

# BOOKS FOR KEEPS

the children's book magazine online

March 2023

No.259

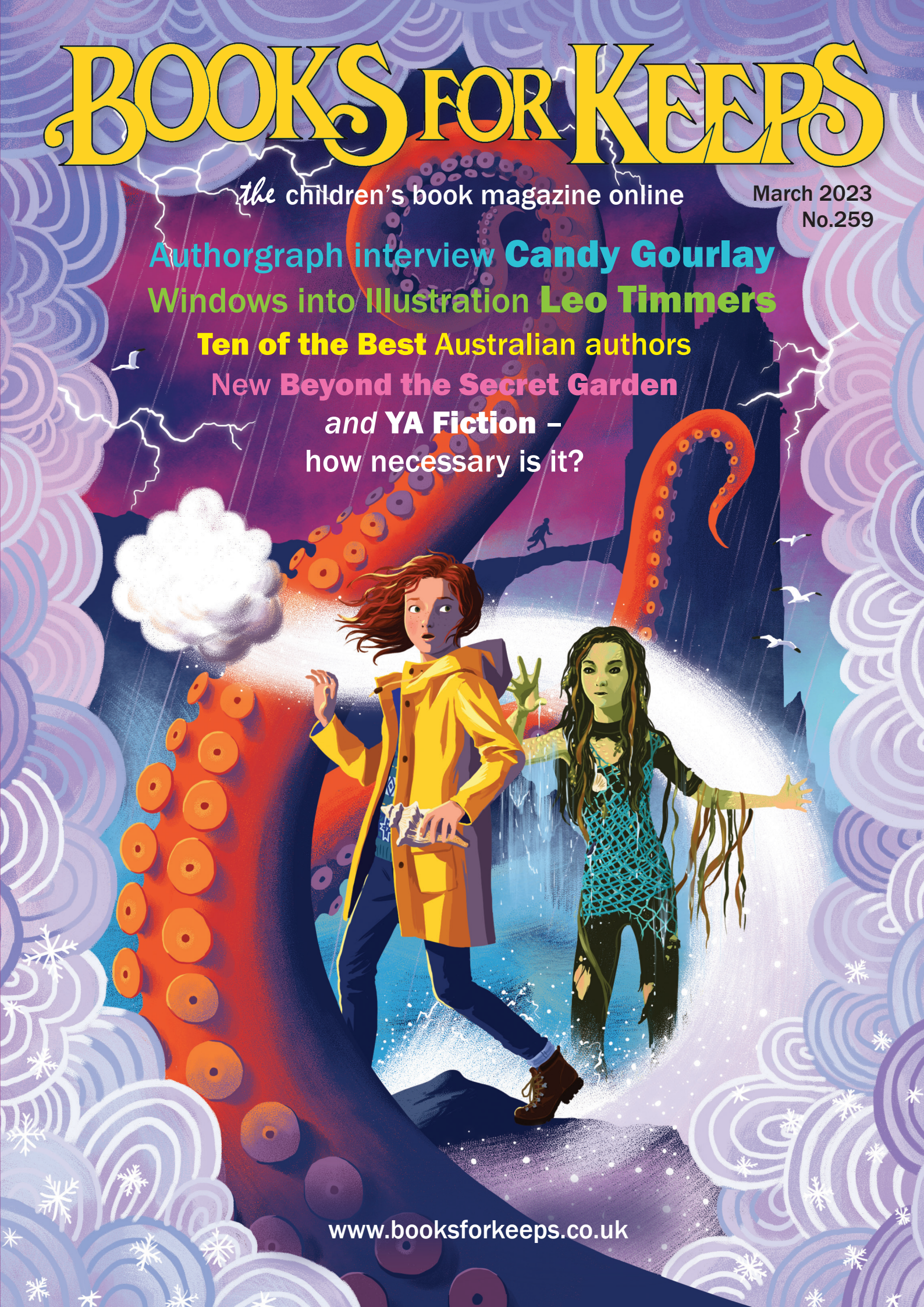
Authorgraph interview **Candy Gourlay**

Windows into Illustration **Leo Timmers**

**Ten of the Best** Australian authors

New **Beyond the Secret Garden**

and **YA Fiction** –  
how necessary is it?



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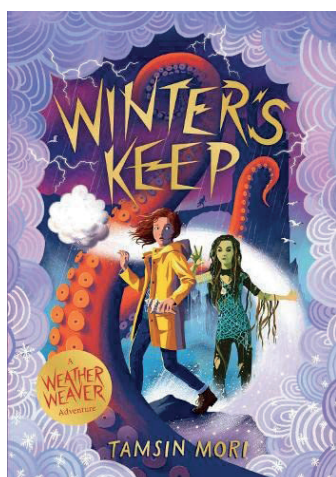
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### COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **Winter's Keep** by Tamsin Mori, illustration by David Dean. Thanks to **UCLan Publishing** for their help with this cover.



# Editorial 259

## Great School Libraries Campaign – Unequal Futures: An Imbalance of Opportunities

A guest editorial by **Mary-Rose Grieve**, co-chair of the Great School Libraries campaign

Since 2018, **CILIP**, the **CILIP School Libraries Group (SLG)** and **The School Library Association (SLA)** have been collaborating on the **Great School Libraries Campaign** which aims to ensure that every child in the country has access to a school library and to professional library staff. On 7 March, we published a report into the current school library provision in the UK based on a large-scale survey carried out on our behalf by BMG Research.

The research highlighted the glaring inequality of school library provision across the UK, both in terms of quantity and quality. It seems it really does make a difference where you live, what school you attend and what your socio-economic background is. Schools who have a higher proportion of pupils who receive free school meals are less likely to have access to a library space and when they do, their libraries are stocked with 60% fewer books than their counterparts who have the lowest number of children receiving free school meals. In Northern Ireland, a third of their schools have no library on site. Three quarters of schools in Wales have no specialist library staff and only a fifth of them have a designated budget for the library. The story continues in Scotland, where nearly a quarter of schools have no library space at all and two thirds of school libraries have no designated budget.

It makes for fairly depressing reading. However, the research has allowed us to highlight innovative, pioneering and transformative work being done by librarians in school libraries around the country. The research showed that in Secondary schools, more school librarians are being recognised as heads of department and work collaboratively with different subject departments and specialist leads. This is hugely encouraging and allows us to demonstrate the multifaceted skills of a librarian to school leaders and policy makers.

There is no doubt of the librarian's role in finding the right book for the right child and in creating a safe space for pupils to read and relax; however this is to ignore their more fundamental

position in the academic life of the school. The school library should be at the very heart of learning, inquiry and intellectual curiosity; a place where the work of the classroom is continued, enhanced, expanded and enriched. The school library is a place where both students and their teachers come for inspiration and ideas and where academic success and individual curiosity is allowed to flourish alongside the social and emotional support that the space (and its staff) can offer to the school community as a whole.

The role of the school librarian is more important than ever as we teach our children to negotiate the wealth of information, misinformation and fake news that is available to them at their fingertips by giving them the skills they need to be informed and media literate – which at the moment is not embedded into the National Curriculum and is surely doing our young people a huge disservice.

The success of our launch in Portcullis House has given us much optimism for the future. An audience of politicians, publishers, charities, authors and other sector bodies all agreed that by working together we can put school libraries at the heart of every school. To do this, we need to demonstrate to headteachers and policy makers the impact that a great school library can have on their pupils' attainment and then equip them with the resources they need to establish, develop and improve their library provision. It can and must be done! Find out more about how you can support us at [www.greatschoolibraries.org.uk](http://www.greatschoolibraries.org.uk) and sign the petition here: <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/634208>

# Great School Libraries

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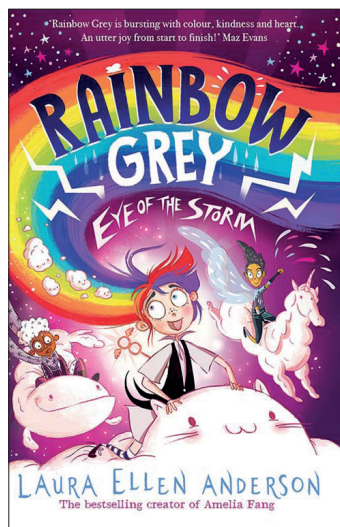
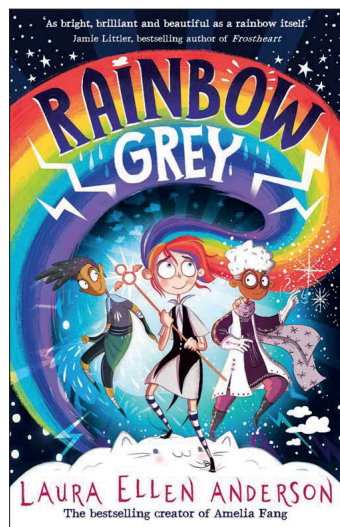
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# Rainbow World:

## An interview with Laura Ellen Anderson

Fiona Noble interviews Laura Ellen Anderson about **Rainbow Grey**.



The character of Rainbow Grey first came to Laura Ellen Anderson shortly after she graduated from university in 2010. 'Rainbow came from a single image of a girl with rainbow coloured hair and a cloud cat next to her,' she tells me, speaking over video call from her Brighton home. 'I had a few sketches, but I didn't have a story.' Towards the end of writing her bestselling **Amelia Fang** series, when Laura felt she had 'found her feet' in the middle-grade fiction world, she sent some sketches to her then editor, Ali Dougal. 'I vividly remember Ali asking, "Who's that? More, please!"' Suddenly ideas began to form. 'Rainbow was born over 10 years ago and sat in the background waiting for her story to arrive,' Laura recalls.

Spirited, optimistic 10-year-old Rainbow is the eponymous heroine of the **Rainbow Grey** trilogy, the third volume of which, **Battle for the Skies**, was published by Farshore Books in February. Like the **Amelia Fang** series, the books are aimed at readers of seven and above, but the extended format of around 30,000 words makes them well suited to independent readers transitioning to slightly longer books. Set in the Weatherlands, a cloud world ruled by weather magic, Rainbow is a young Weatherling surrounded by people with astounding powers, but none of her own. The women in her family, however, tend to find their powers later, and on a forbidden trip to Earth, she discovers a shadow crystal. It's full to the brim with an ancient magic that Rainbow manages to unleash and absorb under an eclipse. 'Suddenly Rainbow has to deal with this brand new life,' Laura explains, navigating these new powers and finding herself at the forefront of the confrontation with the Weather Rogues, led by the gloriously evil Tornadia Twist. Book two, **Eye of the Storm**, sees Rainbow learning to master her powers as beloved cloud creatures begin to disappear and dark magic threatens Earth. In Book three, Rainbow must figure out what her ultimate magical gift is, and finally defeat Tornadia Twist. 'It's all about finding your feet and not giving up,' says Laura, 'and the teamwork with her friends.' The books combine the everyday drama of school and friendships with magical world building and fast-paced sky battles that read like anime cartoons, all underpinned by Laura's trademark humour. And, of course, it's wrapped up in a dynamic, highly illustrated format, featuring Laura's pictures or artwork on almost every page. As someone who worked as a professional illustrator for a long time before embarking on her writing career, Laura describes herself as 'a very visual person'; words and pictures are equally important and inextricably linked to form her narrative voice.

The writing process of the **Rainbow Grey** books was, Laura admits, 'a very epic, blurry learning curve'. The impact of Covid lockdowns challenged her creativity and she felt burdened by 'second album syndrome' following the success of **Amelia Fang**. The rocky start led her to strip the idea back to its foundations. 'Character is definitely my strongest point,' she acknowledges. 'I concentrated on looking at Rainbow as a character, and all the things I liked about her. I wanted her to be this strong female protagonist but someone with strengths and weaknesses that readers could relate to.' Rainbow struggles with reading and sometimes has to ask her friends for help. 'She's patient with herself and gets there in the end. She doesn't give up. Once I made myself happy with the characters the story started to write itself.' Laura isn't a writer who plans her books meticulously; plot and worldbuilding come together more organically once the characters are in place. 'There are always a few surprises actually,' she laughs. 'I enjoy exploring the world and going on the journey with them.'

From the hilarious character names – pigeon Coo La La has a star turn in book three – to friendship banter, slapstick moments and dastardly villains, humour is integral to Laura's work but creating emotional depth is also vital. 'It's something I try to portray in all of my books,' Laura explains. 'I've been inspired, growing up, by the likes of Disney and Pixar. Something like 'Up' has the ability to make you laugh and break down crying. Obviously, I don't want people sobbing,' she adds, 'but I want to create an emotional connection to the characters and I really want readers to be invested in the emotional journey of the characters. I don't like to create characters that are two dimensional.' What does she hope readers will take away from the **Rainbow Grey** books? 'I hope that readers will be inspired to pursue their own dreams. I hope they'll read it and find a little escapism from the world but also be able to relate to the characters. When kids tell you the characters are like them, that's a really special moment. It's a powerful feeling.'

Laura has left the ending open enough that she could, perhaps, return to the world of **Rainbow Grey** in the future, but for now she's working on a new project, **Marnie Midnight**, a series about a young moth who enrolls at Minibeast Academy. The first book will be published early in 2024, similar in length to **Amelia Fang**, full of illustrations and the same 'silly, but heartfelt' characters. 'I basically pick something I love and let myself absorb into that world. I love the moon, and moths. I find weather and rainbows fascinating. What if there is actual magic in the sky? I try to suspend disbelief. I've never been in a rush to grow up and this is my chance to stay young at heart and write the stories I enjoyed reading as a kid.'

**Rainbow Grey**, Farshore Books, 9781405298728, £7.99 pbk

**Rainbow Grey: Eye of the Storm**, Farshore Books, 9781405298704, £7.99 pbk

**Rainbow Grey: Battle for the Skies**, Farshore Books, 9781405298858, £7.99 pbk

**Amelia Fang and the Barbaric Ball**, Farshore Books, 9781405286725, £6.99 pbk



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



# Ten of the Best Great Australian Children's/YA Books

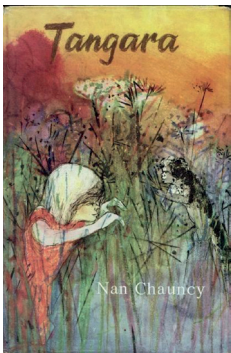
Chosen by **Judith Ridge**



## Seven Little Australians

Ethel Turner (1894) Ward, Lock and Bowden

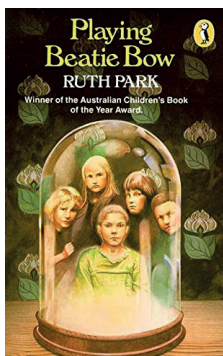
Although not technically the first Australian book published for children, **Seven Little Australians** can certainly lay claim to being the first to self-consciously address the 'joyousness and rebellion and mischief' of the Australian child as distinct from the 'paragons of virtue' to be found in England and elsewhere. In print continuously since 1894, it tells the story of the Woolcot family, chafing against the bounds of colonial patriarchy (as embodied by their army captain father), and especially of the Jo March-inspired Judy: 'Killed Judy to slow music' Turner wrote unsentimentally in her diary, but generations of little and not-so-little Australian readers have never recovered.



## Tangara

Nan Chauncy (1960) Oxford University Press

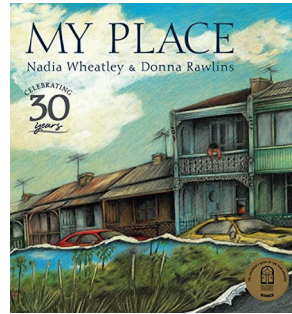
Although Patricia Wrightson is generally considered to be the progenitor of the distinctively Australian children's fantasy novel, Chauncy's remarkable **Tangara** predates Wrightson's first forays into the genre by several years. Set against an ancient escarpment in Tasmania, the novel employs time-slip to explore the impact of colonisation on the Palawa/Pakana (the Indigenous people of lutruwita, the traditional name for Tasmania) through the experience of two settler-colonialist children. The passage where the white child, Lexie, witnesses the massacre of a tribe of Palawa is devastating, as is the novel's closing image of the last surviving child of the tribe, Merrina, 'alone — alone, and calling to her dead.' It's hard to imagine a contemporary children's novel being so blunt about the horrors of colonisation as the powerfully elegiac **Tangara**.



## Playing Beatie Bow

Ruth Park (1980) Puffin Books Australia

Another time slip novel, this time set in a contemporary inner city Sydney. Ruth Park first came to attention in the late 1940s with **The Harp in the South**, a novel that exposed the extreme poverty of Irish Australians and others living in the slums of the inner city. 30-something years later, Park's ongoing interest in the lives of the working poor is met with the influence of second-wave feminism in the much-beloved **Playing Beatie Bow**. Distressed by her mother's submissive forgiveness of her philandering husband, Abigail slips back in time to the late 1800s, where she lives with and witnesses the hardship experienced by the Bow family and experiences romantic love and loss for the first time.



## My Place

Nadia Wheatley and Donna Rawlins (1988) Collins Dove

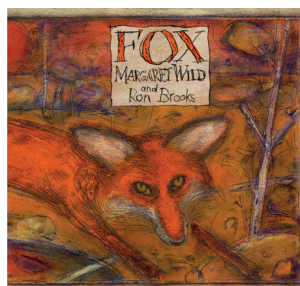
Published in the year of the bicentenary of the arrival of the British colonialists in Sydney Cove in 1788, **My Place** is the unmatched result of detailed research and intense collaboration between its historian author and award-winning illustrator-designer. **My Place** explores the waves of immigration to Australia through the changing face of a parcel of land in what is now known as the inner Sydney suburb of Newtown. Moving back every ten years in history to the undisturbed pre-colonial days of the Eora people, the double-page spreads of this classic picture book depict the lives of the fictional children of Middle Eastern, Greek, Chinese and British and other immigrant families against the changing fashions, transport, past-times, architecture and landscape.



## My Girragundji

Boori Monty Pryor and Meme McDonald (1998) Allen and Unwin

Prior to the 1990s, most Australians were only able to access stories of Aboriginal people through the lens of White authors, or from stories from the Dreaming as 'collected' and recorded by White anthropologists. Drawn from stories from Pryor's own childhood and family, **My Girragundji** broke new grounds in children's publishing by presenting an utterly authentic contemporary Aboriginal voice, and by its depiction of a childhood straddling two cultures. The first of a trilogy of stories about the central character over ten years, which complement Pryor's heart-breaking but hopeful memoir of family and loss, **Maybe Tomorrow** (also co-written with the late and much-missed Meme McDonald).



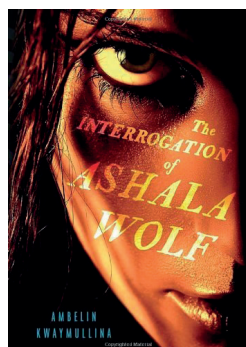
## Fox

Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks (2000) Penguin Books Australia

Less well-known internationally than Graeme Base, Shaun Tan or Mem Fox, Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks are responsible for some of Australia's finest picture books: I would go so far as to claim Wild as our greatest picture book author of all, and Brooks as one of our most accomplished and versatile illustrators and fine artists. **Fox** works on many levels: as an allegory of colonisation, as adventure story, as a breath-taking visual depiction of outback Australia, and as a compelling and deeply moving story of friendship, loyalty, temptation and reconciliation.



# 10



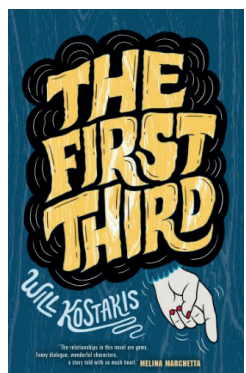
## **The Tribe Trilogy**

Ambelin Kwaymullina

**The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf** (2012), **The Disappearance of Ember Crow** (2013), **The Foretelling of Georgie Spider** (2015). Walker Books Australia

Palyku (Western Australia) author, lawyer and activist Kwaymullina's trilogy draws on and breaks wide open the familiar tropes of dystopia by marrying them with Indigenous Dreaming and an unflinching gaze into the

deep abyss of colonialism. It's also utterly exhilarating storytelling on its own terms. Kwaymullina, along with fellow YA author Rebecca Lim, went on to spearhead the Australian Own Voices movement, which like its international counterparts has been in Australia led by writers, publishers and advocates for young people, and later taken up by the adult writing community. As with her leadership on Indigenous rights and the law, Kwaymullina is an under-recognised force in progressive action for change through art.



## **The First Third**

Will Kostakis (2013) Penguin Australia

Grief and love work their way through many of Kostakis's books: the loss of friends through death, of friendship through misunderstanding and fear, and the potential of grief that faces all teenagers as they come to terms with looming adulthood and the changes that will entail. There's also plenty of love, too, as embodied by **The First Third's** Yia Yia, grandmother to protagonist Billy (and based on Kostakis's own glorious grandmother), who charges

him with completing her bucket list and fixing their family. Nascent queer love is there too, which Kostakis explores more fully in his later novels which coincided with his own public coming out. Oh, and it's funny. Really funny.

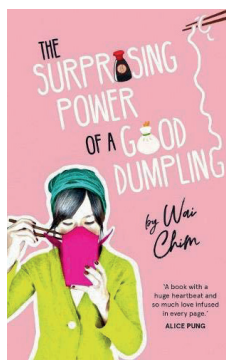


## **One Would Think the Deep**

Claire Zorn (2016) University of Queensland Press

Despite our reputation for being a nation of ocean-loving athletes, there are fewer Australian novels for children and teenagers that are set in the world of surf culture than you might expect. Zorn's 2016 novel sees 17-year-old Sam dislocated after the sudden death of his mother, living with an aunt and cousin he barely knows in a tiny seaside town a world away from the culturally dynamic inner city suburb he grew up in. His cousin Minty is a champion surfer —

and champion party boy, and Sam has to navigate this new life, new family and a potential new love (with complications). With brilliant and vivid descriptions of the Australian coast, this book captured the attention of an entire Year 10 class of non-readers.

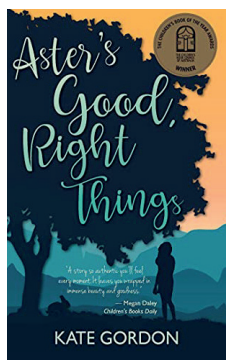


## **The Surprising Power of a Good Dumpling**

Wai Chim (2019) Allen and Unwin

Anna Chiu, the protagonist of *Dumpling*, is torn between duty to her parents — looking after her siblings when her mum swings between depression and her fierce Tiger Mother persona, while Dad runs a restaurant more than an hour from their Sydney home — and her desire to live the same kind of free and easy teenage life as her White Australian friends. A classic YA tale of identity and

agency layered with the particular challenges that comes with being a Third Culture teen, the book is funny, warm and hopeful despite the shadow that hovers over the Chiu family.



## **Aster's Good, Right Things**

Kate Gordon (2020) Riveted Press

Gordon's middle-grade novel treads a delicate line in its portrayal of the fragile mental health of its two young protagonists: Aster's anxiety, which takes the form of a compulsion to do one 'good, right thing' every day, and the debilitating depression experienced by Xavier, who she meets in a liminal space between her school and his home, one that connects their lives with a delicate web of growing trust and friendship.

More and more books are depicting the experience of neuro-atypical young people, by writers with lived experience — which when done as well as this novel is itself a good, right thing.



**Judith Ridge** is a writer, editor and critic from Sydney, Australia specialising in literature for children and young adults. She is an English teacher and is currently employed as a Teacher Librarian in a busy multicultural public (state) boys' high school in Western Sydney. She is the commissioning and contributing editor of **The Book That Made Me** (Walker Books Australia, 2016) and is currently writing her PhD thesis on Australian children's and YA fantasy at the University of Newcastle, NSW.

She tweets @msmisrule and her website is [misrule.com.au/wordpress](https://misrule.com.au/wordpress). (Misrule is the name given to the home of the Woolcot children in **Seven Little Australians**. Judith is still grieving the death of Judy Woolcot fifty years after first reading it.)



# Authorgraph

## No.259

**Candy Gourlay**  
interviewed by  
**Andrea Reece**

'The creative process always begins with a question', says Candy Gourlay as we talk on Zoom about her new book, **Wild Song**, a vivid, evocative historical adventure story and the follow up – though in fact originally planned to be out first – to her **Costa Children's Book Award** shortlisted novel **Bone Talk**. And the question at this book's heart: 'What does it mean to be civilised?'

A former journalist, Candy Gourlay writes in prose that is both accessible and profound, the compassion she feels for the people whose stories she is telling shining out. Now based in London, she sets her books in her homeland, the Philippines, her debut **Tall Story** still prompting letters to this day from children there saying it's the first book they've read to feature Filipino characters like them. **Wild Song's** long journey to publication – we'll find out just how long – began when she came across a photograph of a young Igorot boy dancing the 'cakewalk' with a white woman, who is dressed in full Edwardian finery, at the World's Fair in Saint Louis, in 1904. The Igorot people come from the mountains of Luzon, the largest island in the Philippines. Intrigued, Candy started to research the Fair and 'it was amazing!' she says. 'The hot dog was invented there, as well as the ice cream cone and the first baby incubator. Edison designed the lighting for the Fair...'. Inspired and intrigued, she began writing a book for middle grade readers from the point of view of a young Filipino boy at the Fair who witnesses the invention of the hot dog. It was set to be funny and heart-warming, but as she researched the Fair in depth, her plan changed. 'I only had to read a tiny bit to see that I didn't understand the World's Fair at all.'

