

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.265

the children's book magazine online

March 2024



Authorgraph interview **Catherine Doyle**

Windows into Illustration **Mariajo Ilustrajo**

Plus **Comics: the answer to the UK's literacy crisis?**

And **Kate Saunders** a retrospective



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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is **Where Sleeping Girls Lie** by **Faridah Ābiké-Íyímíde**. Cover artwork by **Ayikut Aydoğdu**. Thanks to Usborne for their help with this cover.



Editorial 265

The last two months have been busy ones in the world of children's books. They've seen the announcements the shortlists for a number of key children's book awards, including the [Yoto Carnegies](#) and the [Children's Book Award](#) as well as the winners of the inaugural [Inclusive Books for Children](#) awards, the [ALCS Educational Writers' Award](#) and the **2024 Ruth Rendell Award**. Congratulations to all the authors and illustrators shortlisted and also to all those involved in the judging and administration of awards. Awards do much to alert people to new books, authors and illustrators they may not know, and to raise awareness of the best writing for children and we're always pleased to cover the lists in **BfK**.

Augmented reality for toddlers

Research carried out by **Oxford University Press** reveals that almost 9 in 10 parents believe educational apps can benefit their child's learning (89%), digital skills (89%) and numeracy skills (89%). While 4 in 5 parents have concerns around online safety, 66% of respondents believe that children whose parents spend time using apps with them know how to keep themselves safer online later on in life. With these findings in mind **OP** has created the **Little Oxford** app, which uses augmented and virtual reality technology to create a fun, collaborative learning experience for young learners and their parents or carers.

One of the few apps to offer educational content for pre-schoolers, **Little Oxford** was developed with Early Years specialist Sue Cowley, and aligns with the UK curriculum. It's one of the few apps to provide activities to guide children through all the seven key areas of Foundation Stage and Oxford International Early Years Curriculum: communication and language; literacy; mathematics; physical development; personal, social and emotional development; understanding the world; and expressive arts and design.

Available on all major app stores, including the Apple App Store and Google Play Store, a limited version of the Little Oxford app is free to download and trial, with the full app available with a subscription of £15 for three months or £30 for the year. There are no in-app purchase options, ensuring parents can be reassured that young children can enjoy the app safely. Brave new world? Let's wait for the next research findings.

And now we hand over to Jon Appleton to introduce his new children's lit fan zine, *the gab* ...

If you're like me, news of an exciting book will send you scurrying to the phenomenal resource that is the **BfK** website. Didn't that illustrator cut their teeth on a novel back in ...? X says Y is an influence ... That's not surprising, and I want to know more about them both. Practically every time the answer is available at the click of your fingertips. For 44 years, BfK has faithfully and perceptively recorded the history of children's books.

But no magazine is an island, and I'm all too aware that other sources exist that can corroborate and challenge, provide contrast and contradiction and fill in gaps, too. But unlike **BfK**, there's no dedicated website to archive these resources. They exist only in paper form and when the paper perishes ... how will they be preserved?

That's why I've begun bringing voices together in a new quarterly fan zine called *the gab* short for **The Golden Age Bulletin**, because my starting point is the second golden age of children's books which thrived in the 1950s and informed writers of the 60s, 70s, 80s and on to today. It was a collegiate time, long before social media provided a platform to unite colleagues and still everyone found a way to know each other, and talk about books they loved for the sake of their love of these books. These endeavours are too important to be forgotten and should, I hope, provide encouragement to our industry today. Quite a few initiatives in the 2020s feel maverick and new but it's salutary to know that activism in children's books is far from new - but it needs to be championed, or else gains may be lost once more ...

The gab introduces you to wonderful pieces from decades past which might not otherwise be readily available. But there are new features, too, including interviews with many of the leading movers and shakers of the children's book world - including former **BfK** editors **Chris Powling** and **Rosemary Stones**, authors **Jill Paton Walsh** and **Gillian Cross**, and editors **Judith Elliott** and **Jane Nissen**.

Will you join in? It's free to subscribe - just email me at jon@lettersfromrobin.com, and the pdf will be emailed to you quarterly. I hope you might like to contribute. Wouldn't that add to the fun?

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Reimagining Robert Louis Stevenson's **Treasure Island**

Jewell Parker Rhodes has updated Stevenson's classic in her new book **Treasure Island: Runaway Gold**.



When I thought about writing an updated version of Robert Louis Stevenson's novel **Treasure Island** (1883), my mind and heart were immediately engaged. As a professor, I'd taught Stevenson's novels frequently and always marveled at the psychological complexity and moral ambiguity. **Treasure Island**, one of the first children's books to feature pirates, included the rare instance of an adult betraying a child. Nonetheless, Stevenson's novel created an enduring popular culture legacy of pirates as enticing characters

that ignored their well-documented roles in the proliferation of colonization and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The 1911 N.C. Wyeth-illustrated American edition with its detailed drawings and brilliant colors, ensured **Treasure Island's** enduring fame. Numerous television and film adaptations soon followed.

Reimagining **Treasure Island** for today's youth, I wanted to deepen the exploration of class and race. Setting the novel in contemporary New York City provided the perfect opportunity to explore social inequities and to disband the original white cast (with its inference of white exceptionalism) and create a multi-ethnic world.

Zane, my protagonist, is African American. Like the original protagonist, Jim Hawkins, Zane's father has recently died and he helps his mother earn income by renting to borders (including the mysterious Captain Maddie who receives the dreaded 'black spot.')

Instead of one central protagonist, I have three heroic kids. Kiko is mixed race (African-American and Japanese) whose father is a doctor and her mother, a professor. Kiko is the 'brains' of the trio as well as a kendo master. Jack is a low-income kid who tries to protect his mom and himself from his father's bullying. These three life-long friends set out to solve seemingly impenetrable clues and locate the treasure. During the search, their perspectives and loyalty are challenged and tested. Each child's 'coming of age' realistically includes heroism, bittersweet self-awareness, and life-defining choices. Hip-Hop, Zane's loving Jack Russell, provides comic relief and protection (especially from rats!).

But how do urban kids sail? On skateboards, of course! During the pandemic, skateparks became a perfect metaphor for the camaraderie, derring-do, and resiliency of today's youth.

My pirates use skateboards as sailboats, racing down streets and through abandoned underground subways to steal the treasure map. Zane, Kiko, and Jack, dodge the threatening crew and debate whether Captain John (a pirate or pretender?) can be trusted. Zane, desiring a father-figure, is the most vulnerable to Captain John and learns the hard lessons of John's hypocrisy and shifting personas.

Setting the novel in New York also allowed me to memorialize African American history and the market where Black people were stood against a wall and sold. This wall inspired the famous and infamous name 'Wall Street.' To this day, very few people know that lower Manhattan was a profitable slave market and that thousands of Blacks built the port, banks, and office buildings of this world-famous economic centre.

Thomas Downing, a free Black and abolitionist known as the 'Oyster King,' used his Wall Street restaurant to cater to businessmen while also running an underground railroad station. Unlike Captain John who was deceptively 'two-faced' to steal treasure, Downing used his shifting personas to free oppressed people.

Searching for gold, Zane uncovers his heritage and discovers how the North did indeed enslave Black people and how his ancestors since colonial times, contributed significantly to the culture of New York. In 1991, while preparing construction for a federal office tower, human skeletons were found buried thirty feet beneath the surface. This led to the discovery of a six-acre cemetery for free and enslaved Blacks that had been built upon since the 1630s. Over 15,000 intact skeletal remains were uncovered. The last remaining quarter of the cemetery's acres was spared and transformed into a national park site, The African American Burial Ground.

Sadder yet wiser, more aware of human dynamics, both psychological and emotional, Zane saves the treasure from pirates and donates the gold to preserve New York's African American cultural heritage and the burial ground history.

I loved reimagining **Treasure Island**—combining my interests in history and literature with the exuberance of adventure tales. I hope all readers will cheer (and maybe weep a little) as Zane and his friends overcome treachery with allegiance, dishonesty with honesty, and betrayal with morality.

This novel is my praise-song to kids everywhere—each of you is a hero of your own life's adventure. Set sail!

Dr. Jewell Parker Rhodes is an award-winning and New York Times bestselling author and educator for both youth and adults. She is the author of seven books for children including **Ghost Boys** and **Black Brother, Black Brother**, and the **Louisiana Girls Trilogy**: *Ninth Ward*, *Sugar*, and *Bayou Magic*. She is the Founding Artistic Director and Piper Endowed Chair at the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing at Arizona State University. She was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from Carnegie-Mellon University.

Treasure Island: Runaway Gold is published by Quill Tree Books, 978-0062998354.



Dr. Jewell Parker Rhodes is an award-winning and New York Times bestselling author and educator for both youth and adults. She is the author of seven books for children including **Ghost Boys** and **Black Brother, Black Brother**, and the **Louisiana Girls Trilogy**: *Ninth Ward*, *Sugar*, and *Bayou Magic*. She is the Founding Artistic Director and Piper Endowed Chair at the **Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing** at **Arizona State University**. She was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from Carnegie-Mellon University.

Comics: The Answer to the UK's Literacy Crisis?

Peter Kessler thinks they are

We're used to Spider-Man saving the world from the Green Goblin and a multiverse of masked miscreants. But new research suggests that he could have the super-powers to do something even more valuable – something our government has signally failed to do: turn us into a nation of readers again.

A unique project has been unfolding in a primary school in North Manchester. **Abraham Moss** is a typical, hard-working community school in an underprivileged area. Most of its students are from ethnic minority backgrounds, and it has a higher-than-average number in receipt of the Pupil Premium subsidy given to disadvantaged students. The school has spent two academic years participating in a Europe-wide research project entitled *Comics and Literacy*. The aim of the project: to analyse and quantify the impact of exposure to comics on young people.

The results are jaw-dropping.

Jaw-dropping but, for me at least, not surprising.

I used to work as an English teacher, and I saw first-hand how transformative comics can be for children disengaged from the written word. In my school the first five minutes of every English lesson were spent in silent reading. Everyone was expected to have a book. But of course there were some who never brought one along. For these defiant souls I kept a stash of graphic novels in Mr Kessler's Cupboard. They ranged from the wordless (Shaun Tan's **The Arrival**) to full Shakespeare adaptations (Ian Pollock's **King Lear**). I witnessed young teenagers change from staring dumbly into the middle distance to shyly requesting the same book they had last time. I even witnessed pupils with learning difficulties increasing and improving their powers of description by adding speech-bubbles to comic-book pictures.

But this was all anecdotal, individual. The *Comics and Literacy* programme is different. It's the first time a professional academic study has been conducted into the impact of comics on literacy.

Funded by **Comic Art Europe**, conducted by the **Lakes International Comic Art Festival (LICAF)**, and overseen by Prof. Andrew Miles, Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester, *Comics in Literacy* presents incontrovertible evidence that the combination of words and pictures produces hitherto unimaginable levels of enthusiasm, interest and dedication in young minds. In other words, comics are good for you.

During the project, 50 children in Year 3 to 4 participated in the comics programme. 50 children continued their regular syllabus, as a control and comparison group.

Here are some of the highlights from the final report:

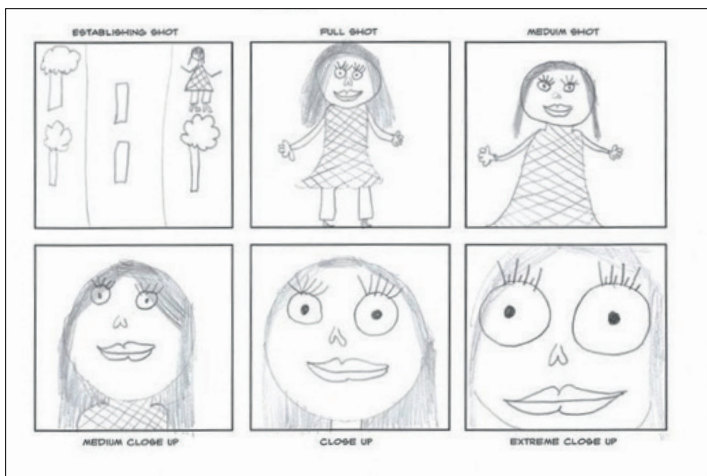
- The average reading age of the class involved in the comics intervention rose by 18 months in the 12 months after the workshops started. The comparison group saw a rise of only 11 months.
- Two thirds of the parents of this group noted specific changes in reading habits in their children, including interest, independence and confidence in learning.
- The pupils spoke enthusiastically about receiving and reading **The Phoenix** comic at home, where it was often read also by participants' siblings.
- By the end of the project, the number of students agreeing that being given a book as a gift would make them happy had risen by 13 percent while there was a decline of 14 percent among the comparison group.
- The number of children who listed reading as one of their favourite leisure activities doubled in the comics group, while it reduced in popularity among the comparison group.

These results are, self-evidently, spectacular. They suggest that comics have the power to unlock a love of reading. That in turn leads to a love of learning. And that in turn leads to better educational outcomes for our society. And when I say better education, I don't just mean better OFSTED reports or higher percentages of grades 9 to 5 at GCSE. I mean a deep, ingrained, generational appreciation of the value of education.

So what exactly was going on in those comic-based sessions at **Abraham Moss**?

The **LICAF** team (Hester Harrington and Sim Leech, both experienced teachers who also work in the comics field) ran a series of ten full-day workshops with the children, focusing on both making and reading comics. The making element was a crucial part of the process, as it helped the students understand the comics format and how it can be used to tell a story.

To help with this, they were joined by a series of professional comic artists. Marc Jackson (marcmakescomics.co.uk) ran a session called



Learning the language of comics



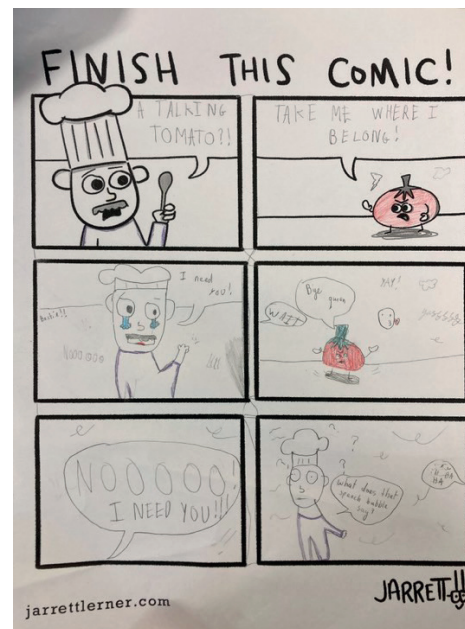
Shared reading



A comics poster made by the children



Creating autobiographical comics



Learning sequence and narrative with comics

Confidence in Drawing, encouraging children to draw big, bold pictures (the only rule being that no crossing out was allowed). Sim Leech recalls the impact on a seven-year-old boy: 'He started off saying he couldn't draw, and he didn't want to join in. Two hours later he was standing at the front of the class waving a huge picture he'd created, proud and happy.'

Artist Sayra Begum (sayra.co.uk) whose breakthrough graphic novel **Mongrel** is an unflinching account of a young Muslim woman growing up in the UK, worked with the group on autobiographical storytelling through pictures. The class's regular Year 3 teacher commented that these workshops didn't just improve the children's storytelling and confidence: they also helped them understand sequencing of events and narratives. She later found that the children who had participated in the comics programme more easily grasped a lesson on first aid than those in the non-comics group.

Occasionally the impact of the programme surprised even the workshop runners themselves. Sim arrived at one session to find the children had created a wall display about Anglo-Saxon life. With no input from the teacher, several pupils had drawn figures outside their primitive homes, with speech-bubbles talking about their lives. And as for the guided reading sessions, Sim said, 'I've never known a group of seven-year-old kids sit and share books for 25 minutes without mucking about before.' Hester Harrington recalls one boy with behavioural issues who found a particular comic which appealed to him (**Strange Skies over East Berlin** by Jeff Loveness and Lisandro Estherren). 'He kept it on his desk all day, and in the

end we let him keep it. It made him engage in the workshop, and he found a way to put his energy into his learning through comics.'

At the same time, all the pupils were receiving a weekly copy of **The Phoenix** comic, posted directly to their homes. As well as sharing the comic with their family members, this meant the reading at school could continue at home – and getting their own comic delivered personally made the children feel valued and special.

All this positivity is against a particularly gloomy background for literacy standards in British schools. Last September the **National Literacy Trust** published their latest report on children's and young people's reading. It was a depressing summary: 56% of 8- to 18-year-olds don't enjoy reading in their free time – an all-time low statistic. And levels of reading enjoyment were found to be weakest for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Our programme didn't just buck that trend. It obliterated it.

So, *Comics in Literacy* was a success. But it would mean nothing if it ended there.

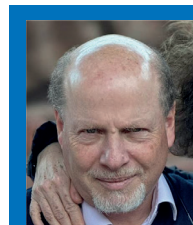
Under the leadership of its director Julie Tait, **LICAF** is continuing its work with a new project, funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Called *Comic Potential*, it is expanding the workshops into several primary schools and special schools in Barrow and Kendal. On top of that, the team is working on a suite of online resources that can be rolled out across the country and used by any school, anywhere.

We have also run a similar project in a remand centre, showing how comics can promote literacy with offenders – and the results were again impressive. A parallel project, *From Ink to Action*, is using comics to promote awareness of climate change. And **LICAF** is also busy creating touring exhibitions and activities across library consortia, engaging children in manga and comics with participatory work curated by young people.

The overall slogan is *Comics Can Change the World*. And, despite a long history of sniffy disregard, the data is telling us that it might actually be true.



Never known them so peaceful and engaged



Peter Kessler is a former TV producer, English teacher and the author of **The Complete Guide to Asterix**. He is the Chair of the **Lakes International Comic Art Festival** board, and he also runs the **Oxford Comics Network**, devoted to promoting the academic study of comics at Oxford University.

Authorgraph No.265

Catherine Doyle
interviewed by
Fiona Noble

The themes of Catherine Doyle's latest book, **Pirates of Darksea**, a swashbuckling adventure of magic and bravery and brotherhood, can be traced back to some of her childhood favourites, she tells me, speaking over video call from her home in Ireland. '**Peter Pan** and **The Chronicles of Narnia** were huge influences on me.' The tranquil waters of the magical kingdom of Darksea are being haunted by a deadly monster that is eating islands in huge bites. In our world, Max and his family are fighting the very different monster of his elder brother's illness. When Captain O'Malley needs a human crew member in Darksea, Max must embark on a dangerous quest that will see him navigate far more than he bargained for.

'With all my middle-grade work, and in particular with **Pirates of Darksea**, I always try and instil a very big emotional heart in the middle of it,' Cat tells me. In **Darksea**, the story of Max and Christopher has a very personal connection, their bond inspired by Cat's relationship with her own two brothers. As a teenager, Cat's eldest bother Connor was diagnosed with a serious heart condition. 'It was the first time in my life I'd ever seen my parents afraid,' she recalls. 'Overnight my brave older brother who was incredibly adventurous, never took no for an answer and did crazy dangerous stuff on the regular was suddenly a completely different version of himself.' It was a very formative experience which led to a shift in the family dynamics. 'My younger brother and I had to step into this



role of being the sibling leader and figure out what our identities were.' This is the scenario that Max encounters in the book as he ventures into the unknown without Christopher. 'I like the idea of a younger brother getting vaulted into his older brother's shoes without much warning,' Cat explains. 'He has this childish desire to want to fix his brother and help his family. And, of course, life is not really that simple.' The book is all about bravery, she continues. 'There's the obvious bravery that you need to face down a villainous monster ship, but also the quieter kind of bravery, which is just as important, to sit in the scary moments with the people you love and just be there for them.'

Happily, Christopher went on to make a full recovery but the experience left a profound impact which has influenced Cat's work. 'It's the idea that this can happen to anyone at any time,' she continues. 'Children are not shielded from the worries, complexities and sadness of everyday life.' Her middle-grade books explore topics including illness and grief. 'I think it's really important to tell those stories because that's what life is like, for anyone of any age.' Writing about these topics for a middle-grade audience can be a challenge. 'I never want my books to be extremely sad,' Cat agrees. 'I try to do two things: one is to bring in a huge amount of humour to the story. For me, as for a lot of people, the way you deal with sadness is humour, it's a natural antidote. I also like to ground these emotional journeys in big magical adventures. There's always a sense of enjoyment and fulfilment even as you're going through the tougher emotional elements.'

Cat's middle-grade work is typically inspired by Irish folklore and mythology and in **Pirates of Darksea**, Cat initially researched legendary 16th century Irish pirate queen Grace O'Malley as an inspiration. 'I thought she was so cool, growing up,' enthuses Cat, 'this figure that blazed her own trail, utterly fearless and reckless.'



However, Cat quickly realised there was little she could use in a middle-grade story. 'She's not child-friendly at all,' she laughs, 'nothing usable there!' Cat's own pirate queen, Captain Eliza O'Malley is a 'slight nod...the name and appearance, but they are very different.' Eliza is a very satisfying, well-drawn character, multifaceted and nuanced. 'I love a really twisty, complex character,' Cat admits, 'Eliza was really fun to write. At first glance you wonder, who is this mean, moody, cranky woman pirate who is just a shadow of her great older brother who is now dead?' As the book progresses readers learn she is deep in grief. 'She doesn't really want to be in the shoes of her brother. She hides away and is frightened.' This contrasts with Max's youthful enthusiasm for doing the right thing and being brave in every encounter. 'That's the other natural reaction to this kind of situation. We can't all be like Max.' The book is ultimately hooked around the beacon of hope. 'In the darkest of our journeys, in the scariest of times there's always a current of hope and that's what you reach for to light the journey.'

