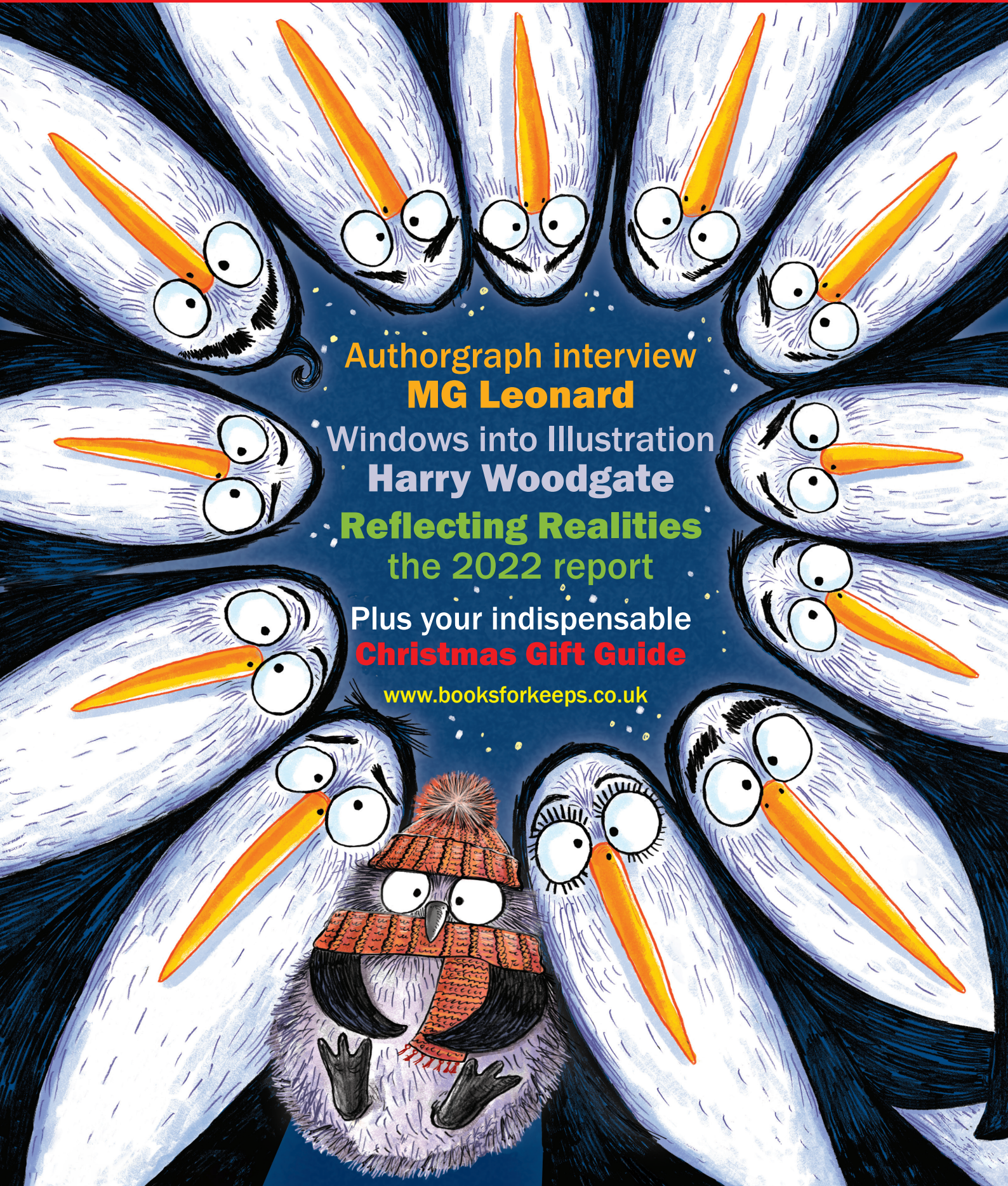


BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.257

the children's book magazine online

November 2022



Authorgraph interview
MG Leonard

Windows into Illustration
Harry Woodgate

Reflecting Realities
the 2022 report

Plus your indispensable
Christmas Gift Guide

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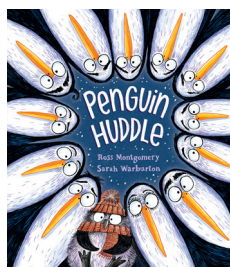
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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **Penguin Huddle** by Ross Montgomery, illustrated by Sarah Warburton. Thanks to Walker Books for their help with our Christmas cover.



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Editorial 257

Who are we missing?

Another year draws to a close and **BfK** is still here*, still offering independent and informed reviews, interviews, articles and comment. Huge thanks – and a restful Christmas – to our team of writers and reviewers. Between them, the latter have read and reviewed over 400 books in 2022, so deserve to put their feet up.

As our November issue goes live, **CLPE** have just published their fifth **Reflecting Realities** report and Farrah Serroukh explores its findings and impact for **BfK** readers in this issue, and the challenges that remain. The latest set of data shows that 20% of children's books (picturebooks, fiction and non-fiction for ages 3–11) published in 2021 feature a minority ethnic character, a significant increase from the 4% reported in the first report, published 2017. The increase of representative titles published also corresponds with an increase in the presence of ethnic minority main characters, with 9% of the children's books published in 2021 featuring minority ethnic main characters, up from 1% in 2017. However, while this slow but positive growth is to be welcomed there remains a significant disparity between the demographic make-up of story worlds compared to the world as actually experienced by young readers.

A separate report undertaken by online personalised children's book company Wonderbly asked 1,000 children aged six to 12 in the UK, and their parents, their thoughts on representation and 37% of children questioned said they don't feel represented in the books they read. Characteristics children hadn't seen in their books, according to the survey, were physical disabilities, different locations children can live such as in the city or the country, and skin conditions. When asked which were least represented by main character traits, parents identified being transgender, being physically disabled and having alopecia.

Elsewhere, there has been debate this year about representation of working-class authors, and Natasha Carthew, a **BfK** contributor, arguing that their voices in fiction are still on the margins and largely unheard. We will be examining working class representation in children's books in our next issue, do get in touch with your comments by email.

For the sharp-eyed who noticed the * in our opening sentence, this is a reminder that **Books for Keeps** still needs your help: if you can, please make a donation, either via our [Givey](https://www.givey.com/booksforkeeps) site or [Paypal](https://www.paypal.com). Thank you to everyone who has contributed, your support means a great deal.

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"The most important periodical in children's books." PHILIP PULLMAN

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Merry Christmas Reading: an interview with Ben Miller

Fiona Noble talks to Ben Miller about his latest festive adventures.

During lockdown Ben Miller and his family discovered a new walk close to their house. 'In this little valley is this amazing hollow tree with a face – two eyes, a nose hole and a mouth,' he tells me over video call from his home. 'It's incredible and really felt like a jumping off point for a story.' That moment led to Ben's sixth book for children, **The Night We Got Stuck in a Story**, published in September and once again pairing him with long term illustrator Daniela Jaglenka Terrazzini. Two children, Lana and Harrison, discover that their favourite tree is about to be cut down by unscrupulous property developers. Later that night, a golden thread draws them up the tree and into a magical storybook world where Lana must use all her courage to rescue her brother and restore balance to the land. The book combines escapist adventure with strong environmental themes about protecting our eco-systems.

Ben is, of course, well known as an actor and comedian, starring in everything from **The Armstrong and Miller Show** and **Death in Paradise** to **Paddington 2** and **Bridgerton**. He studied science at university and had written several science books when his literary agent asked if he had ever considered writing for children. He had the outline of a Father Christmas origin story which had begun life as a story to read aloud to his oldest son, Jackson. 'That evolved, over a period of some years,' he explains, 'into my first book **The Night I Met Father Christmas**.' He made a strong connection with the team at Simon & Schuster Children's Books, particularly his original editor Jane Griffiths. 'What I had wasn't really a children's book, it was just a story. I worked a lot with Jane on how to turn that into an actual 50,000 word novel.' The book was a success and Ben was hooked; he talks with such warmth and delight about his new career path. 'Writing children's fiction is a lot tougher than I expected but I enjoy it so much.' Another 'lightbulb moment' came when he began doing school visits. 'I just loved meeting these kids, making them laugh, chatting to them about the story.' After releasing several books during the pandemic he clearly relishes the opportunity to get out and meet his readers this year, at both school and festival events.

In common with most of Ben's other books, the stars of **The Night We Got Stuck in a Story** are based on his own children., this time his younger two. 'I use their conversations, their personalities. Harrison is the health and safety officer, so serious, Lana is a real wild card, a big personality.' (Right on cue, Lana makes an impromptu appearance on our video call.) So, what do they make of it all? 'It doesn't get tougher than my kids,' Ben confesses. 'They are so unimpressed by the whole thing.' He test drives the stories with his children, reading them drafts, watching very carefully for when their attention flickers. 'I'm always trying to grab kids, constantly, from the very beginning, and keep them until the end of the story.' His compact chapters and cliffhanger endings are perfectly suited to being read aloud, as a classroom read or at bedtime. 'One of the things you're always hopeful for as a parent is short chapters!' he laughs. For newly confident readers, this format can garner a real sense of achievement.

The Night We Got Stuck in a Story has a rich sense of magic and wonder but there is also a seam of darkness, in the evil Spider Queen and those shady property developers. Pitching the right level of peril for a young readership can be a tricky business, so how does Ben strike the balance? Having children of the same age as his readers, and hearing what they consider to be scary stories is, he says, enormously helpful. 'You have a responsibility to tell the world as it is. Children are



living in that world; they hear the news and they know what is going on. I feel that a story should equip a child for the world as it is.' Each of the books is loosely based around a well-known fairy tale and Ben uses the events of these as a guide. 'It's not my intention to scare children. Darkness is in fairy tales for a reason, so that a child gets that feeling that they have mastered, in some sense, some form of danger.' He is also keen to address common childhood fears and anxieties. Whatever is happening in his stories, Ben always tries to make things funny and to weave humour into the danger. In one of **The Night We Got Stuck in a Story**'s most dramatic sequences a spider called Elvis lightens the tone considerably. 'Comedy makes things slightly more manageable.'

A busy autumn will also see Simon & Schuster publish **Secrets of a Christmas Elf** in November, the second part of a festive trilogy which began in 2021's **Diary of a Christmas Elf**. The stories are inspired by the description of Father Christmas in Clement Clarke Moore's classic poem **The Night Before Christmas**, a seasonal favourite in the Miller household. 'The practical side of what must be involved in being a Christmas elf really made me laugh,' Ben tells me, citing the numerous and rather mind-boggling skills which a successful elf might require, from toy making to IT systems and human (and reindeer) resources. This time, Father Christmas's daughter Holly takes centre stage, inventing a robot to help them get finished on time. Writing in diary form offers a different challenge for Ben, who typically writes in the third person. 'The logistics are really tricky – the character telling the story has to be in every single event – but it's a very fun challenge.'

The Night We Got Stuck in a Story, illus Daniela Jaglenka Terrazzini, Simon & Schuster Children's Books, 9781471192494, £12.99, hbk

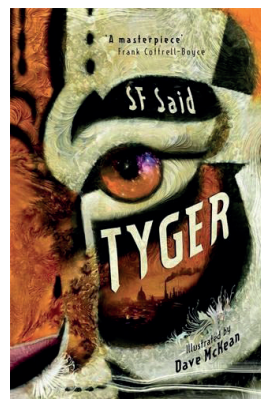
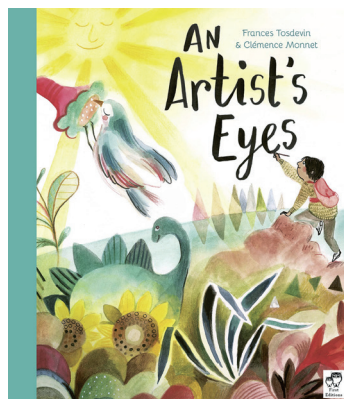
Secrets of a Christmas Elf, illus Daniela Jaglenka Terrazzini, Simon & Schuster Children's Books, 9781398515819, £9.99, hbk



Fiona Noble is a books journalist and reviewer, specialising in children's and YA literature, for publications including **The Bookseller** and **The Observer**.

Books of the Year 2022

2022 has been another bumper year for children's publishing. Thanks to our team of reviewers, here at **BfK** we've managed to review over 400 new books, still just a fraction of the publishing output. Now we've asked a panel of experts to choose the best books of the year and their picks follow. Congratulations to SF Said, David Almond and Laura Carlin, Janelle McCurdy, and Jordan Stephens and Beth Suzuma, for winning multiple recommendations.



Ferelith Hordon, editorial advisor, Books for Keeps

Looking back over the past year there have been many exciting books to catch the eye. Picture books in particular exploring ideas, taking the format beyond its assumed audience of the youngest. **An Artist's Eyes** (Frances Lincoln Children's Books) by Frances Tosdevin and Clemence Monnet uses the theme of difference – but in an eye-catching way. Our eyes are the same shape and function in the same way, we see in the same way, but our individual experience of the world around is different and unique. The gorgeous palette of the illustrations sings off the pages bringing the text alive to make the point. Singing off the page also are Laura Carlin's illustrations for David Almond's text in **The Woman Who Turned Children into Birds** (Walker Studio). Here, Almond reminds the reader that there is a spark in everyone, adults and children, that will allow them to fly and Carlin creates the perfect visual accompaniment.

Emily Drabble, Head of Children's Book Promotion and Prizes, BookTrust

My first is a modern day classic **Tyger** (David Fickling) by SF Said. This is a thought-provoking, profound, political and spiritually profound book. The myths, legends and violence of real-life history are woven into the fabric of the story and they trigger lots of thoughts. I think it's a modern day classic that children will be reading and we'll be cherishing forever, a bit like Varjak Paw.

My second book is **Mia and the Lightcasters** (Faber), a debut by Janelle McCurdy which blew me away. Telling the story of Mia who must find and tame her Umbra then face the Nightmare plains and defy the Reaper King. This is an incredibly exciting book which will keep readers on the edge of their seats. It's so imaginative, with next level world building. It's utterly refreshing to find a sci fi fantasy book where all the heroes are children of colour too, still unfortunately rare and very much needed. If adults want to get young gamers reading this is the book to go for!

John Newman, the Newham Bookshop

I wanted to focus on my abiding love of illustrated text and the power of collaboration between writer and illustrator. David Almond's **The Woman Who Turned Children into Birds** (Walker Studio) is a resoundingly joyful celebration and Laura Carlin's illustrations just add to the magic. In **Colours, Colours Everywhere** (Two Hoots) Julia Donaldson and illustrator Sharon King-Chai add even more magic to a world of nature and colour which is both a compulsive

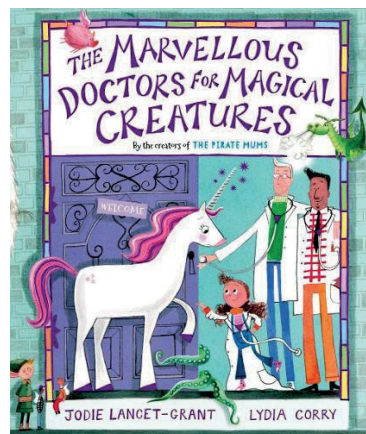
page turner and a beautifully designed book. **Our Tower** (Frances Lincoln Children's Books) elevates Joseph Coelho's finely honed text thanks to Richard Johnson's vision of a world of wonder on the edge of a council estate. Last but not least, **Oxygen Mask** (Faber and Faber) by Jason Reynolds with stunning art work by Jason Griffin is a collaboration which began remotely with Griffin responding to the shared text. Ostensibly it's about the pandemic but it embraces so much more.

Professor Teresa Cremin, the Open University

Tyger by SF Said (David Fickling Books) is remarkable book which demands re-reading, respect and in-depth discussion. The dystopian world that SF Said creates burns with injustice, but through their encounters with the mythical Tyger, Adam Alhambra and his friend Zadie open themselves to infinite possibilities and dig deep to discover their creative strength. Dave McKean's illustrations brilliantly capture the running threads of fear, power, hope and imaginative freedom, and echo the complexity of this thrilling and fast paced narrative. Inspired by William Blake's writing and so much more, this is exceptional writing - a book to keep, to share, to reread, debate and celebrate.

Zoey Dixon, Children's and Young People's Librarian, Lambeth Libraries

As a big fan of fantasy, I was very excited to see so many middle-grade fantasy novels by Black writers published this year, especially by UK writers. **The Elemental Detectives** (Scholastic) by Patrice Lawrence is a fast-paced adventure, steeped in history and is set in an alternative version of London but with roots in reality. The world building is amazing and the extensive research on the history of London is worked naturally into the narrative. Debuts from Janelle McCurdy's **Mia and the Lightcasters** (Faber and Faber) and Alake Pilgrim's Trinidad-set **Zo and the Forest of Secrets** (Knights Of) fuse fantasy, sci-fi and elements of horror to create an atmospheric adventure to keep you on the edge of your seat. **The Unmorrow Curse** (Uclan Publishing) from Jasmine Richards borrows from Norse mythology and celebrates friendship in an action-packed magical adventure. I loved the twists and turns and the use of familiar characters to tell a new story. There's more myth and magic in **Mwikali and the Forbidden Mask** (Lantana Publishing) by Kenyan author Shiko Nguru. Inspired by East African mythology, Mwikali learns important lessons about self-acceptance and being



true to yourself all whilst battling monsters. I can't wait to see the next books in these series and what next year brings for middle grade fantasy.

Jake Hope, chair of the working party for Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals.

Connections and belonging are explored with great warmth and emotional understanding in **The Missing Piece** (Bloomsbury Children's Books), a picturebook written by Jordan Stephens and illustrated by Beth Suzuma. Like the puzzle that acts as the metaphor at the heart of the story, this is a book that is worldly, wicked and wonderful. **Choose Love** (Graffeg) is a collection of poetry which admirably raises empathy and understanding around refugees. Every word in Nicola Davies poems is meticulously hewn and Petr Horacek's abstract art carries an urgency and directness, the two combine to create a deep and long-lasting impression. **Aftershocks** (Old Barn Books) by Anne Fine is a book of contradictions, it is at once familiar, yet otherworldly. It is a ghost story yet is rooted in real and highly relatable emotions. It's ambition and scope are large, yet at once it explores the intimacy of personal grief. It's a remarkable novel which defies easy categorisation.

Fen Coles, Letterbox Library

LGBTQ+ representations took a slice of the starring roles in publishing for younger children this year but it felt a little slight compared to 2021. Lancet-Grant/Corry spun another magical tale in which Ava and her two 'Marvellous Doctor' dads oversee the care of sickly dragons, fairies and unicorns in **The Marvellous Doctors for Magical Creatures** (OUP). LaCour/Juanita told a very relatable story in **Mama and Mummy and Me in the Middle** (Walker Books) in which a child sighs and frets over the empty space left in the middle when one of her mums works away from home. (Both book feature interracial couples). Paperback editions of the charming **The Boys** and the comical **Who's Your Real Mum?** plumped up the picture book offerings. A highlight in the middle grade category was **Alice Austen Lived Here** (Scholastic), not just for its two non-binary protagonists but also for its nuanced understanding of LGBTQ2+ history, its celebration of a wider queer community and for its – hurrah! – refreshingly informed and knowledgeable use of the word, 'queer'.

Natasha Radford, Chicken and Frog children's bookshop

Where do I begin when I'm writing about Vanessa Harbour's **Safe** (Firefly)? Although it is a powerful sequel to **Flight**, it can be read as a standalone. This highlights the craft behind Vanessa's writing. The relationship between Kizzy and Jakob is poignant, as their shared experiences create a common ground. Whilst the narrative is seated very much within the time period of World War Two, there are, sadly, many lessons for children (and adults) to take from this powerful book. **Safe** is an ideal class read for teachers, but also an important read for anyone who wants to understand the impact of the displacement of children.

The Missing Piece (Bloomsbury) is a beautifully illustrated picture book, which sensitively deals with issues of empathy,

friendship, and family. Sunny experiences the world through vibrant colours and rich aromas, leading the reader on a journey of the senses, as she searches for the missing piece to her puzzle. What she finds is more valuable than a jigsaw piece. She discovers new friends in her neighbourhood – new cultures and experiences that fill her heart. Sunny's resilience and zest for life is infectious. A truly joyous read.

Charlotte Hacking, Central Learning Programmes Director, CLPE

Joe Todd-Stanton is an exceptional picturebook maker. His knowledge of how to weave together words and pictures, using every element of visual storytelling to create narratives, is nothing less than outstanding. **The Comet** is a quiet yet powerful story of belonging, wrapped up in the experience of Nyla and her dad moving home, from the countryside to the city. Every word is judiciously chosen and, combined with the evocative illustrations, allows us to step into their world and their experiences, evoking deep empathy for the characters as they move through their difficult but ultimately hopeful journey; creating a sense of awe, wonder and magic along the way. There are wonderful messages about the power of creativity in helping us to make sense of and work through experiences, which is so important in the current climate. The book invites many re-readings to revisit and explore specific details in the sumptuous spreads that might be missed on a first read.

Books for the youngest readers are often taken for granted, but it a real and specific skill to craft and illustrate narratives for this age group. **Zeki Rise and Shine** and **Zeki Sleep Tight** by Anna McQuinn, illustrated by Ruth Hearson (Alanna Max) deserve applause and celebration. This is a team of writer, illustrator and publisher who deeply understand their audience and how to engage and enchant their readers and cater for their specific needs. These quiet stories centre on real and everyday experiences that every child can relate to. The rich and evocative language enriches a growing vocabulary and invites the reader to join in. The carefully observed illustrations capture attention, build visual literacy skills and richly develop characters and their world. The books are published perfectly for tiny hands – in a perfect size, with heavyweight paper and rounded corners. Perfect reads for 0-5 year olds.

Tyger is S.F. Said's first book in nine years, and the time taken has absolutely been worth it. This is the work of a master storyteller who has taken the time and care to create an epic tale, set in an alternate Britain in which the Empire never fell and slavery was never outlawed, with superbly crafted characters, which is critical for our times. In my humble opinion it's his best book yet. A superb gateway for children to begin to explore and make sense of the history of the past, its impact on the present day and the potential for the future wrapped up in a page turning and gripping adventure. Dave McKean's exquisite illustrations, as ever, give another dimension to the story, immersing and engaging the reader in the world of the story and its characters even further.

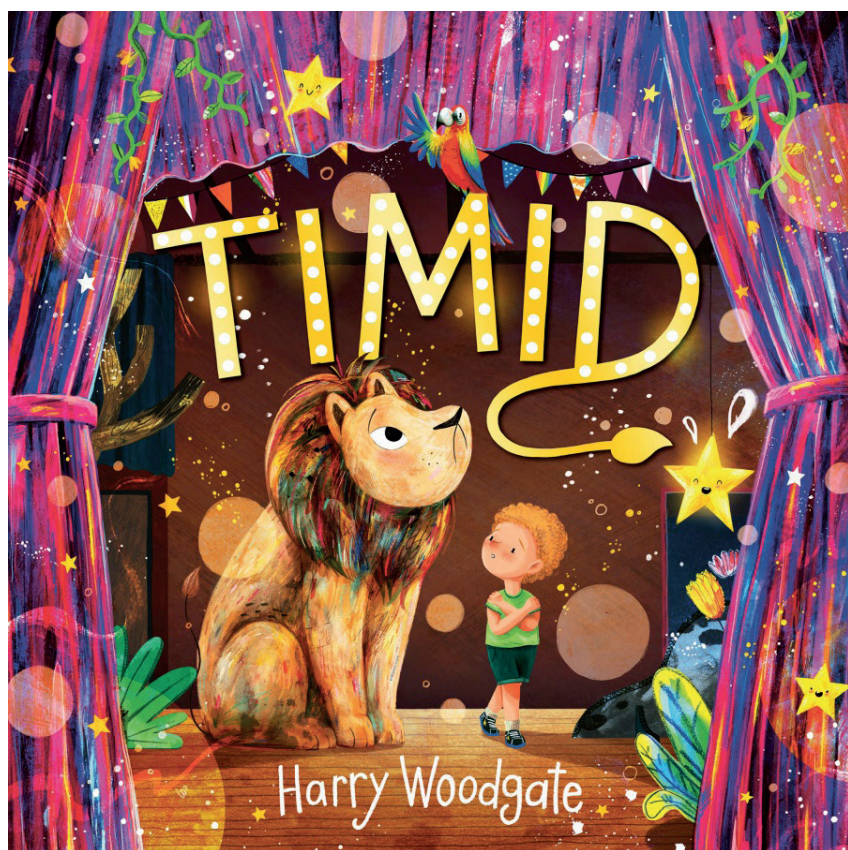
All the books mentioned are listed in the **BfK Christmas Gift Guide**.

Windows into Illustration: Harry Woodgate

Harry Woodgate combines rainbow colour palettes with carefully crafted textures to produce illustrations that are characterised by warmth and a sense of inclusiveness. Their books include **Grandad's Camper**, **Little Glow** and **Shine Like the Stars**. In this article, they describe the illustrative process for **Timid**, the story of two young performers.

In my latest picture book **Timid**, Timmy loves performing, but only when there isn't an audience, and they constantly live in the shadow of their inner cowardly lion. So, together with classmate Nia, they set out to tame the pesky feline in time to take part in the school play.

In the spread I've chosen for this article, Timmy and Nia are trying different methods of addressing their shyness, including mindfulness, positive affirmations, and reframing worst-case scenarios. I've struggled with anxiety for most of my life, so it was important to me that this book began a conversation for young readers and caregivers about how to manage it in healthy and sustainable ways. One big thing I've learned is that it doesn't just 'go away', so I wanted to express this through the lion's continuous presence throughout the book, and instead bring the focus towards learning to live alongside your worries.



Characterisation was a big part of this book and the illustrative process. Nia is creative and enthusiastic, which comes across through her bright outfits and expressive gestures. She's willing to jump straight in, whereas Timmy is a little more earnest and hesitant – in the top left illustration we see them focusing more intently, and below, they begin to relax and have fun when Nia takes the lead.

Mr Stevens is another important presence - I wanted him to feel warm and reassuring, gently guiding Timmy and Nia whilst allowing them to take ownership of their emotions and discover things independently, in the way that all good teachers do. Everything down to his cosy jumper and mug of tea was illustrated to help achieve this!

Finally, the lion functions as a visual mirror or shadow, reflecting and amplifying Timmy's emotions. Whilst we gain a certain level of understanding from Timmy's expressions and posture alone, the lion and surrounding illustrations help reinforce these readings. For example, on this spread, the lion first appears irritated and alert, then calmer but still inquisitive, until finally it curls up asleep on Timmy's bed, reflecting how Timmy is beginning to feel more in control of their anxiety. Throughout the book, the lion's technicolour mane suggests that whilst it is flighty and anxious, perhaps there's an inner confidence waiting to break free.

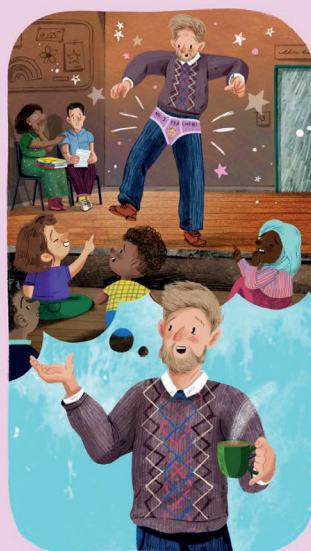
As the play got closer, Timmy and Nia tried more and more ways to overcome their shyness.



"My brother says that meditation helps him calm down if he's feeling anxious," said Nia.



"My mum writes encouraging notes to stick up around the house," Timmy said.



"When I'm nervous, I think of the most embarrassing thing that could happen, and then I act it out," suggested Mr Stevens.



Timmy hadn't ever felt this confident before. In fact, they actually felt excited.

I illustrated *Timid* using a combination of digital and traditional techniques. To me, there's something really appealing about organic, hand-drawn textures and mark-making in picture books; they bring a tactility, spontaneity, and relatability which helps engage young readers, so I thought a lot about how to incorporate these in meaningful ways. Together with the colour scheme of

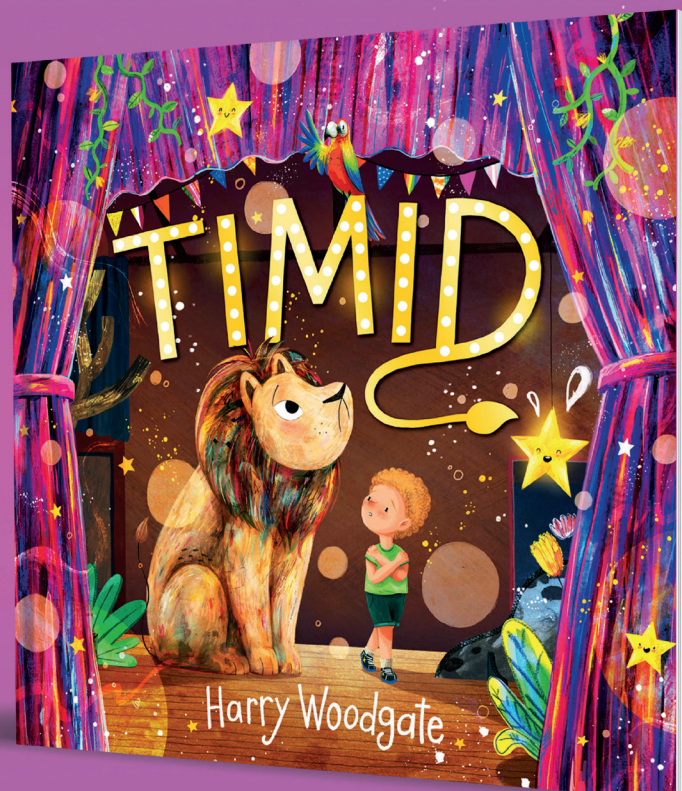
yellows, pinks, purples and blues, which also references the non-binary pride flag, they help establish different emotions and guide the reader through the story, whilst building a world that feels immersive and three-dimensional.

