

# BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.271

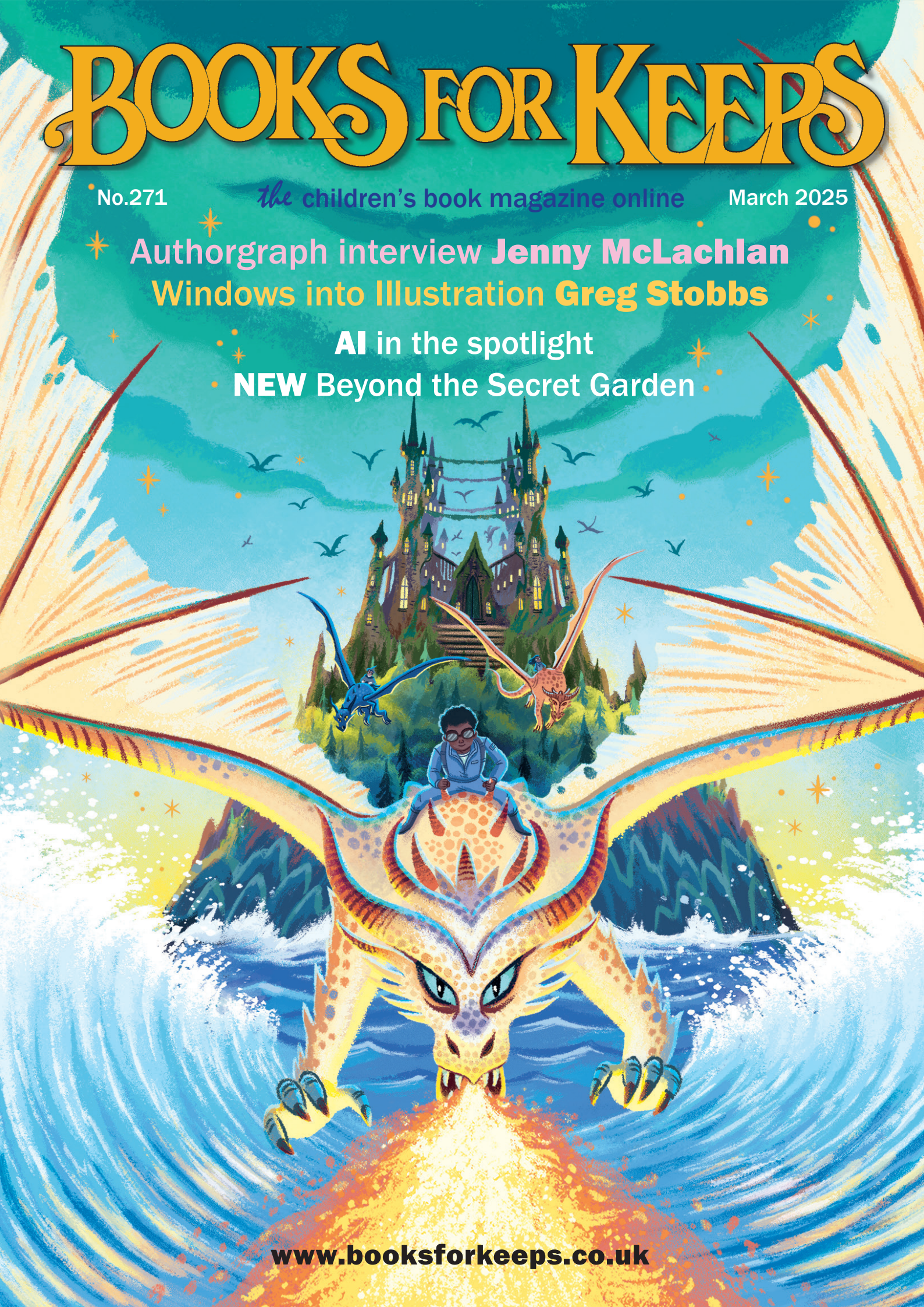
*the children's book magazine online*

March 2025

★ Authorgraph interview **Jenny McLachlan**  
★ Windows into Illustration **Greg Stobbs**

★ AI in the spotlight

★ **NEW** Beyond the Secret Garden



[www.booksforkeeps.co.uk](http://www.booksforkeeps.co.uk)



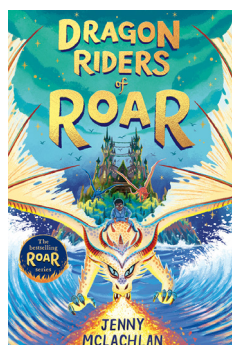
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Brian Alderson bids farewell to another remarkable volume.

### COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from *Dragon Riders of Roar* by Jenny McLachlan, cover illustration by Ben Mantle. Thanks to Farshore for their help with this cover.



# Editorial 271

Since publication of our last issue, we have been celebrating the *Beyond the Secret Garden* book by Karen Sands-O'Connor and Darren Chetty which draws on and expands their long-running BfK column. The book is available now from publisher [English & Media Centre](#) and well worth reading. In his speech at the launch at CLPE, Darren referred to BfK's long policy of highlighting books that reflect our multi-cultural society and emphasising the need for them, referencing the *Books for Keeps Multi-Cultural Guide to Children's Books*, first edition published 1999. He also praised the work of former BfK editor Rosemary Stones and her work in this area. A reminder that you can track all of this on the BfK website, all of our 271 issues are available in full on the website and searchable.

### New research on the 'crisis' in children's reading for pleasure

In the weeks after **World Book Day 2025**, we're drawing your attention to two pieces of research into ways of addressing the issue. New research from the **National Literacy Trust** finds that listening to audio formats, such as audiobook and podcasts, could provide a gateway into reading and reading enjoyment for many children and young people.

The **National Literacy Trust** surveyed more than 37,000 UK 8 to 18-year-olds who said they listened to audio formats in their free time in 2024. The research revealed that **children's enjoyment of listening has risen slightly in the past year** (from 39.4% to 42.3%), **surpassing children's enjoyment of reading (34.6%) for the first time** since the charity started asking children about their listening enjoyment in 2020. Almost 2 in 5 (37.5%) children and young people said that **listening to an audiobook had sparked their interest in reading books**, while more of those who **enjoyed listening to audio also enjoyed reading in their free time**, compared with those who didn't enjoy listening (52.4% vs. 36.0%).

The research also found that when children and young people listen to audiobooks and podcasts in their free time, **their learning, creativity and wellbeing can benefit**.

Half of children and young people said listening to an audiobook or podcast enabled them to

**better understand a story or subject** (48.4%), made them **use their imagination more** than when watching videos (52.9%) and helped them **relax or feel better when they were stressed or anxious** (52.0%).

The research also found that the **gender gap in boys' and girls' reading enjoyment (28.2% vs 40.5%) reverses direction when it comes to audio, with slightly more boys than girls saying they enjoy listening to audio (43.4% vs 40.4%)**.

The **National Literacy Trust** has curated a range of **audio resources to help families and teachers** boost children's enjoyment of reading through listening to audio: [literacytrust.org.uk/audio](https://literacytrust.org.uk/audio). These include resources to help primary and secondary teachers make the most of audiobooks to support children's literacy in the classroom and a monthly selection of audiobook picks from the **National Literacy Trust** for Audible.

Shared listening could be a particularly good way to encourage reading for pleasure as research from **World Book Day** shows that children are much less likely to grow up as readers if their parents don't read.

Unsurprisingly, parents who don't consider themselves as readers are much less likely to read with their children, with only 59% saying they do, compared to 71% of those who identify as readers. Additionally, parents who were not encouraged by their own parents to read (12% of those polled), are twice as likely to say they don't encourage their child to read (15% versus 7% of readers.)

The research shows that reading avoidance is passed down, with the children of non-readers almost twice as likely to hold negative attitudes towards reading. Almost a third of this group (31%) say they avoid reading as much as possible (compared to 17% of children of readers), and that they don't read for fun as books are boring (30% versus 16%). On the converse, three-quarters of children who think their parents enjoy reading for fun want to read more themselves. Time to switch on an audiobook?

### Follow us on Instagram and now BlueSky

We're less active on X (formerly Twitter) than we were but you can find and follow us on Instagram ([@booksforkeepsuk](#)) and BlueSky ([@booksforkeeps.bsky.social](#)).

## Books for Keeps

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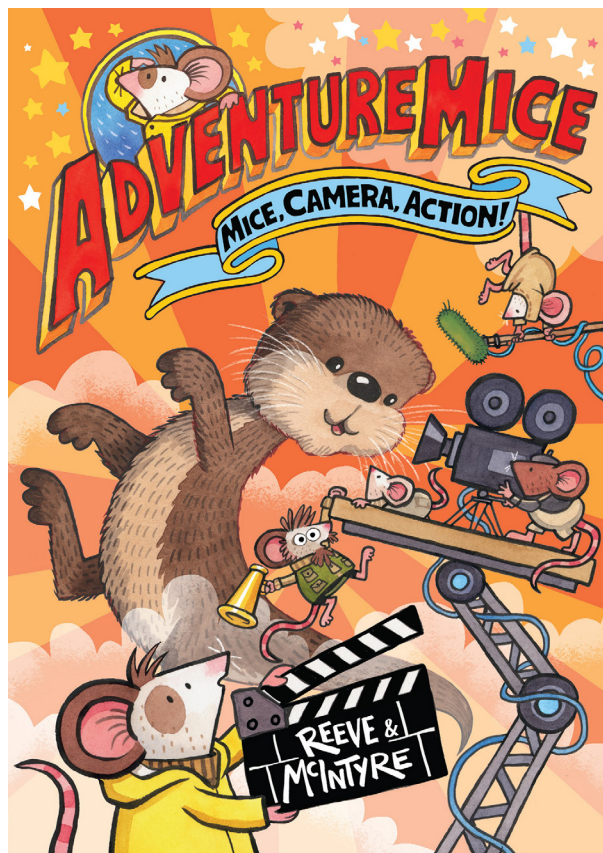
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# AI & Copyright: why does it matter?

**Sarah McIntyre** argues that authors' work needs protecting



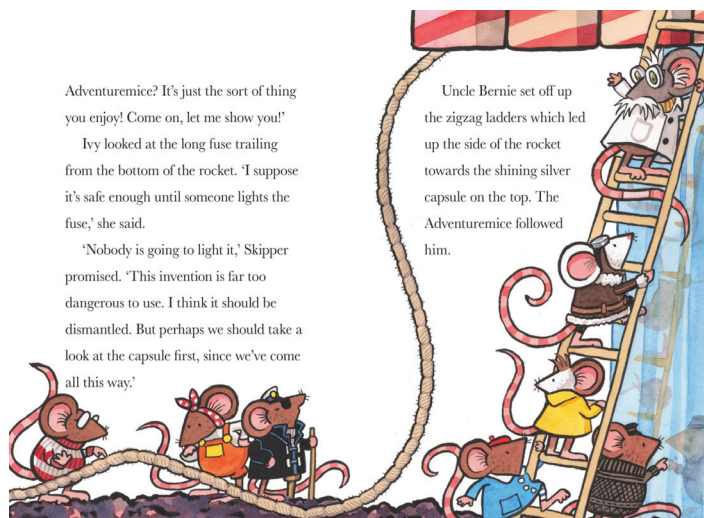
Artificial Intelligence offers big gifts. Do you need a free poster? A book cover? Pictures for the children's book you wrote? You no longer need to hire an illustrator or be able to draw. All you need to do is enter some written prompts and – hurrah! – you have it!

How does AI come up with these images? Large tech companies 'scrape' the Internet for existing artwork, including artists' web portfolios and artwork they've shared on social media. The company then processes the artists' work and reissues it. Often a new image look very much like the original artwork the company nabbed. But because the artwork has been processed, it's no longer under that artist's copyright. Something similar happens with words; you can enter prompts and AI will sift through authors' texts it has scraped and give you a mash-up version that's yours to use as you like.

This comes at a price. The AI user gets an illustration for free, or by paying a subscription fee that goes to the tech company, but the artists whose work has been used to train the AI get nothing. Margins are already very tight for almost all writers and illustrators, and if they are competing against their own work, repackaged by AI, they can't make a living at all.

Do we really want books for children that are chugged out by a machine? The way AI works is to suppress anomalies and outliers and come up with a convincing-sounding average blend. But that uniform result gets things wrong, and sounds boring. Behavioural science expert Rory Sutherland argued that if, using AI, 'you could produce someone who is the average of all your friends, you probably wouldn't like them very much and they'd be extremely dull'.

Frankly, I think many risk-averse people in the children's book industry are satisfied with stories that are average and bland. And many illustrators, instead of going out to develop their own visual take on what they encounter, are satisfied to copy other illustrator's



work they find online. In a sense, these people are acting like AI, and perhaps it doesn't matter if they're replaced.

But what does matter is losing those books of brilliance, created by a person with a heart, who has an eye for detail and can add quirky, brilliant and unexpected elements to the words and pictures of a story. These books take our minds to new places, and give us entirely new pictures in our heads. They don't only comfort us with what we already know, but stretch us, and perhaps throw in absurdities that make us laugh.

Children right now are devouring stories by the likes of Jamie Smart and Dav Pilkey, and the humour of these writer-artists is built on unexpected and startling juxtapositions. Having pored over these books, many children are then inspired to write and draw their own stories, and they can imagine they, too, might be able to be writers or illustrators like Jamie and Dav.

We ought to be proud of our children's book tradition, not give it away free. The government is currently considering AI policy measures that would make illustrators, as copyright holders 'opt out' if we don't want tech companies using our work to train their systems. I can't imagine tracking down the thousands of images I've made public, images which, until now, were protected by copyright law. Here's my colleague Steve Antony's description:

*It's like allowing someone to break into my house and steal my belongings so that they can research, recycle and resell them, unless I stick a label on each and everyone of my belongings that says 'Do not steal', even though the objects are clearly not theirs and clearly within someone else's house.*

We'll see what our government really values when they make their decision about copyright. Will they favour small business and freelance creatives or the big tech industry? Will I still be making Adventuremice books in a few years' time? I very much hope so, I've been training hard for the last 20 years and I think it's the best work I've ever made. But will I be undercut by an editor somewhere entering mouse-themed prompts? If that's really what people want, I need to be looking for work elsewhere.



**Sarah McIntyre** co-writes and illustrates the **Adventuremice** books, her new series for early readers with Philip Reeve. Together with James Mayhew in 2015, she started the #PicturesMeanBusiness campaign, showing how everyone wins when artists are properly credited for their work. Discover fun, free creative resources on her websites, [Jabberworks.co.uk](http://Jabberworks.co.uk) and [Adventuremice.com](http://Adventuremice.com).



# Better support for authors in public libraries

A new foundation to support 'up and coming' children's authors was launched in November by charitable social enterprise and libraries operator **GLL**

The **GLL Literary Foundation** offers up to 20 author bursary placements, alongside a number of additional author support placements, in areas where **GLL** operates public libraries under its 'Better' brand: Bromley, Greenwich, Wandsworth, Dudley and Lincolnshire.

Each author selected for a bursary placement receives £750 as well as further 'in kind' support valued at up to £4,000. Authors are partnered with a specialist local librarian 'champion', who will help deliver a series of author events and provide networking opportunities with local booksellers, publishers, literary festivals and schools. Authors are also offered three online training courses.

In February 2025 the first tranche of successful authors was announced and paired with their 'Literary Foundation champion'. **Alex Falase Koya**, author of the **Marv** Collection and his 'champion', Bromley children's librarian **Caroline Nolan**, explain how the scheme works, and describe their hopes and aspirations for the coming year.



## **Caroline Nolan writes:**

The **GLL Literary Foundation** offers a unique and exciting opportunity to champion and support local authors through our public library partnerships.

I was delighted to be asked to be the Literary Foundation Champion for **Bromley Libraries**, a mentoring role providing support and guidance to our winning authors, and one of five across the **GLL Library Partnerships**. I am responsible for mentoring four of our fantastic group of six published authors – Alex Falase Koya, Adeola Sokunbi, Marcela Ferreira, and Alom Shaha – all of whom are incredibly talented, committed and keen to champion public libraries.

Their work ranges from picture books to highly illustrated children's fiction and non-fiction, many of which have been shortlisted or have won awards including the **Inclusive Children's Book Awards** and the **Waterstones Children's Book Prize**. All their books, alongside the other **GLL** authors across the partnerships, are available to borrow from Bromley Libraries and will be badged with a special sticker to make them easily identifiable. We will be promoting the authors widely and stocking and publicising their books across all our branches.

As part of their commitment, each author will carry out one public and one school event in a nominated library setting, linking to key events such as the **Summer Reading Challenge**, the **EmpathyLab Festival** and the Federation of **Children's Book Group's National Non-Fiction November** and **National Share A Story Month**.



As well as offering advice and assistance with the delivery of these events, I will provide the authors with introductions and networking opportunities with local booksellers, literary festivals, schools and the local community.

*It's always a privilege and a thrill to work with authors and arranging and experiencing a successful author event fuels my passion and enthusiasm for what I do.*

To watch a group of children become enthused and inspired by meeting an author is wonderful, especially when even the most reluctant of readers is clamouring to read their books by the end of the session.

As an experienced children's librarian, I am passionate about getting inclusive books into the hands of children and giving them the opportunity to meet and engage with authors. Both, I believe, are key to inspiring and fostering a child's lifelong love of reading for pleasure. Ensuring that children have access to diverse and inclusive books that represent them and to diverse and inclusive authors is incredibly important. Author visits are hugely beneficial for children not just in terms of their improved literacy and creativity by also as a way of broadening their horizons and showing them that a career as a writer or part of the wider publishing industry is possible.

Over the course of my career, I have had the pleasure of arranging events with many wonderful authors, most recently alongside my children's librarian colleagues Jenny Hawke and Ed Zaghini as part of the **Bromley Libraries Children's Team**. This has given me a greater understanding of some of the challenges that authors face. It's so important to build a rapport and to make sure our authors feel completely supported in order to help them deliver their best session. From providing practical advice ahead of the visit, to being on hand to meet and greet, introducing them to colleagues on arrival and ensuring that they are fuelled with their favourite biscuits and beverages!

I'm really looking forward to connecting children to our authors and I know the response is going to be positive and inspiring and a potentially life-changing experience for many of these children.

I'm incredibly excited to be part of this brilliant initiative and feel extremely lucky to be championing such an incredible cohort of authors at Bromley Libraries.



A gathering of authors at Bromley Library.





### Alex Falase Koya writes:

Being an author is a funny old business. I remember when I was unpublished (and in between spending lots of time trying desperately to become published), I used to imagine what my publishing life would be like.

I imagined that my life would be very solitary after my book came out. I would sit in my room with my cats, write my little children's books, edit them, and sometimes see them on shelves. That would be the end of it.

I spent years thinking that was the case. Then I got published, and I quickly realised that I was completely wrong. Books don't just magically appear in children's hands. Libraries, schools, and other places where children's authors can connect with children are so important. But, knowing these things are important only gets you so far.

Becoming a published author doesn't come with a manual. You have to figure out so many things by yourself.

Schools seem like a good place to start, they have lots of kids, but how do I even contact them? Libraries are all around me, but how can I build relationships with librarians? How can I get invited to talk to the people who might be interested in reading my books? Events seem like a good way to connect with my audience, so should I do events? And if I do, what should my events be?

I remember being terrified of the idea of events because I didn't know how I would entertain children for an hour.

All those questions I mentioned earlier don't even begin to cover all the information I didn't know about being a children's author. One big example is PLR, Public Lending Right. I didn't realise that libraries paid authors money based on how many people borrowed their books.

This lack of knowledge makes it really hard to navigate the children's literature ecosystems (libraries, schools, literature festivals), which is a problem as these ecosystems are essential for promoting children's books. As an author, I'm not just a robot that prints out words, I have to be a business, able to market and promote myself. That's really difficult.

All of this is why I'm really excited about the **GLL Literary Foundation**. It's really encouraging to see the **GLL** reach out to local children's authors to try and help them with these problems. I especially love the fact that this focuses on local authors.



# SUPPORTED AUTHORS



HANNAH MOFFATT



JANELLE MCCURDY



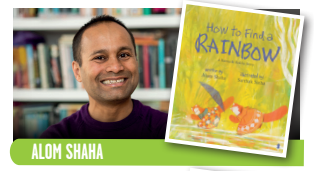
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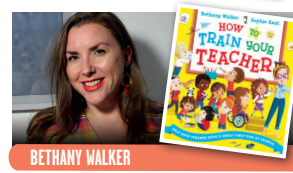
ALEX FALASE-KOYA



ALOM SHAHA



MARCELA FERREIRA



BETHANY WALKER



HELEN HANCOCKS



MARY AULD



JESSE KAUR



OLIVIA WAKEFORD



NATHANAEL LESSORE



NADINE WILD-PALMER



JACK MEGGITT-PHILLIPS



SHARADA KEATS



FAY EVANS



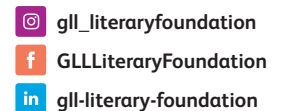
MIREILLE HARPER



NATASCHA BIEBOW



JONATHAN SELLARS



### *Children's authors and libraries ultimately want the same thing.*

We just want kids to find and read books that they love. I think that the connection between children and the books they read can be made even stronger when the books are written by authors who are local to them. It makes being an author feel not like something completely foreign but something that's actually possible. It also means having authors that represent the diversity of children's communities.

When I think of the **GLL Literary Foundation**, I'm really looking forward to building stronger relationships with libraries and the librarians who do so much good work to get children reading.

I also don't think I'm the best at marketing myself (I don't even have a website), so I'm looking forward to learning a lot about that.

I'm also really excited about the events that I'll do as part of the Literature Foundation. The opportunity to visit libraries and schools and talk to kids is invaluable, and I'll always be grateful for that opportunity.

Thanks to librarian **Caroline Nolan** and author **Alex Falase Koya** for their contributions. Expect regular updates on the progress of the **GLL Literary Foundation** in future issues of **Books for Keeps**.



# Authorgraph No.271

**Jenny McLachlan**  
interviewed by  
**Joy Court**

'Someday I'm going to walk through this same house and find a room I've never found before.' It was this line from a beloved childhood picturebook (**Someday** by Charlotte Zolotov) that made Jenny McLachlan want to be a writer. 'To me that's what books were like, opening up not just a room, but entire worlds for me to explore.' She loved books 'more than anything', but she struggled with spelling and punctuation and was a very slow writer. Age 11, her class was given the task of creating their own picturebooks and she describes writing and illustrating her book as like a 'beam of sunlight shining down on me, I realised this is what I want to do.' The thought was immediately dismissed however, 'I didn't feel good enough'. Instead, an English degree followed by teaching: 'circling around what I wanted to do.'

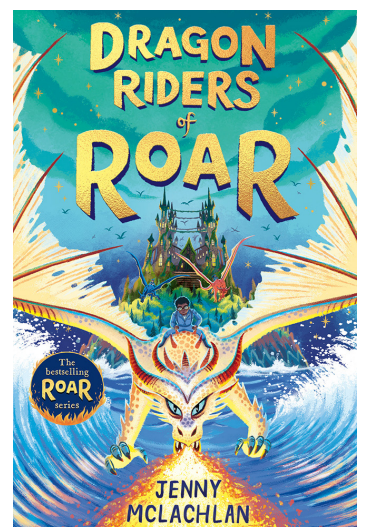
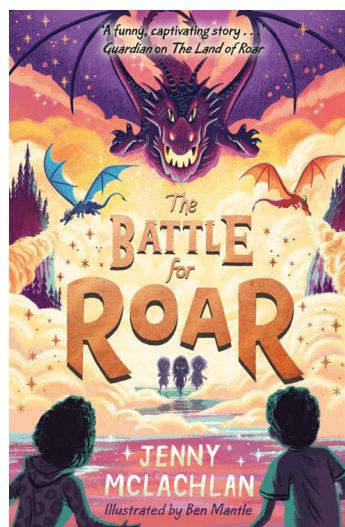
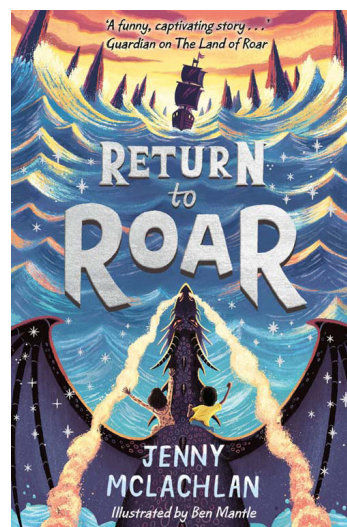
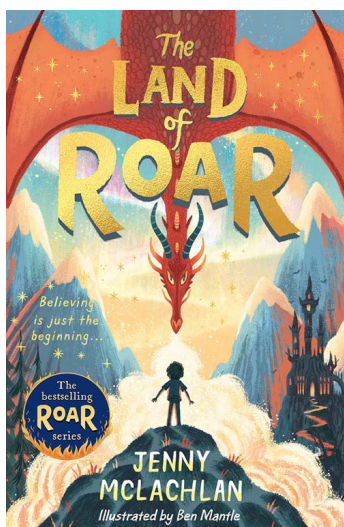
When she finally did submit a book to an agent, it resulted in a four-book deal with Bloomsbury – more than good enough! If that makes it seem that Jenny had an easy journey to becoming an author, she's clear about not wanting to add to any 'mythologising' about the authorial process, 'Like everything else you do, it requires constant practice and thousands and thousands of words to become any good'. From deciding, finally, to write, to the publication of what was then called **Flirty Dancing**, took her 'about 8 years'. The four-book series is now called **Friends Like Us** with Bea, Betty, Kat and Pearl each the featured friend. She wanted them to be funny but also realistic. 'I want them to feel as though they are real worlds, real children and real scenarios', a principle she was also later to apply to her fantasy titles. The characters were 'entirely autobiographical, apart from the good bits! The clothes may change, the language may change, but the emotions of being a teenager are all the same', She is, she says, 'obsessed' with that stage in your life when you grow up: 'how you do it, do you have to do it?'. She herself found growing up hard, 'I didn't like that there is a point at which you have to stop playing'.

This goes some way to explaining why, after two more successful younger teen novels, **Stargazing for Beginners** and **Truly Madly Deeply**, she decided to move to middle grade fantasy and eventually to produce the phenomenon that is **The Land of Roar**! But it was also that times were changing. She was 'very uninterested' in tech and phones. although she could see 'the comic potential' of the latter, 'phones really spoil plots'. She wanted to move away from writing about schools and into fantasy, because she 'wanted to capture that pure magic that I remember so vividly ... when the line blurs between reality and fantasy in a brilliant game'. Above all

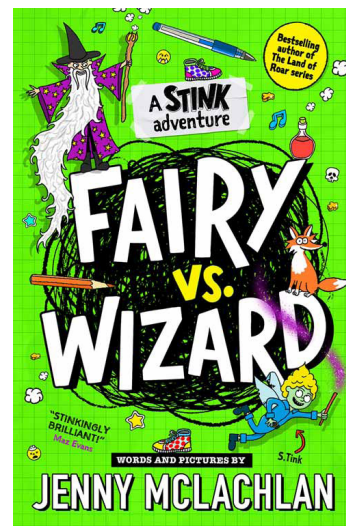
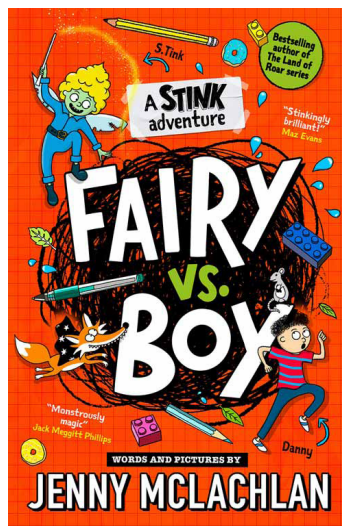
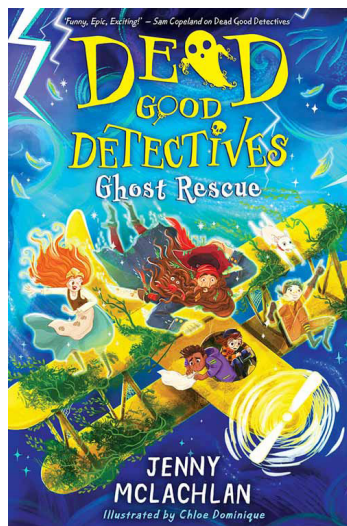


she 'wanted to make the joy and magic of playing, real and never-ending. I really do feel that children need sources of happiness, escape and joy in book form'.

Arthur and Rose, the twin central characters of **The Land of Roar** series, very nearly had a completely different adventure, because her initial idea was for the fairy door, that she later brought to fruition for Danny in **Fairy vs Boy**, to be in Arthur's bedroom. Her publisher had another fairy book scheduled, so she was asked to come up with something different. She was 'almost nervous' about creating an entire magical world, but a 'wild and windy' cliffside walk with her husband, where they came up with every conceivable thing that they would have in their ideal fantasy world, brought the Land of Roar to life. Basically 'two grown-ups reminiscing about playing!' She wanted to keep her style of first person, present tense, but it was 'harder than I thought' not to use an omniscient narrator.







