

# BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.258

*the* children's book magazine online

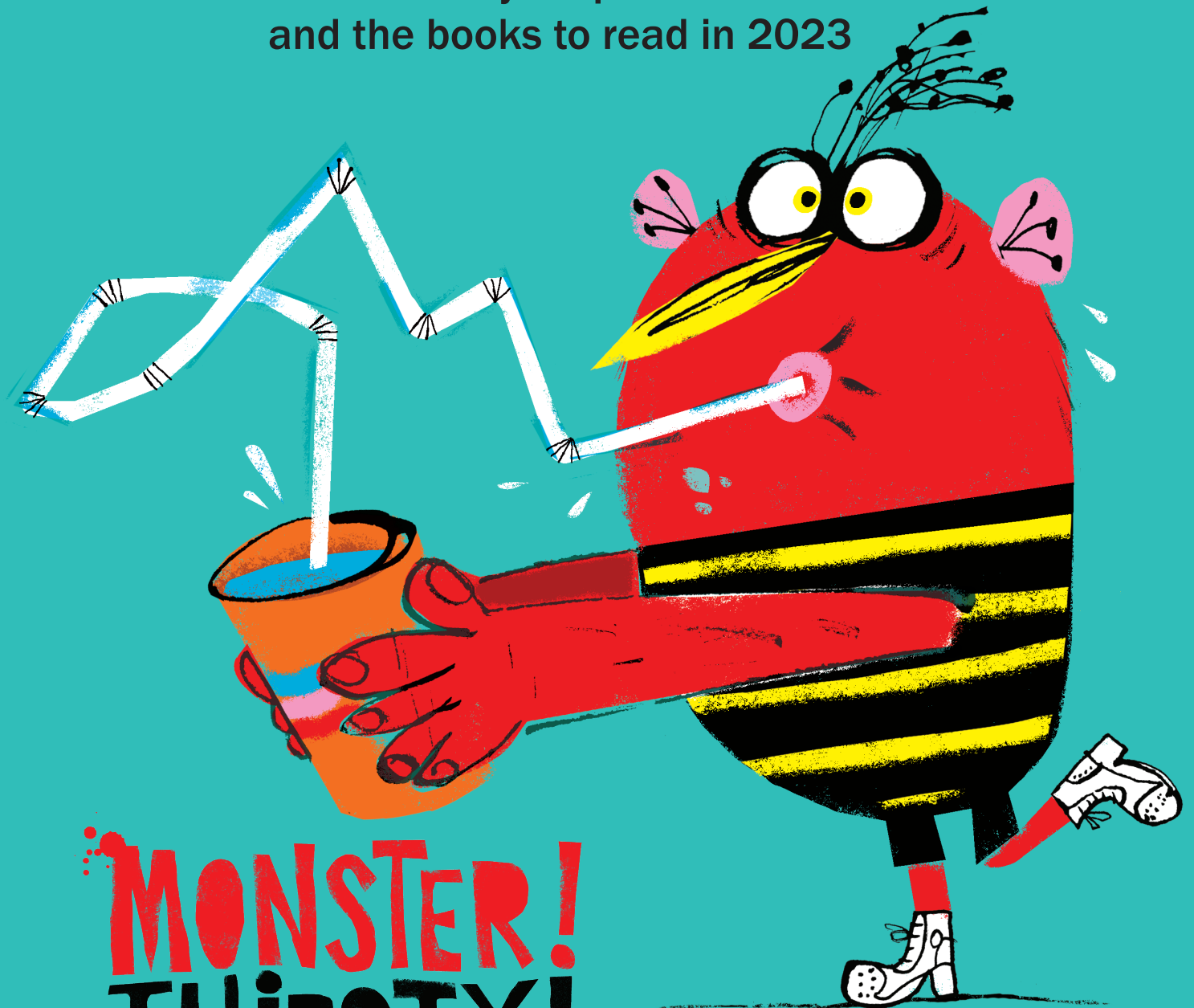
January 2023

[www.booksforkeeps.co.uk](http://www.booksforkeeps.co.uk)

Authorgraph interview **Sean Taylor**

Windows into Illustration **Duncan Beedie**

Plus new year predictions  
and the books to read in 2023



**MONSTER!**  
**THIRSTY!**  
**DRINK!**

Sean Taylor  
Fred Benaglia

# CONTENTS

## January 2023

### 2 Editorial

**3 Where are the Working Class Voices?** by author Eve Ainsworth

**4 New Year Predictions:** a panel of experts look into the future

**6 Books of the Year:** what will we be reading in 2023?

**11 Witness Literature:** Beverly Naidoo on the importance of speaking truth to readers

**12 Authorgraph 258:** Sean Taylor interviewed by Clive Barnes

**14 Windows into Illustration:** Duncan Beedie on an unusual 'love' book

**16 Beyond the Secret Garden:** Transitions by Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O'Connor

**18 I Wish I'd Written:** Clare Weze on the books that gave her permission to fly

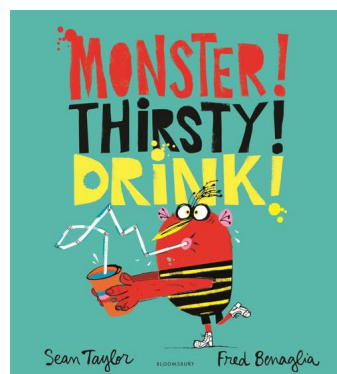
**18 Reviews**  
Books About Children's Books  
Under 5s (Pre-School/Nursery/Infant)  
5-8 (Infant/Junior) + Ed's Choice  
8-10 (Junior/Middle)  
+ New Talent  
10-14 (Middle/Secondary)  
14+ (Secondary/Adult)

**32 A Classic in Short Revisited:**  
by Brian Alderson

### COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **Monster! Thirsty! Drink!** by Sean Taylor, illustrated by Fred Benaglia.

Thanks to **Bloomsbury Children's Books** for their help with this cover.



# Editorial 258

## January 2023

Welcome to the first **Books for Keeps** of 2023. Issue number 258 is filled with predictions, from which books will be setting trends in the year ahead – huge thanks to all the editors who shared their tips – to the issues likely to be preoccupying us.

We're opening with a look back, however. This time last year, Oxford University Press had just revealed *anxiety* as the 2021 Children's Word of the Year. Of 8,000 children surveyed, almost a quarter had plumped for *anxiety* (21%) as number one word, with 19% choosing *challenging* and 14% *isolate*. This year, in what might appear to be a complete turnaround, almost half of children surveyed chose *Queen* (46%) as their word of the year, and over a third (36%) selected happy. Although when asked why they chose *Queen*, many of the children cited sadness – not surprising in the year of her death – almost half of children (48%) felt hopeful and over a quarter (29%) felt excited about the year ahead. Perhaps we should follow their lead and trust that things will improve, cost of living crisis, the looming threats of environmental breakdown and further pandemics notwithstanding.

One of the things giving us reason to be positive for 2023 is the resurgence in children's poetry – publishing, performance and writing, all ably

championed by our Children's Laureate Joseph Coelho of course. While publishers Macmillan, Otter-Barry Books, Troika, the Emma Press and Bloomsbury continue to champion poets new and established, it's exciting to hear that Scallywag Press are launching a poetry list this year. This year too, the **CLiPPA** turns twenty, with special events and announcements promised, while **Poetry By Heart**, the national poetry speaking competition for schools and colleges is ten. Both competitions celebrate what poetry offers children and young people – opportunities to explore feelings and emotions, to connect, escape, expand experiences, and the freedom to play with words and language – something even the 14% of children who described themselves to Oxford as worried should relish.

Whatever you plan to do in 2023, we hope you'll continue to read Books for Keeps as we continue to report on the books, the words and pictures shaping children's lives.

As always, if you appreciate what we do, do please make a contribution via [Paypal](https://www.paypal.com) – work to transfer 40 years of our archive to the website continues and all donations, small or large, are very welcome.

**Happy reading, 2023!**



### Books for Keeps

#### January 2023 No.257

ISSN 0143-909X

© Books for Keeps CIC 2016

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

Editorial correspondence should be sent to Books for Keeps,  
30 Winton Avenue  
London N11 2AT.

Books for Keeps is available online at

[www.booksforkeeps.co.uk](https://www.booksforkeeps.co.uk)

A regular BfK Newsletter can also be sent by email.

To sign up for the Newsletter, go to

[www.booksforkeeps.co.uk](https://www.booksforkeeps.co.uk) and follow the Newsletter link.

If any difficulty is experienced, email addresses can also be sent to [enquiries@booksforkeeps.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@booksforkeeps.co.uk)\*

**Email: [enquiries@booksforkeeps.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@booksforkeeps.co.uk)**

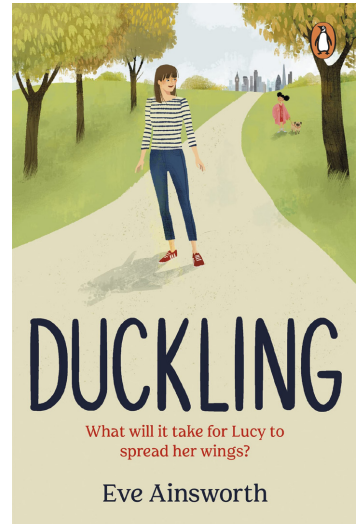
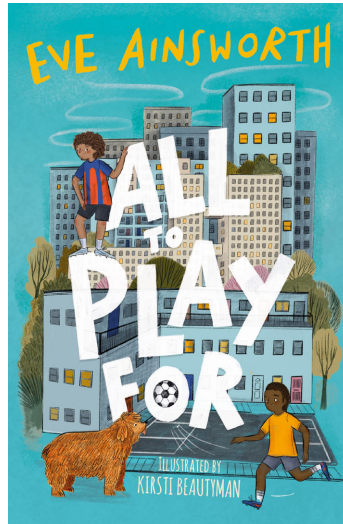
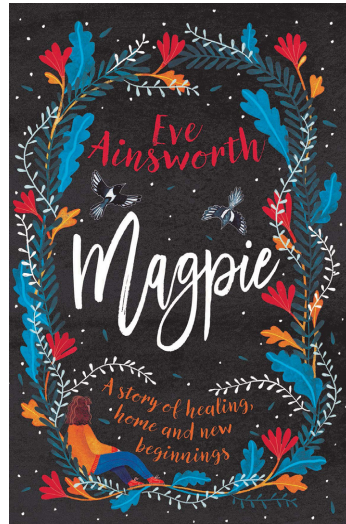
**Website: [www.booksforkeeps.co.uk](https://www.booksforkeeps.co.uk)**

\*Email addresses will be used by Books for Keeps only for the purpose of emailing the Newsletter and will not be disclosed to third parties.



# Why Working-Class Voices Matter

Eve Ainsworth argues for the necessity of representation of working-class authors in children's books.



I wasn't aware of my class as a child, but I knew we were poor. I also knew that certain things were tougher for me, but I tried not to let that get in my way too much. My parents were avid and eclectic readers, feeding my love for books and expanding my knowledge. Weekends were spent scouring jumble sales or charity shops for new reads or stocking up on library loans. A new book was a birthday or Christmas treat. However, if I ever brought up the notion of wanting to be a writer – this was quickly, but not nastily, shut down. I soon learnt that there was an expectation that 'people like us' didn't become writers – we didn't have the right connections – and we probably weren't 'good enough' to make it, anyway.

My father was a talented artist and scholar. He swotted up on the works of Shakespeare, highlighting where he felt there had been errors in the later writing and making corrections. He sent his work off to numerous experts but felt largely ignored because he had no 'merit'. He was an unemployed, working-class man with no connections and no qualifications to his name. The process left him feeling defeated. My father also invented board games and created great pieces of art – but was never recognised in his lifetime – and I think a lot of his self-doubt was hinged in his own lack of self-worth. The imposter syndrome looms deep inside all of us, but I do believe it's a louder and darker beast inside working-class people. It's a nagging voice that never shuts up – no matter how successful you become,

Seeing my dad go through rejection and hearing his cynicism only made me more determined. I knew from a young age that I wanted to be an author, and despite an English teacher telling me it wasn't possible ('someone from your background would struggle'), I pressed on. I figured I didn't have much to lose and if anything, I had a lot to prove – and a lot of people to prove wrong. That I never read many working-class voices when I was younger became a driving factor for me. I was aware that a lot of the publishing space was taken up by white middle-class writers and this made me feel unseen as a child. The few working-class characters I encountered in books were often stereotypical tropes, often very harmful and sometimes humiliating. They certainly didn't represent the life that I recognised. I knew I wanted to write about things that reflected my life better – and although I would often touch on gritty subjects such as poverty, addiction, and mental health – I wanted to do so in a way that wasn't patronising or harmful.

I suffered a lot of rejections along the way and have been on more slush piles than most, but I learnt to smother the voice of self-doubt

that continued to nag at me. As I accumulated positive feedback, I started to believe that maybe one day I would be published – and my dreams wouldn't be as far-fetched as I once believed.

I began to work in secondary schools with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This was an important career move for me, as I became even more motivated to amplify working-class voices. It was here that I began writing my first YA novel, subsequently published in 2015.

From that moment on, I focussed on writing books that reflected the community I grew up in and work with. I strive to write about working-class issues in a fresh, honest and unpatronising way – and many readers have contacted me, thanking me for writing characters and themes they recognise and can relate to. This, for me, has been one of the most rewarding aspects of being a published author.

I really do believe it's vital that working class writers continue to have a voice in children's writing so that they can continue to inspire and ignite a new generation of authors. I never want a young reader to feel, as I did, that books didn't represent me, such an isolating and damaging feeling. The publishing industry is still, despite some improvement in diversity, predominately white middle-class and I fear that due to low pay and limited opportunities, this will be slow to change.

I just wish my Dad could have seen what could be achieved with a lot of grit and determination (and some luck along the way). Sadly, he died before my first book was published. Yes – it is a bit harder for those of us from underprivileged backgrounds and yes – we do have to shout just a little bit harder to be heard – but we must never give up. Our voices are so important, and they need to be out there.

I just hope, that one day in the future, articles like these will no longer be necessary and working-class and other underrepresented voices will be fairly represented.



**Eve Ainsworth** has written for both middle grade and teen readers. She was born and raised in Crawley, West Sussex and is one of seven children. After her degree, she had a varied background working within HR and Recruitment roles, before landing a job she loved – mentoring and supporting challenging and vulnerable students in a large secondary school. This inspired her first YA novel **7 Days. Duckling**, her debut adult novel, will be published by Penguin in May.

# New Year Predictions 2023

The pandemic, war in Europe and a cost of living crisis. The last few years have thrown up some very unwelcome events. How optimistic should we be for 2023 and what will be the key things shaping the world of children's books? **Books for Keeps** asked those in the know for their predictions.

## Professor Teresa Cremin, FAcSS, FRSA, FEA

Co-Director, Literacy and Social Justice Centre, Open University

2023 looks to be a challenging but engaging year. With less resource to spend on books, I think the quality of children's texts will be foregrounded by teachers and schools keen to kindle, stoke and sustain the elemental fire of reading in the young. Intense heat may accumulate around the diversities agenda, but surely common sense and continual recognition of all young people's realities will follow through, supported by the new DfE Reading Framework: Developing Reading in Years 2-9 (expected in April). This is likely to become a focal point in England, with attention to text selection, progression and complexity and the critical role of professional knowledge and use of texts. How teachers can nurture the habit of reading, facilitating autonomy and developing positive reader identities, as well as readers' skills, alongside discussions about the nature of comprehension are likely to characterise the year ahead. I suspect, these embers, particularly of the comprehension debate, will linger long into 2024.

## Diana Gerald

Chief Executive, BookTrust

For **BookTrust**, 2023 will see increasing level of challenge to delivering on our mission of getting children reading regularly and by choice. We are increasingly focusing our work on helping children from low-income families reap the lifechanging benefits of reading and close the gap with their peers in terms of career prospects, academic achievement and mental health outcomes. However, it is precisely these low-income families which are being hit the hardest by the current cost of living crisis and by real terms cuts to the public services and local charities who provide them with support. So not only are families being hit hard, but so are the libraries, schools and local charities with whom we work.

Whilst this is, without doubt, a very challenging backdrop to our work it also is an opportunity to talk about the fact that children's books and getting children to become regular readers is an incredibly cost-effective way to transform lives. I expect that in 2023 the value-for-money that children's literature represents will become more widely recognised and a bigger feature of our public discourse.



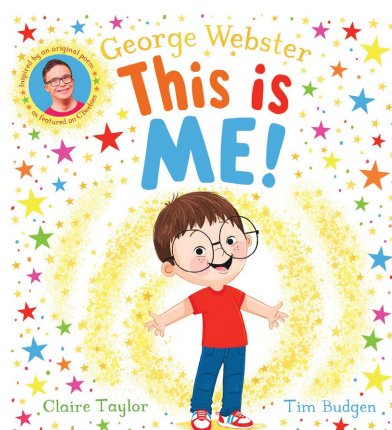
## Louise Johns-Shepherd

Chief Executive, CLPE

There's a great deal that I'm looking forward to in 2023 but top of the list has to be children's poetry. 2023 will see the twentieth **CLIPPA** and we have a brilliant judging panel looking at the most amazing collection of submissions this year. We are also hatching a super-secret, super exciting plan which will celebrate CLPE's role as the **National Centre for Children's Poetry**, and we are thrilled to be working with Macmillan to celebrate their **Big Amazing Poetry Book** and 30 years of Gaby Morgan's wonderful

overseeing of their poetry list, working with Macmillan on some very interesting research about poetry in primary schools. Our work with our Patron and Children's Laureate Joseph Coelho will continue as

he uses his laureateship to celebrate all things poetry and encourage children to write for themselves. I'm looking forward to finding new poets and discovering new poems from old friends, and to seeing poetry at its rightful place front and centre of children's literature.



## Dawn Woods, Member Development Librarian, SLA

One challenge in libraries which will be increasingly important in 2023 will be questions around representation in books from underrepresented parts of society – books dealing with issues of race, gender, sexuality, and identity. Our society is a diverse population, all deserving representation in our literature without censorship.

Ayaan Mohamud's **You Think You Know Me** is shocking and powerful but the everyday experience of racism for many students. Patrick Ness and Tea Bendix have collaborated to bring **Different For Boys** – spot on regarding homophobia.

Lesley Parr's **Where The River Takes Us** cementing Parr's name in historical adventures for upper primary/lower secondary age children and Natasha Farrant's **The Rescue of Ravenwood**, about guarding our extraordinary environment, are two MG titles to look forward to.

In picture books Laura Baker and Sandra de la Prada's **All The Wonderful Ways to Read** celebrates books and reading and in **This is Me!** George Webster, Claire Taylor and Tim Budgen have collaborated to produce a story from the authentic perspective of George.

The School Library Association (SLA) continue to support everyone running a school library so don't hesitate to contact us – [www.sla.org.uk](http://www.sla.org.uk)

## Barbara Blenheim

Editor of emagazine, Education Consultant, English and Media Centre

In 2023 I'm hoping for a strong emphasis on YA fiction in education and a growing recognition of the sheer range and quality of what is on offer in newly published work. I'd like to see contemporary fiction cosy up to books from the past, establishing warm connections, with those close, loving relationships allowing us to see both in a fresh light. For example, inventive new novels using poetic form, such as those by Sarah Crossan or Manjit Mann, can be read as part of a tradition of narrative experimentation, from Laurence Stern to Virginia Woolf and other modernist and post-modern writers. Contemporary Gothic can sit side by side with classic Gothic texts. YA writers speaking to, and speaking back to, the canon in diverse and exciting ways, is something to be celebrated. I hope to see more wonderful examples of that this coming year.



## Letterbox Library

We continue to witness a decline in those suffocating, heavily gendered, pink/blue-covered, 'for' girls/boys-titled, children's books. Amidst an uptick in titles which now chip away at gender stereotypes, there is a growing presence of anthropomorphic characters no longer saddled by gendered pronouns (in truth, these defaulted to 'masculine') or hyper-gendered visual markers. Very excitingly, we are also witnessing the stirrings of gender free characterisations and non-binary (NB) representations outside of YA fiction. Those few and far between NB secondary/multicast characters – e.g. in Middle Grade novels, **Harriet Versus the Galaxy** (2019) and **StrangeWorlds: Travel Agency** (2020) and the NB child included in the 14-strong cast of picture book **You Can!** (2021) – will, we predict, crescendo clamorously and joyfully onto your shelves in 2023. NB author, Harry Woodgate, has just recently gifted us Timmy, a protagonist blissfully free of gendered-pronouns (**Timid**, October 2022; see also Tasmanian author Daniel Gray-Barnett's **Katerina Cruickshanks**). They've also gone on to illustrate the cover for NB author, L. D. Lapinski's, much anticipated March 2023, MG novel, starring the titular NB character, **Jamie**. The following month will see Meg Grehen's MG **The Lonely Book**. Long may this populating of gender-busting, gender-free and NB characterisations thrive. This is surely, finally, their time.

## Miranda McKearney

Founder, EmpathyLab

Last year saw exciting developments in the way the book world got behind a growing empathy movement, building on the scientific research showing the empathy-building power of reading. 2023 promises to see further growth in this exciting, much needed movement.

46 children's publishers having joined a collective called **Empathy Builders**, which is committed to growing **Empathy Day** into a major force for change – helping more and more children learn about empathy, and have empathy experiences through engaging with books and their creators. Last year's **Empathy Day** achieved a 24% increase in the number of children reached – now up to 403,000.

The 46 publishers have adopted an **Empathy Manifesto** with a series of strategic pledges to further develop the book industry's contribution to building a more empathetic society. 2023 will see the roll out of training for authors, illustrators and publishing staff, inspiring them to make the most of their role in developing empathy.

The year begins with the launch of **EmpathyLab's 2023 Read for Empathy** book collection. These 65 books for 3–16-year-olds kick start year-round empathy work in schools and libraries, work which is having a real impact in communities, as this Deputy Head from Pennar School testifies: *'Our children have become much kinder and more empathetic – I've been blown away'*



## Piers Torday

The debate over celebrity interference in the children's book market should continue. While midlist authors' earnings remain low, the star-covered ceiling imposed on sales by parachuting in big names from unrelated fields to Hoover up precious coverage and resource will be hammered on only harder from below.

Sustainability in children's publishing could also set agendas this year. We need a thoughtful revision of the current shiny, foiled, high-finish design aesthetic in the children's book retail environment, but **Waterstones** must engage with the issue first.

Graphic novels will continue to gain popularity and deserve greater critical attention. In return, I wonder if there will be more heavily illustrated children's prose fiction.

The two biggest books of the year will be by two of our most talented and exceptional storytellers – **In the Shadow of the Wolf Queen** by Kiran Millwood Hargrave (Hachette) and **Impossible Creatures** by Katherine Rundell. I can't wait.

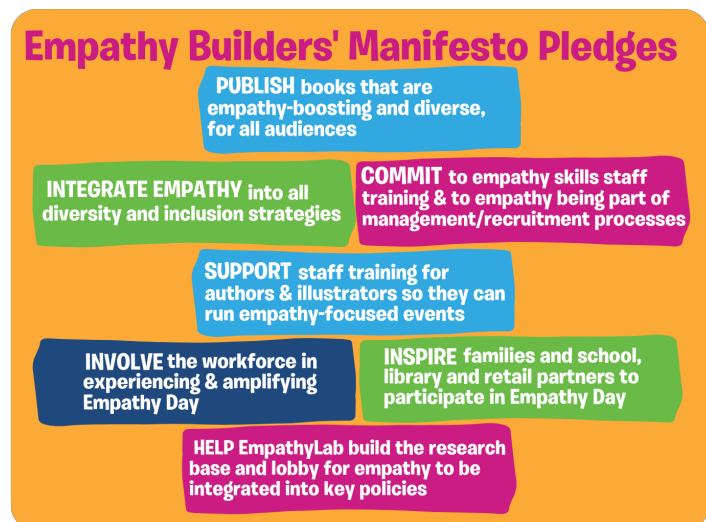
## Caroline Jones

Director and CEO, the Story Museum

At the **Story Museum** we create powerful encounters with stories for children and families. In 2023, we're looking forward to celebrating the monumental series **Choose Your Own Adventure** in a new installation in which visitors will create their own branching narrative through 33 playable boxes. Giving young people agency, enabling them to drive their own narrative, is crucial if they are to feel positive about their future.

**Stories to Save the World** launching in May, is our creative exploration of how stories can support families to be hopeful for the planet. Writer Chitra Soundar (**You're Safe With Me**) and illustrator Barry Falls (**Wild Child**) are collaborating with us on a new immersive exhibition based on Aesop's fable *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, inviting families to step into a fantastical world of insects...

