

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

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Nov 2023

the children's book magazine online

Authorgraph interview

Sophie Anderson

Windows into Illustration

Helen Cooper

Plus Books of the Year and the
BfK Christmas Gift Guide

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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from *The Snow Girl* by Sophie Anderson, illustrated by Melissa Castrillón. Thanks to Usborne for their help with this Christmas cover.



Editorial 263

Here we are in November 2023 and watching the launch of another new campaign for school libraries. **Libraries for Primaries**, founded by the **National Literacy Trust** and **Penguin Books**, is calling for the government to commit to match-fund private investment to create more primary school libraries, the aim being to ensure that every child at primary school has access to a dedicated library or reading space.

Research carried out for the campaign reveals that over 750,000 children in the UK do not have a library at their primary school and are therefore missing out on the opportunity to read for pleasure. Furthermore, access varies across the UK, with 18% of primary schools in the north-east of England reporting they do not have a library, compared to just 6% of schools in the south-east.

As part of her Laureate initiative in 2021, **Cressida Cowell** launched **Life-changing Libraries**, detailing to the government how a ring fenced, yearly investment of £100m could help ensure that all schools access to the key ingredients required to create and sustain a library space and develop a culture of reading for pleasure.

The [new report](#) published by the Libraries for Primaries campaign, funded by Arts Council England, features national polling from research agency Public First, which finds that investment in primary school libraries has the potential to be 'a

key winner with voters across all political parties' so maybe we can expect to see some action. 85% of parents polled said that it's important their child reads for pleasure, so that message is clearly getting through.

We look forward to watching the development of more school library spaces.

First Wendy's House opens its doors in the UK

Earlier this year we reported on the various projects being launched to commemorate the life and work of [Wendy Cooling](#), children's books champion and creator of **BookTrust's Bookstart** programme. We're delighted to report that on Saturday 25 November, author and illustrator Steve Antony will open the first **Wendy's House** in the UK, at Orpington Library. The library will feature pop-up tents where children can explore a selection of books, including some by Wendy Cooling herself. Children's librarian Jenny Hawke, who worked on the project says, 'The London Borough of Bromley has an established history with **BookTrust** and we have seen first-hand the joy which **Bookstart** packs have brought to families over the years.' There are already three **Wendy's House** projects up and running in India and Malaysia and it's hoped that many more tents will follow in community spaces across the UK.



Wishing a happy Christmas to our team of reviewers and to our readers

Huge thanks and a very happy Christmas to our team of writers and reviewers. Between them, they have read and reviewed over 500 new children's books in 2023. We are hugely grateful for their support and careful reading. Happy Christmas too to all our readers and in particular to everyone who has contributed to our fundraising in 2023. If you can, please make a donation, either via our [Givey](#) site and with your help, we'll be here for Christmas 2024 too.

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Flying High: a distinctive imprint celebrates ten years



It's a happy tenth birthday to **Flying Eye Books**, a publisher consistently bringing us intriguing, original and distinctive books. **Sam Arthur**, Co-Founder/Creative Director looks back, and forward.

The story I tell about the creation of **Flying Eye Books** is probably not what most would expect. As a publishing business, Alex Spiro and I had already been going for four years with our 'all ages' **Nobrow** imprint. We had already gone through the excitement and adrenaline of creating a start-up enterprise. The creation of **Flying Eye Books** was much more pragmatic and in many ways a problem-solving exercise. Let me tell you the story, I haven't really sold it to you so far, but bear with me... this storytelling thing; it's why I got into to publishing in the first place.

It was a weekday mid-morning and I had gone for a scouting mission in the West End, I gravitated toward one of my favourite book shops – Foyles. It was still in its old location and back then you could find dusty first editions of books published in 1972 about Robotics or Goat Husbandry (I know this as I bought both). I'm pretty sure they hadn't been touched since at least 1980. Anyway, my prime motivation was to check which of *our* titles they had stocked and where they had displayed them. I was conforming to the archetype of publisher on their day off perfectly. My heart leapt when I discovered an edition our new **Hilda** book on a shelf in the Graphic Novel department! It was face out on a prominent shelf. I gave myself a pat on the back – job done.

But then I noticed it was on the same shelf as some decidedly adult graphic novels, also face out. Books not appropriate for the age group intended for **Hilda**. I turned my gaze to the other side of the shop floor where the children's department lay. I could see the perfect shelf for our **Hilda** books, and it lay in the heart of the cosy children's book area, like King Arthur's Stone waiting for its sword. In a bookcase next to a couple of **Moomin** comics in good view of any inquisitive child that might be perusing the department of the store designed especially to cater for their reading needs...

When I asked a children's bookseller why they didn't have **Hilda** in *their* department they gave me the matter of fact answer; 'We don't do the ordering for the graphic novel department'. This didn't exactly give me the answer I was looking for – or even any answer at all... but it did give me the impetus (when no one was looking) to move the **Hilda** title from the somewhat adult graphic novel shelf across the shop to the wonderful children's bookshelf which seemed to have its own golden ray of light beaming down on it. Job done.

This is the rightful place for a brilliant book that should be read and enjoyed by kids. I couldn't help feeling quite pleased with my act of guerrilla shelf stacking. It took me until Tottenham Court Road tube station steps before I realised how difficult it would be to re-enact this anarchic marketing stunt in every book shop in the land. And so **Flying Eye Books** was born from the need to get our very good children's books from our tiny **Nobrow** 'all ages imprint' – into the hands of children everywhere.

When I lecture in art schools this is the example I give when I discuss the importance of branding! **Flying Eye** gave us a dedicated children's



book brand which was recognised by booksellers and book buyers immediately. It was no coincidence that our sales of the **Hilda** series exploded with the new branding.

Over the 10 years of **Flying Eye's** existence, I am very proud to have supported the careers and given debuts to some important creators. It is unfair to single out individuals but for me there are key moments that stand out and which have helped us find our foothold in the competitive children's book market.

The first thing I should mention is the **Flying Eye** team over the years have been and continue to be an incredibly talented bunch – Harry Gwinner and Harriet Birkinshaw have both been instrumental in forming the list – for their belief, blood, sweat and tears in our project; I will be eternally grateful. Others I should mention who have also been influential are Lilly Gottwald, Camille Pichon, Ben Newman, Emma O'Donovan, Zoe Aubugeau Williams, Geoffrey Lapid and Marie Bedrune. It's also important to mention the role of Robert Snuggs and his team at **Bounce Sales and Marketing** who have been dedicated to our project since day one. Thank you all for your invaluable input.

As for the publishing moments, a big one was the publication of William Grill's debut book **Shackleton's Journey**. Not only did this title win the **CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal**, but it also helped change the face of children's non-fiction publishing opening the door for many more illustrators into a field previously dominated by clip art and photography. It was one of the first books that we commissioned for the new list and it is still to this day one of our best selling titles. What a way to start!

Luke Pearson's **Hilda** has also continued to be a great success story and seeing a 24pp saddle-stitched comic book develop into a series of graphic novels and then an animated TV show worthy of its **BAFTAs** and other awards has been incredibly exciting.

I am proud of the work we have done with Joe Todd Stanton who as well as creating prize winning picture books such as **The Secret of Black Rock** and **The Comet**, has also worked diligently on the **Brownstone Mythical** series. This series of graphic reader titles gave us a great platform to launch the careers of others such as Sarah Soh and Laura Suarez with debut titles in the range more recently.

Of course, every title we have worked on deserves its own mention and so I am especially grateful to all of our contributors and collaborators over the years as they have made **Flying Eye Books** the special list that it is today.

Children are very discerning; if they don't like something they let it be known. Luckily, judging by the sales of our books, lots of kids seem to be getting hold of our titles and doing what we hoped they would: Enjoying reading them. Job done.

But here's to the job of the next 10 years of **Flying Eye Books**! Find out more about [Flying Eye Books](#).

Books of the Year 2023

TikTok, mystical beasts, romantasies (no, us neither), it's been another busy and exciting year in children's publishing. Fads aside, which are the books that really stood out and which are the books we'll be reading in years to come? We asked a panel of experts to pick the best books of 2023.

Professor Teresa Cremin,
Professor of Education (Literacy), the Open University

The Final Year by Matt Goodfellow, illustrated by Joe Todd-Stanton (Otter-Barry Books). This powerful verse-novel deservedly hit the headlines on publication and has remained in the spotlight since. There's a rawness and immediacy in 10-year-old Nate's voice and rising anger which evokes close engagement and empathy. He's been split from his best mate PS, who's placed in another class and makes friends with the school bully. Struggling to cope and with SATs looming, Nate must also face his brother Dylan's sudden illness and hospitalisation. Joe Todd Stanton's black and white illustrations imaginatively capture Nate's fear and vulnerability, as well as moments of connection with Caleb and his teacher Mr Joshua. Connecting to David Almond's books **Skellig** and the prequel **My Name is Mina**, Matt Goodfellow reaches out and reaches deep here, punching home messages about the power of story and self-expression, ('wings and words sir'), about hope in periods of intense pain, and about the crucial role of friends, family and teachers. As Nate learns 'in the darkness you find your people'. This is a must read.

Urmi Merchant, co-founder and director of the children's specialist bookshop and events space Pickled Pepper Books

Greenwild by Pari Thompson (Macmillan Children's Books) interweaves the world of botany, themes of the environment and aspects of otherness into a fast-paced eco-fantasy, perfect for middle grade readers looking for a new series. 11 year old Daisy Thistledown has escaped her boarding school and is looking for her missing mother. When being chased through London, she discovers a portal to a magical world, the Greenwild, in Kew Gardens. There she teams up with a botanical genius, a boy who can speak to animals and a cat with attitude to channel the magic of the Greenwild to not only save this world, but her own, and find her mother. This is sure to enchant readers, young and old.

Charlotte Hacking, Interim Executive Director, Learning and Programmes Director CLPE

The Artist by Ed Vere (Puffin) is an exquisite picturebook. Ed Vere perfectly captures the wonder, joy and empowerment that creativity brings to us all through the tale of a young dinosaur who leaves her home to (quite literally!) make her mark on the world. Ed is such an advocate of the power of creativity on children's education and wider well-being that he also sensitively guides children through the

fact that being creative is about looking at the world through new eyes, being brave, taking risks, and learning to adapt when things don't go as planned. The carefully chosen words and ingeniously crafted illustrations, which show creativity in action through cut out and taped vignettes, surrounded by scribbles, spatters and doodles, interspersed with rich full bleed spreads draw us into the dinosaur's world, investing us in her story and evoking empathy in the reader.

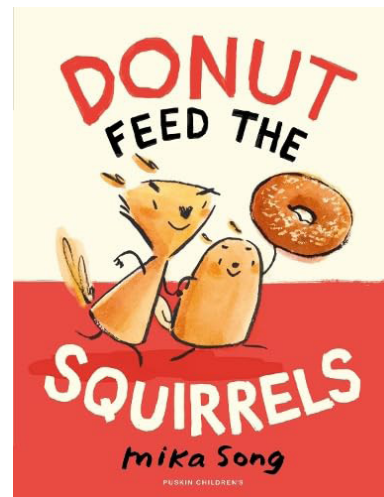
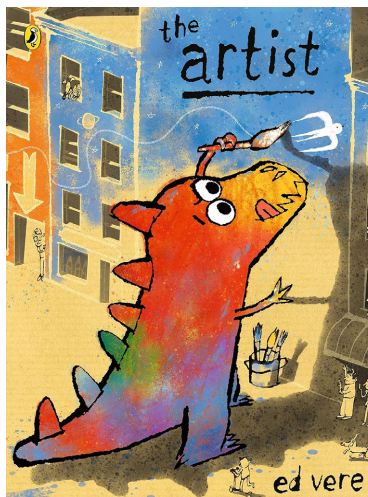
Graphic Novels and Comics are incredibly popular with children, but as our **Power of Pictures** research at **CLPE** showed, many adults don't include these in their own reading. They are incredible for engaging children in reading, and for building reading stamina. This is why, when I see a fantastic example, I always recommend it. **Donut Feed the Squirrels** by Mika Song (Pushkin Children's Books) is one such title. After burning their breakfast pancakes Norma and Belly catch a whiff of a donut. But the donut seller isn't up for giving one to a pair of squirrels. Will a hefty dose of ingenuity and a little help from Gramps get them what they want? The illustrations are full of complex simplicity, the characters are wonderfully expressive and the colour palette is vibrant without being overpowering.

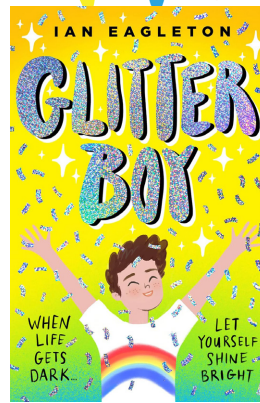
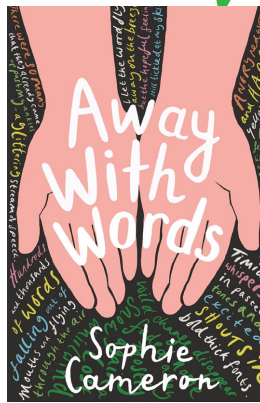
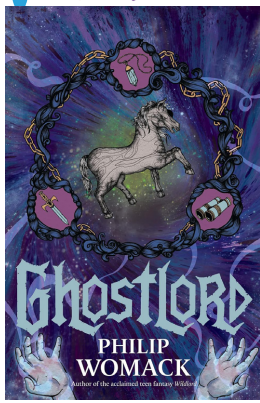
Nicholas Tucker, honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

Philip Womack is expert in bringing the supernatural into contemporary environments and in **Ghostlord** (Little Island Books) he provides readers with enough for even the wildest imagination to feast on. It starts almost immediately with teenage Meg Lewis, transplanted with her mother to the remote English countryside, seeing apparitions. These lead her to making contact with the ghost of a young boy imprisoned for 500 years by a wicked necromancer. But is the unfortunate lad for real, and should Meg and her new adolescent male friend Skanders get involved? A sequel to the much praised **Wildlord** but a complete story in itself, this full-blooded fantasy-mystery never lets up from first page to last.

Ferelith Hordon, editorial advisor Books for Keeps

Out of many outstanding titles over the past year, three really stood out, drawing me into their worlds. First, from Finland – **Rhubarb Lemonade** by Oskar Kroon translated by A. A Prime (Hot Key Books). Teenager Vinga stepped off the page, an unforgettable character inviting me to share her island summer with her – and I did. Equally immersive is **The Swing** from Britta Teckentrup (Prestel). Reflective, mesmeric her colour saturated illustrations cross





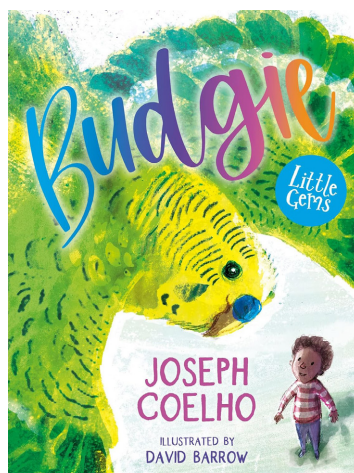
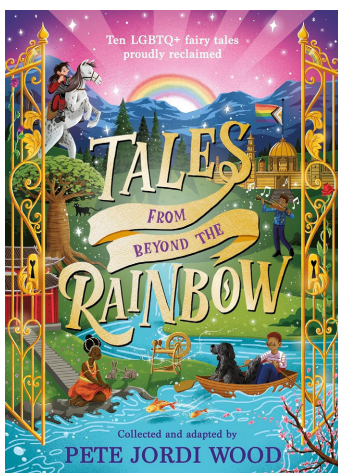
time, seasons and human relationships, the swing the one constant. Finally a verse novel – Matt Goodfellow in **The Final Year** (Otter-Barry Books) opened the door to the real experience of a boy facing his last year in Primary school – immediate, vivid and accessible. I walked with him.

Jake Hope, chair of the working party for Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals

Have You Seen the Magpie? (CYPI Press) is an extraordinary concertina book written by Dai Yun and illustrated by Yu Rong. The book reproduces the traditional Chinese scroll painting 'Along the River During the QingMing Festival' by painter Zhang Zeduan. It shows the landscape and everyday life of people in the capital city Bianjing 900 years ago. The painting celebrates the festival spirit and hustle and bustle of the Qingming festival. The painting is reproduced with new hand-drawn characters to help children, engage with, read and understand the painting through the medium of play. The reverse of the concertina tells the fictional story of Duan'er, painter Zhang Zeduan as a child, and an adventure he has along the river, the people that he meets and the magpie that draws everyone together as it flaps and flutters along the riverside. It's full of tradition, discovery and fun!

Zoey Dixon, Children's & Young People's Librarian, Lambeth Libraries

Away with Words by Sophie Cameron (Little Tiger) was one of my most unexpected reads this year and had me thinking, imagine if you could see the words we speak, what would you do with them? This device, where words become tangible objects once spoken, highlights the power of communication and the importance of making one's voice be heard. It's a celebration of language and words. Kids, especially those for whom English is an additional language, will relate to Gala's struggles of fitting in. The placement of the text on the page, including blank spaces that indicate missing words that Gala doesn't understand, allows you to really empathise with her. I really loved the LGBTQ+ inclusion, and how it represents a different kind of blended family not usually shown. A simple, subtle, and yet powerful story, it is told with a lot of heart.



Fen Coles, Letterbox Library

2023 witnessed a rich casting of LGBTQ+ characters. Middle Grade novels, **Glitter Boy** by Ian Eagleton (Scholastic) and **Just Like Everyone Else** by Sarah Hagger-Holt (Usborne) and picture book, **Out of the Blue** Robert Tregoning and Stef Murphy (Bloomsbury) all foreground a (white) child exploring their identity with, first, hesitancy and, then, pizzazz. Uniting these creators is that they all grew up under the homophobic legislation, Section 28, and their work feels like a truly glorious uprising. Queer genre subversions in 2023 included several fairytale rewrites with mixed results. Standouts include **Tales From Beyond the Rainbow**, adapted by Pete Jordi Wood and various illustrators (Puffin Classics), a proud reclamation of fairytales across cultures and a reimagining of 'The Frog Prince' in which kisses bring out all the rainbows (mixed race couple). Our topmost 2023 LGBTQ+ dazzlers are: **Budgie**, by Joseph Coelho and David Barrow (Barrington Stoke) with its rare portrayal of an older gay man (mixed couple); the paperback edition of the under-exposed **Over the Shop**, by JonArno Lawson and Qin Leng (Walker Books) starring a queer PoC couple and a visual shower of queer signifiers; **Everything Possible**, by Fred Small and Alison Brown (Nosy Crow), a picture book anthem to children with an explicitly queer-inclusive message or, to paraphrase: 'the only measure of your words and your deeds will be the love you leave behind when you're done'.

Pam Dix, Chair of IBBY UK

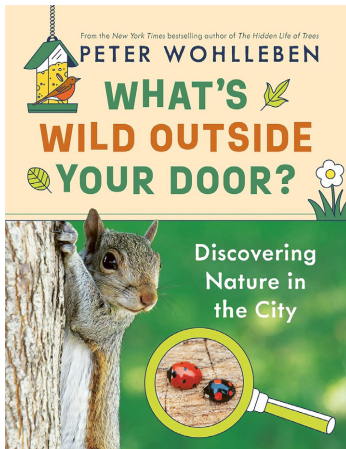
In my research on illustrated information books from around the world, I have been fascinated to find several author/illustrators using fabric and needlework as part of their storytelling, reminiscent of the work of Faith Ringgold. The work of the Brazilian artist, embroiderer and writer Flavia Bomfim is particularly exciting. In **O Adeus Do Marujo**, which translates as **The Sailor's Goodbye**, (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Pallas, 2022) she looks at the life of the important 1890s sailor, João Cândido, imprisoned after leading a revolt to stop the mistreatment of sailors in Brazil. In prison Candido himself learned embroidery, so Bomfim's embroidered images, superimposed on to striking indigo illustrations and photographs, are particularly poignant. The indigo refers to trading between Brazil and West Africa and slavery. This book won a special mention at the Bologna Ragazzi awards this year. An English edition is to be published by Tara Books.

Dr Rebecca Butler writes, lectures and tutors on children's literature

My first choice is **Sing If You Can't Dance** by Alexa Casale. Casale's portrayal of Ven and her medical condition acquired as a teenager, will resonate with anyone with a similar life-changing experience. The black humour Ven uses in relation to medical appointments and the profession jumps off the page, imbued with veracity. Casale does not shy away from describing the negative aspects of life with a chronic condition. This book will bring about conversation on topics which are often buried or unexplored. **Thieves' Gambit** by Kayvion Lewis is an electrifying thriller with an unusual premise and an unanticipated twist at the end. If you have ever wanted to know what goes on in a criminal mind and how audacious heists are planned and executed, this is the book for you. Whether you want to or not, you will be rooting for Rosalyn Quest, however devious her objectives.

Non-fiction all wrapped up

From the origins of life to the mysteries of the unexplained, **Sue McGonigle** selects recently published non-fiction that could find a place under the Christmas tree.



The Natural World

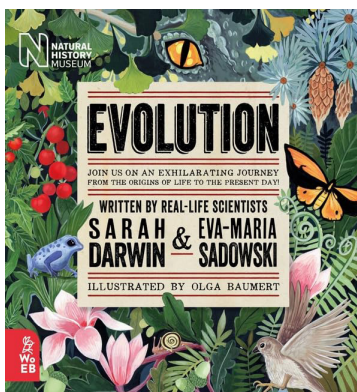
What's Wild Outside your Door? by Peter Wohlleben (10-12) is a book to inspire city children to explore their neighbourhoods and discover the natural world on their doorstep. It covers equipment, where to look, what you might find, simple experiments and how to record or display your finds. A substantial read, it is translated from the original German and fully illustrated with clear and attractive photographs and artwork from the best-selling author of **The Hidden Life of Trees**.

A book which focuses on the subcategory of insects who feast on humans in different ways, **Please Don't Bite Me** by Nazzzy Pakpour, illustrated by Owen Davey (8-10) covers a range of pesky creatures from mosquitoes to cockroaches, wasps to fleas. We learn it is the female mosquito who is the bloodthirsty one, why wasps are amazing architects and which insect is the world's worst housemate. Written in a lively style, and beautifully designed and illustrated.

Sarah Darwin and Eva-Maria Sadowski, the creators of **Evolution** (8-10) suggest we join them on an exhilarating journey from the origins of life to the present day. Themes covered include creation, natural selection and fossil hunting as well as contemporary concerns notably climate change. Pioneering individuals feature throughout from Charles Darwin (The author's great grandfather) and Mary Anning to Greta Thunberg and David Attenborough. An interesting book with a retro feel to the font and illustrations, it includes maps, charts, and a timeline.