Timid is published by Little Tiger, 978-1838915117, £7.99 pbk.

Find your inner roar!

Timid is the stunning new picture book from Harry Woodgate, winner of the Waterstones Children's Book Prize Illustrated Book 2022

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Authorgraph

No.257

M G Leonard
interviewed by
Joy Court

'Beetles made me a writer' is the instant response that M.G. Leonard gave to my traditional opening question, before describing how education had convinced her that she could not write. Instead, she had turned to the theatre, where her writing was liberated by discovering that the greatest storyteller of all ignored grammar! It was when attempting to describe a setting populated with the creepy-crawlies she feared that she began investigating insects, realising the depth of her ignorance. She was particularly struck by the heroism of beetles and searched for books she could share with her 7-year-old son, so that he did not inherit her phobias, and found none. This was the lightbulb moment for what would become the **Branford Boase Award**-winning **Beetle Boy**, although it took 10 years of research and 14 rewrites before she felt she had a story worthy of the subject matter. Thinking it would be a 'niche' product, she worked hard to make it 'so compelling, funny and appealing that the reader would be dragged in and made to like these creatures'.

But she 'had no idea what [she] was doing' and wrote the complete story all in one go. A newly employed editor friend told her that, at 250,000 words 'nobody would read it'. Luckily this is where her theatre experience paid off. She was able to think in the familiar three act structure, with her focus being that her conclusion to the trilogy would have to have 'proper final-actness'. Having read 'every

trilogy going' and often finding herself dismayed by the ending, she did not want her readers left with any sadness or questions. She still thought her beetle story could 'bomb' so was delighted to be able to negotiate a 3-book deal with Barry Cunningham at Chicken House, which meant the whole story would be published. Triumph was followed by dismay when she discovered how quickly Chicken House would need the finished text for **The Beetle Queen** and then **Battle of the Beetles**, when she had a one-year-old baby and full-time job!

The idea for her next venture had popped up and been 'pinned' before **Beetle Boy** was published. Trains were another topic Maya knew literally nothing about, yet every male member of her family was completely obsessed with them. Once again, she searched for something that would appeal to her eldest reluctant reader son and found nothing. 'This was either a terrible idea or an opportunity'. She was working with Sam Steadman at the National Theatre at the time and when she described her concept, 'He exploded with ideas'. If Sam could bring the fanatical train knowledge, she could bring her childhood Nancy Drew obsession and desire to be a detective, to the creation of this very successful 'Agatha Christie for children' series. Her only proviso being that the final last edit 'would be mine' but the process has been 'a real pleasure' and **The Highland Falcon Thief** went on to win The British Book Awards Children's Book of the Year, with the final sixth book in this bestselling series, **The Arctic Railway Assassin**, just published.

The breakneck pace of the **Adventures with Trains** journey meant that any solo work 'felt like an extra special treat' and when Walker Books invited her to join them to discuss ideas (a meeting which also led to her first picturebook **The Tale of a Toothbrush**) they were very keen on another 'pinned' idea inspired by children she met during **Beetle Boy** tours. Many of these nature-loving children were birdwatchers. One child asked if she would write about birds one day and in another lightbulb moment, she looked at this child and noticed that his bird watching paraphernalia was just what a detective would have – the notebook, camouflage, observation skills and patience.

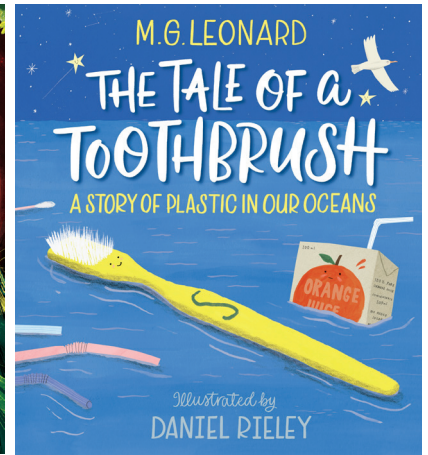
But the other inspiration for what would become **Twitch** was much more personal. Her late mother-in-law was an inspirational primary headteacher and a keen advocate of her books but, when asked if there was anything she didn't like in the books, replied that actually there was! The bullies in the **Beetle Boy** trilogy remained bullies throughout and were never given the opportunity to learn to love insects. 'I felt so told off- she was 100% right'. That shock realization meant that this book would have to have a bully so she could try again. She already had **Twitch**, the bird watching loner detective and she knew that the relationship between the boys would be at the heart of the story. Both characters had a 'lot of me' she says, 'I was an oddball, but I was fine with being weird, I never minded not fitting in, I was never insecure.' But she also moved around a lot with her father's job and knew how Jack felt as a newcomer. 'There is something really isolating about looking out at a playground, seeing everyone in their groups and knowing that you don't fit in to any of them.' Jack is very insecure, he has an information deficit, he knows nothing about the countryside, he feels stupid and that makes him mean. 'I don't believe in bullies. All behaviour has a context.' is something her mother-in-law said that really resonated and teachers have told her how much they value the way that bullying behaviour and the friendship which develops between the boys, is explored in **Twitch**.





Having only just got into insects (by now vice president of the insect charity **Buglife** and with a tank of exotic pets) she was determined birdwatching would be a hobby too far. It was important that the setting would be realistic and in **Cromwell Bottom Nature Reserve** in Yorkshire she found just the place, with mixed habitats and in the middle of a working-class area. These books may be her 'homage to the Secret Seven' but they were not to be some idealised middle-class way of life. Realising that birdwatching is a very seasonal activity, with the type of birds seen and their type of activity varying, she wanted to be completely accurate. **Twitch** takes place in the summer and the whole family spent several days at the nature reserve with every bird spotted featuring in the book. But it was also this trip which presented her with a 'spark moment'. An early morning encounter with kingfishers 'felt like witnessing real magic. The world seemed to get bigger, and time slowed down'. This 'changed the world for me' and now a self-confessed bird nerd she wants children to seek that moment and realise there is magic to be found.

Spark, just published, very properly takes place in the autumn, and takes its title from that 'spark' moment for Jack, whose insecurity is still showing. Compared to Twitch's birdwatching knowledge, he feels a bit of a fraud and still an outsider. Instead, he tries to prove himself the top detective in the Twitchers group. Pursuing the mystery attacker of neighbourhood cats leads Jack to uncover the darker side of grouse shooting and the danger presented to birds of prey. The Twitchers have certainly moved on from pursuit of the classic 'robber' figure in **Twitch**, although that very deservedly won the **Crimefest Award** for Best Crime Novel for Children, to a very serious, contentious and current issue. 'The idea that wealthy people breed one particular bird just to kill it and that birds of prey also get killed needs to be addressed'. Yet she also says she has no wish 'to wallop children over the head with an eco-message' but they do need to be aware. Jack's transformation to 'birder' obviously mirrors her own experience and there is no mistaking the author's passion.



Character names always have a significance in all her books and while some are obvious like Corvus Featherstone or Darkus Cuttle, others are more subtle. 'Names ooze with the right kind of vibe to give the story a layer that is possibly invisible to anyone but me'. Jack is synonymous with Everyman and if he can become a birder, then anyone can, being the underlying message.

The seasonal nature of birdwatching meant that she realised very early on that she wanted to write a quartet reflecting the seasons – 'a nice structural conceit'. Although each book stands alone, 'If you read all four you will get a rich feel of the ornithological world'. Tying in real world publication schedules can be trickier hence, **Clutch**, the next to appear in April 2023 will be set in spring to be followed by winter in February 2024 by **Feathers**. The Twitchers will be on the track of respectively egg thieves and a daring feather heist from the Natural History Museum. Now the train series is finished she looks forward to spending more time with the birds. Books she is 'fiercely proud of' and which she describes as 'the best books I've written', multi-layered, with fast paced adventure and great detective plotting, it is the humanity and emotional truth that does indeed make this series outstanding. I think her mother-in-law would be very proud!

Books by MG Leonard

- The Tale of a Toothbrush**, illus by Daniel Rieley, Walker, 978-1406391817, £7.99 pbk
- Spark**, Walker, 978-1406389388, £7.99 pbk
- Twitch**, Walker, 978-1406389371, £7.99 pbk
- Beetle Boy**, Chicken House, 978-1910002704, £7.99 pbk
- Beetle Queen**, Chicken House, 978-1910002773, £7.99 pbk
- Battle of the Beetles**, Chicken House, 978-1910002780, £7.99 pbk
- Rex the Rhinoceros Beetle**, illus Duncan Beedie, Scholastic, 978-1406391817, £6.99 pbk
- The Highland Falcon Thief**, with Sam Sedgman, Macmillan, 978-1529013061, £7.99 pbk
- Kidnap on the California Comet**, with Sam Sedgman, Macmillan, 978-1529013085, £7.99 pbk
- Murder on the Safari Star**, with Sam Sedgman, Macmillan, 978-1529013108, £7.99 pbk
- Danger at Dead Man's Pass**, with Sam Sedgman, Macmillan, 978-1529013122, £7.99 pbk
- Sabotage on the Solar Express**, with Sam Sedgman, Macmillan, 978-1529072655, £7.99 pbk
- The Arctic Railway Assassin**, with Sam Sedgman, Macmillan, 978-1529072761, £7.99 pbk



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

The Books for Keeps Christmas Gift Guide 2022

It's always a pleasure to put together the annual **Books for Keeps Christmas Gift Guide** and once again, we've been snowed under (sorry) with seasonal offerings to recommend. Indeed, the BfK offices resemble Santa's workshop, such is the plethora of seasonal treats we've been sent. What follows is just a small selection of the wonderful range of books ready to find their place under the tree this year, but we hope you'll find exactly what you're looking for, and don't forget to use our review section, **Books of the Year** and **Book of the Week** reviews too to draw up your gift lists.

Big books and little books

Clotilde Perrin's **Inside the Villains** (Gecko Press) was one of our gift recommendations in 2019, and **Gotcha!** is unmissable too. Flamboyantly large, it invites readers to escape some scary monsters by entering three fairy tale houses. Lift the flaps to explore the best hiding places and pick up tips along the way so that you can turn the tables on those doing the seeking. A book to have young readers shrieking with delight and one that roars new shocks and excitement into the fairy tale world.

Almost as large, very different but just as likely to be received with glee is the **Tom Gates Totally Brilliant Advent Calendar**, which counts us down to Christmas Eve via 24 little mini adventures-come-activity books, neatly stored inside a hardback outer. It's been a good year all round for Tom Gates fans, as book 20 in the series, **Tom Gates: Happy to Help (eventually)** (Scholastic) is just out, Tom as funny, spontaneous and personable as ever.

For little people meanwhile, there are some lovely little festive board books. **Merry Little Christmas** by Nick Sharratt and Sally Symes (Walker Books) is a Finger Wiggle Book, matching holes on every page allowing readers to give some familiar characters, including a snowman, robin and jolly elf, wiggly legs. Usborne have a very engaging 'touchy feely book', with added sounds, **Don't Tickle the Reindeer**, but **Lights and Sounds Christmas** by Sam Taplin and Jordan Wray is particularly appealing, night-time scenes lit up by real twinkling lights, and buttons that pressed play Christmas tunes. Emma Dodd's **Christmas is Love** (Templar), starring a reindeer and calf, has a sparkly cover but no other gimmicks, just Dodds' warm, tender evocation of family love.

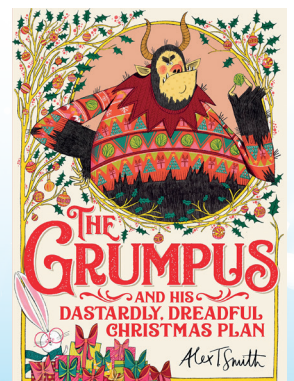
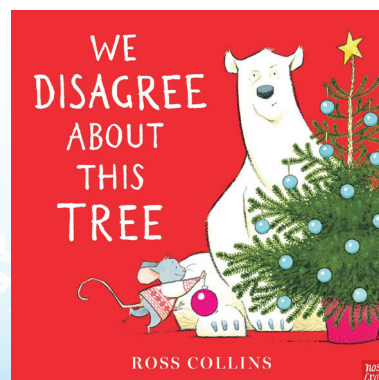
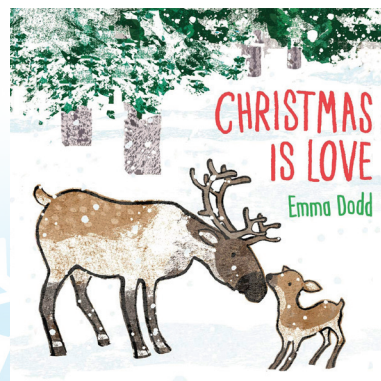
Polar bears and penguins

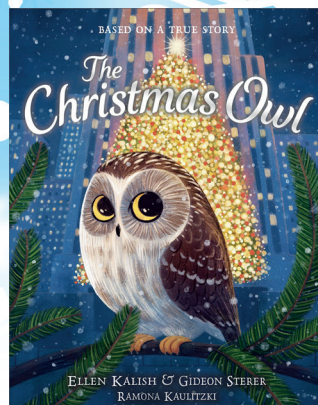
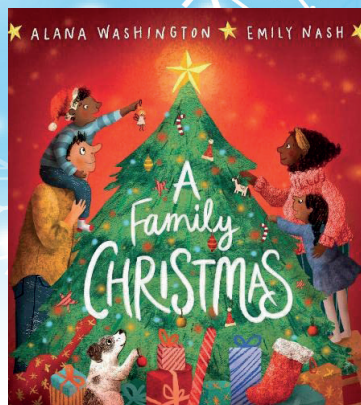
That quarrelsome couple, the bear and mouse, first encountered in Ross Collins' award-winning **There's a Bear on My Chair** are back and disagreeing about the decorations on their Christmas tree in **We Disagree About this Tree** (Nosy Crow). Bear wants lights, lots of lights, while Mouse argues for tinsel. The more they tussle, the more damage is done to the tree. All ends amicably of course, with the two friends finding something on which they are in complete accord.

Playful, perfectly illustrated, and certain to prompt discussion. **Little Bear** by Richard Jones (Simon and Schuster), a BfK favourite and a more quiet, gentler investigation of friendship is out now in paperback and recommended too. A penguin huddle becomes a penguin muddle in Ross Montgomery and Sarah Warburton's delightful comic celebration of community. Frozen together, the penguin friends need help to defrost, and find it after journeying (lovely map) to the big city. **Penguin Huddle** (Walker Books) is full of surprises, and Warburton's penguin portraits packed with character. **Well Done, Mummy Penguin** (Walker Books) is Chris Haughton at his absolute best. Mummy Penguin is going out and leaving Daddy Penguin and Little Penguin, but where is she going, and will she return? There's excitement, tension, surprises, humour before the reassuring ending. Haughton's bold colours, deft characterisation and flawless control of the story makes this a supremely enjoyable reading experience. Penguinophiles should also search out Einstein the Penguin's second outing, **The Case of the Fishy Detective** (HarperCollins Children's Books), for sharp writing and wonderful situation comedy while Laura Ellen Anderson's **Evil Emperor Penguin** adventures are now available as a chunky paperback, with added 'how to draw' information to boot (David Fickling Books).

Ready wrapped picture books

Father Christmas makes personal appearances in numerous new picture books of course and here are some favourites. In **Through the North Pole Snow** by Polly Faber and Richard Jones (Walker Books), he has an unexpected guest, a little Arctic fox searching for food. The fox has no idea who this tired old man is, but watches as the seasons pass and her new friend prepares again for Christmas Eve, until joining him in the sleigh, finally, 'she understood everything.' Text and illustrations welcome the reader into a world that changes from white to green to white again, while Santa's comfortable home is a place of warmth and happiness. Floris Books have a new edition of **Little Fairy's Christmas** by Daniela Drescher, in which he helps a fairy and little elf both lost in a snowstorm back to the cosiness of the elf's family. First published in Germany in 2010, the charm of Drescher's story and watercolour illustrations of the wintery countryside are appealing as ever. Those baddies Lanky





Len and Hefty Hugh almost get away with Santa's newly delivered presents in **What the Ladybird Heard at Christmas** by Julia Donaldson and Lydia Monks (Macmillan) but are foiled – again – by the eponymous ladybird. Donaldson and Monks go together like the holly and the ivy and as always with their collaborations, this is a treat to read aloud and a treat to look at. **Santa's Christmas Countdown** by Sebastien Braun (Townhouse Books) has a very jolly black Santa and readers can join in the fun of his preparations, touch and feel panels, including of course a fluffy beard, adding to the excitement. No Father Christmas but an owl in **The Christmas Owl** (Andersen Press). This true story of a little saw-whet owl accidentally transported to the Rockefeller Centre in the branches of its Christmas tree is filled with the spirit of the season. Released back into the wild, the little owl takes a detour by 'her' tree, observing the love on display as people come together to celebrate. Similarly, in **Gaspard's Christmas** (Graffeg) by Zeb Soames and James Mayhew, the reactions of Gaspard the fox and his animal friends teach us humans a lesson about the true meaning of Christmas. Proceeds from this book will go to St Martin-in -the-Fields homeless charity to help people across the UK.

Families are central to Christmas and **A Family Christmas** (Uclan Publishing) by Alana Washington and Emily Nash rejoices in those ordinary activities that make Christmas special, while romantic love is celebrated in **The Woodcutter and the Snow Prince** (Owllet Press) by Ian Eagleton and Davide Ortu. An adaptation of *The Snow Queen*, two lonely young people, a woodcutter and the Snow Prince find each other, lose one another, and find each other again in magical story.

Two final picture book recommendations: **The Perfect Present** (Otter-Barry Books) by Petr Horáček and **The Perfect Gift** (Tiny Owl) by Alan Durant and Marjan Vafaeian because they are, indeed, perfect for giving.

Story collections

Christmas is a time for storytelling and there are plenty of new collections. Guaranteed to brighten up bedtime, **The Faber Book of Bedtime Stories** is illustrated by Sarah McIntyre, features authors Natasha Farrant, Emma Carroll, Aisha Bushby, Kate Saunders, Kieran Larwood amongst others, and achieves its aim of bringing children 'a comforting story for tonight for a happy day tomorrow.' In in **Folktales for a Better World** (Crocodile Books), reviewed in this issue, Elizabeth Laird gathers stories from Ethiopia, Sudan, Palestine and other countries affected by war. Full of wisdom, the tales celebrate peace. Winner of an English PEN Translates Award, **A Fairytale for Everyone** (Farshore) reimagines fairy stories, some familiar, some less so, in a contemporary, inclusive light and gives them new relevance and vibrancy. Elli Woollard's retellings in verse of favourite **Grimms' Fairy Tales** (Macmillan) will be hugely popular with young readers. With lively illustrations by Marta Altés, these are fresh, funny and delightful to read aloud. Boxer Books have new paperback editions of two truly beautiful books by self-confessed 'story-collector' Jane Ray, **The Little Mermaid and Other Fishy Tales** and **The Emperor's Nightingale and Other Feathery Tales**. Ray's selections are wide-ranging, often accompanied by a

thoughtful, eloquent introduction, and her illustrations, created on scraperboard, are exquisite. Welbeck have a new version of **Aesop's Fables**, illustrated by Robert Ingpen and retold by Caroline Lawrence and together they give Aesop's world of clever slaves, Greek gods and talking animals a new immediacy, Ingpen's use of perspective, composition and emotional focus powerful as ever.

Old friends

Christmas is a time for old friends too and Oxford are celebrating the 35th anniversary of **Winnie the Witch** with a special edition of the very first book in this long-running, much-loved series. It comes with added extras including a behind the scenes 'making of' by Korky Paul. A new story, **The Festival of Witches**, sees Winnie and Wilbur in party mood, making friends in typically exuberant style. Nosy Crow has a new version of **The Wind in the Willows**, abridged for young readers by Lou Peacock and illustrated by Kate Hindley. All the elements that make it such an appealing story for the young, are there: Ratty and Mole messing about in a boat; Toad delighting in his motor car; his daring escape from the police. Kate Hindley is a whizz at illustrating vehicles and her characters jump out of the page too.

Christmas themed fiction

Alex T. Smith delivers another fabulous, illustrated Christmas story with **The Grumpus** (Macmillan). The Grumpus is 'a big, grumbly-huffy-puffy, pink-the-bridge-of-your-nose-and-sigh-loudly-like-a-sat-upon-whoopie-cusion grumpy grump of a creature' who doesn't like anybody AT ALL and loathes Christmas. He comes up with a dastardly, dreadful plan to stop it once and for all but, Scrooge-like, comes to learn the true meaning of the season through unexpected friendships and a journey of self-discovery. It's great fun, and the illustrations sparkle. Mel Taylor's Christmas-loving family the Carrolls are back in a new adventure, **The Christmas Competition** (Farshore) and determined to win the title of Most Festive Family. Silly, full of fun and totally Christmariffic, this will have everyone laughing. As will **Operation Nativity** (Usborne) by Jenny Pearson, though it will also bring a lump to the throat. Borrowed donkeys, a runaway turkey, lots of relatives plus the Angel Gabriel, Mary and Joseph, Balthazar and a shepherd called Steve all have their part to play in a story that is fantastical but absolutely rooted in family and abiding love.

Treat yourself

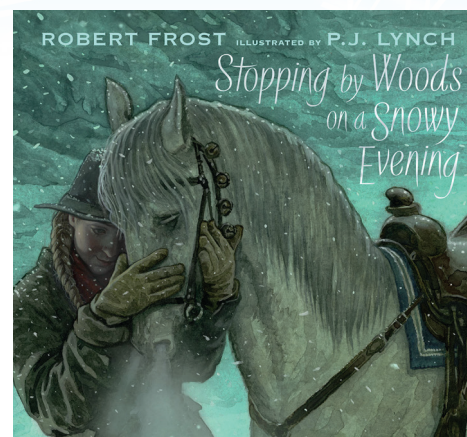
Finally, if there's any space left in your bag, **Creature** by Shaun Tan (Walker Studio) is a collection of his extraordinary previously unpublished and rarely seen paintings and drawings of the mysterious creatures of his books. They're accompanied by notes detailing his fascination with non-human beings and explanations for it. We thoroughly recommend **The Watkins Book of English Folk Tales** Neil Philip's superb anthology of more than one hundred extraordinary tales, highly readable, endlessly entertaining.

Happy Christmas, one and all!

All the books mentioned are listed in the [BfK Christmas Gift Guide](#).

We Wish You a Merry Christmas: the best poetry for giving

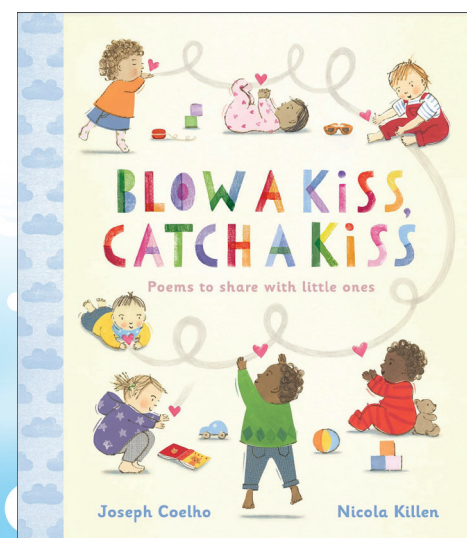
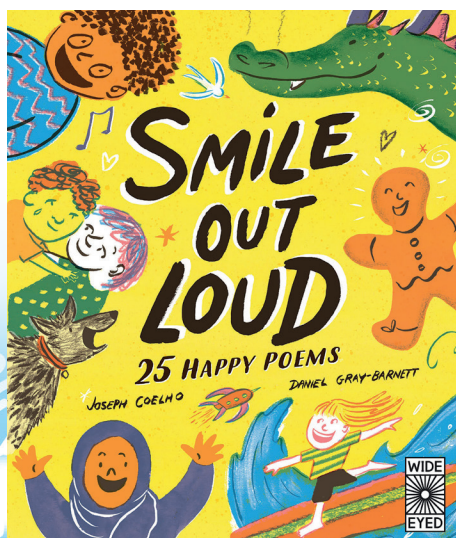
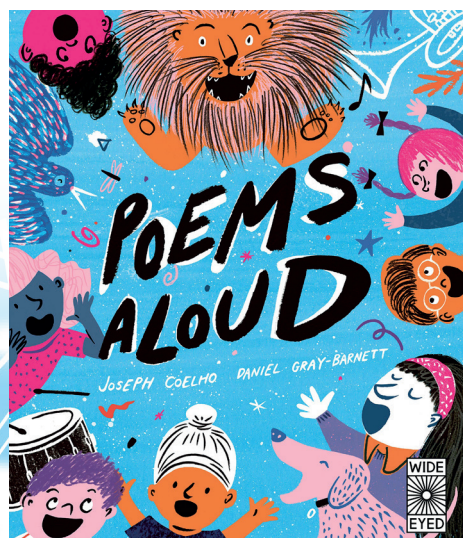
'It's coming on Christmas, they're cutting down trees', so it must be time for a round-up of the new poetry for children published in 2022. Thanks to **Clive Barnes** for this selection.

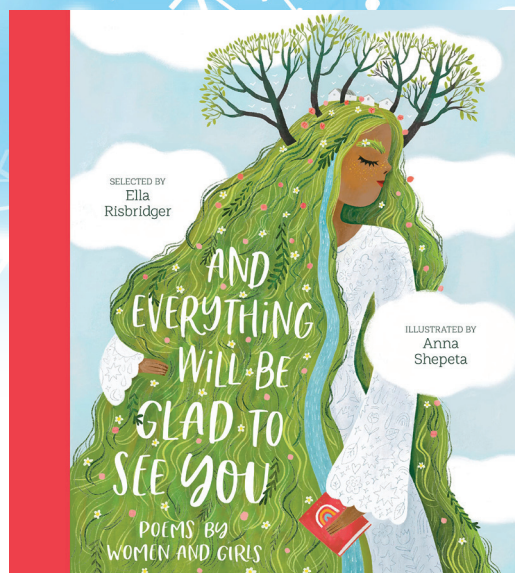


Let's start with two books with the same season appropriate title, **We Wish You a Merry Christmas**. For the youngest, there's a suitably bright, jolly and glittery big board book from Floella Benjamin and illustrator Lydia Monks. Dame Floella is in Playschool mode as she leads the singing on the accompanying CD. Most of your favourite Christmas songs should be here, although sadly only the first verse. The exception is *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, where it would be definitely odd to stop on the first day. *The Twelve Days* also turns up in Chris Riddell's wide-ranging collection for older children. There are a lot of classic poems alongside the carols and songs, and not just poets of the distant past, like Hardy and Wordsworth, but some much more recent: Benjamin Zephaniah's wonderful *Talking Turkeys*; Adrian Mitchell's *Nothingmas Day*; and Wendy Cope's *The Christmas Life*, for instance. While Chris Riddell supplies the illustrations to his own collection, he has also been busy decorating **The Big Amazing Poetry Book**, a thumping bumper collection from Gaby Morgan subtitled '52 weeks of poetry from 52 brilliant poets', reminding us that a poem is not just for Christmas. Each poet is given a short biography and allowed only seven poems. Long-time favourites like Brian Patten, Charles Causley and James Berry rub shoulders with newer voices like Jan Dean, A.F. Harrold and Kate Wakeling. They really are all brilliant and this is the sort

of book I'd love to get for Christmas. It will certainly give weight to any stocking and if, in addition, you're looking for something to pull the stocking out of shape in a beguiling picture book way, then P.J. Lynch's lovely atmospheric rendering of Robert Frost's mysterious **Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening** might be the book for you. Who better than Lynch to convey the poem's mystery?