I'm excited by the increasing representation in children's books with imminent titles such as **You're So Amazing** by James Catchpole and **Xanthe and the Ruby Crown** by Jasbinder Bilan. I admire Elle McNicol's initiative the Adrien Award and am looking forward to the TV adaptation of **A Kind of Spark**. So too, the stage versions of **Noughts & Crosses**, adapted from Malorie Blackman's novel by Pilot Theatre and Neil Gaiman's **The Ocean at the end of the Lane**, produced by the National Theatre, both on a UK tour.



# Books of the Year 2023

It's become a tradition for our first issue of the year to ask editors at the UK's publishing houses about the forthcoming books that they most want us to read. We have another bumper selection for 2023. Thank you to everyone who contributed, especially those who stuck to our 100 word limit.

From Fay Ereik, Co-publisher, **Alanna Max**

**Lulu's Nana Visits**, and we are so excited that the family reunites. Words by Anna McQuinn and illustrations by Rosalind Beardshaw, this amazing story captures moments between three generations celebrating life and passing on traditions. Every page reflects moments shared between family from Lulu's eyes, and it's impossible not to share her excitement.

From Alison Green, **Alison Green Books**

**Discovery Atlas** by Thiago de Moraes (September) is a huge and glorious book in every way. It's witty, gorgeously illustrated, and chock-full of amazing facts about the discovery of everything from Technology and Medicine to Food and even Sport. I defy anyone not to be fascinated!

From Ailsa Bathgate, Publisher, **Barrington Stoke**

Our short novellas punch far above their weight in terms of depth of content and richness of language, and nowhere is this more exquisitely displayed than in **Nightjar** by Katya Balen (June 2023). As Noah prepares for his Bar Mitzvah, he has to navigate his troubled relationship with his father, and a disagreement over helping an injured nightjar exposes the painful distance between them. Katya writes beautifully about relationships and nature, and this is the story of a wonderfully unique boy on the cusp of adulthood, learning to navigate challenges with a rare sensitivity towards the people and natural world around him.

From Lara Hancock, Head of Illustrated Publishing, **Bloomsbury Children's Books**

In this important new book, **Brilliant Black British History**, author and storyteller Atinuke takes us on an illuminating journey that celebrates the history of Black people in Britain, from the very first inhabitants on these islands to the present day. A fascinating chronological narrative, this captivating book also shines a light on figures from the past whose stories are inspiring and often surprising. Nigerian artist, Kingsley Nebechi, brings the story vividly to life, with illustrations that are detailed, rich and strikingly contemporary.

From Ellen Holgate, Associate Publisher, **Bloomsbury Children's Books**

For me, Katherine Rundell's **Impossible Creatures** is the publishing event of the year. It's the story of a boy called Christopher who discovers the Archipelago: a cluster of magical islands, where all the creatures of myth live and breed and thrive alongside humans. They

have been protected from discovery for thousands of years, but now the protection has worn thin – with unimaginable consequences for their world and ours. The book has been years in the making and is both a thrilling adventure and a hugely ambitious story about the problems of power, knowledge, and what love demands of us. In the hands of this great writer, we have one of the most extraordinary books I've ever read and the beginning of a landmark trilogy.

From Hannah Sandford, Editorial Director, **Bloomsbury Children's Books**

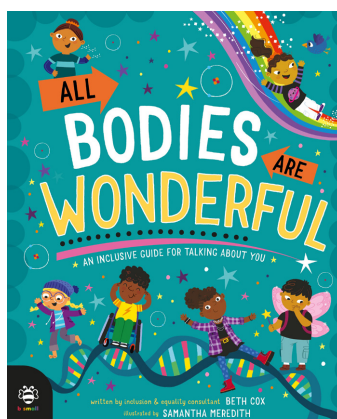
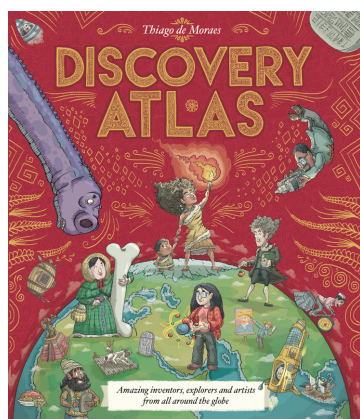
**Gwen and Art Are Not In Love** by Lex Croucher is a hilarious, angsty, romantic romp through medieval England that reads like Red, White & Royal Blue meets **A Knight's Tale**! Gwen and Art are life-long enemies, and, rather inconveniently, betrothed to be married. This tournament season they're out to dupe everyone into thinking that they're happy about their upcoming nuptials. But their secret crushes (Gwen's on Bridget Leclair, Camelot's only female knight, and Arthur's on Gabriel, heir to the throne) might just prove that the path to true love is far from ... straight? It's funny, joyful, brave, subversive and touching – escapist YA fiction at its most brilliant and accessible best.

From Hannah Rolls, Editorial Director, **Bloomsbury Children's Education**

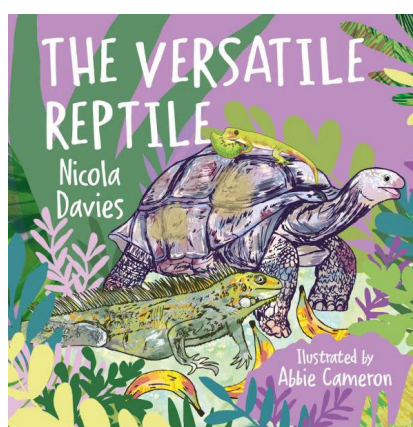
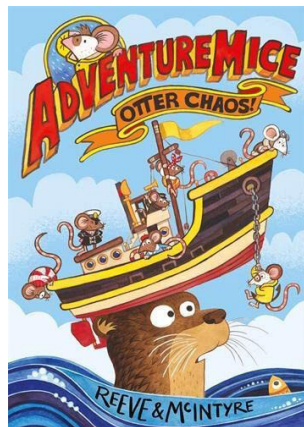
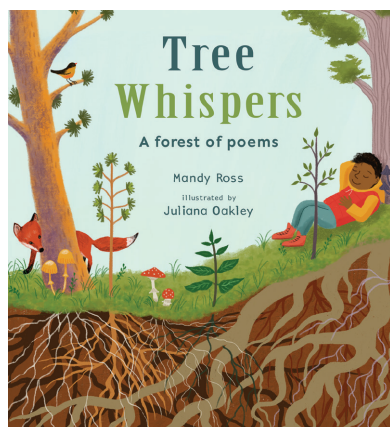
I'm particularly excited to be publishing the first book in a new young fiction series by comedian and podcaster Iszi Lawrence in April. **The Time Machine Next Door: Explorers and Milkshakes** tells the story of Alex the inventor and her next-door neighbour Sunil. When Sunil accidentally breaks his grandfather's most prized possession, Alex has an unusual solution to his problem – a time machine! Soon they're off on a madcap adventure visiting Shackleton in Antarctica and meeting the Apollo 11 astronauts – all while trying to stay away from a mysterious man with a suspicious pet kiwi... This series will bring history to life with hilarious plots, fascinating facts and fantastic illustrations by Rebecca Bagley. I love it!

From David Bennett, Publisher, **Boxer Books**

The book we are most excited about publishing in 2023 is **A Year of Good News!** (May). This book was inspired by the constant barrage of bad news filling the media – particularly during the pandemic year 2020. Slovakian film-maker Martin Smatana made it his mission to collect a good-news story for every week of 2020. Martin then illustrated each individual story with models made







from used and scrapped fabrics and shared these with his friends and neighbours bringing a smile to their faces. It's a perfect book to share, spreading something we all need in these difficult times – positivity and happiness.

**From Sam Hutchinson, Editor, BSmall**

I'm particularly excited to be publishing Beth Cox's inclusive guide to talking about bodies, **All Bodies Are Wonderful** (September 2023). Illustrated in full colour by Samantha Meredith, the book untangles the complex topic of DNA to communicate the idea that our genetics naturally lead to bodies that work in different ways. It's just science! We've established a name over recent years for our STEM publishing so it's exciting for us to use this experience in order to create a book that adults and kids will find an invaluable tool for big conversations. The target age is 7+.

**From Sue Baker, Editor, Child's Play**

This year, Child's Play is publishing a poetry collection by Mandy Ross about the wonderful and mysterious role trees can play in all our lives. **Tree Whispers** imagines the songs that trees might sing and the words they may whisper. It is a book that celebrates the role trees play in our personal well-being and the protection they offer to wildlife and our environment. Evocative illustrations by Juliana Oakley encourage us to rejoice in their existence, to appreciate the rich diversity of their lives, and ensure their protection for the future.

**From Liz Cross, Publishing Director, David Fickling Books**

I am very excited that we will be launching a new, full-colour series from Philip Reeve and Sarah McIntyre in 2023 – the wonderful **Adventuremice!** These books manage to capture the instant appeal and immersive nature of TV series like **Paw Patrol**, but with all the qualities of story, writing, art and design, and all the heart, you'd expect of a children's classic. I can't imagine any 5-7 year old who wouldn't be thrilled to discover this series. The ever versatile Philip Reeve is also bringing out **Utterly Dark and the Tides of Time** for a 9+ audience in September – an absolutely astonishing conclusion to this trilogy, which makes my jaw drop each time I read it.

**From Anthony Hinton, Commissioning Editor, David Fickling Books**

The very best stories show you the world in a whole new light, such as Candy Gourlay's incredible new YA novel **Wild Song**. Luki, a Filipino girl, and a main character in Candy's Costa and Carnegie-shortlisted **Bone Talk**, journeys from her remote mountain village to become part of the Saint Louis World's Fair of 1904. Her dreams of breaking out of the prescriptive life of a young woman in her home village, combined with the reality of the new world she encounters for the first time, are evocative, deeply moving, and utterly extraordinary. **Wild Song** is rare, special, and entirely unique.

**From Alice Swan Editorial Director, Faber**

An absolute book of my heart, **The Rescue of Ravenwood** by Costa-Award winner Natasha Farrant, out in February. Prepare to

feel all the feels! You will fall in love with Bea, Noa and Raffy, three fearless children looking to change their world for the better. This rollicking adventure invites you to escape up into intricate tree houses, to jump off the cliffs into the sea and to stow away on trains across Europe... It is a story about what it means to have a voice and use it, and a celebration of the incredible natural world on our doorstep. It might just be one of my favourite books of all time.

**From Matthew Howard, Publishing Director, Graffeg**

Ever since Nicola Davies spotted the talent of (then) student Abbie Cameron, Graffeg have enjoyed working with both on **Animal Surprises**; a fun, informative series of books exploring the natural world we live in. Bright, colourful and exciting, Abbie's images are unerringly accurate – there are no smiling cartoon creatures in a Nicola Davies book! Instead you'll find a delight in nature, a desire to explore, and masses of encouragement to discover more about the weird, wacky, wonderful world around us. Closing the series, **Versatile Reptile** is a book that will send many young readers on their own journey of exploration.

**From Bella Pearson, Guppy Books**

Guppy only publishes a few books each year so picking just one feels wrong! But I'm really looking forward to the publication of **Maggie Blue and the White Crow** by Anna Goodall. It picks up Maggie's adventures after the Costa-shortlisted **Maggie Blue and the Dark World**. Maggie is trying desperately to forget the Dark World – but the world can't let go of her. This second book in the trilogy reflects the difficult times we ourselves are living in, exploring climate and political unrest, and it promises to be one of the most prescient of our time with a heroine who is courageous, individual and flawed. Unmissable.

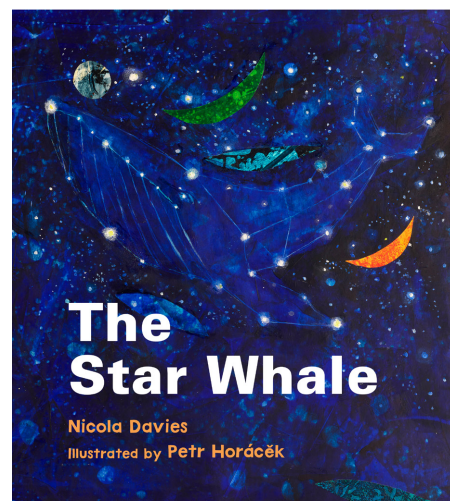
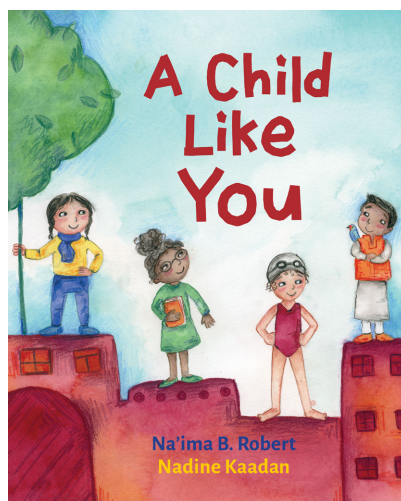
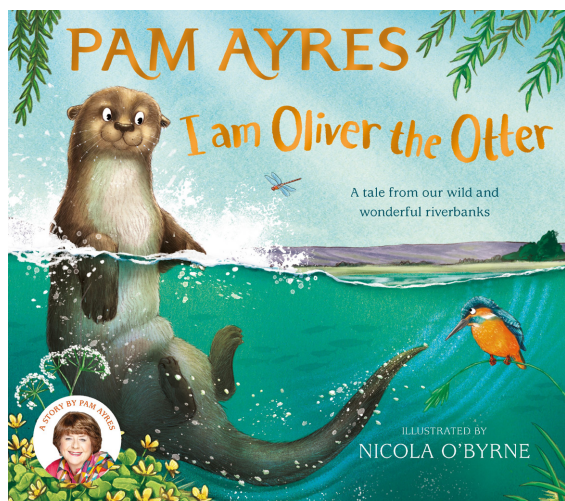
**From Rachel Wade, Editorial Director, Hachette**

Kiran Millwood Hargrave says **In the Shadow of the Wolf Queen** is the book of her heart, the book she's wanted to write since she first realised she wanted to be a writer. It's the sort of story which, as an editor, you can only dream will come your way. The first in an action-packed fantasy trilogy, it took my breath away – Ysolda's epic adventures with her sea-hawk Nara immerse us in the magic of nature, the lure of power and the strength of love. It's for all readers, young and old, aged 9 and above. And it will be the publishing highlight of 2023!

**From Aliyana Hirji, Editor, Hodder Children's Books**

In **Meet the Maliks**, Zanib Mian has written an infectious warm and funny own-voices book, filled with her trademarks – a strong family dynamic, mystery storyline and perfectly pitched giggle-inducing jokes. It is the book I longed for as a child, one that gives an organic and natural insight into everyday Muslim family life. I cannot wait for readers to fall in love with these twin detectives as they get into hijinks and uncover clues at their mosque to catch a cookie culprit. The Malik twins might be total opposites but together they are an unstoppable team!





#### From Archna Sharma, Publisher, **Neem Tree Press**

Neem Tree Press is a vibrant, independent publishing house producing books that change and broaden perspectives. They are recent recipients of a prestigious English PEN grant, a literary award for an upcoming work in translation. The **Seven Seas** collection focuses on fiction for junior and young adult readers that showcases diverse cultures and protagonists.

**Feast of Ashes** by Victoria Williamson is a YA dystopian novel set in East Africa. With a strong environmental theme, and warnings on the dangers of corporate takeover of genetic engineering research and development, it is an action-based story that takes a deeper look at family, friendship, romance and sacrifice. A stand-alone novel, **Feast of Ashes** has the potential to become a trilogy.

#### From Penny Morris, Associate Publisher, **Macmillan Children's Books**

Poet Pam Ayres has a devoted following and is well-known for her love of British wildlife, so I was thrilled when she agreed to write a series of animal picture books for Macmillan. **I am Oliver the Otter** has a rhyming text about Oliver, his mate Ottilie, and their cubs, and the illustrations by Nicola O'Byrne are gorgeous. Pam cleverly weaves lots of otter facts into the story; we learn that otters can close their ears and noses to keep water out; and sea otters hold paws when they sleep so they don't drift apart – the book is a complete delight for all ages.

#### From Emma Jones, Editorial Director, **Macmillan Children's Books**

**Greenwild** is a stunning debut novel: at once an epic fantastical mystery and a love letter to the magic of nature. Pari Thomson's writing is spellbinding, and she's woven an unforgettable tale that grabbed me on its very first page and never let me go. Her brilliant, bold protagonist steps into a world bursting with magic, and the resulting adventure feels a little Diana Wynne Jones, a little Eva Ibbotson – but hugely original too. It's perfect for contemporary readers, who I know are going to love joining Daisy on her journey to protect the wild and beautiful magic of the Greenwild.

#### From Lucas Adams, Editor, **New York Review Books**, says -

**Let's Go Swimming With Mister Sillypants** is one of my favorite books in childhood, and I'm very excited to bring it back into print. M K Brown was one of National Lampoon's great cartoonists, and she brings all of her kindness and humour to this book. It's got everything: a wildly dressed everyman (allegedly based on the author's Scandinavian father-in-law), concerns about learning to swim (Mister Sillypants asks: 'What if I step on a fish?'), gorgeous 1980s watercolour illustrations, pickle and peanut butter sandwiches, and solid lessons about finding ways to laugh at your fears and overcome them. A must for the curious and weird kids out there, it's published 19th September.

#### From Sarah Walden Managing Director, **Noodle Juice**

From the beginnings of human history people have tried to explain the wonders and mysteries of the universe around them through the stories that we share with one another. These are the stories that have stood the test of time, from all four corners of the globe, helping to build the cultures and societies we hold dear today by changing the way we think and communicate. From ancient Greek myths and legends to African and Indian folk tales, from Perrault's fairy tales and Aesop's fables to Norse Sagas and Shakespeare comedies, the 52 beautifully illustrated stories in **Stories That Built Our World** (October) really have all helped to build our world.

#### From Ruth Huddleston, **Old Barn Books**

This year A. M. Dassu is a **World Book Day** £1 book author with **Boot it!**, a bridge between **Boy, Everywhere**, and October's full-length novel, **Kicked Out!**. Dassu writes from the heart and **Kicked Out!** will be the most personal of her titles to date. She displays extraordinary empathy with her teenaged subjects trying to find their places in the world, their footballing dreams battling the conflicting forces of family, friendship and racism. I can't wait to get this book into the hands of her young fans, particularly those South Asian readers who are currently woefully under-represented in children's literature.

#### From Anne-Marie Ryan, Editorial Director, **Orchard Books**

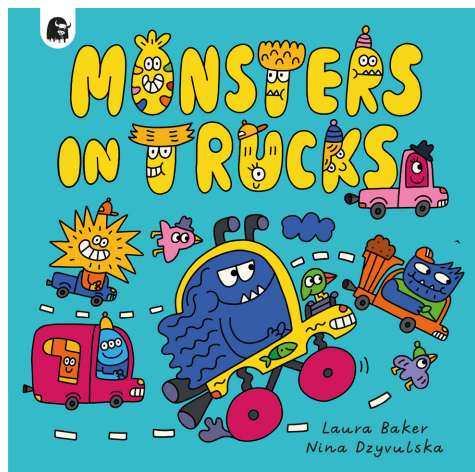
Tom Easton gives Gelos, the Greek god of laughter, a run for his money in **Hotel of the Gods: Beware the Hellhound**, a madcap adventure set at a hotel where the magical, mischievous gods and goddesses of world mythology are looked after by a boy named Atlas and his family. I can't wait for readers to meet Tom's hilarious immortals in this first instalment of a new four-book series. 2023 is set to be a challenging year, but **Beware the Hellhound**, featuring irreverent illustrations by Steve Brown, provides much-needed belly laughs while also introducing young readers to stories from Greek, Roman, Norse, Egyptian, Aztec and Polynesian mythology.



#### From Janetta Otter-Barry, **Otter-Barry Books**

In April we are incredibly proud to publish Naima B Robert and Nadine Kaadan's first picture book collaboration, **A Child Like You**, showing through four inspirational real children how children everywhere can speak truth to power and change our world for the better. Then in September comes **The Star Whale**, a stunningly beautiful and powerful poetry gift book by Nicola Davies and Petr Horáček. In this unique celebration of the natural world, Nicola's extraordinary, powerful poems are perfectly matched by Petr's





expressive, glowing paintings. This truly is a book for all ages, for families and schools alike. I'd love to see it in every classroom in the UK and beyond. 96 pages, jacketed with silver foil, a special book for readers aged 6 and up.

#### From Lou John, Head of Reading, Oxford Children's Books

We're so excited to be publishing Harriet Muncaster's brand-new **Isadora Moon** spin-off, **Emerald**, in 2023 – with the first book in the series, **Emerald and the Ocean Parade**, publishing in March. The series follows Isadora's mermaid friend Emerald, who was first introduced to readers in **Isadora Moon under the Sea**, released in 2022 and chosen by *The Times* as one of the best children's books of the year. These charming, funny and beautifully illustrated first-chapter books will take readers on a spellbinding underwater adventure, filled with enchanting characters who share valuable lessons about the importance of staying true to ourselves.

#### From Sarah Odedina, Pushkin Children's Books

Kereen Getten has made her name in the world of touching, family-focused, stories set in Jamaica and with **DI Island Crew Investigates The Case of the Lighthouse Intruder**, her first in a series of three, she brings her hallmark kindness and care to younger readers. Fayson is a bright, slightly cheeky, very determined girl who dreams of being a detective. When she gets to visit her cousins on their exclusive island for a summer holiday she finds she and her new group of friends have a real-life mystery to solve. Filled with humour, friendship and some relationship friction, this wonderful story has it all.

#### From Rhiannon Findlay, Associate Publisher, Quarto

**Monsters in Trucks** has been such a joy to work on and I am itching for it to publish. It's jam-packed with a hilarious array of monsters in incredible trucks. Monsters and trucks, what more could you want? Thanks to Nina Dzyvulska's gleeful artwork there is so much to spot on each spread... and lots to laugh at. Laura Baker's gently rhyming narrative and wordplay is ideal for pre-schoolers and

early readers. This is the first book in a super-fun series, and if you think this sounds good just wait for **Monsters at Christmas!**

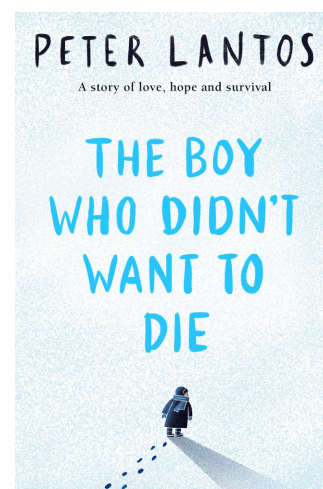
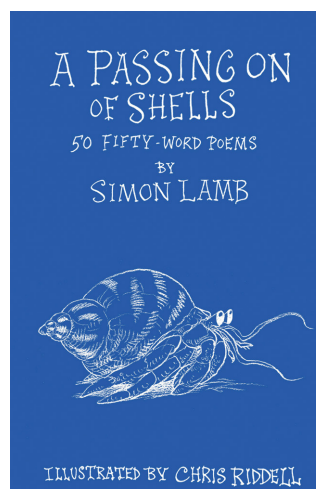
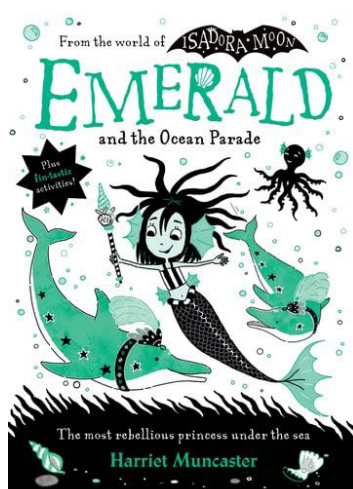
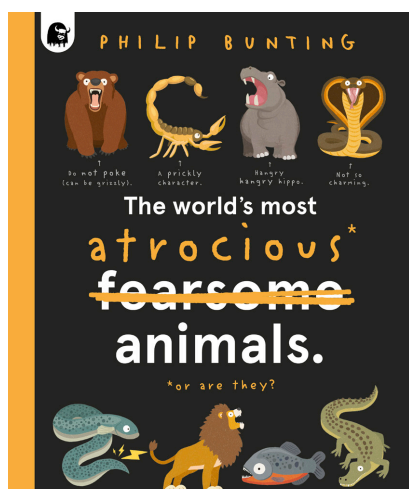
It's always fun to work with an innovative format and shaped, layered board books are the perfect home for Evie and her dog, Juno. In their most exciting adventure yet, **Explore Under the Earth** sees the pair travel to the centre of the Earth... featuring a shaky earthquake, amazing fossils and an explosive ending! Publishing simultaneously, the richly-illustrated **Explore the Rainforest** finds Evie climbing to the top of the rainforest canopy. Neil Clark's colourful, entertaining artwork makes this series shine – the sleepy sloths in Rainforest are incredibly cute and the daredevil mole in Earth always makes me chuckle!

