

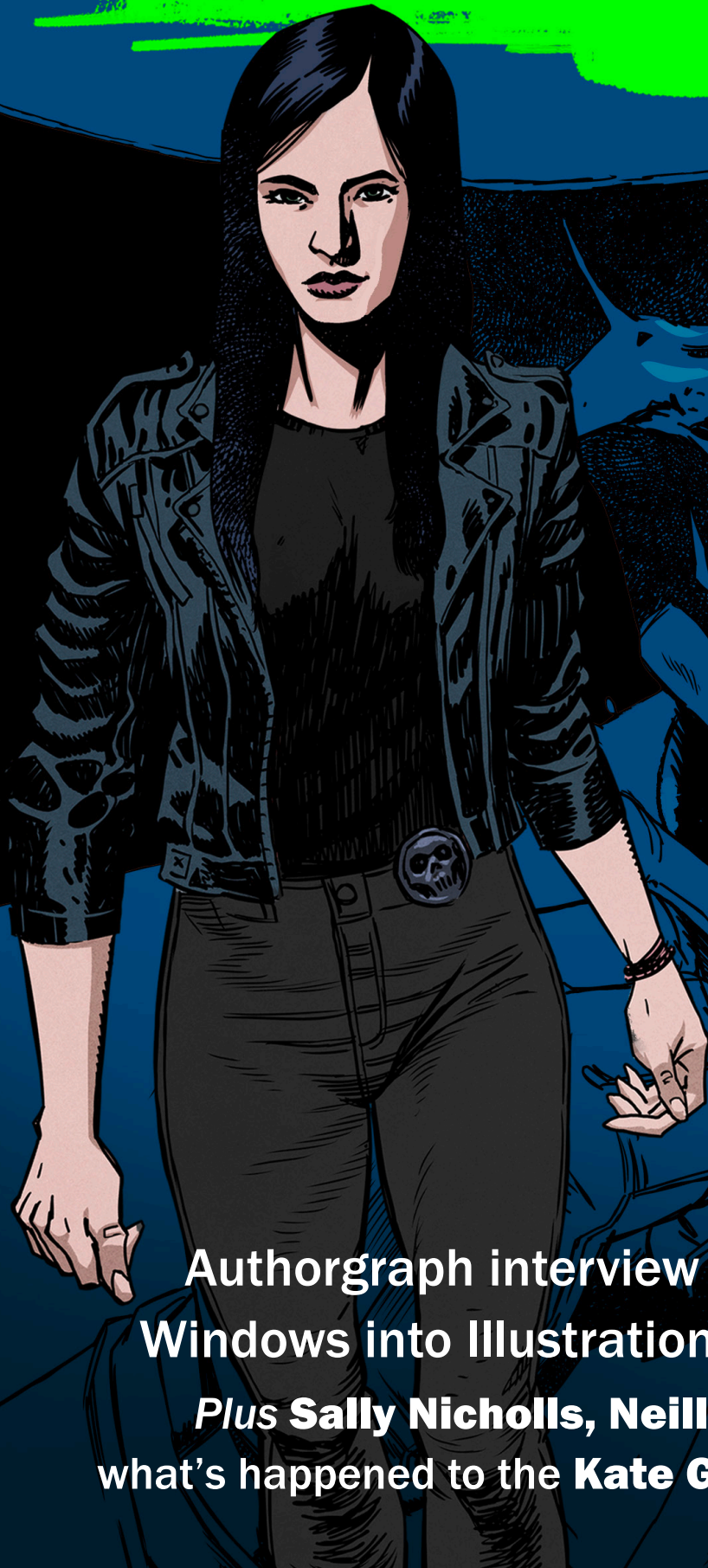
BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.262

the children's book magazine online

Sep 2023

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Authorgraph interview **Derek Landy**
Windows into Illustration **David Melling**
Plus Sally Nicholls, Neill Cameron and
what's happened to the **Kate Greenaway Medal?**

- 2 Editorial:** comment from the editor
- 3 Dear Readers:** Nicholas Tucker interviews Sally Nicholls
- 4 Ten of the Best** School Stories chosen by Rebecca Butler
- 6 Authorgraph 262:** Derek Landy interviewed by Julia Eccleshare
- 8 Windows into Illustration:** David Melling describes how using digital technology is bringing something new to his work
- 10 Erasing Kate Greenaway:** campaigner Rose Roberto on the implications of CLIP's decision to change the name of their illustration medal
- 12 Beyond the Secret Garden:** Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O'Connor consider the representation of Jewish people in children's books
- 15 Only Connect!** An introducing to new independent publisher Neem Tree Press
- 16 There's a serious side to comics:** Neill Cameron explains
- 18 Reviews**
Under 5s (Pre-School/Nursery/Infant)
5-8 (Infant/Junior)
8-10 (Junior/Middle)
+ New Talent + Ed's Choice
10-14 (Middle/Secondary)
14+ (Secondary/Adult)
- 34 Valediction Number 12:** Brian Alderson bids farewell to another collection illustrated by Gwen Raverat.

COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **Bad Magic A Skulduggery Pleasant Graphic Novel** by **Derek Landy, P. J. Holden, Matt Soffe, Rob Jones and Pye Parr.** Thanks to **HarperCollins Children's Books** for their help with this September cover.



Editorial 262

Reading for pleasure

Although we didn't intend it, this issue has something of a focus on reading for pleasure. Our Authorgraph interview is with Derek Landy, whose cleverly balanced mixture of fear and fun have made the **Skulduggery Pleasant** books hugely popular, and especially with reluctant readers. We also have a piece from Neill Cameron, who argues for comics' unique power to connect with young readers and to spark their imaginations. Both features feel particularly timely as this month the **National Literacy Trust** published their latest research into children's reading trends, which, alarmingly, reveals that over half (56%) of children and young people aged 8 – 18 don't enjoy reading in their free time. This is an all-time low statistic since **NLT** began surveying children in 2005 and is down 15.2 percentage points from its height in 2016.

Levels of reading enjoyment were found to be weakest for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, with over 60% of children on Free School Meals saying they don't enjoy reading in their free time. The report references recent exam data [2022 KS2 attainment data, gov.uk] which shows that over a third of children on Free School Meals are leaving primary school without reaching the expected level of reading, and with poverty rates rising this number is in danger of increasing. A widening attainment gap means that even more children could fall behind their more affluent peers in their education and literacy skills, which can go on to have a lifetime impact.

This makes current initiatives such as Children's Laureate Joseph Coelho's campaign in support of public libraries, and his predecessor Cressida Cowell's campaign for libraries in primary schools even more necessary, but it's on all of us to address the downward trends in reading enjoyment and frequency. As the **NLT** says, declining reading enjoyment across a growing number of children and young people must act as a wake-up call for all who support children and young people's reading for pleasure.

A new spotlight on inclusive books

Finding the right book for the right child is crucial in promoting reading for pleasure, together with access to books that reflect their experiences. This month saw the launch of a new website **Inclusive**

Books for Children, and related award intended to help parents and other adults searching for 'high-quality, inclusive books'. Founders Sarah and Marcus Satha came up with the idea for **IBC** in 2022 after experiencing difficulties sourcing inclusive books for their two mixed-heritage children. Visitors to the site can browse through more than 700 book recommendations and search the database to find books featuring protagonists with specific characteristics. There's a short review for each book and the review team includes Jake Hope, Jen Campbell and Tanja Jennings. Fabia Turner is head of content. **Books for Keeps** is pleased to see a new organisation working for change in this space alongside stalwarts **CLPE**, **Letterbox Library** and **BookTrust**.

IBC also announced a new set of awards, which will recognise the best new inclusive books published in the UK across three categories: books for babies and toddlers aged 1–3, picture books for ages 3–7 and children's fiction for ages 5–9. A judging panel will award £10,000 to the winning book in each category.

The Friends Calendar

The 2024 Friends Calendar is on sale now! This year's calendar features a fantastic collection of award-winning illustrators, comprising Posy Simmonds, Ruth Brown, Mary McQuillan, Debi Gliori, Jane Hussey and Jane Ray, Tony Ross, Arthur Robins, Michael Foreman, Ian Beck, Colin Hawkins and Colin McNaughton, with a special tribute to the wonderful David McKee.

The Calendars are A4 spiral bound, opening up to A3 wall size, and cost £10.50 each which includes P&P. All profits from the sale of the calendars goes to **BookTrust**. For further information, contact Anne Marley at: lucia51252@gmail.com



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Dear Readers,

Nicholas Tucker interviews award-winning author Sally Nicholls about her new book, *Yours from the Tower*.

It's Britain 1896, and the only way three closely bonded seventeen year-old girls can still keep in touch after leaving school is through letters. They all have much to tell, and their evolving story is entertainingly captured by Sally Nicholls in her splendid new epistolary story, ***Yours from the Tower***. I spoke to her while her two young children were playing outside, supervised by her own mother. Given letter-writing has practically disappeared now, why has she chosen a literary device also deeply out of fashion?

*I've wanted to write an epistolary novel for ages. I have always loved Jaclyn Moriarty's **Ashbury/Brookfield** books, put together so cleverly, and it's an interesting technical challenge discovering how to tell a story without using a central narrator to take over. And as a historical novelist it's wonderful to be able to write without feeling an obligation to describe to modern readers what these characters themselves would already know so well and take for granted. So there is never any need to get bogged down in the detail everyone would have been familiar with at the time.*

All three girls have their problems, Tirzah is locked away in Scotland in order to minister to an unrelentingly cruel grandmother, Polly is working in a poorly funded orphanage in Liverpool and Sophia is unwillingly 'coming out' in the London Season with instructions to find any rich husband and so save her family's otherwise straitened finances. The girls themselves can be quite funny about all this, but modern readers may well be aghast at the way their poor education has rendered them useless in any sort of future employment market. Do you share this anger?

Well, I have always felt for those unmarried women in the past who were condemned to a life of near invisibility, with the assumption that any left behind spare female would naturally give up their lives to look after their aged parents to the end.

No spoilers, but the book does finish positively. Yet the possibility of a darker ending for all three is always present. Were you ever tempted to go down that path?

*One of the nice things about writing YA novels is the sense that most of your readers still at the beginnings of their lives continue to feel a sense of inherent hopefulness. And I wrote this current story just after I had finished **Close Your Pretty Eyes**, which is very intense and sad. So I was ready to try out something more generally optimistic.*

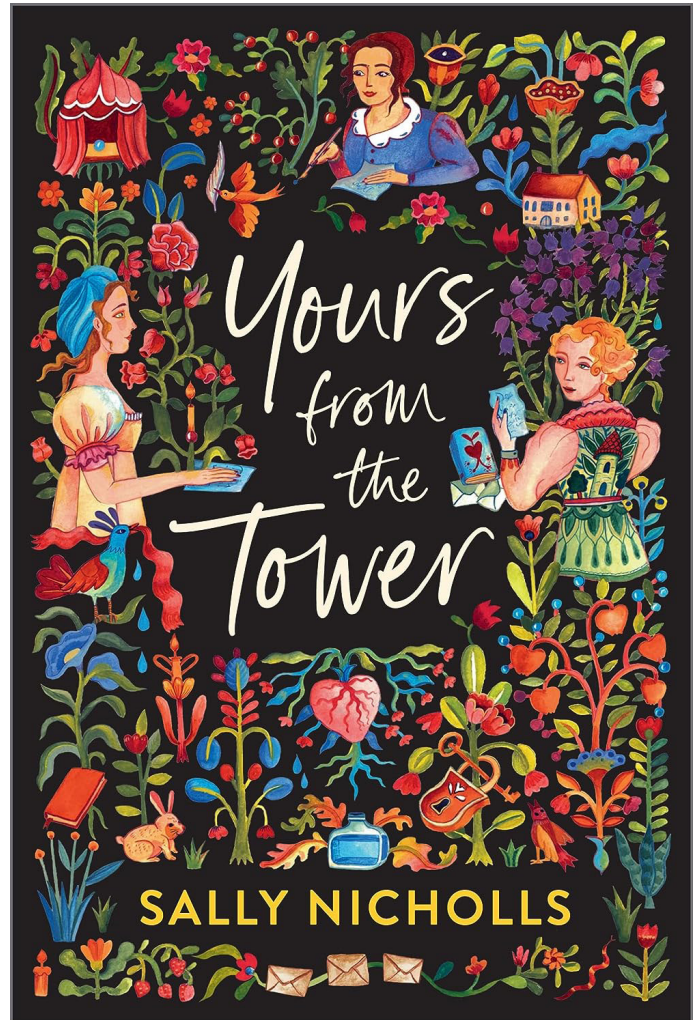
Why did you make Tirzah's grandmother so horrible?

She is a villain, definitely, but I hope I explained why she felt so over-protective of her granddaughter. The consequences then should any over-impulsive girl get herself into trouble, as Tirzah at one stage seemed likely to do, were quiet appalling, as her absent mother had already discovered at terrible cost. The grandmother is not a pleasant person and she's not supposed to be. But I tried to make her understandable given the culture and expectations of the time. She is at least behaving in the way that makes sense to her.

Did you always know what was going to happen to your characters while you were writing?

Well, I knew there was a sort of fairy tale structure here, with Tirzah something of a Rapunzel, shut up in a tower and waiting for a handsome rescuer. And I knew the other two girls would also have adventures with their own affections.

The First World War is only 18 years away. By this time the girls will be in their mid-thirties and it would be fascinating to see how they have progressed and what still remains in store for them. So, any possible sequel? *It would be a very interesting thing to try; I can definitely see more potential for a sequel here. When people in the past have asked me*



about sequels I normally replied no, the story is now tied up with a bow and will stay that way. So a sequel this time round is certainly more possible than with some of the other. But I have no immediate plans at the moment.

Letters always have the potential to make good reading – at best direct, sometimes indiscreet and often crammed with recent laugh-aloud detail. Sally is a practised writer, and in this novel delivers this three-way correspondence, with a few interlopers coming in at various stages, with style, good humour and warm understanding. Her previous novel, **Things a Bright Girl Can Do** was deservedly short-listed for all the major prizes that year. This present story is equally good. Parents and grandparents also in search of a really captivating read need look no further either.

Yours from the Tower is published by Andersen Press, 978-1839133190, £14.99 hbk



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

Ten of the Best School Stories

Selected by **Rebecca Butler**

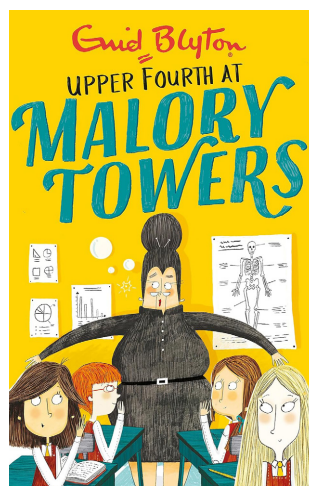
Whether school is a safe place or a nightmare scenario or somewhere in between on any given day, it is a place most of us have experienced on some level. In celebration of the new school term, I have selected ten of my favourite school stories which might serve to console or inspire...No essay required!



Back Home

Michelle Magorian, Puffin, 978-0141354811, £7.99 pbk

Twelve-year-old Virginia, better known as Rusty, is sent back home to England after having been evacuated to America in WW2. This is the story of her readjustment to life in England and her misadventures at a girls' boarding school. The Head Mistress's dismissive attitude towards Rusty's American education still haunts me with her judgement, 'Small Latin, less Greek, Oh Dear!' A searing portrayal of loneliness.



Upper Fourth at Malory Towers

Enid Blyton, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444955392, £10.99 (books 4 – 6)

This maybe a controversial choice for some, given the conflicting attitudes to Blyton's work. I have revelled in the adventures of Darrell and Felicity Rivers since the age of seven. In this one, Darrell becomes head girl of the Upper Fourth despite her notorious temper. She also meets many challenges during this year including the common theme of exam anxiety.



Friends and Traitors

Helen Peters, Nosy Crow, 978-1788004640, £7.99 pbk

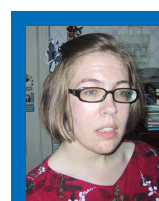
Sidney Dashworth is evacuated with her school, St. Olave's, to a secluded country mansion. This book features impressive writing by Peters about the motivations of Nazism. It also encourages readers to examine our notions of class and privilege and not to assume that a high social class necessarily makes a person more honest. Peters' novel contains a deeply felt rendering of childhood grief and guilt connected with the presumed death of loved ones. The contrasting ways that adults handled grief in the 1940's and now are made apparent.



Bad Influence

Tamsin Winter, Usborne, 978-1474979078, £7.99 pbk

This is a very modern school story which deals directly with social media and its use among teens. Amelia Bright is thirteen, a cello prodigy who also loves debating. She gets high marks, that is until she meets a boy called Evan Palmer. She sends him a semi-nude selfie which she assumes, wrongly, will stay private. What will be the consequences for them both? It is really refreshing to have a protagonist who is academically able but still makes glaring social mistake.



Dr Rebecca Butler writes, lectures and tutors on children's literature and is a regular reviewer for **Books for Keeps**. She is also an active member of the **IBBY UK** committee.

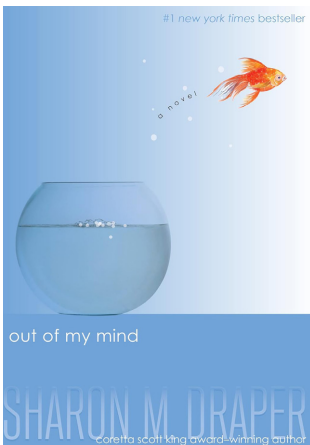
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Beswitched

Kate Saunders, Scholastic,
978-1407196510, £7.99 pbk

Flora Fox is a spoiled contemporary teen. She is annoyed to be sent away to boarding school so that her parents can bring back her ailing grandmother to live with them. Flora time travels to the 1930's and her best friend in the time period is her grandmother. This encourages readers to question their perceptions of age and youth and the values our society places on each. Flora and her concerns leap off the page in this extremely memorable tale.



Out of My Mind

Sharon M. Draper, Atheneum,
978-1416971719

This was originally published in America and deserves to be much more widely known. Melody Brooks is an eleven-year-old who is non-verbal and a wheelchair user. She has cerebral palsy. She is highly intelligent but is still being taught the alphabet in Year 6 at a Special School. Will Melody ever get a chance to show her true intelligence? This story closely mirrors my own experience, apart from being non-

verbal. I and many other readers, adults as well as children, have been captivated by it. The infamous airport scene will remain in the minds of readers long after they have finished the book.

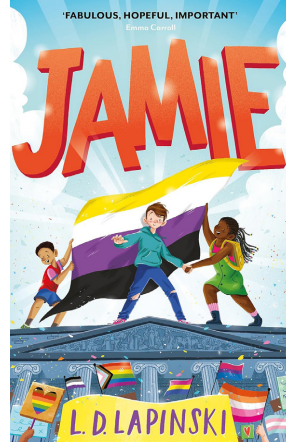


The Extraordinary Adventures of Alice Tonks

Emily Kenny, Rock the Boat,
978-0861542055, £7.99 pbk

This is an outstanding debut novel by an autistic author. Alice Tonks is an eleven-year-old who has autism. In a rare combination of a fantasy narrative with a neuro-divergent protagonist, the author has merged two unusual subjects. When Alice arrives at boarding school, she discovers she can talk to animals and they can understand her. What is the purpose of this talent and what is Alice's mission? You could

describe this book as **Malory Towers** with animals and it will hook you from page one..

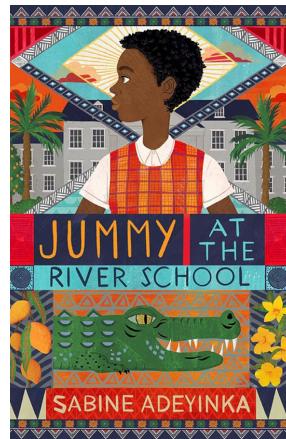


Jamie

L.D. Lapinski, Orion Children's
Books, 978-1510110922, £7.99 pbk

Jamie is an eleven-year-old who identifies as non-binary. They and their family are faced with a dilemma. Which of the two single sex secondary schools should Jamie attend and should they be forced to attend either school when doing so, would require them to identify as a particular gender? This story is about their struggles to find a place where they truly belong in society. There are also age-appropriate explanations of gender-related terms.

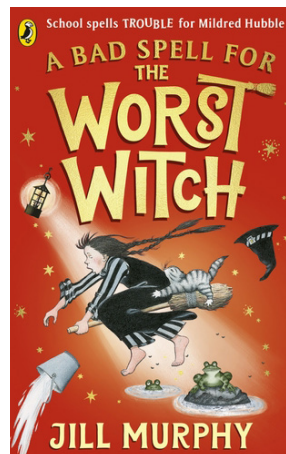
This book has stayed with me long after I finished reading it. Lapinski also places great importance on the role of friends in supporting those who identify as non-binary.



Jummy at the River School

Sabine Adeyinka, Chicken House,
978-1913696047, £5.99 pbk

Set in Nigeria, Jummy passes the exam to the elite River School where pupils are expected to garden and clean as well as study. Her friend, Caro, is equally bright but cannot afford the fees so she works at the River School as a servant. She is forced to do the work of the school bully who is privileged but did not pass the entrance exam. Can Jummy and Caro uncover and correct the injustice? A fascinating glimpse into the education system of another culture.



A Bad Spell for the Worst Witch

Jill Murphy, Puffin, 978-0241607930,
£7.99 pbk

A classic I have loved from childhood. Apart from Mildred Hubble's endearingly scatter-brained ways, this is the first book in which Murphy gives us a glimpse into the back story of Miss Hardbroom, the deputy head of Cackle Academy, whom I have both feared and are now fascinated by. Also, there is a misadventure with a frog who turned out to be a teacher. I have met very few children who do not identify in some way with Mildred Hubble.

Authorgraph

No.262

Derek Landy
interviewed by
Julia Eccleshare

The creator of **Skulduggery Pleasant** talks to Julia Eccleshare.

2007 is a long time so it is pretty telling that I remember the launch of **Skulduggery Pleasant** so well. From the outset, we all had huge expectations. **Skulduggery Pleasant** was billed by its publisher as a VERY big new book and the idea of a sharply dressed skeleton detective had exactly the kind of edge that makes pulses race. And, in Ireland where Derek comes from, he was promoted as the next J. K. Rowling from the outset.

The writing was slick and fast, the idea was original and so was the launch – we gathered in a crypt. But, though important, those background details are not entirely new. What made it so memorable for me was the author. Derek is a striking physical presence and, though he spoke with modesty, he had passion, energy, wit and conviction. And he had a track record as a writer of a zombie screen plays which gave him a certain authenticity. Added together, it was enough to carry conviction that **Skulduggery Pleasant** would indeed be a very big success.

By my memory and Derek's memories of the launch differ slightly. Where I saw a confident new addition to the distinguished band of Irish writers for children, Derek's memories of the early time around



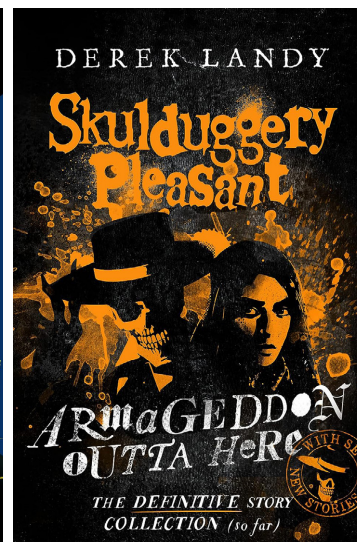
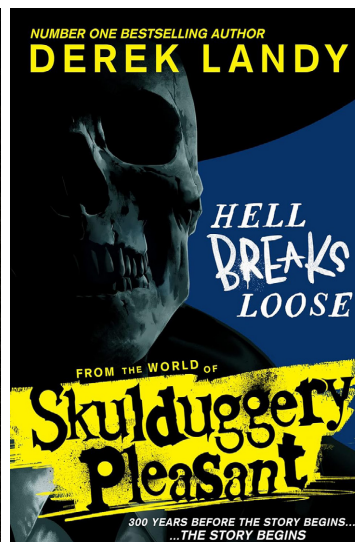
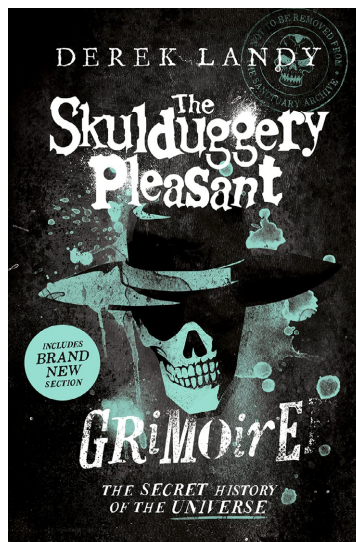
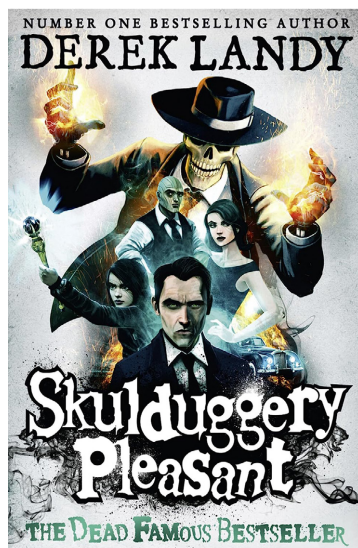
publication are hazy. He knew that his publisher was backing the book strongly but he was also aware enough to know that all publishers think that their book is the best. How does he remember the launch?

Even now, 15 years later he still shivers. 'Every publisher has huge hopes for their debut author. Everyone hopes for longevity but for no definable reason, a debut release just doesn't catch on. That could have been me! I was just extraordinarily lucky. **Skulduggery** gave me longevity. I had the right idea at the right time and it hit the right readers. It's scary to think it could all have gone wrong!'

But beyond luck, Derek had enough of a back story as a wannabe writer to know that beyond having the right idea at the right time he had to apply some carefully honed principles to getting **Skulduggery Pleasant** right. 'I'd written loads of stories before but I had always got bored. My track record was about a third of a book. But then **Skulduggery** popped into my head and I suddenly had this idea for a great character. I knew how he looked and who he was. Because my track record on writing a whole book was bad, I had to find a way of fooling myself into keeping going. I made sure every single chapter contained fun – usually it had fun on every page. I had a blast and it was suddenly a book that had no limits.'