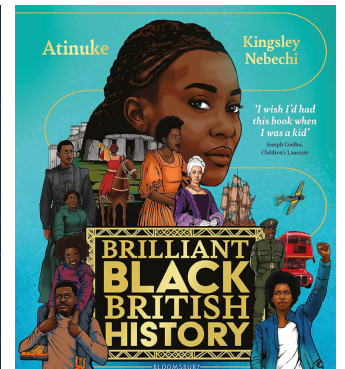
The Night Sky and Space

The wonder of the world at night is explored from different angles in **When the Stars Come Out**, a highly attractive book by Nicola Edwards, illustrated by Lucy Cartwright (8-10). Readers are invited to look up at the sky at night, find out about the history of astronomy



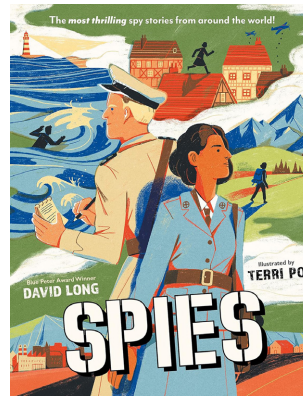
and marvel at the aurora and shooting stars. Other topics include nocturnal animals, humans and their sleep patterns, fear of the dark and night-time festivals.

Luna Scope is keen to become an astronaut and with her grandmother as her guide, embarks on a special programme, learning about the universe, space travel and training in zero gravity. In the process she also learns about female scientists, engineers and astronauts from Valentina Tereshkova to Wally Funk and Katherine Johnson. **We are all Astronauts** is a lively feminist take on space exploration from Kate Pankhurst, the creator of **Fantastically Great Women**.



Human Stories and achievements

Travelling through time, **Brilliant Black British History** by Atinuke, illustrated by Kingsley Nebechi (8-10) introduces us to important topics including slavery, the British Empire and fight for independence, the Windrush generation, racism and the richness of Black British culture. Readers also learn a little of the individual stories of Black Britons from former slaves in the Georgian era to First and Second World war heroes.

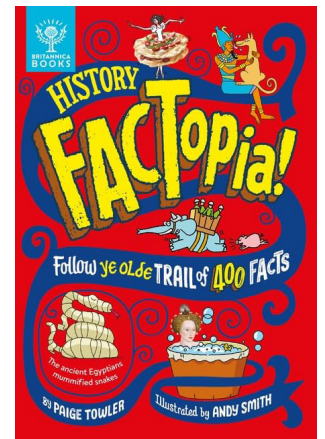


Focusing in particular on the Second World War, **Spies** by David Long, illustrated by Terri Po (10-12) tells the exciting stories of secret agents working undercover to access classified information for the war effort. It includes the story of Roald Dahl and his involvement in a scheme to try and persuade the Americans to take part in the war and the dancer, Josephine Baker who used her stardom to gain access to diplomats, listen to their conversations and carry messages.

Following the success of Kay's Anatomy, **Kay's Incredible Inventions** by Adam Kay, illustrated by Henry Paker (8-10) is an entertaining guide to inventions that changed the world. It focuses on everyday objects in our homes, transport and communication; from safety pins to satnavs. Lots of fun with interactive elements, imaginary inventions and (warning!) rather a preponderance of toilet humour.

Magical Worlds

The Book of Mysteries, Magic and the Unexplained by Tamara Macfarlane, illustrated by Kristina Kister (8-10) is a book which invites young readers to wonder and ask questions. It looks at magical objects, figures including witches, wizards and familiars questioning why witches get a bad press and wizards generally don't.



Legendary places, strange happenings such as ghost trains, hauntings and curious creatures, aliens also feature and it asks big questions such as is time travel possible?

OK, this is stretching the nonfiction genre but **The Secret Lives of Dragons** by Prof Zoya Agnis, illustrated by Alexander Utkin (8-10) is a highly inventive look at the world of dragons from an international expert(!). It includes chapters on dragon evolution, different species and notable sightings. The history of dragons in stories is included with the tales of Perseus and Beowulf. Keen 'drackenosphers' are advised to listen for the sound of leathery wings and invest in a pair of heatproof gloves and a book of riddles and jokes.

Music, Dance and Celebration

Following the success of **Musical Truth**, in **Musical World** Jeffrey Boakye aims to present Modern World History 'as you've never heard it before.' Readers take a 300-year trip through time exploring how forty songs can be seen to represent key moments in world history. Each chapter starts with a question, from the factual 'How did black culture make it into the pop mainstream?' to the philosophical: 'How can music bring joy through pain?' Illustrations Ngadi Smart (10-14).

Dance by Sir Alistair Spalding illustrated by Jason Raish (10-12) is a stunning coffee table sized gift book for the dance enthusiast in the family. Ballet is covered in depth as well as dance styles around the world from Morris Dancing to Flamenco. Its ceremonial and social role is explored and the power of dance to tell stories. Back stage we learn about choreography, set and costume design. The illustrations make clear dance is not just for girls, in fact the majority of the individuals named both on stage and behind the scenes are male.

Another very attractive book, **Celebrate!** by Laura Mucha, illustrated by Hannah Tolson (8-10) outlines 50 festivals around the world from those internationally well-known such as Diwali, Chinese New Year and Christmas to festivals specific to a particular place or people and the reasons for them. For example, we learn about Witangi Day marking the signing of a treaty in New Zealand and the Iditarod Trail Sled dog race from Alaska to the USA.

General Knowledge and Fact finder Fun

The Big Book of Things to Know by Sarah Hull, Laura Cowan, James MacLaine, and illustrated by Susanna Rumiz, Alyssa Gonzalez, Carolina Búzio and Paul Boston (5-8) covers four popular themes: Your Body, Space, Animals and Dinosaurs, and is a great introductory general reference book. Readers will learn interesting information to

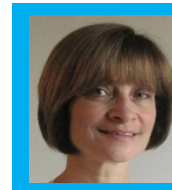
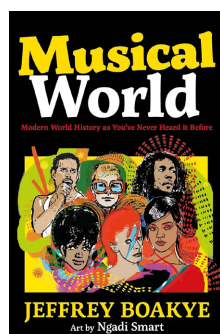
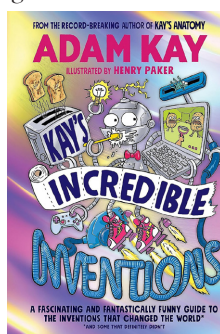
astound family and friends such as why their blood is red, and how many people it takes to land on the moon. With an accessible layout, appealing artwork plus glossary, index and downloadable links this is a great book for young fact finders to explore.

And finally, **History FACTopia** by Paige Towler, illustrated by Andy Smith (5-8 & 8-10) is just the book for Christmas Day (or rainy-day amusement) with a clear and colourful layout and a good mix of photographs and artwork. It is ideal for random browsing of trivia. Readers choose their own trail through the book. For example, by starting with naked athletics in Ancient Greece you can travel to the first Jamaican Bobsleigh team and then onto the invention of artificial snow in Hollywood.

Happy non-fiction reading, one and all!

Books mentioned

- What's Wild Outside your Door?** Peter Wohlleben, Greystone Kids, 978-1771648950, £14.99 hbk
- Please Don't Bite Me**, Nazzy Pakpour, illus Owen Davey, Flying Eye Books, 978-1838740900, £14.99 hbk
- Evolution**, Sarah Darwin and Eva-Maria Sadowski, What On Earth Books, 978-1912920532, £16.99 hbk
- When the Stars Come Out**, Nicola Edwards, illus Lucy Cartwright, Little Tiger, 978-1838915124, £14.99 hbk
- We Are All Astronauts**, Kate Pankhurst, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1526615435, £7.99 pbk
- Brilliant Black British History**, Atinuke, illustrated by Kingsley Nebechi, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1526635716, £12.99 hbk
- Spies** by David Long, illus Terri Po, Faber & Faber, 978-0571361854, £12.99 pbk
- Kay's Incredible Inventions**, Adam Kay, illus Henry Paker, Puffin, 978-0241540787, £14.99 hbk
- The Book of Mysteries, Magic and the Unexplained**, Tamara Macfarlane, illus Kristina Kister, DK Children's Books, 978-0241612071, £16.99 hbk
- The Secret Lives of Dragons**, Prof Zoya Agnis, illus Alexander Utkin, Flying Eye Books, 978-1838741174, £9.99 pbk
- Musical World**, Jeffrey Boakye, illus Ngadi Smart, Faber & Faber, 978-0571377497, £8.99 pbk
- Dance**, Sir Alistair Spalding, illus Jason Raish, Big Picture Press, 978-1800783362, £25.00 hbk
- Celebrate!**, Laura Mucha, illus Hannah Tolson, Nosy Crow, 978-1839940415, £18.99 hbk
- Big Book of Things to Know**, Sarah Hull, Laura Cowan, James MacLaine, illus Susanna Rumiz, Alyssa Gonzalez, Carolina Búzio and Paul Boston, Usborne, 978-1805074113, £16.99 hbk
- History FACTopia**, Paige Towler, illus Andy Smith, Britannica Books, 978-1804660409, £10.99 hbk



Sue McGonigle is an independent consultant and co-creator of [Lovemybooks](http://Lovemybooks.com).

Poetry for Giving

How is poetry for children faring in 2023? Well, very well, it would seem; and here's a selection from this year's production in the run up to gift giving time, selected by **Clive Barnes**. You'll find more in the reviews in **BfK's** back issues and don't forget to look at the shortlist for the **CLIPPA 2023 (Centre for Literacy in Primary Poetry Award)**.

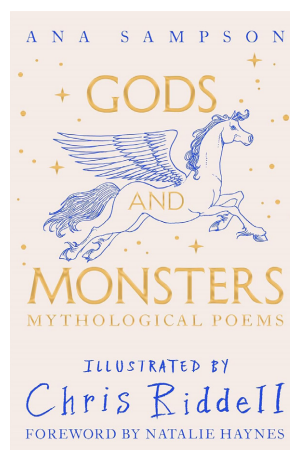
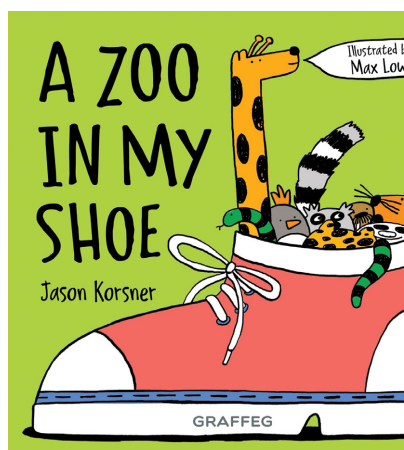
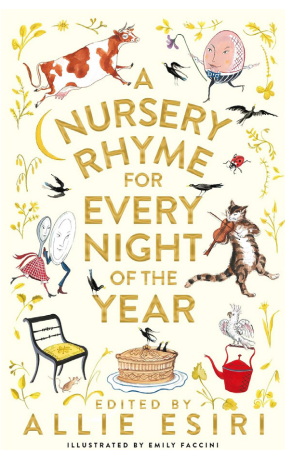
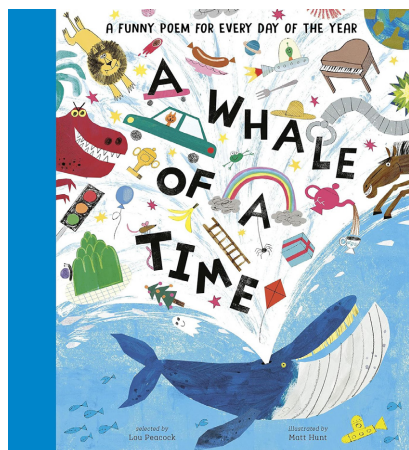
Let's start with the anthologies. **A Whale of a Time** is my favourite, a hunky collection of funny poems in large format, generously and cheerily illustrated by Matt Hunt. Here are poets you know and, almost certainly, poets you don't, cleverly assembled by the enviably well-read Lou Peacock. The price tag matches the book's size, but it more than delivers on its promise of a poem and a chuckle for every day of the year and would make a suitably impressive gift. The prescription of a daily dose of poetry seems to be popular. Allie Esiri offers **A Nursery Rhyme for Every Night of the Year**. You might not be able to think of 365 nursery rhymes immediately. But dip in, and I guarantee you'll find some you remember. Also, Esiri has cleverly widened the field. So, there are verses that, at first, I wouldn't count as nursery – *Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do* – but you might very well have sung to your little ones (case in point) and new verses by poets who are not anonymous, but that are comfortable here: Julia Donaldson and Michael Rosen, for instance. And, quite separately, here's something that might similarly find its way into the family rhyme world. Jason Korsner's **A Zoo in My Shoe** plays some wickedly funny rhyming variations around zoo animals, accompanied by Max Low's illustrations, that will have parents and children giggling night after night. Anyway, back to the anthologies. Ana Sampson's **Gods and Monsters** gives us the expected Greek and Norse, but also Celts and some other scary individual figures, like tricksters, witches and sea monsters, more difficult to pigeon-hole culturally, with poets from Homer to our present children's laureate. These are accompanied by a wealth of Chris Riddell drawings, so keen to be seen they sometimes muscle the poetry to one side.

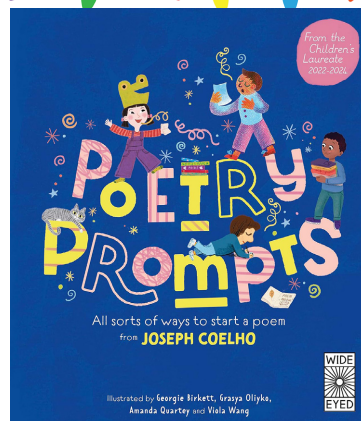
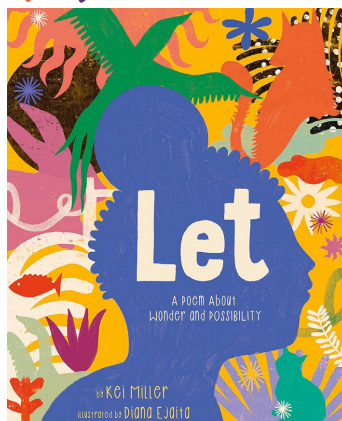
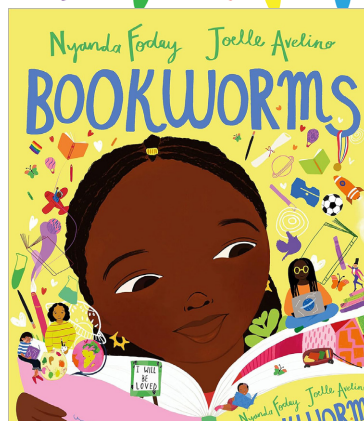
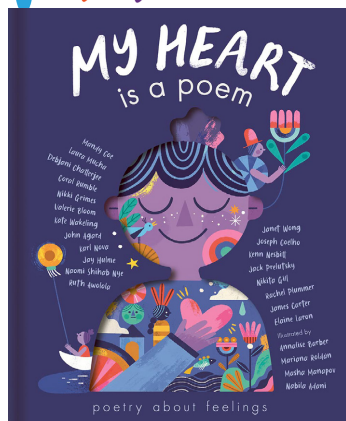
There are some slimmer collections, too, that are well worth looking at. Publisher Little Tiger follow up on last year's **Courage in a Poem with Our Earth is a Poem and My Heart is a Poem**. Aimed at middle school, these are in picture book format, usually one poem to a double-page spread, and feature contemporary poets and new(ish) illustrators. **Our Earth** looks at the myriad wonders of nature and how we might share and protect them. **My Heart** explores the world of feelings, from the depth of sadness to the heights of joy and everywhere in between. Both collections are carefully chosen with an eye for diversity, and a warm welcome to individuality, not only in the poets' and illustrators' backgrounds but in the way each of them, and us, experiences the world. Joelle Avelino, one of the illustrators of the Little Tiger collections, is also

the illustrator of a picture book version of the poem **Bookworms** by Nyanda Foday, a poem that shows us the solace and inspiration that can be found in books: 'A good story shows you a new world/ The right story shows that you can exist in this one.' I like this idea of the poem picture book, there's so much space in a poem for pictorial interpretation.

Diana Ejaita takes inspiration from her Nigerian heritage for her illustrations for **Let**, a book for older readers from Kei Miller's poem *Book of Genesis*, which, not unlike *Bookworms*, celebrates the liberating and community building power of the word. Last year, Children's Laureate Joseph Coelho gave us two books encouraging children themselves to become poets. This year, there's another from him in the same vein, **Poetry Prompts**, full of tips on how to get your poetic juices flowing, and backed-up by **BookTrust** videos on YouTube, presented by the poet himself.

Finally, there are three individual poetry collections from Troika publishing. **The Moon's Gorgonzola** is a second collection from Debra Bertulis and reflects her work as a poet in schools. These are poems for the youngest school children looking at their lives, likes and dislikes; encouraging them to join in with chants, rhymes and jokes; and, like Coelho, encouraging them to write and perform their own poetry: 'Help me write a poem/So I don't forget today/So the memory stays forever/And never fades away.' **And I Climbed And I Climbed** is Stephen Lightbown's first poetry for children and it draws on his experience as a wheelchair user after becoming paralysed following an accident. In the first poem, eight-year-old Cosmo addresses the tree from which he fell and broke his back, 'Now I use a wheelchair/because like you/I can't walk.' In subsequent poems, some angry, some questioning, some resigned, some determined, he tells the tree about his feelings and about his experience in the walking, running, climbing world. The tree has a word to say, too, and so does Cosmo's mum and his sister. How does Cosmo get on? Well, you need to read it to find out. No spoilers here. Let's stay with the theme of finding your place in the world (as if we could get away from it). Shauna Darling Robertson's second collection for young adult readers, **You are Not Alone**, also from Troika, is advertised as talking about mental health. So it does, but 'Aren't we all in the spectrum?' And these are poems that definitely speak to all of us: the strangeness of us, the strangeness of them, and the strangeness of the world. How to navigate that, and how sometimes you can't. It's a collection





that, like **Bookworms** or **Let**, finds in the inspiration of other poets and in poetry itself, a means of conveying, if not entirely understanding, the unbearable oddness of being and making order, beauty, wonder, humour and compassion from everyday discomfort and more than occasional pain.

Books mentioned:

A Zoo in my Shoe, Jason Korsner, ill. Max Low, Graffeg, 9781802584073, £7.99, pbk
Gods and Monsters, Ana Sampson (ed.), ill. Chris Riddell, Macmillan, 978 1035023011, 14.99, hbk
Bookworms, Nyanda Foday, ill. Joelle Avelino, Andersen, 978 1 83913 149 3, £7.99, pbk
A Whale of a Time, Lou Peacock, ill. Matt Hunt, Nosy Crow, 978 1 83994 201 3, £25.00, hbk
Let, Kei Miller, ill. Diana Ejaita, Cameron Kids, 978 1 951836 45 0, £11.99, hbk

The Moon's Gorgonzola, Debra Bertulis, ill. Zoe Williams, Troika, 978 1 9127453 02, £8.99, pbk

You Are Not Alone, Shauna Darling Robertson, Troika, 978 1 9127451 7 3, £8.99, pbk

And I Climbed And I Climbed, Stephen Lightbown, Troika, 978 1 9127452 9 6, £8.99, pbk

Poetry Prompts, All Sorts of Ways to Start A Poem, Joseph Coelho, Wide Eyed, 978 0 711 285118, £9.99, pbk

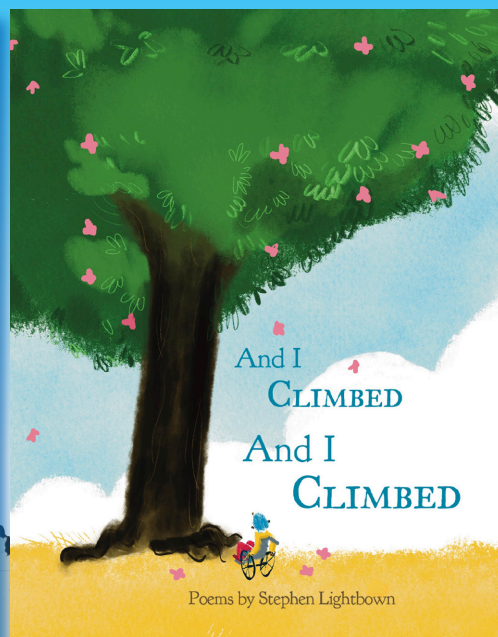
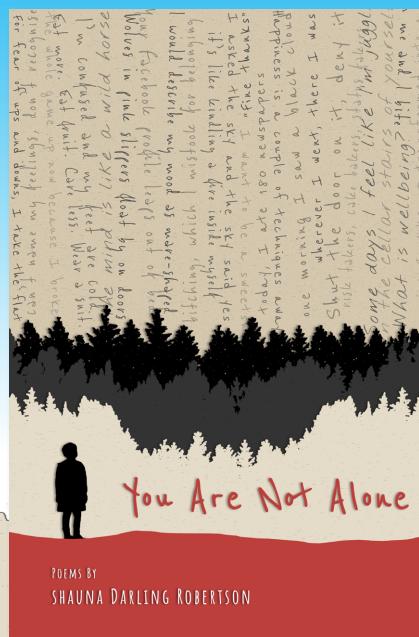
My Heart is a Poem, Little Tiger, 978 1 83891 440 0, £12.99, hbk

Our Earth is a Poem, Little Tiger, 978 1 83891 555 1, £12.99, hbk



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

Best of Troika Poetry 2023



troika

www.troikabooks.com

Books for Giving Christmas 2023

Throughout 2023, we've seen a welcome focus on reading for pleasure. Giving books is also a pleasure, especially when you know that they're guaranteed to be received with delight. Each year, we sort through the books that their publishers claim deserve to be under the tree. Find out which have passed the BfK test.

For the very young

Usborne rise to the festive challenge with **Don't Tickle Santa**, a touchy-feely sounds book in which you can stroke the reindeer, tickle Santa and his elf and finally, press a button to hear them all join in a raucous chorus of *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*. **Can you Find Santa?** by Axel Scheffler for Campbell will also develop motor skills and an early appreciation of books – felt flaps of different shapes can be lifted to reveal various characters and animals who are most definitely not Santa, excitement rising until we find him on the last page. **Snow!**, a boardbook by Leslie Patricelli is great fun too, two toddlers get dressed and play in the snow ('We fall. We don't care.') before coming back in, stripping off to warm up in the bath. An exuberant, delightful depiction of fun and friendship for the very young.

