

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.277

the children's book magazine online

March 2026

Authorgraph interview Patrick Ness



PIPER
AT THE
GATES
OF
DUSK

Windows into Illustration Sarah McIntyre

Plus Polly Dunbar

New Letterbox Library recommends

Ursula Dubosarsky profile

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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **Piper at the Gates of Dusk**, written by **Patrick Ness**. Thanks to **Walker Books** for their help with this cover.

Editorial 276

Children's Books: who's winning?



March is a busy month for prizes, with the winner of the **Nero Gold Prize** announced as well as the shortlists for the **Children's Book Award** and **Carnegie Medals**. It was particularly sad therefore to hear that **Oscar's Book Prize** is closing. Set up over 10 years ago by Viveka Alvestrand and James Ashton in memory of their young son, the prize celebrated picture books 'that spark wonder, comfort and connection in the earliest years of life' with winners including Chris Haughton, Benji Davies and Polly Noakes amongst others. It's not proved possible to find a sponsor.

Also looking for a backer is the unique and important **Little Rebels Award**, run by **Letterbox Library** and **Housmans' Bookshop** on behalf of the **Alliance of Radical Booksellers**. The Award is paused this year, and **Catherine Barter** of **Housmans Bookshop** explains, 'Like so many endeavours across the book world, the **Little Rebels Award** runs mostly on love and enthusiasm, and relies on a huge amount of unpaid work. As organisers we've temporarily reached a point where it's unsustainable. But we hope that this pause will allow us to regroup and come back with a bang in 2027.' If you know of potential sponsors or sources of funding, contact the organisers via info@letterboxlibrary.com.

There's good news though with the announcement of the **Barrington Stoke Reader of the Year Award**. Launched by the **School Library Association** in collaboration with **Barrington Stoke**, the award will celebrate young readers, recognising pupils in Year 7 and 8 who 'have overcome challenge to discover the joy of reading.'

The **School Library Association** are also celebrating the receipt of £500,000 from the **Charlotte Aitken Trust**. The funding will deliver 1,000 social book clubs in over 100 secondary school libraries in London, the West Midlands and North East of England as part of a scheme called **Reading Reboot**, which aims to transform how the most disadvantaged and disengaged young people interact with literature and reading. With a focus on Year 8 pupils, the age at which reading for pleasure often shows the steepest decline, and the year group that will soon be subject to a new mandatory reading test, **Reading Reboot** will deliver ten-week book clubs, run in dedicated spaces within school libraries, by specially trained school librarians.

Key components of the book club sessions will be dedicated space and time for reading engagement

within the school timetable, supported by senior leadership teams; dedicated book stock, with 100+ new books provided to each participating school; free choice of book titles for participating pupils and a removal of the pressure to read.

Reading Reboot builds on a proven model, piloted in collaboration with **Farshore** and **HarperCollins Children's Books** in 2024. We look forward to reporting on the results.

State schools can sign up to receive more information about the **Reading Reboot** programme now.

AI update

The **House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee** have published a report on AI, copyright and the creative industries.

The report's recommendations included:

- Rejecting a broad copyright exception for AI training
- Supporting a 'licensing-first' approach to AI development
- Establishing meaningful transparency requirements around AI developers' training data

The report acknowledges the importance of protecting the UK's copyright system and supporting the development of measures to enable a licensing regime that will balance use of content with appropriate compensation to authors and suggests a potential future where *'the UK becomes a world-leading home for responsible, licensing-based artificial intelligence (AI) development, where commercial model developers using UK content obtain permission, pay fair remuneration to rights holders and can deploy their models without questions of legal liability'* and acknowledges the importance of 'a "gold-standard" copyright framework, which rewards creativity, supports sustainable business models for creative work, and commands international respect' to achieve this.

ALCS is working closely with partners to explore and develop a licensing framework aimed at ensuring that authors are properly recognised and remunerated when their works are used to train and develop generative AI systems. Collective licensing for AI is still in its early stages but represents an important step towards bringing about transparency, accountability, and fair value exchange into the AI ecosystem.

More on this no doubt in the months ahead and [read the report in full here](#).

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Continuing the Story: Welcoming the 2026 GLL Literary Foundation Authors

Over the past year, **Books for Keeps** has followed the journey of the **GLL Literary Foundation** as it supported its first cohort of children's authors across Bromley, Dudley, Greenwich, Lincolnshire and Wandsworth. What began in 2025 as a commitment to invest in emerging writers and to champion public libraries has developed into something rooted in partnership, conversation and shared experience.

As we enter our second year, we are delighted to begin sharing stories again and to announce the **2026 GLL Literary Foundation** authors.

During its first year, the Foundation supported 20 authors to deliver more than 60 events in libraries, schools and community venues. Thousands of children met authors in their local libraries, often discovering that writers live in their borough, know the places they know and sometimes grew up nearby. Those moments of local recognition have stayed with us.

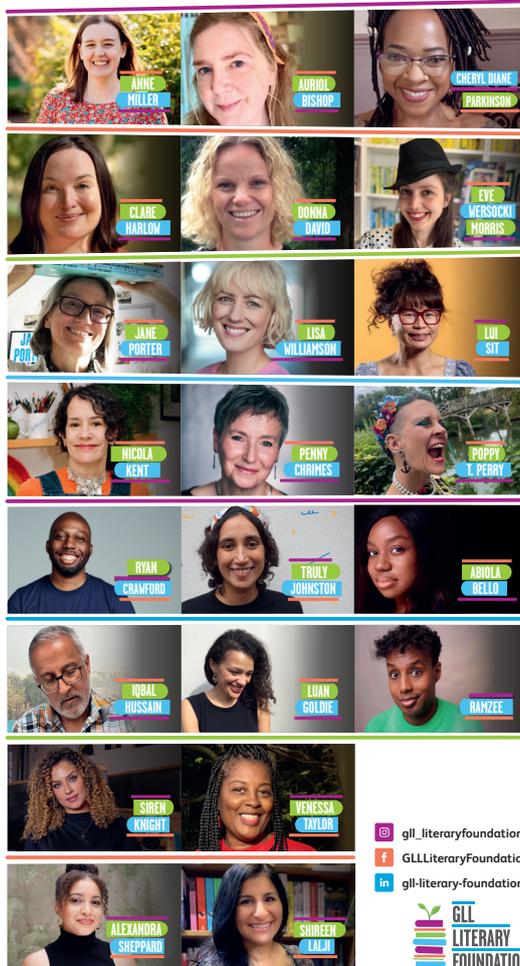
At the centre of the programme are the Literary Foundation Champions. These librarians work closely with each author throughout the year, helping to shape events, make introductions to schools and local partners, and offer practical encouragement. Over time, those working relationships have become collaborative partnerships. Champions and authors have shared ideas, reflected on what works well with different age groups and supported one another as confidence grows.

Each author in the Foundation receives a £750 bursary alongside tailored in-kind professional development support valued at up to £4,000. This includes specialist training in branding, marketing and business skills, as well as introductions to booksellers, festivals and wider industry contacts. The intention is to provide space for development while keeping libraries at the heart of the work.

Much of what the **Literary Foundation** team has been doing in recent months has involved building on those foundations. We have continued working with publishers, festivals and sector partners to create opportunities for authors beyond individual events. Some of this is visible in industry gatherings or training sessions. Much of it happens more quietly, in planning conversations and introductions that gradually widen an author's network.

All 20 authors from the inaugural cohort will now continue through a new Alumni Programme. Their relationships with schools and libraries have strengthened over time, and extending their involvement allows those connections to deepen. It also creates space for peer support as a new group of writers joins the Foundation.

We are pleased to introduce the **2026 GLL Literary Foundation** authors: **Truly Johnston, Penny Chrimes, Venessa Taylor** and **Abiola Bello** in Bromley; **Poppy T. Perry, Donna David** and **Siren Knight** in Dudley; **Clare Harlow, Ryan Crawford, Nicola Kent, Auriol Bishop, Lisa Williamson** and **Luan Goldie** in Greenwich; **Cheryl Diane Parkinson** and **Anne Miller** in Lincolnshire; **Lui Sit, Eve Wersocki-Morris, Jane Porter, Iqbal Hussain** and **Ramzee** in Wandsworth.



The new cohort brings a wide range of genres, experiences and creative interests. Over the coming months they will begin working with their Literary Foundation Champions, planning school visits, library sessions and opportunities to meet young readers within their communities.

For 2026 author Iqbal Hussain, joining the Foundation feels closely connected to his own experience of libraries, 'As someone brought up in a large working-class family where books were seen as a luxury, I've been a lifelong supporter of libraries and the worlds they open up for children like me who couldn't afford our own books. The year ahead will give me dedicated mentoring on building my author brand, developing school visits and meeting my audience, alongside invaluable writing and networking opportunities. Most importantly, it's my way of paying it forward: doing what I can to champion libraries for young readers, especially in this National Year of Reading.'

His reflection captures something we have seen repeatedly over the past year. Libraries are not simply venues for author events. They are places connected to personal reading histories, and returning to them as a writer carries particular meaning.

In recent months, the Foundation has also remained active within the wider children's books community. We attended the **Inclusive Books for Children Awards** in

February, celebrating inclusive storytelling during the National Year of Reading. We were also pleased to learn that the **GLL Literary Foundation** has been shortlisted for Library of the Year at the **2026 British Book Awards**. The recognition belongs to the authors, Literary Foundation Champions and library teams who have shaped the programme across all GLL Libraries.

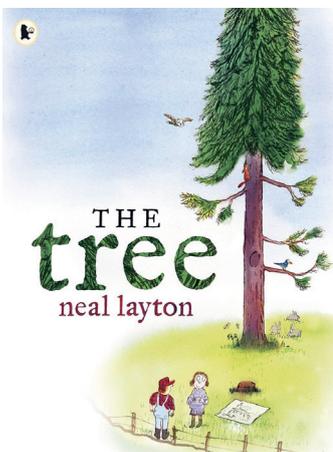
Looking ahead, we will take part in discussions at the London Book Fair about how libraries and publishers can work more closely together to support authors and strengthen local connections with readers. These conversations build directly on what we have learned through practical collaboration over the past year. As plans take shape across the boroughs, there is a sense of anticipation. Returning authors continue their work with growing confidence. The 2026 cohort prepares for first events and new introductions. Champions are already reaching out to schools and mapping out the months ahead. We are looking forward to working with such an inspiring group of authors and to sharing more of their experiences with **Books for Keeps** readers as the **GLL Literary Foundation** continues into its second year.

For more information about the **GLL Literary Foundation**, visit: www.better.org.uk/library/gll-literary-foundation

10 Ten of the Best Books about Trees for Young Children

Selected by **Ann Lazim**

The significance of trees in our world is explored in books extending far beyond identification guides. Research that demonstrates the interconnection between trees and fungi in ways that are co-operative rather than competitive is filtering through to children's literature, joining the many books that show the relationships between humans and trees. The variety is so good and wide-ranging, narrowing the selection proved difficult so I've chosen to focus on titles, particularly picturebooks, with appeal for younger children. However, many will speak to older readers too.

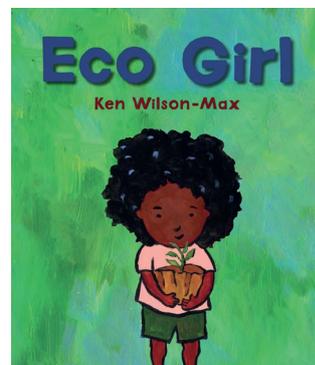


The Tree

Neal Layton, Walker Books, 978-1406373202, £7.99 pbk

The minimal text in this picturebook, begins with 'a tree' opposite a picture of a lone tree next to a fence and a sign saying 'Land for Sale'. Then the animal homes within it are named, while the pictures portray their occupants. Along come some new arrivals – what changes might they bring and will they be for good or ill? There's a wonderful wordless central moment when

the protagonists realise what they have done and before they are galvanised into affirmative action uniting the tree's inhabitants.



Eco Girl

Ken Wilson-Max, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1913074319, £12.99 hbk

One of this author/illustrator's picture books encouraging environmental awareness in young children. Eve's home is near a forest and of all the trees she especially loves the Baobab. On her birthday, her grandmother gives her a Baobab seedling for her to plant and care for, continuing a family tradition. Eve's own growth is

likened to that of a tree, graduating from being called a 'sprout' to a 'sapling'. Her family aid her curiosity and growing understanding about communication between trees and their importance in Earth's ecosystem. Facts following the story include information about Wangari Maathai's environmental work planting trees in Kenya..

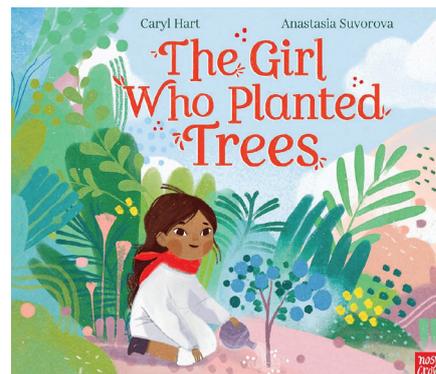


Leave the Trees, Please

Benjamin Zephaniah, illus. Melissa Castrillon, Magic Cat 978-1915569202, £12.99 hbk

A simple heartfelt plea from the much-missed poet reflecting on the interconnectedness of nature and begging humankind to recognise the vital role that trees play in this, and leave them alone to play their part. In this picturebook Melissa Castrillon places an oak tree at the centre of her illustrations that complement and extend

the words in the poem, using a limited but very striking palette of greens and reddish browns and portraying children at the heart of protests to protect the trees.



The Girl Who Planted Trees

Caryl Hart, illus. Anastasia Suvorova, Nosy Crow 978-1788008914, £7.99 pbk

A small girl lives 'in a dry little village at the foot of a great grey mountain.' A picture in a book shows her that the mountain was

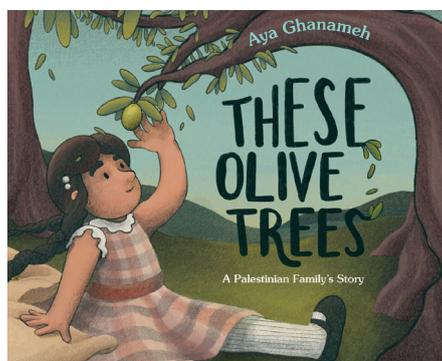
once covered in trees but gradually these have been cut down leaving it barren and bare. She determines to restore the trees. She experiments with planting fruit pips and, by trial and error, and with patience and the advice of her grandfather and ultimately the help of their whole community, she succeeds in turning the great grey mountain green again. The setting is not specified although the illustrations in this picturebook suggest an Asian location.



Ann Lazim was librarian at **CLPE (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education)** for 29 years. She is a committee member of the UK section of **IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People)**. She edits reviews of children's and YA books for *Historical Novels Review* and is on the jury of the Indian **NEEV Children's Book Award**.

Plus a mention for **Once I Was a Tree** by Eoin McLaughlin, illus. Guilherme Karsten (Nosy Crow 978-1805130406) which received a recent 5 star BfK review: booksforkeeps.co.uk/review/once-i-was-a-tree/

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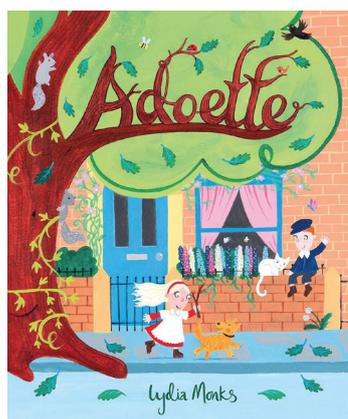


These Olive Trees. A Palestinian Family's Story

Aya Ghanameh, Viking,
USA 978-0593525180,
£15.99 hbk

The significance of the olive tree in Palestinian culture, history and survival is shown in this picturebook that begins with a small child tasting

its fruit and learning the many uses of this tree and how long it takes to grow. Over the years, her family is forced to move to different refugee camps, always planting and tending olive trees where they can and seeing them as a symbol of return. The story is based on the life of the author/illustrator's grandmother, Oraib, born after the 1948 Nakba.

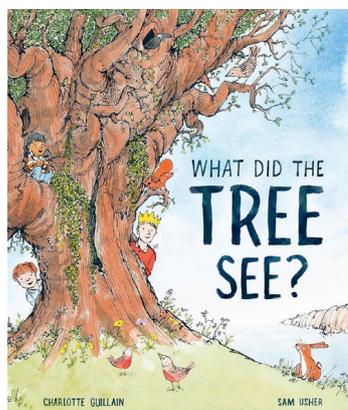


Adoette

Lydia Monks, Andersen Press,
978-1839131905, £7.99 pbk

Changes in a city street over a period of a hundred years are envisioned as though seen by a tree that has been growing there all that time. Adoette – a French word for a big tree – sees families grow and people come and go in a microcosm of social and political history. When Adoette's presence is considered to be a problem plans are hatched to chop her

down and the local community gathers in protest. Inspired by a real situation in Sheffield where Lydia Monks lives, this picturebook draws on environmental concerns, especially consideration of the importance of trees, and demonstrates the power of people and community. Nominated to the **IBBY Honour List 2024**.

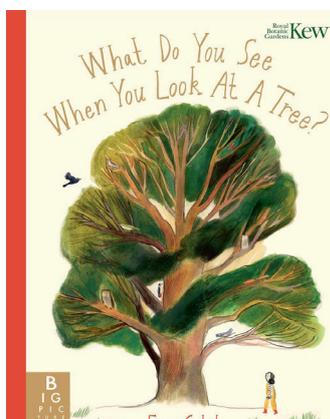


What Did the Tree See?

Charlotte Guillain,
illus. Sam Usher, Welbeck
978-1913519292, £6.99 pbk

A rhyming text describes the changes that occur as an oak tree grows from an acorn and concurrently what it sees over many centuries from the place where it grows overlooking a bay by the sea. A fascinating narrative about how the histories of humans and trees intertwine.

Appendices include a timeline about historical events that have taken place during the tree's lifetime and a description of its life cycle. The idea of an oak tree bringing history to life is also explored by Julia Donaldson and Victoria Sandøy in **The Oak Tree** (Alison Green Books 978-0702324352) while Rob and Tom Sears inhabit the persona of a thought-provoking ancient yew tree in **A Tree is a Time Machine** (Laurence King 978-1510231207)

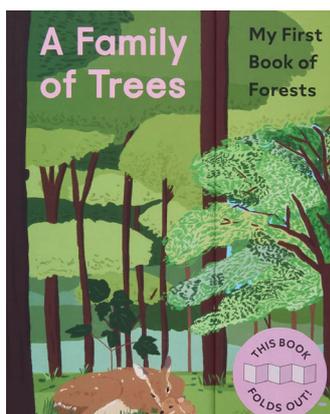


What Do You See When You Look at a Tree?

Emma Carlisle, Big Picture Press,
978-1800784383, £8.99 pbk

Endorsed by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, this poetic picturebook celebrates the interconnectedness between trees and human beings and inspires the deepening of that relationship. Readers are encouraged to realise that "Trees are all different, special, unique..." as well as consider their history and the wildlife that lives

within and around them and learn 'How to Be More Like a Tree.' An endnote acknowledges the 'wood wide web' communication network that functions amongst trees and fungi. A warm palette predominantly of greens and browns has been used in creating illustrations that are broadly representational of some of the species of trees mentioned

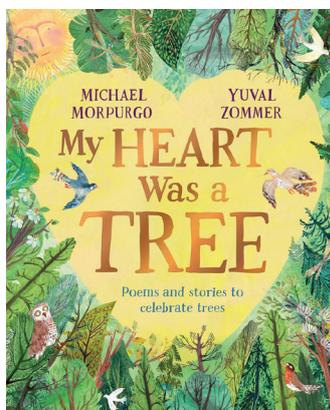


A Family of Trees: My First Book of Forests

Peggy Thomas, illus. Cookie Moon, Phaidon 978-1838667817,
£12.95 fold-out board book

'A group of trees is called a forest... and a forest is a family'. Thus begins the text in this foldout board book which then goes on to expand on this analogy by showing how trees care for each other and share this with nature more widely. On the reverse a map opens an exploration of imaginatively described 'Forest

Families Around the World' with an example of each kind. Selected for the 2025 **Bologna Ragazzi Award: BRAW Amazing Bookshelf in the Sustainability** category.



My Heart Was a Tree Poems and stories to celebrate trees

Michael Morpurgo, illus. Yuval Zommer. Two Hoots
978-1529094800, £12.99 pbk

Inspired by a Ted Hughes' poem, Jean Giono's **The Man Who Planted Trees** and the bluebell woods near his home, Michael Morpurgo has written this collection of stories and poems that celebrate the close links between trees and humans. Some are told by trees

themselves, such as the red oak tree that begins the first of its nine lives in a Nova Scotia forest and the ancient alder that observes teeming riverside wildlife. Others are full of meaning for people, whether it's the apple tree that witnesses the exchanges between a grandparent and grandchild or the weeping willow tree which is reborn in a new land when a family flees Ukraine. Full grown trees stand tall and leaves are scattered in Yuval Zommer's accompanying illustrations.

Authorgraph No.277

Patrick Ness
interviewed by
Nicolette Jones

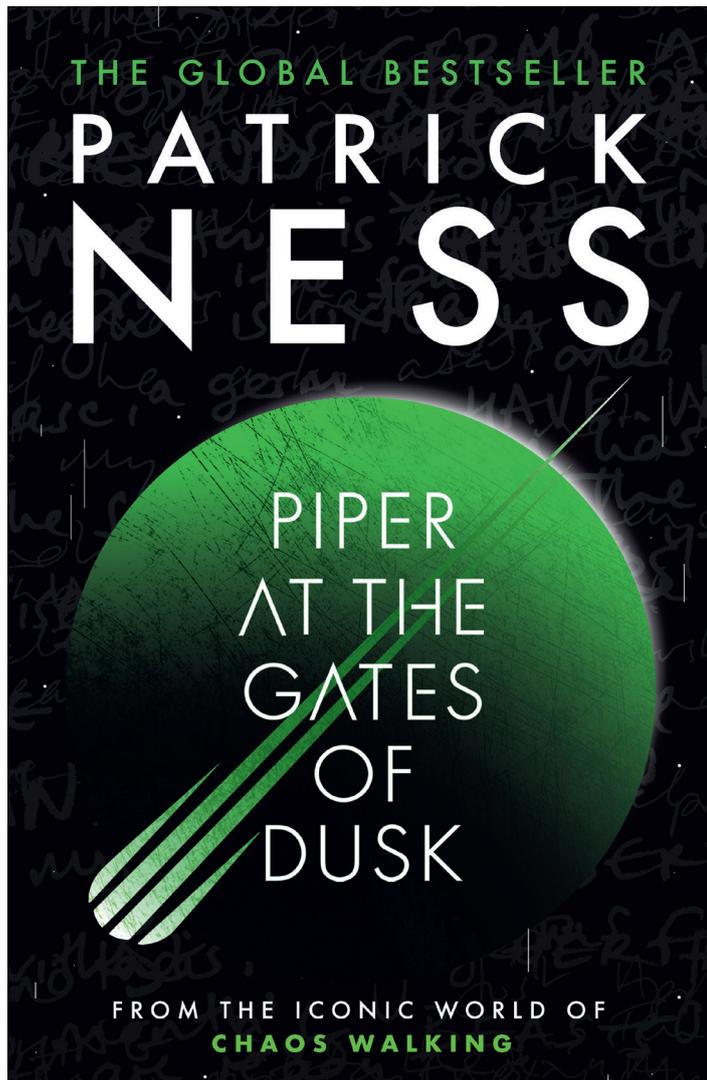
Patrick Ness was happy with how his celebrated **Chaos Walking** trilogy ended, and he considered its story complete. But now there is **Piper at the Gates of Dusk**, the first book in a new trilogy from his world where, to begin with, all the thoughts of men were audible (as 'Noise'), and only women's were silent. It is set twenty years later and Todd and Viola are now the parents of two boys, Ben (in honour of his grandfather) and Max. And in the foreword Ness says he feels nervous.

'My terror is complacency. I think that's how mediocre books get written. If I'm starting on a book thinking, yeah, I know how to do this and it's going to be fine, fine is the death word. I didn't want to repeat myself and fall into the terrible, terrible trap of fine. But it was scary enough; I like to be fruitfully nervous and fruitfully scared for any book, because it makes you pay attention.'

Despite the nerves, two new ideas turned Ness's doubts into a fourth volume. 'The main idea I had been turning around and around was the Pied Piper, which is not an easy fairy tale to unpack. What is it? A lesson? Part of it is about how we're led and how we act as groups. And that to me is always a scary, scary thing. And then there is that terrible exception, the boy who gets left behind. And that feels so poignant to me, the feeling of being left out; every teenager feels that.' The second idea came about because in the 18 years since Ness wrote **The Knife of Never Letting Go**, 'the conversation about gender



photo by Stephen Day

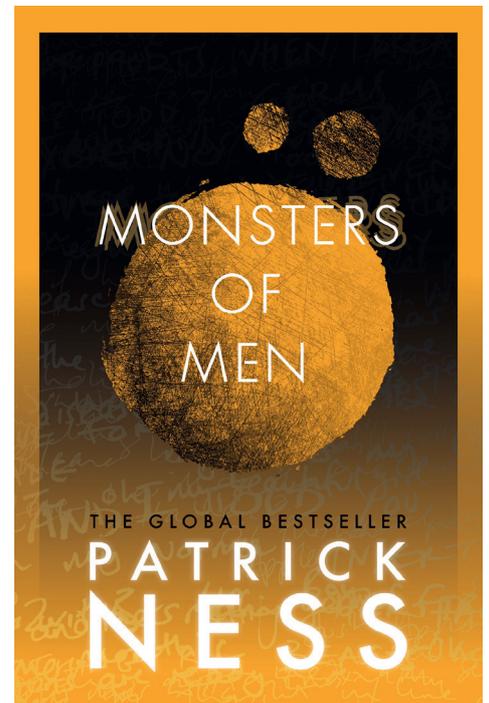
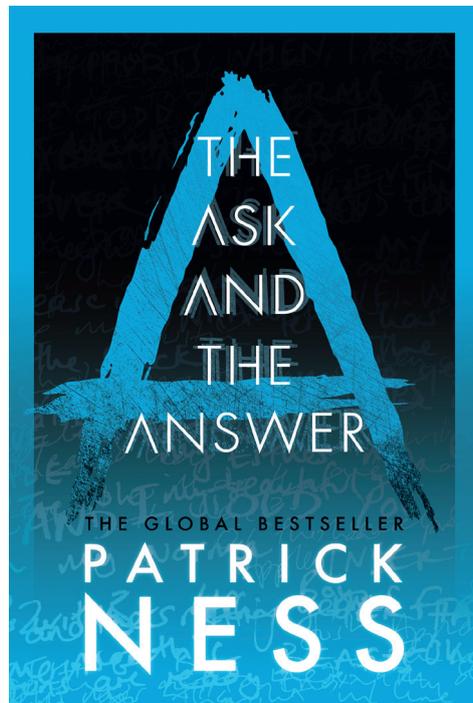
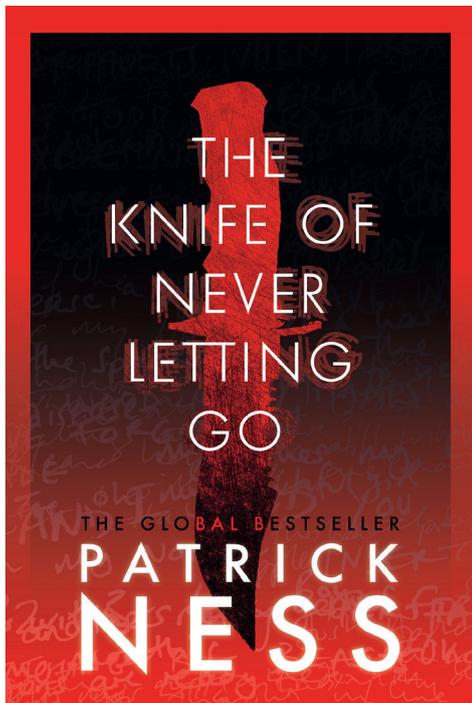


has changed. I drew a line between genders, not to – and really, this is a strong emphasis - not to point out some core difference between them, but just to explore how humans handle obvious difference. But I've been asked what about the people in between? What about someone who might be transitioning from one to another? And I thought, that feels really interesting. How do they exist in that world and how does the world view them?

We learn, after a while, that one character was born with Noise, but was assigned female at birth, before transitioning when he got older. 'What I'm trying to suggest is that there is a spectrum on the Noise. Ben [the grandfather] talks about it a little bit: some boys have quieter Noise and some girls have a little bit of Noise, and sometimes those girls are girls and sometimes those girls are boys.'

Ness gives Viola the opportunity to ask some questions. Such as: Are you sure? Is it a phase? Are you a tomboy? 'It felt a little risky, because I want us to love Viola, and Viola is on the right side of everything, but it also is the experience of the closet. You live an entire life in secret. And then you come out of the closet, usually after many years of thought and decision, and you want everybody to be right there with you at the end of the road, when the reality is they haven't had all this time to come to terms with it or to ask their questions. I just thought Viola is the scientist and would want to know the facts of the case. You're allowed to wonder. You're allowed to be curious about something that you have no personal experience of. But in the end, believe the person who has the experience.' Viola does when she has her answers.