Derek still buzzes as he talks of the energy that the fun he has had creating **Skulduggery Pleasant** gives him. It is the big tip that he shares with young writers when they ask him for advice. 'I always say just have fun. It sounds trite but fun jumps off the page. It is not contained.'

But while fun helped him to trick himself out of boredom, the thing that has kept him returning to the books again and again is the characters. 'When I go back, it's like meeting up with old friends. I adore them and really enjoy their company. To write a character like **Skulduggery** who dresses like a character from a 1940s private eye movie and speaks with that kind of dialect keeps my interest. I have a wandering attention span but that has held my interest throughout.



Valkyrie also interests me. I really care about what has happened to her and how she will navigate what is to come.

Derek's dynamic storytelling has a 'light the blue touch paper and run' quality to it. The cleverly balanced mixture of fear and fun is at the heart of their popularity – especially with reluctant readers as he has learnt from the time he spends talking to children. From his conversations with readers of all kinds at the many events he has done across the country he is very aware that there are reluctant readers everywhere and that they need to be encouraged to find the right book. 'I firmly believe that for reluctant readers often they need just to find one book. When they do, it can become more important than anything else.' He knows how often that book is **Skulduggery Pleasant** and it delights him that he gets letters from parents saying their child has never read anything before but because of finding **Skulduggery Pleasant** the whole world of books has been opened up to them.

In the years since **Skulduggery Pleasant** was first published Derek has written 15 **Skulduggery Pleasant** books neatly published in a series of trilogies starting with **The Faceless On** and including **The Death Bringer**. He has also added additional titles including a prequel, **Skulduggery Pleasant: Hell Breaks Loose**, and a story collection, **Skulduggery Pleasant: Armageddon Outta Here**. Taking a different tack, he wrote **Skulduggery Pleasant Grimoire, The Secret History of the Universe**. A witty and insightful compendium to the series which he wrote partly because his mother had been on at him to do because, unlike most **Skulduggery** readers, she only read each book once and so needed some reference back up, it shows just how carefully and richly he has created his complicated fictional world.

And now he's taken yet another new tack. **Skulduggery** has been freshly re-imagined in **Bad Magic: A Skulduggery Pleasant Graphic Novel**. Derek is very clear that this is not just a new version of his first book. It is a new format which has allowed him to take a new approach to how he tells the story. 'You must never take your readership for granted or exploit them. Every move that we make as a writer/ publishing team shows that we are on the same page as the readers and that we respect and are grateful to them. I'm lucky that I can experiment and try new formats through which I can deliver something surprising and nourishing.'

To hear him speak about his books you would think that Derek lives entirely within the world of **Skulduggery Pleasant**. But he does have time out from them and he unwinds by reading comics and playing video games. 'I can't play games when I'm in the middle of a book as I'd stay up far too late and not be able to my job. But I play an awful lot of games when I'm not writing - in a disciplined way for six months of the year. I started out writing screen plays, to relax and for intellectual stimulation, it's sitting down with a movie, playing video games, reading comics or books. That's how I unwind.'

'My best advice to parents and teachers about how to get children to read is to point out where books sit in that universe. It's a united world not a divided one. You have the video game, you have the film, you have the books, you have the comic. What it shows is that the players, and the readers, and the viewers are all after story and they are all after the characters so they will follow them through different mediums. All of them are just a way of engaging a person in a world that doesn't exist. Videos are just another system of storytelling. They are very immersive which is why they are very attractive. Parents are often anxious about the immersion because of a fear of tech and games. They think of books as the Holy Grail but really it's an inter relation of all these things. There should be no fear of any of it.'

Coming from an author that might seem like surprising advice but Derek himself has experience of many ways of storytelling. He studied animation at college though only lasted on the course for a year. He was kicked out because he wasn't focusing on it partly, he says, because although he was good at art he wasn't great. And before he hit on **Skulduggery Pleasant** he wrote the screenplays for a zombie movie but found writing for film frustrating. Although he'd been writing stories since primary school he had never met a writer and assumed you had to be a kind of rock star. 'It just didn't seem to be a feasible career for me. Before you make it there are so many chances to accept defeat. So many off ramps. It's up to you to stick it out.'

It took Derek ten years to write **Skulduggery Pleasant**. Thank goodness he stuck it out!

The **Skulduggery Pleasant** books by Derek Landy are published by HarperCollins Children's Books.

Books mentioned

Bad Magic: A Skulduggery Pleasant Graphic Novel, by Derek Landy, P. J. Holden, Matt Soffe, Rob Jones and Pye Parr, 978-0008585785, £14.99 pbk

The Skulduggery Pleasant Grimoire, 978-0008472450, £8.99 pbk
Hell Breaks Loose, 978-0008585730, £14.99 hbk

Armageddon Outta Here, 978-0008554279, £14.99 hbk



Julia Eccleshare is children's director of the Hay Festival and head of Public Lending Right policy and advocacy.

Windows into Illustration: David Melling

Perhaps best known for his hugely popular **Hugless Douglas** series, David Melling has been illustrating children's books since 1993, creating over 150 books. **The Kiss That Missed**, the first book he wrote as well as illustrated, was shortlisted for the **Kate Greenaway Medal**. In this article he describes how using digital technology is bringing something new to his work.

I've always been a bit of a technophobe. Throughout my 30 years in children's publishing I've used the same techniques and traditional materials of pen, ink and watercolour. Yet in recent years, I was becoming more aware I was asking designers to help make small changes or corrections digitally to an original illustration that might otherwise need re-doing. Despite my reservations, I realised that if I was asking someone else to help me digitally I should at least have some awareness and knowledge myself about how this could be achieved. Until only a few years ago, I literally had no idea.

After a couple of evening courses, together with some advice and tips from friends, my knowledge improved. Unexpectedly, I found myself thinking differently about how I might approach an illustration, using Photoshop in a more significant way and not just as a correcting tool.



The opportunity to develop this new way of working came when I began work on **Goldilocks and the Three Crocodiles** by Michael Rosen and has continued with **Not-so-Little Red Riding Hood**, which is where this illustration features. It's been a steep learning curve. Fortunately, I've had a patient and supportive team at HarperCollins who've kept faith with me throughout the process.

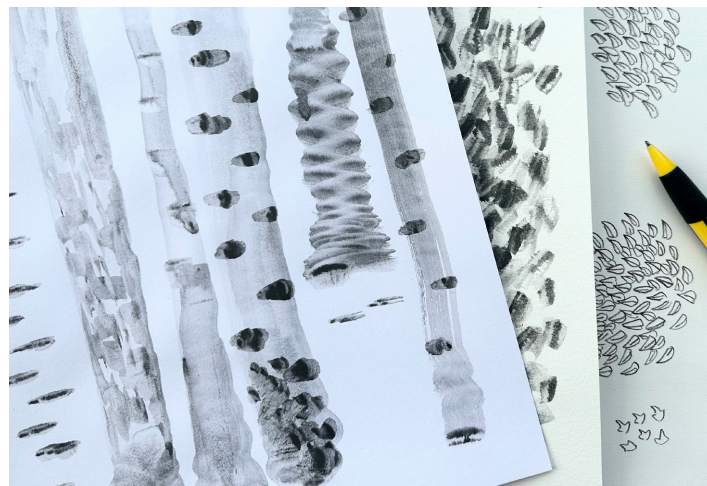
For me, everything starts with a pencil; designing characters and moving them around on the paper.



Next, are the pencils roughs and the opportunity to add little details not necessarily in the text. In this case, I thought it would be fun to have the more contemporary wolf in the story navigating the forest on a scooter.



The next stage is where things have changed in my process. Where once, I used to carefully trace the drawing (using a lightbox), onto watercolour paper, I now start creating textures (trees, foliage etc), using a range of materials; watercolour, charcoal, pencil, etc.



These textures are scanned, along with the original pencil sketch, and composed (using some digital brushes too), in Photoshop. A sort of a digital collage.

Somewhere along the way, it was decided that Little Red should be looking and pointing at a sound off stage. This was easily corrected by drawing a new arm and adding it digitally.



Once the final piece had been done, a late narrative issue cropped up which meant, sadly, that the wolf could not be shown in this image. Again, another time saver, as I simply deleted the layer (seconds!), whereas I almost certainly would have had to re-do the colour piece from scratch.



Working digitally has certainly brought something new to my work. And I've found one unexpected extra bonus; the option to use my looser, pencil sketches (usually just roughs), into my final artwork. (When you trace a sketch, you always lose that spontaneous line). It's a work in progress but, much to my surprise, I've managed to find a new way of combining analogue and digital techniques – the best of both worlds! I would never have believed that not so long ago.

Goldilocks and the Three Crocodiles and **Not-so-Little Red Riding Hood** by Michael Rosen, illustrated by David Melling, are published by HarperCollins Children's Books, £7.99 pbk and £12.99 hbk respectively.



Illustrating how illustrators are erased

This year, **CILIP** announced that the **Kate Greenaway Medal** would become ‘**the Carnegies for Illustration**’. **Rose Roberto** co-ordinated the campaign to reinstate the Greenaway name as she explains in this article.

On the morning of August 16, 2023, in response to the BBC News article, ‘Call to reinstate illustrator Kate Greenaway’s name on literary award,’ author Patrick Ness made the first of two tweets. The first one read:

Hey @BBCNews I won the Carnegie Medal for *A Monster Calls*, but I did NOT win the Kate Greenaway Medal for it. That was won by the genius illustrator Jim Kay. Further underlining the need for illustrators to get more recognition...

Also in response to the news article, I (Rose Roberto) tweeted at BBCNews:

Both [the illustrator Tamsin Rosewell] @autumnrosewell & I made KG petition. Thanks for covering story, but why is article obscuring the illustrator again?

Within an hour of our Tweets being posted, the BBC quickly corrected most mistakes. However, Patrick made a second tweet:

Article has been updated to reflect that I’m the author, not the illustrator, but still doesn’t mention the actual illustrator, the amazing Jim Kay (who won the Greenaway Medal). *A Monster Calls* is what it is because of Siobhan Dowd, Jim Kay and myself, all of us.

Jim Kay’s name has still not been added to the article, and the BBC News page does not acknowledge any omissions were corrected, as it does on most of its stories. It is ironic that even a story by the BBC about the erasure of illustrator Kate Greenaway from a medal founded in her honour, managed to erase the illustrators from its story, and needed to be corrected.

This social media exchange on Twitter and the story the BBC covered outlined the **CILIP** (Library and Information Association) decision to change its distinguished, seventy-year-old award from ‘**Kate Greenaway Medal**’ to the ‘**Yoto Carnegie Medal for Illustration**’ due to sponsorship with Yoto, an audio-based educational publisher, in 2023. In complete disagreement with **CILIP**’s renaming decision, as well as **CILIP**’s failure to respond for weeks when contacted in April/May directly, Tamsin Roswell, an illustrator and bookseller, and myself, a librarian and historian, created a petition to reinstate the Greenaway name. The petition pointed out that the **Kate Greenaway Medal** was one of the very few British literary awards recognising illustrators, and actively promoting the importance of their work. The petition was launched on 17 July and within its first 24 hours online, nearly 1000 people had signed it. By the end of August, it had gained over 3000 signatures from around the world. The first person to sign the petition was Jackie Morris, who won the **Kate Greenaway Medal** in 2019 for *The Lost Words*.

Partially addressing the petition, a **CILIP** press release on 19 July 2023 justified their action in removing Greenaway’s name by stating ‘the decision...to adopt a ‘family’ of awards under the Carnegies name... adds clarity to the awards structure for young readers... [with] the intention of elevating the illustration Medal...[through] association with Andrew Carnegie.’



The press release further stated that this rebranding decision had been made in consultation with former **Carnegie Greenaway** judges. Since I ran a 2023 shadowing scheme at Bishop Grosseteste University (BGU) Library in Lincoln, which has been training teachers since the 1830s, I questioned statement. I had not heard this news until I received **CILIP**’s shortlist award material in late February. None of the other librarians I spoke to knew about this decision either, not the Lincolnshire School Librarians group I’m in touch with, nor other more general members of **CILIP**. In fact, Charlotte Everett, one of my colleagues at BGU Library said, ‘I don’t believe *any* librarian in their right mind would think removing the name of a beloved female illustrator like Kate Greenaway from a medal, would be a good idea.’

Greta Paterson, Head of Children’s and Young People’s Services, East Sussex signed the petition and commented, ‘As a former judge on the medals [panel] I strongly oppose this move which undermines the role of illustrators. **Carnegie Greenaway** is a strong brand without any need for tampering. If it ain’t broke don’t fix it.’ Scotland-based Moyra Hood also writes, ‘As a retired librarian and former judge on the Carnegie and Greenaway panels, I support this petition. Hugely disappointing decision by **CILIP**.’

Cambridge-based librarian Susanne Jennings wondered how **CILIP** could make such decisions without wide-ranging consultation, and London-based Phil Bradley wrote, ‘It is very disappointing [that] **CILIP** has made this decision. It is wholly inappropriate and completely out of step with how members and wider society feel.’

Other librarians, who have been active in CILIP contacted Tamsin and me directly to offer their support to illustrators in general, and have reported to Tamsin they were told by CILIP not to engage with the petition, due to behind-the-scenes negotiations with the sponsor.

A mis-matched sponsorship?

I believe the Petition has generated so much support because we are not the only ones who questioned **CILIP**’s decision-making process. Matt Imrie, a British-born librarian, who previously served as a **CILIP**, Youth Libraries Group judge for the Carnegie and Greenaway medals and is now based in the US, seems to be more aware of what is going on in the UK than we were. Matt first queried **CILIP**’s decision in late 2022. Months before any of my colleagues in the UK took notice, Matt’s blog wondered how a partnership with an audio media company was going to work in promoting the **Kate Greenaway Award**. ‘Being a screen-free device’, he pondered, ‘how would a Yoto Player show the best of the illustrated works nominated for it?’

In a September 2022 blog post, he wrote that ‘The **Carnegie Medal** and the **Kate Greenaway Medal** were always two distinct awards and now the line between has been blurred...I feel that with this rebrand something is being lost.’

Specifically, Matt wondered if making the **Kate Greenaway Medal** just one of 'The Carnegies' was the price that a **CILIP** working party had to pay to close the sponsorship deal with Yoto? Instead of 'elevating the illustration medal' as **CILIP**'s press releases have claimed, would this re-branding not just do the opposite?

'The medal for writing has historically always had a higher profile, but the awards were in no way dependent on each other,' he posted, concluding that [a previous post expressing] this concern of an audio device sponsoring an illustration medal did not make complete sense [now] seems to have been borne out.

Kate Greenaway Medal is a Cultural Signifier

Critic Robert McCrum of the **Guardian**, writes, 'Far more than book reviews, it's literary prizes that shape the afterlives of new titles.' Writer and blogger, Emma Rose Hollands writes that book awards especially show us that books *should* be prized.

'Like any other form of art, books are important to cultures across the globe. They can bring about change across society; they can touch our hearts in the smallest ways. Regardless of who gets nominated or who wins, it is crucial that our society has these awards in place so we can culturally recognise books as an important part of our lives.'

The **Kate Greenaway Medal** was named after British artist Kate Greenaway (1846-1901) who produced fine art illustrations and books for children. Born in London to a woodblock printer and a seamstress, she and her two siblings periodically resided in Rolleston, Nottinghamshire with relatives when their father's business was financially unstable. Greenaway attributes a vivid childhood with fond memories in a countryside teeming with trees, flowers, and rural animals as inspiration for her later work. Her mother's sense of fashion also influenced her drawings, and many art critics have praised Greenaway's human figures with finely designed clothing.

In 1877, Edmund Evans, a professional contact of her father's, invited her to work with him. Other illustrators working with Evans' colour printing firm, included Randolph Caldecott (1846-1886) and Walter Crane (1845-1915). The collective work of all three, Greenaway, Caldecott and Crane, characterises the 'Golden Age of Children's Literature' as well as the Aesthetic movement. In recognition of her artistic achievements, Kate Greenaway is not only historically important to the British Book Industry, her work remains an influence on illustrators today.

Named awards have meaning. Individuals who have awards named after them should embody the values of the organisation they represent and/or the spirit for which an award was given. As a librarian, I think it's wrong to make a named award for illustration about anyone but the illustrators, themselves.

Irish-based landscape artist Eleanor Hunt signed the petition and wrote, 'It's important that an influential illustrator's name be on an award for illustrators, especially as Kate Greenaway was a woman. Women are still not recognised or celebrated enough for their achievements in our society.'

New-England based artist, Anne Holt wrote, 'Kate Greenaway's **Under the Window** is imprinted on my earliest childhood memory (a very old edition handed down 82 years ago by an elderly aunt) together with my very first watercolour paint box. Can't believe anyone would want to erase the Greenaway name from anything to do with children's illustration.' Sarah Westfall wrote, 'As a native of West Virginia in the United States, I am familiar with Andrew Carnegie's more disappointing and disastrous decisions. As a former librarian, I believe the medal's name should be restored.'

When Tamsin Rosewell and I first met in July, I did not know I'd be asked to write an editorial for **The Bookseller**, an article for **Books for Keeps**, or be interviewed with her for **The Illustration Department's** podcast. While I expressed bewilderment and embarrassment at CILIP's decision as a librarian, and was troubled in witnessing the erasure of a prominent British female artist as a historian, Tamsin articulated frustration at yet another example



where illustrators of any gender, are constantly affronted by the book trade and the media. The tight phrasing of the *Bring Back the Kate Greenaway Petition* is due to her professional experience as a UK bookseller, navigating the current publishing world.

Despite rumours that Yoto has been unhappy with the CILIP sponsorship and might terminate it before the initially agreed third-year contract (in 2024), it is unclear what CILIP will actually do, since their press release has discussed *alternative* ways of 'honouring' Kate Greenaway, which do not include restoring her name to this prestigious medal.

James Mayhew, author and illustrator encapsulates why thousands of people have signed the petition. 'Kate Greenaway was a pioneering woman,' he said. 'It is right and proper that she is remembered, celebrated, and has her name attached to this important prize. Losing this link with an actual illustrator greatly lessens the significance of such an award. Her name should be reinstated.'

Readers can sign the petition via the link.

<https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/bring-back-the-kate-greenaway-medal>

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Recent publications include Roberto, R. and Alexiou, A. Eds. **Women in Print: Design and Identities, Volume 1** Oxford: Peter Lang Ltd 2022.

Roberto, R. 'Working Women: Female Contributors to Chambers's Encyclopaedia' IN Archer-Parré, C., Hinks, J. and Moog, C. Eds. **Women in Print: Production, Distribution and Consumption, Volume 2** Oxford: Peter Lang Ltd 2022.

Beyond the Secret Garden: Jewish representation in British children's books

In the latest in their long-running Beyond the Secret Garden series, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** consider representations of Jewish people in children's literature.

Many children in Britain will read books featuring Jewish people in Religious Education lessons. However, Jewishness can also be thought of as an ethnicity, and historically has been seen as a racialised category. Many people identify as 'secular Jewish', recognising shared history and certain traditions – and in some cases use of language, while not being religiously observant.

The first recorded Jewish community in Britain arrived in the time of William the Conqueror. In 1190, in the run up to the Third Crusade, the Jewish population of York was massacred and 100 years later King Edward expelled Jews from England. This was not reversed until the 17th century. During the 1911 riot in Tredegar, Wales, Jewish homes and businesses were looted and burned over a period of a week. Winston Churchill, Home Secretary, described the riot as a 'pogrom'. Antisemitism has a long history in Britain, and an even longer history in Christianity. It was not until the 1960s that Pope Paul VI repudiated the idea of a collective, multigenerational Jewish guilt for the crucifixion of Jesus.

The recent launch of the computer game **Hogwarts Legacy** brought renewed allegations of antisemitism in the JK Rowling's **Harry Potter** series. Many have pointed out that the goblins, who control Gringotts Bank resemble the caricatures depicted in the antisemitic 1903 book, **The Protocols of the Elders of Zion**, and that a star resembling the Star of David is shown on the floor of the bank in the films. The Campaign Against Antisemitism issued a statement in which they offered the view that 'mythological associations have become so ingrained in the Western mind' and their continuation 'is a testament more to centuries of Christendom's antisemitism rather than malice by contemporary artists'.

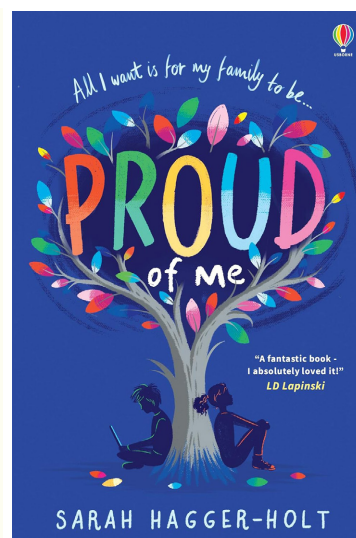
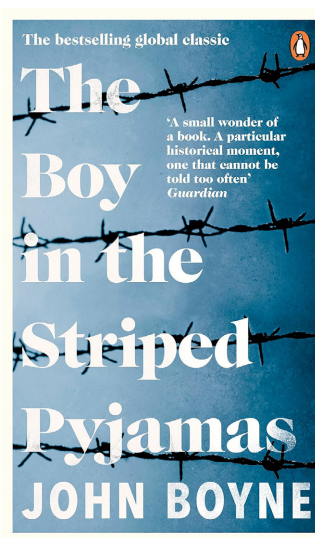
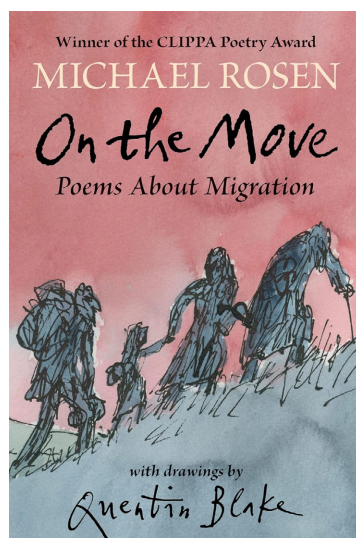
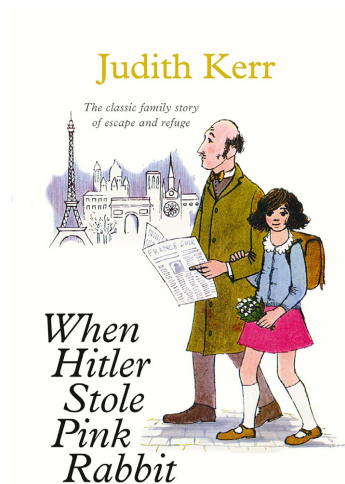
Representation of a minoritized group is often difficult. Individual authors can run the risk of presenting too little information about a character (and potentially falling into stereotypes to ensure the 'recognition' of the character as belonging to a specific group) or too much, losing the overall story in an attempt to teach readers about a culture. Too often, Jewish representation has fallen into the former category: **Oliver Twist's** Fagin (1838) or **Ivanhoe's** Isaac of

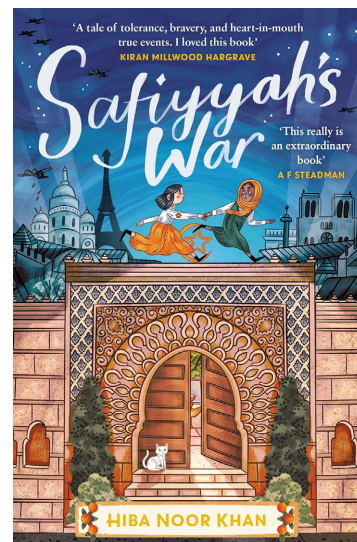
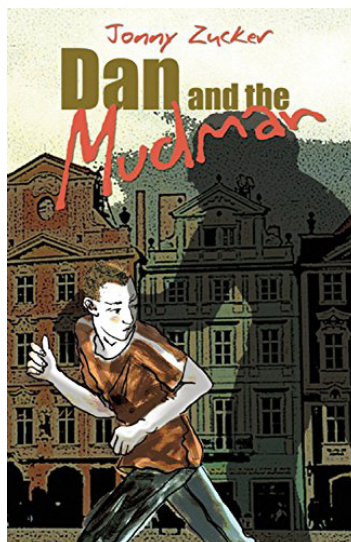
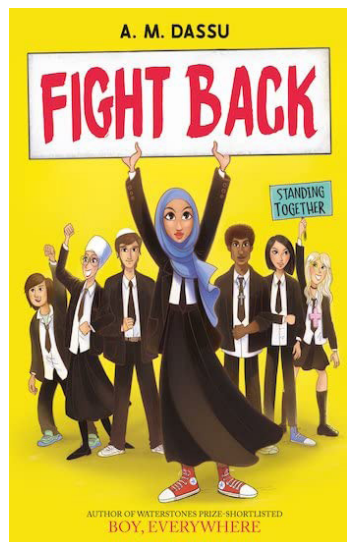
York (1819) are figures from 'classic' literature, regularly abridged for children since they were first published, that reinforce stereotypical depictions of and attitudes toward Jews. Both characters are marked out by their looks as different, and both are constantly referred to by their religion. Isaac of York's features, according to Walter Scott, 'would have been considered as handsome, had they not been the marks of a physiognomy peculiar to a race'; Fagin is 'a very old shrivelled Jew' with a 'villainous-looking and repulsive face'. In these 'classics', the physical description of Jews as different from Christians is necessary to plots which hinge on their outsider status.

As Madelyn Travis writes, 'defining Jewishness is complex, varied and contested, even among Jews. Defining Jews and British-Jewishness textually therefore can be fraught with difficulties...' (2011:112). Despite a significant Jewish population in Britain, few stories about British Jews exist for children. Beyond non-fiction books, most readers, if they encounter Jewish people at all in British children's books, find them in Holocaust stories. Judith Kerr's **When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit** (1971), opens with the main character Anna discussing her heritage with her friend Elsbeth. Elsbeth probes Anna's connection to Judaism through stereotypes, and becomes impatient when Anna and her family do not conform to what she 'knows' about Jews: 'if you look the same as everyone else and you don't go to a special church, how do you know you are Jewish?' she demands in disgust.

Michael Rosen's poetry regularly acknowledges his family's Jewishness and make use of Yiddish phrases he heard growing up (like 'Two Languages', included in **On the Move: Poems about Migration** (2020), which won the CLIPPA Poetry Award). In **Please Write Soon** (2022), Rosen tells a story through letters of a Jewish teenager from Poland who joins the 'Anders Army' and fights the Axis powers. The story is based on the life of his father's cousin.