The toughest scene she had to write – ‘it took weeks’ – was Arthur going through the camp bed in the attic and arriving in Roar. It delighted me to discover that the unique concept of a folding camp bed as the portal to a magical world where childhood games become reality, was based upon Jenny’s childhood adventures with multiple cousins in her grandmother’s attic, where she did indeed crawl into the camp bed and was convinced that she was transported to another place. ‘Writing is amazing, you can make your dreams happen.’ A concept that obviously struck a chord with countless children and **The Land of Roar**, a Waterstones Book of the Month and Sunday Times bestseller, was swiftly followed by **Return to Roar** and **The Battle for Roar**. Young fans will be so delighted that they can now return to their favourite fantasy world with newly published **The Dragon Riders of Roar**. ‘I had always thought there would be four books because I wanted to go into grandad’s fantasy world.’ The twin’s grandad’s fantasy world will, I’m told, now be in the concluding episode of what will be the three books in this highly anticipated new sequence.

Finding a new part of Roar to explore was never going to be a problem, none of the **Roar** books have visited the same area, and she knew she wanted to showcase her love for dragons, but again it was a favourite game of her childhood that brought inspiration. She had loved inventing her own school: designing uniforms, timetables, maps and so on. In **The Dragon Riders of Roar** Rose has been busy writing a story set in Roar, complete with a Dragon Riders Academy. ‘The comedy potential of Arthur having to attend a school invented by his sister, where she was the star pupil and which all comes to life, was irresistible’ Unbeknownst to Rose, Arthur finds her story and adds extra comments which also come to life when the book ends up in Roar. A wonderful metaphor for the power of words (and authors!).

But before returning to Roar, Jenny created two further fantasy series, continuing to produce at least one new book every year since her first in 2014. Having had the pleasure of reading all her novels before this interview, I think what really struck me was what she said about real children and real scenarios being important to her even amid the most imaginative fantasies. ‘I take children seriously’ she says, ‘I provide escapism but not escape from the real world.’ **Dead Good Detectives** and the sequel **Ghost Rescue** feature Sid and her best friend Zen who, like the twins, are at that key transition age between child and teenager and give Jenny the opportunity to examine tricky friendship issues. Essentially, she has ‘written the books I needed to read when I was younger. Giving myself the message: “You’re fine!”’ She remembers so clearly the feeling of having to ‘be on high vigilance and not do anything weird,’ and Sid’s anxiety about fitting in nearly destroys her friendship with Zen. The series also gives her the chance to feature some of her favourite things: history, ghosts, and seaside villages. It was the discovery on a Dorset camping trip of an apparent Pirate’s graveyard with gravestones adorned by the Skull and Crossbones, that provided the spark.

I am sure her characters feel so real because of their real-world inspiration. So, when she finally achieved her ambition of writing and illustrating a book and the hilarious **Stink** (now called **Fairy Vs Boy**) was born, we meet Danny, who is at that age where social embarrassment is feared more than anything and what could be worse than having a fairy door in his bedroom with ‘the worst fairy ever’ popping out of it? She loves ‘discombobulating’ readers and challenging assumptions, not just about boys but also about fairies, and Danny has a lot in common with her own long suffering older brother, just as the anarchic toddler Sophie, who inflicts the fairy door upon him, is like her own little sister or indeed her daughter at that age! **Fairy vs Wizard** swiftly followed, and fans will I am sure look forward to whatever the irrepressible Fairy will be vs next! Admitting that she has ‘a mind crammed full of stories and not enough years to write them all,’ she tells children that she has them all lined up ‘like Netflix’ in her mind and can flip between them, choosing which to land in. ‘I can go into my fantasy world whenever I like. It must be quite frustrating for my family...’ She can have these ideas running through her head for ‘months or years,’ before she begins to work through them, filling a notebook by hand. A typed chapter by chapter plan, about 10,000 words long follows, ‘then I start to write and having been through these three stages, I rarely need to look at the plan. I can concentrate on how I write, not what I write. I know what’s going to happen and I try to write it in the best way I can’. Despite what sounds like quite a lengthy process, she keeps to a fairly punishing publishing schedule by ‘basically working all the time’. But, she admits, ‘I enjoy it a bit too much!’ Her many fans would argue that her sheer enjoyment is what comes across to the reader and makes her stories such a delight to read and Jenny a go-to author for parents, teachers and librarians who want to get youngsters reading for pleasure.

**Books mentioned**, all published by Farshore.

**The Land of Roar** 978-1405293679

**Return to Roar** 978-1405295024

**The Battle for Roar** 978-1405298148

**Dragon Riders of Roar** 978-0755503377

**Dead Good Detectives** 978-1405298155

**Ghost Rescue** 978-0755503353

**Fairy vs Boy (Stink)** 978-0008524272

**Fairy Vs Wizard** 978-0008524302



**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**.



# Windows into Illustration:

## Greg Stobbs

**Greg Stobbs** is an illustrator, street artist, and associate lecturer. He's worked internationally on a range of projects, from installations to interactive art pieces and created the illustrated digital backdrops for the BBC's CBeebies Christmas Pantomime. In this piece, he describes his approach to illustration in **Cloud Boy**, the first book he has written and illustrated.

Illustrating is usually a joy, and I'm very lucky to do it for a job, but on occasions during the making of *Cloud Boy* it was hard. Developing drawings based on feelings of self-doubt, not fitting in, masking, faking, not understanding what was different, and being quite overwhelmed brought back a lot of painful memories.

While it was important to share how wonderful it is to be able to drift off into your imagination, it was equally important to illustrate how that is perceived by others, and how there is often a tendency to want to fix young people so that they fit comfortably in with the collective norm.

Although it isn't the first page in the book, the Lighthouse spread is the first page that I drew for

**Cloud Boy**. I wanted to illustrate in as bold a way as possible just how far Bobby could float, how far his imagination could take him, and the potential risks and dangers that might occur when he has that impulse to drift. To really bring that to life it had to be a full bleed double page spread.

I love the look of lighthouses, and also what they represent. They symbolise a kind of care for somebody who might be in trouble, as well as hope, safety, and awareness. If the opportunity presents itself, I like to try and have one in the backgrounds of my illustrations for picture books as everybody needs to feel like there's somebody keeping an eye out for them every now and again.

This is what the lighthouse spread looked like originally. My illustrations start as thumbnails and quite loose pencil sketches, where I am trying to find the flow of the page or spread. I think a little about how much text is going to be needed, how much breathing



space characters and elements might need, the connections between the characters, and what it is that I want readers to feel when they look at it.

Here I wanted a lot of space for Bobby to fly in to, so much of the real-world detail is packed in to the left-hand page, while the right-hand has lots of room for Bobby's imagination thread.

At this stage we didn't know that we would be using that incredible fluorescent pink, so I was just working out how to illustrate his thoughts in a way that would stand alone from the solidness of the real world. You can see here that we didn't have all the characters completely worked out either.

I like to make grounds with paint and pencils and textures and then build scenes and characters from cut outs before adding detail. Here are some watercolour sections on textured watercolour paper. This gives that feeling that there is depth to the illustration, and that you can feel or touch it.

I hop back and forth between traditional and digital techniques partly because I like what both of those things offer. Traditional techniques bring that human element, with imperfection, roughness, and reality, while we also live in a time where digital media is ubiquitous and brings its own aesthetic. Why not use both? Another reason is that I can get bored if I spend too long working in one technique; that ability to move between ways of working keeps my interest and allows for a state of creativity in which I am directed by the illustration and what it needs rather than enforcing strict rules upon it.

When working with the brilliant Rob Lowe and Katie Haworth at the OUP on colours, we decided to bring some of the vibrancy of my wall works into the illustrations. Bobby's imagination is a fluorescent pink that has to be printed as a separate layer. These kinds of decisions make a huge difference to the overall look of a book. The imagination thread needed to feel like it was separate to the real world, and the choice of colour went some way to achieving that.

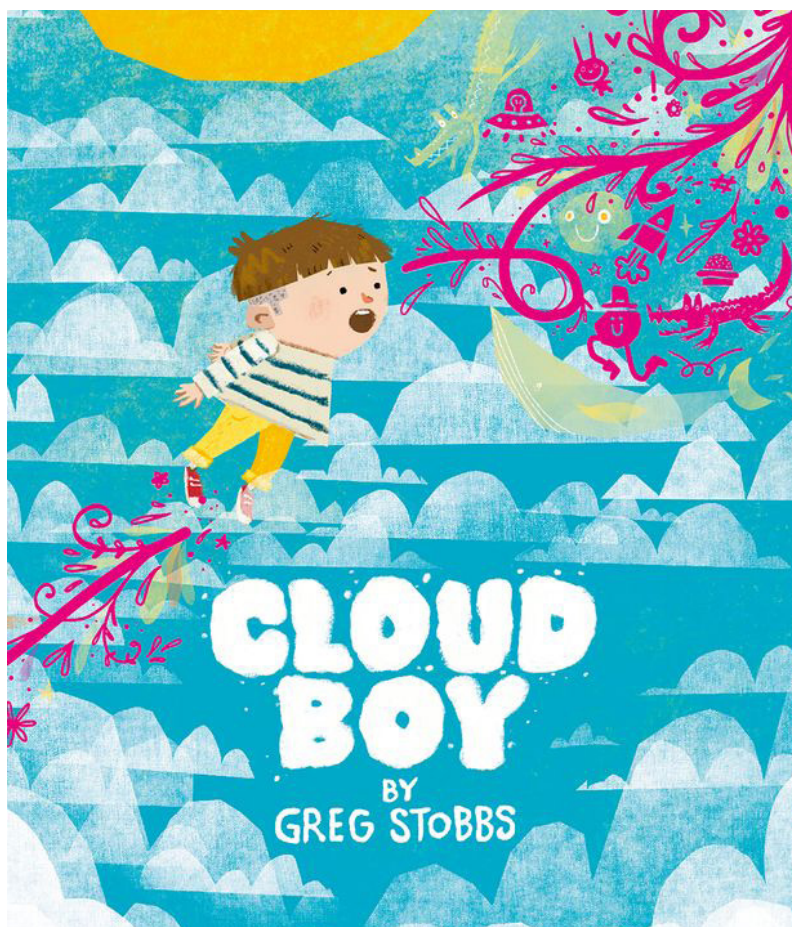






I try to find a good balance between double page spreads, vignettes, full bleed single pages, and spot illustrations. I also love an opportunity to turn the book up a different way and change the composition and format.

Things change a lot from the start of the process, with the story, the characters and the book evolving all of the time, but the message remains constant: to understand and celebrate all of the different kinds of brains out there.



**Cloud Boy** by Greg Stobbs is published by Oxford Children's Books, 978-1382054904, £7.99 pbk.



# Picture This: Illuminating the Dark

**Nicolette Jones** takes a look at three picturebooks illuminating dark events.

Anyone who thinks children's picturebooks are invariably cute and trivial has not looked at many recently. Those who have, know that they can deal with the big topics of our time, including, for instance, refugees and migration, climate change, pollution, war, tyranny, social justice, prejudice, grief, mental and physical health, gender identity and all kinds of love.

Some of these topics – the ones that involve pain and fear – set particular challenges for illustrators when young children are the audience. What do you show of horrors? How do you depict them in a way that is not too distressing, without misrepresenting the truth?

The three pictures I want to look at more closely here all reimagine actual events, and have all appeared as [#NewIllustrationoftheDay](#) on BlueSky ([@nicolettejones.bsky.social](#)) and Instagram ([@nicolettejonesig](#)). They all portray something upsetting taking place but find a way to show it so that the worst of the danger is implied. The more you already know, the more you understand, but the books they come from can be shared with children to increase empathy without giving them nightmares.

The first is an illustration by Vietnamese-born illustrator Linh Dao, now living in Czech Republic. It comes from **The Endless Sea** (Walker Books), a picturebook which was published to mark the 50th anniversary of the first sea journeys of Vietnamese refugees who became known as 'the Boat People'. An estimated 200,000-400,000 of them died at sea but the family of the author Chi Thai survived. She was three years old when her family surrendered their home, sold what they could for gold, burnt the rest of their belongings and fled.

The scene is the moment of their rescue. A ship lets down ropes to the refugees, one of whom can be partly seen climbing up the side of the vessel. Thai's mother is too weak to climb and her family of

four is hoisted up on a pallet. Moments later the wooden boat they sailed in goes down.

Murky grey-greens reflect both the storm and the sadness, with scuffed white expressing clouds and surf, with diagonal lines of rain. The frieze of coatless people at the foot of the page all look upwards, calling and waving to the source of their hope. The one raised arm recalls the arm reaching up in the figure to the right of Picasso's 'Guernica' – a gesture simultaneously of entreaty and desperation.

The use of scale emphasises the vastness of the sea and hugeness of the ship, against both of which the refugees are small and vulnerable, clustered close to the big black form which seems to lean protectively over them. Protective too are the poses of Thai's parents, trying to keep their children safe. This is a dangerous episode but the emphasis is on hope rather than fear. It is the miraculous point of reaching security. There is a gentleness in all the faces and postures which belies the terror of the circumstances.

Also a story of people who had to leave their home to survive is **The Bicycle** (Farshore) written by Patricia McCormick with Mevan Babakar, whose family had lived for generations in Kurdistan in the north of Iraq until they were forced out by the regime. They travelled for four years through four other countries before they found a home in a fifth: the UK. The illustrations for this picturebook are by Asian-American illustrator Yas Imamura.

Although this picturebook focuses on a remembered gesture of kindness, this particular image shows the threat of a time when Babakar's family were punished for speaking their own language, using their own Kurdish names, or celebrating their traditional holidays. Imamura seems to have researched settings and clothes carefully, and the house itself with its leaded windows and its patterns of tiles is convincing.

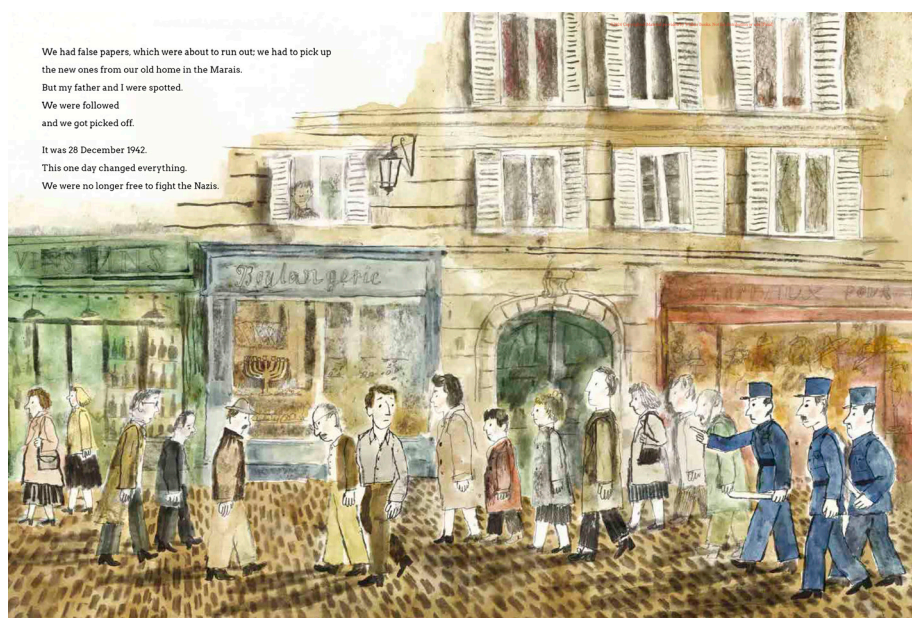


from *The Endless Sea*



The picture shows how the family was menaced beyond what the text tells us. We see a visit from the police/military in their blue shirts and berets, and how they confronted Kurdish people: bullying them in the street, separating them, outnumbering them, invading their personal space, admonishing them, laying hands on them, confiscating personal items, overriding their protests. The simply rendered expressions on the faces variously show anger, anxiety, defiance, and lack of compassion.

In other images in the book of the family home, the plants are lush. In this, the lone, bare-branched tree (in soft pencil or charcoal) conveys a different mood. The colours are from the colder part of the palette, and the white space suggests a chill. This is not a violent scene, but while adults looking at it know what it means to have authorities take things from you and issue warnings, it leaves young people the space to infer as much as they can bear to.



from **One Day**

**One Day** (Walker Studio), written by Michael Rosen, tells the true story of a father and son who escaped from a cattle train heading to Auschwitz and survived the Holocaust. It is illustrated by Benjamin Phillips in hand-made works of pen and pencil and wash that seem to bypass computer programmes. (Phillips is the sole UK artist now in this year's touring Bologna exhibition of global illustrators.) This spread tells the story with a freedom in the drawing but a precise sense of place – a Parisian street, with its characteristic architecture, shutters, arched doorways, shop fronts, cobbles and gas lamp (an ironic, ominous detail?).

As in **The Endless Sea**, muted colours convey a serious mood. As in **The Bicycle**, blue uniforms are menacing - in this case not the uniforms you might expect of the German occupiers but of the collaborating French police. The crowd ignores the drama. Only one head turns in reaction to the call of a policeman, and we see the worried face of Eugene, a Jew who was hoping to go unnoticed through the Marais in Paris to collect new false papers. His father, who walks beside him, looks at the ground in a last attempt to avoid the arrest that is coming. Only two men, walking towards

the protagonists, wear expressions that suggest any dismay, but all the faces look as though they are making an effort not to react, no one talks to each other, and straight arms hang down as if holding themselves together. No one swings their arms, looks about them, holds hands, skips along ...

A seven-branched Menorah in the window of a bakery reminds us that there were still some Jewish businesses in Paris, and a young face at a window above watches the arrest – with concern, perhaps, about who might be next. Although it is late December, Eugene and his father have no overcoats – already a sign of the hardships imposed on them? Phillips conveys the gravity of this moment by such small hints, and what is not shown – no one intervenes, no one behaves as though this taking of two individuals in the street is unusual. It is an illustration which, in its quietness and detail, demonstrates the banality of evil. Using understatement in images can be a very effective way of making fear tolerable – as all three of these examples demonstrate. And what is missing from a picture can be powerful.

#### Books mentioned:

**The Endless Sea**, Chi Thai, illus Dao Linh, Walker Studio, 978-1529516487, £12.99 hbk

**The Bicycle**, Patricia McCormick & Mevan Babakar, illus Yas Imamura, Farshore, 978-0008720391, £7.99 pbk

**One Day**, Michael Rosen, illus Benjamin Phillips, Walker Studio, 978-1529515985, £12.99 hbk



from **The Bicycle**



**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).



# Trump and the Book Ban Deniers

For Donald Trump and his allies, ‘freedom’ is no longer a universal right, but a selective privilege, argues **The Bear**.

Last weekend, I had a fascinating exchange on the social media platform previously known as Twitter (and now more commonly referred to as ‘that post-apocalyptic hellscape owned by Trump’s emotional support billionaire’, or X). The topic? Book bans. Or, more specifically, the increasingly tortured mental gymnastics some people will perform to insist that books aren’t really being banned, despite the fact that they have been quite literally removed from schools and libraries by state mandate.

The argument, in its most absurdly distilled form, goes like this: A book isn’t banned if you can still buy it on Amazon.

There is a sort of bleak ingenuity to this line of reasoning. It’s the same logic that says poverty isn’t real because there are billionaires, or that healthcare in America is accessible because technically, hospitals exist. It reduces everything to a transactional marketplace where access is purely a matter of individual means. If you can afford it, it isn’t banned.

If you can’t, well, that’s just your problem, isn’t it?

## The Luxury of Access

At the heart of this argument is the fundamental American conflation of legality with accessibility. It’s an idea that’s been baked into the country’s economic and social structures for decades: nothing is ever outright forbidden, merely priced out of reach. Want higher education? Get ready for decades of student debt. Need life-saving insulin? That’ll be hundreds of dollars a month, if not more. Want to read a book that’s been pulled from your school’s library? No problem – just go buy it yourself.

This kind of thinking only works if you ignore the fact that millions



of children don’t have the disposable income to casually purchase books, nor the means to access them outside of their school system. If a state removes a book from a school or public library, for the overwhelming majority of students, that book might as well not exist. But in the American economic mind, where everything is viewed through the lens of the free market, it isn’t censorship – it’s just a redistribution of access.

It’s worth asking who benefits from this framework. Because, as always, the rules don’t apply evenly. No one is pulling Shakespeare off the shelves. No one is scrambling to protect children and young people from **The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn** or **1984** (ironically, the latter frequently cited by the very people trying to erase books from public institutions). The books being targeted – the ones that require this kind of linguistic acrobatics to justify their removal – almost always focus on race, or gender and sexuality, or histories that complicate the neat, patriotic narratives preferred by reactionary politicians.

This is not an accident. The point isn’t to ban books outright in the traditional sense, where possession of them is illegal and punishable. The point is to make access difficult enough that only the privileged can afford to bypass the restrictions.

## Selective ‘Freedom’

What is particularly revealing is that the same people who insist these books aren’t banned are often the ones loudly proclaiming that their own “freedom of speech” is under attack. They scream censorship when social media platforms enforce content moderation but will happily endorse the state’s removal of books from schools. They rage against the “tyranny” of fact-checkers but have no issue with government-mandated book removals.

It’s a remarkable double standard – one that only makes sense when you realise that, for these people, ‘freedom’ isn’t a universal principle but a selective privilege. They don’t want free speech; they want speech that aligns with their own worldview to be dominant and uncontested. Removing books from public institutions isn’t a violation of freedom in their eyes because the people most affected







– the students who lose access – don't count in their equation.

It's also why they rely on the 'just buy it yourself' argument. Because in their world, the only voices that matter belong to those who can afford to be heard.

### When Power Decides What is 'Appropriate'

The other rhetorical sleight of hand in this debate is the insistence that these books haven't been 'banned' – they have merely been deemed age-inappropriate. But who decides what is appropriate?

Florida, for instance, has pulled books discussing civil rights, LGBTQ+ identities, and even *The Hill We Climb* by Amanda Gorman, arguing that these books are somehow harmful to children. But the same school districts continue to allow books filled with graphic violence, war, and American exceptionalist propaganda. The "appropriateness" standard isn't based on protecting children – it's based on ensuring they are only exposed to a narrow, curated set of ideas.

A book that discusses racism? Far too dangerous.

A book that glorifies war? Perfectly fine.

The goal is less to protect kids from harm, more to ensure they don't encounter ideas that might make them question the worldview of the people in power.

### Censorship by Economic Gatekeeping

This brings us back to the fundamental issue: when does a ban count as a ban? If a government or institution deliberately removes access to information for the vast majority of people, what else can you call it?

If a book is available only to those who can afford it, and deliberately withheld from those who can't, then it is functionally banned for an enormous portion of the population. The fact that someone, somewhere, can still buy it online doesn't change the material reality for students who will never see it in their school libraries or classrooms.

This is what makes the 'not banned, just unavailable' argument so disingenuous. It's an attempt to have it both ways – to control what students read without admitting to outright censorship. It's the same kind of linguistic trickery that authoritarian governments have used for centuries: make something inaccessible, but never technically illegal, so you can claim the moral high ground while achieving the same result.

### Call It What It Is

Banning books isn't just about restricting access to paper and ink – it's about controlling the narratives that shape the next generation. And in a country where wealth already determines so much – healthcare, education, legal justice – it should come as no surprise that access to knowledge is now being subjected to the same economic gatekeeping.

The argument that 'you can still buy it' doesn't hold water. If a state strips a book from schools and libraries, they are banning it from the very institutions designed to provide free and equal access to knowledge.

So let's call it what it is: not just a ban, but a transparent attempt to ensure that only the privileged get to decide what's worth reading.

And if that isn't censorship, then what is?

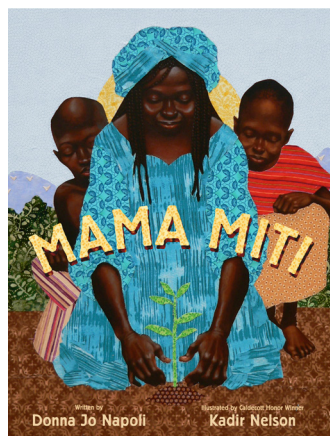


**The Bear**, also known as Iratus Ursus Major (Big Angry Bear), is a commentator known for dissecting ideology, news and politics with a blend of wit, sarcasm, and just a dash of frustration. He is the author of **Bear Necessities of Politics and Power: Decoding the Chaos of Modern Politics, One Ideology at a Time**. This article first appeared in **Byline Times** and is reprinted with permission.

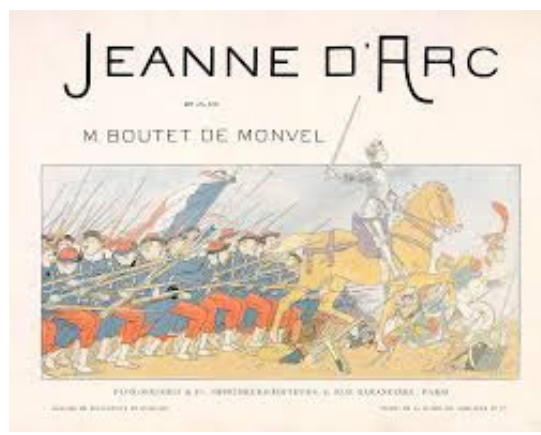


# The art of biography

In their new series for **Books for Keeps** looking at illustration in children's information books, Pam Dix and Ruth Thomson turn to biographies.



**Mama Miti: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya**, Donna Jo Napoli, illustrated by Kadir Nelson. Simon & Schuster, 2010



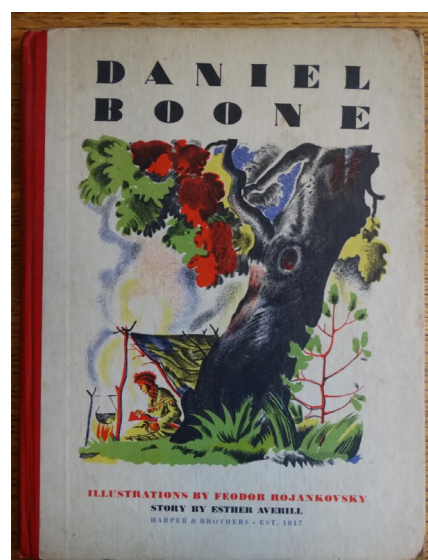
**Jeanne d'Arc**, Louis-Maurice Boutet de Monvel. Éditions Plon-Nourrit, 1896 (English edition Joan of Arc, Hodder & Stoughton, 1980)



Biographies have always been a mainstay of children's publishing, conventionally focusing on the lives of the famous, in history, literature, sport. In recent years, there has been a pressure to find and tell the stories of those under-represented or marginalised in terms of gender, race and class. These previously untold stories open new ways of thinking, refracting history and our view of the world through a different lens. A new history emerges with this broader balance of biographies, a change that helps engage a wider audience.

What is the role of the illustrator in biographies? Often the likeness of the person is known, so the illustrator has an image to work from. Their role is then to give a visual context, to help bring the narrative to life. The images - of country, home, family- help locate the biography in time and space. Through illustration, skills, achievements, discoveries or significant moments can be explored visually.

Two early illustrated biographies have been very influential. The French painter and illustrator **Louis-Maurice Boutet de Monvel (1850-1913)** is known for his watercolour illustrations of children's books. Born in Orleans, his choice of Joan of Arc was an obvious subject for an inspirational story to counter-balance the defeat of the Franco-Prussian War. He creates dramatic scenes of pivotal moments in her life.



**Daniel Boone**, Esther Averill & Lila Stanley eds, illustrated by Feodor Rojankovsky. Domino Press, 1931, simultaneous publication in English and French. (British edition, Faber and Faber, 1931)

The well-known illustrator **Feodor Rojankovsky (Rojan) (1891-1970)** (Latvia, Russia, France, USA) during his time in France was commissioned to work on a book on Daniel Boone, the subject chosen to appeal to both American and European audiences. Boone was known for his love of nature, so Rojankovsky had the opportunity to demonstrate his skill in drawing the natural world, for which he later became famous in series for both Pere Castor in France and Golden Books in the USA. **Daniel Boone** was an instant success, celebrated as *The Observer's* book of the season in 1932 while the *London Week-end Review* commented, 'Here is the technique of film applied to the children's book [which] marks a new era in the history of children's books.' Each page is designed as a dramatic series of mise-en-scene.

Producing biographies as a series was commercially successful for publishers, with series usually having a coherent visual style. The early American series, **The Childhood of Famous Americans**, published by Bobbs-Merrill between the 1940s - 1960s, included about 220 titles and used a range of creators working within the same format.

