always a joy and this latest creation is particularly joyful. Not only do the illustrations spill off the page in vibrant colours and movement, even the end papers are beautiful. Tom and Mot are nonspecific beings (though the very youngest might see them as cats) but they mirror each other (look at the names!) and it is this sharing, the enjoyment in the simplest things (including cake) and the extravagance with which they express their friendship that will engage its young audience. A lovely book to share - just as Tom and Mot share. **FH**



Queen of the Classroom

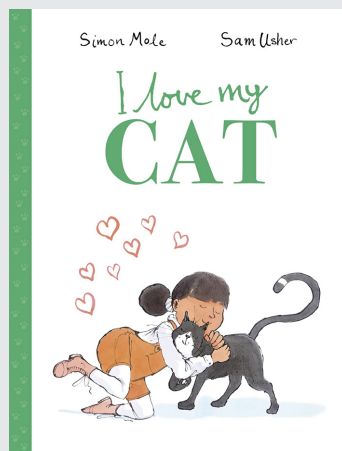
★★★★★

Derrick Barnes, illus Vanessa Brantley-Newton, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978-1912650941, £7.99 pbk

Starting nursery is a milestone in every child's life but little MJ is absolutely ready for it. Her mother has washed and braided her hair and it looks so good, 'But she always helps me look nice. Yes, she does.' Mum has the finishing touch too: a sparkly tiara, that she wore on her first day at school. 'But today', she says to her little daughter, 'You will become Queen of the Classroom.' As Queen, MJ will brighten up every room, be caring and kind, and helpful to others. As we follow little MJ through her day, we see her doing all those things. It's an absolutely lovely introduction to school and demonstrates perfectly too how parents can set their children up to be happy, confident and secure, all you really need to succeed in school and life. The illustrations are full of warmth and extra detail, and Barnes' prose has a cadence to it that will make the repeated readings that are sure to be demanded a pleasure. This is a companion to *King of the Classroom*, also recommended by Books for Keeps, and equally joyful and empowering. These books are must haves for anyone with a child about to start school. **MMA**

reviews

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant continued



I Love My Cat

★★★★★

Simon Mole, ill. Sam Usher, 32pp., Frances Lincoln, 9780711276512, £7.99 pbk

Starting nursery is a milestone. The girl loves her cat, Aditi, (variously Addie-Addie-Adster, Addie-Boos, etc), in spite of her mischievous tendencies, which are illustrated with panache by Sam Usher. One day, the cat is too naughty, trying to steal toast and jam, and the girl shouts at her, so Aditi runs away. The girl and her family are distraught, and search everywhere, knocking on doors all down the street, and hunting everywhere they can think of. The girl makes posters to stick up on the local lampposts, and Sam Usher makes these suitably childlike. Days go by, and they jump at any sound that might be a cat- then finally, one scritch-scratch IS Aditi coming home. They both have a snack, and the girl says again that she loves her cat.

Simon Mole is also a poet, and his story has lovely rhythm, and Sam Usher is an experienced illustrator of a large number of books: his slightly retro style suits this story well. This will be fun to read and share, whether readers are cat-lovers or not. **DB**

Five Bears. A Tale of Friendship

★★★★★

Catherine Rayner, Macmillan, 32pp, 9781529051278, £12.99 hbk

Bear is out walking, alone. Then – surprise – he meets another bear, a bear who greets him. They walk on separately but a couple more bears turn up. There is no interaction; they are all different bears – until they meet a polar bear who is stuck. This is a situation that requires more than a greeting. It requires talk, planning and encouragement. Five different bears discover that being different does not mean that you cannot have a very nice day together.

Any picture book by Catherine Rayner is worth attention and Five

Bears is no exception. As is to be expected her use of line is dynamic and expressive while her watercolour palette brings texture and vibrant life. Each bear is certainly a bear – but each is clearly defined and recognisable; these are not teddy bears. But can they be friends, talk to each other? Here Rayner creates a subtle narrative around similarity and difference, assumptions and ideas that can hinder friendship. The text is simple and direct in its presentation. There is satisfying repetition as the procession of bears grows – first one, then two, then three, then four – at first all separate, thinking different thoughts until gradually understanding companionship works a change from 'different' to 'similar' to the recognition that 'We all just like each other'.

Picture books have a great deal to offer to young readers from exciting stories of derring do to direct instruction and, as here, reflective texts that through the perfect marriage of image and word allows the audience to make a connection from the imaginative to reality. Excellent. **FH**

The Zoo Inside Me

★★★

Ruth Doyle, ill. Yessica Baeten, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978 1 83913 14 8, £12.99 hbk

In this picture book we meet a little boy confused by the mixture of feelings he is experiencing. His changing emotions are personified as a zoo inside him – with a wide range of creatures anxious to break free. These are mostly real animals but also include the fantastical too. In turn he is fizzing with excitement like a dragon, mischievous as a monkey or doleful as a llama. At other times he tries to hide his emotions, quash the zoo inside him and try to fit in or even to hide like a chameleon.

Addressing the reader, the book ends with the child narrator making a plea for acceptance and friendship although he may appear different. There is a reminder that we are all complicated and may have our own zoo partly hidden below the surface.

This is a book which aims to increase understanding of the range of emotions in all of us and to raise awareness and acceptance of neuro diverse children. It may also increase curiosity in some of the creatures described and pictured, some likely to be familiar to young readers and some lesser known such as 'mustang' and 'skylark.' Some of the vocabulary chosen for the rhyming text is likely to be unfamiliar too, and at times it is quite ambitious eg foraging, igniting. Attractive and colourful illustrations bring the range of emotions to life. **SMC**

What Do You See When You Look At A Tree

★★★★★

Emma Carlisle, Big Picture Press 40pp, 978-1-80078-127-6, £12.99 hbk

Stunning mixed media artwork sets the scene for an exploration of the secret life of trees in this thoughtful and rewarding non-fiction picturebook.

By taking a daily walk near her Devon studio, painter and illustrator Emma Carlisle learned to see trees as individuals with their own stories to tell and hopes this book will inspire others to look more closely at the natural world.

Powered by one child's curiosity about her local area – 'What do you see when you look at a tree? Leave and twigs and branches?'- Carlisle's rhyming text swoops up and out to embrace wider themes as it leads us on a tree-themed journey across time and space. Carefully curated scientific facts are presented in a way that encourages empathy, mindfulness and personal growth ('What has a tree seen over hundreds of years? Who else made a home in its arms?') and this fusion of intellectual and emotional insight is one of the key features of the book.

The artwork is delightful, too. Watercolour washes in a warm, natural palette are brought to life with pencil details to create an inviting visual world. Diverse characters (including a wheelchair user in one of the later vignettes) are physically and emotionally expressive, and subjects include the changing seasons in a rural setting, the comfort and love of home and family, and the wonder of the natural world. Standout spreads include a peek into the long life of a mature tree, with snapshots of the families that interacted with it, and 'How to be more like a tree' which links tree-knowledge to our own self-care. Carlisle shows and suggests, rather than instructing her audience, but there is plenty of information on offer, and much to enjoy and remember on every page.

This beautifully printed and bound picturebook is published in association with **The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew**, and will appeal to a wide age range. **CFH**

Family and Me

★★★★★

Michaela Dias-Hayes, Owllet Press, 32pp, 978-1-913339-39-5, £7.99 pbk

A little girl with a wonderful head of curly hair sits on the branch of a tree, and tells us, in rhyme, about her family tree. She has her Mum's eyes, 'so caring and true: looking out for each other is the best thing to do'. She introduces us to a lovely Caribbean family, all with characteristics that she has inherited. She has her grandad's glowing skin, and is 'proud to share his melanin'. (Some explanation will be useful for the young reader!). Her aunt has long dazzling plaits, and she

plaits the girl's hair in cornrows. Dad has straighter hair, and Grandma wears a sari - this is a mixed-race family. Having picked out noses, ears etc, we have the 2 families each on a double-page spread: 'Mum's family makes half of me, and half comes from Dad's family, and everyone is proud to see a part of them in ALL of me!'

This is a positive look at loving families and how this delightful and happy child fits in. Michaela Dias-Hayes has illustrated two books by Monika Singh Gangotra, about two friends of different backgrounds: **The Gifts that Grow** about looking after the planet, and **The Sunflower Sisters**, about loving the skin you're in, with both reflecting her own part-Jamaican heritage and her marriage into an Indian family, but this is her first as author/illustrator, and it is certainly encouraging. **DB**

Narwhal: The Arctic Unicorn

★★★★★

Justin Anderson, illus. Jo Weaver, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781406396065, £12.99 hbk

Anderson spent close to two decades working for the BBC as a naturalist. Having captured the first aerial footage of migrating narwhals for a wildlife documentary, he tells the story of these beautifully mysterious creatures as they traverse the freezing Arctic waters to breed – foraging the icy depths for food and avoiding polar bears when seeking air.

On their journey, Anderson sheds light on their nature, habitat, lifespan and social habits. Placed separately from the written narrative on each spread is a concise, scientific section that provides further insights into narwhal behaviour. Presented in a smaller, more delicate font, these can be accessed and read by the adult sharing the book with a younger, less accomplished reader or read independently by the more fluent reader.

Alongside the written narrative and factual aids are Weaver's gorgeous full-page double spreads. Her charcoal illustrations are perfect for this story with deep ocean blues brimming with depth, and long, rolling icy peaks almost glowing against rich blue skies. The narwhals themselves, and the wildlife they encounter along the way, are gently captured; Anderson's words and Weaver's illustrations do much to bring these elusive 'arctic unicorns' to life.

There is a growing resurgence in texts that fuse fact and fiction within a beautifully illustrated narrative and I welcome them. This kind of partnership invites the reader into these worlds rather than keeping them at a distance. **Narwhal: The Arctic Unicorn** is perfect for readers who are curious about the natural world and its inhabitants. **MT**

I Want the Moon

★★★★★

Frann Preston-Gannon, Templar, 32pp, 978 1 78741 925 4, £7.99 pbk
In this story we meet a little boy whose parents struggle to find a way to please him so that he stops crying. They give him countless gifts, but nothing stops the screaming. Inviting the little boy from next door to play makes things worse; in no time they are fighting over toys. One night, in desperation, the boy's parents offer to buy him anything he wants, but what he wants is the moon!

The boy grows up to be a rich businessman, but he still longs to own the moon – so he sets about achieving his aim, thoughtlessly destroying homes and a school to create the space to do so. When he eventually builds a 'Get Moon' machine and reaches the moon he finds, to his surprise, he is not alone; his childhood rival is there too. Things do not go according to plan leading to near disaster and a hard lesson learnt.

This is a story about greed and selfishness and the power of working together to deal with big problems. Ostensibly set in the nineteenth century, the clothing and many of the settings evoke the Industrial Revolution. The timelessness of the theme and relevance of the story to modern audiences is highlighted with clever touches – the boy's parents give him an iPad as well as a teddy, they suggest a 'playdate' and the street scenes include drones as well as penny farthings, baby slings alongside perambulators. Adult readers will recognise the suggestion of the monopoly branding and greed of modern tycoons in the city scene and also the hint of Neil Armstrong's famous words – 'one giant step'.

The text is rhyming, a device which helps to create the sense of a traditional cautionary tale. The illustrations are beautiful, with Preston-Gannon's familiar textured artwork. The book design is very attractive, from the choice of borders and framing to the gold leaf on the cover. The endpapers are carefully thought out too, showing the plan for the 'Get Moon' machine at the front of the book and the patched-up moon at the end. **SMc**

Our Tower

★★★★★

Joseph Coelho, ill. Richard Johnson, Frances Lincoln, 48pp, 978-0-7112-6882-1, £12.99 hbk

When Joseph Coelho was growing up in a London tower block, his favourite storybook adventures began in grand old country houses and rarely featured the city environment he knew so well. But magic can happen anywhere, and a high-rise estate makes the perfect setting for an imaginative fable, as this striking picturebook for older readers demonstrates.

Illustrated in an atmospheric monochrome that gives way to a jewel-bright palette later in the book, *Our Tower* tells the story of three children who discover a secret world inside a tree, where they meet an ancient entity wielding a power capable of changing everything.

Together, text and images brilliantly evoke the children's experiences as they peer out of their top-floor flats, set off to find a special tree they've noticed beyond their estate, and discover an enchanted kingdom beneath its roots. On a showstopper spread that redirects the action (and the magic) back towards their tower block, the 'tree-grown man' extends an ET-style finger and gives the children a gift. Folktale-style, they view their 'boring, hard, grey' home through the hole-within-a-stone, only to find it 'upside-a-diddle' and wonderfully changed. As ancient songs rise through the earth and spill from the concrete, the windows of their tower look down like loving eyes, and a new kind of enchantment begins to work its magic on the whole community.