Rosen's **The Missing** combines narrative non-fiction and poetry to tell a story of family history, of the Holocaust, and of antisemitism, while Rosen stresses from the outset that genocide, racism and hatred of refugees extends to other groups also. It is also the story of a





search – and of the sense of loss that continues through generations. We may view this search itself as a form of political resistance, for the Nazis aimed not only ‘to remove people, but also to remove the memory of them’ (p44). Combining narrative non-fiction with poems from previous books, Rosen continually reminds the reader that this is a personal story while helping them to make connections with broader histories. The particularity of his story, and the avoidance of well-worn phrases forces us to respond personally. Writing of the police officers in France who arrested his great-uncle; ‘What did they do then? Have breakfast? What did they say to their families? “We arrested a Jew tonight.” Or were they sorry? Sad? Guilty?’ (p94). Such everyday language reminds us that so many heinous actions were committed by everyday people – and that choices were being made throughout; something that can sometimes be less apparent in traditional textbooks for young people laden with terminology and statistics that can have an emotionally distancing effect. Rosen does not eschew statistics; after sharing letters his family sent each other in attempting to secure safe passage from Poland, he tells us the St Louis ship that carried 900 Jewish refugees from Germany was turned away by the US government and returned to Europe, where many of them died a few years later.

The Missing is supported and checked by the **UCL Centre for Holocaust Education**, who in 2016 raised concerns about John Boyne’s **The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas**, a work of fiction that it found was often used as part of teaching about the Holocaust in schools. It found that many young people appeared to draw mistaken and/or misleading conclusions about the Holocaust based on their engagement with the book.

Possibly the first post-war British book to feature a Jewish protagonist, **A Box for Benny** (1958) was written by Leila Berg, with drawings by Jillian Willet. Benny’s desire for a box to play a game provokes him to make a series of swaps while travelling around his working-class Jewish neighbourhood in Manchester. We encounter a number of characters with popular Jewish surnames, ‘baigels’ and mention of special Saturday meals of sponge cake and wine. However, Benny and his neighbours are not explicitly Jewish and no mention is made of Judaism. It may be that this is an authorial decision to not explain the characters for a mainly non-Jewish readership; they are shown simply getting on with their lives without the need for explanatory commentary. But we learn that Benny is glad to have switched school from one where ‘the children used to sing strange songs about Jewish children eating babies for dinner’ (p62). We are left guessing as to exactly how Benny felt about such antisemitism, how common it was, and how he himself feels about his identity. This is not necessarily a criticism of the book; it can be read as suggesting Benny’s identity is not in any way a challenge for him, only for antisemites. Berg’s story can be viewed as an early example of casual inclusion of Jewish characters in British children’s fiction; one that does not stereotype, seek to explain, or ignore the presence

of antisemitism. In this light, the book is deeply radical; it offers a mirror to working-class Jewish readers. Berg went on to create the **Nippers** and **Little Nippers** series, published by Macmillan. Writing in the **Times Literary Supplement** she commented that ‘**Nippers** are written in the belief that every child needs to be able to look at a book or hear a story and feel “That’s me!”’. This is what every middle-class child has done practically since babyhood.’

Little Rebels winner, **Proud of Me** (2021) by Sarah Hagger-Holt features a Jewish family, including a mother who attends shul. While siblings Becky and Josh both explore their identity in the narrative, Jewishness is not presented as problematic or challenging for them. The contemporary antisemitic pressure to not stand out as Jewish comes up in A.M. Dassu’s **Fight Back** (2022) ‘I know I don’t look it, but I am different. I’m Jewish and some people hate to hear that’ (214). Jonah goes on to say he cannot wear his kippah outside of the synagogue, because he doesn’t feel ‘safe to say I’m Jewish’ (215). Jonah speaks up in Dassu’s book to support the main Muslim character, Aaliyah, who wants to wear a hijab at school, and this support along with others leads to protest.

Solidarity between minoritised groups is also key in Hiba Noor Khan’s **Safiyyah’s War** (2023). Khan credits Karen Gray Ruelle and Deborah Durland DeSaix’s picture book, **The Grande Mosque of Paris** (2009) as an inspiration for her own, in which eleven-year-old Safiyyah, daughter of the rector of the Grand Mosque of Paris, becomes instrumental in saving Jews during the Nazi occupation. Khan’s book connects several communities, both directly and indirectly, in the fight against oppression. Isabelle, Safiyyah’s best-friend, points out that Hitler is targeting ‘not just Jews, he says Black people and those with disabilities are less human too’ (33). Safiyyah’s father says they will remain in Paris because ‘[o]ur responsibility is to our community’ (39) including their neighbours ‘of all faiths’. Safiyyah knows her grandmother has experienced being a refugee because of her Muslim faith. She discovers her Jewish botanist friend has been targeted by the Nazis, and also that the friendly librarian is sending books away from Paris by Jewish authors. All these people serve as models for Safiyyah so that she can have the strength to resist in several ways herself. Although it is a story of helping Jews to escape the Nazis, the book does not portray the Jews as helpless victims without choices or the ability to act. Rather, it offers a portrayal of a community working together against injustice.

Solidarity is also a theme of historical novel **The Battle of Cable Street** (2022) by Tanya Landman. Based on real-life event in the 1930s and narrated by Elsie, who describes her neighbourhood of Stepney as ‘mostly Jewish, with a big dollop of Irish thrown in for extra flavour’ (p4). Elsie hears English, Irish, Yiddish and Russian spoken in Stepney, and comments that most people in her neighbourhood are Jewish migrants driven out of their homes by antisemitism. We see how Oswald Mosley’s growing popularity impacts Elsie’s group of friends from different backgrounds. While the Smiths embrace

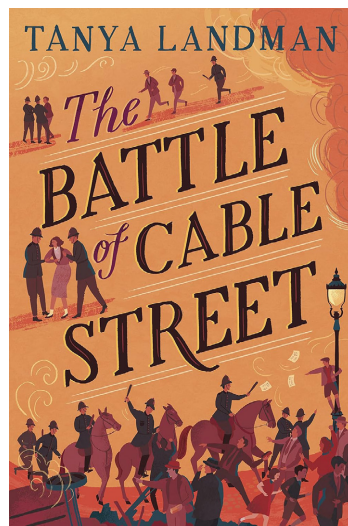
fascism and leave the area, others unite to stand against Mosley's Biff Boys, later renamed the Blackshirts.

Elsie tells us about real-life World Boxing Champion Ted 'The Kid' Lewis. Originally named Mendeloff, The Kid is slower than many in his community to recognise Mosley as antisemitic, and works for him as a bodyguard. When he is finally convinced, The Kid knocks out Mosley's other bodyguards and punches the man himself. Elsie also discusses Lord Rothermere's enthusiastic support for Hitler and Mosley. For Elsie, the antisemitism she observes is something propagated by the British Establishment, 'posh men' like Mosley and Rothermere, as a way of providing scapegoats for working-class people. This narrative of 1930s Britain is at odds with some of the accounts of World War II for children, which often suggests that Britain was wholly opposed to antisemitism. The author's endnote connects this history to contemporary 'mainstream politicians stirring up hatred and division to gain power' (p113).

Writing in 2021, Keren David describes Jonny Zucker's **Dan and the Mudman** as 'the rarest of things – a contemporary British Jewish story.' Dan's family leave multicultural London for Wareham. Dan is met with antisemitic abuse, relating to keeping Kosher, claims that 'the Jews' are powerful and wealthy, and eventually, that he is a 'dirty Jew'. A clay statue he builds reveal itself to be a golem that transports him to 16th Century Prague where he encounters the historical figure of Rabbi Loeb. While the Golem has 'no power to stop big historical events from taking place', Dan is active, not passive in Prague intervening when a Jewish boy is being attacked. In so doing he finds the means to physically stand up to his bullies at school, while the text makes clear the physical violence should always be a last resort. In his final meeting with Rabbi Loeb, he is told 'if a group of people are attacked and you are an onlooker, you must step in to protect this group and do whatever it takes to end the violence against them' (p123). The Rabbi stresses that this applies to other cases of racism and intolerance such as 'Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur.'

Keren David's own YA novel **What We're Scared Of** (2021) centres on contemporary British Jewishness and is told through alternating first-person narratives from Lottie and Evie, twins who are very different. Lottie is studious and shy. At the start of the story, she doesn't consider herself Jewish and her classmates don't know that she has a Jewish mother. Lottie tells us that she thinks a lot about Anne Frank. When her classmates make antisemitic comments about Hannah, a Jewish classmate, she fails to speak up. Hannah is not impressed by her attempts to apologise. Lottie joins the group at school preparing for 'Jewish assembly' and begins to connect with her Jewishness. This helps her to speak out against antisemitism and other forms of racism.

Evie is outgoing and starting out as a stand-up comedian. She is keen on Luke, but soon hears him spreading antisemitic conspiracies. Their mother Bex is a radio presenter who is trolled online after speaking about antisemitism in France. Both their house and the shul Lottie attends are attacked. Two chapters in the book are real-life testimony from Holocaust survivor Mala Tribich. At one point Lottie tells her father, 'I'm looking for my way of being Jewish'. This seems to hold for each of the Jewish characters we encounter: Noah explores ways of striking back at antisemites; Hannah, while having a clear view of her Jewishness as a seven-point plan of attending shul, keeping kosher, socialising in 'the bubble', attending youth group, giving tzedakah (charity), visiting Israel annually, and having her batmizvah, is critical of gender roles at the synagogue; Bex chooses to share her family history with her daughters, and break with her father's silence of painful memories. Historical and contemporary antisemitism motivates the family to consider their Jewishness as more than what Hannah jokingly terms, 'Judaism through the medium of food.' The novel addresses a phenomenon in the UK that Evie herself articulates, '... I really only know about Jewish stuff from American TV.' (p148). In the work of Berg, Kerr, Hagger-Holt, Rosen, Dassu, Landman and David we see overlapping and diverse perspectives that foreground Jewishness in Britain.



Books listed

Oliver Twist, Charles Dickens

Ivanhoe, Walter Scott

When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit, Judith Kerr, HarperCollins Children's Books,

On the Move: Poems about Migration, Michael Rosen, illus Quentin Blake, Walker Books, 978-1529504361

Please Write Soon, Michael Rosen, illus Michael Foreman, Scholastic, 978-0702303180

The Missing, Michael Rosen, Walker Books, 978-1406395594

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, John Boyne, 978-0552773805

A Box for Benny, Leila Berg

Proud of Me, Sarah Hagger-Holt, Usborne, 978-1474966245, £6.99

Fight Back, A.M. Dassu, Scholastic, 978-0702315886, £7.99 pbk

Safiyya's War, Hiba Noor Khan, Andersen Press, 978-1839133138, £7.99 pbk

The Grande Mosque of Paris, Karen Gray Ruelle, Deborah Durland DeSaix

The Battle of Cable Street, Tanya Landman, Barrington Stoke, 978-1800901087, £7.99 pbk

Dan and the Mudman, Jonny Zucker, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1845078515

What We're Scared Of, Keren David, Scholastic, 978-1407196442

Other works:

Madelyn Travis (2011) **Almost English: Jews and Jewishness in British Children's Literature** [Phd Thesis]

Madelyn Travis (2013) **Jews and Jewishness in British Children's Literature**

<https://holocausteducation.org.uk/research/the-boy-in-the-striped-pyjamas-in-english-secondary-schools/>



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



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

Only Connect!

An introduction to Neem Tree Press



Neem Tree Press is an independent publisher of books intended to change and broaden perspectives and give readers a deeper appreciation of the world around us. Their team introduce this new publishing house and its aims.

At **Neem Tree Press** we focus on children's and YA books that introduce young readers to new perspectives and invite them to discover cultures beyond their own. These books invoke a sense of adventure and exploration with stories grounded in art, mythology, history, dystopia, and physical and mental health. We look for stories that are fast-paced, cinematic and immersive. We also really appreciate books that make us laugh!

The company was founded by Dr Archana Sharma, a doctor and healthcare financier. She has lived and worked in many parts of the globe and her family crosses all manner of geographic and cultural boundaries. She considers herself a world citizen and was inspired to start the company when she couldn't find specific books she was seeking for her two young sons. She feels strongly that by building compassionate bridges between people we can transform the world into a better place. She wholeheartedly agrees with the sentiments of EM Forster, 'Only connect! ... Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer.'

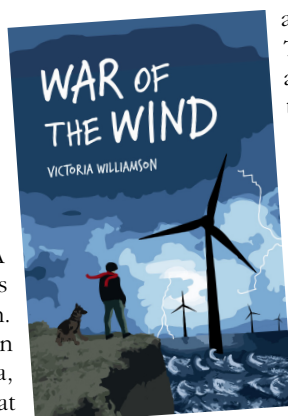
The team at **Neem Tree Press** is committed to increasing diversity and inclusion in children's books. We look for terrific stories that shine spotlights on ideas or histories or places that should be illuminated, whether right here on our doorstep or far, far away. Our children's authors come from across the world, from England and Scotland all the way to Spain, Canada, Algeria, and Palestine. We understand how important it is for children to see themselves represented in books for a more confident and empowering future.

Picture Books

We are excited to launch our very first picture books in early 2024! **Misty Mole** is a series of three books written by a Canadian eye-doctor, Yasmin El-Rouby. Yasmin is passionate about paediatric eye health and has spotted a gap in connecting with children to teach them how to take care of their eyesight. In book 1, **Misty Mole Gets New Glasses**, she highlights the fast-growing problems of myopia (short-sightedness) through a cute little mole who trips and tumbles when she walks and paints blurry pictures until she goes for her first eye test. In books 2 and 3, **Misty Mole and the Big Switch-Off** and **Misty Mole and the Eating Adventure**, we learn about the importance of reducing screen time and how good nutrition is important for healthy eyes.

Children's Fiction

One of our bestselling books is **War of the Wind** by Victoria Williamson. It's a climate fiction mystery book set on a remote Scottish island, where an evil scientist is conducting research into



a potential new weapon that utilizes sound waves. The four feisty young protagonists foil his attempt, as in all great children's adventure books! However, these characters happen to have different disabilities. Victoria was a teacher to special needs children and has reflected her wonderful students in this book. The book has won the **Glasgow Libraries Award** and is currently shortlisted for **The Week Junior Book Awards** and the **Leeds Libraries Award**.

We've recently released Victoria's new book, **Norah's Ark**, a story of friendship, belonging and animal rescue. Set in Hull, **Norah's Ark** tells the story of two children, Norah and Adam, who come from very different socioeconomic backgrounds but connect through their love of animals. The story shines a light on the reality of food banks and homelessness, and how this impacts children both in and out of school.

For Halloween, we've released **Scareground** by Angela Kecojevic, a spooky adventure story set in Victorian London, a time when fairgrounds were flourishing. When a scary fairground returns to Greenwich, 12-year-old orphan Nancy Crumpet uncovers a world of dark magic, forbidden adventures, and family secrets.

Young Adult Fiction

This October we'll be publishing **Feast of Ashes**, a YA dystopian thriller also by Victoria Williamson. It's set in 2123 when the Earth's ecosystems have collapsed and young Adina believes she has accidentally killed 14,756 people by causing her home, a biodome, to blow into smithereens. She's tasked with saving the survivors and navigating a treacherous path to the rescue point. A tense ending for each chapter and a breathless pace.

Next year, our children's and YA books include **The Djinn's Apple** by Algerian author Djamila Morani, translated from Arabic by Sawad Hussain. The book, which won an **English PEN Translate** award, is a historical crime thriller set in the Abbasid period—the golden age of Baghdad. It features a strong-willed young teen girl, Nardeen, who defies all stereotypes of the era and becomes a doctor while solving the mystery of who killed her entire family, and why.

Last year, we published the final instalment in our cinematic, immersive YA action-packed series, **The Three Hares**. Book 3, **The Terracotta Horse**, was shortlisted for the **Young Quills Award** for historical fiction, and takes readers back in time to the Viking era, while book 1 (**The Jade Dragonball**) takes you on a ride through the Song Dynasty and Byzantium in book 2 (**The Gold Monkey Key**). The series is co-authored by Scottish author Scott Lauder and American author David Ross, who have lived and worked in the Far East and bring their love of history and cultural knowledge into their books.

Our books are available to buy in-store and online at your favourite bookshop.

We'd love to connect with you! You can write to us at info@neemtreepress.com, and follow us on social media: @NeemTreePress.

There's a Serious Side to Comics as Neill Cameron explains

Comics are very silly, and children shouldn't read them. That's not my own opinion, of course. Indeed, full disclosure, I am a professional comics creator and thus have a vested financial interest in the idea that children should read comics, as many of them as possible, and preferably mine. But occasionally tales reach my ears of well-meaning parents or teachers who, seeing how obsessed their children are with comics, react with alarm and try various combinations of bribery, discipline and imposed book-choice restrictions to move them onto reading 'proper' books instead.

Honestly, I find this baffling. You see kids being excited about reading, engaged with reading, falling in love with stories and characters and joyfully spending hours losing themselves in those worlds, and your response is... to try and stop them? But rather than just react with bafflement and condemnation, I try to understand where this impulse comes from. And the fact is, I honestly think there are a lot of people out there who simply don't understand what comics are.

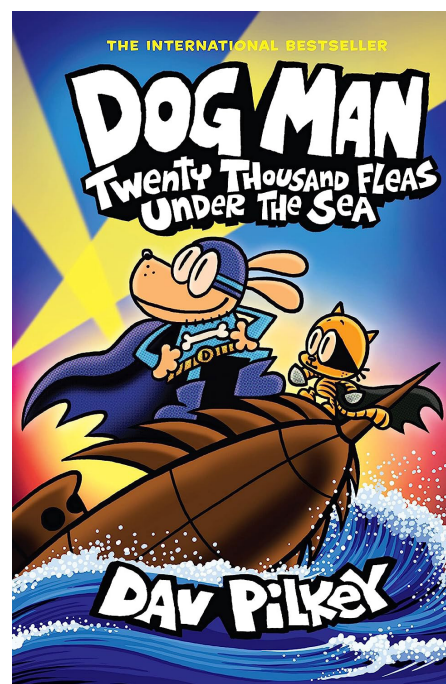
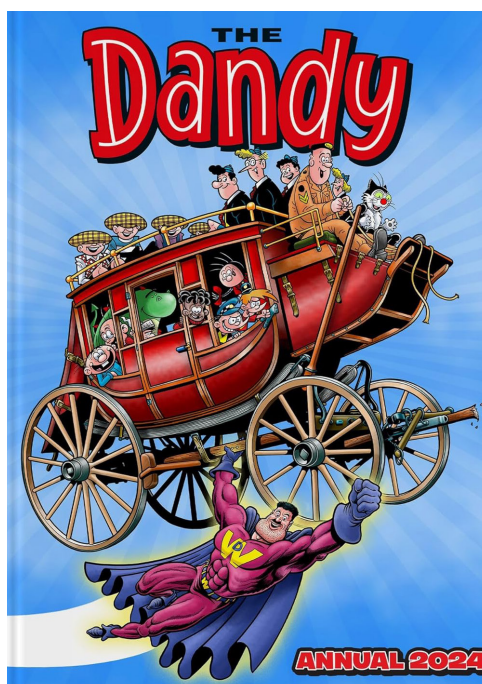
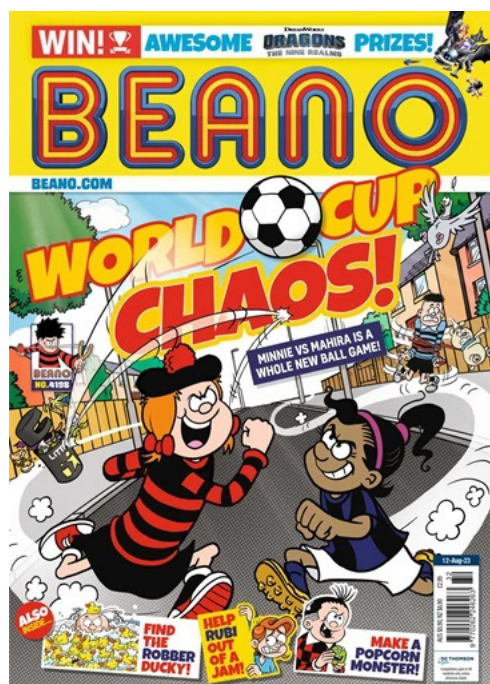
I wonder if some of these comics-averse grown-ups are basing their opinions of an entire medium on their own distant, faded memories of reading the **Beano** or **The Dandy** as children. If they perhaps see comics as something inherently lightweight, throwaway. Things that can be silly and funny and not much else. And look, before we go any further, I should be clear that my intention here is not in any way to cast aspersions on silly and funny comics. The Beano is to this day a wonderful thing, a national institution genuinely beloved by children, created by brilliant writers and artists who bring joy and laughter to households across the country.

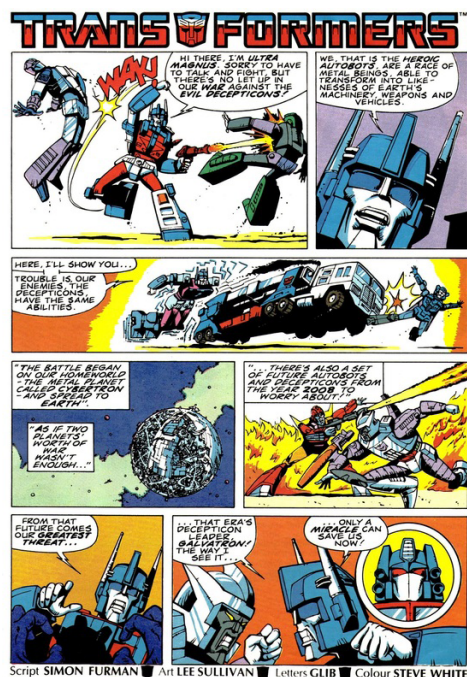
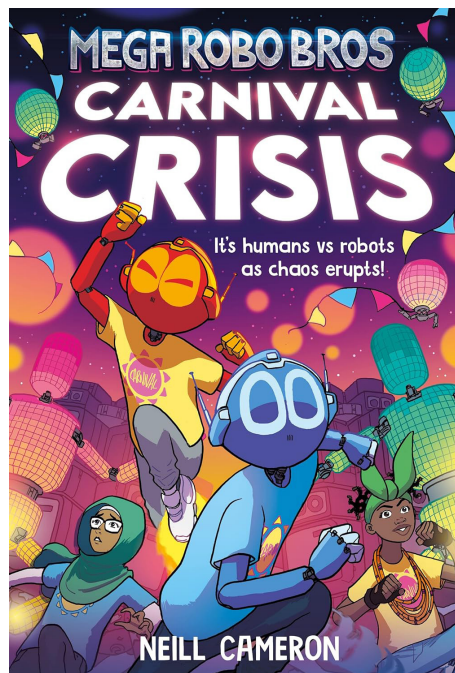
But perhaps that's the thing: laughter. I think we in this country, or perhaps in the anglophone West in general, have a tendency to undervalue things that bring laughter. To think that the comedic is in some way intrinsically lesser than the dramatic; less valuable or important. (How often do comedies win the Oscars for Best Picture, or Best Actor? A cursory google tells me the answer is 'not very'.) I also think we have a similar inherent bias that leads us to consider the written word as more intrinsically valuable or important than the visual arts. (How often do illustrated books win the Booker prize? Actually you know what I'm not even going to bother googling that one). And I think

if you combine these two biases, you have a pretty strong explanation of why funny comics are such a singularly under-respected art form.

And this makes me sad. Because I think that those grown-ups labouring under these misapprehensions – and by extension the children whose reading habits fall under their sphere of influence – are missing out on so much. I've been doing this job for a while now and have travelled all over the country doing comics workshops at schools and festivals. I've seen firsthand, too many times to mention, the amazing effect that comics can have on children. So many times I've heard from teachers or parents about children who struggled to engage with reading before they discovered Jamie Smart's **Bunny VS Monkey** series, or Dav Pilkey's **Dog Man**, or – and there's no way to say this without sounding self-aggrandising – my own **Mega Robo Bros**, and how those books transformed them into devoted, voracious readers. But also, some of my most cherished memories from doing this job are the times I've heard from parents – or from readers who grew up reading my comics and are now a bit older, telling me how much something in my stories meant to them; how it helped them deal with something in their own life or just how important it was to see a character going through struggles that really resonated with them, even if they weren't quite old enough at the time to be able to articulate exactly why.

I think comics have a unique power to connect with young readers; to deal with sensitive subjects with empathy and compassion in ways that are really direct and powerful. Because with comics you can bypass all this awkward, tricky 'words' business. You can simply show exactly how a character is feeling. You don't have to spell everything out; you can leave it to the reader's own experience, imagination and empathy to make connections. To find their own meaning. I personally feel I am a lot more eloquent in comics than I am in words. **Mega Robo Bros** deals with all sorts of stuff – about identity, and gender, and feeling different, about all the ways the world can be exciting and brilliant and scary and cruel – that I would struggle to write articulately about in prose, but feel just about brave enough to try in comics. Because comics, like real life, are so much about what is left unsaid. It's there, baked right into the structure of





the medium: two images, with a little blank space between them, trusting the reader's own imagination to go into that blank space and link the images together. To breathe life into them as a story.

Comics can absolutely deal with subjects that are Important and Serious, and there are any number of great graphic novels for young readers around today that do exactly that. But there can also be a lot going on where you might not expect it; hidden depths in work that may seem on the face of it, to the comics-averse grown-up, frivolous or trivial. So I thought I'd quickly try and explore this by looking at a few of the comics that shaped my own reading journey, in roughly ascending order of the age at which I became obsessed with them.

TRANSFORMERS

The **Beano** was my first comic, as it was for so many of us. And I loved it, and it started this whole journey for me. But the one that really got me next was Marvel UK's **TRANSFORMERS** – a licensed tie-in comic designed explicitly to help sell more toys. Talk about things that on the face of it might not scream Literary Merit. And yes, sure, it's a story about goody robots who turn into cars, fighting baddy robots who turn into planes. But that barely does justice to what this story was, or how much it meant to those of us who were lucky enough to be 8 years old when it was coming out. Crafted principally by writer Simon Furman and a range of brilliant artists like Geoff Senior and Barry Kitson, **TRANSFORMERS** became an epic saga of sacrifice, heroism and loss. Filled with incredibly vivid characters, and imbued with a sense of brutality and violence that was absolutely thrilling, and indeed in any other context would have been pretty shocking and controversial in a piece of media aimed at young children. But it was okay, because they were just robots.

