

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.276

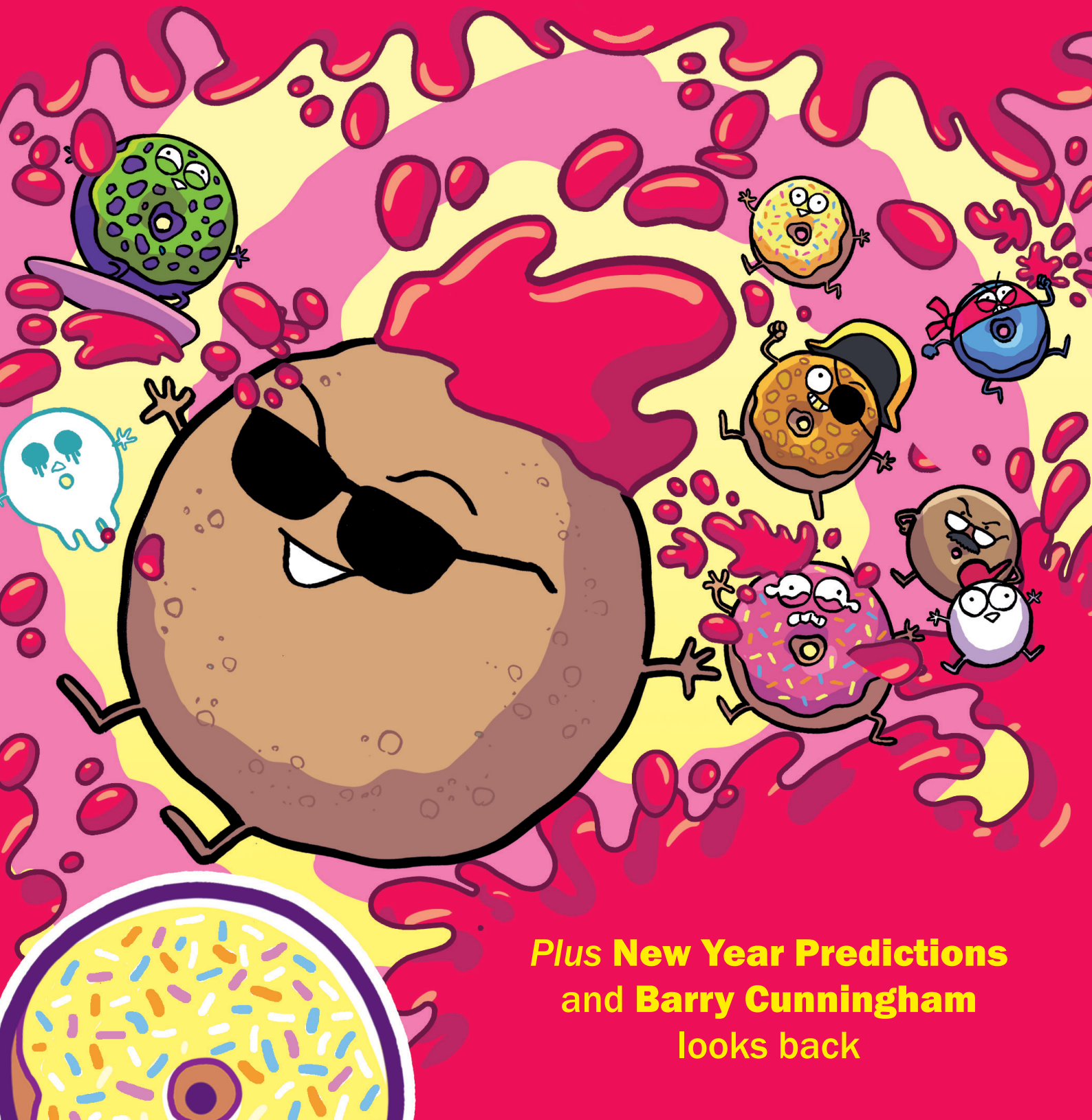
the children's book magazine online

Jan 2026

www.booksforkeeps.co.uk

Authorgraph interview **Neill Cameron**

Windows into Illustration **Alea Marley**



Plus New Year Predictions
and **Barry Cunningham**
looks back

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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **Donut Squad: Make a Mess** (a **Phoenix Comic Book**), written & illustrated by **Neill Cameron**. Thanks to Neill and **David Fickling Books** for their help with this cover.

Editorial 276

Happy New National Year of Reading!



We fully expect that all **Books for Keeps** readers will be ready to 'Go All In' to promote children's reading and literature in 2026. (It's tempting to add that every year is a National Year of Reading for us, but no-one likes a smug git so we resisted). We will do our best to report on all the various initiatives taking place this year and highlight ways in which you can get involved. Check back for our notes on the launch webinar for the **National Year of Reading**, keynote Professor Teresa Cremin, taking place online 15 January 2026, which promises to set out a bold, inspiring vision for reading for pleasure across early years, primary and secondary education and unpick the research behind the campaign.

If you want to make a difference locally, we recommend the **Bookmark Reading Charity 'Mind The Gap'** campaign which aims to close England's 'literacy gap' – the discrepancy in reading attainment between disadvantaged children and their peers. The charity recruits and trains volunteers to support children in primary schools who are falling behind and provides each child with two, 30-minute sessions, twice per week. Volunteers are mostly online, making it easy to complete sessions from anywhere. If this appeals to you, find out more.



Our own plans for the year ahead remain the same they've always been.

- To review as authoritatively as possible the broadest possible range of contemporary children's books, actively seeking out the work of independent publishers and community publishers as well as the work of mainstream houses
- To reflect the nature of our society by reviewing work and dealing with issues relevant to diversity and disability
- To improve standards in reviewing, especially with regard to illustrated books
- To nurture the creativity of writers and illustrators by maintaining the highest critical standards
- To draw attention to new authors and illustrators, giving them necessary critical attention and exposure
- To re-examine our cultural heritage by featuring classic children's books from the past
- To remain as accessible as possible to specialists and non-specialists alike and to remain at the forefront of new thinking about children's literature.

We are grateful to the children's publishers who support us, enabling **Books for Keeps** reviews, interviews, features to remain free to read. If you would like to show your appreciation, we welcome donations of any size. These can be made via the [Givey](https://www.givey.com) platform.

Thank you and here's to another year of Books for Keeps.

Books for Keeps

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All we need is Love (and a continued commitment to inclusive literature)

Farrah Serroukh picks out the key take away from the most recent CLPE Reflecting Realities Report.

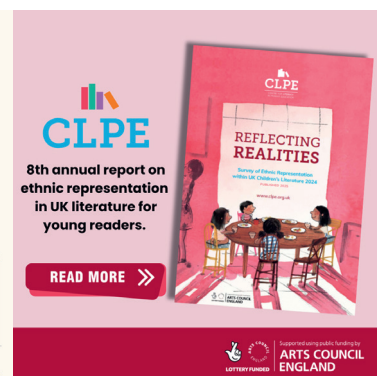
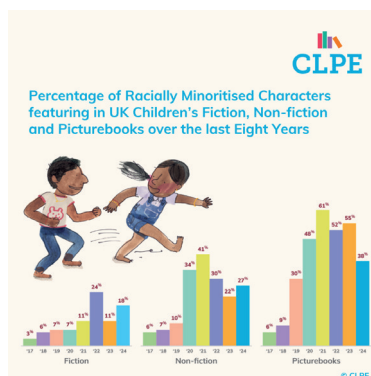
Soon trails of pine needles on the pavements outside will be one of the few reminders that another festive season has come and gone. Strolling past the shop assistant who carefully dethrones the tree in the window whilst neatly packing away the sparkling decorations. Passing abandoned bare trees propped up against railings, avoiding their sad gaze out of respect. And feeling for the tree that is mercilessly dragged along the cold concrete after weeks of enjoying its short-lived status of glorified glowing alter.

But what has any of this got to do with an annual survey of ethnic representation in children's literature? The latest **CLPE Reflecting Realities** report published in the lead up to Christmas, two months ago, marked the eighth instalment of the survey series. Over the course of eight years the children's literature community have witnessed remarkable shifts in the quality and quantity of representative children's books published in the UK.

The survey reports on the level and nature of ethnic representation within picturebooks, fiction and non-fiction aimed at readers aged 3-11. We report on the profile of characters and casts and share insights into the representation featured across genres and text types. The findings of the eighth report indicated marked improvements in comparison to the data shared in the seventh report, with overall representative output increasing from 17% to 24%. In the first six annual reports, we observed significant and consistent growth in the volume of children's literature featuring racially minoritised characters from 4% in the first report to 30% in the sixth report. Amongst other factors, the initial shock caused by the low baseline figure documented in the first report appeared to fuel this remarkable growth. In the seventh survey published in 2024, we reported the first decrease in the presence of racially minoritised characters in the overall output and in other key measures that we have tracked over of time. These findings were in stark contrast to the prior six reports and provided a sobering reminder that the work of ensuring inclusion requires critically reflective, deep and sustained effort to ensure a long term systemically integrated approach.

If we are to ensure that the gains made during this period are embedded as a sustained industry standard, then it is crucial to apply an inclusive lens at every stage of the publishing process – from the seed of an idea for a story to the published book reaching the hands of the reader. This journey from seed to shelf has some parallels with the abandoned trees. Unlike puppies and despite the love poured into them, Christmas trees do have a very finite life span. Like trees of the festive season, a great deal of love, energy, thought and care is invested into the production of a book. However, unlike the trees, the aspiration is that these bound treasures have infinite shelf lives and reach as many readers as possible.

As well as an increase in overall output reported in the eighth survey compared to the seventh report, we also observed an increase in the presence of racially minoritised main characters from 7% to 24% in titles reviewed. We noted an increase in representative fiction output from 11% to 18% and an increase in representative non-fiction output from 22% to 27%. The one area in which we observed a drop was in picturebook output. Although we expressed concern about the dramatic decrease from 55% to 38%, we were pleased to be able to



share the rich breadth of realities encountered through this text type. This breadth encompassed a range of ethnic representations as well as varied portrayals of gender, sexuality, family compositions, socio-economic contexts, communities, experiences and themes. Although the exemplifications highlighted were varied in style and subject matter, it was apparent that the theme of love was at the core of every title. Each picturebook highlighted in the eighth report centred love in different ways, from the love of

- and care for a hive of bees in **Lulu meets the Bees** (Anna McQuinn, illus Rosalind Beardshaw, Alanna Max).
- and support for a child on their first day at nursery in **Olu's Teacher: A Story About Starting Nursery** (Jamel C. Campbell, illus Lydia Mba, Walker Books).
- food and family in **Papa's Butter Chicken** (Monica Saigal, illus Abeeha Tariq, Little Tiger) and **Dim Sum Palace** (written and illustrated by X Fang, Pushkin Children's Books).
- families in **Changing Tides** (written and illustrated by Júlia Moscardó, Little Tiger) and **The Big Day** (Rachel Plummer, illus Forrest Burdet, Little Tiger).
- and connection to heritage in **My Mother's Tongues: A Weaving of Languages** (Uma Menon, illus Rahele Jomepour Bell, Walker Books)
- community in **One Sweet Song** (Jyoti Rajan Gopal, illus Sonia Sánchez, Walker Books)
- our world in titles like **Ayo's Adventure: Across the African Diaspora from Afro to Zulu** (written and illustrated by Ain Heath Drew, Barefoot Books) and **L is for Love** (Atinuke, illus Angela Brooksbank, Walker Books).

Each book was clearly made with love and is a celebration of our humanity – showcasing the power of literature to be a much-needed force for good. As we make our way into the new year, our hope is that the publishing industry remain steadfast in their commitment to inclusive literature by applying an inclusive lens at every stage of the process and continuing to infuse the books with love because when all is said and done love is really all you need.

Click [here](#) to read the latest **CLPE Reflecting Realities Report**.



Farrah Serroukh is Research and Development Director, CLPE.

Happy New Year?

What does 2026 have in store?

As 2025 trudges away into the distance and the new **National Year of Reading** dawns, we asked key people in the children's book world to tell us what they are hoping for from 2026, and what they are most excited about in their own organisations. Here's what they said.

Photo by David Bebbler



Waterstone's Children's Laureate, Frank Cottrell-Boyce:

I'm very interested in the fact that people who were born after 2010 – the **Bluey** generation (Gen Alpha if you really must) are noticeably less engaged by social media and the online world that their immediate elders – the **Sponge Bob** generation (Gen Z as it were). The optimistic part of me hopes that this means that the cohort that will have to deal with the unknown consequences of A.I. are already more critical about the digital world. And maybe looking for the connection with reality that perhaps they lost during COVID. One of the young people in my life has just acquired a portable DVD player and raided the shelves of DVDs that everyone told me to clear. At a time when everything – and the pace of everything – feels overwhelming, when even the News is turning into a fully immersive experience – then the value of books as a fully unplugged form of entertainment, in which you are totally in control of the speed of the input – is surely appealing. I hope they recover it. Conversations about the decline in reading always default to talk about young people. If adults love football, their kids will love football. If adults scroll – and boy do adults scroll – their kids will scroll. If adults model good reading habits, they may yes save the World.



Professor Teresa Cremin, Open University:

2026 heralds our third national year of reading and I'm looking forward to joining colleagues in this collaborative endeavour, and, drawing on our research, highlighting the social nature of reading. The OU team have ongoing UK studies on the social motivation to read and the role of talk in reading for pleasure and I'll also be exploring social reading spaces online through work in Australia and their potential use in school.

Across this frenetically busy year, with myriad opportunities offered to teachers, parents, children and young people, I hope there will be time for everyone to reflect on what counts as reading, to consider what it really means to be a reader and to revisit the power of literature. Research makes clear that narrative matters and that literature has a particular potency for volitional reading (Torppa et al., 2020). As Barbara Hardy (1977) wrote 'narrative is a primary act of mind- transferred to art from life.' We think through story and connect to our own and others' worlds through story.

So, I'm also hoping that nationally adults and children find stories that resonate and take the time to share these – to blather about them. Wouldn't it be wonderful if society experienced a renewed sense of relational connection through talking about texts together?



Victoria Dilly, CEO of the School Library Association:

As the **National Year of Reading** gets into full swing, I think that we will see more awareness of the importance of school libraries and school librarians, with a growing understanding of the role they can play as antidotes to the

decline in children and young people's reading engagement. As school librarians lead the charge for the Campaign in their school communities, the importance of book talk and reading clubs in schools will come to the fore, and we will be talking about the enormous impact a reading role model can make on a child's reading habits, and the power of getting the right book into the hands of a young person at the right time. As school communities come together through reading, senior leaders will see first-hand the impact school libraries can have on children and young people.

Considering book trends: books that give children the opportunity to simply engage with the joy of reading through humour, exciting adventures and fun will be important. I think we'll continue to see the rise in popularity of graphic novels and beautifully illustrated fiction, as well as a renewed focus on accessible fiction, like the excellent dyslexia-friendly novels published by Barrington Stoke. School librarians know the difference these titles can make in building confidence, establishing reading as an enjoyable activity and offering independence and choice to all readers – I hope this knowledge will continue to spread throughout 2026.



Emily Jack, CEO, Bookmark Reading Charity:

For **Bookmark Reading Charity**, 2026 feels like a year of opportunity with the government-backed **National Year of Reading** wanting the nation to get involved, and it also allows us to shine a spotlight on our work too.

We'll be building on our core mission: ensuring every child has the literacy support they need to thrive. This will involve expanding our One-to-one volunteer-led reading programmes into more disadvantaged schools alongside our other nine literacy programmes. We can do this by recruiting more volunteers to read with children, alongside continuing to use evidence and insight to show what really helps children catch up and fall in love with reading.

We improve children's literacy by promoting a reading for pleasure culture in primary schools, with a focus on supporting children in the most disadvantaged communities.

Looking more broadly at the children's literacy landscape, I think the agenda for 2026 will continue to focus on inclusion, access and relevance. Ensuring that all children can see themselves reflected in books, and can easily access high-quality, engaging reading materials, remains vital. We need to keep championing reading for pleasure, especially at a time when there are so many competing pressures on children's attention and digital distractions too. These all make the ever-widening attainment gaps between disadvantaged children and their wealthier peers very real concerns.

I'm hopeful the **National Year of Reading** will spark a genuine national conversation about the value of reading, not just as a skill but as a source of joy, confidence and connection. Most of all, I hope it leads to lasting change for the children who need it most.



Beth Cox, Inclusion and Equality Consultant:

In 2026, I truly hope to see a renewed and sustained investment in inclusion across children's publishing, not just in the content of books, but in the people, processes and structures that shape them. The National Year of Reading offers a timely opportunity to ensure that the books we encourage children to read

truly reflect the breadth of their lives and experiences.

We are currently awaiting confirmation of funding for phase three of *Reflecting Disability*, which would allow us to carry out in-depth analysis and reporting on the 400+ eligible books submitted to the first round of the survey. While funding allocation isn't guaranteed, oversight of the reviews, anecdotal observations, and the bookshelves full of submissions have already given me valuable insight into where the sector is, the progress that has been made, and what still needs to be done.

There has undoubtedly been significant progress in the range of disability representation appearing in children's books. However, alongside this, we continue to see inauthentic portrayals, embedded ableism and misrepresentation that could often be avoided. This suggests not a lack of good intentions, but gaps in knowledge and support. A reminder that in this area especially, we don't know what we don't know.

If we are to see lasting change, publishing's infrastructure needs to evolve. There needs to be long-term strategic investment not just in training staff and outsourcing for lived-experience insight, but in providing meaningful, in-depth support throughout the creative process. Only when inclusion is embedded early and consistently will it stop being something that leaves creative teams second-guessing themselves and fearing mistakes, and instead become an opportunity to deepen, strengthen and expand creative work.



Imogen Bond, Managing Director, Empathy Lab:

At **EmpathyLab** our goal is to get 1 million children and young people jumping into someone else's story during the free Empathy Day Festival in June, through brilliant authors and illustrators sharing the empathy message at family events, and our Schools Programme which embeds

empathy as a core value, practiced through reading. We'll be highlighting compelling new research demonstrating the tightly intertwined nature of reading engagement, ability and empathy development - suggesting an empathy focus could help reverse the decline in reading for pleasure.

I want children and young people to be setting the agenda, making it *their* **National Year of Reading** with stories in all forms visible - time to let go of what 'counts' as reading and celebrate the diversity of story enjoyment, for everyone and everywhere.

I hope this is the year we all champion reading as a way to connect - to ourselves, each other and the world. With so much division we need to supercharge our human connections and stories are a brilliant way to do that. I hope the **National Year of Reading** is a joyful catalyst which fundamentally changes how we value reading, trusting that if we concentrate on how it connects us, literacy skill will flourish too. Let's go all in for connection!



Marion Deuchars, illustrator, author and Royal Designer for Industry, and Trustee at Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration:

This year feels especially exciting for all of us at the **Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration**. After many years of planning and preparation, we will finally open our doors in May. Set within the grounds of an 18th century waterworks in Clerkenwell, London the Centre will

Photo by Nina Tschorn

be the UK's only permanent space dedicated to illustration. It will welcome around 100,000 visitors each year to its galleries, learning studio, illustration library, café, shop and gardens.

We are looking forward to sharing the wonder of illustration and creating a place where people can come to look, to learn, to make and to enjoy it in all its forms.

Illustration is fundamental to how we understand the world. We often respond to images before we use words. Pictures help us feel, imagine and make sense of things, but they also invite curiosity, suggest possibilities, and spark ideas of our own. Images ask us to slow down and pay attention, which feels increasingly important. From picture books and editorial illustration to animation, graphic storytelling, and digital media, illustration is one of the main ways ideas are shared, explored and brought to life.

Much of my own work has been about encouraging people, especially children, to draw, make, and engage with books and images without fear. This creates a real opportunity to give attention to visual literacy, and how images and stories working together can surprise us, move us and stay with us.

With the **National Year of Reading** ahead, I'm interested in how pictures might help more young people discover reading as a way of seeing, and how stories can open up new, exciting ways of looking at the world.

▼ Plans for the **Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration**, opening in May 2026





**Louis Coiffait-Gunn,
Chief Executive CILIP:**

It's fantastic to have another **National Year of Reading** to look forward to. CILIP and our members are proud to 'Go All In' behind it in 2026. Our expert members in school libraries, public libraries, School Library Services and elsewhere know how to curate an inclusive and engaging collection, create a welcome space, and

achieve the most impact with available resources. There's currently a postcode lottery of library provision, and any tangible support the Year provides them with will grow their positive impact, especially with the hardest-to-reach readers.

The £15m from government for school libraries is welcome and librarians are uniquely able to increase the return on that investment. It's bizarre that the Department for Education still doesn't gather basic data about school library provision and that they're not statutory, unlike public and prison libraries. Meanwhile in Sweden, school libraries and librarians are every child's right and that is something we'll continue pushing for in 2026.

This year is the start of CILIP's new five-year strategy, **Empowering Impact**. That includes our new **Intellectual Freedom Committee** to fight censorship and book bans, another fantastic year of our children's book awards **The Carnegies**, and new Super Searchers information and media literacy training with Google. 2026 is the year to reimagine reading, and librarians' unique role sharing its life-changing magic.



**Natasha Ryan, Education
Co-Ordinator, Poetry Society:**

At the **Poetry Society**, we're looking forward to a busy year ahead, full of events including our **Free Verse Poetry Book Fair** in April, **Young Poets Network** collaborations with **Plymouth Poetry Festival** and **Verve Poetry Festival** in Birmingham in the spring, and our usual schedule of competitions

and publications, including the **Foyle Young Poets Award**. For the **National Year of Reading**, we're commissioning young poets to create peer-led resources, which will shine a spotlight on our suite of anthologies featuring winning poems from the **Foyle Young Poets Award**. We're also launching a teachers' reading group, creating a shared space where educators can rediscover the joy of reading poetry communally. We're looking forward to the **National Poetry Library's** celebration of 75 years since the opening of the **Southbank Centre**, which includes the 'Poet in Every Port' project, as well as to National Poetry Day in October. There will be a passing of the baton as Frank Cottrell-Boyce's tenure as Children's Laureate comes to a close, and we'll also be looking forward to hearing about how the new Children's Laureates for Wales – Nicola Davies and Siôn Tomos Owen – will encourage children to read and get creative.



Pam Dix, chair of IBBY UK:

With my personal interest on the non-fiction area of children's publishing, I hope that we will continue to see books on the forgotten parts of history, on previously untold stories. David Olusoga said recently at a talk that that British black history is only just beginning to be told in books. I hope he is right and that there will be more published on this during the year.

I am looking forward to the launch of Ken Wilson-Max's new book **The Big Green** (Otter Barry, 2026) which is set in sub-Saharan Africa and tells the story of a real-life environmental project. Ken talks so powerfully about the need to hear the voices from Africa telling their own stories and I hope that this will be the first of many.

On the same point, I am very pleased to have discovered two

Australian publishers doing the same. **Magabala Books** is dedicated to producing works that celebrate indigenous cultures and the result is a wonderful collection of high quality, really well illustrated books. The **Indigenous Literacy Foundation (ILF)**, winners of the **Astrid Lindgren Memorial Prize** in 2024, has recently shared with me some examples of their community language publishing programme. These are books that have been written with indigenous communities and capture voices and views that have not been seen in written form before.

IBBY and **UNESCO** are [collaborating on a new project on Indigenous and Endangered languages](#). The call for submissions has just closed and details of the project will be announced at the **IBBY Congress** in Canada in August. It is exciting to think what books might emerge from this. I think 2026 is a year when we will all become more aware of books in indigenous languages.

In **IBBY UK** we are very pleased to be working in Wales. It has been a number of years since Wales was actively involved with **IBBY**. For the first time we have submitted two books in Welsh for the **2026 IBBY Honour** list and look forward to collaborating with Nicola Davies, the Welsh laureate, to promote the work of **IBBY**.

I hope that the **National Year of Reading** will continue as it has started, on **Radio 4** at least, to bring more focus on children's books. I would like to see increased coverage of reviewing of children's books in mainstream media and I would like to see some hard research on the impact of reading in different media on the brain. It goes without saying that I would love to see children's public libraries and school libraries have a more stable financial basis.



**Jasmine Richards, author and
founder of the multi-award
fiction studio and micro-publisher
Storymix Books:**

In 2026, I think children's books will pull in two directions - tales of comfort and tales of survival. When the world feels unstable, readers reach for stories that soothe and for stories that show resilience but also resistance to power structures that harm. Both are a way of making sense of the chaos.

So in terms of my predictions for 2026 – we will see books coming through that focus on coziness, and books that focus on the disruption of corrosive control. **Storymix** is collaborating with a major publisher on a YA dystopian novel that is really going to get readers thinking about who suffers and who thrives in a world that does not look so different from our own [title still to be announced]. And our teen title with Usborne: **Princess (Apparently)** by Siren Knight is on the surface a summer romance but beneath explores ideas of identity, and also how Small Island Developing States can stand up to big corporations and political machinations.

I think the industry will also continue to see a focus on seasonal titles – as the hook feels very obvious and that hook is necessary in such a tight market. There was a lot of love for our cosy festive title **The Other Father Christmas** which came out in Nov 2025 and there will be more of this kind of publishing.

I'm thrilled to be a Trustee of the **National Literacy Trust** as the **National Year of Reading** begins. Reading has often been framed as something children ought to do but this year is about recasting it as something they choose to do because it feels relevant to them. I hope as well that the 'Go All In' conversation will also rekindle a love of reading for many adults because I feel this is key to children reading - them seeing the adults in their lives reading as well.

I predicted last year that the backslide around the acquisition and promotion of 'diverse' books would continue. I will predict that again this year but with a hope that this sliding will slow down. We lost some really important indie publishers last year who were championing inclusion. If you have a budget – please support those organizations that are doing the work because otherwise we will lose them.

Do you have predictions and news to add?

Email us at enquiries@booksforkeeps.co.uk and we will share them.

‘Laughter is delayed fear’ (Roald Dahl) or... a career in children’s books

by Barry Cunningham OBE

Barry Cunningham retired at the end of 2025 – after nearly 50 years in publishing, mainly in children’s books, from Kaye Webb’s **Puffin** via **Chatto**, **Cape** and **Bodley Head** to Bloomsbury and signing **Harry Potter**, to setting up his own publishing company, **Chicken House**. He looks back at half a century of children’s publishing.

