



BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.264

Jan 2024

the children's book magazine online

Authorgraph interview
Debi Gliori

Windows into
Illustration
Steve Small

**Plus looking
forward to 2024:**
new books,
new initiatives



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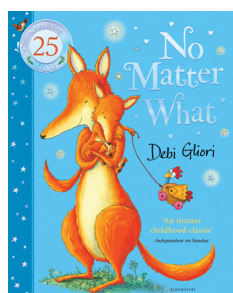
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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from the 25th anniversary edition of **No Matter What** by **Debi Gliori**.

Thanks to **Bloomsbury Children's Books** for their help with this New Year cover.



Editorial 264

Happy New Year to our readers from all of us at **Books for Keeps**. This January issue, our 264th, alongside the regular features, includes a look ahead at the books and issues that will be exciting us in 2024. We hesitate to call this 'the hope issue', but there are real reasons to be cheerful: the continuing rise in the quantity and quality of ethnically representative and inclusive literature, as highlighted by CLPE's 6th annual **Reflecting Realities Survey**; the ongoing resurgence in children's poetry – indications are that there will be a record number of submissions for this year's **CLIPPA (CLPE Children's Poetry Award)** and the **2023 Poetry By Heart** competition received its highest ever number of entries, 2,000 in total, with over 90,000 pupils taking part in some way and over 37,000 poems learned by heart. We continue to watch with awe the work of our Children's Laureate, Joseph Coelho, tireless in his efforts to promote poetry – the reading and writing of – and the necessity of children's libraries. With the world feeling a particularly dangerous and uncertain place at the moment, the growth of **EmpathyLab** is also to be celebrated; if the growth of an empathy-educated generation doesn't engender hope for the future, not much will.

January provides us with two new prize shortlists to celebrate. Now in its second year, the **Adrien Prize**, founded by author Elle McNicoll celebrates children's books that explore disability experiences. Four books are on the shortlist: Lily Bailey's **When I See Blue** (Orion Children's); Lizzie Huxley-Jones' **Vivi Conway and the Sword of Legend** (Knights Of); Patience Agbabi's **The Circle Breakers** (Canongate); and Thomas Leeds' **Jayben and the Golden Torch** (Hodder). In a statement on X, formerly known as Twitter, McNicoll commented on the quality of eligible books this year, and celebrated that, 'Disabled leads can be fun and happy and nuanced and in control of the narrative and, most importantly, not dead or cured by the end.' Hurrah to that!

Also announced this week is the shortlist for the brand new

Inclusive Books for Children Children's Book Awards. 13 books are shortlisted across three categories, Baby and Toddler Books, Picture Books and Children's Fiction 5–9. Marcus Satha, co-founder of **Inclusive Books for Children**, says of the Awards, 'Our aim is to showcase amazing, inclusive children's books that children and their families will love to read. What sets these books apart is that they offer authentic glimpses into different ways of life, as a backdrop to stories told through writing and illustration of the highest standard. [Discover the shortlist here](#) and congratulations to all the authors and illustrators on the list.

As we sign off this new year issue, we are also looking forward to the announcement of the category winners of the new **Nero Book Awards** on 30th January. The shortlist for the children's category is very strong and it's cheering to see that children's books are included in the award alongside adult fiction, debut fiction and non-fiction for adults. The judges are asked to choose the books they would most want to press into the hands of friends and family for their quality and readability, which just about sums up the **Books for Keeps** approach too.

Whatever you plan to do in 2024, we hope you'll continue to read **Books for Keeps** as we continue to report on the books, the words and pictures shaping children's lives.

As always, if you appreciate what we do, do please make a contribution via [PayPal](#) or our [Givey fundraising page](#) – work to transfer 40 years of our archive to the website continues and all donations, small or large, are very welcome.

Happy reading, 2024!



Books for Keeps January 2024 No.264

ISSN 0143-909X

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Editorial correspondence should be sent to Books for Keeps,
30 Winton Avenue
London N11 2AT.

Books for Keeps is available online at

www.booksforkeeps.co.uk

A regular BfK Newsletter can also be sent by email.

To sign up for the Newsletter, go to

www.booksforkeeps.co.uk and follow the Newsletter link.

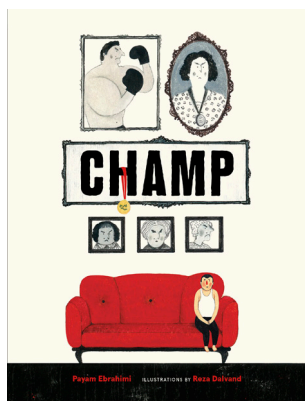
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Children's Books of the Year 2024



Aldana Libros (an imprint of Greystone Kids)

In many countries today, people are penalized for who they are, what they do, or say. **Champ** comes from two Iranian creators about a child, born into a family of athletic champions, who is completely unlike the rest of his family. He loves making art, reading, dreaming, and thinking. His family strongly disapproves. When he thinks of a way to make them like and accept him, he fails spectacularly. But we know that he will persist. A

beautiful tribute to self-determination from a country with great children's book creators whose work we rarely see. *Patricia Aldana, Publisher*

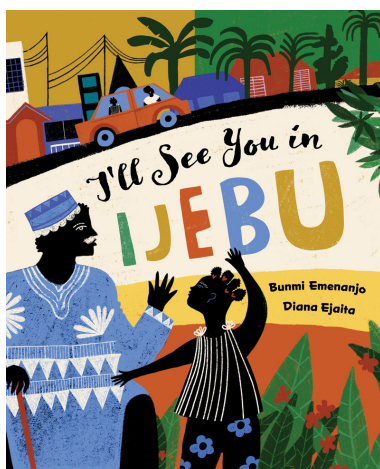
Andersen Press

On Silver Tides by Sylvia Bishop is a beautifully written book that reimagines the myths of our rivers, seas and lochs. Set within a secretive community of people who can breathe underwater, Kelda is on a race against time and tide to rescue her little sister. Along the way, she must face down a mysterious disaster that threatens the waterways of Britain. It has heart-stopping adventure, intricate worldbuilding, and characters you will truly care for. I loved it from the first, maddeningly intriguing line, and it never lets up from there – it's a really special fantasy adventure for teens. *Chloe Sackur, Andersen Press Commissioning Editor Fiction*

Don't Think of Tigers by Alex Latimer is magic! Imagine a picture in your mind, then be amazed to see it actually appear on the next page. Just don't – ever - think about tigers! Although that is far easier than it sounds... Alex Latimer ingeniously and hilariously exhorts readers to join in a mind game that takes his artwork down a seemingly irreversible path of absurdity resulting in the loss of control of his images. And yes, there is a serious point being made, this is Alex's wonderfully inspiring advice on how to become a good artist – by first being a bad one! Genius. *Sue Buswell, Picture Book Editorial Director*

Barefoot Books

I am so looking forward to when **I'll See You in Ijebu** makes its glorious debut this spring. The book brings young readers along for a journey from bustling city life in Lagos, Nigeria out to the small town of Ijebu with a Catholic girl named Olu as she visits her Muslim extended family for Eid al-Adha. This book features glimpses of daily life in present-day Africa rarely seen in picture books and offers an inspiring vision of people from different faiths celebrating their special days together. With rich, lyrical text and show-stopping illustrations, this picture book is art! *Kate DePalma, Senior Editor*



Big Picture Press

'I am beyond excited to finally be publishing **Faedom** this autumn. **Faedom** will take readers on a magical journey to discover the world of fairies, uncovering their origins and revealing the secrets

behind their extraordinary abilities. Filled with stories, songs, poems, facts and folklore, this stunningly illustrated, large format gift book will be sure to captivate readers of all ages.' *Joanna McInerney, Head of Big Picture Press*

Bloomsbury

Publishing in October, the book I'm dying to share with the world is **Hidden Treasure** by Jessie Burton. It's a gripping mystery, full of secrets and plot twists, about the events that unfold when two children find a treasure with the power to bring just one person back from the dead. It's a masterclass of storytelling from a great writer whose incredible characters and brilliance in capturing moments of history are added to a page-turning plot that any eleven-year-old will devour. It's my unmissable book of 2024! *Ellen Holgate, Associate Publisher*

We're incredibly excited to be publishing **The Girl and the Mermaid** by Hollie Hughes and Sarah Massini in April 2024. A brand-new picture book from the creators of the bestselling **The Girl and the Dinosaur**, it's the captivating story of a girl called Alina who goes on an underwater adventure to seek out the precious memories her grandmother has lost. Filled with beauty and heart, it brings to life a vivid world of mermaids and lighthouses, deep magic and great courage. I was swept away by Hollie Hughes' irresistible, evocative text and Sarah Massini's stunning, immersive artwork – and I know readers will be too. *Pari Thomson, Editorial Director (Picture Books)*

Bloomsbury Education

The book I'm excited to be publishing in 2024 is **The Best Eid Ever**, written by Sufiya Ahmed and illustrated by Hazem Asif. The main character, Aisha, is really excited for her favourite festival, Eid-al-Fitr. This year her family have promised her an epic treasure hunt to find her gifts. This is a beautiful own voices story about family and celebration, and touches on many Eid traditions. Publishing in February, in plenty of time Ramadan and Eid, this gorgeous picture book has illustrations which glow from the page and is a must have for every child's bookshelf. *Hannah Rolls, Editorial Director*

Bsmall

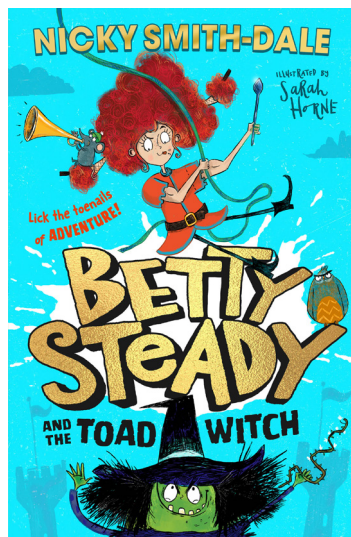
At b small, we've become specialists in STEM for primary school aged kids over the last few years, so I'm thrilled to be publishing **Eurek-HER!** – a book that celebrates the discoveries and inventions of diverse women throughout history. And more importantly, includes activities so kids can put what they're reading into practice! A perfect mix of inspiring and practical. *Sam Hutchinson, Publisher*

Campbell Books

My top pick for 2024 is **Can You Find the Easter Bunny?** Not only am I over the moon for Campbell to be publishing a book illustrated by the award-winning Axel Scheffler, it's also a sumptuous feast for a baby's eyes and senses. With brightly coloured soft felts flaps to pull down and develop motor skills, eggs galore to spot and the most delightful bunny surprise at the end, I couldn't think of a better way for babies to celebrate their first Easter with their families! *Deborah Kespert, Editorial Director*

Chicken House

Of course, I'm gloriously excited about all our books. But debut author, scout leader, green campaigner and survival expert Philip Kavvadias' **Mission Microraptor** captures my secret 11-year-old boy heart – and will give a boost to everyone trying to get MG boys to read! Newly hatched dinosaur, thrilling tech and best friends on the run from evil forces begins this series with a bang! *Barry Cunningham OBE, Publisher*



Child's Play

Building on the success of **Look Touch Learn**, Child's Play continues to publish unique, groundbreaking books for babies based on the latest research into infant neuroscience. Developed with a leading university baby lab, each book in the new **Baby See** series is designed to promote early brain development through maximal targeted stimulation, using topics such as repetition, optical illusions, odd one out and sequencing. Each book features bold contrasts and a palette of colours optimally suited to infant retinas, and looks completely different to more traditional books for babies. *Sue Baker, Editor*

David Fickling Books

In June I am thrilled to be publishing **Ettie and the Midnight Pool** by Julia Green, illustrated by Pam Smy. Everything about this book feels special – the beautiful, dreamlike cover; the haunting, immersive story told in Julia's deceptively simple, lyrical style; the exquisite illustrations which enhance both the book's celebration of natural beauty and its undercurrents of darkness. Julia has been instrumental in the careers of so many incredible writers as course leader in the MA in creative writing at Bath Spa University, and I think it is now her own turn to really shine, with this multi-layered, unforgettable book. *Liz Cross, Managing and Publishing Director*

I want to recommend a book for 2024 to you all that was written for JOY! Because who doesn't want to finish a book soaring? **Girl on the Fly** by Nansubuga Nagadya Isdahl is a total celebration of the everlasting friendship between young girls: the in-jokes, the laughter, the silly misunderstandings and the absolute ease. Alongside all the fun though, the story has a heart-grabbing depth as we follow 12-year-old Kam navigating her half Tanzanian heritage in 90s Philadelphia, her passion for running, her sense of who she is and her first love. So go on, stick on a banging 90s playlist, read **Girl on the Fly** and bring some joy to 2024! *Rosie Fickling, Commissioning Editor*

Faber

The most phenomenal acquisition Faber has **ever** made, **Songlight** launches the trilogy of the decade! Set in the far future, where the planet as we know it has been ruined by firefuel, some humans have developed telepathy, or 'songlight'. But in Northaven, those with songlight are hunted, then destroyed. This is where Elsa finds herself coming of age, in grave danger now that her songlight has emerged... An edge-of-your-seat, epic, unmissable saga: it is also beautifully written. I am beyond excited about this one. Moira Buffini is an award-winning screenwriter: her debut novel is about to set the world alight! *Alice Swan, Associate Publisher*

Farshore

Golly gherkins, the book event of 2024 for me has to be Nicky Smith-Dale's comedy young fiction debut, **Betty Steady and the Toad Witch**, illustrated by Sarah Horne. I proper guffawed from the

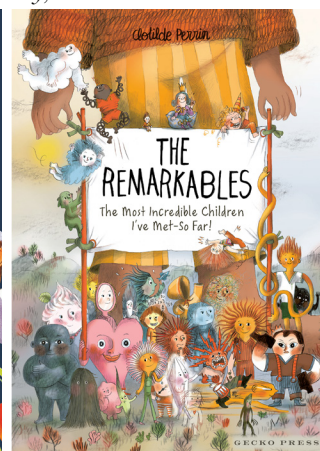
first page, as the indomitable Betty (plus biceps Linda and Gregg) is reduced to the size of a biscuit by the wicked Toad Witch and then has to save the kingdom of Wobbly Rock from doom and destruction. Packed with catchphrases, jokes and LOTS of fighty stuff, it will bewitch readers from 6 to 60+ with its heartfelt message about the importance of friendship. **HOT CROSS BUNS!** *Lucy Courtenay, Senior Commissioning Editor*

Five Quills

Following the success of **I Am Nefertiti** (shortlisted for the **Little Rebels Award**), I am delighted to announce the publication of **Dance Just Like So!**, a new book by the brilliant author/illustrator duo Annemarie Anang and Natelle Quek. This heartwarming and lively story features a boy called Kwesi, his grandmother who is a dancer and their cheerful community of neighbours. Gran will teach Kwesi and the neighbours her trophy-winning dance, the Shooby-Doo Mambo. But Gran hurts her knee before Kwesi can learn all the steps... Annemarie's rhythmic and melodic voice, and Natelle's vibrant illustrations are sure to make this book a story time favourite! *Daniella Schneider, Publisher*

Frances Lincoln Children's Books

We have a hugely exciting programme in 2024, which includes **Little People, BIG DREAMS** titles that are destined to be bestsellers, beautiful board books that take **The Story Orchestra** series to a younger audience and stunning picture books. One title I can't wait to publish is **The Not-So-Wicked Witch** by Bethan Stevens, whose debut picture book, **The Grumpy Fairies**, was the winner of the **Waterstones Children's Book Award**. Her hilarious new picture book about a young witch that breaks the mould is perfect for Halloween, but it also has strong year-round appeal, delivering the timeless message that kindness trumps wickedness. *Peter Marley, Publisher*



Gecko Press

Clotilde Perrin's previous books include the magnificent, multi-layered (literally) **Inside the Villains**. She has a unique sensibility that draws from deep fairytale forests overlaid with mischief and laughter. In her new book **The Remarkables** (September) we are introduced to the most incredible children Clotilde has met—so far—and see how each of them is individually extraordinary. Through large, detailed portraits and personality pages, she presents children with superpowers like speed, elasticity, invisibility, sweetness, noise and silence. It's an inclusive encyclopedia in which we see ourselves and our friends, and find ways to talk about emotion, imagination and difference. *Rachel Lawson, Publisher-at-large*

Graffeg

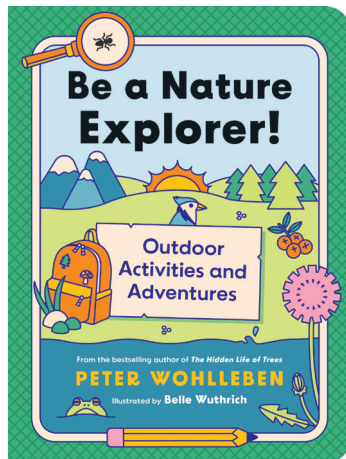
Watch them Grow! Is Graffeg's first collaboration with experienced author and poet James Carter and his first collaboration with illustrator James Munro. It's also the first in a three-part series which takes in animal growth, diversity and migration, so there are a lot of firsts here! But it's a book (and series) we're delighted to publish given the quality of work on display. James's entertaining verse

belies the meticulous research that lies behind and Mr. Munro's illustrations likewise combine reality with a terrific sense of fun and play. Altogether an exciting start to a fun, educational series of books.'

We're also delighted that *Culhwch and Olwen* will be our first published title in the Cadno imprint. The purpose of the imprint is to place Wales at the heart of texts, be that as a geographical location or by virtue of the characters involved. And where better to start than with a classic tale from the **Mabinogion**, where Wales' literary heritage combines with the storytelling talents of Catherine Fisher in a modern reworking of a timeless adventure story. Wales at its best in terms of setting, text and author – and new Graffeg imprint Cadno off to a flying start. Look out for plenty more. *Matthew Howard, Publishing Director*

Greystone Kids

Peter Wohlleben has a knack for connecting with audiences of all ages, but he has a particular soft spot for children. He loves taking young children out into the forest to experience nature with all their senses: vision, touch, hearing, smell, and even taste. When the kids on the school kindergarten field trip start nibbling on spruce tips, the trip leader knows they must be from Peter Wohlleben's class. Peter wants kids to have fun and immerse themselves in the wonders around them. His new book, **Be a Nature Explorer!**, helps them do exactly that. *Jane Billinghamurst, Editor*



HarperCollins Children's Books

It's not often that a debut picture book comes along and instantly grabs your attention, but as soon as I clapped eyes on Mikey Please's extraordinary picture book, **The Cafe at the Edge of the Woods**, I knew that it was something special - and utterly unique. Mikey Please has a very particular and very funny way of rhyming that makes this book a total joy and an absolute riot to read aloud. Children will delight in the revolting-sounding food that the book's hero, Rene, cooks up for the Ogre. Paired with the extraordinary level of detail in the illustration and brilliantly depicted characters, this outrageously funny picture book really is set to be a highlight of the publishing year. *Alice Blacker, Publishing Director Picture Books*, I am so excited to be publishing **Compass and Blade** by Rachel Greenlaw: an irresistible YA romantasy filled with wild magic, swoony romance and cutthroat betrayal. This is the first in an epic new trilogy following wrecker Mira as she sets off in search of a family secret buried deep in the ocean. But learning who to trust is not easy, and securing her future will come at a high price. **Compass and Blade** has won incredible praise from authors including Alexandra Christo, Catherine Doyle and Laura Steven – and will be truly unmissable in 2024. Get ready to be swept away! *Megan Reid, Commissioning Editor*

Hot Key Books

The Prisoner's Throne by Holly Black is the unmissable sequel to **The Stolen Heir** and the latest in the much-loved **Folk of the Air** series. For me this is compellingly addictive fantasy, with lush yet razor-sharp narrative, alongside drama laced with revenge and romance entwined with treachery. Holly has been named 'Faerie Queen' – by Victoria Aveyard no less – for good reason. Fans await each book with anticipation; new readers have such a treat in store! I am envious of readers able to start the series anew... this is magnificent storytelling and an author writing at their very best. *Emma Matthewson, Publisher*

Kingfisher Books

Curious Features of Extraordinary Creatures showcases some of the most unique mammals, birds, fish, reptiles and insects found on our planet and the extraordinary tactics they employ to survive. Fiona Fogg's glorious illustrations bring together a dynamic animal portrait and a graphic-novel story panel that reveals a particular quirky behaviour. Parents and guardians be warned – some of these curious animals have particularly gross habits, but young readers will relish every moment. Dancing spiders, poison-sucking slugs and snot-eating aye-ayes... who wouldn't be enthralled? *Lizzie Yeates, Senior Commissioning Editor*

Kumusha Books (an imprint of HarperCollins Children's Books)

Kenny is a happy little boy who tells us about his life, his likes and dislikes, hopes and dreams. At the start of the book, he wonders if anyone else is like him. Then a world of boys and girls answer back! **A Book of People Like Me** is the first in a series of books discussing life from a primary school child's point of view. The book speaks directly to them, inspiring children to think about their identity and place in the world. Joelle Avelino's vibrant and joyful illustrations celebrate how different people can also be so similar. *Ken Wilson-Max, Publisher, Kumusha Books*

Macmillan Children's Books

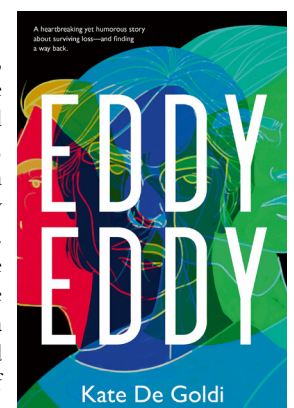
I am so excited for **Some Like it Cold**, the debut YA novel from bestselling Elle McNicoll. This big-hearted neurodivergent romance for **Gilmore Girls** fans follows Jasper Montgomery, who, on visiting her hometown to say goodbye, unexpectedly encounters her teen nemesis Arthur. Against the backdrop of old movies and a wintry bucket list, it explores complexity of love in all its forms – familial, platonic and romantic, and is the most heartwarming romance I've read in years. It's comforting and tender and bold and I can't wait for readers to fall head over heels for Jasper and Arthur next autumn! *Emma Jones, Publishing Director, Fiction*

I can't wait for Julia Donaldson and Lydia Monks' **The Tooth Fairy and the Crocodile**. Packed with adventure, it's the story of Ruth Mary the tooth fairy, who gets more than she bargained for when she is re-deployed for animal duty and has to collect the teeth of a host of jungle creatures, including a less-than-friendly crocodile! With gorgeous artwork and so much fun, this toothy tale is sure to become a firm favourite with young readers. It's a joy! *Hannah Ray, Publishing Director, Picture Books*

My poetry highlight is **Heroes and Villains: poems about legends** chosen by Ana Sampson and illustrated by Chris Riddell. This is a companion volume to **Gods and Monsters: Mythological poems** which we published in 2023. This beautiful collection features classic and brand-new poems about legends and legendary folk from around the world including *The Pied Piper, The Lady of the Lake, King Arthur, Joan of Arc, Robin Hood, Lady Godiva, Mulan, Fin McCool* as well as dragons and sea monsters. Footnotes and asides to shine light on the stories themselves. *Gaby Morgan, Associate Publisher*

Old Barn Books

Eddy, Eddy is a richly layered novel, written with humour and pathos: a love story, peopled with flawed and comical characters, both human and animal; and a story of grief, the way its punch may leave you floundering – and how others can help you find your way back. Shortlisted for Book of the Year in Kate De Goldi's native New Zealand, the many who loved **The 10pm Question** will find here the same unparalleled empathy with the tortured mind of a teenager and De Goldi's matchless linguistic dexterity. Old Barn Books will also re-publish **The 10pm Question** this summer. *Ruth Huddleston, Founder and Publisher*



Otter-Barry Books

We are particularly excited by two titles, first **Spin! Ten Exciting New Voices in Poetry**, edited and selected by Joseph Coelho and illustrated by Ruthine Burton. It is a collection of fifty poems for KS2 from a new generation of young poets all from diverse/under-represented backgrounds. Published with performance trailblazers Apples and Snakes and including three new poems from Joseph.

