

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

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the children's book magazine online

May 2023



Authorgraph interview
Jackie Morris

Windows into Illustration
Rob Ramsden

Pictured Worlds

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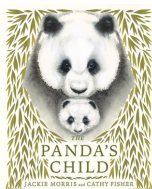
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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **The Panda's Child** written by Jackie Morris, illustration by Cathy Fisher. Thanks to Otter-Barry Books for their help with this cover.



Guest Editorial 260

It's all Nadia Shireen's fault, says Frank Cottrell-Boyce...

Every time I get a bit of a platform I go on about how there is no national conversation about children's books. I was on Radio 4's Today programme along with Robin Stevens and the Carnegie winner Katya Balen. I think I said something intemperate about how – despite the fact that what's left of the UK's soft power and a big chunk of its tourist industry (Potter, Paddington and Pooh – and that's just the P's) derives from children's books – any given niche West End restaurant probably gets more review coverage than all the new children's books added together. Ironically, it's a (fictional) restaurant critic – Anton Ego in *Ratatouille* – who best describes why this is important, 'There are times when a critic truly risks something, and that is in the discovery and defence of the new. The world is often unkind to new talent, new creations. The new needs friends.' Lots of new work is being published – work that embraces the rich diversity of race, faith and neurological type – but there are only a handful of bold, brilliant critics offering to befriend it. And they have a tiny number of column inches.

Anyway shortly after I got off the show Nadia rang me and said, 'Stop campaigning and complaining and actually do something. Like a podcast.' We both had the great good fortune to know a sonic wizard – Geoff Bird – and before we knew it we were off on the **Island of Brilliant**. I can't remember how the name came about but a fictitious island seemed a great way to frame a show about children's books. First of all because it makes you think of all the great children's books set on islands – from Robert Louis Stevenson through End Blyton to Kiran Millwood Hargrave (and hopefully my own *Noah's Gold*). But also because a book is a kind of island in the storm tossed sea of life. On top of that we're having a thunderingly great time improvising the island geography. I had no idea until Nadia mentioned it that there was a fun fair on the island. And of course we have our favourite band – Ukulele Uff



and Lonesome Dave – strumming up some lovely lilting holiday vibes. The podcast has Nadia and I talking about our favourite children's books; the wonderful Emily Drabble (her voice brought to us via a magical shell) giving us a rundown of the latest releases; and interviews with our favourite writers. We had Cressida Cowell herself flying into the island on a dragon in our first episode.

Everyone knows by now that a child that reads for pleasure will not do better at school. More importantly – more importantly than anything – reading for pleasure helps build the apparatus of happiness. It builds resilience by helping create that happy place inside of us. But but but but ... if you're going to read for pleasure you need to have a choice. You need to be able to find the book that's right for you. How are you going to do that without someone handing you the map, a boat and a compass and pointing you towards the glittering horizon. That's what we want to be ... the map, boat and compass in the adventure of a lifetime.

Discover the **Island of Brilliant** wherever you get your podcasts.

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Wild Adventures:

An interview with Ele Fountain

Michelle Pauli talks to the author of **Boy 87** about her new environmental adventure story.

When Jack's mother suggests they take a holiday together, he's thinking swimming pool, wifi and surfing. Instead, he finds himself deep in a tropical rainforest with her and her local friends, fighting for survival as they try to capture evidence against gun-toting loggers whose crimes endanger the very existence of the area's indigenous peoples. It's quite a trip. But

although, like all of Ele Fountain's books, **Wild** has a contemporary, news-based theme as its background, at the heart of the story is not an 'issue' but a character – in this case an angry, grieving and desperately hurting boy.

When we meet Jack he's numbly going through the motions of his life after the loss of his father three months previously. Feeling unconnected from his mother, who was always busy with her work as an environmental anthropologist while his dad was there for him every day, Jack withdraws, a creeping sense of nihilism setting in. He veers towards the wrong path at his secondary school, moving from his old, familiar friends with their football games and pizza to a new gang that's into bunking off school, shoplifting and vandalism. But when he reluctantly agrees to go on his mum's 'work trip', he finds himself shaken to his core – physically and emotionally.

This combination of big background issue and strong foreground character started with Fountain's debut, **Boy 87**, about a refugee child, and has continued to the more recent **Melt**, set in a remote Arctic village with a backdrop of environmental catastrophe, and **Fake**, about the impact of technology.

'I like to make a connection between news stories and what's happening in children's lives, because these big news stories they're hearing about can feel quite abstract,' Fountain says. 'So I try to create a story that will immerse them, give it context and make it real for them. If you can do that, then that deeper sense of understanding and greater knowledge of the issue can help to reassure them.'

'My motivation for writing stories is to explore things I care deeply about. That's often my starting point. But my books are very character led. So after I've decided what I want to be at the heart of my story, I immediately start thinking about who's going to be in that story. The characters are really my way of expressing the subject I care about and giving those topics a more solid form.'

And Jack is a glorious character. While the journey through the rainforest is undoubtedly an exhilarating page-turning adventure, it is Jack's inner journey that is the true heart of the novel. As the stakes increase and he faces a life and death situation and the prospect of losing his mother as well as his father, we see him gradually move from an angry, isolated boy unable to speak of his deep pain to a slow opening up, along with a recognition of the difference his own bravery can make, both personally and politically.

For Fountain, the different ways individuals – and cultures – deal with grief was instructive. She lived in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia for three years and points to the more collective and community-focused attitudes towards death and grieving she witnessed there.

'When a death was announced, members of the community – family, relatives, neighbours – would descend on the household, there'd be

tents erected, even in the road. People would come over for two or three days to grieve really openly together. In our culture, grief is often something that's not discussed openly and people who've experienced grief can feel quite lonely. And, of course, everybody feels something different. That's what I wanted to show, through Jack's experiences, that there is no one feeling and there's no right way to experience grief and instead we muddle through it together.'

Fountain's strong character-led approach helps prevent her stories becoming too weighed down with the issues she explores but it is also, for her, a way to ensure she is writing about cultures other than her own in a respectful way. It's a complex, sometimes controversial, area that Fountain is acutely aware of.

'As a storyteller you must do your research and show respect,' Fountain says. 'Before I start writing, I research as much as I can quite intensely. And then I try to push it to the back of my mind when I write the character so it's all there in my head but not coming out as a list of facts. I feel that it's really important, when you're writing about other cultures and other places, to respect them by doing thorough research and making sure all your facts are correct, whether you use them or not.'

For **Wild** she drew on her own visits to rainforests in Costa Rica and Malaysia but also delved into resources, from news reports, books and documentaries to weather reports and recordings of birdsong. It makes for an incredibly vivid, sense-assailing read – the reader is fully there in the sticky humidity of the rainforest surrounded by the cacophony of insect sounds and bird calls – not to mention the roars of belching howler monkeys or the excruciating pain of a bullet ant bite.

Unusually, perhaps, while the rainforest in **Wild** is clearly based on a real place – and there are lots of clues eagle-eyed young readers will pick up on if they want to identify the country and region – Fountain never names it. It's a quirk throughout all her books and ties in with her very spare style of writing and habit of leaving things that can be, unsaid.

'I have a very specific way that I like to write. I like to store everything in my head. And then I like to be very pared back, very reserved in what I put on the page,' she explains. 'It means there's more scope for the reader's imagination and to make it easier for them to relate to something that's happened to them personally, or a story they've read about. There's a bit of room to manoeuvre with more space to think and wonder.'

Fountain is now at work on her sixth novel, which she promises will be 'quite stormy as there's a female protagonist who's also quite stormy. And there are oceans and sea and storms...' In the meantime, students at the University of Reading will soon be able to make the most of her expertise and experience when she takes up post as a Royal Literary Fellow under the Royal Literary Fund Fellowship scheme, helping students develop their writing.

Wild is published by Pushkin Children's Books, 978-1782693840, £6.99 pbk.

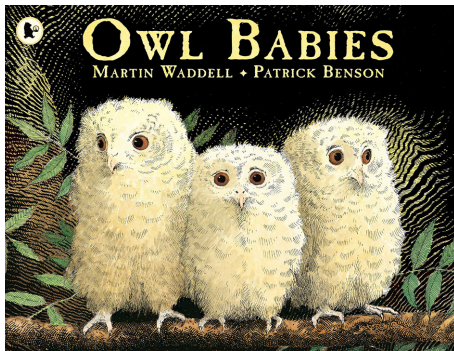


Michelle Pauli is a freelance writer and editor specialising in books and education. She created and edited the **Guardian** children's books site.

Ten of the Best Irish Children's Books

Selected by **Gráinne Clear**

Could there be a more joyful but impossible task than writing about ten of the best Irish children's books? Researching and then limiting an endless list of remarkable books to just ten? As a country known for its way with words, its mastery of storytelling, its outstanding artists, there are not only dozens but hundreds of books that could have been in this roundup. I've chosen some of the very finest examples of storytelling, characterization and illustration that have, in some way, been ground-breaking or a big moment in Irish children's fiction, as well as books that I have found myself reading again and again. For a hundred more recommendations, come find me at a book launch or on the internet – and let's discuss.



Owl Babies (1992)
Martin Waddell and Patrick Benson, Walker Books, 32pp, 978-0744531671, £7.99 pbk

Long renowned as a classic in the world of picturebooks, **Owl Babies** is a lyrical, powerful story of three young owlets waiting

for their mother's return. Impatient and hungry, the baby owls wait and wait, the stakes gently rise until – with the great whoosh of a page turn and of flapping wings – mummy returns! Will there ever be a greater moment of relief than 'And she came'? Dark backgrounds, intricate line work and gleaming natural tones of brown, green and blue show a world of darkness and moonlight, a forest full of danger – but also a cosy home. This book is a thing of great beauty and remarkable storytelling.



Oh No, George! (2011)
Chris Haughton, Walker Books, 32pp, 978-1406344769, £7.99 pbk

I could have chosen any one of Chris Haughton's masterpieces of deceptively simple storytelling, colour and form – but **Oh No, George!** carries a special place in my heart for its deeply loveable main character: George the dog,

who tries to be good, who wants to be good, but finds it so very difficult to be good. Glowing artwork and numerous opportunities for young readers to join in in the joyful, scolding repetition of 'Oh no, George!' throughout the text make this book enormous fun, and a complete pleasure to re-read a hundred times over. A message of how no-one is perfect, but every one of us is as loveable as the highly stressed-out George, marks this as one of the absolute greats.

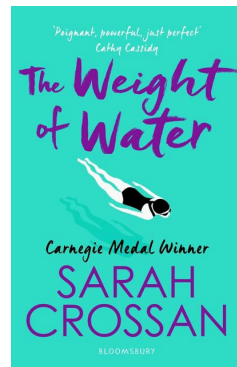


Rabbit and Bear: Rabbit's Bad Habits (2016)

Julian Gough and Jim Field, Hodder Children's Books, 112pp, 978-1444921687, £6.99 pbk

For those of us who adore **Frog and Toad** with a fervent passion, who stand over **Winnie the Pooh** as a tome of great wisdom, empathy and hilarious unlikely friendships, make space on your shelf for the perfect duo that is Rabbit and Bear. The story revolves around a grouchy, didactic Rabbit

learning a thing or two about friendship and sharing from soft-hearted Bear – with Bear (and the reader) learning about gravity, avalanches ... and poo. The witty and warm text sparks with funny dialogue and simply adventure, brought to life by Jim Field's joyful illustrations. This is a series that every child will love.



The Weight of Water (2011)

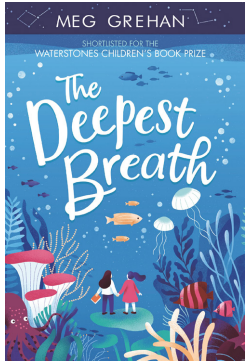
Sarah Crossan, Bloomsbury, 112pp, 978-1526606907, £8.99 pbk

This hugely original and perfectly composed verse novel by former Laureate na nÓg is a beautiful exploration of what it is to come to a new place, to build a new life, and to make yourself anew – while still holding on to who you are. One of the first Irish verse novels, it follows the story of Kasienka, a 13-year-old girl who moves from Poland to England with her broken-hearted mother.

The only release Kasienka finds from this cold, strange new place is through the thing that brings her greatest joy: swimming. Painful, hopeful, beautiful, accessible, this is a story that stayed with me for years after reading.

Gráinne Clear is a Senior Commissioning Editor at Walker Books, with a focus on fiction for age 6+. She was previously Publishing Manager and Art Director at Little Island Books, an independent Irish children's publisher. She is also the co-founder of the **Staróg Prize** for new voices in Irish children's fiction, has written and hosted two children's literature series for **RTÉ Radio**, was president of **IBBY Ireland** and a board member of Publishing Ireland, and worked as a storyteller. You can find her on Twitter at @grainneclear.

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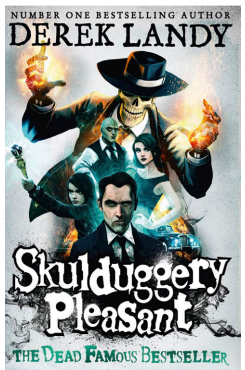


The Deepest Breath (2019)

Meg Grehan, Little Island Books, 180pp, 978-1912417186, £6.99 pbk

This verse novel is a rare, beautiful exploration of first romantic feelings and self-discovery, following the story of one of the most endearing characters in middle grade fiction: eleven-year-old Stevie. Stevie likes lots of things: the sea, reading, and the fizzy feeling she gets when she's with her friend Chloe – the kind of feeling she thinks she's supposed to get with Richard, or Andrew. Her search for answers leads

her to the library, where Stevie is finally able to understand her romantic interest in other girls, and 'let out a big breath/Long and slow/ A steady/Woosh'. This is one of those stories that is about so many things – anxiety, sexuality, the power of reading to transform lives – but is so carefully and delicately written that reading it simply feels like taking a long, deep and reassuring breath.

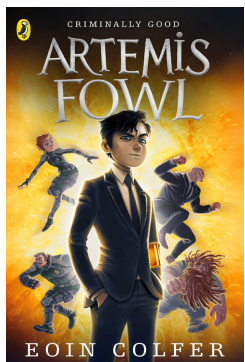


Skulduggery Pleasant (2007)

Derek Landy, HarperCollins, 398pp, 978-0007241620, £8.99 pbk

This might be one of the widely-read titles on the list, with millions of copies sold worldwide, and it deserves every bit of its success. Clever, funny fantasy-adventure that crosses into so many other genres, including horror, mystery and pure comedy, this is a hugely clever series that will appeal to so many different types of readers. Following the character of Skulduggery – a skeleton, sorcerer, detective and smartass –

and his partner Valkyrie Cain, they overcome trial after tribulation with their numerous magic-wielding allies over the course of (to date) sixteen books. Excitement and page-turning action as well as some of the smartest dialogue in any series, this is the ultimate fun, accessible and pacy read.



Artemis Fowl (2001)

Eoin Colfer, Penguin, 320pp, 978-0141339092, £7.99 pbk

I simply couldn't have a roundup of great Irish children's books without a book by Eoin Colfer, and the truth is that this recommendation is my ten-year-old self speaking with a loud and firm voice: you must read **Artemis Fowl**. Following the story of a twelve-year-old criminal mastermind who hatches an ingenious plot to steal all the gold in fairy land, this is a

whip smart, pacy story with characters that climb right out of the page. The unscrupulous Artemis Fowl should be the kid you love to hate, but instead you almost will him to succeed in his dastardly schemes – while also rooting for the bold and brilliant Captain Holly Short of the LEPrecon. Colfer's take on old-world fairies and his careful, techy worldbuilding is completely believable, making this a modern classic that is still going strong twenty years on.

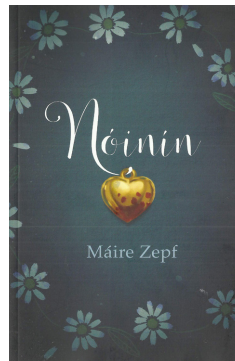


A Dangerous Crossing (2017)

Jane Mitchell, Little Island Books, 232pp, 978-1910411582

Jane Mitchell is an author who writes with remarkable care – both in her research into the lives and experiences of the people she writes about, and the way in which she tells that story, delivered with the perfect level of truth and fiction, of safety and danger. This book follows the story of thirteen-year-old Ghalib, a boy from Kobani in Syria, who is fleeing his home country due to the

war. We follow him on his journey across many countries, finally making his way to a boat, to the sea, and to an unknown shore where the rest of his life will begin. First-person perspective and present tense makes this story especially immersive, immediate and powerful. This recommendation was a close tie with **Run for Your Life**, a moving and important exploration of life in Direct Provision (Ireland's reception system for asylum seekers) by the same author.

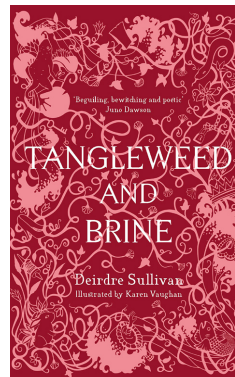


Nóinín (2019)

Máire Zepf, Cois Life Teoranta, 278pp, 978-1907494949

This powerful, compelling verse novel by (just former) Laureate na nÓg tells a powerful story of the online grooming of a teenage girl that builds to a shocking crime, told from the perspective of her best friend. Its imagery is rich, the language utterly beautiful, and the references to fairy tales and Irish mythology expertly and effortlessly woven through. Written in Irish, but accessible to many unsteady

Irish-language readers in its verse form, this award-winning and very special book is a standout of modern stories in the Irish language, and helping to create a literature for today's young Irish speakers that is deeply relevant to their own lives.



Tangleweed and Brine (2017)

Deirdre Sullivan, Little Island Books, 180pp, 978-1912417117, £8.99 pbk

This superb and deeply original collection of thirteen dark, feminist retellings of traditional fairytales follows in the tradition of Angela Carter, but is a masterpiece entirely its own. Emerging before the great wave of feminist retellings of the last few years, Deirdre Sullivan set the bar for all those that followed, taking stories from Cinderella to Rumpelstiltskin, and exploring the perspectives of the women

behind each of these tales. Winner of numerous awards in its year of publication, it was soon followed by the equally magnificent **Savage Her Reply**, a retelling of the **Children of Lir** from the perspective of Aífe, the traditional villain. Tales of blood and intrigue, betrayal and enchantment – with stunning, intricate black and white illustrations by Irish artist Karen Vaughan.

Authorgraph

No.260

Jackie Morris
interviewed by
Ferelith Hordon

‘While words often need translation, and are often interpreted in many ways (reading between the lines), images need no translation; they speak across land borders and language borders, and across time.... Images cross borders in ways that words struggle to.’

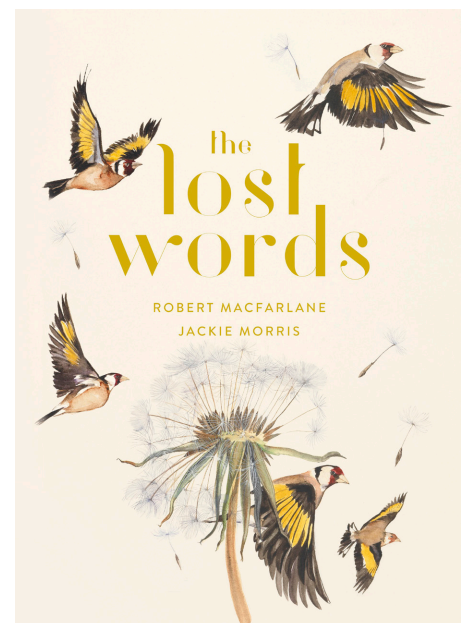
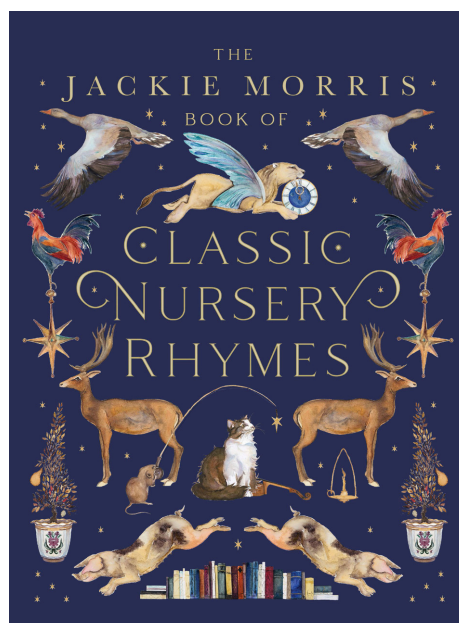
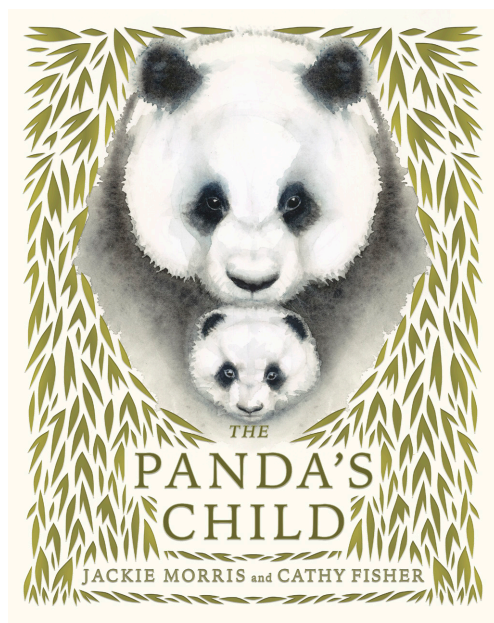
Jackie Morris has a passionate belief in the power of the image – illustrations that accompany words, bringing them to life and extending understanding. One of our best-known book illustrators, she has an impressive catalogue of titles both illustrated and written by her, and those she has illustrated for other authors. She has won prizes – notably the **Tir na n-Og** and the **CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal** for **The Lost Words** in 2019. She has now been nominated for the **Hans Christian Andersen Award for Illustration 2024** – the most prestigious international prize awarded to writers and illustrators.

Jackie Morris was born in Birmingham in 1961. Her father was a policeman and ‘my mum was a proper “mum”, she made pies and things’ she tells me. The family moved to Evesham in Worcestershire when she was four. Here she attended Prince Henry’s High School where she was frequently reprimanded for dreaming and drawing; she was told she could never be a painter – her ambition since childhood. She recalls at the age of six watching her father meticulously drawing the wing of a lapwing and ‘I decided to learn how to conjure birds from paper and colour.’ It is perhaps, this early inspiration that led to Jackie’s intense relationship with the natural world. Indeed she says she is much more comfortable depicting animals than people. This can be seen across the whole range of her work where we find wild life, birds, plants, and animals everywhere – many familiar to the British landscape and others more exotic – tigers, snow leopards, polar bears – and then the fabulous including her favourite, the dragon. However, the journey to the fluid, immersive spreads that capture this world was not immediate.

Starting at Hereford College for Art she moved to Exeter for her BA before finally obtaining a place at Bath Academy of Art, ‘a saving grace’. On leaving college, she found work creating postcards and calendars for organisations such as **Greenpeace** and **Amnesty International** as well as providing illustrations for a range of magazines – among them, **New Statesman**, **Radio Times**, **New Society** and **Country Living**. At this time she lived in London,

taking her portfolio round the various publishing houses. It was while illustrating cards that her work caught the attention of the author Caroline Pitcher. The resulting collaboration led to Jackie’s first picture book, illustrating Caroline’s text for **Jo’s Storm**. The result brings together many of the elements that have become so significant in Jackie’s work – landscape and its importance, the respect for animals and how they are depicted, her use of watercolour, so fluid, combining energy with a sense of space. These can all be seen in her later works such as **The Snow Leopard**, where the relationship between the child and the wild animal and their snowy world are central to the narrative and the immersive illustrations capture the immensity of this mountain landscape, the vibrant palette of cold blues and whites, a contrast to the destructive drama created by the vivid reds and oranges of the invading warriors. In this book, Jackie is illustrating her own words; in **The Lord of the Forest** she is working with Caroline Pitcher again. Here we find the same intensity, same meticulous consideration and respect for the world of the tiger. As she herself comments, when creating images for the text of someone other than herself she tries to get the soul of the writing. Indeed, there is strong spiritual element in Jackie’s work.