Sometimes I think all children’s books are really about what scares children most, and how to deal with it. And I suppose that means what still terrifies us adults too – and what remains from our childhood, that we need to overcome or come to terms with. That’s all the big things: love, hate, resentment, lack of confidence, who we find attractive, what makes us angry – and of course, how we feel about animals! And I think we publishers and authors have got better, braver and more respectful at our task – using, like the quote above from Roald Dahl, all those important techniques that help children learn, laugh and feel those stories fiercely. But maybe at a cost.

Back when I began in publishing, in 1977, the year of the Sex Pistols, Children’s books were a backwater (even in the mighty **Penguin**) – left to capable women who didn’t really trouble the might of the sales departments (and their once-a-year Puffin promotion), whilst squirrelling away funds and favours for school activities and Kaye’s precious baby, The **Puffin Club**. Here, something special dawned on my understanding. The **Puffin Club** invented social media before the internet was even dreamt about, inviting children to join a club about what reading was for – adventure and imagination for sure, but practical skills like knot making and animal tracking too. I was cross with Kaye because she had more **Puffin Club** helpers than the embryonic Marketing Department – still called The Schools Unit, had at its disposal. But I saw the transforming power of story in real children’s lives: something to take and treasure in the future for me.

But what of the authors? There were exceptions, of course, Roald Dahl, Robert Westall, the Ahlbergs, Diana Wynne Jones, but most were quite content with steady domestic stories where adults always knew best, and love was a cat on the rug. But gradually things were changing – tough, adventurous stories began to sell to young adults too – **The Wizard of Earthsea**, **The Dark is Rising**, following the breakthrough of the violent and cruel **Watership Down**. Editors like Tony Lacey and Liz Attenborough ushered in gaming books and real-life school stories (always the toughest place). And of course, I recognised another key difference in the changing world of children’s books – some authors became just as important as the characters in their books, to their eager readers. And the children’s editorial process demonstrated how that was built as part of a collaboration with editors, working on plot, character and direction, together. So, the result was a crafted piece of work, with due regard to what children needed and would respond to. A new successful business began to emerge, maybe more in line with the team work around films, and marketing began to work with editorial, and design and art, together, to build story. This was quite different from my experience in adult books, where the author was clearly king, and we followed with money and...more money

So, when I was gloriously given the opportunity of starting a children’s list from scratch – courtesy of high-risk strategist Nigel Newton at **Bloomsbury** – I wanted those books that children themselves would respond to, books for ‘book huggers,’ whose emotional appeal was high, with lots of action and very very importantly, that used humour to enhance or interpret experience. So, I had no hesitation in choosing a book – and a series, that (unbeknown to me) the rest of the publishing world had rejected. So, **Harry Potter** was born,



and the era of rock star authors, and such huge sales that adult lists began falling over themselves to commission children’s books. I will always be so in awe of what Jo Rowling achieved: to make reading cool again, especially for boys, and literally to create a generation of readers is an achievement like no other. All this was wonderful, and allowed me to leave **Bloomsbury** and start **Chicken House** with my colleagues Elinor Bagenal and Rachel Hickman. There we lived the dream: a children’s list that could build through sales, marketing, editorial and rights, a perfect storm of innovation and risk taking, where new authors could grow – latterly with the brilliant support of **Scholastic** in the USA, as well as in the UK and Australia – making careers as varied as those of Kevin Brooks, Kiran Millwood Hargrave, MG Leonard, Maz Evans, Cornelia Funke and James Dashner.

But simultaneously the market was changing, as had been well observed. Middle Grade began to fail – series to languish and shorter illustrated books take over. Was this as a result of falling literacy, a post COVID phenomenon, or something more permanent? Time will tell, but alongside this came the massive rise in Young Adult books – with more sex, violence and pure romance than we ever imagined, back in the day when we tried out ‘teen’ titles at the top end of older middle grade (anyone remember Beverly Cleary’s **Fifteen**?) So – at Chicken House we found ourselves publishing brilliant series like Amy Jordan’s **All the Hidden Monsters** for 20, or even 30-year-old young women readers, as well as the young adults we expected. Here’s a dilemma: do we work to appeal to this growing market – encouraging content that goes way beyond what an emerging teen might expect or experience? Do we treat this part of our market as just another publishing category – ignoring any child-centred mission to inform, even educate? I think this is a situation that has grown directly out of our success. By treating children as fully formed consumers, as true-to-life versions of adults, with fantasy worlds as superbly realistic parallel universes where our moral, political and family relationships explode into life – we have created an alternative to adult literature. Here, good and bad can resolve, where hope still largely lives, and characters are much, much larger than this ordinary world can contain. Pretty cool, eh – let’s take the win, but worry about what we are losing. We need to find ways to reclaim the Middle Grade readers, to keep children’s books for children as well as continue to respect those older readers we have drawn into our books and series – through our superbly strong editorial work with authors, using marketing to reach out through the new channels, as well as to our best friends in schools and libraries.

We should find strength in our dedication – and the importance of childhood to our futures!

Chicken House continues to publish new authors and build exciting talent with its new Publisher, Rachel Leyshon with the team in Frome and with Scholastic Books around the world. Barry will continue his association through **Chicken House Entertainment**, and working with his colleagues as Chair of **The Times/Chicken House** new writers’ **Children’s Fiction Competition**.

Authorgraph

No.276

Neill Cameron
interviewed by
Lucy Starbuck Braidley

'Donut Squad was never really supposed to exist. It was certainly not supposed to be my next big project...'

For many creators finishing a long running series and taking the next creative step can be a daunting prospect, and for cartoonist Neill Cameron, it was no different, **'Mega Robo Bros'** was such a big thing, it took 10 years to tell that story, and it was such a huge part of my creative life that when that came to an end, I was looking around thinking, what do I do next?...what's the next big story?' To his surprise, what was supposed to be a creative palette cleanse – a series of fun comic strips featuring donuts for **The Phoenix** weekly comic – has exploded into a popular series with young readers. With two books released and another set to come later in 2026, **Donut Squad's** blend of humour, chaos and snackable short stories has been a runaway success, in a way he could never have predicted: 'The way I've come to see it now... is that doing the last **Mega Robo Bros** book was quite stressful and a lot of pressure, and I think all that pressure did something strange to my brain and as a release valve for that pressure, I started drawing these just very, deeply stupid little four panel gag trips about donuts...'

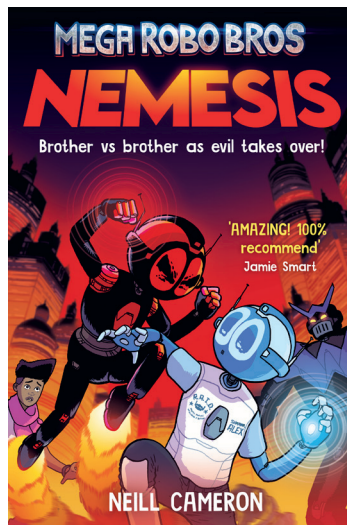
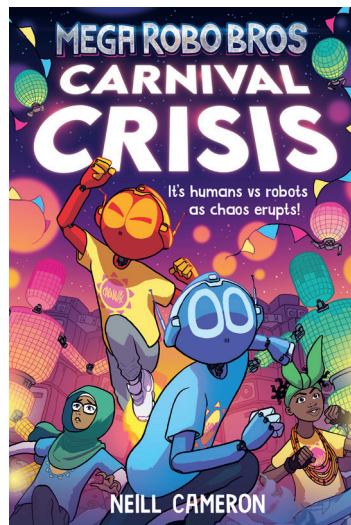
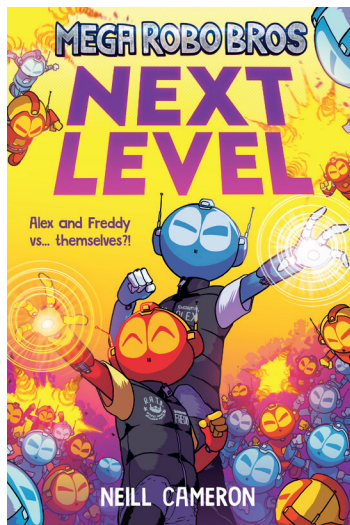
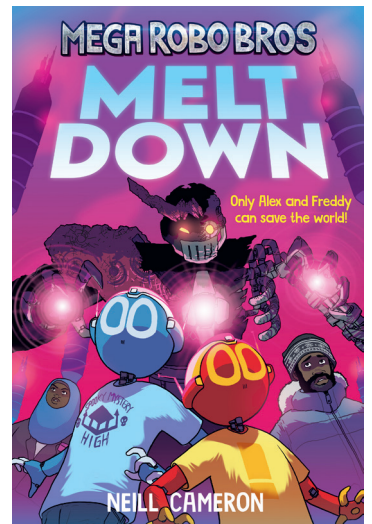
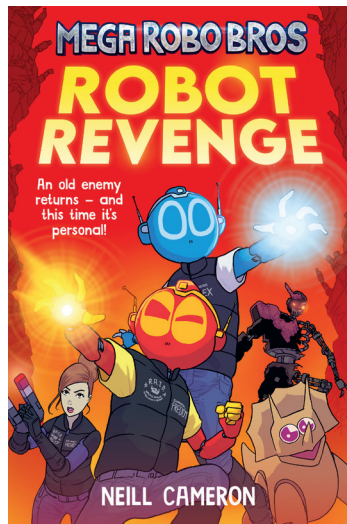
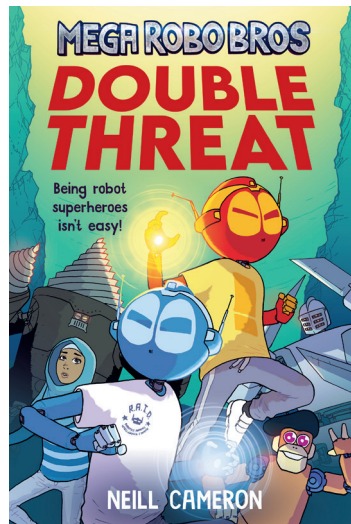
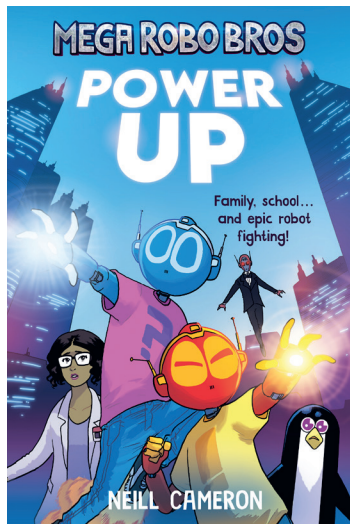
Ironically, the project designed to take his mind off the pressure of the next big project has become just that, 'It's completely taken over. I think it's fair to say it's just instantly eclipsed **Mega Robo Bros** in terms of popularity by quite some margin.'



Initially a series of loosely connected weekly strips in **The Phoenix** comic have amalgamated into a complex overarching narrative that sees, among other things, the donuts wanting to take over the world and battling with bagels. Neill explains how the project evolved from a simple strip, to his next epic creative endeavour, '... it just happens naturally, doesn't it? You do a strip and then you think, 'Oh, I could build on that', and then, 'Oh I know what the next version of that gag is.', or 'I know how I can build on that'....And then before you know it, you've constructed these giant elaborate cathedrals of nonsense, out of what was supposed to be this very simple idea... it's fun and accessible to read but from a creative point of view, it's become quite a lot!'



The new project has also unlocked a new way of working for Neill, moving away from carefully planned long-form narratives, towards a more organic development process which has offered him a new creative outlook. 'Mega Robo Bros had a plan.... I knew the emotional shape of it and the emotions I want to end on, and I had that in sort of sight from the very beginning. This is just... I'm just making it up as I go along, and I think that's done me a power of good, you know? Because it's not working to a plan, it is just coming up with jokes and then building jokes on top of jokes, and seeing where it takes you.'



I think that that is a completely different way of working, but it's really fun and it means that you end up places you would never have... it opens you up to discoveries along the way in a way that you can't, if you're locked into a plan.'

When thinking about the power of comics as a form of storytelling, Neill reflects on what initially drew him to comics as a reader and that younger version of himself that he sees in many of his young fans, 'In terms of its initial appeal and why [comics are] so appealing to kids in particular, I think it's just because pictures are cool... I have quite a visual brain...and I think like lots of people do, certainly kids do. Kids love drawing, kids love making pictures, kids love looking at pictures...that's just a huge part of how you are engaging with the world at that age... And so a storytelling medium that is 'Picture Books Plus' is intrinsically incredibly appealing to kids.'

As well as encouraging a new generation of readers through illustration, many children are turning creator too, after inspired to pick up a pencil by with the simple drawing style in **Donut Squad** and finding space for their own stories within the Donut's stretchy world. 'Donuts are quite easy to draw - that's the joy of it. - And so they're very inviting to have a go at drawing your own. The amount that we get in the post is wild...I think that's a really good lesson that I maybe hadn't intuited earlier... When I was a kid and I loved comics, I loved the simpler cartoony styles like, **Snoopy, Charlie Brown, Garfield, Calvin and Hobbs**... you're not intimidating readers with how great you are at drawing, you are inviting them in by making it feel like they could do it too. That's a really important part of how kids engage with comics, which I should have known because that's how I got started.... you read the comic and then you have a go at drawing your version of it or drawing those characters and then making up your own new ones.'

Despite Neill's surprise at the size and scale of **Donut Squad's** success, that recipe for creative gold was undoubtedly forged in the pressure of producing for a weekly comic, something he's been adept at for over a decade now. 'I've been doing it for however long **The Phoenix** has been around now, which is like 14 years or so, and if anything I'm doubling down at this point... it's literally every week, and I think it's great for me... You have a weekly deadline, and you have to finish things, and you have no choice about that... I think that's one of the best things you can do as a creator. I'm always telling this to young people that are starting out: finish things and let people read them... and that implies don't overthink and don't go too mad with your vision for the scale of this thing...Start with a four panel gag strip and then see what that prompts, and let things build more organically that way. Actually finishing things gives you a sense of achievement and self-belief, and letting people read them reinforces that... you come to trust yourself and believe in yourself as an artist. Start small and build up is a good rule of thumb, and I feel very lucky to have that weekly deadline because it's what enforces that.'

The donuts may not have achieved world domination they dream of (yet), but if Neill Cameron continues to take his own advice for creative success, their popularity is sure to keep on growing.



Lucy Starbuck Bradley is the producer and host of **Comic Boom - The Comics in Education Podcast**, co-author of upcoming title **Comics in the Classroom** and Head of School Libraries at the **National Literacy Trust**.

Windows into Illustration: Alea Marley

Since being Highly Commended for the **Macmillan Children's Book Prize** in 2017 Alea Marley has illustrated a range of picture books and younger fiction. She skilfully blends traditional and digital work to capture mood and atmosphere, creating artwork that is often playful and always a warm representation of children's lives and experiences. In this issue's Windows into Illustration, she describes illustrating the cover for **Auntie's Bangles**, written by Dean Atta.

When I was asked to illustrate **Auntie's Bangles**, it already felt familiar. I had illustrated Dean Atta's debut children's book **Confetti**, and that project had been such a great experience that being invited to work together again felt both meaningful and exciting. Although **Auntie's Bangles** isn't a sequel it is very much a sister book, connected greatly by feeling and emotions.

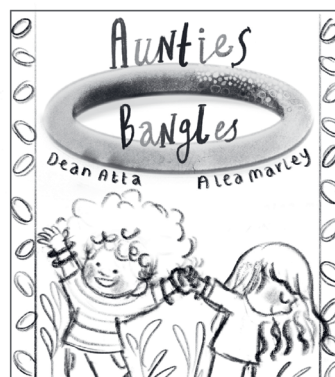
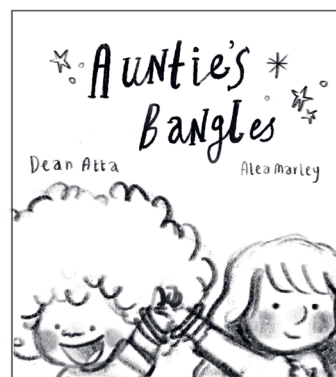
The illustration I've decided to focus on is the cover, which is usually created towards the end of the bookmaking process once most of the interior artwork is complete. Working on the cover at that stage allowed me to draw on everything I had already discovered while illustrating the book. I knew the cover needed to hold the emotional weight of the story without explanation; it needed to capture a feeling.

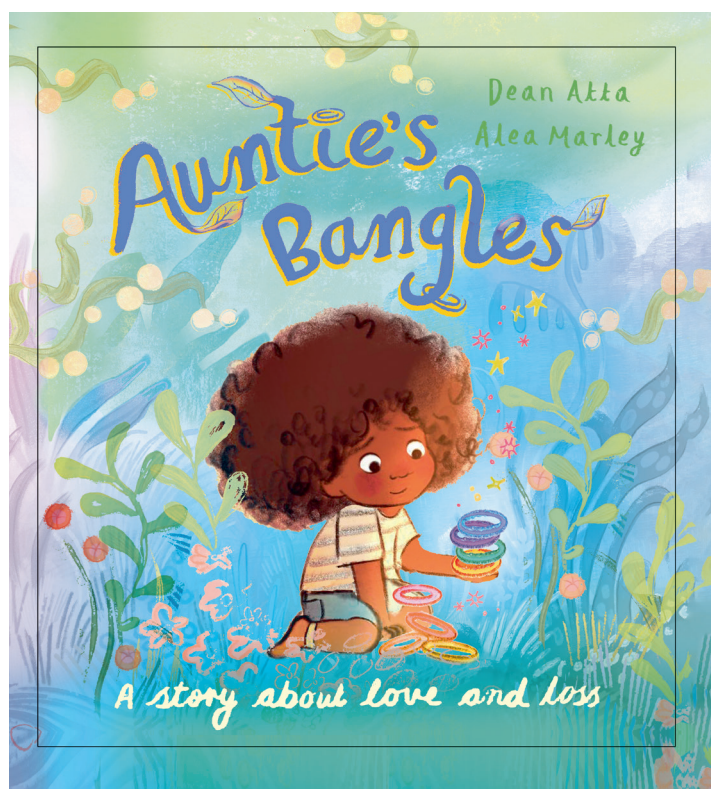
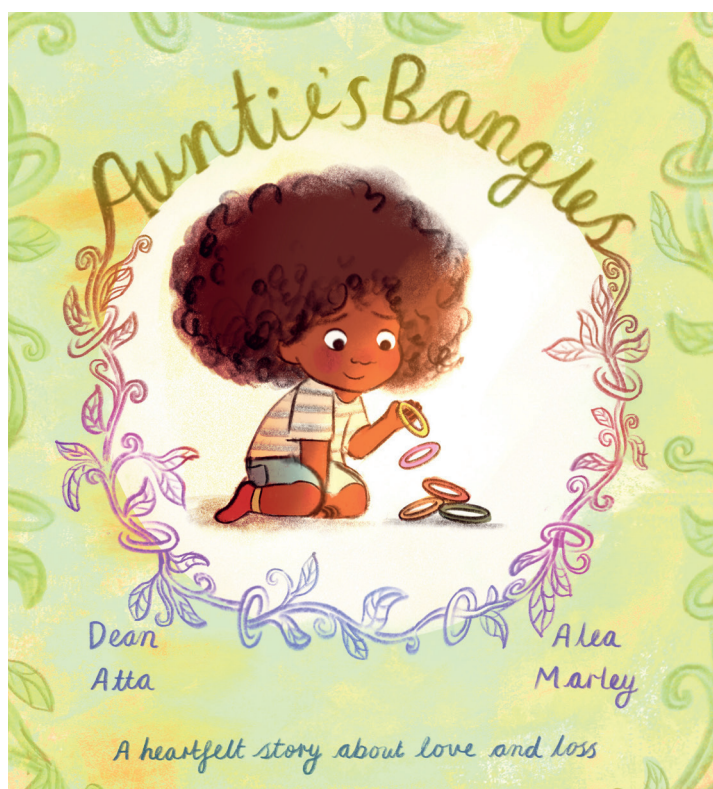
I began with loose thumbnail sketches by hand, getting all those ideas out of my head and onto paper. This stage is extremely rough, but that's okay, as these early sketches are just for me, instinctive and exploratory, helping me work out what felt right before developing them further to share with the publishing team.



These are the first round of cover sketches I did in Procreate with the HB Pencil brush. They focus on composition rather than detail, exploring placement and scale. I wanted to show both characters together with the bangles used as a defining element in some way, but overall it looked a tad too simplistic.

The next round of sketches have more detail and intertwine the title and border, with small bangles wrapped around the vines. The consensus was that they both look too happy. This stage was tricky, as neither character could appear too joyful or too sad.





After some discussion the publishing team sent me a mock up they created. They wanted to shift the focus to the cousin and remove Rama from the cover. At first I wasn't sure, but I quickly realised it was a way to communicate the loss she is experiencing. Sometimes what is missing speaks just as loudly as what is present. So I created a colour rough of their mock up, adding more vines and softening the cousin's expression.

After some back and forth we decided to use elements from an important moment in the interior as background art for the cover and began finalising where everything will be placed and what colours to use. This is the final rough image we chose and now I was free to make the final art.

Illustrating the cover was one of my favourite parts of the whole process. I worked across many layers, gradually adjusting colour, texture, and light until the image felt settled. Using a mix of Kyle T Webster dry brushes and Procreate's original pencil brushes allowed me to keep the plants loose and expressive, framing the cousin and almost holding him in place. Every decision, from brush choice to colour was guided by the emotional tone of the story.

Auntie's Bangles by Dean Atta, illustrated by Alea Marley, is published by Orchard Books, 978-1408370599, £12.99 hbk.



How to get children reading because they want to, not because they have to

Charlotte Hacking has ten suggestions.

Reading for pleasure does not happen by accident. It grows out of time, access, relationships, and an understanding that reading is not simply a skill to be mastered, but a cultural, social and emotional experience. At a time when pressures on schools, families and children feel greater than ever, it is worth returning to what we know really matters. The following ten points build directly from classroom practice, research and lived experience, and are offered as practical, realistic ways to nurture children who choose to read because they want to, not because they have to.



1. Reading together

We need to relook at what supports effective cognitive development for children as well as what supports academic development, and shared reading sits at the heart of both. Reading together, including multiple re-readings of favourite books, is key. When children hear the same story again and again, they deepen their understanding of language, narrative and meaning, and they do so in a way that feels safe, predictable and pleasurable.

Reading to children allows them to experience the pleasures reading can bring, to learn vocabulary, sentence structures and the patterns of language and texts, and to see different purposes for reading, all without the cognitive overload of having to lift the words from the page themselves. They can focus on meaning, emotion and enjoyment. This remains just as important for older children. A child's reading comprehension does not catch up with their listening comprehension until around the age of 12 or 13. Reading aloud to children and reading with them therefore continues to matter long after they can read independently, offering access to richer language and more complex texts than they might manage alone.

Audiobooks, alongside and as well as print texts, are also a valuable vehicle. They allow children to hear what fluent reading sounds like, to engage with texts they may not yet be able to read for themselves, or to revisit texts, gaining a deeper understanding of what they have heard. Importantly, they exemplify that listening to stories is also a form of reading.

2. Access to books

A factor we cannot escape, and which drives much of the disengagement from reading for pleasure, is the financial situation and the widening inequality gap. School finances are stretched, and English budgets are often subject to external pressures that dictate how money is spent. In many schools, funding phonics training, decodable texts and scheme books has taken priority in recent years, leaving less money for real books. Too often, teachers fill these gaps from their own personal collections or pockets.



At the same time, disposable income in many households has reduced, leaving parents with less money to spend on buying books. The underfunding and closure of local libraries further limits public access to a wide range of high-quality, expertly curated texts.

Access also means access to places where books are chosen with care. While popular chain stores and supermarkets are convenient, they rarely offer the breadth, diversity and specialist knowledge provided by local independent booksellers. If children are to encounter books that truly speak to them, these spaces matter.

3. The Importance of Libraries

Public libraries are an essential resource. They offer carefully curated collections, knowledgeable librarians who can encourage and recommend reading, and welcoming spaces that feel different from school. Libraries also run engaging activities that encourage reading, such as bounce and rhyme sessions, author and illustrator workshops, and initiatives like the **Summer Reading Challenge**, which help sustain reading habits over time.

School libraries are also important, but it is vital to recognise what it takes to set up and maintain them well. A library is not just a room with shelves. It requires funding for ongoing book stock, trained staff and dedicated time within an already crowded curriculum. Schools face enormous pressures, and this work must be properly valued.

That said, every classroom should have a well-stocked, thoughtfully curated book corner, tailored to the needs and interests of that class. Partnerships between schools and local libraries can strengthen provision further, through librarian visits, regular school trips and shared expertise, ensuring children experience a wide and current range of books.

4. Ensuring choice and not upholding a hierarchy of reading

Don't be snobby about books. Children enjoy a wide range of reading: picturebooks at all ages, comics and graphic novels, poetry, highly illustrated texts, humorous books, information texts, short

stories and novels. Children should be supported to express their own tastes and preferences, with adults acting as guides on the side rather than gatekeepers.

Reading is not a race to a novel. More text and more pages do not automatically mean better reading. What matters is engagement, meaning and pleasure.

Classroom book corners, personal selections and libraries should reflect this diversity, giving children opportunities to explore different kinds of texts and discover what appeals to them. When children feel their choices are respected, they are far more likely to choose to read.

5. Know the value of different types of reading

Illustrated and graphic texts are not stepping stones to 'real' reading; they are highly sophisticated, multimodal forms of literacy. Picturebooks allow children to experience complete narratives in short form, exploring character, pacing, plot and emotional depth. They also support children's understanding of how stories work, feeding directly into their own writing.

Comics and graphic novels can be fast-paced, exciting and humorous, requiring readers to integrate visual and textual information in complex ways. Humorous books, when done well, are powerful motivators. Good humour invites readers to laugh alongside characters, not at them.

Information texts can be deeply satisfying for children interested in the world around them, and for some readers they offer more engagement than fiction. Poetry, too, is often overlooked, despite its ability to captivate, challenge and resonate emotionally. Traditional tales introduce children to the rhythms and patterns of storytelling and often offer space for reflection on behaviour and values.