**The World's Most Atrocious Animals** is the third in the series from the uber-talented Philip Bunting. It features some of the scariest, most feared and shocking creatures in the natural world. There are lots of fabulous gruesome facts for children to absorb and share, as well as incredibly witty captions and contemporary illustrations in Bunting's distinct style. As with the previous titles in this series, I particularly love the clever layers of humour – silly and fun for the kids with an extra depth of subtle humour for grown-ups. Real laugh-out-loud moments for young and old!

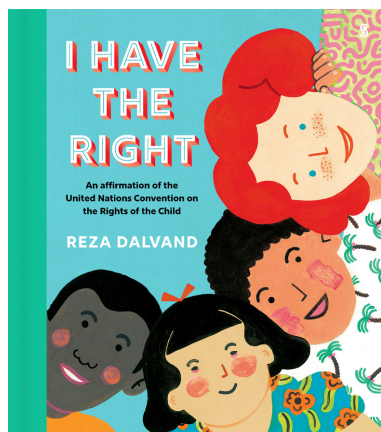
#### From Janice Thomson, Scallywag Press

Scallywag Press is delighted to launch its poetry list in February 2023 with performance poet and Scriver, Simon Lamb. His first collection, **A Passing On of Shells**, for readers of 7+ and beyond, is imitatively illustrated by Chris Riddell and is a collection of such diversity and breadth, so imbued with wisdom, wit and warmth – and so intriguing in Riddell's generous and thought-provoking interpretations – that I can say without fear of contradiction: here is a luminous collaboration and one which will engage the hearts and minds of children and adults alike.

(PS, it's difficult to choose a favourite poem – everyone will have their own – but, for me, *The Boys at Summer's End* is perfection.)







From Elizabeth Scoggins, Non-Fiction Publisher, **Scholastic**

As a young survivor of Bergen-Belsen, Peter Lantos' memoir about his family's journey to the concentration camp, **The Boy Who Didn't Want to Die**, and his eventual return home is an important read for all ages. At its heart is the value of learning and understanding, which the author conveys so powerfully. It is a real honour to be publishing his story.

From Fiz Osborne, Publisher Illustrated Books, **Scholastic**

**This Is Me** by George Webster, Claire Taylor and Tim Budgen, one of the books I'm most excited to publish in 2023 is – just like George – full of energy, warmth and a cheeky sense of fun. It's a book for everyone, and a genuine celebration of the things that make us different.

From Lauren Fortune, Fiction Publisher, **Scholastic**

From the creator of **SPOOKS**, David Wolstencroft, **The Magic Hour** is a funny, high-octane, race-against-time adventure in which our heroine Ailsa discovers that there are in fact twenty-five hours in a day and the extra hour exists in a fantastical parallel world, accessed at twilight. Sparkling writing and a brilliant hook give this story a future-classic feel.

From Aoife Datta, **Scribble**

With words and art by the internationally acclaimed illustrator Reza Dalvand, **I Have the Right** introduces children to the universal rights they are entitled to under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Adopted in 1989 and ratified by 190 countries, the convention promises to defend the rights of children and to keep them safe, respected, and valued. Dalvand's stunning illustrations speak to children all around the world, some of whose rights are often challenged and must be protected every day.

From Susie Brooke, VP and Publisher, **Sunbird Books, an imprint of Phoenix International Publications Inc**

From our very first glimpse of the gorgeous cover, which evokes childhood, creativity, and imagination, we couldn't wait to publish **The Chalk Garden** (April). Emma's actual garden is made up of concrete paving, which she uses as a canvas. Day after day she draws flowers and birds while her father digs and plants beside her. Over time, the chalk garden and real-life garden merge to create a place where real-life birds come to visit! Along the way, Emma learns what plants need to grow. Beautifully written and illustrated by Sally Anne Garland, the story inspires hope, and rewards curiosity and patience.

From Hazel Holmes Publisher, **UCLan Publishing**

We feel really lucky to be publishing Liz Flanagan's new series, **Wildsmith**. Brought to life with beautiful illustrations by Joe Todd Stanton, these accessible reads really bridge that gap between chapter books and lengthy middle grade. They're a huge asset to our developing list. Liz has created a world full of magic, imagination and inspiration, along with a sensitive focus on conservation, and I'm genuinely excited for children to discover the wonder of **Wildsmith**.

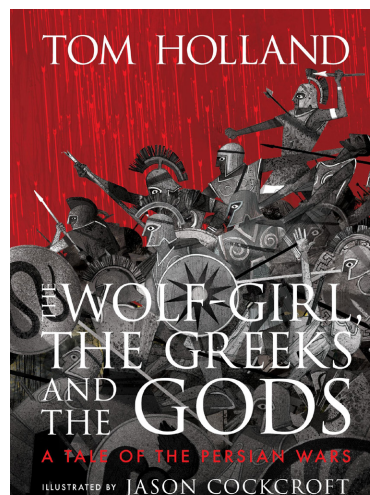
From Rebecca Hill, Fiction Editorial Director, **Usborne**

It is Usborne's 50th anniversary in 2023 and to celebrate we have a bumper year of brilliant fiction. There are hugely exciting debuts from authors G.M. Linton, Kimberly Whittam, Ravena Guron, Ayaan Mohamud and Isi Hendrix. Plus a yet to be revealed festive story from the fairy-tale world of Sophie Anderson. One book that everyone must read is **The Boy Who Made Monsters** from **Laugh Out Loud Book Award** winner Jenny Pearson. A tender novel about love and hope after loss – this book will make you laugh, cry and hold your loved ones dear. It is a triumph!

From Denise Johnstone-Burt, Editorial Director, **Walker Books**

Walker Studio has something for everyone but this year, historian Tom Holland's **The Wolf Girl, The Greeks and The Gods** stands out for me for the sweep of its narrative coupled with Jason Cockcroft's astonishing art. Tom, known for his brilliant adult history writing and his phenomenal podcast **The Rest is History**, has brought the wars between the Ancient Greeks and the Persians to life through the eyes of Gorgo, a Spartan princess. This is a tale of vengeful gods and invincible heroes, of wolves and the intrigue of war as a mighty empire threatens Athens. With spellbinding art on every page this is a book that is both mesmerising and lasting – one to devour and treasure.

For Walker in 2023, Angie Thomas's first middle grade adventure **Nic Blake and the Remarkables: The Manifestor Prophecy** stands in a league of its own. Angie is an incredible writer with a gift for character, pace and emotion and her books transcend age and geography. Middle grade fiction was what made her fall in love with books. In her own words 'I could ignore the gunshots in my neighbourhood if I was immersed in a magical world'. And she has created the most fabulous fantasy world, full of spells and curses, folktale characters and prophecies. There may even be a dragon. But, more than this, she has written a story which shows young people, young people like her, what is possible, about how to find the power within, magical power this time.





# Witness Literature

**Beverley Naidoo argues for the vital importance of speaking truth to young readers.**

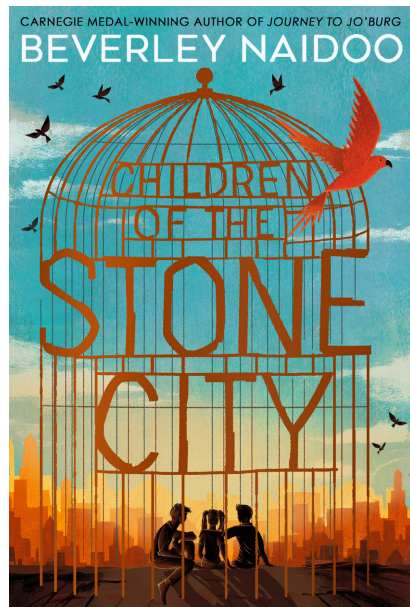
I was born in colonial South Africa, where my birth certificate, issued in the middle of World War 2, included a category 'Race'. I was classified 'European', although 6000 miles away from Europe. Invisible threads in my schooling and upbringing, including my reading, entwined me mentally. They helped to create a 'European bubble' in which most of the ideas, pictures and words were shaped in Europe, of which Britain was a prime component.

Breaking through that bubble in my late teens was a multi-layered process and South African 'witness literature' played an important role. I remember the shock of reading **Down Second Avenue**, the banned childhood autobiography of Es'kia (then 'Ezekial') Mphahlele and **Tell Freedom**, Peter Abrahams's memoir of youth. How did I not know? Nor have I forgotten the impact of poems personally cyclostyled and handed out by poet Dennis Brutus, then working as a 'teaboy' at my university. His campaigning to get South Africa excluded from the Olympics got him arrested, shot, and sent to Robben Island to break stones alongside Nelson Mandela.

The writer whom I thank for the term 'witness literature' is South African Nobel Literature prize winner Nadine Gordimer. She has written of being a 'child of the white minority, blinkered in privilege' and how she became 'witness to the unspoken' and tried to find meaning in what she saw 'by transforming it into stories based on everyday incidents of ordinary life'. While black writers bore witness to their own experiences, she was an acute observer of apartheid's inhumanity. In all their stories, I sensed the question: 'How do we keep humanity alive?'

Gordimer writes of witness literature as 'a genre of circumstance of time and place'. Far from feeling herself restricted by reality in her fiction, she found herself inspired 'to create form and use it anew'. Her task was 'to find how to keep my integrity to the Word, the sacred charge of the writer'. Papa, journalist father of Sade and Femi in my novel **The Other Side of Truth**, would agree with her. It's what gets him into trouble under a military regime: *'How can I write what's untrue?'* Moreover, there is no one way in which to rise creatively to the challenge of truth-telling.

**Journey to Jo'burg** – my first novel published after 20 years in exile in Britain – arose from deep childhood memories and re-imaginings. Its sequel **Chain of Fire** demanded more intense research to unearth stories of the ethnic cleansing that South Africa's apartheid



government was intent on keeping out of the public eye. I was dependent on the work of human rights' activists and dedicated journalists. The release of Nelson Mandela in 1990, however, signaled new possibilities. As soon as I could return freely to my birth country, I set about getting to know young people of all backgrounds. This included running and taking part in writing and drama workshops, often with deeply insightful educators like Martha Mokgoko of Speak Barefoot Teacher Training Programme and theatre

director Olusola Oyeleye. Back in the UK, I began to create **No Turning Back**, a draft of which I took back to South Africa for further workshops. Ten years later, transforming my short story 'The Playground' from **Out of Bounds** into a play for Polka Theatre, also demanded research and development in situ.

I believe this work in my birth country prepared me to undertake **Children of the Stone City**, reflecting a society with deep similarities but in a very different setting. When the British Council took me on author visits to the Occupied Palestinian Territories in 2000 and Amman in 2001, new voices called out to me. Not even young South Africans addressed questions to me so intensely as these young Palestinians. When asked, 'Is Justice sleeping or is it a dream? If Justice is sleeping, who will wake Justice up?' I was stunned. I probably simply said we all had to go on *trying* 'to wake justice up'.

The question remained with me while I wrote **Burn My Heart** (2007), my novel about two boys set during the last years of colonial rule in Kenya. It stayed with me while I wrote **Death of an Idealist** (2012) a biography of my cousin's son, Neil Aggett, born in colonial Kenya. (A young medical doctor and volunteer trade unionist, Neil had died in the hands of South Africa's apartheid security police who, despite all evidence, had been absolved. In 2022, forty years later, a new inquest found them guilty.)

But the Palestinian schoolgirl's deep question still called for a novel of its own. There was a lot I needed to learn. My first notebook is dated March 2013 as I began immersing myself in books by Palestinian and Israeli writers concerned with justice and human rights. I needed to read *their* witness literature.

Children often form a hidden presence when the focus is on adult experiences. Moreover, as I began thinking about a possible fictional family and story, I knew that I had to find credible threads of hope. Young Palestinian musicians on study visits to the UK convinced me how deeply music mattered in staying resilient. In 2016, I spent a couple of weeks visiting schools and projects in Occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank with Jehan Helou of **IBBY** (International Board on Books for Young People) Palestine. Visiting the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music in Jerusalem helped crystalize my setting. My decision to name the city in my story as simply 'The Stone City', with its inhabitants universalized as 'Permitteds' and 'Nons', would come later.

I have been very fortunate to be part of a generation of children's writers, born during or immediately after WW2, whose work I see as that of bearing witness, even if they haven't used the term themselves. Writers like Jamila Gavin, Elizabeth Laird, Berlie Doherty, Philip Pullman, Michael Morpurgo, Michael Rosen and others have all written truth to power in individually creative ways, whether in non-fiction or fiction, including fantasy. Other generations have followed, for example Catherine Johnson, Frank Cottrell-Boyce, Alex Wheatle, Sita Brahmachari, Bali Rai, S F Said, A M Dassu and so many more whose writing explores fractures in our fragile world, while seeking hope. In this age of slick fabrication, how can we talk more with young readers about the importance of gleaning the truth?

**Children of the Stone City** is published by HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0008471743, £12.99 hbk.



# Authorgraph

## No.258

Sean Taylor  
interviewed by  
Clive Barnes

The writers of picture books can easily pass under the radar. I don't mean those picture book creators who both write and illustrate, but those who write stories for others to illustrate. Yet there are only a very few talented writers who can pitch a story perfectly for the youngest children and their parents, and who offer space and possibility for an illustrator's imagination: people who understand how a picture book works. Sean Taylor has been providing such stories for over fifteen years for a number of publishers and a variety of illustrators.

Sean remembers feeling surprised that he had written a poem at the back of 'a rather boring lesson' when he was sixteen or so, but he also remembers the sense of freedom it gave him, and he has been writing ever since. It has been a winding path, 'following his bliss', as he says, quoting the American Jungian mythologist Joseph Campbell. The path reached an early turn back in 1990s London when Sean joined The Basement Writers, a group which had been associated with Chris Searle and other radical writers about twenty years before. Sean was a performance poet at the time and his first published book was poetry for adults. In 1994, he made his debut as a children's author, winning second prize in a competition sponsored by *The Independent* newspaper and Scholastic publishers. This brought him to The Catchpole Agency, run then by Celia Catchpole and now by her son James, a small agency specialising in children's books. Sean generously credits the support and advice that Celia and James have given him as crucial to a career which has seen him publish over sixty books since.

Over mushroom soup, bread and cheese, Sean tells me that he believes writing picture book texts has an affinity with writing poetry, 'saying as much as you can with as few words as you need.' And he works hard at achieving that economy. There's a lot of redrafting, working on different aspects of the story until it's right, enjoying the concentration and experimentation: 'I do like that process. Once I

focus in, I'm happy. Even if I have to throw things away, that's fine.' His major frustration is finding the time to write. 'With children and our older parents to think about, perhaps I've now reached the age of responsibility.'

Sean has 'a great passion' for picture books, which he sees as one of the new art forms to arrive in the last century, and he sees himself as part of that movement. He has an interest in older picture books, seeking them out on visits to the British Library. We spend a while talking about some of the pioneers. A chat in which Maurice Sendak naturally turns up for his economy and resonance. When I ask what rules he might have for writing a successful picture book story, Sean resists the idea of rules, but offers an off-the-cuff checklist instead. For instance, does it have 'a character for children to fall in love with from the opening sentence? Does it have a page turning quality? Does it have a satisfying, uplifting ending, perhaps a surprise or a twist? .... If there's not enough emotion in the story, for instance, I'll try to work out how to heighten the emotion.' When we further explore what might have contributed to his gift for this kind of storytelling, he considers that his work in schools as a teller of traditional tales might have provided him with a feel for the structure of a story. 'After all, a picture book has to be able to be told aloud and actually perhaps it is a way of keeping the oral tradition alive in new circumstances.'

In Sean's recent story, **Monster! Hungry! Phone!** illustrated by Fred Benaglia, we can perhaps see some of this at work. This features a shouty central character of few words whose desperate ringing for a take-away is repeatedly thwarted by wrong numbers. Monster is a character whose frustration children and parents can identify with and also feel free to laugh at. It's a story which uses few words but is structured by the sequence of phone calls and is full of noisy refrains – Monster's demands, the tap, tip, tap of the phone keys, followed by the bling, bling, bling of the ringing at the other end – and the

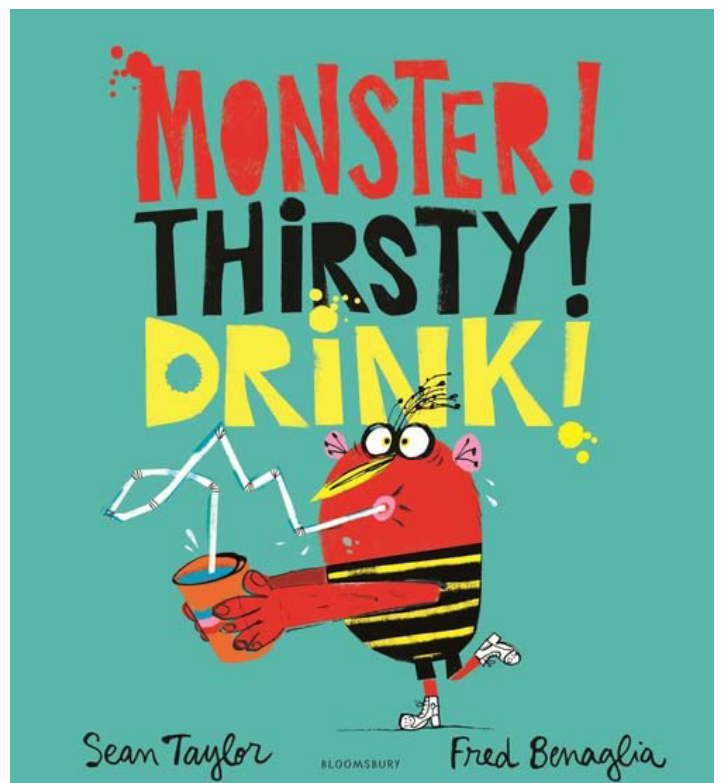






Photo: www.nicolapercy.com

inventive unhelpfulness of the replies, of which my favourite is 'This is the voicemail of Simon Sloth. I'm sorry, I'm probably asleep. If you'd like to leave a short message, please speak after the beeeeeep.' There's a companion story out now, **Monster! Thirsty! Drink!** which is every bit as unmissable.

It is rare for Sean to work directly with an illustrator. Typically, the publisher will send one of his stories out to an illustrator that looks right for it. Sean is frequently surprised and delighted by how it is re-imagined. 'Always a surprise. You might have a picture in your head and it is never that picture that comes back.' It is relatively rare for Sean to feel that an illustrator has got it wrong, however different their vision. 'Everything has to work towards the story being easy to read aloud and being a fulfilling experience for a child. Only if anything works against those two things, will I intervene.' Sometimes, it should be said, Sean can set quite a challenge for an illustrator. In **Hoot Owl, Master of Disguise**, a self-important owl disguises himself as, among other things, a carrot, a sheep and a bird bath: an off-the-wall idea which might partly explain why it took so long to be published, until rescued by Walker Books master editor, David Lloyd. Then, imaginatively realised by illustrator Jean Julien, **Hoot Owl** went on to be an award winner and a best seller, and was followed by two other books from Sean and Jean.

Sean says he welcomes collaboration and happily works towards that 'bit of magic' which, for him, makes a collaboration 'better than the sum of its parts'. His latest partnership is with Bristol naturalist and writer Alex Morss, who lives just round the corner from Sean. Between them, they have now written four natural history books. They began with the crowd-pleasing title **Funny Bums, Freaky Beaks & Other Incredible Creature Features** for primary school age children. Now they have three books on the seasons for younger ones, all illustrated by Cinyee Chiu, a Taiwanese illustrator. **Winter Sleep, Busy Spring** and **Wild Summer** have appeared already; and the draft of Sean's contribution to the fourth, about Autumn,

lay on the floor when we went up to his writing eyrie in the roof to continue our chat.

Sean describes his writing imagination as a kind of garden, where he finds unexpected things growing. About ten years ago, he wrote a well-received novel for teenagers **A Waste of Good Paper**, based on his experience of working with children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. And there's always a possibility something similar may spring up in the future. At the moment, though, he has returned to poetry, with three books coming out in the next year, each with a different illustrator. Again intended for younger children and their parents, they arose from what he describes as a difficult time in his own life when he felt he only had space for poetry. Sean presented me with a copy of the first of the trio, **The Dream Train**, a beautifully produced collection of poems for that quiet time before sleep, stunningly illustrated by Anuska Allepuz. Full of warmth and humour, it is a gentle and reflective book. Sean's mother died recently, and these poems honour the memory of his childhood bedtimes with her. It is a work which, like Grandma's knitting in Sean's poem The Blanket, 'has a little bit of love in every stitch'. Look out for it.

**Monster! Hungry! Phone! and Monster! Thirsty! Drink!**

by Sean Taylor, illustrated by Fred Benaglia, are published by Bloomsbury Children's Books, £6.99 pbk.



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

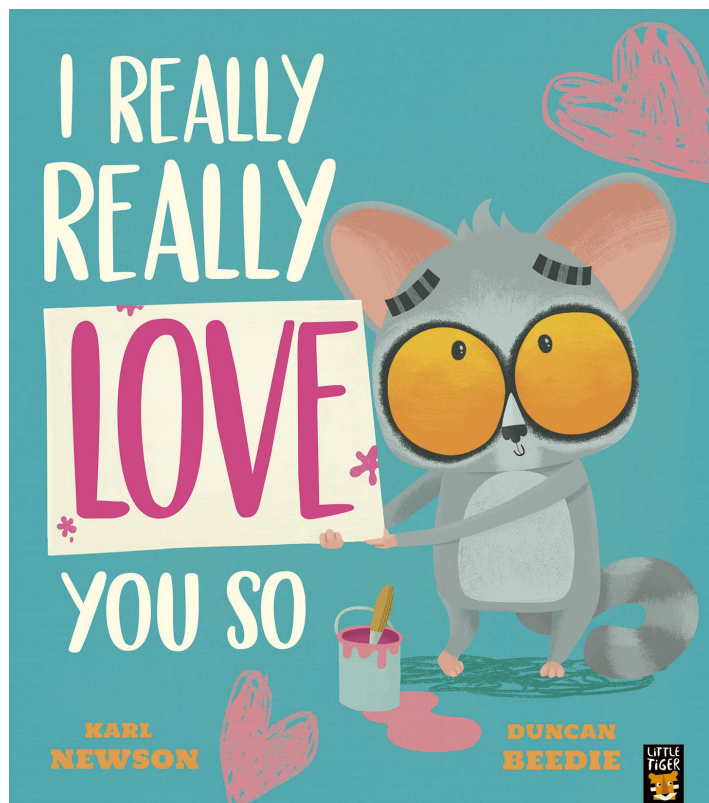
# Windows into Illustration: Duncan Beedie

Illustrator Duncan Beedie has been drawing since he could first hold a felt tip. His first solo picture book, **The Bear Who Stared** (Templar) was nominated for the Waterstones Children's Book Prize 2017, and since then his colourful, busy illustrations have brought a variety of characters to life. Here he describes the techniques and approach he used in creating a key scene in **I Really, Really Love You So**.

**I Really, Really Love You So** by Karl Newson is not your average 'love' book. As it's our follow-up to the mightily silly **I Really, Really Need A Wee**, the text rattles along with the endearing Bush Baby returning as the protagonist, with one major difference: this time around, she isn't desperate for the toilet – she's desperate to show her love for a certain someone.

As with the first book, **I Really, Really Love You So** gave me the opportunity to draw the jiggly-wiggly Bush Baby in a number of bizarre scenarios, thanks in no small part to the author's delightfully bonkers imagination. The particular illustration I have chosen to describe sees our lovestruck primate displaying the lengths they would go to in order to profess their love – by wrestling a crocodile and piloting a raft over treacherous seas, of course!

Naturally, this page was going to be a fairly dramatic one, so it gave me the opportunity to go to town with the composition and colour palette. My first rendering of the wrestling vignette was a little more conservative in nature, as I wasn't sure how far I could push it. I opted for the characters to be dressed more like college or high



school wrestlers from a substandard American teen drama. But it was widely agreed that we should go all out, so those outfits were replaced with the sort of sartorial razzmatazz you would expect from an 80s TV wrestling extravaganza - purple leotards and dyed pink mullet wigs and all!

The larger image on this page is the rafting scene, so I had plenty of space to conjure some drama – crashing waves, brooding skies, and a giant kraken puckering up for a big old sloppy kiss. I love seafaring films and TV dramas, so wanted to emulate the derring-do of Russell Crowe's Capt. Jack Aubrey from **Master and Commander**, but in a much sillier fashion, obviously.

All in all, this page is very much an example of 'more is more' – not something I usually abide by in my illustrations, but in this case it was called for. The absurd drama is offset by some more refined moments throughout the book, lending the story a more balanced dynamic, but this image was certainly the most fun to produce.