The Saint Louis World's Fair came just after the end of the Philippine-American war – or, as the US called it, the Philippine Insurgency – which had raged in the Philippines from 1899–1902, though in fact skirmishes and rebellions continued long after that. The war was not popular with the American people and, to justify it, President

McKinley claimed that the Philippines needed to be 'civilised', forgetting the inconvenient fact that under the Spanish, Filipinos had been Christians for three hundred years. The discovery of the indigenous Igorot – and their subsequent appearance on the cover of *National Geographic* – created huge interest and allowed that line to be promoted, and a group of Igorot were brought to Saint Louis to take part in the Fair. Their experiences form the basis of **Wild Song**. Before Candy could write the book however, there were more questions: 'Everyone would have known people who had died during the war, and I wanted to know what the Igorot were doing there; whether they were really happy to be there.' This was the time of the rise of #OwnVoices says Candy and, 'I was very aware that the Igorot are not my tribe. I couldn't just write about them without learning much more.' She began to research them, and that led to her writing **Bone Talk**, 'the way in to understanding their culture and to my understanding of the war.' It took her five years to research and write **Bone Talk**, another five to research and write **Wild Song**.

What her research revealed was a very spiritual people with a complex society structure. She had three main sources: a book on the Bontok Igorot written by a man called Albert Jenks, 'very detailed on how they lived, what the houses were like' says Candy, but somewhat like 'a zoological study'. Later she discovered that it was in fact Jenks who was responsible for bringing the Igorot to the World's Fair. Then there are the diaries of Albert's wife, Maud, who stayed behind with the Bontok people while her husband went on



Photo: Paul Musso



his expeditions, and which do a better job of conveying a sense of what they were really like, of their own voices. This is true too of the books of William Henry Scott, still respected in the Philippines today, who tried his hardest to record the voices of the Bontok people, a 'very useful, very sensitive record' says Candy.

**Bone Talk** describes the arrival of US soldiers in Bontok territory, and the impact they have. They are cruel and violent, deceive the Igorot and regard them as 'savages', as they were often described in the writing of the time, though the soldiers' own behaviour is far less 'civilised'. Despite this, in **Wild Song**, the heroes of **Bone Talk**, Samkad and his best friend Luki, accept the invitation to travel to Saint Louis. In fact the real driver for their trip is Luki, a character readers already love, fierce, independent, not afraid to leave, but rather afraid of how her life would be constrained by staying at home.

Their trip entails traveling to Manila, crossing the Pacific and then continuing by train from Tacoma to finally arrive in Saint Louis, where they have to build their own Igorot Village and then live in it for the entertainment of visitors. They encounter a great deal of racism, from the train conductor who chose not to turn on the heating for the 'savages' in freezing temperatures, resulting in the death from pneumonia of two of the party, to the professor who preserves the brains of dead indigenous people to study. Luki also witnesses racism against her friend Johnny, a black musician in the Philippine Constabulary Band. Yet, as Candy points out, this was the Progressive Era in the US, when people were becoming conscious all sorts of things, women's suffrage, workers' rights, environmental protection, even animal rights. It was 'America trying to be good', says Candy, yet despite the growing awareness of human rights, Native Americans were excluded from them and the backlash from the civil war was at its fiercest. She talks about Mark Twain, 'who was my hero and admired in the Philippines for being on our side during the Philippine America war', who not only wrote fiction that was anti-Native American but essays on the subject too. 'It makes me think about what we are aware of that we also choose to ignore', she says.

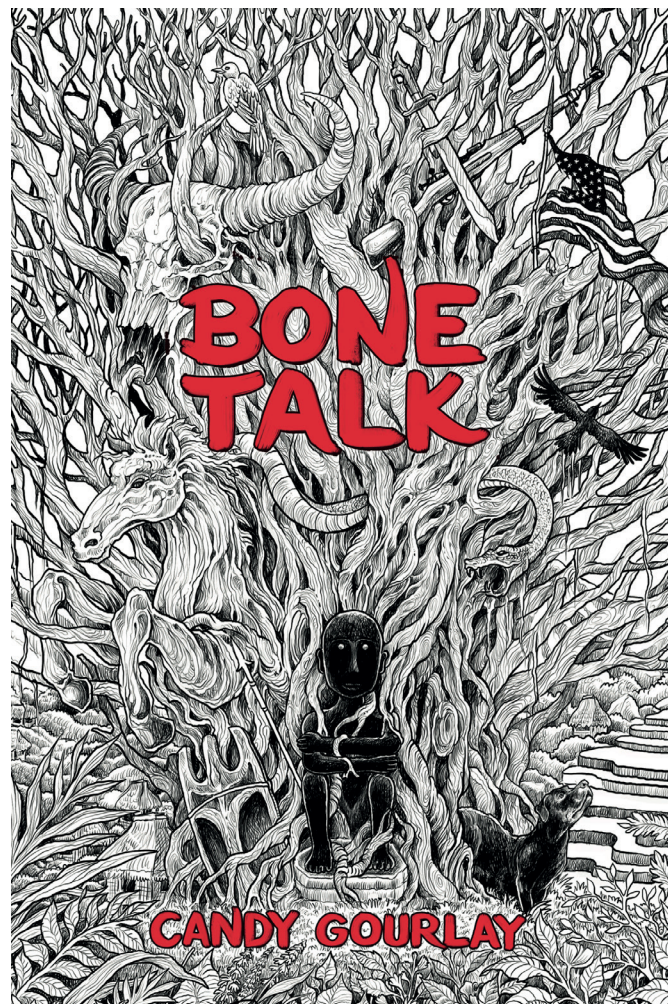
Luki and Samkad choose to return to their village in the Luzon mountains, shedding their American clothes on the boat back, Luki putting on again her Bontok skirt and top, Samkad his loincloth, and their homecoming is a joyful one. Kinyo, who also appears in **Bone Talk**, chooses to stay however. 'Kinyo is based on a real life character called Antero,' says Candy. Antero was a servant to Albert Jenks and his translator. He remained in America after the World's Fair, travelled widely there, and later appeared as part of an attraction at Coney Island. 'Kinyo is a complex character who made his own decisions', says Candy. 'For me he represents all the Filipinos who were enticed by and fell in love with American culture, which is very lovable. I bought into it myself – I grew up with Sesame Street, speaking English like an American, my mother remembers watching movies every morning, the joy of them. It wasn't until I started this research that the gravity of what they did to us hit home.' She quotes Philippine author Gina Apostol, 'forgetting is an aspect of genocide'.

We return to the question that prompted the book, and what it means to be civilised. 'The more I read about the Igorot, the clearer it is that their society was very ordered, very civilised. That they were very spiritual, and that in fact the Americans were able to use that spirituality to infiltrate their society. But when you compare the Americans and the Igorot, what happened and what they did, to be civilised is to be able to look at someone who is not like you and be able to see their humanity. No matter how often the Americans describe the Igorot as savages, the more civilised society was always the Igorot.'

'I put my heart and soul into this book,' she concludes, 'and I think it's the most important I've ever written. The story of the Igorot is my story, this is what happened to Filipinos, we all need to understand what happened to us. Knowing who you are enriches you, and it's empowering to know the truth.'

**Bone Talk** and **Wild Song** are published by David Fickling Books, £7.99 pbk and £12.99 hbk respectively.

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





# Windows into Illustration: Leo Timmers

Leo Timmers' style is characterised by humour, form and colour, which make his illustrations leap off the page. He likes to tell stories visually with a minimum of words, and his books including **Elephant Island**, **Who's Driving?** and **Kind Crocodile** have been hits in the UK and across the world. He was the first Flemish illustrator to have a book included in the New York Times' ten best books of the year.

As a picture book maker, I love to tell stories through pictures. For me, sketching is the only way to find a story. I try to be as spontaneous as possible, open to wherever my hand and pencil will take me. It's pretty magical.

I chose this illustration because a rough version of this picture became the starting point of my story. I stumbled upon a horizontal, long crocodile with a big mouth, and then I filled his back with all kinds of animals (much more than in the final picture). The image triggered my imagination, and that's what I'm always looking for: one image that sparks a whole story.

This time the story came very quickly (I wish that was always the case!). It's about animals finding shelter on the crocodile's long back, while his big teeth scare their enemies away. I felt this story carried enough interesting ideas and themes to make a book. I liked the idea of a good, kind-hearted crocodile as a protagonist. It goes against the cliché of most crocodiles being mean. The story also emphasises the importance of the oppressed joining forces. They can be very strong if they work together. But there's a flipside to that idea: overconfidence!

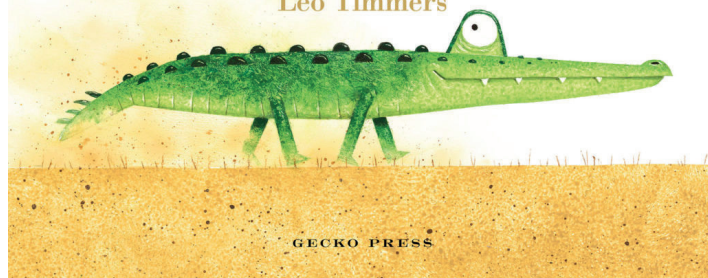
The look of the crocodile grew out of the story. He needed a long back to fit all the animals, and a big mouth with lots of teeth to scare away all the enemies. But I also gave him long, narrow legs. If you look closely at the illustration, you'll see the crocodile looks very tired. With every animal that jumps on his back, he sinks closer to the ground. In this illustration he's already on his knees, about to collapse under the increasing weight. (And the rhino hasn't even





# KIND CROCODILE

Leo Timmers



arrived yet!) The only way to show the weight increasing was to put him on long legs. It took me quite a while to figure that out.

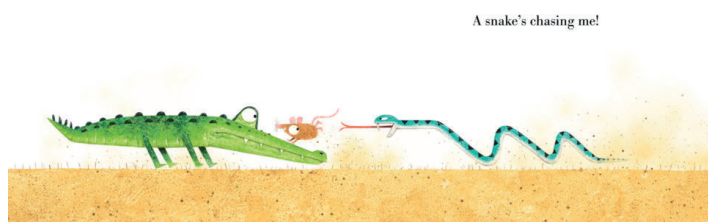
All my illustrations are painted with acrylics, without the help of photoshop or collage.

To paint the fluffy dust clouds – a visual motif throughout the book – I used an airbrush for the first time. That was fun! The dust also helped me to suggest speed and acceleration which was very important for this dynamic story.

Because the story is so visual, I wanted a spare, simple text. In early versions I had the crocodile saying much more, but with every new version I cut out more and more, until only 'Grrrr!' remained.

The 'GRRRR!' becomes gradually bigger and longer throughout the book as the crocodile needs to put in more effort to scare away the bad animals. The last 'GRRRR!' of the book is enormous! Whenever I do readings, it is so much fun to let the children shout 'GRRRRRRRRRR!' as loud as they can! They love it!

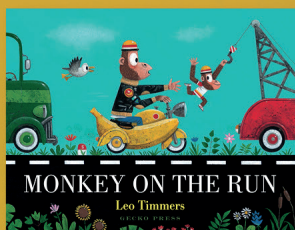
**Kind Crocodile** is published by Gecko Press, 978-1776574704.



## Discover the world of Leo Timmers

“A diverting reminder that kindness comes in all shapes and sizes—and sometimes requires community.”

*Publishers Weekly*



*New York Times*  
Best illustrated book



*New York Times*  
Best books of 2022

*The Times*  
Book of the week

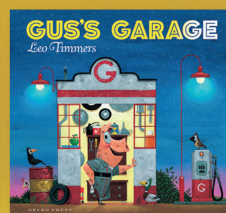
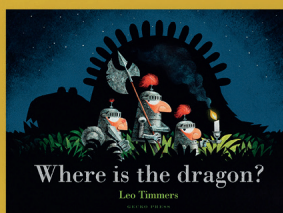
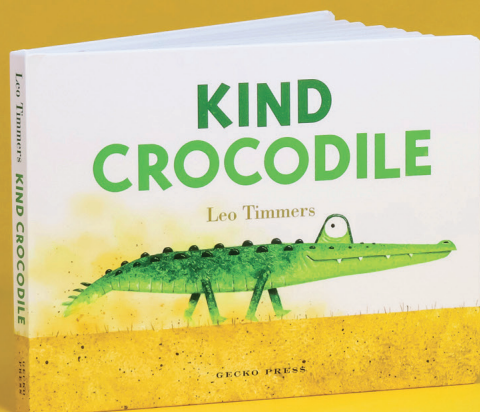


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# YA Fiction! What is it good for?

Why is Young Adult (YA) fiction even today sometimes dismissed as lower quality literature compared to that aimed at adults? In her new book, **The Necessity of Young Adult Fiction**, **Deborah Lindsay Williams** argues that YA fiction helps us to think about some of the most pressing problems of the twenty-first century by offering imaginative reconceptualizations about identity, nation, family, and climate change; indeed, that the cultural work of YA fiction shapes reader's perceptions, making them receptive to—and invested in—the possibility of positive social change. In this extract, Williams describes the ways in which YA fiction is doing some of the most important and creative work in literature today.

Unlike, for example, 'detective fiction', 'YA literature' is at once a designation of content and audience—an audience that is always in the midst of transforming. We have all been teenagers; we have not all been detectives. We can remember ourselves as teenaged readers, the utter immersion with which we used to sink into a story, an experience that hovers, ghost-like, when or if we return to those books as adults. The books become a mirror not only of the moment when they were written but also of where and who we were when we first read them. Because we read these books when we are young (or younger than you are now, presumably, as you read this), our reading experiences are often more intense, unmediated. The reading is not necessarily 'innocent', but it may be, perhaps, unaware of the book's reviews or the author's politics. Philip Pullman suggests that young readers are an exacting audience, even if they might not be 'sophisticated' in an adult sense: 'in a book for children you can't put the plot on hold while you posture artistically . . . [These readers] have more important things in mind than your dazzling skill' (qtd. in Falconer 5). When teenagers engage with fiction (unless they're reading a book for school and thus probably for some kind of an exam, which we might think of as 'transactional reading'—reading for a purpose and information rather than pleasure), they can be thought of as 'lay readers', people whose reading 'proffers the possibility of reconnecting with the everyday life of literary engagement' (Buurma and Heffernan 115). Unlike literary scholars—scholars writing for other scholars—for whom the stereotype of a hermetically sealed discourse is often all too accurate, teenagers see themselves and their worlds in the texts; their reading becomes, as Eric Shouse describes it, 'a non-conscious experience of intensity . . . of unformed and unstructured potential' (Shouse qtd. in Anker and Felski 175). I want to focus on the word 'potential' here, because

that's one of the key factors that makes YA literature so important: The readership of YA is one of *potential*. These are readers who do not yet hold any of the official levers of power and who exist, in a sense, on the margins of their societies by reason of their age. Many of them are additionally marginalized by reason of sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, economics, or religion. What I see in YA literature are the ways that the texts render the experience of being sidelined and then offer examples of how readers might imagine themselves as people with agency in the world. We see characters who discover the ability to engage with and sometimes even improve the worlds in which they live. I suppose some would say that it is naïve to think that fiction can change the world, and perhaps that's true. But people can change the world—and books can change people.

Fiction allows us to inhabit lives that are not our own: When we read, we are inside lives and consciousnesses that may be quite different from our daily experiences. As we read, we do not erase differences between ourselves and the protagonists; instead, we find moments of connection and resonance that enable us to bridge those differences, like a Korean American student did in reading **Akata Witch** [about a Nigerian girl who grows up in New York and is teased for her accent, and then moves to Aba in Nigeria, where she is teased for her accent]. Reading about Sunny Nwazue's experiences on the margins gave my student insight and language with which to think about her own life: connections were established across difference. Although she didn't name it as such, the student had engaged with what I will be calling a cosmopolitan reading practice, which necessitates a willingness to engage, to move away from what is comfortable or familiar. Fiction, as the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum says, is what develops 'the compassionate imagination, which can



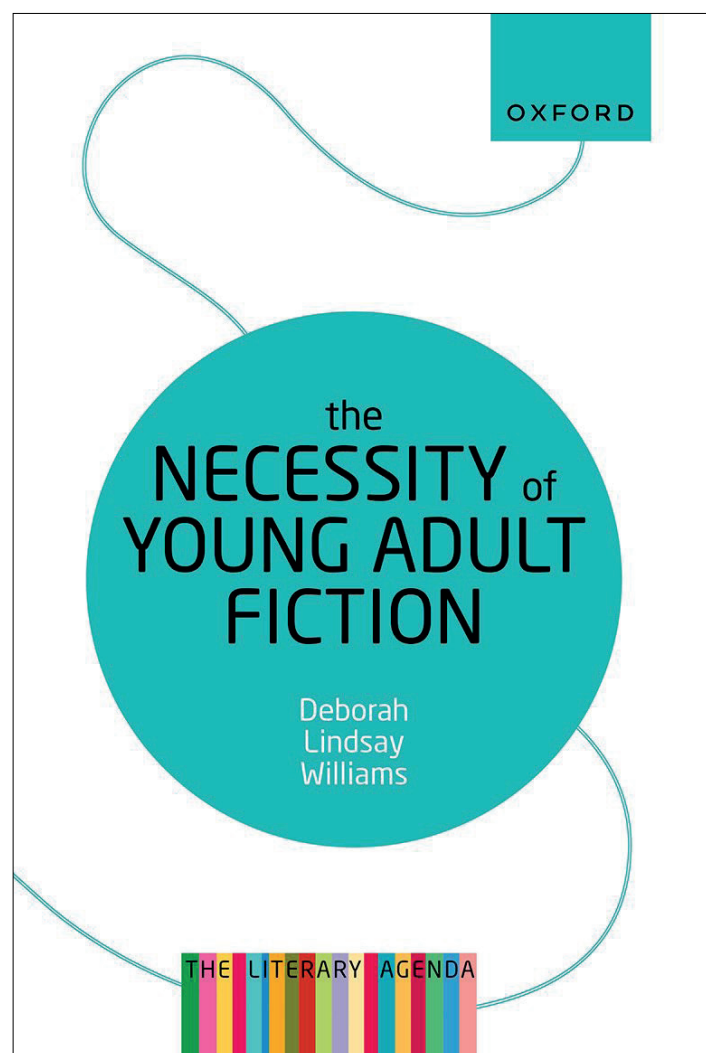


make other people's lives more than distant abstractions' (np). It is in abstraction that the threatening Other—the migrant, immigrant, slave—becomes a monster. In **Monster Theory: Reading Culture** (1996), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen stipulates that 'the monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture' (4). The monstrous body is a site of ambivalence, in other words, and as such provides the opportunity for negotiation and innovation. In all the novels that I discuss in this book, monsters are at the centre, as is the importance of finding different ways of engaging with the monster. What we see, ultimately, is that the very definition of 'monster' is being challenged: The monster becomes less about Otherness and more about those individuals and entities that see the planet and its inhabitants solely as commodities. Once we know how to see them, these monsters of commodification—the monsters that threaten the health of the planet—can be found across genres, and not only in the speculative fictions that I discuss in my book.

This process of engagement is essential to cosmopolitanism, a word that is never used in these novels but is illustrated by them nonetheless. Cosmopolitanism is a term that has been much theorized over the past few decades, although very rarely in the context of children's literature. I want to stress that cosmopolitanism as I see it is a *practice*, something that one does—in reading, in conversation, in the classroom. Originally developed as a response to nationalism, cosmopolitanism offered models for thinking about a global conception of citizenship and in its simplest iteration sees difference as an opportunity rather than a threat. Cosmopolitanism asks us to consider our obligation to others, beyond the ties of family or state. In his seminal book **Cosmopolitanism** (2006), Kwame Anthony Appiah points out that *people are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences. Because there are so many human possibilities worth exploring, we neither expect nor desire that every person or every society should converge on a single mode of life. Whatever our obligations are to others (or theirs to us) they often have the right to go their own way.*(xv)

It is important to note that this acceptance of difference may be more difficult than it seems: 'cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge' (xv). How do we put into practice the attitudes that will allow us to find common cause with those who may not share our perspectives or our particular context? How do we put aside those structures of fear that so often (and so easily) preclude engagement? When we find these moments of disgust, discomfort, disidentification, can we nevertheless resist the impulse to isolate ourselves from that discomfort? Appiah suggests that perhaps we may be more naturally cosmopolitan than we know: 'Cultural purity is an oxymoron. The odds are that, culturally speaking, you already live a cosmopolitan life, enriched by literature, art, and film that come from many places, and that contains influences from many more' (**Cosmopolitanism** 113). Intellectually, we may agree with Appiah's assessment about our cosmopolitan lives, but we need only to glance at the news to see how readily people rally around ideas (however chimerical) of cultural purity and authenticity, with the belief that this ostensible purity confers some sort of cultural power and authority. An essential aspect of cosmopolitan practice—and one that rarely emerges in fundamentalist rhetoric—is the acceptance of fallibilism, the willingness to see knowledge as something that evolves over time and through encounters with ideas and attitudes different than one's own. Fallibilism requires us to step back from our certainties and be open to alternatives.

I do not mean to suggest that YA fiction offers some kind of cure for fundamentalist certainties or that there aren't reactionary YA novels that bolster fear of the Other, but I do think that we want to keep in mind that YA is for a readership of potential citizens—people who have not yet, we hope, calcified into rigidity. In art—reading, film, music, maybe even TikTok memes, if my children are to be believed—we can encounter things that nudge us toward new structures of feeling. The phrase comes from Raymond Williams,



who references it in several different texts, perhaps most notably in **Marxism and Literature** (1977). In its most general terms, the phrase refers to the ways that lived experiences may vary from society's conventional narratives and expectations; that is to say, often our feelings change well before social norms and laws. And it is often in response to encounters with art that these changes begin. In **Preface to a Film**, Williams writes:

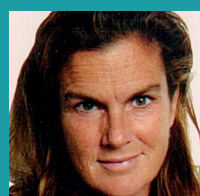
*[T]he new generation responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting, taking up many continuities, that can be traced, and reproducing many aspects of the organization, which can be separately described, yet feeling its whole life in certain ways differently, and shaping its creative response into a new structure of feeling.*(49)

YA fiction, I suggest, often provides the occasion for the sorts of encounters that can produce changes in structures of feeling.

© Deborah Lindsay Williams

Extract from **The Necessity of Young Adult Fiction: The Literary Agenda** published by Oxford University Press in March 2023, available in paperback and eBook formats, £15.99

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-necessity-of-young-adult-fiction-9780192848970?cc=gb&lang=en&>



**Deborah Lindsay Williams** is a Clinical Professor in Liberal Studies at New York University. Her essays have appeared in **The New York Times**, **Paris Review**, **Brevity**, and **The Common**; she has published widely on children's literature and US women's writing, including her book **Not in Sisterhood**.



# Beyond the Secret Garden: Magic

In the latest in their long-running **Beyond the Secret Garden** feature, examining the representation of black, Asian and minority ethnic voices in British children's literature, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** look at magic and who gets to wield it.

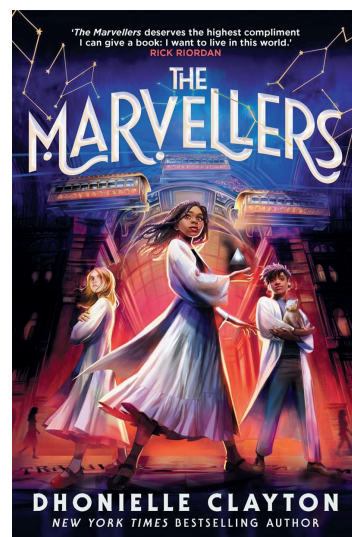
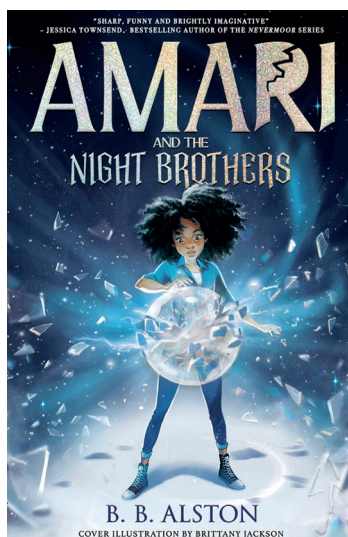
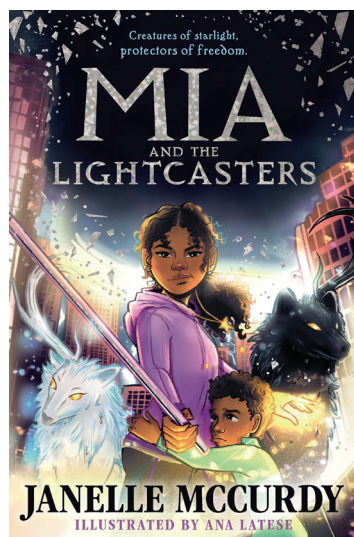
The first English translation of **1001 Nights** (variously titled as **Arabian Nights**, **Arabian Nights' Entertainment**, and **1001 Arabian Nights**) appeared in 1706, based on the French version by Antoine Galland. Although published for adults, illustrated and pantomime versions quickly became part of British children's experiences, ensuring that orientalist stereotypes of the magical, mysterious 'East' were ingrained in the British consciousness from childhood. In the early nineteenth century, for example, Charlotte Brontë's juvenilia were peppered with magic carpets and genii, and reference to **Arabian Nights** can be found in her most famous novel, **Jane Eyre** (1847). Charles Dickens has Ebenezer Scrooge envisioning Ali Baba when the Spirit of Christmas Past takes him back to his student days and favourite books. Later authors play on this sense of 'the East' as a magical and almost imaginary place—Kipling's **Just-So Stories** (1902) is a prime example, with its camel whose hump is lifted 'by the sun and the wind and the Djinn in the garden' and its Parsee whose outfit reflects 'more-than-oriental splendour'.