Pirates of Darksea is Cat's fifth middle-grade novel, following **The Stormkeeper** trilogy, standalone adventure **The Lost Girl King**, and Dickens reimagining **The Miracle on Ebenezer Street**. The publication of **The Stormkeeper's Island** was a pivotal moment in her career, achieving critical praise, commercial success and multiple international deals. 'It really launched me into a different realm of my career,' says Cat, but what feels most important to her is how personal and poignant the trilogy is. The series was set on the island of Arranmore where her grandparents grew up, and deals with the loss of her grandfather to Alzheimer's. 'It was a really personal intense journey for me that helped me come to terms with my grandfather's diagnosis and also to memorialise him.' He died of Covid the week that the third book in the trilogy was published, and Cat feels that the process of writing the trilogy took the sting out of the grief and the tragedy. 'These three books very much feel like the essence of him and the essence of my grandmother. It's so much more than just a series of books for me; it's like a little piece of my heart and my family.'

Cat's writing career began almost a decade ago when she was studying for an MA in Publishing, writing her thesis on the success of YA trilogies like **The Hunger Games** and **Twilight**. 'I was really immersed in that world,' she remembers, 'and as I wrote my thesis,

hooked. 'It was just a joy. I was reminded that YA is so fun.' **Burning Crowns**, the third and final book in the trilogy will be published in April. The marketing campaign for the series is awash with princess gowns, elaborate balls and fan cosplay. 'It's been the most pure, wonderful form of fun,' says Cat. Cat and Katie live in different countries, so the writing process sees them plan the plot before writing and exchanging chapters and then tying it all together at the end. Katie writes Rose, the idealistic, romantic princess whilst Cat writes Wren, the sarcastic, Irish-coded witch. 'It's an easy division of voices,' she laughs.

The experience has reignited Cat's love of writing YA and, in September, Simon & Schuster will launch **The Dagger and the Flame**, an epic, cat and mouse, enemies-to-lovers fantasy set in the darkly enchanting city of Fantome, inspired by 18th century Paris. Publisher Rachel Denwood calls it 'an ambitious, seductive tour-de-force.' 'It's a tiny bit older, more romantic and darker than **Twin Crowns**,' explains Cat, and she expects it to appeal to an upper YA/crossover audience. 'As a reader YA romantasy is the thing I've loved the most consistently throughout my life and **The Dagger and the Flame** has been incredibly fulfilling to write.'

Books mentioned:

Vendetta, Chicken House, 9781909489813, £7.99, pbk
The Storm Keeper's Island, Bloomsbury, 9781408896884, £7.99, pbk
The Lost Girl King, Bloomsbury, 9781526608000, £7.99, pbk
The Miracle on Ebenezer Street, Puffin, 9780241435250, £7.99, pbk
Pirates of Darksea, Bloomsbury, 9781526655103, £7.99, pbk
Twin Crowns, Electric Monkey, 9780755503643, £8.99, pbk
Burning Crowns, Electric Monkey, 9780008617530, £8.99, pbk
The Dagger and the Flame, Simon & Schuster, 9781398528376, £16.99, hbk, September



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

Windows into Illustration: Mariajo Ilustrajo

Mariajo Ilustrajo won the **Klaus Flugge Prize** for most exciting newcomer to picture book illustration with her book **Flooded**. **Flooded** also won the **English Association Book Award** and the **UKLA Book Award**. Her next book **Lost** is currently on the shortlist for the **Yoto Carnegie Medal for Illustration**. Here she talks about the creative process that led to her new book, **I Hate Love Books**, another fresh, beautifully drawn story, full of playfulness.

I Hate Love Books is my third book as an author / illustrator. I wrote the first two (**Flooded** and **Lost**) during my Masters in Children's Books Illustration at Anglia Ruskin, with a lot of feedback from tutors and colleagues. However, with this last one I flew solo, with the support of my publisher, of course, but it felt slightly terrifying being alone out there.

I feel this book is a bit of a mix between **Flooded** and **Lost**, technique wise, as I created the 'real' world in a similar technique to **Flooded**, with acrylic ink (wet and dry strokes) and a very limited colour palette with accent colours to highlight what I wanted to.

When the protagonist jumps into her imagination the pages become colourful like in **Lost** and I think this worked very well as you can easily recognise her in the real-world vs inside her imagination.

The idea of the book was born from a batch of single images I created of a girl reading as an experimentation with *Panpastels* and



acrylic ink. I loved the contrast of the fluffy texture I created for her hair with the *Panpastel* against the dry and sharp lines of the acrylic ink applied with the dip pen.

The publisher and I thought it was quite an interesting character, so I had to give her a story and everything went from there.

As with my previous books which also grew from a one-off image, I started doing some sketches and trying to figure out what the story was about. Soon enough, during the development process, I decided that the girl was going to jump into her imagination and some sort of jungle scene should appear in the book. I was very excited about this jungle scene! Usually there is a page or two in the story that I get very excited about and this is the one that got me to experiment with the artwork initially.



Usually, I have an idea of how I would like the book to look, but it's not until I start working that I know just how it will look. In this case I was looking to play with green. I know it might sound weird but there is very little green in my illustrations, and I wanted to experiment with that. I started to play with *Panpastel* backgrounds and leaves with acrylic gouache, inks and colour pencils. Always adding a bit of fluorescent pink ink to check how it would work with the neon *Pantone* once we printed it.

I enjoyed playing with the texture of the dry brushes and on some occasions painting some of the leaves with my fingers! I must say I was very pleased to introduce some greens to my colour repertoire!

I think I am pretty happy with this page as I think it's a cool page turn from the previous muted colours pages.

I Hate Love Books

is published by Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-0711277991, £12.99 hbk.



New from **multi-award-winning** break-out star **MARIAJO ILUSTRAJO**

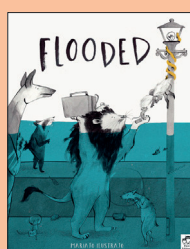
From the **WINNER!**

The Klaus Flugge Prize
The World Illustration Award
EA 4-11 Picture Book Awards
UKLA Book Awards

A magical ode to
the power of a good
book: for readers and
not-so-readers

'Enchanting'
The Bookseller
Editor's Choice

'A witty
treat'
The Mail
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I Hate Love Books
Mariajo Ilustrajo
9780711277991 | February 29
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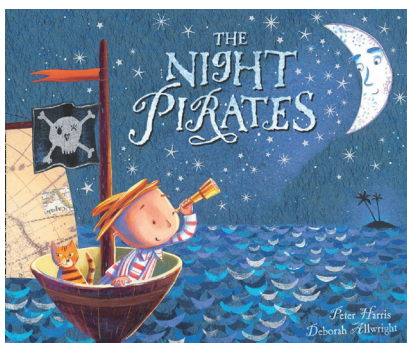
10 Ten of the Best Books About Pirates

Chosen by **Ann Lazim**

My own first childhood memory of the world of pirates was watching the jerky rolling figures on John Ryan's animated series *Captain Pugwash* at Sunday afternoon teatime. Today's children's visual associations are more likely to come via the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films.

Pirates have been portrayed in many guises in children's literature since Robert Louis Stevenson's **Treasure Island** first appeared in the 1880s. This classic has had many editions and adaptations, including sequels by Robert Leeson and Andrew Motion, and a recent sci-fi mashup novel by Bali Rai – **Doctor Who: Rebellion on Treasure Island** (BBC 978-1405952330), not to mention Jewell Parker Rhodes' new retelling mentioned in this issue.

Here is a selection of relatively recent favourite piratical titles.



The Night Pirates

Peter Harris, illus. Deborah Allwright, Farshore, 978-1405211611

An adventure that begins and ends with memorable patterned language as a band of rough, tough little girl pirates adopt Tom as their shipmate and sail to

an island where they get the better of a group of rough, tough grown-up pirates. This classic picture book's design – the layout of the text across the pages and the use of various sizes and types of font – is integral to the way the story is told. Was it all a dream? The final spread suggests perhaps not!

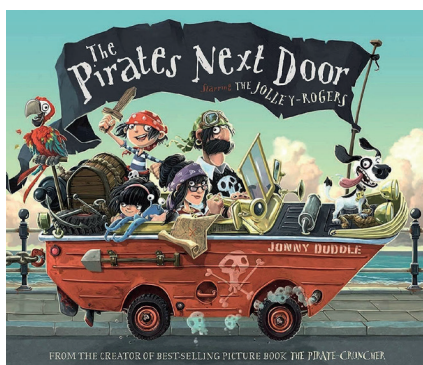


The Pirate Mums

Jodie Lancet-Grant, illus. Lydia Correy, Oxford University Press, 978-0192777799

Billy wishes that his family were more ordinary. His two mums are pirates and he finds their behaviour – such as singing sea shanties, consulting smelly old maps, having a parrot as a pet, not to mention their attire and language – really embarrassing. So when they offer to be parent volunteers on a school trip

to the seaside, Billy is horrified. However, on the outing a boat ride starts to go dangerously wrong and Mummy, Mama and Birdbrain prove to be worth more than their weight in pirate gold.



The Pirates Next Door

Jonny Duddle, Templar, 978-1848773929

Matilda is delighted when her new neighbours turn out to be a pirate family, the Jolley-Rogers. The rest of the inhabitants of the dull seaside town where she lives are less than

thrilled and band together to have the pirates removed. However, the pirates never planned a permanent stay anyhow...This picture book has a humorous rhyming text and pictures that combine the real and the fantastical, and provides an interesting way to explore ideas about prejudice. Other picture book titles by Jonny Duddle include **The Pirates of Scurvy Sands** (9781783704095) and **The Pirate Cruncher** (978-1848773769) and a fiction series featuring The Jolley-Rogers



The Pirates Are Coming!

John Condon, illus. Matt Hunt, Nosy Crow, 978-1788006798

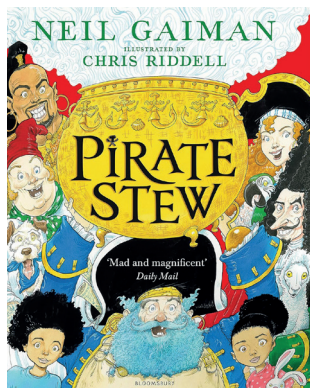
In a story patterned on the fable of 'The Boy Who Cried Wolf' (but with a different surprise denouement) Tom keeps warning the inhabitants of the coastal village where he lives that 'The Pirates Are Coming!' and urging everyone to hide. Time after time, he is mistaken and his Dad reminds him: 'Just remember, pirate ships are big

and fast and they have a special pirate flag.' Then one day when the villagers least expect it ... the pirates sneak in. Will they be able to hide in time?



Ann Lazim was librarian at CLPE (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education) for 29 years. She is a committee member of the UK section of **IBBY** (International Board on Books for Young People). She edits reviews of children's and YA books for *Historical Novels Review* and is on the jury of the Indian **NEEV Children's Book Award**.

10



Pirate Stew

Neil Gaiman, illus. Chris Riddell, Bloomsbury, 978-1526614711

When their parents go out for the evening, an astonished brother and sister are left with a most unexpected babysitter – Ship's Cook Long John McRon. They are soon joined by his motley crew who proceed to create a strange and sumptuous pirate stew. The playful rhyming text draws on many elements associated with pirates and takes them in new

nautical directions as they sail away to complete their meal with donuts. Chris Riddell's bold and colourful figures seem to burst out of the pages. Sadly, Chris Riddell's 2001 Greenaway Medal winning **Pirate Diary** (Walker) is currently out of print.



Blackbeard's Treasure

Iszi Lawrence, Bloomsbury, 978-1801990967

In 1718, Abigail leaves her life as a plantation owner's daughter in the Caribbean alongside her father's slave Boubacar, her secret best friend. They board a pirate ship run by maroons, escaped slaves, under Captain Black Caesar. Abigail and Boubacar learn to swim, climb ropes and avoid disgusting smells, as they sail off in search of the infamous pirate, Blackbeard, with whom Caesar has a longstanding feud. Abigail's natural sense of justice quickly

becomes conflicted as she sees how the morality of this pirate world – where the enslaved are forced to choose between the devil and the deep blue sea – mirrors the contradictory values of white, mercantile culture..



Pirate Academy: New Kid on Deck

Justin Somper, illus. Teo Skaffa, Uclan, 978-1915235886

The first in a new series set in the same world and time period - the 26th century - as the author's earlier Vampirates series. The children in Barracuda class at the Pirate Academy have formed a strong bond of friendship as they serve their ten-year apprenticeship to become fully-fledged pirates. Then parents go missing, one child is sent away and a new student arrives in their midst causing consternation and resentment. Change appears to be

on the horizon as the Pirate Federation's control over the seas is challenged by the League of True Pirates.



Pirates of Darksea

Catherine Doyle, illus. Manuel Šumberac, Bloomsbury, 978-1526655103

Christopher lives on the Galway coast and has long dreamed of setting sail on the ship Stolen Sunrise with Captain O'Malley to the secret kingdom of Darksea. However, when the invitation eventually comes, Christopher is very ill and it is his younger brother Max who must don the pirate mantle and embark on a voyage that brings adventure and responsibility and encounters with mermaids and monsters.

Surely the name of O'Malley recalls Ireland's own real Pirate Queen who is featured in novels **The Ghost of Grania O'Malley** by Michael Morpurgo (Farshore 978-1405233408) and **Granuaile: Pirate Queen** by [Morgan Llywelyn](#) (O'Brien Press 978-1847173867)

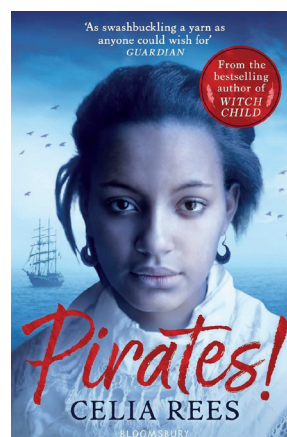


Vengeance of the Pirate Queen

Tricia Levenseller, Pushkin, 978-1782694267

Set in the same world as the duology **Daughter of the Pirate King** (978-1782693680) and **Daughter of the Siren Queen** (978-1782693703), the story follows the fortunes of characters from those books other than the pirate queen Alosa herself. The narrator is Sorinda, a highly accomplished assassin, commissioned to captain a pirate ship at the behest of Alosa and carry out a rescue mission. The

carefully chosen crew are mainly women with the notable exception of sailing master Kearan who Sorinda has encountered in earlier adventures. Dicing with death and losing one's heart run through the centre of this swashbuckling YA novel.



Pirates!

Celia Rees, Bloomsbury, 978-1526632302

This YA novel is set in the 1720s during the golden age of piracy. It draws on historical facts, which are integrated seamlessly, and demonstrates understanding of the interrelationship between colonialism and the slave trade and the position of women at that time. The lives of Nancy, a merchant's daughter and runaway bride, and Minerva, a runaway slave from Nancy's family's Jamaican plantation, are interwoven as they become pirates in a

narrative that involves danger, love and loyalty. The story travels from Bristol to the Caribbean and eventually to Madagascar where Nancy and Minerva join an existing community of pirates.

Beyond the Secret Garden: Reading Joyfully

In the latest in our long-running **Beyond the Secret Garden** series, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** take a critical look at joy in children's books.

The phrase 'childhood joy' often goes with words like 'pure' and 'unadulterated'. But joy as depicted in children's literature is almost always *adulterated*—written by adults. This means that joy in children's books can often fall into adult nostalgia for what they see as the simple and stress-free life of the child. In some classic children's texts, joy is quashed by adults, and any adults that are joyful are depicted as childlike. J. M. Barrie's **Peter Pan** (1911) is an example of this; the Darling children's mother tidies their minds at night and is most alarmed by the idea of the joyful freedom to do whatever you choose embodied in Peter Pan. Joy is depicted as amoral, if not immoral, and the Darling children must ultimately reject it. If they don't, they risk turning into the kind of adults who live in eternal childhood with Peter, pirates and Barrie's made-up Indian tribe, named after a racial slur and described as 'savages' and animal-like. This negative linking of childhood joy with people of colour is not unique to **Peter Pan**; many British children's books have historically described adults of colour who find 'childlike' joy in new clothing, food, and music as figures of ridicule, or examples for (white) readers to avoid.

But the critical attitude toward joy found in these children's books belies the fact that joy, whether for children or for people of colour, is rarely simple or self-absorbed. Joy in a new outfit or a good meal is more intense if it is a rare occurrence; playing music brings joy through the hard work of creativity and through the way that it connects the musician to others. A good example of the joy that results from the hard work and co-operation of children is Lucy Farfort's **In Our Hands** (2022). In Farfort's imagined world, colour disappears, and with it joy disappears also: 'people felt sad and angry' and 'Hurt replaced harmony'. The opposite of joy, in Farfort's book, is indifference: 'When the last drop of colour finally left our planet, the people in charge shrugged their shoulders and said nothing could be done'. Adults give up; but the unnamed child protagonist of Farfort's story looks for joy – she is shown peering through a telescope. She finds a seed, but a seed is not enough to change a planet. She must nurture the seed, not alone, but with other children, who use their creativity (some play music to the small tree, for example) to help it grow until 'Bit by joyful bit' their energy, creativity and hard work pay off and colour returns to the planet.

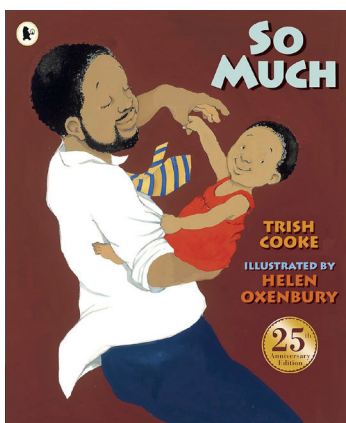
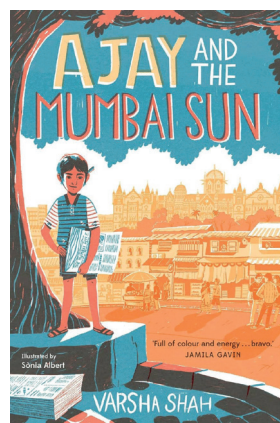
Similarly, Varsha Shah's **Ajay and the Mumbai Sun** (2020) depicts a group of young people who find joy in working together to achieve a

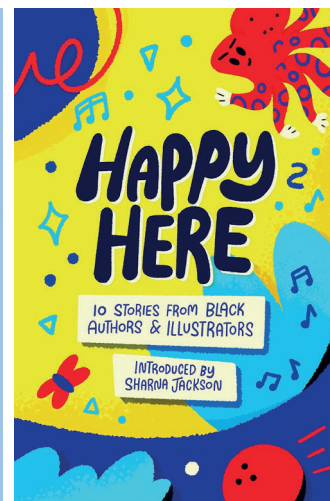
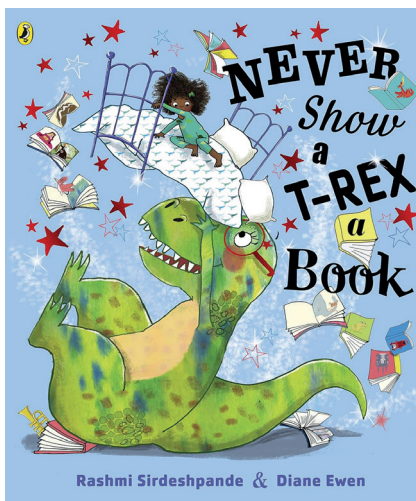
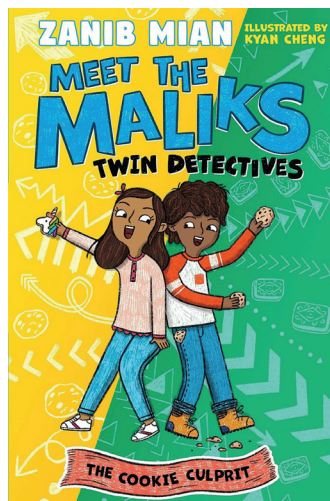
goal: putting out a newspaper written and produced by themselves. Ajay, Saif, Vinod, Yasmin and Jai are from Mumbai's slums, and often have to struggle to find enough to eat—but the book is about joy rather than the misery of poverty. The book is full of joyful words: grinning, happy, jubilant, celebration—almost all of which are connected to the creative energies of the child protagonists. When the first edition of their newspaper appears, 'Ajay had never felt as happy in his life' (58). When Saif sees a way to use his engineering skills to help the others get information for a story, he is described as 'looking as if all his birthday and Christmas presents had come at once' (206). The child characters in Shah's books find joy in their own ability to make change happen, and (as in Lucy Farfort's book), their joyous activism comes despite adult indifference and lack of faith in their abilities.

Joy does not always have to result from hard work in children's books, but it is often connected with the end of a period of waiting. The two most common joyful depictions in children's books are new babies and holiday celebrations. Trish Cooke's now-classic **So Much** (1994), with pictures by Helen Oxenbury, shows an entire extended family who come together to celebrate the new baby. The waiting in this book is not about the baby, but waiting for the baby's father, whose birthday it is, to arrive. However, the baby is the centre of the narrative, and because of the baby the house is full of music and play, dancing, music, and food for adults and children alike, all of whom have smiles on their faces.

Dean Atta and Alea Marley's **Confetti** (2024), similarly combines two periods of waiting (for the new baby to arrive and for a wedding) that lead to growing joy for the main character, Arianna. The book starts with a single piece of confetti that Arianna finds under a sofa, which triggers a happy memory of her third birthday; after she finds it, she begins to look for confetti—the symbol of joy—in everything from falling leaves to fireworks, as well as the birth of her baby sister, a Pride parade, and wedding of her uncle. Joy, Atta and Marley suggest, can be big or small but is always worth looking for.

In **Jump Up** (2022), written and illustrated by Ken Wilson-Max, Cecille experiences the joy of celebration at Carnival. It is a joy that connects her to her family history, as she sleeps and dreams of her mother's village. The information provided at the back of the book helps readers to understand how Carnival is at once joyful, playful and political in nature.





A number of recent series have also foregrounded racially minoritised children experiencing joy and proved to be commercially successful. Zanib Mian, a former **Little Rebels Award Winner**, and winner at the inaugural **Inclusive Books for Children Awards** last month, is now well into her second series of books that foreground fun and joy with Muslim protagonists. Mian followed up the **Planet Omar** series with the **Meet the Maliks** series. Rashmi Sirdeshpande and Diane Ewen's series of picture books beginning with **Never Show a T-Rex a Book** (2020) introduces us to a Black child at the centre of dinosaur-related madcap fun.

