

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.267

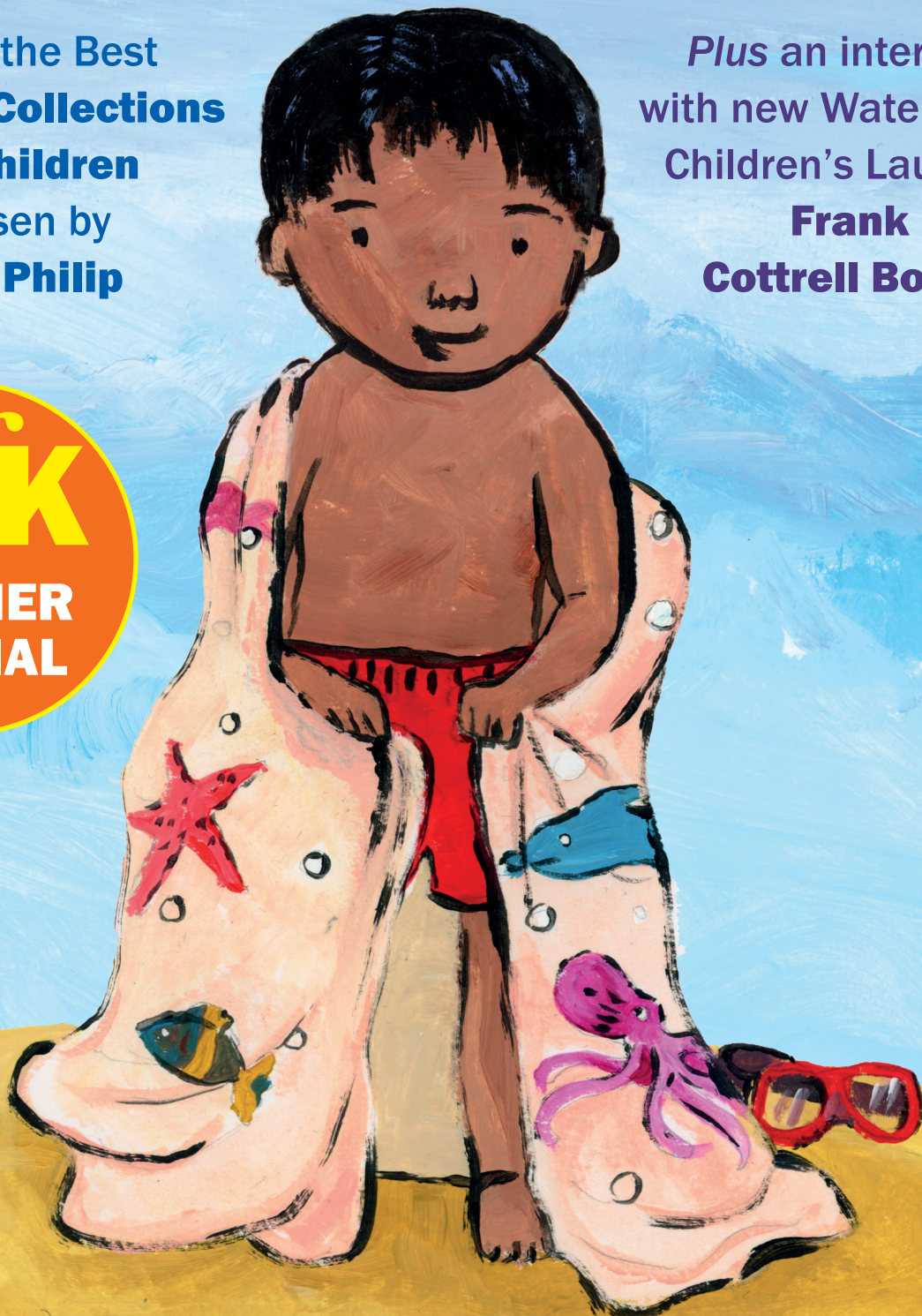
the children's book magazine online

July 2024

Authorgraph interview **Manon Steffan Ros**
Windows into Illustration **Marjoke Heinrichs**

Ten of the Best
Folktale Collections
for Children
chosen by
Neil Philip

Plus an interview
with new Waterstones
Children's Laureate
Frank
Cottrell Boyce

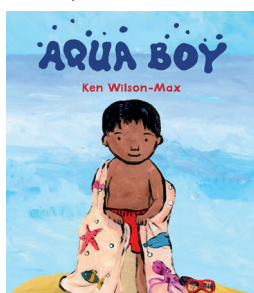


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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **Aqua Boy** written and illustrated by **Ken Wilson-Max**. Thanks to **Otter-Barry Books** for their help with this cover.



Editorial 267

The last two months have been exceptionally busy ones. We have a new government and a new Waterstones Children's Laureate, while the winners of many of the UK's leading children's book awards including the **CILIP Carnegie Medals**, the **Children's Book Award** and the **CLiPPA**, have all been announced.

Bridget Phillipson, the new education secretary, is pledging a transformation in education including the recruitment of 6,500 more teachers, free breakfast clubs in all primary schools, much more focus on early years education, reform and broadening of the national curriculum, and more access to music, art, drama for all children. All of this is needed and is welcomed by schools and teachers everywhere.

Our new Children's Laureate, Frank Cottrell-Boyce, is also keen to make real change happen, quickly, in order to address the inequalities that have grown over the last 14 years. He too has a focus on early years and ensuring that books become more of the daily experience for the very young. He's also determined to increase the national conversation about children's books, something that naturally all of us at **BfK** support. Read our interview with Frank in this issue.

We turn our attention to the subject of inclusivity and representation again in this issue, with a guest comment piece from Sunny Singh, one of the founders of the **Jhalak Prize** and an interview with Ken Wilson-Max in which he talks about his new inclusive imprint for HarperCollins Children's Books, **Kumusha Books**.

This year's **Carnegie Medal for Writing** was awarded to the retiring Children's Laureate, Joseph Coelho for his verse novel **The Boy Lost in the Maze**, but congratulations too to Nathanael Lessore, who won the **Branford Boase Award** for his debut **Steady For This**, and to Matt Goodfellow who was awarded the **CLiPPA, CLPE Children's Poetry Award**, for **The Final Year**. Both **Steady For This** and **The Final Year** are contemporary stories featuring kids who seldom take starring roles in children's books and, refreshingly, both are written in the language that is natural to their protagonists. Find out more about Lessore on the [Branford Boase Award website](#) and there will be an in-depth interview with Matt Goodfellow in our September issue.

New initiatives

Inclusive Books for Children (IBC), the new charity that exists to make inclusive books mainstream, has launched the IBC Bookshelf, a UK-wide campaign aimed at independent booksellers to help encourage sales of inclusive stories and raise the profiles of their creators. IBC is offering quarterly book lists to UK independent bookshops, highlighting the best-in-class inclusive children's books for booksellers to feature in-store. Booksellers will also receive Point of Sale materials,

including shelf wobblers, posters and bookmarks, to help them promote the campaign. The campaign is entirely free to take part in.

Booksellers who have signed up to the IBC Bookshelf so far include Chepstow Books & Gifts, Chepstow, Chicken and Frog, Essex, Kibworth Books, Leicestershire, Mr B's Emporium, Bath, Norfolk Children's Books Centre, Norfolk, The Children's Bookshop, London and The Rabbit Hole, North Lincolnshire

Marcus Satha, co-founder of IBC, says 'The IBC Bookshelf has had such a positive reception so far. We know how difficult an environment booksellers operate in, and we know how powerful it can be to see yourself reflected in stories. Our campaign aims to champion independent booksellers and reach as many young readers and their families as possible with our recommendations and reviews, which will also help to achieve our mission of bringing inclusive stories further into the mainstream.'

Join the Book Squad?

HarperCollins UK has announced the launch of **Book Squad**, a new collaboration between education and children's imprints Collins, HarperCollins Children's Books, Farshore and Barrington Stoke, aimed at supporting reading for pleasure in primary schools. Book Squad has been developed to help 'break down and dispel the perception of reading as a subject to learn, instead creating a culture where reading is enjoyed'. Hosted on [collins.co.uk](#), Book Squad will give free access to unique content about children's literature, in-depth research, guidance, reading recommendations for all ages and interests, and free resources for use in the classroom. Book Squad also features exclusive content from HarperCollins' children's authors and illustrators.

Help co-create research about poetry and young lives

Poetry By Heart and Manchester Metropolitan University have combined forces, with financial support from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, to get to the bottom of the question of what poetry does for young lives with a three-year research project.

Making the Case: What does poetry do for young lives? seeks to address a key challenge faced by poetry organisations working with young people: how to speak with confidence and credibility about why such work matters. While a wealth of anecdotal experience indicates that engaging with poetry affords various kinds of value, research to date has been scarce and limited in scope. The project aims to produce an authoritative and pioneering account of poetry's impact on young people. 'It is vital to all those involved in this project that the research should not be undertaken "behind closed doors"' says Mark Thomson, who is undertaking the research, 'and that everyone with a stake in the potential outcomes (young people, teachers, caregivers, poets, etc.) should be given the opportunity to participate in the design and implementation.'

If you'd like to contribute to the project, email info@poetrybyheart.org.uk explaining what interests you about taking part.

Thanks as always to everyone for reading **Books for Keeps**. Enjoy the summer!

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Reading Rights: Books Build a Brighter Future

An interview with our new Waterstones's Children's Laureate, Frank Cottrell-Boyce

At a ceremony in Leeds on 2 July, Frank Cottrell-Boyce assumed the role of Waterstones Children's Laureate. In a passionate speech, full of urgency, he set out his intentions: to address the inequalities that mean so many children in our society miss out on the benefits of reading and being read to; and to ensure that children's books are valued and taken seriously. Four days into his two-year tenure, he discussed his plans with **Books for Keeps**.

It was in November 2023 that Frank was offered the role of Children's Laureate. He was in Warrington, opening a library; something, as he points out, that you don't get to do very often these days. An auspicious beginning perhaps to his term, and we are speaking on the morning after the General Election (Frank has been up watching results since 4.00am), so there's a strong sense of optimism and of sleeves being rolled up in preparation for work ahead. He's determined, he says, 'to make a measurable difference in the role' and has been laying the ground since November, approaching people he wants to help deliver his aims. Keeping the appointment a secret has been a real challenge.

Asked what made him decide to take the role on, his response is instant: 'Anger.' He is furious at the inequality he sees on school visits and already has plans in place to tackle it. 'I've seen great practice in schools [around the promotion of reading] and if there was a vehicle for sharing that, you could improve things massively without needing any kind of major policy shift or budget change.'

He quotes as an example, something he saw in a school in Tower Hamlets. 'The school didn't have a library, so your immediate reaction tends to be, "well, this school needs a library", but their literacy lead did this thing where she went around the classes every half term with a box of books and personally recommended each book in it: "This is a really funny one. This made me cry," etc and then asked the children, holding them up, "So who wants to read this one?" By the time she got to the last in the box, there was more or less a riot. She's handing them out saying, "You know you've got to read it quickly because that girl wants it too so you can have it first, but remember, she wants to read it too". Her curation of that cardboard box was worth a lovely state-of-the-art library that actually isn't used properly. So, using this type of solution seems an easy thing to share and it's evidently enjoyable.'

He plans to bring together people who know what works and share what they're doing and is delighted that a lot of the people and organisations he wants to involve in these discussions have already approached him, while he's also been offered venues to host them.

This is an area where his background as a screenwriter is an advantage too. 'If you make a movie, you have a really strong sense that all the pieces matter – you need the electricians and joiners and caterers and makeup people, as well as the actors. I'm the right person for this too because I've been around a long time. I've got an address book and a lot of practice at being good in a room which quite a lot of writers don't have. Making movies is all about being in the room and listening and taking notes and being comfortable talking to people.'



Amongst those he wants in the room are people who are successfully promoting books and reading to the very young. 'Early years is more important than anything: how do we get to the 50% of nought to three-year olds who are not read to? So that means reaching health visitors, grandparents... How do we contact them? How do we how do we praise the ones who are doing it and share what they're doing? It's a matter of collating that evidence and sharing that practice.'

He's happy to admit he doesn't have the answers to these questions, it's all about asking. That will include questioning things we tend to value without question: 'A library that's not working as it should, is not worth anything.' His acceptance speech talks about a 'massive national investment' in children's reading, but that's not necessarily one requiring huge amounts of money. 'I'd love by the end of this tenure to produce some kind of systemic change that says it's part of the core mission of this government that every child gets the chance to be read to in their early years, whatever that takes. And I'm sure at some point that's going to take some money or some guidance, but it doesn't seem to be a huge ask given that it's happening in some parts of the country already.'

As to why reading to children has fallen off in recent years, while he's more interested in fixing it than in lamenting it, he does identify certain issues, 'We live in a world of distraction, and we've failed to value boredom, and we've failed to value stillness and quiet. These are not expensive commodities, but it turns out that they are crucial commodities. And I think we can bring them back.'

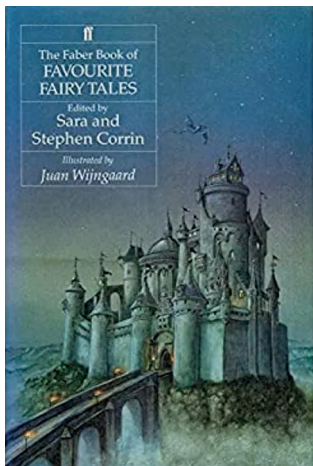
His other aim is to have the value of children's books properly appreciated, something he thinks would have significant impact. 'Sometimes initiatives don't land because there's a lack of public conversation around children's books.' He's been highlighting the lack of coverage for children's books in that national conversation for some time and will continue lobbying for a better quality of discussion around children's literature. He admits that his experience interviewing authors and illustrators for **The Island of Brilliant**, the podcast he broadcasts with Nadia Shireen, has made him more aware for example of the extraordinary amount of work that goes into creating a picture book. He'll be carrying on with the podcast, 'I see it as the parish magazine for children's books', he says.

When he's not in those rooms with people in the know, or putting together the parish magazine, Frank will still be making school and festival visits, and hopefully opening more libraries, his energy and determination to make a tangible difference, to increase the sum of happiness in our children, unmissable.

Ten of the Best Folktale Collections for Children

‘Once upon a time’, says **Neil Philip**

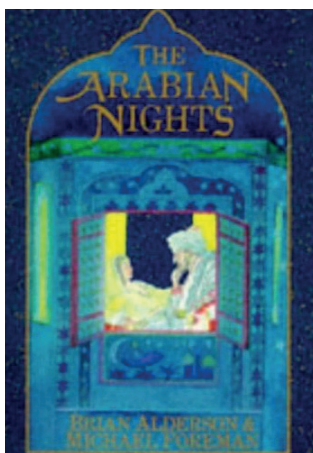
Choosing ten ‘best’ in such a wide field was a challenge. I have ignored Grimm (the best of many versions being those of Jack Zipes and Brian Alderson) and the literary fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen (my choice of translations being those of Naomi Lewis). Andrew Lang was the first to establish himself as a reteller of folktales from all round the world in his series of **Colour Fairy Books** (though Lang chose the stories, but delegated the retellings to his wife and others). More recently, folk and fairy tales have benefitted at the skilful hands of Ruth Manning-Sanders, Marcus Crouch, and the editors of my first choice, Sara and Stephen Corrin.



The Faber Book of Favourite Fairy Tales

Edited by Sara and Stephen Corrin, illus Juan Wijngaard, Faber, 978-0571148547, £12.00hbk

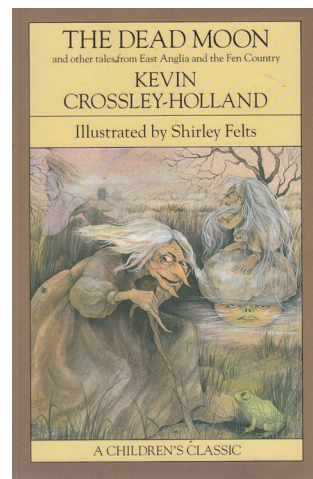
Here is a feast of stories from Grimm, Andersen and Perrault, but also Norway (East o’ the Sun and West o’ the Moon), Russia (Baba Yaga), and Greece (Midas and the Golden Touch). As an introduction to the classics of folk literature, it could hardly be bettered. As the editors say, ‘Children are new and these stories are new to children.’



The Arabian Nights

Rendered into English by Brian Alderson, embellished by Michael Foreman, Victor Gollancz

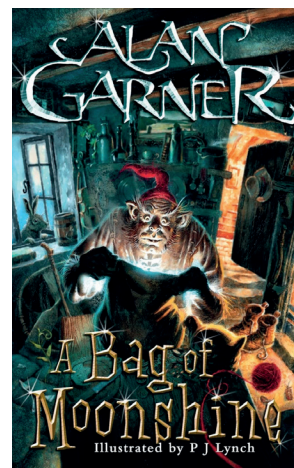
Just as there are countless versions of Grimm and Andersen, so too with The Arabian Nights (or 1001 Nights). Many of the best-known versions for adults are untrustworthy, ‘embellished’, to use the word for Michael Foreman’s beautiful illustrations here, to enhance the erotic content, while the scholarly versions by Haddawy are a bit dry. So to lead us into the magical storytelling of Scheherazade, who better than Brian Alderson?



The Dead Moon: Tales from East Anglia and the Fen Country

Retold by Kevin Crossley-Holland, illus Shirley Felts, Scholastic O/P

Of all Kevin Crossley-Holland’s many collections of folktales, I suspect this one, consisting of strange and eerie stories collected in his own home patch, is probably closest to his heart. The best of them, such as the title tale and Yallery Brown were first collected in the Lincolnshire Fens by Marie Clothilde Balfour, but Crossley-Holland makes them his own. Pity farmhand Tom, who frees an imp only to told, ‘For harm and bad luck and Yallery Brown/ You’ve let out yourself from under the stone.’

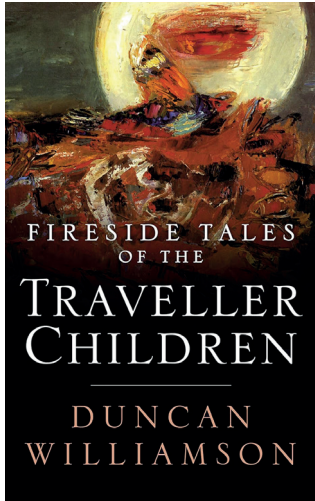


A Bag of Moonshine

Alan Garner, illus PJ Lynch, CollinsVoyager, 978-0007127900, £6.99 pbk

Like Crossley-Holland, Alan Garner has put himself at the service of the English folktale (his **Collected Folk Tales** also contains a version of Yallery Brown). Hard to make a choice among his books, but **A Bag of Moonshine** is perhaps the closest to his true creative voice. ‘They say that, once upon a time, in such and such a place, not near and not far, not high and not low, there lived an old man and an old woman by the side of a lake.’

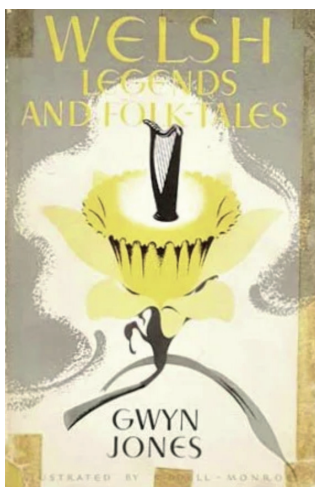
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Fireside Tales of the Traveller Children

Duncan Williamson, illus
Alan Herriot, Canongate O/P

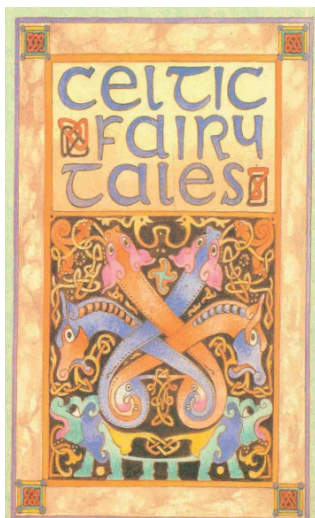
The Scottish Traveller Duncan Williamson was an inexhaustible well of stories. 'Many years ago, before your day and mine, there lived a woodcutter in the forest and he had three sons.' You are drawn straight into the tale. Duncan's tales of supernatural creatures are collected in **The Broonie Silkie & Fairies** (same publisher and illustrator). His autobiography is **The Horsie Man** (also Canongate), while there is an excellent two-volume biography by David Campbell, **A Traveller in Two Worlds** (Luath)



Welsh Legends and Folk-Tales

Retold by Gwyn Jones, illus Joan Kiddell-Monroe, Oxford University Press, O/P

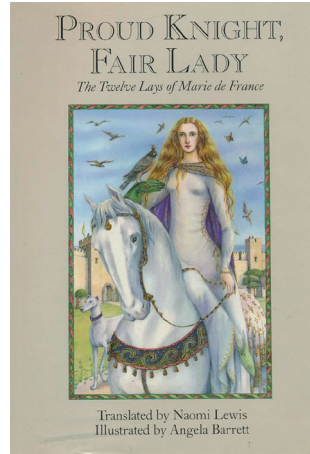
As an introduction to the myths, folktales, and legends of Wales, this volume could scarcely be bettered. As Gwyn Jones was co-translator of **The Mabinogion**, his versions of the *Four Branches of Story* are note-perfect, as is his long retelling of the story of Culhwch's search for Olwen. But there are enchanting short tales too, such as the *Eight Leaves of Story*. Some of the stories are so elaborate they can be confusing, but Jones cleaves a bright path through them.



Celtic Fairy Tales

Collected annotated and introduced by Joseph Jacobs, illus Victor Ambrus, Bodley Head, O/P

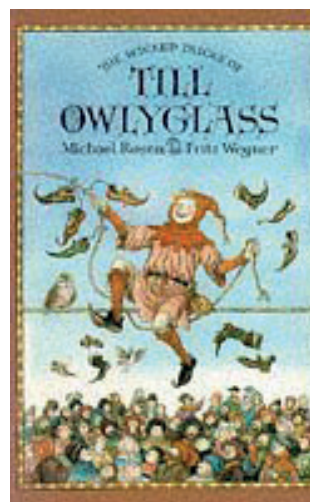
A combination of two volumes published in the 1890s by renowned folklorist Joseph Jacobs, perhaps best known for his two volumes of **English Fairy Tales** (also republished in one volume by Bodley). This is a book full of wonders drawn from the oral traditions of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Cornwall. The kind of book to enter at your peril, in case you get lost and never find your way out.



Proud Knight, Fair Lady: The Twelve Lays of Marie de France

Translated by Naomi Lewis, illus
Angela Barrett, Hutchinson, O/P

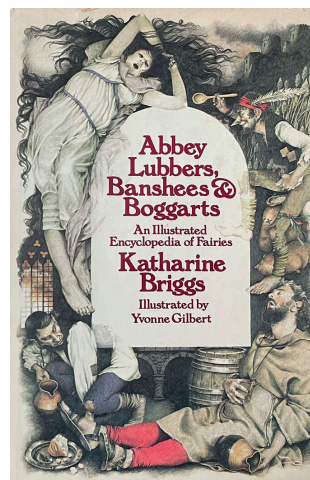
Naomi Lewis had an innate understanding of how to phrase and pace a story. She was the ideal person to make prose versions of the twelfth-century verse *lais* of Marie de France, based on Breton tales. Lewis writes, 'a thread of magic runs through the lays; it gives them a place in the great tradition of fairy tale.' Perhaps the best-known is *Bisclavret*, the tale of a werewolf with a noble heart.



The Wicked Tricks of Till Owlyglass

Retold by Michael Rosen, illus
Fritz Wegner, Walker Books, O/P

From magic to mischief. Michael Rosen's retellings of the comic tales of the German trickster Till Eulenspiegel are funny and fast-paced, leaving the reader wondering 'Whatever will he get up to next?' There's a touching frame story in which Rosen and his brother are told the tales by Old Man Horst. There's even a version of *The Emperor's New Clothes*, in which Till pretends to paint a masterpiece that is invisible to liars.



Abbey Lubbers, Banshees & Boggarts: A Who's Who of Fairies

Katharine Briggs, illus Yvonne Gilbert, Kestrel Books O/P

As the subtitle suggests, this is not exactly a collection of folk and fairy tales; instead it is a children's version of Briggs' *Dictionary of Fairies*. But it is the work of a born storyteller. If children want to find out where the name Dobby comes from or hear the story of the ghostly Cauld Lad of Hilton, this is the place to come.



Neil Philip is the author of numerous books of fairy and folk tales, including **Horse Hooves and Chicken Feet**, which won the Aesop Award of the American Folklore Society. His most recent book is **The Watkins Book of English Folktales**.

Authorgraph No.267

Manon Steffan Ros
interviewed by
Clive Barnes

The **Yoto Carnegie Medal**, awarded to Manon last year for **The Blue Book of Nebo**, doesn't come up until quite late in our conversation, but it's an award that means a great deal to her. 'It was a year ago yesterday,' she tells me, as if the date is etched in her memory. 'It was such an honour. It changed my life.' It hasn't changed who she is, or where she is, or what she spends her life doing, of course. She is still writing in Wales between the mountains and the sea, and her writing has brought her many Welsh language awards. But the **Carnegie** was a new level of recognition. 'If you would have asked me ten years ago, what I would have wanted for my career, it would have been that.' It was also a vindication of her dedication to writing for children, 'I'm lucky, I have been working as an author for eighteen years now, but people are a lot more interested in what I'm doing, particularly in my writing for children and young adults, and that's really what I want to do and that's what people want from me at the moment.'

The Blue Book of Nebo, like all of Manon's books, was written first in Welsh, and takes place in Wales, even the nuclear reactor, whose breakdown triggers its story of survival against the odds, is in Anglesey. Her parents were Welsh language enthusiasts and activists, although her father was born in England and learnt the language in his twenties. And, at home, Welsh was the language of her childhood.