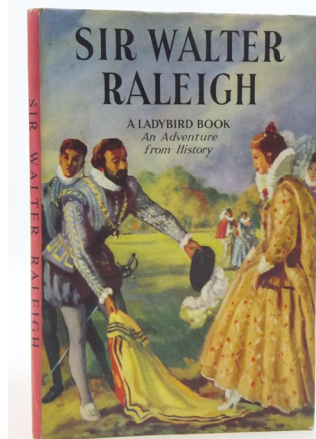
Each book focuses on the childhood of a famous person told in a story format. The series aim was to 'reflect true Americanism, a love of freedom, equality and fraternity, a strong distaste for racial or religious, economic or social prejudice'. Ironic to read this currently, but reflecting the fact that the choice of who to include in any series is influenced by contemporary values. Interestingly, at least 40 women from a range of backgrounds are included, and a significant number of African Americans - both groups often missing in later series. Many use silhouette illustrations on a coloured background, a style more frequently associated with illustrations of African Americans.







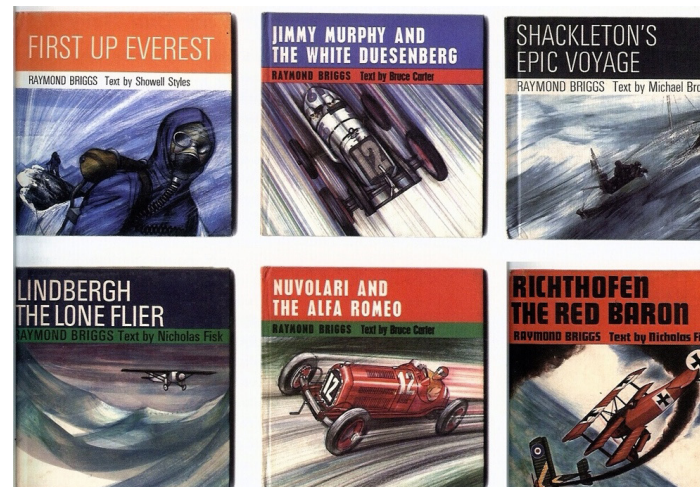
Maria Isabel Sánchez Vegara's highly successful contemporary series **Little People, Big Dreams**, now at about 80 titles, also uses the childhood of the famous person as a stepping off point for each biography. Told for a very young age group, each title is in the same format and has a distinctive easily recognisable graphic illustration style.



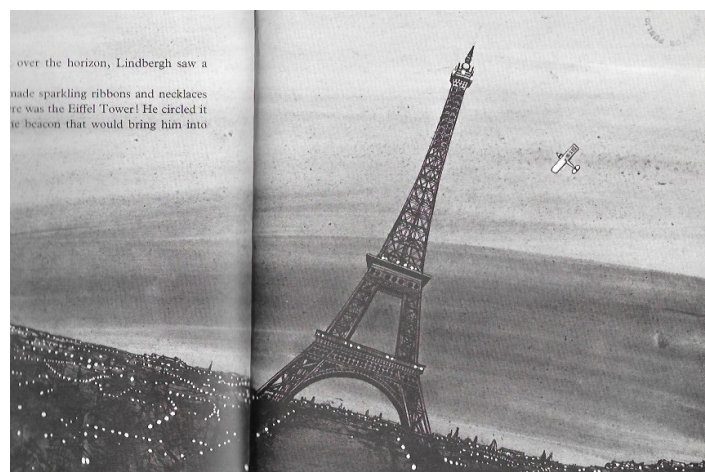
**Sir Walter Raleigh, L du Garde Peach, illustrated by John Kenney.** Wills & Hepworth, 1957

angles and perspectives, body postures and gestures, to create drama and excitement. This series uses pivotal moments in the life as the focus of the narrative.

In the UK in the 1950s, **John Kenney (1911-1972)** collaborated with the writer Lawrence du Garde Peach on the first 23 titles in Ladybird's **Adventures from History** series, looking at key events and popular stories in the lives of a range of mainly British subjects, kings, adventurers, writers and a few notable women such as **Queen Elizabeth I, Florence Nightingale and Joan of Arc**. The distinctive Ladybird format, text on the left facing a full page illustration, suited Kenney's distinctive and memorable artwork. His illustrations locate the viewer in the centre of the action, using complex cropped compositions, close-up viewpoints, unexpected



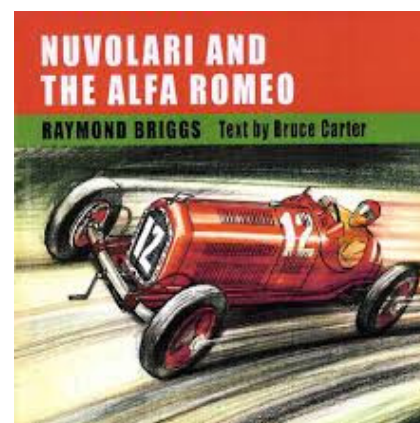
In the late 1960s **Raymond Briggs (1934-2022)** illustrated a series of six biographies, **Briggs Books**, for Hamish Hamilton. Very different from the graphic picture which have made him a household name, these books are accounts of strong masculine heroes and high adventure. The series includes two racing drivers, three adventurers and one fighter pilot.



**Lindbergh, the Lone Flier, Nicholas Fisk, illustrated by Raymond Briggs.** Hamish Hamilton, 1968

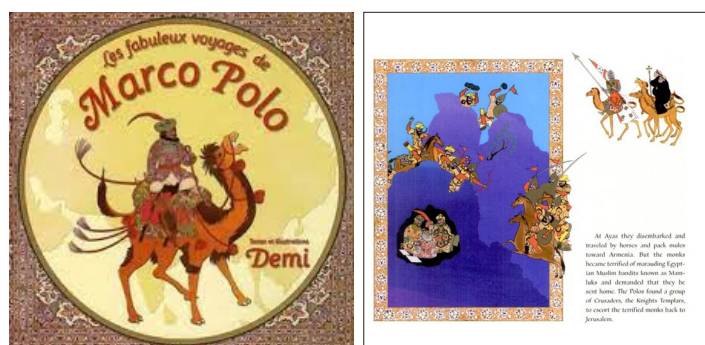
Briggs who later wrote several very strong anti-war books, found the inclusion of Von Richthofen, the German fighter pilot, difficult.

The relationship between man and machine or man and nature provide dramatic opportunities for the illustrations. The adventurers are portrayed as tiny figures in immense landscapes, or in control of powerful machines. Action and movement are marked by swirling lines and colours



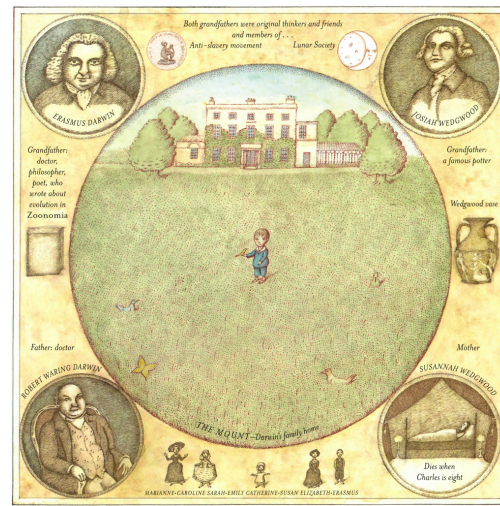
**Nuvolari and the Alfa Romeo, Bruce Carter, illustrated by Raymond Briggs.** Hamish Hamilton, 1968

Some writer /illustrators have specialised in creating biographies, becoming well-known through this interest. The American writer / illustrator **Demi (1942-)** has published biographies of spiritual leaders of many faiths and ancient scholars, stimulated by her Buddhist faith and her interest Chinese culture. The travels of the 13th century Marco Polo, his 24-year journey in an eastern world unknown to Europe, reflects these interests. Polo travelled more widely and had greater knowledge of the world than any man who had ever lived. Demi's illustrations create a sense of this excitement and mystery, her sumptuous artwork influenced by the fabulous riches that Polo encountered. Chinese inks, gold overlays, a mixture of Chinese, Indian, Italian, Arabian and Persian designs framed within borders create a sense of the exotic.



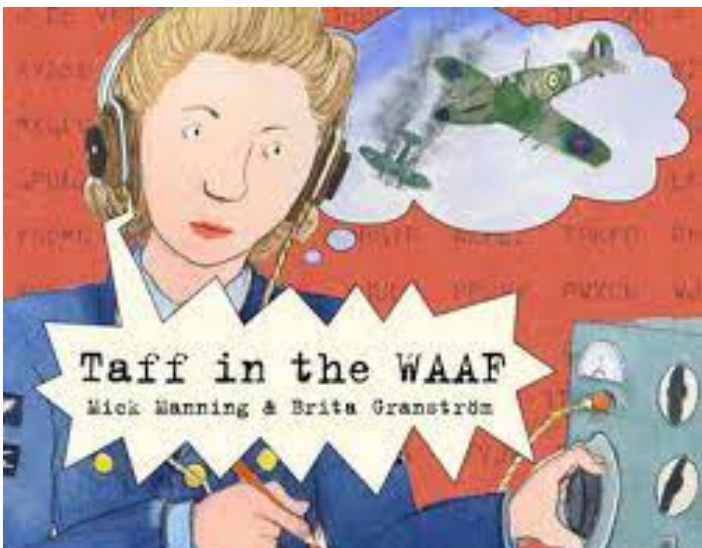
**Marco Polo, Demi. Marshall Cavendish, 2008**



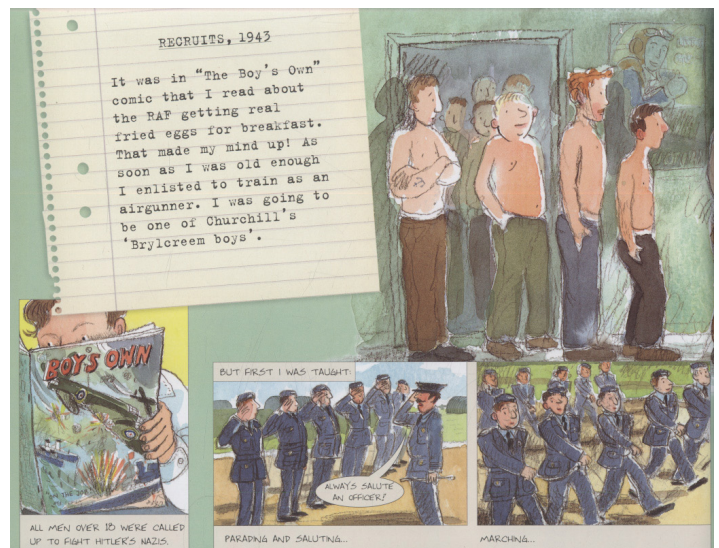
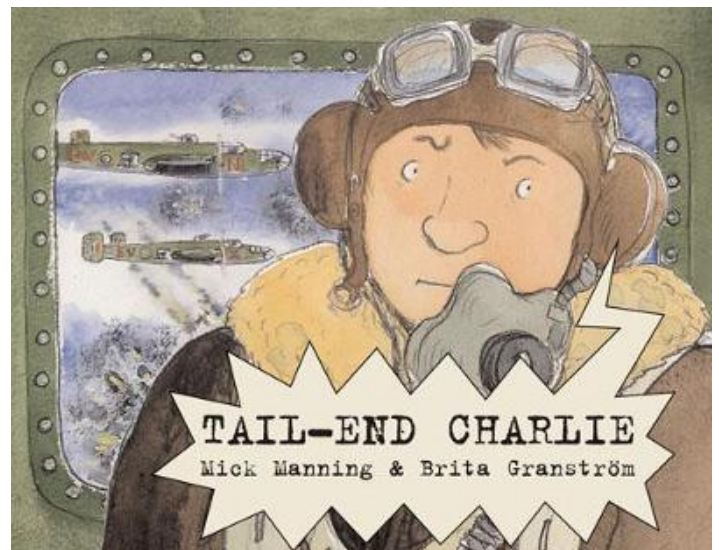


**The Tree of Life:**  
A Book Depicting  
the Life of Charles  
Darwin, Naturalist,  
Geologist, Thinker.  
Frances Foster  
Books, 2003

The Czech-born USA based writer/illustrator **Peter Sis (1949-)**, winner of the **Hans Christian Andersen Illustration Award** in 2012, uses minimal text and multi-layered images in his biographies. He is interested in people who 'follow their dream', independent thinkers who challenged the views of their contemporaries or society. Sis uses multiple styles and viewpoints, birds' eye views, cutaways, collaged materials, handwritten text, diaries, maps, charts to build an overall impression of his subject.



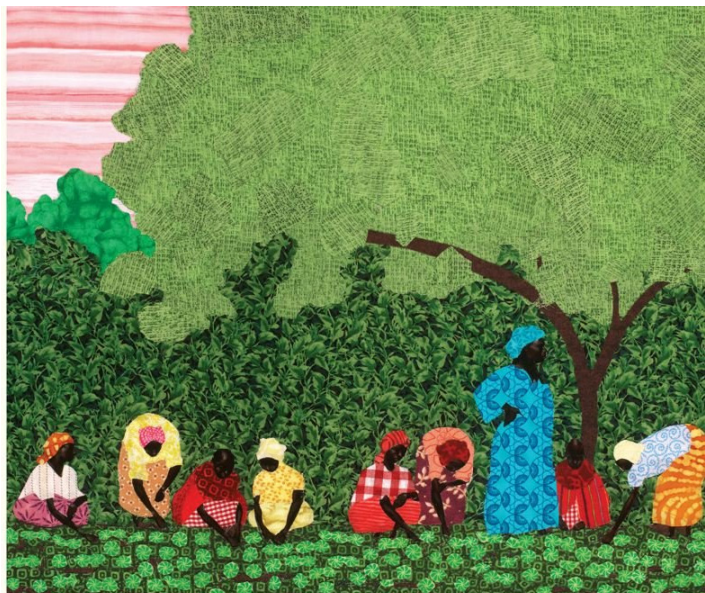
**Taff in the WAAF**, Mick Manning & Brita Granström. Francis Lincoln, 2013



**Tail-end Charlie**, Mick Manning & Brita Granström. Francis Lincoln, 2009

One way of illustrating the lives of 'ordinary' people is to use a 'scrapbook' approach incorporating archival material, personal records and memories, mixed with ephemera and artefacts. The personal can then become part of a bigger and more universal or political story. **Mick Manning (1959-)** and **Brita Granström (1969-)** refract the experience of war through the eyes of 'ordinary' people in a companion pair of books which look at the wartime experiences of Manning's parents. Taff, Manning's mother, joined the WAAF Women's Auxiliary Air Force, at 18 where she was trained as a wireless operator working at Bletchley Park. Charlie his father was an RAF air gunner.





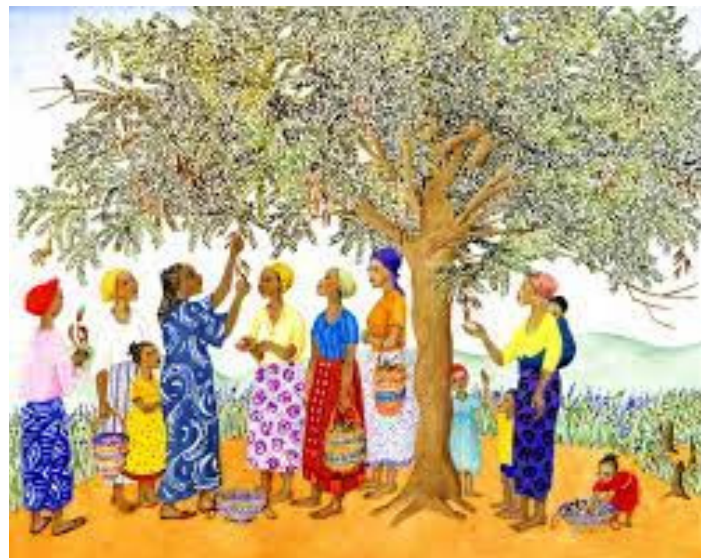
**Mama Miti: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya**, Donna Jo Napoli, illustrated by Kadir Nelson. Simon & Schuster, 2010

Comparing the representation of one subject by a range of illustrators gives insight into the power of illustrations to set the mood and tone in a biography. These four books about the life of environmental activist, Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to win the **Nobel Peace Prize** in 2004, use very different styles. Maathai's activism and her engagement with local women in a programme to replant trees in Kenya place her firmly within a Kenyan environment that has to be re-created accurately. The American illustrator **Kadir Nelson (1974-)** uses a mixture of collaged African fabrics and oil paint to create a rich sense of the Kenyan countryside. The brightly-coloured patterned fabrics contrast with the painted sections, giving an overall three-dimensional effect. His image demonstrates the African roots of the story and the strength and dignity of its characters



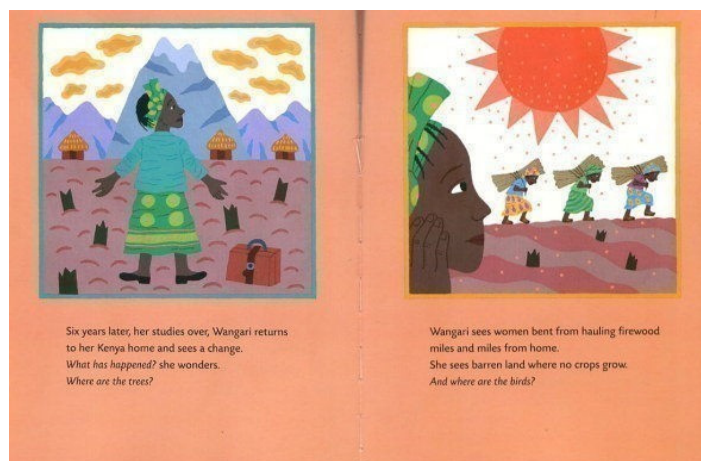
**Wangari Maathai: la Femme qui Plante des Millions d'Arbres**, Franck Prévot, illustrated by Aurélia Fronty. Rue du Monde, 2014  
(English edition **Wangari Maathai: the Woman who Planted Millions of Trees**, Charlesbridge, 2017, translated by Sarah Ardizzone)

The French illustrator **Aurélia Fronty (1973-)** creates images that have a lyrical mystical quality. She draws on her travels in Africa to create exuberant images that have echoes of Rousseau or Matisse. In this image, Maathai appears symbolically as a tree with arms raised and the women working around her.



**Planting the Trees of Kenya: the Story of Wangari Maathai**, Claire A Nivola. Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2008

The American writer/illustrator **Claire A Nivola (1947-)** creates watercolour images that are accurate in detail, clear visual storytelling of Maathai's work. Here Maathai is shown demonstrating to the women how to collect seeds from the trees. The clothing and artefacts are authentically Kenyan.



**Wangari's Trees of Peace: a True Story from Africa**, Jeanette Winter, Harcourt, 2008

Another American writer /illustrator **Jeannette Winter (1939-)** is well known for her many biographies, particularly of women from all walks of life. She regularly uses the same format of square images with text underneath, creating a strong filmic narrative.

New series and new formats, including the increasing popularity of graphic approaches to biography, make this a vibrant area in publishing. Each country has its own pantheon of heroes to celebrate, giving illustrators a rich opportunity and one in which they can explore cultural, political and social norms.

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**Pam Dix** has worked in the school library sector and as a university lecturer in children's literature. She is chair of IBBY UK and also the chair of the Akili Trust, a small charity that has been working in Kenya since 2008, and is a trustee for Book Aid International.

**Ruth Thomson** has had a versatile career in children's information books as a prize-winning author, commissioning editor and book packager, specialising in social history, art and design. She has also worked with the publishing arm of Tate, the National Gallery and the Imperial War Museum on a range of products and books for children.



# Beyond the Secret Garden:

## Growing up away from Birth Parents PART TWO

In the latest in our long-running **Beyond the Secret Garden** series, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** return to the subject of the representations of lone children of colour, and look at books published in the 21st century

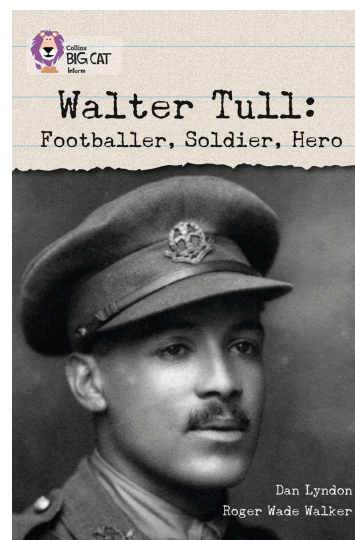
The twenty-first century has seen two major developments regarding books featuring racially minoritised children living away from their birth parents. The first is that such books have increasingly been written by authors who spent some of their childhood in care in one form or another. The other is a proliferation of books set in the past which often highlight how colonialism and racism have impacted questions about who is best placed to raise children of colour.

The line between adoption and forced removal / kidnap within the context of colonialism was often unclear. Forcible assimilation of racially minoritised children into white Christian society was often a strategy of colonialism (discussed in our column on schools in BfK 256). **Jemmy Button** by Jennifer Uman and Valerio Vidali (Templar, 2013), words by Alix Barzelay, is a picture book telling the story of Orundellico, a teenage member of the Yaghan (or Yámana) people from islands around Tierra del Fuego in modern Chile and Argentina. He was one of the hostages taken to England by Captain FitzRoy on the HMS Beagle in 1830. Fitzroy's stated belief was that he was introducing 'Button' to Christianity and civilization so that he could later return and spread them to his people. 'Come away with us and taste our language, see the lights of the civilised world.' It is only in the afternote that the authors use Orundellico's original name. Jamila Gavin's **Coram Boy** (Mammoth 2000) detailed the darker side of Thomas Coram's Foundling Hospital through the character of Toby, who as a baby was taken from his enslaved mother and given to the hospital 'for rearing and education' by a man who intended to later 'apprentice' him as a 'servant'. Toby has no choice and no hope of escaping the house, where he serves drinks and is treated as 'a favoured pet' by wealthy women. He faces being shipped to Virginia and a life of slavery if he disobeys or tries to escape. Gavin's depiction of the Foundling Hospital is grimmer than that found in Jacqueline Wilson's **Hetty Feather** (2009); Wilson's book includes a mean Matron, but not the blatant disregard for the fate of children who leave the hospital that Gavin includes.

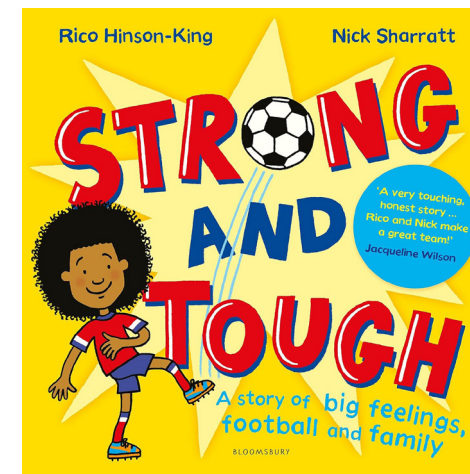
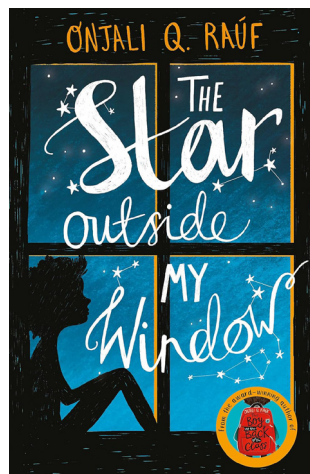
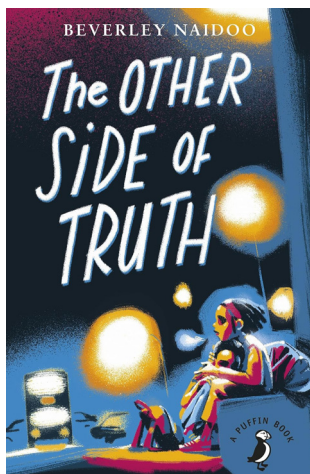
Recent books have also examined informal adoption arrangements in the 19th century, including the historical Africans and Indians 'adopted' by Queen Victoria such as Victoria Princewill's YA offering, **The Diary of Sarah Forbes Bonetta: A Novel** (2023) or Zetta Elliott's ghost story for younger readers, **The Ghosts in the Castle** (2017). J. T. Williams' historical mysteries, **Lizzie and Belle: Drama and Danger** (2022) and **Lizzie and Belle: Portraits and Poison** (2023) include a fictionalized version of the historical figure of Dido Belle, daughter of an enslaved woman and a British navy officer, brought up by her (white) uncle the Earl of Mansfield. All of these protagonists struggle with the 'privilege' of being looked after while at the same time being treated differently from white children in the family. Here, the 'adopted' children have parents who are alive, but their white guardians (and sometimes their own parents who 'give' the children to the white families) feel they can offer better care.

Historical fiction and nonfiction set in more recent times depict children's homes as kinder places, interested in fostering children's interests and skills, but also places of exile from families that had rejected them for one reason or another. Both Hilary Claire's **The Story of Walter Tull** (Northamptonshire Black History Society 2007) and Dan Lyndon's **Walter Tull: Footballer, Soldier, Hero** (Collins Big Cat 2011) indicate that Walter and his brother were well looked after at the Bonner children's home where their stepmother had sent them, but it was not home. Their stepmother had not wanted to send them away, but 'couldn't manage' seven children on her own. The children's home is depicted in both books as the place where Tull learned to play football and thus began his career—but the memory of his parents and the love of his brothers and sisters is the reason that Tull is described as excelling.

Proponents of racism have always been obsessed with sexual relations. Apartheid, Jim Crow, and the Nazi Rassenschande (race defilement) laws all prohibited white people having sexual relationships with racially minoritised people. The offspring of such relationships were often stigmatized, and in many cases this impacted







decisions as to who would raise them. J.P. Rose's fictional depiction of a post-Second World War child of a white English mother and an African American soldier father, **Birdie** (Andersen 2024), and E. L. Norry's **Fablehouse** (Bloomsbury 2023) both include children's homes designed specifically for 'Brown Babies'. Mrs Dudley, in Rose's Birdie, and Miss Isolde, in Norry's **Fablehouse**, are both extremely kind housemistresses. Mrs Dudley loves Birdie as 'if thou were my own flesh and blood' and Miss Isolde considers the children in her care 'Absolutely magical'. But the children's homes are both located outside of towns and the children are protected against malicious racism by being taught within the homes. However, this attempt at shielding the children can only last so long and go so far. Heather, at Fablehouse, is treated by one of the staff 'like we were her own real-life dolls' at the same time that the people in the nearby town of 'Selworthy liked to pretend we didn't exist. All because our mums got too friendly with Black soldiers'. Birdie, in Rose's book, feels more loved in Mrs Dudley's care than she does when initially adopted by her Great-Aunt; she has to explain to her how both malicious and casual racism feels, including defending (as Heather does with Miss Gloria) her hair, which her Great-Aunt calls 'wild and unruly' and tries to 'tame'. Birdie and Heather both experience racist taunts and bullying from local white children and adults. The care home in both these books is the safest place for the child characters.

After the 1990s, following increased concerns about 'transracial adoption', there was a push to find more Black and Asian British foster parents for Black children, although this initiative tended to assume that all Black or Asian communities shared the same values. Beverley Naidoo's **The Other Side of Truth** (2000) includes Nigerian refugee children being fostered by British Jamaican foster parents. Mrs King suggests to Sade that they may be related because her ancestors had come from Nigeria, but Sade finds that there is considerable difference between how she, as an African, is treated in comparison to Black British children from the Caribbean. Africa is seen as a place of deprivation and Sade is bullied in school by a white British and a Black British girl with Jamaican heritage. Naidoo's text highlights tensions between Black communities, but also the institutional indifference to those tensions.

According to government statistics, children of Black or Asian heritage are much less likely to be adopted from foster care than their white counterparts. This can be seen in recent literature, including Onjali Q. Rauf's **The Star Outside my Window** (2019), where the foster mother Mrs Iwuchukwu has adopted the white girl Sophie but not the other foster children—two of Brazilian heritage and one Black British who has been separated from his sister—in her care. The other children worry that they are too old to be adopted—although Ben and Travis tell Aniyah and Noah that they have a chance, because people like taking brothers and sisters together.

Rico Hinson-King won the Premier League Young Writer of the Year competition with his powerful short story on the topic 'fearless'. This led to his picture book **Strong and Tough** (Bloomsbury, 2022) written when he was ten years old and illustrated by Nick Sharatt. He

tells the story of Charlie and siblings, their journey through the care system, separation, and eventual adoption by a white gay couple. At the end Rico reveals this to be a true story. The book might offer reassurance to young readers going through similar experiences though its upbeat message is tempered by the note at the outset that, 'This is Charlie's personal foster care journey but not every child's story will be the same. We recommend reading and reflecting on this book with a grown-up.'