Secondly, **The Boy Who Loves to Lick the Wind** by Fiona Carswell illustrated by Yu Rong for KS1. This is a touching and empathetic picture story book showing how friendship and acceptance grows through understanding. We hope it will help children and adults understand neuro-diverse traits and behaviour in themselves and others. *Janetta Otter-Barry, Founder and Publisher*



Penguin

Once upon a time, in a forest of tangled secrets, a wild girl and a broken boy fell in love. Part dark fantasy, part feminist reimagining of Beauty and the Beast, **Where The Dark Stands Still** by A.B. Poranek (February) is a sweeping gothic romance infused with polish folklore and the must-read romantasy you've all been waiting for. The ideal read for fans of **Belladonna**, **A Curse So Dark and Lonely** and **Gallant**. The story follows Liska, who makes a pact with a demon to rid herself of her magic. In return, she must agree to a year of servitude in the demon's crumbling manor at the heart of a spirit-wood. An enchanting spell of a book. *Carmen McCullough, Publisher*

Piccadilly Press

Peregrine Quinn and the Cosmic Realm by debut author Ash Bond is my book of the year. It's an action-packed and wildly inventive fantasy adventure that that fizzles with humour and combines old gods and new tech in a race to save the realms. Peregrine is a fabulous hero: she's impulsive and headstrong but has so much heart, too. The dynamic between Peregrine and her companions – a holographic faun and a trainee dryad librarian – provides plenty of laughs to offset the drama. It will keep you gripped right through to its dramatic finale. *Ruth Bennett, Editorial Director*

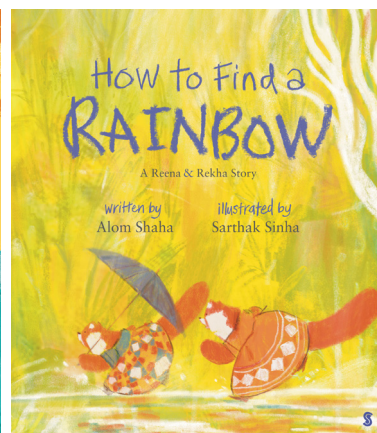
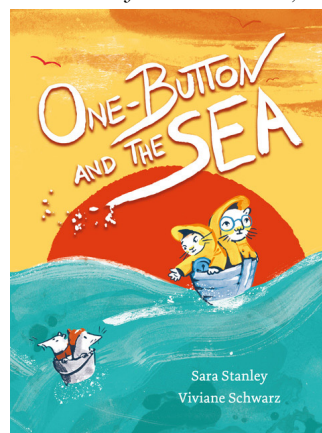
Puffin

Discover a world of magic and secrets, friendship and unimaginable quests in this spectacular new fantasy series about a boy who doesn't believe in magic and an impossible world that will change his mind. **The Whisperwicks: The Labyrinth of Lost and Found** is filled with characters that will stay with you long after you turn the final page. Join shy and bookish Benjamiah and the fierce and headstrong Elizabella on their journey through a strange and marvellous labyrinth to find Elizabella's missing brother. Combining the writing power and world-building of Philip Pullman and Katherine Rundell and the page-turning appeal of **Skandar and the Unicorn Thief**, this story is guaranteed to be a future classic. *Carmen McCullough, Publisher*

Scallywag Press

The story of **One-Button and the Sea**, by Sara Stanley (author) and Viviane Schwarz (illustrator), is told entirely through dialogue between a grandparent and his grandchild, as they explore together

their shared memories of a disruptive event in their lives. It is lyrical and moving – sometimes funny, always direct. Using the sea as a metaphor for the limbo of displacement – whether emotional or physical – this is a heartwarming and robust collaboration between author and artist, celebrating the importance of community during times of crisis – and the power of hope. I love this book. I can only give you a hundred words, but the pictures alone will give you thousands. *Janice Thomson, Publisher*



Scribe

We're thrilled to be publishing **How to Find a Rainbow** by Alom Shaha, a captivating tale blending the contrasting perspectives of two sisters on rainy days and the magical allure of rainbows. With vibrant illustrations by Sarthak Sinha, Shaha takes readers on a heartwarming journey, emphasizing finding light in the darkest moments. Beyond the enchanting narrative, this book provides a guide to creating your own rainbow. Alom brings a wealth of experience as a teacher, writer, and filmmaker. His passion for science and education shines through, making this book an engaging and enriching experience for readers of all ages. *Nicola Garrison, Scribe*

Simon and Schuster

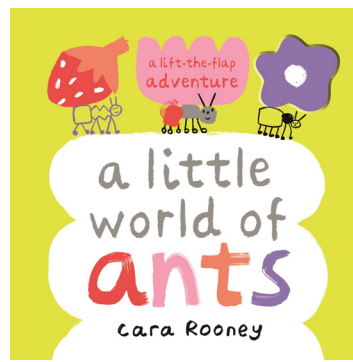
This May we are very proud to be publishing **The Wrong Shoes**, Tom Percival's stunningly illustrated first middle-grade novel, and a moving exploration of the experience of child poverty. Faced with some difficult situations at home and school, twelve-year-old Will discovers the importance of choice and the uplifting power of friendship. Tom is much celebrated for his beautiful depictions of empathy and expression. Here, he shines a light on an issue affecting more than four million children in the UK today. Published in partnership with the **National Literacy Trust**, this is a vital book for 8+ readers. *Lucy Pearse, Fiction Publisher*

Studio Press (an imprint of Bonnier)

Wolves Will Not Be Wolves by Frances Stickley and Hannah Abbo is a fairy tale picture book with a difference – based on the story of Red Riding Hood, it asks the question, why should Little Red stick to the path when the wolf can wander anywhere? Why is the onus on the victim to change their behaviour, rather than on the villain? Fran and Hannah explore a serious subject in an easy-to-understand way, encouraging children to challenge the narrative of traditional cautionary tales. It includes a note for parents and caregivers to help support them as they discuss this topic with young ones. *Stephanie Milton, Head of Studio Press*

Sunbird Books (an imprint of Phoenix International Publications)

I'm over the moon about Sally Anne Garland's new picture book **The Moon Seed** (August)! Her extraordinary story—inspired by historical events—imagines the 'inner life' of one of the seeds launched into space on the 1971 Apollo 14 moon mission. When the seed is planted back on Earth, it grows like a normal seed...except for one thing. It longs to be near the moon again! Garland's gorgeous illustrations depict the seed maturing into a tree that is determined to stay awake each night and grow as high as the sky. Will it ever be content to live on Earth? *Kathy Broderick, Executive Editor*



Tate Children's Books

The Dream Kite (May) is about a young Caribbean boy who dreams of making a beautiful, soaring kite for his town's kite festival. Written by Grace Hallworth, an author, librarian, and bastion for Afro-Caribbean children's literature, **The Dream Kite** was one of the last manuscripts that she was working on before she sadly passed away in 2021. It is our honour to publish it now, with Sophie Bass as illustrator. Sophie Bass is a singular talent who is already making waves in children's publishing and who has breathed new life into this uplifting tale with her utterly unique, dynamic style. *Cherise Lopes-Baker, Tate Children's Editor*

Templar

There are so many books I'm excited to publish in 2024 but one that has touched me personally – and will change how I interact with others in the future – is **My Name is a Gift** by Zeshan Akhter. This picture book is about the power of a single word – one's name. It has been brought to life so beautifully by illustrator Åsa Gilland who renders the characters with such emotion and empathy. I believe it will become a cherished guide for years to come on the art of saying someone's name and the importance of heritage – one which will inspire both adults and children. *Sophie Hallam, Head of Templar*

The Emma Press

We can't wait to bring Clare Pollard's re-telling of Arthurian myth **The Untameables**, illustrated by Reena Makwana, to readers in March. It's not only a thrilling quest narrative following two engaging and complex lead characters, but an innovative and relatable exploration on timely big issues, with warmongering Knights of the Round Table and the land suffering from an unseen poison. It's an adventure for all of us: an acclaimed poet and novelist's first book for children, the Emma Press' first original English-language chapter book, and of course for Roan and Elva, the young protagonists, setting out to save Camelot and more besides. *James Trevelyan, Director (Maternity Cover)*

Two Hoots (an imprint of Macmillan Children's Books)

A Little World of Ants by Cara Rooney is something brand new for Two Hoots: a gorgeous lift-the-flap non-fiction celebration of one of nature's tiniest wonders – ants. Author/illustrator Cara Rooney won the **Macmillan Prize for Illustration** with this one, and her stylish and distinctive artwork is cleverly paired with interactive novelty elements and exciting facts to immerse young children in a world of friendly minibeasts. It's incredibly cute and completely unique – perfect for kickstarting a love of the natural world. *Helen Weir, Senior Editor*

Usborne

2024 is an exciting year for Usborne Fiction, but if we had to pick just one book then it would be the YA novel **Where Sleeping Girls Lie** from the phenomenal Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé. Publishing in March, this gripping dark academia mystery is packed with twists, turns and dark secrets making it utterly impossible to put down. Alongside being a propulsive read, it is also a thought-provoking look at the imbalance of power around sexual assault, and the importance

of community and speaking up. Plus, there is more coming from Faridah in June, with enemies-to-lovers Muslim romcom **Four Eids and a Funeral**, written in partnership with fellow prize-winning YA author, Adiba Jaigirdar. Both books are sure to top the charts next year! *Rebecca Hill, Fiction Editorial Director*

Walker Books

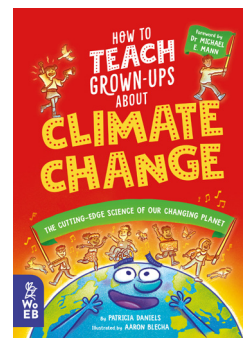
For Walker Books in 2024, Patrick Ness's middle grade debut **Chronicles of a Lizard Nobody** stands in a league of its own. Patrick is simply the most dazzling writer of his generation, and these fresh adventure stories about a mismatched group of animals attending school together show his great skill. Illustrated with humour and style by Tim Miller, these are school stories as only Patrick could write them, full of the terror and humour of being forced to spend your life with others whose only bond with you is that you are the same age and live nearby. Intensely funny and brilliantly imagined.

Walker Studio, our flagship list of art-led crossover books, has two incredibly special books in 2024. **In London – A History** award-winning illustrator Laura Carlin delves into London's rich history and culture, celebrating one of the world's greatest cities, with her spellbinding artwork, paired with poems and historical accounts. My other favourite is **Ukraine – Remember Also Me**, a unique collection of personal testimony of Ukrainians collected during the year after the Russian invasion, by award-winning artist George Butler as he drew their portraits. From civilians in occupied cities to soldiers on the front line, this is a powerful testament to the resilience and pride of the people of Ukraine. *Denise Johnstone-Burt, Publishing Director*

What On Earth Books

How to Teach Grown-ups About Climate Change

(March), written by Patricia Daniels, illustrated by Aaron Blecha, is a unique, positive book for 2024. Children are the ones leading the way in conversations about our planet, and this book equips them with the cutting-edge science they need to educate the older generations! The writing is both authoritative and witty, and we have a stellar expert consultant in climate scientist Dr Michael E. Mann. Readers will discover how to counter every argument a grown-up might make who shows signs of inaction, despair or denial – and at the end there is a quiz to check they have been paying attention! *Natalie Bellos, Publisher*



Zuntold

Miriam Halahmy, twice nominated and once longlisted for the **Carnegie Medal**, has an astonishing gift of narrating the experience of young people across boundaries of time, culture, and class. Illuminated in uncluttered, beautiful character driven storytelling, **The Brontë Girl** (March), brings the Brontës alive for a new generation of readers. In a world of increasing inequality and global attacks on women's rights, we believe this is a novel for our time. Zuntold currently publishes around four books a year and we focus on stories that inspire and support young people's hopes for a better life. *Elaine Bousfield Founder & Director*



Happy New 2024

This time last year we were faced with war in Europe and a cost of living crisis. Not much seems to have improved for 2024 but are there reasons to be cheerful looking ahead? **Books for Keeps** asked those in the know for their plans and predictions for this new year.

Author and campaigner, Frank Cottrell Boyce

I can tell you what I'll be talking about in 2024 – making sure that ALL children have a choice when it comes to reading. I'm haunted by the story that Cressida Cowell told me about a little girl she met who loved reading but was in fact reading the same book over and over again because she had no access to more books. We surely all know by now the enormous benefits of reading for pleasure in terms of educational achievements and in terms of helping build the apparatus of happiness in a child. But if a child is going to enjoy reading the child must be able to choose the right book for them. There is no book – not even one of my books – that will please every child. Children must be given the opportunity to browse, pick, cast aside and pick up. That means more books in schools but it also means more coverage. Over the last few years it's been cheering to see publishers begin to seek out new and more diverse voices. But publishing them is only half the story. People have to know about them. So a bigger, louder more engaged national conversation about Children's books please.

Dawn Woods, Member Development Librarian, SLA

Listening to the news for the past year has been gloomy. Conflict in Europe and the Middle East and the cost of living have hit families hard. Both these factors have been reflected in books published this year and I see this continuing. Children need books which help them cope with the reasons and feelings of people forced out of their homeland and to (try to) understand why conflict happens. Many books do not necessarily mention specific places, helping children take what they need from the story and adapt it to their circumstances. Books depicting living on the breadline reflect the lives of many children and call for understanding for children who cannot go on the school trip or cannot afford new clothes for every party. Among others Tom Percival has a new Middle Grade title to be published next year, sensitively exploring poverty in **The Wrong Shoes**.

To counterbalance this gloom, fantasy titles allow the imagination to soar and there have been an abundance of fantasy titles, continuing into next year. Abi Elphinstone is a master and with **Ember Spark and the Thunder of Dragons** her new fantasy, adventure series starts. Hopefully children can use books to take themselves away from the reality of the world adults have created.

Pam Dix, Chair, Ibbey UK

During 2024 **IBBY UK** will be working on the selection of books to nominate for the **2025 IBBY Outstanding Books for Young People with Disabilities**. We hope to find a similar rich and diverse selection as we had for the 2023 collection. We are also looking forward to more in-person events including our annual conference in November which will look at environmental themes.

I hope 2024 will see non-fiction publishing continue to flourish and be radical and challenging, both in content and style. What an exciting time it must be to be writing or working in children's non-fiction when there is a sense of an explosion of new subjects to explore. New ways of looking at the past, finding the voices of those previous erased from history, looking at well-known topics from different perspectives, all of these give scope for great creativity. And this will certainly lead to new readers, excited to engage with the past in ways that are more meaningful for them. There are new publishers on the scene and exciting imprints like Kumusha at Harper Collins.

One of the most exciting books I read last year was Shelina Janmohamed's **Story of Now: Let's talk about the British Empire** (Welbeck Children's Books). This is aimed at the 10 plus age group, but I found I learned so much that was new to me even though I have read widely on this subject. How great it would be to have a fully illustrated version. It deserves it and it is so good to see that illustrated non-fiction is becoming more widely accepted across the age ranges. Janmohamed writes in a style which is personal and interrogative, and I suspect we may see more of this too.

I have also been thrilled to see writers like Satnam Sanghera and David Olusoga producing children's versions of their books. These are writers who talk about their archival research making it attractive and more accessible.

I always look for translated titles and I am really pleased that this year there were more translated non-fiction books. I hope this will continue as some publishers, like Thames & Hudson, seem to have a commitment to publishing one or two titles a year.

Barbara Hayes Executive Director and Chief Executive, ALCS

At **ALCS** we care deeply about literacy and its ability to improve lives. In 2024, we would love to see UK libraries flourish. Firstly, by ensuring more children have access. Libraries play a vital role in supporting literacy, encouraging curiosity and providing a safe and quiet space to learn and develop. These invaluable spaces should be available to children equally across the UK; however, research has found that 1 in 7 primary schools in England do not have a library.

That's why we have pledged our support to the **Primary School Library Alliance**, which aims to transform 1,000 primary school libraries by 2025, giving them the books, staff training and support they need. It looks like 2024 will be an election year, and whoever is in government, we will call on them to match the private funding of programme, which would enable the scheme to reach more schools and help boost literacy and learning, both of which were badly affected by the pandemic.

We also want to see funding increased for the vital **Public Lending Right (PLR)** scheme. **PLR** compensates authors when their books are loaned for libraries, providing a much-needed source of income while allowing their works to be freely accessed.

Increasing **PLR** funding would help sustain those writers whose works aren't bestsellers but populate library shelves up and down the country. This is vitally important for ensuring new generations remain exposed to a wide range of books. Libraries are a vital resource for families and the wider public and we really hope the coming year will see them thrive!

Miranda McKearney, founder of EmpathyLab

Right now, it can be hard to feel hopeful, but from the standpoint of my involvement with **EmpathyLab**, I have three reasons to feel optimistic about 2024.

1. In the face of a growing need, publishers are creating more and more books which help children deal with turbulent emotions and troubling world issues. The teachers we work with say these are a key tool in supporting children with anxiety, and building the social and emotional life skills which so many were denied the chance to develop during the pandemic.
2. Key education bodies including the **Education Endowment Foundation** and **Department for Education** are recognising



literature's role in equipping children with life skills. The Department's recent Reading Framework highlights how stories help children learn about lives different from their own: *'this begins to break down a sense of otherness that often leads to division and prejudice.'*

3. **EmpathyLab** is working with a range of book, education and psychology bodies on a book-driven empathy movement, and this is really gaining momentum. 47 children's publishers are part of an Empathy Builder scheme to develop Empathy Day into a force for change – it's working! Last June saw a real increase in the number of children benefitting from the chance to learn more about empathy, and have creative literature-linked experiences. One teacher fed back: 'I believe developing empathy in children is one of the most important things we can for the future of the human race and our planet.'

Professor Teresa Cremin, Co-Director, Literacy and Social Justice Centre

In recent years, children have benefitted from a wider range of texts that reflect their diverse realities and that consider issues of contemporary relevance. For instance, we've seen an increasing number of books positively representing (dis)ability, linguistic diversity, gender equality and that are LGBTQ-inclusive, as well as books foregrounding matters such as poverty, climate change and the experience of being a refugee. When well-researched and underscored by quality writing, such books offer young people rich tools to think with. However, I think (and hope) that 2024 will also herald some less 'heavy weight' texts, and we'll see more adventure stories – both real world and fantastical – as well as poetry, joke books and graphic novels that offer young people a higher degree of humour and delight. These also offer rich tools to think with.

Children love to laugh, and take pleasure in comical texts of all kinds, in word play, nonsense and parody as well as in zany characters and ridiculous events that trigger laughter and a sense of the carnivalesque. Part of their enjoyment is in the sharing of these texts. This can be socially motivating and contribute to the strengthening of relationships, and even an enriched sense of wellbeing and self-esteem. So, my sense is both the profession and publishers will be talking more about both 'the funnies and the feelies', to quote Georgie Lax's Year Two class. In particular, teachers who are seeking to nurture volitional reading- that is reading for pleasure – may be seeking a better balance between the serious and the humorous as they listen to and learn from the desires and delights of their young readers.

Fiona Evans, Director of School Programmes National Literacy Trust

It's a new year and it's all change. At **National Literacy Trust** we often hear from our young people that they feel change is the only constant. Changing identities. Changing circumstances. Changing schools. Changing relationships. Growing up and moving on. And they feel keenly how this is mirrored in the world around them; a world shifting constantly around and beneath them. My prediction is that children and young people will continue to be seeking out both fiction and non-fiction books which explore climate change, the environment, social justice issues and identity. They will continue to demand stories from different perspectives and different lived experiences. But, perhaps we will also see an increasing appetite for fantasy and escapism, for time spent in worlds that are very different from our own, for time-travelling adventures and for characters with enviable powers. There are some great upcoming titles for all ages that will take the reader out of this world, many of which will also be available on audio. How brilliant to be able to plug in the earphones, drown out the noise of this world and slip into another...

Natasha Ryan, Education Manager, the Poetry Society

In the year ahead, I'm looking forward to new collections by lots of well-known and emerging poets, including Caroline Bird's **Ambush at Still Lake** and Isabel Galleymore's **Baby Schema** (both Carcanet), Charlotte Shevchenko's **Knight's Food for the Dead** (Penguin), Rachael Allen's **God Complex** (Faber) and the late Gboyega Odubango's **Adam** (also Faber), to name just a few. Several poets will release their debut novels, including Phoebe Stuckes (Sceptre) and Kaveh Akbar (Pan Macmillan).

The relationship between humans and the natural world looks like it will continue to be a key theme in both adults' and children's books alike. Exciting new children's books from Otter-Barry Books in 2024 will explore biodiversity themes, including Ken Wilson-Max's **Aqua-Boy** and Catherine Barr's **Wildlife Crossings**. Similarly, the list from Nine Arches Press will include the latest poetry collections from Caleb Parkin, Wendy Pratt and Tim Tim Cheng, all exploring, in different ways, the relationship between the body and natural landscapes. Young readers should keep a look out for **Spin!**, an anthology of poems by ten debut poets from diverse backgrounds, selected by Children's Laureate Joseph Coelho. And in August, beloved poet Valerie Bloom releases **The River's A Singer** (Macmillan), a selection of her best poems for readers aged 7+.



Authorgraph

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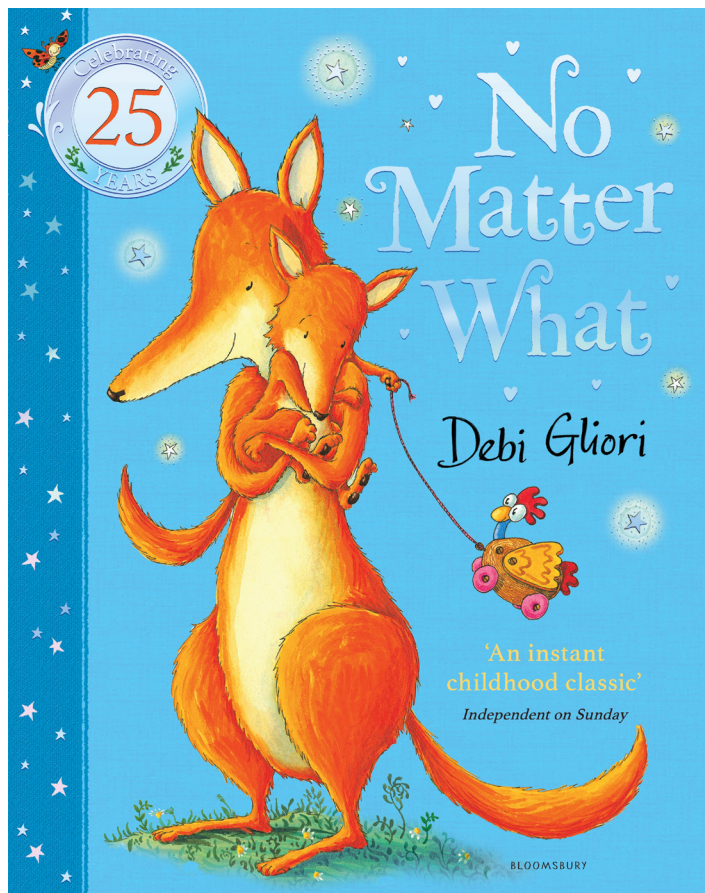
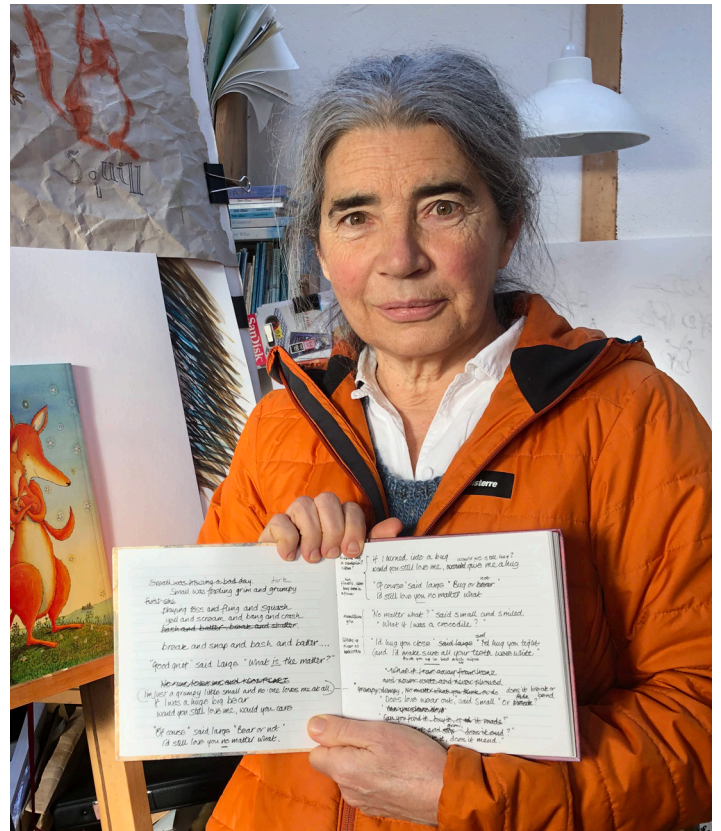
Debi Gliori
interviewed by
Lindsey Fraser

Conversation with Debi Gliori is always wide-ranging. Cooking, recipes, cycling, knitting, family, friends, environmental concerns, sea swimming, climate change, guinea pigs, the world of publishing – not necessarily in that order. Her boundless curiosity is both engaging and inspiring. She laughs a lot – her signature chuckle punctuates much of what she says. But she's also serious, well informed, and holds firm opinions. There's nothing half-hearted about Debi.

Which should come as no surprise to those of us familiar with her books.

Debi was already well published by the time Sarah Odedina, then Editorial Director at Bloomsbury, read the text for **No Matter What**. 'She instantly loved it. I didn't want to change a word, couldn't bear the idea of it being tweaked or pulled about. And she just got it, immediately. It made her cry.' The backstory to **No Matter What** is buried in a deeply unsettled period in Debi's life. 'I'd split with my husband, and my small daughter was broken, confused, angry, upset... I was reeling. It was my partner who held it together, who explained what was going on. He told me she was behaving as she was for very good reasons, her world had fallen apart, but also, because she wanted to know that I would always be there for her, she was testing me. And I had to get it together, do what needed to be done. I went off to my studio and wrote the story really quickly. And I knew at once that it was the real deal. It said everything I wanted to say, and everything I would love to have heard as a child of a broken family.'

Why foxes? 'I always knew the characters had to be foxes. Such maligned animals, really beautiful and I'm partial to orange.'

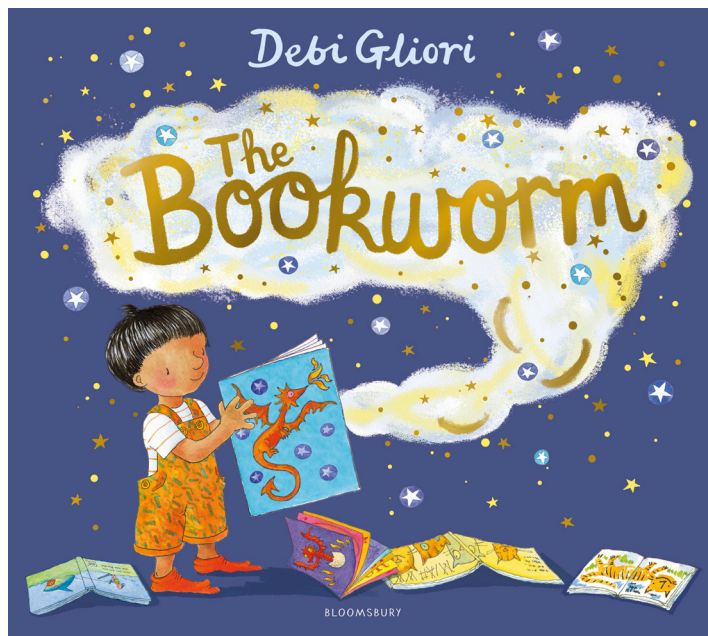


No Matter What, a global best-seller, now celebrates its 25th birthday. 'I think I knew it was going to be a success,' says Debi. 'My books need to satisfy me, first and foremost, but I also had confidence in that story. And I was right. Sarah (Odedina) was such a champion... She knew what I wanted to achieve, and she helped me achieve it. Gave me creative space, freedom, I don't remember any 'I love it, Debi, I really do, but...' moments.' This remark, delivered with a classic Gliori wince, leads to a canter down memory lane. 'Publishing has changed. A lot,' she says, smiling grimly.

Debi graduated from Edinburgh College of Art with the ambition of creating children's picture books. 'I knew it wouldn't be easy, that I'd have to support us with other stuff, commissions... We were told to take our portfolio to London – in those days that's where all the publishers lived – colour photocopies of your artwork – it wasn't cheap and I was *poor* – I was up and down on the train with my precious cargo, offering it up, hoping... Some publishers made you leave your work and hope for the best, hoping, dreaming you'd get the call, others let us meet editors, and art editors.'

Debi's first 'yes' came from Walker Books. 'I had a call from (editor) Caroline Royds saying my story had made her laugh out loud. I mean, *Walker Books*! I remember seeing Sebastian Walker walking among the editors' desks – God was in the room. He understood the value of words of encouragement. A contract was the dream, and I got that (**New Big Sister** was published in 1991), but it was the encouragement... from people for whom I had such respect... that was special.'

It was Amelia Edwards, legendary co-founder of Walker Books, who persuaded Debi to use watercolours. 'I was avoiding them because when they're on the paper there's nothing much you can change. But I've learned a lot – with the right paper, good quality paper...