'Oriental' magic enters Britain in children's books as well, perhaps most famously in Frances Hodgson Burnett's **A Little Princess** (1905), where Sara Crewe's miserable life as a servant in a girl's boarding school is transformed by 'the Magic' of Ram Dass, an Indian servant who lives next door. Ram Dass's magic is actually just the ability to move furniture and food from his attic dormer to Sara's, but Sara insists on framing his kindness in terms of magical ability designed to restore her to her original status as 'a little princess'. This hierarchy of white character served by magical 'oriental' figure would be revisited by the writer Robert Leeson in his **Third-Class Genie** (1975), in which Alec Bowden is happy to use a genie's power until he realizes that he has enslaved Abu—who is not the 'Arabian' he expected but a Black African.

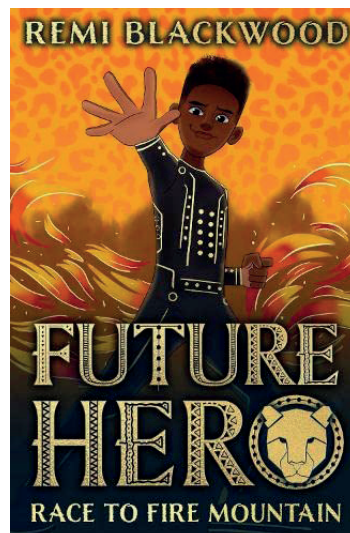
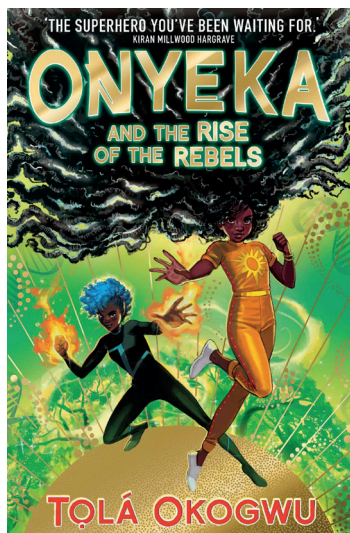
Although Abu is a genie, most magic connected with people of African origin in British children's literature has historically been dark magic. H. Rider Haggard's **King Solomon's Mines** (1885) and **She** (1887) exemplify white versions of dark African magic. In the twentieth century, a Hollywood-inspired version of the African and

Afro-Caribbean religion of Voodoo became a common feature—and, for British characters, fear—in children's literature about the Caribbean. Following Hollywood movies such as **White Zombie** (1932), **Black Moon** (1934) and **I Walked with a Zombie** (1943), British children's literature from comics (**Tiger Tim's** 1948 annual had 'Alan's white magic' saving white British Alan and his sister Sheila from violence and superstition of the Black 'natives' of Coral Isle) to novels. Philip Pullman's **Broken Bridge** (1990) uses similar tropes; Ginny, the daughter of a white British father and Black Haitian mother, at first turns to Voodoo gods to find her mother, but eventually realizes that her true mission is to forget her mother and heal her white family who had become estranged because of Ginny's father's marriage.

The 21st century has seen **Harry Potter** become one of the highest grossing franchises of all time. The huge success of **Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone** and the books and the eight films that followed, not only shaped the imagination of many young readers in the USA and elsewhere about life in Britain, it also shaped ideas about who did and did not get to be magical. In 2023 the video game **Hogwarts Legacy** was released onto the market. By 2016, the value of the franchise was estimated at \$25 billion dollars. That same year, in his chapter in **The Good Immigrant**, Darren described the Potter series as; 'a story that has so much to say about racism on an allegorical level at the same time depicts people of colour as marginal without exploring their marginalisation.' This point was also made in the 2015 YouTube film **Every Single Word Spoken by a Person of Color in the Entire 'Harry Potter' Film Series**, made by Dylan Marron which runs to just 6 minutes and eighteen seconds. In a poem published in **The Working Class** (2018) Darren wrote, 'I hope that someone / Opens a / Black Wizards' Supplementary School / Very soon' (p305), attempting to make connections between issues in the Potter books, the education system, and children's publishing. However, the last few years has seen an explosion of children's and young adult fiction where Black and other racially minoritised people are depicted as magical – and in non-stereotypical ways.







The Jhalak prize shortlisted **Mia and the Lightcasters** (2022) by Janelle McCurdy is the first in a series in which Mia encounters the shadowy Reaper King – a creature of nightmares. Mia's whole life changes when a mysterious cult captures the protectors of her city – including her parents and their magical creatures made of shadow and stars, the umbra. In **The Thief of Farrowfell** (2023) by Ravena Guron, twelve-year-old Jude Ripon, from a family of magic-stealing masterminds, decides to steal valuable magic to prove herself, leading to a series of comedic twists and turns.

Many of the other recent magical books have continued the long tradition of stories set in fantasy worlds but speaking to real-world events. In B.B. Alston's **Amari and the Night Brothers** (2021) Amari learns of her own magical powers as she searches for her brother Quinton who has disappeared from their home in the low-income housing projects, after receiving full scholarship offers to two different Ivy League schools. **The Marvellers** (2022) shows a diverse cast of characters attending a school of magic in the clouds. In a recent interview with Darren, author Dhonielle Clayton said, 'Publishing **The Marvellers** could be seen as an act of aggression and critical commentary on the Harry Potter universe because it includes all the children J.K. Rowling marginalized, stereotyped, and frankly, forgot. But I'm not writing to be in conversation with her or her world, though it may seem like it and I can't seem to escape the comparisons. I'm writing for the children that are not seen by her, and that are not seen in general.' There are clear echoes of the Jim Crow era and the school desegregation that followed the landmark Brown vs Board of Education case. Angie Thomas' **Nic Blake and The Remarkables** (2023) draws on historical events, including the Atlantic slave trade as well as elements of African American folklore.

**City of Stolen Magic** by Nazneen Ahmed Pathak (2023) set in 1855, explores the British rule of India. Indian magic is being stamped out and people born with magic are being taken across the sea by the 'Company'. Cultural imperialism and the system of indentureship are explored, while the action shifts from Bengal to London. Gita Ralleigh's middle-grade novel **The Destiny of Minou Moonshine** (2023) is set in the Queenom of Moonlally, an alternate Colonial India that is ruled by a tyrant.

Tolá Okogwu's **Onyeka and the Rise of the Rebels** (2023) continues the series that began with **Onyeka and the Academy of the Sun** (2022). Onyeka is a British-Nigerian girl who discovers her curls have psychokinetic abilities and is sent to the Academy of the Sun, a school in Nigeria where Solari – children with superpowers – are trained.

E.L. Norry's **Fable House** (2023) is set in a children's home for many of Britain's 'Brown Babies' – children born to African-American GIs and white British women following the Second World War. Emma Norry, who herself grew up in the care system in Wales, combines

this historical story with Arthurian legend in a narrative that sees Heather set off on a quest to rescue the children of Fablehouse.

**Future Hero: Race to Fire Mountain** (2022) is the first in an Afrofuturist series by Remi Blackwood, the name of a team of writers led by Jasmine Richards. Jarell finds a magical mirror and an exiled God working as a barber in his cousin's barbershop, and discovers that he is the hero that those in a distant land called Ulfrika have been waiting for.

Books mentioned:

**Mia and the Lightcasters** Janelle McCurdy, Faber & Faber, 978-0571368433, £7.99 pbk

**The Thief of Farrowfell** Ravena Guron, Faber & Faber, 978-0571371174, £7.99 pbk

**Amari and the Night Brothers** B.B. Alston, Farshore, 978-1405298193, £7.99 pbk

**The Marvellers** Dhonielle Clayton, Piccadilly Press, 978-1800785472, £7.99 pbk

**Nic Blake and The Remarkables** Angie Thomas, Walker Books, 978-1529506549, £7.99 pbk

**City of Stolen Magic** Nazneen Ahmed Pathak, Puffin, 978-0241567487, £7.99 pbk

**The Destiny of Minou Moonshine** Gita Ralleigh, Zephyr, 978-1804545478, £14.99 hbk

**Onyeka and the Academy of the Sun** Tolá Okogwu, Simon and Schuster, 978-1398505087, £7.99 pbk

**Onyeka and the Rise of the Rebels** Tolá Okogwu, Simon and Schuster, 978-1398505117, £7.99 pbk

**Fable House** E.L. Norry, Bloomsbury, 978-1526649539, £7.99 pbk

**Future Hero: Race to Fire Mountain** Remi Blackwood, Scholastic, 978-0702311758, £6.99 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 Nikesha Shukla and the author, with Jeffrey Boakye, of **What Is Masculinity? Why Does It Matter? And Other Big Questions**. He tweets at @rapclassroom.



# O Tell Me the Truth About Poetry in Schools

**CLPE**, the **National Poetry Centre for Primary Schools**, with the support of **Macmillan Children's Books**, have just published the results of a survey into the place of poetry in primary schools, intended to provide a picture of poetry practice and provision in primary schools, and help understand what support teachers and children need. If you took the headlines in the press as a guide, things seem very bleak: 'Many UK primary schoolchildren 'drastically' missing out on poetry' reported the *Guardian*, but there is much in the findings that is encouraging.

For example:

- 80% of teachers said that they thought poetry was a significant part of a literacy curriculum, evidence that they value the place of poetry as part of children's developing literacy.
- Teachers also reported that children really enjoy hearing, writing and performing poetry.

As positive as this is, it still means that one in five schools do not have poetry as a significant part of their curriculum and many of the responses to the survey recognised the considerable challenges in providing a rich experience of poetry as part of the curriculum.

Despite teachers acknowledging how much children enjoy poetry, the survey found that poetry is read aloud less than once a week in 93% of schools and in nearly 20% of schools children never have the opportunity to hear a poem read aloud.

## Children's experiences of poetry

88% of teachers thought their children enjoyed engaging with poetry, with 28% of them saying they really enjoyed it.

In terms of what the children enjoy most about poetry, 89% reported that children enjoyed listening to it being read or performed and 72% reported that they enjoyed performing it themselves.

'This reflects what we know about children's engagement with poetry from **CLPE** research over the past 50 years', says Charlotte Hacking, Learning and Programmes Director at **CLPE**, 'and is why we film videos of poets performing their poetry as part of the CLiPPA shadowing scheme, and why the shadowing competition focuses on

children performing a poem from one of the shortlisted collections.'

'The best way to engage children in poetry is to make sure they hear a wide range of poetry as often as possible. It is important to hear and feel the distinct rhythms of different voices and dialects, and to see that poetry comes in different forms and can be written by a range of different people. Videos and audio performances of poets performing are a fantastic inspiration for children's own performances.'

Yet when asking how often children get the chance to hear poems read aloud or listen to poets read their poems via audio or video, the survey found that poems are read or listened to daily in only 4% of classrooms. In 74% of primary school classrooms poems are heard or read less than once a week.

The survey also asked about how often poems were read or listened to in whole school routines, for example in assemblies. In 93% of schools this is less than once per week and 19% of schools felt they never had the opportunity to share a poem in this way.

The picture on poet visits to schools is even more depressing. Asked whether schools were able to offer children the opportunity to connect with poets directly through poet visits, 44% of teachers reported that they'd never had a poet visit. Of the schools that said they had experienced a poet visit, 42% reported that this had been 5 or more years ago.

Teachers that had experienced a poet visit were hugely positive about their impact. 'We have had Karl Nova visit and work with us twice' said one teacher, 'Every pupil was fully engaged and in awe of him. They wanted to write more poetry and have the chance to share it with him.'

Not only were poet visits enjoyable and inspiring for children, there was an impact too on their confidence as well as their reading, performance and writing ability. Many teachers talked increased understanding and aspiration encounters with poets provoked in children, in terms of writing, both within and beyond the visit. They also talked about the impact pupils meeting poets they could relate to and whose poetry reflected them, their language and their experiences.





The barriers to poet visits were identified as lack of funding and the low priority of poetry in the curriculum in relation to other text types, such as non-fiction, picturebooks and novels.

Lack of poetry focused CPD is also an issue.

Three quarters of teachers (76%) plan their own units of poetry, whereas a quarter use published plans or schemes. Many teachers are aware of and use a wide variety of resources to support them in finding out more about poets and poetry to support their planning.

However, only 38% of teachers felt confident about planning units of work focussed on poetry. Many cited that they felt they didn't have enough knowledge about poetry or experience of teaching it to do so. There was a significant link to a lack of training and development in this area of literacy. 61% of teachers told us they had never had CPD or training on poetry and only 7% of had received CPD or training on poetry in the last year.

Another issue – not restricted to poetry but across all genres – is poor book stock. In 79% of classrooms, the book corners contained fewer than 10 poetry books and in 44% of classrooms, the figure was 5 or less. 'This is a drastically low figure if you are trying to create an environment where children can see a range of poetry and types of poetry, giving them a broad perspective of what poetry is, what it could be and who it is written by.' Says Charlotte Hacking. 'This also gives limited access to poetry as a free choice for independent reading or reading for pleasure. Only 21% of classrooms had a book stock of over 10 poetry books.'

### Name that poet

Previous research into teacher's knowledge of children's poets, namely **Teachers as Readers** (Cremin et al, 2007) and **Poetry in Schools** (Ofsted, 2007) showed that too limited a range of poets were known by primary phase teachers. Responses collected in the survey showed that this has not moved on in the 16 years since those research reports were published. Aside from Joseph Coelho, who has come to prominence due to his role as **Waterstones Children's Laureate** 2022-24, Valerie Bloom and Julia Donaldson, the names of the top 9 poets named by respondents matched those in the Teachers as Readers survey from 2006-7.

### Barriers to poetry teaching

87% of teachers questioned said that their children had the opportunity to read poetry for themselves at least once per term and 75% said that children had the opportunity to write poetry at least once per term. However, 69% of teachers thought that there were barriers to teaching poetry in their classroom.

The most commonly cited perceived barriers were:

- Time
- Teacher knowledge
- Teacher confidence
- SLT and/or other teachers valuing the importance of poetry
- Finding it difficult to see the grammar and writing expectations in poetry
- Poetry not being prominent enough in the National Curriculum or assessments (SATs)
- Knowledge of and access to poets, poems, and poetry texts
- Lack of training
- National or school curriculum being weighted to fiction and non-fiction
- Constraints of assessment preparation

There are 26 references to poetry in the current National Curriculum in England (DFE, 2014). The majority of the references relate to children listening to or reading and responding to poems, or performing or reciting poetry.

It is only in Year 2 that poetry is specifically mentioned in relation to writing composition, although in the introduction to English in Upper Key Stage 2 (Years 5 & 6) it is stated that 'Pupils' knowledge of language, gained from stories, plays, poetry, non-fiction and textbooks, will support their increasing fluency as readers, their facility as writers, and their comprehension.'



Kate Wakeling

While there are references to reading poetry, other than a general direction to expose children to 'a wide range of contemporary and classic poetry', there is no additional guidance about what this might be. 'When we put this together with the data regarding access to poetry books in the classroom, and teachers knowledge of poets and poetry' says Charlotte Hacking, 'It's easy to see why some of these barriers were mentioned by respondents.'

With significant barriers to teaching poetry, a serious lack of professional development in this area and with a substantial shortage of poetry books in class collections, there is much to do to raise the profile and recognition of the importance of poetry to children's literacy.

### What's happening in secondary schools?

For the view from secondary schools and colleges, **NATE** have published the results of a National Poetry survey carried out in 2022. Themes identified include lack of opportunities for professional development (38% reporting they did not have the opportunity to develop their own expertise through training/further study); the 'hijacking' of KS3 to teach GCSE prescribed texts, including poetry due to exam pressures and time constraints; similar pressures restricting enrichment opportunities, despite awareness of many schemes available, including the **CLIPPA**, **Poetry By Heart** and **Foyles Young Poets**.

[The results are available to read in full on the NATE website.](#)

The **2023 CLIPPA** shortlist will be revealed at a live online event on the afternoon of Wednesday 3rd May 2023. Its hugely popular **Shadowing Scheme** will launch on 15 May.

The **CLPE Macmillan Children's Books** report is based on the responses of 468 people who filled in a survey in January 2023. CLPE says, 'We are aware that this is a survey that relies on people self-referring. The survey was publicised through **CLPE** email and social media therefore the respondents are likely to be teachers with an interest in literacy teaching and children's literature. They are also likely to be teachers who understand the importance of reading for pleasure and the pedagogical approaches that are effective.'





# Marcus Sedgwick

## Nicholas Tucker remembers author Marcus Sedgwick through his many novels for young people.

Marcus was a born writer. A man of intriguing opposites, he could be shy one moment, gregarious the next. Multi-talented, sometimes adding his own woodcuts to stories for younger readers, he was also an accomplished amateur musician, playing the drums and the bass guitar in two bands. He ended his days living on his own in Dordogne in search of respite from the Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) that plagued him for much of his adult life. From enjoying a daily run of up to three miles he was sometimes reduced to a state where he was barely able to walk or even stand.

But his mind remained as restlessly questing as ever, as evidenced in his over forty novels. Most of them subtly weave intellectual enquiry into a narrative where nothing could be taken for granted. Marcus always said he wrote for himself not for any particular audience. Many other writers have made similar claims; in his case, it was true. Always curious about new developments and also apprehensive where some of them may be taking us, his teenage novels allowed him the scope he needed to continue such dialogues with himself as well as with his readers. But there was always a sustaining narrative there for them as well from a writer who never forgot how to tell a good story at the same time.

The breadth of these interests as they crop up in his stories is wide and unpredictable. **She is Not Invisible** contains a fascinating study of the part played in our lives by coincidence and its possible link to Jung's theory of synchronicity. It also delves into the mystery of the Fibonacci spiral and its possible links with the Phi coefficient. Drawing on his experience of studying maths at university if only for the first year, Marcus explains this as the measure of association for two binary variables. The same theme also crops up in **The Ghosts of Heaven**, featuring four interlinked stories stretching from the Stone Age to life in a sinister American Mental Asylum during the 1920s.

He wrote about social and political issues too. **Floodland**, his first popular success and winner of the **Branford Boase Award**, is set in a future Britain covered by sea with Norwich just surviving as an island. **Saint Death**, taking place on the US/Mexican border, describes the dreadful privations currently faced by the poorest there, with Marcus adding his own comments in a number of one-page essays. This does not make for a comfortable read, but for those that persevere surely an unforgettable one.

**The Monsters We Deserve**, which includes quotations from Nietzsche in the original German, tells how an author living in a remote mountain house struggles to write a story loosely based on Mary Shelley's classic novel **Frankenstein**. He is subsequently visited first by her ghost and then by her famous creation in all its gory detail. Are monsters created by authors, he asks himself, or else by the demands of an audience eager for thrills? And once out there, can they take on a life of their own? Ambitious and sometimes hard to follow, this novel was aimed at an adult audience. But Marcus would have welcomed young readers too, never letting up in his determination to push them into new areas of thought.

His most personal novel, **Snowflake, AZ**, is set in the near future and narrated by teenage Ash in a style of speech somewhere between Huckleberry Finn and Holden Caulfield in **The Catcher in the Rye**. Afflicted by a mystery illness that absorbs all his energy, Ash winds up with a group of fellow-victims living in a community outside a small town in the Arizona desert. They believe they are suffering from Multiple Chemical Sensitivity, a compound of severe allergies caused by modern day pollutants. Ash stays there for six years, mostly lying in bed but occasionally doing the odd minor



chore. In a forward, Marcus describes how he too had previously been struck down in similar fashion. He also had at one time stayed with a group of fellow-sufferers living in America near the real-life town of Snowflake. Whether he too was the victim of increasing air, water and food pollution is left as an open question, but his story finishes with a serious warning for all our futures.

Slim, quietly spoken, consistently thoughtful but with an engaging sense of humour, Marcus when his health allowed was excellent company. He loved researching his novels, with **Witch Hill** benefiting from his wide reading about the Salem Witch Trials. In **Blood Red, Snow White** he combines a potted history of Russia written in the form of a fairy tale with an account of Arthur Ransome's high-wire adventures during and after the revolution. He quotes from authentic Secret Service reports written about Ransome at the time by puzzled British functionaries trying to make sense of what he was up to. Here once again was a quite new story with no connection to anything he had written previously.

A regular visitor to schools and a popular lecturer in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University, he was also adept in producing light-hearted fare for younger readers. There was also some non-fiction, with **All in Your Head: What Happens When Your Doctor Doesn't Believe You?** describing his own fight to have his debilitating condition properly diagnosed. His last, sadly posthumous story **Ravencave**, published this year by Barrington Stoke, is narrated by a young character who turns out to be a ghost. As he tries to keep up invisibly with his troubled family, a visit to Crackpot Hall in the Yorkshire Dales finally brings some peace to all of them. Crackpot, in this context, is in fact old English for 'Cave of the ravens.' How typical that Marcus would have both known this and then incorporated it as one more memorable detail into yet another of his haunting stories. Dying last November aged 54 well before his time, he will be very greatly missed.



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



# Good Reads

Our Good Reads were chosen by young people at **Brixington Primary Academy, Exmouth**. These young critics are the school's Reading Ambassadors and meet once a month to discuss what they have read and to share recommendations. Thanks to them and Head of School, Stuart Dyer, for these reviews.

## **Dennis the Menace: A Mission to Menace**

Meadowside Children's Books,  
978-1845390952

This is a different book to what I would normally read. I usually enjoy non-fiction books but I liked this one very much. I especially liked when Dennis wanted to get out of sports day, and when he threw eggs at the other competitors during the egg-and-spoon race...it was really funny! Dennis has a dog called Gnasher and he is always getting into trouble with Dennis. I would recommend this book to children in Years 4 and 5 because some of the language is quite challenging but it's very funny! *Owen, 10*

## **The Illustrated Mum**

Jaqueline Wilson, illus Nick Sharratt, Yearling, 978-0440867814, £7.99 pbk  
I enjoyed this book very much and would recommend it to any children over 8. This book is about a mum called Marigold who is covered in tattoos. She is the wife of Micky, who has left the house, but Marigold is convinced he'll come back. My favourite part is at the end when Dolphin – the younger sister – decides that, even though she and her older sister – Star – are in foster care, and her mum is in hospital, they are still a family. I've read lots of books by Jaqueline Wilson and this is one of my favourites. *Daisy, 10*

## **Happy from Head to Toe**

Fearne Cotton, Penguin,  
978-0241466711, £9.99 pbk

This book makes me feel really happy. It is non-fiction and it tells us how to find our own happy. It reminds us that other people are going through the same things as we are and is helpful if you are feeling worried. The author, Fearne Cotton, is especially talented and brings along some of her friends to teach us how to make our whole bodies happy. I enjoyed the interviews with famous people like Tom Daley and Tom Fletcher, who explain how they find their own happiness... with knitting, for example! I would recommend it for people older than 7, and I would rate it five stars! *Sophie, 11*

## **The Longest Whale Song**

Jacqueline Wilson, illus Nick Sharratt, Yearling, 978-0440869139, £6.99 pbk  
Ella is about to get a little brother.

Her mum is pregnant but, sadly, after she has the baby, she falls into a coma. It is extremely sad and Ella helps as much as she can. She finds whale music to play to her mum that she hopes will make her feel calm and happy.

I like how Jacqueline Wilson's stories are always inspired by the truth: this could really happen. She uses powerful description that make you feel all sorts of emotions and she keeps you guessing about what will happen next. Anyone over 8 would enjoy this book. The main character is a girl but it's a brilliant book for anyone to read. *Chloe, 11*

## **Anna at War**

Helen Peters, Nosy Crow,  
978-1788004718, £7.99 pbk

**Anna at War** is about a young Jewish girl whose house is smashed on the night of Kristallnacht. A few days later, her parents make the desperate decision to send her to England on the kinder transport (a train and a boat used to evacuate Jewish children). However, as the train sets off, a lady hands her a basket and says, 'Look after my baby,' and Anna wonders how she is possibly going to make it all the way to England and look after a baby! When she arrives, she is welcomed by a kind family. One day, when they are out playing, they find a mysterious man in a nearby barn and this is the start of a great adventure.

I like this book because it's fun to learn about history like World War Two through stories. It is exciting and once you start reading it, you won't want to put it down! *Aelfrice, 10*

## **Amari and the Great Game**

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

This is the second book in the series and is about a girl who is invited to a school all about magic and she gets given the illegal powers of a magician. Amari is confident, fierce and strong and, in this book, she meets some new characters but not everyone is who they seem. I really enjoyed it because it explains the origin of disasters from history (such as World War Two) in a magical way. Anybody who has read Harry Potter or The Wizards of Once would enjoy this book.

*Jack, 11*

## **Tom Gates: The Spectacular School Trip (Really)**

Liz Pichon, Scholastic,  
978-1407186733, £7.99 pbk

A boy called Tom enjoys going on a school trip but worries he might be in big trouble when he draws all over a wall that he shouldn't have. Luckily for him, the owners of the wall are quite impressed by his art work!

I liked this book because there aren't too many words and lots of pictures to enjoy. It's really good if you find reading a bit tricky or if you're a big fan of comics and cartoons. *Aimee, 11*

## **The Christmasaurus and the Naughty List**

Tom Fletcher, illus Shane Devries, Puffin, 978-0241407479, £7.99 pbk

I enjoyed this book because it was funny and exciting. I have read all three of the **Christmasaurus** books and I enjoyed this one the most: I couldn't put it down! The illustrations are great but I would prefer fewer pictures, to let my imagination run wild. My favourite character is Gemolina Shine from chapters 28-34. She changed her ways because of the Christmasaurus. I would recommend this book to 8-11 year-olds and would give it 5 stars out of 5! *Sophia, 9*

## **Where the World Ends**

Geraldine McCaughrean, Usborne,  
978-1474943437, £7.99 pbk

It is based on a true story from Scotland about men who try to harvest different types of birds from a foggy, dark cave called a stack. After their boat fails to collect them for their return journey, they fear that the world has ended and that angels must have taken everyone up to heaven. This leads to some truly gruesome action (I wouldn't read it just after you have eaten... it may upset your stomach!). It is one of my favourite books I have ever read and I would recommend it to people who like realistic and gruesome stories. I would give it 10 out of 10!