Now, moving on ourselves, away from snow, presents and Christmas, let's have a look at what other poetry has appeared this year. We'll start with three titles for the youngest, all from our children's laureate, Joseph Coelho: **Poems Aloud**, **Smile Out Loud** and **Blow a Kiss, Catch a Kiss**. The first two are illustrated by Daniel Gray Barnett and they're good for providing material and encouragement for budding poetry performers young or old. But it's the kissy book I like best. Illustrated by Nicola Killen, these are 'poems to share with little ones', and they demonstrate Coelho's enviable gift of getting inside toddler lives, delivered with fun and tenderness. Coral Rumble's **Things that Should be in a Poem**, for slightly older children, comes from the author of the award-winning **Mustafa's Jumper**, which is included in the collection. These are poems of appealing simplicity, humour and musicality. **Scared?** is Neal Zetter and Joshua Siegal's second joint collection, and, while the usual scary things like Vampires, Werewolves and Dinosaurs make their appearance,

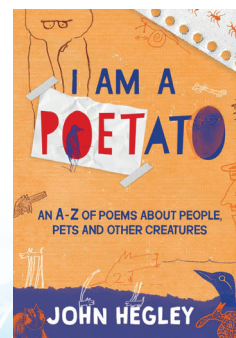
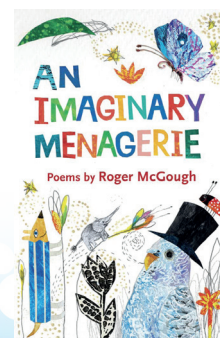
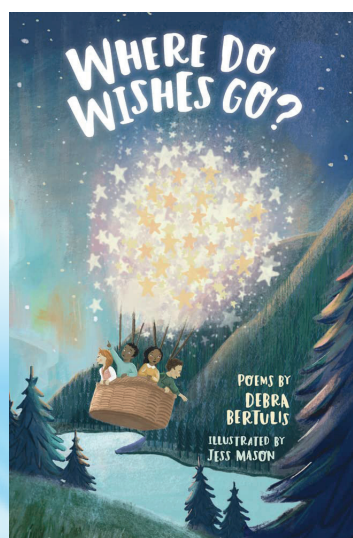




there's space for more mundane horrors, like *Gone Off Milk* and the seriously scary, *Carbon Footprint*, which looks at the real horrors awaiting us all if we don't deal effectively with climate change. These collections come from seasoned poetry performers in schools, but not all poetry needs that kind of audience or response. **Let's Chase Stars Together** from Matt Goodfellow, himself a former teacher, includes poems whose images and themes benefit from the close attention of the single reader to the page. There are poems here that are heartfelt and moving. *A Thought*, for instance, where a child watches his mum putting away her necklace at night, brings a lump to the throat in just three stanzas. Moving further up the age range, Ella Risbridger has put together a collection of 'poems by women and girls' entitled **And Everything Will be Glad to See You**. This has evidently been a labour of love and it's given a production to match by publisher Nosy Crow. It's in large gift book format, with stunning double page illustrations by Anna Shepeta, at a premium price. These are poems that sometimes express a distinctly female or feminist point of view, but needless to say, the collection is wide ranging and is for anyone who enjoys the poetry of, say, Grace Nichols, Carol Ann Duffy and Jackie Kay, to name but a few. And there are some cracking poems from names that I don't so readily recognise. It certainly fulfils one of Ella Risbridger's aims of 'making sure that when someone asks you to think of a poet, you think of a woman, just as quickly as you think of a man.' A rather thinner collection is Little Tiger's **Courage in a Poem** featuring poems from a mainly young and ethnically diverse group of poets all exhorting us to be confident in ourselves; for, as Jason Reynolds hopefully reminds us in his poem *A Talkin'-To*, 'everything bad and frightening and loud/will always hide when you hold your head up.' Nikita Gill

appears in both the last two collections and she has published a fine book of feminist poems of her own intended for young adults: **These are the Words**. Drawing on her experience as a young woman of colour, these are remarkable poems of rage, consolation, solidarity, hope and love. I particularly like her witty reworking of newspaper astrology columns into soothing advice and reassurance, 'Libra: if the world feels too heavy, remember, you can set it down'. Sophia Thakur, who appears alongside Nikita in **Courage in a Poem**, has her own collection too. **Wearing My Mother's Heart** eloquently explores her own loves and losses and, in particular, her relationship with the female generations before her and their Christian faith. These are adult poems, I would say, but they speak as much to those who are on the edge of adulthood. In the topical *But if the statues have to stay*, she asks for a bench to rest the legs 'of the two hundred and twenty thousand non-white staff members of the NHS' – 'Immortalize the sacrifice/not the one holding the knife. /To what we still give glory, history makes right.' In *Reframing*, she asks, 'Why use creativity to doubt/when you could instead use it to dream.' This does not exhaust the year's poetry. You might also like to look back at the reviews in this magazine of Valerie Bloom's **Stars with Flaming Tails** (winner of the CLIPPA award for 2022); **Where Do Wishes Go** by Debra Bertulis; **When Poems Fall from the Sky** by Zaro Weil; and **Razzmatazz**, a 'best of' compilation of Roger Stevens poetry. Older readers might remember Roger McGough's **An Imaginary Menagerie**, and John Hegley's **I am a Poetato**, both republished this year.

All the collections mentioned are including in the [BfK Christmas Gift Guide](#).



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

Have a Non-fiction Christmas

The boom in non-fiction publishing continues and 2022 has seen a wealth of engaging, thought-provoking texts for all ages. Here **Sue McGonigle** suggests some of the best new children's non-fiction for Christmas giving, for all ages, a mix of information and some fun too. Topical concerns dominate, with the environment a key theme together with the importance of asking questions and taking action to make a difference.



Questions and Answers

My Very First Book of Everything illus by Ben Newman (under 5) Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1529094671, £12.99 hbk

An early encyclopedia with clear attractive illustrations and simple definitions. covering a wide range of topics including the human body and wild animals. The lift the flap feature is engaging, showing for example, how a chameleon uses camouflage to hide.

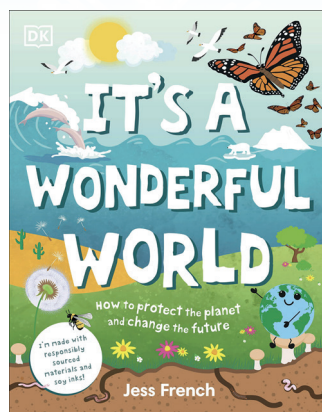
The Bedtime Book of Impossible Questions

by Isabel Thomas ill. Aaron Cushley (8-10) Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1526623751, £12.99 hbk

This attractive book is full of enormous questions (how big is the universe?) smaller ones (why we need eyebrows?) and very strange ones (how do we know unicorns have never existed?) It introduces the idea that science is about investigating seemingly impossible questions to encourage young readers to be curious. Great fun.

Every Word Tells a Story by Tom Read Wilson, ill. Ian Morris (8-10) Words & Pictures, 978-0711277519, £12.99 hbk

With four words for each letter of the alphabet, we are taken from aardwark to zombie, meeting familiar and very unusual words to find out their meanings and origins. My favourite word was 'quignog' - a Cornish word meaning a ridiculous notion. Very attractive with lively poetry and exuberant illustration, this is an ideal book for young readers who like to amaze family and friends with quirky facts.



Our World and Beyond

It's a Wonderful World Jess French ill. Aleesha Nandhra (5-8) Dorling Kindersley Children's Books, 978-0241533543, £9.99 hbk

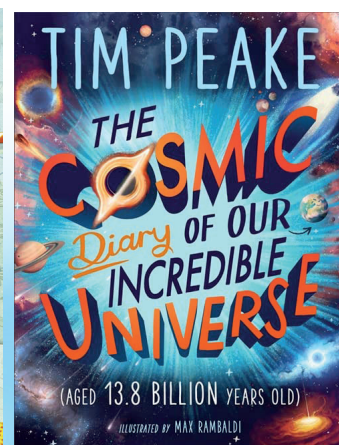
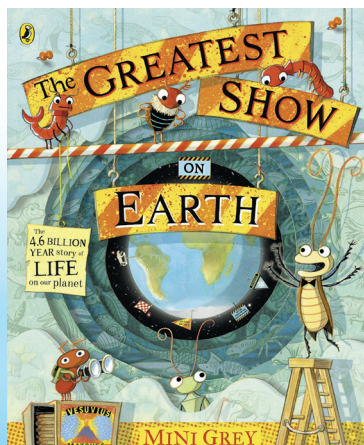
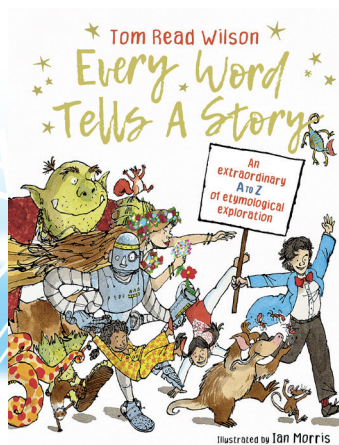
TV presenter Jess French takes us on a journey around our world exploring plants and animals and habitats. Key concepts are introduced such as the balance of life and how to protect it. Beautifully designed with photography, diagrams and artwork. Eagle eyed cosmologists will notice a discrepancy in the depiction of the planets in the first image.

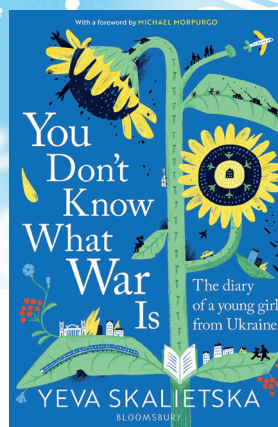
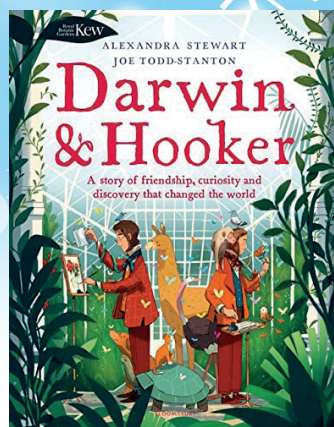
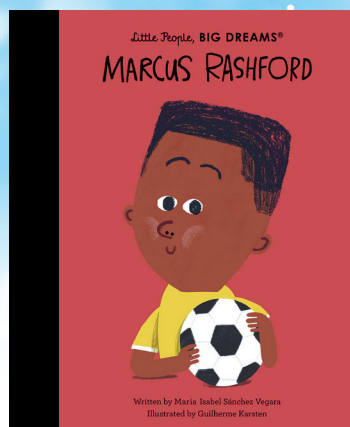
A Wild Child's Book of Birds by Dara McAnulty, ill. Barry Falls (8-10) Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1529070750, £14.99 hbk

The team which created the highly successful **Wild Child** are back with a focus on birds. A poetic introduction and beautiful illustrations emphasise the wonder of the bird world through each of the four seasons. We learn about flight, nests, and why birds sing and gain a sense of the incredible variety of bird species. There is practical advice on bird watching, how to look after a bird feeder and useful links.

The Greatest Show on Earth by Mini Grey (8-10) Puffin, 978-0241480830, £14.99 hbk

Crossing the boundaries between fact and fiction Mini Grey presents the 4.6-billion-year story of life on Earth as a theatrical performance with a team of insect performers in a shoe box theatre. Each double page represents a key moment in evolution, introducing a complex topic in an engaging way with wry humour and food for thought; looking after our fragile planet is an underlying theme.





The Cosmic Diary of our Incredible Universe by Tim Peake, ill. Max Rambaldi (8-10) Wren & Rook, 978-1526363619, £12.99 hbk

In attractive and accessible graphic novel format we travel through space and time to explore the history of the universe with contributions from not only Tim himself, but other experts too.

Weather, Camera, Action Liam Dutton, ill. Giordano Poloni (8-12) Templar Publishing, 978-1787418844, £16.99 hbk

Meteorologist Liam Dutton's knowledge and passion shines through in this beautifully designed guide to the sky. We gain an insight into his work and learn about phenomena such as dust storms, the aurora borealis and extreme weather from hurricanes to heat waves. Pollution, climate change and simple ways we can all help to protect the planet are included.

Individuals making an impact

Little People Big Dreams, Marcus Rashford by Maria Isabel Sánchez Vegara, ill. Guilherme Karsten (5-8) Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-0711270978, £9.99 hbk

An introduction for younger children to the life story (so far) of one of the UK's most celebrated footballers and social activists. Readers learn about Marcus Rashford's journey as a footballer including his successes but sadly also his experience of racism. We find out how his early life shaped his passion for helping end childhood food poverty leading to his well-publicised campaign for free school meals.

Hope on the Horizon Onjali Q. Raúf ill. Pippa Curnick, Isobel Lundie (8-10) Wren & Rook, 978-1526364418, £9.99 hbk

Award winning author Raúf draws on her own experiences in writing this handbook. It aims to reassure and encourage children not to feel anxious or depressed but rather strive to make a difference, develop their empathy 'muscle' and help to build a better world. A warm-hearted book which celebrates many individuals, past, present and fictional and provides insight into Onjali Raúf's own passions and work as an activist.

Darwin and Hooker Alexandra Stewart and Joe Todd-Stanton (10-12) Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1526613998, £14.99 hbk
A beautifully illustrated book which foregrounds the friendship

between Charles Darwin and Joseph Hooker, a scientist in his own right. We learn about their separate careers and explorations, and most significantly Hooker's role as confidante and adviser while Darwin was developing his theory of natural selection and writing the ground-breaking **Origin of Species**. A book which shows the importance of teamwork in developing new ideas.

You Don't Know What War Is by Yena Skalietska (10-12) Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1526659934, £9.99 pbk

In this slim volume twelve-year-old Yena from Kahrkiv, Ukraine tells us, in her own words, how her world changed when war broke out in February 2022. We follow her dangerous journey to safety eventually settling into a new life in Dublin after her story is discovered by a UK news team. A 21st century child's war time diary with echoes of Anne Frank. Although there is a happy ending for this writer, Yena is aware some of her friends still live in danger in war torn Kharkiv.

Eye catching books for families to share

Transported: 50 Vehicles that Changed the World Matt Ralphs, ill. Rui Ricardo (10-12) Nosy Crow, 978-1839942174, £18.99 hbk

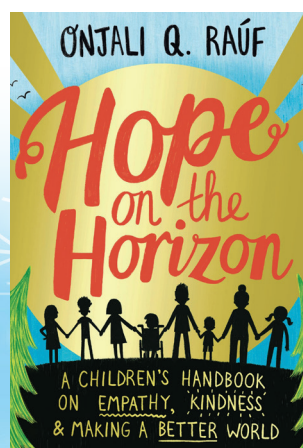
This book introduces 50 vehicles that changed the world, designed for a range of purposes including trade, exploration, private use, to feed or entertain us or to save lives. We travel through history from bronze age wagons to solar powered aeroplanes. Very attractive double page spreads for each vehicle with facts and stats; a coffee table sized book for families to pore over.

How Many Ways can you Cook an Egg? Lizzie Mabbott, ill. Charlotte Dumortier (5-10) Big Picture Press, 978-1800781160, £16.99 hbk

An attractive and accessible book to encourage families to roll up their sleeves and cook together. Organised into food categories with general information and three or more easy to follow recipes. The recipes are from around the globe including Mexican street corn and Vietnamese noodle soup and even how to make a delicious meal from a 'treasure trove' of goods from the corner shop.

The Very Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra by Tim Lihoureau and Philip Noyce, illustrated by Olga Baumert (5-8) Dorling Kindersley Children's Books, 978-0241562499, £20.00 hbk

Two children set off on an interactive musical adventure. In a riverbank scene we are introduced to the cello, press a button to hear it play the swan theme from Saint-Saëns *Carnival of the Animals*. A New York Street scene introduces the clarinet and Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. A great introduction to the instruments of the orchestra for the very young. Information about composers, instrumentalists and the make-up of the orchestra is also included. Spot the ear worm on each page.



Sue McGonigle is an Independent Consultant and Co-Creator of www.loveybooks.co.uk

CLPE's Reflecting Realities Annual Survey:

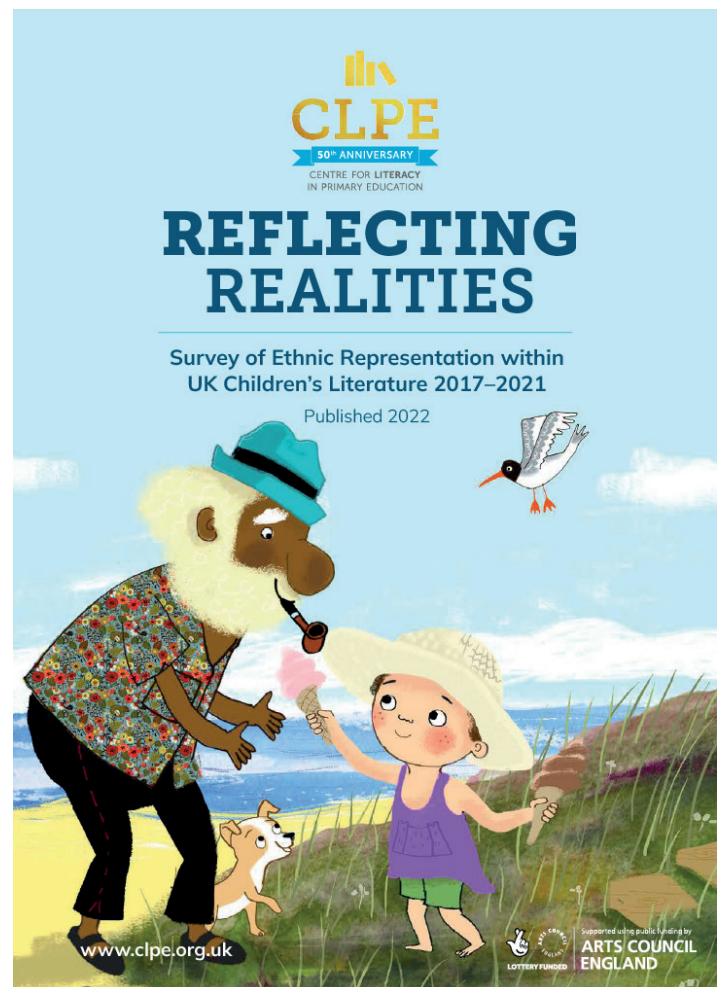
5 years on, what have we learnt?

Farrah Serroukh, Research and Development Director at **CLPE**, explores the impact of five years of Reflecting Realities and the challenges that remain.

Last month CLPE celebrated its [50th birthday](#). For 50 years we have worked alongside colleagues in Primary schools up and down the country and beyond to support them in developing best practice in all aspects of their literacy provision. Part of our mission has been to determine the role that literature has to play in supporting young children on their path towards literacy. Evidence from teachers and the responses, engagement and outcomes of pupils have clearly indicated the transformative power that quality literature can have in shaping a young child's reader, writer and learner identity. This is why determining what constitutes 'quality' has been an ongoing consideration for our charity over the years. We know through our work that books can be affirming and have the capacity to enable connection. They can be great sources of comfort, entertainment and escapism. They can also spark curiosity and imagination, as well as, deepen knowledge and understanding whilst broadening outlook. This is why we house an in-print reference library of over 23,000 titles which represent some of best books currently available in the children's literature market. This is also why books are central to our Learning Programme and feature so prominently through our online materials, from our Librarian's popular '[Phoebe's Picks series](#)' to hundreds of videos and teaching resources.

In November 2022 we are pleased to be publishing the 5th Reflecting Realities Annual Survey. This area of work forms one strand of our wider research and development work. It is a piece of research that we initiated as part of our ongoing quest for determining the defining features of quality literature. As educators and curators of children's literature, we will often seek to determine quality in terms of the language, narrative and characterisation of a text. We will consider whether the themes, subject matter and genre lend themselves to meaningful study or engagement. The question of whether or not a text is inclusive has often been an implicit consideration for many educators. Our annual survey sought to make this an explicit consideration by interrogating the extent and quality of representative titles available to young readers.

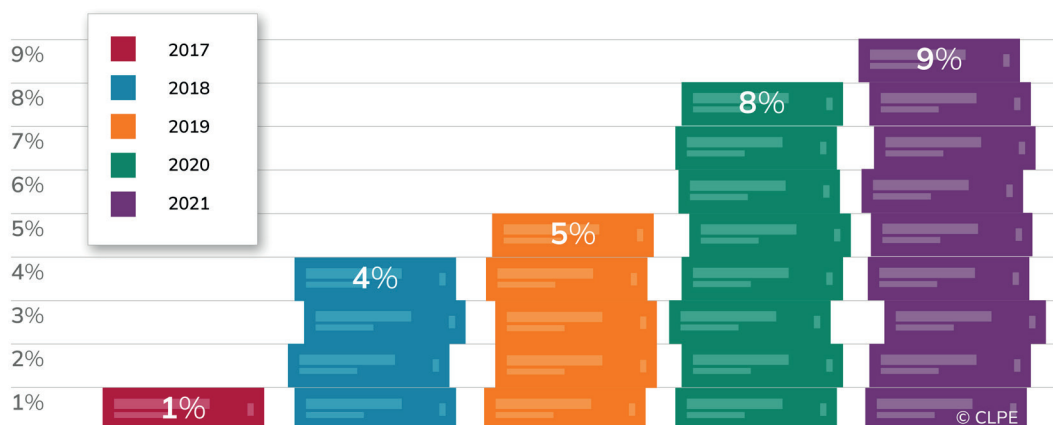
The term Reflecting Realities was inspired by [Dr Rudine Sims-Bishop's](#) analogy of books having the potential to serve as mirrors, windows and sliding doors. By having aspects of our reality mirrored back at us in the books we read, we can experience affirmation and connection. Books can also offer windows into realities beyond our own, broadening our outlook. And books can serve as sliding doors, enabling us to slip into and inhabit other realities. With this in mind, the underpinning questions that have consistently driven our work in this area, have been, what is the extent and quality of the presence of racially minoritised demographic groups in UK children's literature? And, to what extent do the portrayals of characters of colour that young readers encounter reflect their realities and that of society at large? These focused contemplations we hoped would clarify the extent of the issue, channel the momentum of longstanding advocacy in this respect and contribute further nuance in this area of discourse.



Reflecting Realities is not merely about characters of colour being present; it is an exploration of the ways in which they are present, how they are present and where they are present. In each survey we consider the ways in which they are characterised and portrayed and if they are multi-dimensional, well fleshed out individuals. We contemplate their level of agency, the casting dynamic and their proximity to the narrative. And, we explore the thematic range, subject matter and genres of the books in which they are located. We take such matters into account because through this work we hope to convey that it is not enough to be given the spotlight, we need to consider how our stories are being lit.

The data collated from the books reviewed for our very first report indicated that the extent of presence was very low and the quality was significantly lacking. Reporting that only 1% of main characters in books were characters of colour in that first survey sparked the

Main Cast of Characters



Children's Books Published featuring a Main Character from a Racially Minoritised Background (FIG. 2)

'ReadtheOnePercent' hashtag, which celebrated the important work of independent publishers like [Alanna Max](#), [Lantana](#), [Tiny Owl](#) and [Knights Of](#). The response was overwhelming and inspired Knights Of to create a pop-up inclusive children's book shop which has since taken up permanent residence in Brixton standing shoulder to shoulder with longstanding inclusive booksellers like [Book Love](#), [New Beacon Books](#), [Newham Bookshop](#) and [Letterbox Library](#).

The first report provided a benchmark against which to measure progress, progress that we were hopeful could be achieved with a collective investment of time, money and focus. It was published at a point in time when the public discourse regarding the need for better inclusion was prompting much introspection across industries. We could not have anticipated just how responsive the publishing industry would be.

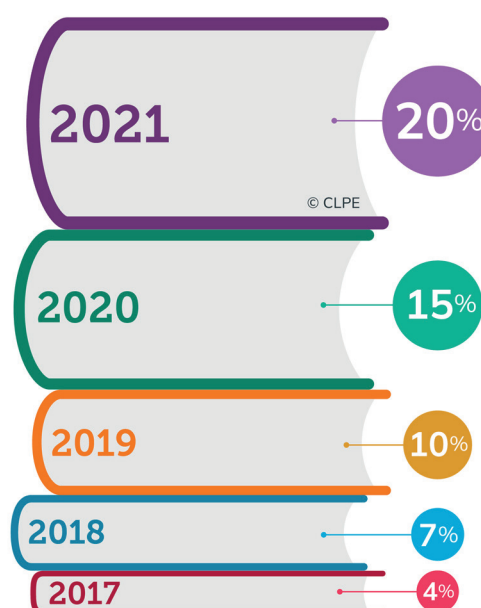
We have observed a steady year on year upward trend in all areas surveyed, which is remarkable given that this has been achieved in such a short time frame. This is of course something that we are greatly heartened by and welcome. It is important however to bear in mind that given how low the baseline was in the first report, there is still quite a distance to be travelled. Whilst there is a larger volume of inclusive titles available on the market, the growth is not consistent across text types, the growth of inclusive fiction has for example been much slower than the growth in inclusive non-fiction and picturebooks. The number of characters of colour present in the output has grown from 4% to 20% in this five-year period but characters of colour being cast as main characters has only grown from 1% to 9%.

Over the five years of reporting we have been keen to emphasise that increases whilst commendable, should be viewed with cautious optimism, because greater volume alone does not necessarily equate to better representation. In every report we have been very clear that the quality of the content of this growing presence must be carefully considered to ensure that the portrayals of racially minoritised characters do justice to their subject.

Each report marks a milestone on the journey that the industry has committed to taking in the interests of improving their output in this regard. Each year, we have been able to highlight exemplary titles that embody the principles and ideals of this work. We have delighted in spotlighting the growing pool of both emerging and long-established talent many of whom are creatives of colour. The fruits of the investments made in these creatives are evident in the richness and variety of high quality titles available to young readers and referenced in this year's report.

Whilst there is much to celebrate, there is also still much to be done. Five years into this work we find ourselves at an important junction. We have a sense of the scale of what can be achieved when raised consciousness hones the focus and informs collective efforts. We have clear examples, of what quality portrayals look like.

Overall Output



Percentage of Children's Books Published featuring Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic characters (FIG. 1)

Highlighting these, we hope improves understanding of the ingredients that shape such portrayals. We also have insights and a [lexicon](#) that define features of problematic, surface or poorly executed portrayals and convey the ways in which these can compromise the quality of the presence.

This is a pivotal moment for the publishing industry. The potential to build on these gains cannot be compromised by complacency. It is our hope that over the next five years these annual surveys continue to support ongoing dialogue within the industry. We also hope that the volume of inclusive and representative output continues to grow, the nuance in representations becomes more varied and the quality of portrayals becomes more refined, ultimately leading to improved quality inclusive literature that reflects the realities of all readers.

To read and download your free copy of this year's full report and the entire series of annual surveys click [here](#).



Farrah Serroukh is Research and Development Director at **CLPE (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education)**.

Beyond the Secret Garden: *Listen to This Story!* From Archive to Exhibition

For this issue of **BfK**'s long-running series **Beyond the Secret Garden**, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** offer a different kind of column, about the importance of preserving and celebrating children's books in a national institution. Listen to this story about an exhibition, the first exhibition entirely focused on the history of children's literature by and about Black Britons.

Like many stories, this one begins before the exhibition was born, in the archive of **Seven Stories**, the UK's National Centre for Children's Books in Newcastle. In 2014, Seven Stories began a project to expand their archival holdings. The organization, which includes materials from hundreds of children's authors, illustrators and publishers, primarily from the 1930s onwards, wanted to 'ensure our Collection tells fully the story of British children's literature' (Seven Stories) including reflecting social and cultural diversity. The Collecting Cultures project at Seven Stories produced many outcomes, not least of which was bringing several authors and scholars together in a one-day symposium in November 2017. The Diverse Voices symposium, whose participants included Patrice Lawrence, Catherine Johnson, Verna Wilkins, and Alex Wheatle, allowed space for authors to talk about the difficulties of getting—and staying—published in the British children's book world. Seven Stories' initiatives over the next five years led to the acquisition of material from John Agard, Grace Nichols, Valerie Bloom, Verna Wilkins, Errol Lloyd, and Ken Wilson-Max.

