

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.268

the children's book magazine online

September 2024

Authorgraph interview **Jenny Pearson**

Windows into Illustration **Sarah Massini**

Plus an interview with CLIPPA
winner **Matt Goodfellow**

and a poetry guide for
National Poetry Day



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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from *Shipwrecked* by Jenny Pearson illustrations by Nick East. Thanks to **Usborne Books** for their help with this cover.



Editorial 268

Welcome to the first issue of **Books for Keeps** of the new school year/autumn. After a summer which saw violent racist riots in England, we're hoping for kinder months ahead that restore people's sense of community. We're pleased to share a selection of books selected by **Letterbox Library** to challenge the prejudice of those who backed the riots, and to report on the latest initiative from **EmpathyLab**.

EmpathyLab is calling on new Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson to 'mainstream' empathy education as an antidote to hatred and division, and for a new drive using reading to build children's ability to empathise with others. 'We see empathy as a fundamental life skill', says Miranda McKearney, **EmpathyLab**'s founder, who is delighted to see the OECD highlight its importance in their Future of Education and Skills 2030.'

EmpathyLab's letter highlights scientific research showing that empathy is learnable – only 10% of the variation in people's levels of empathy can be explained by genes. (Warrier et al., 2018). It calls for the government's forthcoming curriculum review to focus on using reading more cannily, since research also shows that reading fiction can build real-life empathy. Whatever you think is the purpose of reading, it's clear that as **EmpathyLab**'s partner Professor Robin Banerjee of The University of Sussex's School of Psychology says, 'Cultivating empathy should be a priority within the curriculum as part of a greater focus on social and emotional skills.'

EmpathyLab has new resources for teachers, **Don't Hate, Educate**, available for teachers to use immediately, including a list of recommended books for children. It has also partnered with the **United Kingdom Literacy Association** to offer discussion prompts, booklists and family activities. In the words of teacher Jon Biddle, Moorlands Primary Academy, '**EmpathyLab**'s book collections are going to be more important than ever as schools return. They're all books which deliver powerful messages about community, acceptance, understanding and compassion'.

New psychology research is also underway. **EmpathyLab** is also the impact partner for a major University of Sussex research project on the connections between reading fiction and children's empathy. Professor Banerjee says, 'Empathy is a critical focus for work that many schools are undertaking to promote children's social and emotional learning, which goes hand in hand with developing academic skills. The power of children's books as a vehicle for supporting this learning deserves the urgent attention of policymakers and practitioners.' The three year research is funded by UK Research and Innovation and reports in 2025. <https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=ES%2FW001462%2F1>



photo Mark Waugh

World Book Day 2025

This week, **World Book Day** revealed the 15 £1/€1.50 books that children will be able to pick up for free this year in exchange for their £1 token. Its 2024 impact report highlighted the importance of choice when it comes to children's reading for pleasure. When asked, 47% of children said reading is best 'when they can choose what to read' and 25% said they wanted more freedom to read in other ways, such as graphic novels/ audiobooks.

Children were involved in selecting the titles this year therefore, and the £1/€1.50 book line-up includes short stories starring Bluey and Paddington Bear, as well as an **Acorn Wood** search-and-find story from children's book superstars Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler, and new **Barbara** story from Nadia Shireen. It's good to see that a selection of poems from former Children's Laureate Joseph Coelho is also included.

For older readers, there's a thriller from Benjamin Dean and a football story from Tom Palmer; a fart-heavy story by actor Stephen Mangan, but also a fantasy adventure by Kiran Millwood Hargrave. Books featuring, we quote, 'the beloved and globally renowned brands **Pokémon** and the **LEGO® Group** also feature in this year's selection. [Find the full list and details here.](#)

As all **BfK** readers know, reading for pleasure [continues to be the single biggest indicator of a child's future success](#) – more than family circumstances, parents' educational background or their income. And if reading more widely can stop young people believing the lies propagated by too many politicians at the moment, then children's books have the potential to create a better future for us all.

No pressure then, but we hope you find lots of books you'll want to share in this issue.

Happy, positive reading!

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Set SAIL: the new South Asian Children's Illustration and Literature Festival

The South Asian Illustration and Literature Festival (fondly SAIL for short) set off on its maiden voyage on Friday 6th September at The British Library in London.

Co-founder author Chitra Soundar tells us how it got started and what happened on the day.



SAIL Fest organisers L-R Sinéad Gosai, Chitra Soundar, Sanchita Basu De Sarkar

SAIL Festival is a new and exciting children's book festival celebrating South Asian illustrators, writers and poets creating books for readers between the ages of 0-17. Sanchita Basu De Sarkar and I had been mulling over such a festival on and off for a few years and the timing

now felt right. Sanchita, who owns the **Children's Bookshop** in Muswell Hill recently won the **Nibbies Book Retailer of the Year** and the **Children's Bookseller of the Year**, so if there was ever a time to be strategic it was now. I'd worked with PR expert Sinead Gosai previously so approached her too, and she said yes right away. We bring complementary skills to the table. I understand the author side of things - things South Asian authors care about and worry about. Sanchita understands the readers and the books out there and has wonderful connections in the publishing world. And Sinead brought a unique skill-set we didn't have - spreading the word and making alliances and partnerships. Personality-wise we are all very different too but good friends, we can laugh together and discuss things without getting too precious about it. This was important - we wanted the festival to be joyful and celebratory of South Asian creatives and for that we needed to approach it joyfully too. And all that was made possible with numerous cups of coffee and many late evening phone calls and zoom meetings.

South Asian kidlit is rich and nuanced and varied. We had a clear idea of what kinds of discussions we wanted to initiate and what our community would want to know more about. It was crucial to create a safe space where we could have nuanced conversations, something which is not always possible when we are not well-represented in other literary festival spaces.

Our very first event came together on Friday 6th September at a small venue in the British Library. Perminder Mann, CEO of **Bonnier** and President of the **Publishers Association** opened the festival with an inspiring and encouraging keynote address. Perminder talked about her own childhood and not feeling as though she belonged in bookshops but how she always felt very at home in her local Southall library. She questioned how our sense of identity and belonging can sometimes feel fragile, especially since the racist riots, but urged us to stay strong and to unite as a community, explaining that she truly feels publishing can be for everyone.

During the day, we managed to cover a variety of topics across children's literature created by South Asian creatives in the UK. The Publishers panel was hosted by lecturer and writer Darren Chetty, who was joined by Children's Book Consultant Jake Hope, **Tate's** Commissioning Editor, Cherise-Lopes Baker and Eishar Brar from **Knights Of**. The discussion focused on the lack of South Asian books being published, what publishers are looking for when evaluating books from South Asian creators, and what new authors can expect when entering the industry.

Then we talked about all things in the space intersecting storytelling and culture with writers A.M. Dassu, Jasbinder Bilan and Zanib Mian, chaired by Sinead. This conversation covered the research needed when writing about culture and heritage, celebrating cultural elements and touchstones like food and clothing in stories, and whether there's sometimes a need to inflate or tone down cultural references. The conversation also looked at how we can push back to make sure our stories are truly authentic and not being written for a white gaze.

In the afternoon, I hosted the picture books and visual storytelling panel, featuring illustrator Rikin Parekh, who designed and illustrated our gorgeous **SAIL Fest** logo, writer Smriti Halls and author/illustrator/poet Krina Patel-Sage. Looking at the approach taken by authors/illustrators when creating a new picture book, we also tackled the misconception that writing picture books is easy and talked about battling imposter syndrome. Even though I've been writing picture books a long time, the panel had many valuable insights to offer.

Sanchita dug into the past to unpack historical versus contemporary writing with authors Savita Kalhan, Bali Rai and Hiba Noor Khan who talked through the books and writers they were inspired by, and how they choose to set a story in the now or in the past. Ranging from research to hard topics, the panel was insightful to all, especially to Young Adult authors. Lastly, Sanchita chaired a dedicated fantasy panel, joined by the hilarious Sarwat Chadda, Nazneen Ahmed Pathak and Zohra Nabi. The authors discussed world building and drawing from cultures and perspectives and showed us how they make stories from South Asian mythology, folklore and fantasy accessible to all readers.

The three of us have only been planning the festival for a little over 4 months and knew how everything was expected to go. But we were blown away by the emotional response of our delegates and our speakers. Many came to tell me that they had 'found their tribe', that they felt seen, and that they were able to relate to every speaker they had heard.

Looking back, as an author who had to build my own space and community, I feel proud we created this space for everyone. We are ambitious to expand so we can spotlight more authors, illuminate amazing books and support new and aspiring creatives and industry professionals. We want to build a community that supports one another, offers advice, and cheers and celebrates each other's success.

To do all of the above, even in small steps, we need support from the UK publishing sector. Funding and space plus time and expertise from publishers will help expand the readership, and open up books created by South Asian authors, illustrators and poets to a wider audience. We are open to partnerships and support for outreach activities and more. So if you'd like to chat, drop us a note.

Find out more about us on our website sailfest.org.uk and [click here](#) to donate to the festival. Follow us on twitter / X @SAILFestUK and Instagram at sailfest_uk.

Chitra Soundar is an internationally published, award-winning author of over 50 books for children. She is also an oral storyteller.

Ten of the Best Books to resist what happened in the UK this August

"People haven't started thinking like this overnight. For years our newspapers and TV. and our politicians have painted a picture of Muslims and immigrants...as the bad guys. It's the headlines and the way politicians talk about us" (Eliyas Explains: What's Going On in the UK?)

As early as August 12th, mere days after the start of the far-right-inspired riots, children's author, **Zanib Mian**, with her trademark generosity, wrote and shared a free resource for children on social media, the title of which bolted straight to the point: 'What's Going on in the UK?' The work of caring for children and answering their questions in the face of this violence is vast and complex; it can be sustained, channelled and boosted by books which dismantle harmful stereotypes, explore disinformation's project, interrogate power and propaganda, enable children to spot fake news, discover their own voices – and resist. **Fen Coles** of **Letterbox Library** makes just ten book suggestions for primary aged children.



Dare

Lorna Gutierrez and Polly Noakes, Tiny Owl, 978-1910328422, £6.99 pbk

For the youngest of readers, a picture book which expands 'daring' out from small individual acts of courage, such as trying something for the first time, to bolder, transformative actions: seeing what others don't, speaking when others won't, joining a protest, placard brandished high. A wonderfully toddler-friendly text which cements the rights to have opinions and to express those freely.

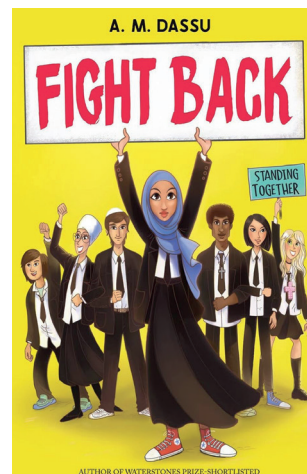


Eliyas Explains: What's Going On in the UK?

Zanib Mian (Muslim Children's Books, August 2024)

A free PDF from Zanib Mian, an author who excels in busting racist myths with buoyancy and wit (see her series, **Planet Omar** and **Meet the Maliks**). For ages 8+ and told in Eliyas' voice, this story takes place on August 7th, the day a second wave of rioting was predicted across the UK. Eliyas' parents say that none of them can go outdoors that day.

They carefully explain to their children the inexplicable – that there are people who wish them harm because of who they are. They describe how the ground had already been well laid by politicians' and the media's hateful rhetoric. Because this is Zanib's work, there is also hope – from duas sure to make a demon's plans flop to emboldening children with ways to counter hatred to citing real life role models such as Muslim chaplain Adam Kelwick who met the violence directed at his masjid by handing out burgers and chips.



Fight Back

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

Interest in Dassu's middle grade novel resurged in August across social media. It describes the aftermath of a terrorist attack at a K-pop concert in the Midlands. Racism is stoked, false narratives peak, tensions simmer and ultimately spill over into the local community. A young British Muslim, Aaliyah, resolves to move forward against this tide, choosing to wear the hijab and drawing on a thoughtful activism which draws her friends into the fight. The racist and religious-based discrimination experienced by young people feels palpable and the might of their resistance is striking. A numbing swipe at racist tropes, Dassu also exposes assumptions about who makes up the far-right. [Shortlisted for the **Little Rebels Award 2023**].



The Fights That Make Us

Sarah Hagger-Holt, Usborne, 978-1801315791, £7.99 pbk

It's perhaps no surprise for a list such as this to feature a third **Little Rebels Award Winner** (alongside Mian and Dassu). This novel tracks the violence of prejudice and the joy of pride across two very different generations. Parallel narratives describe two young women who fall in love in the 1980s against the backdrop of homophobic legislation (specifically Section 28) and, in the present, the discrimination experienced by two friends who identify as non-binary and pansexual. The stories speak to each other in a dance of solidarity, community and hope for the future. Above all, this is a celebration of how minorities have historically fought back with marches, direct action and, also very often, with playful irony.

Fen Coles is co-director of **Letterbox Library**. Before joining in 2015, she worked in the charity sector, predominately in the field of LGBT and women's rights. **Letterbox Library** is a not-for-profit children's bookseller specialising in equality, diversity and inclusion. **Letterbox Library** runs the **Little Rebels Award for Radical Children's Fiction**.

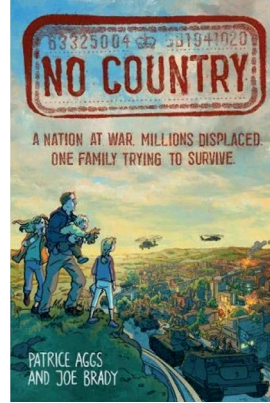
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A Hero Like Me

Angela Joy, Jen Reid and Leire Salaberria, Frances Lincoln, 978-0711270411, £7.99 pbk

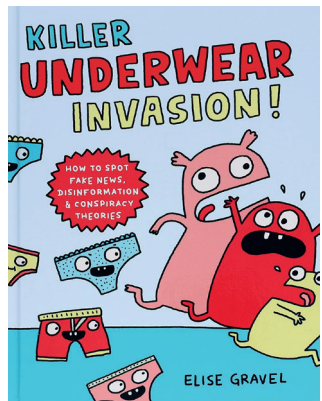
A proudly political title, inspired by the infamous toppling of Edward Colston off his plinth in June 2020 and part authored by Bristol activist, Jen Reid. Included here because of the ways in which it celebrates children's lively questions and then encourages them to keep thinking critically. The protagonist, a young girl, wanders through her neighbourhood, observing memorials and wondering who gets anointed as a 'Hero' and why. Her interrogation travels through to the backnotes which prompt the reader to, similarly, unpick who our culture reveres as role models. A warm invitation to young readers to resist dominant narratives and think independently. [Shortlisted for the **Little Rebels Award 2024**].



No Country

Joe Brady & Patrice Aggs, David Fickling Books, 978-1788451833, £9.99 pbk

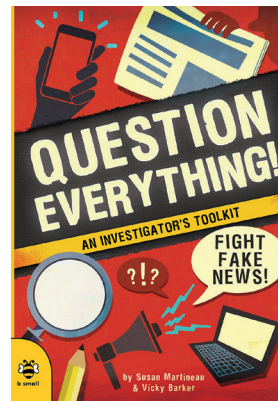
The best dystopian fiction always tiptoes closest to the boundaries of our present world. With this graphic novel for readers aged 9+, we see a country fractured and brought down by the terrifying conclusion of far-right ideologies, creeping authoritarianism and its servicing by a corrupt press, menacingly titled, 'The Daily Truth'. This is a nightmarish but painfully legible vision which could easily be read as an acceleration of this summer's riots. It also works powerfully as a parable which lays out how domestic terror could easily make a refugee of any of us; the author says he was inspired at the time of writing by the Syrian refugee crisis and the subsequent nativism that followed. [Shortlisted for the **Little Rebels Award 2022**].



Killer Underwear Invasion!

Elise Gravel, Chronicle Books, 978-1797214917, £10.99 hbk

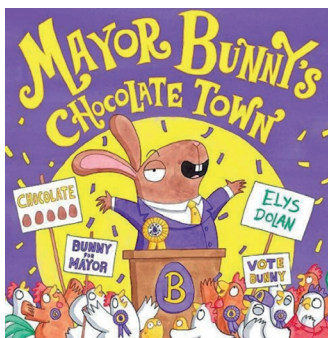
Canadian author Gravel's website is devoted to equipping children with the knowledge they need to be 'mindful of social justice'. Pitched at ages 6/7+, **Killer Underwear** uses wonderfully brash comic art to explain and uncover the pernicious functions of fake news before building a toolkit for crushing it at the source. Six tidy chapters explore the ubiquitousness of disinformation, its ideological occupations (from making money to accumulating power), how it endangers us all and devalues democracy. It ends with ten doable steps to partition off real news from fake news which include source checking and examining your own 'confirmation bias'. Invaluably practical.



Question Everything: an Investigator's Toolkit

Susan Martineau and Vicky Barker, b small, 978-1912909353, £5.99 pbk

'This book is good because it tells you not to trust everything on the Internet'. Praise indeed from one of **Letterbox Library's** (11-year-old) reviewers and proof that the content executes precisely what it claims on the cover as a megaphone blares out 'Fight Fake News!' Accessible chunks of text, bold headers, emoticons and symbols lay bare our culture's chaos of information and equips the reader with the resisting forces of fact extraction, fake-news spotting, research and independent critical literacy skills. Ideal for Key Stage 2 and well suited to reluctant readers, it ends with the vital manifesto, 'The Rights of the Fake-news Fighter'.



Mayor Bunny's Chocolate Town

Elys Dolan, Oxford University Press, 978-0192746238, £6.99 pbk

Mr Bunny, supreme wielder of capitalism's worst excesses, is back (see Mr Bunny's Chocolate Factory). This time he is laser-focused on a new prize: the mayorship of Coop town. To seduce his chicken electorate, he unrolls a steady stream of audacious lies, chocolate-flavoured bribery and burst-with-a-pinprick policies. One of the most child-friendly and screamingly funny exposés of Trumpian-styled politics in picture books which also delivers smart, accessible points about fake news and fearmongering. [Shortlisted for the **Little Rebels Award 2023**].



Something, Someday

Amanda Gorman and Christian Robinson, Puffin Books, 978-0241535875, £12.99 hbk

Not so much a counter to disinformation as a rescue from drowning feelings of hopelessness, as well as a challenge to the lie children are so often told: that they cannot alter anything. The young child in this picture book is told there is not a problem to be seen, that in any case there is nothing they can fix, that – at best – they should just sit and wait for change. But this child is hopeful. They know the depths of their own resources and they're confident in their mettle. Most of all, they know that people 'have already waited too long'. Change blossoms, not as a dream, but as a time lived out in the present. A hymn to overcoming... someday.

Authorgraph

No.268

Jenny Pearson
interviewed by
Tanja Jennings

Jenny Pearson has always loved stories. She confides in me that her mum marked her down as a literary genius at the age of four when she wrote about, 'a mischievous egg hatching out of a saucepan with little legs and running away to have adventures.' Some of her favourite early memories are of her father reading Gerald Durrell stories to her, a tradition which has carried on with her own children, and which has provided inspiration with her most recent novel, of which more later.

With a real skill for balancing hilarity with big emotions, Jenny believes that her chosen profession of primary school teacher has had an enormous influence on her writing.

'I wouldn't be a writer if I wasn't a teacher' she states. 'Sharing brilliant stories with my classes is amazing. You go on a journey together, all of you on the edge of the seat or laughing or crying. When I'm writing I'm always keeping in mind my classes and my kids while exaggerating my characters. I'm really lucky to get to listen to how children speak, see what they're into and how they behave, and generally just be constantly reminded how brilliant they are.'

Inspired by everything from fascinating facts, funny family anecdotes and conversations with friends, Jenny has created a succession of warm hearted and hilarious adventures for young readers. Her writing is joyful, entertaining and empathetic too: starting with her 2020 debut, **The Super Miraculous Journey of Freddie Yates**,

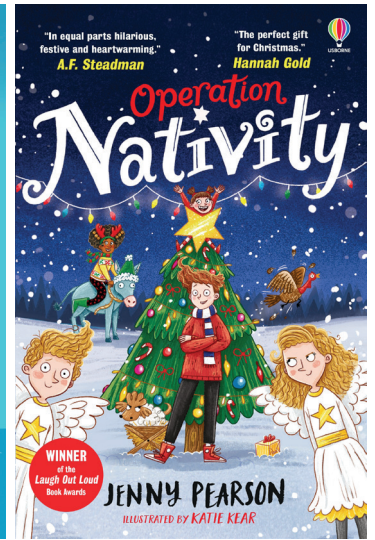
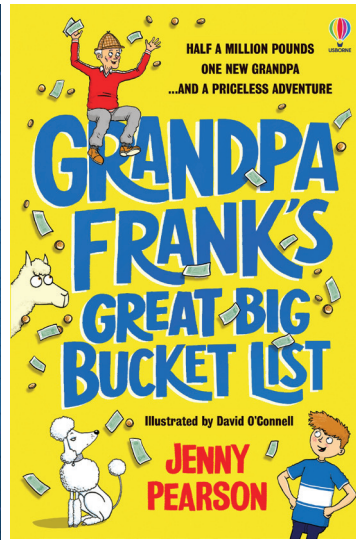
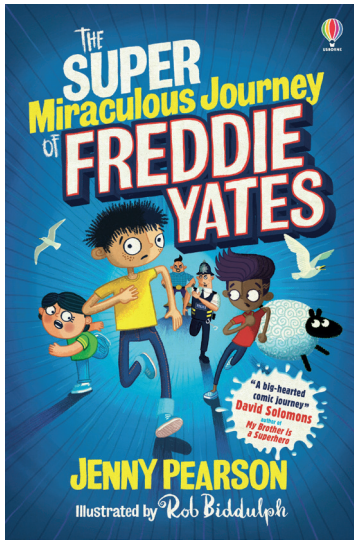


which won the 2022 **Laugh Out Loud Book Awards** in the Middle Grade category and was shortlisted for the **Costa Children's Book Award**, her books feature children dealing with bereavement, difficult family dynamics and even mental health issues.

She sends her characters on physical and emotional trips, giving them quests and challenging their expectations. Her first two books are full of fun factoids, madcap mayhem, firm friendships and realisations while **Grandpa Frank's Great Big Bucket List** is a rollercoaster of hysterical octogenarian hijinks balanced with heartfelt emotion. Inspired by her friend's grandfather's list of '90 Things to Do When You're 90', it features state of the art gadgetry in a home for the elderly, parkour and monster truck driving. Conversely, **The Boy Who Made Monsters** explores the metaphor of grief as a monster.

Among her influences are the gentle, authentic humour of Frank Cottrell Boyce, with Carnegie Medal winner **Millions** being one of her favourite books, and the contemporary, funny style of Sam Copeland, now her co-author on the **Tuchus and Topps** spy detectives series. Describing her creative process she says, 'Sometimes jokes and scenes come really easily and they just flow but other times they take a lot of effort, writing and rewriting to get them to land. It is important to find a balance. When you're dealing with difficult stuff you inject humour to balance emotion.'

Her latest venture, **Shipwrecked**, is an anti-**Lord of the Flies**, set on a desert island with a lively cast of characters and a menagerie of alliterative creatures. Imagined during lockdown and inspired by a true story of six lost Tongan boys stranded on the South Pacific Island of Ata in 1965, who built a peaceful self-sufficient existence



before being rescued, it addresses climate change and turtle trafficking while also challenging Golding's idea that children will become feral without adult supervision.

Lord of the Flies, now reaching its 70th anniversary, traumatised Jenny when she first read it in Year 9, although she recognised its power. Golding based it on a dark view of human nature in the aftermath of the Nazi invasion, yet Jenny thinks shipwrecked children would be inventive, kind and helpful, like the Tongan boys who splinted their friend's leg and took time outs to avoid disagreements. In **Shipwrecked** troubled Sebastian and his friends, resourceful Lina who uses a copy of **Lord of the Flies** as a guide of what not to do, and Etienne, who is the Dr Dolittle of the group, experience rivalry, friendship, humorous mishaps, hazardous fruit and home sickness when they become castaways. They have to rely on scarce supplies and surprises ensue as they encounter more obstacles during their bid to survive.

Asked about her desert island skillset (and discs), Jenny lists Bear Grylls' **Survival Skills** box set as a go-to, plus **My Family and Other Animals** of course, and Durrell's **Beasts in My Belfry**. For her playlist, she enthuses, 'I would like the beautiful *Seabird* by the Alessi Brothers because it makes you feel like you're outside, the joyous *My Lighthouse* which we sung at school all the time and did all the actions to and *The Pirates of the Caribbean* theme tune which reminds me of when my kids were young when I'd crank that tune up in our Bongo Mazda Campervan and we'd pretend that we were pirates. It's very stirring and might actually make me feel like I could build a raft and sail off to save myself if I had that music going.'

As for other considerations, her advice to the shipwrecked is to avoid panicking, consider risk vs reward, to remain calm, to not make hasty decisions and be aware of dangers when foraging.

Another factor for Jenny when writing **Shipwrecked** was her desire to raise awareness of the terrible trade in turtles in Southeast Asia where the Green Sea Turtle and the Hawksbill Turtle make up 93% of the turtles trafficked. She shares shocking statistics, citing the latest research in Oceanographic Magazine which has revealed that in the last thirty years 1.1 million turtles have been killed in the pursuit of food, medicine and cultural status. 'It's a difficult problem to tackle because it is about changing a culture. Obviously, climate change is affecting the turtles too so these majestic creatures are really up against it.'

When educating children about environmental activism, Jenny observes that there's a fine balance between enlightening them and frightening them with the enormity of the problem. Making a difference is the key. Choosing to walk, recycling, food choices, fundraising for nature charities, turning lights off and helping with beach clean ups all count.

As Jenny sails off from Sunrise Island, new horizons beckon in her story landscape. February will see the release of **Speed Wheels**

3000, a high-octane father daughter epic road trip fuelled by a mash up of the 1960's heist movie **The Italian Job** and **The Gumball Celebrity Motor Rally**. Following this, her next middle grade project will be a major departure. Set in Deptford, it will coincide with the 80th anniversary of VE Day and will recount the lives of boys who viewed bomb sites as playgrounds.

Jenny has always been fascinated by historical narratives and is inspired too by the emotive writing of Michael Morpurgo, Phil Earle and Lesley Parr. She praises **When the Sky Falls** for its deft use of shadowing, cried at **Private Peaceful**, and enjoyed Serrailier's **The Silver Sword**. Leaving hilarity behind, **Shrapnel Boys** will focus upon the plight of vulnerable boys with absent fathers who fall prey to the machinations of the underground fascist movement led by Oswald Mosley. Jenny explains, 'I was reading something about how kids used to collect 'hard rain' shrapnel, and I had an idea about these boys who stayed in London during World War Two. Focusing on the gang element, I brought in the Black Shirts and the simmering fascism that was bubbling away at that time. As I wrote, I felt attached to these three boys and what they were going through. While I included some conversational humour, I mostly concentrated on the emotional impact of their journey and the dynamics of their group, making one of them a conscientious objector. It was a stimulating challenge which involved poring over bomb maps of London, learning the locations of shelters and lots of fact checking.'

Drawing on stories from her dad about how he found a bomb as a child, personal accounts from the **BBC Voices** project and old newspapers, she enjoyed time travelling. Warm, funny and modest about her extensive body of work, Jenny feels energised by a new genre. She is already planning a second wartime tale, one motivated by interviews about life in occupied Jersey.