The title of the book, alluding to a chapter of **The Wind in the Willows** (also quoted in an epigraph), suggests that Kenneth Grahame is another inspiration. Ness admits he is a fan. **The Wind in the Willows** never apologizes for its setting or characters. It is 100% its own world. And it expects you to come to it, just lays it down as it is. And that is my favourite sort of universe. While you're



reading it, it makes perfect sense. And that's what I always want to do. I want to give you a universe that doesn't justify itself.

'And every time I think of **The Wind in the Willows**, I think of them [Mole and Ratty] in that little boat, and the sun just peeking over. Obviously my book is not bucolic. It's violent and messy, but the sun peeking over those two in a boat feels like what that world could be and what it might have been, what it was before humans got there.'

Certainly the opening of the new novel is not bucolic. It opens with a rampaging monster – a burning god, whose nature does not become clear till late in the book. 'The images of the god were pure gut. I didn't question. I just think the nightmares I have tend to be something huge and overwhelming. And so I thought, let's not unpick. Let's just leave it as that. I tend to find out what my books are about when I've finished.'

The monsters in this story, like the Piper, make children disappear. And the book has a twisty plot, which can make the reader feel safe, then suddenly not, and meanwhile it carries big themes and big emotions. 'I always say, show me a writer who says plot isn't important and I'll show you a writer who can't plot. I love plot. I love a story that is a rollercoaster. I always do my best to make sure that my plot works. Then I can concentrate on everything I really love, which is characters and jokes and odd scenes. So that's really important to me: plot as structure, on which you can pile all kinds of fun stuff. That to me is the magic.'

The stuff piled onto the plot includes explorations of relationships between brothers, of what it means to be a good father, and the power of adoption. There is a good deal of personal experience behind this. 'I have two brothers and a sister. My younger brother is adopted and his oldest son is adopted. And every book I've ever written has been one way or another about found family because that's often the queer experience – though definitely not exclusively. Biology can be important, but that a human being can reach out to another human being to whom they're not biologically related and say, you are family, is a miracle to me. A beautiful miracle. And in the midst of all these terrible choices that humanity is making, that's a gorgeous one.'

Ness talks about his characters as if they exist outside himself. 'I feel like Ben is a glimpse of those boys we see more and more these days – which is great – boys who say I love you to their male friends. That kind of boy who's learning that there is more to a man's emotional life than he's been allowed in the past. Give him a chance to be the good guy, to love his brother, and he will. I found that really moving.'

Ness lost his father just over a year ago, and fatherhood is also a strong theme. 'I was very close to my father. He was an unexpected man, quite religious, quite conservative, former military, and yet we always got along, always, my entire life. He had been somewhat burned by his own upbringing, by his own father. His first priority was I love my family. Everything else we'll figure out. And that's what I try to have Todd be. There is something so moving about a dad like my dad, who steps outside of a stereotype and who will surprise you. I have always thought Todd would make a great dad, and he is.'

It is not surprising, given the exploration of authoritarianism in **Chaos Walking**, that there is also a strong political current to the new book. An elected leader who lies, not least to himself, and a scapegoated community. This has resonances both in the US, where Ness finished the book, and in Britain, to which he has now returned. There is no single real-life model for the character but only an internal logic to the way people behave, inevitably informed by real events – although people have seen more emphasis on politics in the book than Ness expected.

And there is another unlikely source of inspiration for this book: E M Forster and the cross-class relationship in his novel, **Maurice**. 'Maurice and Scudder run off together and have a happy ending. And they have nothing in common.' The dynamic influenced Todd and Viola. 'They're entirely different people: their upbringings, their references, everything is different. But I believe that they would be in love, and I believe that they would have a connection. But what if years later they have a little bit less in common than they thought. How would they deal with it? This comes from wondering what happens twenty years later.'

And now there are answers for readers who wonder too.

Books mentioned: all published by Walker Books

Piper at the Gates of Dusk, 978-1529537581, £16.99 hbk

The Knife of Never Letting Go, 978-1406379167, £9.99 pbk

The Ask and the Answer, 978-1406379174, £9.99 pbk

Monsters of Men, 978-1406379181, £9.99 pbk



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

Windows into Illustration: Sarah McIntyre

Created jointly by Philip Reeve and Sarah McIntyre, the **Adventuremice** books, stories of a community of little mice who undertake some big adventures, are action-packed and full of humour. Each page features glowing full-colour illustrations of the Adventuremice and here **Sarah McIntyre** describes the creative process that goes into each one.

Of the nearly 100 illustrations in the new **Adventuremice** book, let's focus on the title page. I love title pages; you see them before you really know what the story will be about, and it's a clue to what's going to happen later. One of the most enjoyable things about these books is the growing friendship between Pedro and Fledermaus. This later scene in the story is supposed to be quite serious, when they're assembling mummy disguises to escape from the baddies, but I had fun showing them mucking about.

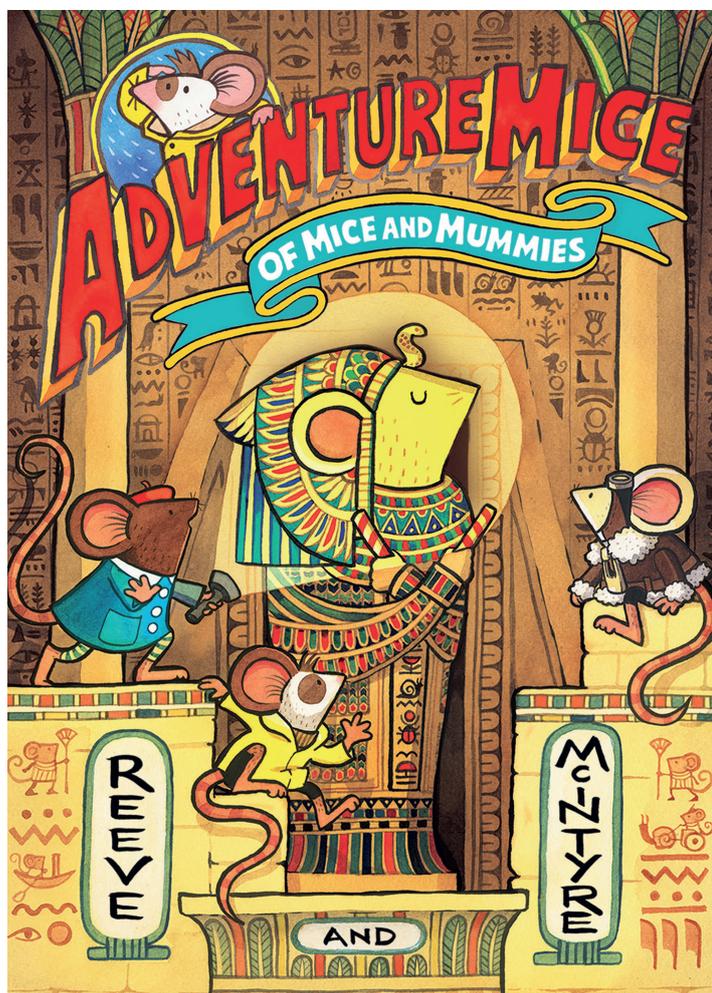
After Philip and I brainstormed the story, he wrote most of the words, although I kept helping with more ideas when we needed them. Then he helped me with the early sketches, which we call



'pencil roughs'. We spent about two days filling spaces in between words, adding little jokes and details as we went.

I scanned our sketches and emailed them to designer Katie Bennett, who figured out how our sketches would best fit into the book's pages.

It's a tricky process: sometimes a picture neatly fills a space but doesn't sit well enough with the story's pacing. For example, a jokey picture might immediately follow a joke in a text and belabour the point too much. Or we might decide to show a character just before a surprising thing happens to them, rather than their follow-up reaction, to let the reader be in on the joke. Katie might find there's a bit of extra space and we'll slip in a fun extra picture. Or she might advise us not to let an important part of a picture fall down 'the gutter', the crack down the middle of the book where it's hard to see what's going on.





When Katie sent the layouts back, I printed out this page, about 150% larger than the size it would be in the book, then taped it to the underside of heavy watercolour paper. When I placed it on my light box, I could see through the thick paper, exactly where I needed to paint and areas I needed to leave clear for the words. The painting process took about five hours: to start, I painted a gentle yellow watercolour wash, to give the picture a warm, antiquated atmosphere, like an old papyrus scroll. After that dried, I used a Pentel brush pen to create thicker black lines, tracing the sketch, and finally used watercolour to paint all the details and shading.

Then I scanned the painting and, using Photoshop, placed it into the digital file Katie had created, sizing the picture so that it fit underneath my hand-lettered title banner and above our author names. Finally I emailed it to her, and she made sure all the pages were organised into a tidy book file that was ready to email to the printer. Now I have a finished piece of art that I can sell on our [Adventuremice](http://Adventuremice.com) website or frame for my own wall. (I think I'm keeping this one!)



The **Adventuremice** books by Sarah McIntyre and Philip Reeve are published by David Fickling Books. Book eight, **Adventuremice: Of Mice and Mummies**, is out now, 978-1788453547, £6.99 pbk.



Discover more at Adventuremice.com

Out and about in the National Year of Reading

The **National Year of Reading 2026** from the **Department for Education** and the **National Literacy Trust** seeks to address the steep decline in the nation's enjoyment of reading, as research shows that children and young people's reading enjoyment and daily reading habits have reached 20-year lows. **Charlotte Moore**, Campaign Manager at the **National Literacy Trust**, reports on successful local initiatives up and running now.

Reading for pleasure matters. When children and young people enjoy reading, they read more often, helping to strengthen vital reading skills and improve academic attainment across the board. Not only that, but it also supports improved wellbeing, helps to build empathy and confidence, and sparks imaginations. And these benefits are felt long into adulthood.

Inspiring a transformative love of reading sits at the heart of our place-based work in communities across the UK where low literacy and poverty are having the most serious impact on children's and families' lives.

Our teams in 21 localities across the four nations, from Belfast to Lowestoft, Cornwall to Dundee, work tirelessly with schools, community groups, businesses, local government and families to promote reading for pleasure and the myriad benefits it brings.

But not every year can be the official **National Year of Reading**, and this intensely focused 12-month period, when the bang of the drum is loudest, is being seized as an opportunity to extend our reach and impact. Beyond this year, the success of the National Year of Reading will depend on the legacy we are able to build by empowering more children and families to discover a love of reading and develop the reading skills they need to succeed.

'It's definitely the right time for us,' says Linzi Winn, Manager of the **National Literacy Trust** in the North East, which focuses its efforts on reaching audiences in Newcastle and Gateshead, where the need is greatest.



Linzi Winn with child

The **National Year of Reading** has given Winn an extra hook with which to introduce the **National Literacy Trust's** mission and work to potential partners in these cities. Organisations and foundations have approached her, too, either with funding for projects or an eagerness to sign-up as volunteers, and this has allowed work to evolve, take place in many different forms and engage new community groups.

A collaboration with **Gateshead Music Service** to celebrate **National Storytelling Week** in February saw Newcastle musician Kema Kay visit school children to deliver sessions that linked music and literacy. Not only did this encapsulate the **National Year of Reading's** campaign message to 'Go All In' on your passions through reading, but it engaged the strong Nigerian community in Gateshead. Winn says, 'These voices weren't necessarily represented so much in the books children were reading. We wanted to find an artist that resonated with them, that inspired them with interest first.'

Summer plans in Newcastle and Gateshead include a travelling teepee to take storytelling and reading to families in the places and spaces where they already spend time. 'A lot of the places that have all the exciting stuff on in the summer are ticketed, and that's a huge barrier, so getting funding from **Daisy Education** for the teepee has been absolutely brilliant for us.'

Recruiting volunteers – known as Literacy Champions – is key for Winn as part of the legacy of the **National Year of Reading**. Families who see people from their community championing the benefits of reading are more likely to connect with the habit, and this, Winn says, is 'the way in.'

'In one of our areas in Byker, we've got partners literally next door to one another, all doing something different. The Family Hub is next to a local housing association, which is next to the food bank and schools, and that collaboration within the community really raises the profile of literacy and embeds reading in the places families encounter every day.'



Dundee school library opening (Jenni Leigh pictured)

This is echoed in Dundee, where Manager Jenni Leigh is seeing the **National Year of Reading** as a way of encouraging conversation about reading and building a momentum that connects people, places and books.

Following the **National Year of Reading's** Scottish launch in Edinburgh this January, which was supported by Her Majesty The Queen, Patron of the **National Literacy Trust**, Leigh said, 'Without a doubt, the reach of the launch event was huge. I thought it was quite spectacular. And in terms of opening doors, it hopefully has for other people in the country. There are many people talking about it – but we just need a lot more people to do so.'



National Year of Reading launch, Scotland

Her hope is that momentum keeps building in Dundee, made all-the-more likely with partners like DC Thomson, who publish *The Beano*, on board.

'I think the current trends we're seeing through our Annual Literacy Survey show it's not a losing battle, but we are fighting against the tide,' she adds. 'Visibility of reading and conversation, they're key things for me.'

Plans are afoot to work with Dundee Libraries to host free events with storytellers and authors that open venues and new reading experiences to families who wouldn't be able to afford to attend paid events. But Leigh also sees opportunity in working with families who already centre reading in their homes and social lives.

'I went to **Waterstones Children's Book Festival** recently and was giving stickers and bookmarks to everyone waiting in line for Cressida Cowell's event. I was encouraging all the children to tell their friends at school how much they love reading, and their favourite book, and talk to them about the library. The people who know the value of reading can help us spread the message; theirs are the voices in the community who people will listen to.'

Naturally, these conversations are more easily sparked in a **National Year of Reading**, where the practice is front and centre.

Leigh continues, 'In lots of ways, we are carrying on as normal with the programmes we deliver and the work we do, but with a sense of a weight of something really interesting and exciting that we can plug into. It adds another layer to everything we do.'



Anish Harrison (on left) with donated books

In Swindon, the campaign that threads through the **National Year of Reading** – encouraging people to read around their passions and interests – was already on the radar. Anish Harrison is the Manager of the **National Literacy Trust** in Swindon and has gleaned from conversations, particularly with dads, that hobbies are a big hook to get parents to pick up a book and share it with their children.

Consequently, plans in Swindon were easily aligned with the **Go All In** campaign. A recent virtual author event with Big Manny, best known for his science-themed social media content, had 1,276 pupils registered to attend from 11 local schools. An event with a motorsport correspondent who now writes children's books about Formula 1 drivers is planned. Literacy Champion volunteers are putting on workshops about comic books, and Little Tiger Press is working with Harrison to bring a different author every month to meet young people in the town.

Harrison says the **National Year of Reading** has been used to 'really sharpen and enhance our offer in Swindon.'

The priority she is keeping in mind is that 'you don't just want to get the low-hanging fruit from this. Because I still think there's such a narrow view of what reading is. So we need to have the **Go All In** messaging reinforced from lots of different places and contextualised. And that's what we're trying to do.'



Tales in the Park, Stoke

One of the most important solutions Harrison highlights is giving children and young people the freedom to choose what and how they read. The **National Literacy Trust** relies on generous donations from publishers and booksellers to be able to gift books for free to children who need them most in communities where as many as one in six children say they don't have a single book of their own. This matters because when children have access to high-quality, diverse books and reading materials, they're more likely to enjoy reading, read more often and reap the benefits of reading for their education, wellbeing and confidence.

Many of the children Harrison works with see reading as something done for school and aren't then motivated to explore the shelves in their school or public library to see if anything piques their interest.

'We notice that boys from a certain age group wouldn't come near us when we were gifting books at community events in the summer. Older boys are very discerning; they know exactly what they like and what they don't like. But as soon as it was framed around their interests, the change in their outlook was instantaneous – so we took the decision to find more ways to get a wider selection of books in for them.'



Peterborough, pupils with book

Donations from local bookshops and businesses helped, with manga, football and Lego books going down a storm with those who previously shunned our activities.

'I would say that we've got a bit more work to do with young women, aged 15 and up. But we've honed our work through time, through discussions, through observations - we know what our communities want. It's not that they don't like reading, but reading has to mean something a lot wider. And we have to get that choice spot-on first time, or we lose them.'

Across the UK, **National Literacy Trust** teams are working with communities to harness the excitement and appeal of the **National Year of Reading** to make reading feel personal, relevant, accessible and special. Through conversations that lead to collaborations, which open up opportunities to provide more children and families with opportunities to choose what, when and how they read, the legacy of the **National Year of Reading** will thrive.



Robin Hood storytelling, Nottingham



Charlotte Moore is a Campaigns Manager working in marketing and communications at the **National Literacy Trust**, having previously worked as a local journalist and for Peterborough Library services

Words and Letters in illustrations

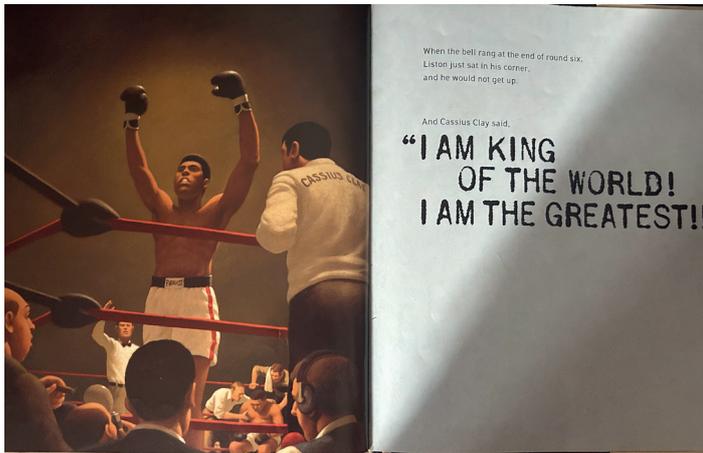
In their latest article looking at the role of illustration in information books, **Pam Dix** and **Ruth Thomson** examine the use of words and letters.

Letters and words can be incorporated into illustrations in a number of ways, the most obvious examples are in collage and in graphic design. In information books, letters are often used to indicate sounds but there's a broad range of different uses. The subject must be the book's main focus but words and letters can be used for a variety of purposes. In this article we will look at books in which the use of lettering in one way or another plays a key role.

The selection of font and of font size, the use of handwritten text, the use of capitals, of colour and of hand-lettering, these are all tools for communicating information, making a point emphatically or creating a mood.

Muhammad Ali: Champion of the World, Jonah Winter, illustrated by François Roca. New York: Schwartz & Wade Books, 2007

A clear example of this can be seen in this biography of Muhammad Ali, where bold, coloured or capital letters are all used at different points in the text for emphasis or to show where Ali's own words are quoted.



The use of large bold capitals and spacing on this page emphasises Ali's famous statement, making the text totally coherent with the image, the text and image work together. The words become an illustration.

Radiant Child: the Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, Javaka Steptoe, New York: Little, Brown, 2016

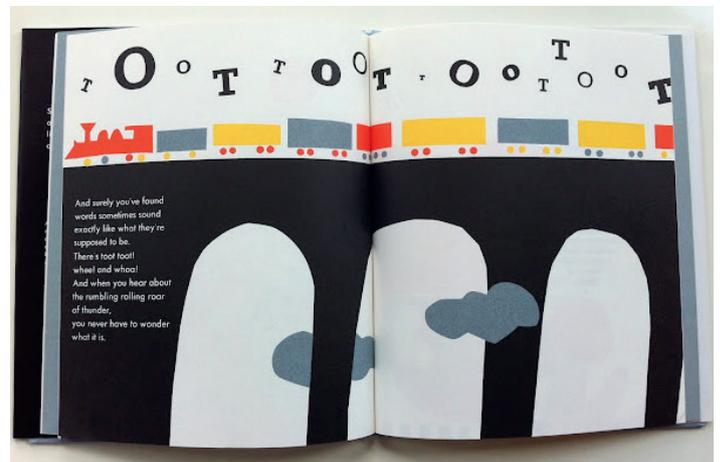


A clever use of collage can be seen in Steptoe's biography of the young Basquiat, which tells the story of his growth as an artist. Steptoe's images mirror Basquiat's own style, moving from his time as a street artist working on graffiti to collaged large scale art works. As in Basquiat's work, words, letters, cuttings all play a part and Steptoe uses this skilfully in telling his story.

In midcentury America, a generation of children's writer/ illustrators emerged who had previous experience in advertising and graphic design. They were particularly interested in the relationship between pictures and words and with the total look of the page, design and typography. One of the leaders in this field was **Paul Rand**. He was already a significant designer with many

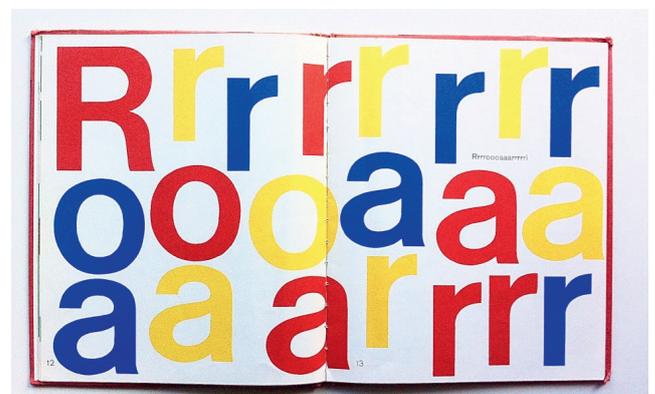
well-known logos to his credit when he created the artwork for four children's books written by his wife, **Ann Rand**. These are books encouraging young children to look at the world around them, the feel of the books matching the fresh eyes of the child. Her rhythmic language style has a simplicity and lightness of touch which is matched by his playful illustrations.

Sparkle and Spin: A Book about Words, Ann Rand, illustrated by Paul Rand. New York: Harcourt, Brace, World, 1957 (Reissued Chronicle Press, 2006)



Sparkle and Spin: A Book about Words inspires readers to think about the sound of words in a text that is itself rhythmical. In this illustration we see a word that sounds exactly like what it's meant to be. The stunning page layout has a small delicately-coloured train at the very top of the page above the black arches of the viaduct, with the letters floating above. The noise it makes is like smoke from a steam engine, with the letters in an irregular pattern and in different sizes encouraging the reader to play with the simple sound 'toot'. The illustrations are from collaged paper shapes in a repeating limited range of colours.

Listen, Listen, Ann Rand, illustrated by Paul Rand. New York: Harcourt, Brace, World, 1970 (reissued Princeton Architectural Press, 2016)



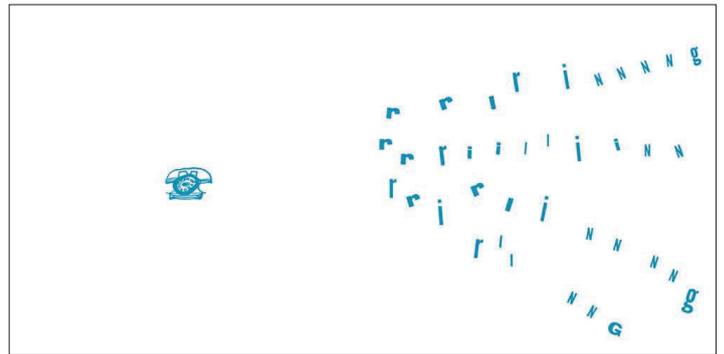
This book is an encouragement to the child to look at their own worlds, to listen to sounds and repeat them. Here the sound is the roar a child makes when pretending to be a lion, the letters in a combination of three primary colours, each letter fresh and dynamic, repetition and layout encouraging experimentation with the sound.

Books!, Murray McCain, illustrated John Alcorn. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962 (reissued AMMO Books, 2013)



Alcorn, another graphic designer, was known for his book covers and this is his first title for children. It is a lively interrogative introduction to what books are and how they work. The images are in bright neon colours, the typography is playful with each page a joy, a witty celebration of fonts and layouts.

TOOT!, The Sound of Things, William Wondriska, Yale: Yale University, 1965



A renowned graphic designer, Wondriska in **TOOT!** uses a simple and entirely typographic technique to explore the volume and pattern of familiar sounds. The sources of the sound are shown as comparatively small monochrome images located in the centre of the lefthand page, unnamed, with the sound they make conveyed by letters in bold and adventurous patterns on the righthand page, as in this example of the telephone ringing, with a wonderful burst of the letters r, i, n, g.

The focus on playfulness and simplicity, the emphasis on clarity and on simple, though carefully positioned marks typical of these illustrators' work has had a lasting impact on the design, layout and illustration of children's books.

Sound and Music

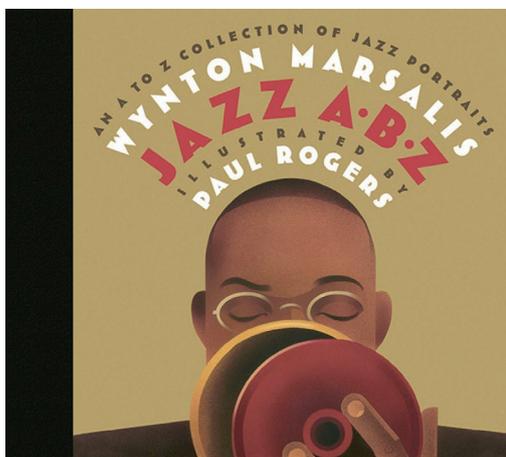
Illustrating sound and music, subjects that can't be seen but have to be given a visual reality in books, is a real challenge which has resulted in many exciting and innovative visual images. A good example is the number of books reflecting the American passion for jazz and the blues. Illustrators of these books had to be experimental and innovative, reflecting the ideas of improvisation in musical practice and the energy contained in the music. The reading experience is non-linear as image and text experiment with conveying this improvisation.

I See the Rhythm, Toyomi Igus, illustrated by Michele Wood. Chicago: Children's Book Press, 1998

This is a visual history of African Americans told through music, from traditional roots in Africa to contemporary rap and hip hop. Wood used the music as inspiration for the images, and each is expressive of time and the music itself.



The repetition and structure of the blues is reflected in patterns in both the image and text. In the image, the foregrounded workers dominate in their checkered clothing which emphasises their active angular positions. In the background are the musicians, almost camouflaged, in the green forest. The layout of the text is disjointed and flows around the page reflecting these angular patterns, using different font sizes, colours and layouts. Both image and text work on multiple plains.



Jazz A.B.Z.: An A to Z Collection of Jazz Portraits from A to Z, Wynton Marsalis, illustrated by Paul Rogers. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2005

Paul Rogers had extensive experience as a designer of posters and album covers and his knowledge of jazz was comprehensive. This is distilled in this collection of jazz portraits. Playful lettering changes in style, size and layout for each portrait, which also contains objects, background images and locations of relevance to the individual musician. Images and text overlap, giving a sense of the improvisation, immediacy and energy of jazz music, as these vigorous contorted hands on the piano demonstrate. The name of each musician is an integral part of the image, spelled out in playful typography.

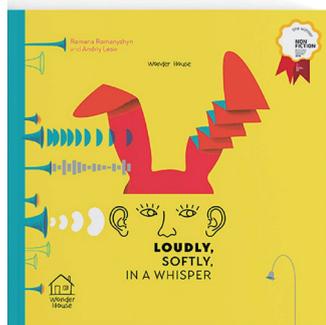


Hot Jazz Special. Jonny Hannah, London: Walker Books, 2005

Scottish illustrator Jonny Hannah picks up and develops this creative approach in a highly colourful explosion of illustrations in his book about jazz. His musicians are in an imaginary café and improvisation dominates – in the text layout, lettering styles, images, use of colours and ideas.



Louis Armstrong, his name shown in vertical letters on the lefthand side of the page, as if in lights outside a theatre, is shown with his oversize trumpet surrounded by words about his life and songs which can be read in any order. There is no linearity here, the reader can improvise.



Loudly, Softly, in a Whisper.

Romana Romanyshyn and Andriy Lesiv Lviv: Old Lion Books, 2017 (English edition **SOUND Shhh...Bang...POP...BOOM!**, translated by Vitaly Chernetsky. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2020)

The Ukrainian graphic designers/ artists Romanyshyn and Lesiv work on illustration and text simultaneously, seeing these as two languages, the verbal and the visual, words and images.

‘These two voices, or two book “languages”, are equal for us, equally important. Verbal and visual concepts deal with our brain on different levels so we can receive wider panorama of knowledge. ...

Sound and sight are two abstract categories, and it is really hard to illustrate such an abstract thing. The best way to understand something abstract is to compare it with its own opposite. We wanted to highlight the opposites and contrasts, like silence is opposite to the sound and darkness is opposite to the sight.’



At first glance the character appears to be sheltering from the rain under an umbrella, but close study shows that the columns are not raindrops but words, in coloured vertical columns, words representing different sounds. The text is ‘sometimes we need to spend time in silence’, and this is a powerful image of seeking silence, sheltering from noise. The character can be seen in a white space carved out from the strips of words.

Poetry

By definition books about poetry are concerned with words, but here we look at two biographies of poets which play with the position of words and letters to convey a sense of the poets and their style.

