

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.261

the children's book magazine online

July 2023

Authorgraph interview
Maz Evans

Windows into Illustration
Clara Anganuzzi

*Plus Thiago de Moraes
and Books about India*



Skellig

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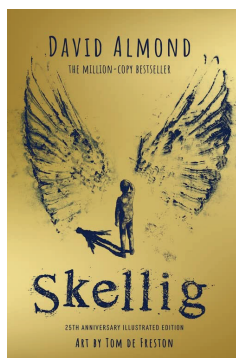
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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **Skellig: the 25th anniversary illustrated edition** written by **David Almond**, illustrated by **Tom de Freston**. Thanks to **Hodder Children's Books** for their help with this July cover.



Editorial 261

June and July are months of awards and celebrations. Congratulations to Ted Kooser and Connie Wanek, who were awarded the **CLiPPA** (CLPE Children's Poetry Award) for their playful, inspiring collection of nature poems, **Marshmallow Clouds** (Walker Books), and to Nicola Davies who was Highly Commended for **Choose Love** (Graffeg). This was the 20th anniversary year of the **CLiPPA**, and **CLPE** report submissions have been rising over recent years. Children's poetry is in a healthier state than it was as recently as 2015 when Roger McGough, then a **CLiPPA** judge, bemoaned the low numbers of submissions. What's more, anyone lucky enough to attend the **CLiPPA** award ceremony at the National Theatre, or just two weeks earlier, the Grand Finale of the **Poetry By Heart** competition at Shakespeare's Globe would have seen how much children and young people enjoy the opportunity to learn and perform poetry, and how directly it speaks to them.

In the same week as the **CLiPPA**, Christine Pillainayagam was named winner of the **Branford Boase Award** for her funny, song-filled, second-generation coming of age story **Ellie Pillai is Brown** (Faber and Faber). The **Branford Boase Award** highlights the role of the editor in nurturing new talent so the award is shared with Christine's editor Leah Thaxton. What the **BBA** also does is provide a measure for the health of publishing for children and Chair of the judges Julia Eccleshare commented on the exciting freshness to this year's shortlist of eight books, not just in terms of the diversity of the authors, but in the stories they are choosing to tell.

The Lollies, created by Scholastic in response to the demise of the **Roald Dahl Funny Prize**, are now in their sixth year and the categories have been extended to include to include four new categories: Teens, Poetry Book, Non-fiction and Illustrator of the Year. In the opinion of **BfK**, funny books and their creators deserve special recognition, so this is very good news.

The **UKLA Awards**, chosen by teachers, are always worth following and this year went to

Katya Balen, winning a second year in succession, to Mariajo Ilustrajo for her debut picturebook, **Flooded** (Francis Lincoln) and to Jeffrey Boakye for **Musical Truth – A Musical History of Modern Black Britain in 28 Songs** (Faber and Faber).

As the **Great School Library Campaign** continues, aiming to ensure that every child has access to a great school library, Michael Rosen visited Parliament to lobby MPs, while the winners of this year's **School Librarians of the Year Awards** demonstrate the very real impact access to a well-stocked and carefully curated library has on reading attainment, particularly when it also has staff aware of the importance of reading for pleasure. Congratulations to winners Sally Hamerton from Two Mile Hill Primary School, Bristol and Secondary School Librarian of the Year, Bridget Hamlet from Rushey Mead Academy, Leicester, and to the staff of Colham Manor Primary School, a state-funded primary school in West London, who transformed a neglected storage area into an inviting and engaging library on a very limited budget, winning the Enterprise of the Year Award. Also deserving of praise is Megan Urmston from Abbeyfield School in Chippenham, named Pupil Library Assistant of the Year (PLAA) 2023.

June also sees the announcement of arguably the most prestigious of all UK children's book awards, the **Yoto Carnegies**, formerly the **Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals**. This year's winners were Manon Steffan Ros for **The Blue Book of Nebo** (Firefly Press) and Jeet Zdung for **Saving Sorya: Chang and the Sun Bear** (Kingfisher, an imprint of Macmillan Children's Books). The awards are not without controversy however. The organisers say that the decision to change the names of the medals is to develop 'The Carnegies' brand but a petition has been launched to restore the Greenaway name. Read more about this in our September issue.

As the school term comes to a close, we wish all our readers a very happy summer, with lots of reading.

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Old Gods, New Stories:

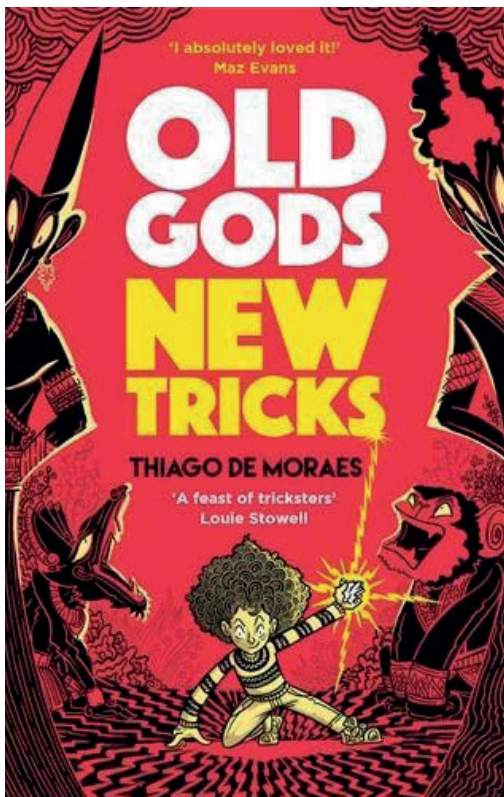
An interview with Thiago de Moraes

Fiona Noble talks to Thiago de Moraes about his new book, **Old Gods New Tricks**.

'I've been obsessed with mythology since I was a very young child,' Thiago de Moraes tells me. As a child in Brazil, he pored over his parents' vast book collection, discovering everything from West African mythology to tales of Norse and Hindu gods, to Old Testament fire and brimstone. 'I spent my whole childhood reading that stuff, much of which was clearly inappropriate,' he laughs. His passion for the subject is infectious. Our conversation is peppered with snippets of favourite myths; no wonder then that his latest book **Old Gods New Tricks**, published by David Fickling Books, brings together mythology from across the world.

Thiago's love of drawing and creating stories was also fuelled by French comics like **Asterix** and **Tintin**, sent by his mother's French family. After studying graphic design, he moved to the UK with his wife, Ana, in his early 20s, working in advertising and eventually becoming an Art Director and running his own agency. Thiago and Ana initially created a few picture books together for fun. **The Zoomer's Handbook** was published by Andersen Press in 2015, and this sparked the idea of children's books as a career. In 2018 came **Myth Atlas**, first in a long-running partnership with publisher Alison Green, an intricately illustrated non-fiction book exploring how 12 cultures saw the world. 'One thing that always struck me was a lot of cultures had oral stories and sculptures but few drawings of what things actually looked like,' Thiago recalls. 'Then I found out some of the descriptions are completely physically impossible to put together...' He spent 18 months researching and creating the book, which sold in over 20 languages and enabled him to become a full-time writer and illustrator. Two sequels followed – **History Atlas** and **Discovery Atlas** – along with his first foray into fiction, **A Mummy Ate My Homework**, and **The Age of Stone**, a comic strip in **The Phoenix** magazine, but he yearned to return to mythology.

During the first lockdown his wife suggested that he write a book about trickster gods, an idea that gradually took hold in his mind. In **Old Gods New Tricks** the world is suddenly plunged into darkness when electricity disappears, an intriguing 'reverse engineering' of the Prometheus myth. 'If somebody stole fire from the gods and gave it to humanity, what happens if they take it away?' he explains. 'Or in our modern world, what happens if the power goes?' Writing towards the end of lockdown, the concept echoes that sense of something very fundamental going wrong in the world. 'I like the idea,' he continues, 'that there's stuff around that maybe operates in places and in ways that we don't see.' When the power goes out, a young girl, the gloriously resolute Trixie, immediately suspects divine intervention and embarks on a quest to recruit trickster gods from across the world to bring back the light. In a fast-paced and very funny adventure we meet Exu, of the Orisha, Loki from Northern Europe, Coyote from Central America, Maui from Polynesia and Sun Wukong from Asian folktales. 'The thing that is fascinating about tricksters,' Thiago remarks, 'is that they are usually the catalysts of creation in mythology. They are the characters that change social rules and the orders of society, that bring fire from



the gods and give it to humanity.' If the typical god represents an individual notion like strength, war, love or motherhood, these maverick gods are a little different. 'I always found them the most fascinating group of gods,' he admits, 'not because they are mischievous but because I think they are the closest to us. They have more facets to them.'

Then, he says, the hard part began. 'If you write a book full of clever stratagems then you have to come up with clever stratagems. When Trixie recruits each trickster I wanted her to, in most cases, reverse engineer a trick they have done.' The book cleverly weaves myths into the action and creates the distinct character of each trickster with strong dialogue. Mythologies, of course, contain multiple versions of each god which Thiago used 'as a place to jump from' in shaping his characters. A factual index is also included at the back of the book, to further inspire a love of myths in his readers. Although the book includes some black and white illustrations, **Old Gods New Tricks** is, he notes, the book he has written the most and drawn the least. 'I wanted things to be a bit more considered, to spend more time on each individual illustration and maybe not draw Loki 50 times, but 3 times, and make them count.'

The world of mythology is notoriously bloody and violent. What challenges does this present in creating books for children? 'We do live in a world where there is a lot of cushioning,' Thiago says, 'but there is a brutality which is scarring, borne out of a lack of kindness or compassion.' Although he avoids certain topics, he suspects that actual gore itself is less frightening for children. 'There are things in the book which might be a bit scary but I think it's important to show that sometimes, most of the time, those who have power wield it without concern for those who haven't.'

Old Gods New Tricks is published by David Fickling Books, 978-1788452953, £7.99 pbk

Other books mentioned:

The Zoomer's Handbook, Andersen Press, 978-1783442157, £6.99 pbk

Myth Atlas, Alison Green Books, 978-1407178134, £18.99 hbk

History Atlas, Alison Green Books, 978-1407189239, £20.00 hbk

Discovery Atlas, Alison Green Books, 978-0702300516, £20.00 (September 2023)

A Mummy Ate My Homework, Scholastic, 978-1407194929, £8.99 pbk

The Age of Stone, The Phoenix Comic

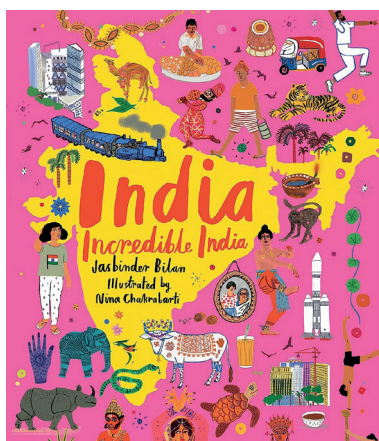


Fiona Noble is a books journalist and reviewer, specialising in children's and YA literature, for publications including **The Bookseller** and **The Observer**.

Ten of the Best Children's Books about India

Selected by **Ann Lazim**

I've suggested a range of the best children's books about India, from information books to picture books and fiction. There are more authors of South Asian heritage being published in the UK now, several of whom are exploring personal identity and challenging earlier versions of history in the context of relations between India and Britain. An interesting new trend seems to be emerging of novels set in an alternate version of the early days of colonial India with **City of Stolen Magic** by Nazneen Ahmed Patak (Puffin, 978-0241567487, £7.99 pbk) and Gita Ralleigh's **The Destiny of Minou Moonshine** (Zephyr, 978-1804545478, £14.99, hbk). I've also featured some titles I've been delighted to discover through being on the jury of the **NEEV Children's Book Award** www.neevliteraturefestival.org/neev-book-award/

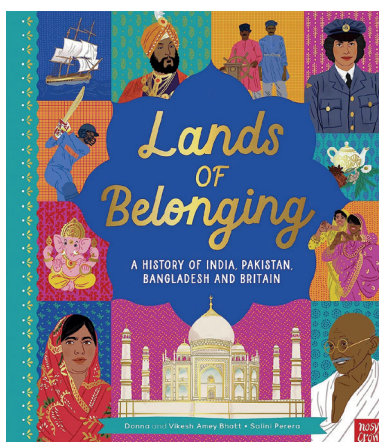


India, Incredible India

Jasbinder Bilan, illus.
Nina Chakrabarti, Walker,
978-1406395426, £14.99 hbk

A vibrant array of aspects of India, inviting readers to dip in. Thara and her Nanijee tour the country by exploring stories and facts related to objects gathered on the latter's travels and kept in a trunk made of sheesham wood. They include a sketchbook of copies of cave paintings in

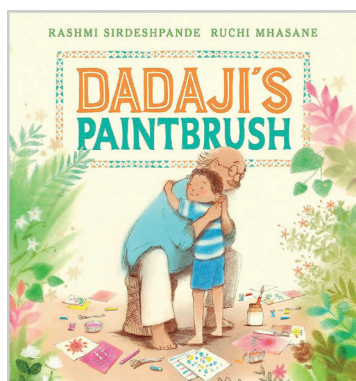
Madhya Pradesh, a puppet from Rajasthan, ankle bracelets from a dance school in Chennai, postcards of artworks from the Indian Museum in Kolkata, a model rocket from the Space Centre in Andhra Pradesh. A positive picture of the variety of life and cultures in India encouraging further exploration.



Lands of Belonging: A History of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Britain

This thoughtful book surveys the historical and current relationship between people of South Asia and Britain. It ranges from Ancient India, through the horrors of colonial history and partition, to the contributions made to Britain by South Asian people, both as individuals and culturally,

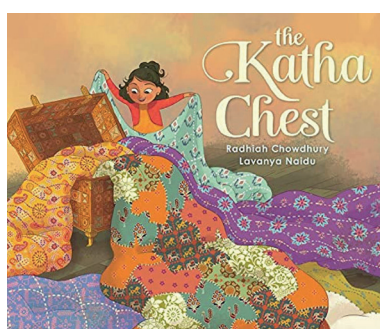
including language, cuisine, celebrations and sport. To understand more about the role of the British Empire, particularly in this part of the world, young people are recommended to read **Stolen History** by Sathnam Sanghera (Puffin £8.99 978-0241623435)



Dadaji's Paintbrush

Rashmi Sirdeshpande, illus.
Ruchi Mhasane, Andersen Press,
978-1839131400, £7.99 pbk

A universal story about bereavement and learning to live again following loss, with a specific setting in a small village in India. A boy lives with his grandfather who shares his joy in art and painting with all the local children. The shared lives of grandson and grandfather are depicted in words and delicate pictures – they grow, sell and eat fruit, make paper boats to float in streams made by the monsoon rain. Grandfather says he will never leave but inevitably he dies and the boy's sorrow is so great he puts away his paints and brush – until one day a small girl arrives with an important request.



The Katha Chest

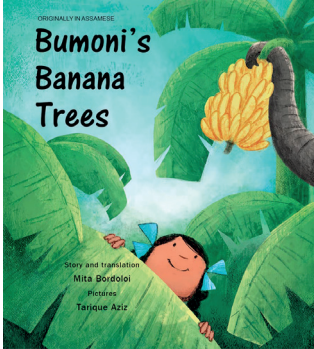
Radhiah Chowdhury, illus.
Lavanya Naidu, Allen & Unwin, 978-1911679141,
£11.99 hbk

Asiya loves to see, smell and feel the beautiful kartha quilts made from old saris stored in a chest in her Nanu's house, holding stories the family continue to share after Nanu is gone. Alternate spreads in this picture book are inspired by Bengali folk art – cloth paintings called Pattachitra, showing the family's past and their historical context, especially women's roles. Another book evoking tender memories of a grandmother is **Paati's Rasam** (Karadi Tales 978-9391790103) by Janaki and Dhvani Sabesh, illus. Pallavi Jain & Vajayanthi, shortlisted for the **2022 NEEV Award**, in which her granddaughter and daughter recreate her special recipe.



Ann Lazim is an active member of the UK section of **IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People)**. She edits reviews of children's and YA books for **Historical Novels Review** and since 2022 has been on the jury of the Indian **NEEV Children's Book Award**.

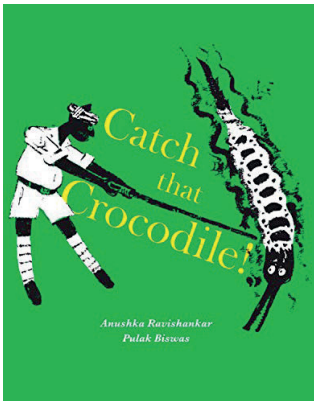
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Bumoni's Banana Trees

Mita Bordoloi, illus. Tarique Aziz, Tulika, 978-9390834259, £6.99 pbk
Based on real events seen from a child centred viewpoint. Interesting facts about the growth and use of bananas are delivered in a story with an underlying theme about sustainability. Bumoni's family and life in Assam are well portrayed and her ideas taken seriously. A winner of the **2022 NEEV Award**

in the Early Years category. Tulika publish their titles in many of the languages of India. This book was first published in Assamese. Another picture book from Tulika, this time originally published in Bengali, in which a young girl's idea benefits her community is **Jhupli's Honey Box** by Achintyarrup Ray, illus. Shivam Choudhary (£7.15 978-9390834518)

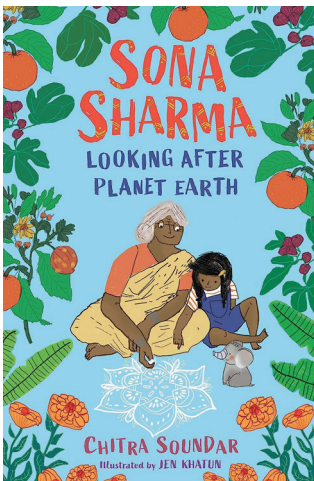


Catch That Crocodile!

Anushka Ravishankar, illus. Pulak Biswas, Tara Books, £6.99, 978-9383145089 pbk

Anushka Ravishankar is one of India's most loved authors, renowned for her nonsense verse. Here all the townspeople are terrified by the appearance of a crocodile until young Meena calmly coaxes it away. The text is thoroughly integrated within Pulak Biswas's lively, spare and striking black, white and green pictures. Visual as well as aural wordplay is

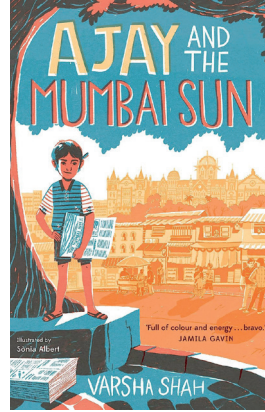
characteristic of Anushka's work, much of which is published by the innovative Tara Books. To dig deeper into this see Gita Wolf's blogpost tarabooks.com/blog/typography-as-illustration-nonsense/



Sona Sharma. Looking After Planet Earth

One of a series about the everyday life of Sona who lives with her Tamil speaking extended family. After hearing about climate change at school, Sona is determined that everyone around her will do their bit to save the planet and quickly learns that she needs to do this in co-operative ways. By encouraging her grandmother to use only organic materials when creating her kolam – an art form made mainly from rice flour with added ingredients – she influences the whole neighbourhood. Chitra has written a great range of picture books and folk

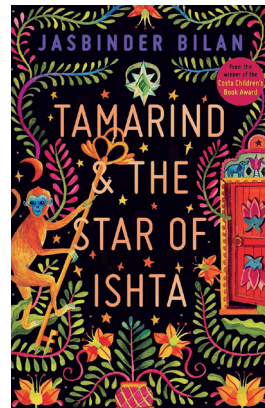
tale retellings. I'd particularly like to mention **Pattan's Pumpkin: An Indian Flood Story** illus. Frané Lessac, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1910959848, £7.99.



Ajay and the Mumbai Sun

Varsha Shah, illus. Sônia Albert, Chicken House, 978-1913696337, £7.99 pbk

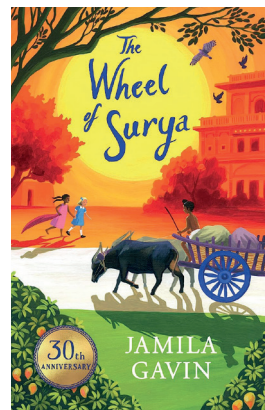
Ajay, an orphan in the slums of Mumbai, has the wit and determination to found his own newspaper with a group of friends. His streetwise knowledge and relative invisibility enable him to seek out stories and expose corruption and fight injustice. A story in the tradition of children outwitting adults with suitably attendant humour, this novel nevertheless incorporates some serious issues around social justice, living and working conditions and the environment. There's a sequel too: **Ajay and the Jaipur Moon** (978-1915026132 £7.99)



Tamarind and the Star of Ishta

Jasbinder Bilan, Chicken House, 978-1913322175, £7.99 pbk

Tamarind travels with her father and stepmother from England to India where she will be staying on her own with her mother's family who she doesn't know. No-one will talk about what happened to her mother and facts and feelings about this are at the heart of this novel set in the Himalaya. The local flora and fauna play significant roles and Tamarind's gradual enjoyment of food her family eats demonstrates their growing mutual trust. Like Jasbinder Bilan's earlier novel **Asha and the Spirit Bird** (978-1911490197) this is a story with a realistic setting and a strong mystical element. An excellent novel for slightly older readers about a UK-based girl connecting with her Indian heritage is Sita Brahmachari's **Jasmine Skies** (Macmillan, 978-1509855353)



The Wheel of Surya

Jamila Gavin, Farshore, 978-1405291743, £7.99, pbk

Great to see new editions of the Surya trilogy, set in India at the time of partition and its aftermath. It begins in 1947 in a village in the Punjab where the lives of an Indian Sikh family and a British family become intertwined. The action moves to London when Marvinder and her younger brother Jaspal become separated from their mother in the turmoil surrounding partition and they travel in search of their father. In the remaining volumes **The Eye of the Horse** (978-0008511258 £7.99) and **The Track of the Wind** (978-0008511241 £7.99) the children return to India. An in depth look at this period in history seen through the lives of some engaging characters.