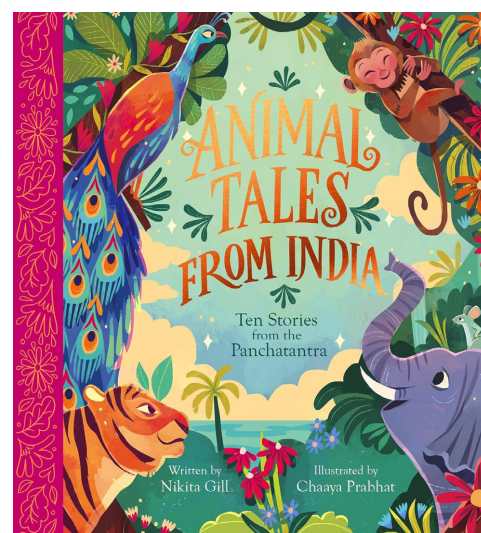
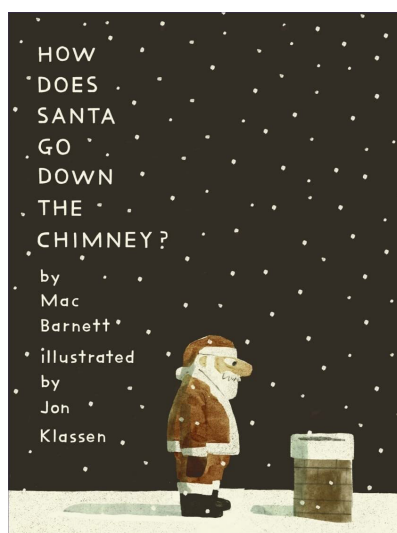
Christmas picture books

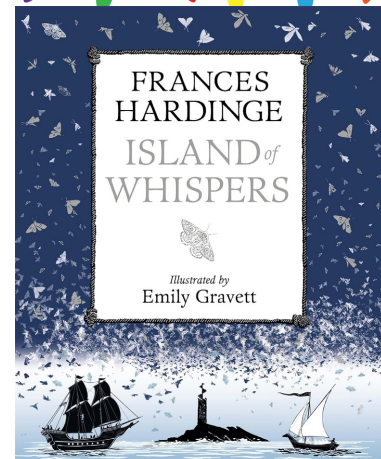
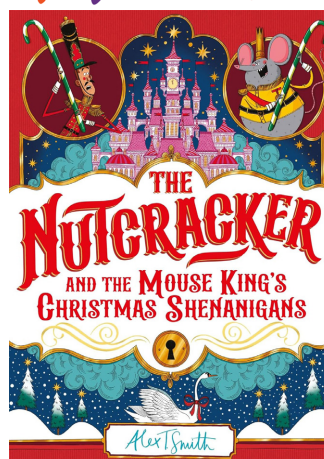
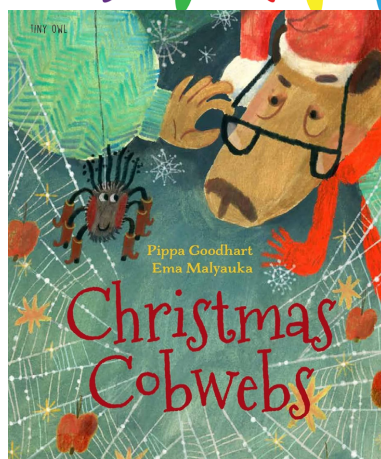
We're talking books that specifically feature Christmas celebrations and/or Santa here. Top of the list is **Luna Loves Christmas** by Joseph Coelho and Fiona Lumbers. Little Luna has two homes – one with Mum, one with Dad – so gets two Christmases. This year however, they're all doing something different. The special day is spent at the community centre, sharing Christmas dinner with people who'd otherwise be alone or without. Story and illustrations capture the real joys of the season, sharing, giving, being together. There's an added Christmas gift in the middle, an illustrated poem by Coelho, presented as a book read to Luna. In **How Does Santa Go Down the Chimney?** Mac Barnett attempts to answer that perennial question, coming up with some wonderfully absurd suggestions though no actual answer. Santa is inscrutable in Jon Klassen's illustrations, even when being licked by friendly dogs, which only adds to the hilarity of the story while the final page turn is a piece of picture book genius. There's more delicious absurdity, and invaluable advice, in **You Can't Let an Elephant Pull Santa's Sleigh** by Patricia Cleveland-Peck and David Tazzyman. It might be book six in the series, but it has all the energy, fun and zingy rhymes of the first. **Merry Whatmas?** by Eoin McLaughlin and Polly Dunbar explores Christmas through the eyes of Hedgehog and Tortoise, stars

of **The Hug**. The two know nothing of Christmas, it being their first, and the other animals give descriptions skewed to their own particular interests. Our two little heroes are left feeling bemused and even anxious, until Owl explains what Christmas is really about. Polly Dunbar's illustrations give Hedgehog and Tortoise so much character and it's a lovely to book to share; the final image is a joy. **Christmas Cobwebs** by Pippa Goodhart and Ema Malyauka is, I think, the only book in which spiders are involved in Christmas celebrations. Old Bear is not happy that they've decorated her Christmas tree with cobwebs, until she sees it sparkling on a frosty Christmas morning. Real Christmas magic. New in paperback, **Eight Nights, Eight Lights** by Natalie Barnes and Andrea Stegmaier celebrates Chanukah highlighting, as all these books have, family, love and the reassuring quality of traditions.

Story Collections

Long nights and holidays call for new story collections. Nikita Gill's retelling of stories from the Panchatantra, **Animal Tales from India** will prove very popular. Featuring quick-thinking jackals, clever mice, and a not-so-clever crocodile, the ten stories open with a direct address to listeners, drawing them in, and they conclude with suggestions for what children might learn from the stories and the animals' behaviour. Gill gives a freshness and contemporary heft to these age-old stories; they read aloud beautifully and illustrations by Chaaya Prabhat are as warm and vivid as the narration. The stories in **Where Magic Grows** by Onjali Q. Raúf are all new but draw inspiration from old myths and fables, and have a shared intent to encourage kindness, tolerance and understanding in their readers. Settings range from magical lands to Cairo, Mumbai and the Amazon rainforest. It's definitely worth adding **Ten-Word Tiny Tales** by Joseph Coelho and illustrator friends to the list too: ten stories, told in ten words and accompanying illustration, and an irresistible invitation to readers to continue the story. Unmissable too is **The Shirley Hughes Treasury**, a collection of nursery rhymes, poems, short stories and longer stories, Hughes' unmistakable child characters jumping, spinning, toddling across the pages exactly as her readers do.





Christmas fiction

Alex T. Smith reserves himself prime place beneath the tree again this year. Following **How Winston Delivered Christmas** and its sequel, and **The Grumpus**, this year he delights us with an inventive, gorgeously illustrated retelling of *The Nutcracker* in **The Nutcracker and the Mouse King's Christmas Shenanigans**. The Mouse King, self-styled 'the Great Gorgonzola', has plans – of course – to disrupt Christmas, and it falls to young Clara and Fritz Strudel, plus their new friend Walter the Nutcracker to stop him, the stakes being raised considerably when Fritz is turned into a mouse. In 24½ chapters it's designed to be read Advent-calendar-like, one chapter a day, though it will be hard to resist calls for 'just one more', especially with titles as tempting as *A Marzipan Mystery* and *The Battle of Marshmallow Mountain*. We recommend Jacqueline Wilson's **The Magic Faraway Tree** Christmas adventure elsewhere in this issue, another food-filled Christmas treat. In Eoin Colfer's **Juniper Christmas**, 11-year-old Juniper needs Santa's help to find her missing mother, the task made more complicated since poor Santa, grieving the death of his wife, has left the North Pole and is resolutely avoiding all children, though he is living in the park near her home. It's a consummate piece of storytelling from Colfer, weaving themes of recovery, healing and forgiveness into a heart-warming adventure (and we find out how Santa manages to deliver all those presents in just one night).

Three icy adventures offer different but equally enticing reading experiences. In **Finding Bear** by Hannah Gold, April of the award-winning **The Last Bear**, returns to Svalbard in the depths of winter to help Bear, discovering that there is now a polar bear cub to be cared for too. Gold's passion for polar bears and the environment drives the narrative, making this another vivid, memorable and moving adventure. **The Ice Children** by M.G. Leonard takes *The Snow Queen* as inspiration, as children, first one then more and more, are found frozen though still alive. Desperate to save her little brother Finn and her friends, Bianca risks her own life and enters the magical world where they are being held. Environmental themes are at the heart of this too, though readers will mainly relish the sense of magic, the magical world and the talking animals that protect the children there. In **The Snow Girl** by Sophie Anderson, lonely Tasha makes a snow girl who becomes a real, living girl, a friend, though a secret one. But spring must come, and what will happen then? The story is beautifully told, an investigation of friendship, family and the power of old tales.

Ghost stories and the supernatural

Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without ghost stories to share. Daniel Morden's **Strange Tales** from Firefly is a collection of supernatural tales, uncanny and unsettling, and likely to haunt you long after you've finished the book. **Tales of the Damned** by Matt Ralphs with illustrations by Taylor Dolan contains eight classic horror stories retold, from *Red Riding Hood* to *Frankenstein* to *The Monkey's Paw*. There are pages of background information throughout, so there's something of an information book about it too though, NB, it's

definitely not one for the young or easily scared. Dolan herself has a new book in the delightfully quirky **Ghost Scouts** series, **Mayhem at Camp Croak!**, which I can just about slip into this section and are highly recommended for young fans of the Gothic. **Mermedusa** concludes Thomas Taylor's *Eerie-on-Sea* mysteries. Set in a seaside town, surprisingly creepy and with a wonderful cast of eccentric characters and mournful monsters, the books are full of imaginative twists and turns and the conclusion is everything you'd want.

Classics and old favourites

'The greatest thing that children's books – maybe any art – can do is teach us how to be happy', says Frank Cottrell-Boyce in his introduction to Oxford's 65th Anniversary edition of Philippa Pearce's **Tom's Midnight Garden**, adding, 'Above all, **Tom's Midnight Garden** is a book about learning how to be happy.' With a cover by Levi Pinfold this handsome new edition, with its unmissable foreword, is happiness guaranteed. While we're talking timeslip stories, Faber have a shiny new edition of Alison Uttley's masterpiece **A Traveller in Time** with striking black and white illustrations by John Broadley. It's 65 years since **A Bear Called Paddington** was first published too, and HarperCollins have a lovely new hardback featuring Peggy Fortnum's original illustrations now 'in glorious colour' thanks to Mark Burgess. Paddington of course, always deserves a warm welcome. Anniversaries are coming thick and fast and the 20th Anniversary Edition of **How to Train Your Dragon** by Cressida Cowell also features a sparkling cover but contains an exclusive new story too. This year also sees publication of a paperback edition of **Pippa Longstocking** with Lauren Child's glorious, distinctive illustrations, originally published in 2016, while Templar have brought out a new paperback edition of Michael Foreman's illustrated WW1 story **The Amazing Tale of Ali Pasha**. Look out too for the paperback edition of **Tyger** by S.F. Said, first published only in 2022 but already acquiring the status of a classic. Finally, **Paws, Claws, Tails & Roars** presents Brian Wildsmith's animal illustrations in a beautiful, new, contemporary way, freshly written, lyrical text accompanying each portrait. The images have been remastered and the colours blaze from the page, breathtaking in their boldness and movement. A must have, whatever your age.

Books that defy categorisation

Finally, two books that can't be categorised but demand your attention. **Island of Whispers** by Frances Hardinge and Emily Gravett is a ghost story, a folk tale, a chase, a lament for the dead, a tribute to the power of stories and a reflection on fate. Full of powerful images – in text and illustration – it should be read and reread. **Begin Again** by Oliver Jeffers asks questions of all of us about the state of our world and what we want for it. It positions each of us in history, celebrating the slow passing of stories to and from each other. Images, layout, composition and colour keep pace with the vastness of his subject but leave us feeling hopeful and calm.

Happy Christmas reading.

There's a full booklist on the [BfK website](https://www.bfk.org.uk/).

Authorgraph No.263

Sophie Anderson
interviewed by
Fiona Noble

'I was so nervous about everything, I was quite overwhelmed by it all,' Sophie Anderson tells me, speaking over Zoom from her home in the Lake District. We are reminiscing about our first meeting, back in 2017, when I interviewed Sophie for **The Bookseller** magazine ahead of the publication of her debut children's book, **The House With Chicken Legs**. It was clear from the start that this was something special. Early proof copies of the book were already attracting rave reviews; **Waterstones** had selected it as Children's Book of the Month, and the book went on to be shortlisted for almost every major award that year including the **Carnegie Medal**, the **Branford Boase Award** and both the **Blue Peter** and **British Book Awards**. 'Publishing was all so new,' Sophie recalls. 'I didn't grasp how much Usborne were investing in me, how being **Waterstone's** Book of the Month would launch my career...it was a whirlwind of a rollercoaster.'

The House With Chicken Legs is a reimagining of the Baba Yaga story, told from the perspective of her 12 year-old granddaughter. Marinka lives with her grandmother in a house with chicken legs that periodically stands up in the night and moves without warning. Baba Yaga's job is to prepare and guide the spirits of the dead between this world and the next, but Marinka longs for a normal life and sets out to forge her own destiny. The book reworks the traditional Slavic folktale into a story of identity, love and belonging, woven together by Sophie's lyrical prose and magical storytelling.

This idea of reimagining traditional tales had long been at the heart of Sophie's writing, inspired by her grandmother who had fled post-war Germany to marry a Welsh man. Sophie recalls their house, filled with Prussian folk patterns, music, food and, above all, stories from Eastern European countries. Before she was published, she remembers exploring writing for different age groups and experimenting with voices but once signed to Usborne Sophie worked very hard, with her agent Gemma Cooper and editor Rebecca Hill, to establish the right feel for the book. 'Some people



in publishing might call it building a brand,' she explains. 'We wanted it to have a fairytale feel so it was Rebecca's idea to remove all the place names and mentions of time and anything that was too modern, so that it could have a timeless feel.' This sensibility of reimagined folktales tapping into universal themes has carried through to her other books.



That first editing process was also invaluable in establishing her voice and pitching Sophie's writing at the right level for children. 'The very first draft of **The House With Chicken Legs** was probably too old and too dark,' she remembers. 'Rebecca helped me get it to the right tone for its readers (9 to 12 year olds).' Darker themes resonate throughout her books, from death in **The House With Chicken Legs** to grief in **The Thief Who Sang Storms** and trauma in **The Snow Girl**, but are always handled thoughtfully and with great care. 'We should never write down to children,' she asserts. 'They know about death, they have trauma ... we don't want to shy away from that, we want to talk about it openly and honestly but we want to wrap it up in a nice, comfortable way so that they can read about it feeling safe.'



The power of the human spirit is at the heart of Sophie's writing: characters such as Olia in **The Castle of Tangled Magic** find great resilience and courage, new friends nourish Yanka in **The Girl Who Speaks Bear**. And above all there is always hope, a tonic in a world where we are constantly blasted with negativity. Hope, Sophie believes, is what sets middle-grade fiction apart. 'The endings don't have to be happy, necessarily, but they do need to be hopeful in some way. No matter how dark things are you need to have some hope there. I think we all need that.'

The Snow Girl, published by Usborne this autumn, is Sophie's fifth novel and is clearly close to her heart. She had long loved the story of a girl made of snow who comes to life and counts Eowyn Ivey's adult novel **Snow Child** as one of her favourite books. 'That's inspired by the same fairy story,' she explains, 'and I thought it would be nice to do a middle grade version of it. It's a lovely story, lots of beautiful imagery and the message is essentially living life to the full.' In Sophie's version, Tasha and her parents have recently moved to live with her grandfather, who is struggling to cope with running his farm. Following an incident the previous year, Tasha now finds it difficult to make friends and feels isolated in her new home. One wintry night she and her Grandpa build a snow girl and Tasha longs for her to come to life. That same night she does, and the two girls become friends. In early drafts Tasha was scared or in disbelief of the magic but Sophie realised her reaction didn't chime with the spirit of the book. 'As a grown up there's that feeling that magic can't be real and you're a bit wary of it, but that was the moment I found Sasha's voice: this is going to be a girl who just believes the magic can happen and it doesn't need to be explained. It's a wish that comes true.' Together Tasha and Alyana, the snow girl, explore an enchanted icy land on starlit nights, conjuring the kind of winter magic that makes for a classic Christmas gift. That sense of a book that could be shared with all the family was very much in Sophie's mind. Her own children range in age from 5 to 17: 'I wanted to write a book that someone like me could take and read to all their kids.' This is the first time Sophie's work has been published in hardback in the UK and the foiled jacket, beautiful two-colour illustrations by Melissa Castrillon and slightly shorter chapters than her previous books help to create that feel of book to read aloud to the family on a cold night.

In her research for **The Snow Girl**, Sophie explored the evolution of the story, from ancient tales to modern interpretations. There was, she tells me, an old pagan goddess called Morana, a goddess of winter in Slavic folklore who had to die to give birth to spring. 'To me

that's the snow girl,' she says, 'and this is my version of it. As always I'm standing on the shoulders of other storytellers and I always want to express some gratitude for this long line of storytellers who have carried this story across thousands of years so that I can play with it today.' I ask if her own understanding of the story has changed during the writing process? She had an idea, she says, of what the original story meant to her when she first read it, but that perception has evolved over time. 'If I were to read **The Snow Girl** now I would think about my children leaving home,' she observes. 'I like the idea that different people will read my books and take away different messages. You want to have that ambiguity. If you write something that is essentially an authentic human experience then people will relate to it and take their own message from that.' The overarching message she feels, is one of living life to the full. 'A short full life is more preferable to a long empty life.'

Looking ahead, Sophie admits that all the ideas in her head come from old folk and fairy stories, particularly the ones from Eastern Europe that feel part of her heritage. Why does she think we continue to be so drawn to these stories in modern times? 'There's a reason these stories have survived for so long. Essentially, it's because they all relate to those common human experiences. It's comforting to think that thousands of years ago people were experiencing the same trials, they had the same hopes and dreams and fears and tribulations.'

Books mentioned, all published by Usborne

The House With Chicken Legs, Usborne, 9781474940665, £7.99, pbk

The Girl Who Speaks Bear, 9781474940672, £7.99, pbk

The Castle of Tangled Magic, 9781474978491, £7.99, pbk

The Thief Who Sang Storms, 9781474979061, £7.99, pbk

The Snow Girl, illus by Melissa Castrillon, Usborne, 9781803704357, £12.99, hbk



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

Windows into Illustration:

Helen Cooper

Helen Cooper is an author and illustrator whose work includes favourites such as **The Bear Under the Stairs**, **Pumpkin Soup**, **The Baby Who Wouldn't Go to Bed**, **The Hippo at the End of the Hall** and **Tatty Ratty**. Her books have been translated into 30 languages and won many awards including the **CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal** – twice. Written during COVID lockdown, her new book, **The Taming of the Cat**, is a modern fairytale and not a picture book but work of illustrated fiction. Here she describes how she created the book's cover.

I wrote **The Taming of the Cat** because I wanted to fashion a modern fairy tale with unusual alliances, and themes of bullying and prejudice. There was lots to illustrate: a fierce princess with no intention of marrying anyone; enchanted foxes, a magical feast; and the overarching story of a mouse trapped by a cheese shop cat who spins the tale while questioning the nature of friendship.



This is a book with chapters. The illustrations are black and white, drawn with pencil or pencil and wash. I began them in peak COVID lockdown. For a while I worked unbriefed and couldn't seem to stop – there are over a hundred illustrations. But the cover art came later. Cover art is usually directed by ideas from the marketing department as well as editorial. Sometimes that can be tricky for the illustrator, but in this case it went really well. Emma Eldridge, the designer at Faber, cleverly isolated a tiny section of a margin shaped forest illustration from Chapter 14, blew it up to book-cover size, added some rough type – and everyone loved it.

The brief was 'like this but with more magic and movement'. I thought that the serpentine path, the strong vertical of the trees and the dramatic lighting were the elements that made the composition pleasing. But in the original, we look down on tiny static figures to accentuate their unease and fear. It's a moment of pause. The cover needed action.

First, I lowered the horizon and the tunnel at the end of the wood. I wanted our eyes to travel at the level of the path. To create movement, I returned to another illustration; this time of the Princess and the cat escaping from the castle at night. I wanted to evoke the same exhilaration and speed but with more focus, so I re-drew the characters to gallop towards us.

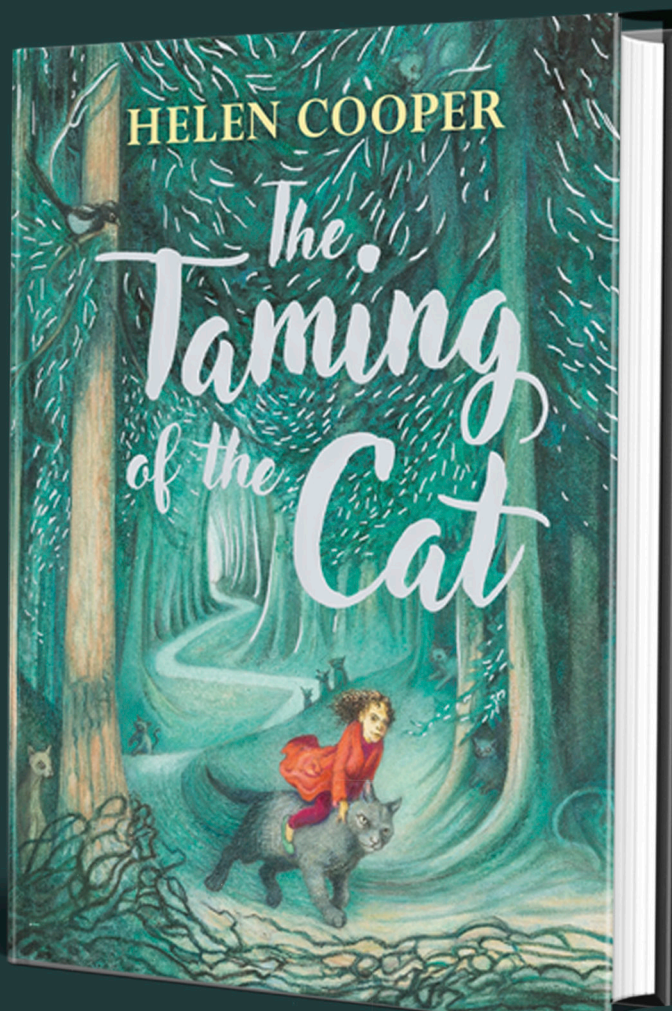


I painted my final illustration on paper, with watercolour and some colour pencil. I'm keen on blue-green forest scenes and fans of **Pumpkin Soup** might recognise a similar colour pallet in the first picture of *The Old White Cabin*. However, for **The Taming of the Cat** I wanted a flash of scarlet to balance Prussian blue shadows. So, I went back through the text to change the colour of the Princess's dressing gown from green to red. For atmosphere, I used strong rays of light and a tangle of stylised brambles following the path completed the scene. As I worked, I grew fond of the section to the right – the mystery path around the bend. Originally intended for the front flap it would have been covered up by type. Once again Emma Eldridge came to the rescue – she moved that section with photoshop to the back cover instead. The title type and the silver foil flecks give the cover an appealing flourish.

The Taming of the Cat is published by Faber & Faber, 978-0571376018, £14.99 hbk.



From the
award-winning
author of
Pumpkin Soup
comes an
enchantingly
illustrated story
within a story for
older readers . . .



Available online and in all good bookshops



Exploring Realms of Imagination at the British Library

A visit to the British Library's new exhibition, **Fantasy: Realms of Imagination** will be a must for many Books for Keeps readers. **Tanya Kirk**, Lead Curator of the exhibition gives us a guided tour in this article.

Fantasy: Realms of Imagination is a major exhibition at the British Library, exploring the whole history of the Fantasy genre – from its origins in the oldest forms of storytelling right through to the proliferation of fan culture today. Although Fantasy is often thought of as a 19th- or 20th-century genre, the roots are far older and can be found in historic forms of storytelling, like fairy and folk tales, or epics and quest narratives. Modern Fantasy continues to draw on these narratives for inspiration, and to rework them in new and exciting ways. Our exhibition sheds light on the historic threads that run through Fantasy, but demonstrates that it is anything but stuck in the past. Whilst the core of our own collection is books and manuscripts, we were really keen to display many different formats to show the wide influence of Fantasy. Visitors will be able to see original artwork, film and TV props, costumes and clips, alongside tabletop and video games.