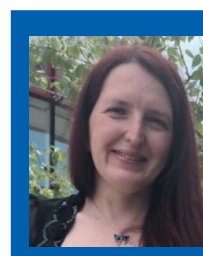
Books mentioned (by Jenny Pearson, all published by Usborne):

Shipwrecked, illustrated by Nick East, 978-1474999908, £7.99 pbk

The Super Miraculous Journey of Freddie Yates, illustrated by Rob Biddulph, 978-1474974042, £6.99 pbk

Grandpa Frank's Great Big Bucket List, illustrated by David O'Connell, 978-1474974066, £7.99 pbk

The Boy Who Made Monsters, illustrated by Katie Kear, 978-1474999892, £7.99 pbk



Tanja Jennings is a judge of the **CILIP Carnegie Medals**, a dedicated school librarian, children's book reviewer and creative book blogger from Northern Ireland.

Windows into Illustration: Sarah Massini

As part of the 80th anniversary of the original translation, Sarah Massini was asked to illustrate a new picture book version of **The Little Prince** by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Her graceful, illustrations, wheeling back and forth from desert to stars, proved up to the task of retelling this much-loved classic. She explains her approach to illustration here.

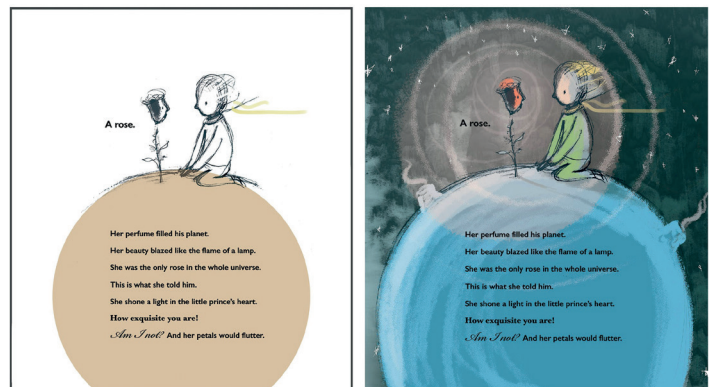
My first response when asked to illustrate **The Little Prince** was complete euphoria. After all, it has been my favourite book since my early teens. I know it so well. I love it so much. I jubilantly signed on the dotted line... and then reality set in! How could I possibly even think of visually reinterpreting one of the most beloved and iconic books in the whole world? But then again, here was the opportunity of dreams....

The illustration I've decided to discuss is one that focusses on the two characters at the very heart of the story: the Prince and the Rose sitting on Asteroid B-612, with its three volcanoes (two live and one extinct, but you never know). It also happens to be the first illustration that I completed for the book. And I was really happy with how it turned out, which enabled me to tackle the rest of the book with a flim-flam of confidence – a belief that perhaps I could do this thing after all.



Final art

Illustrating a picture book is always a strict process of making THUMBNAIL SKETCHES, then DETAILED PENCIL ROUGHS, and finally FINAL ART.



Thumbnail sketch

Thumbnail Sketch

I always love this stage as it's so full of possibility. It's speedy and energetic. And it's all about the Cs: Composition, Characters, Colour, Content and Context. So with these, and also author Louise Greig's beautiful and concise retelling in mind, I was propelled towards an obvious direction for this illustration. The Little Prince says, 'How exquisite you are!' and so I clearly needed to show him appearing to be enchanted by the Rose. And, prompted by 'She shone a light... and Her beauty blazed like the flame of a lamp', I created a compositional repetition of rounded shapes: the Asteroid and the Rose's glowing light. And that light also helped provide the all-important focal point for the illustration, visually and also metaphorically, as The Little Prince is drawn inexorably into the Rose's sphere.



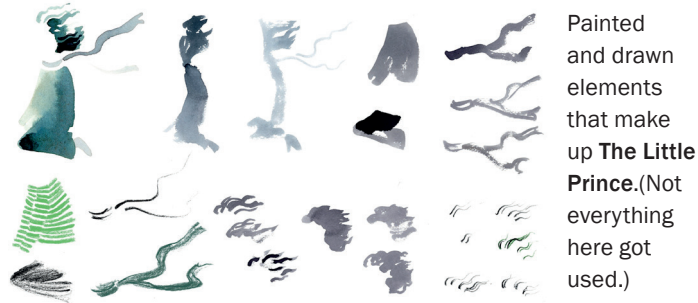
Detailed pencil rough

Detailed Pencil Rough

This is an important stage not least because much of the detailed line-drawing ends up in the final art. I try to keep fluidity and vitality in my drawing. I always draw with a 2B pencil on layout paper- the right softness-of-lead upon paper which has a perfect level of friction. (It's the little things that make the big things work out!)

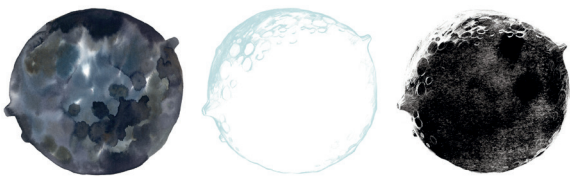
Final Art

Like very many illustrators working today, I use a mixture of traditional and digital media. I create every detail separately, using mainly watercolour, pencil and pencil-crayon. The details are scanned and pulled into Photoshop, where, like a complex jigsaw puzzle, every little brush mark and pencil line gets coloured and teased into place. But it's a trial-and-error approach.



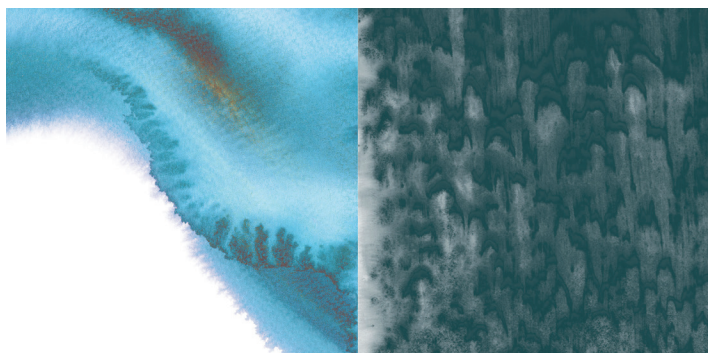
Painted and drawn elements that make up **The Little Prince**. (Not everything here got used.)

I was keen in the end that the text should reverse out of a black Asteroid. I find it frustrating that we are always bound to black text for co-edition reasons. But if you reverse out the text, it can be in a colour, ie the background colour of the art. It's a trick I probably overuse, but the black also makes an image bold and punchy. (Some parts of the illustration – notably here, the space background – I plundered from my vast library of washes and blotches. I blended a dragged watercolour texture with what is, in fact, part of a landscape that I'd previously created for **The Velveteen Rabbit**.



Left - rejected watercolour. Mid - pencil-line coloured in Photoshop. Right - pencil-line combined with relief-print texture)

In both cases, the washes had been happy accidents, creating unique textures that are impossible to recreate no matter how hard I try. I'm obsessed with texture. And I love happy accidents.

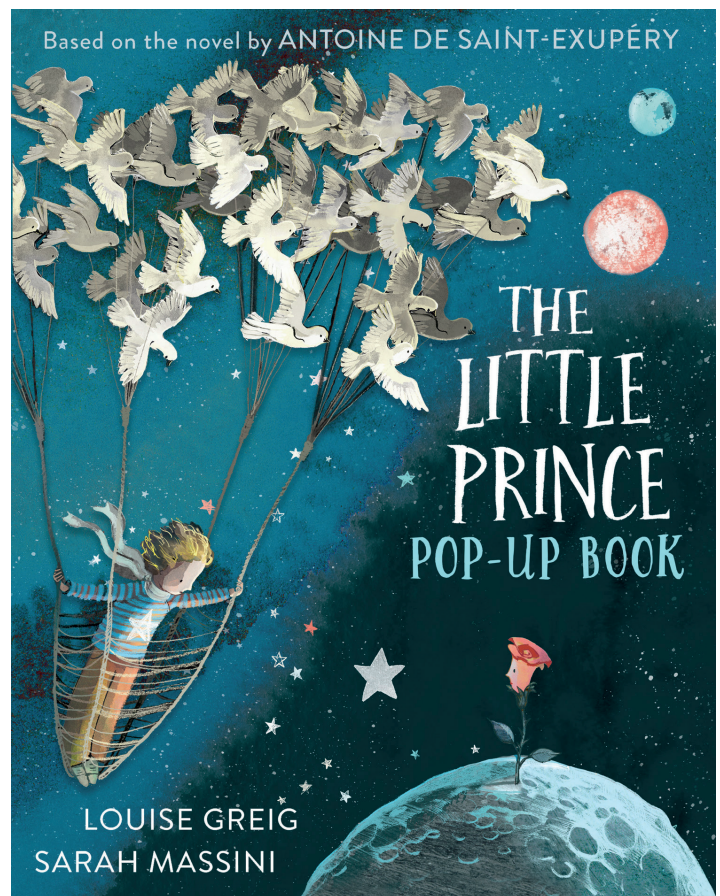


The background - a blend of two textured watercolour washes



The final book

All the while I'm fiddling with tiny bits of detail, I'll have thought about contrast and balancing the colour; and creating a sense of atmosphere, ensuring the connection between the Little Prince and the Rose is the focal point for the illustration. And I'll have been trying to keep everything fresh whilst wrestling with 100s of mind-boggling Photoshop layers. But I will have reminded myself of that first thumbnail which had so much immediacy and spontaneity in it. I always use the thumbnail as a benchmark for my final art.



The new edition of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's classic **The Little Prince**, adapted as a children's illustrated picture book, written by Louise Greig, illustrations by Sarah Massini, is published by Farshore, 978-0008621759, £7.99 pbk.

Picture This: Are We Old Enough for Picturebooks?

In the latest of a new **Books for Keeps** series putting picturebook illustration in the spotlight, **Nicolette Jones** asks if we ever get too old for picturebooks.

When my elder daughter was 15, I was opening book parcels and read a picturebook I particularly liked. I handed it to her, saying 'Isn't this great? Then I added: 'Though I suppose you aren't the target audience'. She gave me a Hard Stare. 'Since when,' she said, 'do you get too old for picturebooks?'

I was delighted that my opinion had been taken so decisively on board. Why are good picturebooks for everyone? Because they are made by adults, who have often spent a lifetime looking at art and making it. Because they need to have a double audience, if pre-readers are to enjoy them: both the child who looks and listens, and the adult who reads aloud – and if the adult does not take pleasure in repeated reading, enthusiasm for books will never be passed on. And because it is peculiar to say that we grow out of pictures. If that were true, art galleries, the cinema and all other visual media would have had it long ago.

But while I believe that even books that are enjoyed by the very young can equally be enjoyed by the less young, it is also true that some picturebooks are obviously aimed at a sophisticated audience. The work, say, of Armin Greder (Swiss Australian author-illustrator of, for example, **The Island, Diamonds, The Inheritance** ...) or German author-illustrator Wolf Erlbruch's **Death, Duck and the Tulip** fall into this category. Partly because of the darkness of their subjects: prejudice, exploitation, loss, anger. Some of the images I have Tweeted for #NewIllustrationoftheDay also invite adult appreciation. I have chosen three of these to consider here.

The first is from **Bird is Dead** (Greystone Kids), illustrated by Herma Starreveld, written by Tiny Fisscher and translated by Laura Watkinson. It is a picturebook about death that reproduces, with exceptional candour and a vein of black humour, the kinds of things people say when somebody dies. They cry, they squabble, they speak well and ill of the deceased (Bird, in this book). They put him in a hole in the ground and criticise each other's orations. And in the picture I chose they then process to consume tea and worms, or cake.

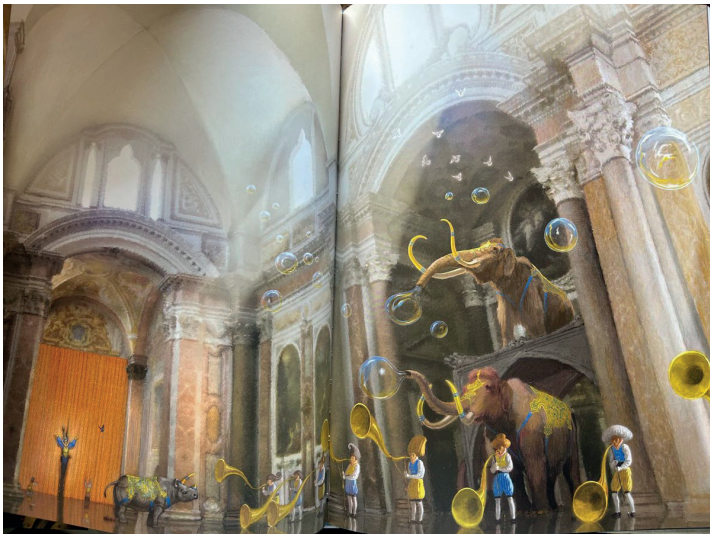
The birds (stand-in humans) in this wordless spread are haphazardly constructed from collage, ink and paint. They are all different – not birds of a feather – suggesting individuality rather than commonality (because grief leaves us all alone?). The Cubist-influenced collage seems to depict clothes rather than plumage (one bird wears boots) and it, and the birds' expressions, also hint at busy interior thoughts – each processing, in silence, their own response in their own way? And as the colours of these imaginary birds are beautiful against the grey background, they seem vivid with life. By comparison, on other pages the corpse is slightly muted. Meanwhile the dark cloud and blasted trees could be a metaphor for the territory of loss. And if we are inclined to go for such interpretation, the ray of light through the cloud, and the lantern carried by one of the birds may represent hope and solace.

There is no doubt that this image is unexpected, and odd to the point of surreality. So, usually, is our experience of a death. This unsentimental picturebook may well be a useful way in to honest conversations with children, and is marketed as such for age 4-8. Its openness to analysis, despite having few words of text, means it might interest older students of Art, English, Ethics, Philosophy, Sociology ... Or anyone inclined to have fun with collage. Its visual quirkiness and originality made me pause and pore over it, since, unusually, it did not remind me of any other picturebook I had seen.

Also startling is a dreamlike image by Australian Matt Ottley from his book **The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbearable Sadness** (One Tentacle Publishing). The book sets out to depict, from the author-illustrator's own experience, the internal landscape of bipolarity and psychosis. I chose this surreal picture not only for the éclat of its subject but for the skill of its execution. The golden-tusked mammoths blowing bubbles, the fantastically behatted and costumed musician guards blowing giant horns, the excreting rhinoceros, the venerated tyrant appearing through a distant curtain, and the flights of birds in a cathedralesque interior, are conjured with tromp l'oeil craftsmanship, elegance and a love of light.



Bird is Dead is written by Tiny Fisscher, illustrated by Herma Starreveld.



The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbearable Sadness is written and illustrated by Matt Ottley

The large format book marries both beauty and the grotesque as the narrator finds himself entangled and then consumed by a tree (pencil drawings), haunted by nightmare faces and vital organs (in shocking colour), banished by a nightmarish sovereign but also floating free over breathtaking scenery. The subject of all the images in this book is beyond words – it can only be depicted visually. We can analyse the technique, and the relationship of parts, as in a poem, but what it tells us cannot be summarised, though we may bring outside knowledge of psychology to it and reduce it to highs and lows, fears and visions and hopes. There is, for instance, in the particular image I chose no narrative to illustrate. There is only the illustration.

There is also music in the package. The book comes with a DVD of a score and narration, because Ottley is a composer as well as an artist. The reader is invited to listen to this while turning the pages. Music is a good analogy for the images: it creates an atmosphere and a feeling, but does not tell a story. And the appropriate audience is anyone who wants to pay attention. Ottley's book is only not for children because some of the fantastical pictures, though not the image with the mammoths, are potentially disturbing.

My third image is by Yevgenia Nayberg and is from a personal memoir and tribute to an American artist and salonniere. It is called **A Party For Florine: Florine Stettheimer and Me**, and is published by Neal Porter Books. Nayberg is a Ukrainian artist now living in the US who saw an exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York in 2017 of the work of Florine Stettheimer (1871-1944). She was struck by the physical resemblance between herself and the artist. Loving the pictures, she felt a 'mystical' connection, researched Stettheimer's art, life and poetry, and imagined the difference it would have made to her as a shy, creative child to have found this connection with this larger-than-life character when she was younger. The result is part biography of Stettheimer and part reimagining of her own youth.

The pictures throughout Nayberg's book are vibrant, striking and delightful, but most admirable is the fact that her own style pays homage without imitation. 'The most exciting challenge,' she said, in a recent interview with Robert Lee Brewer on writersdigest.com, was 'inventing a style that resembled Florine's without losing my own.' This is so unusual. Picturebooks about artists tend to copy, which is always dissatisfying because however clever the copy it inevitably loses something of the original. Nayberg's book reproduces some instances of Stettheimer's work but does not attempt to recreate it.

What Nayberg has learnt from her doppelganger is, she says, that 'it is up to us to create a world full of colour and full of surprises'. Nayberg's work has both. The book does not shy away from portraying Florine's friends, including elegant reimaginings of artist Marcel Duchamp, and poet Carl von Vechten who compared Florine's



A Party For Florine: Florine Stettheimer and Me is written and illustrated by Yevgenia Nayberg.

work to jazz. The text incorporated into this image by Nayberg says: 'And just like jazz, it was! Everything Florine painted danced and sang on a canvas: purple socks, yellow books, skinny cats, giant flowers, darkness and light!' It depicts the elements of this list, while also adding a glance of kinship between Florine and the child, and abstract shapes that suggest the flow of one life into another, as well as turning Stettheimer's seat into a blaze of glory. It is both decorative and expressive, in harmony with Stettheimer's pictures and quite distinct. It is indebted to the perspectives and stylisations and patterns of Expressionism, and its intense colour. Something of the charm of Klee and Kandinsky as well as Stettheimer has crept into Nayberg's illustration.

The protagonist is a child, and certainly Nayberg found a way of making this story resonate for a young audience. If it alludes to people a child may not know it does not matter. They are brought to life with details. And anyway everything and everyone is new to the young.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to say that this picture, and this book, would not also appeal to adults. This work is asking for a coffee table as well as a classroom. And again students of any age might find it a springboard for learning more about Stettheimer, Duchamp, von Vechten, and how to make a painting zing.

Nayberg also said: 'Don't worry about pleasing an unknown child with your story. Write [and presumably illustrate] for the child you once were, or better yet for the child you are.' Maybe that is why picturebooks are for us all: because we are all still the child.

Books mentioned:

Bird is Dead, Tiny Fisscher, illus Herma Starreveld, trans Laura Watkinson, Greystone Kids, 978-1778401176, £12.99 hbk.

The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbearable Sadness, Matt Ottley, One Tentacle Publishing, 978-0645042030, £25.00hbk.

A Party For Florine: Florine Stettheimer and Me, Yevgenia Nayberg, Neal Porter Books, 978-0823454105, £16.99 hbk



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).

Tara Books: 30 years of creativity



Pam Dix interviews Gita Wolf, founder of Tara Books

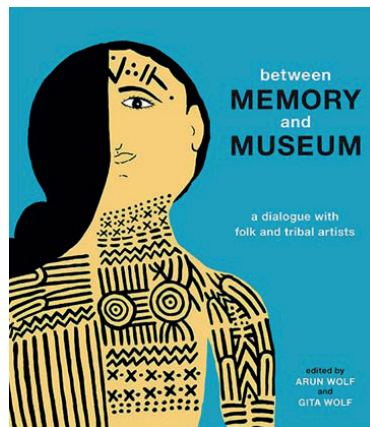
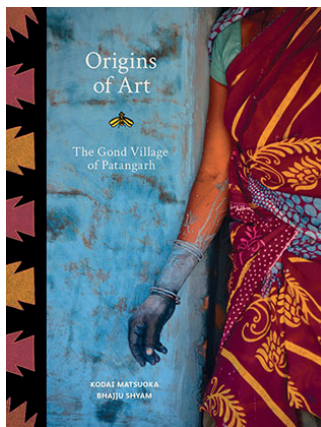


2024 is the 30th anniversary of **Tara Books**, a remarkable achievement for an independent publisher and for Gita Wolf and her team, a collective of writers, designers and bookmakers. Gita shared her story in this interview and with **IBBY UK** during a recent visit to London from India. Most of us could remember the first time we saw a Tara publication, innovative and exciting and so different to anything we had seen before.

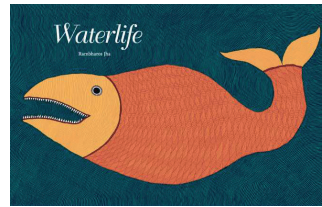
That quality and freshness has not diminished over the years, opening a Tara book is a sensory, emotional and intellectual experience.

Tara Books started at a time when most books published in India were moralistic and educational and there was a feeling, as Gita says, that adventure happened elsewhere in books, something which they have successfully overturned. As a team, they had a passionate commitment to quality publishing, to the visual and to Indian traditions. And of course, they were very much rooted in their non-hierarchical feminist inclusive approach

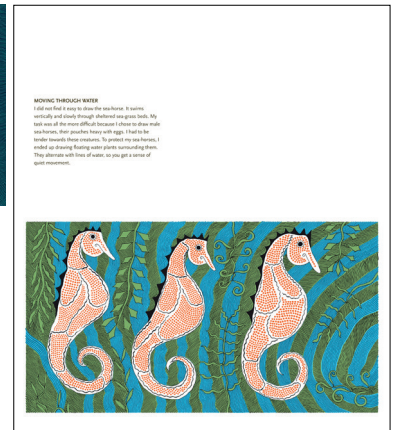
Gita sees these 30 years as a period of organic growth, very much based within the Indian context, rooted in the land and the ideas and resources that come from the local environment. She is very pleased that nowadays 75-80% of their sales and selling rights are within India, with Japan remaining their major export destination.



The visual was important to Tara from the beginning, partly because of the number of indigenous art styles which they wanted to draw into book format. As Gita says, the artists know about their work, their artistic styles and the stories they can tell, but it is the publishers and designers at Tara who know how to make this into book format. The result is that they have been able to work with new unknown creators. We discussed the ever-present debate about art versus craft, the individual artist versus the tradition of an art form, an issue explored in two wonderful Tara publications **Origins of Art: the Gond Village of Patangarh** (Kodai Matsouka and Bhajju Shyam) and **Between Memory and Museum: a Dialogue with Folk and Tribal Artists** (Arun and Gita Wolf).

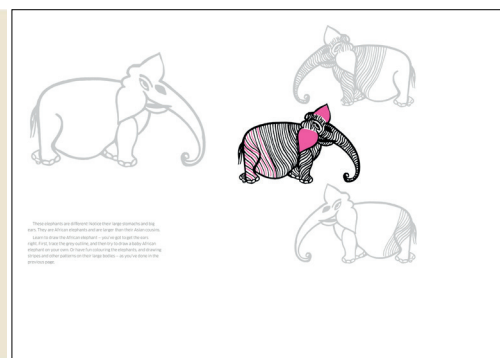
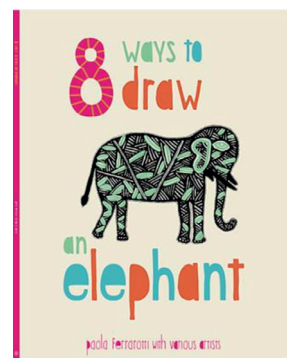


Waterlife is in oversize landscape format, silkscreen printed by hand on handmade paper, which has a rich textural effect.



Many Tara books use these traditional art forms as a visual starting point, as in **Waterlife** (Rambharos Jha), a Mithila artist exploring childhood memories of growing up by the river.

Tara also publish practical activity books for children to learn and explore, as in **8 ways to draw ... an elephant** (Paola Ferrarotti), one of a series of three including fish and deer, which explore eight different Indian art traditions through tracing, patterns and having fun.



The visual is also important because of the number of languages spoken in India. Tara publishes in English and in Tamil, and rights are sold for other Indian languages. A very visual output helps transcend any barriers of language.

India and Asia have many varieties of book formats (scrolls, unfolding pages), of paper quality, including handmade, and of printing including block printing and different presses. These have been celebrated by Tara and are represented in their catalogue. Graphic and typography are also explored in a variety of ways. The result is that Tara employs a wide range of skilled craftspeople to produce the handmade books, plus original art works related to the books, and to work on a variety of printing techniques. The company is in itself a whole creative industry. Their printing is now done in India.



Find the feels you're looking for

Ana Sampson interviews Matt Goodfellow

Matt Goodfellow's powerful yet accessible novel in verse **The Final Year**, illustrated by Joe Todd-Stanton, won the 2024 **CLiPPA, CLPE Children's Poetry Award**, and the hearts of readers of all ages. Nate is facing down the dreaded Year 6 – SATS, friendship struggles, anger and all – when his little brother falls ill and his world, already chaotic, spins off its axis. He finds lights to guide him, though, including friendships old and new, a perceptive new teacher and reading and writing.

Nate felt so real to me, and we can see from the book's success just how real he felt to young readers, too. I asked Matt how difficult it was to achieve such an authentic child's voice.

'Everything I write is inspired by a combination of three things: my life, lives that I've seen, and things that I make up. I taught as a Year 6 teacher in East Manchester, where the book is set, and Nate is a combination of lots of different young people I taught, kids that I've met doing events around the country, and stuff from my life.'

Matt's editor, Charlotte Hacking, also comes from a teaching background, and their hard work getting the accent and dialect right and creating a setting that felt true to life has paid off.

'As a teacher, I didn't see lives like Nate's represented in literature. And we're saying: this is a story to be told, and these lives are important. Your cultural heritage matters. Your accent matters. We're trying to get teachers and young people to understand that an expression of self in the voice that you've grown up with is really important. It's about identity.'

The dire warnings about 'knuckling down' and 'stepping up' issued to students in **The Final Year** struck a powerful chord both for my daughter – who has just navigated that year of SATS and stress – and for me. Nate benefits from the wisdom and sensitivity of new teacher Mr Joshua, who became a mouthpiece for some of Matt's feelings about the educational system and poetry in schools.

'There's an undeniable pressure to do things in a certain way, and it does push creativity out, and it does stop things like poetry creeping in. Schools bump out young people disenfranchised by poetry because of the way teachers are forced to teach it. My son's nineteen, and his dad's a poet, and he still left high school thinking poetry was nothing to do with him. But the first thing he does when he leaves school is put his headphones in and listen to rap and rhyme.'

No writers write the way that teachers are made to teach writing in school. So poetry can become this fluid space where things can be done differently – but because a lot of the teachers won't have had training in teaching poetry, it can become self-perpetuating that everybody's frightened of it.'