Inspired by memories, folklore and a lifetime of reading and imagining, Coelho's lyrical text draws us in and evokes a personal response. Rhythms and sounds are explored, but it's the story that drives this book. Take-away messages are clearly stated (which may be reassuring for readers who are less familiar with poetry) but plenty of room is left throughout for curiosity and dreaming.

Johnson's artwork uses light and shade to create depth and atmosphere, and much is left unshown on every spread. Direction and boundaries are played with to heighten our sense of magical transformation: the book must be turned as the children leave the tree, and vignettes set into disorienting perspectives demand that we look closely and change our viewpoint. 'I wanted to... create a visual adventure that would complement Joseph's poem, blending the mundane, the dark and dangerous with the fantastic and celebratory' explains Johnson, who researched this book extensively: the tower-block spreads, for example, were inspired by the Roehampton estate where Coelho grew up.

'Richard has done a magnificent job,' said Coelho, speaking to Arena Illustration. 'I love the warmth and the magic of his illustrations, I love the details he has included...(and) think the comic book style framing and overlapping works brilliantly. It feels like an advent calendar with gorgeous surprises on every page.'

Celebrating the sense of wonder and possibility that children explore through play, *Our Tower* urges us to stay in touch with those feelings, and reminds us that nothing is more important than connecting with each other and the natural world. **CFH**

Adoette

★★★

Lydia Monks, Andersen Press, 32pp 978 1 8391 3189 9, £12.99 hbk
This inspiring conservation story chronicles the life of Adoette, the hundred-year-old oak tree that grew in the street where Grandad, the story's narrator lived. When the houses were first built it was small – the only green in the street. The first residents of the houses grew up with the tree, children played in the street and the tree was part their lives.

(An almost completely greyscale spread shows a child up in the branches looking down on a wedding party below) But with the passing years, life become busier, more hectic, the resident population more diverse, and for some, the tree became a nuisance – in the way. Some people became anti-Adoette – we see the paving stones being forced apart by her roots and branches growing very close to some of the houses. Other people loved the tree and did all they could to protect her but eventually, Adoette was felled. For those who championed the tree, the street felt diminished, a dismal place. Something green was needed to restore harmony and happiness among the resident. Yes, nothing of the physical tree but a stump remained but the manner in which Adoette had grown from small beginnings planted an idea and a vital lesson was generated for everyone: nothing is ever entirely hopeless if people are kind and caring – that way lies future hope. So it is for this community who come together to transform the waste ground into something beautiful for all to share, in the centre of which a tiny oak tree is planted, grown from one of Adoette's acorns.

The seed for this ultimately uplifting book grew out of the author's participation in a campaign to prevent the unnecessary felling of 10, 000 street trees in her hometown of Sheffield. Much of the story is shown in the immediately recognisable, detailed illustrations of street life through the ages. **JB**

The Girl Who Noticed Everything

★★★★★

Jane Porter, ill. Maisie Paradise Shearring, Walker Books, 32pp, 978-1-4063-9814-4, £12.99 hbk

If you keep your eyes and mind wide open, you'll always have marvels to wonder at. And one day, if you notice everything, you might just solve a mystery!

But when should you share your observations with those around you, and when should you guard your tongue? Talking about other people might hurt their feelings, but sometimes we just have to speak out – like Stella in this story, who reunites a lost parrot with its owner and learns to exercise a little self-restraint.

In the course of an ordinary outing to the park, Stella spots a lonely glove abandoned on a post, a gang of wheelie bins with faces and a line of geese whooshing overhead. Dad enjoys her observations but doesn't always have time for clues and stories, and Stella's comments about other people worry him.

'Sssh!' he says, when she asks whether a furry-hatted man is wearing a cat on his head, and 'Let's play at NOT noticing things,' when she draws his attention to the 'shuffly rainbow lady' who's searching for a lost someone called Frankie. So Stella doesn't mention a bright blue feather lying on the ground, and has to think hard about the multicoloured parrot in the tree. But surely that needs sharing? And hasn't she seen those colours somewhere before? Luckily, Stella makes the right call in this rounded and well-characterized story about curiosity and caring, and Frankie the parrot is reunited with his owner.

The Girl Who Noticed Everything addresses relevant (and potentially quite challenging) issues by drawing its audience in and delighting rather than instructing them. Its focus on the visual and imaginative joys of connecting and observing are particularly welcome, and embedded within the story and images are prompts for learning and discussion.

Jane Porter's cheerful text has a natural, real-world feel, and Maisie Paradise Shearring's characters also burst with life. Plenty of location-specific spreads anchor the action in familiar settings (a rumpled sitting room, an urban street, a sandpit...) but good use is made of white backgrounds to focus attention on Stella's internal world.

Appropriately, there's a lot happening in this book, but it all comes together in a satisfying way to deliver an enjoyable and thought-provoking read for children from about 4 up. **CFH**

The Zebra's Great Escape

★★★★★

Katherine Rundell, ill. Sara Ogilvie, Bloomsbury, 60pp, 9781408885758, £14.99 hbk

In what is an unusual alliance between a young girl named Mink and a young zebra named Gabriel, Rundell and Ogilvie present us with a classic adventure that champions celebrating and fighting for the freedom to be your true self and coming together to overthrow oppression and wickedness.

Known for loving her father but delighting in not playing by society's rules, Mink decides to stay up past normal bedtime and play in the city park whilst all the other children are abed. Mink soon finds herself face-to-face with an unusual visitor, a baby zebra, and discovers that she has a gift for being able to 'feel' animals'

reviews

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

emotions and thoughts, beautifully realised by Ogilvie's artwork in a riotous fanfare of exploding colours. It isn't long before Gabriel the zebra shares his plight with Mink: his parents have been stolen by a man with an 'unlovely smile' who intends to kill them and then stuff them in glass boxes for display along with a host of other animals.

With no time to lose, Mink encourages Gabriel to find his inner warhorse and fight for his parents' freedom. Employing the help of two more creatures, a cantankerous but delightful dog called Rainbow and a ledgerdemon-proficient squirrel named Rodentina, they head off in search of the evil, Terry-Thomas-inspired, Mr. Spit. Can they find the courage, wit and tenacity to win the day?

Rundell and Ogilvie share the space so well in what is a delightfully inspired partnership from Bloomsbury. At times, Rundell's narrative dominates but is always accompanied by Ogilvie's richly-coloured vignettes. At other times, the words are reduced so that the watercolour, pen and print illustrations can dominate: the escape of the animals from their cages is an absolute delight and a real cavalcade of colour and energy. It is clear that Ogilvie has spent time with the text and chosen key moments to represent with real care.

With a rich cast of cunning animals and a sense of adventure that exudes a similar warmth and humour to Dodie Smith's *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, *The Zebra's Great Escape* is a delightful modern-day classic with a strong-willed and determined young girl whose passion for fighting for what is right is something all readers can aspire to. **MT**

Shu Lin's Grandpa

★★★★★

Matt Goodfellow, ill. Yu Rong, Otter-Barry Books 32pp, 978-1-91307-408-1, £8.99 pbk

Shortlisted for the **Yoto Kate Greenaway Medal** in 2022, this engaging story about the power of art and cultural connection weaves a gentle magic and is impossible to forget.

On her first day at a UK school, Shu Lin stands nervously to one side in the playground and eats alone at lunch. Dylan knows they're not being very welcoming, but Barney's comments - 'What's up with her? How can she eat that?' - make it harder for the rest of them to get involved.

'What's the point if he can't even speak English?' asks Barney, when their teacher announces that Shu Lin's grandpa is going to show them his paintings. But great art doesn't need words to work its magic, and on a surprise gatefold spread a wonderful ink landscape complete with flying dragon is revealed.

The children find it tricky painting their own ink pictures so Shu Lin steps in to help. 'Nice one,' says Barney,

but its Dylan who's quietly making friends, and that night his dreams are full of art-inspired wonders.

Every word counts in poet Matt Goodfellow's beautifully balanced text, and his story has an authentic feel that reflects his experience as a primary-school teacher. Pared to a stylish minimum but packed with insight, compassion and the kind of details that really make a difference, Shu Lin's Grandpa demonstrates the transformative power of art and imagination in a relatable and non-preachy way. Readers may recognize the flavour of Barney's casual insensitivity, if not his actual comments, but there's a sense of possibility and optimism in this story that reflects the potential for change in every child in every classroom. Small actions can have big consequences, and every act of kindness and connection matters.

Pencil details added to coloured shapes and solid backgrounds bring Yu Rong's showstopping illustrations to life, and their engaging and expressive sophistication ensures wide age appeal. Every character bursts with energy and individuality, and readers will enjoy observing their many interactions, but skilful page design ensures that Shu Lin's story always takes centre stage.

Shu Lin's Grandpa helps readers develop cultural understanding and empathy, and makes a good starting point for creative projects and research. **CFH**

The Missing Piece

★★★★★

Jordan Stephens, ill. Beth Suzanna, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 32pp, 978 1 5266 1813 9, £12.99 hbk

Do we ever feel whole or are we always searching for that elusive something that will make us complete? That question is explored in this tale of a child seeking and finding connections.

Sunny loves to do jigsaws, the more pieces the better and finishing one makes her feel all warm inside though she sometimes worries that if she completes every single jigsaw puzzle she might feel forever sad. Her Gran questions whether it's really finishing puzzles that makes her happy. One day Gran gives her an old box containing a one thousand piece jigsaw. Piece by piece Sunny fits the picture together but then, disaster! The final piece is missing.

Now, being a very determined child, Sunny sets out to find that vital piece. Her search leads her to encounters with a variety of people from different households. The day passes rapidly and she makes lots of new friends but of the puzzle piece there is no sign until evening falls and she gets back home. What Sunny has found, so she tells Gran, is that looking for something is as enjoyable as finding it; and as for the puzzle piece, maybe Gran has something to reveal too.

The author's late grandmothers

were his inspiration for this beautiful debut picture book story that contains a powerful message about empathy, opening our hearts and minds to what life's journey has to offer, and the importance of family and friends. I love his descriptions of the various homes Sunny calls at and positive responses she receives from the young residents.

Equally uplifting and heart-warming are debut illustrator, Beth Suzanna's bold, bright scenes of Sunny's learning journey as she searches for wholeness. **JB**

I Remember: The most important things are never forgotten...

★★★★★

Jeanne Willis, ill. Raquel Catalina, Nosy Crow, 32pp, 978 1 83994 122 1, £11.99 hbk

This beautiful picture book about the moving relationship between a small boy and his Grandmother, who is deeply into dementia, is memorable for both text and illustration. When he visits her each day, she doesn't remember his name, but he knows that he can help her and that they are very close. He finds the biscuits and plans their games in the garden, buttons her coat for her, and knows just how to calm her down when she gets upset. He is endlessly patient and understanding, and she is very willing to follow his lead. 'George knew that even if Grandma's mind forgot who he was...her heart always remembered.' Simply outstanding. **ES**

The Worry Jar

★★★★★

Lou John, ill. Jenny Bloomfield, OUP, 32pp, 978 0 19 278273 1, £10.99 hbk

A lovely book for Grannies to read to their very own grandchildren with big worries. Frida is a serious worrier, and she worries about any and everything: 'Big worries, little worries, and all-the-time worries.' She collects pebbles, one for each worry, and they weigh down her pockets. What if she hasn't packed everything for school? What if the slide at breaktime is too slippery? Would her friend feel hurt if she sat at a different table? Frida's Granny comes to visit each Sunday, Frida's favourite day, and on this day they make jam. When they finish, Granny, who is well aware of the worries, brings out a very large empty jar and suggests that Frida put all her pebbles into it, closes the lid and keep the worries inside, 'so they don't weigh you down any more'. This seems a good idea, so into the jar all the pebbles go. It takes a little while for Frida to be able to put her very last special pebble in, but when she is able to, her worries improve greatly, and Granny has done the trick! The illustrations are full of soft, chalky colours and match the gentle text beautifully. **ES**

Blue Badger and the Big Breakfast

★★★★★

Huw Lewis Jones, ill. Ben Sanders, Happy Yak, 32pp, 978 0 7112 6755 8, £7.99 pbk

This is an unusual children's book. There are four animals involved: Badger, Squirrel, Dog, Bird and Owl. Badger is eating a huge breakfast of blueberries, and he is too busy eating to help his friend Dog find his lost ball. He encounters the other animals though, and wise Owl, who is very into aphorisms, tells him to 'look into himself' for the answer about the lost ball. Badger then cogitates and comes to the conclusion that he has eaten the blue ball amidst all the blueberries! When he confesses to dog what he has done, he and dog begin throwing the blueberries as though they are balls and are soon friends again. Either this is the world's smallest ball, or Badger has been eating the world's largest blue berries, either way, this is not a book that is easy to understand. The illustrations are splendid, with solid coloured backgrounds to the large central animals, and there is a 'knowingness' about the partly-rhyming text that would take a sophisticated child to pick up on. A bit of a 'curate's egg'. **ES**

An Imaginary Menagerie

★★★★★

Written and ill. Roger McGough, Otter-Barry Books, 96pp, 978 1 91307 435 7, £7.99 pbk

Roger McGough is a much-loved poet and these original animal poems show him at his best. The way in which he plays with words will appeal to all ages, for example Bookworms, Catapillow, Emus. However, a clever poem such as *Grey Starling* (Grace Darling) might need a little explaining to younger children. Whether it is the real Camel or the imaginary Teapet the poet is describing, these animals spring to life with their funny characteristics. Many of McGough's followers will find his lines enjoyable to memorize.