Novels provide sustained immersion, allowing readers to build deeper understanding over time. Audio and digital texts also have a role, particularly when linked to print versions, reinforcing that these formats are part of a broader reading experience. Quality matters across all formats, and suitability should always be considered.

6. Ensuring reading doesn't feel squeezed in or pressured

Time is one of the biggest challenges. Digital advances promised to give us more of it, yet email, smartphones and messaging apps have made it harder for adults to switch off from work. Economic pressures mean many parents are working longer or multiple jobs, reducing time for shared leisure, including reading.

In schools, an overstuffed curriculum leaves little room for sustained reading aloud, even in the early years. If reading is constantly squeezed into the margins, it risks feeling like an optional extra rather than something that matters. Protecting time for reading together sends a powerful message about its value.

7. Understanding the difference between practising reading and purposeful, pleasurable reading

A recent reading report from **HarperCollins** and **Farshore** showed that many parents view reading primarily as a subject to be learned, rather than a pleasurable activity. Children spend significant time at school practising the mechanics of reading, including phonics, so reading at home should focus mainly on real books and meaningful experiences.

This includes environmental print, non-fiction linked to interests, poetry and stories. Scheme or decodable books sent home are for practice and should be approached without panic or pressure. Adults should praise effort, offer help when needed and talk about meaning, characters and ideas, keeping the experience conversational rather than instructional.

If reading becomes stressful, it is better to pause and return later. A child who feels anxious about reading is unlikely to choose it voluntarily.



8. Browsing and choosing

Choosing what to read can itself feel overwhelming, with thousands of new children's books published each year. Children benefit from seeing how experienced readers choose: considering mood, interests, favourite authors, recommendations, covers, blurbs and first pages.

It is equally important to model putting a book down when it isn't enjoyable. This is something confident readers do all the time, and it reinforces that reading is about pleasure, not endurance.

Knowing where to go for recommendations helps. Librarians, independent booksellers, specialist magazines, charities and award lists offer thoughtful guidance, often more reliable than commercially driven charts.

9. Sharing tastes and preferences, creating a community of readers

Talking about reading matters. This does not mean formal comprehension questions or follow-up tasks, but genuine conversations about likes, dislikes, questions and connections. Discussing who else might enjoy a book helps children understand that readers have different tastes and that reading is a shared cultural activity.

Keeping an informal log of books read can support future choices without turning reading into a monitored task. Book clubs, whether at school, in libraries or informally, add a social dimension that many children find motivating and enjoyable.

10. Engaging with creators

Children's authors, poets and illustrators are more visible and accessible than ever, and they can be powerful sources of inspiration. Festivals, bookshop events and school visits allow children to connect texts with the people who create them.

Online resources also offer opportunities to hear authors read aloud, watch illustrators draw, or listen to poets perform. Exploring these together and linking creators back to their books helps children see reading as a living, human activity, rooted in creativity and connection.

Encouraging reading for pleasure is not about quick fixes. It is about creating conditions in which reading can flourish: time, access, choice, conversation and joy. When these are in place, reading becomes not just something children can do, but something they want to do.



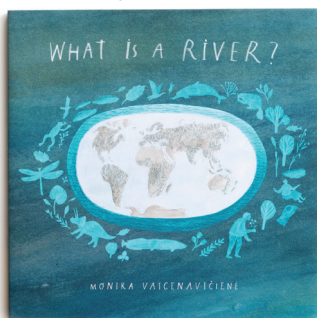
Charlotte Hacking is the Teacher Engagement Lead at the **Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy** at **UCL** and the Research and Curriculum Lead and Teacher at **Herne Hill School**. She is also a children's poetry editor on titles including **The First Year** and **The Final Year** by Matt Goodfellow and **The Poetry World of John Agard**.

What is a River?

In their latest article on illustration in information books, **Ruth Thomson** and **Pam Dix** reflect on the river as metaphor

Rivers are a feature of mainstream geographical studies, though books about rivers sometimes take a more reflective approach, using the river to explore connections in the natural world, human progress, even as a metaphor for life. Most of the books considered here extend beyond the geography to explore some of these issues. The concept of the river has often been linked to metaphors of journey, of life experiences, the flow of the river as a linking thread. These writer / illustrators have produced lyrical, richly illustrated works meditating on these themes and each book plays into a rich vein of imagination and creativity and is often aesthetically beautiful.

What is a River? Monika Vaičėnavičienė New York: Enchanted Lion, 2021 (first published in Swedish as *Vad är en Flod?* Bromma, Sweden: Opal, 2019)



This is a book that completely embodies this approach by the talented Lithuanian writer / Illustrator Monika Vaičėnavičienė.

What is a River? was inspired by references gathered from various documentary sources and personal memories of growing up close to a river. Its starting point is a grandmother answering the child's question 'Grandma, what is a river?' She answers by talking about threads and connections: the river as a source of water, as a source of energy and life, as a natural habitat, place of meetings and journeys.



The river flows through the pages, here with multiple activities to spot in the detailed images. The text is hand lettered and flows around the illustrations. Effortlessly diverse, the book looks at different rivers around the world and their histories, at the relationship between people and nature. It is both philosophical and environmental, a mixture of fact and poetic stories. In Vaičėnavičienė's words, 'Rivers have many powers: they carry sediments and sentiments, revive lands and minds, connect places and times. They are sources of life and of conflict; paths of stories travelling the Earth. Their flow continually reminds us – we all live downstream, or upstream, from someone, we are all neighbours.'



The banks of the sacred river crowded for the Kumbh Mela, the world's largest religious festival. The pencil drawings of the background buildings show the Indian context and the sense of large numbers of people is created by detailed colourful images in the foreground shading to multiple black and white outlines of people in the background.

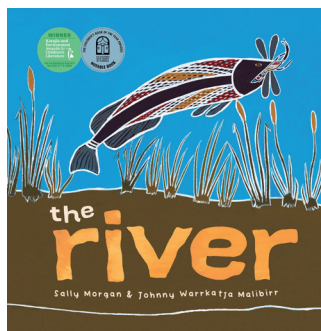
For her illustrations, Vaičėnavičienė uses pencils, watercolour, gouache, drawing firstly on paper and then refining her work digitally. Details of her working process and her commentary on the link between writing and illustration can be seen in this [interview](#) in which she shares preliminary ideas and the various stages of her work.

Panorama du Fleuve, Marie Colmont, illustrated by Alexandra Exter. Paris: Flammarion, 1937

Following a river from source to sea indicating natural and human impact on the landscape is a popular topic and was the subject of several Soviet books of 1930s. A spectacular example was published in Paris by the Russian exile, Alexandra Exter. **Panorama du Fleuve**, a panoramic approach, is one of a series of three, including Mountains and Coast. Visual wordless panels open to make a frieze, almost six feet in length with the text on the reverse. Exter became one of the significant illustrators at the publisher Pere Castor, her illustration work influenced by her work in the theatre.



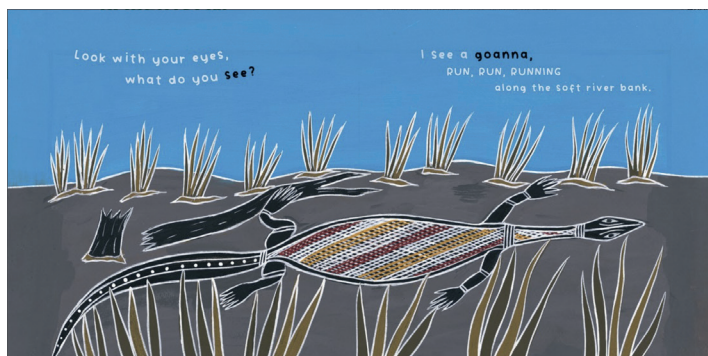
A dramatic view of the source of the river, with the blackness of the rocks contrasting with the lighter colour palette as the river moves through a more pastoral landscape.

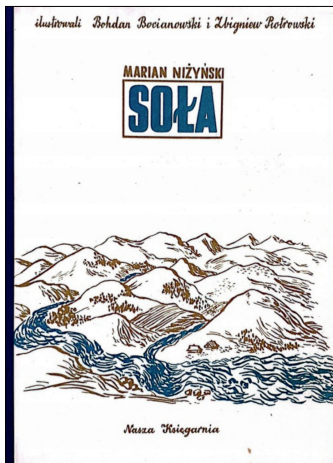


The River, Sally Morgan illustrated by Johnny Warrkātja Malbirr. Broome, Western Australia: Magabala Books, 2021

Magabala Books is Australia's only independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander publishing house. Their mission is dedicated to acknowledging and valuing tradition and their 'unbroken connection to traditional lands, water and cultures'. This book for young readers is about the interaction between the river, the animals and the humans

who are part of its ecology, and encourages the reader to use all their senses to be fully engaged. The illustrator is from the Ganalbingu clan, known for his paintings of their songlines. Here an intense blue background highlights the images in the traditional earth colours of browns and reds, with changing perspectives of the river in each image.

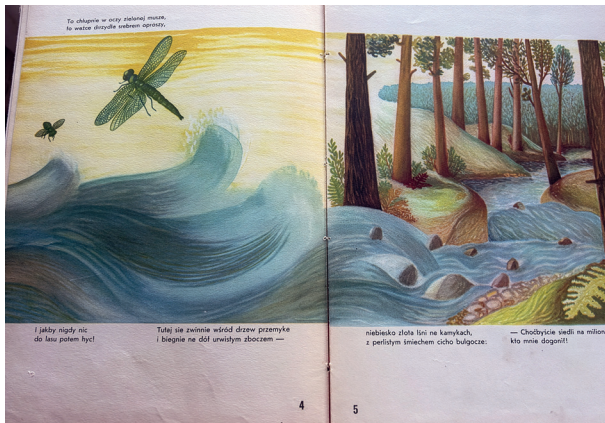




Sola, Marian Niżyński, illustrated by Bohdan Bocianowski and Zbigniew Piotrowski. Warsaw: Nasza Księgarnia, 1952

The river as a source of energy is interestingly explored in a number of illustrated books from 1950s Poland. This example is illustrated by two famous Polish illustrators. Bocianowski was a graphic designer and the artistic director of this publishing house, for which Piotrowski also worked.

The book focuses on the idea of showing progress and improvement to life by harnessing the power of rivers to create electricity. The language is lyrical, with the pace of the book developed through a variety of illustrative styles and techniques

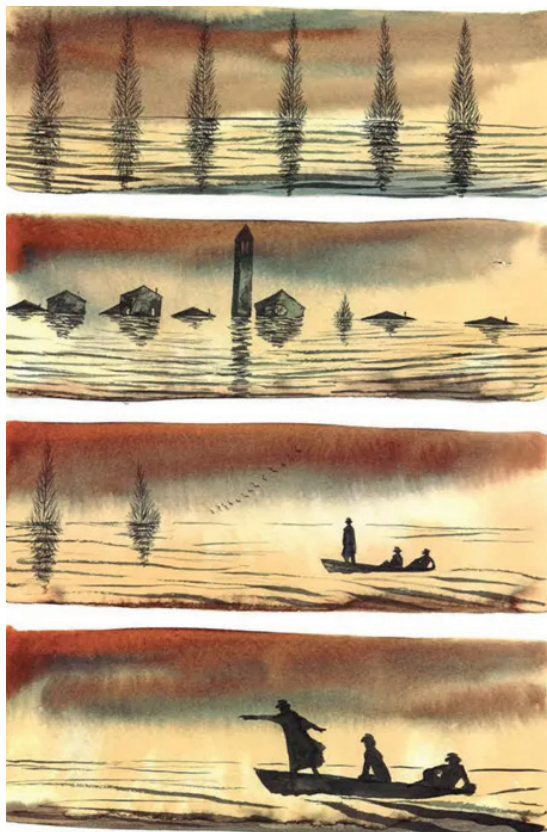


An idyllic pastoral scene in colour shows the source of the river. This is followed by a dramatic black and white image of the devastation caused by flooding



The River, Alessandro Sanna, trans. by Michael Reynolds. New York: Enchanted Lion, 2014 (Italian edition **Fiume Lento: un viaggio lungo il Po** Milan: Mondadori, 2019)

Sanna's study of the River Po takes a very different position. Sanna, the first children's laureate in Italy, lives on the banks of the Po and observes the impact of the seasons on life along the river, telling a complex detailed story through stunning illustrations. This a largely wordless book so each illustration requires close study. It becomes a meditation on life as the flow of the river and the seasons run through its pages.



These dramatic scenes of flooding show the impact on human life. The skies in each image, indeed throughout the book, are vividly realised.



A soviet realist style image of the power and might of construction, using perspective to emphasise the immensity of the achievement, modern technology

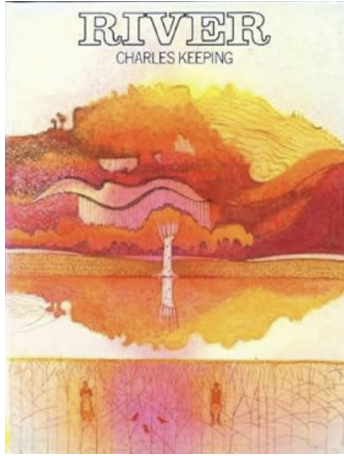


Black and white photographic images show examples of electricity in use. This river here is controlled by human power, a celebration of the achievements of soviet-era Poland.



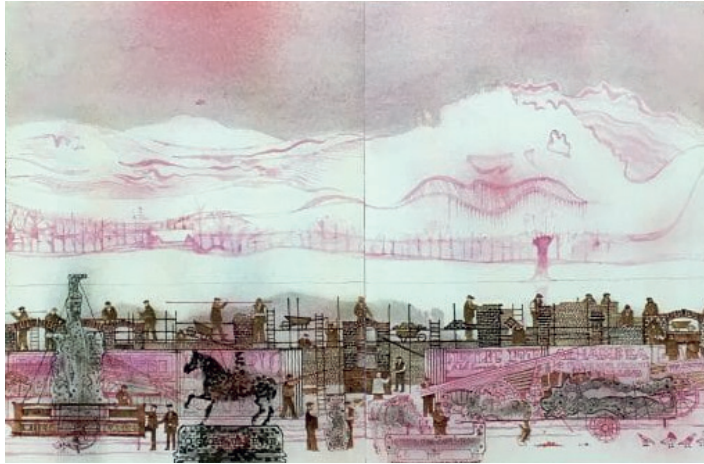
The colour palette changes with the seasons becoming increasingly vibrant as the harsh summer sun approaches.

This is visual storytelling of great sophistication. Illustrations vary from whole page spreads to panels of varying sizes, showing pace and emphasis. Nature, seasons, the river have power over the human environment.



River, Charles Keeping, Oxford: OUP, 1978

Keeping, in this wordless book, poses questions about the circle of life, about progress and change and decay, with the river as a backdrop. Each image is painted from the same position, the viewer is looking across the river to the mountains beyond, sometimes visible, sometimes blocked by ever taller buildings. Change over time is shown as farmland is replaced by a series of buildings, constructed and destroyed, with context clues about time shown through people and clever use of text in the images, as adverts, posters, graffiti. The question for the reader is whether progress is a good thing.



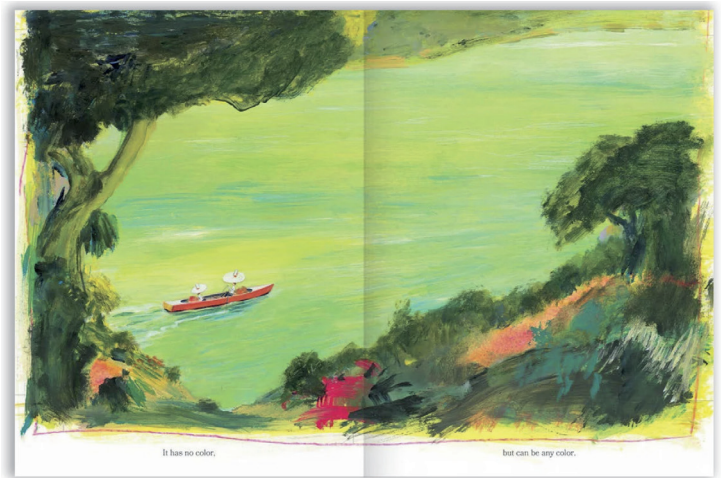
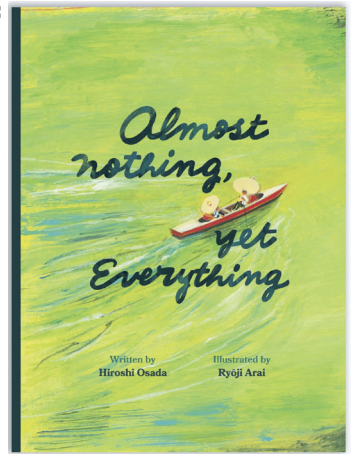
A River, Marc Martin. Melbourne: Penguin, 2015

Marc Martin is an Australian writer/illustrator whose illustrations are notable for his use of intense deep colour and texture, as can be seen on this embossed cover. **A River** recreates a young girl's imaginary dream journey following a river which she can see from her bedroom window. She travels through a variety of landscapes, finally returning to the city as night falls. The dreamlike quality of her journey is shown in vividly imagined illustrations, which have both real and imaginary features.

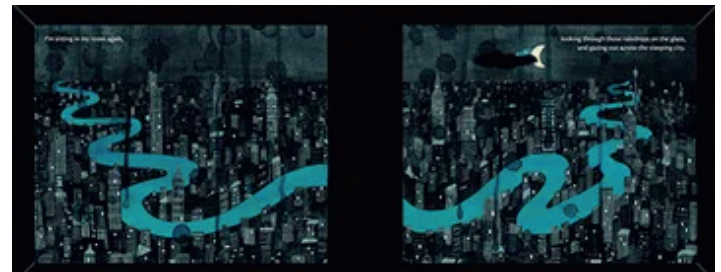
Pam Dix worked in London in the school library sector and as a university lecturer in children's literature. She is chair of **IBBY UK** since 2014, the chair of the **Akill Trust**, a small charity that has been working in Kenya since 2008 and is a trustee for **Book Aid International**.

Almost Nothing, Yet Everything: a Book about Water, Hiroshi Osada, illustrated by Ryōji Arai, translated by David Boyd. New York: Enchanted Lion, 2021 (original Japanese ed. **Mizu no Ehon** Tokyo: Kodansha Ltd, 2019)

The highly regarded Japanese illustrator, Arai, has illustrated two of Osada's lyrical poems, both meditations on the natural world, one on water, one on light. Here, a journey along a river taken by a man and a boy, presumably father and son, provides the framework for an exploration of water and rivers. It is, at the same time, like a quiet meditation on life and love, explored very much from a child's viewpoint. Each beautiful watercolour illustration is presented as if in a notebook, with a hand-drawn red line around the illustration as if to frame a section, giving a sense of looking at work in progress, a book in preparation.



It has no colour ... but can be any colour



Many of these books, and interestingly a number are wordless, require the reader to think about the images, make their own interpretations, set their own questions, to fully engage with the concepts and ideas being explored.

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

One Year On Celebrating the First Year of the GLL Literary Foundation

It's a year since **GLL** launched the **GLL Literary Foundation** to support early career children's authors, inspire children to engage in reading and to champion public libraries. **Rebecca Gediking** celebrates its achievements, and looks forward to year two of this effective initiative.



During our first year, **GLL Literary Foundation** supported 20 children's authors to deliver over 60 events in Bromley, Greenwich, Wandsworth, Dudley and Lincolnshire, engaging more than 3,000 children and over 500 adults in reading.

What the Foundation offered authors

Authors in areas where GLL manage public libraries (Bromley, Greenwich, Wandsworth, Dudley and Lincolnshire) received a £750 bursary, alongside tailored, in kind support valued at up to £4,000. Each author was paired with a librarian Literary Foundation champion who provided mentoring and guidance throughout the year, helped shape sessions, and supported introductions to schools, booksellers, festivals and local partners. Authors also received training sessions delivered by our Start Up Business teams on managing finance, marketing and essential business skills.

We worked closely with publishers, literary agencies and industry partners to further develop the programme across the year and provide a wide range of opportunities. Literary Foundation authors performed at festivals, spoke at conferences, attended publisher events and award evenings.

A particularly special moment came at the **Carnegie Awards**, where Wandsworth Foundation author Nathanael Lessore won the Carnegie Shadowers' Choice Award Medal for **King of Nothing**. It was a proud day for Nathanael and for the Foundation, and it felt especially fitting that the award reflects the voices of children and young people.

We celebrated publication milestones including the release of two new titles from GLL Literary Foundation authors. We were delighted to celebrate Bethany Walker's **Medusa's Bad Hair Day** and Alom Shaha's **About Time**.

What authors and champions told us

In our end-of-year author questionnaire, 100% of authors said they felt well prepared and supported to deliver events, all authors had grown in confidence in managing the practical business elements of their work and authors shared that they had seen an increase in book sales. Literary Foundation authors also reported being given more opportunities to work due to promotion and contacts made through the **GLL Literary Foundation**.

A real highlight of the Foundation for the authors was meeting other authors, sharing stories and forming a network of support. One author reflected on the value of the opportunities created through the Foundation, sharing: '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.'

Literary Foundation Champions have also reflected on their experiences with 100% of them responding that they enjoyed working with authors and communities to bring stories and new partnerships to life. Libraries have seen an increase in book borrowing and one of our **Literary Foundation** Champions said that after an event a family immediately joined the library and the children proudly ran back to show the author their new library cards. Miriam Storey, **Greenwich Literary Foundation** Champion, said: 'A network of support has grown across all the **GLL** library partnerships both for the authors and the **GLL Literary** Champions... Feedback and discussion is encouraged... and this enriches the experience as well as fuelling future ideas.'

The feedback from schools who we engaged with to deliver events has been hugely positive. After a live session with Bromley author Adeola Sokunbi, a parent/helper at **Harris Primary Academy Kent House** said: 'The children were inspired by Adeola and loved her stories. Adeola created a fun and attention-grabbing session, her enthusiasm was infectious.' Another teacher in Lincolnshire highlighted the power of local connection, sharing: 'The children loved that Mary Auld knew Spalding and they could talk about being from the same place!' These comments reflect exactly what we hoped the programme would achieve, where meeting an author becomes a moment of connection that makes books feel exciting, relevant and personal.

Looking ahead to year two

As we move into year two, we have established a new offer to provide continued support and opportunities for all 20 authors from our first cohort and we have opened applications for new authors to join us in 2026 the **National Year of Reading**. Applications for the 2026 author placements opened in November 2025 and are now closed.

We have big plans for year two and have established new partnerships to support authors, inspire children to read and to champion public libraries. We're excited to keep building on everything we've learned in our first year and we can't wait to keep you updated on our journey throughout the **National Year of Reading**.

If you would like to collaborate with us and be part of our network, please email us at: Literary.Foundation@GLL.org
More information is available [here](#).



Rebecca Gediking is Head of Libraries – **GLL**,
Head of **GLL Literary Foundation**

Beyond the Secret Garden

Poems by Black Poets

In this issue's **Beyond the Secret Garden** column, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** are inspired by a new poetry anthology.

In September 2025, Nosy Crow published **This is Not a Small Voice**, a full colour 128 page hardback anthology, subtitled **Poems by Black Poets**, and selected by Traci Todd with warm, lively illustrations by Jade Orlando.

Poetry anthologies do useful work: they can introduce readers to new poets; bring together several poets in one place; and highlight both the similarities and differences between poets with something in common (whether that be something geographical or cultural or similar poetic themes or styles). Traci Todd begins her introduction by talking about the collection of poetry, **Black Voices**, that inspired her as a child. The collection focused on African American poets, as well as some Caribbean poets (such as Claude McKay) who took part in the Harlem Renaissance. In order to understand the achievements of **This is Not a Small Voice**, it is useful to look back at other anthologies published in Britain and see what has—and hasn't—changed.

Una Marson, the Jamaican-born poet, playwright, and wartime broadcaster for the BBC grew up on British literature, but had rarely been given any Caribbean poets to read in school. As part of her Jamaican publishing venture, Pioneer Press, she published **Anansi Stories and Dialect Verse** (1950). Crucially, this included poems in patois by poets including Louise Bennett. Jamaican patois had not previously been included in serious educational collections of poetry, as it had long been seen as a 'broken' form of English by the establishment. It would be some time before a British collection of poetry for young people included patois poetry. Anne Walmsley, a white British editor for Faber & Faber and Longman who died in July, worked tirelessly to bring the voices and art of Caribbean and Caribbean-heritage writers to readers. She published **The Sun's Eye** (Longman) in 1968, an anthology of poetry and short stories.

However, her first attempts to include patois poetry failed; she writes in her introduction to the new edition (1989), 'When I first submitted **The Sun's Eye** for publication in 1962, it was rejected because some of the writing was in 'dialect'. By the time of publication in 1968, dialogue in 'dialect' was permitted, but no work written entirely in what was still considered a 'debased language form'. Louise Bennett's poems would have to wait for the 1989 edition. Heinemann's **Facing the Sea** (1986), also edited by Walmsley with Nick Caistor, not only included patois poems like Valerie Bloom's 'Trench Town Shock', but also British-themed patois poems, such as Linton Kwesi Johnson's 'Sonny's Lettah'.

Walmsley's anthologies were aimed at secondary school and above, and were focused on an educational market, but by the late 1980s, mainstream publishers were producing anthologies for younger readers as well. Blackie first produced **Black Poetry**, edited by Grace Nichols, in 1988; in 1990, Puffin republished it as **Poetry Jump-Up: A collection of Black Poetry**. Nichols anticipated the potential criticism of such an anthology, writing, 'Some would argue that poetry has no colour and that one wouldn't dream of putting together an anthology of 'white poetry'. One might well say as a parallel to this, that the fact that one wouldn't need to describe an anthology of poems by men as 'men's poetry' as opposed to 'women's poetry' points to certain real issues of omission and neglect by the literary establishment and to the whole question of power.' (**Poetry Jump-Up**, p.7)

Nichols' collection uses a definition of 'Black poetry' that was common in the 1970s and 1980s, which is to say one that included Asian and British Asian poets as well as Black British, African, and African Caribbean poets. 'Black' used in this sense is less likely to make sense to readers today; though its use is continued in British Trade Unions. Nichols also included poetry by young people, including her own children and the daughter of Jessica and Eric Huntley, Accabre Huntley, who had published two collections of poetry by the time she was 16 with her parents' publishing house. The anthology is themed around common poetry anthology themes for children, including nature, animals, music and magic. By using these universal themes, Nichols reaches out to all poetry readers but also subtly suggests to other anthologists that these poets should not be left out of thematic collections just because they are 'Black'.