OINK!

A humour comic filled to bursting with jokes about burps, pus and farting, **OINK!** was also a brilliant and satirical explosion of punk energy, a hilarious and vital reaction to the repression, hypocrisy and unfairness of the Britain of Mary Whitehouse and Margaret Thatcher. Honestly I wish it was still around today, on roughly a daily basis.

2000AD

A comic whose flagship character, Judge Dredd, is both a straightforwardly thrilling action hero and walking indictment of society's worst impulses towards fascist authoritarianism. 2000AD has been since its creation in the 1970s a perfect example of how comics can use cool, exciting, visual storytelling as a way to talk about pretty much every serious important theme you could care to name.

...and that pretty much takes me up to around age 14, and to discovering comics like **THE UNCANNY X-MEN** (enough metaphors for oppression, intolerance and identity politics to genuinely last one an entire lifetime) and **MAUS** (the holocaust, mental illness, suicide. But with talking mice).

The world is of course very different now to when I was a kid, and so indeed are comics. But their power to spark imaginations, and to use jokes and action and cool visuals to engage readers with complex and unexpected subject matter, are as vital as ever. My own son has of course grown up reading **The Phoenix**, and the works of many of my friends and fellow creators on that comic, and I am so grateful for how much that has given

him. Just to pick one example from so many; the aforementioned **Bunny Vs Monkey** by Jamie Smart, a comic that is VERY funny, and VERY silly. But which also delivers an endless stream of mind-expanding ideas, from parallel universes to simulation theory and everything in between, alongside incredibly deep and rich character work, and impeccably-delivered fart jokes.

Let your children read comics. And sit back. And just watch what happens.



Neill Cameron is a cartoonist and writer, creator of the graphic novel series **Mega Robo Bros**, the **Freddy Vs School** illustrated novels, and frequent contributor to weekly children's comic **The Phoenix**. A former artist-in-residence at The Story Museum in Oxford, he continues to be involved in comics-based education and activities, and runs a monthly Comics Club group for young cartoonists.

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.lovelybooks.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**.

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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

Gigantic

★★★★★

Rob Biddulph, Harper Collins, 28pp, 978 0 00 841343 9, £12.99 hbk
In this picturebook we meet Gigantic, a young whale who has a long way to go to live up to his impressive name – he is very tiny. His brother Titan (who definitely does live up to his name) makes fun of him and says Gigantic should play with smaller sea creatures such as Myrtle the Turtle. Gigantic is a jolly creature and does just that; we see him having exuberant fun deep in the ocean with his new friend Myrtle. One day Titan and his friends Hulk and Colossus are watching Gigantic practise his tail spins. Hulk and Colossus are very impressed with the little whale's amazing skills. Titan is jealous and determined to show that anything his little brother can do he can do better. Despite warnings that the water is too shallow he goes ahead and unsurprisingly quickly becomes grounded. It is up to Gigantic and his team of small sea creatures to try and save the day.

This is a delightful story about sibling rivalry and love. It shows that it is possible to make a difference even if you are small and it is the size of your heart not your height or weight that is important.

Stunningly illustrated and designed with rich colour and lots to savour in the detailed undersea world this is an enjoyable picturebook with some lyrical touches and a rhyming text. **SMC**

Who Lives Here?

★★★★★

Julia Donaldson, ill. **Rebecca Cobb**, Macmillan, 32pp, 978 1 5098 9396 6, £12.99 hbk

Who is not delighted, excited, to discover a new publication of a Julia Donaldson picture book? A little boy is thrilled to be invited to play at his friend's house. But there is a problem. On South Street all the houses stand in a row, but which is his friend's house? In Julia's characteristic rhyming style, the tale begins, as we lift each flap to discover the amazing people living in each surprising house. Whilst a cook inhabits the first house, next door is a knight in shining armour. Each page uses a different kind of flap, the thick card making the book accessible for the youngest of children. Once the friends are united, they play knights and pirates, sharing adventures. The play date is a success, and this book will certainly be a success, one which is requested time and again. This author/illustrator partnership has again hit on a favourite. **GB**

Elephants Cannot Dance

★★★★★

Mo Willems, Walker Books, 64pp, 9781529512359, £7.99 pbk

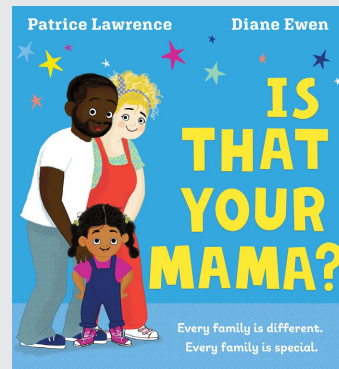
Elephants Cannot Dance brings back the beloved Elephant & Piggie series,

offering a delightful reprint filled with the hilarious antics of best friends, Gerald the Elephant and Piggie. With echoes of an indomitable friendship to rival Lobel's timeless Frog and Toad stories, Willems presents a heartwarming humorous tale that follows Piggie's determined mission to teach Gerald how to dance.

The story unfolds as Gerald, convinced that elephants cannot dance based on a book's assertion, is persuaded by Piggie to give it a shot. The ensuing dance lessons lead to comical mishaps, with Gerald seemingly doing the opposite of Piggie's instructions. Frustration sets in, and Gerald contemplates quitting, but the question remains: has his unique approach inspired others?

Willems' signature bold and expressive illustrations once again shine in this book. The consistent use of speech bubbles, cleverly distinguished by contrasting colours for Piggie and Gerald, allows young readers to easily follow the dialogue and actively engage with the story. Willems' background in comedy injects a playful freshness into the narrative, while his skilful breaking of the fourth wall invites readers to interact with the text in an engaging and interactive way.

With its interactive and humorous nature, this is a perfect choice for emerging readers. The book's easy-to-read format and charming characters create a reading experience that invites joy and laughter from both children and adults alike. **MT**



Is That Your Mama?

★★★★★

Patrice Lawrence, ill. **Diane Ewen**, Scholastic, 32pp, 9780702314971, £6.99 pbk

Josie loves her family. They're the best and they do all look different, but she is fed up with people asking 'Is that your Mama?' every time they go somewhere together.

Josie starts to wonder if her family are all supposed to look the same; how would it feel if they were all blue... or if they were hummingbirds... then no one would ask questions. Maybe families should look alike... maybe other people are right and her family don't belong together after all.

Her family are worried and together, make a plan to find a way to help Josie see what truly matters and what it really means to be a family. Josie revels in the love and comfort and soon realises that her family do belong together after all.

Award-winning author **Patrice Lawrence**, who herself comes from a blended family, has written many books for children which enable to them to empathise with her true-to-life characters. This book was inspired by her own experiences with her daughter and will provide much comfort and encouragement to younger readers and parents in similar situations. The glorious colour illustrations from **Diane Ewen** bring this warm and empowering story to life, encouraging everyone to celebrate the differences in families and in our society as a whole. **AH**

Whirly Twirly Me

★★★★★

Manjeet Mann, ill. **Amanda Quarrey**, Harper Collins, 30pp, 978 0 00 850113 6, £7.99 pbk

A little girl wakes up feeling strange, with a mixture of unsettled feelings inside.

Her day gets worse when her big sister eats her favourite breakfast cereal, another child in her class takes her favourite pencil and at playtime her friends are playing a game she doesn't understand. Mum, Dad and her teacher all tell her she should not get angry, but the little girl knows she isn't just angry, her feelings are more complicated than that.

Eventually she talks to her mum who helps her understand her confusing mixture of emotions including sadness and nervousness about different situations. The illustrations convey the young child's confusing mixture of feelings very effectively in her expressions and body language. However when the child is described as painting her room red it might be a bit confusing to young readers that there is no red paint or crayon to be seen in the illustration.

This is a book designed to help young children understand their complicated feelings a little better and realise the importance of talking about them. A first picture book for young children from award winning, **Manjeet Mann**. **SMC**

The Thing at 52

★★★★★

By **Ross Montgomery**, ill. **Richard Johnson**, **Frances Lincoln**, 40pp, 978-0-7112-7914-8, £12.99 hbk

'There's a Thing on my street. He lives at number 52...'

It's hard to imagine that anyone as large and fluffy as the Thing could go unnoticed, but the girl telling this story seems to be the only one who really cares about the lonely creature on her street. When the gift of a flower brings the unlikely pair together, a gentle and

reviews

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant continued

very satisfying friendship begins.

The girl and the Thing spend lazy days together until a chance encounter on a cliff-top reveals the existence of other Things. A party follows, with presents and streamers and plenty of delicious gravy, and the guests dance in a joyful, Sendak-inspired rumpus that will get young audiences on their feet.

Even the best parties come to an end, though, and change is always round the corner. As the two friends climb a hill to watch the dawn, the mood shifts. It's time for the Thing to move on.

'All Things have to go sometime,' he says, taking the girl's balloon, and as he disappears into a glowing landscape, we feel her loss and pain.

The story could end there, but it doesn't. The girl's mum helps her to remember good times with her friend and grieve for him. A new family moves into number 52, more flowers bloom, and with a different colour palette comes yet another change. The Thing has gone, but there were other party guests, and the girl has lots of new friends to play with. We never forget our loved ones, but their most important legacy may be the doors they continue to open for us long after they've left.

Ross Montgomery's thoughtful and beautifully crafted story addresses some challenging issues - loneliness, connecting with others, dealing with loss and change - but there's a lightness of touch about both words and pictures that imbues this book with playfulness and warmth. Powerfully atmospheric and bursting with soft colour, Richard Johnson's pencil illustrations create a world that shines with emotion. We note the changes in mood, time of day and season as the palette varies, and the Thing's departure, when it comes, feels almost inevitable. But the girl is not abandoned in her grief and we're shown her finding hope and moving on.

The Thing at 52 will prompt discussion and activities around emotional literacy, personal wellbeing and connecting with your community, and although aimed at younger audiences, it would make a good starting point for reflection and debate with older readers, too.

It's worth noting that the girl's mum is present on almost every spread as an emotional supporter and enabler, and even in the midst of sadness, hope and optimism are never far away. **CFH**

Under the Table

★★★★★

Allan Ahlberg, ill. Bruce Ingman, Walker Books, 40pp, 978 1 4063 9526 6, £12.99 hbk

Meet the Cannon family; there's little Elsie, her parents named Mrs and Mr, her brother named Banjo, their cat, Mildred and dog, Bruce.

One morning Banjo and Dad are busy washing the car when out rushes Elsie proclaiming 'There's an egg in my egg

cup! And a great big grey thing under the table!' When they go in to investigate, the egg (Bertie) has run away but the large grey thing - an elephant that introduces itself as Nathaniel - is still beneath the table. Elsie makes a useful suggestion and out they go to wash the car, courtesy of the elephant.

Later on when Mum returns with a boot full of shopping, out dashes Elsie: now the elephant 'neath the table has been replaced by a big bouncy thing with a pocket. Said kangaroo is Abigail and her offspring, Joey. They make splendid assistants when it comes to unloading the shopping. Come meal time, two penguins make their appearance and at Mum's suggestion, the following morning the family, plus animal entourage, plus various items of crockery make their way to the caravan and off they all go on a seaside holiday. where a jolly good time is had by all. The culmination is a barbecue and as you might expect Elsie discovers the presence of animals - 'thingamebobs' - hundreds of them, underneath the table (yes they took the table on holiday too) that didn't seem to be going away any time soon. Before long it's party time times two and there the story ends. We leave them all, sleeping under the stars. Did I say that was the end, but ...

Brilliantly capturing the wonderful imagination of young children, this author/illustrator team, with a full appreciation of children's predilection for the preposterous, have created what is sure to become a classic. **JB**

The Best Bad Day Ever

★★★★★

Written and ill. Marianna Coppo, Frances Lincoln 48pp, 978-0-7112-8333-6, £12.99 hbk

Until a new friend comes along, Wolfie's having an absolutely terrible day in this stylish, perceptive and highly entertaining exploration of grumpiness and viewpoint. As soon as Wolfie wakes, it's obvious that today is going to be bad. The sky is cloudy, his glass of milk isn't full enough, and his bath water's cold. Even his teddy's feeling cross, and by the time Wolfie gets to nursery everything's going wrong. Eventually he doesn't notice anything except his mood - not even the overtures of friendship from someone who clearly admires Wolfie despite (or because of?) his atrocious attitude.

Marianna Coppo's text is well crafted and enjoyable to read, but keen eyes will quickly start to notice that her pictures tell a different story. Wolfie isn't the most reliable of narrators, and by the time his crosspatch scribbling prompts Penguin to copy him, everyone wants Wolfie to look up and see what's really going on. So it's even more of a pleasure when the naughty friends swap snacks, and they can really start to have some fun.

As a deadpan exploration of mood and viewpoint, **The Best Bad Day Ever** is wickedly funny and will

quickly become a favourite with young audiences and their adults, but the humour is always delivered with affection. Everyone knows a Wolfie, whether or not they recognize themselves in his glass-half-full approach, and young audiences will connect with his fluctuating emotions and enjoy being 'in on the joke' as he displays the kind of behaviour they probably shouldn't admire. Reading about Wolfie won't stop a tantrum or transform a natural pessimist, but Coppo's gentle messages about stepping back, reframing and looking for what's good will help children to develop self-awareness, empathy and the ability to take a slightly longer view.

Coppo's artwork is pleasingly minimal but there are plenty of details for children to spot and relate to their own experiences. Forms and props suggest settings, and characters are brought to life with careful, easy-to-read gestures and expressions. White backgrounds allow what matters to sing out on each page, and a saturated pastel palette adds a touch of contemporary sophistication.

Marianna Coppo is the author and illustrator of several other picturebooks including *Petra*, which was shortlisted for the **Kate Greenaway Medal**. **CFH**

Within My Branches

★★★★★

Nicolas Michel, trans. Sarah Ardizzone, Pushkin Children's Books, 64pp, 9781782694083, £12.99 hbk

A picturebook that spans generations, offering a poetic glimpse into the life of a single tree and the interconnectedness of all living beings in the natural world. Set against the backdrop of the French countryside, the story begins with the tree's humble origins as a tiny sapling, barely reaching the height of a dandelion, and follows its remarkable journey of growth, resilience, and profound connections across the land as its own seeds scatter and grow.

Through beautifully detailed illustrations and eloquent prose, the oak narrates its life's story, sharing the joys and challenges it has witnessed over its 457 years of existence. The tree becomes a living witness to a myriad of moments: from animals seeking refuge in its branches to weather-induced trembles in its roots. Throughout its long life, the tree stands as a symbol of harmony, where nature and creatures coexist in a delicate balance, often overlooked by human eyes.

The exceptional illustrations by Nicolas Michel offer a raw, natural insight into the narrative. Black and shades of grey watercolours capture photographic moments in the tree's life as the natural world depends upon it for food and shelter. The sharp contrast of these colours against negative space captures the drama of these moments, and the sparse prose on the verso guides the reader's focus. From the breathtaking beauty of nature to the dramatic moments of storms and survival, Michel's artwork completes a harmonious synergy that

will resonate with readers of all ages.

Within My Branches is a delightful invitation to contemplate the wonders of the natural world and consider the life and struggles of a tree from an intimate, imaginative perspective. It serves as a beautiful reminder for readers, both young and old, to cherish and protect the fragile ecosystems that surround us. **MT**

Two Wheels

★★★★★

David Gibb, ill. Brizida Magro, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 5295 0017 2, £12.99 hbk

The small boy narrator of this story has a bike-obsessed dad and other family members also ride bikes, not so the youngest one. That is until his dad responds to the child's refusal to sit in the baby seat by suggesting he tries his brother's old tricycle. Soon he's competently riding that, so it's replaced with a balance bike and not long after, by a cycle with two big wheels and two stabilisers. This means that our narrator is allowed to ride out in the street. He practises and practises until one day his dad takes him to the park and there at the top of a hill, removes the stabilisers. With his heart pounding and Dad's reassuring words in his head, off the newbie cyclist goes, faster and faster reaching the bottom safe and sound where he receives a big hug from his dad.

Becoming a confident rider of a two-wheeler bike is almost a rite of passage for children and this is beautifully and expressively portrayed - albeit sans any spills - in Brizida Magro's bright, patterned illustrations. She shows clearly how supportive the boy learner's dad is in his facial expressions and body language in scenes that complement the upbeat text, which the author has based on his own experience.

Just right for sharing with young children starting out on the road to becoming competent cyclists. **JB**

Sunny and the Birds

★★★★★

Wendy Meddour, ill. Nabila Adani, OUP, 32pp, 978 0 19 278440 7, £7.99, pbk

There is much to ponder in this thoughtfully illustrated book. It centres on a father and son, and readers need to read the pictures to understand that they have recently moved home from a far warmer clime. Their joint interest in birds is featured throughout the book, the small boy rejoicing in each sighting of a different bird species in their new environment, the father constantly comparing them with the similar birds they found at their previous home. The grandmother provides a bird table for their garden, when the number of bird visitors increases, and gradually the Their new home slowly becomes a reality for the father as well as the son. The final endpaper shows a well-stocked bird table being visited by many birds, each clearly labelled. This is a comforting book, giving a feel of family and the meaning of home. **GB**

5 – 8 Infant/Junior

A Boy, his Dog and the Sea

★★★★★

Anthony Browne, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781529507058, £12.99 hbk
 Danny is bored. His brother Mike is out with his friends. Danny has nothing to do. 'Take the dog for a walk on the beach', says his mother. So Danny does. What starts as another boring episode in the day gradually develops and changes as Danny discovers the fun you can enjoy with a doggy companion, the interest and imagination that can be found in piles of pebbles – and how drama can suddenly flare up.

Anthony Browne is well known for his playful treatment of his illustrations, filling them with surreal details. Here he takes a step back. Certainly, there are intriguing details for young readers to explore; strange images that attract the attention – why is that crow (or is it a raven) holding a balloon? There are details to notice leading the mind to wonder if there is another story taking place outside the covers. Who is the old lady with red shoes, a matching handbag and a dog on a red lead? What can you find among the pebbles. It is the sense of space, the juxtaposition of the beach meeting the sea stretching out to the horizon that draws the reader in as we follow Danny and Scruff; then the moment of drama – the tension watching Scruff brave the waves – the rescue. The story celebrates the everyday, ordinary incidents that can become extraordinary. The language is direct, unfussy matter-of-fact. Yet the reader is held, immersed. In Danny's little world. Brown's artwork carries it through. His palette of browns, greens and blue merging into each other to create the atmosphere of the seaside, the silky move of the water, the roughness of the seaweed strand, the immensity draw the viewer in the experience this landscape. Taking in wide double page spreads to the progression through smaller panes as Scruff swims out then swims back, the images move through the events. At the heart of the narrative is the relationship between Danny and his brother, unspoken, perhaps a little spiky, but real nevertheless - and linking them is Scruff. **FH**

It Wasn't Me!

★★★★★

Written and ill. Marta Altes, Macmillan, 32pp, 978-1-5290-2089-2, £12.99 hbk
 Charlie and Ellis live all by themselves on a tiny island. They spend their days swimming, telling stories and playing on the beach. Everything they have is shared, and everything is perfect - until one morning when their breakfast pot goes missing. Both deny taking it, and searching gets them nowhere. Wherever could it be?

As more objects are lost, Charlie and Ellis are too busy blaming each other to think constructively,



but keen-eyed readers will be one step ahead. It's no surprise when a well-planned page turn reveals a cheeky bird on a suspiciously pot-shaped nest, but Charlie and Ellis remain oblivious to the drama unfolding above their heads. By the time they've lost their spoons, their firesticks and their clothes, they're so cross with each other that leaving the island on separate boats seems the only option. Building things alone is difficult, though, and time apart allows them to calm down enough to work together on a raft.

Everything finally looks rosy, but ten little fledgelings have joined their mother on the beach. Charlie and Ellis are about to learn the truth. Will they realise before they set sail? Or will they be left without a paddle, all at sea?

In this funny and perceptive picturebook about falling out and making up, Charlie and Ellis inhabit an isolated but always charming world where they can express themselves without any real jeopardy. The tension builds with each turn of the page, but there's plenty of humour along the way, and young readers will delight in knowing more than the protagonists. It's worth noting that gender is downplayed, both visually and textually, allowing audiences to read the words and pictures as they choose.

Learning how to navigate the strong emotions that come with childhood friendships isn't easy, so books like this are always welcome. Ellis and Charlie's desert island heightens the sense of separation and shared identity that accompanies their intense bond, and although *It Wasn't Me!* is funny, joyful and an immensely good read, it also addresses some complex ideas. Rushing to blame or judge others without checking facts, allowing anger to obscure reason or empathy, being unable to disagree constructively or negotiate a compromise.... this would be challenging subject matter for most age groups, but Marta Altes navigates it here for younger readers with humour, kindness and insight. In

this respect, *It Wasn't Me!* is a great example of showing not telling and will have all the more impact for its light-touch approach.

With its vibrant and expressive artwork, pantomime-style drama and surprisingly relatable dilemmas, *It Wasn't Me!* will stimulate discussion, storytelling and playful activities of all kinds. **CFH**

Betty and the Mysterious Visitor

★★★★★

Anne Twist, ill. Emily Sutton, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 5295 0812 5, £12.99 hbk

Betty loves to visit her grandma every summer in the village of Wobbly Bottom. She especially delights in the garden, Acorn Hollows, which all the residents of grandma's terrace of cottages share. It's full of trees and burgeoning with wildlife. There her gran grows a variety of fruits and Betty enjoys helping to pick them and make jam to sell in the local market.

On market day morning Betty wakes full of excitement but that soon becomes shock horror. When she looks out of the window the garden is a muddy mess. Grandma says they must leave finding out how this happened and hurry to market. There it's all hustle and bustle and by teatime all the jam has been sold. As they leave Betty determines to discover who had ruined the Hollows. That night as she watches the moonlit garden through her bedroom window she sees a large animal pushing its nose under the fence but it soon disappears. Next morning Grandma tells Betty the animal was likely a badger and to expect further visits. Over the next few nights the badger wreaks havoc in the garden: Betty is greatly concerned: suppose the badger gets into the fruit cage? She has an idea and the following morning starts putting her creativity to work, fashioning an alarming monster and then laying a trail to where she has erected it. Emily Sutton's scene of the night garden guarded by the scare-badger is magnificent. That night Betty sits wide awake watching and sure enough in comes the badger but then it stops suddenly and when the wind blows it has such an effect on the creature that it turns and beats a hasty retreat.

The following morning she tells Grandma what had occurred, including that the badger looked directly at her, seemingly saying goodbye. Grandma is delighted and the two celebrate with hot chocolate under the trees.

Anne Twist was inspired by her own countryside garden and her debut picture book story is a wonderful celebration of the natural world and the bond between Betty and her grandma. Emily Sutton really makes that world come alive in her lavish

illustrations, every one of which is so rich in detail that each time you read the book, you will discover something new. **JB**

**Whose Dog is This?**

★★★★★

Andrew Sanders, ill. Aysha Awwad, Macmillan, 32pp, 978 1 5290 3710 4, £7.99 pbk

This highly amusing book is a follow up to *Where Has All the Cake Gone?* by this author/illustrator team, which was shortlisted for **The Children's Book Award**. The living room, in ten short minutes, has been reduced to chaos, and father demands to know what has taken place. Albert, the son, protests it was all the work of the dog. What dog? The family does not have a dog. And so begins Albert's tall story. The dog was really a secret agent, trying to capture Doctor Feathers Von Beak, a really bad goose who was trying to take over the world. The father's interrogation continues, in bolder type, whilst Albert builds his tall story, in a lighter typeset. The humour of the text is amplified by the whacky drawings, as the tale comes to a close. Clearing up the house and garden is top priority. Readers will love it, and laugh their way through the pages. **GB**

Afterward, Everything Was Different

★★★★★

Jairo Buitrago, ill. Rafael Yockteng, trans. Elisa Amado, Greystone Kids, 64pp, 978 1 7784 0060 5, £13.99 hbk

This beautiful near-wordless picture book takes readers on a captivating journey back in time to the Pleistocene era, where early humans coexist with gigantic beasts. Meticulously illustrated with graphite and white ink, it offers a unique and thought-provoking exploration of prehistoric life and the birth of storytelling.

The story begins with a thrilling bison hunt, setting the scene in a wild and mountainous landscape filled with volcanoes and prehistoric creatures. The narrative follows a small band of early humans, including a single humanoid ancestor intriguingly difficult to place, and the tribe's hound. One observant young

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

girl stands out as she keenly notices the dangers that surround them. As the tribe migrates, they encounter various perils, and lose members to animal attacks and natural disasters, yet persevere to find a warm cave to call home. Here, the girl showcases her artistic talents, creating cave drawings that depict their adventures and become the foundation of storytelling for her tribe. Through her art, she preserves their history and shares their experiences with her family, forever changing the course of human culture: it is a beautiful, touching moment.

This compelling tale delves into themes of survival, human ingenuity, and the power of storytelling. The narrative highlights the importance of observation and creativity, as the young girl's keen eye for detail and artistic expression play pivotal roles in the tribe's survival and cultural development. The book also subtly alludes to the significance of women in prehistoric societies, mirroring modern research that suggests women likely played a prominent role in creating ancient cave art.

The black and white illustrations by Rafael Yockteng are breathtakingly atmospheric and intricately detailed, drawing readers into the prehistoric world with every page. The artist skillfully portrays the vastness of the landscape and the sheer scale of the creatures roaming it, creating a sense of wonder and danger that captivates young and old alike. The visual storytelling allows readers to notice new details with each re-reading, enhancing the overall experience, and I often found myself gasping as I turned pages.

This is a masterful and original picture book that breaks away from convention. Its wordless format allows young readers to interpret the narrative through evocative illustrations, sparking their imaginations and encouraging close observation. Whether enjoyed individually or shared with a small group, this book is bound to provoke stimulating conversations about human history, creativity, and the impact of stories on shaping cultures. A must-have addition to any library or bookshelf. **MT**

Tiny the Secret Adventurer

★★★★★

Aisha Bushby, ill. Kubra Teber, Usborne, 128pp, 9781801314121, £5.99 pbk

Tiny the Secret Adventurer is the first in a new series for younger readers venturing into chapter-based stories.