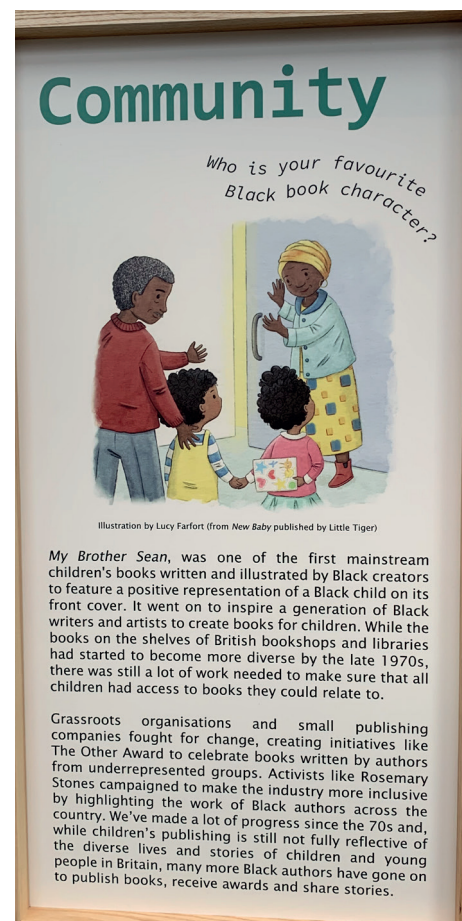
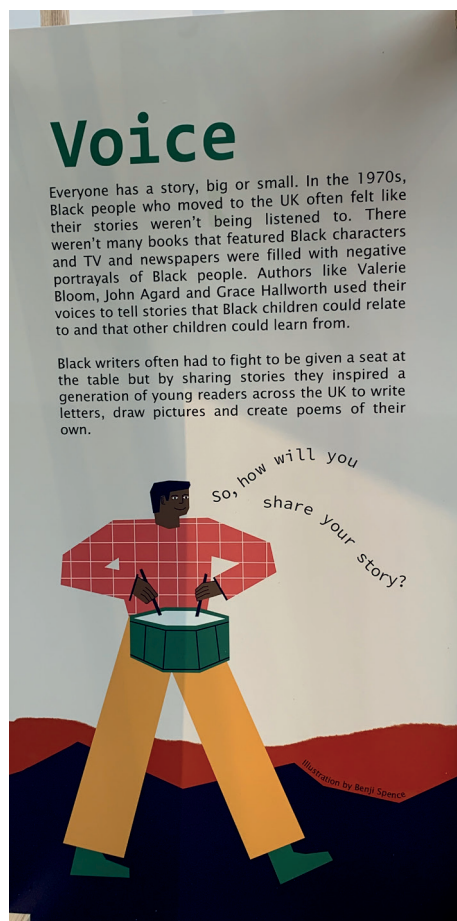
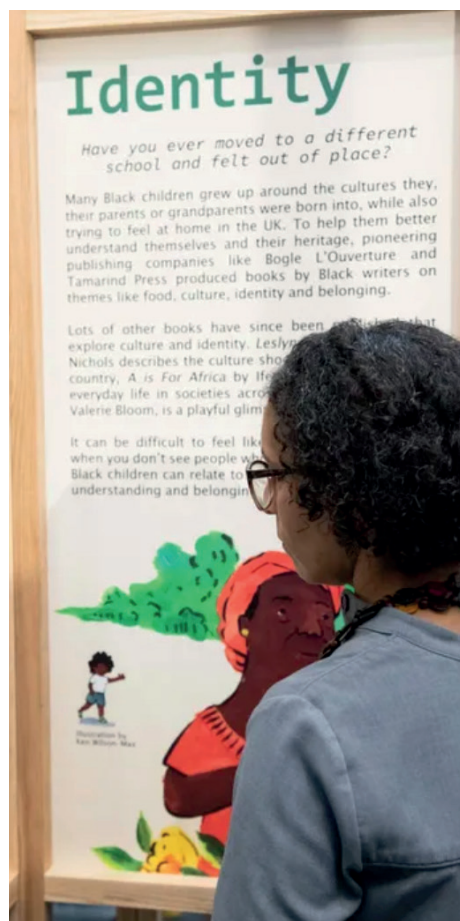
But while it is important to collect the work of these authors, preserving history is not enough if it means that their work is filed away in archives, traditionally places that are inaccessible to the general public. Ensuring that authors are in the public record is not the same as getting the public excited about their work, and it is not the same as recognising those authors' struggles and successes. Archives provide the material for telling something about history, but someone has to decide that a story is worth telling. By working in collaboration with Newcastle University and the City Library in Newcastle, **Seven Stories** was able to bring **Listen to This Story! An exhibition about children's books and Black Britain** to life.

The exhibition organisers (like any good storytellers) had to consider how best to balance their main subjects' passion and persistence against the difficulties and barriers they faced. Publishing for Black British authors has often been a labour of love—with emphasis on both labour and love, as authors struggled to find recognition in a very

white British publishing industry. But the audience for the exhibition (as for any good children's story) also had to be a consideration. This was the first time that Seven Stories set a major exhibition in the centrally-located Newcastle City Library rather than the Seven Stories Visitor Centre. The change in venue has advantages—a wide range of people in terms of age and other demographics visit the library—but these advantages also mean that the exhibition had to speak to all of those people. Community was, therefore, key to this story. The exhibition looks at the importance of community to Black British authors. This includes communities of Black activists who demanded reading materials like Bernard and Phyllis Coard's **Getting to Know Ourselves** (Bogle L'Ouverture 1972) for Black children being failed by the British educational system. It also includes community publishers, from the independent Black publishers such as New Beacon and Bogle L'Ouverture to community centres like Centerprise in Hackney that became publishers for the young Black people in their writing groups. Publications like **Talking Blues** (Centerprise 1976) allowed young Black Britons to imagine themselves as writers.

But—partly as a nod to the many communities in Newcastle who may experience the exhibition—the global and the present-day local community are also critical. The idea for the exhibition started with African-Caribbean authors, illustrators and publishers who created books for children in the 1970s. But then and now, the Black British community has been wider than this, and the exhibition celebrates the work of British African authors including Ifeoma Onyefulu and Ken Wilson-Max. Like Britain, the Black British community is not a single voice but many. Newcastle's community is also made up of many people from all walks of life, and the exhibition has a full programme of author and storytelling events to bring different communities together with the common goal of learning about Black British history and culture. Black British literature and history is British literature and history, and all children can and should experience it.





Voice is another main theme of the exhibition, because 'having a voice' doesn't just mean speaking (or writing) but being *heard*. British children's literature has not always made room for Black voices, but many artists and writers kept speaking until they were heard. The exhibition celebrates the patois of the Caribbean through Valerie Bloom's prominently displayed quotation from the poem *Show Dem* (**Touch Mi, Tell Mi** Bogle L'Ouverture 1983) and the manuscript page from John Agard's **Calypso Alphabet** (Collins 1989). It also indicates the ways that Black authors use their voice to counter stereotypes of Black people, as Ifeoma Onyefulu does in her discussion and creation of **A is for Africa** (Frances Lincoln 1993). And it celebrates children's voices—through publications like *Talking Blues*, but also through the letters children write to authors. Designed by architect Daniel Goodricke, **Listen to This Story!** includes an interactive space for workshops, with display space for children's drawings and stories: their voices matter too.

These two elements, having a supportive community and being able to speak and be heard, help children build strong identities, and identity is the third theme of the exhibition. Petronella Breinburg's and Errol Lloyd's character Sean, in **My Brother Sean** (Bodley Head 1973) is a classic and important story of Sean's first day at school. Afraid of not being accepted, he uses his voice—Lloyd depicts him with mouth wide open and in tears. The community of the classroom steps in and steps up, and makes Sean feel secure. Lloyd wanted to depict Black Britishness as 'ordinary' at a time when Black children often suffered both institutional and individual racism, but his books suggest that feeling ordinary, and having a sense of belonging, requires a community in which your voice matters.

The author Grace Nichols' novel, **Leslyn in London** (Hodder and Stoughton 1984) is about a girl from Guyana moving to Britain, and the feeling of belonging to two places—a duality which is shown positively in the exhibition by a letter from the National Library of Jamaica accepting Nichols' novel into the collection. The explanatory blurb notes that Nichols' work is part of the British Library as well. Identity can be multiple and fluid, changing and adapting. And just as the community centre Centerprise valued the voices of young

writers enough to publish their work and let them—literally—see themselves as writers, books like Ken Wilson-Max's **Eco Girl** (Otter-Barry 2022) allow readers to see themselves as activists with agency, caring for the planet that we all share. The exhibition's featuring of Wilson-Max's bold artwork from **Eco Girl** is a celebration of Black agency—but also of children's agency, no matter what their background. Strong communities can build identities, but strong individuals build communities as well.

Listen to This Story! tells a narrative of Black British history and children's book publishing through community, voice and identity. But the exhibition tells other stories too. By highlighting illustrations, letters and drafts from the archival collections alongside children's books, the culture and history of the books and their creators are valued as having national significance. This significance is not hidden away, but celebrated by turning archive documents and collections into a narrative that can change people's thinking, add to their understanding, and above all increase their enjoyment of Black British children's literature for all British readers.

Listen to This Story: An exhibition of children's books and Black Britain is on display through 30 November, 2022, at Newcastle's City Library, after which a national tour is planned.



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.

Lulu, Zeki and Anna McQuinn

Booky Girl Lulu and Zeki Books are two high-quality picture book series totally in tune with how young children view the world. Conceived by award-winning publisher and author [Anna McQuinn](#), each carefully crafted book joyfully reflects the everyday routines and mini adventures of babies and pre-schoolers as book-loving Lulu and her baby brother Zeki become intrepid little explorers supported by their loving parents.

Published in the UK and Ireland by [Alanna Max](#), both series are also hugely successful worldwide. And with a 10-book US publishing contract just secured, there's an exciting future ahead for these empowering, inclusive stories.

As a former teacher, Sure Start community librarian and publisher, author Anna McQuinn is a multi-talented yet unassuming giant in children's publishing who has written over 30 works for children. Fabia Turner interviewed Anna for **Books for Keeps**.

You started writing the Lulu series while working, part-time, as a community librarian. Did this experience inform your writing in any way?

Yes, it did. I was delighted with the opportunity to work directly with young children and their families. It was challenging but I really loved it. Using books with children every day, I learned a lot.

For me, stories need to take children and their concerns seriously. The things this age group are concerned about may seem small or inconsequential to adults - but I believe they are worthy of respect and serious consideration. The resulting stories may appear simple, but there's often a lot going on under the surface.

When I submitted the first Lulu story to publishers, I was repeatedly told that it didn't have enough going on—'too slight' was the phrase I remember. That was hard to hear, but after working closely with young children for two years, I had the confidence not to give up. I took the story to the Bologna Book Fair and I sold the US & Canadian, Dutch and Danish rights.

Recently I was really gratified when Charlotte Hacking of [CLPE](#) put me in the amazing company of Ken Wilson-Max, Chris Haughton, Daisy Hirst, and Petr Horáček, describing us as, 'Some of the very best writers for the youngest children.' So I am enormously grateful for what ended up being twelve years at Sure Start. I don't think I would be the writer I am without it.

Lulu and Zeki's family is depicted in a naturally inclusive and authentic way. The books also gently address class, economic status, gender roles and same-sex relationships. Can you tell us how you achieve this?

I often struggle to explain how I approach this. Rumaan Alam in his [extraordinary article](#), 'We need more diverse books like **The Snowy Day**', sums it up in ways I never could. Alam says,

'Peter is a gift to readers like my sons because what's never in question is that he is the everyman—an everyboy—and that he is black. That this is so rare is maddening. We need more books in which our kids are simply themselves, and in which that is enough'.

In Lulu I wanted to create an 'everychild'—a little Black girl with real agency, who is the hero of the story for no reason at all. I wanted to take all of her 'small concerns' seriously - her love of books, her ambition to have a garden, or get a pet cat, her preparations for starting preschool or going on her first sleepover...

In wanting to create an 'everychild', I knew I would have to work hard so more children would see themselves in Lulu. That meant being sensitive to things that might exclude and looking all the time to create opportunities to include instead. That often comes down to small careful details.



For example, early on, I decided to locate Lulu's family in an upper-floor flat. It's not an 'issue'—millions of kids thrive living in flats—but it does mean I have to think about how that impacts on every story I write.

So, when I researched **Lulu Gets a Cat**, all the online advice was to put a new kitten or cat in 'your utility or spare room' until they settle. Lulu's family doesn't have a utility, so I contacted **Cats Protection**. They advised that a small, contained space would do the job perfectly well. So, that's what I did. It's a tiny detail, likely unnoticed by children who live in houses with spare rooms, but it includes all those children who don't.

You work hard to be inclusive in your own writing. Are you involved in other projects that aim to increase diversity in publishing generally?

Yes, I started waaay back in the 1990s when I was very involved with the Working Group Against Racism in Children's Resources. More recently I've mentored people via [Creative Access](#), and informally I work with a few authors and two small publishers in the UK and Ghana. I'm a mentor for the **Jericho Prize** – I think it's fantastic not just in giving a prize but in offering free [workshops](#), panel sessions and advice to aspiring writers - that's hugely important in opening doors.

The illustrations are exquisite thanks to the genius of Ruth Hearson and Rosalind Beardshaw. There is an effortless synergy between your words and their artwork. As an author who's also an experienced editor, how involved are you in the illustrative process?

Many of my favourite books are by author-illustrators (Ken Wilson-Max, Suzanne Bloom, Kevin Henkes, Shirley Hughes, Ezra Jack Keats, Sandra Boynton...) so when I worked as an editor and publisher, I tried to create books where text and illustrations were interwoven as if one person produced them.

It's really unusual for authors to be involved in the illustration process, but because of how Lulu started (with me effectively acting as a publisher) I've ended up commissioning the art.

I have to be REALLY self-disciplined and not ask the illustrators to draw what's in my head. I leave as much as possible up to them. I usually send them draft text which, although rough, is often actually closer to what I want to say. Then, when the illustrations come in, so much of what I want to communicate is in the art that I can strip away unnecessary text. It's a much easier time to kill your darlings!

Over time, the illustrators have developed their own strong sense of the characters so the synergy between words and illustrations has grown. I feel extraordinarily blessed to work with two such talented women.

The latest titles, *Zeki Rise and Shine* and *Zeki Sleep Tight*, feel even more lyrical than previous books. Was this a conscious shift?

Gosh, that's a good question. I think that I try to respond to whatever topic I'm writing about. The first three Zeki stories were quite matter-of-fact, so the language is appropriately simple. When the publishers asked if I would do *Zeki Loves Mummy* and *Zeki Loves Daddy*, I responded with more playful and rhyming text.

When they asked for a good morning and goodnight pair I was thrown, not knowing how I would do anything different or original.

Then I came up with the idea of the senses waking up/going to sleep one by one, and that got me going. I LOVE alliteration, consonance and assonance, so I went wild!

I was also thinking about the parent reading so *Zeki Rise and Shine* is full of vibrant words that are fun to say, but *Zeki Sleep Tight* is slower—and the sentences get longer as you go along, to force the reader to linger on the page and slow down,

'He soaks in smells of forests where all the owls are sleeping'.

I did have to fight to keep that one, but I'm really proud of how well it sounds.

We're already at work on the next pair (*Zeki Goes to the Park* and *Zeki Hikes with Daddy*). There's a lot of play with hot and cold contrasts and different textures, so the texts are less lyrical but they work with the subject matter.

It sounds like the future is bright for Lulu and Zeki?

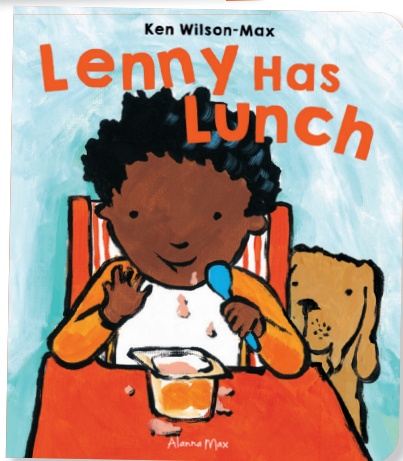
It's amazing! My publishers in the UK and the US have believed in Lulu and Zeki from day one, so I'm absolutely thrilled that they feel confident enough to sign up in advance for 10 new books. It's very exciting! And hectic—it's a lot of writing!

The Booky Girl Lulu by Anna McQuinn illustrated by Rosalind Beardshaw and **Zeki Books** by Anna McQuinn and Ruth Hearson are published by Alanna Max.

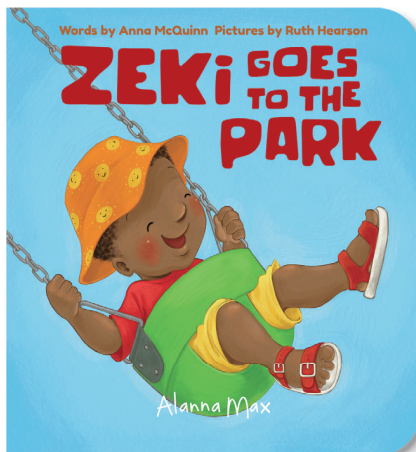


Fabia Turner is a former teacher and an educational book editor. She runs the [Candid Cocoa](#) book blog and created the [Black Children's Books Directory](#). She is founder of the [Jericho Prize for Children's Writing](#).

Coming Spring 23



Lenny Has Lunch
ISBN: 978-1-907825-361

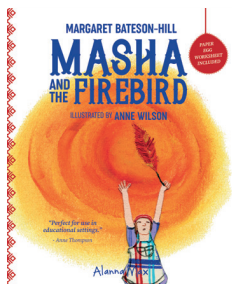


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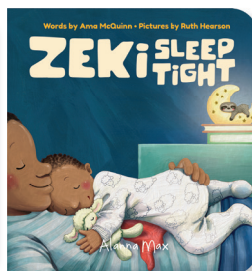
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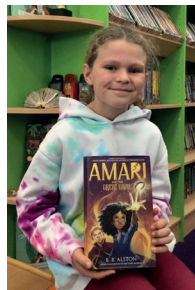
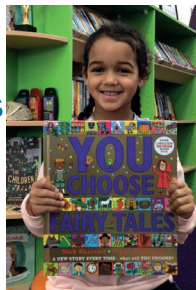
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Everyone loves a good story!

Good Reads

Our Good Reads were chosen by young people at **South Wilford Endowed C of E Primary School**, Nottingham. These young critics are the school's Reading Curriculum Leads and help teacher **Amy Greatrex** plan and promote reading for pleasure. Amy is a winner in the **Farshore Reading for Pleasure Teacher Awards 2022**, held in association with the Open University and the UK Literacy Association (UKLA), and was chosen for her successful work developing a reading community in school as well as in the home. Thanks to Amy and her students for this selection of Good Reads.



You Choose Fairy Tales

Nick Sharratt and Pippa Goodhart, Puffin, 978-0241488874, £6.99 pbk
Other people would like it because you get to choose your own person and you get to make a story. My favourite part of the book is the villain page because I like to see all the baddies and see what they do. The best villain is the Fox because he says to the Gingerbread Man 'pop on my nose' and then he eats the Gingerbread Man! It's a cool trick. The book makes me feel excited because you don't know what will happen next. I like it because it can be different each time and you can choose a new story. Sometimes my favourite character is to be the Frog because frogs are my favourite animals and then I like to choose a small house for them, like the tent! *Ava, Year 1*

Ruthless Romans Horrible Histories

Terry Deary, illus Martin Brown, Scholastic, 9781407167022, £5.99 pbk
I think people should read this book because it tells you the

history of the Romans and how they put real people and wild predators together to watch them fight. They were called gladiators and I learnt that they were only given a shield and a sword to fight, slaves weren't given anything and had to fight with their hands! They fought in a Roman stadium called the coliseum and it had loads of windows. The animals were real, so if the lion got out it could escape! I think people should read the whole series of Horrible Histories because the books are accurate and facts, whereas information on the internet can be false. I've read the whole series but I'm excited to read the new **History of the World** and **Horrible Christmas** books next. The most gruesome one is Henry VIII because he is really gruesome so watch out for that one if you are squeamish! *Peter, Year 3*

Amari and the Great Game

B.B. Alston, Farshore, 978-1405298643, £12.99 hbk

Amari and the Great Game is an amazing second story of Amari;

she has to win the crown so that the enemy doesn't decide upon a dreadful fate for magician kind. A book full of adventure, mystery, and shocking surprises that will keep you guessing! Overall, this is a page flipping read that I highly recommend. *Ellen, Year 6*

Skandar and the Unicorn Thief

A.F. Steadman, Simon and Schuster, 978-1398502710, £12.99 hbk

I loved **Skandar and the Unicorn Thief** because it was a real page turner! It's about a boy called Skandar who is meant to be tested to see if he's a unicorn rider but his teachers don't let him. Then one night there's a knock on the door and that's where it all begins. It's very exciting and a little bit scary. It's thick so it lasts a while so you can enjoy it for a long time and savour it. It's also interesting because in it, it pictures unicorns very differently to how people imagine unicorns based on most books. The only downside is that the book didn't last forever. If you

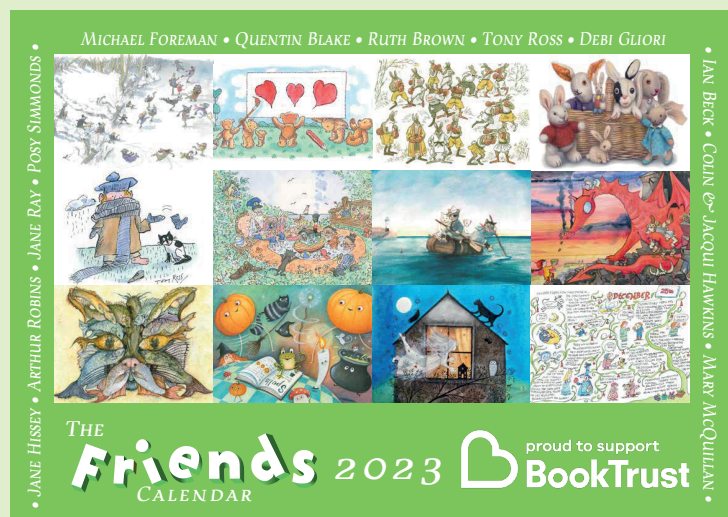
like fantasy, then this is the book for you! *Ben, Year 5*

The Night We Got Stuck in a Story

Ben Miller, Simon and Schuster, 978-1471192494, £12.99 hbk

This is a fantastic book with a vibrant front cover and an exciting blurb that makes you want to dive into the story more. It is about two children that spend the summer holidays at their grandparent's house. They really want to climb a tree that's close by. One night they climb the tree and enter a magical new world. There's a lady that had been trapped in string and she takes one of the kids. The kid that hadn't been taken find a bear and the bear gives her three magic berries. She went to a little village that looked wrecked! She later got bit and climbed out of the tree and became a spider. The spider she became was the spider species she saved and made humans and spiders friends! I hope you will read **The Night We Got Stuck in a Story** as your next book! *Esme, Year 4*

The Friends Calendar 2023



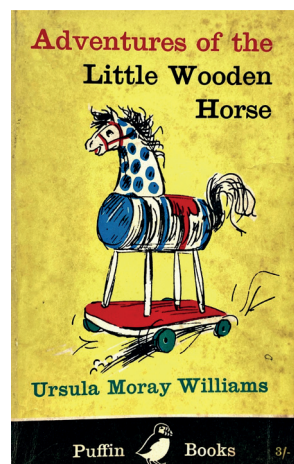
The perfect Christmas present for friends or relatives who love children's book illustration.

Featuring Quentin Blake, Jane Ray, Debi Gliori, and Ian Beck plus Tony Ross, Posy Simmonds, Michael Foreman, Ruth Brown, and Arthur Robins and a dedication to the amazing David McKee. All proceeds to BookTrust.

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A Story from the Archives: Of Wooden Horses and Happiness

At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 when we were all beset with shortages and supply chain difficulties, **Sarah Lawrance** found herself thinking about a series of letters from George G Harrap & Co in the archive of author Ursula Moray Williams at **Seven Stories**. She shares them for us here.



Harraps published many of Ursula's early titles including the two for which she is best known – **The Adventures of the Little Wooden Horse** (1938) and **Gobolino the Witch's Cat** (1942) – and the correspondence from this period tells a story of remarkable resilience in the face of wartime and post-war shortages (staff, paper, ink...), printing and bookbinding delays, government imperatives and rising costs.

Many of the letters are from George Anderson, Chairman of Harrap & Co, who was also a friend of Ursula's uncle (the publisher Stanley Unwin) and evidently took a close interest in Ursula's work while also being frank about the challenges of publishing – especially picturebooks – at such a difficult time. Sadly, there are no copies of Ursula's outgoing letters to Harrap's in the archive, but it is clear from the other side of the correspondence that she was both tenacious and business-minded in ensuring that, in spite of everything, her books continued to appear.

In a letter dated 5 October 1943 we read that though 'the printers are taking a dreadful time to get through colour books at present' Harrap's expected Ursula's picturebook **The Good Little Christmas Tree**, to be out within the month. The book was a wide oblong format illustrated with scissor cut collage pictures in an array of bright colours – the six-colour printing making for an expensive product. Nevertheless, the publisher is sufficiently confident to order 10,000 copies for sale at 10s 6d in the expectation that they will almost all be sold before Christmas – and indeed they were.

Two years later, the situation had evidently become even more challenging:

*'Although I can realise your disappointment over **The Three Toymakers**, I think you are a little hard upon us. It is quite evident that you do not realise half the difficulties that publishers have to contend with, especially over books with coloured illustrations. You have had rather more than your fair share of the paper we have had available during the last two or three years, and you must remember that we have a long list of authors and we have to try to be fair all round. We have got to the stage when we can make so definite promise [...] about the publication date of any book until bound copies are actually delivered into our premises [...] To add to our difficulties, the Army Education Department has ordered several hundred thousand of our books and these have to have priority and they put back the books that are intended for schools and the booksellers.'*

*'[...] **The House of Happiness** is in the printer's hands [...]. I do not think you need be in any fear that this book will not come out in July or August next year at the latest, but is it a big job and we are lucky to get it accepted by a printer at all. The government is still giving out an enormous amount of work to every lithographer in the country, and this is again another reason why publishers' work cannot be normally proceeded with [...].'*

(Letter from George Anderson to Ursula John (married name of Ursula Moray Williams), 16 October 1945.)



The House of Happiness referred to in this letter was another picturebook with collage illustrations. The letters in the archive allow us to follow every twist and in turn in its publishing story: the book eventually appeared in October 1946 and by 17 December Mr Sanderson was able to report that they had no more copies in stock; he would attempt a reprint 'during the coming year' but was far from hopeful of getting the order accepted by the printer...and so it goes on.

There are also letters from Ursula in other parts of the **Seven Stories** Collection, notably in the archive of Puffin editor Kaye Webb. **The Adventures of the Little Wooden Horse** had first appeared in Puffin under the editorship of Eleanor Graham in 1959; under Kaye, Ursula became a regular guest-come-organiser at Puffin Club events, exhibitions and holidays and in 1974 was made the first honorary member of the Puffin Club.

Ursula was now in her early sixties but her letters to Kaye describe a whirlwind of activity recounted with breathless enthusiasm: '... I was up in Bolton, Lancs, at a Federation Book Exhibition – theme being Witches and Wizards, awful journey, 4 changes and stood the last hour in the train – but a wonderful exhibition that I'd like you to have seen, all kinds of possible witches, paintings, models, mobiles, scenes thousands of children, far more than they expected, lots were actually turned away after queuing for ages in the rain. I've never signed so many autographs in my life, too many because one never looked up and there were all those splendid children to talk to...' (letter from Ursula Moray Williams to Kaye Webb c.1974).

Almost all of Ursula's seventy-odd books are now out of print, and it would be easy to forget the extent of her work if it wasn't for her substantial presence in the archive at Seven Stories. Though so much has changed in the intervening decades, through the archive Ursula's commitment to and joy in both her storytelling and her readers remain as an inspiration and encouragement.

Illustrations (with thanks to Seven Stories):

The House of Happiness (1946) – collage illustration; copyright Estate of Ursula Moray Williams

The Adventures of the Little Wooden Horse, Puffin Books 1959



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

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.lovelybooks.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

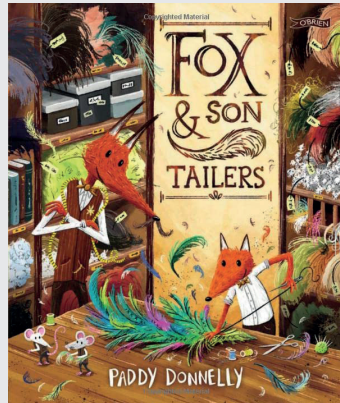
Lucy Staines is a primary school teacher

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



Fox and Son Tailors

★★★★

Paddy Donnelly, the O'Brien Press, 32pp, 978-1788492768, £12.99 hbk. Inspired by a real tailors in his hometown of Tullow, Co Carlow, Paddy Donnelly's new picture book will suit young readers perfectly. It celebrates the joy and importance of creativity, family love and relationships, and it has a particularly fine 'what if' as its starting point. *Fox and Son Tailors* you see, have been providing tails to smartly dressed animals for generations. Their shop is always busy, filled with birds and animals of all sorts trying on tails for size. Rory, youngest in the family, helps his dad in the shop, measuring the customers. Each spread is filled with bustle and activity so that you can almost hear the chatter of the customers, the opening and closing of doors and drawers. The pages depicting the fittings for the first day back at school is particularly hectic, feathers, tape measures and fluffy tails flying everywhere as little bunnies cause chaos.

A note of discord enters when Rory shows his dad his ideas for new tails – different, more flamboyant. His dad dismisses Rory's designs as silly, but when a customer arrives looking for something fabulous, Rory's sketches are just the thing. Rory worries he'll be in trouble, but his dad surprises him and soon they're working together to bring Rory's creations to life. The final spread shows Rory running the shop, tails now available in all colours, shapes and sizes. Donnelly's digital artwork has a gorgeous textured, painterly feel that is just right for the story and there's much to enjoy, discover and discuss in this story. **LS**

Eco Girl

★★★★

Ken Wilson-Max, Otter-Barry Books, 32pp, 978 1913074319, £12.99 hbk. Eve loves the flora and fauna of the forest near her home, especially the trees; best of all she loves the Baobab tree. She wonders whether trees talk

to one another and wishes she too were a Baobab so she could talk to other trees. Being a tree means being patient, her mother tells her, while her father explains how each tree plays a special role in caring for animals, humans and birds. On the day before her birthday Eve and her parents visit Grandma and on the seemingly long walk, Eve remembers about patience. When she meets her Gran, Eve asks if she'd talk to her granddaughter if she became a Baobab and receives a response that pleases her, as does Gran's mention of tomorrow being a special day.

Next morning, after a walk deep into the forest, a wonderful and very special surprise awaits the birthday girl. It's something that she must plant and tend, something that will connect her to the forest for many years to come. Proudly Eve promises to love and care for her little Baobab: happy birthday Eco Girl.