Joy, particularly Black joy has been the focus of three recent anthologies. **Happy Here** (2021) published by Knights Of brings together ten Black writers and ten Black illustrators. In the opening story *A House Like No Other*, written by Alexis Sheppard and illustrated by Dorcas Magbadelo, Izzy travels from her town where her she and her white mum are often stared at and where she can't buy her favourite hardlo bread, to visit her great Aunt V in Brixton. Izzy finds joy and confidence while there. Sheppard subverts a popular trope in British children's literature; that adventure is to be found when one escapes the city for the countryside, suggesting that there is joy to be found in the city and in a sense of community.

Curated by Jamie Wilson and Jade Orlando, full colour hardback **A Year of Black Joy: 52 Black Voices Share Their Life Passions** (2023) includes among others Michelle Ogundehin, Lady Phyll, and Sheku Kanneh-Mason. Topics include 'the joy of habitats', the joy of wheelchair racing', and 'the joy of democracy'. Political dimensions of Black people's lives are not omitted, but joy is foregrounded throughout.

Joyful, Joyful (2022), curated by British Book Awards Illustrator of the Year Dapo Adeola features twenty-two writers each paired with an illustrator. Patrice Lawrence's foreword begins with, 'In the last two years, I have almost managed to convince myself that there

is no joy in the world.' In his introduction, Adeola writes that he 'wanted to create something that I wish had been available to me as a young reader'. Both statements offer context for the urgency for joy in books featuring Black characters.

Books mentioned:

In Our Hands, Lucy Farfort, Tate Publishing, 978-1849768146, £7.99 pbk

Ajay and the Mumbai Sun, Varsha Shah, Chicken House, 978-1913696337, £7.99 pbk

So Much, Trish Cooke, illus Helen Oxenbury, Walker Books, 978-1406390728, £8.99 pbk

Confetti, Dean Atta, illus Alea Marley, Orchard Books, 978-1408362075, £12.99 hbk

Planet Omar, Zanib Mian, illus Nasaya Mafaridik, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444951226, £6.99 pbk

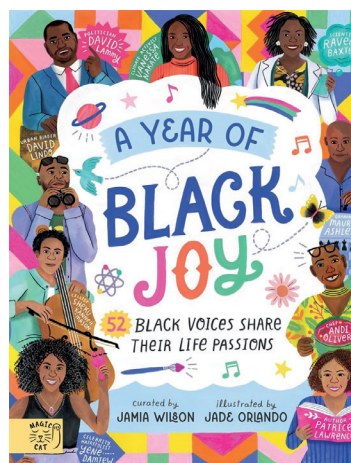
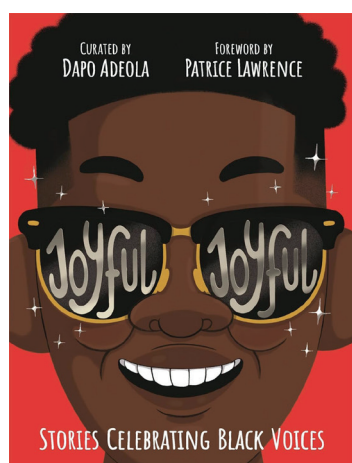
Meet the Maliks, Zanib Mian, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444923674, £6.99 pbk

Never Show a T-Rex a Book, Rashmi Sirdeshpande, illus Diane Ewen, Puffin, 978-0241392669, £7.99 pbk

Happy Here, various, Knights Of, 978-1913311162, £6.99 pbk

A Year of Black Joy: 52 Black Voices Share Their Life Passions, edited Jamie Wilson and Jade Orlando, Magic Cat Publishing, 978-1915569028, £14.99 hbk

Joyful, Joyful, curated by Dapo Adeola, Two Hoots, 978-1529071504, £20.00 hbk



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.

Adventuring with Reeve and McIntyre

Andrea Reece interviews Philip Reeve and Sarah McIntyre about their latest series, AdventureMice.



Reeve and McIntyre have been a star double act in children's books now for over a decade, bringing unbridled fun and laughter to young readers. Catching up with them in between author events on World Book Day to talk about their hugely successful creative partnership was just as much fun as you'd expect. It was a conversation in the Green Room of the Edinburgh Book Festival that first brought the two of them together, Sarah telling Philip about her aim to post a drawing on her blog every day. Philip, originally an illustrator, had stopped drawing and thought that was a good idea. Soon they were comparing their daily illustrations and before long had decided they should do a book together.

That was twelve books ago – there's a thirteenth about to go to print and a fourteenth in process, so what do they like about working together? Philip likens it to writing comedy, something he used to do as a student. 'It was very collaborative – I would write with one or two partners, and the jokes sparked off one another. I don't know how you'd write a novel collaboratively, but it works really well for this sort of fiction, because it is like writing comedy basically.'

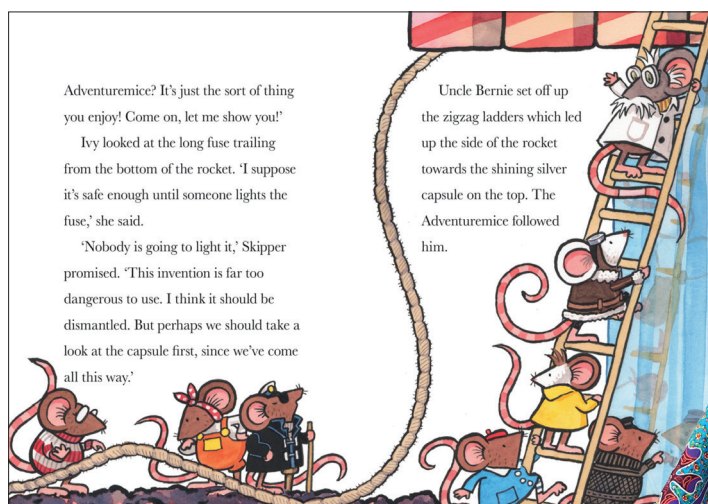
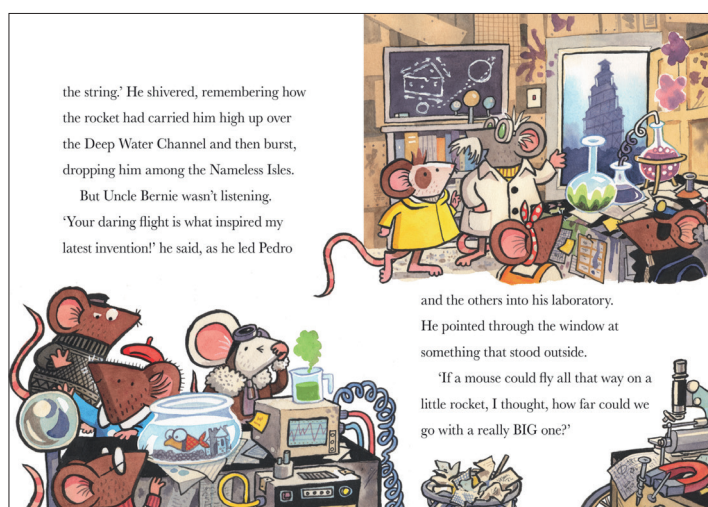
Plus, adds Sarah, 'It's really handy to work with Philip because he started out as an illustrator, so he gets it and doesn't come up with unrealistic designs.' Philip chips in, 'And I'd always liked the idea of books that combine text and illustration in interesting ways.'

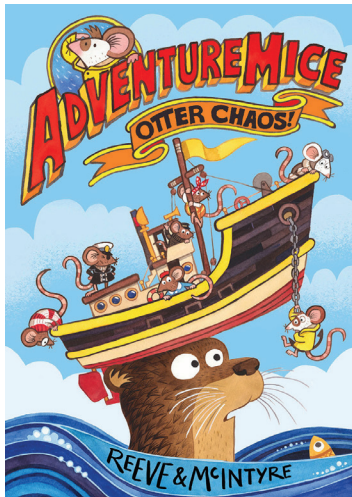
Both agree that the author tour is much more enjoyable when there's two of you. Initially that's when they did most of the writing – in hotels, on trains, in festival green rooms. But now that Sarah and her partner have moved to Devon, 'just down the road' from Philip, they can get together much more easily. Walks across Dartmoor are obviously conducive to creative thinking too. 'We're always coming up with ideas when we're out for walks' says Philip, 'Silly ideas pop up and some of them stick. We think maybe we could develop that one into a story, start talking about characters and how it would work and come up with the rough outline. I write with Sarah checking in on me, and we do the roughs together usually, and then Sarah does the artwork, which is the big job, especially with **AdventureMice** which are full colour.'

'It takes me about two weeks to do pencil roughs by myself' interjects Sarah, 'But when Philip comes and sits at the desk with me, we can do it so much faster.'

Like many books of the moment, the **AdventureMice** books began in lockdown. Sarah had set time aside for a sabbatical which then got cancelled because of COVID. With a gap in her publishing schedule, and confined to home, she began doing paintings of model ships she'd collected from Deptford Market – 'for about £3 each!' – putting little mouse characters on them 'just to make it fun'. She'd put them on Twitter and people would buy them instantly. 'I really enjoyed it' she says, 'Stuck in lockdown I couldn't go on adventures so the idea of these tiny mice going on tiny adventures was a lot of fun.'

Initially she thought about putting the mice in a picture book but felt that more space was needed to tell the story. Even so, the **AdventureMice** books are shorter than their earlier series; on the advice of their long-time editor Liz Cross, they're just 6000 words. 'They have to be very spare,' says Philip.





The stories of a community of little mice who undertake some big adventures, in the latest a trip to the moon, spare they may be, but they're still action-packed and full of zest and humour. There's a real child's-eye view to the books – Philip likens it to that sense of being down on the floor playing with toys – and the mice display a delightful ingenuity, flying planes and helicopters and even steering a submarine. The pleasure the two have in writing for this age group is clear from start to finish. What do they like best about it? 'It's fun because kids at this age are happy to believe in the world', says Sarah. 'They'll suspend disbelief very easily' agrees Philip. 'You don't have to put props and framework in place to achieve the suspension of disbelief that you do with older readers.'

They're also happy to be creating books that bridge the gap from picture books to chapter books. 'Some kids go from picture books straight into books with no pictures, and that's scary' says Sarah, 'You need pictures to anchor you on the page. But you also need text to anchor you. If there's just an illustration, adults will miss that page altogether. We've learned to go back and make sure we always have some words on the page.'

'Even when Sarah does one of her big lovely double page spreads' says Philip, 'We try and make sure there's a couple of lines of text.'

'Adults don't realise the pictures are important to the story' laughs Sarah, 'Kids think it's the only thing!'

As it's World Book Day, I ask them what they recommend to ensure children are reading for pleasure. 'Fun,' says Philip decisively, 'Actual fun. Children's books should be entertainment and if children enjoy being entertained by books, they'll move on to more artistic things later, to serious literature if you like. I'm not saying books have to be funny, but they should be entertaining – that's how you get people to read for pleasure, you entertain them'.

He's adamant too that they steer clear of issues in their books. 'Things have got very Victorian in children's publishing now, with a

lot of books training to you to be a good and responsible citizen. We just want to muck about.'

'The Adventure Mice are brave little mice' adds Sarah, 'They go out and do stuff. We don't just want kids to read, we want them to read and also go out and do things.'

'Occasionally you meet a child who reads hundreds and hundreds of books' adds Philip, 'And it's slightly worrying, as worrying as if they were spending all their time on computer games. If someone's reading to the exclusion of everything else, that's not a well-balanced childhood.'

'Yes, don't give kids books that make them feel guilty all the time' says Sarah. 'Make them love the world, then they'll want to protect it. Don't just tell them it's their fault the world is going to pot, they'll turn into little nihilists.' 'Who hate books!' adds Philip.

Their secret to successful creating books for this age group can be summed up as humour and heart. 'Well-crafted jokes are a good thing', says Philip, 'A well-made joke is funny to 2 year olds and 82 year olds.' 'And if you can capture a sense of warmth even when things get tense and dramatic, that's great' says Sarah..

As the interview draws to a close, I ask them what they admire most in the other's writing. 'Philip has a really good sense of how stories work' says Sarah, 'how the structure works. He doesn't just start with a good premise and then spin it out, even in the last third of a book, he's still introducing interesting new elements. I love the fact he doesn't relax until the very end.'

'Sarah is a very good writer' says Philip, 'which people don't always realise, they think she's just playing with paint. And her drawings are fantastic and getting better and better, each **AdventureMice** book is more magnificent. This is the sort of working relationship I always wanted.'

The **AdventureMice** books are published by **David Fickling Books**, £6.99 each.

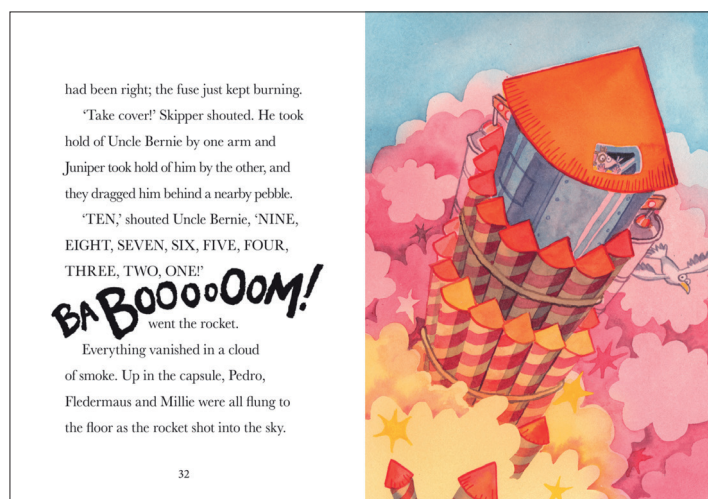
Adventuremice: Otter Chaos, 978-1788452670

Adventuremice: Mermouse Mystery, 978-1788452687

Adventuremice: Mice on the Ice, 978-1788452694

Adventuremice: Mice on the Moon, 978-1788452700

Be sure to visit the special [AdventureMice website](#), which is full of great activity sheets and more to download.



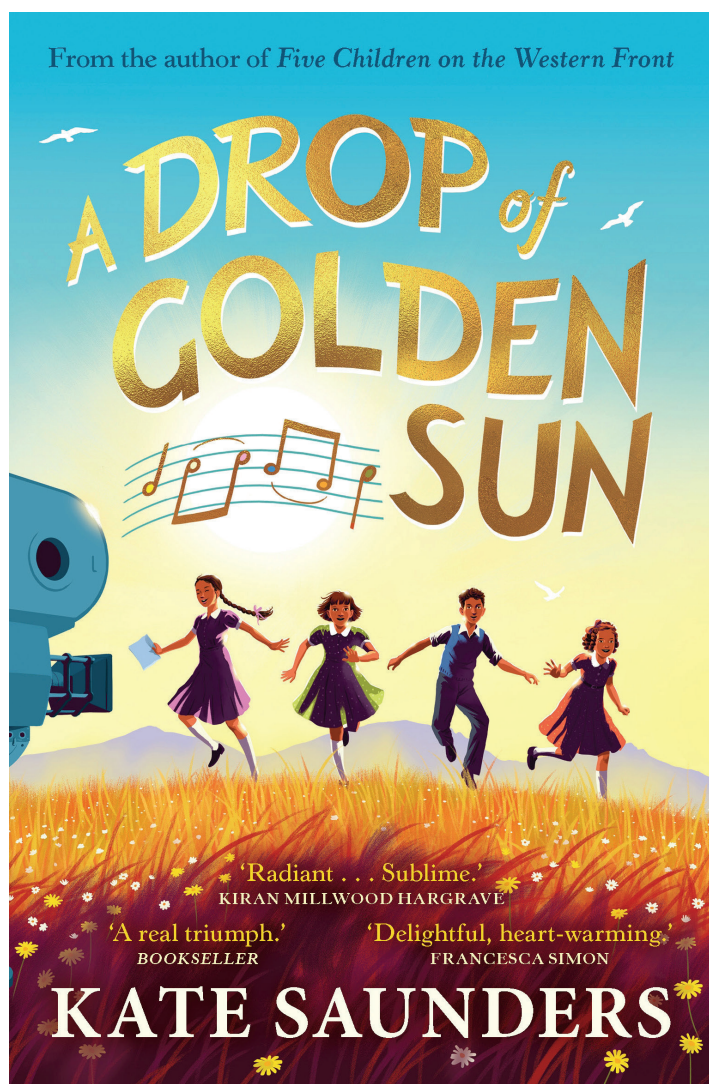
Andrea Reece is
managing editor of
Books for Keeps.



Kate Saunders 1960–2023

An appreciation by **Nicholas Tucker.**

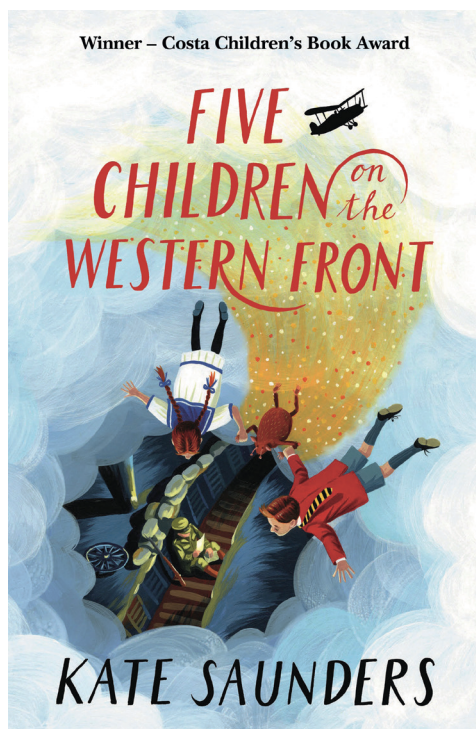
Kate Saunders' last children's novel, **A Drop of Golden Sun**, is published this month by Faber. Although in poor health before dying of cancer last April aged 62, she still managed to create all the humour, excitement and drama familiar from her previous stories. E. Nesbit, who provided the inspiration for Kate's award-winning sequel **Five Children on the Western Front**, Noel Streatfeild and C.S. Lewis were all major influences on her throughout, warmly acknowledged in notes to young readers appended to her story **Magicalamity**. Like them, Kate always gave excellent value, plotting her stories intricately and taking her time. Catering for the tricky 9+ age-group, neither quite child nor teenager, she served up fiction generous in length, broad in humour and firmly positive in outlook. Although she often turned to fantasy **A Drop of Golden Sun** takes place in the real world of 1973. Four British children find themselves selected for an American movie based on the real story behind **The Sound of Music**. This entails a long stay in France, where the film is being shot, with shy Jenny soon making friends with junior co-stars willowy Harriet, curly-haired John and irrepressible Belinda, the youngest and also at least to begin with the most irritatingly self-confident. Circling each other warily they soon meld, which is more than can be said for some of the adult stars. As in Noel Streatfeild's immortal **Ballet Shoes**, there is plenty of technical detail, in this case concentrating on make-up procedures, lighting effects, costumes and the whole art of screen acting for children whose previous experience sometimes only extended to the school play.



Some of the accompanying parents or grandparents acting as chaperones cause trouble which has to be sorted out before an ending where everyone is happy and successful. What main characters may be thinking and feeling is always made abundantly clear for younger readers still happy to be led by the hand by an author so clearly on their side. This is a story that can be recommended without qualification. Great fiction it is not; enjoyable wish-fulfilment tempered by realism it most certainly is, with rural France and its wonderful cooking coming out as an almost equal object for more delightful daydreams.

In 2017 Kate won the **Costa Children's Book Award** for the second time with **The Land of Neverendings**. Nine-year old Emily is mourning the recent death of her severely disabled sister Holly. Her parents, in their own grief, are no longer any fun and Maisy, her previous best friend, is now distant. But Ruth, a neighbouring middle-aged antique dealer who had also lost a child, provides invaluable new company after the pair discover they are both able to summon characters to life previously existing only in their imagination. After that things run riot, and while mature readers may occasionally sigh at so many fart jokes their juniors may well enjoy these the most. At the story's climax Emily comes to understand that while she can never summon back her sister to life, 'Humans die but love never dies. And neither do stories.' This advice is given to her by Sturvey, an old toy bear also given to quoting Shakespeare. Once again there is a triumphantly positive ending, with Emily starring in the school production of **Alice**, friends again with Maisy and no longer caught up in her other world adventures.

In an Afterword, Kate writes that inspiration for this story came from an episode in the life of C.S. Lewis when he and his brother Warnie decided as adults to bury their much-loved toys in the garden of the family house about to be sold. In this way they were neither thrown away nor given to other children. Kate understood this fierce love of old toys, adding that when she wrote she habitually kept company with the old bear plus toy penguin that belonged to her only son Felix. Already a promising writer and musician he suffered from clinical depression, finally taking his own life in 2012



aged nineteen. As a child he had always loved his mother's stories about these two toys, and while suffering terribly after his death she was still able to come up with this emotional but finally hopeful story in which they appear once again.

Magicalamity, published in 2011 but still in print, is another favourite story, involving three aged fairy godmothers, each difficult in their own way. One runs a corrupt boarding school and is given to 'pursing her lips

in a thin streak of fury', while another had married rich husbands eight times over, taking their money and then turning them into slaves a week post-honeymoon. But the third, Lorna, is good-hearted and makes a special friend of Tom, the pre-teenage main character who has just discovered that his father is in fact an escaped fairy on the run. Tom's mother has also disappeared, only later rescued after having been transformed for her own safety into a sun-dried tomato. As a 'demisprite' Tom's own continuing existence is now in peril, given that a menacing fairy world has no time for mixed race offspring. The stage is therefore set, with plenty of nice meals consumed in-between high adventure. Shakespeare is quoted again, along with references to Bach and Mozart. A happy ending sees everything right, and the many readers who loved this story could always move on to **Beswitched**. Published the same year but quite as entertaining, this tells the story of Flora, living in the present but somehow managing to swap lives with a 1935 schoolgirl.