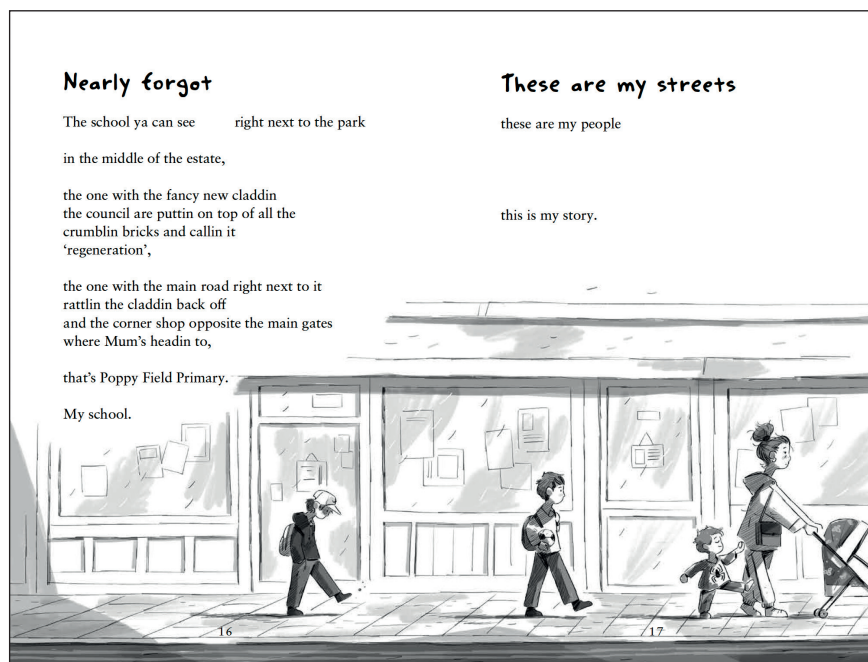


Nate uses both the public library and the school library as places of refuge, seeking out new reading experiences. But Matt says that wasn't inspired by his own experience – 'I rebelled against reading, mostly because I was an idiot' – but rather his years seeing the book corners and school libraries that dictate what young readers have access to.

'Although there's a movement within publishing to reflect everybody, there's still not a lot of lives like Nate's being seen, so I think it's important that people can go and find those stories.'

I'm so grateful to Matt for putting David Almond on my radar. His children's classic **Skellig** threads through the book: comforting and inspiring Nate and giving him a new sense of the possibilities of storytelling. 'David writes with a beautiful sense of place about the northeast and there's real life in it, but there's also a magic that he does so uniquely. When I became a teacher, I'd wanted to be a rock star. I didn't have kids yet. I knew nothing about kids' literature. And in my second year of teaching, I had a year 5 class, and I read **Skellig** and I thought, this is one of the best books I've ever read. I just didn't know that kids' writing could be that textured.'

The idea of writing something with the same power for children had taken root, but songwriting was in the rearview mirror, and Matt saw his future in education. Then, author Tom Palmer came into the school, and – as Matt organised more school visits, focussing on poets he admired like Wes McGee, Brian Moses and Jan Dean – another path appeared for him.





Matt Goodfellow at the CLIPPA Award Ceremony with children from the winning Shadowing groups. Photo by Ellie Kurtz

David Almond loved **The Final Year**. And when Matt talked to him about it after publication, he realised that after a gruelling year, much of Mr Joshua’s encouragement to Nate was a way in which Matt was talking to himself. ‘And David said, “You only find out what they’re about after you’ve written them.” Genius.’

I wondered whether Matt had had a similarly inspiring teacher, but he says, ‘I went through primary school easily but moving on to high school, when my behaviour changed a bit, nobody really took the time to say, let’s unpick this. I started writing songs when I was about thirteen, and the idea that you could write and talk about yourself came from there, not from any teachers.’

He adds, ‘And I was nowhere near as good a teacher as Mr Joshua is. I wanted him to be at the start of his career because he’s not tired. I needed him to really want to be in the classroom, to really care about the kids. He spots that Nate has something to say, and I did try to do that when I was a teacher because there’s noisy kids, there’s quiet kids and there’s kids in between. And quite often, kids can fall through the gaps, and teachers are so busy. It does feel like he’s there speaking to the readers who don’t have that teacher.’

And maybe Mr Joshua is the teacher that I needed when I was a kid, and that’s why I wrote him like that.’

The Final Year has been justly praised for Matt’s authentic, sympathetic handling of fear and grief, as Nate’s little brother falls ill. He draws the realities of the way in which children are kept at a remove from crises, the need to blow off steam and the way kids offer each other support in pages so deft and true, I’m sure I wasn’t the only reader reading through tears.

‘There’s always been sadness in my life and I knew I wasn’t the only one. The music I listen to and the stuff that interests me is generally about articulations of sadness, which some people think is weird. But the stuff that happens in the book, happens. And quite often, we don’t talk about it. I’ve had a lot of emails from parents and kids thanking me for writing about it. Young people

live lives in which people die and sad things happen, and if we pretend that they’re not because it’s difficult for us to talk about, it’s very unhelpful.

Some teachers said they wouldn’t read **The Final Year** to their class because it’s too close to the bone. It’s not my job to tell any teacher what to do in their classroom, but those are the young people that I wrote the story for, to let them know that they’re not alone. But in general, the reaction to this book has been so brilliant, from kids and teachers. There’s been a lot of response from adults because, hopefully, it’s written on several different levels. I work really hard to make space for any adult to read the book because it’s about life. It’s about grief, and it ultimately, it is about hope.’

I was thrilled to hear that Nate will return in a sequel, **The First Year**, to be published by Otter-Barry Books in April 2025. Matt says, ‘I’m never interested in writing the same book twice, so it’s a very different set of issues.’ Readers will be able to follow Nate’s transition to secondary school and the new challenges he’ll face.

In the wise words of Mr Joshua as he ignites Nate’s passion for writing: ‘It’s the feels you’re looking for.’ Reader, you’ll find them within the pages of **The Final Year**.

The Final Year by Matt Goodfellow, illustrated by Joe Todd-Stanton, is published by Otter-Barry Books, 978-1915659040, £8.99 pbk



Ana Sampson is the editor of fourteen poetry anthologies, both for adults and children. Her latest book is **Heroes and Villains: Poems About Legends**, illustrated by Chris Riddell and published by Macmillan Children’s Books.

The countdown to National Poetry Day

This year's National Poetry Day takes place on 3 October 2024 and the theme is **counting**. There are all sorts of ways to get involved in the celebrations, but poetry is for life not just for National Poetry Day. Use this article to discover how to embrace poetry all year round.



National Poetry Day

To make the most of the 3 October celebrations, visit the **National Poetry Day** website for a list of everything happening on the day, including events near you; download the free resources and explore the **NPD** poetry book recommendations, which include two lists for young people. Plus, find out all about poet Laura Mucha's attempt to break a **Guinness World Record** for the largest poetry lesson (multi venue)! If you're in a school, you're invited to join in for free. The number of young people needed to take part to break the record is 60,000 and the last time we checked, 90,000 were registered so it looks like the record will be smashed! Find out more and register to take part [here](#).

The Poetry Society

The Poetry Society champions poetry for all ages, all year round. Working with leading poets, its innovative education programmes include a Poets in Schools service for all key stages, free downloadable PoetryClass resources, the Cloud Chamber teacher-poet network, and young writer development schemes the **Foyle Young Poets Award** and **Young Poets Network**.

Schools can celebrate National Poetry Day or any day of the year by inviting a poet into the school. Find the perfect poet for your students through the Poets in Schools service: [make an enquiry today](#).

To celebrate **National Poetry Day**, **The Poetry Society** will present an array of materials, new poems and activities on this year's theme.

- announcements of the **Stanza Poetry Competition 2024** winning poems on the theme of 'Counting' judged by **Rachel Long**
- the release of a **National Poetry Competition** writing resource by **Jonathan Edwards**
- teachers are invited to join the **Cloud Chamber** network of poetry educators for an online CPD session on Thursday 26 September, introducing new resources for the classroom on the counting theme
- Join The Poetry Society for '**Count Me In**' at **The Poetry Café**: an open mic on the National Poetry Day theme of **counting!** Come and see City Bridge Poet in Residence **Cecilia Knapp** perform a headline set, and get the chance to read your work at London's most iconic poetry venue: [find out more here](#)
- A poetry workshop with accomplished New-York-based poet, editor and translator, **Lola Koundakjian** at the **Armenian Institute** – [find out more here](#)

The Poetry Archive

The Poetry Archive is a not-for-profit organisation that produces, acquires and preserves recordings of poets reading their own work out loud. They make substantial excerpts from their recording sessions freely available online through their website and their dedicated Children's Poetry Archive. poetryarchive.org

CLPE

As the **National Poetry Centre for Primary Schools**, **CLPE** (**The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education**) runs the annual **CLiPPA** (**Children's Poetry Award**). The **CLiPPA** shortlist regularly highlights the very best new poetry for young children while the **CLiPPA** shadowing scheme, which runs from May to June every year, is a fantastic way for children to join in the celebrations with free teaching resources suitable for students from EYFS all the way to Year 7 and 8.



CLiPPA 2024 English Martyrs Primary School with certificates photo Ellie Kurtz



Astounding performances by young people. **Poetry By Heart** at Shakespeares' Globe Grand Finale 2024 photo Marcus Duran

'The **CLiPPA** school shadowing scheme aims to directly engage children with the award and the poetry that has been created for them,' explains **Charlotte Hacking**, **CLPE** Director, Learning and Programmes. 'To support schools, **CLPE** provide planning and video resources, based on what we know works in effectively teaching and engaging children with poetry from the action-based research we regularly undertake alongside schools.'

'Activities encourage children to listen to the shortlisted poets perform poetry and engage in reading and discussing poetry, before performing poetry for themselves. Schools can submit videos of the best performances for the chance to win the ultimate prize – the opportunity to perform on stage at the National Theatre in London at the award ceremony alongside the poets themselves.'

A report on **CLPE's** new research project into the effective teaching of poetry and its benefits, **Another Year of Poetry**, led by **Michael Rosen** and **Charlotte Hacking**, will be published later this year. www.clpe.org.uk

Poetry By Heart

Poetry By Heart is the national poetry speaking competition for schools and colleges in England. The competition invites young people to choose a poem, learn it by heart and perform it aloud. It's open to primary schools, secondary schools and sixth form colleges and 2024 saw the biggest ever response: almost 4,500 video entries of poetry performances; 110,000 young people involved; a staggering 48,000 poems learned by heart. The celebrations culminate in an exuberant Grand Finale at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, young finalists coming from every corner of the country to perform for the panel of poet judges and live on the Globe's main stage in front of a packed house of supporters, VIPs and poetry fans.

This year's competition will launch on National Poetry Day, 3rd October, with a special event in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, Shakespeare's Globe Theatre featuring poet Imtiaz Dharker, a poem learn-a-long led by **Poetry By Heart** co-director Julie Blake, and live poetry performances by young people. Registration for the competition is open now, and it comes highly recommended by teachers, parents and young people themselves. 'Poetry By Heart has massively increased our awareness and enjoyment of poetry' says one teacher, 'It brings poetry 'alive', off the page and into people's hearts'. 'I gained confidence and found I love POETRY!!!' commented one young person; you can't say fairer than that. Registration is free and open now, and brings access to the thoroughly excellent **Poetry By Heart** resources.

The Stephen Spender Trust

Inspired by the cultural activism of Stephen Spender, the Stephen Spender Trust celebrates multilingualism and literary translation through a range of initiatives, including a Poetry in Translation Prize. This has categories for pupils, teachers and individual young people in the UK and Ireland. The 2024 winners will be announced at a special celebration event in November 2024. The 2025 prize will open next May. In the meantime, find a wealth of poetry translation resources, including a [multilingual bank of suggested poems](#) in dozens of languages, on the Stephen Spender Trust website stephen-spender.org.

The Children's Poetry Summit

The Children's Poetry Summit is a UK network of individuals and organisations actively interested in poetry for children. It provides a regular forum for discussion, information exchange, sharing of ideas and good practice, and a pressure group which campaigns for children's poetry. Members are children's poets, publishers, teachers, librarians, booksellers, organisations and individuals interested in children's poetry and its principle aims are to exchange information and ideas, keep up to date with what is currently happening and generally to raise the profile of children's poetry. A regular blog features contributions from poets, publishers, educators, and others from the poetry community. These are always of interest and signing up is a great way to keep up with what is happening in the world of children's poetry. childrenspoesrysummit.com

Tyger Tyger Magazine

Tyger Tyger Magazine is an online journal of new poems for children. Once a term, it publishes twelve 'roaring, leaping, bright-burning poems' on a shared theme, by contemporary writers from all over the world. Each issue comes with free poetry teaching resources for use in the primary school classroom and at home, and each poem is also available as a free, downloadable, printable poster. [Sign up to receive the magazine](#).

Brian Moses

For regular helpings of new poetry, from poets and from children themselves, as well as comment pieces and articles from children's poets, and tips to get children writing, follow the indefatigable **Brian Moses** and visit his blog. You'll find it here <https://brian-moses.blogspot.com/>

Beyond the Secret Garden: Island Kingdoms and Robinsonades

For the latest in our long-running **Beyond the Secret Garden** series, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** look at the influence of Daniel Defoe's classic, **Robinson Crusoe**.

This summer saw the cinema release of **Kensuke's Kingdom**, based on the book by Michael Morpurgo. The screenplay, written by Children's Laureate Frank Cottrell-Boyce, dispensed with the book's framing story, most of the sea-voyage and much of the dialogue between young Michael and Kensuke, the Japanese man he encounters on an island. Island stories have a long history in English writing and often include racially minoritised characters.

Daniel Defoe's **Robinson Crusoe** (1719) was not written for children, but it quickly became a children's favourite when reproduced in chapbook and abridged forms. Defoe's original spends considerable time on Robinson's day-to-day existence, describing activities such as raising goats and sewing the garments. While this earned Defoe's book approbation from educationalists such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (who recommended it as a must-read, alongside the Bible), it was the excitement of the shipwreck, the conquering of the island, and the encounter with indigenous people that appealed to children and the authors who wrote for them.

In **Robinson Crusoe**, Defoe offers in narrative form the same justification for England's appropriation of American soil provided in philosopher John Locke's **Two Treatises of Government** (published thirty years earlier). Crusoe builds two permanent homes on the island and instigates a system of agrarian farming, both Lockean justifications for claiming property rights. In **Robinson Crusoe**, the people encountered by the European protagonists are usually described in deficit terms; not white, not English-speaking, not Christian. Chapter 15 is entitled 'Friday's Education', but it is in fact the narrator's account of a series of conversations with the man he names 'Friday'. 'Friday' for his part, is instructed to address Crusoe as 'Master'. Crusoe frequently refers to his co-habitant as a 'creature' and a 'savage'; the Europeans he encounters are referred to as 'people' or 'souls'.

This depiction of a natural imperialist is a model for similar tales written for children, many of which alluded directly to Defoe's novel, such as Johann Wyss's **The Swiss Family Robinson** (1812). There were so many Crusoe imitations that they became known as 'Robinsonades' (a term coined by the German author Johann Gottfried in 1731).

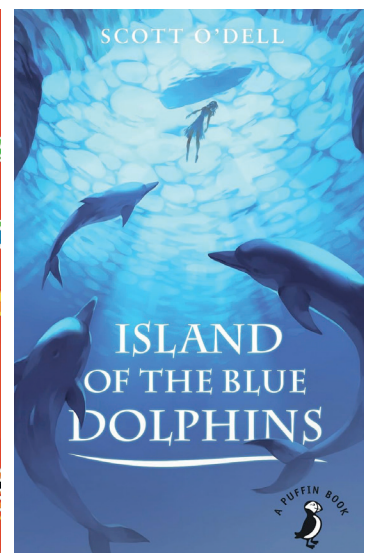
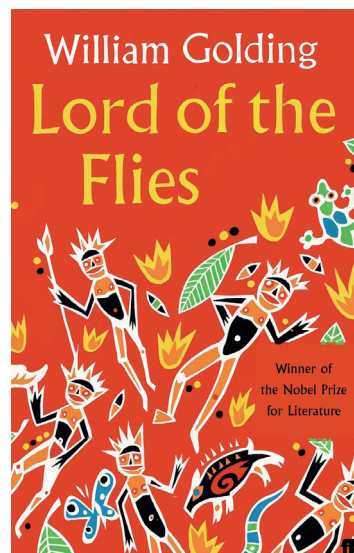
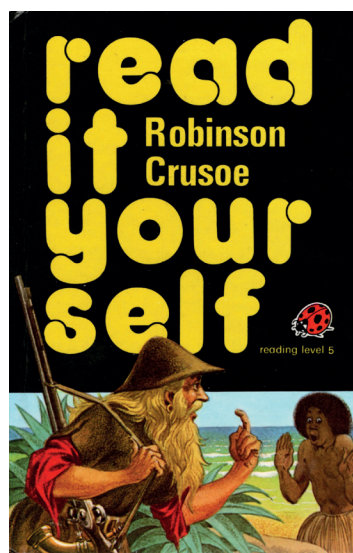
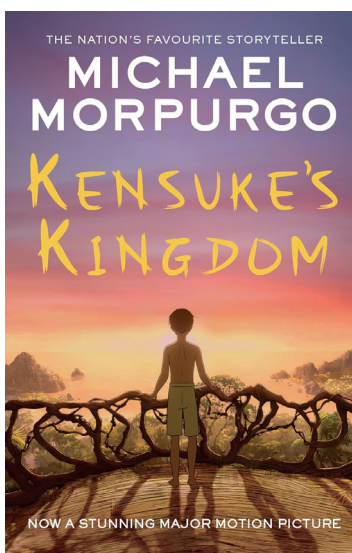
Many British Empire-era Robinsonades followed Defoe's template closely. Perhaps the most popular book-length example was

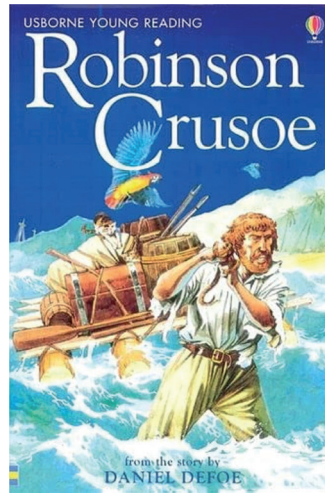
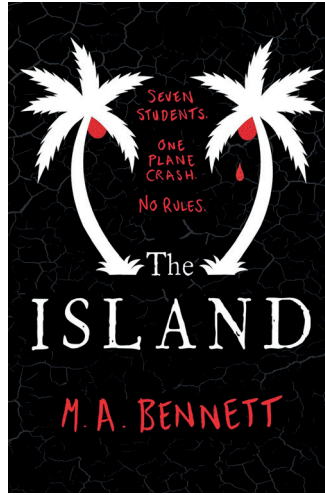
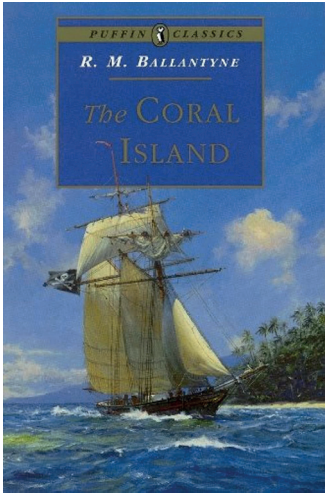
R.M Ballantyne's **The Coral Island** (1857); in it, three boys are shipwrecked in the South Pacific. Like Crusoe, they must survive; but once basic survival is attained, they proceed to (again, like Crusoe), map out 'their' island, convert indigenous people to Christianity, and battle 'cannibals'. Of the island, one boy says 'We'll take possession in the name of the king; we'll go and enter the service of its black inhabitants... we'll rise, naturally, rally, to the top of affairs. White men always do in savage countries.'

Ballantyne's book inspired others, including Stevenson's **Treasure Island** (1882) and Barrie's **Peter Pan** (1904). Many such stories feature an almost exclusively male cast, but some Robinsonades featured girls. Elizabeth Whittaker's story "Robina Crusoe, and her Lonely Island Home" was serialized in the *Girls' Own Paper* in 1882-3. Bessie Marchant's **Sylvia's Secret** (1924) is set in the contemporary Caribbean; it is Sylvia's cultivation of the land that gives her ownership of the island when a modern-day pirate comes to steal the island's treasure.

William Golding's ironic homage to the Robinsonade, **Lord of the Flies** (1954) showed a darker side to British island colonisation. His protagonists explicitly mention **The Coral Island**, **Treasure Island**, and **Swallows and Amazons**, and are given the same names of the children in Ballantyne's book. Golding suggests that the violence and savagery that Defoe and Ballantyne view as the preserve of non-Europeans is evident in the young boys, who are in the process of being educated in the ways of English upper-classes.

British publishing in the 1960s welcomed American versions of the Robinsonade, particularly the popular if controversial **Island of the Blue Dolphins** (1960) by Scott O'Dell, which depicts a young indigenous woman, Karana, stranded and having to fight off the same 'warlike' tribes as are found in **Robinson Crusoe**. At the time of its original publication, it was hailed as a feminist Robinsonade, and it was picked up in Britain by both Puffin (1966) and Heinemann New Windmills (1967; New Windmill was an imprint for the educational market). More recently, critics like Debbie Reese have pointed out the repetition of imperial-era stereotypes, including the Noble Savage and the supposedly uncivilized nature of indigenous people ('A Critical Look at O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins*'), but the book remains in print and continues to be a popular choice in schools.





Children's versions of Defoe's books continue to be popular too, although recent publications occasionally depart from the original. In the Ladybird read it yourself series, 'Friday' is depicted as having curly hair, as are the seven men with him. Robinson is referred to by his name, not 'master'. 'Friday' is 'a friend' who 'helped' Robinson and who learns to speak English.

Usborne's 2007 version clings to Defoe's description of 'Friday', but again there is no mention of servitude. Friendship is foregrounded. There is no apparent power differential between them, and we don't hear Crusoe addressed as 'Master'. But it is a strange sort of friendship;

Like earlier Robinsonades, O'Dell's book appears in multiple media forms, keeping the story (and the basic Robinsonade myth) alive even for those who haven't read the book(s).

Published in 1999 and set in 1987, Michael Morpurgo's **Kensuke's Kingdom** begins in Thatcher's Britain. Michael's father has been made redundant and the only money coming into the home is from Michael's work at Mr Patel's shop (we could read this as a sign of imperial decline). Out of work, Michael's father suggests a trip around the world. He outlines their journey, naming 'Africa. South America. Australia, The Pacific', p10, in a way that strongly recalls the trajectory of colonial expansion. The trip inspires Michael's interest in political history – St Helena evokes a fascination with Napoleon – but this interest is noticeably partial. Considering South Africa, the focus is exclusively on the animals and 'big red sun'; neither Michael, nor Morpurgo, have anything to say about the people living under Apartheid – colonial relations that strikingly echo Defoe's rendering. Some way through the story, Michael finds himself stranded on an island where he encounters Kensuke, a Japanese soldier who has been there since the Second World War. Kensuke provides shelter and food, in a way that Michael at first finds difficult.

'He was looking after me, he was keeping me alive, but he was also keeping me prisoner' p86 Michael's words here could have been "Friday's" had Defoe ever given voice to the character. They could also be those of any child whose freedom is restricted by a parent or carer. The island remains **Kensuke's Kingdom** not Michael's. However, it is Michael who possess the language to narrate the tale. Initially, Michael likens Kensuke to a madman, a child and an orangutan. Later, he comes to see him as a friend. Some readers might detect elements of the 'magical Asian' trope in Kensuke's characterisation; his heavily accented English, his inscrutability, the strictness bordering on rudeness, his expertise in health and affinity with nature. Others might argue the elements shift as Michael gets to know Kensuke as a person. In contrast to Defoe, Morpurgo appears to be more interested in identifying the possibility for human connection than in using individuals as proxies for whole populations.

Set in the present day, after a period of colonisation, Jenny Pearson's **Shipwrecked** focuses on pupils at a private international school in Singapore. The narrator, Sebastian, is the son of a Royal Navy Admiral. His friend Lina Lim has a Singaporean father and, when the children find themselves stranded on "Sunrise" island, she becomes the de facto leader.

As a Robinsonade, **Shipwrecked** is more self-reflexive than many. The children explicitly refer to **Lord of the Flies**. The group is not monoculturally white (although there aren't obviously any people of African descent). Nevertheless, some colonial attitudes persist; the children hold a fashion show dressed in their 'jungle finery' p250. To scare of 'Pirates,' they smear mud on themselves, until they 'look like savage beasts.' (p292). Is the continued popularity of Robinsonades (which we also see in the publication of books by Olivia Levez and MA Bennett, both entitled **The Island**), tied to the colonial imaginary?

Crusoe exhibits no interest in 'Friday's' real name, first language or culture. We wonder how readers unfamiliar with the original will make sense of 'Friday's' assimilation into Crusoe's ways; are we to interpret it as a free choice made out of recognition of Crusoe's superiority? Has removing some of the brutality and racist language rendered Defoe's themes all the more difficult to interrogate?

The imperialist violence evident in the original text is less likely to be overtly expressed in contemporary books. Still, it would be a mistake for readers to ignore the connections – particularly as the writers sometimes make connections themselves, in this most intertextual of genres; **Lord of the Flies** references **The Coral Island**, **Swallows and Amazons**, and **Treasure Island**. **Shipwrecked** references **Lord of the Flies**. **The Master** references **The Tempest**. And the back cover of **Kensuke's Kingdom** includes a quote describing it as 'a modern Robinson Crusoe'. When children's writers draw on the features of the Robinsonade sub-genre, they almost inevitably find themselves in conversation with colonial fantasies.

Books mentioned:

- Robinson Crusoe** Daniel Defoe (1719)
- Robinson Crusoe: Read it Yourself**. Adapted by Fran Hunia, illustrated by Robert Ayton Ladybird. (1978)
- Robinson Crusoe** retold by Angela Wilkes, adapted by Gill Harvey, illustrated by Peter Dennis. Usborne. (2017)
- Sylvia's Secret** Bessie Marchant (1924)
- Island of the Blue Dolphins** Scott O'Dell (1960)
- Shipwrecked** Jenny Pearson. Usborne. (2024)
- Kensuke's Kingdom** Michael Morpurgo. Egmont. (1999)
- Lord of the Flies** William Golding. Faber and Faber. (1954)
- The Coral Island** R.M. Ballantyne. (1857)
- Treasure Island** Robert Louis Stevenson. Penguin. (1883/2018)
- The Island** MA Bennett, Hot Key Books (2018)
- The Master** T.H. White. Puffin. (1957)



Karen Sands-O'Connor is a Visiting Professor of Education at the University of Sheffield. Her book **British Activist Authors Addressing Children of Colour** (Bloomsbury 2022) won the 2024 Children's Literature Association Honor Book Award.



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

Welcome to the World, Post Wave Children's Books

Emma Blackburn, publisher of **Post Wave Publishing UK**, introduces the publisher's new imprint, **Post Wave Children's Books**, and the delights of its inaugural list of illustrated nonfiction, preschool, gift and picture books.

A new publisher in the children's book industry always generates a bit of a buzz and, in our experience, a plethora of questions.

Who are you? Are you independent? What will you publish? What makes you different? Where will you sell your books? Who will sell your books? When will you start publishing? How will you start publishing? What are you looking for? Where are you going? Will you be originating your own titles? . . .

These are just some of the questions (there are many more!) that I and the team at Post Wave Children's Books have been asked since arriving on the scene. Most of the questions have straightforward answers, but some remain open as we are still in the early stages of our journey. Understandably, however, people are keen to know as much as possible about us and this, of course, is music to our ears.