Tiny, as her names suggests is a very small creature who lives in a primary school garden, along with an assortment of other creatures. She loves her home in the tall sunflowers and enjoys listening to the children play and watching them read their books in the playground. However,

the other animals don't like Tiny, as to them, she looks like one of the humans, who are big, noisy, messy and prone to destroying their homes. Fear makes them decide that they need to get rid of Tiny, before she can cause any trouble for them, but when something happens to Frog's home and he finds himself in real danger, she faces her own fears to come to Frog's rescue and proves to the others that you don't have to be big to be brave.

Award-winning author Aisha Bushby has written a gentle and heart-warming tale about finding courage in the face of bullies, encouraging the acceptance of differences and how if we can work together, then even the biggest obstacles can be overcome. The gorgeous and expressive black and white illustrations from Teber create a wonderful, warm garden world with easily recognisable characters. Perfect for the newly independent reader or as a bedtime read-aloud, Tiny is going to be a very popular addition to all libraries, home or school.

A sequel is due out in Spring 2024, with a further two titles to follow. **AH**



We Are All Astronauts!

★★★★★

Kate Pankhurst, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 9781526615435, £7.99 pbk

Kate Pankhurst has long been known for her inspirational books championing fantastically great women across the ages and in a wide variety of occupations and fields. Her latest title turns to the fascinating subject of space and the many women, mostly unknown, without whom the human race (and a few animals) would never have made it into space at all.

Unlike her other books, **We Are All Astronauts** blends true facts within the story of Luna Scope, aged seven-and-a-bit, who is determined to be an astronaut. However, as her Granny reminds her, she needs to know her space stuff before she can blast off on a mission to the stars.

There is so much to read and find in this gorgeous book. Kate has packed each page full of fact after fact, amid glorious colour illustrations as Granny guides Luna across the stars and galaxies.

We learn how astronauts train and

prepare for their missions in space and which animals were used in the early days of exploration to test the safety of space travel. (Did you know that fruit flies were actually the first living creatures to reach space?) As we zoom through the cosmos, we explore all the planets in our galaxy and see why Earth is the perfect home for us, so we need to make sure that we all take care of it. There is also a variety of astronaut badges to find throughout the book and the reader will surely discover something new to find on each page on every rereading.

An author's note in the end pages tells how the book was inspired by the real-life story of the Mercury 13, a group of talented female trainee astronauts in the 1960s who never made it into space because they were women. The unfairness of this and the realisation that even today there is a huge disparity in the astronauts chosen to go into space due to gender, race or disability, made this an important book for her to write.

All children love to dream of going into space and with this perfect introduction for the next generation of space travellers, will love this book too. I certainly did. **AH**

Brains

★★★★★

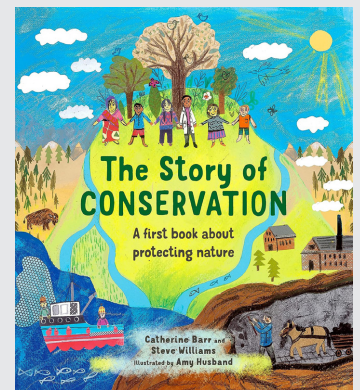
John Deville, Pushkin Children's Books, 32pp, 978 1 78269 403 8, £12.99 hbk

Here is another welcome picture book in the series, **Big Science for Little Minds**. It follows three books on **Atoms, Planets and Germs** published Pushkin. The brightly coloured pages and endpapers immediately caught my attention and draw me into this hardback.

The language is simple and straightforward, as would be expected when explaining a very complicated organ to a child just starting school and learning to read. The use of an analogy of a computer to the human brain is clever and the illustrations on this spread, as well as throughout the book, are of a high standard.

In thirty-two pages this title covers how the brain makes our bodies move and gives us ideas, neurons, different sizes of brains, location of brains etc. I particularly like how Deville draws this actual book on the pages which illustrate, 'You are using your brain right now to read this book' (p.16-17). The pictures throughout are bold, colourful and accurate; they are just what young students need.

If you want to find out how many brains an octopus has then this book is where you will find the answer! It also compares it to a worm's brain! Congratulations to this author/illustrator for producing a book which successfully captures the child's imagination and at the same time educates them at a basic level in how the human brain works. This is a great book for parents, carers, teachers and librarians to share with youngsters and it is certain to spark conversation and lead to lots more questions. **JS**



The Story of Conservation

★★★★★

Catherine Barr and Steve Williams, ill. Amy Husband, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 40pp, 978 0 7112 7803 5, £12.99 hbk

This is a very comprehensive picture book looking at many facets of conservation; it is part of the successful **The Story of ...** series. Laid out chronologically from Prehistory to Today, each page is clearly labelled with a time period. The text is detailed and starts with how, 'These early people lived as part of nature' (p.5). Peoples' use of fossil fuel is explained, and the story follows how indigenous people were moved from their settlements so that national parks could be created, as in Yellowstone. The early work of conservationists is laid out and the development of conservation over time is described.

Children will enjoy the appealing illustrations and abundant use of speech bubbles that this important topic alive. The book covers how humans have plundered natural resources and are now realizing the effects of their actions. The authors have shone a light on particular places: the Arctic peoples fighting against companies wanting oil from their shores; the Pacific islands of Palau learning how to help their sea life flourish once more.

This is a great book to educate youngsters and does not shy away from huge problems about conservation, 'All species have an important role to play and without diversity in nature, both people and wildlife are in trouble' (p.34). I think students will enjoy finding ways to play their part in helping conservation as outlined in this hardback e.g. in Oslo residents are creating roof gardens to encourage wildlife.

The inclusion of a glossary at the end of the book is helpful and much needed for this age group. All in all, a well-illustrated story which gives children ideas and information on climate change, fossil fuels, geography and history. By acting together we can all play our part in conservation and saving our world. **JS**

Ed's Choice

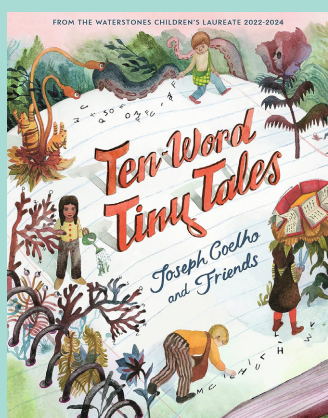
Ten-Word Tiny Tales

★★★★

Joseph Coelho and Friends,
Walker Books, 56pp, 978-
1529502688, £14.99 hbk

Can you create a story with just ten-words? Indeed you can – and Joseph Coelho demonstrates this in this sparkling collection of ten word starters. Or are they the endings? Maybe they are the middle of a narrative? His aim is to encourage young readers – and adults – to be closely involved in the creative process behind the production of a book. In this he wants to free young minds from the idea of The Book as something in which they have no agency. The Book will start with the words – the words spark ideas – the ideas string together, a plot emerges, characters step up, there is action, or maybe reflection ...a story is born. And it will be yours. You are the author.

This is a compelling idea and Joseph carries it off with panache. The subjects of his ten-word tiny tales range from space, to demon hamsters and a sleeping house people with tiny robots to a bear crossing an ice field on a jet-ski and a skull being decorated. Each mini sentence flies off the page, the vocabulary both direct and rich. There is no talking down. He challenges his audience to pick the idea that catches the attention, then to take up a pencil



(or pen) and write for five minutes continuously. It is an intriguing notion – and one easy to launch whether at home or in a classroom. The key, however, the reader should find the words that speak to them. No straightjackets here, please; no pre-selection by an adult who should be as involved as the young. However, the challenge does not just rest on the words – providing a visual inspiration for each tiny tale there are images created by 21 extraordinary artists and illustrators. They are as fascinating as the sentences that inspire them and are a powerful addition to the imaginative impact of the ten-word stories giving children an alternative door to use in their creations. To help those feeling less confident, Joseph includes an introduction – and then advice. His enthusiasm is contagious. Truly inspirational. **FH**

The Dog Squad: The Newshound

★★★★

Clara Vulliamy, HarperCollins
Children's Books, 114pp,
9780008565336, £6.99 pbk

This playful detective story for children is fun for any young readers who love mystery...and dogs!

Eva and her friends are budding journalists who enjoy nothing more than sniffing around for a juicy news story. Their school paper - The Newshound - is in need of some fresh material, though, with stories about recycling bins and missing gloves failing to sate the appetite of Eva and her two ambitious friends. A potentially exciting scoop arrives for them when Eva finds an abandoned puppy outside the shop. There's just one problem...there's no way Eva's mum (or her landlord) is going to let her keep a puppy in the flat!

Eva names the dog Wafer, on account of his scrawny frame, and her team set about finding his owner. It's a tough task as there

are very few clues to work with and, secretly, Eva would much rather keep her new companion!

In many ways, Wafer embodies the spirit of The Newshound team. He's constantly alert and nosing around for clues and he's also utterly enthusiastic and positive... just like Eva and her friends - Simone and Ash. The three children are totally endearing; they are not the most popular children in school but they also have no designs on becoming so. They are not chasing ways to be cool or to stand out from the crowd. Instead, they just want to focus on spending time with their friends, writing their newspaper.

Like any good journalists, The Newshound team is resilient. They won't stop until they have found Wafer's owners, interviewing people who can help and putting up posters around the park. The landlord's urgent deadline to remove Wafer from the flat adds jeopardy to their hunt and, whilst searching for evidence, Eva also has to win the support of her mother - who already

New Talent

Yomi and the Fury of Ninki Nanka

★★★★

Davina Tijani, illus Adam
Douglas-Bagley, Little Tiger
Press, 176pp, 978-1788956123,
£6.99 pbk

In the tradition of many excellent adventure stories for young readers, Yomi and her little brother Kayode are spending the summer away from their parents and with their exciting Uncle Olu. They are in The Gambia and as the book opens, with a storm raging outside, he's telling them stories of Ninki Nanka, the Dragon King of The Gambia and Protector of the Gambia River. That night, Yomi dreams of Ninki Nanka being chased and enveloped in a white mist, only to disappear. Except it wasn't a dream, she saw it all from their window. Uncle Olu refuses to believe her, but clearly knows more than he is letting on. Ostensibly an academic lecturing on African Studies it emerges that he's also part of a secret society working to protect the sacred Nkara against wicked Beast Hunters. Again, our expectations are met that in an adventure of this kind, it's the children who will take up the fight against the baddies. It is Yomi and



Kay – that latter a good deal more reluctant – who end up saving Ninki Nanka, after a series of hair-raising adventures.

This fast-paced adventure story makes irresistible reading. Yomi and Kay are well-rounded characters, their relationship entirely credibly, and their action-packed exploits very satisfying. Their adventures also provide an excellent introduction to the fascinating folklore of The Gambia. This is the first in a series of Africa-set adventures and it will be worth collecting the set. **MMA**

has a lot in her life to juggle.

The **Dog Squad's** story is playful and positive. With the possible exception of a mildly curmudgeonly landlord, everyone is nice to each other. Readers won't have to face the kind of school bully or unfair teacher characters that so often feature in books for this age-range. Instead, they can enjoy spending time with a kind, joyful set of children and their adorable new newshound! **SD**

A Dinosaur at the Bus Stop: Poems to Have Fun With

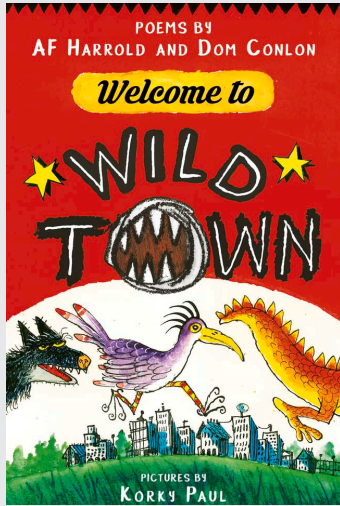
★★★★

Kate Wakeling, ill. Eilidh Muldoon,
Otter-Barry, 80 pp. £8.99, pbk

One of Kate Wakeling's strengths is what she can achieve with the simplest vocabulary and, consequently, how her poems might be enjoyed by a wide age range. So, while this new collection might be read by eight to ten-year-olds, it could certainly be read to much younger children. She's a poet that celebrates imagination and the world's variousness and quietly asks her readers and listeners to do the same. The first two poems are both about difference, *Cloud Stories* celebrates the difference

of perception and imagination that might be found contemplating the shape of clouds and *Mr Long Gets Everything Wrong* wonders whether Mr Long "might have a lot more fun/ than someone who gets everything/ right." She hunts out the mysterious in the everyday. In *Splinter* she marvels how something so tiny can be so painful, in *Pudding Place* she revels in the space for pudding that is always there after even the largest meal. She incites you to join in. Can you keep up with *The Fastest Poem in the World* or ride on the *Ready Steady Steam Train*, or perhaps you might like to bob like a robin, or just lie quietly in a forest clearing. Of course, monsters and dinosaurs make an appearance, there are some mini-beast and ocean riddles to solve; and there's even a (very serious) fart poem. But I like the homely mysteries best: the random treasures with their unique appeal, the stick collection which is best on the street; and, above all, *My Home* itself, a poem for all us home lovers: 'My home knows my favourite story. / My home knows the toy I like best. / It knows when I pick at my toenails. / It knows when I put on my vest.' A gentle, witty, and captivating collection. **CB**

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued



Welcome to Wild Town

★★★★

A. F Harrold and Dom Conlon. ill. Korky Paul, Otter-Barry, 96pp, 978 1 9156 5912 5, £8.99 pbk

Let's visit Wild Town. But first we must sign the Wild Agreement. We will 'become completely stuck/within the pages of this book' and it will not be comfortable – a place where 'danger leaps from off the page' and 'words are sharpened like a knife' – and we could change to be 'entirely free'. So Dom Conlon draws the reader into this clever, slim anthology in which he and A. F Harrold imagine a Wild Town peopled by insects, zebras, lions, wolves and others – a wild town that is in reality every town. There are poems to suit every taste ranging from Dom Conlon's reflections to the spiky, anarchic humour of Harrold. The words sing, shout and whisper, the vocabulary rich and varied. The poets play with words and create images to capture the imagination (take a look at Conlon's *Wild Flower Meadow* or *The Pool* by Harrold). There are lyrics – and horror stories. Providing the perfect visual accompaniment are Korky Paul's spiky, energetic, humorous illustrations. This is a thoroughly enjoyable collection from the pens of two poets who know how to speak to young readers and is well worth promoting in the classroom – and at home. **FH**

Worrybot

★★★★

Simon Packham, UCLan, 256pp, 978 1 9152 3547 3 £7.99 pbk

Simon Packham is the author of several well-received books for readers aged 9 and above and has a gift for addressing issues that will be familiar to many young people sensitively but in a way that feels totally true to life. Josh, the protagonist of his latest book, is beset by worries, to the extent that it seriously impacts his life. Work with a counsellor has helped hugely and Josh has a number of strategies to help him cope, including his Worrybot,

the home-made cardboard robot into which he posts his fears. Now though, he has a major new worry: the family are moving to Brighton, which means a new school. Worrying enough for any young person, but a nightmare for Josh. What really drives his worries is the bullying he endured at his previous school and fears that there might be another Lottie at the new one.

Readers won't be surprised to discover that there is another bully – thoroughly nasty Noah – maybe there is in every class? Isolated initially, Josh finds friendship and support with Charlie, who can't physically be in class, but attends school via a learning robot. With Charlie's help, Josh even starts to attend the drama classes he enjoyed so much before it all went wrong at his old school.

It's proof of Packham's writing ability that we accept completely the growing friendship between Josh and Charlie. Their eventual double act at the end of term show – boy and robot – is a huge success with everyone, and it emerges that their classmates are far less enamoured with Noah than his brashness has led us to believe. There are two twists to the story – one I saw coming, one I didn't, the latter perhaps stretching our credulity a little, but it's another thoroughly satisfying story from this author, skilfully blending empathy and humour. **LS**

The Piano at the Station

★★★★

Helen Rutter, ill. Elisa Paganelli, Barrington Stoke, 94pp, 978 1 8009 0218 3, £7.99, pbk

Lacey Layton has a sharp tongue and a reputation as a troublemaker; as a result, she spends a lot of time in her school's isolation unit. However, her head teacher is keen to help, recognising Lacey's intelligence and that a lot of her problems are due to her chaotic home life. When lunchtime music sessions are suggested Lacey is initially suspicious, but she soon discovers she has a natural talent for piano playing and composition and really enjoys sessions with the music teacher. Lacey is devastated when she discovers he is leaving, and her behaviour deteriorates once more. However, one day Lacey discovers a piano at the nearby train station and playing it secretly it becomes a lifeline for her. Unfortunately, she soon discovers there are plans to remove the piano. In order to save it, not only for herself but also the others who rely on it, Lacey decides she has to take action which will mean revealing her passion and skill to the public and even worse to her family.

Lacey is an appealing character, and this is a very moving story about a troubled child who discovers an unexpected talent. We see her struggles as she tries to reconcile her identity as a member of the fiercely loyal but anti authority Layton family and the new

opportunities nurturing her musical talent may bring her. It is a lovely story full of warmth and sensitivity.

With Barrington Stoke's trademark dyslexia friendly format this is an accessible, inclusive and engaging read, highly recommended. **SMc**

The Best Sleepover in the World

★★★★

Jacqueline Wilson, illus Rachael Dean, 224pp, 978 0 2415 6722 7, £14.99 pbk

This is a companion book to Jacqueline Wilson's, *Sleepovers*, which was published in 2001. In this new book, Daisy's wheelchair-using sister, Lily, plays a much more developed and prominent role. She has moved to a new specialist school where she has learned Makaton, a language like British sign language, used by people who have learning difficulties.

This new language has allowed Lily to express her ideas more clearly, though still with considerable difficulty. Most importantly, it has improved the relationship between Daisy and Lily immeasurably. When Daisy is upset because she is not invited to mean-girl Chloe's sleepover, Lily suggests they should have their own on the same night. Daisy is very pleased but a little conflicted because she doesn't see how they can compete. What can someone like Lily do that everyone would enjoy? Wilson's highlighting of those who are different is not confined to disability. The girls' much-loved uncle, Gary/Gloriette performs as a drag act and the way he interacts with both girls is heart-warming and another celebration of someone who is often perceived as an outsider.

Wilson's depictions of those who are different are fully realised and there is a welcome development of the characters who starred in the original *Sleepovers*.

Rachael Dean's illustrations work well and are stylistically different from Nick Sharratt's original depictions of Daisy and Lily. **RB**

Meet the Maliks – Twin Detectives: The Cookie Culprit

★★★★

Zanib Mian, ill. Kyan Cheng, Hachette Children's Group, 196pp, 9781444974294, £6.99 pbk

In this brilliant new comedy series for children, Maysa and Musa Malik hone their detective skills in order to find the villain responsible for destroying a precious collection of charity cookies.

Maysa is the story's narrator and all readers will find her great fun. It's not always easy to behave perfectly in class – at school or at mosque – especially when the teacher is so miserable and some of the other students are determined to look down their noses at you. Sadly, Maysa's automatic response to such challenges is to daydream or crack jokes... or to contrive ways of covering her foes in worms! This habit for mischief makes it difficult for her

adoring-yet-strict parents to agree she can go on the biggest event of the year – the residential activity week with her friends. Disaster!

The majority of the story is dedicated to Maysa's attempts to prove she is sensible and mature enough to attend the trip. This means trying her best to design and sell the very best cookies for the mosque's Ramadan charity event. When the cookies are mysteriously smashed to pieces, Maysa is determined to uncover the cookie-crashing culprit.

Maysa is helped in her detection by Norman, the next door neighbour, whose willingness to partake in Maysa's family's Muslim traditions (especially those involving food!) are endearing and are a gentle way of shining a light on the many misconceptions people have about Islamic culture. Most of all though, Maysa is helped by her twin Musa. He has a 'twin' sense, which means he can guess what she's thinking. There's no hiding anything from Musa. The twins' relationship reminds readers of the importance of supporting one's family and of being open with friends. Musa helps Maysa learn important lessons about honesty and kindness, which are amplified by the story's setting during the month of Ramadan.

As in Mian's first book – *Project Omar – Meet the Maliks* offers readers an opportunity to see the world from a perspective with which they might be unfamiliar, in a way that is engaging and very funny. As the twins are such an enjoyable combination of kindness and mischief, future episodes are bound to be very welcome indeed. **SD**

Calling the Whales

★★★★

Jasbinder Bilan, Ill. Skylar White, Barrington Stoke, 76pp, 978 1 8009 0180 3, £7.99 pbk

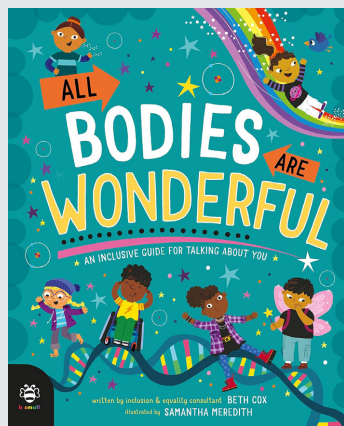
Best friends Tuls and Satchen enjoy spending time outside exploring near their home in Scotland, but one night they spot something unusual in the sea and are drawn to investigate further. After rowing out to the nearby island, they discover a humpback whale trapped in a fishing net and risk their own lives trying to save it from drowning. When a storm hits, they must decide whether to save themselves before it is too late or stay to help. Whilst trying to row back to shore, their boat capsizes and they fear that all is lost, but suddenly rescue comes from an unexpected source. Once safely reunited with their families, the pair of friends are both astounded and delighted to see the freed whale also back in the fold of his family, making his way back into the wide ocean once again. They are determined to share their adventures and encourage others to make a difference in saving wildlife and the beautiful countryside around them.

Atmospheric black and white illustrations from Skylar White perfectly invoke the wildness of the sea and surrounding landscapes, as

award-winning author Bilan invites us into her rugged coastal town, inspired by a much-loved place she visits in Scotland. End notes give us more information about humpback whales and how readers can get involved in the fight against ocean pollution.

As always, Barrington Stoke's dyslexia-friendly publication makes this a story that can be enjoyed by a wide range of readers and the length of the book will appeal to those looking for a shorter, more accessible read.

This is a heartwarming and exciting story of adventure, courage and friendship, sharing important messages about conservation and the need to preserve our ocean wildlife, with a thread of hope that this generation will continue to work together to protect our planet. **AH**



All Bodies are Wonderful

★★★★

Beth Cox, illus Samantha Meredith, b Small, 978 1 9139 1858 3, 36pp, £9.99 hbk

Written by Beth Cox, Inclusion and Equality Consultant and a co-founder of Inclusive Minds, **All Bodies are Wonderful** is informative, inclusive and inspiring. Her approach is to explain that differences in us, our bodies, is not just normal but inevitable. From this starting point, she is able to prove convincingly that indeed, all bodies are wonderful.

The book not only explains how humans develop physically (the opening pages cover stardust, atoms and DNA), it also shows readers how the world we grow up in shapes us too, e.g. through the family we are born into. Helpfully, it alerts us to the ways in which our brain can make us stereotype others without our noticing, as well as showing how such stereotypes can even affect the way we see ourselves. The text is clear, well supported by Samantha Meredith's lively illustrations, and the examples given throughout will be readily understood by young readers. A spread entitled 'Baby Labels' explains the difference between gender and sex in ways that children of this age will understand, while pointing out too that both are spectrums, and that people can fit anywhere on them. The

child characters whose voices explain the science include youngsters with spina bifida, vitiligo, cerebral palsy and ectrodactyly.

It's particularly good to see that as well as encouraging everyone to feel comfortable in their body, it offers practical things to do to help achieve that, including simple ways to tackle unhelpful thinking styles. An inclusive and supremely helpful guide to talking about bodies that will be useful in classrooms, at home, and to individual young readers. **MMA**

The Thames and Tide Club: The Secret City

★★★★

Katya Balen, ill. Rachael Dean, Bloomsbury, 160pp., 978 1 5266 4048 2, £6.99, pbk

Not so long ago, I came across an adult book called **Mudlarking, Lost and Found on the River Thames**, by Lara Maiklem, which is the fascinating account of the possessions discarded through history that can be discovered on the muddy shores and bed of London's river as the tide goes out. **The Time and Tides Club: The Secret City** is Carnegie award-winning Katya Balen's first book for a younger age group and begins a series about a band of children, who know that 'Mudlarking was treasure-hunting. It was story-finding. It was magic.' Not that much of what the children usually find could properly be called treasure (a withered crisp packet and an old coke bottle), but, on an apocalyptically wild and wet Saturday, Clem finds something that plunges the club (literally!) into a truly magical tale. Enhanced by Rachael Dean's quirkily cheerful black and white illustrations, this is an engaging and funny fantasy that features a group of attractive child characters living in a diverse and warm riverside estate and discovering an underwater world that is a punning reflection of the city in which they live. There are more stories to come in the series. **CB**

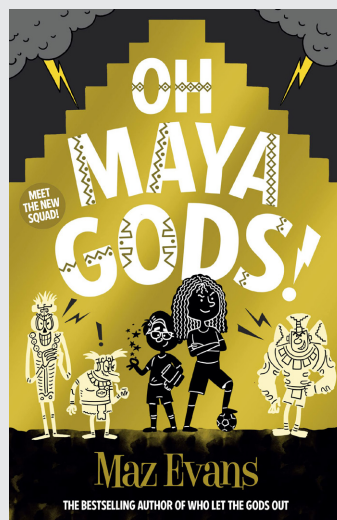
Oh Maya Gods

★★★★★

Maz Evans, Chicken House, 978 1 9136 9687 0, £7.99 pbk

Twelve-year old Vesper Hooper is angry about a lot of things. She has messed up on her chance to get a place on the national youth football squad. She is fed up with getting teased for being adopted and her annoying cousin, Aster, is coming to stay for an indefinite period. Because of her mood, she goes to her 'safe place', Stonehenge and accidentally awakes a vengeful god. How can she get him back where he came from and what secrets are her dad and her aunt hiding and will Aster help?

This is the first in a new series of stories about gods by Maz Evans. She has succeeded in making what could be quite a dry, academic subject by turns deliciously scary and



uproariously funny. Hermes speaks mostly in street slang and steals many scenes. Pegasus is snooty, aloof and demanding. He drinks only mineral water. Evans needs to produce the next volume in the series as quickly as possible.

This book could be utilized in Key Stage 2 history. **RB**

Action Dude Holiday on the Moon

★★★★★

Andy Riley, Welbeck Publishing, 142pp, 9781801300632, £7.99 pbk
First name ... Action. Second name... Dude. And he's back!