Strikingly attractive and quick-witted, Kate for some years led a busy public life in journalism and on radio and television, playing the role of Policewoman Sandra in the BBC's sitcom **Only Fools and Horses**. But life became progressively harder with the onset of multiple sclerosis in 1993, the same year her son was born. This was kept secret from all but a very few. Divorcing her husband Philip Wells but with whom she remained on good terms, she was still left with no savings. This eventually led to a move back to the family home where her increasingly necessary daily assistance was provided by a younger brother and sister. No longer as much in demand in the media or as an adult novelist, she concentrated instead on writing for children, only just getting by financially and sometimes not even managing that. But she never gave up, with her **Belfry Witches** children's series later televised by the BBC. There were also some well received detective stories.

She continued up to her death to add to her stock of novels, finally amounting to twenty-six in total. To continue to have done so and always with such wit, energy and seemingly endless powers of invention was an extraordinary achievement from a truly remarkable person.

Books mentioned, all by Kate Saunders:

A Drop of Golden Sun, Faber Children's Books, 978-0571310982, £7.99 pbk

Five Children on the Western Front, Faber Children's Books, 978-0571342327, £7.99 pbk

The Land of Neverendings, Faber Children's Books, 978-0571336562, £7.99 pbk

Magicalamity, Marion Lloyd Books, 978-1407137322, £7.99 pbk

Beswitched, Marion Lloyd Books, 978-1407108971, O/P



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

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Obituary: Niki Daly 1946-2024

By Janetta Otter-Barry

Niki Daly, the internationally celebrated South African writer and illustrator, who died aged 77 in January this year, was a pioneer of diversity and inclusion in children's books from the 1980s, long before diversity became a mainstream publishing genre. He cared passionately about highlighting the lives of black South African families and other under-represented communities and he did this brilliantly for over forty years through his picture books and storybooks, which were published worldwide by discerning publishers who recognised the importance of what he was doing – and his extraordinary artistic talent.

Niki had a particularly enthusiastic and loyal fanbase in the US from early in his career and was published first by Margaret K McElderry, the legendary editor of children's books. This was the start of a long relationship which resulted in classic picture books such as **Fly, Eagle, Fly** (1985), a wonderful parable-style story about self-belief and reaching for the sky, with an introduction by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and the ground-breaking **Not So Fast, Songololo** (1986), a gem of a picture book for young children, so simple and yet profound, about a child shopping for trainers with his grandmother, a book which broke through South Africa's apartheid barriers to celebrate black lives.

He was also published in the US by Penguin Putnam, Lothrop Lee & Shephard, Scholastic, Farrar Straus, Clarion and, most recently, Catalyst, and he fostered strong relationships with publishers in Japan, Korea, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Holland and France and of course the UK.

In the UK, **Frances Lincoln** was his principal publisher from 1990 until 2016, publishing, among many other picture books, the classic **Jamela** series, depicting the everyday adventures of a little girl living with her ma and grandma (Gogo) in a black South African township. These lovely stories are filled with joy and mischief, with universal appeal, while opening a window onto a close-knit family and a community that young western readers would not be very much aware of. The books are beautifully illustrated in watercolour – and more recently with digital media.

In 2016 **Otter-Barry Books** took up the baton, publishing the delightful **Lolo** series of first chapter books for five to eight year



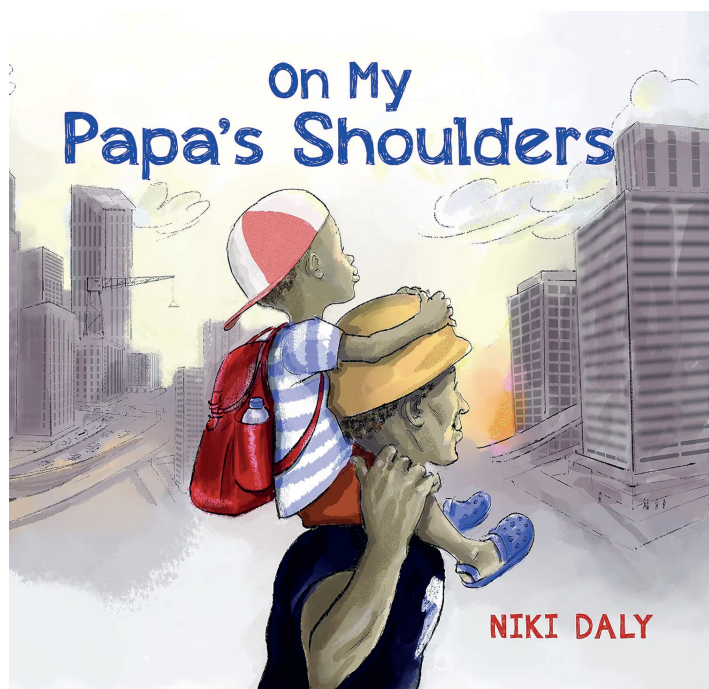
olds, again featuring an extended single-parent black family, and starring mischievous, warm-hearted Lolo. **Otter-Barry Books** also published Niki's final picture book in 2022, **On My Papa's Shoulders**, a celebration of fathers everywhere – Niki was feeling that fathers needed some praise!

He wrote and illustrated most of his picture books and had that rare talent for bringing characters to life in both words and pictures – 'an innate ability to capture the essence of a child, no matter what their background,' as Dianne Hofmeyr described it in her **IBBY** obituary. He was also exceptionally generous with advice, acting as a mentor to young, unpublished illustrators from South Africa and beyond. He was an excellent, incisive speaker on the subject of diversity and inclusion, and in earlier years was a much-loved visitor to UK library conferences and book festivals.

Niki was South Africa's nominee for the **Astrid Lindgren Award** in 2020, and previous honours include **ALA Notable Book** awards, **IBBY Honour Awards** and a shortlisting for the **Hans Christian Andersen Award**. **Jamela's Dress** was one of the top ten African-American picture books of 2000.

Niki was born in Cape Town and lived in South Africa for most of his life, latterly in Kleimond, by the sea, not far from Cape Town. He was part of a loving family: his wife, the acclaimed illustrator Jude Daly, his two sons, Joe and Leo (also an illustrator), and granddaughter Emily.

I feel honoured and privileged to have been part of Niki's literary journey. Niki Daly was one of the greatest picture book creators of our time and a pioneer and champion of diversity in children's books. I am proud to be one of his publishers and to have been his editor for over 25 years. His genius for storytelling and illustration, almost always focusing on families from under-represented backgrounds, was unparalleled and his stories are loved by readers all over the world.



Formerly publisher at Frances Lincoln, **Janetta Otter-Barry** founded **Otter-Barry Books** in 2016.

I wish I'd written...



Alex T Smith's new book, **Astrid and the Space Cadets: Attack of the Snailiens!**, is out now, published by Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1035019748, £7.99 pbk.

The pictures are equally wonderful. Knight balances high glamour and close detail with beautifully observed images of a six-year-old being a six-year-old in all their marvellous, messy, jam-down-their-front realism. The text and the images bounce off each other in such a way that I can't think of another example of it working quite so brilliantly. The result of which is something bursting with energy, honkingly funny and, considering the books are nearly seventy years old, incredibly modern and fresh

Alex T Smith on the series that is bursting with energy, honkingly funny and, at seventy years old, still modern and fresh.

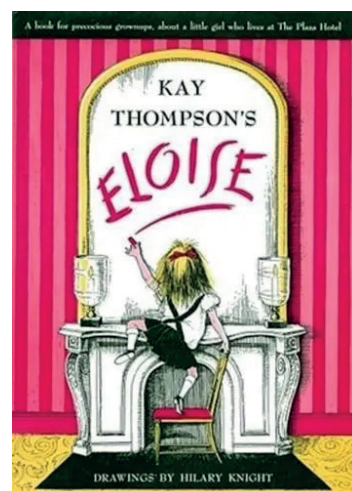
Without question the book I wish I'd written (and illustrated) is **Eloise** by Kay Thompson and illustrated by Hilary Knight.

Eloise is a giddy, precocious six year old who lives on the 'tippy-top floor' of the Plaza Hotel in New York with her long suffering Nanny, and her pug, Weenie and her tortoise, Skipperdee.

I discovered the books when I was about seventeen and fell immediately in love with the entire package - the story (such as there is one), the pictures, and their relationship to each other.

From the second you open the cover you are swept along by Eloise as she tells you in her own hilariously inimitable way about her life living pretty much unmanaged in a luxury hotel in the 1950s.

The text is breathless and exciting with no full stops. It skitters here and there all over the page as Eloise goes about her day causing trouble on purpose, getting involved in things she has no business getting involved in, and generally larking about. Eloise doesn't run, she 'skibbles'. She doesn't skulk about, she 'slathes'.



Eloise by Kay Thompson, illustrated by Hilary Knight, is published by Simon and Schuster, 978-0743489768, £7.99 pbk.

BfK reviews

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant

New Talent

The Cat Who Couldn't Be Bothered

★★★★

Jack Kurland, Frances Lincoln, 40pp, 978-0711287440, £7.99 pbk
Several picture books address sadness, few do it with as much humour or as effectively as Jack Kurland in his debut. This cat really can't be bothered to do anything. His friends, in contrast are full of energy, chasing string, going to parties, even planning a trip to Mars. They invite Greg to join them but the response is the same every time: 'I can't be bothered.' Undaunted, they ask, 'What's up? What DO you want to do?', and Greg explains. He's feeling sad, 'All I want to do is nothing.' At this point, his friends support him in the best way possible, acknowledging that we all feel like that sometimes, and



then they join him doing nothing. Readers will see the difference this makes to Greg. The recognition of the universality of sadness and low mood is well handled and the cats' method of supporting Greg through it is perfect, delivering a lesson we should all learn. The humour comes from the juxtaposition of Greg, slumped and unmoving in black and white, with the other cats, all brightly coloured, tearing around enjoying their increasingly unusual activities. There's one final joke to enjoy too. **LS**

My Baby Sister is a Diplodocus

★★★★

Aurore Petit, Trans. Daniel Hahn, Gecko Press, 48pp, 9781776575725, £12.99 hbk

Aurore Petit's landscape-formatted picture book offers a visually bold and honest exploration of sibling relationships. Through the lens of a young boy trying to understand his place and role when his baby sister arrives, Petit skilfully addresses universal themes of adjustment and acceptance in the face of new family dynamics, making for a resonant narrative presented in a format made for sharing.

The picture book chronicles a brother's initial excitement upon welcoming his newborn sister into their home. Petit expertly manipulates perspective, often setting the lens at the boy's eye level, subtly obscuring the parents' faces and emotions. Through gentle visuals, we witness the boy's blend of excitement and cautious curiosity towards the new addition. Initially, his attempts to engage with his sister are met with parental intervention,

resulting in repeated rejections of 'No!'. As communication falters, so does his enthusiasm, culminating in a moment of emotional upheaval where he retreats to his bedroom, donning a dinosaur costume. It's only then that his parents grasp his need for understanding and provide the comfort he craves. Reunited as a family, the boy embraces his sister anew, naming her his 'little diplodocus' and inviting her into his inner world, eager for the day when they can explore it together.

The deceptively simple and vibrant style, accentuated by bright pink lettering, suggests a target audience of younger readers. Particularly compelling is the subtle passage of time and the boy's emotions conveyed through sparse yet poignant lines. A standout moment occurs when the mother queries her son's feelings about 'being a big brother,' with the background transitioning from yellows to reds, skilfully capturing his frustration and emotional distance. Ultimately, it's a touching and authentic portrayal of the complexities inherent in family relationships. **MT**

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.

Rebecca Bates is Librarian at **Farnley Academy, Leeds**

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.

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/>

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

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Janet Syme is a former school librarian and current member of the FCBG.

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

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

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant continued



Runaway Cone

★★★★

Morag Hood, Two Hoots, 32pp, 978 1 5290 2612 2, £12.99 hbk

This is the sequel to **Dig, Dig, Digger** wherein an ambitious digger wanted a change. Now Digger is ready to start on some new roadworks and as he greets the team, it becomes evident that Gary, one of the six traffic cones, is missing. Has he perhaps as Traffic Light suggests, run away to be a vase, an elephant, as Digger wonders, or even been eaten by a snake - that's a fellow cone's idea. Suddenly CLONK! A pictorial message arrives with news of Gary; he doesn't look at all happy. Thus begins a search for their missing team member. Having hunted high and low, they're about to about to abandon the operation, but instead Digger declares they should go up - up into the clouds courtesy of a helicopter. After a long search they spot a tiny orange shape, way, way down below on the ground. Down they go to where Gary waits with an explanation but ...

For sure young construction vehicle enthusiasts will delight in following Morag Hoods' splendidly silly characters in their search and, along with adult sharers who appreciate the wry, idiosyncratic humour, have a good giggle at the final twist. **JB**

A Home for Stone

★★★★★

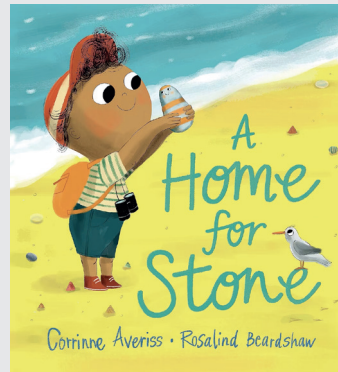
By Corrinne Averiss, ill. Rosalind Beardshaw, Orchard, 32pp, 978-1-40835-585-5, £12.99 hbk
'So there he was, a single stone, looking lost and quite alone....'

It's hard to resist collecting stones, especially when they're as visually (and anthropomorphically) appealing as the one in this book. When a beachcombing child spots him lying on the sand, Stone's little face is the picture of misery. Naturally, the child wants to help. But what should they do? Allow the tide to wash Stone away, or find him a new home; somewhere this handsome but unhappy fellow can be with others just like him?

Billed as a story about finding friends in unexpected places, the bold artwork and rhyming text in this warm-hearted picturebook also explore the idea that 'fitting in' does not mean 'being the same'. Our

differences bring pleasures and possibilities, together with room for learning, change and growth, and if we go in search of them, we'll enjoy the 'brighter company' they offer.

Corrinne Averiss's pacy text reads well aloud. Many locations for Stone's new home are considered, from a nearby rockpool or dry stone wall to the rockery in the garden of the child's marvellous boat-shaped home. But Stone's downturned mouth betrays his dislike for all of them, so the child deposits him on a bedside table with a trio of other treasures. And finally, beside a leaf, a coin and a shiny shell, Stone smiles at last. Could it be that what he'd wanted all along was the energy and inspiration that comes from not being the same? This can be tricky territory to explore without overtly moralizing, but Averiss addresses the issue head-on in lively, appealing fashion, and pulls the whole story off with well-judged panache.



Rosalind Beardshaw's illustrations have a fresh, modern feel, bringing the child's solitary world to life in a stylized but emotionally convincing way. Much is achieved with expressive lines: even the youngest audiences will read the characters' facial reactions quite readily, and Beardshaw's depiction of the child's beach-hut home with its turquoise port-hole is particularly appealing. These are landscapes that readers will want to inhabit and explore, and wondering what could be round a corner just out of sight is definitely part of the fun. **CFH**

There's a Tiger on the Train

★★★★★

Mariesa Dulak, ill. Rebecca Cobb, Faber, 32pp, 978 0 571 36834 1, £7.99 pbk

A little boy is on the way to the seaside with his dad. When they get on the train something amazing happens - a tiger in a top hat gets on too, sits right next to the little boy and starts reading a comic! Dad doesn't notice, he is too busy with his phone. The tiger is swiftly followed by crowds of crocodiles and piglets, three large hippos, two pugs and a mouse. Dad, still absorbed with his phone, is unaware of these strange passengers arriving and their

antics. He only starts paying attention when the tiger swallows his phone! However, being separated from his device enables dad and the little boy to have lots of seaside fun together without distraction.

This is a lovely rhyming story full of imaginative fun. It includes a subtle message about the conversations and experiences, whether real or imaginary that might be missed if adults are too wrapped up in their devices.

An engaging debut picture book with an enjoyable story. The delightful artwork by acclaimed illustrator Rebecca Cobb includes lots of amusing detail - spot the tiger before he steps on the train, and is that a snake on the platform too? **SMc**

Measuring ME!

★★★★★

Written and ill. Nicola Kent, Little Tiger, 32pp, 978-1-83891-558-2, £12.99 hbk

'My body is amazing. Just look at some of the reasons why!'

Children are drawn to books about the human body and **Measuring ME!** will be no exception. It's bright, full of energy, and really catches the eye. Numbers can fascinate young readers, too, but larger quantities bring their own challenges, and if we want children to engage with them in any meaningful way, they usually need some help. Nicola Kent takes a step in the right direction with the real-world measuring activity on the cover. 'I'm as tall as ten tin cans,' announces the girl on the first spread, and this familiar and undeniably concrete unit of measurement also features on a delightful height chart included with the book.

That's as far as it goes for the cans, though and the spreads that follow take other approaches to exploring the numerical wonders of the body, with varying degrees of impact and success. The child powering a light bulb is an arresting illustration of an intriguing idea, but the depiction of a boy's weight in toys scattered across a spread seems design-focused in a way that makes the conceptual comparison more challenging. At times, concrete examples are abandoned altogether, and statements about large numbers are allowed to stand alone, such as the 50,000 scents detectable by our noses and the 97 billion nerve cells in our bodies, along with similar information about our genes, sweat pores and tendons. These facts and figures refer to an average Western five-year-old, and the characters and toys that are pictured also appeal to this age group, so younger readers appear to be the target audience. But the numerical statements about complex topics feel more suited to an older audience, so there's a degree of dissonance in this respect.

Nicola Kent won the Independent Bookseller's Best New Illustrator Award in 2019, and has been shortlisted in both the **World Illustration Awards** and the **Teach**

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

Primary Book Awards. Her artwork for **Measuring ME!** is lively, bold and appealing, with sunshine yellow, bright blue and white backgrounds creating visual drama and contrast, and a variety of page compositions and layouts. The children depicted are diverse: one uses a walking aid, for example, and the girl on the cover has a tracheostomy to aid her breathing. Kent has a tracheostomy herself, and knows how vital it is for children with physical differences to find themselves represented incidentally 'as part of the rainbow of humanity' in books and other media. It's particularly welcome to see a book about the wonders of the human body quietly taking this **approach**.

Measuring ME! doesn't deliver all it promises on the numerical front, but there is plenty here to intrigue and entertain young audiences. Given the ongoing need for vibrant and appealing STEM books for younger readers, it will find a welcome place on bookshelves, and will prompt lively discussions and activities at home and in school. **CFH**

Meet the Wildlings

★★★★

Gwen Millard, Templar Books, 32pp, 978 1 78741 933 9, £7.99, pbk

In a home where walls are covered with children's drawings and paintings, Max is cross. Growling, he glares at Poppy, who is playing with HIS truck. A huge tussle ensues, the two children getting more and more furious until they turn into ENORMOUS, HAIRY WILDLINGS. The parents are at a loss what to do with them, trying the outdoors, the supermarket... the Wildlings eat up everything... a cinema trip... their fidgeting and roaring means a hasty departure. Until finally, in shame, the parents take their huge, hairy Wildlings home. The resolution is a befitting ending, with the two at last sharing amicably, and suddenly, poof, the Wildlings are transformed to Max and Poppy once more. Illustrated throughout with humorous depictions of the family in all the various situations, the pictures are full of detail and give lots of opportunities for talking about sharing, and the problems of coping with the anger, frustration and jealousy that can come whilst learning how to share. A good book for both the home and the nursery, where the characters will be quickly recognised. **GB**

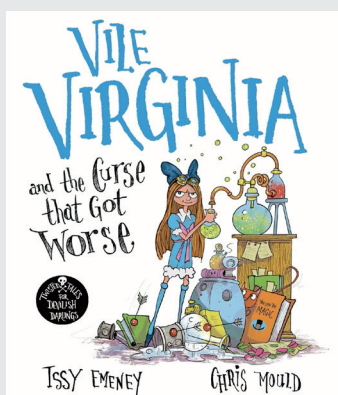
Vile Virginia and the Curse That Got Worse

★★★★

Issy Emenev, illus Chris Mould, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 978-1471187643, £7.99 hbk

Virginia was a tyrant, a bully and a brat, who was rude to sweet old ladies and tormented next door's cat.

Virginia is a truly horrible child.



Other children run away from her in the street and she is a world champion at tantrums. Until one day the doorbell rings and there is the angelic looking Julian, who has apparently come to stay. Much to her disgust, Virginia is made to share her room with Julian and even her Mum seems to prefer him to her. There is only one thing for it, Julian must go! However, Virginia's wicked attempts to get rid of her unwanted visitor just don't seem to work and even when she comes up with her most evil plan of all, an unexpected twist means that things definitely do not go the way Virginia expected!

Issy Emenev has created a wonderfully horrible character in Virginia, with a clever rhyming tale that will make readers laugh out loud again and again. Chris Mould's glorious Dahlesque illustrations add the perfect element of darkness to this twisted tale, bringing Emenev's characters to life with comedy and in great detail.

A fun new favourite which is sure to be loved by children and parents alike. **AH**

The Library Mouse

★★★★

Frances Tosdevin, ill. Sophia O'Connor, UCLan Publishing, 32pp, 9781915235893, £7.99 pbk

Quill is a timid little mouse, residing deep within a library full of other peoples' stories. He dreams of the day when he might become a real author too and the children will flock to listen to one of his creations. Quill is inspired to start to write his own tales, *his pen full of power, his words bold and bright*. Unfortunately, every time he tries to share his heartfelt stories, he is too quiet to be heard or noticed, until one day, thinking that his work has been thrown away, he finally shouts out loud in frustration. Could it be that someone will actually hear him this time and appreciate his beautiful words?