*Lincoln, 10*

## **The Last Bear**

Hannah Gold, illus Levi Pinfold, HarperCollins Children's Books,  
978-0008411312, £7.99 pbk

April and her father are doing research in the frozen Arctic when she comes across a giant polar

bear. When it's time to leave, the bear becomes an unlikely stowaway on their ship!

Once I started reading this book, I couldn't stop and just wanted to keep turning the pages. I like reading about animals and I like the theme of rescue. April is a funny character and is also cheeky: she often runs away. She reminds me of myself!

I think that children in Years 4, 5, and 6 would like this tricky book. *Isla-Jayne, 10*

## **The Boy in the Dress**

David Walliams, illus Tony Ross, HarperCollins Children's Books,  
978-0007279043, £7.99 pbk

When Dennis was little his mum and dad had an argument and it led to divorce. Dennis loved his mum so much. His dad burnt every picture that Mum was in. But, luckily, Dennis saved one picture of his brother, John, chasing him at the beach with Mum and Dad sat next to each other, smiling. Dennis finds a friend called Lisa who shares his passions for dressing up and looking at Vogue magazines. Lisa has a funny dare for Dennis which sets up the rest of this really funny story. I won't tell you the dare otherwise it would ruin the story! I rate the story 9/10 stars and recommend it to eight to eleven-year-olds. It's very funny! *Cobi, 10*

## **Attack of the Demon Dinner Ladies**

Pamela Butchart, illus Thomas Flintham, Nosy Crow,  
978-0857636065, £6.99 pbk

This book is really funny and I'd say it is for children aged 7-10. I love funny, adventurous books and this one was perfect.

The characters are really hilarious and silly. I love it where they think something bad will happen but it doesn't because it's their crazy imagination. I really like the character Jodie - she's adventurous and the leader of the pack. I liked the bit when they thought Maisie had been kidnapped by seagulls and when they thought there were eyeballs in the water.

All through the book you are not sure what will happen next; you'll want to keep reading!

I really enjoy Pamela Butchart books because they are crazy and silly and make me laugh out loud, a lot. *Esme, 10*



## 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.

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

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**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



### Don't Be Silly!

★★★★

Padmacandra, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978-1915252111, £12.99 hbk  
There's a lot to be said for being silly and it's explored with glee and gusto in this new book from the illustrator of *The Tale of the Whale*. Bouncy Bo and little Smudge live in a castle, lucky children, its walls covered in portraits of solemn-looking grown-ups. Their father, Mr Judge, a judge evidently weighed down by his caseload, is shocked by his offspring's exuberance as they somersault, jump and run through their home, and shouts out at them, 'Don't be silly!'. The two youngsters try to be more like grown-ups, dressing up in 'important hats' and 'shoes of a serious size' but the adults, real and painted, look down on them with disapproval. A trip to meet their grandparents, however, turns everything on its head – quite literally; a pair of travelling acrobats, they might be well past the first flush of youth, but they can and do cartwheel, dance and juggle with the best of them. Open-mouthed and even disapproving, Bo and Smudge take up their father's cry and, 'Don't be silly', they shout.

There is so much for readers of all ages to enjoy in this picturebook. Bo and Smudge's joyful antics have an irresistible appeal as they gallop through their home, accompanied by an equally lively little cat and – count them – dozens of mice too. Adult readers will particularly enjoy the gallery of portraits and everyone will relish the disparity between our rosy-cheeked young protagonists and the stern faces around them. Its message that silliness isn't the sole preserve of the young is beautifully delivered too. **AR**

Read our [Q&A interview](#) with author Padmacandra.

### Let's Stick Together

★★★★

Smriti Halls, ill. Steve Small, Simon & Schuster, 9781398511095, 40pp, £7.99 pbk

This is the third outing for duo Bear & Squirrel, following the best-selling

titles *I'm Sticking With You* and *I'm Sticking With You Too*. This time the friends are planning a party, with Squirrel at the helm, although his plans seem to be getting more and more extravagant as they go on. Bear is not so sure and starts to feel a bit shy, but after being reassured by Squirrel, he agrees to stick around and is confident that they will have a good time.

However, as their friends start to arrive in large numbers, it is Squirrel who is suddenly overwhelmed by the event. Bear is having a wonderful time, but when he can't see Squirrel anywhere, he rushes out of the party to look for his best friend. Bear now needs to reassure Squirrel how much fun he will have at the party and that it just wouldn't be the same without him there to share it too. 'We're there for each other, whatever the day. So let's stick together and party away'.

*Let's Stick Together* is a lovely heart-warming tale about the importance of friendship, being there for each other and how you are never truly alone when you have your friends by your side. Steve Small's bright and colourful illustrations create a wonderful, busy atmosphere, with plenty of fun things for small readers to find and talk about, while Smriti Halls' easy and clever rhyming story has the perfect mixture of humour and pathos. This is a warm and gentle book to cuddle up with and reassure little ones that everyone feels shy and scared sometimes, but that all you need are your friends. **AH**

### The Big Bad Bug

★★★★

Written and ill. Kate Read, Two Hoots Books, 32 pp, 978-1-5290-8540-2, £12.99 hbk

Down at the bottom of the garden, the minibeasts are gathering. The Big Bad Bug can't resist throwing his weight about, so the others decide to leave him to it. Cue the most enormous berry that anyone has ever seen. It's big enough to share, but will the Big Bad Bug agree?

Infinitely upbeat and packed with visual and verbal humour, this brightly-coloured picturebook tells the story of a beetle who wants ALL the blackberry, and finds himself in trouble – and lots of juice – when his selfish move backfires. Full of self-importance, lacking empathy or patience and completely unable to share, our antihero isn't BAD as such, he's just a bit obnoxious: rather like a toddler, in fact, which may explain one aspect of this book's appeal.

Kate Read uses painting, printing and drawing to create glowing, richly textured collages which clearly depict each character, and her imaginative illustrations are informed by observation of the natural world: children will be able to identify the

minibeasts on these spreads. The Big Bad Bug is particularly expressive, especially for readers familiar with tantrums: look for the picture of him falling backwards as the berry explodes, and enjoy the deliciously deadpan exchange that follows. When the other minibeasts ask why they should help the Big Bad Bug when he's so mean, the Big Bad Bug answers with a wonderful non-sequitur 'But I'm a very rare species...' Many of us have moments when we think we deserve special treatment, and Read enjoys the opportunity to poke gentle fun at such delusions.

Textually, this book is well-paced and easy to share, with plenty of alliteration and repetition (big bad bug, big bad mood...) to support language development, although the text might have benefited occasionally from tighter editing. The vocabulary is punchy and engaging (sneered, bellowed, magnificent, loomed...) and there are some great phrases ('I'm doomed.... DOOMED!') which will be speedily adopted by children who enjoy exploring words.

Some adults may miss the presence of an overt moral in this book: the Big Bad Bug doesn't mend his ways, and is only silenced by the arrival of the Big Bad Slug. But there's humour in the way that he emerges apparently unchanged, and his behaviour does invite audiences to consider why we act as we do. Like stropky toddlers, the Big Bad Bug will eventually learn from those who cheerfully demonstrate a kinder and more constructive approach, and working together and sticking to our principles, as the other minibeasts do in this story, may be the most effective way to make an impact.

Bright, bold and enormously appealing, *The Big Bad Bug* has a classic feel about it, and will quickly become a favourite at home and school. **CFH**

### Who Ate All the Bugs?

★★★★★

Matty Long, Oxford University Press, 9780192772633, 32pp, £7.99 pbk

Snail and Worm are out for a morning stroll and come across a shocking scene! Somebody has been eating all the bugs, but who could it be? Glow-worm tells him 'You can't fight the food chain!' but Snail is determined to investigate and sets off on a mission to bring the culprit to justice. Along the way he meets many creatures that could possibly be the one he is looking for, but who is really to blame? And what will happen when he finally catches up with the bug-eater?

Author/illustrator Matty Long is well known for his funny, inventive picture books and this new title is another brilliant addition to his stable of work. Each page is packed full of bright, eye-catching and humorous



# reviews

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

characters, each with their own hilarious additions to the story, with just the right amount of grossness for the intended younger audience. There are also a few unexpected twists to the tale, including how Snail's journey finally culminates, proving that Glow-worm was right all along.

There are many talking points along the way, giving the reader laughs and lessons in equal measures. The Bugsplaining pages at the end of the book give us even more information, accompanied by giggle-inducing comments from the bugs themselves. There is even a Bug Hunt activity to encourage a further delve back into the book to find any funny creatures we may have missed on first reading.

This wonderful book is a perfect mix of story and fact to keep readers entertained time after time. **AH**

### Mummy Time

★★★★

Monique James-Duncan, ill. Ebony Glenn, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 52951586 2, £12.99 hbk

Taking readers through the day from wake up time to bedtime, two young children show just how much they appreciate everything their mother does for them and the love and care she puts into every single part of their routine.

It certainly is a busy routine that keeps Mum actively engaged. Once the two are up she combs their 'bushy hair', gets them dressed and gives them breakfast; then with lunch packed, she drops the older child off at school and proceeds to an adult and child group session for some drumming and movement fun. It's enormously enjoyable but eventually they leave and move on to the market that's full of tempting-looking fruit and vegetables.

From there they head to the playground for some swinging and to meet friends, which takes them through to noon.

Back at home Mum settles her little one for a midday nap and sets about the household chores but in what seems like no time at all the infant is wide awake, hungry and in need of a nappy change. Very soon it's pick up sister from school time, after which off they go again to one of the many after school activities. Phew! Returning home, big sister tells Mum all about her day.

Come the evening, it's time to wind down; dad is back home and already busy in the kitchen giving Mum an opportunity to assist with any homework her daughter may have before they sit down for the evening meal. Then it's bath, story and bedtime.

All this is captured in Monique James-Duncan's cheery, rhythmic narration and Ebony Glenn's softly hued illustrations through which the love between mother and children shines forth in abundance. **JB**

### Dig Dig Digger

★★★★★

Morag Hood, Two Hoots, 978 1 5098 8986 0, 32pp, £12.99 hbk

This simple, witty text of a big adventure that befell a small digger. Life has become boring, always dig, dig digging down. So one day, Digger decides he will go up, to the blue sky, the stars, to adventure. Getting going was a huge challenge, each attempt failing until, on a page turn, suddenly, Digger goes up with the help of dozens of brightly coloured balloons! Down at street level, the vehicles, streetlights and even the traffic cones watch in amazement. But initial excitement palls, and Digger decided what he wants is to go away from these empty skies, with no friends. Luckily, what goes up usually comes down,....but his landing is on a desert island. As he sits in his solitary state, sobbing, he realises all he can do is DIG, dig down. A wonderful double spread follows, as furious progress is made, down and down, round and round. Until.... lights, traffic lights and cones and smiley vehicles welcome him, Digger is home! Quirky illustrations throughout follow this playful story, and young readers will love all the humorous characterisations from this UKLA award-winning and best-selling author-illustrator. **GB**

### The Nose, Toes and Tummy Book

★★★★★

Sally Nicholls, ill. Gosia Herba, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978-1-83913-185-1, £12.99 hbk

This bright and appealing picturebook for the very young celebrates playful physicality with energy and style. Thrillingly scary games of 'turn me upside down' and tummy-tickling jostle with gentle invitations to whisper, dance or hug, and **The Nose, Toes and Tummy Book** will be an instant hit with many families.

Sally Nicholls' humorous and informal text is well pitched for its target audience and she does a great job of cueing and supporting adults to read aloud with confidence. The visual and verbal drama is reinforced by constant invitations to participate – if the families on these pages are beeping each other's noses or playing peekaboo, why not join in? – and there are plenty of alliterative and joyfully repetitive verbal hooks (nom-nom-nom/kiss-kiss-kiss...) for children to pick up on, too.

Areas of flat colour in a bright but muted palette are punctuated by pleasing graphic patterns, but it's Gosia Herba's wonderfully diverse characters that dominate each spread. With large, expressive eyes that focus our attention on their gaze, we know who they care about and how they feel, and their elongated limbs are enjoyably sinuous and tactile. Seven whole-page images and

one high-energy double spread dwell on specific moments, but the rest are divided into multi-action rectilinear patchworks defined by coloured backgrounds. Some families will be drawn to these busy and exciting spreads; others may find them more challenging. Overall, though, this is strong, eye-catching design for the very young, who need and deserve to be stimulated in this way.

Despite ending with a wind-down and a definite GOODNIGHT, this book may be a little high-energy for some bedtimes, but families will enjoy sharing it whenever they want to cuddle up and have some fun. Thoughtful and inclusive representation, high quality design, a strong text and a focus on naming body parts will recommend **The Nose, Toes and Tummy Book** to nurseries, too. **CFH**

### Carry Me!

★★★

Georgie Birkett, Walker, 32pp, 978 1 5295 0273 2, £12.99 hbk

A perfect story for Mothering Sunday, this book features a youngster and his Mum. When Wilbur was very little, his Mummy loved to rock him, cuddle him, and carry him everywhere. He was such a snuggly baby, a little parcel of joy! As he grew, Wilbur (rabbit) grows bigger and stronger, but still he always wants his Mum to carry him. Perfect illustration of a toddler flat on the floor, screaming and shouting, 'CARRY ME!' He loves piggybacks and shoulder rides, and sitting cosy in his buggy whilst his Mum pushed him. Mum pushed or carried him everywhere, through rain and sun and snow. When Mum becomes really tired and achy, she suggests Wilbur should walk home, telling him he is very good at walking. Wilbur has three stock answers for that suggestion, the best being, 'My shoes get all grumpy-pumpy when I walk'. Until one day, his beloved toy rabbit falls out of the buggy and Wilbur hops out to retrieve it. When he comes back, shock horror, Mummy is sat, exhausted but relaxing, in Wilbur's buggy. Readers are asked what they think Wilbur will do next. A lovely story about the struggles in bringing up children, and a final caption reads 'Cuddle me!' for a hard lesson has been learnt. Comfortable pictures throughout, with a supportive audience of many animal families to follow the main events. **GB**

### Shine Like the Stars

★★★

Anna Wilson, ill. Harry Woodgate, Andersen Press, 32pp, £12.99 hbk 978-1-83913-150-9

This picture book introduces the young reader to the planet, and everything all around. 'I am planet Earth. The stars surround me...You make your home on me. You are part of me.' 'I am the sun. Sit with me. Watch me.' We are introduced to the ocean, a seed, for which we have to wait and not get cross when it takes a while, the sky in its various

moods, the moon, which controls the tides, and the stars, 'We are the stars, waiting to shine'. Author Anna Wilson declares, 'You rise like the sun, breathe like the ocean, grow like the seed, your moods change like the clouds. You light up like the moon. You shine like the stars.' Children all over the world (including a Japanese girl flying a kite from her wheelchair) experience various aspects of life on earth, with charming illustrations by Harry Woodgate. **DB**

### Granny and Bean

★★★★★

Karen Hesse ill. Charlotte Voake, Walker Books, 32pp, 978-1-5295-1004-1, £12.99 hbk

This atmospheric picturebook is about spending time with those we love, and the pleasures that that come from noticing and experiencing the natural world.

In keeping with weather that most readers would regard as unpromising, Granny and Bean's encounter with the beach is an active one. They laugh and sing, crouch to greet dogs, paddle in the water, leap over logs, and finish with a picnic on a weed-draped rock. Tactile watercolours invite us to share their experiences (the shuddering wave-foam, the sharpness of the dune grass, the grittiness of the sand...) and a sense of scudding wind and wetness pervades every spread. At all times, though, Granny manages to be wonderfully positive, and we watch Bean learning to be just as appreciative and observant.

Karen Hesse's lyrical and uplifting text has been carefully crafted to reflect the rhythms and vocabulary of everyday speech, ensuring accessibility alongside a sense of quietly epic grandeur. Rhyming verse keeps the action moving and helps those sharing it to read aloud with confidence and style, and the large, clear font enables interested children to connect spoken and printed words.

Despite their impressionistic approach, there's a realistic feel to Charlotte Voake's illustrations. Granny's yellow mac and Bean's red trousers pop against the grey beachscapes, but otherwise these atmospheric watercolours are as muted as the conditions. Many of the spreads take a long, wide-angle view, often from a raised perspective, rather than focusing close-up, and this sense of 'watching from the dunes' invites us in, as does the presence of other, unidentified walkers. Who are they? Could we join them on this beach and make memories of our own?

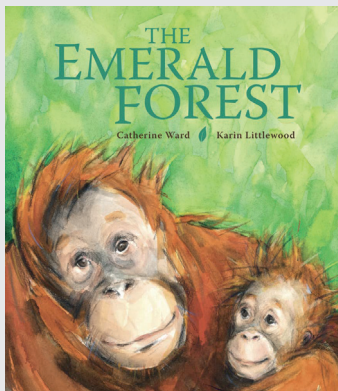
Granny and Bean invites the very young to share their experiences (of weather, the seaside, time with loved ones...) and gently primes them to notice and enjoy the natural world. Their eyes may not be drawn to this book among other, more brightly-coloured titles, but time in its company will be well spent. Voake's illustrations are perfect to grow on, evoking layers of memory and experience, and **Granny and Bean**



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

would make a rich starting point for creative work with older audiences.

One of the lovely things about this book is its gentle advocacy for the quiet benefits of attention, observation and reflection. There is no heavy-handed moral here, but important lessons are woven into every page. Wonderful memories can be created anywhere, and days out don't need to be expensive (or even warm and dry...) to be a hit. **CFH**

**The Emerald Forest**

★★★★★

Catherine Ward, illus Karin Littlewood, Otter-Barry Books, 32pp, 978-1913074142, £12.99 hbk  
Gorgeously illustrated with the jewel-bright colours of the Sumatran rain forest, this picture book carries a powerful message about the plight of the orangutans that live there, while providing hope for the future. The story's focus is Orangutan, who lives in a forest 'bursting with life'. We see her with her family, teaching the young orangutans what to eat, how to swing through the trees. It's an idyllic life, even after men's activities – implied, not described outright – force the family to move. As adults will expect, it's not long before the family are forced from their home again as loggers chop down the trees, the images changing suddenly from green and orange to nightmarish landscapes of purple and black. Orangutan and her family are rescued by a young woman, who leads the family to safety, the little group hand in hand. We discover she is a warden for the National Park. The final pages show paradise restored, the family happily settled and safe in their new home, and the last line opens the possibility that maybe, one day, the forest will be restored in full. The story is simple, and more effective for that, allowing the images to convey both the extraordinary beauty of the orangutan's habitat, the quiet joy of their lifestyle, and the terrifying destruction wrought by mankind. Final pages include information about orangutans, the threats to them and what young readers can do to help. **LS**

**Oh, Armadillo! This party is all wrong**

★★★★★

Ellie Irving, ill. Robert, Happy Yak, 32pp, 978 0 7112 7694 9, £7.99 pbk  
This little Armadillo is a happy chap with a great sense of humour, but he is very different from his other animal friends. While he tries his best, things always go wrong because he tries too hard, and, oh my, do they go wrong! When he invites them all to a party, they are excited and make requests: a cake, musical chairs, pass the parcel and balloons, but on the day of the party, his friends discover a sponge cake, made of kitchen sponges, an empty pass the parcel, a chair made of musical instruments, and a very large hot air balloon tied to the front door. After feeling glum about all this when the others explain, he trips over the musical chair, and after a series of unfortunate accidents in which he ends up falling in the cheese, he hops up, full of beans and explains to his friends that 'I'm creative, I think differently! And that's not wrong, it's right.' Then he shows all the ways they can use his mistakes, and it ends up the best party ever. They all learn that Armadillo being himself is 'the best thing he can be'. Lots of rhymes and repetition that young children love and the funniest of brightly coloured pictures full of incident will appeal to every child, whether 'different' or not. **ES**

**Word Trouble**

★★★★★

Vyara Boyadjieva, Walker, 32pp, 9781406398755, £12.95 hbk  
Ronnie, the four-year-old in this picture book, has not only moved house recently, but has also moved countries and has no English. He is happy and excited, and his supportive parents are helping him adjust. Because he is starting nursery, they have taught him a few words, and when he goes for the first time, the teacher and his classmates are smiley, welcoming and friendly. But when asked to introduce himself, he gets the words confused, and the children laugh. He feels so lonely and out of place that he spends the rest of the time playing on his own. When he tells his parents afterwards, they explain that things will get better. But the next day, when the children ask him the sorts of things that children do ask, like, 'What's your favourite ice cream?', all he can say is 'yes'. When he comes out of school, a very sad little boy, Dad has an idea – going to the park – and there Ronnie meets a little girl from his class. Swinging on the swings, they both enjoy being together, and their playing results in his starting to tell her all the individual words he knows. She responds with smiles and encouragement, and he soon learns that she and no doubt the others are wanting to like him. The tender and sympathetic illustrations

are just right for a child with such monumental changes to his life and will be perfect for use in schools and at home to promote understanding. **ES**

**Two Places to Call Home**

★★★★

Phil Earle, ill. Jess Rose, Ladybird Books, 32pp, 978024152952, £7.99 pbk  
Florrie is happy to have two of everything good – parents, brothers and pets, but when her parents split up and she has two homes, this is a development that worries her and makes her sad. Both parents are supportive, but the changeover times are hard. Her Dad makes up a story about finding bravery in a snowy country through looking for a special stone to hold to make her brave. Her Mum does the same, except her story is about flying to the moon in a space rocket to collect moon flowers for a necklace for the difficult changeover times. These magical stories, presented as though they are real happenings, may be confusing to the very young. The two brothers also never seem to have to make these changeovers which is odd, two criticisms that must be noted in an otherwise fine production with excellent illustrations. Florrie becomes adjusted to having two homes, and in the end gives her stone and necklace to Dad, who has himself become sad when she must leave. **ES**

**As Brave as a Lion**

★★★★★

Erika Meza, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781406393620, £12.99 hbk  
The little girl who inhabits this colourful story has an imaginary friend, a lion. She just calls him 'my lion', and they have lots of adventures because he is always with her. Some of their adventures have to do with being afraid to speak through nerves and shyness, or having to say 'sorry' when she has done something wrong. But most of the story has to do with fears: being in the dark at night, or a very high slide in the playground, when she climbs to the top of the ladder and then can't make herself go down until she remembers that her lion is afraid too, and together, they can be brave and slide down – which, of course, they do and learn to love it. The little girl is part of the lion as he is part of her, so they are brave together and encourage each other. It's a super parable about how to manage your own fears, and as so many young children have imaginary friends, this picture book would make a nice way of using them to the good. There are supportive parents, too, which is a good touch. The illustrations are fun, full of the two expressive faces interacting with each other through play as well as frightening times. A fine story that covers the general subject of fear without being the least bit preachy. **ES**

5 – 8 **Infant/Junior****Art and Joy Best Friends Forever**

★★★★★

Danielle Krysa, Prestel, 40pp, 978-3791375373, £12.99 hbk  
What are the secrets of creativity (and other life-enhancing essentials besides)? Art and Joy of course, perfectly personified in this delightful and inspiring picture book.

Art and Joy are best friends and like nothing more than making stuff – using paper, a few crayons and a roll of tape for example, they can create a brand new planet, while old boxes are transformed into a wonderful floats, the fanciest parade in town. It seems there's no end to their creativity until an Art bully arrives. It's very loud and

very grumbly, and its criticisms – 'That is silly and weird' – get inside Art's head. Confidence undermined, Art refuses to make anything unless it's 'serious, normal, tidy and right'. Fortunately, a walk in the open air and an encounter with a dragonfly, dressed in every colour of the rainbow, restores Art's creativity and soon, reenergised, our little maker is reunited with Joy. It's not just children who will recognise the damaging impact of the inner critic, we all know what it's like to feel that our artistic efforts are not good enough, or somehow silly, and we all need reminding how to overcome Art Bullies to find Joy again in the creative process. Art and Joy are proper characters and the story will bear multiple rereadings, while added treats include some activity suggestions. **LS**

**Dodos are NOT Extinct!**

★★★★★

Paddy Donnelly, O'Brien, 978 1 78849 396 3, 32pp, £10.99 hbk  
Highly recommended, this fabulous book suggests all readers should become aware that Dodos are NOT extinct! They are simply all around us, but in disguise, like many other famous creatures. Hidden under that long shaggy coat may be woolly rhinoceros, a sabre-toothed tiger, a megalodon or an Irish elk. Maybe



# reviews

## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

in disguise is a woolly mammoth, a moa or a Tasmanian tiger. Strangest of all disguises, the whole family of dinosaurs may be living right beside us. The dinosaurs are the most cunning, but, of course, 'disguises are expensive, so a lot of dinosaurs have full-time jobs. In fact, one of the top surgeons is a velociraptor.' The illustration is hilarious, masked and gowned, the 'surgeons' do look completely authentic! Dodo hang out as toucans and pelicans, or by slipping on a tuxedo, they mingle with penguins. Bound to be a favourite, the quagga, (front end like a zebra, back end like a horse) - well, they just wear striped trousers or a brown jumper and pretend they are one or the other.