My final artwork is all produced digitally. As an erstwhile animator I still use animation software to do the bulk of my drawing (Adobe Animate – formerly Flash – to be precise). I then export the flat colour images into Photoshop to add texture, brush highlights, and overlays to give the image more depth and detail. It's a convoluted method that could probably be streamlined, but it's served me well for the last decade or so.

**I Really, Really Love You So** by Karl Newson, illustrated by Duncan Beedie, is published by Little Tiger, 978-1801044080, £7.99pbk.





Bush Baby is BACK...  
and has something  
really, really  
**IMPORTANT**  
to say... but how?

Find out in the hilarious and  
adorable new picture book from  
Karl Newson and Duncan Beedie.



Illustration © Duncan Beedie 2023



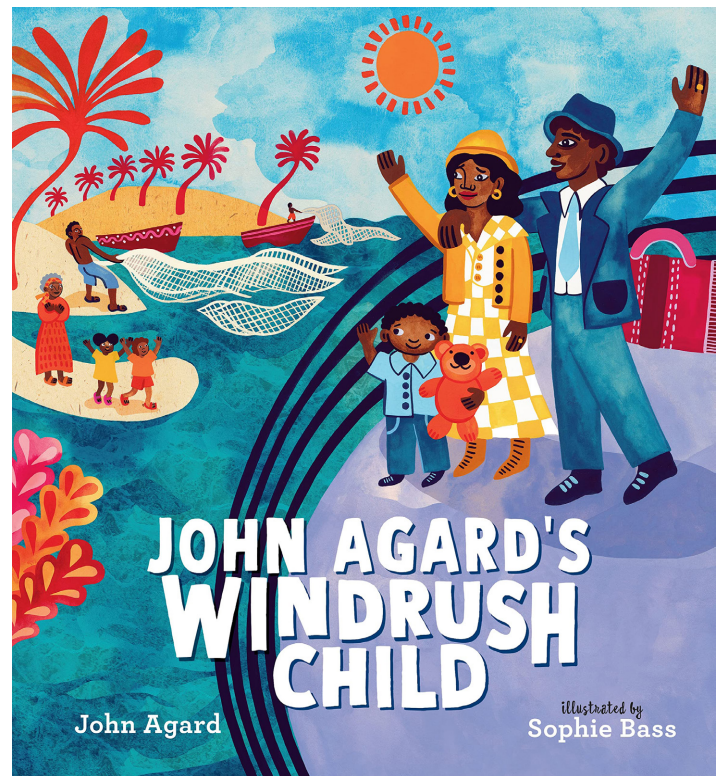


# Beyond the Secret Garden: Transitions

In the latest in their series examining the representation of black, Asian and minority ethnic voices in British children's literature, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** examine depictions of two important anniversaries.

The new year brings a transition between two 75th anniversaries: 2022's anniversary of the partition of India, and 2023's anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush to Britain. It is not too much of a hyperbole to say that both these events changed the world of the British Empire and of Britain itself, and that the consequences continue to influence modern Britain. British children's books have acknowledged both anniversaries, but have had to face the difficulties of representing British imperialism and racism in doing so.

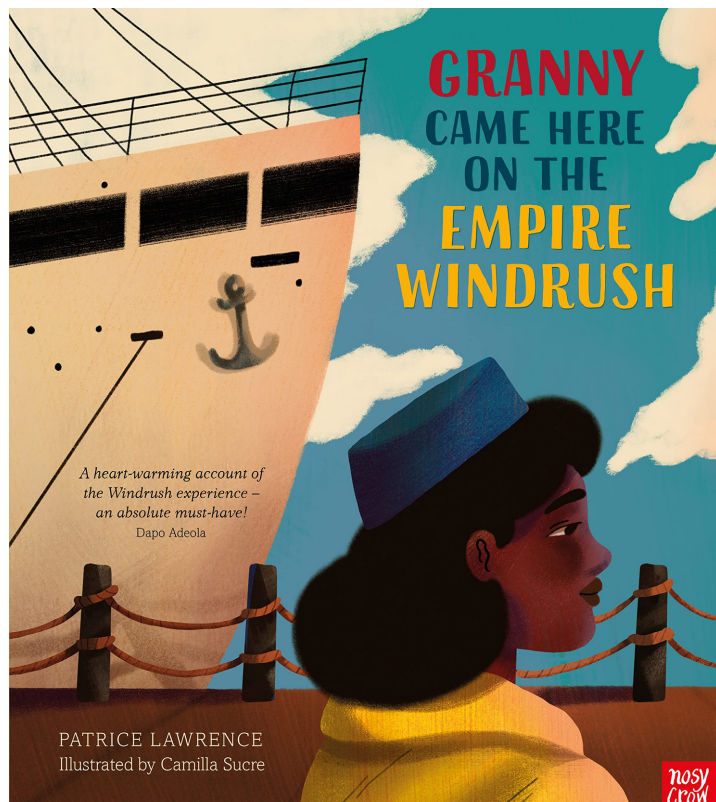
Children's books have been examining Windrush for decades, and the pending anniversary has occasioned the re-packaging and republishing of some of these stories for new audiences. Floella Benjamin's popular 1995 biography, **Coming to England**, was originally published for middle grade readers. It includes an account of Benjamin's happy family life in Trinidad; a period of unhappiness when her parents and younger siblings went ahead to England leaving Floella and her sister in the care of people who made them work 'like servants' (43); the adventure of the ship journey to England; and the racism that she and her family faced in England, from school bullying to being made unwelcome in English churches to a teacher calling Floella a 'guttersnipe' (100) for speaking in patois. Benjamin is well-known for her sunny personality, but her original biography indicates the struggles she faced – and the tenacity required to survive and thrive in Britain. In 2020, Benjamin's biography was reissued in picture book format, with cheerful illustrations by Diane Ewen. The picture book is billed as 'An inspiring true story celebrating the Windrush generation' on the front cover, and indeed, celebration rather than struggle is the focus of this version. Adult racism and abuse is erased (the woman who treated her like a servant is called 'wicked' in this version, but the illustration shows her with hands on hips as Floella and her sister play in a pond in their underwear; the incidents of the church and teacher are removed). Racist bullying from other children at school is reduced to name-calling, and quickly resolved.



John Agard's poem, *Windrush Child*, originally performed on Blue Peter in 1998 and then published in **Under the Moon and Over the Sea** by Candlewick Press in 2002, was published by Walker as a stand-alone poem in 2022 with illustrations by Sophie Bass. Whereas the original publication placed Agard's poem in a collection with poems by other authors, giving a variety of viewpoints on the transition from the Caribbean to England, the new version of **Windrush Child**, like Benjamin's picture book biography, highlights a positive experience of the transition. In only one illustration—the arrival in England – is the main child depicted without a smile, but he is encouraged by his smiling father to enter into the new part of the adventure. Agard himself did not come to England until nearly thirty years after the Empire Windrush, and the poem was written in a time when most Black schoolchildren in Britain had been born in the country; Agard's poem was therefore a piece of history to most of his listeners, and Agard clearly wanted to depict that history positively.

However, although **Windrush Child** mentions racism in the afterword, the racism is not present in the part of the book that young readers read – the poem itself. Benjamin Zephaniah's **We Sang Across the Sea** (Scholastic 2022), with illustrations by Onyinye Iwu, is also a poetic exploration of Windrush that does not address the struggles and racism faced by Windrush passengers in England. Zephaniah tells the story of singer Mona Baptiste, who (like Calypsonian Lord Kitchener) arrived on the Empire Windrush in 1948. The story, illustrated in bright colours throughout, has only a single page depicting Baptiste as unhappy. The poem seems to indicate on

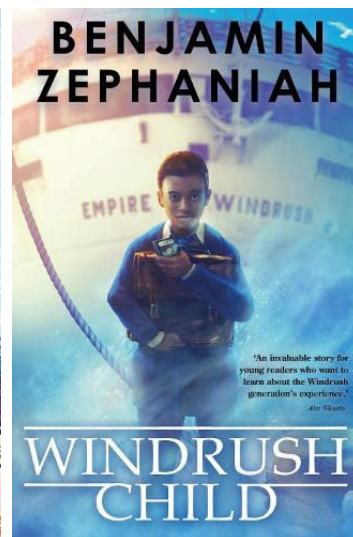




this page that it might discuss racism when Zephaniah writes, 'As a Caribbean girl, sometimes I just had to be quite strong' (n.p.), but the next two lines focus on Baptiste's stage fright. Zephaniah's depiction is very different from Patrice Lawrence's **Granny Came Here on the Empire Windrush** (Nosy Crow 2022). Although both are stories of women crossing the Atlantic for a new life in Britain, Lawrence's narrative includes several things that other Windrush picture books do not. Unlike other picture books, Lawrence's begins in the present day, with a small girl requiring a dress-up costume for school and asking her grandmother for ideas. This allows Lawrence to include pre- and post-Windrush Black history, including stories of Winifred Atwell, Mary Seacole and Rosa Parks. But the granddaughter is more interested in her grandmother's own story, which is nuanced and thoughtful despite the limited narrative space of the picture book. While the book depicts racism and loneliness, aided by the careful use of colour in Camille Sucre's illustrations, it also depicts the grandmother's reason for remaining in England despite these struggles. This makes Lawrence's picture book unusual; while books for older readers, including Sita Brahmachari's **When Secrets Set Sail** (Orion 2020) and Benjamin Zephaniah's **Windrush Child** (Scholastic 2021), focus on difficult issues (including the Windrush Scandal) as plot points, books for younger readers tend to focus on the celebratory aspects of Windrush.



A focus on the celebratory is impossible when writing about the 1947 Partition of India. Britain's departure from the country and overnight division in August 1947 of India into Pakistan and India caused displacement, terror, and chaos. Between 200,000 and a million people lost their lives, many massacred by neighbours with whom they had long lived in peace. Swapna Haddow's **Torn Apart: The Partition of India** (Scholastic 2021) is the only fictional account of this event for children, and it is, like Partition itself, a grim story. Like Zephaniah's **Windrush Child**,



**Torn Apart** is part of Scholastic's Voices series. However, unlike all the other books in this series, the events take place entirely outside of Britain, and the British are conspicuous by their absence: on page 2 in the book's prologue, 'the British ... left'. In their wake, religious tensions result in horrific brutalities, including trains filled with massacred people. The first one that Ibrahim, the displaced Muslim main character of **Torn Apart**, sees, he reports: 'Scrawled on the side of the train in blood were the words, 'a present from Pakistan'. And then the bodies of the Hindu refugees fell out' (24). Haddow makes clear through the narrative that these 'present' trains travel in both directions. Although a brief friendship is formed between Ibrahim and a Hindu boy named Amar, the friendship cannot last and there is no later reunion during times of peace. In the last chapter, Amar reports, 'I never heard from Ibrahim again' (115). Haddow's novel describes an important part of history, but unlike the Windrush stories, it does not celebrate the anniversary of Britain's decision to change its relationship to part of its empire. But it does encourage readers of all backgrounds to consider the ways that the British Empire created the conditions for racism and sectarianism within and outside of Britain, and how those histories still matter today.

**Coming to England**, Floella Benjamin, ill. Diane Ewen, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1529009422, £7.99 pbk

**John Agard's Windrush Child**, ill. Sophie Bass, Walker Books, 978-1529501124, £12.99 hbk

**We Sang Across the Sea**, Benjamin Zephaniah, ill. Onyinye Iwu, Scholastic, 978-0702311161, £6.99 pbk

**Granny Came Here on the Empire Windrush**, Patrice Lawrence, illus Camilla Sucre, Nosy Crow, 978-1839942310, £7.99 pbk

**When Secrets Set Sail**, Sita Brahmachari, Orion, 978-1510105430, £7.99 pbk

**Windrush Child**, Benjamin Zephaniah, Scholastic, 978-0702302725, £6.99pbk

**Torn Apart: The Partition of India**, Swapna Hadow, Scholastic, 978-0702300417, £4.99 pbk



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



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

# I wish I'd written...



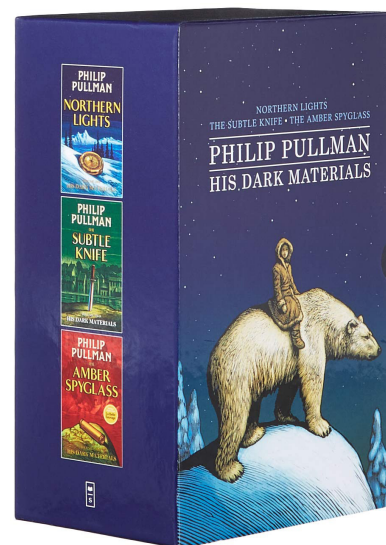
**Clare Weze** was raised in London and Yorkshire and has British and Nigerian heritage. She writes for adults and children and has always written around her day job, starting out as a hairdresser in London's West End, then moving on to a science degree, postgraduate studies and work in the fields of biomedical and environmental research. **The Lightning Catcher** was her debut novel for children, and Clare also contributed a story to **Happy Here**, the anthology of stories from 10 Black British writers and illustrators. Her latest book, **The Storm Swimmer** is published this month by Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1526622211, £7.99 pbk.

## Clare Weze on the books that gave her writing permission to fly.

The book(s) I wish I'd written is the **His Dark Materials Trilogy** by Philip Pullman. Many people rave about this series, but on first reading it, I actually stopped writing for a while. Pullman had nailed almost everything I wanted to say! When I recovered, my writing was wilder. I'd had permission to fly.

Pullman fuses all the key aspects of a perfect read – including great characters and amazing world-building – and overlays them with exactly my kind of science and philosophy. He seems to say, 'Come here, look at this amazing scientific fact and see how it's connected to this other one, and to this philosophical theory, and this is why it's all vital to Lyra's next move.' There's death, particle physics, abandoned children, mind-body dualism; I could get very jealous indeed. He uses archaic names for things like petroleum (naphtha) and electricity (anbaric current). Why didn't I think of that? It gives these things such a magical, other-worldly sheen.

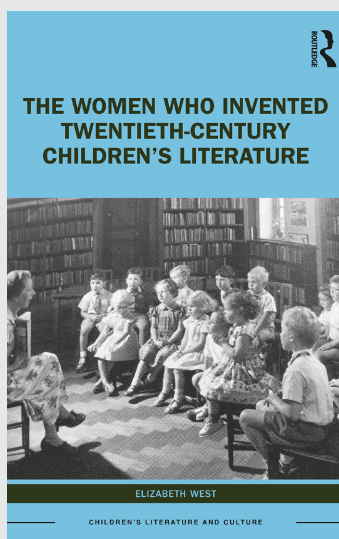
Then there are the glorious names for people and animals: Pantalaimon; Stelmaria (swoon!); Serafina Pekkala (wow). And there's chocolate. I know exactly how it would taste: like hot chocolate, but darker, more honeyed and perhaps with undertones of brandy. Lastly, Lyra is the most gorgeous, relatable main character ever.



**His Dark Materials trilogy** (boxed set) by Philip Pullman is published by Scholastic, 978-1407188997, £24.00 pbk.

# BfK reviews

## Books About Children's Books



### The Women who Invented Twentieth-Century Children's Literature

★★★★

Elizabeth West, Routledge, 252pp, 978-1032308272, £120

Venerable British publishing houses, it has been fairly said, were once run by men but serviced by badly paid women. Cruelly and inaccurately written off as 'desiccated spinsters' by Penguin Book's historian J.E. Morpurgo, adoptive father of the more famous Michael, the more determined of these bookwomen often took advantage of their overlooked status to get on with creating their own empires. While their employers were having long lunches in the Garrick Club they were nurturing new talent, pressing for higher standards and finally coming up with good sales and critical success.

This present study describes their achievements, focusing on Eleanor Graham, Grace Hogarth, Kaye Webb and Julia MacRae. Space is also given to others also heavily involved in this transformation, in particular the inspired children's librarian Eileen Colwell and writers Ursula Moray Williams, Kathleen Hale and Amabel Williams-Ellis, all of whom pioneered further innovation. While hardback books cost more than a pretty penny it was inevitable that target audiences remained those middle-class parents who could afford them. Once paperbacks arrived it was possible to start extending readership but Puffin Books' first supremo Eleanor Graham generally preferred to stay with things as they now were. She rejected *The Hobbit* as too violent and turned down **National Velvet** fearing it might offend parents and teachers, especially those in convent schools. But her

overall record in improving standards, particularly in the picture book world, is impressive.

She had no time for Enid Blyton, however, and her successor Kaye Webb shared similar misgivings about publishing Roald Dahl, eventually doing so only after pressure from above. For by now those in charge realised that a new golden egg had been hatched, with children's books' sales now sometimes subsidising the adult market. Inevitably this led to an emphasis on profit over quality, with former almost universally female editorial support for children's writers increasingly replaced by interventions from tougher-minded sales managers. The world these bookwomen created was therefore eventually replaced, but it was good while it lasted and well deserves its celebration in Elizabeth West's closely argued if hideously expensive book. **NT**



## 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](http://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](http://www.healthybooks.org.uk)

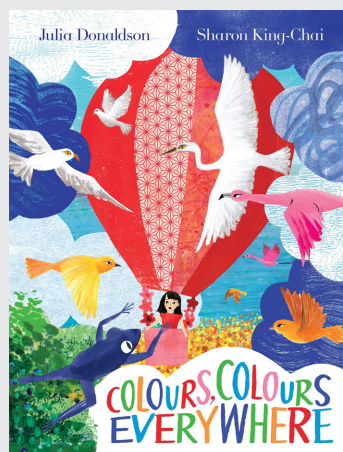
**Lucy Staines** is a primary school teacher

**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



## Colours, Colours Everywhere

★★★★★

Julia Donaldson and Sharon King-Chai, Two Hoots, 48pp, 9781529078527 £14.99 hbk

*Colours, Colours Everywhere* is the third collaboration between Julia Donaldson and illustrator Sharon King-Chai. After looking at numbers and the alphabet they have turned to colours. And as we would expect from these two, the result is fun, engaging and beautifully crafted.

Opening the arresting cover where a vivid red balloon sails surrounded by clouds and colourful birds, we find we are going on a journey. It will be a journey to create a story using the colours in the artist's paintbox. But this is not a journey that just relies on Donaldson's concise gently humorous rhyming text. The young reader is invited to join the illustrator as she chooses the colours and the right subject. The first action asks them to open the sketchbook to find the first colour - a small blue dot. Turn the page and a glorious blue tree frog leaps, literally, off the page. It is this little frog who will guide us through the artist's palette, the colours, objects and creatures popping out as each page is turned. However, this is a book aimed at a very young audience and paper engineering can create a problem. Here, King-Chai makes use of flaps cut-away pages and windows. This is the ideal technique to encourage the child to engage fully with each spread while also introducing the element of surprise (or even the potential for guessing or suggesting what might come next). It is both simple and effective.

Julia Donaldson and Sharon King-Chai set out to teach and they have succeeded, the colours clearly and vibrantly presented through an interesting narrative. As a result they have also created a visually exciting picture book that can be enjoyed by young and old. A lovely book to have on any shelf and to share. **FH**

## A Day That's Ours

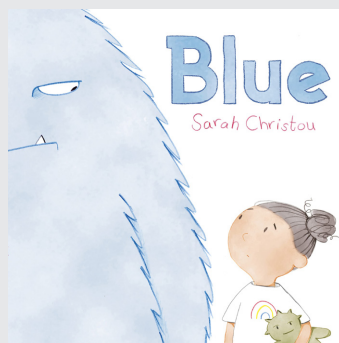
★★★★★

Blake Nuto, ill. Vyara Boyadjieva, Flying Eye Books, 32pp, 978 1 8387 4075 7, £12.99 hbk

'Can we? Shall we steal a day?' So begins this wonderful ode to childhood and to slowing down and savouring life's simple things.

An unnamed father and child forget about the mad daily rush and instead delight in making and consuming a somewhat messy breakfast and then sally forth, slowly of course, into the great outdoors where all around them are people dashing hither and thither on bikes or in cars. They in contrast, spend time observing with all their senses as they make their way to the park, be it discovering tiny treasures like the beetle beneath a leaf or a flower peeking up between the paving stones or watching the leaves dancing in the air. There are a wealth of sounds to enjoy: murmuring roots, birdsong, the child's laughter. Prepare to be captivated, not only by their shared experiences but also by Vyara Boyadjieva's delicate, detailed illustrations that portray poignant moments throughout the book and show the 'small signs' of seasonal change in her rich colour palette. Children's will surely love spotting such things as the bird's nest with a parent feeding its little ones, the activities of the cat and the lively dog.

A gentle, joyful read aloud where words and pictures fuse together seamlessly; it will resonate with both children and adults, especially those who have a child about to start preschool or school with all the pressures that brings. **JB**



## Blue

★★★★★

Sarah Christou, Faber, 32pp, 9780571376353, £12.99 hbk

'Once I had a secret no one could see...', the opening words of this charming picture book from debut picture book creator, Sarah Christou. The secret kept by the young protagonist is how she is feeling - her worries and anxieties. She gives them a body and a name, a creature she calls Blue. As Blue looms ever more present, she finally manages to tell a

friend about her fear, her anxiety. Blue starts to shrink. The more the feelings are aired and shared, the smaller Blue grows, becoming manageable.

There are now an increasing number of picture books emerging to help young children confront their fears and to open up about them. This is an excellent addition and invites both adult and child to share. While blue is the traditional colour to symbolise sad or anxious feelings, as the author points out, it is only one colour in a spectrum. There is no promise that these feelings will disappear - rather that to feel 'blue' on occasion is all right

Christou's uncluttered illustrations using a limited palette of colour washes combine with her clear outlines which add texture to the images. They fill each spread to engage the reader the moment the book is opened. The text is as clear and direct, the setting recognisable and every day; no fantasy here. The message is as immediate as the narrative and the illustrations. This is a book to recommend - and an illustrator to watch. **FH**

## That's Nice, Love

★★★★★

Owen Gent, Book Island, 32pp., 978-1-911496-26-7, £12.99 hbk

Some readers may be reminded of David McKee's *Not now, Bernard*, but in this picture book the distracted parent is just Mum, constantly on her mobile phone. There is no Monster at the end, but there certainly is a lot of jeopardy, as the boy declares that he will climb a tree in the park and go higher than he has ever gone before. He does so, teetering on a small branch, with his Mum on the bench below, her face lit by the glow from her phone, saying 'That's nice, love'. The view up the tree is wonderful: 'it's like a whole new world up here!' but the boy's imagination leads him to shout to his mother that he's about to be eaten by snakes, and again the reply is 'That's nice, love'. He's King of the Monkeys, helps a beautiful leopard, he's flying as high as the sun on the back of a red bird - but Mum is not paying attention. As they walk away from the park, he tries to make contact: 'I know you're right here, but sometimes you feel far away', but he gets the same response. Once home, he leaves the treasures he has collected on the table, and trudges upstairs, head down, saying, 'Sometimes you miss the magical things' - and Mum finally takes notice 'I'm so sorry, love. Can you tell me again about your adventures?' She puts her phone down, takes his treasures upstairs to him, and, in his pyjamas, he tells her all about it in an almost continuous stream of words, as children do, and, amazed, she says she'd love to come along next

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

time- we then see her joining him in a tree, doing exactly that.

In his bedroom we see his toy snake, his cuddly monkey, and he has waved goodbye to a cat in the same colours as the leopard – he has used what he knows to invent his stories. This is a salutary tale for distracted mothers, who are indeed often seen out and about, and certainly the reader hopes that mothers, (or fathers/carers), who find this book will put their phones down and share the fun of their children's imaginations. The stylish illustrations, by the author, are mostly in warm autumnal colours, with unusual usage: e.g., the boy's hair and the cat/leopard are blue. It is a very beautiful book on fine quality paper, with a message... **DB**

## Well Done, Mummy Penguin

★★★★

Chris Haughton, Walker Books, 40pp, 978 1 4063 8553 3, £12.99 hbk  
Mummy Penguin is going away, and Little Penguin is a bit concerned: '...she'll be back, won't she? She sure will, says Daddy Penguin.' She is getting dinner for them, Daddy explains. As they watch together, they see her moving swiftly through the sea, swimming with the other mums, and catching a big fat fish for Little Penguin's dinner. Then she must get home again. It's quite a journey up a steep cliff in the slippery snow and ice, with no problems, but then there are the seals – big and dangerous – and when Mummy wakes one up, she falls all the way down the cliff again into the water. Oh dear. But Mummy is a plucky sort and back she comes, leaping over the waiting seals this time, and soon she is home to the great relief of her family. The themes of concern about if and when Mum will come back and worries about what might befall her are repeated in various ways, and the strength that she has in always returning is a positive vibe for women's strength of character when faced with a challenging task. Lots of white snowy background, blue sea, and large pictures of the penguins, drawn with straight lines and basic colours of black, grey and orange, make for dramatic illustrations, and the large, black print adds to the drama. There is an information aspect to the book too, as we learn something about penguins. There is fear, but it is not emphasised in any way, and the whole is reassuring. **ES**

## The Kiss

★★★★

Eoin McLaughlin, ill. Polly Dunbar, Faber, 48pp, 978 0 5713 6189 2, £7.99 pbk

Cleverly constructed, this is a tale of two sleepy animals, a tiger cub and a little crocodile, both in need of a comforting goodnight kiss.