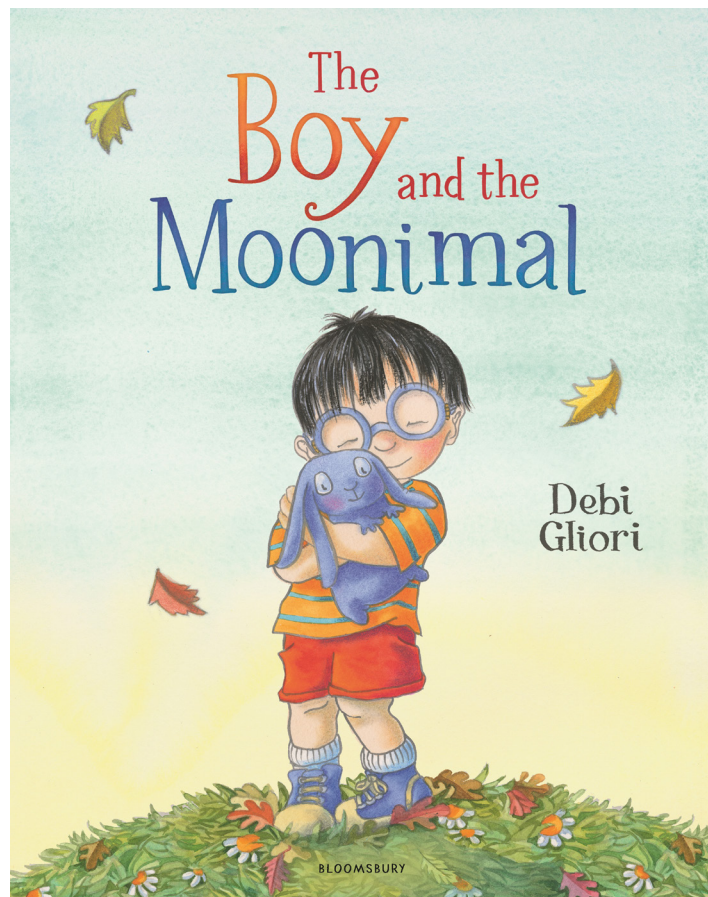


the gentle application of a stanley knife, burnishing the area with the back of a teaspoon, you can do it. Make lines disappear. Magic.' Debi found the paper of her dreams – Windsor and Newton Artist's Watercolour Paper – and when she discovered it was being discontinued, she bought all the remaining stock.

Debi's pencil roughs are extraordinary, packed with detail, jokes, kindnesses. 'I can make a rod for my own back. But times have changed, so I probably send less detailed roughs to my editors these days... detail is my thing, and although working with editors – when it works – is great, I don't really send out my roughs for debate.' She regales me with anecdotes about editorial relationships, 'tempestuous editorial relationships are rich with possibilities, they don't shut down your ideas, they build them up...' She recalls working with the late Pam Royds at Andre Deutsch on **A Lion at Bedtime**. 'That book was a joy to work on... so much detail... And Pam loved it.' But it wasn't entirely plain sailing. 'She baulked at a tiny detail – really tiny – showing minute mice hotwiring an electric blanket, but I stuck to my guns. I mean, really... We have huge responsibilities as creators of books for young children, but there's a health and safety mentality that I work hard to resist.'

Two of her more recent picture books reflect Debi's desire to push herself, and therefore her readers, into a more challenging narrative zone. 'It's not all bunnies in PJs...', she says. The inspiration for **A Cat Called Waverley** was a soldier, returning home having fought in war, to find his home had been demolished. 'It's about PTSD, really,' says Debi. 'And homelessness.' **The Boy and the Moonimal** is about a lost toy, tested to its limits before being returned to the boy – who has grown up. 'I'm proud of them both. I found a way to get myself out of the way, let the book take over... a kind of meditation... We have had moods, get ourselves into some very dark spaces, all by ourselves, and it's love that pulls us out again.' Both picture books suffered because of the pandemic. 'Publishing into those dead periods was fairly disastrous, certainly for me... it's been a difficult period for lots of us. I put the same level of energy, passion, focus, into all my books and it can be crushing. If readers can't find the books, those stories vanish. And they're not given long to make their mark.'

What next? 'The good folk at Bloomsbury often asked if I had another **No Matter What** in me. I couldn't see a sequel... It's not that I didn't want to do it – I *couldn't* do it.' However, it was while out running – 'I ran to stay sane' – during the pandemic that the refrain for a new story came. 'Originally, in the pandemic panic and fear early days, I thought I was writing about what ifs. 'What if the sky falls down?' kind of cataclysmic narrative thread. But as time went on and in all my attempts to write towards that direction, I realised that it was the personal internal 'what ifs?' Maybe it was the rhythm of running, the



weird silence of the world at that time, maybe it was because my dad had just died, maybe it was my way of self-soothing... it was like walking on air, it felt scary but wonderful. Many rewrites later – and the response from my editor was fast.'

The finished artwork is well underway and Debi is delighted with it.

'I'm two decades older, if not wiser, and I know stuff now that I didn't know when I wrote **No Matter What**. I'm carrying baggage... not in a bad way. I know what a story like this can do because I have seen it happen with **No Matter What**. The letters I've been sent... it's spoken to people in ways I couldn't possibly have imagined... felt right for so many situations – joyful and sad. So many gay weddings! I even used it to bribe my way onto an overbooked last flight to Edinburgh on my way back from a book festival.' Debi laughs and shakes her head. 'The reach of a book for children – it blows my mind. They influence small people, put them to bed, tuck them up ...'

Debi is loving working on the new book. 'I'm in seventh heaven, not rushing...' Publication date is yet to be set, but for now there are so many books – in addition to **No Matter What** – by Debi Gliori to explore.

Books mentioned:

No Matter What 25th Anniversary Edition,

Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1526665157, £7.99 pbk

The Boy and the Moonimal, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1408892916, £11.99 hbk

A Cat Called Waverley, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1913074067, £8.99 pbk



Lindsey Fraser is a partner in **Fraser Ross Associates**, a literary agency she co-founded after working for **Scottish Book Trust** for many years.

Windows into Illustration: Steve Small



Steve Small was shortlisted for the **Klaus Flugge Prize** for most exciting newcomer to picture book illustration for his book **I'm Sticking with You**, written by Smriti Halls and published in 2020. Since then he has written and illustrated **The Duck Who Didn't Like Water**, **Wellington's Big Day Out**, and now **Brave Little Bear**. All are full of pace and movement, characters perfectly defined, with a wealth of deadpan humour to enjoy. Here he talks about the creative process that produced his new book **Brave Little Bear**.

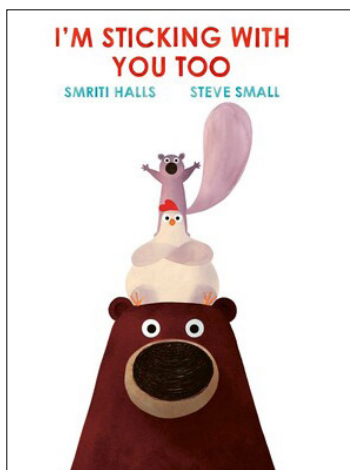
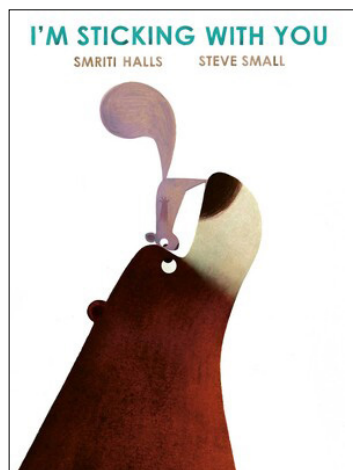
Brave Little Bear is a simple story about how a small bear family faces change. Arlo and Eva are siblings who, only knowing the safety of their winter den and their immediate surroundings, leave their home with their mother to travel across the mountain to a lowland valley for the approaching Spring. Each bear faces the prospect of change, and the story focuses on Arlo who is the most fearful of change and the journey ahead.

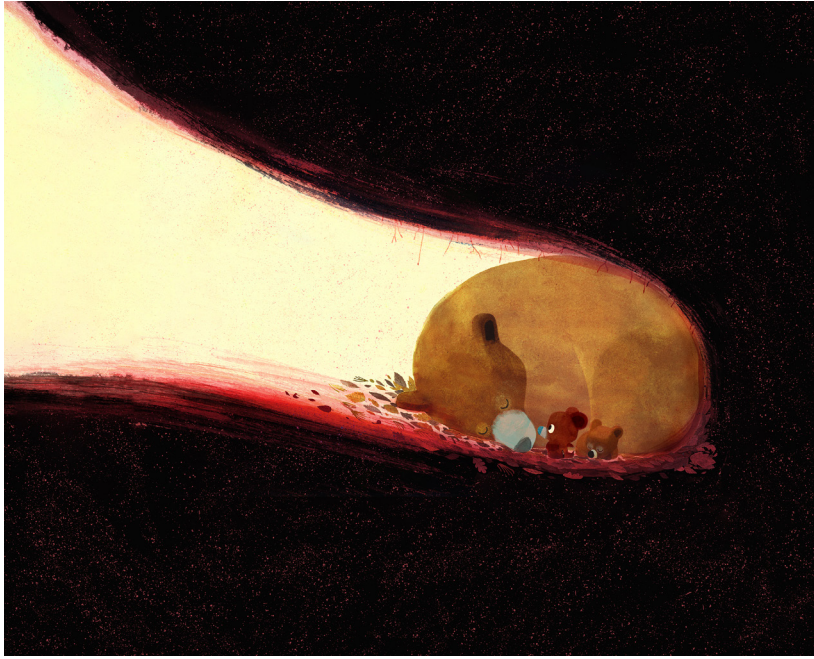
After I had written the text of **Brave Little Bear**, I spent a while drawing the characters and thinking more closely about the tone of the illustrations.

Though I favoured a naturalistic illustration style for this book, I still prefer to make simple images that set out to capture emotional qualities of the story rather than the detail. I particularly wanted the first image in the story to communicate how Arlo loved being curled up with his Mum and sister in his warm and familiar den. I knew it had to be a dark image because the rest of the book takes place in the outdoors where everything is in daylight and in the open, and not hidden from view. It is this lack of barriers between himself and 'new' things that makes Arlo feel afraid.

I work in watercolour, and after a final pencil sketch, I paint all the elements of the illustration separately on layers of paper which I scan into my computer and compose digitally. It gives me all the accidents of paint and real mark-making that I enjoy and allows me to colour and fine tune the composition freely whilst meeting my deadlines.

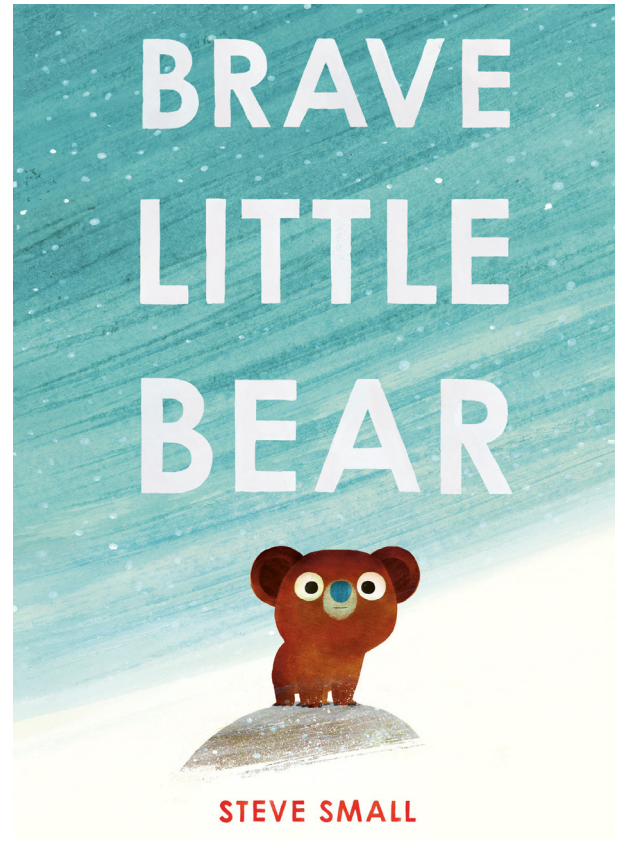
After a warm-up watercolour sketch, I went straight into painting, and rather than creating a dimensional space for the den, I made several watercolour washes that layered in the rocks and earth in an abstract manner, communicating the feeling of being enclosed, rather than painting the den itself. I approached the bears more traditionally. Since it was the first time the reader would see the three bears, I needed to make sure they were easily discernible.





Whenever you work in this kind of abstract way, it leaves more room for interpretation. I showed the final illustration to someone, and they said it felt like bears sleeping in a meteor soaring through the night sky. I hadn't expected that reading but they were right. Seen in a certain way, it did look like that, and the more I thought about it, the more I enjoyed the metaphor it offered for Arlo's emotional experience: encased in rock, warm, and safe, soaring past each new experience, uninterrupted.

I hope it also looks like three bears in a den.



Brave Little Bear is published by Simon and Schuster, 978-1471192418

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Beyond the Secret Garden: The Power of Exhibitions

In the latest in our long-running **Beyond the Secret Garden** series, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** explore exhibitions of children's books.

In the late 1990s, the **British Library** ran an exhibition of children's books (it was called **Children's Books at the British Library**). The poster for the exhibition featured a picture from Janet and Allan Ahlberg's **Jolly Pocket Postman** (1995) of a giant Alice towering over a forest containing tiny figures from L. Frank Baum's **The Wizard of Oz** (1900) while the cow jumped over the moon. The Ahlbergs' postmodern pastiche was a perfect advertisement for 1990s Cool Britannia: classic children's literature with the British figure (Alice) writ large, yet with all the Victorian era politics stripped away.

This includes the uncomfortable racial politics of classic children's literature; all the human figures on the poster are white (and as we have discussed in other columns, classic children's literature is far from an all-white world). Just as you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, you can't judge an exhibition just by its poster—but posters, like covers, are a choice about what will appeal to viewers and make them enter the space inside the book or exhibition. Authors and characters of colour have rarely been the focus of children's book exhibitions in Britain. But recently, that has begun to change.

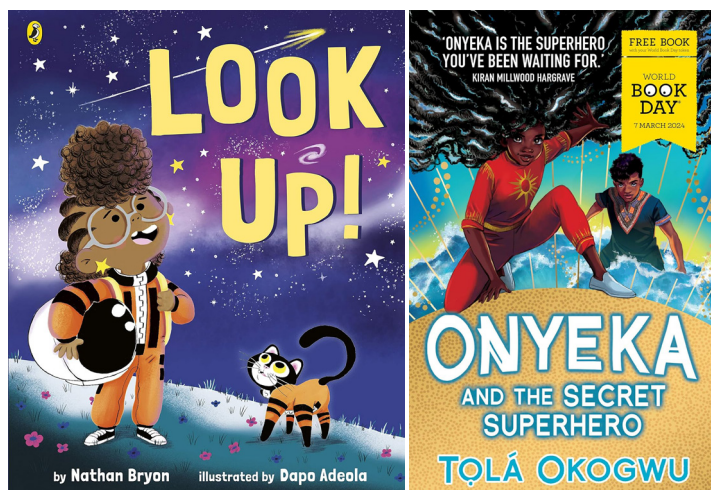
In 2022, **Listen to this story! An exhibition about children's books and Black Britain** was produced in Newcastle, as we wrote about last year. The exhibition focused on community, identity and voice in Black British book creation, and the poster featured an illustration from Errol Lloyd, the pioneering Black children's book author-illustrator who also played a critical role in promoting and supporting Black art in Britain. The poster picture, of two schoolgirls reading, was a deliberate choice to celebrate both Black childhood and reading in a single image. In 2023, London caught up with the north by producing two significant exhibitions featuring Black British children's books: Stratford's **Discover Story Centre** produced **The Box Rocket** exhibition based on Dapo Adeola and Nathan Bryon's popular Black British character, Rocket. The window of the Discover Story Centre in Stratford, east London, was covered by a larger than life-size illustration of Rocket under the exhibition title, with the tagline 'An interactive, intergalactic exhibition'. This was not an exhibition about **Look Up!** (2020), which won the **Waterstone's Book Prize** and first featured the character of Rocket, but a new narrative experience designed by Adeola and Tolá Okogwu (whose **Onyeka and the Secret Superhero** is a forthcoming **World Book Day** book). While reading and words play a critical role in the experience, the focus is on children and

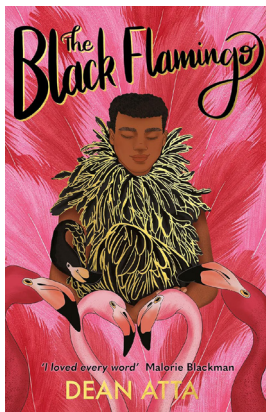
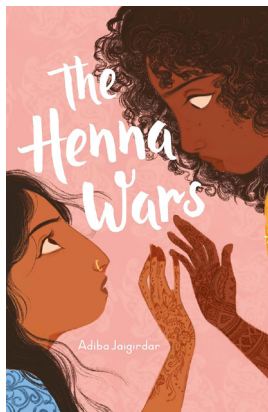
creativity. This is typical for the museum, which (according to their website) is designed to be 'a place where children and their families can enjoy playing, learning and making up stories together'. But the fact that this exhibition (which will continue through January 2024) foregrounds a Black character who has been an inspiration for many young readers (the number of 'Rocket' costumes appearing on social media for World Book Day has been increasing every year) suggests that the definition of Britishness in children's literature is changing to become more reflective of society, and that this can be seen across the entire cultural sector.

In autumn of 2023, the **British Library** opened two exhibitions which exemplify these changes, as well as the limits of those changes. The first, a ticketed exhibition on **Fantasy: Realms of Imagination**, was advertised through an original poster by Ukrainian-born artist Sveta Dorosheva. The poster, a complex collage of several fantasy characters from around the world (although mostly British and European sources, including **Alice in Wonderland**, the **Chronicles of Narnia**, and **Lord of the Rings**), was designed to recall 'Golden Age storybook artists such as Arthur Rackham, Edmund Dulac and Kay Nielsen, alongside her love of medieval manuscripts' ([illustrationx.com](https://www.illustrationx.com)). However, it does include books by and about people of colour, notably Hayao Miyazaki's Princess Mononoke and No-Face from **Spirited Away**. The exhibition itself is even more inclusive; Andrew Salkey's and James Berry's versions of Anansi stories feature; also drafts of Ursula LeGuin's **Wizard of Earthsea** (1968) which features a main protagonist of colour; as well as epics, legends and fairy tales from around the world. The exhibition is not focused on children's fantasy, but those children who are interested in fantasy worlds would find a few reflective mirrors into our own world there.

At the end of November, the **British Library** opened its first exhibition dedicated to a children's author of colour, Malorie Blackman. The poster for this exhibition features Blackman's photo from the hardback cover of her biography, **Just Sayin'** (2022), and is entitled **Malorie Blackman: The Power of Stories**. Curated by Katie Adams, Sandra A Agard, Debbie Cox and Nicole-Rachelle Moore, this is the first exhibition at the British Library dedicated to the work of a single living author. However, the British Library is careful not to represent Blackman as an isolated case of Black success.

As we enter the exhibition we see the work of current Black British illustrator Dapo Adeola, who worked with Blackman on **We're Going to Find the Monster!** (2021). The exhibition is organized into four sections. In the first, 'Representation', we see the work of Black authors, illustrators working in Britain who came before Blackman, including Beryl Gilroy (**New People at Twenty Four**), Errol Lloyd (**Nini at Carnival**), John Agard (**Letters for Lettie**), Grace Nichols (**Leslyn in London**), Petronella Breinburg (**Brinsly's Dream**), Andrew Salkey and Buchi Emecheta and Thomas – later Tam – Joseph (**Titch The Cat**). Black independent publishers John La Rose and Sarah White (New Beacon Books), Eric and Jessica Huntley (Bogle-L'Ouverture), and Margaret Busby (Allison and Busby) are also acknowledged in this section. Relevant to regular readers of this column, this section also includes James Berry's 1966 typescript for a BBC Radio programme on the negative and racist representation of Black people in children's literature. We are told that the programme was rejected by the producers, who felt that Berry had 'exaggerated the issue'.





In the section entitled 'Claiming A Voice', we learn of Blackman's persistence and see one of the 82 rejection letters she received. We see how her power as a storyteller grew through television adaptations of **Whizziwig**, and **Pig Heart Boy**, the latter earning her a BAFTA. We are told how Blackman often writes from personal experience as in the case of **Hacker** (1992), (drawing on her career as a computer programmer), and **Forbidden Game** (1999) which explores sickle cell disease, with which Malorie was diagnosed at nineteen.

The third section is dedicated to the phenomenon that is **Noughts and Crosses**, Blackman's speculative fiction series where racial hierarchies are inverted to great effect. Malorie's initial story, inspired in part by the MacPherson report into the failure of the Metropolitan Police to properly investigate the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence, grew to a body of work consisting of six novels, three novellas, two plays and a BBC television series. A video shows actor and author Paterson Joseph speaking of the length of time it took for the **Noughts and Crosses** series to be filmed, which he suggests, shows how Malorie was ahead of her time.

The final section, 'Legacies', looks at the impact of Malorie's publishing career and includes shelves with books from 'contemporary writers of colour'. We are told of Malorie's 2022 **PEB Pinter Prize**. A quote from Malorie about her time as Children's Laureate shows her acute awareness of the power of news stories and broader racist discourses. She says,

'I knew if I mucked up, it wouldn't be "Malorie Blackman stuffs up!" It would be "Black author and first Black Children's Laureate stuffs up!" Being Black in the UK in a public-facing role means you end up representing – whether you want to or not.'

Bookshelves in this section show books from the next generation of writers of colour. A display case holds copies of Dean Atta's **The Black Flamingo**, Adiba Jaigirdar's **The Henna Wars**, Danielle Jawando's **When Our Worlds Collided** and Jade LB's **Keisha the Sket**. A poster of Karen's list of '50 Books to Diversify Your Classroom Library,' produced by the **Times Educational Supplement** to accompany an article written by Darren in 2016, is also featured in this section. And the link to education is made again with information about Lavinya Stennett's project 'The Black Curriculum'.

Exploring The Power of Stories made us reflect on how stories and power have a dynamic relationship. Historically, it is those with proximity to establishment power who have been best positioned to platform, spotlight, and exhibit stories. Nevertheless, stories written from more marginal positions can, with great talent and huge effort, sometimes find their way in. In so doing they can shift perspectives and open doors for those who follow. Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé, author of **Ace of Spades** is quoted in the exhibition as saying, 'Reading Malorie's work was the first time I did not feel like a side character. I had always loved writing, but before this point, I couldn't imagine being something that I could do as a living. My whole world shifted from this newfound knowledge: the existence of Malorie Blackman.' It is to the curators' great credit that Malorie Blackman is presented as both as an individual writer of exceptional talent and as a key figure in what can be viewed as a broader tradition of Black and racially minoritised writers working in Britain.

Books mentioned:

- Look Up!** Nathan Bryon and Dapo Adeola, Puffin, 978-0241345849, £7.99 pbk
- Onyeka and the Secret Superhero**, Tolá Okogwu, Simon and Schuster, 978-1398528697, £1 World Book Day Books
- Pig-Heart Boy**, Malorie Blackman, Corgi Children's Books, 978-0552555616, £7.99 pbk
- Whizziwig**, Malorie Blackman, Yearling, 978-0440866572, £7.99 pbk
- Noughts and Crosses**, Malorie Blackman, Penguin, 978-0141378640, £8.99 pbk
- Hacker**, Malorie Blackman, Corgi Children's Books, 978-0552551649, £7.99 pbk
- Forbidden Game**, Malorie Blackman, Puffin O/P
- Just Sayin': My Life in Words** (2022), Malorie Blackman, Merky Books, 978-1529118698, £10.99 pbk
- We're Going To Find the Monster!**, Malorie Blackman and Dapo Adeola, Puffin, 978-0241401309, £7.99 pbk
- Earthsea**, Ursula LeGuin, Penguin, 978-0241956878, £14.99 pbk
- New People at Twenty Four**, Beryl Gilroy O/P
- Nini at Carnival**, Errol Lloyd, Red Fox, O/P
- Letters for Lettie**, John Agard, O/P
- Leslyn in London**, Grace Nichols O/P
- Brinsly's Dream**, Petronella Breinburg O/P
- Titch The Cat**, Buchi Emecheta and Thomas Joseph O/P
- The Black Flamingo**, Dean Atta, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444948608, £8.99 pbk
- The Henna Wars**, Adiba Jaigirdar, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444962208, £7.99 pbk
- When Our Worlds Collided**, Danielle Jawando, Simon and Schuster, 978-1471178795, £8.99 pbk
- Keisha the Sket**, Jade LB, Merky Books, 978-1529118926, £9.99 pbk



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



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

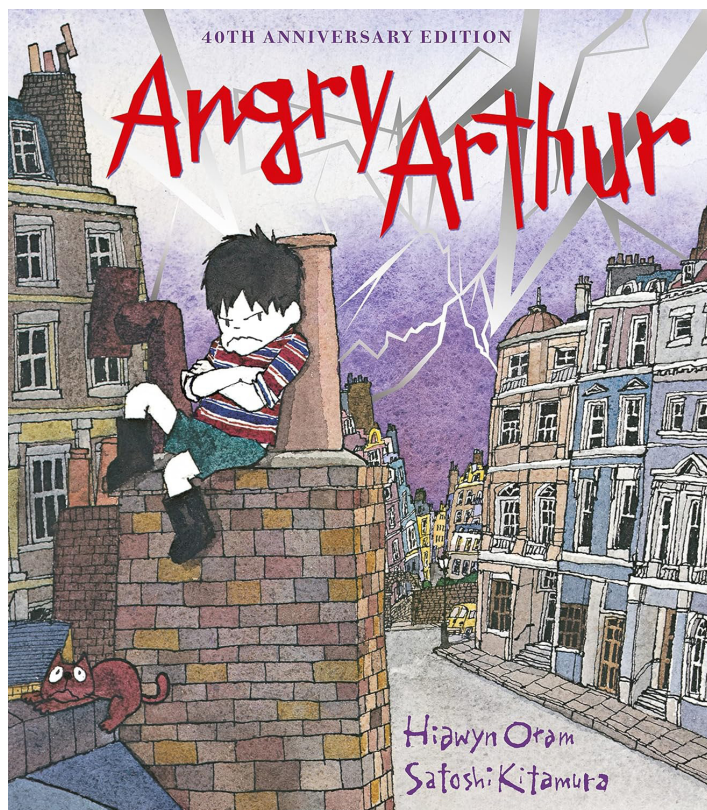
Catching up with Satoshi Kitamura

Satoshi Kitamura's work is notable for its distinctive, whimsical line-work, warm humour and a charming ability to visualise the depth, scale and turbulence of children's emotional and creative range and capacities. It covers an impressive range of genres and has embraced numerous influences and approaches. **Jake Hope** caught up with **Satoshi** on a recent visit to the UK.

Satoshi's early reading involved a fascination with comics. 'There were great comics, which helped to pave the way for modern comics. You would see the stories every week and they had strong storytellers and artists. I often copied the characters and that helped me develop as well as influencing me.'

