

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.272

May 2025



the children's book magazine online

Authorgraph interview

Matt Goodfellow

Windows into Illustration

Rébecca Dautremer

Owning It: Our disabled
childhoods in our own words

Explore **Alice's Oxford** with Peter Hunt

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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from *The First Year* by **Matt Goodfellow**, cover illustration by **Joe Todd-Stanton**. Thanks to **Otter-Barry Books** for their help with this cover.



Editorial 272

Another issue, another alarming report on reading for pleasure. New research from HarperCollins highlights what its authors call 'a national crisis in reading and young people'.

It reveals that fewer than half of parents of children up to 13 years old say reading aloud to children is 'fun for me' and that Gen Z parents, who grew up with technology themselves, are significantly more likely than Millennials or Gen X to view reading as 'more a subject to learn' rather than a fun or enriching activity.

Almost one in three (29%) children aged 5-13 think reading is 'more a subject to learn than a fun thing to do', up from 25% in 2022. This growing association of reading with pressure rather than pleasure is contributing to disengagement.

More than one in five boys (22%) aged 0-2 are rarely or never read to. Only 29% of boys in this age group are read to daily, compared to 44% of girls, underscoring early disparities in exposure to books. Only 12% of 12-13-year-old boys read for fun.

Charlotte Hacking responds to the report in this issue, in a special guest comment piece for Books for Keeps. Do email us (enquiries@booksforkeeps.co.uk) with your thoughts too and ideas for addressing this national crisis.

New Platform Launches in Response to Class Crisis in UK Writing Industries

In perhaps better news, a new initiative has been set up to tackle another 'crisis': *The Bee* magazine has been created to fight the increasing marginalisation of working-class writers, and of working-class people in publishing. Publishers New Writing North report that in 2014, 43 per cent of people in publishing came from middle-class backgrounds, with 12 per cent being of working-class origin. Since 2019, the former figure has risen to sixty per cent, and as recent news stories about access to the arts have shown, the barriers for the less well-off are increasing.

Editor Richard Benson says, 'Justice and fairness demands that people from the less well-off sections of society have the chance to tell their stories, and to get them heard. But it's also about common sense. Much of the important writing being done today, and so many of the best-loved



THE WORKING CLASS LIBRARY

stories come from ordinary working people. So often, it's stories from the working classes that express what's really happening in the world.'

The Bee's channels include a website, literary magazine, podcast, and a large-scale outreach programme to seek out, and support the professional development of, new writers from working class backgrounds. It will publish fiction and non-fiction.

The initiative was born out of *A Writing Chance*, a UK-wide programme for working-class writers co-founded with the actor and philanthropist Michael Sheen, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and Northumbria University, and produced by the writing development charity, New Writing North.

Claire Malcolm, CEO of **New Writing North**, says, 'Our research shows that despite incredible success stories from these initiatives the class crisis continues to grow. There's never been so much debate about class in the creative industries but nothing has changed, and things are actually getting worse and inequality more entrenched, hence the need to make our own reality.'

'Talent is classless. Opportunity, however, is class-bound. The Bee is an urgent response to that.'

The same issues identified by **New Writing North** will impact would-be writers of children's books, and Eve Ainsworth highlighted the need for increased representation of working class voices in [this article from our archive](#). It's another issue we expect will return to.

Books for Keeps May 2025 No.272

ISSN 0143-909X

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30 Winton Avenue London N11 2AT.

Books for Keeps is available online at

www.booksforkeeps.co.uk

A regular BfK Newsletter can also be sent by email.

To sign up for the Newsletter, go to

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

If any difficulty is experienced, email addresses can also be sent to enquiries@booksforkeeps.co.uk*

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Reading for Pleasure – Why the decline and what could we do about it?

Charlotte Hacking considers a major problem of our time.



New research from publisher HarperCollins revealed last week that 'parents are losing the love of reading aloud.' One of the most striking findings was that, despite reading aloud to children being a proven way to boost their enjoyment of reading, the number of parents reading aloud to children is at an all-time low. Fewer than half (41%) of 0–4-year-olds are read to frequently, a steep decline from 64% in 2012. The new data also revealed that many parents don't find enjoyment in reading to their children, with only 40% of parents saying it is 'fun for me'. Parents face increasing pressures, with 34% of parents of 0-13s wishing they had more time to read to their children. Attitudes towards reading are also changing, with parents increasingly aligning their children's reading with schoolwork rather than something fun to enjoy.

There's much in here to unpick. We all know the wide-ranging benefits of reading for pleasure and the research that underpins this. However, many of the issues raised are being pointed towards parental attitudes to reading, and in turn, the blame in news reports and in the underbelly of social media comments, is directed toward parents suffering from socio-economic inequality, certain ethnic groups and others being blamed for society's wider ills.

To remedy this, we need to centre children and childhood in policy. The curriculum, inspection and assessment system must stop rushing children through to unreasonably demanding expectations, give time for play and slow, deeply embedded learning. For children to connect with themselves, others and the world around them. This includes time and play spaces for outdoor learning, time to read and be read to and with, and time away from screens and technology. Reading has become faster; skimming, scanning and consuming content, rather than reading deeply; inferring, comprehending and empathising.

Society also needs to make time for parents to be present. So many families can't make ends meet without the financial security of both parents working full time, making time they do have with their children scarce. Reading should be relaxed, social and pleasurable, with time to ponder and discuss, but so often the pressure and number of things to do in the little time parents have makes this a challenge.

If parents and children see reading more as a subject to learn, the curriculum and assessment system has created this. Books sent home

for children in their earliest years of school are likely to be decodable texts or levelled readers. Whilst important for practising reading, these deliberately reductive texts are not going to be those that instil a love of books or make reading a pleasurable activity at home. If reading is seen as a chore, or worse still, if it becomes a battle to get through the 'school reader', parents and children will be put off the experience. Sharing rich stories, picturebooks, comics, graphic novels, poetry and information books together at home unfolds the wonder and potential of the reading experience, allowing children to develop tastes and preferences and creating connections above and beyond those seen between letters and sounds.

With a curriculum and assessment review underway, we must ensure reading for meaning and pleasure sits the centre of the curriculum experience. Yes, children can't do this without knowledge and skills of how to read, but purpose and pleasure need to be centred to provide the will to carry on when things are challenging. This also requires investment in CPD for teachers, as well as the autonomy to respond to the needs of individual readers. We must also ensure that all schools have dedicated budgets for regularly improving stock of high-quality books that engage all readers.

In turn, communities should be supporting families with opportunities to connect and learn about the joys and challenges of parenting, child development and about family literacy, beyond the school gates. The tidal wave from the shift in name from the Department for Children, Schools and Families to the Department for Education and the closure of **Sure Start** centres is marked, with the ripples of impact still spreading.

Many comments on the report came from parents who do make time to read and who provide a range of books for their children at home, recognising the value of this. However, we must recognise the privilege of this. Not every parent has the disposable income to buy books from book shops, or even charity shops, as well as the luxury of time to read to and with their children, and not all local communities have the luxury of a well-stocked children's library or the leisure time to visit these. With an increasing amount of children now living in poverty, we must make sure all children have access to books, rebuilding public libraries instead of closing them and investing in book gifting programmes like [Dolly Parton's Imagination Library](#), to ensure all children have a collection of books that are uniquely theirs.

The publishing industry must also play its part in allowing every child and family to see themselves in books, publishing books and supporting creators and publishing industry professionals that allow every child and family to see that reading is a place and space for them with books that speak to them authentically, as **CLPE** highlight so importantly in their [Reflecting Realities](#) research.

The blame doesn't sit at the door of parents. This isn't just a parenting, publishing, school, or education issue. It's at the heart of the society that has been created with its ever-widening inequality gap. For the good of children, it's up to all of us to see and accept each part of the problem, and to do what we can to remedy it together.



Charlotte Hacking is a teacher, Literacy Consultant and Educational Speaker. She co-authored the book **The Balancing Act: An Evidence Based Approach to Teaching Phonics, Reading and Writing**, which is currently shortlisted for the **UKLA Academic Book Award 2025**, alongside Professor Dominic Wyse.

The GLL Literary Foundation takes off!

As **BfK** readers know, a new foundation to support up and coming children's authors was established in November 2024 by charitable social enterprise and libraries operator **GLL**. We find out how it's going

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. This struck us as an innovative and practical initiative, that offers valuable support for authors and creates worthwhile relationships for libraries and publishers so we're shadowing the initiative in a series of articles. This is the second.

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

Authors across all genres of children's literature were encouraged to apply, including picture books, early readers, chapter books, poetry, non-fiction, novels, graphic and verse novels. Entries were submitted by publishers and assessed by a board of trustees drawn from GLL libraries.

In March 2025, children's authors, librarians and notables from the publishing world gathered at Battersea Library in the London borough of Wandsworth to announce the first cohort of **GLL Literary Foundation** authors and to celebrate the official launch of the **GLL Literary Foundation**.

Speakers at the event included GLL's CEO Peter Bunday, who emphasised the importance of collaboration in protecting, supporting and growing library services. Isobel Hunter MBE, CEO of Libraries Connected talked about the unique role of libraries in uniting publishers, authors and audiences, GLL's Head of Libraries Rebecca Gediking shared the vision and purpose behind the newly established Foundation, while Wandsworth Council's leader Councillor Simon Hogg, highlighted the borough's continued support for libraries as London's 2025 Borough of Culture.

Nadine Wild-Palmer, author of **The Tunnels Below** and Nadine's 'champion', Wandsworth Children's Librarian, October Jones, share their experiences of attending the **GLL Literary Foundation** launch event.



Nadine Wild-Palmer says:

Walking into the GLL Literary Foundation national launch was like stepping into a wonderland. Not only were there echoes of the Lewis Carroll classic in the teatime refreshments put on by PeonyRose, but it was held at Battersea Library: my memories of studying there as a youth brought the past and the present all together under the ornate glass roof.

Working with the **GLL Literary Foundation** has already made me feel like I am back where I belong with a lively literary community championing the work of early career authors. It has also renewed my sense of hope and reassured me that I will be able to continue and sustain my career as a children's author. This had been challenged first by COVID and then when Twitter turned into X, a change which not only made me feel unwelcome, even lost but which severed the communication I had built up with my peers and community, which I have found difficult to repair. I now know from talking to other authors at the **GLL** launch event that I am not the only children's author who has experienced this. And so it was, that gathering with the other 19 children's authors who are supported by **GLL** has made me feel like I am getting a second chance to commune, contribute and to shine.

The launch itself was beautifully organised and well attended but my main takeaway was the positive connection that the Foundation seeks to reinforce by marrying authors with local libraries which, I still believe, are the heart of the community. Libraries are not just places to read books, they have their own ecosystem. They are places to exchange and share ideas, study, chat, have tea, make friends or, for me, on one desperate afternoon, to breastfeed. Thanks to libraries I have always had a safe place to be.

I am naturally drawn to libraries, and started my career in children's books in my twenties as an assistant librarian in a school keen to learn what children wanted to read and to discuss books and ideas. When I look back on my life, I realise that whether on my gap year visiting cities around the world or sheltering from the rain or, heartbreak, I find myself at all stages hidden among shelves lined with books. So now, given the opportunity to give back to the institutions that have given me so much it fills me with a sense of homecoming embellished with feelings of gratitude and joy. I'm looking forward to the events and exchanges that will help me grow as an author and hopefully a person through working with the GLL Literary Foundation and would encourage any budding author to apply in the future.

Off the back of an author visit to a beautiful school in Southwest London recently I was reminded that being a children's author is one of the most fruitful and fulfilling jobs out there, but it can also be lonely, especially when the bank balance is low and you're feeling a bit dog-eared. Being part of the **GLL Literary Foundation** – something bigger than myself – provides the support and confidence that someone has my back and that there's always a library to go to if I ever lose my way!





October Jones says:

At a time when national data paints a worrying picture of falling reading enjoyment and literacy rates among children, GLL has stepped

forward with a powerful response: putting libraries, authors, and communities right at the heart of the solution.

The **GLL Literary Foundation** (GLF25) isn't just a timely intervention, it's a bold reimagining of what library-led literacy work can be. More than a single programme, it's a living, breathing framework that puts equity, creativity, cultural representation, and real community connection front and centre.

The Foundation officially launched in March 2025, with a dazzling celebration at Battersea Library. This landmark event brought together local, regional, and national leaders, industry powerhouses, literacy leaders and supporters and of course, the stars of the show: our author cohort. We were all united by a shared mission to bring back the joy of reading and weave libraries and literature into the fabric of everyday life.

The atmosphere was electric: a tapestry of celebration, hope, and community spirit stitched right into the historic walls of the Battersea reference library. For one magical event, the space was transformed into an enchanted wonderland, complete with stunning décor, sumptuously thematic catering, and the unmistakable sense that we were all witnessing something momentous.

With rousing speeches from Councillor Simon Hogg, Libraries Connected CEO – Isobel Hunter MBE, GLL CEO Peter Bunday, Literary Foundation Founder and Head of Libraries Rebecca Gediking, Patron Joseph Coelho (appearing via video) and Trustee Mo O'Hara, it became clear: this wasn't just the start of a project, it was the beginning of a movement.

As Wandsworth's Literary Champion, I felt truly honoured to stand among so many passionate, committed people, all united in the belief that authors, libraries, and communities, together, can light a path towards a brighter future for children's literacy. Together, we are writing a new chapter, and it's a thrilling one!

It's my great pleasure to introduce the phenomenal authors leading that new chapter for Wandsworth: Nathanael Lessore, Fay Evans, Olivia Wakeford, Nadine Wild-Palmer, and Jack Meggit-Phillips. This line-up represents the vibrant, diverse world of children's literature today, each bringing their own distinctive stories, cultural perspectives, creative energy and their incredible enthusiasm for libraries. Throughout 2025, these authors will be visiting libraries across Wandsworth, delivering three different events: one in a school, one in a library, and one online. This triadic approach will allow us to reach as many children and families as possible.

The **GLL Literary Foundation** may have only just begun, but it's already proving what we've always known deep down: A good story can change a life. A great library? It can change an entire community!

Authorgraph No.272

Matt Goodfellow
interviewed by
Clive Barnes

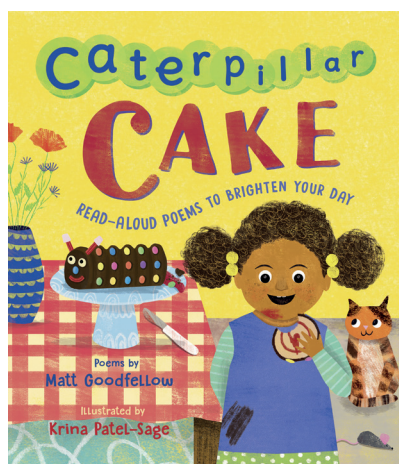
It has taken Matt Goodfellow a while to discover where his talent might find a home. When we meet on Zoom, Matt tells me he has always been good with words, 'When I was a kid, I found making stupid stuff up to make people laugh came quite easily.' He admits that maybe this talent went unrecognised at high school, at least by the teaching staff: 'I was a bit of a pain, really.' He went on to study English at university and worked for a short time as a journalist – 'so the writing was always been knocking around there.' But, from the time he was thirteen, he was determined to be a songwriter. He says now that 'poetry and song lyrics are best mates, one and the same thing to my mind.' But at the moment he gave up the songwriting dream and retrained as a primary school teacher, he thought 'the songwriting, the creativity, was all done.' It wasn't, of course.

Once in front of a class, Matt began creating poems and songs with the kids and inviting authors in. Tom Palmer was one of the first. Matt watched Tom with his class and thought, 'right, I quite like the idea of that.' And then 'the writing gradually took over from the teaching.' His poems began appearing in children's poetry anthologies. His headmaster allowed him to take his poetry sessions out to local schools. He self-published his first collection of poems



in 2016 (now an expensive second-hand purchase on Amazon) and appeared on the radar of two of the principal publishers of children's poetry: Janetta Otter Barry at Otter Barry Books and Gaby Morgan at Macmillan. His collections began to be regularly shortlisted for the **CLiPPA (Centre for Literacy Primary Education Poetry Award)**. By then, he was writing full time and last year his first verse novel, **The Final Year**, took the **CLiPPA** and a host of other awards. His most recently published verse novel, **The First Year**, quickly followed that success. It finds young Nate, who spent his final year at primary school in the earlier book, moving on to his first year at high school. This is a bigger, and, Matt believes, even better book. It is shortlisted for the **Carnegie Medal** and looks likely to gather more awards.

Matt's poetry displays enviable strengths: a sensitivity to the audience, a command of form and subject, from playful and funny to thoughtful and serious, a sharp and subtle take on the world, and a vigorous attention to language. He says that the verse novel



was a new challenge, 'I wanted to push my boundaries. I'd got to the stage where I had a spine of poetry collections from KS1 to KS4. I feel that I'd said all I'd needed to say with the single poem.' There were difficulties to overcome, though. 'I have ADHD. I don't sit writing for hours at a time. I have written about kids like Nate for a long time, but giving him more space meant I was spinning more plates to keep control of the narrative.' Matt is thankful for the support of his editor, Charlotte Hacking, particularly as he realises he is sometimes a difficult man to work with: 'I'm quite childish and I'd be sulky about stuff at times.' It was Charlotte who introduced him to the illustrator Joe Todd-Stanton, whose illustrations Matt describes as 'just beautiful' and which contribute so much to both the Nate books. When Matt talks subsequently about the verse novels it is often as a joint author with Charlotte, we rather than I; and it was appropriate that **The Final Year** was shortlisted for the **Branford Boase Award**, which uniquely recognises an editor's role in a book.

We talk about Nate's voice, the voice of both the books. Matt says, 'It's not really my voice. The book is set where I used to teach for eleven years. Nate's voice is a bit of my voice as a kid, the voices that I heard as a teacher in that community, and a bit of stuff I made up. Hopefully there's an authenticity there because that's what young people that I taught sounded like.' We move from there to regional patterns of speech, to dialect. Matt says, 'One of the greatest things that poetry offers us is the chance to capture patterns of speech like this. The musicality of regional accents and dialects is a beautiful thing. Nate's voice is an interesting one and he's proud of it.' Matt returns to the theme later but before that we talk about how Nate has grown between the two verse novels.

Nate is still the eldest of three boys and living with single parent Gemma, with the support of her best friend Auntie San. His sworn enemy Turner is still giving him grief. But little brother Dylan isn't poorly anymore and, being at a different school, Nate moves away from his brothers who, for a while, make a team without him. He has new things on his mind, including the return of his dad, whom he barely remembers. Matt says, 'We are perhaps even more inside Nate's head. He is beginning to understand a bit more about the world swirling around him and into which he's been catapulted. And, in that sense, it's darker. I wanted to explore Nate's mum and Auntie San a bit more and to introduce a new female friend, Muna, to Nate's circle of mates. I think Nate begins to understand that a lot of power comes from the female characters in his life.'

We talk a little about Gemma, Nate's mum, and Nate's family. Matt says Gemma was quite a divisive character among readers of the first book, perhaps because she has three children from different absent fathers and leaves Nate to take a lot of responsibility for looking after his brothers. I noticed that one review of **The Final Year** describes Nate's family life as chaotic. I wondered whether Matt agreed. He thinks hard about the answer. 'I think Nate's life is difficult as all lives are difficult. We really worked hard to treat that family with respect. I write about lives that I've seen. It is chaotic but there's a lot of love. Human beings doing the best that they can. This is real life, we are all victims of life and all lives are important and Nate's experiences of life matter.' Over the course of the two books, Nate discovers that he wants to talk about his life through his own poetry and this is what Matt says is his mantra when he talks to children and young people, 'wherever you live and whatever happens to you, you matter.' In the novel, Nate begins to understand, too, that some of his strength and his need to express himself through poetry comes from his mum.

There is an intensity and passion in what Matt says about his ambitions for his future work. He says that **The First Year** is perhaps the last we will hear of Nate, but he hopes there will be more verse novels. He wants to challenge both himself and perceptions of what poetry can do. We talk about Alan Garner and David Almond, writers that Matt admires for their ability to bring place, working class community and language together in work that transcends conventional notions of prose and poetry. Talking about Garner's **Stone Book Quartet**, he says, 'The words are on fire. It's an incendiary for the brain. I'd



like to be able to do that for my readers.' And it seems to me that this is not just a challenge for himself as a writer. We talk, too, about his continuing work in schools, 'for me as important as the books.'

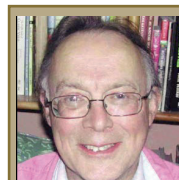
Matt sees the way that poetry is taught in schools and tied to the exam system as disempowering for both poetry and the next generation. He wants to bring poetry back to communities that he feels have been disenfranchised. 'Poetry has often been talked about in an elite way. Poetry is the distillation of this and that...I tell the kids if you like music, you will like poetry.' Matt feels that poetry should be a way for everyone to articulate who they are and where they come from, which is there in their own patterns of speech: 'People's cultural heritage matters, their accent and their dialect matters.' It's a conviction that drives his performance of his work ([which you can catch on the CLPE website](#)); that resonates throughout the verse novels and that will surely shape the work that is to come.

The First Year (978-1915659606) and **The Final Year** (978-1915659040) are published by Otter-Barry Books and illustrated by Joe Todd-Stanton, £9.99 and £8.99 pbk respectively.

Other books by Matt Goodfellow:

Caterpillar Cake, illustrated by Krina Patel-Sage, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1915659392, £8.99

Let's Chase Stars Together, Bloomsbury, 978-1472993847 £7.99



Clive Barnes was Principal Children's Librarian, Southampton City and is now a researcher and writer on children's books

Windows into Illustration: Rébecca Dautremer

Rébecca Dautremer is a celebrated French illustrator and author. She graduated from the Arts Décoratifs School in Paris and went on to illustrate several bestselling picture books, including **L'Amoureux** which won the Prix Sorcières. She has been relatively unknown in the UK though that is set to change as Post Wave Children's Books publish her long-form picture book **The Ordinary Life of Jacominus Gainsborough**. Rébecca introduces the book and her artistic approach.

I am so delighted that my book is finally publishing in the English language for the UK, US and ANZ markets. Jacominus made his debut in France in 2018, and the book has sold strongly there and around the world. It has been published in 19 languages – and I am so proud that the 20th will be in English.

Jacominus is a fluffy white rabbit who enjoys the simple pleasures and beauty of things. From childhood through to old age, Jacominus is fortunate to be surrounded by family and friends. He may not be the biggest or strongest, but he grows, learns, faces moments of sadness and also finds great joy.

I started by thinking I could make a book about life. I wanted it to explore what life is, the beginning of life, the end of life, meeting people, knowing things, sharing good and bad moments. And because I wanted my book to be welcoming for children, even if I was exploring serious or sad subjects, I decided to create a world where all the characters have different animal heads but live a life with human characteristics.

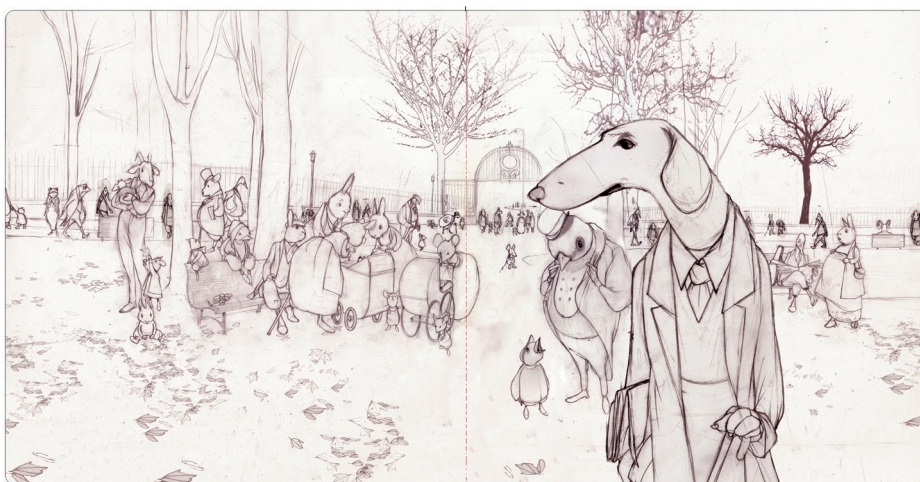
The book has 12 detailed scenes which reflect the changing seasons and major milestones in Jacominus' life; and ten portraits of our hero at different ages.

I paint traditionally, so the illustrations are all hand-painted and take many hours. I work on the composition and light based on research sketches:

Then I create a detailed pencil drawing. And sometimes a digital colour sketch:

The colouring is done with brushes and gouache on watercolour paper. This technique uses the light from the white of the paper. It is not possible to redo it. It is therefore important to design the final image well before execution.

This scene is the first one in the book where we are first introduced to Jacominus Gainsborough and his family. I don't like to draw modern things, I prefer to draw old things like old boots and clothes, because they are more pleasant to draw and paint. I prefer to step back to the beginning of the 20th century, in a kind of steampunk way. It's an alternative version of the past.





When Beatrix Gainsborough witnessed the birth of her youngest grandson, she was filled with joy. "He'll be named after his grandfather!" she declared. "Isn't that a rather long name for such a teeny-tiny person?" asked the child's mother.

"Pompoms, ma chère," retorted Beatrix. "Jacominus Stan Marlow Lewis Gainsborough is a simple and elegant name, and it will suit this dear child perfectly!" Mr and Mrs Gainsborough were so delighted at the arrival of their new baby that they wanted to make his grandmother happy too. And so, they named their son Jacominus. Short and sweet.

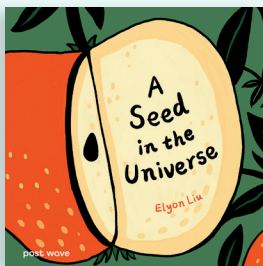
*Babik, my dear.

I hope you enjoy meeting Jacominus Gainsborough - think of this book as an album of a life well lived, a life worth celebrating.

The Ordinary Life of Jacominus Gainsborough
by Rébecca Dautremer, is published by
Post Wave Children's Books, 9781836270171, £16.99 hbk.

Heartwarming and thoughtful picture books.

post wave
children's books



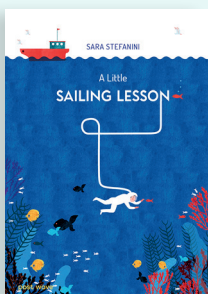
£9.99
ISBN: 9781836270126



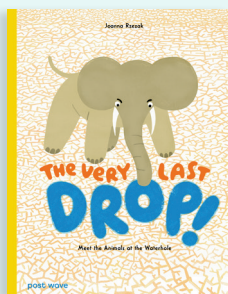
£12.99
ISBN: 9781836270164
Publishing 8 May



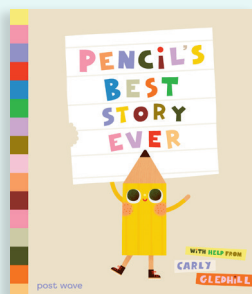
£16.99
ISBN: 9781836270171
Publishing 22 May



£7.99 PBK
ISBN: 9781836270874
Publishing 3 July



£12.99
ISBN: 9781836270218
Publishing 3 July



£12.99
ISBN: 9781836270256
Publishing 4 September



Les Heures Riches de Jacominus Gainsborough by Rébecca Dautremer
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Picture This: Three Bears

In her new **Picture This** column, **Nicolette Jones** takes a look at three picturebooks starring bears.

'Every illustrator has to do a bear book sometime', Raymond Briggs said to me once. The three pictures I want to consider here are by artists who did just that. And they made me reflect that illustrations of bears fall into three categories. They can be based on toys – specifically teddies, or on real animals, or they are caricatures. (Although caricatures may also overlap with either of the other two classifications.)

Examples of the first group include E H Shepard's depiction of A A Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh, which Disney turned into a caricature of a toy. We know that Shepard based his drawings on his own son's teddy bear, Growler, and not on any plaything belonging to Christopher Robin. Also in this category, for instance, are Jane Hissey's *Old Bear* and *Little Bear*, soft toys rendered with scrupulous precision, and *Rupert the Bear*, who, although he appears in a cartoon strip and is dressed like a person, clearly derives from a conventional ted shape, as originally illustrated by Mary Tourtel and later by Alfred Bestall. Other toy-based representations would be, say, the family of teddies in Jill Murphy's ***Peace at Last***, or Jarvis's endearing hero in the ***Bear and Bird*** early readers.

Raymond Briggs' own version, in ***The Bear***, was indebted to a real animal: a huge polar bear with long black claws, though his fur suggested infinite softness. Other illustrators who looked at the actual creature include Levi Pinfold, for the cover and inside illustrations of Hannah Gold's ***The Last Bear***, and, despite the use of textured collage, Eric Carle, who followed the body shape of a real bear in ***Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do You See?*** Peggy Fortnum's original *Paddington* made use of observation of the South American spectacled bear; it was RW Alley's illustrations to later books that turned him into something much more like a toy. And Helen Oxenbury's final glimpse of the solitary cave-dweller in ***We're Going on a Bear Hunt*** is inspired by nature rather than stuffing.