Fantasy is perennially popular as a children's literature genre, and some of us will have been introduced to it via fairy and folk tales at a very young age. Many of their recurring themes – such as enchantments, transformations, wishes and the supernatural – anticipate later Fantasy writing. There is also plenty of mischievousness – and even darkness – in fairy stories which certainly inspired Fantasy creators. On display we have an early edition from 1819 of **Kinder- und Haus-Märchen (Children and household tales)** by the Brothers Grimm; a beautifully rich illustration of the Slavonic folkloric figure Baba Yaga by the artist Ivan Bilibin from 1901; and the manuscript of Alan Garner's seminal 1967 novel **The Owl Service**, which draws on the early Welsh folk stories in the **Mabinogion**. We also feature documents from the archive of Jamaican writer James Berry, who penned a collection of stories called **Anancy-Spiderman** (1983) inspired by the tales he had heard in his childhood 'in moonlight or in dim paraffin lamplight, during rain and storm winds' of the trickster hero who could transform into a spider.

Another section of the exhibition looks at the history of world-building; the creation of detailed and believable imaginary worlds, by means of invented geographies, histories, languages, cultures, creatures and laws of physics. This features some of the British Library's greatest treasures, including tiny books handwritten by the Brontë siblings in childhood, describing their imaginary land of Glass Town. Paracosms – invented childhood worlds of this nature –

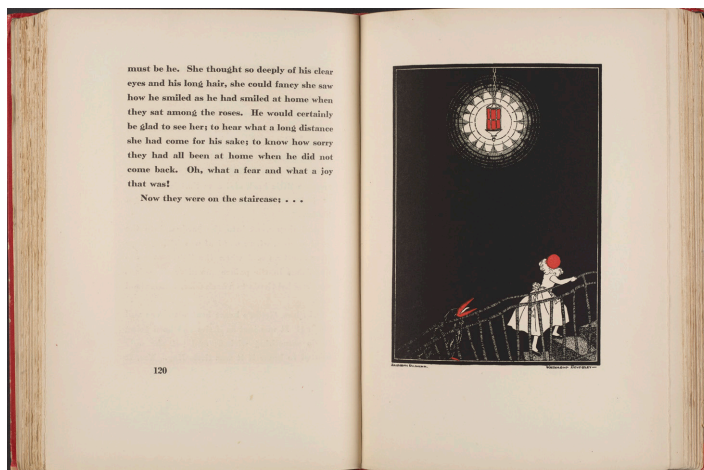
can be a fascinating outlet for creativity and pure imagination. The exhibition features Fantasy stories 'The Spell' and 'The search after happiness' by Charlotte Brontë – in which enchantments and magical portals play important roles – and a map and historical account of Glass Town by Branwell Brontë.

The manuscripts are shown together with E. Nesbit's handwritten draft of her 1910 novel **The Magic City**, a perhaps lesser-known work by Nesbit in which the hero of the story, Philip, builds a tabletop city out of household objects and toys. Subsequently he and his friend Lucy find themselves inside the city itself where Philip assumes the role of the 'Deliverer', rescuing the city by taking on quests including slaying a clockwork dragon. The manuscript survived because a librarian at what was then Woolwich Public Library had written to Nesbit in 1913, expressing admiration for her work, and she had replied saying perhaps the Library would like to keep the manuscript of one of her novels. She wrote 'This will probably be more interesting to the next generation than to this... If anyone ever should be interested in this M.S. [manuscript] the most interesting thing will be the comparison of the notes with the finished work. The comparison will show how a story develops itself, and how far it something travels from the author's original intention.'

The exhibition features one section entirely given over to children's literature, and this is called 'Gateways and Thresholds' – an exploration of portals. Portals allow the reader to experience an imagined world through the eyes of a protagonist and compare it with our own. Perhaps that is why they are particularly popular in children's fiction, firing the imaginations of young readers for whom the discovery of a doorway into another reality seems a real possibility. Portals first appeared in children's books in the 19th century, with writers such as George MacDonald, Charles Kingsley and E. Nesbit all early adopters of the trope. At the British Library we are lucky enough to hold in our collection the original manuscript of **Alice's Adventures Under Ground** (1864), the handwritten story that would eventually be published as Lewis Carroll's **Alice's Adventures in Wonderland** (1865) – sometimes called the first children's portal Fantasy. The author's original illustrations may be unexpected for those who grew up with the distinctive Tenniel version – and perhaps even more



Children's and Household Tales, Grimm Brothers, 1819 © British Library Board



The Fairy Tales of Hans Christian Andersen: The Snow Queen, Hans Christian Andersen,



Page showing *Baba Yaga*, illustrated by Ivan Bilibin, 1901-1903 © Justine Trickett

surprising are the pen-and-ink artworks by Mervyn Peake for his illustrated version of the **Alice** books, which we show alongside. Peake's grumpily surreal White Rabbit, depicted marching down the rabbit hole, is extremely characterful.

In early portal stories, the portal was often a straightforward gateway to a different world, appealing to the child reader's sense of adventure and their desire to explore, or, in the case of the **Alice** books, occasionally as a mechanism for reflecting and mocking the 'silly rules' of adult society. But in the 20th century and beyond, portals have often acted as metaphors, with thresholds representing stages of growing up. We are delighted to have borrowed from Neil Gaiman for the exhibition his original manuscript for the novel **Coraline** (2002). The young heroine of the story finds a passage into a sinister alternative version of her own reality, ruled over by the terrifying 'Other Mother', who has black buttons for eyes. Like Lewis Carroll in the **Alice** books, Gaiman makes the world beyond the portal a twisted version of our own – but far more than Carroll does with Alice, Coraline's courage is emphasised as she overcomes her fears and enters the realm of the Other Mother to rescue her real parents.

As a librarian, I was delighted to be able to display volumes from the Japanese manga series **Honzuki no gekokuj.: Shisho ni naru tame ni wa shudan o erande iraremasen. (Ascendance of a Bookworm: I'll Stop at Nothing to Become a Librarian)**, by Kazuki Miya and Suzuka in 2013-17. This is an example of a subgenre of Fantasy called *isekai*: stories in which the main protagonist, often a teenager, becomes trapped in another world, sometimes by dying and being reborn. **Ascendance of a Bookworm** follows the adventures of Urano Motosu. In the story she is crushed to death under a pile of books and reborn into a world where books are extremely scarce and has to recreate them herself. The roots of *isekai* lie in Japanese folk tales, but they sometimes feature a quest narrative similar to the plotline of a video game – a clear demonstration of how Fantasy is constantly drawing on influences old and new to create something transformative.

There can also be a bittersweet element to portal Fantasy – such as in Philippa Pearce's **Tom's Midnight Garden** (1958), a 'timeslip' story in which the portal takes the protagonist into a different period of history – a popular trope from the mid-20th century onwards. The exhibition includes an original illustration by Susan Einzig, as reproduced in the first edition of the novel. It shows the main character Tom entering a magical garden when a clock strikes 13. He befriends a girl whom he discovers is from the Victorian period, coming to the poignant realisation as he witnesses her ageing over repeated visits that we do not stay children forever.

A similar sense of loss and poignancy can be found in Seanan McGuire's **Wayward Children** series, the first volume of which is **Every Heart a Doorway** (2016). The books are set in a special boarding school for children who have previously travelled to other

worlds via portals. On returning to our world, they often mourn the other realities where they felt able to be their true selves, and long to return. McGuire uses the idea of the portal and the children's reactions to explore the trauma of growing up and learning to fit in with our peers.

Of course, we couldn't have a Fantasy exhibition without featuring Diana Wynne Jones, who returned to the idea of a multiverse and the portals within it many times in her books. On display in the exhibition we have the first pages of the original manuscript of her great comic novel **The Dark Lord of Derkholm** (1998), which satirises portal Fantasy. The story is set in a High Fantasy world besieged by groups of tourists travelling from our world. Expecting the full Fantasy experience, they force the inhabitants to take turns playing stereotypical roles. In an attempt to bring about the end of the tours, senior officials appoint the seemingly incompetent wizard Derk to play that year's Dark Lord. The novel is filled with Wynne Jones' wonderfully idiosyncratic touches – several of Derk's children are griffins, for example, although he is human – and it draws on her own earlier satirical Fantasy travel book **The Tough Guide to Fantasyland** (1996), which uproariously yet fondly sends up clichés of the genre.

The exhibition runs at the British Library in London to 25 February 2024, and is accompanied by an events programme featuring children's authors including Philip Pullman and Susan Cooper, and by satellite exhibitions and events programmes in public libraries that are part of the Living Knowledge Network, all across the UK. A book of essays inspired by the exhibition's themes will be available from the British Library's shop and other retailers (**Realms of Imagination: Essays from the Wide Worlds of Fantasy**). It features 20 different perspectives on the genre, including many that will be of interest to children's literature enthusiasts.



Lewis Carroll [Charles Dodgson], **Alice's Adventures Under Ground**, MS 46700 ff.34v-35r © The British Library Board

Beyond the Secret Garden: Witness Literature

By **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor**

Writing for **Books for Keeps** (258) earlier this year, Beverley Naidoo shared how her visit to the Occupied Palestinian Territories and East Jerusalem in 2000 and 2016 informed her latest novel **Children of the Stone City**. Written as a work of fiction, her decision to name the city in the book ‘as simply ‘The Stone City’, with its inhabitants universalized as ‘Permitteds’ and ‘Nons’, would come later.’

Naidoo describes her approach to fiction as ‘witness literature’, a term she learnt from fellow South African Nadine Gordimer. Both writers grew up racialised as white by the Apartheid regime. Acknowledging that witnessing in fiction is matter of degree, Political Scientist Ian King suggests that ‘[a] radical literature of witness says, “Hey, look at this! Do you see what’s going on here? How are you going to react? Can you just stand by and shrug your shoulders?”’ King acknowledges that where writers are ‘witnessing’ rather merely ‘observing’ the writing ‘clearly has a (often brazenly didactic) “point” to it.’

This potential didacticism is one of the reasons that witness literature for children is sometimes a subject of debate. Concerns about a work of literature being propagandist should not be rejected out of hand, in our view. But we should also question any assumptions that literature and childhood can exist entirely independently of politics. A further reason for controversy is the increased attention to the identity of the author and a concern in promoting ‘own voices’ literature. Naidoo addresses this concern in a 2004 speech entitled ‘*Out of Bounds: Witness Literature and the Challenge of Crossing Racial Boundaries*’: ‘It is essential to be campaigning and promoting access for more black writers, illustrators, editors, publishers, designers – for more black participation in every area of production – but this political activity should not dictate creative activity. The work must stand or fall in terms of its own artistic merit. To judge work in terms of the so-called racial classification of the author is a backward step. It confirms the racialisation of experience and imagination.’

Naidoo offers a distinction – between political and creative activity – that makes demands of the witness author beyond the page, while also holding open the possibility for understanding. This is a position in keeping with the Anti-Apartheid struggle of which she was part.

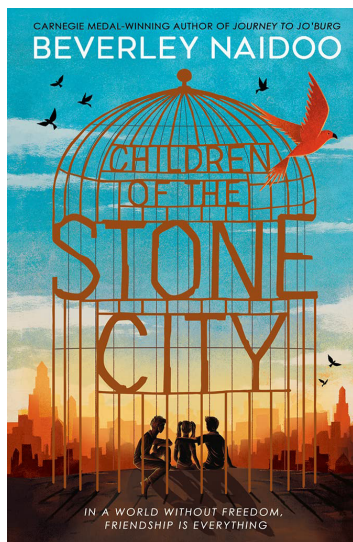
In any violent incident, people can be positioned within that incident—as victims or aggressors—or they can be present but not directly involved. These outsiders have a potentially important role to play, bearing witness to the event and often speaking for or with the victim against the aggressor. When the violence is perpetrated by a nation or government against another nation or some of its own people, witnesses sometimes choose to become authors, telling the story of the atrocity so it can reach more people. Witness writing has been an important part of children’s literature for hundreds of years, and has motivated young people to take action. However, the way that the narrative is told and who it is told by has an effect on who benefits most from witness-bearing.

A prime historical example of this is the 18th and early 19th century abolitionist writing by British women authors like Amelia Opie. Opie wrote poetry, such as ‘The Black Man’s Lament: Or, how to make sugar’ (1826), to encourage white British child readers to participate in sugar boycotts and become part of the abolitionist movement. Using the power of sympathy, Opie addressed white British children in an effort to ‘move souls to pity’ the enslaved. This rhetorical technique empowered young people to take action, but also encouraged the continuance of power hierarchies which gave agency to white children rather than enslaved people. Claire Midgely points out that

these boycotts had ‘no clear impact on West India sugar imports’ (‘Slave sugar boycotts and anti-slavery culture’ p. 155) and thus no direct influence on the enslaved people in the Caribbean. Opie was a ‘witness from a distance’—she never travelled to the West Indies and what she knew about enslavement came from her connections with Quakers and other religious groups that objected to the system of enslavement. This meant that Opie’s influence was felt mostly in Britain by unenfranchised British people—mostly women and children—who, despite their lack of voting ability, could have an impact on national politics through participation in sugar boycotts. Many supporters of women’s rights in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including Emmeline Pankhurst and Elizabeth Blackwell, credited childhood abolitionist literature for their activism later in life. Opie herself also increased her fame through her abolitionist poetry, and though there is nothing to suggest she did it for this reason, the fact remains that white women and children benefitted more directly from abolitionist writing for children than the enslaved people they were moved to help.

Witness literature for children does not always benefit the author who writes it. Anthony Delius, a white South African journalist, spent his entire career writing against the Nationalist party in South Africa which, in 1948, made racial segregation and economic oppression of Black South Africans legal under apartheid. Among his published works was a volume of **The Young Traveller** series from the publishing house of J. M. Dent. Delius’s **The Young Traveller in South Africa** (1947), like other books in the series, involved British children visiting a country and meeting its people, learning its industries, and observing its culture. Although Dick Wisley, the main British protagonist, stays with white South African relations, Delius ensures that Dick meets many Black individuals and communities, and he uses these encounters to comment negatively on the South African government. When, for example, Dick visits a Bantu township and is shocked by the poverty and the fact that families are torn apart by the system, his cousin Alice says that ‘Johannesburg is responsible and so is the rest of South Africa’ (52). Delius also points out how white South Africans deem the Black South Africans uncivilised, but that the Bantu had produced sophisticated irrigation systems and folk-lore that Dick recognized as the origin of Brer Rabbit stories. Whereas Amelia Opie’s abolitionist writing earned her renown and success, Delius was exiled for his anti-government writing and a subsequent edition of his **The Young Traveller in South Africa**, published in 1959, was edited to soften Delius’ criticism of the South African government and its people.

Writing about apartheid proved difficult for many authors while they were in South Africa. Toeckey Jones attended the University of Witwatersrand, known for its anti-apartheid protests and activities; he became a journalist after university but left the country in 1971 rather than remain under the apartheid system. This was a choice many white activists made, as they had the freedom to travel that nearly all of their Black counterparts did not. Jones wrote about South Africa under apartheid in **Go Well, Stay Well** (1979), told from the viewpoint of white teenager Candy, who befriends a Black teenager, Becky, from Soweto. Candy struggles with the resistance she faces from her liberal but cautious parents, and with her own fears—she admits to Becky that she doesn’t want to see a Black government in power, because she thinks they would take revenge on white people (156). Becky appreciates her honesty, and somehow the two remain friends. The book ends with the two going on holiday in



Swaziland—Candy tells her mother that she ‘needs it, to help me find out what I really think and feel’ (189). Jones suggests that it is impossible for white people to escape the normality of apartheid while under the system itself. This is something that Beverley Naidoo discusses in the 1995 edition of her first novel, **Journey to Jo’burg**, about Black South African children living under apartheid. Naidoo based the story in part on the experience of the woman who looked after her while her own children lived (and eventually died) far away in a township. Looking back, Naidoo commented, ‘I still feel very angry about how the racism of the white society stopped me and other white children from really seeing and understanding what was going on’ (142). Her book, unlike Toecky Jones’, focuses on the experience of Black South Africans to create empathy in the reader, but it does not (except in her additional commentary, outside the main narrative) suggest the complexities of a white writer telling the story of Black characters to readers who have no direct experience of the situation described. Naidoo’s book successfully contributed to raising awareness about the apartheid system for young British readers, but as with abolition this awareness was from a distance, and the book was banned in South Africa itself until the fall of apartheid. It was not until 2000 that Naidoo wrote a story about injustice that was published in the country of the injustice; **The Other Side of Truth** exposed the corrupt government in Nigeria, but also the problematic refugee and asylum system in the UK. This book won the Carnegie Medal in 2001.

The Day The War Came (2019), written by Nicola Davies and illustrated by Rebecca Cobb is a recent picturebook, endorsed by **Amnesty International UK**, that can be said to be an example of witness literature. As an afterword explains, Davies initially wrote the text as a poem in response to the UK government’s 2016 refusal to give sanctuary to 3,000 unaccompanied child refugees. We see both the effects of war and the indifference of adults towards refugees from the point of view of the child protagonist. It is children who bring chairs from home to accommodate the child refugees; their chairs represent a warmth and sense of home that the adults of the story were reluctant to offer.

In **Four Feet, Two Sandals** (2007), written by Karen Lynn Williams and Khadra Mohammed and illustrated by Doug Chayka, it is the sharing of sandals in a refugee camp on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border that is the motif of care and hope. When Lina’s name appears on the list of people granted access to America, and Feroza’s does not, they take one sandal each and vow to be reunited. The story ends on a note of hope, tempered with realism.

In **My Garden Over Gaza** (2022), written by Sarah Musa and illustrated by Bazlamit, Noura’s commitment to her father’s rooftop garden, in the face of drones spraying herbicides, again offers a tale of hopeful witnessing. Noura expresses fear and anxiety but also warmth and resilience. We witness her struggle to maintain a garden, so often employed as a symbol of childhood flourishing.

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Journey to Jo’burg, Beverley Naidoo, HarperCollins Children’s Books, 978-0007263509, £7.99 pbk

The Other Side of Truth, Beverley Naidoo, Puffin, 978-0141377353, £7.99 pbk

The Day The War Came, Nicola Davies, illus Rebecca Cobb, Walker Books, 978-1406382938, £7.99 pbk

Four Feet, Two Sandals, Karen Lynn Williams, Khadra Mohammed, illus Doug Chayka, Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 978-0802852960, £10.99

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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 Nimesh Shukla and the author, with Jeffrey Boakye, of **What Is Masculinity? Why Does It Matter? And Other Big Questions**. He tweets at @rapclassroom.

REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

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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.

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Louise Johns-Shepherd was CEO of the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education for ten years and is non-exec board member for a range of organisations.

Matthew Martin is a primary school teacher.

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

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

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

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant

Doris

★★★★★

Lo Cole, Rocket Bird Books, 24pp, 9781915395054, £12.99, hbk

Doris is an elephant who hates everyone looking at her. The trouble is she stands out from the crowd because she is red – all over. Doris decides to hide and chooses a flock of highly colourful birds where she is very well camouflaged. This leads her to wonder whether she is an *ele-finch* rather than an *ele-phant*. Unfortunately, the birds soon fly off and Doris is visible again. She seeks out more hiding places and finds refuge amongst wildflowers and in a pool of shimmering fish; leading her to wonder if she is an *ele-plant* or even an *ele-fish*. Doris feels increasingly lost and alone until she meets a blue rhinoceros who seems to be having similar problems.

This is a lovely picture book with a very appealing story about a shy elephant having an identity crisis. The beautifully designed flat colour illustrations are bold and full of humour and there is a playful approach to language and to the book format itself as Doris stomps off 'to the next page.' The repeated refrain 'Stop looking at me!' encourages children to join in. There are other interactive elements too, as young readers are directly invited to find the elephant hidden in the sea of birds, flowers or fish. Overall great fun and highly recommended. **SMC**

Ollie's Birthday Surprise

★★★

Nicola Killen, Simon & Schuster, 24pp, 978-1398500020, £7.99 pbk

This new story in the series about Ollie and her friends begins with Ollie unpacking and donning a tiger suit as a birthday present. Then, peep through the cut out to see what Ollie sees, a huge bunch of colourful balloons floating by. She dashes outside to try and capture the balloons, realising she is a tiger so has ROARING powers! Soon she is flying through the air, clutching tight to the balloons until she is gently landed in a forest, with mysterious goings-on. Surprise!! There are her animal friends, all wishing her a Happy Birthday. Then begin the games, all the familiars; a treasure hunt followed by pass the parcel, and musical statues. Guess who won that game... Sloth! As the birthday feast comes to an end, Ollie drifts home with the balloons, and on the final page, there she is, still in her tiger suit, amidst torn wrapping paper and a collection of wild animal toys... just like in her surprise party! A wonderful rendering of an imagined party, with peep holes to take the tale on to the next event.

The colour palette is gentle throughout; the pictures are full of charm, and will be an instant memory for small readers of the excitement of birthdays. **GB**

New Talent

Wolf and Bear

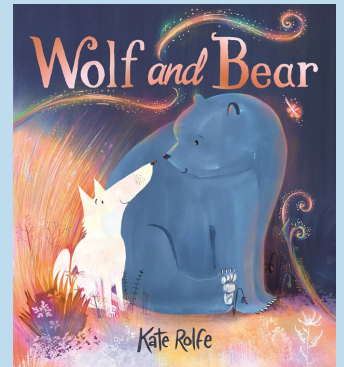
★★★★★

Written and ill. Kate Rolfe, Two Hoots Books, 32pp, 978-1-0350-1957-1, £12.99 hbk

Wolf's enthusiasm for fun and games is almost irrepressible. She wants to catch and splash and tumble and munch, but sometimes her best friend Bear feels too sad to respond. When the shadow of the mountain calls him, Wolf can do nothing to persuade Bear back into the light. Full of pain, she withdraws, howling a song which travels deep into Bear's shadow. Finally something is able to reach him in that dark place and touch his heart.

In this sensitive and beautifully illustrated picturebook, text and pictures work together to explore mental health and wellbeing in a way that readers of all ages will respond to and enjoy. Wolf listens to Bear and tries many ways of helping him, but she won't accept the jagged outbreak of aggression that becomes the story's turning point, and it's her honest expression of grief that enables Bear to inch his way back. Unusually for audiences of this age, there is no miracle cure. Bear's sadness isn't vanquished immediately, and when he does emerge from the darkness, it's on his own terms. Playing is out of the question, but Wolf continues to listen and adapt, and when Bear suggests an alternative – sitting quietly as Wolf sings – she's more than happy to agree.

Kate Rolfe's well-written story is fun to read and share, but her artwork is every bit as eloquent as her text. Colour and movement are important throughout, cueing us to interpret not just the characters' actions, but their state of mind and heart. It's notable that Wolf's body (and attention) is always directed towards her friend, while Bear's sadness is described as something



'falling on him' that 'draws him away', and this is reflected in his posture and response. And when Wolf ventures into Bear's blue shadow, her pale body is lit by her own peachy-coloured mood, which battles with the very edges of Bear's shadow but can't survive its depths.

As Kate notes in her afterword, she used 'a technique of painting with sunlight and shadow' called cyanotype in this book. A relatively unusual printing process, it relies on sunlight to expose an image, and its presence here reflects the metaphor of light and shade that expresses the characters' emotions. Kate added soft colour with crayons, pastels and digital drawing to create luminous spreads with a gentle, dreamy feel: the only hard-edged shape or texture is Bear's growling silhouette.