She learnt English 'by osmosis...It's everywhere.' And now she is 'equally comfortable in both languages, and I've never had to learn either of them...Fair play to my parents.' She talks about the privilege and encouragement of being part of the Welsh language community. 'There are so many creative opportunities. It's a cultural thing. You rarely meet someone who speaks Welsh or who has been through the Welsh education system who isn't writing creatively or isn't in a band.' She talks about the Urdd (Urdd Gobaith Cymru), the Welsh language youth movement which has its own Eisteddfod. 'You get the opportunity to do these things to test yourself, to explore, to find what you're good at.' There is a lively, exciting literary scene in Welsh that doesn't necessarily follow Anglo-American trends and, on the other hand, because there aren't that many books, you are encouraged to read across genres. 'It creates something unique. You can't stay in a box. You have to explore it all.' Above all, she reflects, 'I think in Welsh. I speak to all my family in Welsh. It's the language of all those special relationships.'

Manon has written for adults. Her novel **Blasu**, which she translated into English as **The Seasoning**, is a moving book about family life

in a North Wales village and the buried secret at its heart. But her first books were for children and these had their origin in grief in her own family. Her mother died young, and then when Manon was pregnant with her first child, she didn't want her mother to be known to her own children just as a two-dimensional 'still, silent' figure in a photo-frame, so, in a remarkable act of fictional resurrection, she wrote two fantasy books about how she imagined her mother might have been as a fourteen-year-old, 'feisty, funny, cool and clever.' She credits her mother with her love of story, 'I've always been an average reader, but Mam would always read to me, even after I could read independently.' I remind Manon of an inspiring talk she did for **The Reading Agency** a couple of years ago called [Books are My Best Mates](#) (available on YouTube), 'Yes, always, always,' she emphasises, 'Always company for you. There's something about understanding another person on a deeper level, when you're reading their story. These black marks on white paper somehow allow me to transfer these images in my head into your head. That's amazing. It's a sort of magic that we've grown used to and that we don't see as miraculous anymore.' Although she enjoys writing for adults, she finds writing for children and young people more



rewarding. 'I feel more self-conscious writing for adults.' She finds children wholehearted and open in their responses. 'I trust children to get it. We are our most true selves in our teens. Everything you believe you believe wholeheartedly. There's an energy there.'

Manon has said that she tends to use her writing as a form of therapy. 'If there's something I find difficult or I can't understand, or I can't empathise with, I try to write through it.' **The Blue Book of Nebo**, of course, deals with an apocalyptically difficult situation, a nuclear disaster, but it's also about a boy, his mother and his sister, learning to live together in a new intimacy. At the moment we join them, Dylan has known no other life, while Rowenna, his mother, has a

past he knows nothing about. We explore their individual responses to this new situation and their developing relationship through their separate entries in an exercise book with blue covers. This is the blue book of the title, a Welsh classic for the nuclear age to match the red and the black of medieval Wales.

Sam, the younger narrator of Manon's latest novel, **Me and Aaron Ramsey**, has his own difficulties. They are more prosaic than Dylan's perhaps, but enough to keep him awake at night with insistent anxieties which he christens "The Bad." His parents are arguing, his dad is injured in a car accident that ends a promising local football career, and there is a deep-seated problem that the family have yet to confront, his dad's illiteracy. This is the story of how Sam copes with all these pressures, partly through his love of football, and his emulation of his hero Aaron Ramsey, partly through friendship and support from outside the family, and mostly through his own good sense. It's a reassuring book, and it helps that it is written in the past tense. These are problems that Sam has survived and he can look back on them. When we talk about the book, Manon says, 'I do tend to write from the perspective of teenage boys, perhaps because I have two of them now. Also, it's a little bit of my own experience as a teenager. Adults think you don't know what's going on, but you really do. Children are really brilliant, sometimes better than adults, at reading a room. I don't think we give them enough credit. Sam is kind, but I do think that is partly connected to the dysfunction of his family. When someone grows up in that kind of tension, they tend to want to make everything ok.'

Manon has been the translator of all her books that have been published in English: a process she also characterises as adaptation, since there have been elements in the stories that made sense in a purely Welsh context but perhaps needed altering for an English audience. It's a process she finds fascinating, particularly as in her early translation of **Blasu**, translating word for word, she found that the original book in Welsh seemed much darker than the English version. Following her **Carnegie** success, she has been excited to see all the international translations of **The Blue Book of Nebo**, and gratified that she had been able to point to the richness of the Welsh language culture through the book, not only in her references there to the **Black Book of Carmarthen** and **Red Book of Hergest**, but to Dylan's discovery of the poet and essayist T.H. Parry Williams, 'it's mind-blowing that there are now people across the world who might know of our greatest writer in Welsh through my work.'

Even before the success of **The Blue Book of Nebo**, Manon began work adapting some of her other novels for children and young people into English. Two books to look out for in the autumn are **Greta**, a young adult novel, adapted from Manon's adult novel **Llechi**; and for children, **Feather**, adapted from **Pluen**. And, with the Carnegie a year behind her, eventually there will be something new. 'I am taking my time with doing the next thing. I think I've known for a few years what I have to write next. I vaguely know what it's about and the characters, and now, a year later, I'm looking forward again to the thrill of writing and not knowing exactly where the story's going.' And we, too, can look forward to discovering a new story from this greatly gifted writer, in Welsh and/or in English.

Books mentioned, all by Manon Steffan Ros:

The Blue Book of Nebo, Firefly Press, 978-1913102784, £8.99 pbk

Me and Aaron Ramsey, Firefly Press, 978-1915444493, £7.99 pbk

The Seasoning, Honno Welsh Women's Press, 978-1909983250, £8.99 pbk



Clive Barnes was Principal Children's Librarian, Southampton City and is now a freelance researcher.

Windows into Illustration: Marjoke Henrichs



Originally from the Netherlands and a former theatre designer and painter, **Marjoke Henrichs** is a graduate of the MA Children's Book Illustration course at Cambridge School of Art in 2019. Her work is characterized by uncluttered images, her visual language always child-focused and interesting. Here she describes her approach to illustration and embracing experimentation to give her artwork vitality.

For many years, I designed sets and costumes for the theatre. Recently, I have started making picture books, which I love doing! I think you can tell I was a stage designer as I treat my spreads like an empty stage – but the difference is that now I can create whatever I like without worrying if it can be recreated in full size!

My first two books **NO! Said Rabbit** and **Ready! Said Rabbit** were created with this in mind. Both books were inspired by my own children – they are grown up now, but I still remember those lovely toddler years. Currently I am working on the third book in the series.

NO! Said Rabbit was written and illustrated as my graduation project for the MA in Children's book illustration at Cambridge School of Art. I did experiment a lot while working on it and began with ink outlines instead of pencil. One day I forgot my pen, but I had some wooden coffee stirrers, which I sharpened and used instead. I loved the slightly unpredictable and uneven lines. It made the artwork much more alive and gave it energy.

Fast forward to the present, and I now prefer to draw my artwork with a sharpened coffee stirrer and ink! This also serves as a good excuse to visit coffee shops to do some observational sketching as well as drink coffee!

My latest book **Detective Catz and the Missing Nut** was inspired by my cat Boris. One day I was wondering what he might be doing when he was out, and just doodled various different situations. I imagined him being a detective.

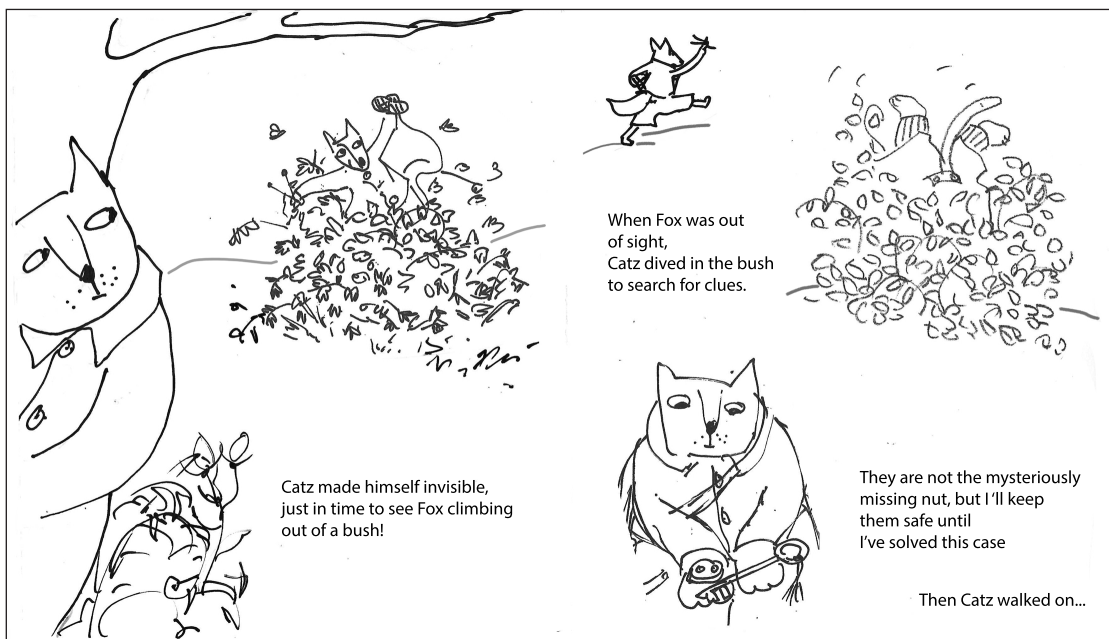


Detective Catz has made quite a journey since those first doodles, from my real cat to a sophisticated grown up picture book cat, enjoying croissants with strawberry jam and coffee for breakfast, reading detective novels, and studying detective practice – because he really wants to be a detective.

Over time, as the story evolved, Catz became a lot younger, more enthusiastic, curious – and importantly – determined not to give up. He also got five good little friends.

I set the story in a forest environment, and it took a bit of working out how to draw the trees and leaves without them looking 'stiff'. I also set the action in Autumn so I could use a whole array of bright earth colours from green to yellow and deep red, to avoid the whole book becoming green.

I usually hand draw my roughs immediately in ink, so they keep their freshness when I draw the final artwork. For colour, I use a combination of Gouache and coloured pencil, sometimes both or one or the other. Catz's clothes and his markings are in colour pencil only, and looking at Foxy, his cardigan is just in colour pencil, but I combined gouache and coloured pencil for his trousers, shoes, tail and face.



The only time I use Photoshop is to enlarge, minimise or move an image in development, then I'll print it out and will redraw it by hand again using a light board.



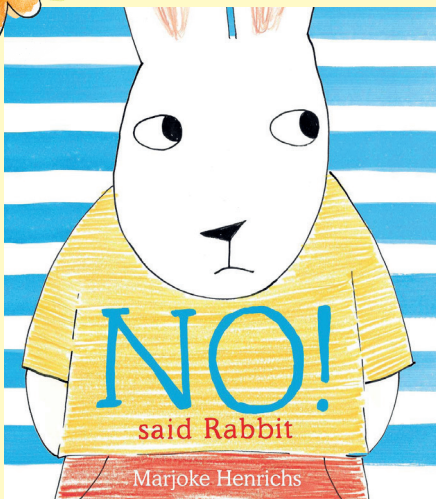
◀ Rough for *Detective Catz and the Missing Nut* pps 18-19



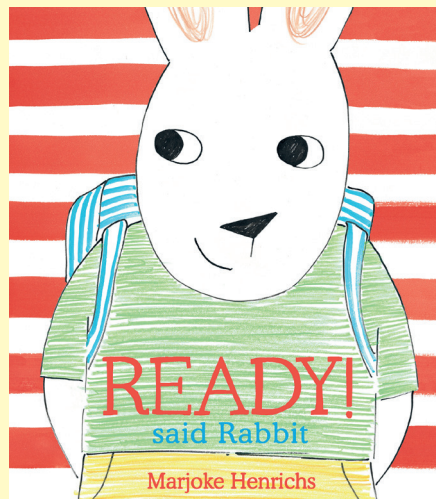
Detective Catz and the Missing Nut is published by Scallywag Press, 978-1915252715, £12.99 hbk

▲First version *Detective Catz and the Missing Nut* pps 6-7

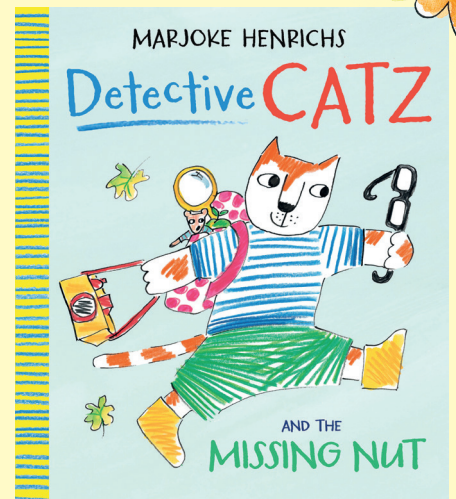
Kind and humorous books to celebrate play, family and friends, and love



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Picture This: Interior with Woman

In the second of a new **Books for Keeps** series putting picture book illustration in the spotlight, **Nicolette Jones** discusses three interior scenes

Pam Smy has emerged from my [#NewIllustrationoftheDay](#) Tweets as the Illustrators' Illustrator. She teaches on the celebrated illustration MA course at Cambridge School of Art, and the image I posted, from Neil Gaiman's picturebook/poem, **What You Need to be Warm**, received more Likes than any other by quite a margin.

Gaiman's text was a composite of responses he received on social media when he asked for memories of being warm, and it is published by Bloomsbury, with 13 illustrators, each embellishing a spread, in aid of the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, to whom Gaiman gave the poem.

Smy's image accompanied this section:

**The tink tink tink of
iron radiators
waking in an old house.
To surface from dreams in a bed,
burrowed beneath blankets
and comforters,
the change of state from cold to warm
is all that matters, and you think
just one more minute
snuggled here
before you face the chill.
Just one.**

The colours – orange and black – were a given for all the illustrations in the book, combining warmth and cold. Smy's image is open to several interpretations. The text suggests a childhood memory of staying in a family house in pre-duvet days, with old-fashioned comforters, blankets and iron radiators. My own speculation to begin with was that this might be a child in a grandmother's spare room, or part of it, where his belongings are being unpacked while he stays for the winter holiday. But the boy and his mother could be refugees who have been housed in someone's attic with a makeshift curtain? Or is a mother/grandmother packing possessions (a comfort blanket?) for a child who is about to emerge from the cosiness of bed to the chill of having to leave home, as others, seen from the window in the snowy landscape, are already doing. Is the expression of concern on the woman's face one of compassion for others, or anxiety about having to share their journey?

A vignette on the other half of the spread, below the text, shows the adult and child at the door, hailing the people who have passed by. To wish them well? To say goodbye? To join them? The cleverness of this image is that it merges the two possibilities: of the childhood memory of warmth in a safe home, and the experience of those who have to leave.

There is so much more storytelling in the picture. The patchwork comforter is evocative. A handmade, old-school object. Which implies another kind of warmth: the patient, loving creation of a gift to keep a child snug. It is also made of scraps of fabric that reflect the maker's own history. Patchwork itself has an element of narrative.

The pets suggest cosiness. Two cats? Or possibly the animal on the bed is a dog (are the ears a slightly different shape?). Ambiguity like this in illustration opens up the possibility of a conversation when reading to a child. Where does the child think this is? Who is in the picture? What are the animals? It allows room for the options that mean the most to each observer. And meanwhile the essence of the text – that last moment of warmth before you get out of



What You Need to be Warm is written by Neil Gaiman. This illustration by Pam Smy. Reproduced by permission of Bloomsbury Children's Books.

bed on a cold morning – is communicated whatever the particular circumstances.

Then I checked with Pam Smy about which of the interpretations above was intended. She said:

'All of these! The image was made as the war in Ukraine was breaking out, and there were so many people being displaced. I wanted to show a mother packing up somewhere that was already makeshift, a hurried home that was made with strung curtains and belongings that were never fully unpacked, already preparing to move on as her child slept those last few delicious moments of snuggled warmth. I wanted to show the mother being aware of what was happening outside, and the child unaware.'

Smy also told me about the technique by which the image was made.

'In this particular illustration I drew the black layer directly onto a type of plastic with a textured surface called True Grain. This holds a waxy black crayon like a Chinagraph and a dip pen and ink and a wash in a way that can replicate the feel of lithograph printing, so I was able to make a tonal textured layer on it. I painted the orange layer separately and scanned them together in Photoshop to make the two layers Bloomsbury needed for the book.'

Pam Smy's website says she has a passion for observational drawing and sketchbooks. This image is a fine example of how traditional skills can be used with new technology without losing the precious evidence of the human hand.



My Baba's Garden is written by Jordan Scott. Illustration by Sydney Smith. Reproduced with permission of Walker Books.

and there she is, hidden in the steam of boiling potatoes, dancing between the sink, fridge and stove.

A hand holding a beetroot, a leg opening a cupboard, an elbow closing the fridge door.

My Baba hums like a night full of bugs when she cooks.

I wanted to choose for this piece three images whose subjects have something in common, in order to explore how differently a scene can be depicted by different artists, and therefore how many possibilities can be added to the text by an illustration. Canadian illustrator and 2024 **Hans Christian Andersen Award** winner Sydney Smith's image is also a childhood memory, involving a grandmother and another room with light coming through the window, this time a kitchen: from **My Baba's Garden** by Jordan Scott (Walker Books).

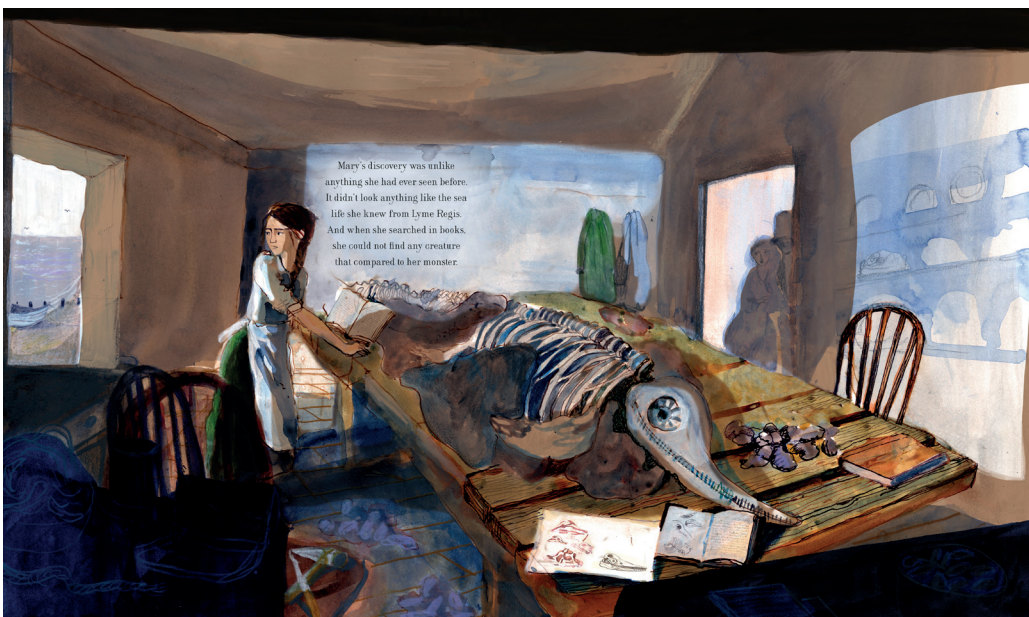
As in Smy's picture, there seems to be a narrative underlying this one, even though it focuses so much on the moment – on the effect of the light, and the haze of the steam. The text encounters Grandma ('Baba') 'hidden in the steam/ of boiling potatoes,/ dancing between the/ sink, fridge and stove'. We learn elsewhere that Baba picks up dropped food and grows vegetables in her garden because she had nothing to eat for a long, long time. The brightness, like Smy's cosiness, is part of painful history. This kitchen is the happy place of a person who once starved. In the story, as in the image, there is shadow as well as light.

Smith has said he likes to create one big image on a spread when there is a big feeling it conveys or something for the reader to meditate on. This scene, with neutral colours splashed with red, loose brushstrokes, light glancing off the jars of home-made jellies, white haloes, assorted decorative kitchenware, the red heat under

the pan, and detail that is sumptuous to look at without suggesting grandeur, all express the warmth of the child's relationship with his Polish granny. There's an empty stool in the picture that looks like an invitation to come and sit and watch Baba cook.

There's an empty chair too in another inviting scene of a room with a window: in Kate Winter's **Klaus Flugge Prize**-shortlisted **The Fossil Hunter: How Mary Anning Unearthed the Truth About Dinosaurs** (Puffin). Winter has said she originally depicted Mary's brother sitting at the table, but removed him digitally. (Mary after all deserves the focus.) Again, technology is a tool in work that looks very much hand-made, with Winter's loose use of ink and watercolour. The quality of light, as in Smith's work, is very specific. Smith's felt like sunshine coming into the room. Winter's has the cool of seaside light, shining on her face, as we see boats on the shore through the window. Light also comes in from the other side, where passers-by look in on Mary. The sharpest detail is of Mary, of her dinosaur skeleton, and her sketchbooks. These are the most important elements of the story: the girl, and her discovery, and her recording of it.

These three images, I hope, underline the impact of technique and imagination in illustration. The basic content is a small part. Each of these pictures involves a woman in a room with a window. But the stories they tell, and the places they take us, are so much more than that.



The Fossil Hunter is written and illustrated by Kate Winter. Reproduced by permission of Puffin.



Nicolette Jones writes about children's books for the **Sunday Times**, and is the author of **The Illustrators: Raymond Briggs** (Thames & Hudson); **The American Art Tapes: Voices of Twentieth Century Art** (Tate Publishing) and **Writes of Passage: Words to Read Before You Turn 13** (Nosy Crow).

Beyond the Secret Garden: Palestinian People in Children's Books

For the latest in our long-running **Beyond the Secret Garden** series, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** look at the representation of Palestinians in children's literature.

Historical fiction about the crusades, such as G. A. Henty's **The Boy Knight: A Tale of the Crusades** (1883), and those set in Palestine during the British Mandate (1918–1948) like **Biggles Flies East** (1935), generally focus on British characters in Palestine; 'Arabs' are the inhabitants of Palestine, and often act as antagonists to the British. They rarely are given unique identities, and are often so nondescript that British heroes like Biggles, can easily 'dress as an Arab' and move through the land unnoticed. Palestine, as in many novels set in British imperial holdings, acts as mere background for the (usually) white, male British hero's exploits.

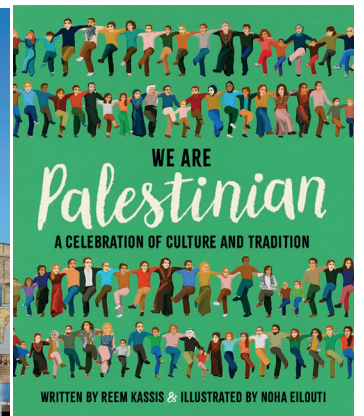
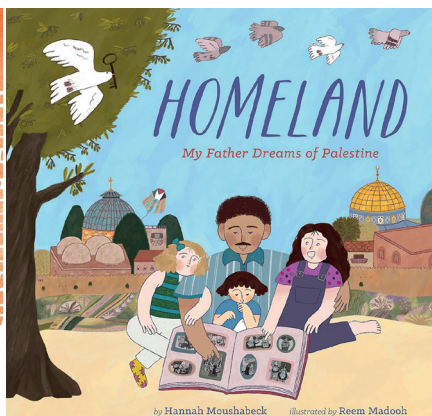
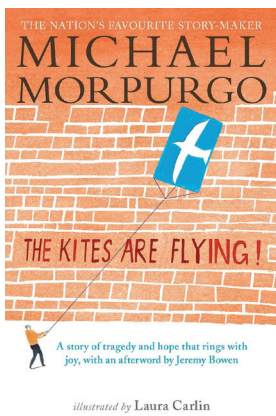
As of June 2024, the State of Palestine is recognized as a sovereign state by 145 of the 193 member states of the United Nations, just over 75% of all UN members. However, this list of states does not include the UK or the US, the two nations where most of the books read by children in the UK are published. In his foreword to **Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema** (2006), Edward Said opined that, 'the whole history of the Palestinian struggle has to do with the desire to be visible' (Said 2006: 2). The representation of Palestinians in children's literature remains contested terrain. A 2007 **Books for Keeps** article on the [The Depiction of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Contemporary Children's Fiction](#) by Fouad Moughrabi prompted a letter to the editor from author Lynne Reid Banks. Author and researcher Nora Lester Murad notes that, 'the erasure of Palestinians from children's literature pervades all stages of the publishing process. Erasure is apparent in the difficulty of getting books with accurate representation of Palestinians published, the challenges faced by Palestinian authors, soft censorship during the editorial process, in the reluctance of reviewers and booksellers to give visibility to Palestine, and later, after publication, in blatant attacks on Palestinian books, authors, teachers and students' (Murad 2024). This may have informed Beverley Naidoo's decision to employ an allegorical form to write about Palestinians in her 2023 novel **Children of the Stone City**, in contrast to the real-world setting employed for her earlier book **Journey to Joburg** that explored life for Black South African children under Apartheid.