McGough's skill as an illustrator here complements his verse and, in the case of his first creation, *Allivator*, the art works with the pattern poetry to grab our attention. The drawings are fantastic and I particularly liked the charming Flamingo doing the Paso doble! The talented Petr Horáček illustrated the cover for this new edition and his style works well paired with McGough. Otter-Barry Books are known for their collections of poetry as well as their high-quality production and this volume is attractive in so many ways.

An Imaginary Menagerie is a collection which young people, parents, teachers and librarians will want to return to and dip into many times after the first reading. Badgers and Goodgers is one of the longer poems and probably my favourite in this collection. I was thinking about the origin of their white marks long after I closed the book! **JS**

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

Peggy the Always Sorry Pigeon

★★★★

Wendy Meddour, ill. Carmen Saldana, Oxford, 32pp, 978 0 19 277856 7, £6.99 pbk

Poor Peggy the pigeon always assumes she is in the wrong. Her automatic reaction to any conversation is to blurt out 'Sorry!' Shouted at by bossy pigeons and the roadsweeper, and yapped at by a little dog, Peggy feels very sorry for herself. Only when a great big seagull alights next to her and tells her she should stop saying sorry when she hasn't done anything wrong does Peggy question her responses. The seagull points out that in fact Peggy has been bullied, and she needs to learn to stand up for herself. With constant gentle reminders from Seagull to repeat her new replies when harried, but louder, Peggy tries other responses rather than her customary SORRY. Like 'Soggy hat sandwich,' and 'Ice cream ketchup pants.' Peggy thanks the seagull for helping her stand up for herself. The seagull replies, 'You're crumbtastically amazing,' to a reformed pigeon.

The text is a timely reminder of the power of facing up to bullies. The illustrations throughout show a cowed Peggy until with help from the huge seagull, she realises life can be different for her. Friendship from an unlikely source is appreciated and is life transforming. Readers will want to absorb the state of play through the pictures on each spread before turning the page to find out how the story pans out. **GB**

Attack of the Giant Baby

★★★★

David Lucas, ill. Bruce Ingman, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 978 1 4088 9887 8, £7.99 pbk

Just perfect for all children with lively imaginations and a sense of fun, this is a hoot of a book which will fast become a favourite. It is an amazingly successful read-aloud book and the illustrations bounce with adventures. The partnership of author and illustrator shows their great experience and expertise in the field of children's books. A giant baby enters stage left, causing mayhem in the King's palace. Looking over the battlements the King cries, 'Our kingdom is in peril!' The Queen and courtiers squeal in terror. ('He's just a baby,' says the Princess, but no-one listens to her.) Giant baby topples the tallest mountains, flattens forests, houses and bridges, grinning with delight. People are running for their lives! The King's advisers say the situation calls for expert diplomacy, an international peace conference. And meanwhile, Baby crashes through the castle walls. 'He's just a baby,' says the Princess, but no-one listens to her.

The King sends out his knights in shining armour and even the airforce is no match for this giant Baby. At last there's respite, in the form of a giant teddy bear. But the respite is only temporary. Resorting to His final sting, the King summons from the darkest dungeon the really scary skeleton dragon with the spiky tail and the flashing eyes. ROAAAAARRRR! How will the story resolve?

The illustrations throughout show the characters in their plight whilst Baby rules the day. From the cover picture, showing Baby with that twinkle in his eye, body ready for destruction, to the imagined fate of each of the members of royalty and their entourage, the reader is captured by each event in this enthralling laugh out loud tale. Three cheers for humorous books like this, to capture the imagination of young readers, wanting to relive the enjoyment and fantastic fun of reading it again and again. And another cheer for the Princess, even though no-one listened to her! Highly recommended. **GB**

Move Mountain

★★★★

Corinne Averiss, ill. Greg McCleod, Oxford, 32pp, 978 0 19 277866 6 £6.99, pbk

A book to make readers feel warmer. Friends join together to enable a magical happening, to make Mountain feel warmer and brighter. Mountain faces away from the sunrise, so he himself blocks out the amazing daily rise of the sun, the beginning of each new day. He has never seen the sky turn rosy red, yellow and change into the bright blueness of day. Snow-capped, he lives his days with his face remaining shaded and cool. He says he would turn around if he weren't so heavy! His friend bear tries pushing Mountain round, and bird suggests music might help Mountain to imagine the sunrise. Squirrel's music sounds like the beginning of something, but it only makes Mountain wish more than ever to see the sun rise. One final idea, and eureka, Mountain witnesses a huge yellow disc emerge slowly before him, and drift up into the sky. In the balloon's basket, Bird leads the flying chorus, Squirrel plays his song, whilst Bear blows the balloon upwards with all his might. How the Mountain is moved! He feels happy. He feels alive. For anything is possible with friends at your side. Illustrated as a snowy landscape with stark trees and cartoon like creatures, the colours mirroring the time of day or night, readers will warm to the simplicity of the artwork. A book to reinforce the value of friendship. **GB**

Once upon a Fairytale

★★★★

Natalia O'Hara, ill. Lauren O'Hara, Macmillan, 40pp, 978 1 5290 4577 2, £12.99, hbk

Packed full of illustrative detail, this book is an enchanting 'choose your own story' fairytale adventure. At each page-turn the reader can select from a varied menu, who, what, why, when or where the tale should begin and continue. For example; Once upon... a golden morning... a fairy's birthday... a cosy teatime ... a rainy Tuesday... a broken armchair ... there was a ... and here follow eight jolly characters from whom to select the hero to enact the adventure. The hero, dressed in a disguising red cloak, meets so many different storybook characters, maybe sitting down to eat ... newt pie and pig-tail pudding, with warlocks. The hero rescues various creatures from various calamities, and each time is rewarded with a gift of ... a blue whale... a flying bed...

a ring to turn you into a fish, ... or a talking wolf. Home eventually, still wearing the disguising red cloak, to a marvellous party where everyone from the whole book attends. The illustrations burst with colour and great detail, and the final party page is a riot of fun and laughter. There is a definite feel of Austrian castles in the landscapes, with bright flowers, and fly agaric toadstools abound. The O'Hara sisters reveal that they are life-long fans of fairy tales, and their book is peopled by characters who could happily have jumped out of Hans Andersen, or brothers Grimm. One to be tackled one to one with an adult or older reader, but also one to which readers can happily return time and again for a completely different adventure. **GB**

8 – 10 Junior/Middle

New Talent**Mwikali and the Forbidden Mask**

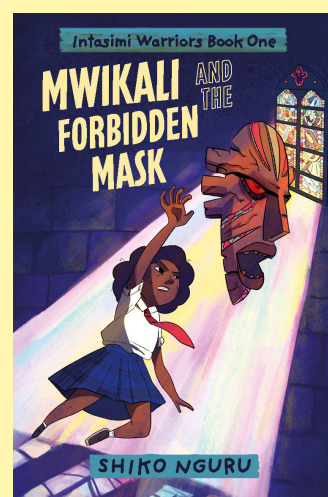
★★★★

Shiku Nguru, Lantana, 222pp, 978 1 915244 03 1, £7.99, pbk

Twelve-year-old Mwikali believes she is cursed with a dangerous power which makes bad things happen. Whatever she draws seems to come true, and she has come to think of her sketchbook as a dangerous weapon. When she moves to a new school, she decides to try to blend in – just like a chameleon. Although this doesn't go according to plan, a group of three children soon make contact with Mwikali and tell her that she isn't making things happen, she is predicting them. She is an 'Intasimi', born with a supernatural gift, in her case to see the future and also to be able to identify the monsters who walk among the people on Earth, one of these being her unpleasant teacher Mrs Amdany. Her new friends are Intasimi too, each with their own special powers. For once Mwikali begins to have a sense of pride in who she is – and feels more confident too.

On Saturday mornings the four children learn more about Intasimi history and have the chance to practice their powers under the guidance of a mentor, Mr Lemayian. As a team of Intasimi warriors they are given a special task, to destroy a powerful 'Forbidden Mask' before the Harvest moon when its black magic will release more monsters from the underworld and a threatening villain, the Red Oloibon will take over the world.

The children gather clues as they attempt to find the Forbidden Mask. Mwikali gains extra insights when she is transported back in time, meeting not only her grandmother



and great grandmother but also her ancestor Syokimau, one of the most accurate seers in history. Mwikali is given a special heirloom, to help her in her quest – a divining horn.

This is an exciting fantasy adventure – with an urgent mystery to solve and a surprise ending. A range of themes are covered – including the idea that true power comes from believing in yourself, using your skills, learning to trust and cooperate with others.

This book also celebrates Kenyan culture, from ancient legend to life in modern Nairobi. The use of some Kikamba vocabulary adds authenticity and depth. There are insights into Kenyan history too, in particular the experience of colonisation. Family and the importance of story in forging links between generations is another thread in the book. This is illustrated when Mwikali's great grandmother says, 'My stories are your stories.' This is an exciting debut novel, and the good news for young readers hungry for more, is that this is the first in a new series about the Intasimi warriors. **SMc**

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

Which Way to Anywhere

★★★★

Cressida Cowell, Hachette, 406pp, 9781444968194, £12.99 hbk

This rollicking story never lets up in energy, inventiveness and almost excessive good humour. If normally silent books could talk, this one would be shouting its head off, with the author's comic black and white illustrations also eager to join in the noise. But it starts on a quieter note as the author writes very personally about the recent death of her beloved father. Her story also describes a moving final parental separation that can never be bridged however much all concerned wish otherwise.

For the rest of the time death appears not as an impending tragedy but as a constant threat. This is because K2 O'Hero and his twin sister Izzabird are forced to use their secret magic powers to rescue their kidnapped baby sister. Their appearance in an imaginary world now turned real goes down badly with other powerful fantasy figures, already there and not wanting any competition. The children are also not helped by a new stepbrother and sister intent on disrupting family life as much as possible.

Huge capital letters break out when a crisis gets really serious, with occasional hand-written invitation to readers to write their own thing on an otherwise blank page. The writing itself is sometimes inelegant, as in 'Everest stumbled on on foot, bleeding.' But there is also a Dhaesque love of invented language. 'I don't like Cyril... he's an absoloot weasel-meaner of a human being.' Older readers may occasionally wish for a little more subtlety, but younger ones will probably love it. Cressida Cowell is a genuine one-off; her writing energy unaffected by all the time she has had to take off as Children's Laureate. Started 25 years ago, this story now forms the cornerstone for what looks likely to be yet another wildly popular series still to come. **NT**

Space Blasters: Suzie Saves the Universe

★★★★

Katie and Kevin Tsang, illus Amy Nguyen, Farshore, 224pp, 978-0755500161, £6.99 pbk

One minute young amateur inventor Suzie Wen is at home watching her favourite TV series Space Blasters and wishing her summer holidays were going to be more exciting, the next she's actually in the TV series, transported there somehow thanks to her very own Super 3-D TV Gizmo. It's a surprise for the crew too, Captain Jane, Spaceman Jack and Five-Eyed Frank the alien but, with the exception of Frank who seems put out by the unexpected arrival of a small human, they're very welcoming, especially when Suzie lends a hand in saving the



universe. It turns out that a number of moons have been going missing, something that allows for Suzie to visit not one but three very different planets, each with their own unusual inhabitants. That in itself makes for thoroughly enjoyable reading, but there are added bonuses too, including the crew camaraderie, plus the chance for Suzie to save the day when Jane and Jack are both out of action – once she's won round Frank that is. The set-up is very satisfying, allowing endless opportunities for adventure with an empowering emphasis too on Suzie's talent for invention; plus, the book is sprinkled with fact boxes of space and science-y info guaranteed to spark the interest of all readers. At the book's conclusion, Suzie accepts the crew's invitation to stay on board the spaceship and boldly go on to their next universe-saving adventure. Readers will be eagerly awaiting the next instalment. **MMa**

The Spell Tailors

★★★★★

James Nicol, ill. Jenny Zemanek, Chicken House, 356pp, 978191332286, £7.99 pbk

In an alternative version of England, called Ingle, there are great similarities to our world, but also many differences. Hen (Henryton) wants to join the family tailors, making clothes which have an element of magic sewn in to them as a spell; unfortunately, he manages to sew in a fault and is not allowed to work in the workshops. At the same time tailoring families are facing a threat from large clothing factories that say they can produce goods for a cheaper price. With the business facing ruin, Hen and his cousin Connie decide that the only way to help is to win a competitor for young tailors. However, they soon find that there are dark deeds afoot and they need to battle the evil Mrs Thackeray and the mysterious Tiberius Pepper, owner of the clothing factories. We follow the two heroes as they ride a roller coaster of danger in their attempts to save their families.