Just as the natural world inspires awe so do the stories emerging from the world’s religions. Jackie has illustrated a number of books where this can be seen. In particular her series with Mary Hoffman – **Parables: Stories Jesus Told, Miracles Jesus Worked** and **Animals of the Bible**. These are notable not just for the palette, which draws the young reader into the landscape of the Middle East, but also in her depiction of the people of that part of the world. Though she does not use models, when illustrating the Nativity story, **Little One, We Knew You’d Come** by Sally Lloyd-Jones she took care to have a real baby at its heart. Her integrity shines through. What also shines through is her love of story. This is love that goes back to her childhood, very much inspired by her father, though reading did not come easily to her. Indeed, as she





says even today 'I read word by word, it takes ages and that's how I write'. From the beginning she has been drawn into the wonder of folklore and fairy tale. Here she can evoke the sense of another world – that feeling expressed by the words 'once upon a time'. In both **Cities in the Sea** by Sian Lewis and in **The Seal Children** for which she wrote the text, she captures the haunting atmosphere of Celtic myth to great effect. Her palette of soft sepia browns and the blue of the sea colours echoed in the costumes of the fisher folk bring reality and humanity to the tales. Both of these picture books which come from the beginning of her career were awarded the **Tir na n-Og Prize**. In her own retellings – **East of the Sun, West of the Moon** and **The Wild Swans** – she takes the time to expand the tales, keeping the traditional element at their heart but adding and shaping them to meet a contemporary audience while her jewel-like illustrations add that moment of visual excitement to draw the reader in. This ability to bring fantasy alive is apparent in **Quiet Music of Gently Falling Snow** which brings her work to an adult audience as her imaginative picture book **Tell me a Dragon** does for a very much younger audience, while the illustrations for her collection of **Nursery Rhymes** draws both young and old together to play with the wonder of the familiar words,

Her paintings may appear reassuringly classical in their composition and technique; they satisfy the eye through the imagery and colour, her bold use of space. Though she used gouache for the images in **Song of the Golden Hare** she now works almost exclusively in watercolour. However, even here she is breaking rules. 'I have never used watercolour in the way you are supposed to' she tells me. 'I do use washes but I work by building up layer on layer' – the result is that they shine with depth and texture. Jackie is constantly exploring new and innovative ideas. This interest in experimenting is very apparent in **Feather, Leaf, Bark and Stone** where she takes these unconventional materials to explore texture and impressions. She is currently painting in watercolour on clay board – a very untraditional practice but one which will bring life to the book she and Robert Macfarlane are working on about birds. Indeed, innovation is at the heart of her earlier collaboration with Macfarlane, **The Lost Words**. She is very definite that this extraordinary book that has had such an impact across the book world and inspired both adult and children, is indeed a very real collaboration. In her words 'It is a book that has taken them to so many places.' She certainly suggested it – she asked Robert for an introduction to a book she planned using the lost words. She created the design in which the images move across three spreads allowing one to be a ghost image and a design that challenged the traditional expectations of a picture book. The result



though is a true partnership where Robert's spells, which use 'words you can taste', work seamlessly with her paintings. But Jackie is also quick to recognise the contribution made by her editor, the publisher, the designer, all those who have contributed to the making of the book – and the public who have taken it to their heart

'It is very difficult to be taken seriously as a writer if you are seen as an illustrator' – and Jackie to most people will be seen as a consummate artist and illustrator. For Jackie the words are as important as the image – 'writing is a real passion for me' she says, but she never thought that she could be an author. Now she is turning more to be the creator of the text, teaming up with other illustrators. She talks with pride about her work with James Mayhew and the three books she has written about Mrs Noah – a character she would like to develop further. She is the author of the forthcoming **The Panda's Child** for which Cathy Fisher has created the images. 'Watching Cathy paint the images for **The Panda's Child** was just wonderful. Each one has heart and soul poured into it. Together, I hope, we have made something beautiful.' It will also challenge since it will be a picture book in three chapters that she hopes will open the door to conversation and thought, especially about the trade in wild animals. It breaks the rules, she tells me. She and Cathy are now working on **The Summer Pup**, a story about one of Jackie's dogs, Rosie, that has been in her mind for a long time. Another book in the making is one for adults working with the glass artist, Tamsin Abbott, using folk and selkie tales – another innovation. It is this generosity – her willingness to collaborate – her connection with the natural world around her, her belief that all art is curiosity, that makes Jackie such a special author and artist. She still lives in the little house she bought on her first visit to Pembrokeshire. 'I came for a weekend. I arrived after dark and woke to a sky so blue and clear. There was the cathedral in the dip then fields and the sea and tiny islands and there and then I fell in love.... I went shopping and bought a house.' It was an adventure, and it is this sense of adventure that still informs her art as she works to give expression to her dreams – 'I love the place that writing takes me to inside my head' she says, while her images take her audience to that special place. They tell her 'they had to buy a picture because it was in their dreams... That really is a privilege, to be able to get into people's dreams.'

Book list is available [here](#).



Ferelith Hordon is editorial advisor to **Books for Keeps**.

Windows into Illustration: Rob Ramsden

A graduate of the MA in Children's Book Illustration at the Cambridge School of Art, Rob Ramsden channels his fascination with nature and love of gardening into his work. His picture books are deliberately simple in approach and speak directly to their young audience. Here he describes his illustration technique and approach.

This illustration from **I Heard A Bird** (see opposite) perfectly demonstrates the idea that links all the books in my **In The Garden** series; it's the idea that our senses and feelings might help us to engage with nature. This spread shows a close-up of a child engrossed with nature, having been led to it through their senses. An awareness of nature and biodiversity, and the interdependency between nature and ourselves has never been so important, and my aim is to try and encourage that connection.

I begin each new project with a simple idea in mind, and with **I Heard A Bird** the idea was a question: What could sound bring to exploring nature? I also explored what the extremes of noise and silence might bring to that experience too. Personally, I experience a lot of inner 'noise', but nature can, if I take a moment to notice it and get interested, stop the noise of everyday life and help to relax and focus me.

Once I have an inkling that the idea might be worth finding a story for, I explore it through drawing, and writing single words and lines of text. Sometimes it's easier to explore the idea through a drawing and sometimes through words - eventually they impact on each other.

Out of this process emerges the story and the final text, and I can begin to design and draw a sequence.

I love this next part, I get to set the stage, ask the actors to read the script, and let them improvise the scenes. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, and there's always my editor and designer sitting in the wings ready to have an editorial and design meeting. I need a shout out for my editor Janice Thomson, and designer Goldy Broad, the books are always stronger because of their dedication and understanding of the story.

The artwork for these books began life in **I Saw A Bee** as linocut printing, to work with simple shapes which made the exaggerated movement of the character possible. This set a certain aesthetic,





and although the artwork no longer uses this method, it still informed me about how to illustrate the rest of the series. Before I begin, all the spreads are drawn with pencil on paper, I scan the drawings, then redraw them digitally, and each part of the drawing becomes a shape which I colour and add texture to. I hope that, by adding real pencil and printed textures, the illustrations balance somewhere between the simplicity of the shapes and being more tactile to the eye.

One thing I enjoy doing is including small details, and most of the insects in the books are living their own lives until we notice them, so in **I Heard A Bird** an observant reader might notice an ant investigating a flower or collecting seeds. I must have spent so many hours wondering what ants were up to, until I stopped, took notice, and began to investigate a little closer.

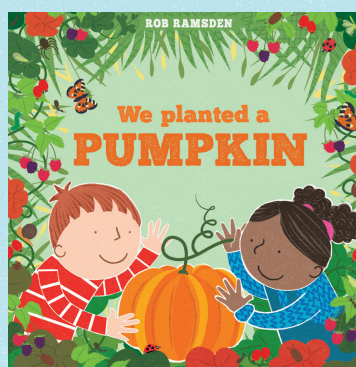
I Heard A Bird and **I Saw A Bee** are published by Scallywag Press, hardback £12.99 and paperback £7.99 respectively.



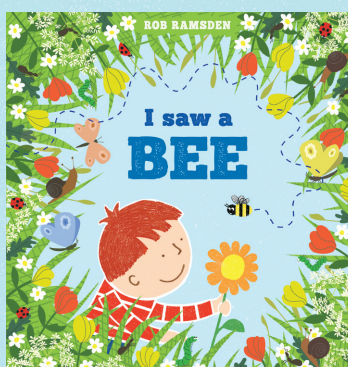
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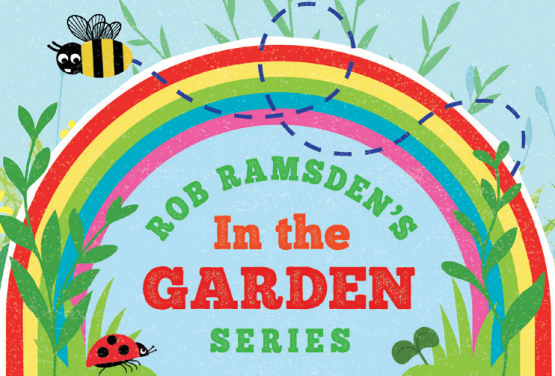
Paperback



Paperback

*'Through exploring this book,
the reader gets such a wonderful
opportunity to explore and
understand the world around them.'*

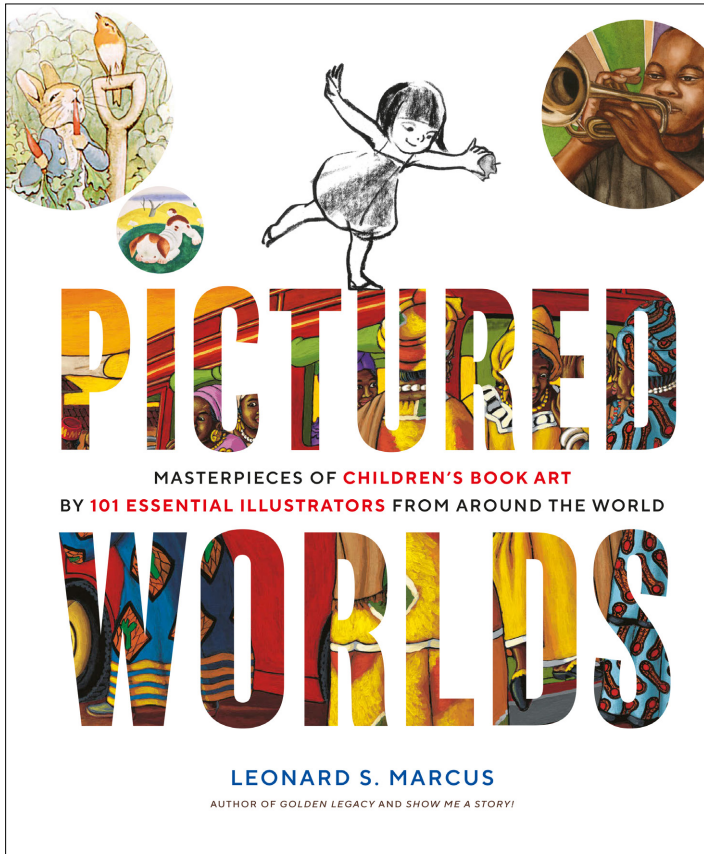
JUST IMAGINE



Scallywag Press

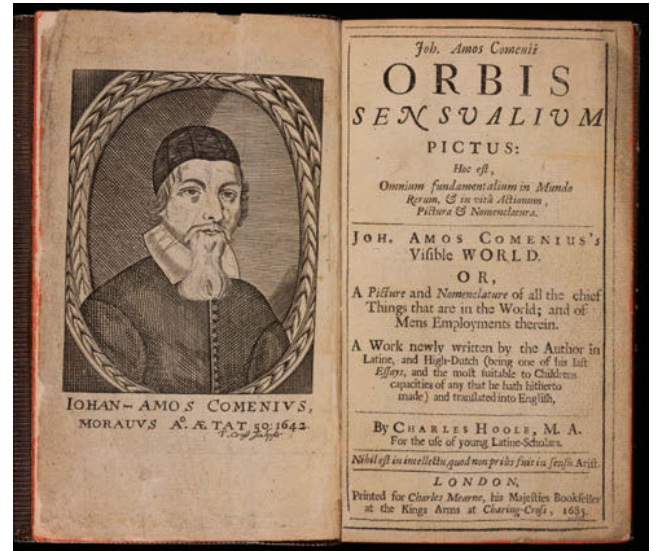
Pictured Worlds

In this extract from his new book, **Pictured Worlds Masterpieces of Children's Book Art by 101 Essential Illustrators from Around the World**, Leonard Marcus chronicles the beginning of a vibrant art form and cultural driver that has touched the lives of literate peoples everywhere, and its current status.



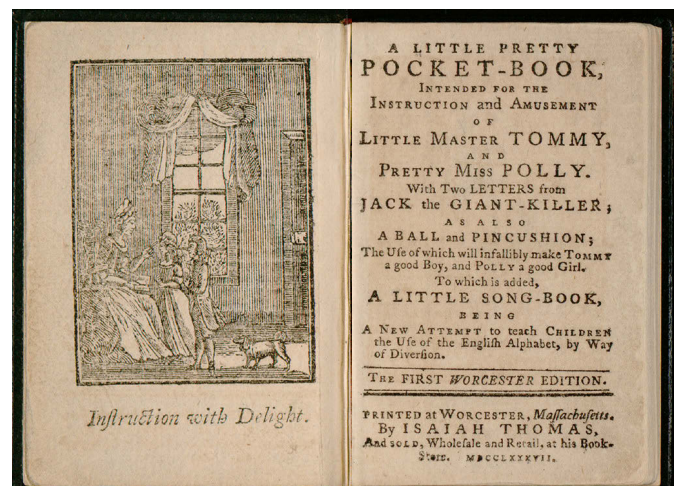
The ideal children's book, John Locke observed, is 'easy, pleasant . . . and suited to [the child's] Capacity.' Published in London in 1693, Locke's revolutionary advice book was called **Some Thoughts Concerning Education** and had something to say about all aspects of a child's upbringing, starting with the body and ending with the mind. A child psychologist before his time, Locke speculated on the types of books best suited to young people's capabilities and interests. In doing so, he laid the groundwork for modern-day children's literature. Noting, for example, that a child who feels scolded or lectured to is less apt to pay attention than one for whom learning is cast as a game, he argued that a good children's book is one in which 'the Entertainment that [the child] finds might draw him on, and reward his Pains in Reading.' Locke listed brevity and the addition of illustrations as two other key elements of effective bookmaking for the young. Pictures, he said, were an essential ingredient because, from the child's perspective, showing always works better than telling.

Widely popular in the West, Locke's treatise inspired entrepreneurial bookmen like London's John Newbery—affectionately dubbed 'Jack Whirler' by literary lion Samuel Johnson—to specialize in publishing juveniles in the mold of his forward-looking ideas. In doing so, Newbery established the first commercial market for children's books in the West. Newbery's small, trim paperbacks sold briskly to the burgeoning ranks of upwardly striving middle-class English parents and were soon being imitated, or simply pirated, in North America. Half a world away, in the vibrant commercial city of Edo, Japan, a comparable retail trade in akahon, or 'red-bound' picture books for young readers, had sprung up independently of developments in



The first English-language edition of this hugely influential book appeared in London in 1659. Courtesy of Newberry Digital Collections

Britain but for much the same reasons. A clear pattern thus emerged that would repeat itself elsewhere around the globe many times over: the recognition of a critical link between literacy and economic and social advancement, and of the illustrated children's book as a gateway to literacy and a better life. An occasional illustrated book for young readers had appeared in the West before Locke, most notably Johann Amos Comenius's **Orbis Sensualium Pictus** (1658), a picture encyclopaedia and language primer that remained in print in one form or another well into the nineteenth century. But it was Locke's prestigious endorsement that crystallized educated opinion and established the modern children's book's norms. By the time **Alice's Adventures in Wonderland's** first readers were asked to consider, 'What is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?', the answer was plain, Locke's prescient 'thoughts' having long since taken their place as literary guideposts for the new literature for young people.



Worcester, Massachusetts, publisher Isaiah Thomas issued this popular North American edition of John Newbery's first children's book forty-three years after its initial 1744 publication in London. Courtesy of the Miniature Book Collection, Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division.



Illustration from *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle (Philomel Books, 1969), Collection of Eric and Barbara Carle © 1969, 1987 Penguin Random House LLC.



Preliminary art for *The Snowy Day*
© Ezra Jack Keats Foundation.

What do we see now? Picture books in the 21st century

The digital revolution of the early 2000s presented illustrators with a new set of tools with which to paint and draw and spawned a new art form: the app, which combined aspects of animation and the illustrated book. The internet also allowed illustrators to showcase their work to a global market, a once unimaginable opportunity that, in combination with the ease of electronically transmitting digital art to any locale, resulted in a sharp rise in the number of picture books created by collaborators working across national borders and at great distances from one another. The new technologies, however, did not, as some had confidently predicted, render the traditionally printed picture book obsolete, but seemed rather to do just the opposite. For many in the children's book world, the ubiquity of digital imagery in everyday life highlighted the unique experiential value of the well-designed picture book that one could hold in hand as the centrepiece of an intimate encounter between an engaged caregiver and a child. By 2015, the never-very-robust demand for electronic picture books all but evaporated in the United States, and publishers found themselves redoubling their efforts to fashion picture books that were alluring material objects. All this was happening as a generation of seasoned editorial illustrators, having seen demand for their work dwindle in the shrinking newspaper and magazine market, migrated to children's book illustration as a viable alternative outlet for their creativity. Synchronously, the audience for picture books and illustrated narratives generally was becoming more fluid as experimental zine and web-based comics artists, long accustomed to operating on the non-commercial fringe, suddenly found themselves embraced by mainstream publishers eager to build the graphic novel into a cross-generational phenomenon. Some of these artists went on to discover the picture book as well, bringing formal comics elements and, often, a hipster maverick sensibility to the genre that further enriched its narrative vocabulary. By the turn of the new millennium, the audience for picture books had expanded to include a growing number of adult collectors, aficionados, and fans. **The Chihiro Art Museum**, the world's first museum of picture book art, had opened in Tokyo in 1977, initially as a local memorial to a beloved Japanese illustrator. Not only did that pioneering museum undergo a dramatic expansion in its size and mission in subsequent years, but it also set the model for an international trend. Children's book art museums would later be established in the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Finland, Germany, and South Korea, among other countries, and university archives of children's book art and manuscripts would likewise proliferate alongside the academic study of the field. In the United States, the second decade of

the new century also became the time for a long-overdue reckoning with regard to the publishing industry's historic marginalization of children's books by and about people of colour, a bias also embedded in publishers' traditional hiring patterns. It was not that no effort of this kind had been made in the past, but rather that from the 1920 launch of the short-lived, NAACP sponsored **Brownies' Book** magazine for the 'children of the sun' onward, attempts at diversifying the literature and the professional community surrounding it had been sporadic at best and had typically received only very modest support from the white mainstream of librarians, educators, and individual book purchasers. In the picture book realm, milestone events charted the course of a slow but ultimately meaningful industry-wide cultural transformation: the awarding of the 1963 Caldecott Medal to Ezra Jack Keats's **The Snowy Day** (1962); the rise to prominence during the mid-to-late 1900s of African American author-illustrators such as John Steptoe, Tom Feelings, Ashley Bryan, Donald Crews, Jerry Pinkney, and Pat Cummings; the subsequent arrival on the scene of an impressive and much larger group of authors, artists, librarians, and publishing staffers representing not only the African American community but also those of Latinx peoples, Asian Americans, the LGBTQ+ population, and American Indians. As the audience for picture books steadily expands and their cultural status continues to rise, the genre appears likely to flourish well into the twenty-first century, even as other categories of printed books – reference works and disposable series fiction among others – vanish into the digital ether. To many parents and grandparents who grew up on **Goodnight Moon** and **The Tale of Peter Rabbit**, it is still unimaginable to pass down a 'classic' to the next generation in anything but tangible form. Yet in the end nostalgia will have had surprisingly little to do with the picture book's long-term prospects, at least when weighed against the genre's proven utility to engage young children in the kind of artful blend of instruction and delight that John Locke recommended long ago, and which continues to prove its worth to an ever-larger portion of the world's population.

Pictured Worlds: Masterpieces of Children's Book Art by 101 Essential Illustrators from Around the World

by Leonard Marcus, Abrams, 978-1419738982, £55

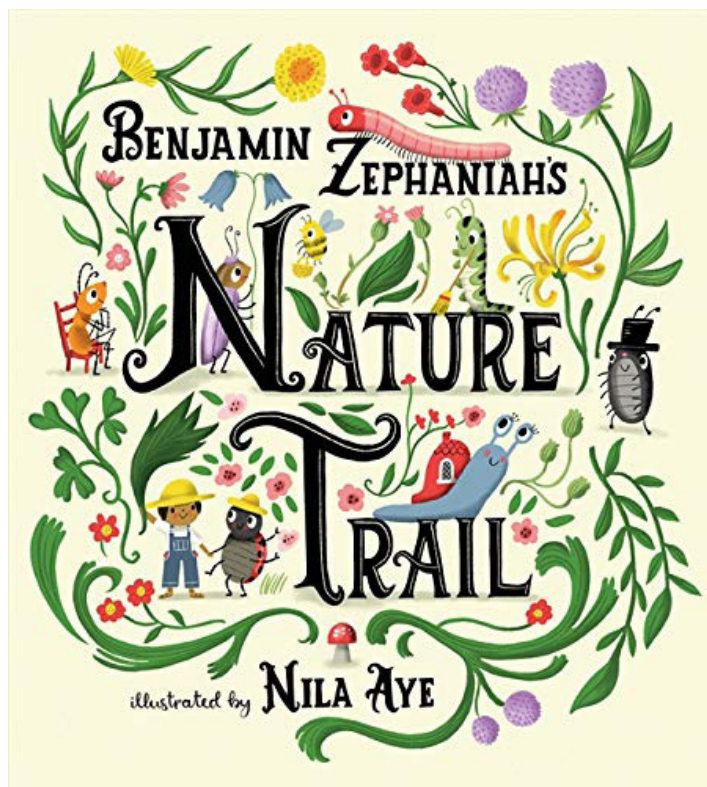
Leonard S. Marcus is one of the world's leading authorities on children's books and the people who create them. His award-winning books include **Golden Legacy: The Story of Golden Books**, **Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon**, and **Show Me a Story! Why Picture Books Matter**. A frequent contributor to the New York Times Book Review and commentator on radio and television, Marcus is a founding trustee of the **Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art**. He teaches at the School of Visual Arts, New York and lectures about his work across the world.

Beyond the Secret Garden: Natural Environments: Belonging and Nature in British Children's Books

The latest in our **Beyond the Secret Garden** series, by **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor**

We have discussed in previous 'Beyond the Secret Garden' columns how the British countryside, historically and within children's books, was a space populated and controlled by white, middle- and upper-class Britons. In **Return of a Native: Learning from the Land**, Vron Ware reminds us that the English countryside is itself shaped by social processes. However, the assumed 'natural environment' for Black and Asian Britons has often not been the most obviously human-constructed spaces; densely populated urban areas. However, recent books by Black and Asian authors have begun to offer a different view of 'nature', the city, and belonging for British children of colour.