There's an authenticity about Bear's experience (and Wolf's reaction to it) that draws us deep into this story and makes it easy to engage, but fundamental issues about mental health, wellbeing and relationships are also being explored in ways that prompt reflection, discussion and growth. Wolf demonstrates the power of true friendship in practical, achievable ways that will spark audiences to consider their own and others' behaviour: Wolf is the kind of friend we all want to have, and this quietly moving account of her compassion and care will help young readers develop empathy and insight. **CFH**

I Really Want to be a Cat

★★★★★

Helen Hancocks, Walker Books, 24pp, 978 1 5295 0993 9, £12.99, hbk

Many adult owners have looked at their pets and reflected on how much easier their lives appear to be. This book takes that idea much further exploring the many attractions of life as a cat.

The narrator is a young girl who watches her pet cat throughout the day and to the surprise of her feline friend mimics him too, even squeezing through the cat flap for adventures.

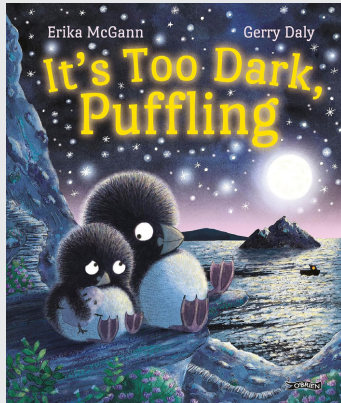
She envies her cat who has, it seems, all the time in the world to do what it wants. She reflects that cats can curl and stretch, sneak and pounce, come and go as they please and are not criticised for trivial things such as bad table manners. They seem to have lots of fun too and are fearless and adventurous, but always remember to return home for mealtimes. There is only one thing that doesn't appeal to our young narrator and that is cats' personal hygiene routine with its emphasis on licking.

Very well observed, in both the artwork and commentary and

reviews

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

with touches of humour this is an enjoyable exploration of the everyday lives of domestic cats which cat lovers both young and much older will relate to. **SMc**



It's Too Dark, Puffling

★★★★★

Erika McGann, illus Gerry Daly, O'Brien Press, 32pp, 978-1788493796, £13.99 hbk

This charming story takes us back to Skellig Michael and reunites us with the kind little puffling we first met in *Where Are you, Puffling?* Here she has a smaller puffling friend, who is scared of the dark. He won't go into his cosy burrow, can't be convinced by the small rabbit playing hide and seek in the big stone hut, and even the sweep of the lighthouse light, which makes the puffling's heart warm, can't cheer him up. Perhaps, we feel, as he looks out at the quiet and the calm of the night and the sea and the hide-and-seek huts, he might be feeling less frightened, but then his puffin parents arrive and, after describing everything he's seen, he happily goes with them into his dark little burrow which suddenly seems 'snuggly and cosy and lovely and warm'. Both pufflings are immensely appealing characters and the very young will love the thrill of their moonlit wander across the island, and the reassuring ending. The text is perfect to read aloud, full of repetition, and great for joining in, while the illustrations convey so much information about life on Skellig Michael, from the puffins arriving with fish in their beaks to the fulmars and guillemots on their cliff edge nests. A cross section at the very beginning contains facts about the puffin beaks glow under UV light. I had no idea! **LS**

Wolves in Helicopters

★★★★★

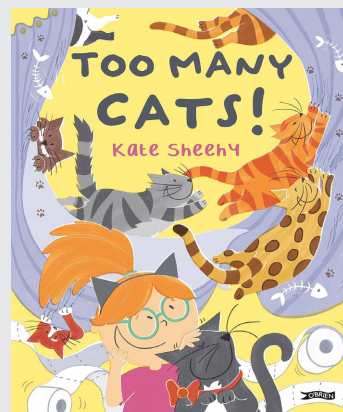
Sarah Tagholm, ill. Paddy Donnelly, Andersen Press 32pp, 978 1 8391 3146 2, £12.99 hbk

Little Hop is troubled by horrific dreams of hungry wolves: 'she shivers in a dark wood' fearing she's watched through the twisted trees by

one hundred, hungry-eyed lupines. Fortunately for her though, when she wakes, her mother is there with a calming suggestion to allay her fears. This happens time and again until Mummy offers a very important statement: "You are in control of the dream and the wolves. Maybe you could frighten the wolves into another dream."

When the next dream comes, as the wolves approach with their fangs and claws at the ready, Little Hop remembers what she's been told and she finds her voice, turning things upside down in a wonderfully ebullient ending.

Children, especially those who are besieged by terrifying dreams will be empowered by this book. The combination of the enthralling telling and the dramatic illustrations will help young listeners approach bedtimes full of positive thoughts. **JB**



Too Many Cats!

★★★★★

Kate Sheehy, O'Brien Press, 32pp, 978-1788493710, £13.99 hbk

How many cats is too many cats? Little Lily loves her cat, Lenny but thinks a house filled with cats would be 'AMAZING'. She sets out to attract the neighbourhood cats therefore, cooking up a batch of irresistible (for felines) fishy treats. It works, and soon there are cats everywhere – on the curtains the carpets, in the cupboards... At this point, Lily realises she has too many cats and there's added stress when she discovers their owners are looking for them. Fortunately, this resourceful young lady knows just how to send the cats back home.

The story is lots of fun, cleverly structured to build to its catastrophic climax before a resolution and final twist in the tale. Kate Sheehy's compositions are perfect too as the cats pour in. Lily's problem-solving will intrigue youngsters and she and Lenny are proper characters. A lovely book to share not just with young cat lovers but anyone who appreciates chaos and the restitution of order. **LS**

The Treasure

★★★★★

Marcela Ferreira, ill. Brian Lambert, Magic Cat Publishing, 32pp, 978 1 9135 2086 1, £7.99 pbk

I wonder what you treasure most in life. In this fable it's said that a treasure can be found in an old wooden chest and that it has the power to make your dreams come true. Hearing this, Hare sets off on a quest to find said treasure. As she gets higher up into the mountains it's so cold and scary that climbing becomes very difficult. Seeking shelter, she hears a voice inviting her into a cave. It's Bear and despite his somewhat alarming appearance, Hare accepts and the two sit down to drink tea. The following morning the two set out treasure seeking together and when they stop for lunch, they share what they have with a bird. Soon Blackbird too is a friend and despite the worsening weather, and terrible terrain, the three are driven on by their hopes and dreams. These are superbly shown in such scenes as scuba diving and singing on stage.

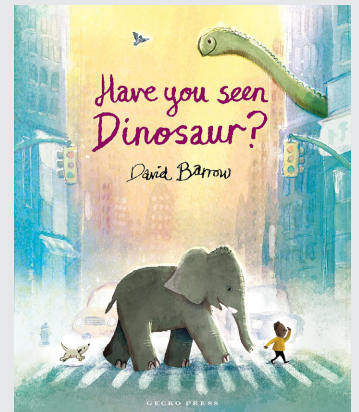
Finally, thanks to Hare's spirit, Bear's warmth and Blackbird's song they reach the wooden chest. What they find within comes as a disappointment at first but then a realisation dawns ... A powerful story of courage, discovering happiness where you don't expect it, and the importance of friendship and the joys it brings. **JB**

Have You Seen Dinosaur?

★★★★★

David Barrow, Gecko Press, 32pp, 978-1776575138, £11.99 hbk

If you really want to spot a dinosaur, you have to be very observant. So



concludes the little boy in this new picture books from award winner David Barrow as he sets off to go looking with his friend, Elephant, and his little dog. As they roam the city, by bus and underground train, visiting the museum and the skateboard park, they don't see a single dinosaur, until they climb to the top of a (suspiciously green and scaly) hill for a better look and finally, there it is. Their journey will have been delicious fun for observant young readers, who will have spotted the dinosaurs on each page, hiding in plain sight. The follow up to **Have You Seen Elephant?**, this cleverly plays on the absurdity of the storyline while filling each page with extra details for readers to find – dog has his own adventure with a city pigeon for example. In warm, rich reds and greens, the city appears to be both welcoming and mysterious, exactly the kind of place that dinosaurs would be drawn to! **AR**

Read our [Q&A interview](#) with David Barrow.

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I Want a Dog

★★★★★

Jon Agee, Scallywag Press, 40pp, 978-1915252104, £7.99 pbk

Jon Agee's typically witty, clever picture book puts a fresh spin on the 'I want a pet' story. A little girl pulls her wheeled wagon to the Happydale Animal Shelter and tells its lanky proprietor 'I want a dog.' Over the next double pages, in scenes that build the comedy superbly, the man presents her with an adorable armadillo, an awesome anteater, a baby baboon (it chases a ball, 'just like a dog'), and more, to her increasing irritation. At last, after bringing out a lizard dressed up as a dog, he has to admit, he doesn't even have a dog. Only then, when the little girl describes what's so special about a dog – a dog is 'loyal, loving, smart, cuddly, goofy, courageous ... the best friend you could ever have in the world' does he bring out Lucinda, who eats 20lbs of fish a day and needs to swim in at least 3,000 cubic feet of water. She's perfect! The comedy derives from the parade of so many unsuitable



pets, the little girl's determined refusal to accept them, and the man's changing demeanour – confidence, desperation, hope again – all perfectly depicted in Agee's deadpan illustration style; but the immediate connection we see between the little girl and Lucinda is powerful, a moment of true love. **AR**

Doggy Dance Off

★★★★

Steve Smallman ill. Robert Starling, Little Tiger, 978 1 80104 496 7, £12.99, hbk

This hilarious book is a sure-fire winner. It oozes charm and is packed with adorable characters. Any household with a pooch and a child or two will just love it. The illustrations are intriguing, full of humour, and will attract a great deal of attention from readers and listeners. There is Eva, the golden retriever, a dance floor diva; Dynamite Doug, a body popping pug; Duke Doggy Doo,.... 'a punk rocker cockapoo bouncing all around like a mini kangaroo!' 'Down at the big doggy dance off,' cries the chorus... can you hear listeners all chanting this catchy line as it reappears, spread after spread? Lenny Labrador, never ever been to a disco before... 'got a bit excited and piddled on the floor!' Spot the boogie woogie, the funky chicken, the hand jive. The crowd go WOOOOOOOOO as the latest newcomer does a backflip, startling all the other doggies. What a surprise, as the identity of the latest dancer is unmasked... through a slip on the piddle puddle. The story ends in the biggest dance off ever. The rhyming text reads aloud splendidly, and the characters are created with great skill and mastery. A book to return to time and again. Love it. **GB**

The Magic Faraway Tree: A Christmas Adventure

★★★★

Jacqueline Wilson, inspired by Enid Blyton, illus Mark Beech, Hodder Children's Books, 336pp, 978-1-444-97154-5, £14.99 hbk

If you are looking for the perfect comfort read with much wish-fulfilment, Wilson's latest title is the answer.

Milo, Mia and Birdy make a welcome return from Wilson's first book about the Faraway Tree. Their family has conveniently rented the same cottage for Christmas but, disaster strikes! When they arrive they find the boiler has broken and because it is perishingly cold, the parents threaten to take the children home. Thankfully, the boiler is repaired and the children can make regular visits to the Faraway Tree.

The first Land which appears at the top of the Tree maybe a surprise to some, given that this is a Christmas adventure in England, but the children go to the beach. The other Lands which appear, more fully conform to the Christmas theme.

One of the most notable tributes in this book is to Judith Kerr when Birdy receives a copy of **The Tiger Who Came To Tea** in her stocking. Because adaptations of Kerr's books have become so synonymous with Christmas, this feels very fitting. A scene involving an errant clock in Santa's Workshop steals the show. Huge personality is conveyed in a series of ticks and tocks. **RB**

The Moon's Gorgonzola

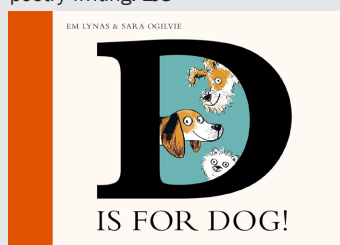
★★★★

Debra Bertulis, ill. Zoe Williams, Troika, 96pp, 9781912745302, £8.99, pbk

A collection of poems for younger children which is designed to be accessed by individual readers or enjoyed as a group. The poems are organised by subject which could be helpful for teachers wanting to use them with a class and who are keen to find a poem on a particular theme. There are also a range of poetry types within the collection so it's easy to find puzzle poems, list poems or those with a chorus that could be good for call and response performances. The book has tips for using the poems or for performing them as well as some facts about the subject matter and there's a helpful summary of ways to use the collection as a starting point for writing at the end of the book.

The simplistic style of the poetry and the design of the book make it particularly accessible to the very youngest readers and there are some delightful poems which really lend themselves to group reading. *Train Ride to the Sea* with its repeating rhythmic 'we're off to the sea / on the train today', followed by a variety of responses ('Fish and chips, Fish and chips' or 'buckets and spades, buckets and spades') will be enjoyed and improvised on by many a class of children. There are other poems that are similarly destined to become class favourites such as *Broccoli Price* appealing to children's sense of fun and the absurd.

Zoe Williams' illustrations are used to great effect throughout the book and are particularly impactful when they are take up a full page such as the illustration for *Firework Night* and *Sitting at the Harbour*. A very handy book for teachers to have in a lower key stage one class, sure to spark ideas and provide inspiration for poetry writing. **LJS**

**D is for Dog**

★★★★

Em Lynas, ill. Sara Ogilvie, Nosy Crow, 32pp, 978-1-83994-422-2, £9.99 hbk

'A is for action... and B is for Bark. C is for catching a ball in the park...'

Every page of this delightful picturebook features a different breed of dog, one for each letter of the alphabet and all are engaged in canine activities that will delight dog-lovers of all ages. Thus 'O is for over...'

shows an Old English Sheepdog jumping over the letter O, and 'Q is for quietly chewing a shoe' features a Queensland Heeler contemplating the destruction of a pair of pink stilettos. Kindness, humour and joie de vivre are in evidence throughout, and curiosity will be amply repaid. As always, Sara Ogilvie's illustrations are full of energy and charm.

Just like the dogs themselves, Em Lynas' rhyming text lollops along in an amiable and satisfying way. Vocabulary is friendly and accessible and provides just the right framework for Sara Ogilvie to populate with her cast of canines and their capers. One of the joys of this book (for the very young and their grown-ups alike) is the familiarity of the behaviours being depicted. We all know of a muddy, dozy or gleeful dog that flops or yawns or hides, and two end spreads are provided to help with breed identification.

Quarter-bound in a warm burnt orange which pops against cream and teal green, this beautifully designed small-format hardback sits well in the hand and features a die cut cover. Through the middle of a giant capital D (in a font called Bembo, I'm reliably informed) three dogs contemplate the reader in expectation of the fun to come. It's a lovely way to be greeted by a book, and the typeface is perfectly chosen to bring something really satisfying to the design, so displaying this one face-out makes lots of sense. **CFH**

The Night Train

★★★★

Matilda Woods, ill Penny Neville-Lee, Little Tiger, 96pp, 9781788952248, £6.99 pbk

Whilst children across the land are tucked up in their beds, the characters who will later appear in their dreams are boarding the Night Train to Sleepy Town. There's the ballet dancer (formerly a footballer), the yeti, a friendly monster, and the princess with her pet dragon, all eagerly awaiting their night's adventures to come, under the watchful eye of Charles the train guard. But suddenly the train slams to a halt; a fallen tree is blocking the train tracks, preventing them from going any further. It is too heavy for the guard to move on his own, but unless something is done, they won't be able to finish their journey in time and the children's dreams will be empty tonight. Can the passengers pull together using their individual talents to move the tree and get the train to the station before midnight?

Accompanied by the most glorious illustrations, this heart-warming tale feels like a mixture of the **Polar Express** and **The Snowman** rolled into one, but with its own unique twist. Young children will love the host of interesting new characters who teach us about not judging on appearances and how everyone has something special to share, as the characters use their gifts and work together as a team to save the day.

Ideal as both a bedtime read or an early chapter book for newer readers, this cosy tale of a snowy nighttime world makes you want to curl up with a hot chocolate by a roaring fire and enjoy it again & again. **AH**

Zoom!

★★★★

Sam Usher, Templar 32pp, 978 1 8007 8609 7, £7.99 pbk

The first of a new series featuring the adventurous Boy and Grandad has themes of mending, re-cycling re-using and up-cycling.

It's almost unbearably hot and so Grandad suggests the only way to cool down is to go onto the roof. This they do and once Grandad has fixed the telescope Boy is able to see a space module and astronauts, astronauts, whom, he surmises are in need of assistance.

The two go back inside, collect the resources they need and return to the roof, where they create a space rocket, climb aboard and start the countdown. ZOOM! Off they go on operation rescue.

The astronauts are duly grateful when Grandad and Boy fix their module and as a thank you, invite them to sleep for a while in their space station. Such is their excitement at what they see however, that the visitors stay wide awake till it's time for them to go home. It's then that Boy realises they've forgotten their parachute. Now it's the turn of the astronauts to become the fixers and ensure their visitors have a safe landing in time for breakfast. ZZZZZZ ...

As always the intergenerational love between Grandad and Boy underscores everything and it's always a delight to spend time with the creative duo. **JB**

The Mermaid Moon

★★★★

Briony May Smith, Walker, 32pp, 978 1 5295 0962 5, £12-99 hbk

An enchanting story, full of magic, this book has much in which to delight. Two best friends, Molly, a child and Merrin, a mermaid, live one in a fishing village, the other in a cave in the harbour wall. After school each day they play together, Molly above water, Merrin below. The village comes alive with busy preparations, for that night was the Mermaid Moon festival, when all sea creatures would be able to swim through the air to explore the human world. Merrin's Mum warns Merrin that she must be home before the moon's reflection disappears from the sea, otherwise her scales would dry out and the magic would disappear from the cove forever. (Readers will recall a certain fairy tale here.) Swishing her glittering fin, Merrin follows a flurry of fish, swimming through the air, joining Molly in the village street. After enjoying the market square stalls, the two friends sneak upstairs to Molly's bedroom, and Merrin is fascinated by the bedside lamp, the fluffy carpet,

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the blankets. Outside once more, Merrin loves the swing in Molly's garden, 'It's like swimming and flying all at once,' she cries. Realising time is passing and the moon dipping, the two are horrified when a branch in the tree they have climbed snaps, leaving Molly stranded. Merrin feels her magic waning, and she knows she can't think what to do till she remembers her mother's song. 'Whale, whale, great or small, deep below the white sea foam, listen, listen, hear my call, mighty whale please help me home.' Pictures full of awe and wonder close the story as the two are rescued, and their hero's fluke slaps a farewell. The illustrations are endearing and dramatic, conveying the out of water adventure shared by the two friends. The colours are deep and satisfying, the fishing village beautifully portrayed, especially in the Mermaid Moon festival spread. A book to savour, and to let imaginations swim... and fly. **GB**

The Wild

★★★★

Yuval Zommer, Oxford University Press, 32pp, 978-0-19-278262-5, £12.99 hbk

How to communicate the message that the world we live in needs our care and attention and cooperation? There are an increasing number of picture books that aim to do this, often linking directly to real life experience. Yuval Zommer takes a different route, harnessing the imagination. How can he bring this world we live in alive? He starts from the idea of **The Wild**; what might epitomise wildness for a young reader? The wolf of course. So, a great green wolf, whose body teems with all life and whose colours change with the seasons, bounds across the double page spreads bringing the narrative to life. But living creatures can fall ill – our wolf-world is sick and we are the cause. Faced with what seems a hopeless situation Zommer is not afraid to offer hope – one voice making a noise, small individual actions that can start a wave. These are actions even the youngest in the audience can take on board to make a difference.

Zommer's work is saturated with colour. He makes full use of the large picture book format to create the sense of expansiveness – a wide world teeming with finely drawn details, plants, animals, birds, shoals of fish – even snowflakes. By imagining the world in this animal form, he is able to create a real sense of connectedness – there is no separation into different parts of earth. The text is concise and accessible, carrying the metaphor to its conclusion. The message is immediate 'somewhere not far away is the Wild...' With high production values and a serious theme, this is a book to delight and share. **FH**

The Most Famous Rhinoceros

★★★★

Dianne Hofmeyr, ill. Simona Mulazzani, Otter-Barry Books, 40pp, 978-1-915659-10-1, £12.99 hbk

Princess Beatrix's father has been sent a one-horned creature as a gift. The palace is already home to an exotic menagerie, but the unruly Beatrix is convinced the new arrival is a unicorn and couldn't be more excited.

Unfortunately the 'big, bulky creature with a stumpy horn' turns out to be a rhinoceros called Genda, and Beatrix isn't the only one who's disappointed. But when her father decides to pit Genda against his elephant in combat, Beatrix realizes just how much she cares about the lonely creature and tries to change her father's mind.

Her protests fall on deaf ears, but all is not lost. Genda and the elephant show more respect for each other than their human captors have (spoiler alert: you can't make animals fight if they don't want to) and at last Genda is treated with more dignity and care.

This poignant and beautifully illustrated picturebook was inspired by a well-known work of art – Durer's woodcut print of the rhinoceros sent from India to the king of Portugal in 1515 – and the historical and ethical themes running through it give it depth and impact. Sensitive to the needs of modern audiences, Genda's tale in this book has a happy ending, but an informative endnote tells readers about the real Genda, whose story took a different turn.

With its sumptuously decorated fabrics, rich colour palette and interest in surface pattern and design, Simona Mulazzani's artwork conjures a flavour of the period, and there are intriguing details to be spotted on every spread. Changing viewpoints keep us alert and engaged: Genda's arrival is viewed through a window (reminding us that even princesses may not go where they please) and sympathy for his captivity is evoked by a floor-level view through iron bars.

In **The Most Famous Rhinoceros**, Dianne Hofmeyr tells an unusual and potentially challenging story with confidence, sensitivity and style. Vividly evocative, with enough description to bring a vanished world to life without overwhelming young audiences, this book reads well aloud and will prompt thoughtful discussion across a wide age range. **CFH**

The Big Dreaming

★★★★

Michael Rosen, ill. Daniel Egnéus, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 32pp, 978 1 5266 3980 6, £12.99 hbk

Many adults will have anxiously followed Michael's COVID journey and draw some parallels with this story, young children though will enjoy it as a tale of Little Bear seeking reassurance before his first long winter sleep.

With the cold fast approaching Big Bear talks to Little Bear about that long sleep until spring returns and they agree it's called a Big Dreaming. Little Bear is still worried however: supposing I run out of dreams and end up with a big nothing, he thinks and decides to go off searching for dreams to allay those fears.

In the forest he meets Squirrel. Squirrel shares the dream of 'Happiness Right Now'.

Next, Little Bear encounters Rabbit and again asks, 'Do you have any spare dreams for when we sleep, deep, deep?' Rabbit tells of the dream of Coming Home Safe which Skylark had facilitated as he flew past. On goes Little Bear till he meets Wolf. Wolf's reply to the question is the dream of Always Having Hope.

Little Bear heads homewards and down comes the snow: the Cold has arrived. Our little ursine cub, shivering and lost now worries about getting back in time for the Big Dreaming. Fortunately he recalls all the dreams he's gathered thanks to the other animals and in so doing eventually finds his way home where Big Bear is waiting. Time for the two bears to snuggle together and dream ...and dream ... and dream

Such a poignant story; I envisage young children wanting to hear it over and over so they can join in the repeat refrains and enjoy again such lines as 'the light in the moon went out. / Like a candle blows out in the wind.' Equally they will enjoy Daniel Egnéus's beautiful illustrations with their various perspectives and gorgeous autumnal hues which give way to wintry ones.