Pablo Neruda: Poet of the People, Monica Brown, illustrated by Julie Paschkis. New York: Henry Holt, 2011

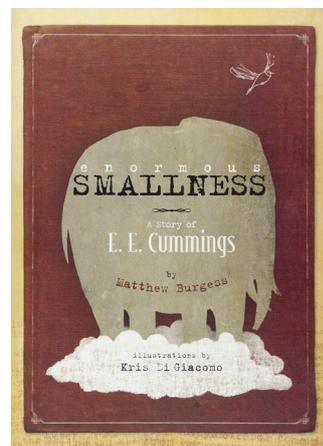
Paschkis learned Spanish before illustrating this book on Neruda as she wanted to be able to express his words in both English and Spanish. She immersed herself in his poetry and visited Chile to see where Neruda lived, to ‘walk through the door into his life’. Her style of incorporating letters and words into images, to form part of the image is one she has experimented with in other works.



When soldiers came to get him, Pablo hid in the homes of friends and then escaped on a horse over the mountains of Chile.

Pablo Neruda was brave. He wasn't afraid to share the story of Chile with the world.

The book tells the story of Neruda's life and focuses on places and events that are important for his story and for his inspiration. In these two facing images, on the left Neruda is shown escaping persecution from the restrictive political environment of Chile. The words here are in straight lines, in severe blacks and greys. The righthand facing page shows Neruda's escape from repression crossing the mountains against a bright blue sky. A sense of freedom dominates the image, and the words too have freedom as they form different patterns on the mountain landscape



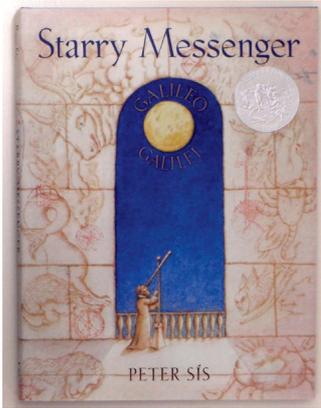
Enormous SMALLNESS: A Story of E E Cummings, Matthew Burgess, illustrated by Kris di Giacomo. New York: Enchanted Lion, 2015

Burgess emphasises the fact that Cummings was a poet from a very young age and that he was always conscious of letters, words and of using them creatively. His work was both playful and experimental. Di Giacomo captures this enthusiasm by showing an abundance of typewritten letters floating around the workspace as if bursting out of the typewriter. The experimental nature of Cummings' writing gives Di Giacomo the opportunity to be free in her illustrations.



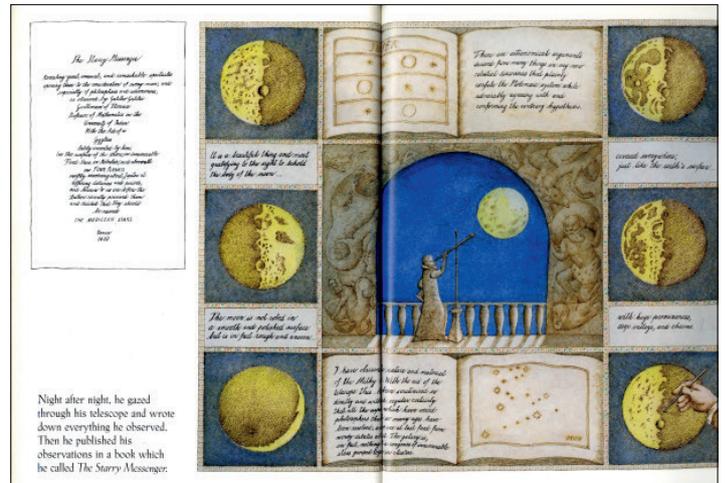
Integration of illustration and text

When a book is written and illustrated by one person, they sometimes have a vision of the completed work. Peter Sis, 1968 **Hans Christian Andersen Award** winner for illustration, is a magnificent example of this. Reading each of his books is a totally integrated experience. His illustrations are a mixture of different styles of illustration and viewpoints, birds' eye views, cutaways, collaged materials, diaries, maps, charts and different texts, all carefully presented in relation to each other on the page. Each page is a total entity.

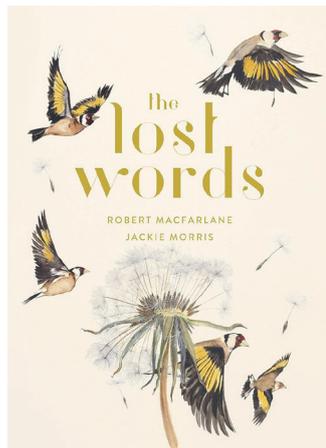


Starry Messenger: a Book Depicting the Life of a Famous Scientist, Mathematician, Astronomer, Philosopher, Physicist Galileo Galilei. Peter Sis, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996

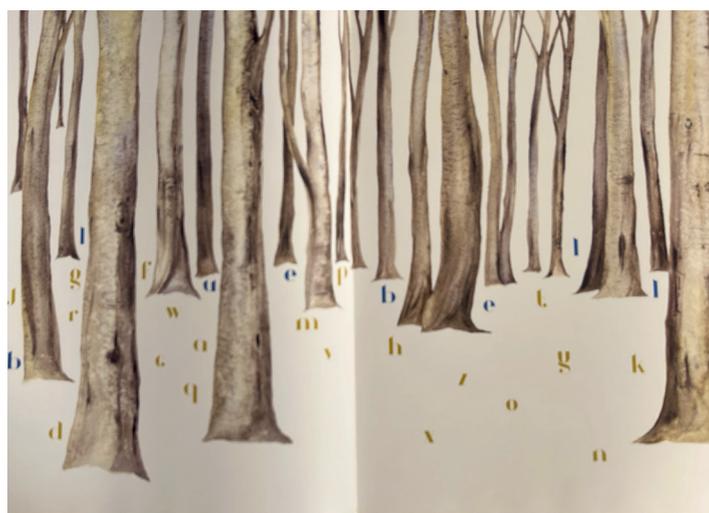
This biography of Galileo is one of a series looking at people who pushed the boundaries of knowledge. Layering of text and illustration is a key feature of Sis' work and handwritten text is often important. The two text styles used here have different purposes, one sets out the narrative, the other, handwritten, is Galileo's own words. Galileo can be seen in the central image looking at the heavens, the surrounding text explaining what he sees.



It is appropriate to conclude with a book in which words are the centre piece. These are the words famously removed from the Oxford Children's Dictionary, which led to an extraordinary collaboration between **Robert Macfarlane**, an academic and nature writer, and **Jackie Morris**, a well-known children's illustrator and writer.



The Lost Words, Robert Macfarlane, illustrated by Jackie Morris. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017
Macfarlane created a series of 'spells' about some of these 'lost' words which Morris has imaginatively visualised. The book is a lavish, large format production giving space to Morris' beautiful illustrations. These are rich, detailed, realistic, powerful, sensitive and make skilful use of gold. Each of the 20 words is explored in three ways: as hidden letters set in an appropriate environment (the lost words); as the spell, which is in the form of an acrostic poem with the initial letter of each line in a different colour to the rest of the text; and as an illustration of the plant or animal. Here the lost word is **bluebell**.



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**.



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.

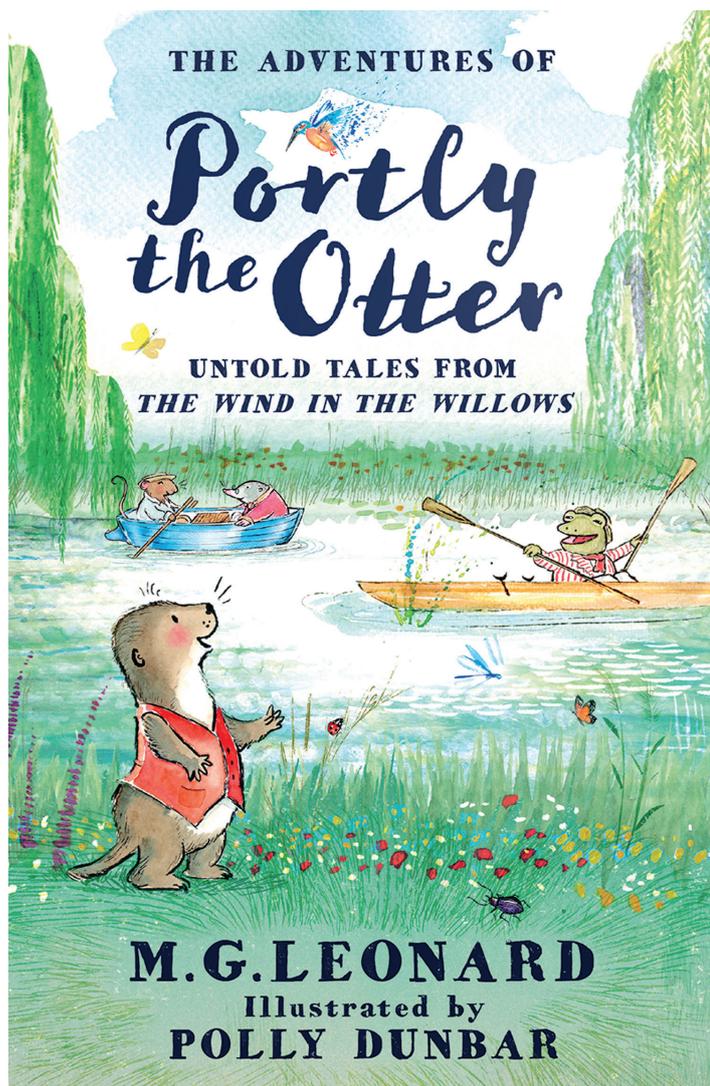
A Return to the Riverbank



Nicolette Jones interviews **Polly Dunbar** about illustrating M.G. Leonard's new *The Wind in the Willows* story.

The Wind in the Willows was a childhood favourite for Polly Dunbar so when she was asked to illustrate the spin-off by MG Leonard it 'stirred all the memories.' The book is **The Adventures of Portly the Otter: Untold Stories from The Wind in the Willows** (Farshore).

'I wasn't sure I would want to touch it because it's a precious thing in my childhood and my memory.' And being asked to follow in E H Shepard's footsteps (in the 100th anniversary year of the first **Winnie-the-Pooh** book) was for Dunbar 'a cross between, Ooh, what an honour, and, Oh, can I do this? Is this allowed? But,' she says 'I think the way that Maya has done it is a beautiful tribute, but also a thing in its own right, so it doesn't feel like it's stepping on any toes.' Familiar characters wear Shepard's costumes in Dunbar's pictures, but 'I didn't overthink it,' she says. 'Shepard's drawings are so much a part of my visual memory that I didn't study them overly because I didn't want to try to be emulating his style. I'd rather just respond



as myself. Otherwise it would have not been authentic. What I've learned from Shepard is the character and the love that he puts into his drawings. That has always been something I've tried to do as an illustrator anyway. That's my whole career, what I've been trying to get at: that sort of warmth and body language.'

Of course other illustrators of *The Wind in the Willows* have since followed Shepard, including, Robert Ingpen and Inga Moore, and even Raymond Briggs illustrated the *Dulce Domum* chapter for a Christmas anthology. Dunbar loves the version by John Burningham who 'did what he liked.'

'I wanted to take to it that sort of confidence in expressing the feeling rather than thinking about what this is going to look like in a long line of illustrators. And that's also what's important to children, isn't it? Because they don't have that history. You have to speak to them without all your baggage of who am I to step in here? It's more like, what would they enjoy seeing most of in the moment? And how can I express that joyfully?'

Dunbar's schedule was also short: two months over the summer. 'So I had to just get on and throw all the energy and the spontaneity at it.' The climactic story in the new book is the most obviously untold one: what happened to Portly the baby otter before he was found in the lap of the god Pan in the chapter *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn* (outrageously omitted in some editions). In Kenneth Grahame's book, Mole and Ratty do not remember what they have seen, and Portly's memory is wiped too. In Leonard's version, weasels and stoats are involved, and Pan keeps Portly safe.

This mysterious chapter was Dunbar's favourite in the original and the scene with Pan is the first she tackled. 'There's the hustle and bustle of the river and the picnics and the motorcars, and then there's that magical stillness. I always felt it was like childhood itself. Magical, but hard to grasp. It slips through your fingers. Like the magic light of dawn that fades. You sort of remember it and want to get back there, but then it goes, and you're back on with the hustle and bustle, and you don't really remember, but you feel the presence of it. So I was so keen to do that spread and then built around it all the others. I wanted that atmosphere.'



The illustration for this chapter that was most vivid in her mind was Arthur Rackham's picture of Pan, which is echoed in Dunbar's image, though she replaces the direct gaze of Rackham's Pan with closed eyes, so the scene is dreamy and restful and less disconcerting.

'I sat outside last summer and painted it [with watercolour, later inserting the background with Photoshop] and there were actually magpies flying about. And so they became part of the picture, which was a lovely thing.' Staying at a friend's countryside lodge she worked for a week at a table on a little verandah, 'trying to be present for the kids, but also do the work. And there was a gypsy caravan opposite, which was amazing. I was just like, oh, I'm here! I'm here!'

Dunbar lives with her partner and two sons by the river in the Waveny Valley in Suffolk, which was also an inspiration. 'We do have otters locally and I have seen them but not enough to observe them and draw. More like, oh my goodness, there's one and then it's gone.' So Dunbar also depended on a book of otter photographs as a source, and watched otters playing online. 'It was a gift really that the main character is an otter because they are quite like children in their movement and they're very expressive.'

Leonard's text sometimes has the events of the book we know going on in the background, such as Toad's imprisonment, and sometimes it invents completely new episodes. In one, for instance, Toad decides he can explore the stars using a backpack full of rockets. Dunbar enjoyed depicting him not getting far off the ground, and says 'I do love Toad's extravagant fabulousness.'

Leonard's writing also accurately celebrates nature, in a way that Dunbar was eager to capture: 'It's joyful, and encourages you to look at the detail.' It helped that Dunbar was walking her young dog twice a day. 'It felt fortuitous that this text landed in my lap when I was spending my spare time by the river connecting with nature in a way that I haven't really done for quite a while. Having a dog makes you live in the moment a bit more.' She confesses, though, that she is in trouble with a son for making Toad green. Toads are brown, he insists.

One significant development in the spin-off stories is that female characters are introduced into a famously male world: Mrs Otter, a roe deer, and Molly, an otter friend for Portly, who aspires to see the

sea and is likely to be his companion in a further series. There is also a human girl, Jennifer, described romantically by Leonard: 'Jennifer's skin reminded Portly of a dog rose: pale with a blush of pink on her cheeks. She had a nose like a button mushroom and hair the colour of honey. She was wearing a blue dress with a collar of white lace.' Dunbar says 'I was delighted when Jennifer stepped in and that was maybe projecting myself onto her because I thought oh, I am in the book as a seven- or eight-year-old. And I think if that had happened in the original, goodness, I would have been so excited.' Especially since Jennifer looks, she admits, the way she would have liked to look. Perhaps her image of Jennifer is a self-portrait – with a touch of Alice. After all the dedications in this book by author and illustrator are to their childhood selves. (Dunbar's is to 'Madeline, aged seven', since that is her first name.)

Dunbar had to be accepted as the illustrator of this book by the Shepard Foundation, to whom she submitted a sheet of drawings of otters for approval and permission to use of a version of Shepard's original map. And she and Leonard made a pilgrimage to the Shepard archive at Guildford University. 'That was a very moving experience. The human touch of it all, the splodges and the mistakes, like a little pencil question mark or a crossing out. All those things that signalled the human hand brought you immediately closer. The things that you don't see in the book made it special for us. Shepard did very loose and squiggly roughs, and that was lovely to know as well. And I don't know how, I came away with a feeling of, what a nice man.'

'I think, especially now everything is being ironed out with computers and AI it's the humanity that's the beauty. As you become a more professional illustrator, you get better, but you become more stylized and lose the truthfulness, like the unself-conscious children's drawings. That's why John Burningham's one of my favourite illustrators, because he never, ever polished his humanity away. It's always there. And I feel it's more important than ever to hold on to that.'

The Adventures of Portly the Otter: Untold Stories from The Wind in the Willows by M.G. Leonard, illustrated by Polly Dunbar, is published by Farshore, 978-0008667771, £14.99 hbk.



Polly Dunbar and M G Leonard at the Shepard archive at Guildford University



Nicolette Jones writes about children's books for the **Sunday Times**.

Beyond the Secret Garden

Alphabet Books – Words and Worlds

In this edition of their **Beyond the Secret Garden** column, **Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O'Connor** start with ABC.

All alphabet books are political. This may seem like a surprising statement. Books designed to teach children their letters do not seem likely candidates for introducing partisan ideas. A is for apple, right? And apples are delicious, not dogmatic. But alphabet books are, more than most childhood reading, deliberately didactic. They are meant to teach a child about the world around them at the same time as teaching letters (and sometimes sounds). An apple is familiar, also healthy for a child. But so too is ackee, and when Valerie Bloom chooses to use ackee instead of apple in her alphabet book **Ackee, Breadfruit, Callaloo** (Bogle L'Ouverture/Macmillan 1999), she is making a political choice to value familiar Caribbean food over familiar British food.

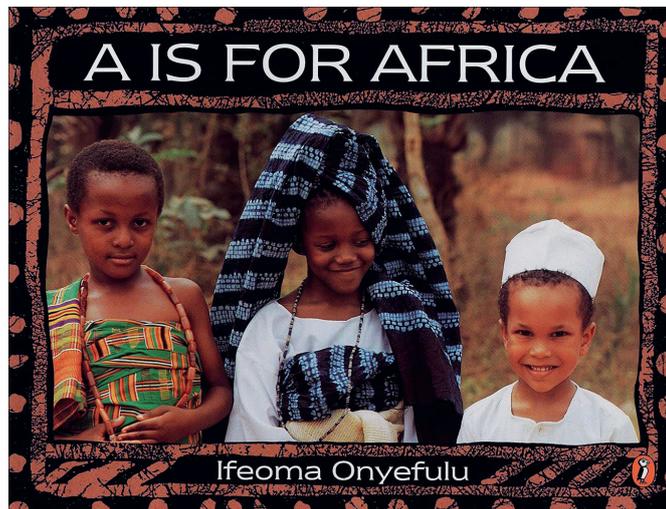
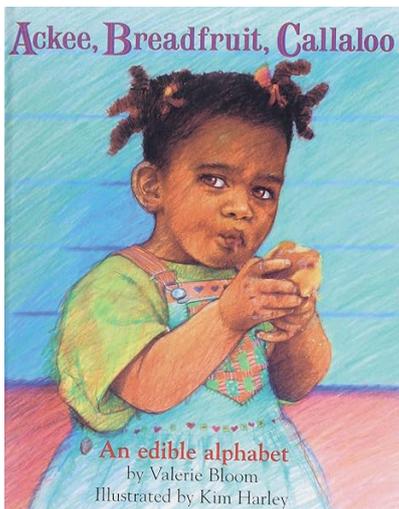
Some alphabet books are more overtly political than others. **An ABC for Baby Patriots**, by Mrs Ernest Ames (first published in 1899) extols the virtues of the British Empire in outrageous, overtly racist fashion. While some have called her book satirical, it was published by the successful children's publisher, Dean and Son. Nineteenth century alphabets often referenced the expanding British Empire, from **Peter Piper's Practical Principles of Plain and Perfect Pronunciation** (J. Harris 1813) in which a young boy 'itches for an Indian image'; to **The Mother's Picture Alphabet** (first published by the British editors of *The Children's Friend* monthly magazine in 1862) where 'S begins Slave' in a call for Americans to follow the British example and abolish enslavement.

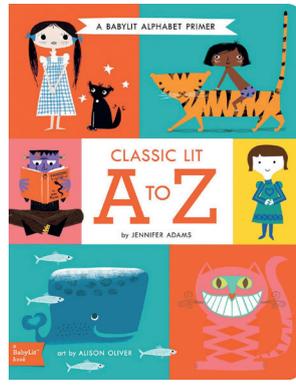
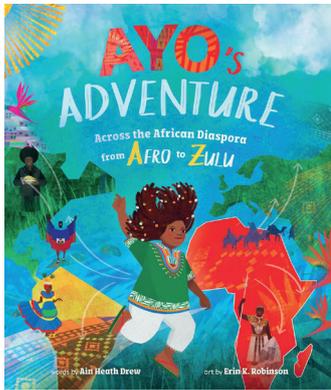
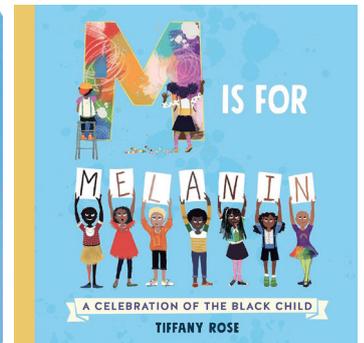
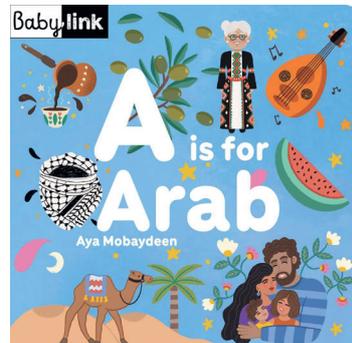
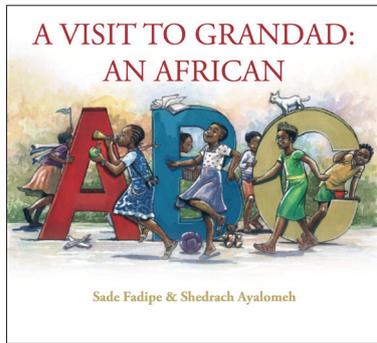
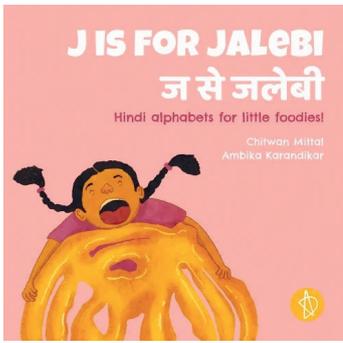
Occasionally, an alphabet book relies on its illustrations to make its politics clear. W. Suschitzky's **Open-Air ABC** (Collins, 1947) includes photographs, taken by Suschitzky, of outdoor scenes in Britain. While many alphabet books from this time had pictures of (G is for) Golliwogs (caricatured dolls supposedly representing Black people), or (I is for) Indian (often white children dressed up in headdresses and buckskins), Suschitzky's book takes an unusual step in presenting a full-colour photograph of a well-dressed Black child with a book, seated on a park bench, looking patiently and directly at the camera as the image accompanying 'N Negro' (the term in common parlance of the time to describe people of African descent). This is not the usual image of people of African descent found in 1940s British children's literature. So in that sense, the photographer (who spent much of the late-1940s photographing children, globally and in London) was doing something quite radical. However, at the

same time, the publisher undercuts Suschitzky's vision by presenting the book as made up of 'all sorts of objects the child is familiar with' (jacket flap). Describing a Black child as an object, however beautiful and beautifully photographed, for (presumed white) children to look at undermines the radical possibilities of Suschitzky's photograph.

After the second world war, the British population underwent a dramatic change, with many people from the (former) British Empire coming to help Britain rebuild. This also meant an increase in independent publishers from these communities producing books for young people. Bogle L'Ouverture, one of the earliest Black British publishers to produce books for children, published Valerie Bloom's **Ackee, Breadfruit, Callaloo** quoted at the beginning of this column. Alphabet books produced by Verna Wilkins' Tamarind Press, including her own **ABC I Can Be** (Tamarind 1993) and Dawn Allette's **Caribbean Animals** (Tamarind 2004). More mainstream publishers also responded to the changing population; Frances Lincoln, for example, published Ifeoma Onyefulu's **A is for Africa** and Prodeepta Das's **I is for India** in 1996. Both of these books were photographic alphabets, offering children pictures of real communities in places that were often stereotyped as less developed than Britain. What most of these alphabets from the late 1990s and early 2000s have in common, however, is a depiction of communities of Black and Asian people outside of Britain. Wilkins' **ABC I Can Be** is unusual for its time in depicting Black British and British Asian workers to be direct role models for British children who might not otherwise see themselves in jobs dominated by white British people. Many of the alphabet books published more recently focus on particular regions of the world. Two books published in India but sometimes found in the UK are Priti Paul's **ABC Desi** (Apeejay 2016) and **J is for Jalebi** by Chitwan Mittal and Ambika Karandikar (AdiDev 2021). The latter is an illustrated Hindi alphabet book 'for little foodies' that includes the English spelling of each word. **A Visit to Grandad: An African ABC** (Cassava Republic 2016) by Sade Fadipe and Shedrach Ayalomeh is a rhyming narrative picture book that employs the alphabet structure. The plot allows for a range of detailed interior and exterior views of Nigeria as young Adenah goes on a car journey to visit her grandfather in the village.

Other alphabet books have a focus on the diversity of particular groups of people such as Aya Mobydeen's board book **A is for Arab**



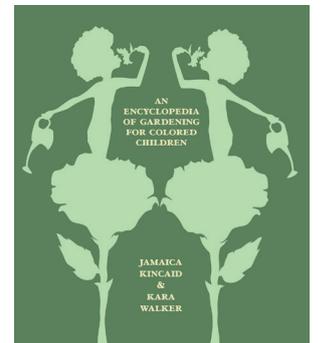


(Crocodile 2025) and **M is for Melanin: A Celebration of the Black Child** by Tiffany Rose (Macmillan 2019). **Ayo's Adventure: Across the African Diaspora from Afro to Zulu** with words by Ain Heath Drew and art by Erin K. Robinson (Barefoot Books 2024) uses the alphabet format to highlight the diversity and connections within the African diaspora, each illustrated double page spread focusing on a particular country in Africa and the Americas.

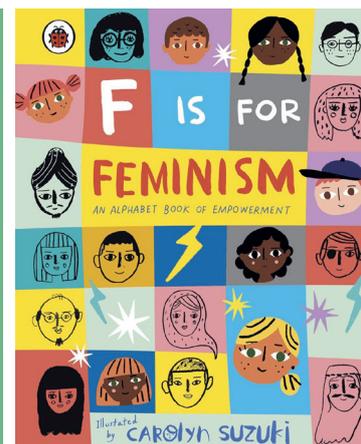
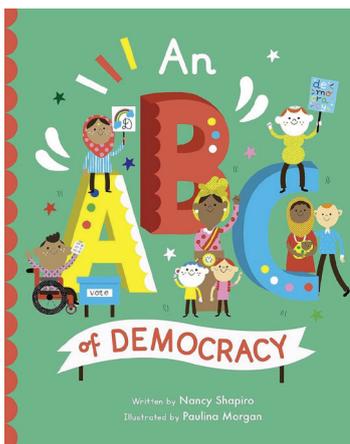
Some recent ABC books are themed around religion and culture. Published in the USA, **R is for Ramadan** (Gibbs Smith 2019) by Greg Paprocki offers a diverse representation of Muslims observing the holy month. The same publisher's **Classic Lit A-Z** by Jennifer Adams and Alison Oliver (2017) depicts Aladdin, Shakespeare's Oberon and most surprisingly Frances Hodgson Burnett's Becky, 'a serving girl and Sara Crewe's friend' as brown people – with (presumably) Mowgli riding a tiger on the cover. Karimah Campbell's self-published picture book **ABC Come and Skank with Me** is an **A-Z of Reggae Legends**. A QR code on each page takes you to the artists' websites.

A number of recent ABCs with overtly political titles feature racially minoritised people such as **A is for Activist** written and illustrated by Innosanto Nagara (2013 Seven Stories), **F is for Feminism: An Alphabet Book of Empowerment** illustrated by Carolyn Suzuki (Ladybird 2019) and **An ABC of Democracy**, written by Nancy Shapiro and illustrated by Paulina Morgan. (Frances Lincoln 2022). **An Encyclopedia of Gardening for Colored Children** is a fascinating experiment with the form, combining Jamaica Kincaid's words, often

placed with irony, with Kara Walker's startling watercolour paintings (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2024). Kincaid frequently deploys irony to highlight the cruelty of colonialism. We learn that breadfruit is native to the Polynesian Islands, was found by botanist Joseph Banks and Captain James Cook and sent to the West Indies: 'The slaves were apparently taking time from their labors to grow food to feed their hungry selves' (p9). 'Daffodil' leads her to Wordsworth's poem which 'became canonical in the education of children who were subjects of the British Empire. For the most part, these children were native to places where a daffodil would be unable to grow and would never be seen by them' (p13). Perhaps most suitable for teen readers as well as adults, the book reveals the colonial histories lurking within the garden. Kincaid can be read as acknowledging and subverting the political nature of the alphabet book, drawing our attention to the very construction of knowledge in the process.



[Books mentioned in this article](#)



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



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

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

The Wide, Wild World of Ursula Dubosarsky

Jon Appleton introduces the work of Australian children's author Ursula Dubosarsky.



I once read an essay by Beryl Bainbridge who said she avoided writing short stories because they wasted material you could stretch into a novel. Bainbridge's now-classic novels were concise and succinct – and short. So too are the novels of multi-award-winning Australian writer for young people, Ursula Dubosarsky.