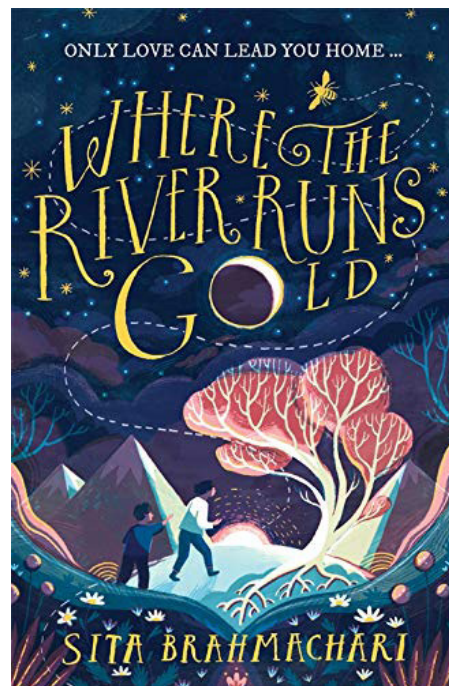
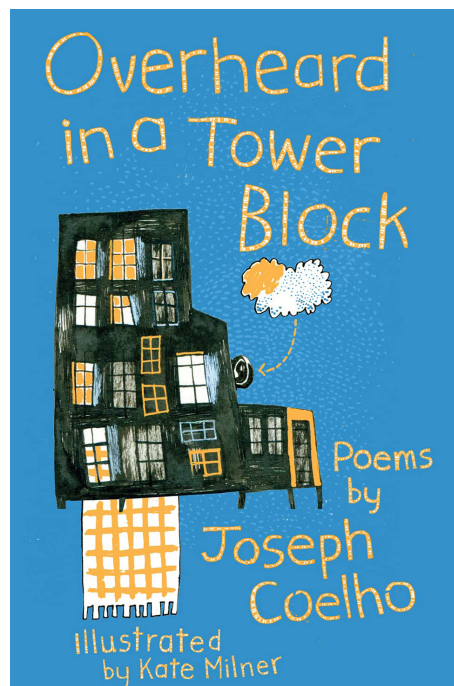
In the 1960s, 70s and 80s, when children's books began to depict a multiracial view of Britain more frequently, it was almost exclusively in an urban context. Charles Keeping, in his Kate Greenaway medal-winning **Charley, Charlotte and the Golden Canary** (1967) suggested that the tower block (the first of which was built in 1951) was the answer to the urban slums of London, populated by multiracial families. He creates a gleaming, golden tower block rising up above the darker slums. Although he does admit that the tower block has the power to separate people from their communities (Charlotte moves from the slum to the tower block, but Charley, the Black child, stays behind), Keeping argues that the natural world (in the form of a canary as golden as the tower block) can bring friends back together. However, Keeping's optimistic view is countered by British African author



Buchi Emecheta, who depicted the poverty and lack of access to green space for Black and working-class children in **Nowhere to Play** (1980). In either case, Black children have no access to green spaces, and their 'natural environment' is the streets.

The view of the tower block as gleaming or golden quickly disappeared, both in real life and in children's books. Books such as Eric Allen's **The Latchkey Children** (1968) showed the tower block as a place where the 'deprived section of the community' (10) lives, where children must make the most of the single tree in a playground. The council decides to replace the tree with a cement train, and the children must fight to save the only remaining natural element in the playground. It is the Black child and his father, who come from outside the community, who lead a strike against the killing of the tree. The children do save the tree in the end, but it remains their only connection to the natural world.

The image of the tower block in the popular imagination has not changed very much, and was made worse by the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in which 72 mostly poor and working-class people, many from racially-minoritised backgrounds, died and more were injured or lost their homes due to shoddy construction practices. Current children's laureate Joseph Coelho published his poetry collection, **Overheard in a Tower Block** (2017) just a month after the disaster, and his work offers a very different view of the tower block and of the children who live there, seeing both as vibrant and full of wonders. Coelho, who grew up in a tower block himself, suggests in 'City Kids' that children in tower blocks are observant of everything



that goes on around them—including ‘the flower-filled roadside’ and the colours of nature in the world around them. Coelho goes further in connecting tower block children and nature in his recent picture book, **Our Tower** (2022). The group of tower block children, led on the front cover by a Black girl, explore the world around their tower, finding a magical world of nature that they are able to bring back to the tower in the end. By exploring the natural world that still exists near their tower, the children are able to find ‘A power that connects us all/ to an ancient tree-grown throne’. The power of nature brings the community together.

Coelho’s depiction of a multiracial group of children who belong both to the tower and to the natural world is important in reinforcing the idea that nature belongs to everyone. This is an idea that also is central to Benjamin Zephaniah’s **Nature Trail** (2022) in which a small brown child explores the natural world in a garden, concluding ‘And I believe we all deserve/ A garden of our own’. Rather than being contained outside of nature and in a gritty urban centre, Zephaniah’s child is in a space—a garden—that is normally considered a way of containing nature. But Zephaniah’s child discovers that the garden contains more nature than first meets the eye. The ‘garden of our own’ that Zephaniah suggests all children deserve is depicted in illustrations by Nila Aye as a playground—that childhood place that combines human- and nature-constructed space.

Both Ken Wilson-Max’s **Eco Girl** (2023) and Nathan Bryon and Dapo Adeola’s **Clean Up!** (2020) suggest that nature is more than just a place to play or observe, but something we all have responsibility to nurture. **Clean Up!** has its protagonist, a girl named Rocket, visiting grandparents in the Caribbean. Rather than the sunny paradise depicted in many previous children’s books, Bryon and Adeola show the ways that nature has been destroyed by human carelessness. Rocket is appalled by the destruction of the beach habitat through littering, and she rallies friends, family and strangers to clean up the beach so that everyone, including the plant and animal life, can thrive. Wilson-Max’s Eve, who wants to be like a tree, is given a seed to plant from her grandmother so that the African forest will continue to grow and survive for many years to come.

This responsibility for nature is even more urgent in books for older readers. Sita Brahmachari’s **Where the River Runs Gold** (2019) examines a world in which bees have been destroyed and child labour is required to pollinate food crops. The symbols of the broken land are trees: the massive agora tree sculpture in the centre of the city, and the illegal ‘graffitrees’ painted by defiant artists. Neither type of tree is real, but the graffitrees offer memory and

hope. As Shifa says, ‘*The Graffitree blossom has a thousand times more life in it than this* [the tree sculpture]’ (28). Shifa and her twin Themba must face danger to escape their captivity and bring the balance of nature back. Brahmachari’s book posits children not only as caretakers of nature, but as the only ones who can fix the mistakes and carelessness of people in the past. It is not just important for all British children, including children from racially-minoritised backgrounds, to see themselves as ‘belonging’ in nature, it is imperative for us all to survive.

Books mentioned:

Overheard in a Tower Block, Joseph Coelho, ill. Kate Milner, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1910959589, £7.99 pbk

Our Tower, Joseph Coelho, ill. Richard Johnson, Frances Lincoln, 978-0711268821, £12.99 hbk

Nature Trail, Benjamin Zephaniah, ill. Nila Aye, Orchard Books, 978-1408361252, £12.99 hbk

Eco Girl, Ken Wilson-Max. Otter-Barry Books, 978-1913074319, £12.99 hbk

Clean Up!, Nathan Bryon, ill. Dapo Adeola, Puffin, 978-0241345894, £7.99 pbk

Where the River Runs Gold, Sita Brahmachari, Orion Children’s Books, 978-1510105416, £7.99 pbk



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



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

Poetry Power

Charlotte Hacking introduces the shortlist for this year's **CLIPPA**, the best new poetry for children and young people.

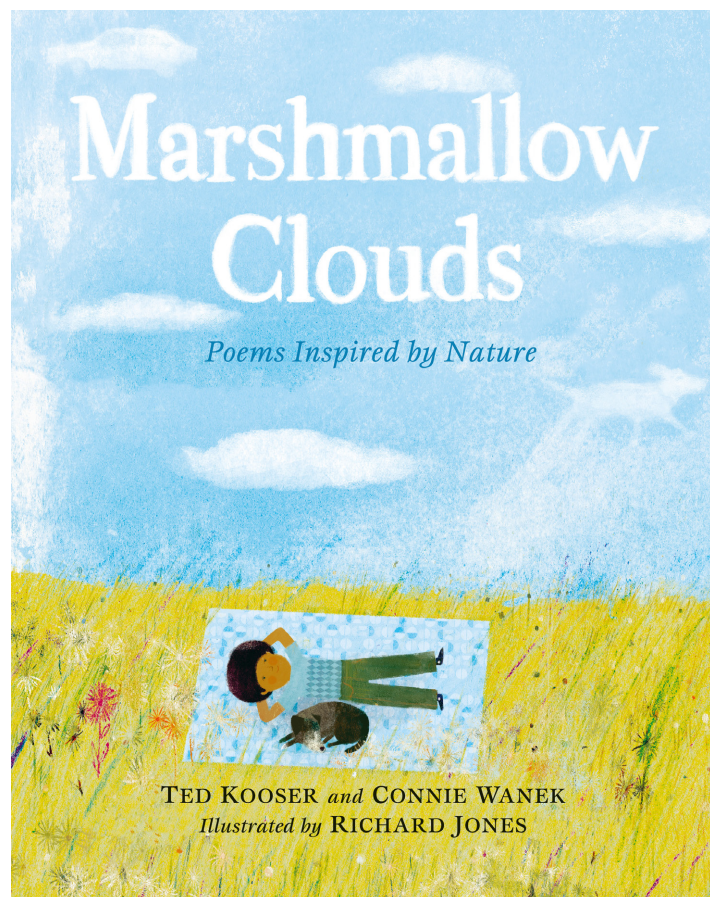
Poetry is a wonderful medium for engaging children in reading and writing, however it can often be overlooked in favour of more traditional stories or non-fiction in classrooms, bookshops and in the home.

At the **Centre for Literacy in Primary Education**, we are proud to be the National Poetry Centre for Primary Schools, and our **Centre for Literacy in Primary Poetry Award (CLIPPA)** is the only national award to celebrate poetry published for children. This year's shortlist celebrates a broad spectrum of what poetry is and what it can do for children.

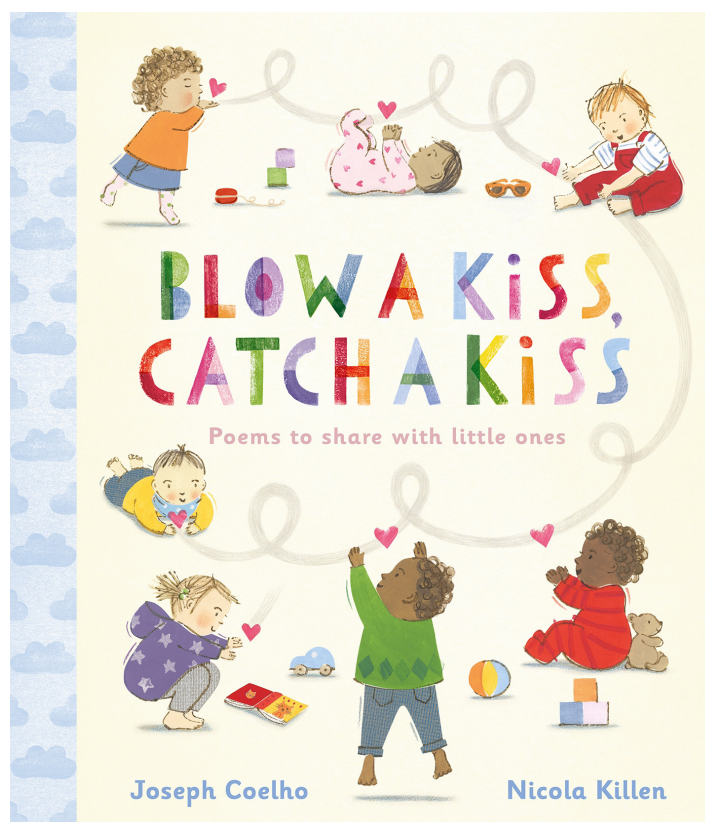
Blow a Kiss, Catch a Kiss by Joseph Coelho, illustrated by Nicola Killen is a wonderful example of the joy of early play with rhyme and song. These are the foundations of a quality early reading experience. Joining in with nursery rhymes, jingles and songs is often children's first way in to connecting spoken words to print on the page. Listening to and joining in with poems such as *Baby Exercise* and *Avocado! Avocado!* delight children in the musicality of language, as well as encouraging them to use their whole bodies to engage in the action on the page.

There are also many poems focussed on supporting children in recognising and dealing with their emotions, such as *This is...* and *Take a Deep Breath*. These poems actively contextualise children's growing understanding of self-regulation, an important aspect of learning.

Poems in the collection tune in to the lives and direct experiences of children, enabling them to respond to poems read by connecting them with their own lives, whether this be a trip to the supermarket in *Shopping Adventure*, engaging with the elements in *The Whooshing Wind* or closely observing nature in *Pigeons*.



THE CLPE POETRY AWARD 2023



Ted Kooser is a former US Poet Laureate and joins prize-winning poet Connie Wanek to create **Marshmallow Clouds**, with evocative illustrations by Richard Jones. The poems within the collection are a celebration of the natural world and the power of poetry to express our connections and experiences with the world around us.

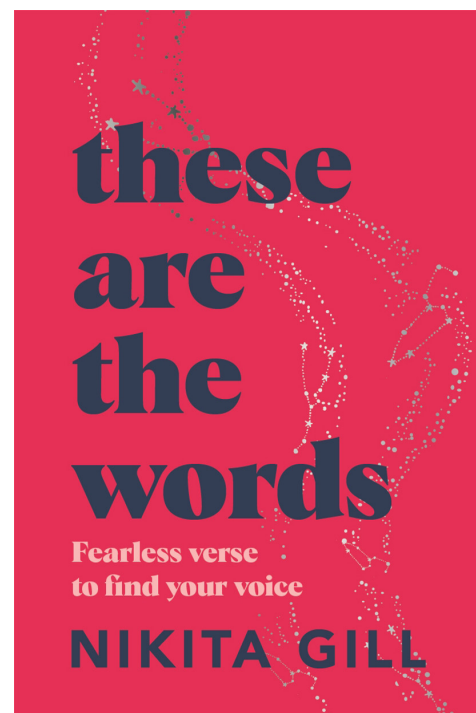
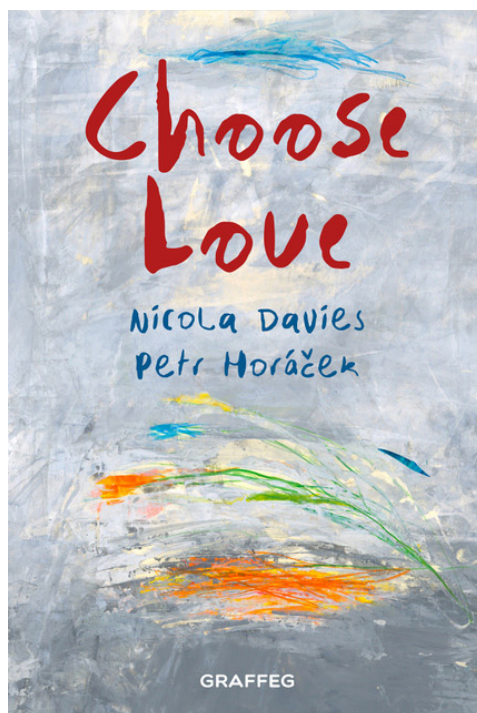
Poignant and judiciously chosen language paints vivid pictures of a range of scenes and experiences, such as the tingling excitement of watching a *Meteor Shower* or watching the Autumn leaves fall *In November*. You feel part of each and every moment described, like you're sitting alongside the poets watching the *Winter Ponies*, with 'frost on their eyelashes like white mascara' or picking up *Marshmallows*, 'soft and lightly powdered like a grandmother's cheek'.

In a world full of noise, rush and busyness, this beautiful collection encourages us to stop and look at the world around us, taking in the small details with a poet's eye.

For the third time in as many years, Matt Goodfellow appears on the CLIPPA shortlist, this time with **Let's Chase Stars Together**. This quietly presented collection speaks with care and consideration to its intended audience, not only in its topics and themes – such as friendships, loss, school, and growing up – but even more powerfully in showcasing the power of poetry to work through experiences and express emotions.

Poems like *Jake*, *Callum* and *The Wolf* explore themes, issues and emotions that pupils may or may not have direct experience of, but that they can connect with and empathise with on an emotional level, showing how poetry can help us to make sense of experiences and to connect with the lives and experiences of others.

Matt's ability to observe the world poetically is precise yet imaginative, with exceptionally well-chosen metaphors throughout.



His pastoral poetry is rich and poignant; poems such as *Poem for a New Year*, *Darker Now* and *Blackbirds* evocatively explore our relationship with nature as humans.

Choose Love by Nicola Davies is a cycle of poems that highlights the experience of those forced to become refugees. The core of the collection was written in 2018 as part of a project with the charity Refugee Trauma Initiative. With the permission of both individual refugees and aid workers, RTI shared with Nicola a number of true and poignant stories, which were then used as the basis for the poems. Over the following years, Nicola has added to this core of poems to create this collection on the theme of forced migration, its wider causes and consequences.

The collection starts with a direct instruction to the reader to *Choose Love*, highlighting the shared experience of being human and sharing compassion for and empathy with our kin, understanding their experience and putting ourselves in their shoes. Petr Horáček's art throughout complements the sentiment of the collection skilfully – challenging the reader to look more deeply and see beyond initial first impressions to look for recognisable details, which help us make connections with our own lives.

The sections in the book follow the journey of those forced to leave from their *Departure* to their *Arrival* and on to the *Healing* needed to remain hopeful and strong. The urgency of the language in poems like *Five Minutes* take us directly into moments, forcing us to think from the point of view of another. *The Interview* is a particularly arresting poem, challenging us to look at multiple viewpoints and why people might behave in the way they do. The closing poem, *Unbroken*, offers a poignant metaphor for the hope that can still be present amidst the scars of trauma, preventing the collection from tying up in an unrealistically neat conclusion.

The final collection in the shortlist, **these are the words** by Nikita Gill is a lyrical and empowering collection for older readers – pre-teens and teenagers will see their lives and experiences directly reflected in Gill's compelling voice. The poems are arranged according to such themes as sisterhood, family, protest and healing, and although some difficult topics are addressed, a line of hope shines through.

Much of the verse is written in second person, thereby speaking directly to the reader with love, support, and reassurance in themes such as the difficulty of leaving aspects of your childhood behind as you grow older in *On the First Wave of Summer*, and the sometimes daunting prospect of having your own Space. Other verses address the complexities and different meanings of love, including self-love,

offering a safe space for readers to explore facets of themselves, their relationships and emotions. Finding and using your voice and having the confidence to do so if you wish features throughout, in poems like *For the Days You Feel Unheard* and *When They Say You Shouldn't Talk About It*.

The peritext, too, holds the readers' emotions with care, opening with a content note and closing with a list of related charities. This is a book that serves as a friend or confidante to the reader, saying 'here is a space just for you'.

Booklist

Blow a Kiss, Catch a Kiss by Joseph Coelho, illus Nicola Killen, Andersen Press, 978-1839131363, £12.99 hbk

Marshmallow Clouds by Ted Kooser and Connie Wanek, illus Richard Jones, Walker Books, 978-1529507072, £14.99 hbk

Let's Chase Stars Together by Matt Goodfellow, Bloomsbury Education, 978-1472993847, £7.99 pbk

Choose Love by Nicola Davies, illus Petr Horáček, Graffeg Books, 978-1802583779, £16.99 hbk

these are the words by Nikita Gill, Macmillan, 978-1529083606, £7.99 pbk

The full shortlist will be celebrated and the 2023 winner announced at the award ceremony at The National Theatre in July. As these windows into each text show, it's going to be hard to choose a winner from this fantastic collection, which showcases the range and breadth of poetry for children of all ages.

A wide range of resources including videos of shortlisted poets, teaching plans and information and information about poetic forms and devices can be found on CLPE's website: clpe.org.uk

Schools wishing to shadow this year's award and enter the shadowing competition for a chance to perform on stage at the award ceremony in July, alongside the shortlisted poets, can find information about the shadowing scheme at: clpe.org.uk/poetry/CLIPPA/shadowing-scheme



Charlotte Hacking is the Learning Programme Director and member of the CLIPPA judging panel at CLPE, an independent UK charity dedicated to helping schools develop literacy learning that transforms lives.

Dyslexia and Me

Author **Naomi Jones** describes how being dyslexic has affected her life and her writing.

I have always loved stories. As a child I learnt to read early and I would stay up late reading under my duvet with a torch. I always looked forward to trips to the library to choose new books and began writing my own stories and poems in earnest from the age of seven. I used to love, and still do, playing with language and words and making up characters and worlds.

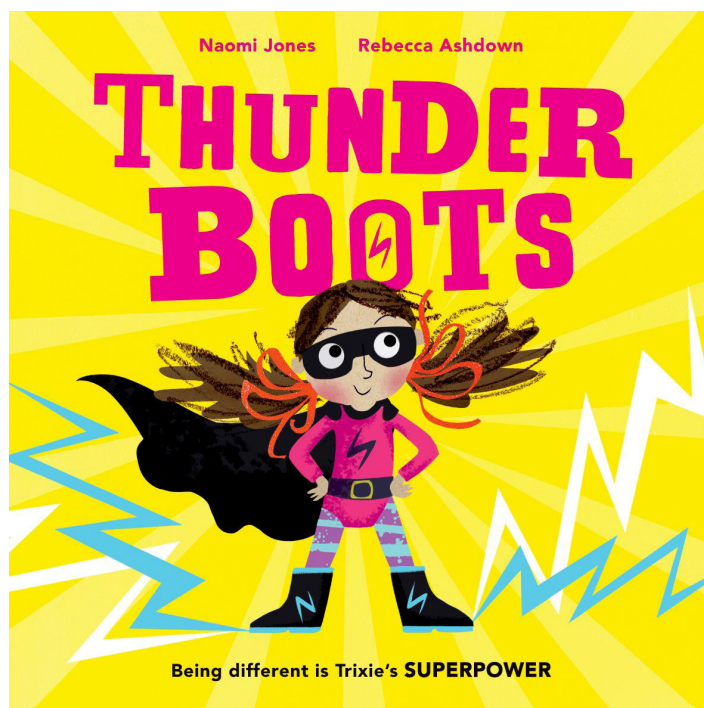
I had no idea at secondary school that I might be dyslexic. I'd always done well academically although looking back I can see that I'd just developed strategies to help me in the areas I struggled with. I wrote copious notes when the teachers talked during lessons as I couldn't retain the information otherwise. I used mind maps to help me revise and I also used to look up the marking schemes for exams at school to see how many marks I'd lose for my poor spelling. It was a real struggle to make my handwriting legible, especially in tests!

It was when I started my English Degree at Nottingham University that my undiagnosed dyslexia caught up with me. I found it really hard to keep up with reading all of the academic texts – I have always been a fast reader, but this is partly because my eyes skip when reading and I don't read all the words. If I have to read every word on a page, I literally have to put a ruler or a finger under each line to try to pin the words down and it takes aaaggggeeees. I could hold my own in seminars and knew my ideas had value, but couldn't seem to structure or write essays in a way that was getting me the marks I knew I deserved. I felt like I was working twice as hard as my peers and still getting lower marks. It was incredibly frustrating.

My mum was a primary teacher growing up and always said she thought she might be dyslexic. Looking back, she was sure her dad, my Grandpa, was severely dyslexic. So when I started to struggle at University, I went and spoke to Student Services who arranged for me to be assessed by an Educational Psychologist. I got my dyslexia diagnosis at the age of twenty-one. It helped me make sense of so many things – my appalling sense of direction, why I got my left and right mixed up learning to drive and why I sometimes get words muddled up.

One of the first people I told about my diagnosis was my housemate. I still remember what she said, 'Oh, but you're not stupid at all.' It hit me then how there is still a perception that people with dyslexia are less intelligent when this simply isn't true. We just live in a world that judges academic success based on a specific way of thinking.

Estimates suggest that 10% of the population are dyslexic and amongst that 10%, there is a huge spectrum of ways that dyslexia affects people. My experience of dyslexia will not be the same as anyone else's, but I do think that just like Trixie learns in my new book **Thunderboots**, thinking differently is actually a superpower. Dyslexia allows me to see things differently and make connections



that others might not make. I'm not afraid of making mistakes or re-writing my work, over and over and over again, because I've always had to do that. You won't see the mistakes I make while writing this because I will correct them and very carefully proofread it, but as I type this, my word document is littered with words underlined in red.