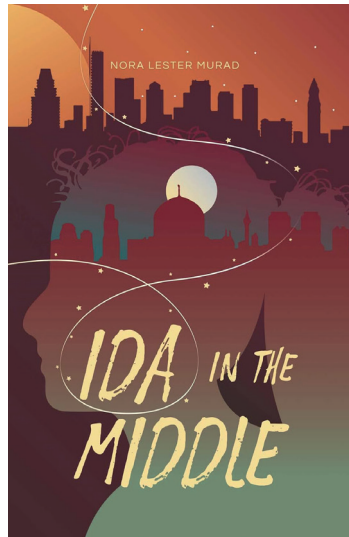
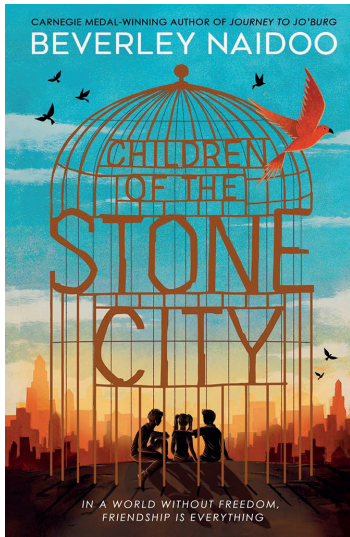
Elizabeth Laird's **A Little Piece of Ground** (2003) and Michael Morpurgo's **The Kites are Flying** (2009) both depict Palestinian boys but the characters have differing attitudes toward the Israelis. Laird lived in Ramallah and co-authored the novel with Palestinian author Sonia Nimr (however Nimr is not named on the cover or on 'about the author' page – another type of erasure, perhaps). Morpurgo conceived of his book at a peace rally in Hampstead for

Palestinian children. Karim, in Laird's book, refers to the Israeli army as 'invaders' and longs to participate in action to stop them. Said, in Morpurgo's book, has lost a brother to the conflict but still tries to befriend an Israeli girl on the other side of wall (the 'Iron Wall' built between Israel and Gaza) by sending her homemade kites. In both books, there is a sense of claustrophobia and voicelessness. Being a child is not enough to ensure safety, as Palestinian children are targets and part of the resistance in both these books.

Palestinian author Ahlam Bsharat's **Code Name: Butterfly** (2009; translated by Nancy Roberts in 2016) portrays Butterfly's (we do not learn the narrator's real name) coming-of-age story in a Palestinian village. Like Laird and Morpurgo, Bsharat portrays a sense of claustrophobia and voicelessness. Butterfly observes, 'This was how I discovered that there was a connection between falling in love, honour and the Israeli occupation. The common denominator... was that all three ended in disaster' (p58). It is likely that YA readers in the UK will find that they have much in common with the narrator, while also being able to identify how the occupation makes her life very different to theirs. Butterfly's father is employed to take care of grape vines now owned by Israeli Settlers, he avoids listening to what he terms the 'Palestinian factions' on the news, while she goes to school and has to 'memorise the dates of the massacres the occupiers [have] committed against us' (p13). Butterfly has many questions which she keeps in a 'treasure chest' and which appear in italics throughout the story and range from the occupation and politics, to the facts of life and her physical appearance. She is observant, inquisitive and uncertain; a believable character and a useful narrative technique for telling a story that does not shy away from the harshness of her life – Butterfly recalls friends and family who have been arrested or killed, but does not offer simplistic moral solutions to its readers.

Two recent picture-books depict Palestinian exiles. **Homeland; My Father Dreams of Palestine** is written by Hannah Moushabeck and illustrated by Reem Madooh (2023). The story of bedtime stories told by the father of three girls are based on Moushabeck's childhood in Brooklyn. The 'Author's Note' tells us that on May 15 1948, 'the day Palestinians call Al-Nakba' her family left West Jerusalem and took refuge in the Greek Orthodox Monastery in East Jerusalem. Their houses are now 'occupied by others'. Their father recalls walking through the streets of East Jerusalem, the people, languages, tastes, smells he encountered. '...the chanting of the muazzin's call to prayer mixed with the ringing of church bells and the market vendors singing the praises of pickling cucumbers or prickly pears.' 'And





there are stories about our homeland, a place we've never been.' **The Girl Who Lives Between Two Worlds** (Bright Books 2024) features Noor, a girl living in London with her Palestinian Muslim parents, written by Shereen Malherbe and illustrated by Sarah Nesti Willard. When Noor's family return to Jerusalem; her new friends don't dress as she does, or play the same games. A relative tells her, 'Noor, you are the girl who lives between two worlds but you don't have to choose between them.'

Two further picture books, both about the olive harvest, approach their subject matter in different ways. **These Olive Trees** (2023) by Aya Ghanameh, a Palestinian illustrator and writer from Amman, Jordan, tells the story of the author's grandmother. Set in a refugee camp in Nablus, the young Oraib harvests olives with her mother. But in 1967, 'war has come to their door once more, forcing them to flee'. Before she leaves with her family, Oraib plants an olive pit and vows, 'One day, when we're older, I'll return to you for harvest.' **Olive Harvest in Palestine** (2019, Gate) by Wafa Shami, and illustrated by Shaima Farouki (both Palestinian), tells a contemporary tale where Noor and Manal join their family to pick olives before visiting their father's olive press. The text and images portray a thriving, happy community and make no reference to Israel, the occupation, or conflict.

Thunderbird, (2022), book one of the **Thunderbird Trilogy** written by Sonia Nimr and translated by M. Lynx Qualey, is set in Ramallah and Jerusalem. Noor's parents have died and she lives with her grandmother. She learns of the cryptid bird – a phoenix, mentioned in 'Arab, Greek and Egyptian mythologies' (p33). Noor becomes aware that she is able to control fire and that only she can ensure that the phoenix regenerates by finding four magical bird feathers. Noor finds herself going back 500 years, and is by a djinn cat and girls who look identical to her. Occupation is referred to in this timeslip tale – Noor passes through a checkpoint and news of shootings in Gaza is mentioned – but it is the fantasy story that takes centre stage.

Indeed, in many of the fiction books the conflict is a backdrop to the story and described from the perspective of a young Palestinian child. This gives readers insight into the lives of Palestinian children, but not necessarily much by way of broader context. (One might argue that that is the not the role of writers of fiction, as much as it is of teachers). In contrast, Rez Aslan's non-fiction text **A Kids Book about Israel and Palestine** (2024) attempts to offer young readers a broader historical overview of the conflict. The book is published in the USA and is recommended for readers aged 5 and older. The book does not include images but rather uses text sparingly and creatively. Aslan includes information about the second world war and the Holocaust and writes that, 'Britain supported Jewish immigration to Palestine and was even open to the idea of establishing within it a **separate national home** for the Jewish people. But many people who have been living in Palestine for generations are against the idea of dividing the land into two separate states. They wanted a

single independent Palestinian state, no longer under British control' (bold text in original). While it could be argued that this ignores the nineteenth century origins of modern Zionism, it offers some context for children to learn more about the region. The book ends with discussion questions in keeping with opening statement that it 'is best read together, grownup and kid.' Further information about Palestinian people can be found in **We Are Palestinian: A Celebration of Culture and Tradition** (2023) written by Reem Kassis and illustrated by Noha Eilouti, a full-colour hardback non-fiction text with sections on geography, cultural symbols, creative minds, agriculture, cuisine, performing arts and history and religion. The book shows the diversity of Palestinian people, referring to the conflict at points in the text, while showing Palestinians as people in their own right.

Two middle-grade novels tell very different stories about Palestinians living in the USA. **Wishing on the Same Stars** (2022) by Jacquetta Nammar Feldman explores the friendship between a Jewish Israeli American and a Christian Palestinian American. Feldman is the daughter of a Christian Palestinian. Nora Lester Murad, herself from a Jewish American family and married to a Palestinian Muslim, views Feldman's story as implying that 'Palestinian-Israeli relations are a function of miscommunication or cultural misunderstanding rather than a struggle over land and rights. In other words, **Wishing on the Same Stars** plays into the erroneous belief that there is something inherently conflictual in the relationship between Palestinians and Israelis, perhaps something that is age-old and too complex to understand.' In contrast, Murad's own **Ida in the Middle** (2022) opens with Ida experiencing difficulties at her school where she is recognised as a Muslim, but not a Palestinian. After eating an olive, Ida finds herself switching between two realities; life in the US and life in Palestine. Murad's book extends the notion of erasure to the choices made in US classrooms. At a picnic for Palestinians in a neighbouring town she hears 'Nobody even says the word "Palestine" in my school' and 'The teachers are afraid to teach about anything related to the Middle East – even if the topic has nothing to do with politics' (p16).

Books mentioned:

- The Boy Knight: A Tale of the Crusades** (1883) G.A. Henty
- Biggles Flies East** (1935) W.E. Johns
- Children of the Stone City** (2023) Beverley Naidoo, HarperCollins Children's Books
- A Little Piece of Ground** Elizabeth Laird & Sonia Nimr, Macmillan Children's Books
- The Kites are Flying** Michael Morpurgo, Walker Books
- Code Name: Butterfly** Ahlam Bsharat (2009/2016) Neem Tree Press
- Homeland – My Father Dreams of Palestine** Hannah Moushabeck, illus Reem Madooh, Chronicle Books
- The Girl Who Lives Between Two Worlds** Shereen Malherbe, illus Sarah Nesti Willard, Bright Books
- These Olive Trees** (2023) Aya Ghanameh, Viking Press.
- A Kids Book About Israel and Palestine** (2024) Reza Aslan, A Kids Book About
- Wishing Upon the Same Stars** (2022) Jacquetta Nammar Feldman, HarperCollins Children's Books
- We Are Palestinian: A Celebration of Culture and Tradition** (2023) Reem Kassis, illus Noha Eilouti, Studio Press
- Thunderbird** Sonia Nimr, Centre for Middle Eastern Studies
- Ida in the Middle** (2022) Nora Lester Murad, Crocodile Books



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



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

Books beyond Great Britain

The UK produces some of the best children's writers in the world, but how often do we read outside our own borders and what are we missing? **Rachael King** describes **New Zealand's** children's book scene and some of the authors we really should be reading

Chances are, if you live in the UK, you can't immediately call to mind the names of very many New Zealand children's authors. This is because, while British books are almost all shipped off down under through the distribution arms of multi-national publishers or independent networks, the traffic is mostly one way. For a New Zealand (or indeed, Australian) children's writer to appear on the shelves in UK bookshops, they really need to have a UK publisher. Publication by Penguin NZ, for example, does not guarantee publication by Penguin UK, which acts as a separate entity – unless it's coming the other way.

Don't get me wrong! We have plenty of international successes: Lynley Dodd and her **Hairy Maclary** books are beloved by millions (and I love that they are all exposed to the very kiwi word for 'corner shop' – dairy); Stacy Gregg's pony series published by HarperCollins are some of the most successful in the genre; Dawn McMillan and Ross Kinnaird's **I Need a New Bum!** (and other subsequent bum-oriented titles), published in the UK by Scholastic, have sold well over a million copies world-wide; and Craig Smith's ever-popular **Wonky Donkey** went stratospheric after a video of a Scottish granny reading it in a fit of giggles to a baby went viral (we can all only hope for such publicity!).

The most notable New Zealand writer for children is probably Margaret Mahy. She published more than 160 books in her lifetime, from verbally acrobatic picture books and magical middle grade to my personal favourite – deep and dark YA that combines realism with the supernatural (such as **The Changeover** and **The Tricksters**). Her death in 2012 was keenly felt. Mahy won the **Carnegie Medal** twice (the only New Zealander to have done so), and her name is on the best children's playground in the country, a post-earthquake recovery project in her hometown of Christchurch. Her own New Zealand children's book collection is proudly housed in the Christchurch library and is being added to all the time.

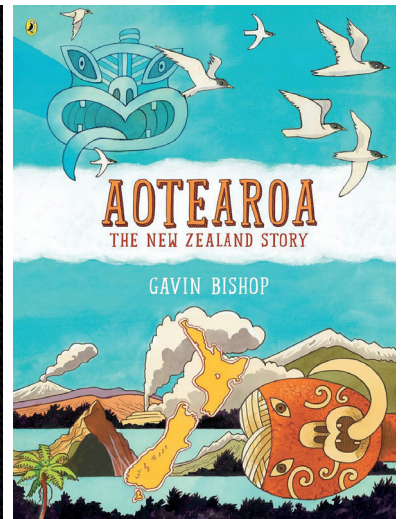
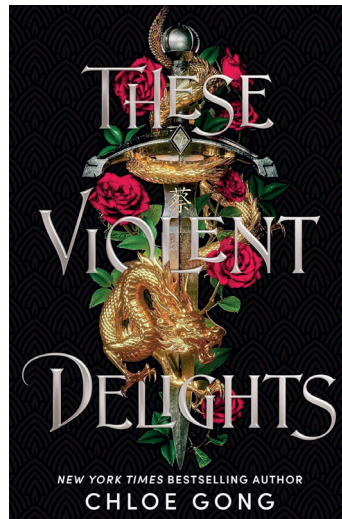
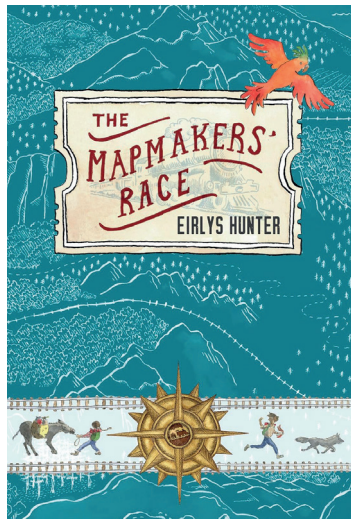
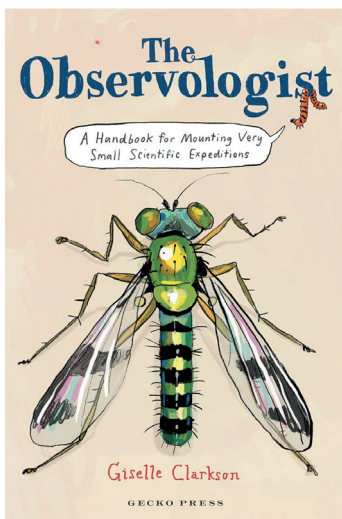
So, who are some New Zealand writers you should know? The more visible examples I have mentioned aside, there's a unique cauldron of children's writing brewing down here in the South Pacific. The range of books being published is huge, from resolutely 'kiwi' books, with New Zealand place names, idioms and history, and Maori words –

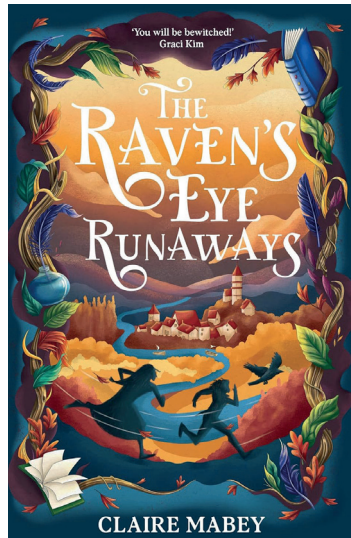
which are incorporated seamlessly into the lexicon or that stand alone in books entirely in te reo (Maori language) – to fantasies and dystopias with no discernable connection to our shores at all.

Publisher Gecko Press, known for its beautifully produced books, often foreign translations for an English-speaking market, has also achieved excellent international distribution for its New Zealand-made books. Notable recent works include Giselle Clarkson's delightful **The Observologist**, a quirky handbook for exploring the treasures in our backyards, (just longlisted for the Wainwright Prize too); Jonathan King's middlegrade graphic novel mystery **The Inkberg Enigma**; Juliette McIvor and Sarah Davis's award-winning picture book **That's Not a Hippopotamus**; and Eirlys Hunter's middlegrade adventure **The Mapmaker's Race**.

Two other recent international successes of note are Chloe Gong (**These Violent Delights**) and Graci Kim (**The Last Fallen Star**), who have both made the *New York Times* bestseller lists with their fantasy series rooted in their Asian ancestry. Significantly, their books are not set in New Zealand, and you might argue that this has helped their work to travel internationally.

Back at home, history is big right now, as the school curriculum is being adjusted to more fully acknowledge the darker side of our colonial past. Tessa Duder, author of the hugely important 1980s YA series **Alex**, has just published her first novel in 20 years – a historical drama for young adults, **The Sparrow**. Phillipa Werry writes novels that teach young people about the lives of ordinary New Zealanders and their past struggles, and she won last year's Young Adult book award for a verse novel (a coming trend but not one well established yet) about the writer Robin Hyde. Veteran author and illustrator Gavin Bishop leads the non-fiction charge with large-format picture books for older children that cover general history (**Aotearoa: the New Zealand story**), the origins of Maori gods (**Atua**) and the bloody land wars between Maori and the invading British, the trauma of which needs to be acknowledged to begin to heal (**Patu**). Even Stacy Gregg, she of the pony novels, has turned for her latest middlegrade to a story inspired by her Maori heritage, which also touches on the land wars, the effects of colonisation, and the 1981 Springbok rugby tour which divided the nation.





As part of our last, Labour-led, government's attempts to more fully honour the Treaty of Waitangi, our nation's founding document, a new public holiday was established for Matariki, the Maori new year, which focuses on remembrance, gratitude and planning for the coming year. As with all festive publishing (Easter, Christmas), this has unleashed an avalanche of books, although these are not simply cash-grabs but an opportunity to spread understanding about what Matariki means. As of writing, a week after Matariki, all top ten New Zealand children's bestsellers are Matariki books or picture books by Maori authors.

This is really heartening to see, as the traditional imbalance in publishing continues to shift. Most Maori friends of mine speak of growing up and not seeing themselves reflected in many books. This is changing. An incubator initiative by Maori-led publisher Huia (which this year won Best Children's Publishers of the Year, Oceania, at Bologna) mentors new writers so that work can be produced, and books by Maori writers frequently dominate the bestseller lists in adult as well as children's books. The national children's book awards also award a book written in, or translated into, the Maori language each year.

Many of Huia's books would have international appeal, especially Steph Matuku's **Migration** (sci-fi YA with an indigenous lens) and Tania Roxborough's **Charlie Tangaroa and the Creature from the Sea**, the first in a series about a disabled boy who encounters Maori gods – a Maori Percy Jackson if you will.

Both Bren MacDibble, who writes voice-led climate fiction and Kate de Goldi, a crossover author universally adored in New Zealand, have been published recently in the UK by Old Barn Books. MacDibble lives in Australia, so many of her books are set there, but she wins New Zealand book awards and I am claiming her because I think she is writing some of the strongest, most intelligent and beautiful middle grade around. Kate de Goldi is one of our most respected children's writers and commentators, and the only New Zealand writer to be shortlisted in both the adult and children's national books awards for the same book, **The 10pm Question** (2008), which Old Barn Books has just rereleased alongside de Goldi's latest, **Eddy, Eddy**, another crossover book.

Other names that are telling entertaining stories for 8-12 year olds include Leonie Agnew (children fake an alien invasion to boost tourism in their town in **Take Me to Your Leader**), Fifi Colston (a papier mâché puppet comes to life when a ferocious dog's ashes are mixed in with the paste in **Masher**), Raymond McGrath (the **Big Little Blue** junior graphic novel series about penguins), Des Hunt and David Hill, two veterans of the New Zealand book scene.

Newcomers to watch: Jane Arthur for her gorgeously quiet novel **Brown Bird**, written with a poet's eye, and the glorious debut by huge new talent Claire Mabey, whose **The Raven's Eye Runaways** is set in a fantasy medieval world where reading and writing are restricted to a privileged elite.

You might not be able to find them easily in the UK, but we have strong YA writers exploring both the real world and the make-believe – sometimes both together: Rachael King (look out her upcoming romantasy series **The Lost Saint**), Whiti Hereaka, Mandy Hager, Shilo Kino and Eileen Merriman to name just a few.

Finally, my favourite living writer for young people, who is also a generous mentor to many younger writers, is Elizabeth Knox. You might know her from adult novels **The Vintner's Luck** and most recently **The Absolute Book** (published to great acclaim in the UK by Michael Joseph). Her young adult **Dreamhunter** duology, and the standalone **Mortal Fire**, set in an alternative past New Zealand (Southland), are absolute masterpieces, and I have high hopes that another Southland novel may be on its way.

The **New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults** this year received 175 entries, with 35 places on the various shortlist categories. That number might seem small but keep in mind these books are being published in addition to the books that would be found at any London Waterstones, so competition for sales is intense. We have a separate New Zealand-only bestseller list because otherwise many good books wouldn't get a look-in. While picture books seem to do relatively well (it's a joke among children's authors that if you want a bestseller just stick a kiwi on the front – unlike an actual kiwi, the book will fly), our middle grade and YA are eclipsed by the usual suspects: Kinney, Pilkey, Walliams, Jackson, Rowling and Griffiths (whose live events sell out 1200 tickets overnight). To continue the bird analogy, like our endangered native birds – who have to compete in a habitat with non-native magpies, starlings and Canadian geese for example – they need a bit of help to thrive.

Like other countries, our literacy rates are falling; the number of kids reading for pleasure is dwindling, and our new government seemingly hasn't noticed the direct co-relation between these figures and the shrinking number of school libraries and librarians to staff them. There are plenty of hard-working people, though, who are determined to get that message through, and to try to reverse the trends. And it hasn't stopped writers doing what they do best and contributing to a national canon that by most measures is in rude health and only getting stronger.



Rachael King is an award-winning writer, book reviewer and former literary festival director from Aotearoa New Zealand. Her latest book, **The Grimmelings**, is published by Guppy Books.

An interview with Ken Wilson-Max

This issue of **Books for Keeps** boasts a cover featuring **Aqua Boy**, the latest picture book from award-winning author and illustrator Ken Wilson-Max. **Aqua Boy** stars a little boy whose close encounter with an octopus, stranded on the beach, helps him to overcome his fear of swimming underwater and to understand his responsibility to take care of the ocean. It follows **Astro Girl** and **Eco Girl**, forming a series of family-based, information-rich, empowering picture books for very young children. It also brings the number of picture books created by Ken Wilson-Max to over 70. In addition to his work as picture book creator, Ken is also now publisher at **Kumusha Books**, the special imprint set up by HarperCollins Children's Books to publish inclusive books. **Andrea Reece** talked to Ken for **Books for Keeps**, about his experiences as author and publisher.



Born in Zimbabwe, Ken Wilson-Max came to the UK to study design, before moving into publishing. That was almost forty years ago, but it was another eight before he illustrated his own book. 'I had a book idea that I had roughed up for somebody else, and the publisher said to me, "Why don't you do it?" And up until that point, I had never considered myself an illustrator. I've always loved drawing, but it was only after I had almost been given that permission to do it that I started illustrating. That changed everything.' That decision enabled him to carry on and importantly with a focus on the books and projects that he really wanted to do rather than simply taking commissions. As a publisher turned creator, he's still very aware

of the tussle between business and creativity and the balance that needs to be maintained.

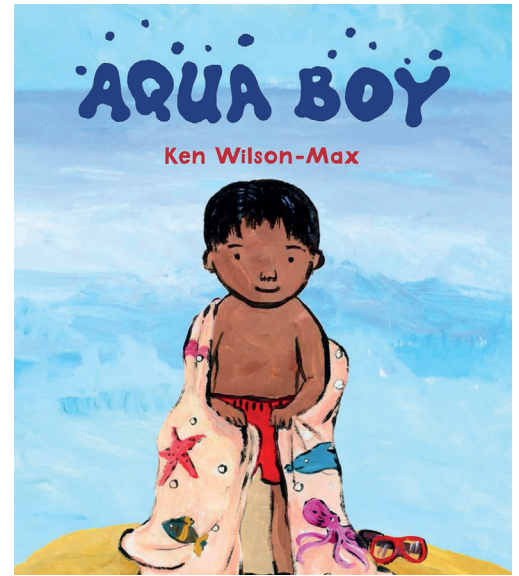
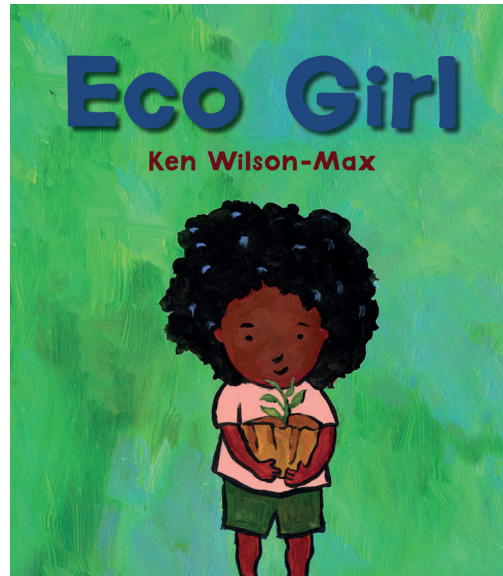
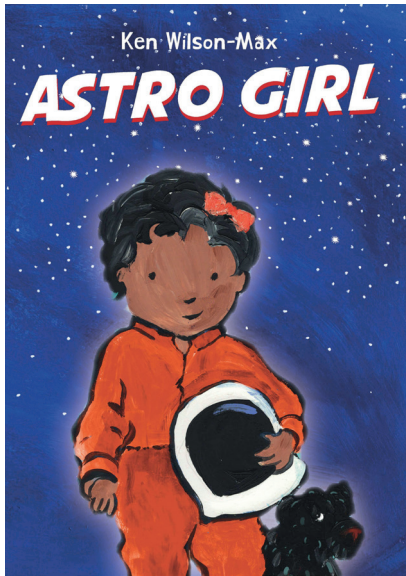
The series that **Aqua Boy** is part of developed out of work that was definitely on the business side. 'I was networking with small businesses in the City of London' explains Ken, 'And I realised I wasn't a businessperson in the sense that the bankers and accountants there were.' Struggling to get them to understand publishing and buy into his idea, he created a newspaper for children, had it printed and took it along. 'It ended up in in them really getting behind it,' he says. The newspaper was inspired by the Millennium Development Goals, which have now become the



As the octopus felt the water, it slowly unwrapped itself until it was free. Then it went under.

Aaron put on his goggles, took a deep breath and went under too!

The octopus did a slow, wavy dance, blinked, and then swam away into the deep blue ocean.



Sustainability Development Goals. ‘That led me to thinking what if we could create some really good picture books that were based on these themes and **Aqua Boy** is the third.’ He has a further 17 ideas to explore so watch out for more.