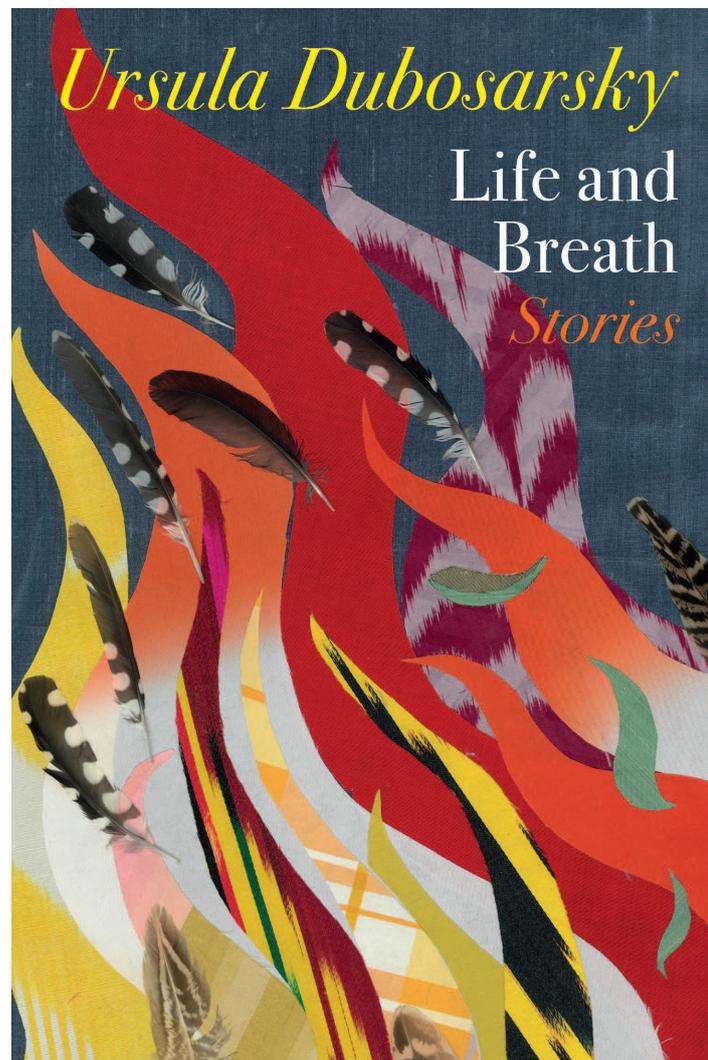
Perhaps you are unfamiliar with Ursula's work. So here are the first paragraphs of three of her novels.

Let's kick off with **The First Book of Samuel** (1995):

Most of this story happened when Samuel was nearly twelve, and Theodora just thirteen. But stories can only happen because of all the things that happened before, no matter how small and sudden those things may have seemed at the time. Or no matter how large and terrible, and no matter how much a person might prefer to live as if such things had never happened. They happened, it's on the record, and that is why things are as they are.

We'll look next at **Zizzy Zing** (1991):

This is a story about things that happened in the summer. You know what they say about summer – either lots of things happen to you or nothing happens to you at all. Well, this summer was one of the first kind, and some of those things were terrible things. Things to make you shout out in the night.



And this is how she begins **The Golden Day** (2011):

The year began with the hanging of one man, and ended with the drowning of another. But every year people die and their ghosts roam in the public gardens, hiding behind the grey, dark statues like wild cats, their tiny footsteps and secret breathing muffled by the sound of falling water in the fountains and the quiet ponds.

These beginnings represent a quality of Ursula's work for older readers which makes it so intriguing and exciting: a sense of sheer abundance, offering a freight of experience outside – but essential to – the realm of the tale being intimately told. Her novels are imbued with a whole raft of other stories, entire quiet histories of families and public global conflicts and the trajectory of cultures. This embeds the narrative with wisdom and caution and optimism.

This abundance is ironic, when you think about it, because the novels are short (succinct, spare – choose your own term).

Unlike Beryl Bainbridge, Ursula hasn't avoided writing short stories. 'I think I'm more a natural short story writer than a novelist,' she told me from her home in Sydney. 'Perhaps my mind is one that thinks like a short story, in sort of emotional moments. The intensity draws me – you can't sit back and relax when you read (or write) a short story – every word counts, you have to pay attention – like reading (or writing) a poem.'

Short stories operate differently to novels. Where the characters come from and what has happened already influence a novel's plot. But in short stories characters are compelled towards a moment of reckoning, where they must make their own decisions, which will inform the rest of their lives. This makes for bracing reading.

I'm proud to have just published a collection of Ursula's stories, which previously appeared in magazines and anthologies, called *Life and Breath*. (I recommend you seek out her novels too).

Part of the marvel of these gems is that they absolutely bear the legacies of human experience that equip the novels. Details – like a character's name (Alaric, Rosabel ...) or a flavour (sarsaparilla), or a type of clothing or ... or ... so many things, tell us the present circumstances of the story owe so much to other forgotten lives, and times.

They bear a trace of exoticism, too, which is also ironic, as they are all firmly set in Australia. Ursula explained that while she gets ideas 'when I'm away from home, they are almost all ideas about Australia.' She has spent time in Argentina (where her husband was born), in Israel, the UK and most of all in Paris (where her daughter lives). Yet: 'I think where you live and the times you are living in seep into everything you write ... I suppose each writer has to work out for themselves where and when they feel they are most at ease writing about, most themselves, dare one use that overused word "authentic"! For me, at any rate, that has always been Sydney – more or less late-twentieth-century Sydney.'

Authentic and exotic – strange bedfellows, perhaps, but both in evidence in *Life and Breath*, which varies in tone and theme, in length and scope. (You'll laugh out loud and quietly reflect with equal satisfaction.) Overall, it's an excellent place to start your journey into the wide, wild world of Ursula Dubosarsky's writing.

Life and Breath is available now from Roffo Court Press, 978-0993547386, £8.99 pbk.

Free teachers' notes for **Life and Breath** are available at ursuladubosarsky.squarespace.com/life-and-breath

Jon Appleton is a children's book editor, researcher and author, and editor of **the gab**, a zine published five times per annum which celebrates innovation and inclusivity in children's books from the second golden age of children's books. He manages the website janmark.net

I wish I'd written...



Peadar O'Guilin chooses a novel that does everything.

A book is only as good as the feelings it kindles: the warmth, the chills; that gawping fascination that demands to be fed. There are plenty of award winners that don't hit the right levels of emotional intensity and these disappear down history's plughole before the last bottle of champagne has been recycled. Meanwhile, 'weaker' books can last through generations on the basis of one perfect kiss, or a fight scene that has us postponing bedtime until well after madness o'clock.

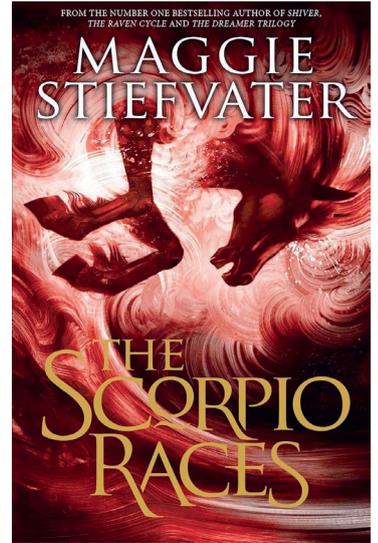
And then, a few times in a busy life, a novel appears that does everything. I mean all of it.

Maggie Stiefvater's YA story, **The Scorpio Races**, is one of those. It's a love story. It's terrifying. And big, bold emotions are shaded on all sides by subtler tones too: like companionship, warmth, unease and nostalgia.

It's a tale that stimulates the mind as well as the heart, with a compelling setting that is steeped in legend and fear, and it does all of this without ever short-changing the plot.

The island of Thisby, where the action takes place, could be Scottish, Irish, or a patch of land off the Isle of Mann. I once asked the author, where exactly it was. She wouldn't say, and it doesn't matter. Read **The Scorpio Races**. Read it now.

The Call by Peadar O'Guilin is published by David Fickling Books, 978-1788453943, £8.99 pbk.



The Scorpio Races by Maggie Stiefvater is published by Scholastic, 978-0702322839, £8.99 pbk

Good Reads

This issue's Good Reads were chosen by young people at **Northampton International Academy**. Thanks to **Julie Broadbent**, who was awarded **School Librarian of the Year** by the **School Library Association**, for her help.

Impossible Creatures

Katherine Rundell, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1408897430, £8.99 pbk

Impossible Creatures is a magnificent fantasy book that will fill the hearts of anyone who reads it. It is the story about a boy called Christopher who one day uncovers a secret about his grandfather. His whole life changes when he uncovers an island where mythical creatures still exist. He meets a girl called Mal and they set off on the adventure together. However, Mal is being pursued by a killer. Together they must try to save the island and stop the person from killing the island itself. I really enjoyed reading this book as it is really fun and exciting. It is a book that takes you to an amazing fantasy world and will introduce you to new and wonderful creatures. It will take you somewhere that you have never been before. It is a great book, and you should read it too. *Agata*

Fireborn

Aisling Fowler, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0008394189, £7.99 pbk

Fireborn Twelve and the Forbidden Forest is a fantasy adventure book written by Aisling Fowler. It follows Twelve and her friends as they travel through a danger-filled forest in an attempt to save their kidnapped friend. It is a fantastic book and is part of a three-part series which is perfect for thrill seeking readers aged nine and above. This book is packed full of twists that keep the reader guessing and has detailed illustrations scattered throughout. The book is brilliant and is highly praised by readers which is another reason you should read it too. *Sunshine*



Agata



Sunshine



Abil



Patrick



Samiya

Vanya and the Wild Hunt

Sangu Mandanna, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1035022519, £8.99 pbk

This book contains mythical creatures and wild spells suitable for fantasy lovers and curious explorers. The main character of this story is a young, bright girl named Vanya Vallen, who has the ability to speak to books! However, great tragedies unfold quickly, as young Vanya is swept into many great dangers including monsters terrorizing the family. But when Vanya learns her parents' secrets, she discovers Auramere, a palace filled with magic and witches. Unfortunately, a mysterious creature, The Wild Hunt, lurks around the castle's borders with its evil owner, and it's up to Vanya to save the world from horrifying dangers... I loved it and couldn't put it down, a great book for fantasy readers. *Abil*

Reek

Alastair Chisholm, Barrington Stoke, 978-1800902589, £7.99 pbk

Reek is a sci-fi dystopian world where Sparrow lives after a deadly gas called the Reek has covered the

earth. Only tech billionaire, Axel Brodie knows a way to make clean air. For Sparrow she has to work to near death every day to keep her family and her alive. But one day, her genius friend finds another way for people to have free clean air. However, the tech giants will do anything to stop her and what she knows... Can she find a way to breathe free or will the rich win? This is a perfect book for people who love action, adventure, science-fiction and dystopian worlds. *Patrick*

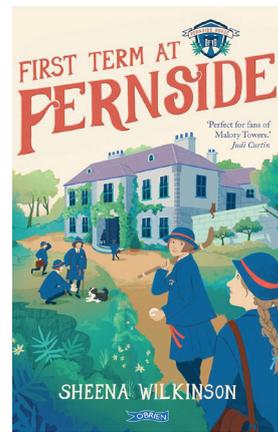
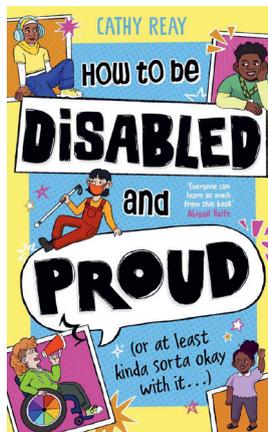
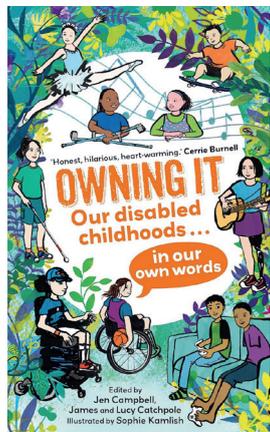
Orphans of the Tide: Shipwreck Island

Struan Murray, Puffin, 978-0241384459, £8.99 pbk

The sequel to **Orphans of the Tide**, Ellie and Seth travel on a boat to get away from the Inquisitors in the 'Enemy's City'. They arrive on a tropical island ruled by a very mysterious Queen. They think they have found their perfect home, but little do they know. Will they make it out alive? They're looking for one thing, and one thing only, peace, but will they ever find it? For Ellie and Seth they will never forget their trip there. If you enjoy fast-paced, fantasy adventure stories then you will really enjoy this book. I couldn't put it down. *Samiya*

Amplifying Disabled Voices: Why and Why Now?

Rebecca Butler writes



As we continue the National Year of Reading 2026, we must focus on the under-representation of disabled children in literature and in our society.

One of the catalysts for this article was the **EmpathyLab** selections for 2026. For the first time, out of a total of sixty-five titles, there were two focused on disability. They are the brilliant **Owning It**, an anthology of letters to their younger selves from disabled writers, and the groundbreaking **How to Be Disabled and Proud (or at least kinda sorta okay with it...)**, a non-fiction work by Cathy Reay, an author with Achondroplasia. These are two of the best examples of own-voices disability writing for young people.

In Reay's work, she discusses the phenomenon of disabled people having to disassociate from their body during intimate personal care. This is such a private coping mechanism for disabled people that it is very rarely written about and hardly ever with such compassion and understanding. This is one of the primary reasons why children's publishing needs to increase its amplification and support of disabled voices. If disabled young people don't see writing like this, how can they believe that they too have a right to express themselves?

There are other reasons why the amplification of disabled voices is vital and timely. The government has just announced the much-awaited reform of the **Special Educational Needs and Disability** system (SEND) in England and Wales. There is agreement that the system needs reform but there is concern from the disabled community and the wider sector that the changes to eligibility for **EHCs** (Education Health and Care Plans) and future reassessment during the transition from primary to secondary education, could be detrimental.

We await further details, particularly on funding, but those with invisible disabilities such as chronic illness or autism and ADHD could find it harder to access specialist education with a risk this could create a multi-tier system and increase segregation between disabled children and those who are not.

There have been attempts to ensure parity for disability and other minorities in research. **CLPE (Centre for Literacy and Primary Education)** has published several **Reflecting Realities** reports highlighting the depiction and number of racially minoritised characters in children's books. Within the last two years, **Inclusive Minds** has been attempting to conduct similar research into the portrayals of disability in children's fiction in a report to be called **Reflecting Disability**. They have completed the first stage: designing the scope of the research and, in consultation with disabled people, designing the questions to be asked. This has been well received and has had very positive reactions among the publishing and disability

communities. Disappointingly, however, the second stage has had to be paused due to lack of funding.

The disabled community is simply asking for parity with other minorities. Pausing any programme seeking to improve representation of a minoritised community cannot be justified, whether that's race, disability or other protected characteristic.

On a brighter note, the **International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY)**, publishes a list every two years where each national section is invited to submit up to twelve titles each which they consider outstanding examples of disability representation, including mental health, for inclusion in the international selection. This is one of **IBBY's** most affirming and long-standing projects. Anyone can access this list via the **IBBY** website.

To highlight some recently published outstanding examples of disabled characters in children's literature, look no further than **Under the London Sky** by Anna Woltz, translated from Dutch, in which four teenagers meet at the height of the London Blitz, one of whom, Ella, is a polio survivor. Her internal monologue, reflecting her experience, is at once beautiful and exquisitely painful.

A novel set in contemporary times **How to Rollerskate with One Leg** by Ella Dove is an own-voice, first novel about twelve-year-old Mia who is a below-the-knee amputee of her right leg. Dove deals exceptionally well with the range of emotions Mia experiences in relation to her leg. She also writes explicitly about some of the negative attitudes Mia endures. Readers should be hugely excited by the upcoming sequel **How to Do Paris with One Leg**.

In historical narratives, rarely is a disabled character credible for the time period but in Sheena Wilkinson's recent works, set in 1920s Ireland, **First Term at Fernside** and **True Friends at Fernside**, we meet feisty Sadie who uses crutches for mobility, as a result of polio. She is an ordinary schoolgirl and her disability is not her only character feature.

Disability representation in children's literature has come a long way in the last twenty years. This progress is much appreciated. We must fight to ensure its upward trajectory flourishes.



Dr Rebecca Butler writes, lectures and tutors on children's literature and is a regular reviewer for **Books for Keeps**. She is also an active member of the **IBBY UK** committee

Letterbox Library Recommends: books that empower



Books for Keeps has long respected **Letterbox Library**, who for over 40 years have been promoting children's books that put social justice and equality in the spotlight. This is the first in a regular column in which co-director **Fen Coles** will recommend books on a particular theme, this time, books that empower children.



The traditional picture book format can prove restrictive when creators seek to tackle social justice themes. There are the obvious space limitations but there is also, in the UK market especially, a belief that picture books should somehow 'safeguard' young minds. It's a view often filtered through nostalgia and one which results in a surplus of timeless, placeless and anthropomorphic-led stories.

Where social justice topics do push through in picture books, environmental and animal welfare issues are overrepresented, which might make us reflect on what is it about those particular subjects which permits them space?

It has been refreshing, in very recent years, to have seen a handful of books published for the very young which speak directly to issues of equity and prejudice- and that do so through the voices of young, traditionally marginalised, characters. Two such recent books, **I Am Nefertiti** and **My Name is a Gift** both address the perennial racist microaggression of repeatedly mispronouncing the names of racially minoritised people.

In **My Name is a Gift**, a child of Pakistani descent shares how her parents considered carefully 'what name to gift me', but that those around her scramble 'Sitara', making it 'jumbled up sounds'. However unintended, the impact hurts. This pain is vividly externalised in **I Am Nefertiti** as the protagonist starts to visibly shrink after her new music teacher addresses her as 'Nef', surmising that this will be 'easier for the band to say'. Sitara ends up, at the front of the class, explaining the correct pronunciation of her name, contextualised by an account of her heritage. **I Am Nefertiti's** conclusion is perhaps more challenging: it's the children who tell the teacher that she must learn to articulate Nefertiti's name in order to, again quite literally, return her to her full stature.

In **What Happened to You?**, we meet Joe who has one leg. Joe is very busy fighting off sharks in the playground but is increasingly

interrupted by a barrage of questions from the other children: 'You've only got one leg! What happened?' 'Did it fall off in the toilet?' Alongside Joe's retorts is his uncompromising refusal to explain his disability, an empowered decision which results in the children finally preferring to join in on the pirate game. This challenge is, by the way, turned on patronising adults in the sequel, **You're So Amazing**.

Is That Your Mama? also has impertinent adults in mind. Most mixed-race families can offer an entire anthology of episodes in which they've been questioned about their origins. In this picture book, Josie's sense of self risks being fragmented by all the strangers who are overly curious about her relationship to the adults she goes out and about with. It takes her family to show her the rainbow heritage which makes them 'shine together' and make her uniquely her. This journey is enough for Josie to respond to the next 'Is that your Mama?' with a determined silence.

The agency and eventual self-determination demonstrated by all of these protagonists reverberates well beyond the page. We might conclude that it shouldn't fall to children to challenge prejudice. But then, nor should they wait for the adults in their lives to do so.

Books mentioned:

I Am Nefertiti, Annmarie Anang & Natelle Quek (Five Quills, 2022)

My Name is a Gift, Zeshan Akhter & Åsa Gilland (Templar, 2024)

What Happened to You?, James Catchpole & Karen George (Faber, 2021)

Is That Your Mama?, Patrice Lawrence & Diane Ewen (Scholastic UK, 2023)

All available at letterboxlibrary.com Est. 1983, **Letterbox Library** is an online children's bookseller specialising in diverse, inclusive and social justice themed children's books. They co-run the **Little Rebels Children's Book Award**.

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**.

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

Anna Rushall is a primary school teacher and English lead.

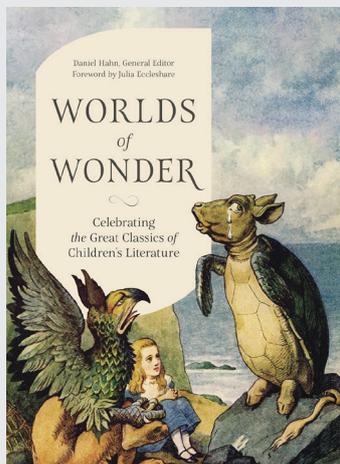
Lucy Staines was a primary school teacher, now retired.

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

Books About Children's Books



Worlds of Wonder Celebrating the Great Classics of Children's Literature

★★★★★

Daniel Hahn (editor) Princetown 256pp 9780691274638 £20.00 hbk
I have to confess my heart sank when this book landed in front of me, but I was pleasantly surprised. Aimed at an adult readership this is, as the title proclaims, a celebration of works that are already judged to be classics of children's literature together with titles that may surprise some readers. The desire is to showcase books written for children (and Hahn qualifies this further – no Teen/YA, no picture books or non-fiction) that have acquired a certain status; they are classics. Inevitably the result is selective – 79 titles ranging from the 19th – 20th century presented by a panel of critics, academics and writers. This is not a critical work. However, the titles have been selected because they have qualities that made them stand out in their time; they were memorable, unique and above all loved – and still are. They opened doors to worlds of wonder, whether those were through a looking glass, up a Faraway Tree or into the real world of Prince Edward Island. They introduced a young audience to interesting, inspirational characters and exciting stories. The articles demonstrate this and it is this sense of a relationship in the choices that comes over as does the individual voice of each contributor. It is an impressive list, and all are passionate about reading for pleasure. None of the entries are overlong. They present the plot, the context and the author (fascinating facts emerge) and what makes the book stand out (some of the contributors expand this element more than others; all are illuminating). The selection certainly reflects publishing in the UK and to a certain extent, North America, but there is more and we find books from across Europe and even the Far East. Hahn is a translator and passionate

about bringing awareness of books in translation over here. Some of these titles will already be well known – **Heidi**, **Pinocchio**, **Asterix**. Others not so much – but this is exciting; so much to explore. Sadly – and this may be picked up by critics- there is little representing the diversity found today. Hahn comments on this himself and expresses a hope for a future 'celebration' which will redress this as new 'classics' emerge. Celebratory certainly – difficult aspects are not ignored but not dwelt on. However there is no sense that the editor and contributors are creating a Must Read list. These are books that could be explored both by readers who will remember many of the titles with pleasure and excitement and those who might feel encouraged to find titles they missed or never encountered. They are books that could be offered to young readers with an appetite because they are worth reading with attention. All will, potentially, open that window onto a world ready to inspire the imagination. What is on offer here is only the tip: what has not been chosen? Where are Juliana Ewing, George Macdonald, Paul Berna, Rosemary Sutcliffe and what about **Tom's Midnight Garden**? Readers will have their own list of books that made an impression and were loved. Indeed, the very title raises the interesting question – what is a classic? What is a great classic? Who gets to decide? Here, as Julia Eccleshare tells us, are some suggestions – riches to satisfy memory, encourage curiosity and above all bring that pleasure to reading that transcends the merely educational. **FH**

Tiger, Tom & Tinkle

★★★

David Wood, Book Guild, 296pp, 978183574308, £10.99

David Wood has an unparalleled record for transforming children's stories into excellent stage versions, and in this book he reproduces his extensive correspondence with Judith Kerr and Philippa Pearce leading up to the successful staging of their two masterpieces, **The Tiger who Came to Tea** and **Tom's Midnight Garden** in that order. There were also plans for bringing Kathleen Hale's **Orlando** picture books onto the stage but this project never came off. In all cases Wood quotes voluminously from the unfailingly kind and sensitive letters he wrote to all three, by that time all quite elderly themselves and appreciative of this extra turn in their distinguished careers.

And that's just about it. There are some nice photos of all three ladies, along with shots of those plays that did reach the stage. Some scratchy handwriting is also reproduced plus a few quick sketches. In their answers to Wood's letters Judith Kerr comes over as charming and gracious as ever, Philippa Pearce remains benevolently sharp and to the point and Kathleen Hale still issues poignant reminders of the bohemian life she had once so enjoyed. Fans of these three wonderful women will not want to miss the extra bonus offered by these further glimpses into their professional and daily lives, and there is plenty of personal detail here well worth recording. But the matter at hand – the day-to-day problems and issues turning prose and pictures into plays – is ultimately of more limited interest to all but the most stage-struck readers. **NT**

Under 5s Pre – School/ Nursery/Infant

Different

★★★★★

Eva Eland, Andersen Press, 32pp, 9781783449996, £12.99 hbk

One morning, Mia wakes and something doesn't feel right. Nothing is out of place, and yet everything is. She looks in the mirror. She goes outside. She tries to fit in – to be 'just like the others.' But still, she feels... different.

Eland returns with her unmistakable visual language – pared-back compositions, luminous washes of colour, and those softly outlined, wide-eyed figures that feel both vulnerable and strong. Like **When Sadness Is at Your Door** and **Where Happiness Begins**, this is emotionally literate storytelling distilled to its purest form. The line work is simple, almost childlike, yet

profoundly intentional; the white space does as much work as the text.

Mia's bright pink figure stands in gentle contrast to the cooler blues and greens around her – a visual cue that mirrors her internal state. The typographical choice of hot pink on the cover and title page reinforces that sense of visibility and self-definition. Even the title page offers quiet nods to Eland's earlier books – small, framed images echoing her recurring themes of feeling, belonging, and inner weather. It feels like an artist in conversation with her own body of work.

The emotional arc is beautifully handled. Mia tries to 'fix' herself. She seeks answers from doctors, teachers, grown-ups. She attempts to shrink into the crowd. Yet nobody seems to notice. Nobody seems to care. Until she meets someone who also feels different.

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant continued

They are visually distinct – one vivid pink, the other cooler and calmer in tone – yet it is precisely this contrast that allows them to see one another clearly. Difference, here, becomes recognition.

Eland resists grand solutions. Mia may always feel a little different – and that's the point. The closing spreads, rich with textured grasses, ladybirds and soft snowfall, suggest not conformity but acceptance.

There's something quietly radical here. Rather than urging children to become 'normal,' Eland gently untethers them from the idea that normal was ever the goal. Different isn't a problem to solve – it's a truth to embrace.

Spare, tender, and visually assured, this feels like a natural continuation of Eland's work: a soft but steady reminder that being yourself – bright pink and all – is more than enough. **MT**

Owl and Moon

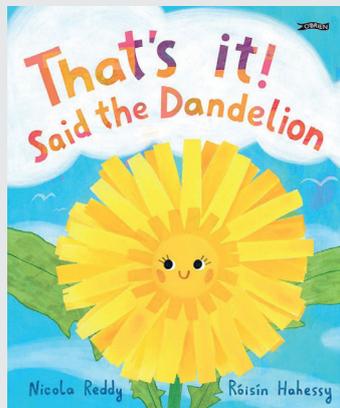
★★★★

Kate Rolfe, Two Hoots (Macmillan), 971035019625, £12.99, hbk

Everyone was snuggling down to sleep. Everyone, except Owl! This is not the soporific bedtime story I was expecting, but neither is it the riot of animal noises we find in Pat Hutchins' classic **Goodnight Owl**: the fluffy white owl goes out to meet her 'best friend, Moon.' Moon and Owl dance together – but Owl is too busy to notice what is happening with Moon.

Moon and Owl dance together, but Moon fades, and Owl is left alone in the shadowy forest. As she confronts her loneliness Owl restarts her dance, and is joined by a bat, a moth and 'a blaze of golden fireflies' until slowly Moon reappears. 'Owl knew that even when Moon felt far away, she would always return.' Core messages that arise from this are laid bare in the dedication page where the book is dedicated to friends 'who dance us through our darkness,' and the whole story is not simply introducing the lunar cycle and the terms 'waxing' and 'waning,' but stands as a metaphor for friendship in times of loneliness and depression.

The observant reader will have seen the glorious, instructive endpapers (I love a good endpaper!) depicting, but not explaining, the 30 days of a lunar cycle. Just the moon and numbers, no owl, no face on the moon, in contrast to the charming title page, where Moon smiles down at Owl with an iridescent glow and orange-rosy cheeks. Moon, Bat, Moth and Owl are humanised but not fully anthropomorphic, and the artwork is beautiful throughout, from the stunning moonrise through sad Owl's reflection, to the subtle glow of the moon on the mountains, and the story is told with gentle rhythm and immense sympathy. **NS**



That's It! Said the Dandelion

★★★★

Nicola Reddy, illus Róisín Hahessy, O'Brien Press, 32pp, 9781788495899, £13.99 hbk

In lyrical (non-rhyming) text, and via vibrant illustrations, this inspiring picture book introduces young children to the life cycle of a dandelion, but shows them much more besides. It opens with a dandelion seed falling onto soft grass. 'What can I be?' she asks a passing snail, and as she grows, she comes up with answers to the question drawing on what she observes around her. Her roots are strong and deep she notes, so she decides she must be a tree, or noting her jagged, toothy leaves, decides she must be a lion; when her crown of yellow flowers bursts open, she decides she must be the sun. Night falls and she closes up, releasing new seeds in the morning, deciding she is the stars as they fly away for the cycle to start again as the seeds float through the meadow on their 'pappus parachutes.' Pages at the end share more information about dandelions, where they grow, how pollinators love them, also referenced in the story. The extras contained in the narrative however are to do with growth, change, working out who you are. Parents might also identify with the dandelion watching her seeds float away to start their own journeys of discovery. A rewarding reading experience for home and school. **LS**

The Sleeper Train

★★★★

Mick Jackson, ill. Baljinder Kaur, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781529516494, £12.99, hbk

In this picture book we meet a young child who is embarking on a journey on a sleeper train with her family for the first time. The experience is very exciting, far too exciting to think about going to sleep. Wide awake, she starts to reminisce about other places she remembers sleeping, from mum and dad's bed after a bad dream, to a tent in a field or even in hospital after having an operation. Eventually the motion of the train rocks her to sleep, and the experience soon becomes

another memory to draw on during sleepless nights.