This is a gem of a picture book, with beautiful, clever brush stroke illustrations and a gentle rhyming text for the perfect bedtime or classroom read. Little Quill and his spider best friend Leggy are sure to become

firm new favourites and encourage a whole new generation of children to share their stories too. The end pages give some ideas from Quill on how the reader can also become a writer, 'catching ideas' by daydreaming, plus some closing questions to generate conversations and maybe even more ideas for a story. **AH**

Bird is Dead

★★★★

Tiny Fisscher, illus. Herma Starreveld, trans. Laura Watkinson, Greystone Kids, 40pp, 9781778401176, £12.99 hbk

Translated from Dutch by Laura Watkinson, Fischer and Starreveld's picture book invites an honest exploration of death and grief. It opens with a silent spread depicting one bird discovering another, lifeless, against a pale, washed landscape. The narrative unfolds as other birds, individualised by a blend of their natural attributes and human-like clothing and appendages, approach the deceased. Some exhibit a childlike curiosity, asking, 'Are you sure he's not sleeping?' while others reminisce and reflect on their relationship with the departed bird, expressing sentiments such as, 'I'm sad too. Can I cry with you?' or 'I thought he was a pest.'

As each bird grapples with their grief and frustration in diverse ways, they



collectively agree to bury their fallen comrade. A silent, double-page spread portrays the flock somberly dragging the bird's body to its final resting place. Following the burial, each bird offers a few words or a song as they bid farewell, honouring their own unique memories of the departed. With the ritual complete, the birds gather to commemorate their friend through shared food and drink.

The story, conveyed with simplicity, carries the profound message that grief and loss are complex emotions, experienced uniquely by each individual, yet entirely normal and acceptable. Fischer's narrative embraces acceptance without judgment, while Starreveld's illustrations transport the reader into a realm where reality fades into the distance. **MT**

5 – 8 **Infant/Junior**



A Hat Full of Sea

★★★★

Maudie Smith, ill. Jen Khatun, Lantana, 32pp, 978 1 915244 66 6, £12.99, hbk

A heart-warming story about one very special hat. Or should that be one very special girl? Cora visits her grandfather in hospital and is appalled that his only view of the world is one small square of sky. She determines to rectify this, claiming she will bring him something of their usual panoramic view of the seaside... and so she does: in her hat, spreading the sea out across the hospital bed. Grandpa is delighted! He can see, smell and taste his beloved sea. Cora also brings him the town, the market, the countryside, each page turn showing his happiness as

his granddaughter brings him more delights. When she loses her hat, she is devastated, fearing she has lost her power to make her grandpa happy, but he lets her know it is she herself that is the cause of his joy. Illustrated in bold, bright colours, there is a freshness on every spread, and the emotions of the two characters are so well described in the pictures. A great book to read when a loved one is in hospital. **GB**

The Best Eid Ever

★★★★

Sufiya Ahmed, ill. Hazem Azif, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 978 1 80199 377 7, £7.99, pbk

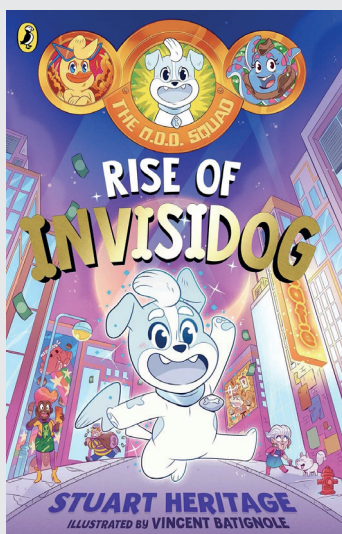
Aisha is very excited because her favourite festival, Eid Al-Fitr has arrived. Readers are invited to join her as the family prepares to mark the end of Ramadan. The house is decorated, and Aisha's hands are covered with beautiful henna patterns. A special meal is prepared, and sweets are taken to neighbours. The family go to the mosque wearing their best clothes and greet their friends. Aisha's excitement builds throughout the day – she knows there is an Eid gift hunt waiting for her at home and can't wait to begin.

This is a picture book offering an introduction to an important Muslim festival in the form of a simple day in the life story. Young readers will gain

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

an insight into this important Muslim festival and what it entails, its link to the cycle of the moon, and the role of fasting within the Islamic faith.

The back of the book contains a list of related facts and a glossary including how to greet Muslims at this time of year. The rich and colourful illustrations helping to convey Aisha's excitement and the theme of celebration. **SMc**



The O.D.D. Squad: Rise of Invisidog

★★★★

Stuart Heritage, illus Vincent Batignole, Puffin, 240pp, 978-0241572269, £8.99 pbk

It's still early in a new year and already young readers have been treated to some great new graphic novels, see **Pablo and Splash** by Sheena Dempsey for example or Andy Riley's **Action Dude**. Stuart Heritage and Vincent Batignole's new series, **The O.D.D. Squad**, which opens with **Rise of Invisidog**, is certain to be another favourite with those who like their reading fast, funny, metafictional and highly illustrated. Set in Justice City, it introduces us to three unlikely superheroes, veterans Quack Attack (a duckling) and Detective Octopus (an octopus – you probably guessed that – she struggles rather with crimes that take place on dry land), plus eager newbie, Invisidog. Young Invisidog's superpower is invisibility, but he's yet to find a way to use it effectively to right wrongs. Their enemies are the suitably wicked Captain Bad who, of course, has a plan for destroying the world, and his sidekick Daniel, the latter handicapped by his inability to differentiate 'evil' and 'slightly annoying'. As casts of characters go, they make an unusual and pleasing set. There are jokes and funny situations throughout while chapters end on cliffhangers and often with a comment from the book's author. Sharp and comic, these work a treat in making readers feel part of the

action. The action itself is a zany as you'd expect from a book starring a crime fighting octopus, and will be much enjoyed by its audience. **MMA**

How to Find a Rainbow

★★★★

Alom Shaha, ill. Sarthak Sinha, Scribble, 32pp, 978 1 915590 39 8, £12.99, hbk

Reena hates rainy days. Her younger sister Rekha disagrees, she loves rainy days and wants to persuade Reena to change her mind. She thinks showing her artistic sister a rainbow would make all the difference. She would surely love to paint it. Unfortunately, when she spots a rainbow and tries to take her sister to see it, the rainbow has disappeared.

The two sisters decide to go rainbow hunting. After lots of searching and some hard thinking they work out the ingredients which work together to create rainbows and which way to look in the sky to spot them.

How to Find a Rainbow is a warm story about showing someone you love the beauty they may be missing in the world around them. The soft and muted illustrations are appealing, though the two characters sometimes become lost in the predominantly green landscapes. However, the colours of the rainbow, when it is finally discovered, stand out and young readers will enjoy naming the colours.

This is the first of a planned series of Reena and Rekha stories exploring scientific themes.

The back of the book includes a little more scientific information about rainbows and instructions for making your own rainbow at home on a sunny day, even if it is not raining. **SMc**

A Horse Called Now

★★★★

Ruth Doyle, Ill. Alexandra Finkeldey, Nosy Crow, 978 1 83994 685 1, £7.99, pbk

'When I'm afraid, I breathe in and out and let the feelings come.... And then go. Nothing lasts for ever', says Horse. So begins this delightful book about tackling imagined fears. Horse, called Now, lives in the moment, and continues to dispense his wisdom, as one after another, a group of rabbits, a hen and chicks and a sheep and her lambs, all arrive noisily at Now's feet, all terrified of what they think is chasing them. 'Farmer has a terrifying new dog,' trembles a lamb. 'He might have claws like saws, and fangs as long as spears.' 'Or he might not,' responds Now, as he allays their fears. When a huge bang terrifies all the assembled animals, Now explains it is only a clap of thunder which heralds a storm, which is a real threat. He leads them all to shelter in a barn, where they meet an even more potentially terrifying crowd of animals sheltering. The whole book is enchanting, the animals drawn both in text and

pictures with great charm. An ideal book for bedtime, or at any time when it is appropriate to talk about real or imagined fears. Included is a QR code for a smartphone free audio reading of the book. **GB**

Mo's Best Friend

★★★★

Bridget Marzo, Otter-Barry Books, 40pp, 978 1 91565919 4, £12.99 hbk Set in the Stone Age, this delightful story of young Mo and her family was inspired by the discovery of two footprints by archaeologists working in the Chauvet cave in France around thirty years ago; one footprint was of a dog, the other of a child.

Mo's main task is to keep a watchful eye on baby Babba, a fast crawler who is not aware of danger.

Liking to have time to herself sometimes, Mo takes the opportunity to go and sit in her favourite spot up on the hill, eat her food and listen to the sounds around. While so doing one day she hears a strange 'Yip!' coming from a bush and ignoring what she's been told about the dangers of wild beasts, she goes to investigate. She discovers a small animal that is clearly in trouble and looking more closely Mo finds a thorn in its paw. She takes it out and soon the creature wants to play; it becomes the girl's friend, playing with her all afternoon. Mo decides to introduce her new friend to rest of her family but they're horrified by the strange animal and scare it away. Almost immediately they realise baby Babba has disappeared. They start to search, Mo leading the way and she soon spies a pawprint: they then hear a 'WOOF! WOOF!' but it's not what they think. It's Mo's new friend and he's defending the infant from a hungry lynx. Now it's not only Mo who has a new friend; the little animal becomes part of the family and you can guess what they decide to call him ...

Gouache scenes show the action as it unfolds: I love the intimate sequence of Mo's first encounter with the little wild beast and their subsequent animated frolicsome play of fetch and return of Mo's stick. Bridget Marzo uses natural and earth colours for her illustrations with ochre predominating, adding authenticity to her portrayal of the story. **JB**

A First Book of Dinosaurs

★★★★

Simon Mole. Illustrated by Matt Hunt, Walker Books, 80pp 9781406396096, £16.99, hdbk

Children, even the youngest, are fascinated by dinosaurs. The dinosaur galleries at the Natural History Museum are always crowded, and library kinder boxes sport innumerable stories featuring dinosaur characters. These naturally present the dinosaur protagonist as very humanized – essentially the child. What about the facts? How to make the long names, the amphibian and reptile characteristics easily available – but without patronising? Simon Mole, ably assisted by the

illustrator Matt Hunt, does just that using his skill as a poet. Here we meet a whole range of dinosaurs whose existence spanned the Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous periods. Though they are not so sorted in the actual narrative, a helpful factual spread with a colourful timeline brings the book to a close.

The text is made up of short punchy poems that use language to highlight characteristics or lifestyle. There are no long drawn out explanations. These creatures stomp, crunch, zip across each double page spread accompanied by Matt Hunt's vibrant, colour saturated, energetic illustrations. These are dinosaurs to spark the imagination with vivid colours and a satisfying solidity that mirrors the words on the page. The vocabulary is immediate, visual and instantly engaging; factual correctness is embedded. The dinosaur names are clearly displayed with their pronunciation while the final section brings us up to date presenting the extraordinary fact that the chicken (representative of all birds) is a direct relative of the dinosaurs, while fossil remains are still waiting to be uncovered - perhaps by the reader! Lively, accessible, instantly eye-catching, this is a book that would brighten any library or classroom providing pleasure and immediacy if included in any lesson, stretching the imagination, enriching language without ignoring facts. **FH**

Be a Nature Explorer! Outdoor Activities and Adventures

★★★★

Peter Wohlleben, trans. Jane Billingham, ill. Belle Wuthrich, Greystone Kids, 100pp, 978 1 77164 969 8, £8.99 pbk

As a young girl one of the highlights of my annual holidays in the Devon countryside was identifying wildflowers with my dad. In particular I enjoyed using a guidebook to find out more about the specimens we collected. If only such a book as **Be a Nature Explorer!** had been available to me then, a love of the outdoors could have been nurtured from an early age. Alas I have only come to appreciate nature in all its glory relatively recently.

Through Greystone Kids I have become a serious fan of Peter Wohlleben's amazing books on trees and nature. He is a New York Times bestselling author with **The Hidden Life of Trees** and **Can You Hear the Trees Talking?** and his passion as a forester shines through his work. In this engaging book for 6 years upwards we have an impressive translation from the original text with helpful illustrations throughout by an award-winning illustrator.

I found this handy sized book very well laid out. The Contents page itemizes the 52 activities within, one for each week of the year. Peter introduces himself and the purpose of the book before explaining What to Take with You on your explorations

reviews

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

and A Few Tips Before You Set Off. Practical help occurs throughout the book, for example teaching valuable organizational skills to the youngster 'Include the matching page number from the book when you record your find'.

Fun activities include Using a Forest Telephone, Snacking on Sweet Blossoms, Drumming for Earthworms and Playing with Ticky Grasses and Sticky Burs. The latter reminds me of hikes on Brownie Pack Holiday and communicates how the natural world is there to be discovered throughout the generations.

Please grab yourself a copy of this five-star book and share it with the young people with whom you have contact. There is so much to learn from what exists around us. For me a love of flowers persists. I was fascinated to learn that the difference between North American columbines and those in Europe is the fact they have 'evolved long spurs to accommodate the long thin tongues of hummingbirds, which feed on their nectar'. JS

The Narzat

★★★★★

Luke Marchant, ill, Rory Walker, Everything With Words, 224pp, 978911427384, £7.99 pbk

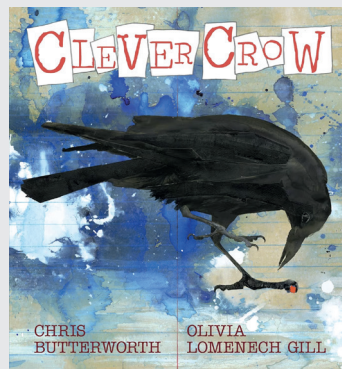
Welcome to the Ungle Bungle Jungle, a place like no other on Earth, where you will meet a whole host of unusual creatures, such as the Looky Looky Lizard, a feisty reptile who communicates at rapid speed through sign language, and the Chatty Chiwunga, a crazy, brightly coloured bird who can't stop talking, mainly nonsense! The most unusual of all these characters is, of course, the Narzat; if you combined the muddiest puddle with a dustbin full of dirt, you still wouldn't have something as grimy as the Narzat. No one, including himself, knows from where he originates and how he came to live in the jungle, nor where he got his favourite possession, his "shiny", but he is definitely not as scary as he looks.

When the villainous Lord and Lady Snide arrive in the jungle with both weapons and an evil plan, they don't care how many of its residents get hurt in their hunt to find the fabled lost treasure. The Narzat and his friends must join together and bravely overcome their fears to defeat these terrible interlopers and save everything and everyone they hold dear.

The Narzat is not just a riotous fun-packed adventure tale of good versus evil, but also a real story of acceptance, how you should not judge people on their appearances and that friends can come in all shapes and sizes. I loved how the explanation of why the Looky Looky Lizard used sign language does not come until halfway through the book, the reason being that the fact she can't hear 'is

the least interesting detail about her', which is surely how we would wish any disability to be viewed.

I'm sure like me you will find yourselves cheering on the jungle creatures as they battle the terrible Snides, and after many twists and surprises we get a suitably satisfying conclusion for the residents of the Ungle Bungle Jungle and most especially the Narzat himself. AH



Clever Crow

★★★★★

Chris Butterworth, ill. Olivia Lomenech Gill, Walker Books, 32pp, 978-1-4063-8033-0, £12.99 hbk

On the front cover, a glossy-feathered crow is playfully exploring ink. It's an eye-catching opener for a book that wants its audience to think differently about this familiar yet often misunderstood bird. But who is watching, and who is being observed? As readers quickly discover, crows are clever, crafty problem-solvers with long memories, able to wield tools and work in groups. In fact, they're really quite like people!

Chris Butterworth's engaging text takes a child-friendly approach to topics from food and flying to nesting, playing and remembering, and reads well aloud. Three font sizes encourage younger readers to focus on key messages while enabling those who wish to delve further to discover more. There's an effective call to action on the final spread, where readers are encouraged to record crow sightings and pay close attention to their behaviour, and the basic index comes with a friendly note for novice researchers, which is a thoughtful touch.

Olivia Lomenech Gill respects her young audience with illustrations that do the opposite of 'talking down', and her striking artwork is beautifully observed. Painted and found papers are used as backdrops or collaged into mixed media scenes where they provide texture and evoke a vintage atmosphere, and sketched wing outlines are visible beyond some of the birds in flight, suggesting movement and the immediacy of a sketchbook. The book's subdued palette is notable. When the American Crow goes head to head with its dapper cousin, the Eurasian

Jay, the crow's black feathers really pop against a bright background, and the greens and blues of the eggs on the beautiful endpapers sing out. But shades of grey and brown and mossy green predominate elsewhere. It's an unusual palette in a book for this age group, and won't go unremarked.

Lomenech Gill started her career as a fine artist, and although her artwork for **Clever Crow** does illustrate the text, there's a sense in which it stands alone, as well. Occasionally, it also seems to be inviting questions that don't quite add up. Tangential discussion can be rich and wonderful, and text and image don't have to say the same thing. But some of the non-verbal prompts in **Clever Crow** seem to be slightly at odds with the words.

Children deserve to encounter a wide range of visual styles, and the even youngest of readers will respond to this book with interest and insight when supported by adults who encourage observation and discussion. Families who aren't as confident in this respect could find the artwork challenging, though, and the book's biggest fans may be older than the text suggests. CFH

The Magic Callaloo

★★★★★

Trish Cooke, ill. Sophie Bass, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 5295 0488 0, £12.99 hbk

With its origins in the fairy tale, Rapunzel, Trish Cooke has fashioned a neo-folktale inspired by stories of enslaved Africans who made patterns in their cornrowed hair, using them as maps to help them escape to freedom.

It's set far away and long ago in a small village where grows a magical wishing callaloo plant that satisfies the needs of all the villagers. In this village lives a selfish man who wants the plant for himself, so having uprooted it one night uses it to wish for ever more things. Around his land he puts a barbed-wire fence inside which he stays stuffing himself and growing ever fatter and lazier until all that remains of the plant is a single leaf.

Meanwhile back in the village a couple are devastated at the loss of the plant, which they hoped could have provided them with their dearest wish – a child. One evening a wise old woman stops by informing the husband of the callaloo's whereabouts and the couple decide to search for it. They eventually locate the plant, the wife consumes the last leaf and they both wish for a child. In due time, joy of joys, a baby is born and they name her Lou. She grows into a beautiful, curly locked girl and her parents decide to tell her the story of her origin. This prompts Lou to make up and sing a magic callaloo song, which troubles her father. Then one day who should pass through but the plant thief. On hearing the song, he snatches Lou, takes her to his home where he keeps her prisoner, making her do all the work. As a consequence Lou grows ever more miserable.

Years pass with her parents constantly missing their daughter and vice versa until who should come along but the wise woman who had helped her father. Lou explains the cause of her sadness and the wise old woman devises a clever plan to reunite the family using the plaited patterns she lovingly twists into the girl's tresses. Lou however isn't all that returns from whence it came in this superbly woven story, which is magnificently embroidered by Sophie Bass's illustrations of dragons, wild and domesticated creatures, and fantastical plants – a veritable feast for the eyes executed in a kaleidoscope of colours. JB

The Brilliant Brain: How it Works and How to Look After It

★★★★★

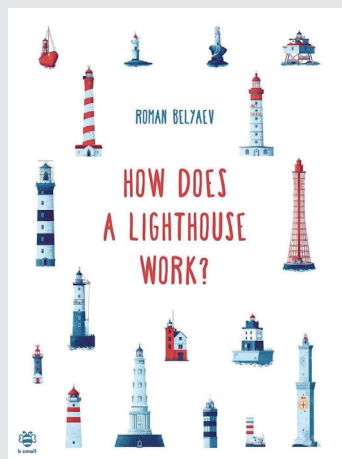
Dr Roopa Farooki, ill. Viola Wang, Walker Books, 28pp, 978 1 5295 0450 7, £12.99 hbk

Here is a brand-new picture book series, **Dr Roopa's Body Books**, and the first book looks at how our brains work. The author is very well qualified to explain this as she is a medical hospital doctor as well as a successful writer.

I liked the way the explanation of this complex body organ is broken down into manageable sections. After mentioning how thoughts come from the brain Dr Roopa goes on to describe the brain regarding its size, weight, and appearance. She then compares it to a machine and starts off detailing each part of the brain starting with the biggest part called the cerebrum. It is very helpful how she spells out this complicated sounding word so that the reader knows how to pronounce it. After a page spread all about nerves the picture book continues with the cerebellum and the brain stem. The hippocampus as the place for storing short term memories is shown before the explanation that 'important memories are stored all over your brain, to make sure you can't forget them easily'.

At the end of the book Dr Roopa gives young people some excellent advice on eating, drinking and sleeping for better brain health, together with activities to keep your busy brain in tip-top condition! This is a well laid out book which is very successful at explaining a complex body part. The illustrations and diagrams are very clear and attractive. They work well with the text and are particularly colourful. Viola Wang is an award-winning illustrator and her talent is very visible here.

Congratulations to all the team involved in producing this picture book. I think it will work well with an adult reading aloud about this complicated organ and what it can do. Having reviewed this book, I am now looking forward to the second book in the series about **The Super Skeleton**. JS



How Does a Lighthouse Work?

★★★★★

Roman Belyaev, b small, 40pp,
978-1913918903, £8.99 pbk

This beautiful, atmospheric non-fiction book is a celebration of lighthouses, their coastal history and the engineering that goes into making them work. The approach is beautifully simple and will immediately draw in young readers. A child – with a passion for the subject – is on a school trip to visit a lighthouse, and poses a set of questions, one per double page spread. They start with what is a lighthouse for, what will I find at a lighthouse station, what is it like on the top deck. Text with the answers is clear, and builds on information delivered on the previous page, while striking colour illustrations in blue, red and yellow not only provide additional insight – eg the cross section of a lighthouse enabling us to see inside – but convey too the singular beauty of these extraordinary buildings and their wild settings. Answers to questions such as how does the light shine so far, what did people do before lighthouses, combine history and geography with STEM, and the final pages invite children to design their own lighthouse, walking them through the decisions that need to be made, reinforcing what has been learned but emphasising again the special nature of lighthouses. With wide appeal and an approach that will make rereading a pleasure, this is a truly illuminating information book. **MMA**

Stitch

★★★★★

Padraig Kenny, illus. Steve McCarthy, Walker, 208pp, 978 1 5295 1778, £7.99 pbk

Elegant and beautifully written this is a charming Frankenstein-esque tale about forging friendships, loyalty and finding a place to call home.