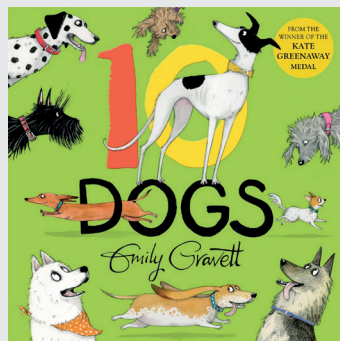
The illustrations are full of humour, and every spread is bustling with activity. Readers will just love this book, which is indeed the intent of this well-known and award-winning author-illustrator. The book ends with details of all the creatures mentioned, many having become extinct because of human activity. There are notes on how we can all help in preserving habitats for the many animals now facing extinction. Encouraged to preserve habitats, recycle, use sustainable products and volunteer to clean up our world, there is a part for everyone to play. Finally, there are notes on 16 different extinct creatures, from the tiny Christmas Island pipistrelle, last heard in August 2009, to the great auk, hunted for their skin, feathers and eggs, last pair killed 1844, to the famed dodo. The dodo was a flightless bird which existed solely on the island of Mauritius. It had no natural predators. But man brought cats, dogs, rats and pigs to the island...and the last sighting of a dodo is recorded for 1662. After reading these facts, readers will surely want to peruse the story again, new knowledge firing their imaginations as they enjoy the fantasy the author has created. Splendid, a book for every library, classroom and home. **GB**

### 10 Dogs

★★★★★

Emily Gravett, 32pp, Two Hoots, 9781529028089, £12.99 hbk

Emily Gravett can always be relied on to deliver a picture book that is not just fun but will inform and engage with interesting ideas. **10 Dogs** is one of those picture books. We are familiar with books that introduce very young children to numbers and counting. **10 Dogs** certainly does that. The young audience will see the numbers go down – and up. However, Gravett is not content to present a simple sequence. Here she subtly introduces subtraction, addition and even division as the dogs share (or not) the sausages. We should not be surprised. After all, this is an author who is not afraid to introduce the Fibonacci sequence in an attractive way that makes it visual for any age.



There is nothing pedestrian about this book despite its familiar subject – numbers one to ten. The production is excellent, and Gravett's illustrations have all the liveliness, humour and quality that we expect. Her dogs fill each double spread, bouncing off the pages, every line full of energy and clarity. Her colour palette, here quite limited, adds interesting texture and ensures the illustrations really do pop. As always every detail has been considered from the front cover where we see those enticing sausages to the final back cover where nothing remains but some greasy marks and crumbs, to the expressions of each dog and, oh dear, Two Hoots has attracted the attention of one of the mutts. This is a joyful addition to any collection – fun to read, fun to use. Excellent. **FH**

### Arthur Who Wrote Sherlock: The True Story of Arthur Conan Doyle

★★★★★

Linda Bailey, ill. Isabelle Follath, Andersen Press, 48pp, 9781839132995, £8.99 pbk

Whether you enjoy reading biographies, non-fiction, crime books or beautifully illustrated books about books, this picture book will delight you. It is an illuminating account of Arthur Conan Doyle's colourful life and how his world-famous fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes was born.

From his early years at home with his parents, Arthur loves stories which his Mum skilfully relates. However, he has a very sad and poor young life, going off to boarding school and later attending medical school. In order to earn some money to finance his studies, he starts joining ships intermittently and travelling across the world.

Arthur enjoys writing all kinds of stories, but publishers send them back; eventually he creates the character of Sherlock. His detective stories are loved by his fans; reading for pleasure is on the increase at this time. He finds people love reading about Sherlock every month in *The Strand Magazine*, but eventually he tires of writing these stories. When he kills off Sherlock and Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls, 'Twenty thousand readers immediately cancel their subscriptions to the *Strand*' (p.37).

The book concludes with more details of his writing, how he brings Sherlock back to life and how Arthur strives for fairness throughout his life.

There is an interesting Author's Note on the final pages giving extra detail and describing Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's legacy. The author's passion for her subject here is very evident. Linda Bailey is an experienced, multi award-winning Canadian author and her skill in creating this inspiring text is striking. Swiss illustrator Isabelle Follath brings the words to life with her gorgeous illustrations: my favourite being the picture of Arthur buying a book from Edinburgh bookseller, James Thin, which leaves him without his two pennies for lunch!

As well as being suitable for five-year-olds this book would work well as background reading for any student of Arthur's novels and short stories. I was hooked from the start of this life story and highly recommend it for schools, libraries and homes. **JS**

### Blanksy the Street Cat

★★★★★

Gavin Puckett, ill. Allen Fatimaharan, Faber, 80pp, 978 0 571 36960 7, £7.99 pbk

A perfect book for children just starting independent reading, with black and white illustrations on every page, a dyslexia-friendly font, with a layout especially designed for early readers. The tale opens as we are introduced to Pete, a busker who travels from town to town, playing his guitar and singing his songs. But Cat notices that they only get a few odd coins in their collecting tin, for most people scurry past, often with heads down and eyes on their phones. Cat hatches a cunning plan and soon he leads Pete to stand and busk in front of brightly coloured walls, covered in seascapes or views of the countryside, with the signature Blankys added to each one. These are all executed by Cat, Pete having no idea what is going on. Crowds begin to congregate and their tin overflows. Eventually Cat's artwork is sold at an auction house for a million pounds! Does Pete accept this fortune, and retire, as Cat thought? The towns that they visit are no longer dreary, and the people who stop now feel happy, not weary. Dotted with crochets and quavers and other musical notation, with Pete and his companion Cat as main characters, this is a very lively book with much to recommend it. The pictures, quirky and expressive, are by the World Book Day official illustrator for 2022 and 2023. Great fun. **GB**

### Lost

★★★

MariaJo Ilustrajo, Quarto Kids, 40pp, 978 10 7112 7794 6, £12.99 hbk

Most of us know how scary it feels to be lost; but to find yourself lost in a completely unknown concrete city knowing not how you came to be there, like the polar bear in this story, must be totally alarming. His efforts to ask for help result merely in a cup of takeaway coffee and a tube map,

which leads him not to the North Pole but merely to an underground station where he boards a train.

Unexpectedly Bear hears a little voice greeting him in a friendly manner. He follows the small girl and her mum until they reach their home. There, seemingly unknown to her mother, the child welcomes the bear, clothes him, feeds him, gives him a bath and they share some stories. Then the homesick creature finds a book entitled *The North Pole* and as they look at it together the little girl realises that her new friend needs her help to get back home.

Soon she works out a plan: Bear is wrapped up and under the watchful eye of a bird, is air-lifted all the way back to his homeland. There he receives a joyful welcome from his bear family to whom he shows the special something that the little girl has given him.

With touches of gentle humour, the author/illustrator uses Bear's voice (sometimes spoken, sometimes his thoughts) in combination with her striking art to convey the story about the power of friendship and the way it can help you to feel comforted, perhaps even found, in a seemingly alien place.

Ilustrajo makes effective use of contrast in her page layouts and colours – the cold greys of the city and the warm reds and oranges of the little girl's home.

(Those familiar with the author's first book *Flooded* will likely spot it in one of the scenes.) **JB**

### A Ticket to Kalamazoo!

★★★★★

James Carter, ill. Neal Layton, Otter Barry, 26pp, 978 1 91307 410 4, £12.99, hbk

There are a wide variety of poems in this collection, poems with imaginative imagery, clear patterns and memorable choruses, list poems, a rap, a recipe, and poems which invite actions.

We are taken on a journey throughout the book from poems about ourselves to exciting adventures (travelling to Kalamazoo, Timbuktu and Katmandu!) There are poems about animals in all shapes and sizes from bugs to elephants, poems about fairy tales, nighttime, space and aliens.

The order of the poetry is well balanced, after taking us on adventures the collection ends with a comforting poem for anyone not feeling too happy, 'Hug Day,' followed by a celebratory 'Happy Poem.'

Appealing illustrations wrap around the poems on highly colourful pages making this a very attractive book.

The strap line for this lively poetry collection is 'Zippy Poems to Read Out Loud' and they certainly invite you to do just that. This collection would be fun to share at home and even better in school with an enthusiastic chorus of voices. The simple structures and ideas are also perfectly pitched to inspire children to create their own poems. **SMC**



**The Fragile World**

★★★★

Alexandra Mirzac, Tate, 32pp,  
978 1 8497 6816 0, £12.99 hbk

Based on her own collection of ceramics, Alexandra Mirzac has created a moving and dramatic story that demonstrates the futility of war.

Conflict had long smouldered between the Reds and the Blues, each living as separately as possible with Reds hating Blues and vice versa. Did one colour believe its members superior or just different? Nobody is sure but this hatred had been passed down through many generations.

Then one day the Blues' jealousy regarding the lush garden of the Reds decided it should become owned by the Blues and a little girl comes up with an idea. Her plan was to paint everyone and everything blue thus making everything theirs.

Come midnight the Blues, armed with brushes and blue paint crept into the realm of the Reds and began working, starting in the garden. What they didn't know however, was that Red Dahlia was suffering an attack of insomnia and raised the alarm waking the other Reds and war broke out, the Reds fiercely fighting the Blues until everything was broken. Was it just possible that by collaborating, the warring factions could rebuild a world where friendship reigned and colour didn't matter; it seemed the only sensible way to go for therein was power instead of prejudice.

Quirky, but effective, this fable of fresh starts is one to stimulate discussion.

(Make sure you turn to the dedication page at the back of the book.) JB

**Major and Mynah – Operation Raven**

★★★★

Karen Owen, ill. Louise Forshaw,  
Firefly, 165pp, 978 1 9154 4403 5,  
£6.99, pbk

**Operation Raven** is the second instalment in the **Major and Mynah** series. The stories feature Callie and Grace, two young sleuths or, as they style themselves, 'SPUDS' (Super Perceptive Undercover Detectives) and their feathered sidekick Bo the mynah bird.

In this adventure Callie and Grace are off on a school trip to the Tower of London and Bo is heading there too – as a stowaway in Callie's bag. When they get there, it isn't long before they spot two suspicious looking individuals and find themselves witnessing a daring attempted robbery of some of the Tower's treasures. The team set out to thwart the robbers with the help of the tower ravens.

The story is told with humour and some beautiful imagery. Additional touches such as fake beards, fact files, codes and case file notes add to the fun. My review copy contained an indication of the lively illustrations

which will complete the final volume.

The action is set in London, and young fans may enjoy visiting the sights mentioned in the story, but there may be some disappointment – although they will find ravens at the Tower, Trafalgar Square, described as full of pigeons in the story, has been pigeon-free for twenty years.

Callie is deaf and everyday tasks such as remembering to pack spare batteries for her hearing aids is acknowledged, she refers to her hearing aids as 'slugs' suggesting a less than positive attitude towards them. But these are no ordinary devices, they give her magical powers – allowing her to communicate with her mynah bird, an extremely useful skill for a would-be detective.

With positive representation and an engaging story this is an accessible read for young readers developing independence. **SMc**

**John's Turn**

★★★★★

Mac Barnett, ill. Kate Berube,  
Walker Books, 32pp,  
978 1 5295 0677 8, £12.99, hbk

Every Friday at John's school there is a special assembly where children take turns to 'share gifts' – this involves doing a performance of some kind. There have been musical performances, magic tricks and jokes. The story begins with John waiting for his turn to perform, and he is very nervous. As he changes his clothes, we can see John's performance is going to be something different, he is preparing to show his skill at ballet dancing. The audience is underwhelmed as his music starts – the classical orchestral music is not what they are used to. However, as John's performance begins the audience become captivated. We see John visibly transform as he dances too, his nerves disappear, he becomes more and more confident – he is lost in the music and the well-rehearsed, familiar movements which become more and more spectacular. His skill is impressive.

The illustrations and page design are wonderful. They convey movement brilliantly with John's initial ballet positions developing into an explosion of exuberant pirouettes and twirls followed by a triumphant final leap. The audience leap to their feet to show their delight.

Challenging stereotypical assumptions that ballet is not an activity for boys, this is a simple, appealing and powerful book about having the confidence to be yourself and share your passions. **SMc**

**Bear and Bird**

★★★★

Jarvis, Walker Books, 68pp,  
978 1 5295 0489 7, £9.99 hbk

Here are four sweet and knowing stories about the friendship of Bear and Bird. You might expect a Bird

and a Bear to have less in common than Arnold Lobel's **Frog and Toad**, of beloved memory, not being as close in their nature as they are in a dictionary. But like their fabled amphibian forebears, they are innocent, well intentioned, vulnerable, foolish and, well, human. Their difference in size is the opportunity for humour in the first story as Bird falls upside down into a flower and, looking for Bird, Bear thinks he has discovered a talking flower. Bird takes on something of an adult role in the second story, as they set off for a picnic, and she quizzes Bear about whether he has been to the toilet and packed the music player, the deckchairs and a picnic. He says he has, but, of course, he hasn't. Subsequent improvisation saves the day, with Bird sparing Bear's feelings by never letting on that she realises he has forgotten everything. In the next story, it is Bear's turn to be understanding, as Bear's first attempt at painting is so much better than anything Bird has ever done and she flounces off affronted and jealous. The last story sees Bear cuddling up for a duvet day with Suzie, his favourite blanket, leading to an understandable misunderstanding from Bird, until their friendship is finally consummated with a joint 'blanket time'. These are stories of friendship for young children and their adults to enjoy, perfectly accompanied by Jarvis's own illustrations. **CB**

**My Baba's Garden**

★★★★★

Jordan Scott ill. Sydney Smith,  
Walker Books, 40pp,  
978-1-5295-1555-8, £12.99 hbk

*'My Baba lives in a chicken coop beside a motorway, behind a sulphur mill shaped like an Egyptian pyramid, bright yellow like a sun that never goes to sleep...'*

With this wonderfully vivid and specific sentence, the poet Jordan Scott grabs our attention and tells us that attending to this picturebook will be worthwhile. Who wouldn't be intrigued by such a house, in such a place? But already we sense more complex undertones: this is a thoughtful tribute to a real person who led a hard life and found her own way to flourish. Sydney Smith's arresting illustrations are wholly in tune with the text, and bring the relationship between Scott and his Polish grandmother to life in ways that speak to readers of all ages. **My Baba's Garden** is a book for intergenerational sharing and much more besides.

In keeping with the location of her house, the world that Baba creates around herself is endearingly unusual. Baba didn't express herself fluently in English, but she didn't need words to communicate what was in her heart. We come to know her, as Scott does, through her absorption in food – the growing of it, the preserving and cooking of it, and above all, her focus on ensuring that the boy she loves

eats well. Seen through a child's eyes, Baba's eccentricities shine brightly – on rainy days, she's an avid collector of worms for her garden – and as she grows older and needs more support, Scott learns to be with her, slowly and mindfully, in ways that bring them joy.

Although the young Scott doesn't fully understand, he senses that food matters to his Baba in a different way. He won't discover until later that her family experienced great suffering in WWII (and this information isn't shared directly in the text) but the knowledge informs every aspect of this book, and adds much depth.

Dark painted lines and stunning bursts of light feature in Smith's tender, luminous artwork, and every image is an impressionistic microcosm of action and emotion. Unusual viewpoints draw us in: we're able to peer over Scott's shoulder as his dad drives the car, or gaze child-height through an open kitchen door, and the illustrations of Baba's interactions with her grandson leave a warm glow, even in the rain.

Easy to read and enjoy at a glance, these spreads also reward closer, more contemplative looking, making this a book with much to unpack, and one that will continue to deliver new experiences as children grow. For adults – or those who've lost loved ones – the intensity of the feelings it evokes may be almost overwhelming. But there is such compassion here, and such appreciation of the small, important moments in our lives, that looking at these images and reading these words is always lightened by a sense of continuity and hope.

As a moving testament to the resilience of the human spirit and enduring love, **My Baba's Garden** is perfect for sharing within families. It also makes a great focus for creative projects with older readers about family and memory, about how we interact with our environment and what matters in our lives.

An autobiographical note at the beginning of **My Baba's Garden** supplies background information about Scott's Polish grandparents, who survived WWII before emigrating to Canada. **CFH**

**Adventuremice: Otter Chaos**

★★★★

Phillip Reeve, ill. Sarah McIntyre,  
David Fickling Books, 128pp,  
9781788452670, £6.99 pbk

Reeve and McIntyre revisit one of their favourite themes – imaginary islands in the sea – in this new adventure series for children.

Pedro is a little mouse with a big sense of adventure. In his desperation to see the world, he is whisked away by a wavy sea and disaster seems certain. That is until the Adventuremice arrive to rescue Pedro and fly him back to the fabled Mouse Islands in the ocean.

This is a dream come true for Pedro. Not only has he been granted his first taste of adventure, but he has been washed up in the home of the world's most famous band of mice!



# reviews

## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

When a giant, hungry otter is spotted nearby, Pedro has the chance to prove his value to the Adventuremice, and to plot a course for future adventures.

Episode One of **Adventuremice** has enough charm, wit and silliness to hook young readers into the series, and McIntyre's illustrations are typically irresistible. Brilliant characterisation is achieved in the simplest way – with bold line and colour delivering pictures that sparkle and fizz on almost every page. As is always the case with David Fickling publications, the book is lavishly published on generous paper with bright, vibrant colours that do full justice to the gorgeous pictures.

It's a simple story and this first episode is very much an introduction. Though there are few moments to get readers' hearts racing, Pedro and his friends offer enough in **Otter Chaos** to win over young fans for this new series. **SD**

### The Spectacular Suit

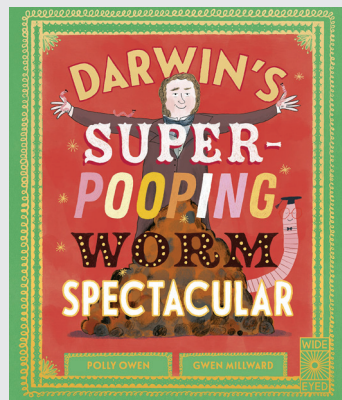
★★★★

Kat Patrick, ill. Hayley Wells, Scribble, 32pp, 978 1 913348 79 3, £12.99 hbk  
Perfect for any little girl with a birthday coming up, who longs for party gear that does not involve frilly dresses! This is how Frankie feels as she helps her Mum decorate the borrowed gazebo, for shelter come rain or shine. Everyone in Frankie's class is invited. Her big brother bakes a blue cake and a funny looking pie, promising both would be delicious. However, when her Mum sorts out a choice of three dresses to wear for the party, Frankie hates each one. Her dream is to wear a suit, a spectacular suit; not a grey suit, like school uniform, pigeons or grey buildings. She dreams of a suit with lightning bolts, and stars – a suit with swagger! Drawing her ideas does not help, her party being only one day away. Family to the rescue. Her discarded drawing is found and out comes fabric, scissors and a sewing machine. Miracle workers! Next morning, Happy Birthday they all cry, as Frankie tries on her spectacular suit. What a party, and Frankie is delighted to feel so special. The digitally created illustrations are bold and accurately portray all the emotions throughout the tale. The colour palette is shades of orange. Yellow and blue, the figures outlined in black, and the final double spread of the party goes has a feel of carnival. Frankie certainly looks pleased with herself! **GB**

### Darwin's Super-Pooping Worm Spectacular

★★★★

Polly Owen, ill. Gwen Millward, Wide Eyed Editions, 32pp, 9780711275959, £12.99 hbk  
The bright and eye-catching front cover of Charles Darwin and a pile of poo is quite startling and will attract lots of children to pick it up.



But underneath this light-hearted story is a very serious message: earthworms are the most important species on Earth. Their amazing poo provides nourishment for all plants and animals.

With brilliant illustrations by talented artist Gwen Millward, Polly Owen recounts the true story of how Charles Darwin studied earthworms for 40 years. The pages of this book are filled with the experiments he performed and the reasons he carried them out. For a long time people didn't believe what he was telling them about worms, but in the end he published his findings in *The Formation of Vegetable Mould Through the Action of Worms*.

Darwin considered worms to be superheroes: this picture book is filled with fun facts throughout, as well as a Wormy Facts page at the end. Young people will enjoy delving into this story and learning all kinds of information about worms; there was even a type of worm named after Darwin! In all there are about 3,000 species of earthworms!

The illustrations often include speech bubbles which work well, and the colourful, amusing pictures will hold a child's attention. Finally, the author explains about how we can all care for earthworms and even join The Earthworm Society to support their cause. Any budding young scientist will adore this volume with its detailed experiments on worms taking place on the world stage! I enjoyed reading how Stonehenge was included in Darwin's thinking; this book is a fitting tribute to one of our most famous scientists. Children and young people in homes, classrooms and libraries won't want to put it down! **JS**

### Tell Me About...Plants

9781787418080

### Tell Me About...Human Body

9781787418097

★★★★

Emily Dodd, ill. Chorkung, Templar Books, 46pp, £9.99 each hbk

These two books from the **Tell Me About...** series are in a small hardback format which is just

perfect for this age group. **Tell Me About...Plants** is also produced in partnership with the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, which is an excellent idea to encourage young scientists and those keen on the natural world. I think this connection will help to promote this title in the series, as well as the whole series itself.

Both volumes are packed full with information for young readers on these subjects and the Glossary at the back of both books is extremely helpful. **Tell Me About...Plants** covers many different aspects of the subject: seeds, flowers, fruit, leaves, plant attack, organising plants, types of tree. There are some amazing facts to satisfy curious minds, such as the way in which pollen grains are actually different shapes depending on the plant!

With a similar layout to the title on plants, **Tell Me About...Human Body** is divided into 18 sections of two pages each. After some facts about the body generally, we are taken through various parts and clear explanations follow in easily manageable chunks. I liked the description of ears being connected to a, 'Library of sound memories' in your brain so that we can understand language.

The illustrations in both books are colourful, clear and fun. Diagrams work well with the text and simplify difficult concepts: the heart in the Pumping Blood section and the map of the Brilliant Brain. I found some beautiful illustrations which are a credit to the artist, especially the two pages (pp.30-31) showing Trees & The Seasons in **Tell Me About...Plants**.

Overall, these are very successful books which experienced writer Emily Dodd has created. It cannot have been an easy task to communicate information about these complicated topics to five-year-olds. I am sure both hardbacks will be fabulous gifts or reading material in homes and schools to inform and excite budding scientists! **JS**

### So You Want to Be a Frog

★★★★★

Jane Porter, ill. Neil Clark, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781406399714, £12.99 hbk

If you are looking for an innovative, engaging picture book which simultaneously teaches you lots of interesting facts about frogs, then this is the perfect read! The book is about joining Frog Club and Fabio Frog, the coach, gives ten rules to absorb about joining the club.

Rule One starts with how a frog begins life as frogspawn, and Fabio asks the reader to, 'Wriggle like crazy' (p.9). The book includes amazing facts about frogs: they can jump extremely far and their tongues are incredibly long. It is fascinating to learn about all the different types and colours of frogs; the gifted illustrator positions various green frogs crouched on an artist's palette!

This volume is very comprehensive as regards factual content: there are

pages covering the history of frogs, where in the world you can find different species of frogs, what they eat and how they are camouflaged. Fabio also invites the reader to try out croaking...

I thoroughly enjoyed this beautifully illustrated book and there are some clever devices including the Frog Club Checklist and the Clubhouse Menu. The endpapers at the beginning of the volume are truly beautiful. This is a splendid work of art and is a fine example of high-quality publishing from Walker Books.

When I learned that this is a follow-on title to **So You Want to Be an Owl**, I was delighted to discover there is more to savour from this talented author. Jane Porter is a very experienced writer who often works with children and this understanding of youngsters shines through. Whether at home or school, little ones will love to pretend they are frogs as they also learn so much about these creatures. I am sure this will be such a successful series; congratulations to the whole team on creating an extremely clever and fresh look at frogs. **JS**

### Outside

★★★★★

Bee Chuck, Little Tiger, 32pp, 9781838913946, £12.99 hbk

As we go about our daily lives again now, it almost seems hard to imagine that three years ago we all stayed home for such a long time and couldn't really go outside. When we were allowed to go out again, the world felt so much bigger and we noticed the changes that had taken place while the human inhabitants had been kept away from the streets.

Bee Chuck's debut picture book perfectly captures this unique time in our lives, with its clever and clear summary of the world then and bright, bold, almost child-like illustrations. There is so much to see on every page and each re-reading of the book is sure to uncover another bird, flower or animal not previously spotted.

As the book reminds us, going outside was just something that we did. It was taken for granted and not really thought about, until we could no longer do it quite so much. Once the novelty of staying home had worn off, the luxury of being able to just go out whenever we wanted to was sorely missed.

I loved the chaotic colourful illustrations, which grow throughout the pages, much as the untamed countryside around us was allowed to do without human intervention. 'Outside had broken free'; nature abounds with trees, foxes, and the bees as 'we realised that our world wasn't just for people and that outside should not be tamed'.

This beautiful book is a perfect way to gently explain the events of the pandemic to younger children, who were too small to remember this time and should be a staple read for all schools and libraries. **AH**



## Ed's Choice

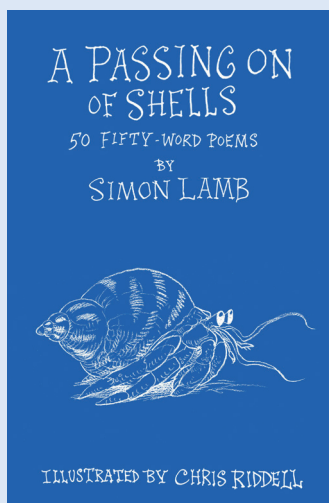
### A Passing On of Shells

★★★★

Simon Lamb, illus Chris Riddell, Scallywag Press, 112pp, 978-1915252128, £10.99 hbk

It's fitting that Simon Lamb's debut collection of children's poetry opens with an invitation: the poem *How to Start an Adventure* invites us to get up, step outside, 'and run'. His poems, likened later to snow globes, 'each a little capturing of a moment, a memory', are full of invitation to explore those moments and memories they capture, and many share the sense of excitement and exhilaration as to the adventures they begin. It's more than likely too that these fifty poems – just fifty words each – will also serve as invitations to children to write their own poetry; it seems in this playful, ingenious collection such a very enjoyable thing to do.

