

# BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.278

*the* children's book magazine online

May 2026

Authorgraph interview **Brian Moses**

Windows into Illustration **Natalia Shaloshvili**

*Plus* **Michael Rosen at 80**



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### COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **I Am Ray's Imaginary Friend**, written by Brian Moses, illustration by **Bethan Welby**. Thanks to **Scallywag Press** for their help with this cover.

# Editorial 278

## The reading paradox

Hello and welcome to this issue of **Books for Keeps**. There has been both good and less good news in the children's book world since our last.

April saw publication of another gloomy report into children's reading. NielsenIQ BookData's 2025 *Understanding the Children's Book Consumer* survey, undertaken in December 2025 with 1,530 parents of children aged nought to 13, and 470 14 to 17-year-olds, and including proprietary questions commissioned by HarperCollins Children's Books and Farshore to provide further insights, found that daily reading for pleasure 'collapsed to a 14 year low' in 2025. Just 25% five to 17-year-olds are reading for pleasure, compared to 39% in 2012, with the proportion of those who rarely or never read tripling to 15%.

A 'reading paradox' was identified, 'with literacy attainment and reading for pleasure in direct conflict with each other': 41% of parents said reading for pleasure is more important than ever, but 58% of parents did not cite enjoyment as a reason for reading to their child, with developing reading skills and improving vocabulary becoming the primary motivators, suggesting "a focus on literacy skills is actively undermining [reading for pleasure]".

The research points towards a 'disconnect between parents and teachers, with 28% of parents of five to 13-year-olds thinking school strongly encourages reading for pleasure, and only 32% of parents saying that their child's teacher talks to them about the importance of reading books to their child. **Charlotte Hacking** responds to the report in an article in this issue, and identifies what is the real paradox at the heart of the report.

### Laureate news

Just after this issue goes to press, **Children's Laureate, Frank Cottrell-Boyce**, will host the inaugural *Laureate Lecture* at The Royal Institution in London. Titled **'The Kids Are Not Alright'**, it will set out the challenges facing children today and include demands for national action on the reading crisis. We will report on the speech on our news pages and look forward to interviewing Frank again as he comes to the end of his tenure as Children's Laureate. The new Children's Laureate takes over in July, with six months of the National Year of Reading still to run, and will no doubt have to carry on making demands for national action.



In other Cottrell-Boyce news, this month saw the announcement of the judges for the inaugural Children's Booker Prize. **Sanchita Basu de Sarkar** of the Children's Bookshop Muswell and actor **Lolly Adefope** (best known for her role in BBC comedy drama *Ghosts*) will be joining Frank on the panel. The search is on too to find three child judges who will help select the winner from the adult judges' shortlist of eight. Entries for the first round close on 2 June so if you know a young reader confident enough to argue their case against a panel of grown-ups, encourage them to apply. Meanwhile, the winner of the **Children's Book Award**, administered by the **Federation of Children's Book Groups** and chosen entirely by children, will be announced on 13 June. Good luck to all the authors [on the shortlist](#) and congratulations to all the young people who have voted.

### Congratulations

Are also due to **Michael Rosen**, who is celebrating his 80th birthday this year and was also announced as recipient of the **Hans Christian Andersen Award**, Presented every other year by **IBBY**, the **International Board on Books for Young People**, the **Hans Christian Andersen Award** is the highest international distinction given to authors and illustrators of children's books and recognizes lifelong achievement and a lasting contribution to children's literature.

Congratulations too to **Quentin Blake** whose new **Centre for Illustration** opens on Friday 5 June 2026 with three exhibitions, a cafe, shop, gardens and free spaces including a Library and Creative Studio.



## Books for Keeps

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# Continuing the Story: Beginning Year Two of the GLL Literary Foundation

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. Now in its second year, the programme is welcoming a new group of authors while continuing to work with those already involved.



**GLL** at London BookFair

Our journey so far in 2026 has been a busy one.

The week before the launch, the Foundation was represented at the **London Book Fair**, where discussions explored how libraries and publishers can work together to support authors and connect more readers with books. During the Fair, Rebecca Gediking, Library Services Director at **GLL**, received the **Trailblazer Award** in recognition of her work in establishing the Foundation. It felt like a moment to acknowledge the collective effort behind the programme, from Literary Foundation Champions and library teams to the authors themselves.

Shortly afterwards, at Battersea Library, authors from the 2026 cohort joined returning writers and Literary Foundation Champions for a national launch and networking event. Publishers, agents and others from across the children's book world were also there. It was a chance to meet in person, reconnect and begin building relationships.

In this issue, we hear from Penny Chrimes, a Chapter 2 author, and Caroline Nolan, Bromley Literary Foundation Champion.

## Being Part of Chapter Two

*Penny Chrimes, author*

First things first. Excellent cakes. Wow, those **GLL Literary Foundation** cakes... But no. Wrong place to start.

When I went to the launch of Chapter 1 of the **GLL Literary Foundation** at Battersea Library last year, I was bowled over by what a great idea this was.

For children's authors to be offered support at whatever stage of their journey – advice on early steps with agents and publishers, how to make those daunting school sessions work, how to market your books and how to sustain success ... this felt like something so badly needed.

I must admit I felt a little stab of envy. And consoled myself with the excellent cakes (see above).

So when I was offered a place with Chapter 2 this year – what a gift!

I am lucky enough to have five books for Middle Grade published. But, as I once heard author Sarah Crossan say, with every new book, you just worry about the next one.

Because it's a funny old business, being a children's author.

Most of your time you spend alone at your desk, making up stories and trying not to eat too many biscuits. Laughing at your own jokes and weeping at what your characters are going through.

Part of your time you spend in front of a classroom of children, hoping they won't bully you and that your books will make them laugh or gasp out loud.

Trouble is, both experiences can feel pretty lonesome.

'You are not alone'. Those were the welcoming words at this year's launch. That idea has stayed with me.

I am so looking forward to the year ahead, working with the children's librarians in Bromley and sharing the journey with my peers.

As I write, we are all on Whats App congratulating Adeola Sokunbi for her new deal with Piccadilly Press.

It feels like we are already part of something.

Each author receives a £750 bursary alongside tailored in-kind professional development support valued at up to £4,000. Working with their Literary Foundation Champion, they develop events, build relationships with schools and gain experience in presenting their work.



## A Champion's Perspective

*Caroline Nolan*

Following a successful first year, the national launch of Chapter 2 at Battersea Library took place in March, with a real sense of anticipation for the year ahead. It was wonderful to see authors, Champions and guests from across the children's book world come together in one space. The launch welcomed the new cohort and celebrated the 2025 author alumni, with much to recognise from the past year, including new publications, events and wider opportunities. As the Literary Foundation Champion for Bromley Libraries, I am working with five authors this year: Abiola Bello, Penny Chrimes, Ryan Crawford, Truly Johnston and Venessa Taylor. Their work spans a range of genres, and I am looking forward to introducing their stories to children across the borough.

I was particularly pleased to meet my new authors alongside colleagues from across the **GLL Library Partnerships** and to begin planning how we will work together.

For me, building relationships with the authors I am championing and introducing them to new audiences is the most rewarding part of the role, and something I look forward to developing over the coming months.

As the year begins to take shape, authors are starting to plan their first events and connect with schools.

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

# A Reading Paradox Long in the Making

**Charlotte Hacking** responds to a new report showing that the focus on measuring literacy progress in schools has a detrimental effect on reading for pleasure.

This month marks the publication of the 2026 **HarperCollins** and **Farshore** Reading Trends Analysis, *The Reading Paradox: How Our Focus on Literacy is Undermining Reading for Pleasure*. A paradox indeed; but one that has been years in the making, highly predictable, and warned about repeatedly while too many chose not to listen.

In March, I presented a keynote at the annual conference of the **National Literacy Trust** on the decline in reading for pleasure: how we arrived at this point and what might now be done to reverse some of these patterns and trends. The publication of this report only reinforces what many teachers, librarians, literacy experts and families have felt for a long time; that in our pursuit of measurable literacy outcomes, we have steadily eroded children's relationship with reading itself.

As the late great educationalist and reading specialist Margaret Meek-Spencer observed back in 1992, 'There is always some kind of public concern about literacy. Parents are naturally anxious about their children's education, at the heart of which is literacy. Schools and teachers are expected to assume responsibility for making children literate in demonstrable ways.'

That final phrase matters enormously: *in demonstrable ways*. For decades now, literacy has increasingly become something schools must prove through data, targets and assessment, rather than something children experience as meaningful, joyful and deeply human.

The roots of our current situation can be traced clearly through education policy. In 1997, Tony Blair entered Downing Street under the famous mantra of 'Education, Education, Education,' and with this came the birth of the **National Literacy Strategy**. Introduced in England in 1998, it was a significant government initiative aimed at improving literacy standards in primary schools, driven by concerns around low attainment and structured around the ambition that 80% of 11-year-olds would meet nationally expected standards in English by 2002.

The strategy brought with it the daily 'literacy hour' – structured, systematic and measurable by achievement in the SATs at Key Stages 1 and 2. Alongside this came the first **National Year of Reading**, launched with substantial government funding, celebrity endorsements and partnerships across libraries and media. Its intention was admirable: to transform the nation's attitude toward reading while boosting literacy standards.

Yet even then, the seeds of contradiction were already present.

By 2004, Literacy Strategy Director Steven Anwyll openly reflected on the unintended consequences of the strategy's emphasis on attainment. He acknowledged that increasing measurable outcomes at the expense of children's enjoyment and engagement with reading represented a serious problem. His response was to push additional funding toward campaigns promoting reading for enjoyment through the **National Literacy Trust**, followed in 2008 by a second **National Year of Reading**.

But this also reinforced a growing divide: literacy standards became the domain of government policy and accountability, while reading for pleasure increasingly became the responsibility of charities, campaigns and enrichment initiatives. Schools found themselves trapped in the middle; accountable for attainment yet simultaneously expected to cultivate a love of reading with diminishing time, funding and autonomy to do so.

At precisely the same moment, another transformation was taking place inside schools: the rapid rise of educational technology. During the early 2000s, school libraries disappeared to make room for computer suites. Interactive whiteboards replaced big books. Budgets shifted toward hardware, subscriptions and digital infrastructure.

This shift was compounded by years of austerity that left school finances stretched to breaking point. Technology, once purchased, demands continual reinvestment. When devices fail, they must be replaced. Books, meanwhile, can remain on shelves for years, quietly deteriorating while still technically 'usable.' Yet the real question is not whether a book still physically functions, but whether it still invites children in and whether it still reflects their lives, interests, identities and imaginations.

At the same time, the teaching of reading itself narrowed significantly following the publication of the 2006 *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading*, led by Jim Rose. The review mandated systematic synthetic phonics as the primary approach to early reading instruction. This was followed by the introduction of *Letters and Sounds*, a government-produced phonics framework for Early Years and Key Stage One.

For politicians such as Nick Gibb, this represented the solution to low literacy standards. As schools minister, Gibb later intensified this approach further, recommending that schools adopt approved systematic synthetic phonics programmes paired with decodable reading schemes aligned strictly to pupils' phonics knowledge.

Over time, this generated an increasingly commercialised phonics landscape, with schools encouraged – and in some cases effectively required – to invest heavily in validated schemes, training packages, assessments and decodable readers, including involvement from the educational arms of children's publishers. Millions of pounds have since been spent on phonics programmes, scheme books and on the annual *Phonics Screening Check* introduced for Year 1 pupils.

Yet despite this enormous investment, the evidence for transformational impact remains weak. Whilst we all know and agree that phonics is critical for reading and writing, and must be explicitly taught, **The Education Policy Institute** concluded in 2025 that there was no clear evidence that the Phonics Screening Check had improved national average levels of reading or literacy attainment over time.

It is time for policymakers and educational publishers to reflect on the potential impact not only on reading for pleasure, but also for overall sales in the children's book market as the collateral damage of an unbalanced approach to the teaching of reading has become increasingly visible.

Schools' ability to invest in one of their most valuable resources – high-quality children's books – has steadily diminished. The 2021 *Reading for Pleasure* survey conducted by the **Centre for Literacy in Primary Education** revealed the scale of the problem: large numbers of teachers reported either having no budget for new books or personally funding classroom collections themselves. Others relied on donations simply to refresh stock.

No single policy or initiative alone caused the decline in reading for pleasure. But together they have created the perfect storm.



The consequences are starkly reflected in the data. The **BookTrust Family Reading Survey** found that only 25% of 11-year-olds now say they love reading. More troubling still is that this disengagement begins early: only a third of seven-year-olds report loving reading.

Before the age of seven, childhood should be immersed in stories, songs, play and conversation. It should involve connection: with language, with imagination, with other people and with the wider world. Yet increasingly, young children spend more time sitting in formal instructional environments than ever before.

And for what result?

The long-standing tail of underachievement remains stubbornly persistent. Reading for pleasure continues to decline year after year. England now records the lowest levels in the **National Literacy Trust Annual Literacy Survey** since data collection began in 2005, and we are now amid a third **National Year of Reading** with millions more invested.

The **HarperCollins** and **Farshore** report also examines changing patterns in book purchasing, noting that most children's book buyers are now light or occasional buyers, purchasing only a handful of books each year, while the number of heavy book buyers continues to shrink. Yet framing this primarily as a challenge of persuading people to buy 'just one more book' risks overlooking the much deeper realities shaping family life.

This is not simply a crisis of interest. It is also a crisis of affordability, time and social inequality.

Books have become a luxury in many households already grappling with the pressures of the cost-of-living crisis. **Sure Start Centres** and community libraries, which provided access to books and family literacy have faced cuts and closure. At the same time, many parents and carers are working longer hours simply to stay afloat. The economy of time has contracted alongside the economy of money. Families are exhausted. Bedtime stories become rushed rather than cherished. Shared reading competes with work schedules, stress and financial anxiety, again exacerbated by the round the clock impact of workplace technology.

Parents are not the problem. Schools are not the problem either.

Schools have responded to the priorities signalled to them through curriculum policy, accountability systems and funding structures. When schools are encouraged to invest in technology, intervention programmes and tightly structured reading schemes while struggling to afford diverse, engaging books, a message is inevitably communicated about what matters most.

The same can be said of the wider educational culture. Reading for pleasure is signalled through recurring national campaigns such as **World Book Day**, **National Poetry Day** and the **National Years of Reading**, rather than being embedded at the heart of the curriculum and everyday school life.

Every single school day should contain stories, poetry and opportunities to read simply because reading matters. Every year should be a year of reading. That requires curriculum time, sustained investment in books, properly funded libraries, and recognition that all forms of reading deserve equal value - picture books, graphic novels, poetry and contemporary fiction.

Other countries have begun to recognise this. Nations such as Sweden, Denmark and Finland have started shifting investment away from excessive dependence on educational technology and back toward books, libraries and reading culture itself.

Because reading is not merely an academic skill.

Stories help us understand ourselves and one another. They shape empathy, identity, memory and belonging. They connect children to language and to human experience in ways no data metric can fully capture. Deep reading of the kind we do in physical texts as opposed to the shallow reading we do online not only enhances our ability to analyse, criticize, infer, deduce and empathise but also increases our ability to discern misinformation, to spot scams and to avoid being manipulated – vital skills in the current climate.

At a time when England's young people report some of the lowest wellbeing levels in Europe, this matters profoundly. A young child curled up with a book beside an invested adult is not simply learning to decode words. An older child read aloud to by an engaged parent is not being overly scaffolded. They are learning that reading is comforting, meaningful, pleasurable and a lifelong experience. They are experiencing language as connection, security and joy.

And perhaps that is the real paradox at the heart of this report: in trying so hard to measure reading, we have too often forgotten what reading is actually for.



**Charlotte Hacking** is the Teacher Engagement Lead at the **Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy** at UCL and the Research and Curriculum Lead and Teacher at **Herne Hill School**. She is also a children's poetry editor on titles including **The First Year** and **The Final Year** by Matt Goodfellow and **The Poetry World of John Agard**, and co-author of **The Balancing Act: an evidence-based approach to teaching phonics, reading and writing**.

# Authorgraph No.278

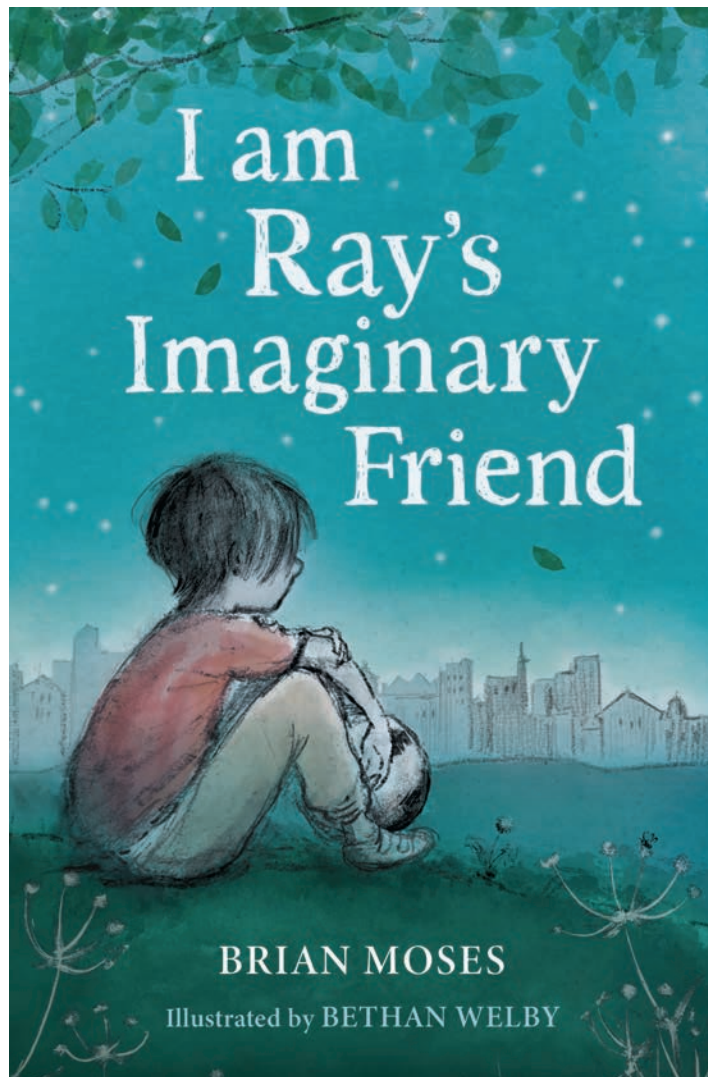
**Brian Moses**  
interviewed by  
**Ferelith Hordon**

I met Brian Moses online for a lively conversation around his work and most particularly his collection **On Poetry Street** and, of course, his latest book – a free-verse chapter book, **I am Ray's Imaginary Friend**.

Brian is well known for his many poetry collections, picture books, anthologies and early years' chapter books. He is also well known for his performance poetry in which he will accompany himself with an instrument – very often a drum; who can forget **Walking with my Iguana** which you can hear on the [Children's Poetry Archive](#) as well as on his **YouTube** channel?

*When did poetry become important to him? Did he grow up with poems in his childhood? Did he read Lear or Lewis Carroll?*

Surprisingly not: 'I really came to poetry through the lyrics of rock music. I was listening to the Beatles and Bob Dylan... and reading the lyrics on the back of the album sleeves. And that was my first introduction to words and how you can assemble words into something meaningful. Then I encountered the Mersey Scene – Roger McGough, Brian Patten, Adrian Henri ... That was a kind of Road to Damascus moment for me.'



He realised that poetry could be fun and meaningful for a teenager like him. 'It spoke to me and really started me off writing'. School had provided no support. Indeed, his one effort at writing a poem had merely elicited a comment about his handwriting. At Secondary School his teachers had little enthusiasm in teaching poetry presenting it as dull and difficult,

'It was in a way inappropriate material at an inappropriate age,' he comments. As a result, it took a long time for him to find a connection with the traditional canon. However, visiting the Lake District as an adult brought Wordsworth to life, a visit to Cawdor Castle opened him to Shakespeare. Now he explores all the time.

I am reminded of the anthologies he has edited. 'One of the best was when Macmillan asked me to do an anthology of my favourite traditional poems. That was just lovely.'

*Does he have a particular favourite poet?*

'Charles Causley – a wonderful, wonderful writer,' is his immediate response.

*Who does he see as his audience?'*

I haven't written much for the Secondary age range, although as I always say to people, I write poems for children and for the child in every adult.'

His work is very much aimed at a younger audience often involving school visits. This came about when he was a teacher, using the work of poets like Kit Wright and Michael Rosen: 'That's when I realised poetry could be written directly for children and when I started writing my own poetry.'

*Does he find a reluctance today among the teachers to use poetry in class?*

Often, he will be told by a teacher that the children are afraid of poetry; Brian feels rather that it is the teacher who is afraid of poetry.

### No Word of a Lie

My dad got baked into an apple pie,  
when my train left the station, it started to fly.  
It's really no word of a lie.

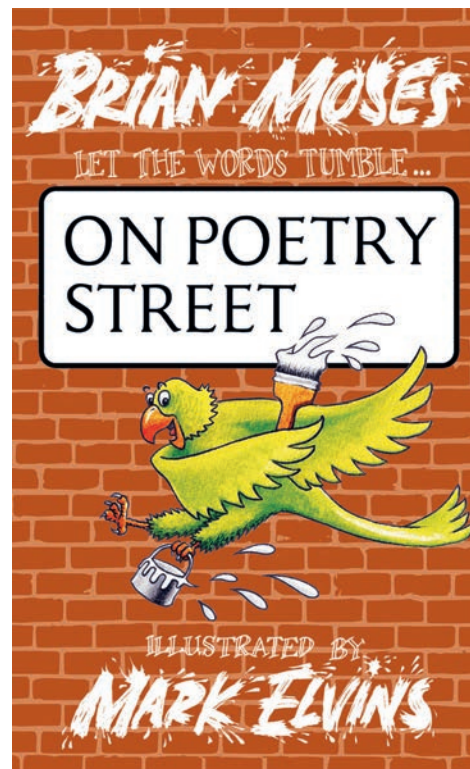
A see-saw flung me into the air,  
I played chess with a polar bear,  
I was frozen by a witch's stare.  
It's really no word of a lie.