Some people might think that being dyslexic would be challenging for a writer and in some ways I do have to work harder than others might. But I also think my dyslexia is a gift precisely because it helps me see the world differently. One of the things I've always loved about stories is that they allow you to step into someone else's shoes and experience life the way they do, just for a little while. This is why it's so important for children to see diversity in the books they read, both in terms of characters and themes as well as seeing diversity in the creators of the books themselves.

I am really proud of my new book **Thunderboots**. It is about a girl named Trixie who is excited to start school but struggles when she finds some things harder than her peers. The truth is, we are all good at different things and I hope that readers take that message away from this story as well as the importance of celebrating your strengths. Thunderboots was my Grandpa's nickname for me when I was little. This book has been illustrated by Rebecca Ashdown whose husband and daughter are also dyslexic and I know it means a lot to us both.

Thunderboots written by Naomi Jones, illustrated by Rebecca Ashdown is published by Oxford University Press, £7.99 pbk.



Naomi Jones is a poet and children's author. Her published picture books include **The Perfect Fit**, **One More Try**, **The Odd Fish**, **How to Catch a Rainbow**, **How to Make a Story** and **Thunderboots**. Her work has now been translated into 19 languages.

You can follow Naomi on Instagram @naomiandjamesjones and on Twitter @NaomiJones_1

I wish I'd written...



Alex Falase-Koya has been writing since he was a teenager and was a winner of Spread the Word's 2019 London's Writers Awards for YA and Children's. He is the author of the **Marv** series, illustrated by Paula Bowles, published by Oxford University Press. The fifth book in the series, **Marv and the Killer Plants**, will publish in July 2023.

Alex Falase-Koya on the book that turned his liking for horror into love.

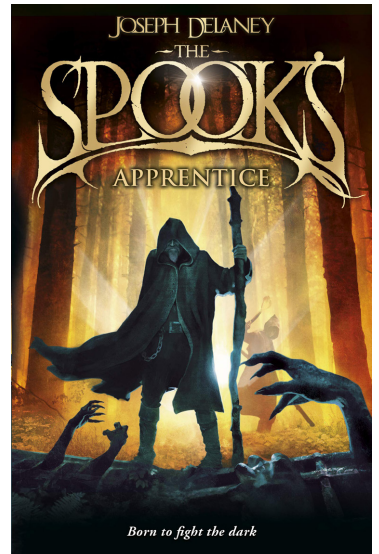
When it comes to most children's fantasy novels, a core element of their appeal is creating a world that the reader wants to live in. **The Spook's Apprentice** by Joseph Delaney goes in the opposite direction. It creates a world that I *don't* want to inhabit and that's one of the reasons I find it so cool and wish I'd written it myself.

The premise, at a high level, is about a boy being trained to become a 'Spook', someone who takes on monsters, evil ghosts, witches and other things that go bump in the night.

The Spook's Apprentice is a horror novel at its core, that's part of the brilliance of it. It demonstrates one of the cool things about the horror genre, which is not just its darkness, but its vulnerability. Physically, everything feels dangerous. The main weapon, Thomas Ward, our protagonist, trains with not a sword, but a chain, one he can throw around his enemies to bind them. Even that sets a tone. The creatures here are so scary, and powerful that sometimes just binding them is the best that can be done.

Mentally, the job of a Spook doesn't carry much praise; Thomas spends a lot of the book scared and lonely. I really related to him.

I grew up liking horror, but I don't think I ever really loved it until I read this book.



The Spook's Apprentice by Joseph Delaney is published by Red Fox, 978-1782952459, £7.99 pbk.

Good Reads

This issue's Good Reads were chosen by young people at **St Richard Reynolds Catholic Primary School, Twickenham**. Thanks to **Hannah Parker, College Librarian**, for her help and to **Rebecca Butler**.

Turtle Boy

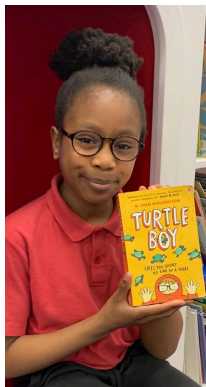
M Evan Wolkenstein, Usborne, 978-1474981385, £7.99 pbk

Turtle Boy is a brilliant book about bravery and friendship. It tells the story of a boy called Wilf who is made to volunteer at a hospital as part of his Bar Mitzvah preparations, where he meets RJ, a boy who is very sick and spends his whole life in a hospital room. The friendship they make helps both of them overcome the problems they have and shows that we shouldn't spend our lives hiding away in our shells. The book is very sad in places, and because of some of the more grown-up themes I would recommend it to Year 6 and above. *Nicole, Year 6*

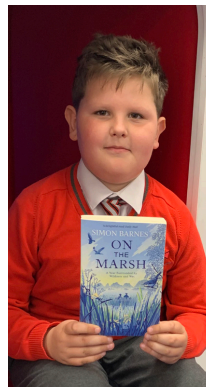
On The Marsh

Simon Barnes, Simon and Schuster, 978-1471168512, £8.99 pbk

This book brought me so much joy! I loved this book because it was so educational and full of humour. I enjoy reading books based on a real-life story or about other people's lives, and *On The Marsh* taught me so much about all the animals and plants that are found on the beautiful Norfolk marshes and what we should be doing to protect nature. I would



Nicole



Luke



Catherine



Anastasia



George

highly recommend this book to anyone interested in wildlife. *Luke, Year 5*

Tin

Padraig Kenny, Chicken House, 9781911077657, £6.99 pbk

This is a story about friendship and adventure with a darker science fiction soul. It takes place in a strange world where Christopher and his five mechanical friends live relatively happily (apart from the sinister presence of Mr Absalom), until one day, a man takes Christopher away and he realises that he is not a human child either. It is action packed and a bit scary in places, but I would

really recommend it to older readers who like gripping stories! *Catherine, Year 5*

The Lost Whale

Hannah Gold, HarperCollins, 978-0008412968, £7.99 pbk

This is a lovely book about a boy called Rio and a whale named White Beak. When White Beak disappears, Rio embarks on an adventure to save both her and his sick mum. This story mixes action and emotion with an important message about how we should look after our oceans, and it proves that humans are not the most powerful creatures on the planet. *Anastasia, Year 4*

Dragon Destiny

Katie and Kevin Tsang, Simon and Schuster, 978-1398505933, £7.99 pbk

Dragon Destiny is the final book in the amazing **Dragon Realm** series. When the Dragon Realm collides with the Human one, four children have to save both worlds, but they have help...from dragons! It's a thrilling book full of action, suspense and drama and it gripped me as strongly as a snake tied around my chest! My favourite character is Spark because she is so kind and has some awesome powers too. I would rate this book 5 stars. *George, Year 3*

Talking Point:

navigating the literacy resource landscape

Sian Hardy introduces **Literacy Hive**, a one-stop site for literacy support.

In 2014, a coalition of leading charities and educational organisations launched the **Read On. Get On.** campaign to improve reading levels in England and ensure that all children left primary school able to read well by 2025. One of the key points made in their 2016 strategy document was that solving the country's literacy problems was not something that teachers would be able to achieve on their own. Success would require a concerted effort from everybody:

We need to mobilise the resources of all parts of society – including business, the third sector, the media, publishers, authors and celebrities...¹

Sadly, the **Read On. Get On.** campaign is no longer active and we are still a long way from meeting the ambitious targets it set. However, I would argue that support for teachers from the wider world of literacy has never been greater:

- Authors have never been more visible or accessible, providing inspiration at literature festivals, through online events, and even engaging with schools on social media;
- Despite the loss of the **Blue Peter** and **Costa Book Awards**, we still have numerous national and regional book awards that cover a wide range of genres and are now helping to raise the profile of previously under-represented groups. Many of them also run shadowing schemes to help engage young readers with the latest titles;
- Arts organisations have literacy-based outreach projects and our many literacy charities run nationwide initiatives fronted by high-profile figures, including royalty.

And that's before we start looking at the digital tools and innovative online platforms from commercial organisations that harness the latest technology to support learners and make the curriculum more accessible. Support for classroom teaching is available from many different quarters.

And therein lies part of the problem. All these projects, programmes and services are scattered across hundreds of different websites and take time to find – time that most teachers simply do not have. The result is that, all too often, teachers are simply unaware of the resources and expertise available to support them. Of course, there are some schools that are taking full advantage of what's on offer, while literacy charities must demonstrate engagement to ensure future funding. However, just as the children's book market is characterized by a relatively small number of committed book buyers who buy a disproportionately large share of books², I would argue that awareness of this wider literacy support is also skewed, with a few schools that are 'in the know' and many that have never heard of even well-established resources such as **Books for Keeps**. I felt there was a need to provide a way to help raise awareness of *all* these different resources, to ensure that all schools could take advantage of the opportunities on offer. And that's when the idea for [Literacy Hive](#) was born.

What does Literacy Hive do?

Literacy Hive was created to provide a way to connect teachers to the wider world of books and reading and help them find high-quality resources to support all aspects of the literacy curriculum quickly and easily.

Literacy Hive does not create any resources of its own. It is a signposting service designed to help teachers navigate the existing literacy resource landscape. There are already plenty of places where

you can find lists of useful websites, but Literacy Hive does much more than that. It recognises that, when teachers are looking for support, they aren't looking for generic literacy resources, they need help to tackle a particular issue. That is why all the resources on the platform are categorised into headings that cover different areas of the literacy curriculum or address a particular literacy concern – help with planning a poetry module, for example, or resources to support a new EAL student. Selecting a heading from one of the four main categories – **Supporting Individual Pupils**, **Whole School Reading**, **Inspiring Writers** and **Books and Authors** – pulls up a selection of different resources from a variety of different providers. Teachers can then use filters to refine their search by Key Stage, Cost or Resource Type – choosing from a range of support options from lesson plans and book recommendation sites to author events and CPD courses.

Literacy Hive also includes an online [Literacy Year](#) calendar of relevant celebration days, book awards, conferences and writing competitions that allows teachers to see what is coming up month by month to help them plan their literacy curriculum. Each calendar entry also includes a 'Further Resources' feature with links to relevant booklists, author events or other projects on a similar theme. The advantage of an online calendar is that it can be easily updated as new resources become available so that teachers always have the latest information at their fingertips.

Supporting teachers today

Literacy Hive was created to support and empower teachers. It is a place of discovery where they can be introduced to new resources, but it also provides them with an overview of what's available so that they can compare different resources and choose the ones that are best suited to their needs or setting. With education budgets under such enormous pressure, it is more important than ever for teachers to know what is available so that they can make informed buying decisions that will ensure best value for money. They can also take advantage of the surprising number of free resources to help those literacy budgets stretch just that little bit further.

The impact of the pandemic, the role of Ofsted, low morale and recruitment issues ... the list of challenges facing our education system is long. Demands for better funding and campaigns such as the **Great School Libraries Campaign** are all vitally important, but they are dependent on government policy and could take years to come into effect. Meanwhile the work of teachers carries on as they seek to ensure the best outcomes for the 10.5 million young people in UK schools, outcomes that depend on high levels of literacy. Helping teachers access the support that already exists to enable them to deliver an engaging literacy curriculum is something that can be done today. Literacy Hive does not claim to have all the answers, but I believe that the service it provides is an important first step to ensuring that all our young people have the literacy skills they need and deserve.



Sian Hardy has over 35 years' experience of working in the children's book world, in a variety of roles. She began her career in editorial and then moved to be the buyer for a national children's book club after doing an MA in Children's Literature. More recently, her work has focused on schools, working on delivering the schools programmes for several children's literature festivals and supporting an e-book platform dedicated to the school market. That overview of the children's book world, combined with a desire to help teachers create the readers of tomorrow led her to set up [Literacy Hive](#).

¹ Read On. Get On. (2016) *A Strategy to Get England's Children Reading*
² Farshore (2022) *Reading for Pleasure and Purpose* and Nielsen's *Books and Consumers: rolling 12 months to end of September 2021*.

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.

Fen Coles is co-director at *Letterbox Library*, a not-for-profit children's booksellers specialising in book which celebrate equality, inclusion and diversity. Fen is also co-organiser of the *Little Rebels Book Prize*.

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.

Tanja Jennings is a school librarian, children's book reviewer and creative book blogger from Northern Ireland.

Matthew Martin is a primary school teacher.

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

Neil Philip is a writer and folklorist.

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

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

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

Sue Roe is a children's librarian.

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

Lucy Staines is a primary school teacher. **Janet Syme** is a former school librarian and current member of the FCBG.

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

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

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant

Ed's Choice

My Dad Is a Tree

★★★★

Jon Agee, Scallywag Press, 40pp, 978 1 9152 5217 3, £12.99 hbk

When Madeleine's dad discovers his daughter standing still, arms outstretched, he asks what she's doing and why. 'Because a tree gets to stay outside all day long' comes her explanation. The canny child begs Dad to be a tree too and he agrees, 'But only for a minute!' Unfortunately Dad's dedication to the task makes him a very convincing tree: a baby owl falls asleep on his shoulder and a robin nests in his hair. It's not long before he's attracted lots of minibests including a spider that spins its web beneath his arm, and a squirrel uses his shirt pocket as a storage facility. Furthermore the poor long-suffering chap is hit by a kite, soaked by an unexpected rain shower and he's still standing there when darkness falls - trees aren't of course bothered by such insignificant things, Madeleine assures him.

Finally, Dad's dedication to the task runs out and it seems others have too: off flies the baby owl to join its parent leaving the two humans alone. Unsurprisingly it's

My Dad Is a Tree

Jon Agee



the child who has the last word on the matter: 'We definitely are not trees. But that's OK. We got to stay outside all day long!' What of tomorrow, one wonders and so does the child.

Weird and wacky, this is a playful celebration of the power of the imagination and the lengths some small children will go to in order to get what they want, and the lengths some Dads will go to for their little ones. Agee's dead pan telling and collage style illustrations of a young child challenging parental authority are delightfully droll. Parents beware if you share this one, who knows what might happen. **JB**

Much Too Busy

★★★★★

John Bond, HarperCollins, 32pp, 9780008506148, £7.99, pbk

Pigeon is busy. Very, very busy indeed. He is busy doing extremely busy business things and has no time at all to stop. He and all the other busy animals in the city are rushing here and there, heads down, looking at their phones and just being busy. In fact, he is so busy, he forgot to look where he was going and now, he is lost!

But here is Mouse and Mouse is not busy at all. Of course, he can help Pigeon find his way home... but look at all the interesting things they come across in the woods on their way. Mouse is fascinated by every small thing - a leaf, a feather - but suddenly it starts to get dark and he is worried that they are in fact both lost. However, the longer Pigeon is away from his busy life, the more he is forced to stop thinking about how busy he is and start to appreciate and admire the beauty around him. Maybe he is not in such a rush to be busy again after all.

This witty and beautifully illustrated picture book perfectly highlights how important it is for us all to take time out to appreciate the beauty of the world around us and spend time with

friends and family. As we have all returned to a post-pandemic world, we seem to have forgotten the time when we were forced to do nothing and how our appreciation for the natural world around us grew. Young children will always want their parents and carers to just stop and make time for them and do more fun things; this book is a wonderful and timely reminder for adults to be more Mouse and not busy Pigeon! **AH**

Home is Where My Heart Is

★★★★★

Smriti Halls, Alice Courtley, Andersen Press, 32pp, 9781839131943, £12.99 hbk

Home is not just where the heart is, it's behind all life's experiences. It is where you find love, companionship, grow up, quarrel, fight, make up...and in the end it doesn't even have to be a fixed place, 'Home could be right where I stand'. Smriti Halls' cumulative and repeated text surrounds the reader like the 'home' that is being evoked. The repeated use of the word drives the narrative on, ensuring the page is turned. The gentle rhymes and rhythms provide the beating heart, keeping time. However, it is the illustrations by Alice Courtley that bring movement to the words. A vibrant, immersive palette creates vivid landscapes, the backdrop

to the journey being taken by the bear; swirling brush strokes conjure the sea, fireworks pop and sparkle, grey high-rise buildings loom in the city, soft greens bring a peaceful meadow. The cast in this play are animals rather than people - a useful way to get the message across. An attractive addition to the picture book boxes and a quiet moment in a busy classroom. **FH**



The King's Hats

★★★★★

Sheila May Bird, Welbeck Flame, 978-1803381329, 32pp, £7.99 pbk

Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown, said Shakespeare, and the crown is weighing heavy on our new King's head in this lively picture book. Fortunately, his old friend Tom the gardener is there to offer advice and reassurance, pointing out that kings wear lots of hats. In the pages that follow, we see Charles III in Tom's sunhat in the garden, and wearing a shower cap in the bath; he's got a hard hat on a building site (adults will appreciate the sign on the digger he's driving that reads Carbuncle and Sons); youngsters will like the hairnet he's sporting at the factory making cakes. The expression on his face is spot on in the image of him standing surrounded by cows in a muddy field under a wide-brimmed rain-hat and there's real joy in the page that shows him at a party, wearing a paper crown upside down to make the children laugh - and is that Archie swinging from the chandelier?

Mark Beech's loose, energetic illustrations and Sheila May Bird's rhyming text make this a fun book to share but there is a message that it's natural to worry about taking on new responsibilities, whatever they are. Amongst the plethora of books being published to mark the coronation this will have a wide appeal. **LS**

My Friend, Loonie

★★★★★

Nina LaCour, ill. Ashling Lindsay, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 5295 1367 7, £12.99 hbk

Representing friendship is Loonie, the large, bright yellow balloon given to a little girl by her two parents (both women) in this gentle tale. The child

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant continued

forms an immediate bond with this spherical object, talking to it, showing it things of interest and taking it to meet her neighbours. She even sets a place at the dining table for Loonie and positions her in the best place to see the pages of her bedtime story. Indeed the balloon goes everywhere with the girl, except school when it's left under the watchful eye of the family dog. Loonie becomes a dancer, a homework companion and then the girl decides to show Loonie the garden. There though the balloon breaks free and soars off into the sky, gradually getting smaller and smaller. Inevitably the child is very upset but her supportive parents suggest that she joins them in some gardening and in so doing the seed planting forms a conduit for her sadness. Eventually something grows that causes a smile to form on the little girl's face, a bright yellow flower that brings with it warm memories. The following morning she wakes with her heart aglow and as she looks out she sees, 'yellow in places she'd never noticed before.' From then on, her whole world starts to regain its brightness.

A beautiful story that introduces loss in a novel way to the very young, showing that love can live on in warm memories. **JB**

Twenty Questions

★★★★★

Mac Barnett, ill. Christian Robinson, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 5295 1278 6, £12.99 hbk

Barnett starts with a straightforward question 'How many animals can you see in this picture?' accompanied by Christian Robinson's unambiguous collage style illustration that includes the feathered, the furred and others. Turn the page and we have a large, somewhat scary-looking tiger partially hidden by leaves and a wry question that invites readers to be imaginative in their responses: 'How many animals can you not see in this one because they're hiding from the tiger?'

The remaining questions become more whimsical, with some being more open ended than others. 'Which of these ladies just robbed a bank?' Mac Barnett asks, the text being set above a row of six women, all differing in skin colour, age and dress past which a police officer is driving in the opposite direction.' Giving a broader imaginative canvas for instance, is 'How did that cow get all the way up there?' There, being a wind turbine atop which the animal is standing.

Clever, interactive and offering plenty of opportunities for flights of fancy on the reader's part since there are no pictorial clues to help answer the questions. This would be great fun to use in the classroom, or with an individual child, so long as you have lots of time to let imaginations soar. **JB**



I Heard a Bird

★★★★★

Rob Ramsden, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978 1 915252 00 5, £12.99 hbk

Here is the final picture book in this very successful series of four titles by the talented author/illustrator Rob Ramsden: Whilst *I Saw a Bee* was longlisted for the Klaus Flugge Prize; both *We Planted a Pumpkin* and *We Found a Seed* were shortlisted for the Teach Early Years Awards 2021.

I Heard a Bird is a delightful story about a little girl who notices that the bird she was listening to is frightened away by two cats screeching. As she endeavours to find her bird, she meets lots of insects and minibests whilst connecting with nature.

I particularly liked the way in which this poetic narrative draws the reader in so that they feel part of the action. The text describing the 'Caterpillars crawling, centipedes strolling,' (p. 17) is cleverly positioned to demonstrate the different movements of these creatures. Whilst the illustrations are bold and relatively simple, they clearly show the beauty of the natural world and the wonder of the little girl.

This picture book considers some big themes: wellbeing, mindfulness and the beauty and sounds of nature. As the little girl closes her eyes and enjoys the silence outside, she decides to lie down and experience being at one with her surroundings: 'I breathed in – I heard the breeze...I breathed out – I heard the leaves' (p.29).

I am sure any teacher, parent or carer sharing this book with a toddler or young child will delight in getting involved in this gentle adventure together. It is an ideal starting point for discussing the importance of wellbeing, how to get out and enjoy being in nature, as well as how we all share the duty of looking after the natural world where we live. Congratulations to the relatively new Scallywag Press on a beautifully produced series with important messages. **JS**

Where Have You Been, Little Cat?

★★★★★

Richard Jones, Simon and Schuster, 32pp, 9781398502529, £12.99 hbk
I am always captivated by Jones' illustrations and gentle storytelling style. Both *Perdu* and *Little Bear* celebrate themes of empathy within rich and imaginative settings, and this latest addition to his picturebook collection beautifully echoes these cherished themes.

The story begins with a young girl joyfully welcoming her cat back into their home. With a warm smile on her face, she wonders about the cat's recent escapades and the places she might have visited. What unfolds next is a series of captivating spreads that invite us to witness the little cat's adventures intertwined with the young narrator's vivid imaginings.

Jones' breathtaking double-page illustrations depict a clowder of cats in a myriad of colours, ranging from radiant reds to enchanting purples and intriguing mottled patterns. This diverse portrayal, perhaps

emphasizing the celebration of the imagination, captures the coronation of one cat, as well as a poignant encounter with a dog. Throughout these encounters, the story highlights the importance of bravery and kindness in overcoming obstacles.

What truly stands out in Jones' work is his profound respect for his young readers. He skillfully leaves ample room for them to bring their own interpretations to this endearing kitty quest, while also tapping into the powerful themes of kindness triumphing over prejudice and love triumphing over segregation. This picturebook serves as an excellent catalyst for meaningful discussions and explorations.

Jones' exquisite illustrations, coupled with his tender storytelling, create a magical reading experience. With its underlying themes of empathy, the power of imagination, and the triumph of love, this picturebook not only entertains but also encourages young readers to reflect on the importance of kindness and acceptance in our world. **MT**

5 – 8 Infant/Junior

Professor Google Debunks Goldilocks and the Three Bears

★★★★★

Paulette Bourgeois, ill. Alex G. Griffiths, Rocket Bird Books, 40pp, 9781915395023 pbk

Professor Goose dons her spectacles, picks up her notepad and pencil, and scrutinizes the narrative of the three bears with a keen scientific eye. She is eager to demonstrate that her Great-Aunt Mother Goose's fairy tales are not scientifically sound. Through her STEM-fueled investigations, she proceeds to fact-check numerous moments in the narrative that defy both logic and science.

One aspect I particularly enjoyed is the play on how the Goose family's thoughts about the purpose and role of stories have evolved over time (from the age of Mother Goose's 'Wonder' to Professor Goose's 'Critique'). However, I'm not entirely convinced about the choice of a traditional tale setting as a place to experiment with science. Nevertheless, the witty narrative and Griffiths' zany, colourful spreads help to create a tongue-in-cheek sense of humour.

There are moments where the facts being checked don't quite align with the 'fairy tale elements' of the story. For instance, the inclusion of Goldilocks having a mobile phone seems out of place unless the retelling is a more modern one. This raises the question of whether we are truly "debunking" or simply playfully engaging with the narrative. Sometimes, it feels uncertain about whether it aims to retell the story

through a STEM lens or to use STEM concepts as a way of encouraging readers to think differently about the world around them through a story.