Contemplating his childhood, Satoshi describes a burgeoning interest in art. 'I've drawn all the time, ever since I was three or four. My older brother was very good at it. He drew and I copied him. I drew a lot in school. We never learnt art; we just did doodles.'

Practising his art in this way helped pave the road to a career in illustration. 'I started illustrating commercially when I was nineteen. I didn't mean to be an illustrator. I took a job in advertising which involved illustrations for magazines. I teamed up with a designer and we did a lot of work together.' Satoshi feels working in commercial illustration helped hone his technique. It also equipped him with an awareness for how to persuade potential clients. 'There's a psychological game to it. What I did when I first sent my ideas to publishers was that I had a very short story and I put the story and drawing onto a one-page piece of paper. This meant it was very easy to present and to get a sense of who was interested. With picture books you have to keep your readers interested and engaged in a way that's similar to commercial illustration.'

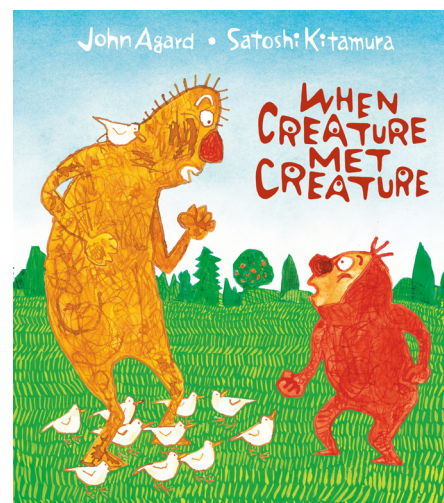
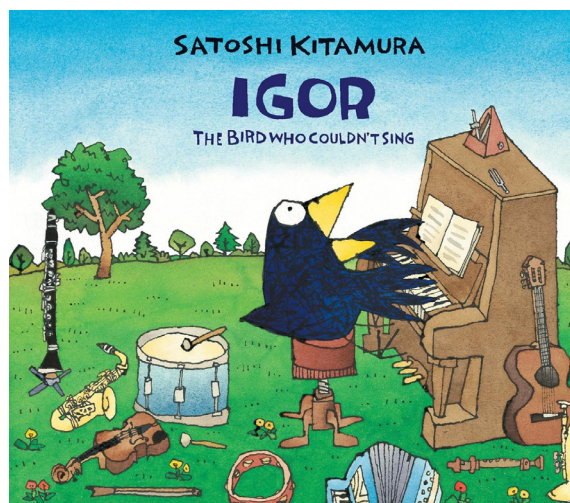
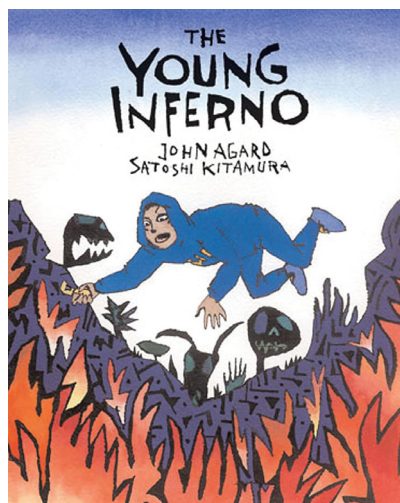


Aged twenty-three and wanting to learn English, Satoshi came to England. Whilst here he had an idea for a picture book. 'I made a small dummy which I sent to publishers. It got good responses.' Despite this, the book was not published. Satoshi described a reticence that existed in taking a punt on new illustrators at the time. A change came, however, when Satoshi met with Klaus Flugge, the founder of Andersen Press.

'Klaus gave me a text by Hiawyn Oram.' This was **Angry Arthur**. 'I spent three or four months working with the text, trying to visualise it. Working with Hiawyn, I learnt such a lot about how to write texts and how to tell stories through pictures.'

2022 saw **Angry Arthur** celebrate its fortieth anniversary. It's a book whose story and themes endure, a fact Satoshi attributes to its uniqueness and ability to help children to open up about their emotions. 'Hiawyn writes so concisely and so profoundly.' The book won the **Mother Goose Award**, creating new opportunities for Satoshi. The book was published in new territories and led to new commissions both with Hiawyn Oram and also with Kestrel Books who invited Satoshi to illustrate a collection of Roger McGough's poetry.

Since then, Satoshi has illustrated across a wide range of forms which have included picture books, poetry, non-fiction and even signage for museums. Picture books are his favourite form, but illustrating poetry requires an approach that Satoshi feels he learns from every time. 'Reading poems make me visualise images. Often these are different to those I usually illustrate and I have to find a way to bring these to being.'



Many of the poems Satoshi has illustrated have been by John Agard. He recently illustrated a picture book text for John, **When Creature Meets Creature**. The book is a celebration of verbal and non-verbal communication. Satoshi describes some of the challenges of working on the book. 'At first, I saw Creature as more of an animal, but then I felt it should be somewhere between being a human and an animal. I also had to try to visualise the emotional side. It was translated into Japanese by me and won a prize there. It was a difficult book to translate because of the rhymes.'

When Creature Meets Creature is one of a number of projects Satoshi and John have worked on together. One of these was **The Young Inferno**. An ambitious urban retelling of Dante's **Divine Comedy**. 'It was a really interesting project. It was John's interpretation of Dante. I really enjoyed it. I drew it very freely. I like the way John seems to be able to think of anything and everything and is very spontaneous.'

We discuss the differences between when Satoshi is working on his own text or someone else's. 'When I'm working on my own, if I have an idea, I draw or write about it in my sketchbook. Sometimes it's the fragment of an idea, sometimes it erupts into something bigger. It can be a slow process as it takes a long time to develop a fully-fleshed story. One idea doesn't make a story, it often takes two or three. Looking through old sketchbooks, I sometimes see an idea I had years ago and it accumulates to become a story. All of this happens internally which makes it hard to describe. Once the idea is in place you have to do a lot to find the right setting and characters that match the story. As you work and work upon it, the text gradually becomes smaller and shorter and eventually gets to a stage where it can't get any shorter without becoming meaningless. That's when the story is done and the pictures have to be finished.'

Alongside his illustration, Satoshi also works as an artist and sculptor. 'If I had more time, I would like to do more exhibitions. I like doing sculptures. I enjoy working with timber. This year, in the summer I had an exhibition in Kyoto of paintings and small sculptures. Creating picture books is a full-time job. It doesn't leave enough time to do other things as much as I would like.'

One of these other things that Satoshi has enjoyed is working on graphic stories for adults. 'There's a literature magazine in Japan called **Monkey**, which features lots of Japanese short stories. I have illustrated for **Monkey** for many years and have done well over a hundred pages. They are hoping to publish some of these in America. I would like to do more of graphic stories that are suitable for any age.'

Satoshi's next book is **School for Puppies**, due out in 2024. 'It's a charming book about a girl who goes to school and whose puppy has to wait for the girl to return home. He sees a group of other puppies and chases them, finding his way into a school for puppies.' The book will publish with **Andersen Press**.

Satoshi is also working on another book with **Scallywag Press** about music. It's a return to a theme that recurs through his work and that influenced **The Carnival of Animals** and **Igor, the Bird who couldn't Sing**. He also has possible plans for another non-fiction title. Satoshi's creativity and enthusiasm for his art and his ability to find expression for the influences and emotions around him is infectious inspiring, our conversation concludes far too soon!

Books mentioned:

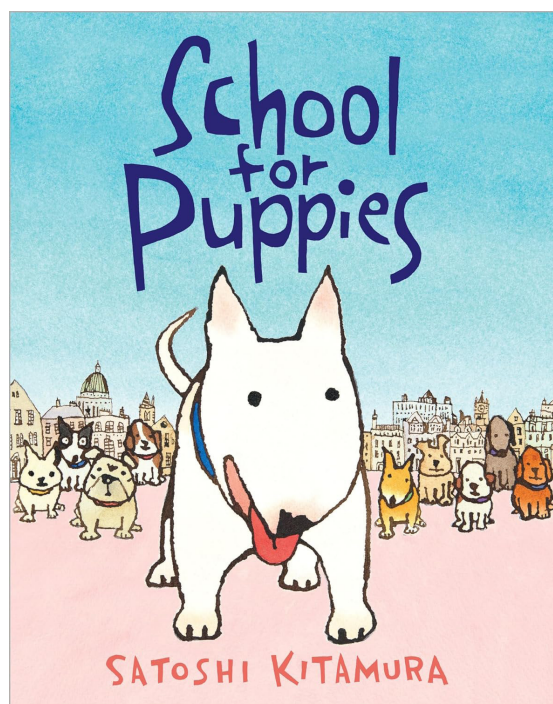
Angry Arthur, Hiawyn Oram, illus Satoshi Kitamura, Andersen Press, 978-1842707746, £6.99 pbk

When Creature Met Creature, John Agard, illus Satoshi Kitamura, Scallywag Press, 978-1912650507, £12.99 hbk

The Young Inferno, John Agard, illus Satoshi Kitamura, Frances Lincoln, 978-1845077693, £12.99 hbk

Igor, the Bird Who Couldn't Sing, Satoshi Kitamura, Andersen Press, 978-1842705223, £8.99 pbk

School for Puppies, Satoshi Kitamura, Andersen Press, 978-1839133442, £12.99 hbk



Jake Hope is a reading development and children's book consultant, and chair of the working party for YOTO Carnegies Working Party.

Happy 10th birthday, **David Fickling Books**



Liz Cross, managing and publishing director of **David Fickling Books** looks back over the ten years since its formation, and highlights what makes the company so successful.

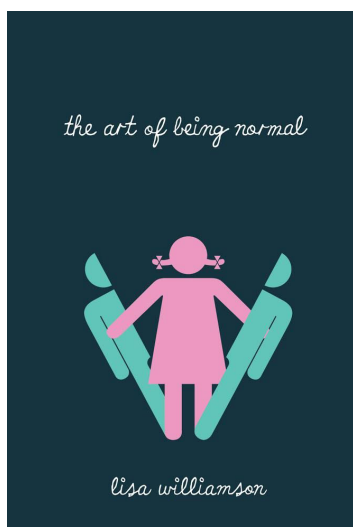
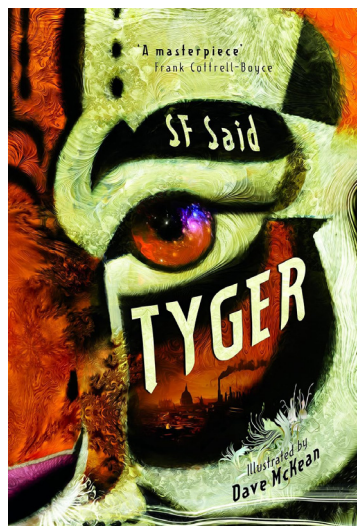


Ten years ago David Fickling had a dream – to build a truly independent publishing company that was rooted in editorial excellence, supporting its authors and illustrators for the long term, and trusting the instincts of its team to find and nurture the very best creators, the very best stories. Ten years on, that dream is a wonderful reality, and as we celebrate DFB's tenth anniversary it's a great opportunity to look back at some of the wonderful books we've published in that time, and how we've tried to remain true to that central ethos of publishing from the heart and backing the things we believe in.

Looking at our list, it's immediately apparent what a central role is played by the relationship between DFB and the **Phoenix** comic. These two companies enjoy a wonderful, symbiotic relationship, which has resulted in an incredible range of comic book and graphic novel publishing – not least the all-conquering **Bunny vs Monkey** series. DFB published the first **BvM** book on launch in 2014, drawing together six months of strips from the **Phoenix**. The books weren't an instant success – they had a modest, mainly online, sale to begin with – but the belief in **BvM**, and in creator Jamie Smart, from the teams at both the **Phoenix** and DFB never wavered, and together they kept at it, keeping the same wonderful content but working with the book trade to develop just the right publishing format and programme to relaunch and hit the market square on – with glorious results. It's very easy in publishing to think that a book only has one chance to make its mark, and that if it doesn't find its audience right away then it's just too bad – but the success of **BvM** in its reissued form is a real counterexample to that, a rare instance of a series that's been boosted to bestseller status through a new format and a renewed campaign. It's a great case study in sticking with what you believe in.

Sticking with what you believe in can take other forms, too. Sometimes it means standing alongside an author and giving them the time they need to write the very best book they can. In 2022 we published **Tyger** by SF Said – a book that was nine years in the writing. (When SF sometimes mentions, at events, how many drafts he went through, I've seen other authors and editors in the audience turn positively pale...) Throughout the process, both SF and the DFB team were totally focussed on ending up with the very best book possible – from the wonderful text itself, to the astonishing artwork from Dave McKean, to the care and attention to detail in all aspects of production. **Tyger** is a really great example of how striving for excellence can sometimes not be the speediest of paths – but that if the whole team is committed to the process, then the results can be spectacular. In a market where the received wisdom is that a writer should publish a book every year, it takes a certain bravery to take the time to get things right.

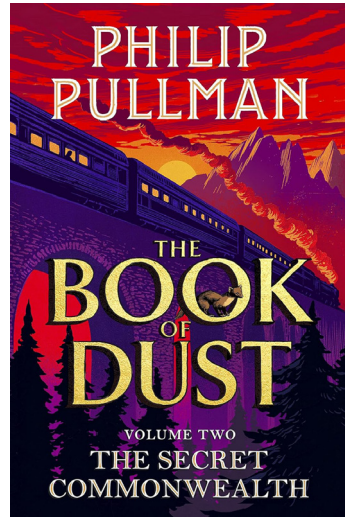
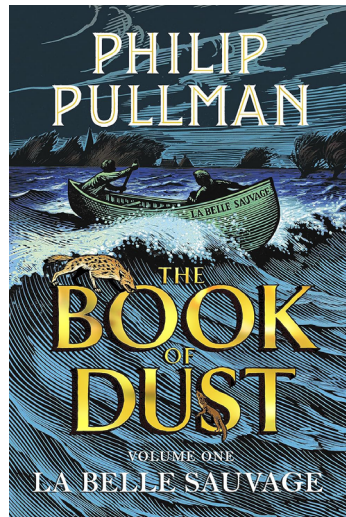
Of course trusting your instincts and backing your beliefs isn't just about perseverance and publishing people you've worked with for a long time. It's about spotting exciting new writers too – finding the people you want to welcome in and hope they become a part of your future list. So debuts are of great importance to us – from Lisa Williamson's groundbreaking **The Art of Being Normal** back in 2015, all the way through to the sparkling **Girl on the Fly** by Nansubuga Nagadya Isdahl, coming in 2024. Finding a new voice is always thrilling and we're really excited too about the [Search for a Storyteller](#) competition we've just launched, to find a new writer to join our list.



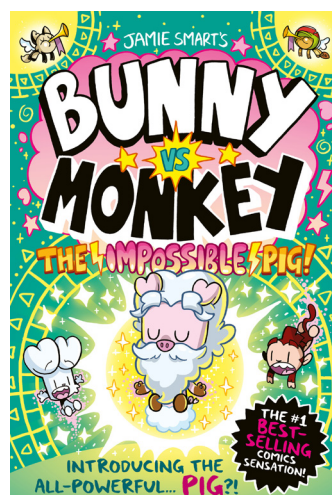
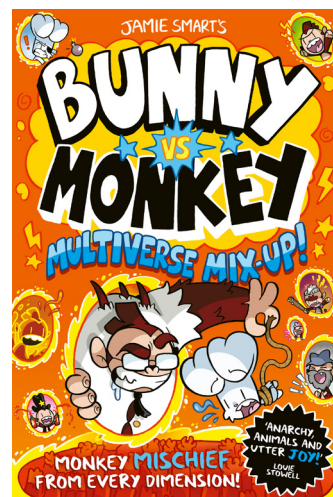
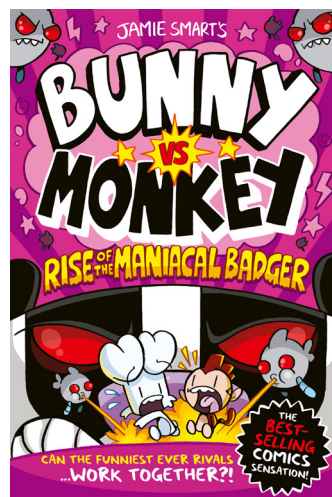
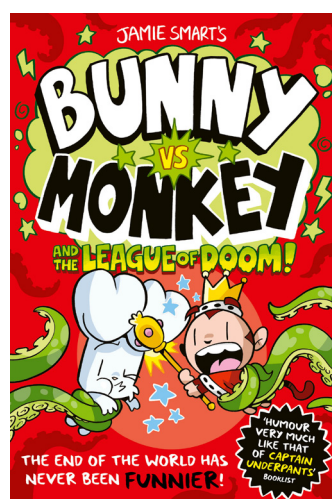
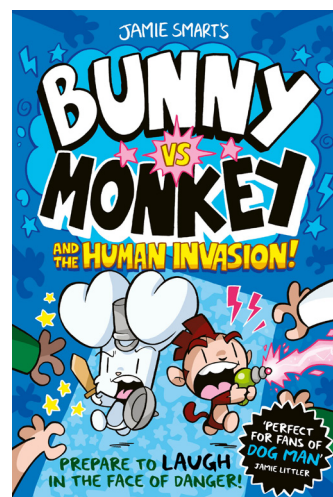
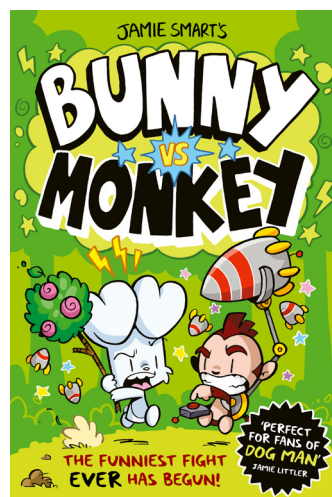
It's also about taking chances on things that might not seem to make immediate commercial sense, but which the team feel passionate about. One of the books I love most on the DFB list is **Thornhill** by Pam Smy. Published in 2017, this is a hardback book of over 500 pages; a challenging, haunting story told half in prose and half in pictures. With solid black edges and a dark, brooding cover, it's a truly distinctive physical object. On any normal 'commercial' costing model it would be hard to make this book make sense – but at DFB belief carried it through, and it's been a wonderful success. I'd go so far as to say it's become iconic – I probably have more conversations with authors and illustrators about this book than any other on the list.

It's also important to us to stick with authors and illustrators across different kinds of books if that's what they want to do, rather than being too prescriptive. So we have the phenomenal Philip Reeve and Sarah McIntyre, separately and together, published across a range of genres and ages – Sarah's wonderful picture books, Philip's brilliant **Utterly Dark** novels, and the totally delightful illustrated young fiction series they're working on together, **Adventuremice**. Or Chris Wormell, who is of course one of the pre-eminent illustrators working today, but who publishes his own wonderful illustrated fiction with DFB.

There are so many other books and creators I would love to mention – across picture books, fiction, comic books, poetry and non-fiction – but the one author I really can't finish without talking about is Philip Pullman. Philip and David have worked together for decades, and the importance of Philip to DFB, as an author, a friend, and a supporter, cannot be overestimated. We are so proud to publish **The Book of Dust** in partnership with PRH – a wonderful example I think of the way publishers can work together without competition or mistrust, in order to do the very best for a book and an author, and the openness of all concerned to this cooperation is wonderful to be a part of. Incidentally I know many of you reading this will be eagerly awaiting the third volume of **The Book of Dust** – I will say no more than watch this space...



So what has changed in ten years? Well – as is so often the case – both everything and nothing. DFB has moved from tiny start-up to established company – but is still in our cosy little offices in central Oxford. We have grown from the initial team of three to ten members of staff – but we are still proudly part of the Independent Alliance and love the community of independent publishers that Faber has created. We reach more customers and more readers every year – in the UK and across the world – and we are constantly looking for the best ways to help our books travel as widely as possible, whether that be innovations in format, in production, in systems or in logistics. But at the heart of it, the important things remain the same – the faith in the instincts of our brilliant team, the love of a good story, the drive for excellence, the desire to provide the very best for readers – and, always, that determination to stay independent and publish from the heart. Whatever changes in the next ten years, we know these principles will remain for us – and we can't wait to see what they bring!



I wish I'd written...



Laura Ellen Anderson's new book, **Marnie Midnight and the Moon Mystery** will be published by Farshore, 1st February 2024, 978-0008591335, £7.99 pbk.

Laura Ellen Anderson on the series that made her a writer.

There is one book series that will stay with me forever, and how I wish I'd come up with such a wonderful, warm and timeless classic. **The Worst Witch** series of books written and illustrated by Jill Murphy are my all-time favourites. It's hard to pick one of them but when I think back to how they made me feel, **A Bad Spell for the Worst Witch** gives me the warm and fuzzy memories as Mildred starts her second year at Cackle's Academy desperately trying to rid her reputation of being the WORST witch!

The books, each with the bold colour cover and silhouette of Mildred Hubble, shaped much of my childhood as I spent hours drawing Mildred Hubble, coming up with alternative storylines for the characters or trying to recreate the Cackle's Academy uniform.

I devoured the books over and over. I'm not the kind of person who reads the same book twice, but for some reason, **The Worst**

Witch series was the only set of books I could... they were, and still are, my comfort blanket. When I open the pages, I feel at home. I feel welcome, like greeting an old friend. It's hard to put into words what these books mean to me, but I have Jill Murphy to thank for inspiring the writer in me, providing a magical place to escape to if I were feeling ill or sad, and creating wonderfully relatable characters with flaws as well as strengths. Each character is appealing (even Ethel Hallow!) and I'd have loved to be a part of Mildred's gang with my very own patched up broomstick



The Worst Witch series, written by Jill Murphy, is published by Puffin, paperback, £7.99 each.

Good Reads

This issue's Good Reads were chosen by young people at **Farnley Academy, Leeds**. Thanks to **Rebecca Bate, Librarian**, for her help

First Term at Malory Towers

Enid Blyton, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444929874, £7.99 pbk
Malory Towers by Enid Blyton is a fantastic book about a group of girls who are at boarding school in Cornwall. In the first book we are introduced to the main characters, Darrell Rivers, Sally Hope and Gwendoline Mary Lacey and teachers, Miss Grayling and Miss Potts. A fantastic book full of fun, midnight feasts, friendship and mischief. A must read. *Ella (Year 8)*

A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Hostile Hospital

Lemony Snicket, Farshore, 978-1405266130, £7.99 pbk
My personal review on this book from a scale on 1 to 5 it would be 5/5. It was absolutely amazing. The plot, the growth, the cliff hangers. What is it about? Well, **The Hostile Hospital** by Lemony Snicket tells the story of a young girl, her brother and her baby sister, trying to escape from a man who is trying to steal their family fortune. They go to a nearby hospital to hide, just to learn the evil man is still there and after them. He's got their sister, will he get them too? Will they finally be safe or will they always be tormented by the evil man and his minions? I would definitely recommend this, as it is amazing. It has beautiful plots and is so good for when you are bored, with twists every second,

wondering what will happen and then you turn the page and you shout at the characters 'No don't do that!'. *Kitty (Year 8)*

Defender of the Realm

Mark Huckerby & Nick Ostler, Scholastic, 978-1407180465, £6.99 pbk
This book is about a young boy. At the age of 14 he finds out that he is the heir to the throne, while still trying to manage school life. He finds out being a king is not all about power but protecting his people. I enjoyed the book because it was so different from something that would happen in the real world. I liked the way the characters were described; it was full of adventures and most importantly it was fun. I would give **Defender of the Realm** 5/5 *Casey-Leigh (Year 8)*

Cinderella is Dead

Kalynn Bayron, Bloomsbury, 978-1526621979, £8.99 pbk
Cinderella is Dead is a refreshing and inventive retelling of the classic Cinderella fairytale. The novel is set in a society where the Cinderella story is not just a fairytale, but a rigid tradition, that dictates the lives of young girls. One of those young girls, the protagonist, Sophia rebels against the oppressive



Kitty



Casey



Elizabeth



Oakley

system, refusing to conform to the expectations placed upon her. Her journey is not just one of self-discovery, but also a quest for justice and equality. What sets Sophia apart is her complexity as a character. Bayron beautifully explores her sexuality, presenting it as a natural and integral aspect of her identity. Sophia's queerness is not a mere plot point, but a nuanced exploration of love and self-acceptance. The world building in **Cinderella is Dead** is equally impressive, with Bayron creating a dystopian kingdom that feels both magical and oppressive. *Elizabeth (Year 8)*

When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit

Judith Kerr, HarperCollins, 978-0007274772, £7.99 hbk
When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit tells the story of Anna, a young girl living in Berlin, in the 1930s and how she and her family escape from Germany just before the Nazis come to power. No doubt this saved their lives. On the journey they have to move around from

Switzerland to France, but finally they settle in the safety of the UK. The part on the train was the most enjoyable part of the book for me. The family were hiding from the Nazis and the train was about the cross the border. The descriptive language used, really created the tense atmosphere. I was so worried that they were going to be caught. People who are interested in the Second World War would enjoy this. It was very exciting and I would describe it as a historical thriller. *Oakley (Year 7)*

Metamorphosis

Franz Kafka, Penguin Classics, 978-0241372555, £8.99 pbk
A haunting but beautifully written analysis of Gregor and the Samsa family. **Metamorphosis** tells the story of salesman Gregor Samsa, who wakes one morning to find himself transformed into a huge insect. Kafka's level of detail and sympathetic tone ties off perfectly at the end into a woeful, yet thought provoking finale. *Milo (Year 11)*

Inclusive Books for Children:

promises, prizes and plans for 2024



It has only been four months since they launched but UK-based charity **Inclusive Books for Children** has achieved a great deal in a short space of time, thanks to the dedication and drive of co-founders Sarah and Marcus Satha and their 10-strong reviewing team. Head of Content, **Fabia Turner**, reflects on the young charity's achievements and looks ahead to 2024.

Inclusivity runs through everything we do at **Inclusive Books for Children**. We are dedicated to showcasing high-quality inclusive books for young readers alongside the authors and illustrators who create them. Our endgame is simple: we want all children to have easy access to books reflecting the rich diversity of human experience. The hope is that, one day, inclusive children's books will become mainstream.

With the current socio-economic downturn, and reading for enjoyment at a record low, we know our visionary goals are ambitious, but we hope our optimism, good intentions and commitment to promoting change are clear.

We might appear to be the new kids on the block, but most of the **IBC** team are not really 'new kids' – they are experienced reviewers who bring a wealth of book knowledge from many years working in education, publishing and library services.

Every book is rigorously checked and graded by at least two of these highly skilled reviewers who also specialise in inclusivity. They consider not only the extent of representation but also the quality of stories or information conveyed through text, illustrations and design, which means that not every book submitted makes it onto our website.

Partnering with **CLPE** to ensure we review the latest releases as well as backlist books, we have over 800 fiction and non-fiction titles listed on our website featuring representation that goes beyond skin colour and culture. Disability, neurodiversity, LGBTQIA identities and modern family structures across many different ethnicities are depicted, as are challenges to traditional gender stereotypes.