The fact that this is written by James Nicol, author of the *Apprentice Witch* series is enough to let you know that this is going to be a very good read. He has once again given us a magical world that we absolutely believe in and I would love to have a garment that incorporates a memory stitch, so that I could use it like a comfort blanket. The descriptions of the clothing factories really hark back to the sweatshops of the 19th century and it is a timely reminder that having improved working conditions so much, we do not want to see any lessening in standards. This is very much a story of family and what can happen when things go wrong and reminds us that reconciliation needs someone to make the first move. It is also about building strong family relationships and respecting the skills that people have, even if they are not immediately seen as important. James Nicol has not only given us a great adventure story, he has also given us a tale that makes us think and appreciate the good things we have in life, whether they are great or small. **MP**

The Elemental Detectives

★★★★★

Patrice Lawrence, Scholastic, 396pp, 9780702315626, £7.99 pbk Marisee Blackwell's grandmother is keeper of the London Wells. When she mysteriously disappears one day, leaving only a cryptic note behind her, Marisee decides to investigate. She finds herself with a companion in her mission when she meets Robert Strong, young slave to rich Lady Hibbert. He is desperately concerned about the fate of his friend Lizzie who has fallen prey to a sleeping sickness, a strange and pervasive condition sweeping London. Together they decide to investigate.

There follows a fast-paced quest story taking our two detectives and the reader across a fantastical version of eighteenth-century London in search of Marisee's grandmother and the elusive freedom of the city.

A complex world has been created, in which human inhabitants are referred to as 'solids', and there are also 'elementals', personified spirits, representing air, water, earth and fire. We meet a complex villain 'The Shepherdess' imposing harsh justice on the world in her desire to remake London, a monster in the Serpentine, gruesome ghosts in Hyde Park and some really quite scary scenes (this is not a book for the faint hearted!) The two detectives are complex too – Marisee struggles with who to trust and Robert with conflicting commitments.

This is an exciting fantasy adventure with a fully imagined and complex world, an alternative historical London. It may inspire young readers to find out more about subterranean rivers, foundlings, or Robert's back story as a slave transported to England from a plantation in Barbados. The importance of memory in remembering those we have lost and the distinction between dream and reality is also explored.

The two detectives are successful

in their quest and the story comes to a satisfying end, but the Freedom of the City remains an enigma. However, Robert makes steps to achieve his own freedom leaving the way clear for the quest to continue and more adventures for the Elemental Detectives to follow. **SMc**

The Dangerous Life of Ophelia Bottom

★★★★★

Susie Bower, Pushkin Children's Books, 304pp, 9781782693604, pbk £7.99

Are we producing too much plastic? In this new mystery story by Susie Bower, the versatile material is much more than an ecological concern; it is virtually a source of evil.

Ophelia Bottom has an issue with fitting in and making friends. Her parents are travelling actors, performing the Bard's work from their beat-up old van in small towns around the country. Ophelia spends her mornings being home-schooled (mostly in the dramatic subjects of English literature and theatre) by her long-suffering and risk-averse 'Ma' – who mostly speaks in italics. The rest of her day is spent helping her Ma and 'Ar' (an insufferable servant to the arts who MOSTLY speaks in capitals) by learning lines, stitching costumes and painting props. She longs to settle down and go to school, where she might learn maths, and science and, most of all, meet some friends.

When the trio arrive in the small seaside town of Stopford, they are struck with a severe case of bad luck (the result, arguably, of Ophelia mentioning the name of 'the Scottish play'). A broken leg and the alarmingly hostile welcome from the locals, means that Ophelia's family must – at least temporarily – become Stopford denizens.

The everyday problems of finding school and work put their strain on the family, and Ophelia has to seek the help of new friends to try and prevent her parents from drifting apart. This is made virtually impossible by the angry and violent treatment they receive from Stopford residents, all of whom work for Professor Potkettle in the plastic factory. They reveal in the town's motto: 'plastic is fantastic; different is dangerous' and seek to mould the Bottoms into their own model, or to expel them.

There is a great deal of mystery for Ophelia to uncover, and she suspects sinister motives behind the town's relentless pursuit of plastic production, and reckless approach to its disposal. In an increasingly tense and subversive third act, characters' bonds of family and friendship are stretched to snapping point, and Ophelia has to be brave enough to accept that standing out and being different might not be the worst thing in the world after all.

The ecological messages of the story – though oversimplified at times – remain powerful throughout, without upstaging the engaging mystery and enjoyable pace of the

narrative. Ophelia's courage and resilience are endearing and her willingness to poke gentle fun at herself and her family make her very enjoyable company. Readers will eagerly race through the pages in order to keep up with her. **SD**

The Story of Babur. Prince, Emperor, Sage

★★★★

Retold by Anradha, illus Jane Ray, Scala Arts & Heritage, 176pp, 9781785513947, £12.95 hbk

'I am Babur...At the young age of twelve I became king of Ferghana, and at the age of fifteen I ruled two kingdoms.' A proud boast made by the Emperor Babur in his autobiography which is here presented in a retelling aimed at a young audience. It is a lively narrative and Babur certainly emerges, as history has judged him, a charismatic ruler of intelligence and culture, a thoughtful philosopher and poet and an outstanding military commander. It is to be commended that there is now a version of this classic, the Baburnama, available for a wide audience of young readers because it is indeed a tale full of excitement and action, setbacks and triumphs – and, though it is Babur himself who is telling the tale, his reflections particularly on the role of a leader (in this case a king and emperor) are still very relevant. He is very human as he expresses his love for his family especially his son. The choice of Jane Ray to illustrate the story is inspired. Her jewel like colours and compositions reference Mughal art bringing both the period and the setting to vivid life. It is important that such texts that expand the awareness of a world beyond our borders should be available in schools and libraries for all communities

My only reservation – this is not a fictional story but a historical narrative that includes warfare and the creation of an empire by invasion. Perhaps something for a conversation between parents, teachers and young readers? **FH**

The Little Match Girl Strikes Back

★★★★

Emma Carroll, ill. Lauren Child, Simon & Schuster, 208pp, 9781398512818, £12.99 hbk

A cleverly reimagined reworking of Hans Christian Andersen's literary fairy tale in which Carroll brings some grounded research and pertinent insight into her telling. Bridie Sweeney, the match-girl herself, tells wonderful stories as she sells matches. After experiencing a series of dreams seen through the light of her final matches, she turns her talents to stand up for the rights of female workers, including her mother, at the East London, Bryant and May Match Factory. Carroll has created a fine short piece of historical fiction

that speaks of empowerment for change.

Opening with Bridie's lamentation that the Danish storyteller himself probably never met a real match girl, Carroll's narrative begins with the protagonist introducing her immediate family and poverty-stricken situation. Bridie's own mother suffers from phossy jaw and her brother, Fergal, chooses to work at the factory instead of getting the education that is offered to him. With a real gift for illuminating the past, Carroll guides us through Victorian London's East End through the eyes and mind of Bridie whose family are struggling to survive.

Weaving both a modern, feminist retelling into Andersen's original whilst still maintaining many of the plot elements could have been a challenge, but Carroll does well. Instead of being a looming, abusive threat at home, father is cast off to sea for work whilst the urchin who stole her slippers plays a greater part near the close. Powerful, narrative anchors from the original, such as the visions she received when lightning the matches occur and are reworked to tell a different story.

Whilst Andersen's tale closes with a despairing note, Carroll uses Bridie's visions to empower her, drawing together hopeful possibilities and gifting Bridie with the tenacity to help her mother and fellow workers to take a stand and make a change. As with much of Carroll's work, careful research informs the tale and Bridie's story finds itself interwoven with the real Bryant Match Factory Strike in 1888.

Throughout the telling are Child's immediately-recognisable illustrations. Her multimedia pictures, created with cut-out patterns and red and black ink are a perfect choice for capturing the fire within Bridie. Key events, in which the typography is also in the control of the illustrator, shed light on those powerful moments for change.

Whilst Andersen, in 1846, may have seen the ending of his short tale as a happy one (the girl freezes to death but finds herself with God and her grandmother having escaped suffering), Carroll and Child ignite something far more empowering for the current-day reader – a story in which the match girl fights to change life's circumstances and argues for a revolution in the way women and children in these factories were treated. However, I do wonder whether something is lost in choosing to shy away from Andersen's darker exploration of the emotional and domestic challenges faced by families like Bridie's. Whatever the case, Bridie remains Carroll's empowered and gifted storyteller and she will inspire her readers to stand against what they believe is wrong too. **MT**

If You Read This

★★★★

Kereen Getten, Pushkin Press, 188pp, 978 1 7826 9281 2, £7.99 pbk.

Brie's joyous and exuberant mother died three years ago and since then her life with her father and grandmother has lost its centre and its excitement. She wants to please her father with her successes at school, both in class and on the sports field, but he seems to spend more and more time at work and barely sees her or registers her achievements. It is almost as if she has lost not just her mother, but him, too

To her sorrow and anger he is absent from her twelfth birthday party, where she has a surprise present-three letters from her mother, written in the last stages of her illness, promising a final adventure which she has planned. Her disappointment at what seems like her father's indifference to her resolves itself into a determination to pursue the quest with the help of her remaining family and her two best friends, Femi and Smiley, despite his disapproval.

The story is set in Jamaica and there is a good deal of local colour, use of patois and references to food specialities, which give the story authenticity. The quest leads her to her beloved grandfather Brim's house, an eccentric and captivating place which she has always felt to be special. It has lost its centre, however, as her grandfather is now living in a care home as a result of his encroaching dementia. The home is painted rather clumsily by Getten as a dark prison from which Brim must be-and is-liberated, with no sense of the necessary care he receives there. Brie solves the mystery in the letters in a surprisingly short time, since her mother explained that it took her many years to unravel the secret. The narrative seems rushed towards the end, not always giving characters like Smiley and Femi chance to develop. Readers will be drawn into the many interesting facets of the story but need to be rewarded with nuanced personalities who do more than facilitate plot movement.

That said, the book has a good deal to offer on other fronts, not least Brie's reconciliation with her father and the sensitive handling of both of them trying to make sense of grief in their own very individual ways. There is much to move readers and to provide a way through the incomprehension of loss. **VR**

The Mystery of the Missing Mum

★★★★

Frances Moloney, Pushkin Children's Books, 224pp, 978 1782693529, £7.99 pbk

Jake wakes on Monday morning to find his mum is missing. He is anxious to find her quickly, not only because he misses her, but also because it's only ten days to Christmas – and with no mum will there be any presents. Getting no help from his grandma, dad or older sister Rose, Jake starts

to investigate. He writes a list of all the possible explanations for mum's disappearance, from going on holiday to being in prison. He tries to rope in his best friend Lukas to help in his quest, but his friend seems elusive and preoccupied. Jake is worried and really missing Mum.

Jake narrates the story, and we follow his search as it happens, together with flashbacks where Jake remembers details of family life including his mother's recurring illness, filling in the back story for the reader. Gradually Jake faces the truth and the memories he has blocked out – he already knows what has happened to mum. Coming to terms with this is a turning point for him.

The story includes a cast of interesting characters, from Jake's super tidy dad to his exhausted grandma coping with two grandchildren and a daughter in hospital on top of her demanding job as a nurse. His friend Lukas's warm and friendly Polish family is a nice addition, and through them we gain an interesting insight into Polish Christmas traditions. But it is Jake who is centre stage and through him we experience his struggles with facing the truth and the love he feels for his mum – giving her a Christmas angel decoration to keep guard over her in hospital is a lovely touch.

This is a sensitively story written from a child's perspective about living with a parent with mental health issues, it includes themes of facing reality, coping with change and the love that binds families and friends together despite the problems they may have. The liberal use of bold text may feel a little 'shouty' to some readers, but this fits the idea of a child's voice and notebook very well.

A successful debut novel likely to appeal to readers who enjoyed books such as Jacqueline Wilson's *The Illustrated Mum* or *Little Bits of Sky* by S.E. Durrant. **SMC**

The Girl and the Ghost and the Lost Name

★★★★

Reece Carter, Usborne, 350pp, 9781803700724, £7.99 pbk

This magical adventure story for children introduces a truly original heroine and invites young readers to forget what they already know about ghosts and monsters and witches.