However, I appreciate the potential in the latter element, and humour abounds throughout the book. It's evident that we are not meant to take everything seriously but instead to encourage readers to question and critique the world around them from a scientific perspective. No fact-checking is required to approve of this aim. **MT**

A Bed of Stars

★★★★★

Jessica Love, Walker Books, 40pp, 978 5295 1276 2, £12.99, hbk

Written in the first person, a young boy speaks of his fears of night-time and going to sleep, he finds the enormity of the universe daunting.

Dad decides to take him camping in the desert, hoping it will be a way for his son to feel at one with the universe.

Their journey towards the desert is brought to life with descriptions of the smells they encounter as they leave the city and drive through the mountains. An accompanying soundtrack of country and blues music adds to the atmosphere.

When they arrive in the desert, they have fun together jumping in the sand dunes. Dad teaches his son about the birds of the desert, mountain flowers and how to build a fire.

Inevitably night-time comes and the boy's fears return. Dad is reassuring and encourages him to make up names for the stars so that they become his friends.

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

It is soon time to return home, leaving only their footprints behind them. When they arrive home, they find that Mum has a surprise of her own for him, to make night-time magical rather than scary.

The text and images evoke some of the contrasting landscapes of America. The soft colour palette makes the book very attractive; the night-time scenes of star-filled skies and the titular bed of stars are especially appealing.

From the creator of the award-winning *Julian is a Mermaid* this is a gentle and reassuring story about family love, bonding, building memories and conquering fears. **SMC**

Fly Boy

★★★★

JJ Bola, ill. Clara Anganuzzi, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 978 1 3985 0254 3, £7.99 pbk

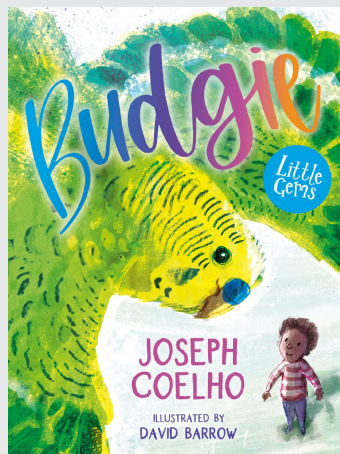
In this picturebook we meet Fly boy, a young boy who has wings but cannot fly. Symbolically his wings are red, representing anger. His anger increases and continues when he goes to school to a classroom full of fly boys and girls – all with wings but none with red wings like his. His friend Thomas has blue wings; Thomas is peaceful, he can fly. Fly boy desperately wants to escape and fly like his friend, but he is too full of anger, jealousy and sadness.

Thomas tries to make him feel better by hugging him. When Fly boy allows himself to let go of his anger, to hope and breathe his wings change to a cool and calm blue like Thomas's and he finds he can fly.

This book is intended as a story about believing in yourself. A major theme of the story seems to be to not allow negative feelings prevent you from succeeding and the importance of allowing others to help you is also suggested. It is left to the reader to deduce why Fly boy is so angry in the first place – the text mentions noise at home and the illustrations indicate there is parental conflict.

The author's poetic background is evident in the rhythm and rhyme throughout the book. The illustrator has done her best to make the whimsical text concrete by creating a classroom of angels with wings of differing pastel colours, and contrasting Fly boy's anger and depression at the beginning of the book with attractive dream like images at the end of the book as he transforms.

The story could provide a starting point to discussions about managing negative feelings such as anger, however the abstract nature of the message would be hard for young children to grasp if read independently. **SMC**



Budgie

★★★★★

Joseph Coelho, ill. David Barrow, Barrington Stoke: Little Gems, 96pp, 9781800901407, £6.99 pbk

In Coelho's charming new illustrated novella for children, themes of empathy, love and grief are observed through the eyes of a young boy - Miles - and some unexpected friends.

Miles and Chris love climbing the trees in their estate, but the grumpy Mr Buxton is always telling them to clear off, as if they all belong to him! One day Miles finds an injured budgie and he can't resist its beautiful, 'a-kiss-on-the-eyelid-soft', 'crayon box'-coloured feathers. He smuggles it home and is amazed when his formidable mother agrees to let him keep it. After setting up its home in an old cage donated by a kindly neighbour, Miles names the bird Pippin.

Like all *Little Gems* publications, Miles' adventure is vibrant, lively and short. It's a simple tale but vivid descriptions of interesting characters provide depth and colour. Miles' affectionate toddler sister (who is wiser than her years) provides especially heart-warming moments, and the return of Mr Buxton later in the story provides an emotional lesson about kindness and understanding others.

Coelho's language is rich and generous. He also uses original, unorthodox figurative language that brilliantly captures the innocent, accepting way that children view the world, such as the way that Miles' head 'swirls with sadness', or the bird's tiny body feels like an 'empty egg shell'. His words are accompanied by David Barrow's stunning illustrations, whose soft edges and inky palette contribute to the book's timeless, peaceful atmosphere.

Budgie is a wonderful bedtime story for parents and children to share and would also be a helpful and positive way to introduce important messages about loss and empathy. **SD**

The Bear and the Wildcat

★★★★

Kazumi Yumoto, ill. Komako Sakai, Gecko Press, 48pp, 978 1 8774 6770 7, £12.99 hbk

With its opening sentences this beautiful, moving picture book plunges straight in: 'One morning, Bear was crying. His best friend, a little bird, was dead.' With great care, Bear makes a small wooden box into which he gently places his friend. This box goes everywhere with Bear and he shows it to all the animals he meets as he walks in the forest. They love the box but cannot see why Bear carries a dead bird around with him. He'll never come back to life, they insist, you must forget all about him.

Back home Bear locks himself away, sitting alone in the darkness, till one day the morning sun streaming through the window wakes him and he decides to take a walk outside. As he walks beside the river, he discovers a wildcat asleep on the bank; next to him are a rucksack and an unusual shaped box. This interests Bear who wants to see what's within. Wildcat agrees to open it so long as Bear reveals the contents of his box too. Cautiously Bear does so and the wildcat listens to his story, understanding how special his friend was and that he must miss his friend a great deal; it's the very first time another animal has acknowledged this. Wildcat takes out his violin and plays some music. As he does so Bear recalls some of the times he and Bird had spent together. As a result Bear starts to come to terms with his loss and the healing begins. Knowing that those happy memories will always remain, Bear and his new friend bury the little bird and the wildcat suggests Bear accompanies him, travelling the country and making music together, wildcat on the violin, Bear on a tambourine from wildcat's battered bag.

Lovingly and lyrically written and equally lovingly illustrated in smudgy, soft-edged black and white, with touches of pink as Bear begins to accept the bird's death, this perfectly pitched, poignant and ultimately hopeful, book is one to offer comfort to those experiencing loss, and an opportunity to talk about death and grieving with young children. **JB**

A Child Like You

★★★★

Na'ima B. Roberts, ill. Nadine Kaadan, Otter Barry, 32pp, 978 1 91307 417 3, £12.99, hbk

Described by the author as a love letter to the future generation, this book shows young readers that although they may be children their voice can be heard, they can make a difference. The text is written like a poem and would be great to read aloud with its clear structure and repeated refrain at the beginning of each section, 'somewhere out there in the wide, wide world a child like you is ...'

We are introduced to four children from across the globe. In the first half of the book, they are shown to be

witnesses to what is happening in our world, they are watching, listening, searching and feeling. In the second half of the book, we see them acting on what they have seen, heard and felt; each of them in their own way making a difference.

The four children chosen are climate activist Greta Thunberg, Olympic swimmer, refugee and United Nations ambassador Yusra Mardini, campaigner Marley Dias and spokesperson on child slavery Iqbal Masih. There is information about each of these individuals at the back of the book.

A Child Like You is a vehicle to introduce these four significant children or young people who have used their voices to highlight key issues in our world, climate and the environment, refugees, child slavery and representation. Sharing this book could lead to discussion in homes and classrooms not only about these individuals but also about other children who have made a difference and could be included, for example Malala Yousafzai.

This is an empowering book showing that each of these young people who have made a difference is, in the words of the title, 'a child like you,' young readers will feel they too can make their voices heard and stimulate change; they do matter. **SMC**

The Woman Who Turned Children Into Birds

★★★★★

David Almond, ill. Laura Carlin, 32pp, 9781406307115 £12.99 hbk

A partnership between two master storytellers is truly a cause for celebration, and this exceptional tale of overcoming fear to attain freedom perfectly weaves together the power of words and images.

Nanty Solo, a woman of enchantment, arrives in a dreary, grey-tone town, proclaiming her ability to transform children into birds, granting them the gift of flight. The sceptical adults dismiss her claims as mere 'piffle, twaddle, and balderdash,' their anxious voices warning the children, 'You surely wouldn't want that, would you?' However, a young girl named Dorothy Carr is captivated by the notion of soaring above the rooftops, her imagination ignited by the possibility of such freedom. With a single gesture from the enigmatic Nanty, Dorothy takes flight, surrounded by a golden halo of flowers and light.

Word quickly spreads, and more children are enticed by the promise of liberation and happiness. They flock to Nanty like benevolent souls drawn to a kinder, gentler Pied Piper. She effortlessly transports them away from their monotonous lives. Rather than embracing this transformative change, the adults recoil in horror, demanding that Nanty depart, labelling her as 'mad, bad, and utterly terrifying.' Granting their request, Nanty poses a question to the fearful adults: 'What is it that you truly fear?' In this poignant moment, David

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

Almond skilfully alludes to themes of prejudice, otherness, and the propensity to judge those who differ in their ideas and perspectives. As a parting gift, Nanty bestows the joy of flight upon the narrow-minded adults, their vision broadened. One can only hope they recognize how their narrow judgments have cost them a future of richness and vibrancy.

This extraordinary masterpiece, interwoven with subtle layers of meaning, is beautifully adorned with Carlin's unmistakable mixed-media illustrations. It is a true classic that leaves an indelible mark, resonating with its harmonious rhythm and cohesive storytelling. **MT**

An Artist's Eyes

★★★★

Frances Tosdevin, ill. Clémence Monnet, Frances Lincoln, 32pp, 9 780711 264861, £6.99 pbk

Jo and Mo go for a walk. Mo is an artist and while walking with her young companion she talks about what she sees – the beauty in the world around her. Mo vividly and poetically describes colours in the landscape as they walk together – the range of blues in the sea, greens in the forest and yellows in the fields. Jo feels increasingly frustrated that he can't see colours the way Mo sees them; he feels he doesn't have an artist's eyes. Mo is reassuring and encourages Jo to take his time. When Jo relaxes, he finds he can see so much more; pigeons are like feathery fans in flight and autumn leaves like the footprints of dinosaurs. Together they share the beauty of the world around them, describing what they see in their own ways.

An Artist's Eyes is a beautifully written and illustrated picture book which encourages readers to open their eyes to the beauty of the world around them. It shows there is no one way to see like an artist, we all have our own unique and equally valid viewpoint.

This is a simple story full of warmth and the book appropriately ends with a cuddle emphasising the warmth and closeness of Jo and Mo's relationship. **SMC**

Leila, the Perfect Witch

★★★★★

Flavia Z. Drago, Walker Books, 40pp, 9781406386479, £12.99 hbk **Leila, the Perfect Witch** by Drago, the winner of the 2021 **Klaus Flugge Prize**, takes us on another delightful journey into the vibrant world of Mexican culture and imagery. Fans of Drago's previous work will recognize Leila as a charming character who made a guest appearance in Flavia's debut, **Gustavo, the Shy Ghost**. Drawing inspiration from her own experiences, Drago crafts a tale where Leila excels in many areas and garners awards for her accomplishments. However, when



it comes to baking—the one skill the author's own big sister has mastered yet she had not — Leila finds herself struggling.

With a captivating blend of sorcery, traditional witchy tropes, and Mexican folklore, Drago skillfully merges Western influences to create a comic and heartwarming narrative. Green-skinned and accompanied by her froggy familiar, Basil, Leila is a determined witch who strives to be the best in her class. Upon discovering a baking competition, she ventures to excel on her own, only to realize that baking doesn't come naturally to her. Thankfully, her sisters Lucy, Fer, and Adelfa (paying visual homage here to Dahl, Erdmann and Slavic folklore) step in, offering their wisdom and a guiding rolling pin. Not only does Leila learn valuable lessons from her sisters, but she also forges stronger bonds with them.

While the competition's outcome may not align with Leila's initial aspirations, she quickly realizes that the true prize lies in the strengthened familial ties. This refreshing and beautiful lesson resonates with readers, defying the conventional notion that challenges always lead to immediate success in children's books. Drago's narrative is filled with intertextual references that entertain accompanying older readers, and the meticulous attention to detail encourages multiple re-readings. Personally, I find myself a devoted fan of Drago's work, as she challenges stereotypes and playfully subverts traditional notions of terror. May she continue tickling those terror tropes while providing us with wholesome, uplifting stories that prioritize kindness and friendship above all else. **MT**

Nell and the Cave Bear: The Journey Home

★★★★

Martin Brown, Piccadilly Press, 170pp, 9781800781931, £6.99 pbk This is the second book about Nell and her best friend Cave Bear, from illustrator/author Martin Brown, best known for his hilarious illustrations in Terry Deary's **Horrible Histories** series.

After her previous adventures, Nell has decided to stay with the animal

loving Sea Clan, rather than go back home with her Cave Clan. When she sets off on a quick visit to see Saira, one of the older members of the Sea Clan, she finds herself caught up in a rescue mission to save her beloved Cave Bear from the clutches of the trouble making Woodland Clan, who are fed up with just eating porridge and are determined to fatten him up for a feast. Will they be able to escape in time and reunite with their friends and the rest of the clan?

Having not read the first book, it did take me a while to catch up with the details and characters in the story, as it does somewhat assume that the reader already knows the history, but as I read on, I was soon caught up in the fast-paced tale and laughing along at the hapless would-be huntsmen.

This is a perfect book for younger readers enjoying their first forays into chapter books, with a heart-warming message of friendship and finding your family. The quirky and humorous illustrations, in a lovely shade of green (to match the Woodland Clan theme, perhaps?) add to the overall fun of the story, which will be enjoyed by adventure seekers and animal lovers alike. **AH**

The Circles in the Sky

★★★★★

Karl James Mountford, Walker Books, 40pp, 9781529502572, £12.99 hbk

Having long been an illustrator but never a writer, this marks Mountford's full debut in embracing both roles. With a successful career as a designer and cover illustrator, along with illustrating books for other authors, **The Circles in the Sky** showcases Mountford's storytelling talent, making the world of children's books much richer. The story beautifully honours

the cycle of life, as a lone moth helps a lone fox understand the death of a bird. Mountford has shown that great children's books always write up to their readers and never down.

The tale begins with Fox being awakened by a gathering of birds outside his den. Intrigued, he follows them and discovers the lifeless body of a bird. Through stunning digital art, expertly manipulated to guide our gaze along Fox's journey, we witness the abundance of life—a sight that includes salmon fighting the currents on their quest to create new life and felled trees making way for new landscapes.

Perplexed and ignorant about the unmoving bird, Fox seeks an explanation from Moth, who attempts to describe death metaphorically. Fox's childlike questions reveal a sense of curiosity and innocence, mirroring the young reader's perspective: 'Bird isn't here anymore.' 'What do you mean, Moth? Bird is right here, all bird-shaped.' It becomes clear that Moth's metaphorical answers lack the clarity that honesty and truth can provide. Eventually, Fox becomes frustrated, demanding that Moth 'tell the truth.' Through this experience, both creatures learn something about themselves and the world they coexist in.

It's worth noting that the world of children's books in the U.K. often avoids tackling significant subjects, unlike its European counterparts. Rather than shying away from or obliquely addressing them, **The Circles in the Sky** embraces these themes with a visually stunning book that offers a touching and truthful exploration of life and death in the natural world. It opens the door for readers of all ages to ask similarly profound questions. **MT**

8 – 10 Junior/Middle

The Lonely Book

★★★★★

Meg Grehan, Little Island, 176pp, 978-1915071-44-6, £8.99 pbk

This is an utterly absorbing verse novel. Annie and Charlotte's two mothers known as Mum and Mama own an independent bookshop called Birch Books which is their pride and joy. Annie, the younger of the two siblings, is convinced the book shop is magic because every morning there is a new stack of books on the counter for which they must find homes. This will be a concept which is intensely appealing to book lovers.

Initially, everything is going beautifully and the reader cannot imagine how this idyll can be broken. Then a book appears in the book shop called **The Lonely Book** and its perfect home cannot be found. For several days, the book shop becomes angry and books are strewn about regularly. Coupled with this, Mum is seen by Annie reading a book about

money. Is the shop in trouble? Also, what is Charlotte's secret? She has been very quiet and withdrawn lately.

All these issues are resolved in very convincing ways. This will be one of the most life affirming books for any young person who identifies as non-binary. For those who are cis-gender, the issues are explored non confrontationally and compassionately. **RB**

People Power Peaceful Protests that Changed the World

★★★★★

Rebecca June, illus Ximo Abadia, Prestel, 64pp, 978-3791375403, £11.99 hbk

By telling the stories of thirteen peaceful protests from around the world, Rebecca June and illustrator Ximo Abadia demonstrate the power people have when they come together and take joint action.

The stories are told in chronological order, beginning with the so-called

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued



Mud March in 1907, when thousands of women, from all backgrounds and social class, marched from Hyde Park to the Strand demanding 'Votes for Women.' Impossible to ignore, it demonstrated the strength of support for their cause. Next up is Mahatma Gandhi's Salt March of 1930, the start of a national campaign of civil disobedience that 'opened the door to India's independence in 1947'. Also featured are the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the People Power Revolution against the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines, Estonia's Singing Revolution, and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The book concludes with three movements that are shaping the world today: the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, Fridays for Future, and Black Lives Matter.

June's text is short but provides the necessary information to explain the background to these mass movements, and her tone is positive and encouraging, acknowledging the bravery of all those who took part, and the strength of union and joint action. The drama and noise of the events however are captured in Abadia's striking illustrations, bold blocks of colour, people's faces in sudden focus, and lots of raised arms.

A book to counter the sense of frustration and helplessness that many young people no doubt feel, and an important reminder that change can come if we work together. **MMa**

The Curio Collectors

★★★★

Eloise Williams, illus Anna Shepeta, Barrington Stoke, 96pp, 978-1-80090-200-8, £7.99 pbk

Lily is twelve and her brother, Tom, is six. The year is 1896 and Lily, Tom and their mother are curio collectors. These people would search for objects – a bottle, a shell, other items – which they would then pick up, creating a fantasy story around each and putting on a show for customers to buy the curios. They would then move to a new area and set up again.

Lily and Tom find a shell known as a scrimshaw which has strange markings on it. A dubious gentleman named Horatio Pinch desperately wants this scrimshaw. Can Lily and

Tom work out why and what the markings mean before Horatio Pinch acquires it? Can they also find the scrimshaw's true owner and where will that discovery lead them?

The most interesting part of this narrative occurs in the last three chapters and could have been made into a story on its own. Williams touches on the history of women horticulturists at Kew Gardens and the discrimination that they faced at this period.

This book would be inspiring to young girls aiming to become scientists. **RB**

My Laugh-Out-Loud Life: The Big Breakout

★★★★

Burhana Islam, ill. Farah Khandaker, Knights Of, 126pp, 9781913311391, £6.99 pbk

The laugh-out-loud life of Yusuf Ali Khan is given a third outing in this children's comedy. Having already battled with bullies and caused chaos at his sister's wedding, Yusuf is now facing the prospect of becoming an uncle. Typically, it's freaking him out!

Yusuf is a relatable and likeable narrator. Dedicated to his family, friends and faith, he is very much a 'normal' schoolboy, with a few close school friends who help him stay out of trouble (or, at least, help him get out of trouble when it inevitably finds him!). He has a lively imagination and lofty ambitions, and taking on a role or responsibility in the family is very important to him. With his sister expecting a baby, Yusuf ponders how he will step-up as an uncle. It's an honourable position in the family and one that, having already secured the prestigious position of class captain, he is eager to succeed with (even if his sister is a terrifying, pillow-chucking Nutella obsessive!).

The book's title refers to Yusuf's need to break out of school and detention in order to attend Friday prayers – because that's where all the other uncles go on a Friday. The escape plan is hatched with his friends but is made more difficult by some unfortunate accidents involving Ofsted inspectors and a school chameleon. In truth, the 'big breakout' applies less to the main storyline and more to Yusuf's desire to break free from childhood and being the baby of the family.

Fans of earlier episodes will be pleased to see the return of familiar characters, such as Sarah (who is as troublesome and devious as ever) and the endearingly mischievous grandmother, Nanu. The Big Breakout is not an especially memorable story, but enjoyment is delivered through the numerous set-piece chapters that feature Yusuf's classic brand of gross-out, haphazard comedy. Snotball pizza, anyone? **SD**

The Treasure Hunters

★★★

Lisa Thompson, ill. Gemma Correll, Scholastic, 327pp, 9780702301605, £7.99 pbk

In this children's drama, a lonely, awkward boy reluctantly swaps the gaming world for a real-life adventure in the woods.

Vincent's life at school is challenging. His dyspraxia makes being organised for lessons difficult. He keeps his head down and mostly succeeds in remaining invisible to his peers, spending his playtimes and lunchtimes alone and dodging unkindness from mean girls like Scarlett, and the self-appointed class-clown, Josh.

Vincent finds solace in his favourite computer game, where he can succeed and collaborate on adventures with virtual companions. He wishes his parents would let him play all the time, rather than forcing him to go outdoors and try sports and be more like his angelic older brother.

Vincent's worst nightmare comes true when he is put forward by his teachers and family for the Wilderness Warriors weekend. He can think of nothing worse than spending a weekend back-packing through the woodland, especially when Scarlett and Josh are signed up, too. Fortunately, the fourth member of the crew is Lena, who has social capital similar to Vincent and is mysteriously skillful with maps!

The foursome is a strange one and seems unlikely to function, especially in the stressful environment of Fortune Mountain, where they are accompanied by much more professional (and willing) groups of children from other schools. However, just when Josh's antagonising and Scarlett's obnoxiousness appear to be reaching boiling point, Lena unveils her secret motive and the group are forced together in a shared effort to find some treasure!

The third act has the feel of **Indiana Jones** or **The Goonies**. It adds excitement, energy and genuine peril that readers will enjoy, and introduces a devious villain. Though the change of pace is welcome, the treasure-hunting scenes are not the highlight of the story. Much more compelling is how the children's individual stories are slowly revealed through minor details and conversations. Vincent learns that he might not be the only kid in school who is hiding who they really are, and that even the meanest people in the world might have hidden depths. **SD**

Honey's Hive

★★★★

Mo O'Hara, ill. Aya Kakeda, Andersen Press, 176pp, 9781839133282, £6.99 pbk

This adventure story for children is full of excitement as well as interesting information all about the fascinating lives of bees.

Honey is a young, excitable bee who struggles to find her place in

the hive, even though there are so many jobs on offer. She's not cut out for guard duty or honeymaking, and her efforts with looking after the colony's larvae leave her in a gross-out, vomitous mess! She's more interested in breakdance than waggle dance.

What Honey really craves is adventure. She understands the collective responsibility of hive-life but longs for independence and agency. Such dreams have to be put to one side, though, when Honey's hive is attacked and she is suddenly part of a team protecting the homeless queen who needs a new hive...fast.

In the end, adventure finds honey after all, finding a new hive means escaping fierce wasps and clueless humans and learning to work with new friends, like flies and solitary carpenter bees.

The book is a festival of everything bee. The story is regularly interrupted for the delivery of bee facts and the charming illustrations of elfin bees gives the insects an even more magical feel. Though the hive-lives of bees are celebrated, Honey's adventures show her that not everyone lives the way she does and that this is something to be grateful for.