Nichols, along with John Agard, also published poetry anthologies for even younger readers, such as **A Caribbean Dozen** (Walker, 1994), illustrated by Cathie Felstead. The poems included in this

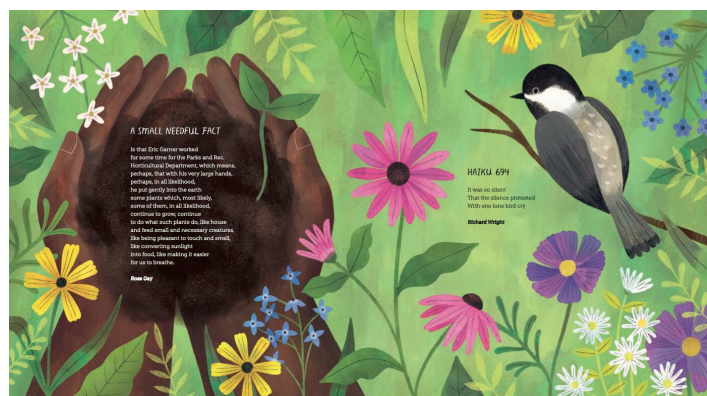
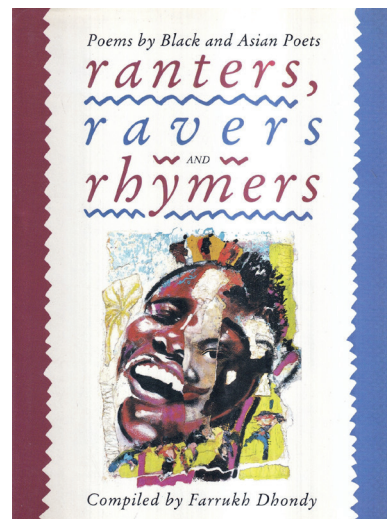
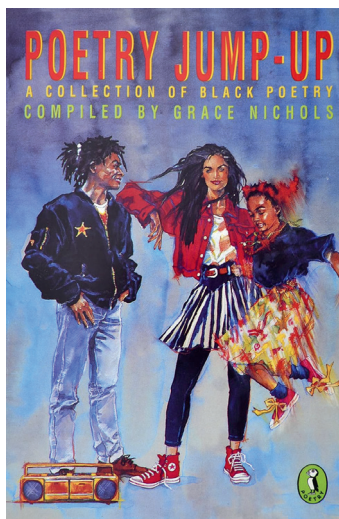
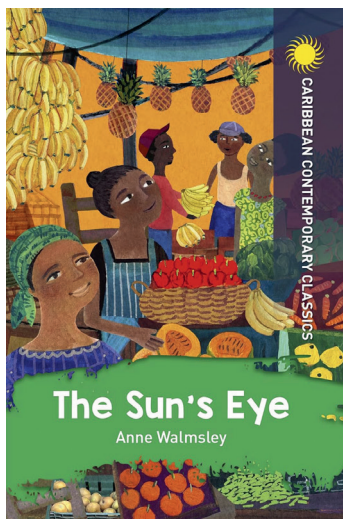


Illustration from **This is Not a Small Voice**



anthology are all from Caribbean-born poets, although most of them lived or had lived in the UK, US, or Canada by the time of publication. Agard and Nichols note that 'their formative meeting with the magic of the word happened under tropical skies where fireflies were shooting stars and English nursery rhymes and fairytales mingled with the tricky doings of Anancy spiderman' (p. 11). Most of the poets included are Black, but David Campbell has Portuguese and Arawak ancestry. Anthologies like these are a reminder that terms like 'Black' and 'Caribbean' are not simply and universally defined as belonging to one community.

Ranters, Ravers and Rhymers (1990, William Collins) compiled by Farrukh Dhondy, is subtitled **Poems by Black and Asian Poets**. Poems are organized under four sections: 'The Caribbean, India, Africa, and Black Britain'. In his introduction Dhondy explains that he has selected only poets who write in English and acknowledges that the poets themselves may not agree with his description of them as 'black British'. His justification is that some of their work deals with the experiences of being in Britain; identities are revealed to be dynamic, overlapping and contested rather than static and essential. The title of **This is Not a Small Voice** comes from a Sonia Sanchez poem: 'This is not a small voice /you hear this is a large / voice coming out of these cities.'

The collection opens and closes with poems by Langston Hughes. 'The Dream Keeper' first published in 1925, begins 'Bring me all of your dreams / You dreamers./ The closing poem ends with, 'Beautiful, also / are the souls of my people.'

Between these invitations and affirmations are poems which though not categorised, appear to be loosely ordered thematically. In 'In Praise of Okra', January Gill O'Neil combines pop reference - 'Your stringy, slipper texture/ Reminds them of the creature /From the movie Aliens' - with the history of Black resilience and creativity, 'So I write this poem/ In praise of okra/ & the cooks who understood/ How to make something out of nothing...'. Black history - and the withholding of it - emerges as a theme. Valerie Bloom's 'Ab Was

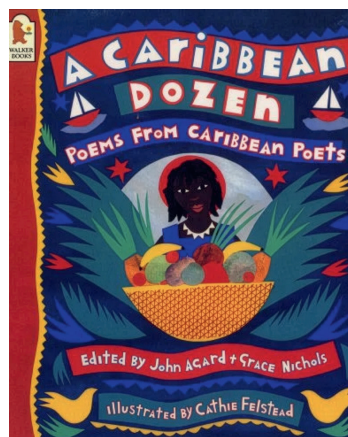
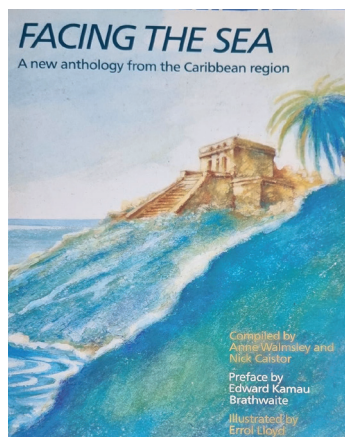
Readin' A Book', is one that speaks about power, knowledge and ignorance; 'Ah was readin' a book about England / An' a stop an' wonder for a minute / If a English girl have a book 'bout Jamaica / An' if a little girl like me was in it.'

There are also threads of joy in collective identity and solidarity, what Mari Evans in 'Who Can Be Born Black' terms 'our comingtogether /in a comingtogetherness', celebrated also in Ja A. Jahannes' poem, 'Being Black in my neighbourhood /Is a splendid thing/ Like bright sunshine/ And new clothes in Spring'.

The poems span decades. An extract from 'Lift Every Voice and Sing' by James Weldon Johnson, first performed in 1900 and adopted by the NAACP in 1919, is one of the oldest included. The most recent poem, 'Good Trouble', by Nikki Grimes ends with a timely question; 'Tomorrow, I'm starting / an after school banned-book club. / You want to come?'

While the collection includes South African poet Richard Rive and Nigerian poet Ijeoma Umebinyuo the majority of the poems are from US poets, with UK poets being the next most featured. An afterword section entitled **Power and Protest** discusses only the US and UK with Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America not mentioned despite the rich history of struggles against colonialism, neo-colonialism and Apartheid, for example. This may well be due to commercial pressures - but for a book that is not explicitly framed around poetry from particular nations, it has the effect of not quite communicating as broad a vision of global Blackness as it might. This book is a superb achievement; there is plenty more poetry for future Black anthologies.

This is Not a Small Voice: Poems by Black Poets, selected by Traci Todd and illustrated by Jade Orlando, is published by Nosy Crow, 978-1805132646, £20.00 hbk.



Dr Darren Chetty is a writer and a lecturer at UCL with research interests in education, philosophy, racism, children's literature and hip-hop culture. He is a contributor to **The Good Immigrant**, edited by Nikeshe Shukla, and has since published five books as co-author and co-editor. He tweets at @rapclassroom.



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

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

Bring poetry into the heart of your school this National Year of Reading

by Fiona Kirk

POETRY BY
HEART

Until recently I was the school librarian of an academy in east London, and I have been involved with **Poetry by Heart**, the national poetry speaking competition, from its inception in the academic year 2012/13. The competition was then open to students aged 14 to 18 years. They had to choose two poems to learn, one published before 1914 and another published post 1914, what is now known as the Classic competition. In 2018 the age range for students opened up to include those aged 7 to 13 years old and the Freestyle option of reciting one poem became available.

Running a **Poetry by Heart** competition is such a rewarding project to be involved in if you are passionate about the power of the spoken word and share a love of poetry. **Poetry by Heart** has been a highlight in my calendar and it has always been a joy observing students grow in confidence as they master their chosen poems. Taking part and learning a poem or two has always had a tremendous impact on the students, who often surprise themselves with their achievement. Coaching students who take part has always been a rewarding experience.

I remember attending a training event in 2013 at the National Portrait Gallery in London at which some of the finalists performed. Kaiti, the first ever champion, recited *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* using the original text in the Northwest Midland dialect of Middle English. I had never heard the like before, such an impressive and unforgettable performance: a very well-deserved winner. [You can listen to it still.](#)

In the first three years of the competition local county heats were held in person. I remember a fantastic event held at Clapham Library in 2013 with Sir Andrew Motion as one of the judges. In 2014 the heat was held in the Soho Theatre, London – another exciting trip into town. Our school contestant Mariam, a year 13 student, performed *Verses on the Burning of our House* by Anne Bradstreet

and *The Fish* by Elizabeth Bishop, both very long poems. Mariam was commended for her recitations and her choices were said to be amongst the most ambitious of all the contestants. Then in 2015 there was a trip to Romford Library for the East London heat. Jay gave a stunning performance of Robert Browning's *Porphyria's Lover*, a poem he had chosen from the timeline. His passionate heartfelt performance of *The Show* by Wilfred Owen also greatly impressed the judges. It was a fabulous evening of poetry.



In 2014 as part of the centenary of the start of the First World War, **Poetry by Heart** encouraged schools to run a competition to write a 'Letter to the Unknown Soldier.' This was a great opportunity for me to collaborate with the history department: letters could be from the point of view of the soldier, a relative or close friend or written from the point of view of someone living in 2014 to the soldier. The judging criteria included historical knowledge, imagination, creativity and empathy.

I have run **Poetry by Heart** in a number of ways over the years with participation ranging from three to twenty students. The competition was always promoted in assemblies and by posters around school. The English department were also asked to encourage and suggest possible contestants. Often though I found the best way to find contestants was to approach them directly, so students I already knew as regulars in the library. Another successful tactic I used once was to target drama club students with the assistance of the drama teacher. In most years, we held an in-house competition to determine who would be put forward for the nationals. I have a vivid memory of a student giving a faultless performance of *The Listeners* (Walter de la Mare) and *The Stretcher Bearer* (Thomas Crawford) to the respect and admiration of a group of completely dumbfounded Year 9 boys. Their reaction was priceless.

Students either chose poems themselves from the website timeline or from a collection of poems including *Spellbound* (Emily Brontë), *The Witch* (Mary Elizabeth Coleridge) and *Checking Out Me History* (John Agard) that I pre-selected to inspire them as some students find the timeline daunting.

In 2016-17 there was a switch to submitting entries by uploading films of student recitations rather than holding in-person local heats. This change brought a few challenges but I was always lucky in having help from the school media and marketing team.



Kaiti, 2013 Poetry By Heart Champion



Mohammed performing at Shakespeare's Globe

In 2021 a student from school made it through to the KS4 Classic national final at The Globe. Mohammed gave a tremendous performance of *The Destruction of Sennacherib* (George Gordon Byron). His other entry had been a heartfelt performance of *The Shout* (Simon Armitage).

The following year Mohammed again made it to the finals. This time he performed *Rouen* by May Wedderburn Cannan live on stage after sitting a **GCSE** Chemistry paper in the morning! His performance was outstanding, full of passion and verve. Afterwards he described the occasion as being 'really empowering, fun and a cathartic experience.' The judges said 'it was a great pleasure to hear a poem that is rarely chosen' and one 'that sets you many memorisation challenges.' His second poem that year was *Sing me a song of a lad that is gone* (Robert Louis Stevenson). His ability to memorise long poems word perfectly never ceased to amaze me.

The finals are held at The Globe and are such an exciting event, with a real buzz in the air. All the performers, both students and staff, are wonderful. One year when I volunteered as a prompter I was on stage and that was quite nerve-racking enough for me.

Every entrant submitted to the national competition now receives a certificate with a grade and personalised feedback from the judges which is so encouraging for the students. The **Poetry By Heart** website and handbook are full of inspiring ideas and contain all the information you require to run a successful school competition.

The year 2024-25 has been my last but I feel that I ended on a high with three entries to the competition. Two were entered for the Freestyle KS3 earning a Commended and a Highly Commended. Reiley in Year 11 entered the Classic KS4 category winning Best in County: East London for his recitations of *Ozymandias* (Percy Bysshe Shelley) and *The Soldier* (Rupert Brooke) which the judges praised for his 'great clarity and emotion.'

I am so proud of all the students who took part in **Poetry by Heart** since 2012/13. It has been such an enjoyable experience. I cannot recommend being involved highly enough.



The audience at a Poetry By Heart Grand Finale



Fiona Kirk now works at
The Excelsior Academy, Hackney.

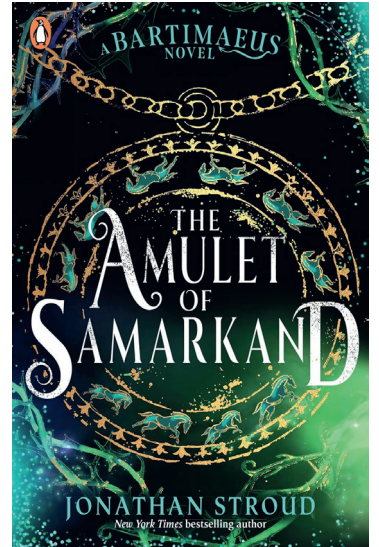
I wish I'd written...



Shadow Thieves by Peter Burns is out now, published by Farshore, 9780008667818, £7.99 pbk.

Peter Burns chooses a book that shaped not just his writing but his career.

There are so many books that I wish I'd written – but the books I wish I'd written most are the *Bartimaeus* trilogy by Jonathan Stroud. Back in 2003, I was in my final year of university and I vividly remember browsing in Waterstone's on George Street in Edinburgh and stumbling across a gorgeous boxed edition of **The Amulet of Samarkand**. This was a seminal moment for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the book was just incredible – I loved the dual narrative of the acerbic, wise, hilarious and sceptical djinn, Bartimaeus, and the earnest yet ambitious and brilliant Nathaniel/John Mandrake, all set within an alternative London ruled by an all-powerful class of magicians. The plotting was immaculate (as Stroud would prove across all three books in the trilogy), the characters exceptionally realised, the writing mesmeric. I'd been harbouring an ambition to be a middle-grade author since I was a child, and this just added more fuel to the fire. The other huge influence came from Stroud's biography on the back flap, which said that he'd been an editor of children's books. I was about to graduate with a degree in English and had no idea what to do next (other than to keep writing). Thanks to this spark of inspiration, I studied for a postgraduate degree in publishing and then embarked on what has now been a twenty-year career as an editor. Thanks to the wonderful people at Farshore taking a punt on **Shadow Thieves**, I have taken the final Stroud-inspired step from editor to middle-grade author.



The Amulet of Samarkand by Jonathan Stroud is published by Corgi Children's, 9780552562799, £8.99 pbk.

Good Reads

This issue's Good Reads were chosen by young people at **Mangotsfield C of E Primary School, Bristol**, the **Peter Usborne Primary School Library of the Year 2025**, awarded by the School Library Association. We thank Verity Robinson, school librarian, for her help.

The Travelling School Mysteries

Jo Clarke, illus Becka Moor, Firefly Press, £7.99 pbk

I really enjoyed this extraordinary series because my favourite type of book is mystery and I like how in each book you get to learn about different things in the countries around the world. If you want a good mystery book then I recommend this amazing fiction text. *Ivy, Year 5*

Squirrel and Duck: Mission Improbable

Tom Percival, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1526665638, £7.99 pbk

Squirrel and Duck: Mission Improbable is a very good book for anyone who enjoys a good laugh! It tells the story of a squirrel and duck who go on an adventure to find a new home. The story teaches you about friendship and never giving up. My favourite character is Squirrel because he is funny and clever. I recommend this book because it is exciting, entertaining and makes you laugh all the way through. *Ezra, Year 5*.

How to Be Me

Cath Howe, Nosy Crow, 978-1788005975, £6.99 pbk

A perfectly pitched and moving story about family, friendship and having the confidence to be yourself. **How to Be Me** follows the story of young, lonely Lucas who lives with his dad and his girlfriend. Nothing seems to make him happy since his mum died and he and his dad don't really understand each other anymore. Because Lucas is bored in the summer, his dad decided to sign him up for this



Ivy



Ezra



Arianna



Ambila



Raniyah

drama club that Lucas has been dreading. Naturally shy, Lucas hardly talks to anyone during the club. Will Lucas make friends or will he just stay shy forever? Read this amazing book to find out more! *Arianna, Year 5*

Grimwood: Let the Fur Fly

Nadia Shireen, Simon & Schuster, 978-1471199349, £7.99 pbk

Grimwood: Let the Fur Fly is about two foxes named Ted and Nancy who live in Grimwood. Grimwood is a silly, chaotic place where lots of unusual animals live. Their mayor, called Titus, is a kind, old stag and likes everyone being nice to each other. In this book a mean, posh fox named Sebastian Silver wants everyone in Grimwood to flee so he can make it a part of his town, Twinklenuts Forest. Two birds named Sharon and Pamela have a crazy idea which involves them making the world's biggest glitter cannon! This saves the day by setting it off just as Sebastian Silver's helicopter appeared

in front, banishing him, the helicopter, and glitter to a remote corner of the galaxy. I like how Sebastian Silver tries to take over Grimwood but failed, even though he won the Treebonk match. I recommend the book to age 7+. *Ambila, Year 4*

Safiyyah's War

Hiba Noor Khan, Andersen Press, 978-1839133138, £7.99 pbk

As a Muslim girl myself, even if you have a different race, ethnicity or religion, you can still be friends with someone else. That's one of the main things I learnt from this book. The world will be a better place if we're all kind to each other like Safiyyah and her friends. She follows all of our school's BRAVE values: belonging, resilience, aspiration, virtue and empathy. I think this book is also extremely educational as it shows us what it was like for Jews in World War 2 and how Muslims helped them. I rate it 10/10 and recommend it for ages 8 and above. *Raniyah, Year 4*

Applications are now open for the **Secondary School Librarian of the Year Award**, now in its 21st year, and the **Peter Usborne Primary School Library of the Year Award**. Find out more [here](#). The deadline to receive nominations is 9am on 16th February 2026.

REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**.

Gwynneth Bailey is a freelance education and children's book consultant.

Diana Barnes was a librarian for 20 years, mostly as a children's specialist, working in Kent, Herts, Portsmouth and Hampshire, and Lusaka (Zambia) with the British Council.

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

Eleanor Blake is a writer and a school librarian with over a decade's experience of working with young people.

Emily Blake is **Books for Keeps** editorial assistant.

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

Rebecca Butler writes and lectures on children's literature.

Jane Churchill is a children's book consultant.

Fen Coles is Co-Director **Letterbox Library**

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

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

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

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Lucy Staines was a primary school teacher, now retired.

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

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

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

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant

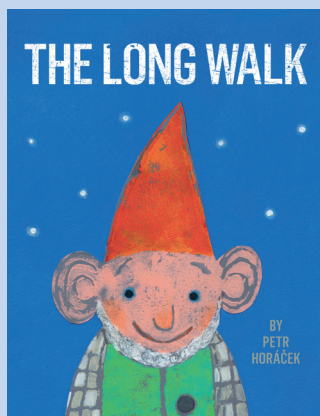
Ed's Choice

The Long Walk

★★★★

Petr Horáček, *Ragged Bears*, 48pp, 9781857144994, £14.99 hbk
Frank, a garden gnome with longer legs than is usual, enjoys hearing the stories told by the birds who visit him. Until, that is, the sparrows tease him stuck in the garden, never going anywhere. Now it is his turn. His long legs take him on a journey round the world through all types of weather, across all landscapes, through cities and countries, day and night. Not everything goes smoothly – Frank carries on, his beard growing longer until at last he finds himself back in his own garden. Now he has stories to tell – and he is a bit shorter.

It is always a pleasure to welcome a new picture book from Petr Horáček, and this one is overdue; originally published in Czech in 2017. As one would expect, Horáček's palette was as vibrant then as it is today. His illustrations spill off each page to enrich the



eye creating a truly immersive experience as we follow Frank on his Long Walk. These colours combine with the illustrator's use of collage techniques which adds exciting textures to the images. The narrative is simple; each experience captured directly in words and pictures. This is a joyous and ultimately satisfying picture book providing a rich visual journey for a very young audience. Definitely one to share. **FH**



Clive Penguin Learns to Fly, Sort of

★★★★★

Hugh Lewis Jones; ill. Ben Sanders; *Little Tiger*, 32pp; 9781838918347, £12.99, hbk

In a previous book we met Clive Penguin, moaning and dissatisfied with his chilly, boring life. In *Clive Penguin Learns to Fly, Sort of*, Clive objects to the sweeping tones of a documentary narrator who sets the scene with the 'wondrous frozen south where majestic birds soar through the sky' (almost impossible to read this without the tones of David Attenborough or Morgan Freeman): Clive calls them 'Nothing special.' Penguins, however, are 'adventurous and up for anything and not at all jealous,' and this pushes Clive to prove his worth and to want to learn to fly.

The influence of Jon Klassen's style and humour is very evident from

the colour palette to the challenge presented to the reader of seeing motives and success/failure. Here Jones and Sanders deliberately leave a lot unsaid, so that the reader notices what's going on at a deep level: an Early Years educator would need to step back to allow the child-reader to spot, for example, Clive's inept landing and to ponder what the seagull is doing among all the penguins.

Clever, well-paced and with a quiet humour, this is a book that deserves reading and rereading. **NS**



Mildred and the Copy Cat

★★★★★

Jono Ganz, Tate Publishing, 32pp, 9781849769785, £12.99

The art world is full of mysteries. In Ganz's mischievous sequel to *Mildred the Gallery Cat*, the biggest mystery of all is: who's behind the most exciting new artworks in town?

Back for another nocturnal adventure, secret artist Mildred returns – brush in paw – to delight and dazzle with her creations. But when a floppy-eared newcomer named Barksy begins taking credit for her work, it's not long before the press, the public, and the galleries are hailing him as the new genius on the scene. The twist? He's not even trying. The injustice stings, and Mildred hatches a plan to unmask the impawster.

Ganz continues to carve out a distinctive author-illustrator identity, blending a knowingly art-literate premise with a striking mixed-media approach. His use of cut paper, layered collage, and digital composition gives each spread a handmade, almost theatrical quality. Nods to the modern art world abound – from exhibition flyers and gallery walls to a dramatic installation of paper cranes that gestures toward large-scale origami works. But what gives the book emotional weight is Mildred's hurt – the sense of invisibility, of being overlooked in favour of louder, flashier voices.

The character work is rich, too. Barksy isn't a villain – just misunderstood. A pivotal moment reveals that while his owner finds his violin-playing dreadful, Mildred sees something beautiful in it. It's a tender twist, suggesting that what one person dismisses might be exactly what another cherishes. Ganz resists neat moralising; instead, he offers a story about recognition, empathy, and the desire to be noticed not for being the best – but for being yourself. The rivalry dissolves not in triumph or defeat, but in playful reconciliation and mutual respect.

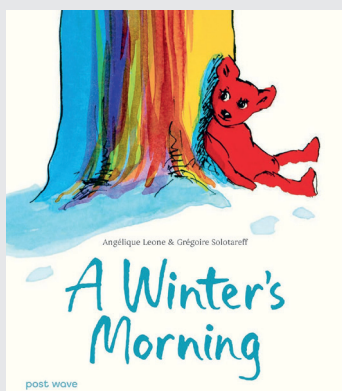
Visually, this is full of treats. From the Warhol-inspired endpapers – a Pop Art-style repeat of Barksy in alternating colours – to the painterly textures and collage-like compositions throughout, each spread buzzes with energy and wit. Children will delight in spotting Mildred's mouse companion throughout (watch that tail on the title page!). Inspired by the real Mildred – Tate Modern's much-loved resident cat – this is a warm, funny, and stylish exploration of authorship, art, and the joy (and pain) of creative visibility. A delight for little artists, big thinkers, and anyone who's ever felt unseen. **MT**

A Winter's Morning

★★★★★

Angélique Leone, ill. Grégoire Solotareff, *Post Wave Children's Books*, 40pp, 9781836270683, £12.99

Sylvester the wolf lives a solitary life in a snow-quiet forest – until one winter morning, a flash of red catches his eye. It's a lost teddy bear, frozen and forgotten beneath the trees. He could leave it... but then, 'for as long as Sylvester can remember, he has



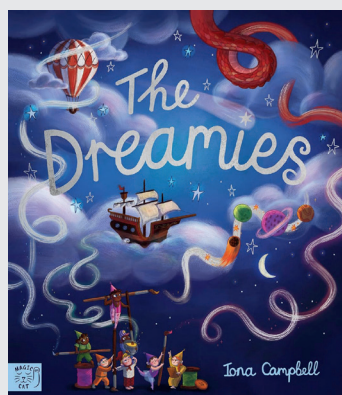
always been alone'. What follows is a gentle, transformative tale of unexpected friendship and emotional healing, told with poetic economy and child-like wisdom.