My sister heard a werewolf's cry,  
my dog grew wings and took to the sky,  
my cat played rugby and scored a try.  
It's really no word of a lie.

I woke up this morning with purple hair,  
I squeezed into a fox's lair.  
It's really no word of a lie.

I found a fallen star still shining bright,  
I flew away on the tail of a kite,  
and this poem took all of two seconds to write.  
It's really no word of a lie.

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This was the impulse behind **On Poetry Street** – to make a way into poetry for teachers. ‘The models are there and they can use them,’ he says. Then there is the performance element.

*Does he consciously compose with a beat in the background as he works?*

Yes – often he will be tapping on his desk aware of the rhythms behind his words – not always of course but when the poem seems to demand it.

We are back with that teenage introduction to poetry.

It is his poetry that people will recognise, contemporary, fun, full of rhythm demanding to be spoken aloud. However, **I Am Ray's Imaginary Friend** marks a new direction.

*Why has he decided now to try a verse novel?*

He had read **Love That Dog** by Sharon Creech and thought it an interesting format but took no action at that point. It was only after reading an article about imaginary friends that a spark was lit, the result this new book, a story about an imaginary friend in the words of that imaginary friend.

He was also particularly interested in writing a verse novel for a younger audience: ‘Verse novels are quite popular at the moment, but I cannot think of many for the younger age. One aspect really struck me, as an author who has written early chapter books, which is where is the boundary between a conventional prose narrative and this free-verse composition?’

*Was it something to do with the absence of description? I noticed that in I am Ray's Imaginary Friend there is very little description. Did he find a tension between writing free verse with its very direct, stripped back format and the fiction he had written before?*

‘I think because I was thinking it was really going to be for 7 to 10 year olds it was to do with economy of language and speaking to them directly, and wanting them to really focus on the narrative as it went along without putting in too much description...I just wanted it to be as direct as possible, so somebody reading it through would travel very easily from one bit to the next.’

*How much was autobiographical I asked. Did he have an imaginary friend as a child?*

No – I had a friend across the road...I didn't need an imaginary one.’ His childhood in fact was a very happy one, an only child roaming the countryside and beach round Ramsgate. But there are

some autobiographical elements in this new book – the poem *Inch* for example, answering the owls, Bess the dog (Jess in real life), the Ukrainian family, aspects of village life – and humour.

He may not have had the experience of an imaginary friend, but he knows people who have. For him it was an interesting way to tell his story, and he wasn't aware of any other book using this particular approach and voice, ‘I always think, with my poetry too, there are very few new subjects to write about today. It is just finding that angle, that different way in to express yourself...’

*As the verse novel becomes more popular might there be a risk of the format seeming to be an easy one, leading to lazy writing?*

Brian agrees a little but feels that, ‘It is easier to tell when something doesn't work. You have got to have an idea yourself that this really is justifying the technique you are using... yes, I wanted to challenge myself because I hadn't written a verse novel before...and to me it seemed to be working.’

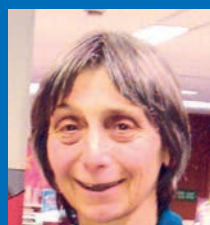
He comments that there are so many who think they can write children's poetry; you just have to be funny, whereas: ‘I think we underestimate how sophisticated children are’.

He is convinced children deserve thoughtful, thought-provoking writing. And here in **On Poetry Street** and **I am Ray's Imaginary Friend**, Brian's commitment to providing the best for a young readership is very clear.

*Books mentioned, published by Scallywag Press*

**On Poetry Street** by Brian Moses, illustrated by Mark Elvins, 978-1915252593, £10.99 hbk

**I Am Ray's Imaginary Friend** by Brian Moses, illustrated by Bethan Welby, 978-1836300342, £8.99 pbk



**Ferelith Hordon** is co-editor of **Books for Keeps** and editor of **IBBYLink**, the online journal of **IBBY UK**.

# Windows into Illustration: Natalia Shaloshvili

**Natalia Shaloshvili** began her creative career as a fashion and editorial illustrator, working with international magazines and creative agencies, before finding her true calling as writer and illustrator of children's books. Her stories about Bear, are tender and comical, full of carefully observed emotions. She describes how the character came about and her illustration technique

**Bear Worries** is the second book in a series about Bear, where I try to talk about emotions. In the first book, called **Bear**, the main character, also Bear, kept finding himself in awkward situations where he didn't know what to say or do so as not to hurt or offend anyone - but eventually he got hurt himself. He also learned that it's important to say no from time to time.

In the second book, Bear worries. A lot. He worries about all sorts of unpleasant things that can happen to him. And, to Bear's regret, they do happen to him. But Bear, going through his worries, finds out that even if all his worries come true, things can still turn out better than he expects.

I created this character a while ago. I just scribbled a bear sitting on the bench with an ice cream cone, and there was something about this Bear that made me realise he's not just a character - he's a main character. And the stories started to spin around him. Or, more likely, he started stumbling into them.

As it happened, this project became a very personal and favourite one for me. I was happily tinkering with it. Some illustrations in the book are very new, but some of them are more than five years old, dating back to when I first started thinking about the story.



One of those illustrations depicts Bear walking into a scary forest where he thinks he's going to get lost. And he will get lost.

I have warm feelings toward this illustration for many reasons. I drew it a long time ago in my very first studio, when the story was just evolving around Bear. And I remember taking long walks in the woods, looking for beautiful spots I could later illustrate.

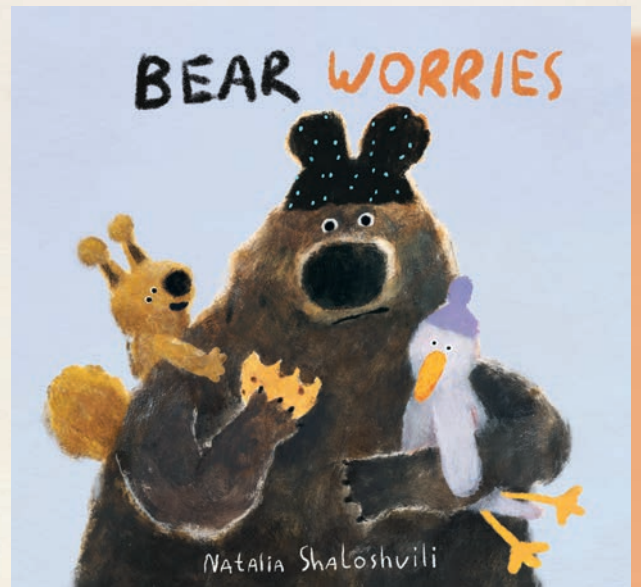




Funnily, there were Fox and Duck walking into the scary forest together with Bear. But the story changed, and so did the characters. First, Duck changed her mind and left the company. Fox followed her shortly after. And in the final draft, it's only Bear, all alone. That's why I find it a bit funny and a little bittersweet to look at that lonely Bear heading into the woods to get lost.

Overall, I have warm feelings about many of the illustrations. I worked with acrylic paints on paper and used crayons on top to add some texture. The hardest part was probably maintaining consistency – ensuring that the drawings I did years ago still matched the style and mood of the ones I created much later.

**Bear** (978-1836006565) and **Bear Worries** (978-1805701026) are published by Frances Lincoln Children's Books, £7.99 each pbk.

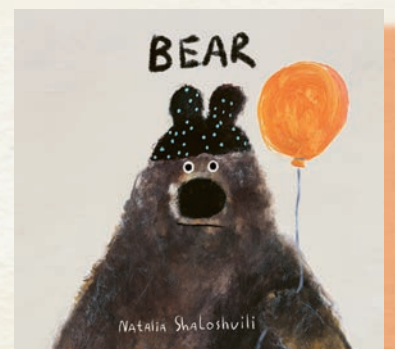


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# Michael Rosen at 80

Charlotte Hacking interviews Michael Rosen on five decades-plus of talking and listening to children



Few writers have shaped the landscape of children's literature in Britain as profoundly as Michael Rosen. Poet, performer, broadcaster, former Children's Laureate and the latest recipient of the **Hans Christian Andersen Award for Writing**, his work has, for more than five decades, bridged the gap between the spoken and the written word, inviting children not just to read, but to listen, join in, and make stories their own. As he reaches his eightieth birthday, reflecting on that body of work reveals a career rooted not in a single breakthrough, but in a set of enduring influences; most notably, family, performance, and an unwavering attention to the language of children themselves.

Rosen begins, as he often does, with his upbringing. His parents, both teachers, and his older brother created what he describes as an environment so saturated with language that it is impossible to disentangle from his writing. 'I can't separate it from me. It's in me,' he says. His mother's work on children's speech and writing, later published as *The Language of Primary School Children* (1974) placed real voices at the centre of education, while his father took on the role of literary guide at home, introducing him to close reading through *Understanding Poetry* (Brooks and Warren, 1938). Yet it is not simply formal education that left its mark, but the atmosphere itself: a household alive with poetry, parody, storytelling and song. 'You didn't know what was hitting you,' Rosen recalls. Shakespeare might be quoted mid-task, a French song sung in passing, a joke spun into an elaborate performance. His father made up songs and rhymes; his brother, a gifted mimic, performed comic cameos of teachers and acquaintances that left Rosen 'weeping with laughter.' These experiences were not incidental. They formed the bedrock of his understanding of language as something dynamic, embodied and shared.

This understanding deepened in his early professional life, particularly during his time working on the BBC children's programme *Play School*. As a trainee director, Rosen observed performers such as Johnny Ball and Floella Benjamin bringing songs and poems to life for young audiences. 'It was quite wonderful to watch the way they did that,' he says, noting how performance could transform even the simplest material into something compelling. It was here that he saw, in practice, how rhythm, gesture and voice could connect with children; lessons that would stay with him throughout his career.

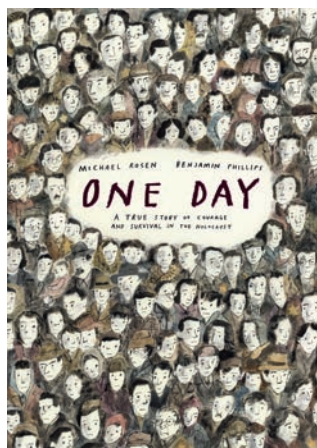
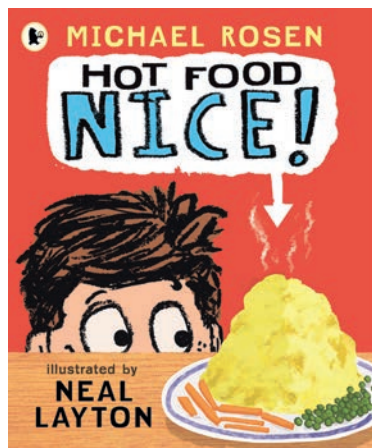
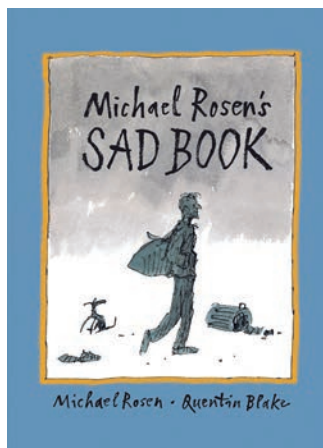
Another crucial influence came from the poets he encountered beyond mainstream British literary culture, particularly Caribbean writers and performers such as John Agard, Grace Nichols, James Berry and Benjamin Zephaniah. Their work, Rosen explains, demonstrated the power of poetry as something physical and immediate. 'Seeing the way they embodied poetry in their bodies, I learned a lot from them,' he says. Alongside this, figures like Louise Bennett showed him how storytelling, rhyme and audience participation could merge seamlessly. These influences reinforced his sense that poetry belongs as much to performance as to print.

From these combined experiences Rosen's writing emerges as something inherently oral in origin, even when it appears on the page. This is perhaps most evident in ***We're Going on a Bear Hunt***, a book that began life as a performed piece. Drawing on a traditional camp song, Rosen developed his own version in front of audiences before being encouraged by Walker Books publisher David Lloyd to write it down. The transition, he admits, was not straightforward: 'my oral version didn't work on paper,' because in performance he relied on sounds rather than words.



Translating the sounds he made for swishing grass and squelching mud into onomatopoeic text was only part of the process. The story had to be expanded, structured, and reshaped for the picture book form. The defining transformation came through the illustrations by Helen Oxenbury. Rosen initially saw the piece as 'a rollicking party piece,' but Oxenbury introduced the beauty of the landscape, which Rosen compares to 'an Impressionist painting,' as well as adding tension, atmosphere and ambiguity: a family driven forward through uncertain terrain, a baby whose vulnerability matters, a dog who confronts the bear, and, most strikingly, a bear who is not easily defined.

The lasting image of the bear wandering alone on the shore was all down to Oxenbury but is loved by Rosen for its 'defeated hero' quality, reminiscent of Norse Myths. Children, Rosen notes, frequently tune into this image and ask what the bear is thinking. His answer is disarmingly simple: 'I don't know... they have as good an idea as me.' It is a response that reflects his broader philosophy: that meaning in a book is not fixed by the author but created in the interaction between text, image and reader.



If **Bear Hunt** exemplifies Rosen's playful, performative side, then **Michael Rosen's Sad Book** reveals the depth of his emotional range. Created with Quentin Blake, the book confronts grief directly, resisting the temptation to offer neat resolutions, instead acknowledging the persistence and unpredictability of loss. Written after the death of his son, Eddie, it presents sadness as something that cannot be tidied away. Instead, it comes and goes, often unexpectedly, embedded in everyday life.

For Rosen, writing the book was both a creative and a personal process. Faced with overwhelming emotion, writing allowed him to shape and examine his thoughts: 'there's a release element in it... and then when it's there on the page, you can contemplate it.' Crucially, he measures the success of that process through authenticity. 'Is this authentic to the feeling I had?' becomes the guiding question and one that ensures the work resonates with readers across ages. He addresses the way writing has supported his experience of life and loss, including his own experience of contracting COVID, with a candour that is both striking and deeply considered. Writing, he suggests, provides a way of imposing a kind of order on emotional experience - not a definitive explanation, but a structure through which feelings can be explored and understood. 'You're dealing with your thoughts and feelings as if it's plasticine,' he says, describing the process of shaping and reshaping emotion through language.

His latest book, **Where Are You, Eddie?** reflects on the longer-term experience of loss and grapples with how to answer a question often posed by children: where is the person who has died? Rejecting conventional metaphors of heaven or stars, he arrives at a more grounded idea; that people live on in memory, in stories, and in the lives of others. Encounters with people who remembered his son, including a Teaching Assistant he met on a visit to a primary school helped shape his thinking. In sharing a class photo and anecdotes about his son, she showed him that, 'She owned Eddie,' along with others he met whose lives Eddie had touched, enabling him to recognise that memory is shared and lives on through the stories of others.

In the book, this idea is explored through the figure of a talking cat, Meg. The use of this folkloric figure allows Rosen to introduce a sense of wonder while remaining grounded in emotional truth. The result is a book that offers readers a way of thinking about loss that is both accessible and deeply considered.

While these works have brought particular attention to Rosen's writing, they sit within a much broader and more varied output. Early collections such as **Mind Your Own Business** established the voice that would become his hallmark: humorous, observant, and rooted in everyday experience. His collaboration with Quentin Blake on this book exemplifies the dynamic relationship between text and image that Rosen would come to value so highly. He recalls performing poems while Blake sketched, creating images that not only reflected but extended the meaning of the words.

Rosen has also engaged with explicitly historical and political themes, particularly in relation to the Holocaust and migration, distinctly relating to family experience. Books such as **The Missing, On the Move, Please Write Soon**, and **One Day** demonstrate his ability to

find the right forms, including memoir, poetry, letters and narrative, to make these subjects accessible without diminishing their seriousness. Rather than presenting history as distant or abstract, Rosen brings it into the realm of personal experience, allowing young readers to engage with it on an emotional as well as informational level.

What unites these diverse books is a consistent respect for the reader. Rosen does not write down to children, nor does he assume that difficult subjects must be simplified. Instead, he trusts his audience to engage, interpret, and respond in their own ways. This trust extends to his understanding of how books are experienced. He is particularly interested in the relationship between oral and written language, and in the ways in which performance can enhance reading. His own practice in reading aloud, encouraging participation and inviting repetition, reflects a belief that books are not static objects but part of a shared, social experience.

As he reflects on his career at eighty, Rosen resists any grand summation. Instead, there is a continuing curiosity about language, performance and the ways in which stories are told and retold. If there is a unifying thread, it is perhaps this: a commitment to the idea that words, whether spoken or written, are not static objects but living, shifting forms of connection.

And in that sense, Michael Rosen's work, like the voices that shaped him, continues to speak, echo, and invite response from each new generation that encounters it.

This year's **Michael Rosen Day** will take place on 12 November – find out more at [www.walker.co.uk](http://www.walker.co.uk)

#### Books mentioned:

**We're Going on a Bear Hunt**, Michael Rosen, Helen Oxenbury, Walker Books, 9780744523232 £7.99 pbk

**Michael Rosen's Sad Book**, Michael Rosen, Quentin Blake, Walker Books, 9781406317848 £7.99 pbk

**Where are you Eddie?**, Michael Rosen, Gill Smith, Walker Books, 9781529522877 £12.99 hbk

**The Missing: The True Story of My Family in World War II**, Michael Rosen, Walker Books 9781406395594 £6.99 pbk

**On the Move: Poems About Migration**, Michael Rosen, Quentin Blake, Walker Books 9781529504361 £7.99 Pbk

**Please Write Soon: An Unforgettable Story of Two Cousins in World War II**, Michael Rosen, Michael Foreman, Scholastic 978-0702303180 £12.99 hbk

**One Day: A True Story of Survival in the Holocaust**, Michael Rosen, Benjamin Phillips Walker Books 9781529515985 £12.99 hbk



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

# What Baby Books do Babies Really Look at?

By Taysa-Ja Newman & Professor Anna Franklin,  
The Sussex Baby Lab, University of Sussex



*New insights into colour, contrast and simplicity could reshape how we design and sell books for the youngest readers*

Walk into any bookshop and the baby section offers a wide array of choices, from high-contrast black-and-white designs with simple shapes to softly coloured, intricately illustrated, heartwarming books. As adults, we choose books for babies based, not only on what we find visually appealing, but also on what we assume will appeal to babies. So, what books do babies really look at?

In our new research, published in the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, we challenge some long-held assumptions about what makes a baby book visually engaging. We carried out the research in the Sussex Baby Lab at the University of Sussex ([www.sussex.ac.uk/babylab](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/babylab)), where we investigate how babies see, think and learn. We showed babies, between the ages of two and twelve months, pages from 100 board and picture books. The selection reflected the breadth of the baby book market, from classic, softly illustrated titles such as **Guess How Much I Love You** (Walker Books) to black-and-white, high-contrast books and brightly coloured, bold designs. We also included a few picture story books aimed at toddlers and preschoolers, to better understand the limits of what babies can engage with.

Using an eye-tracking camera equipped with infra-red technology, we recorded how infants looked at each page. We measured how long babies' gaze lingered, where it settled, and how their eyes moved across the images. These patterns allowed us to build a detailed picture of babies' visual engagement: which images held attention, what features drew the eye, and how actively babies explored what they saw. To explore whether adult preferences align

with those of infants, we also asked adults to rate how much they liked each of the book pages.

Surprisingly, we found that babies looked least at the books that adults liked the most. Whilst adults favoured books with softly illustrated, detailed and gentle illustrations, babies were least drawn to these. Babies of any age, even the youngest, also did not particularly favour the high contrast black and white books. Rather, the book illustrations which captured babies' attention the most had intense and contrasting colours and had bold well-defined shapes and images.

By analysing both the eye-tracking data and the visual properties of the images, we were able to identify more precisely what kinds of designs engage babies. As well as being colourful, the most engaging pages often featured large faces with clear, bold features. For example, pages from **Who is Smiling?** (Minedition), **Hello You!** (Campbell), **Look, Touch, Learn: Sky** (Child's Play), and **All About Me!** (DK), all included face-dominated images, and all appeared in babies' 'top 10'. Babies were also drawn to strong visual contrasts, such as the red and green striped hat in **Look, Touch, Learn: Sky** (Child's Play), the bright yellow sun against a black background in **Faces: A Black and White Baby Book** (Ladybird), and the clearly defined, curved contours of the animals in **Where's Mr Penguin?** (Nosy Crow).

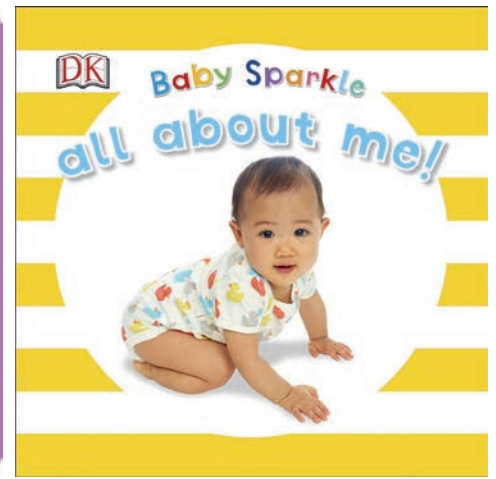
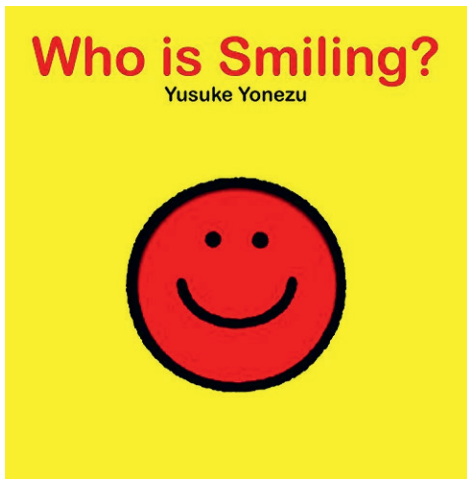
The image below shows an eye-movement analysis of how babies look at a page from **Look, Touch, Learn: Sky** (Child's Play): the 'heat map' on the right shows that babies look for the longest at the high contrast eyes and hat, but that babies also appear to be drawn to other facial features and snowflakes.