We are very proud of our user-friendly website, what we call our giant 'bookshelf' at **IBC** HQ. Through its design and functionality, the site makes it easy for parents to source the precise books they want for their children. Our promise is that the **IBC** website will always be free to use, but of course we are a charity, so donations earned through affiliate book sales are vital to support our running costs.

Along with our website we have launched the first-ever **IBC Awards**, recognising the outstanding contributions made by authors and illustrators to inclusive children's literature. This year, we have concentrated on younger audiences, including a prize category not just for picture books but also for baby and toddler books and children's fiction for ages five to nine as they don't often get the attention they deserve. We hope the IBC Awards will encourage UK children's publishers to continue to seek out and publish excellent new literature, for all age groups, that is naturally inclusive.

Our shortlists will be announced on 15 January, and we cannot wait to celebrate our enormously talented winners at the awards ceremony in February.

Plans for 2024

One focal point for the new year is to ensure inclusivity continues to permeate everything we do at **IBC**. Our team is already incredibly diverse, but we have plans to go even further, bringing as many expert perspectives as possible into our book-reviewing and decision-making processes.

We'd also like to strike a careful balance between ensuring affordability of books for parent consumers on low incomes while supporting indie booksellers (another important aspect of our mission). Achieving equilibrium here is a challenge for everyone in the book industry, not just for **IBC**, but we are confident we can offer palatable solutions.

We are thrilled to share that we will broaden our book offering in the early autumn, adding middle-grade reviews and booklists to our website. Books currently range in age and stage suitability from babies up to children aged nine, so it will be exciting to add texts that appeal to older or more confident readers.

The feedback we have received so far has been largely positive, and we'd love to build on this goodwill by forging stronger relationships with publishers, booksellers, library services and emerging/established authors and illustrators. We also respect the work of other literary organisations in the inclusive kidlit space, some of whom have been working for change in this area for a long time. We'd welcome opportunities to collaborate in the future to reach our collective goal.

Ultimately, we all want the same aim: for all children to see themselves and their peers reflected in the books they read. **IBC** provides another vehicle to help us all shout louder and effect change. And though we have exciting ideas in the pipeline, we are mindful of taking our time to ensure everything is true to our vision. We promise to share more soon!

For more information about **Inclusive Books for Children**, visit: inclusivebooksforchildren.org



Fabia Turner is head of content at **IBC** and the founder of the **Jericho Prize for Children's Writing**. She is also a former primary teacher and educational book editor with a love of children's literature.

Obituary:

Benjamin Zephaniah 1958–2023

Nicholas Tucker remembers the remarkable Benjamin Zephaniah.

Irrepressible, wonderfully talented, unpredictable, sometimes mischievous but deeply principled, Benjamin Zephaniah was a gift to the British literary world both senior and junior. While expressing anger at the extreme racism he had suffered when young he still remained permanently on hand not just for a quote but very often a joke too. His public following extended over every class and colour. Instantly recognisable in life or on the screen, his was a solo act that will long be remembered.

Born Benjamin Springer, his early life in Handsworth, Birmingham, shared with seven other siblings, was marred by violence from his father Oswald, a postman originally from Barbados. His mother, a nurse from Jamaica, also suffered and after a particularly savage outburst escaped the family home taking ten-year old Benjamin with her. Now living in poverty and unable to settle he was the only black pupil in his new school, suffering repeated racist taunts and bullying. His next school was better and it was here, although dyslexic, he began to exhibit his extraordinary gift for poetry. He was dubbed 'Zephaniah' after the Old Testament prophet by the elders of his mother's church who believed his verbal powers could indicate that he too might one day be 'treasured by God.' The name stuck.

Also often getting into trouble and at 13 still unable to read or write, he was finally expelled and then spent time first in an approved school and then a Borstal. In his late teens he was imprisoned for affray and burglary. But coming under the influence of Rastafarianism in prison he made a complete break aged 22, leaving Birmingham for London to join in the burgeoning punk and alternative comedy movements. His first poetry book was published in 1980 followed two years later by an album. Film work, television and spots on the radio quickly followed, with a final count of 14 poetry books, 7 'dub' poetry albums based on meshing Jamaican patois with reggae rhythms, numbers of novels and some children's books.

One of these, **Talking Turkeys**, was an immediate hit. Lines like 'Be nice to yu turkeys dis christmas Cos' turkeys jus wanna hav fun' were already popular from his frequent poetry readings. Reprinted after six weeks, this volume was followed by another collection, **Funky Chickens**, taking on issues surrounding war, racism, bullying, preserving the environment and animal rights. A vegetarian from aged 12, he later became a leading light in The Vegan Society.

There was also a novel **Face** about a young man trying to cope with what the author describes as 'facial discrimination' arising from his character's disfiguring injuries after a car accident. He gradually comes to understand that the unkindness he now often receives from others is a mirror for the attitudes he once held himself as gang leader. After that **Refugee Boy** describes how young Alem, whose



father is Ethiopian and his mother from Eritrea, spends a welcome holiday in London away from the continual strife at home. But one day he wakes up to find his father gone, with Alem now having to make his own way in a new country. **Windrush Child**, written towards the end of Zephaniah's life, swiftly became standard school reading along with much of his poetry.

In the Authorgraph published in this magazine in 1998, he describes to fellow writer Errol Lloyd how he believed his role was to be 'a newscaster when the news is not picking up our stories, so must tell that news through poetry.' Increasingly celebrated for doing just this he toured abroad for the British Council where he was widely appreciated by many including Nelson Mandela, who wanted to meet him on his 1990 visit to the UK. At home he was appointed Professor of Poetry and Creative writing at Brunel University, later spending three months each year in China practising tai chi. The notion that he might become the next Poet Laureate after Carol Ann Duffy was rejected by him in forthright poetic terms: 'Don't take my word, go check the verse/ Cause every laureate gets worse.' The offer of an OBE was also turned down, this time in prose: 'Stick it, Mr Blair and Mrs Queen. Stop going on about the empire.'

Public recognition was now frequent, particularly after he accepted the part of Jeremiah Jesus, a street preacher also bearing long dreadlocks, in the television series **Peaky Blinders**. Claiming to be 'Still as angry as I was in my twenties,' he talked freely about some of his own past behaviour which he now regretted, including the physical abuse of former girlfriends. But there were many positive memories too, with his autobiography, **The Life and Rhymes of Benjamin Zephaniah**, published in 2018, an eloquent reminder of a truly remarkable person who died of a brain tumour aged only 65.

Nicholas Tucker

Obituary:

K M Peyton 1929–2023

K M Peyton remembered by **Linda Newbery**

Kathleen Peyton, who died in December at 94, held the remarkable record of publishing across eight decades, beginning with **Sabre, the Horse from the Sea** under the name of Kathleen Herald when she was just 15. Best-known for **Flambards**, she's sometimes referred to as a pony-book writer, a term that fails to do justice to the range of her work and its settings. Much-loved by readers, she also gave encouragement and support to several other writers including myself; our first meeting was at her home when I interviewed her for a **Books for Keeps** Authorgraph feature, and we were friends from then on.

The M of K M Peyton refers to Mike, her husband, with whom she produced serialised adventure stories in the late 1950s and early 60s, Mike providing cliff-hanger endings and Kathleen doing the writing. After a few years teaching art in Northampton, and the birth of daughters Hilary and Veronica, Kathleen continued as K M Peyton for the books she wrote alone. Recognition for her work included a New York Herald Tribune Award for **The Maplin Bird**, the Carnegie Medal for **The Edge of the Cloud**, the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize for the **Flambards** trilogy (as it was before she added a fourth book, **Flambards Divided**, after an interval of twelve years), and the Children's Book Award for **Darkling**. In 2014 she was made MBE for services to children's literature. The **Flambards** trilogy was televised by Yorkshire TV and a stand-alone novel, **A Pattern of Roses**, was filmed, giving the young Helena Bonham Carter her first screen role.

Kathy's gifts as an author are readily apparent. Her plots are compelling, her characters memorable; she excels at writing action, whether on horseback, at sea or in a flimsy aircraft, and her understanding of adolescent yearnings and frustrations leaps off the pages. What especially attracts me to her work is her depiction of scenery, landscapes, weather and light, which she draws economically but with a painterly eye. She wrote with enviable fluency, making it look easy; in our conversations she told me that she rarely spent much time revising her work.

The **Flambards** sequence covers a sweep of time from 1908 to the early 1920s, through the First World War and beyond. In the first book, twelve-year-old Christina, an orphan, is sent to live with her Uncle Russell and two cousins at Flambards in Essex. Her relationships with cousins Mark and Will, and the kindly groom, Dick, develop throughout the four books of the series. Under the harsh rule of Uncle Russell, life at Flambards is dominated by horses and fox-hunting, a sphere in which Christina soon finds herself at home. While Mark shares his father's obsession, the younger son Will, intelligent and reserved, is far more socially aware, seeing the regime at Flambards as feudal. The novel ends in 1912 with Christina and Will running away together, symbolically from a hunt ball.

The Edge of the Cloud, which follows immediately, takes us into the exhilarating and perilous world of early flying, with the First World War looming; the final two novels return to Flambards and the difficulties of running a productive farm during wartime. Although we never visit the front line in these stories, Christina's friend Dorothy, first introduced in **The Edge of the Cloud**, tells of the harrowing scenes she's witnessed as a VAD nurse, and both Mark and Dick are deeply affected by their experiences; after the Armistice, the jazz age and new freedoms provide welcome relief as Christina's relationships become ever more complicated.



In a quite different vein, **Pennington's Seventeenth Summer** shows Kathy's gift for humour and her sense of the absurd. An engagingly rebellious character on whom many a reader has had a crush, Patrick Pennington is a talented pianist whose career develops over another series of novels, combining with Ruth, heroine of one of Kathleen's most typical pony stories, **Fly-by-Night**.

There were several adult novels too, of which I think Kathy's favourite was **Dear Fred**, set in Victorian Newmarket, in which teenage Laura is obsessed with the champion jockey Fred Archer before finding loves of her own. Kathy felt that this had been published rather uncertainly, not a children's book but not marketed for adults either; in recent years she hoped that it might be reissued.

Kathy will be remembered as a pioneer of young adult fiction in the 1970s and 80s, along with such other notable writers as Jean Ure, Robert Westall, Robert Cormier, Aidan Chambers and Jill Paton Walsh. A talented artist, she also provided cover images for several of her novels.



Linda Newbery is an author and environmental campaigner. Her novel **The Key to Flambards**, written with Kathleen Peyton's approval, revisits Flambards in the 21st Century with Christina's great-granddaughter as the main character.

REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**.

Gwynneth Bailey is a freelance education and children's book consultant.

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

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

Rebecca Butler writes and lectures on children's literature.

Jane Churchill is a children's book consultant.

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

Janet Fisher is a children's literature consultant.

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

Anne Horemans is a secondary school librarian.

Tanja Jennings is a judge of the CKG Book Awards, a dedicated school librarian, children's book reviewer and creative book blogger from Northern Ireland.

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.

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

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

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

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

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

Rainbowsaurus

★★★★

Steve Antony, Hachette, 32pp, 978-1-44496-451-6, £12.99 hbk

What happens when you follow a rainbow? And what – or who – will be waiting for you on the other side? In this joyful celebration of togetherness and adventure, two dads and their children are joined by a host of rainbow-coloured animals to oink, hiss, ribbit, growl and mew their way across the rainbow. They're searching for a very singular beast, and when they finally meet the Rainbowsaurus, he does not disappoint. Children will be thrilled by what appears to be a multicoloured diplodocus roaring a full spectrum of colours – and who wouldn't want to ride on such a creature's head?

Loved for many books including the **Mr Panda** and **The Queen's Hat** collections, Steve Antony understands what children enjoy, and delivers accessible, well-crafted fun that appeals to a wide audience, including children who don't usually read for pleasure, and families that are less confident around books. The big, friendly dinosaur at the heart of this story has obvious child appeal, and the cumulative nature of the expedition to find him includes features that carers and educators will appreciate, such as colours, animal noises, repetitive text and a jaunty rhythm that becomes apparent when the story is read aloud. Practise a little first, though, to ensure you include every single one of those oinks and moos!

With its two-dad family and rainbow theme, this book flies a flag for LGBTQ+ inclusion, but it's far from being an 'issue book' in that or any other respect. Drawn and painted on a stark white background that gives no hint of the wider setting, the illustrations have a style and vibrancy often associated with comic book art, and this adds to its popular appeal. Readers expecting sophisticated visual layering may be disappointed, though.

Rainbowsaurus has a pleasantly traditional feel about it, and families will warm to memories it evokes of old-school favourites by picturebook creators such as Pamela Allen, Rod Campbell and Pat Hutchins. It also reads well aloud. **CFH**

Tap! Tap! Tap!

★★★

Hervé Tullet, Chronicle Kids, 64pp, 9 781797 221465, hbk, £14.99

This is an interactive book exploring the movements hands can make from tapping to whooshing, bouncing and sliding.

Every page reveals abstract shapes and patterns with instructions for the reader to move their hands in different ways, like a fish or a rocket,

Ed's Choice

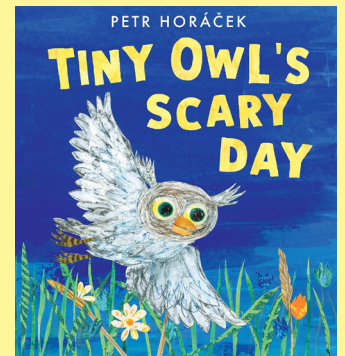
Tiny Owl's Scary Day

★★★★

Petr Horáček, 32pp, Walker Books, 9781529509274, £12.99 hbk

Tiny Owl doesn't want to go to bed. She wants to explore the day. But owls sleep then; their time is the night. Even though Mama tries to dissuade her telling her the day is scary for little owls, Tiny Owl is undeterred. How will she fare?

This is not a new theme, but Petr Horáček's simple text makes it a pleasure to read. There is plenty of opportunity for interesting sounds – tiptoe, tiptoe or swish, swash, click crack and plenty of movement as Tiny Owl flies across the double spreads. Yes, the day can be fun – but dangers lurk. Young eyes will enjoy spotting the cat in the undergrowth or the fox in the reeds among other perils. And who is that following in the distance? The audience will quickly spot Mother Owl. Here it is not just the text



that works but Horáček's glorious colour saturated images that burst off each page full of energy and excitement. Not a space is wasted across each double spread whether the page is broken to create visual storytelling or the frisson of the double spread where Tiny Owl finds herself alone, the blues surrounding her reminding us how small she is. And what is making that Whoosh? From the starry front covers to the starry back covers this is picture book from a picture book creator at the top of his form. **FH**

changing speed or direction as they travel from dot-to-dot or loop to loop. The page transforms into an ice rink or a pebbly beach. Young readers are encouraged to move elegantly and gracefully creating circles, spirals and figures of eight. As well as these challenges for readers there is challenging language too including unfamiliar vocabulary, for example 'curlicues.'

More inventive interactive fun from the award-winning creator of **Press Here** and **Say Zoop**. **SMC**

The Duck Never Blinks

★★★

Alex Latimer, Andersen Press, 32pp, 9781839132469, £12.99 hbk

This interactive picture book introduces a delightful narrative, engaging both the narrator and the reader in a comical staring contest with an unflinching duck. The story begins with the narrator's plea to make the perpetually wide-eyed duck blink. As various tactics, from shouting to sharing jokes and sad stories, unfold (cue a lone tear from the wide-eyed duck but no blink), readers find themselves becoming active participants in the challenge too. The humour peaks as the narrator's frustration grows, leading to a satisfying and amusing resolution, revealing a secret bond between the duck and the reader that supersedes that with the narrator.

The deft simplicity of the drawings, reminiscent of Warhol in places, combined with a grid of tiny panels depicting changing light throughout the day, adds a layer of visual humour

that pervades throughout. Subtle changes in the duck's expressions, from a teardrop to an open beak, enhance the comedic value, encouraging attentive readers to closely observe any shift in Duck's features.

With its irreverent and hilarious tone, Latimer skilfully presents a funny picture book that combines humour, interactivity, and clever illustrations. Fans of Willems' **Pigeon** books will find the book appealing with its similar riff on character/reader interplay. The witty narrative and playful engagement empower young readers above the narrator, making it a delightful choice for shared laughter and enjoyment. **MT**

The Bedtime Boat

★★★★★

Sital Gorasia Chapman, ill. Anastasia Suvorova, Farshore, 32pp, 9780008534318, £7.99, pbk

Chandan has had a very exciting day out with his Mum, but now must head home for bed. After a calming bubble bath and his usual nighttime routine, he snuggles down in his bed and prepares to go to sleep. But, as soon as the bedroom light goes out, Chandan's mind springs to life with a whirl of images and thoughts, keeping his brain far too busy for sleep. His mother returns and places the bedtime boat on his stomach, encouraging him to "Watch the boat, Chandan, it floats on the ocean. It rises and falls with your breath's gentle motion." He tries to relax along with movement of his breathing and the boat, but each time is drawn into another exciting

reviews

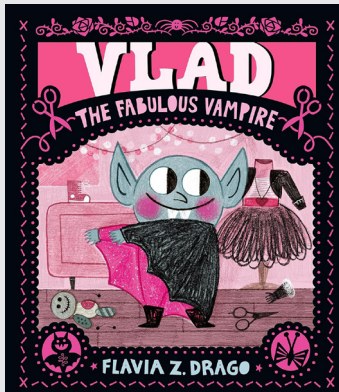
Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant continued



adventure in his imagination and each time his mother is there, with her gentle refrain to ease him into sleep, until finally he rests.

This is a delightful, charming story, told in a gentle rhyming text for a perfect bedtime read. The bright, primary colour illustrations by award-winning illustrator Suvorova, burst from the page, bringing Chandan's dreams and adventures vividly to life. Our children's days are busy and full and as their little minds struggle to rest, the repetition of the chorus and the calm rhythm within the story will gently lull them to sleep... and probably a few parents too!

Readers can also make their own bedtime boats by following the origami instructions at the end of the book. **AH**



Vlad the Fabulous Vampire

Flavia Z. Drago, Walker Books, 40pp, 9781529509175, £12.99 hbk
In this third instalment of the **Gustavo** series, Drago introduces young readers to Vladislav Varnaby Roland Dragul, also known as Vlad. This charming picture book unveils a little vampire with a passion for fashion and a colourful secret hidden beneath his black cape. Inspired by a sketch created during the development of **Monsters Play... Peekaboo!**, Vlad's journey becomes a heartwarming exploration of self-discovery and acceptance, inviting readers to celebrate their differences and find pride in their uniqueness.

Having been captivated by Drago's

illustrations since her **Klaus Flugge Prize** winning, **Gustavo the Shy Ghost**, was published, I continue to admire her distinctive style. Combining cartoon and folk art influences from her Mexican heritage, Drago's artwork evolves seamlessly from muted shades to vibrant hues as Vlad embarks on his quest for self-affirmation. The hardback variants, a credit to Walker's design team, present an aesthetically pleasing whole, echoing the warmth and gentle humour found in all three **Gustavo** stories. The delightful appearance of characters from previous tales adds an extra layer of joy for fans.

Vlad's character development is portrayed with poignancy, capturing his internal struggle with insecurity and the journey toward self-acceptance. The narrative unfolds gracefully as Vlad, alongside his friend Shelley, discovers the empowering value of embracing individuality. Throughout the story, themes of friendship and self-discovery resonate, providing young readers with a relatable and uplifting experience. This narrative also serves as a powerful catalyst for discussions around accepting oneself and celebrating the unique qualities that define each individual. **MT**

Taxi, Go!

Patricia Toht, ill. Maria Karipidou, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 4063 8568 7, £12.99 hbk

What a busy day it is for the little red taxi; it's on the go from early morning until well after dark, driving through the streets of town, picking up passengers and taking them to desired destinations. First, as we learn in Patricia Toht's jaunty rhyming narrative, it's a woman with an important business date but no matter how much hurry she's in, the little vehicle drives with care, stopping to allow people to cross, wending its way through narrow alleys in the rain, halting to allow a fire engine and crew to attend to an emergency call out. The next passengers are shoppers and then as the sun does down, people going to the park for a football game; a couple are off to a dance and: others to watch a play; all give their fare as per the meter. The last run is to the airport to collect a family laden with luggage and take them right to their front door, as Maria Karipidou's increasingly misty three spread sequence shows.

After their farewell wave, it's time for the little taxi to head back to the depot, turn off its engine and lights and settle down for a thoroughly well deserved night's sleep.

This is sure to appeal to the many young vehicle enthusiasts who will enjoy emulating the taxi's 'wee-wooo-weee' and joining in with the frequent **STOP!** and **GO!** instructions as the cheerful, energetic story unfolds. "Where's the driver?" one of my listeners asked: perhaps **Taxi** is one of those driverless cars ... **JB**

A Way to the Stars

★★★★

David Almond, ill. Gill Smith, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781529506655, £12.99 hbk

A magical and uplifting picture book that explores the bond between a father and son. Joe longs to find a way to reach the stars even when his 'pals' berate him for such lofty dreams. His father, however, listens thoughtfully and actively engages in play and imagination, nurturing a relationship that is heartwarming and inspiring.

Almond's sparse, rhythmic tone, allows the freedom and space for Smith to paint a rich, diverse cast and environment. Implicitly, the story portrays the father as a primary caregiver, a depiction that exudes tenderness and closeness. This portrayal is not only welcoming but also affirming, breaking away from traditional stereotypes.

At the core of the tale lies the beautiful relationship between father and son, expertly crafted through dialogues that capture the shared dreams and intimacy between them. Smith's watercolours burst with vivid energy, depicting both characters building dreams from cardboard and or sharing joyous moments side by side. The whimsical exploration of reaching the stars unfolds through a series of inventive and humorous ideas, showcasing the creative companionship shared by father and son.

Almond and Smith come together to tell a story that encourages families to work and play together, emphasising the importance of shared experiences: a poignant reminder for readers in days when work and technology can separate and a theme that Almond has explored in earlier work too. The picturebook serves as a poignant reminder of the significance of shared experiences, particularly in an era where work and technology often threaten to create divides. In a world where connections are increasingly digital, this story serves as a reminder that the strongest bonds are formed through shared dreams, play, and the simple joy of being together. **MT**

Confetti

★★★

Dean Atta, ill. Alea Marley, Orchard Books, 32pp, 978 1 40836 207 5, £12.99, hbk

Confetti focuses on celebrations in Arianna's family – from her third birthday party to a baby shower to the marriage of her uncle to his boyfriend. **Confetti** features throughout her family's celebrations and also in the firework display and the Pride march Arianna's uncle takes her to. As the seasons change, Arianna notices the autumn leaves and snowflakes 'helicopter down' – just like confetti.

Love, warmth and celebration form the background to a story which contributes to the growing body of picture books featuring diverse families, gay marriage and Pride marches.

This is a well written and attractive picture book with warm illustrations

in a soft palette of colours. A debut picture book from successful poet Dean Atta. **SMc**

AlphaBot: Mix and Match the



Robot Parts from A to Z

★★★★★

Vicky Fang, MIT Kids Press, 32pp, 978 1 5295 1218 2, £10.99 hbk

Here is the perfect flip-flap book for young children who love tech. It is a highly original publication and the first novelty book for youngsters from MIT Kids Press. Please note it was first published in Great Britain by Walker Books Ltd. with the MIT Press.

AlphaBot comprises twenty-six A to Z flaps which enable the reader to create a robot of three parts. Together with definitions on the parts and actions of a robot, this interactive book teaches the user about Android, Hydrojets, LED, Quadcopter, USB and Z-drive, for example. Each flap on the left consists of a definition and the flap on the right is an illustration of that term. I learned that 'OLED screens (or organic light-emitting diode screens) are used in very thin displays, like in phones or tablets' (p.12) and 'Yaw describes a turning or twisting movement, such as the way a top spins' (p.21). Towards the end of the book is a clearly laid out page explaining the three robotic capabilities: sense, think and act.

This spiral bound hardback with bright, attractive illustrations is both durable and fun! From the 26 Android terms the youngster can make up to 729 amazing robots. This publication will keep the curious under 5s happy for quite a while and is an ideal present as well as a welcome addition to a library, nursery or primary school. An adult alongside the child would be able to read out the definitions in a helpful manner.

The author Vicky Fang used to work for Google where she created new products for children; later she became a children's writer and illustrator specializing in coding for young girls and minorities. This is the type of innovative book which will give hours of pleasure whilst simultaneously educating the user. It could just spark an interest in robotics and turn a little person into a scientist one day! **JS**

5 – 8 Infant/Junior

Brave Little Bear

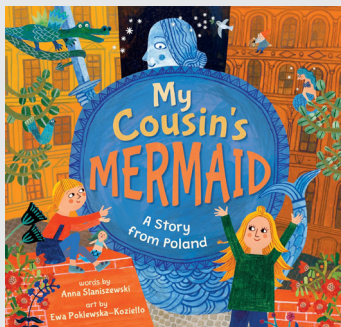
★★★★★

Steve Small, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 978 1 4711 9241 8, £12.99 hbk

As winter draws to a close, three bears are fast asleep in their cave; there's Arlo, his sister Eva and their mother. First to wake is Arlo who loves being snuggled in the family den beneath the mountain. In contrast Eva is ready to start exploring what the world outside has to offer on their forthcoming travels to Spring Valley. Arlo doesn't feel ready to make the move to a new home, he doesn't feel sufficiently brave to embark on new adventures. However join the others he must.

As the three travel, it's carefree, fearless Eva that races through the Great Wood, up the tall tree, down the steep hill and goes splashing into the water. As the three reach a tall, snow-covered mountain ridge, a chill wind starts blowing but they must cross to get to their destination. They start up the slope, Eva in the lead, but suddenly Arlo realises that his sister is no longer close to their mother as she'd instructed. Without any hesitation, Arlo starts searching for her using the sounds of her cries and eventually in the distance, there is Eva. He runs towards her and in an embrace, the two admit their fears to each other. Now Arlo must embrace his fears and it's he that takes the lead on their long trek over the ridge to their mother. 'Being brave when you feel afraid ... is the very bravest brave of all, a relieved mother tells Arlo gently.

Steve Small captures the emotions of the bears' journey through the swirling snowstorm superbly, in starkly striking atmospheric scenes supporting the notion that everyone is capable of finding inner courage at critical moments. **JB**



My Cousin's Mermaid

★★★★★

Anna Staniszewski, illus Ewa Poklewska-Kozietto 32pp, Barefoot Books, 9798888590058, £7.99 pbk
Natalia and her mother are visiting relatives in Poland. Natalia holds onto her doll, Mari. She feels a bit lost and alone. She cannot understand her aunt and her mother as they talk.

Their Polish is so fast. And then there is Karolina, her cousin. She is certainly friendly – but Natalia finds it difficult to follow the TV or understand the board game. She hugs Mari – Karolina lights up because Mari is no ordinary doll – she is a mermaid, a syrenka, the special protectress of Warsaw. So the two girls set off to see the Warsaw syrenka and Natalia discovers that Karolina loves stories as much as she does. The ice is broken.