Those in the third category, caricatures, look as they tend to in animated films: the Yogi Bear school of illustration. Exponents include Steve Small in ***I'm Sticking With You***, making use of the style's comic potential, or Leo Timmers in ***Bear's Lost Glasses***, notwithstanding his notably original technique, or Ross Collins, skilfully drawing a cartoon polar bear in ***There's a Bear on My Chair***.

No doubt readers can think of plenty of other examples of illustrated bears and identify for themselves which of the three types they belong to.

So, let's look at three bear images that have featured recently as #newillustrationoftheday on Bluesky and Instagram. The first is by Richard Jones from ***Safe at Last*** (out from Walker Books on 3 April). It is the story of a boy who has animal friends and worries about them during a storm, going out into the wild weather to check on them, only to come home to find that

they have all gathered at his house to make sure he is safe. In this image, half of a spread, the assembled creatures watch the dawn rise together and are seen largely from behind. The use of sweet shop colours, in the sky and particularly in the jewel-bright birds, gives this picture a quality of fairy tale, with a distinct echo of the joyously colourful work of Brian Wildsmith. But the bear and its two cubs anchor the scene in the natural world – which Wildsmith also often made vibrant. This brown bear sits in the posture of a human being; doubtless bears do also sit like this. The scale, the shape, the texture of the fur and the stance of the two little bears all make us understand we're looking at real animals. This is a bear you want to spot in the wild in Canada, not acquire at Hamley's. The creature's face, illuminated by the morning sun, expresses gentleness. The point of this picturebook is to evoke the possibility of affection between children and animals, suggesting not only the magical light of the sunrise but also the magic of a harmonious world.

The second bear picture is by Sara Ogilvie from ***Gozzle***, a new picture book by Julia Donaldson, which was published by Macmillan on 27 March. Ogilvie has to complement the humour and the tenderness of the text, and find the middle ground between the actual tendency of goslings to attach themselves to anything they see when they hatch, and the fact that these are talking creatures in a fictional world, albeit in a natural setting. Ogilvie's talent is for caricature, often, as here, underpinned by an underlying observation of reality. So this illustration belongs to the tradition of caricature, with a bear that walks and talks and gestures like a person and has large comical eyes. But unlike, say, the Disney version of Winnie-the-Pooh, this parodies a beast, not a teddy.

The setting is evoked in the same way as the principal characters, making use of the observed shapes and appearance of trees and



from ***Safe at Last***

foliage and a log over a stream but with the expected economical reductiveness of a cartoon. The conventions of caricature are also followed consistently in that it is not only the bear and the baby goose that react with exaggerated human emotions but also a frog and a fish who watch the goings on from a rock in the middle of the stream. Ogilvie has retained a quality of bear-ness in the large shaggy creature, with the snout, the ears, and the claws, but also takes advantage of the possibilities of this genre to engage us with its feelings as if it were one of us.

And my third bear image is by Natalia Shaloshvili, from her picturebook **Bear**, which is an exploration of the kind of temperament that prefers its own company. It was published by Frances Lincoln on 13 March. Rich and textured layers of pastel create a softness to rival the pelt of Raymond Briggs's bear but although this image uses some of the techniques of caricature the bear that it represents is a big cuddly toy rather than a living ursine original. Not only because of the way it sits on the bench and clutches a biscuit, a balloon and a book. The big splodge of the nose and the little round eyes and ears in spotted warmers suggest a face that has already been made to snuggle up with, not one you might be afraid of if it entered your tent. It has the right vibe and the right visual language for a book which is a metaphor for our relationship to each other rather than a study of our relationship to other animals. We want this bear to be sympathetic and comforting and funny and not a wild creature we might need to defend ourselves against. The blurry medium, the candyfloss colour, and the anxious expression all serve the creation of a tender and comical effect. This story celebrates not the majesty of bears (as Pinfold did) but their huggableness.

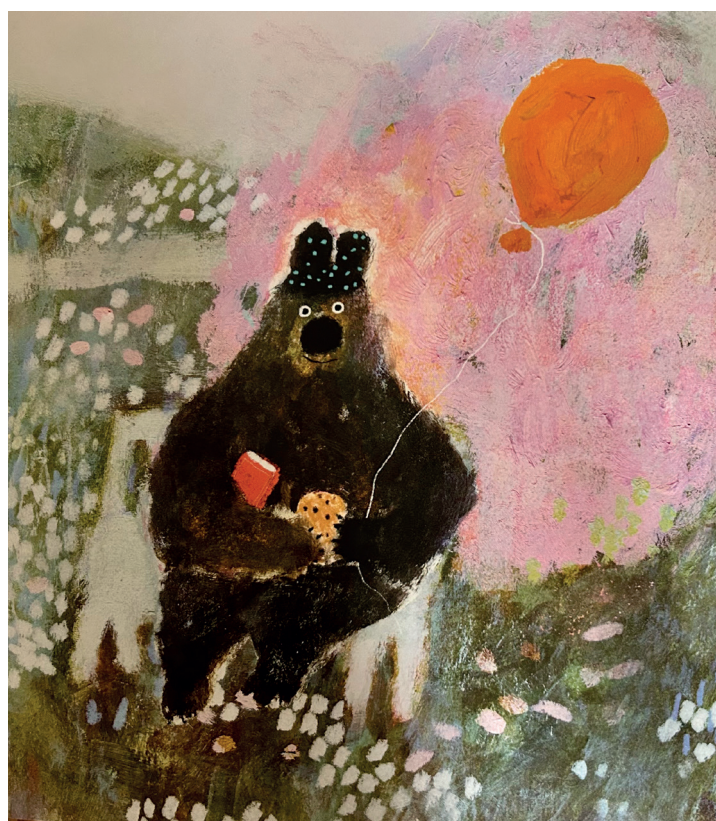
All these three bear images are delightful, but before you set out on your own bear book it is worth considering which of these three paths you wish to go down, like Goldilocks, to find something that is just right.



from **Gozzle**

Books mentioned:

- The Bear**, Raymond Briggs, Puffin, 9780141374079, £7.99 pbk
Peace at Last, Jill Murphy, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1509862597, £7.99 pbk
The Last Bear, Hannah Gold, illus Levi Pinfold, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0008411312, £7.99 pbk
Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do You See?, Eric Carle, Puffin, 978-0141501598, £7.99 pbk
We're Going on a Bear Hunt, Michael Rosen, Helen Oxenbury, Walker, 978-0744523232, £7.99 pbk
I'm Sticking with You, Smriti Halls, illus Steve Small, Simon & Schuster, 978-1471182815, £6.99 pbk
Bear's Lost Glasses, Leo Timmers, Gecko Press, 978-1776575947, £12.99 pbk
There's a Bear on My Chair, Ross Collins, Nosy Crow, 978-0857633941, £6.99 pbk
Safe at Last, Richard Jones, Walker, 978-1406376258, £12.99 hbk
Gozzle, Julia Donaldson, illus Sara Ogilvie, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1529076417, £12.99 hbk
Bear, Natalia Shaloshvili, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1836006565, £7.99 pbk



from **Bear**



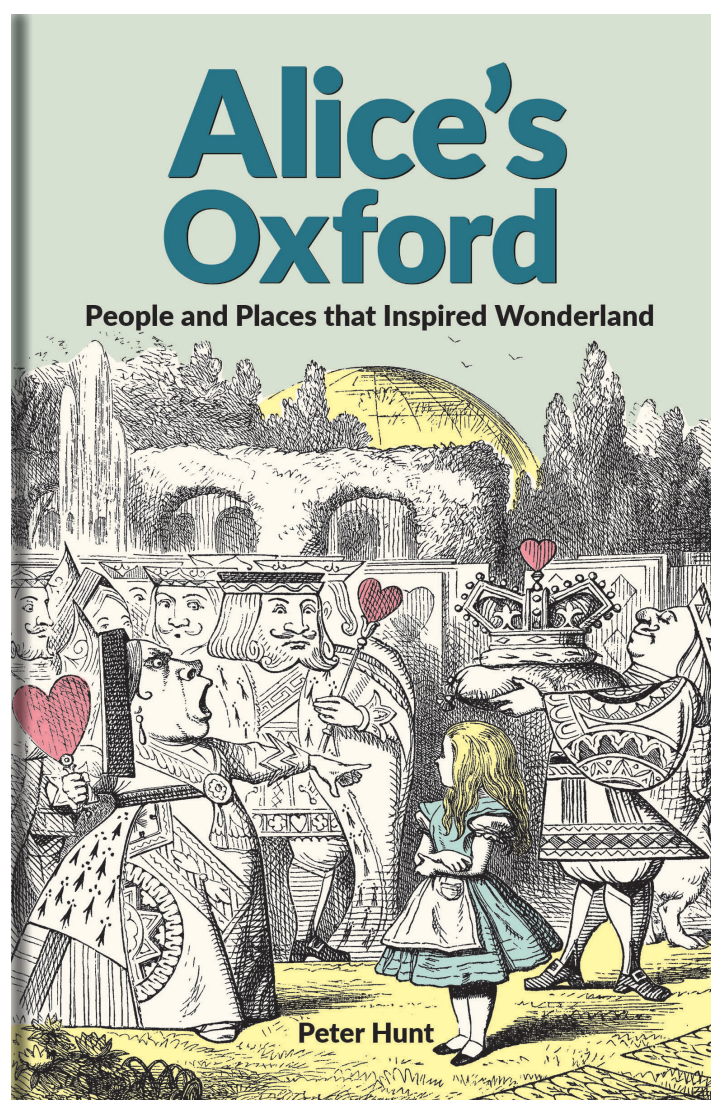
Nicolette Jones writes about children's books for the **Sunday Times**, and is the author of **The Illustrators: Raymond Briggs** (Thames & Hudson); **The American Art Tapes: Voices of Twentieth Century Art** (Tate Publishing) and **Writes of Passage: Words to Read Before You Turn 13** (Nosy Crow).

Alice's Footsteps – Mad Hatters and Paper Houses

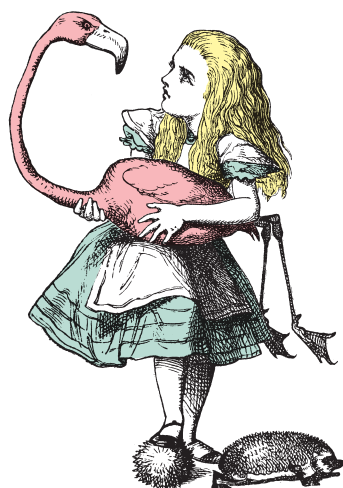
Children's Books and Real Places have often been entwined and confused and none more so – and none more deliberately – than Lewis Carroll's **Alice** books and the English City of Oxford. **Peter Hunt's** new book, **Alice's Oxford**, explores some of the extraordinary entanglements between fiction and fact, as he explains.



Google 'Alice' and 'Oxford' and you'll be inundated with details of Oxford's annual 'Alice's Day', 'Alice'-themed walking tours, bicycle tours, and boat trips, exhibitions and events, all linking a real place with a world-famous group of fictional characters. Hundreds of thousands of people seem not to find it odd to retrace the steps of creatures that never existed on solid paving stones that did, and do, and wherever you turn in modern-day Oxford, there seem to be traces not only of Lewis Carroll's creations, but of a whole society that he knew. For a few short years the small and intimately interconnected world of Oxford was shared between the eccentric writer and mathematician, Charles Dodgson, aka Lewis Carroll, and his muse, the daughter of the head of his College, Alice Liddell, aka Alice in Wonderland, and somehow, they seem to still be around.



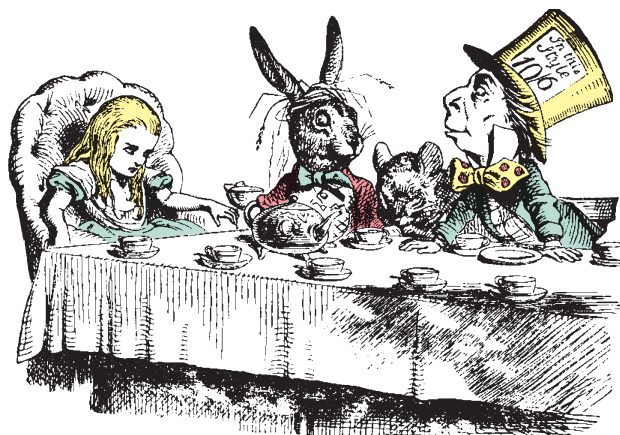
Carroll may have been a fantasist, but the fabulous creatures and places in **Alice's Adventures in Wonderland** and **Through the Looking-Glass** were solidly based on fact, and any day in Oxford you can see tourists admiring Humpty Dumpty's wall, or visiting the Dodo in the Natural History Museum, or watching the rowers at Folly Bridge where Dodgson hired boats to row Alice and her sisters on the river.



This slightly surreal sight would probably have amused him as much as it would have embarrassed Alice, but once you have adjusted to the eccentricity of literary tourism, Oxford and Alice may be the most fruitful place to indulge it. This is partly because Carroll was a consummate intellectual games-player, and could scarcely look at a place or a person without blending it into his off-kilter world.

For example, in **Alice's Adventures**, one of the most famous characters that Alice encounters is a Hatter, thought to be mad. If you walk along

Oxford High Street today, you will pass the sites of the houses and shops of no fewer than three possible candidates for the original Hatter. At 48-9 could be found Theophilus Carter, who looked remarkably like John Tenniel's picture of the Hatter (the more remarkable because Tenniel almost certainly never visited Oxford or saw him) and who was rumoured to be the inventor of the Alarm Clock Bed, exhibited at the Great Exhibition of 1851, which ejected its occupants into a bath of cold water. (Just to help things along, Mrs Carter's name was Mary Ann – coincidentally (?) the name of the White Rabbit's maid.) And then at 83-4. there was a hatter who later became famous for selling his wife's marmalade, Frank Cooper (yes, *that* Frank Cooper).



At number 22 was the most famous hatter of all, one Thomas Randall (grandson of the John Randall who rebuilt Magdalen Bridge from 1772), who ran the 'London Hat Warehouse' and by 1861 had moved to Grandpont House, literally built on (or over) the river. His daughter Eliza (later Lady Stainer) was a friend of Mary Prickett, Alice's governess, and the Liddell girls often visited. Alice Liddell remembered in her old age that it had been a special pleasure to be allowed to take Rover, a retriever 'belonging to a well-known Oxford tailor called Randall'... out for a walk. And Randall gave tea parties for poor local children. A hatter living near Folly Bridge would have been the kind of joke that Dodgson appreciated, the kind of joke on which the 'Alice' books were built.

But it is not just the endless intricate whimsy of the books that leads people to stare. Dodgson's contemporaries, the occupants of the Oxford buildings that stand today, were remarkable, extraordinary people. Perhaps one of the most enduring mental images conjured up by the 'Alice' books is of a small girl in a boat on a sunny river, but there cannot have been many – or any – other girls who were routinely taken on boat trips by two young men both of whom eventually had memorials in London's Westminster Abbey. One was Lewis Carroll – the other was Robinson Duckworth, who went to officiate at the funeral of Charles Darwin, and was one of Queen Victoria's and King Edward VII's chaplains. Nor can any girl have gone on to be married in the same church, wearing a brooch given to them by the son of the reigning monarch – in this case, Queen Victoria's youngest son, Prince Leopold – with whom, as a teenager, she had had a brief dalliance (and blacked his eye with an oar) – but, she noted, 'I was never ordered to be beheaded.'

Alice's father, Dean Henry Liddell, was (arguably) the most powerful academic in the world at the time, and head of (arguably) the most famous Oxford college – Christ Church – and as she grew up, Alice had the very best of tutors, including John Ruskin, the most powerful art critic of the century, as her drawing master for a while. Today, Christ Church is (arguably) almost as famous for 'Alice' as for its historical reputation (although being used as locations for the first two **Harry Potter** films has confused things further). There you can see memorial windows to Alice and her sister, and doorways and fire-irons that she would have known, and the quadrangles and gardens where she grew up.



And so the spirit of Alice and Carroll can be imagined to live in the Broad Walk (where Alice and her sisters planted trees to celebrate the Prince of Wales's wedding), or Merton Field and its lawn where croquet was played; and the Oxford Botanic Garden, which may have been a model for the Red Queen's and whose Keeper in the 1850s was the amiable and eccentric Professor Charles Daubeny probably the model for the White Rabbit: 'a little, droll, spectacled, old-fashioned figure, in gilt-buttoned blue tailcoat, velvet waistcoat, satin scarf, kid gloves too long in the fingers, a foot of bright bandanna handkerchief invariably hanging out behind.'



There are convoluted links to Carroll and Alice everywhere you look in both the books, and in Oxford, and some very curious sidelights on history. In **Through the Looking-Glass**, Alice takes a brief train ride and encounters a man dressed in white paper (!), who advises: 'Never mind what they all say, my dear, but take a return-ticket every time the train stops.' Where on earth can this apparent nonsense come from? It seems that originally, when the new railway branch line from Didcot to Oxford was being built, the main Abingdon to Oxford Road was going to cross it on a new bridge, close to Hinksey Paper Mill. The owner of the mill, one John Towle (who became mayor of Oxford in 1856), objected, possibly out of political cussedness (he was a non-conformist) or because he hoped for compensation. And so, being a paper miller, he built a paper house (of brown paper, with a fireplace) on part of the proposed embankment which delayed the opening of the line. Towle's house was much extended and survived until 1996, as a listed building, until a tree fell on it. So perhaps nothing is as nonsensical as it may seem.

Up river to the eel traps at Godstow, or down river to the Deserted Village at Nuneham, in rainstorms or on railways, from the treacle well at Binsey to the Sheep's shop in St. Aldate's, the associations keep coming, and even if they can be tenuous, they are always fascinating. They are both a part of the mythology of Oxford and the currency of almost universal literary childhood.

Peter Hunt's, **Alice's Oxford. People and Places that Inspired Wonderland** is published by Bodleian Library Publishing, £12.99, bodleianshop.co.uk



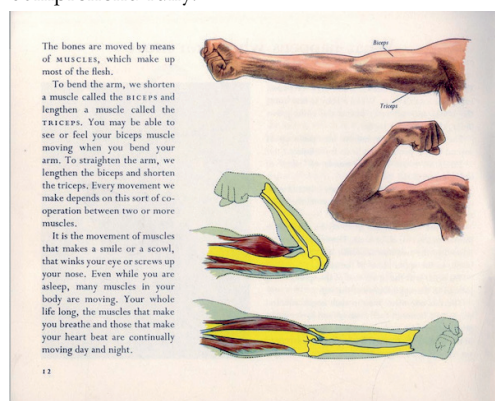
Peter Hunt is Adjunct Professor of Children's Literature at Dublin City University

Inside the body

The third in their new series of articles **Ruth Thomson and Pam Dix** get under the skin of illustration in children's information books.

In the course of our research, we have become intrigued by the varied ways in which illustrators visualise the working of things hidden from view: under the ground, inside machines, vehicles and buildings or, as in the case of this article, the human body under the skin. The challenge here is to create images of internal organs and body systems, and convey the complexity of their inter-relationships, in a way that makes them both understandable and enticing for young readers. Illustrators have to choose not only what to depict, but also how much detail to include to make their images comprehensible.

Anatomical drawings have existed since the Renaissance and medical books with accurate coloured anatomical drawings flourished in the early 19th century, when anatomy became an essential part of surgeons' training. However, children's books exploring and explaining the human body were rare until the 1950s. The Puffin picture book, **The Human Body** (1955), written by a biologist, is an early example. The illustrations are a mixture of realistic, but mainly disembodied, images of body parts and explanatory diagrams – not that far removed from those in a conventional anatomy book. Most children would have found these too decontextualised to comprehend fully.

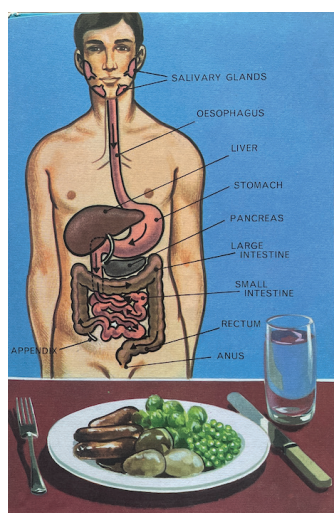


Cyril Bibby, illustrated by Ian T Morison, **The Human Body** (Puffin 1955) The most effective illustrations are perhaps these realistically-drawn arms, matched on the same page with diagrams of their internal workings. Words in capital letters in the running text match the image labels, to aid comprehension.

In the Ladybird book, **Your Body** (1967), realistic illustrations mainly depict whole bodies – although only those of white, athletic, wholesome adults and children. Diagrams of different body systems (digestion, waste, blood circulation, breathing, nerves, etc.) are superimposed over naked figures, indicating their positions in the body – all except the reproductive organ diagrams, which are depicted with no context at all. Children may have been hard-pressed to understand the inter-relationships of the various systems from these illustrations.

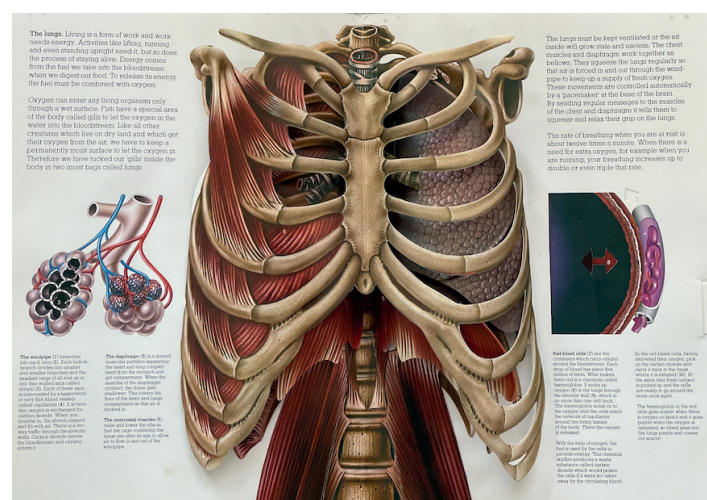
It was not until the 1980s that two ground-breaking books appeared which, for the first time, offered empirical, interactive learning experiences for children about the way the body functions. Both were produced by Intervisual Communications in Los Angeles, whose founder, Waldo Hunt, was credited with single-handedly

David Scott Daniell, illustrated by Robert Ayton **Your Body** (Wills & Hepworth, 1967) A labelled diagram of the digestive system is overlaid onto a stiffly-standing young man, showing where this fits within his body. The plate on the table, strategically positioned in front of him, shows typical British fare of the time – meat and two veg.



revitalising moveable books in the latter half of the 20th century. Requiring the imaginative technical skills of specialist paper engineers and expensive to produce, these books were painstakingly put together by skilled hand-workers in Colombia.

The Human Body (1983) uses the analogy of the body as a space capsule – the head being the command module, which controls life, and the trunk being the service module, which contains the life support system. By manipulating the first spread, a large 3D head pops up with a jaw that opens and closes. On another, a flap of muscle unfolds to reveal ribs behind, which in turn unfold to show the heart and lungs protected behind it and the relative positions of the digestive system. On a third, a layered, curved cutaway heart pops up. All the body parts are numbered and relate to explanations in the text. In addition, pulling tabs help demonstrate how heart valves or muscles work, aiding young readers' immediate understanding and piquing their interest in how the body works and how its parts fit together.

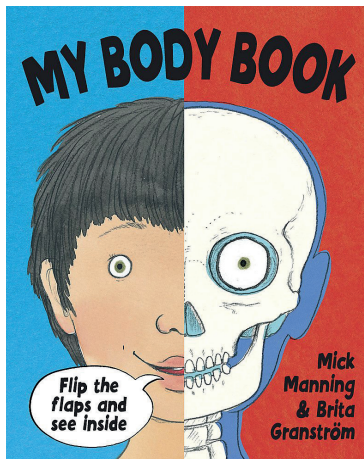


Gently opening and closing this spread of Jonathan Miller and David Pelham's **The Human Body** (Jonathan Cape, 1983) aptly shows how the lungs work in conjunction with the ribs and the raising and lowering of the diaphragm. The shaded, textured artwork of pitted bones, striated muscles and tendons provides a sense of realism.

Essential information about **Your Amazing Senses** (1987) is reinforced by three-dozen, innovative, visceral activities to help children understand the value of their five senses – including feeling the tactile raised dots of a Braille alphabet and a touch maze; comparing soft and smooth surfaces; twanging lengths of elastic, as well as smelling scratch and sniff patches. A variety of interactive tricks, experiments and games about sight, co-ordination, reactions and reflexes make it fun finding out about the relationship of the senses to the brain. Special-coloured glasses add an extra element of surprise and enjoyment to the experiments. Clear and approachable line and wash images and crisp diagrams of the sense organs break up the dense text.

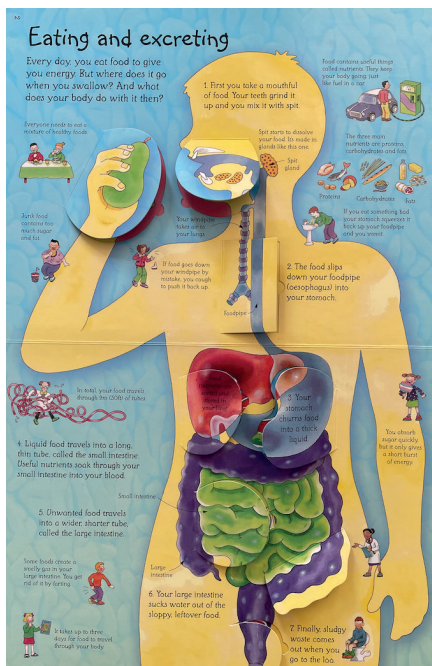


This spread from Ron and Atie van Der Meer's **Your Amazing Senses** (Child's Play International, 1987) is packed with visual illusions and interactive games to prove how your eyes can be fooled.



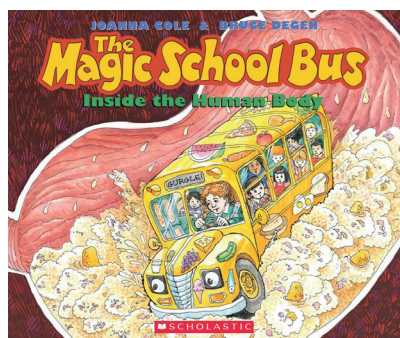
See Inside Your Body (2006) has more than 50 flaps, used extremely effectively to convey the way each body system works. Lifting each one shows what is inside an organ or has a magnified view of minute elements, such as blood cells or bone marrow.

Katie Daynes, illustrated by Colin King, **See Inside Your Body**, (Usborne Publishing, 2006). By lifting each flap in turn, corresponding with the numbered explanations of each part of the digestive system, the reader can actively follow what happens from taking a mouthful of pear to excreting its waste. Additional information is given on the back of each flap.



An altogether different illustrative approach is to visualise an imaginary journey through the different elements of the body. **The Magic School Bus Inside the Human Body** (1989) is one of a successful, long-running American series of junior science story cum information books, based on the imaginative conceit that Miss Frizzle, a zany teacher, can take her class on impossible school trips in a magic school bus – whether inside the earth, out in space or back to the time of dinosaurs. In this title, the bus shrinks to fit inside a body of a daydreaming pupil and the miniaturised children journey through his digestive system, via the bloodstream into the heart and lungs, until they are eventually expelled when the child sneezes.

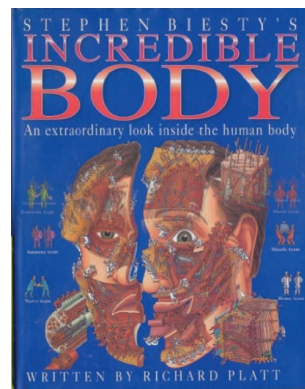
The landscape format of the book encompasses a variety of illustrations and multi-layered text – which includes a running narrative, speech bubbles with children's reactions to each event and separate factual information presented on lined notepaper, as if written by one of the pupils. The full bleed, light-hearted, busy line and wash illustrations imagine the tiny children smaller than blood cells, with the ability to climb up the spine and around the brain.



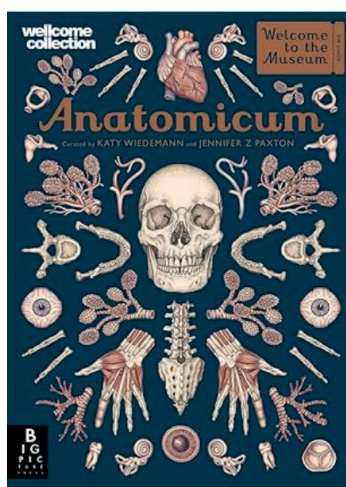
The cover image of Joanna Cole and Bruce Degen's **The Magic School Bus Inside the Human Body** (Scholastic, Inc., 1989) shows the bus, driven by their teacher, splashing its way through the churning digestive juices inside the stomach.