Taysa-Ja Newman, a doctoral researcher at the Sussex Baby Lab getting ready to record the eye-movements of a young baby in the Sussex Baby Lab.



Results of an eye-tracking analysis of how babies look at a page from **Look Touch Learn Sky** (Child's Play, 2022). The page as shown to babies is on the left, the page with the eye-tracking 'heat map' is on the right. The lime green areas of the heat map show regions of the image that babies particularly look at, and the reddish areas of the heat map show the areas where babies look for the longest (e.g. the eyes and the hat)



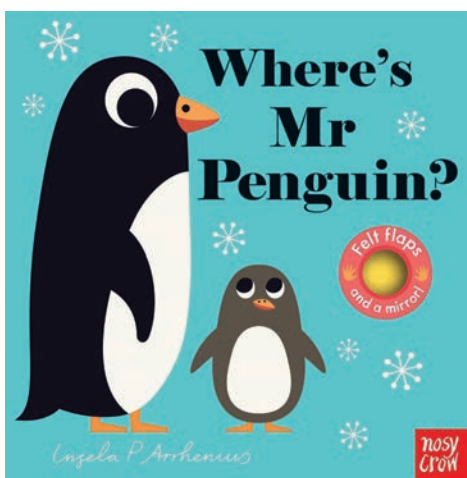
The findings from our study which investigates how babies look at books are supported by our previous research on how babies' vision develops. While it is often assumed that babies prefer black-and-white designs due to their immature vision, evidence shows that they can perceive a range of colours by around two to three months of age. In this context, black-and-white designs may quickly become too visually simple, whereas highly contrasting colour combinations, such as red and green, become engaging.

Our earlier work has also shown that babies tend to look longer at certain colours, including red, blue and purple, compared with others such as green, pink or brown. Notably, the books that featured in babies' 'top 10' made strong use of these more visually engaging colours. Even when babies can perceive colour, it needs to be bold and saturated to be seen: softer, pastel palettes will appear muted or washed out. For example, the gentle tones of **Guess How Much I Love You** (Walker Books) are likely to appear as a washed out grey for most of the first year after birth.

While babies' ability to perceive fine detail improves rapidly over the first six months, many of the books we tested contained levels of detail that are difficult for young infants to resolve. Using software developed at the Sussex Baby Lab, we simulated how these images appear at different stages of visual development. Our simulations show that baby vision is too blurred for babies to be able to make out the detailed and softer illustrations clearly. However, the eye-tracking data also showed that when colour, contrast and simplicity are well matched to infants' visual abilities, even the youngest babies can engage meaningfully with images. With the right design, babies are able to focus on relevant features and actively explore what

they see. This visual exploration of books by young babies, and the shared attention of babies and their caregivers, lays down the foundation for a childhood of book reading.

For those designing or choosing books for babies, our research helps sharpen what "appealing to babies" really means. By focusing on bold colour, strong contrast and simplicity, we can better match books to babies' visual abilities. Crucially, what engages babies does not always align with what adults find most appealing, reminding us to look beyond our own preferences when designing or choosing books for the youngest readers.



**Taysa-Ja Newman** is a PhD student in the School of Psychology at the University of Sussex, and her current research is investigating how infants respond to nature: [www.linkedin.com/in/tj-newman/](http://www.linkedin.com/in/tj-newman/)

**Professor Anna Franklin** is co-lead of the Sussex Baby Lab and has been researching how babies see, think and learn for the last 25 years. She regularly consults on the design of products for babies, including books: email: [anna.franklin@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:anna.franklin@sussex.ac.uk); [www.linkedin.com/in/anna-franklin-a30711201/](http://www.linkedin.com/in/anna-franklin-a30711201/)

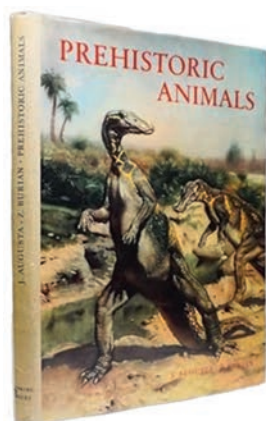
# Illustrating Dinosaurs and Prehistoric Life

In their latest article on illustration in non-fiction, **Pam Dix** and **Ruth Thomson** turn their attention to a subject of primordial interest to young readers.

Prehistoric life, the world of dinosaurs and other extinct creatures, has always been a source of fascination for young readers, both in serious information books and in picture books, fiction and science fiction. Dinosaurs are so popular that they are used in counting books, rhymes, and picture books for the very young. Illustrations of all kinds and styles add to this fascination, but what did these creatures look like? The illustrator has a seemingly free hand, especially in picture books. However, creating images of prehistoric life for factual books is a specialised field, 'paleoart', where the illustrator is required to merge scientific facts with artistic imagination. It is an area where knowledge has changed frequently, for example about

## Early 'Realism'

Two influential artists working in this field in the 1950s were Zdenek Burian (Czechoslovakia, 1905-1981) and Rudolph F Zallinger (American based Russian, 1919-1995)



**Prehistoric Animals**, Joseph Augusta, illustrated by Zdeněk Burian, translated by Greta Horn. London: Spring Books, 1955 (Originally published as *Tiere der Urzeit* Prague, 1955)

Burian was the pre-eminent painter of dinosaur reconstruction of his time with an estimated 500 paintings of prehistoric life. His collaboration with a specialist, Professor Augusta, resulted in books which combined scientific exactitude with artistic skill to bring the prehistoric world to life. This was in great contrast to the bones / skeleton approach more common at the time. Many of their books were translated into English in the 1950s and 1960s.

His work was much copied and emulated and his influence can be seen in many films including *Jurassic Park*. A film based on this book won the Grand Prix of Films for the Young at the Venice Film Festival in 1955.



This *Diplodocus* shows Burian's ability to create an atmosphere and his attention to detail. The background setting gives a context to help imagine size, and a sense of movement and action is created by the dynamic position and shadow, and also by blurring of the edges of moving objects, here the palm fronds in the wind.

His works vary in size from A4 to several square metres and are both colour and black and white. In my copy of this book the illustrations are attached as numbered plates. The illustrations are so realistic they seem to have been painted from life, with muscular creatures shown in action.

size, skin colour and covering, dietary habits, so artists have to keep up-to-date with research. It was not until the 1990s, for example, that paleontologists found widespread evidence of feathered dinosaurs. The illustrator has to conjure a world populated by creatures who have long been extinct, with evidence gleaned from fossils and bones. Artistic imagination is essential to bring these topics to life in ways that readers can understand and here we look at some of the ways illustrators approach this. Inevitably, they will be influenced by living creatures but this is often to provide a basic understanding of muscle and body mass.

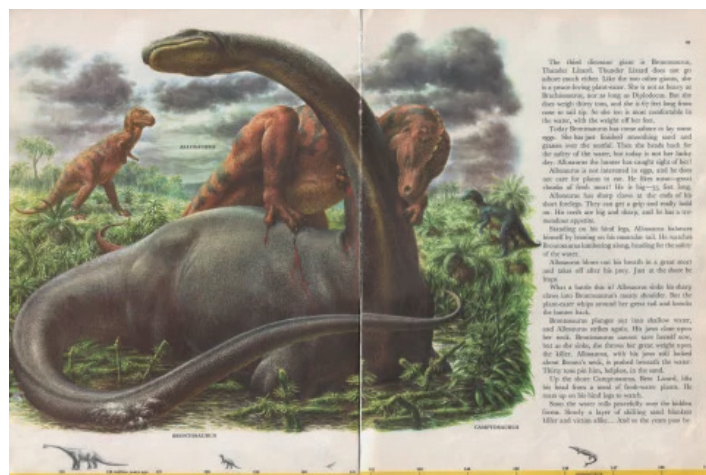


A painting full of action and drama - *Tyrannosaurus Rex* attacking a pair of *Trachodon*. Subsequent discoveries meant that Burian modified the dinosaur amending the skull and tail.

**The Giant Golden Book of Dinosaurs and Other Prehistoric Reptiles**, Jane Werner Watson illustrated by Rudolph F Zallinger. New York: Golden Press, 1960

Zallinger's most famous work is the 34 metre mural *The age of reptiles* created for the Great Hall in the Yale University Peabody Museum, painted 1943-47. Best seen on one of the many YouTube videos, it is a timeline of 350 million years of animal and plant evolution using trees to divide it into periods of geologic time. Scientifically accurate at the time, it was hugely influential.

Like Burian, Zallinger's illustrations in this book imagine muscular creatures in action in vividly imagined backgrounds, creating bold and dramatic scenes. A timeline runs through the book, using mini-images of prehistoric creatures at the bottom of each page.



This full action view shows a *Brontosaurus* being attacked by an *Allosaurus*, claws dug in and blood dripping, the black clouds and rain adding to the sense of menace and creating a mood.

## Technical approaches

### The World of Dinosaurs: a North American Selection,

M K Brett-Surman, James Gurney & Thomas R Holtz, illustrated by James Gurney, New York: Greenwich Press, 1998

Gurney is a New York based author and illustrator of many books on prehistoric life, including the extremely popular **Dinotopia** fantasy series. He has written extensively about how to paint dinosaurs, notably in **Imaginative Realism: How to Paint What Does Not Exist** (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2009) His process includes working with scientists on the research knowledge, studying fossilised remains to work out anatomy and proportions, and then reconstructing skeletons which he sculpts into models. He paints from this reconstruction. 'I build outward, building the muscle sets, and trying to figure out what the skin would look like – whether it's covered with feathers or some feather-like surface. It's kind of reverse X-ray vision'.



Creating the model

### Ancient Earth Journal: The Early Cretaceous, Gregory S Paul, illustrated by J C Alonso. California: Walter Foster, 2015

This series is written and illustrated in the style of a naturalist's notebook, seemingly giving the reader a first-hand account of what it feels like to be amongst these creatures. This is an imaginative approach both textually and illustratively.



Many details are included in this carefully labelled illustration: the whole creature, close-up views of the head and jaws, guides to the size. Set against a pale background, careful use is made of colour, light and shadow, the creature is shown in action with one foot lifted.



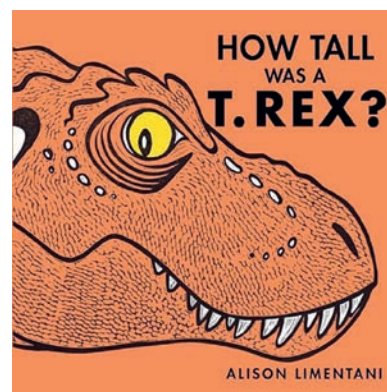
**Pam Dix** worked in London in the school library sector and as a university lecturer in children's literature. She is chair of **IBBY UK** since 2014, the chair of the **Akill Trust**, a small charity that has been working in Kenya since 2008 and is a trustee for **Book Aid International**.



In 1997 Gurney was invited by the US Postal Service to design dinosaur postage stamps. He created images of 15 dinosaurs and other creatures who lived in two areas, Colorado and Montana, in the Jurassic and Cretaceous eras. Images of the stamps and Gurney's original paintings are included in this book.

## Size comparisons

A more graphic approach has become popular in recent years.

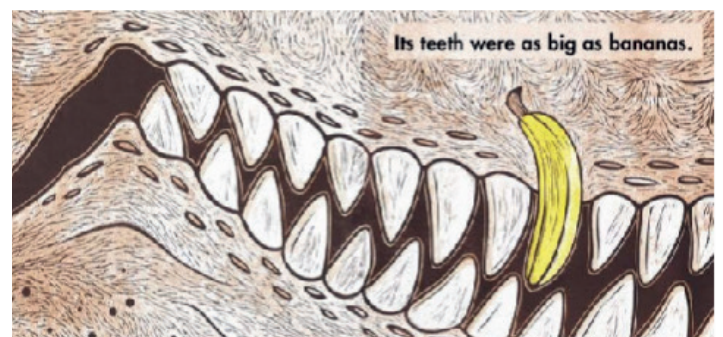


### How tall was a T-Rex?,

Alison Limentani, London: Boxer Books, 2018

Limentani, in this series called **Wild Facts and Amazing Maths**, uses a rather jokey illustrative style and bold colour palette to present a humorous image of the T-Rex. Nevertheless, this is underpinned by scientific facts, the measurements based on actual skeletons in museums in Los Angeles and Cambridge and the facts determined through an analysis of bones and fossils.

Limentani uses familiar objects and other animals to make comparisons about size of body parts, speed, weight and height. Limentani herself studied animal behaviour and worked as a veterinary nurse at London Zoo, before doing the Cambridge illustration course, so she brings this knowledge to her books linking animals, both prehistoric and living, to maths.

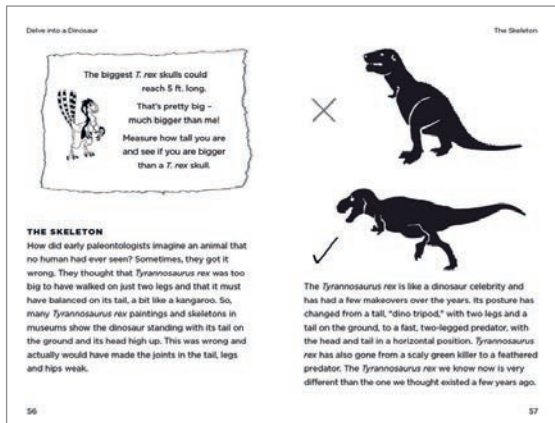


**Ruth Thomson** is an award-winning educational author and editor, who specialises in writing books on art and history. She has an MA in Museum and Gallery Learning and has written children's publications for major British museums and art galleries.

**What did dinosaurs really look like?**

**So You Think You Know about ... Dinosaurs,** Ben Garrod, illustrated by Scott Hartmann and Gabriel Ugueto. Brookline, MA: Zephyr, 2018

This popular series by TV presenter Professor Ben Garrod is illustrated with solid black images, so that attention is focussed on the shape of each dinosaur and not on details of colour, feathers and skin. The two paleoartists chosen to illustrate the series are well-known: Hartmann for the skeletal reconstructions he has created for numerous books, museums, and as a consultant for TV and film; Ugueto for work that is both traditional and digital and as a herpetologist.



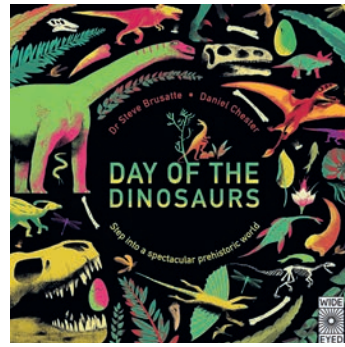
**How life on earth began: fossils, dinosaurs, the first human,** Aina Bestard, translated by Mathew Clarke. London: Thames & Hudson, 2021 (originally published as *Paisajes perdidos de la tierra*. Barcelona: Zahori Books, 2020)

Bestard makes the complex story of evolution accessible and comprehensible in a beautifully crafted and structured book. She makes clever use of colour-coding and timelines to keep the reader grounded in understanding where they are in the aeons of time as they read. Prehistoric life is contextualised in this larger study of life on earth.

All the tools available to an information book illustrator are used to great effect. Flaps lift to show fossils and what the original was like, or skeletons and skin covering. Cutaways are used to show earth's interior. Diagrams and labelled specimens are reminiscent of museum collections (indeed the book is based on the Museu de Ciències Naturals in Barcelona) as are the hand-drawn borders of the full colour illustrations which were inspired by the frames on antique panorama prints in the museum archives.

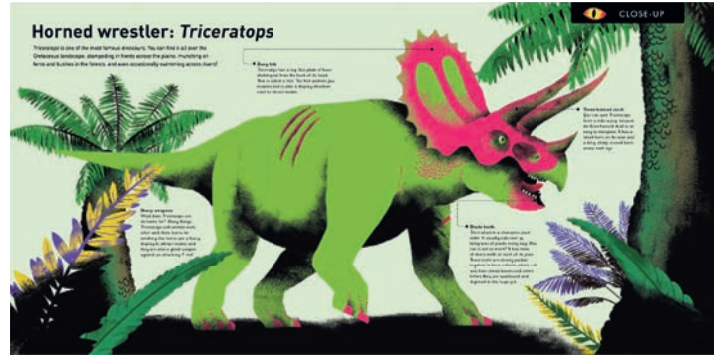
This book is inspired by scientific illustration, particularly 19th century engravings and lithographs, and has a texture and colour palette reminiscent of these.

The range of illustrative approaches in the representation of dinosaurs and prehistoric life is amazingly varied but what is most impressive is the fact that so much is underpinned by the science and then imaginatively recreated



**Day of the Dinosaurs,** Steve Brusatte, illustrated by Daniel Chester. London: Quarto, 2016

As the colours of any dinosaur are completely unknown, Chester uses the freedom this brings to create bright vividly coloured dinosaurs, creating mood and atmosphere. His unexpected colours are engaging and challenge expectations. Chester works in animation studio as well as illustration, and these influences are apparent in his illustrations.



Clever use of cutaways show the layering of the earth's history and on the facing page flaps are used to show the Stegosaurus skeleton and what it may have looked like. This is a reversal of the usual approach of showing the outside with the flaps lifting to show the skeleton hidden from view. The bones are all that is known and that can be seen in the case of dinosaurs



Context - A page of detailed line drawings of bones and skeletons opposite a series of three transparent overlays - of flying reptiles, of Mesozoic life and of land and sea dinosaurs, the images building up through the overlays to create a contextual scene.

# Everything With Words, Nothing by Numbers



An interview with **Mikka Haugaard**, founder and publisher of **Everything With Words**



*'Readers want to be taken by surprise. They want something that's fresh and special.'*

So shares Mikka Haugaard, founder and publisher of **Everything With Words**, and a writer herself, in a statement that cuts to the core of what makes her publishing house so distinct. Namely, furnishing readers, from 6-year olds to teenagers and adults, with refreshingly-voiced stories that typically suggest atypical ways of experiencing the world. Similar to seeing a Puffin or Picture Lions logo on books of yore, the **Everything With Words** owl, with its jaunty pose and wide-eyed gaze, signifies that something special is in store. In fact, 20% of the children's books published by **Everything With Words** have been nominated for the **Carnegie Medal**.

Ahead of celebrating its tenth anniversary next year, the 2026 schedule, packed with space pirates, wild griffins and secret gremlins, along with a sarcastic goat, and two teenagers trapped in a time loop, showcases everything **Everything With Words** does best. That is to say, it's a delicious smorgasbord of voices that embody its founder's devotion to publishing books that centre storytelling excellence, and children's reading pleasure.

Mikka's love of language falls into focus when she speaks of her background. Born in Denmark on the tiny island of Bornholm, Mikka's family 'travelled all over Europe, particularly Italy and Spain' through her early childhood. 'I first went to school in a seaside town called Scuari, an hour's drive from Naples. I came to the UK at the age of nineteen and studied Classics at Cambridge – I've always liked languages.' Moreover, Mikka's grandfather and great-grandfather both wrote fiction, and her father was a children's book writer, and translated the **Complete Fairy Tales of Hans Christian Andersen**. Incidentally, young Mikka had the joy of hearing secrets about **The Borrowers** from Mary Norton herself, a neighbour and family friend, over a gin and tonic: 'The secret was a lot of gin, hardly any tonic, and a glass that was more like a vase.'

When I ask Mikka what drives her editorial ethos, her priority is clear: 'Look for talent – it's rare, but when it's there nothing else matters.' A case in point is one of the first books she published, **The Wolf Road** by Richard Lambert, which won the **Mal Peet Children's Book Award**, and was selected as a Best Book of the Year by *The Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Financial Times*, and *Guardian*. 'It had been rejected by all the major publishers and Richard sent it to me as a last throw of the dice. I took it because I felt it was a fine book.'

Having come to publishing 'from an unusual route, from writing novels', Mikka is focused on finding talent over following trends: 'Don't look back at last year's fashion or bestsellers.' She's also unwaveringly devoted to the needs of readers: 'We all like to agree

with Auden that there are no good children's books that are only for children, but you still have to consider the child, and how children respond to stories. They do seem to live inside them in a way that we just don't. And books have to offer that possibility, that possibility of living within. And for that you need a blend of reality and the larger-than-life.'

That's certainly the case with Hannah Moffatt's **Help! Aliens Stole My Grandad** (May 2026), a comic cosmic caper that blends a boy's very real experience of losing his grandfather with an amusing intergalactic pirate adventure. 'Hannah has real comic talent and her writing is accessible but clever, and she wears it lightly,' Mikka says of a writer whose debut, **Small**, was shortlisted for the **Waterstones Prize** and esteemed as a *Times* Book of the Week.

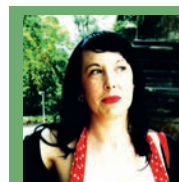
Though very different in style, D. T. Moorhouse's glorious **Grebs & Co** debut ('he's very talented, and there's something about this book that's rather special', says Mikka) also integrates everyday life with extraordinary magic when a girl called Alice falls into a letterbox and finds a secret society of letter-sorting, biscuit-loving gremlins. Through launching a campaign to save her community's letter boxes, Alice realises that 'small things such as biscuits, letters, tiny promises or even just words on a page really could change the world.' This beautiful book (September 2026) very much chimes with Mikka's core passions: 'Growing up with Hans Christian Andersen, I love the blend of fairy tale and realism we find in his work. That's what I look for: the blend of the real and the magical with a strong lyrical touch.'

That blend also runs through Luke Marchant's **Arthur and the Wild Griffin** (August 2026) in which endearing Arthur embarks on a mission to save the mythical monsters of Fantasy Zoo from the clutches of an evil sorceress. Radiating courage and kindness, Marchant's writing also showcases the special kind of storytelling that defines **Everything With Words**: it's thoughtful, child-centred, and charmingly quirky.