Each of them approaches various other animals asking for the kiss that

will send them off into slumberland and both receive somewhat silly excuses as to why they won't fulfil the request. The monkeys for instance, tell the little tiger that they are already asleep whereas a pair of toucans respond thus to little crocodile, 'We only kiss each other. We hope you understand.' The smoochy birds then proceed to use their beaks and wing tips to form a heart shape.

Both little tiger and little crocodile talk tearfully to the full moon, telling the smiling object, 'I shall never get to sleep. I shall always be awake.' The moon is empathetic telling them another creature is coming; but rather than being encouraged, they each see a menacing-looking shadow coming towards them. All ends happily however, with a snuggly surprise final twist.

A sweet, heartwarming pre-bedtime tale that offers lots of potential discussion points. Polly Dunbar's illustrations are playful and wonderfully expressive and her colour palette is soft as befits the moonlit evening. I can see this becoming a favourite with young humans to be shared with hugs and kisses. It would also work well as a solo or supported read for slightly older children. **JB**



## Get Real, Mallory!

★★★★

Written and ill. Daisy Hirst, Walker Books, 32pp, 978-1-4063-9530-3, £12.99 hbk

Nomi loves drawing, but big brother Stephen mocks her picture of Mallory the dog. "You're much better at drawing fish," he says, but - as Nomi tells him - that's because she can look at them in their tank on the kitchen worktop. If they had a pet dog, she'd be able to draw that, too.

'Get real, Nomi,' Stephen says. Why should she be special, when no-one in their flats is allowed a dog?

Later, Nomi crumples her paper and throws it away. Why should her drawing be special, either? 'Get real, Mallory!' she says.

And that night, Mallory DOES!

'I wanted to tell everyone, Nomi confides. 'I didn't want anyone to know.' So she learns to speak dog instead: 'Aruff!'

With Mallory beside her, Nomi doesn't care when Stephen ignores her in the park. There's far too much to explore! And as for bedtimes, they've never been such fun...

Stylised in a way that feels oddly realistic, Daisy Hirst's cheerful, energetic illustrations capture the camaraderie between a child and her imaginary pet. Colour-blocked shapes with minimal line detail clearly evoke settings, facial expressions and movement, and the warm, rich palette has a gentle mid-century vibe.

Some of the playful interaction between Mallory and Nomi occurs in smaller spot illustrations which pop against a white background, speeding us to the heart of a warm and satisfying friendship (and reminding us how much can happen during one visit to the park!)

Hirst's ear for dialogue and attention to the cadences of her text make *Get Real, Mallory!* fun to read aloud. Careful thought has gone into the concept and storyline, and serious messages are there for reflective readers to discover, but the result feels spontaneous and engaging.

Children who live (and don't live) in flats will enjoy seeing high-rise reality reflected: the night-time/daytime views through Nomi's bedroom window are especially intriguing, and overall the depiction of family life in an urban setting feels natural and positive.

In fact, there's an intensely optimistic energy about every aspect of this book. Read it and enjoy! **CFH**

## My Dog, Hen

★★★★

Written and ill. David Mackintosh, Prestel, 32pp, 978-3-7913-7535-9, £11.99 hbk

The boy at the heart of this thoughtful story is determined to do the best for his new pet, and the rescue pup is given everything he needs. But Hen doesn't play with toys, he eats them – along with lots of other objects – and when the boy spends his pocket money on new toys, Hen eats those, too.

'No more,' Dad says, clearing up the mess, and Mum agrees. Hen must learn to be less destructive, or remain toy-free. But Gran, who loves repurposing things, takes a different approach. Why not teach Hen to be more careful by giving him something indestructible to play with?

The object Gran creates from Hen's cast-offs could have been truly monstrous but there's humour in the pup's refusal to be daunted by its size or shape – and alongside the fun, important questions about empathy, responsibility and consumerism are waiting to be explored. Being too young to direct your own life adds to the significance of taking action on another's behalf: as the boy observes, Hen is 'only a new dog' and can't make decisions on his own, so 'it's up to us

to make them for him', and the way this book models such awareness and behaviour creates a powerful stimulus for growth and change.

Visually, *My Dog Hen* is as exciting as its content. Chalky white lines pop against black or grey backgrounds, with areas of flat colour working alongside surface patterns and textures to create eye-catching designs, and views taken from a low perspective emphasise the vulnerability (and small stature) of Hen and the narrator.

Overall, there's a sophistication and sense of relevance about this book that ensures wide age-appeal, so although the guide range is perhaps 5-7 years, younger and older readers are also likely to enjoy it. **CFH**

## Shine Like the Stars

★★★★

Anna Wilson, ill. Harry Woodgate, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978 1 8391 3150 9, £12.99 hbk

Powerful, poetic and told from the viewpoint of the natural world is this reassuring presentation from in turn, the voices of planet Earth, the sun, the ocean, the seed, the sky, the moon and, the stars. Each component of the cosmos speaks directly to the reader in a kind of guided meditation that aims to help him or her understand and 'cope with' troubling feelings and situations be that relating to loneliness, loss, sadness, nervousness, frustration, fearfulness or insignificance.

In his evocative and awe inspiring scenes of children and adults together experiencing the great outdoors Harry Woodgate captures the rhythms, patterns, cycles and the very essence of being spoken of in the text. His use of light suggests the possibility of transcendence and this possibility is reiterated in the final explanatory pages that bring together science and practical actions.

This is for me both a deeply philosophical book and a comforting cuddle of a book. It deserves to be on the shelves of every family where there's a young child and in all foundation stage and KS1 classroom collections. However, in the classroom, it's a book to be used with sensitivity: there's a fine line between using and abusing literature. **JB**

## Friends

★★★★

Daniela Sosa, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 978 1398518667, £12.99 hbk

This delightful picture book is aimed at young children who don't quite understand who and what friendship means, and it gives a whole new perspective to it. Accompanied by lively illustrations that explain exactly what is going on between friends, the text, beautifully composed, does not need to do so. Therefore, we meet a little boy looking into a crib with his new baby sister in it, and the text tells us, 'Some friends are there from the start.' Another, showing us a boy on a swing with a huge elephant in the swing beside him says, 'Some friends



# reviews

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

can only be seen by you.' We learn that friendships can endure or be very short, such as smiling at someone on the street, when the friendship is fleeting; or can begin 'with words' and end 'with anger'. And so it goes. Friendship is shown in some unusual ways, but very relevant nonetheless. Friends can teach you all sorts of things, or make you brave or angry or jealous. The whole is a great concept, beautifully presented with real children doing real things in what appear to be watercolour or perhaps chalk drawings. A great treat that both parent and child will appreciate and want to read over and over. **ES**

### Luminous: Living Things That Light Up the Night

★★★★★

Written and ill. Julia Kuo, Greystone Kids, 44pp, 978-1-77164-888-2, £12.99 hbk

This elegant non-fiction picturebook by Taiwanese-American author-illustrator Julia Kuo explores the subject of bioluminescence in a series of eye-catching matt black spreads. Sophisticated illustrations make the most of the plain backgrounds by emphasising pattern and form, and the pared-back, almost meditative page design leaves plenty of space for observing and wondering.

Readers are invited to take a leisurely but visually exhilarating stroll through a variety of natural habitats in the company of two curious observers, one adult and one child. Along the way, basic questions (what is bioluminescence? Which creatures produce it, and where can it be observed?) are suggested and explored via a double text: one minimalistic and poetic, the other delivering relevant and well-phrased nuggets of factual information. Attention is paid to the needs and interests of young readers, and where the facts are known, Kuo shares carefully-selected details to enlighten and appeal. When attacked, for example, jellyfish use light to protect themselves by luring bigger fish, and foxfire on a forest floor is created by bioluminescent fungi 'growing and glowing on rotting wood.'

Sometimes, however, even the scientists have no answers, and Kuo celebrates this uncertainty. Tiny one-celled creatures called dinoflagellates may 'cause the ocean to sparkle with each wave', but the reason for this behaviour is unknown, and it's this exciting collision of fact and mystery, of information and poetry, of what is seen and what is imagined, that gives this book depth and ensures that it always has more to offer.

Beautiful, meaningful and distinctive non-fiction presented in such a child-centred and affective way is something to celebrate, and *Luminous* deserves to be widely shared. **CFH**

### Cloud Babies

★★★★★

Eoin Colfer, ill. Chris Judge, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781529502671, £12.99 hbk

When I saw the names of the author and illustrator on the cover of this book, I knew I was in for a special treat and I was definitely not disappointed.

Erin and her parents love to spot their favourite animals within the clouds – foxes, polar bears and even a dragon! Erin calls them her 'cloud babies'. One day Erin falls very ill and has to spend a long time in hospital which opens up a whole new, unfamiliar environment for her, even though everyone is very welcoming and friendly and she soon feels safe and comfortable. She still manages to play cloud babies with her Dad and even when they are apart, they can still be together by just looking up through their respective windows.

When Erin is well enough to leave hospital and return to school, she finds that things have changed and she has to readapt to the new world outside of the hospital. Her school friends have grown up while she was away and don't seem interested in looking for cloud babies, so maybe she is too old for them too? Erin starts to feel like she doesn't belong properly with either her school friends or her hospital friends and she does miss her cloud babies.

However, Mum and Dad never give up and make a plan to help Erin merge the two parts of her life. Soon Erin is able to share both of her worlds and her cloud babies with all her friends and finds happiness in being herself once more.

This heart-tugging story evolved from both a lockdown project creating cloud drawings and illustrator Chris Judge's own family experiences of dealing with his daughter's illness. Master storyteller Eoin Colfer weaves a beautiful tale of comfort and hope for the many families that unfortunately have to inhabit a similar world to Erin.

The illustrations blend captivating photographs of clouds and landscapes with more traditional artwork, including pictures painted by Judge's own children which adorn the walls of both the hospital wards and Erin's home.

The personal letter from the author at the start of the book is a lovely touch, as this story aims to create empathy for the young children that have to spend time in hospital, encouraging their friends to understand more about the things they have to go through & how it may feel difficult to belong once more in their former lives.

This is surely a book that should be found in all children's hospitals and schools around the world. **AH**

## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior

### Ed's Choice

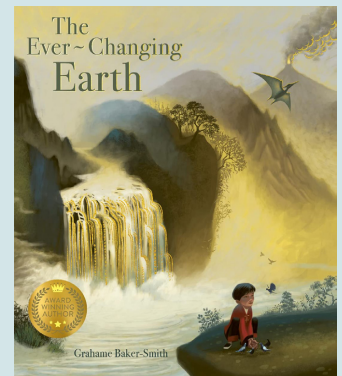
#### The Ever-Changing Earth

★★★★★

Grahame Baker-Smith, Templar, 40pp, 9781800782211 £12.99 hbk

Kun imagines dinosaurs that existed millions of years ago. But they were not the beginning; the Earth is older still. Grahame Baker-Smith takes the reader on a visually dramatic journey from the moment the Earth – the world we live on – was struck by an asteroid to become the planet we know with its satellite moon. The journey is almost unimaginably long and the Earth moves from a world of fire to one of water where the origins of life can emerge; from a planet in the grip of ice to one where life can flourish and continue to evolve – thanks to its core of fire.

This is, perhaps, the most complex of the elements that Baker-Smith tackles and is much less amenable to the coherent narrative that can be seen in his previous books, *The Rhythm of the Rain* and *Wild is the Wind*. It is a story that usually demands a tome to explain all the changes. However, in simplifying his story, Baker-Smith also brings it to life. His colour saturated images fill every spread alive with drama, movement, fire, space. His figures are dwarfed not just by the natural world of mountains and oceans, but by the concept of time. However, Baker-Smith prevents his



narrative becoming an abstract of history by introducing his two young protagonists, Kun and Solveig. They live far apart, experiencing different aspects of the world, yet connected. It is a simple device to engage the young reader in this extraordinary – and challenging – story. There is nothing cosy as the reader opens the book to an image of a fiery ball whirling in space. We follow its violent evolution to close the back cover where the image of that blue planet floats serenely in its galaxy; as serenely as Solveig watching the Northern Lights in a lake warmed by the earth's core or Kun feeding the birds who were once dinosaurs. Here is a book to inspire the imagination and lead to further exploration, creating a vivid visual background to other narratives, bringing evolutionary history alive. **FH**

### How to Make a Picture Book

★★★★★

Elys Dolan, Walker Books, 48pp, 978 1 5295 0059 2, £12.99, hbk

Written and illustrated by award winning picturebook creator Elys Dolan, this book provides an appealing and entertaining step-by-step guide for young writers and illustrators.

The process is broken down into easy to manage steps from generating ideas to production.

Stuck for ideas? No problem, we are shown how creating a gallery of favourite things can act as inspiration, and how these can help build an idea for a story by adding two together – playing a kind of story maths. Readers are shown how to develop characters and get to know them by drawing them in different situations and 'interviewing' them. The story setting can be developed by firstly imagining your character in their bedrooms and then zooming out to their house and then to their town. Not sure how to develop the text? Try the suggested writing frame with sentence starters. Examples are provided throughout as Elys shows how a story about a pizza loving dinosaur might develop.

The book finishes with ways to make a simple paper book and how to design it. There is an interesting perspective on page layout and insights into composition – for example how to make the storytelling slow down with one large, detailed image or speed up with a series of small images. The impact colour can have on mood is also considered.

Each section is followed with activity time encouraging young picturebook creators to try the ideas themselves to develop their own stories.

Amusing, accessible and inspirational this guide is a useful and fun filled recipe for successful picturebook making. **SMc**

### Bookworms

★★★★★

Nyanda Foday, ill. Joelle Avelino, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978 1 8391 3148 6, £12.99 hbk

A good book takes readers to new worlds; the right book shows you that you deserve to exist in this one.

If we want children to be real readers – book lovers – it's vital that they see themselves in the books they read. So, it's good to see former Birmingham Young Poet Laureate

## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

Nyanda Foday's poem wherein she encourages all youngsters to become, like her, avid readers. She writes of spending nights reading under the bedclothes with a phone torch, days in playground corners and lunchtimes in libraries reading. I love this description: 'Sometimes a book is the sole piece of driftwood to cling to when it feels like your life is going down with the ship.' Surely all readers deserve to come across a special character, a friend that reminds them there are others like them. No child should feel lonely during their reading journey: this is vital for both authors and illustrators to remember and assuredly Joelle Avelino had this in the forefront of her mind when creating the illustrations for this powerfully expressed book: a book that gives everyone the confidence to find their place in the world.

There's huge classroom potential and the possibility of hours of discussion between the covers of this one. **JB**

## An Unexpected Thing

★★★★

Ashling Lindsay, Frances Lincoln, 32pp, 978 0 7112 7489 1, £7.99 pbk 'Being afraid sometimes is quite normal', but then there is Fred. Fred is afraid of almost everything, particularly of the unexpected. The result of all this fear is that when a large black ball appears in the sky, he is terrified and runs to hide. This is well portrayed in the huge amount of black trees and bushes that appear over and around the quaking Fred while he is hiding. His friend Coco sees something quite opposite from Fred. When she finds him, she brings him out of his hiding place and they discuss the possibilities. What could it be? Fred thinks it might be a comet about to hit the earth or a moon out of orbit, but Coco sees a lovely balloon with a message attached or 'a bubble bobbling in the wind'. They continue to compare points of view, but in the end can't decide what they are seeing so they begin to investigate, something Fred has never done before, and he finds on climbing the nearest tree right to the top, that Coco has showed him how to face up to fears. They still discuss the special thing it could be without coming to any conclusion, but when they spy a 'sparkling string' hanging from the black spot, they climb up it and the rest is pure magic while they dance around together in the growing darkness of the sky. 'The world is fizzing with things – scary things, terrific things... and even though these things can make us feel afraid and unsure, together we can find them out.' The illustrations are full of darkness at the beginning of the book and then burst into full colour and light when Coco's positivity enters the scene. At the end, the blackness of the ball

is the only thing black left, meaning that when we enter into fear, we can discover that a fear can turn out to be enchanting. A lovely story. **ES**

## Alcatoe and the Turnip Child

★★★★

Written and ill. Isaac Lenkiewicz, Flying Eye Books, 64pp, 978-1-83874-014-6, £9.99 pbk

'I got into witchcraft when I was 54 years old and I haven't looked back since...'

In the middle of Plum Woods lives Alcatoe, a mischievous little witch who prefers her own company and finds rules annoying. This brings her into quiet conflict with the meticulous and austere Goonwartha, Head of the Plumtown Witches' Social Club, who is always on at Alcatoe to smarten up.

Every autumn, Plumtown hosts a vegetable pageant which Goonwartha runs like a military operation, but this year a surprise request has given Alcatoe a chance to mess things up. Three local children have demanded a spell to grow a prizewinning turnip, but once harvested the enormous vegetable turns out to be alive. Alcatoe has programmed it to run amok in the Special Attributes class, and everything is in place to cause maximum embarrassment until the children realise that the prizewinning vegetables will be cooked for the Harvest Feast, and decide to rescue the Turnip Child before it meets an untimely end. Mile-a-minute fun ensues!

Bursting with warm-hearted silliness and nostalgic pop-culture references, Isaac Lenkiewicz's storyline will appeal to readers who enjoy imaginative pyrotechnics and are willing to follow its twists and turns. Panel sequences are punctuated by full-page spreads, which help the action to progress swiftly but in a visually and imaginatively expansive way, and Lenkiewicz's eye-catching autumnal palette sits well with the macabre forest setting.

Alcatoe may be 54 years+, but she's a small child at heart, and younger readers will recognize the way she chafes at authority while being thoroughly delighted by the unconstructive power that she wields. Lenkiewicz's focus on stylish, child-centred fun will ensure a warm welcome wherever this book is shelved. **CFH**

## When the Storks Came Home

★★★★★

Isabella Tree, ill. Alexandra Finkeldey, Ivy Kids, 32pp, 9780711272774, £9.99 pbk

This beautifully illustrated picture book is remarkable in many ways. Firstly, it is a work of fiction but is based on a real story. In the adventure we follow Beanie and her friend, Andy, as they try to find a way of reintroducing white storks to the United Kingdom. Beanie only hears about these birds when her baby

brother arrives and friends bring new baby cards depicting storks. Do read the book to find out whether Beanie and Andy's plan is successful!

Secondly, there is an excellent section at the back of the book explaining how white storks returned to the Knepp Estate in Horsham, Sussex, led by Isabella Tree, author and conservator. There are some amazing facts here, such as the last nesting of white storks in the UK was on St Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh in 1416! Photographs of the White Stork Project and suggestions for further information about this are also included.

Finally, it was important to Isabella Tree to have the books printed on 100% recycled paper to avoid unnecessary costs and resources. In addition, they were printed in this country so that no travel was involved. At the front of the book there is a paragraph explaining why this was so important.

The illustrations throughout the story work well with the text and were drawn by Alexandra Finkeldey, a Canadian artist who specialises in drawing animals amongst other subjects.

This informative publication would be of interest to any child keen on nature, the environment and sustainability and has inspired me to learn more about the topic and to read Isabella Tree's award-winning book, **Wilding**. **JS**



## Pick A Story A Dinosaur Robot Adventure

★★★★

Sarah Coyle illus Adam Walker-Parker, Farshore, 32pp, 978-1405299053, £7.99 pbk

The choose your own adventure format has long been popular in junior fiction and in her **Pick A Story** series Sarah Coyle applies it ingeniously in picture books. The adventure starts on the first spread where our protagonist Gwen is getting ready to celebrate her birthday, at least that is until her cake suddenly vanishes. Gwen is presented with three questions about its whereabouts, which we the reader answer on her behalf. Depending on the answer we choose, the story takes off in different directions, involving dinosaurs, unicorns or robots. Each spread offers sets of questions, the answers as chosen by the reader

sending them back and forth through the book as they track down the cake, a different story arc each time. There's a great sense of fun thanks to the Pick A Story format, supported by the lively nature of the different scenarios, and a tangible sense of independence too. Additional questions are posed on the pages, inviting readers to share their thoughts and there are also mini puzzles and challenges scattered across the pages. It all makes for a thoroughly rewarding reading experience and it's a great way too to introduce children to decision making and indeed storytelling. **LS**

## Never Brush a Bear

★★★★

Sam Hearn, Happy Yak (Quarto), 32pp, 978 0711265523, £7.99 pbk

A delightfully humorous rhyming story, with a small boy, Herschel. As head stylist, pet pamperer extraordinaire, we meet him at work coiffuring creatures of all shapes and sizes. 'Like beagles, or bunnies, or ponies, or pugs....he'll even brush fir trees and Grandma's best rug!' Yet Herschel's dearest wish is to brush a bear. Off he goes on a wonderful adventure, braving mountains and forests, eventually locating a bear deep in a dark cave. Is he wild? He is certainly polite, and he does indeed look in need of a brush, his fur being covered in leaves and pine needles. After a good, friendly brushing session, a tickle sends both boy and bear rolling down a hill, Herschel landing on his bum in a big squelchy puddle. Likewise, Bear. Another brushing required! The illustrations carry Herschel through each stage of his quest in a wide range of colours and lots of gentle humour. The two main characters are well portrayed, whilst the forest creatures that accompany the adventure scoot from one page to the next with glee. Readers will enjoy seeking them out on each spread. A sound read-aloud book to be shared with a group before children read it for themselves. **GB**

## Winnie the Pooh and Me

★★★★

Jeanne Willis, illus. Mark Burgess, Macmillan, 48pp, 978 1 5290 7038 5, £12.99, hbk

This picture book is a clever homage to the author and creator of Pooh and to the illustrator, E. H. Shepard, whose realisation of A.A. Milne's characters is how they properly are and always will be, despite the intervention of Walt Disney. Jeanne Willis, inspired by the poem *Us Two* from Milne's verse collection **Now We are Six**, takes Milne's characters and puts them in a poem that has all the playfulness, warmth, wit and richness of character of the original. The illustrations by Mark Burgess honour Shepard but seem to me to show a rather younger Christopher Robin, which possibly makes the book more an introduction to the stories than a sequel. I am not too sure about the relationship of the



# reviews

## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

story to the illustrations. The story features Christopher Robin and Pooh wondering about two friends who are following them. These finally turn out to be their shadows, which I imagine will be a revelation to most readers, since neither Christopher Robin nor Pooh pays any attention to them for most of the book, unlike other possibilities, like the clouds in the sky shaped like their friends and, latterly, Heffalumps. My suspicion is that Jeanne Willis wrote the text first, where, without the illustrations, the poem sets a puzzle which ends in a very satisfactory surprise. The illustrations, however, are likely to confuse the reader by giving more pictorial weight to the other possibilities considered by the foolish pair. **CB**

### Timid

★★★★

Harry Woodgate, *Little Tiger*, 32pp, 978 1 83891 511 7 £7.99, pbk

For many a small child, performing in front of an audience may be a terrifying ordeal. Especially for someone like Timmy. In his bedroom he just loves performing, dressing up, dancing and singing. And he dreams of performing on stage. But there is a small problem, well, rather a big one. Timmy is very timid, so shy. For even when he attempts to talk to anyone new, a giant lion will appear from nowhere, ROOAR at him, and sap all his confidence. Then a classmate Nia befriends him, and they discuss their common fear of performing before an audience. With the school play approaching, together they make costumes for themselves using Timmy's brother's meditation technique; but Nia's mum's writing of encouraging notes around the house: 'Believe in yourself'; 'You can do it!' to boost each other's confidence. Come opening night, the huge Lion still makes an appearance. But at long last Timmy faces him down, and after that the two children create a dazzling performance. The first endpaper pictures snatches of events to come. One of these says, 'HELLO! My name is Timmy. My pronouns are they/them'. The illustrations do great credit to the story, being full of lively and sparkly detail, showing how shy Timmy is, and how gloriously proud and BIG is the Lion, with his enormous multicoloured mane. A story to combat the fears performance can create for some children, and with a salute to identity, to the need to be oneself. **GB**

### People Need People

★★★★★

Benjamin Zephaniah, *Orchard*, 978 1 40836 815 2, £12.99 hbk

Opening at the first endpaper, readers are amazed to be confronted with over 200 heads of people! Young and old, babes and grandparents, all shapes, sizes and ethnicities, each

different, never one repeated, but all with one characteristic in common. They all have a smile! A grin, a giggle or a guffaw, each beams in their own way. What an introduction. Every spread throughout this heart-warming book is packed with people doing all sorts of activities. There they are, waiting in an airport, playing in the park, enjoying family get togethers around the dining table. 'People live in families, gangs, posess and packs, it seems we need company before we relax.' The joy in the text, rhyming of course, is reflected abundantly in the bright, graphic illustrations, which deserve a huge thumbs up. Nila Aye's colourful, contemporary style portrays every single character with care and individuality, and the whole book hangs together brilliantly. The colours sizzle throughout, and the book will delight readers young and old, and should reach a wide audience, not just fans of Benjamin Zephaniah. Do find it, and enjoy! **GB**

### What is Philosophy?

★★★★

Sarah Walden, ill. Katie Rewse, *Noodle Juice*, 32pp, 9781915613004, £9.99 hbk

This is an attractive book and is the first of a new series entitled *Little Book, Big Idea*. It successfully explains quite a difficult concept to young children by using twelve questions to answer, 'What is Philosophy?' Each spread concentrates on a question such as, 'What is Love?' 'What is Truth?' and 'What is Beauty?' Most of the pages have a few small illustrations with brief explanations beside each. There is also a short paragraph to clarify the concept in the question.