Corpse is an unlikely hero for any story. She is a ghost who lives in the virtually deserted town of Elston Fright, whose only other inhabitants are three menacing witches and a furry spider called Simon – Corpse's only friend. She is brilliantly resourceful, and constructs herself a body by mimicking spells from witches in order to bring together everyday objects and pieces of flotsam and jetsam into shapes that barely resemble body parts.

Corpse is consumed by questions about her existence. She remembers almost nothing of her life and, in death, has to fathom why there are so few other ghosts around and why

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

she appears to be trapped on the tiny island that she calls the-rock-that-doesn't-exist. When she learns that the treasure sought by the witches might unlock some of her own secrets, Corpse becomes determined to find it for herself first.

The originality of this story will really challenge readers' imaginations. Characters are deliberately different from those that usually feature in generic ghost stories. The witches – all men – are deliciously evil. Other monsters are genuinely frightening but also strangely vulnerable and are sometimes so unlike anything readers would have encountered in other stories that it is difficult to conjure just what they look like. This imaginative scope adds to an enjoyably spooky feel, which is complimented by an unpredictable narrative that meanders about the maritime location.

The world Carter creates is dark and menacing and will be enjoyed by any fans of Gaiman or Riddell. Yet, even in the deepest and darkest corners of the story, a bright light of hope shines brilliantly. Other-worldly creatures like formless ghosts and desperate witches need friendship just as much as anyone, and Corpse's brave acts of kindness make this debut book stand out as much more than just another ghost story. **SD**

The Case of the Runaway Brain

★★★★

Nick Sheridan, ill. David O'Connell, Simon & Schuster, 186pp, 9781398506848, £6.99 pbk

In this new detective story for young readers, three children with absolutely nothing in common find themselves working together to thwart an evil plot from the proprietor of the town's Academy for Incredibly Irritating Children.

With a first act that features a daring escape from hundreds of cuddly sausage dogs, and a pair of friends categorising different types of mud, it is clear from the outset that the book has a silly sense of humour. Yet the three protagonists all have serious matters to attend to: Riz is a professional (and secret) friendship provider, Drew has an escape from Madame Strang's Academy for Incredibly Irritating Children to arrange, and Olly has the local mud-specialising newspaper – Unearthed – to edit. Yet, despite their busy personal schedules, the trio are brought together when they learn that Madame Strang has a dangerous secret that threatens the entire town of Snoops Bay.

The three main characters are simply drawn, with uncomplicated motives like family, money...and mud. Yet the book invests substantial time introducing them before treating readers to the juicy and exciting details of Madame Strang's plot. As the three children begin to unravel

the mystery, they also discover the value of doing things for the benefit of others, and that friendship can come from the unlikely of places.

The most dramatic, heartwarming, and funny moments of the story are saved for the final chapters, when readers' stamina is rewarded with the bringing together of earlier details (often involving mud!) to hilarious effect. **The Case of the Runaway Brain** succeeds as a simple and enjoyable introduction to detective stories that lots of children will enjoy. **SD**

Wishtree

★★★★★

Katherine Applegate, ill. Charles Santoso, Wellgate Flame, 219pp, 978-1-80130-070-4, £7.99 hbk

This fine and feisty book is narrated by Red, a 216 year old northern red oak, the eponymous Wishtree. Tradition dictates that on the first of May people come to hang their wishes on Red's branches. He is a very unusual tree as he has the power of speech but he converses only with his friends in the natural world and with the occasional individual who has the heart and mind to listen. He is at the heart of the community, knowing its secrets and watching its dealings, both supportive and unkind.

This is no idealised world but one in which racism and prejudice can rear their ugly heads and patience and courage are needed to surmount antagonism. Samar's family are Muslim and when they move into the neighbourhood 'Leave' is pointedly carved into Red's trunk. Maeve adopts a baby left in one of Red's hollows and is at first castigated for it as the child is Italian and she is a single Irish mother. However, just as the wounds inflicted on Red's trunk heal, so the outrage felt against those who are different eventually cools.

Red supports much more than wishes: many different kinds of birds and animals live in his protection. These are humorously anthropomorphised by Applegate, thus simultaneously educating and amusing readers with their mix of human qualities and animal mannerisms. The most winning of these is Bongo the crow, Red's special friend who affects a cool, sardonic style to counterbalance his unswerving devotion.

The climax of the book is the threat from Francesca to fell Red. Her drains are being invaded by his roots and her garden is consequently annually flooded. In a rousing and moving finale Applegate mobilises Red's animal inhabitants and an impressive number of the community to protest against the felling. When Francesca finds a family connection with the tree-Maeve was the one who took her in as a baby – Red's life is saved and his new status as Heritage Tree ensures that he will be protected forever.

Applegate steers an impressive

and unerring course between strong emotion and sentimentality, rendering Wishtree an endearing and thought-provoking story for all who will listen and learn. **VR**

The Day No One Woke Up

★★★★

Polly Ho-Yen, ill. George Ermos, Simon & Schuster, 234pp, 9781471193569, £7.99 pbk

Ana is anxious – a new school day but she doesn't want to go to school. She and her best friend, Tio, have fallen out. Ana doesn't know why – and she feels she cannot tell her new friend Layla, though they are almost inseparable. She struggles through two days then Wednesday, another ordinary day; or is it. Why is everyone asleep – except herself and Tio? Can they work together enough to solve the mystery?

This is an intriguing and imaginative look at friendship. What if we are the subject of research by, yes, aliens looking to study how humans react emotionally to situations and interact with each other? This science fiction premise effectively allows the author to remove all adults from the scene leaving Ana and Tio to work out their relationship with each other – and potentially with another species. The situation that has caused the rift in the friendship will be one that young readers will recognise, even relate to, and provides believable parameters. Both Ana and Tio are convincing – Ana anxious, looking inwards, Tio, hurt and reacting in a credible manner. The interactions from the 'aliens' at first a bit confusing perhaps, will very quickly be accepted by an audience familiar with a computer driven world. Here is an enjoyable narrative that effectively delivers a message without being didactic rather allowing the imagination to engage, the reader to empathise and sympathise. **FH**

How To Be More Hedgehog

★★★★

Anne-Marie Conway, ill. Danielle Dey, UCLAN Publishing, 978-1912979813, £7.99 pbk

Lily Marks is eleven. She lives with her Mum and her older brother, Dylan who is two years older. Her Dad has moved to Scotland to live with his new partner. Dylan struggles to accept this. Lily loves everything about animals and also has a stammer.

Lily's new teacher, Mr. Daly, assigns her and her best friend, Mia, a project on climate change. This will involve presenting orally to the class. Can Lily do it? What will she learn about herself, coping with a stammer and the strength of friendships in the process? And why does she have to be more hedgehog?

Conway's novel deals sensitively with the immense challenges that having a stammer cause Lily. Lily's progress towards accepting her stammer and learning coping strategies is satisfyingly non-linear. This will make it easier for readers to relate to. The other major strength of Conway's novel is that the digital

world plays a significant role in what otherwise is a very nature focused book as there is an incidence of severe cyber bullying. This book could be used in Key Stage Two classrooms to discuss cyber bullying and true friendship. **RB**

The Whale Watchers

★★★★★

Dougie Poynter, ill. Amberin Huq, Owllet Press, 224pp, 9781913339548, £6.99 pbk

Before starting this book, I'd already heard quite a bit about it in the press and social media, so I was really looking forward to reading it myself and it did not disappoint.

It's the first day of the summer holidays and Finn and his little brother Jesse have had a long train journey to the north of Scotland with their marine biologist mum, where she will be studying Minke whales out at sea for the next six weeks. Whilst very proud of the work his mum does, a recent sad incident involving a Minke whale stuck in the River Thames has left Finn feeling that trying to do anything to stop climate change is just pointless, when nothing they do will make a difference.

At first all Finn can think about is how all his school friends have flown off abroad to sunnier countries, while he has ended up somewhere where it's always raining, but Jesse is more excited about their holiday destination and is desperate to spot a humpback whale for himself. Exploring the beaches nearby, the brothers bump into local resident Skye and her dog Rain, who once she learns that they're not just uncaring tourists, shares both her binoculars and her secret look out point. After spotting something disturbing happening on one of the beaches, the trio soon find themselves caught up in an unforgettable race against time adventure to help save a whale and come to realise that if everyone tries, we can all make a difference.

Recent research has shown that a large majority of young children are extremely concerned about climate change and the future of our planet, particularly how plastic pollution is impacting the seas around the world. Dougie Poynter, himself a keen conservationist, has created a charming tale, interwoven with non-preachy practical tips and suggestions of how we can all do something, no matter how small, to try and create a better world around us. The back of the book contains a fascinating 'Science behind the story' section, which explains more about whales, pollution and human impact on the planet. There is also a glossary of new terms and words used, which is perfect to help with discussions both at home and in the classroom and I learned so many interesting facts – who knew that whales have magic poo?

This is a must-read book that needs to be in all homes, schools and libraries. **AH**

My Mum is a Spy!

★★★★

Andy McNab and Jess French, illus. Nathan Reed, Welbeck Flame, 191pp, 9781601300193, £6.99 pbk

At first glance, the dual authors of this book might seem an unusual combination; Andy McNab, best-known for his former SAS connections and more recently for writing numerous action thrillers, co-writing with Jess French, a nature lover, vet and environmentalist, now also presenting for **CBeebies**. However, they have clearly found the perfect mix of ingredients for what is both an exciting children's espionage thriller and informative conservation tale.

Idris is dreading the arrival of his Mum's boyfriend David and his annoying daughter, Lucia, who are coming to stay for a week, especially when Lucia won't stop insisting that Idris's Mum is a **SPY**! Despite his best attempts at ignoring her, Lucia persists in presenting him with the evidence she has recorded in her special notebook. At first Idris refuses to believe anything she has to tell him, but eventually his own suspicions are raised when, after an eventful visit to the zoo to see the cage from where a pair of pangolins have been stolen, and a strange car journey home, his Mum disappears from their front doorstep. Idris and Lucia, accompanied by Philby the dog, suddenly find themselves caught up in an exciting, if sometimes scary, adventure involving secret tunnels, endangered animals and a very fast car.

The book has some lovely inclusive elements to it, with Lucia's hearing disability and the wearing of her aid mentioned only in passing within the story, so it in no way defines her or seems to impede her daily life. This only serves to normalise it and will be something that encourages any hearing-impaired children enjoying the book. Some readers will hopefully also be able to identify with the two very different personalities of the children; Idris being far quieter and introverted, opposite Lucia's bouncy, confidence and self-belief, but both having equally important roles to play in their solving of the mystery.

Nathan Reed's black and white drawings bring the characters wonderfully to life; I particularly loved meeting Budi the orangutan and also now know what a pangolin looks like!

The second book in this new series **On Safari** is due out next year and I'm very much looking forward to seeing what adventures the pair get up to next! **AH**

A Mind Like Mine

★★★★

Rachael Davis, ill. Islenia Mil, Wide Eyed Editions, 64pp, 9780711273993, £14.99 hbk

This beautifully produced hardback was created by the author in order to

highlight how 'many of the greatest minds throughout history had lived with mental health disorders.' Rachael Davis hopes to educate people about mental health and I think she has done this in a very appropriate way. She herself has grown up with mental health disorders and wanted to research role models from whom she could learn. If great figures such as Florence Nightingale and Charles Darwin experienced problems with their mental health and achieved amazing things, there is hope for everyone affected.

Randi Silverman, Founder of the **Youth Mental Health Project**, in the USA, writes a very moving Foreword. This Project came about after Randi's family tried to cope with her son's diagnosis and found a lack of support.

The 21 biographies of famous people are interspersed with information on different mental health conditions: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD); Depression; PTSD; Schizophrenia; Bipolar Disorder; Eating Disorders and Anxiety. I particularly liked the page entitled 'Spotlight on: Talking about Mental Health' where phrases to avoid are listed and in their place are the phrases to use. This page typifies how the author is trying to change conversations about mental health.

Islenia Mil's illustrations add beauty to this gorgeous book; her portraits are colourful and original.

Information on treatments as well as useful weblinks are given at the back of the book. I would recommend young people reading this with an adult initially as it is full of new terms and can be quite intense. Another recommendation would be to dip into it rather than reading it all in one sitting. This volume is a great and sensitive addition to books around mental health disorders. **JS**

Am I Made of Stardust?

★★★★

Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock, ill. Chelen Ećija, Buster Books, 126pp, 9781780557540, £12.99 hbk

This attractive hardback by inspirational space scientist Dr Maggie is the second book she has written. Known to many as an enthusiastic presenter on the new BBC series of **The Sky at Night** and **CBeebies' Mini Stargazing**, she has encouraged many young people to learn more about science. Dr Maggie is currently President of the British Science Association and has been awarded the MBE.