Two recent books aimed at young adults provide contemporary stories of young people in care. Marc in Danielle Jawando's YA Book Prize-winning **When Our Worlds Collided** (2022) is one of three main characters, and reflects on his experiences as a young gay man dealing with foster families, social workers and teachers. Jawando's use of alternating narrators highlights the commonalities and particularities between three young Black people in Manchester who witness a stabbing in the Arndale Centre.

In Patrice Lawrence's **Needle** (2022), Charlene, the elder sibling, is put in foster care while her younger half-sister Candy is returned to her father. The pain of sibling separation makes being in foster care much worse, as she feels twice abandoned. Charlene is a keen knitter, whose trust has been eroded to such an extent that she struggles to ever apologise. When a blanket she is knitting for her sister is destroyed by the son of her foster mother, she stabs him in the hand with a needle. Lawrence writes in such a way that we can understand Charlene and root for her even as we see her make questionable choices. The knitted blanket can be read as a metaphor for the delicate fabric of family – tightly-knit yet easily unravelled in careless hands. In contrast to Bernard Ashley's voiceless **Donovan Croft**, where we find ourselves gazing upon Donovan just as many of the characters in the story do (BfK 270), Lawrence invites to see the story of a fostered Black child from the inside.



**Dr Darren Chetty** is a writer and a lecturer at UCL 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 has since published five books as co-author and co-editor. He tweets at @rapclassroom.



**Professor 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.

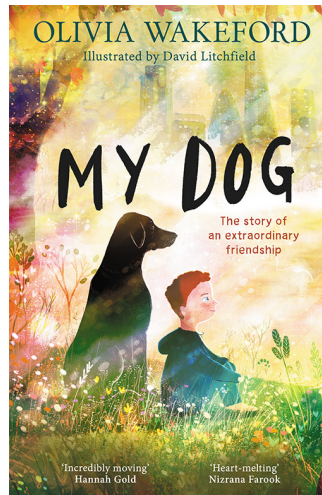
Darren and Karen's book **Beyond the Secret Garden: Racially Minoritised People in British Children's Books** is out now, published by English Media Centre.



# Debut author **Olivia Wakeford**

**Olivia Wakeford** writes a lot about grief, states the press release for **My Dog**, her debut novel, and it is a book inspired by grief. It's also a book about love, about coping with change, and about the special relationship between a boy and his dog. **Andrea Reece** talked to Olivia for **Books for Keeps**.

It was while she was on the influential MA Course in Writing for Children at **Bath Spa University** that Olivia Wakeford began writing **My Dog**. She was writing before then, and indeed, had already completed one novel – unpublished – but felt that doing the MA would help her finish the new book she was planning. 'I knew that I needed extra help with it,' she says, 'Because I knew it was going to be a hard one to write.' Even so, she was still toying with another idea, when halfway through the course, her dad died: 'I just thought if I'm going to write this book, now is the time to do it, when I'm dealing with all of these emotions myself.'



In **My Dog**, ten-year-old Rhys loses his mother. The trauma is made worse when he moves from his home in Wales to London to live with his father, stepmother and their new baby. His father does his best but has his own issues to manage, and it's only the love and companionship of the big black labrador Rhys finds apparently lost under his mum's hospital bed and names Worthington, that enables him to cope. Teenage Olivia went through something similar: her own mum died when she was a teenager, having been ill for a lot of Olivia's childhood. Obviously, that affects her writing. 'I think I've always been drawn to stories that have an element of sadness in them and the MA helped me tap into that, because it's scary writing about those experiences.'

She feels that the MA also helped her find her voice which, to her surprise, is 'much Welsher than I thought it would be.' She spent all her childhood in Wales, only moving away in her twenties, and the book is set exactly where she grew up; Rhys home with his mother is her old house, Rhys goes to the school that she went to. With a background in screenwriting too, she feels she's a very visual writer and believes that settings are almost characters in the book: 'you have to know them in and out, and if it's a place you're really familiar with then it's a lot easier.' Exploring her childhood on the MA course really made her connect with her Welsh voice and she thinks that makes it authentic, 'because it's me writing from my heart.'

We talk about some of the books that describe grief for children, and Olivia's determination that her book wouldn't be too dark, which brings us on to Worthington. 'You bring a dog in and that immediately brings lightness, doesn't it?' she says, 'It's a salve to the sadness. I hope that the presence of the dog creates the balance so that it's not too depressing, that's what I was conscious of when I was writing it, that it shouldn't be too depressing'. She wanted a book that 'would touch you emotionally and not completely devastate you. I like to think that it's heartfelt rather than heartbreaking.'

Worthington is a presence from the first page, line two in fact: 'a black labrador with conker eyes and ears like triangles of velvet.' Rhys, who longs for a dog of his own and whose hero is TV vet Dr Jimmy Mackenzie of The Dog Rescuers, falls in love with him immediately, and surely all readers will too. With his mother gone, his father tired and tense, and far away from his beloved Nan and Bampy, Worthington is exactly what Rhys needs, a companion who is always pleased to see him, always ready to listen, warm,

comforting, dependable. He's based on Olivia's own dog, Obi, also a labrador though a golden one.

When no-one comes forward to claim the lost dog he reports to the hospital, Rhys decides to keep Worthington, though in secret. He doesn't tell his dad or anyone else, smuggling Worthington to London in the boot of his father's car, hiding him in the garden shed. When things go horribly wrong at his new school, and Rhys decides to run away back to Wales, it's his dog who goes with him, all the way from Blackheath to Paddington to Cardiff. For all his furry solidity though, in the book's final chapters, Rhys admits that Worthington might not have been real. There have been hints throughout – no-one else sees Worthington, he doesn't really eat anything, he's unable to fetch a ball – but we are not really sure. Either way, readers will feel as closely connected to Worthington as Rhys does.

Maintaining that ambivalence is no easy thing to do, and there were various different incarnations before Olivia settled on Rhys being the only one (nearly) to see Worthington. 'One idea I had was that everyone could see him and just kind of accepted that he was there. But then I realised that the thing is with Worthington, he's so real in Rhys' mind that he doesn't question it at all, because he needs Worthington to be real. He needs something to take away his pain, something to focus on that's not that; he's basically disassociating from reality, putting all his energy into this dog because it's easier for him than to face what's really happening.'

She hopes that young readers will decide for themselves just how real Worthington is, 'you can take from it what you want.' We can all be certain that Worthington helps Rhys come to terms with the changes in his life, the book as much about accepting change as it is with coping with grief, and the story ends on a positive note, with Rhys happier and more secure.

We talked about crying in public over the book – I'm not alone in this, it had the same effect on Nick Lake, HarperCollins publisher too. 'Hopefully though, it's happy tears at the end. I do hope that it leaves you feeling warm,' says Olivia. They were and it does.

**My Dog** by Olivia Wakeford, illustrated by David Litchfield, is published by HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0008658588, £7.99 pbk.

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



# I wish I'd written...



Adeola Sokunbi's book **Destiny Ink: Sleepover Surprise** won the Children's Fiction category of the 2025 IBC (Inclusive Books for Children) Book Awards.

**Adeola Sokunbi** chooses a book she wishes she'd written and illustrated

The story I wish I'd written, and illustrated, is **Hilda and Twig Hide from the Rain** by Luke Pearson. It's the perfect balance of whimsical, magical and adventurous – a balance that I hope to achieve one day in my books!

The story follows an adventurous girl named Hilda and her trusty deerfox, Twig, as they head off to explore the forest around them. But when their exploration is interrupted by a big storm, and they have to find shelter in a mysterious mound in the earth, Twig quickly realises that trouble is afoot. Each character is endearing and the story itself is wonderfully engaging, with numerous unexpected moments that kept me turning the pages. The humour is another highlight – and I particularly love Twig's witty remarks throughout that Hilda can't understand.

I love how energetic and expressive each panel is. The line art is stunning – even the way he drew the rain looks beautiful to me. And the use of colour throughout the graphic novel is very tasteful. Every spread is candy to my eyes! If I had one wish, it would be for the graphic novel to be longer because by the end, I was left wanting so much more.



**Hilda and Twig Hide from the Rain** by Luke Pearson is published by Flying Eye Books, 978-1838741563, £12.99 hbk.

## BfK reviews

### Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant

#### New Talent

##### Our Love

★★★★★

Fatima Ordinola, Post Wave, 36pp, 978-1836270089, £7.99 pbk  
Concluding with a glorious gatefold parade of animals and their babies, *Our Love* is a beautifully illustrated celebration of the love between parent and child. Each spread is given over to an illustration of a different animal grown-up and little one with a line of text that is both particular and general: we see a koala mum with a baby on her back, 'Our love can climb higher than any tree'; bears snuffling up berries with the text, 'Our love is sweeter than any breakfast'; a penguin family, 'Our love warms me on the coldest of days'. 'Love' books are always popular but this feels particularly charming. Fatima Ordinola's soft delicate illustrations in a palette of



pinks, blues and purples, have a real warmth while each animal duo or group project an enveloping sense of love, togetherness and family. The illustrations provide ample opportunities for book talk too as we meet a range of animals, from lions and elephants to birds, giraffes and tortoises, this is certain to be a favourite with all family members. **AR**

##### Doodle and Dot: The Trouble with Triangles

★★★★★

Lily Murray, ill. Bia Melo, Oxford University Press, 32pp, 9780192787699, £7.99 pbk

Doodle and Dot are the best of friends, bound by a shared love of creativity. But when an innocent session of shape-drawing takes an unexpected turn—summoning a hungry dinosaur, mischievous sharks,

and an entire invasion of triangle aliens—they find themselves in an artistic pickle. Can they sketch their way out of trouble?

Murray's text crackles with energy, capturing the spontaneous joy of creative play while seamlessly introducing early years readers to shape recognition. The narrative unfolds with a wonderful sense of improvisation, giving the impression that Doodle and Dot's world is being created in real time—just as unpredictable and thrilling as a child's creativity.

Melo's illustrations are a visual delight, her trademark folk-art influences and collage-style textures lending the pages a joyful sense of movement. The contrast between the sharp, angular triangles attacking and the rounded, organic forms of Doodle and Dot's creative world offers a subtle yet effective introduction to how shapes hold meaning—a clever visual play that enhances the book's exploration of artistic expression.

Fans of her Klaus Flugge Prize-shortlisted *The Dream Book* will recognise Melo's ability to infuse every spread with warmth, humour, and the playful chaos of imagination. Her linework and mixed-media approach ensures that you can see and feel the artist's touch on every page, making this book a delight not just to read

but to experience. The layering of media – graph paper backgrounds, crayon strokes, and cut-out shapes – perfectly mirrors the theme of unbridled artistic exploration.

This is more than just a fun-filled romp. It's a celebration of creative problem-solving, teamwork, and the idea that sometimes the best adventures come from unexpected mistakes. Young readers will relish the riot of shapes, colours, and action, while adults will appreciate the encouragement of open-ended play. A vibrant, dynamic picture book that proves creativity knows no limits—even when triangles get in the way! **MT**

##### Hannah and the Violin

★★★★★

Satoshi Kitamura, Scallywag Press, 36pp, 978-1915252821, £12.99 hbk

Satoshi Kitamura returns to favourite themes of music, creativity and the imagination in this new book. Hannah is alone in the garden and wishing for someone to play with when she spots a leaf on the ground. She decides it looks like a violin and that she will play it. As she starts to play her leaf-violin, extraordinary things happen: Pied Piper like she calls birds and insects to her – even the flowers seem to be turning their heads and



## 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, in Kent, Herts, Portsmouth and Hampshire, and Lusaka (Zambia) with 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.

**Tony Bradman** is an award-winning author of children's books, editor and reviewer

**Rebecca Butler** writes and lectures on children's literature.

**Jane Churchill** is a children's book consultant.

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

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

**Anne Horemans** is a secondary school librarian.

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

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

**Matthew Martin** is a primary school teacher.

**Sue McGonigle** is a Lecturer in Primary Education and Co-Creator of [www.lovelybooks.co.uk](http://www.lovelybooks.co.uk)

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

**David O'Rourke** is Programme Manager at charity **The Kids Network**

**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.

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

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

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



'an orchestra of clouds' arrive. As she plays on, 'Everything was singing and dancing to the music,' and Hannah leaves the earth to float in a hallmark-Kitamura cerulean sky surrounded by birds, flowers, musical notes and musical instruments. Only then does her mum, who has heard nothing, call her in for dinner, requesting a repeat performance after they've eaten. The story is rich with the elements that make Satoshi Kitamura's books such a pleasure to read and to share – imagination is given full rein but paired with a sophisticated comic simplicity. An equally simple but expressive range of gesture and expression bring the characters to life, while luscious landscapes and scenes leave readers visually enriched. A book to capture a child's imagination and encourage it to soar. **MMA**

### The Great Unicorn Rescue

★★★★

Diane Ewen, Macmillan Children's Books, 32pp, 9781035015962, £7.99 pbk

Louella and her friends live on the edge of an enchanted forest, where every child has their own magical unicorn, who even accompany them to school. Louella's unicorn is called Norrie whose special feature is to shine a bright beam of light into the forest whenever Louella is feeling scared of the dark. She knows that with Norrie by her side, she need never be afraid.

Louella's teacher is planning an adventure for the whole class to go and watch the fireflies, but when they are ready to go into the forest, Norrie is nowhere to be found. Louella begs for them to wait a little longer but becomes more and more worried the longer they wait. Where could she be? As she imagines her friend in trouble, can Louella overcome her fear of the dark forest and help find Norrie?

This bright and colourful picture book is a sweet, enchanting story of friendship and facing your fears. Each page is packed full of beautiful, illustrated details, from tiny fairies shooting stars through the sky or cheeky forest animals peeping out from behind a tree, giving young (and older) readers something new and exciting to find on each re-reading. Although award-winner Ewen has illustrated many acclaimed picture books previously, this is her first publication as author/illustrator

and this glorious and magical world surely has the potential to share more stories of other children and their special friends in the future. We know that unicorns are a firm favourite everywhere and these happy characters are guaranteed to capture many a young heart. **AH**

### Brenda's Revenge

★★★★

Sarah Tagholm, ill. Laurie Stansfield, Rocket Bird Books, 32pp, 978 1 9153 9519 1, £7.99 pbk

'Poor Brenda is just a cat.' So says the little girl narrator of this story. She's actually an extremely good-natured moggy that tolerates her owner giving her new hairdos, dressing her up in all manner of fancy attire and chastising her for terrible table manners and even for not concentrating on her schoolwork. Trampolining is considered a treat but only one of the two enjoys bouncing up and down. It's patently clear that Brenda is relieved when her owner announces that she's been invited to play with her new neighbour - the one she'd spied during the trampolining session.

Having been the domineering one in her relationship with her pet, this approach is unsuccessful when it comes to the girl next door. Being forced to don tight itchy garments, taste a terrible green magic flying potion, being pushed down the slide while sitting in a pushchair and getting a soaking while they play firefighting are surely experiences one is justified in complaining about, even if the grumbles are ignored by miss bossy boots neighbour.

Back in her own home the narrator complains to Brenda about the 'most dreadful time' she's had. Now Brenda is a pretty astute cat and grasps that some quick action on her part is required to sustain this new 'friendship' and thus obtain more time to pursue genuine moggy things.

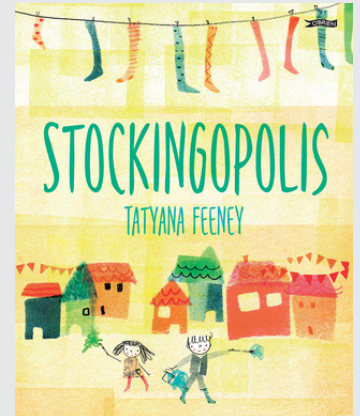
A thought-provoking tale of the importance of being able to see things from another's perspective - human and feline. The illustrations speak volumes and show the characters' real feelings which are often completely at odds with what's said in the text. **JB**

### Stockingopolis

★★★★

Tatyana Feeney, O'Brien Press, 32pp, 978-1788494991, £13.99 hbk

In Stockingopolis, it's not only the sheep who are grey, but the sea that surrounds it, and the factory that makes the town's famous stockings. As for the stockings, well, yes, they are grey too. Everyone seems quite happy with this, except for youngsters Ben and Lucy. They like colour – in fact they even like the rainy days because there's always the chance of a rainbow. Together they decide to make some colourful changes, applying their paints to the sheep in



the fields. The arrival of the rain and the town's other children ensures that soon, colour is everywhere. How will the world react to Stockingopolis' new brightly coloured stockings? Tatyana Feeney's loose scribbly, child-like style is perfect for a story that is delightfully silly but also a celebration of colour, painting, creativity and children's agency for change. Young readers will be inspired to pick up paints, knitting needles, or both, while a note at the end tells us that Stockingopolis is based on a real place, Balbriggan, which supplied stockings to people around the world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; Queen Victoria was a fan. A book to brighten up the greyest day. **LS**

### A Card for my Mum

★★★★

Bashahi Fraser, ill. Maanvi Kapur, Lantana, 9781836290087, £7.99 pbk

It is Mothering Sunday tomorrow and the little girl in this book searches the shops for a card with an image of her mother. Everywhere she looks she sees bright lights and gifts, candles and chocolate hearts. Thinking fondly of her own mother, she sees her with her gold bangles jingle jangling as she washes curry pots, and her silk kameez with its beautiful colours. Searching each and every card she sees, there is not a single image that depicts her own mother. She has money only enough to buy a card, not any of the luxurious gifts on display in each of the shops. Not downhearted she realises what she should do. The card that she draws is a wonderful likeness of her mother. The illustrator captures the little girl's sadness as her search bears no result and the quiet tenderness between mother and daughter, a joy that leaps from the pages. Just right for lauding mothers worldwide. **GB**

### Blue Monster

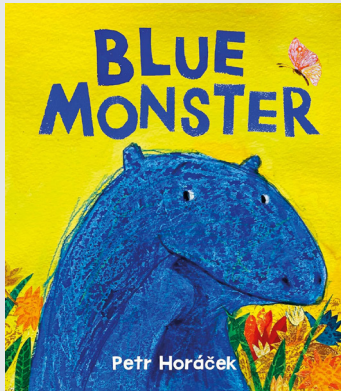
★★★★

Petr Horacek, Otter-Barry Books, 40pp, 9781915659385, £12.99 hbk  
Blue Monster swallows the friends who won't play with him or who challenge him in a series of



# reviews

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



confrontations. It is only because the friends - rabbits, a wolf and so on - emerge when he yawns that he has the chance to ease his guilt and apologise.

The history of children's books with a moral goes back a long way, and on the first reading this looks like just the latest exploration of the idea that apologies solve problems. A slower consideration of the text makes for a more carnival reading, a deeper understanding. Author/illustrator Petr Horáček builds at one level a predictable sequence story, but as the monster continues his journey, his lies and the enormity of his actions weigh on him. The young reader is challenged to look at deeper questions - and complex concepts: what is guilt? Why is the monster lying? We are in a world that readers of Jon Klassen will recognise; at once simple and complicated, the humour resides in the bizarre twists and turns: the monster simply eating the other inhabitants of the forest, the use of complicated language around lies and embarrassment.

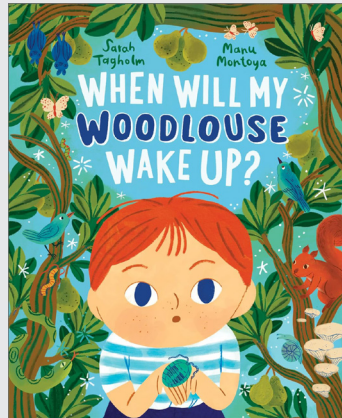
The artwork is wonderful, with chaotic scribbles adding to the colours of the animals and the sense of movement, and just the right amount of facial expression for a young reader to pore over, matching the text well. When the animals emerge from being swallowed by the monster 'They all looked a bit cross, which, to be fair, was quite understandable' - and the downturned mouths and sidelong glances catch the mood perfectly. **NS**

## When will my Woodlouse Wake up?

★★★★★

Sarah Tagholm, ill. Manyu Montoya, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978 1 83913 271 1, £12.99 hbk

Ross's woodlouse, impressively named Lord Jeffry the First, usually enjoys nibbling pears, rolling into a ball and wiggling his antennae, but one day he just won't wake up. Ross's older and wiser sister Fay tells him that this is because Lord Jeffry is dead. Traumatized, Ross starts obsessively checking on the family's other pets - two cats and a hamster



- to check they aren't also 'definitely, incredibly dead'. He plans to continue doing this 23 times a night! Fay, who shares a bedroom with him and wants some sleep decides Ross needs a visit to the library to find out a bit more about death and the librarian is more than happy to help.

This is a reassuring tale about coping with the death of a pet told from a young child's perspective. Different theories about what happens when you die are explored which may lead to far reaching discussions about reincarnation, how bodies can provide nutrients for the soil after death and the concept of heaven and an afterlife. The text and illustrations are warm and appealing.

With a lively and appealing style, this is an interesting picture book which additionally represents but does not foreground a diverse family unit (the illustrations indicate Ross has two mums of different ethnicities). **SMc**

## Coorie Doon: A Scottish Lullaby Story

★★★★★

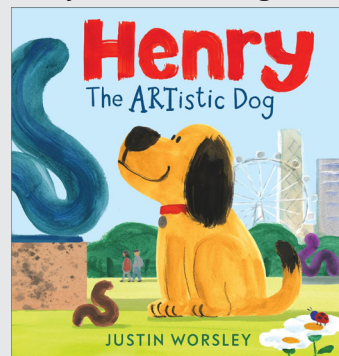
Jackie Kay, illus Jill Calder, Walker Books, 40pp, 9781529506662, £12.99 hbk

'Coorie doon, coorie doon - snuggle down', Shona's dad would sing her to sleep with these words, so soft and beguiling, sending Shona to her dreams. Here she meets her friends, follows Lassie the sheepdog to the fields, while in the world the moon is seen off by the stars, trees rustle and foxes prowl across the yard. Shona has grown up - now it is her turn to whisper 'coorie doon' to her father while outside in the night sky the moon still shines down following its phases. It is Shona's turn to sing traditional songs, and now that the moon is full - the horse moon - to wave to it as it waves back.

The subtitle of this picture book is **A Scottish Lullaby Story**, and this is the perfect description. As a lullaby and poem it does not need a narrative, rather the gentle hypnotic marshalling of words to create atmosphere and a particular experience. It is one that is timeless.

Just as a baby, a small child - even an older child is lulled by the flow of these gentle words and familiar rhymes, so an old man can be soothed by the same words, the same moon. Picture books bringing poetry to life are becoming familiar. They look to marry the best of the imagination, the most considered words, with illustration. This is a risky move - poetry, in principle, does not need a visual accompaniment. It could be a real failure. Here we have an example to cherish. The illustrations by Jill Calder are particularly striking bringing the perfect visual accompaniment to the poet's words. The distinction between the real world and the dream world is cleverly managed by the use of colour and line. We meet Shona and her father, bold, saturated colours, animated graphics while as Shona dreams the artwork becomes ethereal and soft pastels fill the page and images overlap to fill the spreads. Calder's art reflects the flow of the poet's imagination. Above all, Shona is not just a name, here she is presented as a real person both a child and then an adult. Jackie Kay's notes at the end invite the audience to think about their own experiences, a gentle nudge to parents and teachers. **FH**

## Henry: The Artistic Dog



★★★★★

Justin Worsley, Andersen Press, 32pp, 9781839135040, £12.99 hbk From toy designer to picture book creator, Worsley's debut is a tongue-in-cheek celebration of perseverance, creativity, and the subjective nature of art.

Henry is an artist. A master sculptor. A dog. Unfortunately, his work - crafted with dedication and, let's say, a very 'natural' medium - goes largely unappreciated. Undeterred by dismissive humans tossing his creations away, Henry continues to express himself, striving for recognition. And then, one day, something unexpected happens: an admirer finally takes notice. What follows is an unlikely artistic ascent, as Henry's work is transported from street pavements to a place of high prestige.

With its dry humour and subversive wit, Worsley's picture book operates on multiple levels. Young readers will delight in Henry's

antics, while adults will appreciate Worsley's playful nod to the art world—one that wryly acknowledges how perception and context can transform the overlooked into the celebrated. The visual humour is sharply executed, Henry's expressive determination counterpointed by the reactions of oblivious or disapproving passers-by. Personally, I was a fan of Henry's work being appreciated by the smaller inhabitants of this tale. Worsley's illustrations bring an irresistible energy to Henry's creative process, reinforcing the absurdity and sincerity of his artistic mission.

Much like its titular protagonist, this book is unafraid to push boundaries, inviting discussion on the nature of creativity, persistence, and artistic value. A bold and irreverent debut, Henry proves that inspiration can come from the most unexpected places - and that every artist, no matter how unconventional, deserves their moment to shine. **MT**

## Cake for Everyone

★★★★★

Thé Tjong-Khing, Gecko Press, 32pp, 9781776575930, £12.99 hbk

The author/illustrator, Thé Tjong-Khing, has won the **Max Veltiuis Prize**, and this is a book in the same captivating world between animal and human activity as Veltiuis' charming *Frog in Love*, *Frog and the Birdsong* etc - with the exception that this is a wordless book with a host of characters. The reader is invited to explore a world in miniature, full of playful detail, following an eagle's dastardly (and unsuccessful) attempt to steal the picnic blanket from a group of animals out to enjoy a meal outdoors. As the eagle flies off with their picnic, the stork makes the eagle let go of the blanket scattering everything over a very varied landscape - and this is where the fun really starts.

Where did the cake go when it fell? What will the snake do with the plant pot? Why does the gorilla (yes, there was a gorilla in the early pictures) look sad later on? Follow the football or the sword, count the mice, tell us about how (and why) the stork is feted as the hero at the end... My current favourite subplot has to be the beautifully sinuous snake who finds the fez with a feather in it, and loves to look at itself in the mirror the ant finds; this alone tells you the complex actions to be discovered in this glorious puzzle of a book - and can you spot the snake in the final party? It took me a while!

This is an addictive read whether shared by an adult, or by a group of children, or simply explored by a child mesmerised by all the different storylines that appear and disappear.

**Cake for Everyone** really is a book for everyone: it captivated this reviewer and will equally delight an inquisitive 3-year-old! **NS**



## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior

**The Endless Sea**

★★★★★

Chi Thai, ill. Linh Dao, Walker Studio, 40pp, 9781529516487, £12.99 hbk

Some stories demand to be told - not just for those who lived them but for the generations that follow. This is one such story. Inspired by Thai's own childhood experiences as a refugee from Vietnam, this deeply personal picture book follows a young girl and her family as they embark on a perilous journey across the sea, searching for safety, survival, and a new home.

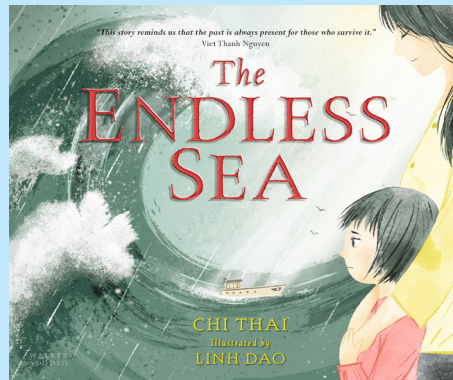
Narrated through the eyes of a child born after the war but still marked by its aftermath, the story captures the fear, uncertainty, and resilience of displacement. The journey is filled with quiet moments of tension - nights spent hiding in silence, the oppressive closeness of an overcrowded boat, the gnawing hunger as supplies dwindle. Thai's text is spare yet powerful, each word carrying the weight of memory, loss, and hope. The language is deeply evocative, its understated simplicity heightening the emotional impact.

Dao's illustrations amplify this storytelling with striking visual contrasts. The opening pages, rooted in earthy tones, depict life in a village 'a tiger's whisker away from the jungle' - a fragile sense of belonging overshadowed by the lingering consequences of war. As the family's journey begins, darkness and vast expanses of water dominate the pages, mirroring the immensity of the unknown. The use of dark, tonal colours and space is particularly effective, at times making the characters seem almost swallowed by the endless sea. Yet these moments pass.

After so much uncertainty comes a moment of stillness. The girl, now safe, lies in bed with her cat, a 'whisker away from my new home.' The story that began with fear ends with warmth, reflecting the long journey from loss to belonging. The endpapers, too, quietly enclose the narrative with family photographs—a tender reminder that memories endure, even as life moves forward.

This is more than a refugee story - it is a testament to survival, resilience, and the unbreakable bond of family. In a world where forced displacement is an ever-present reality,

this book carries an urgent, timeless relevance. A profoundly moving, beautifully illustrated narrative that lingers long after the final page. MT

**Ending the silence**

Chi Thai, film-maker, talks about her book **The Endless Sea**, which tells the true story of her childhood as a refugee at the end of the Vietnam war.