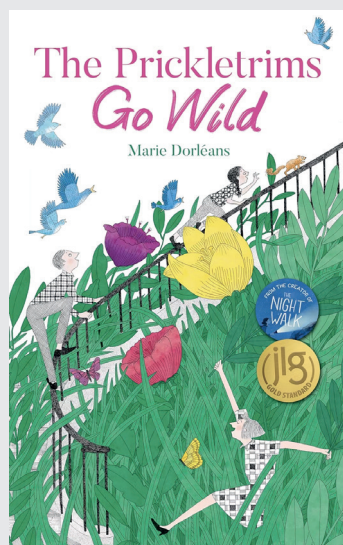
Stitch has spent all his 584 days so far in an isolated castle with an

eccentric genius professor, along with his friend Henry Oaf, who sleeps in a cage, his pet brown mouse and a treasured book of exploration. He has been told not to disturb the professor. But when the professor's nephew Professor Hardacre arrives at the door with his assistant, Alice, Stich's world turns upside down. The professor is found dead and his nephew quickly takes over the workshop hoping to 'improve' his uncle's handiwork and in particular Henry.

When Henry finds out that he has been created by the professor he runs away and Stich soon follows to look for him – he has always wanted to explore. In turn, Alice comes to Stich's rescue as he is about to be captured and sold to a freak show. Alice explains that the outside world is not kind to people who are different – she has a humped back but Stich doesn't think this is important and understands that every person is unique and different in their own way.

Stitch and Alice offer kindness to an old man which delays their search for Henry and then Stich finds a baying mob who have captured Henry and are about to burn him on a pyre for being a so-called 'monster'. Stich manages to turn everything round and saves the day by showing that what is means to be human is not necessarily what you see on the surface.

Moving and powerful, yet delicate, this story celebrates the uniqueness of every individual. It would be a great one for classroom discussion. **JC**



The Prickletrims Go Wild

★★★★★

Marie Dorleans, Floris Books, 40 pages, 9781782508830, £12.00 hbk

The Prickletrim family love their garden – but control it in such detail that their gardener cannot stand it, and leaves. The family learns what happens when 'the plants, full of life, burst forth EVERYWHERE!'

Dorleans has constructed a simple yet clever narrative here, with a similar message to Emily Gravett's *Tidy*: that a world in which we control nature is in effect not really wild, and accepting that brings freedom. The artwork tells the story just as much as the text, moving from spare lines on a white page with lots of blank space standing for walls, paths, &c, to exuberant and less ruler-sharp depictions of leaves and flowers. Note the end papers: the first endpaper has regimented, almost characterless tulips in regular boxes; in the last endpapers the same boxes of five plants are bursting with exuberant flowers.

But what of the family, the Prickletrims? They are not without love for their garden – we see them enjoying it early on – but they are controlling to an annoying degree: witness the Mum checking the leaves against colour matching cards, or the Dad measuring the topiary. There is comedy here in their expressions and body language, underlined by the subdued colours. When their gardener – his name is Florian, linking him to the flowers – has had enough and flounces off, the drama and the comedy take over. The Prickletrims are increasingly unable to cope. The best openings to my mind are where 'Deliveries soon became difficult,' and we see an arm reaching up from the thick foliage to knock at the door and then later, where Dorlean suddenly changes the colour scheme to show us the joy and wonder of the garden at night.

While the family learns to enjoy their riotous garden, they cannot hold back time, and autumn – and a return to school and work – begins to beckon. What will they do? If the arrival of a 'land-clearing company' seems drastic, all is not lost, as the final opening shows.

The message is clear, and if on some level this all seems a little formulaic, there are plenty of readers who will enjoy this, revelling in the explosion of colour, and there would be plenty of short and long term class projects that could arise from or be enriched by the straightforward narrative and artwork. **NS**

Murray and Bun: Murray the Viking

★★★★★

Adam Stower, Harper Collins, 167pp, 9780008561246, £6.99 pbk

This new illustrated series for children introduces Murray: a typically lazy cat who belongs to a totally useless wizard and is very reluctant to do anything beyond snoozing, napping and sleeping.

Murray's peace and quiet is shattered when another mistake from his wizard owner – Fumblethumb – causes a delicious sticky bun to morph with a rabbit, resulting in a



brand new friend for Murray... Bun! Bun is everything that Murray is not. He is excitable, energetic and desperate for adventure and he is the source of much hilarity as he leaps around the pages screaming 'Bun!' as loud as he can, getting frequently stuck to things.

As if this noisy intruder wasn't bad enough, Fumblethumb makes Murray's life even more miserable by accidentally enchanting the cat flap, transforming it into a magical portal to an endless number of adventure zones. This terrible news for Murray unlocks limitless potential for the series: every time Murray and Bun leave the catflap, they're transported to another exciting place and time.

In this curtain-opener, Murray and Bun's journey through the cat flap takes them to an archetypal Viking village, full of huge, hairy, horn-helmeted brutes. The curious pair are mistaken for troll-hunters (albeit somewhat small ones) and are charged with trekking to the gobble-you-up-woods to find the lost Viking, Eggrik. On their journey they face the terrifying chasm of certain death and the world's longest (and funniest) longship but, fortunately, Bun's energy is limitless and his ability to leap about getting stuck to things proves to be surprisingly useful.

Though their story is a simple one, Murray and Bun pack plenty into the pages of this comic adventure story. There are brilliant visual gags that stretch over multiple pages, as well as clever word play and gorgeous gross-out moments (troll-nostril carrots, anyone?!). Most enjoyable of all are Stower's trademark playful illustrations, which are full of life and chaotic movement.

There's not enough time in this first outing for readers to really get to know Murray as much as they'd like. His contrasting character to the zestful Bun has potential for lots more laughs and there is something

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

immediately charming about a lazy hero with no sense of adventure. Fortunately, Murray's cat flap leads to literally anywhere, so it is likely readers won't have to wait long to get to know him a little better. **SD**

Twice Upon a Time

★★★★★

Michelle Harrison, Simon & Schuster, 336pp, 9781471197673, £12.99 hbk

The Morrow Twins, Merry and Spike, have a secret that only they know about; working together they can actually stop time. Not only that, they also occasionally have curious visions (one seeing into the past, while the other girl sees what is yet to come), not to mention the very strange effect that they have on any nearby clocks or watches. When they arrive at the mysterious Fox House for the summer holidays, they must find something to entertain themselves while their mum works in the main house restoring paintings. However, it is not long before they discover that Fox House also has a few secrets of its own, including a missing woman, a baby left on the doorstep and a locked study, and the sisters are soon drawn into a quest to find out what really happened all those years before. Can the twins uncover the decades-old mystery using their special powers and without being discovered themselves?

This is a delicious mystery thriller, with perfect amounts of suspense and twists to keep the reader guessing right up until the end. There are a wonderful mix of characters, both good and evil, and I particularly enjoyed the comeuppance of one of the less than pleasant residents of the house, who makes the twins' lives very uncomfortable indeed.

As Harrison's previous titles have shown, she is a master of magical stories and with *Twice Upon a Time*, she has yet again created a unique and fantastical tale. There is most certainly scope for these main characters to have further adventures in the future and if so, I can't wait to see what Merry and Spike get up to next. **AH**

The Shape of Rainbows

★★★★★

Neal Zetter, ill. Will Hughes, Otter Barry Books, 96pp, 978 1 915659 16 3, £8.99 pbk

The most striking thing about Neal Zetter's collection is its sheer energy. It bounces and bounds from subject to subject, driven on by short lines and driving rhymes. He certainly lives up to his own claim in *The Poem Machine*: 'Creating odes, /ballads and rap, /You want free verse, /It's here on tap /My works are one /long endless stream, / I am the poem machine!' Here are poems filled with the thrill of words and a love of life. *The Poet Tree* has 'gazillions of poems for everybody...

Rhythms roll down from its branches to its roots / Do you want inspiration / Come pick yourself from fruit.' Even the first day of a new school year gets an exhausted thumbs up. These poems surprise you, bite you, infect you with relentless enthusiasm, drive you to emulation (nearly there, but not quite!). Lucky are the schools that book his workshops. I'd like to be at the back of the class. **CB**



Time Travellers: Adventure Calling

★★★

Sufiya Ahmed, Little Tiger Press, 145pp, 9781788956598, £7.99 pbk

In this historical adventure story for children, three school children travel back in time to 1911, and learn about social injustice and the women who fight against it. Suhana finds school difficult. She is curious, intelligent and sociable but, sadly, Mr Hayes – her headteacher – does not value these attributes. He is far more concerned with courtesy and obedience, and frequently scolds Suhana for calling out in class or offering opinions that aren't needed. Suhana knows that her head teacher dislikes her. She feels a hot sense of resentment about this; it stings the scars that she suffered when her mum abandoned her. Suhana's gloominess about schools is interrupted when – against all odds – she wins a trip to visit the Houses of Parliament with two other children, Mia and Ayan.

Unfortunately, Mr Hayes also attends the trip, and his constant put-downs make it hard for Suhana to enjoy the fascinating history of the building. This changes, though, when Ayan and one of the tour guides warm to Suhana's enthusiasm and sense of humour. The charitable words she receives from them give Suhana a new confidence, which is just as well because – seemingly out of absolutely nowhere – her phone starts vibrating and Suhana, Mia and Ayan are transported through time to 1911!

The trio take this extraordinary shock in their stride and soon take advantage of such an impossible learning opportunity. It is a perfect time for Suhana to travel back to: the women's suffrage movement is in full swing, with vociferous crowds of demonstrators gathering outside Parliament. Suhana empathises with their struggle to be heard: she knows what it's like to have a man (Mr Hayes) deliberately exclude you from things. She's inspired, too, by these courageous women who reject social norms and are brave enough to speak their minds. Suhana, Ayan and Mia meet new friends and are delighted to learn that early 20th century London was not the all-white monoculture that their schooling had led them to believe, and that the crucial women's suffrage movement included women from a similar Asian heritage to Suhana.

As an adventure story, *Time Travellers: Adventure Calling* feels rather slow, and readers looking for an exciting science fiction tale about racing through time are likely to be disappointed. There is no shortage of children's fiction featuring time travel to different historical periods, but Ahmed's new series offers an original perspective in its efforts to open readers' minds to the often-overlooked fact that people from all over the world, of all types of culture and heritage, have played key roles in famous events in history. The English women's suffrage movement is an engaging place to start, and Suhana's new secret society of time travellers will surely share lots more enlightening historical discoveries in future episodes. **SD**

Tiger Warrior: Fight for The Cursed Unicorn

★★★★★

Maisie Chan illus. Alan Brown, Orchard, 144p, 978 1 40837 097 1, £6.99 pbk

This is the fifth story in the dynamic and engaging *Tiger Warrior* series.

Jack ends up being blamed in a fight in the school playground when he sees a bigger boy making a racist comment and bullying his friend Klye. Unbeknownst to them Jack is the Tiger Warrior in a parallel world of the Jade Emperor and has a special coin that unleashes powers of the animals from the Chinese zodiac to help him but unfortunately not in the real world. Jack is upset that although he is protector of the Jade Kingdom he feels unable to protect his friends in his world.

Back at home Jack notices his jade coin is glowing and jumps straight through the portal into the next adventure. In the Jade Kingdom someone has put out the flame in the Light of Protection which gives the Emperor his power putting the kingdom in grave danger. And to make matters worse the Trustworthy xiezhi who can point out the guilty party has pointed his horn at the Jade Emperor accusing him of treachery. Jack and

his band of amazing animals must prove the Jade Emperor's innocence.

Pacy, short chapters with large print give easy access into this story – perfect for newly emerging readers to tackle. There is just the right amount of peril and danger and the somewhat mischievous zodiac animals give warmth and humour to the story! Jack always learns something important too from the adventure – this time not to act too hastily.

The black and white illustrations are slightly reminiscent of animé and add extra pizzazz to the story. **JC**

Mission Microraptor

★★★★★

Philip Kavvadias, Chicken House, 373pp, 9781915026941, £7.99 pbk

Imagine how cool it would be if the British Museum of Natural History had its own special agent branch in charge of rescuing and protecting important scientific and natural phenomena. In this new action adventure for children, Finn and Milo learn that, not only is there such a special branch, but that they are about to need its help if they are going to stay alive!

Finn and his reluctant partner, Milo, are not enjoying their school trip in the French Alps. Things get much more exciting, though, when Finn discovers a prehistoric egg preserved in ice, which hatches to reveal a flying dinosaur... a microraptor! The unique new species draws the attention of more than one group of terrifying and extremely well-financed special operative teams and Milo and Finn find themselves at the heart of a breathtaking effort to flee from villains and save Artemis... Finn's very special new pet.

This book has a breathless, exhilarating pace. From the very first chapter, Finn and Milo perpetually leap from frying pan to fire. In the first 90 pages alone they fall from cliffs, smash into glaciers, escape attacks from ninjas, survive an exploding van, build a snow cave and learn to pilot a helicopter!

Obviously the children couldn't do this all alone. Their guardian angel is the Natural History Museum secret agent – Lara – who is a fierce, resourceful, steely soldier full of ideas for how to evade capture from a brutal band of stereotypical super-villains. Refreshingly, Lara and her special forces pals value the ideas of Finn and Milo, giving them space and encouragement to solve problems and develop their own special skills. Readers will enjoy accompanying Finn on his journey from wise-cracking, game-addicted couch-potato to focused, fearless field agent. His odd couple-partner, Milo, is good company, too. He is adorably geeky, with an interest and curiosity for every imaginable subject, which is very useful when the boys suddenly need to make a fire in a snowy forest... or fly an aeroplane!

Adrenaline pumps from start to finish in this story. Just when a

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

reduction in pace seems likely, there is another explosion or plot twist and the roller coaster starts again! The book also raises interesting, environmental questions (should we bring back extinct species just because we can?). Moreover, Finn's bond with the feisty (and, occasionally, life-saving) microraptor is endearing and demonstrates the strength of relationship that can exist across species.

If Kavvadias can maintain such a high standard of fun and excitement, this could become a very popular series indeed. **SD**



Hugh Dunnit: Taking Shelter

★★★★

Guy Bass, ill. Lee Cosgrove, Andersen Press, 75pp, 9781839134180, £6.99 pbk

Hugh lives with his mum, dad and baby brother, and finds it hard to make friends at school. Perhaps it's his habit of pedantically correcting his teacher (is it a heptagon or a septagon?) or his decision to spend lunch time doing his homework (to avoid doing it at home) while his peers are all out playing that make him somewhat of a loner. This changes, to Hugh's delight, when he finds an abandoned dog in a bus shelter. Naturally - and conveniently for those who love puns - Hugh calls his new pal Shelter.

Shelter is, unarguably, adorable. This is made obvious by Cosgrove's lively and cheerful illustrations, which pop up occasionally to add extra laughs, and also feature in a number of full page comic strips that add variety and action to the storytelling. Sadly, though, Shelter's habit of chewing things to oblivion makes her difficult company for Hugh's family. When Hugh's maths homework is discovered in tatters, Mum is sure that it's time to take Shelter to the shelter. Hugh can't accept that his new best bud could do such a thing so instead he

embarks upon a mission to uncover the true culprit.

Hugh narrates his own story in the classic style of a private investigator film noir, and he is extremely generous with his jokes, taking every opportunity to deliver puns and one-liners. Hugh's decision-making is funny too: surely it's much more likely that a jealous neighbour broke in and stole his homework than his mum's cruel allegation that Shelter is responsible? Hugh is willing to go to great lengths (including making wild allegations in giant graffiti) to prove his point but, sadly, it's extremely difficult to dissuade his family of Shelter's guilt.

Taking Shelter is a short, manageable story that is perfect for less confident readers or for those who fancy a bite-size snack to sate their appetite for reading. It is also great fun to read aloud with a parent...who will chuckle at the jokes just as much as the children will! **SD**

One Sweet Song

★★★★

Jyoti Rajan Gopal, illus Sonia Sanchez, Walker Books, 40pp, 978 1 5295 1783 5, £12.99 hbk

A little girl listens and watches as a person in the window across the street plays a single note, and the little girl joins in with a chime on a triangle. Two notes become three, and soon a sweet song embraces a whole community.

At one level this is a simple counting book, where the reader can count first one quaver, then two and so on all the way to ten, and as the days draws to a close back down until 'a hush, a silence, blankets all'; at another it is a wonderful exploration of a crowded area of a city, where we have glimpses, not only of musicians, but other lives, united by the music they create together. And (going deeper still), we see the diversity of the characters living in the district, their occupations and cares - a violinist, a child and mother drumming, a couple playing with a pot and a cup with their spoons. Incidental characters - the boy blowing raspberries, the dog howling along - add to the charm of the artwork.

The text is evocative, expressive: 'A violin croons liltily'; 'Ten notes swirl and whirl and wing, sparkling, glittering, a living thing'



and presents (lightly) words like 'melody' and 'rhythm' as well as, in passing, giving us 'violin' as well as 'ghatam' (a south Indian clay drum) and morsing (a jaw harp, also from south India), less familiar to some readers. This is a book for a classroom or home collection, where the vocabulary is to be savoured as much as the artwork.

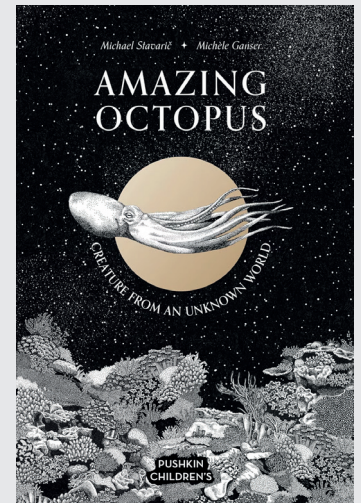
A (very slight) issue is that the musical note which multiplies and diminishes throughout the book might be more clearly drawn, and that one note (where we start) cannot strictly be said to trill, but these are really minor concerns: this is a book whose main message is not formal music education, but a celebration of the power of music. The dedications at the end - 'To music and its wondrous power to heal and bring us together' and 'For my family, especially Helena, who was born in the pandemic time,' tell us something of the motivation for this book, and a message of joy and solidarity from a troubled time that we should not forget. **NS**

Red Sky at Night, Poet's Delight

★★★★

Alex Wharton, illus Ian Morris, Firefly, 64pp, 9781915444356, £6.99 pbk

In this latest collection from Alex Wharton, Children's Laureate Wales our senses are not bombarded with the grotesque or unremitting slapstick humour. Of course there is Mr Slime and the awful Horrible Hector the Hedgehog (now deceased) but rather Wharton invites young readers - and listeners - to reflect, see the world with thought. Where do notes played on piano take you? *Climb up Poetry Hill* where 'all is still on poetry hill:/the poet doesn't speak./He piles his thoughts into/a heap and slips into/his dreams '. A brief reflection on life, a night car journey, a contemplation of of self in *This is Me* draw the reader in. Then there is the final narrative poem in which Wharton imagines a year of seasons through the voice of an oak tree as it grows. This is a poet deeply invested in the natural world. However, this is not an overly serious collection - there is plenty of humour as Wharton describes such moments as the effect of a stubbed toe or what might happen if you watch too much television (scary). Rhyme is treated lightly, rhythm runs through every line - Wharton is a performance poet and while these poems are easily read to oneself there is the sense they should be spoken aloud. Forms range from the quatrain, couplets, and blank verse narrative to shaped poems - see the ball bounce in *Basketball* or the lovely *Far Away* framed as a lantern. Adding to the life and beat of Wharton's words are the illustrations and page decorations by Ian Morris bringing a visual element and another dimension to the experience. Excellent. **FH**



Amazing Octopus: Creature from an Unknown World

★★★★★

Michael Stavaric, ill. Michèle Ganser, transl. Oliver Latsch, Pushkin Children's, 144pp, 978 1 78269 424 3, £20.00 hbk

As I opened this beautifully produced book I was immediately drawn into the world of the octopus. The high-quality paper used, the gold and black printing throughout, with many stunning black and white drawings all contribute to the creation of a rich and original artefact. There are 144 pages bursting with facts, information, puzzles and pages to colour. In addition, there are pages where you can add your own personal details, such as what you want to be when you grow up! In all it is quite a quirky publication which appeals to our senses.

The reader learns some fascinating facts about the octopus in every chapter. Having just had some eye surgery I was intrigued to learn about how the eyes of the octopus share a characteristic with the human eye: both species have a dominant eye. Most chapters have a section entitled *For Bright Minds* and this gives the reader even more information on the octopus. The work covers everything from their history, 'They have been roaming our oceans for 400 million years, making them the oldest intelligent creatures on the planet.' (p.115) to their number of genes (33,000)!

Both author and Illustrator are extremely talented, and they ooze enthusiasm for their book. It is very interactive with 'Eight Ink-redible Jokes to Tell Your Friends' as well as some *Spot the Difference* illustrations.