Illustrated flap books also offer an effective and accessible interactive exploration of the body. In **My Body Book** (2006), turning half-page flaps on each spread reveals the workings of each organ in turn. The simple, bold artwork is clear and appealing. Flipping the flaps quickly gives a sense of movement.

Richard Platt, illustrated by Stephen Biesty, **Stephen Biesty's Incredible Body** (Dorling Kindersley, 1998) The cover image is typical of the inside images – with the different teams working together. Here, the home teams are peeling back the skin to reveal other teams lifting and pulling muscles, carrying red blood cells or defending his body from infection.



Stephen Biesty, best known for his masterful historical and architectural cross-sections and explosions of buildings, places and machines, visualised his own body as a gigantic building through which two tiny explorers embark upon an adventurous journey to discover each organ. In Stephen Biesty's **Incredible Body** (1998), the illustrator imagines his body staffed by teams of minute workers – each identified by a particular coloured uniform – who maintain and service it, and offers explanations about their specific tasks. The book also includes visual jokes and asides to surprise and amuse sharp-eyed readers.



Jennifer Paxton, illustrated by Katy Weidemann, **Anatomicum** (Big Picture Press, 2019) The cover image demonstrates both the complexity and the beauty of the parts that make up the human body.

An outlier in this roll-call of body books is the more recent, lavishly-produced, oversize **Anatomicum** (2019), one of the successful Welcome to the Museum series. It imagines the body as a virtual museum with an entrance and six galleries, each one devoted to linked body systems, such as the cardiovascular and respiratory system or the digestive and urinary system. The ink and watercolour whole page illustrations are a throwback to the style of images in many Victorian anatomy books – realistic, incredibly-detailed, static elements elegantly arranged on the page, but ultimately somewhat lifeless specimens.

Today, even in this age of x-rays and digital imaging, illustrators continue to find new ways to show the insides of the body, using laser-cuts, transparent layers and other cutting-edge printing techniques to help explain this topic of endless fascination to children.

In more recent years, alongside books exploring the insides of the body, an increasing number of publications focus on body positivity, abilities and diversity. Such books encourage children to celebrate their own bodies, counteracting some of the increasing concerns that they may have about their size, colour or body image. Although discussion of these books is beyond the scope of this article, mention must be made of a pioneering example of this genre, **It isn't Rude to be Nude** (2020).

Rosie Haines, **It isn't Rude to be Nude** (Tate, 2020) The lush, exuberant ink and coloured pencil artwork shows bodies of every shape, size and colour, moving about and standing still, standing out in their simplicity from stark white pages.



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, and is a trustee for Book Aid International.

Ruth Thomson is an award-winning educational author and editor, who specialises in writing books on art and history. She has written children's publications for major British museums and art galleries.

Beyond the Secret Garden: books for babies and toddlers

In the latest in our long-running **Beyond the Secret Garden** series, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** look at books for the very youngest.

Although durable books made of cardboard or cloth have been around since the 1880s, according to researcher Allison Kaplan, board books and toddler books began to take off in the 1940s and 1950s when the Bank Street College of Education in New York began investigating the benefits of books for pre-readers. Booktrust's new Writer in Residence is Camilla Reid, who writes books primarily for early years – often in the form of the board book. In her reflection on her upcoming residency, Reid commented that 'Early years reading doesn't mean teaching babies and toddlers to read, it simply means cuddling up and sharing a fun reading experience with a favourite adult' (Booktrust.org.uk). This adult (or older child)-younger child contact is certainly one of the joys of books for babies, but research shows that pre-readers who have access to books develop reading skills (directionality, for example, or recognising repetition in text, or shapes, objects and colours in illustration).

THE DOG John Burningham



THE RABBIT John Burningham



In the UK, publishers imported books such as Dorothy Kunhardt's **Pat the Bunny** (1940), but it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that toddler and board books became a common feature of children's book sections of British bookstores. John Burningham's Little Books (**The Baby, The Blanket, The Dog**) from the 1970s, Shirley Hughes' Nursery Collection from the 1980s, and Helen Oxenbury's 1985 series (**Friends, Playing, Dressing, Family, and Working**) were popular British books for pre-readers, but like many books, they were aimed at a book-buying adult – which at the time was seen to be primarily middle-class white British parents and grandparents. The children in the stories for babies and toddlers were almost exclusively white (although all of these authors produced books for reading children with broader representation).

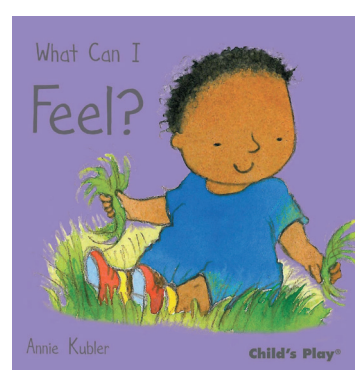
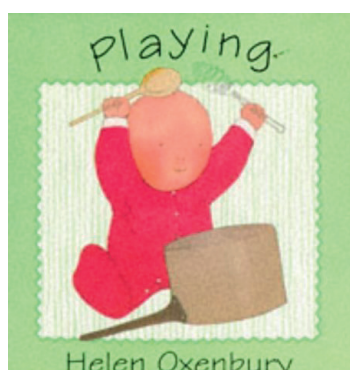
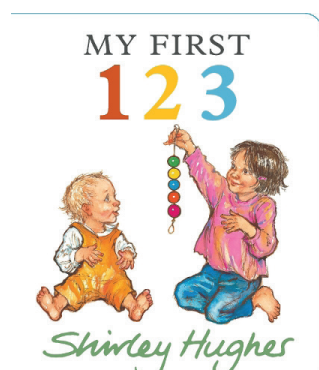
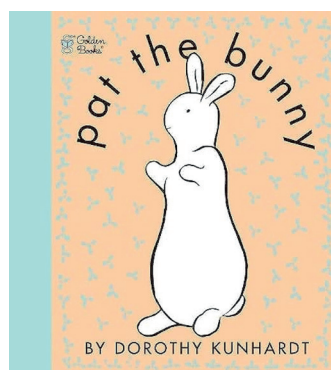
Beginning in the 1990s, health and literacy charities began testing programmes that provided books to new parents. The Boots Books

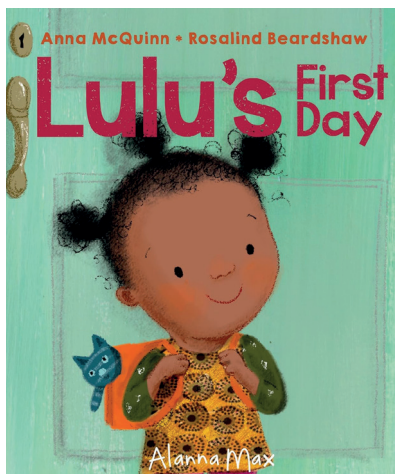
for Babies project (1998-2000), for example, offered free books to parents who brought their babies in for infant hearing checks; parents of babies who received the free books were encouraged to get library cards for their children and the number of applicants surged (Bailey, Harrison and Brooks, 'Boots Books for Babies project'). The Booktrust programme Bookstart, first piloted in 1992, began providing book packs to infants and conducting research on their pre-school assessments; although the research was small scale, the data was positive enough that the supermarket Sainsbury's became a corporate sponsor. These types of programmes marked a change in what kinds of books and how many were available to young children. Patrice Aggs' **Teatime** (1995), for example, was published by Walker for Sainsbury's (the supermarket's name is branded on the cover) and features one white child and one Black child having a fantastic time over fairy cakes and sippy cups.

The number of board books in these programmes (and Booktrust's Bookstart is now national and funded by Arts Council England to provide all newborns with books) have broader representation *when they feature humans at all*. However, many board books do not include humans; they represent objects (apple, ball, truck), animals, or anthropomorphized transportation (trains with faces). Most studies on board books and racially minoritised people (readers, characters and authors) come from the US, but the numbers are not encouraging. Hughes-Hassell and Cox found in 2010 that nearly 60% of board books featuring people had only white people ('Inside Board Books'). And Elizabeth Dulemba, writing in 2023, noted that 'while representation in *picturebooks* is increasing in the US, time will tell if these lessons are reflected in the content of board books as well' ('Board Books are for Babies, or are they?'). Different types of board books feature different types of representation, so it is useful to look at the board books available to think about what good representation looks like.

Early Concept Books

Early concept books provide young children with pictures of objects, sometimes in the framework of alphabet, counting, shapes, sensory, or colour learning. Of these types of book, it is the sensory books (seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling) that are most likely to feature humans, for obvious reasons. Child's Play, singled out by Kaplan, Tobin, Dolcetti and McGowan ('Representation Matters') in 2022 as providing quality books on racial and ability-based representation, has board books by Annie Kubler focused on the senses, such as **What Can I Feel?** (2011) in which three out of five feature racially-minoritised children on the cover.



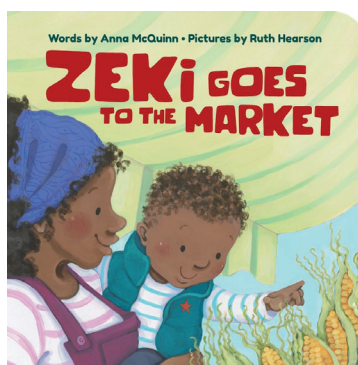
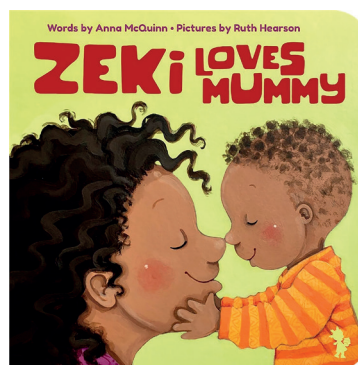


Babies' and Toddlers' Daily Lives Books

The books in this category showcase common activities in the lives of baby and toddlers: bedtime, eating, bathtime, going to the park or playgroup. This category is the most likely to represent racially minoritised children, sometimes as main characters and sometimes as part of the background. Ladybird's seasonal walks, **A Walk in Spring**, **A Walk in Summer**, **A Walk in Autumn** and **A Walk in Winter** (2024) feature a mixed heritage family walking through the same landscapes (town and countryside) throughout the year; the town scenes feature people of different racial backgrounds. Board books by Pamela Venus, such as **Let's Go to Playgroup** and **Let's go to Bed** were originally published by Verna Wilkins' Tamarind Press in 2004 and then reprinted by Tamarind's successor, Firetree Books in 2016; interestingly, Penguin Random House failed to reprint these books after they took over Tamarind in 2007. In contrast to the Ladybird Walks, Venus's books are more focused on the racially minoritised child character as they travel through the landscape of bedtime or playgroup rituals. Jessica Spanyol's excellent **All About Rosa** series features Rosa, a little girl of colour, in everyday adventures like **Rosa Loves Cars**, **Rosa Loves Dinosaurs**, **Rosa Plays Ball**, and **Rosa Rides Her Scooter**.

Storybooks

Unlike other categories of board books, these books are designed to tell a story with a beginning, middle and end, with characters and (a generally very simple) plot. Often publishers will take popular picture books and turn them into shorter versions in board books. Anna McQuinn's books could be placed in the previous category but given the attention to plot and characterisation they fit this one also. Her Lulu series, illustrated by Rosalind Beardshaw includes **Lulu Loves the Library**, **Lulu Loves Stories**, **Lulu Gets a Cat**, **Lulu Loves Flowers**, and **Lulu's First Day**. McQuinn's Zeki series, illustrated by Ruth Hearson includes **Zeki Gets a Checkup**, **Zeki Can Swim!**, **Zeki Sleep Tight**, **Zeki Loves Mummy**, **Zeki Loves Daddy**, **Zeki Eats Out**, **Zeki Rise and Shine**, **Zeki Goes to the Park**, **Zeki Hikes with Daddy**, and the forthcoming **Zeki Goes to the Market**.



Books that are focused on parents' interests

These books are often focused beyond the understanding of babies and toddlers – board books that introduce the 'classics', for example – but many are designed to support parental and cultural values, emphasising environmental, arts-based, religious or global concepts. Barefoot Books is one publisher that has a number of these, including board books based on life in various countries. Barefoot has been careful to try and engage illustrators and authors with some connection to the country, such as publishing British Congolese poet Mel Nyoko and Congolese Angolan British illustrator Joelle Avelino for **Our World: Democratic Republic of Congo** (2024). The book includes elements of a daily life book and a counting book, with a short glossary of words in Lingala, Tshiluba, and Swahili.

Books mentioned:

Helen Oxenbury, **Baby Board Books**, Walker Books, O/P
Pat the Bunny, Dorothy Kunhardt Golden Books, 978-0307120007
A Walk in Spring, Rose Cobden, illus Hannah Abbo, Ladybird, 978-0241615430, £9.99 board book
 Also: **A Walk in Summer**, 978-0241615454; **A Walk in Winter**, 978-0241615492; **A Walk in Autumn** 978-0241615478
Booky Girl Lulu series, Anna McQuinn, illus Rosalind Beardshaw, Alanna Max, £8.99 pbk
Zeki series, Anna McQuinn, illus Ruth Hearson, Alanna Max, £7.99 pbk
Our World: Democratic Republic of Congo, Mel Nyoko, illus Joelle Avelino, Barefoot Books, 979-8888592311, £7.99 pbk
What Can I Feel?, Annie Kubler, Child's Play, 978-1846433740, £4.99
All About Rosa series, Jessica Spanyol, Child's Play, £5.99 pbk



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 Nimesh 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.

Owning It: Our disabled childhoods...

Owning It, an anthology of stories by top writers in the disabled community, is out this month. Praising it as ground-breaking and vital, **Dr Rebecca Butler** interviewed its editors, **Jen Campbell** and **James Catchpole** for **Books for Keeps**.

Can you tell me what inspired the idea for this ground-breaking and vital book?

James: I honestly can't remember if Jen first said the word 'anthology' to us, or one of us to her – probably the former. But it came up during the online launch for my book **What Happened to You?**, which Jen was hosting back in Covid times. Inevitably, we'd been discussing the still-radical idea of stories about disability being written by disabled people. And I think we stayed on the video link afterwards, to natter.

There's often an easy solidarity among disabled people – it's intriguing and cathartic, when you get to talking about the strange ways people respond to you and your disability. But in common with a great many disabled people of our generation, we didn't grow up having those conversations. The internet didn't exist, for one thing – but nor did the mainstream use of the term 'disabled' as a flag to fly and follow with pride. I think we both, Jen and I, had an awareness of how much a book like this would have meant to us, as children. Lucy became disabled at nineteen, just as the first online message boards were going up in 1998 and had felt the benefit of them. For all three of us, there was a very immediate and clear purpose: we wanted our generation to be able to share our experiences with current and future generations of disabled kids, to give them true stories of disability written by real-life disabled writers, rather than the ableist stereotypes that still saturate our culture.

How did you choose the contributors and, with hindsight, is there anything you would change about the process you used?

Jen: As a disabled bookseller and book reviewer, I've been on the hunt for good books by disabled authors for what feels like my entire life, and they've been thin on the ground – not because disabled folk don't write good books, obviously, but because of frustrating barriers within the publishing industry, and because non-disabled books about disability are often prioritised over Own Voices (I could write an essay on this, but we don't have time here). I have a whole bookcase dedicated to books by disabled authors that I've loved over the years, and it was so exciting to be able to reach out to some of my favourite people, asking them if they'd like to try their hand at writing something for this anthology. Due to the nature of the book, there were some writers who wanted to take part but were unable to do so because of illness etc, even with extended time frames, and whilst this isn't something that we can change in hindsight, because this is just the reality of disabled life, perhaps there will be an opportunity to recruit these writers for another project further down the line.

James: We also couldn't have made this book without the internet. A few of our contacts we knew from the real world... I used to play amputee football with the poet Daniel Sluman, and with Ali Abbas, who became disabled as a child during the Iraq War. But Lucy and I know the majority of our contributors through Instagram, where there's a thriving community of disabled creators – and the same for Jen with both Instagram and YouTube. Steven Verdile with his satirical website *The Squeaky Wheel* was clearly a writer, as were our academics (Jan Grue, Leona Godin) and poets (Daniel Sluman, Ilya Kaminsky), but so are the online creators who write their own scripts to deliver to camera, like Nina Tame, Imani Barbarin and Jessica Kellgren-Fozard. The challenge was to find writers, first and foremost, who could translate their charisma onto the page for children.

The second criterion was to cover as many different disabilities as we could. Then geographical location and a range of ethnicities felt important, to make sure we were casting the net as wide as

we could. Oh, and making sure we had enough men! It was easier finding female voices, we discovered. So with hindsight, perhaps if we'd have been aware of this discrepancy from the outset, we'd have made a concerted effort to find more male disabled writers sooner than we did. There may be something about the intersection of disability with masculinity which makes it harder to find them.

The emotional depth of all the writing was impressive.

Did you give the contributors a structure or questions in order to write their piece? And were there any submissions you felt that you couldn't include?

Jen: When we approached writers, James and I had already written our pieces, so we were able to share those as examples if anyone wanted to see them before writing their own. This wasn't really for the purpose of inspiration, but more camaraderie; we know how difficult it can be to write about something so personal, so in that respect we wanted to lead the way. We were keen to highlight that everyone could write their pieces however they felt worked best; for instance, James wrote his in the past tense, looking back on his childhood, and I wrote mine in the present tense so the reader could relive it in the moment. Some contributors decided to write letters to their past selves instead. Something we did ask everyone to do initially was to send us one or two ideas before writing everything out in full (a one-sentence pitch), so that we could make sure no one was writing about the same thing. This seemed unlikely, given the range of disabilities and experiences, but we thought it best to make sure! In the end, there were no submissions we felt we couldn't include. Our brief was essentially this:

'What we're asking contributors to do is describe a memory from their childhood. The memory doesn't have to solely focus on disability, but it should touch on it somewhere along the way. It might be a memory about school, family, friendship, travel, food – anything, really. We're looking for memories that explore disability joy, as well pieces that tackle topics of ableism – moving moments, funny moments, and everything in between, however you'd like to approach it. Basically, we just want writers to write about what they want to write about, showcasing us as we are/were: no inspiration nonsense, no pity party – just us living our lives.'

Was there anything that came up in any of the contributions that you think would surprise a non-disabled reader?

James: I'm always surprised by how much surprises the non-disabled reader! That's not to say we disabled folk have a particular monopoly on empathy – not at all. Just that human beings are less able to imagine themselves into others' shoes than we might suppose. So a great deal of what's in this book will come as a surprise, I think.

The vexed relationship between disabled people and charity, which Steven nails in *The Price of Free*, will be controversial for some readers. People cling to these comforting narratives and often don't want to see them challenged. But the same issue comes up for Rebekah Taussig and for Ali Abbas. And if it's the same whether you're in Kansas or Kuwait, that becomes harder to dismiss.

Another vexed relationship, this time between disability and religion, comes to the fore in stories by Imani Barbarin and Matilda Feyisayo Ibini – however different the practices of Christianity may be from Nigeria to the US, the similarities are striking, when disability is involved.

Something that surprised me was how many of these stories ended with a flash forward to adulthood, marriage and children (my own included). Will that surprise non-disabled readers? If so, maybe that's why so many of us chose to include this.

Good Reads

This issue's excellent **Good Reads** recommendations are provided by students at the **London Academy of Excellence, Tottenham**. Thank you to them, to their teacher, Melanie Socrates, and to Angie Smith of **Creativity Unleashed** for their help.



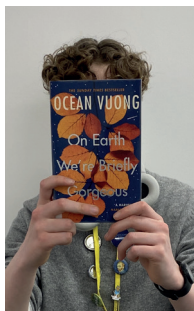
Laura



Omolayomi



Jennifer



Eilidh



Eva T



Eva S



Kay

Children of Blood and Bone

Tomi Adeyemi, Macmillan, 978-1509871353, £9.99 pbk

When I picked up **Children of Blood and Bone**, I was immediately hooked by its rich use of West African mythology, a rarity in fantasy that resonated with me, especially as a Nigerian. From the start, the world-building and vivid language completely drew me in, creating a setting that feels magical yet familiar.

The strong, fierce women at the heart of this story face adversity head-on, and that's what makes this book shine. Our main character, Zélie, is not only tough but also wounded and immature, adding layers of realism that tug at your emotions in unexpected ways. Her journey is intense, filled with moments that make you cheer for her and moments that break your heart.

And let's talk about the romance—it's the perfect subplot to keep you turning pages late into the night! It's so well-done that you become absolutely obsessed with the characters' chemistry from the very beginning. I couldn't put it down.

But don't be fooled, this book isn't afraid to make you suffer. It plays with your emotions, lures you into moments of hope, and then shatters them just as quickly. I lost count of how many times I gasped and yelled due to the emotional rollercoaster it took me on. Moreover, the addition of morally grey and complex characters adds a profound depth to this book.

Behind this amazing story, there is a dark truth which is the oppression faced by real people every day. While the book pulls you into a mystical world, it also reminds you of the struggles and injustices that real people endure. It serves as both a wake-up call and an eye-opener to the evils present in humanity making its narrative not only fantastical but relevant.

That said, the pacing isn't for everyone. If you love fast-paced reads, this one might feel a bit slow at times, but the depth of the story more than makes up for it. Overall, **Children of Blood and Bone** offers a fresh, exciting twist on the usual Young Adult fantasy trope, whilst blending romance, magic, and mythology in a way that feels both new and captivating. *Laura*

Ace of Spades

Faridah Abiké-Íyímíde, Usborne, 978-1474967532, £8.99 pbk

Ace of Spades is a thrilling blend of mystery, social commentary, and psychological suspense. It follows Devon and Chiamaka, the only Black students at an elite private school, who are targeted by a mysterious bully called "Aces." As their secrets are exposed,

they uncover something much darker and more dangerous. Devon and Chiamaka are compelling protagonists, each facing their own struggles—Devon with his sexuality and financial instability, and Chiamaka with the pressures of being a perfect overachiever. Their voices are distinct, making the reader root for them as they fight against oppressive forces. The book explores how systematic racism can be disguised in seemingly welcoming places, and it left me reflecting on real-world issues of privilege and power. I was hooked by the suspense, but what stayed with me was how real the story felt. It made me reflect on issues of privilege and power in the real world. I recommend **Ace of Spades** if you enjoy thrilling mysteries that explore racism, privilege, and identity, all while delivering suspense and unexpected twists. *Omolayomi*

The Power

Naomi Alderman, Penguin, 978-0670919963, £9.99 pbk

The Power is a provocative and thought-provoking exploration of gender, power, and societal structures. Set in a world where women suddenly gain the ability to generate electric shocks, the novel offers a fascinating twist on traditional gender dynamics, flipping the script on patriarchal power. The central feminist theme—examining how power, when wielded by women, changes not just personal relationships but entire social systems—is compelling and timely. Alderman does an excellent job of showing the complexities and potential dangers of power. As women begin to dominate, the world shifts, revealing how deeply entrenched power imbalances are and how quickly systems of oppression can be reversed. The novel succeeds in illustrating that power itself, beyond gender, is ultimately corrupting and dehumanising. The exploration of power as an intrinsic force is both chilling and insightful.

While the feminist angle is undoubtedly strong, **The Power** sometimes feels a bit heavy-handed in its critique. The characters, though diverse in their experiences and responses to newfound power, can occasionally come across as archetypes rather than fully fleshed-out individuals. That said, Alderman's world-building is vivid, and the thought-provoking questions the novel raises about gender, society, and power will resonate with readers long after the final page. It's a bold and original take on feminism, and while it may not fully hit every mark, **The Power** is an engaging and necessary conversation starter about the future of gender equality and social justice. *Jennifer*

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous

Ocean Vuong, Vintage, 978-1529110685, £9.99 pbk

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous presents a semi-autobiographical, melancholic account of the narrator's youth. It contains a powerful message about hope, which persists for the narrator Little Dog despite the despondency arising from the constant discrimination he experiences due to his intersectional identity. It both beautifully shapes Vuong's experience as an immigrant in America and the queer experience, as felt within the opioid crisis of the 1990s that claimed thousands of lives at the time and was prevalent within the gay, working-class community in Hartford, Connecticut that surrounded Little Dog.

The syntax, specifically the disintegration of verse into poetry during exceptionally difficult parts of the novel, is used skilfully. Written with tenderness about a narrative that is so often spoken over and erased, this novel is a devastatingly beautiful read that lingers and haunts its reader. Described by Vuong as a 'phantom novel', it provides insight into multiple worlds: the personal history of his family in Vietnam together with poignant, specific memories of his childhood in America.

Perhaps, though, the most intriguing and heart-breaking element of this novel rests in its narrative structure. Written as an epistolary novel addressed to Little Dog's illiterate mother, Vuong ultimately creates an anguished echo of the inevitable lack of understanding between the protagonist and his mother *Eilidh*

Daydream and Drunkenness of a Young Lady

Clarice Lispector, Penguin Classics, 978-0241337608, £3.00

In this novella, Clarice Lispector tells the story of an unnamed woman whose simple life as a wife and mother shifts after an encounter with a blind man in the street. She sinks into a realisation that life is underpinned by emptiness, revealing her deep desire for lost experiences and a sense of satisfaction in life, all in just 49 short pages.

The protagonist's epiphany that life can create pain and suffering calls her to realise that her own life is dull. She tells her children of the evils of life, calling on the reader to see her destroyed emotional being as something destructive to her and her family (those she is responsible to reward with maternal love as her only role in her life), yet strangely liberating. The protagonist communicates this theme of liberation through her confessed profound, yet seemingly

falsified, love for the blind man, with whom she has created an imagined relationship with. Though the character is labelled as a drunk in the title, and while there are a few mentions of her drinking, it does not appear excessive, nor as if it is something she relies upon.

The narrative is structured into three chapters ('Daydream and drunkenness of a young Lady', 'Love' & 'Family Ties') which provide us with different lenses and insights into the narratives of other characters and the way they all impact each other. 'Daydream and drunkenness of a young lady' and 'Love' surrounds the protagonist and her epiphany, while in 'Family Ties', we learn more about the protagonist's family life and the role her husband plays in relation to her consistent discomfort with her marital role.

I loved reading about the protagonist's realisation of the futility of her life within her role in each of these separate spheres. It felt to me as though Lispector's main point was intended to be the protagonist's awakening to all she has missed out on as a woman in our modern society. I also appreciated her seemingly snobbish middle-class take on the blind man's suffering being more dramatic than it was, allowing for a communication of her privilege in her class in comparison to her suffering in her gender.

This short book is quickly beautiful and can be enjoyed in one sitting; the vivid descriptions of a woman's role in life as an entity of disappointment and lost experiences was something I felt an immediate connection with as a woman living in a patriarchal society. I highly recommend this novella for a quick and interesting read – both to girls who are looking for their place in society, but also to boys who might help unravel the patriarchy through more progressive feelings of women's roles in society. *Eva T*

Letters to My Weird Sisters

Joanne Limburg, Atlantic Books, 978-1838950071, £10.99 pbk

In her memoir, Joanne Limburg tackles the experience of being diagnosed with autism at a later stage in her life. Written as a series of essays presented as letters to four historical women, this book highlights the autistic experience and particularly how it presents itself in women and girls. At the same time that Limburg works through her own journey to understand her diagnosis, she gives readers an exciting opportunity to view historical female figures through a new, sympathetic lens.

I love this book because of how it addresses both autism and feminism, drawing parallels to how women were treated, or rather mistreated, throughout history and continue to be in the modern day. It is a wonderful read if you want to discover more about autistic people beyond the mainstream, often stereotypical and hurtful depiction generated by the media.

Limburg structures the book in the epistolary format, as four distinct letters, each addressing a female historical figure who seems to have demonstrated several autistic traits in the records we have of them. These include: Virginia Woolf, Adelheid Bloch, Frau V, and Katharina Kepler. In the letters, topics such as autistic parenting, social isolation and feminism are discussed. Limburg uses her writing to help process her own experience of being diagnosed with autism so late, considering how this has influenced her own parenting style. All of her addressees experienced a sense of marginalisation or othering because of their differences being misunderstood. As women and girls still struggle to get diagnosed with autism and access the support they need while in the education system, I believe it is a really important text to highlight and encourage everyone to read it.