We are new, very new in fact. Post Wave Publishing UK was established in the autumn of 2023 as an independent publishing house, focusing on our children's imprint, Post Wave Children's Books. As the UK subsidiary of Post Wave China, a leading, privately-owned publishing house, we champion fantastic stories from all around the world. We are led by Managing Director Emma Hopkin, who has over 30 years of industry experience, including roles at Bloomsbury and Macmillan Children's Books. Our mission is to make every child around the globe a reader.

We are committed to publishing beautiful, illustrated books showcasing diverse voices, excellent design and award-winning illustration. Our experienced and creative acquisitions teams are based in London, New York and Berlin. When Emma Hopkin came on board at Post Wave Children's Books' inception, she quickly assembled a talented team of publishing experts that would deliver

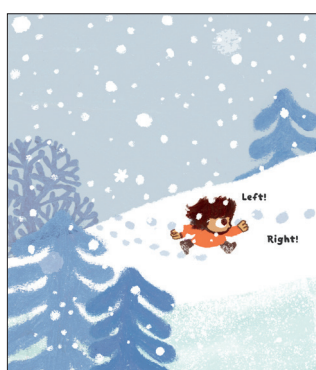
on our aim to grow quickly, cleverly and creatively. In our central London office, our creative team is led by me, Emma Blackburn, as Publisher. I had worked with Emma Hopkin (Note: At Post Wave Children's, we do nothing to dispel Posy Simmonds' assertion, in her early noughties Guardian cartoon, that 98% of people who work in children's publishing are called Emma. But neither of us, for those who can remember the cartoon, wear black Lycra-wool mix trousers!) at both Bloomsbury and Macmillan, and I knew that Post Wave would be a dynamic, creative, nimble and fast-moving enterprise with Emma at the helm.

And so, in April this year, I stepped across from my then role as Group Picture Book and Preschool Publisher at Hachette Children's Group to join our Editorial Director, Joanna McInerney, who had recently joined from Big Picture Press, and our Art Director, Avni Patel, who had joined from Thames and Hudson. Shortly afterwards we appointed Krestyna Lypen as our Editorial Director in New York. Meanwhile, in Berlin, Harriet Birkinshaw, Chief Editor, was already busy making books for our Berlin Studio. Most recently we have taken on two junior editors; appointed Nicola Goode, from Hachette Children's Group, as our Global Sales Director; and announced our UK and US sales and distribution partners (Bounce and Chronicle respectively). We will be announcing our sales and distribution partner in Australia shortly.

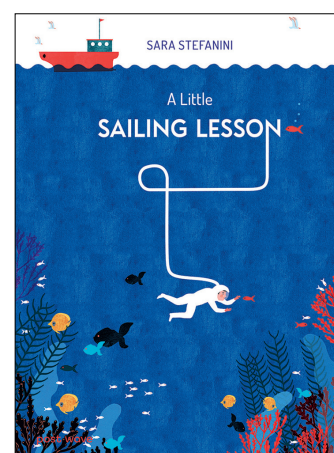
We acquire and translate original, beautiful, fun, clever books that visually delight, entertain, inspire and help children discover the world around them. Our motto is: Read. Dream. Discover. And we are delighted that our Autumn launch list is a varied mix of picture books, nonfiction, preschool and gift books that showcase the very best in international publishing.



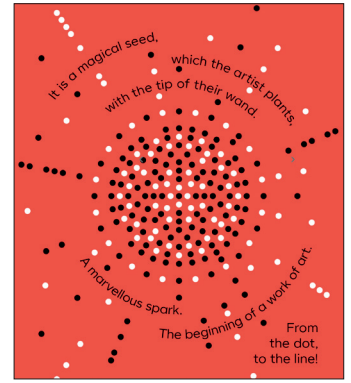
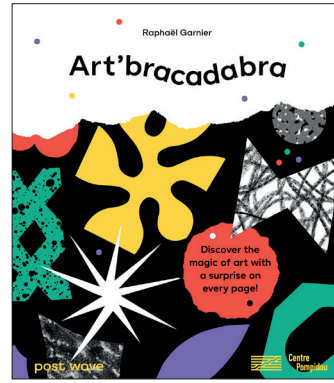
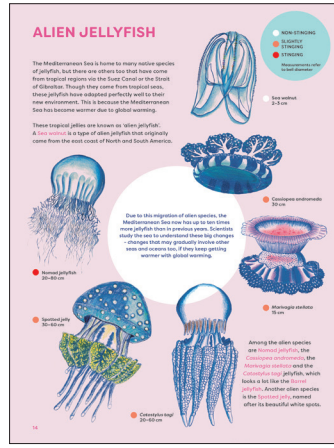
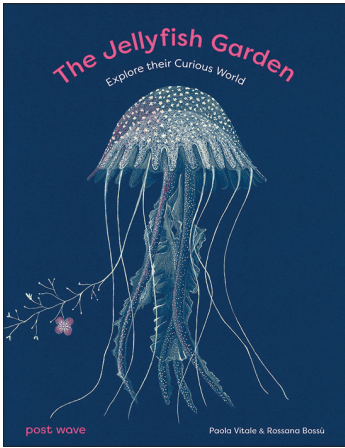
Tiger, It's Snowing! by London-based Chinese illustrator Daishu Ma is the first book in an exciting new series introducing two adorable picture book characters, Mei and Tiger. Little ones will love joining this dynamic duo as they navigate new experiences, solve problems and enjoy a world full of fun, adventure and friendship (whilst still managing to get home in time for tea!). Daishu is a hugely talented picture book creator, and we are thrilled that her books are at the forefront of our picture book list. There's lots more to come from her!



In the preschool space, we are publishing **Who Ate The Little Bug?** by Hector Dexet, a gloriously bold, innovative and colourful board book with a succession of die-cut multi-coloured holes that get smaller and smaller to reveal a delightfully funny twist, whilst introducing the very youngest book lovers to a host of different animals.



Sara Stefanini's **A Little Sailing Lesson** is the perfect book for life's big moments and a thoughtful gift for anyone facing a difficult time. It tells the story of a sailor called Aldo who, along with his companion, sets sail on a journey of discovery. It's wonderfully life-affirming with a positive message about enjoying the moment and appreciating the small joys of life – and it's great for showing little ones what resilience looks like.



The Jellyfish Garden by Paola Vitale and Rossana Bossù is a breathtakingly beautiful introduction to the fascinating world of jellyfish. From their capacity to self-heal to their ability to glow in the dark, the book is full of incredible details and information.

As our fledgling list grows and develops, we will continue to publish the very best books in translation, selling these English language editions through our global partners, but we will also begin publishing original titles acquired and developed by our in-house creative teams. Our list of originated titles launches at the start of next year with an array of stand-out books from both new and established creative talents such as Fátima Ordinola, Elyon Liu and Carly Gledhill.

This is just the start of our journey and there's so much more to come. I am often asked whether I find the unanswered/open questions unnerving or scary, but it's quite the opposite. Finding the answers and ploughing our own furrow is energising, motivating and inspiring. Because we are starting from scratch, we can do things differently, and we aren't afraid to do so. We hope you like the results!

For updates and news, follow us on social media: @postwave_books or visit our website: www.postwavepublishing.com

Art'bracadabra by Raphaël Garnier is a fantastic introduction to the fundamentals of art for inquisitive and creative kids. Featuring a host of clever interactive elements such as pop-ups and rotating wheels, alongside beautiful design features such as pantone inks and a variety of textures, this visually arresting book helps to unlock the secrets of art.



post wave
children's books

FEDERATION OF CHILDREN'S BOOK GROUPS ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Weaving Magic With Stories: Gwehyddu Hud Gyda Straeon.

At Monmouth Girls School from 11th to 13th April 2025

Confirmed speakers include Manon Steffan Ros

There will be a full programme of speakers, a bookshop provided by the

Norfolk Children's Book Centre, and the ever popular publishers' exhibition.

Bookings open in October. More information is available on the website

fcbg.org.uk/conference



History Man: an interview with Tony Bradman by Andrea Reece

'How do you write an exciting book? You just write a good story, and don't put any boring bits in.' That's Tony Bradman's advice and it's an approach that's stood him in good stead in a career that spans decades and covers all sorts of different books: picture books, young fiction, poetry collections, fiction and of course historical fiction, all alongside journalism and reviewing. Tony is a long-time friend of **Books for Keeps**, his first written piece appearing in issue number 6, and we were delighted to speak to him about his new book, **Roman Boy**, the latest in an extremely popular series which also includes **Viking Boy** and **Anglo Saxon Boy**.

Tony's enthusiasm for historical fiction is inspiring and no wonder, given that it played a huge part in turning him into a reader and later writer. A regular visitor to schools, he's often asked by children how he got started and always gives the same answer. 'The first book that I remember encountering was read to me by my teacher at primary school in what would now be Y6. Mr. Smith read us **The Hobbit** and it made me want to go and read Tolkien's other books. We had a wonderful library opposite the flat where I lived with my mum and my sister, so I borrowed **The Lord of the Rings** and then I stumbled onto Henry Treece and his book **Horned Helmet**, which I loved; the pictures by Charles Keeping were amazing. So, clearly, I was interested in Tolkien and fantasy, but Tolkien was professor of

Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, an expert on the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings and **The Hobbit**, like all great fantasies, was infused with the sense of history.'

The other big influence was his parents, 'They were both of the war generation, and they talked. They told us lots of stories about the Blitz and the war.' Then, when this working-class South London boy won a place at grammar school, he started studying Latin and Greek (one of just five boys selected to do Greek) and this sparked something too. By then his parents had divorced, and his dad would take Tony out on Saturdays. 'When my dad asked where I wanted to go I said the British Museum.' He remembers the Roman gallery vividly: 'It actually had a staircase and a little fountain, I loved it'. By the time he stumbled across Rosemary Sutcliff, the die was cast.

He read English at Cambridge, immersing himself in Shakespeare's history plays but also their sources, such as Plutarch. 'All of that was part of my intellectual development as a writer, and the appeal for me has always been that they're great stories. There's lots of action and adventure, and then a good writer like Henry Treece or Rosemary Sutcliff can just insert a young character into these periods of enormous jeopardy and danger.'

He's certainly very happy to see the current resurgence of interest in writing stories set in the past and, as editor of the Scholastic **Voices** series too, proud to have commissioned stories about diverse communities in Britain's past from some of our top contemporary authors, including Bali Rai, Patrice Lawrence and Benjamin Zephaniah, and delighted that they are doing so well.

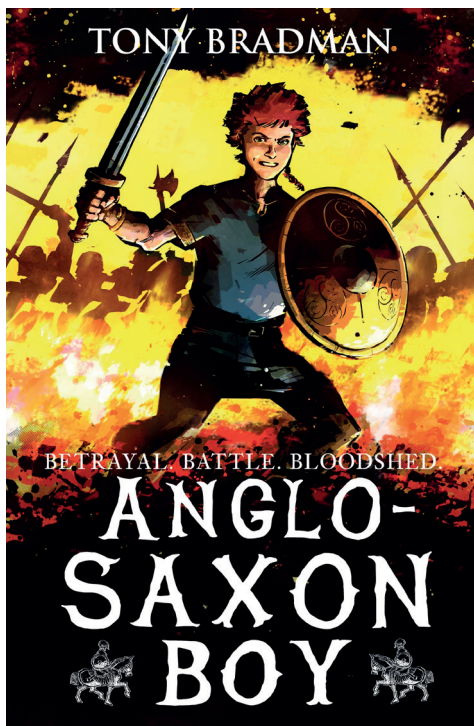
He got to interview Rosemary Sutcliffe when he was working as a journalist and remembers her saying how, as a writer of historical fiction, you're influenced by your own time and the things you grew up with. Her influence was Rudyard Kipling, evident she felt in **The Eagle of the Ninth**, and in **Frontier Wolf**, which he thinks is a brilliant book and also draws on images of young subalterns on the North West frontier in the Raj. Writing **Roman Boy** he was determined to give young readers a sense of what it was actually like to live in Rome. 'When you read historical fiction, you tend to imagine the people as the same as us. People think of Rome and imagine everyone in uniforms of the legions, or togas, but actually, Rome in the 1st century AD, according to one of the historians I read, was probably more like Kolkata than London, full of noise and colour, with crowds of people, animals, horses, temples full of clouds of incense.... I want to show kids that Rome was quite different, and also a place of enormous disparities of wealth and power, a slave society too.' He's keen to counter any fictional view of the Romans as bringing civilization to those they conquered: 'The Celts for example were really civilised with established cultures, it's just that the Romans were incredibly powerful. And the question that kids don't get the answer to, is why were they so successful? The Roman Empire encompassed 60 million people, and ruled for



500 years, in fact the Eastern Roman Empire lasted till the mid-15th century. They were incredibly good at war because they were incredibly ruthless.' If you accepted Roman rule, that was fine: 'If not, they would slaughter everybody, burn down everything, then plant colonies. I wanted kids to get a feel for that, to understand what that meant'.

He admires Tanya Landman's Roman story **Beyond the Wall**, which stars fifteen year old slave Cassia, and though he finds slavery in the Roman Empire interesting, and in particular the way slaves could regain their freedom, decided that Lucius, the central character in *Roman Boy*, would come from a wealthy background. 'To give the concise view of what life was like in the Roman world, as I wanted, I decided it was best to do it from the top down.' Lucius' privileged background doesn't help him much, however; his stepfather, jealous when Lucius catches the eye of the emperor Hadrian, sends him far away to Britannia in the care of his ex-slave Callistus. On arrival, Lucius overhears Callistus arranging his murder and just manages to escape, joining the army as a young recruit, and that way managing to find his way back to Rome.

Missing or failing fathers seem to be something of a theme in this series and it was Tony's son who pointed out that many of his stories are about boys and their dads. His own father, he says, had a lot of problems. His childhood and early life was difficult, growing up in an orphanage before joining the navy just as World War II began. Divorced from Tony's mother, he died in his early fifties from heart disease. Tony was determined that the dad in the next in the series, **Greek Boy**, would be quite nice, but it didn't work out like that at all.



'In fact, what he gets up to jeopardises his entire family. I am going to allow myself a chapter about two thirds of the way in where the boy gets to have a real go at him, "This is all your fault, Dad. You know I'm never going to forgive you"' Cathartic we hope.

He talks very fondly of his old grammar school head teacher. Mr Raeburn, the man who taught him Greek and who was so influential in his development. They met up again years later, by which point Raeburn was living in Oxford and teaching at New College and Tony was able to tell him how much he felt he owed him. 'His thing was drama. He used to put on plays at Bradfield College, near Reading, where they actually had a little Greek theatre in a glade with trees. He took us there one summer's evening and we saw a play performed in Greek. I was fifteen, at the time we had no money, and a lot of problems, and being taught by this guy and getting to see these incredible things, changed me. That's why I'm a believer in education. Not the relentless fact driven statistics, but things like that which change people. When you talk to people, if they've got a fond memory of school, it'll be a teacher or a play or something special they did like that.' It's why he's so angry at the cuts to arts in schools. David Raeburn died during the pandemic, and **Roman Boy** is dedicated to him: '*Ave Atque Vale*'.

This seems like a natural place to end, but we can expect lots more from Tony Bradman, both historical fiction and more contemporary adventures too for Barrington Stoke, whom Tony admires a great deal, and who published his recent book **When Saturday Comes**, another story in which a boy has a strained relationship with his dad. He's hoping to write more poetry, would love to compile more anthologies, and dreams of a new verse retelling of **Beowulf**. Recently made a fellow of the **Royal Society of Literature**, all his ambitions are surely eminently achievable.

Books mentioned:

- Roman Boy**, Tony Bradman, illus Alessandro Valdrighi, Walker Books, 978-1529512748, £6.99pbk
- Anglo-Saxon Boy**, Tony Bradman, illus Sam Hart, 978-1406363777, Walker Books, £6.99 pbk
- Viking Boy**, Tony Bradman, illus Pierre-Denis Goux, Walker Books, 978-1406313833, £6.99pbk
- When Saturday Comes**, Tony Bradman, illus Tania Rex, Barrington Stoke, 978-1800903241, £7.99 pbk

Andrea Reece is managing Editor of **Books for Keeps**

I wish I'd written...



Laurence Anholt makes a very personal choice.

I sure don't wish I had written **Anne Frank's Diary of a Young Girl** - if I had I wouldn't be here today. Nonetheless it is one of the most seminal books ever published about the triumph of hope over adversity. The fact that it was written by a 15-year-old child almost defies belief.

There are several reasons why the book is almost unbearably poignant to me: my father was a Dutch Jew of Persian heritage, and during the War many of his extended family were in hiding in Amsterdam just like the Franks. Plenty did not survive. My father had settled in London where he joined the British Army. As a very young Sergeant he was amongst the Allied troops who liberated Bergen Belsen. The experience traumatised him for life.

As we witness the global rise of the Far Right, the book seems more essential than ever. But the main reason that the book feels almost written on my soul, is because my family suffered the loss of our beautiful daughter to cancer a year ago this month. As a teenager Maddy bore a striking resemblance to Anne Frank, with that long dark hair, the olive skin and the sparkling eyes. She shared Anne's cheeky smile and her kindness. Bless you Maddy and bless you, Anne. May every teenager read the words of gratitude from the Girl in the Attic - 'Think of all the beauty still left around you and be happy.'



The Diary of a Young Girl by Anne Frank, translated by Mirjam Pressler and Susan Massotty, is published by Penguin, 978-0141315188, £8.99 pbk.

Small Stories of Great Artists by Laurence Anholt, 9783836593564, will publish in October 2024, TASCHEN, £30.00 hbk

Laurence talks about his father on BBC Radio 4 [here](#).

Good Reads

This issue's Good Reads were chosen by young people at **Weatherhead High School, Wirral**. Our thanks to librarian **Heather Grainger** for her help. Heather is on the Honour List for the [2024 Secondary School Librarian of the Year](#). Through lessons, book recommendations, author visits and clubs, she seeks to engage all readers whatever their interests or needs, empowering students to gain skills too through her Student Librarian Leadership Scheme.

Last Gamer Standing

Katie Zhao, Scholastic, 978-0702318252, £7.99 pbk
I enjoyed reading **Last Gamer Standing** - I think the excitement and tension makes it thrilling. If you are into girls beating boys then this book is for you! It's about a young Chinese-American girl secretly disguised as one of the best players ever in a huge gaming tournament. Will she win that big game?
Reviewed by Tay, Year 11

The Hunger Games

Suzanne Collins, Scholastic, 978-1407132082, £8.99 pbk

The Hunger Games is a series for teenagers that shows the power everyone holds to change their own fate. In the Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen sticks up for her sister and volunteers as a 'tribute' in the brutal annual fight-to-the-death that children face in this world. It is a great book that is empowering and a brilliant read.
Reviewed by Claudia, Year 9

The Creakers

Tom Fletcher, illus Shane Devries, 978-0141388847, £7.99 pbk

I am reviewing the book **The Creakers**, as it is one of my favourite books. It is very funny but very strange, and is about a girl finding out that all the adults have disappeared, and discovering 'monsters' under the bed! If you like a mysterious book with lots of comedy, then this book is for you. My favourite part of the book is the end, because everything is happy and fun!
Reviewed by Kaitlyn, Year 8



Claudia

Kaitlyn

Molly

Ava

Excuse Me While I Ugly Cry

Joya Goffney, Hot Key Books, 978-1471410116, £7.99 pbk

This is an emotion-filled romance with running themes of friendship, and it also zooms in on racism and how the main character Quinn struggles with finding who she really is. The author really captured how Quinn was feeling, and threw you into her shoes, which was a great aspect to this book. However, I do feel it could have been extended with more storyline, and it felt as if it was cut too short! It is such an enjoyable read that makes you want to read more! This book portrayed each character very well - it is almost as if you can see the people in front of you, and they were all very unique and had their own stories and backgrounds.

If you want a rollercoaster of emotion then read this book! Anger, sadness, happiness, love and betrayal are all packed in. I recommend this book for young teens (13+) who love an emotion-filled book.
Review by Molly, Year 10

Songs About A Girl

Chris Russell, Hodder Children's Books, £3.49 Kindle

I love this book so much! I love the music, and how it is so relatable. When you finish it, you want to read the other books in the series. It is about a girl called Charlie who loves photography but doesn't like being in the spotlight. She gets an opportunity to take photos of a new boy band, which ends up leading to lots of mystery and a bit of a love triangle.

Charlie is the main character, and I really like her because she is relatable and has an amazing heart-felt relationship with the reader. I enjoyed all the music references, and the established and new relationships between the characters.

Reviewed by Ava, Year 8

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**.

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.

Rebecca Butler writes and lectures on children's literature.

Jane Churchill is a children's book consultant.

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

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**

Anne Horemans is a secondary school librarian.

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

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

Matthew Martin is a primary school teacher.

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

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

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

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

Anna Rushall has worked in primary schools for the past twenty years and has also been an English lead for most of this time. She now works with schools advising them on their English curriculum and the best new books to use.

Lucy Staines is a primary school teacher

Nick Swarbrick is Affiliate, School of Education, **Oxford Brookes University**

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

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

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

Books About Children's Books

Before Tom Brown: the Origins of the School Story

★★★★

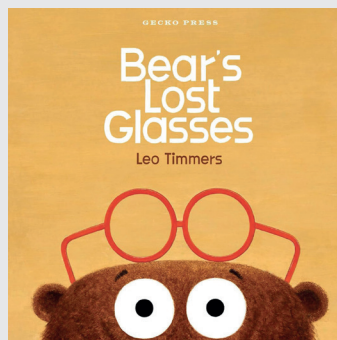
Robert J Kirkpatrick, Lutterworth Press, 978-0718897369, £25.00 hbk
Ask somebody if they know a good school story, they're likely to say Harry Potter. Probe a bit further and they might recall **Tom Brown's Schooldays**, published in 1857, above all if they're Flashman fans. Ask again and they might speak of Thomas Hughes's memories of Rugby, its famous headmaster Thomas Arnold and his belief that education made boys moral and self-reliant. They might even compare Dean Farrar's gloomier **Eric, or, Little by Little** (1858), and throw in Talbot Baines Reed, Bunter, Angela Brazil, **Malory Towers**, and **Jennings**. A long tradition, then.

Yet going back further into children's literature will take you into expert territory where scholars, cultural historians and bibliographers roam. Robert Kirkpatrick takes the reader there in his book **Before Tom Brown**, drawing on wide knowledge of school stories, and carrying it lightly in this timely and useful study. Back in fact to ancient times, gathering evidence from descriptions of school life and from dialogues between teachers and pupils (both boys and girls). The approach is to pick out how school life and education are represented in fiction, and what happened when it was – moral improvement, punishment, and satire.

Much of it is a lens for us to examine what society between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries thought education was for and how it worked. He suggests that school stories really became a genre in the eighteenth century with **The Governess** (1749) by Sarah Fielding and works like it where there was as much interest in characters interaction as in educational dialogues and moral precepts. The eclectic choice of Erasmus and Defoe, Rousseau and John Newbery and many more, enables Kirkpatrick to show how writers sought to entertain as well as educate.

He lets generous quotations speak for themselves, and guides the reader through a wealth of sources (the books themselves and the books about the books). Themes like rivalry and bullying, honesty and indolence emerge here long before Tom Brown, and as we know have not gone away with Harry Potter. **Before Tom Brown** reminds us that children's classics have contexts that are richer than we thought, and we appreciate their origins and traditions more fully in knowing it. **SH**

Under 5s Pre – School/ Nursery/Infant



Bear's Lost Glasses

★★★★

Leo Timmers, Gecko Press, 40pp, 978-1776575947, £12.99 hbk

The best jokes are the simplest ones, and the joke at the heart of Leo Timmer's new book is perfectly simple and very good indeed. Bear has lost his glasses, but we can all see them perched on top of his head, the round, bright red frames a wonderfully comic image. Bear decides he must have left them at Giraffe's house and sets off. Along the way, he notices all sorts of things he's never seen there before, including a deer, a crocodile, an elephant and a flamingo. Again, readers can see that they're really a tree, a green bush, a grey boulder and a pink flower. Bear even mistakes Giraffe for a snake. Once that misunderstanding is sorted, the two friends retrace Bear's steps, as he's keen to share all the unusual things he's seen. When they're not there, he decides, 'There must be something wrong with my glasses', and sure enough, when he takes them off, the world is suddenly again full of unusual things. Perhaps we should all look at the world differently occasionally? Leo Timmer's timing is impeccable, his characters wonderfully expressive and this simple story will stand repeated readings. **LS**

The Spaceman

★★★★

Randy Cecil, Walker Books, 48pp, 9781529517903, £12.99 hbk

Our story begins with a tiny, orange-skinned spaceman who lands on what he initially perceives as an ordinary planet. His job, as he solemnly informs us, is to collect soil samples, label them, and move on to the next destination—a monotonous routine he carries out with diligent precision. However, this particular planet is unlike any he has encountered before. As the spaceman becomes captivated by its mysterious beauty, his focus shifts from the mundanity of his tasks to the extraordinary world around him.

Telling the story from the spaceman's first-person perspective

is a masterstroke by Cecil. The spaceman's voice, formal yet endearing, evokes a sense of nostalgia and humour that will delight both older readers and young listeners alike. This tone, combined with the spaceman's wide-eyed observations, is charmingly reminiscent of a Bill Bryson-esque narrative, adding a layer of innocence and wonder.

Cecil's use of oil paints gives the illustrations a rich, textured feel, with each brushstroke adding depth and warmth to the pages. The colour palette is both vibrant and subtle, with the orange hue of the spaceman's skin and white suit standing out against the soft greens and blues of the planet's landscape—impressive for such a tiny creature. What initially seems like an ordinary planet is soon revealed to be teeming with life—flowers, butterflies, and a friendly yet "hideous" beast that turns out to be a dog. The juxtaposition of the spaceman's small stature against the planet's large flora and fauna emphasises his vulnerability and the vast beauty of the world he has stumbled upon—a subtle invitation for readers to contemplate the significance of their surroundings.

Ultimately, this is a story about finding joy in the unexpected and learning to appreciate the world around us. The spaceman's journey from duty-bound explorer to joyful participant is touching and uplifting. When he finally finds his spaceship lodged in a tree, he faces a choice: return to his old life of routine and monotony, or stay on this extraordinary planet where he has found happiness and friendship. The decision is made with a delicate touch of humour and grace that resonates deeply.

Cecil's storytelling is as thoughtful as it is whimsical, inviting readers to pause, look around, and perhaps see the world in a new light. This beautifully crafted picture book captures the essence of discovery, wonder, and the unexpected beauty found in the most ordinary of places—a gentle reminder to stop, breathe, and appreciate life's simple pleasures, preferably, with a dog. **MT**

Little Lion Girl

★★★★

Olivia Hope, ill. Fiona Woodcock, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 32pp, 9781526619624, £7.99 pbk

Leonie and her mother board the city bound train for a day's adventure. As she looks round the carriage she sees people whom she considers rather extraordinary and this makes her decide to follow suit. It's a brave little lion girl who roars, Leonine fashion as she sallies boldly forth determined to make the most of the city's sights and sounds.

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant continued

To her mother's gentle urgings to take care and stay close to her, Leonie responds with reassurances that the city doesn't scare a lion girl, a clever and amazing one at that. And when the two of them sit together refuelling on drinks and cakes, Leonie tells her mother how happy she is. Before long she's off again looking for more adventures, stopping to scale a fountain and proclaim herself 'King of this city.'