This charming picture book addresses a situation that many in its intended audience will recognise whether it is going back to Poland or to another country. Language spoken here can sound very different elsewhere. However, here we are in Poland and the author includes a small amount of familiar vocabulary to introduce some – or maybe wake excited cries of recognition. Phonetic pronunciation is also included. No adult reader needs to feel afraid. The two girls are neatly delineated and their walk through Warsaw is not drawn out – the stories Karolina tells are cleverly introduced by a sentence each. The reader can find a resumé at the end. It might have been nice also to have been pointed to a good collection where the stories could be read – or told – in full. The illustrations are as bright and cheerful as the storyline. Saturated colours pop off the page. The characters have a satisfying solidity as they move across the spreads, or sprawl on the grass in a park. Perspectives change as we move in and out of buildings. And then the artist has included some Warsaw highlights to spot – again these are listed at the back. A really good addition to any classroom or children's library looking to ensure there is a diverse and inclusive stock among its picture books. **FH**

Do You Remember?

★★★★★

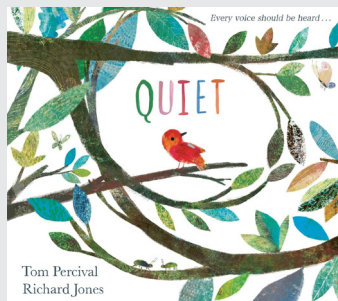
Written and ill. Sydney Smith, Walker Books, 40pp, 978-1-5295-1991-4, £12.99 hbk

IA boy and his mum are sharing memories in the dark. The first – a picnic in a grassy field – is full of warmth and light, but then the boy remembers falling off his bike. Mum asks him about a scary storm – 'you called out for me, but you couldn't find me' – and what started as a game develops an uneasy edge. Mum and the boy are camped out in a city room, surrounded by possessions that we know belong elsewhere. Are they lost, or having an adventure? And why did they leave Dad?

Changes can be positive, and the boy recognises this. 'Can we make this a memory, too', he asks. But his suggestion hangs unanswered in the sleepy darkness, and whether the new memories they make will be full of hope is left unclear.

Twice winner of the **Kate Greenaway Medal**, Sydney Smith is known for his light-infused, spare and emotionally charged artwork. Whole worlds of meaning are created from a gesture, glance or object. Here, vignettes depict the fleeting (and often sensory) essence of the memories being discussed, until enough has been captured to fuel a full-page spread. These are interspersed with intimate, nighttime portraits of the duo, and on every spread we are able to take the text at face value or read the artwork for a more challenging or nuanced view.

Precisely crafted around a moment of transition (which may be good or bad, or both), this affecting book brings words and images together in ways that seem simpler than they are. The clarity and power of Smith's images make them relatively easy to interpret – children won't have to work too hard to decide what's going on, or feel the emotional punch. But there is depth here, too: multiple interpretations are always possible, and as well as being a great book to share with younger audiences, **Do You Remember?** would also make a rich starting point for creative projects and discussions with older readers. **CFH**



Quiet

★★★★★

Tom Percival, ill. Richard Jones, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 978 1 4711 7391 2, £7.99, pbk

This is a story about a little bird living a happy life in a bustling woodland where her main problem is making herself heard amongst a cacophony of birdsong.

One day she finds she has to make herself heard despite the noise around her when she realises the woodland is under threat, endangering all the animals, birds and insects who lived within it. Courageously, she finds a way to make the other creatures listen to her and encourages them to work together to face the threat.

This is a story about finding your voice, bravery, teamwork and peaceful protest. It also highlights the rich diversity of living things who make their homes in forests and woodland and the reality that these habitats are under threat.

A beautiful picture book with soft and colourful textured images which bring the forest to life and convey the threat facing the woodland creatures powerfully. **SMC**

Have You Seen The Magpie?

★★★★★

Dai Yun, ill. Yu Rong, Cypi Press, 64pp, 9781913190552, £17.90 hbk

A beguiling collaboration between Rong and Yun both multi-award winning creators in their respective fields. The result is a multimodal, double-sided concertina picturebook, an astonishing six-metre spectacle when fully revealed. One side narrates the tale of Duan'er as he embarks on a quest for good fortune, guided by a magpie. Meanwhile, the other side showcases a lustrously illustrated handscroll painting by Zhang Zeduan, a renowned Song dynasty painter, titled 'Along the River During the Qingming Festival'. In this intricate masterpiece, readers are invited to engage in a mesmerising seek-and-find game, searching for Duan'er and her puppy as they dart and skip throughout the painting.

Set against the backdrop of the Song dynasty, the story follows Duan'er, a young boy yearning to read and paint but lacking the financial means and formal education. His pursuit of a magpie, believed to herald good fortune, leads him on a journey where he encounters various characters offering pearls of wisdom and advice. Mirroring these spaces and characters are counterparts in Zeduan's painting, creating an enthralling parallel for readers to discover and make connections.

Throughout the chase, creators Yun and Rong skillfully unveil hidden narratives behind the characters and moments in the painting. Their words, combined with pencil and paper-cut illustrations, provide gentle glimpses into culture and history, interwoven with a delightful sense of play and freedom characteristic of the creators' oeuvre. The result is a unique, rich, and wonderfully experimental experience.

Much like Duan'er's fascination with the people along the Bianhe River, readers too will find themselves captivated by the interactive playfulness of this art. As the narrative unfolds, quite literally, it orchestrates a seamless interplay between history and storytelling, all gracefully underlined by a palpable sense of playfulness. This dynamic engagement serves as a thoughtfully crafted game, skillfully providing readers with a vivid window into life during imperial China from the mid-900s to the twelfth century.

The book's interactive nature, coupled with its cultural depth, presents a captivating journey for readers of all ages. This work stands as

reviews

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

a testament to the enduring ingenuity of storytelling and literature. Notably, publishers Cypri Press merit applause for their role in offering readers a unique opportunity to explore history and narrative in such an innovative and immersive manner. **MT**

The Oak Tree

★★★★

Julia Donaldson. Illustrated by Victoria Sandoy, 32pp, Alison Green Books, 978072324345, £12.99 hbk

'Way back in time, a thousand years ago/An acorn in the ground began to grow....' So Julia Donaldson begins her story tracing a thousand years of history through the great oak tree that develops from this tiny acorn; an oak that outlives the Anglo Saxons, Vikings, Tudors, Stuarts, Victorians and survives a World War until finally comes the storm that will see its fall. But then a new acorn starts to grow. Across all those centuries the oak tree is a playground for local children, a hiding place for a fugitive and a home for innumerable animals, birds and insects – even as a gradually decaying tree trunk. This is not a history book. Rather the aim is to introduce very young readers to the amazing longevity of an iconic tree species now threatened. Donaldson's gentle rhyming text does this while providing opportunities for adult led stories expanding the text or for exploration in the local park or countryside. Victoria Sandoy's illustrations are a fitting accompaniment. Bold images fill each double page spread with children everywhere. There is the drama of nature as lightning strikes and then the final fall. Together with children the illustrations are filled with wildlife for young eyes to spot. The whole concludes with a spread of interesting facts excite to young minds. This will certainly prove popular bringing as it does an element of factual exploration to the picture book to encourage enquiry and understanding. **HH**

Where Can We Go? A Tale of Four Bears

★★★★

Dai Yun, ill. Igor Oleynikov, adapted by Helen Mixer, Greystone Kids, 40pp, 9781771649810, £14.99 hbk

Author Dai Yun and the award-winning illustrator Igor Oleynikov lead their readers on a contemplative journey with a polar bear family navigating the complexities of finding a new home. Originally published in China, the narrative delves into the profound themes of immigration and the pursuit of a place where resources like food and shelter abound.

As the Arctic habitat's resources diminish, the bear family reluctantly settles into a nearby city, referring to the urban landscape as 'square icebergs.' In a nod to fairy tale elements, they

find a place where, in Goldilocks fashion, everything is 'just right.' Oblivious to the departing residents, the bears, influenced by images from books and television, set their sights on Antarctica, seeking abundant food and a thriving environment.

Oleynikov's illustrations, characterised by a captivating grainy, textured style, lend depth to the narrative. They skillfully straddle the realms of fairy tale and modernism, offering a subtle commentary on climate change and the refugee experience. The polar bears, depicted with humour and expressiveness, create an oxymoronic challenge in visual storytelling. The result is a visually striking and emotionally resonant experience that both challenges and delights.

This moving and imaginative exploration of immigration, home, and family resilience goes beyond traditional storytelling. The words and pictures invite readers to confront universal desires for food, comfort, and joy, particularly for the younger members of the bear family.

In this narrative, there is no fairy tale ending that so often concludes stories of this nature. The exploration of shared human experiences is honest, reflecting the reality that not every journey concludes with an expected resolution. A picturebook that challenges readers in all the right ways, offering a rich and striking artistic experience coupled with a thought-provoking narrative. **MT**

The Ogre Who Wasn't

★★★★

Michael Morpurgo, ill. Emily Gravett, Two Hoots, 32pp, 978 1 0350 1026 4, £12.99 hbk

When Princess Clara finds a little ogre hidden in the long grass of the palace gardens, she takes him back to the palace and hides him under the bed. Now this little princess is a spirited child; she hates to wear shoes, preferring to run wild and perform acrobatics outside. She also hates pretty princessy attire and uses her many pairs of shoes as temporary hiding places for the little creatures she brings inside so when she discovers the little ogre, into a shoe he too goes and very soon he becomes the best friend she's always wanted. At times though, she still feels sad, for since her mother died, her father no longer spends any time with her, he's far too busy looking after his kingdom, leaving looking after his daughter to a bossy butler and a pernickety nanny.

One evening she shares her sadness with the little ogre and is surprised when he speaks back, revealing that in fact he's a toad, - a King Toad - not an ogre and offers to make her dearest wish come true on condition she return him to the garden. In fact Clara's wish is threefold for she wants to be rid of the bossy palace

staff who make her life a misery. She agrees to the toad's request and what happens thereafter is life changing in more ways than one for Princess Clara. Indeed it's a happily ever after ending involving three people.

Celebrating the natural world, Morpurgo has created a modern version of a classic fairytale wherein kindness is key. With their wealth of delicious details, Emily Gravett's illustrations bring out the humour of the story providing a perfect complement to the telling. **JB**

Flying High

★★★★

Cao Wenxuan, ill. Yu Rong, trans. Jake Hope and Simone-Davina Monnelly, Uclan Publishing, 40pp, 978-1-915235-98-5, £8.99 pbk

Expressive illustrations packed with movement catch the eye and engage the heart in this kite-themed story about loneliness, self-acceptance and growth.

A young child wants to fly a kite with the older children in town, but is told they're too small to take part. The child joins in anyway, but their kite strings get tangled and disaster ensues. Berated and excluded, the child turns to the company of Wawa, an imaginary bird friend, who leads them to the countryside and opens their eyes to the diversity and beauty of the natural world. As Wawa plays with a flock of gulls who don't care that their strange new friend is blue, the child realizes that it's OK to be different. People are who they are, and whether that's tall or small doesn't matter. With that in mind, anything seems possible, and with the help of their grandparents, the child makes a new kite and flies it at the Kite Festival.

Cao Wenxuan grew up in rural China and is a professor of Chinese literature and children's literature. He was the first Chinese author to receive the Hans Christian Andersen Author Award, and his poetic prose depicts honest and often melancholy moments. Flying High addresses universal issues with sensitivity and insight, and will encourage thoughtful reflection and discussion. This translation by Jake Hope and Simone-Davina Monnelly reads well aloud, and has a directness that will appeal to readers who prefer to be told how a character is feeling or what they're learning, rather than having this suggested or inferred.

Yu Rong is a Chinese artist now living in the UK whose distinctive artwork brings vitality and zest to Cao Wenxuan's story. Her dynamic designs feature mixed media collage, naturalistic pencil-drawn faces and a strong sense of shape and pattern, and in keeping with a story about wind, air and flight, interesting angles encourage readers to observe the action from unexpected viewpoints. Yu Rong was shortlisted for the 2023 Kate Greenaway Medal for *The Visible Sounds* and also illustrated the beautiful *Shu Lin's Grandpa* for Otter-Barry books. **CFH**



King Lion

★★★★

Written and ill. Emma Yarlett, Walker Books, 32pp, 978-1-5295-0159-9, £12.99 hbk

It's tough being a king, and even harder when you're fundamentally misunderstood. The lonely lion in this picturebook wants to make friends with his subjects, but all they see are his DANGEROUS claws, his DEAFENING roars and his DRIPPING jaws. No wonder they all run away!

As Emma Yarlett's expressive artwork and sensitive text make plain, lonely creatures don't thrive on such a response, and soon King Lion is almost wild with sadness. Every night he howls his pain into the darkness from the highest roof, and his fearful subjects batten down the hatches. STAY indoors, SAVE lives, says one billboard, with a dash of the characteristic humour that endears this book to its audiences (including time-pressed adults reading it 'just once more' at bedtime...)

Happily for King Lion, one of his youngest subjects – also lonely – eventually questions the status quo and uses logic, empathy and judgement to devise a solution. The next day as King Lion prowls his empty kingdom, she is waiting for him. With a sensitive and respectful nod to the fact that many people need more time and support to learn the art of friendship than is often recognised in picture books, the lion takes a little while to understand what it is to BE a friend, as well as to NEED one. But they get there in the end, and the final page reveal leaves everyone on a heartwarming note.

Emma Yarlett's punchy artwork sings with colour, and thoughtful layouts encourage emotional involvement and speedy page turns. Rhythmically balanced and with just enough 'exciting words' to stimulate rather than overwhelm young audiences, Emma's text makes its points economically and effectively, and is a pleasure to read aloud. Note that an apparently hand-lettered cursive font is used, which is easy on the eye but may be challenging for young readers.

This heartening and reassuring book fosters a strong sense of wellbeing, and adults looking for ways to promote constructive discussions with young children about loneliness

and friendship will be well pleased. But King Lion delivers its message at the heart of an involving and well-written story, brought to life with stunning images that ensure that message is felt and remembered, as well as heard. **CFH**

The Girl Who Became a Fish

★★★★

Polly Ho-Yen, ill Sojung Kim-McCarthy, Knights of, 120pp, 978-1- 913311452, £5.99, pbk

Ita is a girl who is afraid of many things. She's just moved house and the unfamiliar surroundings, her confident brothers, her grandmother's illness and her sad dad aren't making anything easier. She's afraid of talking to people in her new school and of walking around the new town she lives in but most of all she's afraid of swimming. Then she discovers a river that appears wherever she goes, and the flowing water of this strange river seem to turn her into a fish. Illustrated throughout with charming pictures by Sojung Kim-McCarthy this is a gentle tale of overcoming fear and understanding what 'home' is.

Polly Ho-Yen is a skilled writer and observer of young children as her book **The Boy Who Grew A Tree** showed, and this story is similarly accurate in its depiction of the very real fears and emotions of a young child. We see scenes at school and at the swimming pool where Ita's reactions are raw and compelling and very, very realistic. The world in the story is seen from Ita's viewpoint, and it is initially scary and confusing. As she comes to terms with her surroundings and her family's circumstances she can overcome her fears – with the help of the magical river, of course. The lovely scene where Ita first swims by herself is illustrated with a double page spread and the words and pictures together portray the full beauty of the enjoyment of confident swimming. "I can be brave, she thought. I am brave."

The Girl Who Became a Fish is perfect for confident early readers to tackle themselves or as a read aloud book. **LJS**

Lily the Pond Mermaid

★★★★

Lucy Fleming, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 5295 0447 7, £12.99 hbk

Most ponds are lush, green places burgeoning with flora and fauna. So it is with the one mermaid Lily calls home. Lily spends her time nurturing the wildlife – the plants, butterflies, damselflies and dragonflies, the algae; the fish and snails that share her world. Her very best friend is Bobble, a member of the tadpole family.

Lily works tirelessly to keep the pond free from hazards that might harm her friends but worries that she might not be able to cope.

One day a fierce rainstorm hits the pond and after a night of wind

and rain, Lily wakes up to find debris everywhere. Inevitably her worries escalate almost completely overwhelming her. But then she thinks of all her friends and suddenly she senses a tiny flicker of courage within herself. At last, Lily feels able to reach out to them, share her fears and ask for their help. In times of need, it is often teamwork that saves a situation and so it is with Lily and the pond community.

Vibrantly illustrated with lots of realistic detail, this sweet story of camaraderie and finding your inner courage offers an important life lesson to young children. **JB**

The Colour Monster: The Feelings Doctor and the Emotions Tool Kit

★★★★

Anna Llenas, Templar Books, 56pp, 978 1 80078 763 6 £12.99, hbk

The Colour Monster, whose muddles feelings were first introduced in the highly successful first book in the series is now a 'feelings doctor' helping patients manage their own feelings.

At the beginning of the book, we meet a young girl called Nuna who is feeling confused about her feelings and decides to visit Doctor Colour Monster. Nuna has said 'yes' to something she didn't want to do and now feels uncomfortable about it. Colour monster helps her sort out her feelings and find ways to cope with them.

The Colour Monster helps her put her feelings into words and quantify the degree of her discomfort. The central idea in the book is a 'tool kit' to manage emotions. The tool kit is presented in physical form and the doctor draws on its contents to help Nuna, these are a range of strategies including taking deep breaths, drawing how she is feeling and most importantly, having a big hug. After reading Nuna's story young readers are encouraged to create their own emotion tool kit.

This is an attractive book with amusing illustrations and a fold out double page spread displaying the contents of the tool kit. However, young readers will need a supportive adult to get the most from it as some of the ideas and strategies are quite abstract, for example applying plasters to a broken heart, taking a spoonful of 'no' syrup and indeed the concept of an emotions tool kit in itself. **SMC**

The Last StarDog

★★★★★

E.K.Mosley, Flying Eye Books, 64pp, 9781838741068, £15.99 hbk

Stardog, a celestial being and the last of her kind, descends from the night sky, burdened by an overwhelming sense of loneliness. Stripped of her star magic, she embarks on a quest to restore her celestial powers and seek others of her kind. The weight of

sorrow accompanies Stardog on her journey across an earth-like terrain, unfamiliar yet laden with rich symbols and delicately imagined spaces.

This voyage unfolds as a compelling exploration of themes such as loneliness, the absence of dreams, and the emergence of unexpected yet rewarding friendships. Stardog's encounters with various animals serve as catalysts, gradually unravelling details about her origins and theirs, fostering a deeper understanding of a sense of self. The collective journey traverses intricately imagined and dream-like landscapes until the characters confront a cavernous tunnel inhabited by The Darkness. What will Stardog and her companions discover as they journey through to the other side?

In this debut work, Mosley crafts a vivid tapestry. The narrative, presented with a leisurely pace, is richly textured, and suitable for being read aloud and shared. With a lengthier text and more expansive page count than conventional picture books, the story unfolds akin to a fairy tale. The host of enchanting animals and magical landscapes, thoughtfully illustrated, celebrates Mosley's unrestrained imagination, leaping off the pages thanks to Flying Eye's commitment to print quality.

This enchanting and thoughtfully envisioned work stands as a valuable addition to any library and home. The inclusion of supplementary stories, providing the backstories of the animals Stardog encounters, adds depth to the narrative. However, it is the vibrant illustrations that are likely to captivate the young readership, creating an immersive visual journey. **MT**

Fish and Crab

★★★★★

Marianna Coppo, Chronicle Books, 48pp, 9781797204437, £12.99, hbk

Fish and Crab are best friends and live in an aquarium with their other watery chums. When it is time to turn off the light and go to sleep, Fish keeps them both awake with his thoughts and questions, until Crab finally caves in and tells him to share everything that is worrying him, so that they can both finally get some rest. With worries ranging from "What is that noise?" to "What if aliens abduct us as we sleep?", this clever tale is full of humour and quirkiness and Fish's questions typical of the late-night queries children create when they too are meant to be settling down for the night. Parents and children alike will relate to the two best friends, reassuring readers that it is always best to share any worries with those closest to us, to help the fears go away. Coppo's effective illustrations have a wonderful attention to detail and perfectly capture the conversations and bursts of Fish's imagination, with clever use of black and white images too. This fun picture book will be one to share and enjoy for many bedtimes to come. **AH**

Donut Feed the Squirrels

★★★★★

Mika Song, Pushkin Children's, 112pp, 9781782694526, £8.99 pbk
In Song's delightful early-reader graphic novel, readers are warmly welcomed into a captivating world inhabited by mischievous squirrels embarking on a quest for the ultimate sweet treat. Within this charming narrative, Norma and Belly, two brown squirrels boasting distinctive personalities, set forth on a mission to procure coveted donuts from the park's van.

The story unfolds with a delightful blend of humor and wit, presenting the duo with obstacles such as burned pancakes and a less-than-amiable donut seller. Undeterred by challenges, they strategically enlist the assistance of Gramps, a bespectacled squirrel who enjoys reading the newspaper whilst sitting on the park bench, and the charmingly B-shaped Little Bee for an incognito mission. Together, they navigate the intricacies of an overenthusiastic donut machine and contend with the ever-watchful donut maker.

Song's artistic prowess takes centre stage, evident in a natural colour palette and watercolours that gracefully bleed beyond thick black lines. This artistic choice not only enhances the visual appeal but also immerses readers in an engaging world. The squirrels themselves, depicted as balls of yellowish fluff, become as irresistible as the donuts they fervently pursue. It is Song's masterful use of ink and watercolour that breathes life into these characters with such finesse.

This 112-page graphic novel, nominated for an Eisner award, boasts a sparse text that places a deliberate emphasis on visual humour. Song skillfully celebrates sweetly funny moments and crafts endearing outsider characters, with Norma and Belly's escapades serving as a poignant exploration of determination, problem-solving, and the inherent power of teamwork. An ideal offering for young audiences. **MT**

Monster Support Group: The Mummy's Curse

★★★★★

Laura Suarez, Flying Eye Books 64p, 9781838741327, £9.99, hbk

What do we first think of when we picture a Mummy? Is it an evil, moaning and threatening movie image, an archaeological treasure to be examined or a revered Egyptian carefully prepared for the afterlife? Galician illustrator Suarez's latest addition to her Monster Support Group series encourages pre-teen readers to redefine their concept of what constitutes a monster.

In this entertaining and insightful instalment, the Dreadbury crew meet Anatiti, a young and rebellious pharaoh who has difficulty listening to advice. A victim of her own mistakes, she is transported from her ransacked tomb by Lord

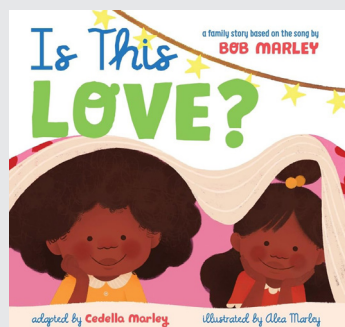
reviews

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

Pilferington, a 1920's archaeologist. His daughter Pearl knows this desecration is wrong and vows to use her knowledge of Egyptology to help Anatiti find peace. Will her plan succeed?

Behind the energetic story line there is a strong message about the importance of respecting burial rituals. Friendship, teamwork and overcoming obstacles are among the themes explored. Colourful, dynamic and lively illustrations enhance the speech bubbles and text by Emily Hibbs. The eye-catching details and visual jokes will amuse the reader as they hurtle through time and discover the significance of canopic jars, hieroglyphics, mythology and the scrolls of the Dead.

This will appeal to fans of the humorous *Corpse Talk* series, which also puts a comic spin on the past. Suarez's perspective challenges stereotypes and promotes understanding of ancient cultures. **TJ**



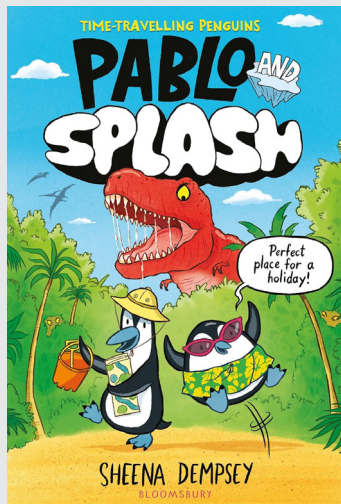
Is This Love?

★★★★

Adapted by Cedella Marley, ill. Alea Marley, 978 1452 171739, Chronicle Books, £12-99, hbk

This beautiful book, based on the lyrics of a song from Bob Marley, is adapted by his oldest child, Cedella Marley. 'I'm going to love you and treat you right. I'm going to love you every day and night', vows big sister, on the birth of her sibling. 'Is this love? Is this love that I'm feeling?' The sisters share their lives together as they grow, always together, always the same. The refrain, 'Is this love? Is this love that I'm feeling?' on each repeat is decorated with colourful hearts and smiley faces. Bob Marley was one of the most important and influential entertainment icons of the twentieth century and his lifestyle and music continue to inspire new generations as his legacy lives on through his music. His daughter Cedella brings his lyrics alive again in this delightful book. The illustrator has created a loving family, the older sister always there for the younger one. The colour palette is vibrant, rich in glowing oranges, reds, purples and greens. It is a book to share with the family and one to which the whole family can relate. **GB**

8 – 10 Junior/Middle



Pablo and Splash

★★★★

Sheena Dempsey, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 240pp, 978-1526662606, £8.99 pbk

A warm welcome to a wonderful new comedy double act! Meet penguins Pablo, the sensible one, and Splash, the impetuous one, and follow them on the first of what will hopefully be many adventures. It's mid-winter in Antarctica and Splash is dreaming of a holiday somewhere fun, warm, different and exciting. Those are the pros for the trip, the cons: how to get there. Splash puts her trust in Pablo, sure her friend will find a way... Pablo decides the human scientists will have the answer and the two head off to find out how to make a seaworthy craft. Here Dempsey turns the dial from zany to out of this world as the penguins fall (literally) into the hands of a – we assume – mad scientist, accidentally steal her time travelling machine ending up in the Crustacean period – sorry, Cretaceous, that's Splash getting to me. There are no beach bars or mocktails, but lots of hungry dinosaurs. In a final turn up, it's Splash who kicks the space ship, after it's been fixed about by a T Rex, so that the two can return for more surprises, happy ones this time.

Our odd couple have huge appeal for young readers and their relationship is beautifully observed and portrayed. As a graphic novel the book scores highly too – each short chapter full of excitement and humour, the action conveyed entirely via speech while the illustrations are lively, varied and full of character. There are extra treats at the end for readers including how-to-draw guides and some real dinosaur facts. **LS**

The Snow Girl

★★★★

Sophie Anderson, illustrated by Melissa Castrillón, Usborne, 288pp, 9781803704357, £12.99 hbk

This story almost sinks before finally taking off in some style. It starts in a valley somewhere very cold and possibly Russian, where everyone is consistently sweet to each other. Young Tasha lives with her parents in grandpa's farm all in a perpetual state of mutual adoration. But while she loves the countryside and its abundant natural life she has no self-confidence after a near-drowning accident in her former home miles south. Excited by her first sight of snow she creates a model girl outside who disappears by the morning leaving only a scarf behind. But Tasha tracks her down next night, now a living person speaking a language she can't understand. Together they go on to have wonderful times playing with wild animals and exploring the forest. Tasha keeps these nocturnal secrets to herself.