Even if readers themselves are not girls, or indeed autistic, the book will enable them to understand better, and perhaps have more empathy and support, for those who are. *Eva*

The Song of Achilles

Madeline Miller, Bloomsbury, 9781408891384, £9.99 pbk

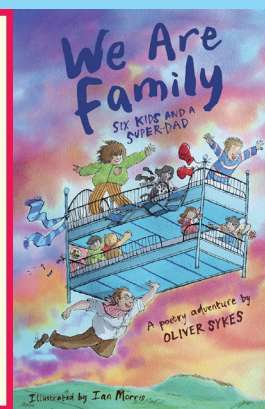
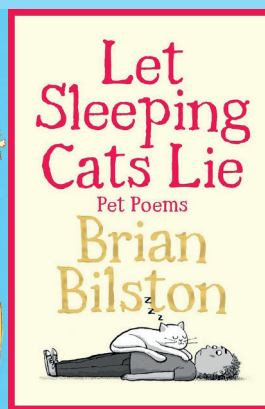
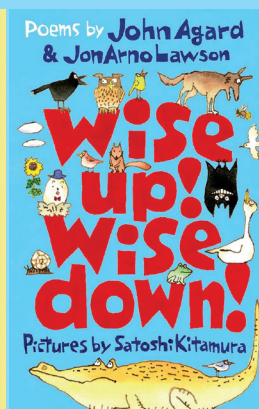
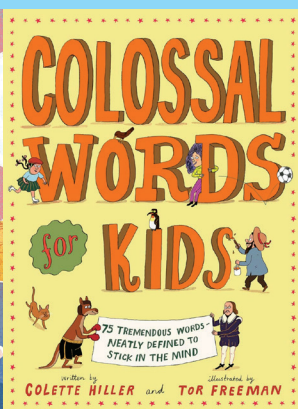
The Song of Achilles retells the tragic, sincerely beautiful story of one of Greece's greatest warriors from the perspective of his dearest companion: Patroclus. With a uniquely romantic portrayal of these protagonists, Miller guides the reader through their journey, sacrifices, and near-tangible connection to each other. Theirs is a relationship conceived of a violent past, and further catalysed by the violence they are still required to face.

Achilles and Patroclus, through their respective meeting, banishments, hardships, and eventually the Trojan War, are united by the being that is their love. They are shown to grasp firmly towards the other through tragedy, while simultaneously providing light through each other, toward each other, and for each other.

A profound retelling of the Trojan War, this novel evokes laughter, heartbreak, joy and despair. Madeline Miller presents a stunning narrative of what it means to love, belong, and be truly devoted to another using immaculately-crafted language and a storyline it's impossible not to become entirely invested in. *Kay*

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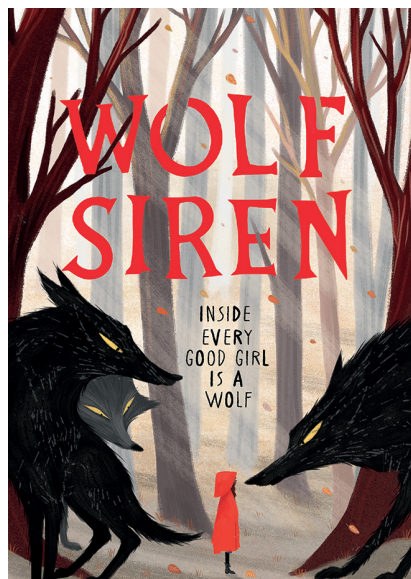
clpe.org.uk/poetry/CLiPPA

Reimagining Little Red Riding Hood: an interview with Beth O' Brien

Talented and charming, poet **Beth O'Brien** is the founder and editor of **Disabled Tales**, a website dedicated to analysing the way disability is represented in folkloric literature. **Wolf Siren**, her dazzling debut novel for Middle Grade readers, is empowered by her own voice, her affinity with nature and her reimagining of an iconic fairy tale. **Tanja Jennings** spoke to Beth for **Books for Keeps**.

Born visually impaired, Beth O'Brien grew up learning about how other people see through the art of reading. Her favourite books, which she often revisits, are L.M Montgomery's tales about red headed orphan Anne who used her imagination to revisualise her surroundings, so that Barry's Pond became The Lake of Shining Waters, *'I feel a special connection with Anne. I love the joy she finds in the natural world transforming it into a magical fairy tale-esque landscape through the power of language.'*

When she came up with the idea of a new version of Little Red Riding Hood, a module in intertextuality focusing on fairy tales as part of her MA in Creative Writing from the University of Birmingham, writing about navigating shapes and colours in her poetry collections **Catching Sight** and **Light Perception**, a treasured copy of Oscar Wilde's **The Selfish Giant** and the emotive and evocative poetry of Emily Dickinson and Mary Oliver, contributed to her vivid reimagining of Red's journey through the wood.



With an intriguing opening that leaves the reader wanting more, **Wolf Siren** is a poignant, symbolic, tender, thought provoking and beautifully observed piece of eco fiction incorporating fairy tale elements. Using traditional characters like woodcutters, huntsmen and herbalists, Beth's version delights in role reversals and posits the idea, 'what if the villagers had taken their fear of not straying into the dangerous woods too far and the men felt challenged by the women's ability to be safe from wolves?'

O'Brien equates the treatment of the female villagers to Atwood's **The Handmaid's Tale**, philosophising that the skill of women to do what men cannot places them at the bottom of the hierarchy when they should be at the top. Her village is based on 'the patriarchal structure of a hunting town where the fall of tradition and the rise of female power are not met positively', typified by the controlling behaviour of the mayor.

No longer the vulnerable Little Red Riding Hood evoked in some versions, Beth's Red is magical and rebellious, determined to solve a mysterious disappearance, support her family and challenge the misogyny of her village. As Red becomes older, she experiences a rite of passage which O'Brien links to the symbolism of the moon, wolves and shape shifters. In discussing the transformative power of the menstrual cycle, Beth felt it was important to address the good and the bad, talking about not just the moods associated with it but the pain that can occur, making the 'distinction that the main debilitating element is the shame associated with it' when it is a key natural life moment. Girls as young as 10 can experience it so she felt it was relevant to represent it through her protagonists.

Secondary characters in the novel are also well crafted. Nature is reflected in their names which Beth meticulously chose. Aeron derives from the Welsh word for berries and also signifies earth's gift which is perfect for Red's artistic sister. Her brother Luki is from the Latin for light while her friend Delana translates as 'where older trees can grow'.

Amidst themes of deforestation, loss and regrowth, Red's journey beyond the Wolf Siren Tower has an atmospheric quality of magical realism as she enters the forest. It causes the reader to question whether Red is inventing the wolves that become her companions. Beth explains that this represents her own visual experiences, *'My voice and my vision very much informed Red. The initial uncertainty about whether those wolves are real was quite deliberate. Sometimes I think I'm seeing things and I'm not hallucinating. So much of what I see is guesswork or filling in the blanks of what I think should or shouldn't be there. Sometimes I'll be walking along and I'll think there is someone walking towards me but it's actually a tree or a bin. I've seen a static blob of colour and I've tried to think what could that possibly be and I don't always get it right. It's about that sort of uncertainty of what you think you see versus what's there. That uncertainty is part of my everyday life. It can be quite funny and quite surreal at times.'*

What Beth enjoyed most during writing was guiding Red. She explains, 'I really had fun inventing a magic system that supported Red because in fairy tales specifically disability is often something to be magically cured or erased and then overcome as a reward. I thought if I'm in charge of this magic it can literally be what I want it to be. On the face of it as a visually impaired person the woods are not the easiest place to be traversing but the trees help Red locate where she is. They guide her, sometimes giving her a helping branch.' With a successful two-day symposium entitled *Disability in Fairy Tales: Keeping the magic- confronting the stigma* behind her and ongoing PHD studies researching the (mis)representation of disability in contemporary self-described feminist fairy tale retellings there is much more to come from this pioneering author. Beth's future projects will include a fresh look at Welsh legend *Ceridwen's Cauldron* told from the twins' perspective as potioners, featuring a cast of mischievous magical creatures, and a new way of seeing *Rapunzel*, including Easter Eggs from other fairy tales such as Hans Christian Andersen's *The Wild Swans*.

For now, Beth would like her debut novel to be not just a mirror but also a window, *'As much as I hope that kids with visual impairments or partial sightedness can feel themselves in Wolf Siren, I hope it's equally an interesting thing to read for sighted people to sort of experience a different way of seeing.'*

Wolf Siren is published by HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0008642013, £7.99 pbk.

Find out more about Beth O'Brien and her poetry [on her website](#).



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

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.

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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.

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

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

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

Books about Children's Books

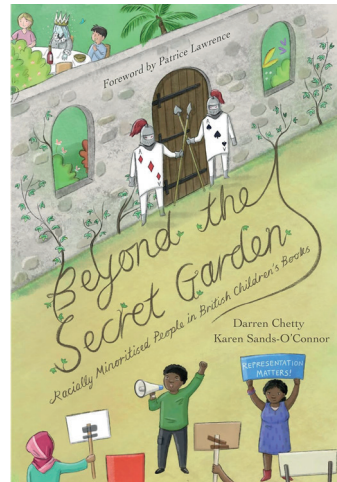
Beyond the Secret Garden: Children's Literature and Representations of Black and Racially minoritised People

★★★★★

Darren Chetty, Karen Sands-O'Connor, English and Media Centre, 208pp, 9781906101749, £24.50 pbk

I first encountered Darren Chetty's work through *The Good Immigrant*. His chapter, *You Can't Do That! Stories have to be about white people!*, took me straight back to primary school. I'd brought in a book to share with the class – the cover showed a girl in a hijab praying, backlit in golden light. Another child brought *Winnie the Witch*. You can guess which one the teacher chose. I went home and told the story to my mum and her friend, a white woman and an English teacher. My mum's friend looked at her and said, "I wonder why?" I spent years wondering.

Reading Chetty and Sands-O'Connor's *Beyond the Secret Garden* made me realise I hadn't imagined it.



There are structures that make white stories feel central, and for those of us who are minoritised, our existence is too often positioned as peripheral. But what makes this book remarkable isn't just its truth-telling – it's its hope. The writing is deeply attentive

to what children do with texts, and so it feels both timely and essential for classroom teachers.

That commitment to reimagining English teaching is at the heart of *Beyond the Secret Garden*. Chetty and Sands-O'Connor have long foregrounded how children's literature shapes – and distorts – what young readers understand about race, empire, and belonging. Their work became essential reading for English teachers during the pandemic and following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.

Now, with the rise of the Far Right and Reform's gains in the local elections, the chapter *Powerful Politics* lands differently. After watching children march in the Far Right riots of summer 2024, this feels urgent. Chetty and Sands-O'Connor make protest central to what children's literature should enable – and offer teachers ways to make space for those conversations in the classroom.

This book gives teachers both the language and the courage to act. **MS**

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant

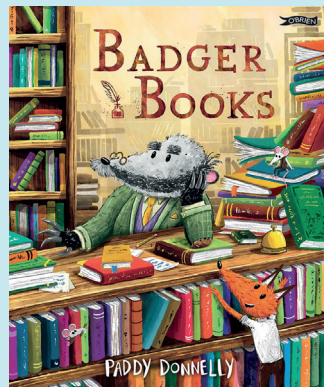
Ed's Choice

Badger Books

★★★★★

Paddy Donnelly, O'Brien Press, 32pp, 978-1788494946, £13.99 hbk

We revisit the little town of Ballybrush in Paddy Donnelly's new picturebook and drop in on Badger Books, next to Fox & Son Tailors, setting of course for his earlier bestseller. *Badger Books* is for readers of all kinds, not just badgers, and Badger, who runs it, can find any book you want, 'though sometimes he was a little bit grumpy'. One day a new customer comes to the shop with a very specific request. Rory, hero of *Fox & Son Tailors*, tells Badger exactly the book he wants, but Badger doesn't have it, it doesn't exist and – becoming more than a little grumpy – he tells Rory he'll have to write it himself. There's just one problem for Rory: he hasn't learned to write yet. For a while, the two are dejected – Rory sad, Badger guilty – their emotions beautifully expressed in an illustration of the pair of them sitting side by side on a bridge, legs dangling. But then, Badger decides they will create the book together, with him writing the words



and Rory providing the pictures. Instantly they cheer up and set to work, and the last pages shows Badger's customers snapping up their copies at the book launch. It's another quirky and charming story, elegantly plotted and beautifully paced and with a world of detail and description on every page. Young readers will find the book with a much stronger understanding of the creative process than when they opened it too and will feel immense satisfaction that Rory is able to realise his vision of the story. A lovely celebration of books (and bookshops), the imagination and community too. **LS**

I Hate Everything!

★★★★★

Sophy Henn, Simon and Schuster, 32pp, 9781398526792, £7.99 pbk

Some days just start badly and roll downhill from there. The kind of days where you hate getting dressed, hate your breakfast, hate that butterfly, that cake, and especially that flower. Hate. It. All.

Henn captures this beautifully with a young narrator having one of those days – the kind where nothing feels quite right and everything is slightly (or extremely) annoying. The twist? Our narrator – and their quietly patient companion – are both ghosts, rendered in classic blanket-overhead style. Why ghosts? Perhaps because emotions, like ghosts, can feel invisible and overwhelming, or perhaps simply because Henn knows how to use the simplest of shapes to convey the biggest of feelings.

Visually, this is a masterclass in tonal storytelling. Bold block colours shift with the narrator's mood: red when emotions rage, through orange to a slow-simmering yellow, before looping back – tongue firmly in cheek – to a final blast of crimson. The visual palette is a roller coaster, and it mirrors the internal one.

The voice is gloriously sulky, exaggerated, and all-caps LOUD, but beneath the surface is real emotional literacy. This isn't a tantrum for its own sake – it's a moment of candid vulnerability, as a small person tries

to name the bigness of their feelings. The comic timing is pitch-perfect, especially as the list of hated things spirals from socks to sunshine to Frank.

And when the tide finally turns (with a little gentle prompting from a friend), we're reminded of something essential: that feelings are fleeting, that talking helps, and that sometimes the best cure for rage is a shared hiccup-laugh at how ridiculous we were feeling all along.

Big-hearted, brilliantly paced, and hilariously relatable, this is Henn at her best—playfully perceptive. **MT**

Our Wee Place

★★★★

Sophie Kirtley, illus Ellan Rankin, O'Brien Press, 32pp, 9781788495141, £8.99 pbk

Emily arrives at Granda's house angry with her best friend Zak after an argument. Usually she loves spending Saturday afternoon with Granda, sitting under the apple tree in their wee place in the garden. Today she is too upset. But Granda understands – he used to fall out with his sister. He also has a solution: they will go on an adventure. And they do. It is an adventure that sees Granda replay his boyhood and Emily realise how much she wants to share it with Zak.

This attractive picture book is rooted in the reality of childhood; the emotions, the fun that relationships foster, the imagination shared by friends. Its young audience will quickly identify with Emily and empathise with her. The relationship between the grandfather and the child is warm and believable. The adventure they share is no fantasy because it is the adventure of exploring the past, Grandpa's past, which has so much in common with Emily's present. The illustrations by Ellan Rankin with their bright colours, energy and soft focus perfectly capture the tone and mood of the narrative. They work together to bring the whole to life. Without moralising the author and illustrator join forces to create a book that can be enjoyed by adult and child as they share it together. **FH**

Little Rhino Lost

★★★★

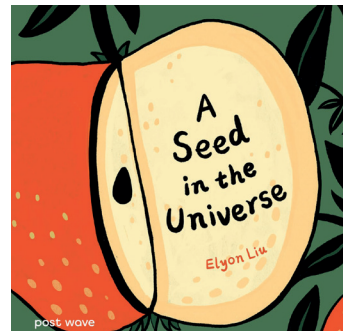
Candy Gourlay, ill. Jamie Bauza, Otter-Barry, 32pp, 9781915659361, £12.99, hbk

When Maya finds a baby rhino lost in the middle of her city she decides to help him. The little rhino wants to go home but Maya cannot see anywhere resembling the place the rhino describes; there is no green grass and no giant leaves anywhere. She decides to take the little rhino home with her and both she and her neighbours do their best to make him feel comfortable, but will she ever be able to reunite him with his mother?

Fortunately, a happy ending is in store for the rhino, and also a change in attitude for Maya and her neighbours who embark on a mission to transform their environment and create a place rich with plants to support living things, including a family of rhinos.

Little Rhino Lost is a warm story perfectly matched by the colourful illustrations which reflect the bustle and harshness of the concrete city in comparison with the leafy green rainforest.

See the end papers at the back of the book for background to the story, which is inspired by the plight of rhinoceroses in South East Asia where rhinos are facing imminent extinction, their numbers continuing to dwindle and their habitat disappearing. **SMC**



A Seed in the Universe

★★★★

Elyon Liu, Post Wave, 24pp, 9781836270126, £9.99 hbk

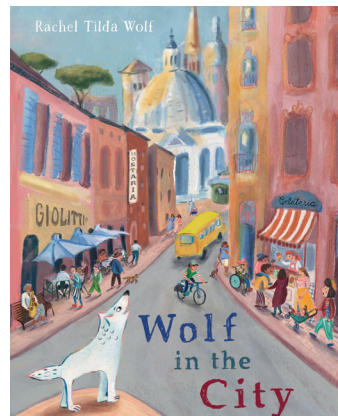
Have you ever read the nursery rhyme *The Key to the Kingdom* in which the anonymous poet takes the reader on a journey that plays with the linked-up nature of the world? Here in this simple but effective picture book Elyon Liu takes the same theme. She starts with an apple seed and traces its connection across its local world to the wider earth and so to the universe. Her text is simple using direct vocabulary that makes no concessions to her young audience. Her images are equally bold and direct. Here strong outlines combine with a limited palette of vibrant colours. We move from the closeness of a seed inside an apple, an apple that fills the whole double spread. We travel to the final image – a vast black universe and there shining against the black is that tiny blue planet. It looks like a seed. Within each page is a cut out for small fingers to explore, to intrigue young minds, to inspire conversation. The design of the whole is excellent. The sturdy board pages will encourage handling without fear – yet it avoids categorisation as a Board Book. This is a very clever book which combines information with active imagination. **FH**

Patrick and Flippa

★★★★

Wendy Meddour, ill. Merle Goll, Oxford, 32pp, 978 0 19 278816 0, £7.99 pbk

Patrick is a big white polar bear with an identity crisis. His friend Flippa is a cheerful seal who catches fish with ease, and the two creatures enjoy each other's company, resting on their backs on chunks of icebergs, cloud watching. Flippa willingly feeds his tasty, juicy catches to his friend Patrick. But there is a problem. Patrick has this 'strange, empty bear feeling', and realises he would really like to catch his own fish. Meantime, Flippa convinces Patrick that he is too big, too hairy to fish, that he will sink. On reflection, Patrick realises how mean his friend is being. The resolution of this story will start discussions about the true nature of friendship. Illustrated throughout with the bright blues, greens and silvers of the sea, dotted with fish, puffins and clouds. It will please all readers interested in sea life. **GB**



Wolf in the City

★★★★

Rachel Tilda Wolf, Scalegag Press, 32pp, 978-1915252838, £12.99 hbk

Take a tour of Italian cities courtesy of a stone wolf in this gentle and amusing picture book. Wolf lives on a plinth in a quiet square, watching her neighbours going about their business. Apart from the pigeon that poops on her head, no-one pays her much attention so, certain it will be different among the magnificent statues in the city centre, she takes herself off on the bus into town. Map in hand, she wanders the squares, finding statues in fountains, in museums and right on the top of a hill. Sadly, the statues are not as she'd hoped, in fact they are rude, aggressive and arrogant and they don't want to be joined by a small wolf. Tail between her legs, she decides to go back home and finds a hero's welcome awaiting! She's been missed, and her neighbours throw

a special party to celebrate her return. This is a lovely what if ... story with lots to enjoy, and Wolf is a real character. Following her trail gives us a real sense of old Italian cities, the warm browns, greens and pinks of Rachel Tilda Wolf's illustrations placing us right in the sunshine. There's a lesson to learn about valuing what you know and have over what you think is on the other side of fence too. This is Rachel Tilda Wolf's debut and she's an illustrator to watch. **LS**

[Read our Q&A interview with Rachel Tilda Wolf](#)



Taking the Long Way Home

★★★★

Jake Hope, illus Brian Fitzgerald, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978-1915252845, £12.99 hbk

The walk home from school becomes an imagination-filled, sensory experience in Jake Hope and Brian Fitzgerald's picture book. When Daddy comes to pick up Zarah and her brother, it's 'Lickety-split! Zip, zip, zip!', which suits Zarah as she hates walking. But when Uncle Jerome is in charge, they take the long walk home through the woods, alongside the river, up to the top of the hill and down the other side. There's so much to see, to hear and to smell and when Zarah starts to complain, Uncle Jerome's imagination turns it into an amazing adventure, with dinosaurs, crocodiles and tigers to run from. It all ends with a tasty ice cream from the ice-cream van, and as they fly home as vampire bats, raspberry ripple dribbling down their chins, even Zarah says it's been magic. A perfect demonstration of the power of the imagination and the glories of the natural world, this is a lovely book to share with little children. Brian Fitzgerald's varied compositions and printmaking create a sense of a world waiting to be explored and this story should inspire lots of outdoor adventures. **LS**

A Little Birdie Told Me

★★★★

Tarsila Krüse, O'Brien Press, 32pp, 978-1788494878, £12.99 hbk

Taking the popular formula of repetition and memory games, Tarsila Krüse has lots of fun in this bright, appealing picture book. A string of little birdies – a robin, a blue



tit, a house martin – all repeat and add to the sentence: 'A little birdie told me ... that someone very special ... is coming to the surprise birthday party'. It builds the anticipation beautifully and no wonder the birds, who by now include blackbirds and starlings, magpies and more, get very excited asking questions about this special person who loves cake who is coming to the spectacular surprise birthday party. More excitement is guaranteed when we finally discover who this special person is. It's a simple but effective piece of anticipatory storytelling and full of added treats and extras. There are colourful items such as party hats or sparkling wands to count on every spread for example, while these singing, dancing birds are beautifully depicted, stylised but distinct and clearly identifiable as real birds. Their interactions with each other are lively and engaging throughout, these little birdies are real characters. **MMa**



Bear

★★★★★

Natalia Shaloshvili, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 40pp, 9781836002611, £12.99 hbk

Bear is a creature of simple pleasures. A warm bench. A crisp cookie. A balloon, a book, and the serenity of a quiet afternoon. But when visitors begin to arrive – Fox wanting a seat, Wolf reaching for the cookie, Rabbit peering into the book—Bear's patience is tested to its absolute limit. And as more and more animal friends stop by with cheerful, self-centred demands, Bear's inner wild beast begins to stir...

Shaloshvili – whose previous titles

include **Pavlo Gets the Grumps** and the exquisite **Miss Leoparda** – brings a rich visual flair to this picturebook about personal space and the quiet toll of 'being nice.' Her use of acrylic and watercolour crayon gives the artwork both energy and fuzzy warmth, while Bear himself is a triumph of subtle expression: a character who simmers with polite resistance until the pressure finally erupts.

The comedy builds through rhythmic repetition and increasingly absurd intrusions – both in request and animal size – but beneath the whimsy lies something deeply familiar: the moment when your kindest instincts begin to fray. Shaloshvili captures with real nuance that tipping point where good intentions collapse under the weight of others' expectations.

Thankfully, the story closes not in chaos but connection. Redemption comes in the form of Duck who – tellingly – wears a little hat just like Bear's. With a cookie of his own, and in a perfectly-judged full-circle moment, it's now Duck's turn to be asked: can I have a bite?

Playful yet perceptive, this is a beautifully observed exploration of boundaries and balance, told with humour, honesty, and style. For every child (or adult) who's ever smiled politely while their biscuit vanished, this is the picture book hug you didn't know you needed – a small triumph of comic storytelling, made to be enjoyed on many levels. **MT**



Good Golden Sun

★★★★★

Brendan Wenzel, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978-1836300304, £12.99 hbk

Filled with all the light and warmth of the sun, Brendan Wenzel's picture book leads readers through a day, tracking the sun from the first rays of dawn until it disappears over the horizon at day's end. We experience it through different living creatures, each of whom rely on the sun, the text, in gentle, perfectly paced verse, posing their questions: 'Good golden sun, where have you been? We've been waiting in the dark, eager for your glow again.' Each turn of the page brings changing colours and growing light, of course, but there's a story to follow too, as the sun's glow lights a flower, then the bee collecting its nectar, the bear who eats the bees' honeycomb, the mosquito who bites the bear, the bird

who eats the mosquito and so on, until finally a small child and their cat watch the sun go down, 'Good golden sun, what bright colours you have saved for the moment in the evening, just before you slip away!' Illuminating in every way, this beautiful picture book demonstrates the connection between all living creatures and our reliance on the good golden sun, which, despite all the questions asked, retains its mystery throughout, silent above the busy world. Brendan Wenzel's illustrations, reminiscent of Eric Carle's, mix collage, watercolour and digital art to extraordinary effect, each spread a visual treat. Recommended for readers of all ages. **MMa**

Don't Trust Fish

★★★★★

Neil Sharpson, ill. Dan Santat, Andersen Press, 40pp, 9781839136429, £7.99 pbk

What do we really know about fish? Why are they always underwater? And what, exactly, are they plotting down there? These are the kinds of pressing questions raised – loudly and with growing suspicion – by the unnamed narrator in this glorious spoof non-fiction picture book – one part paranoid pamphlet, one part comic manifesto.

Sharpson takes full advantage of the narrative stage, blending absurdist logic with faux-scientific authority in a breathless cascade of 'evidence.' What begins with a relatively structured taxonomy – single-page guides to mammals and reptiles – quickly begins to unravel. The entry for birds ('That's it. Anything with feathers is a bird. Birds are dead easy.') is our first real clue that this might not be the work of a trained zoologist. Elsewhere, throwaway lines like 'some fish even eat poor crabs' raise a different question altogether: just who is doing the narrating? A front-facing stare from a small red crustacean offers a clue.

Santat, with some fine creative flexing of his own, takes this hint and runs with it. His artwork doesn't just echo the text – it interrogates it. Background characters break the fourth wall, diagrams collapse into chaos, and blink-and-you'll-miss-it jokes simmer beneath the narrator's bluster. There's a whole subplot playing out beneath the surface (in every sense), and Santat ensures that readers – not just fish – are invited to read between the lines.

What elevates this beyond comic novelty is its sheer commitment to the bit. Both creators lean in completely, making this a picture book that children will gleefully quote – and adults will quietly admire for its craft, chaos, and timing. There's even a knowing pause near the end ('Where were we? Sorry. Got a bit carried away...') before launching into one last fishy tirade.

Playful, outrageous, and

delightfully suspicious, this is a mockumentary picture book that's one part Monty Python, one part Attenborough on a sugar high. Trust me – but don't trust the fish. **MT**



Recycling Day

★★★★★

Polly Faber, Ill; Klas Fahlen, Nosy Crow, 32pp, 9781839949494, £7.99 pbk

What happens to all the things that we throw away? Well, this fun new book from award winning author Polly Faber will tell us.

In a clever mix of fact and fiction, we see the many varied types of rubbish or unrequired items thrown away in a typical family home, from a pair of holey socks to leftover breakfast scraps and follow their subsequent journey through collection to disposal or repurpose. From Holly in her bin lorry, Darcy in her forklift and Stan with his can crusher, we see all the many people, vehicles and jobs that are required to dispose of the rubbish from our homes.

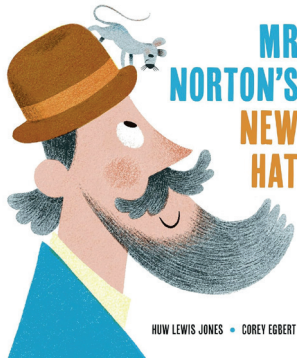
Each different material type is visited and explained in an easy-to-understand format with bright and stylish artwork from Fahlen showing the complete cycle of each item. Children who may have visited the recycling centre or 'tip' with their families are given a clearer picture of why things are sorted into different containers or bins and not just thrown in all together. We then see what happens to each container-full after it leaves the centre, whether it be glass bottles that are crushed to make new bottles (or even airport runways!), food scraps that become compost or some types of rubbish that can't be recycled and must be burnt or buried.

After all the rubbish has been dealt with, we return to the family home where every day they try to make it a 'Not for the Bin Day' and try to reuse, mend or recycle, proving that together we can help keep our world beautiful for years to come. The final pages talk more about how everyone can help to do this in lots of small ways, whether by carrying our own bags for shopping or bottles on days

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

out, reusing paper and cardboard or passing on toys and clothes that we've outgrown.