However, it transpires that our lion girl can be rather too adventurous, for having spied a butterfly, she forgets her mum's wise words and suddenly finds herself in a very scary situation, sans her mother and sans her roar. Then above the sounds of her surroundings she hears a voice that lifts her spirits once more. Held tightly in her mother's loving embrace, Leonie's roar starts to return.

Told through Olivia Hope's lyrical words and Fiona Woodcock's wonderfully expressive, vibrant scenes that work brilliantly together, this roarsome, reassuring tale of the power of the imagination and of having a loving parent to return to who is willing to leave room for a child to explore.

Just as the city was for Leonie, this book is a delight for the ears and eyes. **JB**

Torla & Smorla and the Lower-than-Average Cloud

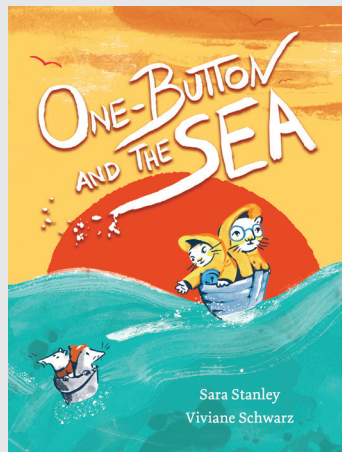
★★★★

Kes Gray and Chris Jevons, Happy Yak, 32pp, 9780711288072, £7.99 pbk

Torla and Smorla are giraffes, one more than average taller, the other more than average smaller. This could cause a problem when they for a walk and Torla finds her head shrouded by a lower -than- average cloud. However, friends help each other whether it is by providing instructions and guidance or by producing a bigger-than-average umbrella from a larger-than-average pocket.

This is a light-hearted book with a quirky charm that can only be expected of the creator of **Oi Frog**. The messages are subtly presented – the friendship and trust between the two giraffes so similar but so different is obvious. Maybe there will be another story in which Torla gets to play the starring role. The style is easy and rhythmical in keeping with the theme and a delight to read – no shouting frogs or cats here. The conclusion provides a neat surprise but no moralistic finale, just an appropriate gesture for the occasion. The illustrations by Chris Jevons are equally appropriate his colour saturated palette against a pastel ground sings off the page. The two giraffes, created with such affection, walk steadily across each spread as the journey continues onto the next page –there is even a page extension as the two cross a hazardous bridge. The flaps that

open vertically provide a moment of visual excitement emphasising the differences between the two giraffes and the solution to a problem. This is thoughtful and effective design that will draw the young reader into an enjoyable experienced to be shared in classroom or home. **FH**



One-Button and the Sea

★★★★★

Sara Stanley, illus Viviane Schwarz, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978-1915252609, £12.99 hbkk

This is a big story. So says Grandpa to little One-Button who has just asked to be told (again) the story of 'when we went to sea'. It begins with the uprooting we're told, and there's a dictionary definition of 'uprooting' on the first page, green tendrils providing a frame. The calm of this and the kitchen in which Granda and One-Button are sitting is transformed dramatically on the next spread, as we see them and their neighbours run to the boats, huge green branches now breaking through pavements and houses. The sky is dark grey and threatening, expressions on the faces of those fleeing a mix of shock and fear. One-Button's questions drive the narrative, 'and then what?', 'what did we do?', 'were we safe, Grandpa?', and text and illustrations describe their journey across the sea, part of a fleet of little boats. Sometimes these sailors are happy, sometimes things are scary, the blue sea turning green, but throughout their community looks out for one another, 'carried by the same sea'. Eventually the wind changes direction and they return to their home. As a new story begins, the final image is of One-Button and a friend playing in a boat suspended from a tree.

The story can be read in a multitude of ways and provides so many openings for conversation and discussion. Each question One-Button asks is an opportunity for readers to consider the answer and provide their own. The sea journey too can be so many things: a journey undertaken by refugees, by those avoiding climate change, or is it a metaphor for grief

and recovery? In addition to posing questions, text and illustrations provide reassurance, moments of comfort and comedy, and a sense of the unending nature of things. A big story indeed. **MMA**

Mama Car

★★★★★

Lucy Catchpole, ill. Karen George, Faber & Faber, 32pp, 9780571377169, £7.99 pbk

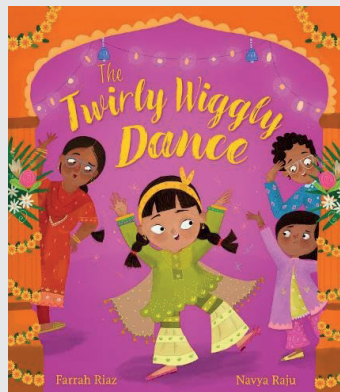
This gentle picture book tale is a wonderful celebration of a mother's wheelchair as seen through the eyes of her young daughter. For her, 'Mama's Car' is part of everyday life, providing expeditions to get snacks from the kitchen, rides around the house and back to the bedroom, with a chance to play and make it pretty. The Mama Car has so many things, but best of all, it has Mummy.

As a part of the child's life from the beginning, the normality and acceptance of her mother's wheelchair is gloriously celebrated as a thing of comfort and joy, without any stigma being attached, which is as it should be.

Award-winning illustrator Karen George's beautifully simple but effective pictures show a family living their day-to-day life, with Mama's car being just another part of it.

As a wheelchair user herself, author Catchpole wrote the book based on her experiences with her own children and has spoken of how her chair is precious to them, because it is so very close to her. This oozes out of her story.

It is ever more important that our books represent the diverse world around us and that children are able to see their own homes and families in the books they read from an early age upwards. This book is a delightful, proud and important story that should be shared as widely as possible. **AH**



The Twirly Wiggly Dance

★★★★★

Farrah Riaz, ill. Navya Raju, Oxford Children's Books, 32pp, 978-0192789679, £7.99 pbk

Little children are fascinated by weddings and no wonder, with the excitement, special food, happiness and dancing. Little Intisar is very much looking forward to her Aunti Mahira's wedding and is thrilled when her auntie asks her to be part of the

big group dance at the Walima, the last party to celebrate the wedding. Intisar loves dancing but there's one bit of the routine she just can't get right, no matter how hard she tries. In the end, she invents her own move instead. With just five sleeps to the Walima though, Intisar is getting nervous, especially when her cousin says she's just not trying hard enough. All ends happily of course, and Intisar is encouraged by her family to do her own special twirly, wiggly dance, freeing everyone else up to do their own moves too. It's a lovely story about the importance of confidence and creativity and being true to yourself. For readers not familiar with Muslim traditions, there's a special explanation at the end though there's lots to be learned throughout the story and from Navya Raju's vibrant illustrations. **LS**

Farrah Riaz [introduces her book](#) for Books for Keeps readers.



We're Moving House

★★★★

Mick Jackson, ill. Rashin Kheiriyeh, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781525904422, £12.99 hbkk

It's evident from the outset that the small child narrator has completely misunderstood what his mum meant when she tells him they're moving house.

Eagerly anticipating the move he conjures up images of his present home being lifted up and taken elsewhere, a task that will require several cranes working in sync. He hopes that the family will remain in situ during the move so he can wave at people through the window. With such an enormous object being moved, the logistics of so doing will cause some inconvenience to others and likely the relocation of certain items of street furniture. Then there's the possibility of encountering water – a river with a rickety bridge maybe, in which case the loan of a boat or two might be required. And so his imagination continues to run riot with the house being dangled beneath a helicopter or loaded onto a train as freight. Then once the house itself has been moved, it will need securing into the ground, essential services will have to be reconnected and at last there'll be a welcome from neighbours. All these ideas are playfully captured in Rashin Kheiriyeh's detailed scenes before we learn the boy has had a chat with his mum and now realises that he'd

reviews

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant continued

got in a muddle and perhaps this move isn't what he wants after all. But then reassurance that nothing of importance will be left behind in the current house, lifts his spirits once more and award-winning adult author, Mick Jackson's story ends on an upbeat note.

With the wealth of transportation imagined by the boy, youngsters with an interest in vehicles especially, will love the visuals, even if a house move isn't imminent. **JB**

Mabel and the Big Wide World

★★★

Paul Stewart, ill. Jane Porter, Otter-Barry Books, 32pp, 9781915659279, £13.99 hbk

Smallest of the mouse siblings, Mabel lives contentedly in a barn with no intentions of ever leaving its confines to venture out into the big wide world. Her brothers and sisters ask her to join them but she prefers to watch, indeed there's something stopping her going outside however much fun

it might appear. Mabel watches the changing seasons worrying about the rain, heat, wind and cold in turn and still her siblings tell her she's missing so much. Then one day, from her safe looking place Mabel spies a beautiful rainbow in the sky outside. Little by little she edges towards the world beyond the barn and once outside there before her eyes stretching from hilltop to sea is a glorious arc of colour. As the rain continues falling gently, she frolics delightedly, splashing in puddles, playing chase, picking flowers and climbing trees. Never once does she think of those 'great big hairy things and teeny-weeny scary things' she feared so much.

Back in the barn after an exciting day, she feels the space has become very small and fashions an 'inside rainbow' to remind her of the amazing one she's seen outside.

Months pass, the seasons change and now, her fears banished, Mabel enjoys even the thunderstorm with its rumbles and flashes. Now she's the one doing the reassuring. Autumn

and winter bring further delights and meanwhile back in the barn there's more excitement for Mabel. No longer the littlest mouse; she has lots of new sisters and brothers, one of which is Marco. Now it's her turn to encourage him to venture into the big wide world.

Written from Mabel's viewpoint, this story should help alleviate the fears young children might have about stepping outside their comfort zone. Jane Porter's collage style scenes showing Mabel's journey towards self-confidence are a great complement to the author's telling. **JB**

Dig Dig Dinosaur

★★★★★

Professor Anjali, ill. Maggie Li, Nosy Crow, 32pp, 978180513 2042, £7.99 pbk

This book has been written by a professor and research leader in palaeontology at the Natural History Museum, London. On the colourful cover fifteen holes have been pinched, just right for small fingers to investigate and introducing the three characters who people the book. Three small children are setting off for an expedition to a faraway

land. They have collected together brushes, trowels, notebooks and maps, and hope to find something REALLY BIG. Dig! Dig! Dig! Peep through the holes scattered across the page to guess what is their first find... and it's a velociraptor. There is a brief description of it, before the children dig further, finding all the old favourites, wondering at their increase in size as the pages are turned. The holes provide such ideal talking points, guessing what will come next, and the backgrounds suggest how the children really did travel about the world. The square format of the book seems to fit the subject well, and the tough pages will withstand much handling. There is a code to scan on the front endpaper for a free audio reading, and the book ends with a whopping three page foldout of their final find, a diplodocus. The artwork is intriguing, showing all the details of the dinosaurs, such as children have learned. Youngsters will want to read the book for themselves, rejoicing in knowing and reading the names of their favourite dinosaurs. A much-loved choice to be sure, for all adventurous readers. **GB**

5 – 8 Infant/Junior

The Fun We Had

★★★★★

Clarissa Coulthard, illus Sam Usher, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 9781398524492, £12.99 hbk

Over a year a small girl visits her grandmother and together they share memories of things they have done together, the things they have collected – playing in the river and making a paper boat, splashing in the sea and finding a special shell, running through leaves in autumn – and that one leaf that was so red, the games in the snow, the feather that fluttered by. The visits are tiring – Nana is not well – but the visits bring joy. It is the memory of these occasions and the objects that are associated with them that become so important when Nana is no longer there – and there will be new objects – another feather, another shell ensuring these memories stay live.

Picture books dealing with loss and death are important. Clarissa Coulthard and Sam Usher have created a picture book that that could find its home in any collection, public or private. In an attractive rhyming text with a simple repeated refrain that starts, 'You always make me happy...' she takes us through a year of shared moments brought to life by Sam Usher's lively and expressive illustrations. The ending is muted for a moment, then life goes on as the child grows up but with the memory of the fun that was had. This is a book to share after the loss of someone loved, a reminder that it is the memories that are important –

memories of a relationship. It is this warm relationship between the child and the grandmother that comes through the words and the images with particular clarity. Usher is a master at creating this bond as he depicts the two sharing experiences to the full, exploiting the space of each double spread, his colours popping off the page; the perfect accompaniment to Coulthard's gentle descriptive verses. **FH**

Wild Blue

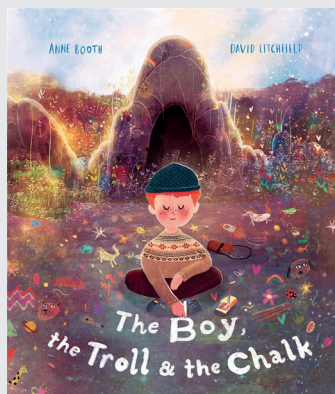
★★★

Dasha Slater, ill. Laura Hughes, Walker Books, 30pp, 9781529510768, £12.99 hbk

Kalya has a little pink bike with stabilisers, and she loves riding it, to her it is just like riding a pony. One day her daddy decides it is time for Kalya to have a bigger bike. They visit a cycle shop to choose a new bike or as the text describes 'wrangle a new bike from the herd.'

Continuing the equine metaphor Kalya finds she has to 'tame' her new bike, which quickly lives up to the name she chooses for it, 'Wild Blue', throwing her off just like an unbroken horse. Kalya doesn't give up and with daddy's help and lots of practice her bike learns who is in charge. Kalya stops wobbling and starts to enjoy riding on her bike and being just a little bit wild.

This is a simple story about coping with change. The ongoing metaphor, which is likely to be hard to grasp for many young readers, is made more accessible by the beautiful illustrations. **SMc**



The Boy, the Troll & the Chalk

★★★

Annie Booth, illus David Litchfield, Templar, 40pp, 9781800783058, £12.99 hbk

A troll lives in the cave, 'Leave me alone' it yells; so the children do just that. However, one boy doesn't leave and taking some chalk he draws a flower leaving one petal uncoloured. The following day, the petal is complete. But still the troll refuses to accept any compliment or overture of friendship, until in despair the boy creates a picture that reveals the truth – the troll is not a troll – but a boy convinced of his own lack of worth. Now with the help of another he can discover that he does not need to be alone.

How much will the young audience for whom this book is intended understand of the metaphor I am not sure – and perhaps it doesn't

matter? 'Leave me alone' is a familiar cry and the sense of monstrous behaviour understood – though the consequence may not be. Then how to move on? Here another child extends a hand of friendship and is prepared to persevere. This is a clear message – recognising a need and then working together breaks down barriers and brings colour to the world. Litchfield's illustrations, full of saturated colours, bring the text to life both literally and metaphorically. The cave is a very real cave – a hiding place on the edge of a playground; the troll is a troll (blue whiskers and all) – until someone is able to see beyond the façade. The final spreads are a joyous expression of creativity, imagination and working together. **FH**

The Seal on the Beach

★★★★★

Mara Bergman, ill. Brita Granstrom, Walker, 72pp, 9781529505795, £14.99 hbk

Maggie is on holiday, at the seaside, with her aunt and uncle. She appears initially to be enjoying all the expected seaside traditions of a British summer holiday: a picnic on the beach, ice cream on the pier, a cliff walk. But then the second strand to the story is introduced and the reason for the holiday becomes clear. Aunt Jean and Uncle Jack are looking after Maggie whilst her mum remains in hospital with her poorly baby brother. This parallel theme, once introduced, continues to intersperse the individual tales of the family's seaside adventures – often via dreams which

come to Maggie, reminding her of home. On one occasion the family stumble across a seal pup stranded on the beach and Maggie assumes the role of championing the seal's rescue and survival, perhaps as a goal which is more achievable for her than her being able to have any impact on her brother's recovery. Almost at once, the seal pup becomes as much as part of her dreams as her concerns about home. Fortunately, both strands of the story end happily, with the family being reunited and everyone returning to the beach to watch the seal be released back into the wild.

Written in a strongly poetic style, the text is light and well chosen, mirrored by Granstrom's characteristic illustrations which are typically full of warmth and feeling. This story provides many talking points, gently exposing the youngest readers to the potential of family disruption and ill health; the concept of patience and the time it takes for healing in both the human and the natural world; the sense that even in the very young individual responsibility can be found and conservation can lie in your hands. Yet because these themes are met with such beautiful full colour spreads, and because the language used is so thoughtfully selected, the story remains overwhelmingly hopeful. **ARu**

Watts and Whiskerton

★★★★

Meg McLaren, Piccadilly Press, 120pp, 9781800786592, £6.99 pbk
This charmingly illustrated detective story for children introduces two friendly canines with a talent for solving problems and hunting clues. Watts is the child of two celebrated detectives, famed throughout the land for solving crimes and uncovering mysteries. It seems only natural that he will follow in their footsteps, but Watts is a little reluctant to seek fame and much prefers writing and note-taking to crime-solving. When Watts' parents send him to stay with Count Whiskerton - an old client - he meets a brand new friend. Pearl (the Whiskerton of the story's title) is inquisitive and excitable and, when it comes to solving mysteries, is like a dog with a bone.

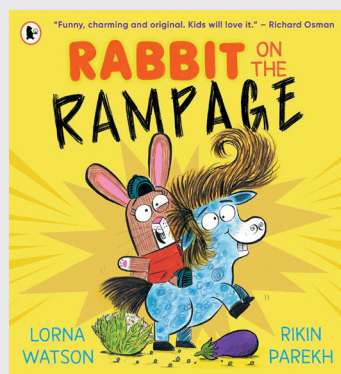
It is immediately obvious that the pair are an endearing match, brought to life by an attractive rose-pink palette, in illustrations that accentuate Pearl's enthusiasm and Watts' patience and calmness. Naturally, it isn't long before a mystery arrives at Whiskerton Manor and Watts and Pearl have some serious clue-hunting to do.

Pearl's father, Count Whiskerton, has grand designs for building a swimming pool in his grounds, but all plans are put on hold when an exciting fossil is found and an archaeological dig is arranged with the local museum. Yet things aren't

all they seem, and Pearl and Watts soon notice a few little details that simply aren't adding up.

The patience and kindness that Watts and Whiskerton show each other is heartwarming and helps them to stand up to naughty grown-ups with nefarious intentions. As is always the case with whodunnits, there are a number of dead-ends and false suspects that Whiskerton and Watts have to navigate. Their approach to problem solving is carefully and clearly described in a manageable, step-by-step way with accompanying diagrams and labels to help young readers. The young target audience is well-served by this approach but the tone can occasionally become somewhat condescending: moments of threat or peril are avoided entirely and even the villains are loveable, really.

The world of Sherlock Holmes has been reimagined in so many different ways that it is hard to believe any new concepts are even possible, but this pair of curious young animal characters, serving a very young audience, are just original enough to capture the imaginations of some new readers. **SD**



Rabbit On the Rampage

★★★★★

Lorna Watson, ill. Rikin Parekh, Walker, 32pp, 9781529500493, £7.99 pbk

Rabbit explodes onto the bright yellow cover of this quirky book, with his baseball hat and his boots, riding a blue, cross-eyed pony with a mane quiffed high. Rabbit has a very special carrot a curly, whirly carrot that is his absolute favourite, and it goes with him everywhere. At the swimming pool he hides it in his coat but then discovers it has GONE. He goes into panic mode, and charges off to accuse his friends in turn, Badger, Madame Mouse the ballet teacher, and Hedgehog the bookshop owner, of stealing his special carrot. (Study the bookshop for sections marked Elephantasy, Shrew Crime, Giraffic Novels, Grownance.) The narration is pitch perfect, the rhyming helping to keep the pace racing as Rabbit rampages through the pages. A really funny book, the text and illustrations

knitting together brilliantly. **GB**

Oh! Look, a Boat!

★★★★★

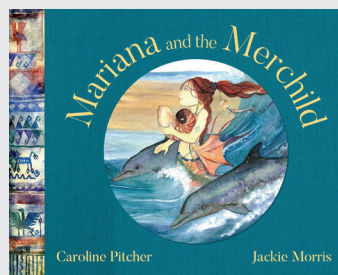
Andrew J. Ross, Flying Eye Books, 48pp, 9781838742232, £12.99 hbk

The story begins when a curious little mouse discovers a boat by his front door and, without hesitation, climbs aboard. What starts as a simple act of curiosity quickly turns into an epic adventure as the boat drifts away, carrying the mouse farther and farther from home. Ross masterfully captures the mouse's wide-eyed wonder and trepidation as he sails past volcanic lands, navigates icy waters, and battles fierce storms, starting in the familiar and drifting into the fantastical. The rhythmic and engaging prose pulls readers into the mouse's journey, making them feel as if they are right there with him, facing the vast and unpredictable world.

Ross's illustrations are the highlight of the book. His use of traditional materials like gouache, coloured pencils, inks, and acrylics, later assembled digitally, brings a unique texture and depth to each page. The vibrant and immersive colours, especially the striking contrast of the red volcanic lands against the cool blues of the icy waters, create a visual feast that will captivate both young readers and adults alike. The detailed and dynamic artwork not only enhances the story but also encourages repeated readings, with new details to discover on each page.

As the mouse's journey unfolds, the story subtly conveys themes of resilience and the courage to face the unknown. Despite the challenges and the overwhelming vastness of the world, the little mouse perseveres, ultimately finding his way back home. The return to familiar ground after such an adventurous voyage is both a comforting and empowering conclusion for young readers.

Ross's picture book is a celebration of curiosity, imagination, and the joy of exploring the world around us. It invites readers to look beyond the familiar and embrace the endless possibilities that lie just over the horizon—delivered with a touch of humour that adds to its charm. **MT**



Mariana and the Merchild

★★★★★

Caroline Pitcher, ill. Jackie Morris, Otter-Barry Books, 32pp, 9781915659460, £13.99 hbk

Mariana lives by herself in a hut by the sea, a sea that provides her with fish for food and wood for fuel. Close

by live the village children with whom she would love to make friends but they mock her and run away.

One day a fierce storm blows up causing the sea wolves to howl and threaten, then after it's abated Mariana goes onto the shore and collects some of the things the sea has deposited there. One of these is a crab shell and once back in her hut, she empties her basket and notices that the crab has split and inside is a beautiful baby girl. Immediately Mariana loves the baby more than anything and she takes it in her arms and goes to visit the village Wise Woman. The Wise Woman says what she's found is a Merbaby belonging to a Sea Spirit who has put her in the shell for protection from the sea wolves. Her advice is to put the Merbaby on a rock and watch for her mother to return and reclaim the infant. Return she does but instead of taking her child, she asks Mariana to take care of her until the seas calm. She promises to return each day to feed her little one and teach her to swim.

Time passes, Mariana is supremely happy as she watches the Merchild grow into a beautiful girl making friends with the village children and learning to speak 'the words of our world'. Despite her love of the Merchild, the old woman knows in her heart she must allow her to return to the sea when the time comes. Inevitably, come it does and Mariana is devastated; however her kindness is repaid in many ways, including through the help and friendship of the village children.

Caroline Pitcher's poetic retelling of this Chilean folktale is wondrously done and will assuredly captivate listeners and readers. So too will Jackie Morris's richly detailed watercolour paintings, some of which have an ethereal quality. Altogether a magical conjuring forth of a folk tale world that will linger long in the reader's mind after the covers of the book are closed. **JB**

A Book of People Like Me

★★★★★

Joel Avelino, Kumusha Books, 32pp, 9780008622169, £7.99 pbk

Kenny discovers all the things he really likes as we join him in his world of discovery. Whilst he loves riding his bike, playing in the park, being creative at nursery school, he realises there are lots of other children who love all these things too. The illustrations carry so much in this book, each spread demanding careful examination and discussion between reader and listener. Every child pictured carries a joyful expression as they dance, ride, play and eat their way through the book. There is just one spread of DON'T likes... each option asks for discussion. Kenny closes the book with the realisation that there are lots of people like him. But only one Ketchup, and only one of himself. A book full of wonderful illustrations, with an inclusive ideal that should be well circulated. **GB**

reviews

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued



Two People Can

★★★★

Blessing Musariri, illus. Maisie Paradise Shearring, Kumusha Books, 32pp, 9780008658724, £7.99 pbk

Blessing Musariri's narrative delicately explores the themes of loss, grief, and the enduring strength of love. The story follows Shingai, a young boy struggling with the absence of his father, and the emotional upheaval that ensues. Through his restless energy and the disorder he creates at home, Shingai's internal struggle is poignantly depicted, capturing the confusion and sadness that come with loss.

As the story unfolds, Shingai and his mother find solace in each other, realising that even in the face of loss, they remain connected by their love. This shared understanding becomes the anchor that helps them navigate their grief, emphasising the importance of togetherness in healing.

Shearring's watercolour illustrations add a soft, expressive quality to the narrative. The vibrant colours and dynamic compositions bring warmth and visual depth to the story, complementing the emotional tone of the text. Shearring's artwork beautifully captures the shifting moods of Shingai's journey, providing a gentle contrast to the book's heavier themes. Allusions to the past run throughout the family's home and celebrate Shearring's ability to weave more into the story.

While the central message about resilience through shared love is touching, the narrative progression tends to be straightforward, with a resolution that, though heartwarming, arrives somewhat quickly. This pacing may leave readers wanting a deeper exploration of the emotional nuances presented throughout the story.

Ultimately, this is a tender and comforting tale for children experiencing loss. Musariri's sensitive storytelling, combined with Shearring's evocative illustrations, results in a thoughtful book that, despite its simplicity and a reluctance to delve deeper, successfully conveys the healing power of love and connection. **MT**

Badgers Are Go!

★★★★

Susannah Lloyd, ill. Nici Gregory, David Fickling Books, 256pp, 9781788453196, £7.99 pbk

Lulu Whifferton-Rear is a happy young badger, who loves nothing more than scampering through the flowers and lying on her back daydreaming near her cosy home in the woods.

Her life is suddenly changed beyond recognition, when she is thrust into the world of Rumpington Academy of Badgering and instructed to report for training as a pilot of the BOPs (or Badger Operated Persons), who are actually some of the most important humans in the world! Poor Lulu can't seem to remember all the information being thrown at her and is convinced that she shouldn't really be there, for surely she is the 'wrongest badger for the job'? When a spy infiltrates the training academy with a dastardly plan to cause chaos in the human world, can Lulu manage to recall her training and prove that, with just the right amount of welly and a pile of cheese and tomato sandwiches, maybe she is the right badger for the job after all?

This original and fast paced tale is full of hilarious and well-crafted characters, with wonderful names that will make readers of all ages enjoy a chuckle to themselves. For younger readers, I feel that this would work well as a "read-aloud" with parents or teachers explaining some of the vocabulary and context.



Illustrator Nici Gregory specialises in drawing animals and here she endearingly brings the many badger characters to life, each displaying their own qualities and quirks, adding the perfect addition to Lloyd's fun packed text.