I particularly like how the author writes of important values and how children can adopt them. For example, she communicates that, 'Being truthful is a good thing' (p.15) and 'Helping your parents tidy up your bedroom shows them that you respect your home' (p.27). The final pages explain how philosophy comprises many questions and we should keep asking them. The tone of the writing is very child-friendly and the scenes pictured throughout the book are places familiar to the young person: school; the park; home; the shops.

At the back of the book is a very useful glossary covering many words found in the text.

I think this innovative publisher, Noodle Juice, does indeed fulfil its 'aim to be disruptive and challenge conventions with titles that help little people answer the big questions in an increasingly confusing world.'

This book would be a fabulous addition to any school classroom, library or home. It goes a long way to answer big questions for any inquisitive child. I am already looking forward to future, planned titles in this series. **JS**

## 8 – 10 Junior/Middle

### New Talent

#### Wildoak

★★★★★

C.C Harrington, *Chicken House*, 329pp, 978 1915026149, £7.99 pbk

Set during the big freeze of 1963, *Wildoak* tells the story of a girl called Maggie and a snow leopard called Rumpus. Maggie is passionate about the natural world; she has an affinity with living things but struggles with communication, feeling a failure at school and a disappointment to her father due to her stammer. Rumpus is one of a number of exotic pets on sale at Harrods department store. Bought as an unusual gift for a rich woman he is soon rejected, having wrecked her pristine flat. Both Maggie and Rumpus find themselves dispatched to Cornwall; Maggie to spend time with her grandfather and hopefully outgrow her speech impediment, Rumpus, who has never known life in the wild, abandoned in an ancient woodland Wildoak Forest (itself under threat). It isn't long before their lives collide, and Maggie finds herself involved in a fight to protect Rumpus, facing disbelief, fear and growing danger.

Rich and multilayered with an exciting narrative, this is an engrossing novel with great characterisation; in particular the brave, resourceful young heroine and her caring inventive grandfather, Fred. Their relationship is sensitively described and central to the plot.



This is a story about making your voice heard on issues of importance to you, no matter how difficult. Readers will learn a little of what it is like to struggle with a speech impediment and how patience is required to allow individuals to communicate.

The richness of ancient woodland habitats and what might be lost when they are destroyed is a key theme. The story also highlights other issues, including the ethics of viewing wild animals as exotic pets; how fear of the unfamiliar can lead to violence and the kinds of rifts and tensions that can keep families apart.

An excellent debut novel, engaging, moving and thought provoking, highly recommended. **SMC**

### A is for BEE: an alphabet book in translation

★★★★★

Written and ill. Ellen Heck, *Pushkin Children's* 40pp, 978-1-78269-362-8, £12.99 hbk

Portuguese speakers don't say bee, they say *abelha*, while in Turkish the same insect is an *ari*, so the title of this unusual picturebook is true. A is for bee – and that's just the beginning of a curiously mind-tingling journey through 68 world languages in this eye-catching debut.

Inspired by reading in Lithuanian to her son, printmaker Ellen Heck matched each letter of the alphabet with animal names in other languages. From T is for Octopus (or German *tintenfisch*) to V is for Zebra (or Tamil *varikkutirai*), expect to be challenged and intrigued as the classic genre is playfully subverted.

Bold scrapbook illustrations evoke memories of traditional woodcuts and provide a strong visual framework for the concept. Each page includes a design reference to the corresponding letter – a device

that's left to readers to discover and enjoy – and saturated single-colour backdrops help individual animals take centre stage.

Full of visual and linguistic drama, **A is for BEE** will prompt wonder, curiosity and debate about language, nature and design, and deserves to be widely accessible. Adults and older children will enjoy it every bit as much as younger ones, but it could confuse emerging readers who are just getting used to English phonics, though.

A postscript gives further information about the chosen languages and a QR link is included for those who would like to hear native or fluent speakers pronouncing the words. **CFH**

### Time Travel at Puddle Lane

★★★★★

Emma Shevah, ill. Laura Catalán, *Bloomsbury*, 80pp, 9781801991391, pbk £6.99

This historical novel for children shows readers what it would have been like to live in Georgian London. Ariella and Yosef – brother and sister – are interested and curious pupils at

the much-loved Puddle Lane School. In particular, they adore spending time in the library, where Yosef can indulge his fascination with history. This proves invaluable when they follow their mysterious librarian, who leads them on an unforgettable time-travelling adventure!

Stepping through a door in the library leads the siblings onto a bustling, filthy street that is clearly of the past. Yosef quickly deduces when they are but the mystery of how to get back to their own time is much tougher to solve – especially when they are interrupted by the potentially catastrophic problem of the future founder of Puddle Lane School being gravely injured.

As the pair try to help new friends, readers are introduced to a huge amount of information about Georgian Britain (fans of history are in for a treat). From the sights and smells of Georgian high streets, to the gruesome and deadly details of nineteenth century medicine, Shevah doesn't shy away from any unpleasant or inconvenient truths about the period. Catalán's monochrome illustrations also help readers to imagine the grimy greyness of Georgian London.

The diverse population of historical London is well-described, and readers are invited to open their minds and challenge assumptions about the past. Though the book is a very manageable length, it is rich with ideas and questions about how we used to live and features activities at the end to encourage readers to launch their own time-travelling stories.

With the whole of history at their disposal, Ariella and Yosef may have many more adventures ahead, and young readers will enjoy finding out all about different time periods with them. **SD**

### Xanthe and the Ruby Crown

★★★★

Jasbinder Bilan, *Chicken House*, 227pp, 978 1 913322601 £7.99 pbk  
Xanthe loves visiting her grandmother in her tower block home. She loves spending time in Nani's roof garden and really admires her; Nani was an archaeologist and Xanthe has inherited her love of history from her.

But Xanthe is worried about Nani, who is becoming more and more forgetful. Xanthe's parents seem to be considering sending Nani to live in a care home. Xanthe thinks it would be awful to tear Nani away from her home and the world she knows. She wonders if reconnecting with Nani's childhood, which she strangely refuses to talk about, would help strengthen her memory.

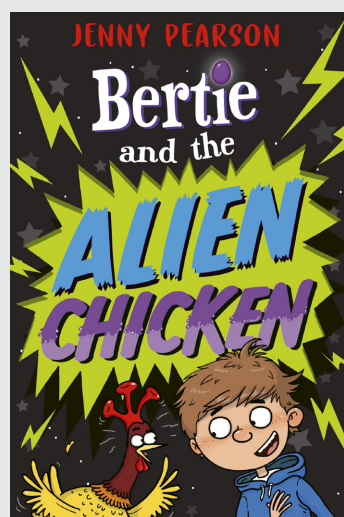
Xanthe sets out to find out all she can about Nani's past spurred on by a mysterious, mystical cat who guides her to finding several objects, of significance to Nani, hidden in the

building. On finding them Xanthe is transported back in time where she observes scenes from Nani's childhood in Kampala, Uganda and begins to understand the events that shaped her grandmother. Xanthe, together with her friends Romeo and Pria, set to work on a special project that Xanthe hopes will help Nani come to terms with her past and keep hold of her precious memories.

There are beautiful descriptive passages of the natural world in the narrative, and sensitive characterisation, in particular of the protagonist Xanthe and her struggles to come to terms with her grandmother's condition and her best friend Romeo acquiring a new friend. There is a mystical strand too with Xanthe's visions of her Nani's childhood guided by Leo, seemingly the ghost of her grandmother's childhood pet.

This is a story with family love and friendship at its core which explores memory, coming to terms with the past and the early stages of dementia. It also highlights the shocking experience of forced deportation faced by many Asians in Uganda under Idi Amin's regime.

A heartfelt story with a satisfying ending from an award-winning writer. **SMc**



### Bertie and the Alien Chicken

★★★★★

Jenny Pearson illus Aleksei Bitskoff, *Barrington Stoke*, 96pp, 978-1800901810, £7.99 pbk

Young Bertie is not expecting much when he's dropped off by Mum to stay with his uncle Brian on Long Bottom Farm for the summer. But this is a Jenny Pearson story, and readers familiar with her work know to expect the unexpected. The first surprise for Bertie is an encounter with a talking chicken, the second that this is no ordinary talking chicken, this chicken is an alien in disguise from the planet Nurgle-7, sent to Earth to find its most valuable resource.

Furthermore, unless the chicken – call me Nugget he says to Bertie – returns with Earth's most valuable resource by the end of the day, Earth will be exterminated. It's a challenge Bertie has to meet. Rejecting Uncle Brian's suggestions, which are very farm-based, and those of the farm hands almost-identical Perry and Bernard (ditto), Bertie and Nugget fire up the farm computer which in turn sends them out in search of data – ultra-valuable. Here there are more surprises in store. In their efforts to identify the really important stuff, Bertie learns that his big strong uncle is scared of being lonely, and discovers some unexpected truths about himself, while his attempts to gather data on the Nurgles turns everything upside down.

Jenny Pearson manages once again to craft a story that is simultaneously funny and sensitive, filled with moments that will have readers laughing aloud and others that will make them stop and think. Her timing is superb and her understanding of the way young children think and speak second to none. This is her first book for Barrington Stoke and as such, accessible to readers of all abilities. **MMA**

### A Pack of Your Own

★★★★★

Maria Nilsson Thore, *Pushkin Press*, 40pp, 978 78269 358 1, £12.99 hbk  
The hero of this remarkable picture book is a very lonely dog (probably dachshund). He or she knows 'they' are very lonely, and doesn't know what to do about it. They are tidy, meticulous, live in an old house on their own, use a toilet, make coffee, collect lovely things and altogether live a far different life from the other dogs they see in the park. They try their best to be like the others, offering to play ball games, and having to watch while the others pee on a tree and growl at them when they happily stroke a cat. They are very sad and feel they will never have 'A pack of their own'. One day, there is a knock on the door, and in pops a poodle, a friendly sort, who has noticed they walk on two legs, and can do the same. It proceeds to learn about everything in their life, sees the loo in action, enjoys the coffee, turns everything upside down, but also is genuinely friendly and interested in a different way of life. They are soon close friends, and dachshund have discovered that different people (and dogs) can like each other in spite of differences. The use of 'they' is interesting and emphasises that some people are gender neutral like this sophisticated dog, and that they can experience friendship with many different types of people. The illustrations are remarkable and full of tender details of their home. Mostly black and white and grey, the only colour is the dog collars, all of which are a dark red and 'they' is brown throughout. Wonderfully understanding about a problem so many people are now admitting to and

needing support for, and children will enjoy learning about others who are different from themselves, but no less interesting because of this. Unique in its quality and presentation. **ES**

### Secret Beast Club: The Unicorns of Silver Street

★★★★★

Robin Birch, ill. Jobe Anderson, *Penguin, Random House*, 176pp, 978 0 241 57348 8, £7-99, pbk

Welcome to a different world, one where mystical, ancient creatures live inside Bewilder Bubbles! Appealing to any young reader with a lively imagination, this first in a new series of early chapter books will delight. The two main characters are best friends; Jayden is shy and bookish, whilst Aisha is feisty and fearless. They both favour being indoors, reading or playing on a tablet. Both their mothers strive to entice them outside, into the marshes of Hackney, but the resistance of the two children is great until one day a mysterious narrowboat docks in the canal outside their block of flats. Enticed outside at last, the children soon discover that they are blessed with the rare ability of magic sight and hearing, all related to this strange narrowboat and its occupants. Other characters enter, especially Guy Goyle, size of a two-year-old, with pointy ears and leathery wings tucked close to his gravelly grey body. The children join the Secret Beast Club, and their adventures begin. They soon learn so much about mythological creatures, and especially unicorns. They are amazed to learn that a unicorn foal is only born about once every fifty years or so and is called a sparkle. And the collective name for unicorns is a blessing. The book is liberally illustrated in black and white, especially confirming the characteristics of the fearless girl Aisha and the fearful boy Jayden. The ending shows the two adventurers receiving their first badge to show they are official members of the Secret Beast Club, they have had their first taste of magic and they want more, ready to lead into the next book in the series. The book closes with a map of the Hackney marshes and the Thames, showing the Tower Bridge, the Shard, Big Ben and the Eye, along with a few facts about unicorns, including the date April 9th, National Unicorn Day as it is celebrated in the UK! Youngsters with a love of magic will devour it. **GB**

### Montgomery Bonbon: Murder at the Museum

★★★★★

Alasdair Beckett-King, ill. Claire Powell, *Walker Books*, 285pp, 9781529501049, £7.99 pbk

Montgomery Bonbon is the super-sleuth pseudonym of a 10-year-old Bonnie, who loves nothing more than donning her lustrous moustache and getting to grips with a mystery.

In this story, Bonnie's visit to the local museum of curiosities is somewhat interrupted by the



## 8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

small matter of a murder, and the theft of the most famous exhibit: the Widdlington Eagle. This is wonderful news for Bonnie, who hastily disguises herself as the world's finest detective - Montgomery Bonbon - and begins looking for clues. Quickly, she identifies several suspects, all of whom are singular characters with individual quirks and questionable connections with the museum. Beckett-King has fun in his description of them: the frizzy-haired horticulturist with plants sprouting out of every pocket, and the indomitable handy-woman who caretakes the museum are especially good comedy value.

Like all respectable detectives, Bonbon is despised by the local Police Inspector and relies heavily upon the sensible and practical nature of her sidekick, Grampa Banks. The relationship between Bonnie and Grampa is adorable. Like all perfect grandparents, he is quietly proud of Bonnie and loves secretly spoiling her and indulging her hobbies - even when Mum really doesn't want him to. He is handy as a sidekick, too, and helps move the story forward beyond Bonbon's lengthy monologues (which are frequent).

**Murder at the Museum** delivers a good deal of laughs and is a love letter to classic Christie novels that will delight any parents reading the book to their children. As well as the obvious inclusion of a somewhat conspicuous moustache, the story features the assembly of a cast of curious characters connected by mysterious truths, and has a big-reveal-climax that is thoroughly rewarding.

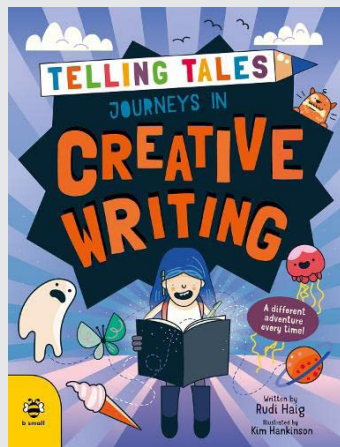
Though there is a little room for more originality and surprises in further outings for Montgomery Bonbon, young readers are sure to enjoy the twists and turns - and laughs - of this playful introduction to crime fiction. **SD**

### Telling Tales: Journeys in Creative Writing

★★★★

Rudi Haig, illus Kim Hankinson, b small publishing, 978-1913918453, £7.99 pbk

Young writers are invited on a journey of adventure and creativity in this effective and brightly illustrated guide. Setting off with Ms Adjective the Adventurer, plus (useful supporting character) Fluffy the dog, they will make their way through eighteen different story settings, each one offering fun writing challenges and prompts. To escape the sweltering dunes of Desert Valley for example, they need to describe finding something to drink, maybe cutting open a cactus, discovering an oasis or hitching a ride on a giant vulture to a supermarket. The challenge in Animal Kingdom is to write a conversation with a made-up animal, in a made-up language. At times you are invited to write a description of



something very familiar, at other times to let your imagination loose. Each adventure setting also features a 'Fab Fiver', a list of five useful words or phrases likely to expand the reader's vocabulary, while 'Adventure Clues' provide useful information to help with writing. I was delighted to learn that a 'smack' is the collective term for a group of jellyfish, and pleased to see a comment on the Punctuation Park scenario that 'although it's useful to understand grammar and punctuation, it's not that important in Creative Writing', though the Adventure Clue does provide a clear description of apostrophes and when to use them. The book is engaging, useful and with its friendly, encouraging tone, likely to get all children to the Story Summit, whether writing comes naturally to them or not. **MMa**

### Glowrushes

★★★★

Roberto Piumini, trans Leah Janeczko, Pushkin, 128pp, 9781782693819, £9.99 hbk

Samukat is an artist renowned for the detail and life that he invests in his paintings. He is not just a painter who sees his art as work, it is his life. Then one day he receives a request from the lord of a country to the north. He is asked to come and create a visual world for the lord's eleven-year-old son, Madurer, who suffers from an unusual allergic reaction to sunlight and the outside air. The boy has to live a cloistered and protected life with no access to the outdoors or outdoor life. Samukat with some anxiety, accepts the commission. This is the start of an increasingly deep friendship between adult and child, artist and dreamer, for Samukat also gives up the outdoor world. Together the two create a whole landscape in which the scenes seamlessly (magically) change as their ideas and dreams change. And as Madurer's strength fails, Samukat's desire to show him a world the boy will never know except through his skill with paint, grows ever stronger.

This is an interesting novel to consider. It is not a tempestuous

adventure or stereotypical relationship. Here we see a very deep real bond between child and adult, a bond that develops and grows. We see how even in the face of an extreme situation, imagination can open a door to bring dreams, ideas, stories to tangible life and we are presented with both life and death - but not perhaps the way we might expect. It is a reflective story - a novella rather than a long drawn out read - but it is completely engrossing. The style, here recreated by the excellent translation of Leah Janeczko, is that of a traditional tale from the **Arabian Nights** which allows a certain distance and acceptance of the magical dreamlike elements. It also avoids any sentimentality. The author opens a door to the feelings, and attitudes of not just a child but of the adults involved - the conclusion and Samukat's response are particularly telling. This is a novel which reflects a different tradition in writing for young people. We can see a similarity in many ways to Exupéry's **The Little Prince**, already a well-established classic here. These two books have a real affinity in their atmosphere and belief that children can respond to questions and ideas that might be considered too philosophical. Piumini is an important author in Italy and this is the first book by him to appear here. It is a welcome addition to the cannon of children's literature in the UK. **FH**

### A Day in the Life of an Astronaut, Mars and the Distant Stars

★★★★★

Mike Barfield, ill. Jess Bradley, Buster Books, 128pp, 9781780557441, £10.99 pbk

As the subtitle on the front cover says: 'Space as You've Never Seen it Before.' This is a highly original book and continues the series, **A Day in the Life...** by Mike Barfield and Jess Bradley. They were the 2021 winners of the **Blue Peter Awards: Best Book with Facts**. This partnership of author/cartoonist Barfield and illustrator/comic artist Bradley works well to produce a thoroughly researched and attractive comic style.

Whilst the book is divided into three sections: The Solar System, Outer Space and Space Travel, the reader can easily dip into it wherever they decide. Serious facts about all things to do with Space are presented in different ways to enthral the reader. 'A Day in the Life of ...' pages provide innovative stories about, for example: the sun, oxygen molecules, fast food! 'The Bigger Picture' pages go into more depth on topics and you can also find 'The Even Bigger Picture' articles. My favourite stories are the 'Secret Diaries' and I especially enjoyed *The Secret Diary of an Astro-Mouse* where a mouse recounts its journey on the International Space Station!

This colourful, fact-packed volume will delight any older student keen on all things connected with Space. The graphic novel style will appeal to many youngsters and draw them into

learning lots of interesting information along the way. The numerous diagrams and varied presentation of facts encourage the reader to scan through the book. Alternatively there is a helpful index along with a full glossary. Both author and illustrator working together here seem to have reached a winning formula with this series and I look forward to the next title. **JS**

### A Different Kind of Freedom - A Romani Story

★★★★★

Richard O'Neill, Scholastic, 176pp, 9781 407 199580, £6.99, pbk

In this first-person narrative we hear the story of Lijah Vesh, born into a proud Romani family living a traveller life, full of tradition.

Set in Sheffield during the reign of George V (the interwar years) this is a time of change for the Romani community with pressures to conform leading many to opt for a settled life.

When Lijah attends school he discovers an unexpected talent for football - leading to conflict with his father who considers that football is not a suitable game for Romanis. The story outlines Lijah's struggle and confusion as he tries to reconcile his passion for football with his loyalty to his family. With help from his older brother and an influential family contact, Lijah takes steps towards achieving his dream of following in the footsteps of his hero Rab Howell, the first professional Romani footballer.

This is a story about ambition and realising your dreams. It highlights the prejudice Romani people have experienced over the years. The book challenges misconceptions about Romani people and emphasises family pride in their rich culture including storytelling and singing. The narrative is interspersed with Romani language and there is a useful glossary at the back with key vocabulary.

Alongside Lijah's fictional story, readers are also introduced to the true story of Rab Howell highlighting his achievements and showing how inspiring his story is to the Romani community.

This short novel is an interesting addition to the Voices series from Scholastic bringing formally untold stories to young readers. **SMC**

### Saving Neverland

★★★★★

Abi Elphinstone, ill. Geraldine Rodrigue, Puffin, 302pp, 9780241473320, £12.99 hbk

No 14 Darlington Road is almost as famous as Privet Drive, when talking about children's classic stories. However, when Martha Pennydrop, her brother Scruff and father move in they have no idea about the history of the house. It is only when the two children discover a strange golden dust in one of the drawers that they meet the legendary Peter Pan for the first time. Neverland is under threat from a curse laid by Captain Hook and it looks as if Martha and Scruff are its only hope. Unfortunately, Martha has

lost her belief in magic and adventure, after a near accident to her brother. She has decided that it is time for her to be a grown-up, even though she is only ten years old. Can Martha regain her magic and are the children able to save Neverland? You will be on the edge of your seat as you wait to find out.

What a fabulous book from the world of **Peter Pan**. It is full of excitement, action and adventure, with well-loved characters, as well as the new central heroes. It is also about the pressures that Martha feels; we would all agree that a ten-year-old should be able to act as a child and not try to be an adult. There is also the underlying relationship with their father, who is so busy at work that he forgets that the children need his support. However, despite this, the children do not agree with Peter Pan that they would be better off staying in Neverland. Not only that, they help the remaining lost boys to remember facts about their families and maybe they can return them to their homes. There are a multitude of books written about Peter Pan and his further adventures, but I am delighted to say that this is one of the best middle grade adventures that I have come across. Abi Elphinstone is a superb author and this proves that she is just getting better and better. It well deserves its five-star rating. **MP**

### A Tricky Kind of Magic

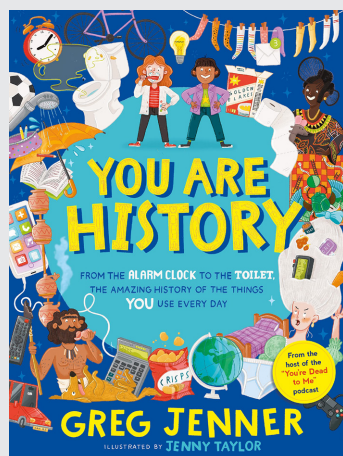
★★★★

Nigel Baines, Hachette, 246pp, 9781444971354, £7.99 pbk

In this graphic novel for children, a talented amateur magician comes to terms with the loss of his father and hopes to find the magic to bring him back to life. Cooper's love of magic is inherited from his dad – the Great Eduardo – and he is named after the famously funny Tommy Cooper. Cooper is talented and brave enough to perform frequently in the corridors at school for his friends: being a magician is his passion; his identity. When Cooper's father sadly dies, he is overtaken by sudden flashes of anger and confusion, which are largely aimed at those he loves the most. His yoga and lentil-loving mum, his attentive best friend, and his manic little brother, Fin, all face the wrath of Cooper's furious explosions. A method for coping arrives in mysterious form when Cooper is visited by a talking, cuddly rabbit with attitude... Rabbit DeNiro. With his wise-cracking, carrot-crunching new companion, Cooper withdraws further from his friends and family, until he finds an old magic shop that is concealing much more than just trap-doors and secret compartments.