Oliver Lendon's **No-Tune Ned** (August 2026) also has child-pleasingly quirky characters at its joyful heart. 'It's wonderfully unpredictable and very funny,' Mikka says of a debut in which a would-be bard bravely channels his discordant voice to bring harmony to his monster-ridden kingdom. Mingling a big sense of adventure with delicate messages around being proud of who you are, it's a zestily fresh take on a classic quest.

Fresh takes are also a feature of Oran Doyle's **Give Me 'til Midnight** (September 2026): 'While I have a special affinity for middle grade, this year we're publishing an outstanding YA novel, an exceptional debut,' Mikka enthuses. And it really is special. Set in Dublin across 24-hours, it elevates the time-loop romance trope to tell an authentically-voiced, stirring story that explores loneliness, class privilege, and how we might escape lives that trap us.

All that considered, through tales that variously involve time-loop truths, tuneless bards, pink-feathered parrots, mythical beasts, and more, in doing nothing by numbers, **Everything With Words** has a habit of doing everything right to strike storytelling gold.



Joanne Owen is a writer, reviewer and workshop presenter. With a background in children's publishing, she's the author of several books for children and young adults, among them the **Martha Mayhem** series, the Carnegie Medal-nominated **Puppet Master**, and **You Can Write Awesome Stories**.

# Beyond the Secret Garden

## Multilingual Children's Literature

In the latest in their long-running series, **Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O'Connor** turn to multilingual books..

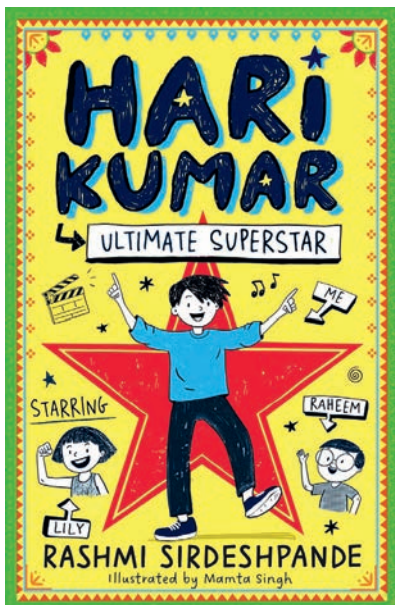
Britain, unlike many other countries, has no official language. Although over 90% of people in Britain have English as their main language, according to the Office for National Statistics, several other 'living languages' are spoken, including Welsh, Gaelic, Cornish, Scots, Irish and British Sign Language. Polish, Romanian, Panjabi, Urdu, Portuguese, Spanish and Arabic all have over 200,000 speakers in the UK, as of the 2021 census. Yet multilingual books (books using multiple languages) are still, according to Sabine Little, 'comparatively rare' ('Multilingual Picture Books' 2025, p. 3). Of those that exist, many are bilingual and often demonstrate a hierarchy of languages (with English nearly always privileged in predominantly English-speaking countries). Multilingual children's literature is often seen as a concession to someone learning the dominant language rather than a vital part of the story.

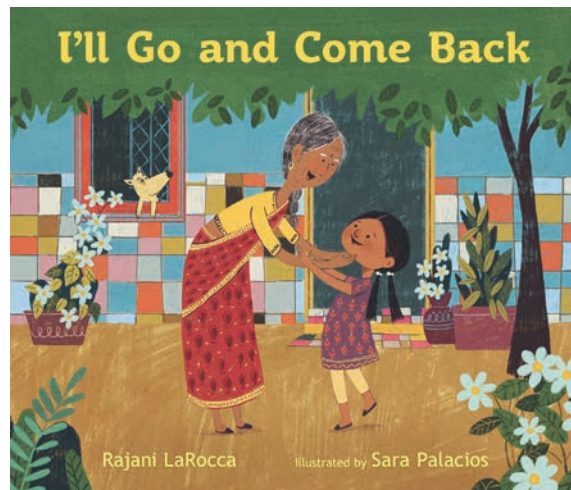
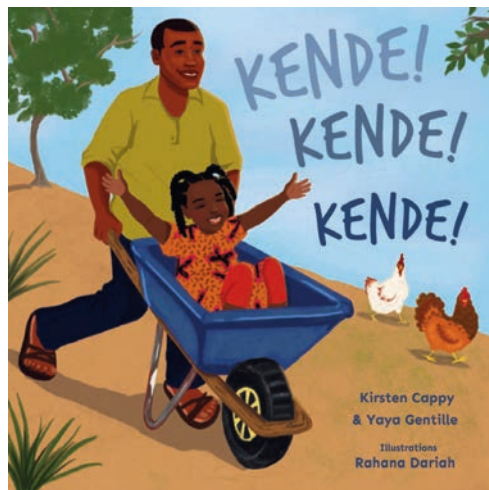
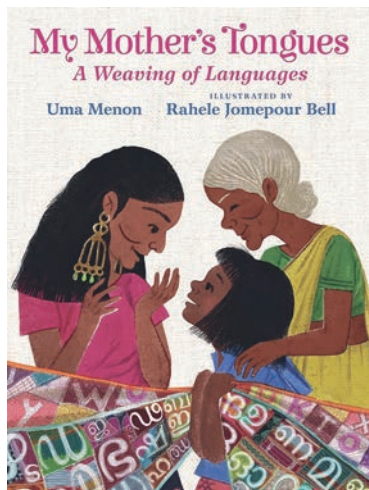
Although historically, British children's books have nearly always privileged English, the use of other languages in books for young readers wasn't always rare. Throughout the British Empire, children's books introduced readers to new words from the colonies, such as *veldt*, *pajamas*, or *hurricane*. Often, these colonial words were indicated by italicizing but not given any definition; readers had to learn through context. In G.A. Henty's **In Times of Peril** (1881), which concerned the Sepoy Uprising, the English girl Rose is given a disguise by her uncle: 'I have also ordered her to get me two dresses: one, such as a young Mussulman [sic] *zemindar* wears' (32). The reader is not told what a *zemindar* is, but as the word is repeated several times throughout the novel, the reader can gather that such a person has money and servants. While this use of words from the colonial empire was meant as instructive, the instruction had purpose: to teach the white British reader how to survive in the colonies and protect and defend themselves against the 'native'.

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, European languages were considered a necessary part of education for the middle and upper classes; therefore, readers often encountered them as part of their leisure reading as well. French, for example, is found untranslated in **Jane Eyre** (1848), both when Mr. Rochester's ward Adèle speaks it, and in the repartee between Mr. Rochester and

Miss Ingram. Jane is engaged as governess to Adèle because she speaks French; she starts to learn German but is asked to give it up in favour of Hindustani by her cousin St John Rivers, but unlike the French neither language is included in the text. French is also one of the languages Sara Crewe can speak in Burnett's **A Little Princess** (1905) and she embarrasses Miss Minchin by speaking it fluently to the French master who is expected to teach her. Sara also speaks Hindustani, but her words to Ram Dass are not recorded in the book, just that: 'She spoke to him in the language he knew' (173). Like Burnett's other well-known heroine, Mary Lennox, Sara has learnt Hindustani to speak to servants. Sara is nicer than Mary in the way that she uses language, but Hindustani is a language to communicate between colonizer and colonized. Including some languages but not others sets up a language hierarchy among European languages as well as between imperial and colonial languages.

After the second world war, when migration from the colonies and former colonies to Britain increased dramatically, the number of languages spoken on a regular basis across the nation also rose. Although initially most mainstream publishers emphasized English-only texts especially for racially minoritised communities, by the 1980s some publishers were creating bilingual books, such as Blackie's **All About Me** series; written by Jennie Ingham and photographed by Prodepta Das (Puffin 1987). This series was designed for the educational market and the cover of the books were in English only, indicating that it was the dominant speaker who was selecting a text for a child new to English, rather than a child picking out a story because it included visible familiar language. Hamish Hamilton's series about racially minoritised communities in Britain, including books like **Kikar's Drum**; written by Olivia Bennett and photographed by Christopher Cormack (Hamish Hamilton 1984) were also designed to teach, but focused on the child from outside the community rather than the child inside the community. This book, and others like it, include a glossary at the beginning as well as explanations within the text: 'patka' is defined in the glossary, but also in the text, when Bennett writes, 'Mum tidies his hair in a small knot and covers it with a square piece of cloth called a patka' (5).





This renders the glossary unnecessary except for highlighting the 'otherness' of the language.

Poetry was one of the few places in this time period where multilingualism was depicted in celebratory fashion. This was especially the case in collections edited by poets from the Caribbean where people of African, Indian, European and East Asian heritage had shared cultural traditions for over a century. Grace Hallworth's collections, including **Down by the River** (Scholastic 1996) but also those designed for the classroom such as **Buy a Penny Ginger** (Longman 1994) and **Rhythm and Rhyme** (Longman 1995) have words from multiple languages, including French ('Baissez down', p. 4 of **Rhythm and Rhyme**), Spanish ('Acas Acas Los Maracas', p. 40 of **Rhythm and Rhyme**), Swahili ('Moja mbil tatu', p. 4 of **Buy a Penny Ginger**), as well as words unique to Trinidad such as 'congotay' (part of the phrase *one day congotay* meaning one day justice will be done) and 'washekong' (a kind of shoe; the word is possibly of Chinese derivation). Hallworth, in her introduction to **Down by the River**, calls her childhood home 'a fantastic mix' and said that 'Although we represented so many races, our culture was the same—Trinidadian.'

While many children in the UK live their lives using more than one language, this has rarely been acknowledged in the novels that are published. However, there are signs of more books engaging with multilingualism in recent years. Yassmin Abdel-Magied's fantasy adventure **Silver Brook: Yumna and the Golden Horse** (Hodder 2026) includes 'Left, right, left, bismillah, yallah!' on its opening page, English and Arabic combined in a single sentence. In Rasmi Sirdeshpande's diary novel **Hari Kumar, Ultimate Superstar** (Harper Collins 2026) Hari's Indian and French relatives use terms of endearment such as 'beta', 'bachaa' and 'mon petit chou' and Hari writes about the Sanskrit origins of his name.

Recently, multilingual families have more often been a subject for picture books. **My Mother's Tongues: A Weaving of Languages** (Walker 2024) written by Uma Menon, and illustrated by Rahele Jomepour Bell, begins with the sentence 'My mother has two tongues' and includes Malayalam words in Malayalam and Latin scripts. More languages are introduced throughout the narrative, the young narrator ending with 'Having a tapestry of tongues will be my superpower'. In **I'll Go and Come Back** (Walker Books 2022) by Rajani LaRocca, illustrated by Sara Palacios, young Jyoti makes her first trip from North America to India since she was a baby and spends time with her grandmother, who then comes to visit her the following year. The book uses the refrain, 'She didn't speak much English and I didn't speak much Tamil, but we understood each other.' **Kende! Kende! Kende!** (Child's Play 2024) written by Kirsten Cappy and Yaya Gentille and illustrated by Rahana Dariah is an affirming story 'inspired by families in Central Africa who are forced to leave their homes.' In addition to the multilingual text, the book offers QR codes too hear translated recordings in French, English, Lingala, Swahili, Portuguese, Kinyarwanda, and Arabic. **Nigeria**

(Barefoot Books 2025) written by Bunmi Emenanjo with art by Diana Ejaita, is a board book that tells a story set in Nigeria. Characters use Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa and phrases are asterisked and explained on the same page, enabling a smooth reading experience that captures some of the linguistic diversity of the country.

#### Books mentioned

**In Times of Peril** (1881), G.A. Henty

**Jane Eyre** (1848), Charlotte Brontë

**A Little Princess** (1905), Frances Hodgson Burnett

**All About Me** series written by Jennie Ingham and photographed by Prodeepta Das (Puffin 1987)

**Kikar's Drum**, written by Olivia Bennett and photographed by Christopher Cormack (Hamish Hamilton 1984)

**Down by the River**, Grace Hallworth (Scholastic 1996)

**Buy a Penny Ginger** (Longman 1994) Grace Hallworth

**Rhythm and Rhyme** (Longman 1995), Grace Hallworth

**Hari Kumar, Ultimate Superstar**, Rashmi Sirdeshpande, illustrated by Mamta Singh (Harper Collins 2026)

**Silver Brook: Yumna and the Golden Horse**, Yassmin Abdel-Magied (Hodder 2026)

**Nigeria**, Bunmi Emenanjo, art by Diana Ejaita (Barefoot Books 2025)

**My Mother's Tongues: A Weaving of Languages**, Uma Menon, illustrated by Rahele Jomepour Bell (Walker 2024)

**Kende! Kende! Kende!** Kirsten Cappy & Yaya Gentille, illustrated by Rahana Dariah (Child's Play 2024)

**I'll Go and Come Back**, Rajani LaRocca, illustrated by Sara Palacios (Walker Books 2022)



**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 Nikesh 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.

# We're going to make a friend

Karen Sands-O'Connor interviews Darren Chetty, her co-author on the *Beyond The Secret Garden* column about his debut picture book, *I'm Going to Make a Friend*.



When we write our column, 'Beyond the Secret Garden', together, we are always thinking about representation of minoritised communities. Do you think about representation when you are writing picture books? What did you think about when you wrote *I'm Going to Make a Friend*?

I tried not to think 'representation' too much as I wrote *I'm Going to Make a Friend*. And yet it's very much there. I wanted to write about a brown child but I didn't want to make them into a hero or even an aspirational character. I've nothing against those stories but they're not the ones I gravitate towards as a reader or a writer. It made sense to me that they would befriend a Black child. It seemed to chime with particular memories and experiences. When I switched back into 'analytical' mode I saw that it prevented the story being read as an assimilation tale. And I was happy about that.

How would you describe your approach to writing picture books?

Well, it's early days for considering myself a picture book author! I have a bunch of ideas at various levels of completion. But one thing I hear from my agent is that some of my ideas are far from where the market is currently. I guess I start with 'I wish there was a book about...' It's a great motivator. But perhaps sometimes it takes me down a journey of discovery of why there isn't a book about that very thing!

Most of the advertisements of your book mention that you are a philosopher, and I know you've used your training in Philosophy for Children (P4C) in your teaching. The blurb on the American Amazon site goes so far as to call *I'm Going to Make a Friend* 'a funny, philosophical take on the pursuit of friendship'. How do you see philosophy figuring into this book or your writing in general?

Yes, it always feels like a grand claim to say a book is philosophical. But yes, I've been doing P4C for nearly 30 years and it was the subject of my doctorate and in some ways my way into writing about picture books. I like the idea of leaving space for thinking and for embracing ambivalence and ambiguity. I tried to use words sparingly in the book and leave space for Sandhya to explore the imaginative world of the child. Children have tended to have lots to say about each page – about what exactly is going on, and how they themselves would answer the questions the child asks themselves. The end papers show two children, a cat and a homemade robot. Children have lots of views about how many friends are in the image! Tell me about creating your main character. Obviously, you wanted a character with a big enough imagination to 'make' a friend. What other factors did you consider? Why did those things matter to you?

Well, I think I spent a lot of time reading and imagining as a child. Often people get rose-tinted about their childhoods. But for me, reading and imagining were often something I did out of boredom more than anything else. And I moved house to completely different parts of the UK twice before I reached my teens. So, there was some isolation in there too. I don't think that's at all uncommon – even if technology makes it harder to be bored these days.

The book deals with emotionally stressful experiences (moving, making new friends, sharing with others). Was it difficult to depict anxieties and their resolution in the limited word count of a picture book? Why was it important to you to do so?

Yes, that's something I thought about a lot. Some of the reviews have described the book as 'quiet'. But to me, feeling alone and isolated is a profound, dramatic experience for children. We see how an active imagination can help you get through difficult moments and how making a friend is a creative act. We tend to expect picture books to have a resolution. But I didn't want that to be too neat. In fact, it's not completely clear that the happy ending is not also part of the child's imagination. I like that ambiguity.

In your essay in *The Good Immigrant* ('You Can't Say That! Stories Have to be About White People', reprinted in *Beyond the Secret Garden*), you talk about how the children you taught hesitated to use names from their family in stories, yet none of your characters in *I'm Going to Make a Friend* are named — was there any reason for this? And do you think children today still think stories have to be about white people, or has that changed?

I wanted to try and withhold some information from the reader – the child's name and their gender, for example. Partly this was an attempt to keep the child as a bit of a stranger to the reader too. I'm not sure whether I was entirely successful – but I've had some really interesting conversations with children about this, so maybe it was. I think children's views on who stories should be about depend on their reading experiences, and their writing experiences. We've seen an increase in books featuring Black and brown characters since the start of the CLPE's *Reflecting Realities* research. But we know that there's a difference between a book being published and a book being marketed and publicised so that it gets the attention of book buyers and lenders.

What's next for you in terms of writing for children?

I've a Welsh history book coming out that I coauthored with Professor Martin Johnes, who also contributed to *Welsh (Plural)*, a book I co-edited. And a children's novel written with Adam Ferner with whom I wrote *How to Disagree*. I'm also working on my next picture book with Little Tiger plus a couple of other books that I can't say much about just yet!

*I'm Going to Make a Friend*, by Darren Chetty, illustrated by Sandhya Prabhat, is published by Little Tiger, 978-1801046619, £7.99 pbk.



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.

# Letterbox Library Recommends: Tower Blocks Rise Up



In the latest in our new column, **Letterbox Library** recommends books that celebrate equality, diversity and inclusion. Their theme here, the tower blocks rising up in picture books.

Portrayals of working class and economically disadvantaged families have traditionally been viewed as inconsistent with the world of picture books. Publishing leans in to offering the youngest readers messages of hope, play and fun, very often within pastoral sites and with a heavy note of nostalgia. These worlds are then populated by (and so also associated with) the white middle classes, leaving, of course, huge swathes of children unrepresented. Housing estates are anathema to these landscapes, literal eyesores. And so, it feels like an especially bold interruption to see tower blocks rising up in recent picture books.

**Thunder Boots** introduces 'the smallest person in Primrose Towers', an effervescent (white) child who we see at either end of her school day, thundering about at home. While teetering on the edge of fantasy – the residents include a classical trio ensemble, the exterior is draped in flowering climbers – the incidental inclusion of the high rise is very welcome.

The tower block in **Luna Loves Christmas** is more realistically drawn with its broken lifts and concrete steps. It is also 'democratised', given equal status to the other homes and inhabitants who Luna (mixed race) and her mum meet on their food bank deliveries: the McKenzies in their terraced house overlooked by cranes, 'Old Ms Pothers' in her rural cottage and the Sandhus on the block's 12th floor. This gentle messaging is carried through to the story's conclusion. All the characters are brought together in a festive dinner at the town hall 'where everyone is welcome, so no one is alone.'

The towers in **Children of the Throne** are a portal in to a magical subterranean world. Here, a band of child residents (different skin tones) encounter a 'tree-grown man' sunk in to his 'root-grown throne' who portends an environmental apocalypse. Back above ground, children climb down from their towers and stride out as newly made eco warriors, bearing crowns of hazel stems.

Elsewhere, the tower block environment themselves become a pivot for quiet community activism, even, found family. In **Errol's Garden**, a solid grey block is pierced by colourful windows where we see residents watering meagre plant collections. The protagonist (of colour) extends everyone's reach by bringing them together to create a shared roof top garden. In **Let's Go Puddling!** three families pick a rainy day to climb down the steps of their respective flats and enter



the estate's communal space. Ignoring a minimally furnished playground, the toddlers 'puddle' with glee, splashing and stomping in their ready-made water park. The rhythmic, onomatopoeic text pulls the reader in to their irrepensible play. The final pages show bonds cemented with the families snuggled together on a sofa.

**The Concrete Garden** by Bob Graham opens with a vast row of high rise flats, the tops and ends guillotined by the pages. A gaggle of children emerge, 'spill[ed] out like sweets from a box.' Amanda, a (Black) girl from the 15th floor, enters the shared concrete space and chalks out a bright flower. Toddlers and children tumble in to add their own flourishes – foliage, a bird of paradise, an alien invader. Graham's trademark 'tracking' shots deliver a bird's eye view of this emerging 'beautiful and exotic garden' and then flip back to a young Hijabi woman leaning down from her balcony to snap a photo. Soon, the very many residents stretch out of their windows delivering a chorus of applause while the children take a bow. A seemingly inhospitable environment has been transformed, not through magic and not by idealising or ennobling the setting nor its inhabitants. Instead the landscape has been shifted by a recognisable, gloriously diverse, community and with the tools they have to hand, chalk and cardboard boxes. A culmination of small acts by ordinary people in the shadows of tower blocks becomes a site of hope, play and fun – for all.

*Books mentioned all available from [Letterbox Library](#):*

**Thunder Boots**, Naomi Jones & Rebecca Ashdown (Oxford University Press, 2023)

**Luna Loves Christmas**, Joseph Coelho & Fiona Lumbers (Andersen Press, 2023)

**Children of the Throne**, Joseph Coelho & Richard Johnson (Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 2025)

**Errol's Garden**, Gillian Hibbs (Child's Play, 2018)

**Let's Go Puddling!**, Emma Perry & Claire Alexander (Walker Books, 2022)

**The Concrete Garden**, Bob Graham (Walker Books, 2025)

Established in 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**.

# Alexis Deacon: saving the world with picturebooks

An interview by Nicolette Jones

Alexis Deacon's career, he thinks, has had two parts. After studying at Brighton, he had early success with his picturebooks **Slow Loris**, **Beegu**, **Jitterbug Jam** and **While You Are Sleeping**, but from about 2006-10, in his late 20s/early 30s, his hypermobility joint syndrome, which caused tension in the body, led to a physical breakdown. He spent much of his time in bed, trying to get better through his own remedies, until he was helped by 'a really talented physiotherapist who was very brutal with me.' When he came back to work, he illustrated chapter books, including **Soonchild** and **Jim's Lion** for Russell Hoban, and created his own graphic novel series, **Geis**. He also taught at Anglia Ruskin from 2009, until he moved a year ago to teach full-time on the Illustration MA at Goldsmiths, which he describes as 'superfun.' Nevertheless, despite successes in this second half of his career, he says 'I was never able to pick up the momentum that I'd established in the first half.'