Some stories live in our bones, carried in our blood. **The Endless Sea** is one of those stories for me. It's the first story I remember being told, passed down so many times that it almost feels like it wrote itself—flowing from my childhood memories, down my arm, through my fingers, and finally onto the page. It is the story of my family's refugee journey.

People often ask why I wrote it. The truth is, for much of my life, I didn't think about putting our story into words. I knew the facts - how my family fled our tiny village, risking everything - but I hadn't considered writing them down. It wasn't until I became a mother that I realized something was missing. I had nothing tangible to share with my young daughter that could explain the journey we had taken and why. There was only silence - an emptiness waiting to be filled.

That emptiness lingered, calling to me. I thought about it often but wasn't ready to act.

Then, while working with Nicola Davies and Laura Carlin on adapting their perfect picture book, **The Promise**, into a BBC animation, something shifted. I felt ready and had become the person I needed to be to tell this story. I scribbled down the first draft, then sat with my mother to make sure I had the details right. Though I had heard the story countless times, I questioned myself—so much of it had become a memory of a memory as I grew from child to adult.

In many ways, I wrote **The Endless Sea** for my younger self. A story to make sense of what my family endured. A way to hold together the vast history of conflict and political forces that threw us - and so many others - into turmoil, forcing us to take unimaginable risks.

As I write this for **Books for Keeps**, we stand on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. When my family stepped onto that boat, we were four among more than six million refugees worldwide. Today, over 110 million people are forcibly displaced, including more than 36 million refugees. The numbers are staggering, but they are not just statistics—they are stories, lives, and families searching for safety. Many are not as lucky as our family was.

That is why **The Endless Sea** feels more relevant than ever. It is a story for anyone and everyone who has ever been forced to leave their home in search of safety.

**Chi Thai** is a British Vietnamese independent filmmaker. She is a BIFA-nominated producer and a Screen International Star of Tomorrow. She directed and produced the short film adaptation of award-winning Walker Books title **The Promise** by Nicola Davies and Laura Carlin. Her production company, **Last Conker**, was awarded the BFI Vision Award in 2020–22 and produces films that unravel from the complex web of diaspora. She produced the two-time SXSW23 Grand Jury winning film, **Raging Grace**. Her latest work, **Lullaby**, is a deeply personal short film inspired by her refugee crossing. It serves as a creative counterpart to her debut picture book, **The Endless Sea**. Both works explore themes of resilience and hope. **The Endless Sea** is Chi's debut picture book.

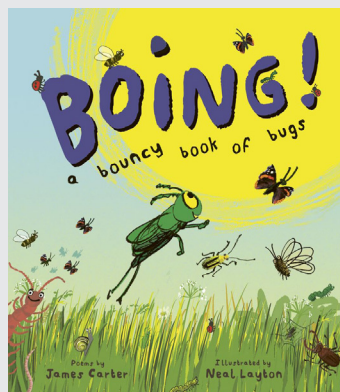
**Boing! A bouncy book of bugs**

★★★★★

James Carter, illus Neil Layton, Otter-Barry Books, 32pp, 9781915659507, £12.99 hbk

'Hey, little bug...' James Carter addresses a bug, his poem neatly fitting into Neil Layton's image of a bug. Surrounding this 'bug' are a variety of species cheerfully waving at the spectator while in an attractive box at the bottom of the page Carter explains with commendable brevity what a bug is; and there is a picture to illustrate this. Though this is not the opening poem of this lively picture book collection, which aims to marry lively verse with facts to engage the very young, it neatly characterises the approach of the poet and the illustrator.

Information books aimed at Early Years and KS1 look to present the facts in a very straightforward concise



format, sometimes enlivened by elements of paper engineering. Here Carter - one of the most established poets for the young - takes a more novel approach; he combines his lively, humorous, punchy verses with

carefully selected facts. The whole is brought together by Neil Layton's energetic, amusing illustrations. A poet deals in words - so overlaying the facts and the illustrations is the vocabulary. Words spin out - a stampede of millipedes, a flickery flame - rhyme and rhythm, alliteration and acrostics; all to attract the ear and the attention. But just in case you are missing the point, there are those pop-out facts where you can learn about spiders, dung beetles, moths, even tardigrades. Neil Layton's illustrations provide the perfect match. The bright saturated colours and energetic images capture the lively bugs being described. These are not photographic representations; they are designed to give the twenty-four creatures presented by Carter, characters. Combined, the verses, the facts, the visuals, really do 'boing' off the page. This would be ideal shared within a classroom. FH

**Squeak! Squawk! Roar!**

★★★★★

Kate Williams, ill. Hannah Asen, Otter-Barry, 96pp, 9781915659552, £8.99 pbk

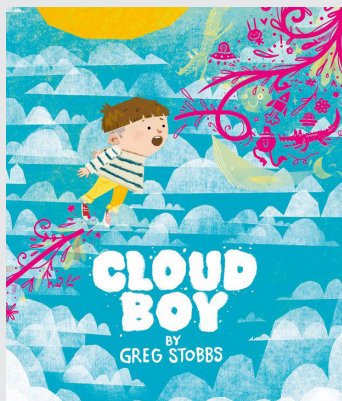
Kate Williams' poems have been appearing in children's anthologies for some years and this is her first collection. It's very good value, with over ninety pages of poems about animals of many shapes, habitats and characters, with a lot of appeal to KS2 children and more than a few poems that might go down well with younger ones. Often the poems home in on personality traits. The elephant sulks because he doesn't have the giraffe's elegance. The hippo's not keen on getting clean. In one poem, we observe how a cat approaches life and, in the next, a dog tells us what he thinks of that. Sometimes character is the basis of



# reviews

## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior

word play. The 'chimpantease' who throws bananas. The rhinoceros who is 'crosseros.' The wombat who is 'no bat' (one I particularly like). And the alliterative lion who lazily lounges, languidly looking at you and licking his lips. There's plenty of music in the rhymes and the occasional invitation to bop with the rabbits or 'step, hop, wobble, skid' with the penguins. There are riddles, too, but not too challenging. Then, there are poems that step away from the humour and, even at a relatively simple level, provoke deeper thought. Why is a mouse in the meadow a charming sight and in the larder really alarming? We follow a hedgehog as he navigates the obstacle course we have made of his nocturnal search for food. We learn why an elephant insistently trumpets 'Mine!' about his tusks. This is an attractive collection, tailored craftily for its audience, which should be enjoyed both by the individual young poetaster and in the classroom, especially if delivered by the poet herself on her school visits. Hannah Asen's illustrations strike exactly the right note. **CB**



### Cloud Boy

★★★★

Greg Stobbs, Oxford Children's Books, 32pp, 978-1382054904, £7.99 pbk

Any young person who struggles to keep their feet on the ground will identify with Bobby, the star of Greg Stobbs' picturebook **Cloud Boy**. Bobby tries his best to pay attention but there are always so many things to distract him, a snail, an interesting smell, birdsong ... As his attention wanders, we see him start to float away, a thread of fluorescent pink tracing out his path into the sky. His friends want to help and find a way of keeping him tethered to the ground, but without his soaring imagination, Bobby realises he's just not himself. A new way of living is worked out, with Bobby's family letting their imaginations run free sometimes too. This is a clever and positive depiction of neurodivergence, story and images (that wonderful pink thread) making it clear and accessible

to even the youngest readers, while everyone can learn lessons from Bobby's family's response. A welcome exploration of the importance of making room for those whose minds work differently. **MMA**

### Eli and the Uncles

★★★★

Jehan Madhani, ill. Rashin Kheiriyeh, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 5295 2091 0, £12.99 hbk

Every year Eli's mum drops him off to the abode of his eight uncles and there he spends the whole day. Each of the uncles is tall but each is taller than the previous one and each has a beard, a very stylish one.

There's Uncle Mahmoud who regales Eli with wonderful stories. Uncle Salim cooks and serves up all Eli's favourite foods. Uncle Hanif and Uncle Aman entertain the boy with their singing and dancing respectively whereas Uncle Riz's way of entertaining is to tell jokes. Uncle Farouk and Uncle Aziz are constantly arguing either with each other or everyone else. That leaves Uncle Nooru, whom Eli dubs 'a world champion nap-taker'. Following all this entertaining, everybody sits down at a very large table to eat dinner together. Then with the washing up completed Eli's mum comes to pick him up. The process of saying goodbye and goodnight to his uncles is rather a protracted business as Eli enjoys each uncle's beard be it slippery with oil (Uncle Mahmoud), long and curly, scratchy, springy, puffy like a pillow soft and woolly; then last of all, thick and bristly just like a bear. Finally Eli is carried to the car and as Mum drives the lad home he dreams of his eight uncles and 'eight especially elegant beards.'

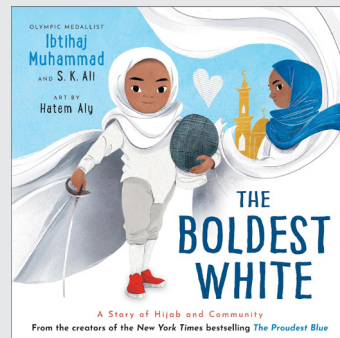
Despite the wealth of description, the narrative is not particularly engaging, rather it lists each uncle's interest. It's the vibrantly coloured, quirky illustrations that animate each uncle; there's Uncle Aziz in his sports gear and Uncle Aman sporting a cowboy hat and boots for instance. **JB**

### The Boldest White

★★★★

Ibtihaj Muhammad & S.K.Ali, ill. Hatem Aly, Andersen Press, 32pp, £12.99, hbk

Faizah loves going to the mosque, dressed like everyone else she feels that she fits right in. Faizah feels the same when she goes to fencing classes. Once more she is covered head to toe in her white kit and helmet, the same as everyone else. Faizah is getting better and better at fencing, just like her sister Asiya who is taking part in a tournament soon. The coach wants Faizah to take part in the tournament too, but is she brave enough? We watch as Faizah wrestles with the dilemma of whether to take



part or not eventually discovering that through helping others she becomes braver and more confident herself.

As well as an exploration of bravery this story is also a celebration of community and pride, both in being part of a team and in wearing the hijab to visibly represent her religion. The writer, Ibtihaj Muhammad, holds an Olympic medal in fencing. See the author's note at the back of the book which describes her experiences both in sport and growing up as one of only a few young Muslims in her town.

With a lively and engaging writing style and delightful illustrations this is an enjoyable read. It is third in the series from the team who created acclaimed books **The Proudest Blue** and **The Kindest Red**. **SMC**



### Fluffy, Flying Seed (Start Small, Think Big)

★★★★★

Mary Auld, ill. Dawn Cooper, Mama Makes Books, 20pp, 9781916780071, £10.99, hbk

I can vividly remember decades ago, when I was about 8 years old, setting off on exciting bike rides with my younger, very fair-haired brother. Our first stop would be the end of our road where a patch of grass, usually covered in dandelions, was always slightly overgrown. We would pick these flowers when they were dandelion clocks and eagerly blow on them whilst shouting out the time to each other! I can remember the messy milk-like juice on our hands too!

This beautifully produced book in the successful 'Start Small. Think Big' series captures the wonder and curiosity of young children

perfectly. It traces the life cycle of a dandelion and covers topics such as germination and photosynthesis. It is helpful that there are two levels of text throughout the hardback: the easier narrative is printed in bold at the top of each page with the more advanced text below. The book is full of interesting snippets of information such as, 'The dandelion's leaf shape gives it its name - it comes from 'dent-de-lion', French for lion's tooth' [p.6]. There are useful details such as the pappus being like a parachute to transport the seed away to be planted somewhere else [p.15].

The gorgeous illustrations work well with the text, and the diagram of the dandelion [p.7] as it starts to flower is very clear. One of the highlights of the book is the huge, fold-out map at the end of the volume. It shows a large world map with areas indicated where the dandelion grows. In addition, there are some difficult scientific terms explained for the older reader. Words such as 'apomixis' and 'taraxacologists' are new to me, and I am sure will delight the inquisitive youngster.

Hats off to the team who created this attractive hardback which includes a die-cut, textured cover and even a perfect I-Spy game! I am already on the lookout for other titles in this original series and recommend it for all school/local libraries as well as the home. **JS**



### Wrong Time Rooster

★★★★★

Michael Parkin, Flying Eye Books, 32pp, 9781838742249, £12.99 hbk

A new arrival at the farm means that Farmer Tony and the farm animals have to pull together, especially since Ronnie, the new rooster, can't tell the time. It turns out that no-one has ever taught Ronnie to tell the time, and the farmer is forever being disturbed by Ronnie's cock-a-doodle-doing, and the chorus of farm animals repeating, 'Wrong time rooster.' Slapstick moments are all very well, but Ronnie is worried that his past bad experiences of crowing at the wrong time are repeating, and that



## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

he will be packed off again to another farm. Farmer Tony's compassionate approach saves Ronnie from being sent away – and (of course) he learns to tell the time with the help of his new friends. Some quick examples of clock time show him being helped – and would also provide a young reader with some examples to help them.

This is a brightly coloured almost cartoon version of a farm, but the author-illustrator draws us beyond the immediate into thinking about poor Ronnie's predicament: we see him 'too worried to crow,' gazing into the night sky, and our hearts go out to him. It's a shame that the alliteration – and perhaps a desire for a wider readership -- gives us a rooster instead of a cockerel, but this is a minor quibble. Key Stage 1 in the current National Curriculum in England requires that pupils should 'tell the time to the hour and half past the hour and draw the hands on a clock face to show these times,' and this book would fit well into younger children being introduced to clock time. There is a bigger debate about whether this remains an important part of maths in Primary schooling, but nevertheless this goggle-eyed cockerel and his amusing farmyard companions would be a fun addition to the book corner and a reminder that kindness is important whatever the time! **NS**



### The Playdate

★★★★

Uje Brandelius, ill. Clara Dackenberg, Lantana, 32pp, 978 1 8362 9017 9, £7.99 pbk

Showing not telling is key in this story wherein a little girl tells of her visit with her mum to Henry Henriksson's house. Henry and his mother live right on the other side of town, which involves journeying by bus, underground and on foot. On the way, the little girl spies a robot that she really really wants in a toy shop window, but knowing it's far too expensive, she keeps quiet.

Once they arrive, the girl narrator and Henry start playing together; they chase the dog, enjoy a game of hide-and-seek, imagine being kings and servants with Henry as servant, and do some den building. Come lunch time, despite an offer to join Henry and his mother for spaghetti bolognese, the girl and her Mum sit and eat the sandwiches they've brought.

After lunch Henry wants to play computer games and leaves the girl to play chase with Felix the dog. Suddenly it runs off into a room she hasn't been in before and there sitting atop a huge bag of toys is a robot exactly like the one she wants more than anything in the world.

When Henry's mum calls out the two children come back together, eat some fruit and watch a film. Come time to leave, the little girl suggests that perhaps Henry might come and play at her house some time to which she receives a non-committal response. On the journey home the little girl says that she really enjoyed playing with Henry, who is now her best friend. Then she remembers what she's done: 'a really awful terrible thing' she calls it, beginning to cry as she shows her Mum the contents of her backpack. Mum treats the revelation very calmly, puts the object on a shelf and says she will return it the following week.

What is never said is that the little girl's mother is the cleaner for Henry's mother and the two families live very different lives. Essentially the book is a comment on class divide and our throw away society – a sociology lesson for young audiences; but what those around the age of the child protagonists will make of it I'm not sure. There's assuredly plenty to discuss in a classroom. **JB**



### We are Definitely Human

★★★★

X.Fang, Pushkin Children's Books, 48pp, 9781782695172, £12.99, hbk

There is a gripping and dramatic opening to this picture book in both the text: 'It was midnight when something crashed outside Mr and Mrs Li's house,' and the first illustration of a bright pink flying saucer making its descent. Investigating, Mr Li discovers three strange looking blue individuals who are keen to declare that they are definitely human, which even the youngest readers will quickly spot they are obviously not.

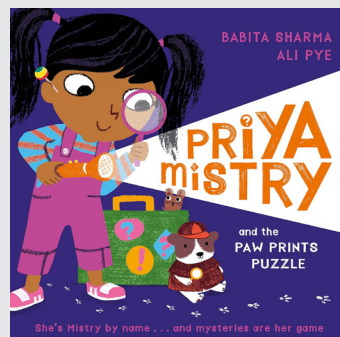
The story develops with Mr Li and his family and later the whole neighbourhood helping the strange

visitors fix their 'car' and subtly teaching them about the very best of humans in particular their ability to help others and have fun too.

This is a story about kindness and open-mindedness. There is humour too – in both the story and the illustrations with the aliens bizarre sleeping arrangements, and occupations which include 'wearing hat' and their declaration they are from 'Europe.'

The artwork is very striking with a muted palette for the human world – indigo for nighttime, shades of brown for daytime contrasted with fluorescent pinks and blues for the aliens.

A second successful picturebook from award winning American author/illustrator of *The Dim Sum Palace*. **SMC**



### Priya Mistry and the Paw Prints Puzzle

★★★★

Babita Sharma, ill. Ali Pye, Orchard, 978 1 40836 630 1, £12.99, hbk

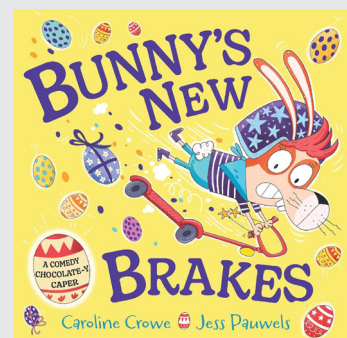
Priya is used to helping her parents run their shop, sweeping floors, refilling sweet jars and ensuring everywhere is clean and tidy. One morning after her chores completed, she spots something unusual. Footprints? Tiny PAWprints, tracking across the floor. Hmmmm. Time to investigate. From under her bed she retrieves her MISSION KIT, taking out her magnifying glass, torch and notebook ready to solve the mystery. Solving it is not straight forward, but we are absorbed in her efforts as finally she lays a trap for the flock of fairies/ hungry miniature dragon. In the depths of night her mystery is solved.. first noted by hearing a loud, high-pitched BURRRRRRP! Readers will laugh aloud as Priya announces, "Mission accomplished!" The artwork adds much to the telling of this tale, Priya herself portrayed as a feisty youngster, the night-time pages glowering in the dead of night. **GB**

### Bunny's New Brakes

★★★★

Caroline Crowe, ill. Jess Pauwels, Faber, 978 0 571 38317 7, £7.99, pbk

Having read through this hilarious rhyming tale at speed to find out what happens, readers will want to turn back to the first page and take each spread at a time, absorbing the artwork as it shows all the action. Bunnies are quiet, gentle creatures, and are going about their



preparations for Easter celebrations with concentration and determination, except for Blaze. Blaze is unlike other bunnies. What she likes is travelling fast upon her scooter, leaving behind her havoc and mayhem. Can Blaze restore peace amongst her community, having wrecked all their preparations, smashing the stalls as well as all their chocolate eggs? Well, yes Blaze can. Even though she has to work throughout the night to do so. Great detail is packed into the illustrations, each rabbit carrying its own character, emotions and intent. One to enjoy many times, especially over the Easter period. **GB**



### Detective Stanley and the Mystery at the Museum

★★★★

Hannah Tunnicliffe, ill. Erica Harrison, Flying Eye Books, 64pp, 9781838742119, £7.99 pbk

Newly retired Detective Stanley is looking forward to a relaxing day ahead, now he has hung up his crime-fighting hat for good, but he has barely sat down to eat his pancake breakfast, when he receives a letter from the Director of the Narlybone Museum. There has been a break in at the museum and he is the only detective smart enough to help them. Immediately flattered, Stanley rises to the request and rushes over to the museum, only to find that nothing actually appears to have been taken. Just as he is starting to get a whiff of something suspicious (there's a clue there...), he is interrupted by Superintendent Rhino stomping into the museum to take charge. A sudden



## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

twist makes Stanley the prime suspect, but he uses the time he is locked up to figure out who the real suspect is and returns to the museum to reveal the true villain in a dramatic Poirot-esque denouement. Another case closed for Detective Stanley, who can now return to his retirement and his pancakes, at least until the next time.

The level of detail in this clever debut graphic novel is astounding. Each page has so much going on, both in its pictures and clever puns and I particularly loved the inside of Narlybone prison, with its view into each inmates' cell and the hilarious museum cleaning duo. The artist whose painting is at the centre of the heist has been cleverly renamed in this story as Bleat Mondrian and there is a special case file at the back of the book with details of the actual artist on whom he is based, Piet Mondrian, who is known for his use of bright primary block colours and bold lines, used particularly in the end papers by illustrator Harrison. Although aimed at a younger audience, there is much for slightly older readers to enjoy too. A fun mystery adventure with ingenious plot twists, colourful, clever illustrations and a shiny gold cover. What's not to like? AH



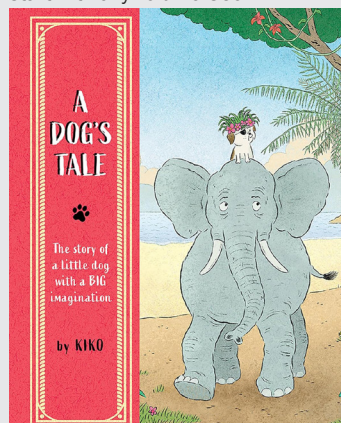
**Guardians of the New Moon**  
Ming and Miaow's Great Race  
978-1788957373  
**The Year of the Rat**  
978-1788957380

★★★★

Eric Huang, ill Phùng Nguyễn Quang, Little Tiger Press, 160pp, £6.99 pbk

A lively, highly illustrated new series which introduces young readers to a host of gods, goddesses and mythological creatures from Ancient Chinese folklore. This will be a real asset when studying the Chinese New Year Festival since each book concludes with a really useful glossary, a zodiac calendar and

more information about each of the mythological characters featured. But these attractive little books will also be enjoyed for their fast-paced action, intriguing characters and humour. The first book explains how the New Year Festival started. The Jade Emperor having finished creating the world was bored, but then he spots Miaow the temple cat chasing the rat Su and this inspires him to arrange a great race between all the animals on Earth, with the prize being that the fastest 12 will each have a Lunar Year named after them. Both Miaow and Su join in and meet Ming a 9-tailed elemental fox who can transform into a girl. Miaow and Ming form a bond during the exciting race, despite being polar opposites in character. Although neither win one of the 12 places, the Jade Emperor has noticed their courage and compassion and offers them the posts of Guardians of the New Moon. They have to ensure that each New Year Festival goes well. The inaugural celebration is the Year of The Rat and this is the subject of book two. The rat is none other than Su, who cheated Miaow on her way to victory. Old enmities and causing offence to a Sea Goddess would seem to have doomed The Year of the Rat to disaster, but the strong team of Miaow and Ming are determined to succeed. Young readers will be keen to meet each New Year creature as the series progresses and a clever Prologue ensures that a reader could start with any volume. JCO



**A Dog's Tale: The Story of a Little Dog with a Big Imagination**

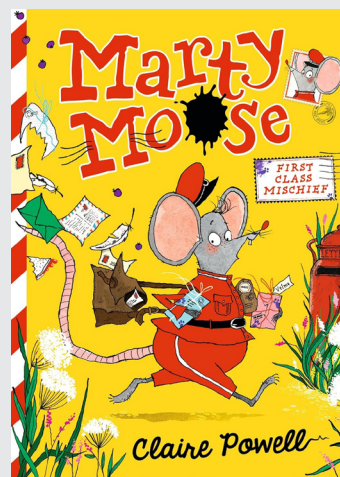
★★★★★

Kiko, Post Wave Children's Books, 32pp, 9781836270102, £12.99 hbk With the spirit of an explorer and the heart of a dreamer, One-Eyed Patch is not just any ordinary pug - he is an adventurer of the high seas, a fearless rat-catcher (even more impressive when you see how big those rats are!), and a legend in the making. At least, that's how he tells it. Kiko's narrative is a playful and exuberant journey into the boundless world of imagination, where the everyday transforms into the extraordinary.

Lost at sea after a storm, Patch is saved by a 'kind soul', a great whale who shares the secrets of the deep. From there, he finds himself in a kingdom of 'towering green castles', playing alongside its joyful inhabitants before embarking on yet another daring escape - this time by air in what is a vibrant, richly colourful spread of birds taking flight carrying one pug in a basket. But as the adventure reaches its climax, a familiar voice calls him back - his beloved owner, Lily, gently grounding him from his larger-than-life daydreams. Keen observers will note in her room subtle nods to Patch's dream-encounters - a little addition that I loved.

Kiko's artwork is brimming with energy, its graphic-novel-inspired compositions lending momentum to Patch's wild storytelling. There's a touch of Tintin in the way the illustrations embrace movement, colour, and a cinematic sense of framing, reinforcing the thrill of discovery at every turn. The visual storytelling expertly shifts between Patch's imagined feats and his more modest reality, inviting readers to delight in the unreliable narration of a dog who dreams BIG.

This is a book that revels in the power of storytelling and self-invention. For readers who love a tall tale (or a wagging one), **A Dog's Tale** is a joyful reminder that sometimes the best adventures exist in the space between reality and imagination. MT



**Marty Moose: First Class Mischief**

★★★★

Claire Powell, 153pp, Walker Books, 9781529524031, £6.99 pbk Marty Moose is a mouse and, in this eye-catching, graphic series-opener, he enthusiastically begins his new job delivering post to all of his animal neighbours.

When he was born, a splodge of ink meant that Marty Moose was mistakenly registered as Marty Moose. Such a mistake is not surprising given the lively, chaotic nature of Marty's family mouse hole. With such a large number of brothers and sisters, leading such busy lives, it is hard for Marty to make himself

heard. His loving Dad makes Marty thoughtful meals but forgets how much he hates stilton, and, even when Marty makes his own snacks, they are snaffled by one of his older, hungrier brothers.

His new role at the postal service is a brilliant opportunity for Marty to strike out for some independence and to adventure beyond his frenetic home. He is not the first member of the family to take on such a role, and he is hopeful that, one day, he can become as impressive a post mouse as his famous Great Aunt Ada, who inspires Marty to remember that he can be just as brave as all the other animals, despite his size.

Sadly for Marty, the delivery service is much harder than he was expecting, and some of his new colleagues are less than pleased to see him - eager to avoid any competition for the coveted employee-of-the-month slot.

For his first delivery, he is charged with travelling deep into a maze of burrows, and he soon finds himself helplessly lost. Fortunately, he bumps into a totally doolally rabbit called Nibbles, who has limitless enthusiasm, a trumpet in her tail, and an inexplicable hatred of potatoes.

Nibbles has a number of irritating habits: she does not handle the post with care, and she calls Marty charmless names like Mousy Moomoo or Farty Moose. However, she is relentlessly positive and fun-seeking and she successfully guides Marty through the burrows. With his helpful new companion hopping by his side, Marty is ready to take on the next deliveries. Unfortunately, though, the next address to visit is even worse...Marty's first day does not get any easier!

Marty is a very endearing companion for young readers. He squeaks endearing proclamations like 'Flummoxing fluffballs,' 'Pongy puddles,' and 'Walloping whistles,' that show his stoic and cheery attitude, and he is determined to complete his tasks, no matter how challenging.

His most difficult mission of all is the swampy dwelling of two hideous, curmudgeonly toads, whose violent and foul-mouthed domestic dispute is reminiscent of Dahl's iconic Mr and Mrs Twit. A hilariously fatulent pheasant adds further comedy to an otherwise modest number of characters, with Nibbles and Marty playing out a two-hander for much of the story.

The book's finest quality is Powell's gorgeous, original illustrations, which dominate every page. The exclusively red and black palette is striking and every picture is bursting with action and energy, brilliantly bringing the terrible toads and farting pheasants to life with enough detail to entice children back to repeated readings. Though it is a simple story, this opening episode offers enough fun and friendliness to suggest that Marty Moose may have more deliveries to make in the future. SD



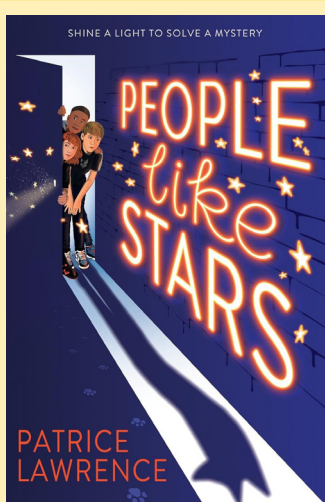
## Ed's Choice

### People Like Stars

★★★★★

Patrice Lawrence, Scholastic, 304pp, 9780702315640, £7.99 pbk  
In *People Like Stars* we hear the stories of three very different children. Ayrton is moving to a new town and a new school with all that entails – and his life is still completely overshadowed by something that happened to him as a baby. He meets Stanley who has an annoying twin brother and a whole lot of family secrets he wants to know more about. In another part of town and after years of temporary accommodation, Sen and her mum may have finally found a permanent home in the house of a mysterious and secretive artist. The plot is centred around the children's intertwined stories and how they eventually untangle the truth of their histories and their present, creating a future that's full of hope and friendship.