One of the things that is so effective about **Aqua Boy**, and the other books in the series, is the mix of message and family. While there’s an emphasis on the work that needs to be done to protect the planet, it’s clearly a team effort. ‘My family is very big and very mixed, which always makes family gatherings so interesting, and I feed that into my stories,’ says Ken, ‘But I do think it’s important to help children to appreciate that what they do, however small they may think it is, is worthwhile. I wanted children to see that every little bit counts, so it doesn’t matter if they don’t understand the big words, they can actually do something towards making a difference. Climate change, the environment, all the big issues, including politics, affect children too, so it made sense to find these accessible ways and entry points for them. That’s one of the drivers of the work that I’m trying to do nowadays.’

His work running **Kumusha Books** at HarperCollins is equally important in achieving change and his experience as publishing professional and creative will be invaluable to its success. ‘It’s a very exciting role,’ he says, ‘The challenge is to try and mix the inclusive ideal with the necessarily market focused approach of a big publisher. It might take us a little bit of time to work that out, I think.’ He adds, ‘I still come across people who regard inclusive books as ‘niche’, which is not what it means, versus other people who think that the bigger publishers are almost like the big bad wolf. And I’m sitting right there, not even in the middle, but jumping from one to the other side.’ He’s convinced that the outcome will benefit everyone in the field however and is also enjoying working to develop both with brand new illustrators and authors and some more established names. What’s the one thing he looks for from them? ‘Well, the first thing when I’m working with people that I want to work with or bring into HarperCollins or anywhere else, is to ask them about whether they can give me their own lived experience. And I don’t really mind what that lived experience is. So that might mean asking the dreaded question, “Where are you from?” but in a way that’s meant to encourage them to start thinking about the relevance of their childhood in the stories they want to tell. I like to have those conversations and encourage them to do that because I found that often people show me things that they think I’m going to like and actually my job is more than that, it’s to find the best ideas. What I like is not a determining factor.’ Board books and two very appealing picture books are out now.

With so much going on, it’s a wonder he finds time for his own work. It means being organised, and it sounds like Saturday mornings are always taken up with his own illustration. It’s still clearly enjoyable too, and he’s excited to be developing a new style. ‘I felt like I’ve

been really struggling to do something different for quite a few years and it’s only in the last, maybe five or six years that I have managed to break out of that a little with a new approach, and that’s like being a 20-year-old again. It’s totally fresh and new, I’m using different media and now digital whenever I can.’ Something’s haven’t changed though, ‘My work always starts with observation, and I still work hard on the drawing and to make sure the scenarios are really well chosen.’ He relished having the chance to illustrate Valerie Bloom’s CLIPPA winning collection, **Stars with Flaming Tails** and hopes to do further poetry collections too.

Does his own success and the development of **Kumusha Books** give him an optimism for the future? He recounts a disheartening story about being told by a Nordic publisher – twice, at 30-year intervals – that they weren’t going to publish books with black and brown children on them ‘because they don’t sell in our country’ so, ‘I would just reiterate the idea that actually we can’t really stop. Thinking about how representation is the goal, when I started the job, I thought when we’ve conquered this, they won’t need me doing this anymore, but I don’t think that’s true now. I think that the minute you take your eye off representation, it goes back to being a topic and then a topic can be either continued or abandoned. An ongoing vigilance, that’s what’s needed.’



Books mentioned, all published by Otter-Barry Books

Aqua Boy,
978-1915659224,
£12.99 hbk

Eco Girl,
978-1913074319,
£12.99 hbk

Astro Girl,
978-1910959213,
£12.99 hbk

Stars with Flaming Tails,
Valerie Bloom,
illus Ken Wilson-Max,
978-1913074678,
£8.99 pbk

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

Changing the literary landscape: an introduction to the Jhalak Prize



The winners of this year's **Jhalak Prize** were announced at a ceremony at the British Library on 30 May. Yepoka Yeebo won the **Jhalak Prize** for her non-fiction debut, **Anansi's Gold: The Man Who Swindled the World** (Bloomsbury) while Hiba Noor Khan won the **Jhalak Children's and Young Adult Prize** for her novel, **Safiyah's War** (Andersen Press). Prize founder **Sunny Singh** explains the background to the **Jhalak Prize** and its intentions for the future.

The **Jhalak Prize** was founded in 2016 after years of observing acute structural exclusions of writers of colour from the British literary landscape. Although there existed overwhelming anecdotal evidence, hard data had been hard to gather and collate at this point. Even the **Writing the Future** report in 2015 and **The Bookseller** magazine's follow up in November 2016 had been frustrating for (and perhaps frustrated) by a lack of clear statistics: publishers seem not to collect or collate this information.

In this context, the Prize was created not only to celebrate extraordinary literature by writers of colour in Britain but also to attempt to piece together information on what was and was not being published. Eight years later, we continue collating year on year data from our annual submissions and piecing together a nuanced analysis of exclusions in publishing.

The **Jhalak Prize** is deliberately set up to be as inclusive as possible. There are no fees or expenses, books may be submitted by publishers, agents and/or authors, and the Prize accepts books in multiple formats including paper and electronic. We also accept self-published books.

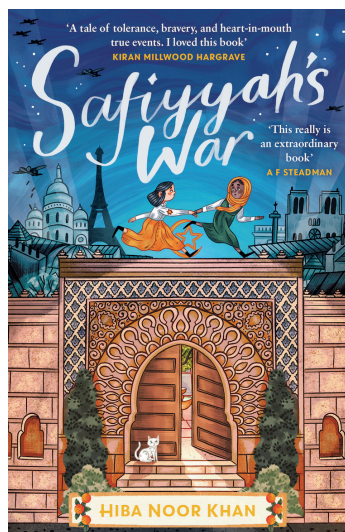
Despite these efforts, in our first year, the Prize received a mere 118 submissions including fiction, non-fiction, short story, graphic novel, poetry, children's books, YA, teen and all genres. Of these, nearly two dozen were self-published. To place this number in context, a 2014 report from the **International Publishers Association** noted that UK publishers had released over twenty new titles every hour in that year.

Only 15 children's and young adult books were submitted to the **Jhalak Prize** in 2016. The scale of exclusion in books for children and young adults was made clearer by the 2018 **CLPE Reflecting Realities** report which noted that only 4% of children's books published in 2017 featured Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic characters and only 1% of these books featured us as the main character. The subsequent **Reflecting Realities** report in 2019 found that books featuring characters of colour published in 2018 had increased from 4% to 7% and books featuring us as main characters had risen from 1% to 4%.

Although this signalled a positive trend, it was still far too slow. When one of every three children in schools in England and Wales is a child from a minority ethnic background, such exclusions tell one in three children – implicitly at least – that they are neither seen nor valued. It means that in every classroom, every day, one out of every three children is being made to feel that they do not belong or maybe do not even exist.

While such lack of representation is not only commercial foolishness on part of publishing, it also has deeply harmful social, political and cultural consequences, individually and collectively. This is why we introduced the **Jhalak Children's and Young Adult Prize** in 2020.

The **C&YA** award is also not limited by genre and accepts fiction, non-fiction, poetry, graphic novels, picture books and more. The award also has no age restrictions and seeks submissions of all eligible children's and young adult literature published each calendar year. In its first year the **Jhalak C&YA Prize** received 76 submissions, including a dozen self-published books. Although a record 170 books were submitted for the 2024 awards, the quality and output remains



Hiba Noor Khan

wildly variable, especially year on year. There is also no viable way of creating genre specific awards or even age categories (yet). There simply aren't enough eligible books being published!

The **C&YA Prize** has also revealed the scale of devastation caused by a decade and a half of austerity on our schools, libraries and bookshops and thus, our communities. However, we draw hope from dedicated teachers, librarians and booksellers who are keen to address the exclusions to the best of their abilities.

As a community focussed and led initiative, the Prize team puts writers and readers of colour at its centre, asking ourselves and our communities what we can contribute. When we identify a need, we find ways to address it. This is why the Prize actively reaches out to schools, literary festivals and bookshops to offer appearance opportunities to our longlisted writers and judges. Our website has become an ever-growing database of accomplished writers.

We also bring books by writers of colour to readers with the **Jhalak Books to Readers** programme. The project donates curated book boxes and partners donors with independent booksellers to ensure books by writers of colour reach readers through donations to community and school libraries. Through this programme, we reach readers who are often excluded for social, economic or geographical reasons and extend the readership of a broad base of writers of colour in the country.

The **Jhalak Prize** has always been a strategic intervention for equity and justice for writers and readers as well as a literary prize. Our aim for the **Jhalak C&YA Prize** has been even clearer and is driven by a moral imperative: we will not let a child – any child – feel unseen, unloved, unvalued. Until children's and young adult publishing recognizes this same necessity, our work shall continue.



Sunny Singh is an author and founder of the **Jhalak Prize**.

Here Be Dragons

Sophie Hiscock gives an overview of a new exhibition opening at **The Story Museum** on 13 July.

This summer, **The Story Museum** in Oxford is opening a new exhibition – *Here Be Dragons: co-curated by Cressida Cowell and Toothless*. The exhibition references over 100 different dragon stories, paying tribute to these enduringly popular mythical creatures. From mythology and epic to books and films, dragons have held an enduring appeal in human cultures across the world. These mighty beasts, who can be cruel and bloodthirsty but also wise and witty have clearly got the best PR in the business to keep them top of the charts. But what is their secret?

From a very unscientific piece of audience research, it appears that everyone can name a couple of dragons – whether it's the cuddlier varieties from Idris the Dragon who lives in the firebox of **Ivor the Engine**, or Mushu the guardian dragon in Disney's **Mulan**, to the mighty monsters from the world of epics such as Drogon, Rhaegal and Viserion in **Game of Thrones** or the live action remake of **Maleficent**. Inspired by dinosaurs and a host of reptiles, these fire-breathing giants adapt well to the world of the big screen and CGI special effects. And then of course the list of literary dragons would fill a book in its own right. In the British literary canon, Tolkien probably claims the top spot but Christopher Paolini, JK Rowling and Cressida Cowell are pressing hot on his heels! And dragons have deep roots down across every civilisation from the Mesopotamian ušum-gal (literally 'big snake') to the Dragons representing the four elements in Chinese folklore, through to Ladon guarding the golden apples of the Hesperides and the wyrms of Mediaeval Europe. Through time and culture, dragons have populated our imaginations, inspiring fear, awe and respect.



Dragon mask, from China on loan from the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford

In many of these stories, dragons can be seen as representing or connecting us to aspects of the natural world. Speaking about her own fascination with these fearsome beasts, Cressida Cowell talks about the inspiration provided by her childhood summers spent in the rugged landscape of a remote Scottish island in the Inner Hebrides, and the stories her father told by firelight in the evenings. As Cowell explores in her **How to Train a Dragon** series, the taming of dragons can be read as a way of exploring our relationship with the wild. Dragons represent the wild and destructive side of nature and our desire to establish control. What dragons teach us is that you can't always be in control. Eventually, you have to accept and respect that dragons live in the wild.

Metaphorically, this extends further to the relationship we each have with our wilder and more destructive emotions, and how these darker emotions can be both negative but also have the capacity to be channelled more positively. From lazy, greedy and cunning dragons to wise protectors and guardians, we can all relate to these dragon-ish traits. By respecting dragons and understanding their many and complex traits we can build empathy and self-knowledge.

THE
STORY
MUSEUM



Hiccup riding Windwalker from **How to Train Your Dragon**

In her books, Cowell also presents a real variety of dragons – some of which are very sympathetic and others that represent untameable and untrainable wildness – and in this exhibition Cowell urges us to be curious and find out more about a host of different dragons. Themed around the four elements of earth, air, fire and water, with each zone protected by its own guardian dragon, the exhibition blends stories, objects and activities in the Story Museum's trademark hands-on approach. Visitors are invited to step into a newly discovered vault of dragon lore, with Cowell voicing an introduction to each zone, accompanied by video footage of her drawing characters from her **How to Train a Dragon** series.

Notable loans include a gruesome pickled dragon in a jar, created by author Alistair Mitchell. This extraordinary object – allegedly discovered in a garage along with paperwork revealing it as a 19th century forgery – was created by Mitchell in response to a host of rejections for the manuscript of his book. More traditional museum fare includes a Chinese dragon mask and a ceramic ridge tile topped with a dragon which have been loaned by Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum along with mammoth bones from the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. Tolkien fans can see original slides from his 1938 lecture on dragons whilst fans of the golden age of children's TV can find the Soup Dragon from the **Clangers**, along with original illustrations by Peter Firmin of Idris the Dragon from **Ivor the Engine** and the Ice Dragon from **Noggin the Nog**. The team has also commissioned eight new dragon portraits representing the dragon in different cultures from Japan to Egypt and from India to Iceland.

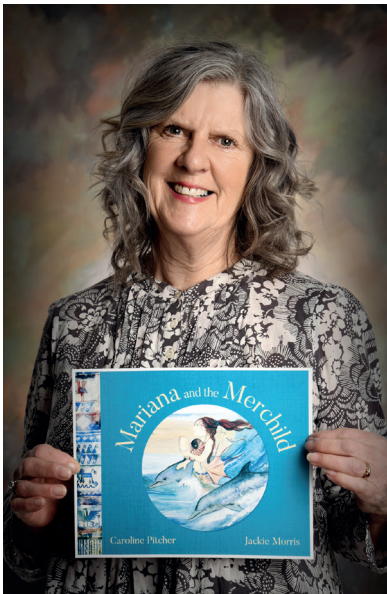
Visitors can learn a dragon dance and make their own dragon music with the dragons of the air or fold their own dragon origami puppet, before racing dragons on a zip wire across to the magnetic poetry wall where they can compose their own dragon odes. A special handle fuels the fire-breathing dragon, complete with sulphur-smell box, whilst a chest of mysterious bones can be pieced together to discover a dragon. Visitors can also choose a costume in which to meet a dragon, add their illustrations to an ever-expanding Bestiary book and create their own mix and match dragon.

Above all, what this exhibition shows is the flexibility of dragons which is surely why they have endured so well. They can be wise and loyal, greedy and selfish, violent and unpredictable. As Cowell once again explains, using a bird-watching analogy, dragons have very distinct traits – each one is specific. And their stories and their personalities can teach us something about ourselves and the world in which we live. So, we should all follow Cowell's advice to know your dragons and know what you're dealing with.

Here Be Dragons – co-curated by Cressida Cowell and Toothless opened on 13 July at The Story Museum in Oxford and runs through until Summer 2025. The exhibition is included in a Museum Galleries Ticket, priced at £14 for adults and children, £6.50 for ages 1-4, free for under 1s and carers.

Sophie Hiscock is director of communications and impact at **The Story Museum**.

I wish I'd written...



Mariana and the Merchild by Caroline Pitcher, illustrated by Jackie Morris, is published on July 4th by Otter-Barry Books, 978-1915659460, £13.99 hdbk

Caroline Pitcher chooses a joyful story, singing with love of the natural world and the affection between child and grandparent.

Lob, by Linda Newbery, illustrated by Pam Smy

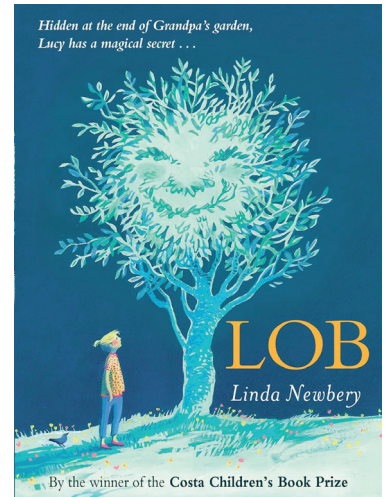
Grandpa Will grows vegetables in earth as rich and moist as fruit cake, and Lucy loves to help him. So does hard-working Lob. He can only be sensed by special people, being a creature from folklore, both an industrious household hob and a Green Man. His eyes are green as new acorns, his imperceptible presence like the 'bustle in your hedgerow' from Led Zeppelin's Stairway to Heaven. To Lucy he's a bent old man, a flitty green thing like a dragonfly, young as herself or younger.

When her beloved Grandpa dies, Lucy longs for Lob to come to London and find her so they can grow things again. Her parents think Lob is an imaginary friend and in her grief Lucy wonders if she'd just gone along with Grandpa's game of make-believe. Yet the magical memory of Lob is a constant comfort.

Meanwhile, Lob walks the roads, as Grandpa said he would, through the seasons, sharing his thoughts, searching for his next special person. Lob finds nature everywhere, on a farm, at the Chelsea Flower Show, even in a crowded city with its snake-tunnels and gliding steps.

Not everyone is kind to Lob. Be warned! He isn't some namby-pamby elf, but a force of nature who will fight back.

Linda Newbery writes clearly and poetically, and Pam Smy embroiders the text with her lovely line drawings.



Lob by Linda Newbery illustrated by Pam Smy is published by Jonathan Cape, 978-1780080833, £7.99 pbk

Good Reads

This issue's Good Reads were chosen by young people at **Thomas Mills High School, Woodbridge**. Our thanks to **Elizabeth Vale, Library Co-Ordinator**, for her help. Elizabeth is on the Honour List for the 2024 Secondary School Librarian of the Year and has ensured the library is embedded in the school's daily life through many popular clubs and book events.

Dragon Mountain

Kate and Kevin Tsang, Simon & Schuster, 978-1471193071, £7.99 pbk

Dragon Mountain is a fantasy story about four mystical warrior dragons, and their heart-bonded humans, fighting the monstrous power-hungry dragon of death in the enchanting Dragon Realm. The humans are children from four different places around the world. Billy Chan is from California; he is an award-winning surfer in the twelve and under competitions. Billy is heart-bonded to the dazzling blue seer dragon, Spark. Charlotte Belle is heart-bonded to a red warrior dragon named Tank; she is quite blunt and headstrong in the book. Dylan O'Donnell is from Ireland. Dylan is heart-bonded to Buttons who is a green healer dragon with short arms and a large tummy. Dylan is anxious but he will always help his friends; from helping them in the face of danger to just uplifting their spirits with his good humor. Ling-Fei is from China and is quiet and kind. She is heart-bonded to the sarcastic and sharp-tongued xing whose name means 'star'. I loved the way that the book was written. It filled every sense so much that you felt as though you were actually there, riding alongside a magnificent blue dragon with an electric mane, power pulsing through your body as you fly into dangerous situations together, many which are life or death. I didn't like the idea of there being no images inside the book though.

Reviewed by Isabelle

The Immortal Game

Annaliese Avery, Scholastic, 978-0702306099, £8.99 pbk

The blood moon marks the start of the games played by the gods of Olympus. The gods randomly select



Isabelle



Andrea



Thomas



Felicity

humans as their token to play for them based on their sign of the zodiac. When Ara gets chosen by the god of the underworld, she is not sure what to expect. It is an amazing story of first love and deception. You definitely should take it out of your school library to read! *Reviewed by Andrea*

Biggles Sees It Through

Captain W.E. Johns

Whether you are a fan of World War II or adventure books **Biggles Sees It Through** is a great book for you to read. The **Biggles** series are a classic about a pilot and adventurer taking on crazy missions, with his loyal pilot friends. On 30 November 1939, The Winter War broke out between The Soviet Union and Finland. Biggles and his mates Ginger and Algy have volunteered to help flying reconnaissance missions over Russia on the lookout for Soviet forces. Whilst searching for nearby enemy, Biggles spots a black dot in the distance. Getting closer they find out it's a lone figure at death's door in the clear snow. They land to investigate the scene and discover the man is Petolski, a Polish scientist. He tells them his plane has crashed on the Finland-USSR border while trying to escape Occupied Poland. During the crash he was grasping seven years' worth of precious experimental

aircraft research. Protecting it from any harm, he has hidden it near the downed plane. The research is a key to the allies' success and cannot fall in enemy hands. Biggles, Ginger and Algy with the help of Commander Raymond have the task of recovering the precious goods and returning them to good hands. Ending in an exciting climax. It is well worth reading. *Reviewed by Thomas*

Born to Run

Michael Morpurgo, illus Michael Foreman, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0008638597, £7.99 pbk

I like this book because it is so adventurous and suspenseful! The book consists of not one, but four, epic adventures of just one dog. This is a great read for dog lovers and those who want to read a good book. The illustrations by Michael Foreman really bring the stories to life. It is planned out neatly and each adventure has a clear start and end point. I would grab a tissue box because, even though this is a wholesome read, it is so emotional! You feel a mixture of happiness, sadness, anger and worry which dives into you as you make your way through the book. Such a great way to spend your spare time! Highly recommend! *Reviewed by Felicity*

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.

Joy Court is a trustee of **The United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA)**, co-founder of All Around Reading and Conference Manager for **CILIP Youth Libraries Group**. She is a Past Chair of the **CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals**.

Clive Barnes, formerly Principal Children's Librarian, Southampton City is a freelance researcher and writer.

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 Bate is a secondary school librarian

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

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Geoff Fox is former Co-Editor (UK) of Children's Literature in Education, but continues to work on the board and as an occasional teller of traditional tales.

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

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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.

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Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant



I Really, Really Don't Like Parties

★★★★★

Angie Morgan, Otter Barry Books, 30pp, 9781915659231, £12.99 hbk

When Dora receives an invitation to a party, she really doesn't want to go – she went to a party once and hated it, it was very loud and busy. She thinks up lots of reasons for not going – a gorilla stole her party dress; a giant frog ate her shoe, and she was just too poorly to go. But her mum insisted that she should go and that she might even have fun.

Once at the party Dora discovers it is just as noisy as she thought but when she crawls under the table to escape, she finds she is not the only one wanting to enjoy the party quietly. This is a lovely story about taking a risk and challenging your own expectations. It shows there are lots of ways to enjoy yourself, and not everyone wants to be loud. The illustrations are lively and amusing and the varied text style adds to the book's appeal. **SMC**

Pavlo Gets the Grumps

★★★★★

Natalia Shaloshvili, Walker Books, 32pp, 978-1529505764, £12.99 hbk

Sometimes we wake up and get out of the wrong side of the bed. Little Pavlo has done just that as becomes evident as he sits with his Mama at the breakfast table. Mama suggests a visit to the park but immediately this idea is turned down. So too are her further offers of a swim and a cinema outing. Today Pavlo is full of excuses no matter what is proposed. Mama thinks it's all down to a case of the grumps and decides the best way to deal with that is to go out anyway.

Unconvinced Pavlo sets out with his Mama and as they walk he hears someone calling his name. There stands his friend Mila, asking if he's OK. 'I've got the grumps,' Pavlo responds. Now Mila knows just the way to send those grumps packing. After a tight hug, she leads the way to a laugh-inducing, good mood restoring go on the slide. After a cheering-up ice-cream cone Mama

makes a suggestion. Will the others, naysaying Pavlo in particular, go along with it this time?

The sweet, fuzzy illustrations show clearly little Pavlo's emotions as he discovers that his family members and friends will be there for ever even when he's having a bad day and learns that what starts as a bad day can end as a good one. (Look out for the bit part characters – a playful mouse, a frog that enjoys films and reading, and a bird hoping for a taste of ice-cream.) **JB**

Smelly Peggy

★★★★★

Helen Stephens, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1529507133, £12.99 hbk

A rescue dog is much loved by her new family, but she is a bit wild, has her own way of going about things and crucially is very smelly. How can the family love her?

There is a lot to delight a young reader here: the dog knocks people over with a big stick on the beach; she rolls in rabbit poo and wipes herself on the little girl's pyjamas. This naughty (the author's words) behaviour is a disruptive carnival at home or outside, and goes beyond the usual behaviour of a young child in a way that is both comic and dreadful. The reader is invited to sympathise with the dog and the child; an adult reader might look at the horrified adults with glee

Both in terms of style of illustration and family context we are very much in classic Bob Graham territory (**Let's Get A Pup!** **Said Kate** or **How the Sun Got to Coco's House**) in a cosy description of family life, and it is none the worse for that: the story raises important questions about socialisation and inclusion without being heavy-handed, and the story might even obliquely suggest the tolerance needed when a new member of a family arrives. The greatest design feature for me has to be the peritext, where Pie, the little girl narrator, first of all plays with a very accepting, biddable dog and in the endpapers copes with her cat-menacing dog who also chases Pie; a charming way of broadening the narrative without over complicating a story aimed at being shared with four and five year olds. **NS**

Holey Moley

★★★★★

Bethan Clarke, ill. Anders Frang, Little Tiger, 32pp, 978-1801044141, £7.99 pbk

When Mavis Mole meets Gus the Goat, she struggles to get a word in edgewise, for Gus loves to guess and he loves to rhyme and is determined to keep on doing both until he has discovered where Mole lives! Is it in a hole, a bowl or even a sausage roll? Poor Mole keeps trying to interject, but Gus isn't listening and just keeps on guessing.



This imaginative debut picture book from Bethan Clarke is so very silly, but so much fun! The repetitive rhyming just begs to be chanted aloud by the reader and Frang's bright and clever illustrations perfectly convey Mole's frustrations at Gus's constant guessing. There are some beautifully drawn scenarios created from Gus's guesses, (my favourite being Rock n' Rolly Moley with his rock star guitar), and the detailed pages are just waiting to be explored and discussed with inquisitive little minds. A crazy HOLE-arious romp of a story. **AH**

Invisible Dogs

★★★★★

Ruby Wright, Rocket Bird Books, 32pp, 9781915395061, £12.99 hbk

At home, Ida is vibrant and full of energy, playing imaginative games with her Grandpa, who happily encourages her creativity. However, starting school brings a stark contrast; she becomes quiet and struggles to make friends in the bustling, noisy environment. Grandpa, with his clever idea of playing invisible shops, introduces Ida to imaginary animals and suggests that perhaps some could keep her company on the noisy playground and in the classroom. Chaos ensues.

Wright's distinctive use of neon pink Pantone ink brings Ida's invisible world to life, making the imaginary dogs a delightful addition to the story: we see them, but almost everyone else does not. The pace of the narrative is well balanced, allowing readers to fully appreciate the contrast between Ida's vibrant home life and her initial struggles at school. Wright's style is engaging and whimsical, humorously drawing readers into Ida's imaginative adventures.