Sharing a continuing family tradition, this heartwarming story charmingly demonstrates the importance of tree cultivation, no matter where in the world you live. With a vibrant colour palette, Wilson-Max captures the verdancy of the forest environment around Eve's home and the loving tenderness of her family. Back-matter provides some tree facts including a paragraph on Wangari Maathai and her awesome environmental work in Kenya. **JB**

Ballet Kids

★★★★

Holly Sterling, Walker, 32pp, 978 1 4063 9524 2, £12.99 hbk

Open this charming book to endpapers covered in twelve different ballet positions, demonstrated by small children, delight stitched upon each of their faces. The magical pictures enhance every page, the author/illustrator obviously enjoying augmenting the text. Through twirling snowflakes we see Thomas, who wants to be a ballet kid, set off for the ballet school with this Mum. The little boys and girls struggle into their ballet shoes and then are ready, seated in a circle with Mr Elliot, the teacher. Stretching, marching, jumping, they limber up with obvious pleasure until it is time to choose their outfits for their Winter Show. They are to perform *The Nutcracker*! There are toy soldiers, fluffy white mice, and Clara in a floaty white dress. But what costume does Thomas find? 'Purple as a plum, covered in sparkly sequins,' it is the most wonderful costume he has ever seen. 'You're the Sugar Plum Fairy, Thomas,' calls Mr Elliot. As the music begins, Thomas prances and leaps and whirls and twirls, caught up in the moment, as are all the little dancers. Before leaving the rehearsal, Thomas voices his worries as he has never before been in a show. Mr Elliot

reassures him, 'Just listen and move with the music, Thomas. The magic will come from within.' And it is indeed a wonderful show. The illustrations glow with the enthusiasm that these very small children bring to the story, expressing the joyful spirit generated by their movement with the music. All dancers of all ages will surely tap their toes and join in the pirouettes and the arabesques as Thomas and his friends strut their stuff. **GB**

The Boy Who Dreamed Dragons

★★★★

Caryl Lewis, ill. Carmen Saldaña, Puffin, 30pp, 978 0241 48981 9, £12.99 hbk

Albie is a boy who doesn't need to be persuaded to go to bed. Unusually, he looks forward to it - because his dreams are full of dragons. As he sleeps, dragons of all kinds appear to him, some bright as jewels, some fierce and some quiet and whispery. Each night the dragons he dreams stay with him the following day, with fire dragons browning his toast and water dragons helping him swim.

His mum is a bit worried that Albie doesn't have any 'non dragon' friends to play with. Albie tries to be brave and make friends only to find he is laughed at when he introduces his dragon to other children, they can't see it and think he is being silly. Luckily, he finds a kindred spirit who not only sees his dragon but has similar magical dreams of her own. They soon became best of friends and together create wonderful worlds with fantastical creatures.

This is a beautifully written picturebook, the first in English by Caryl Lewis, an award-winning Welsh author. The illustrations are lovely and complement the text perfectly, creating a sense of magic and wonder.

A reassuring story for any child with an imaginary friend or a vivid imagination and any child inspired by the magic of dragons. **SMC**

Ghost Orchid

★★★★

Fiona Lumbers, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978 1 8391 3137 0, £12.99 hbk

This story is narrated by young Ava whose parents are explorers. We meet them on the day a letter arrives informing her mum and dad they are to undertake a mission: to find a very rare ghost orchid flower. There's a mad dash to catch the ferry and in their haste Ava's parents respond to her every comment both then and throughout their travels with 'Later, Ava, later.' Single-mindedly they can neither think or speak of anything but that Ghost orchid flower. Ava meanwhile marvels at the natural wonders around her - the glow of the Northern Lights, the moose in the forest, the rustling of bird wings, the starry desert sky with its wealth of tiny

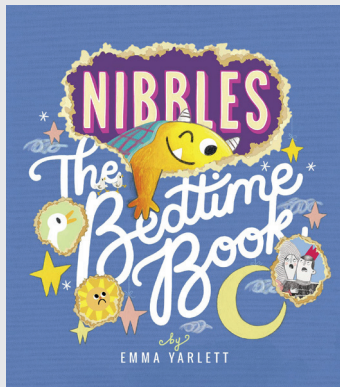
reviews

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flying creatures, the lush rainforest rich in birds and animals, the amazing flamingos and the enormous whale that swims beneath their boat.

After an exhaustive search, just when it seems her parents have failed in their mission, Ava looks upwards into the verdant canopy and there is something very special ... It's something I suspect readers will be as excited about as the characters Fiona Lumbers portrays in this scene.

There's a touch of the **Not Now Bernard** mentality in the tunnel vision approach of Ava's parents, though happily they make a decision about slowing down, enjoying the moment and looking through wider lenses on future expeditions. **JB**



Nibbles The Bedtime Book

★★★★★

Emma Varlett, Little Tiger, 32pp, 978-1801042932, £12.99 hbk

Everyone's favourite toothy little monster is back and hungry as ever. As fans of Emma Varlett's indefatigable creation will know, Nibbles' favourite food is books and he chomps his way through some favourite stories in his latest outing even though what he should be doing is snuggling down and going to sleep. In her ingenious fashion, Varlett sends him scampering up and across pages and through cleverly designed nibbled die-cut holes so that there are surprises and giggles with every page turn. The stories he devours include *The Ugly Duckling*, in which he really makes a splash, and *Cinderella*, where his bottom makes a surprise appearance. Eventually *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* works its magic, calming him down, though a black hole proves he was there, 'Up above the world so high, chomping planets in the sky'. Little children will absolutely love it but there are treats for grown-ups too: how many favourite books can you spot in Nibbles' library? It's wonderfully interactive and imaginative and Varlett imbues Nibbles with warmth as well as mishchief. **LS**

Goldilocks and The Three Crocodiles

★★★★★

Michael Rosen, ill. David Melling, HarperCollins 32pp, 978-0008509880, £12.99 hbk

Goldilocks and her dog, Tiddles, decide to go and hunt for the house they visited before with the chairs, and the porridge, and the bears, but on the way, they hear the sea: 'Persheeee, I am the sea...' a rhyme in six lines that is repeated throughout the book, and they follow the sound to the beach, where they enter a cave. They find three chairs shaped like fish, and three bowls of seaweed, and although, unlike the bear story, there are no contrasting problems (too hot, too cold, just right etc); two chairs are too slimy and slippery, (Yerchhhh!) but one is just right (her legs fit better on the smallest chair), two bowls of seaweed are too smelly, though the smallest one is fine so they eat it all up, and finally there are whelk shell beds, where the sound of the sea ('persheeee, I am the sea...') is too loud in two of them, but just at the right level in the smallest one, so Goldilocks and Tiddles go to sleep in it.

They hear the owners as they return: 'Who's been sitting in my chair?' before they see a baby crocodile, and behind the baby crocodile a bigger crocodile... (the reader sharing this book with children can really build up the drama here) and of course the biggest crocodile is wearing a pair of blue crocs! They are very fierce, and Snap! at Goldilocks and Tiddles, who 'run along the long, long, long beach, through the deep, dark woods and, and, and, back home'. As Goldilocks (and Tiddles) go to sleep in her own bed, cuddling a toy crocodile and with a whelk shell on her bedside table, (did it really happen?) she can still hear the sea poem...

This is a delightful follow-up to the Three Bears version, with all Michael Rosen's skill with words, and a few nods to **We're going on a Bear Hunt** at the beginning and at the end. David Melling's excellent illustrations add humour: see Tiddles attempting to carry a very worried-looking Goldilocks out of the cave! The décor in the crocodiles' cave is very inventive, and children may enjoy spotting the details, like the mobile consisting of fish skeletons.

This beautifully produced book will be great to read aloud to children, and good fun will be had by all. **DB**

My Rhinoceros

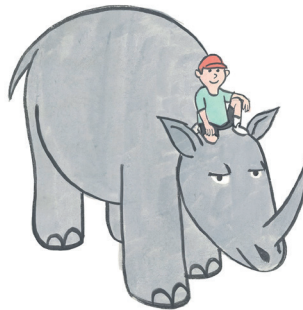
★★★★★

Jon Agee, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 9781912650996 £12.99 hbk

Scallywag Press continues to bring us entertaining children's books from established creators alongside new ones; the ongoing publication of Jon Agee's work is proving to be an utter delight. It is clear why Maurice Sendak was known to be an admirer. Known

MY RHINOCEROS

JON AGEE



for juxtaposing the normal alongside the unusual, Agee's picturebook opens with a child peering through an 'exotic pets' shop window where he spies a dozing rhinoceros. Possibly ignoring the 'All Sales Final' plaque that stands upon the shop desk, the boy leaves with his purchase and the story begins.

Hoping, perhaps, that the rhino will live up to its explosively belligerent persona and charge around the garden, the boy finds that his newly acquired pet is far from stereotypical. In true Agee style, the rhino is placid, docile and, at best, 'tolerant' of its owner. Here, Agee excels in telling so much through the rhino's eyes – a few black lines and the exasperated, withering look from the rhino are clear.

As the young owner becomes more exasperated by the rhino's unwillingness to 'play', humorously heightened by Agee's use of perspective to exaggerate the size difference between pet and owner, the boy seeks out advice from adults. The only piece given is that rhinos enjoy 'popping balloons and poking holes in kites'.

With such an oddly specific playful resume attached to the rhino's reputation, the boy heads to the balloon-and-kite-filled park only to find that even then his pet disappoints. Could he have purchased the dullest animal possible? In true Agee style, the joyfully funny and nonsensical reveal comes near the close with an outcome that will delight readers both young and old. A joy. **MT**

Valentine's Guest House

★★★★★

Sam Sharland, Child's Play, 32pp, 978 1 78628 562 1, £7.99 pbk

Valentine runs a guest house, and her daughter Elsie likes to help out, making sure guests have all they need. One day Elsie discovers a tiger, hiding in a store cupboard, in need of somewhere to stay. The tiger quickly settles into life at the guest house, but unsurprisingly, the other human guests are less impressed, and they all promptly leave. Valentine is very worried that no one will want to stay in her guest house again but when Emmet messages his friends, soon lots of prospective (four legged!) guests arrive. There is a strong message of inclusion as Valentine and Elsie find ingenious ways to accommodate their varying needs – from the tortoise who

wants a room with a view but can't get up the stairs to the elephant who can't fit through the doorway.

The richly coloured illustrations are soft, warm and very appealing. The image of the tiger asleep in Elsie's bedroom is a particular delight. There are lots of details to spot such as how the tiger helps Elsie and her mum. Don't miss the end papers with a glimpse inside the guest house pre and post its change of occupancy from human to animal guests.

With echoes of **How to Hide a Lion** (Helen Stephens) and **Everybody's Welcome** (Patricia Hegarty and Greg Abbott) this is a delightful picturebook. **SMC**

Mina Belongs Here

★★★★★

Sandra Niebuhr-Siebert, ill. Lars Baus, Floris Books, 40pp, 978-1782508113, £12.00 hbk

Mina is worried about starting kindergarten in her new country. Everything is different and confusing and at first the only words she can understand are her own name. As she spends more time in school, the noises and sounds around her become less confusing and her understanding grows. Her dreams become calmer, and she practises the exciting new words and sounds at home; 'when she said the word 'squirrel', her tongue tumbled and turned like a somersault and tickled her mouth!'

Her new friends and teacher help her and Mina's grasp of the new language grows until she realises that it now also belongs to her and she is soon confident enough to welcome the next new arrival to the school.

The author of the book is an experienced linguist and has done extensive research into multilingualism in childcare and educational settings. Lars Baus' lively illustrations were created using water and acrylic paints, as well as digital methods. The early monochrome pictures give way to increasingly vibrant colours as Mina's understanding grows and each page holds an array of intriguing pictures and ideas to discuss with a young audience, many of which will be familiar to children also facing new and daunting situations. With the growing arrival of many non-English speaking children into UK schools, Mina's experience is a wonderful way to build empathy in young readers and this uplifting story of a migrant's journey to understanding and belonging would be a great addition to any younger years' classroom. **AH**

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The author of the book is an experienced linguist and has done extensive research into multilingualism in childcare and educational settings. Lars Baus' lively illustrations were created using water and acrylic paints, as well as digital methods. The early monochrome pictures give way to increasingly vibrant colours as Mina's understanding grows and each page holds an array of intriguing pictures and ideas to discuss with a young audience, many of which will be familiar to children also facing new and daunting situations. With the growing arrival of many non-English speaking children into UK schools, Mina's experience is a wonderful way to build empathy in young readers and this uplifting story of a migrant's journey to understanding and belonging would be a great addition to any younger years' classroom. **AH**

Blow a Kiss, Catch a Kiss

★★★★★

Joseph Coelho ill. Nicola Killen, Andersen Press, 48pp, 978-1-83913-136-3, £12.99 hbk
Blow a kiss, catch a kiss put it in your heart...

Perfectly pitched for modern families and covering a range of topics that will be familiar to all, this anthology for babies and toddlers presents a collection of brand-new poems that already feel like much-loved classics. Themes range from car journeys, supermarket shopping and screen use to windy days and bubble baths, and a joyful parade of busy and diverse characters enlivens every spread. Nicola Killen's illustrations shine with playfulness, sincerity and warmth, and young readers will enjoy spotting familiar situation and objects. Special emphasis is given to emotions and their impact, and inventive, playful approaches help minds and hearts engage (as in the poem that starts *Anger came a-bubbling, a-bubbling, a-bubbling / Anger came a-doubling, a-doubling, a-doubling*, which is hard to read without laughing, and should be required reading for anyone in a strop).

Effective use is made of rhyme and rhythm throughout, but these poems are not constrained by form: they can be recited, or sung, or danced to, or acted out, and can be shared in different ways according to situation

and mood. Many readers will add their own special touches – growly voices, fingers pitter-pattering like rain, a much-anticipated hug – and a sense of warmth and fun bubbles along throughout. Coelho recognizes the importance of such interactions in his dedication to the book – '*for all those taking the time to read to their little poets. You rock!*' – and his awareness of how these poems will be shared reflects his experience as a playwright and performance poet.

Rhymes and wordplay are so important for early language development, and traditional nursery rhymes are much-loved and will always have a place – not least because they introduce unfamiliar language and ideas that may excite and intrigue young audiences. But many traditional collections don't reflect the experiences of modern families in a diverse world, and children need to see themselves and their daily lives represented in the books they read. The poems in **Blow a Kiss, Catch a Kiss** connect with contemporary family life and reflect it in a way that everyone will recognize and enjoy, and this anthology will be welcomed anywhere that adults and their little ones have time and space to interact. It will also please children as they grow: there is plenty here to draw on as they start school, for example, and begin to explore the wider world. **CFH**

What Feelings Do When No One's Looking

★★★★★

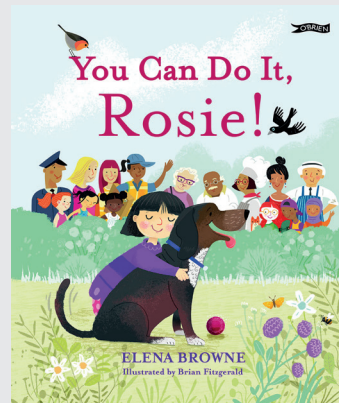
Tina Oziewicz, ill. Aleksandra Zajac, Pushkin Press, 62pp, 978 1 78269 359 8, £12.99 hbk

This hardback picture book is longer than usual but is worth every page. In a highly imaginative and remarkable way, we see feelings portrayed as they have never been before. Twenty-nine different small furry creatures show us what they do when no one else is around, and the artistic work, in different greys and blacks on white backgrounds with the odd spot of occasional soft colour, is outstanding in every way. For instance, Contentment 'rests in an armchair with a cup of tea in its paws', Trust 'builds bridges', Compassion 'helps snails across the pavement', and Patience has 'a beautiful garden'. More negative feelings are handled too: Anger 'explodes'; Hatred 'chews through wires'; Sadness 'wraps itself in a blanket'. Translated from Polish into twenty-five different languages, this poignant and heart-warming information book will teach children about feelings as nothing else quite can and deserves to be in every primary classroom. **ES**

You Can Do It, Rosie!

★★★★★

Elena Browne, ill. Brian Fitzgerald, O'Brien Press, 978-1788492898, 32pp, £11.99 hbk
This gentle story, in which a little girl and an old dog find adventure together,



is very charming and rooted in a setting that all children will recognise. Aoife and her dad are getting ready to go out, and Aoife feels like an adventure, perhaps a trip to the mountains or the sea. But 'It's too much for poor Rosie' says Dad, referring to the grey muzzled dog in her basket. A trip to the park can be filled with adventure though, if you're ready to use your imagination and with the help of friends and neighbours. Rosie is helped along by all those they meet on the way, the postman, playing children, other dogs, the people at the bus stop, while the butcher and the baker provide treats. Arriving at the park, Aoife and Rosie transform themselves into pirates before reversing their steps and returning home. 'Who needs mountains and the sea?' asks Aoife, 'Adventure and kindness is the key/ To unlock a world for you and me.' Rosie is a lovable and reassuring presence in the story, and children will enjoy following her route, and identifying the settings and people they know from their own lives. The book's message of resilience and perseverance is an important one, as it quietly demonstrates that with imagination and the support of other people, just about anything is possible. **LS**

The Blue-footed Booby

★★★★★

Rob Biddulph, HarperCollins Children's Books, 32pp 978-0008413392, £12.99 hbk

The uber-talented Rob Biddulph became a firm household favourite during the pandemic lockdowns thanks to his **Draw With Rob** videos, which attracted huge audiences and kept thousands of children & their parents captivated both then and since. Many of these fans will recognise the hero of Rob's latest book as the star from one of these videos and this glorious tale is sure to create many more new fans. As everybody knows, red-footed boobies are fabulous bakers, but when one of Desmond's frangipane tarts goes missing, he begins a hunt around town to track down the culprit. All signs point to the lesser-known blue-footed booby being the culprit, but all is not as it seems.

'Let's follow the footprints to see where they go! Left footprint... right footprint... dash through the snow!'

From the very beginning of this delightful book, the fantastic rhyming storyline makes you smile to read it aloud. Each page holds a new delight

of riotous colour and clever drawings, as we follow the red-footed boobies on their hunt for the baking thief.

I've enjoyed many of Rob's previous books, but this one is sure to become a classic. The clever and funny story has many twists and turns to keep the reader guessing to the very end, but also has so much to look at that it will keep you returning again and again, each time spotting something new.

Eagle-eyed readers will also spot the 'Five things to find' list at the front of the book, plus the removal of the dust jacket reveals some extra hidden delights.

This is a must-have book for all home and school libraries, and I loved it. **AH**

Found

★★★★★

Written and ill. Sam Usher, Templar Books, 40pp, 978-1800781191, £12.99 hbk

On a day trip to the coast, a little boy and his Grandad explore rockpools, build an amazing sandcastle and eat ice cream, but their long-awaited swim must be postponed when they discover a seal pup tangled in a net. Keen to return it safely to its home, the pair borrow a little red boat and set sail, but a storm blows up and makes their task more difficult. 'What a day!' says Grandad, later, as seawater drips onto his kitchen floor. 'You never know what you're going to find at the beach!'

Found celebrates the important details of everyday life, but over and around them it layers inventive fantasies, bringing the boy's inner world into sharp focus and adding poignancy to his inter-generational relationship. An underwater swim turns into a search for pirate treasure, and in a homage to world architecture, a few buckets of sand upended on the beach become a gigantic town complete with towers, cupolas and pediments - but whatever the boy throws at him, Grandad rises to the challenge. Dressed in a sleeveless pullover, rolled up trousers and wire-framed specs, he keeps his tie firmly knotted at all times but clearly welcomes adventure, and his facial expressions and body language reflect genuine and heartfelt involvement with his grandson's world. As in previous titles in this series, the relationship between the pair is sensitively and convincingly portrayed: they clearly love and respect each other, and their interactions are a pleasure to observe.

Admired for his technical drawing skills, Usher works in watercolour and his artwork for this book is imbued with a sense of timelessness, simplicity and honesty that ensures wide appeal. The minimal but well-written story creates an effective framework for these illustrations, allowing Usher to expand visually on the text in a way that feels so natural we barely notice it.

Found offers exciting and productive starting points for learning in schools and other settings, and its gentle blend of fantasy and realism with a dash of nostalgic joie-de-vivre will stimulate and reassure young readers and speak to adult hearts. It is the latest instalment in a much-loved series including **Free, Wild and Lost**. **CFH**

5 – 8 Infant/Junior

New Talent

The Search for the Giant Arctic Jellyfish

★★★★★

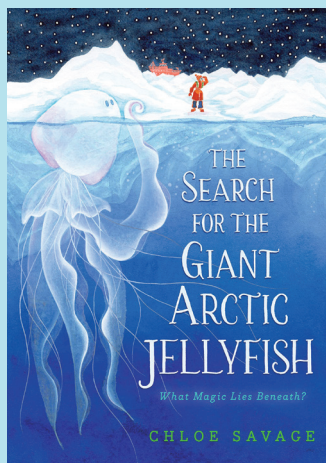
Written and ill. Chloe Savage, Walker Books, 32 pp, 978-1-4063-9188-6, £12.99 hbk

After years of preparation, Dr Morley is embarking on a quest to study her favourite jellyfish in its natural habitat. As her well-equipped research vessel makes its way through the icy waters of the Arctic, the dedicated scientist and her crew are able to measure, test and record all sorts of interesting encounters, but the giant jellyfish remains elusive. Or does it?

Imbued with an icy coldness that evokes the grandeur and excitement of its setting, **The Search for the Giant Arctic Jellyfish** brings the landscapes of the frozen north to life in a playful, warm-hearted exploration of scientific perseverance and visionary leadership. Chloe Savage's theatrical sense of composition and page turn creates mounting tension of the most gleeful kind, and even the youngest audiences will quickly realise that we're being shown much more than we're being told. Poor Dr Morley's fate is entirely in the hands (tentacles?) of the jellyfish, which conceals itself with ease and chooses the most dramatic moment to reveal itself.

Colour and perspective are also key components in the drama. The deep, rusty red of Dr Morley's vessel pops in a satisfying way against the saturated blues, and the horizontal page division between air-breathers and water-dwellers transforms our understanding of what's going on.

Savage is keen to show the reality of Dr Morley's research. A cutaway through her vessel invites readers to explore life on board, and a few gently scientific terms (measurements,



samples, algae...) are amplified by images of the scientists peering down microscopes, drilling through ice sheets, netting samples and making copious notes. Alongside the attention to detail and practical fact-finding most commonly associated with this kind of work, Savage also captures the visionary and creative aspects, making her depiction unusually well-rounded and nuanced. This is an expedition that feels as though it really could take on the beauty and unpredictability of the Arctic, and in Dr Morley it has a determined and effective female leader who will inspire young readers to 'think bigger' and pursue their dreams.

The expedition's voiceover is disarmingly straightforward, creating a sense of routine practicality punctuated by hints at the poetry and passion behind Dr Morley's enterprise. There are moments when the text doesn't flow as easily as it could, but generally it's a pleasure to read aloud, and does an excellent job of framing everything that young children (and their adults) will love about this well-planned and immensely well-executed debut. **CHF**

Our Story Starts in Africa

★★★★★

Patrice Lawrence, ill. Jeanetta Gonzales, Magic Cat, 40pp, 978-1913520588, £12.99 hbk

This brilliant, vibrant picture book tells the story of Africa and its people in an engaging, sensitive, and child-friendly way. The book is set in Trinidad where Paloma, full of excitement to be visiting family, is confused when her cousins refuse to play with her, saying that she does not talk like them and so cannot be family. Tante Janet then ably addresses the issues of the wider African diaspora by telling Paloma the story of the oldest family in the world, a family that she,

Paloma and her cousins all descend from. Tante Janet's story starts in Africa and celebrates the peaceful, creative history of its stories, trading, art, weaving, music, and writing. The story does not shy away from talking about slavery, colonisation and the scramble for Africa's land and resources. Paloma feels empowered by tales of past warrior Queens and by hopes for Africa's future and the book ends with the united, loving family looking up at the stars from their Trinidadian garden.

Patrice Lawrence succeeds beautifully in combining a celebration of African history and achievement with a child friendly treatment of difficult subjects such as war, slavery,

Ed's Choice

The Lucky Bottle

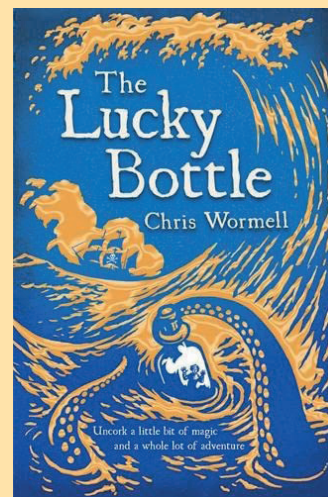
★★★★★

Chris Wormell, David Fickling Books, 304pp, 978-1788451888, £12.99 hbk

Have you ever wondered how a ship could get into a bottle – especially a ship with masts? Well, you are about to find out, though this may not be the main point of the story.

Jack is ten, his home a farm. He longs for adventure; his head filled the tales of pirates, action and treasure. He becomes a cabin boy on board a ship. Then – the storm. Jack finds himself the sole survivor washed up on a deserted island with only a giant tortoise for company. But then Jack meets Robinson, who has been living there for nineteen years! Despite the friendship that develops, Jack longs to get home – but how? Determination, imagination – and the help of a magic potion might make it possible. However, it will be a journey fraught with danger – storms, sharks – and a pirate called Bad Bob.

Wormell is a master storyteller. This is a story to share, to read aloud at bedtime or to a class or just to yourself. The voice is direct; short, sharp, simple constructions allied to longer descriptive moments. There are also references to raise a smile of recognition for the adult reader, or encourage a younger reader to explore further. It is refreshing to



meet such a positive adult in the character of Robinson, while Jack is a very real boy whose reactions to his predicament are entirely believable. There are plenty of practical details to enjoy (or not) but Wormell then adds the excitement of imagination and the leavening of humour; a magic potion which can shrink you (there is an antidote) and a crew of pirates who are satisfyingly nasty. Adding another dimension to the text are Wormell's masterly illustrations and page decorations – line drawings in ink – highlighting details, anchoring a scene, but doing so subtly without the distraction of colour. Indeed the whole production is excellent sure to encourage adventurous children to open the covers and set sail. **FH**

and colonisation. This book will facilitate conversations with children about African history, legacy, potential and about the African diaspora. The text is complemented perfectly by Jeanetta Gonzales' warm and vivid illustrations of a lively family in a lush, tropical Trinidadian environment. The sepia tones of the illustrations depicting historical events contrast effectively with the bright, Caribbean colours. There is an informative note from the author at the end of the book and two pages of further answers to questions that a curious child like Paloma would ask. This is an excellent book, one to share with children of all ages, a must have title for home and library shelves, and highly recommended. **SR**

Joao by a Thread

★★★★★

Written and ill. by Roger Mello, trans. Daniel Hahn, Elsewhere Editions, 40pp, 978-195386134, £13.99 hbk

This lyrical and visually intriguing picturebook explores the shadowy, existential world between waking and sleeping, and celebrates our right to

think freely, question and create.

'Where's it hiding, the night that kisses Joao? In the strands of a lullaby? Fluttering in the wind?'

Joao is snug in bed where sleep beckons, and as he tumbles headlong into the pattern on his blanket, his adventures among its woven images become increasingly surreal. Grappling with a worrying hole that grows and grows, Joao discovers that his blanket is unravelling into threads – and ultimately, words – that gleam like moonlight against the saturated red and black of the pages. But all is not lost. Using a question mark as a needle, Joao sews the words together to make himself another blanket, and peaceful sleep is possible at last.

From the very first spread, our attention is captured by the lacy white pattern of the blanket flowing on into the book, and we barely notice the boy tucked up in bed. Later, Joao's lanky silhouette takes centre stage and is remarkably expressive. 'Mello draws like a shapeshifter', says his publisher, and the more we look, the more the apparent simplicity of his artwork becomes richer and

more complex. Traditional motifs are transformed before our eyes: fish, boats, shells and other objects grow and shrink within the patterns, and Joao's interactions with them become increasingly surreal.

Mello's sensitively-translated text is also spare and dreamlike. Questioning and suggesting, it evokes the disorienting nature of sleep in a verbal dance that leads and responds to the images on every spread. Readers able to meet his "poetic and bewildered language" with curiosity and confidence will be rewarded: this is a book to fire imaginations and prompt creative explorations and responses. But it does require audiences to suspend expectations and enter a world where questions must be asked – and many are left unanswered – so may deter some readers.

In *Joao by a Thread*, Mello acknowledges and explores the loneliness and anxiety we all experience in our sleep ('How do you stop a hole that doesn't stop?') and there's nothing cosy or predictable about reading it. But text and pictures work together to offer an intriguing and unthreatening way to confront this essential unease and celebrate the independence, curiosity and creative spark it brings.