The Sleeper Train may prove a reassuring read for any child unsure about the prospect of sleeping in different surroundings. It comprises a series of vignettes rather than a story; for although readers may wonder what happens when the travellers reach their destination, this is left to the imagination.

The illustrations are excellent, stylish, detailed and colourful with lots to discover, evoking the richness of Indian landscapes and interiors beautifully. The nighttime views through the train window are particularly striking. **SMC**

My Best Friend Tilly

★★★★

Iris Samartzi, trans by Ikaros Publishing, Post Wave, 40pp, 9781836270348, £12.99 hbk

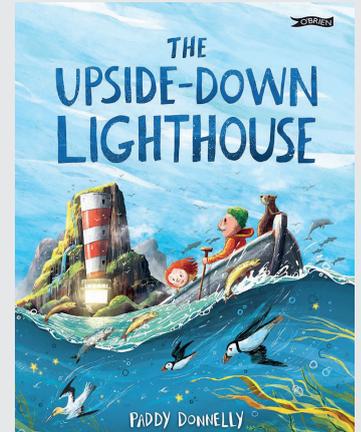
'I live here' declares our picture book protagonist. 'My best friend Tilly lives over there. I wish she would come and play. Imagine if ...' And so the story grows as more and more excitements are imagined to make the perfect play date. The pages get ever more crowded until even they outgrow the book and extend upwards. Now we have everything – but wait – where is Tilly? The observant young reader will have noticed that Tilly has been squeezed out; Tillyland, so lovingly created, has no room for Tilly.

Full of humour and with a voice that speaks directly to her audience, Iris Samartzi subtly reminds young readers that friendship does not require a plethora of gadgets, objects – or even animals real or imagined. In the end a game of ball between two friends is all that is needed. The effect is immediate – the images are uncluttered and direct, artfully set against a white background that will gradually become full of ideas and cluttered. Using nothing but simple lines Sarmatzi creates two little girls who have real character. The enthusiasm of one, the anxiety of the other is obvious. The pages then fill with colour as the child's imagination runs riot – until the final spread where all that is required is a white double page spread, two small girls linked by a small red ball and one word. There may be an underlying lesson, but this is a picture book that is fun and distinctive in its visual impact. Highly recommended. **FH**

The Upside-Down Lighthouse

★★★★

Paddy Donnelly, O'Brien Press, 32pp, 978-1788495998, £13.99 hbk Stars out during the day, flying fish, swimming birds, and an upside-down lighthouse, Meara doesn't believe Grandad when he tells her they'll see all this and more as they row out to a small, foggy island (actually Rathlin Island off Ireland's Causeway Coast). Their trip is as eye-opening for readers as it is for Meara as we spot starfish in rockpools, razorbills, puffins and gannets, as she learns about fish that



build nests. As for the lighthouse, it really is upside down, built that way, as Meara works out, in order that the light will shine strong during the low-lying fog common round the island. This is the third outing for this intrepid pair, following *The Vanishing Lake* and *The Golden Hare*, and once again, it's a rich and rewarding experience for readers young and old. Paddy Donnelly's skilful use of perspective and composition, plus the palette – rich, buttery yellows and cool greens and blues – take us right to the island and the sense of a warm family relationship is strong as ever. A mesmerising adventure in a book. **LS**

Porridge Please!

★★★★

Laura Mucha, ill. Marc Boutavant, Walker Books, 48pp, 9781529504279, £12.99 hbk

Bear just wants to read his brand new book. That's all. He's tucked up in bed, determined to turn to 'the very last page' – when **KNOCK, KNOCK!** Fairytale chaos arrives at his door. Red Riding Hood has been chased. The Three Pigs need refuge. The Big Bad Wolf is, inevitably, lurking. But while the fairy-tale cast plead for safety (and all the porridge – some things never change), Bear grows increasingly irritable. "WHAT DO YOU WANT? I AM TRYING TO READ MY BOOK!" he roars whilst his parents are outside fixing a small, broken chair.

Mucha's text plays gleefully with narrative expectation. The Wolf is outrageous (and unexpectedly sneeze-prone), but the real twist lies in Bear himself. He may not be the reliable host we first assume. In fact, there's a deliciously meta suggestion that Bear might be inside the very story he's trying to finish – trapped in a loop that ends with a mischievous 'READ AGAIN!'

Boutavant's illustrations soften and sharpen in equal measure. His warm, textured palette and slightly Scarry-esque character design make the escalating absurdity feel inviting rather than threatening. The forest setting is cosy; the chaos, comic. Even the Wolf's theatrics are rendered with slapstick charm.

But beneath the humour lies something sharper: a playful interrogation of storytelling itself.

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant continued

Who controls the tale? Who gets sympathy? And what happens when the supposed hero is more self-serving than the villain?

Funny, fast, and just a little bit wicked, this is a fractured fairy tale that understands its readers are clever – and rewards them for looking twice. **MT**

My Friend Billy Whiskers

★★★★

David Litchfield, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 40pp, 978 0 7112 9602 2, £7.99 pbk

Patrick is so shy that he doesn't join in with other children's play. Instead there's Billy Whiskers, his imaginary lion friend that no-one else can see. Together they ride bikes and read stories, and Billy listens to Patrick talking about all manner of things. The lion is a really good listener: he listens as they play games, swing in the park and when Patrick kicks a ball or climbs his favourite tree from where he can watch other children. Eventually as Patrick continues to worry, Billy takes him on amazing adventures: they fly through the air, wander through magical forests and visit a stadium where the boy scores a winning goal in a football match. These adventures embolden Patrick, who is now sufficiently confident to say hello to other children and even join in their games. He has a terrific time but then he falls from his favourite tree. Suddenly, back come all his worries; if only he could fly away with Billy Whiskers. Instead something truly magical happens: his new friends make him feel brave just like Billy did.

The story doesn't end there: Billy stays in Patrick's life as he grows into an adult, though he only pays him an occasional visit.

David Litchfield's glowing watercolour scenes are sheer magic especially the ones showing Patrick and Billy Whiskers flying through the night sky and wandering through the forest; they illuminate his wonderfully warm, touching story about an imaginary friend that helps a boy find the bravery he needs to participate in the real world with human friends. **JB**

The Tour at School (Because You're the New Kid!)

★★★★

Katie Clapham, ill. Nadia Shireen, Walker Books, 40pp, 9781529505740, £12.99 hbk

It's a really important job, being a tour guide. You have to tell the New Person EVERYTHING. Where the toilets are. The best playground game. The Emergency Meet-Up Place. And absolutely, definitely, what happened to Barry the goldfish.

Told entirely in the voice of one irrepressible child guide, this is a gloriously funny, big-hearted celebration of school life – and of the small acts of kindness that make it less frightening. Clapham's first-

person narration places the reader directly in the tour. "HELLO! I'M YOUR TOUR GUIDE!" the guide declares, and from that moment on, we're not observing – we're included. The running commentary is breathless, digressive, deeply sincere, and often hilariously off-topic (well, to adult readers anyway). There are warnings not to get lost (until the end of the tour), dramatic asides about soap that smells 'amazing-zing-zing', and careful headcounts that sometimes go slightly awry.

Shireen is inspired here. Her bold, textured characters – all wide eyes and emphatic shapes – bring warmth and comic exaggeration in equal measure. The spreads hum with detail: corridor chaos, library hush, playground mayhem, tempestuous toilets. Yet amid the noise, she captures something tender. When the Emergency Meet-Up Place becomes a quiet confession of having once been the lost 'New' yourself, the book shifts – gently, honestly – into empathy. The final hug lands with emotional precision.

Funny, inclusive, and brimming with heart, this is a school tour that understands what really matters: not the toilets, not the timetable – but the courage it takes to say, 'We could just become friends?'

A brighter school would absolutely have this kind of tour guide... and frequent, unscripted visits from a certain Marcus. Observant readers will delight in all the hidden gems. **MT**



Auntie's Bangles

★★★★

Dean Atta, ill. Alea Marley, Orchard Books, 32pp, 9781408370599, £12.99, hbk

Theo's cousin Rama has come to stay, something she has often done in the past, but things are different now because Theo's auntie has recently died. Rama is so very sad, and Theo doesn't know how to cheer her up. Theo misses Auntie too, she was always such fun whether dancing at weddings or cooking delicious food with her colourful bangles jingling.

Eventually Theo and Rama find ways to remember Auntie together, through the books she gave as presents and by dancing together while wearing Auntie's bangles.

This is a simple, warm picture

book about coping with grief after the loss of a loved one. It may provide reassurance for children trying to help a close friend or relative who is experiencing loss, particularly by indicating the power of celebrating fond memories of the loved one. **SMC**

The Butterfly House

★★★★

Harry Woodgate, Andersen Press, 32pp, 9781839132896, £12.99 hbk
Holly has an encounter with Miss Brown, her reclusive next door neighbour that leads to her writing a letter to apologise for creeping her into her garden. Miss Brown responds by explaining 'My brain was ill for a long time and I fear the wildness has spilled out and now I can't tidy it up again.' Holly looks for advice from her teacher and the project attracts the attention of other neighbours. But does Miss Brown approve?

Key to the communication between Holly and Miss Brown is the letter format; we see four between the two of them (and one invitation to the neighbourhood), and the narrative hints at others. There are plenty of 'teachable moments' here: a letter-writing project would not be out of the

question, and more might come from the story: Harry Woodgate's inclusion of the teacher is an open invitation to a school to start or promote a school allotment, for example.

There are some things to consider here: safeguarding needs to be discussed, although the use of letters to communicate is a clever way to keep things warm yet appropriately distant. There are some choices in how Miss Brown's house is depicted and how it appears to improve although extended help from the neighbours is not part of the story. The biggest issue for me is Miss Brown's mental health. Harry Woodgate is sensitive and clear about the 'wildness' Miss Brown struggles with, and how she comes to the conclusion that 'a bit of wildness is good for all of us.' This is a lovely idea - but again, as with the safeguarding issues of Holly encountering her neighbour, presenting this book to a group of children could lead to discussions an adult would need to be prepared for. Discussion of mental health is, as Miss Brown herself says, a thorny issue, but well worth including - led by an adult who is primed for the deep questions this book might suggest. **NS**

5 – 8 Infant/Junior

Meet the Mubbles

★★★★

Liz Pichon, Macmillan Children's Books, 128pp, 9781035041695, £9.99 hbk

Meet The Mubbles, as they burst colourfully onto the scene in a brand new series from best-selling author Liz Pichon. The bright, fun-loving Mubbles – Berry, Dash, Cheery and the gang – live happily together on The Isle of Smile, where they love to sing songs to help make the flowers and plants grow big and strong. The gang all love their island, especially the mysterious Uncertain Curtain, which always delivers an unexpected surprise; cue song for the reader to join in – 'What's behind the Uncertain Curtain?'

When a strange object lands on the Isle of Smile, nobody knows what it is, but when someone presses a button, suddenly all the colour starts to disappear from their island and the flowers become grey and droopy. What has happened and can the Mubbles solve the mystery in time before the colour disappears from their world forever?

This is the first in what is certain to be another hugely popular series from Pichon. A full-colour graphic comic style novel, packed full of vibrant and funny characters doing crazy things, perfectly pitched for the intended 6+ age group. The Mubbles even have their own QR code and website where you can meet the characters and learn the songs featured in the story, to singalong while you read, as well as play 'The Uncertain Curtain' game. Children can also send their own artwork in and be featured on

the website too. The drawings within the book are simple but effective and the pages exude fun and joy. It might not be the perfect bedtime story, as it is more likely to have the readers bouncing around to the songs and rhymes of the Mubbles than winding down ready to sleep, but it is certain to be a household and classroom winner, with bonus ear-worms for all the adults. **AH**

Isadora Moon Has a Birthday

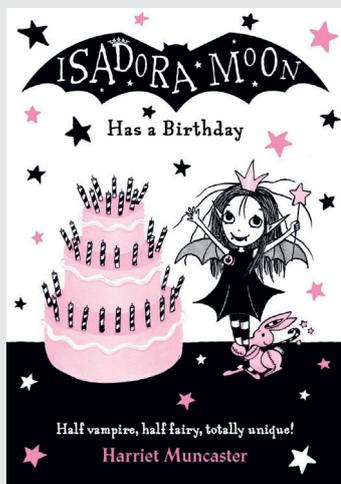
★★★★

Harriet Muncaster, Oxford Children's Books, 192pp, 978-1382074797, £14.99 hbk

It's ten years since the first **Isadora Moon** book was published and she's been enchanting readers ever since, with over six million copies sold. This adventure describes Isadora's own birthday and she's determined to have a human-style party, much to the consternation of her fairy mum and vampire father. They naturally want to put their spin on the celebrations and when bossy cousin Wilbur arrives to do magic tricks for the guests, things nearly end in disaster. The story is everything that readers have come to expect and which make this series so successful. It's a lively, funny story, Isadora and her unusual but always close, loving family are perfect company, and, throughout, there's a gentle but distinct message about being happy and confident in who you are. As Isadora says, 'I wasn't sure where I fitted in but then I went to human school and discovered that everyone is a little bit different and that's the best way to be.' Who could resist?

reviews

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued



There's also an extra story starring ex-toy, Isadora's special friend Pink Rabbit, brought magically to life by her fairy mum. Pink Rabbit is normally silent, so it's great to hear him speaking! Both stories are delivered via short chapters and with two colour (vampire black and fairy pink) illustrations on every page making them just right for newly independent readers. Here's to the next **Isadora Moon** anniversary! **LS**

[Read our interview](#) with Isadora's creator **Harriet Muncaster**.

Grandad's World

★★★★

Michael Foreman, Scholastic, 32pp, 9780702323119, £12.99 hbk

It is the beginning of the summer holidays. Jack is looking forward to them. He will be leaving his home in the city to stay with his grandfather in the country. Here the two of them will explore the countryside watching the wildlife both on their walks and from the den they build. When the weather is stormy, Jack and Grandad work on making a bird box in Grandad's shed. But then the peace of the countryside is shattered by vandals using the local pond as a rubbish dump. It needs Jack's enthusiasm to galvanise the neighbourhood to clear it up. The holiday's end on this positive note and Jack returns bringing a little bit of Grandad's world with him – that nesting box they made together in Grandad's shed

A conversational accessible storytelling voice is brought to life by Foreman's luminous illustrations. Young readers will easily step into Jack's world. The relationship between the grandfather and the boy is warm, creating a positive atmosphere. The situation that faces them is one that will be recognised whatever the background of the audience and the solution is potentially simple – a neighbourhood working together. The theme is a familiar one today. Here it is handled with the affection and attractive directness that is such a

characteristic of Foreman's work in which image and text work together. The setting is local drawing attention to wildlife that can be seen without leaving the country, the problem recognisable, the solution possible and at the heart an intergenerational relationship that is warm and loving. **FH**

We Grew a Dragon

★★★★

Emma Chinnery, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 978-1526687449, £7.99 pbk

In this tale set deep in a city, there is a very special relationship between a small daughter and her mother. They both love stories, music and dressing up. Mum then meets a man, a single parent living deep in the countryside, who has a son called Tom. Mum and Tina travel a great distance by train to visit them. The pictures show the greetings between Tina's mum and Tom's dad are amorous, whilst Tina and Tom become fast friends. Tina is beyond surprised when Tom shows her a tiny squawking dragon hatching from an egg. In caring for the hatched dragon, the children discover she needs lots of exercise, trees to climb and midnight feasts, dragons always being hungry. Above all, she needs lots of love and cuddles. The relationship between the adults breaks down and Mum and Tina take the long journey back to the city. Tina desperately misses the countryside, Tom and their pet dragon. The conclusion shows a reunited Tina and Tom on the dragon's back racing through the night skies.

A story about a blended family and how friendship can grow. The author/illustrator has created an arresting cover with magical gold highlights. Throughout, the colour palette is wide and colourful, shades of light and dark enhancing the magic created between the adults and then between the children and the dragon. Good fun! **GB**

The Sad Book

★★★★

Howard Pearlstein, ill. James Munro, Graffeg, 32pp, 9781805950899, £8.99, pbk

The Sad Book is based on a clever premise; for this is a book which can actually speak to its readers. Our book narrator starts by telling readers not to expect a 'happy ever after' story where the frog turns into a prince or the good guy wins. It goes on to show, largely through illustration, that sad things happen to all of us from time to time, it is not unusual. The examples given range from dropping an ice cream or hearing parents arguing.

With interactive elements, the text cleverly conveys strategies for coping with sad thoughts such as controlling your breathing, talking about your feelings, drawing a picture of how you feel or finding ways to help someone else. The overarching message is that it is normal to feel sad sometimes and that sad feelings don't last forever.

An effective idea, this is one of a series of four books by the same author and illustrator team focusing on different emotions and how to cope with them. **SMC**

You Can Do It, Bert

★★★★

Ole Konnecke, Gecko Press, 32pp, 9798348030360, £8.99 pbk

It's Bert's big day. Bert, a small, round, red bird with a comically big beak, is about to jump off a branch into the water, but he is nervous: he checks everything, but puts off his jump by strolling along the branch eating a banana. Will he do it? Will his friends' encouragement help him to take the leap? This very simple story will have resonances for a young child who is screwing up their courage in lots of areas, from jumping in a swimming pool to trying out a climbing frame.

The simple story line and artwork are very engaging; the plain white background means there are no distractions, and the text is easy to read out loud: often on the left hand page is the text, often a word – 'Bert,' for example, in increasing letter size suggests his bird friends (at this point unseen) are shouting encouragement from out of our view. Bert throws away his banana skin, stands irresolute and then takes a running jump. The picture of him (on the left hand page: he has leaped over the gutter of the book) with one wing over his eyes is tense and comic all at once, and when we finally see his friends in the water it is worth looking out for that banana skin...

This is a splendid little book, full of simple charm and with a main character who is instantly someone to sympathise with. I can see this being shared with a nursery/reception group, or one to one with a child for whom physical challenges seem too much. 'When Bert says he'll do something, he does it,' says one of the friends in celebration of Bert's jump: this is a story of growing confidence and winning over nervousness that lots of children (and adults) could relish and learn from. **NS**

Tractors In Space

★★★★

Ross MacKay, ill. Alex Willmore, DK, 32pp, 978-0241720219, £7.99 pbk

The cover immediately attracts attention from any would-be reader with its black background of outer space, and a clutch of tractors gleefully flying about. One dark night at the farm, Toby the tractor is dreaming of going up into space, wishing his big bouncing tractors could touch down on the moon. Determined to make his dreams come true, Toby works through a raft of experiments, trying to become space bound. This achieved, he finds himself in a sky that is very dark, very cold and very empty. Just imagine! Bursting to life, Toby meets Big Red who leads him across the wispy, whirly galaxy. Swiftly retreating from the enormous heat of the sun, the two tractors meet up with the fastest tractors Toby has ever

seen, all joining in a space rock race. Disaster! Hit by an asteroid, it takes team work to right Toby once again. His final quest, to see the moon, and it shimmers, silver, round. Toby must seek assistance from his new friends to return safely to the farm, having glimpsed the planet Earth from his hide and seek games on the moon. What an adventure! Every page is packed with action in every colour possible, many of the space pages with black backgrounds, through which each event is enacted. Every tractor has an identity, eyes and mouths speaking volumes.

This is a really exciting read-aloud adventure, full of opportunities for younger readers to follow flight paths with fingers, dodge asteroids and linger over favourite pages. The book deserves to be a big hit, from best-selling, award-winning duo Ross MacKay and Alex Willmore. Prepare to laugh aloud. **GB**

Pawprint Productions: Stop! Gangster Koala!

★★

Jenny Moore, ill. Berta Maluenda, New Frontier Publishing, 172pp, 9781916790162, £7.99 pbk

The **Pawprint Productions** series features short stories about animals who work at a TV studio and all the jolly japes they get up to. **Stop! Gangster Koala!** is a playful introduction to the gangster genre for early readers eager to take on some chapter books.

Archie the koala loves being an actor, and he is excited (but secretly very nervous) about portraying the menacing gangster boss Houdlam Pie-Claw in a new series. When a shambolic accident happens on the studio set, Archie transforms into the meringue-chucking mafioso for real, and embarks upon a vengeful mission to 'splat' as many animals as he can!

As hardworking actors, directors and camera operators are trying to shoot their programmes, Archie/Houdlam Pie-Claw causes chaos, threatening everyone with a thoroughly good splatting and failing to understand that the various sets he wanders through - from quiz show to hospital drama - are not real-life.

The setting of a TV studio means that each chapter can play with tropes from different types of show and introduce all sorts of zany characters. Their animal identities will appeal to younger readers, but children are unlikely to be familiar with all of the various types of TV genre portrayed, so may miss lots of the jokes. However, children will enjoy the simplicity and playfulness of the illustrations, which capitalise on the cultural capital of cute and cuddly creatures like giraffes and chameleons, as well as the undeniably adorable Archie the koala.

This story is not without charm and there are a few poignant moments between Archie and his friends, but, overall, a lack of drama or excitement might mean that the book fails to maintain the interest of readers all the way to the end. **SD**

Sadie Jones and the Ball

★★★★★

Sally Nicholls, ill. Ashley King, Barrington Stoke, 60pp, 978000876046 5, £7.99 pbk

The palace is buzzing with gossip. The prince has been told by the queen that he must find a wife by the end of the summer. He decides to hold a ball to find a suitable bride. Sadie Jones, the smallest kitchen maid at the palace, doesn't think this event will involve her - until she receives an invitation. She discovers all the unmarried girls in the kingdom have been invited, even the servants, but unfortunately there is no invitation for Sadie's friend Joey, a kitchen boy at the palace.

After surmounting difficulties in finding an outfit, Sadie attends the ball. Also attending is a very mysterious and rather familiar girl who captivates the prince, and leaves behind a glass slipper....

This is an amusing take on the Cinderella story told from a different perspective. It poses several 'what if' questions - including what might a ball be like if only girls are invited? Will the male servants including Sadie's friend Joey find a way to join in with the fun? And what might happen if the prince isn't keen on marrying Cinderella once he discovers she is only a servant?

Another engaging and accessible read from award winning publisher Barrington Stoke. Written by highly acclaimed author Sally Nicholls, key moments in the story are perfectly captured in Ashley King's greyscale illustrations. An ideal book for newly independent readers. **SMC**

The Big Green

★★★

Ken Wilson-Max, Otter-Barry Books, 32pp, 9781915659651, £12.99 hbk

Set in Mali, this story is an example of the massive Great Green Wall project's work involving eleven countries across sub-Saharan Africa. (There's more about this after the narrative.)

It's another long, hot day but excitement is in the air in the village where Maryam and Issa live. As it's far too hot to run about, the siblings make clapping music. Their parents meanwhile make a different kind of music as they work on the parched earth. Suddenly Uncle Cedric drives up with his taxi full of plants. Issa's question about what the plants are for is met with an unexpected response from Uncle Cedric: 'Your future,' he tells them cheerily. It's a community task to create this future and very soon neighbours arrive to assist, some bringing food and water in buckets on their heads. The children help by carrying seedlings into the shade ready to plant. The adults dig lots of holes into which they place the seedlings; then everybody waters them, continuing working until the very last plant is in damp soil. 'They all knew they were making

a difference to their world.' So too were the people in other towns and villages. Then comes the waiting ... and eventually beneath the trees life began once again.

The final spread shows a somewhat bigger Maryam and Issa walking through green grass beneath spreading trees, enjoying the flora and fauna around, safe in the knowledge that they now have a place to play and a place to look after.

Young listeners will enjoy making the various sounds that are part of the narrative of this upbeat tale. Ken Wilson-Max's bold, bright illustrations conjure the heat, the vibrant patterned clothes of the villagers and the determined spirit of those involved in the project.

The book ends with a 'Plant Your Own Tree' activity to inspire youngsters to emulate Issa and Maryam and make a difference in their own part of the world. **JB**

The Map of Me

★★★★★

Nicola Davies, ill. Olga Shtonda, Templar Books, 32pp, 9781835871782, £7.99 pbk

This story is narrated by a little girl who has recently moved to a new home in a new country where everything feels strange and unfamiliar. She gets lost when she ventures out, calling the streets 'a jumble of spaghetti.' Her empathetic Mum helps her draw a map to enable her to navigate her way around; they include the roads, the supermarket, the school and the flowers by the traffic lights at the corner. But some of the most important things from before the move are not included - her grandmother and Joe-Dog being two.

When Mum mentions that the map isn't big enough, her daughter decides to make it so large that it covers an entire wall. This enables her to add new things as she finds them - the library, the swings in the park and her new friends, for example. When those friends see the map, they add more things of their own and gradually the distance between everything and everyone seems to diminish and her new house begins to feel like home at last. However, two sad things then happen: Joe-Dog gets sick and dies and the girl's favourite tree is cut down. Both had been included on the map but it hadn't kept them safe, so the girl cries herself to sleep that night.

Next morning however she discovers another map on the kitchen wall; it's large and has been drawn by her dad, showing how things once were. The girl and her friends approve of this and decide to find out more about the past and add to the map other places where their families have lived. This leads to some further thoughts about how things change; some are definitely for the better, others not.

The narrator draws a new map that shows a future that is much greener,

her Granny now living nearby, and a puppy. In this enormous world there are no wars, instead it's 'full of love and wonder.' Surely this is the kind of world we all want and need to work towards.

An empowering book about belonging and relating to other people, to share with primary age children whether or not they are experiencing big change in their lives. **JB**

Make Every Week Wild

★★★★★

Fiona Danks and Jo Schofield, ill. Anna Ivanir, Wide Eyed Editions, 112pp, 9781836000273, £10.99 pbk

This attractive book works along the lines of a scrapbook for children aged 6 years upwards. It is brimming with 52 activities about our natural world, one for each week of the year. The young person is encouraged to make the book their own using scissors, paint, glue etc. and collecting natural objects as they spend more time outdoors. It is a follow-up publication to the successful **Make This Book Wild**.

There are some delightful features of this book: 'My Wild Week Calendar', on the reverse of the front cover, where the child can log activities which they have completed, and their own bookplate/dedication on the first page. The aim is that the student takes the book outside with them, sticking in pictures etc. and making the book their special memento. Forest bathing is introduced to the youngster on pp.10-11 and is explained thus: 'Forest bathing is about taking time to slow down, relax and let nature wash away your worries.'

Original ideas for pursuits can be found throughout: a Maths Challenge with a measuring stick (pp.19-20), creating memory jars (pp.65-66) and painting snail spirals on pp.84-85. Wild games, scavenger hunts, bark rubbing and bird spotting are all here to keep the youngsters entertained. It was the blackberry picking (pp.104-105), flower pressing (p.61-62) and the interviewing an older person (pp.74-75) which took me back to the 1970s when children played outside all the time. **JS**

Ernie's Mindful Journey

★★★★★

Kirsty Topley, Every Cherry Publishing, 32pp, 9781836892496, £7.99 pbk

This is a symbolised version of the book of the same name from SEND specialist publisher **Every Cherry**. This version allows the reader to access the story through the text and illustrations as well as through symbols created by the publisher. Each line of text is thus accompanied by symbols depicting the main words in the sentence. The symbols used are similar to British Sign Language and Makaton symbols, so are easily recognisable for those who use these regularly to communicate. Symbols and symbolised texts like this are great for those young readers who struggle to access language and can instead use these symbols to interpret the story visually, making this version

a more accessible way to read.

The story itself is about Ernie the frog who learns about mindfulness from his friends to help him through life's daily worries. It's a sweet story full of tips for readers of all ages and is complimented nicely with the colourful and uncomplicated illustrations.

There's also a QR code for a free audiobook version and a free signed video of the story too shown alongside the illustrations. Every Cherry really do think of everything! Every Cherry also publishes a range of other formats of accessible reads for a variety of ages- including 'Easy' and 'Easier Classics', symbolised board books, stories focusing on the senses, chapter books and books for older readers, plus a variety of accessible sports biographies. **CH**

Big Brilliant World

★★★★★

Matt Ralphs, ill. Aysha Tengiz, Big Picture Press, 32pp, 9781835870952, £12.99 hbk

Here is a brightly coloured hardback overflowing with interesting information about 12 cities around the world: Mexico City, New York, London, Paris, Barcelona, Amsterdam, Berlin, Budapest, Rome, Istanbul, Seoul and Tokyo. The Contents page comprises a map of the world indicating the cities covered, and the scope of the book is laid out on the next two pages. Each of the following spreads is devoted to one city and includes bite sized chunks of information regarding the architecture, food, cultural venues and transport to be found there.

I was fascinated to learn little known facts about these chosen cities. For example, 'Rome is home to thousands of stray cats, which are protected by law and allowed to live freely throughout the city' (p.22). Similarly, there are lots of interesting pieces of information about food and drink: 'Turkish people each drink an average of 3 kilograms of tea per year - more than any other country in the world' (p. 25).

In addition to the above contents there are also some first words in foreign languages which I am sure youngsters of this age group will have fun learning. It must be pointed out that adult help and support with this book will bring out its full potential. I particularly liked the final spread entitled 'Goodbye!' which provides the young person with the foreign language words for 'goodbye' as indicated by the various flags on different modes of transport.