Wright's story may be fun and engaging, but it subtly addresses the challenges of adapting to new environments and the importance of imagination in overcoming social anxieties. The invisible dogs serve as Ida's companions, helping her navigate her first days of school life and eventually connecting with other children who end up choosing their own imaginary friends.

This is a humorous yet touching

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant continued

picture book, especially for those embarking on new adventures like starting school. It celebrates the power of imagination and the comfort of invisible friends, providing both entertainment and reassurance to young readers and their parents. Fans of Wright's **Animal Crackers** will notice a special guest appearance, adding an extra layer of delight for those familiar with her previous work. **MT**

We are the Wibbly – A Tadpole's Tail

★★★★

Sarah Tagholm, ill. Jane McGuiness, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 978 1526627346, £7.99, pbk

This tale (or tail!) is told from the perspective of one egg as he moves from being part of 'the wibbly' aka frogspawn to gradually transforming into a frog. The wibbly is a happy secure place and our little egg experiences a strong sense of togetherness within it. He is very shocked when his fellow eggs leave the wibbly, develop tails, legs and arms before him and he has an even bigger shock when it happens to him too. 'Oh my Crikeys! I is bursting out of the wibbly.' He finds there is fun to be had and new skills to learn at each stage in his development including 'water flying' and 'air swimming.' But he also has to navigate the dangers all around him from 'spiked hunger munchers' under the sea to 'furry danger monsters' above ground.

There is lots of humour in the language which will appeal to some readers though others may find it a little contrived and overdone. There is humour too in the delightful illustrations which convey both the drama and tranquillity in the story beautifully.

As well as the engaging story young readers will learn about the different stages of a frog's development. The inclusion of a life cycle fact file or diagram at the back of the book could have been a useful addition to consolidate this. **SMc**

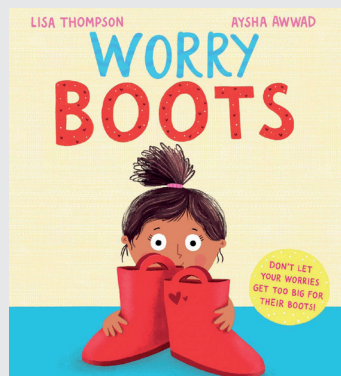
Grotti

★★★★

Leonie Lord, Walker Books, 9781529507188, 32pp, £12.99 hbk
This charming picture book from author-illustrator Leonie Lord takes the young reader on a journey with the young protagonist who is recognisably a child immersed in what is to them a very real scenario, fighting beasts and defending kingdoms. This exciting activity is interrupted by something small and green – Grotti. Yes, surely that sibling baby. Grotti makes their presence felt impinging on the real tasks confronting our hero and annoyingly requiring both attention and adaptation of the main activities. Luckily a Mum and Dad are the answer leaving our hero to return to the adventurous life. But something was missing...

The author's text reads well, moving the story along with attractive repetitions which bring a rhythm

to the telling while the illustrations provide the visual background to the narrative, adding and expanding the text to create a very real world for the young protagonist. The colour saturated palette and the bold compositions make use of the spaces created by each spread, drawing the young audience into the story to enjoy this imaginative world. However as the adult reader – and the child – can see, this story reflects a real and familiar situation. The author is gently reminding the reader that family and sharing can be annoying, but problems can be solved in a way that actually adds to enjoyment – and in the end doing something together brings real happiness and satisfaction. **FH**



Worry Boots

★★★★

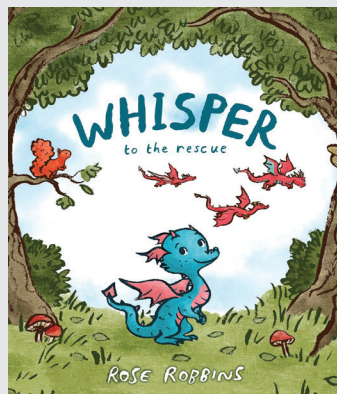
Lisa Thompson, ill. Aysha Awwad, Scholastic, 9780702324536, £7.99, pbk

First day at school for Connie, who is trying on her new red boots. But as she walks to the bus stop with her Mum, Connie shouts out that there's something horrid in her boot, feeling lumpy and bumpy. 'Like a dinosaur's bumpy bottom!' That is just how her tummy feels too. Is there maybe a unicorn, or a shark in her boot? Being welcomed at the school by the smiling teacher, Connie still thinks something is wrong in her boot, and tummy. Mum takes off her boot and tips it up... and out rolls a pebble. Reassurances from Mum are timely, telling Connie that worries often feel scarier than they actually are. The colourful illustrations show her integrated immediately into the class, all the children, and teacher, wearing big smiles as everyone interacts. Spot the dinosaur, unicorn and shark! **GB**

Whisper to the Rescue

★★★★

Rose Robbins, Scallywag Press, 9781915252203, 32pp, £12.99 hbk
Whisper is the little one in his dragon family – and ignored by all. He is also the one to notice that their practices – building great bonfires to satisfy their love of fire is causing a real problem for their forest home and the wildlife there. But will anyone listen? Whisper must turn to his forest friends for a solution...



This gentle picture book has a clear message. The story is attractive with vivid, colour rich images that are immediate and child friendly. The text is undemanding and straightforward, ensuring the moral can be clearly stated. How Whisper achieves his aim of making his dragon family 'listen' and understand is cleverly managed and again would be an action recognised by the young audience; the use of the picture to explain where words may be difficult or not available. Rose has already made her name as a picture book creator. While lacking the immediacy of her previous books, **Whisper to the Rescue** draws on current concerns about our relationship with nature to present a problem in a way that will reach a very young audience. **FH**



The Wild Beastie

★★★★

Helen Kellock, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781529512915, £12.99 hbk
Far away off the coast of Scotland is the Isle of Begg. It's home to young Bumble and her parent. Bumble is content to play beside the stream close to where she lives but her mother suggests she should try exploring the entire island. This, Bumble refuses to do on account of the scary wild beasties. Instead she returns to her safe location and to her surprise there's a splash in front of her and there before her eyes is a little green beastie eating an acorn. Bumble demands to know who he is and what he wants. "I'm Little Mop," comes the reply and ... I want to play.'

Having introduces her toy, Peedie too, the two creatures start playing

with the toy, Little Mop way too enthusiastically. Off sails the tiny boat containing Peedie with Bumble and Little Mop paddling their fastest in pursuit. By the time they reach the boat they're far from Bumble's safe place and Little Mop tells her they've arrived at the sea. Bumble insists she must get home before dark; Little Mop sets off, leading Bumble back into the woods. There, the two have a falling out but eventually Little Mop explains the reason for his exuberant, seemingly uncaring actions and they make up. Then, energised by Little Mop's underground acorn store, the friends make their way towards Bumble's home. When almost at the cottage they come to a gorge. What will Bumble do? Dare she make a leap?

A magical tale about facing your fears and being brave enough to embrace a bit of wildness: sometimes expanding your boundaries brings rewards you'd never dreamed of.

Helen Kellock's ending leaves the way open for further adventures set in this beautiful Isle of Begg that are so alluringly depicted in her watercolour illustrations. **JB**



Who Ate Steve?

★★★★★

Susannah Lloyd, Kate Hindley, Nosy Crow, 32pp, 9781839946226, £7.99, pbk

This is a wonderful book to read aloud with a child, a group or class, and then for a child to explore alone. There is a terrific atmosphere created between the hilarious text and the illustrations, and a free audio reading by scanning the QR code. The opening explains that the characters in the book are going to find out about SIZE, with the help of two creatures, Marcel, (a sort of crow,) and Steve, (a worm). Right, we get it. Marcel is BIG, and Steve is... but Steve has vanished. Oh no! After a severe telling off, Marcel is persuaded to cough Steve up. Also his HAT. There's another attempt by Marcel, and another, to gobble up Steve... one illustration shows Steve stretched to impossible length, his tail in Marcel's beak... until Marcel is given a final warning. 'You are letting EVERYBODY down. This is not the sort of behaviour we expect in our book.' Then what a denouement... readers will love it. The illustrations are remarkable, giving much character to both the crow and worm, such that readers will be empathising with one... or the other? And then comes the twist in the tale! There is the most effective use of capitals letters throughout, and surely young readers will be chanting parts of the text, for days, with enthusiasm. What drama. One not to miss. **GB**

5 – 8 Infant/Junior

Ed's Choice

The Boy on Fire

★★★★★

Sarthak Sinha, Flying Eye Books, 32pp, 978-1838749026, £12.99 hbk
New from the Klaus Flugge Prize shortlisted Sarthak Sinha, *The Boy on Fire* bursts with movement and emotion from the very start, the illustrations are vibrant and brilliant, particularly when gold and yellow images are placed in scenes of deep, rich blues. It's the story of a boy named Til, who 'was always on fire'. The fire gets bigger when things upset him, and his fiery temperament makes him an isolated figure at school. Angry and lonely, he runs away and shouts his frustration into the night sky. He shouts so loudly that a star comes swooshing down – a kindred spirit? Soon the two are playing together in the night, their glowing light making everything magical. With a friend, Til isn't angry anymore and being different is no longer an issue. It's refreshing that



Til's fire doesn't represent rage, instead it's just who he is. With a friend, loneliness banished, he can control the fire and then what makes him different makes him special too. The final spread should all the children from his class dressed as stars. Rather than deliver a moral message or advice on control, this is an ultimately joyful celebration of individuality and the glorious impact of bright light on darkness. A book to leave you glowing, just like Til! **MMA**

Hot Dog

★★★★★

Doug Salati, Pushkin Press, 40pp, 9781782694571, £12.99 hbk

Our sparsely-worded story follows a little dog as he navigates the bustling cityscape with his owner, becoming increasingly distressed by the sizzling sidewalks, wailing sirens, and crowded streets. After near misses with feet, skateboards, and rushing traffic, our canine companion simply lies down in an act of defiance. His compassionate owner notices his discomfort and decides to take a spontaneous trip to the beach, providing much-needed relief and a breath of fresh air for both of them.

Salati's poetic narrative is simple yet evocative, perfectly paired with his brilliant illustrations that bring the dog's journey to life (as well as his owner's). The vibrant, detailed artwork transitions from the oppressive heat of the city to the refreshing, open spaces of the beach, offering readers a palpable sense of the dog's transition from stress to relaxation. Salati's use of colour, line, and perspective are masterfully executed, especially as they shift from the hot reds and oranges of the sweltering city to the cool blues and greens of the ocean.

The story's strength lies in its ability to convey both the dog's and owner's emotions through word and image. The clever use of sensory details and shifting environments makes this a joyful exploration of finding calm amidst chaos, a theme that is sure to resonate with readers of all ages. There is movement on the pages here, too, and

character. As Salati's third publication, he comes across as a visual storyteller to watch with this life-affirming and visually captivating piece.

This charming picture book's canine protagonist reminds us that veering off the tide of a busy life and taking time to find peace and solace can be immensely rewarding. **MT**

A Hat Full of Sea

★★★

Maudie Smith, ill. Jen Khatun, Lantana, 32pp, 9781915244666, £12.99 hbk

Cora's Grandpa is in hospital and each time she visits him, she makes sure she wears the hat he'd given her. She really wants to cheer him up but how does one have adventures when Grandpa's in bed with only a tiny window in his room. She'd love to visit the sea with him but instead decides to bring the sea to him. Using her hat, Cora captures 'the white foaming waves...the softness of sand and the seagull cries all wrapped up in the wind.' Carefully she returns and the two share the experience of the salty sea.

On future visits Cora brings Grandpa different experiences in her hat: in this way they visit the countryside delighting in its wonderful flora and fauna, a funfair, the town with its market, she even captures the velvety night sky all a-sparkle with stars.

However, her best idea, to bring Grandpa a train journey goes disastrously wrong. As she waits to capture the train as it zooms along, off flies her hat and although she looks everywhere, Cora cannot find it.

A distressed Cora goes to see Grandpa without her precious hat but finds his bed empty. What has happened? Where is he? Suddenly she hears a familiar voice: it's Grandpa up on his feet. When she explains that without her hat, she won't be able to make him happy any longer, his response reassures Cora and together they make their way to the seashore, Grandpa wearing a hat of his own under which is a special surprise ...

With Maudie Smith's warm, playful words and Jen Khatun's spirited, digitally created illustrations, this wonderful portrayal of the strong loving bond between a grandparent and grandchild offers an uplifting example of imagination reaching across the generations and enriching the world, and a reminder of the importance of spending time with loved ones. **JB**

My Momo-la is a Museum

★★★★★

Mamta Nainy, ill. Violet Kim, Lantana, 32pp, 9781915244635, £12.99 hbk

A little girl describes her grandmother as a collector of unusual things and especially stories. We follow as Momo-la takes her granddaughter into the city to search for stories in the world round them and (somewhat exhaustingly!) four museums: The Ancient History, Modern Art, Space and Maritime Museums.

Momo-la dismisses the child's first reaction that this is boring telling her 'Everything is interesting if you really look at it.' Together they find links to Momo-la's heritage in the objects on display. As they go from object to object and museum to museum, they discuss what they see and Momo-la tells her granddaughter more of her own memories and heritage. When they return home the child decides her grandmother is a museum too, as she is so full of stories.

The writer pays homage to her own grandmother and family here in a book which may encourage children to look closely for stories in the world around them and investigate their own family histories. The references to Tibetan culture in the text are explained at the back of the book. **SMC**

The Bridges

★★★★★

Atinuke, ill. Emily Hughes, Walker Books, 9781406382433, 128pp, £12.99 hbk

Beti lives in a little round house deep, in the Welsh countryside. She is an independent little girl and this can sometimes land her in difficulties. She loves the different seasons – and each brings another adventure – whether it is a disastrous birthday party or rescuing horses in a snowstorm. Throughout she shows resourcefulness and character. Here is a friend and companion who will step off the page.

This is a lovely sequence of four stories following the seasons of the year. Each story has an appropriate situation, and all celebrate a life lived close to nature. Atinuke's prose is a joy to read. Each story starts in the same way drawing on Atinuke's skill as a storyteller allowing them to be read and enjoyed separately. Beti is a completely believable, indeed recognisable, little girl. She is lively and determined, her relationship with her family warm and caring. The audience will relate to her easily and will follow her adventures with interest because they are adventures grounded in the real world. Accompanying the text are the warm, lush illustrations by Emily Hughes. These both ground stories in the countryside as well as bringing personality to the characters. Her style is ideally suited to that of the storyteller. A rich textured palette brings depth and to each spread while pages have the added visual interest of lively decoration and vignettes. This is an ideal pairing to create an attractive package that can only be highly recommended. The reader leaves hoping for more adventures about Beti, her friends and family from this skilled storyteller and this illustrator. **FH**



The Big Day

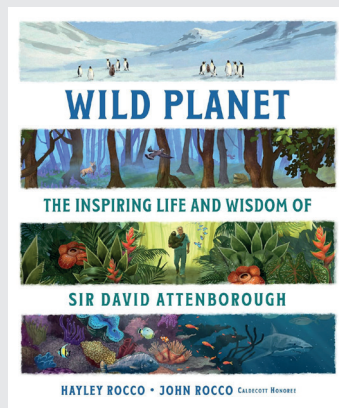
★★★★★

Rachel Plummer, ill. Forrest Burdett, Little Tiger, 24pp with flaps, 978-1838915384, £12.99 hbk

The stories Oscar Wilde wrote for *The big day* is very big indeed in this celebration of love and marriage. A child receives a surprise invitation to a wedding and sends an acceptance straight away. Young readers can lift the flap on the RSVP and will be intrigued and fascinated by what they see: it asks about travel for example, will that be by magic carpet, unicorn or omnigrobbliwobblibus? When the big day arrives, the child sets off for the wedding, smartly dressed, and joins a colourful congregation to wait for the grooms, two giants in tuxes. After the service, it's the reception, an equally magical affair with unusual but delicious food, the table laid out in all its glory across gatefold pages,

then speeches and dancing. This will be a wonderful introduction and guide to any child about to attend a wedding, but its overall message is love and inclusivity, with the happy couple taking the child aside to explain that love is love, whatever size or shape it comes in. That message is effectively delivered in a book that is full of joy and community. Rachel Plummer is a poet and the rhyming text is very pleasing. **LS**

[Rachel Plummer talks about The Big Day for Books for Keeps.](#)



Wild Planet: The Inspiring Life and Wisdom of Sir David Attenborough

★★★★

Hayley Rocco, ill. John Rocco, Rock the Boat, 48pp, 9780861548972, £7.99 pbk

For as long as most of us can remember Sir David Attenborough has been on our televisions bringing us groundbreaking documentaries about caring for the natural world. Over many years he has had an immense and powerful impact on our planet's survival and this appropriate picture book pays tribute to his long and meaningful life. He has won many honours and awards, made countless films, and been successful in communicating his message across the world.

This quality title has been published to mark both **UN World Earth Day** and the **Great Big Green Week 2024**. It traces Attenborough's life from his childhood and early realisation that he wanted to devote himself to the survival of the planet. Furthermore, the book clearly shows how, through his television documentaries filmed in natural habitats, 'He became our connection to the natural world' (p. 18).

At the time of Attenborough's birth more than two thirds of our planet was covered in wild places for animals to live. To indicate this fact two thirds of both page spreads (p.8-9 and p.10-11) are in colour and a third is in black and white. This is a clever way for the illustrations to emphasise important facts. The colours used in the drawings throughout this publication are sumptuous and quite stunning.

I found the bonus material towards

the end of the book most helpful. After a brief biography of Attenborough there is a useful glossary of terms used. Finally, there are two pages which go into detail about rewinding our planet, together with problems and solutions. The reader is involved in the book's message as there are tips about how everybody can help the current situation.

The publication of this book is well timed and will be an up-to-date resource for the primary library or a fabulous gift for any youngster. **JS**

Grandad's Star

★★★★

Frances Tosdevein, ill. Rhian Stone, Rocket Bird Books, 32pp, 978 1 9153 9510 8, £12.99 hbk

The little girl narrator adores her famous astronomer Grandad and loves listening at length to his star stories and learning the names of the stars and constellations. Grandad has even discovered seventeen new stars and hopes eventually to have one named after him.

One day though, her beloved Grandad starts forgetting things: he can't find his possessions, nor the answers to questions, even the names of some of the stars elude him. To help him, Mum begins writing important things on a memory board. She likens the memories stored in our brains to 'twinkles of stars, shining brightly or growing dim'...explaining that there may be times when there aren't any stars and that it's OK to feel sad.

His granddaughter reacts to these cloudy times empathetically and with lots of patience, regaling him with stories of stars.

Together Mum and the little girl create something very special and very important. It's called a 'Grandad-scope' and can show any star; but most importantly it's able to find the slowly dimming twinkles of her beloved 'Grandad Star' that she names the Alpha Grandadi Lovliet.

This wonderfully warm story of intergenerational love shows a family responding to the dementia of a loved one. Older readers and adult sharers will likely draw parallels between the failing utility of Grandad's old telescope and his fading memory described in the text.

Executed in gouache, pastel and pencil, debut illustrator Rhian Stone's scenes at once evoke the vast splendour of the night sky, the distress and confusion surrounding dementia and the domestic detail of loving family relationships. Effectively dealing with a difficult topic this is a book to help children cherish their grandparents. **JB**

Deep

★★★★

Stephen Hogtun, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 9781526610683, £12.99 hbk
A young whale is born and learns to swim by his mother's side as she cares

for him and sings him lullabies. One day he spots a school of whales and is keen to join them, but his mother tells him it is too soon, he still has lots to learn. They set off on a long journey together sharing many special times and enjoying each other's company. They also experience danger, but his mother teaches her calf to be brave. After years growing in deep waters the young whale is ready to return to the shallow waters of his youth, bigger and stronger. When the school of whales' swim near again the young calf is ready to join them, and his mother, with sadness and pride, encourages him to swim free and her song of love follows him as she leaves.

This is a beautiful picture book with stunning pastel illustrations. The text is engaging and moving as we follow the mother and calf's experiences. It is a story about love between a mother and child, growing up and letting go. There is also the message about 'diving deep' used here as a metaphor for navigating life's ups and downs and finding the positive in any situation. This more abstract theme may be more meaningful to an older audience. **SMc**

No. 5 Bubbegum Street

★★★★

Mikolaj Pa, illus. Gosia Herba, trans. Scotia Gilroy, Greystone Kids, 56pp, 9781778400629, £12.99 hbk

Enter the charming world of No. 5 Bubbegum Street, a bustling apartment building home to an array of quirky animal residents. From Mouse the rapper, frantically searching for his hat, to the houseplant-obsessed Panther and the musical Spiders, every character brings vibrant energy to this delightful story. I particularly enjoyed spending time in Panther's apartment, where a love for potted plants flourishes.

The narrative unfolds at a leisurely pace, allowing young readers to immerse themselves in the intricacies of each household. Gosia Herba's illustrations are a visual delight, bursting with bright, bold colours and intricate details that invite repeated exploration. Each character and their environment are brought to life with a distinct colour palette, enhancing the individuality of their stories.

After all the characters have been introduced, we find them on the rooftop terrace, transformed into a lively party scene where all the neighbours gather to share their talents and passions. This culmination underscores themes of community, acceptance, and the beauty of diversity. The colourful and dynamic illustrations capture the essence of this celebration, making each page a visual delight.

Pa and Herba, along with Gilroy's translation, encourage children to appreciate the richness of differences and the joy of coming together. This picture book offers repeated readings that can be shared and enjoyed together, with children always spotting details that adults might miss. **MT**

Destiny Ink: Sleepover Surprise

★★★★

Adeola Sokunbi, Nosy Crow, 96pp, 9781805132318, £6.99 pbk

In this imaginative debut first chapter book, we meet Destiny Ink, who loves doodling and drawing, about to go on her very first sleepover at her best friend's house. Destiny is excited, but when she thinks about sleeping outside she gets a funny feeling in her tummy. What if there are monsters or scary creatures that come out in the dark? She decides to have a practice sleepover in her bedroom the night before, but after hearing strange noises coming from her homemade tent, she is very surprised to meet Trog, a monster who has got lost in the human world. He is quite nervous and scared, so he can't be a bad monster, right? As Destiny shows Trog the exciting things that happen on a sleepover, she realises that sharing these experiences with friends mean it isn't so scary after all. In fact, sleepovers are ink-tastic!

Highly illustrated throughout, **Destiny Ink** is a heartwarming short story about using your creativity and imagination to deal with tricky situations and develop empathy and is ideal for readers venturing into chapter books.

The second book in the series is due out in October 2024. **AH**

Gordon: the Meanest Goose on Earth

★★★★

Alex Latimer, Oxford University Press, 112pp, 9780192788658, £6.99 pbk

This illustrated comedy for children is all about Gordon the Goose. He really is a very mean goose indeed: so mean that he has dark angular eyebrows and a permanent cloud over his head!

Gordon lives in Grover Gardens and is a celebrated, award-winning member of the Meanest Goose Society, who regularly meet up to regale one another with tales of their recent meanness. Gordon always has the meanest exploits to share. As well as stamping on sandcastles, spoiling people's ice creams and honking angrily at anyone who so much as looks at him, Gordon even brings along rocks disguised as biscuits, which fracture the geese's teeth (!) to prove that there truly is no limit to his meanness.

Not everyone in Grover Gardens is mean and horrible. Gordon shares the town with other residents (mice, pigs, rabbits) who value kindness and generosity, and one denizen is so committed to the notion of friendship that even Gordon receives tokens of affection (much to his confusion). So unusual is it for Gordon to be given a gift, that he can't even bring himself to stamp on anyone's sandcastle and descends into melancholy.

Though the overwhelming tone of the book is very silly, the story does raise seriously interesting questions about the nature of bullying and 'meanness'. Gordon is genuinely bewildered when someone extends an offer a friendship...it simply isn't in his DNA to accept it. Yet, could even

reviews

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

he be able to make friends if he really wanted to?

Gordon's journey of self-discovery is an unusual one: few coming-of-age stories include plans to punch sharks or to yell mindlessly at old people. Latimer uses utterly wacky humour, delivered via outlandish characterful cartoon drawings, to explore why some people (and geese!) turn out to be bullies and what can be done to help. Every page features puns and slapstick moments and the limited colour palette (red, black...very occasional blue) provides an original, quirky feel. Gordon the goose is plenty of fun... whether you like geese or not! **SD**

A Better Best Friend

★★★★★

Olivier Tallec, Antony Shugaar (trans), Gecko Press, 32pp, 9781776575732, £12.99 hbk

A red squirrel chances on a 'best friend,' Pock, a Penny Bun mushroom. They take some time to become best friends, but they have the 'very best times', and 'even bad times' are good times with a best friend,' the squirrel asserts: so the woodland year progresses, However with spring comes a little bug called Moo, and doubt creeps in: 'I'm starting to wonder if Moo isn't a better best friend than my best friend Pock.' Moo brings new skills and sows doubt in the squirrel's mind. And then Gunther the mouse arrives...

Tallec has a great skill in conveying emotion in the unlikely faces of mushrooms and mice, and the text captures the dilemma the squirrel faces in direct language, looking at the difficulties of forming friendships (none of them are immediately to be seen as extroverts, a further complication an adult sharing the book might explore), and how one might categorise a best friend: 'I want ONE best friend. Not two!' As autumn returns, Tallec's woodland psychogeography shows the little squirrel forlorn amid wind-tossed trees, and with Gunther joining the group there is a comic, anthropomorphic resolution and a deliciously understated final line: The (Better) End.

So much to talk about with children about rivalries, our needs for friends: how is this end 'better'? How does the squirrel feel? What about his first best friend, Pock the mushroom? The faces, although comic and expressive, give little away, leaving room for speculation and discussion.