An innovative and interesting picture book, perfect for answering questions about our rubbish and encouraging recycling from an early age. **AH**

**Mr Norton's New Hat**

★★★★★

Huw Lewis Jones, ill. Corey Egbert, Little Tiger, 32pp, 978-1838917104, £12.99, hbk

This is a wonderful accumulative tale which demands to be read aloud with an audience joining in. Mr Norton is a kind gentle and patient being who doesn't like to make a fuss, even when a mouse makes a house in his hat, birds make a nest in his bike basket, and then on the third day of the week he finds a squirrel asleep in his shoe! What should he do? Wonderful in its repetition Mr Norton accumulates a selection of stoats and a collection of cats curled up in his coat. 'Well, this is all jolly inconvenient,' he says. However, as he is running late, he goes to work just the same, but when on retiring to bed that night he finds it fully occupied by an abundance of numerous creatures he finally explodes, 'Enough is enough!' This kind, gentle and patient man who doesn't want to make a fuss terrifies all the animals and he finds himself alone... and lonely the next morning. There's a great resolution to this classic in the making, with illustrations which enhance every line of the tale, every portrayal of each creature as well as Mr Norton himself revealing empathy, pleasure, friendship, patience, exasperation and penultimately sadness. This is a book to treasure as audiences join in all the accumulating phrases and return again and again to read for themselves. What a treasure. Do find it and enjoy! **GB**

The Biggest Breakfast

★★★★★

Richard Jones, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 978-1398523036, £12.99 hbk Herein we meet a little child who starts off by feeding just one bird. The following morning the same

bird is back waiting for breakfast accompanied by two mice. The child feeds all three: 'See you tomorrow!' says the child, after they've eaten everything. And so it continues with four squirrels, eight wolves (kind-eyed ones), sixteen elephants – a veritable herd. After this what should be waiting for breakfast in addition to the previous animals but thirty-two ring-tailed lemurs, sixty-four puffins and one hundred and twenty eight round-bellied frogs. What a lot of noise they made – two hundred and fifty-five animals all together – as they consumed their food. After all this the child is exceedingly tired and decides to stay in bed. Sitting there exhausted the child now wonders who will make their own breakfast. There comes a knock at the front door. Who and what do you think awaits?

What a mouth-watering and extremely heart-warming surprise the little human receives.

Young children will love the gatefold spread with a veritable zoo full of hungry animals that await the kind-hearted breakfast giver. They'll relish too, copying the sounds the creatures make as they eat, and joining in with the repeat refrain, 'See you tomorrow'. Yes, there's lots of maths potential in this but most importantly it's a delightfully illustrated, funny feast of a book. **JB**

How Long Is That Dog?

★★★★

John Bond, Harper Collins Children's Books, 32pp, 978 0 0085 019 3, £7.99 pbk

Evie wants a dog, really, really wants one. Her parents tell her that maybe she could have one for her birthday. However, she doesn't want to wait till then because she's already found a dog that utterly delights her. Evie's parents like him too and tell her that if she's able to guess how long the pooch is, then maybe she can keep him. Now that is a really tricky task, which leaves the girl completely baffled. Determined to discover the answer she starts comparing him to all manner of things - one hundred hot dogs, her dad, the school bus, a 'whoooooole bowl of spaghetti' but she just can't think of anything the right length. The days go by and Evie's desperation for that dog builds until she believes she's got the answer. Off she goes to get the dog but is heartbroken on getting to the kennels, to discover that Mister Long Dog has gone.

Back home she goes and straight upstairs to bed. In all her thinking about Mr Long Dog's length, she's forgotten one very important fact. The next day is her birthday and ...

John Bond's bright, dramatic illustrations, especially those of Evie's canine considerations are full of wit and certain to bring a big smile to the faces of both young children and adult sharers. **JB**

5 – 8 **Infant/Junior****Spring Chicken**

★★★★★

Paul Nugent, O'Brien Press, 32pp, 978-1788494793, £8.99 pbk

Amelia Egghart is no ordinary chicken; she's a chicken with a dream. Ever since she was a chick, she's been in training to achieve her goal and fly, fly longer than any chicken ever has before. She knows chickens aren't very good at flying – in fact the longest a chicken has even flown for is 13 seconds – but she's not going to let that stop her, and her friend Ferguson is there to help. Mole Ferguson is a genius inventor, coming up with plan after plan to get and keep Amelia airborne. They're all needed too because Amelia is so focused on her flying, that she forgets to pay attention to Ferguson's last-minute instructions. Finally, after many failed attempts, Amelia's dream comes true, in a totally unexpected way. With a light-touch message about the importance of persevering and gentle championing of STEM skills, Paul Nugent's adventure is funny and satisfying. There are lots of jokes for grown-ups to enjoy (take a look at the titles of the books scattered about the floor in Ferguson's studio for example) and everyone will find Amelia and Ferguson delightful. You'll believe a chicken can fly! **LS**

100 Goats and Granny

★★★★★

Atinuke, illus Lauren Hinds, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781406397574, £12.99 hbk

How many goats does Granny have? 'Not 1, not 2, not 3, nor 4. But more and more and more and more'. Is it 99? No, there is one missing, that mischievous goat 100. Where did goat 100 go? Granny goes everywhere with her goats, so a chaotic, noisy search starts. Indeed, there is so much noise, Granny has to intervene marching off with all her goats – or does she?

This is a fun book full of energy and life as young readers are introduced to numbers and are challenged to count but also to observe and

explore the illustrations. The text by storyteller Atinuke swings along with satisfying repetition, rhyme and rhythm. Granny is a very real grumpy granny whose character is captured by Lauren Hinds, as she marches across the page, harangues the crowd – and plays; just like her goats. The illustrations bursting with action and vibrant colours join Atinuke's text in a joyous celebration of community and counting. Each energetic spread encourages the eye and the voice to engage with the story joining in with the children as they play and chase those naughty goats. This is a picture book that invites the active collaboration of reader with the book and its creators and one that demands to be shared. **FH**

**Leave the Trees, Please**

★★★★★

Benjamin Zephaniah, ill. Melissa Castrillón, Magic Cat, 32pp, 978-1915569202, £12.99, hbk

A simple but powerful poem by the late, great Benjamin Zephaniah is given new life in this thought-provoking picture book. With a memorable rhythm, rhyme and chorus the text has a strong message about the importance of trees for the living creatures who make their homes in them, for our atmosphere and well-being.

Award winning illustrator Melissa Castrillón has taken this poem and woven an absorbing visual narrative around it depicting a young child whose special place is a wonderful old tree. We watch as the boy grows up, falls in love and has a child of his own, the tree central to the key moments in his life. When the tree is under threat, he leads a campaign to save it.

The illustrations are rich with detail throughout including the end papers of oak leaves where there are lots of living things to spot.

There is the suggestion that the poem was inspired by an ancient tree known and loved by the poet. The message has particular resonance in the light of recent

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high-profile stories of tree felling. The back of the book includes some information about Benjamin Zephaniah, his legacy and passion for environmental concerns. **SMc**

Kwesi and Nana Ruby Learn to Swim

★★★★

Kobina Commeh, ill. Barbara Quintino, Barefoot Books, 32pp, 979-8888593639, £7.99 pbk

When Kwesi meets his friends at Lagoon Lake, they tease him because, despite his yellow swimming trunks patterned with sharks, he's scared to get into the water and join the fun. He feels very dispirited as his mum drives back home but once there he smells something delicious coming from the kitchen. It's Nana Ruby's cooking and she's made delicious fufu with peanut soup. As he consumes the food, he feels as though he's in Nana's birthplace in a village in Ghana.

After dinner Kwesi and Nana play a game of oware. During the game Nana notices something is wrong with her grandson. Kwesi confesses his fear of the water that prevents him joining in the fun with his friends. Nana admits that she too is scared of the water. She goes on to tell him something about segregation and also relates a story about Mami Wata, a mythical half-woman, half fish. water spirit. In response to Kwesi's 'Is she real, Nana?' his grandmother makes a pact with the boy: if he learns to swim, she will too. Then, with the help of instructor, Ms. Esi) who has 'locs all the way down her back and eyes as deep as the darkest part of Lagoon Lake', they both overcome their fears and Kwesi even impresses the very friends who had made fun of him some months earlier.

In addition to Mami Wata, the author, who spent his childhood in Ghana, integrates other facets of Ghanaian culture into his telling including Adinkra symbols that represent words of wisdom, the djembe drum and the oware game the two play. Bárbara Quintino's mixed media illustrations are imbued with the vibrant hues and geometric patterns of traditional kente cloth.

(Back matter includes a note from the author) a glossary, a map. information about Akan names and an illustrator's note about how her work for this book inspired her to try and learn to swim.) Altogether a poignant and informative tale. **JB**

Wiggling Words

★★★★

Kate Rolfe, Two Hoots, 32pp, 9781035019717, £12.99 hbk

An unusual and rather beautiful picturebook, that performs a valuable task. Using her own lived experience, the winner of the **World Illustration Award** has created a wonderful visual representation of what dyslexia feels like. The frustration of the child, who wants to know what is happening, to



understand the story and to get to the end of the book, but for whom the words keep jumping around the page, not making any sense, is so very apparent in the body language and expressions. The words become a dominating, insurmountable mountain taking up nearly the whole page, making the would-be reader feel very small. But this is actually an empowering and joyous story, because we see the child reaching for an 'o' and then another and she turns them into glasses. Next, a pair of 'b's are turned into a butterfly, gracefully flying away. By creatively combining different letters with the power of her imagination, her joy in words really takes flight. All children will recognise the challenge of mastering decoding of text and will be able to empathise with children facing even greater difficulties. The empowering message, that all children can be successful, is backed up with a note from the author explaining her experience and offering tips that helped her, which will be invaluable to parents and teachers. The two-tone, hand-lettered illustrations are extremely effective. In addition, the font and yellow paper are chosen specifically to support dyslexic readers, which demonstrates the care with which this clever text has been put together. **JCo**

We are like Birds

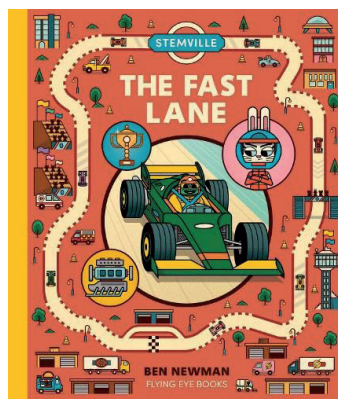
★★★★

Laila Ekboir, Kumusha, 32pp, 978-0008693817, £7.99 pbk

Laila Ekboir's warm and empathetic illustrations are the making of this picture book on starting again. Flor is only seven and is moving for the third time. We watch as she leaves her old home behind and begins to settle in a new home, new community, school and country. There is so much more said in the detailed illustrations than in the simple and lyrical text and this is arguably where discussion will be sparked with young readers who perhaps will notice Flor's apprehension on arrival in the new country, or her tentative inquisitiveness as she begins to wonder whether she too can join the games at school.

For older readers there is perhaps more that could be drawn from the numerous analogies throughout the text between the family and the many animals their plight resembles: birds, snails, crabs. Perhaps this could inspire some reflective poetry, or encourage children to share the animal that they feel most reflects their own family's journey. References are made also to puzzle pieces, seeds blown on the wind, and patchwork quilts which may help children to explore and share feelings about their family make-up, the movement of families around the world and the many reasons for such movement.

As we near the end of the book Flor begins to find her feet, establish friendships and feel more confident sharing her heritage; for those young readers who share this story and relate to Flor's journey, we can only hope this title helps them to feel represented, welcome and hopeful that they too will soon feel at home. **ARu**



Stemville: The Fast Lane

★★★★

Ben Newman, Flying Eye Books, 48pp, 978-1913123246, £12.99 hbk
The tortoise and the hare are back – but not as you know them. This time, the Big Race is a Formula 1-style showdown in the town of Stemville, and it's less about fairy tale and more about fuel injection. Frankie Thunderfoot is the latest in a long line of speed-obsessed hares. Wilbur Hardshell, the tortoise, takes a slower, more logical approach. The twist? Neither of them wins.

Newman's riff on the classic fable offers something quietly radical. When the inevitable accident occurs, Wilbur chooses kindness over competition, carrying the injured Frankie across the finish line – only for an unassuming little mouse to pip them both to the post. It's a warm, generous reworking of the story's original moral, swapping smugness for sportsmanship.

Narratively and visually, this is a hybrid (pun fully intended). Part picture book, part STEM primer, part comic-strip caper, each spread stands alone – welcoming the back-and-forthness of shared reading. Like Richard Scarry's bustling worlds, the book invites browsing, re-reading, and the joy of spotting something

new each time. Newman's aesthetic, however, is sharper and more geometric: bold shapes, clean lines, and graphic design flair make every page feel like a poster in motion.

Flying Eye's production values only heighten the experience. From the embossed cover to the thick, colour-rich, weighty paper stock, this is a book that feels as good as it looks. No page is wasted, and no corner is ignored. STEM content is smartly integrated – tyres, gears, fuel mixes, G-force, and wind resistance are all explored – but always in service of story. And it's Wilbur's quiet resolve, patience, and empathy that power the emotional engine.

A narratively generous joyride through science, storytelling, and unexpected heroism. **The Fast Lane** is a joy in design and detail, with a big thump of heart too: a book to slow down with, look closely at, and read (and learn) together. **MT**

Twigs and Stones

★★★★

Joy Cowley, ill. Gavin Bishop, Gekko Press, 32pp, 979-8765668238, £12.99 hbk

Lizard and Snake are friends who live in a hole under a rock together. As with all friendships sometimes things happen to make them fall out with each other. As described rather cleverly in the book, sometimes they are friends with a 'capital F' and sometimes only with a 'small f.'

Troubles occur when Lizard wants to put their names over the door spelt out with twigs. Unsurprisingly, storm damage causes some of the letters to fall down. Lizard's hasty repairs cause problems – when in replacing the letters he inadvertently changes snake's name to something far from polite. The situation goes from bad to worse when snake decides to get his own back. Luckily, they finally realise that names over the door isn't important but treasuring their friendship is.

Another story in the popular series about these two animal characters this time on the theme of friendship itself. **SMc**

Meet Amber Class

★★★★

Enomwoyi Damali, Otter-Barry, 80pp, 978-1915659576, £8.99 pbk

Meet Amber Class is, in many ways, less of a story book and more of an instruction manual for how to be a peaceful and successful primary school class. The book features three stories, and all of them deliver crystal clear messages about believing in yourself and treating others kindly.

The book opens with a story called *Believe in Yourself*, which introduces readers to some of the children in Amber class, and their inspirational teacher, Mrs Adisa. Mrs Adisa is kind and patient with all of her children, as she gently urges them to nurture their self-belief. For some children, this comes naturally: Nzingha confidently takes on the role

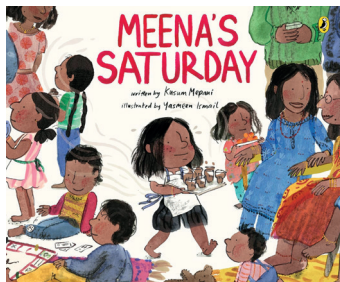
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of cheerleader for her friends and encourages them all to focus on the things they are best at. But some find it harder to see their own strengths, and Kayden finds things particularly tricky and needs the help of – of all things – a large beetle!

The second story, *Sort it Out*, focuses on the children's reciprocity and conflict resolution. A game of football sparks a fall out between Kayden and Andrew and Mrs Adisa is eager for the children to solve their problem without her help. It is a playground conflict that all young children will have experienced, and the story includes a step-by-step guide for making things better.

Finally, *Feeling Good* revisits the theme of self-belief as the children work together to recognise what makes them all individually special, and they consider ambitious life goals for themselves.

The book is a low-interest, high-ability book, in that it will appeal most to younger readers but offers a good reading challenge. Its overtly positive themes may feel saccharine to some readers to begin with, but the vast majority of young children will instantly recognise the classroom being described, and Nzingha, Kayden and the rest will remind them of their own friends. It is unusual for a book of this length to celebrate the magic of a primary school classroom in such an obvious manner, and young readers will love its familiar feel. **SD**



Meena's Saturday

★★★★

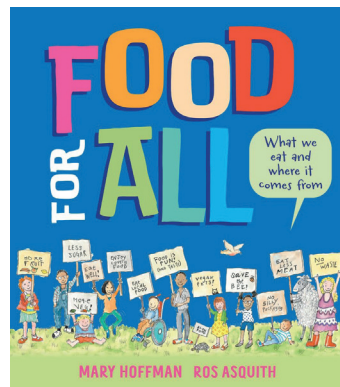
Kusum Mepani, ill. Yasmeen Ismail, Puffin, 40pp, 978-0241739877 £8.99, pbk

As the cover illustration suggests, Saturdays in Meena's house are very busy; Mum, Meena and her sisters have to prepare for all the visitors who come to see them each week. There is the house to clean, shopping to be bought and, as visitors start to arrive, lots of cooking to be done. Meena can't help noticing it is the girls and women who do all the work while the men and boys, including her own brother, rest. The men and boys even get served before the women and girls do. Meena decides if she wants this to ever change then she needs to take action now.

This is a day in the life story celebrating family traditions while gently challenging inherent unfairness. The illustrations by award

winning picture book maker Yasmeen Ismail are warm and lively evoking the chaotic party atmosphere of Meena's Saturdays perfectly. They are full of mouth-watering detail together with captions and speech bubbles.

A glossary would have been a great addition making the few words of Gujarati clear to all readers and describing the wonderful food depicted in the text and illustrations. **SM**



Food For All: What We Eat and Where It Comes From

★★★★★

Mary Hoffman, ill. Ros Asquith, Otter-Barry, 48pp, 978-1915659378, £14.99 hbk

Here is a beautiful hardback for everyone to enjoy, and which delves into a subject affecting us all. As soon as I saw the gorgeous and tempting endpapers, I knew I was in for a treat!

This inclusive and diverse book is well laid out and structured with a different topic on each spread. It starts with sections on growing food and looking at what plants and animals need, followed by how the food gets to humans and what is a balanced diet. Later chapters inform the reader about food waste and climate change before ending with suggestions as to how the world can feed itself both now and in years to come.

The inclusion on each spread of the little outer space creature is a great idea: it pops up with a speech bubble asking questions of the reader and adding interesting pieces of information. There are very attractive drawings and tables by illustrator Ros Asquith which work well with the interesting text of Mary Hoffman. They are a great team and this shines through the pages. I think the table on page 25 of all the different vitamins and which foods contain them is particularly helpful, as is the glossary at the end of the book. The pages entitled, 'All around the world' on pages 30-31 explain about national dishes and there are some brilliant illustrations of tea in different countries alongside popular foods from the four corners of the globe.

I highly recommend this publication for home and school libraries. It will answer all the questions about

food that the curious youngster has, and I am sure readers will enjoy the cartoon-style illustrations. This is the ideal book for adults to share with children and might just spark a child's interest in a career in this area. **JS**

Hupo and the Wonder Thief

★★★★

Billy Partridge, Flying Eye Books 64pp, 9781838741624, £12.99 hbk

Creative talent Billy Partridge won the Society of Artists Agents Award for New Talent at the World Illustration Awards in 2023 for his quirky contemporary cover of Lewis Carroll's *The Jabberwocky*. Known for his visual development work in advertising and television, he has a distinctive exaggerated style. His debut book *Hupo and the Wonder Thief* is designed to appeal to 5–8-year-olds. It captures the spirit of *Hilda* and the wonderment of *Alice*. Visual influences include cartoonish Funko Pop oversized heads melded with the handlebar moustaches of Studio Ghibli characters and the gaping mouths of Edward Gorey.

Hupo is an effervescent dog who is enthusiastic about the power of stories much to the dismay of the mundane townspeople of Yorger who just find him annoying. Despondent, he begins to lose hope until a mysterious, yellow fog and a sudden abduction change everything, starting him on a noble quest where he will find some surprising answers. As Hupo wonders through weird, eye-catching fantasy scapes populated with bizarre shapes such as zeppelin fish, Hitchcockian crows and watchful eyes, Partridge's palette graduates from earthy browns to murky yellows to aquamarines, bright pinks and zesty colour pops reflecting different moods and environs.

While *Hupo* has much to recommend it and will appeal to fans of outlandish cartoons and stories with positive messages about staying true to yourself, unfortunately the synergy between text and illustration falls short due to design choices. The speech bubbles work but the cramped, small print at the top of pages and the occasional use of coloured fonts on dark backgrounds could cause difficulty for readers. Sadly, this detracts from the rhythm of the alliteration and onomatopoeia and as dynamic as the illustrations are, some of the story's magic is lost in translation. **TJ**

Finders of Silverthorne Forest: The lost treasures

★★★★

Rachel Chivers Khoo, ill. Laura Catalán, 224pp, Walker Books, 9781529523805, £7.99 pbk

This magical adventure story for children takes place in an enchanted forest – one that is under threat from greedy capitalists, eager to develop their new car park.

The young fox Tuftorous Snook (or 'Tuft', for short) strikes a curious image, adorned with one slipper and one Wellington boot and baggy dungarees,

as he treks through the woodland looking for 'treasure'. Anything from discarded tin foil to an old umbrella count as treasure but, despite coveting human objects, Tuft, like all 'Finders', knows that human beings are frightening beasts to be avoided at all costs. It's a terrifying moment, then, when Tuft finds Max hiding in his treasure trove (an old treehouse).

Max is a young boy whose elderly grandma owns the forest and has tasked Max with finding a sentimental time capsule she buried when she was a young girl. Max must work at speed because, tomorrow, the house and surrounding lands are being sold to a new developer. He thinks he has found a clue in Grandma's old treehouse when he is discovered by Tuft. Very quickly, the pair recover from the shock that humans aren't evil/foxes can talk, and realise they may have a shared goal: one that is threatened by bulldozers and by Tuft's fellow Finders and their unbreakable rules regarding finding and keeping. The race is on to find Grandma's time capsule and rescue the animals from the destruction of their home.

The story is essentially a two-hander, with Max and Tuft exploring one another's worlds and learning to reconsider everything they thought they knew. Together, they grow brave enough to face their fears and stand up to the Finders' outdated rules and the greedy developers' earth-movers.

Catalán's illustrations are of the highest quality, delivering a pleasing balance of cute and cuddly with action and drama. They are used generously and creatively to draw readers deeper into the story, sometimes as full-page spreads and other times as border decorations.

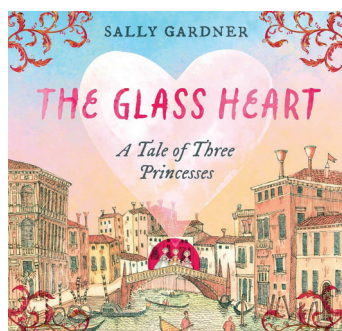
For a book marketed as 'magical' and 'enchanted', there is little in the way of fantasy content, beyond the hoard of talking, endearingly-dressed foxes. The dominant themes are family and kindness, with both Tuft and Max showing remarkable levels of empathy even when faced with a world completely different to their own. The relationships that they both have with their grandparents are also heartwarming, and will evoke fond memories in many readers. Readers eager to lose themselves in a magical, new world may be disappointed by the limited scope of this series-opener, but Tuft and Max are engaging protagonists so plenty of young readers will be happy to stick with them into future episodes. **SD**

The Glass Heart: A Tale of Three Princesses

★★★★★

Sally Gardner, Zephyr, 32pp, 978-1035912636, £12.99 hbk

Once upon a time... so begins the story that Nana tells to cheer Rosie up when she breaks Nana's precious delicate glass heart. It is a story about three princess each with a glass heart – a fragile thing that can, if broken, be fatal; or that can be mended as though never as it was; or can find



the happiness it deserves. Of course, there will be conditions. All fairy stories require that. Will Valentino who is not a prince be able to meet these conditions? Will he win the heart of the third princess? And what about the princess whose heart had to be mended? Well, as she says 'That's the way it is, something that has been broken and mended often lasts longer than something new'.

This is an attractive, gentle fairy story based on a German tale published in the 19th century. Gardner's telling first appeared in 2001 and it is a pleasure to see it back in print. The text is satisfyingly direct as Nana tells the story allowing for interpolations by Rosie, a technique that adds immediacy and life. There are no monsters or dragons. The tasks are practical but require time and patience. Will the princess wait for her true suitor? The fantasy element is that of the glass hearts. But real hearts can be hurt – even broken – and always need love and care from the right person. The young audience can take the fantasy as presented, older readers will appreciate the metaphor. Adding to the atmosphere are the illustrations by Sally Gardner herself. Her delicate watercolour landscapes and figures perfectly capture the tone and the magical setting of the narrative. Adults may recognise her subtle nod to painters such as Canaletto and Watteau. Her images bring the enchantment to life as they work in tandem to the printed text. A book that should find a home on library or home bookshelves to be shared at bedtime or indeed anytime. Recommended. **FH**

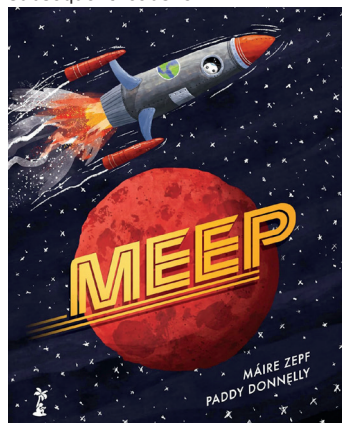
Letters to a Monster

★★★★★

Patricia Forde, ill. Sarah Warburton, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 978 1 5266 1581 7 £7.99, pbk

Here's how this book opens: it is a dark and stormy night with a determined looking girl tucked in bed whilst her window is battered with rain. Sophie is writing a letter which begins, 'Dear Monster, leave now or I will call the Monster police'. So follows a whole book full of letter writing between Sophie and the Monster which turn from threatening to hilarious and eventually to a lasting friendship. Written by the Irish Children's

Laureate it is a heart-warming tale of facing up to dreams (nightmares?) of the Monster, visiting cousins in the deep dark woods, fishing for stars in the river and chasing Zingabobs through the trees. Monster always replies instantly to Sophie's letters and as the correspondence grows ever more imaginative readers can study the pictures to realise just what Monster is facing as he braves the world. But how will they jointly tackle the gorilla police? This hilarious tale with the unexpected friendship of Sophie and the Monster will perhaps be a spark for young letter writers? Illustrated with just the right amount of scare and delight, there's lots to intrigue readers in the illustrations on subsequent reads. **GB**



Meep

★★★★★

Máire Zepf, ill. Paddy Donnelly, Little Island 32pp, 978-1915071668 £8.99, pbk

This picture book has the same basic premise as *Man on the Moon: a day in the life of Bob* by Simon Bartram, in which the little robot, as with Bob on the Moon, spends a lot of time on Mars, but fails to see the aliens, who make sure they are always hidden. *Bob* was published over 20 years ago, so a new generation of small children can delight in spotting the friendly-looking aliens in their hiding places, and see them in their underground base. They can also watch them pick up the bits that keep drooping off Meep, and know more than the scientists about how Meep was able to be restored to active service – that is a totally different angle.

The scientists, a delightful bunch of multicultural characters, male and female, young (purple hair) and older (balding), get very excited about their 'brave' little robot, and Meep is thought of as female. They send her a love song when she stops working after the dust storm, promise never to forget her, and are delighted when she starts transmitting again.

This will be a good book to share and read aloud: children can do the countdown before Meep is launched into space, and spot the first hidden alien...**DB**

The Bicycle

★★★★★

Patricia McCormick & Megan Babakar, ill. Yas Imamura, Farshore 32pp, 978-0008720391, £7.99 pbk

Mevan loves her home in lush hilly Kurdistan in the northern corner of Iraq where she lives with her family who have lived there for generations. So much love surrounds her that she feels ten feet tall. However when Iraqi soldiers push the Kurds from their homes into the mountains everything changes. With heavy hearts Mevan's parents leave behind other family members and friends in the community and set off in a van towards Turkey. But they're not allowed to stay so what is to be an arduous journey continues to Azerbaijan and thence to Russia. The girl feels increasingly small – virtually invisible. After two arduous years in chilly Russia, Mevan's family have saved sufficient money to leave and they fly to the Netherlands where they're given an apartment to stay in until they can find a real home. Mevan watches from the window (we see how lonely she is looking at everybody on bicycles enjoying themselves) and wishes she could join them. Then to her surprise and joy a kind man named Egbert, responsible for fixing things in the apartment building, brings her a shiny new red bike: at last Mevan feels more like one of the other children. A year later the family receive good news – a permanent new home in a safe country awaits them, but in their haste to leave, the girl doesn't get an opportunity to say farewell to Egbert. However, she never forgets his kindness.