Roger Mello is an award-winning Brazilian illustrator with more than a hundred titles to his name, twenty-two of which he also wrote. This book was dedicated to children on the Uros Islands of Lake Titicaca, where weaving has a long and distinguished history, and in a moving afterword, Mello talks about growing up under an authoritarian regime in which people had to search for missing relatives and could be arrested for owning the wrong book. 'So I decided to make my own blanket of scattered letters,' he explains. 'From animal tales to contemporary arts, I pulled on the thread that connects today's books to an ancient tradition. Just like the first piece of fabric that sheltered a sleeping child on Lake Titicaca.' **CFH**

Midnight Magic Witch Trap

★★★★

Michelle Harrison, illus Elissa Elwick, Little Tiger, 978-1788951500, 96pp, £5.99 pbk

Michelle Harrison's magical little story is a perfect lesson in how to write for emerging readers. The story fizzles along in verse that is both a help to young readers spelling out the words, and a pleasure for adults to read aloud (sadly not always the case with rhyming texts), and is delightfully inventive. Trixie and her witch's kitten Midnight have great fun playing the make-believe games loved by all children, but they can take things to a higher level thanks to Midnight's magic and a pile of leaves can be transformed into a real-live leaf dragon they can ride round the garden. The dragon is there to help

them too when Midnight is kidnapped by a witch. In a twist that also delivers for the audience, the witch is revealed to be sad not bad, and is helped by our young heroes to find a new, more satisfying way of life. The sparkle of the story is more than matched by Elissa Elwick's illustrations, in vibrant black and orange, making this a bewitching package. **LS**

Rudy and the Monster at School

★★★★

Paul Westmoreland, ill. George Ermos, Oxford Children's Books, 96pp, 9780192782519, £6.99 pbk

This story of friendship introduces early readers to the world of classic monsters. Despite being full of mummies, monsters and ghosts, though, the scariest things about Rudy's story are the fear of not fitting in and the threat of bullying.

Rudy is a werewolf and understands the power of the pack. His pack of friends love skateboarding and football at playtimes. They are a little frustrated by the arrival at school of Frankie, an enormous gentle giant of a monster whose clumsiness causes all sorts of problems in class.

Rudy and his friends are faced with the dilemma of how to be kind and tolerant without letting Frankie spoil all their fun. Some of the other children – the demon boy Jimmy Voll, in particular – are less willing to give Frankie a chance, and the story explores what it means to be a good friend in difficult circumstances.

With bright, bold illustrations in black and blood-red generously adorning each page, *Rudy and the Monster at School* is visually striking. The spooky setting evokes traditional horror movies but readers looking for scares will be disappointed. The book rarely departs from its main issue of friendships and fall-outs and, though it delivers powerful messages in a child-friendly manner, there are few moments of humour or drama to excite young readers. With other episodes in Rudy's series on the way, there are plenty of avenues to be explored with this friendly werewolf. **SD**

Flying Scotsman and the Best Day Ever

★★★★

Michael Morpurgo, illus Michael Foreman, Thames & Hudson with National Railway Museum, 32pp, 978-0500652947, £12.99 hbk

Iris has a wish. She wants, just once, to stand in the cab of the Flying Scotsman, the great steam locomotive her father drives. Every birthday she is taken to the station where she sees her father standing proudly beside the engine as the steam builds up and the train finally sets off on its journey north. She longs for more – will her wish ever be granted?

Morpurgo has just the right voice for this real-life story as he captures the longing, the excitement, even the disappointments of Iris. This is no fantasy. The Flying Scotsman was

indeed an iconic locomotive all its working life and remains a star in retirement. Children who will never experience travel behind a real steam locomotive – the noise, the rhythm of the wheals, the smoke – nevertheless are fascinated by such engines as can be seen by the continuing popularity of Thomas and his friends. Foreman's illustrations are as grounded as the storyteller's voice bringing the period and the Flying Scotsman to life in lively vignettes adding colour and atmosphere to every page. For the young with curious minds there is a fact file including satisfying statics as well as added history, while the covers open and close with the schematic of the engine itself. Whether a steam enthusiast or not this is a lively enjoyable glimpse of history. **FH**

Strong and Tough

★★★★★

Rico Hinson-King, ill. Nick Sharratt, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 978 1 5266 4863 1, £6.99 pbk

This real-life story by footballer Rico Hinson-King, written when he was ten years old, is a life-affirming tale of children who have had to learn at a young age to be 'strong and tough'. He and his two sisters were taken from their birth family at an early age, and at first he is taken to different foster parents than his sisters, and this makes him very sad and fearful. Sometimes he cries, but his new home is nice, and he tries to be strong. He sometimes sees his sisters at a Contact Centre or in the park, but when they must separate again, it is hard. He is happiest when playing football, and when the three children are finally sent to a new set of foster parents – together – they are all delighted. These new fosterers are both male, and they do lots of exciting things together. There are still worries, though. This is not a forever family, and the children know they may be separated again. He repeats his mantra to be 'strong and tough'. But it is only on the football field that he knows he can completely be himself. When told by a social worker that he and his sisters will 'probably' be split up, he is horrified and wants to 'scream and cry', which he does, but 'only a little'. The delight he feels when told that their foster parents have decided to adopt all three children can only be imagined, but the Sharratt pictures show us clearly: 'It was like scoring the winning, sudden-death penalty in a cup final.' Charlie in the story is, of course, Rico himself, now a Junior Premier League footballer, and his story is gentle and heart-warming. The loving and caring LGBT adoptive parents are shown in both text and illustration as the perfect parents for these three young kids who need all the help they can get. **ES**

Planets

★★★★

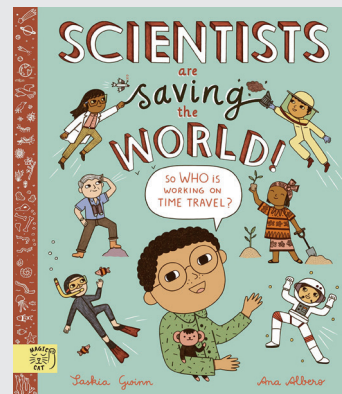
John Devoille, Pushkin Children's, 32pp, 978-1782693444, £12.99 hbk

Planets sets out to explain, to anyone thinking of moving to another planet, just why Earth is the best or rather only

choice. We are taken on a whistle stop tour of the solar system to find out the reasons other planets would not be a suitable alternative, for example the sulphurous smoke on Venus and the lack of gravity on Mars. The spread on Jupiter deviates from this pattern focusing on the huge storm visible as a big red spot leaving the reader to infer the planet's unsuitability. We are invited to return to Earth as the only planet to support life. Along the way we are also provided with some interesting information and very big numbers such as the speed the Earth is travelling around the sun and why you would only have a birthday once every 164.8 Earth years on Neptune.

This is a striking book with bold design and attractive illustrations, the spread depicting the diversity and richness of life on earth is particularly engaging. The premise is good, and the tone of the text is informal and friendly; the Earth is described as 'hurtling' around the sun. The illustrations add humour.

It is a pity that creating eye catching imagery seems to have driven the illustration decisions at the expense of a little more accuracy. For example, the illustration of the solar system could have depicted the relative size of the planets to each other and perhaps also have been labelled to help young space explorers. Also, it would have made more sense if Jupiter's red spot had been painted red rather than black. Reference to Pluto seems to have been added as an afterthought on the disappointingly empty end papers. **SMC**



Scientists are Saving the World!

★★★★★

Saskia Gwinn, ill. Ana Allberow, Magic Cat Publishing, 32pp, 9781913520540, £12.99 hbk

This colourful graphic novel is an illuminating read which aims to encourage young people keen on science to learn more about those who have made a career in this sector. Various branches of science are taken one by one, and the author explains the types of jobs connected with each area. For example, those scientists who enjoy collecting rocks are called geologists; they examine rocks in all sorts of places. The author then introduces Natalie Starkey, a geologist who is interested in finding rocks that have fallen from space and then experimenting with them.

reviews

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

If this is something which appeals to the reader they can turn to the end of the book where there are brief biographies of the scientists that appear in the main text. In this way the young reader learns more about a subject they enjoy.

Throughout the book scientists in different fields are described on each spread: palaeontologists, astronauts, meteorologists, acoustic biologists, robotic engineers, marine biologists etc. As you can see, this volume is teeming with information and this is all presented in a clear and enticing way.

Towards the end of the book the young boy character is in bed and his Mum explains to him how grown-up scientists were once young, like him; they were always asking questions and were curious about the world around them.

This excellent book ends with 24 short biographies of scientists under the heading 'Which Scientist Inspires You?' All the scientists have a small cartoon-like character of themselves and the text makes interesting reading.

All in all, this is an exciting book which draws the young scientist in and will also encourage those who haven't shown an interest in science before. It would be a useful non-fiction title for the school library, classroom or home. Enjoy! **JS**

The Last Rainbow Bird

★★★★

Nora Brech, Floris Books, 40pp, 978 1 7825 0800 7, £12.99 hbk

While snoozing in their boat, Alex and Jo are suddenly awoken by a crying sound drifting on the breeze. They think it's coming from the professor's house high in the trees and decide to investigate. They discover from the distraught prof. that although he has saved many rare birds he has failed to find a mate for the rarest of all - the Rainbow Bird - and unless he can do so, the species will die out. The children offer to search and having loaded up The Explorer they set sail on a journey to find the elusive bird. Their quest takes them through thick forest and they ask all manner of birds - House Birds, Big-to-Little Birds, Underwater Birds, Lamp Birds and others if they've seen a Rainbow Bird, but to no avail.

Next morning they're on the point of giving up when Jo spots something perched precariously on a rock just in front of a waterfall. The next thing they know they're sailing right over the edge of the falls. They fly into the air and land, Jo with the bird safe in her hand. Suddenly something magical happens, which we see in a glorious feathery illustration, as the bird's plumage bursts into coloured profusion: 'Its feathers painted the air: pink and blue and red and green and every colour in between,' we read. With the problem of returning solved by a gigantic Tower Bird, Alex and Jo are flown back to a euphoric professor and all ends happily with

the future of the species assured.

Nora Brech infuses some of her spreads with gentle humour: she gives full rein to her imagination, and has great fun inventing fictitious birds - that of the Big-to-Little Birds, each a different colour, is superb.

In an afterword she explains that although Rainbow Birds are imaginary, environmentalists are working to save rare birds from extinction. With its important ecological message, this arrestingly illustrated story would make a good starting point for discussions on the importance of protecting rare species. **JB**

Black Swans

★★★★

Laurel van der Linde, ill. Sawyer Cloud, Sunbird Books, 40pp, 9781503764095, £12.99 hbk

This ground-breaking book about the obstacles faced by many black dancers over the last century, seeks to encourage today's young dancers to follow their dreams. The work focusses on six black dancers who have made their mark in the world of ballet and modern dance: Essie Marie Dorsey, Arthur Mitchell, Christian Holder, Dwight Rhoden, Misty Copeland and Michaela DePrince.

Each biography follows the dancer's route to a dream career and the reader is left with the message that if you are determined and do what you love then you will succeed! Whilst each dancer has a different story they are united in the racism that they encountered and how they eventually overcame this. A few of these figures opened their own dance schools whilst others took leading roles in established ballet companies across the world.

The author, Laurel van der Linde writes from experience, and explains in the Author's Note that 'The desire to dance is born in you'. She encourages readers who have a passion for dancing to follow their instincts. A list of other well-known Black Swans is at the end of the book and Laurel acknowledges the talents and determination of these dancers.

This attractive volume is well laid out and I liked the way in which the biographies were quite detailed and gave a full history of the dancer. A Contents list would have been useful to guide the reader through the book, but this is a small criticism.

I am sure this book will encourage many young black students to choose dancing as their passion and to appreciate those who went before them. Hopefully they will not encounter the obstacles of these amazing Black Swans. **JS**

The Wilderness

★★★★

Steve McCarthy, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 4063 8519 9, £12.99 hbk
Meet the Vasylenko family, Mum, Dad and twelve children, explorers all. Each of the children is named after

a month but whereas all his siblings relish the prospect of adventuring outside in the wilderness, Oktober just dreams of being a great adventurer, preferring to go on his adventures inside books. That way he can keep safe from the Wilderness monster. Nevertheless, his reassuring parents insist he accompanies them on an adventure in the great outdoors; only that way, by confronting his fears, will the boy overcome them, they tell Oktober. But instead of seeing treasures in the sky, what he sees are hideous creatures lurking in the mist. At this point the text changes abruptly urging readers to listen, pay close attention and stick together or they might get LOST.

Seemingly finding himself lost in the wilderness is exactly what Oktober needs: indeed it appears from the swirling, whirling tornado scene, that he's about to find a very unlikely friend. Someone or something to point out that what the boy needs to do is to view his adventure from a rather different viewpoint; and so it was that he came to be the creator of a wonderfully wild tale of adventure, bravery and finding a friend when you least expect it.

With a glorious autumnal colour palette and powerfully atmospheric scenes of the family's journey, this book will surely encourage young listeners to embark on their own outdoor forays into the wild. First though, snuggle up warm indoors and share this unusual story, which is Steve McCarthy's authorial debut. Make sure you look carefully at the endpapers too: there you will discover a host of unlikely 'dangers of the wild' served up with sprinkles of humour. **JB**



Iceberg

★★★★

Claire Saxby, ill. Jess Racklyeft, Allen & Unwin, 32pp, 9781911679509, £6.99 pbk

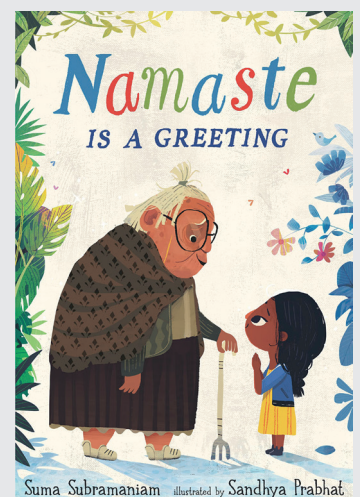
This picture book is stunningly attractive! Not only are the colours particularly beautiful but the central pages open out into a panoramic illustration of sea creatures in Antarctica. I am sure the hardback edition will be even more alluring.

In taking as her theme an iceberg's journey from one springtime to another, the author has chosen an unusual subject, but one that is very interesting and informative. Whilst

shining a light on the problems of global warming, award-winning Claire Saxby looks at the positive side of the iceberg. We see penguins, whales, squid, birds, seals and many other polar creatures appear as temperatures change. The text is particularly poetic and comes alive with the wonderful illustrations. We learn how Antarctica is a very special place and is full of life.

The beauty of the natural world appears on every page; I particularly enjoyed the colours of summer arriving and the darker shades of autumn. Author and illustrator work well together throughout the life cycle of our iceberg: from when it first floats away until 'In another pale Antarctic dawn an iceberg calves, settles to the sea.'

This book would be a welcome gift for any young person keen on animals, geography, Antarctica and the issue of climate change. The surprise and beauty of the central panorama add a great deal to this volume. Classrooms and libraries would appreciate this book enormously too; it covers a serious issue in an inspiring way. **JS**



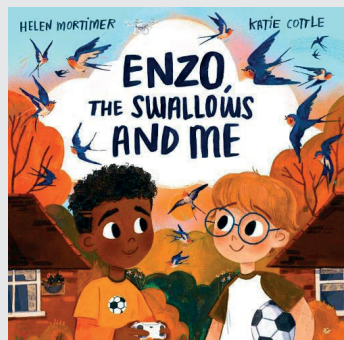
Namaste Is a Greeting

★★★★

Suma Subramaniam, ill. Sandhya Prabhat, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 5295 1003 4, £12.99 hbk

Having looked this word up, I find it is a Sanskrit word often used as a greeting in India. The actual meaning is 'I bow to you', or 'the divine in me bows to the divine in you'. Sometimes it is used in yoga practices along with joining the palms together. But it is so much more than that, and this picture book shows us a small girl and her mum going about their lives and using the term every day. It is the pictures that convey the story, while the short, beautifully-written sentences of the text tell us of the different things namaste can mean. It can be shown in silence or in a smile, in a friendship or in saying hello; one can convey it in sadness or happiness, or loneliness, but it is always a way of 'loving the world'. It is being helpful or kind to those who are suffering - and it's 'a path when the road is unclear'. The little girl uses namaste in all sorts

of ways, at the end of the story in gifting a plant to the sad and lonely lady, who lives next door. Namaste is a lovely and interesting word that means so much to those who use it, and it makes one realise it could be a world-wide way of bringing peace. The illustrations are outstanding as well as the lyrical text, and this is a wonderful way of bringing Indian culture closer to home. **ES**



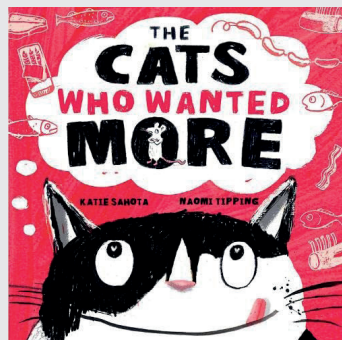
Enzo, the Swallows and Me

★★★★★

Helen Mortimer, ill. Katie Cottle, Owllet Press, 32pp, 978 1 913339 12 8, £7.99 pbk

Dedicated to all birdwatching readers everywhere, this delightful book follows the friendship between Jack and his new neighbour, Enzo, recently arrived from Africa. Enzo's Dad is an engineer, whose enthusiasm for birdwatching is contagious, and soon both boys are busy scanning their surroundings, binoculars around their necks. Enzo's Dad has told them that each year swallows fly the thousands of miles from Africa to nest and rear their chicks. So the two boys are thrilled to spot the arrival of the first swallows, skimming across the skies. In a nesting bowl high up in a tumbledown shed, Enzo's Dad has set up a webcam, and the boys are entranced to watch eggs laid and chicks developing. Time passes, and they realise that soon it will be time for the swallows' flight back to Africa. As Enzo's Dad's job comes to an end, his family will also be heading home to Africa. Will the boys' friendship endure the miles? Yes, it does. Through technology they chat as if they are still together, and their passion for birdwatching continues. The book resounds with the strong connection between the natural world and that of humans, and shows how deep children's friendships can run, despite distance separating them. The final pages show two letters written by the boys, sharing facts they have learnt about swallows. The illustrations enhance the story line throughout, particularly the emotions, from the joy of first spotting swallows to the grief of impending separation. 'Dad says it's OK to cry,' sniffs Enzo, on a dark page with a setting sun and the houses in deep shadows. The pictures of the many,

many swallows throughout the book will make readers long for the sight of them in the skies again. A charming book. GBand again for a completely different adventure. **GB**



The Cats who Wanted More

★★★★★

Katie Sahota, ill. Naomi Tipping, Owllet Press, 32pp, 978 53 913339 53 1, £7.99, pbk

This is such a funny book which will delight readers, especially those who have a cat or two living in their household. Oh yes, these cats want more. Readers soon realise that the setting for this humorous book is the beginning of the global pandemic, when humans stopped going out to work, stayed at home, sitting at their computers, ordering food to be delivered to their doorsteps. We see the humans, top of the chain; the cats in huge abundance, the mice, also in hundreds, and below the floorboards... the rats. All after any scraps of food to be found. On the humans' laps we see the cats lounging as the humans click away on their computers, the cats assuming sleep whilst cunningly storing up keyboard know-how. Soon the cats are ordering quantities of food online, delivered to their doorsteps. With full and bulging tummies the cats dare to grumble to the starving mice and rats that they are SO hungry. There is a separate page, a black and white extract from the Rodent Reporter, where food shortages are reported, as there has been an unprecedented spike in internet grocery orders. The tale continues with so much detail in the pictures, dramatic in tones of black, grey and red throughout, as the scheming plans of the cats plays out. There is humour to be found in every small detail of the illustrations as the tale draws to a close. Who would have guessed that the avenging rats and mice would think of chewing through the computer cables so that the cats could order no more food? Or that the final endpaper would show cats, stuck in the catflaps, their bulging tummies trapping them fast? A great read-aloud, but the detailed pictures demand close, first-hand perusal. Lots of fun, a book to be returned to many times. **GB**

Paper Boat, Paper Bird

★★★★★

David Almond, ill. Kirsty Beautyman, Hodder, 112pp, 9781444963274, £9.99 hbk

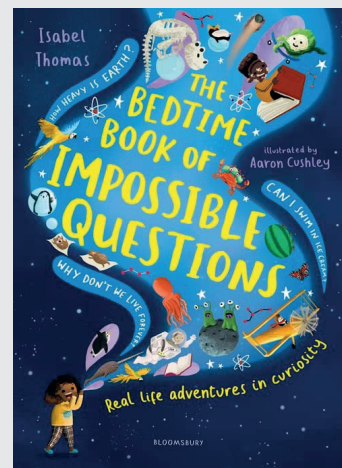
This is a short story about Mina, who has already appeared as a character in David Almond's *Skellig* and *My Name is Mina*. Here, she is visiting Japan and is presented with an origami boat and bird by someone she sits next to on a bus. Little happens in the story subsequently. She makes her own boat and bird, writes her name on them, and floats them on the temple lake at Kinkakuji in Kyoto; and that night she dreams of a dark-haired boy. The story's focus then switches to Miyako, who may be the boy in Nina's dream, and who finds her boat and bird while swimming. He writes his name on the bird and sets it free, and Nina catches it and finds his name. Finally, after passing each other unknowingly more than once, Nina and Miyako meet, and there the story ends. This low-key tale demands the kind of sensitive reader that you imagine Mina herself to be. Written with poetic restraint and precision, its quiet purpose, I think, is to convey the fascination of Japanese culture to a child visitor and to suggest gently how art and creativity speaks across cultural difference to our common humanity. This is certainly the message of David Almond's afterword, where he reminisces about his own visit to Japan. I would imagine the lack of dramatic incident in the story presented a challenge to the illustrator, Kirsty Beautyman. Using a restricted colour palette, accenting significant features in red – the bird, the boat and elements of Mina and Miyako's clothing – and posing her characters as if caught in freeze frames, she succeeds in creating a sense of meditative stillness that perfectly complements Almond's story. **CCB**

The Bedtime Book of Impossible Questions

★★★★★

Isabel Thomas, illus Aaron Cushley, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1526623751, 96pp, £12.99 hbk

How does gravity work? Why do we need eyebrows? Do animals have imaginations? What's the opposite of spider? These are just some of the impossible questions posed and answered in this excellent and thoroughly engaging information book. There are generally one or two questions per page, all accompanied by bright appealing illustrations, and the tone is infectiously enthusiastic, encouraging readers – or listeners, as it's pitched as ideal for bedtime – to think about the answers and come up with more questions. Indeed, it



opens with the premise that science is all about asking questions and demonstrates that each 'impossible' question asked is a stepping stone on the path to 'understanding the universe and everything in it'. While it encourages this asking of questions, it also reassures readers that there's no such thing as a perfect answer, and that some puzzles including, rather alarmingly, 'how do aeroplanes fly?', are impossible to solve. Certain to appeal equally to the always and the sometimes curious, this is a book you'll want to return to again and again. **AR**

Journey Back to Freedom

★★★★★

Catherine Johnson, Barrington Stoke, 120pp, 9781 78112 922 7, £7.99 pbk

This book tells the true story of the early life of Olaudah Equiano and is based on his autobiography. Born in Essaka, Africa in 1745, Olaudah lived a happy, uneventful life with his family until he was captured and sold as a slave as a child.

Through this story, written in the first person, young readers will learn something of the reality of losing freedom – when you do not even own your name and can be bought and sold as if you are an object rather than a human being. Although Olaudah did not experience the worst aspects of slavery himself, he was in constant danger, witnessed a woman wearing an iron muzzle and refers to flogging, branding and the fate of slaves who try to escape.

Olaudah was introduced to the wider world when bought by a naval officer on the high seas, travelling to Barbados, America, England, Guernsey and even Nova Scotia. Through these experiences he learnt about ships, sailing and how to cut hair and also experiences war and shipwreck. There are lighter touches such as Olu's confusion when he sees a porpoise at sea or experiences snow for the first time in England. Through friendships with a master's

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children and one of his shipmates he learns to speak English, and later to read and write, (despite his master's resistance) eventually writing his own story. Oludah uses his determination and initiative to buy his freedom by trading goods on voyages.

The afterword refers to rest of his life, his complex relationship with slavery, contribution to its abolition and achievement in writing an autobiography.

Johnson is highly skilled in bringing historical figures to life for young readers. This volume, with Barrington Stoke's dyslexia-friendly features, is written in an accessible and engaging format with clear facts and carefully selected detail and description. **SMC**

Little People, Big Dreams: Marcus Rashford

★★★★

Maria Isabel Sanchez Vegara, ill. Guilherme Karsten, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 32pp, 9780711270978, £9.99 hbk

The popular **Little People, Big DREAMS** series has championed the childhood stories of many celebrated role models and, in this episode, international footballer Marcus Rashford is given centre stage. Many young readers will already know much of Rashford's story and will enjoy the opportunity to see his footballing exploits and social action brought to life through vibrant and playful illustrations. The book successfully contextualises Rashford's celebrity, highlighting the challenges Rashford faced as a child and the courage and selflessness shown by his mother.

Though there is a positive and hopeful tone throughout, readers will also learn about racism and bullying, and the strength it takes to come back from adversity. It captures well the nuance of Rashford's story: sometimes our heroes don't win the game, and even famous footballers can't have everything they want.

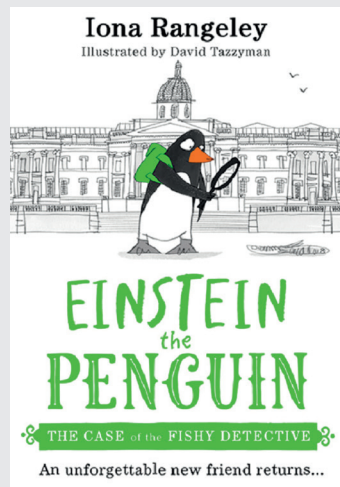
By framing Rashford's story as an effort to overcome injustice, this book successfully emphasises the human story of a young role model. Its message will be longlasting and accessible to children, whether or not they are football fans. **SD**

Einstein the Penguin The Case of the Fishy Detective

★★★★

Iona Rangeley, illus David Tazzyman, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0008476007, 320pp, £12.99 hbk

This fishy tale reunites young Londoners Imogen and Arthur with their friend Einstein, the penguin, recently moved to Sydney Zoo. The two have been missing him very much and are delighted when he, and fellow penguin Isaac, are sent to London to take part in an advertising campaign. Alarm bells start to ring – as they should – when the children



realise that the animal agent is none other than failed detective Bill Hunter, whom they outwitted in their first adventure. When the penguins are kidnapped Imogen steps up again as detective, with Arthur as accomplice.

The delights of this story are many. Eccentric as the set up is, the friendship between the main characters is perfectly realised, as are the family relationships. Einstein's attitude to life echoes that of that other warm-hearted, curious immigrant Paddington, though unlike Paddington, Einstein can't speak, relying on loaded facial expressions to make his feelings known. The writing is sharp with some acute observations and memorable phrases, and at no point does the whimsicality veer into tweeness. As illustrator, David Tazzyman is perfect, his scribbly black and white drawings capturing the absurdities of the plot and the emotional truths with equal skill. This will be very much enjoyed by children and adults alike as bedtime reading. **LS**

Stories Of Peace and Kindness for A Better World

★★★★★

Elizabeth Laird, illus Mehrdokht Amini, Otter-Barry Books, 64pp, 9781913074296, £16.99 hbk

A collection of tales from Elizabeth Laird will always be a treat – a source for the storyteller and a door through which young readers can walk to find distant or perhaps not so distant worlds. Here, Laird presents seven tales from across Africa, the Middle East and Asia; worlds with which she herself is familiar. Each of these traditional tales reflect not just their cultural backgrounds, but also the themes of peace and kindness as highlighted by the title of the book. These are not stories peopled by djinni and driven by magic and enchantment; these are stories grounded in the real world bringing to life real predicaments, peopled by ordinary folk. The tales may reflect the world they come

from but the actions and reactions of the protagonists, the situations presented are universal. Laird's retelling is direct, the storytelling immediately accessible and her text finds the perfect accompaniment in Amini's illustrations. Filled with the colours of North Africa and the Middle East her lively images populate the pages with characters, interesting perspectives and humour that enhances the subtle humour of the tales themselves. This is a lovely collection to explore – could a more intriguing title add to the attraction? **FH**

The Story of Greenriver

★★★★

Holly Webb, ill. Zanna Goldhawk, Orion, 256pp, 978-1510109629, £12.99 hbk

This charming story from much loved author Holly Webb is, as the title suggests, set along the banks of the Green River. Young beaver Silken feels an outsider within her family and the community who live in the Beaver Lodge. No matter how hard she tries, she just doesn't fit in and feels that somehow the other residents blame her for everything that goes wrong. Her favourite thing is to escape on her own and sing with the birds, although she has to hide this from everyone else, as 'beavers don't sing'.

After their home flooded last spring, everyone is worried about the river levels rising, but when something happens during the work to secure the lodge and Silken is once again blamed, she feels that she has no choice but to leave her home and search for answers about her true identity and where she really belongs.

Meanwhile, further down the river, otter Sedge knows that he should be more interested in the traditions and rituals of the otter holt, as he is now the heir to the Leadership following the loss of his sister in the great flood. He worries that he can't remember her, but recently his dreams are becoming more vivid and, on the verge of recalling what really happened that night, Sedge feels driven to venture out onto the river in search of answers.

I won't spoil what happens next but suffice to say this really is a truly heart-warming story, with a touch of magic, which ultimately shows the importance of family and belonging.

The characters are beautifully drawn, both in words and in the wonderful black and white pictures from illustrator Zanna Goldhawk. The environmental message about the effect of man's actions on the animals that live alongside our rivers and the importance of nature, is subtly wound into the story, without any preaching.