Leone's storytelling is spare yet affecting, drawing readers into Sylvester's quiet world with just a few choice lines per page - beautifully stark against the negative space that the snowy landscape provides. There's no backstory, no exposition - just a moment, a discovery, and the slow thawing of something that had been long buried. As Sylvester names the bear Poppy, tends to her, and makes her part of his daily rhythms, we feel the weight of his loneliness lifting. A silent bond forms. They play, climb, and rest together. It's tender, never sentimental - and deeply moving.

Solotareff's illustrations carry the emotional arc with painterly grace. Cold blue inks, wide empty landscapes give way to warmer, richer hues as Sylvester's world becomes less empty: the warmth mirrored by flame and leaf in his home. His bold crayon textures and expressive compositions evoke both childlike immediacy and artful restraint. One unforgettable spread shows the pair curled under a patchwork of leaves - an image of quiet intimacy and devotion. Later, when Poppy is rediscovered by the child who lost her long ago, it's Sylvester's grief we feel most. And when the father recognises the wolf from his own childhood - a circular echo of love and loss - the emotional payoff is quietly enormous.

This is a story of letting go and being remembered. Of how love, even fleeting, can change us. The final scene, with Sylvester tucked into bed, reading to a new red bear, lands with emotional precision. He has lost something, yes - but he has also healed.

Delicate, resonant, and visually beautiful, this is a wintry meditation on friendship, memory, and the soft strength of kindness. One to treasure - and return to - on the quietest of nights. Like Leone's tribute to 'the gentlest soul' and Solotareff's dedication 'to all who meet by chance,' this is a book that honours quiet connections - the ones that find us, change us, and stay with us, long after the snow has settled. **MT**



The Dreamies

★★★★★

Iona Campbell, Magic Cat Publishing, 32pp, 978-1915569806, £7.99 pbk

The imagination is celebrated in this luminous picture book, which also provides gentle but practical advice on managing nightmares. The Dreamies, we discover, are jolly little people, childlike in appearance, who live in the hidden space between the walls. Cross-section pages let us peep into their cosy living quarters, decorated with buttons (that's where they all go), and furnished with corks and thimbles. 'With magic paint ... swooshes of daring and splashes of fun', they draw wonderful dreams for a sleeping child, full of exciting adventures and experiences. The only problem is, they sometimes get distracted and while they're not looking, dreams can grow into nightmares. Fortunately, the little Dreamies can help with illustrated tips on how children can use their imaginations to turn those nightmares back into happy dreams.

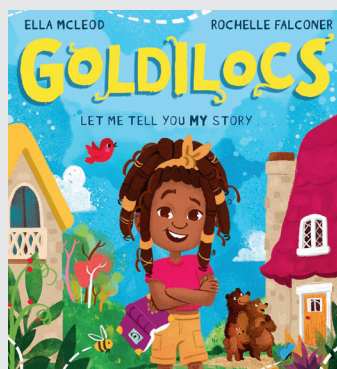
It's a perfect bedtime book, wonderfully child-friendly and reassuring, with lots to help parents help children with nightmares. Sleep-specialist Gemma Coe is an advisor and provides a note for grown-ups at the end. Iona Campbell's illustrations use a rich colour palette and are both robust and dreamy, offering swooshes of daring and splashes of fun on every page. The Dreamies will prove real friends to children. **LS**

Goldilocs

★★★★★

Ella McLeod, ill. Rochelle Falconer, Scholastic, 26pp, 978 0 702 31387-5, £7.99, pbk

Goldilocs lives in Fairytale Land where girls tend to be princesses, witches or evil queens, unfortunately none of these roles really appeal to our young heroine. She decides that of these options being a witch may be the most fun. After finding a cauldron and trying some unsuccessful spell-mixing she decides to make her grandad's cornmeal porridge which immediately summons three bears - this is Fairytale Land after all. Scenes



from the familiar story follow and eventually, with the help of the three bears, Goldilocs experiences an epiphany realising that she can be whoever she wants to be, there is no need to conform to a set of rules.

This is an interesting take on the familiar tale with a dark skinned and dark-haired Goldilocks (or rather Goldilocs) in the title role - her name coming from her style, her beads and her golden smile. Although the rhyming text and empowering message are a little clumsy at times the illustrations are lively, colourful and fun. The inclusion of the recipe for Grandad Cecil's cornmeal porridge at the back of the book is a nice touch. **SMc**



The Dream Kite

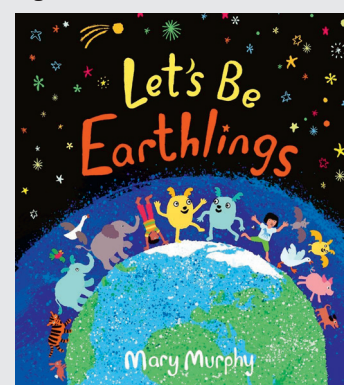
★★★★★

Grace Hallworth, illus, Sophie Bass; Tate Publishing, 32pp; 978184979204, £7.99, pbk

Arty has a dream about flying a bird-kite, and when his friend Tall Boy is too busy to help in the run-up to a festival, Arty's family step in, building a frame kite with bright coloured cloth. While the boy is worried that other kites will outshine his at the festival, a 'warm, strong breeze' picks up the kite, which 'dances to the rhythm of the wind.' There is a subtle play here with the role of tradition and family. It is not overdone, and the boy feels the rhythm of the wind as it takes the kite which Granma says is 'flying high high, like an eagle in the sky.' The kites, all shapes and colours, take over the final pages in a riotous depiction of the community's kite flying.

Reading aloud texts where a version other than standard English is represented has its own challenges. Grace Hallworth knew her task, however, having been a major force in the continuation of Trinidadian storytelling, as well as a librarian, and an author nominated for the Kate

Greenaway medal. Here, the spoken text draws on the author's own Trinidadian language experience - 'Pappy for true? Is my kite to fly?' little Arty asks his father. How to read this aloud opens up a lot of issues that are beyond the scope of a short review, but while this book might require a bit more preparation for many practitioners sharing the story with a group, this shouldn't put anyone off: the value for a child who speaks like this, or whose family talk to one another like this, is incalculable, and all children will relish the lively story and vibrant artwork of a family and friends celebrating kite flying together. **NS**



Let's Be Earthlings

★★★★★

Mary Murphy, Otter Barry Books, 978 1 915659 62 0, £12.99, hbk

'Rhythm, rhyme and wordplay, along with brilliant pictures make up this a book full of warmth and JOY. We see this 'thing' landing on Earth, using its transformer to make it into an Earthling. Eyes pop out, a nose and a mouth, enabling it to see, smell and taste. Ears pop out, then hands and legs, enabling it to hear, touch and walk. Off it goes, to explore what it means to be alive on this wondrous planet, whether as a snail, a beaver or a panda. It explores movement of all kinds, and learns that it is gravity that keeps them close to the planet. Next, exploration of how Earthlings lovingly caring for their babies, whether as a bear, a tree or a human. It discovers that Earthlings can work together, play together, follow their dreams. Every page-turn reveals more wonders, as the illustrations enthrall and delight, from explosive interactions between different creatures, to the gentle caring relationships between each other. Readers will be delighted to be involved in this world of ours, seen through the eyes and ears of these affectionate beings who claim that wow, Earth is the best planet ever! There is a kindness which engages readers, weaving between the bold nature of many of the pictures. The eye-catching graphics and rhythmic text make this another outstanding book for Mary Murphy, perfect for reading aloud or for sharing one to one. **GB**

5 – 8 Infant/Junior



The Girl and the Mermaid

★★★★★

Hollie Hughes, ill. Sarah Massini, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 9781526628114, £7.99 pbk

A title that quietly washes over you with meaning and heart and a sense of why it matters so much that we ensure that the next generation see shared stories and reading as an essential part of all of our lives: a way to make sense of the world around us, a way to spark imagination and share a sense of unexplored shores, most importantly, a way to cling onto connections that might otherwise be lost to the waves.

The Girl and the Mermaid opens with Alina and her granny who live together in a lighthouse Alina has been left to run. Having helped her granny in the day, Alina listens to her granny's stories at night – but these too are slipping from her grasp. There is so much that is suggested here in just the first few pages that might resonate with some young readers (a role as a young carer, living with memory loss in relatives), but these sentiments are woven so gently that others may simply ease into enjoying the story.

Before we know it, we are pulled down to the depths of the ocean floor with Alina as she puts her faith in a mermaid to reveal a 'well of stories old and new'. Here Alina can fill a story shell and return some of her granny's stories to the surface and to the forefront of her granny's mind. But in doing so Alina realises too the broader significance of sharing stories – that in doing so our worlds can be understood across the seas, and that these stories can bring us closer at times when words can't be found or sense seems to be slipping.

A title brimming with empathy, with quiet and steadfast opportunities for representation, and with a wholehearted expression of the power of storytelling – which we should hold onto at all costs, this is a title worth sharing widely. Massini's illustrations are the perfect accompaniment and

just as integral in expressing the story as the words themselves – perhaps in turn offering a timely reminder that the arts in general (be that in words or pictures) must be kept in the light, just as Alina does with her granny's stories. **ARU**

The Bestest Big Brother Ever

★★★★★

Ben Mantle, Walker Books, 40pp, 9781529506099, £12.99 hbk

Nano looks up to his big brother, Felix; he is the bestest. Together they do everything together – smashing monster trucks, exploring, drawing (and painting) pictures – we are a team, declares Nano. But...what is going on? Why does the notice on Felix' special tree house say NO Nanos? If that is how Felix feels, Nano will have his own tree-umbrella-house. It is brilliant – until the wind strikes. Thank goodness for a Big Brother. Felix is the bestest – well most of the time.

Ben Mantle will be recognised through his collaboration with Philip Ardagh and the Bunnies series. Here Mantle is both author and illustrator – but the drama and action are still there – just very different. This is not a scenario featuring high speed chases. The narrative is presented through the words and opinions of Nano. However, readers will have no difficulty in seeing Felix' take on situation – Mantle makes sure the expressions are indeed expressive. Indeed Felix does not need to speak – his thoughts are obvious without any words; many will empathise at that point – especially if they are an older sibling. The images fill each double spread, the main illustration often enhanced by vignettes while throughout there are telling details adding depth. This is a story about the everyday and a recognisable everyday relationship – but the everyday can be full of drama. Mantle draws on this with confidence. The result is a thoroughly satisfying and enjoyable story that his young audience will recognise and relish. **FH**

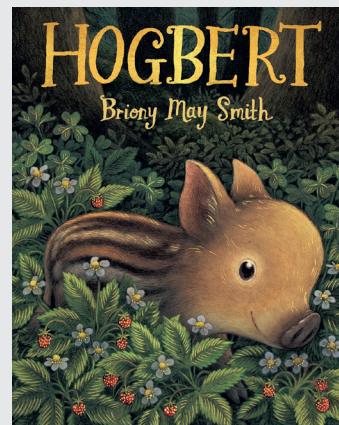
Super Goat Girl

★★★★★

Tracey Baptiste, ill. Dapo Adeola, Puffin, 32pp, 978 0 24 176756 6, £7.99, pbk

What a title! There she is, unmistakably the character of the title, her proud **G** emblazoned upon her front. The Super class is full of SUPERS, who mock her shy appearance...this is a page to be studied, taking in all the other SUPERS. At playtime, the Supers show off their individual talents and demand to know just what talents Goat Girl has. So when an army of evil aliens lands in the playground and lasso their teacher, whilst all the other Supers fail to rescue her, it is S.G.G., with her super strong teeth

who snaps the impossibilium rope. The other Supers can write with lasers, do maths at lightning speed, and stretch all around the classroom, so S.G.G. wonders however she can match up. It takes a real disaster to reveal just how super special she actually is. This is a wonderful tale exploring the joy of finding confidence and friendship, in being just who we are and finding what makes each of us special. The completely whacky illustrations will entrance solo readers. Every character leaps into action each time it is appropriate, and it is possible to read the story without using the text, the pictures follow the story line so closely. Lots of appeal for those readers who like a bit of action in their choice of books. **GB**



Hogbert

★★★★★

Briony May Smith, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 5295 1835 1, £12.99, hbk

Here is a cover to draw one into this intriguing tale in which the hero is the runt in a litter of six piglets. We meet Hogbert, bright eyed, his body glinting with the gold flecks which bring the cover to life. When the young family are taken out into the forest to explore for the first time, Hogbert is thrilled to fall upon a trail of cherries, berries and acorns, so much so that he falls behind his family and finds himself alone, and lost. His mother's warnings of the big bad wolf ring loud in his ears as he meets other woodland creatures, and others who have lost their families. Strategies for finding their tribes are exchanged and tried out, until at last squirrels, deer, rabbits and piglets discover themselves back within their own families. The illustrations are rich in colour, depth and accuracy and the forest is brought to life with ferns, foxgloves, wild strawberries and giant confers. There is a frog on a lily pad, a crown atilt upon its head, watching the youngsters trip through the dripping forest, after a thunderstorm. By sticking together, the lost youngsters have the courage to keep searching for home. As Hogbert's

family snuggles together in their nest on the final page, Mummy catches the aroma of Hogbert's adventures swirling in his fur, like a map of his travels. 'Do you have a story to tell us?' she asks. 'Do I ever!' oinks Hogbert. A story to return to time and again, full of charm to delight young readers. **GB**



The Witch in the Tower (The Three Sisters, book 2)

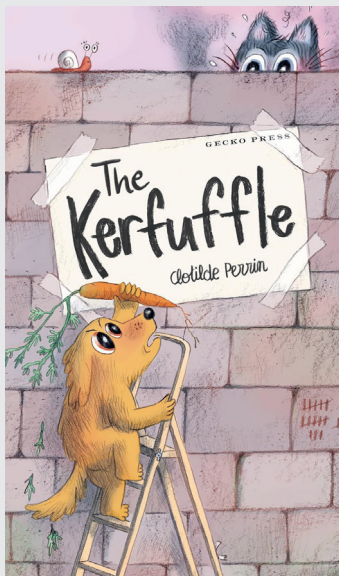
★★★★★

Júlia Sardà, Walker, 68pp, 978 15295 0292 3, £14.99, hbk

This is the second in a trilogy of picture books by Júlia Sardà featuring each of three sisters. It began with the eldest, Franca, in **The Queen in the Cave** (2021) and here it continues with the middle sister, Carmela. Carmela is gloomy from her rejection by Franca, who has found new friends. The new friends have no time for Carmela and have treated her unkindly. In turn, unhappy Carmela has snapped at her younger sister, Tomasina. Carmela decides to go on a solitary walk, 'I am going to play walk until you can't walk anymore.' And, as she walks, she turns over in her mind the cruel things that Franca's friends have said to her. When she can walk no more, she knocks on the door of a witch's tower. The witch seems to know all about Carmela, and the rest of the story sees Carmela enrolled as apprentice witch and given a tour of the tower. This is also an effective course of psychotherapy through the casting of spells and the taking of magical potions in which Carmela is cleansed of her resentment and anger and has her singular potential and the possibility of a community of like minds and fellow sufferers revealed to her: 'Let the outcasts come! Let the lonely, the lost and the different ones come! May they stop their roaming. May they all come home.' The arc of the story is familiar from **Where the Wild Things Are**, even down to a wild dance and the final happy reunion, but here there is an explicit concern with Carmela's feelings and the positive transformation that the witch

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

effects in her. And this paraphrase of the tale is only half the story. The text is expanded by vivid and detailed illustrations, which, to me at least, recall the crowded colour, dynamism and humour of the late 1960s, and, specifically, in places, the work of the great Tomi Ungerer. It is hard to put an age range against such a book. Even the youngest might like to pore over the detail in the pictures. And the story and illustrations might very well both fascinate and reassure into the teenage years and beyond. Already, it may be on reading lists for degree courses in children's literature. **CB**



The Kerfuffle

★★★★★

Clotilde Perrin, trans Daniel Hahn, Gecko Press, 32pp, 9798765688656, £12.95 hbk

Kitty and Pup are the best of neighbours – until something happens and the relationship breaks down. (Eagle eyed readers will be able to detect the cause – so small but so immediate). From then on their lives become separate; a wall is built. But what happens when Bunny turns up keen to make friends? Will that be Pup? Or will it be Kitty? Each try to establish 'ownership'. There is a real kerfuffle. Bunny takes umbrage and leaves. What will happen now?

This is a fun picture book that playfully explores an all-too recognisable situation. The conclusion is satisfying, hopeful, but there is a sting to raise another smile. Clotilde Perrin has already established herself as an illustrator with a strong sense of humour and an ability to extend the possibilities of the book. Here it takes the shape of a wall that separates the two homes. It is an ingenious a very simple device that allows the young reader to both interact with each spread and to see exactly what is happening. Originally published in French, the translation by Daniel Hahn is excellent bringing text to life. Particularly to be

admired is his decision to translate the French title *l'embrouille* as that lovely – but somewhat unusual slang word – the kerfuffle; it perfectly captures the essence and atmosphere of the story. Perrin's style is as lively, light-hearted, and contemporary with a nod to the world of the comic book and graphic novel. A picture book to enjoy and talk about. **FH**

Some Days I'm the Wind

★★★★★

Rebecca Gardyn Levington, illus. Dinara Mirtalipova; Barefoot Books, 32pp, 9798888596623, £12.99, hbk

A young girl describes her emotional states in terms of the world around her: she is the wind ('a cyclone,' 'giddy,' 'mellow;' and sometimes a 'resilient, bold stone...') The bold, energetic artwork shows her at play, cooking (and in a temper as she makes a mess), or a shy moon behind a cloud. Some illustrations show her more than once, and in others a double-page opening has her alone, as when she is a 'shy sliver' like the moon. One of the clever aspects of the text is that emotional states are not just one thing: the girl is dancing on the windowsill "reaching for the sky," and then on the next page it looks like she has kicked over a plant and the watering can, and the tree metaphor tells us she is a 'tree, trembling, bare, bidding leaves goodbye.' There is a subtlety here that shows us how metaphor does not give us easy answers, and that these harder times - being 'buried by worry, planted deep with doubt' - are mirrored by occasions when she is 'eager and ready to change, to grow.' She is no less herself on difficult days.

Emotional literacy needs some support as it develops, from engaging play in Early Years settings (and beyond), to texts that can give structure to a child or group of children as they discuss emotions. **Some Days I'm the Wind** is special, with a text that reads as a free-verse poem with occasional rhymes, and a central character often full of joy - and without it being an issue or a central point to the text, a girl with long black hair and darker skin. Positive in so many respects and yet without being patronising or overly didactic, this is a book that could start a whole project, or further a circle-time discussion – but for the right child, at the right time, it could be a revelation. **NS**

This That What

★★★★★

Katy Ashworth illus. Colleen Larmour, Puffin, 32pp, 9780241586068, £7.99 pbk

Kiki Dime is a young girl of around five or six who has a busy brain which flits between projects and finds concentration extremely difficult. Kiki is also very creative and energetic, and she desperately wants to be liked.



Although the condition is never made explicit, Kiki appears to have ADHD. All young children will enjoy getting to know Kiki because of her colourful art realized through Larmour's brilliant, full colour illustrations.

Every child who might be like Kiki will feel validated by Ashworth's narrative. Although it explores the liveliness of her brain, Ashworth does not shy away from the fact that Kiki's neurodivergence causes her to experience anger and frustration and also the teasing and ostracization by other children. She shows that a range of emotions can be experienced among a group of individuals and, with acceptance and understanding, can be embraced.

Ashworth ends with the universal message that every individual is unique. **RB**

This Is Who I Am

★★★★★

Rashmi Sirdeshpande, illus Ruchi Mhsane, Andersen Press, 32pp, 9781839135774, £12.99 hbk

How do you help young children – KS1 and 2 – who have rich varied backgrounds but still feel the need to ask who am I? Rashmi Sirdeshpande, herself with a mixed heritage, has turned to a picture book to celebrate this richness – and to present what it means for her. From the first double spread the message is one of optimism and joy. She starts 'When people ask me what I am or where I'm from I smile' Ruchi Mhsane's illustration shows her – a little girl – with a beaming smile on a swing in a park. Turn the pages and the same little girl is in a very different environment, one with temple bells and banyan trees. The narrative then progresses switching between not just different countries but different backgrounds and experiences. Throughout the tone is positive and engaging. Mhsane's images reflect this atmosphere through cool pastel colours that enrich the reading experience. The clever use of the double spreads allow author and illustrator to play with the idea of a mirror image – two pictures – the same child and family but two settings. This is a gentle poetic narrative that would be effective in both classroom or family setting allowing conversation and recognition of similar lives. **FH**



Ming the Panda

★★★★★

Jake Hope, ill. Yu Rong, Otter Barry Books, 48pp, 978 1 915659 85 9, £9.99, pbk

A young child who can't sleep asks his mother to tell him about her childhood in China and the animals she saw there. Did she see a panda? Although she didn't see any pandas, she tells him the true story of a famous panda called Ming instead. Ming was captured as a cub in 1938 and transported to the UK where she was the first panda to be held in captivity in London Zoo. The panda's short life in the zoo is described and also the joy and wonder she brought to Londoners in the build-up to the Second World War. The sadness of her death is described with compassion. The back of the book contains additional information which helps to fill out any gaps in the story.

This is an interesting and sensitive picture book which may prompt conversations about pandas, endangered species, the ethics of keeping animals in captivity and the work zoos do to promote conservation.

The illustrations are excellent, not only evoking the ever-appealing pandas themselves but also the delicacy and beauty of the Chinese rural landscape in contrast to wartime London. **SMc**

Electric Birds of Pothakudi

★★★★★

Karthika Nair, ill. Joëlle Jolivet, Tate Publishing, 48pp, 9781849769150, £14.99 hbk

Can a village run on kindness alone? In this gorgeously illustrated eco-fable, inspired by a true story from Tamil Nadu, we follow young Raja as he discovers a family of birds nesting in the village's only electrical box – the very same box that powers the whole community. To protect the eggs, Raja must convince his neighbours to do the unthinkable: switch off the village's power.

Told through a layered, conversational exchange between Raja and a curious child, Nair's narrative structure blurs the line between storyteller and listener. The child's voice, full of questions and doubt, punctuates the flow – challenging Raja's account, teasing out ambiguities, and offering moments of reflection and comic relief. It's a clever narrative device, grounding the story in the emotional

reviews

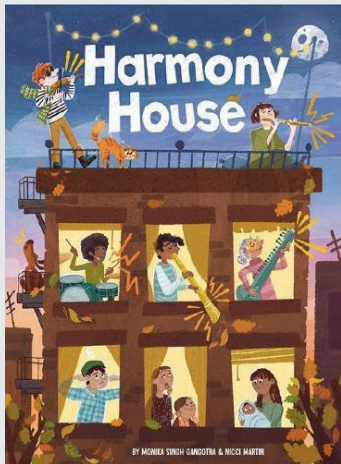
5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

logic of childhood while opening space for layered ethical debate: *What if the eggs never hatch? Do birds really need us? What does it mean to protect something small when the cost is so great?*

Jolivet's illustrations are striking, too. With flat colour planes, bold linework, and screen-printed textures, she captures both the physical vibrancy of Pothakudi and the emotional richness of its people. Each spread is alive with storytelling – from the electric glow of the wires to the intimate detail of the nest. The palette shifts with the narrative, moving from dusky purples and parched pinks to hopeful greens and golden dawns. Visual metaphors abound: Raja and Deepa's mobile phone photos of the birds carry threads of white light across the sky, echoing both electricity and interconnectedness.

The final pages deepen the impact. A backmatter section reveals the true events that inspired the story, honouring the real-life characters who became the seeds of the story. It adds weight and authenticity to what might otherwise feel like magical realism – and affirms why this book was named Winner of the 2023 Prix *Felipé* for Ecological Children's Literature.

This is a story of sacrifice, community, and the quiet power of saying no. Of choosing life over light, and love over convenience. **MT**



Harmony House

★★★★

Monica Singh Gangotra, ill. Nicci Martin, 24pp, Owlet Press, 978 1 913339 67 8, £7.99, pbk

Harmony House was full of residents who loved music and spent a lot of time practising. The trouble was they all played their instruments separately, inconsiderately and competitively. Consequently, the sounds emanating from the house were anything but harmonious. The cacophony was so awful that their neighbours complained, the council was called and an ultimatum issued. This was the prompt the residents of Harmony House needed to get together and discuss the problem.

However, it took the intervention of the youngest resident, appropriately named Melody, before they recognised their shared love of music, began to truly cooperate and ultimately play in harmony.

This is a lively story with appealing illustrations. Its themes include recognising shared interests, respecting the talents of others, cooperating, compromising and working together. Music is central to the story, and the back of the book contains suggestions for creating a family band with makeshift instruments. Useful tips are included to encourage everyone to play in harmony. **SMC**

My Magic Hamster: Hide and Squeak

★★★★

Leah Mohammed, Welbeck Children's Books, 160pp, 9781804536322, £7.99pbk

This gentle comedy for younger readers celebrates the best pet in the world: a magic hamster. Sana's hamster, Frank, is – entirely without explanation – magical. His powers appear to originate from his rear end and, with the slightest jiggle bottom wiggle, Frank can grant wishes, transform into other animals and generally bend reality to his will.

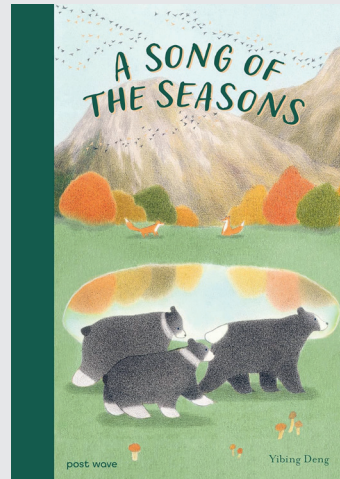
Frank's magic is impressive but unreliable. For every wish he grants Sana, he earns one for himself – and his ideas are a little cheeky, including making it rain fish, for example! Sana, meanwhile, spends most of her time trying to stop Frank from being discovered, while also working out the most fun way to use his unpredictable powers.

The book presents two standalone stories. In the first, Frank freezes time in an attempt to make life more exciting, which leads to the irresistible (and risky) possibility of him accompanying Sana to school. While there are opportunities for heroics – saving people while the world stands still – Frank's mischief, food-focused nature means that noble intentions are quickly derailed. The story makes a gentle point that wishes are not always as wonderful as they seem: freezing time, after all, also means fewer people to play with.