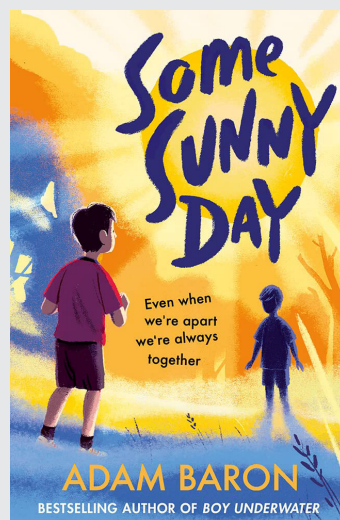
The book is well laid out: three chapters plus occasional 'Try this at Home Activities' and Astro Facts. The first chapter covers The Universe, looking at black holes and the Big Bang for instance. In the second chapter entitled Our Solar System, the author answers lots of questions about the sun and the planets as well as shooting stars and eclipses. The third and final

chapter is devoted to Humans in Space, focussing on spaceships, astronauts and our future in space. Questions here range from 'How do astronauts breathe inside spaceships?' and 'What does space smell like?' to 'Will everyone be travelling into space 100 years from now?'

Having been published ready for World Space Week (4th-10th October 2022) I think this is a great book for young people to dip into. It is bursting with interesting facts and appropriate illustrations. The

question-and-answer format works well and presents a lot of information clearly. Both the Contents page at the front of the book and the Glossary at the back are detailed and very helpful for young readers. As the front cover clearly states 'Dr Maggie Answers the Big Questions for Young Scientists.' This would be a welcome addition to any home, classroom or library as it involves readers educating themselves about science, engaging in fun activities and learning topical facts too. **JS**

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

**Some Sunny Day**

★★★★

Adam Baron, HarperCollins Children's Books, 320pp, 978-0008422370, £7.99 pbk

Two years on and children's novels about the pandemic are just starting to appear. As Frank Cottrell-Boyce points out in his guest editorial (**BfK** 255), no-one is yet addressing the impact it had on children but turning their experiences into stories is important.

Adam Baron perfectly evokes children's experience of lockdown in his new novel, and does so with typical humour, compassion and insight. Cymbeline Igloo's lockdown life will be immediately recognisable to many young people. At home with his mum he's bored, missing his friends, missing other people in general, even missing school. He's vaguely aware of why things have to be different, but mainly just wishing they'd go back to being normal, especially with tomato ketchup in short supply. But there are added difficulties for Cym too. His mum's mental health has been precarious, and lockdown increases her anxiety resulting, amongst other things, in a frenzied clear out in which she accidentally gives away his precious signed Charlton FC shirt.

The lost shirt takes on added significance as the story continues. When the school's much-loved cook

and number one Charlton fan Mrs Stebbings is hospitalised with COVID it becomes even more important that Cym gets it back. Then Cym discovers that the bag of clothes his mum left out was picked up by a young girl living in a makeshift camp in nearby woods. Wansa, now owner of the shirt, and her sister Meyan are refugees, displaced by war, opening up an important new element to the story.

Baron brings all the plot strands together linking past (Cym's World War II class project) and present, emphasising throughout the importance of community. While there's a happy ending for Wansa and Meyan, and Mrs Stebbings returns to make her famous Sticky Toffee Pudding once more, Cym's school does not escape COVID, the story including an honest and important acknowledgment of the loss and grief experienced by so many during those strange and not so distant years. **MMA**

Read our [Q&A interview](#) with Adam Baron.

Resist

★★★★

Tom Palmer, illus. Tom Clohosey-Cole, Barrington Stoke, 183pp, 9781800901063, £7.99 pbk

In a fast-moving story, Tom Palmer has taken the bones of the experiences of Audrey Hepburn during her time in occupied Netherlands during the Second World War. Audrey or Edda as she was then known, as to have an English name in Nazi occupied territory would have marked her out immediately, began working delivering newsletters for the Resistance in 1943, graduating from washing bandages to be re-used in the hospital. The family lived in Velp, very near to Arnhem. An uncle had already been killed by the Nazis in reprisal, and one of her brothers was in hiding. After the failure of the airborne invasion by the British at Arnhem, life became very difficult particularly as any food the villagers had was given to the refugees from the fighting. Edda was called on to help an American airman who had been shot down. Then the Germans started sending any food there was sent back to Germany and in an episode not widely known, many

reviews

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

Dutch people died from starvation. Edda herself was wasting away from malnutrition.

Although many young people now might not know who Audrey Hepburn was, for the purposes of this story it does not really matter, as the events are exciting in themselves and the atmosphere of occupation rings very true, particularly the growing hunger of the population. The danger that people who worked for the Resistance were in is clearly demonstrated, and also for young people who could be taken to work in German factories and possibly not return. The scene of the concert held in secret and silence is very dramatic, and the reader follows Edda's growing malnutrition with alarm.

This is beautifully produced with Tom Clohosey-Cole's illustrations running along the bottom edge of each page, matching the pace of the story. Tom Palmer has taken the focus away from the Resistance in France where many stories are set for this age group, and told of the courage of the Dutch, almost starved out of existence in this corner of the Netherlands. **JF**

Safe

★★★★★

Vanessa Harbour, Firefly, 356pp, 9781913102937, £7.99 pbk

For fans of historical novels, adventure stories and animal tales this book is ideal! It carefully combines all these genres and is the second in the series by talented Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing, Dr Vanessa Harbour; the first novel is *Flight*.

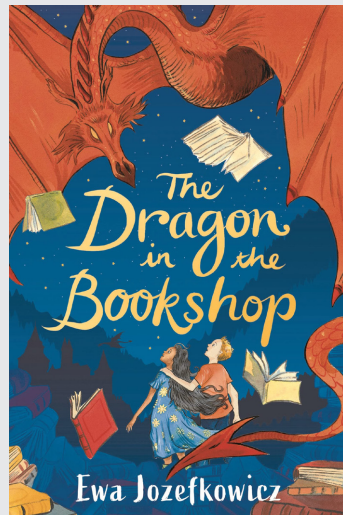
Following orphaned Kizzy and Jakob as they travel from their adopted family in Austria to rescue some beautiful horses from Nazi controlled Hostau towards the end of World War II. Some of the descriptive passages of the landscape and fine horses are truly magical. Mix this with all the ingredients of a captivating adventure involving lots of children and many more horses and it is easy to see how this book will delight readers.

With important themes such as lost/displaced children and disabled young people **Safe** may follow *Flight* as an **Empathy Lab** recommendation.

There are many memorable scenes in the novel, such as the time the children are fending for themselves and Jakob guts a fish they have caught. Anyone keen on outdoor pursuits or a member of Scouts or Guides will be able to relate to this.

The action moves at pace with a clever plot and quite short chapters. It can be read as a standalone title, but I would recommend reading *Flight* first for setting and background information. The novel is full of interesting characters: the countess, Heinz and even a cowboy! This story soon hooks you in so that you don't want it to end! Without giving too much away and spoiling the read;

the children have seen many war atrocities and are particularly brave. It is interesting to watch a group of young people acting together without adults present. I am looking forward to Vanessa Harbour's next book with eager anticipation; it is always fantastic to find a new author. **JS**



The Dragon in the Bookshop

★★★★★

Ewa Jozefkiewicz, Zephyr, 248pp, 978 1 801 109208, £7.99 pbk

In a letter printed after the novel's closing chapter, Eva Jozefkiewicz tells her readers that her father died when she was a teenager. He had always shared books with her, and 'when he died, I missed him so much I didn't really want to speak to anyone'. In time, she realised that their love for each other, and his passion for stories and legends, remained powerfully alive within her, helping to shape this novel. For readers who might have endured a similar loss, Jozefkiewicz adds a page of information about the charity, Grief Encounter, who offer support, a helpline, and much more.

Kon is about 12 when he also loses his dad, who had been great at sharing books and just talking with Kon; and Kon could talk to him about anything too. His father opened a bookshop, A Likely Story, in the seaside town where they lived. Dad had the knack of finding just the right book for any of his customers. Then, everything stopped; a fatal heart attack among the bookshelves in his beloved shop. The months pass, but Kon speaks to no-one – his friends (and enemies) and teachers at school; not even his grieving Mum. When he can, he heads out to the lonely marshes by the sea, which he and his dad had often explored. Kon discovers the shape of a creature's claw, embedded in an outcrop of rock. Dad had taught him well. Kon can spot the difference between the print of a Baryonyx and a Megalosaurus, but he's never seen one like this

before: three-pronged, like a bird's claw, but much, much bigger.

Whenever he returns to gaze at the outline, Kon feels calmer, closer to his dad. It's here, in this secret place, that he first meets Maya. Or, rather, hears her haunting singing, before they come face to face. She's studying creatures in danger of extinction; she's well-informed, because her dad is a conservationist. Her family has just moved to the town since these isolated marshes provide a rich habitat for endangered species.

British Kon and Brazilian Maya share the story from this point. To his surprise, Kon wants to talk with Maya; they find a swift empathy. Kon soon takes her to the bookshop and it's while they are alone there – about a third of the way through the novel – that the narrative abruptly shifts in pace, place and time. The seaside town will surely have seemed familiar enough to many young readers. The personalities of Kon and Maya may have seemed less familiar, given their circumstances; and also, for a couple of twelve-year-olds, they are exceptionally articulate, self-aware and academically eager (Kon is already making strong progress in trigonometry at his school). Now, within a sentence or two, readers must leave A Likely Story hundreds of years behind them, emerging with Kon and Maya in medieval Krakow, which Kon knows from the legends his father told of his Polish homeland. The locals seem to expect the newcomers, welcoming them warmly. What's more, the pair are soon playing a part in one of Krakow's most famous legends – which Kon also recognises as one of his dad's favourites. It's about the terrifying dragon who lives beneath the royal castle of Wawel. Rampaging through the city every night, the dragon is reducing the streets to famine and terror, his hunger never sated. Kon is in a strange position since – unlike his new friends – he knows how the story ends, and it didn't finish well for the dragon. He also now knows who made that print out there on the marshes.

Maya and Kon are quick to see they've been brought to Krakow to bring the tale of the dragon to its conclusion – but that doesn't mean they have to stick to the narrative Kon heard in Dad's version. Readers will surely enjoy the dangers and surprises as the adventure races to its unpredictable end, in contrast to the patient establishment of the characters and their difficulties in the first third of the book. These early chapters may seem to have lacked incident, but the author had her reasons. Remembering her own response to her father's death, no doubt she wants young readers to recognise the richness of Kon's relationship with his dad, so that they might later realise that such love neither fades nor dies, but remains to strengthen the one left behind. **GF**



Festergrimm

★★★★★

Thomas Taylor, Walker, 320pp, 978-1406386288, £7.99 pbk

'Quaint is one of those words that can tip easily into *eerie* once the weather turns and the dark of winter closes in,' says Harbert Lemon, Lost and Founder at the Grand Nautilus Hotel in the seaside town of Eerie-on-Sea, and narrator and hero of Thomas Taylor's Gothic adventure series. In this the fourth book, Harbert and his friend Violet edge closer to the secrets that are buried deep in Eerie, secrets that may reveal how Herbie came to be washed up on the seashore in an empty lemon crate. With the visitor attractions empty and mist rolling in from the sea, Eerie is always creepy, but the return of Herbie and Violet's arch enemy Sebastian Eels ups the fear factor considerably, especially when he sets about reopening the town's long-abandoned waxworks, Festergrimm's. The children's endeavours to find out what Eels is really up to involve secret night-time visits to the Waxworks, while in story within a story we discover more about the man who made the waxworks, and so much more besides, Festergrimm himself. That story is one of love and loss and stars a huge iron man, complete with figurative human heart. It's cleverly told, full of surprises and the imaginative twists and turns we've come to expect from this series. Eerie-on-Sea's wonderfully eccentric inhabitants have their own part to play and the story will cast its spell once again over readers. **MMA**

Read our [Q&A interview](#) with Thomas Taylor.

The Lost Girl King

★★★★★

Catherine Doyle, Bloomsbury, 308pp, 9781526608000, £7.99 hbk
Brother and sister Liam and Amy are sent to scenic Connemara to spend the summer with their grandmother whilst their mother holidays abroad with her new boyfriend. The reader soon finds out what she's missing

when the two siblings discover a waterfall flowing backwards, through which a white hawk flies and neither returns nor dies. Amy, headstrong and bold, follows the bird without hesitation and cautious but protective Liam warily follows her, into the seemingly idyllic land of Tir na nOg.

Doyle immediately immerses her readers into a narrative rich in Irish mythology as Liam is swiftly captured by the Dullahan, headless horsemen in thrall to the wicked mage Tarlock who has used an ancient, evil spell to chain the sun to the world and thus stop time. The spell requires a child to make it work and, as it is losing its potency, Tarlock needs another victim: Liam.