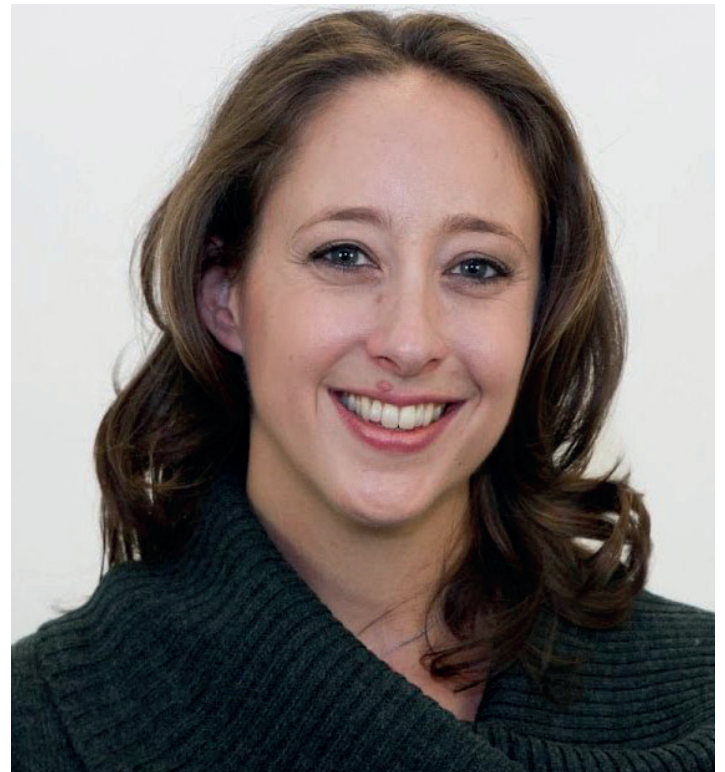
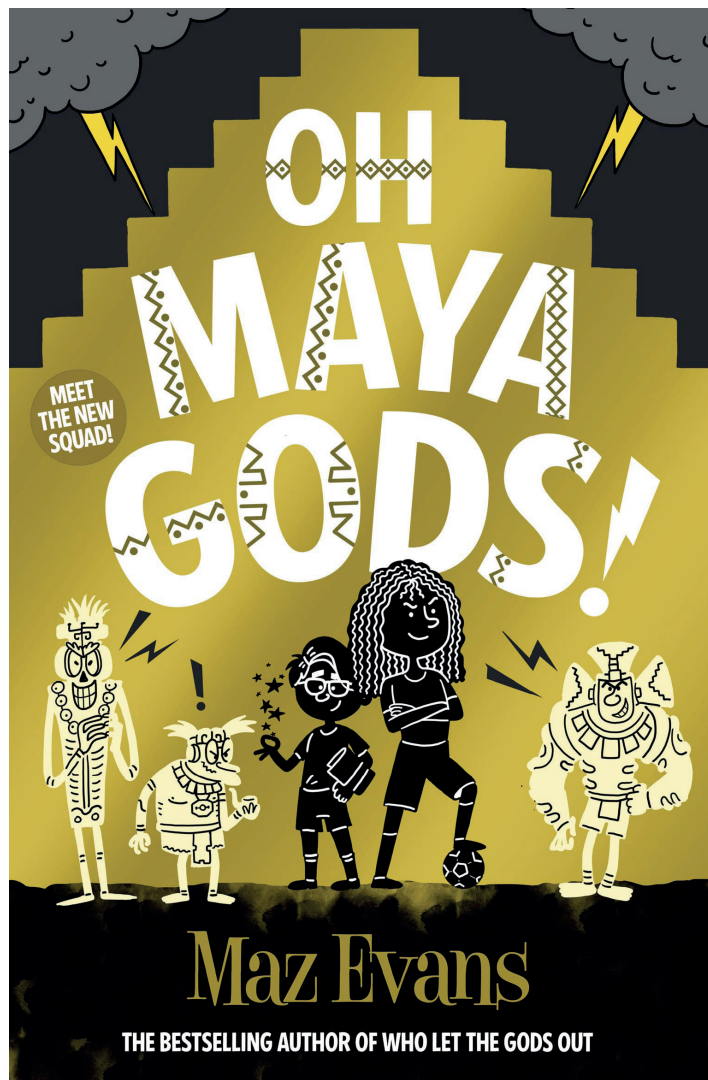
Authorgraph No.261

Maz Evans
interviewed by
Damian Kelleher

Not all children's writers can expect the kind of success that Maz Evans has enjoyed over the past ten years. **When Who Let the Gods Out?** was first published in 2017, it caused a sensation with its laugh-out loud take on mythological gods supplanted in a modern world. Since then, she's gone on to sell more than half a million books around the world, and here she is back with a spin-off series that sees the return of some of our old favourites – and some fabulous new mythological baddies to boot. But ask Maz about how it all began and she'll tell you a tale that's every bit as extraordinary as the ones she writes.

'All an accident!' Maz explains, laughing. 'A happy accident.'

She's nursing a cup of hot sweet tea and a chocolate rice cake as she talks about the lucky break that took all of eight years. 'It was in 2009 when I turned 30 – a very big mistake and I haven't had a birthday since – and I'd just had my third child in three years. I was a journalist at the time and I went from running around doing reports on the telly and the radio to literally being vomited on the whole day. I was going out of my mind. So I sat down and started writing books.'



I wrote this book with the incredibly inspiring title 'Elliot and the Immortals'. I thought it was brilliant and I sent it off to agents and publishers – tumbleweed!

Maz's first book was rejected by every publisher and agent she sent it to, and she didn't take it well. 'I'd been a writer for years so I was used to rejection, but oh, that one hurt. I knew this book was going to change my life and I could see me on stage at the Hay Festival talking about this book – quite a lofty ambition. Then I went into a massive strop for about five years and didn't write a word.'

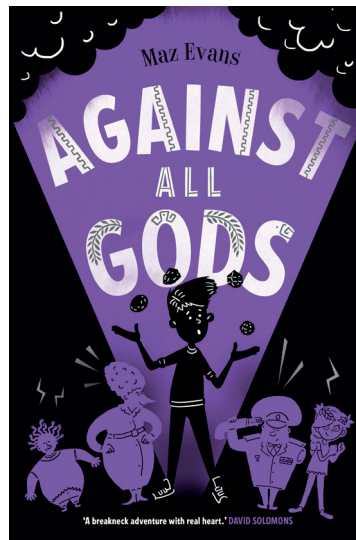
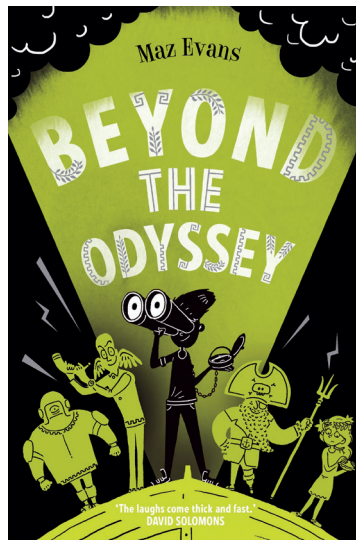
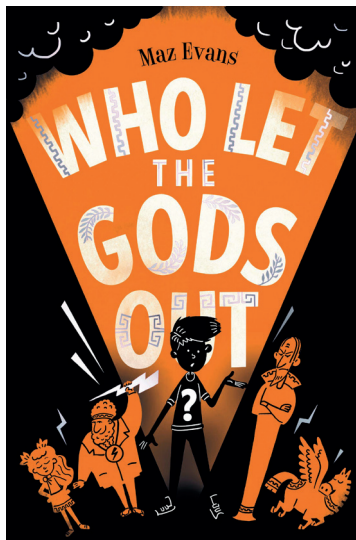
It was only when Maz started taking Story Stew, her creative writing workshops, into schools and the children started to ask her about her own work that she realised she was missing a trick. 'The kids would say, "well you're coming to teach us writing. What have you ever written?" And I'd say "nothing".'

Realising she had, as she calls it, 'a direct route to market', Maz rewrote the book, changed the title and commissioned an illustration from Mark Beech ('for a pack of pork scratchings'). Soon she had sold several thousand copies – and that's when the agent came knocking on her door. 'I said, "but you turned it down six years ago!"'

A book deal with Chicken House followed and **Who Let the Gods Out?** was finally launched 'on the stage at the Hay Festival, just as I had imagined'.

Nowadays, the publishing programme for Maz is less accidental. She realised with **WLTGO**, she had benefitted from a *happy curriculum coincidence*.

'The *original* **WLTGO** series centred on Greek mythology, and Ancient Greece is a core key stage 2 curriculum topic source for schools – bless them! That would have been a brilliant idea if I'd had it. But this time I've been slightly more – I don't like to use the word cynical because that's not why I've done it – but slightly more considered. Schools have said so many times that the ancient Maya is a big topic for KS2 as well, and there are just no books at all.'



Teachers and librarians for years have asked, “Please, please will you write a book on the Maya?”. It wasn’t a mythology that I knew at all so that was fascinating. Maya mythology is bonkers and glorious.’

In the new series (there will be three books in this sequence) it is not the original stars Elliot and Virgo who take centre stage but their children Vesper, Elliot’s football-loving daughter, and Aster, Virgo’s nerdy and uncoordinated son. Was Maz not tempted simply to return to the further adventures of Elliot and Virgo?

‘I could have done, but I really felt that story was told. There’s nothing worse than stretching material until it gets so thin it snaps. One thing we don’t get to do with the characters we really enjoy in children’s books is get to see the adults they become so I thought that would be quite fun. It’s interesting to see what becomes of those children – after all, we’re all still children, aren’t we?’

Like all of Maz’s work, there’s endless research involved to get the details right and make sure her versions are accurate to the original sources. Kizin, the supervillain of **Oh Maya Gods!** is strangely reminiscent of a certain ex-President of the USA (I couldn’t possibly confirm that!) and he’s an egotistical maniac surrounded by death and decay, with a disgusting stench following him wherever he goes.

‘Yes, there are some horrible smells in this book but there’s a very good reason for this,’ Maz explains. ‘Kizin is the Maya god of death but his name means ‘fart’ in the original language. It looks like I’m just being an overgrown kid, but there is some mythological basis to what I write! Seriously though, although these stories are made up and have been transmitted orally, I do feel an important ethical responsibility to honour them and respect them. So the next book in this series goes into the Egyptian underworld where it is governed by the Book of the Dead. It’s a book of spells that, depending on how many your family could afford, you were given to navigate Duat, the Egyptian afterlife, And spell 189? It prevents you from eating your own poo and wee. What a gift for a children’s author!’

Of course, like all Maz’s books, comedy is key and what makes the books so popular with her readers.

‘The humour is the stuff that comes most easily to me,’ she admits. ‘Because I’m naturally absurd, I try to find as much in this world as amusing as I can – in most situations you can find the light and that’s the way I process the world. When it comes to talking to children, no one likes messages rammed down their throats; I think people listen better when they’re having a good time. The difficulty with humour, particularly as sensibilities and sensitivities evolve, is making sure that in trying to hit the comedy target your arrow doesn’t graze the wrong people along the way, and that is something I am very mindful of, and something that I haven’t always got right.’

Maz tells me about Sisyphus, one of the characters from **WLTGO**, who had a pronounced lisp ‘because Sisyphus has 74 ‘s’s in his name, and that was the point of the joke! And I’ve had both sides of it. I’ve had people who get in touch to say, “We’re so happy with

the fact that you’re celebrating a lisp in this character”, but I’ve also had people come and say, “This is really challenging because I’ve got a child with a lisp in my class and I don’t know how to approach this”. I would never want anyone to feel “less” because of anything in my book; that is so far away from what I’m trying to do. The point is that if any child reads my books and thinks that Maz Evans is making fun of speech difference, that breaks my heart. I spoke to my publishers who were incredibly supportive and said I wanted to rewrite those bits.’

In the revised editions, the joke is now that Sisyphus repeatedly uses the letter ‘s’ in all the words that he uses so that ‘whatever he says is insanely alliterative. It’s the same joke, but now it doesn’t hurt anybody. I did it a few years back now and just the other day I got my first email saying we have two versions of this character. I don’t agree with virtue signalling – if you do something right, it doesn’t need signalling – but it felt like the right decision.’

Next month marks another milestone for Maz. Her first adult novel, **Over My Dead Body**, is published by Headline, another idea that she admits dates back to 2009.

‘Here’s the other weird thing; the same year I wrote ‘Elliot and the Immortals’, I wrote a script about a dead woman who solves her own murder, and I’ve come back to it again and again over the years. That’s my adult novel that’s coming out next month with Headline. It’s taken me 12 years with **Over My Dead Body** but we got there.’

Now she’s entering the world of adult literature, does this mean her younger readers will be missing out? Maz takes a breath and suddenly gets serious.

‘So long as I’m allowed,’ she says. ‘I do worry though; I’m 44 now. I’m not sure we’re going to have the doyens of literature that we have now in the future. As a middle-aged woman I worry how long I’ll have a career in children’s books. I’m not sure we’re nurturing writers in the same way – publishing seems to be so youth-obsessed these days. I know agents who won’t take on writers who are over 40 or 50 because they think we’re not relevant to children any more. I think that’s really sad. But so long as I’m wanted, here I will be.’

Oh Maya Gods! by Maz Evans is published by Chicken House in September, 978-1913696870, £7.99 pbk.

The four books in the **Who Let the Gods Out?** series are published by Chicken House, £7.99 pbk.



Damian Kelleher is a writer and journalist specialising in children’s books.

Windows into Illustration: Clara Anganuzzi

Originally from the Seychelles, **Clara Anganuzzi** studied Illustration at Falmouth University in the UK before completing an MA in Children's Illustration at the Cambridge School of Art. She uses a mixture of traditional techniques to create narrative images and depicts emotions with gentle sensitivity. She describes her approach to illustration in her new book, **The Ocean Gardener**, which has a strong environmental message and stars a little girl and her marine biologist mum.

This illustration from **The Ocean Gardener** encapsulates what the story is about: a relationship between mother and daughter, their love for the sea and the work they do to counter the adverse effects of climate change. It's a story of hope and determination. I thought about what was important for this story and the main things for me were to represent Seychelles within the illustrations and to highlight the work that MCSS (Marine Conservation Society Seychelles) has been doing for a few years now.

Character development and setting mean a lot to me when I start working on a story, so for **The Ocean Gardener**, I drew on a lot of personal experiences from my childhood. I loosely based Mum and Ayla on my own mother and me, thinking about the outfits she wore – her dungarees right down to her anklet that jingled across the house, and my favourite shell PJ shorts that I wore every day.

I love creating 'gentle moments' between characters – quiet interactions and connections that come across from their body language – and I feel like this page has a lot of those moments, from the way Ayla looks up to her mum, to the way mum is showing her how to set up the tree-like structures and then encouraging Ayla to help with the work mum is doing.

In all of my books, I enjoy adding 'Easter eggs' for authors, myself, or the people I dedicate the book to. The interior page on the right of this spread has a few of those little moments – family photos, a map of Mahe, the scientific posters my parents had in their offices and the green gecko.



But the further out Ayla swam, the more she realised something was different...

The once vibrant and colourful corals were now pale.

Meanwhile, the fish were gathering in shoals and disappearing into the deep blue.



"Where are they all going?" asked Ayla.

"The reef has slowly been fading as the days get hotter," said Mum. "Without the reef, the fish can't survive so they're leaving to look for a new home."



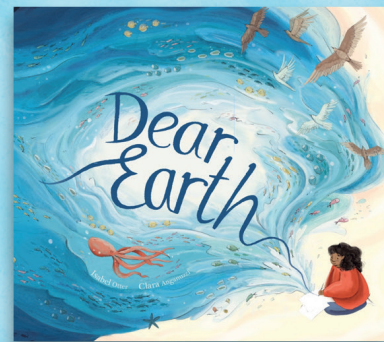
Ayla didn't want the fish to go.

I work both digitally and traditionally when creating illustrations. I create line work using a pencil which is then scanned in, and coloured digitally, adding monoprint and inky textures to add depth. Colouring digitally allows me the freedom of adjusting colours while keeping playful lines created in a more intuitive way. It's always a tricky balance working across the two mediums as

digital allows you to correct mistakes very easily, which then takes away the spontaneity of mark-making. There's always a small inner battle between keeping things loose and fresh or getting carried away with overworking an image.

The Ocean Gardener is published by Little Tiger, 978-1838915315, £12.99 hbk.

Dive into the world of Clara Anganuzzi



Illustrations © Clara Anganuzzi 2023



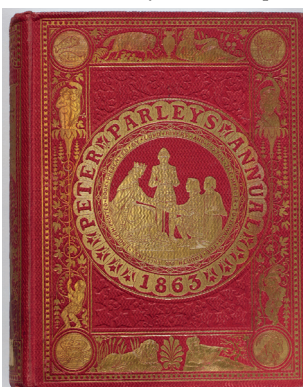
Gifts and Books: Children's books as gifts, and stories of generosity in children's books

In this article adapted from her chapter in **Gifts and Books: From Early Myth to the Present**, **Maria Sachiko Cecire** demonstrates how books for young readers are intimately bound up with the gift relationships between adults and children, and with ideas of childhood as a kind of gift itself.

Children come into the world without possessions, and so most things they own – including books – must be given to them, usually by adults.

That's true of material items, but also of knowledge, beliefs, and stories. For as long as children's books have been around, they have acted both as gift objects and as vehicles for education and socialization.

Children's tales also often contain important or magical gifts – from Harry Potter's invisibility cloak to Lyra Belacqua's alethiometer. These help young protagonists to navigate their worlds, and show them that they have the power to change their stories and societies.



Children's literature didn't really exist as its own category until the eighteenth century, but as book production became cheaper and as Romantic ideas about childhood as a precious life stage became widespread, publishers offered more affordable works for small hands. Some were even explicitly marketed as gifts, including Christmas annuals: volumes including stories, poems and pictures in beautifully bound editions, such as the long-running Peter Parley annuals.

The nineteenth century also saw an explosion of books for kids, including interactive ones like foldout panoramas, pop-ups, and dissolving-view books. Novelties like **A Visit to the Country**, with its intricate stand-up pictures, encouraged children's curiosity and desire to play. This copy was given at Christmas 1891 to a girl called Marjorie, who has coloured in the title page to match its bold cover design.



As well as children's gift and 'toy' books, book series invited children to collect the set; these included the fairy story books compiled by Scottish writer Andrew Lang with his wife Leonora Blanche Lang, filled with tales promising fun and education.



Illustration from **Red Fairy Book**
© Bodleian Library.

'The Twelve Dancing Princesses', from the Langs' **Red Fairy Book** (1890), rewrites the version by the Brothers Grimm for a younger audience. In Grimm it's an old soldier who discovers how the princesses wear out their dancing shoes every night, but the Langs' protagonist is Michael, a dreamy young garden boy who wins the affections of the youngest princess, Lina. In his deference to the princesses, Michael is a very Victorian hero. But his later elevation to royalty, and Lina's declaration that she would

rather 'marry a gardener' than see Michael in danger, suggest that at this time of empire and industrial growth, any British boy might dream of becoming a gentleman through a combination of high feeling, impeccable behaviour, and shrewd action. (Well, *almost* any boy, as I will discuss below.)

Beyond the gifts of entertainment and learning, many books for children emphasize generosity, even making literal the idea of 'giving of yourself'. Oscar Wilde's classic **The Happy Prince** is one example. It features a golden, jewelled statue of a prince, who weeps at the state of the desperate people in his city. The prince convinces a swallow to pluck out his jewels to deliver to the needy on successive nights: 'Swallow, swallow, little swallow... will you not stay with me one night longer?'



Illustration from **The Happy Prince**
© Bodleian Library.

The swallow eventually peels off the statue's gold leaf to deliver to hungry children. When the frost and snow arrive, the swallow, who has delayed his migration south to stay with the prince, freezes to death. The bird kisses the statue's mouth before dying, and the Happy Prince's leaden heart 'snaps right in two'. The fragments of heart and the bird's body are later chosen by an angel as 'the two most precious things in the city'.

The continued popularity of this tale of same-sex, cross-species love, despite Wilde's social ruin for acts of so-called 'gross indecency' with other men, speaks to how strongly the public understood his writing to artfully convey important values such as generosity and sacrifice.

There are many positive connections between books and giving in children's literature, including the idea of children as themselves precious gifts. But in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Black and Brown children could – and often did – function as an entirely different sort of gift. As property in British and other colonies and the United States, enslaved children were often passed down within families, including to other (White) children. Meanwhile, Anglo-American notions of 'the child' have always been implicitly raced White, excluding other children from the category of childhood in ways that continue to have painful effects today, including disproportionate punishment of Black and Brown youth in school and legal contexts.

Such racial exclusion from childhood appears throughout children's literature; for example, Michael is not the only boy to appear in the 'The Twelve Dancing Princesses': the princesses' magical castle is staffed by 'negro boys'. The fates of these unnamed 'black pages' are not discussed when the spell breaks and the princesses leave that land forever.

The omission, silencing, and servitude of Black and Brown characters mean that the gifts of enjoyment, knowledge, and cultural inheritance that children's books often represent for White children can take on very different meaning for readers outside this constructed racial category. In response, many authors have creatively adapted the

norms of children's literature to be more representative of the people and histories in the Anglo-American story.



Illustration from *The Ghosts in the Castle* © Charity Russell.

Canadian-American author Zetta Elliott's 2017 middle-grade novel *The Ghosts in the Castle* is one engaging example. A fantasy-loving Black girl named Zaria from New York visits her family (descendants of the Caribbean-born Windrush generation) in London. There she learns about the painful history of colonialism that hovers behind the real-world castles, royal jewels, and noble titles in her favourite books.

On a tour of Windsor Castle, she meets the ghosts of Prince Alemayehu of Ethiopia and Sarah (Sally) Forbes Bonetta Davies, from what's now Nigeria. Both were brought as children to Victorian England. While

Sally's ghost can travel between locations from her remarkable life, Alemayehu, who died aged 18, sorrowfully haunts the castle buildings at Windsor, where he was buried – and remains today, despite requests from the Ethiopian government to repatriate his body.

Sally tells Zaria and her cousin Winston to help Alemayehu 'hold onto that which binds him to home'. The children buy gifts for Alemayehu: an Ethiopian-made shamma cloth, scented oil, and a popular Ethiopian snack called kolo.

As Alemayehu revels in the scent of the oil and recalls tales of his homeland, he regains the joyful qualities of his childhood self and

finally, with the shamma cloth wrapped around his shoulders, walks off with Sally – presumably to the land from which he was taken so long ago. Zaria and Winston's adventure teaches them that African legends, objects and experiences can hold their own potent magic; and that celebrating and sharing their places in the Anglo-American world can be part of the larger work of acknowledging and repairing deep colonial harms, whose effects still resonate today.