Whilst a departure from her usual style of animal stories, this book has all the makings of a modern classic and will definitely appeal to Webb's legions of fans and many more new ones. **AH**

The Amazing Edie Eckhart, The Big Trip

★★★★

Rosie Jones, illus Natalie Smillie, Hodder Children's Books, 224pp, 978-1444958379, £6.99 pbk

Edie Eckhart is now twelve. She enjoys drama at school and has joined the Drama Club. Edie is still worried that everyone else seems to have figured out who they are and that they seem to be secure in their identities while she isn't. With great trepidation, she and her friends, apart from Oscar who isn't into drama but likes football, sign up for a drama trip away at half-term. Edie has to convince her parents to let her go, by stressing the need to practise her independence, even though she's not fully convinced herself. She does go but actually ends up having a really negative time. Will she recover her passion for drama and will she ever feel secure in herself?

There are two stand out issues in Jones' second novel in this series. One is that Edie experiences discrimination at the hands of a teacher. She is not allowed a main part in the production because she speaks too slowly as a result of her cerebral palsy. This resonated with the reviewer who has experienced similar discrimination. The other is that Edie meets a wheelchair user during the trip who is dismissive of her. There is a perception that all wheelchair users are always pleasant and do not have the rights to the same spectrum of moods as every other human. Jones disabuses the reader of this notion. This will be an affirming book for all children who have ever felt in some ways different or inferior. **RB**

Wishes Come in Threes

★★★★

Andy Jones, Walker, 270pp, 9781529500882, £7.99 pbk

This gentle, empathetic debut children's novel tells the story of Phyll, who is struggling to cope with her Mum's depression and with a move to a new home by the sea. Phyll feels lost and alone, especially when she must attend Camp Sunshine and face bullying Hilda and her gang the Horribles. Phyll's difficult summer is lifted by her friendship with Clark, a fellow summer camp attendee, and with a wise old man, Mr Djinn, a local care home resident who claims to be a genie and who tells wonderful stories. Mr Djinn's tales and advice help Phyll to make positive changes in her life and to learn that making wishes is easy but to wish well is hard.

As Phyll's confidence strengthens she sets up a free dog-walking service, reunites a lost dog with its owner and helps to catch a dog-napper. Phyll learns that life is a story, and she can write her own happy ending if she believes in herself.

Andy Jones has written a positive book, full of empathy, which deals with themes of friendship, self-belief, depression, loss, love and the

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importance of emotional support and encouragement, all helped along with a touch of magic. The characters are sympathetic, the subplots add pace and sensitive issues, such as mental health and loss, are sensitively handled. This is a heart-warming, witty and hopeful book for young readers. **SR**

The Spectaculars

★★★★★

Jodie Garnish, ill. Nathan Collins, Usborne, 368pp, 9781801312547, £12.99 hbk

This is definitely one for those who love theatre and schools, but with an added element of magic. When Harper is invited to attend the school attached to the Grand Wondria Theatre she discovers a world that she had forgotten, as a result of a train crash that had killed her father and separated her and her mother from the 'Spectaculars', members of the theatrical and musical life, who are imbued with a special star magic. However, Harper and her long-lost friend Trick soon find that life at the school is not all fun. Someone is out to shut down the Wondria Theatre and are trying to capture the mythical four Curses, which appear to be making an appearance after many years. There are totally unexpected twists and turns and the young people have to decide who they can really trust in the complex situation they find themselves in. The question is whether they will be able to solve the mysteries and save the Grand Wondria?

What a fantastic story, full of danger and adventure. It absolutely races along and takes us along for the ride (hanging on to anything that will support us). Harper finds herself having to completely change everything that she thought she knew. She has been growing up in a city where the magic of music and theatre is banned and the old theatre district is totally empty; discovering this other place where there is magic and music gives her a link to her father and also to her younger self. Of course, we have the obligatory school bully, who thinks that she is better than everyone else; so, we are very happy when she gets her comeuppance. However, lurking in the background is a dark and very evil character who wants to destroy everything and it is they whom our young heroes have to defeat. This is a book about being different and embracing those elements that make us who we are. It is a glorious read and I have no hesitation in giving it five stars. **MP**

The Day My Family Disappeared

★★★★★

Jo Simmons, ill. Lee Cosgrave, Barrington Stoke, 104pp, 9781800901070, £6.99 pbk

This bite-sized adventure story will appeal to any child who has ever been so fed up with their family that they wished they would simply disappear!

Bob Bunyun is a young boy who is not very creative. This is a huge bone

of contention for him as he is the only member of his family without a discernible talent. While his brothers and sisters seem destined for fame via dance, opera or even baking, all Bob can create is grotesque blobs out of mashed potato. To make matters worse, Bob's family are eager to remind him, frequently, of this depressing lack of originality.

It's no surprise when Bob wishes that his whole family would disappear. What is a surprise, is when he wakes up to find, like Kevin in *Home Alone*, that the house is empty and his family are nowhere to be seen!

After a short while enjoying the novelty of his situation (wearing his brother's clothes, eating his sister's cakes etc) Bob begins to realise that it is not just his family who are missing. The whole town is like a ghost town: the only remaining residents seem to be the witless police officer (Bill) and his son (Bill Junior), neither of whom appear minutely concerned by the sudden displacement of the town's population. It becomes clear to the earnest and brave Bob that he must embark upon an intrepid adventure (just like his favourite TV explorer) in order to find his family.

Bob is just the kind of easygoing, positive person that one would want for company on an epic adventure. He isn't phased by things like over-friendly farm animals or mysterious ex-teachers wandering through the woods, and he is quite handy at picking up clues.

The story and accompanying illustrations are fun and playful but there are not quite enough jokes or silly moments to keep young readers chuckling all the way through. The manageable length and level of challenge mean that it's a very accessible story; one that may help some young readers develop their love for stories and encourage them to read even more. **SD**

Courage in a Poem

★★★★★

Cecelia Knapp and many others, ill. Masha Manopov and three others, Little Tiger, 48pp, 978 1 83891 439 4, £12.99 hbk

This anthology of forty-two different poems about empowerment, each one written by a different contemporary poet, are reflective of modern concerns such as racism, LGBT, different cultures, fears, refugees, dyslexia, making one's voice heard, and others; they are full of positivity and the central idea is that one can be sure of one's values and self-esteem, even when life seems to be going a bit wrong. The beautifully produced illustrations that go with each poem are – similarly – done by different artists and reflect the subject of each one in a vibrant and very relevant way. Full of bright colours and interesting shapes, they will appeal, as will the

poems, and this could become a classic book of our era. Courage is among the many things that young people must face (as do their elders) and this anthology could be the perfect antidote to fears. **ES**

Slow Down and Be Here Now

★★★★★

Laura Brand, ill. Freya Hartas, Magic Cat, 64pp, 978 1 913520 65 6, £16.99 hbk

This amazingly detailed book offers 'to take the reader away from the busy world, to step into the here and now to experience nature's tiniest things.' The latest in the best-selling *Slow Down* series, this book will delight readers of many ages, and will be a favourite to dip into, time and again. Every page is a joy to explore, whether by just reading the pictures or exploring the detailed text. There are twenty separate stories, each covering just one spread, with choices for example, of watching a caterpillar creating its own leaf tent; watching lichen transform with water or seeing a ladybird emerging from its pupal case. After the contents page, there is a page to encourage the reader to stay in the present, to calm the body and mind, take up the invitation to journey into the natural world, to enjoy some extraordinary events that take place every day. Illustrated lavishly throughout, every page-turn reveals a new colour palette, maybe a different layout, and the subject matter is as diverse as the text is descriptive. It is possible to glean much from a spread by just following the pictures. The text starts in easily accessible font and size, with more detailed information coming in much smaller print. Every spread is just a thrill in which the reader can absorb much of the wonders of nature, planting the desire to go out into the great outdoors and discover these tiny miracles of nature first-hand. Life cycles are clearly explained, as habitats, environments, and the seasons are illustrated, in words and pictures. Awe and wonder! The pages are of quite thick paper to endure the countless handling this book will receive. Hats off to the whole of the publishing team at Magic Cat for producing such a gem. Surely this would be the gift of a lifetime for any child, enriching their daily lives by opening up their eyes to see, their ears to hear, and their understanding of their world becoming a greater daily wonder. Find this book, keep it, and gift another! **GB**

Project Fairy

★★★★★

Jacqueline Wilson, illus Rachel Dean, Puffin, 336pp, 978-0-241-56714-2, £12.99 hbk

Mab Macclesfield is a primary school aged girl. Her brother, Robin, named after Robin Goodfellow – also known as Puck, the Shakespearean fairy, is in Reception. Their Dad left when Mab was much younger and Robin was a toddler. This caused their Mum, who is obsessed by fairies, to have a mental breakdown. The children are in foster care for a year.

Will they ever see their dad again and do fairies really exist? These are the two main questions Wilson's novel posits. In short, the reader learns that fairies do exist in the form of Bindweed, an amusingly cantankerous and pedantic fairy. Wilson plays with the reader's preconceptions about fairies and turns most of them on their heads.

Dean's plentiful black and white illustrations add much to the whimsical feel of this narrative. **RB**

Beyond the Frozen Horizon

★★★★★

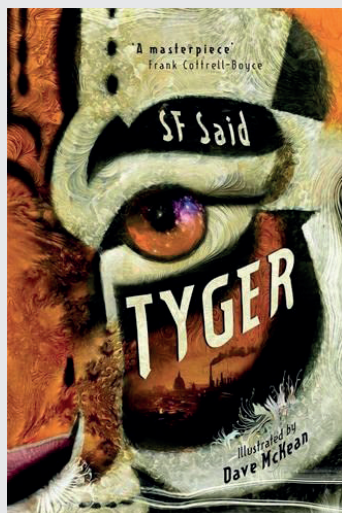
Nicola Penfold, Little Tiger Press, 292pp., 978-1-78895-4471, £7.99 pbk

The passing of Global Climate Laws of 2030 has at last made an impact on climate change, but 12-year-old Rory has permission to fly with her geologist Mum to the Arctic, where Mum's new job with a company called Greenlight is finding rare earth metals. Rory has been unhappy at school since her best friend moved away, and her Dad, separated from Mum, has given her a Polaroid-type camera to encourage her to keep track of her adventures. Svalbard, Spitsbergen, Longyearbyen: it's all very exciting, but when they arrive at Pyramiden, (a real place, an old Russian mining community), they find that Mum has not been given accurate information. The facilities are not great, and there are settlers there, with children, who had nowhere else to go when the mine closed after a terrible disaster. Rory is hopeful of making friends, and eventually breaks down their initial hostility due to her association with Greenlight. The locals are concerned about the number of reindeer dying, and suspect that Greenlight is responsible. The Arctic Council is due to have an inspection, but Mum and her Greenlight bosses deny that anything is wrong. Rory, with her camera, and her new friends set off to prove contamination, and almost get lost in the snow – this is a very exciting part of the story. The ghost of a girl who was killed in the disaster has a significant role in helping Rory to find out the truth and to stay safe.

Rory is vegetarian, and that causes some issues for a community that eats a lot of reindeer meat – there has to be understanding on both sides. Her new friend Mikal has a pet Arctic fox, Kaiku, who is important, but polar bears are to be avoided and any sightings recorded: it certainly is a very different way of life. Nicola Penfold has written other books set in the future after climate events: *Between Sea and Sky* finds Pearl living on a floating oyster farm after a series of environmental disasters have left the whole country under water, and *Where The World Turns Wild* has a family living in a walled city from which nature has been abolished due to a killer disease. The covers of all three books are by Kate Forrester, and will encourage readers to pick them out, and discover unusual stories. **DB**

reviews

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary



Tyger

★★★★★

SF Said, illus Dave McKean, David Fickling Books, 304pp, 9781788452830, £12.99 hbk

Ramzi has an errand to complete – taking deliveries for his parents' business out of the Ghetto into London. Accosted by a would-be thief, he stumbles into the dump and there meets Tyger. She is his saviour – a creature not of the world; but she is also in trouble being hunted by her age-old adversary, Urizen. She needs Ramzi as much as he needs her. Can Ramzi and Zadie open the Gateway in time?

Said is an author not afraid to explore metaphysical ideas in stories aimed at a young audience. In particular he is concerned to remind all his readers that the world and power of the imagination are as important and as necessary for true humanity as thought and reason. However, his storytelling is far from a sermon. Here in a London of the future, recognisable as we follow Ramzi through familiar streets past recognised landmarks, the reader is drawn into a tense adventure that also highlights contemporary tensions and concerns – attitudes to others, inclusion and exclusion, our treatment of the natural world. Said is not afraid to draw on the imagination and ideas of the poet William Blake who confronted his world in his work. The most obvious reference, of course, the title *Tyger*, recalling one of Blake's most famous poems, but running through the text there are many more – some subtle others more obvious, adding depth and resonance, making it more than an adventure; this is narrative that rewards rereading. While Said may be looking to the poetry and metaphysical writings of Blake for inspiration, his own style is direct, contemporary, his descriptions

vivid and accessible to his readers whether the book is being read in the privacy of personal engagement or shared with a class or family. Adding to the whole imaginative experience are the illustrations by Dave McKean. This is an ideal partnership between author and illustrator. From the concise drama of the cover – both the dust jacket and the boards – through the end pages with the Thames a river of light to the page decorations, and the energy and immediacy of McKean's images, black ink on the white page, strike home. Following *Varjak Paw* and *Phoenix*, Said and McKean have given young readers a story to remember and pass on in its imagination and inclusivity. **FH**

Unraveler

★★★★★

Frances Hardinge, Macmillan, 494pp, 9781509836970, £14.99 hbk

This latest novel from Frances Hardinge, once more displays her inventiveness and her skill at creating alternative worlds. The notion on which the plot turns is a brilliant development of the idea of the transformative power of curses. Its title refers to the powers of its central character, Kellen, who has the rare gift of being able to track back the source of a curse and so unravel it, freeing its victim from whatever awful transformation has been visited upon them. This is a gift that has its own problems since it extends to anything that is woven, and results in him wearing iron studded gloves to prevent him unwittingly reducing nearby curtains or clothing to shreds. Kellen takes his place in a world that is densely imagined: from 'The Little Brothers', who resemble spiders, and live in the wild places of the country of Raddith, to the merchants of Chancery, who can do business only by virtue of an ancient pact with the Little Brothers that enables an uneasy coexistence of the rational and the magical. Add to this a man who has literally given an eye for a partnership with a Marsh Horse, a creature whose jaws are as deadly as its skin is glossy, and who drags Kellen and best friend Nettle (lady sensible to impulsive Kellen) on a mysterious quest. And there is a lot more deliciously dark, and wickedly witty, fun to come – nearly five hundred pages of it – weighted with some insight into the worst and best of human behaviour and a poignant consideration of the duality of mind of a human turned into, say, a heron or a seagull. Presented with such a feast of a book, it is undoubtedly churlish of me to say that I nevertheless found the restless invention running away with the thread of the story, making it difficult for me to stay on track. **CB**

The October Witches

★★★★★

Jennifer Claessen, ill. Heidi Olivia Cannon, Uclan, 368pp, 9781912979905, £7.99 pbk

A wonderful debut novel that introduces us to the concept that there are covens of witches who only have their powers during the month of October. The limitation having been placed centuries before after a falling out of the two sisters, who were the first witches, called Merlyn and Morgan. The heroine of this story is Clemmie, who has just reached the point where she comes into her powers as part of the Merlyn coven; this is made up of her mother and several aunts, as well as her cousin Mirabelle and they are somewhat quirky. The Morgan coven on the other hand is a larger group and led by the arrogant and power-hungry Aunt Morgan; these covens only meet on one night of the year, at the beginning of October, when they regain their magic and young witches are made. This year both covens are trying to extend their powers to the rest of the year, but they have very different ways of going about this. The question is whether either group will succeed and will they learn what really happened at the beginning.

This is a fascinating concept for a story and makes the reader ask so many questions about the idea of family. The two covens have very different attitudes to this, with the Merlyns being very down to earth and concerned about nature and keeping the family together. The Morgans, on the other hand have a strong centralized leadership, with the leader being callous even to her own children and making us glad she is not related to us. However, this is also a story of people trying to come to terms with the powers that they have been given and we see this particularly with Mirabelle, who had a bad experience in her first year and misses her mother (who goes away every October). The underlying links to Arthurian legend are fascinating and I love the fact that Merlyn is shown as a female, rather than the usual old man; although the Morgana link seems much closer to the character in the myths. I was also delighted to hear that the author is to write two more books in this series and can't wait to see where these lovely characters go. **MP**

Filippo, Me and the Cherry Tree

★★★★★

Paola Peretti, translated by Denise Muir, Hot Key Books, 144pp, 9781471411052, £7.99 pbk

Mafalda is now thirteen. When we first met her in *The Distance between Me and the Cherry Tree* she was ten and learning how to cope with her

deteriorating sight. Here her sight loss is much more acute; she can only distinguish a bright red in terms of colour – her life is dark. However, she remains cheerful as she negotiates the beginning of her teenage years. She has her friend Filippo, her cat and her family – and her diary. There are problems – the bullying Debbie in her class and her father suffering acute depression after losing his job are two. We learn all about them as she addresses us and the cherry tree.

Readers who met Mafalda in the earlier book will relish finding out more about her; if she is a new acquaintance they will want to go back to find out who everyone is. Peretti's voice is as fresh as ever and Mafalda steps off the page to engage the reader with her thoughts, anxieties and determination. The diary style which avoids long descriptive passages for the immediacy of the present tense and first-person narration ensures that there can be no delay in turning the page, in walking with Mafalda as she faces the challenges of being unsighted. Denise Muir's translation captures the contemporary cadences of Mafalda's voice. She may live in Italy but she is the reader's friend here. It is refreshing to meet a protagonist who is blind dealing with the everyday problems without self-pity but with independence and support from the adults around her. We are drawn into her life not just moving around the home or neighbourhood but coping with school and lessons. Mafalda experiences the same emotions young readers will recognise – anger at being bullied, confusion when faced with her first period, her impetuous decisions, sadness and happiness. A refreshing novel to be widely recommended. **FH**

The Haunted Hills

★★★★★

Berlie Doherty, illustrated by Tamsin Rosewell, Uclan, 218pp, 9781912979936, £7.99 pbk

This latest intriguing novel from twice **Carnegie Medal** winner Berlie Doherty never knows quite where it is going. Its urgently written opening account of the miseries that can occur when a close juvenile friendship is first threatened and then brutally terminated gets everything off to a flying start. Carl, the unhappy pre-teenage survivor, then moves with his parents to an isolated farm in the Peak District in order to recover. All this is drama enough, but Doherty brings in a local ghost to add to Carl's already near-breakdown state. This development is less successful, as is the introduction of a wandering under-age and homeless local girl also sometimes working at the farm. Her ability to evade any intervention from the local Social Services makes her generally less credible. The whole story

ends with a brief note from the ghost himself, explain how he got there.

Not the easiest of plots, perhaps, but Doherty is such a good writer she still compels complete attention. Her descriptions of the remote Derbyshire countryside are as powerful as anything in Alan Garner's stories, as is her use of local dialect. Scenic black and white chapter heading illustrations from Tamsin Rosewell add to the effect. Although Carl is permanently miserable he still comes over as a sympathetic character, backed up by nice parents and an understanding school. His final coming to terms with the tragic death of his friend Jack is movingly done, although the last-minute arrival and guilt-ridden confession of the teenage villain of the piece is less convincing.

This story is launched by Uclan, an independent publisher based at the University of Central Lancashire. It also helps teach M.A. students studying publishing as a possible career. Already gaining awards, this is clearly a firm to watch. Adding such a fine writer as Berlie Doherty to its list is further guarantee of its commitment to high quality. NT

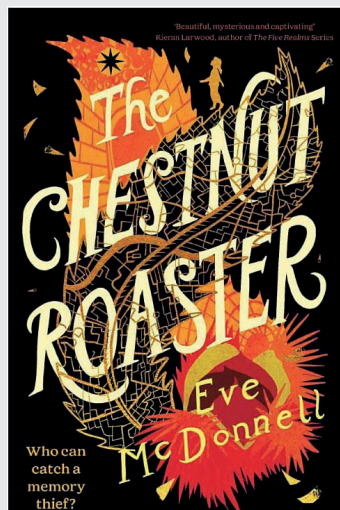
The Worlds We Leave Behind

★★★★★

A. F. Harrold, illus. Levi Pinfold, Bloomsbury, 272pp
9781526623881, £12.99 hbk

What if we could cancel those who have hurt us. Cancel them totally, so that they no longer existed, and the world would knit itself back together again, as if they had never been born? Does it sound tempting? It does to Hex. Hex knows that he sometimes does things that are stupid and hurtful, and he doesn't quite know why. Then the stone he throws means little Sascha is off the rope swing and in the stream, with a broken arm. Alone with shame and confusion, he has nowhere to turn. He is found by Sascha's vengeful elder sister, Maria. Fleeing a beating, he reaches a clearing and a cottage in the woods that he has never seen before. There is a dog and an old woman, and the old woman makes him this fateful offer to get his own back on Maria. He is considering it, when he discovers the old woman has made an identical offer to Maria. A.F. Harrold cleverly interweaves elements of familiar folk tale with a week in the lives of three children, each of whom is presented with the same dilemma. Hex, Maria, Tommo and the adults in their lives are people we might know, with familiar preoccupations, failings, and frustrations. The old woman, Missus, and the dog, Leafy, are the stuff of nightmares, ably characterised by Levi Pinfold's sinister illustrations. Harrold's solutions to the alternative worlds that might be produced by the children's absences are thought provoking, and the explanation he provides for the witch's intervention in the children's lives owes as much to a

vintage American tv series as to the brothers Grimm. It's a handsomely produced tale about the darkness that can come to any of us on any day, the decisions that we take or avoid, and the possibilities, for good or ill, that stem from those choices. A perceptive and disturbing book. CB



The Chestnut Roaster

★★★★★

Eve McDonnell, ill. Ewa Beniak-Haremska, Everything With Words, 350pp, 978-1-911427-29-2, £7.99 pbk

McDonnell takes us to Paris in the Belle Epoque era in this marriage of history and fiction. Piaf - 'little sparrow' - is both cursed and blessed as she cannot forget anything. Her memories jostle in metaphorical boxes inside her head, ceaselessly demanding her attention, making her flutter and fidget in an attempt to subdue them, but also helping her out of the many tight spots she and her companions encounter in this compelling novel.

Luc, her twin is ill, being treated by a mysterious doctor who Piaf does not trust. Since the doctor's arrival Paris has been possessed by 'vanilla cream' fogs and reports of missing children have begun to proliferate. Distressingly, her Maman is entirely in thrall to the doctor and even more distressingly, she, like the rest of the population, has no memory of the year which has just passed. Clearly something is profoundly wrong and when a man with a young girl chained to his arm tries to kidnap Piaf from her chestnut roaster she takes her story to Madame LeGrand, an old family friend. She, too, has lost a year from her memory-Piaf realises something sinister is afoot.

The narrative occupies two settings-the streets of Paris and the labyrinths beneath, created when the stone to build Paris was quarried and with its map mirroring the streets above. When Piaf falls through a sink hole in the fragile shell of rock she

discovers a world of bones, of ghosts, of kidnapped children and, most satisfyingly of all, the evil doctor's lair.

Piaf returns to the surface, liberates Luc and they return underground. They discover Bertie, woodcarver extraordinaire, captured and incarcerated by the doctor and the three children bravely battle to defeat the doctor's evil plans in a whirlwind of activity deep in the labyrinth. They are forged together by loyalty, by filial love and by an indefatigable desire to restore Paris and its inhabitants to order and when they finally succeed it is a triumph of determination and of mental and emotional resilience over seemingly insurmountable odds.

The Chestnut Roaster brings the city of Paris to life. Set at the time of preparations for the World Fair it is a very satisfying blend of fact and fiction, shot through with magic realism, imbued with a sense of justice over wrongdoers. The beautifully realised illustrations are given a section at the end of the book in which readers are given a chance to explore and study them. There is a second explanatory section, 'In Actual Fact' which details the events in the book which really happened. A further delight is that the chapter headings are in both French and English and so young readers are introduced to French in the most accessible way.

This is a tremendous book on every level and would make an excellent class reader and a rich addition to library shelves. VR

Always, Clementine

★★★★★

Charlie Sorosiak, Nosy Crow, 308pp, 978-1-83994-108-5, £7.99 pbk

Charlie Sorosiak's previous books for young people were **My Life as A Cat**, and **I, Cosmo**, told from the point of view of a golden retriever, so it's no surprise to find that this one is told as a mouse. Clementine is no ordinary mouse, though: bred in a laboratory with altered genes, she is super-intelligent. She thinks about prime numbers, dreams in Latin, and saw no reason to find her way around a maze when she could just jump out, astonishing the lab staff.

As the story begins, Clementine and another mouse with similar markings have been rescued by a kindly lab assistant, Felix, and find themselves in a mailbox (this is in the USA, so it's a box on a post at the end of a drive). Clementine is thinking her story as she reports to Rosie, her chimpanzee friend from the lab. Unable to take the mice home, and unwilling to release them into the wild, Felix makes an inspired choice. The mailbox belongs to Pop, a kindly man who has a regular TV slot about his hobbies, and his grandson Gus spends a month with him every summer. Gus's Dad has a low opinion of his son, and Gus is a bit clumsy, but the arrival of the mice gives both of them new focus. The other mouse, later called Hamlet, is bright, but not as intelligent. Clementine learns

to play chess, and beats Pop, who used to be a champion: hearing on the radio that the lab wants to study the brains of the mice, Pop and Gus devise a plot to save them by showing the public how well 'wondermouse' Clementine plays chess.

There are many twists, as things don't always go to plan, but it's all very exciting, and eventually, of course, at the end of the story the mice and all the other lab animals have been saved and given good homes. Gus has become more confident, and Pop has found new friends. Reunited with Rosie on a visit, Clementine can finally 'open' her 53 letters, which she has always signed 'Always, Clementine'. This is not a great title-would 'Wondermouse' have been better, to attract readers?

Although the format feels a little awkward at first, the reader gets use to it, and this is an engaging story which brings out clearly the issues about lab animals. Although US laws were tightened in 2015, millions of animals are still subjected to testing, and the Author's Note at the end reports this sad fact and encourages us to buy cruelty-free products. DB

Children of the Stone City

★★★★★

Beverley Naidoo, HarperCollins, 262pp, 9780008471743, £12.99 hbk Set in an imaginary country with strong overtones of modern-day Israel, this searing story does not pull its punches. Young Adam and Leila, both 'Nons', try to share living space with the bullying ruling group who speak another language and are known as the 'Permitted'. At the end of their street a local house previously lived in by Adam's aunt is taken over by a Permitted family following more legal jiggery-pokery Adam is then arrested on a trumped-up charge by police who try to frame him. His best friend Zak gets a prison sentence of three years for a crime he did not commit.

Beverley's genuinely groundbreaking first book, **Journey to Jo'burg**, still in print, was banned in South Africa until 1991. Published thirty-five years later, this current novel is no less powerful, but written in a style that now feels somewhat dated. Too often open dialogue is abandoned in favour of indirect speech, where questions in characters' minds are conveniently followed by instant answers. Adam remains almost unnaturally good all the way through, practising his violin every day with uncomplaining zeal. He is backed up by a family and friends of unimpeachably consistent high virtue. So far, so noble in their day to day struggle to get by. Things warm up considerably when he is briefly in prison, but it is no surprise when an almost happy ending finally rounds off proceedings.

In an epilogue Beverley writes how the main inspiration for this story arose from four visits made between 2000 and 2016 to Israel's Occupied Territories and Jordan. She has also

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drawn on memories of Apartheid South Africa, known by her at first hand and also resisted with huge courage. Anything she writes is well worth reading, with this passionate and well-constructed novel no exception. While not her best, it still works and younger readers can only benefit from renewed contact with an author of such grace and moral probity. **NT**

Honesty and Lies

★★★

Eloise Williams, Firefly Press, 233pp, 9781913102999, £7.99, pbk

Two girls with secrets meet in London in 1601. Honesty has run away from a marriage her father wanted to arrange, and Alice has a darker secret involving an assassination attempt on Elizabeth I. Alice leads Honesty into believing she has an important job at the court, but when Honesty, who is trailing her in hope of help, saves Elizabeth I from a man with a gun, she finds the girl is given a job alongside her. That job is in the laundry, but Honesty has the gift of storytelling and becomes a favourite of the ladies of the court. Alice is terrified of her brother and when his plot to kill the Queen fails, she finds even her father will not help her escape. But Honesty comes to the rescue and the girls stow away in the hamper of the Globe theatre players lining the two up for another adventure.

This is told at a breathless pace in alternate voices, which carries the reader along, though with an engaging heroine in Honesty and an intriguing one in Alice, at no point does interest lapse. There are many details of court life alongside those of ordinary life, including working in the laundry. The nastier side of Tudor life, e.g., the petty jealousies of the court and the real poverty and grime of life in Southwark are also made clear for the reader.

The story could have done with some close copy editing; Barnaby the eight-year-old page, suddenly appears without being introduced to the reader, and on p47 Alice declares to herself that she loves Honesty's stories but there is no evidence of her having heard many. These need to be addressed in the next story as all the signs are there that there will be a sequel. **JF**

The Last Storyteller

★★★

Donna Barba Higuera, Piccadilly, 314pp, 9781800784208, £7.99 pbk

This **Newbery Medal**-winning novel was originally published in the US as *The Last Cuernista* and it blends Mexican folklore and science fiction in a gripping and thought-provoking story. Petra Pena has grown up listening to the stories of her beloved grandmother and wants to be a storyteller herself, not a scientist as her parents hope. When life on Earth

is about to be destroyed by a comet, Petra and her family are among those chosen to journey to a new home on a distant planet. Hundreds of years later, Petra awakes from the long-induced sleep to discover that Earth has been forgotten and her family has not survived the journey. A sinister Collective, intent on erasing the past mistakes and memories of humanity, has taken over the spaceship during the journey and Petra is the only one who remembers the stories and memories of the past. Now known as Zeta-1, Petra is tasked with using her knowledge of botany to explore the new planet for the benefit of the Collective. Instead, she uses her skills and story memory to fight against the conformity of the Collective and to plan a life of hope and community for her fellow Zetas on a new planet.