What dream would you offer Little Bear, should you be asked by a little human? **JB**

The Panda's Child

★★★

Jackie Morris, ill. Cathy Fisher, Otter-Barry Books, 96pp, 978-1-91565-905-7, £16.99 hbk

Set in a faraway forest at a time when the Great Alexander rules supreme, wealthy strangers arrive on horseback and steal a panda cub to give their king. Their raid is observed by a peasant boy, who as a tiny baby had been lost in the forest and cared for by a panda, and although he's dazzled by the strangers' wealth and splendour, he feels connected to the cub. An exciting and moving tale of bravery and adventure follows, as the boy tricks the horsemen, makes off with the cub and is rescued from the strangers' retribution by the timely appearance of an avenging tiger.

Perhaps best known as the illustrator of **The Lost Words** for which she won the **Kate Greenaway Medal**, Jackie Morris is also an acclaimed author and uses words as delicately and powerfully as she paints. In **The Panda's Child**, her imaginative evocation of people living in harmony with their natural surroundings is affecting and compelling. Told in three chapters, the text is carefully crafted

to provide an immersive listening or reading experience for children ready for a longer story. There are ten text-only spreads, but a large clear font, centrally aligned short sentences and plenty of white space makes them easy to read and share.

This substantial, well-presented gift book has an eye-catching binding, and Cathy Fisher's tender, insightful artwork draws readers into a vanished world and brings it vividly to life. There's a sense of realism and wonder about her illustrations, which were created with pencil, charcoal, watercolour paints, inks and crayons, and they will please audiences who like to explore and understand the natural world.

However, there's something about the interaction between words and images that doesn't work as well as it could at certain points. Sometimes a picture reveals information or resolves emotional tension before the text has caught up; sometimes it's the text that has already moved on. And there are images that, although beautiful, don't sit well within the narrative, perhaps because they encapsulate the essence of the story as a whole. Readers who are fully immersed in the story or are simply browsing the artwork may not notice these moments (or be bothered if they do) but those who are sensitive to images and what they're saying may find such pictures distracting. They can also cause a subtle sense of dislocation that won't help uncommitted readers to get lost in what could be an utterly absorbing and fascinating story world. **CFH**

Nabil Steals a Penguin

★★★★

Nishani Reed, ill. Junissa Bianda, Nosy Crow, 978 1 83994 591 5, £12.99, hbk

Pierre the penguin is fed up of eating fish, fish, fish at the zoo. He tastes a spoonful of Nabil's biriyani and instantly decides he must get out of the zoo, and go home with Nabil. This family is returning from a holiday in France, and there are alarming events on the ferry as Pierre rejoices in his new-found freedom. Despite Nabil's fears, his own family remains oblivious of their new visitor. Nabil anxiously hides the penguin, masking his honking and cavorting from his family. The bathroom scenes are a delight as the two enjoy diving and splashing until, uh-oh, Mum arrives. Despite his fears, Nabil watches as his Mum welcomes Pierre, and insists on him joining them for a meal. 'Ooh la la,' laughs the adorable penguin, as he views the table, set out with ten different dishes from which to select his dinner. Will the family let Pierre stay? Does he want to? Nabil asks if the penguin will go back to France. 'Oh no, French cuisine sounds very fine, but nothing beats a curry!' The illustrations sing from each page and the colours pop, matching the rhyming text well. Youngsters will enjoy the stupidity of the tale, whilst having their mouths water, savouring each picture of foods. A fun story. **GB**



The Wild Robot Protects

★★★★★

Peter Brown, Piccadilly Press, 288pp, 978-1800784567, £7.99 pbk
This is the third adventure for Roz, the wild robot. In her first outing, readers watched as, washed up on a remote island, she made her home with the animals there, adopting a gosling in the process. **The Wild Robot Escapes** saw her back in 'civilisation', working on a farm and finding more in common with the livestock than the human owners, before eventually finding her way home. Her friends on the island and in the seas around it are threatened in this new story when a toxic tide flows towards them through the ocean, poisoning the water and killing any vegetation it touches. Roz can organise the animals so that food and water are shared but as the situation becomes more perilous, she sets out to discover the source of the tide and find a way to stop it. Fortunately, the improvements to her metal body made in the last book, mean that she is waterproof, and able to swim through the ocean and sometimes stride across its floor. She meets all sorts of fish and seabirds, winning friends as is her way, and eventually arriving at the source of the toxic tide, which turns out to be manmade. Directed by Roz and Gurry, the Ancient Shark who knows so much, the wild creatures can work together to save our world. The descriptions of Roz' underwater adventures are thrilling and Peter Brown's striking illustrations are a delight, adding warmth and humour. No matter how dark things get or seem, Roz is an indestructible figure of hope and kindness. Superb robot adventures, these stories have so much to say about the world and how best to live in it. **AR**

Books for Keeps interviewed Peter Brown about The Wild Robot

Oscar's Lion

★★★★★

Adam Baron, ill. Benji Davies, Harper Collins, 192pp, 978 0 00859675 0 £12.99 hbk

Oscar wakes up one Friday morning and his whole world has changed, his parents have disappeared, and it appears as though he is going to have to get used to being looked after by an enormous, unpredictable and rather haphazard lion who seems to have replaced his parents. After a weekend of magical, extraordinary and emotional experiences he realises that this is no ordinary unexpected lion and comes to understand how special his extended family are to him, making sense of his own feelings and coming to terms with some very personal loss.

It's hard to write about this book without giving away key plot points and the surprise is key to the enjoyment of the book. This is a remarkable story told with humour and love. Adam Baron creates a Mary Poppins type world where anything is possible, strange things quickly become ordinary, and lessons are learnt through fantastical adventure and emotional connection. The narrative voice accepts all of the magical at face value and is a skilful portrayal of a child's view of the complexity of life as the plot tumbles through historical, real life and eccentric exploits. Expect to go from primary school homework to a Napoleonic sea battle to a World War 2 bomber and back to sledding down a hill in London. The book doesn't shy away from the emotions that come when you are scared or sad and bear in mind that it does deal with the issue of the death of a family member and the grief that comes with that. Benji Davies's beautiful illustrations enhance the words bringing the magic to life and even more love to the pages.

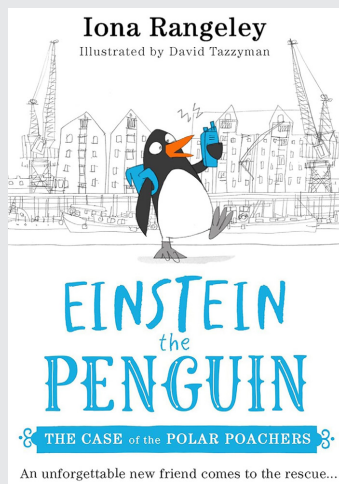
A great book to read with children or for more confident readers to read to themselves. This is a book that will appeal to the lower end of a middle grade audience, and which will really support conversations about growing up and coming to terms with your feelings. **LJS**

Einstein the Penguin The Case of the Polar Poachers

★★★★★

Iona Rangeley, illus David Tazzyman, HarperCollins Children's Books, 256pp, 978-0008476045, £12.99 hbk

'Children halt nefarious exotic pet scheme', to borrow a headline from sneaky journalist Sullivan Prior, in this the third adventure starring junior detective Imogen Stewart, her eight-year-old brother Arthur and, of course, Einstein the penguin. If you haven't had the pleasure yet of reading Iona Rangeley's tales of Einstein and his



friends, the stories bring the children up against penguin thief, villainous Vanessa Hunter as they thwart her efforts to sell penguins on the black market. In this adventure, Einstein and his friend Isaac are happily settled into London Zoo, or so we think, and Imogen has set aside her detective kit, as unnecessary – and embarrassing – to a year seven. But mysterious penguin disappearances from Sandwich Island in the Antarctic indicate human interference, and Arthur and Einstein are determined Imogen should come out of retirement and investigate.

Imogen was born to be a detective, and readers will cheer when she takes up the case, which is full of twists and turns and reaches its dramatic conclusion in the Ritz.

Iona Rangeley's writing is a delight to read aloud, and the stories are full of wit and sophistication, as well as perfectly observed descriptions of family life, even if this family's best friend is a penguin. The joy and the surreal nature of the stories are perfectly captured in David Tazzyman's distinctive black and white illustrations, and this is a treat from start to finish. **LS**

The Star Whale

★★★★★

Poems by Helen Davies, illus Petr Horáček, Otter-Barry Books, 96pp, 9781915659095 £16.99 hbk

Colours explode off the pages, animals, birds, butterflies, prehistoric reptiles, vibrant, compelling, fill the eye through Petr Horáček's art. Each spread draws the viewer in to swim through the galaxies with the star whale, enjoy a mandrill looking at itself, strut through the snow with a turkey – and more. What a gallery of images bold, immersive, gorgeous. But they do not stand alone. Bringing them to life are the poems by Helen Davies. Crossing the natural world from pangolins to dinosaurs, butterflies to an ostrich, a

galactic creature to a kingfisher, the poet's words are as much a part of each spread as the image. Ranging from the lyrical to the humorous, from the sensuous to the rhythm of the popular song, angry, reflective – here are poems to attract a wide range of tastes and capture imaginations. The production values are impressive creating an object that is satisfying to hold, paper that is a pleasure to feel and pages to turn. The font is clear and bold, and even on few occasions stands out against a saturated colour background. This is a volume to explore, to excite, to open anywhere and start a journey through that spread – a journey beyond the physical pages, meeting the world through words and image; an inspiration of a book. **FH**

Girls

★★★★★

Annet Schaap, translated by Laura Watkinson, Pushkin Press, 192pp, 9781782693789. £12.99 hbk

Enchanted by the possibilities of recrafting classic fairy tales, Carnegie Medal shortlistee and Gouden Griffel past winner Annet Schaap has teamed up again with translator Laura Watkinson for *Girls*, to unravel traitorous tropes. She believes that, 'Fairytales can go very deep, because anything can happen in a fairytale, even something that doesn't exist in the real world.'

With Lampie she explored mer myths and the question, what is a monster? *Girls* brings the folktales of the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault screaming into the modern age as gender politics are challenged and myths are debunked. In seven short stories reader's expectations are challenged as the message hits home that 'life isn't a fairy tale.'

Catherynne Valente's opening epigraph captures the spirit of the book,

'If you live in a tower, a dungeon, a throne,

If you weep for wanting, to be held to be known,

Come stand by me'.

There is a liberating cry of 'what is my name' as women reclaim their voices. Wolves are not ruthless predators and exploitative slave labour in the guise of sweet treats replaces child hungry witches. Bluebeard takes on religious garb and beauty becomes a beast. Men are exposed as controlling, dangerous, feckless, greedy and self-absorbed as the patriarchy is called to account. Schaap questions the concept of handsome princes on white horses. A game of chess reflects the famous Ingmar Bergman film, *The Seventh Seal* as an unconventional princess longs to be in the company of a salty seadog, free from the constraints of a corset and sewing samplers.

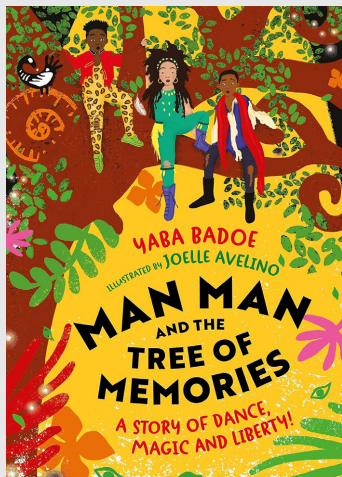
reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

The wicked stepmother is no more. There is commentary on parental abandonment and girls strike out on their own.

Woodcut style illustrations pulsing with shades of light and dark enhance the images and complement the text. All is not what it seems and readers should be prepared for some surprises. Nothing is black and white as roles switch. Unlock the secrets and explore the 21st century social commentary that lies beyond.

This will appeal to fans of feminist retellings of traditional tales who want to smash the glass slipper, demolish the tower and dismiss the prince. TJ



Man-man and the Tree of Memories

★★★★

Yaba Badoe, ill. Joelle Avelino, Zephyr, 182pp, 978 1 837930074, £14.99 hbk

Interweaving myth and a resume of African and Caribbean history with the present day this vibrant story almost leaps off the page.

Man-man loves to dance and with his sister Pan is practising hard for the upcoming carnival. Aunt Flo is making their costumes and tells them stories of the of the Revel Queen who might steal him away as his costume will be so amazing but these tales are dismissed and Man-man is desperate for his mother to see his performance but she is afflicted with a mystery illness and seems to be wasting away. Their grandmother is summoned from Jamaica to help look after the family. But Nan does not really approve of dancing and thinks wickedness will befall them if they

Man-man's mother slowly improves with Nan's home cooking and on the day of the carnival is able to sit on a balcony to watch the procession and see her children dance. Man-man dances as he has never danced before in the hope that he can dance his mother back to health. But the Revel Queen spots the children's performance and travelling through time whisks them off to Africa to show them the sacred Tree of Memories

where Man-man discovers that what is really affecting his mother is the weight and pain of past enslavement enforced on her forbears and if he understands this he might be able to help his mother by showing her freedom through this eyes.

This is a joyous affirmative book – full of colour and the rhythm of the carnival. The exuberant and eye-catching illustrations add to the package magnificently. You cannot help but want to tap your toes too. This story would be an excellent addition to the school library. JC

And I climbed and I climbed

★★★★★

Poems by Stephen Lightbown. Illustrated by Shih-Yu Lin, Troika, 96pp 9781912745296, £8.99 pbk

What must it be like to be confined to a wheelchair with no hope of ever leaving it? What if you are only 8 years old? Stephen Lightbown knows something as a wheelchair user since his teens. In this sequence of poems he explores the frustrations, the anger, the joys, the sadnesses that just such a boy would experience capturing his tone and voice. We meet Cosmo who, falling from a tree, breaks his back – and there is no going back. He shares his thoughts in verse that is direct and immediate as Cosmo faces the fact that he is paralysed; he will never walk, run or climb again. His voice is refreshingly unsentimental as he addresses the tree 'Why did you let me fall', he asks. He would like to tear the tree up 'Some days I hate you'. He comments on how people now react to him, that they start to look at him in a different way. We experience his excitement when he discovers what he can do – dance, surf. We feel his real anger and frustration when he cuts off the legs of the footballers in his magazine, off his sister's dolls – 'If I can't cut my own legs off/These will have to do/SNIP,SNIP,SNIP'. Interspersed with Cosmo's thoughts we find comments from his mother, his Nana and his sister each expressing their reaction to the situation. Capturing moments are the pen and ink illustrations by Shih-Yu Lin. Ranging from vignettes on the edge of a page to the occasional full page spread these spare, soft-focus images provide a perfect foil for the words. Deceptively simple, these poems open a door to a situation that few can imagine, while giving a real voice to children (or even adults) who, like Cosmo, face a future from a wheelchair. FD

Where Are You Really From

★★★★★

Adam Rutherford and E.L. Norry, ill Adam Ming, Wren and Rook, 192pp, 9781526364241, £9.99, pbk

Where Are You Really From? is a science and history book tackling important and tough topics with sensible, down to earth explanations

and well researched scientific facts. Adam Rutherford and E.L. Norry show how to answer the 'where are you from?' question by going back 4 billion years to the beginning of life on Earth. The result is a clear, readable and engaging explanation of the history of people that deals with evolution, DNA, taxonomy, scientific racism, anthropology, race and much, much more.

The cartoon/magazine format (skillfully illustrated by Adam Ming) and the sheer vastness of the subject matter could have resulted in something that was surface and flippant but actually, this book provides a comprehensive and straightforward introduction to incredibly complex questions. The design and the writing work in harmony to make it engaging and accessible. It doesn't shy away from answering difficult questions or from confronting racist assumptions or the impact of colonialism and empire – and it does it in a clear and intelligent way that is straightforward and not patronising.

It's a book that deals with pertinent issues for children today and answers their questions in a straightforward and non-judgemental way. Some of the examples are necessarily very current and one does wonder how they will date. But as Rutherford and Norry point out, there are new discoveries in science all the time so perhaps second and third editions will update the modern culture references as well as the future scientific references.

Middle grade readers will be drawn to the book by the colour and the format and will stay for the writing and the subject matter. A book like this has a place in every classroom and library to provide a springboard for future scientists and historians to ask further and deeper questions about these important and complex issues. LJS

Brilliant Black British History

★★★

Atinuke, ill. Kingsley Nebechi, Bloomsbury, 68pp, 978 1 5266 3571 6, £12.99, hbk

Atinuke and Nebechi's book has already caused controversy among the right-wing media, largely for its assertions that people living in prehistoric Britain were black and that the builders of Stonehenge had dark brown skin. I will return to that later in this review, because, while aspects of those claims are questionable, it should not overshadow the rest of what the book has to say. Most important, Atinuke draws on recent historical and archaeological research to trace the black presence in Britain since Roman times. The book highlights in words and pictures an array of black people who have made important contributions to the life of this country both in the past and the present: those who fought against slavery and racism, from Olaudah Equiano to Doreen Lawrence; those who have been celebrated and honoured for using their talent and

skills to help define who we are as a nation; and the otherwise ordinary people whose service to the wider community in war and peace deserve their own recognition. Its scope is also wider than the title suggests, placing black British history in a world context. It begins with the emergence of Homo Sapiens in Africa, takes in the earliest human migrations, the evolution of skin colour variation in the human population, early world civilisations, European empires and their relationship to Africa and the struggle for African independence from Britain. Meant for children of junior school age, it is a handsome Bloomsbury production, packaging its subjects in accessible double page spreads, clearly and trenchantly written by Atinuke, and strikingly illustrated by Kingsley Nebechi. Given the age of its audience it can only be an introduction to some vast historical areas, some of which remain highly contested. I guess there might be historians and archaeologists who will find some of Atinuke's words surprising, provocative, and, particularly in the early chapters, a-historical, in the sense that it describes some events in the distant past in the anomalous terms of racial identity. So, while scientists studying the genome of "Cheddar Man," who lived in Somerset 10,000 years ago, have speculated that he may indeed have had dark skin, there is little evidence to support Atinuke's assertion that the Celts 'were the first white Britons' and that 'Britain was Black for 7,500 years before that.' We certainly have no evidence that they thought of themselves in this way. This is to interpret history in 'black and white' terms that, as Atinuke herself identifies, were solidified in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as justifications for slavery and imperial conquest and would have little meaning in prehistory. There are perhaps three reasons for seeing the past through this racial lens. It is a conscious challenge to the assumptions that have historically governed text and illustration in British children's history books in the last century, where white was the default position and black or brown faces were rarely seen; it is an answer to the racist declaration that Britain is and has always been a "white country"; and it offers support and self-confidence to children of African descent who might not feel part of the British past and may yet face racist taunts in the playground. However, some parts of its account, particularly the early history, need to be treated with care. CB

Kevin the Vampire: A Most Mysterious Monster

★★★★★

Matt Brown, ill Flavia Sorrentino, Nosy Crow, 9781839945403, 224pp, £7.99, pbk

Kevin Aurealis is like nearly every other eleven-year-old, apart from just a few differences... such as his fangs,

the fact he is immortal and oh yes, he's a vampire!

We first meet Kevin as he and his family are travelling to Monstros City, along with the rest of the travelling circus of scary beasts on their way to the Festival of Fear. However, when their batnav takes them the wrong way, the group find themselves stranded in the strangely quiet and human-filled village of Lower Drudging, where the townsfolk are keeping quite a big secret of their own. Despite their initial fear and horror on meeting the newcomers, when this monstrous secret wakes up and starts to cause chaos within the town, the townsfolk need Kevin and his new human best friend Susie to work together to save the day, with hilarious consequences.

With fantastical spooky illustrations and pop-up monster fact files scattered through the book, this is a laugh-out-loud, fun-packed ride of a story, peppered with crazy characters and wonderful word play. Kevin and his bonkers family prove to the townsfolk that not everything is always as it seems and send a wonderful message about not judging others and celebrating differences in life.

This is the first in a new series of adventures for Kevin the vampire and after a sneaky preview at the end of the book, we look forward to reading the next hilarious instalment very soon. **AH**

The Council of Good Friends

★★★★

Nikesh Shukla, ill. Rochelle Falconer, *Knights Of*, 150pp, 9781913311445, £5.99, pbk

This short story is a fun way for children to learn about the highs and lows of friendship, through the eyes of Vinay and his group of best friends.

Vinay and his council of friends represent – in many ways – a user's guide to perfect friendship. They love and respect one another deeply, talk through their problems, and find shared things to enjoy, while giving each other the space to be themselves as individuals. Whether they are playing football, making mischief with water guns, or teasing one another about girls, the four boys always act as a team and won't let anything come between them.

Their unbreakable bond is threatened when Nikesh (Vinay's cousin) comes to stay. It's clear that Nikesh is a troubled soul who represents the type of challenge that the Council of Friends have never faced before. From the moment he arrives, Nikesh shows that he is utterly unwilling to share or compromise and that he intends to bully people into submission in order to get what he wants.

Such a mean and selfish outlook is alien to Vinay and his friends. The group are abnormally mature

and empathetic when it comes to resolving conflict but even they can't find a way of bringing Nikesh into the fold so, naturally, they revert to playing horrible pranks on him. The resulting mayhem is a very funny and a welcome respite to what is, otherwise, a serious and emotional tone.

Readers will recognise their own relationships and fall-outs in **The Council of Friends**. The story invites them to consider interesting dilemmas about friendship: how would you act if a new child joined your group? Why are some children unkind? Does family always come before friends? The book is also a great starting point for discussions about the themes of belonging, immigration and identity; it would be an ideal story for parents or teachers to read alongside their children. **SD**

Scrap

★★★★

Guy Bass, ill. Alessia Trunfio, *Little Tiger*, 310pp, 9781788955973, £7.99 pbk

This is another lively and enjoyable underdog story by the author of the celebrated **Stitch Head** series.

Scrap is a tiny, rusty, lonely humanoid living on a pile of junk on a planet occupied exclusively by robots. Planet Somewhere 513 was intended as a new colony for Earthlings after they had ruined their own planet but – following the robot revolution (or 'Slight Disagreement' as the robots call it) – the hyper-intelligent cyborgs rejected their human creators and decided to make the planet a robots-only place forever.

On Scrap's planet the only things that matter are putting robots first and 'upgrading' as often as possible. Robots are constantly on the hunt for the latest trade-up for their casings, resulting in huge piles of discarded exoskeletons littering the landscape. One of these piles is Scrap's home. It is clear from the outset that he has shunned the way of life enjoyed by all the other robots and, instead, is living out an endless existence in a battered, antique shell surrounded by scrap...and he is obviously miserable about it.

Two unexpected visitors to Scrap's pile force him to reconsider his anti-social reclusion. Impossibly, the pair seem to know about his dramatic past as the once human-loving 'king of the robots' – a history that he barely remembers himself! Even more impossibly, the pair of visitors are children...human children! They are definitely not supposed to be there.

The discovery of human children ignites a breathless drama featuring countless escapes from Terminator-like hunters, as Scrap stands up to robots several times his size and strength, in an effort to understand his past and to rescue the children from certain death.