Cooper is propelled into a world of magic-gone-wrong, where he is given hope that he'll find his father. With Rabbit at his side, he has to navigate hoards of marauding bunnies who haven't been pulled from hats and

escape the clutches of a villainous old magician who never made the big time. This magical world is utterly bonkers and is captured in Baines' monochrome illustrations whose details and energetic lines contribute to an atmosphere of drama and excitement. The final act describes Cooper's attempts to find his father and return to his real world. He learns that magic really does exist but may not be in the form he expects, and that anything is possible with the help and love of one's friends. This enjoyable balance of comedy and emotion will appeal to many young readers, and the intricate nature of the illustrations means that children will also enjoy re-visiting the story to find all of their favourite jokes again and again. **SD**



### You Are History

★★★★★

Greg Jenner illus Jenny Taylor, Walker Books, 144pp, 978-1406395679, £14.99 hbk

Greg Jenner is a public historian and, as he explains in the introduction to this new book for children, that means his job is to make history 'super enjoyable for other people.' A gifted storyteller and communicator he sets out to make history real and relevant to young readers by putting them at its centre. He guides us step by step through an ordinary day, revealing the history of all those objects we use daily and take for granted, from the alarm clock to the toilet (of course), the calculator to the smartphone, the sofa to the tin can, they're all included the last item being, naturally, the bed. The history ranges across the globe and centuries, and the accompanying text is lively and always clear. Laughter is a great way to hold children's attention, and this is full of jokes, but Jenner also covers serious subjects: a section on 'The Dark History of Chocolate' for example explains slavery. He succeeds brilliantly in demonstrating to children how interconnected the world is, and this is a book to spark their imaginations and stimulate their curiosity. Super enjoyable indeed.

Read our [Q&A interview with Greg Jenner](#).

## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

### Snot, Sneezes and Super Spreaders: Everything You Need to Know about Viruses and How to Stop Them

★★★★★

Marc ter Horst, ill. Wendy Penders, Greystone Kids, 136pp, 9781771649735, £14.99 hbk

I think the subject matter and alliterative title of this book will hook a lot of young readers immediately, and for others browsing this book they will soon see its great merits. Young students will likely be drawn to the 'Respect for the Runny Nose' section with lots of information about sneezes. However, with fine details about animal testing as well as AIDS/safe sex, STDs and condoms then younger readers will need some guidance in navigating this volume aimed at aged 8-12 years.

The Foreword by Dr Jennifer Gardy, one of the world's top scientists, is full of enthusiasm for her subject and sets the right tone for this well researched book. Similarly, the Thank You at the close of this guide by author Marc ter Horst explains his passion for communicating some difficult concepts in a child friendly way.

This is a thorough investigation and explanation of viruses and vaccines brought about by COVID-19. It is divided into six chapters with clear subheadings: What Viruses Are and How They Work; How Viruses Spread; How Viruses Make You Sick...; How to Frustrate a Virus; How Vaccines Protect Us and How Virus Outbreaks Happen...

I particularly enjoyed learning about the beginnings and consequences of diseases throughout history, as well as seeing the timeline for COVID-19. The illustrations are excellent and go a long way in explaining complicated scientific concepts, such as cells and DNA.

Most children were affected by the recent pandemic and this work will help them to learn more about it in a scientific and historic context. It would be fantastic if it also encourages a new generation of young scientists too! Older students will also value its information and clear explanations: a great book for a school/home library. **JS**

### Midwinter Burning

★★★★★

Tanya Landman, illus. Tom Clohosy Cole, Walker Books, 97814063978185, 254pp, £7.99 pbk

Mysterious standing stones are found all over the county of Devon, but not many on a cliff I suspect. The origin of these stones is certainly prehistoric, and little is known, but it is usually supposed to have some sort of religious purpose, often involving a sacrifice. Alfie has been evacuated to a small village just before the outbreak of war in 1939, and is lucky to end up with Auntie Bell and

her son Ted on a farm. This country life is completely unknown to Alfie, as is a proper home, and he is given freedom to explore, sent off with flask of cold tea and a sandwich on his first day. He is drawn to the stones on the headland, and is befriended by Smidge, strangely dressed and unable to speak English, but the boys bond, both being loners, making Alfie happy for almost the first time in his life. The village custom of burning midwinter has pagan origins but when the custom is suspended for a nativity this first year of war, events come to a head, when Smidge is under threat of being sacrificed, and the bullies close in on Alfie, who dressed as an angel flees to try to save Smidge.

Poor Alfie, lonely, bullied at school and seemingly unable to make friends is beautifully drawn, as is the countryside of Devon and the atmosphere of a village community, where incomers, that is the evacuees, cause tension. Is Smidge real or is he a creation of Alfie's imagination? It does not matter as with the war beginning in the background, Alfie fights his own battle with evil, fighting for his friend.

A lovely deep story, full of the countryside, history and of the goodness of people, contrasted with a pagan society, not just of the past, but of the present in the form of bullies. Boys and girls of 9+ will find much to learn and empathise with in this story from the experienced hands of Tanya Landman. **JP**

### Mountainfell

★★★★★

Katherine Orton, ill. Sandra Dieckmann, Walker Books, 318pp, 9781529503296, £7.99 pb

Erskin and her family live in a small village, below a mountain which they are told has a dangerous Dragon living in it. Their lord makes them send several people up to the mountain as a way to appease the spirit who live there. When Erskin's sister is taken by the Dragon she is determined to try and rescue her and with the help of a local boy called Leif and her rescued cat Scrat, she sets out on her perilous quest. What she discovers is even more horrendous than she could imagine and the two heroes need to get help from unexpected quarters in order to achieve their aims. Of course, the questions are whether Erskin will find her sister Birgit, will the village be safe and can the mystery of the mountain be solved?

This is a delightful story with a feeling of Scandinavian legends running through it; the names, descriptions of the country and the Dragon itself, all add to this atmosphere and there is also a strong thread of magic running through the story. At its heart it is a tale about family, love and friendship and how they can be tested by external



## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

circumstances. The heroine Erskin and her friend Leif are outsiders in some ways, but this enables them to question some of the warnings that they have been given and to learn that opinions can have more than one side.

There are also strong messages about the environment and what occupations such as mining can do to damage our world and we would do well to listen to these warnings. This author keeps going from strength to strength as she blends magic and imagination into stories that often have quite a hard central theme. This story is highly recommended for KS2 pupils and beyond. **MP**

### The Gardens of Dorr

★★★

Paul Biegel, illustrated by Eva-Johanna Rubin, Pushkin Press, 223pp, 978178269, £7.99 pbk

Fairy tales from the rest of Europe often hint at a more violent, tragic world than anything found in their counterparts over here. Dark forests can be truly menacing and witches unsparing in their evil and cunning. Child characters adrift in this world do not always prosper. A similar scenario got another airing in Paul Biegel's modern fairy tale, first published in 1975 and now reissued. Along with its original Gothic black and white illustrations by the German artist Eva-Johanna Rubin, the world she and Biegel describe is sometimes downright ugly.

Details include a sadly misshapen dwarf insisting on a kiss from Melissa, a young princess. She is in search of the gardener's boy she used to play with until he was transformed into a plant by wicked witch Sirdis. Later on a hideous toad also looks for a kiss in return for minimal services. Elsewhere a young goatherd, fed only with brown bread except for soup every Sunday, is promised a beating for every animal she loses. A dress made entirely of butterfly wings is subsequently coveted by an unrepenting mad old lady.

British readers are certainly in for something different here, and for a while this strange and unpredictable fantasy journey has much to offer. But there is also a wandering minstrel determined to help Melissa in her quest and after a while his songs, translated onto the page in the form of short verses, rather outlive their welcome. It all ends happily enough with the witch thwarted and the gardener's boy released from his spell. But by this time tension has slackened with too many mini-stories, paid out by characters throughout the narrative as a form of currency, taking away from the main plot. Biegel is best remembered for his classic **The King of the Copper Mountains**. This story also showcases his extraordinary imagination, but overall less successfully. **NT**

### All four quarters of the Moon

★★★★

Shirley Marr, illus Sian James, Usborne 336pp., 9781803704326, £7.99 pbk

Eleven-year-old Peijing enjoys making mooncakes (filled pastries with a cooked egg yolk in the middle) with Ah Ma, her grandmother, on the night before they are all due to leave Singapore for a new life in Australia, and the Moon and mooncakes of various kinds recur throughout the book. Little sister Biju firmly believes in the Jade Rabbit who lives on the Moon, and she, although only 5, is already as good a storyteller as Peijing is an artist, but to a traditional Chinese family, creative activities are very much second to working hard and getting good grades in more academic subjects. They are to discover a very different way of life in Australia. When Ma Ma arrives at school to feed her daughters with chopsticks from a set of tiffin tins, this is, of course, hugely embarrassing, but on the second day a teacher tells Ma Ma that she is not allowed on school grounds. Invited with her class to spend a week camping, Peijing is firmly told by Ma Ma that she has a perfectly good bed at home, so why should she want to go away and sleep in a tent? The other girl not going camping is Joanna, who has befriended Peijing, and it soon becomes clear that Joanna is being bullied, starved and beaten by her father. Their lovely teacher, Miss Lena, spends the week with the two girls and winks the truth out of Joanna, so wheels are set in motion to help her to a better life.

The two sisters have invented Little World, with Peijing's cut-out paper animals and Biju's stories, which they think is their secret, but their creation doesn't make it to Australia, so they start again, and are soon adding llamas, alpacas and Australian animals to the new collection. The relationship between the sisters is delightful - sometimes Biju is a pain, but they are very close. The family have to adjust in various ways: Ba Ba (Dad) becomes less formal in his working clothes, Ma Ma finds a job and enrolls in English classes, and it becomes clear that Ah Ma has the beginnings of dementia, making some hard choices necessary. Adapting to a new way of life has its problems, but they are settling in well, and the girls' creative talents are being allowed to develop as the story ends.

Shirley Marr is a first-generation Chinese/Australian, having anglicized her name from Mah Sher Li ten years ago when her first book was published - she says she would have more confidence in using her Chinese name now. Her previous book **A Glasshouse of Stars** won two awards, was shortlisted for other awards, and nominated for the **Carnegie Medal**. **DB**

### The Rescue of Ravenwood

★★★★

Natasha Farrant, Faber, 346pp, 9780571348787, £7.99 pbk

This story tells how three children from different families take up the fight to preserve a beautiful house and patch of land in the North of England where they have all come to live in cheerfully ramshackle conditions. But greedy developers are afoot, eager to build a Theme Park and, worst of all, to cut down Yggdrasil, a mighty Ash which also hosts the children's tree-house. There is no money to fight them off once two of the three adult co-owners of the site decide to sell up. For the children, this would mean losing not just their loved home but their very souls, so much does the house, its barns and the surrounding countryside, mean to them.

What follows next involves some dangerous adventures involving one still quite small child stowing away and then existing alone for a while and without money in a foreign country. Meanwhile a dangerous fire back home makes everything worse, particularly when one of the children is unjustly blame for causing it. In the final stand-off they all occupy their favourite tree when it is about to be chopped down. Local support is strong, but all still seems lost until a last-minute revelation comes along worthy of an Agatha Christie denouement.

Natasha Farrant is an excellent writer. Her writing is clear and her sentences flow. The only drawback in this story is that it does go on and on about the joys of living in unspoilt countryside almost to the point of tedium. Young readers will surely sympathise with the children's desire to keep things as they were. But will they be as willing to accept the frequent assertions about the contrasting poverty of urban living, particularly if they live in towns or the suburbs themselves? Might they too wonder whether they may actually have quite enjoyed going to the prospective Theme Park so derided in these pages? Town versus country is a perennial theme in literature; this lively story gives only one side of the argument. **NT**

### The Raven's Song

★★★★

Zana Fraillon and Bren MacDibble, Old Barn Books, 284pp, 978-1-910646-81-6, £12.99 hbk 978-1-911427-29-2, £7.99 pbk

**Dust Jacket:** Dominated by a raven, wings spread, alighting or taking off. Background of ruined buildings. Two young children in foreground, backs to reader.

**Set before the narrative:** 'The Ravened Girl of the Bog - an old local folk song.' Echoes of sacrificial bog people, excavated in Denmark?

**Chapter 1 (9+ pp):** 1st person narration by young, unnamed girl waking up in her room on a chicken farm she runs with her 'Da'. Language

differs from present-day English ... e.g. repeated use of 'honoured' to describe, e.g. 'jungle', 'land', 'river', 'world' - meaning? 'Was' and 'is' replace 'were' and 'are' as plurals in narrator's idiom. All communities controlled in her world .... max. 350 people per 700 hectare unit. No explanations.

**Chapter 2 (8 pp):** Phoenix (boy), in bed. 3rd person narration. Dream/nightmare/hallucination - visit by grotesque raven in red sneakers. Phoenix very anxious. 'Aunt Josie' rubbishes his visions, but 'Gran' celebrates his 'sixth sense' as recurring family gift. Raven leaves sack on bed...wet and wriggling contents. Phoenix texts best friend 'Charlie' ref. significance of raven's visit. No illumination.

**So The Raven's Song** begins, already opening up questions. The only links are the ravens (dust jacket, folk song and Phoenix's 'dream') and both children waking up to a new day. The 3rd person narrative in Chapter 2 is close to our current English, while the 1st person telling in Chapter 1 is marked by differences a reader can't ignore...n.b. later, an elderly teacher (History enthusiast) wearily corrects 'was' to 'were' in a student's speech.

Readers learn that Shelby, Chapter 1's narrator, lives in a society where pollution, over-population, needless travel and the like are avoided. Cities have been abandoned as unworkable. Clearly, climate change issues have been addressed. Rural, self-supporting life in the 700 hectare units may be less varied, more labour-intensive than our own, but Shelby has been taught about her ancestors' (our) mistakes and accepts the limitations of life in her community. She seems to be living around a hundred years into our future.

Chapter 2's Phoenix and his four siblings are much closer to us - maybe only a decade or so beyond our own present.

The startling experiences Shelby and Phoenix confront throughout the novel will surely interest - and excite - today's thoughtful reader. Inventively imagined accounts of what our descendants might live through as climate change unfolds are not common. Eventually, and ingeniously, the pathways of Shelby and Phoenix cross. The complex, moving consequences of their meeting demanded re-reading - readers may well feel they want to reflect on what has happened to them.

Those readers may also be fascinated to learn how the book evolved. An enquiry by one of the authors on Twitter began things - leading to a potential plot emerging through exchanges between the two award-winning novelists, both living in Australia. In a joint interview online after the book was completed - their first meeting in person - they speak of increasing excitement as creative interplay developed. Each developed the stories of one of the two main protagonists, which are told

in alternating chapters. Zana Fraillon says she and Bren MacDibble worked so closely together that it felt as though she had two brains. Certainly, when the stakes could not be higher in the novel's climax, there's a sense of an unusual passion driving the writing. It may be that the complexity of content and narrative makes the book accessible only to the more able in the 10+ range; but it would also surely engage and excite older readers, regardless of age. **GFVR**

### Bramble Fox

★★★★★

Kathrin Tordasi, translated by Cathrin Wirtz, Pushkin Press, 352pp, 978-1-78269-345-1, £7.99 pbk.

12-year-old Portia is staying in North Wales with her aunts, Rose and Bramble, since her mother is too unwell to take her on a longed-for holiday to Andalusia. Her apprehension at meeting relatives who haven't seen her for nine years is quickly dispelled when she sees the remote and beautiful position of her aunts' cottage and the quirky and fascinating interior of the house. When she discovers a key in a hidden drawer of Bramble's desk and is drawn to follow a mysterious fox across the surrounding countryside and through a door which the key opens, she is so curious to explore that she neglects to close the door behind them.

Meanwhile, in a parallel narrative, Ben, whose mother has introduced him to Portia, also finds that things are not quite what they seem. He rescues an injured blackbird, only to see it transform into Ridik, a tiny man who warns Rose that the fox is the cunning Robin Goodfellow who is trying to return to his home in the Faerie kingdom. When Rose and Ridik race to prevent him, Ben insists on accompanying them and thence begins a journey into worlds beyond human comprehension.

Tordasi creates a series of fascinating and often terrifying worlds which have their own legends and mythical creatures and through which the children, with Rose and their fairy guides must find their way. The Grey King and his Huntress want to control the worlds and one of the weapons in their armoury is a fog which strips people of their memories and therefore their sense of self, thus rendering them harmless. The David and Goliath analogy comes to mind most forcibly here: a small army of fairy creatures with their own skills finely honed but facing a numberless army of shapeshifters, ruthless in the pursuit of what they most desire.

Readers will be surrounded by and fully involved in the detail of the warring worlds and thanks to skilful characterisation will care about what happens to those fighting on the side of good and feel curious about what they hope for. The battles are

absorbing, fired by a love of country and compatriots, often worryingly hanging in the balance between good and evil. Finally, good prevails after near-disaster has repeatedly raised its head, but the doors to the Other Worlds must remain locked in perpetuity to prevent the Grey King penetrating human realms. Tordasi's moving and exciting story would be a marvellous research tool for discovering more about those who ruled in ages gone by and is, indeed, a reminder to us all about the strength of moral compass and of true friendship. **VR**



### Lily Takes a Chance

★★★★★

Judi Curtin, O'Brien Press, 272pp, 978-1788493925, £11.99 pbk

This is the fourth book in Judi Curtin's deservedly popular *Lily at Lissadell* series. The stories are set in Sligo, in the early part of the last century. Lily works as a housemaid at Lissadell House, which was the real-life home of the Gore-Booth family and counts Maeve De Markievicz as a friend, as well as fellow maid Nellie and the other members of the household staff. Though she's now very happily settled at Lissadell, it's 1915 and even in quiet Sligo, change is coming. The war is turning things upside down, and, as her new friend Sam points out, women's lives are set to change enormously. Lily is excited at the idea of a world in which girls like her can wear trousers, go to university, drive motor cars and vote but all of this is still some way off, and when Maeve recklessly takes Lily with her to Dublin to visit her mother, Lily's dreams of becoming a teacher are suddenly under real threat.

The ferment of political change provides an exciting backdrop for the story, and the lives of Lily and her friends, servants and gentry, are vividly drawn, giving readers a complete sense of their different lives, as well as the different constraints they are under. Caring, capable and compassionate, Lily is trusted by her

friends to make things right, and by readers too. At the book's close, she's achieved her ambition, and this could be the last in the series; whether it is or not, we feel sure that Lily's life will bring her lots more adventures.

Author notes at the end give readers more information about the real life characters who feature and life in early 20th century Ireland. **LS**

### The Door of No Return

★★★★★

Kwame Alexander, Andersen Press, 430pp, 9781839133244, £14.99 hbk

The new verse novel by Newbery Medal winner Kwame Alexander may be his most ambitious work to date. The resonant title has become almost a generic term to refer to the seaboard exits from the slave-holding forts along the West Coast of Africa, through which slaves were driven to be loaded for the murderous Atlantic crossing. This novel is the first of a trilogy which will take its hero from childhood on the Gold Coast of Africa, to enslavement in the United States and through the American Civil War to Emancipation. Probably the unique strength of the verse novel as a form is the focus and scope it gives to a first-person voice and Alexander makes the most of it here. The first part of the book establishes young Kofi as part of an indigenous culture on which the world of English imperialism is just starting to impinge, through the medium of the village schoolmaster who has been trained at a mission school and is introducing his charges to the English language and to Shakespeare and the Greek classics. These initially alien cultural references lie alongside the traditional tales and songs which Kofi learns from his grandfather. Apart from suffering from the bullying of his overbearing cousin and his heartache for the lovely orphan, Ama, Kofi is living a sweet life, cleverly reconstructed and imagined by Alexander from elements of Asante culture. And if there are speech cadences and inflections that have an African-American flavour, then that, I suspect, makes its own cultural point as well as providing immediacy and familiarity to readers. Kofi's sweet life ends when Kofi's idolized elder brother, Kwasi, is blamed for the death of a neighbouring king's son in a festive wrestling match. Both Kwasi and Kofi are kidnapped: Kwasi to die at the hands of the neighbouring villagers and Kofi to be handed over to local African slave traders. This begins a journey of violence and degradation, which ends at the Door of No Return, where Kofi and his companions are thrown aboard an American slave ship. This is a powerful work which draws much of its power from its portrayal of Kofi's life among the Asante and Kofi's restlessly upbeat and curious, if rather innocent, nature. Brought up in a loving family, cocooned in custom and story, and guided by

dreams, he is initially non-plussed by his kidnap, believing it might be part of the traditional initiation rite into manhood. He, like the reader, has to learn how cruel the world can be, enduring a very different passage to another world and to manhood. **CB**

*Historical Note: I admire this book both for its visceral power and the African perspective it provides to African-American and American history. However, I would query its status as 'historical fiction'. Not for its depiction of the inhumanity of the Atlantic slave trade, of course, but whether Kofi would have experienced it in quite this way at the date suggested. I can guess at why Alexander has set it in 1860 because that will enable him to take Kofi to the United States at a crucial time in American and African-American history. However, by 1860, although slavery was still flourishing legally in the USA, the Atlantic slave trade itself had long been declared illegal by both the British and American governments. Both had small squadrons of ships in the Atlantic trying to intercept any slavers who continued the trade, and the British were suppressing it on the Gold Coast. So, an experience like Kofi's would be unusual, although not impossible, at this late date. And what would be even more unlikely in 1860, would be the involvement of British troops (the 'Governor' and the 'red coats') and an American warship ('USS Georgetown') in the trade, as the novel suggests.*

### Choose Love

★★★★★

Nicola Davies and Petr Horáček, Graffeg, 48pp, 9781802583779, £16.99 hbk

Do not be misled into thinking this is a simple picture book appropriate for the Kinderbox. Rather it is a collection of poems, written by Nicola Davies, to describe and respond to the experience of being a refugee; of being that person who has had to leave a home to travel to a foreign country, facing a difficult passage through the many border controls only to arrive and find a cold welcome. The poems are short, only one is more than three stanzas, and have been arranged under the headings *Departure, Arrival and Healing*. Each group is a sequence of four. The result is this elegant slim book. However, this does not diminish the power or the emotional impact of the whole. An impact that is then made more powerful by Petr Horáček's paintings which are dramatically different from the art we associate with him; this is art for a different audience and mirroring a different sort of text. His style is always saturated with colour. Here he turns to a very different palette. This is sombre, harsh, the textured washes a foil for brilliant splashes of reds, blues yellows; it is art expressing the emotions - anguish, desperation, anxiety and finally with Davies' illuminating poem *Unbroken*, hope. Framing this collection are



## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

brief essays from the author and the illustrator as well as from Onjali Rai whose lived experience is reflected here. The whole is dedicated to the charity Choose Love. This is a book to put before teens and young adults for a personal response, maybe a discussion that might even lead to the creation of more poems. more artwork.

There are many books both fiction and nonfiction now looking at the humanitarian crisis that is the result of war and climate change, this is one to be highly recommended. **FH**

### The Song Walker

★★★

Zillah Bethell, ill. Saara Söderlund, Usborne 368pp, 9781474966856, £7.99 pbk

The story starts when a girl wakes up in the Australian outback with no idea who or where she is, why she's wearing a shiny black dress and only one shoe, and what it is in the locked case she clutches. After an uncomfortable night, she is startled to hear a girl's voice shouting 'Hey! Don't move!' and Tarni, a First Country girl of about the same age, frightens a snake away with her slingshot. Tarni is on a journey to find her runaway sister, and the girl joins her, in hopes of finding civilization, but as they talk and share adventures together, it becomes clear that Tarni's quest is not what it seemed. The girl dreams about aspects of her former life, with memories of the very restricted life she led, and of her selfishness.

A nasty man and his mother recognize her as 'the girl on the News', and try to catch her and hold her in hopes of increasing a huge ransom, with Tarni's help, she manages to get away and they carry on with their journey. Thirteen-year-old Tarni can find water, make hats and a shoe, and her survival skills are excellent, but not infallible: they eat some fruit that makes them both very sick indeed, but they are rescued by a kind lady in a caravan. The girl manages to open the case and finds that she can play amazingly well on the old violin inside. Tarni eventually sells some of her stone art at a garage, and buys a newspaper that reveals that the girl is a concert violinist who was on her way to perform at a concert on her very valuable Stradivarius violin: her teacher and the pilot of the small plane were killed when it crashed. As the truth about Tarni's sister being a Spirit Walker emerges, and the girl realizes that is just her own spirit which has been accompanying Tarni, she returns alone to the site of the crash and is rescued, but resolves to be a better and kinder person. The book ends with the adult violinist accompanying Tarni's prestigious art exhibition: they have remained friends.