The talent of both the award-winning author and illustrator shines through every busy, colourful page in this book, including the covers and endpapers. I loved the little characters that pop up throughout the city scenes. Meticulous detail is evident throughout this beautiful hardback making it a lively source of interesting facts. My only suggestion is that the same team should create a follow-up publication on another 12 cities as I am sure this publication will capture the imaginations of little ones. **JS**

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle

Ed's Choice

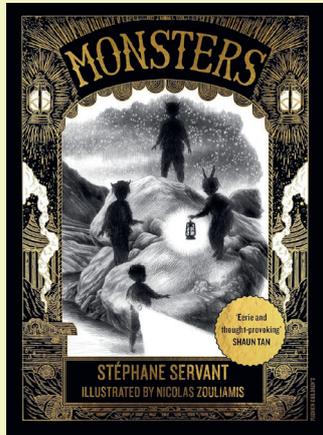
Monsters

★★★★★

Stéphane Servant, illus Nicolas Zouliamis, trans by Sarah Ardizzone, Pushkin Press, 112pp, 9781782695547, £14.99 hbk

Otto lives in a remote village rarely visited by travellers from the outside world. Any who do come are soon frightened away. We have the impression of a withdrawn self-sufficient community. Then a circus arrives. It styles itself The Circus of Dreams. The villagers are thrilled and flock to the show. Otto is taken by his mother. He is entranced – then the Ringmaster announces a monster will be revealed. A shrouded cage – the covering is removed – and there, the monster – a boy...a human child! So who or what is Otto?

Who are the monsters? This is the question Servant subtly asks his audience. It is a story about the assumptions we make – assumptions that Otto makes, assumptions that we, the readers will make because initially we do not see Otto face to face. There are clues when the circus arrives. Who is that lady sitting on the steps of her caravan? Does she have two heads? But then a circus is known for creating entertainment from apparent 'freaks' – monstrous beings. What if it the audience including Otto is 'monstrous', as well... except for that one exhibit? This is Otto's narrative. But there is more. In parallel the haunting illustrations by Zouliamis tell another story; the story of how this boy has



arrived here, in this remote village. It is a story that reveals monsters do not necessarily have grotesque faces or obvious differences. Monsters can exist in a home; or indeed a community. Otto also is a victim. Can differences be overcome? That is the hope, the message at the heart of this powerful slim novel as Otto and the boy who is also Otto find the strength to face their monsters as they sing 'A song about how monsters sometimes look like us. And about how cages are made to be broken.' The text reaches us through the excellent translation by Sarah Ardizzone, direct, immediate. The illustrations do not just create the setting and landscape, they expand the story being told by the author, introducing visual details, enhancing our understanding, creating a wider picture for this. An outstanding book that poses questions without didacticism, shocking- but allowing a positive ending. FH

Once Upon an Island

★★★★★

Alice Albinia, ill. Helen Cann, Magic Cat Publishing, 64pp, 9781917044349, £16.99, hbk

This book gives itself the tagline 'an atlas of islands from around the world' but it's much more than just another geography book on islands. It combines beautifully illustrated maps with information about the island's geography, origins and people. It features well-known islands like Madagascar whose animals are 85% endemic species, and Hawaii - the island created by volcanoes that is over 3800 km from land. But it also features lesser-known places like Waiheke near Aotearoa New Zealand with its rich Māori history, and the Amazon River Islands that are a collection of 'floating forests' in the heart of the Amazon Rainforest.

There is plenty of information included to make it a suitable curriculum companion for those studying landforms. The maps

themselves feature a range of highlights from native animals to local delicacies and historical or natural monuments. At the start there are a few spreads about terminology used to describe different types of islands, climate change, people, flora and fauna and how islands are classified, and ends with snippets of conversation with the author and women from each island featured.

It is evident that a great amount of work and time has gone into creating this book and it is without doubt a book to pour over and devour, whether you are a travelling enthusiast or have selected it for your young readers to help them with schoolwork. CHR

The Heart

★★★

Noemí Fabra, trans. Gabriella Aldeman, Post Wave Publishing, 48pp, 9781836270911, £14.99, hbk

This is quite an unusual book. It appears at first to be a biology book, detailing the science behind the

human heart, how it works and how to look after it, but its exploration of what the heart is doesn't stop there.

It also includes sections on animal hearts and how they differ from that of humans, which compliments the curriculum well. So far, so expected for a book on the heart, but then we move onto looking at the heart in a more abstract sense, starting with looking at its meaning in different cultures and throughout history. It's an interesting angle to take on the subject and is full of interesting observations, such as how the Egyptians valued the heart so much so that they had two words for it-hat for the physical heart and ib for the consciousness - one's will, imagination, memory and life. This section also features information on religious beliefs around the heart, such as a Judeo-Christian belief that the heart was the centre of religious devotion and how in Hindu culture one of the seven chakras systems is the heart, as well as historical romances, Romanticism and even the heart's legacy in music.

From there we move onto the heart as a symbol of love and romance - such as the use of ivy leaves in Etruscan and Greek cultures, and the origins of Valentine's Day and great love stories throughout history. The penultimate section is on the heart as a metaphor, like how one can be described as being 'cold-hearted' or having a 'heart of gold' or a heart made 'of stone' and what that means, plus stories of broken hearts and painful loves. We finish with a section on the heart's beat and its use in music and science.

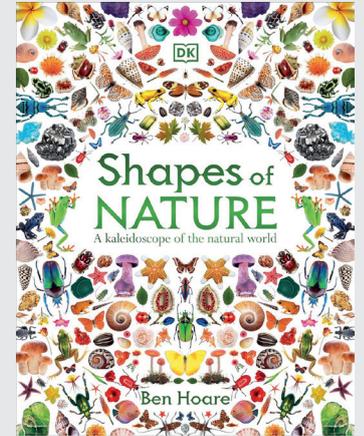
As mentioned, it's an unusual angle to look at the heart and leaves the book sitting somewhere between the worlds of curriculum support and leisure non-fiction but it's an enlightening and enjoyable read. The language is quite low level so would suit reluctant older readers as well as younger readers in search of topic support. CH

Shapes of Nature

★★★★★

Ben Hoare, DK, 96pp, 9780241772256, £20 hbk

In a letter included with the review copy of this eye-catching large format book author Ben Hoare describes it as a child-friendly reimagining of the display cabinets you see in the world's great natural history museums and it's hard to think of a better summary. Double pages present small photos from DK's unique picture library e.g. of bees, beetles, feathers, starfish, carefully arranged in the relevant shape - a bee, a beetle, a frog. Apparently, there are over 3,000 different objects included; I didn't count but can quite believe it. Each of the photos is numbered and named, and the effect is absolutely that of a



cabinet of beautiful objects, an image that you will want to pore over, and an extraordinary visual representation of the variety and beauty of nature. If you can tear yourself away and turn the page, there you'll find photographic close ups of the objects, the tiny scales on a butterfly's wing, the underside of a starfish, the spiral pattern on a pinecone. There, there is also information to lift the objects off the page. Hoare's text is always accessible and he claims to have included as many 'wow' facts as possible. This is a book that has been carefully and thoughtfully created to inform, educate and inspire. It will fascinate children and encourage them to understand and appreciate the natural world and to learn even more about it. The final topic is gemstones, which is entirely fitting, as this a gem from start to finish. Naturally there is an index and glossary. MMA

Formula Fast: Your Ultimate Guide to Formula One Racing!

★★★★★

Matt Ralphs, ill. Dragan Kordi, Phaidon, 64pp, 9781837290161, £16.95 hbk

This is a real must for anyone who has Formula One fans in their classroom, community or at home, or for those who may have a new interest brewing. It's up to date for the 2026 season and is packed with information, facts and fun for petrol heads and sports lovers alike.

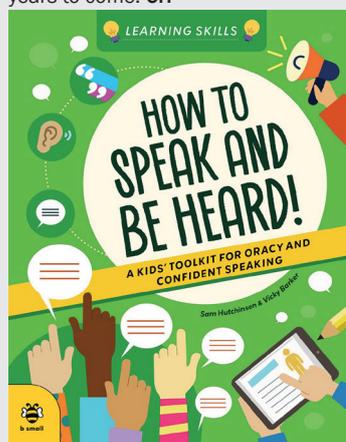
It covers all aspects of the F1 from detailing what happens on a race weekend to what buttons are on the drivers steering wheel and even how drivers train.

For beginners it's great to pick up on the basics like what the different types of tyres or flags mean and what actually happens at a pit stop, plus plenty of terminology throughout and a thorough glossary at the end, but there is plenty to keep more experienced fans entertained too with sections on famous cars in history, legendary circuits and iconic drivers.

It's also pleasing to see sections on the rise of women in Formula One and the efforts being made to make it a more diverse sport, thanks in most part to Lewis Hamilton.

It's stylishly illustrated and accessible too with small snippets of information and plenty of visuals. My favourite pages would be the 'making tracks' spread that shows the map of a generic circuit with facts about each area - great for someone with limited knowledge of the sport!

This will have no doubt have leisure reading potential in any setting for younger and older readers alike, and barring any major changes next year's season it should remain a great one-volume book on Formula One for years to come. **CH**



How to Speak and Be Heard! A Kids' Toolkit for Oracy and Confident Speaking

★★★★★

Sam Hutchinson, ill. Vicky Barker, b small, 40pp, 9781916851917, £8.99 pbk

When I saw the attractive cover for this accessible paperback it immediately took me back to my secondary school years where I was a member of the public speaking team. Whilst public speaking is only one part of the oracy training described here, I have learned over the years how much my early experience of speaking aloud has helped me throughout life. Oracy is now, more than ever, a valuable skill which helps young people in the social, academic and business world. So do not underestimate the true power of this book for 7-year-olds upwards! Oracy is about to take centre stage in the new curriculum.

This publication oozes excellence: it is written in collaboration with the **English-Speaking Union** by an award-winning author and a **Blue Peter Book Award** winning illustrator. The book focusses on the four important strands of oracy: Reasoning and evidence; Listening and response; Organisation and prioritisation; Expression and delivery. Colour coding throughout the paperback shows how each area of oracy is necessary. The contents page

guides the reader through speaking and listening skills and ends with the useful spread on 'Famous Speakers in History.'

Throughout the book advice and activities are well structured and laid out. I liked the way examples and tips are to be found on every page. There are some fabulous drawings of students, and some striking, brightly coloured spreads e.g. illustrating body language skills on pp.18-19. The section entitled, 'Are you Joking?' (pp.24-25) gives helpful hints as to how humour can work in your favour when speaking. As the final section makes clear, 'We can all learn through talking' (p.34) and the inclusion of examples of how to start your speech is very useful (pp.34-35).

I am sure many young people will be supported in their speaking and listening training by this valuable book. It is suitable for home and class learning, if only I had had such a book when I was preparing for my public speaking team appearance! **JS**

Koalas in Capes: the Zombie Chickens

★★★★

Terrie Chilvers, ill. David O'Connell, Nosy Crow, 192pp, 9781805132202, £7.99 pbk

This comedy superhero story for children is the first in a new series set in Pawtopia, celebrating the antics of two superhero koalas as they come to terms with their new powers and responsibilities.

As in Chilvers' previous book, **Snails of the Unexpected**, the koala heroes - Archie and Bob - are somewhat reluctant to embrace their amazing new powers. Life for a lazy, eucalyptus-munching koala is pretty sweet, so having the responsibility of invisibility and flight thrust upon them feels a little too much like hard work!

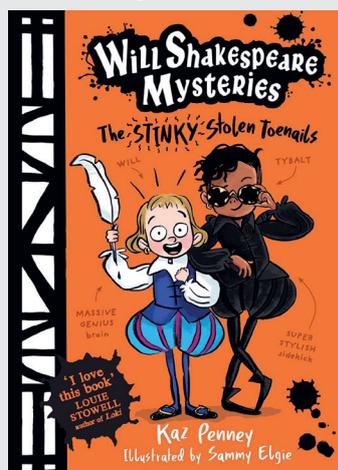
With the evil ostrich Doctor Colosus and his gaggle of robber ducks terrorising the neighbourhood and stealing heirlooms from the museum, Pawtopia really needs a superhero. But a series of unfortunate (and funny) misunderstandings means that the help of Bob and Archie is not particularly welcome, especially from the stern police officials, the 'kangatroopers'.

Fortunately (and predictably) the duo have help from a wise and enigmatic benefactor (Quinn, the aardvark) whose scientific skills help them to overcome their nerves and re-focus on their heroic deeds. You have to be very brave if you are going to sneak into a supervillain's ball and take on zombie chickens, but Archie and Bob show great resilience to take on the task.

This isn't the only book up for review this month that features koalas. It's not even the only book up for review that features a koala hero called Archie! However, **Koalas in Capes** is not without originality. The

villainous Doctor Colosus is especially funny and he has various menacing henchmen who threaten the koalas throughout. Children will enjoy the zombie chickens, too, whose arrival in the story is skilfully delayed until just the right comedic moment.

Lively and playful illustrations add further comedy to the story and make the animals stand out from the page. There is plenty of pace and action but, despite enjoyably silly moments, there is not enough to make the koalas in capes stand out from similar stories in this genre. **SDLJS**



The Stinky Stolen Toenails (Will Shakespeare Mysteries)

★★★★

Kaz Penney, ill. Sammy Elgie, Andersen Press, 356pp., 9781839137594, £7.99 pbk

The young Will Shakespeare, with his friend, Tybalt, wants to become famous as a Person-Who-Solves-Crimes, and he thinks there should be a word for that... Ordered by his mum to clean the privy (which is explained), he is only too willing to be distracted by the wailing of his neighbour, Ronald Moundsogoo, who has been told that he cannot marry Judy Catapult (we get the references) unless he hands over the Moundsogoo Treasure, but it's been stolen. Now this Treasure is actually a bag of King Henry VIII's toenails, given to Ronald's grandad, the blacksmith, for shoeing the King's horse on his way through Stratford-upon-Avon. They are supposed to have healing powers, and the boys soon find that a small bag of other toenails doesn't fool Master Catapult, so they have to try and find the real thing. The sensible Tybalt, who writes awful poetry, manages to dissuade Will from some of his imaginative theories (that door might lead to the Fairy Kingdom) and tries to prevent Will from following the wrong clues, but they do get into some tricky situations. Near the end, Mum drags Will home in disgrace for not collecting the Christmas Pie for the Twelfth Night Party, but, stuck minding his baby brother in his room with his other brother, Gilbert, whom he calls 'Perfect Pants' because he's so good at everything he does, he manages to work out who has the Treasure, and climbs out, trying not to

be Will ShakeSplat...Using the props brought by travelling actors, including a donkey's head, he gets the Treasure back, and all is well.

You will already have noticed that references to the plays are plentiful - Fair Rosaline appears, as does a character called Laurence Fryer, an apothecary who can't turn lead into gold and keeps his dirty laundry in the cellar. Will reports that his mother berated him for telling stories, saying 'it was just as well he wasn't trying to earn a living telling stories, because no-one would swallow the sort of drivel I had just come up with.' There are loads of funny asides and daft explanations, and Sammy Elgie's cartoon illustrations are excellent - this will be great fun to read, especially for readers who know the story of Romeo and Juliet. **DB**

Zamzam for Everyone: Sharing Water at Hajj

★★★★

Razeena Omar Gutta, ill. Bassant Dawoud, Barefoot Books, 9798888592373, 32pp, £7.99 pbk

Makkah (Saudi Arabia) is bustling, brimming, bursting at the seams. The small girl narrator of this tale is just one of the millions gathered in the desert sun, for the once-a-year celebration of Hajj. Early in the book, Mariam wears a white robe, dotted with purple, so she is easily identifiable in the pictures. Her Mama reminds her that Hajj is a time to do good, to share and to be thankful. On their pilgrimage she will need lots of water to refresh and recharge. Mariam fills her bottle from a large cannister full of Zamzam, water from an ancient well that has given Makkah life for centuries. As Mariam shares her Zamzam with strangers from Pakistan, South Africa, Indonesia, America and Iran, she receives gifts in return: dates, cookies and ginger candy.

The book offers insight into the beliefs and customs of others from around the world. It bursts with shared love, not just for family, but for strangers too. The final page gives notes from both the author and the illustrator, a glimpse into their personal worlds. **GB**

The Misadventures of Mina Mahmood: School Inspectors!

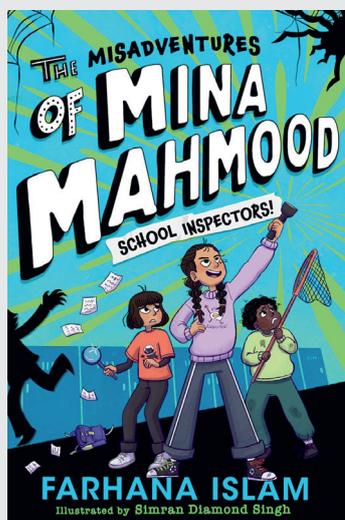
★★★★

Farhana Islam, ill. Simran Diamond Singh, Farshore, 192pp, 978-0008640019, £7.99 pbk

Mina and her best friends Reema and Mobeen return for new (mis) adventures in this second book in a series. Book one, in which Mina and co experience the thrills of the school trip, has just been longlisted for the prestigious **Branford Boase Award**. Here the long-awaited Year Six post-exam 'party bonanza', including school disco, water balloon fight and - best of all - class trip to Fisbo's Circus, is under threat thanks to the arrival of school inspectors. All young readers and teachers will immediately understand the tension

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued



that provokes. Selected as school ambassadors, Mina and her friends are under strict instructions from their very strict headmaster not to embarrass him. This challenge is made even harder when Barney's pet tarantula Buttons escapes, scuttling off down the school corridor. Chaos follows of course and it makes for very funny, highly entertaining reading. Author Farhana Islam is a primary school teacher and children will recognise many aspects of their own school life, while Reema's attitude will strike chords too: 'Lunch was usually my favourite lesson of the day,' she says at one point. Her Bangladeshi heritage is an integral part of the story too and the depiction of her class a real and recognisable reflection of multi-cultural contemporary Britain. Recommended for school or home reading. **MMA**

The Accidental Vikings

★★★

Karen McCombie illus. Anneli Bray, Barrington Stoke, 80pp, 9780008748500, £7.99 pbk

Alfie and Kat are ten years old in contemporary Britain. They go on a school trip to the Viking museum in York where they are accidentally transported back to the Viking period approximately one thousand years ago. They must pretend to be the grandchildren of an 'old woman' called Yamma, who is in fact only fifty years old. They discover that Vikings had slaves called thralls who were often children and were badly treated.

Kat, who they think is twelve because that is the age of the girl she is pretending to be, is almost married off. Can they escape back to modern times before this happens?

McCombie manages to combine modern concerns about AI with history in this narrative. Malfunctioning AI technology which the children were unknowingly testing, turns out to have been the reason for their accidental time travel. This may encourage young readers to question the risks and

benefits of AI technology. There are also some very interesting historical facts in the Author's Note about the variety of languages spoken in Viking Britain. These facts, if incorporated, could have made the narrative even stronger, especially as some young readers may not read the Author's Note! **RB**

The Dad Trap

★★★

Ian Eagleton, Scholastic, 384pp, 9780702331381, £7.99 pbk

William finds school difficult. He processes the world differently from many of his peers, and the noise, unpredictability and social pressures of everyday classroom life can quickly become overwhelming. His greatest source of comfort is his dad, who understands William's passions (murder mysteries, stationery, reading and detective work) and provides the security and predictability he relies upon. When new pupil Florence arrives and is placed beside him, however, that sense of balance begins to shift. Florence is prickly, outspoken and seemingly determined not to befriend him.

The situation escalates when William and Florence discover that their fathers already know one another and then they discover that they are beginning to date. Faced with the alarming possibility of becoming part of the same family, the reluctant classmates join forces in a shared mission to sabotage the relationship before it can properly begin. Their increasingly elaborate schemes drive a lively narrative filled with comic mishaps, misunderstandings and moments of gleeful chaos that will strongly appeal to readers in upper Key Stage Two.

Eagleton's story offers a contemporary reworking of the familiar parent-trap premise, grounded firmly in the realities of modern primary school life. Alongside the humour sits thoughtful and matter-of-fact representation of adoption, same-sex parenting, neurodiversity and children's mental health. These elements are woven naturally into the narrative rather than positioned as issues to be solved, reflecting the diversity of experiences children encounter in today's classrooms.

The novel moves at a brisk pace, mirroring the busyness and emotional intensity of school life, though at times the level of detail (particularly lists of books and references) slightly interrupts the flow of the central plot. Shifts into extracts from William's dad's writing may initially feel confusing, but their narrative purpose becomes clearer as the story develops and ultimately adds emotional depth.

At its heart, **The Dad Trap** is less about preventing change than learning to navigate it. Eagleton combines humour with genuine

empathy, exploring friendship, family dynamics and the anxieties that accompany new relationships. The result is an engaging, accessible and distinctly modern middle-grade novel that balances laughter with emotional understanding, offering readers both entertainment and reassurance. **LJS**

The Night I Borrowed Time

★★★

Iqbal Hussain. Puffin, 224pp, 9780241742624, £8.99 pbk

The ability to time travel is quite possibly one of the most wished for superpowers and any book promising a time travel adventure will immediately attract readers. This highly accomplished and enjoyable debut novel will certainly not disappoint, and readers will also find themselves thinking quite deeply about the philosophy and logistics of time travel as we are gripped by eleven-year-old Zubair's well-meaning, but increasingly dangerous attempts to manipulate time. Zubair is the baby of his noisy, chaotic family, with a four-year gap between him and his sextuplet older brothers, and he suffers an almost-constant stream of teasing from his siblings, whom he professes to hate. But his biggest worry is the conflict between his parents. His father is recovering from the accident that has stopped him working as a taxi driver, which has increased pressure on Zubair's mother to earn enough to ensure that their family has all that it needs and leads to her asking her mother to come and help around the house. When Zubair's gran arrives from Pakistan, she gives him a mysterious amulet that belonged to his great uncle, who was also a seventh son and who was killed during the Partition riots. Zubair discovers that being the seventh son means that he has the power to time travel. Can he use his new skill to go back in time and help fix his parent's marriage? Each attempt has unintended consequences, and his increasingly desperate actions threaten to destroy the life he has always known and always with the constant threat of him getting trapped in the past. This is such a skilful interweaving of an entirely relatable contemporary family story with equally convincing descriptions of life at the time of Partition and the culture and practice of arranged marriages in Pakistan. The narrative is beautifully paced and pitched, with the serious thought-provoking insights and moments of real pathos and tension interspersed with genuine humour that is frequently driven by the vivid cast of characters and their witty interactions. In fact Zubair's world is so believable that one becomes entirely convinced by the rules of time travel. The epilogue gives us a very satisfying, gentle and authentic conclusion. We have watched Zubair's increasing understanding that the adults in his life as fallible people with their own hopes and dreams; he may not have

wanted anything to change, but he does learn to accept that change does not always have to be for the worse and more importantly that divorce isn't anything to do with the children. An important takeaway for readers! **JCO**

The Unlikely Diary of Prince Kal The Alien

★★★

Ross Welford illus. Harry Briggs, HarperCollins Children's Books, 256pp, 9780008544805, £7.99 pbk

This rather strange gothic cautionary tale unfolds in three chapters. Prince Kal is a very self-important young alien. He accidentally climbed into his tutor's Anywhere Cabinet, a magical transportation device, with his two-tailed odiferous dog-like pet and has ended up on Planet Earth. Luckily for Prince Kal, because he is royal, he was endowed with the speak-easy spell which enables him to understand and speak any language. Will Kal end up back home on Planet Imaginaria? And what havoc will he have caused at home and on earth in the meantime?

The most interesting part of Welford's very humorous creation is the spotlight he is able to shine on the processes of foster care. This elevates the story from humorous caper to something with more depth. The reader is made aware through foster care reports and emails of how precarious Prince Kal's foster placement is.

His foster parents, Debbie and George, and foster sister, Noa, are loving and caring and supportive of what they at first think are the detailed imaginings of a very disturbed child. The foster care system is not so tolerant or flexible. Social workers do not come off well in this narrative, which may be very amusing and affirming to those with experience of the care system. All children will be swept away by Kal's beguiling nature. Harry Briggs's illustrations add to the humour. **RB**

Alex Abbott is (un)dead

★★★

Louise Austin, ill. Katie Kear, Macmillan Children's Books, 267pp., 9781035065752, £7.99 pbk

In what is promised to be the first in a new series, Alex Abbott is living as a vampire. He is eleven, and he still has to go to school, but he can't eat chips or ice-cream, (his parents make a special drink for him!) and he works hard to conceal his status from his friends, Mia and Archie. Contact with an ancient ghost who haunts the house next to the school leads to an opportunity to be restored to human life, but it's complicated...

There are many other supernatural beings living in his town, Draihampton, one of which is his teacher, Mr Tilbury. Some are helpful, some are not: Alex blunders around making some wrong decisions, and most reckless of all, persuades his dad to take him to Mount Etna in Sicily, where he tries

to make a deal with the tricky god, Vulcan, to restore him to life. Without giving too much away, this results in Draihampton being in grave danger, and threats to all that live there. Step up Gareth Forge, who goes on TV straight after the qualified scientist, for 'balance', assuring people that it's all a hoax and that there's no need to leave. (We can make our own real-life comparison!) Alex has to use all his ingenuity and friends to try to save the situation.

It's a very exciting story, full of all kinds of supernatural beings and happenings, and although Alex has not totally succeeded, his friends now understand and support him, and we are promised more adventures to come. **DB**



Oceanforged: The Wicked Ship ★★★★★

Amelia Mellor, Simon & Schuster, 216pp, 9781398553194, £7.99 pbk
Hailed by the publishers as the first in a new series of swashbuckling adventures, this is indeed an exciting story. 13 year-old Cori had been orphaned when the Council allowed the Burrows to flood rather than the richer areas, and had been trained as a Council Page, but, as she wasn't a very good Page, she was about to be sent to the Blackrocks, when she escaped, and joined what turned out to be a pirate ship. Her time at the Council had been made more interesting by the discovery of tapestries showing the Champions, people with magical artefacts that prove useful for their good deeds during the Age of Glory, and that becomes important knowledge. Pirate Captain Scrimshaw is a nasty piece of work, and he lands his ship near a village where one of the artefacts is hidden, which he knows about because he already wears one: a far-seeing pendant. Only Cori is small enough to retrieve it, and she keeps it, mostly because it's a gauntlet, and it has sealed

itself to her arm. Joining forces with local villager Tarn, a boy who can communicate with living creatures, and Jem, a trainee witch who owns a boat, she gets away. The fact that the gauntlet has attached itself to her shows that she is destined to become a Champion, and she swears to rule better than the Council, but first she has to learn how to make use of its power. Off they go in search of the remaining magical artefacts, led by the gauntlet, and we are left at the end of this book with their arrival at Whalehead Island, which seems rather sinister...

The characters are good - Tarn is very useful, especially as he can listen to what animals and birds are saying, but he cannot read, and Jem starts to teach him. Although she has failed at the witch skills demanded by her tutor, Jem has bright ideas of her own and creates useful spells. Their stories may give encouragement to children who feel they are failing, but just haven't found their way yet...

Amelia Mellor is well known in her native Australia as an author of children's fantasy fiction, notably the series *The Grandest Bookshop in the World*, and this may be the beginning of a new readership. **DB**

Small Poems for Big Imaginations ★★★★★

Neal Zetter, illus. Will Hughes, Otter-Barry, 80pp, 9781915659873, £8.99 pbk

This is the third book of primary school poetry by this poet and illustrator and lives up to the high standard set by its predecessors. These are indeed short poems, often not getting beyond a single stanza and half a page. And, if there isn't the scope to tackle weightier or more thoughtful topics, this is just the right space for quick wit, wordplay and exploration of the idiosyncrasy of language. The poems are unerringly aimed within the experience and interest of Zetter's audience, with a generous leavening of the two R's, rhythm and rhyme, and great support from Will Hughes's cartoons, which are on exactly the right wavelength. Try this limerick for size: *A student of English, Dolores/ Completely consumed a thesaurus/ She struggled for ages/But ate all the pages/And now her vocab is colossal, huge, gigantic, massive, vast, immense, prodigious, large... enormous.* Neal is a regular visitor to schools, and the composition and production of this collection has been shadowed by a year 6 class from start to finish. It's both an inspiration to young poets and a gift to teachers who might like to throw a short poetry hand grenade into their class from time to time and set off an explosion of laughter and amazement. **CB**

New Talent

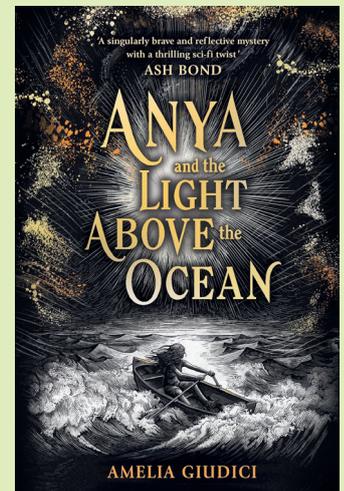
Anya and the Light Above the Ocean ★★★★★

Amelia Giudici, Andersen Press, 272pp, 9781839136474, £7.99 pbk

Amelia Giudici's debut novel marks the arrival of an ambitious and confident new voice in children's fiction. *Anya and the Light Above the Ocean* combines science fiction, mystery and emotional drama in a fast-paced story that continually shifts expectations and keeps readers questioning what is real.