This novel tells a compelling story of a threatened future with suspense-filled action sequences and challenging themes of memory, resistance, identity, history and the importance of art and story in making us human. Fantasy, folklore, and science fiction combine to give the novel the atmosphere of a fable. The action sequences are gripping but a considerable suspension of disbelief is required as the plot progresses. The narrative includes Spanish words, phrases, and story extracts; these are not translated, although the general meaning can usually be understood. Overall, this thought-provoking story, with its emphasis on the value of storytelling, will lead young readers to think about the importance of memory, knowledge, adaptation, and reflection in building a hopeful future. **SR**

The Haunting of Tyrese Walker

★★★★

J. R. Rose, Andersen Press, 290pp, 9781839132407, £8.99 pbk

This new horror tale for older children is much more than just a scary story. It explores the themes of loss, grief and mental health in a genuinely frightening way but also celebrates Jamaican folklore. Visiting relatives with his mum in Jamaica, after the tragic loss of his father, Tyrese finds it extremely difficult to overcome his negative thoughts and low mood, despite the constant delicious offerings from Grammy's kitchen and the kind attention of his cousin, Marvin. What's worse is his Grammy's tiresome tales of 'duppies': spooky spectres that, for reasons that Tyrese refuses to believe, require the scattering of rice about the estate every night just to keep at bay.

Soon, though, Tyrese notices that there really are unusual and inexplicable things happening to him. He is haunted by genuinely terrifying ghosts, which are perfectly described to the effect that readers will find it impossible to discern if Tyrese is being haunted by duppies and other ancient ghouls, or if his grief is somehow causing him to lose his grip on reality.

Rose delivers real hair-raising moments of horror. The scariest characters are kept hidden until absolutely necessary, and a hot, damp, earthy atmosphere is created to suffocate readers.

Tyrese enlists the help of Marvin and a new friend, Ellie, to try and find the answer to the unbelievable goings on. They find themselves delving deep into the mystery of nineteenth century experiments upon dead bodies that blur the line between science and fairy tales, evoking some classic horror tropes in an original new setting.

Though a little too much exposition happens via Grammy and cousin Marvin discussing what they know from old spooky stories, a thrilling pace is sustained and there are lots of agonising cliff-hanger moments at the end of chapters. However, the most compelling aspect of *The Haunting of Tyrese Walker* is the terrifying premise that children who are hurting are more vulnerable to the clutches of evil spirits. Increasingly, Tyrese loses grip on reality and, even more frightening, he begins to lose his memories, too - including those of his beloved father. As his feelings of pain and loss intensify, the frequency and severity of his demonic visitations increase, and the effect on the reader is heart-wrenching. **SD**

The Ministry of Unladylike Behaviour

★★★★

Robin Stevens, Puffin 400pp., 9780241429860 £12.99 hbk

The 10-book series of **Murder Most Unladylike**, featuring schoolgirl detectives Hazel Wong and Daisy Wells, has come to an end, and this looks like the start of a new series with May Wong anxious to follow in her big sister's footsteps. The setting is December 1940, during World War II, and 10 year-old May (almost 11) is unable to travel back to Hong Kong, but she can go to Deepdean School with her sister, Rose, who is 12. Hazel, who at 19 seems very old to May, has left the school where she had become famous, and is working as a real spy, but takes the girls out regularly. While looking for sweets in Hazel's handbag May finds a note, inviting Hazel to The Ministry, and she decides to run away and go to the appointment. On the doorstep she meets Eric, almost 13, with dark skin and dusty, curly hair, and they set off to track down an enemy spy. Pretending to be evacuees, which is quite easy in the chaos of war, they are taken to Elysium Hall, and stay in a strange household, including an Irish girl, Fionnuala, just a bit older than May, who wants to be an actress and likes to pretend she's the fictional detective Nancy Drew. They start off on the wrong foot, but learn to work together to find out what is going on. The spy hunt turns into a murder, and then there is another death, and all the various skills the children have are used to identify the spy and unmask the murderer.

It is a serious story, and there is always danger in wartime, but there are many ways to use a gas mask case, and a lot of fun to be had from the resourcefulness of all the children. Eric's family is German, and Robin Stevens has him explain guiltily that he joined a Hitler Youth group, and that it took time for many Germans to realise that all was not well: as in most war situations, there was good and bad behaviour on both sides, and that's a good point to make.

The joke name for the famous Special Operations Executive, brave people who made a big difference in the war, was indeed the Ministry of Ungentlemanly Activity, and Robin Stevens delights in using that idea for this next series. We can look forward to more stories as enjoyable as this, as Fionnuala prepares to join May at Deepdean, and all 3 become the next generation of the Detective Society: for who would suspect children of being investigators? **DB**

Breaking Down the Wall

★★★★

Maximilian Jones, Welbeck Flame, 281pp., 9781801300216, £7.99 pbk

This is the second book in a duology, new word to me, the first being *The Boy Behind the Wall*, set in West Berlin a generation before this title. The setting here is East Berlin in 1989, the year the Berlin wall came down. Greta, who is 13, and whose father is in prison for helping people to escape East Germany, lives with her mother. Greta's great friend is Christian, a boy who is doing all the right things, joining the Pioneers and following the party line. A new girl, Lilli has arrived at their school from Hungary where rebellion against Russia and the authorities is more advanced than in East Germany. Lilli encourages Greta to join a protest and then print leaflets which they leave in the park, but they are nearly arrested and this scares both of them. But when Greta discovers her aunt is spying on them for the Stasi things begin to change and Lilli, Greta and Christian resolve to take action and steal some of the Stasi files. What follows is part of history when the Berlin wall comes down.

The reader feels clearly the claustrophobic nature of life in East Germany, and the oppression of the regime. The drudgery of life, the greyness comes through very clearly, and it is easy to see why young people particularly would begin to chafe against this complete control of their lives. However, it is hard to believe that Greta, with the example of her father in prison, whom she sees only once a month and then under guard, would so quickly join in with Lilli and the protesters. It would have been more credible for the two authors (and others responsible for this book), to take their time allowing her disillusionment to grow, but also giving her time to weigh up the consequences for her family.

The excitement builds as the story progresses, partly because most readers will know of the fall of the Berlin Wall, though parts of the story will stretch the credulity of the reader too far. Witnessing the fall of the wall would have been enough to end this story and been a more satisfying ending. **JF**



The Miraculous Sweetmakers

★★★★★

Natasha Hastings, ill. Alex T Smith, HarperCollins, 400pp, 9780008496050, £12.99 hbk

This story is a wonderful mix of history and magic. The main character, Thomasina helps her father in his sweet shop, whilst also looking after her mother who suffers from what we would know as depression. The family are still suffering after the death of their son Arthur, four years before. The year is now 1683 and winter has arrived with a vengeance, freezing the Thames and allowing for a Frost Fair to take place. Thomasina meets another young girl, called Anne, selling goods for her apothecary uncle at the fair and they soon become firm friends. When Thomasina starts seeing strange ice-like people following her she becomes worried, but then she has a visit from a strange character named Inigo, who says that he will be able to bring her brother back to life and hence make her mother better. What follows is a chilling (in all senses) tale of a parallel Frost fair, ruled over by the frightening Father Winter, as well as a story about family and friendship and the lengths that people will go to in order to help those they love.

I have read this book twice and it just keeps getting better. The underlying themes that we are presented with, about asthma and also mental health, resonates with us just as much today. However, the descriptions of Bedlam and the lack of treatments for both conditions is really frightening. I particularly love

the two strong female characters and the way they both want to develop the businesses that they are growing up in; given that this was such a difficult period for women, they are showing real determination and purpose. There are several stories that have used the concept of the Frost Fairs but this story really does give a sense of the reality of life, particularly the poor, at this time; the old lady, Miss Maplethorpe presents a desperately sad image of what survival would mean in those days. This is one of those stories that should become a classic and which would make a fantastic class reader for children in KS2. **MP**

Hazel Hill is Gonna Win This One

★★★★★

Maggie Horne, Firefly, 284pp, 978 191310 297 5, £7.99, pbk

Hazel Hill is a loner at school, she keeps herself to herself, spending most of her time preparing for her school's annual speech competition. This year she is determined to beat her rival, Ella Quinn. Her priorities rapidly change however when she finds out Ella is being targeted and harassed on social media. Hazel is certain she knows who the culprit is and decides to help, alongside Ella's friend Riley, a decision which proves harder than she expects.

Through this story we learn a lot about Hazel, who is an appealing heroine, about her loving home, her well-meaning parents and the difficulties a new baby can present to older siblings. She shows determination and a competitive spirit when it comes to the speech competition, but is also lonely, feeling herself different. We watch as she gradually accepts her sexuality and shows quiet joy when she makes friends after being thrust into the role of investigator.

This story offers young readers with plenty to think about and themes include being courageous, challenging bullying and injustice, solving problems and coping with setbacks, the pitfalls of social media and the potentially devastating effect of online abuse.

An engaging narrative from Canadian author Maggie Horne told with a touch of humour, great characterisation, and a satisfying conclusion. **SMc**

Witchstorm

★★★★★

Tim Tilley, ill. Tim Tilley, Puffin 336pp., 9781474966610 £7.99 pbk

Tim Tilley's previous book, *Harklights*, about a boy who looks after a hobgoblin baby that he found in an acorn shell, was the Winner of the *Joan Aiken Future Classics Prize* and was shortlisted for Bookfest's *Big Book Award*, 2022. This book also has a magical theme, as young Will, a sensitive lad who enjoys baking, tries to find out why his mother has suddenly disappeared. The family are descendants of Lori Knight, who

had helped a famous witch, Agatha Crow, to escape from witch hunters centuries ago, and his mother has taught Will Agatha's song about buried treasure, which no-one has ever found. Did his mother find a clue that led to her disappearance?

With the help of his aunt, Hera, a feisty archaeologist, and a young witch called Magda who arrives unintentionally, Will leads the hunt for his mother, and finds that he has more courage than he had thought. Although the female characters are useful and equally brave, it's usually Will who comes up with ideas for escape, or tactics for the rescue of his mother from the clutches of Hildreth, the evil chief witch. Hildreth is also looking for Agatha's treasure, as it will bring him power, and he plans to flood the Fens with a mighty storm to restore the damage humans have done. The Fens are home and a source of income to lots of people, including Will's family, and shelter for the wildlife he knows and loves. This extreme re-wilding would be disastrous, as would the plan by the father of one of his friends to build houses on the West Meadow - there is very much a conservation theme here, too. Of course, all is well by the end, and it's a good story.

Tim Tilley is the illustrator as well as the author. His quirky illustrations are profusely spread throughout the book, and will certainly add to reading pleasure. **DB**

Unstoppable Us Volume 1 – How Humans Took Over the World

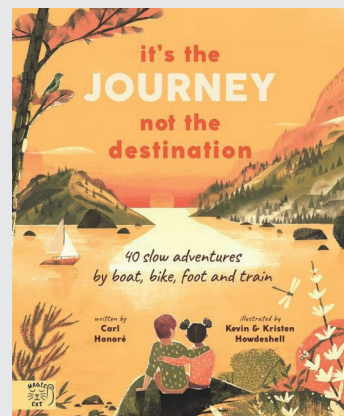
★★★★★

Yuval Noah Harari, ill. Ricard Zaplana Ruiz, Puffin Books, 208pp, 9780241596081, £20.00 hbk

Yuval Noah Harari, the best-selling author of *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, has adapted his adult non-fiction writing to create a four-volume series for young readers which details the fascinating story of humans from pre-history to present day. This first volume describes how homo sapiens came to dominate Earth by combining an ability to create and co-operate with a relentless and destructive voracity. The author takes young readers from pre-history when humans were ordinary animals through to the point at which homo sapiens, our ancestors, spread all over the planet, causing the Neanderthals and other kinds of humans to disappear and driving the planet's giant mammals to extinction. Readers are told that the 'superpower' of sapiens was the ability to tell stories, which enabled them to co-operate and dominate.

Yuval Noah Harari's text is engaging and accessible to readers of 8+, presenting facts and information in an easy to understand and scientifically accurate way whilst always acknowledging all that is still unknown. The information is divided into four main headings, 'Humans as Animals', 'The Sapiens Superpower',

'How our Ancestors Lived' and 'Where did all the Animals Go?'. Each heading is broken up into easily digestible short sections, all interspersed with Ricard Zaplana Ruiz' vivid and appealing full-colour illustrations, maps, and timelines. The text is presented in a clear, readable font. The whole volume portrays the early history and development of homo sapiens in a clear, engaging, and entertaining style which will fascinate young readers and encourage them to look out for the future volumes which will explore the further development of humankind. **SR**



It's the Journey not the Destination

★★★★★

Carl Honoré, ill. Kevin & Kristen Howdeshell, Magic Cat Publishing, 96pp, 9781913520595, £20.00 hbk

The subtitle of this beautifully illustrated hardback explains the contents: '40 slow adventures by boat, bike, foot and train'. The author hopes that your adventures by these four slower modes of travel will enable you to concentrate on the world around you and inspire you to get in touch with your five senses.

This chunky volume is divided into four sections: Journeys on Foot, Journeys by Bike, Journeys by Boat and Journeys by Train; the contents page clearly shows which spread covers a particular part of the world. Helpful maps occur at the beginning of each section and coverage in terms of countries and continents is fairly comprehensive and wide-ranging.

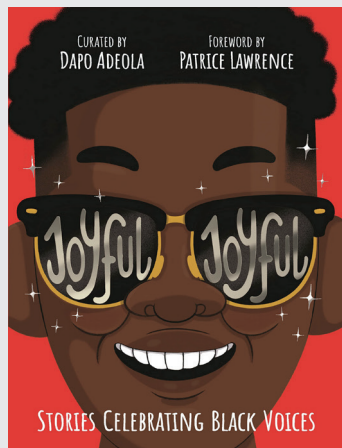
Students with an appetite for amazing facts will love this publication. For example, the pages advising the reader to 'Experience the Haunting Beauty of the West Highland Way' include interesting details such as 'two kilted clans – Clan Gregor and Clan Colquhoun – fought the savage battle of Glen Fruin here 400 years ago' (p.18). Every page is lavishly illustrated and includes some great historical facts including how New Zealand became the country where all *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* films were shot!

Award winning writer Carl Honoré is a proponent of the Slow Movement and wrote a book in 2004, *In Praise of Slow*, has had his works translated into 35 languages and is a popular speaker on TED. This book is brought to a close

reviews

14+ Secondary/Adult

with '12 Ways to Travel Slow' (p.94) which contains some excellent advice for living, and appreciating the journey rather than just the destination. In the light of the pandemic too, his advice is very useful, and I feel this book will be very successful. The illustrators are also to be commended on this project; their work augments the text beautifully. This book would be a fantastic present for a young person who is especially keen on geography and/or history and would also be very inspiring and topical in the classroom or library. **JS**



Joyful, Joyful: Stories Celebrating Black Voices

★★★★★

Curated by Dapo Adeola, variously illustrated, Macmillan 190pp., 9781529071504, £20.99 hbk

Famous writers like Alex Wheatle, Trish Cooke and Malorie Blackman join less well-known authors in this joyful anthology of more than twenty positive stories about people of colour. There are stories set in Nigeria, Uganda, Dominica, and Trinidad, but also stories about black children in the USA, Britain and Norway. The strength of a family, the straining against parental discipline (e.g. Jazmine, the Muslim girl who secretly trains to be a boxer, eventually accepted), but particularly the importance of friends, are recurrent themes. There is also a lot of food, including Dapo Adeola's own tale about his introduction as a boy to cooking, which he now loves, and even a recipe for Jollof Rice. It concludes with *Onitan*, meaning 'the Owner of the Story', when Matilda Feyişayo Ibinu gives a lot of guidance, illustrated by Terrence Adegbenle, as to how to write your own story, and dares you to do it...

All the illustrators are black, as well as the authors, and several pages at the back are filled with brief descriptions of everyone involved, including what brings each one joy and pleasure.

This is indeed a joyful book, beautifully produced, and recommended. **DB**

The Boy Lost in the Maze

★★★★★

Joseph Coelho, Otter Barry, 320pp, 9781913074333, £12.99 hbk

Current children's laureate Joseph Coelho has set himself a challenge here. This verse novel sets out to bring together the modern story of teenage Theo, looking for his absent father, with the tale of the ancient hero Theseus, who killed the Minotaur. Developing an examination of masculinity, and the relationship between fathers and sons, Coelho switches back and forth between the two tales and between free verse and the use of other verse forms. He deploys a part of the Theseus story that may be less familiar than the hero's confrontation with the Minotaur. These are the trials in pursuit of claiming his manhood before he meets his father in Athens, in which he kills a series of monsters, prompting the refrain in the first part of the novel that 'Theseus killed them.' Theo is fascinated by Theseus, and encouraged by his English teacher, is writing his own series of poems about the hero's exploits. Being a thoughtful, as well as an angry, young man, and aware, too, that a series of killings may make repetitive reading, he seeks to develop a more complex, more vulnerable portrait of Theseus himself, who is as reliant on help from others as his sword arm. He also begins to think about the lives and motivations of the monsters that Theseus encounters and, in particular, begins to identify with the Minotaur, whom Theo gradually comes to see as less a monster himself than a victim of his parent's monstrous behaviour. The attempt to draw precise parallels between the incidents and characters in the Theseus and Theo stories is maybe strained sometimes, and I am doubtful about the 'choose your own adventure' alternatives that are sometimes offered. It is, nevertheless, a daring and powerful text, supported by Kate Milner's black and white illustrations. It succeeds in both honouring and revising the heroic myth and in convincingly portraying Theo's own search, both for his father and for his own sense of what it means to be a man. **CB**

Big Bad Me

★★★★★

Aislinn O'Loughlin, Little Island, 307pp, 978-1915071040, £8.99 pbk
Fans of gore with a humorous twist will revel in this book, heavily laced as it is with all manner of slaughtering and mayhem, topped off with quips and asides. Evie Wilder had always been aware of her severe 'diabetes', unfailingly taking the medicine prepared by her mother to alleviate her symptoms – until the truth made its presence known as she morphed into a werewolf. Her sister Kate, always aware of Evie's nature, had cared for her since her werewolf

parents had been killed and Evie had become a part of the family.

When the girls' mother disappeared they resolved to find her, tracking her down to a vampire lair headed by the psychotic Ashton. They accrue an entertaining group of vampire/werewolf characters along the way and full-throttle **Buffy the Vampire Slayer** action builds to a shattering and triumphant climax as their mother is rescued and the monsters are either reduced to dust or humanised.

This is all standard – though cleverly written – full on supernatural action, where decapitations and exploding bodies are *de rigueur* and, eventually, the good guys win. However, O'Loughlin makes space for other experiences so that the carnage almost never overwhelms and the novel is richer for it. The dual narrative is cleverly handled by the sisters, Evie and Kate, revealing their characters and clearly delineated. There is love interest – heterosexual and LGBTQ – but this is woven into the righteous destruction narrative so that it never compromises the main theme. What shines through most strongly is the love between the two sisters, protective and committed.

Humour is snappily delivered and the deep dive into 80's vampire nostalgia is unerringly maintained. O'Loughlin consistently delivers laugh out loud lines, juxtaposing them with the most bloodthirsty passages to great effect.

Big Bad Me both exhausts and entertains and fans of the genre will be delighted by the ending, which seems ripe with promise for another foray by the vampire hunters. **VR**

Well, that was unexpected

★★★★★

Jesse Q. Sutanto, Electric Monkey, 343pp, 978 0008501464, £8.99 pbk
Sutanto won the 2021 **Comedy Women In Print** Prize and she exercises her comedic talents again in this cross-continent romance. Sharlot is Indonesian but her mother has never taken her to visit the country, whereas George lives in Indonesia with his stratospherically wealthy and extremely famous family. Both have transgressed sexually in the eyes of their families, who resolve to remediate this by catfishing on a dating site on behalf of their children, in order to find them ideal partners in the Indonesian tradition.

The problems begin when each set of parents creates an idealised persona in tune with traditional family values, bearing little resemblance to the real thing. Continents apart, they would never have met but for Sharlot's mother's determination to take her daughter to her homeland and away from the sexual temptations which she perceives are rife in America.

Sutanto plays a hectic game,

marshalling her small army of characters to comment and entertain and skilfully weaving dialogue particularly well in difficult situations. When Sharlot and George meet for their first family-organised coffee date, their exchanges are a study in awkwardness. However, she cleverly inserts a nuance of attraction between the two, energetically resisted by both because each feels the fraudulent nature of the enterprise. They are not the people their parents have painted them to be online and neither can they admit that their interaction was done under false pretences. Readers are whisked through a series of exotic locations, with every move wholly in the public eye and peopled with journalists and camera crew, creating misery and frustration for the protagonists.

The greatest success of the book is the interplay between the two characters in this hothouse situation as the attraction between them begins to develop. It is a dance-advancing and retreating and always aware of the deception which lies at the heart of their meeting, which prevents them from being honest about their feelings. Their respective families are an amalgam of Greek tragedy and farce, hilariously entertaining but always a threat to the secrecy which both George and Sharlot are trying to preserve.

Finally, they decide to share their experience online, with the truth of their interaction and their families' reasons for instigating it in the open for everyone to share. Through this familiar medium Suntano is able to give voice to young people's relationship problems and the societal expectations of young women in particular. It makes a powerful and pertinent ending to the book and the much longed-for happy ending. **VR**

We Are All Constellations

★★★★★

Amy Beashel, Rock the Boat, 336pp, 978-0 861540655, £8.99 pbk
Iris is seventeen. At age ten, her Mum died in a fire – or so she thinks. This is a searing and painful novel about secrets, lies, family and the messiness of being human. It tells the story of how Iris comes to terms, or begins to, with her grief and the loss of her mother.

It also touches on what we do as humans when someone isn't who we think they are – not so much what we do, but the problem of what to do when our perception doesn't match the reality of someone, or of our construct of them. This is a book for Year 11 and up as it openly deals with suicide, mental health and the aftereffects.

The reader needs to be in a very positive frame of mind to read Beashel's novel. It is challenging and confronting but ultimately, hopeful. **RB**

Valediction: No.8 Meadows and Muffins

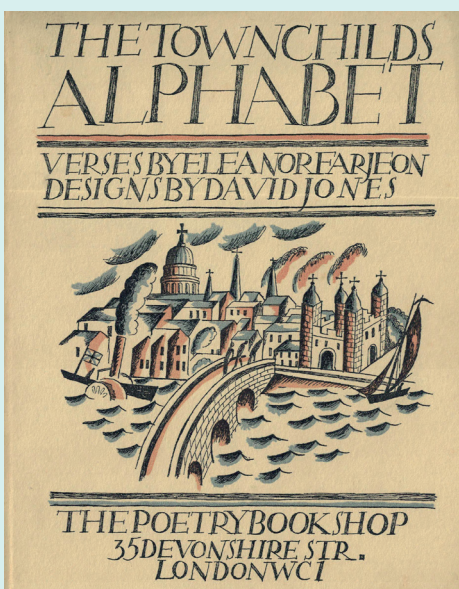
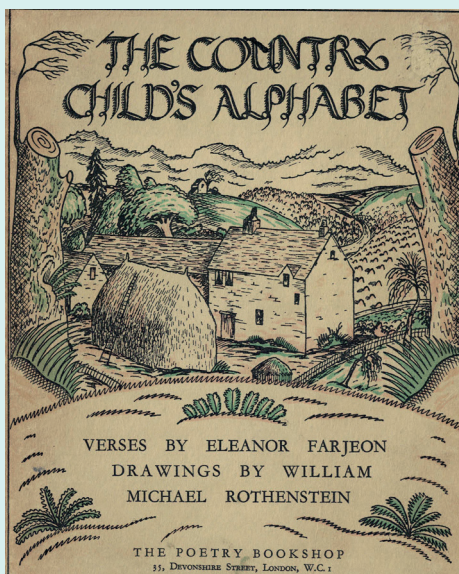
Brian Alderson is donating his remarkable collection of children's books to **Seven Stories**. Here he carefully wraps up two of Eleanor Farjeon's alphabet books.

In 1968 I was honoured with the **Eleanor Farjeon Award**. It came as a great and, to me, seemingly undeserved surprise for, although I had been 'messing about with children's books' for a number of years that hardly amounted to 'distinguished service'. Moreover, my reading experience during those exciting times hardly touched on the mass of writing that marked Eleanor's contribution to the genre.

In an attempted gesture of gratitude to the **Children's Book Circle** I was able to spend some time at the Swiss Cottage Library compiling a chronological booklist of Eleanor Farjeon's publications for children, the seventy or so in Eileen Colwell's 1961 Bodley Head Monograph being, uselessly, in alphabetical order. The experience brought home what the cognoscenti knew anyway that the diversity of her writing and its illustration demanded an analysis beyond contemporary scholarship.

Seeing the poetry in its original published form brings home its character in a way that such a compendium as **The Children's Bells** (1957) cannot. (Published by Oxford and well illustrated by Peggy Fortnum it was a sort of companion to the selected stories in **The Little Bookroom** (1955), famed for its gaining in dodgy fashion the Carnegie Medal and first winner of the Hans Christian Andersen prize.) A defence of her verses from accusations of slightness by such as Humphrey Carpenter cannot be done through a few quotes and kindly words as given, say, by Morag Styles in her much-praised **From the Garden to the Street** (Cassel, 1998) but through an examination of its appearance in individual books. Thus the 366 days in the 400 pages of **The New Book of Days** (1941), marvellously illustrated by Philip Gough and M.W. Hawes, include many poems as well as prose as the seasons progress, and, in same manner, **Perkin the Pedlar**, with its powerful drawings by Clare Leighton (Faber, 1932) takes us on a topographical tour of Britain from Appledore to Zeal Monachorum with a tiny story and a poem at every stop. (This lovely book was read to me in Miss Jones's kindergarten when I was four and may well account for my lifelong appreciation of book-making ever since.)

There were also, of course, books made up entirely of illustrated verses by Eleanor of which in almost continuous print are the **Nursery Rhymes of London Town** (Duckworth, 1917) illustrated by Macdonald Gill, Eric Gill's brother, and the comedy of the English crown that she composed with her brother Herbert, **Kings and Queens** (Gollancz, 1932). A fondness for alphabets as



a founding principle is manifest elsewhere than **Perkin** and includes the two volumes noticed here.

They have a particular appeal as originating from Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop which is sometimes stigmatized as 'Georgian' thanks to its highly successful anthologies before Uncle Ez and Old Possum stole the show. It published few books for children but had a keen interest in illustrators manifested in the four pages of adverts at the end of our books here where can be found many single sheet Broadsheets and Rhyme Sheets illustrated by artists today being celebrated at the centenary of the Society of Wood Engravers: Philp Hagreen... John Nash... Paul Nash... McKnight Kauffer... and especially the draftsman Lovat Fraser.

Eleanor produced one or two texts for the broadsheets but it is not clear how the two

alphabet books were commissioned. Her rhymes are redolent of the period with country children never seeing a tractor or a black plastic bag and town children firmly rooted in the middling classes buying flowers or ice-cream from street traders:

N for Neddy
*Go, Neddy, go, Go up the hill,
With a bag of grist, For the miller's mill.
Hee-haw! Perhaps I won't, Or perhaps I will*

G for Gutter-Sweeper
*When the snow that first came down
Pure and white is turning brown,
Guttersweepers with their brooms
Come to town.*

Both books are designed alike with the letter-title and illustration on the verso and Farjeon's verses on the recto of the page-openings. In both cases the drawings are done by artists at the start of their careers. William Michael Rothenstein was in fact only sixteen¹ but produced accomplished pencil drawings framed by the letters he was illustrating. Eccentricity showed his remarkable confidence in his skills despite running against some of the verse depictions (one wonders what Eleanor made of the wildly gesticulating blackberry-picker for Jam or, in Lambs, where a gentleman is shown consuming a cutlet.

David Jones was on the brink of a more distinguished career, working with Gill at Ditchling before going with him to Wales for great deeds soon after **Town Child** was published. The wit of his drawings often given a blue tint, and their angular patterning, together with his lettering and design for his front cover, make for a rare but, I think, never-repeated entry into children's books.

Biblio:

Eleanor Farjeon *The Country Child's Alphabet*. Drawings by William Michael Rothenstein. London: The Poetry Bookshop, 35 Devonshire Street, Theobalds Road, WC1, 1924. 210x170 mm. [56pp. + 4pp.ads.Books for Children]. Cream paper over boards, cut flush, hand-lettered title and tinted drawing by the artist to front.

Ibid *The Town Child's Alphabet*. Designs by David Jones...1924 [description as above]

¹ He would quickly drop the William which was the forename of his father, a notable painter and Principal of the Royal College of Art. One of his brothers, changing his name to Albert Rutherstone in 1914, was a brilliant artist, illustrator and graphic designer.

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.