This is a charming and warm-hearted story, which should offer inspiration to those of us not always confident in our abilities and proving that being true to yourself is always the best thing to be. **AH**

The Moon Seed

★★★★

Sally Anne Garland, Sunbird Books, 40pp, 978 1 5037 7504 6, £7.99, pbk

An astronaut for the Apollo 14 mission to the moon took a bag of seeds with

him. This book is a reimagining of what might have happened to one of those seeds. For nine days this particular seed floated around the spaceship, with its two wings twirling. It spotted something unbelievably bright and beautiful from up on the moon. Once back on earth, a forester planted the winged seed deep in the soil. Down went its roots, up came its shoot, striving to grow so tall that it could reach the moon again. The days, months, years passed until the tree was fully grown. Night after night, a bear, chipmunks, rabbits and skunks sheltered in and around the tree. Poetic in language, the tale speaks for every growing thing upon earth, even those striving to reach the moon. Beautifully illustrated in soft muted tones, sometimes in bright shining colours, the book leaves a tender spot for all seeds planted and tended, on our stunningly handsome earth... and for the moon. A book to ponder upon, and return to; and maybe be encouraged to plant a seed and tend it through its growth. **GB**

Paper Adventures: A Rip-and-Glue Activity Book

★★★★★

Aya Watanabe, Templar Books, 64pp, 9781800788145, £7.99 pbk

This colourful activity book for youngsters who want to get creative is very original and imaginative. On page 2 Aya Watanabe explains, 'The word "collage" means to make a special picture by gluing together lots of different things. You can use colourful paper, pictures from

magazines or even fabric. It's like a fun puzzle where you get to decide where each piece goes.' Aya's infectious enthusiasm for art comes across in her helpful introduction to the activities..

Twenty-six patterned/coloured pages at the end of the publication are included for the young artist to rip or cut into careful pieces and stick on their collage, whilst following the instructions towards the top of each spread in the main section of the book. An exciting story about exploring the jungle and the ocean is told as you work your way through the pages. Young children can pretend they are going on a big adventure with two explorers, and they will be able to have hours of fun. The first picture of a sun with five rays instructs that the reader adds more rays to the sunshine using the attractive papers provided. The pictures to complete include elephants, snails, butterflies, a peacock, a rainbow, an octopus and the story ends with a big seashell to decorate.

Congratulations to Templar on producing such a high-quality book which enables lots of use of fine motor skills: little fingers are sure to enjoy ripping, cutting and sticking the gorgeous, patterned papers. Some help with the reading of the instructions will be needed for younger children, although artists will soon get the idea of how to finish off the collages. This would be an ideal gift for a preschooler and could also be used in imaginative play by children in Key Stage 1. Happy sticking! **JS**

8 – 10 Junior/Middle

New Talent

The Boy in the Suit

★★★★★

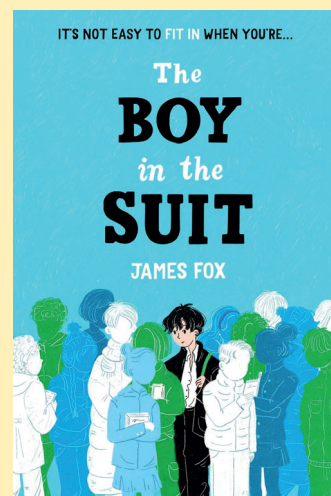
James Fox, Scholastic, 384pp, 978 0702 33310 1, £7.99 pbk

Solo Walker has a strange life. He and his mum, Morag, crash funerals for the free food. And, no, they never know the people who died.

Solo hates this life. He desperately wants to be a normal ten-year-old and not a boy in an ill-fitting grey suit from a charity shop. He also wants to be able to forget the importance of a back story and not have to run out of shops when they can't pay a bill.

This life works for a short period, but what happens when they get caught at the funeral of a famous footballer? And, more importantly, what is the reason behind their way of life?

This book is a sparkling, funny debut full of pathos and important issues such as food poverty and parental mental health as well



as dysfunctional families. Solo's voice is utterly believable and the reader is always rooting for him from the start.

The premise of the book may sound comedic, but the issues embedded in the narrative are not. **RB**

Silent Night, My Astronaut

★★★★

Oksana Lushchevska, ill. Kateryna Stepanishcheva, Andersen Press, 40pp, 9781839135972, £12.99 hbk
Detailing the first ten days following the outbreak of war in the Ukraine, this title follows Ia and her family as they learn to navigate their new lives and face the conflict brought to their doorstep. Her father leaves on day two to fight for Ukraine, by the end of the first week Ia and her mother are spending increasing amounts of time in the basement in Kyiv with complete strangers. By the second week, the mother and daughter have experienced a more prolonged attack and make the difficult decision to leave their much-loved city to find a temporary sanctuary. Crucially, we leave the family at this point – in a perpetual state of transience, which accurately reflects the situation still for so many Ukrainian families.

Silent Night takes the form of diary conversations between Ia and her 'astronaut', something she believes will help to keep her safe. The diary is somewhere she can share her concerns as she faces the difficult challenge of processing and understanding the conflict in her home city, but this is expertly and sensitively handled, so that the diary is also interspersed with some of the regular feelings and tribulations of any other child. For this reason, the relationship between the child protagonist and the child reader builds easily, and the sparse and emotive language selected when crafting such simplistic and frank statements also adds authenticity: 'I want to sleep in my bed so badly, but we sleep on the floor in the corridor'.

Threaded throughout the diary entries are some important themes: safety, family, activism and the reader is invited to consider these themes, whilst also reflecting on what it might be like to have your daily freedom so heavily restricted. Ia admits she doesn't like going to school because she doesn't enjoy maths, but she still wants schools to exist; she has learnt to love silence and to fear noise; she resorts to squats as a form of exercise but still finds ways to tease her mum for stopping at 46. It is this sense of the familiar in an environment so very different from their own that so beautifully helps the reader begin to comprehend how life in Ukraine has changed.

This considerate crafting is wholly matched in Stepanishcheva's emotive illustrations. They are often as simplistic in concept as the text, but it is this simplicity that makes them sing. Each image carries so much heart, and the careful consideration of colour palette to reflect the mood at times, and to consistently and proudly reflect the colours of the Ukrainian flag are stylistic choices which really help to envelop the reader in Ia's experience. A superb title for fostering empathy and understanding. **ARU**

The Reek

★★★★★

Alastair Chisholm, ill. George Caltsoudas, Barrington Stoke, 148pp, 9781800902589, £7.99 pbk.
In this environmental-themed thriller for children, the young Surat takes on a global corporation in a dystopian Edinburgh where everything – even the air people breathe – is controlled by Zephyr industries.

'The Reek' is a dangerous chemical smog: a deadly poison gas cloud suffocating the planet. Its name evokes an early nickname of Edinburgh, where this story is set, whose dirty industry-fueled air once led wealthy people to abandon the 'Old Reeky' city and establish new towns nearby. This theme is reimagined very effectively here. The poisonous smog is deadly to all, but Zephyr industries find a way to purify the air. They are subsequently able to monetise the sale of fresh air to the surviving human beings at a price that all but the wealthiest find desperately difficult to afford.

Surat (or Sparrow, as she prefers to be known) and her family are among Edinburgh's survivors. In order to access enough credits to pay for clean air, Sparrow has to take a job as a hover-skating courier, flying around the crowded streets in her gas mask, desperately hoping that she'll earn enough to pay for some food and maybe even some school uniform for her wee sister on top of the clean air they can't live without.

There's no way Sparrow would survive without the help of an old, enigmatic genius inventor, Miriam. Miriam used to work with Zephyr and, though she's happy to help upgrade Sparrow's skates in her spare time, she's clearly up to something, eager to undermine Zephyr's grip on the population. When Miriam's workshop is mysteriously set ablaze in the presence of Sparrow, an exhilarating chase begins, with Zephyr agents hunting Sparrow through the streets, rivers, and sewers of Edinburgh. The pace of the action is such that breathless readers will find themselves reaching for their gas masks.

Like all Barrington Stoke publications, **The Reek** is brilliantly accessible for young readers, wasting no words on any details that aren't absolutely necessary. The result is a simple, exciting story of manageable length that many children will choose to race through in one sitting. Experienced readers with more sophisticated tastes might find some of the characters too familiar, especially the power-crazed super villain and the resourceful, wise old woman who guides Sparrow, but there's no denying that the way the narrative twists and resolves at such a fast pace is extremely satisfying.

At the heart of **The Reek** are the themes of environmentalism and corporate social responsibility.

Sparrow and her friends face oppression and restriction of liberty every day and they are furious that people with power aren't choosing to help. The book feels prescient and relevant and urges children to ask questions of their own politicians and global corporations. **SD**

Poo Crew Adventures: Journey to Poo-Topia

★★★★

James Turner, ill. Steve May, Farshore, 160pp, 9780008658786, £7.99 pbk

Why do we chew? Why do we fart? Why do cows have so many stomachs? And ... what will happen to a small poo called Ploppy AFTER he's been flushed?!

Poo Crew Adventures: Journey to Poo-Topia is a fascinating, if slightly gross, insight into the journey of our bodily waste, from its origins in the food we eat, to the sewer where it lands ... and everything in between, told in the form of a brightly coloured graphic novel, overflowing with facts. We follow Ploppy and Professor Poo, the self-professed universal leading expert in poo science, from the toilet bowl through the professor's special 'poo-rtal' which enables them to jump across time and space to learn the many important facts about poo.

This is a wonderful new approach to a non-fiction topic, that will appeal to young scientists and all lovers of toilet humour alike. Alongside the detailed poo information, we also take a trip to the Hall of Toilets, learning about the history of these crucial home installations, followed by a quick visit to the Zoo Pods for an insight into animal faeces (who knew that wombats do square poos?!). At the rear of the book, there is even a guide on how to draw your own version of Professor Poo, plus a very sensible glossary on the many scientific areas covered in the book.

If you can get past the initial reaction to the subject matter and the inevitable sniggering, this is a wonderfully fun way to learn more about poo, which is sure to make a splash – sorry! **AH**

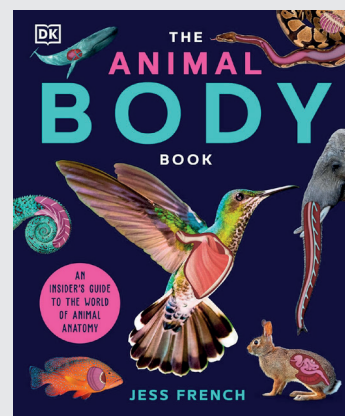
The Girl with Wings

★★★★

Jaco Jacobs, illus. Tori Stowe, trans. Kobus Geldenhuys, Rock The Boat, 176pp, 978861548224, £7.99 pbk

Would you like to have a famous mother? A stepfather who takes photographs of random objects? Would you like to be named after a tennis racket? Taylor Wilson wishes to be normal; to live in a normal house, to stop constantly moving on. Now in yet another new town and with another new friend, a boy called Errol whose head is full of questions and whose hobby is birdwatching – she just wants to fit in. Then Taylor and Errol meet someone truly extraordinary – Ava, a girl with wings! This is certainly not normal – and Ava is in danger. There is someone keen to find her and capture her. Can Taylor and Errol protect her?

Coming to us from South Africa from the author Jaco Jacobs and skilfully translated from the Afrikaans by Kobus Geldenhuys, this is a gently quirky fantasy. Who has not wanted to be extraordinary? But is it all that comfortable? Jacobs takes this familiar desire of many a young reader reminding them that extraordinary can be dangerous. And in any case, everyone is unique – who else is named after a tennis racket? So, what is normal? What is important is friendship and family, of acceptance. Jacobs' style is direct and immediate with a lively mix of dialogue and description providing a satisfying reading experience for its audience. Mixing danger, mystery, and some questions or right and wrong, there is an attractive element of humour that comes out in the relationship between the children. This, together with the lively pen and ink illustrations that decorate the pages throughout by Tori Stowe, ensure that here is a very enjoyable read. **FH**



The Animal Body Book

★★★★★

Jess French, illus. Jonathan Woodward, DK, 160pp, 978-0241635261, £20.00 hbk

As an introduction to anatomy and the way animal bodies have adapted to do such an extraordinary variety of things, this book could not be bettered. Written by TV presenter, vet and conservationist Jess French, familiar to the book's audience no doubt from her CBeebies work, it is well-presented, comprehensive and respects readers' intelligence. Colour-coded sections cover every aspect of anatomy from skeletons and muscles to circulation and respiration, and digestion and reproduction. Alongside high-quality photographs of animals – mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, invertebrates and amphibians – are cutaway illustrations by Jonathan Woodward allowing us to see from the inside exactly how these animals' bodies work. From specific examples, such as how a giraffe can drink without blood flooding its brain, to general information like how nerves and the nervous system work, there's a huge amount of information and the presentation makes it accessible and digestible and it's likely to

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

send readers on further journeys of discovery. An essential book for budding vets and a great addition to library and classroom collections. **MMA**

Knutz + Boltz and the Sorcerer of Science

★★★

Tim Collins, ill. Louise Forshaw, Buster Books, 256pp, 9781780559377, £7.99 pbk

This action-packed title opens as the main characters, Knutz and Boltz, are waiting for a livestream from the Sorcerer of Science. When she doesn't appear, it is clear that something is wrong, and the intrepid young scientists set out to try and locate the Sorcerer and Dr Chaos to restore usual order. In order for this to be achieved, the reader must help solve a range of puzzles, which lead in turn to the next event in the story.

The intentions behind this book are clear – there is a strong link to STEAM subjects, both in the events of the underlying story and in the activities and puzzles it generates. There is also clear consideration of ways to appeal to a wider audience of young readers in the format chosen: there are longer sections of text which seek to narrate the story, but this is interspersed with comic strip sections which are likely to have appeal to the growing fans of graphic novels. The use of a puzzle which requires the reader's input before the next part of the adventure can be reached is also an engaging strategy to help young readers build reading stamina. That said, the pages are very busy and there is a lot of text packed into every page and in some cases in especially small print, both of which could be limiting factors for some readers.

Another title is promised later this year, and this is a series which clearly has an audience in mind and much potential, if still perhaps in the development stage in certain aspects. **ARU**

Cobweb

★★★

Michael Morpurgo, ill. Michael Foreman, HarperCollins, 240pp, 9780008352134, £14.99 hbk

Once again, this esteemed and popular author and illustrator pairing has produced an endearing animal story that will instantly appeal, delighting their many fans. Its inspiration is the astonishing true stories of the drovers, who would take farmer's sheep and cattle to market in the big cities, often hundreds of miles away, always accompanied by a good reliable dog. Remarkably, these drovers would need to stay in the city for weeks, selling the sheep and cattle, and so the dogs would find their way home on their own, stopping at night in the same inns as on their outward journey, where the innkeeper would provide food for

them which would have been prepaid by the drover. The dogs they used on the 250-mile path from west Wales to London were often Pembrokehire corgis just like our narrator, Cobweb, who tells us the story of how he became a drover dog. Born on a farm and beloved by Bethan, who lives alone with her father, Tad, after her mother and brother were lost fishing, his happy life is interrupted when he is abducted by Tad's jealous second wife and given to Drover Morgan. Gradually he realises he must accept his fate and recognises that Drover Morgan is a caring owner and in Goodlad, the old collie, he finds a true friend to teach him the skills he needs to become a proper drover's dog. On his remarkable journey his story becomes entwined with yet another true story – that of the French Drummer Boy of Waterloo and eventually they both find a permanent home with Bethan. This is a story of canine courage and the true bonds which can be formed between humans and animals, but it also deals with the impact of war and the loss and sacrifice found on both sides. The landscape and historical setting are skilfully evoked in both words and pictures, and the accessibly straightforward language makes this a very satisfying read for newly confident readers and equally an engaging read-aloud to share. **JC**

Ghostlines

★★★★

Katya Balen, Bloomsbury Children's, 252pp, 978 1526663849 £12.99 hbk
Katya Balen is known for her beautiful nature writing, for making the natural world come alive and in **Ghostlines** she doesn't disappoint.

The main human character in this middle grade novel is Tilda, a bold and feisty adventurer who loves her home on the island of Ayrie and the story is one of friendship, self-discovery and growing up. But the island itself is also a main character and Balen takes us into the wild, remote and beautiful countryside immersing the reader in the natural rhythms of the land, the sea and the animals who also make the island their home.

Tilda loves her home, she knows every inch of it and lives in a community that thrives in the wildness and the closeness that remote living brings. She is free and happy as she and her friends roam and play around Ayrie, enjoying the quiet that the end of the tourist season brings. A new child comes to the island and, forced to look after him and show him her home, Tilda struggles to convince him to see the beauty and the wonder that she sees in every rock and blade of grass. She goes further and further in her adventures in order to make him see her home as she does and ends up crossing a boundary that she believes no one has ever

crossed before. As their relationship develops Tilda begins to understand a decision her own brother made and to understand that sometimes you need to go away in order to come home.

This is a wild and wonderful story full of daring adventures and beautifully described nature and it is also a story about learning to appreciate difference in opinion, the majesty of the natural world and the power of natural and human history. **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 at rather than hammered home. Charis Loke's cover is dramatic and lovely, and this is a good story- dragons are always popular! **DB**

The River's a Singer. Selected Poems

★★★★

Valerie Bloom, illus Sophie Bass, Macmillan, 126pp, 9781035043767 £6.99 pbk

This attractively produced paperback brings together a selection of poems by Valerie Bloom, one of the best known and established poets writing for children today. She is winner of the **CLIPPA** Children's Poetry Prize for **Stars with Flaming Tails**. Here is a fresh selection of her poems drawn from earlier collections reminding us of her charm, versatility and ability to create poems that will immediately resonate with a child audience. Valerie Bloom's poems are beautifully crafted and designed to capture the attention through words creating subtle rhyme and rhythm. There is plenty of humour to attract the young, humour that often looks to word play for its effect. There are poems that look to the natural world, funny

poems, mini stories, poems about the family – especially her Jamaican granny. There are short poems, haikus, longer poems – a whole variety of forms. Her language is direct, immediate, and contemporary. But she also writes using the Jamaican patois of her childhood, poems that demand to be spoken aloud. The illustrations decorating the pages capture the liveliness, the fun in the verses, picking up details with a delicate touch that enhance lines that already dance off the page.

Valerie Bloom can be found on the [Children's Poetry Archive](#) where you can hear her reciting *The River's a Singer*, *Granny Is* and *Autumn Gilt* all featured in this collection; a real treat. **FH**

Blue Heart

★★★★

Nicola Davies, Graffeg, 64pp, 9781802587500, £14.99 hbk

Created by wildlife expert Nicola Davies and with a foreword by Dr Helen Scales the Marine Biologist, this is a compact and very beautiful book which will introduce a sense of wonder and insight into these most amazing creatures.

The author describes **Blue Heart** as an extended love letter or 'celebration in pictures and poems' of some of the species of whales she has seen or spent time with, including the blue whale, sperm whale and orca. Rich with personal experience and knowledge, the writer draws on her memories to introduce us to the biggest animals that have ever lived.

Through thoughtful and varied poetry and additional annotation, we discover the awesome size of blue whales, the ruthlessness of the orca and the threat to right whales posed by shipping lanes. We learn technical information such as the use of a baleen for sifting food, and the incredible sound whales make to help them propagate. We find out about the value of whales for the world's atmosphere and importance of restoring their communities to pre fishing levels. The loneliness of whales in captivity is described in 'Winnie' and the wonder whale sightings can inspire in the most experienced of professional observers is described in 'Scientifically Trained.'

Rich with illustration, whales swim through the book over wonderful sets of double page spreads coloured deep ocean blue, emphasising their size, majesty and mystery. **SMC**

Alastair Campbell: Why Politics Matters (Little Experts)

★★★★

Alastair Campbell, ill. Maité Franchi, Red Shed, 32pp, 9780008560089, £9.99 hbk

It was not until I was a student in the sixth form in the 1980s that I had formal lessons in politics as part of a general course for all our year group. My school was innovative and forward-looking and such a

helpful introduction to politics and the workings of the government was novel at the time. Fast forward to 2024 and here is a book on politics in a series aimed at 8-10-year-olds and, as Alastair Campbell explains in his dedication at the front of the book, 'To the children of today, who will be the politicians of tomorrow' (p. 4).

The author's passion for his subject shines through these pages, which look in detail at the politics of the UK, and how it affects all of us, every day. Topics covered include 'What is Parliament?', which not only explains the House of Commons and the House of Lords but looks at the role of the King and the Prime Minister. Finance, Voting and Local Government are also included, before a few pages about how students can start being active in politics by practicing debating at school and reading the news regularly. I learned quite a lot from this handy guide. The glossary at the end of the volume will be very useful too.

Well done to all involved in producing such a finely written text, illustrated perfectly to engage the young reader in a complicated subject. Politics needs explaining to all citizens at some point and the earlier the better, to encourage our politicians of the future! **JS**



Eurek-Her!

★★★★★

Frances Durkin, illus Nur Ventura, b small, 9781913918941, £14.99 hbk
This inspiring book profiles twenty groundbreaking women whose work in STEM had a real impact on our understanding of science. First up is Tapputi Belatekallim, who lived in Mesopotamia in 1200 BCE and was famous amongst her contemporaries as a perfume maker. She is often called the world's first known chemist because of her use of distillation. Continuing, chronologically, readers are introduced to more women pioneers in the fields of engineering, biology, geology, seismology, astrology, medicine and more. Some they may already have heard of, Mary Anning, Rosalind Franklin for example, others will probably be new to them,

but they'll all be familiar by the end of the book. Each scientist has a double page spread, with information about the women and their lives as well as panels that explain scientific processes succinctly and clearly. It concludes with Nzambi Matee, the young Kenyan woman whose work on recycling plastic won her a United Nations award. Perhaps most inspiring of all however are the final pages, which provide youngsters with 12 step-by-step science activities to do themselves. There are lots of good books highlighting the achievements of female scientists, but this is particularly well written, well-presented and laid out, the DIY experiments an excellent addition. **MMA**

How to Build a Rocket

★★★★★

Fran Scott, ill. Paul Boston, Walker Books, 64pp, 9781529507539, £14.99 hbk

My message to all young budding engineers, who want to launch into the world of rocket science, is to grab a copy of this excellent manual! Written by Fran Scott, a very experienced radio, television and podcast presenter, and illustrated by the talented Paul Boston, this book will likely be seen competing for future book awards.

The author's conversational style throughout the book is pitched at the right level for 7-year-olds upwards. She wisely advises that youngsters embarking on their mission to build a rocket are supervised by adults for safety reasons. I liked the layout of this attractive book which initially clarifies the parts of a rocket and what household objects you will need to create your own version. The section entitled 'The Rocket Academy' clearly explains Newton's Three Laws of Motion and then the reader meets the team behind space missions together with details of their different responsibilities.

Chapters One to Six then take the student through the whole lengthy process: The Rocket Body; The Launch Pad; The Fuel; Countdown to Launch; Testing and Tweaking; Personalization. Instructions are broken down into manageable sections and together with clear diagrams everything is explained well. This is the perfect gift for a keen scientist to try out during a school holiday or when in a club. It is a practical guide which helpfully explains problems that can occur in building the rocket and how to correct them easily.

I learned lots of useful scientific information as I worked my way through this publication and particularly enjoyed the section on Meet the Team (pp.14-15). Eight roles of engineers were itemized and described so that I now know the jobs they all do. Full marks to the creatives behind this publication.

Young scientists are so fortunate to have the talents of professionals at their fingertips to help them with experiments such as these. **JSNT**

Pluto Rocket: New in Town

★★★★★

Paul Gilligan, Pushkin Children's, 96pp, 9781782694588, £8.99 pbk
This new graphic novel delivers bags of giggles from the very first page and is bursting with visually striking cartoons that young readers will love. It introduces a zany, pink alien - Pluto Rocket - and an inimitable pigeon - Joe Pidge, and establishes them securely as a fresh new comedy duo for the children's genre.

Pluto Rocket descends to Earth from his home planet of Pluto, on a secret mission to find out all he can about life on 'The Neighbourhood'. He lands next to Joe Pidge who is, until that moment, quite happy strutting confidently down the street like normal, talking to himself about how excellent he is. The pair strike up a conversation about Pluto Rocket's amazing good fortune to have landed next to such an authority on 'The Neighbourhood's' social scene and the comedic chemistry between the pair is immediately obvious.

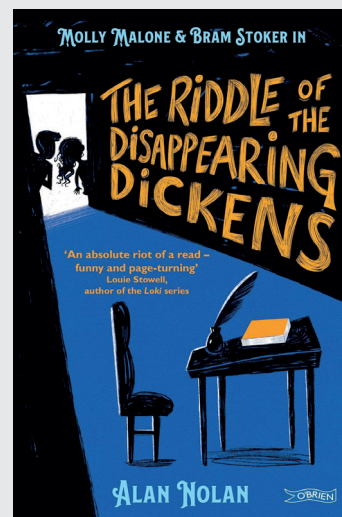
The book is short on characters, focusing almost exclusively upon Pluto Rocket and Joe Pidge. This narrow cast might lead some readers to want a little more from the story, but it doesn't detract from the comedy in any way. Joe and Pluto Rocket are the archetypal odd couple of the comedy genre. They seemingly have nothing in common. On the surface, Joe is all-knowing and Pluto Rocket plays dumb, and his failure to grasp Joe's meaning about everything from hats to tacos is a frequent source of hilarity. However, it is obvious to readers (but not to Joe) that this visitor from a distant galaxy has some crazy alien skills that utterly upstage Joe's self-celebrated talents (which include an ability to wear hats well and to know where to find the tastiest taco).

The Earth that Pluto Rocket has landed on is inhabited by talking animals and humans living alongside one another. Pandas and crocodiles stride jauntily down the street alongside vikings and Abraham Lincoln(!), making clear to readers that, in this series, anything and everything could happen, motivating them to keep turning the pages to find the next totally random, very funny surprise. In this series opener, though, Gilligan resists the temptation to broaden the narrative too much, only revealing a few of Pluto Rocket's powers and a very small number of details about 'The Neighbourhood' and its residents. Instead, Pluto Rocket and Joe Pidge's characters are developed fully through seriously funny dialogues about trivial matters that rarely stretch beyond the search for, eating of and (reluctantly) sharing of tacos.

It is heartening to imagine an alien arriving from Pluto and being as generous, positive and curious as

Pluto Rocket is. His mission is to learn new things and he innocently seeks out joy from the world around him and people in it. The result is an optimistic and celebratory atmosphere that young readers and their parents will find equally enjoyable.

Gilligan's audacious illustrations have a colour scheme that is wild and flamboyant, and a clever use of line delivers great expression and characterisation, with the effect that characters are funny even before they have said or done anything! This is accompanied by great comic timing and plenty of visual gags. The marketplace for silly, witty graphic novels like this is somewhat overcrowded but the simple, double-act approach (which will hopefully be sustained in future episodes) gives this an original feel. With luck, the front cover festooned with tasty tacos will be enough to tempt readers into trying it out! **SD**



The Riddle of the Disappearing Dickens

★★★★★

Alan Nolan, O'Brien Press, 256pp, 9781788495028, £8.99 pbk

You might think Bram (Stoker) and Molly (Malone) are unlikely best friends. The future author of *Dracula* is 'quality', living in Dublin with his well to do parents, while Molly is an accomplished pickpocket and head of the Sackville Street Spooks gang of junior thieves. But, as depicted in these lively adventure stories, they are both sharp-witted, quick thinking and full of curiosity - no wonder they get on so well. In this the third in the series, the friends are in London with Bram's parents, and they've arrived at a particularly exciting time. St Stephen's Tower has just opened - Big Ben would be a good name for its bell, muses Bram - and Nelson's Column is still new-ish and a novelty. The two have a habit of stumbling across mysteries wherever they are and sure enough, they're just about to enter the British Museum when news breaks that Charles Dickens, Bram's hero, has been kidnapped. Of course, they immediately determine to rescue him

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

picking up the first clue in the Lyceum Theatre and having the second drop into their laps in Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese pub. Meanwhile, back in Dublin, Molly's gang are having their own equally exciting adventure with an escaped gorilla. The two plots unfold in perfect tandem, thrills and comedy equal throughout, and it's all sprinkled with literary references to Dickens. The characters convince, even the cockney-rhyme spouting villains, and the settings – a tale of two cities – do too. This is a page-turning treat for young readers and lucky the teacher or parent who gets to share the story. **MMA**

Dungeon Runners

★★★★

Kieran Larwood, ill. Joe Todd-Stanton, Nosy Crow, 194pp, 9781839945182, £7.99 pbk

This whimsical fantasy story for children describes the epic quest of a hapless band of young fairy tale creatures, who seek a place on Crystal TV's biggest show, Dungeon Runners.