Complex friendships are hard to write about whether we are thinking of YA fiction or stories for younger children, and here the reader is faced with a big question: can we have more than one best friend? This is an issue to be thought over a great deal - and this is a book which raises the complex issues without giving the reader (or any age) a flat, definitive answer. **NS**

8 – 10 Junior/Middle

Dive, Dive into the Night Sea

★★★★★

Thea Lu, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781406349993, £12.99 hbk

A diver enters the 'inky depths' of a night-time dive. Their underwater head torch partly reveals mysterious, shadowy shapes: parrot fish, plankton...and then they return to the surface until next time. There is a dreaminess about this main narrative, almost tempting the reader to see this as a bedtime book (which in the hands of the right reader it might be) but there is more to discover; the clever construction of the book invites the curiosity of the reader.

The lyrical main text and illustrations are augmented by flaps - some of which need searching for in the thick paper and dark artwork - and when the reader lifts the flaps, explaining the protective goo of a sleepy parrotfish and the light-sensitive behaviours of zooplankton, we are drawn into the complexities of this dark world. Here vocabulary is stretched and knotty issues explained.

The artwork is incredibly bold, but is not vibrant, rather it is muted: a whole palette of greys and dark blues is employed to give a sense of nocturnal adventure by involving the reader in the uncertainties and shadows of a night dive. It is effective because it is so restrained. We are not always clear what the rays swimming among the swirling bioluminescence are doing. This is not a bad thing: we are participating in, not merely observing, the awe and excitement of the dive. Only the diver's torch illuminates - and then the torch is turned off.

My only criticism might be that the small, blue font under the flaps is just a little too small, not quite bright enough to read easily; the paragraph on unihemispheric sleep is fascinating but could have been a few points larger.

Nevertheless, this is a book for the child or adult who has encountered the undersea world on holiday, or via TV, and wants to learn more, a haunting journey into the dark where shapes can be discerned, and where whole ecosystems thrive. **NS**

The River Spirit

★★★★★

Lucy Strange, Barrington Stoke, 80pp, 978 1800903258, £7.99 pb.

This is the third in an historical trilogy for Barrington Stoke, all of which successfully blend myth and mystery with snippets of history and all reveal elements of the exploitation of child labour in the industrial revolution. As such they are a huge asset to the classroom for study of that period, but also, being from Barrington Stoke, are accessible to a really wide range of readers. More than that, they are atmospheric and mesmerising reads, with beautiful illustrations to add to

their appeal. In the case of *The River Spirit*, there is a further influence in that *The Water Babies*, written by Charles Kingsley in 1885, was a key inspiration for this heart-breaking story of child chimney sweeps. Inspiration also came from a real-life tragedy. In 1875, the 12-year-old chimney sweep, George Brewster, who was working for a Master Sweep, William Wyer, died after getting trapped in a chimney and his death gave impetus to the campaign seeking to ban the use of children in the chimney-cleaning business. 12-year-old Tom Waterman was the son of a ferryman and has a huge affinity to the river, loving the weekly washing sessions for the opportunity to swim and is determined not to forget his origins despite his grim existence enslaved by the evil and violent master sweep Mister Crow. Tom is really getting too big for this incredibly dangerous job. One day an ethereal girl appeared from among the reeds in the river, and nobody knew what to make of her. Was she real? Or was she some sort of river spirit? Elle followed them everywhere, choosing to work in the chimneys and help them where she could and when Tom puts the safety of a new apprentice above his own, the purpose of Elle's appearance becomes apparent. This chilling, atmospheric tale does not gloss over the harsh reality of life for young chimney sweeps in 19th century Britain, the appalling living and working conditions of those forced into child labour because they are poor, orphaned or have had to become money-earners to support their family. But it is also a story of hope. Tom is such an empathetic young boy, showing kindness, friendship and protection towards others and his courage brings hope of a better life - his tragedy becomes a catalyst for change just like the real George Brewster. An impactful and memorable read. **JC**

Pinch Perkins and the Midsummer Curse

★★★★★

Cathy Fitzgerald, illus. Chloe Dominique, Farshore, 384pp, 978-0008603373, £7.99 pbk

Fans of magical fantasy adventures are being well served by publishers at the moment and Cathy Fitzgerald's debut, *Pinch Perkins and the Midsummer Curse*, is guaranteed to please them. Pinch lives in The Crooked Mile, a magical street adjacent to but separate from the human, or Humdrum world. With friendly neighbours and a happy family, all is fine, if a little claustrophobic. Things change when someone - or something - starts stealing souls, putting their owners into a coma-like sleep, Pinch's mum amongst them. Pinch will do whatever it takes to save her mum and sets out



into the Humdrum world to find other magical places and beings who can help. She's accompanied by Henry de Sallowe, neighbour and nemesis at the start of the story, close friend by the end. Gathering clues and trying to unravel the mystery brings the two children into contact with some scary figures, the King and Queen of the fairies for example, while there are two giant, utterly ruthless thugs on their trail too. They find allies however, King Lancelot's knights among them, also cursed and transformed into standing stones for 364 days of the year. The sense of urgency to it all is heightened when Pinch discovers the clock is ticking; if she wants to save her mum, she's going to have to be quick. As fantasies go, this is particularly fast-moving and lively with a large and very memorable cast of characters, and a strong sense that we are there with Pinch and Henry in the race to lift the curse. The tone is mostly light though there are some genuinely scary moments and real tension when it seems as though Pinch might be too late to save her mum. Cathy Fitzgerald's world building is very good, and readers will be looking forward to Pinch's next adventure. **LS**

Tiny Dogs

★★★★★

Rose Lihou, Penguin, 168pp, 9780241631171, £7.99 pbk

This charming children's story introduces pocket-sized heroes that will delight any young readers who love dogs. It focuses on a young girl called Beatrice and is set in her grandparents' wild and wonderful (and somewhat neglected) garden.

Bea is a little nervous about her new life living at her grandparents' country cottage. Though she loves them dearly, Bea has so far only met them on screen and, being a 'quiet and easy girl who never makes a fuss',

Bea is not sure what to expect and struggles to find the words to discuss her worries with her mum. Her fears are soon allayed by her grandparents' doting and affection, and she begins to enjoy her new countryside home – especially the overgrown garden, where blackbirds and beetles roam amongst the flowers and weeds

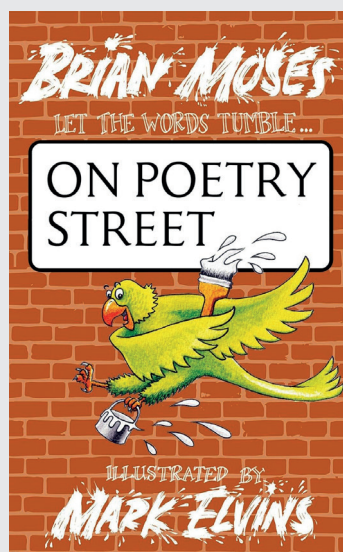
Bea has a calm and peaceful character that allows her to connect quietly with the nature in her garden, and draws the attention of four unexpected new friends. The tiny dogs are a rarely seen species who hide in gardens from the heavy presence of human beings, but Bea is able to gain their trust. She is gentle and patient and offers food and shelter for her new tiny friends, who make her gifts of feathers and flowers and seeds, and invite her to join in their snail racing games.

Naturally, the tiny dogs are adorable creatures. Pepper, Clover, Sorrel and Willow are four different species of tiny dog, and each has a defining characteristic that contributes to the pack (leadership, playfulness...sleepiness!). Children will enjoy reading about the harmless, playful interactions between Bea and her new pals, but the story's peace is interrupted by the frightful, obnoxious demands from Bea's new next door neighbour - Mrs Thistlewort – who vehemently dislikes the overgrown, messy nature of Bea's garden to such an extent that she threatens to take the truly evil step of expelling Bea's grandparents from the neighbourhood committee! This motivates Bea's grandparents to consider paving the entire garden, which would mean the end of her new friendship with the tiny dogs.

Mrs Thistlewort's grumpiness provides a somewhat arbitrary deadline of one week for Bea to save the garden by tidying it up so, of course, she enlists the help of the tiny dogs in their effort to show all the grown-ups that Bea is capable of maintaining the garden to a standard that is acceptable to the neighbourhood committee. Such a substantial responsibility would terrify Bea, usually, but the kindness and reciprocal relationship she enjoys from the tiny dogs teaches Bea to find her voice and to stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves. This coincides with an effort from Bea's grandmother to trust Bea and to encourage her to advocate for herself, even though Mrs Thistlewort can appear formidable! As a result, Bea, slowly, as the story progresses, begins to feel a 'buzz of bravery' in her belly, which is mimicked by her new miniature partners.

Tiny Dogs celebrates how heroes come in all shapes and sizes and reminds readers that we don't always have to be loud, brash and confident to make a difference in the world. Though the problems that Bea and her family face could easily be dismissed

as small or frivolous, the way that Bea overcomes them, without ever departing from her calm and peaceful nature, is reassuring and endearing. There is just enough originality and fun in the characters of the four tiny dogs, too, to suggest that this series could become a future favourite for dog-loving young readers. **SD**



On Poetry Street

★★★★

Brian Moses, illustrated Mark Elvins, Scallywag Press, 120pp, 978-1915252586, £10.99 pbk

If you've been enjoying Joseph Coelho's **Poetry Prompts** then you're also going to love Brian Moses' **On Poetry Street**. This new collection contains a year's worth of poems (52 so one a week), each one springing from an idea or 'what if': 'In the Land of Yesterday' or 'In the Hollywood Lost Property Box' for example, or 'If I Could Travel Back in Time'. The poems are playful, provocative, playing with patterns and images as well as with rhyme and rhythm as you'd expect from a poet of Moses' calibre and experience. They're not just for reading or performing though, each poem is also a poem starter with Moses encouraging readers to take them as jumping off points for poems of their own. And why wouldn't you after reading this? He makes it look not only easy – or doable – but fun. Take the poem 'Still To Do ...' for example which lists in rhyming couplets the things the poet hasn't yet done:

*Still not painted a new Mona Lisa.
Still not straightened the Leaning
Tower of Pisa.*

*Still haven't taught the Moon how
to sneeze.*

Still not run a race on my knees.

Young people will be itching to try out rhymes, especially as the curiously the undone tasks, the better. Notes at the end contain accessible and inspiring tips on using rhyme, rhythm and repetition; a defence of list poems

– also great for young would-be poets; and a description of what Moses calls 'Research poems', where browsing the internet or books provides the material to create poems such as 'Villages'. Entertaining black and white illustrations from Mark Elvins add to the appeal. Now – together – let's take a walk down Poetry Street! **AR**

Nush and the Stolen Emerald

★★★

Jasbinder Bilan, Chicken House, 274 pages, 9781915947024 £7.99 pbk Anushka is a princess of the Indian kingdom, Jaisalmer. She's an excellent horsewoman, a brave and feisty adventurer and the twin sister of the heir to the throne. Set in the middle of the nineteenth century and in the midst of colonial activity of the East India Company, this is a story of travel, bravery, culture and daring adventure.

As their father plans a diplomatic trip from India to England, Nush and her brother Arian decide to swap places so that she can go to England in his place. Nush has a plan to find and restore a stolen emerald – a sacred jewel the size of an egg that was taken from their kingdom and given to Queen Victoria.

The story takes us with Nush across the seas and into the heart of Victorian royal life where Nush becomes friends with the royal princes and princesses and is accepted into the family of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. But all is not as it seems, and in her quest to find the missing emerald Nush uncovers a dastardly plot which is deceiving the British monarch and puts her own father in mortal danger.

Loosely based on some actual historical characters, the story is honest about the devastating impact of the East India Company on Indian life and the role of colonialism in the nineteenth century. It is full of rich descriptions of Indian life, food and clothing giving the reader a picture of the sumptuousness of both the Indian and the English royal households.

At its heart though, this is an exciting story full of secret rooms, double crossing, hidden identities and friendship. It will delight any lovers of historical crime fiction and classic adventure. **LJS**

The Last Dragon

★★★★

Polly Ho-Yen, illus. Charis Loke, 9781913311612, Knights of, £7.99 pbk We may not expect The Last Dragon (TLD, or Old Tildy) to appear in Milton Keynes, but indeed she does in this fantastical story. Yara is having difficulty controlling her anger, mostly due to anxiety about her younger sister George, who is very ill in hospital, and she frequently gets into trouble at school. The name Yara, as we find out much later in the book, is Arabic, and means 'friend' or 'helper', and Yara does indeed become a friend to the dragon, and is entrusted with her egg. She was in a quiet secluded place, out of sight, but

the bad guys, The Dragon Detection Squad, were tracking the dragon and are very suspicious. It takes all Yara's ingenuity, and the help of an unexpected friend in bullying victim Bertie, who discovers his own courage, to keep the egg safe in hopes that it can help to heal George. There is also an unexpectedly helpful teacher involved...

Yara realises that her responsibility to protect the dragon's egg until it hatches is important for the whole world, and this could be seen as an allegory of our responsibility to the natural world, but it's hinted rather than hammered home. Charis Loke's cover is dramatic and lovely, and this is a good story – dragons are always popular! **DB**



Race to Imagination Island

★★★★

Mel Taylor-Bessent, illus. Alessandro D'Urso, Farshore, 256pp, 978-0008642471, £7.99 pbk

Reading doesn't come much more pleasurable than on this race to a place where, whatever you imagine, it comes to life. Naturally, children are the best people to be in charge, and when the time comes to appoint four new Protectors of Imagination Island, the competition is fierce as you'd expect. Luca would seem a perfect candidate – his imagination is boundless, there's nothing he loves more than dreaming up fabulous creatures and adventures in his head. But he's also shy and horribly anxious. When, of course, he finds himself amongst the competitors, despite his best efforts, and on Imagination Island itself, the stage is set for a helter-skelter adventure in which Luca is forced to do things he'd never thought he could (skateboard) and making a whole new set of friends, something else he's always found difficult.

The delights of this story are that readers never know what it is around the corner, and in watching Luca surprise himself at the things he's capable of doing. Fast-paced, funny and full of invention, this is a book children will read and then play out at breaktime or with their friends. **LS**

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

The World's First Roller Coaster and Other Amazing Inventions

★★★★★

Mike Barfield, ill. Franziska Höllbacher, Templar Books, 96pp, 9781800783720, £10.99 pbk

'This book has more light bulb moments than a funfair after sundown' (p.8). The quotation sums up the way this volume is packed full of interesting information and is quite original in both subject matter and design.

The Contents pages show how inventions are arranged by topic and there are eight chapters. Each invention has a double page spread devoted to it and is in both comic strip style and text boxes or prose. Fascinating facts are found throughout the book and humour is frequent. I was amazed to learn that sparkling soft drinks were invented in 1767 by Joseph Priestley! We learn that bubble wrap was an accidental discovery, and its history is very interesting. Initially an American engineer and a Swiss chemist 'were trying to invent a new type of trendy wallpaper' (p.38) but in the end bubble wrap became a way of packaging fragile goods.

Unusual facts are to be found everywhere. For example, ready salted crisps are generally people's favourite flavour, but in China and Japan it is cucumber flavour and seaweed flavour which are preferred! I am sure youngsters will love learning such information and recounting facts to their friends. I think the eighth chapter, 'Screen and Heard' about computers etc. will be particularly popular with students. Young inventors are encouraged to think up a creation with a final page that can be filled in with the reader's own invention.

This is a book you can easily dip into rather than reading it sequentially or in one sitting. For those students who enjoy non-fiction and facts this is certain to be a big hit. Congratulations to both the author and illustrator who work hard and succeed at keeping the reader's attention. It is a fun and colourful paperback which will appeal to ages 7 upwards and will be a great acquisition for libraries and classrooms, as well as a fabulous gift. **JS**

The Voyage of Sam Singh

★★★★★

Gita Ralleigh, Zephyr, 272pp, 978 1804545522, £8.99 pbk

This is the second spellbinding, magical adventure set in an alternative colonial India and Southern Asia and it is every bit as good as *The Destiny of Minou Moonshine*. The author is very skilled in the way she blends deep themes of colonialism, indigenous cultures, repatriation and racism, with those of family, friendship and loyalty and also in the effortless way she combines historical, fantasy

and magical realism genres. Our protagonist here is Sam Singh, who has taken on the job of servant to The Collector, an odious example of the very worst sort of colonial explorer, in order to make his way to the Isle of Lost Voices, where he fears that his beloved older brother Moon is being held in the notorious prison The Octopus. The author revealed that the inspiration for this was the notorious Andaman Islands, a penal colony created by Britain for prisoners from the subcontinent. The indigenous population of these island are also the basis for the tribe of Lola, who befriends Sam on his first night on the mysterious Isle. She is the guide for The Collector's trek into the interior of the Isle, where spirits roam and multiple dangers lurk. He is pursuing his acquisitive interest in ethnic languages and artefacts and claiming to be the first man to set foot in the interior, despite the dignified welcome he receives from Lola's villagers. Also accompanying them is one of my favourite characters and Sam's constant companion, Suka, a parrot who can speak five languages and usually does! Sam is tenacious in his pursuit of any clues to his brother's whereabouts and when they discover that The Collector has stolen ancestral remains on his previous exhibitions and steals from Lola's tribe too, Lola and Sam unite in a bold scheme to rescue Moon and repatriate the ancestors. From battling deadly pirates to stabbing a saltwater crocodile in the eye, Sam proves his courage time and again. The conclusion to their quest is not quite what Sam had anticipated, but there is a hugely satisfying comeuppance for The Collector and we leave Sam and Lola with renewed hope for the future. Packed with action, excitement, lyrical descriptions and thought-provoking insights into our colonial history, this is a beautifully written, rich and rewarding read. **JC**

An Invitation to the Botanic Gardens

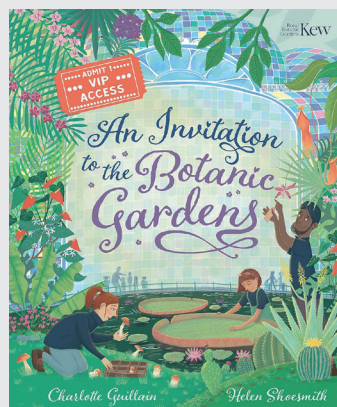
★★★★★

Charlotte Guillain, ill. Helen Shoesmith, Welbeck Editions, 48pp, 9781803381060, £16.99 hbk

This beautifully produced hardback is successful on many fronts, not least its ability to elucidate the many activities happening at this world-renowned scientific centre.

The first page of the book is a gorgeously illustrated invitation to the reader to, 'Join us on a VIP tour of the Botanic Garden' (p.1) which acts as an enticing hook to interest the youngster.

Both author and illustrator are to be congratulated on their respective roles throughout the work: Guillain carefully explains all the workings of the complex organization, helped along by Shoesmith's attractive illustrations. The Contents page



clearly explains where our tour will take us around 17 areas/buildings, beginning with the flower Beds and Borders and exiting through the popular Gift Shop.

I was struck by how we meet many members of the huge team of people working there, and how they carry out quite distinctive roles both front of house and behind the scenes. There are numerous volunteers and horticulture students along with garden designers, scientists, botanists, photographers and botanical artists. It is fascinating to learn some of the facts and information we learn on this tour. For example, the Seed Bank holds more than 2 billion seeds, some of which are extinct. Also, the labelling of plants in Latin is used world-wide for accuracy.

The three gatefolds illustrating The Temperate House, The Herbarium and The Arboretum (my favourite!) add the wow factor to this outstanding hardback. This is the type of publication which will capture a child's imagination and frequently result in them deciding to follow a career they had not heard of until now. The text carefully explains how experiments are being carried out to discover which plants are possible to grow in the hotter conditions caused by climate change, thereby creating relevance to current issues.

I look forward to reading *An Invitation to the Ballet Theatre* in the same series, and I hope my review encourages you to take up *An Invitation to the Botanic Gardens*, preferably with a young person or Primary class in your care. Not only is this book published in partnership with the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, but by buying it the customer is contributing to the important work carried out there every day. **JS**

The Cheat Book

★★★

Ramzee, Hachette Children's, 224pp, 9781444973396, £7.99 pbk

Imagine if there was a user manual for being cool; a step-by-step guide to notoriety; a hardback companion constantly providing tips and hints for how to stay top of the popularity league table. This is just what Kamal discovers during a dreaded trip to the library in this comedy drama for children.

Kamal is not a popular boy in his school. He is not a social 'bottom-

feeder' but he certainly isn't on the cool list and his lack of social capital is a source of anguish, especially as he is haunted at home by the hilariously monstrous and inexplicably popular 'Sisterbeast' (three older sisters who make his life a misery). Kamal can't believe his luck when, under mysterious circumstances, he becomes the owner of the 'Cheat Book'. Unbelievably, the book is able to interpret Kamal's situation and make suggestions for how to improve it.

This is a dream come true for Kamal, especially since he has so recently been the victim of a hideous vomiting-in-assembly ordeal, which saw him drop to a dreaded zero score on the exciting new 'PopStox' app that everyone is tuned into to measure how cool they are.

The Cheat Book helps Kamal navigate all sorts of hilarious, gross and frightening circumstances, such as escaping the head teacher's office unscathed, avoiding the wrath of the evil history teacher (despite forgetting his homework), and defeating the school ogre (bully). But the book also convinces Kamal to ditch his close friends and change his clothes and to try other ways of generally not being himself. It's a dilemma for Kamal that will be familiar to many readers: how much are you willing to give up in exchange for being popular? Kamal seems confused about what 'cool' really means - but he knows that he is desperate to become so...he's even willing to enlist one third of the Sisterbeast to help him follow the book's advice to change his style.

The Cheat Book raises interesting questions about our addictions to apps and to constant affirmations from social media, which will resonate with young smartphone users. Such powerful messages are quite subtle - hidden behind Kamal's bombastic and chaotic descriptions of things. At times, the silliness detracts from the story (a few crass, gross-out moments feel shoe-horned in), and there are occasional, cringe-worthy missteps in tone when describing the actions of the cool kids. However, this rarely detracts from an overall very funny and engaging narrative, which is resolved when Kamal comes to terms with who he really is, despite the Cheat Book's guidance.

Kamal is a loveable protagonist whose increasing open-mindedness is endearing, and his story is illustrated by lively and energetic cartoons that reflect the chaos of his journey. More volumes in the series are planned and readers should hope that they focus upon Kamal and his fun family and friends, rather than on the troublesome concept of the Cheat Book. **SD**

The Wanderdays: Journey to Fantome Island

★★★★★

Clare Povey, Usborne, 320pp, 9781803708089, £7.99 pbk

For Flo and Joseph Wanderday, it's just a normal school day. Their mum,

one of the world's greatest explorers, is away on another trip and they are awaiting her daily phone call home, when the terrible news comes that her ship, the Ariel, has gone missing and all contact with the crew has been lost.

When a mysterious stranger gets in touch, the siblings discover that their mum was on no ordinary expedition but was on a mission to uncover and prove the many environmental crimes committed by her former business partner, Sir Frederick Titan, who the rest of the world believes to be a hero. After discovering secret passages, hidden rooms, unique maps and a whole host of clues, Flo & Jo set off on their own trip of a lifetime, hoping to save their mum and show the world the truth.

The first in a new series from Povey, **The Wanderdays: Journey to Fantome Island** is an exciting action-packed and thrilling adventure story, with many twists and turns, leaving me trying to read as quickly as possible to see what happened next! There is a wonderful cast of characters, including a perfect dastardly villain, and a truly heartwarming relationship between Flo & Jo, who provide strength and support to each other when needed, as their journey helps them both grow in confidence and Joseph tries hard to overcome the manifestations of his OCD, a condition that the author herself has. The book also contains strong and important environmental messages woven into the storyline without it being too preachy.

A definite must for all libraries and school, this is one of the most enjoyable middle grade titles I've read recently, and I can't wait for the second instalment to be released. **AH**

One Extra Sparkle: Ellie and the Marriage List

★★★★

Tricia Seabolt, illus Lucy Rogers, *Lantana*, 224pp, 978-1915244796, £7.99 pbk

Ellie is ten and she absolutely adores her big brother, Ben, who is fifteen. Ellie has Down's Syndrome.

Ben has a girlfriend, Sara. Ellie's best friend, Ling, also ten, is the only neuro typical person outside of her family with whom Ellie regularly interacts. Ling gives Ellie a list of the Steps to Marriage which they are both convinced is real. Ellie is horrified to discover that if Ben and Sara get engaged then, according to the list, Ben will fly off to Hawaii as Sara's husband and Ellie will lose him forever.

Ellie and Ling decide that they will have to break Ben and Sara up to stop the list prediction coming true. In her garden, Ellie also has a willow tree which is her favourite place to sketch and calm down under. Her mum and dad want to cut it down. Can Ellie save both her tree and her brother?

In Seabolt's narrative, Ellie

seems to be very naïve even taking into account her disability. It was disconcerting and quite irritating that the narrative doesn't show Ellie directly interacting much with anyone outside her family and with very few neurotypical people. This doesn't ring true in this reviewer's experience and might perpetuate disabled people's isolation. **RB**

The Houdini Inheritance

★★★★

Emma Carroll, Faber, 304pp, 9780571341412, £7.99 pbk

The great illusionist Harry Houdini remains an intriguing figure years after his death in 1926. He had many friends in the entertainment business except for so-called mediums putting on fake séances who bitterly resented his determination to expose them. Now Emma Carroll, an experienced author, writes about the man and his background in her latest novel. Yet rather than allowing her narrative to grow from the often bizarre show business realities operating in Britain and America at the time, she comes up with a melodrama that quickly gets more confused and unlikely at each turn of the page.

The story is narrated as if by twelve-year old Glory, who lives near the sea in Devon with her older sister while their tattooist mother works in New York's Coney Island. But while her half-Caribbean stage-struck friend Dennis comes over as real enough Glory never convinces, acting like an impulsive child at one moment and then sounding like a fluent adult for the purposes of continuing to tell her tale. Houdini and his wife, on a visit to Devon and who quickly turn into intimate friends, are little more than vehicles for helping the story along. Far too many adventures follow involving the trunk bearing all his magic secrets. Finally the sinister medium Mrs Crandon and her evil daughter Mae transpose from stage rivals to would-be assassins firing off pistols after failing to organise a drowning.