Last year's hilarious graphic novel, also written and illustrated by Andy Riley, introduced us to the superhero that is Action Dude (also known to his Mum as Charlie Munderdrew) and this new sequel brings him flying back onto our shelves with a bang (crash, wallop)!

When famous self-titled 'wazillionaire' Ted Banoffee comes to their school offering one pupil the chance to win a trip into space and a week's holiday staying in his new moon hotel, Action Dude and his best friend Kay are determined to win this once in a lifetime prize. But on the day of the launch into space, only moments before lift-off, there is a sudden and strange broadcast on TV from outer space, warning that anyone using the alien power source on the moon will face immediate destruction! There is only one thing for it, Action Dude must come to the rescue!

What ensues is another fast-paced bonkers adventure, full of exciting inventions, spacesuits, moon buggies, angry green aliens and lots of things being blown up. There is even a new pigeon friend along for the ride, who ends up playing a very important role. The colourful illustrations of the book, whilst fairly simplistic, perfectly create the hilarious and crazy world of the title character and his madcap antics.

I loved Action Dude's first outing, but this new episode is even better. Andy Riley has written another thrill-packed adventure, full of fun, jokes, friendship and explosions galore. Action Dude's latest exploits read like an exciting movie and there's even

a post-credit scene at the end, like all good superhero films! A definite must-have for all graphic novel and superhero fans. **AH**

Finally Seen

★★★★★

Kelly Yang, Knights Of, 320pp, 978 1 91331 187 2, £7.99 pbk

This is the story of ten year old Lina Gao who emigrates from Beijing to Los Angeles to join her parents and younger sister, Millie, whom she has never met. Lina's beloved grandmother is now too old and ailing to be able to look after her. Her parents have been sending her letters telling her all about their amazing life in America, the land of opportunity. Lina can't wait to see it. When she arrives, the reality is very different. She can't even order water without her little sister's help because she knows very little English. Their flat is tiny and they are already behind with their rent. Will Lina ever find her place in America and within her family?

The answers to both questions are in the affirmative but Yang's depiction of the struggles and courage that emigration takes are heart-warming and informative. Readers will root strongly for Lina. There is also a very well-made comment by Yang about the issue of censorship in schools. Who determines and who should determine which books are considered suitable for children? School Librarians will also take heart from this book as it is an affirmation of the role Librarians play in supporting learning. **RB MP**

Batpig Book 3: Go Pig or Go Home

★★★★★

Rob Harrell, Walker Books, 236pp, 978 1 5295 1122 2, £8.99 pbk

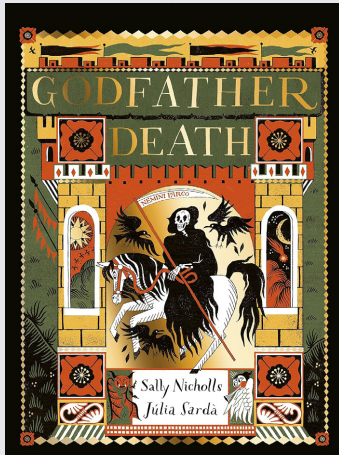
This gloriously goofy graphic novel will delight fans of Pilkey's **Dogman** and the **Phoenix** comics franchise. It's a seriously silly skit on superheroes but it also teaches children valuable lessons about empathy, fairness and kindness. The accessible chapter format, bold palette of primary colours and zany humour will appeal to visual readers looking for instant laughs. With direct speech and pithy narrative commentary, it's a double delight.

Batpig first featured in **Wink** but his popularity meant he went the whole hog with his own series. This is the third outing for the unlikely trio of Gary [Batpig's alter ego], Carl [the nervous fish] and Brook [the sensitive bat, who is also the voice of reason]. The volume encompasses two zany adventures, 'Careful What you wish for' and 'Camp Danger' in which Gary gets himself into a series of scrapes, encounters the hybrid Sharkraham [a hilarious construct], the evil Squown hybrid, a monster with tummy trouble and his arch nemesis who is back to settle the score.

Harrell's illustrations are imaginative and expressive and the plot entertains and sneakily educates. There are movie influences like the **Gremlins** and magical memory

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

wiping photo booths mashed up with anthropomorphic characters who are just trying to survive friendship dramas, fears about fitting in and normal school pressures. Comical word play, the discomforts of attending summer camp, test stress and snack food are all there to savour. **TJ**



Godfather Death

★★★★★

Sally Nicholls, ill. Julia Sarda, Andersen Press 48 pp, 978 1 83913 141 7, £12.99 hbk

If you made a bargain with Death, would you try to cheat him? And what would happen if you did? A fisherman demands total honesty from others but proves untrustworthy himself in this stunningly illustrated folktale retelling for older readers.

When a poor fisherman goes looking for an honest godfather for his newborn son, he ends up making a strange choice. But who is fairer or more predictable than Death? He treats everyone equally and cannot be bribed.

At the baby's Christening, Death gives the fisherman a bottle of coloured water - a charlatan's prop that, with Death's help, will propel him to a more prosperous future. When Death stands at the foot of the bed, the patient will recover, and the fisherman can charge a fortune for his miracle cure. But when Death stands at the patient's head, nothing can be done for them and Death must be allowed to claim his prize.

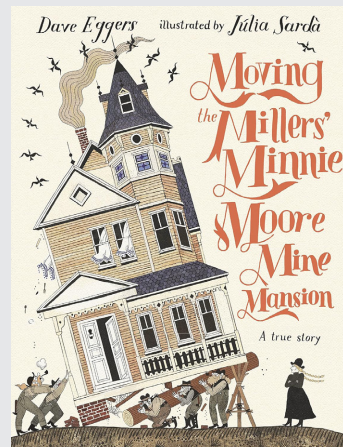
All goes well until the King falls sick. Death is standing at his head, and by rights, his life is over. But the fisherman falls prey to temptation, and turns the bed around. Death has been cheated - or has he? In a dramatic and truly chilling ending, Death catches up with the fisherman to extract his recompense.

Originally collected by the Brothers Grimm, this haunting folktale has been reimagined for the twenty-first century with insight, verve and style. Sally Nicholls' beautifully crafted short story is arranged over eight chapters and provides just the right amount of detail and context for newly

confident readers, who will appreciate its immediacy, pace and accessible vocabulary. With their focus on shared dilemmas and morality, folktales have always captured the interest of adults as well as children, and *Godfather Death* follows tradition in this respect: older readers will also find it engaging and compelling.

Tradition is evident in Julia Sarda's striking and extraordinary artwork, too. Echoes of woodblock printing, medieval manuscripts and folk art abound, but her illustrations also have an arresting novelty and wicked sense of humour about them: trumpet-toting cherubs give way to speeding bats, alarmed ravens scatter teardrop feathers and red-capped candles gather like hungry imps. Freehand borders restrain but don't contain the images: playful marginalia erupt into clean, white space, and backgrounds crowd into the foreground with an immediacy that draws us in and propels us on.

Some of Sarda's visual inspiration, like the original folktale itself, comes from a time when death was ever-present and people were perhaps more used to the gruesome or macabre. *Godfather Death* treads a careful path in this respect, though: there are some shivery moments, but visually they are stylized, and for most audiences this will be a gripping and exhilarating read, but not a scary one. **CFH**



Moving the Millers' Minnie Moore Mine Mansion

★★★★★

Dave Eggers, ill. Júlia Sarda, Walker Books, 56pp, 978 1 5295 1630 2, £14.99 hbk

Set in the 19th-century frontier of Idaho, this delightfully quirky but true tale unveils a fascinating chapter of history with a touch of humour and resourcefulness. The story opens with the discovery of silver in Idaho by a prospector's dog, and one harassed gopher, leading to the birth of the Minnie Moore Mine. Soon after, it is sold to Henry Miller, an Englishman, who marries Annie, a local woman. Henry builds an opulent mansion for his wife, the Millers' Minnie Moore

Mine Mansion. Tragedy strikes when Henry passes away, leaving Annie conned by a dishonest banker and determined to raise pigs for her livelihood. However, the townspeople disapprove of her porcine endeavour. Not willing to abandon her home, Annie hatches a bold plan to move the mansion outside the town limits, and with remarkable ingenuity, the improbable feat is accomplished: this is the log-rolling crux of the story.

At its core, *Moving the Millers' Minnie Moore Mine Mansion* celebrates human perseverance, ingenuity, and resourcefulness. It highlights the power of determination and the ability to overcome adversity with clever solutions. The story resonates with themes of home, family, and the importance of holding on to one's dreams even in challenging circumstances.

Júlia Sarda's exceptional illustrations breathe life into this stranger-than-fiction tale. The earthy and subdued colours evoke the historical setting while providing dynamic energy to the scenes; I'm not sure anyone captures movement and energy quite like Sarda, whose attention to detail and fluid artwork enhances the story's humour and dramatic moments.

Eggers' witty narrative, lots of tongue-in-cheek repeating lines, and narrative intrusion to make us smile and lighten the tone, alongside Sarda's masterful illustrations make this book a gem for readers of all ages. Children and adults alike will be charmed by the resourceful protagonist, Annie Miller, and her daring plan to save her beloved home. *Moving the Millers' Minnie Moore Mine Mansion* is a heartwarming and entertaining read that leaves a lasting impression. **MTDB**

One chance dance

★★★★★

Efua Traoré, cover ill. Micaela Alcaino, Chicken House 323pp., 978 1 9150 2650 7 £7.99 pbk

Efua Traoré grew up in a little town in Nigeria, enjoyed a good life, moved when an adult to Germany, and started writing stories. Her 6 year-old daughter came home from school one day saying that she had learnt that children in Africa were hungry and suffering. Appalled at the misleading information that the class was getting, she asked her daughter to remember their happy holidays in Nigeria and to tell her classmates about them. Unable to find stories for children that showed a more positive side of Africa, she began writing, won a prize for a short story, and then produced *Children of the Quicksands*, also positively reviewed by this reader a couple of years ago.

This book shows contrasting sides of life in Nigeria. Jomi's Mum has gone to find work in prosperous Lagos, and Jomi has to do household chores for his Aunt to earn his keep. Any happiness comes from his friendship with his cousin Tinuke, his school, and his skill at using and fixing the things

he finds on the scrap hill just outside his village. When bulldozers come to clear the village and the forest, Jomi rescues a young bushbaby, and in the chaos he finds letters from his Mother that his Aunt had hidden from him. He confronts his Aunt, and his Uncle is horrified at her treatment of his sister's child: there is a tremendous row, and Jomi takes the bushbaby and runs away. He manages to stow away and reach Lagos, but struggles to survive, until he meets a group of street children, who are being looked after by the kindly 'Aunty Bisi' in rooms in her employer's house, earning money as best they can. The children are resourceful individuals, all with different skills, though the enmity of one of them has to be resolved, but they come up with a plan to find Jomi's mother- they will dance on Lagos Let's Dance, his Mum's favourite programme, as it is open to anyone to audition. Jomi is able to fix a broken radio to enable them to find music to dance to, but things don't quite go according to plan for 'Destiny's Crew'. A word he learned at school: 'Serendipity' proves useful: he does find his mother, extricates her, with the aid of the bushbaby, from the home of the tyrannical Madam for whom she works, and takes the bushbaby to a Conservation Centre where she will be happier and healthier.

It's a great story, beautifully told, and we really get involved with the characters. Jomi's mother, Wande, has always believed in the power of destiny, but it is clear in this book that they also have to help other people, and make the best of what life offers. **DB**

The After School Crime Club

★★★★★

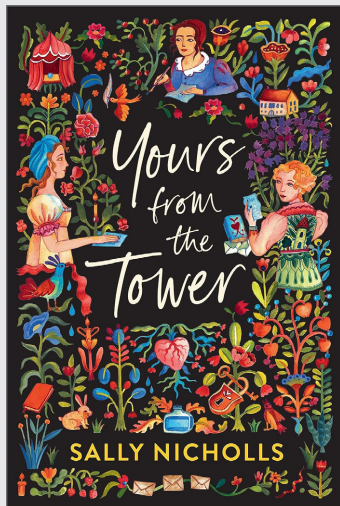
Hayley Webster, Nosy Crow, 208pp, 978 1 78800 606 4, £7.99 pbk

Willow Strong is eleven years old. Her Nanna whom she adored and with whom she spent a lot of time, has just died. Her Mum is worried Willow's grades are slipping so has sent the unwilling Willow to SATS tutoring at the local bookshop. There, she meets Marie, who seems nice and the enigmatic Tay Welding who has a reputation for being mean and doing all manner of disreputable things. Marie tells Willow that Tay, whom Willow is desperately curious about and wants to befriend, wants her to steal an object from home for a dare to join their secret gang. Willow knows this is wrong but how far will she be willing to go to fit in? And is Tay Welding all that she seems or can first impressions be wrong?

Webster details the power of peer pressure and encourages the reader to break down stereotypes and to be less quick to reach a judgement. The strongest relationship in this book is between Willow and her Nanna and it is one that most readers will value.

The one thing that didn't quite ring true for this reviewer was the fact that tutoring took place in a bookshop. There might be a few too many distractions! **RB**

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary



Yours from the Tower

★★★★★

Sally Nicholls, Andersen Press, 356pp, 9781839133190, £14.99, hbk. This book is technically brilliant and consistently engaging. It tells its story via letters exchanged by three teenage girls after they have left the boarding school where they had become close friends. It's 1896, and none of them has it easy. Tirzah is now virtually imprisoned in Scotland by a tyrannical grandmother, her own parents having disappeared long ago. Sophia is pushed into the London Season with instructions to marry as fast and well as she can in order to rescue her family's straitened finances. Polly works in a Liverpool orphanage, a job she loves, and is the only one content with her lot.

All remain as feisty as they can, but there is no disguising the hardships they suffer. Modern readers may well feel aghast that young women not so very long ago were first deprived of education and then of any reasonable hope of a career. But by sticking to each other they all come out triumphant, although this is a near-run conclusion. But no-one could possibly begrudge them their eventual happiness, still through marriage but in every case having now found the right person. Incidental detail skilfully woven into the narrative meanwhile offers a vivid picture of slum life at one end and the various pettifoggish conventions once demanded in higher society at the other.

Sally Nicholls is a prize-winning author, with her previous **Things a Bright Girl Can Do** a deserved best-seller. But this current novel could well be her best yet. Young readers may find their parents also wanting to read this heart-warming story, which so artfully shows how grim reality can with luck still finally give way to the irrepressible optimism and determination of these three girls in their efforts to live a more fulfilling life. NT

Summer School and Cyborgs

★★★★★

Steven Camden, ill. Chanté Timothy, Macmillan Children's Books, 415pp, 9781529011005, £7.99 pbk

In this comedy drama for children, Jay is looking forward to the greatest summer holiday ever. Having fostered two brilliant friendships in the book's prequel - *My Big Mouth* - Jay can't wait to begin weeks and weeks of hanging out with his two totally awesome besties. Unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond his control (involving family tragedy and football obsession) Jay suddenly finds himself facing up to an entire summer holiday with neither of his friends, a grumpy teenage sister, an aged sleepy pet dog and a busy mum who's working nights.

Just as life couldn't get any more miserable, Jay's mum teams up with his favourite teacher to convince Jay that he must join the local secondary school's summer arts camp. He's frightened by the idea of socialising with new people (especially older children) but begins to feel more positive about the camp when he learns that his cool new neighbour over the road - Pam - is going to be there too.

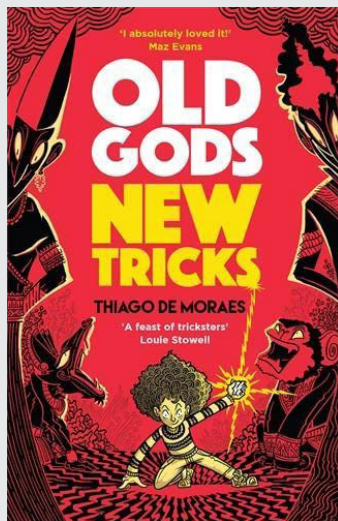
Like *My Big Mouth*, *Summer School* is written as a monologue, which Jay delivers to the reader with total transparency and hilarious turns of phrase. Jay constantly asks us, directly, to imagine how he is feeling and to think about what we would do in his situation: how would you tell a cool girl you liked her? What would you do if your tough older sister asked you to keep a secret for her? It's a powerful device that draws the reader very close to the character, and even children who missed Jay's first novel will quickly feel like he's a close friend.

Jay is at his most entertaining when describing the many disasters in his life. He does a brilliant (and very funny) job of using melodrama to make life's little problems seem devastating. This is characterised most of all by Pam's pet macaque, whose fondness for Jaffa Cakes and petty burglary mean that he soon becomes Jay's nemesis.

Hiding behind Jay's trivial problems is a genuine sadness, though. His dad has abandoned the family and Jay does not know where he has gone. His struggle with coming to terms with such a serious challenge are expertly contrasted with the day-to-day embarrassments and neuroses that all young readers will recognise. Jay begins to see (or imagine he is seeing) glimpses of his father around town, and does all he can to avoid confronting his emotions.

A few sci-fi-loving readers may be disappointed by the very minor role that cyborgs play in the story - given

its title - and the long form monologue style won't be to absolutely everyone's taste. For the vast majority of readers, though, *Summer School* will be an absolute joy: funny, heartfelt and charming. SD



Old Gods, New Tricks

★★★★★

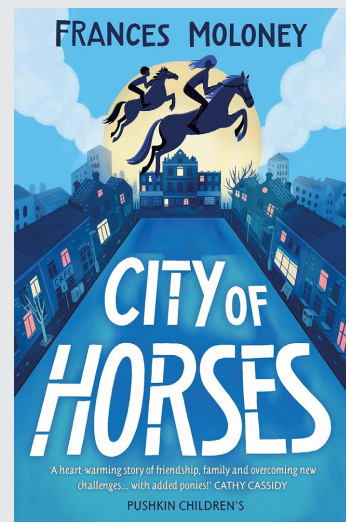
Thiago de Moraes, David Fickling Books, 288pp, 9781788452953, £7.99 pbk

The main character, Trixie dos Santos definitely lives up to her name and as the story begins, she is getting a final warning from her headteacher and is threatened with expulsion. At that moment all electricity stops functioning and the world is without lights, computers and in fact anything that depends on this source of power. As life becomes increasingly difficult for everyone, Trixie decides that it is the old gods who have taken the electricity away and she needs to find a way to trick them into giving it back; the answer is to get the trickster gods to help, something that is a huge challenge, even if she can get them to answer her pleas. What follows is something of a roller-coaster ride as Trixie and her companions follow the trail that will lead them to the other gods and hopefully success in giving electricity back to the world.

What a fabulous take on the world of myths and legends. The trickster gods all have their own little quirks and a real sense of attitude, so that we really enjoy their antics and the interaction between them. We also see these gods develop a real feeling of friendship with our young heroine, which means they start working together as an approximation to a team. Trixie is a really feisty young girl who learns a lot through the adventures that she goes through. There is a lot of growing up and an understanding that life does not always change in the ways you imagine when you start on a journey.

The author is also a very talented artist and his illustrations for the book really focus on the wide-ranging cultures that are represented; the black and white images really add to the overall sense of foreboding that we feel as the world begins to descend into darkness. This story also highlights the dependence that this world has on the use of electricity. Even for those of us who grew up without computers, mobile phones and other digital resources, it is still difficult to imagine going back to the days before this source was available. In a real sense this book provides a call to look after our natural resources and not squander what we have. MP

Reviewer Margaret Pemberton has more to say about *Old Gods, New Tricks* in this blog post <https://margaretpemberton.edublogs.org/2023/07/06/old-gods-new-tricks-by-thiago-moraes/>.



City of Horses

★★★★★

Frances Moloney, Pushkin Childrens, 224p 9781782693963, £7.99 pbk

Frances Moloney's second children's novel, following on the success of *The Mystery of the Missing Mum*, captures the zeitgeist of the cost-of-living crisis and the difficulties that come with being forced to adapt to sudden change. 13-year-old Misty struggles with pride and embarrassment when she has to relocate from her comfortable home to a scruffy housing estate on the outskirts of her city.

Resentful at first, Misty resolves to lie to her best friends Ruby and Jasmine about her situation disguising the fact that she has to commute to school. Meanwhile her dad is experiencing loss, frustration and low self-esteem while trying to help her adjust. As Misty processes her inner conflicts she makes a discovery that gives her a new purpose.

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

City of Horses is inspired by Moloney's childhood experiences at a Pony Centre in London, the BBC documentary *City of Horses* set in Swansea, the O'Devaney Gardens Irish property scandal, Bergin's Saoirse, which chronicles Dublin's travelling community, and her love of Patricia Leach's *Jinny at Finmory* series.

Moloney creates an empathetic and immersive urban equestrian world populated by believable and relatable characters. Issues of class, political machinations, the indomitable nature of community spirit and the importance of social activism are also addressed. Weaker plot points involve a burgeoning romance which is a little forced. The book will appeal to teens who like friendship drama and realistic novels where characters are resourceful and determined to make a difference. **TJ**

Kicked Out

★★★★★

A.M Dassu, cover ill. Zainab Faidhi, Old Barn Books, 221pp., 9781910646892, £7.99 pbk

This is a sequel to *Boy*, everywhere which told the story of Sami's journey from a privileged life in Damascus, when his only concern was which new trainers to buy, via a smuggler's den in Turkey to an immigration prison, and eventually to life in England, but his new life still present challenges. In this second book, Mark's Mum has won the lottery, bought a lovely new house with a swimming pool, and employed Aadam, also Syrian and living with Sami and his family, as a gardener. The friends love to go there after school, and Mark's Mum buys them pizza, but their idyll is spoilt when Mark's Mum's new boyfriend, Callum, accuses Aadam of stealing and sacks him on the spot. Aadam is attempting to pay a lawyer to negotiate his appeal for an asylum application, so he does need quite a lot of money, but of course he is not a thief. They are all 'Kicked out' and Mark is forbidden to associate with his friends. They meet at school anyway, and when they can, and they all decide to help Aadam by raising the money he needs. A chance encounter with a famous footballer turns out to be very useful, and their resourcefulness and thoughtfulness are rewarded when they raise the money Aadam needs. They also discover what really happened to the missing money, and eventually they're having fun at the pool again.

Another thread is Ali's story as his dad, with a new family, comes back into his life. When his step-brother starts at Ali's school, Ali's feelings become very complicated, and there is some way to go before the situation is resolved. It is rare to find a story about an absent dad in a Muslim, or even a South Asian family, but there are many children growing up without a Dad, for whom this story may resonate.

Another story featuring the friends was **Boot It**, which tackled racism and bullying, for **World Book Day**. A.M Dassu writes well and with understanding about these problems, and she is donating a portion of her advances for **Kicked Out** to BACA, a charity that supports young asylum seekers, and another portion to Syrians who lost everything in the earthquake earlier this year. At the end of this book, she offers suggestions for what readers might do to help, ranging from writing to an M.P. to being aware of the fact that becoming a refugee can happen to anyone, and becoming a 'School of Sanctuary'. **DB**

Safiyyah's War

★★★★★

Hiba Noor Khan, Andersen Press, 336pp, 978 1 83913 313 8, £7.99 pbk During the early years of World War Two, leaders of the Grand Mosque in occupied Paris played a little-known role in protecting hundreds of Jews from the Nazis. With determined ingenuity, they created false Islamic identities supported by forged documents for endangered Jews, often concealing and caring for them within the Mosque. As deportation to concentration camps intensified, groups of Jewish refugees were guided through disused passages and catacombs beneath the Mosque to escape, hidden in wine barrels, aboard boats waiting on an underground tributary of the Seine.

It was almost half a century after the War before a documentary film reported this daring operation. Later, attempts were made to gather first-hand accounts; and an information book published in the States told the story to young readers. Hiba Noor Khan spent time living in the Mosque researching wartime events and becoming familiar with the neighbourhood; now, her debut novel draws upon established facts but also imagines the experiences of a Muslim family whose home was in the Mosque.

10 year-old Safiyyah has much enjoyed a childhood with her loving parents, her grandmother and younger sister in an apartment within the Mosque. Her father – her Baba – is involved with the everyday running of the Mosque, including its finances, working closely alongside the Imam and the Rector. Safiyyah's secure world crumbles as the Germans occupy Paris. Now she lives in a humiliated city, restricted by curfews, with food in ever decreasing supply and hostile soldiers on the streets. She desperately misses her closest friend, whose family was among the many who fled Paris to Southern France, England or the States.

Even her home is different. Her much-loved Baba has become oddly secretive, often seeming exhausted; and Safiyyah is sure she hears

strange noises during the night. She is puzzled, then alarmed. Her grandmother, Setti, comforts her with the wisdom of a long life; she had to leave her native Northern Africa to find refuge in Spain and then in Paris. Safiyyah's loving trust in Setti is absolute.

Almost by chance, Safiyyah discovers that Baba, the Rector and the Imam and like-minded Muslims around the city have devised a network to enable Jews to evade the Germans. As Nazi suspicions are aroused about the Mosque's activities, those running the operation realise that they have no option but to make use of Safiyyah's offer of help. She and her friend Timothee, an 8 year-old refugee shepherd from Northern France, can slip unnoticed through the streets, carrying information, documents or supplies to Jews in hiding.

Safiyyah and Timothee are intrepid, even in extreme danger. She is also articulate, compassionate and insightful with young and old. Readers, who will often be in the 10-14 age range, may be surprised to find such resourceful qualities in protagonists of 10 and 8; but they will probably not be distracted from this unusual story of faith translated into courageous, risky action. Though the shadow of the occupying forces is ever-present, there is little direct violence; the writer's focus is rather upon the suffering of the persecuted and the courage of their helpers. That suffering is embodied in individuals – for example, one of Safiyyah's Jewish classmates, reduced to sickness and mute terror, unable to recognise her former school friend, not knowing her parents' whereabouts or even if they are still alive. Safiyyah's family take her in and love her as their own until she is well enough to attempt escape.

For all involved in this Resistance operation, their creed lies in the principle, common to both Islamic and Jewish belief, 'For whoever saves a single life, it is as if they have saved all humanity'. **GF**

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, 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**



Code name Kingfisher

★★★★★

Liz Kessler, cover ill. David Dean, Simon & Schuster, 319pp., 978-1-3985-1249-8, £12.99 hbk

Liz Kessler is the well-known author of 23 books for children and young adults, including the popular **Emily Windsnap** series, and this one follows another novel about the Second

World War: 'When the world was ours' though that was about her own father's escape from the Nazis, and this tells a completely different story.