This book is a brilliant and real portrayal of modern families in all their forms and shows the complexity of familial relationships and the difficulties that occur when secrets become lies. It also addresses real issues faced by children in today's school system where they face poverty prejudice and discrimination from the very place that should be opening up their lives and their futures. Lawrence's skill though is in weaving these issues and reality through a fabulous mystery plot where the clues, the discoveries and the action drive the story forward. We are aware of the difficulties and



the unjustness, and they are fully explored but the rounded characters and the central mystery make this an exciting adventure. The story is told from the point of view of each of the children in turn – each chapter is Ayrton, Stanley or Sen – which gives the whole novel a very filmic quality as you cut from scene to scene and are immersed in the different worlds of each of the children.

Lawrence has a skill for creating interesting and three-dimensional characters that defy the norms of literature and in this novel there are so many. I particularly liked the artist, Vixen, who is most definitely a departure from the usual depictions of older women characters, but whose work, actions and tattoos are the key to the whole mystery!

This is a compelling and wholly enjoyable read with so much depth and interest for modern children. **LJS**

### Blitz: One Family's War

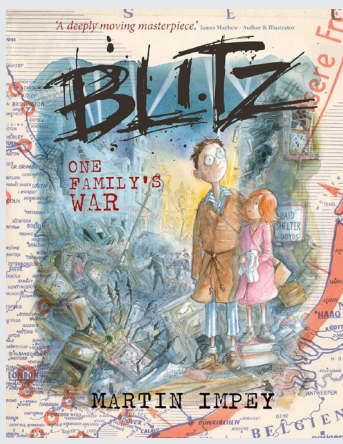
★★★★★

Martin Impey, Harbour Moon Publishing, 120pp, 9781916062528, £19.99, hbk

*Blitz* tells the story of an ordinary family living happily in the East End as war breaks out in 1939. Their world is quickly turned upside down as Dad leaves to fight, there are air raids and nights spent sheltering from the bombing in underground stations, emerging to find destruction the following morning, and experiencing loss and grief.

The story focuses on the home front, but readers also gain glimpses of the broader theatre of war as we learn about the Dunkirk evacuations and a little of the experience of soldiers through dad's letters home. We even meet Churchill on a brief tour of the bomb-damaged East End.

The design of this large-scale graphic book is striking. The watercolour illustrations are sensitive, full of warmth, detail and drama

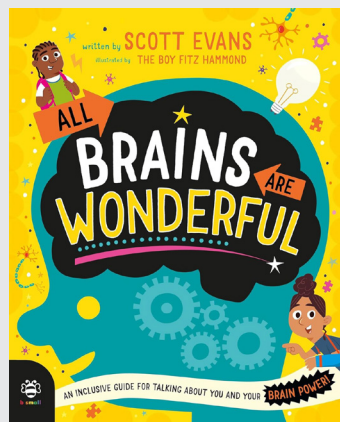


and occasionally a little humour too. Although the pictures do most of the storytelling, there are some memorable and moving lines such as 'the sky cried with us,' when dad decides he must leave and 'our lives seemed to be lived in layers,'

describing nights spent underground in air raid shelters. The difficulty decisions adults were forced to make is explored, including Dad pondering on whether to leave his family and join up and Mum, on whether to send her older children away to safety. The font style chosen evokes the era, resembling an old typewriter with a more handwritten style used for dad's letters home and a dramatic font for radio announcements.

This is a work of fiction, but it was inspired by childhood stories about the author's grandparents whose house was destroyed in bombing. Some original documents are included such as a warden's report form at the back of the book.

Very moving, powerful and visually stunning, this book would provide an important insight into the experience of city children during the Second World War for present day children. It would also have relevance to all children experiencing or hearing about conflicts today. A follow up book is planned focused on the evacuation experience. Highly recommended. **SMC**



### All Brains Are Wonderful

★★★★★

Scott Evans, illus The Boy Fitz Hammond, b small, 36pp, 978-1916851245, £9.99 hbk

Written by teacher Scott Evans with expert input from neuroscientist Dr Rachel Williams, this is both a fascinating and accessible guide to the anatomy of the brain, and empathetic introduction to different forms of neurodiversity; the authors even manage to include a section with advice on caring for your own mental health and using your brain in ways that might improve the world. Comprehensive then and highly useful.

Section one, the science, first puts everything in context in an intriguing way for young people, looking at brain size (from whale to ant) and the relationship between size and smartness (none). Brightly illustrated pages show the development of the human brain, from fertilisation of the egg onwards, and provide diagrams

to explain how different parts of the brain do different things. There's more on using your brain at this point too, from learning to be your own person, to highlighting neuroplasticity and the opportunities to keep learning throughout your life.

The message that all brains are different and equally wonderful, comes through strongly throughout but particularly in the section called 'society', which looks at neurodiversity and the many different forms. This highlights attitudes past and present, and makes clear, positive suggestions as to how best to respond to those who, like Evans himself, are neurodivergent, as well as things to bear in mind if you are yourself.

There are lots of big ideas and concepts in the book's 36 pages therefore, but through lucid explanation and well thought out design, it mostly meets its ambitions. **MMA**

### Superhero Plants

(Little Experts)

★★★★★

Chris Packham, ill. Jake Williams, Red Shed, 32pp, 9780008503628, £9.99 hbk

Here is another attractive hardback in the useful 'Little Experts' series. This volume is packed full of interesting information and the author explains the wide scope of his specialism: "Botanists think there are now as many as 400,000 plant species, with many more waiting to be discovered" p.8.

Packham includes up to date knowledge regarding how plants support our world's climate, how we are fed on a huge variety of plant-based food as well as plants' uses in the textile and medical sectors. I learned some fascinating facts within the above sections. For example, peatlands, submerged mangrove forests and seaweed are all hard at work absorbing carbon in our world. In Ethiopia a herb called enset is widely grown and part of it can be made into porridge and flatbreads: 'Enset can be grown in all seasons and is drought and disease tolerant' p.15. Also, it seems that the Vikings were very clever using hemp for ropes and sails as it is very 'planet friendly' p.16.

The book is well laid out with some very helpful illustrations by talented Jake Williams. I liked the two-page spread (vertical orientation) showing amazing plant-based building materials. There are plenty of ideas showing the reader how they can get involved and 'Help Plants be Superheroes' pp.26-27. At the end of the hardback is a great glossary to explain many of the terms used in the text. In addition, difficult words as regards pronunciation are spelled out which is useful: 'Plants produce invisible chemicals called phytoncides (say 'fie-ton-sides')' p.24.



## 8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

Curious youngsters will enjoy finding out more about plants and their positive uses in today's world. This book would be a valuable acquisition for a school or local library and a much-appreciated gift. This is the sort of reading material which sparks interesting conversations and attracts youngsters to a career in science. **JS**

### Terrible True Tales: The Stone Age

Terry Deary, ill. Tambe,  
Bloomsbury Education, 240pp,  
978 1 80199 596 2, £8.99 pbk

### Terrible True Tales: The Greeks

Terry Deary, ill. Helen Flook,  
Bloomsbury Education, 256pp,  
978 1 80199 600 6, £8.99 pbk

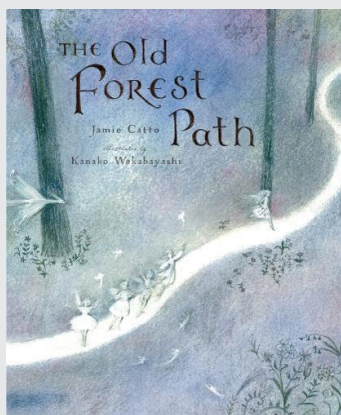
★★★★★

Here is a welcome, new series from expert non-fiction writer Terry Deary which I can highly recommend. I was eager to read these two books in his latest series and both are brilliant. Both the volumes on the Stone Age and the Greeks are four books in one, told with lots of humour. Also, they include bonus facts and activities which this age group will love.

**The Stone Age** comprises stories about The Great Cave, The Great Monster, The Great Storm and The Great Flood. In particular I enjoyed learning about the legend of Gilgamesh in the second story, thought to be the earliest tale to have been written down. The books are based on true events, and this is one reason why teachers and parents/carers encourage young people to read them. It is evident that Deary has researched these periods meticulously and with topics chosen which appear in the national curriculum I am sure this series will be very successful.

In **The Greeks** volume all four stories reference Aesop, the Greek storyteller, and the tales immediately hook readers: *The Tortoise and the Hare*, *The Lion's Share*, *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, *The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse* and *The Trojan Horse*. I am sure readers will have fun learning about the Olympics through the adventures of the twins called Cypselis and Ellie. Likewise, stories about Archimedes when the Romans arrive, and how the Greeks used the wooden horse to conquer Troy educate the reader about life in Ancient Greece.

Both illustrators bring the action to life with manifold drawings throughout. I have no hesitation in recommending these publications to educators and schools, librarians and libraries together with parents and carers. Young people will be excited to learn history via these stories whilst many will be truly inspired and discover a love of reading. **JS**

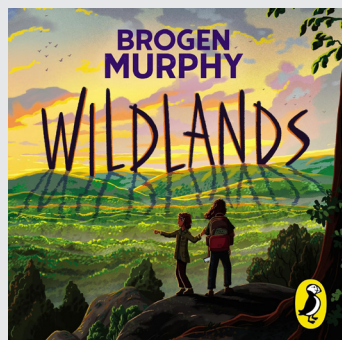


### The Old Forest Path

★★★★★

Jamie Catto, illus Kanako Wakabayashi, Ragged Bears,  
978-1857144963, £12.99 hbk

A metaphor for the transformative power of music and its ability to set us free, this story of a fairy, a musician and their love for each other is beautifully illustrated by relative newcomer Kanako Wakabayashi, whose delicate, layered watercolours bring a lightness and innocence to a story that might otherwise feel overly heady and sensuous. The setting is an enchanted forest, hope to fairies who dance along its central path careful not to stray away from its safety, all that is except the youngest fairy who is so caught up in the music of the forest that she regularly dances off the path. When the source of the intoxicating music – a young piper – steps out of the trees the two unite in a dance that lifts them both up above the forest canopy to vanish forever. At this point, the path dissolves, the boundaries that have limited them disappearing. This might not be to everyone's taste but its exhilarating, liberating sense of music, magic and love's rapture is undeniable. **LS**



### Wildlands

★★★★★

Brogen Murphy, Puffin, 402pp,  
9780241728109, £7.99, pbk

The Wildlands are an ecological reserve stretching from Manchester to Glasgow where the original inhabitants (animals and plants!!) of the British Isles have been

reintroduced. From shrubs to wolves The Wildlands takes its conservation seriously. To travel the country a high-speed rail has been introduced stretching from London to Glasgow and it is on this rail service, somewhere in the middle of the Reserve, that we are introduced to our protagonist Astrid. Astrid is slightly less enthused about her surroundings than her sister Indie – both have a special connection to The Wildlands – that being their Ma was one of its co-founders! Astrid is shouldering a lot of responsibility – looking after her little sister and making sure she keeps her cool whilst holding on to a big secret.

Via a series of poor decisions, the sisters are thrust into survival mode when their train leaves them behind – and they rise magnificently to the challenge. The action comes thick and fast and both Astrid and Indie must use all their powers of deduction and survival instincts to stay alive. They encounter a whole myriad of wildlife – including a very unhelpful moose – on their adventures and come up against the harsh realities of a world which humans have left behind.

Although action-packed, Murphy manages to keep our main characters emotional journey at the centre of the story. Astrid's fears around sharing a huge secret with her sister keep the momentum of this book pushing forward. Murphy also does a brilliant job of tackling the human cost of ecological preservation through a class-based lens – not an easy task and one that they present brilliantly. At the core of this book is a story about tenacity, sisterly love and hope all wrapped up in a brilliant adventure. Chapter after chapter is filled with emotional depth, adventurous dilemmas and thought-provoking conversation starters around what Britain's ecological future might look like – a brilliant read! **DO'R**

### Bigfoot and the Wild Boys

★★★★★

Jenny Pearson, illus Aleksei Bitskoff,  
Barrington Stoke, 104pp,  
978 0 00 8698 10 2, £7.99 pbk

It is the summer holiday before Year Seven, and Joe is determined to find a way that he will not be known as 'average Joe' as he has been called throughout Primary. His best friend, Tiago, has a reputation for his affinity for foreign languages, speaking Portuguese and Italian.

Both boys are huge fans of a vlogger called Wildman Mike who is a survivalist. Wildman Mike has stated that there is a Bigfoot in the boys' local woods so Joe, accompanied by a reluctant Tiago, decides that they will both try to find it before Wildman Mike, thereby becoming distinctly un-average.

Do the boys succeed and what do they find out about Wildman Mike along the way?

Pearson's survival adventure is comedic bordering on farcical and shows strong friendship between the

boys. Because Wildman Mike turns out to be very much only a survivalist for show, the author encourages readers to question media portrayals of people they admire. This is a healthy idea to place in the minds of young readers aged nine upwards. They are likely to laugh uproariously at the mention of 'bum thunder.'

Bitskoff's illustrations, some of them full page, add much to the description of the wildness of the landscape that Pearson creates, in which the boys must survive. They also bring another layer of humour which complements Pearson's own. **RB**

### The Notwitches

★★★★★

Gary Panton, ill. Dotty Sutton,  
Chicken House, 304pp,  
9781915947413, £7.99 pbk

In many ways there are no surprises hidden within this story: it takes a typically Dahl like problem, three horrible relatives and a small child, adds in some witches and wizardry, a talking cat and a predictably comical tone; the outcome is unsurprising.

But perhaps in many ways this is also where its value lies. There is certainly a need for new titles for those children who are just becoming fluent readers, and **The Notwitches** has much appeal in this respect. The chapters are very short, helping readers to quickly feel that sense of satisfaction on completing a chapter and encouraging them to keep reading. Similarly, clear well-spaced print, coupled with regular illustrations to support the reader's own interpretations of the text are other welcome features.

The plot itself also pursues themes of interest to the intended readership: burgeoning friendship and figuring out who to trust, a sense of feeling alone or misunderstood, the notion of dreaming about the 'what ifs' you would conjure up for those that are against you – if you only you had the power. Via Melanda, young readers have the opportunity to live out their fantasies, even if just for the length of the book. The main character, and her ally Mitch, are likeable and well developed and it seems certain there will be subsequent titles in the series to allow readers the opportunity to follow the antics of these new friends further, as they also progress further along their own reading journey. This may not be quite the classic Jill Murphy offered us with **The Worst Witch**, but it is a respectable addition to the shelves for younger junior readers. **ARU**

### Shadow Fox

★★★★★

Carlie Sorosiak, Nosy Crow, 192pp,  
9781839946585, £7.99 pbk

This magical adventure story is narrated by a prickly, wild fox, who, as well as sharing her love of fish and shoes and her distrust of all humans, initially tells us her name is YAAAAARRRRRAAWWWAAAAARRRR!



Tired, cold and hungry, the fox comes across Bee, the granddaughter of a lady who had occasionally been feeding her and was perhaps the only human she trusted. But Nan has gone missing and, in their efforts to find her, Bee and the fox find themselves transported to another world, fighting a fierce enemy in a bid to save all that they love back home.

This is an unusual story, and I'll admit it took me a little while to get into it, but as the adventure progressed, I did get swept into the wintry world of the mysterious islands and the fox's magical powers. Author Carlie Sorosiak's previous titles have shown her love of animals and here again, our fox is the star of the show. There is much talk of a 'chosen one' who will come to save the islanders and some will stop at nothing to prevent this happening. The once distrustful animal, thankfully renamed Shadow, shares a magical bond with the human girl Bee where they can read each other's thoughts and when Shadow discovers previously unknown powers and all seems lost, it is the power of friendship that saves them all.

A main theme of the book is the threat to the natural world due to the actions of humans, which is an excellent spark for environmental discussions on the correlation with occurrences on our own planet. A magical, topical tale for lovers of fantasy and the natural world. **AH**

### The Mizzy Mysteries: A Skeleton in the Closet

★★★★★

Claire Hatcher-Smith, ill; Lester McGoogan, Farshore, 288pp, 978000864557. £7.99, pbk

Murder mystery tales are top of the reading tree for middle grade readers in my school library at the moment and this new title from debut author Claire Hatcher-Smith is sure to be extremely popular when it hits the shelves.

Mizzy the Marvellous, as she likes to call herself, is a funny and feisty twelve-year-old who is going to be a world-famous detective, even if she hasn't actually solved any mysteries yet. She's been looking forward to spending the summer holidays at her aunt's house as usual, but this year her two cousins seem more interested in playing football than their usual game of Holmes and Watson. So, when Mizzy uncovers her Great-Aunt Jane's long-lost diaries, which seem to point to her possibly being murdered, she is determined to prove that she can solve this particular mystery all on her own. This time nothing is going to stop her; not her embarrassing fears, her clumsiness or the fact that her family constantly underestimate her and certainly not the fact that she has Down Syndrome. After coming up with the clever cover story of a school family tree project, Mizzy draws up a list of suspects and manages to interview the oblivious

members of her family, but her theories never seem to be quite right. Can Mizzy prove everyone wrong and finally solve the mystery on her own?

This funny and fast-paced story is an absolute delight. The clever plot twists and turns with a handful of wonderful red herrings to keep us guessing right up to the end. Our new heroine Mizzy is a fabulous role model, both for the neurodivergent community and for all wannabe detectives, showing resilience and determination in all that she does. This is a wonderfully accessible and charming story, and I do hope that there are many more Mizzy mystery adventures to come. **AH**

### The Misadventures of Mina Mahmood

★★★★

Farhana Islam, ill. Simran Diamond Singh, Farshore, 192pp, 9780008639983, £7.99 pbk

Farhana Islam takes a concept that most readers will be familiar with – the school trip, but manages to offer much more in this new series following the chaotic adventures of our unlikely hero Mina Mahmood.

Whilst most children will relate to the main characters feeling nervous as they embark on an overnight school trip for the first time, and unfortunate numbers will also relate to the threat of a dominant bullying character within the class cohort, Islam also envelops the reader in the family life of Mina and her friends offering some readers meaningful representation, and others a deep insight into a culture they may not be familiar with.

The funny, familial tone adopted throughout, coupled with illustrations which feel very reminiscent of the sketches children might draw themselves, help to give this title a diary feel and consequently as a reader your involvement feels almost conspiratorial. Certainly this approach will help newly independent readers to engage and maintain interest, as will the short chapters which end reliably in a manner which encourages you to read on.

Clearly intended as the first in a series, and offering much needed breadth to the diet for our younger junior readers, this is a welcome new title. **ARu.**

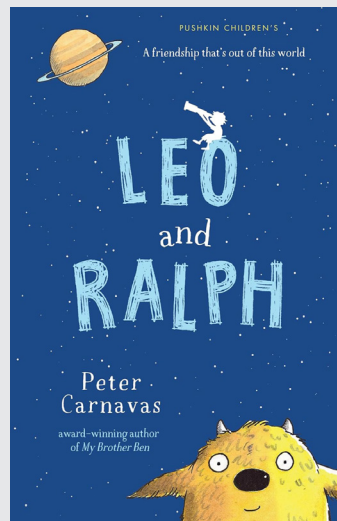
### Leo and Ralph

★★★★★

written and illustrated by Peter Carnavas, Pushkin, 266pp, 978 1 78269 523 3, £8.99, pbk

This is one of those thoughtful and special books that could easily get overlooked but holds a wealth of wisdom and heart between its covers.

Leo is a quiet, reflective boy, small in stature and for whom social interactions do not come easily. He is obsessed by space and aliens and lives in his imagination. None of his



classmates have the patience to give him time to express himself so Leo is always at the edges of playtime feeling lonely as he does not have a friend to play his kind of imaginative games.

His loving and sensitive family along with his younger sister, Peg all encourage Leo to make friends, but nothing seems to work and even they begin to worry. One day Leo spots a white balloon caught in a tree and after untangling it and setting it free he goes back to his room to discover a shaggy creature with floppy ears and stubby horns waiting for him. Ralph has come down from planet Ralphora to befriend Leo. The two quickly become inseparable; looking at the stars through a telescope, making up brilliant games and telling each other funny stories about aliens. Leo doesn't need to try and make friends at school now he has Ralph, even though no-one else can see Ralph.

As Leo grows older his parents decide to move to a small town in the country and make a fresh start. It is time for Leo to say goodbye to Ralph and make some new friends. But all his old anxieties return, and Leo rebuffs any attempts at friendship so inevitably Ralph appears again to help him. There is another boy Gus who seems a bit awkward too and carries around a football wherever he goes. When it is lost, it is Leo who finds it up a tree and so begins their tentative friendship. Leo is now ready to say goodbye to his imaginary friend for good.

This is a charming story, beautifully written and told with great delicacy and sensitivity. Leo and his warm-hearted family feel very real, and Leo's insecurities are handled in a thoughtful and compassionate manner. It is a story that will stay with you long after you have reached the end. **JC**

### Grumpfort

★★

Jamie Hammond, 282pp, Usborne, 978183540095, £7.99 pbk

This adventure story features all sorts of monsters and is a reminder to never judge someone on first appearances.

Like all of his brave ancestors before him, Mo is destined to be a Warden of Bogfoss, charged with defending the town from the fierce beasts that regularly visit from the dark and scary forest next door: Grumpfort.

Inheriting the position of Warden is a nightmare for Mo, one that is worsened by the meanness of the existing wardens who refuse to help him, and by the weight of expectation he feels thanks to his grandma's renowned triumphs as one of Bogfoss's greatest ever wardens.

Brought to life in a generous amount of jagged, lively and playful illustrations, the 'monsters' are actually more cute and colourful than tough and terrifying. Nevertheless, in his first act as warden, Mo fails to get the better of some cheeky goblins, and seems destined to become a laughing stock. Determined to avoid this embarrassment, Mo resolves to secretly enter the forbidden forest of Grumpfort and capture a monster to prove his courage and repair his reputation.

This seems a frankly astounding decision. The preceding chapters describe Mo very clearly as a coward – someone with a nervous and jittery disposition, willing to try all sorts of other jobs in order to avoid the task of Warden. He certainly does not seem the kind of character who would willingly go forth into a forest so frightening that the townsfolk have taken the decision to make it illegal even to step foot in it.

Mo's motivation for this unbelievable act is the laughter and cruel jibes he receives after the defeat by the mischievous goblins. This is a theme throughout the book. Kindness is undervalued by the majority of characters (including, on several occasions, by Mo himself). Whether they are beasts or human beings, characters are prone to exchanging insults and throwing tantrums: it is difficult for readers to discern heroes from villains, and the meaning of the word 'monster' shifts throughout as we learn more and more about each character.

In the forest of Grumpfort, Mo encounters all kinds of mythical creatures and he finds none of them easy to catch – in fact he finds that they are nothing at all like his Monsterology book describes. Giant, talking, cheerful dragons with sausage roll obsessions, and gnomes with traffic cones for hats are certainly not that scary, and Mo begins to question everything he has been taught about the dangerous legend of Grumpfort. This shift in perception takes time, though, as characters' prejudices are deeply entrenched and stubbornly clung to, despite seemingly obvious evidence.

Mo is not the only human in Grumpfort. He meets a daunting, bearded warrior called Fry whose back-story and relationship with the monsters he lives with are mysterious. Fry appears to have his own agenda, which he is unwilling to share with Mo and his new monster friends, whom Fry charges with



# reviews

## 8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

capturing the most fearsome beast of all...the grumpsnatcher!

There are several double-crossings and multiple mind-changes as Mo wrestles with whether he should kidnap one of his new monster friends to take back to Bogfoss or show loyalty to Fry's band of beasts and stay in Grumpfort. There are lots of arguments and accusations as well as a whole host of booby traps and monster-lair invasions, as Mo struggles to make up his mind.

It is an unpredictable and sometimes disjointed narrative and important rules about the setting are insufficiently established. It feels surprising, for example, when one of the monsters Mo encounters suddenly starts to talk, and when another character inexplicably develops mind-control powers in the final act. However, the themes of kindness and open-mindedness are present throughout, and Mo and his monstrous new companions certainly learn important lessons about friendship during this chaotic quest. **SD**

### Snails of the Unexpected

★★★★

Terrie Chilvers, ill. Brenda Figueroa, 164pp, Firefly Press, 9781915444882, £7.99 pbk

Fergus and Shelby are the unlikely heroes of this original comedy story for children. It's easy to think that snails' lives are dull and uneventful (exploring the garden, munching lettuce leaves, perhaps even making the occasional slime trail) but Fergus and Shelby's story is far from boring.

The snail friends are quite satisfied with their lives - happily munching through human Angela Miller's fruit and vegetables - until they learn that their uncomplicated garden paradise is at risk of destruction due to the ambitions of neighbouring slugs. In fact, the threat from their shell-less cousins is far greater than they first realise, and Fergus and Shelby somehow find themselves charged with saving the world from a complete slug takeover!

Fergus is prone to panic and fears that they - and Angela Miller and her garden - are doomed, but he feels somewhat more optimistic when Shelby nonchalantly reminds him that they both have super, mighty-morphing powers since a puddle they were in was struck by lightning!

Shelby and Fergus have the ability to transform into absolutely anything, from a packet of crisps to the British Prime Minister...which is handy, because that is exactly who they are going to have to impersonate if they are to overcome their evil slug overlords, who were also granted transformative powers in the storm.

The story is seriously silly. The snails (and slugs) can transform into literally anything, yet their modest experience of the world means that

they invariably choose humdrum things like confectionery, pets and plants as their disguises. This is a novel concept that would work brilliantly as a series of comic strips. There are several laugh-out-loud moments, for example, when Fergus turns to talk with Shelby, only to discover that he is now addressing an inanimate object.

Though the moments of comedy come along with ample frequency, and the levels of silliness are truly impressive, the story lacks heart at times and further character development would make the story more engaging. **SD**

### School for Fireflies

★★★★

Erica Gomez, *Knights Of*, 263pp, 9781913311735, £7.99 pbk

It is difficult not to reminisce about the opening lines of the *Harry Potter* series on reading the first page of *School for Fireflies*, yet whereas this comparison would perhaps usually make you fear for any title, this escapade into the world of schools for magic is refreshingly original.

We meet Siddy and Zadie, the two strong female lead characters as they begin to question the unusual behaviour of their parents and the disappearance of Siddy's father. Swiftly, both the girls and the reader are drawn into a magical underworld via the mysterious School for Fireflies. Siddy and Zadie quickly learn that they are part of a whole community they knew nothing of previously and they must learn new skills and adapt in order to unravel mysteries which have lasted for generations - and which might explain Siddy's father's absence.

Despite the fantasy setting, the characters are very much facing the same dilemmas of ordinary 8-10 year olds: parents behaving unpredictably, school rules to navigate - both those written and unwritten, the challenges of starting a new school and maintaining old friendships in new circumstances. The relatable themes and characters are perhaps what make this title such a refreshing addition to the genre, and it seems likely that a series will follow.

Beyond the plot itself, the backstory of the author and the struggles she has faced whilst writing the story would also be a useful talking point in discussions and could only serve to promote much needed resilience and determination in junior readers. **ARu**

### The Green Kingdom

★★★★

Cornelia Funke and Tammi Hartung, ill. Melissa Castrillón, Dorling Kindersley, 224pp, 9780241698020, £12.99 hbk

Caspia is not happy. Her parents have decided to take up an offer of work that will mean moving from their small hometown of Wilmerton



to Brooklyn, New York. It will be for the whole of the summer break - eleven weeks. How will Caspia survive without her two best friends, Ellie and Laryssa? Of course, they can talk through their phones but... Then Caspia finds a bundle of letters. They date from the 1950s; letters between two sisters, one of them blind. This discovery sends Caspia on a quest to answer the riddles Rosalind sent her sister Minna, a quest that leads to the discovery of the Green Kingdom around us. These are the flowers and plants, many from across the world, often unnoticed that surround us, entwined in every aspect of life. It will also find her making new friends. Summer turns out not so bad. Indeed will Caspia want to go back to Wilmerton?

This is an attractive novel. Caspia and her family are very real and Caspia's situation is one many will recognise; a change from the usual pattern of life. No great tragedy or trauma - just a temporary adjustment, uncomfortable, unwelcome. Funke offers a positive view of family life and relationships to be enjoyed. The letters do not involve any time-slip. The action is firmly rooted in the present, but the riddles provide the element of interest and discovery. There is the discovery of the plants themselves, their habitats and uses, the existence of Botanic Garden - unexpected places plants can be found. But Funke does more. Rosalind's clues direct the young reader to discover mythologies, folklore, fairytales, the language of flowers, medicinal use and place in history. This is all done with a very light touch adding depth and different levels of interest in this engaging and accessible novel about friendships, opportunities and unexpected surprises. Without heavy didacticism, Funke encourages her young audience to observe the world around and engage with it and the Green Kingdom. A thoroughly enjoyable read that will be appreciated by young readers who do not look for fantasy but would rather remain in the world they know. **FH**

### The Nightmares of Finnegan Quick

★★★★

Larry Hayes, 223pp, Bloomsbury, 9781526677785, £7.99 pbk

This new horror story for children takes readers into the nightmares

of one young boy, Finnegan Quick, whose powers of imagination are as powerful as they are frightening!