Though Lamb limits himself to fifty words for each poem – deliberately cheating in the poem *Word Count* in which the 51st word, 'words' is crossed out – there are few limits to subject or theme. There are poems about nature, about family and friendships, and a good few about the act of writing or creation itself, such as in the witty, entertaining *Murder*



*Mystery*, self-describing *Pocket Poem*, or *Untitled I*; *Paint on Canvas*, which concludes with another invitation, this time to 'Create. /Cause chaos.' The title of the collection can be found tucked in the poem, *Life on the Rock*, about hermit crabs, where the precision of the fifty-word form is delicately used to create the sense of an endless 'passing on of shells'. Illustrations by Chris Riddell match the poems perfectly. **MMa**

Simon Lamb explains why he chose poetry in this [special article](#) for **Books for Keeps**.

though, for what zoologist, Nicola Davies does in this second book in the *Protecting the Planet* series, is to interweave the alarming negative effects of climate change with a positively written, sensitive account of a year in the life of a pair of Emperor penguins raising a chick in an inhospitable environment. We learn how the female finds a mate, lays an egg and then having entrusted it to her partner to incubate, returns to the sea for ten weeks to feed and then makes the hazardous journey back.

This story, with its effective use of metaphor, is one of resilience, but Nicola doesn't spare readers the cruel realities facing the species: 'But there are pools of silence' ... 'At Halley Bay, the satellite looks down onto a page that's almost blank.' She finishes this account by reassuring us that 'Somewhere down there, the Empress has found a new place to raise a chick; a place where the sea ice can be trusted ... At least for now.'

Catherine Rayner's stunningly beautiful water colour illustrations complement the narrative perfectly, providing a variety of perspectives of the Emperors' stark environment and there's an introduction by climate scientist and biologist Dr. Phil Trathan giving information on emperor penguins and climate change. The final double spread reiterates the vital message, explaining concisely what is meant by climate change and what we can all do to help. **JB**

this old dog poet is still up to his old tricks. So there's plenty of wordplay, fantastic and surreal speculation, a number of alternatives to what someone on a mobile phone might say if they weren't telling us they were on a train ('I'm ascending and descending in an ancient elevator') and brilliant riffs on *Taking Umbrage* and *Flip Flop Creatures* (words like hurly-burly, hustle bustle and razzle dazzle). It's a collection that's as thoughtful, ingenious, curious, inviting and funny as ever, completed by some entertaining black and white illustrations from Ed Boxall. **CB**



### Fortune's Fools: A Romeo Roller Coaster

★★★★

Ross Montgomery, ill. Mark Beech, Barrington Stoke, 128pp, 9781800901469, £7.99 pbk

This new story of sporting rivalry shines a light on the very worst things about sport. Dom and Blake are BFFs 'for evaaaaaaaaa!' and are the best two sportspeople in their school. Their friendship is pushed to the limit, though, by shameful grown-ups hungry for a taste of sporting victory.

Headteacher – Mr Fortune – is a Shakespeare nut and decides that the entire school house system is going to be based around Romeo and Juliet. With sports day approaching, the school community takes the play's themes somewhat too seriously, with hordes of Capulets and Montagues behaving appallingly in an effort to assert themselves as the best house. Teachers and parents who are usually very civil suddenly become mortal enemies, willing to win at any cost; even if it means shouting abuse at one another's children or – even worse – insulting one another's baking!

The course of true friendship never runs smooth, even for the fastest two sprinters in town. Placed in opposing houses, with marauding supporters to

please, Dom and Blake must battle one another for victory, whatever it takes.

**Fortune's Fools** is a fun take on the two households of fair Verona, celebrating one of the Bard's most famous plays in a fun and original way that is relatable for young readers. Montgomery's use of a three-legged race to evoke the tragic final scene of **Romeo and Juliet** is especially impressive.

**Barrington Stoke** always publish their books in a way that is accessible to emerging readers, and the manageable length and sporty theme of **Fortune's Fools** means that it could be a real winner for reluctant readers. **SD**

### Emperor of the Ice

★★★★

Nicola Davies, ill. Catherine Rayner, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 4063 9708 6, £12 hbk.

Scientists monitoring Emperor penguins by satellite have concluded that due to global warming, the winter ice at Halley Bay, Antarctica, cannot be trusted any longer.

'Thousands upon thousands of emperors have disappeared', they've had to move and as a consequence the Empress that features in this book will have to find a new place to raise her chick.

That's getting ahead of things

### Selfies with Komodos

★★★★

Brian Moses, ill. Ed Boxall, Otter-Barry Books, 96pp, 978 1 91307 409 8, £8.99, pbk

It's another poetry collection from Brian Moses and just when I was thinking how does he keep it going after thirty years and more, he asks the same question himself. In a poem called *Words*, he looks back on all the words he has spoken and written, even those he 'picked off the page and threw away', and wonders 'could I suddenly find one day/ that scarily, spookily, / I have nothing more to say.' Obviously, not yet Brian, not just yet. Perhaps it's just the perception of another man in his seventies, that I detect something of an elegiac tone in some of his latest offerings. One poem invites us to think of the things that we haven't seen enough of, another advises us to 'Be aware, be wise, catch the moment.' Another talks of 'freezing time', a notion which quickly generates second thoughts: 'Or then I could find/ that I'm eternally a school-child...Or I can't leave the supermarket, ever.' And there's *My dog's bucket list* and *Nobody told the dog*, about the dog who goes about his life, unknowing that the vet has said his days are numbered. But don't let me give the wrong impression,

### Woodwitch

★★★★★

Skye McKenna, Welbeck Flame, 400pp, 978-1801300414, £12.99 hbk

The magical adventures that began in Skye McKenna's debut **Hedgewitch** continue in **Woodwitch**, another engaging story, deep-rooted – in the best way – in classic fantasy adventures from **The Worst Witch** to the **Chronicles of Narnia**. Trainee witch Cassie is living in the village of Hedgely with her aunt who, as Hedgewitch, is responsible for keeping the villagers protected from the Faerie folk who live in the Hedge, an enchanted forest that borders the human and magic worlds. Her skills at riding her broomstick Tantivy and at brewing spells are improving but, mostly educated at a London boarding school, she still trails behind her friends Rue and Tabitha, not to mention Ivy, always top of the class. Cassie does have something in common with Ivy however: both their mothers are absent. Cassie's is lost somewhere in the Hedge, Ivy's in an enchanted sleep. Their different efforts to bring their mothers back draw them both to the Hedge and often into all sorts of danger. Meanwhile, there are related threats to the people of Hedgely from their



## 8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

magic neighbours, with villagers falling under the spell of the wicked Erl King's minions, even Cassie's irritating cousin Sebastian.

McKenna successfully weaves magic and mystery, family and friendships into a bewitching story, her descriptions of the herbs, plants and trees of the British countryside adding a particularly pleasing extra element. She has a proper appreciation too of the importance of food in this kind of adventure and Cassie's aunt's housekeeper Mrs Briggs (who we learn is hundreds of years old) is a marvel at baking, while the variety of delicious teas on offer in Hedgely seems almost never-ending. The cosiness provides an important balance to the real dangers faced by Cassie and her friends as they encounter the inhabitants of the Hedge, some of whom are very nasty indeed. There's at least one more adventure to come, and I look forward to it. **MMa**

Andrea Reece [interviewed Skye McKenna](#) about *Hedgewitch* for **Books for Keeps**



### Ivy Newt and the Storm Witch

★★★★★

Derek Keilty, illus Magda Brol, Scallywag Press, 176pp, 9781915252180, £7.99 pbk

It is Ivy Newt's birthday – but it is not going to be a happy one. A storm has prevented her friends from coming to her party. Never mind, her parents have prepared a real surprise – a magic disappearing act. Except they seem to have really disappeared. It is up to Ivy with the help of her familiar, Tom to find out what is going on...

This is a fast moving, enjoyable story from the pen of a well-established author. The plot gallops along, Ivy and shape-changing Tom are recognisable children who will engage their young audience and there is a satisfying mix of jeopardy and laughter. The wicked witch Clawdelia is suitably nasty. There are problems to face – but cake at the end. Keilty's sure touch ensures the humour shines through

without overwhelming the action. His prose is brisk and contemporary, his vocabulary rich. Magda Brol's lively illustrations and page decorations capture the spirit of the prose, adding a welcome visual element to the narrative. This would be ideal for confident KS1 readers as well as KS2 where well written extended texts that are fun and imaginative are important. It could also be a good book to share aloud. I hope we will see more of Ivy Newt and Tom. **FH**

### The Way of Dog

★★★★★

Zana Fraillon, illus Sean Buckingham, Chicken House, 272pp, 9781915026231, £7.99 pbk

Scruffity is alone. He longs for Family and remembers the love of his mother; a mother who is taken from him when he was a very small puppy. No one seems to want him, even though he has perfected some tricks. Only the ManPup who helps look after him wants him. Escaping together, they set off to find a better future – then tragedy strikes. Can Scruffity find a way to the Family he longs for but has never had?

In this verse novel, Fraillon takes on the persona of a dog. The loose flowing format is particularly suited to creating the sense of a thought process and an understanding of the world from a different viewpoint to that of a human. It is a bold move; while animal narrators, in particular dogs, are a frequent trope in children's literature, not so many attempt to create a language for the animal. Initially the reader might find the use of such terms as Manpup or shoe-legs and the capital letters, forced, but the skill with which the author drives the plot on soon makes this easy to accept. Scruffity emerges as a very real character and what he experiences as he travels is believable. There are moments of drama, emotion – and a satisfying ending. The pen and ink illustrations and page decoration by Sean Buckingham bring a visual element, punctuating the text without overwhelming it, rather they subtly add to the impact of the narrative. An interesting addition to any collection and one for that young reader who is looking for something other than fantasy, something rooted in the real world. **FH**

### My Heart is a Poem

★★★★★

Little Tiger, 48pp, 978 1 83891 440, £12.99, hbk

The best poetry, whatever the subject matter engages the feelings of its readers. This anthology places feelings themselves centre stage. Readers will find poems about joy, excitement and surprises as well as fear, embarrassment and sadness. Mandy Coe's opening poem encourages us to imagine what

laughter might actually look like. In *The Land of Blue* unhappiness is described as a place waiting for you, and loneliness is personified in *The Rider* by Naomi Shihab Nye. Imagery for feelings abounds and this is juxtaposed with Jay Hulme's poem *Lost for Words* about the absurdity of idioms and the difficulty of navigating their meaning. Feelings associated with particular situations are highlighted for example in Coral Rumble's *Ache* about the agony of not being picked when teams are selected and how the prospect of homework can make you feel in Jack Prelutsky's *Homework, Oh Homework*.

Diverse perspectives are represented with a range of lesser-known writers included alongside well-established and celebrated poets including Valerie Bloom, John Agard and the current children's laureate Joseph Coelho. Biographies of the poets featured are included at the back of the book.

Artwork from four illustrators provides variety and makes this a very attractive volume. Part of the joy of poetry is the opportunity to bring your own meaning and interpretation to a poet's words and it is the skill of the illustrator to reflect this and keep possible interpretations as open as possible. It is a pity that the final illustration restricts meanings children might bring to Elaine Laron's beautiful poem entitled *No One Else*. This poem has a broad message telling readers that only they know how they feel and no one else can tell them what to like or who to love. The illustration could be seen to suggest the poem's message refers only to gender identity.

Overall this is a beautiful book which, in line with the publishers' intentions, helps to provide 'a guide to the labyrinths inside ourselves, to recognise our own emotions and gain an insight into the emotions of others.' **SMc**

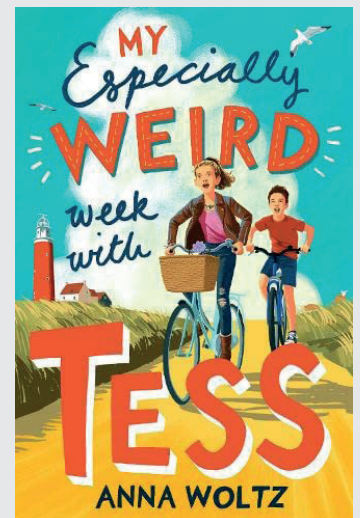
### My especially weird week with Tess

★★★★★

Anna Woltz, translated by David Colmer, Rock the Boat, 166pp, 978-0-86154-584-1, £6.99 pbk

Anna Woltz is a best-selling novelist in her native Netherlands and has won awards, so it's good to have this book translated into English (and 12 other languages) – it's a great story!

Sam is on holiday with his family on the island of Texel, when his brother Jasper has a minor accident and is laid up with a broken ankle, so, with Mum incapacitated by migraine, and Dad preoccupied, Sam is more free than he had expected to be. When he meets the Doctor's receptionist's daughter, Tess, who is a little older than him, she demands that he tries ballroom dancing with her, which very much surprises his Dad when he comes to fetch him, but Tess persuades Dad that she will show Sam the island and keep him safe. He is soon totally swept into her world, and involved in the trap she lays for



the man she knows to be the father that her Mum wouldn't tell her about, and who doesn't know she exists. This man arrives on the island, and Tess manages to spend some time with him and hopes to be able to decide whether she wants him to know she's his daughter. Tess is a force of nature, and Sam is soon on her wavelength: they kindly plan a lovely funeral for a dead bird when his elderly owner couldn't find anyone to give it the respect he feels it should have – that's a nice part of the story that shows Tess to be a sensitive girl and not always spiky and demanding. Sam is a bright lad, and he often wonders about all sorts of odd questions like 'Did the last dinosaur know it was the last?' and his brother Jasper, still smarting at his failure to pass the high school admission test, mockingly calls him Professor. His inventive brain is needed several times as he tries to help Tess, and things get complicated, but all is well by the end, and the whole adventure is tremendously entertaining. Anna Woltz seems to be able to get into the heads of a bright boy and an intelligent but insecure girl, and there is a lot of humour and fun in this book – it's very enjoyable, and highly recommended. **DB**

### The Night Animals

★★★★★

Sarah Ann Jukes, illus by Sharon King-Chai, Simon & Schuster, 288pp, 9781398510920, £7.99 pbk

Nora is fine; her mother fine. At least that is what she tells herself – though it is clear her mother is not fine and the bad days are becoming more frequent. How can Nora cope and return her world to normal? Do the night animals – the fox, the hare, the raven and the otter – rainbow shimmering ghost animals that only Nora can see, have the answer? Can she allow Kwame, her new friend, into her world? How can she be fine, when her life is not?

Sarah Ann Jukes takes a situation that many young people will recognise today to create an imaginative and hopeful story. Nora wants to take care

of her mother, she also wants her life to be normal. The animals, so real to her – and to the reader – are a clever and sensitive way to illustrate Nora's emotions, fears and the difficult decisions she must take. Nora is a well drawn contemporary child as is Kwame, her friend. Both feel that they are outsiders, alone – but both reveal individual strengths. The adults are handled well and have a real presence that is believable. Jukes' prose is direct and accessible. Nora tells her story herself, a technique that mixes vivid descriptive moments with the immediacy of emotion and the directness of dialogue. The plot moves briskly, neatly balancing the real world of school and home with Nora's imaginative engagement with the ghost animals. This is a satisfying and engaging novel to be recommended with confidence. **FH**

### Bob vs The Selfie Zombies

★★★★

Andy Jones, ill. Robyn Boydon, Piccadilly Press, 294pp, 9781800783485, £7.99 pbk

This new sci-fi comedy for children takes readers back and forth through time, following a rather reluctant hero tasked with preventing the rise of a hideous hoard of selfie-taking zombies.

Bob wants nothing more than to jam in his garage with his best friend, Malcolm, in their two piece band The Tentacles of Time. Sadly, there are quite a few distractions for him to navigate. His nosy neighbour, Dismal, keeps banging on the door trying to get in on the act with her tambourine-playing, and the school's biggest big-head, Eno Fezzinuff, keeps showing off about the upcoming talent competition. Bob also has bigger worries on his mind, such as the recent death of his mother. He wants to be there for his dad and the last thing he needs is to randomly keep disappearing into the future.

Bob's time travels always take him to his own future, often not too far ahead, where he encounters his future self and future Malcolm who, for some reason, always seem to be in the middle of some dilemma involving banana bread. It's quite fun frightening Malcolm every time Bob materialises in the future from thin air, but Bob and future Bob have serious matters to attend to: The Tentacles of Time's performance at the upcoming talent show is the only thing that can prevent the entire human race becoming phone-obsessed selfie zombies.

Time travel is a famously difficult thing to explain and stories can easily find themselves tied up in knots by its rules and theories. However, Jones' story retains an astounding clarity throughout and never feels too complicated. The cast of characters is small and each has just a few key traits and details that follow them into the future. Though there's a genuine sci-fi

tone, the focus of the story is on the relationships that its heroes have. The future of the world depends – literally – on Bob and his friends and, when these friendships are threatened, there are moments of real emotion that will stir young readers.

With such a silly title, readers may expect Bob and the Selfie Zombies to be a slapstick affair. Though there are lots of jokes, they are clever and witty and are often the result of Bob and future Bob teasing one another. The real enjoyment of the book comes from Jones' management of the young heroes' relationships over multiple timelines. Bob and the Selfie Zombies is an emotional, time-travelling roller coaster. **SD**

### Yikes! A Mummy's Got My Granny!

★★★★

Jason Beresford, ill Chris White, Caboodle Books, 208pp, 9781919614830, £6.99 pbk

'What happened to Pharaoh Ptomey XIII really was one of the greatest mysteries of the Ancient World. Until now'.

Best friends Stan and Zoe are helping Stan's Mum giving donkey rides on Plimpton beach, when out of nowhere they are caught up in a huge swirling sandstorm, which disappears as quickly as it arrived. Once they can see around themselves, they realise that all their donkeys have disappeared during the storm, other than Fred who is found standing on top of the ice cream van! To add to the weirdness, Stan is sure that he saw a red-eyed, scary character dressed in bandages running around in the sand, although he had lost his glasses, so can't be fully sure.

Stan and Penny try to take their minds off the missing donkeys by going for a swim in the local lake and accidentally stumble on the entrance to a secret underground cave. What are these strange bottles of Klim Yeknod and why is there a sarcophagus hidden down there?

What happens next is a fast paced, madcap adventure involving mysterious hideaways, secret potions, a two thousand year old pharaoh, a magical amulet, armies of mummies, motorbike and helicopter chases, not to mention Fangs the crazed fish! Chris White's cartoon-like illustrations add the perfect touch of additional humour to this bonkers tale, which will keep you guessing right to the end.

Children with a love of history will enjoy the facts about Ancient Egypt interspersed throughout the story and especially the Glossary of Ancient Egyptian terms at the end of the book, but all readers will enjoy the hilarious and sometimes crazy ride as the mysterious past meets our current world.

You will never enter a coffee shop

again without wondering what might be happening behind the scenes! A fun-packed read of family, friendship and adventure, perfect for KS2 and above. **AH**

### Hotel of the Gods: Beware of the Hellhound

★★★★

Tom Easton, ill. Stephen Brown, Hachette Children's Group, 190pp, 9781408365540, £6.99 pbk

In this comedy series opener, a huge host of mythical beasts and ancient gods are all put together into one heavenly hotel. Unfortunately, someone has to take responsibility for running the place!

Artemis and his family are somewhat down on their luck when the news comes through that they have been successful in a very special job application. Atlas is eager to seize any opportunity that will take him away from the bullies at school, and his dad has far too many great recipe ideas to be selling fish and chips every day. Money is tight for the family and they have never really had a holiday: becoming resident employees at an exciting hotel seems like a great move!

Upon arrival, the family quickly realise that 'Hotel of the Gods' is more than just a name. All of the guests are genuine gods taking holidays away from the mortal realm where humans have swapped worshipping gods for worshipping screens. Luckily, because Atlas' Greek mother is obsessed with gods and myths from all different cultures, Atlas is able to recognise most of the residents, from the mighty, hammer-chucking Thor to the feline, Egyptian goddess, Bastet.

However, Atlas' legendary know-how cannot prevent him being mistaken for a human sacrifice, nor can it help him dodge Maui's mischief, which leads Atlas into the basement where he meets Hades... and all Hell breaks loose!

As the opener to a new series, *Beware of the Hellhound* plays its part as an introduction to Atlas and his family and successfully sets the scene that readers can expect in upcoming sequels. For this reason, the initial narrative is somewhat predictable, with little drama, but the pace increases (and so does the comedy) once Hades and his hellish beasts enter the story.

Though some of the gods in the story are familiar, recognisable caricatures (Maui the surf-dude, Thor the muscular hunk) Easton's take on Hades is fresh and original. He is less of a red devil, and more of a heavy metal rocker, and he has a basement full of mythical monsters that Atlas must recapture if he is to save his parents' jobs.

With an endless supply of ancient mythology from all over the planet to explore, *Hotel of the Gods* has the potential for many more episodes and readers will hope that the humour and excitement present for the third act of this story are maintained. **SD**



### The Sleeping Stones

★★★★

Beatrice Wallbank, Firefly Press, 272pp, 9781915444059, £7.99 pbk

Gruff has lived his whole life on a small island off the coast of the Welsh mainland, along with a small community of fellow islanders, including his Dad and Nain (Grandmother). As a new family arrive to start their island life, Gruff has mixed feelings as his family farm is running out of money and his own future there is potentially under threat.

Meanwhile, legends are beginning to stir and the islanders find themselves increasingly drawn to the Sleeping Stones which lead out from the beach.

As the only two children of similar age, Gruff and Matylda, or Mat as she prefers to be called, are encouraged to become friends and although begrudging at first, Gruff soon begins to enjoy her company. He introduces her to the beauty and wildness of his beloved island, but something about her immediate fascination with the sea and the Sleeping Stones concerns him. Is he imagining the deep sea he sees within her eyes?

Gruff is also experiencing new feelings that he finds hard to explain and initially wonders if he has imagined his sightings of a mystery figure standing out at sea atop a seventh stone, when he knows that there are only six. Older members of the community have always shared stories of the island's history and myths and once he meets the legendary blacksmith, Gruff realises that ancient forces are coming to life, threatening life on the island he loves.

Gruff and Mat are plunged into a race against time adventure, risking their own lives to help save the community from a terrifying storm driven by an ancient magic anger.

This really is a jam-packed magical thriller of a book. Welsh culture and language are woven beautifully into the story, with the inclusion of songs and stories, translated very naturally for the non-Welsh readers. I enjoyed the magical elements as Gruff and Mat accept the challenge to finish the sword and attempt to stop the dangerous

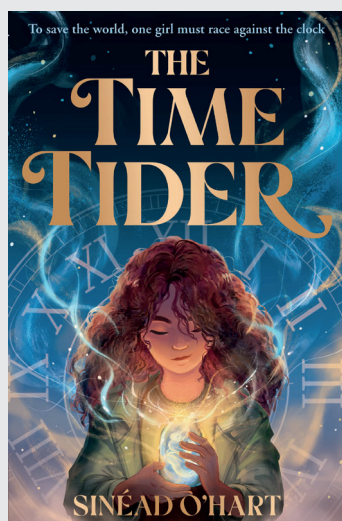


# reviews

## 8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

storm. The scenes during the storm had me gripped, as the tension built almost as high as the stormy waves themselves and I don't mind admitting that a few tears were shed.

This debut novel from Beatrice Wallbank is a glorious mix of magic, mythology and adventure, showcasing the author's obvious love and respect for the natural world. Readers of all ages are in for a treat. **AH**



### The Time Tider

★★★★★

Sinéad O'Hart, ill Abigail Dela Cruz, Little Tiger, 372pp, 9781788953306, £7.99 pbk

Mara has never had a settled life. She and her father, Gabriel, have always been on the move in their mobile home and all she knows is that it has something to do with his mysterious job. When her father disappears and Mara is under threat, she discovers the world of the Timetider. It seems that her father holds this special role, which enables him to harvest any time that is left unused by a person, if they die earlier than designated. Mara discovers a whole group of people who are involved with keeping this 'time' safe, but who are now under threat. Who has kidnapped Gabriel and why? It is up to Mara and her new friends to try and find out the reasons and save the day.

A gloriously imaginative and spooky story about what happens to the time that is lost when a person dies earlier than intended. This is a concept that most of us don't even think about; there is almost an assumption that regardless of age, a person dies when "their time is up". Sinéad O'Hart has managed to get us thinking about other possibilities and consider whether accidental happenings can change our fate. Mara is a strong character who has spent her life moving around with her father, but when he is kidnapped by those wanting his powers as a 'Tider' she finds herself having to take up the challenge and solve the mystery. Not

only does she have to start learning about the role of the Tider, but she has to learn about living in a society that she has not been part of and which she finds difficult. There is a strong element of needing to have more empathy with those who are different, and understanding that it takes many different people to make a world. This is a fantastic and fast paced story that will have readers on the edge of their seat. Great for the MG reader. **MP**

### The Magic of Endings

★★★★★

Tom Avery, Andersen Press, 248pp, 9781839132100, £7.99 pbk  
Jojo Locke's Dad vanished six years ago. Not only can none of the family really remember him, but no one ever talks about him or about the hole he left in each of their hearts and lives. When Jojo and his brother Ricco arrive to spend the summer with their grandparents, they could never have predicted the events that they would experience next. Having looked forward to this summer, the one between leaving primary school & awaiting the start of his next chapter at secondary school in September, Jojo finds himself strangely unsettled, with disturbing dreams and perplexing thoughts about his father.