With a fun story and engaging messages about teamwork and open-mindedness, Honey's Hive will certainly get young readers buzzing! **SD**

The Kingdom over the Sea

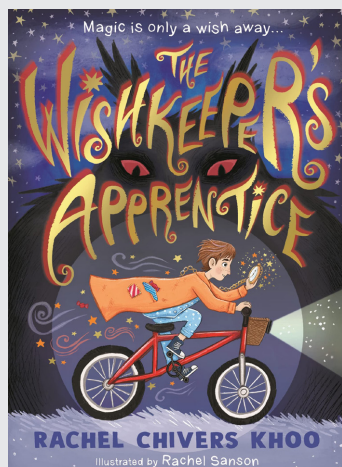
★★★★★

Zohra Nabi, ill. Tom Clohosy Cole, Simon & Schuster, 349pp, 9781398517707, £7.99 pbk

When Zara's mother is killed in an accident, her life changes beyond recognition. With no other relatives, she is about to be taken into care; but when she and her social worker are clearing the last personal items from her home, Zara finds a letter that is about to turn her world upside down. She decides to follow the instructions to go to Poole harbour and recite a poem and is stunned when a small boat and its mystical ferryman arrives to take her to her mother's home city of Zehaira. What follows is a wonderful story of hope and magic, in a place where those in authority have been trying to destroy the communities of alchemists, who once lead the country.

The author has created a fantastic world with many similarities to the tales of the Arabian Nights; there are magicians, sorcerers and Jinns, as well as an array of people who just want to live their lives in freedom and peace. The reader really does feel the atmosphere of the created world and can almost smell the flowers and spices that permeate the air. Whilst there are serious aspects to this story, we also have moments of humour as well. Zara gathers a group of friends around her as she battles to understand her history and also control the magic that is growing in her. There is action around every

corner and the heroine has to decide who she can trust, especially as the whole world is so totally foreign to everything she has ever known. For a newly published author this is a tour de force, which will be loved by anyone who loves fantasy, especially with an Eastern feel. I am sure that it will find itself being nominated for a variety of awards in the coming year and I really look forward to seeing the author's career develop in the next few years. **MP**



The Wishkeeper's Apprentice

★★★★

Rachel Chivers Koo, Ill.

Rachel Sanson, Walker, 240pp, 9781529507904, £7.99 pbk

Who hasn't made a wish at one time or another? Whether on a shooting star or dropping a penny in a wishing well, the lure of potential magic remains strong even as an adult (well, for this one anyway!)

Felix Jones is downhearted, lonely and feeling overlooked, both in school and at home. The closeness he once shared with his older sister, Rebecca, seems to have disappeared now she is at college and too busy for him. When Felix throws a penny and makes his own special wish in the town fountain, he is amazed to meet the usually invisible and wonderfully named Rupus Beewinkle, who reveals himself to be a wishkeeper, currently in need of an apprentice to help him protect the wishes of Felix's hometown of Whittlestone.

When Rupus invites him to visit his hidden house, Snugwarm, and introduces him to the life of a wishkeeper, Felix finds himself suddenly whisked into a magical new world, where bicycles can be created from umbrellas and a coat stand! Rupus explains that he needs help with a long list of wishes that have gone wrong and Felix soon learns that he must help him save the town's wishes from the dark clutches of the Wishsnatcher. When Rupus himself disappears, it is up to Felix to take on the task singlehandedly, but as time runs out to save everything he knows

and loves, is he brave and resourceful enough to tackle the beast on his own?

This heartwarming story has just the right amount of dark and light to keep readers both gripped and enchanted, and Rachel Sanson's illustrations add a perfect magical touch to the pages, (although the Wishsnatcher looks quite cute rather than scary!)

A perfect adventure story for developing young readers, with a positive and hopeful message about the power of wishes and believing in yourself. As the author herself says, I hope this book reminds you to wish boldly. **AH**

The Tree and the River

★★★★

Aaron Becker, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781529512946, £12.99 hbk

In this 'silent' book, we follow the find ourselves in a wild wooded landscape. There are mountains in the distance while a river flows across the spread. A house is being built, a family has arrived, their figures dwarfed by the surrounding countryside. The house, still just a framework will be substantial, they are insignificant. As we turn the pages, we watch a community develop. Houses spring up along the banks of the river. Buildings take over from the woodlands, crowding the riverbanks obscuring the flow of the water. Only the mountains continue as the backdrop – while in the foreground a tree is the only memory of that wild world out of which this increasingly urban civilisation has emerged. The human inhabitants remain dwarfed by their own creations. What happens when nature bursts its banks? The images are dramatic, the result traumatic – even the tree succumbs. Or not – an acorn falls, carried by water to a new resting place and a new landscape is born. Children arrive – the cycle can go on.

Illustration – and illustration without text allowing the images to tell the story is a powerful tool. Here it is particularly effective. Becker has not given his world a name, the city is just The City, but its growth and appearance mirrors the urban landscapes that we see around us, and suggest what might come; an almost science fiction scenario. The reminder of the power of the natural world is immediate – the consequences stark. But note the rainbow. Becker allows hope – hope in the resilience of nature and thus its importance. His use of pen and ink brings energy to his art, his palette mirrors the changes that take place moving from the green of life to the neon world of the city and the blues, greys, browns of the world destroyed – then green again. Then a simple spread – a branch, leaves and an acorn. This is a book to inspire conversation with young readers. **FH**

School Trip

★★★★

Jerry Craft, ill. Quill Tree Books, 256pp, 978-0062885531, £10.99 pbk

Award winning graphic novelist Jerry Craft follows up on the success of **New Kid** and **Class Act** by transporting his diverse cast of engaging middle school kids to Paris, cosmopolitan city of art, culture and je ne sais quoi. He espouses Professor Rudine Sims Bishop's belief, stated in **Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors**, that 'Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience.' School Trip reflects Jerry's representation of what he would have liked to have seen in books when he was growing up: multi-cultural characters enjoying European travel.

Through the eyes of likeable budding artist Jordan, who creates an observational story within a story with his reflective sketch book style inserts, rich social commentary is presented in humorous and thought-provoking ways. An example is Jordan's Section 5 where he makes the insightful comment that 'if there's one thing that people love it's variety, whether it be flavours of ice cream, specialty coffees; TV channels, except when it comes to diversity in people.'

As the Riverdale Academy group navigate being new kids in a city where the pace of life is very different from America, they learn about idioms, puns, underlying prejudices, each other, architecture, cuisine and empathy. School Trip embraces diversity with joie de vivre taking key characters on journeys of self-discovery prior to the trip, during and after.

Discussion of annoying habits, bullying, colourism and micro aggressions is interwoven into the dynamics of the story. Above all it is Andy who has a lot to learn about the consequences of his remarks. An evocative portrait of deflating balloon heads represents how the other students feel about him being part of the trip.

There is a balance of male and female voices as the students work out their problems. The adult faculty members in charge also face challenges when a prank skews everyone's expectations. Miss Brickner, the librarian, even makes an appearance when she re-evaluates her Collections Policy.

Intertextuality and self referentiality are also present in Craft's witty commentary on the career path of an artist, the nature of graphic novels and the importance of diverse books.

Unfortunately, there are visual errors. Notre Dame appears with no mention of the burning or restoration, a ten Euro note is referred to as a Euro and kitsch cherubs represent Jordan's thoughts in certain places. That said, the book has a lot to offer. Bold colours catch the eye and expressive close ups convey emotion as the group grow up and learn from their mistakes. **School Trip**

should appeal to a Middle Secondary audience and **Diary of a Wimpy Kid** fans. **TJ**

Stolen History

★★★★

Sathnam Sanghera, ill. Jen Khatun, Puffin, 190pp, 978 02416 2343 5, £8.99 pbk

Subtitled 'The Truth about the British Empire and How it Shaped Us,' Sanghera, author of best-selling **Empireland** for the adult market writes here on the same topic for children. As he states, this subject covers a hugely important slice of our history which is not currently given sufficient focus within the school curriculum.

In a series of seven chapters in a slim volume the author explains what an Empire is, the extent of the British Empire, its legacy and why it matters today. He explores the background to our multicultural nation, how our towns and cities have been shaped by the Empire and the impact it has had on what we say, do and believe. He considers why we don't know more about all of this and what, if anything, the reader could or should do about it.

The links of the British Empire to the slave trade are made clear; contentious topical issues such as the removal of statues of local philanthropists who made their wealth through links to the slave trade are addressed and whether we have a right to many of the artefacts in our museums.

Key concepts such as repatriation, exceptionalism and jingoism are introduced. The text is interspersed with interesting vignettes, for example the significance of nutmeg, how tea became a national drink, the crown jewels and cricket.

Very interesting reference is made to the impact of the Empire on our language; however, the promised short dictionary disappointingly only contains two words. A glossary of words in everyday usage which originate from corners of the Empire would have been a useful addition – a few words are mentioned, notably toboggan and zombie, but a longer list would have been interesting.

This book is written as narrative nonfiction in an informal style to appeal to young readers. However, the chronology is slightly confused, more clarity would make the book easier to follow, in relation to the growth of the Empire itself, its dependence on the slave trade and the links between The Commonwealth and The British Empire. Although illustrated with lively line drawings a topic of this nature would also benefit from more illustrative material to bring it to life for younger readers, including perhaps more maps, a timeline, facsimiles of documents, paintings or photographs of some of the artefacts and statues mentioned.

This is such an important topic and efforts have been made to find the right tone and tread a diplomatic non-judgmental path. It may provide a useful introduction to the British Empire and encourage young readers to ask questions of teachers and

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museum educators and lead the way for more books on the topic for as the author states: 'We are united by this complex imperial history.' SMC

Can You Get Rainbows in Space?

★★★★★

Sheila Kanani, ill. Liz Kay, Puffin, 126pp, 978 0 241 51972 1, £14.99 hbk

Both the curious title and the colourful cover of this hardback book hooked me in from the start! Then the layout of the text is quite original: each chapter covering one of the seven colours of the rainbow. Author and planetary physicist Sheila Kanani is also an experienced educator, her scientific knowledge and presenting skills shine through the book.

By the time I had finished reading the Introduction I had already learned about visible light, light from the sun, waves and colour blindness. How interesting to learn that 'Reindeer, birds, bees and fish can see in ultraviolet, and snakes, frogs and insects can see infrared!' (p.11.) I could not believe how many of my questions were being clearly answered as I read through the book.

Not only is the scientific information broken down into manageable chunks, but various facts about the different colours are clearly laid out in text boxes or similar. It was fascinating to hear that, 'Green has been known to represent wealth, which is why some countries, like the USA, have green-coloured money.' (p.52.)

The penultimate chapter answers the question in the book's title, 'So, Can You Get Rainbows in Space?' and I will not spoil the climax of this volume by enlightening you! The inclusion of a detailed glossary in the final chapter is helpful for those readers needing clarification of terms used. Whilst this book is considered ideal for students aged 8-10 years, it is a treasure trove for much older readers too.

Both Sheila Kanani and the illustrator Liz Kay are to be congratulated on producing such an absorbing and enjoyable read. The attractive illustrations reinforce the straightforward and lucid text. Puffin has produced an excellent non-fiction volume which young people will not be able to put down. JS

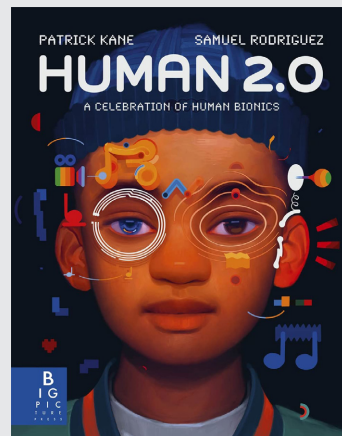
Human 2.0: A Celebration of Human Bionics

★★★★★

Patrick Kane, ill. Samuel Rodriguez, Big Picture Press, 64pp, 978 1 80078 168 9, £16.99 hbk

This is a remarkable book! It clearly informs the reader about the history of prostheses, the scientific engineering around implants, and future possibilities in the world of bionics.

Professor Hugh Herr, Professor of Media Arts and Sciences at MIT and co-director of the K. Lisa Yang Center for Bionics, writes the Foreword and



explains how technology is now looking at ways to go beyond what the human body is normally capable of achieving.

In this volume you can learn about bionic limbs and implantable devices with real life stories to illustrate how technological advances change people's lives for the better. It is interesting to find out about the Paralympics and how they have developed over the years.

The final pages of the book look to the coming decades and the rise of cyborgs. Scientists can now create limbs and body parts, connecting them with the human brain. Fascinating progress is being made and the following quote from Albert Einstein in 1931 is used: 'Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution.' p.61.

Patrick Kane was the youngest person to be given a bionic arm and he is a notable voice on the subject of disability and how this world is changing. He has written a fascinating account of this topic which is enlightening for the reader. The attractive illustrations work well with the text, and I am sure young and old readers alike will enjoy this title. It will likely inspire young people to follow a career in science and engineering. A helpful timeline at the back of the book shows just how far humans have reached already; Kane indicates that we could have a long way further to go. JS

Bridget Vanderpuff and the Baked Escape

★★★★★

Martin Stewart, Zephyr, 288pp, 9781804549094, £7.99 pbk

Bridget is indomitable. Despite her dreadful life in the Orphanage for Errant Childs she faces everything thrown at her by the monstrous Miss Acrid undeterred. In this she is helped by several inventions of her own creation - including her paraskirt - and her best friend, Tom. However, her dream is to find a real family. It seems to be one dream that will never come

true - until Mr Vanderpuff, owner of Vanderpuff's Bake Shop and the most amazing baker in the world arrives at the Orphanage. Could Bridget find a true home? There are only two obstacles - Bridget cannot bake at all - and Miss Acrid is determined to imprison her again.

Martin Stewart has created a lively character in Bridget, and one that young readers are going to want to meet again and again. Her ingenuity is admirable, her inventions imaginative - and the results of her baking attempts dramatic. She is indeed 'the best-worst baker in the world' With a nod to Dahl, the author has created another extreme character in Miss Acrid. There will be relief when the Orphanage for Errant Childs crumbles to dust leaving only its magnificent library intact - now to become the public library for the community. Full of heart, the narrative moves swiftly, the author's style immediate, avoiding over long description and allowing plenty of dialogue. Neat footnotes add interest providing information that might otherwise slow things down. David Harben's images interspersed throughout the text bring Bridget to life with her determined expression and amazing hair. Here is a character to grab the attention, the stories full of heart, humour and imagination and ideal for that KS2 audience whether as a read alone - or read aloud. One to watch. FH

Vivi Conway and the Sword Of Legend

★★★★★

Lizzie Huxley-Jones, Knights Of, 358pp, 9781913311421, £7.99 pbk

Vivi is about to leave her beloved Wales, with her two Mams, when she obeys the call of the nearby lake, and although she has to escape from a water monster, she meets Dara, and yes, when she pulls a sword from the lake it's THAT sword, though it is a smaller version that fits her hand. Dara (they/their) is with the dog Gelert, who can talk, and is very useful - he turns out to be the ghost of the legendary Irish wolfhound (explained later in the story). They realise that they are both 'calons', respectively linked with Ceridwen and Nimuë of Arthurian legend, and each has a special power, but they must find 4 others before they can defeat the evil King Arawn, who rules the Unlands, but wants to take over the country. It sounds complicated here, but the reader is soon swept into this alternative world.

Starting at her new school in London, Vivi is amazed to find Dara there, and they make 2 more friends, Chiasoka who loves to sing and perform, but gets kidnapped by Arawn, and Stevie, who has one arm ending below the elbow. One of them also turns out to be a calon. Vivi is autistic, and has had a bad experience with friends who turned on her at her last school, and it takes time for her to trust her new friendships, but she finds that they are supportive, even when she has a meltdown, and all is well. The

friends are indeed a diverse group, and there is at least one other lesbian relationship developing. Lizzie Huxley-Jones was diagnosed as autistic aged 26, and they are now a vocal advocate of representative stories for children of all ages, including queerness and disability, which is certainly the case in this book.

The story is full of references to Welsh legends, all explained, and it gets very exciting. The group venture into the Unlands, and Vivi meets a boy whom she later finds out was Merlin in disguise: 'Merlin. He's a Disney character.' Indeed, the story is fantastical, but described very realistically, and the reader really wants to know what happens next. This book ends with the 3 calons having achieved one aim, but evidently there is more to come, as 3 more have to be identified and Arawn is not yet defeated: this reader is looking forward to the next exciting instalment. DB

Tourmaline and the Land of Elsewhere

★★★★★

Ruth Lauren, Little Tiger, 357pp, 9781788955911, £7.99 pbk

Like Philip Pullman's Lyra before her, 12-year old Tourmaline also starts out overhearing a nefarious academic conversation while hiding in a university museum. Her subsequent search for a much-loved mother who goes missing takes place with the help of her younger friend George. An initially hostile girl of the same age plus a band of feminist pirates also weigh in. But while main characters overcome a variety of dangers they never develop as individuals. Tourmaline's characteristic scowl stays with her for the duration, and George's timidity rarely gets by without a new mention.

All works out happily by the end, and there is a further adventure due to appear in Spring 2024. Yet in these days of AI, authors now and in the future will surely have to concentrate even harder on creating and then pushing through their own individual take on their fiction. As it is, any chat bot would now be quite capable of producing a stereotyped children's adventures story constructed around a few given names and plot devices. Ruth Lauren is a competent enough writer, but trying to sustain a constant level of excitement over 357 pages does have its problems. This is where some more interesting character development and the cutting of too many near-confrontations with disaster could well have helped. More brevity might too have allowed time to think again when it comes to passages when 'eyes flew open' or heads 'snapped up.'

Talking trees, an enchanted island, a glamorous, loving and successful archaeologist mother and plenty of action all help establish a pleasant enough and just believable mood of contented escapism. This is fine in itself, but it could also have been a little more demanding or even occasionally challenging. NT

New Talent

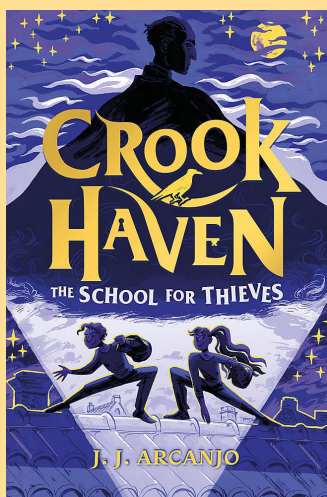
Crookhaven The School for Thieves

★★★★

J.J. Arcanjo, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444965735, 336pp, £6.99 pbk

Gabriel Avery is a pickpocket. He has to be. He lives with his grandma, who isn't really his grandma but took him in as a baby when his parents abandoned him in the swanky hotel where she was a maid. With his olive skin, he's out of place in the little West Country town where they live, and money is short too. Everything changes however, when he picks the pocket of a man at the station because it turns out the man has picked Gabriel's pocket too of the strange, scorched 2p coin that was the only thing his parents left behind. He left some notes for Gabriel too, which send him to Crookhaven, school for wrongdoers, swindlers and thieves. And his new home!

An orphan with special talents and a hidden destiny finds himself summoned to an elite school where he makes close friends and begins to learn about his secret past... We might have been here before but this school for criminals is very appealing indeed and not since the screen version of *Oliver Twist*



has pickpocketing seemed such an attractive art. The plot is full of twists and turns, and cracks along at a very satisfying pace, and this school is definitely somewhere readers will want to spend time. Gabriel's team of friends – I particularly liked twins, super-computer-hackers Ade and Ede – are genuine characters and very relatable. It's reassuring too that even when you've got to pick a pocket or two, boys, you know you're being taught to do wrong, so that one day you can put the world to right. The first in a series, this should find lots of readers. **MMa**

Greenwild. The World Behind the Door

★★★★

Pari Thomson, Macmillan, 394pp, 9781035015733, £12.99 hbk

Daisy Thistledown, aged eleven, is in search of her mother, a distinguished botanist who has disappeared on a dangerous trip to the Amazon rainforest. Shadowy evil figures are behind her abduction, but Daisy has one powerful ace up her sleeve. This is a glass paperweight enclosing a perfect dandelion clock, a parting present from her mother. Once utilised it enables her to enter the dazzling new world of Greenwild, existing side by side with our own day to day Greyside. Greenwild by contrast is only open to those with magical access through a door hidden away in Kew Gardens. Here nature itself is alive, playing a leading part by offering transport, first aid and last-minute rescue when it is most needed. With the help of all this plus a kitten, a botanical genius and a boy who can talk to birds, Daisy sets about first finding and then rescuing her mother in this most satisfying reversal or normal family roles.

There is perhaps a temptation when writing a first children's novel to emulate previously tried and tested plots and characters, and

this sometimes shows in these pages. There is really no need to resurrect once again the image of a mean, granite-faced 'angular' school matron 'with arms like a praying mantis.' Working with children is hard enough without having to fight off dreary old stereotypes from the past. Elsewhere nice characters once again have twinkling eyes while nasty ones generally glint behind lop-sided smiles. Once the author gets into nature in all its variety her writing takes on a new strength, and young readers will surely never see Kew Gardens in the same light again. There is a strong ecological message here too. Two more adventures involving Daisy's adventures are planned. This one is a good start but could be even better. **NT**

City of Stolen Magic

★★★★

Nazneen Ahmed Pathak, Puffin, 370pp, 9780241567487, £7.99 pbk

A debut novel set in India 1855 that took ten years to write and is backed by a top publisher is certainly something different. But while the best fairy tales have always made their point concisely, this sprawling story takes on too much and eventually runs out of steam. A parent accused of witchcraft and abducted in the first

chapters gets things off to a flying start. But this is no superstitious accusation; mother and her daughter Chompa do indeed possess magical powers. These originate from a time when djinns living in trees, ponds and ruins once co-existed with everyone else. Children conceived with ordinary villagers were known as part-djinns, but increasingly persecuted had eventually to decide which side to live on, leaving just a few still in existence and keeping their secrets.

But greedy and ruthless British traders working in what sounds very like the East India Company have got to hear about these part-djinns and what extra power and profit they could bring with them. This is why Chompa's mother has been kidnapped and taken to England. Following in her wake, Chompa teams up with some fellow spirits in London's East End. The author has previously researched the Muslim communities living in that area, but this is where describing the reality of the time could surely have been more interesting than persisting with the delivery of magic as the main theme.

Nazneen Ahmed Pathak writes clearly but after a while her prose tends to become over-explanatory, with hard-worked adjectives sometimes buckling under too much repetition. Sandhya Prabhat's boxed illustrations at the start of each chapter play their part in signalling this is going to be an unusual story. It is welcome at that, but something shorter, more focused and less fantasy-based might have worked so much better. **NT**



Spellstone

★★★★

Ross Montgomery, Walker Books, 336p, 9781529501933, £7.99 pbk
Why does no one notice Evie? Even her parents don't seem to see her – and it is the same at school. No matter what Evie does she gets no reaction. Then she meets Wainwright and discovers that she is far from invisible and anything but ordinary. She is in fact a powerful sorcerer (though she will have to find out what her special power is). She is to be the

one to destroy the Spellstone and so defeat the evil Vale... even though she is just a twelve-year-old girl!

Here is another assured fantasy from Ross Montgomery. We appear to be in our world – though the City is not given a name. However, the urban landscape – including Vale's needle like glass fortress so strongly reminiscent of the Shard – could be London. Once again Montgomery shows his skill at blending the real with the fantastic, normality with magic. The reader has no problem with belief in the Order of the Stone – now a small group of four each with rather specific and somewhat unusual even insignificant powers – since the members are themselves so ordinary. The plot is built on traditional tropes – the young hero ignorant of her power, the quest, the trials, the betrayal and the final battle. However, Montgomery handles these familiar motifs with confidence ensuring that the journey is fresh and imaginative. The characters are engaging, the threat frightening and with a contemporary resonance. As with all good fantasy there is a moral at its heart for the young reader to discover. The author writes fluently in a style that is attractive and accessible, description is immediate, dialogue brisk and the adventure gripping – not least a terrifying journey through the mind of the villain himself. This is another book from this author to recommend to young readers looking to be immersed in a narrative that will fire their imagination. **FH**

The Thief of Farrowfell

★★★★

Ravena Guron, ill. Alessia Trunfio, Faber 309pp., 978571371174 £7.99 pbk

All the members of the Ripon family are expert at stealing and selling magic, (mostly in an edible form) and 12-year-old Jude, not yet allowed on excursions except as a lookout, is desperate to prove that she is a True Ripon and worthy of more inclusion. She steals some very valuable magic from the richest house around, but finds that not only is the lump of magic protected by a curse, but that the occupants of the house are a girl, Eri, and a boy, Fin, around her own age, whose parents disappeared a year ago while investigating the source of magical attacks. The magic-keeper on guard instructs her not only to return the magic to the parents, but to ask their forgiveness, which means that they must still be alive, but she needs to find them without asking her own family for help, or she would be in more trouble. The three resourceful children start the quest, but nothing is straightforward, especially in Jude's own family...