The author adds a three page historical note detailing what is known about Houdini's death while also following up on what happened to various others, some of whom are characters in the story. This she does clearly and with obvious well-informed interest; if only the rest of her story had been written in the same vein! **NT**

The Whisperwicks

★★★★

Jordan Lees, illus Vivienne To, Puffin, 422pp, 978 0241607497, £14.99 hbk

Benjamin lives in the sleepy village of Wyvern-on-the water where his parents run a bookshop enticingly named, Once Upon a Time. Benjamin's parents have gone away to try to repair their marriage leaving him with his grandmother. Benjamin

is a solitary boy who finds refuge in his books of facts and logic. He definitely does not believe in magic. So, when a parcel arrives for him containing a strange doll with buttons for eyes he is somewhat confounded and his confusion deepens when at night the doll changes into a nightjar and then a capuchin monkey that causes havoc in his bedroom. This is impossible, isn't it? One night he follows the nightjar into the cellar and through a door into another bookshop and into the parallel world of Wreathenwold, a place which cannot be mapped and where it is easy to get lost.

Benjamin notices that here every person has a doll or poppet like his, which can transform into a creature. He cannot comprehend this impossibility and how to understand this puzzling new world. Quickly he finds himself in difficulties, but before he is despatched to the dungeons by the scary-looking police enforcers, the Hanged Men, Benjamin is rescued by Hansel, a kindly man who runs a bookshop and offers to take him back to his family as he has a daughter the same age as Benjamin.

Elizabella is a prickly girl nursing a pain she cannot admit to. Her headstrong twin brother Edwid has disappeared leaving her bereft

and without answers as to why he vanished. Elizabella is determined to find out what happened to him and somewhat reluctantly allows Benjamin to journey with her when he finds out she is about to leave to search for her brother.

A rip-roaring quest ensures with plenty of peril and danger as the children track down and solve the clues in the whisperwick messages Edwid has concealed, culminating in an encounter with the feared Minotaur. They are helped to find their way by a piece of thread named Ariadne.

Each chapter is prefaced by a paragraph from a Brief History of Wreathenwold giving useful snippets of background context. The b/w illustrations add to the atmosphere and enchantment.

This is a hugely imaginative and immersive story that carries you along at a tidy pace. The world building is excellent with clever touches such as the use of playing cards as currency. References to the Minotaur legend are woven in well but a times there is almost too much detail packed in and in places the story can seem a little wordy. Ultimately it is story of courage and friendship and believing that there is magic in the world. And we all need a touch of magic. **JC**

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

The Grimmelings

★★★★★

Rachael King, Guppy Books, 303pp, 9781916558250, £7.99 pbk

The title here is taken from an ancient Scots word describing the first and last gleams of the day. Many other colloquialisms, unfamiliar to a non-native audience but too good to miss, are listed at the start of each chapter of this intensely imagined novel. The author lives in New Zealand where her story is set but admits to an abiding obsession with Scottish folklore. And not least legends about the Kelpie, a huge potentially murderous phantom black horse that never forgets or forgives any slight. This avenging spirit is brought to scary life once again in these pages.

Up against him are Ella and her younger sister Fiona, backed up by an apparently widowed mother and a granny with benign but unmistakably witch-like powers. They are all trying to make a living from their horse-trekking business, with each animal very much its own personality. But with father mysteriously disappearing and then a local boy too, the family is unwelcome within the rest of their small rural community. So when Gus, a new, cheerful fifteen-year-old boy arrives on the scene and seems anxious to make friends with Ella, things look likely to improve. But is he all he seems?

Rachael King writes good, effective and sometime poetic prose. While her plot strains credulity towards the

end it is still sufficiently tethered to everyday reality to just about remain convincing. Readers will learn a lot about horses too, not in terms of winning rosettes at gymkhanas but as working animals with their own needs and habits. Rather than follow well-trodden adventure-story paths, there is a freshness of imagination in this story combined with prose that delights in exploring language while also telling an arresting tale. **NT**

Mayowa and the Sea of Words

★★★★★

Chibundu Onuzo, Bloomsbury, 288pp, 9781526660992, £10.99 hbk

Mayowa lives a happy life with her mum and dad in a flat in London. After Mum gets the chance to tour the U.S. playing the piano, and Dad needs to go with her (due to her being blind), it is decided that Mayowa will spend the holidays with her grandpa in deepest, darkest Dorset. Mayowa loves spending time with Grandpa. His grand old house is full of quirky deserted rooms with fancily decorated ceilings, massive overgrown gardens, trees to climb, little paths to follow and animal footprints to be found. It's the perfect place for the perfect summer adventure and an adventure is most certainly what she is going to have, just not in the way she expects.

Mayowa has always known about her excentric Grandpa's strange habit of jumping on books, along with her mum's disapproval of it. But why does he do it? Why does Mum

reviews

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dislike it so much? No matter how much she pleads with Grandpa, he refuses to tell her the truth. But one day, after getting herself stuck in a tree, Mayowa sees him do something which means he has no choice but to explain everything. Mayowa discovers she (along with a lengthy line of ancestors) is a Lagosalter, meaning she has the power to take the emotions from a book and pass them on to other people. But what use is this ability going to be to a 10-year-old girl on holiday in Dorset?

On first glance, this book could seem like many other situational stories, dealing with relationships, families, cultural diversity, disability, immigration. But with the twist of magic running alongside the main story, it stands out from the crowd. And somehow even as an adult reading, the quality of the writing makes the magic seem acceptable. With other middle grade books, you prepare yourself to suspend disbelief for the farfetched elements, but it doesn't seem so necessary with this book. At the bottom of many pages, you will find footnotes, giving extra information/explaining what something means. This is a really nice touch and ensures any younger readers can follow a more complex part of the story (and any older ones may still learn something new). It deals with some extremely relevant topics in an informative way and without patronising the reader. A very special book that has the potential to go in so many directions. **RBa**

Little House

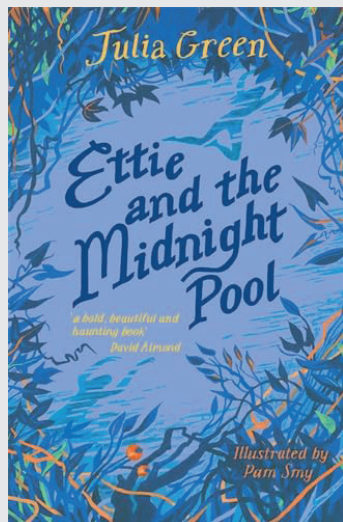
★★★★

Katya Balen, illus Richard Johnson, Barrington Stoke, 9781800902558, 96pp, £7.99 pbk

Juno feels abandoned. Her mother has left to join her father on the front line of aid work. Juno has never been left alone like this; gone are her summer plans. She must stay with her grandfather where she feels strange and out of place. Exploring the house she finds the attic – and a little house, a doll's house together with a family of dolls. They too have been abandoned and need care. Can Juno do something for them?

A novel by Katya Balen will always draw the reader in, bringing empathy and understanding. Here, in this slim novel from Barrington Stoke she does just that. This is not a story about magic, wild adventures or set in a school world. This draws on the everyday – the background to a holiday which looks as if it is not going to be much of a holiday. The doll's house is just a battered old dolls house, the dolls just dolls. But they need repair and attention. She skilfully creates in Juno a very real girl who, reluctantly, discovers an outlet that results in real interest and finally an appreciation of the work of her parents – and the decisions

they make. It is a quiet narrative that nevertheless captures the reader's attention. The soft black and white pencil illustrations by Richard Johnson are as immersive, pinning down moments and expressions to add depth and emotion to the text. This is a book for thoughtful readers and is to be recommended. **FH**



Ettie and the Midnight Pool

★★★★

Julia Green, illus Pam Smy, David Fickling Books, 256pp, 9781788452090, £7.99 pbk

Julia Green returns to some of the themes she explored in her novel *Children of Swallow Fell* in her new book but adds extra layers including the opposing pulls of freedom and family experienced by young people, the importance of facing up to the world as it is, and accepting and understanding the darkness that's part of life. In a society recovering from an (unspecified) pandemic or climate catastrophe Ettie and her grandmother live peaceful lives of self-sufficiency, remote from other people, growing most of their own food, selling what is left to buy what need via their old friend Tom and his shop. Now eleven, Ettie knows no one her own age, but has been happy with her grandma, reading, listening to stories, sketching, and roaming the beautiful hills, fields and woods that surround their home. Her mother left to go travelling and because of whatever it is that's happened is now unable to return or even to send letters. When one evening Ettie sees a girl about her own age, with what appears to be a fox as a companion, she is drawn to follow them, discovering a hidden pool in an old quarry in the process. Returning the next day, she finds the girl hurt in one of the old slate mine tunnels and helps her. As their friendship develops, Cora teaches Ettie how to dive into the freezing water of the pool and tells her stories of caves that can

only be reached through underwater tunnels. Ettie for her part keeps Cora a secret from her grandma, who is increasingly worried about Ettie's long absences and new, angry frustration with their quiet, restricted lives. While Ettie is fascinated by Cora's wild, free existence, readers have a growing sense of unease. Who is Cora really? Is Ettie safe with her, and what happened at the pool that makes her grandmother describe it not just dangerous but a place of tragedy?

As the summer heat breaks, the story reaches its climax and, in a life or death situation, Ettie must decide who she is and what she wants. We discover why the pool has such horrible associations for her grandma, who in turn must admit that hiding the truth can't make everything right in the world. Cora's identity remains a mystery, though there are clues perhaps in the ancient stories that Ettie and her grandmother share. Julia Green combines a striking sense of the British countryside in summer in all its life and verdancy with an awareness of its mystery and dangers too. Black and white illustrations by Pam Smy reflect back that languid energy and menace, the light and dark that's at the book's heart. Haunting and beautifully written, this is a story that will resonate with readers. **MMA**

Be a Scribe! Working for a Better Life in Ancient Egypt

★★★★★

Michael Hoffen, Dr. Christian Casey and Dr. Jen Thum, Callaway, 96pp, 9798987412435, £19.99 hbk

This is an enlightening book which came about due to the pandemic. Michael Hoffen is a young student keen on Ancient Egypt who learned more about this subject during lockdown and was inspired by an ancient Egyptian work entitled *The Satire of the Trades*. Together with two Egyptologists, Dr. Christian Casey and Dr. Jen Thum, Michael Hoffen translated this piece of literature and created a large format book, beautifully illustrated and brimming with fascinating information about the Egyptian way of life.

The Satire of the Trades features an Egyptian named Khety who takes his son Pepi to a school up the Nile far from his home. The introduction explains how the father describes to his son 18 trades in Egypt at the time, and how by learning to become a scribe for the royal family his son can avoid these terrible jobs.

The bulk of the book is the translation of all the trades, and a double spread is devoted to each one. I think the way each important paragraph begins in red ink is a clever way of copying what the scribes did in their writing. The text is illustrated with pictures of approximately one hundred artefacts found in Ancient Egyptian daily life. Also, there is a lot of information around hieroglyphs, how they work, how they are written and how they are pronounced.

The timeline and map at the beginning of the book are very useful, as are the details of the artefacts mentioned which occur at the end of the volume. I liked the inclusion on p. 40 of a reconstructed, typical Ancient Egyptian house as seen on the game *Assassin's Creed Origins*! This certainly brings the subject up to the modern era!

Thank you to all the team involved in this successful project. I will look out for more titles by these authors. **Be a Scribe** works well for Year 6 upwards and is to be recommended for school/local libraries and young historians. **JS**

Delta and the Lost City

★★★★

Anna Fargher, Macmillan 224pp, 9781529046892, £7.99 pbk

Delta is a young wolf dog living in Italy in 79 AD, with her mother Luna and her human family. Her idyllic life is disrupted when she witnesses a horrific crime and she is forcefully separated from her human and animal friends and family. Delta must try and find them all and restore justice – all in the shadow of the rumbling Vesuvius.

With some properly nasty characters and a realistic portrayal of the cruelty of slavery during Roman times, this is a compelling and different telling of the events around the eruption of Vesuvius and the destruction of Pompeii in 79 AD.

The story of the animals, the slaves and the many shades of the Roman way of life is interwoven with the natural disaster and although the audience know what is going to happen, there is a feeling of suspense and excitement throughout. David Dean's black and white illustrations enhance the atmosphere and provide us with stark but nuanced depictions of the characters and action, reflecting the darkness of the volcanic ash.

Primary school teachers are going to love having a new chapter book with this unique animal perspective to teach about the Romans and Pompeii. The descriptions of Pompeii before, during and after the volcanic eruption are vivid and realistic and the bravery and daring escapades of Delta and her eagle friend Bellona carry us through this exciting adventure which is peppered with historical facts and pictures from everyday Roman life. **LSJ**

Storm Child

★★★★★

Ele Fountain, Pushkin Press, 256pp, 9781782693888, £8.99 pbk

All of Ele Fountain's novels contain a strong environmental message, but this is never at the expense of the story or characters, instead the message is cleverly woven into the vivid descriptions of the settings and a deeper awareness of the issues grows for the reader just as it does for the characters. Maya is a mature, capable, surf loving 14-year-old and

the Penrose family have always lived by the sea and historically made their living from it. But their beautiful home, on the headland they own, is falling apart and the fish have disappeared as a result of industrial overfishing. Desperation causes Maya's father to take risks and a storm takes his boat, the life of his crewman and very nearly his own life. Things have to change, and her parents decide not to take the easy option of selling the headland to developers, but to start a new life on an island paradise. Maya is full of doubts but powerless. The island seems idyllic at first but far from her friends, surfing and her beloved home, Maya can't settle. She feels lonely and so homesick and she is beginning to lose confidence in her parent's planning. The depiction of nuanced relationships with friends and family capture that liminal period of growing independence particularly well. Things improve when a very tentative friendship starts to form with Kalani, who introduces Maya to sailing on the island's traditional hand-built boats. This is an experience which matches the thrill of surfing. But Kalani also gradually reveals the darker side of paradise and the horrible truth about human impact on the natural world and how it can spread from one side of the world to another. Plastic in the oceans, beaches covered in rubbish, drifting fishing nets strangling wildlife and, here too, building developments which are threatening the very habitats that attract the visitors. Then one day it is Maya who takes risks in the face of an impending storm. She pushes Kalani to go out one afternoon, things take a turn for the worse and they end up injured and stranded. Together they have to find a way to save each other and themselves. This experience empowers Maya to find her voice and for the family to reset their priorities. Another compelling read which gives the reader much to think about and want to discuss. **JC**

Angel of Grasmere

★★★★★

Tom Palmer, illus Tom Clohosy Cole, Barrington Stoke, 208pp, 9781800902169, £7.99 pbk

Tarn Forthergill is eleven and in mourning for the supposed death of her beloved older brother, Joss, at Dunkirk. The year is 1940.

In this deeply felt novel, it transpires that Joss did not die but deserted from the army following his experience at Dunkirk and he now has PTSD. He has been performing acts of kindness in secret and has been dubbed by his local community in the Lake District, as the angel of Grasmere.

How will his community react when they discover that someone they had lorded is actually a deserter? And how will Tarn react to the apparent resurrection of her brother?

For a very short novel, published by Barrington Stoke, this book is packed with some dark and very adult themes. Palmer handles them with great sensitivity and compassion. This book could be a comfort to anyone who has someone close who is dealing with PTSD. **RB**

Knowing the Score

★★★★★

Ros Roberts, Little Tiger 344pp, 97817888956765, £7.99, pbk

It's always just been Gemma and Mum, but as Gemma approaches the end of her time at primary school, she wonders about the father she never knew, why she rarely sees Gran, and her Uncle Joe, who is a voice on the phone. An opportunity for Mum to go on a free cruise for a month presents an ideal opportunity for Gemma to go and stay with her Uncle Joe and to get to know Gran better, and so it is arranged. Joe's work commitments mean that he has to find an activity for Gemma for some of the time, and he books her onto tennis training for 2 weeks. Gemma is surprised to find that people expect her to be good at tennis, and indeed she is - does she inherit this talent from her unknown Dad? The other students are an interesting mixture: some, like Sarah and Raj, are really good at tennis, Flori is hopeless, and Minxie is struggling to live up to her dad's high expectations of her, but is also talented in another way. The interactions between the tennis players, and their coach, are very credible, and some situations have changed by the end of the course, including Joe's romantic partner. Gemma's investigations lead to healing as she discovers what happened when Mum had a huge disagreement with Gran and Joe, and there will definitely be better relationships with the whole family as the story ends.

Although tennis is very much the focus of this story, the reader does not necessarily have to understand it, as Gemma also has to get to know the strange scoring method and the rules of the game, so we can learn with her.

The first two books by Ros Roberts, **Digger and me**, and **Every Cloud**, were both nominated for awards: and this one also shows that she is an excellent storyteller. **DB**

Too Nice

★★★★★

Sally Nicholls, Barrington Stoke, 80pp, 9781800903265, £7.99 pbk

bby is a teenager whose mum died when she was two. This has left her with very few of her own memories of her mother. What she knows of her mother, she has gleaned from stories told by her dad with whom she is close. When dad gets a new girlfriend, Jen, the librarian at the school where he teaches and Abby is a pupil, Abby rationally knows she should be pleased, polite and sensible as she

is mostly. After all, dad is entitled to a relationship, and she wants him to be happy. But then Jen moves in with Abby and her dad. So, what will happen now?

Nicholls, in this short novel, deftly explores the emotions a child feels in adjusting to a new family member. Anyone who has experienced this adjustment will feel deeply for Abby. Cleverly though, Nicholls has not made Jen, the traditional villain, and the reasons for the way Jen acts are also explained. Written for Barrington Stoke, **Too Nice** focuses solely on family dynamics and there are no subplots. **RB**

The Boy to Beat the Gods

★★★★★

Ashley Thorpe, Usborne 266pp., 9781805075639, £7.99 pbk

The title rather gives away the end of this story, but we do need to know how it happens. The gods are the capricious Orishas from West African folklore, giants who delight in demolishing local villages and devouring the people. Their power comes from eating the fruit of particular baobab trees that each village has to nurture, but young Kayode decides he will steal one of the fruits and become more powerful himself.

A mysterious stranger, who even smells different, appears in his village, and this turns out to be Tiwa, a princess from a neighbouring village in which the important baobab tree died: the Orishas were furious, and now she is the only survivor. She is a feisty warrior, expert with a bow and arrow, and, after initial mutual suspicion, they team up: she for revenge, and he to defeat the gods completely. Kayode's little sister has been captured and taken away by the gods, and he vows to rescue her. He is able to befriend the god Eko, who is unhappy with his fellow gods and willing to work against them. Eko is a shapeshifter, and changes into a goat, but they don't tell Tiwa who he really is for too long: Kayode makes bad decisions as well as good ones, but he does eat some of the fruit of the gods, acquiring temporary incredible powers.

Reaching a seaside community, they encounter Bami, a younger boy who claims to be the greatest fisherman in the world, but has no family, and evidently feels his lack. All three young people bring different strengths to the quest, and Eko is a great asset, as he knows the weakness of each god, so, when they can work together, they gradually pick off their enemies.

This is Ashley Thorpe's first novel, and he draws on his West African heritage, though he has changed the names of the Orishas out of respect to those who still actively worship them. He has produced an exciting tale with an unusual background, and readers will enjoy being immersed in this story. **DB**

The Tall Man

★★★★★

Mary Cathleen Brown, illus Ewa Beniak-Haremska, Everything With Words, 9781911427391, 374pp, £8.99 pbk

Tom and his Mum are moving away from a difficult domestic situation. They are starting a new life in a new house - The Tall Man's House. But from the moment he enters this dilapidated tall house with the enormous tree growing right up to its walls, Tom feels there is something strange about its atmosphere. There are voices - and where did that rat come from? It doesn't help that his mother is still deep in depression while at school he falls foul of the gang of three who have established control of the playground. Tom finds himself on the border between Then and Now as he is drawn further into the past in an effort to rescue the boy he can hear there from the Tall Man.

This is atmospheric, gripping and written in a way that captures the attention; concise sentences, direct dialogue, no long drawn out descriptions and even these are immediate. It is an interesting style that certainly carries the reader along, demanding that the page be turned. The plot, however, is more complex as the present and the past collide - not always comfortably. It is easy to feel rather lost as the narrative hurtles on.

This is an interesting debut which could, perhaps, have benefitted from some trimming. Tom is a well-drawn character and his interaction with his school and his peers very believable. His desperation in the face of his mother's pain is clear and consistent. The interaction between past and present, then and now is interesting if not entirely coherent, while the creation of the Tall Man is truly frightening, as is the overwhelming atmosphere in the Tall House. The resolution is cleverly done to bring the narrative to a satisfying close. Contributing to the background of fear that pervades the whole are black and white images by Ewa Beniak-Haremska. She adopts a scheme which integrates her images within the text - rats crawl around the paragraphs, spider webs have a ghostly presence and finally the shadow of The Tall Man takes over a sequence of pages adding to the terror Tom feels. The whole is overwhelming and while engrossing would certainly require a committed readership. However, I hope we will see more from the imagination of this author as she develops. **FH**

The Ship in the Dark

★★★★★

Yarrow Townsend, Chicken House 255pp., 978191369649-8 £7.99 pbk

Thirteen-year-old Anna lives with her stepfather, Caleb, on the remote Windrose Island, monitoring and caring for its birds. When she discovers smugglers stowing barrels of whale oil in a hidden cove, she reports the details, signalling in Morse Code,

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hopefully to her older friend Mina who has a job with the Society across the water in Mosshaven. Instead, men arrive and arrest Caleb for smuggling, and Bartholomew Rime, Customs Officer for the Society, seems to be behind it. To prove Caleb's innocence, Anna teams up with Mina and sails away on her little boat to find the wreck of The Albatross. That turns out to be a rollicking adventure, where she is helped by an eccentric female professor with a magnificent library and an array of useful instruments for studying the stars, and a ship run by the dashing Captain Cassandra Larke and her crew of women. Anna's knowledge of the sea, the birds and sea creatures, and the stars, all stand her in good stead, and, with Mina's practical sense and her knowledge of science, they make a good team. Whale-hunting is shown to be terrible, and eventually Bartholomew Rime is forced to confront this fact.

This is an exciting story, the second

novel, after **The Map of Leaves** by the wonderfully named Yarrow Townsend, daughter of plant-loving parents, who has spent much of her life outdoors, and lived for a while on a narrowboat, with plants growing on the roof. **The Map of Leaves** was well received and shortlisted for the **Branford Boase Award**, and this book also shows a love of nature and an appreciation of female empowerment. **DB**

A History Of My Weird

★★★★★

Chloe Heuch, Firefly Press, 256pp, 9781915444646, £7.99 pbk

Maureen, known as Mo, Prendergast is an eleven-year-old gymnast who is autistic. She is struggling with her body changing shape due to puberty and there are some direct references to pubic hair and periods which are unusual in middle grade fiction but welcome.

At her new school, Mo meets Carys Melling who prefers to be called Onyx

and identifies as non-binary. Carys's mum is accepting of their choice but because she, herself, is suffering emotional abuse from her husband, she feels she must abide by his wishes and he is hostile to Carys's choice.

Both Onyx and Mo are lonely and frightened by all the change they are experiencing. They become increasingly aware of their separate differences and the inherent problems. Meanwhile, Denham, the local, former asylum, becomes the focus of their shared interest as they wonder about the lives of the outsiders who were interned there in the past.

What new experiences will this interest bring and will Onyx and Mo ever feel comfortable in the school community?

This book is packed with issues very sensitively handled. It also, as is rare in middle grade, looks at the role of adults in being prejudiced against children's differences. Any child who has ever felt alone or different in some way, will feel validated by Heuch's narrative. **RB**

Noah Frye Gets Crushed

★★★

Maggie Horne, Firefly Press, 30499, 9781915444530, £7.99 pbk
Noah Frye is twelve. She does not understand how her two best female friends whom she's known since they were toddlers, have suddenly started becoming attracted to boys. Noah feels no such attraction.

She decides, in order to remain friends with the girls, she needs to get a pretend boyfriend. Can she achieve this? And is a boyfriend what she really wants?

A lot of young girls could relate to Noah's predicament and will find it a relief to see that their confusion is mirrored in a protagonist. Animal lovers will also enjoy Noah's commitment to the animal shelter and preteens who are questioning their sexual preference will end up cheering for Noah.

The major criticism of Horne's novel is that aside from the subject of romance and its confusions, this book does not deal with much else. **RB**

14+ Secondary/Adult

New Talent

Apocalypse Cow

★★★★★

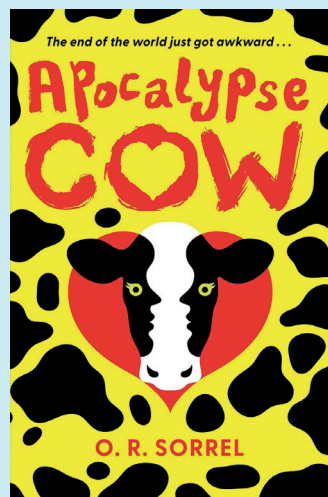
O.R. Sorrel, Guppy Books, 320pp, 9781916558144, £8.99, pbk

Read all about it. Enraged mutant animals invade leafy Wiltshire. From the eye-catching cover to the chaotic cavalcade of bizarre events this is a frenetic, rollercoaster ride of a YA debut novel with complex relationships and gore galore.

Crazed cows, rabid badgers, sonic boom blasting ducks, pernicious pheasants, savage sentient ravens, scurrilous squirrels, psychotic lava bum popping seagulls, electric foxes, exploding hedgehogs and blast freezing woodpeckers are just some of the creatures seeking revenge on humans for calamitous climate change.

Sorrel's outlandish heights of invention are boundless, envisioning a catastrophic apocalypse in the year 2031. Amidst absurdity, satire and ribald scatological humour, a group of diverse teens battle to stay alive with a crash course in survival skills while fending off wild attackers and working out what intimate relationships they want for themselves.