But eventually questions start to form. Is the snow girl also something of a Snow Queen, lovely to look at but with a dangerous agenda for her followers? Is her magical company stopping Tasha from getting round to making human friends in the day? Tension mounts when it finally becomes apparent that her love affair with the maiden also has the effect of prolonging an icy winter increasingly dangerous for grandpa and his bad chest. She now has to choose between renouncing her only real friend or else living in perpetual ice and snow.

Sophie Anderson writes lyrically about the forest world Tasha gets to know so well, drawing on her own memories of the Slavic tales told to her as a girl by her Prussian grandmother. Her story is accompanied throughout by attractive two-colour interior illustrations from Melissa Castrillón. Dreamy, gentle young readers could well really love this story; the more tough-minded may find some of it rather heavy-going. **NT**

Marnie Midnight and the Moon Mystery

★★★★

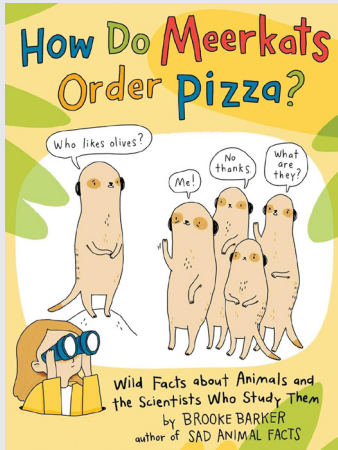
Laura Ellen Anderson, (author and illustrator), Farshore, 244 pp., 9780008591335, £7.99 pbk

The author of books about Amelia Fang, Rainbow Grey, and a number of picture books has now turned to minibeasts. Laura Ellen Anderson tells us that Marnie Midnight has just hatched into a moth, is getting used to having wings, and very keen to go to school, especially hoping to learn more about the Moon. With her acorn backpack filled with moon-themed stationery, she leaves Miniopolis with some of her family on the Snail



Rail, though her little brother Milo, still a caterpillar, comments that she is only going to be 27 garden fences from home. On the journey she meets a bee called Floyd, who would rather be considered an A, and an initially grumpy ant called Star, and they become her close friends and allies in her adventures. Marnie's heroine is moonologist Lunora Wingheart, but she is concerned to find that Lunora is not considered interesting. Moon studies are not covered, and the Moon Club is closed. Where has the Book of Moon Spells gone? Her quest is encouraged by strange communications that seem to be from Lunora in trouble, and she and her friends need to be very brave as they leave the safety of the school, encountering rats and the Early Bird, but finally find a way to the Moon and a rescue.

It's a good story, with much humour: Floyd is a smartly dressed and a highly dramatic character, who clutches his pearls when worried, (which is quite often) and there are a lot of insect references e.g. they learn to use the World Wide Web... Star's grumpiness thaws when she reveals that she is a princess out for Revenge, and Marnie and Floyd help her to come to terms with her feelings. Laura Ellen Anderson has a lot of fun with this imaginary world of insects, illustrating it herself, so we know that the creatures are exactly as she intended. Although the friends hear stories about potential dangers, and Floyd is often unsure that they are doing the right thing, they are never seriously in jeopardy, and young readers need have no cause for concern, but will be relieved as the story reaches its conclusion. This is promised to be the first of a new series about Marnie Midnight, so we can look forward to further adventures. **DB**



How Do Meerkats Order Pizza?

Wild Facts about Animals and the Scientists Who Study Them

★★★★★

Brooke Barker, Faber, 200pp, 978 0 571 38165 4, £10.99 pbk

Here is a very original book about animals which is unputdownable! Talented author and illustrator Brooke Barker includes interesting animals from across the globe such as jaguars, roosters, gars, humpback whales and deep-sea mussels. The double page spread towards the front of the book clearly labels the animals and continents where they can be found. This seems to be in place of a contents page or index which are not included. Brooke Barker combines amazing facts with details about the scientists involved in researching them, frequently with a large dose of humour!

In each chapter there is useful information e.g. 'There are 20,000 different bee species' (p.50). In addition, the chapter on mussels covered geothermal vents which I had never come across before. I was hooked by the graphic novel style of the volume which is clearly laid out throughout. The font used is very accessible and the design of the paperback has been well thought out. Whilst I have used the 8-10 age guide this fantastic book would suit older ages too. I am sure it will be well read by budding scientists as well as their parents and teachers. It is fun to learn that meerkats make their decisions as a team and that midges on Antarctica are frozen for eight months per year!

Throughout this colourful and attractive volume the author generously pays tribute to the scientists who spend long hours watching the animals and studying them. By including the scientists' names, she personalizes the chapters, and the enthusiasm for their work is very inspiring. In the chapter on dogs Natalia decided to study them as she owned a dog for ten years. Such stories enthuse the reader and encourage them to continue. I have no hesitation in recommending this work to STEM students and their teachers, librarians, parents, carers and their young people. JS

Doughnuts, Thieves and Chimpanzees

★★★★

Alex Wharton, ill. Rhi Smith, Firefly, 80 pp., 9781915444585, £6.99, pbk

This is the second of Alex Wharton's poetry collections, following up quickly two years after the first. Alex is the Welsh Children's Laureate, has honed his craft on school visits across the nation, and this collection has something of the air of a workshop about it. His strength seems to be in performance, and, as well setting out some rollicking rhythm and rhyme, including one or two raps and songs, he offers encouragement and advice to his readers to get on the poetry trail themselves. With limericks and haikus, he sets out examples of simple poetic forms that he feels will be within the range of his readers, and he also looks at the possibilities of the challenging named Ekphrastic poetry. This means writing a poem inspired by a piece of art or illustration, in his case one or two inspired by the work of Rhi Smith, his own illustrator on this occasion. It's a collection full of energy and enthusiasm that offers plenty of thoughts and ideas for getting young people interested in poetry. CB

The Incredible Adventures of Gaston le Dog

★★★★★

Michael Rosen, illus Viviane Schwarz, 160pp, Walker Books, 9781529501209 £12.99 hbk

Meet Gaston le Dog, a dog, as he tells us, who has done some amazing things. But perhaps none that have involved so many adventures as his journey back to the beach that he remembers from years ago. In his memory the sand glows golden, stretching into the distance, the sea is a cerulean blue. There are sand dunes – someone had even thrown him a ball. It was perfect. He sets off leaving his friend Hironelle behind, but soon collects a motley band of new friends – Hérissou, Papillon and Chat le Cat. They travel on stumbling into the world of Puss in Boots, survive being turned into garden gnomes, make friends with a snake, and learn the scratch code to communicate with moles. The journey involves making choices. Will they be right ones – and will they reach the beach?

This is a lively tale told by a gifted storyteller whose accessible language, easy wit and humour ensure it moves at a brisk pace. As with all good fairytales there is a moral but it is lightly managed and brings the whole to a satisfying conclusion. The characters – almost all animals – are lively and quirky but very much retain their animal characteristics; Gaston, a loveable, bouncy mutt, Chat le Cat more devious perhaps, Hironelle the House Martin whose migrations are part of the world's heartbeat. Readers



will enjoy spotting the fairytale elements and clever references to the contemporary world. Rosen's inclusion of the French names adds to the fairy tale atmosphere and to the characters of each animal. Dog is not just Dog, he is Gaston – there is a very particular resonance to the name. This is then picked up by Viviane Schwarz in her bold black and white illustrations, surely an inspired choice as illustrator for this text. From the lively opening illustration where we meet an ebullient Gaston (and les Souris) we join Viviane as she brings this unlikely band of friends to life. Read this aloud, read it alone, this is one to really enjoy. FH

The Clockwork Conspiracy

★★★★★

Sam Sedgman, Bloomsbury, 368pp, 9781526665386, £7.99, pbk

This exciting roller coaster of an adventure is the first solo outing for author Sam Sedgman, following his hugely successful *Adventures on Trains* series co-written with his friend M.G. Leonard. As a lifelong fan of puzzles, games and detective fiction, plus having a clock obsessed father, Sedgman has combined all of these and more into this original fast-paced story.

Young aspiring inventor Isaac Turner lives with his dad, Diggory, the chief horologist in charge of maintaining Big Ben and the clock within the tower. The night the clocks are due to go back across the country, Isaac's Dad has taken him with him to help with the special operation needed to do this, but things suddenly go awry when Diggory vanishes leaving behind only a smashed pocket watch and a cryptic message. Along with his new friend Hattie, daughter of the Speaker of the House, Isaac must follow a series of clues across London, uncovering a sinister plot deep within the UK government, which threatens his own and many other lives and even time itself.

Sedgman's debut novel is jam-packed with so many different elements; science, maths, our democracy and how the world measures and engages with time. There are rooftop chases, locked room dramas & heart stopping excitement galore, with a gripping finale

as the true villain is uncovered. It is also populated with many interesting facts about London landmarks and our history, cleverly incorporated in the twists and turns of the exciting plot. I predict this will be a very popular addition to any library, home or classroom and can't wait to read the next book in the series. AH

The Observologist

★★★★★

Giselle Clarkson, Gecko Press, 120pp, 9781776575190, £16.99 hbk

This is a guide of the highest quality from Gecko Press. As the award-winning author explains, 'An observologist is someone who makes scientific expeditions every day, albeit very small ones...They are expert at finding tiny creatures, plants and fungi' (p. 4). The first section of the book explains all about observology, the study of looking. Then the four following sections describe what can be found in four different places: A Damp Corner, Pavement, A Weedy Patch and Behind the Curtains.

Over 100 minibeasts are considered throughout this beautiful hardback. Text is complemented by excellent graphic and comic illustrations. In addition, there are many full-page drawings: the one showing honeybees is my favourite! The information presented is perfect for the curious youngster who is keen to learn more about nature and the environment in an accessible way.

This publication is peppered with useful instructions such as, 'How to Save a Worm That's in Danger of Being Stomped On,' (p.68) and 'How to Help an Exhausted Honeybee or Bumblebee' (p. 75). There are heaps of scientific facts as well as interesting ecological information. For example, the Slugs and Snails chapter covers six pages with lots of suggestions as to where to find them.

I had not come across New Zealand author illustrator Giselle Clarkson previously, but her books have won many awards, and I will be seeking them out. Whilst I have put the age range for this book as 8-10 it is aimed at both younger and older readers than this. It would make a fantastic present for a child keen on science and the natural world as well as being ideal for the school and library. It is a comprehensive, 'Handbook for Mounting Very Small Scientific Expeditions' as it says on the front cover and would be unputdownable for the budding scientist! JS

Luna and the Treasure of Tlaloc (Brownstone's Mythical Collection)

★★★★★

Joe Todd Stanton, Flying Eye Books 64p, 9781838740801, £12.99, hbk

Brownstone's Mythical Collection centres around the concept of a portrait gallery celebrating a professor's adventurous ancestors. Think of a mash up between *The Librarians*, *The Adventures of Indiana Jones* and the *Legend of*

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

Lara Croft, Tomb Raider tailored for pre-teen readers. Each time the professor relates a new tale involving mythological artifacts and creatures to educate and entertain.

From the realms of the fearsome Fenrir of Norse mythology to the terrifying Egyptian Sphinx to the mischievous Chinese monkey king to the cursed Greek Gorgon, Professor Brownstone's family members have traversed the globe to collect and protect the treasures of world mythology. He explains that 'while most have been courageous, virtuous and selfless' there have been some anomalies.

In the latest instalment cunning Luna Brownstone's conscience is put to the test in the Mexican empire of the Aztecs, home to Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent God of wind and light, giant venomous Gila lizards, vicious water dogs and the rapacious Rain God Tlaloc. Teaming up with Atzi, a villager who must go on a quest to help her drought-stricken village, she meets many challenges along the way.

Joe Todd Stanton uses a colour palette of deep blues, jungle greens, fiery oranges and frosty whites with accents of gold for the Aztec Kingdom. He uses maps at the start and end to give the reader a sense of place and vignettes of Aztec Gods to establish them as characters. His dynamic illustrations, intrepid characters and ever-changing perilous landscapes populated with speech bubbles, scrolls and limited text will excite visual learners. This will also appeal to young fans of fast paced, adventurous, treasure hunter stories and could act as a gateway to other popular mythical series like Percy Jackson. **TJ**

Miss Cat: The Case of the Curious Canary

★★★★

Jean-Luc Fromental and Joelle Jolivet, Thames and Hudson, 9780500660263, £9.99 pbk

Miss Cat is a quirky, mysterious character. She is unusually young to be running her own detective agency and she shares an awful lot more in common with felines than just her name. She dresses all in black with a dark hood – complete with cat's ears – tied tight over her head. She slinks and sleuths about the dark corners of the city and uses her nine lives and feline agility to uncover clues and spy on villainous villains. The Case of the Curious Canary is not an especially exciting problem for Miss Cat to get her fangs into: an old man has lost his bird and wants her to find it. Very quickly, though, Miss Cat discovers that this is certainly not a simple bird-napping. She meets strange new characters – including a talking dog and his ice-cold, serpentine owner – who show her that there is much to unravel in this mystery and that even genuine magic can't be ruled out. This new translation of the French graphic

novel is refreshingly original. There is a film-noir palette of dark pastel shades, and bendy-lined drawings of simple-yet-expressive characters give the pages an old-fashioned feel. Readers will enjoy flicking through the artwork and choosing their favourite images as much as they will enjoy following Miss Cat's story. There is an enjoyable sense of the bizarre, with much left unexplained (why can some animals talk? Why does Miss Cat work alone?). In fact, readers may be left feeling slightly less than satisfied. The narrative is wrapped up rather urgently once key questions have been answered, and Miss Cat shares very little about herself with the reader (beyond her love of milkshake and her friendship with Olaf the octopus!). Fortunately, Miss Cat has several more episodes ready to be translated – perhaps more will be revealed in future episodes. **SD**

The Puppets of Spelhorst

★★★★

Kate DiCamillo, illustrated by Julie Morstad, Walker, 160pp, 9781529512854, £10.00 hbk

This author is a close friend of the brilliant American writer Ann Patchett, who was privileged to hear this story read out loud 'clear-eyed from beginning to end' in a private pre-publication session. It tells of five puppets, a king, a boy, a girl, a wolf and an owl rescued from a rag and bone man to join an affluent family. This is a time of respectful servants, large drawing rooms and helpful uncles with time on their hands. The two little girls of the house put on a play voicing each puppet in the process. Without knowing they are doing it they get close to the particular yearnings the puppets themselves expressed in their otherwise secret conversations with each other. The play, although sometimes comic, provides them with some measure of peaceful resolution.

As always DiCamillo's limpid prose reads easily, and it is accompanied by enchanting pencil drawings from Julie Morstad. But there is a lot of repetition in an already short text, with the wolf particularly insistent on the superb sharpness of his teeth. The other puppets lack the energy of a Russell Hoban or the menace of a Neil Gaiman when it comes to creating animated toys onto the page, and the children who play with them are hardly developed as characters themselves. As a two-time Newbery Medalist, the author well deserves due respect and attention for all she does. But while some readers will be happy to go along with this affectionate, restrained, dreamy little story, others may want more action. But with two more stories still to come in what is going to be the Norendy Tales chapter-book series, it will be fascinating to see what might follow next. **NT**

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

New Talent

Paper Dragons: The Fight for the Hidden Realm

★★★★

Siobhan McDermott, Hachette 344pp, 9781444970142, £7.99 pbk

Siobhan McDermott was born in Hong Kong, grew up on a good mixture of Chinese legends and Irish folklore, and has used these memories of her childhood as the basis for this debut novel. She used to look down into the water on boat trips and imagine a world beneath, and so she has created Hok Woh, the underwater home of the immortal Cyo B'Ahon, in which certain young people, chosen by their own provinces and called Silhouettes, are trained, and have to prove themselves worthy of becoming immortal themselves. At the very beginning of the book, we are told of the mysterious arrival of the baby Zhi Ging, who becomes the heroine of the story, so we are aware that she doesn't actually come from Fei Chui, but she doesn't know of her origin, and neither does her adopted mother, Apau. She does have powers she doesn't understand, and they mean that she is allowed to be a Second Silhouette, in spite of the antipathy of the first, Iridill, daughter of the Head Glassmith. Various trials weed out some of the candidates, but Zhi Ging gets through with help both magical and human, and even starts to understand why Iridill is so bitter, but also wonders what has happened to the Silhouettes who are supposed to have returned home. There is a thread running through that it's all right to be different, whatever people might say, and Zhi Ging stands up for herself in more ways than one.

Hok Won has been attacked in the past, and there is concern that the evil Fui Gwai and its thralls are planning another attack – is there a traitor in their midst? Of



course there is, and the identity is surprising. It's a highly original world: there are floating jellyfish used as communication, the Cyo B'Ahon can age shift, dragons are definitely dangerous, and the cast of characters include helpful young Jack with his strange, mismatched eyes that switch around, and Gertie, the creator of magical creams and potions. There are occasional touches of Irish dialogue: Gertie says 'Don't you pay him no mind', but the ambience is entirely Chinese and well imagined. The name 'Cyo B'Ahon' has been in Siobhan McDermott's head for years waiting for a suitably inventive way for her to use it: it's the pronunciation of the Irish version of her name by a Chinese cousin, and it works very well! She tells us at the back of the book that there are other Cantonese links to the names she has chosen, and that is interesting.

This is evidently the start of a series: barely has the traitor been unmasked than this book ends with Zhi Ging being sent on a quest, and there is the mystery of her origin: we eagerly await the next instalment... **DB**

100 Tales from the Tokyo Ghost Cafe

★★★★

Julian Sedgwick and Chie Kutsuwada, Guppy Books, 394p, 9781913101886, £10.99 pbk.

Manga merges with prose to capture Japanese voices from the past.

Irasshaimase to **100 Tales from the Tokyo Ghost Café**. What is fascinating about this companion to the haunting Tsunami Girl, which was shortlisted for the **Yoto Carnegie Medal for Writing** in 2022, is not just the fantastical fusion of evocative prose and manga but the intertextual and self-referential journey of its

author and illustrator who showcase 'traditional, modern and personal Japanese ghost stories' while tackling universal themes of love, loss, loneliness, isolation, trauma, the fear of being an outsider and how solace can be found in the limitless power of imagination and creativity. Julian's reverence for Japanese culture, folklore, history and spirituality is communicated through Chie's atmospheric panels.

The visual versions of Chie [represented as a rabbit] and Julian allow the reader to be both observer and listener as Moon, the mischievous ghost cat, frames an ambitious narrative of sixteen

interwoven stories and one hundred pages of mystical manga. These are introduced through the portal of a mysterious café guarded by a woman with a secret. Here, the adventurous duo befriend a lost boy and embark on a sacred quest to the haunted north of Japan.

What follows is a kaleidoscope of encounters with yokai as the weird and wonderful, sometimes scary, world of anoy approach. Hauntings, sudden disappearances, traumatised ghosts, the symbolism of flowers and music, an unusual night parade, strange noises and smells, the ravages of war and natural disasters, the echoes of loved ones, and the imprints of Japan's past are all collected within these pages. There is an uncanny sense of being watched throughout as the manga episodes reflect classic legends and spooky happenings. Tales range from the magical to the quirky to the poignant to the spine tingling.

Clever interlocking occurs as the old merges with the new. Yuki and Taka return and the reader witnesses the long-term effects of the 2011 Tsunami. This is aptly juxtaposed with the ghost town culture created by the 2020 Pandemic.

Memorable chapters include the Poesque Killing Moon, the nostalgic A Date at the Galaxy, the curious Stranger on the Slope, The Phone of the Wind, which exists in Otsuchi as a shrine to connect loved ones to the other side, and Julian's eerie childhood experience at Devil's Bridge. As he explains, at the core of the book is 'an interest in what our interaction with ghosts tells us about our feelings about this world and the other world.'

This will appeal to fans of **Tsunami Girl** and Julian's previous visionary collaborations with his late brother Marcus, **Voyages in the Underworld of Orpheus Black** and **Dark Satanic Mills**. It will also delight fans of supernatural manga and ghost stories that surf a gamut of emotions, going beyond the psychology of a scare to reflect on the nature of mortality. A useful glossary of Japanese words and phrases is included at the back. **TJ**

Shadowhall Academy

★★★★

Phil Hicks, Usborne, 220pp, 9781805314905, £7.99 pbk

This new scary series for children opens with a thrilling take on the classic haunted house story. It tells the tale of Lillian Jones' first term at her new boarding school - Shadowhall Academy. It's an eventful term. As well as the tedious lessons and unpalatable school dinners, Lillian encounters unexplained noises coming from the walls and fearful visions of ghostly, child-like spectres. Is her nervous mind playing tricks on her, or are the stories about Shadowhall's ghostly alumni more

than just rumour?

Shadowhall Academy is a thoroughly spooky setting, depicted on the front cover as an old, gothic mansion, shrouded in cloud in an isolated, countryside location. With a small cast (mostly just Lillian and a few new friends), and very little detail shared about characters' lives beyond school, Shadowhall's young residents seem very vulnerable and exposed. There is a chilling sense that something is lurking in the shadows, biding its time to pick off one of the girls at any moment.

Lillian is a kind and likeable girl who quickly endears herself to her new school mates. The first part of the story focuses on establishing their relationship, moving beyond gentle taunting and competing to sharing midnight feasts and looking out for one another. When the telling of a scary rumour about a young girl who died at the mansion a long time ago coincides with some strange knockings coming from the wall, Lillian and her new mates decide to investigate. They enlist the help of Mr Bullen - the school's curious historian - who provides them with some information about Shadowhall's eventful past, which makes the present's ghostly goings on all the more worrying.

Though it takes a fair few chapters for the real scares to emerge, Shadowhall Academy is a genuinely frightening book for young readers, who should expect to be fully freaked-out! Hicks reveals details agonisingly slowly (almost too slowly, at times), and red herrings and wrong turns make the mystery all the more unnerving. Much is left unexplained until the very last possible moment and a sudden increase in pace and some juicy plot twists make for an irresistibly frightening third act. **SD**

Best Friends Forever

★★★★

Lisa Williamson, Jess Bradley, Guppy Books, 252pp, 9781913101558 £7.99 pbk

What do you do if you have read all the books by your favourite author - Jacqueline Wilson, perhaps? Well Lisa Williamson might be just the one to fill the gap and this might be the book for you. The author has made her name writing for a YA audience. Here she moves down in ages to that tricky time - the transition from Primary to Secondary facing 11 to 12 year olds.

Lola and Evie are best friends - and have sworn to remain best friends as they face this change; one that will see them in different classes for the first time in their lives. Lola in particular wants the pattern of life to stay the same - Evie finds she is ready to move on with new friendships, new interests. It is a bitter lesson as Lola discovers - especially when your parents have recently divorced.

Lisa writes with a brisk

contemporary style. Plenty of dialogue pushes the action on. Descriptive passages are short and to the point. Issues are introduced without fuss - first periods, the realisation that best friends may not remain best friends - but can be friends, adjusting to new rules, a stricter routine, adjusting to change in the home. Lola opinionated, outspoken speaks directly to the reader and many will recognise her and the environment - the transition from the familiarity of Year 6 to the new world of Year 7. Characters are lightly drawn to fit recognisable types but their liveliness adds to the credibility of the narrative. The illustrations by Jess Bradley decorating the pages throughout capture the mood and humour of Lola's world with a subtle nod to comic book art. This is a lively accessible novel addressing many situations that will resonate with its audience. **FH**



Glassborn

★★★★

Peter Bunzl, illus Katarzyna Doszla, Usborne, 352pp, 978-1801313681, £7.99 pbk

BSet 'a long time ago, when the Kings of England were always named George,' Peter Bunzl's glistening new fantasy continues the story told in **Magickborn**, though works perfectly as a standalone. The four Glass-Belle children are moving into their mother's old home, Fairykeep Cottage, source of so many of the magical stories she told them. They and their father are grief-stricken following their mother's death. Escaping to the churchyard next door to the house, the youngest child, Acton, finds a mysterious key. This will open the door to an adventure in which all four siblings enter Fairyland, Acton alone save for the enchanted robin Coriel; Cora, Bram and Elle together. With his brother and sisters in the power of the wicked Fairy Queen, Acton is sent to fetch her the Glimmerglass Crown from the head of the Dead King. With shades of Narnia, set in a Fairyland that is both familiar and strange, this is a serious, ambitious and finely written fantasy story. The dangers the

children face feel very real and the tone is quite dark, their foes utterly ruthless, with a terrifying disregard for human or fairy life. The cold of an everlasting winter is warmed by love as Acton encounters family members. Bunzl is ready to centre the power of storytelling too while his young protagonists, storytellers all, show an admirable and inspiring ability to spell and riddle in rhyme. Chapterheads and an illustrated family tree by Katarzyna Doszla add even more to the appeal. **MMA**

The Undying of Obedience Wellrest

★★★★

Nicholas Bowling, Chicken House, 324pp, 9781912626687, £8.99 pbk

This story starts in great style, with a countryside cemetery at midnight scene set in the past quite as good as the famous opening chapter of John Meade Falkner's classic **Moonfleet**. What follows is an equally spirited tale involving grave-robbing, theft, and a planned abduction. This is all revealed via a series of convenient eaves-droppings as young Obedience, usually known as Bede, discovers how her father is scheming to marry her off. This would be to Phineas, a sinister scientist stranger with an artificial nose. This dastardly plan is foiled with the help of Ned, a working-class boy her own age with a most useful pet fly named Mosca.

So far, so Gothic, with Phineas constructing a working laboratory where he eventually hopes to discover the secret of life itself. But in an interesting twist, Bede also has ambitions in that direction, having previously built her own secret laboratory. Unknown to Ned, she too has been conducting experiments on newly dead bodies. Both she and Phineas are searching for the final clue to eternal life, but this can only be found in papers buried in the tomb of Bede's disgraced alchemist ancestor Herbert.

All this is exciting enough, but 'less is more' still works even in full Gothic narratives and the final chapters are so over the top that credibility is stretched to breaking point. Bowling having been so well in charge of his plotting increasingly runs the risk of allowing it to become too much in charge of him as he rushes towards an attempted resolved conclusion. When Ned's supposed grandfather rides away at the end still alive despite receiving multiple bullet holes he takes with him any hope of still believing in this up to now gripping and expertly told very tall story. **NT**

Wild Song

★★★★

Candy Gourlay, David Fickling, 323pp, 9781788452083, £7.99 pbk

This sequel to the author's memorable **Bone Talk** takes the story of Samkad and Luki five years on to 1904. Both still lead a tribal existence in the mountains of the Philippines, where with everyone else they are immersed

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

in a complex network of beliefs. The most important of these consists of honouring and protecting the Dead. But Luki is also a natural rebel who insists on hunting even when this is forbidden to females by the village elders. At risk of isolation, she signs on for a trip to America where she and others of her community will be exhibits at the St Louis World Fair. Once there, excitements and anxieties pile up before she has to decide whether to stay on to enjoy her new freedoms or else return with Samkad to the rich but rigid conventions at home.