Amy determines to rescue her brother and her feisty determination eventually persuades Oscar de Barra, leader of the Fianna, to take on her cause. The narrative is packed with action but never at the expense of the characters, who are far more than slaves to warfare. Nuances are gradually revealed and new friendships and alliances are formed: Amy gains the respect of these hardened warriors. Doyle interjects humour into the exchanges between the protagonists whilst remaining invested in the seriousness of their mission-to save both Liam and their world.

Liam spends most of the book in a dungeon in Silverstone Castle, Tarlock's lair, where he finds the courage to fight against his imprisonment and eventual death. He meets the Girl King, whose fate is to remain chained to the sun for ever, and helps her to return to the world of Connemara, which she was taken from 60 years earlier-she is his aunt, Grandma's much-mourned sister.

The ending of the book is positive and warming – the wicked creatures defeated and the good ones triumphant. And how good it is to see a young girl taking a central role in a thrilling and dangerous drama!

Fans of *Narnia*, Philip Pullman and myths and legends with characters writ large and settings beautifully drawn will revel in this roller-coaster read. **VR**



The Book of Secrets

★★★★

Alex Dunne, illus Shona Shirley Macdonald, O'Brien Press, 256pp, 978-1788493208, £11.99 pbk

As the world changes at an ever speedier rate, folk tales and stories of magical creatures feel more important and vital than ever, providing a link to the old ways and playing a special role in a child's imaginative world. Alex Dunne's enthralling story is set at Samhain, Hallowe'en, the time when the walls between the worlds are thin and her protagonist, eleven-year-old Caitriona Donnelly, encounters all sorts of strange folk, some beautiful, most terrible, all untrustworthy. When her little brother and her best friend's little sister are stolen by the Pooka to be presented to the queen of the fairies as playthings, Cat must get them back. She is accompanied in this by Shane, their old friendship brought back to life as they struggle to find their siblings, but is also helped and guided by the words and stories of her grandmother, who, like Cat, has 'the Sight', both providing much needed support for Cat and reassurance for readers when things get dark – and they do get very dark indeed. Cat and Shane face life or death situations, and we meet numerous children whose own meetings with the fairies have ended cruelly. The story is compact and fast-paced, events moving with the urgency of the race against the clock this is, and it makes for thrilling reading. Dunne's conjuring of the old ways is wholly convincing, real and magical successfully fused together. It's particularly satisfying that Cat's final, life-saving escape trick from the king and queen of the fairies makes use of a piece of 21st century magic.

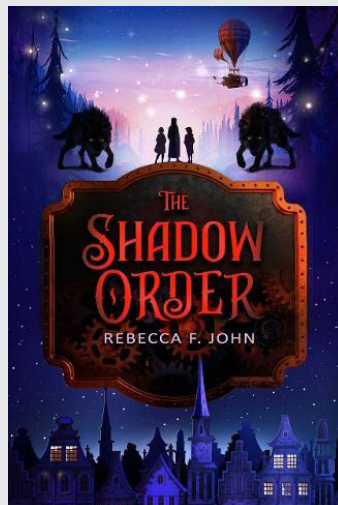
Readers outside Ireland may not be familiar with Clurichauns, the Dullahan or Merrows, but they'll believe in them all by the time they close this story of magic, menace and mortal persistence. **MMA**

The Shadow Order

★★★★★

Rebecca F. John, Firefly Books, 288pp, 9781913102951, £7.99 pbk

This story is set in an alternative version of Britain, where something strange has happened to people's shadows. Instead of reflecting the shape of a person, they are now showing the true personality of the individual. To keep control of this, the government has enacted the 'Shadow Order' which forbids citizens from being outdoors during daylight hours. However, not everyone likes to follow orders. Three children, Teddy, Betsy and Effie, all from very different backgrounds, find themselves wondering why all of this is happening and then are caught up in the struggle to find a way to return life to normal. When they discover an Orrery that seems to affect the way that time work, they know they will



have to try and reverse the damage that is being done. Their attempts to change things leads them on an exhilarating, dangerous journey, where they find allies as well as enemies. But will they bring their world back into the light, or will they be stuck in the shadows forever?

What a fabulous story this is; full of excitement and adventure and with three really brave characters, who have their own fears to face, but who understand the dangers that their society is facing. The world that has been created has echoes of steampunk, mixed with elements that might have come from a Joan Aiken story. However, the author has managed to blend all of these aspects in to a world that we can actually believe in and which we are grateful that we don't live in. The idea of not being able to go out and enjoy the sunshine is really very depressing. Above all the three children are fighting for the right to be individuals; to be themselves and not scared of what other people think of them and to have the right to shape their own destiny. This is a wonderful addition to the canon of fantasy novels out there for middle grade readers and is highly recommended. **MP**

Chameleon Dad

★★★★★

Debbie Thomas, Little Island Books, 300pp, 978-1912417889, £6.99 pbk

Connie Fuller is a twelve-year-old Irish girl. She lives with her adoptive Mum, Mags, who is an airport cleaner. When she was four, her father, Ben, abandoned her in the café at Dublin Airport along with her chameleon named Hue.

Connie finds a letter written to her by her dad which Mags has kept secret. She decides to answer the letter and try to track him down without Mags knowing and without her consent. Can she and her friend, Thyo, find her dad and what secrets is he keeping?

There are three main themes of this novel: Thomas's deep love of chameleons and Connie and Hue's friendship. Second, is the concept

of family in all its diversity. And third, is deception and its implications for relationships.

Thomas's work is clever in that it deals in a very accessible way with some difficult and emotional themes. The reader might think that **Chameleon Dad** is a lighthearted novel. There is some humour but the book deserves to be taken seriously. **RB**

Mouse Heart

★★★★★

Fleur Hitchcock, Nosy Crow, 282pp, 9781788009485 £7.99 pbk

This latest thrilling ride from acclaimed author Fleur Hitchcock is the perfect escapist adventure for young readers. Set in 18th Century Bristol in the reign of an imaginary Queen Anne II, young Mouse is a founding who was rescued and then raised in the Moth Theatre, where she now lives and works alongside her fellow performers, who, despite the huge range of ages and personalities, have become her family.

When her beloved Walter, the theatre's leading man, is wrongly arrested for murder, Mouse is determined to track down the real culprit and ensure that Walter is freed from jail as soon as possible. Mouse proves to be very talented at sniffing out clues to finding the real culprit, but her investigation soon uncovers that this person must also be a member of the cast, which puts both Mouse and the rest of the family in real danger. Can Mouse prove who the real villain is in time to save both Walter and stop an attempt on the Queen's life?

The atmospheric historical setting of Mouse's world is brought brilliantly to life with the author's beautiful descriptive writing and I felt immediately immersed in the twists and turns of this gripping fast-paced adventure. It is a real edge of your seat read as Mouse is surrounded by increasing danger, unsure of who to trust, other than her faithful best friend, Dog. With sword fights, foiled plots and a surprising twist, alongside a rich array of beautifully crafted characters, this book will keep you guessing and gasping right until the last page. **AH**

Once Upon A Fever

★★★★★

Angharad Walker, Chicken House, 323pp, 978 1 912626 98 4, £7.99 pbk

We're in London, but not as we know it. There are no trains in this Lundain (sic), no cars, buses, theatres, bright lights. Electricity is generated by wooden waterwheels. We're told things have been different since The Turn, but what happened then is never explained. There's poverty, squalor and disease. An ambulans drawn by stags hurries the sick to hospital.

Society was once controlled by several guilds. Now only two remain: the Financiers and the Methics. There's a neat irony in Angharad Walker's alternative name for doctors; those caring for the sick are guided by very different moral

reviews

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

values from any principles we might recognise as 'ethical'. For methics, the target is the elimination of feelings, since as a Senior Methic says, 'Disease begins with feelings.... they affect the body in endless fascinating ways'. Cleanse people of feelings, and you rid the world of physical and mental suffering

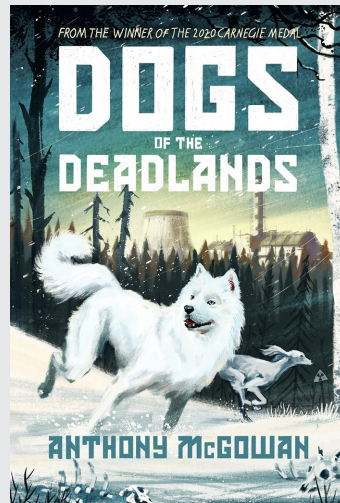
Ani (11) and her sister Payton (13) grew up far from Lundain, in the Isles. When their mother contracted water fever, their methic father brought the family to King Jude's Hospital in Lundain, vowing to devote his career to finding a cure through research. Mother lies asleep, submerged in a stone tomb-like container, awaiting a cure. She has been there for several years. Payton now believes her father's work is leading nowhere – he seems to have lost interest. Living in the Hospital, she determines to learn everything she can to become a methic herself and find the cure; she is so able that she already knows more than most of the junior methics. Anni is just as devoted to finding a cure for her mother, but is more impatient than her sister. Her actions are often fuelled by anger, say the methics, who decide that such a feeling must be controlled by medication and then removed.

Ani's adventurous path takes her out into the city, where she spends time inside Hyde Gardens, an area abandoned to its natural state. Here,

she meets three 'wilders' – two adults and a boy, who become her friends. These wilders are living out an older way of life. The adults believe in engaging with their feelings. Far from searching for suppression and a kind of passivity, they look for a life where feelings are held in balance. Through her new friends and the living Gardens themselves, Anni begins to heal, learning how to enjoy – and yet control – the intensity of her feelings.

Meanwhile, Payton's journey takes her into the world of the brilliant methic Jenipher Blake, the youngest Guild Master in history. It becomes clear that Payton has unique gifts which could be invaluable to Blake in her research. And so begins a complex story in which conflicting beliefs and actions test the values of the Guilds.

It's at this level that the London we know and the Lundain of the novel connect, or even collide. What seems a distant dystopian world may become an illuminating contrast for discerning young readers; a means of thinking about our own society. Making such comparisons could be difficult for Chicken House's suggested readership of 12+. There is a graphic plot often involving violent and almost magical action; but that action is driven by complex ideas which need to be understood for the impact of this unusual parallel world to be felt. **GF**



Dogs of the Deadlands

★★★★★

Anthony McGowan, ill. by Keith Robinson, Rock the Boat, 305pp, 9780861544653, £12.99 hbk

This story bears comparison with Jack London's canine epic *Whitefang* – a novel Nancy Mitford's father so enjoyed it he never bothered to read any other afterwards. The setting this time is Chernobyl 1986, with a half-wolf, half-dog puppy left behind by Natasha, her broken-hearted seven-year-old owner, once the order to quit the nuclear devastation had come through. Avoiding the subsequent culling of all abandoned animals, the puppy grows into a resourceful

mother, fiercely protecting her cubs from dangers, of which there are many. Her chief adversaries are wolves, and there are many descriptions of fights almost to the death before she finally succumbs. Her son Misha lives on, also skilled at surviving ever-present danger but with a few human supporters as well.

These dogs and their various adversaries think like humans but in every other way remain animals. Their chief preoccupation is survival, and for this to happen they must find almost any type of sustenance, particularly scarce in such hard winters. There are plenty of descriptions of the sometimes revolting food they are happy to feed on, including worms as a particular delicacy. The nuclear disaster itself plays a small role in the story after the initial evacuation, but Natasha never gets over having to leave and some of the story describes her own future progress from unhappy child to troubled adult. But this is also a story about hope, and she finally has a long overdue slice of luck just before the end.

Jack London excelled in describing canine fights, and Anthony McGowan is adept at doing this too. By the end his readers will know everything about how to maim and kill at this level, and for some there may be just a little too much of this as yet another wolf invasion is thwarted. But others may find such moments exactly what is called for in a story that never lets up in excitement and overall engagement from start to finish. **NT**

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14+ Secondary/Adult

Ed's Choice

Her Dark Wings

★★★★★

Melinda Salisbury, David Fickling Books, 344pp, 978 1 78845 213 7, £7.99 pbk

It all kicks off at the Thesmophoria which, long ago, was a three day fertility festival attended only by women. Nowadays – on the Island at least – it's a one night opportunity for everyone to get plastered. That'll suit Corey, since she's furious with ex-best-friend Bree, and likewise with ex-boy-friend Ali. Ali's dumped her, Bree said nothing, and now they're an item. Corey reckons the Thesmophoria is the time and place to show them she doesn't give a damn – so let them see her snogging someone else. And, she reckons, that stranger over there could be just the one – his face concealed by a hammered copper mask, other than his beautiful mouth, painted gold. His kiss tastes like ice or salt or diamonds. Corey wants more, so she.....

Time for some explanation and context. Suppose Zeus and the Olympians had never faded into Ancient History but instead became the supreme deities worldwide. So now, everyday speech includes phrases like 'For the love of Zeus'. Everywhere has its own temple and Priestess – and Corey's Scottish Islands even have their own Oracle. Corey's dad works at the lighthouse. Her mother left when Corey was small, but her step-mother, Merry, could not be more loving and understanding in times of trouble.