Kit Kitson is a gnorf - half gnome, half dwarf - and his diminutive stature makes him a target for bigger creatures and bullies such as Breg, the troggle. When Breg throws Kit's tiny gobrot friend - Kleeko - into a muddy puddle, it is the final straw, and a disconsolate Kit rashly boasts that he will show Breg and the bullies how tough he really is by entering a team for the Dungeon Runners Master League.

This is not a wise decision. Teams for the Dungeon Runners are made up of experienced fighters like Breg, talented healers and magical mages, and they almost never include gnorfs. Only Kit's uncle Klot has successfully competed in the dungeon runners before, and his advice for Kit is clear: 'You'll be eaten alive.'

However, what Kit lacks in strength, and magic, and healing power, and size, and experience...he makes up for in stubbornness. Determined not to lose face in front of Breg and the bullies, he recruits his own team. Thorne (a somewhat reluctantly vegan vampire) and Sandy (an aspiring mage who so far only knows how to conjure small sandcastles) complete Kit's team, and they do little to bolster his confidence in success, or to stop everyone else from laughing at them.

As the dungeon running begins, Kit and the team have to face fierce monsters and decipher clues in an effort to earn treasure and ultimately be the first team to escape the dungeon unscathed. The action is charming and funny rather than exhilarating, and Kit and his friends are endlessly more likeable than the other teams, whose members include familiar axe-wielding dwarfs and creepy spiderlings, who really test Thorne's commitment to veganism.

Predictably, it is close friendship

that sets the team apart from their rivals in the end. Kit's loyalty to his palm-sized buddy, Kleeko, is rewarded in an original and plot-twisting manner, in a satisfying climax that sets the stage for more **Dungeon Runners** episodes in the future. **SD**

The Last Life of Lori Mills

★★★★

Max Boucherat, ill. Thomas Humeau, HarperCollins, 266pp, 9780008666484, £7.99 pbk

This spine-chilling story starts off in a very ordinary way. When Lori is trusted to stay at home alone, until her mother arrives after working late, she thinks she can spend time playing her favourite game Voxminer on her computer. But strange things start happening and Lori can't tell if it is her imagination, or something much more dangerous. Events move dramatically downhill as Lori cannot contact her mother or her best friend and even her avatars on the computer appear to be disappearing. Can Lori find a way out of this nightmare; can she contact her best friend, 'Shoelace' and what is it in Voxminer that has taken control of the game and wants to destroy Lori?

This is a fantastic book for those who love both gaming and those stories with an element of horror attached to them. Perhaps one of the most significant points about the initial part of the story is that Lori is 11 years old, although she argues that she is nearly 12 and therefore almost a teenager. She is totally confident that she is safe to stay at home by herself and most of the readers will also feel the same in fact some probably do have this privilege at times. However, the unexpected can happen and in this instance it does. The important element is how does Lori react to what is going on and can she think through any solutions that will help her? The book itself has a fascinating layout, with different text indicating whether this is the story, or text on the computer. There are also hand drawn plans of Lori's house, so that we can follow the action and pages with little or no text, which show her fear as she tries to escape anger. Overall this makes for a fascinating read, but not perhaps for late night reading. **MP**

World of Sport

★★★★

Lawrence Alexander, ill. Violeta Noy, Templar Books, 64pp, 9781787416642, £14.99 hbk

This beautifully illustrated hardback covering a multitude of sports is a timely publication coinciding with the Paris Olympics. Well-known feature writer and columnist Lawrence Alexander must have spent hours researching this huge topic which encompasses the globe, and even the moon: 'Golf is one of only two sports (the other is javelin) to have

been played on the Moon!' (p. 39.) The volume is a treasure trove of historical facts as well as being a detailed study of how different sports are/were played.

The colourful Contents page shows how this book opens with 'How Sport Began' illustrated by an the Epic of Gilgamesh, from 2100 BCE, where King Gilgamesh fights a wild man to see who is stronger (p.7). The pages which follow focus on the Ancient Olympic Games including the sports played there. It is interesting to note that, 'Women were not allowed to watch the games, but at least one found a way around the rules' (p.8).

Types of sports are grouped together in sections followed by a spread comparing how they are played in different countries. For example: 'Around the World: Ball Sports' and 'Around the World: Movement and Balance Sports.'

This colourful book is filled to the brim with fascinating facts that students will love. My favourite fact is on page 11: the longjumpers at the first Olympic Games were accompanied by musicians playing flutes! Similarly, including unusual sports will hook the reader into the volume: 'Quadbball, also known as quidditch, is based on a fictional game from the **Harry Potter** books' (p.27).

It was interesting to learn more about Paralympic Sports and Women's Sports as well as reading lots of short biographies of outstanding sports people. This delightful book scores top marks on a range of features, and I think we will see it in nominations for awards. Congratulations to everybody involved in this far-reaching project. **World of Sport** is highly recommended for classrooms, libraries and homes for readers aged 7 upwards! **JS**

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

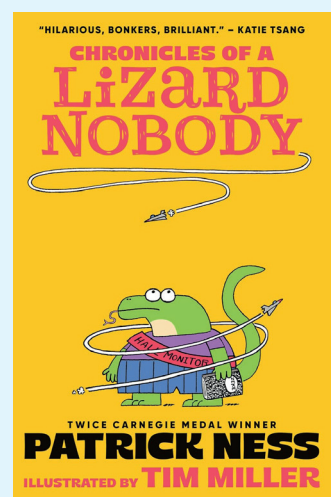
Ed's Choice

Chronicles of a Lizard Nobody

★★★★

Patrick Ness, ill. Tim Miller, Walker, 208pp, 9781529517958, £7.99 pbk

With each Patrick Ness I read, my admiration grows. Leaving his usual hangout on the young adult corner, he turns up with a school story for slightly younger readers. And yes, it's the familiar story of school survival, friendship and bullying, but with the twist that all the classmates and their teachers are animals, mixed up with some haphazard references to their size and characteristics, as the source of some clever jokes and situations. The mood is set in the first chapter. We meet our hero Zeke when he and his friend Daniel are being made school hall monitors. Is it, Zeke wonders aloud, because he and Daniel are monitor lizards, just like their friend Alicia, who is already a hall monitor? Well no, says Principal Wombat, that's just coincidence. Given the opportunity to ask a question, impetuous Daniel uses the opportunity to sort out something that's obviously been troubling him. 'Is it true', he asks the Principal, 'You can use your butt as armour?' 'Yes,' she replies, dismissively, 'It's a wombat thing. Any other questions?' Principal Wombat's butt will indeed play a crucial role but not until we have reached pretty much the end of a tale in which Ness expertly mixes perceptive observation of the pressures of school and home life, and the compensations of friendship, with some situations and characters that are so way out that it is a wonder he can get away



with it. Why and how does Zeke have the whole of France on his knee, so that chief bully Pelicarnassus (he is a pelican) can send a small flight of aircraft on a night bombing raid? Can the friendship of the new cool blind kid, a hawk who shouts in capital letters, boost Zeke's self-confidence? Will Zeke face down Mrs Pfister, the pony in charge of the stationery cupboard and come back with craft supplies? And what is this black dog who has come to live in Zeke's home and who won't let him near his mother? It's a tale that is beyond unpredictable: crazy, funny, and tender. Running through the laughter and bravura invention, there is an uplifting faith in our capacity to understand, love and support one another. Sheer unmissable brilliance. A word of admiration, too, for illustrator Tim Miller, who is happy to rise to the challenge of showing us a monitor lizard wrestling a yak to the ground. You will see it nowhere else. **CB**

The Swifts: A Gallery of Rogues

★★★★★

Beth Lincoln, ill. Claire Powell, Puffin, 495pp, 9781241613016, £14.99 hbk

Your reviewer enjoyed reading and reviewing the first Swifts book so much, that efforts were made to obtain this, the sequel, for more entertainment. This time Beth Lincoln has fun with French words as well as English words, as sisters Shenanigan Swift (no longer so chaotic) and budding scientist Phenomena, accompanied by piratical Uncle Maelstrom, are despatched to France to join their older sister, the elegant Felicity, on the trail of a valuable painting dramatically stolen from Swift House (the thieves leaving behind an exploding inflatable bird).

At the Hôtel Martinet (French for Swift) they meet the Martinet family, with whom the Swifts have had a love/hate, but mostly hate, relationship across the centuries. Aunt Inheritance is also there, with her grandchild, Erf, Shenanigan's cousin and best friend, who is non-binary and wears interesting jumpers. Further robberies of artworks are committed by the group we now know as Ovolupo, always leaving strange tableaux behind, but when a body is found, it all gets a bit more personal.

Shenanigan's detective work involves her cousin Souris, employed as bellboy and lift operator, who proves very useful – but can he be trusted? Pomme, the sister of Pamplemousse who was murdered in the first book, flits in and out of the investigation, and the chef, Gourmet, proves to be an ally against the ineffective manager, Soufflé. See how well the names work? Triplets Elan, Esprit and Ennu also live up to their names, as does Contraire, who always disagrees. All the French words are explained as we go, because Shenanigan and Erf have split a dictionary between them, so they can either look up words in their own half or ask the other.

Families can be difficult, and both groups have their issues: e.g. Shenanigan's dependence on Uncle Maelstrom is tested. There are twists and turns and much mayhem and excitement before all the mysteries are linked and resolved, and there is hope for improved relationships between the families. This was tremendous fun, with laugh-out-loud moments, and although the book looks chunky, the typeface is large on thick pages, and the reader just has to find out what happens next!

The first Swifts book was very popular, a New York Times bestseller, and winner of the Nero Book Award and the Barnes & Noble Book Award. Claire Powell is an established illustrator with a very distinctive style, and her illustrations are perfect for the Swifts in all their lovable eccentricity. Highly recommended! **DB**

A Riddle for a King

★★★

Mark Forsyth, ill. Matthew Land, David Fickling Books, 9781788453165, 240pp, £7.99 pbk

If you wanted to introduce children to some philosophical ideas, how might you do it? Mark Forsyth offers a possible solution here, drawing on the humorous possibilities of the paradox. Our hero, Philo, following a curious little man through a door in a grandfather clock, enters an Alice in Wonderland world, full of baffling possibilities and challenging decisions. As soon as he arrives, he finds himself in a 'Room of Signs' whose meanings are absurd and elusive: for instance, 'if this sign is missing, contact the management.' Less self-possessed and imperturbable than Alice, Philo's preoccupation is finding another way home after the door in the clock is destroyed. This leads him on a quest to meet the reclusive king of this strange realm, who is inconveniently out of reach in a flying castle, pulled by a flock of birds. On the way, Philo meets a cast of characters, sometimes unsettling and sometimes amusing, and consistently of a paradoxical bent, including a useful girl called Verity (the name is significant, I think). Unfortunately, the Midnight Witch, the most unsettling of the characters, riding in a chariot pulled by cheetahs, arrives late in the story to turn Verity into a teapot. Philo, now more concerned about Verity's fate than his own, persuades the king to join him in confronting the Midnight Witch, who happens to be the king's sister. And, by this time, Philo has a sufficient mastery of the twists and turns of logic and language to set his own fiendish paradoxical pitfall for the Midnight Witch. In an Afterthought, the author links several of the incidents and puzzles in the book to the thoughts of philosophers from Heraclitus to Bertrand Russell. However, I would think most children will be carried through the story by its sheer oddity and humour rather than the philosophical framework on which it loosely hangs.

PS I read the unillustrated, proof copy of the book. From glances at the published version, Matthew Land's illustrations add considerably to the story. **CB**

Rosa by Starlight

★★★

Hilary McKay, ill. Keith Robinson, Macmillan, 217pp, 97811529074512, £12.99 hbk

This author has often excelled in domestic stories that approach fantasy while still just remaining rooted in everyday reality. **Rosa by Starlight** crosses this border, with its gentle, neglected eleven-year-old heroine able to bring all the inhabitants of over-crowded Venice

to a total stop as she rescues herself from a murder attempt. This is from a very dubious and possibly self-selected Aunt and Uncle who move in after Rosa's parent die in a plane accident. But these are disappointingly unsubtle characters, chronic over-weight and flashy teeth signalling villainy at every mention. The scorn visited upon their artificial lawn company is reminiscent of Dahl's intolerance of characters whose occupations he also disapproved of.

There are some golden moments, with Rosa desperately trying to get admitted into an orphanage or else irritating every person on her plane journey by asking the stewards to repeat their demonstration as she had not understood it first time round. The atmosphere of Venice at its most beguiling – and sometimes dangerous – is also well caught, backed up by Keith Robinson's beautiful line drawings. Cats make a frequent appearance, with one magisterial feline looked after by staff from whom he orders his lunch every day with a flick of the paw onto an illustrated menu. But the murder plot never rings true, and the summary drowning of the two miscreants passes almost without comment. In her acknowledgments the author describes writing this story while taking a break from a longer novel. There is still much to enjoy in the loving way she looks after Rosa, steering her towards a happy if somewhat unlikely ending. But her fans must also be looking forward to the next story which for them could last quite as long as she likes. **NT**



Save our Forest!

★★★★★

Nora Dåsnes, translated by Lærdal Bryn, Farshore, 231pp, 9780008653781, £10.99 pbk

Bao and her three friends are concerned about proposals to cut down the forest near their school and replace it with a parking lot. Bao is aware of the value of the natural environment and the consequences of destroying it. She tries acceptable channels and as a school council

rep can speak directly to the school managers, but they dismiss her concerns as childish, assuming she is just worried about losing a favourite play area.

Undeterred, Bao goes straight to the local mayor but this proves also to no avail. She decides more direct action is needed, hanging a banner from the school roof to highlight the issue and finally staging an occupation with a large group of friends in the forest on the eve of the planned demolition. Eventually Bao's determination is rewarded, and the forest is saved.

This is a highly readable coming of age graphic novel which makes great use of the format to depict the action, emotion and range of communication between Bao and her friends; the text message conversations are particularly effective. The frustration of not being listened to by the adults around you is very well expressed as well as the uncertainties of developing new relationships. Information about the effects of global warming is clearly depicted. The back of the book contains a guide to making your voice heard. **SMc**

Giraffe Island

★★★★★

Sofia Chanfreau and Amanda Chanfreau, trans Julia Marshall, Gecko Press, 220pp, 9781776575657, £7.35 pbk

Vega lives on an island, Giraffe Island. This is not because it is populated with giraffes – no, rather seen from space it looks like the outline of a giraffe. And the people who live on the island are quite ordinary. Vega is different. For her things that are ordinary to the general world are extraordinary to her – her maths homework dances, meals run marathons and she is surrounded by animals with whom she interacts. Many are familiar, others very different – spoonlurks, forfentipdes perhaps, creatures Vega draws in her sketch book – but all are invisible except to Vega. Or not quite, Hector, Vega's grandfather who waters his garden with lemonade, shares her imaginative reality. Her father does not. And Vega's life with him is carefully organised into a recognisable framework, for Vega has neither mother nor any memory of her beyond a song her father used to sing. Then things change, her father changes and Viola enters their life. For Vega she is the Ice Queen freezing her father and everything around them. The only solution is to find her real mother. With the help of her friend Nelson and her circus pen pal Jenna she sets out to do just that.

This is magical realism that draws in the reader completely so that the boundaries between the real world and the imaginative world are non-existent. Here is a world that compels active engagement and belief from its audience. The narrative is presented with such confidence that there is no doubt as to the geographical existence of Giraffe Island. There is no need for a magic

reviews

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

portal. The characters are engaging and believable; both children and adult step off the page. Vega has no magical powers beyond the imagination, a power all can exercise whether child or adult, ensuring a willing suspension of disbelief. However, grounding Vega's story is another reality; that of a young girl in the need of a mother, facing a change that seems unacceptable because it disrupts her life as she knows it. It is the prospect of this change that takes her on an emotional journey towards understanding and an acceptance that allows the two elements in her life to coexist.

This novel may not suit everyone but should be recommended to adventurous readers who are prepared to go on a journey that plays with the imagination. The prose is immediate and direct thanks to the translation by Julia Marshall. It is exciting that young readers in the UK can join young readers in Finland to appreciate the world created by Sofia and Amanda Chanfreau whose detailed soft-focus pen and ink illustrations both enhance the magical and the real. **FH**

Turtle Moon

★★★★★

Hannah Gold, illus Levi Penfold, HarperCollins, 322pp, 9780008582050, £14.99 hbk

This disarmingly sweet-natured story describes the ecological adventures of modern eleven-year-old British girl Silver when she and her parents spend four super-memorable months on an animal sanctuary in Costa Rica. Her father paints but her depressed mother, a vet, cannot get over the disappointment of being unable to conceive a second child and spends most time alone. Being surrounded by turtle eggs on the way to successful hatching hardly helps. But Silver has a great time, teaming up with Rafi, her own age and the son of the sanctuary chief. They appoint themselves as extra to the already existing guards, and Silver witnesses a leatherback turtle lay her eggs – a rare sight.

Rafi, accurately described as a walking turtle encyclopaedia, answers all Silver's questions about these increasingly endangered animals, therefore allowing readers to learn all about them too. And there are many questions and answers, with the narrative at times risking getting bogged down in its noble intentions. But an aborted raid by poachers renews a sense of urgency and all ends happily as Silver's mother declares she now wants to open a centre for wounded wildlife once back home.

The author, in a note to readers, reveals that she too had suffered from an inability to conceive but had found new fulfilment in writing books for children featuring wild animals at particular risk. Her previous titles have been well reviewed while also

selling well, and the same thing should surely happen with this story. It may be a little too long with characters more interesting in what they can do for turtles than they are in themselves. But the affection in the writing and the general good spirit evident throughout never wavers, with Levi Penfold's atmospheric drawings adding to the general sense of wonder offered by the natural world to those who want to discover more about it. **NT**

Fallout

★★★★★

Lesley Parr, Bloomsbury, 352pp, 9781526648013, £7.99 pbk

Choosing once again, as with her earlier **Where the River Takes Us**, to set her story in the recent past, which it personally pains me to call 'historical', Lesley Parr has perfectly evoked life in a small Welsh community in the 1980's. I distinctly remember the atmosphere of anxiety, with the news full of Margaret Thatcher, The Cold War, Nuclear Disarmament protests and with the backdrop of angry songs of protest from The Jam. It is only the latter that has impinged upon the consciousness of our hero and wannabe guitarist Marcus, at the start of this remarkable novel, but he has a lot to learn. The author has taken on the task of looking at a proverbial 'bad boy' and asking what made him like that and whether he really is bad underneath the swagger and bravado? Marcus is from a notorious criminal family, who expect him to follow in their footsteps meanwhile treating him with brutal neglect. If people expect the worst, why bother to try? Certainly, he has been written off by the village and his school. There has even been a falling out with his lifelong friend Jezza and the brother who supported him against the family is currently in a detention centre. Nevertheless, we quickly recognise that Marcus yearns for something more and the catalyst for change is finding two people who want to see the good in him rather than assume the worst. First an elderly neighbour who asks for his help and then freethinking newcomer Emma, who is shocked by the prejudiced way Marcus is treated. The gradual development of these tentative relationships and the difference that they make to Marcus' self-perception and subsequent behaviour, is both subtle, nuanced and moving. This makes the tragic events of the Carnival parade even more upsetting, when fingers are pointed, blame assumed and, agonisingly for readers now fully on his side, there seems no way out for him. The richly drawn, utterly believable characters make this redemption story about the power of friendship, family dynamics, prejudice and loyalty, wholly gripping and memorable. **JC**

Knowing the Score

★★★★★

Ros Roberts, Little Tiger 344pp., 9787888956765, £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 must also 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**

The List

★★★★★

Keith Gray, Barrington Stoke, 126pp, 9781800903203, £7.99 pbk

The List is the final part of a loosely linked thematic trilogy, charting the highs and lows of teenage friendships. **The Climbers** explored becoming friends, **The Den** dealt with the difficulties of remaining friends and this latest novella examines just how hard it is to say good-bye. Jake cannot believe his lifelong friend, Denny, is going to move away. He has no idea how he will manage life without him. Denny does not want to leave either and comes up with a list of things he must do before he goes; unfinished business he must settle. Jake is all for helping, without realising just how much their friendship will be put to the test. The tasks involve a hilariously misjudged attempt at revenge, a touching revisiting of a first kiss and a beautiful performative apology to a retired teacher. New friends get swept into the challenge

and might make the future less bleak for Jake if he can survive Denny's final confession. Keith Gray has always excelled in nuanced portraits of boys, which really explore their emotions and just how deeply they feel their friendships, as well as capturing all the humour and hubris of their relationships. He also has a real ear for authentic dialogue. He seems to understand the challenges young people face, their impulsiveness and occasional misguided choices and bad decision making. As a Barrington Stoke publication, this is highly accessible to those of a reading age of 8+, but in no way would any reader feel shortchanged. The storytelling is compelling, and we really care about these authentic and relatable characters in this rewarding read. **JC**

We Are Family, Six Kids and a Super-Dad

★★★★★

Oliver Sykes, ill. Ian Morris, Otter-Barry Books, 112pp, 9781915659248, £8.99 pbk

This is Oliver Sykes' first poetry collection – a poetry adventure, as it appears on the cover. And what a remarkable first collection it is. With sustained energy and insight, and an apparently inexhaustible joy in rhyme, Oliver celebrates his childhood growing up poor in a family of six with a single dad. He pays tribute to his resourceful dad and his siblings in over fifty poems about survival against the odds. The collection begins on the day that mum leaves home and there are six weeks to wait before the first benefit payment arrives: 'Mum was gone. Yes, that was true/ And it was awfully sad./ But the rest of us were closer now/ And it didn't feel so bad./ Not with my five super-siblings and/ Our amazing Super-Dad.' There are pen portraits of all the members of the family; poems about the horrors of living on very little, *In our Bowls of Rabbit Stew, I Hate Nettle Soup and Every Day is Pancake Day*; about the, sometimes fraught, relationships with siblings, 'I swear HE'll tell you anything/ to see me get told off!'; about the weight of responsibility felt by a child, 'But I mustn't fret/ I mustn't get mad/ I'll always have love/ As long as there's Dad.'; the extra support to be found at school – *Help me where others have not and Inching my way towards my first-ever/Free school meal*; and the need to have time to yourself – 'When you come from a big family/ It's important not to whine/ But what's even more important is/ That you find space and time.' In their energy, child's eye view, and humour, some of the poems remind me of Michael Rosen's early collections, as Ian Morris's illustrations remind me of Quentin Blake's. But there is a greater range here and an intention to speak up for families like the poet's. It is summed up in the last poem, *As Rich as Me*, when the poet speaks as adult writer to adult reader (with the first trace of bitterness?): 'So when you talk of your childhood/...

Remember this! You may have had more money, /But you weren't as rich as me! It's hard to see how he could have made his case any better. **CB**

Starspill

★★★★

Catherine Fisher, *Firefly*, 392pp, 9781915444684, £7.99 pbk

Catherine Fisher has an enviable track record as a writer of children's fantasy, and her sureness of touch is evident in this new tale. It is Zach's fate to live in a world where long ago the wolf swallowed the sun and his town is enveloped in unremitting fog. In this land of perpetual greyness and shadows, when day and night are scarcely distinguishable, Zach's family have a special calling. Zach's brother, like their father before them, is a 'starsmith', and turns fallen fragments of stars into lanterns, providing his town with a source of light and his family with a livelihood. It turns out that Zach himself has another, more particular, calling. This is offered to him by the cats of the town, who long to stretch warming themselves in the returned sun, and have chosen him to steal one of the three remaining embers of the sun that somehow escaped the wolf's ravenous jaws. The ember is housed in the town's museum, which is a series of intimidating chambers, designed to fray the nerves of anyone foolish enough to enter at night. Zach is reluctant but the cats have something of his that they have stolen and he wants back: the fragments of a mysterious map. Zach teams up with Alys, a candlemaker's daughter, to achieve this cat-given task, and has the unasked-for, but crucial, aid of a bookseller, newly arrived in the town. Of course, once the first ember is secured, the other two must be found, and the quartet of Zach, Alys, Aurelian the bookseller, and Jinx, an annoying talkative kitten, who believes himself in charge of the whole enterprise, set off to secure them. There is excitement, suspense, mystery and humour, as the quartet responds individually and as a group to the subsequent dangers. The mysterious map and the fog itself have a part to play in an expertly plotted and sprightly tale, which leans lightly on its distant and disparate folk tale origins. I particularly enjoyed the important role given to Jinx and the cat mafia. **CB**

Someone Has Been Messing with Reality

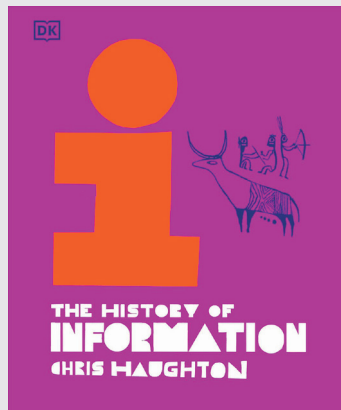
★★★★

John Hearne, *Little Island*, 211pp, 9781915071484, £7.99 pbk

As far as Martin is concerned, he is just your average teenage boy, living in an Irish seaside village, that is until both of his parents go missing from their respective workplaces at the same time. After this everything begins to become even weirder. First, there is a video of his father hovering in the air and then there are strange lights coming from the abandoned mines outside of the village. When

his friend Tina says that she thinks Martin is an alien, his world really does begin to crumble. Can they find his parents and work out who has been lurking in the mines and what they are doing there?

This is a new offering from Irish publisher Little Island. They have become more prominent in the UK in the last few years and I have always found the books to be fantastic reads. There is quite a small cast of characters in this story, and it is their relationships which are at the heart of things. Martin feels that his parents have been hiding things from him, even down to whether he really needs the medication they say he needs. Then we have Tina, who is a very strong character, but who perhaps need to be less assertive and Enda who has been affected by an accident and is very withdrawn. Finally, there are two friendly hippies, who prove to be not quite as ordinary as they pretend. The underlying themes concern the world and the way that humans are treating it; which leads to the fear that we are gradually destroying the environment. The author mixes science fiction with environmental issues, but all of it grounded in Irish common sense; after all, if you come from a culture where magic and myth are part of your history, the thought of aliens is not too much of a stretch. This is highly recommended. **MP**



The History of Information

★★★★

Chris Haughton, *Dorling Kindersley*, 141pp, 9780241553916, £20.00, hbk In a departure from his award-winning picture books for young children, Chris Haughton tackles a challenging and wide-ranging subject in his debut non-fiction book - the exponential development in the storage and sharing of information over the history of mankind.