Based on research, this is a story that entertains while also describing a moment of history still comparatively little known. A child of her time, Luki is also very much a modern young woman, resentful of patriarchal control wherever it comes from. Gourlay also touches on the nineteenth century craze for eugenics, with Luki wondering why her own people are scorned as head-hunters while American scientists are busy collecting and measuring indigenous skulls. The World Fair experience turns out to be not all bad, despite the inevitable humiliation living a semi-public existence in a Human Zoo. But some of the locals are not friendly, particularly those who had fought in the often brutal Philippine-American war between 1899 and 1902. As racism increasingly rears its ugly head, the two adolescents return home. Both they and any young reader of this brilliant novel are left with a great deal to think about. NT

Read the [BKF Authorgraph](#) interview with Candy Gourlay.

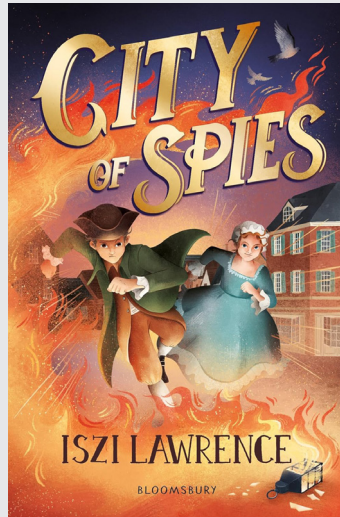
City of Spies

★★★★

Iszi Lawrence, Bloomsbury, 256pp, 978-1801991018, £7.99 pbk

The history of the American War of Independence will be unfamiliar to most young readers but it's an important one and exciting too. Iszi Lawrence, fresh from writing about 18th century pirates, female pilots of World War II and the Suffragettes, opens it up to young readers in her latest historical novel, raising issues that are also relevant today.

Twelve-year-old Aiden is in New York as apprentice to a Manhattan businessman. His family back in England are aristocrats, but his father is the youngest son so won't get the big house or the land, hence Aiden's ambitions to return home with a fortune of his own. He's working for James Rivington, coffeehouse and printing press owner, and, as some adults will know, a key member of the Culper spy ring. Aiden, like most of New York, believes his boss is a king's man, and as the story opens, his own loyalties lie with King George too. As a lowly apprentice, Aiden encounters all sorts of people, and makes friends with servants of his



own age. An accidental discovery of a coded message opens his eyes to the intrigues going on around him, and the realisation that the city is rife with spies and double agents. As his understanding of what's happening develops, his views of the king begin to change. Lawrence's story places Aiden alongside Major John André, head of the British intelligence, as he travels up the Hudson River to meet the traitor Benedict Arnold. The two are involved in skirmishes with the Americans, and Aiden is instrumental in Washington's soldiers taking his former friend captive. Aiden is distressed and guilty about what he's done, but readers are left in no doubt that he was right to do it, and indeed, on the right side of history.

There are many moments of spy action – the passing of secret messages, deciphering of codes, narrow escapes for Aiden and his friends – that will be fun for readers but the challenge of working out who believes what, who supports whom, is just as satisfying and definitely more challenging. André's comparison of the colonies to badly behaved children needing to be beaten into behaving properly rings hollow with Aiden and the image will resonate with all young readers.

A map would be a useful addition to the book, and a cast of characters at the beginning would be welcome too but it's another gripping, revealing piece of historical adventure from Lawrence and well worth sharing. MMA

Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre

(Abridged for young readers)

★★★★

Patrice Lawrence, Walker Books, 224pp, 978 1 5295-0662-4 £7.99 pbk

I have to start this review with a confession. I am not a fan of *Jane Eyre*, never have been. There, I've said it, a terrible literary admission. So, on receiving this book for review my heart kind of sank. However,...

what Patrice Lawrence has done with this book was, for me, nothing short of miraculous. This abridgement of the classic is by no means a 'dumbing down'. It is a retelling where the beauty of Brontë's language is highlighted and the story clarified. Somehow, the simplicity brings the very best elements of the literature to the fore.

As a young reader, I found Jane's decisions irritating. Mr Rochester was cruel, unlikeable and distinctly unattractive. I couldn't understand the reasons behind the actions that took the plot forward and I hated the disparaging way that women were treated and the way in which difference was regarded. I knew the story had been written in another time but I found the cruelty too difficult to get past and so I dismissed the whole thing.

In this abridgement, I found that Patrice Lawrence had managed to recognise and address many of the issues whilst at the same time capturing the essence of the original book. In this version the simplicity means that the very bones of the original story are highlighted, the neatness of the original writing and the beautiful language are at the front and centre of the book and somehow the very 'Brontëness' shines through. All the things that I found irritating, grating and unbelievable as a young reader are there, but set in context and acknowledged in that context.

This adaptation of *Jane Eyre* is a clever and careful introduction to an important classic for young readers. It is perfectly pitched to introduce a great work of fiction and a time in history to those who may not be quite ready for the full version. Oh, and Reader, thanks to Patrice Lawrence, I have rediscovered *Jane Eyre* and found the beauty within it. LJS

Northern Soul

★★★★

Phil Earle, Barrington Stoke, 112pp., 9781800902039, £7.99, pbk

Here's another winner for teenage boys from Barrington Stoke. It poses the question: if you were a boy suddenly smitten by an unforeseen romantic yearning, where might you turn for reliable advice? For all his fourteen years, Marv has found sufficient excitement in football, male friendship, and the occasional trip to the cinema. Then Carly Stonehouse moves into his street, his class, and, most disconcertingly, his heart. Marv has no idea how he might even say hello to Carly, let alone get her to consider him as boyfriend material. Then along comes an unexpected love guru, the ghost of American soul legend, Otis Redding. This is a bonkers idea to start with, and add to it that ghost Otis has a northern accent and an appetite for even the saddest and grubbiest slice of pizza, then Marv is in for some toe curlingly embarrassing moments as he follows the advice of this unlikely matchmaker. Marv suffers badly for

the reader's amusement. It's even his best friend who ends up snogging Carly. For those of us of the same gender who have moved beyond that stage of life and longing, it may be all too familiar, as it may be to those who are the subject of such inept wooing. But, with Marv as a slightly older and wiser narrator, Phil Earle plays it unerringly for laughs. He makes sure that his hero eventually comes to terms with the knock backs, and we leave Marv making friends with a new girl on a bus. Like Marv, she knows that the living Otis Redding was the king of Soul, even if she is blissfully unaware that his ghost turned out to be mostly rubbish at romance. Soul fans may also take solace in the fact that long-suffering Marv shares his name with another soul legend best known as the writer of *Sexual Healing*, although the self-obsessed lyrics of that song suggest that the ghost of Marvin Gaye might have been even more unreliable as a love guide. CB

On Silver Tides

★★★★

Sylvia Bishop, Andersen, 305pp, 9781839133589, £8.99, pbk

Kelda and her family are silvermen. A race of water people who can swim like fish and breathe through their skin in water. They live their water-based lives on the river network of the British Isles, in harmony with the water ecology and with each other. Kelda's sister Isla is different, she can't breathe under water and Kelda, who saved her life when she was a baby, is her fierce and loving protector. When the rivers seem to turn bad and the very existence of the silvermen is threatened, the community looks for something – or someone – to blame and the old superstitions and distrust of difference threaten Isla's life. Kelda is driven to act and driven from the safety and security of her world to discover a new and different life, new people and a whole new way of being.

A twisty, tumbling story of coming of age and developing understanding is brilliantly held together by the invention of a whole new mythology and the actual, geographically accurate, rivers of the British Isles. Part fantasy world, part ecological fable, part quest, this is a fast-paced and fast-moving adventure story that carries the reader with it, every step (stroke) of the way. Reading it is like being in a river, you're carried from calm waters, to rapids, through dangerous whirlpools and into beautiful still lochs and pure streams. Through the watery journey you witness the self-discovery that Kelda goes through and learn about the mythology and lore of the rivers, but you also understand the importance of family and love, of selflessness and bravery in the light of blind belief and fear.

This is a book that will really appeal to lovers of fantasy adventure, but it will also engage any reader who loves a fast-paced voyage story with plenty of peril, daring and courage. LJS

Casander Darkbloom and the Threads of Power

★★★★

P.A. Staff, ill. Nathan Collins, Walker, 388pp., 9781529506280, £7.99, pbk

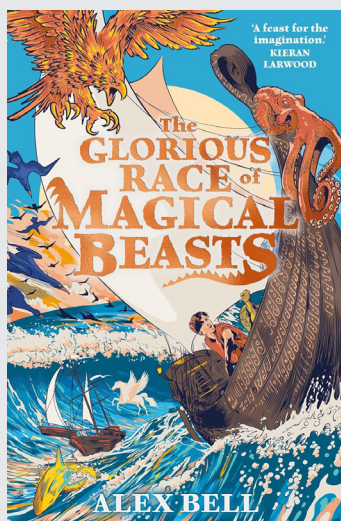
To borrow the phraseology of art history, this debut fantasy is recognisably school of Potter. Most of the action takes place in a school of magic, not unlike Hogwarts. Our hero, Casander, is the Foretold destined to defeat the Master of All, a demonic figure not unlike he whose name cannot be spoken. There are a pair of silver haired, blue-eyed bullies. And so on. However, P.A. Staff does ring some changes. Casander shares a rare neurological condition with the author which causes sudden spasms in his limbs – his ‘funny leg’ – and he finds friendship among a group of children known as the ‘Abnormies’ who do not fit into the usual categories of the magical powers of the other children in the school. An afterword to the novel explains that the book was ‘created to tackle the universal themes of embracing your differences, conquering people’s perceptions of them, and learning to be your own hero who is neither held back nor defined by them.’ And the story carries the message lightly, entertainingly, and effectively. In what might be the first in a series, a lot of time is spent in building the world of the Balance Lands, which, like Potter’s world, lives alongside our own, and, a la Potter, children will find plenty to amuse and intrigue them, mixed up with the everyday routines and challenges of school life. At the very end of the novel, there is a twist that it would be a pity to reveal but which suggests a different trajectory for the next book in the series, should there be one. **CB**

The Glorious Race of Magical Beasts

★★★★★

Alex Bell, ill. Tim McDonagh, Faber, 346pp., 9780571382231, £7.99 pbk

Twelve-year old Eli is an apprentice librarian at the largest library in the world, and is content to remain so, though his magical powers have enabled him to bring daring hero Jeremiah Jones out of a book to be his friend, so he does get a bit of excitement occasionally. His parents had died during a Glorious Race of Magical Beasts some years ago, so he lives with his Nana, and helps her in her café, which is staffed by chocolate penguin waiters and serves utterly delicious desserts and soft drinks. The Race is coming up again, and a rude customer,



evidently a racer, upsets Nana, and her loss of magic causes the chocolate penguins to run amok. Nana is normally able to cope, but finally admits that she is seriously ill. Eli realizes that he must enter the Race, and try to win the magical ruby that will cure Nana. His magical beast, though, is a moon tortoise, called Humphrey, a timid and unadventurous creature who is just looking forward to his 100th birthday, nothing like the Pegasi and dragons that some other racers have. He is befriended by daring Raven, a skilled archer, with her super-speedy ice hare, and she needs to win to save their magical forest. Eli and Raven work well as a team and triumph in various perilous situations and against the machinations of the rude racer, Vincent. Eli is resourceful, but also finds courage he did not know he had. Humphrey the tortoise often gets into difficulties, and they sometimes need the help of Jeremiah Jones and his magical ship, but as they approach the end of the race, they realise that winning means that one of them must lose....

A sub-plot involves the fact that, in taking Jeremiah Jones out of a book, Eli has prevented the author from writing a sequel, and that dilemma is very cleverly solved.

Alex Bell is the author of the excellent **Polar Bear Explorers' Club** series, and this imaginary magical world is just as wonderful a place in which a young reader can be immersed. This former Librarian really loves the idea of being able to travel instantly from library to library, as long as Eli has the right key to the doors... Tim McDonagh's heroic comicbook style is ideally suited, and **The Glorious Race of Magical Beasts** is indeed a glorious adventure! **DB**

Great Minds

★★★★★

Joan Haig and Joan Lennon, ill. André Ducci, Templar Books, 80pp, 978 1 80078 353 9, £16.99 hbk

This is a fascinating journey through 2500 years of thinkers and philosophy and is a book that will not disappoint. It is a wide ranging and fairly comprehensive study of major philosophers throughout the world, each chapter being devoted to a particular philosopher or group of philosophers arranged in chronological order.

Starting with Confucius or Kong Fuzi (551 – 479 BCE) the authors look at other philosophers from across the world such as Zeno of Elea (490 – 425 BCE), the Socratics, Ibn Rushid (1126 – 1198) and Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832). In particular I enjoyed learning more about the life story of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759 – 1797) who is regarded as one of the first feminists. A great strength of the book is the interesting biographical information which is presented. Gandhi's story (1869 – 1948) is recounted in detail showing how he adopted a 'philosophy that would win India its freedom' (p. 43). More recent thinkers included in this publication include Susanne Langer who, 'Believed we needed both science and art to understand life' (p.53). The final chapter concentrates on Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1959 -) who is an American law professor focusing on inequalities in society.

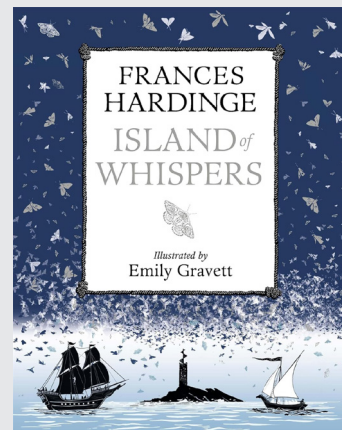
The glossary at the end of the book is very helpful as is the layout of the book in graphic novel style. There are some fantastic whole page illustrations too which engage the reader. I am sure this non-fiction book will inspire many youngsters to study philosophy. The authors have written for an audience of 8-year-olds upwards and there are some great stories and facts within the book. For example, Aristotle tutored Alexander the Great as he was growing up. Here is a good quality hardback which is rich with information and is ideal for young people to dip into. **JS**

Island of Whispers

★★★★★

Francis Hardinge, ill. Emily Gravett, Two Hoots, 120pp, 9781529088076, £14.99, hbk

This seems to me to be something of a departure for Frances Hardinge, at least in its presentation. It's a relatively short book in large format, and Emily Gravett's illustrations pull an almost equal weight in telling the story. Hardinge's prodigious imagination is harnessed and put in the service of a mysterious reverberating folk-like tale of life and death, story and memory, greed and grief, that shudders and shimmers in



and out of shadows and light, like a boat at night. Milo is the son of the ferryman whose task is to carry the ghosts of the newly dead to the island of the Broken Tower. This is not an easy task and is governed by rituals as unquestionable as death itself: the collection of the shoes of the dead and the hooding of the ferryman's ghostly passengers (for to look on the face of death is itself fatal). Milo is the younger son who is not expected to inherit this onerous responsibility, but on this dreadful night, a series of events, which include his father's death, force it upon him. The events are driven by the actions of the local lord, the ghost of whose fourteen-year-old daughter (the same age as Milo) is aboard the ferry, and who her grieving father is determined to bring back to life, even if it can be done only by magic. Milo sets sail but is pursued by the lord, with two magicians in his service, determined to wrest his daughter from Milo's care.

The theme, and Hardinge's treatment of it, is deep, dark, strange, and ultimately hopeful. It seems as if it might be rooted in some real ancient beliefs and ceremonies about the passage from life to death, but which have undergone their own strange alterations over time. In the hands of another illustrator, (why do I think of the late Charles Keeping?) this could have been, for most of its telling, quite disturbing. Emily Gravett, however, takes a cool, objective approach, introducing an equal amount of white space into her pictures from the very start, even for the action which takes place at night, and her depiction of the lord and his magicians mixes up historical and cultural references to a degree that reassuringly emphasises the fictional nature of the tale. Even the magician's headless birds with their monkey claws are made to look like ingenious creations rather than diabolical grotesques. It's a brilliant tale, which deals profoundly and movingly with mortality and, like the folk tales that are its origin and model, will fascinate, excite, and finally comfort its young readers. **CB**

reviews

14+ Secondary/Adult



Little Bang

★★★★★

Kelly McCaughrain, Walker, 304pp, 978-1-4063-7572-5, £8.99 pbk.

New Year's Eve can often occasion reckless behaviour, but not always with far-reaching consequences. One act of lovemaking between studious, dutiful, virgin Mel and her polar opposite boyfriend Sid results in the creation of a baby: Little Bang. Mel is on course for Cambridge University: Sid is on course for total failure in his GCSEs and he harbours an unformed desire to be a musician and song writer. To make matters worse, they live in Northern Ireland, where abortion was banned until 2019 and is often difficult to obtain even now.

What can they do? Mel's deeply Christian pro-life parents insist that she must keep the baby: Sid's feisty, unconventional mother Lucille who brought up Sid on her own-advocates abortion, which would mean Mel travelling to England to have the procedure alone. All is confusion and high emotion and Mel, overwhelmed by her parents, reluctantly agrees that her pregnancy will go to full term. Sid's love for Mel causes him to rethink his life and leave school to take on a series of part-time jobs so that he can eventually support her and the baby.

McCaughrain creates entirely believable teenage characters: Sid is no stereotypical drop-out and Mel is not in thrall to her parents' predictable response to her dilemma. Underneath the stances they have adopted run the powerful urges of a career in music and a prestigious university education respectively. But more immediately still are their learned responses to abortion-it's murder, it's a shameful act, it's a cowardly way of

avoiding responsibility, it's selfish-all of which castigate the woman and elevate the man to someone who was betrayed, robbed of his child, entitled to sympathy.

Mel's decision to have an abortion and her lonely journey to get one weren't the worst of her sufferings. The hardest thing to bear was the failure of her friends, schoolmates, mother-and even Sid-to understand that the decision had to be hers, that pregnancy and its effect on the mother is very different to its effect on the father and she had to decide what was right for her, for her life. This is a timely and thought-provoking book and an essential buy for school libraries and discussion groups. It never preaches, often entertains and has the cast-iron ring of truth. It also has a remarkable character in Sid's mother, Lucille and a happy ending with no whiff of sentiment or contrivance: first-rate indeed! VR



Didn't See That Coming

★★★★★

Jesse Q. Sutanto, Electric Monday, 384pp, 978-0-00-850149-5, £8.99 pbk

Kiki is a Year Eleven student in Jakarta, Indonesia. Her super-strict parents have moved her from her liberal high school where she was happy and popular to an extremely elite, expensive and highly acclaimed High School, much to her disdain.

Whereas in her previous school, students did not have to stand up in class to greet the teacher and were not sent to the principal's office for calling someone a twat, Kiki is required to do so at her new school. Her only solace in her increasingly miserable world, is playing an online game called Warfront Heroes. Kiki

plays as a male as she received online hate when she identified as a female playing this game. However, she didn't expect to make her best friend in this online world and then to discover that he goes to her new school.

Can she find out who her best friend is, when he is not online, while keeping her identity a secret? And what will the consequences be in terms of the sexism inherent in her new school?

With an appealing protagonist and a sparky tone this is a hugely entertaining read. RB



The Bad Ones

★★★★★

Melissa Albert, Penguin, 383pp, 978 0 241 66203 8, £8.99 pbk.

When four people go missing from a small town, alarm bells ring long and hard in the minds of the residents. One of the missing is Becca, Nora's best and lifelong friend. Nora determines that she will find her-especially as their friendship has recently been strained almost to breaking point for reasons which Nora doesn't understand. Becca's dead-of-night text 'I love you' is enough to send Nora to her house, falling asleep outdoors in the brutal cold waiting for her return when Becca isn't to be found.

They created their own world, their Kingdom, with their childhood games-in the woods, the two of them so close that they were one entity. But Becca added layers-tests of Nora's belief in her, tasks which sometimes risked her life, all in the service of the goddess they had chosen to rule their secret world, its centre reaching out into the occult. When the identity of the woman who killed Becca's mother in a hit and run was revealed Becca

invoked the goddess' help in revenge and the woman died when her car was stranded on a level crossing with a train coming at full speed. Little by little, the goddess began to infiltrate Becca's life and then, when Becca disappeared, made a play for Nora, which she finds increasingly difficult to resist.

This blend of gothic horror and the supernatural is skilfully done, but the narrative has flaws which could lead to confusion or exasperation in readers. The story of Nora's quest to find Becca is labyrinthine, with a myriad of characters, many of them chorus figures-of necessity with little or no development. She has a small, key support group and perhaps Albert could have given them more space to enrich their authenticity. Albert's writing is accomplished and rich with imagery, but there is a tendency, later in the book, to over-embellish, especially when she describes Nora's increasingly chaotic thought processes as the goddess tries to overwhelm her. The romantic element of the book-a developing relationship between James and Nora-sits uneasily on the surface of the narrative and is never fully realised or wholly convincing.

There is, however, real tension and drama in much of the book, particularly when Becca and one of her closest friends dig into the library of school yearbooks and find links and clues to disappearances decades earlier and an eerie connection with a now unused part of the campus. Albert is at her best both with the unexpected and when her characters find a sudden solution after careful research.

The Bad Ones is almost 400 pages long, yet very often commands attention from the reader. It is disappointing, therefore, that Albert has seeded so many clues, astounded with the unexpected and then brought the story to such a rushed close that the denouement is not always clear. However, this will find its place in the supernatural genre of YA fiction and be enjoyed by fans of the occult and the mysterious. VR

Valediction: No.14 Oxford Boxes

Brian Alderson is bidding farewell as he donates his remarkable collection of children's books to **Seven Stories**. His latest gift is a set of boxes edited by the one and only Mrs. Herbert Strang.

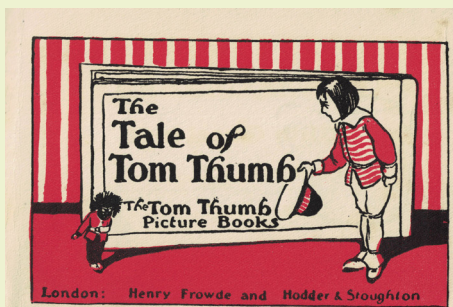
I bought the first of these boxes from Demetzy's stand at a bookfair. I was very pleased to see it since, for some time, I had been collecting Oxford children's books published before the Second World War which must be accounted one of the most extensive and varied range of children's books ever produced by a single publisher but I had never seen a box the likes of this.



1 & 2. Mrs Herbert Strang ed[.] DOLLY'S PRETTY PLAY BOX (Henny-Penny Books for Little Chicks) [1933], MY OWN BOX OF BOOKS (The Teeny-Weeny series) [1934] and BABY BUNTING'S BOX OF BOOKS (The Tippy-Tuppeny series) 1935

Children's books as a new line of business for Oxford had begun in 1906 when the London office at Amen Corner in the City entered into a 'Joint Venture' with the neighbouring firm of Hodder & Stoughton in Warwick Lane, both of them beginners in the field who saw advantage in collaboration.

At that time the head of the Oxford office was Henry Frowde but the ideas man was his deputy, Humphrey Milford who was probably responsible for appointing as editors two men experienced in publishing for children although primarily as authors: Herbert Ely and Charles James L'Estrange, happily combining their talents under the single pseudonym of Herbert Strang. They managed the operation for both companies from the Oxford premises, initially on the top floor of the building where they were known as 'the heavenly twins' and proceeded to issue well over a thousand children's or educational books up to their retirement in 1938. (A valuable account of some aspects of their work – and especially



3. The Tale of Tom Thumb

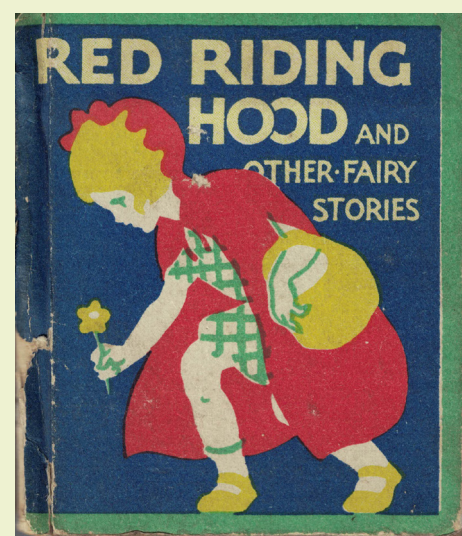
the identity of 'Mrs Herbert Strang' – has been given by Hilary Clare in Newsletter 77 of the **Children's Books History Society** (November, 2000. pp.13-18) while a fascinating reminiscence of a spell as an assistant editor alongside 'Herbert Strang' during the late 1930s is given by Grace Hogarth who had joined the London office after leaving the New York branch in 1936: 'Children's Publishing in the 1930s' (*Signal* 61 January, 1990 pp.51-63).

The first of the boxes may be seen as an experimental production within the immense category of small cheap Frowde/Strang storybooks. In this case eight of the twenty-four 'Henny Penny series' were singled out for the box and given plain coloured bindings with a title label unlike the rest of the series with variegated pictorial covers [pics 3 and 4] rarely with a recognisable author or illustrator although 'Mrs Strang' was a series of women contributors some of whom also invented hundreds of little stories in other series for young children. (Hilary Clare's article is rich in both fact and speculation.)

With two further boxes in the same fashion also turning up at bookfairs I could assume that the experiment was a success. In editorial terms it certainly bears a relationship to the many quarto annuals that came from Amen House during the same period. Many were edited by 'Mrs Strang' (Hilary Clare speculates on authorships) despite the anonymity of writers, but names might be attached to such illustrators as L.A.Govey, May Smith and Angusine MacGregor¹ who were regulars and may well have done drawings for the book boxes. Nevertheless, for all their distinction of design and (as noted above) for all the presence of otherwise unknown boxes in the copyright libraries no more of these boxes seem to

Given the care that went in to the design of the box and its contents, the experiment encouraged at least the two further variants that I also picked up at bookfairs. I have never seen any others although the two English legal deposit collections boast one

duplicate box but not the other two while also having what seem to be similarly made-up collections but with different box titles. As may be seen from the descriptions, the three named series of storybooks amount to 22 titles but they are taken from a total of at least 96 of the unboxed items all of which are of colourful pictorial designs very different from the redesigned covers of the boxed titles. It is impossible to assign an author for any of them although a comparison with stories and illustrations in the annuals allows some fruitful speculation.



4. Red Riding Hood

[Be it known that the following boxes drawing on the same three sets are to be found in the British Library and the Bodleian Library but an analysis of them will take more than tippy-tuppeny's worth of labour:]

My Little Holiday Box, Nursery Rhymes Box of Books, Our Darling's Box of Books, Teeny-Weenie's Gift Box, Tippy-Tuppeny's Gift Box, No other locations are known.

1. MacGregor deserves special mention since she was both author and illustrator for the first series of Ladybird Books that appeared in 1941.

Click [here](#) for the biblio details and descriptions.



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.