It was Thesmophoria that prompted me to read with a Classical Dictionary and an anthology of Greek myths to hand. Melinda Salisbury does not condescend to her readers with laboured explanations, but she offers the occasional echo. When Corey picks a single narcissus and finds herself slipping down into Hades' kingdom, there's no overt reference to Persephone's similar adventure in the old myth. But consider Corey's name. Classically schooled BfK readers might know that 'Core' is an alternative name for the young Persephone. Again, when they learn that Merry is short for MEREDITH, cryptic crossword puzzlers might spot that you could (almost) find the letters there to create DEMETER, mother of Persephone. Once Corey is in the Underworld, we witness her encounter with the swift-witted and readily-amused Hermes. Much of her time is spent with the three Furies, whose seeming friendliness



she can never trust. And then there are her conversations with Hades himself. Readers who know the myths will surely enjoy Salisbury's sustained and ingenious use of the legends; but to those for whom the characters, geography and vocabulary are entirely new, Salisbury offers a fantastic world unlike any they might have met on page or screen.

Outwardly, Corey engages confidently with the immortals. Her emotional challenges, above and below ground, are more testing, though possibly more familiar to YA readers both from their fiction and their own experiences; they include overwhelming attraction, persistent jealousy and consequent guilt. Corey cannot forgive Bree's betrayal with Ali, but when her old friend is discovered drowned on the seashore after the revels of the Thesmophoria, Corey feels as though she is somehow responsible – as though she has willed the death. Corey's mental struggle on the Island is matched by an intense conflict in the Underworld – for here she must try to understand her disconcerting feelings for Hades himself. She confronts the choice: can she remain in the Underworld when the ties to her secure home and the Island community are so strong? Inevitably, those pomegranate seeds of the ancient story play a part in how things turn out. But they are not as strong a factor as the awareness Corey has discovered through her experiences, physical and emotional, in Hades' Kingdom.

This is an ambitious, daring book. It could be a memorable recommendation, not only for those familiar with the myths, but also for those capable of an open-minded, enquiring approach to the challenges – and rewards – this novel offers. **GF**

Waking the Witch

★★★★★

Rachel Burge, Hot Key Books, 282pp, 9781471411083, £7.99 pbk
What a truly magical evocation of Arthurian legend and Welsh myths, told with an underlying hint of menace for the main character. Ivy has spent her life in homes and being shunted between various foster parents; but she has an intense desire to find her mother, who abandoned her as a baby, with only a short message and a locket to hint at who she was. The story begins when she finally gets a message via social media, saying that the messenger had seen someone like her mother on a remote island off the Welsh coast. When weird things start happening at work, Ivy and her co-worker Tom, decide to make the journey to Bardsey, to try and untangle the mystery. What follows, leads them through a maze of challenges, introduces unknown family and a link to a version of Merlin that is not that of *The Sword in the Stone*. The question is whether Ivy can save her mother and also her ancestors?

This was a delightful surprise, as I am not a huge fan of books that lean towards the horror side of fantasy. However, the author has kept a very firm control over her plot and the tensions are just kept at a simmer; so that you have an expectation of evil, but it never becomes too oppressive. The mix of King Arthur and Welsh myths works so well, as they share the same Celtic heritage. However, the author gives us a different perspective on characters that we think we know and presents us with a situation where women are subjugated by the male leaders such as Merlin. In many respects this is a story of women's rights and the fight they have always had, in order to be treated as equals. But this is also a gentle and 'slow burn' romance, as Ivy and Tom gradually come to understand that their teasing of each other, hides something deeper. Highly recommended. **MP**

Stone

★★★★★

Finbar Hawkins, Zephyr, 266pp, 9781838935641, £14.99 hbk

Sam feels bereft and angry. His father has died in a bombing while serving in Afghanistan and the last words Sam had with him were angry ones. How he wishes he could bring his father back, if only to make things right, to once more walk up to the great white horse carved into the side of the hill. His anger spills over into his everyday. Then he finds the Stone, white, silver-flecked, ice cold – a stone that give him power. Who is the one-eyed man he sees patrolling the landscapes? Where have the wolves come from? What do the three Tarot images mean for him?

Finbar Hawkins has already established himself as an author to watch with his first novel *Witch*. This, his second novel, does not disappoint as he mixes the everyday with the world of folklore, legend and myth. Sam is a very real teenager and his response to the death of his father powerful and believable. This allows the interaction with the otherworld – a world where the stories reflecting the concerns, the beliefs of human beings across the ages still resonate; stories Sam's father has shared with his son. This does not mean Sam moves from this world to another; rather, and more credibly, he finds his life connecting to the deep currents of myth and story reflected in the landscape and ready to become a reality. The decorations by the author of images from the Tarot, feathers, the White Horse all add to the atmosphere, opening doors to imagination. Grief is powerful, anger an emotion that can overwhelm; Hawkins manages the journey to closure with skill, his writing immediate and contemporary, bringing Sam and his world to life through dialogue and personal thought as he talks to us directly. A novel to recommend. **FH**

Lark & Kasim Start a Revolution

★★★★★

Kacen Callender, Faber & Faber, 326 pp, 9780571375875, £8.99 pbk
Lark Winters is, American, seventeen year old and identifies as non-binary. They have been best friends with Kasim for as long as anyone can remember. Lark and Kasim are aspiring writers though Lark seems to be more consistent and passionate about it. Will Lark ever get their novel published and are they and Kasim destined to be more than friends?

There is much confusion when a social media thread about unrequited love goes viral. Who wrote it and why is at the crux of Callender's novel. The most memorable part of the novel is its discussions of the role of social media in teen society and the risks and benefits of writing from personal experience. Lark's character is at least partially autobiographical.

The weakness of the novel is that the emphasis is more on Lark and Kasim's relationship struggles rather than the other important themes such as the power of social media, truth and lies and polyamory (being partner to two separate people simultaneously) all of which are featured in the book and could be discussed in PSHE. **RB**

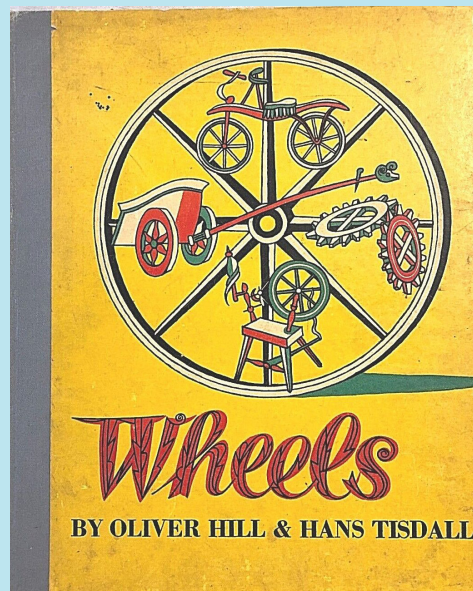
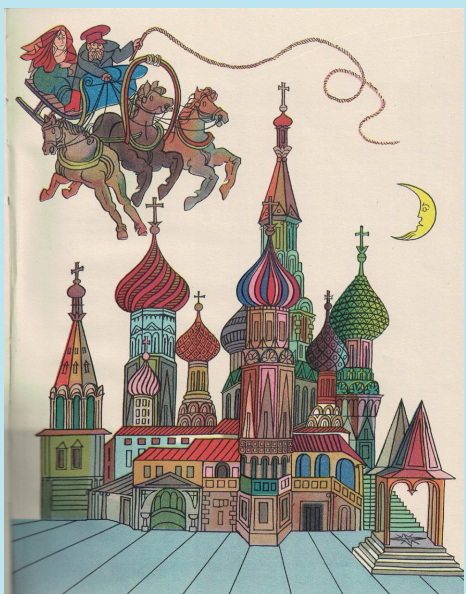
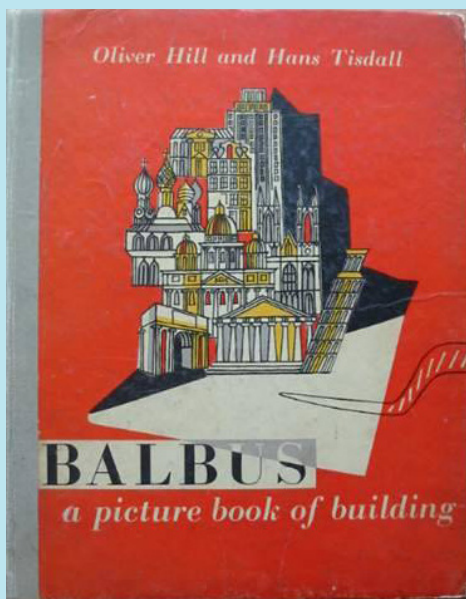
Valediction: **No.7 Walls and Wagons**

Brian Alderson is bidding farewell to his unique book collection as he donates it to the **Seven Stories** archive. Next to be packed up, two unusual books produced by Pleiades Books

I must have bought **Balbus** round about 1964. It was on the outdoor shelves of the now famous 84 Charing Cross Road and probably cost a shilling (5p) and I was very taken with its slightly unusual design. There was something familiar about the phrase 'Balbus was building a wall' which I assumed referred to an ancient Roman senator but must surely have been a comic monologue written by Marriott Edgar for Stanley Holloway. (You can read it on Google.)

As a 'picture book of buildings' the book consists of twenty-four separate double-page spreads mostly with a text and prettily coloured initial on the left and drawings, by no means realistically coloured on the right. Progress follows an unsystematic history of European and near Eastern architectural styles interrupted by examples which the authors probably enjoyed introducing. Thus we start with snails who carry their houses on their backs, followed by movable dwellings like wigwams, caravans and barges. Babylon introduces fixed structures and the vital dependence of early builders on local materials. The standard history from Greece to skyscrapers and Scandinavian craftsmanship (Stockholm's City Hall: 'one of the most remarkable buildings of modern times') has double spread interruptions on such varied matters as Inigo Jones and Christopher Wren and some single choice buildings like Angkor Wat and a Mexican temple. (The pages on the Great Wall of China regrettably fail to mention that Mr Edgar claims that Balbus was the architect of the whole 2,500 mile structure.) An air of levity is present in incidental sketches such as choir boys coming out of Salisbury cathedral along with joyous colouring throughout. The Parthenon of Athens or St Peter's at Rome are transformed.

One would like to know more about the creation of this book whose publisher, Pleiades Books, was a subsidiary of the Cresset Press owned by Dennis Cohen who was devoted to forming a list of books distinguished by both their content and their appearance. I don't think Cresset ever published a children's book while Pleiades concentrated on the arts with only these two items for children along with three other picture books about natural history by Eileen Mayo: **Shells and How they Live** (1944), **Little Animals of the Countryside** (1945), and **Larger Animals of the Countryside** (1949). All lived up to Cresset standards being finely printed by chromolithography, the first three by M'Lagan and Cummin, the other two by the Baynard Press.



Exactly how Oliver Hill and Hans Tisdall fit into the picture is also a puzzle. The first was one of the finest British architects of his time, the second a notable book-jacket designer, especially for Jonathan Cape, and a painter and textile designer. In neither case were they professionally concerned with children's books and the 'written and devised' of the Balbus title-page suggests a collaborative effort on both counts but probably with Hill mainly responsible for the texts and Tisdall for the artwork. It is significant though that the thirties saw advances in chromolithography of which both would have been aware while the arrival in 1940 of Puffin Picture Books edited by Noel Carrington introduced his editorial skills in getting artists to draw for lithographic reproduction 'direct to the plate', which could have provided a model for Hill and Tisdall. It certainly is found in Mayo's **Shells**.

Balbus anyway had a belated successor in **Wheels** which followed a similar design and historical sequence but with more illustrations drifting across to the left-hand page. The subject though is more intricate than buildings which allow themselves to be drawn and described in the large. The wheels may occur here in forms that require more detailed explanation (axles... spinning wheels... watches and clocks etc) and the reader is left with a picture with insufficient explanation. More twentieth century wheels would have been welcome, not least say those on the Flying Scotsman, while the volume ends with rather down-beat ambiguity. Saint Catherine needed no wheels on her apotheosis since she had wings, but the Greek emperor Maximin had ordered her death by the torture of the spiked wheel.

Biblio:

Balbus; a picture book of buildings. Written and devised by Oliver Hill and Hans Tisdall. London: Pleiades Books Ltd. 1944

255x215mm. [2] 1-48 [2] pp. incl. free endpapers and 36 full-page full colour lithographs. grey cloth-backed pictorial glazed paper over boards, endpapers grey brickwork design

Wheels [as above] 1946. Yellow glazed pictorial paper over boards, grey endpapers with wheel design

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.