A mysterious visitor arrives at the house announcing herself as 'Aunt Pen', Jojo's godmother, setting off a chain of unusual and magical occurrences. She soon reveals herself to be a real faerie with the ability to grant wishes, although as the brothers soon find out, these wishes don't always turn out as expected! With the granting of each family members' wish, different areas of Jojo's father's life are revealed and more memories of begin to surface for Jojo, but what is this mysterious world that he glimpses? Whilst experiencing each of the wishes, Jojo gradually learns more about himself and when Aunt Pen tells Jojo that he will need to have courage for what is to come next, he understands that there will be something important that he will have to face and achieve alone.

**The Magic of Endings** is a wonderful mysterious tale, with real touches of both humour and pathos. I loved the arrival of the house-cleaning goblin and the tea with badgers, but also felt deeply for Jojo as he grieves the loss of the father he thought he never really knew. His Grandmother's dementia is dealt with very sensitively, and she too is able to benefit from a magical wish to ease her heart.

This fun, fast-paced magical adventure, has plenty of 'edge of your seat' moments to keep the reader enthralled, dipping into many of the myths and folk stories that abound around coastal Britain. As the story whirls to an emotional but inevitable conclusion, we are left feeling hope for the family now healed and full of love and happy memories. **AH**

## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

### New Talent

#### The Swifts

★★★★★

Beth Lincoln, ill. Claire Powell, Puffin, 450pp, 978-0-241-61300-9, £12.99 hbk

Although this book looks huge, the pages are thick and the font quite large, so it's easy to race through this exciting story. Members of the Swift family has always been given names from The Dictionary, and are expected to behave as their names suggest, so Shenanigan Swift was always expected to be troublesome, and, although she means well, things do have a tendency to go wrong when she's around. With her sisters, Felicity (a lovely young lady) and Phenomena, a budding scientist, former sailor Uncle Maelstrom, and the formidable Aunt Schadenfreude (this name is explained) they lead a pleasant enough life until the arrival of Aunt Inheritance, the Archivist of the family, who calls for a Swift Family Reunion, something which can happen only every decade.

Many Swift family members descend, and mayhem ensues, especially as many of them are trying to search for the lost family Hoard, for selfish reasons. When Aunt Schadenfreude is found in a crumpled heap at the bottom of stairs, accusations fly around, and the detective, Gumshoe Swift, is no help at all, but describes his actions in the style of Raymond Chandler. Shenanigan and Phenomena, who enjoy acting out murder situations and solving them, decide to take action, using Phenomena's Junior Forensics Kit. Eventually a cousin, neither a boy nor a girl, who wears interesting jumpers but doesn't like their name and wants to be called Erf, becomes an ally. Shenanigan is very good at spotting lies: 'A lie is a mischievous thing with a life of its own, and no matter how hard you try to keep it hidden, it will surface on



your face, or through your hands, or in the way you shift from one leg to another': that skill proves useful. The names, and Candour's awful puns, provide much amusement, and generally there is a lot of fun with language. Some words are explained, rather like in the **Lemony Snicket** books, e.g. 'they were quibbling, (a good word that means arguing over something small and silly)' and for a child who enjoys language, this book will be hugely enjoyable. There is even a bit of French from the over-dramatic Monsieur Pamplemousse, who is one of many larger-than-life characters.

One theme that emerges is that of being who you want to be: the identical twins Flora and Fauna, who had copied even rips and stains in each other's clothing, have, by the end of the story, decided to be different, Erf has their own choice of name accepted, and Shenanigan learns that she doesn't have to be chaotic.

The enjoyment of this book is enhanced by Claire Powell's amazing illustrations of angular people – slightly reminiscent of the style of Ronald Searle's *St Trinian's* characters, but much more stylish.

Although the reader does want to find out what happens in this immersive world, it is a pity when it's over... **DB**

### Into The Faerie Hill

★★★★★

H.S. Norup, Pushkin Children's Books, 978-1-78269-386-4, 253pp, £7.99 pbk.

12-year-old Alfred is tired of the constant moves his father's engineering job demands-ten, so far. He never gets the chance to make friends or to fit in and this is exacerbated by his rather unusual appearance: he has one leg 5.3 centimetres shorter than the other and unusual pointed ears. The current move takes him to a place he is familiar with-his Granny's cottage,

where he was born. This should have brought him comfort, but he had always felt that malevolent eyes were watching him from the surrounding forest and that his Granny kept her distance, absorbed in her yarn-dyeing and weaving, almost as if she didn't want him there.

His father's new job is to build a tunnel through the nearby Faerie Hill, a place of myths and legends and rare natural beauty. Local opposition is unco-ordinated and sparse but Alfred meets Saga-the daughter of the midwife who delivered him-he realises how determined she is to stop the destruction of the hill. This

meeting triggers two mysteries-why can he see and hear the strange, small creatures which inhabit the woods and garden and how can he find out more about his mother, who, he was told, died shortly after giving birth to him?

From the outset, Norup seeds her narrative with clues about Alfred's true identity-his ease and skill in water, his ability to see colours in it which are hidden to others, his awareness of evil threaded through the quiet beauty of field, forest and water. Her writing here is particularly luminous and Alfred's transformation in water is handled beautifully and with compelling drama.

Saga and Alfred resolve to stop the destruction of the hill-Saga because she is a determined young activist and Alfred because he finally believes that his mother is alive and trapped within the sprawling labyrinths and sinkholes of the area. Their adventures require courage and determination and Alfred's confidence and self-knowledge grow as a result. His encounters with the good and evil in the world of water give him knowledge about his mother-and about himself. She was half-fairy, as is he and when the spirit of water offered him a place in their world forever, where he had always felt he belonged, he put it to one side to remain in the human world with his father, Granny and Saga-the people he loves. He resolved that instead of hiding away he would no longer give up any part of himself but choose to belong in the place he would make his own. Norup's message transcends the world of fairies, gods and goddesses to give pause for thought to those who, for whatever reason, feel they will never belong. **VR**

### Fritz and Kurt

★★★★

Jeremy Dronfield, illus David Ziggy Greene, Puffin, 384pp, 978-0241565742, £8.99 pbk

Brothers Fritz and Kurt Kleinmann were fifteen and eight respectively when Nazi Germany invaded Austria. In a very short time, the life they had known in Vienna, the 'before Hitler came' in Kurt's words, was destroyed. With so many of their Jewish neighbours, Fritz and his father were taken prisoner and transported to Nazi prison camps, first Buchenwald, then Auschwitz. The family managed to send two of their children abroad – Edith went to England, and Kurt to America, making the long, dangerous journey on his own aged just ten. The greater part of the book however describes what happened to Fritz and his papa, who managed to stay together, Fritz choosing to go with his father to Auschwitz even when he could have stayed in the relatively safer Buchenwald.

An adaptation of his bestseller *The Boy Who Followed His Father*



**Into Auschwitz**, Dronfield tells their story for children effectively and with sensitivity, conveying the horror and cruelty of their treatment in the camps but showing young readers how Fritz and Papa cared for each other and how fellow inmates defied the Nazis to support fellow prisoners and to form a resistance. He is good too at showing the banality of evil and exposes the 'stark stupidity of Nazi ideas' as he describes an episode in which Papa is recategorized as a political prisoner, in order to continue the skilled work he was doing as a kapo on an Auschwitz building site. Jews weren't allowed to be kapos, but making them 'Aryan' solved the problem at the stroke of a pen.

Both Fritz and his papa survived, through luck, determination, but mostly we feel through being together, and were reunited with Edna and Kurt after the war, though by then Kurt had almost forgotten how to speak German. Their mother and sister Tini and Herta Kleinmann were killed.

Throughout the book, Dronfield highlights their resilience, and that of others they met in the camps, providing a sense of hope. Black and white illustrations by David Ziggy Green quietly support the text. There are lots of first person accounts of the Holocaust but this is an important addition, with lessons to apply to the world today. At a time when some claim England is 'full' we should remember that the same argument was used in the 1930s. It demonstrates too how easy it is to turn people into 'the other' and that real courage is standing against oppression.

Jeremy Dronfield knew Kurt well and draws on written accounts by Fritz and their papa, who extraordinarily managed to keep a hidden diary of their experiences. **AR**

### The Marvellers

★★★★

Dhonielle Clayton, Piccadilly, 9781800785472, 403pp, £7.99 pbk

Clayton takes her readers to a magical fantasy world where Ella, an 11-year-old girl, longs to use the Conjuring skills she has inherited from her Black family in the Arcanum Training Institute - a school in the sky run by another magical faction, The Marvellers. When her application to join the Institute-opening its doors to outsiders for the first time-is accepted, her happiness knows no bounds. However, she is the only Conjuror to attend the Institute and this, coupled with her dark skin, makes her a ready target for bullying and discrimination, two practices she never thought to find in a place with such a good reputation for its codes of conduct. After many slights, sneers and false accusations from both staff and students alike she is in despair - until she meets Brigit, who can knit the future and Jason, who can talk to animals. Together they work to solve the mystery of the disappearance of Ella's beloved teacher, Masterji Thakur, the only member of staff who has tried to help and guide her.

This is a book of two halves in terms of pace and plot. In the first half the world of the Marvellers and the Arcanum Institute is described in minute detail, exhaustively covering every last corner of Ella's new home-and everything in it. Vocabulary is often repetitive, with 'star' often overused and characters who too frequently 'plop down' and 'fuss,' for example. This is a story pitched at 'middle graders,' yet it is 403 pages long-more than enough to deter many young readers. A stronger editorial hand would have helped to ensure that the Marvellers' world was rendered as breathtaking and beautiful as the author intended. Further, the excess of pure descriptive detail means that characters lack development in the early stages - just when readers should be hooked in and thus eager to read on. A great number of people are introduced when Ella first arrives at her new home and their many teaching responsibilities and special gifts may feel more like lists than characters about whom readers want to know more.

The second part of the book is where the action really begins and the three main pupil protagonists start to take centre stage. As readers learn about them the pace of the story quickens and mysteries are uncovered and their resolutions pursued. A credible villain - Gia Trivelino - emerges and her ruthless determination to find her missing daughter and strip the Marvellers of their gifts as revenge for imprisoning her provides a rollercoaster ride, with the kidnapping and eventual rescue of Masterji Thakur at its core. Finally, with Gia temporarily dispatched-to return in the next book, no doubt-Ella is now hailed as a heroine and the ending is a positive one.

**The Marvellers** tackles diversity, discrimination and the nature of

friendship and of power and for that it is to be praised. Inevitably, comparisons will be drawn with the *Harry Potter* stories but that is too convenient and simple a construct. It is to be hoped that the next books in **The Marvellers** series carve their own niche in the magical fantasy genre, building more succinctly on the strengths of this initial instalment. **VR**



### Maggie Blue and the White Crow

★★★★

Anna Goodall, Guppy Books, 288pp, 978-1913101817, £12.99 hbk Maggie Blue, first encountered in the highly regarded *Maggie Blue and the Dark World*, is back for her second adventure and while her situation is slightly improved - she has new friends, school is slightly easier, her wonderful companion Hoagy the talking cat remains at her side - the Dark World is by no means finished with her. Indeed, the stakes and the threats are even higher. The first sign of trouble is the arrival of a white crow, which refuses to leave her side, no matter what she does; the next, just as unsettling for Maggie, is the arrival of her mother, newly escaped from the psychiatric hospital that's been her home for some time. At first her mother is an embarrassment to Maggie, who wants to keep her a secret from her friends, but when she is kidnapped and taken into the Dark World, there's an inevitability about it and of course Maggie will go to bring her back, even though she'd hoped never to return. The new adventure has all the excitement of the first, and is another thrilling and distinctive fantasy adventure, the dangers Maggie faces feeling very real indeed. It's good that there is help not just in the form of Hoagy but in Maggie's surprising new friend, Jean, and in Aunt Esme who is made of sterner stuff than we imagined. Both worlds, this one and the Dark, are filled with a sense of spreading foreboding and readers will be eager for the third and final part of this compelling series. **MMA**

Read our [Q&A interview](#) with Anna Goodall about *Maggie Blue and the White Crow*.



## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

### The Storm Swimmer

★★★★

Clare Weze, ill.(cover and map)  
Paddy Donnelly, Bloomsbury,  
308pp, 9781526622211 £7.99 pbk  
Ginika is sent to stay with her grandparents, who run a boarding house on the Cumbrian coast, when her parents' problems mean that they have become homeless and have to live in their campervan. Mum, who is Nigerian and cooks lovely Nigerian food, works in a care home and often sleeps over, and Dad drives a delivery van, but the family has been evicted for non-payment of rent, with most of their belongings sold. This is just before the summer holidays start: desperately unhappy at missing her dance show at the end of term and also her best friend Alisha, Ginika is sulky when she arrives at Cormorant Heights, and goes off to stare at the sea.

When she notices a mysterious boy who moves differently in the water, she is intrigued. He turns out to be one of the sea-people, living under water and speaking their own language. Ginika calls her new friend by part of his name, Peri, and they find a way to communicate through pictures, English words and sign language. Peri's fascination with life on land leads to some interesting situations as she carts him around in a trolley attached to a bike, and they have to avoid other people, especially Scarlett, daughter of the holiday camp owner, and her friends, 3 girls all called Olivia. Some disabled children are staying at the camp, and Ginika also becomes friendly with Ted, who spends most of his time in a wheelchair, but he can spend a short time out of it. When Peri's health deteriorates and he urgently needs to be returned to a particular cave in another cove to call for help, Ginika has to overcome her own fear of drowning, Ted finds he can do more than he knew, and Scarlett becomes a friend after all. Peri's people come to rescue him and they all go far out to sea, but Grandpa, who, it turns out, had seen the sea people before when he was young, translates that he will be back next summer. Ginika will be back, too, as her parents' lives have improved, and she can go back to London, but she is now happy to have two homes.

This is an inventive and original story, with much to say about varying friendships and relationships - it turns out that the Olivias resent being lumped together and want to be treated as individuals, and Scarlett has tried to be a friend, but had been rebuffed. Ginika has spent a lot of time sneaking around and keeping secrets, and she learns to be more trusting. It's a good story, with credible human characters, and Peri is a wonderful invention. **DB**

### Fairy Hill

★★★★

Marita Conlon-McKenna, O'Brien

Press, 288pp, 9781788493604 ,  
£11.99 pbk

Anna is angry and upset. Her mum and her new stepdad are away on their honeymoon; she has to go to stay with a father she has scarcely knows and his new family in their home on the west coast of Ireland. However, it is a magical place and she soon makes friends with her cousin, Jenny though her little step-brother, Jack is a nuisance. But who is the mysterious Daniel? Why does she feel she is being watched? Then Jack disappears and Anna realises why the house is called Fairy Hill. Has Jack been stolen away? But why and who will believe her?

Conlon-McKenna brings together elements that are familiar ingredients in children's literature; the fractured family, new relationships and friendships, change, the world of faerie and folk lore. They are familiar, indeed, but here skilfully woven together to create a warm-hearted story of family and friendship, of change and acceptance with just the right amount of jeopardy bringing an element of danger and potential loss. Anna, her feelings of anger, her impatience with a younger sibling, her reluctant warming to both her new family and to a new cousin, are real and believable and will strike a chord with young readers. The folk tradition of the changeling is a powerful one and particularly appropriate here. Conlon-McKenna's style is accessible and attractive, allowing for just enough description to create a sense of place, while a good use of dialogue engages the immediate attention. Traditional storytelling beautifully handled. **FH**

### Swimming on the Moon

★★★★★

Brian Conaghan, Bloomsbury,  
356pp, 9781526653925, £7.99, pbk  
Any child will find it hard to cope with their parents growing apart but sometimes it may mean a stronger bond between siblings. In Anna and Anto's case, there is already a remarkably strong connection. Not only are they twins, but Anto is autistic and does not speak and Anna has long been a loving buffer and interpreter between him and the rest of the world. With Anna as narrator, Brian Conaghan skilfully introduces us to the family: to parents who have fallen out of love for each other but remain united in their love and care of their children; to Anto, whose best friend is a coat hanger that he carries with him everywhere and who communicates mainly through his moods and the arrangement of Lego bricks; and, most of all, to Anna, whose longing for a different life, where she doesn't have to feel so responsible either for Anto or keeping her family together, is expressed in fantasies of a parallel "perfect" life. It is this other life that seems to be partially coming true when she is selected to take part in a dance competition in Rome,

but it becomes increasingly clear that her hopes of a family trip to Italy bringing her parents back together is itself a dream. This is a remarkable novel, most of all in the subtle way that Conaghan acknowledges all the pressures on Anna, both from within the family and in her friendships; some of which pressures derive from Anto's autism and how others might perceive him. Yet, at the same time, Conaghan shows us that Anna's love for her twin and the bond between them is a source of strength for both of them. **CB**

### The Monkey Who Fell from the Future

★★★

Ross Welford, HarperCollins,  
298pp, 9780008544744, £7.99 pbk  
This boldly ambitious time-travel story certainly works hard for its readers but after a while also becomes rather hard work. Two eleven-year-olds almost accidentally find themselves in a British future four hundred years ahead. At the same time, another child from there plus a monkey are unwillingly transported back to Britain 2023. Both parties have therefore to cope not just with where they are but when. The 21st century children witness the widespread urban destruction caused by flooding after a meteorite's landed in 2044. But in an interesting twist, they see this is also in some ways a good time for children given that germs accompanying the meteorite went on to render most of the population infertile. Surviving children are more valued now, with the pre-teenage child transplanted from the future finding our own century too noisy and distracting.

Ross Welford is good at action-packed incidents, and there are plenty in this story. Yet his determination to explain the speculative science behind the theoretical possibilities of time travel sometimes runs away with him. These discussions take up a lot of time and still I would guess remain puzzling to all but budding young Einsteins. Some characters also speak in relentlessly mangled English, with an over-the-top sympathetic French showman mispronouncing more words than he gets right. If the intention was comic it soon falls flat. Other young characters often omit first syllables, as in 'citing' or 'cept, and this habit too outstays its welcome. An outside villain plus a last-minute rescue effectively ups the tension. But the chance to go deeper into what the future can tell us about ourselves now is never really taken. Welford is a good enough writer to have made more of this than he has here. **NT**

### The Detention Detectives

★★★★★

Lis Jardine, Puffin, 9780241523384,  
328pp, Pbk £7.99  
Hanbridge High proves to be a much more exciting school than Jonno could have imagined and he hadn't been doing much imagining as all he wanted to do was stay in his hometown of Gresham with all

his friends and not be uprooted to another part of the country. However, when he and Daniel-the class nerd and **Star Trek** addict-come across the body of Mr Baynton, their P.E. teacher, in the sports equipment store things take a far more dramatic turn. Enter Lydia, editor of the school newspaper and desperately looking for a scoop that will convince her peers that she truly is a star journalist.

The boys are reluctant to involve her but she proves to be a cunning and skilful sleuth and so, despite police involvement in the case, the three team up to try and discover who has murdered Mr Baynton. Jonno is determined to prove to his parents that moving was a bad idea so he adds finding a dead body to his 'take me back home' arsenal. Normally an obedient and outgoing boy, he becomes surly and unco-operative at home and as much as he dares to at school.

He soon becomes aware that he is not the only one with problems as Daniel's mother is seriously ill and Daniel is her principal carer. He is assisted by Lois, Mr Baynton's wife, who has been arrested as chief suspect for her husband's murder. If Lois's name isn't cleared Daniel will lose her help and Social Services will intervene to have him fostered. Lydia's life is also beset with troubles: she lives with her grandparents as her mother deserted her to live abroad and her domineering grandmother makes a prison of her life. Little by little, Jonno recognises that he is needed and the murder hunt changes the nature of the friendship between the trio from toleration to respect and, eventually, friendship.

The story is as funny as it is clever, moving seamlessly from slapstick comedy to high drama, with illuminating footnotes to explain **Star Trek** and detective story references. The interweaving and strengthening of the bond between the three children gives emotional depth and veracity to the narrative. However, when the murder seems to be solved, there is one final twist at the end of the book which signals a further, hitherto unnoticed suspect-and, happily, the stage is firmly set for a sequel. **VR**

### The Swing

★★★★★

Britta Teckentrup, Prestel, 160pp,  
9783791375366, £19.99 hbk  
'The swing has always been there', with this simple statement Britta Teckentrup starts our journey across time, exploring emotions, relationships and change - but without ever moving from one place. With each double page spread, the organisation between illustration and text varies to create a rhythm that draws the observer in, maintaining interest and engagement. The text itself is minimal and simple and as a result all the more powerful and telling. Occasionally Teckentrup expands to provide a closer connection with a

character whether in the moment or as a link across time. Here the images are the heart of this meditation on time and place. Through her colour saturated collage paintings, the artist takes the reader on a visual journey through days, nights, across seasons and all weathers. Their presentation is traditional – almost static with each image placed within the frame of each page. Sometimes they take up a single page; sometimes they move across the spread as vignettes; sometimes they take a whole spread to create the vastness of the night sky or the sea hidden by fog. At the centre is the swing. Through this device – an artefact that does not move – Teckentrup is able to link many stories. It stands between the land and the sea, its framework encourages you to look up. 'Isn't swinging a little bit like flying?' asks the text. The swing is passive, neutral – a way of introducing a world of emotion and whole range of relationships and ideas. But even a swing, a metal framework so much part of the natural world, is subject to time and change, and cannot exist without the intervention of people. We live in a world where everything is linked and necessary. This not a picture book for the Kinderbox; this is a picture book to be offered to a wider age range, both young people and adults. It is a thoughtful book that could provide the basis for discussion. It is also a book to enjoy for its production, but most of all for Teckentrup's paintings so full of heart, each and every one asking the viewer to stop, look, think and engage. **FH**

### Vita and the Gladiator

★★★★

Ally Sherrick, Chicken House, 311pp, 9781913696535, £7.99 pbk  
I am not sure why stories for young people about the Roman Empire are so few in number but here is one that will really help them to begin to understand such an important part of world history. Set in London during the reign of the Emperor Hadrian, it is the story of Vita who on the day of her twelfth birthday has slipped out disguised as a slave, to see a play but on her return finds her father, a respected Roman magistrate, brutally murdered and her mother and brother missing. In her disguise as a slave, she finds herself in a cell in the gladiators' arena with a wolf and a British woman, Brea. Both Brea and Vita are seeking retribution for the killing of their fathers, and gradually they begin to trust each other and work together to find the culprit.

Life in Roman Britain was violent and the story does not shy away from this, from the killing of Vita's father, to the combat between the gladiators, and the slaughter of the bull, and other beasts. Vita's life as a slave is not easy either and she is grieving for her father, worried about her mother

and brother and hiding the secret of her birth from Brea. Ally Sherrick has captured well the hierarchy of Roman society, but also the history of the tribes in Britain at that time, with Brea being revealed as a direct descendant of Boudicca, so there is much for the reader to absorb. It is an exciting story, full of the flavour and smells of Roman Britain, but also the customs and religion of both the Roman citizens and the tribes.

There are extensive notes at the end for readers to follow up and it is good to see Rosemary Sutcliffe's *The Eagle of the Ninth* given prominence as further reading. **JF**

### The Secret in the Tower

★★★★

Andrew Beattie, illus. Corinne Caro, Sweet Cherry, 299pp, 9781782268819, £7.99, pbk.

The Tower in the title is the Tower of London where the two princes are supposed to have been murdered by Richard III. This story takes a slightly different tack, as Jack Broom, who lives an uncertain life with Old Ma Cobb helping with her apothecary but has a desire to become a surgeon, resembles one of the Princes to the extent that he becomes involved in a plot to spirit Dickon away from the Tower and England, to save him from being killed by Henry Tudor after the Battle of Bosworth Field.

This is an exciting story which tells well the complicated background of the England of Richard III, but because of the lack of evidence of the fate of the two princes Andrew Beattie has taken a different route in which Edward the elder of the two princes has already died and Dickon, (Richard), lies languishing in the Tower very unwell. Jack is brought in by his friend Alice, aka Lady Alice Grey, to use his limited knowledge to help cure the young prince, and subsequently Dickon is spirited abroad. Jack turns out to have been his twin brother taken from his mother Elizabeth Woodville at birth because her mother thought twins were of the devil.

Up to the point where Jack Broom meets his supposed mother, Lady Elizabeth Woodville who is living in seclusion in a convent, the story has real credibility but I fear loses that in the supposed encounter between the two. The adventures up to that point have real excitement and possibility, but that does stretch the story too far, maybe it would have been better to make Jack an illegitimate child of King Edward? Dr. Argentine appears to have been a real figure, and Jack's desire to become a surgeon makes him an interesting character. One of the Princes may of course have been spirited away and turned up again as there were several imposters purporting to be one of them. It is always a difficult line to tread when writing historical fiction

which uses real historical figures to invent scenarios, and of course in this instant so little is known about the fate of the Princes in the Tower it was quite easy to do so, but in this instance less would have been better. **JF**

### Rivet Boy

★★★★

Barbara Henderson, Cranachan, 170pp, 9781911279228, £7.99 pbk

At 12 years old John has to find a job and leave his school, where he would love to spend more time, as he is the breadwinner of the family since his father died. The Forth Bridge is being built down the road so despite his fear of heights and as a result of a bold approach to the Mr. Arrol, the man in charge of the construction, gains a job as a rivet boy. Alongside his story working at extreme heights, heating the rivet, tossing it to the next member of the four man gang, is his love of books and his visits to the Carnegie Library in Dunfermline. It is not plain sailing but aided by Cora who rescues him from the fall into the river, and by saving the Prince of Wales from assassination, John finds his work 'home' at last.