His new picturebook **King School** deserves to gather momentum. It is a picturebook with a philosophy to live by. The title sounds timely, in this era of 'No Kings' protests, and certainly Deacon agrees that with 'the rise of the strongman/patrician overlord' it resonates in its exploration of different kinds of authority. But his original idea emphasised schooling over royalty. It concerns a young king who is crammed with information by his advisors, until he rebels and teaches them instead to have fun and enjoy nature.

'It just flowed out of working with schools, and seeing the pressure teachers are under to deliver a certain sort of learning, which doesn't seem to have the child at the heart of the experience. I felt frustrated that there's so much data to support the fact that reading for pleasure and self-enterprise are much more effective ways of getting people to learn. And yet we keep imposing artificial structures which are target-driven and use as many measurables as possible because things have to be quantified, graded, assessed in order to know whether we're succeeding or not.'

Deacon says his books come out of personal experience 'to an extent which is embarrassingly revealing.' **Slow Loris** for instance, was made when he was a student and therefore 'night active.' 'A lot of my contemporaries were crushingly boring during the day, but very, very engaging at night.'

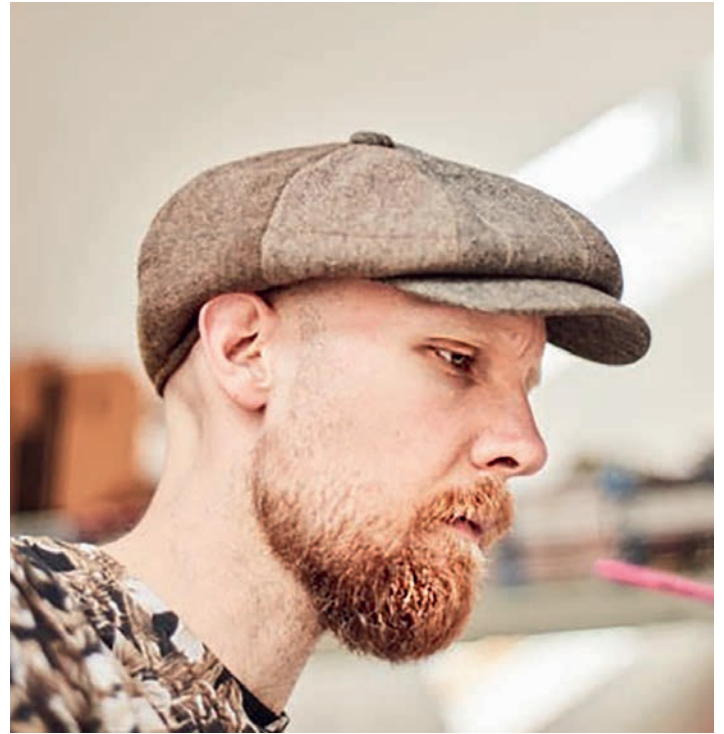
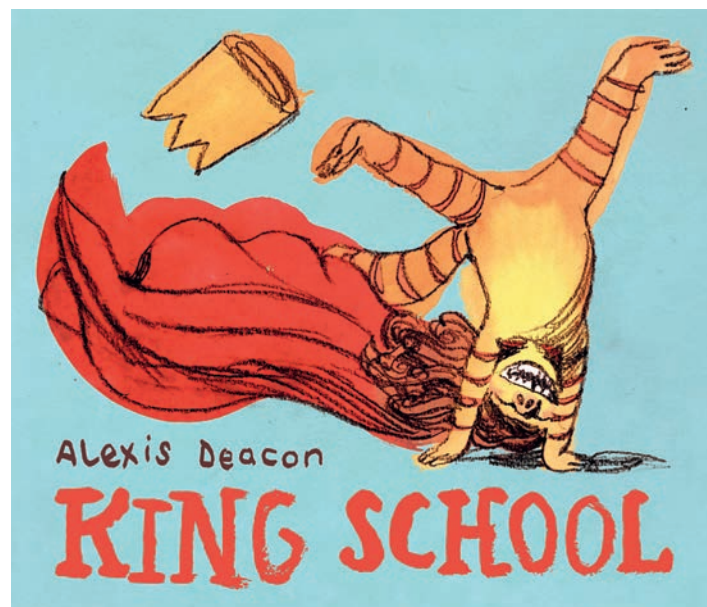


photo by Jake Green

His own childhood seems to have a bearing on **King School**. He 'absolutely loved' his primary education at a small South London school with a family ethos that was 'very free and play driven' until his year became the first to take a formal 11-plus exam. 'I remember seeing the change in the behaviour of the teachers, how the stress and inhibition of the feeling of somebody looking over their shoulder suddenly came into everything that they were doing. And not only did my experience deteriorate, but I started to learn a lot less and value my time there less.' The feeling continued into his private secondary school which followed a very formal system.

Deacon wanted to put the fun, and also the observation, back into learning. 'This is not a story that's trying to devalue education. I really value learning, and that's precisely why I think it deserves to be something joyful. I just wanted to espouse the value of being present and engaged with the world and still open to looking. Rather than the king having to assimilate everything that everybody else has learned before.'

'And that's come out of my own experiences as an art teacher. It's a little bit like what's going on with AI right now. It becomes garbage very quickly because it just starts recycling and recycling. Like our water system: by now it's Prozac and cocaine or whatever. At some point, you need to go back to source and start observing for yourself.' The characters, both king and advisors, in **King School**, are creatures with tusks, bulbous noses, and tails, reminiscent of Maurice Sendak's **Where the Wild Things Are**. Deacon sees another influence. 'There's a character in **The Muppets** called Sweetums, the giant shaggy thing. For some reason, that archetype has always really, really spoken to me. It's like an inner self.' Sweetums, Deacon admits, is his daemon.

'The Wild Things have that quality as well. This massiveness, the ratio of head to body, the quantity of fur or feather or hair really speaks to me. And therefore if I'm given the opportunity I will tend to draw things that way.'

Sendak, though, is Deacon's 'gold standard'. 'And my best friend down the street had cardboard cutouts of the Wild Things all along



the top shelf in his mum's studio. They made such an impression on me, these huge characters. I get a lot of joy from drawing things that look like that.'

**King School**, though, is '100% digital in the conception'. Deacon explains: 'We've moved to a graphic aesthetic which is shape-based and colour-based and line is playing less of a role. But that's never really been my grammar.' He loves 'the feeling of rhythm and energy and pace and speeding up and slowing down and lingering. That almost calligraphic way of drawing where we're looking at physicality and emotion and motion. Line can do a lot of very complex things very quickly.' But he started working on this book purely digitally 'because I wanted to think about that grammar of shape and colour. I planned everything out on the computer, in very simple flat colour paintings. And then I used that as a light box for the drawing, so I knew where all the shapes were meant to go. I replaced the digital originals with gouache artwork. So everything is tactile, physical media, but planned and conceived in the computer first of all.' It seems the opposite way round from the technique of a lot of illustrators who digitise their handmade artwork and manipulate it afterwards.

Meanwhile Deacon '100% and thoroughly and entirely' believes that picturebooks can save the world. 'I think that stories are the most important cultural pillars, and when we think about the rise of the

right at the moment, something that is not engaged with enough is that it's essentially a grieving for a lost narrative. Lost narratives of masculinity, of culture, of identity, of self-worth, of national worth. People are grieving for lost stories that gave them a sense of meaning in their lives. The story or stories exist somewhere that can unite us again, for sure. Not necessarily picturebooks per se, maybe something that's more aimed at an adult audience, but a picturebook is an adult story in seed. And I do think that the story exists somewhere.'

**King School** seems a good place to start.

**King School** by Alexis Deacon is published by Otter-Barry Books, 978-1915659712, £12.99 hbk.



**Nicolette Jones** writes about children's books for the **Sunday Times**, and is the author of **The Illustrators: Raymond Briggs** (Thames & Hudson); **The American Art Tapes: Voices of Twentieth Century Art** (Tate Publishing) and **Inspire Me!** (Nosy Crow), illustrated by Axel Scheffler.

## I wish I'd written...



**Ivy and Bearlock Holmes: The Mystery of the Dinosaur Bones** by Kristyna Litten is published by Magic Cat Publishing, 978-1917768177, £9.99 hbk

### Kristyna Litten chooses a picture book with love at its core

I vividly remember the day I bought it. I had started working full time as an illustrator and my passion for picture books was growing, as was my collection. I wandered into my local bookshop having made a deal with myself that today I was there only to browse. However, as soon as I flicked through the first few pages, I was in trouble. I started poring over the beautiful textures in Marta's illustrations and I ended with a little giggle. I knew I had to have it.

Like all good books that make you think, 'I wish I had written that,' **No!** has a simple but cleverly executed concept – a dog who thinks his name is No - and a clear message at its core: love.

What makes it so charming is that the story is written from the dog's perspective, giving us a humorous insight into the dog's mind and leaving us to wonder what on earth our own pets think when we talk to them. Dog explains he is a very good boy, and he knows this for a fact because his family ALWAYS seem to be calling his name. Like when he assists with the laundry – 'No!' Tastes their food before they eat – 'NO!' Or warms their beds before they go to sleep – 'NOOO!' These lines couple hilariously with Marta's expressive illustrations of the mischief and mayhem involved in his 'helpful' tasks.

The ending is truly heart-warming. Although Dog is confused about why the name on his collar reads Spike, the one thing he's certain of is, 'They must love me very much and I love them too.' A feeling I'm sure anyone with a furry family member can relate to. We love them despite them having peed on the bed or nibbled the sofa, and they love us back.



**No!** by Marta Altés is published by Child's Play, 978-1846434174, £7.99 pbk.

## REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

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

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

**Clive Barnes** was Principal Children's Librarian in Southampton and is a long-standing reviewer for BfK

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

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

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

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

**Alison Brumwell** is an education and literacy consultant and chartered librarian

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

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

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

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

**Cassie Hands** is qualified and chartered librarian working at Creative Learning Services, the Schools Library Service equivalent for Leicestershire.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Anna Rushall** is a primary school teacher and English lead.

**Lucy Staines** was a primary school teacher, now retired.

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

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

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



### Come Along

★★★★

Cosmo Sheldrake, illus Liniers, Magic Cat, 32pp, 978-1917366298, £12.99 hbk

Based on Cosmo Sheldrake's song of the same name, **Come Along** takes inspiration from Edward Lear, A A Milne and Lewis Carroll, and young readers will meet a heffalump, borogroves and slithy toves on an adventure that encourages them to escape the humdrum, depicted in Liniers' painterly, detailed scenes as a sorrowful blue creature, with horns and something of a snail like appearance, protruding teeth notwithstanding. The 'we' of the story become two young rabbits, running on two legs and wearing the kind of outfits that the original readers of Milne would recognise, coats with collars, shorts. They race across the pages, embracing all the opportunities referred to in the text, enjoying a 'Mad Hatter's' tea party with a range of equally formally dressed animals and birds, and gleefully follow the exhortation to dance and sing until sundown. The illustrations delight in all the joy presented through the text and will speak directly to children, while adults might pick up on the occasional notes of melancholy, but for both it will be a quirky, uplifting reading experience. **LS**

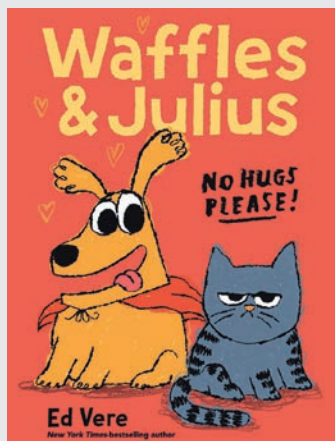
### Waffles and Julius No Hugs Please!

★★★★

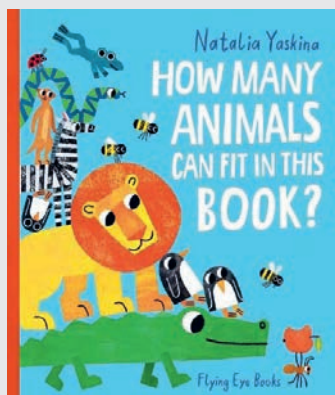
Ed Vere, Penguin, 32pp, 9780241709832, £7.99 pbk

Waffles is a dog. Julius is a cat. Waffles is a dog who wants give you a hug. Cats must love hugs, surely? Well perhaps not. Waffles tries everything until both he and Julius are exhausted. Time for a snooze... Waffles is a furry comfortable dog. A dog that would make a good pillow... Maybe, Waffles does get his wish and perhaps, Julius gets a hug

Ed Vere is the master at packing humour into his illustrations. His images are bold and uncluttered. The focus is on the characters – in this case Waffles and Julius – and their emotions. There is no doubt what each feels conveyed through Vere's vigorous lines together with his brilliance in facial expressions. The text is pared back to the minimum. There is no need for any extraneous



description; it is all there in the images which fill each double spread. Even the colour palette is stripped back; Waffles and Julius stand out against plain colour saturated backgrounds. There is action and a smile on every page – including that final one. Julius may not like a hug, but who gets the last laugh? This a picture book to enjoy and read – with plenty of expression – again and again. **FH**



### How Many Animals Can Fit in this Book?

★★★★

Natalia Yaskina, Flying Eye Books, 32pp, 9781838743444, £8.99 pbk  
Having been asked the question 'How Many Animals Can Fit in this Book?' Ant is very clear that there is only room for ONE ant (and his apple), and that's it, no more. Unfortunately, for Ant, there are other animals keen to join him and prove that there is definitely room to spare. As lions, crocodiles and penguins and quite a few other animals arrive on the page, the book is getting rather crowded, when suddenly, one of the lions has had enough too and with a loud roar, sends all of the other animals scattering, leaving Ant feeling justified that he was right after all. When Ant decides that maybe he'd be better off in another book with more room, he probably isn't counting on the fact that the other animals might also want to follow him...oh dear!

With simple, but bold and bright illustrations throughout, this engaging counting book for younger readers provides a fun and clever path through numbers one to ten, with a gentle message about everyone needing their own personal space sometimes. There is plenty for little minds and fingers to spot on each page, not least poor Ant as he gets more and more frustrated, while all the other animals remain oblivious. A unique, funny and eye-catching picture book, ripe for multiple rereadings. **AH**



### Solo

★★★★

Neil Clark, Rocket Bird Books, 32pp, 9781915395351, £12.99 hbk  
This story is narrated by Solo, who sets off to the park, hoping so she tells readers en route, that it won't be too busy. When she arrives though, she finds that it's full of children dashing hither and thither and making a fair bit of noise. Solo stands apart from the hubbub and starts playing with her her ball, but it soon bounces off and is picked up by someone introducing himself as Jesse. Jesse invites Solo to join him and his friends in their play and for a while she has a fun time but then she feels as though she needs some , let's say, Solo time and off she goes to spend a while by herself. Soon she feels better but her being alone once more concerns Jesse. However, Solo explains that rather than a problem, she likes to enjoy quiet things on her own sometimes. One becomes two as Solo and Jesse play Solo's kind of games together; he enjoys these activities and understands her need, calling it "a little time and space to power up". When she's done so, Solo is ready and willing to spend some more time in the 'whizzy part of the park', so off they go.

Neil Clark shows that both the whizzy world and Solo's quieter one have much to offer, the latter leaving space for the imagination to flourish. Embedded quietly in his story is the message that being alone and being lonely are not the same at all. I'm sure that almost all of us need the former from time to time, some more than others; we can be introvert sometimes and extrovert sometimes. **JB**

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

### I am Strong Just Being Me

★★★★

Laura Dockrill, ill. Kip Alizadeh, Little Tiger, 32pp, 97818398918019, £7.99 pbk

The lyrical text from poet Laura Dockrill and the vibrant warm illustrations work together to make an inspiring and joyous picture book, which actually does some real heavy lifting in terms of the emotional and social development conversations that it is likely to inspire. Our non-gender specific and eminently relatable character, Bean, is pondering what it means to be strong and if that is something they have to be? Very wisely he takes his questions to Nanna, who has a lovely collaborative and respectful attitude to discussions with Bean, and this is such a charming depiction of a close intergenerational relationship. She offers her opinions and asks what Bean thinks. Her affirmative statements are very much focused on the importance of love and showing we care, which is perhaps the exact opposite of stereotypical views of strength. She shows the strength involved in speaking up when needed, being able to ask for help, admitting when something hurts, struggling and making mistakes, admitting being wrong and being able to say sorry and to forgive. A real strength of the illustrations which frame the story are the reflections of strength in nature and the delightful endpapers which showcase wildflowers and the characteristics they are said to represent are a lovely bonus element of this valuable and enjoyable text. Its empowering message of self-acceptance, that each child is enough just as they are, will boost resilience and empathy in its audience. **JCo**

### Seven Babies

★★★★

Forest Xiao, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781529532807, £7.99 pbk

Seven babies arrive at Number 14, long box in hand. A slightly startled man and an enthusiastically welcoming woman open the door and invite them in. What follows is less a visit and more an occupation. From the moment they cross the threshold, the house becomes a lively stage for appetite, curiosity and relentless motion.

Xiao presents the day as a succession of busy visual episodes, each baby absorbed in their own pursuit while the adults attempt to keep pace. There is climbing and sliding, splashing and crawling, enthusiastic eating and the chewing of things that probably should not be chewed. One baby studies books with serious intent, another leads impromptu games, while a third sleeps blissfully through the commotion. It is the sort of image that many tired parents might regard as pure fantasy. Throughout, the humour builds through accumulation

rather than punchline. Toys scatter, furniture becomes equipment, and rooms fill with the soft chaos of early childhood energy.

The book works best as an affectionate observation rather than a grand statement. Xiao notices the rhythms of domestic life with warmth and a light satirical touch. The adults are not portrayed as inept, simply outnumbered and increasingly hopeful that calm might eventually return. Visual details reward attentive readers. The matching onesies echo the patterned endpapers, the 'peas-in-a-pod' mystery book reappears from spread to spread, and each baby develops a quiet individuality within the collective bustle.

Evening brings the only real pause. As the adults finally fall asleep, perhaps trusting that the babies will follow suit, the visitors gather their belongings and move on. The closing question about where they will go next lands as both comic speculation and gentle warning.

Playful, observant and full of movement, this is a picture book that will delight young readers with its anarchic energy while offering older ones a knowing smile of recognition. **MT**



### You've got this Little Pangolin

★★★★

Tola Okogwu, ill. Shirley Hottier, Simon & Schuster, 28pp, 978139850950, £7.99 pbk

Kúyé is a baby pangolin living with his mama in the Nigerian rainforest. He is impatient to grow up and doesn't want to wait for his mother to teach him important pangolin skills such as climbing trees, hanging on branches and digging for termites. He especially wants to be able to make himself into a ball the way he has seen others do, but no matter how hard he tries, he just can't manage it. When danger strikes, and his mother comes to the rescue, he realises there are times when he still needs her help and guidance.

This is an appealing story about the impatience of the young to grow up and the protection and care parents provide. Look out for details in the attractive illustrations such as the predator lurking behind a tree.

The book includes interesting information about pangolins such as what they eat, how they move and

protect themselves from danger and is dedicated to the **Pangolin Crisis Fund. SMc**



### Mo's Stick

★★★★

Fiona Lumbers, Little Tiger, 24pp, 9781788958141, £12.99 hbk

Mo had a stick, a very special one but then he didn't. Sans that favourite stick Mo won't be able to draw wonderful pictures, nor fly high in the sky; there won't be a mast for his sailing boat, nor a fishing rod or something with which to poke dragons. Nothing amazing at all. There's not another stick anywhere that could take its place. However, Mouse is a little creature with lots of imagination that is used in creative play and this is what he's been using the missing stick for.

Almost invariably when out walking in the park near my home, I watch a small child who has picked up a stick and is doing what Mouse was - having imaginative ideas sparked by their stick. No phone or expensive toys necessary.

Mo is a captivating little character and its great the way the book's external narrator is gently supportive of his ideas so that eventually, he realises that it's him rather than a special object that is key. This thoroughly uplifting, child centred tale is superb and deserves a place in every family with little ones as well as nursery and preschool settings. To be read frequently, I suggest. With occasional cutaway pages and die-cuts, the illustrations too are an absolute delight. **JB**

### My Tiger!

★★★★

Joy Cowley, ill. David Barrow, Gekko Press, 28pp, 9798765683200, £12.99, hbk

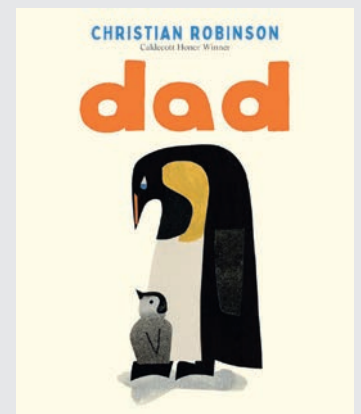
A little boy has a tiger for a pet. This tiger is rather fond of cake. One day the tiger unsurprisingly develops a bad tooth and has to go to the dentist. The tiger is not very enthusiastic about this. The scenes which play out at the dentist rapidly move from light humour to a much darker variety in the final pages.

This is a well-known story by a highly acclaimed author now revamped in picture book format. The illustrations by David Barrow, the award-winning illustrator of *Have you Seen Elephant?* are simply stunning with a magnificent and highly expressive tiger.

Although the book is unlikely to reassure children about forthcoming

visits to the dentist (or trips to the zoo for that matter!) conversations about the story may lead to considering healthy eating for humans and animals.

Adults are advised to read the whole story themselves before sharing with young children so that they are forewarned about the dramatic ending. **SMc**



### Dad

★★★★

Christian Robinson, Two Hoots, 48pp, 97810350 88393, £12.99 hbk  
In this world, Dads come in all shapes and sizes. Of those depicted thirteen are wild animals including birds, the others are humans. Of the former, the order of those presented is carefully thought out, so for example a large green frog with three tadpoles on his back is captioned 'Dad is here now'. Turn the page and there's a nest containing two baby owls and opposite is a large owl flying from that nest and the words, 'Dad had to go away.'