Choosing a book to give to a child recognizes their interests, desires, and potential. It can also have lasting educational benefits: the size of children's home libraries has been correlated with greater literacy, numeracy, and technological skills. But above all, by introducing children to stories that reflect values like generosity and courage, the gift of a book also invites young people to engage with what their societies hold dear – and encourages them to take part in rethinking and rewriting those values for future generations.

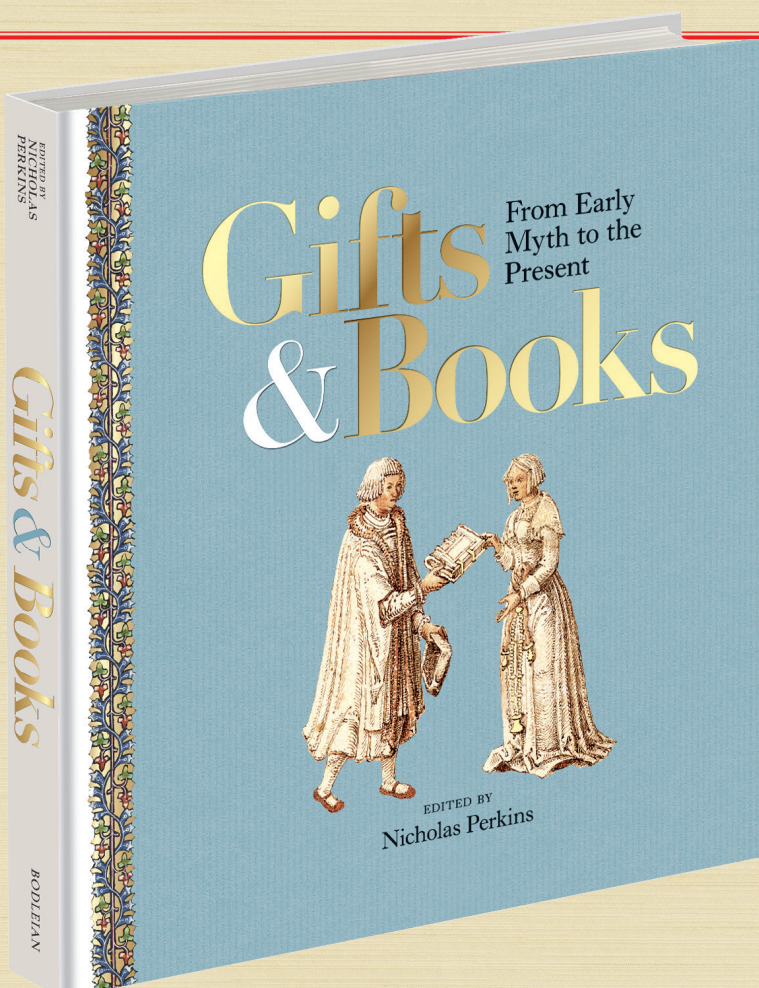
This article is adapted from a chapter in **Gifts and Books: From Early Myth to the Present**, ed. Nicholas Perkins, Bodleian Library 2023, 978-1851246106, £50.00.

The book is linked to the Bodleian Library's free exhibition **Gifts and Books**, open every day until 29 October 2023. It showcases some of the Bodleian's greatest treasures, and its section on children's literature includes original material by J.R.R. Tolkien, Philip Pullman (his own alethiometer!), Shirley Hughes, Kenneth Grahame, and Patience Agbabi.



Philip Pullman's alethiometer
Private Collection.

Maria Sachiko Cecire is associate professor of literature at Bard College in New York, and currently serves as a program officer in Higher Learning at the Mellon Foundation. Her publications include **Re-Enchanted: The Rise of Children's Fantasy Literature in the Twentieth Century** (University of Minnesota Press 2019).



Gifts are an integral part of human societies and this volume explores how, over the centuries, books and writing describe gifts in all their complexity, but also become precious gifts themselves.

In a series of thought-provoking essays, richly illustrated from the Bodleian Library's collections and beyond, the contributors illuminate some of the striking ways in which writing interacts with those fundamental impulses to give, receive and reciprocate.

Edited by Nicholas Perkins

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Beyond the Secret Garden: Gypsy, Roma and Traveller representation in Children's Literature

Darren Chetty and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** examine the way the Gypsy Roma and Traveller communities are represented in children's literature

Gypsy, Roma and Travellers are identified in Britain as minority ethnic groups in the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000). The Act places a general duty on all schools and public authorities to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and promote good relations between people of different 'racial groups'. Despite this, in April 2023, **The Guardian** reported that The Evidence for Equality National Survey showed that Gypsy Roma and Traveller groups experience 'extremely high levels of racial assault, poor health, precarious employment and socioeconomic deprivation'.

In keeping with this, the national charity **Friends, Families and Travellers** identify their main areas of work as 'Health, Hate, Accommodation and Education'. Gypsy Roma and Traveller History Month (GRTHM) was established nationally in June 2008 to raise awareness of the history and discrimination faced by Gypsy Roma and Travellers (GRT), celebrating their cultures and educating against negative stigmas. The term 'Gypsy' is contentious; often regarded as a slur when used from people outside the community, rejected by many Romani people, but used by some.

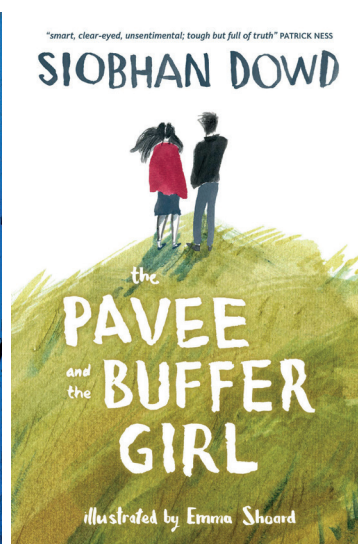
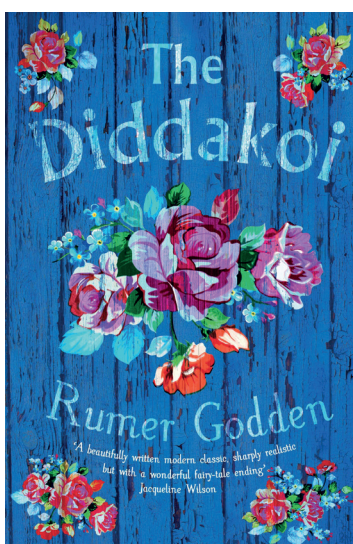
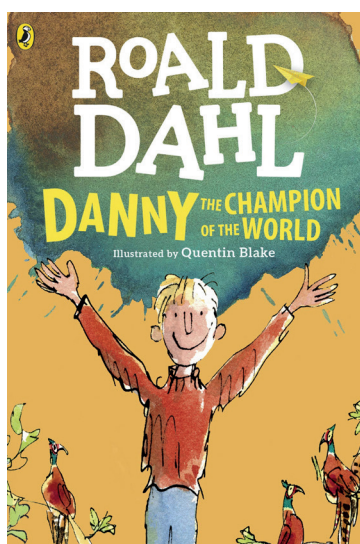
The 'Gypsy Caravan' has been used throughout children's literature as a symbol of freedom and adventure, but also of being outside the law. Toad in Kenneth Grahame's **The Wind in the Willows** (1908) tries to lure Mole and Rat away from the river in his, a plan which ends in the double disaster of a crashed caravan and Toad's obsession with (stolen) motor cars. The main character in Roald Dahl's **Danny, the Champion of the World** (1975) lives with his father in a Gypsy caravan where they poach pheasants with drugged raisins from a nouveau-riche landowner. Neither Toad nor Danny's father are on the right side of the law, but the magnificence of the Gypsy caravans lures the other characters—and readers—to a fascinated conspiracy with them.

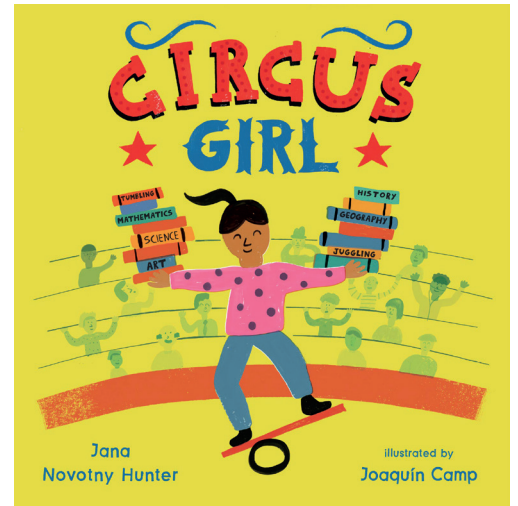
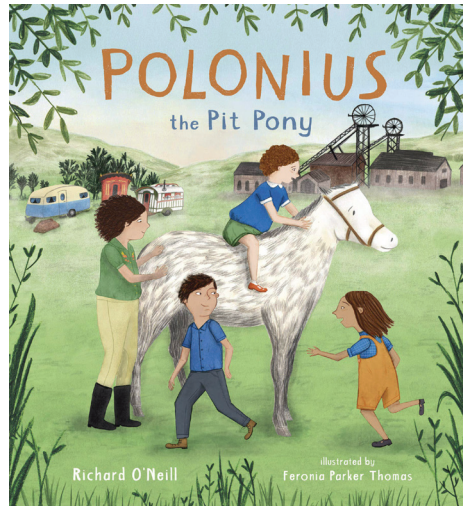
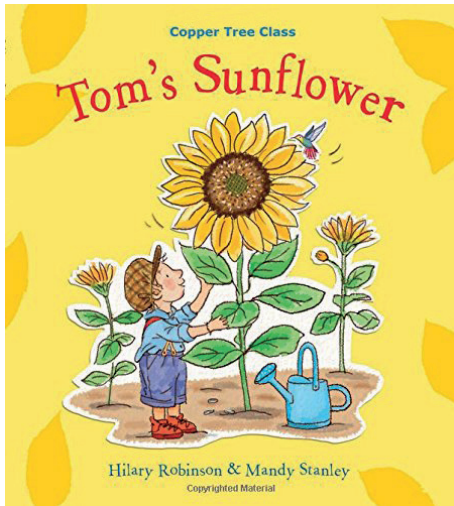
Actual Romany/i people and Travellers are viewed with more suspicion in children's literature, however. They are villains in Enid Blyton's **Five Go to Mystery Moor** (orig. pub. 1954). Although the revised version, published in 1991 (Hodder), has exchanged the

word 'gypsy' for the term 'traveller', the revision cannot erase the way that Blyton depicts them or the white, middle-class Famous Five react to them. Blyton depicts adult Traveller men (Traveller women only appear briefly) as abusers of children, horses, and dogs as well as thieves passing off forged American dollars. The one 'good' Traveller character, Sniffer, is described by tomboy George as 'quite disgusting' (p51) for not using a handkerchief, but he redeems himself by saving George and Anne from his father and the 'gang' of Travellers. George asks Sniffer what he wants in return, and Sniffer requests a bicycle, home, and a chance to go to school—in short, to leave the caravan life. For Sniffer, the caravan is not freedom but a prison, while true freedom can only be found in stable homes and educations.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a number of books featuring Traveller children were published, possibly in response to the Plowden Report (1967) which argued that Travellers were Britain's most educationally deprived group. Roger Clive Kemp, a teacher educator, produced **Derrick and Dora Visit Saint Ives** (1967), which tells the story of Derrick and Dora Romany, two 'very lucky children' (p3) who live in a 'grand, ornately decorated caravan' that lets them travel the world. They go on their own adventure (without the caravan) to the seaside, and eat meat pies in Cornwall and buy a present for their parents. In 1973, the volunteer-run West Midlands Travellers' School was formed; they created a series of reading books in consultation with members of the Traveller community. Stories such as 'The Big Dog' and 'Help, help—Fire!' (both 1976) centered on real-life concerns for Traveller children.

Accommodation has remained a focus for many white authors writing about Traveller children with plots framed around this perceived tension between caravan life and stability. Rumer Godden's **The Diddakoi** (1972), which won the Whitbread Children's Book Award, begins with Kizzy, a 'half-gypsy' or Diddakoi, living with her grandmother in an old-fashioned Gypsy wagon on the wealthy landowner's paddock. She goes to school, but dislikes it because the children make fun of her and the adults mistrust her, calling





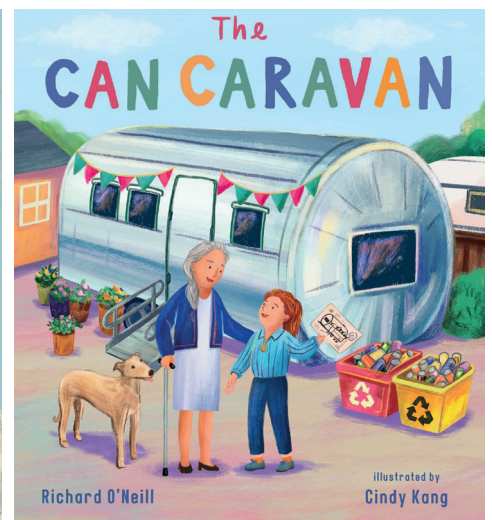
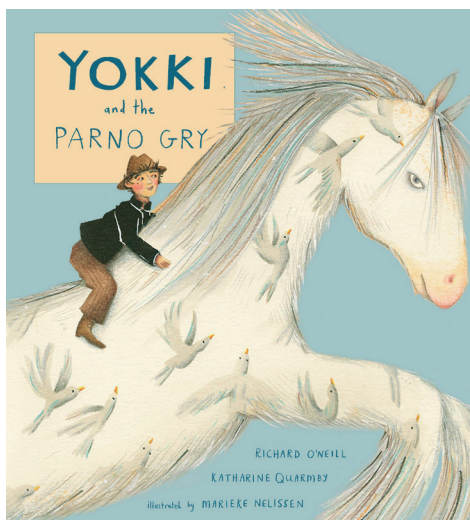
her 'wild' and 'savage'. When her grandmother dies, the wagon is burned as part of the funeral custom, and Kizzy must live in a house. Godden's story is essentially a fairy tale; Kizzy ends up being adopted by the wealthy landowner who has rescued the gypsy wagon from complete destruction, repainting and furnishing it for her as a playhouse. Kizzy is thus given both worlds, a stable home and a caravan, a white upper-class life and a Gypsy one. Anthony Masters' **Travellers' Tales** (1990), which he wrote after working with Traveller children for many years in schools, depicts a girl who doesn't have Kizzy's choices. Prim, who (like Sniffer) longs for school, concludes that for girls, the 'Travellers' way of life ... could also be a prison' (p154) as her future was not in education but in marriage and motherhood.

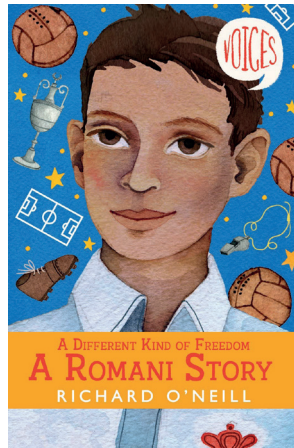
More recent books by white authors speculated on what being a part of GRT culture means; we often see characters who are either exotic and mysterious or tragic and trapped; or a combination of both of these tropes. Elizabeth Arnold's **Gypsy Girl Trilogy** (1995-7) makes Freya, the main character, a magical twelve-year-old loved by all, who can use charms and spells; it was made into a CITV series in 2001. In Gaye Hıçılmaz's **Girl in Red** (2000) Emilia, is a Romanian Gypsy who has arrived in the UK as a refugee. It is striking that she is not heard for the first half of the book. Instead, we see her through the eyes of Frankie, a Year 9 boy who is entranced by her long blonde plaits, and long red skirt. Frankie's mother leads a campaign to protest the arrival of the Roma people in their working-class community. Though Frankie learns something of the history of discrimination and oppression toward Roma people and rejects his mother's views, his concern for Emilia does not appear to extend toward the rest of her community. Emilia, he says, 'wasn't like the others' (p135). Indeed, he and his classmates view her as like 'a princess or a super model' (p95).

The Pavee and the Buffer Girl (2017) is a story for teenagers written by Siobhan Dowd and illustrated by Emma Shoard and originally appeared as a short story in **Skin Deep**, a 2004 anthology published by Puffin and edited by Tony Bradman. Set in Ireland, the story includes racial abuse and racial violence towards Jim, a Traveller accused by classmates of stealing a CD. Jim meets Kit, who 'takes him under her wing', teaching him how to read. The story ends with Jim's family fleeing Ireland. Dowd writes as an outsider but one with some knowledge of Irish Traveller communities gained through her postgraduate research.

The theme of education appears in a number of picture books with Traveller characters. **Tom's Sunflower** (2015), written by Hilary Robinson and illustrated by Mandy Stanley, focuses on dealing with parental break-up. The book is part of the **Copper Street** series of books dealing with issues and reviewed by experts. The story also includes Skye and Amber who 'move about a lot with a travelling theatre'. Their bedroom is shown to be colourful and cosy but, we are told, Amber 'always had a wobbly tummy ... when she had to start a new school again.' In **Circus Girl** (2019), written by Jana Novotny Hunter and illustrated by Joaquín Camp, Sky combines her love of learning circus skills with her love of learning at school and doing her homework.

Informed, rounded depictions of Gypsy Roma Traveller characters are still too rare in children's literature in the UK. The work of Richard O'Neill, often in collaboration with other writers and illustrators, deserves special mention for changing the literary landscape in this regard. O'Neill, his website tells us, 'was born and brought up in large traditional, fully nomadic Romani Gypsy family, travelling throughout the North of England and Scotland. His roots are also to be found in the coal mining communities of the North East having family members who worked down the





pets.' This heritage is explored in **Polonius the Pit Pony** (2018), illustrated by Feronia Parker Thomas and published by Child's Play, in which Polonius meets horses that are part of a Traveller family, and ultimately helps them, showing that being small is not a disadvantage when you are determined.

O'Neill's work also engages with the theme of education but avoids contributing to existing negative stereotypes. In **The Lost Homework** (2019), illustrated by Kirsti Beautyman, Sonny lives on a Traveller site, described as a 'kushti atchin tan' (Romany for 'good stopping place'). He travels with his family to attend a cousin's wedding, but loses his homework book. Sonny's world is both traditional – his Aunt teaches him to sew pinnies for market and the local community group are restoring his Grandma's old vardo, and modern – he teaches a neighbour how to send an email. When he tells the story of the weekend to his class in school, his teacher points out that he covered all the school subjects. O'Neill presents school as very important for Sonny and his family, while highlighting that it is not the only place where learning takes place. Sonny's teacher believes him, offers him space to tell his story, and makes connections between his life inside and outside school.

Yokki and the Parno Gry (2016), written by O'Neill and Katharine Quarmby, and illustrated by Marieke Nelissen, explores how Industrialisation has impacted Traveller communities; 'since we got these new machines I don't need so many extra hands' Farmer Tom tells Yokki's father. The usual camping ground is now fenced off. Yokki is a 'Traveller boy'. His community live in caravans and tents and keep alive traditions such as spoon-making, paper flower-making, storytelling, and trading and mending kitchen utensils.

In **The Can Caravan** (2022), illustrated by Cindy Kang, O'Neill celebrates Traveller resilience and independence while showing the whole community, Traveller and non-Traveller, working together. Janie visits a recycling plant with her class and later repairs a neighbour's caravan using aluminium cans with the help of her classmates and their parents. We are reminded that 'Travellers have been recycling for centuries'.

In **Ossiri and the Bala Mengro** (2016) by Richard O'Neill and Katharine Quarmby and illustrated by Hannah Tolson, Ossiri and her family 'worked hard as "Tattin Folki", or rag-and-bone people, as the settled people called them.' Ossiri dreams of being a musician, and though she is discouraged, she makes her own musical instrument. At first the community complain about the noise so she decides to practice. She awakens the ogre, Bala Mengro, 'huge and as hairy as a Shire horse'. However, the ogre enjoys the music and offers Ossiri first a silver, then a gold chain. A stranger steals the Tattin Folki, but it is found along with the stranger's boots. O'Neill again celebrates the imagination and creativity of Traveller children.

Most recently, Richard O'Neill's **A Different Kind of Freedom: A Romani Story** (2023) is the seventh book in the Voices series from Scholastic and is told through the eyes of young Lijah, as he navigates life and discovers football and Rab Howell, who in 1895 became the first Romani footballer to represent England.

O'Neill's books provide readers with depictions of Romani people who are distinct but not isolated; connected to their heritage and language and viewing both as empowering. He situates innovation within a traditional context where change and continuity are shown to coexist. Romani Traveller people, often absent presences in the earlier examples we have discussed, are shown to be alive and thriving, often in challenging circumstances.

Thanks to teacher and writer, Gemma Bagnall (@MissBprimary), who has done considerable work in raising awareness of the work still to be done in GRT representations in children's literature.

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- The Can Caravan**, Richard O'Neill, ill. Cindy Kang (2022), Child's Play, 978-1786286147, £7.99 pbk
- Ossiri and the Bala Mengro**, Richard O'Neill and Katharine Quarmby, ill. Hannah Tolson (2016), Child's Play, 978-1846439247, £7.99 pbk
- A Different Kind of Freedom: A Romani Story**, Richard O'Neill (2023), Scholastic, 978-1407199580, £6.99 pbk



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



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

Wendy Cooling: New Projects continue the work of the Bookstart Founder

In 2020 the children's book world lost one of its most loved and most important enthusiasts, Wendy Cooling. In a career spent transforming lives, Wendy was a teacher, an author and an anthologist but is best known as the founder of **Bookstart**, the flagship national programme of the charity **BookTrust**, which has done so much to put books into the hands of babies and toddlers and start a lifelong love of reading.

Wendy remained as adviser to **Bookstart** as she embarked on a 25-year freelance career during which she was a friend to libraries, bookshops, families, organisations, authors, illustrators and publishers alike. She informed and inspired numerous audiences at conferences and enjoyed a valuable role with *lbb* UK, with *Outside In World*, the Little Rebels Children's Book Award, Bookaroo Festival of Children's Literature and many others.