The story is genuinely scary, in a much more grown-up way than most horror adventures aimed at this age group. Written in a journal style, the very first pages describe the heartbreaking loss of Finn's beloved parents and pet dog, in a mysterious manner that is somehow linked to the violent, lucid nightmares that Finn suffers every evening.

Finn is forced to confront the truth that his dreams can become real... and so can his nightmares. This makes for a stressful, traumatising and exhausting existence, as Finn tries to avoid his nightmares while still getting enough sleep to survive the everyday routines of school, including persecution from unfair teachers and taunts from the school bully.

Things appear hopeless for Finn, and his recent nightmares show him that soon even his Gran - his beloved guardian and only surviving family - will disappear from reality, too. He finds a glimmer of hope, though, when a new girl crashes into school. Cass cares nothing for school rules or social norms and appears to know more about Finn and his problems than Finn does himself! With further support from Squid (Finn's oldest mate, who has a voracious appetite for reading and a willingness to spend every waking hour researching ancient stories about dreams and monsters), Finn sets about entering the world of his nightmares and finally taking his Gran's advice to 'face his fears'.

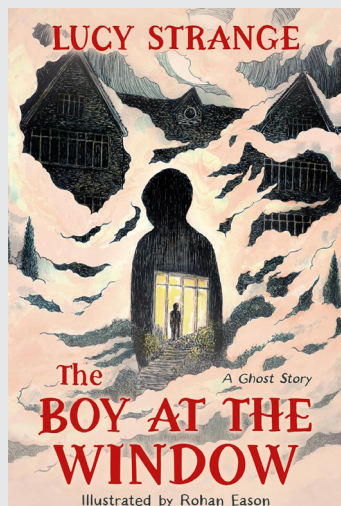
In Finn's nightmares, the trio have to overcome chilling encounters with goblins and gruesome, eyeless grown-ups who seem eerily familiar. There are moments of shock and action as well as a hearty dose of gore and violence - which will test the scare-tolerance of many young readers. Because the boundary between dreams and reality is not always clear for Finn, scary moments could arrive at any time, so there is a tense and gripping feeling throughout.

Like all good horror-stories for children, the book's adult characters are flawed and unreliable, and clearly hiding secrets. However, it is clear to Finn and Squid that Cass is also hiding something: is she just a typically aloof teenage girl, or could her own agenda spell disaster for Finn and his Gran?

**The Nightmares of Finnegan Quick** is more successful than most horror adventures in delivering a tone that is properly scary rather than merely spooky (though the green, slimy font used on the cover and as chapter headings feels unnecessary). The balance is not always perfect, as such young characters grapple with such mature themes, but the overall effect is original, exciting and, most of all, frightening! **SD**



## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary



## The Boy at the Window

★★★★★

Lucy Strange, illus Rohan Eason, Barrington Stoke, 80pp, 978-0008712785, £7.99 pbk

From its opening line, 'I first saw the ghost on a cold autumn night', this new story from Lucy Strange is thoroughly unsettling and eerie. The setting is Gothic through and through: a remote house wrapped around by swirling fog which shuts out not just the sunlight but 'the whole world', within the house a mother and son isolated from one another by grief. It's from the fog that the ghost appears, a boy thin like Hugo, but with shimmering skin and hollow hungry eyes. Terrified at first, Hugo lets the boy into his house and a strange relationship develops. As the two boys get closer, the words of kindly housekeeper Mrs Stubbs that the living too can become ghosts if they go unseen take on an unnerving prescience. The conclusion to this short novel – published by Barrington Stoke it is adapted for dyslexic and reluctant readers – is genuinely chilling, the build-up carefully managed by the author to leave readers unsure what is real, what is imagined. Lucy Strange's use of sound and silence is superb, sharpening the sense of claustrophobia and confinement. A story to haunt readers long after the final page. LS

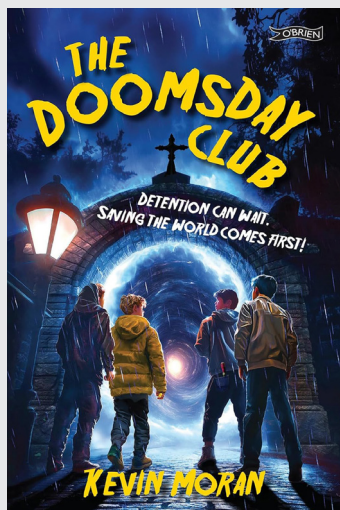
## Vanya and the Wild Hunt

★★★★★

Sangu Mandanna, Ill. Kristina Kister, Macmillan Children's Books, 345pp, 9781035022519, £12.99 hbk Vanya is an eleven-year-old who has just been diagnosed with ADHD, but otherwise life seems to be carrying on as normal; that is as normal as things can be if you can hear books talk and can speak back to them. However, when her parents are attacked by a monster, she discovers that she is

part of a very unusual family; they are monster hunters and archivists, tasked with keeping the world safe from the magical creatures. Vanya finds herself being sent to the magical school of Auramere, where hopefully she will be safe. But as in all good fantasy stories, trouble finds a way to follow her. The question is how can Vanya save the school from the dark Wild Hunt and find her place in this new and strange world?

What a fantastic new heroine in the world of fantasy! Vanya finds that receiving her diagnosis for ADHD helps her to understand why she sees the world in a different way, although the books are a totally different matter. There is a delightful contrast between her normal life, going to school in Norwich, and the community that she finds at Auramere. In each environment she still discovers that she does not fit in perfectly, but that with support, she is able to make friends and make the most of her life. There are some very sneaky twists and turns to this plot and the one at the end of the book had me catching my breath. What did come across is that this is just the first part of a series, and I will be looking out very keenly for the next in the series. There are so many questions to be answered, and I wonder if the author is playing with our ideas about who are the heroes and villains? No doubt time will tell, but at the moment this is a brilliant five star read. MP



## The Doomsday Club

★★★★★

Kevin Moran, O'Brien Press, 266pp, 978-1-78849-526-4, £8.99 pbk

An unlikely combination of Jack, his former friend Conan, clever Yash and big Jerry, 12 year-old classmates, are in detention after a brawl in the toilets – and we find out how that happened a bit later – when Jack looks out of the window and sees old Mr Kilroe ('like a gnarled tree draped in dark

suit') waving his arms at an old archway. The boys are horrified to see a huge monster with antlers, bursting through what turns out to be a portal, and going into Mr Kilroe's house; intrepid Jack opens the window and sets off to investigate. What follows is a supernatural adventure needing courage and ingenuity from all the boys, with their various skills, and the help of the Librarian of a small special library, Bernie, who knows her Celtic mythology. Their teacher, Ms Murphy, and Head Mrs Lynch, are remarkably understanding and tolerant, but all the boys are afraid of the trouble they could be in from their mothers as they get more detentions and sneak about at night... When Conan coins the name Doomsday Club, the others are scornful, but somehow it works, and as they work together this unlikely group of boys do become fast friends.

This is a very exciting story, difficult to put down, in which the boys are in real danger, though Rucht, the shape-changing creature, not a monster after all, turns out to be a dependable ally and very useful indeed. The normal humans with their day-to-day cares are contrasted with the demonic Mr Kilroe, and his story, when it finally emerges, is fascinating. Kevin Moran is a natural and very talented writer and this is the first in what promises to be an excellent new series. DB

## It's a Brave Young World

★★★★★

Anu Adebogun, ill. Soofiya and Lila Cruz, Little Tiger, 216pp, 978 1 83891 640 4, £12.99 pbk

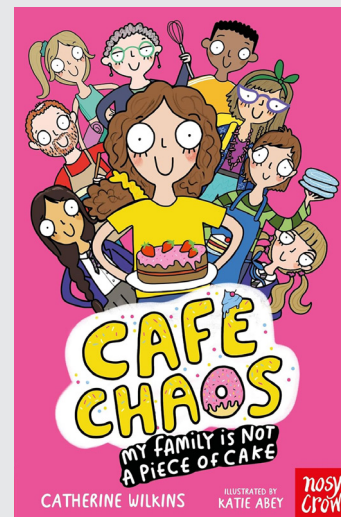
This is a colourful, chunky handbook aimed at supporting young people as they navigate the difficult years of puberty and all that they entail. The book consists of ten chapters covering the following interesting topics: Identity; Family; Friendships; Relationships and Self-love; Mind; Mood and Feelings; School; Belief; The Internet; Your Safety; Future You. Therefore, it is wide in scope and somewhat comprehensive.

The author is very experienced in working with young people and this shines through the pages as she considers various angles on issues such as Friendship Labels, Choosing Friends, Frenemies, Peer Pressure etc. in the chapter on Friendship. I think the inclusion of 'Storytime' in most chapters is very helpful and gives an appropriate example of a young person experiencing an issue. The inclusion of 'Activities' and 'Journal Time' are both good ideas to support the reader in practical ways.

Hats off to the illustrators of this paperback: the drawings are clear, helpful and sometimes amusing. There are some very appealing full-page illustrations such as the one depicting 'Family' on p.33. Also, I like the way in which quotes are used

throughout the well laid out text. Although this book is aimed at males as well as females a high proportion of the examples used are from the female point of view and there are only females shown on the cover.

Overall, I think this is a great book giving practical advice on various emotive subjects. The useful resources given at the end of the book are particularly useful and I can envisage this book supporting lots of youngsters from many different backgrounds and cultures. It would be a well-read volume in a secondary school library or local library and is the type of book readers would engage with alone rather than with friends or adults/carers. JS



## Café Chaos

★★★★★

Catherine Wilkins, ill. Katie Abey. Nosy Crow, 258pp, 978 8051 32660, £7.99 pbk

With a pink cover and cartoon illustrations that will be appealing to many readers, this is a fun story about being part of a family that runs the Café Crumble, named after Gran's prizewinning dessert. Hope and her friend Leila are starting secondary school, along with snidey Skyla, who had made a habit of calling Hope 'embarrassing'. Secondary school is very different from the small pond of primary school, though, and Hope is surprised to find more acceptance than she had been used to.

Home life is chaotic – she lives above the café with her parents: Dad the Chef, Mum the Manager, Grandma Margery a wonderful baker, and her older cousin Connor, who is studying Business, and likes to show off his knowledge, not always helpfully. When Connor's Mum, (Mum's sister) Rita appears, wanting to move in temporarily, Hope is forced to share her bedroom, and this is definitely problematic: she has to endure meditation gongs, perfumed air, and



## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

conversations about auras. The café is running into financial difficulties, and the extended family come up with ideas to help, some with unintended and hilarious consequences. When Skyla finds another cunning angle for getting at Hope, Mum is too busy to listen, but Leila helps her to find a way to stand up to the bully, and of course all is well, with the family and the café, by the end of the story.

This was fun to read, with credible characters and a good plot, about a family whose members have problems and are not always getting on, but muddle through because they love each other – it's a very positive story. **DB**

### Oops, I kidnapped a Pharaoh!

★★★★

Luan Goldie, ill. Amy Nguyen, Walker Books, 254pp, 978-1-5295-1254-0 £7.99 pbk

Skylar and her clever 'bestie', Dana, huge fans of K-pop group AZ8, are looking forward to buying merchandise and hearing the groups at the convention, K-Mania, about to happen in their town, when they are picked up from school by Nana in her tuk-tuk. Nana is a very creative cook, making and selling burritos in many flavours from her tuk-tuk, and it turns out that she sources her ingredients by time-travelling. Nana takes them to Egypt to get some really good figs, and asks the girls to stay in the tuk-tuk, but of course they don't, and they find they're in Ancient Egypt. The young King Tut stows away in the boot and causes a sensation at K-Mania with his short gold skirt and inventive dancing. Stay with it, this story gets wackier still...

Dana accidentally squashes a butterfly, and Skylar, anxious about chaos theory, takes them back in time to before the squashing. Now confident with controlling the tuk-tuk, soon they are whizzing all over history, meeting Shakespeare, bumping into the apple tree under which Isaac Newton sits, and collecting Dana's heroine Marie Curie and taking her into modern times, which she finds fascinating. Breaking all the rules of time travel about not changing anything, they prevent Katherine Howard from marrying Henry VIII and therefore being beheaded: consequent history lessons have to be about 5 wives... Girls who are fanatical about a particular group will sympathise with the divided loyalties as Dana finds she likes K-pop girl group Lilac Eyes as well as AZ8, and the girls almost fall out, but there is a lot to sort out. They have to return Tutankhamun, who no longer exists on the internet, so that he can have his historic death and discovery, and find Nana, who they have left behind in her childhood home: it's totally eccentric and chaotic, but good fun, and readers will pick up some

historical and scientific knowledge, especially from Dana, along the way.

Luan Goldie is a former teacher who has written books for adults so far, some of which were longlisted for prizes, and award-winning short stories, but is now writing for children. It seems quite likely that there will be more madcap adventures. **DB**

### The Line They Drew Through Us

★★★★

Hiba Noor Khan, Andersen Press, 304pp, 9781839134722, £7.99, pbk  
Award winning author Hiba Noor Khan is a British Muslim woman of Pakistani heritage whose debut middle grade novel *Safiyah's War* shone a spotlight on the hidden history of the Paris Mosque.

Her new novel also explores untold stories, its dedication remembering 'everyone who lost a piece of themselves when India was wrenched apart'. She describes her latest book as, 'a love letter of sorts, to the vast subcontinent that is my motherland. A mother whom I have felt disconnected from and conflicted about for much of my life. Yet her unheard stories run deeply within me.'

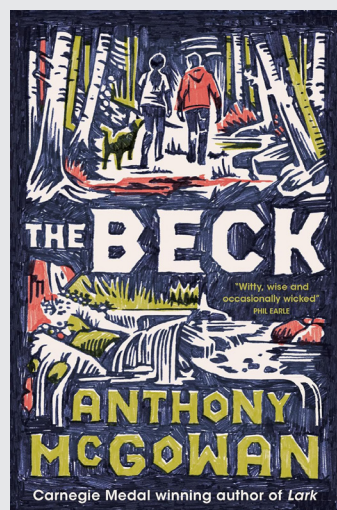
Told through the third person voices of miracle babies Lakshmi, Jahan and Ravi, whose lives change forever on their twelfth birthdays, when their world implodes, the narrative explores these unheard stories. Inspired by post-colonial and political writers like Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Neel Mukherjee and Khushwant Singh, Khan gives insight into a turbulent time.

Drawing on a myriad of sources, she includes fond family memories as well as accounts from the 1947 Partition Archive, Memories of Partition Project, and the writing of William Dalrymple on the East India Trading Company. Meticulously researched and vividly realised, her characters take the reader on a journey through the ravages of colonialism and the heinous practices of the British East India Company. The older generation are still haunted by their experiences while their grandchildren are bewildered at the unrest and politico-religious conflicts setting neighbour against neighbour.

The novel opens with a trip from the busy city of Lahore to a rural Punjabi village for a family wedding. Khan infuses this idyll with the magic realism and symbolism of the Banyan tree. Here Muslim, Hindu and Sikh co-exist in peace cocooned from the upheaval of the outside world. Here they celebrate diverse traditions. Sadly, their existence is under threat from the complexities of geopolitics and the violence that approaches. A character forewarns that 'India is not a potato' as the British move to divide the states.

Khan's well-crafted plot sings with authentic voices and is a celebration

of artisan crafts, diverse cultures and family life. She provides a map at the start, displaying those fateful partition lines which still reverberate today, and a detailed author's note and a language glossary inviting further study at the back. Offering a different approach from previous books for young readers on the topic including Swapna Haddow's *Torn Apart* The Partition of India 1947 and Veera Hiranandani's epistolary novel *The Night Diary*, Khan presents divergent intergenerational perspectives as each child is afflicted by the terrible legacy of the past imposing itself upon the present and their future is thrown into turmoil. **TJ**



### The Beck

★★★★★

Anthony McGowan, Barrington Stoke, 130pp, 9780008722296, £7.99 pbk

Anthony McGowan is a gift to all young readers. Dyslexia friendly, his latest book is printed on an off-white background using a carefully selected typeset. The story itself, then takes off like a rocket, with 13-year-old Kyle soon won over by his eccentric grandfather, once an Elvis imitator now an environmental activist. Between them they cook up a plan to save a newly restored Yorkshire local stream from a proposed industrial development that would have proved ruinous to it. This was all written before current government proposals to force through planning applications in the future regardless of how this might affect previously protected newts, bats or any other endangered natural features. Children's fiction has always previously taken the side of local objections to faceless planning decisions made by vested interests elsewhere, political or otherwise. It is hard to think the government's new policy will change the minds of either this author or any others to come on such issues whatever the current chancellor Rachel Reeves might wish.

But this novella never comes over as a polemical tract. Sentences whizz by, jokey dialogue abounds and clever sub-plots inter-weave with the main

action. Kyle is also well supported by Karthi, a new neighbour his age recently from Sri Lanka but already effective when it comes to seeing off local bullies. She and Kyle agree to be friends but that is all, though readers may speculate this might change to something warmer after their joint plan to save the stream finally comes off. Grandad lives just long enough to witness this triumph and also to oversee the transfer of his three-legged dog, Rude Word, to Kyle and family. Why the dog has been given this name is just one of the many delightful touches in this excellent story. **NT**



### A Sequence of Cosmic Accidents

★★★★★

S.A. Reyhani, Rock the Boat, 372pp, 9780861548774, £7.99 pbk

Twelve-year-old Arian lives with his Dad, and neither of them talk about the loss in an accident of his Mum, who was Iranian (and that is important), as is his name: Arian imagines a Wall of Nothing when he feels he might get upset. He also has an upper limb difference, and is fierce about not letting that get in the way of anything he wants to do. The family had applied for a foster sister before Mum's death, and suddenly a girl is sent to the house without any of the expected preliminaries. Of course, Madlock is no ordinary girl, and uses strange Victorian slang (a Glossary is provided at the back, but it's not too difficult to work out). It turns out that the stick she has in her boot really is a magic wand: she is from an alternative England, and needs to get to Wayles to meet The Chemist (Miyukimist) – the local Berkhamstead pharmacy will not do! Arian and his friend Pete are transported through a wormhole, and we follow their adventures as they try to get the powerful black Sphere into the right hands, and away from the sinister Mr Grey and his scary Lords of the Wrath. The fact that Arian is half-Persian means he has useful language



skills, and he learns to use magic much more easily than Madlock had expected. He develops as a person, using strategy to partly resolve the problems they face, and eventually he also finds that he no longer has to use the Wall of Nothing and is able to talk about his mother.

Madlock is a terrific character, annoying, but vulnerable; Pete is a fount of useful knowledge and likes finding out about the alternative Aerth and the United Clandom, and other characters and places are brought to life very effectively. S.A. Reyhani is half Iranian and half Scottish herself and uses her memories of Iranian stories her mother told her, and of a childhood friend for Arian's upper limb difference. This her debut novel is a tremendously exciting story, and it is planned as the first of a trilogy: this reviewer will be eagerly looking out for the next instalment! **DB**

### Zak Monroe is (not) My Friend

★★★★

Simon Packham, UCLan Publishing, 256pp, 9781916747555, £7.99 pbk

Sam Taylor is in year six at Patchdean Primary. He and his three best friends have been best friends since Baby Bears nursery. There are ten weeks to go before they all move on to year seven at St. Thomas's Academy. Sam overhears his friends talking about the Friends List where each person is allowed to put down the names of three people they would like in their secondary school tutor group and how they are not going to put Sam's name on their list. Sam is horrified by this and determines to change himself so they will notice him and put him on their list.

How will this decision play out for Sam? And will he discover the true meaning of friendship? This is a very timely and necessary book as it discusses with great sensitivity and nuance issues which are almost universal. Interestingly, it also shines a light on the fact that sometimes people who are being bullied can also bully others in a misguided attempt to protect themselves.

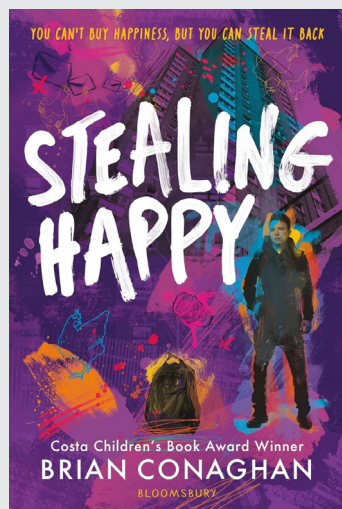
Packham encourages readers of nine plus to find their own identities, do what makes them happy, so long as it's not harming anyone else, and not apologise for it. There is also a wonderful cross-generational friendship between Sam and his grandmother. **RB**

### Stealing Happy

★★★★

Brian Conaghan, Bloomsbury, 304pp, 978-1526653987, £7.99 pbk

There is nobody who can capture the authentic voice of young people growing up in a working-class community quite like Brian Conaghan and this new novel is absolutely pitch perfect. It is



obviously firmly grounded in his own lived experience growing up in Coatbridge, but is even more of an authentic read this time, since our hero, Sonny Gilmour, has Tourette's, as does Brian. Sonny also dreams of being a stand-up comedian and of the gorgeous Carolina Swift, has a best mate Jonah and tries to avoid the bully Archie Burns. He gets on really well with Special K (Mr Kalinski the school counsellor) and it's great to see that he is being supported in school with his Tourette's and OCD. The rest of his life is causing him lots of anxiety. His family is in a dire financial situation, exacerbated by his dad suffering with Long Covid and unable to work, and his mum struggling to cope. She makes a terrible decision when faced with rent arrears, borrowing money from a loan shark and their debts are escalating out of control. The dreaded Chick Lennon has the whole community living in fear and now they are part of it. Sonny's dad has told him he must be 'the man of the house' so it's up to him, his loyal true crime obsessed friend Jonah and the 'gorgeous brainbox' and Sonny's fellow Reading Ambassador, Carolina Swift, to come up with a plan. This plan involves robbing Chick Lennon and paying him back with his own money. Subterfuge of any sort is very difficult when Tourette's makes you blurt out 'ROB CHICK LENNON' any time you are stressed. Sonny's jokes, the banter between friends and the inevitable chaos of the heist, creates laughs a plenty, but the underlying seriousness of the situation is never downplayed. It is an unflinching look at poverty, food banks, Long Covid, Social Security injustices and at how easily families can get sucked in by predatory loan sharks. This is a very real contemporary issue brought vividly to life and Sonny is yet another Conaghan character who will steal your heart and live long in your memory. **JCo**

### Ride North

★★★★

Maria De Jong, Andersen, 222pp, 9781839135200, £7.99 pbk

Maria De Jong has the makings of a good writer. Set in the northernmost point of the deep New Zealand countryside, her well-written story describes the journey taken by 12-year-old Folly in her bid to deposit the ashes of her dead mother where she would have wished. Unfamiliar animal life like rurus and wekas make an appearance as Tooth, Folly's faithful and very long-suffering horse, takes her ever further into dense, semi-explored territory. The two maintain a continuous conversation, with Folly coming up with the mostly cynical comments Tooth continues to provide in her imagination.

And he has reason. Because Folly is running away, resentful of her otherwise loving father's decision to bring a new girlfriend into the house so soon after his wife's death. Folly then gets to hear over the radio that rivers are being dragged in the search for her although she is now widely assumed to be dead. But this news only causes her minimum emotion, with any worry or guilt about the state of her father's and younger brother's feelings quickly brushed aside. At this point, it gets harder to believe in someone of any age so overwhelmingly out of touch with basic human emotions. She goes on to outwit and escape two murderous crooks whose money she has stolen, but as a person she no longer carries conviction as a still young child.

**Ride North** remains a competent piece of writing, but it could have been so much better. But given the choice of exploring the true complexity of an angry child's emotions in this sort of situation the author opts instead for describing more increasingly unlikely adventures. Ghosts also make a brief appearance. By the end it has all got a little too much, notwithstanding some witty dialogue and a real feeling for nature still at its wildest. **NT**

### Black Star

★★★★

Kwame Alexander, Andersen Press, 388 pp, 9781839135675, 14.99, hbk

At the end of **The Door of No Return**, the first book in Kwame Alexander's ambitious verse novel trilogy, I imagined its hero, Kofi, wrenched from Africa on a slave ship, would find himself next in the middle of the American Civil War. I was wrong. Book two, **Black Star**, springs forward two generations to the 1920s. Kofi is now Nana Kofi, the patriarch of an extended African American family living in small Virginia town across the tracks, or, in this case, over the bridge, from the white part of town. The narrator of the new book is Kofi's granddaughter, Charley. Those readers who are interested in what happened to Kofi after the end of the first book, will have to wait until well into the new book to find out, as his



memories appear, partly in response to Charley's prompting. While Kofi looks back, Charley has her eyes set on becoming a baseball star. Already, there are two strikes against her: she is black and, of course, a girl. But her sister Gwen brings her a gift that she bought in a thrift shop, a battered leather catcher's mitt that may have once belonged to a woman who played in a Negro baseball league in Philadelphia. For Charley, a determined, studious, and questioning girl, this is a vindication. Alexander's novel continues to trace the thread of African American history from one continent to another and incidentally introduces us to two significant figures from twentieth century America: the agitator Marcus Garvey, and the educator Mary McLeod Bethune (look out, too, for references to Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and James Weldon Johnson). Marcus Garvey's plans for African American emigration back to Africa feed Kofi's dream of a return to his childhood home and justifies the suitcase he has ready by the door. And a visit from Bethune to the local Colored Women's Club at the Baptist Church gives Charley a source of direct example of black female determination and achievement. The story is, in part, an education for both Charley and the reader in the patterns of racial violence in the segregated South, from the etiquette of exclusion and deference to the white-sheeted beatings and murder in the night that can be sparked by something as apparently innocent as a child's baseball game. But there is much more to this expertly crafted free verse novel. Once more, Kwame Alexander uses 'the lens of sports' to bring friendship, family, and community into warm focus and to show how these have sustained African Americans in the worst of times and how they might be an inspiration to all his readers now and in the future. **CB**



# reviews

## 14+ Secondary/Adult

### The Dandelion Riots

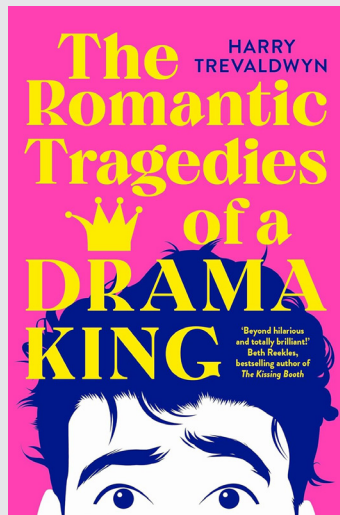
★★★

Kim Smedjkal, Pushkin Press, 272pp, 9781782695257, £9.99, pbk  
This is a compellingly strange tale that mixes a hard-boiled style with what might be called an anti-fairytale in which some girls – ‘the damned’ – are cursed at birth with magical powers by malicious older women, called Aunts, who condemn their victims to ostracism and persecution. Our narrator is sixteen-year-old Drinn, whose curse is never to find love and, for reasons that become apparent, has lived a sequestered life under the care of a series of foster parents. The tale begins when Drinn’s particular tormentor, Aunt Melusine, detecting a bond of affection between Drinn and her temporary carer, slaughters the poor man. In the melee, Drinn uses her own powers against Melusine for the first time and follows Melusine into the wider world. Gradually, Drinn meets and teams up with others of the damned and leads a guerrilla campaign against the Aunts, the gang adopting the dandelion as their insignia (hence the book’s title). Their campaign leads to an apocalyptic confrontation in which Drinn and Melusine meet for the last time. The novel moves rapidly from one danger to another and from one revelation to the next, with intervals for Drinn to catch her breath and muse on the nature of love and where she might find it. But there is little space to fill in how the society in which she finds herself functions from day-to-day. I particularly like the way the novel sets up a kind of gender negative of the male adventure story. Here women and girls fill all the major roles, whether heroes or villains. The one token male unfortunately suffers the fate of so many token characters in literature and film. The novel is marketed as a young adult title but I would think it might also be enjoyed by younger teenagers. **CB**

### The Romantic Tragedies of a Drama King

★★★★★

Harry Trevaldwy, First Ink, 352pp, 978-1035049202, £8.99 pbk  
Teenager Patrick, or to use his preferred, self-invented nickname, Patch (because ‘Patch’ is the type of person to give other people tips on how to kiss whilst also smelling perfect and having the perfect amount of rip on his ripped jeans.) is indeed a drama king. He lives with his single parent mum and big sister in Hiverhampton, a small town that will be perfectly familiar to any UK reader, attends high school with his best friend Jean, a real LGBTQ+ ally and totally lovely person. He’s come out to the drama group he attends (and will do it again, twice, in the course of



the novel) and he is determined that this is the term he will get a boyfriend. Drama club seems the best place to find one and sure enough, there are two new boys attending – gorgeous Peter, recently moved from New York, and quiet Sam, Peter’s friend.