Further contrasts include a seahorse holding his offspring safely in his pouch - 'Dad holds on tight' we read; after this comes a rather fearsome shark above which is, 'Dad needs a lot of space.' and below are two shark pups. I had to smile at the picture of the porcupine accidentally poking his little one with a very sharp spine, this is one of the mistakes mentioned, whereas the Lion snuggling with one of two cubs 'makes you feel safe.' as does the Dad penguin with a chick on one of his feet. The human fathers too are a diverse lot. One is a wheelchair user, another is absent altogether, 'Dad is with you even when he's not' and several watch their little ones grow. It's good to see tenderness depicted - a dad wiping away a small child's tears and another shedding tears of his own.

Look carefully at the bold, textured illustrations and there's a richness of subtle details: the Dad gorilla said to be 'strong' has a look in his eyes that show a possible vulnerability about his role. For instance; some animals already introduced are depicted on the clothing and other belongings of several of the humans.

Altogether this is a powerful affirmation of dads that will mean a lot to human dads and their little ones. **JB**

## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior

### One Fine Day

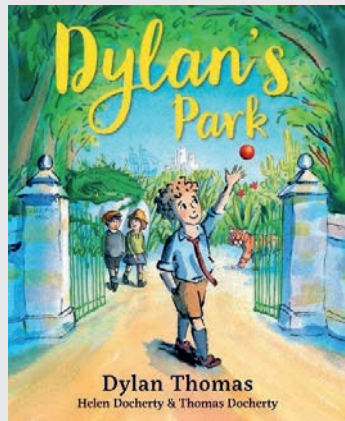
★★★★

Justin Worsley, Andersen Press, 32pp, 9781839135064, £12.99 hbk  
One fine morning in the forest, Moose decides the weather is ideal for doing some landscape painting on the opposite shore of the lake from his home.

Over on the opposite side of the lake, Bear listens to the radio as he has his breakfast of beans and decides it's a good day for fishing. He makes himself some baked bean sandwiches for lunch and dresses in his fishing hat and wellies and sallies forth. Moose meanwhile has packed his bag and is pedalling off in search of the perfect view to paint.

Some time later, down at the lake, the two creatures suddenly find themselves in an angry confrontation caused by an accidental entanglement. Something needs to be done to clear the air, but what?

The humour is largely in the vibrant, detailed illustrations and the way they show things not said in the text, and of course, the bear's emanation of the rear end kind. The latter being something that listeners will delight in along with the two protagonists JB



### Dylan's Park

★★★★

Dylan Thomas, edited by Helen Docherty, illus Thomas Docherty, Graffeg, 32pp, 978-1805950356, £12.99 hbk

The Dylan of this story is Dylan Thomas, and the park is Cwmdonkin Park in Swansea, well known both to the poet and the husband and wife team who are creators of this joyful and inspiring picture book. Using Dylan Thomas' own words, from two radio broadcasts and from his poem *Should Lanterns Shine*, Helen Docherty describes his childhood adventures in the park, introducing readers to a world of imagination and play, where a small park extends to embrace 'caverns and forests, prairies and deserts' and 'as many secret places ... as a country somewhere at the end of the sea.' It's universal,

in that every child will recognise those imaginary adventures, though they'll envy Thomas his freedom to stay out all day, or roast potatoes in a camp fire, and be thrilled by the feats of daring and endurance that bring membership of the children's secret societies. It's also wonderfully particular to Dylan Thomas, as we can hear his voice throughout, the marvellous rhythm and syntax of his poetry. The illustrations show Thomas with young friends, a curly mop of hair to mark him out, and fill the park with a set of the characters he remembered from his childhood, nursemaids, gardeners, old men, an old lady in a bath chair with six Pekinese and a pale girl to read aloud to her, and the park keeper who remembers him as 'happy all the time.' Somehow, they make it even more magical and more real. The book works as an accessible and tempting introduction to Dylan Thomas, and as a celebration of the limitless joy of outdoor play. A book to treasure. LS

### See you later...

★★★★

April Suddendorf, Flying Eye, 40pp, 9781838743475 £8.99 pbk

This picture book, although simple on first appearance and seemingly pitched at infants, is perhaps better placed shared with slightly older primary school pupils due to the prior understanding of stories and rhymes required to truly engage with all that the text offers.

Initially we meet Gary the alligator and it is easy to assume you know the story which is about to unfold. Gary is disillusioned with his swamp and determines to explore the human accommodation at the top of the hill in search of a better life. In many ways we can be forgiven for falling in with the classic aspects of this tale – character seeks better, character explores new environment, character quickly longs for home. This is exactly what we are presented with: Gary progresses from room to room exploring and quietly rejecting the 'shiny' new experiences he finds within the human household. Just as he reflects on his adventure and resolves to return home, the family return! Gary hides out until he thinks he can sneak away undetected only to find that the child in the family had spotted him, but will keep his secret.

As a simple story, it serves as a reminder that home is indeed where the heart is. The illustrations are engaging and there is much to talk about with young readers, helping them to further engage. They may however find some of the language quite challenging and the presentation of the text on the page, if reading independently. There is some lovely use of the well-known rhyme See you later alligator and

also references to other classic texts – these do require a slightly older reader in order to fully enjoy the humour, but the ability to read the text at different levels over time may be an advantage for some. ARu



### Ahab and the White Whale

★★★★★

Manuel Marsol, translated by Chloe Garcia Roberts, NYRB Kids, 40pp, 9798896230052, £17.99 hbk

Ahab is in his own words the captain of the Pequod and the greatest whale hunter ever to sail the seas. He is determined to find and capture the great white whale, Moby Dick. Searching for his dream he crosses seas of jelly fish, touches a warm iceberg, is almost swallowed by a man-eating island – even loses his leg. In fact, his search goes on so long he tells us he forgot what he was looking for and even forgot his name. So how did Ahab make it home?

How to take Melville's extraordinary novel *Moby Dick* and create something for a young readership? Marsol does not make any attempt to retell the story. Rather he focuses on one character, Captain Ahab himself and on his obsession with that great white whale. His text is minimal, pared back as Ahab tells his story. The wealth lies in Marsol's extraordinary illustrations. Colour saturated and textured they draw on a whole range of techniques – collage, watercolour, pencils, plastic emulsion paint – and the effect created by mixing oil paint and acrylic. The result is bold, colourful, immersive – almost tactile. At the heart of the retelling is Ahab's obsession, an obsession that results in a futile search, 'Over and over again, I asked myself the same question: Where the blazes could he be hiding?' The reader, turning the pages to be drawn into the mysteries of the sea, will realise that Ahab's obsession has blinded him. Moby Dick is on every page, hiding almost in plain sight in a richly imagined ocean world. For Marsol the sea is fascinating and indeed full of mysteries. His

illustrations are teeming with them, ranging from wrecked ships to giant squid whose tentacles create fingers, caves inhabited by skeletons, islands that suddenly appear. And to answer Ahab's question – how did he get home? Well, the penultimate spread might answer that for the reader... As Ahab says 'The sea is a mystery.'

This beautifully produced book demands to be on library shelves challenging the comfortable picture books that we are so accustomed to. It is exciting, imaginative, visually demanding, and ultimately rewarding. FH

### The Brave Little Whale

★★★★★

Charlotte Manning, Otter-Barry Books, 32pp, 9781915659828, £12.99, hbk

This beautiful picture book explores the lives and migration of a pod of humpback whales. The story is narrated by one of the pod members, Uki, a small, young whale. Uki is cared for by his grandpa, Yuka, who teaches him whale songs. Yuka also leads the pod to their summer feeding grounds in the cold polar seas. This year, though, it is different; Yuka is too old to make the journey. Uki is very sad to leave his grandpa behind but he follows new leader, Amka, as the pod sets out on their journey north.

Uki is scared without his grandpa but tries to be brave. There are plenty of dangers on the way: huge ships, storms, pollution and plastic rubbish – and then a pack of orcas attack. The whale pod is scattered and it is Uki who brings them back together with a song his grandpa taught him. All except Amka – he is tangled in a discarded fishing net. Once again, Uki's singing saves the day – along with the surprising help of the orca pack. Everyone agrees that Uki is not only a brave little whale but should become the leader of the pod.

This is a work of fiction. The whales are anthropomorphised but sensitively so and in a way that heightens empathy and enriches learning about the life of humpback whales. This learning is augmented further by helpful fact panels throughout the book giving explanatory information. Perhaps these could have been better positioned in places, but this is a very minor niggle in what is a book with many riches – from the colourful glory of the northern lights to the resonance of the whales' names, which are Inuit in origin.

Manning acknowledges the contribution and collaboration of her father, Mick Manning, in creating this book. Lovers of his and Brita Granström's non-fiction picture books will recognise his influence (and I should say I have worked on them in another life). However, through her poetic storytelling and atmospheric

# reviews

## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

artwork, this relatively new author-illustrator clearly has a strong voice of her own, evoking the world of the humpback whale in a way that will capture children's imaginations and also convey a powerful environmental message. **RC**



### Llama Library

★★★★

Holly Ryan, ill. Ella Bailey, Rocket Bird Books, 32pp, 9781915395306 £7.99 pbk

This is very much a reading for pleasure title! Any children with a penchant for llamas will be instantly won over by the sheer variety on offer – and better still, the idea that you can loan them from the library! The title continues with the main character choosing a series of problematic 'pet' llamas to take home, only to find when they get there that perhaps another kind would have been better after all. Each time she exchanges her llama for another variety, but each time they cause further trouble... until she returns to the library and considers dinosaur loans instead.

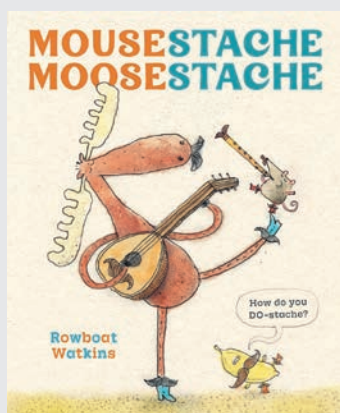
The illustrations in this title are bold and colourful and busy, providing little readers with lots to help them extend their imaginations. The text is easily accessible and, generally, the rhyming format aids the 'read aloud' quality – though on occasions the rhythm is lost. It is lovely too, to have the concept of the library put front and centre – a reminder to children (and parents) everywhere of how essential this service is, though in the case the issue is that the concept of what is being loaned is so preposterous that, arguably, the sentiment with regards to libraries is lost. This is unlikely to deter young llama lovers though, who are, without question, the children most likely to pick up and love this title. **ARu**

### Moustache Moostache

★★★★

Rowboat Wilkins, Chronicle Books, 40pp, 9781797233918, £13.99 hbk

Starting from the cover itself, this book bursts into what can only be described as visual jazz. Moustaches of every conceivable shape and mood ripple, wobble, swoop and



parade across the pages, setting the tone for a picturebook that revels in sound, rhythm and sheer imaginative abandon. There is no conventional narrative to follow here. Instead, Wilkins offers a playful sequence of encounters and transformations, loosely connected by the ever-present 'tache motif that migrates from character to character, landscape to landscape.

The text is clearly designed to be heard as much as read. Rhyme and repetition create a shifting musical structure that invites performance, encouraging readers to experiment with pace, pitch and emphasis. Some passages tumble forward with giddy momentum, while others linger on a phrase long enough for the accompanying illustration to deliver its visual punchline: I particularly enjoyed the shock and sweep of 'migrating flockstaches'. It is a book that comes fully alive in the shared space of read aloud, where its comic timing and linguistic elasticity can be explored.

Wilkins' illustration style amplifies this sense of joyful unpredictability. Every line appears slightly wobbly, as though still in motion, and his softly textured washes of colour give the pages an airy quality. Panels vary in size and arrangement, each bringing its own burst of energy. A bustling spread of animals in unlikely vehicles carries a faint echo of Richard Scarry's humorous anarchy, while elsewhere the eye is guided from one visual joke to the next by subtle directional cues. Migrating 'flockstaches' sweep across mountainous 'rockstaches', linking scenes through visual rhyme even when the narrative thread loosens.

What holds the book together is not plot but creative momentum. Absurdity is embraced rather than explained. Domestic life, nature, transport and fantasy coexist in a world governed by playful logic, where nothing is too strange to belong. Young readers will delight in spotting recurring details and anticipating the next transformation, while older ones may appreciate the affectionate nod to the messy inventiveness of childhood imagination.

Energetic, surreal and gloriously

unconcerned with restraint, Wilkins celebrates the pleasures of nonsense and the possibilities of language set free. It is a book to be performed, revisited and enjoyed in fragments as much as in full: a reminder that picturebooks can sometimes be less about telling a story than about inviting readers into an exuberant creative game. **MT**

### Kid Rex to the Rescue

★★★★

Mayo Agard-Olubo, ill. Diane Ewen, Hodder Children's Books, 30pp, 9781444979084, £7.99, pbk  
Max is a child who loves dinosaurs and is something of a dinosaur expert. So much so that he seems to have developed dino superpowers. He is secretly Kid Rex, always ready to save the day.

Everyday situations become problems only a superhero can solve – the cat reluctant to get in its carrier becomes a wild tiger on the loose, the card for his mother a secret message. One day his dad sets him a very tough mission, to rescue his toys from capture by King Dust Bunny. Can Kid Rex rise to the challenge?

This is a story which demonstrates the power of the imagination to transform everyday situations into fantastical scenarios, further enhanced when adults join in with the fun.

When Max embarks on his mission and his imagination runs away with him the narrative may seem a little confusing but young readers are likely to go with the flow, and all becomes clear in the final spreads.

Split page illustrations are used at times to show Max's imagination and real-world happenings. The bold colourful illustrations and varied formats are very striking and enhance the comic strip superhero vibe of the book. **SMc**

### Where Are You, Eddie?

★★★★

Michael Rosen, illus Gill Smith, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781529522877, £12.99 hbk

When Michael Rosen's son died there was sadness. But now there is a question – a question children, and indeed adults, will ask – 'Where are you, Eddie?' In this picture book, Michael sets out to look for Eddie. He starts with his cat, Meg who gives him pause to think and sends him on a journey round the community visiting places he and Eddie would go – the bus ride, school, the sports field. He doesn't find Eddie, but he finds the people who knew him. For them Eddie is still with them in their memories of him. What about Michael's memories? Sitting down with Meg the cat at home thinking about Eddie and their relationship, he realises Eddie is in fact still here.

After Eddie's death, Michael Rosen wrote *The Sad Book* – a simple picture book validating that emotion. Now he takes the loss and grief a step further to a sense of acceptance. There is no preaching, there are no lessons rather a simple journey which

allows the questioner to meet some thoughts that shine a light. They are not the concrete answers that place demands on the recipient. They are thoughts that are particular, providing space for the questioner, allowing a personal response. This is a welcome exploration for anyone who picks it up. Michael's prose is straightforward, immediate and accessible. The illustrations by Gill Smith capture this gentle, yet ultimately personal narrative without sentimentality or jokey humour. There is a perfect synergy between words and pictures. This is the companion *The Sad Book* needs. Highly recommended. **FH**



### The Lost Robot

★★★★★

Joe Todd-Stanton, Flying Eye Books, 40pp, 9781838741358, £12.99, hbk  
Todd-Stanton excels at placing small, searching characters within worlds that feel vast, ancient and quietly mythic. His graphic novel-like picture books often move between intimacy and enormity: a lone child or creature whose quiet vulnerability becomes the emotional anchor as they are swept into forces much larger than themselves. In this latest adventure, he turns his gaze towards the future while retaining that same emotional architecture. This remains a story about scale and belonging, about what it means to feel insignificant in a world that seems too large to hold you.

The narrative begins in silence and abandonment. A small robot awakens in a sprawling mechanical dump, surrounded by the remains of other broken things. Even here, there is a hint of human presence. An older woman moves through the wreckage with a quiet purpose that feels significant long before we understand why. From this moment, the story unfolds as both physical journey and emotional search. Mio sets out towards the distant lights of the city, driven less by programming than by an instinctive sense that something essential has been lost. Encounters with the environment bring flashes of connection. When Mio finally uncovers the truth of his origin, the discovery offers no neat resolution. Instead, it reframes his quest as one not for function but for relationship.

This movement from design to experience is echoed in the book's careful visual construction. Flying Eye's

characteristic attention to peritext deepens the reading. Endpapers trace a subtle emotional arc from isolation to belonging, while beneath the dustcover, a blueprint of Mio suggests a life once defined by precision and purpose. As in Todd-Stanton's earlier work, environments shape the story's inner weather. Vast cityscapes, lonely wastelands and pockets of unexpected warmth carry the reader through shifting states of hope and uncertainty.

Healing, when it arrives, does so through recognition rather than rescue. A mother and daughter living close to the rhythms of the natural world offer Mio a different way of being seen. The mother's eye patch gently mirrors the robot's own damaged state, reframing brokenness as shared experience rather than defect. Gradually, damaged circuitry gives way to colour and memory. Mio becomes a living tapestry of encounter and care, his identity something grown rather than manufactured. Todd-Stanton's palette warms in response, moving from metallic restraint towards luminous spreads filled with sea spray, forest light and starlit possibility.

By the closing pages, Mio's journey suggests that belonging is rarely found where we are first placed, but where we are finally understood. This is a quiet meditation on loss, repair and chosen connection. It reminds us that being fixed is not the same as being healed, and that even the smallest figure can discover a place within the vastness of the world. **MT**

### Big Book of Feelings

★★★★

James O'Brien/Potato Printer, Boxer Books, 48pp, 9781454712213, £8.99, pbk

The **Big Book of Feelings** is a quirky take on the usual feelings books we come across for young readers in children's non-fiction. Each page features an animal, alongside a fact about them, and then a scenario plays out in speech bubbles to illustrate the feeling of choice. For example, 'upset' features a moose who is being reassured by a puffin that the chocolate mousse in front of him is not his long-lost uncle. It's perfect child-friendly humour and gives them an amusing example of the feeling in question- plus they get a bonus animal fact too! I think the use of examples rather than definitions works well to give young readers a relatable demonstration of the feelings that they can discuss with others.

In terms of the illustrations, each page works like single comic book panel, telling its story in one image. These images have been created using potato printing and bright paints. Despite the simplicity of this method the illustrations are expressive, and the animals are easily recognisable. They may not be to all readers taste but they fit the topic and

the tone of the book perfectly. The overall style and humour reminded me of a Jon Klassen picture book.

It will have uses both in the classroom and at home and would particularly make a good book to share as a class or with others who share the same sense of humour. **CH**



### The Heart of the Storm

★★★★

Teresa Heapy, ill. Kate Read, Otter-Barry Books, 32pp, 9781915659835, £12.99 hbk

Ruby and Growl share a forest but very little else. Their encounters are marked by irritation, suspicion and sharp-edged exchanges that keep them firmly apart. Each creature moves through the landscape with a strong sense of territory, emotional as much as physical, until a violent storm tears through their world and forces an unexpected reckoning.

Heapy's storytelling has a fable-like clarity that resists easy moralising. The opening spreads establish difference through rhythm and space: dialogue sits apart, speech bubbles echo the colours of their speakers, and the gutter itself becomes a quiet visual boundary. When the storm arrives, however, language and layout shift dramatically. Verbs crackle with energy. Typography surges and tumbles. The movement across the page carries both characters and readers from separation towards reluctant interdependence.

What follows is less a tale of sudden friendship than one of survival reshaping perception. Ruby clings to Growl's back. Growl turns in the rushing river. Each act of physical trust precedes emotional understanding. Kate Read's artwork captures this transformation with striking sensitivity. Lightning reveals mirrored eyes in the dark. Muddy currents blur the edges of certainty. As danger peaks, the forest becomes an arena of shared vulnerability rather than private grievance.

The resolution is quietly powerful. Dawn light softens the palette. A new home high in the trees suggests protection that is mutual rather than individual. The storm has not simply passed; it has altered the characters' inner landscapes. Their world feels

brighter because they now inhabit it together.

Rich in language and visually dynamic, this is a picturebook that trusts young readers to engage with complexity. It leaves room to talk about conflict, cooperation, and how difficult moments can forge unexpected bonds. Lyrical, thoughtful and emotionally resonant, it offers a gentle reminder that sometimes the fiercest storms reveal the strongest connections. **MT**

### Rumpelstiltskin

★★★★★

Mac Barnett, Carson Ellis (illus), Scholastic Books, 48pp, 9781338673852, £14.99, hbk

*Rumpelstiltskin* - Tom Tit Tot in its English telling - is the well-known tale of a young girl who is in an impossible situation. Tasked (because of her boastful father) with spinning straw into gold, failure would mean her death. Her predicament is solved by the appearance of a 'little man,' who completes the task for her, each night extracting a price, culminating in the girl promising her first child if she becomes queen. It is a well-known story, with the ending coming as the girl guesses the imp's name.

Barnett does not shy away from the difficulties of the story: the murderous king who marries the girl; the girl willing to risk her baby, and who or what is the stranger who claims the fees for his help, yet is willing to heighten the tension by adding a final challenge: guess his name and the child goes free. *Rumpelstiltskin* is a familiar and uncomfortable story where menace and power are defeated by grace.

Mac Barnett as author makes small but judicious changes to the source material, but requires his readers to sit with the discomfort of a story of greed and threats of violence. The artwork from Carson Ellis draws on a tradition of primitive folk art which serves to underline the roots of the story. The second night of the girl's trial is represented by the king on the left hand page exultant yet still threatening the girl 'Or else, off with your head.' The right hand page is a full-page image of a huge, high hall dominated by a pile of straw, with the girl looking at it, the spinning wheel in the foreground. All the movement, all the energy is in the greedy king crying 'Stupendous! Superb!' The girl is motionless, her face hidden in her long hair.

Barnett allows the girl (who does become queen; we do not hear about her relationship with the king!) more agency as she presents the choices of name for the little man, and there is real humour in the choice of names: 'Argyle; Sharif; Lenny...Mac (yes, it's worth noting); Catsmeat; Rumsfeld?' Carson Ellis has her growing in power, staring at us dressed in rich clothes with fruit on the table, just one picture just before she defeats the little man as dawn breaks.

Barnett introduces a twist at the end as the growing baby and his mother catch frogs in the pond,

and Ellis places them back in the countryside. Lots of questions here, lots of ponder.