Her friend and former colleague, **Alexandra Strick** describes how, three years on from her death, different projects in Wendy's memory are set to enrich the children's book landscape.

Wendy Cooling was a true pioneer. Unquestionably a free spirit, she was universally treasured and respected by all sectors of the book world. So it's appropriate that the three projects set up in her memory have been established by different parties, thereby mirroring her independent nature, as well as her creativity and commitment to getting books into children's hands.

Reflecting Wendy's love of travel, **Wendy's House** is an ingenious pilot project with huge future potential. Set up by Jo Williams, it involves establishing pop-up book tents in a range of venues. One 'Wendy's house' is now in operation in a school in India, another in a library in Malaysia. The first two locations are particularly apt since Wendy loved spending time at Taktse School, and it was after a **Bookstart** talk by Wendy that Kuching Library staff set up their own scheme which subsequently spread across Malaysia.

Meanwhile a project from **BookTrust** will recognise Wendy's role in originating **Bookstart**, which gifts book packs to millions of babies and toddlers each year and has inspired similar programmes all over the world. A travel bursary in her name, funded by **BookTrust**, will be awarded to an organisation or individual from the global south who is looking to set up a **Bookstart**-style programme in their own country.

Plus of course, no Wendy Cooling legacy activity would be complete without a new book. Ten years ago, Wendy and I worked with publisher Child's Play to research and create an innovative tactile book, **Off to the Park**, uniquely based on the ideas, experiences and needs of blind and partially sighted children. This successful book was then followed by two more, also featuring carefully researched tactile elements – **Off to the Beach** and **Getting Ready**. I'm proud therefore to have written and researched a new tactile book for babies, which will be published by Child's Play, **Time to Play**. Wendy was passionate about accessibility and I know how much she wanted to see another book in our series; **Time to Play** will build on the series' success.

These three projects are all inspired by Wendy's lifelong belief in giving all children the right to access great books. Wendy said: 'If you can read, you can do anything.'

There could surely be few more suitable occasions on which to have announced the projects than the Yoto Carnegies award ceremony. The 2023 ceremony provided a perfect platform to share the news



with both a physical and virtual audience, and to give the book world an opportunity to pause to remember Wendy together. It was also particularly pertinent, since it represented three years to the very day since we lost Wendy. Just before the 2023 winners were announced, Janet Noble (chair of judges) invited the audience to remember Wendy for her vision, her passion, her energy and her legacy.

Children's book events still feel strangely incomplete, without her 'larger than life' presence. Wendy was someone who would never miss a party – and she was always easy to spot, with her striking stature, colourful scarves and distinctive jewellery. She was a source of boundless energy and incorrigible name-dropping, always ready to beguile her audience with a fresh stock of stories, fascinating book projects and tales from her travels. So it was lovely to hear her own name on so many tongues at the 2023 Carnegies ceremony, to share memories with others who had worked with her and to be able to enlighten those who hadn't had the good fortune to know her.

Wendy Cooling will undoubtedly remain best known for **Bookstart**. However, she spent a lifetime transforming lives in a wealth of different ways. She had already been a teacher, author and anthologist, before developing the concept that would become **Bookstart**, piloting it in Birmingham with the energetic Library Services without whom it would never have happened.

The Wendy Cooling Legacy Group welcomes any further approaches from parties wishing to link activity or projects to Wendy.

Email: thebookdabbler@gmail.com



Alexandra Strick has worked in the children's book world for much of the past fifteen years. At **Booktrust**, she managed programmes including **Bookstart** and **Children's Book Week**, and was deputy executive director. She regularly reviewed children's books for the **Guardian** and is now a consultant to **Booktrust** on all aspects of disability and diversity.

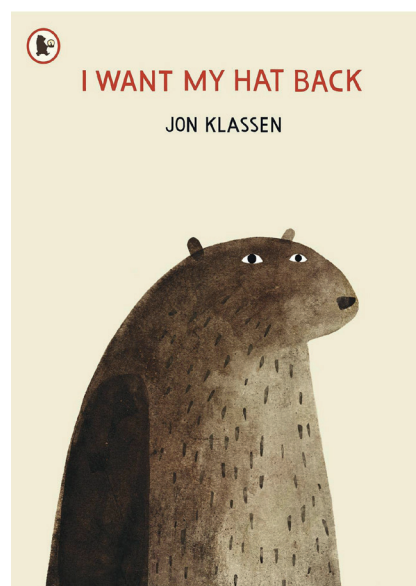
I wish I'd written...



Dave Shelton won the **Branford Boase Award** with **A Boy and a Bear in a Boat**. His latest book, **Monster in the Woods**, is publishing in August, David Fickling Books, 978-1788452212, £7.99 pbk.

Dave Shelton on the tale of a bear and a joke he wishes he had told.

There aren't many books that I wish I had written. Mostly, if I had written any of the books that I really love, then they would be different, and not as good, and I wouldn't love them so much. Because most of the books that I love are just not the kind of thing I would write, not the kind of thing I'm any good at. But Jon Klassen's picture book, **I Want My Hat Back**, kind of is the sort of thing I like to think I'm quite good at. This tale of a bear's search for his beloved missing hat is seemingly very simple, with very few words, and illustrations mostly depicting the cast of animal characters in sparse surroundings with no background. And it is beautifully deadpan, with barely a hint of expression on anyone's face throughout. No one strains to make you laugh, no one shouts or stomps or makes a fuss. Instead, as in an unpolished children's nativity play, everyone stands awkwardly, looking out at the audience rather than at each other, and recites their lines with no hint of emotion. And the result is hilarious. Because the entire story is just a brilliant joke really (albeit one that implies an unseen terrible fate for one of its characters). It's a beautifully constructed, immaculately told joke. The kind I wish I had told.



I Want My Hat Back by Jon Klassen is published by Walker Books, 978-1406338539, £7.99 pbk.

BfK

reviews

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant

The Bear who had Nothing to Wear

★★★★

Jeanne Willis, ill. Brian Fitzgerald, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978-1915252036, £12.99 hbk

When it comes to a rhyming text, there are very few picture book writers who do it as well as Jeanne Willis and she's on top form in this tale of Albie the bear. Clothes conscious Albie is determined to find the outfit that suits him perfectly. But what could that be, when one day he's a prince, and the next a Fairy Queen? He tries on and then discards more and more outfits until, knee deep in a cowpat (his Country Bear day), the truth finally dawns. Discarding (nearly) all his clothes, he is free to be entirely himself. It's a treat to read aloud, and illustrator Brian Fitzgerald has great fun depicting Albie's different outfits and changing moods. Tucked in amongst the fun, there are gentle messages about identity and choice too. **LS**

My Brother is an Avocado

★★★★

Tracy Darnton, ill. Yasmeen Ismail, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 978-1471187704, £7.99 pbk

Tapping into the comparisons used to describe the size of a baby as it grows in the womb, this story describes the anticipation a young child feels while waiting for her baby brother to arrive. The baby grows from a teeny tiny poppy seed to a melon, with comparisons to an onion, a brussels sprout and of course, an avocado along the way.

The child wonders what the new baby will be like, if he is a bean does that mean he'll be a fast runner? If he is an avocado, will he be wrinkly? If he is an onion, will he make me cry? We see the changing emotions and questions in the young child's head as the story unfolds from her perspective. The child thinks about the things they will do together, what the new baby might like to do and promises to look after him forever. In the end there is a surprise in store, because the baby brother turns out to be not an avocado or even a baby brother, but a baby sister!

A warm and reassuring story indicating some of the excitement and uncertainty for the very young about having a new baby brother or sister in the family. The illustrations are warm, lively, expressive and full of colour and movement.

A great book to share with young children in the build up to a new arrival, a little reassurance that the new baby will not really be an avocado may be required! **SMC**

My Self, Your Self

★★★★

Esmé Shapiro, Rocket Bird Books, 48pp, 978-1915395078, £12.99 hbk This is a whimsical exploration of knowing oneself, individuality and the rewards this brings. It's narrated by a humanoid creature, the wearer of a 'very special sprout hat' and brown boots that introduces itself with the words, 'I have been with my self for a very long time.' and then goes on to ponder upon what a self actually is.

Readers are then taken through a verdant environment of plants wherein the protagonist interacts with other beings, a walking mushroom-like friend, a tall, thin flower-like

maker of an abundance of delicious cranberry-butter-pie muffins, and, a snail. With each of these our narrator points out what it particularly appreciates about each one, be it nose wiggling and toe tapping or bath time songs and Shapiro illustrates the actions in small quirky vignettes or double page spreads.

The narrator then returns to a consideration of itself - an appreciator of fragrant roses, a support for a friend that is feeling sad, an understander of the importance of time alone and of the time it takes to truly know oneself. 'And side by side, we can be ourselves together,' it concludes - a wise comment indeed and one that may require a little unpicking for younger children.

Written in an easy conversational style and illustrated in detailed mixed media art, this is a book that affirms every person's essential self. **JB**

Animal Crackers

★★★★

Ruby Wright, Rocket Bird Books, 32pp, 978-1915395016, £12.99 hbk Rocket Bird Books, operating under the highly successful Barrington Stoke

reviews

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.

Diana Barnes was a librarian for 20 years, mostly as a children's specialist, working in Kent, Herts, Portsmouth and Hampshire, and Lusaka (Zambia) with the British Council.

Jill Bennett is the author of **Learning to Read with Picture Books** and heads up a nursery unit.

Rebecca Butler writes and lectures on children's literature.

Jane Churchill is a children's book consultant.

Stuart Dyer is headteacher of a primary school in East Devon.

Janet Fisher is a children's literature consultant.

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

Anne Horemans is a secondary school librarian.

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.loveyourbooks.co.uk

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**.

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 continued

umbrella, introduces a captivating range of picturebooks aimed at transforming parents into master storytellers and children into avid bookworms. Among the impressive debut publications is Wright's **Animal Crackers**, which sets the stage for an exciting start to this new venture.

Animal Crackers follows the endearing character of little Maisie, a constant presence in her pink animal-suit onesie, as she yearns for a pet despite her small flat. When the animals depicted on various containers around her home magically come to life, Maisie's dreams appear fulfilled. However, she soon discovers the challenges of caring for a multitude of animals, even if they are imaginary. Through a heartwarming and imaginative solution provided by her Mum, Maisie learns to surround herself with the animals she loves in a different way.

The story of **Animal Crackers** not only fosters empathy but also promotes a positive attitude towards animal care. Its humorous and engaging storyline, conveyed through simple and accessible language, introduces relatable characters that resonate with anyone who has yearned for a pet that couldn't be accommodated at home. In addition to its delightful creativity and problem-solving elements, this picturebook celebrates the bond between parent and child, with Maisie's Mum offering a supportive and nurturing environment. Her understanding of Maisie's desires leads to a solution that brings happiness to everyone involved.

Wright's screen-printed illustrations are a visual delight. The clever use of negative space effectively emphasizes the emotional highs and lows of the story, while the bright and colourful home within the illustrations captivates young readers, providing ample opportunities for engagement and connection. **Animal Crackers** marks a fine debut for Wright, with a narrative that begs to be read aloud and shared. Its themes touch upon universal experiences that both children and parents can relate to. **MT**

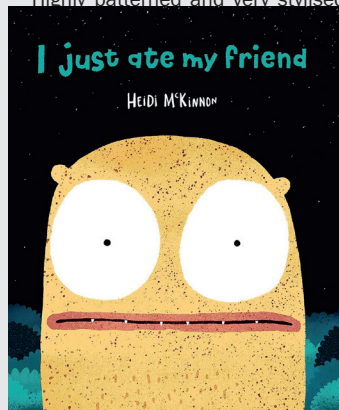
Can I Come Too?

★★★★

Owen Davey, Rocket Bird Books, 32pp, 978-1915395009, £12.99 hbk
When Teddy sets off to go fishing, Cub wants to go too. Teddy isn't keen, he thinks Cub will just get in the way. Sure enough, in no time at all Cub manages to upturn the canoe, entangle and break the rods, before catching Teddy rather than a fish in his net. Teddy gets crosser and crosser with Cub, as expected he is just getting in the way. In the end, however, the tables are turned when it is Cub rather than Teddy who catches a fish, albeit in an unintentional and rather amazing fashion. Cub apologises for misjudging Cub, he realises he was wrong.

This is an appealing story which many children will relate to suggesting the frustrations of having (or being!) a younger sibling. The story shows the importance of being open-minded and prepared to change your mind. Cub and Teddy's changing dynamic is reflected in the way their body language and expressions are conveyed.

Highly patterned and very stylised



(which can make grasping meaning hard at times) the illustrations are very attractive with a distinctive colour palette. **SMc**

I Just Ate My Friend

★★★★★

Heidi McKinnon, Allen and Unwin, 32pp, 978-1911679653, £7.99 pbk
What a hilarious book! The cover introduces us to the main character, a huge grimace on his vast yellow face. He has just eaten his friend! So, he is in search of a new one. He approaches many a creature, but each refuses his offer of friendship, giving reasons that he is too big, too, small, too scary And each gets gobbled up! How can such a tale end? Readers will want to share this book again and again, taking in what is happening and wondering at the ending. The story says much about thinking of enduring friendships. The cover will attract a lot of potential readers, and the bizarre happenings, portrayed clearly in the illustrations, whilst still leaving much to the imagination, will stay in the minds for quite some time. Choose your friends wisely! This book will surely be a favourite. **GB**

The Gardening Dog

★★★★★

Cindy Hume, Macmillan Children's Books, 32pp, 978-1529041293, £7.99 pbk

In the rescue centre one little dog is different from all the others. Unlike them she doesn't bury bones, chase balls or dig holes and in contrast to the rest of the pooches, she is quiet, a tad shy and has been a resident for a long time.

Because of her love of growing plants, doing so whatever the weather, everybody called her the Gardening Dog.

One morning a bus load of schoolchildren arrive at the centre. Among them is Lewis, who like the Gardening Dog is shy and he doesn't join in with the other children; preferring to spend his visit sitting drawing. Come lunchtime the Gardening Dog approaches Lewis nervously, telling him how much she loves the boy's pictures. Lewis in turn responds that her beautiful garden was the inspiration for his art. This gives them both the confidence to spend the afternoon together and when Lewis leaves, he gives his new friend one of his pictures and in return receives a plant from the Gardening Dog with instructions to watch and wait, something wonderful will happen.

This Lewis tells his mum and she suggests that as they don't have a garden, they could plant it in the patch of ground beside their home and the boy does so, remembering to follow his canine friend's instructions.

Several days later a flower blooms. So begins the creation of a new garden. Lewis returns, enlists the Gardening Dog's help and little by little, with work and patience over the months into autumn and through winter, they wait and watch until eventually the garden becomes a gorgeous community place where everyone loves to spend time.

Rather than it being the end of the relationship between Lewis and the Gardening Dog, though, their friendship leads to a new start for both of them; that too was most definitely worth the wait.

An uplifting story wherein the illustrations both large and small are full of delightful details that will make both children and adults smile. **JB**

What a Day. A mindful moment for bedtime

★★★★★

Emma Ballantine and Mark Strepan, ill. Harriet Hobday, Frances Lincoln, 40pp, 978-0711277083, £7.99 pbk

Opening with a child waking to the sun, a smile on her face, the gentle, spare text takes us through her exciting day, following each activity with joy. As the day is ending, readers see her back in her bed, after the routine bath and teeth cleaning. An adult says, 'I've loved spending time with you today. I always will. Let's take a moment to think about what made us smile today.' The text ends with 'Goodnight, little one,' on a spread showing several bedrooms with small children tucked up in bed, with an adult or two giving them their goodnight words, readying them for sleep and sweet dreams. A delightful book, full of charm and just right for story time before settling for the night. The illustrations suggest pure delight in the world, and each spread rewards careful perusal. The book closes with Sleep Guidance, from baby sleep specialist, Andrea Grace. **GB**

Fly, Butterfly, Fly

★★★★

Dom Conlon, ill. Anastasia Izlesou, Graffeg, 40pp, 978-1802580785, £7.99 pbk

'Surrounded by riches/Of summer-bloom flowers/the Cabbage White feels too plain'. So Dom Conlon sends the butterfly on a journey starting in the meadows around the UK then on circling the world to find butterflies of all shapes and sizes whose wings are multi-coloured, brilliantly patterned or camouflaged. But none of these are for her – back home it is among the cabbage leaves 'where Butterfly's colour's just right' that she will lay eggs to become the next generation.

This is no slow, staid fact filled introduction to butterflies of the world; rather it is a whistle-stop tour. Colours spill off the page, environments are immediate as Izlesou's illustrations dominate each double spread adding to the trajectory of the journey and bringing extra vibrancy to Conlon's words. Using blank verse, immediate and authoritative, the poet introduces species, identifying a detail that that will pop off the page. But all the while the presence of the Cabbage White brings the reader back home. However, reminding the young audience that these are not fairytale creatures, the author concludes with a few Butterfly Facts – but it is the journey of the Cabbage White that will entrance and inspire. **FH**

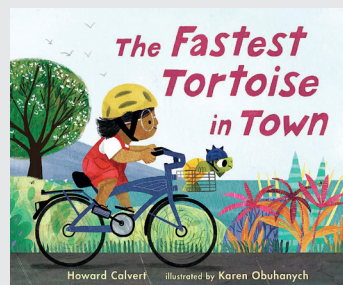
Sammy Striker and the Football Cup

★★★★

Catherine Emmett, ill. Joe Berger, Macmillan, 96pp, 978-1509896936, £7.99 pbk

Her great grandfather's gift of a football when Sammy was tiny is the start of a passion which colours her day and nighttime dreams. As the rhyming text bounces along, so does Sammy, a football ever at her feet. Spotted one day by a legendary coach, soon Sammy is practising with the country's new under eights team. But whilst she is brilliant at tackling and dribbling, when it comes to getting the ball into the net to score a goal, Sammy's kicks always curve adrift. Her confidence is knocked. On their first match day, Sammy is devastated to find she is sat on the bench, just watching. An injury to a teammate has her warming up, and onto the pitch she goes. Says the coach, 'Don't try and do things like all of the rest. I've got a whole team who can kick straight and true, but only one player who can bend it like you!' Fired up with pride, Sammy adjusts her stride, and aims far wide of the goal. Result! The ball curves round the keeper, and it's a goal! Just in time for a summer full of football, this book will encourage readers to follow a dream, but reminds them

that sometimes one's dreams need to be adjusted. Illustrated in bold, bright colours. With quirky images of young players, showing all the range of emotions on and off the field from angst to pride, aspiring footballers will love it. **GB**



The Fastest Tortoise in Town

★★★★

Howard Calvert, ill. Karen Obuhanych, Walker Books, 32pp, 978-1529501506, £12.99 hbk

When Lorraine spots a notice advertising a Fun Run, she sees no reason why her tortoise (curiously named Barbara Hendricks after an American opera singer) should not take part. Barbara, on the other hand, sees an overwhelming reason – she is well known for being slow with zero chance of winning. Undeterred, Lorraine organises an impressive training regime for Barbara involving weights and daily walks. Barbara is despondent and on the day of the race just wants to curl up in her shell. Lorraine persuades her to take part by imagining the race is just another walk. Her competitors include a sloth and a snail (the best of the best in Barbara's eyes!) By placing one foot in front of the other Barbara begins the race, gaining confidence as she goes and flying across the finish line to win, congratulated by a roaring crowd. After the race a hare bounds over to her and suggests they should have a race too...

A very amusing story, the illustrations adding additional detail and humour, the changing expressions of the tortoise are particularly clever. Page design emphasises the ups and downs of the story – the practice sessions and the drama of the race itself.

With a deft link to Aesop's famous fable, *The Hare and the Tortoise*, at the end of the book, this is a very enjoyable picture book about perseverance, focus, encouragement and believing in yourself. **SMC**

Sharks! Sharks! Sharks!

★★★★

Susan Martineau, ill. Vicky Barker, B Small, 40pp, 978-1913918729, £12.99 hbk

Susan Martineau is an award-winning and very experienced author of non-fiction and information books for



children, and the experience shows in **Sharks! Sharks! Sharks!** With bright, attractive illustrations by Martineau's frequent collaborator Vicky Barker, it's eye-catching enough to attract the eye of passing shark-interested young readers and provides a scattering of fascinating facts to facilitate browsing, but will likely be read from beginning to end, and then beginning to end again. There's plenty of real science from the opening spread, which explains *What is a shark?* with a cross-section diagram, close ups on shark skin with accompanying illustration, and description of the workings of shark gills, to the final *Do sharks have friends?* which introduces the different types of fish that live in, on or near sharks. The book emphasises throughout how many different types of sharks there are and how their colouring, shape of their mouths etc are defined by habitat. A spread called *Sharks in the past* reminds us of how long they've been around in the oceans and provides a life size image of a Megalodon tooth. Wide-ranging in the information covered, stimulating in its approach and carefully presented, this is an excellent information book and stands out even in the crowded shark books field. **LS**

Little Big Sister

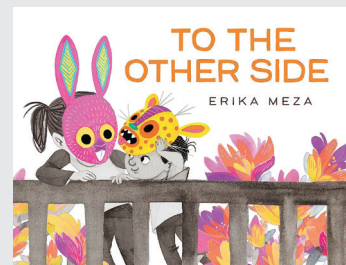
★★★★

Eoin Colfer, ill. Celia Ivey, Little Island, 64pp, 978-1915071057, £10.99 pbk

Published in an extremely accessible format which will enable it to reach a wide age range, *Little Big Sister* addresses the situation experienced by a child with dwarfism. Starr is a regular big sister who adores playing with and helping her younger sister, Babes. She is, naturally taller than Babes – until one day she isn't. And her size becomes even more apparent when she moves from Infant School to Primary. Suddenly all the things she loves doing become problematic and too difficult. No wonder she doesn't want to go to school as the realisation her size will always make her different. However, there are things that can be done

once attention has been drawn to the problem – and a school can become truly inclusive.

Eoin Colfer's easy prose ensures this slight – but timely – novella is a pleasure to read while the illustrations with their bright colours and attractive style are a great addition. Starr is an engaging character who will encourage both sympathy and empathy, and whose reaction to her situation is genuine. There is no sense of self-pity – rather a legitimate self-belief. It is refreshing to have adults, who once the problem is aired, react in a positive way – and with a practical solution that could be transferred beyond the book. This is an addition to the library shelves that will not only satisfy a real need but also create awareness for a wider audience. **FH**



To the Other Side

★★★★

Erika Meza, Hodder Children's Books, 40pp, 978-1444971774, £14.99 hbk

The dangerous journey of leaving home and crossing the border from Mexico to the United States is told in this stunning picture book.