Of course, as any reader of romantic fiction knows, the path of true love is never smooth and there are fallings-out, misunderstandings, making ups and sudden self-discoveries to delight aficionados of the genre. As romantic heroes go, Patch is nigh on perfect, delightfully open, delightfully blind to his own shortcomings but always ready to admit when he’s got things wrong.

Not for nothing surely is Sam caught reading *Sense and Sensibility* when first we meet him; this small town, big emotions romance is sharply observed, witty, full of characters readers will adore, and manages to be both hilarious and heartfelt. **LS**

### Bingsu for Two

★★★/★

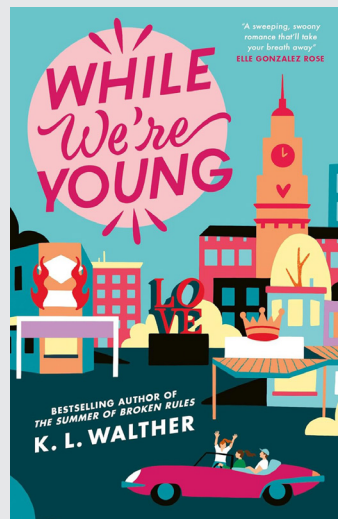
Sujin Witherspoon, Hot Key Books, 355pp, 9781471417740, £8.99, pbk  
It is tough being a teen! It is even tougher when you are tasked with co-managing your family’s flagship coffee shop while struggling to revise for your SAT’s and maintain a relationship with your brilliant (but devious) girlfriend!

Sounds like a lot, doesn’t it? Well, this is where we begin at Bingsu for Two with Sujin Witherspoon’s protagonist River. River makes a series of (in my opinion rather rash) decisions in response to the stressful situation we find him in which result in him walking out of his exams, quitting his job and becoming newly single. River finds immediate solace in a local Korean café just a few minutes away from his old job – with a cast of very likable characters. There is Dario the muscular jock with a soft spot River’s best friend Kai, Vanna who helps at the café with her effortless coolness

and Sarang, daughter of the owner Mr. Cho, who loves to hate River.

The story takes us through a lot of the complex moral dilemmas of late teens dating in the Instagram age – it also takes us through quite a lot of sound online marketing advice. As you might imagine the story comes at us at breakneck speed, not always taking too much time with big moments before another comes along. Witherspoon tackles some important topics head on – the Korean diaspora, consent, online harassment and first loves – deftly switching between irreverence and objectivity.

River is tender and confused as he provides a comforting voice for the reader whilst he does his best to find his place in the world, whilst missing his past. *Bingsu for Two* really grounds itself in Korean and Internet culture – unafraid to reference what our characters know and love. This can sometimes lead to certain references not always translating as hoped – but this is rare, and the essence of our characters is always clear. This is a funny and heartfelt romance that readers will enjoy for its frankness and its strong sense of self. **DO’R**



### While We're Young

★★★★★

K.L. Walther, Electric Monkey, 384pp, 9780008688455, £9.99 pbk  
Siblings Grace and James Barbour are teenagers from the USA. They could not be more different to each other. Grace is student body president and extremely well liked by both pupils and teachers. James has poor attendance and is more used to being out of school than in school, so much so, that he has a daily meeting with the Principal.

One day, Grace decides that she and her two best friends, Isabel Cruz and Everett Adler, will very unusually skip school. The group have been drifting apart and she wants them to

reconnect and make good memories before they all go to different colleges next year. Pointedly, James is not asked on the trip which makes him feel very left out. However, it’s clear why the author chooses to do this, as James gives us a perspective on school without Grace and Isabel.

What secrets will the reader learn over the course of this day-long, road trip novel? Both Isabel and Everett share things which change the group’s dynamic radically.

This is a deeply felt, structurally complex work with four different narrators but this gives the reader an intimate perspective of each of them, as well as their role in the group. This novel contains parental infidelity, grief from the death of a parent, academic pressure and teen relationship issues. There is also a large and welcome dose of humour, mostly provided by James’s character.

Young readers who have experienced the death of a parent will find Walther’s depiction of the grieving process deeply moving. The point is made that grief comes in waves and is not linear. **RB**

### This Feast of a Life

★★★★★

Cynthia So, Little Tiger, 415pp, 9781788953450, £8.99, pbk

Hong Kong born YA author Cynthia So identifies as bi, nonbinary, and demisexual. A new voice graduate of Juno Dawson’s 2019 *Proud* anthology, their short fiction and poetry has been published in *Uncanny Magazine*, *Strange Horizons* and *Anathema*. Cynthia’s debut novel *If You Still Recognise Me* emerged from their recognition of being part of the ACE spectrum. A blend of romance, rainbow identities, Asian culture and love of ice cream, it was shortlisted for the 2023 YA Book Prize.

So’s new contemporary romance novel is a melange of similar ingredients. A dual narrative told in the third person, it charts the emotions and experiences of two confused bisexual young adults over the course of a year. Auden and Valerie are in chaos over their identities, feelings, wants and needs. One is dealing with the pain of bereavement and the hurt they have caused amidst free fall while the other is still on a journey of self-discovery, questioning and testing their new name out by authoring a food blog.

A heartfelt fusion of Asian cuisine, friendships, sibling drama and LGBTQIA+ relationships, the book captures the complexities and awkwardness of understanding the difference between a crush and true love. So delights in exploring a kaleidoscope of romantic identities leaving their protagonists just out of reach of each other, until the last vivid realisation,

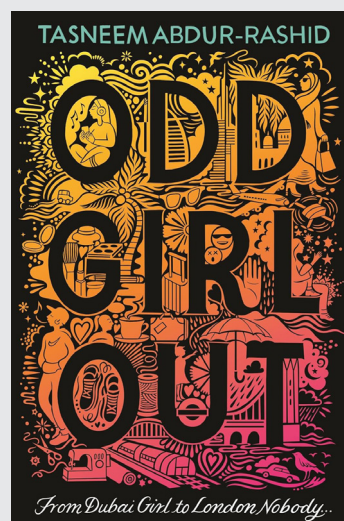


14+ **Secondary**/Adult continued

*"It's like a roller coaster for me, the ones with the long, slow climb towards the top that feels almost torturous, and then the exhilarating rush of descent at the end."*

Influenced by So's love of Asian food blogs *Made with Lau* and *Woks of Life*, the writing is sensory lingering on the spiciness and subtlety of different flavours and recipes, like Korean Kimchi pancakes and jjigae. The text expertly plays with food as a metaphor, mirrored in Auden and Valerie's joyous shared culinary experiences and idolisation of TV celebrity the non-binary Rina.

**This Feast of a Life** will appeal to fans of Alice Oseman and queer and questioning teens as Valerie and Auden bear their souls to the reader, struggle with familial expectations and engage with a diverse cast and divergent family dynamics in five parts alliteratively entitled *Scour, Sweat, Sizzle, Simmer and Savour*. It is an intense and nuanced read celebrating a myriad of queerness. **TJ**

**Odd Girl Out**

★★★★

Tasneem Abdur-Rashid,  
David Fickling Books, 368pp,  
978-1-78845-339-4, £8.99 pbk

16-year-old Maaryah has always lived a privileged life in Dubai but when her parents divorce, her whole world changes dramatically. Her now impoverished mother chooses to live near her family in England and suddenly Maaryah must adapt to a tiny house, a new school and the loss of the proximity of her lifelong friends. Her unhappiness is exacerbated when she discovers that she is the only hijab wearer at her school and the target of particularly venomous verbal and physical racial abuse.

Abdur-Rashid is skilled in exploring tensions in family and peer-group life and when Maaryah feels unable to speak out about her school experiences and her fractured relationship with her mother the author skilfully conveys her sense of complete

and irrevocable displacement. Maaryah's situation is somewhat eased when she makes three friends who she trusts and who do their best to support her but despite this her father's lack of communication, her mother's all-consuming grief and the pressures of school life take their toll on her. Her usual solace of working with fabric deserts her, especially after the design internship she won had to be abandoned on her departure from Dubai.

When Maaryah's relationship with her mother deteriorates further she takes the drastic step of returning alone to Dubai to see her father and, hopefully, pick up her old life. She tells no-one and so is completely unprepared when she meets her father's other family, of which she knew nothing. Abdur-Rashid has woven a fabric of problems and this is another thread, one which Maaryah is utterly unable to deal with - the endgame. When her mother flies to Dubai to support her, Maaryah realises that she belongs with her and, without her, Dubai is second best.

On their return to England, things move quickly and strategies are put in place to make her life at home and at school easier. Despite the rapid acceleration of the narrative it retains its veracity, principally because justice is done. **Odd Girl Out** has many strengths - the resilience of the human spirit, the richness of family life in all its guises, the joy of friendship and the acknowledgement of the power of diversity in our culture. It explores emotion fearlessly and skilfully avoids an over-earnest ending. **VR**

**Solo**

★★★★★

Grainne O'Brien, Little Island Books, 267pp, 978-1-9150-7179-8, £8.99 pbk

Daisy is an exceptionally talented teenage classical musician whose recorder has always been the mouthpiece for all that she is and wants to be: 'Nothing else mattered.'

Her ceaseless hard work and prowess leads her to competition success and makes her 'notable.' However, this status isolates her from her peers and intensive practice and rehearsals leaves little time to socialise. Then David comes into her life and her world is changed as he claims he was first drawn to her because of her devotion to music. After a month they sleep together for the first time - and then after what should have been a special bonding, he tells her he no longer loves her.

The prolonged period of grieving which follows robs her of success in her final music exams and severs her from her beloved recorder and even the choir where she has enthusiastically sung. Having lost the essence of herself she suffers further betrayal when Shannon, her best friend, slips out of her life and joins the girls who cuttily and jealously criticise Daisy as 'a nobody' chosen by 'a somebody.' And yet, there is more despair to come when her father is diagnosed with thyroid cancer. He is no longer her rock and her mother can no longer tend to Daisy's every need. It's time for her to grow up.

Enter new pupil at school, Flora - exquisitely gifted and with a murderous hatred of her father, so much in fact that she gave up music to punish him. Unable to return to her own work she brutally urges Daisy back to her recorder, her studies, her singing - and her final exams. The circle turns and Daisy returns to the siren call of the music and her new role within her family.

In writing *Solo*, Grainne O'Brien examines the often-tumultuous lives of teenagers: at the mercy of strong new feelings, helplessly self-centered, confused and frustrated by their own and others' thoughts and deeds. She also looks at the open-heartedness and determination of young people to embrace their talents and passions and thus travel along that road which takes them to who they are and who they will become. Equally as powerfully, she uses the shape and organisation of her prose to represent music in its many moods, paralleling them with what Daisy is experiencing. This unusual and accomplished book is a fast and furious read, threaded through with a healthy dose of timely wisdom. **VR**

**After Life**

★★★★

Gayle Forman, Hot Key Books, 272pp, 978-1471418310, £8.99 pbk Well-known for highly readable and emotionally charged YA fiction, the latest novel from Gayle Forman echoes something of the feelings and themes generated by perhaps her best-known novel, *If I Stay*. Once again, the central character is negotiating the boundaries between life and death, but in this case, Amber is most definitely dead. She died seven years ago in a tragic accident while cycling home. The novel opens with her cycling home again, only to

find her home strangely changed, her little sister the age Amber thinks she still is, and for her mother to react with extreme horror upon seeing her. Although we mainly hear Amber's voice, different perspectives and narratives gradually help us to piece together what happened to Amber. We are kept in suspense until the final pages to find out exactly who caused the fatal accident that took Amber's life. It is fascinating to see how the ripples of impact spread through the whole community and how people have been affected by her death even when they may scarcely have known her. All the while we are wondering what purpose Amber's return is to serve. Cleverly we see current-day perspectives as well as ones from the past and we wonder if Amber has a chance to right some wrongs. It is philosophically fascinating too, to see different people's ideas about death and what comes after, and to witness the impact of grief on family and friends' relationships. The family dynamics are particularly well drawn. In the afterword the author acknowledges the strength of her feelings for her own daughters and the trauma of imagining how she would feel if she were to lose one of them and this emotional authenticity underpins the whole book. The short chapters and spare writing style, where so much emotion can be conveyed in so few words, make this a highly accessible read, as well as one which is thought provoking and memorable. **JCo**

**Where Shadows Meet**

★★★★★

Patrice Caldwell, Hot Key Books, 352pp, 9781471411181, £8.99 pbk What an incredible world the author has created for us, in this story of old gods and vampires; but they are not as we find them in the usual canon of works. This is a place where the ruling family are vampires and are descended from a goddess called Thana, who together with four other gods left the heavens and founded the five kingdoms that make up Mnara. The story is divided into two parts; the first, set a thousand years in the past, explains how Thana became so powerful and what happened to her relationship with Favre, who gave up her wings for love, but who was finally betrayed. The second section is set in the country's present day, where the five states seem to be heading for war. When her best friend is captured and taken to the Island of the Dead, the princess Leyla decides she must try and rescue her; so, she and a young seer called Najia set out on this treacherous journey. The book is full of dangers and hidden menace and takes us on a roller-coaster ride coming to a thrilling climax at the end. However, there is a cliffhanger teasing us about a follow up in the future.

This is a story of power and love, in which love seems always to give way to power, at least with the character of Thana; when you have been a god, it



# reviews

## 14+ Secondary/Adult continued

is impossible to understand the reality of life for mere mortals and she almost seems to consider them as a food source. The present-day characters retain their vampire heritage, although not always totally draining their victims. All of this makes it very difficult to have sympathy for many of the main characters, although I think Najja comes closest. The book is written from multiple viewpoints and has a dual timeline, making it quite complex to get in to. Luckily the author has given us family trees for the various royal families and they are quite important in understanding the plot. This is a book that takes effort at the beginning, but which repays the reader. **MP**



### Not That Kind of Hero

★★★★

Alexia Casale, Faber, 349pp.  
978-0-5713-7438-0, £8.99 pbk

18-year-old Orla has always positioned herself as a sidekick, helpmeet and reliable support with no desire to step into the spotlight and a determination to suppress her own practical and emotional needs. A repeatedly and increasingly violent father meant that her family had to flee to the protection of a women's hostel and ensure that their whereabouts remained unknown. When her mother found a friend there in Raim, the two women combined families and moved in together. Casale paints a warm and convincing picture of the inevitable chaos generated by a household of 4 adults and 6 children under 12 – wonderfully known as The Brood – where each character and conversation rings true. She adeptly avoids sentimentality in a ménage where life is never uncomplicated, but support is always at hand.

Roks, Orla's 'semi-sib' has been accepted on a university course but her delight is peppered with guilt that Orla does not get an opportunity to similarly fulfil herself, since she is needed to manage The Brood while their mothers work. Eventually Orla

reluctantly agrees to audition for a two-week intensive theatre course which Roks has found and thinks she will enjoy. When she is accepted, her anxieties are slowly dissipated by the realisation that she can continue to support others rather than place herself centre stage.

The course students are not as adeptly created as those in the combined families. It is dangerously easy to let over privileged young people, immersed in drama schools and clubs from early childhood, drift into stereotypes and Pandora, in particular, is two-dimensional. Others, initially taking Pandora's lead, are dismissive of Orla, yet crave her advice and eventually and perhaps rather too conveniently friendships are born. The budding relationship between Orla and Cassian is well-realised and convincingly paced. Initially seeming shallow and rather too aware of his extremely good looks he emerges as a young man with his own insecurities who, nevertheless, gains Orla's trust as she finally tells him about her father.

Casale gives young adult readers touchstones for the problems which beset and bewilder them. In this age of invidious social media perfection she makes it clear that life is a messy affair and things do not always end well. What she also emphasises, however, is that there is no approved route to happiness and personal fulfilment and the joy and relief found when pursuing your own path is the truest measure of a rich inner life. **VR**

### The Restaurant at the Edge of the World

★★★★

Oliver Gerlach, illus Kelsi Jo Silva, Faber, 234p, 9780571381609, £10.99 Known for his contributions to 2000 AD's dystopian *Mega City Max* and GLAAD award winning anthology *Young Men in Love*, Gerlach's empowering and empathetic debut graphic novel celebrates queer identities in an engaging and quirky fantasy world. Inspired by his time as a chef and love of role-playing games, **The Restaurant at the Edge of the World** is a fusion of food and magic. It revolves around a warm-hearted 17-year-old orphan who loves cookery. Her name, Soup, evokes warmth and comfort and she considers her life at the Brazen Manticore to be a happy one until she discovers an unwelcome truth about her hellish boss Tyrstil Heldritch and his malign influence on the community.

As the stakes rise and all she holds dear is threatened, Soup and her nonbinary friend Clari come up with an audacious plan to overcome tyranny and deception and to prevent vulnerable artisans being bullied ever again. It will take willpower, courage and persuasion but can the nefarious Tyrstil, who has more than one trick up his sleeve be defeated?

American illustrator Kelsi Jo Silva,

known for the **Ela Cat** children's adventure series, brings Gerlach's vision to life with lively storyboarding celebrating Soup's passion for cookery in a series of closeups and spiral style vignettes. Her colour work reflects the different moods of the characters and varied settings ranging from warm blushes of orange for cooking scenes to cool blues to dusky violets and deep greens for outdoors.

Arranged in six colourful chapters with a cosy epilogue, diversity, inclusivity and the mutual appreciation of different culinary styles and recipes are at the heart of this creative cook off fantasy. Teens who are looking for queer representation within fantastical worlds will appreciate this. The found family vibe blended with magic will also appeal to fans of Baldree's **Legends and Lattes** series. **TJ**



### Songs for Ghosts

★★★★

Clara Kumagai, Zephyr, 416pp,  
9781803288086, £14.99, hbk

This hugely ambitious story drawing on Japanese myth and legend also takes inspiration from Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. Add in ghosts and descriptions of ancient musical instruments played mainly by visually impaired musicians, and clearly this is going to be a rich mix. In her previous novel *Catfish Rolling*, the author, who is herself from Canada, Japan and Ireland, memorably describes the search for missing family members after a catastrophic earthquake based on the actual 2011 event. The mixture of magical realism and contemporary realities won over many readers.

This story starts with 17-year-old Adam, a gay Japanese-American still at school and who has just split up with a much-loved fellow pupil. He lives more or less amicably with his father and a much younger stepmother, but on a trip to the attic he comes across a previously lost diary dating from 1911. Written by a young Japanese girl living in Nagasaki and also torn between two worlds, her diary then becomes the book's second narrative. Within it she describes being haunted

while also hearing distant melodies. Unbelieving at first, Adam changes his mind when her own ghost starts appearing. He eventually determines to travel to Nagasaki in the hope that all the various ghosts' secrets plus his own questions about his true identity will finally be revealed.

The author writes how she learned to play the cello in order to make describing Adam's own musical efforts on this instrument more realistic. This high level of personal commitment helps make for a quite extraordinary novel, crammed with glimpses of an ancient culture largely unknown in the West. Its sheer length and the density of its prose may put off some readers; for others, it could well be the most fascinating story they will encounter this year. **NT**

### Vanishing Edge

★★★★

Zillah Bethell, Firefly Press, 145 pp,  
9781915444844, £8.99 pbk

Set in Port Talbot, Wales, between the Sandfields Estate and the sea's edge this is the story of two 17-year-olds Apricot and Charlie. Apricot is a character marked by a deep sense of loss, trying to find meaning in her somewhat chaotic life, while Charlie is someone who is deeply affected by her own emotional baggage and difficulties and a need to make everything right. As the two characters exist through the novel, their voices represented by different fonts, their personal struggles and personal realities shift and change, as a view can change depending on whether you are above or below the water or looking back from or towards a horizon. So in the end we are left wondering who exists, who were the characters and who was the storyteller, and what did happen.

Zillah Bethell says that she is fascinated by 'the vanishing point' in art and how that translates into fiction and real life. 'Eventually we all vanish, to reappear in a different form. Life and death sometimes feel like one big magic trick. Just as **Vanishing Edge** is!'

The novel plays with the industrial and not quite but nearly bleak setting of the steel works and also the notion of what is real and what isn't. There is a very trippy feel to this book which is almost but not quite poetic in its form, the reader isn't always sure what is actually happening and what is imagined and what is distorted from another person's perspective. The result is a narrative that doesn't follow a traditional form and gives a window into the mind of teenagers who both love and need friends, family and their hometown but are also looking for escape, adventure and answers.

Zillah Bethell's writing is immersive, and she creates a vivid picture of both the characters' emotional landscapes and the gritty, atmospheric backdrop of Port Talbot. **Vanishing Edge** is an unusual exploration of personal connection, resilience, and the ways in which young people cope with the challenges life throws at them. **LJS**





# Children's Book Award

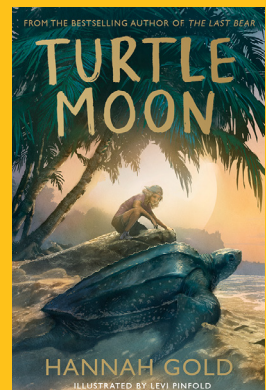
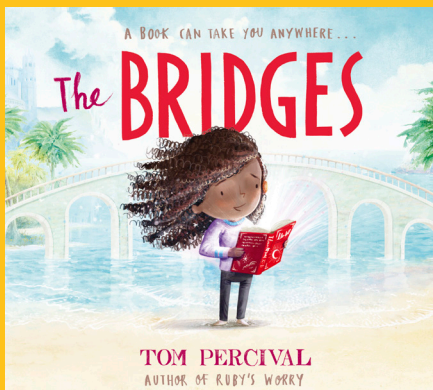
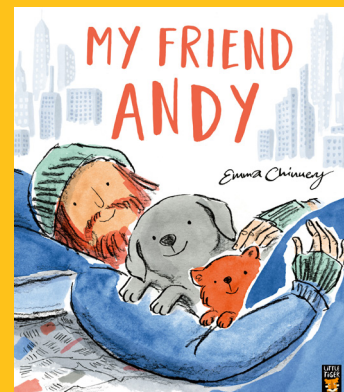
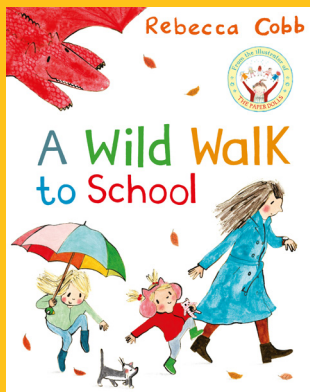
The Federation of Children's Book Groups

The FCBG Children's Book Award shortlist for 2025 has been announced.

Any child in the UK can vote so get hold of the books and read them now ready for online voting to open on 31st March.

Voting closes on 9th May and the winners are announced on 7th June.

[Head to the website for more information on the award, all the books, and to access the voting forms](https://www.fcbg.org.uk/childrens-book-award-2025)

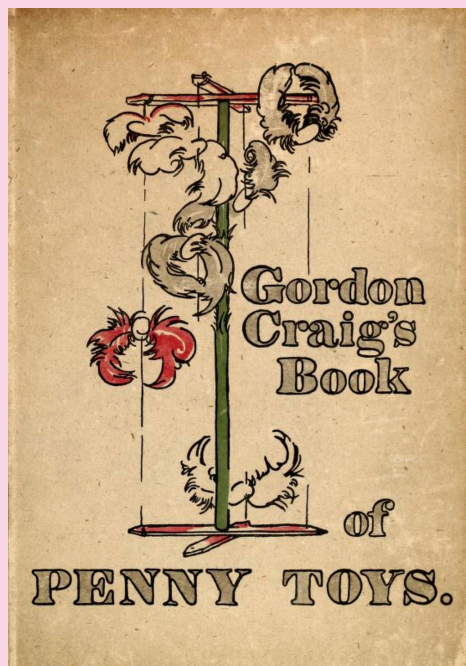


[fcbg.org.uk/childrens-book-award-2025](https://www.fcbg.org.uk/childrens-book-award-2025)



# Valediction: **No.21 Penny Toys**

**Brian Alderson** bids farewell to a remarkable volume by an author whose home life was complicated, to say the least.



## Gordon Craig's Book of Penny Toys.

Vig. With letter "c". Published At The Sign Of The Rose, Hackbridge, Surrey, and Sold By Lamley & Co., 1 Exhibition Road, London. 1899. 335 x 255 mm. 48pp. ([1] Book-plate "Ex Libris. Rosie 1926" [2] blank [3] title-page, as above. [4-5] blank [6-7] "Words" [8-9] blank [10] "Words" cont.] [11] blank [12-13] verso Jingle; recto hand coloured plate [14] blank; [15-76] follow that pattern [77-78] blank. Jacketed paper over boards, title and drawing to front. Imprint to rear. Front free endpaper Signatures and note "and now in 1910, this copy goes on to the Rosie for whom it was made, With Love from Teddy". Verso blank.

The picture book, **A Book of Penny Toys**, saw the light of day during a typically fraught time during the continually fraught life of Edward Gordon Craig, its author and publisher.

He had been born in 1872, the illegitimate son of an architect, Edward Godwin and the actress Ellen Terry but the relationship had failed and at the age of sixteen he had changed his name and been christened Edward Gordon Craig.

From the start of his life, Craig had been ineluctably drawn to things theatrical, especially acting and stage design but things were at a bit of a stand when he hit on the idea of Penny Toys. To his mother's consternation, in 1893 he had married Helen Mary Gibson (May) with whom he would have four children born annually in quick succession: Rosie, Robin, Philip and Peter. Perhaps with May's help, in January 1898, he began to edit a magazine *The Page*, a miscellany of text about literature

and the stage along with his own wood engravings. However, while travelling to give some stage performances for pay, he met an old flame Jess Dorynne and went to live with her in a cottage at Hackbridge, Surrey. At around that time, encouraged by his sister Edy and influenced by the illustrations of William Nicholson, he decided to make his own picture book based upon the Penny Toys that he had been collecting from street sellers for years. It seems that the composition of the book which he undertook with Jess was to be illustrated with his own wood engravings which were mostly to be coloured by hand by Jess.

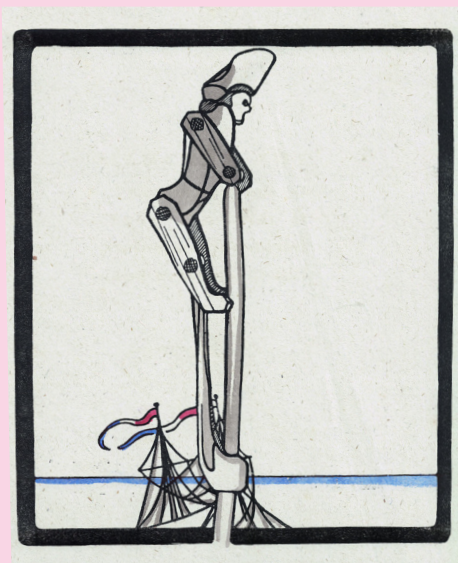
He decided that he would publish the book himself, using a printer in Croydon but a complication arose at the last minute when he discovered that another artist, Mabel Dearmer was also publishing a book on Penny Toys. He therefore had to alter his own title to the present one at the last minute.<sup>1</sup>

Thus **Gordon Craig's Book of Penny Toys** arrived in 1899 with the wood engraved illustrations faced by what he called 'jingles'. A number of these were written using several of what would eventually amount to as many as sixty-five of his pseudonyms, but several were by his sister Edy or his children by May. She would not allow him to meet them at their home, but they would visit him on neutral territory.

With thoughtless ambition Craig had had 550 copies printed of **Penny Toys**. Mathematics would have told him that hand colouring each image would amount to 11,000 pages. He had left much of that work to Jess and had lost interest in doing it himself with the result that he claimed to have got rid of 250 copies of the book by burning them in his garden (There were probably more lost in this holocaust?).

Nothing was easy, however, for Jess became pregnant in the cottage and by the time that she gave birth to a daughter, Kitty, Edward Gordon Craig had encountered another lover, Elena Meo. Jess was heartbroken at his desertion of her, but this affair was more longer lasting, and he would escape with Elena to Italy where his children, Teddy and Nellie were born. In all the extended family Rosie remained his favourite and he gave the present copy of **A Book of Penny Toys** to her and it carries her book plate designed by him.

The plates and their colouring give a good idea of why Craig found them so attractive but the jingles hardly measure up.



## *The Admiral*

*Is the battle lost?*

*Is the battle won?*

*Decide for yourselves,*

*But throw me a bun.*

But Rosie would surely have loved them all.



<sup>1</sup> Craig thought she had copied his title but this is not mentioned by Jill Shefrin in her lecture on Mabel Dearmer. Toronto Osborne Collection 1999

**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.