A range of interconnected topics is addressed including oral language, first mark making, drawing, early writing systems and their development throughout the world. Readers learn about the groundbreaking change which came about with the development of printing, in speeding

up the sharing of the written word and making it accessible to a wider audience. Other topics include the impact of scientific progress on the classification of data and the standardisation of measurements. Readers learn about the history of newspapers, their contribution to the dissemination of information and how visual culture emerged following the invention of photography. The difference made to the spread of information by the development of networks of communication from the postal service to the telephone, internet and social media is also outlined.

Issues around the sharing of information are addressed including freedom of speech, the role of 'Big Tech,' artificial intelligence and the growing threat of disinformation from advertising to propaganda.

The book ends with the reflection that information is meaningless if it is

not understood with implications for our role as consumers of information as well as for educators of the citizens of the future.

With publisher Dorling Kindersley's trademark double page spread for each section the layout is very clear. Each spread includes a brief introduction, short explainers and commentary with interesting examples and key individuals supported with a range of graphics and photographs. Those familiar with Haughton's picture books will recognise his distinctive style and use of colour. The book is easy to navigate with a contents and index. Timelines are used effectively and there is a very special pull-out overview at the back of the hardback book.

A masterful study of a daunting subject; the writer's enthusiasm, diligence and his skills with visual design are put to good effect. **SMC**

14+ Secondary/Adult

Almost Nothing Happened

★★★★

Meg Rosoff, *Bloomsbury*, 231pp, 9781526646187, £12.00, hbk

No doubt about it; Meg Rosoff is a bit of a genius. Her YA novels leap into life from the first page and never let up after that. In this story, plenty of action is balanced by passages of acute late-adolescent introspection, with 17-year-old Callum gradually and thankfully moving from gloomy self-loathing to the reverse. This is after a packed 48 hours charging round Paris on the back of a motor bike driven by beautiful teenage Lilou mostly at top speed. From just about surviving a lonely exchange visit which brings his already active sense of failure to an all-time low, Callum is redeemed in a plot involving theft, police road blocks, a visit to a sex club, a mass demo against climate change and an almost fatal fire. He will have lots to tell his friends when he gets home but by this time he can hardly wait to get back to Paris and the growing affections of Lilou.

Rosoff takes no hostages when talking up to her readers. Proust and Dostoevsky get a mention as do MAGA and Taylor Swift. Short passages in French are sometimes translated or else left for readers to work out for themselves (never very hard). Callum remains a virgin, but has to endure listening to prolonged sexual activity in a bed immediately next to him. And all the time Paris is experiencing a heat wave so severe that a curfew is imposed every night, to stop any possible heat-related violence leading up to the Demo still taking place next day even though officially banned. Everything more or less gets finally straightened out, leaving many readers, including all those adults who now openly enjoy YA fiction, surely wanting even more. And why not? This is a brilliant novel. **NT**

Songlight. Torchlight Book One

★★★★

Moira Buffini, *Faber & Faber*, 480pp, 9780571385669, £8.99 pbk

Set in an Orwellian society, with shades of Atwood's *Gilead* and Wyndham's *Chrysalis*, playwright and screenwriter Buffini's YA novel debut came glimmering out of her childhood imagination. Fusing elements of science fiction fantasy with socio-political and ecological commentary, her post-apocalyptic dystopian fantasy evolved from her vivid replication of friends in her mind even when they weren't present in reality. She explains, "It's inspiring to imagine connections with people, where we can communicate beyond our physical selves. The part of the human brain which makes and remembers song is far older than that which makes language. Song is the most primal way in which humans communicate. That's why I named my version of telepathy, *Songlight*."

Counting the fantastical landscapes of Ursula Le Guin among her influences, Buffini creates believable worlds. There is a dichotomy between the draconian Brightland, where sentient telepaths are persecuted and their light is quenched, and Ayland where equality is practiced. Her prelude in Kaira's voice is reminiscent of Collins' *The Hunger Games* prequel, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* in its depiction of poverty, hunger and control. Following this we hear the teen voices of star-crossed lovers Elsa and Rye, inhabitants of the small fishing community of Northaven, where misogyny, indoctrination, religious zealotry and memories of a great war rule, connecting with each other through *Songlight*. In *Songlight* they conceal themselves behind code names to

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survive. From there the book unfolds in five parts as betrayal, duplicity and political intrigue lead to *Manchurian Candidate* style mind manipulation, murder, persecution, propaganda, sinister eugenics and terror.

Songlight is an ambitious project, juggling with a scatter gun of multiple perspectives as readers are introduced to Piper and Swan who have their own secrets to hide in a corrupt society where the rights of the individual are quashed. Caught in a maelstrom of political chicanery, they must make some painful choices.

Buffini builds up the tension to the perilous denouement, deliberately using copious swearing as a shout of rebellion for her protagonists who find refuge in friendship. While she addresses weighty issues within a dream world of telepathy interwoven with evocative imagery, at certain points the plot is too derivative and the pace too breathless. Minor quibbles aside, it is a promising start to a trilogy entitled **Torchlight**, ending on a cliffhanger which will leave curious readers wanting more. This unusual novel is also a melange of ideas posing philosophical questions. Ultimately, it has the power to open up discussion among young adult readers about the dangers of climate change, the importance of diversity and the evils of totalitarianism and toxic behaviour. **TJ**

The Dagger and the Flame

★★★★

Catherine Doyle, Simon & Schuster, 486pp, 9781398528376, £16.99 hbk

After her mother is brutally murdered in their farmhouse, Sera is forced to flee for her life to the magnificent city of Fantome, taking only her dog, Pippin with her. The city is ruled by Shade – a dark magic used in different forms: the Cloaks use it to hide in the shadows under magical cloaks to steal whatever they are assigned to take, and the Daggers are the city assassins, fuelled by vials of Shade where one touch could mean death. This bitter rivalry between the two factions began many years previously with the two Versini brothers fighting for supremacy each using Shade to their own advantage, ending with the Daggers killing their younger sister as she had discovered an antidote to Shade which would counteract their powers.

Sera finds refuge with the Cloaks but soon realises there is a price on her head and also that her mother had been involved in nefarious dealings with Shade and was not as innocent as Sera had once thought. Monsters are roaming the city, and it is suspected that Sera's mother had created them. When Sera comes face to face with her assassin – the wildly handsome Ransom – a spark is ignited between them and a furious game of cat and mouse ensues, chasing each other across the rooftops

and the catacombs of Fantome. The pace is fast and furious and the pair try to kill each other at nearly every turn but Ransom soon realises that Sera holds a power that he can't extinguish, and that they are falling dangerously in love with each other.

This enemies to lovers romantasy is deftly plotted and makes for addictive reading as there are twists and turns throughout. Sera's fiery temperament and pithy asides are the perfect foil for the cool and calculating Ransom who falls under her spell. There are all the usual tropes here – more than enough to satisfy any romantasy lover and even those who are not but it is the witty dialogue and the eye for detail that takes this above and beyond. My only hesitation is the length, but brevity is rarely a feature of this genre. **JC**

Annie Le Blanc Is Not Dead Yet

★★★★

Molly Morris, Chicken House, 314pp, 9781916558144, £8.99 pbk.

Californian born Molly Morris likes to combine the contemporary with the supernatural. Her debut YA novel **This is Not the End** explored ghosts, adventure and messy romance with a nod to Tolkien's **The Lord of the Rings** and **The Sixth Sense**. **Annie Le Blanc is Not Dead Yet** revisits the same landscape with a shot of '90s nostalgia and a speculative slant.

What if you lived in an unusual town frozen in time? What if you could bring your estranged best friend back from the dead for thirty days? These are the challenges facing talented graphic novel artist Wil who has been feeling increasingly isolated and confused about her feelings.

At the heart of the story is a morass of identifiable universal emotions – awkwardness, loneliness, and first love imbued with a longing for a place to call home. Morris deftly combines cult music and TV shows from the '90s with dysfunctional families, fragmented friendships, flashbacks and high stakes as beleaguered **Buff the Vampire Slayer** fan Wil battles an inevitable countdown.

Complications ensue as stereotypes of small-town America attitudes, perpetuated by the Effie Trinket like character of Ruth Fish, and what constitutes 'America the Beautiful' are challenged. Tension builds as tumultuous passions explode when the protagonists realise their true feelings and why their friendship went awry. Unfortunately, some of the secondary characters like Ryan's brother Mark, lack depth.

Annie Le Blanc is Not Dead Yet is an unusual story, rooted in recognisable Californian locations that will appeal to readers looking for a peculiar mix of the uncanny, female comic book superheroes, karaoke antics, relatable teen issues, feminism and strong LGBTQIA+ representation. **TJ**

Death At Morning House

★★★★

Maureen Johnson, HarperTeen, 372pp, 9780063414099, £14.99 hbk

This latest novel from Maureen Johnson is a standalone mystery thriller, heavily laced with astute detective work, often generated by the quirkily appealing, self-deprecating central character of Marlowe Wexler. Fans of Johnson's **Truly Devious** series will find much to enjoy here and newcomers to her work will be absorbed by the deftly handled dual timeline and convincing narrative voices.

Marlowe attempts to woo Akilah, the love of her life, with a romantic evening in the lakeside cottage of family friends but she had no idea that the petrichor – scented candle she was using would explode, almost burning down the entire building. Accidental arsonist she may be but a spell out of town seems a good idea and she takes a summer job guiding tours in Morning House, built in the Prohibition era in the Thousand Islands by the Ralston family, but hiding deadly secrets.

Johnson peoples the house with an entertaining and well-drawn group of characters with whom Marlowe works, learning about the tragic deaths in 1932 of two of the Ralston children – a boy of 4 was drowned and one of his sisters, overwhelmed by grief, apparently took her own life. The children's father was a eugenicist and the family's outwardly admirable healthy lives, encompassing intellectual, artistic and athletic pursuits and a carefully controlled diet also bred fanaticism and violence.

The dual narrative is intriguing, for there are distinct parallels between the hidden dangers and murderous intent in both eras of the house's history. However, whilst the events in the 1930s are given an entirely credible and eerie resonance, the modern-day murders are somewhat less convincing, not least because they are explained rather than solved. There is tension and unease throughout the book, but those elements are more expertly woven in the earlier era.

Marlowe and the goth-like Riki begin to work together to try to solve the mystery of the two murders in the present day and there is a frisson for the reader, wondering which of the very credible characters has stepped over this unforgivable line. The murders are eventually solved but at the climax of the story a thrilling and life-threatening storm and a carefully laid fire almost take the lives of Marlowe and Riki as they close in on the murderer.

There are many twists and turns in **Death at Morning House**, some more thought-provoking and effective than others, but all revealing the inner workings of minds from two very different eras. Marlowe Wexler steals the show ... might Johnson decide to give her a series of her own? **VR**

The Thread That Connects Us

★★★★

Ayaan Mohamud, Usborne, 416pp, 9781803704517, £8.99 pbk

Hailed as a 'powerful new voice' after her debut novel, *You Think You Know Me*, which shone a spotlight on her experiences of Islamophobia while highlighting her Somali culture, Ayaan Mohamud's second book tells a tale of broken families. Divergent first-person narratives converge as resentful stepsisters Safiya and Halima rail over their circumstances, one abandoned by her father and tending to the ghost of her mother, the other estranged from her stepfather, angry with her mother, torn from her beloved country and friends. They focus on the role of their respective parents in orchestrating their catastrophes, little knowing that painful family secrets are at the heart of it.

London born Safiya wonders if she can trust a boy and commit her heart to Yusuf, who has been a constant friend since childhood while her best friend Muna is struggling to maintain her mystique as the school's gossip journalist. Meanwhile Halima is mourning the absence of her constants, Abti Haroon and Khadiya. As Halima struggles to fit in at her new school, the victim of a bullying campaign, can Safiya overcome her hatred of her father's new family to help her?

Depression, betrayal, fractured friendships, lies, lost loves and pride feature as each character goes on an emotional journey, desperation mounts and the plot reaches its climax. Mohamud's story is rich in cultural references with interwoven language, a loving depiction of Eid and the importance of faith beautifully observed through the Fajr ritual.

For the most part, the interlocking narratives work well in this emotive story of forgiveness and redemption. **The Thread that Connects Us** resonates with believable characters nursing private sorrows, fears, hopes and dreams. This is a book which juxtaposes modern teen sensibilities with divided family dynamics, offering readers enduring reflections and perspectives. **TJ**

Gentlest of Wild Things

★★★★

Sarah Underwood, Electric Monkey, 430pp, 9780008636975, £14.99 hbk

Eirene and her sister Phoebe live on the Island of Zakynthos, in what appears to be the period of Ancient Greece; when belief in the gods and their descendants is still strong. The most powerful man on the island is Leandros, who claims to be a descendant of Eros, and who has become wealthy selling bottled elixirs of Desire to the well off from his own and other islands. The liquid appears to make the men attractive to those that the wish to marry. When Leandros's wife mysteriously dies, he sets his sights on Phoebe, so Eirene decides to offer herself in her sister's place. The offer is provisionally accepted, but only if Eirene can complete four almost impossible tasks; otherwise, he will

marry Phoebe instead. After she arrives at his house, we are introduced to Lamia, the mysterious daughter of Leandros, who secretly begins to help with the tasks. As the girls grow closer, they begin to investigate how Desire is made and what its effects really are. Importantly they need to find out why Lamia is kept hidden from the world and why so many young girls seem to disappear.

This is a striking mix of mythology and magic. There are two really strong themes throughout the book; firstly, we have the growing love between the two girls and their very gradual understanding of those feelings, but they also have love for their families; although it is difficult to understand why Lamia loves her father. Which brings us to the other theme, which is the concept of male domination and power over women. Throughout the book we have the example of Leandros and the way he manipulates and threatens the women in his life; he is the epitome of someone who uses coercive methods to get his own way. We also have the fact that the drug called Desire is used by the men who buy it to make their targets submissive and believe that they are in love with the man. This is a thought-provoking story, that still has so many lessons for us in our modern world. There is so much discussion that can be had in the classroom, particularly about why we still have so many of these attitudes and behaviours today. **MP**

When the World Tips Over

★★★★

Jandy Nelson, Walker Books, 528pp, 9781406363098, £8.99 pbk
Award winning YA author Jandy Nelson's debut novel *The Sky is Everywhere* has been adapted into a film. She is a recipient of both the teen **Michael L. Printz Award** and a **Stonewall Honor** prize for her second book, *I'll Give You the Sun*, a profoundly passionate book about the agony and ecstasy of love. Her new magnum opus is a kaleidoscopic journey inspired by Steinbeck country, her vivid imagination and her connection to universal emotions. She describes it as, 'a chorus of voices telling one story that interweaves over time periods and literary styles with characters consumed by private sorrows searching for love, hope, magic, meaning and belonging - a sense of home in a topsy-turvy world.'

When the World Tips Over is split into four parts telling a multi layered tale from diverse perspectives. Like her previous works, it is an exuberant explosion of emotions and ideas. Bold, ambitious, expressive and intense, it transposes the emotional landscape of John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* over the fictional Paradise Valley, home to a family curse, shattered dreams, betrayal, duplicity, tragedy, messed up longing and imploded secrets.

Sibling protagonists, 12-year-old

Dizzy, 17-year-old Miles and 19-year-old Wynton are at the centre of the plot. Jandy pictured them so vividly, she spied them during a trip through Northern California wine country, 'inside a white Victorian house built in the 1800s, tucked away in the redwoods by a creek, abandoned, enchanted and perpetually light-struck.' Their wine-maker father is missing, their mother Bernadette is a talented chef at the local restaurant who keeps a notebook of unsent letters, and their alcoholic uncle mooches around their home. When a mysterious girl with rainbow coloured hair appears one day each of them feel powerfully drawn to her and the Fall family's lives change forever as a Pandora's box of intergenerational secrets bursts open.

Where Jandy is particularly adept is describing the hidden inner lives of her characters through the device of unsent letters and emails, bags of words and uncovered histories. Each one buries pain under their outer facades. Dizzy is a hopeless romantic and dessert maker, self-destructive Wynton is a troubled renegade and genius violinist and 'perfect Miles' is confused, alienated and tormented by repressed desires. The book is suffused with an adoration of food, the transcendent power of music, the joy of reading and the magical moments that happen when destinies collide.

Amidst the smorgasbord of genres, Jandy addresses important issues like manic depression, the fallout of infidelity, fractured psyches, spiritual connections and the phenomenal beauty of synaesthesia. Her use of meta fiction and intertextuality work well with her story threads intertwined like Scheherazade's and her characters suffering the same symphony of loneliness experienced by Steinbeck's. The only quibble is that sometimes the sense of the surreal, like the inclusion of a sentient dog and the magic realism which paints otherworldly pictures, can overshadow the more important messages. It is a marathon read which readers looking for good LGBTQIA+ representation, a fantastical plot, evocative imagery and tempestuous melodrama will enjoy. **TJ**

Splinters

★★★★★

Rachel Delahaye, Troika, 312pp, 9781912745371, £8.99 pbk

Jean Sylvester is not pleased with her life. Like many young adults, she looks for happiness and an affirmation of identity in those people she feels close to and the novel opens with her dearest friend leaving for a new life in Scotland. There is a counterbalance, however; her blossoming relationship with Luke, 'Love is in the air but it isn't on our tongues.' When the hammer blow of his three week family holiday in Wyoming falls, her summer again loses its glow.

To multiply her woes, her father

insists on moving the family to a huge, old house in order to have more room for his writing and teaching and Jean hates it on sight. Add her spoilt and irritating little sister, favoured by her mother, to the mix and the only positive factor is the anticipation of Luke's return. This, too, is snatched away from her when he inexplicably rejects her, dating one of her sworn enemies and ignoring her publicly and completely.

Delahaye makes it clear that nothing is ever quite what it seems. Jean's successful father is concealing a gambling addiction, Luke is nursing a dangerous secret and her difficult relationship with her mother has a reason other than the one she imagined.

When Luke contacts Jean again it is to try and gain access to her new home, in which there is a secret and dangerous talisman, an apparently non-descript mirror, left by his uncle on his death. Having refused Luke's request, she decides to look closely at the mirror and, to her discomfiture, sees not just her reflection, but another living, breathing version of herself, a Splinter. Tired of the trials of her life she changes places with this alternative identity for a short and carefully defined time and then repeats the process with other versions of herself.

This clever narrative device gives Jean an altered perspective as she becomes a temporary part of realities which are at once familiar and off-kilter, so that she can explore and compare roles, working through her emotional preoccupations from other angles. Delahaye's use of this allegory gives the examination of identity a graphic frisson and an opportunity for Jean to resolve her inner conflicts in a way which is a huge step removed from her normal existence. When she is eventually tricked by a devious Splinter, she is saved from being permanently trapped in a dreadful alternative life by Luke's intervention.

Splinters strikingly and memorably reminds the reader that independence and happiness come as a result of resilience when life hurts us most and the knowledge that we are all ultimately responsible for our decisions. A better life isn't about new, idealised landscapes: it rests on the ability to navigate challenge and disappointment to the brighter days beyond. **VR**

Sisters of the Moon

★★★★★

Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick, Faber & Faber, 305pp, 9780571383009, £8.99 pbk

Suzy Button is grieving the loss of her mother and coming to terms with life without the most important person in her life. She can't fit in at school and she can't see how she will ever be happy again. She wishes only for the past and is terribly lonely. In desperation she finds herself performing a moon ritual and making wishes about the changes she wants to happen in her life.

And then into her school walks Rhiannon - a free spirit whose

attitude, way with words and refusal to accept the status quo take Suzy on the adventure of lifetime and a journey of discovery. Rhiannon is a great friend to Suzy and she helps her to understand how to be true to herself and to negotiate teenage life with all its ups and downs. But Rhiannon is also something of an enigma and there is so much about her that Suzy can't understand or reach.

Sisters of the Moon has all the elements of a great teenage story. It has friendship and enemies, romance, parties as well as laughter with wild and kind of dangerous escapades. It also has unexplainable events, a couple of dead bodies (mostly rabbits), a school trip to a burial ground, a photoshoot on a roof - and magic.

This is a compelling story with much action to keep the reader turning pages and involved in the plot right up to its mystical ending. Suzy Button is a girl who makes friends with the moon and in doing so she realises that her life can be both magical and normal once again. **LJS**

Old Wounds

★★★★★

Logan-Ashley Kisner, Usborne, 349pp, 9781835400944, £8.99 pbk

I wasn't surprised to find out that **Old Wounds** was originally conceived as a screenplay because the writing and the action have all the detail of a classic horror film.

Two teenagers, Max and Erin, run away from their home in Columbus, Ohio seeking a new life in Berkeley, California. Of course, the thirty-seven-hour journey which they plan to make in Max's Impala is anything but smooth and they are soon stranded in middle America and being pursued by both a terrifying monster that eats only girls and a band of frightening locals who want to offer the monster a sacrifice. The teenagers are tricked, captured, chased and separated but by finding a way to run towards one another rather than away they overcome all the adversity to make their literal and metaphorical journeys forward to California and safety.

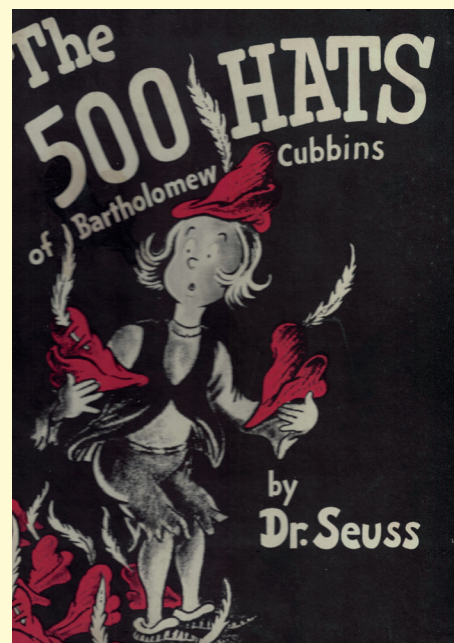
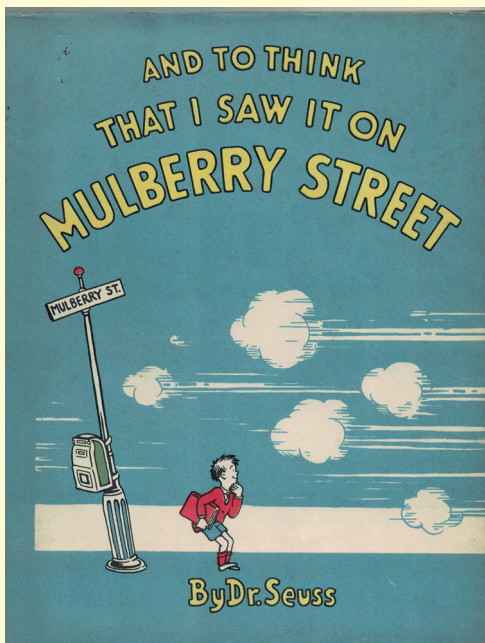
The two teenagers in Kisner's debut novel are trans. Their identity is an integral part of their individual stories, of course, and also of the narrative of the book. As Kisner himself says: 'this is not a book where trans identity is mentioned, pushed aside and forgotten about before the end of the first page. **Old Wounds** is intentionally about gender and trans identity, and the ways in which the horror genre has traditionally forgotten about us'. It is a horror story, and one that has a heartfelt sub plot about love, friendship, acceptance and self-knowledge.

This is a big book which covers a great deal of subject matter. The plot is complicated and detailed and there are depictions of transphobia, references to suicide, murder, assault and death. It might not be a book that appeals to everyone but it will delight lovers of traditional teen horror movies and those who like a pacy, escapist road trip story. **LJS**

Valediction: No.18 Poor Cancelled Dr Seuss

Brian Alderson is bidding farewell to old favourites as he donates his remarkable collection of children's books to **Seven Stories**. Next to be packed up, a very early Dr Seuss.

There was disturbance in the first-grade pigeon lofts of America in 1955 when an educationist, Rudolph Fleisch, published his polemic **Why Johnny Can't Read**. It was an assault, surely justified, on the tedium of such reading schemes as the infamous 'Dick and Jane' primers (cf. 'Janet and John' and the dreadful Ladybird 'Key Words' scheme) and its bestsellerdom bespeaks a widespread agreement. It is said that a suggested remedy might be to get 'Dr Seuss' to write a reading scheme – a cartoonist probably best known for his long-running ads for disinfectant: 'Quick, Henry, the FLIT!' but who had also written several amusing stories for children such as **Horton Hatches the Egg** (1940). Thus it was that in 1957 **The Cat in the Hat** was born: a comic masterpiece with cartoon-like illustrations and a vocabulary amounting to 236 mostly single syllable words.



Probably the first of the millions of copies that came to be sold worldwide was the London edition from Collins, also in 1957¹. It would be followed by the Seuss canon of some fifty or so titles, those for easy reading being joined by 'Beginner Books for Beginning Readers' which brought in other comedians such as the Berenstains who produced that twenty-word masterpiece **Inside Outside Upside Down**.

What needs to be pointed out is that the first of Dr Seuss's extravaganzas had appeared twenty years earlier than **The Cat**, in 1937: **And to think that I saw it on Mulberry Street**. (A boy is asked to observe anything of interest on his way home from school and can find nothing but a horse and cart. So he invents a vast parade of traffic, improving each event in jog-trot verse as he goes along, with lithographs to match:

*An elephant pulling a thing that's so light
Would whip it around in the air like a kite
But he'd look simply grand
With a great big brass band...)*

The originality of the idea was not lost on this side of the Atlantic and a second printing of the story was taken up by Noel Carrington for the ground-breaking children's books that he was editing for *Country Life*. (He would soon after be chosen by Allan Lane to edit the also ground-breaking Puffin Picture Books but the War forbade any further cheerful activity to appear there from the good Doctor.)

Ah, what innocents we were in those days and who then would have credited that by 2024 the corporate owners of the Seuss copyrights would have chosen to withdraw **Mulberry Street** and several other titles from publication. As with the much-loved Laura Ingalls Wilder or, here, the vastly popular Roald Dahl, Dr Geisel has fallen foul of our contemporary evangelicals running their tooth combs through authorial work to find deviations from the current moral code. The sin is clear for all to see when that misguided youth finds in Mulberry Street:

*A Chinaman / Who eats with sticks.
That will not do for us now.*

Dr Seuss [pseud Theodor Seuss Geisel] **And to Think that I Saw it on Mulberry Street**. New York: The Vanguard Press; London: Country Life Limited, 1939. 260x215mm. [32]pp. ([1] tp.; [2] dedication; imprint: Second Printing. Copyright 1937 Dr Seuss. Manufactured in the United States of America by the DUNEWALD PRINTING CORPORATION [3-32] Letterpress verse text with lithographed illustrations.) Blue pictorial paper over boards, blue pictorial endpapers front and back; matching dj., inner flap synopsis with clipped USD price replaced with UK 3/6. Rear flap biography of Dr Seuss. Younger 14-15

Addendum:

The English edition of *Mulberry Street* seems nowhere to be recorded, as is the case with a companion work **The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins**. Perhaps, thanks to the presence in London of Oxford's US children's books editor, Grace Hogarth, the book was published by Oxford University Press in 1939. This wholly prose work does not seem to have offended our guardians of morality – but you never know. I have never seen **The Seven Lady Godivas** of 1939.

1 I have an unverifiable conviction that the first two books in the series were first published by Hutchinson. Could that be so?



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.