With their mother at the door, the small boy narrator and his older sister are playing a game, so the elder sibling explains. The rules are simple: avoid monsters, don't get caught and keep moving. The game is won by crossing the line.

The two walk, get rides, catch the bus, traverse a river, travel on a train roof, all the while desperately trying to stay out of the clutches of the ominous monsters, that want to catch them.

As the atmosphere of the journey turns from playful to deadly serious the more perils they face, big sister acknowledges her brother's fear and feeling of being overwhelmed, telling him 'you're brave like a tiger. I'm fast like a rabbit.'

Eventually they reach a wall on which is written between other marks, the words 'TAMBIEN DE ESTA LADO HAY SUEÑOS' (Also on this side there are dreams). After a very long wait in line where many other masked children stand, they are allowed to cross the border and eventually the narrator is able to talk of a new friend welcoming them into his home.

This is a heartbreaking but ultimately heartwarming book

reviews

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

wherein Erika Meza's use of pattern and in particular colour - monochrome with jewel-bright flashes of colour and the pinks, oranges and yellows of the children's masks standing out starkly against the white pages - make the story hugely powerful.

In a note at the end of the book, the author explains that there are around 13 million child refugees in the world, and that every year tens of thousands of children have to leave their homes, sometimes going alone, sometimes with others, to search for a safer place to live and each has a story to tell.

Yes, this particular story is of crossing from Mexico to the U.S. but with more and more asylum-seeking children from various parts of the world being welcomed into homes and schools in the UK, this book is highly relevant here and wherever else there are immigrants.

Strongly recommended for sharing in primary schools to open up discussion. **JB**

The Chalk Garden

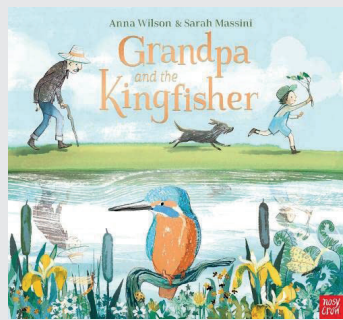
★★★★

Sally Anne Garland, Sunbird Books, 40pp, 978-1503768048, £7.99 pbk

Emma longs for birds to visit her. But she doesn't have a garden with flowers and plants - just concrete slabs. Then a loose concrete block leads to something more and Emma is able to bring the concrete patio to life - but will her wish come true? Will a bird come?

This is a charming picture book that reveals more than might be immediately seen at first sight. It is a simple story - one that will chime with contemporary themes around the environment. However, the author does not take us on a world tour. Rather, in keeping with a young audience she concentrates on the immediate and personal; Emma and the creation of a garden within her own living space - and without spelling out any lesson, perhaps, inspiring another child to follow her example. However, Emma is not the only one involved. The reader will gradually realise that in parallel, Emma's father is creating a garden for the family. While Emma's will bring colour and blossoms, his will bring fruit and vegetables. This is skilfully and subtly done - the view of the father brushing up leaves, his feet and the edge of a wheelbarrow in another spread and then the frames for the bean plants in the background. The illustrations are as direct and simple. Emma is very much the centre of the action; a very real little girl. Garland makes full use of each page sometimes to create vignettes that bring movement - the passage of the seasons, perhaps, attractively composed without panes, rather a continuous narrative. Then there are double page spreads which bring Emma and her plot into

close-up. Inspired by chalk drawings created by children on walls and pavements, the colours and technique mirror the soft textures of chalk enhancing the quiet immediacy of the story. A very attractive addition to any bookshelf. **FH**



Grandpa and the Kingfisher

★★★★★

Anna Wilson, ill. Sarah Massini, Nosy Crow, 32pp, 978-1839942105, £7.99 pbk

A grandfather and his grandchild enjoy spending time together by the river and often go out in Grandpa's rowing boat.

Grandpa teaches the young child about the natural world, the changing of the seasons and the cycle of life. He demonstrates how to watch, listen and spot a kingfisher as it darts to catch fish. On trips to the river throughout the year they watch the kingfisher and his mate as they build a nest and sees the young chicks when they emerge from the nest.

As the seasons change and the young chicks leave Grandpa gently hints that their time together will also come to an end because nothing, except nature, goes on for ever. Grandpa is absent in the last few pages of the book, and we watch as the young child remembers their time together and though missing him continues to enjoy the river and watch the kingfishers.

Written in memory of the author's father who loved kingfishers, this is a beautifully written tale about nature and the cycle of life. It aims to open young eyes to the wonders of the natural world with a lyrical text and beautiful imagery which bring the riverbank to life. The illustrations enhance the text, providing colour, movement, and added detail to describe the natural world and its changes through the seasons.

Full of warmth, this story also celebrates the special nature of the relationship between a child and a grandparent, and gently prepare young children for the inevitability of death. **SMc**

Desert Jungle

★★★★★

Jeannie Baker, Walker Books, 40pp, 978-1406387872, £12.99 hbk
Born from a desire to highlight the reduction in desert biodiversity, as

well as 'nature-deficit disorder' in children, this is a wonderful picture book in many ways. The story follows a young boy staying with his Grandpa in a desert valley, which the author later explains is the Valley of the Cirios in the Sonoran Desert. This part of Mexico is being considered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Even though the boy prefers to play on his tablet, Grandpa interacts with him and shows him the beautiful nature around him: cacti, elephant trees, animals and plants which often are only found in this part of the world. Coyotes figure largely in the story, as well as paintings of these animals in caves. This prehistoric artwork is around 7,000 years old!

The volume is well set out with the story first followed by detailed notes on the setting and the author. A clearly labelled map of Mexico and its surroundings is particularly useful for older students and adults. Jeannie Baker explains how youngsters who grow up with a strong sense of nature from the adults around them feel closer to their environment in contrast to those who have little connection with the natural world.

This is a powerful book to educate the young about a productive area which could be named a 'desert jungle.' For grandparents, teachers and librarians, this is an excellent story to share with young students who will likely not have heard of this particular region. The artwork and photographs are striking and provide lots of subjects to discuss: geography, history, nature, relationships with family, walking and tablets! Although I have marked it for ages 5-8, it is suitable for any age and in many settings - home, school and library. **JS**



Sea Change: Save the Ocean

★★★★★

Edited by Tobias Hickey, Otter-Barry Books, 112pp, 978-1913074180, £11.99 hbk

This is a remarkable book: small and compact yet covering a massive topic. It is the result of an initiative by The International Centre for the Picture Book in Society, based at the University of Worcester's Illustration department. Fifty illustrators from thirty-five countries submitted postcards celebrating the ocean and showing its problems with an illustration and a quote.

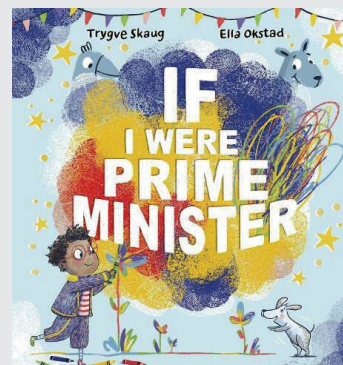
The Foreword to the collection is by Ambassador Peter Thomson, United Nations Secretary General's Special Envoy for the Ocean. He extols the greatness of the Earth's oceans, explains the problems humankind

has made for it and advises that, 'Ocean literacy should be on the curriculum of every school on the planet' (p.8).

This beautifully produced collection by Otter-Barry Books is divided into three sections: Celebrating the Ocean; The Danger to the Ocean; Take Action for the Ocean. Artists/Writers involved in the project include Barroux, Nicola Davies, Jackie Morris, Jane Ray and Axel Scheffler. Each spread consists of the postcard, a relevant quote; the layout is highly effective in communicating important messages about the destruction of the ocean and climate change.

I particularly like Axel Scheffler's illustration where 'SOS' consists of fishes in the shape of those letters. Underneath is a dirty-coloured ocean full of debris. Marti Alcon's depiction of, 'The ocean is our home,' (p.38) is especially striking with houses, people and animals all crowded onto a large fish!

Congratulations to all involved in this project. I love the results and am sure young people of all ages will take away some serious and important messages from it. When I first picked up this book, I thought it would be a quick read, but I was wrong. It has left me with lots of images and thoughtful words about how, 'We belong to the ocean, not the other way around' (p. 8). The royalties from this publication will be given to Greenpeace International and IBBY (The International Board of Books for Young People). An investment in this book will definitely educate, enlighten and inform our students. **JS**



If I Were Prime Minister

★★★★★

Trygve Skaug, ill. Ella Okstad, 32pp, Lantana, 978-1915244451, £12.99 hbk

Originally published in Norway, and translated by Rosie Hedger, this book explores the possibilities of being Prime Minister as seen by a thoughtful and imaginative young child narrator. Wide-ranging ideas are presented from paving the streets with trampolines and ensuring that every tree has a rope swing attachment, to keeping libraries open day and night, with 'friendly old people' available to read to children, to changing the role's name to team captain, filling the oceans with plastic-gobbling water and giving anyone who wanted a friend at least two.

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

I love the notion that play would be a 'subject; taught at every school (actually I'd rather it were seen as a means of learning) and that grown-ups would have to go to nursery once a month to learn how to do it. 'Because playing is for everyone, even the people who have forgotten how.' - a great line that!

This really is a feel-good picture book that encompasses vital socio-political themes including the environment, education and health in a child-friendly manner and readers are encouraged to feel that anything

is a possibility so long as it contributes to a kinder, happier world.

Ella Okstad's illustrations are bursting with energy, scattered with fingerprints and every one makes the reader want to pause and explore the details; children will enjoy tracking the activities of the dog and cat that make frequent appearances throughout the book.

A book that is sure to trigger lots of lively discussion in the classroom. **JB**

Flora and Nora Hunt for Treasure

★★★★★

Kim Hillyard, Penguin, 32pp, 978-0241488607, £7.99 pbk

A winner of the Best Illustrated Book category at the 2023 **Waterstones Children's Book Prize**, Kim Hillyard is certainly an author/illustrator to seek out. This book will enthral all young adventurers and the pictures will be pored over with glee. Introduced are Flora and Nora, two cats, Flora being the with the brilliant ideas, whilst Nora is the one with an organized toolbox! Turn the page and discover they are off in their boat to find the secret treasure. Everything is going swimmingly until lightning strikes (twice!). Their ship splits in two, the

cats are thrown into the sea, Flora going one way, Nora another. Flora, sucked into a whirlpool, thinks, 'What would Nora do?' Nora, trapped in the jaws of a very unreasonable sea serpent, thinks, 'What would Flora do?' Dry land is a relief. The reunion of the two cats far away beats the draw of the glimmering, glistening, glowing Secret Treasure, and, united, they build themselves a new boat. Sharing their adventures as they sail home, they rejoice in their friendship, the greatest treasure of all. The illustrations excite at each page turn, from the deepest dark, never-ending caves to tangled trees, to soupy swamps. Readers will love the quirkiness of the tale, marvelling at the exceedingly quirky pictures. A delight all round. **GB**

8 – 10 Junior/Middle

New Talent

Cosima Unfortunate Steals a Star

★★★★★

Laura Noakes, ill. Flavia Sorrentino, HarperCollins Children's Books, 304pp, 978-0008579050, £7.99 pbk

In Victorian London, Cosima aka Cos, Diya, Mary and Pearl live in a home for disabled girls. The home is run by the disreputable and cruel Stains – Alvira Stain and Eustace Stain. They have been embezzling money meant for the girls' care. When the mysterious and malevolent Lord Fitzroy visits the Stains and says that he would like to adopt all the residents of the home, Cosima suspects foul play. Can she and the other girls prove what is really going on and can Cosima finally find her long lost family?

If you are physically disabled or know a physically disabled child, this book will affirm their self-belief, like very few others. Noakes does not hide the girls' conditions or the effect they have on them but the girls are fully rounded and capable. This is one of the few books in which there is a wheelchair-using character who is mentally capable



and also sarcastic. Noakes's comments through Diya about the British Empire and Britain's colonisation of many countries are on point and will feed well into the current debate on migration.

Usually, in a middle grade, you will find either social commentary on issues like disability or a well-crafted, believable fantasy landscape. In Noakes's almost flawless work, you find both. We need more from this author as quickly as possible. **RB**

majestic underwater city and a whole civilization of mermice!

Despite their diminutive size, the Adventure Mice tackle seriously big issues. How can two very different communities of mice live together peacefully? How should precious resources be shared? Can recycling solve the ocean's plastic problems? Such questions add depth to the concise, fun and jaunty narrative.

Reeves and McIntyre's inimitable, playful and bright illustrations leap from nearly every page in a very lavish and generous publication. The vivid images pack such a punch that there is little need for lengthy descriptions or attention to detail. The result is a joyful adventure of manageable length that many readers will romp through happily. **SD**

a skull at a window looking down at her. Entering with its permission, she and the skull immediately settle into a comfortable relationship, ending up sleeping peacefully in the same double bed. But they are invaded later that night by a headless skeleton in search of the skull. After a chase Otila tips it over a wall high up on the roof and then descends to gather the now dislocated bones in order first to smash them up and then burn them into ash. She and the skull can now rest happy, and decide next day before taking a companionable walk that they should henceforth live together.

The original ending of the Tyrolean folk tale this is based on has the skull changing into a woman in white who fills the house with other children and playthings for Otila before disappearing for good. But Klassen has chosen the way he misremembered this story having read it some time ago. The result is certainly striking, illustrated in minimum detail with mostly monochromatic colours and plenty of surrounding darkness by a skilled illustrator and previous Caldecott Medal winner. A skull as new best friend to dance with before joining it in bed is certainly outside the normal parameters of junior texts involving skeletons. Some children may love this unusual story; others may hate it. But both parties will surely want to read its minimum text just to find out what on earth is going to happen next. **MT**

Adventure Mice: Mermouse Mystery

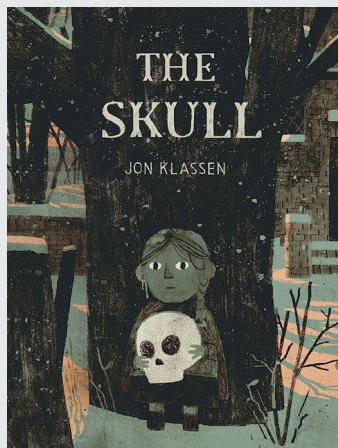
★★★★★

Sarah McIntyre and Philip Reeve, David Fickling Books, 128pp, 978-1788452687, £6.99 pbk

The second Reeves and McIntyre **Adventure Mice** episode dives deep into the legend of mermice.

After Pedro's wish for adventure was granted in the first story, he has now become a key member of the famous Adventure Mice, under

Skipper's orders to carry out daring missions and rescues. One day, Mouse Islands are battered by a brutal storm, causing problems for all the different mouse communities. In its aftermath, Pedro discovers something unbelievable: a tiny mermouse baby! Naturally, Pedro and his clever friend Jupiter take up the challenge to find the little merbaby's home and return her to her family. They enlist the help of the mouse miners of Box Island to search deeper, and discover a beautiful,



The Skull

★★★★★

Jon Klassen, Walker, 106pp, 978-1529509571, £14.99 hbk

Little Otila runs away one night into the forest to escape some unspecified horror. She knows the forest of old but eventually gets lost in the snow and collapses, crying. Eventually getting up she arrives at a 'very big, very old house'. Knocking at the door she sees

Star Cat: A Turnip in Time

★★★★★

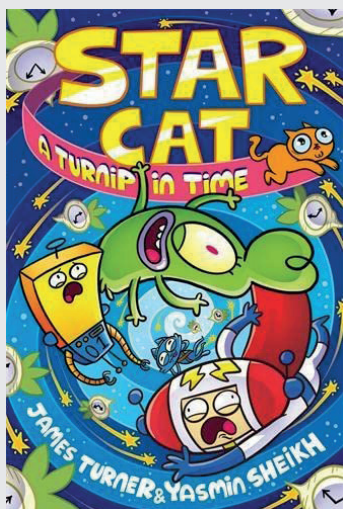
James Turner, ill. Yasmin Sheikh, David Fickling Books, 208pp, 978-1788452564, £9.99 pbk

Imagine the outlandish style of **Futura**, the bizarre vibe of **The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy** and the pure zaniness of Red Dwarf crossed with infantile toilet humour and hop aboard the Star Cat.

This galactically goofy space opera for kids is a star in the Phoenix

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued



Comics firmament, having been awarded Young People's Comic Award Winner at the British Comic Awards in 2015.

David Fickling Books now offer more adventures to enjoy in bound comic book format. **Star Cat: A Turnip in Time** comes packaged in twelve bite sized chapter acts. Sneaky learning is part of its vortex as it explores STEM in an entertaining way.

Tubular twists and pithy puns abound as Captain Spaceington and his mismatched crew get into more scrapes in space caused mainly by their inept alien officer Plixx who longs to be recognised as a scientific genius. All the while his nemesis Dark Rectangle dogs their every step.

The Space Race in Chapter 6 is a stupendously silly segment reminiscent of the Hanna Barbara cartoon **Wacky Races** while Mission Impossible will delight Captain Underpants fans and The Time Turnip gets to the cake matter of time travel.

Turner's witty text is peppered with alluring alliteration like treacherous tetragon and polygonal potentate and scientific allusions like Professor Nematocyst and the University of the Floppy Nebula.

Bursting with eye popping primary colours and wacky shapes, the art of Netherlands born Yasmin Sheikh is inspired by her background in animation and video games.

With quirky chapter headings, sly in jokes and witty word play it's an entertaining journey which works on multiple levels appealing to visual readers and Science Fiction fans.

Extra tuition comes in the accessible step by step drawing guides at the back which will encourage children to attempt their own cartoons.

From DNA gone wild to mutated rodents, spy shenanigans, parasitical infestations, edgy experiments and the science of smelly socks, **Star Cat** is the gift that keeps on giving. TJ

Nightjar

★★★★

Katya Balen, Barrington Stoke, 104pp, 978-1800901667, £7.99 pbk

Katya Balen's books run off emotions and this story is full of hurt, anger and frustration for all the apparent quiet of its setting. Noah and his mother live in a flat. She sews for a living, wedding dresses but also tiny gowns for stillborn babies; Noah's passion is bird-watching and his bedroom is full of his life drawings, and sometimes a box in the corner with an injured bird he's nursing back to health. The stillness of their lives is broken when Noah's father flies in from New York to attend his son's Bar Mitzvah. Neither understand the things that matter to the other and tensions rise first on a walk in the country when Noah finds an injured nightjar and insists on taking it home to nurse, and then over a pizza dinner when Noah's dad relates his own experience with an injured animal and the very different decision he made. Noah can't forgive his father for what he decided to do, but when he wants to return the nightjar to the countryside he needs his father's help. This second outing sees them reconciled, each finding the understanding and grace to acknowledge that the other's decision was correct. 'These words feel so big even when there aren't many of them', says Noah on their conversation, a sentiment which can be applied to the whole book. Written for dyslexia specialists Barrington Stoke, the text is perfectly simple in terms of sentence structure and composition, while acknowledging the shadowy contradictions of relationships, or in Noah's words, 'there's black and white and night and day and sometimes it's all mixed up.'



For those who don't yet need to think about the complexities of love and life, this is also a superb animal story, in which a boy saves a wild creature and thereby heals himself. This features some of the characters in Balen's earlier Barrington Stoke

novella **Birdsong** and is equally skillfully told. MMA

The Destiny Of Minou Moonshire

★★★

Gita Ralleigh, Zephyr, 262pp, 978-1804545478, £14.99 hbk

A colourful fantasy adventure set in an alternative India, drawing on ancient myths and legends.

Thirteen years ago, Minou was washed up on the riverbank as a baby in a boat with nothing to identify her apart from an amulet shaped like an elephant. Taken in by Dima, who became her adopted grandmother she lived with her on her ramshackle houseboat developing a fierce independence and learning the ancient art of Kalari fighting along with the boys in the local school.

Until thirteen years ago Moonlally had been a Queendom, but a despotic General had seized power and the queen was believed to be dead. The General brought in draconian rules and forbade the locals to worship their Goddess, The Dark Lady, even though many townspeople continued their prayer and devotions in secret. A prophecy has foretold the restoration of the Queendom when the monsoon rises thirteen years after the Queen's disappearance.

When her beloved grandmother is murdered, everything changes for Minou and there are many questions to be answered. She joins a band of rebels, the Green Orchids, and after escaping from the wicked General after jumping from the state dirigible, Minou journeys into the hills with her new-found friends Jay and funeral poet, Farisht, along with a mechanical elephant, to discover the truth about the Queen. Along the way she makes new friends and discovers her own extraordinary destiny.

Peopled with a marvellous cast of characters and with a brave and sparky heroine, this is a child-friendly, rollicking tale which touches on themes of freedom, friendship and female empowerment. There is plenty of rich detail here but somehow the even-handed delivery means it doesn't quite rise above the sum of its parts. JC

Willowdeen

★★★

Katherine Applegate, ill. Charles Santoso, Welbeck Publishing, 272pp, 978-1801300841, £7.99 pbk

Willowdeen loves creatures – all animals whether attractive or not. Indeed, she is especially drawn to those seen as unpleasant pests by everyone else. Top of the list are the screechers, a species whose main characteristic is the most appalling smell and an horrific cry; so different from the adorable hummingbears. It is the hummingbears with their amazing bubble nests that attract tourists to the village of Perchance – the screechers are a deterrent so hunted. But things are not well with nature... Then Willowdeen rescues

a screecher and a mission is born; Willowdeen must learn to speak up for the animals others hate and perhaps discover what has gone awry.