Anya's nightly routine is reassuringly predictable. Each evening she waits for her scientist mother to return from conducting experiments aboard her research boat, always back safely by nine o'clock. When her mother fails to come home one night, Anya's concern quickly turns to fear. Determined to find her, she ventures out alone onto the sea, only to discover an unexplained, brilliant light hovering above the water. Drawn towards it, Anya reaches out to touch the glow and suddenly finds herself back on the boat, alone on a calm and silent ocean.

Her mother is still missing. Stranger still, familiar adults begin behaving oddly. Her mother's friend is distant and unwelcoming, and Anya is sent away from her home to live with an unfamiliar couple. Nothing feels quite right. As the narrative unfolds through a series of unexpected twists, Anya realises that her encounter with the mysterious light has changed her in ways she does not yet understand. In searching for answers about her mother's disappearance, she is also forced to confront unsettling truths about herself and the nature of reality itself.



Giudici handles an intricate and high-concept premise with impressive control. The story moves at pace, balancing tension and discovery while gradually revealing its scientific and emotional stakes. The unfolding mystery has the momentum of a thriller, yet beneath the action lie thoughtful philosophical questions about identity, memory and consciousness. What makes someone who they are, and how can we trust our understanding of ourselves or others?

Despite the complexity of its ideas, the novel remains accessible and engaging for middle-grade readers, grounding its speculative elements in Anya's emotional experience of fear, loss and determination. The result is an original and absorbing science fiction adventure that rewards careful reading while maintaining strong narrative drive.

Bold, imaginative and unsettling in the best way, *Anya and the Light Above the Ocean* is an impressive debut that suggests Giudici will be a writer to watch on children's bookshelves for years to come. **LJS**

The Not-so-Great Escape ★★★★★

Emma Green, cover ill. Jack Noel, Usborne, 232pp., 9781856045663 £7.99 pbk

Hedley is not coping after the death of his mother in a car crash, and neither is his dad, who can't get out of bed, so at weekends he stays at a Therapy Centre, where he is bullied by his roommate, Aiden. His support worker arranges for them both to go and work at Farmer Bert's Petting Farm, which bothers Hadley, an expert on risk, but they have no choice. When Aiden decides to steal an alpaca, though, he gets caught on CCTV wearing Hadley's very distinctive hat, and Hedley feels that he has no choice but to go on the run with

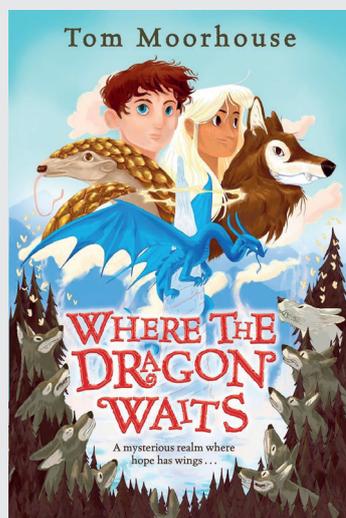
Aiden, little sister Lilly tagging along too. The alpaca, named Duke, is extremely smelly, and most definitely has a mind of its own, and they have some hilarious adventures, including unwittingly aiding a burglar, on their way to what Aiden thinks is a rescue place for animals. Their exploits become hot news on social media and in the local press, (#AlpacaBandit, etc) which makes it harder to stay hidden, but these enemies slowly develop a better relationship. It emerges that Aiden has consistently lied about what his father does for a living, and it becomes clear that he is not really part of his father's life, but he still makes fun of Hadley's dad problem. Although this a spoiler, your reviewer does need to mention

reviews

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

that Lilly, a source of constant worry and annoyance in turns (she tells the awful jokes beloved of 6-year-olds), had died in the same car crash as her mum, and Hedley finally comes to acknowledge this fact. There are happy endings all round, though it's been a crazy ride!

Emma Green owns three alpacas, so she knows about their behaviour, their stubbornness and spitting, and their smell, so we have some reality in the mayhem, and she writes very well. The publishers claim that this is for middle-grade readers, especially boys, but anyone can, and should, enjoy reading it. **DB**



Where The Dragon Waits

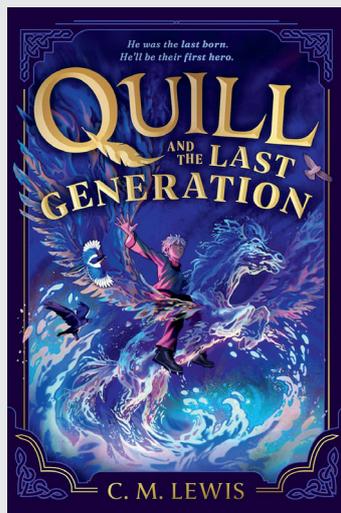
★★★★★

Tom Moorhouse, David Fickling Books, 240pp, 978-1788453837 6, £7.99 pbk

Tom Moorhouse, author of highly praised stories such as *The River Singers* and *The Rising*, goes in a very different direction in his new book, a fantasy adventure which puts its (human) protagonist in a life-or-death situation. It opens with a terrifying crash at sea. Ed and his father are both thrown off their yacht in the collision and when Ed comes round, on an almost deserted beach, things are no safer. Under a strange white sky, there is definitely 'weirdness afoot', to quote Steff, the girl he meets there. Soon the two of them are fleeing from the butterflies swarming the beach as close encounters with them appear to bring death. In true fantasy quest style, they meet creatures who might be able to help them, if at a cost. These include a pangolin, of all things, who needs Ed to help oil his creaking scales, and a wolf named Halfear, who seems particularly tricky. It's the latter who spells out their challenge: to climb a mountain spire on an island and confront the dragon that lives there; only then will the butterflies vanish and the way home open. Meanwhile, readers are aware of Ed's parents

waiting at home for him to return.

There is a great deal here to intrigue readers, bags of action and excitement, a genuine sense of the danger facing Ed and the weight of the task he faces. Astolpho the pangolin is a worthy companion for any young questors, noble, conflicted, mysterious but surprisingly humorous at times too while, despite his sarcasm and all-round trickiness, Halfear prompts our sympathy. Ed, though he seems less knowledgeable than Steff, is the steadier of the two, and proves to have the resilience, determination and character to see him through. Their growing friendship is another pleasure of the book and a second reading will reveal all sorts of hints to Steff's personality that readers might have missed first time round. The story works as a fantasy adventure and on other levels too, reminding us of the importance of family, of honesty, of love, as well as the fickleness of fate. It's original, distinctive, often funny, always exciting. **MMA**



Quill and the Last Generation

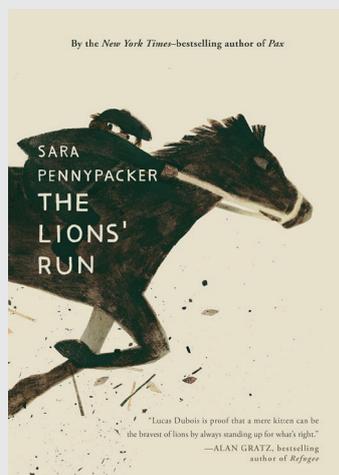
★★★★★

C.M. Lewis, Macmillan Children's Books, 288pp, 978-1035060610, £7.99 pbk

Drawing on the rich mythology of her homeland, Wales, CM (Caryl) Lewis' new fantasy adventure is beautifully told, an atmospheric story full of dragons, magic and true heroism.

Twelve-year-old Quill does seem to be one of the last generation. No babies have been born for twelve years and there have been no summers either. With the world cold and weakening, a hero is needed, and Quill seems uniquely unlikely to fill the role. Slight, quiet, gentle, he's teased by the other children in the village, and his over-protective father brings down more scorn on him. But Quill is the only one who can put the word right. To do that he must travel into the underworld and confront Arawn, the king of the dark, not just to bring back light and summer, but

to enable the souls of the dead to once more find proper peace. Once in the underworld, he is befriended by shapeshifters, bonds with a powerful and beautiful water horse, learns to swordfight, and encounters all sorts of terrifying dragons. There are many challenges to overcome, but biggest of all is recognising and accepting his own strength, trusting the qualities that he learned from his parents and best friend, discipline, softness, humour; believing that to do good is the right choice. This is all delivered through a narrative that is filled with action, intrigue and bravery, set in a world that is elegantly described and defined by an author who knows just how to keep her young audience with her. This is magical storytelling at its very best. **MMA**



The Lions' Run

★★★★★

Sara Pennypacker, Hodder Children's Books, 288pp 978-1444978780, £12.99 hbk

Set in Lamorlaye in Occupied France in 1944, Sara Pennypacker's first historical novel is a powerful story of heroism and the importance of standing up for what is right. Its protagonist 13-year-old orphan Lucas is teased by the other boys at the abbey where they live for being soft; indeed, their nickname for him is Petit Éclair. But when we meet him, Lucas, tired of four years being pushed around by the Germans as well as his classmates, is suddenly 'sick of feeling ashamed.' He rescues a litter of kittens from the boys ordered to drown them by one of the sisters, boys who are particularly aggressive to him, taking a blow to the head from a thrown stone in the process. Searching for a safe place to hide his tiny charges, Lucas meets Alice, daughter of an English horse trainer, who is hiding her beloved horse Bia from the Nazis. These acts of courage lead to more. He realises the greengrocer he works for as a delivery boy is smuggling food to a Jewish family and helps; he deceives a couple of German soldiers to protect the woman in charge of the Lebensborn maternity home, also working for the Resistance.

As his courage grows and the plot proceeds, Lucas does something extremely brave, compassionate, and dangerous, finally galloping to safety down the Lions' Run racetrack. Scenes, setting, and the large cast of characters are described with equal skill by Sara Pennypacker so that the story is always compelling and convincing. It feels authentic and historically accurate, the grim stories of Lebensborn girls and their babies detailed with sensitivity. There's also a deeper resonance to the story as the world seems to present us with more opportunities each day to choose to do the right thing. Jon Klassen provides the cover, chapter headings and map. **LS**

[Read our Q&A interview](#) with Sara Pennypacker.

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 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**

Scare B'N'B

★★★★★

Catherine Doyle illus. Rachael Dean, Bloomsbury, 288pp, 9781526655141, £7.99 pbk

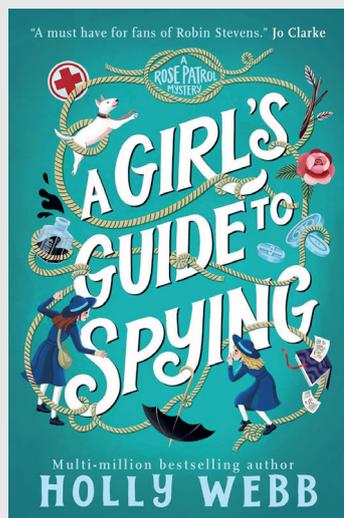
Ted and Frankie (born Francesca) are step siblings. Frankie also has an older brother called Luke. Ted and Frankie detest each other initially. Ted is quiet and nerdy and Frankie is a fast runner, dyslexic and loves to play pranks. To their mutual horror, Frankie's dad inherited an old run-down mansion in Scotland called Tartarus Hall. The adults have decided to renovate the mansion and turn it into a bed and breakfast hotel.

Renovations to old houses are extremely expensive so most of this

family's savings have gone into the work. The hotel must be successful. At the start of the story, it's two weeks until the grand opening but the hotel has a problem. It has resident ghosts who all have unfinished business on earth. They are led by the vengeful Duke of Snoring. He does not like the interlopers in his house. Who will win? Frankie and Ted or the ghosts?

This is an uproariously funny, spooky but not scary fantasy. The ghosts' motivations and the reasons they are stuck on earth are slowly revealed. At points, the reader is not certain which side should win. If you ever wondered what you would do if you found your newborn baby in a flower pot or any other bizarre situation, this is the book for you.

If you want irreverent escapism with heart, it's here. **RB**



A Girl's Guide to Spying
(A Rose Patrol Mystery)

★★★★★

Holly Webb, *Rock the Boat*, 304pp, 9781836432128, £7.99 pbk

It's the early days of the First World War, when Phyllis and her younger sister join their local Girl Guides troupe, despite their parents' worries that they are behaving unladylike by doing so. Their favourite activities are working with their Rose Patrol as a team to solve clues & find the treasure, even if this sometimes means clashing with the other patrols. As the war takes more men away to fight, the Guides are asked for their help in the offices of MI5 and Phyllis is recruited as a messenger, carrying sometimes secret information around the hallowed offices & corridors of the government building. Unfortunately, she finds herself falling foul of the grumpy Major Warren on more than one occasion, although she is not alone and witnesses his seemingly cruel actions to other ladies too, but when he goes missing, Phyllis is sure that there is more to it than meets the eye. Who was the mysterious person who rang to say he had suddenly gone

on holiday? Why has he left his dog alone in his apartment and where is his precious notebook that he never let out of his sight?

Working with her friends and fellow Guides, Phyllis is determined to uncover the real reason for his disappearance and sets out to investigate, even if it means putting herself in danger in pursuit of the truth.

This is a unique and thrilling adventure, full of twists and turns, set as it is within the historical background of war and suspicion, where everyone was looking for the spy in their midst. Each chapter begins with a quote from a mix of newspapers, government announcements, the *Girl Guides Gazette* and mostly *The Handbook for Girl Guides* written by Agnes and Robert Baden-Powell, the founders of the Girl Guide & Scout movements respectively. These words and opinions will seem strange and old-fashioned to today's modern readers, but give an important insight into the way the world was at this time, giving context to the actions and behaviours of the characters within the book. There is also a glossary at the end of the book to explain some of the guiding terms used.

Full of intrigue, dramatic chases, murder, Morse Code and spies, this first book in the series is a wonderful addition to the current popular crime and mystery genre, inspired by the true stories of the brave Girl Guides working undercover during the First World War.

Best-selling author Webb is probably best known for her animal stories aimed at younger readers, so I was intrigued to read this latest middle grade title, especially with the link to my fondly remembered Girl Guiding days, and very much enjoyed this book, incorporating as it does the fun, friendship and adventures of the Guides, although my own experience was of course, much less dramatic and eventful! **AH**

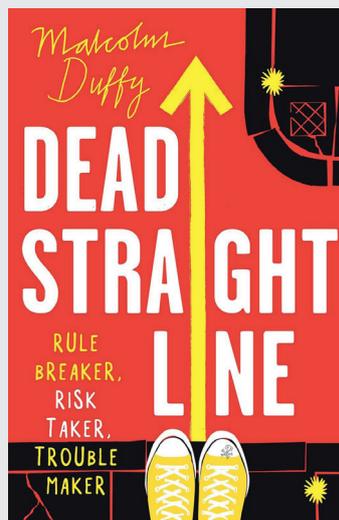
Dead Straight Line

★★★★★

Malcolm Duffy, Zephyr Books, 305pp, 9781035919277, £7.99 pbk.

This compelling book, based on the author's childhood experiences and researched with **Combat Stress** and the **Spinal Injuries Association** is a very welcome addition to the canon of Young Adult fiction. 16-year-old Rory is a habitual rule breaker and addicted to risk: trouble-making runs in his veins. His four like-minded friends are in thrall to him and he revels both in the sense of power and inventing new and ever more dangerous challenges for them all.

When Rory's girlfriend Lauren asks if her brother Eliot can join the gang he makes sure that Eliot knows that participation in all activities is obligatory. He proves to be reticent so Rory forces him to play Dead Straight Line-taking a route which must



remain perfectly straight, despite any obstacles which have to be crossed. During the game Eliot jumps from a conservatory roof, landing on a pile of rubble hidden from sight and is paralysed for life from the waist down at the age of 14. Always the model son and student, he seeks to mitigate his own role in his injuries by saying that Rory pushed him off the roof when he refused to jump.

Following the accident and Eliot's lie Rory is subjected to the righteous anger of those on social media, his parents' lack of trust in him, his friends' desertion and his girlfriend's hatred. His home is attacked, the family car vandalised and a garden shed containing fuel is burned to the ground in an explosion. He is compelled to change schools and has lost the fabric of his life-all as a result of one foolish decision, one accident waiting to happen. Duffy presents the reader with a series of thought-provoking questions in this narrative which explore the culture of teenage boys, the nature of family life, of trust and of consequences.

Rory is brought to his lowest ebb and when a teacher suggests that he might like to do some good in the community and join the group which visits a care home in order to read to the elderly residents he reluctantly agrees to participate. And it is in this unlikely setting that he meets Tanker, a Geordie Army veteran whose PTSD ruined his marriage and his life and whose diabetes decimated his body. This formidable character - whose accent Duffy renders impeccably - leads Rory to an acceptance of his situation and the responsibilities which it brings. Their relationship is pitch-perfect, free of sentimentality and condescension, delivering hard truths with compassion, being completely honest. Tanker springs out of the page.

Rory finds his redemption, Eliot his peace and Duffy avoids the neatly tied up ending with complete success. The two boys come honestly and openly together to respond to a request to stop the viral spread of Dead Straight Line on social media, agreeing to speak in schools to warn their peers

of the dangers of taking extreme risks without thinking of the possible consequences. When Eliot publicly admits his lie, the rift between the boys is healed and their continued appearances in schools reduces the numbers of participants in Dead Straight Line. Rory is still haunted by guilt but is on the road to redemption and he has come to realise that life is 'never a dead straight line' but a series of challenges in which truth must always be on his side. **VR**

A Million Tiny Missiles All at Once

★★★★★

Lucas Maxwell, *Chicken House*, 240pp, 9781917179317, £8.99, pbk

Lucas Maxwell's first published novel is the winner of the 2024 *Times/Chicken House Children's Fiction Award*. The words of its title appear in the novel itself to describe the impact of driving snow. The action takes place in a small Canadian town in a 'bone-cold' winter, and Elias has many ways of describing the biting cold and the way it seems to shape the lives of those around him. As his mother and father argue, he hears the house itself creak and 'the wind seems to seep through the cracks in the walls to grab me by the throat.' His walk from home to school is an exercise in survival that conjures up films he has seen of arctic explorers dying from poisoned canned food or menaced by 'real bad things that crawl around your brain.' When he gets to school, conditions are not much better. There it's the other kids - 'eyes full of sleep and boredom' - making the bad weather. Elias knows he is autistic and that makes him a target. The novel begins with his faded memories of being kidnapped as a four-year-old on the promise of potato chips. And he knows, too, that he himself gets angry with people: 'they just saw something that they could ruin and then went ahead and ruined it just because. It made me feel that there is nothing good out there at all.' It's a disillusion and barely suppressed fury that he presents to us in every word that he uses to tell his story. But it's shaped and tempered by an instinctive irony and humour. He fancies himself as a stand-up comedian and the novel tracks his preparation for the school talent competition, peppering the narrative with his rehearsed one-liners and, incidentally, lightening the mood for the reader. It's also a tale threaded through with the redemptive power of rough family love: from his parents, and, most of all, from and for his elder brother, Bo. The opening chapter is less about the kidnap itself and more about the lengths to which his parents, and especially Bo, go to find Elias. The subsequent story is how, in turn, Elias and his parents struggle to reach and support Bo when he goes off the rails. This is an impressive novel that should be read and enjoyed by both adults and teenagers. It has a pared back semi-colloquial style, telling an edgy story,

reviews

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

spiked with discomfiting images, that bring the winter and the weather-beaten town and its inhabitants vividly to life. At times, it reads like poetry. Towards the end of the novel, here's Elias chopping wood for Crawford, a friend of the family: 'There is a rhythm to it that is like a song. Wood on the stump, chop, wood on the stump, chop...When the wood was done... I made my way up the steps, my arms heavy, my muscles singing like wild baby birds hungry for their parents.' Well worth the five stars. **CB**

The Candleman

★★★★

Catherine Fisher, Firefly, 186pp, 9781917718141, £8.99, pbk

This is a welcome new edition of a book first published in 1994, and which was the 1995 winner of the **Tir na n-Og** English language award. It's a fantasy steeped in the landscape and folklore of the Gwent salt marshes and the flood lands of the River Severn. The force of the river itself is personified by the river goddess Hafren, bent on breaching the flood walls, swamping the reens and sweeping away the fields and homes that cling to the river's margins. Among those endangered families making a perilous living in the shadow of past and possible future disaster are Conor and his mother, the keepers of the Sea Wall Inn. Into their lives comes young Meurig, a travelling fiddle player. He has returned to his family home, the flood watchtower hard by the seawall, and to his ancestral responsibility of holding back Hafren's relentless ambition. But he returns downcast and desperate, for Hafren holds his soul captive within a candle and, when the candle burns down, Meurig, the last of the watchtower guardians, will be no more. This is an adroit and compelling fantasy with a strong narrative and characters, and a brooding atmosphere rooted both in a singular landscape and a powerful sense of community, history and myth. And all accomplished within two hundred pages. **CB**

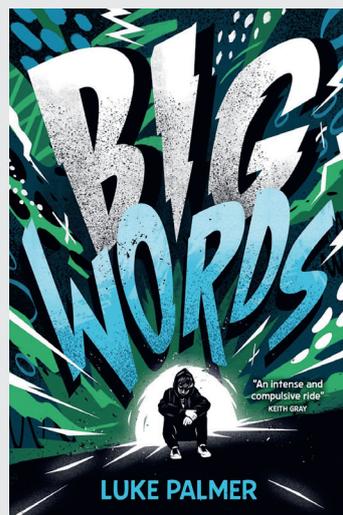
Boy vs Reality

★★★★

James Fox, illus Tika and Tata Bobokhidze. Scholastic, 352pp, 978 0702 33311 8, £7.99 pb

In his critically acclaimed debut novel, **The Boy in the Suit**, James Fox demonstrated his ability to shine an authentic light on the impact of poverty upon children's lives. Here he takes on no less of an important topic, the toxic nature of social media exposure and the importance of protecting our privacy in an increasingly digital world, and does so with the same remarkable veracity. Ethan Lacey's parents are influencers, who document their family's every move in their vlog: Meet the Laceys, where they share their entire life with

their million subscribers. According to his dad, everything is content – whether they like it or not, and Ethan certainly does not like it. He suffers from anxiety and has a zip-mouthed toy monster in his pocket called Fidget, to which he feeds his worries on bits of paper. Fidget is overflowing. Behind the scenes, the cracks are beginning to appear in the family's so-called perfect life. Mum and Dad argue all the time and Dad has taken to sleeping outside in the campervan. His older brother Mason constantly torments him and when he posts an exposé of Ethan's fears, stolen from Fidget's mouth, a traumatised Ethan is forced to retaliate with devastating consequences for all the family. Ethan is on a mission to make Mum and Dad realise they need to focus on the real world, not the online one and especially to focus on his beloved Grandad, currently packed off to a care home. Grandad is his one point of solace, and their relationship is wonderfully drawn. In the course of the dramatic reckonings to follow, we discover that Mason has his own problems and we come to understand the complexities of the parents' feelings. There are no one dimensional villains in this carefully nuanced narrative. This will be a brilliantly engaging read aloud or shared read, prompting discussion of the real worth of online celebrity versus authentic, real experiences. A thoughtful, funny, moving and timely tale sounding a warning bell about the influence of social media. **JCo**



Big Words

★★★★

Luke Palmer, Barrington Stoke, 126pp, 9780008789848, £7.99 pbk
My proof copy comes with an endorsement from Keith Gray, which suggests that **Big Words** belongs on Barrington Stoke's growing library of tough stories for troubled teenage boys, in which we share the growing pains of young men learning to deal with difficult situations and

relationships. In this case, Shaun must accept his responsibility for instigating a reckless game on the local waste ground, sledging on the broken bonnet of a wrecked car, which results in serious injury to two of his friends. The story is told from Shaun's perspective and in his own words. The author, who is a secondary school teacher, provides a convincing portrayal of the horror of the accident, Shaun's troubles at home and school, and his gradual move from aggressive self-justification to acceptance, apology, reconciliation and a new realisation of the value of his friendships. As ever with Barrington Stoke, this is an example of how much can be achieved by a skilled writer using a limited vocabulary and in just twenty-five punchy, dyslexia-friendly, chapters. **CB**

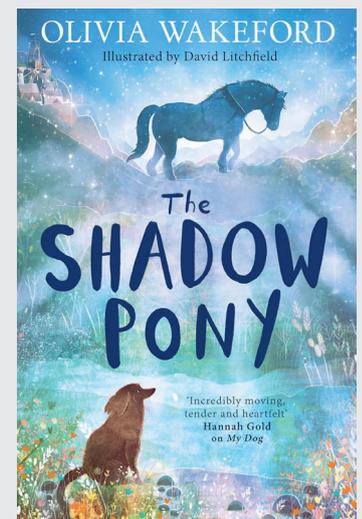
The Nightkeeper's Apprentice

★★★★

Jude Reid. Floris Books, 224pp, 978 178250 989 9, £7.99 pbk

This striking debut and winner of the **Kelpies Prize** is an enthralling mix of history, myth and fantasy. 12-year-old Eilidh hails from Glasgow where she lives with her mum during World War II. Her father is a merchant seaman missing in action. The book opens with a terrifyingly real depiction of what it was like on the night that Clydebank was bombed flat. Eilidh and her mother have a narrow escape, which leads to her evacuation to a remote Scottish island that she has never visited before, to stay with family she had never met. Grim weather and a sullen boy are all that greet her on arrival. When she meets her Aunt Rhona, she explains there are just two rules Eilidh must follow on the mysterious Mirk Skerry. Never touch anything that washes up on the beach and never enter the lighthouse where Aunt Rhona spends most of her time. The wild beauty of the place and the knowledge that her dad grew up here soon begin to weave their magic upon her, but Magnus does not get any friendlier. Then one night, in a terrible storm, she sees a ship in difficulties and believing her aunt could help, she enters the lighthouse only to accidentally break the mirror, which then stops the light. But her aunt reveals the light has a very different purpose, which is to guide those drowned at sea into the lamp and onwards. Rhona is the current Nightkeeper, a role that has been passed down through the generations. Nightkeepers are always women which explains why Marcus is so resentful of her. Eilidh could inherit the role he longs for. While Rhona goes to the mainland to repair the mirror, Eilidh discovers Cam, a ghost left behind from the wreck and Magnus involves her in his search for the Horn of Ran, which he believes will call back the dead to life again, including their fathers and Cam, and she learns about the underwater Finfolk and the role they play in shipwrecks. Not only is this search perilous, they also do not realise what harm they could do with the Horn; the soulstorm they generate could end

the world. This is a vivid and cleverly constructed mythology, and we are completely absorbed by the nail-biting tension of Magnus, Eilidh and Cam's quest and moved by the emotional journey they go on, as the book moves to its dramatic and credible climax. An unusual and atmospheric mystery, which examines themes of loss, grief and self-belief. **JCo**



The Shadow Pony

★★★★

Olivia Wakeford, illus. David Litchfield, HarperCollins, 250pp, 9780008658618, £7.99 pbk

This lively story starts well and gets even better only to falter in the last few chapters. It features eleven-year-old Evan, possessor of Okie, an out of control rescue dog as loveable to him as she is infuriating to everyone else. His already brittle relationship with his busy, divorced would-be career mother is made even harder after the arrival of new boyfriend Nick and his daughter Melly. There is also some nasty bullying at school to put up with.

Evan's most sustaining relationship is with Grandad, an ex-miner still living locally near the Welsh pit where he used to work. But things get tense here too once the old man's wits start wandering. All this could make for a tough read, but the author writes well and cleverly allows her characters to grow and in time become more self-aware. More's the pity, then, when a tight, compelling narrative finally descends into melodrama so unreal that even Enid Blyton may not have risked going for it. Grandad lost down a defunct mine, Evan rescuing him despite his mortal fear of the dark, all sweetness and light at home in the final pages – its rather as if a good first course has been followed by the arrival of a dessert so over the top as to become almost sickly.

Olivia Wakeford's first children's story **My Dog** was picked out at the time as a highly promising debut. There is a lot going for this story too. Readers not over-fond of any sort of dog, let alone one like Okie capable of domestic destruction on an epic scale, may still find themselves at

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least understanding why this animal remains so important to his generally isolated young master. Genuine dog-lovers, on the other hand, will find much to enjoy. **NT**

Tree Thing

★★★

Piers Torday, illustrated by Matthew Taylor Wilson, Quercus, 174pp, 9781786541482, £14.99 hbk

Piers Torday is always a good writer and his illustrator Matthew Taylor Wilson remains at the top of his game. But the modern fable they have come up with here, generously illustrated on almost every page in swirling black and white, is a rum deal. It starts in a faraway land with a suddenly appearing 'Green Thing' then growing into a 'Tree Thing.' Talking through its leaves, the tree also has a human face and keeps up an amiable conversation with the surrounding plants and wildlife taking full advantage of its presence. But then a Rider on a tall green horse comes on the scene: 'His wide-brimmed hat covering his face in shadow and a cloak of rippling velvet, the colour of moss.' More ominously, he also carries an axe, and the tree is cut down and turned into logs with devastating effect on the human and natural world around it.