As an adult consumer of picturebooks, I would want to give the tight, well-composed storytelling and thoughtful artwork together way more than five stars; reviewing this as a book for young readers, however, this perhaps has a limited appreciation, its solemn tone of illustration and the somewhat uncritical presentation of a difficult folk tale mean that it would need careful thought for its first reading - but this is a book that deserves just that kind of close attention. **NS**

### Great-Aunt Margot and Me

★★★★★

Bryher Mackenzie, illus Rhiannon Archard, Andersen Press, 32pp, 9781839132773, £7.99 pbk

A little girl goes to visit her Great-Aunt Margot on Mondays. Margot adores her and she adores her Great-Aunt. Margot is consistently lively and vibrant including teaching her great niece to roller-skate. Both love music and dancing and eating chocolates before tea.

Suddenly, Margot loses her sparkle. She forgets what day it is, doesn't feel like she used to and no longer enjoys her usual activities. A double page spread shows Great-Aunt Margot looking at herself in the mirror, alarmed by what she sees.

The reader may wonder whether Margot has early-stage dementia. This appears not to be the case because her great niece is able to remind her of happier times. She does this with pictures and ticket stubs to a David Bowie concert and she and Margot end the story with a return to music and dancing and mutually happy expressions leading the reader to think that Margot had experienced depression, not dementia.

The colour palette used by Archard is stunning. It is possible to wonder also whether a reference is being made to Jenny Joseph's poem 'Warning in Margot's clothing.' It would certainly suit her character. **RB**

### Fairytales Fiasco: Hansel and Gretel

★★★★

Eygenia Golubeva and Myles Mcleod, Guppy Books, 128pp, 9781916558489, £7.99 pbk

This bright and colourful new animated series for children introduces classic fairy tales.

Cleo is a positive joyful girl who loves reading. She chooses Hansel and Gretel to read and declares it silly because of the obvious errors made by Hansel and Gretel... why don't they just run away from the witch?

Cleo's magical bookmark - Mark - invites her to leap into the story but warns her not to turn it into a Fairytales Fiasco! Arriving in the legendary forest, she soon finds cheery Hansel and Gretel. Cleo learns that things are not all the same in the olden days. There are no paths or signs and

# reviews

## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

listening out for a noisy town does not help as there are no loud roads or traffic to listen for ... they are lost.

The children are soon driven to distraction by their growing hunger and can't believe their luck when they see a stunning cottage made of all their favourite yummy treats, including Cleo's absolute favourite - chocolate sponge with rainbow sprinkles. Deep down Cleo knows this isn't right but the witch who invites them in is such a warm-friendly and harmless-seeming lady... surely nothing could go wrong!

Opening with a simple telling of the classic fairy tale, the story ensures that children have a knowledge of the original text before it begins to play with it, and the adjustments made to the story are well-balanced. There are jokes and humorous illustrations but no silliness or modern technology so that a nostalgic feel is maintained.

Children will be immediately drawn in by the vibrant illustrations that fill every page, and the prose is manageable for younger children. It's a short book, and more ambitious readers might be hoping for a few more shocks or surprises along the way, but it is certainly a fun take on the bedtime story. **SD**

**Spyglass: Mastermind of**



**Mayhem**

★★★★

David Solomons, ill. Miguel Diaz Rivas, Nosy Crow, 240pp, 9781805132363, £7.99 pbk

This breathtaking new action series from David Solomons is an adrenaline-fuelled, comedic celebration of the spy genre.

Adam Stickland lives an uneventful life for most of the year, using his talent for fixing things to help his parents with their barely-profitable holiday park in the country's least exciting coastal town. Every summer, his mates - Tyler and Zada - come to visit and this year there is no time for the sun-lounging that Tyler craves.

Adam's chores around the holiday park are relentless and his friends come along for the ride when it's time to deliver groceries to the spooky old house on the hill with its mysterious new owner: Professor Goodspeed. Once they peek beyond his grumpy and rude character, the three friends learn that Goodspeed is an utter genius - former quartermaster to the very best British spies (including pun-spinning spy-hero Aston Drake). His inventions are beyond their wildest imaginations and, when his mansion is suddenly attacked by scary-looking soldiers dressed in black, the children get to see them in all their glory!

The usual mundaneness of the Golden Cliff resort is well and truly left behind when Goodspeed is kidnapped and Adam and his friends inherit his gadgets. They are soon getting to grips with monster tyres on their bikes and the power to bubble-wrap helicopters, as they try to find a plan to save the professor.

The classic evil baddy is played by Doctor Toe - a devilish chiropodist hell-bent on controlling the world's population through their feet. By bugging Adam's rabbit - Hoppenheimer - Toe tracks down Adam and charges him with locating Goodspeed's Quantum of Shoelace device, or else there will be very explosive consequences!

The overriding feel of the book is one of pace and excitement. Chapters race along from one explosion to the another as the children take on everything from sarcastic AI drones to robotic sharks. However, as with Solomons' previous successes, there are also plenty of jokes. Much of the comedy is in the form of sending up the spy-genre. The book relentlessly pokes fun at how ridiculous the plots of spy-movies are, with a highlight being '...the old raising-the-shipwreck-to-scupper-the-escape-submarine manoeuvre!' The book is also rammed full of deliberately over-the-top, cringy, wise-cracks and quips that even 007 would balk at. It's funny throughout and some of the witticisms will go over the heads of younger readers but delight their parents.

Occasionally, the balance of action and comedy is not quite right and, just as readers are sliding towards the edge of their seats, they are snapped back by another silly gag as if the story suddenly remembers it's supposed to be aimed at children. This is certainly the case in Dr Toe's efforts to take over the world with a giant, nuclear powered nail file, but things don't get really silly until the military wing of the foot care community arrive.

With new episodes in the series already planned, **Spyglass** is all set to become a major new series for thrill-seeking young readers. **SD**

## 8 – 10 Junior/Middle

### The Adventures of Portly the Otter. *Untold Tales from The Wind in the Willows*

★★★★

M. G. Leonard, illus Polly Dunbar, Farshore, 224pp, 9780008667771, £14.99 hbk

Portly is the youngest in the Otter family. His older siblings - especially Ernest and Rowdy - have already taken their step out of the holt and are becoming seasoned swimmers. Now it is Portly's turn. The sight of the river terrifies him. He decides he is not going to learn to swim - but he longs for his father's approval. Indeed his father is dismissive both of Portly's efforts and even more so of his unbounded curiosity. For Portly wants to know about the wider world he lives in, not just the river and its banks. So Portly explores. He meets Mr Toad, braves the Wild Wood, challenges the Weasels and Stoats - he has adventures. He discovers he is brave - brave enough to set off on a real adventure to leave his comfortable home and follow the river to the sea.

M.G. Leonard takes a minor character from **The Wind in the Willows**, the otter cub, Portly, who is an important element in the chapter *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*. It is a chapter often edited out of modern editions. However, we do learn from it that Portly is an adventurous little otter always getting lost. It is this characteristic that Leonard picks up to create the little Portly who steps off the pages of her novel. There are clear links to the original - we meet all the familiar animals, Ratty, Mole, Badger and of course Toad. There are references to their adventures - and a pre-figuring of the invasion of Toad Hall by the Wild Wooders. And yes, the Great God Pan does appear. Leonard captures Grahame's evocation of the Oxfordshire countryside but avoids the lush romanticism of the original. Her prose is contemporary without losing the interest or nature of this world. Polly Dunbar's illustrations are a delightful bonus as she brings to life this river world peopled by characters already familiar but here given a charming, characterful, contemporary twist.

Cosy and readable whether alone or shared as a read-aloud this is an enjoyable addition to any shelf and could encourage readers to go back to Grahame. **FFH**

### Dragon Girl and the Awakened Flames

★★★★

Jenny Moore, Maverick, 256pp, 978-1835110836, £8.99 pbk

All the best stories begin with a knock at the door, starts this story, teasing readers a little as Emba Oak has no door, living as she does in a cave. The knocking is real, though only



Emba can see the huge dragon that seems to be bringing her a message, and the dragon's arrival heralds or triggers a series of events that take Emba and her friend Odolf on the sort of adventures that definitely mark out the best stories. Emba's adopted mother, Winifred, aka the Wise Hermit of Witchingford Wood, reveals to Emba for the first time that she wasn't born, but rather hatched out of a dragon's egg, which probably explains the scales on her arms and legs. Having dropped this bombshell, Fred is then kidnapped in the night. Emba and Odolf set off to rescue her despite prophecies warning Emba to stay hidden or risk capture by the ominous-sounding Necromalcolm, who is searching for dragon's blood. Their journey in search of kidnapped Fred is full of incident, the real dangers they face nicely lightened by the comic relief provided by hapless would-be-hero Odolf, and the reassurance of the steady, thoroughly convincing nature of their friendship. The nearer they get to Fred, the nearer they get to Necromalcolm, and the tension builds splendidly to a thoroughly satisfying climax which leaves the stage set for another episode. It's a pacy, well written and thoroughly enjoyable quest adventure, with a great cast of characters, and a proper sense of its other world; readers will be keen to find out what happens next to this **Dragon Girl**. **LS**

**Swanfall**

★★★★★

Sophie Kirtley, Bloomsbury, 320pp, 9781526642820, £7.99, pbk  
Pip and his mum live in a small cottage on the edge of Rushy Lake and although he might not enjoy his days at school, he loves living there and being part of the nature around him.

Every winter, for as long as he can remember, Pip has eagerly awaited the 'swanfall', when the Arctic Swans

## Ed's Choice

### The Othernauts

★★★★★

Clare Pollard, illus Macha Yao, Piccadilly Press, 288pp, 978-1835873366, £7.99 pbk

You won't find mention of Periclymenus (Perry), Phoebe or Cora in *The Argonautica* by Apollonius, or in the 1963 movie *Jason and the Argonauts*, but these three youngsters have a starring role in Clare Pollard's retelling of the story of the Argo and its heroes and are an excellent addition. Perry is one of the crew of the Argo, an eager to please eleven-year-old with the ability to transform into any animal. It's an ability he is still trying to fully master, but it comes in very handy. Cora insists she's a siren, and has the head of a girl on the body of a bird, though her singing is anything but tuneful; while Phoebe, also eleven, is a stowaway from the female only island of Lemnos with a very sharp tongue and a fierce determination to get away from home and make her own life choices. She also has some skill as an oracle, though it appears seers were two a penny in ancient Greece. In other ways, the story is very close to the original with the Argonauts encountering harpies, wicked King Aëtes and his daughter Medea, plus that terrifying army of skeletons, and having to brave Scylla and Charybdis before they finally get within touching distance of the Golden Fleece, or 'old rug' as Phoebe refers to it in typically scathing form. As with her earlier take on the legend of King Arthur, Clare Pollard tells the story in captivating direct to reader style, highlighting the unthinking chauvinism of the Argonauts and the deeply unpleasant behaviour



of Zeus, while presenting Jason as an amiable hero, who means well, and has learned to live with the effect his blue eyes and perfect teeth have on 'the ladeez.' It's both an unputdownable version of one of the great adventure stories, and very, very funny, much of the humour due to Phoebe and her withering put downs of her fellow crew members. We are aware as readers that Phoebe is also angry, angry at being abandoned by her father, angry at her stepmother for putting her twin brother to sea in a wooden crate when the order came to slaughter all males on Lemnos. She's also very sad, determined not to risk making a friend, in case they break her heart by leaving forever. It all works to create a book that is wonderfully iconoclastic, totally original and thoroughly enjoyable. My proof copy didn't have Macha Yao's illustrations but they look likely to increase the fun. This spiky, human retelling is Greek myth for young 21st century readers. **AR**

return from their annual migration to Siberia, each of them known to him by their individual unique markings. As usual, he is looking out particularly for their favourite three swans, but when for the first time they don't immediately appear, Pip notices that there are strange things happening around him. Mysterious footprints in the snow, eerie whisperings on the wind and a feeling of being watched. Could this all be linked to the unusual book he found, which seems to tell the tale of the missing Children of Lir and which the creepy Mrs De Plume seems to be looking for, and just who is the ghostly girl in white who keeps appearing? After Pip is accidentally left home alone in the middle of a snowstorm, it is up to him and his friends to try to uncover the truth of the strange happenings, but as they find themselves drawn further into a world of danger and trials that will

test their strength and friendship, can they save themselves in time and break the age-old curse?

This glorious story is a magical and thrilling wintery ride, mixing Irish folklore with a modern day tale of friendship and adventure, with plenty of cliff-hanger moments thrown in. Pip is a warm and initially timid character, often struggling in school with friendship insecurities, but who becomes confident when at home amongst the wetlands and in nature, recalling the facts learned over years helping his mum, that in turn help him and his friends in their unusual quest.

Kirtley creates a wonderful atmospheric world, sharing the awesome wonder of nature around us, perfect for snuggling up to read in front of a roaring fire. Another wonderful tale from this author, that will be enjoyed by nature and thrill-lovers alike. **AH**

## Advice from a 12-year-old Nobody

★★★★★

Helen Rutter, illus. Julia Christians, Barrington Stoke, 88pp, 9780008759582, £7.99 pbk

Vinny is twelve. He lives with his elder sister, agony aunt mother, Amanda and his dad. Vinny is aware there have been too many silences between his parents recently, and his dad is rarely home. Vinny is also having problems with his two best friends because they are into girls and not their regular role-playing game on a Sunday.

Vinny finds an old advice blog of his mother's. He notices that some of the requests for advice have not been answered. Thinking, 'How hard can it be?' he begins answering.

The responses he gets are mostly kind, praising his advice, and Vinny starts to feel less invisible. However, he is still unable to voice his true fears about what might be going on with his parents, and then he gets caught writing the blog by his mum. Will Vinny have the courage to ask his mum what he needs to know?

Helen Rutter's characters are three dimensional and believable, even if the situation with Vinny finding his Mum's old blog stretches credulity. The message of this book is loud and clear. No problem is too big to talk about with those you love. This book will also appeal to young readers who love role-playing games. **RB**



### Murder at Hotel Marvelo

★★★★★

Ruth Lauren, illus by Federica Frenna, Piccadilly Press, 272pp, 978-1835870440, £7.99 pbk

When a magicide takes place at their parents' hotel it's up to the three Marvelo children, Finnian, Juniper and Teddy, to work out who is responsible, especially as the grown up Marvelos have been arrested, charged and threatened with banishment. Slowly they begin piecing together the evidence, working out for themselves, and in a way that will be particularly satisfying to young readers, just how detectives go about their work. The arrival of

the increasingly strict Mrs Weatherly as the children's court-appointed guardian makes things harder as does the fact that their guests/suspects are all magical beings – witches, a griffin, an alchemist, a water sprite, even a banshee (by far the most elusive). Our junior sleuths solve the mystery through proper detective work with the identity and motive of the guilty party a shock for everyone. As murder mysteries go this is very good, reminiscent of the best locked room puzzles, while the magical setting allows for all sorts of original twists. Equally enjoyable for readers will be spending time in the company of Finnian – earnest, a worrier, surprised at what he can achieve – and his siblings. His stepsister Juniper is pretty much his exact opposite, hot-headed, reckless but equally determined to crack the case, while their half-sister six-year-old Teddy has her own approach to life. It's never said, but we can work out from her behaviour that Teddy is autistic, and the tender, realistic representation of their family dynamic is another element that sets this book above the average murder mystery. Illustrator Federica Frenna has fun depicting the hotel and its unusual guests and the ending sets the stage perfectly for another Marvelo siblings' criminal investigation. **LS**

### Lily Tripp: Diary of an Accidental Time Traveller

★★★★★

Amelia Tait, Hachette Childrens, 304pp, 9781444931983, £8.99, pbk

Told in a diary style format, this book introduces us to Lily Tripp, who every year since her 9th birthday has woken up on New Year's Day in a different century. She has already lived a year in Roman and Victorian times and although her family or friends are also transported to the different eras with her, none of them act as if it is anything other than normal and don't seem to be aware of any travelling in time. The previous year at midnight she had wished to be back in the 21st century and happily found herself in 2025, righting the timeline, or so she thought. As Lily waits to turn 13, she is really hoping that her time travelling is now over, especially as her long term crush will be at the same New Year's Eve party, hosted by her arch-enemy and school mean-girl, Georgia. As we soon discover, midnight arrives and Lily finds herself in yet another century, but to make matters worse, this time she is actually a servant in Georgia's household and it is clear that their feelings for each other have not changed, even if the year has. There is something else that is making this timehop unbearable, as although Lily's best friend Poppy is also there as a fellow servant, she is becoming very friendly with the horrible Georgia, while Lily is finding herself in more and more trouble. Will Lily ever make it back to a century that she can enjoy properly and is she destined to always have Georgia there causing trouble too?

# reviews

## 8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

Author Tait has found a unique and extremely entertaining take on the much-loved diary format, with a wonderful mix of sci-fi and historical facts thrown in. Lily and her friend Poppy are both very likeable and relatable characters and their trips through time and history not only offer fantastic opportunities for fun and chaos, such as clothing and food that hasn't been invented yet (chicken nuggets in the 17th century?), but also demonstrate that the universal problems of a 13 year-old such as friendship and family dramas, first crushes and just navigating life, are still there no matter when or where you live in history.

Full of hilarity, warmth and the right amount of tension, I can see this clever debut title being hugely popular and can't wait to see where in history Lily might end up next. **AH**

### Monster Diaries: The Cyclops and the Worst Party Ever

★★★★

Anne Miller, ill. Sam Caldwell, HarperCollins Children's Books, 192pp, 9780008733018, £7.99 pbk

This comedy series for children reimagines Greek myths and tells them from alternative perspectives. In this story, the evil, man-eating Cyclops conquered by Odysseus tells his side of the story.

Most children will know what a cyclops is, but few will know about Polyphemus from Homer's *Odyssey*, and almost none of them will have ever tried to empathise with the one-eyed monster. Polyphemus explains straight away that Homer has told the story all wrong, that he has been unfairly misunderstood for millennia and so has the hero, Odysseus.

It turns out that all Polyphemus wants to achieve in life is to throw the world's greatest ever party. It is hard to cut loose and find friends when you are surrounded by sheep and other monsters and when your dad is God of the ocean. When the sailors are stranded on his island, Polyphemus spies an opportunity to throw a wild party and get everyone involved with dancing and party games and eating lots and lots of cheese!

Sadly, Odysseus has other ideas, and plays cruel and unnecessary tricks on the cyclops...just because he occasionally, accidentally gobbles up the odd human or two (who could resist? They're delicious!). The party plans end in tragedy, and friendly Polyphemus is the victim of unforgivable violence, as well as the crime of not being a good party guest!

The book is a love letter to ancient Greece - with plenty of geeky facts hidden in the story - and the inclusion of fact files and appendices will engage readers and also help them to understand the story within a broader context. This celebration of classical history is somewhat undermined by the goofy humour of the cyclops's

hapless and accident-prone antics, which are brought to life by Caldwell's calamitous cartoons. Though there are laughs to be had, the comedic value of re-casting Odysseus as the villain is stretched rather thinly at times, and children are likely to take more pleasure from the less silly parts of the story. **SD**

### Dragonflare

★★★★

Jamie Hammond, (author/illustrator), Usborne, 284pp, 97818360462929 £7.99 pbk

Jamie Hammond's previous book, *Grumpfort*, was awarded Children's Book of the Month by *Waterstones*, and Children's Book of the Week by *The Times*, so this looked promising, and so it proves.

Flynn is a thief, trying to make enough money to look after his little sister, as they are orphans. On the day of the Wingrider Trials on nearby Dragonflare Island, with the town full of people, he is escaping an irate market trader when he accidentally ends up in the right place to enter, and a dragon sweeps him up. Flynn is cross at being whisked away from Faye, is definitely not a natural rider, and the dragon, River, is techy, so they get off to a bad start, but soon realise that they need to work together if they are to get anywhere.

Jamie Hammond has evidently enjoyed inventing creatures, and the trials are fun: in the first, they have to catch a flasilisk but avoid the tentacles of a gorgopus. This reviewer particularly liked the idea of evading the Granshees: first seen as elderly women laughing in their rocking chairs. Their shapeshifting abilities cause much confusion, though there is usually a cardigan or another clue to their real identity! The reader has the opportunity to solve various puzzles and work out some of the clues as the trials continue. Flynn and River fall out at one point, and Flynn tries to go it alone, unsuccessfully: they need to be reconciled. Rivals in the competition to find the dragons' treasure are not always who they seem to be, and accusations of being a 'Hornstinger', a thief of dragon artefacts, are aimed at more than one person. Eventually, the real reason for the trial is revealed, and an enemy is identified: all ends well.

Jamie Hammond is the designer of many children's books, notably the *Loki* series by Louie Stowell. His own cartoon illustrations are, of course, perfect for the characters, and this action-packed story will be great fun to read and to work out the challenges. **DB**

### French

★★★★★

Rhiannon Oliver, ill. Chris Riddell, Firefly Press, 96pp, 9781917718226, £8.99 pbk

The poems in this debut collection explore familiar feelings with a sensitive and light touch which will

resonate with young readers.

The joy to be found in the everyday is celebrated in poems such as *Lazy Sundays*, *Fridays in the Park* and *Kitchen Disco*. More challenging situations are addressed too, including the ups and downs of friendship, the strangeness of moving house and even the loss of a loved one in *Difficult Words*. There is reassurance that not everything in life will go to plan but that's okay. The importance of making a fresh start when you are feeling down is the focus of the titular poem which beautifully describes the wonder of something new or fresh such as 'snow without footprints' or 'beds with fresh sheets.'

A range of types of poetry is included, including lists, haiku and kennings; there are poems in the form of letters, invitations, recipes, surveys, definitions, puzzles and even mathematical equations (for example *leaving your house - a coat = so much rain you need your own boat!*) The use of rhyme is effortless and there is wonderful word play to be enjoyed too such as in the humorous poem about shopping for toilet trees (or in other words 'toiletries.')

A varied, perceptive and engaging poetry collection wonderfully illustrated by the always fabulous Chris Riddell. **SMc**

### Poetry Pizza

★★★★

Simon Mole, ill. Tom McLaughlin, Otter-Barry Books, 96pp, 978-1915659866, £8.99, pbk

The dedication from the writer at the front of this collection makes it clear what young readers can expect from this volume; lots of mischievous word play and imaginative exaggeration.