Applegate is a well-established, recognised author and her prose is immediately accessible to confident KS2 readers. She takes her story out of an immediate environment to one where strange creatures exist. This allows her to focus very clearly on themes around expectation, assumptions, appearance, difference as well as friendship, belief and right action. At the heart is the message that the world we live in is connected; action against one element will have much wider repercussions than anticipated. This is cleverly wrapped in an engaging narrative with an attractive protagonist. Willowdeen is a girl of curiosity, and she questions everything. She is determined to be self-sufficient. But the arrival of Connor with his imagination and creative talent brings something more to her life. Well produced with an attractively sized font, the page decorations by Charles Santoso add extra enjoyment to the text. FH



The Rage of the Sea Witch

★★★★

Roland Chambers, Zephyr Books, 168pp, 978-1789541465, £7.00 pbk

Billy Shaman is used to being left behind by his parents, as they selfishly spend his summer holidays pursuing their own interests, whilst he is abandoned in various odd places with strangers looking after him. This year, he has been left in a house/museum previously owned by some famous scientist or something, he doesn't really know or care, but the summer ahead does not look like fun to Billy. Not only are there a long list of rules and things he can't do or touch, but he's starting to think that the house he's staying in is haunted; Billy is sure that there is a giant breathing in the attic above him at night. Miserable & scared, Billy is wandering through the nearby woods, when he stumbles across a large rock, which is actually a giant tortoise from the Galapagos Islands, named Charles Darwin, after

the famous explorer who brought him to the UK and also owned the house Billy is staying in.

Charles D (the tortoise and narrator of the story) tells Billy more about how he came to be here and of all the amazing discoveries that his namesake made as he travelled the world. He also explains more about the house and contents, including the carved Inuit necklace that Billy had already admired. Later that night, unsure if he asleep or awake, Billy is visited by a magical white fox and led into an icy blizzard, which transports him through time and space to an Arctic world, where he meets Ahnah, the original owner of the Inuit necklace, along with her shape-shifting grandmother and Pytheas, a mysterious Greek explorer. Billy discovers previously unknown powers, as he realises he must restore the collected treasures within the museum to their rightful owners.

The Rage of the Sea Witch is the first in a new series blending fun adventure and fantasy with true facts, bringing the past to life in an original and engaging way for young readers to discover key elements from our history.

At the end of the book, the author also shares more details about the true figures within the story, enabling more opportunities for discussion and further exploration of this time in history. The black and white illustrations throughout the book are the perfect accompaniment, adding many touches of humour from the author/illustrator.

The next book in the series is to be set in ancient China and I look forward to reading it later this year. **AH**



The Viking Attack, Time Travel Twins series

★★★★

Josh Lacey, ill. Garry Parsons, Andersen Press, 240pp, 978-1839133336, £7.99 pbk

Josh Lacey has written a story about the Viking raids on villages given the

twist of time travel, aimed at KS2, which is not easy given the violence of the time. Twins Scarlett and Tom are staying with their grandfather who has invented a time capsule. Unfortunately, he sends Tom off without the means of returning, so Scarlett who was not keen to go, decides she must rescue her brother. Tom ends up in a Viking longship, but Scarlett finds herself with Alfred, he of the burnt cakes, in a small Saxon village about to be raided. Tom finds himself fighting in the raid on the village and using his ingenuity to rescue Scarlett and Alfred when they are captured.

It is easy to write just about the violence of the Viking raids, but the author has managed to give a good picture of the other side of the Vikings, their belief in gods, their code of honour, and especially in Valhalla. The contrast between the life of the twins in the 21st century and their experience in 859 AD is subtly drawn out and the ruse of their homework being so improved might lead children to look for a time capsule of their own! The illustrations of the Vikings and the villagers are plentiful throughout the story and there is a good historical note at the end. The only jarring note for me was Alfred saying 'the other guy' on p.96.

This is an exciting adventure, not glossing over the real violence inflicted on the villagers, nor the death of Orm, or Scarlett and Alfred being put for sale as slaves, and giving children a real feel for what it must have been like to live in 859 AD. Josh Lacey has avoided making fun of the history and instead made it real and exciting. **JF**

The Case of the Lighthouse Intruder

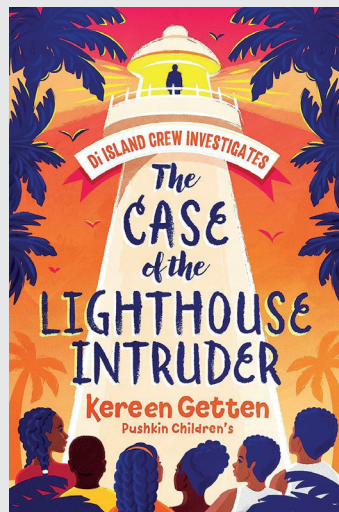
★★★★

Kereen Getten, Pushkin Children's Books, 224pp, 978-1782693901, £7.99 pbk

Inspired by the much-loved children's mystery stories Kereen Getten herself enjoyed as a young reader, this new series takes a group of kids of varying ages and dispositions and gives them a mystery to solve: what is the strange shadow that appears in the lighthouse only to suddenly disappear?

Fayson initially feels out of place when she joins her cousins for the summer in their swanky holiday villa on a small island off Jamaica. In contrast to the cousins, money is tight at home, with her mama working long hours as a nurse. It doesn't help either that Uncle Edmond keeps correcting her for speaking in patois and insisting on English. But Fayson dreams of being an FBI agent and has the brains and observation skills to match, as the cousins are well aware. Challenged to solve the mystery by snobby Tia, she is determined to find out what's going on.

As crime-solving-gang-of-kids stories go, this has everything readers



want. An appealing set of characters, a mystery that doesn't take too much attention but provides a suitably dramatic plotline, and a setting that offers absolute freedom for the youngsters. The island is one of the real delights of the book, described with so much care that we can see and smell exactly what the characters experience. An immensely satisfying story, perfect summer reading. **MMa**

Michael the Amazing Mind-Reading Sausage Dog

★★★★

Terrie Chilvers, ill. Tim Budgen, Firefly Press, 208pp, 978-1915444134, £6.99 pbk

This comedy story, about an adorable sausage dog in a fabulous waistcoat, is an inspiring lesson about resilience and how to come back from failure.

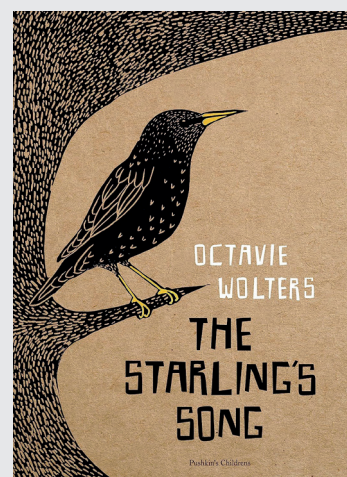
Michael knows that he is special: not every dog is capable of reading minds, after all! It seems only right that such a remarkable talent should be rewarded with fame and fortune and a permanent residency in 'Hollywoof'. Yet Michael struggles for fans and has to make do with one loyal sidekick – Stanley – whose answer to almost any problem seems to be, 'I don't mind eating more sausages.'

Despite Stanley's help, Michael suffers a series of setbacks. His town of Snuffles-by-Sea already has a resident superstar in the shape of Susan the Chocolate Labrador and her amazing peanut-balancing skills. Susan is not terribly keen on Michael's efforts to muscle in on her showbiz turf and she is quick to belittle his efforts. Bored crowds give Michael the cold shoulder and only a chance encounter with Stanley's uncle – a Hollywoof big-time – gives him another chance.

Michael's talent is genuine but can't protect him from the cut-throat life of show-business and only his dogged determination and friendship with Stanley stop him from giving up. The book's powerful message about perseverance and self-belief is delivered through a series of funny catastrophes that Michael must recover from. Stanley is the biggest

contributor to the comedy. He has a loveable, clueless approach to life that plays on what children love about dogs in real life. There are more laughs to be had from a huge amount of word play, too. In fact, there are almost too many doggy puns to enjoy ('puppachino', anyone?!)

Children will enjoy the book's setting; a world where dogs chat in coffee houses and host entertainment shows. They will certainly fall for Michael's endearing act and approach to life, and many will be pleased to see that the book leaves space for more of Michael's adventures to be described in future episodes. **SD**



The Starling's Song

★★★★

Octavie Wolters, trans. Michele Hutchinson, Pushkin Children's Books, 32pp, 978-1782694076, £12.99 hbk

A beautiful symbiosis between word and image, **The Starling's Song** is a celebration of language, landscape and an invitation to see the beauty that Nature selflessly gifts us with and how that can help us find a sense of ourselves and our place in the world.

This enchanting book not only delights the eye with Pushkin Children's signature aesthetic appeal but also offers profound meaning. Translated from the Dutch by Michele Hutchinson, the story comes to life through Wolters' exquisite black and white linocuts, highlighted by the starling's vivid yellow beak and feet—the sole bursts of colour in the illustrations. The book immerses readers in the starling's world, as he embarks on a journey of observation and expression.

Motivated by the innate beauty he discovers, the starling embarks on a musical endeavour to share his profound experiences with others. Along the way, he encounters various bird companions who contribute their own unique perspectives, urging him to include the trees, the night, the water, withering flowers, rocks, life, himself, and the unity of starlings in his song. Each encounter adds depth and wisdom to the starling's composition, culminating in a

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

magnificent melody that embraces the vastness and interconnectedness of the natural world. This harmonious narrative beautifully inspires readers to appreciate the wonders surrounding them.

The author skilfully employs repetition, both in encounters and phrases, infusing the story with a rhythmic flow that reinforces the sense of interconnectedness and unity. The recurring phrase, "Don't forget to sing about," lends a musical quality to the text, echoing the starling's own song. Beneath the surface of each bird's observations lies a profound message, inviting readers to delve deeper into philosophical reflections on our place in the world. The symbolism of trees as bridges between earth and sky and rocks as the earth's secret code is thought-provoking and encourages readers to engage in meaningful contemplation.

Recipient of the prestigious Dutch Silver Paintbrush Award and a strong contender for other accolades, *The Starling's Song* is a beautifully crafted masterpiece. Its philosophical reflections on our connection with the natural world have the power to inspire readers of all ages. By blending captivating storytelling with introspective themes, this book resonates deeply, reminding us of our individuality while emphasizing our interdependence. It is an invitation to reflect on our place in the world, wrapped in a gentle narrative that will leave a lasting impression. **MT**

The Wonder Brothers

★★★★

Frank Cottrell-Boyce, ill. Steven Lenton, Macmillan Children's Books, 272pp, 978-1529048308, £12.99 hbk

On form, Frank Cottrell-Boyce is the best comic writer for children we have, streets ahead of all those later-turned-writer celebrities. But this story while lively and inventive as ever never quite takes off. Like a semi-dysfunctional firework, it splutters intermittently into life without ever delivering its truly big bang. Told as if from different child narrators, its basic theme is magicians past and present and some of the baffling tricks they have pulled off in their time. Boyce knows a lot about these and is also a handy guide to present-day famous stage or television magicians and their favourite acts. But his main cast here involves children not only trying their hands at the same thing but also succeeding beyond any sort of possibility at all.

Kidnapped to Las Vegas in search of the Blackpool Tower which has unaccountably disappeared, cousins Middy and Nathan along with another older cousin Brodie and his enormous pet rabbit soon make themselves at home. Being arrested early on by a very tolerant policeman in no way cramps their style, and their main

aim, attendance at the last sell-out performance of the legendary magician Perplexion, still happens. But at this late stage the plot becomes both confused and ultimately confusing. While Cottrell-Boyce has much to say of interest about the nuts and bolts of stage magic, he seems at this moment to want to go further without quite knowing where that would lead. Steven Lenton's relaxed comic-strip illustrations meanwhile are as always great fun. But while this sprightly story is a total must for any young reader contemplating trying out some of the more modest tricks for themselves it may not have quite the same success with a less engaged audience. **NT**



The Wrath of the Woolington Wyrms

★★★★

Karen Foxlee, ill. Freda Chiu, Pushkin Children's Books, 288pp, 978-1782694137, £7.99 pbk

Mary-Kate Martin is an anxious child and follows various coping rituals to avoid the possibility of avalanches and train crashes as she accompanies her archaeologist mother in an investigation into a collection of bones in a well in Woolington. Travelling on the train into a worryingly unknown future has her breathing deeply, and thinking of five things she can hear, five she can feel, and five she can see, which helps her to feel better. She is wearing her red sparkly shoes, has packed her favourite items instead of sensible clothing, and, once her lovely new glitter pens are opened, they can never be perfect again - is today a pen packet-opening day? She does open them and uses the different colours to write in her strawberry-scented notebook in an investigation of her own into the legend of the Woolington Wyrms. She writes her questions down: why is the town so deserted, why does every building have a bowl of milk outside

it, and why is Wyrms spelled with a 'y'? Meeting Yolanda Honey, President of the Wyrms Watch Society, leads her to a meeting in the library, and the investigation begins.

Lord Woolington wants to knock down the town square and build a shopping mall, expecting concrete to be poured very soon, but Professor Martin is not going to be pressurised before her investigation is complete. Mary-Kate finds an unexpected ally in his daughter Arabella, who is more interested in her plump pony, Pickles, but together they can be very brave, and eventually they meet a dragon-type creature depicted by Freda Chiu as fierce, but, as Mary-Kate realizes, it is anxious and misunderstood, and she finds a resolution that satisfies everyone.

This is a real page-turner, and Freda Chiu's illustrations are lively and fun. **DB**



Arkspire

★★★★★

Jamie Littler, Puffin, 372pp, 978-0241586143, £7.99 pbk

Living in a city ruled by magic does not guarantee that you will have a good life. Arkspire is ruled by the five Arcanists and they each have magical powers that relate to different parts of life and which they use to run the areas of the city in their control.

Juni and her family live in the area called the Dregs, which is controlled by the Watcher, only no one has seen this person for many years. As time grows near for a potential replacement to be chosen, strange things start happening in the city of Arkspire. Magic seems to be getting free and Juni finds that an artefact that she has 'liberated' suddenly explodes and she becomes linked to the creature that is released from its prison. What follows is a desperate attempt to uncover the hidden agendas of the Arcanists, whilst also trying to save Juni's sister from possibly being chosen as a replacement.

What a truly fascinating and at times scary story that will have the audience longing to find the answers, but which

will also have them rooting for feisty Juniper and her friends as they try and battle against a society which wants absolute control. I especially loved the character of Cinder, the creature that was released in the explosion and the way that he gradually becomes more positive about his new life and the humans who surround him. This is a book that reminds us that 'absolute power, corrupts absolutely', something that we have been reminded of over the last century and we also can be guilty if we do nothing to change things when they go wrong. After what can only be described as a true roller coaster of a journey the author leaves us on a cliffhanger and I can't wait to find out what happens as the story continues. **MP**

Next to Alice

★★★★

Anne Fine, ill. Gareth Conway, Barrington Stoke, 64pp, 978-1800901742, £7.99 pbk

Alice and Ben are in the same Primary class. Ben is often distracted and doesn't like studying. Alice is a perfectionist and follows rules. There is a broken window by Ben's usual desk so their teacher insists that Ben sit next to Alice while the window is repaired. Ben protests that Alice is scary but his teacher gives him no choice. Shortly after his moving to sit next to Alice, Ben leaves his pencil case in Music. When the teacher returns it, she makes a joke that the pencil case belongs to Bin and not Ben. Alice has already pointed out that Ben's 'e's don't look like 'e's and this incident prompts Ben to ask Alice for help. Gradually, all of Ben's work becomes neater as a result of Alice's help and insistence.

When the window is finally fixed, Ben chooses to stay next to Alice as a friendship has been forged. This is a story to which many Primary pupils will relate, told with Anne Fine's customary warmth and understanding of children.

Conway's illustrations capture the range of emotions felt by children very accurately. **RB**

The Boy Who Made Monsters

★★★★

Jenny Pearson, ill. Katie Kear, Usborne, 352pp, 978-1474999892, £7.99 pbk

In this comedy drama for children, a young boy and his brother suffer a family tragedy that means they have to move to live with their old Uncle Hamish in the remote Loch Lochy in Scotland.

Benji McLaughlin is a positive and creative soul who, even when faced with the most tragic of circumstances, searches for opportunity and silver linings. His brother Stanley is less optimistic and is struggling to come to terms with their new parenting set-up. Uncle Hamish clearly means well but the porridge is awful and the holiday cottages he owns are well past their best.

In fact, Uncle Hamish's Loch Lochy resort is in big trouble and Benji

realises that it will take a monster-sized miracle to save their new home. Luckily, Benji is full of ideas for how he can help, and so is his new local friend, Murdy. With the help of Uncle Hamish's dog (Mr Dog) they begin their hunt for the Loch Lochy monster... and when this doesn't work, they set about making one!

Benji's enthusiasm is infectious and his efforts to find fame for Loch Lochy lead to a number of trademark comedy scenes that will feel familiar to fans of Pearson's previous novels. Murdy and Benji are determined to stop the mean-spirited neighbour, McGavin, from getting his hands on the Loch Lochy resort. To this end, they embrace all sorts of chaos, including chucking old bath tubs (and themselves!) into the loch.

The true existence of the Loch Lochy Monster is a mystery but, certainly, Benji feels its presence: he is haunted by the notion of a great heavy darkness rising from the loch. Of course, cynical Stanley won't believe him, and responds to Benji's excitement with disdain. This troubled relationship between the brothers, as they come to terms with the disappearance of their parents, is the most effective aspect of the book. Pearson shows what the impact of grief and sadness can be and her gentle, charming characters and vast, scenic location illustrate how much kindness and time can help.

At 350 pages, the story feels a little long at times: there is an awful lot of scheming and planning before the comedy arrives with the making of the monster. The story has a calm and warm-hearted atmosphere and will be enjoyed most by readers who are willing to put the silliness to one side and explore its themes of family, grief and healing. **SD**

My Name is Sunshine Simpson

★★★★

G M Linton, Usborne, 304pp, 978-1801313346, £7.99 pbk

Karis Sunshine Simpson, normally just called Sunshine, is 10 years old, and had been happy at school and home, until things change. She has been on the Wall of Fame as a champion speedy skipper until a new girl, Evie, proves faster, and Evie soon becomes more of a threat than a friend, making snidey backhanded compliments that distress Sunshine. The school's Golden Jubilee is coming up, and the Head wants it to be an opportunity for all the pupils to shine, but Sunshine has lost confidence in herself and worries about what she might do. Her good friends Charley and Arun help her to keep going, but the right idea takes a while to emerge.

At home, Grandad, a former body-builder with huge hands, and her great ally, is getting slower and needs a rest more often. Eventually Grandad has to go into a hospice,

and he dies near the end (this reader had a lump in her throat), but it's beautifully handled, and we know that Grandad's sayings, and the family's memories of him, will live on. Grandad had come over from Jamaica, and still retains the speech rhythms, but everything is easy to follow, and there are some references to West Indian food and culture. It's a colourful family, Mum, Dad, the younger 'Twinzies', and especially Auntie Sharon, whose taste in clothes and furnishings is exotic, to say the least, and they are all very supportive of Sunshine and her desire to do well in the show. Sunshine knows why Grandad's hospice is called Mary Seacole House, but she has to catch up with some other cultural references e.g. Evie's boast about seeing the back of George Clooney's head has her referring to him as Dooley etc., and Dad enjoys music by a band called Queen, or maybe King...

Sunshine gets into some scrapes: she tries to trim her own wayward hair, tells her French pen-pal far too much about her difficulties and is mortified when the reply is read out in class, and she actually has a physical fight with Evie, but finally we learn why Evie was so nasty to Sunshine. Of course, the show, where some pupils reveal their hidden talents, and Sunshine's turn, where she demonstrates her pride in who she is, is hugely successful. This book is published to celebrate the Windrush anniversary, and it is a funny and delightful book. **DB**

Aubrey and the Terrible Spiders

★★★★

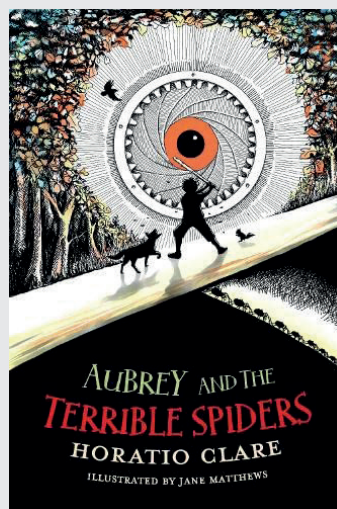
Horatio Clare, ill. Jane Matthews, Firefly Press, 208pp, 978-1913102128, £7.99 pbk

In the third book of the award-winning Aubrey series, our young hero faces a dangerous mission.

Aubrey first notices something is wrong when he finds domestic animals such as chickens, usually quite cooperative, are becoming rebellious and there seem to be an increasing number of wasp attacks on children (including on Aubrey himself). When he also discovers there is an army of terrible robotic spiders apparently aiming to conquer the world, he decides it is time to do something.

With the help of his loyal helpers, Ariadne the house spider, Lupo the husky puppy and Silvio the silver fish he sets out to find out what is going on and attempt to save the day. The fact that Aubrey has a special gift, he can talk to animals, makes communicating with his team of helpers somewhat easier.

Aubrey discovers the terrible spiders have been created by a mysterious individual called Bob B. The spiders bite adults who immediately develop a strange



condition – they dance until they are exhausted. Bob B's reason for doing this seems to be because adults have messed up the world damaging the environment and they need to learn the error of their ways.

A zany adventure story with lots of humour and a serious message about looking after the environment and the role of both adults and children in trying to effect change. With themes of friendship, teamwork and facing your fears. The attractive, detailed line drawings bring key scenes to life with occasional footnotes providing extra information for curious young minds. **SMc**

We've Got This: Six Steps to Build Your Empathy Superpower

★★★★★

Rashmi Sirdeshpande in partnership with EmpathyLab, ill. Juliana Eigner, Words & Pictures, 128pp, 978-0711284920, £9.99 pbk

Since 2015 EmpathyLab has been encouraging children (and adults) to use empathy in our quest for a kinder and less divisive world. This book explains both the theory and practical side of empathy and is laid out in six steps or sections: 'Know what empathy IS; Know how empathy WORKS; Use your empathy out in the WILD; Learn to recognize EMOTIONS; Be a BRILLIANT communicator; Become the ULTIMATE empathy hero' (p.4).

The author explains how a reader's brain shows mirror neurons becoming active and indeed, reading is a fantastic way of becoming empathetic. Whether you are reading fiction, non-fiction, poetry or humorous literature they all count! Each year EmpathyLab selects a number of books which will encourage empathy and this collection is known as 'Read for Empathy' (p.75).

This excellent handbook is clearly arranged and has many wise quotes from well-known authors scattered throughout. I particularly liked this quotation from Joseph Coelho, current Waterstones Children's Laureate:

'The word empathy contains roots that mean "affection" and "suffering" and "within". But it works both ways, together our suffering is halved and our affection doubled' (p.97).