The book concludes with a short account of how as an adult, Mevan was able to use the internet and track down Egbert to thank him for his kindness and we're left with a hugely positive message of how important it is to show kindness to other people, especially those who are refugees. An ideal story (written in collaboration with author/journalist Patricia McCormack) to share and sort discussions on the topics of refugees and being kind to others, both of which the author talks of in her introductory note. Illustrator Yas Imamura deserves a special mention for her illustrations which are both culturally and emotionally aware and further deepen the impact of the moving narrative. **JB**

The Appletree Animal Agency

★★★★★

Katya Balen, ill. Gill Smith, Walker, 160pp, 9781529519181, £6.99 pbk

This is the first in what is bound to be a very popular series with animal lovers or any young reader in search of a story filled with believable characters. It offers a beautifully

crafted, gentle blend of adventure and humour, full of warmth and a real sense of a community, with its cosy village setting populated with some interesting residents. Mattie, who lives alone with her Dad, is so desperate for a pet that she pretends all the night animals she can see from her bedroom are her pets. It seems that almost everyone in her class has a pet. Her friend Zoe is very generous with her beloved dog Heinz, but it is not the same as having your very own puppy. Could it be that the puppy she wishes for on a shooting star and which Heinz found cowering under a bush and in need of rescue, is the pet of her dreams? Taking the puppy to get sorted out at the vet, Zoe and Mattie meet Casper, the son of the replacement vet who has moved in with a menagerie of rescue animals. The children persuade Dr Polly to keep the puppy by offering to help with all the animals. Mattie is in her element as an apprentice vet and now can see 'her' puppy whenever she likes. But all these rescued animals need forever homes and Mattie's idea to set up an agency at the village fete to find people the perfect pet does not go to plan and friends have to support each other to overcome their mistakes and mishaps, recognising their faults as well as their strengths. Young readers will learn a lot about resilience, responsibility and friendship, as well as about the proper care of animals, from this delightful story. The lovely black and white drawings throughout bring all the animal and human characters vividly to life. A truly quality offering for newly confident readers. **JCo**



The Doughnut Club

★★★★★

Kristina Rahman, Nosy Crow, 288pp, 97818051363667, £7.99 pbk

Quinn loves her family; her two mums and her annoying little brother Olly, but sometimes she feels like the odd one out. She enjoys art and being

quiet, while the rest of her family love surfing and lots of loud, boisterous activities. And she's the only one in the family to have red hair. She's been aware from an early age that both her and Olly were donor conceived, but on their way to their annual summer holiday destination, her mums reveal that they have recently registered with a specialist website and have discovered that the pair have at least sixteen donor siblings! Quinn is excited at the thought that at last she will find a relative that enjoys the same activities as her and so is keen to find out more and maybe even meet up with one of them, but her parents are less sure that Quinn and Olly are emotionally ready just yet.

So begins Quinn's secret plan to investigate further and discover the identity of her donor siblings, although things take a worrying turn when she finds out her arch-nemesis Monika is also donor-conceived. Could Monika possibly be her actual half-sibling?

This debut middle-grade tale from author Rahman is a unique look at this often-undiscussed topic, despite the fact that the rate of donor-conceived children is increasing yearly. Whilst a potentially difficult subject matter, the language used throughout is straightforward and clear in a story with family always at the heart of it. The book is full of warmth and humour with many relatable moments as Quinn navigates her yearning for more information. Other minor characters, such as Fred, Quinn's walking friend, offer insights from a variety of adult perspectives, highlighting the diversity of families and their varied dynamics in today's society. Once Quinn realises that she needs to stop worrying and just be herself, she understands that it is not important or essential to all be the same as each other to still be a family.

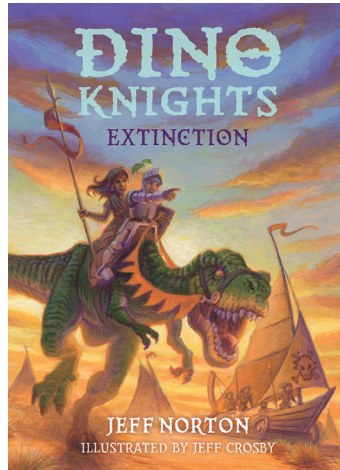
A positive story that will open conversation both at home and in the classroom and help many families negotiate what may be a tricky topic. **AH**

Dino Knights: Extinction

★★★★

Jeff Norton, illus Jeff Crosby, Scallywag Press Ltd, 176pp, 978-1836300083, £7.99 pbk

Reading doesn't get much more pleasurable than Jeff Norton's **Dino Knights** adventures, which see young Henry Fairweather and his fellow knights protect the land of Brecklan from outside threats, and always ready to ride to the help of others on their dinosaurs. Yes, in this world, dinosaurs did not die out and have been tamed enough that some can be ridden, including Henry's much-loved T Rex. There's something of a Wild West feel to this episode, in which Henry and his friends are heading east in an attempt to find out what happened to his parents, who vanished when he was just a baby.



They meet the nomadic and warlike Junji people, travelling across the arid sands of the Dry Lands on wonderful sailboats and preparing for a fight with The Guild, a ruthless enemy who plans to take the desert lands for their own and wipe out the wild dinosaurs who live there in the process. There are twists and turns in every chapter, an unexpected and very satisfying reunion for Henry, and some carefully delivered environmental messages alongside the thrilling battles (who wouldn't want to rid out against their enemies on a huge dinosaur?)

Henry and his fellow knights are great characters and the dinosaurs, brilliantly depicted in Jeff Crosby's illustrations, are just as warmly described. This is great for newly confident but reluctant readers and very good for reading aloud too. Dinosaurs and knights? It doesn't get much better! **MMA**

[Read our interview with author Jeff Norton.](#)

Sandy Fin: Operation Splash Landing

★★★★

Martin Stewart, Zephyr, 200pp, 9781035913855, £7.99 pbk

A perfect book for the summer holidays, this has the feel of a classic seaside adventure – allowing both those readers who are off on holiday to reimagine the landscape before them, and those left in the library to be swept away, transported into the heart of this urgent ocean adventure. We meet and become easily at home from the outset with Sandy and Lily, firm friends and the main characters. Despite living in a land of dreams for some young readers, importantly, these are not characters without difficulties – Sandy has already lost his father and both Lily and Sandy are set to lose their home if they can't provoke the villain of the story, Albo Start, into revealing his true intentions.

As is so often the case, the children see the urgency and the truth behind events at the Museum of Seaside

Stories, and face their fears to pursue Albo Start, uncover the Golden Lobster and return Portwhistle to more prosperous times.

The writing is perfect for readers ready to move from beginner readers to junior fiction; it encourages them to engage with more challenging vocabulary and sentence structure, whilst also retaining short chapters always ending with a reason to read on and plenty of laughs along the way. It will undoubtedly also appeal to readers who have already met Bridget Vanderpuff, another Martin Stewart creation, and those who have an interest, as so many do, in the conservation of our seas and ocean wildlife. With the potential for many more titles in the series to follow, **Operation Splash Landing** looks set to take off. **ARu**

Speedwheels 3000: The Race Against Crime

★★★★

Jenny Pearson, illus Katie Kear & Nick East, Usborne, 344pp, 9781801315128, £7.99, pbk

Jenny Pearson does an absolutely brilliant job of cranking up the pressure in this funny and highly energetic journey across Europe. Jumping from city to city our protagonist Evie Clutterbuck somehow manages to avoid disaster whilst constantly steering into it!

Our story takes place over this year's Speedwheels 3000, a trans-European race taking in some of Europe's most important racetracks. Evie somehow manages to stow away in her dad's trusty and always reliable race car and does a brilliant job of not only co-driving but also a fairly good amount of police-work. When this year's race becomes embroiled in a Swiss Bank robbery everyone becomes a suspect including Evie and her Dad. The story jumps from scene to scene with an amazing amount of energy and a lot of laughs including some entertaining running (or rather racing) jokes.

Chapters are very manageable, which in turn leads to this being a very accessible read. Pearson also has a lot of fun with the formatting with a list of character cards at the beginning of the book and regular investigation prompts throughout the story to get readers thinking amongst a lot of other playful bits of book design.

Thankfully **The ace Against Crime** does not require any prior knowledge of motor racing – it also does not require a huge amount of buy-in! There are lots of lovely teachable moments throughout the book which touch on some very important themes. One of the key elements of Evie and her dad's story is around grief and how people deal with it differently and how talking is a key element of dealing with the things that stay with us. This book was so much fun to read because of its pacing and its extremely likable narrator/co-driver! **DO'R**

Dadbot

★★★★

Jack Noel, Piccadilly Press, 176pp, 978-1800788282, £8.99 pbk

A comic format which will have lots of appeal. Dad works for a big factory as the Plant Operating Supervisor no less. The 'Terrible Two' kids spend time at a car boot, with £5 in their pockets to spend. They explore possible purchases before a seller charms them with what he calls a state-of-the-art machine. The fact that it does not function does not deter them from making a purchase, and the kids head for home to explore its functions. Only a strike by lightning starts up motion in this machine which answers to name of DADBOT. There follows fun in the park, car chases and threats from the car boot seller, who is determined to recapture DADBOT. Every spread is covered in cartoon pictures, balloons and text detailing every move of the kids and DADBOT. When their dad is kidnapped, the action gets even more lively. The reader who gets hold of this book is in for long, page-turning absorption. The book closes with very precise instructions on how to draw a robot, down to selecting a mood; happy, scared, in love. Wonderfully wacky, young readers who are into robots will want to tackle this comic-style book alone. **GB**

Supa Nova

★★★★

Chanté Timothy, 160pp, Nosy Crow, 9781805130666, £8.99 pbk

This striking new graphic novel series for young science fans is bursting with bright ideas and colourful, comic scenes. Nova is the youngest and most enthusiastic in her family of geniuses and it is hard to compete with her scientifically successful parents and sister. She is on the lookout for a brilliant, new, world-saving idea to promote her credentials, and what would be more perfect than a method for solving the globe's plastic pollution problem?

Nova approaches the problem – as she approaches everything – with an unwavering positive attitude and, with the help of her AI system – Comet – gives life to her sister's discarded chewing gum and turns it into an adorable, plastic-munching creature called Chomp!

Somewhat predictably, Chomp's plastic-eating soon gets out of control on an epic scale, and Nova (and the rest of the neighbourhood) must contend with an enormous pink blob terrorising the local area. Chomp slithers about the town seeking out any items containing plastic and gobbling them up, thus adding more and more mass to his giant, globulous body. It is exciting to watch Chomp lay waste to the city's waste and Timothy's lively, bold and original illustrations offer a dramatic and modern take on classic disaster movie scenes, with hapless bystanders leaping for cover as plastic-filled buildings collapse.

However, despite their monstrous size, Chomp is not the real villain of

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

the story: plastic is. Chomp's appetite for everything from traffic cones to the very roads they sit on highlights just how much plastic we use in our lives and delivers an important ecological message that will be easy for all children to understand. Indeed, the narrative is often interrupted by rather obvious efforts to teach lessons about the dangers of too much plastic in the world. Even Police officers' uniforms are made of plastic, and so are the giant nets they throw to try and capture Chomp.

How can Nova possibly reverse Chomp's size and still save the planet from the plastic menace? The answer is, of course, by using science. That is the overwhelming message behind Nova's story, and it dominates the book even more than the themes of family and ecology. Nova's tale shows us that science is extremely cool and we should all take much more interest in it! It is a virtuous message, and a crucial one for young female readers, but its delivery is anything but subtle and, by the end, readers may feel somewhat fatigued by Nova's relentless insistence that science is awesome.

However, Super Nova's infectious enthusiasm and boundless energy make her a fun and engaging character for young readers to root for, and she is likely to find countless more ways of saving the planet through her scientific inventions in future episodes. **SD**

Solving crimes is NOT my superpower

★★★★★

Nathanael Lessore, ill. Simran Diamond Singh, *Little Tiger*, 192pp., 9781788956642, £7.99 pbk
The people of Walsham all have special powers (some are more useful than others: the postal worker has 8 elongating arms, but the mayor does multicoloured farts!) except for 10-year-old Sara, who is the last in Year 5 to find out what they can do. It's worse for her, as her parents are superheroes, and a 'lift' to school involves being flown in Mum's arms, which is SO embarrassing. When the school football trophy is stolen, Sara decides she will solve the mystery, with or without powers... Her best friend, Georgie, is Captain of the school football team, and they have never lost a match yet, but Georgie is afraid that without the trophy, which they see as their good luck charm, they might just lose. As the trophy turns out to be the reason the people of Walsham have their powers, things start going wrong in all sorts of ways. Can Sara discover her superpower in the nick of time?

There is a lot of fun in this book, indeed, it's often laugh-out-loud hilarious and we need more humour in children's books. Award-winning author Nathanael Lessore is an excellent writer, on exactly the right wavelength his readers. **DB**

Puloma and the Bear

★★★★★

Jasmin Bilal, ill. Skylar White, *Barrington Stoke*, 96pp, 978-0008698096, £7.99pbk

This is exactly the sort of book which demonstrates why Barrington Stoke are so good at engaging reluctant or struggling readers. The stories they produce are so engaging and often, as in this case, so thought provoking, memorable, well written and well-illustrated, that they are worth their weight in gold in any library or classroom. In her second book for the publisher, Jasmin Bilal has written a powerful story which will really resonate with children who are passionate about animal welfare, as so many are. They will also quickly empathise with Puloma's predicament, newly orphaned and now housed with inhospitable and cruel relatives. They will be impressed by her courage and resilience, when she runs away to make a life for herself. They will fear for her future when she finds it impossible to find work and be excited when she grasps at the opportunity to work with a travelling circus. But, like her, will be puzzled by the circus's frequent moves and the circus worker's fear of the police. They will be as horrified as Puloma is when we discover that Mr Kapoor, the owner, has been keeping a black sloth bear captive. Nyla is the circus's star attraction, drawing large crowds to watch her dance despite the fact that this cruel practice is now illegal in India. Puloma forms a bond with Nyla and is allowed to care for the suffering bear, who has been stripped of her claws and teeth. Nyla's mistreatment becomes too much for Puloma and she plans another escape, with an angry circus owner in hot pursuit, but she is determined to find a sanctuary for them both. The reader also gets a wonderful insight into the Sikh Gurdwara and its role in protecting those within its walls. Information at the back of this engrossing story raises awareness that, despite being illegal, this practice of keeping bears in captivity for entertainment still exists, which may well inspire animal lovers to action as well as enjoying a really satisfying reading experience. **JCo**

Aggie Morton, Mystery Queen: The body under the piano

★★★

Marthe Jocelyn, *Andersen Press*, 336pp, 9781839136078, £7.99 pbk
Here comes the first in a series following the escapades of Aggie Morton, a young sleuth. Emanating from the author's own childhood passion for Agatha Christie, our protagonist not only shares the same name as the famous crime writer, she also shares many of her attributes. Growing up in a seaside town, following the death of her

father, the painfully shy Aggie is leading an isolate life until fate sends Hector Perot her way. Also an outcast, embodying the experiences of many individuals living in exile during the war, the two fast become friends and, when a body is discovered in the local dance studio, we fall quickly into the expected pattern of an Agatha Christie, but this time aimed at a younger audience.

The number of suspects grows, the tension builds, the town is on the brink of disaster as it folds inwards on itself with everyone becoming a potential suspect. Yet, Aggie Morton and her equally unassuming new companion quietly work away to discover the truth and to save Aggie's dance instructor from being framed for murder. There is plenty within the text here which would support valuable book talk – the resilience the lead character shows to overcome her natural shyness, the concept of belonging and how this can vary, grief, friendship and trust are all raised as themes for further discussion.

The writing itself is ambitious and there is much here that would support older primary pupils in developing their own writing style. The text has an old-fashioned feel very much in keeping with the stories that inspired the author, the plot is dense and the expectations on the reader are perhaps more serious and aspirational than on many texts aimed at this age group these days. Certain to find a readership, especially with those that have already enjoyed similar work by Fleur Hitchcock or Robin Stevens, this is a series which seems set to expand with the second already on the way. Yet it is worth noting that the readership will need to be as ambitious as Aggie herself, and the style of this series may not make it a reading for pleasure book for all readers in this age bracket. **ARu**

The Boy With Big Decisions

★★★★★

Helen Rutter, *Scholastic*, 337pp, 9780702314667, £7.99 pbk

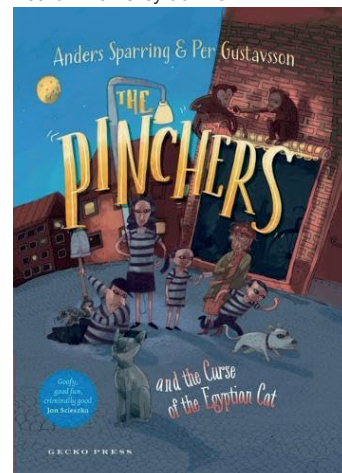
Decisions can be overwhelming – from what to have on your toast to what trousers to wear – but what if your decisions change the course of your life? This is Fred's main concern – or more that decisions are being made for him that are affecting what his life will look like!

We join Fred Durst at a pivotal time in his life – he has just moved to a new town and is looking to start at a new school. He is presented with two options – the vaguely oppressive Gains School (of which his dad is a former pupil) or the amply provisioned art rooms of Bowtree High. The first of many decisions that our readers have to make is which school to attend – both options have immediate and serious impacts on Fred's life and the lives of those around him.

Fred has to ask some big questions about who he thinks he is and the reader can see this play out in lots of different ways. There are many different themes throughout the

book, with each having its own distinctive messages.

Helen Rutter does a brilliant job of highlighting the subtle ways young people can be stripped of agency both at home and in the educational environment. The book does an equally fantastic job conveying what caring and approachable role models can do for children that might need a little extra support in making decisions. The book is paced brilliantly and holds lots of teachable moments around the importance not only of young people using their voices but of being expected to be heard when they do. **DO'R**



The Pinchers and the Curse of the Egyptian Cat

★★★★★

Anders Sparring, ill. Per Gustavsson, trans. Julia Marshall, *Gecko Press*, 9798765670132 £8.99, pbk

What a marvel! On the cover flap is a synopsis of the contents; shoplifting, whistling, a mysterious old woman, an unfortunate accident, a curse, tricky clues, cute monkeys, a mean zookeeper, more whistling... and a reasonably happy ending. Lots here to tempt youngsters who lay their hands on this first chapter book for beginner readers. Mum and Dad Pincher, and kids Ellen and Theo, their CVs outlined at the very start, become involved in the curse of the Egyptian cat, a curse that turns thieves into honest people and honest people into thieves. Readers know that whilst Ellen aspires to becoming a thief like their parents, they also know that Theo has a secret mission to become a police officer when he grows up. Whilst they seek to break the curse Theo and Ellen are led into scrape after scrape. The illustrations are hilarious, characters well matching their individual traits. With coloured pictures on every page there is so much to savour in this book. Translated from the original Swedish it, was voted Best Children's Book of the Year by one of Sweden's largest newspapers. The author is a screenwriter for many popular TV shows and also a stand-up comedian. Illustrated by a Swedish illustrator/author it will be thoroughly enjoyed by readers looking for adventure in their early years of solo reading. **GB**

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

**Boss of the Underworld:
Shirley Vs The Green Menace**

★★★★★

Tor Freeman, 160pp, Hachette, 9781444979343, £7.99 pbk

This comedy graphic novel for children is the start of a new series by celebrated comic book contributor Tor Freeman. Fans of **The Phoenix** and other comics will adore this opportunity to enjoy Freeman's charmingly silly jokes play out over a longer form.

The Underworld is a curious and confusing place that causes creatures to take on strange changes. Thus, when young Shirley falls down a manhole cover, she is confronted by a colourful collection of giant talking animals, all of whom, for all sorts of weird reasons, believe she is the 'chosen one', here to deliver them from the Green Menace and his crocodilian goons, who terrify the Underworld's inhabitants with incessant bullying and petty meanness. Nobody is safe from their birthday party-spoiling, sandcastle-stomping antics!

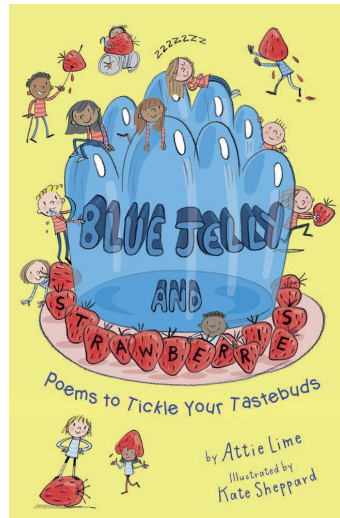
With no clear way home, Shirley decides she has nothing better to do and might as well follow her new friend (a giant cockroach called George) to locate and defeat the nasty green boss.

The journey is long, and very eventful indeed. Shirley and George must overcome a fortune teller with a very obnoxious puppet, child-eating monsters and a delicious looking fruit with lethal powers. They must also outfox two terrifying sphinxes and escape the clutches of seductive sirens who stalk the sewers to the boss's lair. Throughout it all, Shirley lives up to her 'chosen one' status, showing no sign of fear or indecision and taking every set-back as a cheery opportunity to learn more about her strange new world.

Freeman has perfect comic timing and there are laughs to be had on every single page of this hilarious book. Sometimes the comedy comes in juvenile jokes such as toilet humour (sometimes literally) and sometimes it is much more mature. Indeed, some of the jokes will go over young readers' heads at times, but will delight any grown-ups sharing the story with their child at bedtime. There are also charming jokes that play on readers' knowledge of traditional stories, including a wonderful take on Hansel and Gretel, which sees a hungry witch attempt to entice Shirley and George into her cauldron using her house made entirely out of...broccoli!

Freeman's illustrations are always vibrant, playful and full of energy and help make the jokes even more effective. The combination of such joyful pictures with such a funny script is a perfect introduction to comic strip storytelling and makes the book feel like a generous celebration of classic comics of the past.

As Shirley finally catches up with the Green Menace and discovers that they share a dramatic history, she opens up all sorts of questions for future episodes to explore, chief of which are how can she ever get home, and what is under the Underworld? Certainly, readers will be very happy to return to the Underworld soon to follow Shirley on her next adventure! **SD**

**Blue Jelly and Strawberries:
Poems to Tickle Your Tastebuds**

★★★★★

Attie Lime, illus Kate Sheppard, Otter-Barry, 80pp, 978-1915659583 £8.99 pbk

An intriguing title on an eye-catching cover, this would certainly encourage a young reader to pick up this book. Nor would they be disappointed. As the subtitle suggests these are poems to tickle the tastebuds – or the interest. Of course one is not expected to like them all. Just as some snacks are tastier than others, so the poems here will find their own audience. There is plenty to attract from the opening poem *Our Weekend* crammed with created words that perfectly describe the activities of those days to the more thoughtful *Best Tree Ever* or *Dreamer*. All are short and immediate ranging from simple quatrains or questions to longer stories but never more than a page of words. Beside these words are the illustrations from Kate Sheppard. Her firm outlines add character and a lively visual dimension to Attie Lime's imagination; this is indeed a partnership. Here is a debut that promises well for the future. **FH**

A Place of a Thousand Wishes

★★★★★

Sarah Merrett, *Everything with Words*, 324pp, 9781911427452, £8.99 pbk

Set in 1899, and offering a short history on the context of the story – ice cream selling – at the back of the book, **A Place of a Thousand**

Wishes has some clear appeal to the intended audience. What child wouldn't be interested in the story of a youngster who not only sells ice cream for a living, but also discovers they have magical powers and those that can change the fortunes of their family. But as is so often the case in such stories, these powers quickly bring with them forceful enemies, and Mason must grow up fast making decisions which may impact on all those around him.

This is a most unusual junior title, and in many ways this is welcome. Both the subject and the serious undertones are less obvious choices than many comparative texts currently available for this age group and it is possible to see assured readers of 8-10 enjoying accompanying Mason as he discovers not only his hidden gifts but also his family's history. The writing encourages the readership to embrace a challenge with effective and detailed descriptions driving the narrative, combined with clever use of short chapters ensuring that, despite the overall length, young readers should stay engaged until the end.

That said, **A Place of a Thousand Wishes** does feel slightly like it is one wish short in places. It offers plenty of opportunity for productive book talk, considering themes such as the true meaning of family and how to navigate who to trust in testing times – both themes as pertinent to Y5s and Y6s today, as they would have been to Mason and Clem in the story. Equally of note, are the quite superb illustrations by Ewa Beniak-Haremska. Yet just as these illustrations never seem to truly get their moment to shine, there are similarly times when the plot dims, the narrative feels less driven and the focus less clear, and for these reasons it may not be the most obvious choice to consolidate reading for pleasure practice with the intended audience. **ARU**

Land of the Last Wildcat

★★★★★

Lui Sit, illus David Dean, Macmillan Children's Books, 265pp., 9781035040315, £7.99 pbk
Puffin Lau (Chinese Dad, Portuguese Mum) has been feeling that her Mum has been too busy for her, and she spends a lot of time, by arrangement, with Grandad Moe, who is her friend Lance's grandfather. She is disappointed when her class, 5C, is visiting the Pokko Science and Research Museum, her Mum's workplace, and Mum does not turn up to give the promised talk in the Linger Island Gallery about the mysterious wildcat, the kuri. The CEO of the Museum, Roger Smoult, gives the talk instead, and Puffin is worried. She manages to get down to the lab, dragging her friend Lance with her, and finds a captive kuri, kept by Roger Smoult for investigation into its alleged healing properties, and her reluctant Mum under a lot of pressure.

An exciting adventure follows, as the children, with some unexpected help, try to get the kuri back to Linger Island where it belongs, pursued by the devious Smoult. Puffin finds that she has a birthbond with the kuri, and she needs to be very resourceful, with Lance a brave and helpful sidekick. Of course, all is well in the end, and the mother/daughter relationship will evidently be much improved.

Lui Sit, born in Hong Kong, writes in multiple genres – children's middle grade, adult short fiction and non-fiction. **Land of the Last Wildcat** is her debut novel, and the first in a two-part series illustrated by David Dean, whose occasional illustrations do bring the headstrong Puffin to life. **DB**

**Doom of the Darkwing:
How to Train Your Dragon School,
Book 1**

★★★★★

Cressida Cowell, Hodder Children's Books, 190pp, 978 1 44498 192 6, £7.99, pbk

After a quarter of a century and more than twelve novels, four films and a TV series, Cressida Cowell's **Hiccup the Viking** sails on into new dangers. Notionally, this looks like a new spin off series, **How to Train Your Dragon School**, presented in short chapters suitable for the lower end of the dragon reading age group, but fans will welcome that little has changed on the Island of Berk or in the wider Barbaric Archipelago. We have moved back to the time of the very earliest adventures, to the beginning of Gobber the Belch's Viking and Dragon Training School. Snotlout, Hiccup's arch enemy, has been resurrected from before his reformation, after his heroic death in the main series, and takes his place among all the familiar characters, brought to life once more in Cressida's scratchy, smudgy cartoons. There's the same mix of knockabout comedy and improbably inventive epic adventure but rather less of the emotional subtlety that I remember, perhaps because of the slightly younger target age group. **CB**

Bridges

★★★★★

Magda Garguláková, ill. Jakub Bachorík, Post Wave, 64pp, 9781836270119, £16.99 hbk

This book is a stunningly illustrated compendium of notable bridges, their purpose and the craft behind creating them which would be great for topic support or leisure browsing.

It begins by exploring the function of bridges and the types of bridges that exist around the world. There's a particularly enjoyable multiple-choice-build-your-own-bridge section that almost has a choose-your-own-adventure quality to it. This section would be particularly useful for study but also potentially could be used as a creative writing prompt.

From there it moves on to explore existing bridges from around the world ranging from famous bridges like Tower Bridge and the Golden

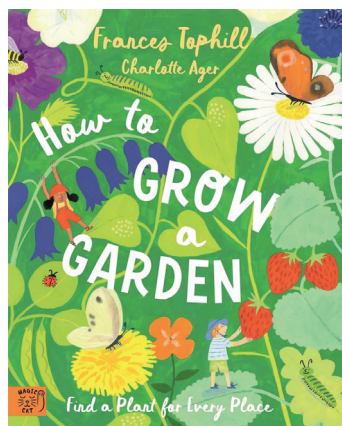
8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

Gate Bridge to dangerous bridges like the Hussaini Hanging Bridge and moveable bridges like the Gateshead Millennium Bridge.

There's a section too on the history of bridges through the ages and the evolution of their architecture. This section is livened up by comic book-esque spreads explaining the stories of historical bridges or their creators.

The penultimate section details the technology behind building bridges which talks the reader through the process of designing and creating a successful and stable bridge, before moving on to look at famous bridgebuilders and ending with bridges in contemporary and popular culture. Who knew you could write so much about bridges? Other books on bridges need not apply!

It would be an ideal text to compliment the study of inventions, technology and design for those who want something bright, colourful and packed full of detail. The illustrations are attractive and the sheer amount of detail and information will keep readers busy for hours on end. One final note – throughout there are some fill in pages which would limit its classroom or library use – but it does make it a more interactive read compared to some books on this topic. **CH**



How to Grow a Garden

★★★★★

Frances Tophill, ill. Charlotte Ager, Magic Cat Publishing, 64pp, 978-1915569738, £14.99 hbk

Here is a colourful hardback by a well-known gardener from television explaining to young people all they need to know about gardens worldwide. The book is helpfully divided into seven sections for the types of gardens which exist: Flowers & Herbs; Trees; Hedges & Edges; Grass; Fruit & Veg; Water; Exotic Plants. At the end of each section there are garden-related activities to try out in each of the four seasons of the year. I am sure readers will enjoy growing their own vegetables and making their own compost, for example.