It is an exciting story set in an imagined future that will appeal to young sci-fi fans. Bass's take on the dystopian space-age novel is original in its focus upon the notion of 'upgrading' and its parallels with evolution. It asks whether shinier and newer always means better, and whether artificially intelligent life forms would be any more likely to look after their world than humans are.

Though Scrap is an enjoyable gateway into such philosophical debate, it is also very much the familiar, jovial, heartwarming story that fans of Bass's other books will expect. Characters ranging from evil, despotic overlords to clueless, loveable helper-bots all have jokes to share and the relationship that grows between Scrap and his young charges is beautifully described. **SD**

How to Spaghetify Your Dog... and Other Science Secrets of the Universe

★★★★★

Hiba Noor Khan, ill. Harry Woodgate, *Bloomsbury Children's Books*, 64pp, 978 1 5266 2781 0, £8.99 pbk

For any young person keen to learn more about physics here is a book that explains lots of scientific facts in a fun way. Hiba Noor Khan was formerly a physics teacher and her enthusiasm and love for this subject shines through the publication. Longlisted for the **Jhalak Prize** and **UKLA Book Award**, she is a talented writer. Along with award-winning illustrator Harry Woodgate they have produced an attractive large format book.

Each page spread concentrates on one aspect of science and the section titles are captivating. For example, *Elephants Vs. High Heels*, *When Light Bends Your Bones* and *Cosmic Collision Course*. If you are curious about how gravity holds things together, the size of our solar system or why the sky is not blue then you will find the answers within these pages. Quite a few sections are given over to learning about the stars, Space and black holes. The section on **How to Spaghetify Your Dog** is enlightening and amusing as well as being a clever way to engage readers. The author knows how to encourage children to concentrate and take notice!

In particular I liked the inclusion of science experiments that enthusiastic children can try at home. The text is broken up into bite sized chunks and there are various Facts scattered throughout the work. Both the Contents page and the Glossary add clarity for the reader; the layout with illustrations is exceptional.

Congratulations to **Bloomsbury Children's Books** on publishing such a welcome scientific book. This is an ideal volume to capture the reader's attention and turn them into a life-long lover of books! Whether you are buying this as a teacher, librarian, parent or carer I am certain you will not be disappointed and will enjoy the book yourselves too! **JS**



The Taming of the Cat

★★★★★

Helen Cooper, *Faber & Faber*, 224pp, 9780571376018, £14.99 hbk
This beguiling story offers double value with its author also providing numerous eye-catching black and white illustrations, the Covid lockdown apparently allowing her the extra time to keep adding. A consummate prize-winning artist, her skimpy line drawings still bring out a whole range of different emotions. The mice that populate this story vary between evil and benign, and there is never any doubt which is which. Gorgonzola the cat, who also plays a leading part, can look terrifying at one moment and much against her normal behaviour almost benign at another. Cooper also comes up with numbers of full page atmospheric drawings, packed with detail and ideal for repeated inspection.

The basic plot is in full Scheherazade mode, with main character Brie lonely and unpopular with his fellow mice all living in a cheese shop. Once caught he postpones his imminent death by telling his feline captor a long story over successive evenings. This features a princess and her enchanted mother, a magic egg, a magpie and – of particular interest to the increasingly attentive and frequently interrupting Gorgonzola – a brave and resourceful cat named Silk. But while Brie manages to preserve his life against the odds he still faces problems when he is grudgingly allowed back into his home community.

It all ends happily enough, along with a quietly concealed message on the importance of toleration. Two Queens meanwhile from different kingdoms end up marrying each other in order to bring lasting peace. The author writes that 'a great deal of cheese was sacrificed during the making of this book.' Minor characters, ranging from Pawlet to Scamorza, are all named after different varieties of this favourite product, each one listed at the end of this utterly delightful book. **NT**

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

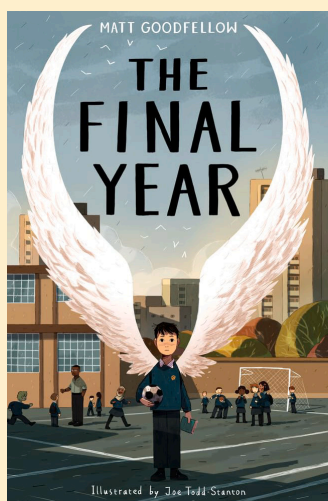
Ed's Choice

The Final Year

★★★★★

Matt Goodfellow, illus Joe Todd-Stanton, Otter-Barry Books, 288pp, 9781915659040, £8.99 pbk
The move to Secondary School always gets attention; it is indeed a big step. But what about that final year in Primary School – Year 6, as you turn away from your younger selves and everyone keeps telling you it will be a tough year. Nate is moving into Year 6 – and from the start it is going to be uncomfortable. For the first time in their school careers Nate and his best friend, Parker find themselves in different classes. Undying friendship is promised – but Parker is drawn into a new set of friends. Nate is on the outside. He misses his absent father and worries about his younger brother, Dylan. Then there is the new teacher. Mr Joshua is rather surprising. But Year 6 see Nate growing up. When he leaves Poppy Field Primary, he will be ready for Secondary School and all its challenges.

This verse novel reflects Matt Goodfellow's own memories of schooldays. Already well known for his poetry for young people, it rings with authenticity, not least because he talks directly to his audience with his own Mancunian voice. Nate will be recognized by many a young reader. The background of uncertainty he experiences, his emotions and anxieties are believable and consistent. This is no fairy tale but a true reflection



of life for some while encouraging empathy in others. Stepping off the page also is Mr Joshua – the teacher who makes a difference. He is prepared to listen and his recommendation of *Skellig* by David Almond – the right book at the right time – opens a door for Nate. Not only does it intrigue, it mirrors Nate's experiences and captures his imagination. Understated and immersive, Goodfellow's prose is instantly accessible. The writing is direct, immediate, unthreatening without sacrificing style while subtle layers of understanding bring to it a depth and resonance. Adding to the whole are the illustrations by Joe Todd-Stanton. They pop off the page in stark black and white bringing a moment of surprise and recognition, mirroring the text without distracting from it. Outstanding. FH

Mexikid: A Graphic Novel Memoir

★★★★★

Pedro Martin, Guppy Books, 316pp, 978 1916558069, £14.99 pbk.

Known for creating *Asteroid Andy* for Hallmark Greetings, Pedro Martin explores his Mexican heritage in his Middle Grade Graphic Novel debut. Deftly transferring his online *mexikid* comic stories to graphic novel format he provides the reader with a myriad of experiences and emotions.

Full of heart and hilarity, *Mexikid* is a rich representation of 1970's pop culture and family dynamics. Embarking on a riotous road trip like no other, Pedro's eight siblings, part Mexican born, part American born, are on a mission to bring their legendary abuelito home. While the youngest travel with Ama and Apa in the camper van from hell, the older siblings follow in a dodgy pick-up truck with ropes for seat belts.

As Pedro searches for his true grito [voice], he juxtaposes his

perceptions of his revolutionary war era grandpa, depicted in comic book action style, using a palette of desert yellow and bruised orange, with hilarious *National Lampoon*



style antics and stomach-churning scatological laughs.

Their eventful journey from California to Mexico features cringeworthy music, a helping of 'the Fonz', sibling negotiations, snack mishaps, a game of Winnebago pinball, corrupt border guards, unregulated toys, pop rock mayhem, licuado calamity, Jedi Mind Tricks, Chun Ta Ta and tourist traps. But what lies underneath the merriment? The reader becomes aware that amid the shenanigans of the nine children, the adults are having important conversations. Pedro recollects, "A lot of things back then were hidden from me, either by choice or by design."

The novel has an accessible chapter format. Its lively characters are animated against pale pastels and evening blues. Narrated in Pedro's twelve-year-old voice, there are observations about the border crossing, 'It was like the driveway at Disneyland but with way more automatic weapons'; childish jokes, 'This is how you wrangle an escaping toro with el choro'; and poignant statements, 'I felt saddersweet.'

Lessons are learnt en route as perceptions change and stories evolve. Chapter 14 is particularly memorable while Chapter 19 leaves Pedro with a difficult choice. There is a perfect blend of humour and pathos with Spanish phrases peppered throughout and photographic memoirs at the back of Pedro's family. He also reveals that his amazing abuelito lived until the age of 107. A sequel chronicling the Martin family's strawberry picking exploits is on the way.

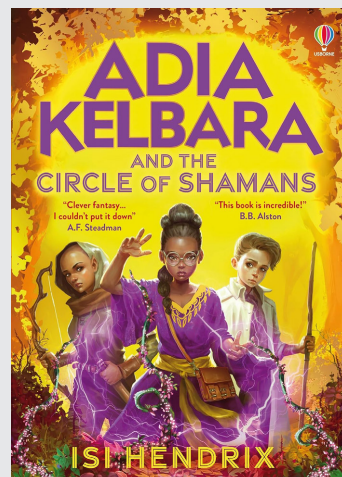
Visual readers, fans of Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and Raina Telgemeier's books will love this but *Mexikid* deserves more than a mere comparison. It works on multiple levels. While it has puerile poop puns, heinous haircuts and sibling rivalry, it also speaks of poignant family history, exploring your cultural identity and understanding your ancestry. An unforgettable tour de force. TJ

Adia Kelbara and the Circle of Shamans

★★★★★

Isi Hendrix, cover illus Godwin Akpan, Usborne, 320pp., 9781803706542 £12.99 hbk

Bespectacled book-loving 12-year-old Adia is unwelcome in her uncle's Nigerian household, though her aunt life, her mother's sister, tries her best. A letter informs her that she can have a kitchen job at the Academy of Shamans, but Uncle would rather she helped in the family business, harvesting agria vines, source of the Drops that keep the adult population docile. In the ensuing confrontation, Adia's anger causes an earthquake, and, accused of being an *ogbanje*, demon-possessed, she runs away with



her savings and her cat, Bubbles, to the Academy, and hopes to find a way to get rid of these strange powers, though her photographic memory is quite useful. Sadly, she finds that the Academy is full of rich, paler-skinned entitled kids who pretend to have powers and back each other up in their claims, and they are very nasty to kitchen maids, so much that one of them gets her expelled. She locates to underused Library, but has to hide, and so as overhears a conversation among the gods about the fact that an evil god has taken over the Emperor of Zaria, and she decides to follow the goddess Ginikanwa, in her quest to find and release him. Adia proves useful, and she and Gini, travelling to the Horrorbeyond, team up with a lost warrior girl, Thyme, but have a complicated relationship with an aspiring soldier-boy, Nami, who is sometimes helpful, but often obstructive. Of course, she learns how to use her powers, and at the end of the story the school is set to become a proper centre of learning for prospective Shamans. This is a debut novel, and a fantastic adventure in the original sense of the word, but Isi Hendrix makes it credible, and this was very enjoyable. DB

Alebriges

★★★★★

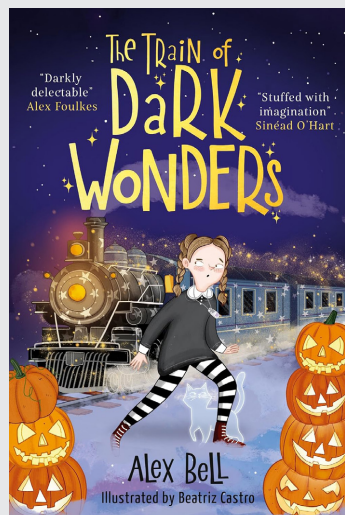
Donna Barba Higuera, Piccadilly Press, 416pp, 9781800785410, £7.99, pbk

This ambitious fantasy novel blends folklore, science fiction and dystopia and is set on an Earth that has been a barren wasteland for 400 years. Surviving humans are existing in a barely functioning city called Pocatel and they are unable to leave because the city is surrounded by a wilderness full of 'wyrmes' – monsters who prey on and destroy anyone who dares to cross their lands.

Leandro and his sister Gabi are orphaned and scraping an existence as pickpockets and potato harvesters in Pocatel. They are Cascabel, a tribe

of people descended from the farmers of the San Joaquin valley, derided and discriminated against by the Pocatelian elite. Everyone is fighting to survive and the scarce food is rotting in the ground. The orphans decide to plan their escape from the city, convinced that what is outside can't be worse than what they are enduring. An ill-advised plan to steal enough food for their journey leads to Gabi being caught and then Leandro taking the fall and being banished with her left behind. A member of the elite intervenes in his banishment and his consciousness is placed inside an ancient drone – an Alebrijes and he begins a quest to free Gabi and ultimately all of Pocatel. He soon finds that outside the city walls there are other Alebrijes, pirates, a hidden oasis, monsters that aren't all they seem and others who are seeking freedom and the truth.

This is a complex and interweaving story which marries folklore and future and has a cast of many characters which is sometimes baffling. The action is fast and furious and there are many twists, turns, quests and battles along the way. The whole thing has the qualities of an epic film or a role playing computer game and will be of particular interest to readers who love world building and dystopian fiction. **LJS**



The Train of Dark Wonders

★★★★

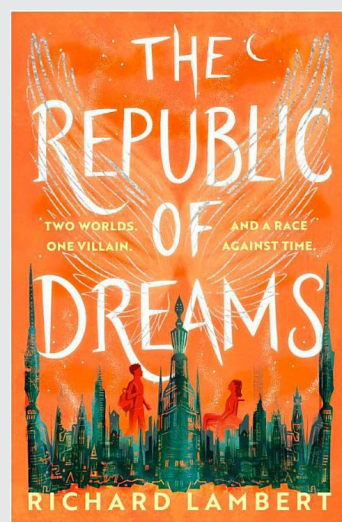
Alex Bell, Rock the boat (Oneworld Publications), 267pp, 978-0-86154-596-4, £7.99 pbk

Bess is the kind of girl who is thrilled to get a set of lockpicking tools for her 11th birthday, and doesn't really get on with the unicorn/rainbow-loving girls at school: she had enjoyed helping her beloved grandfather in his Odditorium of strange and wonderful things. When she finds that he has left it to her in his Will, she realizes that it will be difficult to bring in the crowds and keep it going, while the whispering flowers, who need magical food, have crept around the walls and made the building so unstable

that the Council threatens to have it pulled down. Bess finds a train ticket in one of her exhibits, and discovers an underground station, so when a mysterious train full of entertainers pulls on to the high hill, resourceful Bess realizes that here might be an opportunity for adventure.

On the train, she is befriended by children of her own age, all with magical powers, and finds that they are going to the Land of Hallowe'en Sweets, where their mission is to find the ghostly gobstopper. They find that the land is more dangerous than it looks, living on sweets can actually get quite boring, and not everything is at it seems, but eventually the mission is accomplished and all is well. There was more to her grandfather's life than she had realized, and the story ends with a hint that there is more adventure to come.

Alex Bell is now the author of many books for children, notably **The Polar Bear Explorers' Club**, and the subsequent series, so the reader knows that the adventure is bound to be thrilling and well handled. This is a definite page-turner, and this reviewer is looking forward to the next one. **DB**



The Republic of Dreams

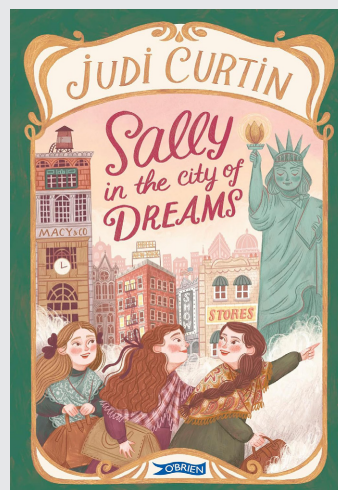
★★★★

Richard Lambert, Everything with Words, 320pp, 9781911427285, £8.99 pbk

This is the final part of a duology, set both in our world and in a parallel world, where dreamers can make their dreams become a reality. Tamurlaine has become the young Queen of this kingdom called Balthazar and wants to ban dreamers, even though this means that the population may lack food and other much needed resources. Her nemesis, Nicodemus Malladain (what a fantastic name) has fallen through to our world and sets about regaining his powers by stealing dreams from young people. However, he has been recognized by Toby, who had helped Tamurlaine regain her throne, before being drawn

back to our own world. We then have a thrilling series of adventures, as our heroes try and prevent Malladain from conquering both our world and that of Balthazar.

Despite this being the second book in the series there is enough background information given, so that you can enjoy the story, without having read the first book; although I think that starting at the beginning would enhance the experience. I really enjoyed this fascinating story, which really zipped along and kept me totally engaged with the plot and it is one of those stories that keeps you reading late into the night. Toby was a great character, who we all end up having great sympathy with, especially as he has an absent father, who appears to work for the Prime Minister. However, Tamurlaine can be quite frustrating at times, as she tries to learn the best way to serve her country; the title of the book finally begins to make sense as we reach the finale of the story and change is in the air for Balthazar. This is an exciting and magical story for the top of KS2 and in to KS3 and ended up exceeding my expectations. **MP**



Sally in the City of Dreams

★★★★★

Judi Curtin, O'Brien Press, 304pp, 978-1788494519, £11.99 pbk
Readers who love Judi Curtin's contemporary stories (their subject mostly girls' friendship) will find much to enjoy in her historical novels too, and particularly in **Sally in the City of Dreams**. Set in the early 20th century, and drawing on Judi Curtin's own family history, it stars young sisters Sally and Bridget. As the book opens, they are saying goodbye to their warm, loving family to travel across the Atlantic to start new lives in New York. They make friends with another young girl, Julia, travelling on her own, and when her brother fails to turn up to meet her, take her with them to Cousin Catherine's where they are staying (much to Catherine's irritation). The girls' journey and adventures as they settle in America are full of incident and excitement. Sally narrates and we learn about her job as nanny to a rich family –

and about the widespread prejudice against young Irish women – while her letters home remind readers of the distance between the sisters and their much-loved family. A subplot involves their efforts to help Julia find her brother when it turns out she hasn't had any contact with him in ten years. Then Bridget is falsely accused of theft, in Macey's department store no less. With no-one else to help, can Sally convince the judge of her sister's innocence? Sally, Bridget and Julia are probably not much older than most readers themselves and Judi Curtin conveys the enormity of their change of circumstances wonderfully, as well as the excitement they feel, their love for one another, their bravery and resilience. Really good historical fiction brings the period alive through the characters, and that's exactly the case here. **LS**



Foxlight

★★★★★

Katya Balen, illus Barry Falls, Bloomsbury, 272pp, 9781526640444, £12.99, hbk

Fen and Rey are twin sisters; Fen fiery, impulsive, outspoken but underneath a confident exterior she is anxious. Rey is quiet – indeed she almost never speaks. She is artistic – and fearful. They are orphans – different from the others in the House on the edge of the woods. Even their names have been given them by Lissa. Their story: they were found curled up with a fox. Lissa even has the scar where the fox bit her. Their favourite game is Imagine... imagine their mother. Setting out to find their truth Fen and Rey must look beyond the stories they have woven round themselves to confront a world that is rich, complicated and unexpected. The truth can hurt – but can ultimately heal.

Katya Balen can write. Her prose flows beautifully, easily. Her descriptions are rich and concise, her language direct and immediate as Fen tells the story. The reader is drawn into the world of Fen and Rey from the first sentence and is held to the final page. We walk with the girls as they find their way through the winter woods, we see the blood 'beeding on the skin'

reviews

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

when Fen is scratched by brambles, we experience Fen's sense of loss when she and her sister quarrel. This is a tale about recognisable sisters growing up. However, though the setting feels very real, we never find out where we truly are. It is a House on the edge of a wilderness. In this it is different to Balen's previous novels and for some this may make it less satisfying. However, her ability to capture the emotions and attitudes of her young protagonists is faultless. This is not a fairy tale, but stories are at the heart of the narrative – stories we tell ourselves, the stories others tell, mixing truth and imagination. As befits this novel the production is excellent with well-spaced font while the art work by Barry Falls provides a perfect punctuation to the text. This is a book to recommend. **FH**

A Sudden Storm

★★★★★

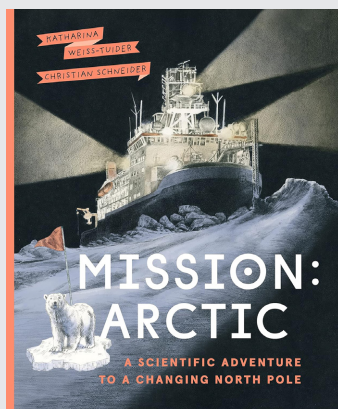
Bali Rai, ill David Shephard, Barrington Stoke, 68pp, 9781800902534, £7.99, pbk

Author Bali Rai is well known for his wide range of hard-hitting titles covering topical and challenging subjects and has worked with publishers **Barrington Stoke** on many of these, offering important reading matter in an accessible format for all young readers.

Arjan is a Sikh teenager, growing up in this world where not everyone can accept the beliefs and cultures of others. On his sixteenth birthday, coming home from school, Arjan crosses paths with a couple of men, who see only his dark skin and turban as marking him out as different from them and confront him with aggression & racist threats. Although shaken by the incident, Arjan spends time with his family before heading out to meet his friends for a celebratory evening at the cinema, but on their way home, the racists return in a larger group and chase him and his friends out into the night away from safety. When Arjan finds himself scared and alone, surrounded by the thugs, things come to a shocking and tragic end.

This story stayed with me for a long while after reading it, knowing that this sort of event and the prejudice behind it is unfortunately still a reality in our world, despite its apparent multi-cultural nature. Although what happens in this story is handled sensitively, the powerful and emotive tale is a thought-provoking read that should hopefully encourage the reader to ask more questions about where and how this prejudice and hatred arises and what we can do to help to deal with it.

Rai's book was inspired by a tragic event in 1997 where after a group of friends were racially abused and attacked, the body of a 20-year-old man, Ricky Reel, was found in the River Thames a week later. This fictional version of similar events in **A Sudden Storm** is no less shocking. **AH**



Mission: Arctic A Scientific Adventure to a Changing North Pole

★★★★★

Katharina Weiss-Tuider, ill. Christian Schneider, Greystone Kids, 122pp, 978 1 77164 956 8, £16.99 hbk

Combining Lauren St John's mastery Here is a riveting book which follows the largest expedition ever to be organised to the Arctic on board the Polarstern ship. The author, a communications manager, took part in this scientific research comprising 500 scientists and other associated professionals. Their remit was to leave Norway in the vessel, allow it to freeze and then drift towards the North Pole. The volume is packed with information, diagrams, photographs and illustrations of the 2019 trip. It is full of detail and very comprehensive as it looks at the practicalities of the journey, the science behind the experiments and how what is happening to the Arctic ice is influencing our weather.

This attractive hardback is divided into three sections: The Biggest Arctic Expedition of All Time; Climate Research on the Ice; Our Arctic, Our Future. I enjoyed lots of things about the subject matter covered, especially the pictures comparing today's high-tech clothing for the scientists, with fur coats worn by explorer Nansen in 1894. The book highlights the similarities and differences between the Arctic and the Antarctic too. Animals and sea creatures appear throughout the book and the science behind what is happening to their habitat is clearly explained.