But twelve-year old Malo, who lives in the smallest and poorest village in the valley, finds that his pet squirrel Rinti has managed to preserve one magical acorn, and to everyone's joy the Tree Thing is reborn, with all its consequential benefits on offer once again. But back comes the Rider for more destruction, which only terminates when Milo turns into a tree himself and harmony is restored. Yet at this stage it's never quite certain what is really going on, with the story's gently seductive prose becoming more opaque as it progresses. There is still a sort of fascination arising from turning one beautifully illustrated page after another, but parents or teachers asked to explain the point of it all may well have some of their own problems coming up with answers. **NT**

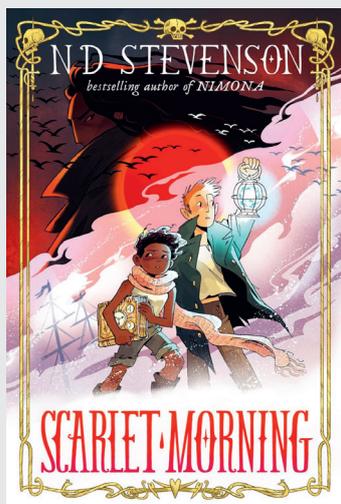
Scarlet Morning

★★★★★

ND Stevenson, Quill Tree Books, 432pp, £14.99 hbk

Scarlet Morning follows two orphans, Viola and Wilmur, as they are taken aboard a pirate ship and begin to venture out into the strange world of Dickerson's Sea, uncovering the mysteries around their parents and the world they inhabit. This book was difficult to give an age range to as it claims to be for middle-grade readers, but it certainly has an appeal to an older audience.

The world-building is unique, somewhat post-apocalyptic, with the



sea being swallowed by salt which acts more like ice, and warped versions of the creatures we know from our world, caused by an event that no one seems to know much about. The mysteries unveiled in this book make for an occasionally frightening read, with some truly horrifying creatures, such as a monster known as the 'angel' with leathery skin, a gaping grin and the ability to parrot human speech. It presumably causes the death of the scientist researching the distortions caused by the event which began it all, and its unknown origins add to the sense of danger. Viola's development throughout the book and her pseudo-familial relationship with Chase allow the story slowly to reveal the secrets behind the lies spread by the government of the world, such as the true details of the pirate massacre, the silver circle and the supposed murder of the Queen by the titular Scarlet Morning, though it becomes clear not all is as it seems. ND Stevenson's prose is witty and the characters feel more human because of it. At over four hundred pages, it is quite a long read, however it never fails to be engaging.

That being said, the plot could perhaps do with sharpening up as it meanders and leaves more questions than answers, presumably to be covered by the sequel, along with the fact that there are almost too many characters to keep up with, especially as many of them flit in and out of the narrative. Wilmur's storyline feels like it could have benefited from him having something more to do, as his exploits blundering about on a ship somewhat pale in comparison to Viola's adventures with the potentially villainous Captain Chase, and it is Viola who does much of the heavy-lifting in uncovering the truth around the Queen and Scarlet Morning. Overall, while it is certainly not perfect, I have not had this much fun reading a book in a long time, and its themes of family, justice and betrayal will likely resonate with a wide readership. It is clear the author loves his work and his characters, with numerous illustrations of key scenes and care taken with every line, that make it a joy to read. **EBI**

14+ Secondary/Adult

Day of Now

★★★

Miranda Reason, Bloomsbury, 416pp, 9781037205422, £16.99 hbk
Siblings Dayna and Pax live in a post-apocalyptic world in which many of the things we take for granted, schools, cars, hospitals, regular food supplies and even energy and water, are in short supply. Most of the population has died due to a lack of immunity to a fungal pandemic known as the Pink Mist or pink rabies.

If infected, a person can become like a crazed zombie and murder anyone or anything in their vicinity or, in rare cases, they can shake off the illness and return to normal. Unfortunately, nobody knows which of these two will happen.

Dayna and Pax's father with whom they live, their mother has apparently died, becomes infected and is then taken by scientists to the mysterious station where they are working on a vaccine or possibly are conducting human experiments. Dayna and Pax determine to undertake a perilous mission to rescue him.

Will they do it and what hazards will they run into along the way? More importantly, whom can they trust?

This is a novel which poses some fundamental questions about human values and what makes one life more valuable than another. There is a lot of violence and repeated references to sexual assault and the negative side of living in a cult.

Dayna and Pax are strong characters and the reader will be rooting for them throughout, particularly Pax who, refreshingly, has retained some of his childhood innocence. There is also a well rounded and believable disabled character, Jean, who is a user of a prosthetic leg. Jean gets to play a strong, active role in the narrative. **RB**

Georgie

★★★★★

Malachy Doyle, Firefly, 9781917718158, 192pp, £8.99 pbk

Georgie is published as part of Firefly Press's new series celebrating classic Welsh writing in English for young readers, an initiative intended to reintroduce significant children's books in editions that feel accessible and relevant today. First published twenty-five years ago and winner of the **Tir na n-Og Award**, Malachy Doyle's novel remains strikingly powerful, with themes that continue to resonate strongly with contemporary audiences.

Georgie has not spoken for years. Unable to make eye contact or interact with those around him, he lives in residential care where staff manage his unpredictable behaviour largely through isolation. He spends much of his time alone in an unfurnished room because he is considered unsafe, a

judgement he has come to believe himself. Georgie is overwhelmed by anger, fear and self-loathing, yet he has no clear way to move forward. When he is told he must transfer to a new placement, the change brings anxiety rather than reassurance. Gradually, however, the new setting offers something different. He is given a bedroom of his own, personal space and, crucially, adults who treat him with patience, consistency and genuine kindness.

Doyle charts Georgie's progress with impressive restraint. The prose is spare and carefully measured, often reading almost like a verse novel in which every word carries weight. Told primarily through Georgie's first-person voice, the narrative allows readers close access to his internal world, so that even small developments feel significant. As Georgie begins to form tentative relationships, including a developing friendship that introduces a second voice into the story, the novel explores trauma, trust and communication with great sensitivity.

Although systems within residential care may have changed since the novel's original publication, the emotional truth at its centre feels timeless. Doyle avoids sentimentality and instead presents a compassionate exploration of how care, understanding and stability can help young people begin to understand their past and imagine a different future.

This thoughtful reissue gives **Georgie** the opportunity to reach a new generation of readers. It remains a quiet, humane and deeply hopeful novel whose honesty continues to make a lasting impression. **LJS**

The Golden Boy's Guide to Bipolar

★★★★★

Sonora Reyes, Faber & Faber, 9780571390625, 384pp, £8.99 pbk

Cesar is a high school senior of Mexican descent on a scholarship to an exclusive American catholic school. Initially, he is an able student who finds the work easy. This is good because his younger sister, Yami, is at the same school but not in receipt of a scholarship and their mother struggles to pay her fees.

Cesar loves his longtime friend, Jamal, but has broken up with him because he was experiencing internalised homophobia as a result of something his absent and extremely homophobic father wrote to him.

At the start of the book, Cesar is on medication for his mental health but then he decides to stop taking it because he thinks the pills are not working. The rest of the book chronicles unflinchingly Cesar's descent into mental health crisis

reviews

14+ Secondary/Adult continued

including a detailed description of suicidal ideation and an attempt on his life.

Every time Cesar hits a new low and the reader thinks Reyes won't describe that, she does. This book admirably if slightly scarily leaves little to the imagination which may be helpful to someone who has experienced any of these issues. It is necessary to approach this book aware that it handles very disturbing topics.

Reyes also discusses young people's questioning of their faith and the existence of God.

In the author's acknowledgements, Reyes tells us that this book is partly autobiographical and that she was undergoing some of the issues explored in the book during its writing. This contributes to the level of detail and immediacy which gives the book its power. **RB**

The Escape Game

★★★★

Marissa Meyer and Tamara Moss, Hot Key Books, 416pp, 9781471419621, £8.99 pbk

With more twists than a corkscrew, new YA thriller **The Escape Game** hits the ground running transporting readers to the corrupt, murderous and shallow world of Hollywood Reality TV built around the sets of devilishly designed escape rooms where fiendish clues, betrayal and sabotage await tenacious code crackers.

The brainchild of NY Times bestselling American author Marissa Meyer, who seized upon the idea of a dead body discovered inside a prop during a visit to an art themed escape room, it also draws on the talents of her Australian friend Tamara Moss Bailey known for her adult crime thrillers.

Enjoying collaborating on conundrums and solutions built around ingenious escape room maps reproduced in the book by Owen Pomeroy, the authors play with intertextual references, word trickery, numbers and atmospheric sets. The novel is also a double act between Putnam book editors Rimas and Durning, who count Agatha Christie and horror novels among their passions.

Sizzling with suspense and crackling with tension, the plot delivers high stakes, challenging cryptography and melodramatic theatricality. As the narrative plays with the concept of what is real and what is staged for the cameras, four teens with very different agendas and secrets to hide are introduced through audition videos. Following a season 4 finale that ended in tragedy, they quickly get caught up in the race for a prize amidst the machinations of an ambitious producer, a predatory Games Master, a cheery Australian host, a surly social media co-ordinator and a former star obsessed with

fame.

Nuanced protagonists Sierra, Adi, Carter and Beck are poised to crack the ciphers with their mathematical, designing, decoding and analytical skills but the spectre of a cold case haunts them. Are they just pawns for Season 5 fodder as other focused teams plot against them and a killer has them in their sights? Will their talents fail them when their insecurities are played upon? Flashbacks reveal truths being kept from them as readers are taken on a rapid rollercoaster ride to a pulse pounding showdown delivered with gothic panache. With an ending promising more problem solving ahead, this series will have great appeal for would be code crackers, twisty thriller fans and teens looking for diverse characters. **TJ**

In Time With You

★★★★

Kristin Dwyer, Rock The Boat, 374pp, 9781836432074, £8.99 pbk

Nieve's boyfriend Carter is dead - drowned while trying to save her from the river. Her grief and guilt overwhelm her, bringing her life to a standstill. The academic year is about to begin at the school she and her cousin Linden attend, the school for the arts, founded by their great-grandmother and it is their duty to be there to welcome new students, but Nieve cannot face it.

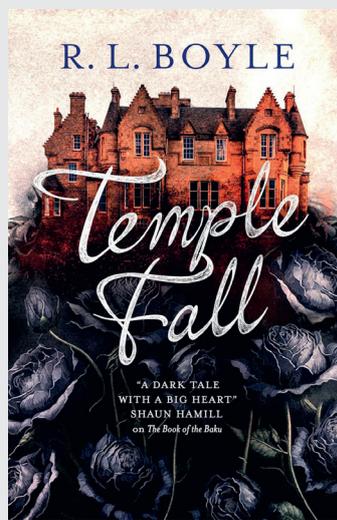
Enter Grandee, the girls' eccentric maternal grandmother, keeper of sheep and goats, healer, weaver of yarn, manipulator of colour, mystic. When the girls were young she encouraged them to knit blankets whose colours they chose and which told the stories of their lives. Nieve goes to stay with her to heal, a process which begins when Grandee unravels the last year's worth of yarn from her blanket and resets time to pre-Carter, her first year at college. Dwyer's use of magic realism makes the reader work as it alters the structure of time and opens the door to the butterfly effect - change one small thing and everything else changes regardless.

There was some drag in the narrative at this point: Nieve is rooted in her sorrow, distanced from her art, endlessly linking her college life to the memories of her relationship with Carter - who now, of course, has only just met her - and determined that, in this incarnation, he will not die. Momentum is restored when loyalties and attachments begin to form anew and Nieve has to come to terms with two things - Carter and Linden begin to be a couple and she has to acknowledge her attraction to Carter's best friend Max, who she had always felt hated her.

Art is the conduit between Nieve and Max and it has a significant role in the narrative as a tool for exploration of the truth but also as a medium which is exploited by some as a route

to money and fame. The untarnished medium is the mysticism which imbues Grandee and it is her wisdom, knowledge and insight which form a strong groundswell in the story.

Time is the master of the narrative: Dwyer swirls us in and out of scenes with Max and Nieve, advancing, retreating and eventually consummating the relationship. Nieve is able to let go of her time with Carter, realising that his love lay not with her, but elsewhere, with Alex, the woman he knew as a child and to whom time leads him. **In Time with You** ends full of the promise of good things to come and is saved from the saccharine by time itself. **VR**



Temple Fall

★★★★★

R.L. Boyle, Titan Books, 336pp, 978-1835414170, £9.99 pbk

Temple Fall is the latest YA horror offering from up-and-coming author R.L. Boyle. Boyle's 2021 debut, **The Book of the Baku**, was shortlisted for the prestigious **Bram Stoker Award** and her writing is in the best tradition of fellow YA horror writers Chris Priestley, Martin Stewart and Helen Grant.

This novel has a cracking premise, and the opening chapters pull the reader in immediately. There's a strong sense of atmosphere throughout and the scenes set in **Temple Fall** itself are chilling and oppressive. Boyle does a great job of letting the house's malevolence seep into the characters' lives and make them question their sanity. Can a house be infused with the past evil and tragedy contained within its walls, to alter lives? How real is the devastating energy of the Split? Is what Flynn experiences real, or a result of profound childhood trauma?

Temple Fall covers a lot of ground in terms of the turning point in the lives of the six young characters: their varying backgrounds, their individual struggles and the seeds of fear and jealousy that the house seemingly sows are probed with skill. Boyle also does an excellent job of traversing multiple storylines. The

relationship between Flynn and her adoptive family, particularly her bond with Riley, is acutely and sensitively observed. **Mad Dog** is a real treat (an artist and visionary who brings Boyle's pages to life). The importance of true connection - friendship, loyalty and understanding - is a thread which runs throughout what is often a dark and troubling narrative. The graphic detail in the book of child abuse, infant death and the inexplicable, haunting presence of **Temple Fall** make this a disturbing, but rewarding, read. And it has a knockout ending that stunned me and will make readers gasp. **AB**

Better off Dead

★★★★

Tess James-Mackey, Rock the Boat, 304p. 9781836430919, £8.99, pbk
Supernatural YA crime thriller **Better Off Dead** keeps the reader second guessing. It is the third novel for Tess James-Mackey, a graduate of the Write Mentor programme, who enthralled readers with her spine-tingling prison set chiller debut **Someone is Watching You** in 2023.

Set in an eerie, crumbling cliff-top holiday park in Wales, her latest spooky read plays with the concept of the unreliable narrator. Bullied and conflicted teen Lacy wants to reinvent herself as a sophisticated art student living in Paris. Spurred on by her older sister Winter, who treats everyone with scorn and has designated herself as Lacy's protector to the point of excluding their hard-working parents, she resolves to earn enough money to follow their dream.

The trouble is Bae Peryg has a reputation as the most haunted caravan park in Wales. Populated by morose staff, in dreadful garb, its coldness seeps into the reader's bones from the start until they're left wondering what is real and what is imagined.

As Lacy searches for the opportunity to take the perfect movement photo for her assignment, she cannot shake the feeling that she is constantly being watched. She rejects the underage drinking culture of the camp, resenting the late-night parties while still longing to belong. Mackey ratchets up the tension and the fear factor as unexplained deaths occur, and Lacy feels under threat from predatory figures and her own visions. Haunted by past events and macabre ghost stories, she starts to doubt her own sanity. What she yearns for is friendship and understanding. Welsh lifeguard Dylan is a welcome distraction, but can he be trusted?

Mackey expertly manipulates loss reveals and twists that will surprise and shock. With an important message about peer pressure, a diverse cast of characters, ghostly chills, mind trickery and an atmospheric location, this will appeal to fans of Karen McManus, Cynthia Murphy, Katherine Foxfield and Kat Ellis. **TJ**

14+ Secondary/Adult continued

When I Was Death

★★★★

Alexis Henderson Penguin, 276pp, 9780241716274, £9.99 pbk

When I Was Death is a dark fantasy novel for older readers. It mainly focuses on Michigan-based Roslyn – who at the beginning of the book is still recovering from the unexplained death of her older sister Adeline a year previous. Roslyn feels like her sister was everything she isn't: beautiful, talented, popular although not without mental health issues which made her something of an enigma to even her closest family. She becomes particularly distant after a summer away with some friends she had recently met – although no-one else seems to spot the change in her demeanour apart from Roslyn herself. Now Roslyn is working in a dead-end job in the local diner when a group of charismatic young women pile in and order huge amounts of food which they proceed to devour. They seem oddly familiar and Roslyn finds herself strangely drawn to them – such that when they invite her to meet with them later she barely hesitates. Despite an inauspicious beginning at a semi-abandoned house – Roslyn agrees to go on a road trip through the United States with them hoping to find answers about her sister's death and in the thrall of Shiloh the leader of the group. It soon transpires that all is not as it seems – these young women are agents of Death and as such beneath their cool personas and exotic clothes, they harbour a terrible secret. One in which Roslyn is now complicit. Can the girls disentangle themselves from Death's grip or are they as doomed as their victims – selected for them by Death himself. Alexis Henderson has created a rich and complicated world of female friendship – parallel to our own and yet perhaps delving into areas on which we would not normally choose to dwell. A world in which beneath the bright, messy, everyday lives of young women lies a formalised killing spree – and one on which it transpires the lives of the girls depends. Who will survive the road trip, and will Roslyn ever find out exactly how and why her sister died. What is the price to find out and is it worth paying?

The book is well written and conceived, but as the title suggests – deals with death in a variety of settings – so possibly not suitable for more sensitive readers or those with direct experience or anxiety about death. **EB**

Her Hidden Fire

★★★★

Clodhna O'Sullivan, Penguin, 416pp, 9780241714812, £9.99 pbk

This book had me hooked from the description, fantasy, Irish mythology and above all else, dragons. But was it going to be as good as I had

hoped? Well, the answer is yes, it has turned out to be an exciting, magical romantasy that is going to win a lot of fans. The heroine Eadha is a servant in one of the ruling magical houses, but she is hiding a secret that puts her very life at risk. She has the ability to channel the magic and when her friend, the son of the house seems to be non-magical, she uses her power to help him. She manages to be chosen as a Keeper (one who looks after the channeller) and joins Ionain in the training camp. This leads to a complex situation in which the future of our protagonists is at stake, especially after Eadha becomes aware of the deadly secrets behind the channellers' powers.

This is a fantastic story about the misuse of power and the way that some people will do anything to hold on to their position and way of life, even if it means the death of those they consider to be inferior to them. It is also a story of human relations, with Eadha willing to take huge risks in order to support Ionain, but without letting him know that she is doing it. This leads to tensions which are further exacerbated as Eadha finds herself attracted to another trainee Keeper, Gry, creating a romantic triangle. The story itself is multi-layered, the author has created a world in which dragons are hunted as an enemy and the elite families nurture their magical abilities by taking from ordinary people, called by the derogatory term 'fodder'. This world is somewhere that we can believe in, even though we would not want to live in such circumstances, and there are lessons to be learnt about human relationships, both personal and societal. As the first in a trilogy this is a brilliant start, and I can't wait to read the following titles as they appear. **MP**

Arcana: The Lost Heirs
Graphic Novel

★★★★

Sam Prentice-Jones, Hot Key Books, 384pp 9781471120122, £14.99 pbk

Brighton based freelance author-illustrator, singer and café owner Sam Prentice Jones spent his youth writing and drawing his own versions of his favourite books and comics but he always dreamed of creating his own graphic novel. His vision has now come to life with **Arcana: The Lost Heirs**, a fusion of joyful queer culture and community with the art of Tarot card reading. Set within the storscape of a secretive society of witches, it plays with an ambitious structure.

Divided into 13 sections introducing a cosy cast of characters, inspired by real people, and prefaced with a different image, the narrative ties the themes of each tarot card to a plot with the covert Arcana organisation as its centre. Readers meet the Fool, representing New Beginnings, who

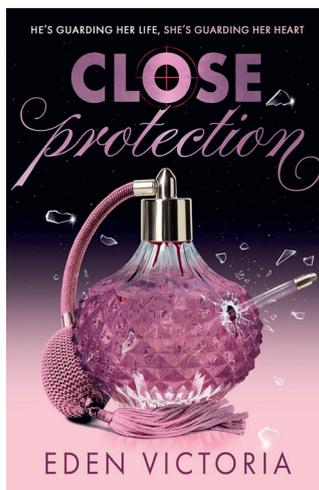
discovers the Magician, James in a kismet moment, who introduces them to the Empress Koko, the High Priestess Daphne and the Emperor Sonny. This instant found family then becomes quickly embroiled in the fallout from the secrets and lies of the past. At the heart of it is a mysterious farmhouse on a hill reached through symbolic arched branches.

Skilled in digital, graphic and character-based work, Prentice-Jones portrays the mundane routines of the protagonists rear window style in wordless sepia, grey scale and coffee brown panels before introducing dialogue and emotive icy blue panels contrasting them with the bright shades of magic. Blends of frosty blue and black with full page bleeds of darkness represent raw emotion while warm colours convey happiness as we learn of the psychological states of the key players. This is punctuated with stalking dark spirits and fiery red

flashbacks in slashes to the origins of a deadly curse.

Significantly, the traditional Tarot deck has 78 cards and this is the first book in the series, featuring foundational cards from the Major Arcana. **Arcana: The Cursed Fate** will follow in June, so different cards could appear. Consequently, the majority of **The Lost Heirs** is focused on character building, setting up back stories and hinting at skeletons in the cupboard involving the original magical rulers, the Founders, and their successors, the Majors.

Featuring a love of libraries, reading, coffee making, drag costumes and a character who cooks their emotions into food, this will appeal to fans of Gerlach's **The Restaurant at the Edge of the World**, Travis Baldree's **Legends and Lattes**, Oseman's **Heartstopper**, esoteric fortune telling aficionados and teens looking for LGBTQ+ representation within fantastical worlds. **TJ**

YA review feature:
Readers' Reviews**Close Protection**

★★★★★

Eden Victoria, Hot Key Books, 400pp, 978-1398539686, £9.99 pbk
I absolutely love this book; I think it is one of my best reads so far. **Close Protection** is a thrilling bodyguard romance by **BookTok Creator of the Year Eden Victoria**. It explores the chaotic life of Daphne Green, the heiress of Greenway Discoveries who lived a life of privilege. After a break-in at her father's office, he hires a bodyguard to protect his daughter, just as a precaution. Assertive and straight-talking Milosh Petrov takes his job seriously – protect and go – but it hits differently when it comes to Daphne; the sweet sunshine, where walking away seems impossible. One of the best parts of this book is that the chapters are written in the POVs of

both Daphne and Milosh. This gives us the chance to understand the feelings and characters from both sides, making the book even more interesting. The book contains many aspects that I believe are most enjoyable for romance lovers like myself: fake dating, yearning for non-platonic love, and extra romance from Daphne's close relationships. Daphne: 'I really like pretending to be your girlfriend'. Milosh: 'I like being your boyfriend too.' The thriller elements also play a dominant role, with guns and escapes all contributing to the intensity of the book and the chills we get while reading it. It was not slow-paced, which is probably why I was upset when it ended so quickly – I was too engrossed in it and did not want it to end. However, I think my favourite chapter is the epilogue, the author gave a perfect ending and the whole book in general is worth a read. I loved the way Milosh and Daphne's relationship develops throughout the book, with each page becoming more exciting and tense. But not only between them – the relationships between all the characters give a warm feeling when you read it. I was surprised by a twist at the end, which made the book even more gripping. In my opinion, the story had a good balance between romance and action, and as I read it, I found myself completely absorbed in the narrative. A 'guy who would give up anything for his girl' type of book is definitely my cup of tea for a good romance, and I believe this book truly had that element. I hope to see more of this author's books, because honestly, I enjoyed every bit of this one. **Sai Sanhita**

The Wind in the Willows revisited

In a break from his Valedictions, **Brian Alderson** considers a boyhood favourite and, on the occasion of celebrations for the 95th anniversary of EH Shepard's iconic artwork, wonders if it ever needed illustrating at all.

Aunty Tootbache came visiting.

Four milk teeth were extracted 'under gas' (fearful phrase to a seven-year-old) so by way of consolation my mother bought me a book for recuperative reading: **The Wind in the Willows** by Kenneth Grahame.

It was an unimpressive affair

The covers were of an unfetching brown sand-grain cloth, blocked with the drab series design of Methuen's Modern Classics (fifty-second edition) and its 192 pages were innocent of any pictures.

After two pages however

such things were of no consequence. Mole had only to bowl over that elderly rabbit who tried to levy a sixpenny toll from him and then trot on his way crying 'Onion-sauce! Onion-sauce!' for one young reader to become his devoted companion for the 190 pages that remained.

As English pastoral,

which is what some readers have called it, **The Wind in the Willows** is more country polka than idyll. Mole's escape to the River Bank is rapidly succeeded by his meeting with Water-Rat (really Water-Vole, as is frequently pointed out in conservation literature, but too assonant with 'mole' to be employable). The first of those feasts which gloriously punctuate the adventures is prepared; Mr Toad is momentarily spotted in his wager-boat – first glimpse of the great central narrative; and Mole's impulsive, but unschooled, oarsmanship sets the tenor for his perfect liaison with the ever-practical Ratty.

Where such a train of events

is not being expounded (Mole lost, say, amid the whistlings and patterings of the Wild Wood... Rat to the rescue... Badger and the eucatastrophe...) there may be equally appealing explorations of the character and relationship of these rural folk (Ratty's low-key, almost sentimental, setting-up of the party for the carol-singing field-mice) and I still recall in that first encounter with the story how readily I came to trust my author. Confidence grew that, in another page or two, more jokes (Mr Toad before the Bench), or more word-play (the arming ceremony before battle: 'a-sword-for-the-Mole, a-sword-for-the-Rat, a-sword-for-the-Toad...') or more farce (especially the Toad's vainglorious follies) would sustain the pleasure of the reading.

The shared verve

is not surprising since, as so often occurs with these classics, the story began with the author telling it aloud at bedtime

to a child and then, over several years, supplementing the oral version with continuations in letters. The chronology is not clear and the sources of inspiration are variegated (the idea probably came through Grahame's liking for fables; 'The River Bank', usually assumed to be that of the Thames, may well involve the Fowey River in Cornwall too) but what is carried over from the family tale to the printed book is Grahame's mastery of the language and the pacing of his narrative.

Except of course

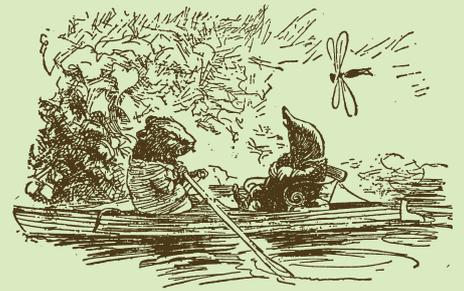
– yes, of course 'of course', those two chapters that have so often roused critical grumblings: 'The Piper at the Gates of Dawn' and 'Wayfarers All'. Both are ruminative interpolations with no direct bearing on the rapidly developing drama of Toad's adventures, and have been seen as self-indulgence on Grahame's part. (Alas that there is not space here to pursue their relationship to his earlier writings: the fin de siècle essays of **Pagan Papers** [1893] and those story collections that foreshadow **The Wind in the Willows: The Golden Age** [1895] and **Dream Days** [1898].)

From those earlier examples and precedents

it seems reasonable to argue that Grahame was willing to risk the charge of self-indulgence for the sake of bodying out and reconfiguring a larger purpose behind his epic fable. Whatever readers might find of comedy or allegory in the doings of these animals it was important for them to recognise behind the larks an all-embracing unity in the natural world and an unquenchable zest (fulfilled or not) to venture beyond the next horizon. Few years remained beyond 1908 when such Romantic idealism could have any validity, and it looks pretty threadbare now with the River Bank clogged up with people-carriers and beakers full of the warm South served up on £5 flights to Venice.

Michael Foreman

in a Note to his expansive, but overweight, illustrated edition of the story (Chrysalis 2001, just reissued in paperback) strongly commends these two 'difficult' chapters, but erroneously remarks that they are 'often omitted from modern editions'. So far as I can discover they are always included but are indeed noteworthy for offering illustrators little in the way of narrative purchase – thereby emphasizing the dearth of action at points when the reader is most expecting it. (Attempts at Pan, including that by Ernest Shepard, should really be forbidden – although



Foreman does better than most – and apart from him the artist is thrown back on variably successful boating scenes and pictures of the Seafaring Rat gesturing 'Go South, young man'.)

Such illustrative problems

are not confined to those two chapters however and there is much to be said for having the story published in plain-text as first occurred (apart from a soggy symbolic frontispiece by Grahame's friend Graham Robertson along with a gilt-blocked Pan on the front board and Toad in motoring gear on the spine). Efforts to add illustrations in 1913, 1922, and 1927 were uniformly disastrous and it's no wonder that when E H Shepard (the publisher's illustrator-of-choice after his success with A A Milne) called on Grahame in 1930 to discuss a new edition the author plaintively cried 'I love these little people. Be kind to them'.

Peter Green

in his perceptive biography of Grahame, first published in 1959, sums up exactly the arguments against illustrating the book. There is a 'fluidity of viewpoint' about the storytelling (most obvious in the shifts between animal and human behaviour in the characters). The inner eye of the reader – such is the genius of Grahame's exposition – 'sees no incongruity in these metamorphoses (and in fact hardly notices them) while visual representation at once pins down Grahame's imagination to a single static concept'. He accepts that Shepard 'came as near as possible' to finding a balance (joined, in my view, by Patrick Benson who was given the book by HarperCollins after his work on William Horwood's first sequel **The Willows in Winter**). But that child in the big armchair, consoling himself with the drab little 'Modern Classic', assures me that he never felt need for someone to show him what was going on. Mr Grahame was sufficient.

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.