This book is suitable for anyone over the age of 8 and would make a special gift for those curious about the natural world or keen on book illustration. Ganser's interest in having different worlds collide through art is evident here with the ocean and space comparison. The translation from the original language works well and I have no hesitation in highly recommending this engaging book for schools, libraries and home. **JS**

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

The Girl Who Wasn't There

★★★★

Jacqueline Wilson, illus
Rachael Dean, Puffin, 416pp,
9780241684030, £12.99 hbk

Luna, who is aged ten and three quarters and her sister, Aurora, an academically precocious, almost-six-year-old, have moved with their parents to a derelict tower house bought by their father on a whim as a DIY project. Aurora is delighted at the prospect of living in the tower like a princess but Luna and her mother are rightly worried that it is not structurally sound. There are also rumours that there is a ghost in the tower. How true will these rumours be? And how many risks will the family take to achieve their dream of living a real-life fairy tale? Aurora is described as a very endearing character. This reviewer found Luna, her older and much more sensible sister, to be far more believable. It seems odd that Luna's new school would allow Aurora, with her significant age difference, to be in her sister's class, even for a short period. One of the most interesting facets of the story was that the girls' father had owned a restaurant but had been forced to close it due to the Covid 19 pandemic. His resulting mental health problems were handled very sensitively but realistically, as he and his wife argued about some of his stranger decisions. Wilson, normally skilled at dual time-line narratives seems less so in this novel. Insufficient narrative space is given to the former of two time-lines in which a significant event occurs which has a dramatic implications for the later time-line. Dean's full page, black and white illustrations add much to the whimsical quality of this narrative. **RB**

When I Feel Red

★★★★

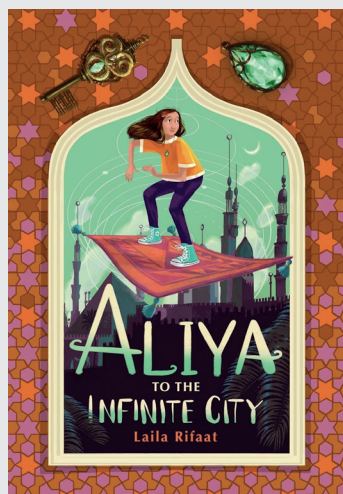
Lily Bailey, Orion Children's Books,
368pp, 9781510109933 £7.99 pbk

Watching animal rescue programmes, drawing cartoons and hunting for stray animals (who she thinks needs rescuing), April sounds like many other twelve-year-olds. With both parents and an older brother working at doctor's and a best friend who appears to be a boy genius, you would expect school to be a breeze for April. You couldn't be more wrong. It's not that she wants to land in detention, it just seems like detention wants her to land in IT.

With a diagnosis of dyspraxia, April struggles with everything from reading and writing to eating her dinner. And it doesn't help when horrible teachers like Mrs Williams pick on her constantly just because she doesn't understand what it means to be dyspraxic. On top of all that, April has the worry of where Tabby Cat is; is she hungry, is she hurt? And why are all the girls in her class suddenly

pairing up with the boys? Ben is the only boy she is interested in but why is he suddenly being so weird with her? Surely best friends should be able to talk to one another. Currently, April has a lot to think about. Luckily for her, not all teachers are evil and with the help of Mr Montague (Mr M) and Mrs Jameel, the school Librarian, she learns that maybe reading could be something that she might be interested in, particularly when there are so many stories about animals. Now she just needs to figure out how she is going to be accepted by the cool girls. Surely being able to draw can't be enough to make her fit in.

Although it is the second book in the series, **When I Feel Red** works brilliantly as a stand-alone story. Characters from the first book, **When I Feel Blue** feature with a hint at the premise of the previous tale. But by no means does the reader feel they are out of the loop. This is a humorous and touching story of one girl's struggles, which are likely to be relatable to many. It is sensitively written, giving you a brilliant insight into living with dyspraxia. **RBa**



Aliya to the Infinite City

★★★★

Laila Rifaat, Chicken House,
448pp, 978-1915026354 £7.99 pbk

An inventive new fantasy adventure, with its roots in the stories of the Middle East, **Aliya to the Infinite City** is a treat for fans of the magical school genre. Aliya's life with her grandfather in Cairo is ordinary, slow walks to the corner shop, dinners of spicy sausages and eggs, feeding the street cats. But then his behaviour changes, he starts disappearing for hours at a time, and then suddenly they up and move, leaving everything behind. With increasing speed, everything she has understood about the world and her family changes and in the kind of plot swerve that makes stories like this so exciting, Aliya is whisked off, by flying carpet no less,

to a parallel Egypt and enrolled as a student at the Infinium School of Time Travel and Related Subjects, motto: Witness. Record. Reflect (and never interfere with the past). Aliya's lineage and her inherited talents make her a target for the evil forces her grandfather tried so hard to escape. The publisher describes the story as 'epic' and it does feel satisfyingly big in scope and ideas, the background giving it a freshness too. There are small details too that make the story stand out. I particularly enjoyed the description of her grandfather naming the street cats, insisting on 'Arabic names that began in the back of the throat and shot over the tongue as if they were late for an appointment: *Kharboush*, *Zoronfil* and *Abu Samak*.' This is Laila Rifaat's debut, and she is an author to watch. **MMa**

Dreamstalkers: The Night Train

★★★★

Sarah Driver, ill. Diana Renzina,
Farshore 435pp, 978-0-00-859502-9,
£7.99 pbk

Your reviewer enjoyed this author's 'Huntress' trilogy, and two more books about children who find that they are witches ('Once we were witches', and 'Twice we make magic'). In this book, Sarah Driver also describes magical possibilities, as 12 year-old Bea Grimspuddle, living with her mother Ula and her owl, Pip, on the edge of a village on the moors, finds that her life changes completely one day when dreams have disappeared and nightmares come: black sticky creatures with long tentacles that could reach under doors. The villagers are leaving, but Ula is sick and Bea doesn't want to leave her, though she does use the excuse of Ula's inattention to find magical items that her Mum has hidden from her, including a Scry, something very special that could be used for good, or for evil. When everyone has gone except her former friend, Martha HearthswEEP, who has brought most welcome food, the Night Train arrives, throwing its tracks in front of it as it steams across the moors, and the shapeshifting Bastian in bear-form grabs Martha in mistake for Bea. Bea rushes to help, and both girls are whisked on the train into an adventure in the world of the Dreamstalkers, performers who creep, ninja-like, into dreams and can change people's minds. With the possibility of healing Ula, Bea becomes a Dreamstalker apprentice to Imelda Greenwood, an old friend of her mother's, and with help from the mage Gallilule, they go up against the evil Queen Mora, who is controlling the nightmares. Bea finds that a supposed Monster chained below the castle is not actually monstrous

at all, and this is one of those books in which a 12 year-old without enough knowledge achieves what adults cannot, but Bea's trust and bravery, and Martha's loyalty and mage skills resolve this part of the story, so that nightmares are no longer dominant, dreams return, and Ula's health is restored. The Queen escapes, though, and it is clear that there is more to come.

Sarah Driver's skill with words creates a completely credible world in an indistinct past when village life was very tough, and her characters, with their strengths and weaknesses are memorable. We can look forward to finding out what happens next... **DB**

Alyssa and the Spell Garden

★★★★

Alexandra Sheppard, Faber, 336pp,
9780571388844, £7.99 pb

Alyssa is eleven. She is annoyed because both her parents who have been arguing more than usual for a long time now, have to go on work trips during the summer holidays. So Alyssa is being sent to stay with her Auntie Jasmine whom she has never met because Jasmine and Alyssa's mother, Violet, fell out a long time ago, reason unknown.

When Alyssa arrives at Jasmine's Tea Shop, she experiences a strange tingling in her fingers which occurs when she's homesick or upset. This explosion of feelings causes a mess in the tea shop. It transpires that Alyssa has magical powers like Jasmine, their magic activated by plants and Jasmine runs Silver Leaf Spell Garden and Magic School.

Alyssa was not to know about this, because her mother has denounced magic. Alyssa's powers, however, are too great not to be trained.

Can Alyssa harness her powers and when Jasmine and the Spell Garden are in trouble, can she help save them?

There are two particularly interesting features of this book. Whilst Sheppard's novel is set in London her characters are Jamaican and their culture is celebrated throughout. The second feature is that any magic conducted by someone at Silver Leaf must be for the good of the community and not for personal gain. This is a welcome decision of the author in her fantasy world-building.

For readers of fantasy, they will recognise many familiar tropes. **RB**

Artezans: The Forgotten Magic

★★★★

L.D. Lapinski, Orion, 384pp,
978-1510110090 £7.99 pbk

L.D. Lapinski's new fantasy series successfully mixes dark and unusual magical adventures with light-touch insight into its hero's insecurities and



struggle to accept himself as he is. Twins Edward and Elodie are part of a magical family of Artezans, people with special supernatural abilities. These powers, which are revealed at an annual summer ceremony, held on their Scottish island home, are all unique but the strength of the inherited magic has been weakening for centuries. Ed is particularly worried about what his power will be as he's always felt second to Elodie, his high-achieving, popular, limelight-holding sister. And yet, his power turns out to be very strong indeed – the ability to enter the Land of Dreams, or Tir Aislingean. Indeed, he is the long-awaited Dream Laird with the power to craft dreams, and nightmares. But great power brings great responsibility, and when Ed sets nightmares loose on the bully who's made his life a misery, though the power rush is exhilarating initially, the results are terrifying and dangerous to everyone. To manage his powers and heal the dream world, Ed will need the help of Elodie, not just his twin, his closest friend. The scenes in the dream world are suitably strange and uncanny, the cast of characters, human and non-human, similarly memorable, and it's nicely balanced with the twins' warm, loving home life with their fathers. This is book one in a new series and promises very well for future episodes. **MMA**

Infinity Alchemist

★★★★

Kacen Callender, Faber, 400pp, 9780571383832, £8.99 pbk

In the beginning of Callender's fantasy, we are introduced to Ash Woods, a person who identifies as male but who has a female physical form. He also has a very intense dislike of his world's class system where the elite are born into one of the ruling houses, with Alexander being the most prestigious and Kendrick being the law enforcers. The poor, however, are not invited to join a house and must make do without the privileges and protections a house

membership affords.

Ash Woods is also a gifted alchemist but he was not able to pay the tuition fee for his exam to obtain his licence and entrance to Lancaster college of Alchemy. Consequently, he has obtained a job at Lancaster as a grounds keeper and persuades Ramsay Thorne, a gifted post graduate student to teach him alchemy illegally. Ramsay's family is hated for having killed a large number of people in the vital search for the book of Source, the book of Alchemic Power.

Can Ash and Ramsay team up to prevent the book falling into the wrong hands and will they both survive to build a future?

Callender's novel is intricate and at times very slow-paced. It is possible that some less-committed readers may give up before they reach the most powerful scenes.

The over-arching message of this work is to judge a person by their actions, not their appearance. A strong theme of Callender's work is the importance of respect for someone's gender identity, a theme which is key to the narrative. This book contains violence and sexual themes and will be appropriate for readers of fourteen-plus. **RB**

The Djinn's Apple

★★★★

Djamila Morani, trans. Sawad Hussein, Neem Tree Press, 168pp, 978 1 911107 85 9, £8.99 pbk

This is a historical novel set in Baghdad in a period that many young readers may know little about: the Abbasid Caliphate of Harun al-Rashid 786-809 CE. Others may recognise it as the time of the beginning of the Golden Age of Islam, in which scholars of many faiths flocked to Baghdad not only to share their knowledge but to seek to put it into practice, particularly in the arts of medicine and healing. As well as a time characterised by the search for enlightenment, it was, nevertheless, a time of ruthless jockeying for power and Djamila Morani's novel cleverly weaves these strands together. The tale begins as twelve-year-old Nardeen escapes as her parents and her brothers and sisters are slaughtered in their home. She does not understand why this fate has befallen the family, although she believes she knows who is responsible and that it has to do with a manuscript her father has been studying. When she returns to the scene of the carnage, she is beaten within an inch of her life to persuade her to reveal where the document is, although she has no idea of its whereabouts. After her beating, she comes under the protection of a professor of medicinal herbs in the Baramistan (or teaching hospital) where she has been taken to be treated. He recognises her thirst for knowledge and her talent as a healer and supports her ambition to be a

doctor as her father was, although this is usually seen as a man's profession. She finds love in the Baramistan and her skills take her a long way, even into the private quarters of the ailing Zubeida, Harun Al Rashid's wife. Her reputation also brings into her care the man she believes to be her family's murderer. Author Djamila Morani, looking through Nardeen's eyes, brings a cool, thoughtful approach to the story, and ends it with a wicked twist. It is translated into English from the original Arabic by Sawad Hussein, whose translation has been recognised with an **English Pen Award**. There are useful historical notes and a short glossary of possibly unfamiliar terms at the end of the book. **CB**

Shadow Fox

★★★★

Carlie Sorosiak, Nosy Crow, 231pp, 978 1 83994-6585 £7.99 pbk

Told in the voice and through the eyes of a fox whose name may be Shadow but may also be YAAAARRRRRAAAWWAAAAARRR, **Shadow Fox** invites readers into a world where the power of magic intertwine with everyday life. The Great Lakes are the setting for the story of the journey of both Shadow and Bea. Bea is a human girl dealing with loss and a need to belong and Shadow is dealing with the fox-equivalent emotions. They become reluctant companions on their quest to locate Nan, the woman who gives them both emotional and actual sustenance and eventually a friendship and a bond is forged through their shared magical endeavours.

Sorosiak has crafted a rich and immersive world filled with vivid imagery and the backdrop of the magnificent Great Lakes. There's an obvious environmental message and a compelling tension between the natural and human worlds - with resolution only coming with respect for difference and understanding of the ecosystem. But this isn't a preachy book. The author's descriptive prose paints a picture that is both enchanting and thrilling, and the magical quest elements add excitement and wonder drawing readers deeper into the story with each turn of the page.

There's a great deal of humour too, the voice of the main Fox character is funny, knowing and there is slapstick and joy within every part of the emotional journey and magical adventure. In addition to its engaging characters and immersive world-building, **Shadow Fox** also tackles themes of identity, belonging, and the power of friendship. Through both Bea and Shadow's journeys, Sorosiak explores the importance of embracing who you are, acknowledging feelings and standing up for what you believe in, even in the face of adversity.

Ideal for readers who connect with animal stories and love environmental fantasy, this is a story with heart and humour. As Shadow tells us, at the beginning and at the end of the book; this is a story about foxes 'so it's a good one'. **LJS**

Hide and Seek

★★★★

Rhian Tracey, ill. David Dean, Piccadilly, 265pp, 978-1-89978-729-2 £7.99 pbk

A sequel to 'I spy', which was set in Bletchley Park at the beginning of the Second World War, this story takes us further into wartime, 1942, and features apprentice gardener Ned Letton, who was involved as a friend of Robyn's in the first book. Robyn and Mary do make an appearance, but it could quite easily be read as a standalone book. Ned and his mother are glad to get away from their unhappy home in Bletchley-Ned's Dad tries to control them both, and Mum has started to stand up to him. Art teacher Mum's new war work is with the paintings that were sent from the National Gallery to be hidden in a disused mine in Manod, Wales, and it is true that paintings were so hidden during the war. Ned and his Mum are billeted with a family in the schoolhouse: Headteacher Mrs Thomas is going blind, and has a lovely guide dog, Kip, who plays a big part in the adventure. Her son Harri is initially antagonistic towards Ned and refuses to let him share his bedroom, but Austrian Jewish refugee, nine-year-old Anni, who has a disconcerting habit of dropping into German occasionally, is more friendly. The locals are suspicious of the strangers, more so because the incomers have signed the Official Secrets Act and cannot say what they are doing in the old mine.

When a report appears in a Liverpool newspaper about 'paintings hidden in a cave' everyone is under suspicion for having leaked secret information, and Ned vows to keep his eyes open, but that part of the mystery is never solved. It must have been very difficult in those troubled times to know who to trust, and Ned's subsequent adventures find him making right and wrong decisions, but he and Harri become friends. Eventually the local people accept him, even grumpy Mrs-Davies-in-the-shop, and his initiative for a Picture of the Month to be shown in the local chapel proves a great success, and makes the local people feel included in keeping the secret.

Some real people appear in this story: concert pianist Myra Hess did give free concerts, Mum's friend Miriam Rothschild really was an influential and important person, and the National Gallery's Picture of the Month was created by Kenneth Clark, later the presenter of the hugely successful TV series 'Civilisation': he appears in the mine as K, until his full name is revealed. There really was a train crash during a blackout at Bletchley Station, and information about these real aspects of the story are given at the back of the book.

David Dean's cover and chapter head illustrations give just the right period flavour to the book, and this is an exciting historical story for young secondary readers. **DB**

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued



The Case of the Vanishing Painting

★★★★

Brian Gallagher, O'Brien Press, 224pp, 978-1788493918, £7.99 pbk
Set in the Dublin of 1911, Brian Gallagher's junior crime adventure is a treat for fans of the genre. When a valuable painting disappears from a guarded train carriage en route from Galway to Dublin, suspicion falls on all the workers involved in its transportation but most strongly on railway staff and train guard Mr Kavanagh in particular. Twins Deirdre and Tim Kavanagh are convinced of their father's innocence and don't need much persuading by their friend, Sherlock Holmes fan Joe, to try and track down the real culprits. With the freedom regularly enjoyed by youngsters in the 20th century, they're able to be out all day, traveling up and down the coast by train and bicycle in their efforts to uncover the thieves. Inspired by Holmes' motto, 'the game is afoot', and determined to do whatever it takes, the three risk breaking into houses and then find themselves in very real danger when discovered by the criminals. We're left in no doubt of what is at stake for the twins, their warm, loving family life and indeed their home itself under threat if they can't clear their father's name. The descriptions of their home life, a concert they put on for the local community, even Joe's cricket practice with his father, give a real sense of their daily lives and provide respite from the action scenes which are tense in the extreme. A well-plotted crime story with a distinctive setting and appealing cast, this has much to offer young readers. **MMa**

The Floating Witch

★★★★

Nicki Thornton, Chicken House, 380pp, 978-1-91526-54-5, £7.99 pbk
The Floating Witch is both a boat and a person: it's home for Hetty Dimple, who collects natural items: stones, conkers and feathers, imbues them with her own special magic, and sells them to

customers, or tells fortunes. Sleeford Island, in the middle of the River Slee, is one of her regular stops and a good marketing opportunity, as there are other shops and houses there and it's a popular tourist destination. Customers are normally attracted by Lorna's café 'Ice and Slice' (her cakes and bakes are lovingly described throughout the book) and often stay to shop at 'Poppy Vale's Bookshop', run by teenage Veena and her Mum, and 'Bloom and Grow', the florist run by Adam's two Dads. Veena, Adam and Octavia, daughter of Flo the lockkeeper, are The Terrible Three, and they enjoy being together in the holidays, although Octavia, a couple of years older than Veena, is growing up and, as Veena puts it, becoming glossy. The youngest, Adam, is over-protected by his Dads, Da Charlie and Pa Chris, and longs for more freedom, especially on the river, where he is totally comfortable in his kayak. Veena, a reporter for her school, was in 'The Poisoned Pie Mystery', but the real star of this whole series, now 6 books, is Nightshade, the magical talking cat, owned in previous books by a boy called Seth. Some of the chapters are written as if by Nightshade, and the constant need for food is very much an issue, but the author has some fun imagining life as a cat. Lorna is refusing to open her café (explained in somewhat clunky dialogue between Veena and her Mum), and, if the tourists don't come for the café, it looks as if the other shops may have to close.

A swanky boat, badly steered, enters the mooring and takes up all the space, and the annoyingly smooth and arrogant Scott arrives, calling the children 'me hearties' and really putting their backs up. He moves into an empty cottage next to the café, but everyone wonders what he's doing there. When Hetty Dimple and her boat arrive, Veena and Nightshade start investigating. Veena is desperate to use magic, but an ancient curse is involved, and life becomes complicated (there is a death). Scott's machinations are revealed, Lorna eventually opens her café and they can all stay.

Nicki Thornton's first book, **The Last Chance Hotel**, was a bestseller and is mentioned on the subsequent books, but she has now written 6 books in 6 years and is evidently still going strong. Comparisons inside to Agatha Christie and Harry Potter are perhaps slight exaggerations, but it's an entertaining story that should be enjoyed by readers of 9+. **DB**

Secret of the Blood Red Key

★★★★★

David Farr, Usborne, 335p, 9781801311090, £12.99 hbk
When you have really enjoyed a new story, it is always a concern that the second book will not live up to the expectations raised. However, this new story by David Farr, is a truly great successor to the **Book of Stolen**

Dreams. It is set months after the defeat and supposed death of the villainous President Malstain; a time in which Rachel and Robert had hoped that their father would recover from his time in prison and that life could return to some semblance of normality. When Rachel is given a bright red key, she does not understand its purpose, but then a mysterious young boy tells her that she is an official Keeper of the Key and she knows she has to be prepared to use it. When a young girl called Elsa mysteriously disappears, Rachel realizes that she must try and find her and the reason behind her abduction. What follows is a real roller coaster of a ride as both Rachel and Robert face their greatest fears and must prevent the spirit of Malstain from returning from the Hinterland. David Farr has created a wonderfully believable world with a fascinating cast of characters. Whilst we cheer on the endeavours of Rachel, we also wish Robert could see the danger; while at the same time understanding his desire to be part of the new and changed world. Once again, we have some truly horrendous villains, but I think it is the dastardly Trueblood family who really send a shiver down my spine. There is an overwhelming sense of entitlement, where they think it is acceptable to kill someone and then transfer their soul into the recipient; it takes the idea of 'seats in a lifeboat' to a totally different level. On the positive side, this is also about the love to be found in families and the length they will go to help and support each other. The author has created a truly emotional ending that brings together the various threads and give us all hope for the future; it is a book that you close with a very satisfied sigh and the knowledge that it will not be the last time you read these two books. **MP**

Countdown to Yesterday

★★★★

Shirley Marr, Usborne, 288pp, 9781805073628, £7.99 pbk
James' life is in turmoil; his parents have just decided to divorce. He now finds himself having to adjust to two homes – and to a mum and dad who are behaving very differently in many ways. James does not like change. His present is not what he wants – he wants to go back to the past and his life as he remembers it. But you cannot travel back in time. Or can you?