In the second story, *Hide and Squeak*, Frank's excitement over a new tunnel maze escalates when he magically shrinks both himself and Sana to tiny size. It is great fun until the local cats notice them. The familiar structure – magic, mishap, and a shared escape – will reassure young readers, even if there are few real surprises along the way.

There is a comforting predictability to these stories. Characters beyond Sana and Frank exist largely to facilitate the hamster's funny catastrophes, and the plotting rarely strays from well-trodden ground. Still, the image of a cheerful, fluffy pet

wielding outrageous magical power for gloriously mundane purposes is an appealing one, and many young readers will be more than happy to follow Frank wherever his wiggly magic leads. **SD**



A Song of the Seasons

★★★★

Yibing Deng, Post Wave Children's Books, 32pp, 978 1 8362 7067 6, £12.99 hbk

Spring is in the air and we follow a Mother bear and her cubs as they waken from their winter sleep right through the changing seasons of the year to winter when the snow falls and it's again time for them to hibernate. With Mother bear leading them, her little ones experience the beauty of a world renewing itself. Readers and listeners share with them the beauty of each new phase of the year; the flora and fauna making adaptations. So in summer, the sun is high in the sky, the forest plants and animals are bursting with energy during the day and all the while the bear cubs are growing. 'Cicadas sing long into the night.' / *The wandering bears head for the lights.* / *Blink, blink! Insects dangle like jewels in the branches.* / *The forest whispers, "What a wonderful night."* till by autumn with its golden glow, they are almost as big as their mother. As autumn turns to winter, it's time for the bear cubs to bid their mother farewell and set out to make their own way in the world and as everything is covered in a blanket of snow, all is calm and 'The world once again holds its breath, awaiting something new.'

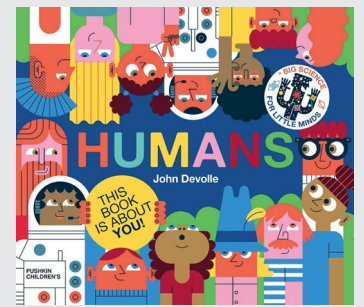
With Yibing Deng's lyrical text and softly textured, delicate mixed media illustrations, the gentle book comes full circle with the animals snuggling into their nests for winter. Beautifully calming visually and verbally, this celebration of nature offers plenty for children to explore in class, and at home. **JB**

Humans

★★★★

John Devolle, Pushkin Press, 32pp, 9781782695318, £12.99 hbk

This is a deceptive picture book that upon first glance could look like it's



going to be a non-fiction science book on the human body but it's much deeper than that. It's about the human race and how, as sentient beings with opposable thumbs and the ability to talk, we are different from other animals on earth.

These 'super powers' have enabled us to be creative and to work with others to build and invent wonderful things, like spaceships to take us to the moon and the internet to allow us to communicate with people all over the world. It's a very stripped-back introduction to the concept of humanity, but one that pairs back some of the complications of modern life to a simple message: we are stronger together. A message that is timely considering the recent months of social unrest in the UK.

This is of course an adult's reading of the book but I believe that younger readers would take this message too and it would highlight the benefits of teamwork as well as increasing their awareness of the bigger picture of why we are here and what we can do.

The illustrations are striking throughout the book. Bold colours, simple shapes but they fit the subject matter well. The subtlety of the inclusivity is delightful too – the people pictured are diverse in terms of their ethnicity, but there's as little quiet nods to inclusion, such as with the spread where it talks about how 'most of us' can walk on two legs and features a wheelchair user in the illustration.

Alongside this bigger message there's also humour – such as not having opposable thumbs is why ants can't knit, or chickens play the guitar. Overall, it's a wonderful, unassuming and beautifully stylised picture book that would be great to share with young readers in any setting. **CH**

I'm very busy

★★★★

Oliver Jeffers, Harper Collins, 32pp, 9780008771911, £14.99 hbk

Billed as a 'nearly forgotten birthday book' the new offering from Oliver Jeffers is an exploration of our allegedly 'busy' lives and a quietly resolute bid to encourage readers to hold on fast to what really matters in our ever-changing landscape.

Even the solitary birthday cake, alone on a page with just one candle, before the story begins is indicative of the sentiment behind 'I'm very busy'. It suggests something of the isolate lives we now live, where it is so easy to forget those around us and indeed

the days that are special to others; but it perhaps suggests too something of the simpler times we have lost – when just one cake was enough.

We meet Bridget on page one, looking forward to a lovely day spent with friends...although it isn't until several pages later, when we have met her very busy friends, that we learn it is in fact not just a lovely day, but Bridget's birthday. It appears her friends have forgotten in the midst of their very busy lives – each offers Bridget a cliché idiom as consolation for their inability to attend, something which will hopefully resonate and encourage the adults reading this title to think as much as the young readers of this book.

Bridget's disappointment is so evocatively depicted in Jeffer's characteristic style that it would be impossible for a reader of any age not to pause in their own 'very busy lives' and consider Bridget's fate. There are no words at all on the next page as Bridget sets out her own birthday tea with her toys – another masterful act from Jeffers, reminding us that whilst we often quickly offer words and phrases without thought as we endeavour to rush on to the next event, there are some times and experiences in life where no words are adequate and you can only acknowledge the feelings that are present and sit with them.

Hope is finally offered as the friends realise their error and rally to arrange an impromptu birthday part and, in an instant, Bridget is at once having the lovely day with friends that she had hoped for. Further messages abound here – the idea that is never too late to acknowledge an error and alter the outcome of the day, that sometimes something simple such as a shared cake can be just as significant as the more elaborate plans we often involve ourselves in now, the overarching reminder that we are simply never 'too busy'.

It is unsurprising that Jeffers has produced another masterful example of how to navigate the world around us and to hang onto meaning wherever we can find it. This is a title as much for the adults reading it, as for the children they are reading it to. **ARU**

Nina Peanut: Epic World Tour

★★★★

Sarah Bowie, 266pp, Scholastic, 9780702329890, £8.99 pbk

This illustrated comedy series continues its joyful, doodle-filled diary of the thoughts, opinions and outbursts of Nina Peanut. Having previously tried her hand at detective work and ghost hunting, Nina is now desperate for something far more glamorous: a proper holiday. Existing fans will be pleased to discover that she is more than willing to document every detail of this trip in her trademark outlandish, outspoken style.

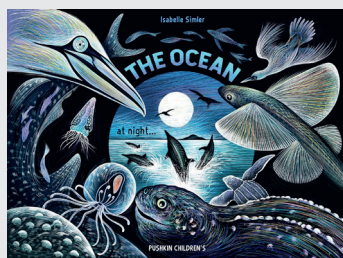
Nina has her heart set on a

tropical paradise, but reality delivers Sunshiney Island instead – a resort notably lacking in luxury touches such as chocolates on pillows or food that doesn't risk food poisoning. Even worse, despite Nina's hopes for an exclusive getaway far from school life, half of her class are staying at the same resort, including her mortal enemy Megan Dunne (who, according to Megan, was definitely going to the Maldives).

Things look up slightly when Nina realises that her favourite holiday influencer, Annalisa, is also staying on Sunshiney Island. Meeting her hero – and securing epic freebies and VIP treatment – becomes Nina's new life goal. Naturally, the holiday spirals off course.

Gradually, the story nudges Nina (and readers) towards a familiar realisation: the grass is not always greener. Being waited on hand and foot and travelling the world alone may not be as wonderful as it looks on social media, and there might actually be more fun – and more laughter – to be found in chaotic family antics than Nina first admits.

Presented as a madcap diary packed with stick-figure drawings, captions, speech bubbles and scribbled asides, this is an accessible and playful read that will appeal strongly to Nina's existing audience. While the number of genuine surprises and laugh-out-loud moments feels slightly lower than in earlier episodes, Nina Peanut's brash voice and boundless confidence remain entertaining company, and young readers will be happy to join her on another gloriously imperfect adventure. **SD**



The Ocean at Night

★★★★

Isabelle Simler, trans. Michele Hutchinson, Pushkin Childrens, 32pp, 9781782694885, £12.99 hbk

Starting at sunset, this luminous book explores life in the ocean during the night and through to sunrise the next day. The reader is led by a succession of eye-catching images stretching across each double-page spread, introducing a different wonder of the natural world at night, from the migration of microscopic plankton to flying fish leaping over the waves. We see turtles coming up the beach to lay their eggs, dolphins hunting through the water and a glorious full moon over the waves. I was particularly charmed by the mucus bubbles – a

kind of transparent sleeping bag – created by parrotfish to protect themselves at night.

Writer and illustrator Isabelle Simler uses a very effective art technique to create her images where bright, colourful lines appear to be reversed out of the ocean darkness, giving a truly glowing effect. A cut-out element on the front cover uses this brilliance to lead the reader into the book. Just looking at these pictures is a pleasure in itself, without reading a word. The text has two levels – at the top of the page, a simple one liner that early readers can access and, across the bottom, a lot more factual information about what we are looking at, aimed at older children. Michele Hutchinson's translation from the original French reads well and has managed to condense a lot of ideas into a small space. To do so, she often uses very sophisticated language and mentions biological concepts that cannot be fully explained in the space available. As a consequence, even more able child readers will sometimes need some guidance and support in understanding them.

This is a beautiful book and a wonderful celebration of the natural world, even if it does not always explain what we are looking at in as much detail as some readers might want or need. Enticed by the artwork and fascinated by some of the extraordinary examples of ocean nightlife, I am sure many readers will be inspired to discover more for themselves after reading this book. **RC**

The Dream Factory

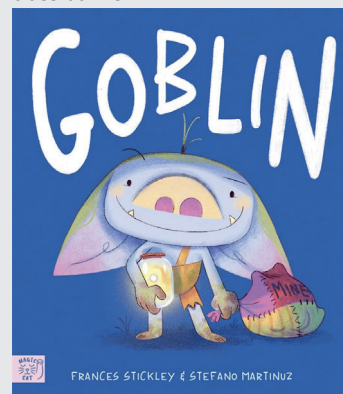
★★★★

Steph Matuku, ill. Zak Atea, Tate Publishing, 32pp, 9781849769891, £12.99 hbk

At the edge of town there stands a dream factory. Every night after the sun sets the dream machine switches on. Lights flash, cogs turn, belts whirr and screens beep, and from the windows pours forth dream mist, drifting all across the town. The town's inhabitants dream of wondrous things – riding unicorns, swimming with mermaids, flowers made of cake, talking tigers for instance and on waking those people make their dreams come true. Then one night through an open window of the factory there flies a kererū to explore. The bird drops one of its feathers; it gets caught in the dream machine and that evening at bedtime when the machine switches on, things go terribly wrong causing a grey-black mist to drift over the town. People's dreams are now of unpleasant things and come morning they lock up the dream factory. No more dreams, no more new things, no more creativity; the kererū attempts to help come to nothing: sameness prevails until one night the bird dreams. Making a return visit to the factory, she breaks a glass window letting in the breeze once more. As it blows through the building, the feather is dislodged and floats to the floor. That evening the dream machine starts to function

once again and out pours the dream mist drifting across town.

There's a richness to both Steph Matuku's text and Zak Atea's richly coloured, textured illustrations. With lots of alliteration and onomatopoeia and action words aplenty, the telling is great to read aloud and the atmospheric scenes draw the reader in to explore the multitude of detail on every spread. This story of the power of dreams and how they can enhance the imagination is likely to appeal over a wide age range and provides a starting point for creativity in the classroom. **JB**



Goblin

★★★★

Frances Stickley, ill. Stefano Martinuz, Magic Cat, 32pp, 978 1 9173 6628 1, £7.99 pbk

This, the second of the author's **Stories from the Swamp** features a very selfish Goblin who despite seemingly having everything is never satisfied. He spends his time searching for trinkets and trash, even resorting to stealing items from passers-by. Eventually though, one night after another of his greed-satisfying rampages, Goblin feels completely empty inside and it's a feeling that he hates. Then he looks up into the sky and spies something that makes his heart sing: fireflies making the darkness come alive with their little bright lights. Briefly the whole world seems perfect but then that terrible 'I want' returns and Goblin thrashes around until he captures a single firefly. He puts it in a jar and sets off home but on the way, the firefly's spark grows ever dimmer whereas the capturer's anger grows ever stronger.

Suddenly up the hill come three familiar creatures as Goblin holds up the jar. They stop and what happens between the four changes Goblin's values completely. He realises that kindness and friendship are where true happiness lies.

This heartwarming rhyming story contains a vital message about what is important in life: it's not material things but positive relationships. Stefano Martinuz's illustrations bring the drama to life with lots of action and details. I love the way Goblin's mood is reflected in the dark and sombre tones as his hoard increases, contrasting with the brighter colours of scenes following his enlightenment heralded by the fireflies and his friends' wise words. **JB**

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle



The Winter Snow Goose

★★★★

Gill Lewis illus. Irina Augustinovich, Barrington Stoke, 72pp, 9780008770006, £7.99 pbk

Tia's mum is the island vet on a fictional, remote island called East Haven. Tia and her best friend, Nat, find a rare and badly injured snow goose. The islanders then know that it will be a very harsh winter because the last time this happened, the winter was one of the worst they had seen.

The children decide to rehabilitate the snow goose whom they name Storm. This process forms the plot of Lewis's narrative, as the whole island community comes together, to support their ultimately successful efforts.

This novella continues Lewis's strong environmentally-focused work and demonstrates how she always shows community spirit and compassion both to other humans and to animals.

Augustinovich's illustrations including the map of East Haven perfectly complement Lewis's text and bring the animal characters to vivid life. **RB**

Beware the Moon: The Last Wolf

★★★★

Rob Biddulph, Macmillan, 272pp, 976 10350 9246 8, £12.99, hbk

The Last Wolf is the first in a new pair of tales from Rob Biddulph which go under the general title of **Beware the Moon**. Why should you 'Beware the Moon'? Well, if you are wary of meeting a werewolf; or, of course, becoming one. The people of Moonhaven are obsessed with both these possibilities. And, in **The Last Wolf**, although a werewolf has not been seen for some time, there is a dawn to dusk curfew on nights of the full moon that is meant to keep people safe in their beds, where most people are happy to stay. The exception is the Moonlighters, a group

of four school friends who enjoy the thrill of exploring on these forbidden nights. Inevitably, there comes a night when not only do they hear a disturbing howl but Purple, a girl who wants to be part of the Moonlighters gang, reports seeing an old man in a cage transformed into a werewolf. This is as much a detective story as a horror story and, as the children seek the truth behind the werewolf sightings, they uncover a sinister plot that involves the Nighthawks, the very police force that is supposed to protect Moonhaven from werewolves. Rob Biddulph's tale is generously scattered with his own illustrations and moves along swiftly in short chapters, although the detective story inevitably takes a while both to set up and to unravel. **CB**

Tiny Hercules

★★★★

Jon Lock, ill. Nich Angell, 208pp, Macmillan Children's Books, 9781035059645, £9.99 pbk

This novelty comedy adventure shrinks Greek mythology down to pocket size and then makes it as funny as possible. In *Tiny Olympus*, only two things matter: being tiny, and being cool. *Tiny Hercules* is convinced he is the coolest hero alive, and *Tiny Zeus* is equally sure the title belongs to him. Their rivalry is petty, loud and obnoxious – until Zeus accuses Hercules of ruining 'the most bodacious party ever' and banishes him from *Tiny Olympus* altogether.

The story then takes a sharp turn to a new setting: the charming British village of Chutney-on-Toast. Here, Hercules meets Jeff, a boy with an unusual love of graphs and an even more unusual hope that they might save his home. Chutney-on-Toast is about to be bulldozed ('These beautiful houses aren't going to destroy themselves!') and Jeff's data-driven determination is the opposite of Hercules' preferred problem-solving methods: '...punching, attitude and sweet, home-saving action!' The contrasting approaches are unlikely to work well together... and they don't!

The book's biggest joke is that there is no real explanation for why the gods are tiny at all. Rather than attempting to explain, the story repeatedly winks at its own weirdness, maintaining a very silly tone throughout. This self-awareness peaks with Zeus' ridiculous disguise as 'Swan Zeus' (especially amusing for readers with a little Classics knowledge), and a pedalo race that feels like the kind of comic set-piece you might find in a children's magazine strip.

Many of the funniest moments arrive as short, punchy episodes: visual gags, throwaway lines, sudden silliness. The momentum can wobble, and the inclusion of extra 'Tiny Tales'

at the end adds to the sense that the book is happiest when it is delivering mini comic strips, rather than driving a plot forward.

By the end, it's clear that *Tiny Hercules* is on a collision course to become an annoyingly permanent housemate for Jeff, as he attempts to complete a fresh set of terrible tasks dictated by party-pooping Zeus. *Tiny Hercules* turns ancient myth into a fun-sized joke machine – occasionally messy, frequently very funny – and it feels engineered for sequels (of which there are clearly plenty on the way). **SD**



Robin

★★★★

Sarah Ann Jukes, illus. Linde Faas, Simon & Schuster, 288pp, 978 1 39853105-5, £12.99 hbk

Sarah Ann Jukes's *Robin* is a quiet but lively winter tale, threaded through with magic, melancholy, and the steady, sustaining resilience of the natural world. Poised and emotionally attuned, it is a novel about listening as much as speaking: about finding a voice in the hush of fear and uncertainty, and discovering that love, like a forest, is sprawling, tangled, and rich with quiet enchantment.

The story centres on Eddie, a boy who has always been 'good.' Careful to the point of invisibility, he takes on the unspoken role of emotional caretaker as his family navigates the serious illness of his sister. Jukes writes with real sensitivity about the impact of illness on family life, capturing the silences that stretch between people, the feelings that go unvoiced, and the heavy pressure on children who try to make themselves smaller so as not to add to the burden. Eddie's goodness is both his shield and his constraint, and the novel gently questions what it costs a child to be endlessly compliant.

When Eddie is sent to stay with his uncle while his sister prepares for

an operation, the narrative slips into the margins of the everyday and into a forest thick with whispering trees, snow, and ancient secrets. Here the story acquires its subtle fantastical charge. Eddie meets Mari, a fierce, enigmatic monster-hunting warrior, and her companion, the Robin. Both are finely drawn figures who act as guides and reflections, helping Eddie to confront his own fears and to recognise his buried anger and grief. Their presence allows the novel to explore the idea that all emotions have value, and that being 'good' is not the same as being honest.

As a snowstorm gathers and Eddie begins to find his literal voice through singing in the school choir, *Robin* unfolds into a thoughtful meditation on memory, storytelling, and the healing possibilities of nature. The forest becomes a powerful metaphor for connection and continuity: trees linked by roots and shared soil echo the way people, histories, and stories are bound together across time. Jukes's prose is beautifully controlled, evoking the bite of cold air and the muffled stillness of winter woods, while never losing sight of the warmth that emerges from friendship, music, and imagination.

Linde Faas's illustrations further enrich the text, deepening its sense of wonder. Her ethereal textures and wintry palette mirror the novel's mood, while her images of the forest and the small, radiant Robin bring a gentle luminosity to the page. Together, text and illustration create a contemplative, emotionally generous book that invites readers to linger, listen, and find their own voices in the quiet. **LSJ**

Escape from the Child Snatchers

★★★★

Sufiya Ahmed, Andersen Press, 9781839136511, £7.99, pbk.

Sufiya Ahmed's *Escape from the Child Snatchers* is a fast-paced historical adventure that shines a light on lives and communities often overlooked in Victorian-set historical fiction. Set between 19th-century India and the streets of London, it combines moral stakes jeopardy with a strong moral core, making it a compelling read for middle grade children.

Humza lives with his mother and younger brother in extreme poverty in India, where survival depends on long hours of hard labour. Their mother works as a maid for an English family, and the family's life is overshadowed by the absence of Humza's older brother, who left for England as a lascar on a merchant ship and never returned. The uncertainty surrounding his fate weighs heavily on them all. When Humza and his friend Ranj decide to go in search of him, the novel launches into a daring journey that sees the boys stow away on a ship bound for England.

What follows is a tense and vividly told adventure. After arriving in London, Humza and Ranj are captured by a notorious child snatcher, exposing the brutal realities faced by vulnerable children with no money, protection, or status. Ahmed does not shy away from depicting the dangers and injustices endured by immigrant children, including the way they are treated as commodities or curiosities by the most exploitative adults. Yet the novel balances this darkness with hope, resilience, and the sustaining power of friendship.

As the boys navigate Victorian London, the story becomes a breathless chase through alleyways, docks, and hidden corners of the city. Ahmed brings to life the diverse communities that existed in London at the time but are rarely represented in children's books, highlighting both the prejudice they faced and the solidarity they found among one another. Acts of kindness sit alongside moments of real peril, underscoring how survival often depends on courage, quick thinking, and trust in others.

Escape from the Child Snatchers is an exciting and very fast paced novel that blends adventure with social history. It invites young readers to consider whose stories are remembered and whose are forgotten, while delivering a narrative driven by bravery, loyalty, and the determination to protect family at all costs. **LJS**

Monster Down Deep

★★★★

Amy Fellner Dominy, Pushkin Press, 9781782695516, £8.99, pbk
Monster Down Deep is a lively, big-hearted adventure that blends ecological concerns with humour, warmth, and emotional depth. Told through alternating voices, it is an engaging read for upper Key Stage 2 children, rippling with suspense and a joyful sense of discovery.

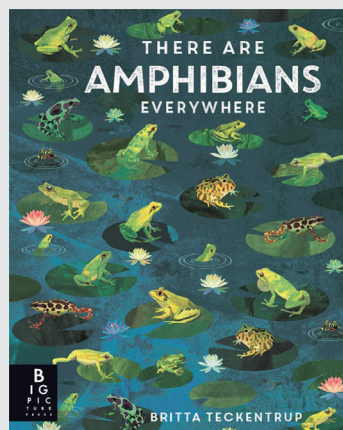
The story unfolds on a beach in Southern California and is narrated by Cassie as a determined treasure hunter, endlessly sweeping the sand with her metal detector Sylvia, in search of a diamond necklace lost in a shipwreck, a find she hopes will change her life. Cassie is enthralled by the living ocean: she loves the creatures of the sea but harbours a secret fear she cannot bring herself to share. Interwoven with her perspective is the voice of Blue, a remarkable and mysterious fish-like creature who has ended up on the beach by accident and is now trapped, unable to return to the depths.

As Cassie searches for treasure, she encounters TJ, initially a rival in the hunt but soon revealed to be an ally. Their uneasy competition turns into friendship when they discover Blue in danger and rescue him from a shark. Cassie's father runs a small aquarium, established in memory of

Cassie's mother, and the children decide to take Blue there for safety. This act of kindness brings them sudden attention and local fame, but it also places Blue at risk from those who see him not as a living being but as a valuable curiosity.

What follows is a daring and fast-paced rescue mission that tests the children's bravery and ingenuity, strengthening the bond between Cassie and TJ and leading them to a different kind of treasure altogether. Beneath the surface of this oceanic adventure lie thoughtful themes of love, loss, and the importance of facing fears with the help of others. The ecological message is woven lightly into the narrative, never overwhelming the sense of fun.

With its tumbling pace, slapstick moments, and satisfying, feel-good ending, **Monster Down Deep** is a joyous romp of a novel, as energetic and unpredictable as the sea itself. It offers young readers excitement, empathy, and a gentle reminder that the greatest treasures are often the ones we protect rather than possess. **LJS**



There are Amphibians Everywhere

★★★★★

Camilla De La Bedoyere, ill. Britta Teckentrup, Big Picture Press, 32pp, 9781800787124, £12.99, hbk
Despite this being the sixth book in the series this is the first one I have read, and I thoroughly enjoyed the experience. From its gold foiled front cover, to its attractive endpapers, this is a fascinating study of amphibians, which exist all over the world. The 'Can you find?' the Macaya breast-spot frog on the final pages is a good idea too.

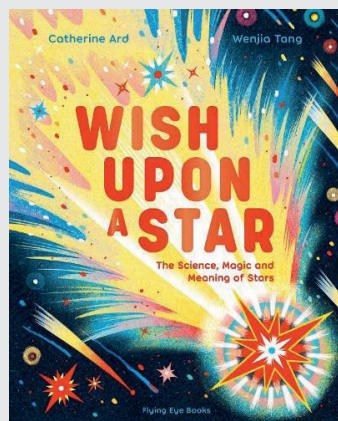
Rich language is used throughout the book which is clearly laid out and brightly coloured. The author explains that the word amphibian means 'double life', and we learn that there is a considerable number of these creatures. 'There are more than 7,800 species of frogs and toads' (p.8), 'More than 825 species of salamander have been discovered so far' (p.9) and

'There are at least 225 species of caecilian' (p.9). The characteristics of amphibians, their habitats, history, movement and feeding can all be discovered in this publication.

This gorgeously produced volume is full of interesting facts, for example, 'Siberian wood frogs have special chemicals, called antifreeze, in their blood to stop them from freezing in extreme cold' (p.12). I was fascinated to learn that frogs have two types of teeth, one type to 'crush the prey' and the other to 'hold the prey still so it can be swallowed' (p.18). The stunning two-page spread entitled 'Tropical Terrors' (pp.26-27) is impressive, detailing the amphibians living in Central and South America.

Towards the end of the non-fiction book the reader is enlightened regarding how these creatures are helping medical research in growing new limbs, and the effect that climate change is having on amphibians.

This would be perfect for a curious child or budding scientist and would be very useful in a school classroom or library. The addition of a contents page or index would aid accessibility as there is a lot of fascinating material within these covers. **JS**



Wish Upon A Star

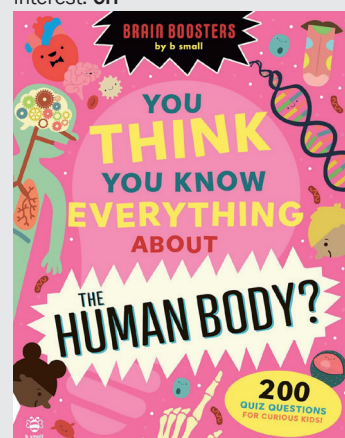
★★★★★

Catherine Ard, ill. Wenjia Tang, Flying Eye Books, 64pp, 9781838742102, 14.99 hbk

If you're looking for something to liven up your space collection, then this book is it. It's a bright, bold and fascinating look at the stars in four broad sections. Firstly it starts with the science behind stars are created. We look at different types of stars, their lifecycle and their place in the galaxies. The second chapter about astronomy and how we use and study the stars. This includes spreads on constellations, how ancient peoples used the stars as calendars and warnings for what was to come. It also includes a section on a diverse range of astronomers which was pleasant to see in an area commonly depicted as being mainly white and male. The next chapter is about the stories we find in the stars, delving more into the mythologies that are linked to constellations such as Romans and Greeks, but also tales from South Africa, Ancient China, the

Māori peoples of New Zealand, the indigenous people of North America and the South American Incas. The closing chapter explores the meaning of stars in our everyday world and how they are part of navigation, faith, astrology, art and popular culture.