Self-deprecating narrator Mel, Dorian, Ella, Sasha and Nev face adversity with tongue in cheek humour as the plot escalates, scattering into three parts as the stakes rise higher and higher.



Where will they find refuge from the growing storm?

Apocalypse Cow is a montage of heightened hilarity, sexual identity, emotional maelstroms and movie homages [from the bonkers title to scenes reminiscent of Shaun of the Dead, The Walking Dead and Romero's zombie trilogy] crossed with grisly horror. It resonates with evocative imagery, crazy chase scenes and cliffhanger moments. At its heart are important messages about not judging people on first impressions, the real and present danger of climate change colliding with genetic experimentation. **TK**

Iris Green, Unseen

★★★★★

Louise Finch, Scholastic, 378 pp, 9780702331084, £8.99 pbk

Iris Green suffers from the desire common to many teenage girls-to be invisible. Like other extreme impulses this feeling can pass - except when it actually occurs. When Iris sees Olivia, one of her best friends, kissing her boyfriend Theo the shock of the betrayal renders her invisible, with no idea how she will return to her corporeal state. As a keen photographer her easy access to the school dark room is unquestioned and it is there that she retreats to, hoping to find answers to the mystery from the photos she has just taken.

Iris has long been haunted by the conviction that she has nothing to offer, that people she regards as friends are simply good people who tolerate her and who would much rather be with someone else. Louise Finch is autistic and this novel came out of her desire to 'write about how love and acceptance can find you, regardless of whether you feel worthy.' Iris' invisibility is both literal and metaphorical, as the book's title signals. Her invisibility is a double-edged sword, protecting her but also making it too easy to hear what others are saying about her, reinforcing her lack of self-worth.

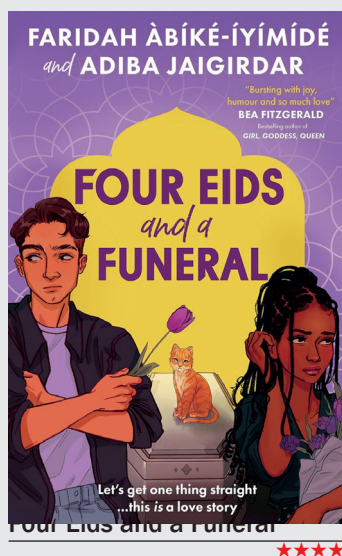
Her character is imbued with authenticity - I found myself becoming exasperated, frustrated and even, at times, annoyed at her continued self-deprecation until I realised that Finch had put me in the position of all those who knew and cared about her but felt unable to convince her of

her worth. Her best friend Bert is a masterful creation-close, caring and with a marvellous repartee. Their more light-hearted conversations are a study in teenage dialogue, clever and funny, and their serious moments are entirely credible.

The cheating Theo, too, is a hard study-skilled in coercive control, cruel in word and deed when his desires are thwarted. The marvellous moment when an invisible Iris upends a large milkshake over his crotch as he is trying to impress a date will make readers laugh out loud. His counterpart, Baker, like Iris, a photographer, provides a touchstone - emotionally honest, ready to keep his distance but clear about enjoying her company.

When Iris embarks on a course of counselling-reluctantly at first-she finds a refuge and the genesis of a pathway through some of her deepest misconceptions. But it is Baker, her companion in artistic endeavour, who guides her towards a fuller appreciation of her talent and a determination to follow the career path she wants and needs, rather than the one which her domineering (and absent) father wants her to pursue. As her belief in her photography grows, so does her relationship with Baker. There is no easy, sugar-coated all-ends-neatly-tied ending for them, but an honest understanding that they will, on an important level, be a part of each other's lives for as long as that is important to them.

Iris Green, Unseen will speak to many young adult readers, conveying much which will nullify the insistent judgemental inner voice which is their own worst enemy. **VR**



Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé and Adiba Jaigirdar, *Usborne*, 384pp, 978-1805312970, £8.99 pbk

This gentle romance stars two of the sweetest, kindest young lovers you are likely to meet in YA fiction. Said and Tiwa are childhood friends who grow apart when Said goes off to fancy boarding school. Each is furious with the other for apparently 'ghosting' them. With Said back home for Eid though, they can't avoid one another, especially as his sister Safiyah is Tiwa's best friend, but also thanks to a bit of post-mortem matchmaking by their much-loved librarian, whose will makes them jointly responsible for the care of her cat, Laddoo. Then they find themselves working together campaigning urgently for a replacement when the town's Islamic centre, important to both, but especially Tiwa, is almost destroyed in a fire; the mayor's lack of enthusiasm for the project forcing them closer together still.

Aside from their initial anger with one another and their sharp sense of betrayal, there are no obstacles to their love, and readers are never in any doubt that this story will have a happy ending. Tension and drama come from the two young people's efforts to save the Islamic Centre, which also touches on the kind of prejudice we don't usually see (the town's Muslim community responding better to Said's requests for help, than Tiwa's); and from Said's worries over how his family will react when he tells them that he's enrolling for art college, not medical school. In fact, the latter issue is resolved remarkably smoothly, Said's family proving to be just as supportive as we expect them to be. Even the shocking discovery of who is responsible for interrupting their relationship, the book's big reveal, causes no real upset, the culprit's motives accepted and their actions forgiven. The authors allow Said and Tiwa's relationship to grow quietly and smoothly amongst their

loving, supportive community, a community depicted with real warmth and understanding. There are laughs and surprises along the way and reading it is as much of a treat as nibbling laddoos. **LS**

The No Girlfriend Rule

★★★★

Christen Randall, *Pushkin Press*, 336pp, 9781782694465, £9.99 pbk
Hollis Beckwith is plus-size, seventeen and a gifted artist. She and her boyfriend, Chris, have been together since sixth grade. He loves to play a role-playing dice game called *Secrets and Sorcery*. One of his other best friends, Landon, is extremely misogynistic in that he has decreed that there should be no girlfriends involved in their game. Hollis, desperately wanting to stay close to Chris, needs to find her own team to play with and demonstrate that she can understand something he loves so much.

Hollis finds an all-girl group but what does the game and the act of playing it and the friendships formed through it have in store for both Hollis and Chris?

Initially, the author lets the uninitiated reader into quite a closed world of a game based on *Dungeons and Dragons* which is surprisingly complicated. This reviewer really enjoyed the interplay between the fictional characters who are inhabited during the game and the normal lives of the characters in the novel. Author Randall plays really well with the line between fiction and reality.

There is an authentic representation of the experience of anxiety disorder in this book which some readers may find comforting. The novel will also be affirming to those who are questioning their sexuality. **RB**

The Vanishing Station

★★★★

Ana Ellickson, *Amulet Books*, 368pp, 9781419764226, £13.99 hbk
Ruby Santos has graduated from high school in San Francisco just a couple of months ago. She's inherited the love of painting she had always admired in her Mom, a recent victim of cancer. The hospital bills have left Ruby and her Filipino Dad with very little money - so no chance now for her to go to Art School as she had planned. She's working as a house painter, as well as struggling to prop up her father, a drunken echo of the man he was, when he had often worked abroad for long periods; as we later learn, those absences were dictated by the demands of a ruthless criminal organisation from which he could not escape.

Ruby's narration often leaves much to be inferred. The novel makes few concessions to UK readers, from preserving US spellings in the text to setting much of the action in a brutal San Francisco underworld,

among streets littered with dirty heroin needles, very different from the conventional tourist image of the city. At times, those readers may also fear they are losing the plot, often at its most dramatic moments, since they will have no idea what's meant by 'jumping the train portals' - a skill which drives much of the action of the novel. One minute, readers are riding the BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) with a desperate, endangered Ruby, and the next - by way of a 'jump' powered by never-to-be-explained storybook magic - they discover her relaxing on a different train among the tranquil snows of Norway, or languishing in the steamy heat of a disused siding in the Taman Negara jungle on the borders of Thailand and Malaysia. Adult readers might well, at such moments, identify a use of *Magical Realism* - not, as far as I know, a narrative strategy likely to be familiar to many YA readers.

Soon, Ruby herself is caught in the clutches of the criminal organisation which has destroyed her Dad's life, led by the glamorous matriarch, Madame M. Essential to her activities is her control of certain stations on the BART, which she maintains through her three sons, her lieutenants in the organisation; they are known to lesser members of the international operation by the names of three important stations, while Madame herself is code-named 'Embarcadero', BART's major transit hub. Madame has shrewdly anticipated that Ruby will have inherited her Dad's amazing gift for 'jumping the portals', which involves leaping from the flexible link between carriages on one train to land, intentionally, in the flexible link between the carriages of another train which might be anywhere in the world. Madame needs Ruby to replace her Dad, engaging in anything from carrying secret messages between continents to drug trafficking.

Ruby's own inner world which her narrative reveals is always interestingly complex, reflecting her determination, her courage and her intelligence. As Ruby is drawn into Madame's web, she finds a surprising ally in Montgomery, one of the sons. We can watch their developing feelings for each other only from Ruby's limited perspective. At times, Montgomery can seem inscrutable, even two dimensional, torn between the obligations of the life his mother has shaped for him and an uncertain, exploratory future with Ruby.

A sequel is foreshadowed in the closing chapters. Ellickson writes with such daring originality, wit and energy that many readers will want to know where Ruby's future jumps from those train portals will land her next. **GF**

Eddy, Eddy

★★★★★

Kate De Goldi, *Chicken House*, 296pp, 9781910646922, £8.99 pbk
Eddy, Eddy is a complex, layered and highly entertaining novel for YA readers. Set in the aftermath of the New Zealand earthquakes it appears

at first to be the story of teenage rebellion and disenchantment but as we get to know Eddy and his world, we uncover a much more nuanced picture of a boy growing into a man, affected by trauma but anchored by his found family and the many bonds that tie them together.

Eddy's caregiver is his uncle Brian who adopted him as a tiny child and whose interest in words and poetry, in drama, music, religion, and baking grate on Eddy's nerves as he grapples with his own identity and his past. Eddy has left his much-hated school and immersed himself in a complex web of jobs looking after an increasing number of strange pets - and eventually people. This is a love story in the traditional sense as Eddy reconnects with an old girlfriend, but it is also a love story for lost childhoods and past memories as well as a recognition that love comes in many forms. The book is threaded through with musical and literary references as well as a depiction of post-earthquake Christchurch which is at once dystopian and very realistic. There are some very adult themes and a very real investigation of both self-destruction and self-harm which is not for the faint hearted. Every character has depth and no-one is perfect, especially Eddy who has to come to terms with himself and his past experiences in order to move his life from darkness to light.

What really carries this novel forward though is the dextrous wordplay and the clever juxtaposition of the darkly humorous and the refreshingly sentimental, it's a novel of many shades with love and kindness at its very lovely heart. **LSJ**

We Have Everything We Need to Start Again

★★★★★

Koleka Putuma, ill. Adriana Bellet, *Hot Key Books*, 140pp, 9781471413322, £9.99 pbk

In three sections, this slim volume explores a wide range of themes affecting young people as they grow up including anxiety, self-esteem, sexuality, family and religion. Culture is another focus for example looking at the importance of hair in black culture. Adherence to gender identity ideology is assumed with reference to 'transitioning' and use of pronouns.

Broader themes relating to the world as a whole such as new technologies, social media, the refugee crisis, the climate emergency and conflict past and present are also explored.

The writer's enjoyment of language is very evident with word play and a variety of poetic forms used, including elements of concrete poetry with good use of graphic space and effective line drawings to illustrate the text throughout. Although many of the poems address serious themes touches of humour help to lift the mood for example when the writer's mother's prayers about her troubled son seem unanswered apparently 'heaven was experiencing technical difficulties.'

reviews

14+Secondary/Adult continued

Philosophy permeates the poetry with wise words such as 'brave and afraid can sometimes feel the same,' and 'rage is sometimes a love's need to grieve.'

A hopeful poetry collection for young adults growing up in today's complex world by an award winning South African poet. **SMc**

Beastly Beauty

★★★★

Jennifer Donnelly, Scholastic, 336pp, 978 0702334740. £8.99 pbk
This gender swapped retelling of Beauty and the Beast is another of Donnelly's powerful and hugely enjoyable feminist retellings of a traditional fairytale, following on the success of *Poisoned and Stepsister*, which reworked Snow White and Cinderella respectively. The gender swap enables her to explore themes like societal expectations, stereotypical gender roles and self-acceptance. The original tale is thought by some scholars to have originated in 18th Century France as a cautionary tale to prepare young women for marriage to 'beastly' older men, as was so often the case at the time. This story is very much set in the same period and our heroine, Arabella, was a rebellious and headstrong young woman who has been cursed to be a beast because she dared to wish for more than just marriage and to let her anger get the better of her. So the reason for the curse has less to do with selfishness and arrogance and more to do with sexism and societal expectations. After being cursed for so many years, she has almost given up hope that the curse will ever be broken. Enter Beau, a handsome thief who breaks into her castle with his gang, but then is abandoned and trapped. At first, we have no more idea than Beau about who or what the Beast is, but he is as determined to solve the mystery as he is to escape. Each of the main characters is complicated, possessing good intentions that have been buried thanks to the harsh circumstances they have experienced. As each of their back stories is revealed we see that Beau and Arabella actually share a common struggle with their self-perception and self-image and neither think they are worthy of love, so how is the curse to be broken? This is absolutely enthralling storytelling, full of rich symbolism, psychological depth and a touch of magical realism, as well as an occasional thoughtful commentary on fairy tales. The romantic chemistry and witty banter of the lead characters is most enjoyable, but the well-drawn minor characters have their moments too. The reader is thoroughly invested in everyone's survival in the dramatic race against time as the curse counts down. Ultimately, this beautifully crafted story is about learning to love oneself. **JC**

If My Words Had Wings

★★★★

Danielle Jawondo, Simon & Schuster, 352pp, 9781398514034, £8.99 pbk
Tyrell (Ty) Forrester made the wrong choice when he became involved in an armed robbery and his decision cost him 18 months in a young offenders' prison. With only three weeks of his sentence left to serve he needs to avoid trouble of any sort. In short, he needs to be simply what the system has labelled him: Prison number 88582LD. However, his internal monologue in the opening pages makes it abundantly clear how hard that is to achieve. Jawondo educates the reader into the twisted etiquette of prison life—the strict hierarchy of inmates, the rules, spoken and unspoken, which have nothing to do with the official regime and the ceaseless, brutal jockeying for position—or for invisibility. Add despair, violence, mental illness and self-harm to the mix and the longevity of sentence becomes a secondary consideration.

This malevolent tapestry is mirrored in the treatment meted out to young black men from the lowest echelons of society, condemned to poor housing and job opportunities and damaging stereotypes. The appalling joint enterprise conviction meted out to Dadir, Tyrell's new-found friend, means that he will serve 21 years for murder when he merely nodded in recognition to someone he knew, who then went on to murder another boy. This sledgehammer approach to controlling gang violence pays no heed to the innocents caught up in its machinations and ignores the spiralling deprivations and prejudices which offer precious few rays of hope or opportunities for progress in abandoned black communities.

Then amidst all the dense negativity and the corrosive boredom in the prison comes the opportunity to attend a poetry workshop run by a black poet. An interest in lyrics and a desire to keep out of the way of trouble send Ty along and it's there that his journey to creative self-expression begins. His teacher Marlon recognises his talent before Ty ever does and Ty revels in being praised and supported in something he comes to believe in. When he is released he finds that words are his weapons and his solace and a brief spell back in jail after a spoken word protest gathering does nothing to deter him from continuing to write and perform his work.

Jawondo offers readers an insight into the world of black teenage male culture and society's response to it. The authentic use of language and the explanation of the way that the legal system is loaded against this coterie makes the book an immersive and powerful experience. It is especially telling that the reader becomes invested in Ty—this reader certainly wanted to know what he went on to become. He had a supportive family but what of those who don't? **VR**

Now, Conjurers

★★★★

Freddie Kolsch, Electric Monkey, 448pp 9780008623494, £8.99 pbk
*Adult content- Recommended 16-18

Suffused with Salem mystique and imbued with 1990's carnivalesque nostalgia, Kolsch's YA debut novel joyfully celebrates queer identities. It's a heady brew of movie culture, bubbling with allusions to cult classic *The Craft*. Knife edge tension mounts throughout as a courageous crew of teen misfits channel Charmed powers, turn cold case investigator and harness Buffy the Vampire Slayer cemetery style action vibes to battle the visceral violence and cruel mind games of a chilling adversary.

Inspired by the fascinating true story of Dana, Enfield, Greenwich and Prescott, four lost New England towns, which were flooded in the 1930s to create the Quabbin Reservoir, Kolsch's narrative has a vividly observed sense of place adorned with the ghostly and gothic trappings she creates.

Steeped in symbolism and intertextuality, the plot revolves around the creepy concept 'Be careful what you wish for', enshrined in W.W Jacob's sinister short story *The Monkey's Paw*. This is fused with the supernatural surge of the *Power of Five* found in *Wicca*. With characters crackling with magical energy, pithy put downs and linguistic trickery, Freddie confesses that she wrote the story of Bastian, Nesbit, Dove, Drea and Brandy to 'thrill her teenage self.'

Now, Conjurers has a gruesome opening and is structured using flashbacks built upon evocative nightmare scapes juxtaposed with the trials and tribulations of high school life. Tragic Bastian leads the North Coven who bear emblematic tattoos and have enduring relationships, vowing to overcome adversity and survive heartbreak. Their *bête noire* Cameron is fighting his own demons.

A quote from Thoreau's *Walden* resonates as the protagonists are sucked into a vortex of despair, desperately seeking an in between world to restore the balance between good vs evil. A deep love connection is at its heart mixed with ribald humour and emotional scenes worthy of *Ghost*.

Frosted with the sentimentality of the classic 1980's wish fulfilment fantasy, *The Never-Ending Story* [in a homage to both book and movie], the story also examines the psychological impact of dysfunctional families and the damage of misplaced guilt.

As Freddie confides, her book is a manifestation of 'the kids who kept all their pain and fear locked inside, fighting monsters that absolutely nobody around them knew about.'

Now, Conjurers will appeal to horror aficionados who are looking for nuanced queer representation set within an exciting, cinematic world that shocks and thrills but can feel strangely comforting too. **TJ**

Your Time is Up

★★

Sarah Naughton Scholastic, 336pp, 978-0702329760, £8.99 pbk

The idea of a real time mystery, set in an exam, had me intrigued from the beginning. Unfortunately, what unfolded was quite disappointing. My first observation was that the story was unrealistic. Yes, I know that it is YA fiction, and I am frequently happy to suspend disbelief when reading about talking animals, flying broomsticks, and bringing people back from the dead. But in this instance, the situation being so real and familiar, really jarred when even the slightest thing didn't go as expected.

The story takes place during an A-level math's exam, beginning with a flash forward to a police interview. The flash forwards and backs are interspersed throughout the book, with the exam. I'm guessing the idea of these little flashes was to create intrigue and slowly reveal key information. However, the premise would have been more interesting and stronger had everything taken place in the exam and the events had been revealed in a more linear way.

There are many reasons why I found the book unrealistic. It's not uncommon for students to put pressure on themselves and Zaina, our main focus, is no different. Along with the compulsion of feeling the need to make her recently deceased dad proud, Zaina has her eyes on the math's prize. None of this seems very unusual so I have to ask why would someone who pushes herself to the nth degree and clearly cares about her future, let herself get so distracted by another student, to the point she could ruin everything she has worked so hard for? The way the students can just breeze in and out of the exam with no adult supervision is frustrating and although I understand that these characters are bright and mature, I don't think there are many 20 somethings who could be so articulate and mindful about their experiences, let alone sixth form students.

The book takes a good 100 or so pages to get going and within those pages there is much rambling. We are introduced to many characters; however, we don't get to know a huge amount about them and what their motives are for doing anything, which leaves the story a little 2-dimensional. On a positive, I did want to keep reading, but I wonder if it were more out of desperation to see how it would all come together. This story has a huge amount of potential, it just needs to figure out where it sits in the grand scheme of things. **RBa**

Valediction: No.17 Mr Punch

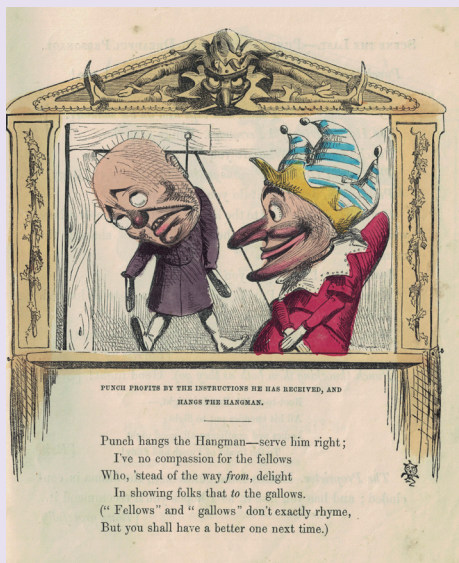
Goodbye, Mr Punch: **Brian Alderson** is bidding farewell to old favourites as he donates his remarkable collection of children's books to **Seven Stories**.

Round about 1860 occurred one of the most insightful occasions for students of **Punch and Judy**: an interview with one of the street performers of the famous tragic-comical puppet play. It was undertaken as one of the hundreds of such articles by Henry Mayhew that were published in the third volume of his riveting account of **London Labour and the London Poor** (pp.43-60). His unnamed contributor gives a somewhat repetitive account of his 'perfection' with verbatim details of what he knows of its history and of the life he leads with his partner as they lug their portable booth round the London streets. (He claims that at that time there were only sixteen Punchmen performing in England, eight in London and eight in the provinces.) He also touches on such features as Punch's high-pitched mode of speaking, the 'call' (now known as the 'swazzle') names and describes the traditional dramatis personae of the play and gives examples of the customary dialogue.

At one point he gives among his obiter dicta an observation on the transience of the craft with 'a new world always wanting a new thing. People are like babies always wanting a new toy' – a remark that shows more prescience than he could have known. For what has occurred about a hundred and sixty years later is the emergence of a woke generation not all that different from the Evangelicals of his time. They have greeted a reformed Punch, politically correct and now abiding by the shibboleths of the day.

This new performance has been reprinted from Covent Garden where, appropriately, the first news of a performance is recorded by Samuel Pepys, who went to see one in May 1672, taking his wife along a week or two later. A 'great resort of gallants' were present and he found the performance 'Very pretty, the best that ever I saw' (which bespeaks other attendances elsewhere of which we know nothing).

The show probably bore more resemblance to the *commedia del arte* harlequinades (with a Punchinello figure) which formed the subject of the turn-ups which children enjoyed in the mid-eighteenth century, and it was also performed by marionettes rather than glove puppets. It was only at the end of the eighteenth century that Punch and his wife Judy (originally Joan) arrived with accompanying accoutrements: the Proprietor with drum and pipe, supervising things from front-stage and taking whatever money was given, while the puppeteer below the stage board performed the play.



It would seem that the original success of the show came from an Italian puppeteer, Piccini (Mayhew's interviewee calls him Porsini) and a full-scale account of what became, through him, a lastingly popular street show was given by Payne Collier in his *Punch and Judy* of 1828.

Collier is notable for providing the first details of the fifteen characters who feature in one or another performance of the play and he gives the text of a version of it. As a literary journalist he is inclined to lard his coverage with learned notes and his reputation has been coloured by his subsequent notoriety as a forger and Shakespearian fraudster. Only long-term comparisons can answer questions as to the authenticity of his initial work although his book was garnished with twenty-four hand-coloured etchings by George Cruikshank – front-of-stage views of the passing tradi-comedy.

As the long-term comparison passes through often rare copies of the play its first example occurs in the volume for children discussed here. George Speaight, the foremost Punch authority, sees it as the first and one of the best editions to give a credible sequence to the serial depredations of our hero. After an introductory exchange between Punch and the Proprietor we proceed through what may have been an established order of scenes but continues to be found with variants: throwing the Baby out of the window, killing Judy and the Beadle, meeting a Distinguished Foreigner, sometimes called a Russian Bear, a visitation from the Ghost which occasions that of the Doctor, comic business with Joey the Clown, a long argument with Mr Jones (often called Scaramouche) who gets the better of Punch over the stealing of his dog, Toby, a famous prison scene where Punch

hangs the hangman, and, at the last, kills Satan (who sometimes, for moral purposes, is allowed to kill him).¹

The only concession to child readers is the provision of the anonymous limp verses, never found again, below each page of the pictorial stage settings – but these, though bolder, are no less fitting than Cruikshank's.

Important though it may be in the canon, this Blackwood edition was never reprinted although an adapted version was published in 1919 as a cheap picture book. Text and a monochrome copy of the illustrations are given a single page and a makeweight six pages are given over to limericks by Edward Lear and the rhyme:

*It must be fun the crowds to chaff
And wback your drum and make
folks laugh.*

*I know what I intend to do
when once my schooling I am through.
I'll buy a drum and pipes of Pan
And be a Punch and Judy man.*

'Papernose Woodensconce Esq. *The Wonderful Drama of Punch and Judy and their Little Dog Toby, as performed to overflowing balconies at the corner of the street*. Corrected and revised from the original manuscript in the possession of the king of the Cannibal Islands by permission of his majesty's librarian: with notes and references. With illustrations by "The Owl" [Robert Barnabas Brough]. London: James Blackwood, Paternoster Row [1849]. 210x179mm. [54]pp.] ([1]blank; [2-3] h/c frontis and half-title in manuscript lettering; [4] blank; [5] tp.[6] imprint: London: Printed by Jack and Evans, 16A Great Windmill Street, Haymarket; [7-8] Preface; [9] Persons represented; [10-11] – [52-53] uniform layout: play text to verso, h/c stage scene, verses below to recto. Pictorial paper over boards cut flush, title to front, framed ads. to rear, rebacked with red cloth spine, new cream endpapers.

¹ Ref. George Speaight, *History of the English Puppet Theatre*. 2nd ed. 1990



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.