This is an enjoyable read drawing on many familiar tropes – family relationships, separation, friendship – and above all memory. Memories always seem so clear; even young people will claim that 'this is how it was – I remember it well'. But as James finds out memory can be very selective and the past may not be quite as remembered. Shirley Marr writes with confidence, her narrative style immediate and accessible as James tells his story himself. There is humour as we see his parents through his eyes – not perfect but human. The two main protagonists – James and

his friend, Yan are drawn deftly and the reader can easily engage with them and understand where each come from. The central motive is clear and the concept of measuring the time as a supposed countdown to the past interesting but a distraction. However, this is unlikely to deter young readers who will enjoy meeting James and Yan (and Tiger the cat – cameo presence) on their particular quest. This is a well-crafted story in which reality and the imagination are cleverly intertwined to result in a clear message – enjoy and appreciate the present. **FH**

The Prisoner of Bhopal

★★★★

Tim Walker, Andersen Press, 264pp, 978 1 839133732 £7.99 pbk

The Prisoner of Bhopal is a novel that weaves together history and fiction, commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Bhopal Disaster and the contribution of the 9th Bhopal Infantry to the First World War. The story follows Amil, a young boy with dreams of working at the modern pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, who is unexpectedly and harshly taken away from his loving family because of a generational debt. Amil is imprisoned as an indentured labourer at a former printing factory and his once happy life is destroyed.

As the narrative unfolds, Amil discovers a secret First World War journal that reveals a magical gift he shares with his great-grandfather – the ability to read the wind. This mystical element means that we hear the story of the Indian soldiers interwoven with Amil's story. We see the devastation that the use of poisonous gas had on the young men who fought in World War One as well as the horrifying outcomes and lasting impact of the tragic event when poison gas leaked from the pesticide plant into the air above Bhopal in 1984.

This is a complex story with many themes, of caste, of the interpretation of cowardice, of the impact of poverty, of intergenerational trauma and of the disregard of large corporations for individual lives. There's also friendship and bravery, magical gifts and the kindness of individuals. There's a great deal of action in this story and it leaps and flies like the wind that is another theme in the book. I sometimes found the multitude of themes a little overwhelming and had the feeling I was reading not one but two or three different stories at the same time. Walker's writing does make the story exciting though and it does bring attention to an important historical event in a way that engages young readers and encourages further research.

Walker is clear that this is a fiction story, inspired by rather than based on, actual events and the book could serve as an excellent springboard or additional reading for a class investigation on the historical events. It could definitely help children to ask questions, explore different perspectives, and develop a deeper understanding of the world around them and the world in the past. **LJS**

Life on the Thames

★★★★★

Emma Shoard, *Child's Play*, 64pp, 978 1 78628 570 6, £12.99, hbk

Author and illustrator Emma Shoard takes readers on a journey along the River Thames 'from source to sea' in this beautiful picture book. With an emphasis on the natural world, we explore the Thames path and later the England Coast path to discover a host of wildlife, including kingfishers, swans, seals and bats. We learn about the varied habitats the river and its banks provide including the chalk hill meadows of the Goring Gap, home to orchids and dragonflies and the Thames Estuary where seals and even porpoises have been seen. The amazing life cycle of the eel is outlined and the importance of native oysters in the Thames Estuary throughout history, their decline and plans to revive the industry.

There is information about some of the boats to be seen along the river past and present including Thames barges and Oyster Smacks. We gain a glimpse of the history of the Thames including its importance for trade and the excitement of a medieval frost fair. We learn how enthusiastic mudlarks can make interesting finds as the river reveals its secrets.

Threats to the Thames and the life which depends upon it and lives near it are described including the risk of flooding and need for the Thames barrier, invasive species and pollution – in particular the way the Thames has been used throughout history as a sewer. Interesting asides such as 'The Great Stink of 1858' during which the smell of the river nearly shut down Parliament add detail.

The book ends with a look at the work of conservationists to restore natural habitats and make the river cleaner. There is information for young readers about what they can do to help from volunteering with a litter clean-up to putting pressure on policymakers. Readers young and old may be encouraged to explore the Thames path or their own local river and create their own wildlife diary just like the book's creator.

A clear design and layout with a double page spread for each topic allows the text and illustration to breathe. This is a great book to browse or read cover to cover. Beautifully illustrated, the author's passion for her subject and close observation of the natural world shines through in her artwork with wonderfully light sketches in watercolour and ink. **SMc**

Before Nightfall

★★★★★

Silvia Vecchini. Illus. by Sualzo. Translated by Geoffrey Brook New York Review Books, 9781681377926, 112pp, £12.99 pbk What is it like to be part of a family where profound hearing-impaired

is a fact? Where language can have no sound? Where even sight might become an impossibility. How does that make one feel if you are part of that family? How do you react? This is a narrative that opens the door to such a situation. We meet Emma whose much loved brother, Carlo faces such challenges. She herself is drawn to silence in the face of Carlo's silence. She tells us her thoughts, her fears, her joys through poems which she types using an old typewriter she has pursued their father to buy. Her voice is immediate, engaging and moving. But hers is not the only one interspersed we meet characters from the world around – the school secretary, a teacher, the local grocer – who record what they observe grounding the story in a place and neighbourhood; offering a different perspective that would match ours. This is a book about communication and language. Each section of the narrative is preceded by a letter from the sign alphabet skillfully drawn by the artist Sualzo, we see Carlo and his seeing dog, LuLú as they communicate without words, we enter Emma's world as she writes her private thoughts to the sound of the typewriter keys, a language in itself. Emma tells us she has 'various languages in my body' – Italian in her notebook, English in the songs she can hear and so sing, the language of her Grandmother's cooking, the language of signs – 'This language is spoken and written/with the hands/the face/the body/and all the air around', Living in a world so dominated by another's predicament is isolating and we see Emma struggling to make friends, to trust that other people can understand. There are no fireworks but Silvia Vecchini's slim novel has an immediacy and emotional power that captures the attention, drawing the reader in to face the possibility of darkness and silence. There are challenges – but in the end there is hope. Originally written in Italian, the translation by Geoffrey Brock is immediate. Here language meets language to reach a new audience. And the inclusion of both the LIS (Italian Sign Language) and ASL (American Sign Language) at the end of book provide a visual demonstration. At a time when novels dealing with trauma and the many challenges that families and young protagonists can face are increasing, *Before Nightfall* stands out. To lose hearing, to be unsighted may not always be obvious in the wider world but will have a profound impact on all involved. Here is a narrative that opens a door to empathy and imaginative understanding. **FH**

Goddess Crown

★★★★★

Shade Lapite, Illus. Jeff Manning, Walker Books, 302pp, 9781529503715, £8.99, pbk Kalothia, has spent her life in a remote part of the country, in what appears to be a West African environment. She has been told that it is because

her parents had displeased the king and her life is at risk. Her life is then thrown into turmoil when her guardians are killed and an attempt is made on her own life. It is only with the help of Nahir, her friend and bodyguard that she escapes, but then finds herself at the royal court; it is there that she discovers that she is the heir to the kingdom and that she is going to have to fight for her place on the throne. What follows is a fantastic story of intrigue, double-cross and more than a hint of magic. The first thing to say about this story is about the totally stunning cover, with its nod to West African costume and the gilded halo that surrounds the figure of Kalothia. Whilst her country reveres a Goddess as their deity, this has not spread out into the general way that women are regarded. In an extremely patriarchal society, women are not even treated as second class, so how is Kalothia going to gain the throne and be something other than just a figurehead, manipulated by the surrounding courtiers? However there appear to be hidden enemies lurking in the background and the young heroine faces an almost impossible task in recognising who she can trust. This story may be set in a fantasy world, but the issues that it raises are still too common in our own world today. I have been writing this as we mark 'International Women's Day' and it is a sad fact that women are still facing the age-old problems of being ignored, abused and unrepresented. It needs stories like this to show strong female role models, who are not prepared to just give in to the prejudices and practices of the past. This is a very readable story with a strong moral message and I strongly recommend it for the 12+ audience. **MP**

Cross My Heart and Never Lie

★★★★★

Nora Dâsnes, translated by Matt Bagguley, Farshore, 256pp, 9780008653750, £10.99, pbk This 2024 winner of the **Stonewall Book Award** fuses a charming graphic novel style with a diary format. Oslo born Dâsnes has based it on childhood experiences. It's a gentle meet cute which will appeal to Alice Oseman fans but has a voice of its own. The story perfectly captures the difficulty of transitioning from innocent and carefree childhood adventures to the pressure of starting a new school year while navigating hormones, insecurity and moodiness. It's a comedy about growing pains, changing friendship dynamics and the peer pressure to date.

Using a cheery colour palette of bubble-gum pinks, lilac hues and verdant greens, Dâsnes introduces the reader to twelve-year-old chirpy, chatty Tuva and her friends Bao and Linnea in doodle style. Tuva is a fan of drawing and music and lives with her dad in Norway. She has goals for seventh grade which include building a base with her friends in recreational

woodland. Tuva's plans turn topsy turvy when she is suddenly drawn to Mariam, a new girl at school, Linnea becomes distracted, Bao becomes frustrated and she tries to follow the advice of older social media influencer Malene.

Cliques, defining what is cool and fake personas all come to the fore as Tuva struggles to make sense of it all. Can her father help her understand? Dâsnes reflects her changing emotions through dusky violets and monochrome explosions. **Cross My Heart and Never Lie** is empathetic and entertaining, embracing diversity, play lists, LGBT identity and the blossoming of a first crush. **TJ**

The Boy Who Fell from the Sky

★★★★★

Benjamin Dean, Simon & Schuster, 312pp, 9781398518742, £7.99 pbk Zed is obsessed with the demons that fall from the sky every time a shooting star appears. His Dad is a renowned hunter of demons – the best of his generation – and one day Zed hopes to follow in his footsteps. Zed has been brought up to believe that demons are a force for evil and must be eliminated at all costs. The Authority whom his dad works for assesses the children of their employees when they reach the age of 12 to see if they exhibit any of the necessary qualities their parents have. Zed appears to fall short apart from the ability to spot a shooting star. Feeling his father's disappointment Zed is determined to go hunting himself and sneaks out after his father expressly forbids him to do so after he and his team have rushed out on the latest hunt. Hearing a whimper in a bush and much to his astonishment Zed finds a very frightened demon – a boy hardly any different from him. What follows is a revelation to Zed and contradicts everything he has ever been taught or read about. Demons are people with feelings and desires just like him. The demon, Spark has accidentally fallen to earth and wants to go home but can only do so when a shooting star appears. His little brother has already been caught and a mad race against time ensues where Zed has to rescue Spark and his brother Speck, defying his family and the Authorities in the process. This is an exuberant and fast-paced read which owes a little to David Bowie's *Starman*. It is a wonderful story of inclusion and friendship and standing up for what you believe to be right even if it means going against the flow. A brilliantly warm-hearted story to curl up with. **JC**

The Girl Who Sang

★★★★★

Estelle Nadel and Bethany Strout, ill. Sammy Savos. Hodder Children's Books, 272pp, 9781444975819, £19.99 pbk This emotive, evocative and heartbreaking graphic novel memoir leaves a lasting impression on the reader. Polish holocaust survivor,

reviews

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

public speaker and singer Estelle Nadel's collaboration with Jewish storyboard artist Sammy Savos, bravely shares her traumatic wartime experiences with a new generation of young readers. Savos's meticulous research, diagrammatic detailing, mapping and long-distance story conferencing with Estelle gave her incredible insight into her life in Borek as Enia Feld.

Personal details are evident in the care Savos takes in portraying Enia's family bringing them to life in soft pastels with a crayon like texture. Maximum dramatic impact is achieved by the book beginning in 1944 with a scared girl hiding in shadow meeting the eyes of a cat through a hole in a straw roof before recalling happier times.

Enia's story then unfolds in

five chronological chapters with symbolic thumbnails as section headers. The text synchronises with the powerful illustrations capturing Enia's poignant journey from a carefree child who joyfully sang and enjoyed learning family traditions to a persecuted, terrified girl just subsisting, and the further challenges she faced as a young adult trying to find a place to call home.

What is most effective is the prelude to the Nazi invasion of the quiet village of Borek where rural peace is juxtaposed with urban horror. The calm is shattered by disturbing vignettes depicting Nazi violence in the aftermath of the Reichstag Fire. Shattering closeups shock and horrify the reader as Jews are marked for discrimination,

persecution and elimination.

There is an adept use of black edging, a contrast from the earlier white surround, with swipes of grey, sepia and vivid splashes of orange framing petrified victims. Poland is caught in a pincer grip, menaced by the savage swastika and the sinister sickle as human rights are vanquished. The vivid red of vegetables being prepared for borscht are juxtaposed with dusky purples as silhouetted figures flee into the darkness.

Atmospheric details throughout convey a sense of fear and urgency as the stark truths of totalitarianism, Nazi oppression and the displacement of the innocent are laid bare. Later sections deal with adjustment and new beginnings as Enia faces what it means to survive.

It was a labour of love for Savos with informative illustrator's notes at the back outlining the creative

process involved. She crafted her characters and settings using family photographs, personal accounts and documentary footage from Estelle's nephew. Following Estelle's death in 2023, she commented,

'While it feels strange and sad promoting the book without her, spreading her story is what she wanted, and so I'm going to do the best I can to put it out there and encourage people to read it. I'm very grateful that she was able to see the finished book, hold it in her hands, and tell me how happy she was with it.'

What is important is that the book shines a spotlight on the atrocities of the Holocaust so that young people can learn from the lessons of history. It reflects the power of the human spirit triumphing over adversity. The reader accompanies Enia through all her trials and tribulations willing her to sing again as Estelle. **TJ**

14+ Secondary/Adult

Ed's Choice

Where the Heart Should Be

★★★★

Sarah Crossan, Bloomsbury, 418pp, 9781526666598, £14.99 hbk

The potato famine is one of the greatest tragedies in Irish history, and Ireland has had more than its share. Before her verse novel begins, Sarah Crossan sets out the bare statistics: 'Between 1845 and 1861 one million people died in Ireland of hunger or related diseases, and two million people emigrated from Ireland and never returned.' It is hard to imagine the human cost behind the numbers, but this is what Crossan sets out to do. The catastrophe is seen through the eyes of teenage Nell, whom we meet on her first day as a scullery maid at the Big House, when potato blight is still a distant rumour. It is a job she keeps throughout the horror, enabling her own family to avoid starvation, but, all-around, death is in the cottages and the lanes, sometimes with the immediacy that we see today in the scenes from Gaza. What wasted body was that lying naked in the brambles, preyed on by

an owl? It must have been a puppy. It was surely not someone's baby? In a scene that starts tears, Nell loses her beloved younger brother to the disease that follows close on the heels of the hunger. We are not spared the ruthless inhumanity of many of the English landowning class. We watch Lord Wicken, Nell's employer, as he fires a tenant's cottage, eager to use the famine as a pretext for land clearance. And we see the answering desperate violence of the Irish tenantry. Yet Crossan is anxious not to make this account as forlorn and desperate as it must have been for many. The first poem is in Nell's voice, looking back on 'a people being torn apart' and asserting that 'love wins, even in the face of death.' Some of that love is to be found among the cottages themselves, with families standing together and neighbour supporting neighbour, but, for Nell, the most important is her love for English Johnny, Lord Wicken's visiting heir and nephew. They are kindred souls, each with a love of reading and poetry and a firm sense of what is fair and just. Their romance, inevitably troubled by the appalling disaster unfolding around them, is a haven and an affirmation of the irresistible



power of life. And Nell's acute sensual longing for Johnny brings all Crossan's considerable powers into play. This is a novel to be much admired. Nevertheless, I am not entirely convinced by the romance itself and certainly not by the resolution of Nell's father's fate, which takes place hurriedly, and mostly out of sight, towards the close of the novel. **CB**

traditional components results in a book full of warmth, depth, and emotional intensity.

With its contemporary setting, authentic well-developed characters, and poignant themes, this is a smart and captivating YA novel that will resonate with the age group through its heartfelt storytelling and authentic portrayal of human experience. **LJS**

Trigger

★★★★

C.G. Moore, Little Island Books, 128pp, 978-1915071538, £8.99 pbk In this brutal and emotional verse novel, we meet Jay as he wakes up from what he later realises, was rape by multiple men. We follow him through the first-person narration as he figures out what happened and deals with the uncertainty, guilt, shame and terror that this brings. Who is he now and can he reclaim himself from the numbness caused by the trauma of rape. Also, who asked these strangers to rape him and why?

One of the most interesting facets of this novel which I have not seen addressed before, is the disconnection of Jay's mind from his body. This kind of disconnection also happens with a physical disability and this reviewer found the sensation very accurately described.

The author states that they want this book to open up discussions about informed consent. Very few readers could engage with this novel without taking from it how private and special the human body is.

Trigger is likely to be for Year 10 and up. **RB**

Seven Days

★★★★

Rebeka Shaid, Walker Books, 264pp, 978 1529513967 £8.99 pbk

Rebeka Shaid's debut young adult novel, *Seven Days*, is an authentically diverse and pacy story set in Bristol, featuring spirited teenage characters grappling with a wide range of modern and timeless challenges. Set over seven days and told each day with alternating voices, the story revolves around universal themes of love, loss, family, friendship and resilience,

which will really resonate with young adult audiences.

Seven Days is a heartwarming YA contemporary novel that follows the journey of Noori and Aamir from the point that they meet on a bench when they are both navigating the complexities of life after experiencing profound loss. The story tracks the course of their relationship as it develops from a chance meeting into a friendship and then into bigger feelings, through loss and towards acceptance and love.

The book beautifully captures the essence of finding first love amidst adversity and will resonate with readers through its poignant portrayal of human emotions and relationships. It takes the reader on a typical love story journey with gentleness and humour and contains all the necessary emotional elements of the genre as well as additional poetry and other classic love story references. Shaid's ability to weave a narrative that is refreshing and yet balances these

Valediction: **No.15** A Toy Town Box

Brian Alderson is bidding farewell to old favourites as he donates his remarkable collection of children's books to **Seven Stories**. His latest gift is a collection of **Toy Town** adventures.

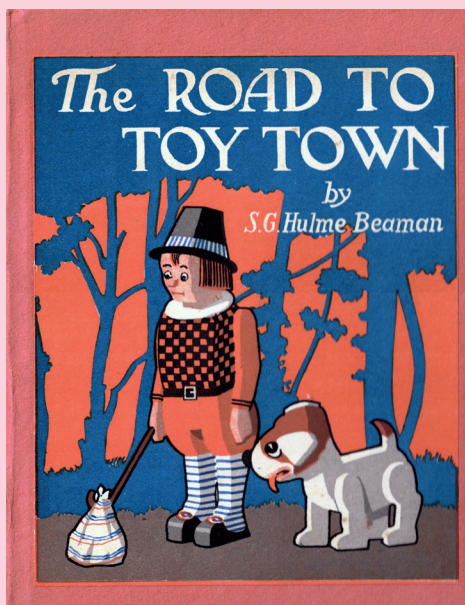


One of the attractions of the plethora of children's books published in London by the Oxford University Press between 1906 and 1939 (see our previous Valediction) was their unpredictability. True, some series such as the **Biggles** books or the girls' school stories followed a standard pattern while other series followed a variable pattern of their own, such as Oxford's editions of the **Peek-A-Boo** books or were single titles following the whim of whoever was doing the design.

Some form of box occasionally put in an appearance such as May Byron's **The Counterpane Book**, illustrated by Millicent Sowerby (1913) an entirely individual production.



Original Toytown book watercolour illustration



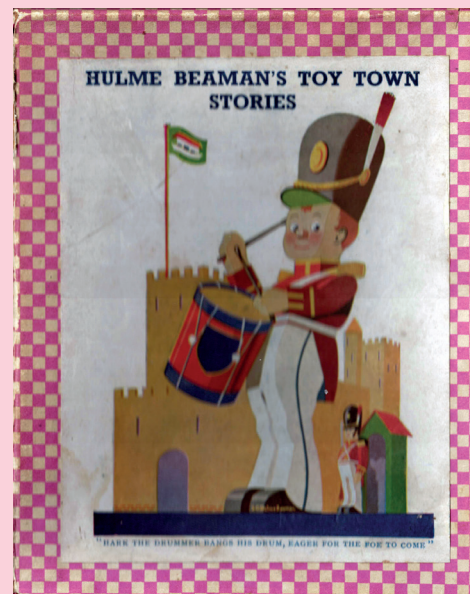
The present boxed set of four 16-page booklets is of particular interest as marking the first appearance of Toy Town in Hulme Beaman's oeuvre. The first story, **The Road to Toy Town** sees Tom and his dog make their way there over the hills and through the forest. The three companion volumes deal with quite separate events there. The figure drawing does not emphatically imply the wooden figures that were to become one of Hulme-Beaman's specialities, but the idea was ready for development. That was to occur in 1929 after one of the 'Aunts' on the daily wireless programme **Children's Hour** spotted the potential for a radio serial. Hulme Beaman joined the team, turning Toy Town into **Toytown** and peopling it with the cast of citizens from the satirically conceived Mayor and

S.G.Hulme Beaman. Hulme Beaman's Toy Town Series [1925]

A hinged cardboard box covered with pink checkered paper with an illustrated title label 113x110 mm. on lid containing four volumes 1[6] pp. 135x110mm. In a single gathering. [1] title-page (Title, vig., 'By S.G.Hulme Beaman. Humphrey Milford / Oxford University Press London) [2-15 text illus.in 3 colours in various consistent placements]; [16] concluding page stating THE END / Printed 1925 in Great Britain by Morrison and Gibb Ltd. Edinburgh. Orange paper over board, pictorial title. In three colours on paper 120x100 mm. to front.

Titles:

The Road to Toy Town
Trouble in Toyland
Jerry and Joe
The Wooden Knight



his side-kick Ernest the Policeman to the talking animals Larry the Lamb and Dennis the Dachshund.

I can speak with nostalgia of those early broadcasts, being a child before the war, coming home from school with Children's Hour on every day at tea-time and with Toytown especially looked forward to. It was, thus, an aural experience rather than a literary one and I have no idea of how many programmes were scripted by Hulme Beaman who died suddenly of pneumonia in 1932. (If you google **Toytown** you can find a list of the 29 scripts by him and their dates.) Collections of stories were published by both Collins and Oxford but I never read them. In my early years as a children's bookseller however (c.1955) we stocked two of the OUP collections, survivors from the Amin House of the thirties.



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.