It's stunningly illustrated with matte pages that absorb the colours perfectly. In terms of the information is clear and it explains some complicated concepts appropriately for younger readers. It would support curriculum study perfectly but also would provide good browsing material for those for whom any of the themes and topics listed above may pique an interest. **CH**



You Think You Know Everything About the Human Body?

Eryl Nash, ill. Vicky Barker, b small, 48pp, 9781916851481, £7.99, pbk

You Think You Know Everything About Space?

Sam Hutchinson, ill. Vicky Barker, b small, 48pp, 9781916851474, £7.99, pbk

★★★★★

If your family is anything like mine, we all love a quiz when we have a get together. These two exciting titles in the **Brain Boosters** series are perfect for ages 6 upwards, so most people are catered for. Both books follow the same structure and comprise a game show for either one person to play alone or where one person hosts and quizzes friends/family.

There are 200 questions in each book with a warm-up round followed by five rounds. Each round has four subjects, and there are three levels of questions worth 1, 2 or 3 points. Answers are at the back of the book, players can mark one another's answers, and the winner is declared either 'Body Brainbot' or 'Space Genius'.

In the **Human Body** volume, the five rounds are as follows: 'Staying Alive'; 'Digestion'; 'Skin, Bones and Muscles'; 'The Senses'; 'The Control Centre.' I enjoyed reading the Bonus Fact on each spread. For example, 'Human livers can grow back parts lost to surgery, injury or disease' (p.14 **The Human Body**). The five rounds in the **Space book** are: 'Deep Space'; 'Planets'; 'Earth's View'; 'People in Space'; 'Another World,' with similar interesting Bonus Facts throughout.

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

Both quiz books are well designed and attractively illustrated with comic style drawings. Congratulations to the whole team behind this project: children will gravitate to the colourful publications and have hours of fun, whilst learning serious and lighthearted facts which will support their STEM learning. Many young people prefer to acquire knowledge in a more informal way, and they can dip into these non-fiction books whenever they choose. These original paperbacks will be a valuable asset to home, school and public libraries, and could be used in class, or as a one-to-one teaching aid. I can recommend them wholeheartedly and will be buying a few for friends and family in future. **JS**

Time Travel is NOT my Superpower

★★★★

Nathanael Lessore illus. Simran Diamond Singh, Little Tiger, 208pp, 9781788956659, £7.99 pbk
Sara, Georgie and Javier are friends and in their town of Walsham, everyone including children, has a superpower. During their history class, Sara, who can teleport, accidentally transports the three of them plus their mortal enemy, Jock, who can transform into a fly, to 2002.

How are they going to get back to their own time, from a time so old-fashioned? They must not interact with anyone, for fear of changing the timeline and consequently their existence.

This is an extremely funny, time-travelling comedy requiring suspension of disbelief from older readers. It will be thoroughly enjoyed by young readers of around nine years old, many of whom will be spellbound by the mayor of Walsham, who can fart in colour! It is amusing for older readers to realise what children currently consider historic. There will be huge attraction for those who are often put off by longer texts, as this is highly and comically illustrated throughout in a graphic novel style. The opening section could almost be counted as a graphic novel. **RB**

She Speaks: The Women if Norse Myths in Their Own Words

★★★★

Honor Cargill-Martin, illus Pauliina Hannuniemi, Magic Cat, 80pp, 9781917044813, £16.99 hbk

We know the Norse Gods - Odin, Thor, Loki and others. What about the Goddesses? Honor Cargill-Martin gives them voices. We meet Freyja, her chariot drawn by magical cats, Idun whose golden apples give them all eternal youth, Skadi, Hervor, Brynhildr, Frigg and others less well known. It is an exciting gathering. Their words are bold as each steps forward to present their stories, dramatic, immediate. They are supported by the vivid images created by Pauliina Hannuniemi. We open the covers to see the world of the Norse myths -through Midgard,

across the rainbow bridge, Bifrost to the towers of Asgard, together Helheim with the realms of the Vanir, the giants and dwarves all linked by the great tree Yggdrasil. We follow each goddess as she talks, the pages full of colour and decoration. Cargill-Martin provides a brief - but welcome introduction, and then at the end adds further background to each character, placing them firmly in Norse mythology; each narrative is a dramatic enactment of details within the myths, shining a light on these powerful women. Finally there is a brief bibliography. This will surely attract young readers today. The voices are relentlessly contemporary - 'Only if I get first dibs?' - says Frey as she bargains with Odin. This is very much the language of the classroom today bringing familiarity to the text. However, in the reading, the result is almost too direct, the tone and characterisation too similar across the collection, the magic lessened. Nevertheless, backed up as it is by impressive scholarship, this is a collection to attract a young audience in the classroom and the library bringing these ancient stories to life. **FH**



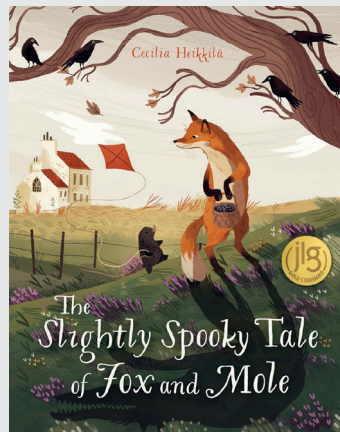
Beastopia

★★★★

Chrissie Sains, ill Jenny Taylor, Walker Books, 221pp, 978 1 5295 1949 5 £7.99 pbk
On the eve of his tenth birthday, Digby should be excited. Birthdays mean pizza and time with his family and best friend, Tai. But Digby is worried about the curse - all his family have lost their pets on their tenth birthday - is it just bad luck or is something odd going on? When Digby's beloved mouse, Cheddar also disappears - despite every precaution - Digby, Tai and Digby's older sister Mog set out to investigate. They soon realise their grandad knows much more than he is letting on and it seems to involve the house's basement and a broken-down washing machine.... Can Digby find Cheddar and the other lost pets and what exactly is Beastopia? Can

they get to it and more importantly, can they get out of it again

Beastopia is a fun read for older primary school readers and is the first in a series centring on Digby



and his friends and a whole cast of magical creatures from the Yeti to Bone Fairies and as they are about to find out, none are exactly as you might imagine! There are plenty of easy-to-follow mini adventures within **Beastopia**, written with humour and lots of quirky detail but also with realism: Mog has diabetes which she needs to manage and Digby's mum needs to work extra shifts to support the family. It is nicely paced with plenty of illustrations from Jenny Taylor and little 'fact' sheets about the various animals the children encounter - perfect for reading aloud or for a competent younger reader who enjoys adventure with a few gentle scares along the way.

This is due to be followed by **Beastopia, The Ice Phoenix** for all those who want to join Digby and chums on their next adventure. **EB**

The Slightly Spooky Tale of Fox and Mole

★★★★

Cecilia Heikkilä, Floris Books, 44pp, 9781782509530, £12.99 hbk
This rather strange gothic cautionary tale unfolds in three chapters.

Fox and Mole are neighbours and friends, their houses sharing a wall; houses that stand on a headland between the moorland and the sea. In summer people visit from the city to fly kites and go boating and Mole likes to join in the fun. Not so Fox: he is fully occupied baking cookies every night and making jams and tea during the day to offer visitors and by the time summer ends Fox's pantry is full of cookies and jam. Come autumn, all the visitors depart, only Fox and Mole remain. Every night Mole goes to Fox's house, sits in his best chair and consumes his cookies, scattering crumbs everywhere while Fox reads aloud from a storybook - *The Legend of the Scuffling Monster*. It tells of a racoon that transforms into a horrific creature. This routine continues with Fox being the giver and Mole the taker until one day Fox discovers that his cupboard is bare save for some cabbages and a jar of pickled

herring. Moreover Mole then forgets all about Fox's birthday but comes to visit intent as usual on consuming cookies. This causes something thorny to find its way to Fox's heart and that evening he too undergoes a monstrous transformation and Mole, who has suddenly remembered his friend's birthday, finds that he's now facing a voraciously hungry companion. What happens thereafter? Well that would be telling.

Readers/listeners will quickly see the power imbalance in Fox and Mole's friendship around which the author spins her tale cleverly mixing wry humour and horror in both her words and pictures. Fox's transformation is pretty scary: enormous yellow eyes against a blackish background comprising one spread, followed by an increasingly horrific-looking visitor to Mole's abode.

Utterly compelling and deliciously creepy. **JB**

Magpie Girl

★★★★

Rowan Foxwood, Usborne Books, 336pp, 9781803707389, £7.99 pbk

Grown from the world of the author's debut, **Heart Seer: The Tale of Anise Star**, but with new characters and able to perfectly well standalone, this beguiling new fantasy has a wonderful blend of a classic rescue adventure, reimagined myths and legends and the creation of an evocative landscape based upon her native France and Corsica. Magpie children featured briefly in **Heart Seer** and the author tells us she could not help but wonder what happened to them when they were returned to their human form and back to their families. Lavender Wild had been missing longer than most and perhaps that is why she still grows feathers on her arms and has vivid dreams of flying. She can understand why her father does not want to let her out of his sight, but why Kit, who had been an inseparable friend beforehand, can no longer tolerate her company, is a mystery. Kit's father is the local overlord, and he has an annual duty to take waters from the sacred spring in their village to appease the Firebird reputed to live in the distant mountain. When he goes missing, Kit is determined to find him and Lavender is determined to help. Along with the feathers, she also has the magpie's uncanny talent for finding things and offers her service, unbeknownst to her father who would have prevented her from leaving. On their perilous quest Lavender and the reader finally discovers what had happened to Kit when Lavender disappeared and as they face the trials and tribulations of their quest and the necessity to work together, they very gradually learn to trust each other again. The relationship between Kit and Lavender is at the heart of the story, as are important themes of freedom and difference. This highly individual take on the legends of the Phoenix and Baba Yaga is skilfully woven into an utterly believable world and a thoroughly gripping and enjoyable adventure. **JCo**

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

**The Secrets of Wild Hill
Lottie's Dream**

★★★★

Olivia Tuffin, Nosy Crow, 204pp,
978 1 80513 764 1 £7.99 pbk

The Secrets of Wild Hill Lottie's Dream introduces us to Lottie, a free-spirited girl who loves her pony Patch so much that she deliberately flunks the entrance exam to a fancy private school so that she can live near her granny Annie and her livery yard at the Wild Hill of the title. Unfortunately, her parents, her father in particular, have different ideas and try to figure out how to move her away from the local comprehensive and the life she loves with Patch at Wild Hill. A tentative friendship forms with kind-hearted Felix, grandson of Ralph McCavendish, owners of the adjoining yard and their family's sworn enemy. With Felix's encouragement she joins the local Pony Club, her ultimate aim being to compete at Badminton. Meanwhile, her grandad is involved in a serious accident, so her charismatic older brother Harry is called back from his promising riding career in Florida to help out at Wild Hill. Much to Lottie's dismay, Harry, like his parents, sees Wild Hill as rundown and a liability and wants to put it on a business footing before a possible sale. With her Pony Club team, Lottie enters a riding competition and brave Patch surprises them all with his spirited performance flying over advanced jumps. Harry meanwhile is drawn into Ralph's orbit, with the promise of a ride on an elite horse that Ralph owns. Lottie senses that something is terribly wrong - but can she figure out what is going on before it is too late? And what did happen in the past between the two families that now threatens her future?

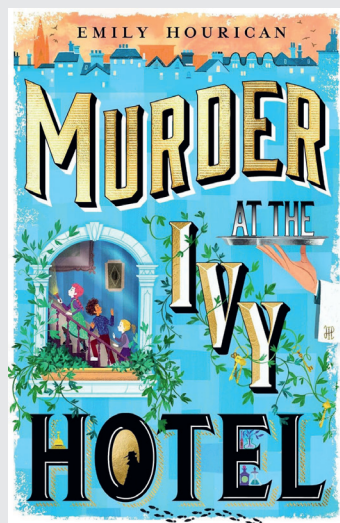
Lottie is a very relatable character with plenty of energy which drives the plot along at a good pace but also manages to touch on deeper issues - largely 'absent' parents, communication issues, aging family members and dealing with unexpected family dramas. There is also a welcome sense of mystery and tension to Wild Hill which also adds more depth to the story: why are the two families so distrustful of each other - is Felix as kind as he appears? can her brother be trusted to run Wild Hill? - but it never gets too heavy in tone for younger readers. Lottie has a resilience and focus - together with a can-do attitude that is really refreshing and all with very little recourse to the dreaded screens. As the book ends with many questions still to be fully answered I imagine Lottie's Dream is the start of a series - one which I predict is set to be ever more enjoyable as Lottie continues to follow her dreams and those of everyone at Wild Hill. **EB**

Fear Files: Hide and Seek

★★★★

Christopher Edge, Walker, 160pp,
978 1 5295 2737 7, £7.99, pbk

This looks like the first in a new horror series: **The Fear Files**. It's an interesting mix of a scary story and snippets of information about aspects of the story which are scattered throughout, as if clippings from a paranormal investigator's case file. The tale itself features a mysterious and disturbing game of hide and seek in a deserted ghost village. Here a group of anonymous children from both the present and the past are remorselessly pursued by a malignant shadow. The additional information gathered by the reader along the way includes 'encyclopedia' entries about various forms of hide and seek games and the seeker's counting rhymes and traditional warning calls that often accompany them. These are slotted in relatively unobtrusively, and, rather than spoiling the atmosphere of the tale, add a semi-rational commentary that emphasises the menace of a situation which is both familiar but increasingly frightening and unpredictable. It's all told in spare prose and short chapters that make it readily accessible. Christopher Edge builds the suspense, introducing twists and surprises, and manipulating his readers' fears expertly. What might happen to the children that are captured by the shadow is left to our imagination. It is the relentlessness of the game that is most disturbing, like a bad dream that is endlessly reworking itself. **CB**

**Murder at the Ivy Hotel**

★★★★★

Emily Hourican, ill. Paola Escobar, Scholastic, 286 pp, 9780702344558, £7.99 pbk

This is the debut children's book from Irish author Emily Hourican. The Ivy Hotel is a small but highly respected

and much-loved hotel in Dublin. The two main protagonists are sisters Meredith and Macy and they live at the hotel, together with their mother, who is the general manager. When the hotel is taken over by new owners it looks as if there are going to be major changes. However, what no one expected was for a guest to be found dead, and it was not from natural causes! With the future of the hotel, the staff and the long-term guests at stake, the two sisters, together with their new friend Colin decide that they need to investigate, as the police think it was an accident. What follows is a roller-coaster of a ride, with a wonderful cast of characters, but will they be able to solve the crime and save the hotel?

Crime has become one of the favourite genres of children's literature, but it becomes increasingly difficult to find original themes and settings for the stories. Luckily the author has brought us to the fresh territory of Dublin and what we would probably call a boutique hotel. It definitely feels like somewhere you would like to stay, despite the incident. Perhaps the closest equivalent that comes to mind is Agatha Christie's 'At Bertram's Hotel', which has that same sense of timeless gentility and service. Whilst the murder is the central theme of the story there are also sub-plots around the potential changes to the hotel, together with the relationships between some of the characters. Although I would not like to see any more murders in the hotel, I do hope that this band of crime solvers will be back in action before long. This is a great read for all of those lovers of crime novels and will make a great addition to schools and libraries. **MP**

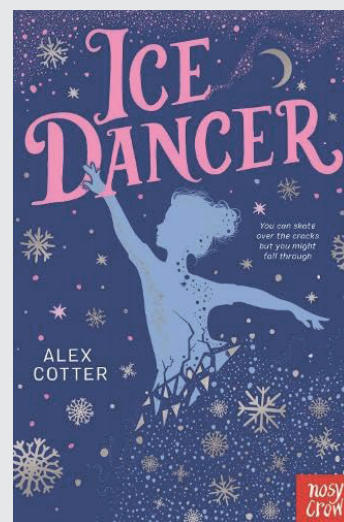
Silent Night

★★★★

Emma Read, Chicken House, 288pp,
978 1 913322 793, £7.99 pbk

Like the author, one of my very favourite books as a teenager was **The Day of the Triffids** and this tense and atmospheric thriller captures perfectly the creeping sense of dread and the terrifying contrast between everyday normality and what was happening to the protagonists, that made that classic so memorable. The protagonists we have here are eminently relatable and authentic as we meet them, newly arrived at their holiday let in a remote village in Wales for the extended family Christmas gathering. With not enough room for everyone in the cottage, thirteen-year-old Masen, his younger brother Joss and wannabe cool older cousin Conor, spend the night in the caravan parked on the drive. When they rush into the cottage the next morning, keen to get opening presents, everyone else has disappeared and the peculiar fungoid

mini-Christmas trees, which were all over the house, are now black and stinking. A further complication is Storm Elena, which means that the children are cut off from the outside world (trees block the roads in and out of the village, the power is out and the phone masts are down). They head into the village only to discover similarly empty houses and then they begin to meet zombie-like adults. Silent, with strange orange and pink eyes, they're blindly marching south, stepping over everything in their path, tragically including cliffs, to reach the coast. The plot thickens when they meet the enigmatic Gloria, who claims her father is working on a cure for the Infected and meanwhile, they will be safe with him. He is offering all the abandoned children sanctuary, but Masen begins to suspect that all is not what it seems in the luxurious set-up. Masen is a brilliantly drawn complex teenager with anxiety issues and a tendency to over think, but resilient, brave and caring. The thoughtful themes around families and emotions, including grief, and how they are all an important part of human experience, really lift this novel above its spooky thriller genre and although it is a story set around Christmas, this is definitely a book with a shelf life far beyond the festive season and precisely the sort of unputdownable page turner to fill those long dark winter evenings! **JCo**

**Ice Dancer**

★★★★★

Alex Cotter, Nosy Crow, 256pp,
9781805133025, £7.99 pbk

Dina is thirteen and, along with her two younger brothers, who are eleven and six, is grieving the loss of their older sister, Sasha who died four years ago. Dina and Sasha were particularly close and initially Dina feels she can no longer ice skate, which was her passion.

The three remaining children are

reviews

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

going on holiday to stay with their aunt, JJ, in Sheffield. Dina is not looking forward to this because JJ used to be fun, but since Sasha's death, she has become withdrawn and serious. Can aunt and niece rekindle their relationship and will Dina find her love for skating again?

In this heartfelt and layered story, Dina eventually finds friends at the local ice skating rink after being coached by the mysterious and masked adult skater known as Silver Blades.

The narrative is set in Sheffield and there is some discussion of the miners' strike as part of the family's history. This was expertly woven into a complex fictional plot. Any young person who has lost someone close to them and who yearns for their support, will be comforted by this story.

Cotter also shows the effort someone must undertake to chase their dream and the sacrifices this can entail. **RB**

Secrets of the Purple Pearl (Millicent Quibb)

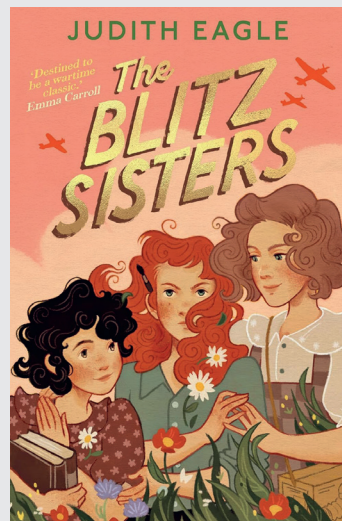
★★★★

Kate McKinnon, HarperCollins, 231pp, 9780008710774, £7.99 pbk

This is the second book in the series featuring the three Porch sisters, as they continue their studies at 'The Millicent Quibb School of Etiquette for Young Ladies of Mad Science.' In this story they find themselves staying at the famous Purple Pearl Hotel, together with the other members of their wider family. However, their purpose is to check on the plotting being undertaken by their enemies, the Krenetics Research Association, who are in search of the real Purple Pearl; a treasure that has some very special powers. The question is whether the girls will succeed in their mission and prevent some very dastardly results in the process?

If you are a fan of the quirky, even weird, type of humour, then this is the type of book that you will devour. The stories are set in an alternative version of our world and in what we would call the Edwardian period; but the actual setting would suggest it is somewhere in the USA. This allows the author to truly let her imagination take over and gives us both characters and situations that could not exist in real life. The central protagonists all have unusual skills which can prove useful when trying to solve the mysteries that they encounter. The eponymous Millicent Quibb is the sort of person that when trying to solve problems only manages to create even greater ones. This combination gives us a delightfully madcap world that is best read about, rather than being lived. What adds to the quirkiness of the book are the wonderfully funny illustrations, with humorous comments and verse that appear throughout; particularly when the narrator starts talking directly to the reader. The series looks as if it

still has some distance to run as the ending of this book gave us a nasty shock, with the potential for total disaster in the next book. I am sure that fans will be flocking to read this when it appears. **MP**



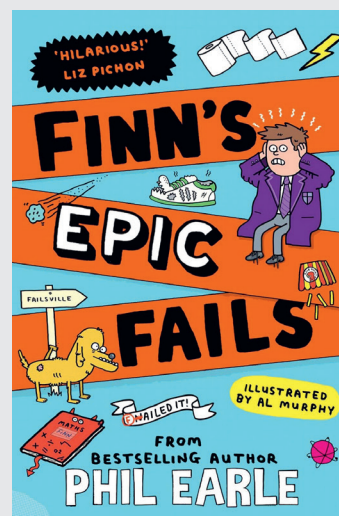
The Blitz Sisters

★★★★

Judith Eagle, Faber, 498pp, 978 0 571 38870 7, £7.99 pbk

Coming in at just under 500 pages, this is truly an epic tale. The size would have thrilled me as a child because I was an avid and quick reader and really liked to get my teeth into a meaty read. But, while it might appear daunting to some, it is actually very accessible and highly readable and just think how proud of their achievement young readers will be when they complete it. They will be helped by the novel's structure in being in three distinct parts, each taking the story arc forward chronologically from the start of the war in 1939 through to 1948, but each narrated by and focused on the perspective of one of the three Linden sisters, whose young lives are turned upside down by World War II. We start with Lydia, the eldest, who feels a huge sense of responsibility for her sisters and mother Cassie. Their father had recently died, forcing their mother to work to support their straightened circumstances. Lydia is a budding chef and takes on the responsibility for cooking the family meals throughout rationing and food shortages that are to come, but when they are forced to evacuate to the country, she finds the fear for her mother in the Blitz and the loneliness and bullying she encounters too much to bear. Her rash return to London will have long lasting consequences that will affect the whole family. One of the very great satisfactions of this expertly plotted tale is the way all the threads of the story weave together. We turn to Peggy, the middle sister, in 1943 with the family together in London again during a lull in the

bombing. Impulsive, volatile and artistically gifted, but with what would obviously be diagnosed as dyslexia today, she struggles in school and starts to bunk off, which leads her to meet refugee Arno, in whom she finds an artistic soulmate. Discovering that a nearby art school is preparing to take on young students, Peggy determines to be amongst them, but her impulsive actions lead her into trouble which could destroy her dreams. The personal dramas we get so caught up in are set against the wonderfully well realised backdrop of life on the Home Front where the good times are inexorably mixed with loss and trauma. While not dwelling on blood and gore, no punches are pulled in depicting the full consequences of the conflict. The hugely empathetic youngest sibling Teddy takes up the story in the aftermath of war with everyone striving for normality. What she can't do is solve everyone's problems, but she is determined to try, even when it means putting herself in mortal danger. While all the threads are satisfactorily resolved not everything ends sentimentally or unrealistically. This is a thoughtfully nuanced, well researched and enlightening portrait of a pivotal period of history and its radical societal changes, especially to the lives of women like Cassie and her daughters and the other redoubtable women we meet, like Aunt Peggy, Barbara and Mrs Jessop. Such well-drawn characters are the compelling driving force which keeps the pages turning. As readers we simply have to know what happens to them next and are absolutely rooting for a good outcome as each challenge and obstacle arises. This is a genuine tour-de force from a writer who simply gets better and better. **JCo**



Finn's Epic Fails

★★★★

Phil Earle, ill. Al Murphy, Simon & Schuster, 254pp, 9781398546165, £7.99 pbk

The cover of this book shows a cartoon Fail-ometer, listing 'Mildly Embarrassing', 'Faintly Useless' and '100% Epic Fail.' Winning is 'Super

Rare', so the reader has a good idea what this boy's life is like. Finlay Hope has just started in Year 7 and finds school life as challenging as his home life. His older brother, Jonah, who is muscly, and very popular at school, bullies him, and, as they share a bedroom, with Jonah on the top bunk, this is very easy. His little sister, Maisie, is so obsessed with unicorns that she tries to turn him into one by sticking a toilet-roll horn on his forehead. Dad is trying to manage on his own, as he and 'the Mothership' are divorced, but struggles to provide edible food, and spends too much time in Lycra (not a pretty sight!) and going on bike rides. School staff are disappointed that Finlay is not like Jonah, and his uniform is many sizes too big, so that contributes to taunts and jeers from his classmates. Fortunately, he has friends: Laszlo, who is always in love, (but never for very long) and a girl who is so brainy that they call her Google.

When Jonah posts a picture of Maisie riding 'Finlaycorn' as a unicorn, and gives out Finlay's phone number, the humiliating total reaches 489 new messages... Laszlo encourages him not to worry- it's Friday, and they'll have forgotten about it on Monday, and he devises a distraction in a hapless teacher's class. Then they are asked to be runners delivering messages, and there is more teacher-baiting, focussed on supply teachers who don't know the names of the students, and that is very funny: e.g. 'Will Chris P. Bacon please go back to his farm?' Teachers don't exactly come out well in this book...