There are some helpful practical exercises to aid the student in his/her search for empathy. For example, why not create some listening vouchers so that you can become an expert listener? Good communication is key to being empathetic, as the penultimate chapter explains. There is also a link with nature through empathy. In his Foreword Sir Michael Morpurgo writes, 'We need to understand and empathize with the environment around us, so we can protect our planet.'

All in all, this is a comprehensive look at the importance of empathy and how we can all achieve it through reading and stories in a variety of media. **JS**

The Stolen Songbird

★★★★★

Judith Eagle, illus Kim Geyer, 342pp, 9780571363148, Faber & Faber, £7.99 pbk

Judith Eagle, whose background includes fashion editing and librarianship, first appeared on the middle grade historical fiction scene in 2019. Inspired by her love of stories she'd devoured as a child including Joan Aiken's *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase*, she resolved to create 'a mystery adventure full of twists and turns and unexpected happenings'. This resulted in *The Secret Starling* influenced by her childhood in the 1970s.

Her fourth middle grade adventure *The Stolen Songbird*, takes place in late 1950s London. Aspiring gymnast Caro, who lives in a London pub with her two mothers and adores her pet rabbit His Nibs, is plunged into peril when she has to go on a sudden journey and comes across a mysterious package in her mother's old suitcase. Family secrets, high stakes and dangerous decisions ensue as she must rely on her wits and tenacity to keep safe all she holds dear.

Eagle writes dramatic high octane scenes tangled up with surprising developments and displays her knowledge of art and fashion. Her protagonists are plucky and bold although some of her plot points stray into tired trope territory such as the gloomy house, the crotchety relative with the sad past, the lonely boy, a case of mistaken identity, the bullies and the kind stranger.

Some of her secondary characters remain ciphers and her villains veer towards Teddy Boys crossed with Kray Brothers gangster style pantomime. That said, the story is quirky and entertaining with good diversity, and some interesting historical facts. It's just a slow burner which may cause some readers to lose interest in certain places. Children who enjoy a mix of mystery and action will appreciate it. **TJ**

reviews

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Ed's Choice

Ghostlord

★★★★

Phillip Womack, Little Island, 264pp, 978-1915071262, £8.99 pbk
Meg is fed-up. Her mother has taken a new job and they are moving out of London to the back of beyond as far as Meg is concerned. But who or what was the vixen that appeared on the balcony? What about the belt with the dagger now safely hidden in Meg's case? Who is the child she can hear calling for help in the garden? And the small black box with the wooden horse and black obsidian stone inside that she unearths in the garden? Suddenly Meg discovers she walks on the boundary between the everyday and the magical; that she, herself, possesses magical powers – and she is now at the heart of the age-old battle to preserve the balance of the world. But who are her friends? Who is the enemy?

This is an interesting, immersive fantasy. Womack is not afraid to bring magic into the contemporary world. He looks for inspiration not to classical myth, but rather to the dark stories that belong to Britain but with a difference. We are not drawn into the world of Faerie that is a familiar setting, rather we meet the Samdhya, who, while not the Wild Hunt, clearly draw inspiration from it, riding as they do across the sky on magical horses, and though tasked with keeping the balance of the world, could draw one into an enchanted existence. Then there are the Crypta – the tunnels through which Meg has the power to travel, taking her across time and space. The reader is teased with echoes of the ley lines, perhaps, that cross the countryside, linking our past to our present. And Jankin, the little boy trapped in a mirror? Who is he really? The glamour cast by his voice, the sense of jeopardy draw the reader in as much as Meg is drawn in and captured, making a promise that will bind her. These are some



of the tropes that Womack skilfully weaves into his narrative adding depth and interest. Then there is Meg, herself; a very real teenager with a very real relationship with her mother – exasperated, angry – but ultimately loving. She is longing for her father who is almost lost to her. It is this that drives her – a search to bring him back. Indeed fractured families, family relationships, are at the heart of the story whether it is Skander also searching for his lost father, or Henry Villiers, the Red Earl whose family is all but destroyed. These are the cracks in the balance and it is their resolution that gives Womack's fantasy a satisfying closure. The whole is presented in well-constructed contemporary prose with plenty of dialogue to bring life and colour. The chapter headings – excerpts from diaries or letters, add intrigue and colour and avoid the necessity for intrusive digressions or explanation. Womack give us a narrative that draws the reader in from the first page to the last.

While not a sequel, **Ghostlord** has a link to Womack's earlier fantasy, **Wildlord**. Perhaps we will hear more from this author allowing us to meet new characters and old acquaintances – and more magic. **FH**

The Last Mapmaker

★★★★

Christina Soontornvat, ill. Christina Chung, Walker Books, 320pp, 978-1529511833, £7.99 pbk

This is a tale of mystery and imagination set in what appears to be a version of ancient Thailand. Sai, the main character leads a double life; she lives with her father in the worst area of town, where he is often a thief and she is forced to act as a forger when required. However, she has secretly found a job as the assistant to the last mapmaker in

the kingdom and her skills are much appreciated. When the Queen calls for an expedition to find a mythical land, Sai and her employer find themselves joining the enterprise. What follows leads them into adventure, danger and new worlds. They are surrounded by colleagues and new friends, but can they really trust those people, or have they got secret agendas that will put lives at risk?

This is a wonderfully evocative story that really makes you believe in the world that has been created. Sai thinks that she is very streetwise, but

she eventually learns that she can be hoodwinked as easily as anyone else. There are several themes that run through the book, the main one being about society and the way people are limited by certain conventions; we would consider it to be a class bound society, with many aspects that feel familiar and where people will do anything to increase their standing. The other aspect that we are presented with, towards the end of the story is what do we do when we discover new environments and creatures? These are questions that we have faced over many generations and we have usually got things wrong. We have lost many animals due to hunting and disease and the same applies to many indigenous peoples, in areas such as South America and South East Asia. I loved the ending of this book and the sense that things might change, due to small differences in the way people think. This story is a delightful exploration of culture and a world that is exotic and yet very relatable, with a set of characters that you really begin to feel close to. **MP**

Nowhere Island

★★★★

Tania Unsworth, Zephyr, 240pp, 978-1804540084, £14.99 hbk

When Gil on an impulse stows away on a car in an effort to escape what he sees as a bleak future, he little imagines what the new future will hold. He finds himself on an island – but not surrounded by water, but a motorway. Nor is he alone. Grayson, Riley and Pez also escaping their past. Together they create something special. But how long can this last?

From BB to Paulsen, Ballantyne to Southall and Morpurgo, stories of survival have always captured the imagination of young readers. This latest addition to the genre will not disappoint. While there are still some areas in the world where a person might find themselves having to survive, it is perhaps more difficult to create the circumstances leading to it. Tania Unsworth looks no further than the great highways that cross the United States. Here there are forgotten, invisible areas – the verges and the central islands of small copses and tangled undergrowth. It is a clever and entirely plausible scenario. Such a setting also allows her to establish an ingenious survival technique. It is only Pez who has a background that has equipped her with real survival skills. At the heart of the narrative is the relationship between the four young people, all very different but all sharing something important; they all feel betrayed and rejected by the adults in their lives. They are outsiders – and now survivors. And when faced with a real threat, they find the strength

together to challenge it – and move on. This is a well written narrative that really does draw the reader in and keeps the pages turning to the very end. **FH**

Jodie

★★★★

Hilary McKay, ill. Keith Robinson, Barrington Stoke, 96pp, 978-1800902206, £7.99 pbk

Jodie is struggling to recover from a family tragedy – exactly what, we're not sure, though her older brother is in prison. The family have moved, and she's slowly managed to start attending school again but has no friends at all. The bleak, dangerous salt marshes that are the location for the school geography trip match her mood and provide the perfect backdrop for this uncanny ghost story. In her isolated state, Jodie is the only one to hear the haunting, melancholy barking of a small dog. Determined to help, she finds herself trapped in the mud as the tide comes flooding into the estuary. In moving and beautifully foreshadowed closing scenes, help comes from the most unexpected quarters.

Written for dyslexia specialists Barrington Stoke, the story is a model of brevity, the short, uncomplicated sentences conveying the shifting moods – loneliness, despair, hope, loyalty, recovery – with real depth. Hilary McKay brings all her characters vividly to life and the ghost story she creates is chilling one moment, filled with warmth the next, like clouds and sunlight racing across marshes. **LS**

The Lorikeet Tree

★★★★

Paul Jennings, Old Barn Books, 240pp, 978-1910646878, £7.99 pbk
Narrated in a diary format by 15-year-old Emily this beautifully told story charts an impossibly difficult year in her family with great delicacy and a raw honesty.

Twins Emily and Alex live with their father in a remote area of the Australian bush. Over the years their father has reforested the farmstead with native trees and plants giving a home to the wild animals of the area and especially the indigenous birds. Already the largest manna gum tree is populated by a huge flock of colourful lorikeets that Emily and her father particularly adore. This tree is also where Alex and their father have built a treehouse as a lookout post.

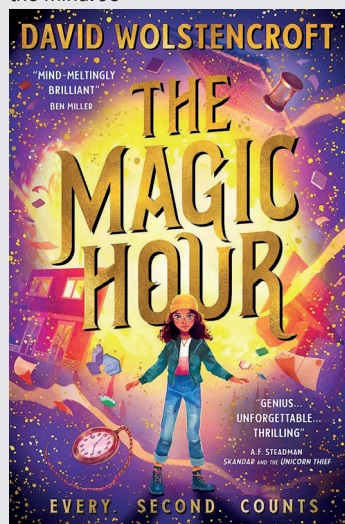
When her father is diagnosed with a terminal brain tumour the twins take the news in completely different ways. Alex refuses to accept the truth, retreating into a world of his own where he believes if he continues to build rooms onto the tree house this will magically save his father. Emily, the more pragmatic of the two is left to deal with the dreadful reality on her

own but encouraged by her teacher starts to write her story as a diary.

Alex is desperate to keep one of the feral kittens found under their house but is told he can't keep one as it would hunt the birds and other wildlife. Much to Emily's disgust Alex manages to sneak his favourite kitten up to his treehouse before the other kittens are taken away by local ranger, Matthew to be rehomed. Alex names the kitten Ditto and she soon becomes doted on by both Alex and his father. At first Ditto is confined to the house but one day the inevitable happens and she escapes, soon returning with a half dead lorikeet in her mouth.

The animosity between the twins threatens to overwhelm them as they vehemently voice their own opinions on the natural world and who should take precedence – the cat or the birds. Emily begins to unravel too and doesn't quite know how to deal with her burgeoning feelings for Matthew. Meanwhile their father is getting sicker and wants his children to be reconciled. A near-disaster brings the family together and the strong bonds between brother and sister are reconfirmed.

This powerful and heartfelt novel packs a lot into the spare and resonant prose but is never mawkish or sentimental. It is a book to savour and talk about and will remain long in the mind. **JC**



The Magic Hour

★★★★

David Wolstencroft, Scholastic, 392pp, 978-0702324260, £7.99 pbk
Set in Edinburgh this magical adventure cleverly weaves in Scottish folklore with science.

Ailsa Craig lives one week with her mother and one week with her father. She is never on time for anything, but it was lucky she wasn't on time one particular New Year's even when her father's house exploded. This unexplained event sets in motion an extraordinary chain of events.

On her way to visit her father one evening, Ailsa finds herself drawn

back to the remains of her old house. She is looking for a steamer trunk her beloved astronomer grandmother had bequeathed to her. But instead of finding the trunk she discovers the words EVERY SECOND COUNTS carved into the inside of a rowan tree split in two by the explosion. Startled by a sinister growl she dives into her father's still standing shed and stumbles into an extraordinary parallel Edinburgh where there are 25 hours in every day.

The extra hour makes all the difference and Ailsa finds she is no longer late and is doing so much better at school. She has even become friends with the most popular girl at school, Credenza, who has always shunned her before but who Ailsa discovers is also using the Magic Hour.

But the more Ailsa visits the strange town, Middlemarket, for her extra hour, the more she realises something is not quite right. Taught to look at every problem with a scientific method by her grandmother Ailsa applies this reasoning to Middlemarket and soon discovers that there is a terrible price to pay for this Magic Hour. It will be up to Ailsa and her friends to solve the mystery of who is behind these nefarious activities.

This is an imaginative and fast-paced exploration of the nature of time – why there is never enough of it and how we should use it wisely. It is also a story showing that actions always have consequences and that the unshakable bonds of family hold power.

The story ends somewhat abruptly but sets the scene for the sequel. **JC**

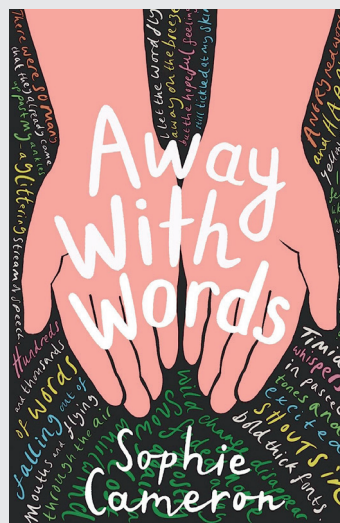
Away With Words

★★★★

Sophie Cameron, Little Tiger, 208pp, 978-1788953924, £8.99 pbk
This is a book about words, their importance and their power, for good or ill. Gala and her father have moved from Spain to Scotland to live with her dad's boyfriend. The contrast between Fortrose and Cadaqués couldn't be bigger and Gala misses everything about her old home. She can speak both Spanish and Catalan but not much English so school is difficult; reported speech, her conversations with her fellow pupils and teachers and with her dad's boyfriend Ryan, are interspersed with wavy lines

to represent what it's like for her. Gala notices another girl who seems ever quieter than she is. Natalie is silent, a target for the school bullies, but Gala is intrigued to see her collecting others' words as they fall from their lips. With little in the way of explanation, Cameron asks readers to believe that in the world of the story, you can see, pick up and preserve spoken words.

As a friendship develops between the girls, we learn that Natalie, selectively



mute at school, uses the words she collects to make poems. Soon the two are creating poems together to leave, anonymously, for those they see needing help, reassurance or kindness. All is well, until someone at school starts using words to the opposite effect, to be cruel.

Key to the story is Gala's gradual acceptance of her father's decision and her growing happiness in her new home, but most unusual is the representation of words as physical things, tangible tools to change the world we share. Cameron's decision to give them physical form is startling and powerful, but equally thought-provoking are Natalie's selective mutism and Gala's initial filled understanding of her new community. **MMa**

The stories Grandma forgot (and how I found them)

★★★★

Nadine Aisha Jassat, Orion, 344pp, 978-1510111578, £7.99 pbk

Twelve-year-old Nyla Elachi was four when her Dad died, or so she was told, so it's a great surprise when Grandma Farida claims to have seen him in the supermarket. Grandma, who spends most of her days in a day centre, occasionally goes 'time-travelling' as the family puts it - so is this due to the Alzheimer's, or the truth? Overheard bits of conversations cause Nyla more confusion, but she has made a promise to Grandma that she will find Dad, Grandma's son Basim, and that changes her priorities, including her support for her best friend Jess's theatrical ambitions. She confides in a new friend, Ray, when they both sit on the beanbags in the local library, and the young librarian, Miss Haldi, helps with research and suggestions. There is a bully, Harry, who calls her names and almost sets the library on fire, and but he has been seen taunting Lyla by Miss Haldi, who suspects him of arson, and she intervenes. Ray knows more than he has been letting on, but insists it's not his story to tell, and Lyla skips school, and misses Jess's audition, to find the person she thinks might be her Dad, but it's

not that simple, and it takes a while to sort everything out and make new discoveries about her family. Miss Haldi says to Lyla, 'No matter what happens in your story, ...You have the power to choose how to tell it, rather than letting it tell you,' so she finally tells Mum what she has been finding out, and together the family work out how to resolve the situation.



This story is written in a poetic format, although nothing rhymes, but the bite-size chunks do make it accessible for any children who may have difficulty reading whole pages of text.

Nadine Aisha Jassat, author of *It's not about the Burqa*, has a Yorkshire Mum and a Zimbabwean Dad and, working with other young women of colour, founded the Readers of Colour book group at her local Glasgow Women's Library; she is a great supporter of libraries and librarians, as is clear from her depiction of Miss Haldi, who is pivotal to the plot. This story about memory, history, and the close bond between a grandmother and granddaughter, is thought-provoking, but also fun to read. **DB**

Monster in the Woods

★★★★★

Dave Shelton, David Fickling Books, 336pp, 978-1788452212, £7.99 pbk

In Shelton's latest novel, readers are treated to a delightful Pratchett-esque cast of characters, from a giant talking head stranded in dry plains to a mysteriously magical squirrel. As with much of Shelton's work, there is an abundance of wisdom intertwined with wit. The story is set in a mock medieval landscape where monsters are fading into myth, and Frith and her family reside in a small village burdened by a tight cost of living, with all their earnings going to the king's war with the North.

However, the question lingers: are monsters truly extinct? Is the war a reality, and is the king as benevolent as he proclaims? It is Frith's journey with her father to the bustling city that unravels these mysteries. There,

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she discovers that the world is far more complex than the simplified narratives fed to her by adults. She realizes that true wisdom often resides in the marginalised corners of society, rather than within those in positions of power.

Shelton's **Monster in the Woods** boasts an exceptional cast of characters, and the author skilfully toys with stereotypical assumptions well. Frith herself shines as a superb protagonist, quick to roll her eyes at the ineptitude of the king's guard and her fellow villagers. However, she is also flawed and ultimately introspective, recognizing and confronting her own prejudices. Frith's family, including her mum, dad, younger brother Spuggy, and their faithful hound Cabbage, are wonderfully fleshed out. The Big Wise Head, the King and his entourage, and of course, the enigmatic monster in the woods, contribute to a world that feels lived-in.

While the story and themes are engaging, particularly for independent readers, what truly captivated me was Shelton's masterful blend of humour and acerbity alongside a decent dose of wisdom and contemplation. The inclusion of Dave's numerous illustrations throughout the novel is a delightful bonus, embellishing the text and providing a visual treat. It's a practice I wish more lengthy novels embraced.

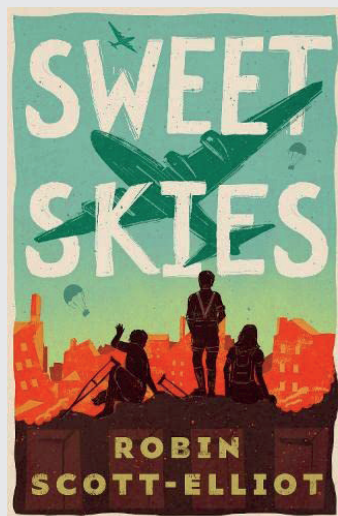
Monster in the Woods is an excellent offering from Shelton, catering to independent readers. Its witty tone serves as a gentle counterpoint to the profound wisdom at its core. From its strong female lead to its exploration of power structures and stereotypes, the book manages to be both humorous and touchingly introspective. **MT**

Warrior of the Wild

★★★★★

Tricia Levenseller, Pushkin Press, 336pp, 978-1782693741, £9.99 pbk
This book was something of a revelation, in a very good way. It is set in an undetermined period of history, where there are no horses, wagons or other 'modern' technologies. The most important skill is that of a Blacksmith, who makes weapons and implements. The setting is an area with five neighbouring villages, all of whom pay tribute to a local god called Peroxolo. When 18-year-old Rasmira is exiled from her village, as the result of sabotage, she is given the task of killing the god, something that seems impossible, even for a skilful warrior. After an encounter with wild animals, she is saved by Soren and his friend Iric, both outcasts from another village. What follows is a tremendous journey, as all three have to prepare themselves to meet the challenges that they have been set. On the way they discover a lot about the world they live in and also about themselves and what they are capable of.

In many respects this is a story about jealousy, envy and friendship. There are two aspects that are highlighted; firstly, we have the conflicts between people, but also the strength of love that siblings can share and then we have the inground beliefs of the villages that the god is exactly that and they must pay tribute, even if this means handing over their daughters for his use. The depth of the treachery that Rasmira has to deal with at the beginning is tremendous, not least because it is caused by several people who are close to her, but she learns to channel that anger and hurt into something more positive. The story itself really focuses on the three main characters and we see their relationships develop as they understand what has brought them to the wilderness. Whilst this has elements of a love story, both between Rasmira and Soren and between Iric and his friend Aros, there is nothing very explicit, so that it will work for the given age group as well as those slightly older. **MP**



Sweet Skies

★★★★★

Robin Scott-Elliott, Everything with Words, 288pp, 978-1911427322, £8.99 pbk

Berlin after the Second World War was a bleak place, divided into segments each ruled by the victors. Life was hard for the population, especially for the children, many of whom had known nothing but war. Otto Hartmann is one of those children, living with his mother in the cellar of the house that once was their home now occupied by a British officer. His father is a prisoner of war, and his sister is missing. Otto who has lost an eye during the war, has a dream of becoming a pilot like his father, who returns home a broken man without hope. The one excitement in the midst of scavenging for Otto and his friends, Ilse and Karl, is the

arrival of the American aircraft, part of the Berlin airlift organized by the Allies to keep Berliners from starving after the blockade by the Russians. Otto is befriended by Charlie, one of the pilots, but when Charlie asks him for a souvenir this sets off a chain of events in which Otto, Karl and Ilse push their luck for the sheer chance of a different life.

This is a downbeat story in many ways; though Otto appears indomitable, his dreams for the future are cruelly broken by his father. The world Robin Scott-Elliott has painted is very real, and readers will want to grasp any chance of hope for Otto they can.