There are some great characters in this book: Moorley, Jude's older sister seems aloof and big sister-ish, but turns out to be very helpful; the aunts and an information-spouting cousin are fun, the patriarch of the family is not called Grandfather, but

reviews

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Grandleader, and he turns out to be not quite the hero Jude thinks he is.

The helpings, who are magical robots, keep getting their instructions wrong, which brings some comic relief to an absorbing story- the reader quickly gets used to the rules involved in the use of magic, and it is pleasing to note that the Hall of Knowledge, an enormous library that talks, is a very useful source of help.

Ravena Guron has previously written a bestselling YA crime novel *This Book Kills*, set in a boarding school, and this intended to be the beginning of a series. Jude's further adventures should be interesting! **DB**

Leeva at Last

★★★★

Sara Pennypacker, ill. Matthew Cordell, Harper Collins, 320pp, 978 0 008606019 0, £7.99 pbk

Nobody's parents are perfect, but Leeva's are the worst. Even worse than those you might have met in Roald Dahl's story of that long-suffering girl, Matilda. Leeva has to do all the household chores and has never been to school. In fact, she is not allowed to go beyond the garden hedge. Meanwhile, her self-obsessed mother is the town's mayor and her penny-pinching father is its chief finance officer. So the citizens of Nutsmore suffer almost as much as Leeva does from their vanity and meanness. However, things are going to change. Just look at Leeva pictured on the cover of this book, smiling, determined, with a flowing green cloak that marks her as an ecological superhero; and, yes, she is outside her front door. This is the story of Leeva going out in the world, making friends, and transforming her town. Along the way, she adopts a homeless badger, is befriended by a librarian and her nephew, and lives for a while in the library's returned books box. She makes her own friends too. There's Osmund, who wears a hazmat suit and worries about all the risks there are in everyday life, and shy Fern, whose quietness belies her considerable talents. This is a charming and funny book, well supported by Matthew Cordell's illustrations. It offers reassurance and encouragement to children who may feel anxious, or perhaps unworthy or unloved (and who doesn't at one time or another?), that there is much to enjoy in the world and much for them to contribute too. Leeva's obnoxious parents are not the only reference to Dahl in the book, Fern's family has some resemblance to Charlie's, and an elevator has as significant a part to play in the library as it does in Charlie's second book. More important, while Sara Pennypacker, like Dahl, is an author firmly on the side of the child, she does not need to be as gruesome, cruel or spiteful as he sometimes is, to make her point or make us laugh. **CB**

Digging For Victory

★★★

Cathy Faulkner, Firefly, 978 1915444110, £7.99 pbk

Faulkner, who has worked as a teacher and examiner, first got the idea for her novel during a Year 5 class focused on life on the Home Front during WW2. The story of Bonnie is told in verse novel format which lends itself to experimentation and offers the reader a different experience. Poet Simon Lamb commented in a recent interview on the importance of typography in representing ideas. Faulkner makes effective use of concrete poetry reflecting the underlying themes of the novel. Clues are planted for the reader like seeds. The white space, italics, shifting words, precipitous text and changing fonts also convey the body language and emotions of her protagonist who is adapting to significant changes in her life.

Bonnie sees war as an awfully big adventure and envies her brother Ralf who is a fighter pilot. Her school friends shun her because of the mysterious and quiet Mr Fisher who has been billeted with her family. They insist that he must be a shirker and decry her for her association with him. Meanwhile her mother has set her to digging trenches for vegetable gardening as her class starts collecting rags for the war effort. Feeling confused, frustrated and resentful she longs to be celebrated as a hero and earn a medal. Above all she resolves to investigate why Mr Fisher leaves the house at night. This is the catalyst to a journey on which she discovers talents she didn't know she possessed. Her tenacity and resourcefulness prepare her for what is to come as she learns that you should not judge people on first appearances.

This book will appeal to primary school teachers and students studying this period who want to know more about Conscientious Objectors, Land girls, the skills required to dig Victory gardens and war work. Faulkner explores the nature of prejudice and suspicion born out of fear and encourages readers to think about what being a hero actually means. While her secondary cast of characters could be more rounded and some plot points stretch belief, overall, she produces an engaging story which will resonate with readers interested in History and STEM. **TJ**

Just Like Everyone Else

★★★★

Sarah Hagger-Holt, Usborne, 320pp, 9781801315784, £7.99 pbk

Aidan Taylor is a thirteen-year-old boy who is one of five children. He is questioning his sexuality although he is not acknowledging that to himself at the beginning of the novel. Aidan's Mum then decides to become a surrogate for two gay men, Justin

and Atif. How will Aidan and the rest of his family cope with this change? And what decision will Aidan make about his sexuality? Talking about a surrogate journey in YA literature is rare and increasingly necessary. Hagger-Holt has undertaken meticulous research and deals with all the stages and emotions experienced by everyone, with great sensitivity. Interestingly, initially, Aidan is not in favour of his mother's choice to be a surrogate. It is refreshing that a character was allowed to take this view and then change their mind. Aidan finds relief in running and the details of competitive running will be of interest to many whether they are runners or not. Hagger-Holt's key achievement in this book is to begin to normalise non-standard families. This will be of huge importance to all young readers. **RB**

Quiet Storm

★★★★

Kimberly Whittam, Usborne

272pp., 9781803708065 £7.99 pbk Storm has a lively family: Dad plays in a band, Mum has a roller-skating club, both still noisily delight in singing and dancing. Minnie the dog is chaotic, and her older brother Isaiah is always busy with a worthy project. He is Head Boy, all-round wonderful, and, although teachers express their delight at having Isaiah's sister starting in Year 7, she is very different, quiet and shy. Reading aloud in class is excruciatingly embarrassing, and she really struggles with Maths, but cannot ask for help. She also has to sit next to Ryan Taylor, who is always getting into trouble. When her friend Zarrish is told to befriend new girl Melissa, who has been expelled from other schools before, Storm learns that three is a crowd, and is sometimes excluded from their activities. Her solace is PE, and she discovers that she is a fast runner: Mr Harris gives her a letter asking her parents to give permission to enter the qualifying stage of the Manchester Schools Athletics Championships, but, without Zarrish, who absented herself with Melissa instead of trying out, she doesn't want to go. Anyway, Isaiah gets their parents, who are always gently encouraging, to sign the letter and he hands it in, so Storm is committed. She is welcomed by Teija, Edie and Razan and other runners, and they decide that their team must be named the Curly Girls, as they all have curly hair.

When the new kitchen instalment goes wrong and a pipe bursts, flooding the ground floor of their house, they all have to go and stay with Grandma, and Storm discovers that Ryan lives next door with his Grandad. His mother is supposed to collect him at weekends, but rarely turns up, and Storm starts to understand some of Ryan's bad behaviour. They become mutually supportive: Ryan turns out to be really good with the space project for which they have been paired, and encourages her running, and Storm helps Ryan to find an outlet for his frustration.

Being accepted in the running team gives Storm new confidence, and, as is evident from the cover of the book, she does finally speak out to explain Melissa's machinations and nastiness, especially to classmate Koko, for headteacher Mrs Osei.

Kimberly Whittam currently works in a secondary school and has a master's degree in Inclusive Education and Special Needs. This, her debut novel, with its sequel to come in 2024, was the subject of a bidding war between publishers, and it's good to see such inclusive novels becoming mainstream. It also happens to be a good story: even if the eventual outcome is indicated on the cover, we need to find out how it happens. **DB**

Nic Blake and the Remarkables: The Manifestor Prophecy

★★★★

Angie Thomas, Walker, 336 pp, 978 1 2925 0654 9, £7.99 pbk

Angie Thomas is perhaps best known in this country for her award-winning young adult novel *The Hate U Give*, now made into a film. Here she turns to fantasy for younger teenagers, guided by two inspirations: Harry Potter and African American folklore and history. As in the Potter books, there are two parallel worlds, the familiar world we live in, populated by us Unremarkables, and the magic world of the Remarkables which is alongside ours. The narrator of this story, Nicola Blake, belongs in her magic world as Harry did in his; but, unlike Harry, she knows who she is from the beginning. Her tale opens on her twelfth birthday when she is given a hellhound as a birthday present and expects to be fully empowered as a Manifestor, one of the elite of the Remarkable world, by receiving 'the gift' from her father. The story subsequently unravels at a breakneck pace, with peril and revelation at every turn. Nic (ola) is no sooner introduced to a long-lost godfather (and best-selling author), a long-lost twin brother and a long-lost mother, than she sees her parents and her godfather arrested and she, brother Alex and best friend (Unremarkable) JP are off on a quest to retrieve a powerful magical weapon, the Msaidizi, which her father has been accused of stealing. Along the way, they travel on an Underground Railroad that is actually underground (see also Colson Whitehead's adult novel with that title) and are captured by an Unremarkable group of Southern Grand Wizards (whose name recalls the Ku Klux Klan). This is a bold novel, with the promise of two more to come which has lots to enjoy. The use of African American folklore yields some strong characters, particularly the whiny shape-shifting Hairy Man Junior. Nic's narrative voice and her exploration of her feelings towards her parents and brother are convincing. There's some crackling dialogue and a lot of humour, sometimes having fun with the fantasy genre and sometimes, I suspect, with the stereotype of

the elders of the African American church. But perhaps there is too much going on. Also, maybe I am being too po-faced, but I wonder about the association of black heroes, like Harriet Tubman, with magical powers, when their courage and strength, remarkable as it was, came from entirely human, and, in that sense, unremarkable, sources. **CB**



Kofi and the Rap Battle Summer

★★★★★

Jeffrey Boakye, ill. Beth Suzanna, Faber, 256pp, 978 0 571 36734 4, £7.99 pbk

This is a hugely enjoyable novel about music and growing up black in London in the early nineties. Eleven-year-old Kofi is an attractive central character, partly for the qualities that get him into trouble at school. He's restless, naturally creative, with an eye on the main chance and an irrepressible sense of humour. Life on an estate, his family and friendships, and ways he finds to enjoy himself in the city and keep himself safe, all have an authentic ring to them. Sometimes the description is so precise, that you are tempted to believe Jeffrey Boakye is drawing on first-hand experience, including how to fool a video machine into thinking you have put in fifty pence, when you have really created a fake 'sandwich' of just the right weight from a penny, a five pence piece, and some chewing gum. More possible evidence of first-hand experience comes in the musical side of the tale, where the kids' 'Cuss Battles' behind the school refectory are not only an outlet for creativity but a way of establishing status in the male school community, sometimes at the expense of those on the receiving end of the cusses. This is an arena where you feel the author would have excelled. In the story, the battles are not only a way for Kofi's quiet friend Kelvin to make his mark and find a life-changing talent but for the pair of them to take a rudimentary step into publishing, selling a homemade magazine that begins by

anthologising the best curses. Kofi has his personal challenges, including betraying Kelvin at one point, and feeling responsible for an incident with the police in which his uncle is arrested, but his good heart is never in doubt, and finally, with the help of his family, he is persuaded to sort out his life. He even returns the money he has made on video game tournaments to the owner of the machines he has cheated. This is a novel that irrepressibly looks on the bright side. Even the cuss battles evolve into rap circles that celebrate community not cruelty. And how I hope that, in real life, the Mini cab owner who ran the video machines really would let Kofi keep the money, as a recognition of his skill as an entrepreneur. **CB**

Juniper Mae: Knight of Tykotech City

★★★★

Sarah Soh, Flying Eye, 64pp, 978 1 912497 45 4, £9.99 pbk

Sarah Soh's first graphic novel is a tale of female ingenuity and courage suitable for junior school age. Influenced possibly by Japanese comics, it mixes armour-clad, sword-wielding young women, with an urban tech world of skyscrapers and futuristic machines, and imaginary woodland creatures called tamamas. Our heroine, Juniper Mae, is a shy girl, who loves inventing things and longs to emulate the legendary warriors who protected Tykotech city long ago. Testing one of her inventions, she is thrown completely off course and ends up in the dark unknown forest that surrounds the city. There she meets the tamamas, who are difficult for this reader to describe, but whose appearance is somewhere between a teddy bear and a frog. With the tamamas she discovers how the city's power source is being stolen and, in a battle with metal insectoids that are attacking the city, realizes her wish to become a warrior. Soh tells the story principally through her illustrations, which are bold and colourful, cleverly characterised, never afraid to be cute, and slyly humorous. **CB**

The Cursed Crowns

★★★★★

Katherine Webber and Catherine Doyle, Electric Monkey, 562pp, 9780008492236, £8.99 pbk

Once again, these authors have given us a thrilling and fast-paced story about the twin sisters Rose and Wren. This is the second in the series and the sisters are now joint queens of their country Eana. However, all is not well, as many do not appreciate having witches as their queens and rebellion is in the air. Added to this they are having to cope with the loss of their grandmother, who is being held captive in the neighbouring country of Gevra. The sisters will have to cope with tremendous danger if they are going to bring peace to the country and its people.

Although this is the second in the series, it can be read without reading the first. We are gradually given the backstory, so that the reader is able to keep pace with the action. The plot is told from the viewpoint of the two sisters and I suspect that each author writes from one side, so that we get a consistent and in-depth feel about the main characters. What comes across is the uncertainty the sisters feel as they cope with situations that are new to them. I particularly noticed the way they had to keep emphasizing that they are the queen, as if they are still very unsure of the role. We also see relationships develop and alter as the central characters begin to understand the viewpoint of others. The authors have created a magical fantasy world, where the main characters are relatable but also flawed in some ways. We also learn to understand the fear that the ordinary people feel when confronted by the witches, even though many of their skills are in healing and nurturing. It shows how easy it is for views to be changed by the use of propaganda and 'false news'. This is a fantastic read and is likely to be one of the highlights of the year. **MP**

The Not-So Uniform Life of Holly-Mei

★★★★

Christina Matula, Inkyard Press, 288pp, 9781335424884, £11.99 hbk

Holly-Mei is horrified. Her mother has just been promoted and the family must move from their Canadian home to Hong Kong. She will leave all her friends behind; or maybe they are no longer her friends. Holly-Mei has a disastrous tendency to say what she thinks regardless of the effect of her words. However Hong Kong could prove to be exciting. Catapulted into a world of privilege and luxury Holly-Mei finds that while appearances and expectations and behaviours might be different, even in an exclusive school, friendship is still important.

This is the ultimate holiday read. The author sets her narrative in the wealthy society of Hong Kong. Holly-Mei is herself of mixed race – and much is made of this, since her mother is Taiwanese, and her beloved grandmother was an immigrant to Canada. But even in the cosmopolitan society of Hong Kong, Holly-Mei can feel different. However, she is a young teenager as are her fellow students so their behaviours are typical and will be reassuringly recognisable to young readers. Told in the first person, the narrative is brisk, there is plenty of dialogue – and food features frequently. Much is made of contemporary teenage fashions and obsessions, not least with the material possessions necessary for status. This may result in dating the narrative; it is very much of the now. While the author does open an interesting window on cultural differences, at heart this is a school story with all its traditional tropes and characters; a nice touch are the recipes and the glossary of Cantonese and Mandarin words at the end of the book. **FH**

Glitter Boy

★★★★★

Ian Eagleton, Scholastic, 368pp, 978-0702317828, £7.99

11-year-old James loves to sing, to dance, to shimmy. He takes Mariah Carey fandom to the next level. But, lately, a pile on of obstacles is tarnishing his shine: his mum has left; his dad can't communicate; his beloved nan is getting frail; his friendship group is shifting; he's having brand new... feelings, especially around his friend, Joel. And then, there is classmate Paul, who is escalating his bullying campaign and calling James that word.

This is former teacher Ian Eagleton's debut novel (his picture book, *Nen and the Lonely Fisherman*, won the 2022 *Polari Prize*). The opening chapters are loud with high octave references to James' 'fabulousness', shot through with knowing nods to Mariah Carey. But the narrative soon settles into very readable middle grade territory of a just pre-teen child navigating complex family and friendship transitions.

Paul's homophobic targeting of James is skilfully described with the smallest of actions carrying real menace and with scattergun impact. Not only are James' anxieties about his own identity exacerbated. His dad and his male friends' views of him are also altered. The story becomes a powerful, credible, exposition of how boys and men so often police each other's gender expressions and sexuality and how this risks strangling a child's sense of self. We witness James' internalised homophobia grow, culminating in his poem, 'Instructions to Make It Through', which reads like a manual on how to 'do' straight-acting, how to pass, how to, effectively, shut down.

It is a wonderful thing that we finally have some UK authors writing stories starring LGBT characters in the middle grade space. (And not just the lone queer characters of old; some even star within a broader queer community). This is the age range where so often complicated desires, early crushes, romantic attachments are being felt but are not always understood. Where children are just on the edge of forming an identity and are doing so at different paces. It is a very deft touch that at the end of the novel, James' friend, Joel, comes out with confidence while we leave James still wondering about himself but now doing so patiently, happily and with ease. This is the age group who need a gentle hand not so much to lead them as to walk side by side with them, opening up possibilities for them. While we have much fabulousness in our popular culture right now – even our long history of uniquely 'British' camp and drag blazes from our prime-time screens – this gloss hasn't triumphed over homophobia. *Glitter Boy* is testament to that and may also become a child's best friend in getting through, surviving and, even, shining bright. **FC**

14+ Secondary/Adult



The Isles of the Gods

★★★★★

Amie Kaufman, ill. Virginia Allyn & Aykut Aydogdu, Rock the Boat, 464pp, 9780861545810, £14.99 hbk

What an absolutely stunning tale of murder intrigue, gods and magic. It is set in a mystical and fantasy world, where the gods once did battle against each other; but five hundred years ago, one god was defeated and the rest of the gods retreated to the home of the gods, leaving their human followers to worship from afar. Now, the defeated god Macean is gaining new followers and if re-awakened he could start conflict all over again. Selly, the heroine in this tale is trying to run away from the ship she is serving on, in order to travel north in search of her father. Instead, she finds herself on board the vessel along with part of the crew, a bookish student and a prince with an appointment on the Isle of the gods. Unfortunately, the opposition will stop at absolutely nothing in order to prevent this, including killing everyone who gets in their way.

This book takes you on a roller coaster of a ride as the followers of the sleeping god, Macean, continue on their trail of destruction; there is Jude, who will do anything in order to help his sick mother and there is Laskia, who leads the enterprise and is trying to live up to her sister's expectations. The story is told from the perspective of each of the main characters and we get an awareness of the conflicting issues that they are facing; whilst this means that we tend to support Selly and her compatriots, it is also possible to feel a lingering sense of empathy with Jude, as he finds himself caught in an impossible situation. The story is full of so many different complex emotions and what we really understand is that every action has a consequence and we need to understand the way that this can affect society as a whole, not just

individuals. I can't wait for the next story in this sequence, so that we can follow the incredible journey that the characters find themselves on. **MP**

Crossing The Line

★★★★★

Tia Fisher, Hot Key Books, 360pp, 978-1-4714-1304-9, £7.99, pbk

Erik is 12 years old when his father dies, a victim of the Covid epidemic. His mother's earnings are barely enough to keep them, he's bullied at school because of his ginger hair and then, as if things couldn't get any worse, the loathsome Jonny takes up with his Mum, getting her pregnant then abandoning her when twins come on the scene. Erik feels he is the man of the house and bravely - if rashly - tries to work out how he can make things right.

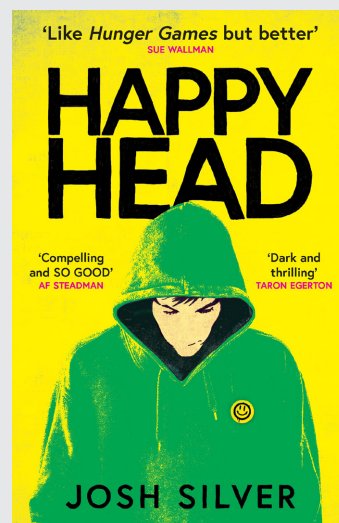
The answer to his prayers seems to come in the shape of Travis and Ben, who appear to have a seemingly endless supply of money, some of which they lavish on him. The reader sees clearly that Erik is being groomed to enter their lucrative and dangerous world of drug dealing, a highly dubious 'family' which he is drawn to, naively feeling the meetings in the apartment which they have cuckooed are a substitute for the love and closeness which he no longer experiences at home.

The novel is written in verse, which immediately conveys Erik's inner voice and the varying speed of events by means of shapes and patterns echoing what he is feeling and what others are doing. It also makes for a fast read, indicating the way in which things rapidly spiral out of his control. Erik crosses many lines in the course of the book - away from true friends, from his mother's love, from school and his ambitions, particularly in running-but most crucially across the county lines and into the most dangerous territory of his life.

Events accelerate and Erik again finds himself isolated, beaten, starved and his life threatened. It's not until his best friend Ravi steps in to help that he hopes at last there is a way forward, away from the underworld. Then he receives threatening notes from the county lines world, indicating that his sisters and mother are not safe. The family are forced to move at dead of night but it's not long until he's found and his beloved dog is poisoned almost to death. It's then he knows he must seek help and the book ends on a hopeful and poignant note with his call to a support group created to help children in his situation.

Fisher researched the issue of county lines thoroughly and her book pulls no punches in both educating and warning, helping to raise the profile of this callous exploitation of children. At the end of the book there

are five pages of information about where children and young adults can get help, a statement from the author about friends' experiences of county lines and discussion questions to be used to discuss the urgent issues contained in the narrative. Perhaps most powerfully of all, there is a reminder that this is a true story and one which we should, as a society, do all we can to prevent happening. **VR**



HappyHead

★★★★★

Josh Silver, Rock the Boat, 388pp, 978 0 86154 553 7, £8.99 pbk

Sebastian Seaton, narrator of Josh Silver's debut novel, is one of a hundred late adolescents (50 female, 50 male) selected to take part in the inaugural programme of the HappyHead Project. We meet him as he arrives at the Project's purpose-built facility in rural Scotland.

The letter of invitation promises that the two week course will unleash Seb's full potential, offering the opportunity to find enduring happiness. His Mum and Dad are delighted. It's just what Seb needs, they're sure; he's always tended to lack self-confidence and this programme, conducted by highly-qualified experts employing assessments, therapies and non-medical interventions, sounds just the thing. Seb isn't so sure but then, as he'd agree, he isn't sure about anything much. And he does have a secret, which unfortunately his 15 year old sister has discovered and is quite willing to use to torment him.

The HappyHead programme is based on Dr Eileen Stone's distinguished lifelong work with adolescents with mental health issues. She is convinced the present generation is suffering from the excessive demands of current society - notably social media, schools and exams - leading to a dangerous notion of what constitutes success in life.

She has won generous government funding to implement a programme which, she believes, will lead to greater confidence, compassion and generosity. But Stone's idealistic vision has been hijacked by senior members of the support team which has been provided for her by the authorities. By the time Seb's course is to begin, the programme has been radically altered.