Many of the characters in this story were real figures in the building of the majestic bridge, including Mr. Arroll, and of course Andrew Carnegie, and feature in the photographs at the end of the book. John is a plucky hero and although the saving of the Prince of Wales at the end of the story stretches things a little too far, it all makes for a good and exciting story. It also shows a light on the working practices of the time, the lack of safety measures for example, no hard hats here. The extreme poverty without the net of the welfare state, but also the kindness of strangers including, (as a librarian I am glad to say), Mr. Peebles in the Carnegie Library! There are also some pointers to the position of women at the time through the character of Cora who desperately wants to be an engineer. There are the bullies who try to get rid of John through sheer cruelty, and the burns John suffers on his face and hands through the work itself make the reader wince, so the reality of life as a rivet boy comes clearly through. **JF**

### Jamie

★★★★

L.D. Lapinski, Orion Children's Books, 256pp, 9781510111950, £7.99 pbk

Jamie is eleven years old. They identify as non-binary which means neither as a boy or as a girl. This should not be a problem except that in their town, there are only two high schools, Queen Elizabeth's School for Girls and St. Joseph's School for Boys. Where does Jamie fit?

This is Jamie's entire preoccupation throughout the novel. All children of this age have asked, at some point, where do I belong? But for Jamie and their family and friends, the question is intense and deeply divisive at times.

Should society change for Jamie or should they be forced to change for it?

This is a groundbreaking and deeply powerful, own voices novel. L.D. Lapinski carefully and age appropriately explains some of the issues around gender. What are hormones? What are pronouns? What does being non-binary really mean?

The author accomplishes this educational task without interrupting or overloading the narrative, a feat of considerable skill. In the end, the reader feels deeply invested in Jamie and the choices they make. Interestingly, Lapinski also talks about the consequences of Jamie's choices for their friends.

This is not a crusading novel. Every single high school and as many Year Six classes as possible should obtain a copy of this book. **RB**

### The Dark and Dangerous Gifts of Delores Mackenzie

★★★★

Yvonne Banham, Firefly, 252pp, 9781915444073, £7.99 pbk

Delores and her sister Delilah live alone on a small Scottish island, after their parents mysteriously disappeared. Both of them have paranormal abilities, but Delores has the ability to see ghosts. When her sister is given a job in Norway, Delores is sent to start her training in how to control her abilities. She is sent to live with 'the uncles', who live in the Old Town area of Edinburgh; an area long renowned for the spooky goings on. What Delores finds is much darker and more dangerous than she could ever have imagined. The spirits that she finds are trying to cross the divide and return to this world and will do whatever they can to make it happen. However, she also has to cope with the less than welcoming characters she finds in her new 'home', they question is whether she can learn to live with the others and can they also solve the issues with the spirits.

This is a wonderful story of magic and mystery that positively oozes dark and sinister happenings. The atmosphere of the Old Town is brilliantly described and definitely reflects the dark and narrow alleys and tenements for which the area is famous. Delores is a strong character who finds it difficult to follow the rules and regulations, but her main desire in life is to find out what happened to her parents and even find them if at all possible. The connections with family are strong themes that occur throughout the book and which apply to several groups of people; however, we also get the feeling that family can be a much broader concept, based around mutual love and respect. This is a wonderful book for those who like the more sinister idea of ghost story. It avoids the definition of being a horror story, but definitely sends a shiver down the spine and is probably best read in daylight. A highly recommended story for KS3. **MP**



## 14+ Secondary/Adult



### As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow

★★★★★

Zoulfa Katouh, Bloomsbury, 432pp, 978 1 5266 4852 5, £12.99 hbk

Zoulfa Katouh has much in common with her narrator, Salama. They share a burning love for their native Syria, though Katouh has spent much of her life in the West (Canada, Germany and Switzerland, I think), while the country of Salama's childhood is now almost lost beneath the devastation of civil war. Both are pharmacists, though Katouh is highly qualified after years of training, while Salama's university course in Homs was cut short by the conflict after a single year. Both have ambitions to write for young readers. Both are keenly sensitive to the emotions of others and themselves. Both retain the hope that one day peace will return to Syria and, God willing, they will be there to relish it.

This debut novel swiftly immerses its reader in Salama's daily routine at Zaytouna Hospital during the siege of Homs, which began in 2011. The Free Syrian Army has held President al-Hassad's forces at bay for several months, but long-term prospects of survival for the surrounded city are bleak. Salama and her colleagues work long hours day after day; her account spares nothing in its detail. The hospital no longer has any trained surgeons, so she performs amputations, removes shrapnel and carries out whatever procedures need doing. Secretaries and porters work as nurses. All too often, she closes the eyes of adults and children whose lives could not be saved.

Salama's domestic life offers no respite. Her Mama died in the conflict, which also took Baba and Hamza (her father and older brother) to their deaths - or to prison and torture. She shares an apartment with pregnant Layla, Hamza's wife and Salama's

closest friend from childhood days; Salama had promised her brother she'd care for Layla and the unborn child. For Salama, the dilemma is whether she should stay to save lives at the hospital or should she find the money for risky passages for Layla and herself to cross the Mediterranean for a new life in the West?

Religious and cultural practices such as arranged marriages and the wearing of the hijab are unquestioned and observed in Salama's daily life. So when she meets Kenan, a young man as passionate as herself in his opposition to the regime, and their relationship grows ever deeper, each treats the other with awareness and consideration born of their rooted beliefs. Their first kiss is long delayed. Their behaviour may contrast sharply with that familiar to many YA readers accustomed to the dominant culture of the West.

Kenan is a photographer, for whom filming the siege and broadcasting his reports online to an uninformed world is all-important; at Salama's suggestion, he records the daily crises at the hospital. So, although he is the sole carer for two younger siblings he would love to send to safety in Europe, he cannot leave his task in Homs unfinished. He and Salama confront similar dilemmas.

Salama's work and her caring for Layla leave little space for herself. Katouh's treatment of the mounting pressures on Salama is impressively daring. Early in the book, we meet the mysterious Khawf, immaculately dressed, cigarette always in hand, who comes to Salama only when she's alone. He is at once menacing and protective, aggressive in his advice: she must leave the hospital and secure those boat passages - she'd promised Hamza she'd care for Layla. Perceptive young readers may realise that Khawf is a hallucination, a consistent voice in the tumult raging in Salama's mind, though his words often bring fear rather than comfort. Later, Salama will encounter an even more startling hallucination, another consequence of highly plausible PTSD.

The issues which drive this lengthy novel are written with unrelenting intensity, from the gentle love of Salama and Kenan to the graphic horror of the hospital. Both the subject matter and the poetic complexity of some of the prose may well make for a tough read; but the novel's final sentence bravely completes its title: 'as long as the lemon trees grow, hope will never die'. **GF**

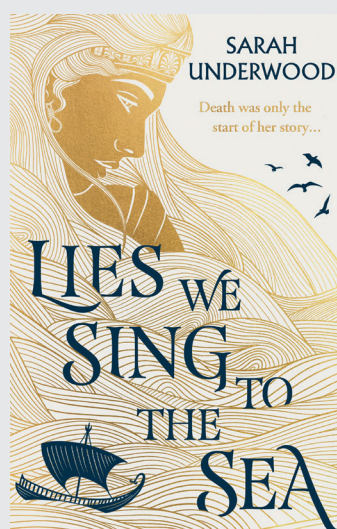
### Different for Boys

★★★★★

Patrick Ness, ill. Tea Bendix, Walker, 108pp, 978 1 5295 0949 6, £12.99 hbk

Credit to whoever at Walker decided to exhume this short story from a YA 2010 collection and give it this single

volume presentation with generous space given to distinctive illustration by Tea Bendix. It's been extracted from a collection about losing your virginity with a very starry author line-up - Anne Fine, Keith Gray etc. - and the late Robert Dunbar, a proper judge, picked Ness out for special mention in his review thirteen years ago. It's just what we have come now to expect from this author: toughness, empathy and an eye and ear for young lives working out who they are and who they belong with. There's also characteristic humour and a little literary teasing in which Ness blanks out all the swearing that might be usual between the four young men we meet, which is swiftly explained when, stepping off the page, the narrator's friend asks, 'What are these [blank] black boxes?' Answer: 'Certain words are necessary because this is real life, but you can't actually show 'em, because we're too young to read about the stuff we actually do, yeah.' A point that continues to be made by the [blank] black boxes throughout the story, which conceal not only swear words but also sexual acts that cannot be owned openly. It's a story about growing up gay, and it's also about loneliness, friendship, the comfort and excitement of sex, the fear of vulnerability, and about the many and varied forms and meanings of love; and of innocence and experience. There's an awful lot in a very short space. **CB**



### Lies We Sing to the Sea

★★★★★

Sarah Underwood, Electric Monkey, 483pp, 978 0 00 855853, £14.99 hbk

The origins of Sarah Underwood's debut novel lie in just a few lines of **The Odyssey**. After his return to Ithaca and his slaughter of Penelope's suitors, Odysseus suspects that twelve of the queen's maids have betrayed her and taken lovers among

those suitors. Homer named only one of the maids - Melantho; twice she coarsely insulted the disguised Odysseus after his return. She and the other maids are summarily hanged on the seashore, by order of Odysseus.

Underwood borrows Melantho's name, but nothing of her character. In this novel, she and the hapless maids are the sexual victims of the suitors - the 17-year-old Melantho was brutally raped by Eurymachus. The maids' innocence is no protection - they are still hanged. Their murders are to echo down the years for, enraged by Odysseus' treatment of his son, the Cyclops Polyphemus, during his wandering journey home from Troy, Poseidon curses Ithaca. He demands that, each year, twelve young women of the kingdom are to be sacrificed, hung on gallows along the tide-line. The bodies must be offered up to the ocean to appease the sea god. If not, Poseidon's furious waves will ravage Ithaca, destroying crops and reducing its soil to infertility.

Melantho's death is temporary. She returns to life upon the island of Pandou, newly created to serve as a burial place for the sacrificed victims. It is Melantho's destiny to watch over Pandou, burying the bodies as they are cast up on the island each year. Very occasionally, one of the murdered women comes back to life, as Melantho had done. Each of these survivors is determined to break Poseidon's curse by assassinating the current ruler of Ithaca, thus preventing him giving the order of execution. Their attempts have not succeeded.

Underwood's narration is engaging. Beneath the title of each chapter is the name of one of the novel's three major characters; throughout the chapter, Underwood positions her reader close to that character, their thoughts and actions. Melantho is one of the protagonists; the second is Leto, daughter of the former royal oracle of Ithaca, destined to be the last of those occasional survivors. After Leto's corpse stirs into life on Pandou's beach, she and Melantho make plans to return to their homeland to kill its ruler. Over the following months, Melantho teaches Leto to harness the magical forces of the sea - she will need such powers if she is to break the curse. As the two women work together day by day, an unhurried, intense love grows between them.

We have already met their intended victim, Mathias, Prince of Ithaca, the third of Underwood's protagonists and the focus of a dozen or so chapters. He is no arrogant tyrant, but an 18-year-old who also longs to end Poseidon's curse which, each year, requires him to give the order to murder twelve of his subjects. He is lonely, troubled. He has lost two dearly loved sisters,

14+ **Secondary/Adult** continued

his mother openly despises him and he faces an arranged marriage with a foreign princess, whose dowry Ithaca needs to replenish its treasury. The unfolding story involves sustained excitement and danger, contrasting with the slowly explored love between Leto and Melantho. That love is to be tested, for having returned to Ithaca intent upon killing the prince, Leto finds herself drawn to gentle, thoughtful and vulnerable Mathias – which is difficult for the watching Melantho.

The story is extraordinary in its invention. Alert reading is needed, for the crowded plot with its underlying web of curses, oracular prophecies and sweeping movements through time (sometimes over centuries) might well lead to some confusion. Approaching the conclusion, the dilemmas facing the three protagonists seem irreconcilable, but Underwood provides an ingenious resolution which fuses the worlds of humans and gods. I intend only admiration in noting that the publishers' release tells us that Ms Underwood is 23 and seems to have written her novel while studying for an MPhil at Cambridge. Watch this space. **GF**

**You Think You Know Me**

★★★★★

Ayaan Mohamud, Usborne, 978-1-80370-450-0, 368pp, £8.99 pbk

Hanan is a clever, highly motivated student and when she passes the entrance exams for Grafton Grammar School she is overjoyed. This is the first important step towards realising her ambition to attend medical school and follow in her late father's footsteps. However, her excitement begins to disappear as she realises she is the sole Asian pupil in the school, and not a welcome one, at that. In response to the many racist comments and behaviours she has to endure throughout her years at the school she follows her mother's dictate that 'a closed mouth is gold' and simply does not respond to the hatred around her, however difficult that may be.

Matters are brought to a head when the beloved school caretaker-a friend to many students, including Hanan-is murdered by an Asian man. The predictable backlash on the Asian community, fuelled by tabloid newspapers and social media, hits Hanan hard and Mohamud's dialogue and narrative structure place the reader in the centre of the vortex, alongside Hanan. A vicious cycle of violence begins which Hanan and her family must endure, just as they did in Somalia, seeing their father shot dead in front of them.

Hanan's breaking point comes when her beloved twin brother Hussein becomes briefly involved in low-key criminal activity and she is attacked when she follows him to discover what he's doing. In defending her, Hussein is stabbed and almost dies. When local newspapers report the incident their sympathies are all with the white attacker and his

protestations of temporary imbalance marring an otherwise flawless character. Hanan decides to make a very public stand at the school's conference on diversity-no more silence, only strength in her beliefs. Her speech is a masterfully written paean to faith, diversity, clearly demonstrating that she has finally made the decision who she wants to be, without any holding back.

Mohamud, also a Somali, has written from her own experiences of Islamophobia, vividly creating a community with a rich and vibrant culture and facilitating access to it not only through Hanan, her family and friends but with the inclusion of a glossary of habitually used words and phrases and a note from the author explaining her reasons for writing this, her first book. **You Think You Know Me** shows that you never do, if you view a person only through the lenses of faith and colour. **VR**

**This Book Kills**

★★★★★

Ravena Guron, Usborne, 382pp, 9781803705415, £8.99 pbk

Being a scholarship pupil at a top private school was never going to be easy, but when one of the elite students, Hugh Henry Van Boren, is murdered, things get even more dangerous for the heroine Jess Choudhary. The method for the murder is a copy of a short story that Jess and another pupil had written, but how did the murderer get hold of it and why try and implicate Jess in the crime? Added to all this is the fact that Jess's best friend Clem was going out with Hugh and is now enemies with his ex, Millie. Mixed with this is the lurking menace of a long-standing secret society and the influence it has on all the pupils. When a second murder is discovered, people don't know who to trust and the possible murderers keep changing. Is Jess going to find herself a target and who can she actually trust to help her?

This is a multi-layered story based on the classic whodunnit and set in the rarefied atmosphere of a boarding school. It is quite frightening to discover the levels of entitlement, manipulation and racism that are taking place in this environment, where social class and money are the main criteria for judging people. However it is not just the pupils that are a threat to Jess and the other scholarship pupils. The school board have declared that they must act in an exemplary way, or run the risk of being expelled from school; this is a very different set of rules from what the other pupils seem to follow. As the events begin to unfold after the murder, Jess is faced with decisions about what she should tell the authorities (and the effect this would have on her place). This is a story about friendship, acceptance and how family can be both a positive and

negative influence. This has to be one of my favourite stories of the year so far and definitely merits five stars. **MP**

**Catfish Rolling**

★★★★★

Clara Kumagai, Zephyr, 371pp, 9781803288048, £14.99 hbk

The author of this unusual debut novel is of Canadian, Irish and Japanese origin. Teenage Sora, who narrates the story, lives in modern day Japan but is constantly drawn back into a world of shrines, gods and powerful folk myths. Her account opens with a description of the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, seen by some as caused when the giant catfish, on which the islands of Japan perch, periodically twists and turns in the mud below.

But this time something else happens too. The shake, as it is called, has also broken time itself. Henceforth there are areas of fast time and others where it slows down. Existing uneasily in the middle, Sora is drawn into exploring cut off areas of past time, very much forbidden as they have a dangerous effect on all who enter them. She is convinced she may still find her mother there after she had disappeared with many others on the day of the quake.

Sora has to cope with contemporary realities too, which include a first love affair with a boy followed by another with a girl. Her father is also showing signs of dementia, with Sora's hopes of going to university suddenly looking bleak. But there is one final adventure to come when she goes really deep into previously forbidden territory where watches no longer keep time and chasms in the road open up in front of her. At this point sentences turn into torrents with Sora repeatedly questioning time itself and whether it exists in entirely different ways in the natural world of trees and rivers. Kumagai writes with passion, and this may be enough to keep readers going through occasional plot thickets where it is sometimes hard to know what is going on. But for those with staying power this urgently committed writing is like nothing else in Young Adult fiction at the moment and well deserves attention. **NT**

**Good For Nothing**

★★★★★

Mariam Ansar, Penguin, 336pp, 9780241522073, £8.99 pbk

This novel is narrated by four separate characters at different times. Three of them, Amir, Eman and Kemi are Muslims. They live in a run-down northern English town called Friesley. Amir's brother, Zayd, has died prior to the book's starting. There are rumours that he had a drug problem. Amir knows that these rumours are built on misleading, harmful stereotypes. He sets out to prove it by memorialising Zayd on a bus shelter. This leads to him and the other characters being forced to do voluntary work for the Police for the whole summer holidays prior to the GCSE results. What will they learn from this and what will the police officer learn from them? This book has three main themes: poverty, injustice and racism. Although it makes sense to have four narrators, the reason for this doesn't become clear until near the end of the book and it's possible that some less committed readers may choose not to finish this novel. The central ideas of Ansar's book are powerful and important but the narrative at times can be confusing. **RB**

**What the World Doesn't See**

★★★★★

Mel Darbon, Usborne Publishing, 384pp, 9781474937849, £8.99 pbk

Maudie is seventeen. She and her brother Jake who is thirteen, lost their Dad to cancer almost two years prior to the start of the story. Jack has severe learning difficulties, so Maudie and her Mum are not certain how much he understands about Dad's death. Two days before her mother's wedding anniversary, Maudie's Mum suddenly disappears. No one knows where she's gone or for how long. Jake is put into temporary foster care, Maudie is seething. She desperately needs to bring her family back together, so she decides to kidnap Jake from his foster home in an attempt to shock her Mum into coming back. Will it work? And what will they each learn in the meantime?

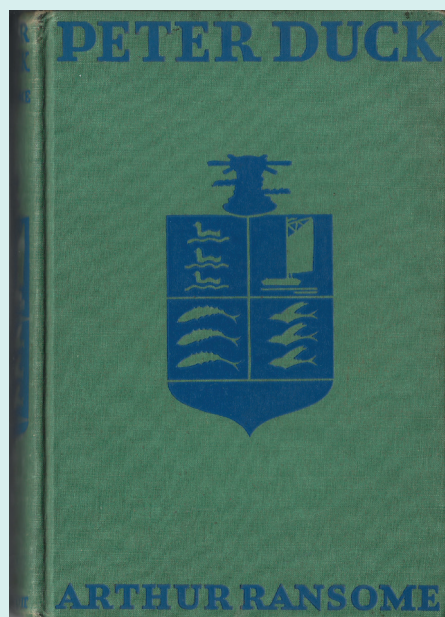
This is a heartbreakingly raw and real story of grief and how one family attempts to come to terms with it. Darbon's portrayal of Jake, who is one of two narrators along with Maudie, is one of the most truthful I have seen of a person with severe learning difficulties. Jake needs twenty-four hour care and supervision and he narrates his story in the third person. Unlike other portrayals, Jake is able to play an active role in the narrative and is not just a cipher. Readers will be both amused and exasperated by him in equal measure.

The relationship between the two siblings is highly nuanced in that Jake's dependency on her scares Maudie at times but it is always deeply loving as evidenced by Jake's scribbles which he interprets for the reader as saying 'Jake Maudie love'. This is a vital read whether you are familiar with people with learning difficulties or not. It is essentially a narrative about family dynamics and love. **RB**

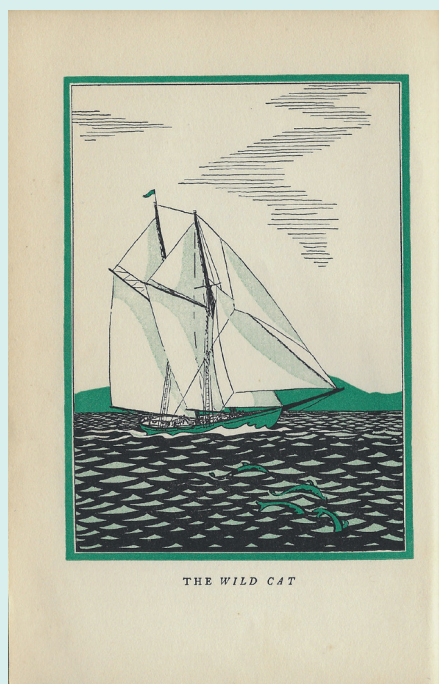


# Valediction: **No.9** Small Gang

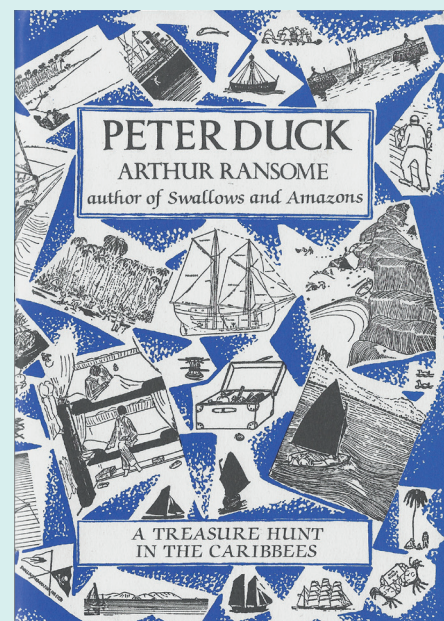
**Brian Alderson** is donating his remarkable collection of children's books to **Seven Stories**. Here he carefully says goodbye to some particularly precious editions.



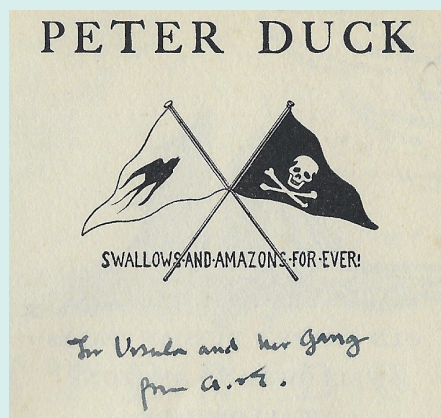
American edition of **Peter Duck** given to Ursula Lippincott. The shield is from Arthur Ransome's design for the drawing that "Admiral Peter Duck" made for his kit-bag, showing three ducks, a Norfolk wherry under full sail, three flying fish, and three dolphins



The two-colour frontispiece by Helene Carter for the US edition of **Peter Duck** which would not appear in the London edition



**Peter Duck** UK dust-jacket presumably by a Cape designer which displays many examples of what were to be Arthur Ransome's first drawings in the style that would be adopted for all the Cape series.



US edition of **Peter Duck** with gift inscription to Ursula Lippincott

In 1898 on holiday on Coniston Water the young Arthur Ransome had a fruitful encounter with the artist and erstwhile assistant to Ruskin, William Gershom Collingwood, and his five children. Collingwood was a keen yachtsman and before long had taught Ransome to sail his dinghy, the *Swallow*. It was to be an enduring friendship (Arthur proposing serially but unsuccessfully to two of the daughters) and would also involve another visiting family, the Syrian Altounyans, one of whom did marry Dora Collingwood, while five others, including their father, were later to inspire the first of Ransome's famed sagas of boats, the sea, and the countryside.

The first **Swallows and Amazons** took some time to get themselves organised. On first appearance in 1930 their story was told in plain text with only a coloured map by Steven Spurrier for endpapers. The next year however he was persuaded to add a set of line drawings (together with a companion set for **Swallowdale**, the 1931 successor). In America however the Lippincott first edition had gained permission for a set of chapter headpieces and separate endpapers, undertaken, with some repetitions, by Helene Carter.

Come 1932 however the author had tired of poor Mr Spurrier whose work he deemed too predictable and he ventured on doing the job himself, cunningly blaming the resultant drawings on the children themselves – possibly leading to confusion for American readers where, despite Ransome's amusing explanation, Carter was retained in places. The book was to be the sailing yarns of **Peter Duck** with Uncle Jim and the children of **Swallows and Amazons** as fellow sailors to the Caribbees and back.

On publication, as was customary, Ransome was given his share of 'author's copies', and so it occurred that one of the Lippincott copies, in its American board binding, found its way with a gift inscription in minuscule handwriting: 'For Ursula and the gang / from A.R.'

This Ursula proves to be the youngest of the Collingwood girls (never, alas, proposed to by Arthur). She had worked as a midwife in London before returning north and by 1932 had married Reginald Luard-Selby, the vicar at Ambleside, with their children making up a small and fairly youthful gang.

I myself was a child reader of Ransome (I remember being wholly oblivious to an evening of V2 bombing raids through absorption in **We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea**) and by a stroke of good fortune much later on picked up an almost complete run of first editions in their jackets. Later on too these were joined by four American editions which included Ursula's – a treasure whose departure will be hard to endure for signed copies are hardly common.

**Swallows and Amazons, Swallowdale** and **Peter Duck** are published by Red Fox, £7.99 pbk.

**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.