Finlay is very happy when a smelly dog arrives in his life, and there is much discussion about whether or not to keep it, but eventually 'Trouble', once washed, becomes part of the family. Jonah's attempt to use the dog to become a star in an advert goes horribly wrong, and finally Finlay has power over Jonah- but what should he do about it? Google has a clever solution, and Finlay's life is, however temporarily, much improved.

The font is as if handwritten by a neat child, easy to follow, and matches the cartoon illustrations by Al Murphy, whose website asks: 'Do you like things that have been drawn by an adult, but which look like they have been drawn by a child in an institute for children with psychological issues and a below average ability in visual communication? Then you're in the right place'. Phil Earle is an award-winning and best-selling author and these are two experienced funny people, and their book is great fun to read! **DB**

Making It Up as You Go Along – A children's guide to writing stories

★★★★

Patricia Forde, ill. by Mary Murphy, Foreword by Michael D. Higgins, Little Island, 296pp,

978 1 915 07190 3, £14.99 hbk

This idea-packed book for budding young writers is by Patricia Forde,

children's author and the current Laureate na nÓg (the Irish equivalent of the Children's Laureate). She is ably supported by Mary Murphy's cartoons and letters from some of Ireland's leading children's authors. The book's aims to encourage children's own writing and imagination are celebrated in the Foreword by poet Michael D. Higgins, until very recently Ireland's greatly respected President.

Each of the twelve chapters explores a different element of story writing. We begin with finding ideas and creating characters, journey through developing and structuring a plot, and end with advice regarding more specific genres, such as comedy, mystery or fantasy. In each chapter, Forde explains the writing process, defines new terms as necessary (such as protagonist and antagonist) and gives examples to support her concepts. 'Over to you' writing exercises encourage children to put these ideas into practice. Each chapter concludes with a letter from another children's author (including Eion Coffer, Derek Landy and Sarah Webb). They talk about their own writing, with a focus on the chapter's theme.

Any aspiring writer should find inspiration here. The tone and language level is friendly and the book is positively bursting with ideas. As its length suggests, these concepts may take some digesting but a potential reader-writer could work through the book on a chapter-by-chapter basis or simply dip in. The chapter-concluding letters add a particularly strong element, full of creative insight arising from the author's own experience. Another strength is that, in telling us how to structure and write stories, the book also builds children's ability to appreciate and understand the fiction they read.

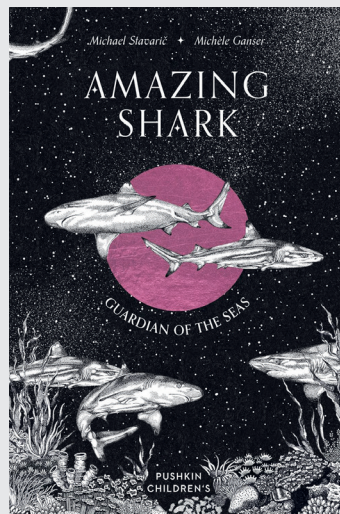
This comprehensive book should be useful and accessible to children younger than the age range given above, but it will really come into its own with older children wanting to write extended fiction, perhaps even a novel. Whilst giving plenty of guidance, Forde makes it clear that there are no set rules. She does not disguise that writing is hard work but it also demonstrates its huge potential for fun. It is a way to harness that unlimited human resource – the imagination. Although some readers might need support in navigating their way through the whole book, I am sure it will inspire creativity and great storytelling. **RC**

Amazing Shark

★★★★

Michael Stavaric, ill. Michèle Ganser, Pushkin Childrens, 144pp, 9781782695530, £20 hbk

This is a real deep dive into the world of sharks. It's different to your usual non-fiction book on animals but in a refreshing way, especially for



those with a love of marine biology. There are no colour photographs used but instead the images are detailed black and white pen and ink illustrations that give you the feel of vintage naturalist's sketchbook. The illustrations have an other-worldly, almost science fiction quality to them, as if in some pieces the sharks are swimming through a starry sky rather than the depths of the oceans.

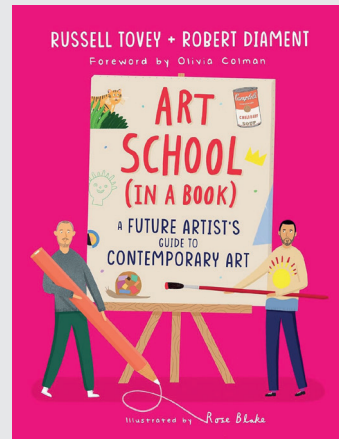
The narrative of the book is written so that it feels that Michael the writer is speaking directly to you, or as if you are listening to a podcast or lecture on sharks. It's very light and conversational but accessible to a younger audience still, allowing it to fit in as a fiction book. For those that want to learn more about these kings of the oceans they'll read the whole thing from cover-to-cover like it's a story.

Its split into seven chapters that cover different aspects of sharks' lifestyles and biology- from lesser-known sharks to shark superpowers and intelligence. It tells you how the book and film of Jaws majorly affected how people see sharks and how they aren't as deadly as we think they are.

Alongside the narrative text and the illustrations there are also added elements such as jokes, search-and-find activities, optical illusions, quizzes, 'bright minds' segments which are even deeper dives into the world of sharks and my favourite, the social media posts from sharks themselves in the final chapter.

This book celebrates the majesty of sharks and would be perfect for any young reader who likes to curl up with a book on a topic they love at home or in the corner of the library. In terms of readership, top primary school aged students with a keen interest in sharks would love this but it would also work nicely for older children too.

In addition to *Amazing Shark* this creative team have previously worked together to create two other books for Pushkin – *Amazing Octopus* and *Amazing Jellyfish*. **CH**



Art School (in a Book): A future artist's guide to contemporary art

★★★★

Russell Tovey and Robert Diament, ill. Rose Blake, foreword by Olivia Colman, Laurence King, 80pp, 978 1 510 23141 1, £16.99 hbk

This is a friendly introduction to (mostly) contemporary art, presenting it as inspiration for making your own. Actor Olivia Colman's funny introduction sets the tone and the writers maintain a personal and quirky feel throughout, although their intent is serious. Our authors are also given colourful, visual life as the book's 'guides' by the illustrations of Rose Blake, as she has done in other books, such as David Hockney and Martin Gayford's *A History of Pictures for Children*.

Russell Tovey, best known as an actor, has built a reputation as a champion of contemporary art through the podcast 'Talk Art' which he makes with co-author and gallerist Robert Diament. The aim of these podcasts is to make art accessible to all, not just an elite few, and this is very much the intent of this book. Each double page spread features an individual work of art, along with some text explaining it, its style or more general information about the artist and sometimes the art movement they are connected with. This is then concluded by a series of questions that invites the reader to think about their own reaction to the art and how they might create their own work based on it.

The text is entertaining and the closing questions should encourage artistic creativity. I did find, at times, that the information was a little inconsistent, with varied language levels and some confusing definitions of terms. In some places I would have liked more exploration of the particular work featured, in others more context. There are no contents, glossary or index. However, none of these are serious issues for a reader looking to find out more about art – this is a book to browse and make your own visual discoveries.

Tovey and Diament have made a wonderful selection of art, mixing up work from some really famous names, such as Henri Matisse and Tracey Emin, with lesser known but

nonetheless amazing artists, such as Cassi Namoda and Lee Ufan. The images are reproduced large and complimented by Rose Blake's illustrations. While the interpretation of 'contemporary' is very broad (stretching back into the 19th century and, in the case of Arcimboldo, beyond), it is very refreshing to find an art book with so many works by living artists in it and with such a variety of styles. It is a book that should indeed excite and inspire future artists. **RC**

You are an Artist

★★★★

Yinka Ilori, Tate Publishing, 32pp, 9781849769129, £12.99 hbk

This is an unusual title and for this reason, perhaps has more resonance than it would if there were many comparable offerings in the field. Each page offers a bold illustration and a thought for reflection and, given that our young people sadly now have less access to the arts than in previous decades, there is less space in the curriculum for discussion of this nature, and our children are unsurprisingly considered to be carrying more mental burdens than their counterparts in other countries, it is perhaps a timely title.

It offers much in the way of aspiration and affirmation: 'Winning doesn't always mean success' or 'The path you take today does not define who you are tomorrow' are fitting examples of the level of reflection and thought the title demands of young readers. But this is perhaps where it becomes difficult to imagine the role of *You are an Artist*. Whilst unpacking such statements with UKS2 children or those at secondary school could be both inspiring and an opportunity for some young people to take away a nugget that helps them move forwards in some aspect of their life, it is difficult to imagine having the time to unpack such statements in an already overwhelmed curriculum. It is equally difficult to imagine many youngsters in this age range being able to effectively navigate this title without some discussion or support and so it perhaps becomes more of a leisure read lurking on the library shelves for a student in need to discover independently. This of course can have immeasurable value, but it perhaps limits the reach 'You are an artist' has.

The illustrations are bold both in colour and in design. Their nature perhaps also encourages readers to try and experiment with expressing themselves artistically as it is a style that feels accessible. The colours used add a feeling of optimism too which, when woven with the words and the intended meaning of the title, offer young readers a space with a greater sense of promise than they are often afforded in their daily lives at present. With support to discuss, or as a starting point for changing behaviours which have led to negative thought processes, this title is a steadfast expression that thought, colour and hope matter most – even in our ever-changing world. **ARU**

reviews

14+ **Secondary/Adult**

New Talent

The Book of Heartbreak

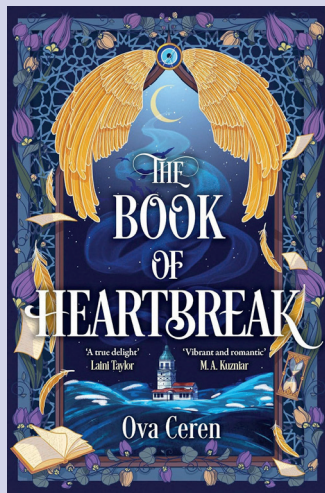
★★★★★

Ova Ceren, Hot Key Books, 422pp
9781471417856, £9.99, pbk

Renowned book blogger and booktok content creator Ova Ceren's debut romantasy opens with a tongue-in-cheek hierarchical angelic structure and a map of Istanbul. It is a deeply personal, intricately layered and meticulously researched exploration of the pangs of love, grief and heartbreak. Metamorphosing into a story inspired by her Turkish heritage, her diasporic background, the iconic symbolism of The Maiden's Tower of Istanbul, her sense of the afterlife and the concept of women scarred by inter-generational trauma, it is also a cautionary tale about the vagaries of love. With a look at how love can be poisoned by betrayal, control, desire, guilt, obsession and revenge, the book breathes the importance of forgiveness.

Ceren's fragile protagonist Sare is struggling with the marks left upon her by a traumatic childhood and a terrible curse that has tainted her life. It has caused her to live in fear and affected her ability to love and trust. When tragic circumstances result in a sudden move from Cambridge to stay in Istanbul with her emotionally distant grandfather Muzaffer, she meets Leon, a charismatic seer. Drawn to the isolated and enduring Maiden's Tower and the mysterious writings of Sufi Chelebi she wonders if there is a way that she can open her heart after all in spite of the fervid entreaties of her ethereal friend Munu pleading with her not to risk heartbreak and death.

Like *The Arabian Nights* *Entertainments*, *The Book of Heartbreak* becomes a story within a story as each chapter is prefaced by an extract from one of the three



books of Sufi Chelebi providing an insight into curse breaking. The reader joins Leon and Sare in trying to unravel the mystery following the revelations throughout. When constructing the casebook, Ceren was influenced by her research into the Ottoman Empire, the role of the Müneccimbaşı (the Sultan's Chief Seer) and the journals of explorer Evliya Çelebi.

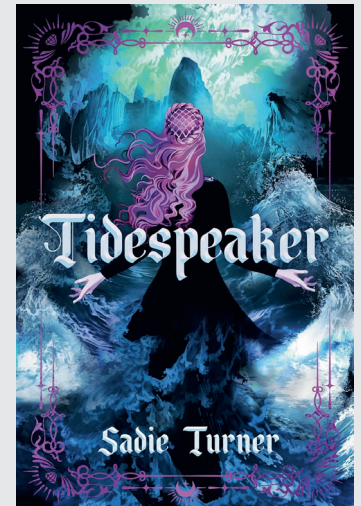
The Book of Heartbreak is an ambitious novel by turns a contemporary fairy tale, a love song to the cadences of the city of Istanbul, inspired by the poetry of Orhan Veli, a vivid study of emotions and an urban fantasy. Theatrical, melodramatic and intense, it addresses important themes, while weaving in Turkish folklore and customs.

Where it strikes a discordant note is the inclusion of angelic emails, which, although quirky, tend to pull the reader out of the story in places. It gets a bit goofy towards the ending which also requires suspension of disbelief. It will appeal to fans of Becca Fitzpatrick, Stephanie Garber and Laini Taylor, but it is gentler, with its own authentic, tender, heartfelt voice. **TJ**



This construct opens up a wealth of authorial possibilities in suggesting to readers who the murderer might be and Bernet mines this complexity with consummate skill. Her timeshifts, combined with red herrings to blur the identity of the murderer could be confusing in the hands of a less talented author. However, Bernet adeptly pulls off this weave of smoke and mirrors and instead of provoking irritation in the reader generates a page-turning fascination. Theories are confounded, characters' emotions are at fever-pitch, alliances are broken and re-formed and yet the characteristics of the original characters shine through, brilliantly transplanted into a new era.

The element of surprise is cleverly and judiciously used, ensuring that readers are wholly drawn into the action yet remain clear-sighted and vigilant. Set alongside the violence and deception are familiar themes from Alcott's original work: morality, the importance of family, sacrifice and personal growth, giving the narrative a universal bedrock - and it is yet again a demonstration of Bernet's skill that she makes these themes sit completely comfortably in the modern world. **VR**



in a corrupt hierarchical system, it follows the fortunes of Flood mouth Corith who is sent from her training school to serve the House of Shearwater after the loss of her good friend Zennia in mysterious circumstances. There she finds the harsh Brigant Rexim, his enlightened daughter Catua, her haughty sister Vercha, who treats Corith like a fashion accessory, and his sons, the feckless Emmet and the brooding, handsome Lir. They are all keeping secrets as a Shakespearean style battle of political intrigue unfolds. Whom can she trust? Will she weather the coming storm?

Likened to both *Jane Eyre* and the *House of Salt and Sorrows*, it has more similarities to Leigh Bardugo's *Grisha Verse* and Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* in its portrayal of the indentured Orha who are feared because they can control the tides, the earth, wind and fire. The influence of *Superman* is in there too with the inclusion of laconite, a material that neutralises their powers.

With high stakes throughout *Tidespeaker* will appeal to readers who like action packed stories with LGBT representation, magic, courtly chicanery, betrayal and surprises. Ending on a cliff-hanger, it leaves the reader wanting more. **TJ**

Beth Is Dead

★★★★★

Katie Bernet, Scholastic, 386pp,
978-0702-34344-5, £8.99 pbk.

It is a bold move indeed to bring a literary classic kicking and screaming into the 21st century. Yet it's a move which Katie Bernet navigates successfully with this murder mystery based on Louisa May Alcott's much-loved family saga, *Little Women*. Meg, Amy, Jo and Beth are transported into a world of parties, technology and highly controversial novels. The one most immediately pre-occupying them and the huge readership which has claimed it has been written by the girls' father and culminates in Beth's death in a car crash.

The reader outrage which this fictional tragedy provokes places the March family firmly in the centre of a media storm and when their father is hounded by protesters and social media pundits their lives are irrevocably changed. Mr March flees not to the Civil War of the original manuscript but apparently to Vancouver, where he hopes his disappearance will protect his family from the vitriol of angry and disappointed readers. His contact with the family is sporadic at best and shortly after it peters out completely Beth is murdered after attending a New Year's Eve party in a gruesome echoing of her death in her father's novel.

Tidespeaker

★★★★★

Sadie Turner, Rock the Boat, 384pp,
9781836431237, £9.99, pbk

This richly imagined new YA fantasy duology promises much. Penned by Los Angeles producer Sadie Turner, it is wildly cinematic with vivid world building and Gothic trappings reminiscent of *Gormenghast*. Alive with bird imagery, it's an electrifying read with an exciting plot in an atmospheric setting of an isolated castle on an island with a causeway prone to flooding, in the Queenom of Nenamor.

Drawing on the premise of magical beings who are treated as second class citizens servile to a ruling class

The House Saphir

★★★★★

Marissa Meyer, Faber & Faber,
421pp, 9780571396979, £8.99, pbk

The House Saphir takes as its inspiration the French folk tale *Bluebeard*, in which a nobleman murders three of his four wives. Although the gruesome killings happened over a hundred years before the start of the novel, the malevolent ghost of Count Bastien - also known as Monsieur le Bleu - is still very much in evidence in the mansion, now occupied by his great-grandson Count Armand. As an added extra, the ghosts of his three wives

14+ **Secondary**/Adult continued

are volubly but benignly present, too.

The time has come to get rid of the Count and who better to do that than a witch well versed in the dark arts? Enter Mallory Fontaine and her sister Anais, encountered by Armand on one of their fraudulent ghost tours. Mallory's only gift is the ability to see ghosts and Anais lost her gifts during a childhood experiment. But when Armand offers a huge sum of money in return for the permanent banishment of Bastien's ghost, Mallory swiftly accepts and the impoverished sisters willingly move into The House Saphir.

What follows is an entertaining and sometimes alarming series of encounters with a variety of bizarre monsters and an elaborate charade on Mallory's part as she tries to convince Armand—who she is reluctant to admit she is attracted to—that she has a wealth of knowledge at her disposal with which to remove his monstrous great-grandfather. This latter artifice provides a good deal of humour, as does the presence of the ghost of Triphine, one of Bastien's wives, who is by turn petulant and prone to elaborately orchestrated histrionics. As the other two murdered wives also appear, the repartee between the three is a rich seam of fascination.

When Julie, the housemaid, is lured into marriage with Bastien, posing as Armand, she is inevitably murdered but Mallory suspects Armand, with whom Julie was completely infatuated. At its best, this shift and weave of alliances adds an intriguing complexity to the narrative. However, it is clear that Armand is besotted with Mallory but she maintains a distance, unable to trust her heart and so the narrative jinks, not always convincingly and at times too obviously around this fragile romance.

This story is packed with memorable characters—the two men who comprise the remarkable Fitcher's Troupe, the three original dead wives and a teeming horde of fantastical

creatures. Pour in an on/off romance, a savage, uncompromising ghost and a liberal helping of humour and there is much to commend it. A stronger central section would have improved



the book still more. Lovers of gothic horror and romance will swallow this down whole! **VR**

This Raging Sea

★★★★

De Elizabeth, Walker Books, 352pp, 9781529532814, £9.99, pbk. De Elizabeth's visceral YA debut novel drips with dread, ritualistic horror and disturbing imagery from the start. Influenced by Edgar Allan Poe's melancholic poem *The City in the Sea* the book uses it as a framework for six parts which span the lives of doomed bisexual teen lovers Briar and Finn. Structured in third person narrative voices throughout, it focuses on a group of diverse and damaged teens who challenge the fabric of time itself in search of a happy ending. They are described as 'a group of people broken in different places. But together they were somehow whole' with their bond at the heart of the story.

Set in a small coastal community in Massachusetts hiding desperately dark secrets, *This Raging Sea* propels readers on a tumultuous journey through pain and adverse childhood experiences, exploring the ravages of abuse, abandonment, bullying, grief, loss, fragmented family dynamics and betrayal.

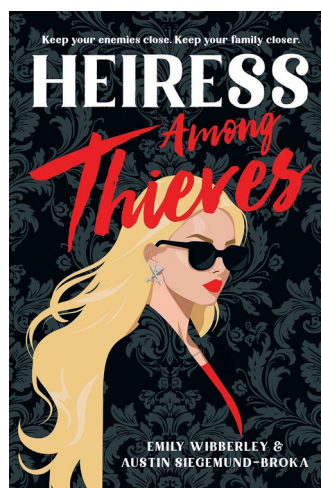
With sharp edges that cut and tear and wound, reflecting Briar's name, the author weaves elemental witchcraft, eldritch motifs, quantum physics, alternate realities and Sapphic tension into a deeply dark, intensely passionate LGBTQ+ romantasy. Its atmospheric cover, illustrated by Evangeline Gallagher, mirrors the marine symbolism and carnivalesque chaos which radiates throughout from otherworldly fairgrounds to tentacled creatures to sinister six-pointed shapes. Psychotic

voices, demonic possession, deadly stakes, twisted *Little Mermaid* style bargaining and tenebrous locales permeate throughout the sections entitled Low Tide, Rip Tide, Mixed Tide, Flood Tide and Red Tide, as the tension surges and the restless imagery of the sea suffuses the text sweeping the characters away through the liminal threads of time.

As a story of fractured love, death and tragic sacrifice, it will appeal to

fans of New England author Freddie Kölsch which is inspired by similar tropes. Where it differs is in its exploration of the butterfly effect. Unfortunately, the book overindulges in horror scenarios to the point where it lacks catharsis. Not for the faint hearted, the text bleeds throughout like Briar's ragged nails and Finn's fragile psyche as shocking revelations come to light like a Ferris wheel spinning out of control. **TJ**

YA review feature: Readers' Reviews



Heiress among Thieves

★★★★

Emily Wibberley and Austin Siegemund-Broka, Little, Brown Young Readers US, 432pp, 978-0316566797, £16.99 hbk.

This is one of the most thrilling books I have ever read. Filled with suspense and romance, every page is packed with excitement, shocking revelations, and tense heist executions. As the sequel to *Heiress Takes All*, *Heiress Among Thieves* takes everything to the next level and never loses its grip. The book completely pulled me into an elite world of thieves, lies, and clever strategies as Olivia carefully plans her next move. It was absolutely thrilling from start to finish. Reading this book also offered me a sense of escapism and pure fun. As a seventeen-year-old reading about a seventeen-year-old Olivia pulling off

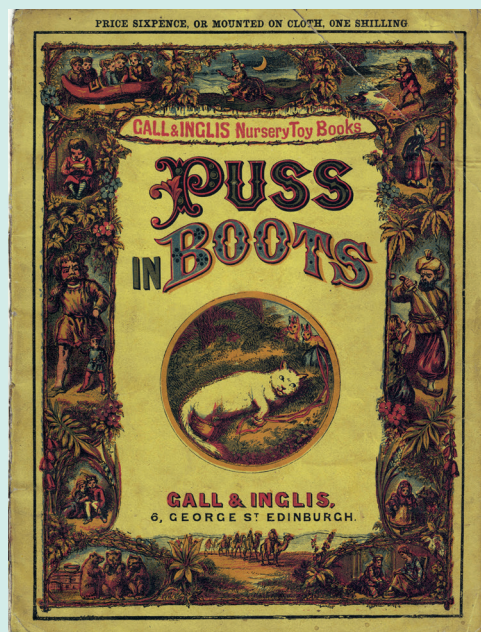
high-stakes heists, the experience felt even more lively. I could easily place myself in her shoes, which made the danger, tension, and decisions feel far more personal and immersive.

Olivia Owens is back with her crew to conduct another daring heist — this time targeting a close relative: her grandmother, Leonie. Set against the breathtaking landscapes of Switzerland, the story begins when Olivia receives an invitation to her estranged grandmother's birthday party at the family's private Swiss castle. The real reason she accepts? A vault full of gold hidden deep in a frigid dungeon. Soon, Olivia is thrown into the challenge of keeping her team together while making difficult sacrifices for the success of the heist. As we travel alongside her, new secrets and unexpected plot twists are revealed — moments that genuinely made me stop and think, *Woah*.

One of the best parts was how the story intertwined high-stakes action with romance — especially the relationship between Olivia and her boyfriend, Jackson, alongside the unresolved tension with her ex, Tom. Nevertheless, the book also balances the suspense of 'will Olivia succeed in her heist?' with deeper themes such as the complicated bond between father and daughter and the idea of sisterhood — though, of course, not normal in a family of deceivers. The only disappointment was the cliffhanger ending, but it definitely sent chills down my spine. This is a book I truly hope gets another sequel! **Sai Sanhita**

Valediction: **No.26** Puss in Boots

Brian Alderson is presenting his collection of children's books to **Seven Stories** and **Newcastle University**. Amongst them, this special edition of **Puss in Boots**.



The story was first published in French as one of the collection of Perault's so-called fairy stories (more likely folk-tales) in 1696, which he claimed to have collected from his son's nurse. The translation by Robert Samber was not published in English until 1722 [?] and the text follows very popular English translations, attributed by John Newbery to a certain G. M Gent (probably Samber).

Some uncertainty concerns the illustrator whom Dr Gote Klingberg names as Kate Greenaway in his study of Swedish translations of English picture books, **Denna lilla gris gar till torget**, Rabén & Sjogren 1987. Klingberg notes the drawings as being mentioned by Spielmann and Layard

but only Klingberg names the Edinburgh publisher. Incidentally, Greenaway's father was also an illustrator and may have influenced the commission. Dr Klingberg lists 9 numbers attributed to Greenaway, mostly from French sources, before Gall & Inglis moved from Edinburgh to London.

There is a surprising parallel in the trick that the cat plays on the Ogre. His capture by persuading him to grow from a lion to a mouse is paralleled by Wagner in the second act of his opera *Rheingold* where Wotan and Loki play a similar trick on Alberich in order to get the stolen ring, getting him to change into a giant snake and then a little toad.

[Charles Perault?] **Puss in Boots**. Edinburgh: Gall and Inglis. ND probably 1870. 245 x 185. [16 pp including covers]. [1] front cover as title. [2] unsigned four colour frontispiece attrib. Kate Greenaway, some misplaced. [3-4] Text? Probably from Robert Samber [5] blank [6-7] two full colour illustrations as frontis. [8-9] Blank [10-11] Two full colour illustrations as frontis. [12] blank [13-14] Text as 3-4 [15] Full colour illustration as frontis. [16] Rear cover Gall & Inglis booklist. Price 6d.



Special offer for Books for Keeps readers

Brian Alderson is offering BfK readers copies of Dr Klingberg's study (free, P&P £3).

To request a copy, email us with your name, address and contact details: enquiries@booksforkeeps.co.uk



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.