Students will enjoy dipping into this book if they are interested in science, climate change, weather etc. The information is so thorough and in depth that it cannot be read in one sitting. Well done to all involved in the production of this title; it is an ideal gift for young adults keen on the above topics. At the end of the book are suggestions for readers to play their part in helping the environment. Then there is an excellent glossary and index to guide and support readers. It will appeal to teenagers and adults alike and had me hooked for a week! **JS**

14+ Secondary/Adult



Play

★★★★★

Luke Palmer, Firefly Press, 320pp, 978-1915444318, £8.99 pbk

This dynamic and probing novel kept me reading long into the night. The protagonists are four boys who have grown up together but who are from very different backgrounds and parental role models. Luc, indoctrinated by his father, is a sports fanatic and misogynist. Johnny, from a privileged but emotionally barren home, plunges himself into unfettered wildness while Matt, the artist, is trying to come to terms with his sexual identity. Mark's family is impoverished and, in the search for the money he needs, he unwittingly and dangerously becomes involved in county lines.

The boys are all fragile, but think that they are not, and they are all feeling their way towards what passes for masculinity in their (and our) confused and fragmented world. They both challenge and support each other in an environment which too often offers only uncertainty and anxiety. Palmer unerringly captures the boys' voices and behaviours from childhood to the world of young adults. This is, par excellence, an examination of small-town claustrophobia and masculinity, the one often dripping slow poison into the other.

And yet, there are possibilities – always possibilities, even when misguided choices narrow their number down. Johnny's recklessness – both physical and mental – results in his death when, having taken far too much cocaine, he falls during a climbing stunt. But even as he is dying, he escapes into an existential consideration of the possible alternatives in the trajectories of his friends' lives and the results of those options, those choices. In the end the reader must decide which paths the boys will take and what

the consequences of those choices might be.

This is a courageous and exceptional novel: courageous because it tackles themes which are not readily engaged in elsewhere and exceptional because there is no clumsy stereotyping to seal development into neatly packaged boxes. There is room to meander, to retrace steps, to reconsider, to allow characters to make mistakes and to experience powerful and all-consuming emotions. Play is exquisitely written and beautifully balanced: and the world it takes its readers into is not one from which we return unscathed. **VR**

The Girl Who Grew Wings

★★★★★

Anna Waterworth, Chicken House, 437pp, 9781912626340, £8.99 pbk

Icari and Sephie are twin sisters in a world full of magic and demons. When they reach their teens, young people are tested to see if they have the gift, to become a healer, alchemist or embalmer; but having more than one gift is forbidden and leads to dire consequences. After their mother is burnt at the stake, for having two gifts, the girls find themselves being designated as being gifted in areas that do not ring true to them. After they arrive at the citadel of Appollis, the area is attacked by demons from the underworld and Icari is kidnapped and taken back with them. Of course, Sephie is determined to save her sister and discover why she was stolen. This leads to a tale of intrigue and hidden secrets many want to keep hidden. Can the sisters find each other and will they vanquish the forces of darkness?

This is a fascinating story, with echoes of Greek mythology and the tale of Hades (God of the underworld) and his kidnapping of his wife Persephone. It is also about how societies and particularly those with a religious basis can be in danger of placing very rigid controls on the way people live, even if it is to the detriment of society. However, at the centre of this complex story we have the theme of love; both that between family members and also a more romantic form, between new friends and acquaintances. We are shown that love is not something we can always make a decision about, it creeps up on us and the person loved is not always who we expect. The author has created two wonderful central characters, both with flaws, but who are determined to do what is right, save their homeland and defeat the Divine Shadow, ruler of the underworld. The language and plot make this suitable for older teens. **MP**

All That It Ever Meant

★★★★

Blessing Musariri, Zephyr, 178pp, 9781035902477, £14.99 hbk

Mati and her family are being taken – reluctantly – to Zimbabwe. It is a family in mourning following the death of their mother. Relationships are strained especially between seventeen-year-old ChiChi and their father who is having difficulty coping. Tana the youngest scarcely speaks. We see the whole expedition through the dispassionate eyes of Mati who is in the middle – the fights, the disasters, the moments of joy, the gradual acceptance as they travel through an exciting new landscape. But who is Meticais, whose exotic costumes are constantly changing?

This is an interesting subtle narrative. Mati tells the story building up portraits of each character – her clever father, Chichi the elder sister and Tana who has his own problems. The language is direct, contemporary without being colloquial. Mati, herself, steps off the page; she has an authenticity that is immediately engaging. We meet Meticais – but what do they represent? The costumes and hairstyles that change with each appearance seem to be significant. Perhaps, they reflect aspects of Mati herself. Because all is not quite as it seems. We certainly get to know Mati, herself as she observes her family – and this is the important element. Mati is an observer, she has apparent agency but...The conclusion provides a twist that observant readers may have subconsciously picked up as the story progresses. Musariri explores family grief and resolution in an intelligent, clever way that would resonate with a thinking reader – for 'life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was. There is absolute and unbroken continuity'. This is a stylish new voice from a debut author to be welcomed. **FH**

Wise Creatures

★★★★

Deirdre Sullivan. Hot Key Books. 378pp, £8.99 pbk

Deirdre Sullivan has an aptitude for exploring teen trauma through a supernatural lens. **Wise Creatures** is a read that requires patience as its fragmented structure reflects unreliable narrator Daisy's fractured mind. Just as in **Perfectly Preventable Deaths**, there is an eerie setting, strange happenings and shocking secrets festering under the mould. Adverse childhood experiences, toxic relationships, abuse, power games, broken family dynamics, anxiety, depression, stress, deteriorating mental health and self-harm all play their part. Adults struggle with their inner demons and broken hearts while the distress of the protagonists, cousins Daisy and Nina, begins to manifest itself.



Adolescent worries, alienated internal commentary, friendship fractures, mysterious video diaries, psychic trickery and tortured flashbacks all make up a broken jigsaw of self-recrimination, doubt, fear and suspicion. Sullivan uses lyrical metaphors to help the reader navigate, likening Daisy's memory to a braid of hair where, 'one strand is the stories I've been told, and one strand is the impact of what happened. And the third strand is cobbled together from memories, from dreams where I can't move, from something in me that I can't let out.'

Haunted by memories of her vicious and manipulative mother, her sensory visions threaten to swallow her as Daisy wonders if she's strong enough to survive a second onslaught. Can she support her sensitive cousin Nina who is suffering from a malaise which she cannot voice?

The story creeps under the skin and makes the reader challenge their perceptions as events escalate when a self-confessed ghost hunter and his son get involved. Just who can be trusted? Even the chapter headings can be read separately to tell a tale of remnants and fragments, scars and humiliation, an exposed throat, dreams that flicker and unexplained chills.

Sullivan meticulously researched the psychology behind **Wise Creatures**. She studied the work of psychiatrists Judith Herman, Bessel Van Der Kolk and Lucia Osborne Crowley who wrote about how early childhood trauma affects the body and the nature of the recovery process.

*'Our pain, our grief, our secrets'
'This house where we're all broken
in different ways and can't seem to fit
together the way we did before.'*

Ask yourself when you read this, what is real and what is imagined? It will chill you to the bone as the shape of the verses and carefully crafted repetition reflect the trapped thoughts.

As Sullivan explains, her novel mirrors the complicated feelings of

young adults as they come of age, '...that bridge between childhood and adulthood, where the contrast between who you are and what you have been told about yourself can sometimes become particularly stark.'

At one point Daisy looks at herself in the mirror and is startled by what she sees. Significantly, it's also a time when adults can be revealed as fallible and vulnerable.

This book is intense and craves to be reread. It switches from first to third tenses giving the reader more pieces of the puzzle. **Wise Creatures** will appeal to teens looking for representation of diverse relationships within the pages of a spooky story. The insightful look at the fragility of the human mind will also resonate with readers interested in child psychology. **VR**

You Could Be So Pretty

★★★★

Holly Bourne, Usborne, 400pp, 978-1474966832, £8.99 pbk

In this dystopian but highly recognisable world, girls are divided into two identities: those who follow the doctrine that women are empowered but should still please men at every opportunity and often to their own detriment 'the pretties', and those who deliberately ignore the doctrine, known as 'the objectionables'. The latter often prioritise education over appearance but are often shunned by the rest of society.

At the end of their schooling, there is a celebration known as 'the ceremony'. It is the objective of 'the pretties' to win this event by being declared the most beautiful. Will Belle Gentle win the ceremony as has been her lifelong dream? Or will a new relationship with 'objectionable' Joni change her destiny and Joni's too?

This is a lengthy and often searing discussion of how our society objectifies young women and defines them by their looks. It also talks about how much we have to fight against societal norms if we do not fit the standard mould and the price young women, particularly, can be asked to pay for non-conformity.

Although this view is highly praiseworthy, the section of the novel in which the author explains her position through the character of Joni, reads a little like an essay and so disrupts the narrative flow.

There is a scene which stands out. When Belle's mother has a cosmetic procedure which goes dangerously wrong, Belle's fear is palpable. It leaps from the page and is unforgettable.

Every child from Year 10 upwards should read Bourne's novel. It will encourage them to question some deep-rooted societal norms. **RB**

Electric Life

★★★★

Rachel Delahaye, Troika, 384pp, 9781912745326, £8.99 pbk

Alara Tripp is sixteen. She lives in London Star, a futuristic version of London in which there is no pain, no

illness and, it transpires, no emotions. London Star's version of entertainment is immersive digital quests, something at which Alara excels.

Alara enters a contest and is mysteriously disqualified in the semi-finals. She is then sent on a secret mission to the world known as London Under, the London which existed before London Star came into being and where they have pain, disease, disability and emotions. Will she survive and which world ultimately, will she choose?

Delahaye's book takes a little bit of acclimatisation as the premise is unusual. It encourages the reader to think deeply about what our primary emotions really allow us to do, which is to connect to other human beings. Would we really like to be emotionally numb and State-controlled to eliminate pain? What price emotional freedom? And, who should decide whose life is worthy and whose is not? **RB**

Thieves' Gambit

★★★★

Kayvion Lewis, Simon & Schuster, 384pp, 978-1-3985-2212-1, £8.99 pbk

Ross or Rosalyn Quest is a member of a notorious family of thieves, the Quests. Ross is beginning to realise at seventeen that her life is a very unusual one and she craves a bit of what we would regard as normal. Her mother has always said not to trust anyone who isn't a Quest.

Ross secretly plans to enrol in a gymnastics summer camp. First, she must complete one last thieving job with her mother, which is supposed to be easy money and simple. Needless to say, the job goes wrong, and Ross's mother is kidnapped. The kidnappers demand one billion dollars in a month or Ross's mother dies.

Ross decides to answer an email from a secretive group called The Organisers who have invited her to play the thieves' gambit, her prize if she wins, is a wish and a year's contract to work for the organisation. Ross decides she must play to get her mother's release money. Can she beat the devilishly difficult gambit and all the other competitors and what will she learn about herself and her family?

This is a rare premise and it results in a page-turning, unputdownable thriller, the denouement of which no reader will be expecting. If you have ever wanted to try to understand the inner workings of a criminal mind, this intriguing book is for you. **RB**

Bad Magic: A Skulduggery Pleasant Graphic Novel

★★★★

Derek Landy, ill. P.J. Holden, Matt Soffe, Rob Jones, & Pye Parr. Harper Collins Children's Books, 256pp, 978-0008585785, £14.99 pbk

Back in 2005 Derek Landy dreamed of fusing his favourite genres of horror, fantasy, science fiction, crime, mystery, and comedy to create

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14+ Secondary/Adult continued

magical mayhem. Fast forward two years to a Skulduggery whirlwind which now numbers a full blown 15-book series with *Until the End* on its way in 2024, and spin offs including a Grimoire guide to the skeleton detective's world. Landy's fast paced formula of sarcasm, arrogance, banter, bone cracking action, diabolical double dealings and social commentary has attracted a large fan base. There has even been an immersive theatre event at Smock Alley in Dublin.

Hot on the heels of Landy's involvement with Marvel comic storylines for **Captain America**, **Ironman** and **Avengers**, Skulduggery has now blasted into the glorious graphic world with the release of **Bad Magic**, a real treat for visual readers.

Set in the small town of Termoncara, described as 'a quiet Irish town for quiet Irish people' which has **League of Gentlemen** vibes, it's visceral, vivid and emotive. A malign presence, fed by the demonisation of anyone considered different, has haunted the town for twenty years. The plot revolves around troubled teen Jamie, who has been keeping a secret, only to be preyed upon by a voracious monster named Mr Friendly, who is anything but. Bedecked in garish garb he resembles a crazy mash up of comic book villains *The Jester* and *The Joker*. Landy also ironically names the town's suffix after the Irish word for friend.

Jamie's plight attracts the attention of Skulduggery and Valkyrie who arrive hoping to vanquish the threat but will they be able to 'meet, mock and maul' this time?

The novel sizzles with the synchronised talents of dream team Holden, Softe, Jones and Parr who whip up electrical energy throughout matching Landy's pithy script with stunning graphics and eye-catching speech bubbles. A palette of murky green, steely blue, fireball orange, pulsating purple, livid lime and volcanic red, the eerie use of silhouettes, the clash of dark vs light and the dramatic slash style panels of converging monsters all communicate the idea of a malevolent force. Dynamic characters crackle in explosive panels portraying muscular combat sequences, with emotions ranging from abject terror, to determined defiance to vicious intent. Valkyrie's feminist feistiness dominates in powerful lightning flashes reminiscent of **X Men** character Storm.

Underneath the fantastical world building is Landy's political statement as he calls to account the hatred, anger, frustration and fear that creates monsters of the mind. Racism and homophobia are linked with guilt and trauma as the self-destructive inner demons born from prejudice are exposed.

This graphic adventure highlights

the importance of diversity and inclusion. It will appeal to **Skulduggery** aficionados, comic book buffs and fantasy fans. It works as a standalone introduction to Skulduggeryverse and has an ending that promises sequels. It is not for the squeamish and is suitable for 14+ readers. **TJ**

Grapefruit Moon

★★★★★

Shirley-Anne McMillan,
Little Island Books, 270pp,
978-1-91507-142-2, £8.99 pbk

Drew has just been accepted by Cooke's, the most prestigious school in the area and where he will study for his A-levels. The odds were doubly stacked against him as he comes from one of the most deprived and notorious estates in the city. He remains an outsider when the academic year begins, struggling to deal with his family's poverty when kit is needed for school and knowing that his only chance to be the first person in his family to go to university, the first to make a change in his destiny, is to adhere to the extreme codes of masculinity expounded by the toxic Stewards, led by the poisonously powerful Adam. This student freemasonry, feared by staff and students alike, can influence who receives the scholarship which will pay university fees.

Charlotte – at the other end of the social and financial spectrum to Drew – is also finding school punishingly difficult. A star student with a controlling mother who has relentlessly mapped out her life for her, she is also Adam's ex-girlfriend. He has pursued her cruelly and continuously since she ended their relationship and is now blackmailing her by threatening to release a sex tape of the two of them together unless she agrees to resume their relationship.

Two very different students but under very similar pressures - forced into doing what parents and peers expect but which neither of them are sure they want. They have something else in common – a love of and talent for poetry, something Charlotte's mother has expressly forbidden and which Drew keeps hidden for fear of ridicule. McMillan has their teacher, Don Antonio, introducing them to Lorca's work as part of their course, for just as they are drowning under the weight of parental and class expectations, so he did, too. Through Lorca – and a school visit to Spain – Drew and Charlotte found the strength to speak out about what they really wanted in their lives and to let not only their poetry be heard but also their views about the injustices and divisions of class and gender within their educational situation. The book ends on a gentle note of hope with a tentative way forward for the two protagonists, individually and together. It is refreshing to read literature

for young people coming out of contemporary Northern Ireland - as the author points out, it is many years since Joan Lingard wrote the excellent **Kevin and Sadie** books and it is good to see that writers like McMillan are now continuing the canon. **VR**



Runner Hawk

★★★★★

Michael Egan, *Everything With Words*, 289pp, 978-1-911427-36-0, £8.99 pbk

Leo is bemused - he feels increasingly separated from the world and he is prey to bizarre experiences: a hawk hovers endlessly in the sky, apparently frozen. A runner is similarly and permanently held in mid-stride and only Leo sees these conundrums. However, it's not just the world which seems odd to him, but his own body, too. His limbs spasm or freeze and no-one, not even doctors, can explain why. His childhood memories have vanished from his mind and it is only at someone's prompting that they return to him. Even then, we - and Leo - are unsure of their authenticity and thus flickers of uncertainty begin to communicate themselves to the reader.

In the midst of these anomalies Leo's parents go on holiday for two weeks and his eccentric Uncle Toby, a celebrated poet and bon vivant, comes to keep him company - a watchful eye but also a liberated and entertaining one. He draws Leo out of his bedroom, his sanctuary, and initiates him in the rites of passage which teenagers pass through on their way to adulthood; smoking; drinking; driving; sex. But still Leo is apart from the world with periods where he freezes both physically and emotionally, without knowing why. He is drawn to a girl near his own age whose sister Becca disappeared some years earlier and, to his horrified fascination, he sees not only Becca's ghost but the place where she met her death.

He realises there is something badly wrong with him and that he is deteriorating and that's when the

reason for Toby's visit becomes clear. He has come to explain something to Leo which his parents cannot bear to do. Leo died when he was five, drowned in a frozen river after falling through the ice. The Leo who now exists is a clone, manufactured in a laboratory as an experiment and with a limited shelf life. His systems are now failing and he will die very soon, as his callous creator-an immensely wealthy business man for whom his father worked-will do nothing to save him. He is merely an elaborate experiment.

Egan subtly and intelligently sows the seeds of Leo's reality through the narrative, with Leo as the narrator, to give more immediacy. The ethical and moral implications are similarly woven through the storyline so that his position as an author becomes clear without the need for literary hammer blows. As Leo dies with his family around him Egan skilfully avoids emotional wallowing and instead transports Leo to an existence where he, the frozen hawk and the runner are liberated to move eternally. **VR**

Sisters of Sword and Shadow

★★★★★

Laura Bates, Simon and Schuster, 387pp, 9781398520042, £14.99 hbk
The heroine of this story had her life changed in a moment, when a knight stole her prized necklace, whilst he was being chased by another knight; however, the latter was shown to be a woman, who invited Cass to join her in retrieving the necklace. Cass is drawn into the life that Sigrid shows her and finds herself within a totally female environment, created for those who have suffered from men in the past. The story follows Cass as she grows older and learns the skills that are needed to fight as a warrior and protect the rest of their community, whilst also taking part in tournaments, in order to win money to help them all live. Running through the story we have suggestions that this is set in the time of King Arthur; there are knights of the round table (but not honourable) and references to a sword in a stone, which reaches its zenith at the end of the book. However, the slight variation in timing, blurs the sense of reality.

There are some very disturbing undertones to this story, based on the way that women were treated during this period. Parts of the story are quite chilling as you realize what women had to do in order to survive. You can understand why a sisterhood of women would try and control their own lives, even though in real life, the closest they would come is in a monastic setting. What is particularly frightening is that women were considered 'property', with no rights of their own, until late in the 19th century and even today we do not have the equality that should be available. This is very much a book for the 14 + market, but it gives so many opportunities for discussion about women's rights. **MP**

Valediction: **No.12a¹** Klaus and some others

Brian Alderson is saying goodbye to his books as he donates his remarkable collection of children's books to **Seven Stories**. His latest gift is a special edition of a classic by that genius of children's books, Maurice Sendak.

I first bought Sendak's **Nutshell Library** in a gallery in Upper Regent Street round about December 1962. It had only just been published by Harper & Row in the United States but at that time they had a London office and were showing some of their US publications. (It was first published in England by Collins in 1964.)

In his admirable and delightful selection of the letters of Maurice Sendak's editor², Ursula Nordstrom, Leonard Marcus includes a long, but informal, attempt on her part to allay the author's worries about competitors pinching the 'Nutshell' idea. In his annotation, Marcus notes not only that in a little over a year the **Library** had sold 100,000 copies but that Sendak's aim had been 'to stand the moralistic children's literature of the past on its head'. That may well have been the case for what he gives us is an entertaining compendium of some first essentials for the young child reader: an alphabet book with alligators engaged in human activities ('Bursting balloons...Catching colds'); a counting book where Johnny finds his room filling up with animals which he then gets rid of by counting backwards; the months of the year all of which are good for eating chicken soup with rice; and a genius work of fiction: the story of Pierre, a boy devoted to saying 'I don't care' and thus getting eaten by a lion. I don't know about selling a hundred thousand copies, it surely ought to be a birthday gift for every child.

That would certainly seem to have been the idea of Sendak's Swiss publisher who in 1970 commissioned the translation into German by Hans Manz (a pseudonym?). As it turns out, Sendak's American phraseology allows for quite a natural transfer to the target language or else a swapping around of pictures. Thus 'Catching colds' is untranslatable using the letter 'c' and has been replaced by the illustration from 'y' to which Manz has been able to create a new caption 'Chauffieren Chevrolets nach China'. This then requires another illustration (taken from 's' and again given a Manz caption: 'Yvan zankt mit Yves und Yolanda' and so the swapping goes on.

With 'Chicken Soup' and '1 is Johnny' the texts are rhymed and keep the original picture sequence but allow the phrasing to be manipulated, 'Chicken Soup' for instance refashioning some of the verses and the concluding refrain. As for the original Pierre, chosen, as noted above, to rhyme with 'I don't care', he has to be re-christened Klaus in order to rhyme with 'Ich mache mir nichts draus!'



A Alligatoren allüberall

1. Alligatoren allüberall; ein Alphabet von Maurice Sendak deutsch von Hans Manz.[Zürich] Diogenes Verlag, 1970. 48pp.



2. 1 war Hans; ein Zahlbuch von Maurice Sendak deutsch von Hans Manz.[Zürich] Diogenes Verlag, 1970. 48pp.

Hanrahan does not note any other attempts at translation but does say that Diogenes published a copy of 'Chicken Soup' in large format in German in 1977. The daft idea of publishing the **Library** as a set of four quite separate volumes in large format, thus negating its whole purpose, would appear to be down to some editorializing by Collins in London.

1 Copying the numbering of Blackwell's JOY STREET to avoid the number following 12!

2 *Dear Genius* (Harper Collins, 1998)

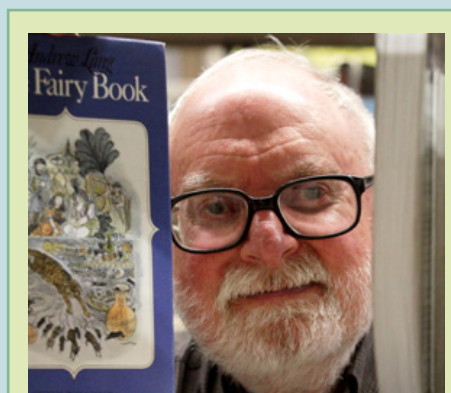


3. Hühnersuppe mit Reis; ein Buch mit den Monaten von Maurice Sendak deutsch von Hans Manz. [Zürich] Diogenes Verlag, 1970. 48pp.

Maurice Sendak. Hexagonal slip-case 90x35x70mm. open to one side. Three 3-colour illustrations within decorative frames, lettered DIE MINI-BIBLIOTHEK von Maurice Sendak.

Containing 4 books page-size uniformly 85x60mm. Variably placed 3-colour illus. and titling cartouches throughout. Yellowy-orange paper over boards with b/w image to front; blank endpapers; dust-jackets. Hanrahan. pp.60, 61

Nutshell Library, Maurice Sendak, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0060255008, £19.92 from Amazon



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.