We follow two threads, which are eventually woven together. 12-year-old Mila and her sister Hannie, 3 years older, are growing up in Amsterdam in 1942, when the Nazis have been occupying the country for 2 years. The family is Jewish, and they all have to conform to the law, but life is getting more difficult, and Hannie, under the codename Kingfisher, begins to work for the Resistance, leaving Mila feeling left out.

The other story is set in the present, when Liv has just moved into Year 8, and her long-term friend Karly has started making snidey remarks and excluding her. Her grandmother, known as Bubbe, is sinking into dementia and is no longer the provider of lovely dinners and chocolate cake: eventually she has to go into a care home. When Liv's teacher sets Family History as a project, with one person's story as a focus, she is not sure where to start, until, when sorting out Bubbe's possessions, she and her new friend Gabi find a box of letters, Hannie's Diary and stuff about Mila and Hannie, all in Dutch, and, with the help of a translation app and fact-checking on the internet, they begin to work out a story of survival and courage. Hannie's Diary proves crucial to her understanding, as, of course we realise, Mila has become Bubbe.

Liv has had to endure bullying from her former friend Karly and her cronies, but when in her presentation to the class she tells how Hannie had the courage to stand up to the Nazis, and that this has helped her to realise that she doesn't have to be defined by other people who try to put her down: she can be what she wants to be. The class applauds loudly, Karly apologises, and is forgiven. **DB**

Finding Wonder

★★★★

Lauren St John, ill. Marie-Alice Harel, Faber & Faber, 356pp, 978 0 571 37616 2, £7.99 pbk

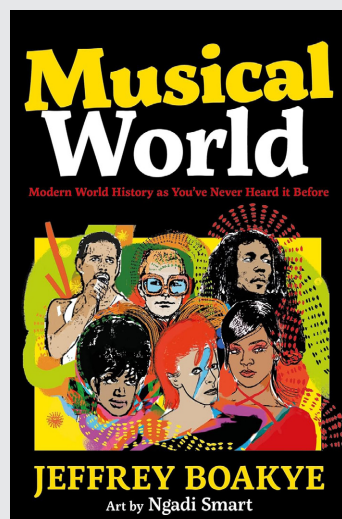
Combining Lauren St John's mastery for bringing the thrill of horse-riding to life and her consummate skill at writing mystery stories this superb adventure is pitched perfectly for a middle-grade audience.

In an instant Roo's world has turned upside down; her beloved father has died leaving her an orphan but a winning lottery ticket found in his coat pocket has made her a millionaire overnight. The only memento of her old life is a small model horse Fearless Fire that has been Roo's lucky talisman throughout her childhood.

Together with her aunt Joni, they set off in Joni's camper van following the advice of Roo's Dad urging his daughter to 'live every minute'. Roo's dream of buying her favourite

champion showjumper, Wonder Boy, is about to become reality as the horse is up for sale. But before they can finalise the deal, Wonder Boy disappears and then shortly afterwards other rare and valuable horses begin to vanish too. Could these mysteries be connected? Joni and Roo think they are and decide to investigate themselves. Travelling the length and breadth of the country following clues, Joni and Roo plus a little assurance from Fearless Fire uncover a web of mystery and intrigue and find themselves in great danger.

This is a thrilling, addictive read. As with all Lauren's stories there is always a deeper, more sensitive element and here the warmth of friendship and strength and loyalty of family bonds underpins this heartwarming story. As ever the joy of riding, and Lauren's passion for animals is portrayed with verve and vigour. **JC**



Musical World

★★★★

Jeffrey Boakye, Faber, 222pp, 978 0 571 37749 7, £8.99 pbk

This is a book which aims to present Modern World History 'as you've never heard it before.'

Following on from the author's very successful previous book **Musical Truth – a musical journey through modern black Britain**, this book has a broader and more ambitious remit.

Readers take a 300-year trip through time exploring how forty songs or their singers can be seen to represent key moments in world history. Each chapter starts with a question, some of these are related to historical analysis such as 'How did black culture make it into the pop mainstream?' Some questions are musical, such as 'what do you get if you mix technology, cultures and different styles of music?' And some are philosophical: 'how can music bring joy through pain?'

A wide range of musical genres is featured from national anthems

and opera to Bollywood, disco, and reggae. As well as famous artists such as Elton John and Bob Marley, lesser-known performers are featured too, for example Big Mama Thornton who was performing *Hound Dog* long before Elvis Presley's version. Sam Cooke's *A Change is Gonna Come* and Fela Kuti's *Zombie* demonstrate how songwriters and performers have used music as a form of protest and a force for change.

The historical incidents explored in the book range from The Voyager Space Programme to the Stephen Lawrence murder. Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit* is selected as it so memorably records the racist murder of black people in the United States.

Racism is a major focus throughout the book as well as nationalism, homophobia, gay rights and sexism. The Spice Girls *Wannabe* is described as a driver for female empowerment. The writer has ensured there is a balance of male and female artists represented. Music is drawn from across the world with the lasting legacy of colonialism running through the book.

The interconnections between peoples through musical creativity are shown in the unusual story of *Under Me Sleng Teng* with roots in Japan as well as Jamaica. Issues around musical fusion are explored; when this might celebrate marginalised cultures and when it might be more exploitative.

The writer feels strongly about the issues he explores and occasionally the language becomes a little emotive for a historical text, perhaps underestimating young readers' ability to make their own judgements when presented with the stark and often shocking facts.

Although the book focuses on injustice there is also joy, celebration and hope showing many artists want to not only call out injustice but also to make the world a better place.

Written with knowledge and passion, **Musical History** is dedicated to anyone seeking unity in a world of music. Readers will be keen to seek out the tracks featured; a playlist will be available on YouTube. **SMc**

Stand Up and Speak Out Against Racism

★★★★

Yassmin Abdel-Magied, ill. Aleesha Nandhra, Walker Books, 128pp, 978 1 4063 9371 2, £9.99 pbk

The first thing that strikes me about this new publication is the very bright and colourful front and back covers; they immediately attract my attention. Congratulations to Aleesha Nandhra on excellent illustrations throughout too. They work well with the informative text and draw the reader in to discover more about this important subject.

Yassmin Abdel-Magied is a writer, engineer, speaker and social activist. Her visits to many schools, where she has asked young people what questions they have around racism, is evident in this work about inequality.



This makes the book particularly relevant and current.

Stand Up and Speak Out Against Racism is very well laid out. There are three sections: *How did racism start?*, *Racism Today* and *How to Stand Up and Speak Out*. The writer manages to break down a lot of information into bitesize chunks so the reader can dip into this volume rather than reading it in one sitting. She compares life to climbing a mountain, and how, 'When we are born, we all get a different set of tools to climb it,' (p.8), a very clear and powerful image.

Towards the back of the book are some ideas for 'How to Get Inspired...' (p.120) as well as a useful Glossary and Index. This title goes a long way in helping young people with answers to some big and very important questions they may have.

Well done to Walker for creating another high-quality book which children at home and school will find easy to pick up and investigate. I agree with the author when she advises that it might be better to have an adult read this alongside the young person as they tackle big issues. **JS**

Story of Now: Why we Need to Talk about the British Empire

★★★★

Shelina Janmohamed, ill. Laura Greenan, Welbeck, 245pp, 9781803381442, £9.99 pbk

This timely book is bursting with big questions and topics which the award-winning author covers in detail. In relation to the British Empire, she considers slavery, migration, inequality, racism, trade, postcolonialism and decolonisation. My paperback proof copy is divided into four parts with a helpful glossary at the beginning of Parts One, Two and Three. The final six pages feature a useful timeline illustrating 'A History of the British Empire'.

Shelina explains her own family background: her ancestors were from India and East Africa before her mum and dad moved the family to London. She hopes her daughters and all young people are inspired by this publication and learn about how their families fit into the world. The book is peppered with quick quizzes on related topics to engage the reader.

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

Likewise, the author focusses on a particular country at different points in the book.

I like the writer's personal touch, how she rallies readers to get involved enthusiastically: 'Creating a fair and just society is a responsibility we all share, and something we should all work together to achieve.' (Chapter 8 p.78.) Indeed, Part Four explains how readers can play their own part in history!

Whilst this book is promoted for 10 years and upwards, I feel that the younger children in this age group might need an adult to guide them through some of the book e.g. when the opium trade is discussed. **JS**

Fablehouse

★★★★

E.L. Norry, ill. Lola Idown, Bloomsbury, 368 pp, 978 1 5266 4953 9, £7.99 pbk

In this ingenious novel, E.L. Norry brings together Arthurian fantasy and the fate of the children of black G.I.s and white English mothers in the wake of the Second World War. Some of the 'brown babies,' as they were known, were brought up in Holnicote House, a children's home in Somerset, the inspiration for the Fablehouse in the story. Norry's narrator is Heather, a girl who has never known her father, and whose mother was taken to 'a sanatorium' when she could no longer cope. Heather arrives at Fablehouse angry and lonely but gradually she makes friends with a group of children who decide to call themselves 'The Roamers' because of their love of exploring the countryside around the Fablehouse. On one of their expeditions to the local cairn they discover a wounded black man, who tells them his name is Pal, which turns out to be short for Palamedes, a knight of the Round Table. Pal has been set at the cairn by Merlin to prevent the Fae, or fairy folk, from entering the human world, but they have broken through and are intent on replacing humans with sinister Fae changelings. Only Pal and The Roamers can prevent the Fae's evil plan from succeeding. There is a lot to enjoy and admire in the story. There is the interplay between the children and the fears and longings that they each suffer because of who they are and where they find themselves, and which the Fae play on in the final climactic confrontation in the Fae underworld. And there is a lot of hope and reassurance to be found in the children's determination and loyalty which ensures that they win out in the end. The 1950s setting is not consistently sustained, nor is Pal's initial antique language ('methinks'), but the grasp of what makes a children's adventure is reminiscent of Enid Blyton, a writer whose stories, although not mentioned, might very well have been read by a real Heather and her friends. **CB**

In the Shadow of the Wolf Queen

★★★★

Kiran Millwood Hargrave, Orion, 285pp, 97815101017816, £12.99 hbk

Successfully conjuring up convincing new civilisations with their own past histories and current threats demands a lot from a fantasy writer, and initially this story achieves these goals well. Descriptions of the woods, bogs and lakes where young Ysolde and her pet sea-eagle Nara live come vividly off the page. Surrounding trees communicate with local human inhabitants, offering timely warnings when necessary. Ysolde herself is an authentically bright but stroppy child, living with her more mature and frequently disapproving sister Hari after both parents had died.

But one day their rural tranquillity is invaded by ruthless armed guards known and feared by the name of Ryders. Wearing red cloaks and thundering by on their horses, they are in search of any local inhabitants thought to possess any sort of sixth sense. Hari is captured and so too is Ysolde after trying to rescue her. They all meet at the court of the Wolf Queen, the ultimate villain, happy to give the order, only withdrawn at the last moment, to have Ysolde killed.

She survives only because she is thought to know the whereabouts of End-World Wood, where a reputed Anchorite may help the queen restore her surrounding environment that is slowly dying. A journey follows, but at this stage the plot begins to unravel. The queen turns out to have a human side after all as do her murderous sea-wolves. Recasting initial villains eventually into something more benign can have a tonic effect in any fiction, but here it becomes increasingly unclear what exactly is happening. Given that two more instalments are still to come completing what will be known as **The Geomancer Trilogy**, there may still be ample time finally to explain everything. But meanwhile what begins here as a tightly-written and highly imagined story rather loses its way. **NT**

Let

★★★★

Kei Miller, ill. Diana E. Jaita, Cameron Kids, 32pp, 978 1 951836 45 0, £11.99, hbk

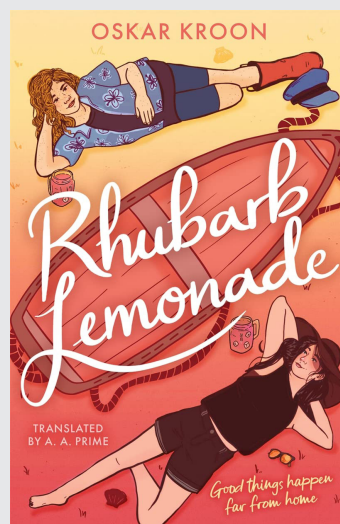
This book is an illustrated adaptation of the writer Kei Miller's poem *Book of Genesis* which is included in full at the back of the book. It is a poem about wonder and possibility.

The writer muses on the idea that there could be a book full of only one word – 'Let' leading to the creation of everything within our world. We could imagine our own creations with something new every day.

Stylised and dream like illustrations

evoke the wonders of flora and fauna in our world.

With a sparse lyrical and spiritual text this book may provide a starting point for discussion with young readers about the wonders of our natural world. Readers may speculate about how they might populate the Earth if starting from scratch themselves and become absorbed with the idea of creation, perhaps even drawing on 'our most secret dreams.' **SMc**



Rhubarb Lemonade

★★★★★

Oskar Kroon, trans. A.A. Prime, Hot Key Books, 220pp, 978 1 4714 1312 4, £7.99 pbk

First, just over 3 pages of narrative ending with a closed door; we discover what's on the other side some 170 pages later. Then, seven chapters varying in length from 5 to 66 pages, each comprising sections rarely longer than 3 or 4 pages – those sections do not necessarily record sequential events. This structure may seem fragmentary, and indeed it is. But the novel is unified by the voice of the narrator, Vinga, and our closeness to the movement of her thoughts and feelings.

Vinga is, I think, in her early teenage years. Most of the novel is set in a sweltering summer before she begins a new school – an anxious prospect for her. She spends much of that summer with her Grandpa on a Swedish island, a voyage by ferry from her home in the city.

She has the acute self-awareness and insights of many adolescents. She is an only child, who has grown up secure in the love of her parents. Until now, that is, for her Dad has found someone else. Someone younger who, Vinga has recently learned, is several months pregnant. Her mother is being outwardly rational, talking to her husband about the situation, not least for Vinga's sake, she says. But beneath her mother's bravery, Vinga reads her loneliness.

Grandpa and the island are Vinga's escape. After Grandpa's working life at sea, it is still the ocean which

energises his mind and body. His loving concern for his grand-daughter is often expressed in ways beyond language. Sensing how she must be feeling about her parents and to fill her mind and days through the summer, he finds a sailing dinghy in need of work to make her seaworthy. He can guide Vinga in that – the sealing, scraping, sanding, painting. New ropes and fittings, mending the sail. Then Vinga will need to learn to handle the boat.

Vinga sets to work eagerly, but she and Grandpa also spend time in talk and silence, feeling the rhythms of the sea, the weather, the birds, the lives of the islanders and the routines of Grandpa's days. Sometimes they just sit, maybe playing chess or resting under the lilac tree with a glass of Grandpa's rhubarb lemonade. Then, abruptly for Vinga, those rhythms are disrupted – by Ruth, another girl over from the mainland, grand-daughter of the island's store-keeper. Where Vinga finds stability in the island, Ruth is out of her element, hating the quiet, missing her 'gang' at home, longing for the glitz of the city. The two could not be more different, it seems – even in their appearance; Vinga with her curly red hair and freckles, her baggy, easy clothes and Ruth, dressed entirely in black and with her black hat shading her 'pale and pointed face'.

They meet most days, talk more and more. Ruth, against her inclinations, even shares a little work on the boat. They survive an explosive episode of utter misunderstanding to find a deeper need for each other's company. There's a single, surprising, kiss.

The fragmentary organisation of the text allows Oskar Kroon to offer readers a sustained empathy with Vinga's confused, contented, distressed, angry, fearful, exhilarated mind. The book won the August prize for Sweden's best children's book in 2019, then a further award in the Netherlands. It has appeared in 11 other languages. The sensitivity and precision of Vinga's narrative suggest that A.A. Prime's translation must be of high quality.

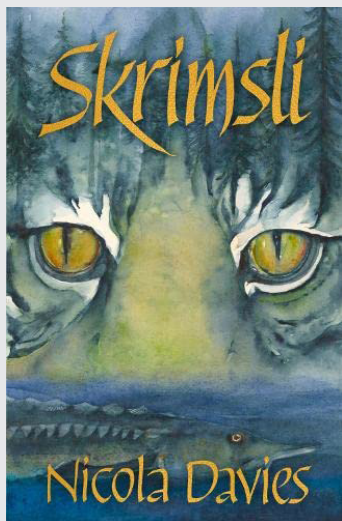
So much in so short a novel. **GF**

Skrimslis

★★★★★

Nicola Davies, Jackie Morris, Firefly Press, 404pp, 9781913102807, £14.99 hbk

It is a night of tension. The old tigress, Narastikeri, once the star of Kobret's circus, is giving birth to what will be her last litter. One by one the cubs die – but not the last, the one that is different. So Skrimslis is born. Owl, the freak, human and owl, befriends him and together with Kal and the horse Luja, they set out on a quest to find who they really are; they seek the Green Forest that haunts their memories and dreams, the Forest where 'The tiger and the sturgeon and the owl are the keepers of the forest. Each must speak to each to keep the forest whole'. For this is a world



under threat. Where the once easy communication between animals and humans is being stamped out, where the forests are being cut down, the land vandalised for minerals and oil. Their journey is fraught – and brings surprises, not least for Skrimсли, a tiger who will become a sea captain.

Nicola Davis has written a wholly immersive story, grabbing the reader's attention from the first paragraph. And this is vital – her narrative is expansive, making demands on its audience – but these demands are well worth the time and engagement. Though we are in the world of Yuderan, Northsky and Romyc, the problems and issues will be recognisable to all. Indeed, they are real problems – though Davis introduces the concept of the Listeners – those who can link into the thoughts of animals and others who can themselves talk to animals – we are not in a fantasy world where magic is the answer. We are being asked to view how we treat the natural resources offered by the world, the question of power and its effect, the importance of relationships and above all friendship despite differences. The plot is sprawling but never hesitates moving from one exciting incident to another without stop. Linking them are the characters – Skrimсли, Owl, Kal – and the Palatine. They each step off the page demanding to be our friend and companion. This is a prequel to Davis novel *The Song that Sings Us* but it can stand alone, either filling in a background or directing the reader to future events. Davis style is contemporary and brisk. Descriptions are relevant and precise while there is plenty of dialogue to ensure immediacy. The cover image and the beautiful chapter headings by Jackie Morris add to the whole – a complete package. This is a novel that will appeal to the confident, thinking reader – a challenge, perhaps but with great rewards. Skrimсли and Owl are not characters the reader will forget. **FH**

The Girl Who Fell to Earth

★★★★

Patricia Forde, Little Island, 192pp, 9781915071439, £8.99, pbk

Aria, from the planet Terros in a galaxy far, far away, does not really fall to earth. She accompanies her father on a mission with a purpose, to destroy human life. Patricia Forde sets up the story quickly and convincingly, beginning with the appalling revelation for Aria during a Terrosian Science class that she has human rather than Terrosian DNA. Appalling, because the Earth – “The Shadow Planet” – and life on it, is merely a Terrosian experiment in which human stewardship is being tested and has been found wanting. All that Aria knows about humans is that they are authors of wars and famines, and that, as a result of their greed and selfishness, the Earth itself will become unsustainable. So, Terros has decided that a new start is needed and Aria and her father are to deliver a virus that will begin the process of human eradication. They release it on the DART, the Dublin commuter train, but then things go awry. Aria herself is stricken by the virus and her father has to return to Terros in order to develop an antidote. Aria is left alone and sick in Dublin, with the police hunting for the “terrorists” who released the virus. It's a tale that grips on several levels. How is it that Aria has human DNA? How can she stay one step ahead of the Gardai (the Irish police) and, as an unaccompanied minor, the Social Services? Why has her father's boss, Seb Roy, arrived from Terros, apparently intent on eradicating her? Above all, will she go through with her father's mission? Forde handles all this expertly, to such a degree that this reader, at least, finds himself just a little disappointed when the novel ends with Aria leaving Earth. Surely there is another story to be told about what happens on Terros as a result of her experience and what she has discovered? Perhaps, but there's plenty of excitement and food for thought here exactly as it is. **CB**



Impossible Creatures

★★★★

Katherine Rundell, Bloomsbury, 326pp, 9781408897416, £14.99 hbk

This author could be one of the great hopes of future children's literature. Scholarly over wide areas, prolific and at home with young or adult audiences, there seems nothing in the writing world she can't do or won't try. Which is why this current children's novel is ultimately something of a come-down. For while the limits of her creative imagination seem almost endless, the actual plots she chooses wherein to display this talent have already cropped up in so many other recent fantasy stories.

In this latest novel, for example, Mal and Christopher, a young adolescent girl and boy, set out to save the world threatened by the gradual disappearance of glimt, a magical substance that supports all creative life. They are supported by a couple of admiring older figures as they sail in to battle. Also on their side: a knife that cuts through everything and a magic magnet that shows them the way. Their long journey is regularly interrupted by near-escapes from different mythical beasts, all of whom speak perfect English and are often given to sarcasm. Evil is represented by a single villain out for universal domination, disputes are settled mainly by violence and the slow growth of young love is cut short at the end. So no real surprises then, particularly for any Philip Pullman fans.

There are incidental riches. The book starts with a fascinating Bestiary of those otherwise lost imaginary creatures who inhabit the story, beautifully illustrated by Tomislav Tomic. And the concept of an archipelago magically hidden from the human world where they still live and thrive is an engaging one. But once the children's quest to retrieve a vital magic potion has started the narrative enters the literary doldrums. Rundell has the capacity to move children's literature into exciting new grounds, just as major children's writers did in the 1960s. But this current novel simply marks time. Let's hope the next two stories in this planned trilogy will be more truly ambitious while also less disappointingly familiar. **NT**

Meesh the Bad Demon

★★★★

Michelle Lam, Faber & Faber, 236p, 9780571382286, £9.99 pbk

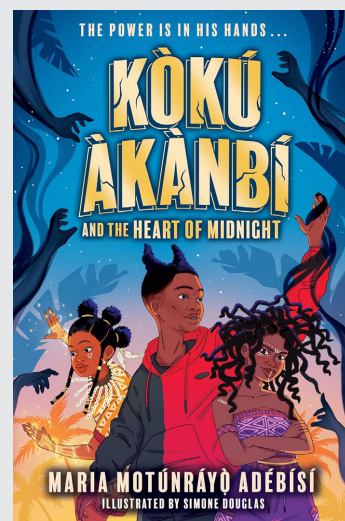
Chinese-American Instagram star and comic book artist Lam cleverly flips readers' expectations from the start with the title of her stunning Middle Grade graphic novel debut- Meesh, the Bad Demon. What signifies bad? What do we first think of when we picture a demon? What do we expect them to be like? Conversely, what do we think of Fairy Princesses?

Inspired by the fangirling phenomenon, a diet of action-adventure anime and magical

girl manga style adventures like **Kamichama Karin** and **Tokyo Mew Mew**, Lam has created exciting fantasyscapes and dramatic transformation scenes with relatable characters. The heroine protagonist Meesh attends Mount Magma secondary school. Her classes include Fire Breathing, Lava Moulding and Acid Puking but she is happiest when communing with nature or enjoying her favourite show, **Princess Nouna**. She is tormented by school bully Xavier and longs to be given the freedom to be herself. Her experiences are a metaphor for pupils trying to find their identity and their tribe in Middle school. The universal fear of being isolated for being different is effective and will strike a chord with teens just starting Secondary.

When Meesh's demon realm is suddenly threatened, she is compelled to undertake a perilous quest to the city of her idol. She chooses to travel incognito. As the plot accelerates, she must rely on her inner strength and a mysterious object to face the challenges ahead. Who can she trust and can her world be saved?

The story boarding is expressive, evocative and dynamic and will appeal to fans of Westernised manga. It teaches readers lessons about judging people on first appearances and explores the importance of being true to yourself. Lauren Perry Wheeler's colour work which plays with bubble gum pink, pretty pastels and violet night shades, complements Lam's varied settings and the emotional range of her characters. Fans of animal transformation manga like **Anima** and fantasy quest fiction will appreciate this exhilarating adventure. Lam intriguingly leaves the plot open for sequels. **TJ**



Koku Akanbi and the Heart of Midnight

★★★★

Maria Motunrayo Adebisi, ill. Simone Douglas, Orion, 375pp, 97815101431, £7.99 pbk

Koku feels he has a lot to contend with in his life; he has sickle cell anaemia,

reviews

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

his parents are dead and he is bullied at school. When he accidentally damages an exhibit at a museum, during a school visit, his uncle decides that he needs to return to his West African home country of Olori, for the summer. However, he finds that the country is ruled by magic and darkness is gradually being banished from the land. Discovering that he is the last member of a dark controlling tribe means that Koku is expected to restore the balance and bring peace to the land; quite a lot for a thirteen-year-old boy.

This is an absolute roller-coaster of a ride through African mythologies, particularly those in West Africa. Koku has spent most of his life in London and he has not been told very much about his culture and history, so all of this comes as quite a shock to him. His efforts to navigate all of the dangers he discovers will have the reader cheering him on, as well as sitting on the edge of their seat. On a very serious note, we have the fact that Koku has sickle cell anaemia, a disease that has a profound effect on sufferers and for which there is no cure. He finds it difficult to come to terms with his condition, so his challenges in Olori help him understand what he can control in his life. Koku is also finding out about his heritage and what happened to his parents, something that he had not known and a subject that is so important to everyone; we need to know our family. The story is told in a very upbeat way and there is a lot of use of slang and street language, which you might expect from a teenager; however, I hope that this does not date the book in the future. Hopefully the way that it is written will appeal to the young audience who do not always see themselves represented in mainstream publishing. **MP**

Shiver Point

★★★

Gabriel Dylan, Piccadilly Press, 153pp, 9781800784772, £7.99 pbk
In this scary story for children, the humble slug is elevated from gross garden pest to truly terrifying monster! Alex is miserable since his mum's job forced them to move to the world's most boring town: Shiver Point. Despite his mum's reassurances, there's no way that Alex is going to make new friends here - not like the ones he had left behind. When something strange in the night sky draws Alex's attention, he spies a chance to cash in on a new-found meteorite and pay for his mum to take them both back home. He grabs his skateboard and heads to the landing site.