First Country beliefs are cleverly woven into the story, and Tarni uses

some Alyawarre words which are made clear by the context, but a Glossary is available to explain them all. There is a charming sub-plot about Tarni's relationship with a honey-eater bird with a broken wing, whom she carries around in a home-made cage, and is reluctant to let free when he is well enough- another instance, like the sister, of the need to let go.

Zillah Bethell had great success with her first book **The Shark Caller**, and this is a cracking adventure story with some great characters, but this reader felt somewhat cheated by the resolution – so many of the people they met on the way didn't exist, and how could the girls be so ill if one of them wasn't real? The press release hails this book as set to become a modern-day classic, but your reviewer is not so sure about that. **DB**

### Speak Up

★★★★

Rebecca Burgess, Quill Tree Books, 272pp, 978-0-06-308119-2, £9.99 pbk

Mia is twelve. She is also autistic. Along with her best friend, Charlie, who identifies as non-binary, she has a secret identity. Mia is a talented singer but she is shy and quiet apart from when she sings. She and Charlie publish videos of Mia singing under the name of Ellie-Q. As Ellie-Q, Mia and Charlie have an extremely large following and a big fan base. When there is a local talent contest where the winner gets the opportunity to host their own show, does Mia have the confidence to show who she really is despite people's perceptions of her disability?

There are many issues covered in this full colour, graphic novel. One of the most interesting is the realistic portrayal of the relationship between Mia and her single parent mother. Mia struggles at school. For much of the novel, Mia's Mum persists in offering her strategies to appear more neurotypical. While well intentioned, Mia hates the offering of these strategies and they actually cause her more stress. This is an issue rarely focused on with such sensitivity on both sides.

One flaw in this book is that there is a completely happy ending. While heart-warming, most of the book has dealt with issues with a large degree of realism and the wish-fulfilling ending detracts from its authenticity. **RB**

### The Mystery of Raspberry Hill

★★★★

Eva Frantz, trans. A.A. Prime, Pushkin Children's, 160pp, 978 1 78269 341 3, £7.99

**The Mystery of Raspberry Hill** comes to the UK with an impressive CV. Finnish writer Eva Frantz is an award-winning author of adult crime fiction and her debut novel for young readers has already won a prestigious prize in Finland. The translator, A.A. Prime, is

similarly distinguished.

The novel's opening sentence tells us that Stina, our 12-year-old narrator, expects to die soon. She is the third of six children, living with their mother in two rooms in a working-class district of Helsinki. Her soldier father was killed in combat. Money is always tight and life is a struggle, especially for Stina since she coughs and coughs, sometimes so hard her bedsheets are soaked in blood. She has tuberculosis.

Occasional passing references – Stina mentions her older sister wishes she had eyebrows like Clara Bow's – suggest (at least to adult readers) that we're in the 1920s. When the family's doctor brings news that Raspberry Hill Sanatorium, deep in the countryside, is accepting city kids with bad coughs on a research project, Stina knows this might be her only chance of a cure. By now, we have seen that Stina is determined to make the most of what life she will have, including her first ride in a motor car on her journey to the sanatorium. Stina is quick and imaginative, perceptive about grown-ups and a keen reader.

Most of the small staff of nurses and doctors welcome Stina warmly as a valued participant in their project. When she realises she's alone on the wards, she wonders whether she's the only participant. Several other things don't seem to add up. She writes frequently to her family, yet she never receives replies. Why are the staff so secretive about a recent fire in the East Wing? Who is Ruben, the seven-or-eight year old boy who appears – and disappears – in her room, full of laughter and chatter? When she searches for the ward where he says he sleeps, it doesn't exist. Then when Stina wanders about the extensive grounds – fresh air is fundamental to her treatment – she meets a witchy

old woman who asks if she's poor or rich. When she says she's poor, the woman urges Stina to run away as soon as possible, pointing out a nearby house where she'll find help.

Subsequent events at the sanatorium raise issues which may give adults pause in offering this book to young readers. The head of the project is Dr Hagman and, in short, what he plans to do with Stina is to murder her on the operating table and transplant her heart to the benefit of a rich girl of a similar age. Some of the medical staff are party to his plans. Hagman's ambition is to gain the wealth and reputation such a pioneering procedure would bring.

Yet it could be argued that the book's ultimate message is one of hope since, having evaded the Doctor's clutches, Stina determines to live life to the full until she is a hundred! Her escape from Hagman (who comes to an appropriately sticky end as he chases Stina across a frozen lake) crucially relies on the help of Ruben who, Stina finally learns, is the spirit of a previous patient-victim less fortunate than herself.

What criteria might you employ when deciding whether to offer this book to a young reader? My yardstick might be, "Would I share this with a child in my family/my class/my school library book group?" In this instance, I wouldn't, while conceding that such decisions are strongly subjective and much depends on the prospective readers. My concern is that Hagman's intentions might frighten a young reader, for whom hospitals, fatal illness and operations can be fearful enough without introducing murderous doctors; and also that, in terms of effective storytelling, I'm uneasy about the mix of domestic narrative, gentle comedy, savage horror and an interventional ghost. **GF**

## 14+ Secondary/Adult

### Promise Boys

★★★★

Nick Brooks, Macmillan, 292pp, 9781035003150, £8.99 pbk

Life in Washington DC is not all about the White House and wealthy areas. There are tough areas where being Black or Latino can have profound influence on your future. Schools such as Urban Promise Prep School provide a tough environment that is meant to steer young men away from crime, but when the Headteacher is found murdered the whole school and system are put under threat. At the outset there appears to be three possible culprits, all of whom have had conflicts with the head in the days leading up to his death. Whilst the police carry out their investigations, the three suspects, Ramon, J.B and Trey decide that they have to try and prove their innocence. What follows really opens a can of worms perhaps the 'much loved' Head was not as

popular as appears on the surface.

This is a fascinating multi-layered story where it is difficult to know who is telling the truth. The author has created a world that many can only imagine, but for many others it is a way of life that they are caught up in. The young men in this story are coping with situations that put huge strains in their behaviour. There are dysfunctional families, prejudice, racism and neighbourhoods where gang culture rules the lives of so many. The story is told from the viewpoint of many of the characters and it also moves around in time, giving us a look at the build up to the murder. The author has also varied the length of the chapters; some of them are only a page and are really just comments from characters, whilst others are multiple pages and deal with more complex issues. Despite this being a very American story, there are themes and situations that will strike a chord

for many young people; the names might be different, but the pressures and dangers that young people face is still very real. Nick Brooks has given us a very thought-provoking and disturbing book that mixes a murder mystery with urban strife and which will keep the reader hooked to the last page. **MP**

### With Fire in their Blood

★★★★

Kat Delacorte, Penguin Books, 407pp, 978 0241487624, £8.99 pbk

Lilly's Dad has uprooted her from rural Maine, where she'd lived all her sixteen years. He transplants her to Castello, a walled mountain town in Italy which, he says, has hired him as an engineer to "replace the electrical grid and wire up the internet" and drag the place into the present decade. Her once-loving father has become a stranger to Lilly since the day, six years earlier, when she had found her Mom lying dead by the fireplace at home in Maine. Suicide, Lilly tells us, but her mother remains a frequent visitor in her restless dreams, whispering that Lilly is "dangerous, that I ruined the things I touched".

Lilly's first day at Scuola Lafolia could hardly be more daunting. She deliberately arrives 'a respectable half-hour late'. The building, like most of the town, is visibly crumbling, there's no helpful front office, no sign of life. She's looking aimlessly about when she suddenly backs into someone – a boy. 'I felt a pulse of heat where my fingers brushed his wrist like static electricity, making me jerk my hand away in a rush'. The boy seems as physically shocked as she is, but he leads her to a room where she meets her classmates, including those who become the novel's small cast of main characters – Nico, Liza, Christian and Alex. Her childhood Italian, learned from her mother who grew up in Italy, serves her well enough. These are no casual first encounters, for Lilly experiences a disconcerting, electric spark of attraction towards three of the students... two boys, one girl. She's known nothing like it before.

No teachers are around but she's told that this is a 'testing' day. Soon, a bunch of uniformed 'enforcers', led by the brutal Tiago, take over the classroom. They have come to administer blood-tests to everyone, including Lilly. She quickly learns that the city is torn apart – there are two ferociously opposed 'clans', the Paradisos and the Marconis. The publisher's blurb likens the clans to the mafia, but the enmity between them is medieval in its raw savagery. Peace depends upon the leadership of 'the General', whose tactic is "to give them something to hate... Something to fear". He has fostered in the citizens of both factions a fear of witches, people embedded in the community who abuse their supernatural powers. The General preaches that witches must be hunted out and burned. Tiago's blood-

tests are designed to expose the power of any hidden witches.

The intensity of the opening chapters is never relaxed for a moment. Delacorte's narrative energy – impressive in a debut novel – is as effective in large-scale scenes, such as a public burning, as in a dialogue between Lilly and one of her classmates. There's magic, violence, corruption, betrayal and jealousy; sudden, urgent sexual attraction is sometimes implicit, sometimes overt. Frequently, Lilly feels alone – there's no-one she can trust, for even her father seems to be playing a secret game. To her astonishment, she discovers that her mother, before she left for the States, had been at the core of Castello's explosive history. For Lilly, Castello sometimes becomes a menacing presence, a character in itself.

At one point, close to exhaustion, Lilly finds it all 'too far-fetched, too impossible'; some readers, confused or overwhelmed by the intensity of the complex plot, might share that view, wishing perhaps for some clearer insight into characters' motivation. But, as a glance at young reviewers' reactions on Google reveals, others are entranced by the action, setting and characters, impatient for the promised sequel to complete a duology. Enticing loose ends are left trailing in the closing chapters. **GF**

### The Tiger Who Sleeps Under My Chair

★★★★

Hannah Foley, Zephyr, 290pp., 9781803289823, £8.99 pbk

The tiger is something that is still even now not talked about too much, that is mental illness. In the 1880s it was not mentioned and people spent long years in mental asylums, shut away. This story tells of two generations dealing with this, Emma and her brother James, and in 2023, of Jude whose friend Rosie has psychotic episodes.

Emma has been shut away in the attic of the family home as she has had a fit and is therefore deemed to be fragile, but it is in fact her brother James who breaks down. Emma and his friend Olivier whisk him away to the family's country home where it is hoped rest and fresh air will help him to recover. In 2023 Jude helps Rosie and with friends Amin and Imogen spend time at the country home where Emma and James went, and which Rosie inherits from her grandmother. While James meets a tragic end, Rosie looks forward to a good life.

Dealing with mental illness in fiction for young people is very tricky but Hannah Foley manages to make it understandable without going into much detail of symptoms. There is some mention of psychosis and schizophrenia, and some questions are dealt with at the end of the book

in an appendix. Teenagers could easily imagine some symptoms and self-diagnose so Hannah Foley has walked a tightrope. What comes across in the story is the love and care that is needed, which unfortunately in James' case is not enough. But it is different for Rosie, having good support as well as medical intervention. The story ends on an upbeat note looking forward to 2027 with Rosie and Jude facing the future together knowing of her illness, but able to deal with it. There is a subplot of Emma's interest and almost obsession with Mary Anning, who has a piece to herself at the end of book and the ammonite Emma keeps close to her appears throughout the book drawn on the pages. **JF**

### Thieves

★★★★

Lucie Bryon, Nobrow, 206pp, 978 1 838741 19 8, £14.99 pbk

Here's a slice of teenage life and romance from French cartoonist and graphic novelist Lucie Bryon. Ella has a crush on schoolmate Madelaine, and enjoys her first conversation with the object of her affection at a party at Madelaine's house. However, it goes rapidly downhill, as drunk Ella throws up in a cupboard in Madelaine's bedroom, and wakes up at home the next day surrounded by items she has apparently stolen from Madelaine. But all is not as it seems, for it turns out that Madelaine had already stolen all of them at parties at various other houses. As their relationship develops, Ella and Madelaine resolve to return all the filched goods by attending a string of parties at the houses of Madelaine's earlier victims. Full of sharp dialogue and inventive graphics that often switch to pictorial metaphors to convey Ella's feelings, and alongside the rather far-fetched main storyline, there's a well-observed tale of the ups and downs of Ella and Madelaine's love, including touching on the more serious issue of what drives Madelaine to steal. As no translator is credited, I assume the English dialogue is all Bryon's own work. For the most part, peppered with expletives, it has a familiar transatlantic ring. Its French origins only occasionally showing through. I doubt many American or English high school students just about to enter a large house for a party would greet it ironically with cries of 'Eat the Rich' and 'Fuck the Bourgeoisie'. But then what do I know? Well, I do know this book is touching, funny and perceptive. **CB**

### Five Survive

★★★★

Holly Jackson, Electric Monkey Books, 386pp, 0 7555 0440 4, £14.99, hbk

Jackson lays a tantalising trail from the very beginning: there are six friends in a camper van but the title starkly proclaims that only five of them survive. The story takes this blueprint as its *modus operandi*,

confounding expectations, wrenching away from what is, at best, a tenuous reality for all those involved.

Red and her friends are travelling in the van to their holiday destination when they take a wrong turning and find themselves in a remote forest, with no phone signal and a flat tyre. Oliver, an alpha male from a wealthy and influential family, takes the lead in organising a change of tyre but as they begin to drive away someone hidden in the blackness all around them shoots out all four tyres. This is the beginning of a hostage situation and during the following 8 hours one of the group dies.

We see events through Red's eyes, the eyes of an outsider, a young woman whose police captain mother was shot dead in the line of duty and whose father has descended into hopeless alcoholism as a result. Her own raw grief and feelings of guilt twist around the story, isolating her in their almost cinematic horror, blurring her ability to deal with relationships and echoed in the unfolding events.

Jackson drip-feeds the tension as the gunman reveals his demands and although this slows the momentum in some central sections of the story, elsewhere the twists and turns of the plot revive the pace of the action. The hidden gunman, eerily heard only through a walkie-talkie mysteriously attached to the exterior of the van, pressurises the protagonists to reveal the secret he needs with the threat of murder if they do not comply. This creates both a hierarchy of fear and a need for action and Oliver appoints himself leader. His character begins to lose credibility as his toxic masculinity asserts itself and he becomes a caricature, his outpourings often described as 'roaring' and his actions and reactions predictably extreme. Those who quail in the face of his anger are reduced to ciphers in the narrative at this point.

However, Jackson also offers the unexpected and the final section of the book grips as persuasively as the first, with shocks, reveals and an eventual high-tension conclusion. There is not simply an ending, but the possibility of a new beginning, too, giving a final puzzle for the reader to solve. **VR**

### Nine Liars

★★★★

Maureen Johnson, KTeenBks, 445pp, 978-0-06-303265-1, £14.99 hbk

This novel operates between two distinct timelines. The first being on June 23, 1995 when nine students who are in their last week at Cambridge University, England go to Merryweather, a country mansion owned by one of them for a week of partying. Two of those students are murdered.

In the second timeline, set in the present in America, Stevie Bell, who is an able student detective, is in her last year at an elite American school. She



# reviews

14+ **Secondary/Adult** continued

contrives to get to England. Can she solve the murder at Merryweather?

This is a very well-constructed and well written mystery packed with detail including realistic police interview records and text messages between the friends. However, for this reviewer, the characterisation was quite weak and some vital parts of the story were only revealed in the last two chapters. At 445 pages, this is quite an investment of time and some readers may lose interest earlier on. **RB**

## Girlhood Unfiltered: A Milk Honey Bees Essay Collection

★★★★

Ebinehita Iyere, *Knights Of*, 300pp, 978-1-9133111-7-9, £7.99 pbk

This non-fiction collection of essays has a very interesting concept. All the authors are teenagers with the oldest being eighteen. They are all self-titled black girls who are writing about their experiences of growing up black in Britain. They might also be described as troubled as they have come from difficult circumstances including homelessness, disability either themselves or a family member and most of them having disengaged from

the traditional education system.

A particularly interesting concept this reviewer has not encountered before is that of adultification. This is when the education or the justice systems view a black child as older than they are and therefore expect adult behaviour from them. This concept is mentioned in many of the essays as being deeply harmful and distressingly often experienced.

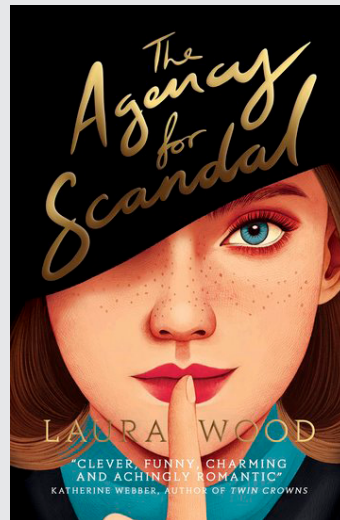
If you are looking for an honest, raw and hard-hitting approach to understanding the many facets of black girlhood and how white people should respond, read this book. There is one criticism I have to make. One of the essayists describes her sister as 'suffering from cerebral palsy'. This language is unhelpful. Only the disabled person should say whether they 'suffer' or not. **RB**

## Agency for Scandal

★★★★★

Laura Wood, Scholastic, 518pp, 9780702303241, £8.99 pbk

Isabel Stanhope may be a member of the 'ton', that part of society that ruled (and still might) the lives of the rich and aristocratic in Great Britain, but she is hiding a secret that could



get her family blacklisted by society. Her late father had lost all of their money and it is now up to Isabel to keep her family solvent. Thanks to her skill with keys and locks (gained from her father) she has been recruited into a secret investigation organization of women, called the Aviary, which aims to protect women from the machinations of powerful and unscrupulous men. When they are faced with an opponent who might become the next Prime Minister, they

need to try everything in their power in order to thwart his plans. Isabel has also got to deal with a Duke that she is in love with, but who happens to be working for the secret service and their nemesis. The scene is set for lots of intrigue and romance.

This is a fabulous book and despite its long length it was a compelling read. Underlying the various experiences of all the women involved is the fact that women were seen as second-class citizens, despite the 1882 Married Women's Property Act. The book highlights the possibility of being put in an institution if the husband, brother or father cannot force them to do as they are bid. We also see the 'unconscious bias' held by some men, as they really believe that they are protecting the fragile females in their life. This would make for a fascinating discussion in the classroom or book club, especially about whether there are still elements retained today. I have loved all of Laura Wood's previous YA novels and this book shows that she just keeps getting better, I really do wish that there had been books like this in my youth; the nearest is Georgette Heyer, although most books are set in an earlier period. Long may this author continue to enthrall us with her works and I can't wait for her next gem. **MP**

Look out for the **BfK March 2023** issue!

## BOOKS FOR KEEPS

*Books for Keeps forever, for everyone*

**Books for Keeps** needs your support We still need donations to develop our website and help preserve the unique **Books for Keeps** archive.

To donate, go to the **Books for Keeps** Givey page  
[www.givey.com/booksforkeeps](http://www.givey.com/booksforkeeps)



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



# A Classic in Short *revisited*

**Brian Alderson** is unwell and unable to submit his article for this number. We have therefore decided on a retrospective article dating back to his first appearance in the **Classics in Short** series. The series began in January 1997 when Helen Levene contributed a piece on **Treasure Island**. She continued with eleven further pieces after which Rosemary Stones, as editor, asked Brian if he could write the thirteenth piece, which was to be on Saint-Exupéry's **Little Prince**.

A coughing rose, a crashed plane and space travel. It can only be...

**The Little Prince** written and illustrated by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

*Who he?*

Born in Lyon, 29 June 1900, Saint-Ex was as he was known, was a hulking 6ft tall aristocratic French *comte* from a traditionally reactionary Catholic background. He was also a pioneering aviator (he learnt to fly when he was twelve) and philanderer whose mistresses were resented by his Salvadorean wife Consuelo. Despite the couple's stormy relationship, St-Ex promised to return to her after the war, saying that if he was killed: 'I will have someone to wait for in eternity'. St-Ex had joined the air force and had been decorated during the fall of France. He took refuge in the US but rejoined his squadron in 1942 although officially too old to fly Lightnings. He died on a reconnaissance mission flying over the littoral of southern France near his childhood chateau on 31 July 1944.

The recent discovery of St-Ex's identity bracelet, 300ft below the surface of the Mediterranean, engraved with Consuelo's name and contact address in New York, implies that she was indeed still close to his heart, something that was refuted after his death by his family. They reviled Consuelo's memory, trying to exclude her from biographies and denying that **The Little Prince** was a metaphor for his relationship with her. One mistress, the aristocratic Hélène de Vogüé, even wrote a biography which reduced Consuelo to one paragraph. St-Ex's mythophile descendants are now opposing a seabed search for his wrecked aircraft.

*First published*

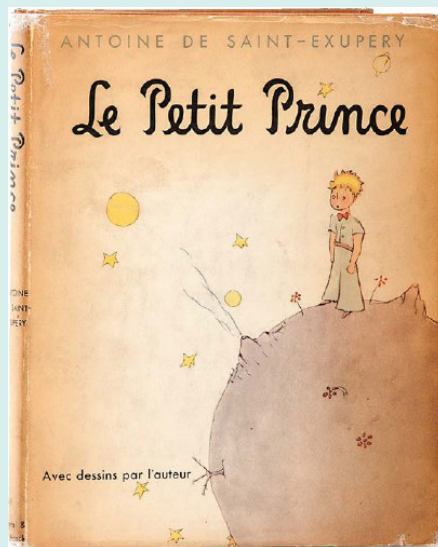
Almost simultaneously in French, and in an English translation by Katherine Woods, both editions from Reynal & Hitchcock, New York, 1943

*Dedicated to*

Léon Werth, a Jewish Trotskyist art critic ('the best friend I have in the world') but as the dedication statement continues it decides to address rather 'the child from whom this grown-up grew' and amends itself to: 'Léon Werth when he was a little boy'.

*What's it About?*

An airman is repairing his plane which has crashed in the desert. He is approached by 'un petit bonhomme' who requests that he draw him the picture of a sheep. This little fellow [Woods = 'little man'] is *le petit Prince*,



sole inhabitant of Asteroid B-612, who has travelled to Earth (taking advantage perhaps 'of the migration of a flock of wild birds') via several other asteroids inhabited by eccentric personages: a lone king, a conceited man, a boozer, a business-man, a lamplighter, and a geographer. He is fleeing from his association with a flower on his own planet whose behaviour embarrasses him, but a meeting with a philosophical fox persuades him that he must follow the dictates of his heart and take responsibility for his flower. He helps the airman to find a well in the desert and then, after a pre-arranged and fatal meeting with a yellow snake, he vanishes – presumably returning (with the drawing of the sheep) to his own asteroid.

*What's it About? (2)*

St-Ex meets his child self in a fable of innocence and experience. It is not hard to make a case for this eccentric story being rooted in his dismay over his difficult marriage with the asteroidal, adenoidal rose, being the hypochondriac spendthrift Consuelo. Confused adult uncertainties bang against the ruthless assurances of childhood ('One runs the risk of weeping a little if one lets himself be tamed.'). The metaphor becomes an excuse for ruminations on freedom and responsibility. Existential Angst enters children's literature and you must work out the interpretation for yourself.

*The illustrations*

The book belongs among those whose text can only at peril be divorced from, or rearranged round, its illustrations. Exupéry's watercolours and monochrome wash drawings (now, with his manuscript, in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York)

are closely integrated with the text, which often refers to them. Their naïveté ('I was discouraged [from painting] when I was six years old') chimes with, and hence lends conviction to, what has often been seen as an absurd, not to say perverse, piece of whimsy.

*Is that so?*

The recent trawling up of St-Ex's silver identity bracelet from the bottom of the Mediterranean has encouraged renewed discussion about the status of this 'children's book for adults'. It could be classed, amongst disparate examples from Rabelais and Swift to **Alice** and **The Water-Babies**, as what the critic Northrop Frye calls 'a Mennipcean satire' – which is to say a stylised dialogue playing with and making fun of human activities as distinct from life as it is actually lived. As with Kingsley though the satiric energy can be blunted by an intrusive sentimentality.

*But sentimental for whom?*

As a writer St-Ex was a master craftsman and his pellucid French mitigates the inherent sopiness of the child's transactions with his flower. That seems to suit the francophones, who have put the little chap on to pre-Euro bank-notes, and it may well suit foreign readers coming at the French text and rejoicing in its accessibility as well as its content (Heinemann used to publish it as a schoolbook). But who knows what the readers of the hundred or so translations make of it? Katherine Woods can be ungainly – and has been called 'ponderous' – but for English readers any successor to her Little Prince has been blocked by Europe. The mad decision a year or two ago to 'harmonize' our copyright limitations with those of Germany (ie extending them to 70 years after the author's death) has prevented Pavilion Books from reprinting their new, and more satisfactory, translation by Alan Wakeman, with its highly discussable pastiche illustrations by Michael Foreman. One is moved to reflect that there should be an asteroid reserved somewhere for *les grandes personnes bruxelloises*.

**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.