A photograph at the end of the book shows German children watching an aircraft just above them. There is also an historical note, although it does not explain that Berlin was divided up at Yalta by the Allies, not just America, and that the British also flew in the Berlin airlift. **JF**

Peril on the Atlantic

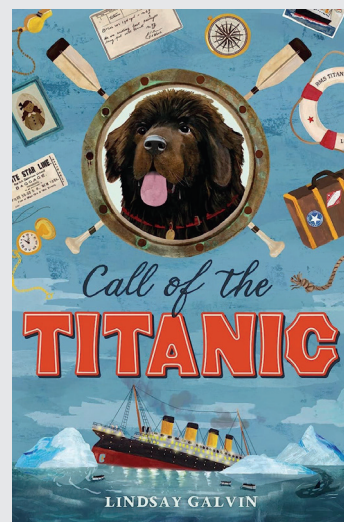
★★★★★

A M Howell, ill. (cover) Marco Guadalupi, Usborne, 320pp, 978-1801316743, £7.99 pbk

Twelve-year old Alice is delighted when she is allowed to accompany her Staff Captain father on his ship, the *Queen Mary*, in 1936, and she meets a couple of the younger crew members as she waits for him on the docks at Southampton, but she is less pleased when she is given some books that are too young for her and he orders her to remain in a very restricted area. Undaunted, this adventurous girl bends her father's rules, and is soon involved in finding out why a crew member was beaten up, making some good friends among the crew and fellow passengers: they are soon a team of two boys and two girls. She soon finds that she is not the only person bending rules and keeping secrets, and her father's ambition to win the Blue Riband for the fastest Atlantic crossing almost becomes an obsession, but there is a saboteur on board, connected with a rival shipping line. The plots are interwoven and also lead her to discovering more about the mother who died when she was a baby; the story ends with her finding more members of her family than when the voyage began. We are promised more adventures with her new family, and the first part of the next book is given at the end of this one.

Life aboard an ocean liner in the 1930s was very glamorous, and most of the passengers were very rich: it's interesting to note the differences from the cruise ships of today. Stewardess Pearl, who looks after Alice and her father, had survived the sinking of the *Titanic*, and Alice becomes well aware of the hazards of sea travel at the time. It's an exciting story, with treachery, secrets and danger, but all is well in the end. A M Howell is the award-winning author of **The House of One Hundred Clocks**,

and **The Garden of Lost Secrets**, based on an old National Trust gardener's notebook, and is evidently one to watch. **DB**



Call of the Titanic

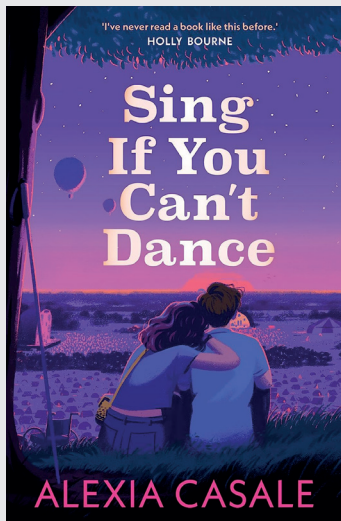
★★★★★

Lindsay Galvin, Chicken House, 320pp, 978-1913696696, £7.99 pbk

Lindsay Galvin has woven an exciting adventure story around the sinking of the *Titanic*, unfortunately in the news even today, as the *Titanic* submersible has gone down with loss of life. American Clara, 12 years old, hides away in her cousin's trunk as he leaves to serve on the *RMS Carpathia*. Clara is a resourceful young lady and finds herself at the centre of the *Carpathia*'s rescue of the survivors from the *Titanic*, aided by the owner of a Newfoundland dog called Rigel. Alongside this is the evidence of a fictionalised third-class steward on the *Titanic*, based on a real figure who did actually survive, written in the form of his story being given to an inquiry.

This is an exciting read, and Clara's story told alongside the real time tragedy of the *Titanic*'s sinking adds extra depth to the inevitability of the ending. Several real figures appear, the Captain of the *Carpathia*, and the photographer who captured the state of the survivors as they were rescued. The details of the telegraph messages sent by the various ships rushing to the rescue, which are interspersed through the story adding to the momentum and tension, all make for a riveting story. Even the menus appear. Each chapter is announced as it were through a porthole, and the different type faces used for the evidence and the telegraph messages all show a real care for the presentation of the book.

The author's notes show the detailed research undertaken and the illustration of the Morse Code, and even the fact that the sea serpent who appears at several points, is rooted in the captain's belief of such a creature. The end papers showing photographs and illustrations all add to a really good historical novel. **JF**



Sing If You Can't Dance

★★★★★

Alexia Casale, Faber and Faber, 336pp, 978-0571385102, £8.99 pbk Venetia is 17. She and her best friend, Maddie, are in a girls' dance group called PopSync who are about to make it big. On the day of their televised audition, Ven finds that she can't dance because her knee has dislocated. She discovers that she has a long-term condition which results in all of her joints being liable to very frequent and painful dislocations. She is no longer able to dance in PopSync. So, who is she now?

This is the no-holds-barred and often darkly humorous story of Ven's journey to discover her new identity and accept the limits of her condition. People with chronic illnesses or disabilities will find her character scary easy to relate to and will laugh at her comments on the medical profession which are sometimes painfully accurate. All readers will feel great empathy with her.

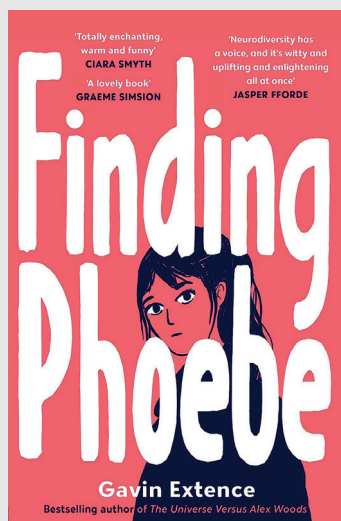
If any reader has struggled with feeling different or worried they will be unable to achieve their dreams, this book is for them. **RB**

Finding Phoebe

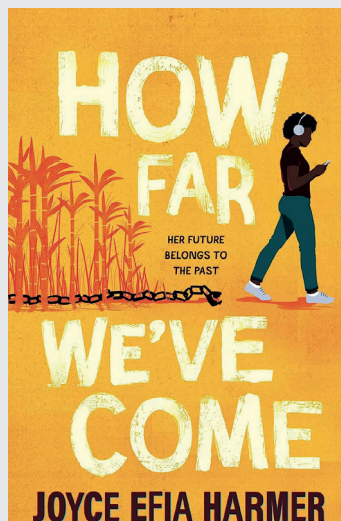
★★★★★

Gavin Extence, Andersen Press, 336pp, 978-1839133312, £8.99 pbk Phoebe is 15 at the start of the novel. She is very articulate, loves words and wants to be a writer. She is also autistic and struggles socially especially with people her own age. Her best friend is Bethany and they have been friends since they were very young. Phoebe lives with her widowed father, her Mum having died when she was eight.

In this novel, the themes are friendship and coping with differences. What will happen when Phoebe, who is the one who usually relies on Bethany, has to help Bethany with a life-



changing situation and its extensive fall-out? What will they both discover about themselves and the nature of friendship? Phoebe's voice as a character takes some getting used to. It can be quite stilted. For this reviewer, the second half of the novel is very strong but the author may have lost some readers along the way, as there is little action in the first half. This may be because of the nature of Phoebe's autism and the fact that she struggles socially. The main flaw of this narrative is that Extence lets the autistic part of Phoebe's character dominate it. **RB**



How Far We've Come

★★★★★

Joyce Efia Harmer, ill. Natasha MacKenzie, Simon & Schuster, 336pp, 978-1398510999, £12.00 hbk This debut novel ambitiously shifts time and place to explore the subject of slavery. Obah is enslaved on the Unity plantation in Barbados. Harmer sets the scene vividly, conveying the sense of community among the slaves

and appealing directly to readers' senses and emotions in order to bring the surroundings-with all its dangers to life. This, combined with the use of Obah's voice and her native patois plunges the reader into her world, a world we may think we know from history lessons, films and books but one which is microscopically recreated far more immediately here.

As Obah uses her instincts to try to carve a safer place for herself and her friends her story unfolds-her mother has left, the overseer is cruel but there are secret letters which she carries between him and the plantation owner's wife, which give her a little respite. Every slave is simply seeking a way to survive, whatever the cost. The sudden appearance of a white man she does not know mystifies her but he has travelled through time with the aid of a silver pomander belonging to Obah's mistress. He is motivated by the guilt of his family's involvement in slavery to take Obah to the future, to a better life with his family. Overwhelmed by the relentless brutality of her life on the plantation, she finally consents.

She finds a world which is difficult to understand and a family who, although they are well-meaning, seem insubstantial when set against the friends she has left behind. She becomes aware that she now has no way of helping them to regain their freedom. When she is an innocent bystander during the toppling of the statue of the man who bought her she realises that she wants to return to the plantation for good, fight for freedom on her own terms and persuade her friends and relatives to do the same.

When she returns to the plantation the fight for freedom begins and at Obah's insistence all stand together to defeat the owner, his family and his overseer and feel the 'breath of our new hope' which the victory has inspired. **How Far We've Come** is a timely reminder that if we combine the strength within us all we can better fight for those fundamental rights which we all believe in. **VR**

Darkhearts

★★★★

James L Sutter, Andersen Press, 352pp, 978-1839133374, £8.99 pbk **Darkhearts** is a queer Seattle set romance sizzling with teenage angst. This debut YA novel is an intense, passionate exploration of the awkwardness, insecurity, wonder and terror of navigating the feelings and labels attached to sexuality.

The plot is informed by the author's own experiences of being in a teen punk band but never hitting the heights of stardom. Told in the first person, it imagines what life would be like for someone left behind while their friends achieve immortal rock



God status.

When a tragedy brings him back into the orbit of the enigmatic Asian Goth lead singer whom he used to hero worship, David is quick to judge. Buried anger battles with magnetic attraction as he decides to pursue what he wants. But is it a poisoned chalice?

Sutter writes visceral prose which he plays for dirty laughs. There is a wildness and urgency about the boys' romance with scenes that some readers may consider graphic. This is juxtaposed with tenderness and vulnerability in places.

The story offers an incisive look at the price of teen fame and what sacrifices it requires. It's daring and thought provoking although somewhat flawed. There is an excess of ribald humour and some of the anatomical descriptions verge on purple prose. David's side kick friend Ridley could also have more depth.

This novel is representative and diverse. It will appeal to older teens deciding upon their dreams and their identities. As Sutter explains, 'most of all, it's about learning to accept yourself for whoever you are right now - straight or queer, rock star or otherwise.' **TJ**

Murder on a School Night

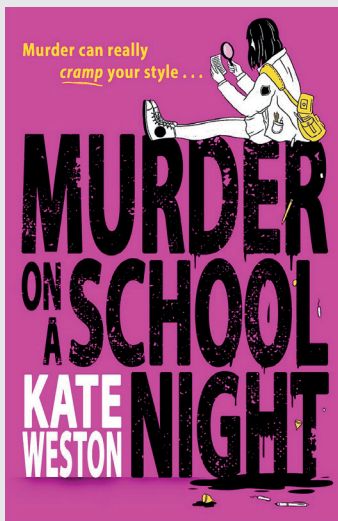
★★★★★

Kate Weston, Electric Monkey, 390pp, 978-0008540968, £8.99 pbk Take Annie and Kerry, 16-year-old amateur sleuths, add three fellow pupils murdered with period products and a story which begins with Annie's prayer to the vulva and that's a guarantee that the sleepy village of Barbourough will have its rural slumber well and truly disturbed.

Annie and Kerry have never been popular - they're endearing to the reader but their failure to embrace the world of make-up, fashion and serious involvement in social media has always isolated them from

reviews

14+ Secondary/Adult continued



their more shallow peers. However, despite herself, Annie still craves recognition from Les Populaires, a brilliant Weston creation of three self-obsessed individuals circling round their chosen star. When Selena, one of their number, is found murdered with a menstrual cup in her mouth, it is both grist to Annie's detecting mill and a chance for her to interact more positively with the three remaining members of the clique. Meanwhile Kerry – whose first foray into kissing a boyfriend was interrupted by her discovery of the body – battles with her anxieties and insecurities to assist Annie in solving the crime and hopes that she won't lose either her boyfriend or her lifelong pal along the way.

Weston weaves an intricate and clever plot as the bodies accumulate, with shifting alliances, miscarriages of justice and the smoke and mirrors of people and events never being quite what they seem. This heady mix requires sustained concentration on the part of the reader – this is not a book to be skimmed or dipped into. Its rewards are many, however. Characters are very convincingly created – particularly Annie and

Kerry – and the empty theatricality of Les Populaires is a quietly savage and hugely entertaining success. Trust and honesty are in short supply and it falls to Annie and Kerry to engage in the risky business of piercing through the facades to find the truth.

An additional strength of the book is its challenge to those who disregard the part that women play in modern society, failing to acknowledge talent and capability and making mention of things like menstruation taboo, because it makes them uncomfortable. Weston gives her female characters the humour, courage and determination to challenge these societal ills and in doing so has produced a book which should be prominent on library shelves, illuminating discussion of these hugely important issues. **VR**

Cupid's Revenge

★★★★

Wibke Brueggemann, Macmillan, 368pp, 978-152903374-8, £8.99 pbk Tilly and Teddy have been best friends all their lives – both from musical families, born four months apart. Once there had been their friend Grace to add to the mix but she was



killed when a car ran into her bicycle and the shock and grief of the loss ripped through their lives. So three years on, when Teddy confesses a 'fierce love' for Katherine Cooper-Bunting, one of his mother's piano pupils, Tilly is determined to do all she can to help him to get to know Katherine better. However, her very best intentions are challenged when she realises that she, too, is strongly attracted to Katherine.

The anxiety generated by this conflict of interests is exacerbated by the fact that her grandfather, who is suffering from the early signs of dementia, is coming to live with them. She cannot bear the thought of watching him deteriorate and die – Grace's death was loss enough. Her parents are absorbed in their careers and her sister is hundreds of miles away and so Tilly becomes more and more involved in his care.

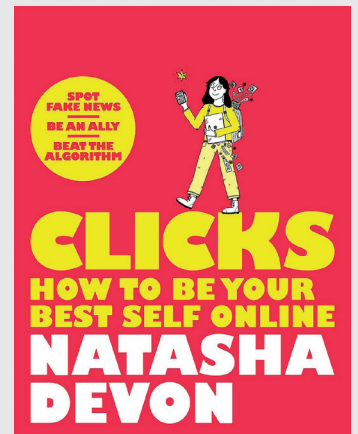
Brueggemann introduces a theatrical production into the narrative, which enables threads to be drawn together, new characters to be introduced and, as a result of his former career, her grandfather finds a new lease of life as the pianist for the production. Characters are beautifully written, with all their eccentricities, rivalries and eventual camaraderie vividly evoked and the rich vein of humour throughout is the perfect antidote to the sorrows and sublimity of love. **VR**

Clicks: How to Be Your Best Self Online

★★★★

Natasha Devon, ill. Rubyetc, Macmillan Children's Books, 200pp, 978-1529066630, £9.99 pbk As a millennial Natasha Devon feels she has a remarkable view on the world of technology and she has helpfully written this book to guide and enlighten young people as well as their parents, carers and teachers. Here is a volume bursting with useful information and presented in an attractive way with bite-sized chunks of writing.

Clicks begins with a lesson on 'What Tech Does to your Brain,' (p.18) and goes on to explain fake news, online



role models, digital consumers and online activism. Not only does the author describe problems associated with the above concepts, she gives positive suggestions regarding how to deal with them. For example, she shows the reader, 'Better Ways to Cross-Check Suspected Fake News' (p.57).

I particularly enjoyed reading the chapter on 'Teaching Up: How to Bridge the Generational Divide,' (p.139) with its practical advice to the teen on choosing the right time and place to ask adults for something you want! Natasha Devon gives talks about mental health etc. in schools around the world and is an expert in this area. Thus her 'tips and tricks' (p.187) at the end of the book are valuable, as are her references and additional material on the final pages.

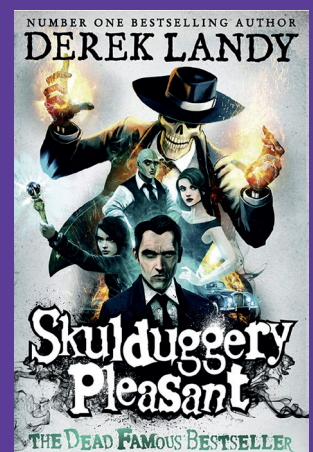
With information on pornography online, for example, I feel this book is aimed at the 14+ age group. However, a parent or carer might like to share this title with a slightly younger child, carefully explaining some of the topics. I am sure adults will learn much about the technological world from this engaging handbook – I certainly did and thus I have no hesitancy in recommending Clicks. The illustrations are fun and work well with the text. I especially liked the positivity that comes across as the author helps young people navigate a difficult and frustrating online world. **JS**



Look out for **BfK 262** in September 2023!

Featuring
Derek Landy:
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Valediction: No.11 First Four

Brian Alderson is saying goodbye to his books as he donates his remarkable collection of children's books to Seven Stories. Here he bids farewell to a collection of Hans Christian Andersen stories illustrated by Gwen Raverat.

A couple of years ago saw the centenary of the founding of the Society of Wood Engravers and in 2022 Simon Lawrence published a richly annotated and illustrated record of the Society's first twenty years (1920-1940) in two mighty folio volumes at his Fleece Press. The leading purpose of the Society had been to organise exhibitions for its members, the main one being at Christmas. A regular feature for discussion was the balance in the show between wood engravings for wall decoration and those cut for illustrating printed books.

It cannot be said that children's books figured very prominently in the latter category although Eric Dalglish, a prominent member, was a specialist in illustrating books for children on birds and natural history while Cicely Englefield is entered solely for her children's books.

Of especial note at the Society's early meetings was Gwen Raverat (Darwin's granddaughter). She was prolific as an engraver, with a mass of beautiful work and, as an illustrator, she was responsible for accompanying several texts for children both as line drawings as in a modern edition of Charlotte Yonge's **Countess Kate** or as engraver in which she brought back to life the joyous **The Runaway** by the unknown Elizabeth Anna Hart which had been a childhood favourite of hers. The present book was produced to celebrate the centenary of the publication in Copenhagen of H.C. Andersen's first stories for children: *The Tinder-Box*; *Little Claus and Big Claus*; *The Princess on the Pea*; and *Little Ida's Flowers*.

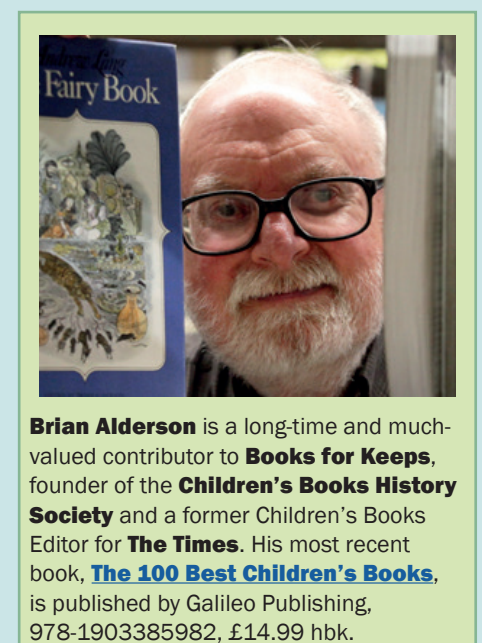
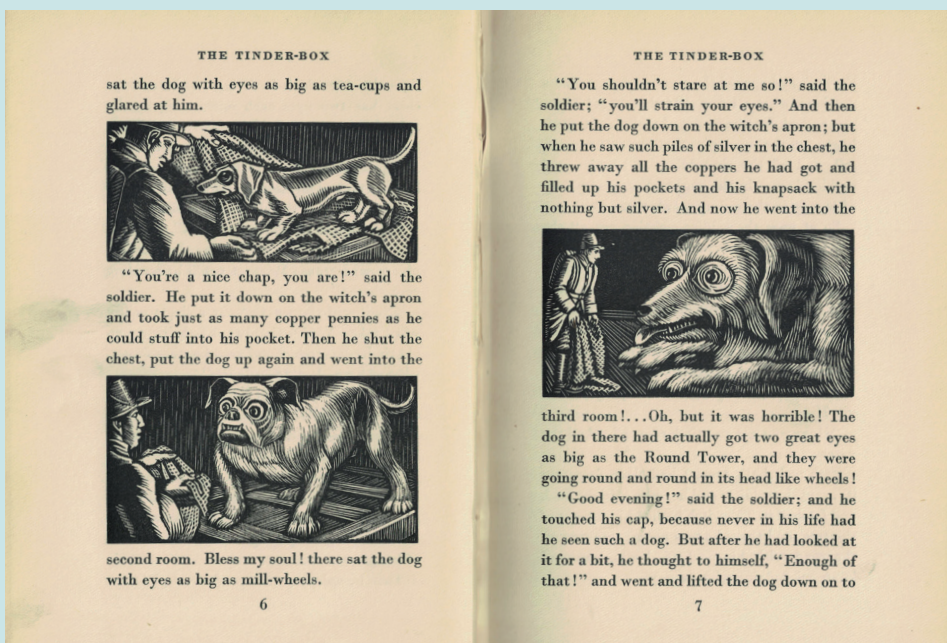


In their form these four stories only hinted at the hundred and fifty two that were to follow them in the Andersen canon. They were printed in a modest little book, followed by a second volume at Christmas (both 118x78mm.) and to Danish folklorists the first of the three tales have a recognisable relationship with folk tradition. With hindsight we can now see that each has some incidents, like the old king going down to open the door to the

princess, or the famous three dogs in *The Tinder-Box*, which will typify many later Andersen elaborations. At the same time, the storytelling diction has the informality of an orally delivered tale. That was to be an Andersen trade-mark but was also a stumbling block for his translators who cannot match it in their own languages. The technique is present too in the fourth story, *Little Ida's Flowers*, but that is the author's own invention and over-long and filled with self-indulgent floral descriptions. The translation was the first from Keigwin (1883-1972) and would be followed by a succession of successful English versions (collections and single stories) after the war. (He spent much time in Denmark where, as a keen sportsman, he introduced the Danes to cricket and organised cricket tours there.)

Gwen Raverat did the centenary volume proud with decorated headpieces, chapter initials and thirty wood engravings of varying sizes and placement within the text – a handsome little book, wholly worthy as a centenary celebration.

[Hans Christian Andersen] **Four Tales from Hans Andersen**. A new version of the first four by R.P.Keigwin. Illustrated with woodcuts by Gwen Raverat. Cambridge: at the University Press, 1935. 180x105mm. [i-iv], frontis, in 3 colours, v- xiii, blank, 1-77, [178] imprint: Cambridge: printed by W.Lewis M.A. at the University Press. Dark blue cloth over boards, oval portrait after title-page woodcut and double frame in a lighter blue. Dust jacket.



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.