The novel follows the daily experiences of Seb and his fellow participants. All links to the outside world, including mobiles, are forbidden. As Seb is to discover, there is no escape; the estate's perimeter fence is electrified. On Day One, each course member undergoes a procedure entailing an open cut to the chest and the implanting of a monitoring chip. Participants are grouped in fours - two female, two male. The assessments impose psychological and physical pressures, some of them acute. Individuals' reactions are monitored and recorded by adult Assessors on their laptops. Bedrooms are numbered 1 to 100 and each day, participants are instructed to move to a new room, whose number reflects their current ranking on the course.

The programme is increasingly demanding, leading to activities which urge participants to form male/female couples - with increasing intimacy encouraged. This is desperately stressful for Seb, for the secret his sister discovered is that he is gay. Yet in this pressured circumstance, he cannot evade the hyper-competitive Eleanor, who targets Seb as a partner who might enable her to achieve the No.1 ranking she craves. Things are even more confusing for Seb since he is strongly drawn towards Finn, the other boy in his small group, and the only one on the entire course who openly rebels against the manipulation of mind and body to which the participants are subjected. What none of the course members yet knows is that the most suitable couples will not be returning to their homes; they will remain for further training, for the focus of those in charge of the programme is nothing less than practical explorations in eugenics. Though readers are given no confirmation, the closing pages seem to demand a welcome sequel.

BfK readers might well think that a good proportion of the young adults they know would not be so readily compliant as almost all the HappyHead participants. But Josh Silver is a compelling storyteller, and the participants' experiences often make for page-turning reading. Silver's background as a trained mental health nurse allows him to make the formulaic language of the controlling adults chillingly convincing. Read as a dystopian fable, rather than a literal

possibility, readers might well find the novel raises uneasy questions.... are there recognisable echoes here of our own world? **GF**

Where The Light Goes

★★★★★

Sara Barnard, Walker Books, 384pp, 978-1-5295-0913-7, £8.99 pbk

Emmy's older sister Beth dies by suicide and the situation is exacerbated by the fact that she is a member of an internationally famous band, The Jinks, under the pseudonym Lizzie Beck. This double identity brings with it an uneasy merger of the many trappings of fame-welcome or not-and the complexities of family dynamics, where she was both daughter and sister. Add to the mix the habitual support systems of drugs and alcohol and the whole begins to resemble *Snakes and Ladders*, with Beth the loser of the game.

Barnard explores with confidence the impact of grief, of fame and of love, in all their myriad forms and strips them bare. Emmy rails against the hypocrisy of those who post on the internet, claiming to love her sister and to mourn her loss, yet they knew only the manufactured alter-ego, not the real person. All too often every unsavoury aspect of her sister's life was vividly chronicled and eagerly read, yet after her death the empty ritual of fan-mourning began, complete with time-honoured empty platitudes.

Emmy is inconsolable, unable to speak to her parents, to accept the compassion and concern of her friends or to respond to the love of her boyfriend Scottie. She is caught in the chains of anger and despair and can't comprehend the world she finds herself in. The only consolation she finds is in the meaningless: sexual encounters with a member of her theatrical school who uses her to make money by reporting their conversations to the national press. Barnard portrays this compellingly, walking the fine line between anguish and rage with aplomb, making real Emmy's counter-intuitive choices.

The breaking point comes when she verbally attacks online the behaviour of The Jinks' remaining members as they announce on TV that they intend to continue the band without Beth, seeing nothing but exploitation of her sister's untimely death. When Jodie, the leading band member and a former close friend of long-standing makes the courageous move of coming to explain the situation to Emmy she discovers that her father, the band's manager, put aside Beth's markedly deteriorating mental health, insisting that she should carry on, despite the other band members' protestations. Those who we rely on to protect are all too ready to exploit and when her father offers Emmy her late sister's place in the band she declines.

Barnard writes with great sensitivity and insight and the reunion between Emmy and her three closest friends is handled beautifully, with character interactions full of veracity and nuance. **Where The Light Goes** is an accomplished and wide-ranging exploration of extremely difficult subjects - and it never falters. **VR**

If Tomorrow Doesn't Come

★★★★

Jen St.Jude, Penguin, 416pp, 9780241627761 £8.99 pbk

Avery Devlin Byrne is nineteen. In high school, she was a gifted student and also a talented football player. At Eaton College in New Hampshire, USA, she is now failing a class and about to be dropped from the football team.

On the morning of her nineteenth birthday, she makes the decision to take her own life. Before she can carry this decision through, news comes that an asteroid is going to hit the earth in seven days. How will this cosmic catastrophe compare with her personal one? Will Avery choose to live when everyone is focused on their imminent death and the need to survive?

St. Jude's novel is unrelentingly dark and so accurate in its portrayal of emotions that it can be a very painful read. Readers who finish the book will be rewarded by realising what is good about their own lives, having been pulled to the very lowest possible ebb by Avery. This could be a very cathartic experience, but readers should be aware that it contains many possibly uncomfortable elements. **RB**

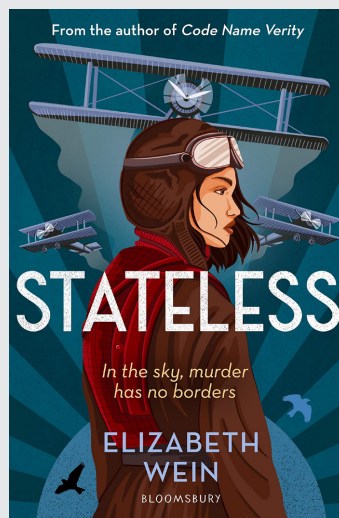
Stateless

★★★★★

Elizabeth Wein, Bloomsbury, 386pp, 978 1 5266 0168 1, £8.99 pbk

The Circuit of Nations Olympics of the Air, August 1937, provides an unconventional context for this murder mystery. The Circuit is Europe's first youth air race, in which a dozen flyers, all under 21, represent their countries. They set off from Old Sarum Airfield, Salisbury, touch down for overnight stops in Brussels, Geneva, Venice, Prague, Hamburg and Amsterdam, before finishing at Le Bourget in Paris. At each stop, they are besieged by clamouring reporters and feted at banquets and receptions graced by some of the most eminent dignitaries in Europe.

The pilots are male with the exception of our narrator, 17-year-old Stella North (a.k.a. 'Northie') the U.K. competitor. They are closely watched over, in the air and on the ground, by four 'chaperones'; three celebrated aces of the Great War and the woman who conceived the whole project, hoping to promote peace between the participating nations, the colourful Lady Diana Frith, herself an experienced aviator.



On race days, the planes take off at intervals calculated to include a time handicap, determined by the power of each aircraft; thus, the competition is based on accumulated flight times reflecting the skills of each flyer. To Northie's horror, on the first day of the race, she witnesses one aircraft forcing another down into the ocean. As she searches for signs of life among the floating wreckage, she knows there could be no survivor.

The plot develops in complexity in each of the cities en route. These venues with their contrasting cultures may well intrigue YA readers. Although the brutalities of Kristallnacht have not yet shaken Europe, the presence of armed police and the Gestapo on the night-time streets of Hamburg is a chilling revelation for Northie, though not for Antoine (Tony), the French pilot, who has already seen action flying for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. He is all too aware of the Nazi Condor Legion's role in the devastation of Guernica. By contrast, the inexperienced Luftwaffe officer, Sebastian, has heard no mention of the town at home in Germany.

The race serves as a backcloth to the murder plot. Elizabeth Wein is a pilot herself, but there is relatively little about the skills of flying or technical aspects of the aircraft, which readers may find disappointing, since her knowledge is clearly extensive. There are few ambiguities or false leads and our heroes are increasingly sure of the murderer's identity, if not motive, well before the concluding chapters. Northie and Tony become targets for the killer themselves, and now the tension of the plot stems from the dangers they face. In such circumstances, it's no surprise that the course of their growing relationship does not run smooth. But they come to see they have much in common; both were born in Russia, both lost parents to violent deaths, both have been 'Stateless'. Their discovery of each other, as Wein emphasises in a brief afterward, enables them to achieve a deeper sense of belonging - 'belonging to no place and yet to every place'.

Readers may well wonder what lies in wait - only a couple of years ahead - for all those young European aviators. **GF**

A Calamity of Mannerings

★★★★★

Joanna Nadin, uclanpublishing, 422pp, 978 1 915 235 09 1, £8.99, pbk

Several major elements of the plot are laid down in Joanna Nadin's first chapter, comprising reflective diary entries by 16-year-old Panther (no, it's not her real name). She is outraged that in Britain in 1924 the mere possession of a penis guarantees a supremacy which has nothing to do with talent or aptitude. Her anger is provoked because Mama is upstairs giving birth (throughout the chapter, in fact) and she and her sisters, Aster (23) and Marigold (10) urgently need the baby to be a boy; the problem being that their much-loved, unconventional Daddy has 'gone and died', run over by a dustcart in Whitehall - Daddy had been in Parliament as a convert to socialism and although he had owned land and property, he'd left very little money. Now, the law requires Mama to produce a male heir if Radley Manor, the Mannerings' home, is to remain within the immediate family. The baby is a girl.

Panther now wonders whether a shrewd marriage might ease the family's straitened circumstances. Aster is not remotely interested, and though Panther has tried to prepare herself by reading the passionate bits in *The Sheikh* several times, she knows very few men at all well, apart from a friend in the village from childhood days. The sisters have idealised notions of masculinity embodied in one or two romantic heroes who survived the Great War, such as 'that poet' Sassoon; indeed, Marigold has named her pet ram 'Siegfried', though he is neither heroic nor romantic in his demolition of domestic furnishings and any food left around by Cook (Siegfried mostly prefers to live indoors along with a dozen or so of Marigold's rabbits).

Four daughters living in rural Southern England might well remind some readers of Jane Austen's novels, and indeed Elizabeth Bennet, Marianne Dashwood, Darcy and Willoughby are mentioned in that opening chapter. Then there's the arrival in the area of a single man with a good fortune (albeit an American), the new tenant of Radley Manor, the Mannerings having reluctantly decamped to share Grandma's home in the Dower House. Grandma herself has something of the social certainties and asperity of Lady Catherine de Bourgh about her. As the novel develops, readers might also wonder whether Panther, like Austen's Emma, has much to learn about men and about herself.

The pleasure for the reader in the first half or more of the book often lies in Panther's ironic ways of seeing,

reviews

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reflected in her even more ironic ways of telling. The language of her diary is considered and frequently comic – a self-aware voice, seeming to amuse Panther as well as her reader. A couple of expensive parties – the dresses, the dancing, the champagne – offer excitement and even the fulfilment of romance. But a facade of courtesy and respect is shattered for Panther as she becomes the victim of a moment of raw sexual aggression. From that disillusioning moment, the voice in the diary changes; irony and humour disappear as Panther confronts callous arrogance in one she had trusted. But eventually she will look beyond male stereotypes to find a man as thoughtful and questioning as herself; and she also discovers a serious, yet joyful sense of purpose for herself. Readers will know that this will not include acceptance of a society shaped by the dominance of those who happen to be equipped with a penis. **GF**

Explodapedia: The Cell

Ben Martynoga, ill. Moose Allain, David Fickling Books, 160pp, 978 1 78845 191 8, £7.99 pbk

Explodapedia: The Gene

★★★★★

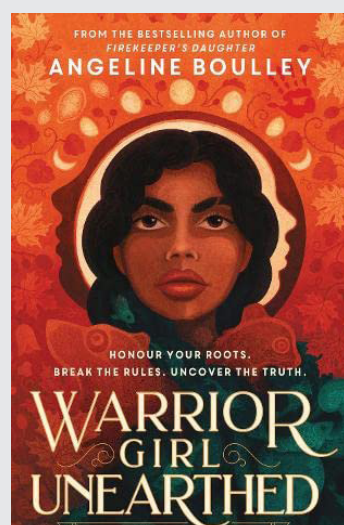
Ben Martynoga, ill. Moose Allain, David Fickling Books, 160pp, 978 1 78845 245 8, £7.99 pbk

Here are two of the three titles published so far in the new series Explodapedia which is promoted as, 'An exploded encyclopedia.' Indeed, they are both accessible books that young people will enjoy dipping into as they learn about these two fascinating subjects. Just as you would turn to an encyclopaedia for trustworthy information, so these volumes are created by reliable biologist Ben Martynoga who writes for national newspapers and speaks frequently in schools and at science festivals.

I particularly enjoyed following the journey of the single cell (named Luca by the author) which could self-reproduce four billion years ago. It hooked me into the text from the start and, with Moose Allain's fabulous drawings, added lots of humour to the book. Both titles manage to engage the reader whilst explaining complicated biological topics and I think the illustrations are key. The chapter on DNA in, *The Gene: What Makes You You*, compares a human cell to a building site and there is a fabulous double page illustration of the work taking place in there!

This series is certain to draw in budding young scientists and inspire them in their studies; there is a high level of detail in both books. A few pages shine a spotlight on the developing embryo and the foetus, explaining how it takes, '266 Days to Make a Human' (p.62-66) and showing the 'highlights.'

This innovative series contains up to date scientific information and I am keen to get my hands on the third volume, *Evolution: How We Came to Be*. Both the glossaries and indexes are substantial, which points to a teenage reader I sense. Nevertheless, enthusiastic Year 7s will gain much from the style and presentation techniques. This writing project began in the pandemic and looks like it will be a great success story. More titles are planned and will be popular in classrooms, libraries and homes. **JS**



Warrior Girl Unearthed

★★★★★

Angeline Boulley, *Rock the Boat*, One World Publications, 400pp, 978 0861544196, £14.99 hbk

The Firekeeper's Daughter, described by its author as 'Nancy Drew Meets 21 Jump Street' exploded onto the YA mystery scene in 2021. Written with a loving attention to detail and sustaining a clever build-up of tension throughout, it joined publisher Rock the Boat's acquisitions of rich, culturally diverse voices. The traditions of the Anishinaabe and the cadences of the Ojibwemowin language were celebrated within the framework of a twisty thriller exploring the universal problem of drug trafficking.

Warrior Girl Unearthed is Boulley's thought provoking return to Sugar Island and the problems faced by indigenous peoples there. Shining a spotlight on the exploitation of Native women, cultural theft of funerary objects and the dehumanisation of ancestral remains, Boulley, who is an enrolled member of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians in Michigan, creates a 'reverse Indiana Jones' story where a fierce indigenous female protagonist fights for justice. Perry Firekeeper Birch is the niece of Daunis, who fans of the first book will remember. She still bears scars from her terrible ordeal and is determined to protect her family from predatory

windigo. Her story is not over.

Impulsive and indefatigable Perry is the opposite of her more academically inclined sister Pauline. When a Summer Internship programme brings them both unforeseen opportunities, it also exposes them to danger. Native teens are disappearing and Perry is traumatised by what she has discovered on a museum assignment mentored by the enigmatic and mercurial Cooper Turtle. Mysteries lie hidden on the island, people are keeping secrets and her cultural heritage is being disrespected.

Boulley's intertextual inserts between chapters from documents that Perry reads educate the reader. They detail the history of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, highlighting grievous practices in handling of cultural artefacts and the devaluing of Indigenous remains. Salient quotes emphasise that anthropologists, Museums, Universities and private collectors are all complicit. Perry vows to cut through the red tape and liberate the spirits of her ancestors.

Romantic interests, friendship, humour, teamwork, family and cultural rituals are part of the fabric of this story which Perry's righteous spirit blazes through. As the stakes are raised, Perry is not sure whom she can trust. She has lessons to learn and obstacles to overcome as the plot reaches a gripping climax. It is a tale of courageous, remarkable women including her friend Shense, who is a dedicated young mother, feisty tribal elders and family members. Where it falters at times is the male representation which lacks substance, verging on eye candy at certain points.

Ultimately Boulley has produced another page turner using elements of crime and mystery to consolidate an important message. *Warrior Girl Unearthed* will challenge readers to re-evaluate museum exhibits and think about important questions like 'would you want your grandmothers and grandfathers to be treated in this way?' **TJ**

Broken Hearts and Zombie Parts

★★★★★

William Hussey, *Usborne*, 400pp, 978 1 803 70003 8, £8.99 pbk

In a post-text note, William Hussey tells us that 'This is far and away the most personal book I have ever written and it feels right that, although it tackles some serious subjects, it is a comedy'. A couple of years ago, he needed open-heart surgery to correct a heart defect - a bicuspid aortic valve. Among the book's dedicatees are the medics who saved his life.

We meet Jesse Spark, our narrator, in hospital undergoing tests. There's a problem with his bicuspid aortic valve. He'll need open-heart surgery. By the time he's stopped talking long enough to allow his consultant to make his diagnosis, we've learned a good deal about Jesse

from his meandering anecdotes about his friends Cas and Morgan and their misadventures during the catastrophic Year Twelve prom at Ferrivale High, his encyclopaedic knowledge of horror movies, and his passionate commitment to making such films himself. It's also clear that any story Jesse narrates will be a comedy. Ferrivale High serves as a stage for YA romcom encounters, melodramas, break-ups and so on; life there is untroubled by lessons and teachers (except for the odd film specialist who isn't like most teachers anyway). Conversations between students, especially Jesse, Cas and Morgs, read like a quick-fire, well-practised script in their wit and idiom.

And that works well, given that the plot is also not over-concerned with everyday realities. Despite his youth, Jesse is already a brilliant film director, he reckons Cas is the most brilliant cinematographer of his generation, while Morgan is a brilliant character actor of such subtlety and range that, by the end of the novel, she's got a top agent and offers of auditions are flooding in. Before he faces the surgeon's scalpel, Jesse wants to shoot his next movie, *Zombie Honeymoon*, based on his own script. At the same time, he's determined to meet his first boyfriend (he came out some time ago to his widowed mother who was more than happy about that - Jesse claims she's so pretty she's the mental pin-up for every straight guy in Year Twelve). The need for that meeting is urgent because Jesse is convinced that after the scalpel has done its work, no boy would want to look at anyone with such a scar. Alongside Jesse's personal anxieties, Cas and Morgs and a couple of other cast members are struggling with their own tangled webs.

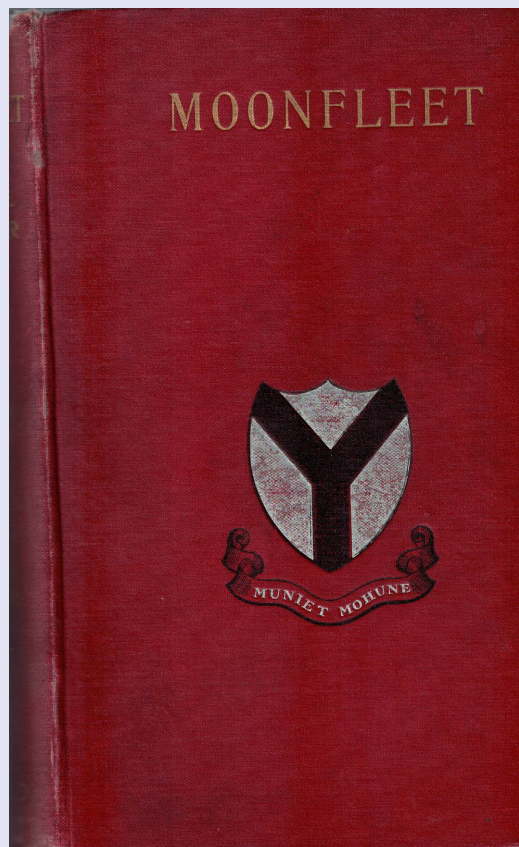
Getting hold of thousands of pounds worth of the school's movie equipment presents a problem, cleverly overcome by the friends through a plan involving Jesse role-playing a middle-aged Australian (cunningly made up) thinking of sending his daughter to the school. The wealthy pig-farming Dad of a wannabe female lead tosses in £5K to cover costs, Jesse and Cas discover three stunning locations in walking distance, Stan the Man with the Cans comes on board to take care of the Sound, Morgs knows loads of people longing to be zombies, as well as superb SFX experts and Roisin, a make-up artist with a special interest in blood, gore and zombies. The weather is perfect, so they can start shooting any time.

Hussey drives everything along at pace, balancing the hectic action against people's awareness that Jesse's imminent surgery is not without risk. And not everyone is as agreeable as they seem on first meeting.

Readers know all will be well; and it is. Jesse can even see that his scar is a cause for celebration - a reminder for him, and for his creator, that they have come through. **GF**

Valediction: **No.10** The Mohune Diamond

As he packs up his collection of children's books to present to **Seven Stories**, a copy of **Moonfleet** by John Meade Falkner, causes **Brian Alderson** to reminisce.



Front cover of the first edition: red cloth over boards.



John Trenchard among the coffins and the lander's kegs in the church crypt. Three-colour plate facing p.54 by Geoffrey S. Fletcher.

My prentis years among contemporary children's books during the 1950s were spent taking care of the showrooms of the Enfield bookseller and library supplier, Don Gresswell. It was a job, like many another, that I had come by accidentally, and it had a degree of independence. Don G's office was across the road over a small book and stationer's shop while my domain eventually expanded to some four rooms for visiting teachers and librarians. I had an assistant in the mornings at one time, often interrupted by cheerful reps, and the afternoons were devoted to much housekeeping.

Thus it was that round about 1955 I found myself invoicing an order for the local library which included copies of John Meade Falkner's **Moonfleet**. It was not a book that we stocked for the good commercial (and indeed principled) reason that the only version in print was available from its original publisher, Edward Arnold, in a bowdlerised, non-net (don't ask) 'school edition'. It is likely that the enthusiastic Miss Jones, the local children's librarian, was ordering copies of the newly published complete edition, now illustrated by Geoffrey Fletcher.

I took a look at it and before moments was absorbed. After all, one had to know one's books and here was a hitherto unknown one whose discovery meant that not much invoicing was done that afternoon. It was a gripping story set in an adapted setting of the coastal village of Moonfleet by Weymouth in the eighteenth century. The orphaned John Trenchard is befriended by the innkeeper Elzvir Block and between them they discover and recover the long missing Mohune Diamond. Thrills abound with an ending sufficiently tragic for a later colleague of mine to break into tears, along with her audience, when reading it to a class of girls.

The romance was first published by Edward Arnold in 1898 and there is no evidence that it was published for children. It is unillustrated and does not appear under Books for the Young in a 32 page Arnold catalogue of the time. Nor is it a common book in trade. Indeed, I cannot recall ever seeing another copy since that which I bought from two lady booksellers down in Old Sarum who had something of a speciality in children's books. They knew of my interest in Falkner and invited me to come and collect the book and take tea with a nephew of the late author. He was not very forthcoming but had a catalogue of

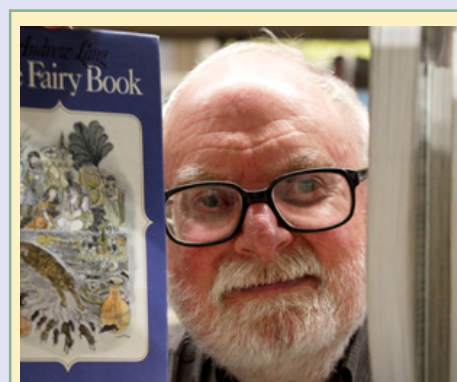
the sale of Falkner's collection of medieval manuscripts which were a special interest of his. (He was at one time Honorary Librarian to the Bishop and Chapter at Durham Cathedral.)

That role was only part of an unpredictable career, he being brought up in the vicinity of the fictional Moonfleet but schooled at Marlborough and Hertford College, Oxford. Soon after coming down he was appointed tutor to the family of Sir Andrew Noble, the head of Armstrong, Whitworth at Elswick, Newcastle upon Tyne, one of the largest armaments manufacturers in the world. He must have impressed for he went on to join the company, eventually becoming Chairman during the First World War.

Alongside this business career he wrote several county or local histories while **Moonfleet** was the second of three novels: a ghost story, **The Lost Stradivarius** (1895) and **The Nebuly Coat** (1903). Of the latter an anecdote has circulated of how he was accompanying a distinguished lady who was to launch one of the Company's

battleships. She was a great reader and, in conversation, recommended that he read **The Nebuly Coat**. 'Madam, I wrote it', he was able to reply.

Moonfleet Vintage Classics, 978-0099541127, £8.99 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.