The author gives a useful, historical perspective to the natural world such as when she describes The Forthingall Yew in Scotland, 'Some experts think

it could be 5,000 years old' (p.15). She then goes on to consider all the history it has lived through and witnessed. Explanations about word meanings clarify topics for the young reader, 'The word 'specimen' comes from the Latin meaning 'to look at' (p.18). In addition, there is a handy Glossary and Plant Index at the back of the publication.

This is a very detailed book with names of all the illustrated plants, flowers, trees and wildlife labelled clearly. Often children focus exclusively on a particular topic, and this work will appeal to those wanting to discover lots of information about gardening. Not only does Tophill talk about dinosaurs in relation to cycads (p.56) but she also explains biomes (p.11), and facts such as these will delight the curious child. So, if you have a budding young gardener in your family this might be the book for them. It is certainly a volume that can be shared with an adult given the special gardening terms within its covers. There will definitely be lots of new information for adults and children alike. **JS**

Secrets of Bees

★★★★★

Ben Hoare, ill. Nina Chakrabarti, Nosy Crow, 32pp, 978-1805133186, £8.99 pbk

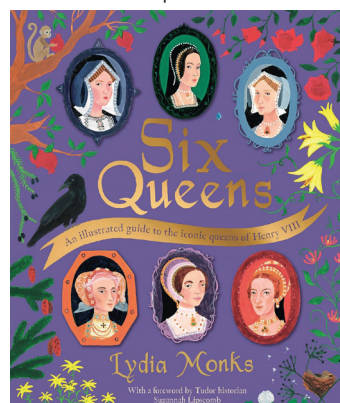
In my opinion everything about this information book is worth five stars! Congratulations to all the team involved, including Professor Beverley Glover and Dr Sally Lee from Cambridge University Botanic Garden. Here we see Nosy Crow collaborating again with the University of Cambridge. This is the first book in a fascinating new series entitled Think Big and will appeal to young and older readers alike.

From the attractive half-title page, I was hooked on this gorgeous softback which took me on a journey of discovery. Ben Hoare's obvious enthusiasm for bees, and his curiosity about this topic seep through the volume, beginning with his Introduction. Each spread poses a question about the characteristics and uses of bees. Inquisitive children will love finding out 'How many bees are there?' (pp.8-9), 'What happens inside a hive?' (pp.18-19) and 'Why do bees have stings?' (pp.24-25), for example. The last spread is particularly useful and encourages the young person to play their part in 'How we can help bees?' (pp.28-29).

Throughout the publication the reader is given information in bite-sized chunks along with some intricate and clear illustrations. I was amazed to learn that, 'Ancient bees ... lived at least 120 million years ago when dinosaurs roamed the planet' (p.7), and that, 'There are more than 20,000 different species' of bees (p.8). Such nuggets of information propel the curious child to continue

through the book and read more. I found the pages drilling down into the senses of bees awe-inspiring: 'What does it feel like to be a bee?' (pp.14-15), explains, for example, how bees can see ultraviolet patterns.

In summary, this is an excellent children's book filled with interesting facts written and illustrated by experts in their fields. We are all so fortunate to have high quality books like this to increase our knowledge in such a captivating way. The illustrations enhance the text throughout, with the result that reading this book is highly satisfying. Hopefully all schools and libraries can find a place on their shelves for books such as this. Also, I highly recommend it as a perfect gift which will leave its mark on the young reader in such a positive manner. **JS**



Six Queens

★★★★★

Lydia Monks, Macmillan, 64pp, 9781529095289, £14.99 hbk

King Henry VIII and his six wives are probably the most well-known and recognisable royals from English history, with the majority of people knowing at least a little about his first and second wives. Whether from school or with the popularity of the musical Six, many younger people will now know the 'divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived' rhyme too, but do we know the full story and how much do we really know about the 'other wives' (other than that they were mainly called Catherine or Anne)?

With her latest title **Six Queens**, her non-fiction debut, award-winning author/illustrator Lydia Monks has brought these infamous wives to life in a wonderful easy to read fashion with her usual distinctive coloured and clever illustrations.

In the foreword by award-winning historian Suzannah Lipscomb, we learn the difficulty of piecing together information on Henry's wives, coming as they did from a time when there were not many official records and women were treated very much as second class citizens, whose details were not deemed as important as their male counterparts.

Throughout the main body of the book, Monks explores each wife in turn with a bright and colourful synopsis of their life, followed by a more detailed look at their history,

from birth to death, in a mixture of text and comic strip graphics, including fascinating details of the many supporting figures in their families and the royal court at the time. We meet the champions and the plotters surrounding each queen and the circumstances that led to each marriage and death, some more untimely than others.

Since I was a child, I have always been fascinated by the Tudor dynasty and Henry's many wives and found this book to be a real treasure, enabling me to discover so much more behind each of the wives' rhyming moniker. Each wife had their own very important part to play in the history of this glorious time in history, including events which changed the course of religion in this country, the lasting effects of which still remain today.

Although aimed at upper primary school ages, this glorious book will be of interest to older children and adults alike. A definite must for all libraries and history bookshelves. **AH**



The Boy Who Became Queen

★★★★★

Christina Balit, Otter-Barry Books, 40pp, 978191565949, £14.99 hbk

Take a trip back to Elizabethan times with this illustrated story about a young actor in Shakespeare's London.

The story tells the tale of how Jack, a young starving orphan boy, is snatched after singing in the street one day near London bridge and his life is changed forever. He's taken by men from Blackfriars Company who upon hearing his beautiful singing voice want him to be part of their troupe. Think Oliver Twist working as part of Fagin's gang, but with less criminal intent.

His new situation finds him performing at the court of Elizabeth I and being talent-spotted by none other than William Shakespeare. The playwright approaches him and invites him to work in his theatre with the hopes of one day having him play a role in his latest play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

We follow the journey of Jack from theatre assistant where he does everything from mending the actor's clothes and props to creating sound effects. After a time, he graduates to work on the stage and eventually to centre stage as Titania.

8 – 10 Junior/Middle
continued

The story itself is informative whilst still having a level of peril and intrigue. It would be great to support the study of the period, Shakespeare and theatre of the period. It could also have uses in terms of discussions and comparisons of gender and performance in the present and the past.

The illustrations are stunning, if you're familiar with Balit's previous works such as *The Corinthian Girl* (Otter-Barry Books) and *Escape from Pompeii* (Frances Lincoln) – this will come as no surprise. **CH**

Becoming Grace

★★★★

Hilary McKay, ill. Keith Robinson, Barrington Stoke, 120pp, 978-0008700522, £7.99 pbk

This short, accessible read is a love-letter to female bravery. It tells the story of Grace Darling, a young girl whose family lived and worked in lighthouses near Bamburgh on the coast of Northumberland in the early-19th Century. Her determination and daring on one fateful evening led to the rescue of survivors from a shipwreck close to her family's lighthouse who those around her believed to be unreachable. What I found most powerful was that Grace herself joined the rescue mission despite being afraid of boats and bad weather! She truly is an historical figure worthy of discussion and celebration.

The story itself tells Grace's life story from a young age to the time of the rescue. It sets the scene beautifully for a life lived in a lighthouse and how her father was the lighthouse keeper who moved the family further from their community to allow him to better protect those at sea.

Grace's character shines throughout as a concerned but proactive voice in the family, despite her being one of the younger children. The setting too comes to life to the point you can almost feel the salty sea breeze on your face. How different Grace's childhood was compared to our modern-day life!

It's a gentle read, full of atmosphere and action that would be great to share with young readers or to be read independently. It comes with both Barrington Stokes accessible formatting to engage readers of all abilities and Hilary McKay's timeless storytelling style to bring you close to the Grace and her story.

The study of Grace Darling and her life compliments several primary school curriculum topics from 'people who help us' to safety, coasts and inspiring women. The accessible nature of the story would make this a useful read for both primary and secondary aged pupils, both in a curriculum sense but also as a moving leisure read. **CH**

The First Year

★★★★★

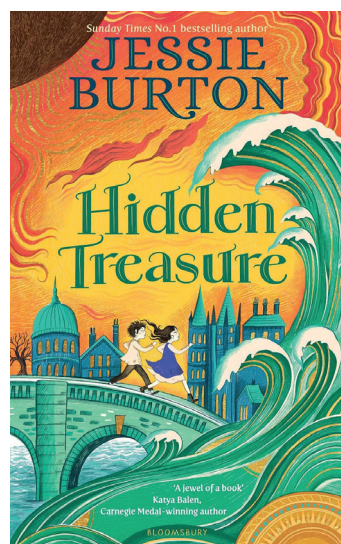
Matt Goodfellow, illus Joe Todd-Stanton, Otter-Barry, 480pp, 9781915659606

This is the sequel to *The Final Year* which has deservedly received much acclaim. Ideally, it is necessary to have read the first volume in order for this second book to have as powerful an effect as it should.

When we re-encounter Nate and his family, it is at the very end of Year 6 when we witness Nate and his friends walking out of primary school for the last time. We follow them throughout the summer before Year 7 and all the way through Nate's tumultuous first year at senior school. For any readers who were worrying about the fate of Nate's younger brother, Dylan, and whether his health remains stable, in this narrative, Dylan stays well.

And we are introduced to Nate's estranged father. How will his return affect Nate and his family's dynamics? And what exactly does Nate's dad do for a job? Both of these questions are answered in Goodfellow's trademark verse in a nuanced and emotional way.

Readers will slip easily into Nate's world again and will be rooting for him from the first to the last page. The illustrations by Todd-Stanton in the proof copy were stunning and I wish there had been more. **RB**

**Hidden Treasure**

★★★★★

Jessie Burton, Bloomsbury, 320pp, 978-1526604569, £14.99 hbk

There's a south shore sayin': All you do is keep your heart open. And if the river thinks it's time, the treasure will find you.

It's 1917 and twelve-year-old Bo Delafort lives with her mum and nineteen-year-old brother Harry near Battersea in London. Bo loves to go mudlarking, often with her

best friend, Eddie who lives in the same street with his mother. As the book opens, she makes a wonderful discovery in the Thames mud: a jewel, a perfect, miniature full moon decorated with rubies and pearls. Not only is it beautiful and clearly very valuable, but when she touches it, Bo seems to hear the river talking to her and sees visions, a man and woman she doesn't know. With a new friend, Billy River, another mudlark this time from the opposite bank to Battersea, she decides to keep the jewel and together they discover its strange history, its supposed magic powers, and its influence on their own personal histories.

This well written adventure story is Jessie Burton's first middle-grade novel and successfully combines themes of love and loss in a fast-moving, magical adventure story. The river Thames threads through the book bringing various disparate plot lines together and there are wonderfully vivid scenes and a strong sense of setting. With Harry heading off to the front, the First World War casts its shadow over the action too with the jewel offering terrible temptation to Bo when the worst happens. No matter what dangers they face, or what strange discoveries they make, Bo, Eddie and Billy too remain believable child characters, ready to kick the parade of truly wicked adult foes hard in the shins when necessary.

A piece of ambitious storytelling, it successfully conveys the awful grief of loss, the feeling of the temptation to bring a dead loved one back, even as a ghost, is genuine. All that is wrapped up in a fast-moving adventure with child friendly central characters and baddies who really are very bad and come to a suitably unhappy ending. There's a dramatic climax but there are twists and surprises throughout, treasures to keep readers turning the pages. **MMA**

How to Roller-Skate with One Leg

★★★★★

Ella Dove illus. Jennifer Jamieson, Orchard Books, 272pp, 9781408373859, £7.99 pbk

Some really awful things can happen while you are impersonating a Maths teacher. Maya Bright, mid-impression of her Maths teacher, didn't see the van coming, which caused her to become a below-the-knee amputee of her right leg.

The book really begins a year later at the start of Year 8, when Maya is returning to school for the first time, with a prosthetic limb. She has lost a large amount of mobility. Her best friend since the age of four, is no longer talking to her, reason initially unknown, and she has lost most of her confidence. She no longer wants to stand out.



How will she cope with this new reality and her parents' new fears and new protectiveness of her?

In this deeply moving, thought provoking, and often funny, own voices debut, Ella Dove explores these questions. What elevates this book is the way Dove shows the reader the nuances of Maya's emotions towards her leg, towards other people and towards herself.

The reader is given direct insight into Maya's interior world, and will be rooting for her, her family and friends, from page one. A sequel is already on the cards and this reviewer is anticipating it eagerly. **RB**

The Curse of the Silvan Oaks

★★★★★

Georgia Channon, Pushkin Press, 272pp, 9781782695011, £8.99 pbk

This delightful and engrossing debut fantasy takes recognizable elements of much-loved favourites like *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Lord of the Rings* and weaves them into a tale which creates a fantastical world inspired by *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Here the descendants of Titania and Oberon, in the kingdoms of Silvanland and Penumbra respectively, are waging a cruel and bitter war. In a short novel packed with fascinating characters, the plot centres around a human child called Oli, who has recently lost her father and been moved away from all she knows. Her mother has found work at Foxley Hall, and it is here that Oli discovers a mirror through which she witnesses a kidnapping and a portal (behind a bookcase – not a wardrobe!) which plunges her into the fairy world in conflict. At this point she does not know how important a role she will have in first rescuing the kidnapped Prince Corylus of Silvanland, from the clutches of the evil Penumbra Queen Hellebore, then breaking the curse and saving

the ancient forests. Nor at this point does she realise the significance of the items she discovered in a box that belonged to her father. Gradually we come to realise that she is the descendant of the Indian Child Arun who, as Shakespeare tells us, was the cause of the rift between Titania and Oberon in the first place. When Titania hid Arun in the human world she gave him the sacred Dark Stone from her crown to protect him. Oli learns that her perilous task is to return the Dark Stone to its mountain origins (just as Frodo did with the Ring) Oli and Prince Cory are somewhat reluctant heroes, but the way they develop resilience and demonstrate their innate courage and moral strength is hugely engaging and believable. Their adventure is action packed and peppered with genuinely perilous moments and not a little bit of violence. Fantasy lovers will certainly feel they are in familiar territory, but the originality of the Shakespearean elements add a fascinating twist. One can tell that this is a complex world that has been developing in the author's mind for a long time, and readers will relish her rich and evocative descriptions of this vividly imagined world and the people who live in it. We have many tempting references to things that we would like to know more about and so I suspect this is a story which will continue, and I suspect there will be lots of keen readers who will enjoy returning. **JCo**



The Seaside Sleepover

★★★★★

Jacqueline Wilson, illus Rachael Dean, Puffin, 416pp, 9780241684115, £12.99 hbk

This is the third novel in a series of stand-alones which started with **Sleepovers**. It features the two protagonists, Lily, the older sister by two years, who is a wheelchair user and uses Makaton to communicate, and Daisy, who is neurotypical.

The two sisters, much to Daisy's delight and Lily's fear, are given the opportunity to look after a very naughty dog called Scruff while his elderly owner is in hospital. Scruff

steals the narrative at many points, as the reader is constantly guessing what type of mischief he may get into next.

The two sisters go on holiday to the seaside, with their parents and Lily's best friend, Natalie who uses a walker. They have been invited by their Uncle Gary. Will they be able to control Scruff who accompanies them? And will the beach prove accessible to those who must use wheels to get around?

Wilson's skill in this novel is that she depicts Lily, even with her communication challenges, as a fully-rounded character and as a natural part of the story. Refreshingly, Lily also experiences and is aware of people's mixed and sometimes prejudiced reactions to her. It is important for young readers to see you can convey anger without being verbal.

Wilson also explores the accessibility challenges that the girls experience. The one slight reservation I have, is that the specially designed wheelchair and walker for use on sand, that the girls hire, may be more readily available than in real life!

The final neurotypical character who stood out for me is the girls' Uncle Gary. He has a drag act at the seaside and is so well loved by everyone that they wish they were related to him. Many readers may feel the same. **RB**

Deep Dark: A Cassia Thorne Mystery

★★★★★

Zohara Nabi, Simon & Schuster, 315pp, 978-1398532922, £7.99 pbk
A Deep Dark by Zohra Nabi is a haunting and atmospheric historical, fantasy, mystery set in the back streets of Victorian London. Cassia Thorne is a fierce and determined musician and ballad seller who sells her songs by day and spends her nights in Fleet Prison with her imprisoned father. Cassia spends her time with other children who are also working, hustling and making the best of their tough lives and when some of these children begin vanishing from the streets and no one in authority will pay heed, Cassia is determined to find them.

Cassia enlists help from Teo, a resourceful pickpocket with street smarts, and Felix, a loyal friend from a very different background, and together they embark on a dangerous investigation. Rumours and strange music converge around the stolen children and Cassia's search leads her underneath the city where myth and menace blend into the city's rivers. The further they go, the more the children find out about a sinister conspiracy involving mysterious men in blue coats and a monster that lives beneath old London.

Nabi recreates the danger, poverty, injustice, and deep social divides of nineteenth-century London but also its heart and community. The city teems with life and with peril, it

is a place where the vulnerable slip through the cracks and the rich have all the power. She doesn't shy away from the realities and cruelty of the time (including death) - although everything is carefully and sensitively told. The writing is as powerful, brave, angry and sharp-witted as Cassia herself and the action is fast paced and exciting throughout.

Cassia Thorne is a fabulous heroine; talented, smart and feisty but deeply likeable and compassionate. There is a chapter of the next book at the end of this one, and I am sure there will be many fans eagerly waiting for Cassia's next fantastical, historical adventure. **LJS**

How to be Disabled and Proud (or at least kinda sorta okay with it...!)

★★★★★

Cathy Reay illus. Jaleel Hudson, Puffin, 272pp, 9780241676967, £12.99 pbk

In this non-fiction guide written by an author with Acondraplasia or Dwarfism, Cathy Reay writes the book that her younger self would have benefited from. Reay's talent as a writer is that she manages to help the young reader who probably identifies as disabled, to navigate some very complex topics such as managing bullies, navigating medical appointments and self-advocacy with precision and humour. She is one of the first writers I have read who has succeeded in explaining the difference between the medical and social models of disability, in a clear and concise manner.

Reay also explores two topics I have rarely seen mentioned. The management of menstrual periods when you have personal care needs, and the phenomenon of disassociation from your body during the procedure. The fact that these are highlighted will be extremely comforting and affirming to teens and pre-teens with disabilities. This book should be in every secondary school library. **RB**

Clem Fatale has been betrayed

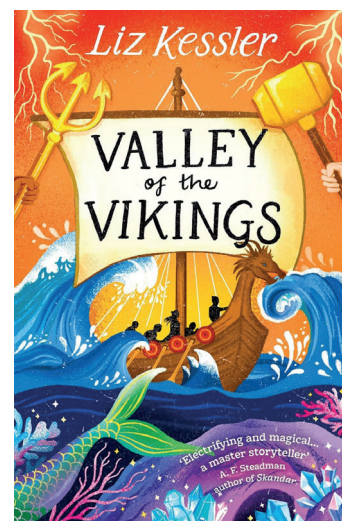
★★★★★

Eve Wersocki-Morris, ill. Honie Beam, Little Tiger, 237pp., 978-1788957502, £7.99 pbk

Twelve-year-old Clem, short for Clementina, is the daughter of master criminal Jimmy, and delights in helping her dad and his team, the Spiders, as she is small enough to wriggle into tight holes, and also very good at picking locks. The setting is London, in 1951, and the gang are trying to steal a famous jewel, the Fool's Canary, a yellow diamond cut into the shape of a bird, from the stately home of Lord Weatherdale. It all goes wrong: the police arrive, the safe is empty and the jewel has gone. Jimmy has disappeared, and the escaping gang accidentally kidnap Lord Weatherdale's son, Gilbert, who tries to pretend he is a servant, but Clem has noticed his resemblance to family portraits, and manages to

prevent the gang from being too nasty to him. The gang are a woman called Twizzler, Screw, and Jimmy's best friend Monty, and Clem's instincts tell her that one of them is a traitor. She and Gilbert run away to try to find her dad and work out who has the jewel, and the over-protected, weedy Gilbert proves more useful than he had seemed, growing in confidence as he experiences real life...

Although the protagonists are, strictly speaking, on the wrong side of the law, Jimmy is helping people with some of his proceeds, and they are up against people who are even worse, (Mascarpone is a nasty character, but he gets his come-uppance!) Clem and Gilbert's resourcefulness ensure that the glory for catching the thief goes to Sergeant Stickler, a woman who has been in hot pursuit. It's a very exciting story from Eve Wersocki-Morris, who knows what works in this kind of plot. It's a world of tea rooms and buns, glamorous nightclubs and sleazy dives, and there is a lot of humour. Honie Beam's cartoon illustrations are great fun, and this should be a popular book. We are promised a further adventure with Clem and Gilbert in January 2026. **DB**



Valley of the Vikings

★★★★★

Liz Kessler, Zephyr, 224pp, 9781035916955, £7.99 pbk

The mighty gods Neptune and Thor are caught in fearsome battle in the skies above the ocean; with curses and threats ringing out, as their weapons collide, a forceful magic creates vivid lightning strikes and enormous waves, opening a chasm which swallows a Viking ship and its entire crew, taking them and their secrets down into the dark, churning depths. Then a calm, as if nothing untoward had ever occurred.

Fast forward a thousand years and two young friends, Emily and Shona, discover a bangle on the seashore containing an unusual blue crystal. Little do they know that this crystal is part of a millennium-long mystery, that will play a part in events affecting the whole world.

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

The narrator of the story is Emily Windsnap, Liz Kessler's half-mermaid, half-human (or semi-mer) character who has now starred in ten books about her adventures. She does, however, explain her background quite quickly and this book can easily be read as a standalone story without needing to know any more of the backstory to enjoy the tale. Emily's friends and family are a wonderful mix of mermaids and humans, who now comfortably exist in the same world. With their help, she begins to uncover more details about the crystal, including a meeting with the mighty power-loving Neptune himself, who shares his version of past momentous events. When the friends' exploration of the seabed and previously undiscovered caves takes an unexpected turn, they realise that unless they act quickly and persuade the selfish gods to reverse their centuries-old actions, the world as they know it may be destroyed forever.

Valley of the Vikings is a wonderful mix of fantasy, mythology and environmental message, delivered in a fast-paced whirlwind of an adventure. Vikings, gods and mermen sit alongside Emily and her mermaid friends, ensuring that the book will appeal to a wide cross-section of young readers. They are a bright, loyal group with a strong sense of social justice and the story weaves cleverly to show that greed is never the answer, while working together as a community is how harmony in the world is restored and maintained. Whilst wonderfully accessible to younger readers who will enjoy the exciting adventure, the book comes with a message that will give thought to older readers and will delight both current and new fans. **AH**

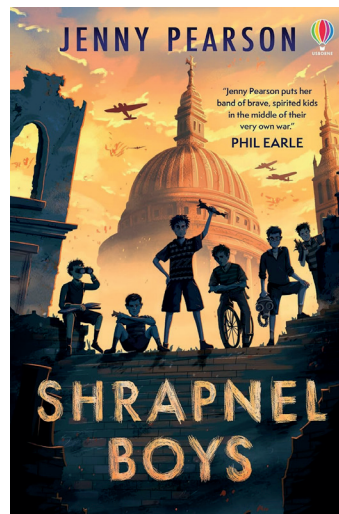
Shrapnel Boys

★★★★★

Jenny Pearson, Usborne, 367pp, 9781805312963, £7.99 pbk

There are many children's books about the Second World War, and it might be easy to assume that every story has already been told - but Jenny Pearson proves otherwise with **Shrapnel Boys**. This moving and adventurous novel captures what it meant to be a child during one of the most turbulent times in history, blending historical detail with a deep emotional core.

At the heart of the story are brothers Ronnie and Micky Smith, who live in Deptford, London, at the outbreak of the war. While many of their friends are evacuated to the countryside, the boys remain in the city, facing the dangers of bombings, blackouts, and destruction firsthand. Pearson skillfully weaves historical events into the fabric of the boys' daily lives - there are shelters to hide in, dens built in bombed-out houses, and prized shrapnel to collect - but this is not just a story about war. It's a story



about growing up in extraordinary circumstances and finding moments of childhood, courage, and connection amid the chaos.

What makes **Shrapnel Boys** stand out is the emotional journey at its centre. Ronnie and Micky's story is one of family love, loyal friendship, and the bravery it takes to stand up for what's right. The themes are timeless and universal: finding your voice, choosing kindness, and navigating the complex emotions of fear, hope, and responsibility.

Pearson's writing is both accessible and richly layered. She paints a vivid, poignant portrait of wartime London, bringing to life the community spirit, the everyday heroism, and the stark divisions caused by fear and fanaticism. Her portrayal of working-class life is especially powerful, giving voice to families often left on the margins of historical fiction.

Shrapnel Boys is a gripping and heartfelt story that will resonate with young readers today. By centring the experiences of ordinary children in extraordinary times, Pearson not only brings history to life but also highlights the resilience and strength of those who lived through it. **LJS RB**

Evie & Maryam's Family Tree

★★★★

Janeen Hyatt, Guppy Books, 352pp, 978-1916558410, £7.99, pbk

There is a lot to like about this debut novel. Janeen Hyatt skillfully moves between two stories. A modern tale about the developing friendship of Maryam and Evie, who are in the same class at school, and another about the friendship of their great grandmothers Kathy and Safia, across lines of race and religion in 1930s India. Both stories are well observed and, while some of the harsher aspects of life under the Raj are softened to allow the earlier friendship enough space to grow, Hyatt introduces both Safia's involvement in the independence movement and the later tragedy of partition with explanations

well within the understanding of her readers. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the tale comes in modern Evie's heart searching about her classmates' treatment of Maryam, as her uneasiness grows to the point where she speaks out against her former friends. In the perceptive contemporary story, Evie and Maryam are brought together by their separate discoveries of the coded letters which passed between their great grandmothers after Kathy left India for Britain. The gradual solving of this mystery will no doubt have some fascination for young readers. But perhaps it is stretching historical credulity too far to claim that the older Kathy might reveal to Safia (and only Safia) that she is working as a codebreaker at Bletchley Park and that these letters, in a code elementary enough to be cracked by schoolchildren, would pass unnoticed by the wartime censor. **CB**



Under a Fire-Red Sky

★★★★★

Geraldine McCaughrean, Usborne, 272pp, 9781836040774, £8.99 pbk

One of the truly great children's writers of our time. Geraldine McCaughrean is still for too many something of an undiscovered pleasure. Recommend any of her novels to new readers and they will almost certainly be coming back asking why they had never heard of her before. This latest novel does not quite have her magic touch formerly capable of turning a hitherto straight story into something stranger but always intensely memorable. But it is still an excellent read.

The author's father was a young fireman before and during the Blitz hitting London in September 1940 and continuing for months afterwards. Occasionally derided as 'call-up dodgers,' regular and newly recruited fire-fighters soon faced terrible dangers night after night. Some were crushed by falling buildings, others died from smoke and fume inhalation. Young Franklin in this story is a fireman's son, one of a quartet of children who band together after dodging the train

journey intended for evacuees. Desperate to emulate his parent he ends up doing so handsomely. The three other children contribute in different ways, and there is also a dog who has his moment too. All manage to survive bombed out homes, lack of food, no education, regular air-raids and the various horrors these led to.

By always sticking to what really happened, with her story checked over for historical accuracy by London's Imperial War Museum, the author necessarily deprives herself of any prolonged escapist moments. The end result can at times come over almost as relentless as the Blitz itself, but she does the many firefighters of that time truly proud. Their achievements since somewhat forgotten, this powerful story puts a heroic record straight in a way readers are unlikely ever to forget. **NT**

Fishfolk

★★★★★

Steven Quincey-Jones, Firefly Press, 313 pages, 9781915444905, £8.99 pbk

I read this book under the impression that it was set in a dystopian future, a world ravaged by climate change. It wasn't until I reached the author's note at the end that I realised it's actually set 8,000 years in the past. That duality - feeling both ancient and futuristic - makes it an outstanding fable about what happens to humanity when the land they rely on is literally shifting beneath them.

The story follows twins Oona and Luna, who live with their grandfather, Mull, on a windswept, isolated island they call 'The High and Dry'. Mull tells them stories of the past and of the fearsome, magical Fishfolk - creatures said to be bent on destroying humans, especially the girls. But when Oona and Luna encounter a Fishfolk themselves, they begin to question everything they've been told. The truth, it turns out, is complex and deeply rooted in survival, fear, and misunderstanding.

What truly sets this book apart is its inventive use of language. Oona and Luna speak in a distinctive vocabulary and rhythm that mirrors the wild, unpredictable natural world around them. Though written in prose, the narrative often feels like a verse novel, employing concrete poetry techniques to powerful effect. In one striking moment, pages filled with repeated 'OOOOOOOOO' convey the thick, disorienting silence of the 'Fogwall' more vividly than description ever could.