Alex isn't the only one who has seen the mystery in the sky, though. In fact, a very random group of 12 year-olds have all convened in the forest to see what the mysterious extra-terrestrial object might be. This sparks an accidental introduction of

five children who would never even say hi to one another at school. Alex learns that he's not the only loner in his new school and that his new acquaintances have some interesting and diverse skills and hobbies (that he is extremely grateful for later on!). The reluctant teammates find themselves caught up in a good old-fashioned horror story where things keep getting weirder and weirder, and a daunting sense of unease grows when a string of thefts coincide with a horrible smell coming from the sewers and the presence of unusually large slugs!

Shiver Point is unashamedly generic. Adults in positions of authority are entirely unreliable, for example, and the children are forced to hunt down the cause of all the horror themselves...because there's no way adults will believe what they say. An 80s and 90s nostalgia (e.g. CDs and **The Goonies**) complement a contemporary tone that references popular culture throughout. In this way, the book taps into the popular trend for retro monster stories (**Stranger Things**; Jennifer Killick) and, arguably, lacks originality. Moreover, there is little about the characters that readers won't find familiar and the ending's opaque setup for sequels is a little obvious.

However, monsters are properly scary and levels of tension are very well-managed: readers will certainly feel a chill as Alex and his new friends attempt to defeat **Shiver Point's** frightening new visitors. It has been quite a few years since **Goosebumps** and **Point Horror** filled the bookshelves of young readers; perhaps it is time for a celebration and retelling of such classic kids' horror. **SD**

Death of a Dove

★★★

Griselda Gifford, Two Falcons Press, 192pp, 9780995588325, £7.99 pbk
Bea, who is nearly sixteen, is determined to be an actress and undeterred by the war, gets herself a post as a governess to Mrs. Rossiter who has connections to the theatre. In 1915 however the war is becoming closer; her brother is desperate to join up but other friends including Mrs. Rossiter's artist son Ronnie are being sent white feathers. Bea falls in love with Ronnie, but when he returns from driving ambulances at the front shell-shocked, she decides he cannot return and a plot to ensure he does not begins. Tragedy strikes Bea's family and the horrors of war come ever closer when a close friend is badly wounded. But her plot succeeds although not maybe in the way she envisaged.

There is a lot going on in this short book (192 pages), and maybe a longer novel would develop the story further. The contrast between Mrs. Rossiter's bohemian life, her acceptance of her husband's mistress, the free way in

which she is bringing up her children, and the farming community into which she has moved is depicted well against the reality of running a farm where the son has joined up, leaving the daughter unable to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor, as Jem has to take his place. Because of Bea's relationship with Ronnie the age range should be to the top end 12+. The cover does not really reflect the sombre nature of the story. **JF**

Wolf Road

★★

Alice Roberts, Simon & Schuster, illustrated by Keith Robinson, 324pp, 9781398521339, £14.99 hbk
Professor Alice Roberts is a distinguished scholar of the Ice Age and much else in the early past. She has now tried her hand at fiction, and despite a warm endorsement on the front cover from Philip Pullman the end result is not a success. The physical details of the small prehistoric tribe making its way to new territory in preparation for the Arctic Spring are clearly and authoritatively described, and Keith Robinson's moody black and white illustrations provide an extra bonus. But the many accounts of dragging sleds over rough ground, preparing food, hunting deer, sewing and carving do become repetitive, and might well have been better suited to child-friendly non-fiction.

But what really does for this story is the treatment of its main characters. Twelve-year-old Tuuli and her best friend Wren seem as far away from any Ice Age reality as it is possible to be. They chatter like today's teenagers, enjoy the warmth of their fur 'sleeping bags', describe another character as 'a pain in the backside', worry whether their aunt's adult relationship 'would ever make out' and exchange numerous hugs with each other and with their relaxed and approving parents. Shamans and sacred dances make an appearance, but there is no real sense of how utterly different experiencing the world must once have been at so remote a period of history.

Tuuli also comes across a boy who has become separated from his tribe. He is of Neanderthal origin, and along with an adopted wolf cub is in danger from those around them less tolerant of taking in strangers and wild animals. Their fate is uncertain, and here the story becomes a little more realistic. But even the youngest reader may wonder quite why characters who have lived so very long ago still come over exactly like children now. **NT**

Bad Influence

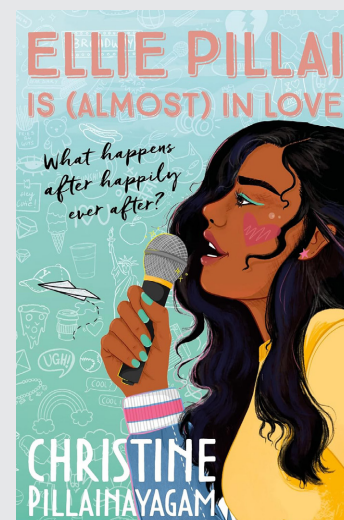
★★★★

Tamsin Winter, Usborne, 384pp, 9781474979078, £7.99 pbk
Amelia Bright is a thirteen year old cello prodigy who also likes to debate for her school. In a slightly confusing turn of events, her American Dad has set up an amateur baseball league. He coaches a team, the Rockets, and he forces Amelia to play for them.

At one of these baseball games, she meets Evan Palmer with whom she is immediately smitten. Refreshingly though, she goes back to worrying about how to perfect her cello solo which she will play to welcome the audience to the school play. However, the situation with Evan progresses and Amelia makes a seemingly small mistake which has huge repercussions.

She takes and sends a semi-nude selfie to Evan which she is convinced will stay private. It doesn't and now Amelia is actually a criminal because sending erotic images of minors even with their consent is illegal. What will be the consequences for both her and Evan?

If any reader has ever been accused of being a nerd, they will identify deeply with Amelia. The author is brave to portray an intellectually very able protagonist who could also be described as socially inept. The reasoning behind Amelia's reactions is well explored and understandable. It is really refreshing to have a flawed character like Amelia in the spotlight. **RB**

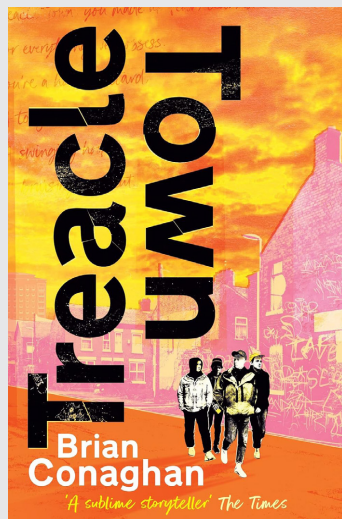


Ellie Pillai is (Almost in Love)

★★★★

Christine Pillainayagam, illus Trisha Srivastava, Faber & Faber, 432pp, 9780571367023, £8.99 pbk
This is a sequel to the Branford Boase award-winning **Ellie Pillai is Brown**. In this book, Ellie has finally convinced her strict Tamil parents that she should be allowed to study drama. Ellie is a talented singer/songwriter and is finally being allowed to acknowledge her talent. She has a boyfriend, Ash, and everything seems positive. Then, Ellie goes to New York with her family and meets a boy called Shawn and a love triangle begins between them.

The one flaw of this book is that the love triangle seems to dominate the whole narrative, when much deeper themes like child loss, parental illness, eating disorders and racism are also covered and could have been treated with a little more depth. However, Ellie is an endearing and multi-faceted character to whom many readers can relate. **RB**



Treacle Town

★★★★★

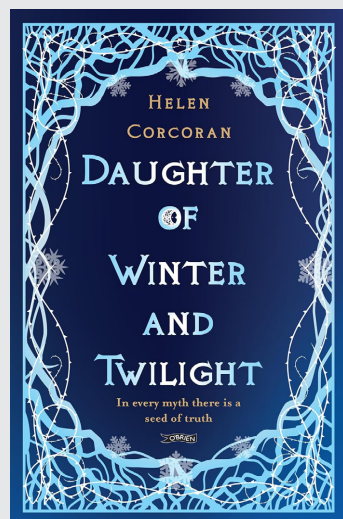
Brian Conaghan, Andersen Press, 296pp, 978-1-83913-361-9, £8.99 pbk. Con O'Neill has lived all his life in Coatbridge, whose name is synonymous with deprivation, alcohol and substance abuse and gang violence. The scene is dramatically set from the first sentence; 'It takes three people to hold up Biscuit's mum.' Little wonder, at her 18 year old son's funeral. He was killed by a rival gang and Con and his friends will be expected to avenge his death, perpetuating the ceaseless and corrosive cycle of violence. Despair and tragedy are everywhere in the town and in Con's life, too-his mother took her own life and his father has retreated into the world of competitive bodybuilding, with no time for his son. But Con has had enough of the grim cycle of retribution and the consequent deaths and longs to find a way out of the environment which has spawned these ills.

Conaghan creates a vivid picture of a community on the edge of a society which ignores or condemns them. The dialogue shocks with its habitual and vicious obscenities but it also rings with realism. His characters-Wee Z, Nails (the only girl) and Trig- are distinctive, erratic and often misled but also have talents and ambitions- for example, Nails is a highly talented black belt in taekwondo who longs to compete at national level. This is not a book for younger readers nor for the faint-hearted but it is one which needed to be written and needs to be read. Coatbridge is far from unique; we see its like countryside but when we view it through Con's eyes there seems no mechanism for change. This is a Treacle Town-sucking its inhabitants in and holding them fast. Yet there is a community and there is loyalty to the area: 'Dream town nightmare town. Both at the same time town.'

In his search for escape Con discovers a slam poetry group, no holds barred performance poetry, and realises this may be a way forward. As he listens on line he feels for the first time that he may have something positive to offer the world. To attend the sessions live he has to miss what Trig has organised- the challenge of facing his friend's killers and exacting rough justice, something he's long been determined to avoid.

When Trig confronts Biscuit's murders he goes with only Wee Z beside him-Con and Nails are at the Scottish conservatoire, Con to perform Biscuit's poetry in honour of his memory and Nails to support. When Trig is killed and Wee Z is hospitalised after his hand has been severed Con and Nails are 'throttled' with guilt and when Con cries at Trig's funeral 'these tears aren't Trig's alone, they're for them all: Mum, Biscuit, friendship, youth.'

Treacle Town is an absorbing and disturbing novel, a clarion call to those in power with the authority to effect change, to sow the seeds of hope and ensure that they germinate. Ears and eyes have been closed for far too long and Brian Conaghan reminds us that now is the time to look, listen and act in order to avoid the wasted lives which are everywhere in far too many of our communities. **VR**



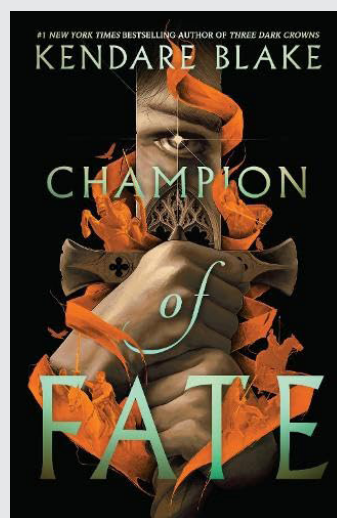
Daughter of Winter and Twilight

★★★★★

Helen Corcoran, O'Brien Press, 576pp, 978-1788493703, £13.99 hbk. Helen Corcoran's fantasy novel **Queen of Coin and Whispers** was well reviewed in **Books for Keeps** and the sequel is highly recommended too. Book one focused on young queen Lia and her relationship with her spymaster Xia and in **Daughter of Winter and Twilight**, the action moves on. Lia and Xia are now married,

ruling jointly as Queens Aurelia and Xania, and the story stars and is narrated by their adopted daughter Emri. Approaching eighteen, Emri is used to the protocols of the court and knows very well that finding friendship and love is not easy when you are heir to a throne; she has already had her heart broken by her friend Rialla. The arrival at court of her cousin Melisande ups the stakes. Is she simply a rival or a threat as well? The issue of who to trust, where to place your faith, becomes even more of vital when the two girls are taken hostage by the cruel goddess Lady Winter - long regarded as a myth by the royal family - and Emri presented with a life-or-death challenge.

Corcoran manages to portray the two cousins as recognisable teenagers even as she constructs the strange, often terrifying magical world that is their prison, and succeeds in bringing her different narratives together so that we perceive them as girls, princesses, and victims of others' ambition and careless cruelty. At 500+ pages, the narrative could have been tighter, but the story more than holds our attention throughout, its world of courtly intrigue, vengeful gods and burgeoning friendships immersive. The courts' relaxed attitudes to queer relationships will be another recommendation for readers. The final pages set the scene for further episodes in this distinctive, original fantasy series. **MMa**



Champion of Fate

★★★★★

Kendare Blake, ill. Thomasz Majewski, Rock the Boat, 480pp, 978086547500, £9.99 pbk. This is the first in a duology set in fantasy world, where an order of eternal female warriors called the Aristene have a calling to become the protectors of heroes and lead them to glory. The central character, Reed is

saved by two of these warriors after all in her village had been killed and she was taken prisoner as a child. But this is only the start of her journey to become one of the Aristene and gain immortality. This brief description in no way prepares the reader for the imaginative world building that the author has created and especially the contrast between the real world and the home of the warriors. However, the characters still show many of the all characteristics that we see surrounding us in our world today. This becomes even more apparent when Reed and her 'sisters' are sent into a world with warring kingdoms, where they are given heroes representing different participants. What will happen when duty and personal feelings conflict and can the warriors find a way to fulfil their destinies?

What a wonderfully rich and well-constructed world, where you really believe in the people and event. The plot is complex, but so beautifully written that it is easy for the reader to follow the twists and turns. The pace of the story is always fast and keeps the reader on their toes. However, it is the interaction between the characters that really makes this book. There are layers of emotions, many developed over a long period, which highlight the great variety in the Aristene warriors. Although they have been trained in a certain set of beliefs, some of them find it more difficult to actually follow the rules. We see lots of conflict but also a real feeling of support and family, in the broader sense. There is also a plot twist which will have the readers gasping, as Reed makes a decision that will have huge repercussions. I am looking forward to the climax of this story in the second book. **MP**

The Boy You Always Wanted

★★★★★

Michelle Quach, Usborne, 363pp, 978-1-4749-8974-9, £8.99 pbk. This thoughtful romance is centred in the Chinese/Vietnamese community in America. Ollie and Francine's families are old friends, adhering to the customs which have always governed their lives. One of these states that every family must have a male heir so that he can make offerings to the dead in order to save them from neglect in the afterlife. Francine's family are without a male heir and when her grandfather becomes terminally ill he is plunged into anxiety at this gap in his heritage. Francine, ever the dutiful and loving granddaughter, determines to solve the problem so that her beloved grandfather can die in peace.

Her solution is to ask Ollie, the boy she has known longest in her life, if he will be an honorary godson to her grandfather. After his first horrified refusal he realises that his family

reviews

14+ Secondary/Adult continued



owe a debt to Francine's as his father was brought up by them when his father was killed. In addition, he needs to provide photos of family history to meet the demands of the Multicultural Society which Francine suggested he joined to boost his personal statement for admission to a top university.

When he undertakes his honorary duties, Quach begins to weave a new fabric into the narrative-a slow and subtle attraction between the two protagonists, all the more powerful for its restraint. This plot development allows her to create Jiya and Rollo - she a promising artist, he a would-be business man - as both distractions and accomplices and the narrative thread is thus serious and lively in turn.

One consequence of Francine and Ollie taking centre stage is that both have a safety net in which to explore deeper personal issues. Francine's discovery of a family secret helps her to realise that her determination to help others overwhelms her need to consider herself, to recognise her strengths and gain a more positive perspective on her self-esteem. In turn, Ollie learns that the canon of 'being a man,' not showing feelings has become worthless for him and this allows him to declare his feelings to Francine. Quach writes with a delicate sensitivity which gives the relationship veracity and a quiet dignity: a resounding success in a genre often littered with heavy-handed pitfalls. **VR**

Overemotional

★★★★

David Fenne, Bonnier Books, 342pp, 9781785304729, £8.99, pbk
Trigger warnings- Violence, Drugging, Medical Experimentation on Pregnant women

Improvisation comedian and actor David Fenne's debut YA novel is the first in a trilogy which is a melting pot of the 1980s Emo movement, super powers, the X Files, the teen drama Misfits and

macabre horror. Imagine being whirled by Magneto into an electrical storm of genres with elements of magic, vampires, Dementor style zombies and gruesome Dr Mengele experimentation grafted on to FBI style reports about risky energy surges known as EMT outbreaks. These influences are fused on to a coming out story that captures the awkwardness and insecurity felt by teens navigating their hormones and same sex attraction.



When 17-year-old Steven, who is naïve and emotionally insecure, discovers his terrifying abilities of Emomancy in a horrific incident, he hotfoots it to the grottiest, most isolated place he can find so that his powers will not hurt others. This is the catalyst for a perilous adventure that will test him to his limits.

Fenne got the idea of Steven's strange magic from thinking about the overwhelming power of emotions in adolescents. He explains,

"I thought emotion-based powers were an interesting concept to explore, but they would just result in someone just trying to be happy. So, I thought, 'What if it were reversed?' What would the pursuit of misery do to a person? Almost immediately, Steven's voice began to form in my head."

While this is an intriguing premise, Fenne's execution of it leads to a convoluted and predictable plot in places as he juggles the four different voices of anxious Steven, his bolshy best friend Freya, her irritating boyfriend Marcus [who is quite a flat character until the denouement] and the eager American Troy who is confused by Britishisms. Juxtaposed with these multiple perspectives are the Field Reports of the mysterious Government agency DEMA headed up by the fierce Director Fareborn, phone transcripts and diary excerpts from a missing operative. Readers are given a Cheat Sheet at the start to keep track of Steven's burgeoning powers, signified by different colours [shades

of **Green Lantern**], which he finds impossible to control until, cue the cliché, he meets a magnetic stranger who promises to help him.

Grunsky on Sea, based on UK seaside resorts gone to seed, is oddly frozen in time and Fenne has fun building its oppressive character as it exerts an eerie spell over its inhabitants. As the octane charged plot spirals, ramping up the high stakes, a few twists, a slow burner romance and dramatic confrontations ensue while lies are uncovered and secrets are discovered. Underlying themes of government conspiracy, political corruption and genetic manipulation are evident too. There is scope for character development with the next two books. Fans of Marvel movies and Hammer Horror flicks will eat this up. It will also appeal to queer teens who are looking for exciting fantasy fiction that represents their emotions. **TJ**



The Black Air

★★★★

Jennifer Lane, Uclan publishing, 352pp, 978-1-91525-55-8, £8.99 pbk
In 1612, 12 innocent women from small villages close to Pendle Hill in East Lancashire were hanged as witches. The **The Black Air** moves the story to the mythical hamlet of Long Byrne, with 18 women hanged on the moor in 1623 and mysterious events through the centuries accredited to the work of their long-dead presences, most notably those of Rose Ackroyd and Jane Hollingworth.

When headteacher Miss Rillington announces that the village is staging a re-enactment of the story of the two girls on the four hundredth anniversary of their deaths, inseparable friends Tawny and Caitlin become involved-Cate, with her fascination with the witches, as scriptwriter for a play based on the story and Tawny, with her acting ambitions, as Rose Ackroyd. Cate is vulnerable: her mother, a writer, committed suicide, her father remarried to a woman she cannot accept and she has sought control

of her life in anorexia. However, she has inherited her mother's gift with words and is determined to complete the script. Tawny was born to act-flamboyant, daring, a presence who cannot be ignored and together they become wholly involved in the re-enactment.

Then a new girl, Bryony Hollingworth, joins their class and is immediately subjected to taunts about her name-and to add to the mix Cate sees her walking in the dead of night to the eerie and deserted Hollingworth Hall, home of the family of Jane Hollingworth, where a light then appears in an upstairs bedroom. Tawny, knowing nothing of this, invites Bryony to join her and Cate and so an uneasy friendship begins.

Little by little, Bryony begins to get closer to Tawny and, ironically, rehearsals on Cate's script bind them together as Rose and Jane. Cate is increasingly excluded as the two begin to resemble more and more the characters they are playing and she is doubly terrified-firstly of losing her dearest friend and, secondly, that Bryony is using her family inheritance to bewitch Tawny.

This is a dark and tangled web, which becomes increasingly so as the story moves on. Lane writes dramatically and skilfully, building the terror and emphasising Cate's problems with her mental health, to which her father and step-mother pay little attention. As the girls-including Tawny's younger sister Robyn-are drawn into Bryony's plan to be reunited with Rose, through Tawny-Cate realises she must act and save her friend and Robyn from Bryony/Jane's clutches. The final scene on the moors where Rose and Jane were hanged is powerful and mesmerising.

The narrative surefootedly avoids the trap of sliding into a happy ending, but the conclusion is moving and has within it the seeds of hope for all the girls-even level-headed Tawny-who Bryony tried to bewitch and take away. Jennifer Lane is a writer to take note of. **VR**

Valediction: No.12 More Raverat

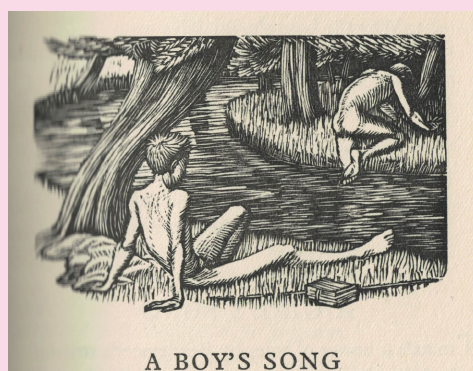
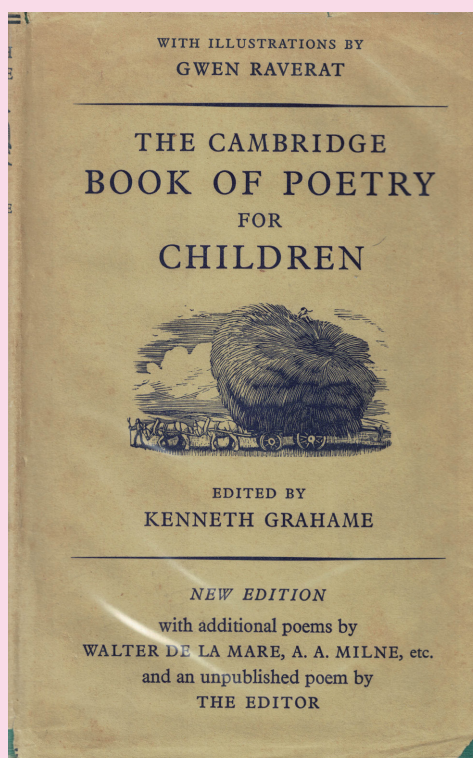
Brian Alderson is saying goodbye to his books as he donates his remarkable collection of children's books to Seven Stories. Here he bids farewell to another prized book, illustrated by Gwen Raverat.

As one volume in two parts **The Cambridge Book of Poetry for Children**, a collection of some 148 poems and verses was first published in 1916. Grahame's wife writes of his 'lavishing much loving labour' on it and his biographer notes that it must have taken more than three years to compile. In his Preface, he concerns himself with the various limitations imposed on the anthologist who has children (whom he takes to be early teenagers) as readers – such things as 'the need to provide only simple examples of the whole range of English poetry' or the avoidance of blank verse and the unapproachability of seventeenth or eighteenth century poetry through its language and classical references. The book thus turns out to be something of an anthology of Victorian writing. Morag Styles's 'Garden' predominates mightily over 'Street' and offers the reader 'a wicket-gate', as Grahame puts it (lyrics on the countryside, on homely things, on fantasy and faery, and on adventure). There is not much rough and tumble (no Lear, for instance) and no resort to what would be natural attractions such as anonymous ballads and the more genteel versions of folk verses.

There were few rivals on this scale at the time of the first edition but there was a violent change in the poetic weather in the twenties. It was hardly likely that there would be any 'making it new' for anthologies by Grahame or Cambridge (Auden and Garrett's **The Poet's Tongue** would not be far over the horizon) but the University Press was unwilling to lose its classic, if quasi-Victorian, collection and decided on a refurbishing job.

From its brief addition to the original Preface it looks as though the editing had passed to Grahame's loyal if unhappy wife, Elspeth – an understandable move since he was in failing health and was becoming increasingly reclusive. She gave the contents a slightly more modern touch by adding some poems by Hardy, Bridges, W.H.Davies and A.A.Milne and surely sneaked in 'Christmas Trees', the little 2-stanza poem that he had written for Alistair, the son who had died in 1920. He probably never even saw the proofs of the finished book for he had died suddenly overnight on 5 July. and Elspeth's short additional Preface carries a September date.

in all probability it was Lewis, the printer, who brought a continuing future to the collection through commissioning Raverat's fifty-four wood engravings that were printed from the blocks in the first run of 5,200 copies (thereafter they were converted to stereos). Not only had she been brought



up in Victorian Cambridge, a childhood so wonderfully described in **Period Piece**, but would have known Lewis well through his positive association with the Society of Wood Engravers. The illustrations were well-spaced throughout the text, rarely with gaps between them of more than two leaves and while twenty or so were tiny (say 20x25 mm. or so) that served only to heighten their intensity.

Whether it was Grahame's selection or Raverat's engravings that sustained the book in print, trade records here indicate that it

lasted at least until 1967 by which time the engravings would have been replaced by the stereos. However, some thirty printings of each block would have been printed for separate sale and the blocks themselves would pass into the ownership of the Press.



1. The legal deposit copy sent to the British Museum has the acquisition date of 31 October 1932

Kenneth Grahame ed. **The Cambridge Book of Poetry for Children**. New Edition. With an unpublished poem by the Editor and illustrations by GWEN RAVERAT [vig of child reading] Cambridge at the University Press, 1932. 20x12mm. xvi,236pp. Imprint: Printed by W. Lewis M.A. at the University Press. Full turquoise cloth titling in black to front within a blue decoration, with reproductions of four blocks at corners. Pale yellow dust jacket with repeat of block on p.36 ['A bumpy ride in a wagon of hay'] in titling to front. Flaps blank save for price of 6s. Net. Prov. Bookseller's ticket: 'Divan' Book and Artshop. Jerusalem, Opp. Cinema Zion.P.O.B.167

The Cambridge Book of Poetry for Children edited by Kenneth Grahame, illustrated by Gwen Raverat, is available from Legare Street Press, 978-1015851993, £14.95 pbk.



Brian Alderson is a long-time and much-valued contributor to **Books for Keeps**, founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His most recent book, **The 100 Best Children's Books**, is published by Galileo Publishing, 978-1903385982, £14.99 hbk.