This is a book of big ideas and bold execution. It explores the resilience of humanity, the brutality of survival, and the fragility of the stories we tell ourselves. It doesn't shy away from the darker realities of life - there are scenes of death, cruelty, and fear - but they are handled with honesty and purpose.

Ultimately, this is a beautifully written, thought-provoking story about humanity's relationship with

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

the natural world - how we adapt, how we endure, and how we understand one another across differences. It is poetic, unsettling, and possibly, in the end, hopeful. **LJS**

Escape Room Game Zero

★★★★

Christopher Edge, Nosy Crow, 200pp, 9781805135845, £7.99 pbk
This prolific and successful author now comes up with yet another good story where young Eden finds herself trapped in a developing new videogame already being played by Ted, a boy her own age. Initially dismissing her presence as a mere NPC (Non Player Character) Ted is gradually won over when Eden starts solving the problems facing them in their quest to finish the game still alive. And for this to happen there remains a long way to go, with Eden never sure why she is there at all. Short chapters, mostly ending on yet another dangerous moment, help make this story stay alive as it steams ahead to its final show-down. So much, so good, but for readers sensitive to the English language there is one persistent drawback. Almost every noun, however strong in itself, is relentlessly qualified by a preceding adjective. Verbs too are rarely allowed to make their case without the over-anxious accompaniment of an often redundant adverb. Clichés are never far away either: both sunlight and a glade are 'dappled' on page 48, and later on the sun is described as a 'glowing globe' twice in three pages. Young readers still struggling to develop their own writing styles will not be helped by this sort of example.

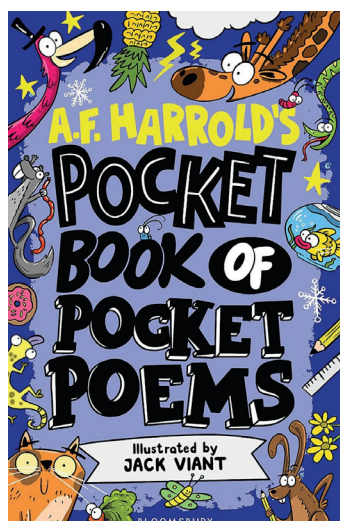
Minimally illustrated with black and white chapter opener pencil drawings by David Dean, the publishers also supply an accompanying soundtrack play list accessible with a mobile phone. The story ends with a beautiful poem by Emily Dickinson, where every word makes its case in the most minimal of texts. Should the author follow this example in his future writing, his extraordinarily vivid imagination would surely continue to come up with more excellent plots but now with a much sparer vocabulary to match. **NT**

A.F. Harrold's Pocket Book of Pocket Poems

★★★★★

A.F. Harrold, ill. Jack Viant, Bloomsbury Education, 192pp, 978-1801994972, £7.99, pbk

This paperback (only for very large pockets!) is an offshoot of its author's habit of sending short poems on postcards to his friends, both to cheer them up and the posties who might happen to read them. I would have said this is eccentric, but as his reasons are so well-argued and laudable, I won't. But perhaps I am on safer ground in suggesting that arranging the poems in order of length, diminishing in size



as you go through the book, is just a bit bonkers. His themes and moods are rather mixed up, coming and going, as he admits in his second introduction (why have only one?), 'like kittens in a washing machine.' This image maybe a little worrying to readers of a more nervous disposition, but rest assured nothing quite as disturbing appears in the poems. Well, not quite as disturbing, although the one about nose picking is a bit reminiscent of Struwwelpeter. And while I am looking for influences, like the old man I am, let's add in Ogden Nash and Spike Milligan. So there are a lot of funny poems, absurdity and wordplay, but also some that are more just musing than amusing, on the beauties of nature and the like. I do like a lot of them, especially Remembering Good: 'her jokes were plasters, bubble baths on winter nights, forget-me-nots and hold-me-tights- she made things right.' They are not just for children, but for anyone with a love of words and fun. While some are not as good as others, some are brilliant, and, at more than 200 poems on somewhat fewer pages (see above), it's top value. **CB**

Please Don't Read the Footnotes Please

★★★★

Rob Walton, ill. Reena Makwana, Emma Press, 96pp, 978-1915628367, £9.99pbk

Certainly, you will read the footnotes, not least because there are laughs there. Rob Walton is a teacher, and many of these short, sometimes very short, absurdist tales are based on the lives of primary school children and their teachers. Perhaps some of them may have been shared with his classes. The children are frequently the subjects and authors here, interrupting, suggesting, and even determining, how the stories should go. There is plenty about school and home life but only somewhat as we know it, retellings of fairy stories also find their way in. Mostly the stories

go off at tangents, exaggerations, twists and unexpected turns, and the author, 'the unreliable narrator' as he identifies teachers and by implication himself, is always very self-consciously present, not least in the footnotes. This is something that worries me. If we are talking in literary terms – and *Ekphrasis* is the title of one story (resolutely and irritatingly unexplained in a footnote) – then uncertain 'narrative register' comes to mind. At times, I sense a teacher talking to other teachers, particularly about the absurdities of school life. That said, there is much to enjoy and some tales do speak directly to and about children. Perversely, my favourite is a quite straightforward story – 'one of those rare serious bits' as Rob has it, in which a child goes to a sleepover with a new friend and for the first time is faced with a pain au chocolat and the question of how to eat it, a disturbingly awkward moment that leads to her adopting a triumphant new school identity, Penny Chocolate, based on how she first heard the pastry's name. **CB**

What Happens Online

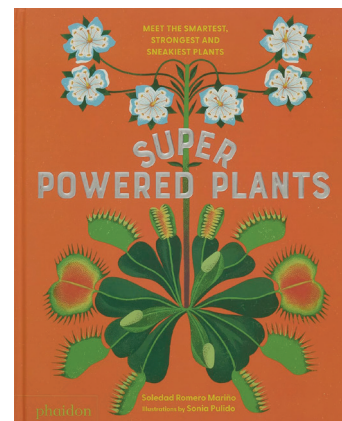
★★★★★

Nathanael Lessore, Hot Key Books, 302pp, 9781471418204, £8.99 pbk
'Nathanael loves writing stories that show his South East London childhood as the funny, warm adventurous world that wasn't always represented as such.' This baffling claim comes from the publishers of a novel which describes the bullying that sad, friendless 14-year-old Fred has to put up with all his time at school. At home his mother can hardly move from depression and his two younger brothers also have problems. But while waiting for the next time his tormentors close in on him Fred entertains himself with relentless streams of jokey word play. Some of this is funny enough; some goes on too long for its own good.

Fred is also a wizard at setting up online gaming sites, and when he anonymously starts using these to spill the beans on his most loathed enemies things start to improve. But his chosen weapon now starts causing others serious pain and this leads him into different types of trouble. A dreamy new girl shows Fred some interest but is rightly annoyed when passed over in favour of those who once shunned him. An increasingly implausible happy ending eventually follows as Fred finally realises that truth is better than continual lying.

The publisher, an offspring of Sweden's Bonnier Books, is committed to producing fiction 'That opens our eyes to new perspectives and brings us closer together.' Certainly there is a lot to think about in this novel with its author who has already written three well-received titles clearly someone to watch out for. But should he write about bullying again I hope he will persuade his publishers to list appropriate contacts

at the close there to that advise pupils on what they can still do in reality should they ever find themselves in a similarly dismal situation. **NT**



Superpowered Plants

★★★★★

Soledad Romero Mariño, ill. Sonia Pulido, Phaidon, 64pp, 978 1 83866 951 5, £16.95 pbk

Here is an appealing hardback with impressive covers, endpapers and detailed, full-page illustrations of 22 plants. The author has chosen these specific plants as they are, "Using their superpowers not just to survive, but to thrive!" p.[7]. I was interested to learn that the book was inspired by tarot cards, and in my view the structure is reminiscent of Top Trump cards!

There is an amazing amount of information in this volume which explains the 17 superpowers displayed by these plants from across the world: Super Longevity, Super Resilience, Super Mimicry and Super Sensitivity to name a few of them. Each spread considers one plant: it is described with its main features, shows stars out of six for its powers, with the scientific name, class, order and family name given. After detailed remarks on the superpowers each possesses the following information is recorded: size, colour, special features, lifespan, habitat, reproduction and enemies.

As I read through the work, I notice the themes appearing in the plants' characteristics. For example, both the lotus flower and oleander improve their environment. In the case of the oleander, it takes 'lead, zinc, and cadmium out of the soil around it' (p.42). This compendium is full of interesting facts, such as how the stinking titan arum mimics rotting flesh to attract pollinators (p.28) and how the dandelion was alive 50 million years ago (p. 38).

The level of vocabulary used will suit older readers who enjoy various lists, comparisons and lots of facts. It is an ideal book for anyone keen on becoming a pharmacist or biologist, as well as budding scientists and geographers. Congratulations to all the team behind this project. It will be an asset to any library, school or home, and is the culmination of many hours of research. **JS**

14+ **Secondary/Adult****New talent****A Better Nightmare**

★★★★

Megan Freeman, Chicken House, 352pp, 978-1915947253, £8.99 pbk

Emily Emerson has got the Grimm. In a repressive society that feels rather too close to our own, children discovered to have the condition – Grimm-Cross Syndrome are dragged from or sent away by their parents to live in Borstal-type establishments until they reach the age of 18, at which point they are deemed cured or incarcerated in a different way. The 'Grimm' takes many forms; some young people can call up wind or cause electric storms, others can shapeshift or switch into the body of a wild animal. Emily has the power to make her dreams – and nightmares – come to life. The symptoms are what in other stories are known as magic, though you could also say the state is responding badly to an excess of imagination in its young people. Alerted to the fact that she's not ill, just different, fifteen-year-old Emily stops taking the drugs that have kept her subdued for so many years and, with a gang of fellow detainees, starts to get organised and to resist. Morgan Freeman portrays her young protagonists as pleasingly normal, despite their strange abilities, in that they are impulsive, determined, disorganised, collaborative and brave. The brutality of the people



they are up against is depressingly believable too, cruelty, cowardice, a lack of imagination their defining features. Emily is an appealing and open narrator, romance offered in the form of Emir and Gabriel, if she can work out which one to trust. This is a tense and even exhilarating piece of writing, driven it seems by anger at the injustices we accept to readily in our everyday lives. It reaches a satisfying conclusion, but the door is left open for more adventures, and it will be interesting to see what Megan Freeman writes next. **MMA**

[Read our Q&A interview with Megan Freeman.](#)

The Hive

★★★★

Anna February, Chicken House, 377pp, 978-915947271, £8.99 pbk

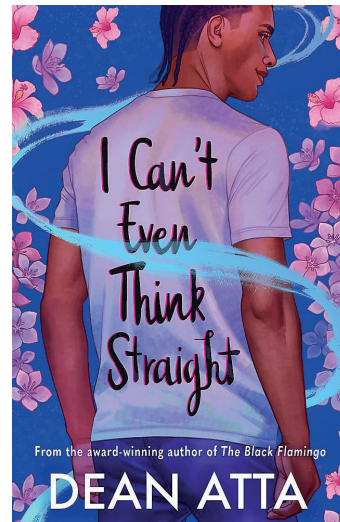
This dystopian novel is set in The Hive, a community ordered on hierarchical lines in a world almost totally engulfed by the sea. A royal family and their ascendants rule, protected by human shields who are conditioned from birth to sacrifice their own lives if their charges are under threat. The story begins with the death of an ascendant, Euphemie, by poisoned arrow and because Feldspar, her shield, was unable to prevent her death she must be burned alive within three days. However, because a shield has never before survived the death of their charge the assumption is that the shield bond has been broken, endangering the Hive's defence systems, an investigation is mounted. Nikolos, mysterious and fabled master of the Dark Arts, is instructed to extract the truth from Feldspar, using torture if necessary.

Nothing is quite as it seems in The Hive. Gentle, considerate and determined to use Feldspar to aid him in his investigation, Nikolos

soon realises that treachery is afoot and the pair begin to work together, forming a close attachment, to discover the identity of the mysterious and elusive assassin. They unearth both corruption within the coterie of royal rulers and ascendants and the precarious nature of The Hive's diminishing essential resources. Winnowings - ritual killings of the weakest members of the community, supervised by the royals - are used regularly to avoid an increase in numbers as resources are now at dangerously low levels.

Treachery is layered upon treachery and murders increase apace, creating a narrative complexity which only an able reader would navigate successfully. February cleverly draws analogies between the Hive's world and our own. Too many people are defined purely by their role - shield, ascendant, worker, royal - creating a fractured community in which there is no encouragement to make the far-sighted and courageous changes which are needed to save The Hive. When people are demonstrably expendable, they choose to do nothing to disturb the status quo, however rotten it is.

During the course of his investigation, Nikolos discovers that Feldspar, a shield all her life, is in reality a member of the ruling royal family, switched at birth. When Euphemie's murderer is finally discovered and brought to book, it is Feldspar who initiates the changes in The Hive which are essential if it is to evolve as a fair society in which everyone has a voice. The seeds of a new era begin to be tentatively sown. There is much in *Survival Is Treason* which should and must speak to us, this race of people seemingly hell-bent on destroying this unique and beautiful world which we inhabit and who seem unable to live in harmony with those around them. **VR**

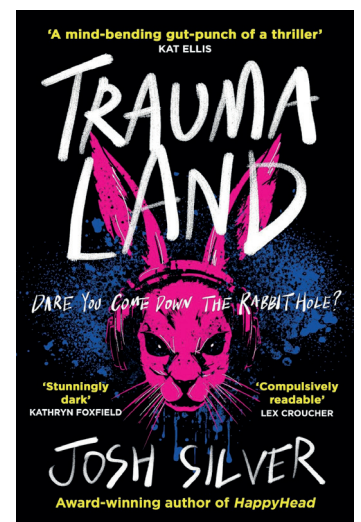
**I Can't Even Think Straight**

★★★★

Dean Atta, Hodder, 368pp, 978-1444960969, £8.99 pbk

With his trademark authenticity and warmth, this is another coming of age queer romance verse novel from the **Stonewall Award-winning** Dean Atta. The central character Kai shares the same ethnicity as the author and loving Greek Cypriot and Jamaican families and friends are delightfully portrayed and are what gives Kai the strength and inner confidence to negotiate some tricky relationship situations. After a long hot summer in Cyprus, where he enviously watched his non-binary childhood friend Vass, so unapologetically happy in themselves and seemingly having a successful romance with a local heart throb, that he feels the time is right to come out at school. He is ready for romance, but not sure where to find it and has no confidence in his instincts or ability to identify potential boyfriends. His best friend Matt has a completely different background, with deeply religious and homophobic parents and is terrified of being identified as queer through his

friendship with Kai. And yet it is only with Kai that Matt can truly be himself. Kai suspects his feelings for Matt go far beyond friendship, but cannot risk losing him. Atta skilfully builds the background of home, school and family life which eventually combine to compel Kai to come out and sadly force Matt to publicly deny his sexuality. What is so refreshing is the non- stereotypical way the influential group of Black youths, The Boys, support and protect both of them. This is only one example of the subtle way in which Atta confronts important issues such as discrimination against Black teenagers, racial profiling by teachers or the police, and homophobia. Matt has his own internal prejudice to overcome and Kai has important lessons to learn about the importance of consent, when Kass reveals the truth about his holiday romance. The eventual resolution of Kai's relationship with Matt gives the reader the happy ending that everyone will be rooting for and that these authentic and relatable characters deserve. There also a lovely intertextual moment when Atta weaves in a mention of his award-winning debut **The Black Flamingo**, which I am sure fans will enjoy! **JCO**

**Traumaland**

★★★★

Josh Silver, Rock the Boat, 392pp, 978-0861549283, £8.99, pbk

Fresh from the success of his dystopian **HappyHead** series, Silver's new novel is a mind melting psychological thriller which delves into the stark realities and scars of mental health and trauma, juxtaposing them with a sinister virtual reality. This is fuelled by a visceral horror movie scape that is being manipulated for nefarious ends.

With twists and turns and skulduggery reminiscent of Tom

14+ Secondary/Adult continued

Pollock's **White Rabbit, Red Wolf**, troubled teen Eli navigates his damaged psyche and uncovers dangerous secrets and lies following a serious accident. Hoping that his therapist Melinda can help him heal, he is frustrated and becomes fixated by trying to feel emotions again. This leads him to risky behaviour as he goes down the rabbit hole to find the opposite of wonderland. Sucked into a nightmarish immersive underground club called Trauma Land where people go to vicariously experience horror and fear Eli faces rows of doors and choices like a monetised version of the 1980s interactive storytelling format. Drawn to a mysterious boy called Jack, he thinks he might be able to unlock his lost memories. But can he handle the truth?

Cranking up the tension, like with **HappyHead**, Silver takes the reader on a challenging journey where they don't know whom to trust. Influenced by his work as an actor and new career as a mental health nurse, there are elements of both these arenas in this stirring novel. The theatrical iconography of *Trauma Land* is startlingly reminiscent of 1990's film **Donnie Darko**, which is about a sleepwalking teen haunted by the image of a demonic rabbit. It also draws on the dystopian world of **The Matrix** while Eli's attempts at recall also bring to mind 2000's **Memento** where the unreliable narrator tries to piece together what has happened.

Cinematic references abound with slasher movie cosplay and disturbing imagery amidst a **Fight Club** vibe. Using a structure of flashbacks and a Chinese box story effect, Silver creates a frightening study of the human need to be scared, the manipulation of vulnerable teens and the exploitation of the mind. Not for the faint hearted it even keeps the reader guessing at the end. **Traumaland** is a breathless roller coaster ride through a twisted virtual reality world where everything is not as it seems. Aptly reflecting concerns about the ethics of augmented reality in the 21st Century, it asks what would happen if the craving to feel alive was taken too far and will appeal to older teens looking for a stimulating, thought provoking thriller with tender queer representation. **TJ**

This Song Is About Us

★★★★★

Sara Barnard, Walker, 329pp, 978-1529525366, £8.99 pbk

I'm sure that one of the cardinal rules when writing a review is never begin with a pun. Forgive me: this novel is pitch-perfect. The story is framed round three music festivals, each bigger than the last: Tenley; Reading; Glastonbury. As the narrative focus moves through to the bigger festivals, Drew Schafer and The Kerbs become increasingly famous, with all the media attention which that ignites and all its inevitable



intrusions into personal lives. Ruby and Drew have been in a deep and committed relationship for years but now, at the insistence of the band's newly acquired manager, they must decide whether or not to make their attachment public. Ruby makes the decision that they should stay secret, both to make Drew's inevitable rise to fame less complicated and to protect herself from the constant, punishing exposure on social media as the girlfriend of a famous and desirable musician. Set as a clever counterpoint is the decision which band member Lex and his girlfriend Stel make to go public.

Barnard carefully seeds the narrative with the tiny details which erode Drew and Ruby's relationship - one slow drip after another. There's a deep-seated awareness here of the highly destructive power of social media, the increasing drains on Drew's time by his management, and the sheer hard work of being constantly on the road, constantly scrutinised, constantly separated from the anchors which tie you to sanity and the comfort of familiar routines. When the pressure of not being able to be open about Ruby is added to the mix, Drew begins to fall apart. His remedies are familiar: drink and drugs - and the consequent alteration of his personality and behaviour. This disintegration is minutely and convincingly detailed by Barnard - as is Stel's rise to a position of favour with the band's fans - a devastating irony for Ruby.

When Ruby finally decides she has to end things with Drew, Barnard writes with a crisp and heartbreaking clarity. Two pages of beautifully constructed writing convey Drew's despair and Ruby's all-pervading grief. This is underpinned - as are all major concerns with the band - by comments on social media, reinforcing its ceaseless presence and damage to those who are discussed and minutely analysed. **This Song Is About Us** skilfully exposes the price of

fame and the hammer-blow power of social media, whether it is accurate or not. And in addition to all of this, the book has a killer of an ending on all sorts of levels. All the more reason to read it, and you should. **VR**

The Other Girl

★★★

Emily Barr, Penguin Books, 360pp, 978-0241643440, £8.99, pbk

British journalist Emily Barr's 2017 YA debut **The One Memory of Flora Banks**, about a girl with anterograde amnesia, was a global hit. Her adult thriller **Backpack** explored backpackers with murderous intent in Asia. Fuelled by a love of travel, adventure and observing strangers on trains, Emily's eighth YA novel **The Other Girl** is a contemporary rags to riches identity swap set in the world of European inter-railing.

Told in a first-person dual narrative by Tabbi and Ruby, it explores the idea of stealing someone else's life to escape your own, courting danger and discovering new possibilities. Composed of three parts, it propels the reader through each girl's story as they make a pact to meet again under the station clock in Zurich. But what if one of them doesn't want to swap back? What if one of them wants to reinvent herself **Great Gatsby** style? What if someone wants revenge?

Part daring heist, part self-discovery, the novel's themes include fragmented families, loss, betrayal, addiction, duplicity and toxic relationships.

Tabbi and Ruby are vividly drawn characters with each having their own agenda as chaotic, spoilt, lonely rich girl clashes with enigmatic scheming grifter. But who is hiding the most damaging secret? As the stakes grow higher, they live up to the maxim, 'Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive'.

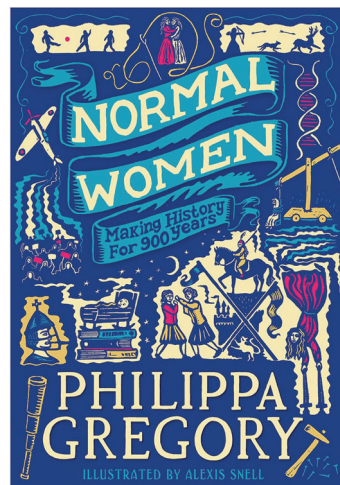
The star is the scenery as stunning locations include Switzerland, Cannes, Paris, the Scilly Isles and Kiruna. Each girl must face their demons as they deal with painful home truths, boyfriend trouble, mistakes and supporting themselves. Where it is flawed are some parts of the plot which goes from the predictable to where the reader has to suspend disbelief. The supporting cast and some unexpected developments add to the drama. The ending might surprise some as will the denouement. The plot lags in places but it will entertain those who enjoy a twisty thriller with secrets and lies. Be careful what you wish for. **TJ**

Normal women: making history for 900 years

★★★★★

Philippa Gregory, ill. Alexis Snell, Red Shed, 288pp, 978-0008622985, £10.99 pbk

Did you know that women prior to the Norman Conquest were more likely to have equal pay than 19th century women? Or that there are more male appendages than women depicted on



the Bayeux Tapestry? Or that women were the true commanders behind the armies in War of the Roses? If these statements intrigue you, then you'll love this book.

Normal Women is a fascinating journey through British social history from doomsday to the present day with a focus on women that has been carefully crafted by one of our most popular historical writers, Philippa Gregory, and adapted for a teenage audience.

It's a refreshing account of the highs and lows of ordinary, 'normal' women over the last millennium, rather than a collection of biographies of famous female figures in history which is particularly refreshing. The familiar names do feature but so do the names and accounts of women from all corners of society from landowners to 'witches' to sportswomen and activists.

It allows the reader to track not only how but why women's position in society has changed through the centuries, and not necessarily always in a forward direction.

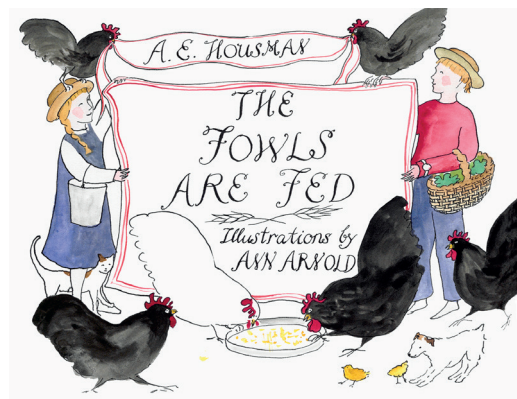
Its chronological format allows the reader to plot social, political, technological and religious changes in British society and how this has affected women's daily lives and freedoms.

It does cover and feature some unpleasant aspects of history involving women, such as slavery, violence and sexual violence so may not be suitable for more sensitive readers. I will admit, it does at times feel disheartening and overwhelming to repeatedly be reading about the awful things that have happened to women over the centuries, but at the same time to raise awareness of how far women have come and what we've had to go through to get to the level of freedom we have now is a vital part of history that should be made available to young people through books like this.

This book was originally published as a longer, more in-depth adult title and has been adapted in this version for teenage readers to be a more accessible, lighter version. Those that enjoy this version may be likely to turn to the original version for a more intensive look at women's history through time. **CH**

Valediction: No.22 Feeding the Fowls

It's an American contribution from **Brian Alderson** for this issue, and another interesting book packed up.



One reason for rejoicing at the turn of the Century was the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the birth of Hans Christian Andersen. Celebrations were held across the world and the British Library laid on a splendid display related to his life and work. Since I had been involved in Andersen translations for some time I was asked to cover the section dealing with English translations from 1846. Part of the show related to a hefty volume devoted to what people often called his 'Fairy Tales', which are nothing of the sort but mostly stories of his own invention many of which were called in Danish *eventyr* or *historia*. His Danish bibliography lists 156 of these, generally known as the Canon, and the hefty British Library edition for which I wrote a Preface, ran to 966 pages including 84 illustrations by various hands (this was also converted to a Folio Society edition in two volumes).

In the course of preparing my Preface I examined a number of complete English translations of the Canon including the expanded collection of 168 stories that had been included in Jean Hersholt's six volumes for the Limited Editions Club, New York in 1942. As I went through the stories, I was struck by the mysterious appearance of number 148 in the Canon. In none of the stories that I read was there a similar translation for this story included. In the recent British translation by Erik Haugaard he gives the story of *Dance, Dance, Dolly Mine* and in the British Library edition there is included a 56 page long *Lucky Peer* which is not part of the Canon anyway and is rarely translated anywhere. What was going on? A solution was found in consulting the complete Andersen in Danish where number 148 turns out to be not a story at all but a comic poem *Sporg Amagermo'er!* which, at the time never seems to have been translated into English anywhere.

This presented something of a challenge and I was able to include a manuscript version of my own translation in the exhibition. It is a delightful comedy taking place at a stall in Copenhagen vegetable market which recounts the marriage and sudden death of a carrot. For English readers I converted the market to Covent Garden but left all the details of the marriage and wedding breakfast, to which many other vegetables were invited, as they stood in Andersen's version.

I was quite pleased with the result and sent a copy to my friend Ian Jackson who was an immensely learned scholar in the University of California at Berkeley, San Francisco. He had himself written one or two comic stories which had been illustrated by his wife, Ann Arnold and it struck me that she might be willing to illustrate the carrot story, perhaps in the form of a panorama for children. Back came an instantaneous reply saying that she was already working on it and before very long there turned up in Richmond Ann's panoramic layout which was as many as 14 feet long. It was a wonderful surprise and has now ended up in the Robinson Library at Newcastle upon Tyne. But that was not the end of it because Ian had a friend at Berkeley who was soon to be married and for whom he turned to the verses for what the Italians call a *Libretto per Nozze*. A publisher was found and the panorama was converted to a little 28 page picture book in colour **Ask the Old Girl**, which referred to Anderson's vegetable seller. Ian, the scholar had also been able to trace at least two English translations of the poem but they were both obscure and unsatisfactory.

To my great sorrow Ian himself was to die before long, although he had also worked with Ann on another picture book based upon a completely unknown set of verses by A. E. Housman. They were drawn from

the visitors' book of the Wise family of Woodchester House near Stroud and are now to be found only in the Lilly Library of Bloomington, Indiana. Questions of copyright were cleared by both Ian and the Lilly Library so there has been no problem of ownership of the text. However, Ann Arnold has copyright in the illustrations which are devoted to the Wise family whose children seem to have been obsessed with ensuring that the family's chickens should have proper feeding throughout the day.

*'...Did we not feed those fowls before?
We did; but now they want some more.
They seem to think that the proceeding
That they are fittest for is feeding...'*

This unknown skit seems never to have been published in Britain but copies from Ann have been received here and a copy is happily passed on to **Seven Stories** and a copy may go to join the vegetable woman at Newcastle.

A. E. Houseman. *The Fowls Are Fed*. Illustrated by Ann Arnold. [2017]. [1] Picture of eggs in a basket. [2] Blank [3] title-page, as above [4-5] text 'At peep of day we rise from bed And feed the fowls: fowls are fed - [6-32] And gnash their beaks with grief and spite Because they are not fed at night'. Upper cover: title A. E. Housman. *The Fowls are Fed*. Illustrations by Ann Arnold. Verso: Introduction unsigned but probably by Ian Jackson. Imprint: Illustrations copyright Ann Arnold 2017. This edition was published in 2017 by Stinehour Editions, South Lunenburg Vermont. ISBN 978-1-944769-33-8. Lower cover both sides blank.

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.