The first poem is a further clarification as the writer ponders the list of things he might write about, ranging from the beautiful to the ridiculous or even the annoying.

There are made up words such as, 'floooble,' and poems imagining what initials could represent, does BRB stand for 'Baking Raisin Biscuits?' or 'Better Relax Bro?' We are asked to consider that if eating carrots can help you see in the dark maybe eating a pizza might help you write a poem.

Interspersed are anecdotes about the writer's brother's friend and his exaggerations such as solving a Rubik's cube with his feet. There are longer narrative poems recounting events, for example the well-known classroom joke of being sent for a long 'weight.'

Football features with a spell for infinite football skills reflecting many aspiring footballers' desires. The frustrations of being a child are included too with being given false choices, (do you want a bath or shower before your early bed tonight?) And there are warm poems about the importance of hugs. Subject matter goes beyond the personal to climate change with *Lights Out* and *Spell for Nature*, considering the plight of polar bears and suggesting taking action to

make a difference perhaps by picking up a pen.

There is further encouragement for readers to get started as poets themselves with space at the back of the book to make their own list of things to write about.

With lively illustrations this is an engaging varied first collection for older children from poet, performer and **National Poetry Day** ambassador Simon Mole. **SMc**

### The Treasure Seekers

★★★★

Cathy Faulkner, Firefly Press, 316pp, 9781815444929, £8.99pbk

The year is 1918. The village has lost so many of its men to the war - sons, brothers, fathers. Now flu is raging through the community. No one is safe. Stanley is sure that this tragedy is because the village has lost the stained glass window from their church because the image at its centre is the young hero, David, triumphant, a powerful symbol for the villagers. Now it is hidden, taken by the local landowner. Stanley is determined to find the lost panes of glass. But for this he will need help from the landowner's granddaughter. But they hate each other and what each stands for.

Faulkner takes the verse format for her novel making it attractively accessible for her readers. Sentences are short, description pared down. She shapes her verse to reflect moments in the narrative or the dialogue creating a pictorial effect with the words. The plot moves between the two characters each given their own voice, suitably differentiated, direct dialogue is shown in italics. There is a strong sense of place - a village in the north of England close to Whitby and both Stanley and Martha are entirely credible; each displaying the assumptions and prejudices that would have been the norm at this period. This is not a story about the heroics of war, rather it brings the effects of the war close to home. An interesting novel to be recommended to KS2 readers who enjoy a glimpse into a relatively recent history, meeting characters and a background they can imagine and recognise. **FH**

### The Ocean and the Bones

★★★★★

Genevieve Carver, *Rock the Boat*, 288pp, 9781836431190, £7.99, pbk

This is a first novel by poet and former archaeologist Genevieve Carver. It is set in early Stone Age Britain sometime after Britain was separated from Europe by the flooding of Doggerland (creating the English Channel). Carver imagines how this event could have also created a small island in the Channel, and what might happen when one of its inhabitants is washed up on the British coast.

The half-drowned islander is a young girl called Kalø. She is discovered on the beach by a British girl called Little Meg of about the same age, who is our narrator. The

adventure story that follows explore how the girls' friendship develops, despite the hostility and suspicions of Little Meg's people or 'kinfolk'. They think Kalø is half-human, half-water spirit, and blame her for the bad weather they are having and the crop failure this brings. Steeped in her kinfolk's traditions and beliefs, even Little Meg is unsure if her new friend is entirely human but slowly she comes to understand Kalø and her different traditions. When together they face a terrifying return across the ocean to Kalø's island, their friendship gives them the strength to stand up to their enemies and enables Kalø to be finally accepted by Little Meg's kinfolk.

Carver holds an MA in European Prehistory and is clearly deeply immersed in her subject. She has cleverly combined an adventure story with a lot of non-fiction learning about the Stone Age. This ranges from the more concrete knowledge of how they knapped flints or built boats to ideas about how their tribal communities and belief systems may have worked. She also sensitively explores modern themes of climate change and migration by considering how these things might have impacted on our Stone Age ancestors. The strength of her writing is that the story never becomes overburdened by these other intentions but is enriched by them. At times moving and literally poetic, Carver tells a great story with two strong and engaging characters at its heart. **RC**



### Small Magics

★★★★

Alex Dunne, The O'Brien Press, 272pp, 978-1788495813, £8.99 pbk  
This cosy fantasy builds to a thoroughly satisfying and exciting climax and there's lots to enjoy along the way too. Molly Flynn is apprehensive about meeting her new foster carers, Pat and Priya. Quiet, reserved and teased by other kids as 'a weirdo',

she's got used to being moved from placement to placement, but nothing can compare to her new home: kindly and very welcoming, Pat and Priya run an antique shop which actually turns out to be an emporium selling 'small magics', everything from something to remove stubborn stains, to a gadget that tells you when you've run out of cheese, all via spells. The shop staff include Ciara, a banshee, and Frank, a goblin, who becomes a particular friend to Molly. Along with Pat and Priya, the young members of her new foster family Wren and Lorcan have magic of their own too, as does Molly, though it takes longer to emerge than she'd wish. Their happy life is threatened when someone starts using dark magic to accumulate huge power and with the grown-ups, including Frank, incapacitated, it's down to the three children to save the day. The world Alex Dunne conjures up is as warm and delicious as one of Priya's scones, and the gentle emphasis on her characters finding themselves and 'their' people adds an extra layer for readers to enjoy. This is ideal reading for everyone who'd like to come across 'small magics' themselves. **LS**

### False Versus Facts: The Truth, the Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth

★★★★

Dan Marshall, Puffin, 124pp, 9780241797891, £9.99, pbk

The front cover urges the reader to, 'Take on the true or false challenge!' and I thoroughly enjoyed doing this. This quiz book commences with a few pages explaining what false facts are, 'They have not been proven and are most definitely not accurate.' (p.3.) The author goes on to explain how the book aims to enlighten the reader regarding myths and highlight the truth about various topics. However, my husband is a scientist, and it is worth pointing out that it can be very difficult to be 100% true or 100% false.

As shown in the Contents pages Marshall groups the subjects into six sections: Humans, Earth, Science, Animals, Food, History, and I think these work well. Each spread explains one false statement and then continues by giving three true ones. For example, on p. 86 'It takes seven years to digest gum' is shown to be false and then the author gives three other true facts. I loved learning that the biggest bubble blown with gum measured 50.8cm! I am sure young people would enjoy reading facts such as this, although I hasten to add there are serious topics covered as well as more light-hearted ones.

Marshall's design and illustration of this volume work well. The drawings are modern and eye-catching, drawing the reader in to the text and maintaining interest. I liked the structure of the book and the way each section works.

This volume with over 200 facts would work equally well in a classroom setting or amongst a small group of friends. Quizzes both in and out of schools are always popular and this would be a great asset to anyone organising a game for youngsters. However, it is also a way of engaging the reader who loves facts and learning. I can imagine an eight-year-old enjoying testing their parents/carers as well as friends in the playground with their knowledge! Congratulations to everyone involved in this project – it is a fine achievement! **JS**

### Cities go wild: to save the planet

★★★★

Catherine Barr, ill. Christiane Engel, Otter-Barry Books, 40pp, 9781915659804, £14.99, hbk

**Cities go wild: to save the planet** takes you on a journey to different urban settings around the world and how they have made improvements to help wildlife and nature thrive. From living walls and garden cities to pollinator pathways and community orchards this book is teeming with interesting facts about a range of cities from all over the planet and the ways they are working towards a greener future.

The illustrations are bright and colourful, making it an attractive book to pour over. The information is given in short paragraphs or small bubbles, so it's great to gather information without it feeling too text-heavy. Alongside the facts are little activity sections where readers can find ways to help in their setting, such as putting up nest boxes, bird feeders or ensuring there is accessible water to encourage birds or 'guerrilla gardening' by sprinkling wildflower seeds in patches of empty soil. It's delightfully positive in its tone and highlights a multitude of ways that urban environments can still be hotspots for wildlife.

It would work nicely as a book to use in school, browse in the library or read at home on the environment for those looking at eco-friendly ways to combat issues such as climate change, pollution and habitat destruction, but would also have uses if looking at cities in general in terms of settlements and local areas. **CH**

### What Makes a Bird? An Illustrated Guide to the Bird World

★★★★

Nadeem Perera, ill. Montse Galbany, Flying Eye Books, 80pp, 978 1 83874 206 5, £14.99, hbk

As soon as I set eyes on this hardback, I was enticed to open it and get reading! The attractive front cover is beautifully embossed, and the endpapers perfectly illustrate all kinds of feathers and eggs. Not only is the text well written in bite sized pieces, but the layout, structure and brightly coloured illustrations are to be highly commended. This is a fine example of a publication where all

parts contribute to a gorgeous and successful whole.

The helpful Contents page announces the four sections of the book: *What Makes a Bird? Where Do Birds Live? What Do Birds Do? Becoming a Birder*. Each spread concentrates on one aspect of the section and there are various Fact Files throughout. These are spreads on the following subjects: *Feathers, Eyes, Beaks, Navigation and Nests*.

This non-fiction book is packed with all sorts of interesting and amazing facts such as, 'All birds have a third eyelid. This helps protect them from sunlight, even while looking directly into the sun.' (p. 24.) Young people will be enthused about birds from the information and stunning illustrations throughout. The beautiful drawing on pp. 50-51 displaying a flamboyance of flamingoes is just one example of the talented illustrator at work here.

Nadeem Perera who has written the text is also a wildlife tv presenter. His skill and experience in this field shines through the book, encouraging the reader to learn more about birds and to get involved protecting them. 'How You Can Help' (pp. 74-75) is the final spread and provides ideas to get young people active in their community, for example.

In addition, there is a useful Glossary and Index provided to aid access to this brilliant hardback. Suitable for anyone aged 7 upwards this is the perfect book for an adult to share with a youngster, or for an older student to enjoy at home or in the library. **JS**

### The STEM Encyclopedia of Wildlife Words

★★★★

Jenny Jacoby, ill. Vicky Barker, b small, 112pp, 978191681689, £12.99, pbk

This brightly coloured encyclopedia won me over from the get-go! There are clearly laid out Contents pages listing the entries of the top 100 words related to animals which the author deems kids need to know. These words are in A to Z order, Amphibian to Zoosemantics. The page entitled 'How to Use this Book' clearly explains how to use the Contents pages and the remarkable Index. Each keyword is on a different page where its meaning is clarified, there are some interesting associated facts and appropriate illustrations. Any terms in bold text are related to the main word and can be looked up in the fantastic Index which gives their definitions. Before the A-Z entries begin, page 7 is usefully devoted to explaining two questions: What is Wildlife? What is STEM?

There are a few ways to enjoy this reference book: the reader can read it sequentially, look up words they come across which need explanation, or dip into it at will. I loved reading some amazing facts such as 'Elephants can sense vibrations travelling through the ground from as far as 6km away' (p.17). There is

## 8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

some difficult vocabulary included in this publication e.g. 'Ethology' (p.33), 'Nematode' (p.65) and even 'Viviparity' (p.100). For this reason, I would recommend younger readers sharing this with an adult or carer. In this way they will get the most out of the volume.

I think the illustrations are first class. Whether they are beautifully illustrating the text, such as the Murmuration on p.64, or are in the form of diagrams, like the one on p. 82 explaining the word Ruminant, they are excellent.

This is the type of book which will stimulate a youngster's interest in STEM subjects and could influence their career choice in such a positive way. Ideal for the library, classroom or home I can thoroughly recommend this title. **JS**

### **Nature is the answer: a toolkit for eco-positivity**

★★★★★

Chris Packham, DK, 176pp,  
9780241768907, £9.99, pbk

This is a comprehensible and accessible book that provides a good grounding for young people in how to combat eco-anxiety and finding ways to make a difference yourself or helping others to join the cause too. It's less about explaining what climate change and related environmental issues are, and more about finding ways to help ourselves, the habitats and people around us and even how we can have an impact on the world. Written by the conservationist and all-round wildlife hero Chris Packham, its tone is engaging without being patronising and informative without being overwhelming. It's written as though he is talking directly to young people rather than it being a text that has been written to suit a younger audience. Terminology is explained clearly and thoroughly, and it's framed as a toolkit for eco-positivity so chapters are accompanied by useful tips and practical advice on how readers too can make an impact. These include not only tasks involving life outdoors but also mindfulness exercises, craft activities, resilience training, communication tips and activism guidance. Together these build a handbook for those who want to turn themselves from an 'eco-worrier' to an eco-warrior!

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and would recommend it for all young readers who have an interest in the environment or nature in general and are showing signs of curiosity or anxiety related to climate change. It would work well as a more positive book to use in school and library settings to contrast the often doom-filled non-fiction texts on this subject too. **CH**

### **Hari Kumar Ultimate Superstar**

★★★★★

Rashmi Sirdeshpande. ill. Mamta

Singh. HarperCollins, 240pp, 978 0 0087381 98, £7.99 pbk

This is the highly illustrated diary style journal of Hari Kumar, who is 75% Indian, 25% French, and 100% superstar-in-the-making! We have teacher Mr Gill to thank for suggesting Hari keep a journal to help him cope with his feelings. Hari is autistic and has ADHD and this journal gives us real insight into what the world is like from Hari's point of view. The author's neurodiversity lends real depth and authenticity to his story. He struggles sometimes with expectations, noise, deadlines, focus and relationships and knows how lucky he is to have non-judgemental best friends Rahim and Lily. He dreams of becoming a Bollywood legend, and when a school filmmaking competition is announced, he's convinced that this is his lucky break, and he has his friend's full support. But with so many ideas buzzing around his head, Hari becomes too intense and too controlling and he risks losing them. Hari also struggles to process his feelings about new boy Cameron, who hangs out with the bullies and steals the limelight, with his dazzling football skills and top marks in class. Will Hari be able to put these distractions aside and focus on what really matters? Hari and his friends and family are richly drawn and really spring to life from the pages, and we get lots of fascinating cultural detail, helpful Hindi translations, and definitions of Hari's favourite long words. The lively illustration and doodles throughout and the fast-paced diary format will be very appealing to readers of all abilities. Warm, entertaining and engaging, Hari is a character everyone will be keen to meet again as the series continues. **JCo**

### **Max and Ella, Stuck Together**

★★★★★

Kristina Rahim, Nosy Crow, 288pp,  
97880513367, £7.99, pbk

Max is trying to work out who he is. He has two mums, a tough time at school and a growing anxiety about the donor dad he has never met. What he wants more than anything is to play drums in the school band, but a bully's unkind words knocked his confidence flat the last time he tried. His mums hope that meeting his donor parent might help him find his feet again.

Ella, meanwhile, really does not want to share her dad Hari, who was a donor parent before she was born. She is already navigating quite enough: a mum who works abroad, the leap to secondary school and the loss of her best primary school friend along the way. A half-sibling was not on her list.

Kristina Rahim is clearly committed to portraying families made up in different ways, and that commitment shows. The family dynamics here are drawn with care and sympathy, and it is genuinely pleasing to see these

kinds of households represented in middle grade fiction without fuss or fanfare. The novel flips between Max and Ella's perspectives as the two children and their families get to know one another, and there is much here that young readers will recognise and respond to.

The book does take a little while to find its pace. The early sections, in which backstory and character are carefully laid out, can feel somewhat earnest, and the shifting viewpoints occasionally slow things down. But when Max and Ella literally climb a mountain together and a series of circumstances turns their walk into a genuinely exciting adventure, the novel shifts gear entirely. Suddenly there is urgency, humour and jeopardy, and the race to get Max on stage in time gives the story a propulsive, satisfying momentum.

The ending is warm and reassuring without being saccharine: both children arrive at a clearer sense of who they are and find security in the love of the families that surround them. A feel-good read for anyone navigating change, difference or the occasionally bewildering business of growing up. **LJS**

### **The Bookshop Sisters**

★★★

Sarah Webb, ill. Lauren O'Hara,  
O'Brien Press, 272pp, £8.99 pbk

We meet sisters Rosy and Martha as they discuss plans for their summer over Sunday lunch. This all changes though when a mysterious call is received from their mother's sister. Despite their father having to take the call because their mother will not speak to her sister, the girls are quickly dispatched to Dublin to help save their aunt's bookshop. Rosy is delighted at this prospect, already an avid reader; her sister Martha much less so.

And so begins a tale of two sisters and saving a bookshop to the untrained eye, however there is much more hidden between the pages of this particular title. Baggot Books is in fact a real bookshop - Parsons, and it too was run by an army of women, just like the committed group we encounter in the story. The story is set in 1956, and gives a real insight into life for women at this time, and specifically women in Ireland. This real life relevance is followed up at the end of the story with a section on the context and some hints for finding out more about the true characters that inspired this fictional retelling.

The plot moves along at pace and the characters and events are engaging, though the narrative style is a little unusual given the level of speech included. But it would perhaps be true to say that the real merit of this title is to be found in the historical context and the discussion this could generate with young readers. There is real insight offered into the injustices that women faced at this time, and into the ways some women chose to stand against this prejudice.

There is much to say too about the family relations portrayed and many readers may well find they relate to these issues, even so many years on from the events of the 1950s. Sparking conversation and further investigation hopefully, this is a title to support readers in engaging with a world which may not be around them entirely any more, but which certainly still influences the way we live now and the experiences and struggles of some. **ARu**

### **The Overthinkers' Club: Happy List**

★★★★★

Nat Luurtsema, ill. Cécile DORMEAU,  
Usborne, 352pp, 9781835409978,  
£7.99, pbk

Birdie is an overthinker. What starts out as a small worry, grows and grows in her head, as she starts to imagine all the worst possible things that could happen. Luckily, her best friend Chloe is also very good at overthinking, so together they come up with the 'Happy List' to help them cancel out their anxious thoughts. At first, the fun things on their list, like dancing and doing things for others, seem to be helping, but when Chloe adds 'making new friends' to the list, Birdie starts to worry that she is going to be left alone, especially when Chloe appears to be choosing being with the cool girls' gang over her and doesn't seem to care about all the changes happening in Birdie's life.

The first in a new series, this book is written in a popular chatty diary format, with DORMEAU's funny and expressive scribble style drawings bringing Birdie's often chaotic thoughts to life, as she navigates that tricky tweenager stage. Her many relatable problems such as moving house into a blended family, pets dying and friendship dramas, are handled in a sensitive manner, with plenty of humour and just the right amount of pathos. It manages to strike the perfect balance between a fun read and a reassurance to readers that these are situations that everyone experiences, and that feeling anxious about them is both perfectly normal and absolutely fine. Birdie as a character is the sort of friend we would like to have and many young readers will also recognise her traits in themselves; the worries of secondary school and wanting to be liked, lacking in self-confidence, all whilst navigating the daily problems of growing up. Her slightly unconventional, but warm and supportive family helps Birdie through her worries and also reassures the reader that there is no 'normal' way to grow up.

In addition to being a funny and heart-warming story, the idea of having a 'happy list' is also a lovely concept and a wonderful way to focus on life's positive pleasures when you are feeling overwhelmed or anxious.

I know that this series will be hugely popular in school libraries across the country and feel that I might have to get in line to find out what Birdie gets up to next. **AH**

### New Talent

#### Crow: Thief of Magic

★★★★

Fiona Dixon, HarperCollins, 298pp, 9780008717360, £7.99 pbk  
The author has a vivid imagination and writes well. The magical world she describes is convincingly rich and strange. Twelve-year-old Crow, a street urchin existing through petty crime, has a new chance when he is chosen to work for Victor. He is an elderly and seemingly benign expert at making and then bottling dreams, both good and bad, which can then be marketed for those who wish to experience them. But can he be fully trusted and why does the ghost of a past apprentice warn Crow to be watchful? In addition to these worries their mythical town of Starsgard is threatened by an approaching planet which may have the power to unleash the dreaded mara. This vindictive force is out to destroy everything in its path and must never get in the wrong hands. Crow also has some dangerous human enemies out to drag him back into thieving.

Lots to be getting on with, then, and Crow also worries about his mates still living a precarious existence while he is now having it easy. Readers will know that Crow is very concerned here because his creator Fiona Dixon has told



them so, not just once but many times over. This over-intrusive authorial presence stops characters from ever progressing from two-dimensions, denied a strong inner voice of their own that would lend them a true sense of personality. But there is still much to enjoy, with street fairs in true Harry Potter style offering 'Griffin feathers, mermaid scales and freshly collected unicorn tears.' By the end villains are finally beaten, and as for dreamcatcher Victor, sadly the ghost was right. If there is to be a sequel, I hope this talented author will this time allow her characters adequate room to speak and think for themselves. **NT**

#### Demon Hunter's Soul Feeder

★★★★

Jennifer Killick, Barrington Stoke, 104pp, 9780008741150, £7.99 pbk  
Caiden and his best friend Sam work with Caiden's dad as house clearers. They have done many clearances before - and have a warehouse full of things to prove it - but this one feels different. A bit 'off', in a way none of them can quite define. Is it the fact that they lose their sense of smell in the house or the weird artefacts they find there? Maybe it's the fact that the late owner - Miss Kinski - was found dead but not decomposed, her head tilted right back, her eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling, that has made the whole job a bit odd? Nevertheless they load up the vans with things from the property to take back to the warehouse for sorting and selling. The boys beg to be allowed to hang out in the warehouse, as they often do, but things only start to get weirder and they suspect that something other than furniture has come back with them. Will they be able to overcome whatever it was that has left Miss Kinski dead, with only their wits and friendship to help them?

Jennifer Killick has form when it comes to writing scary stories and

this one certainly doesn't disappoint on that score - but what comes through most strongly is the power of true friendship which ultimately helps the boys overcome the evil they have inadvertently brought back to the warehouse with them. It is really heartwarming to see how they respond when they are faced with an unpredictable foe and support each other even in the face of terrifying circumstances.

Barrington Stoke produce excellent books for struggling readers and this one is no exception being closely plotted and ultimately up-lifting with normality restored by the end. It might be best avoided by more sensitive children as the story is very much grounded in reality and there is an illustration of the dead Miss Kinski - which might just truly prove the stuff of nightmares. **EB**

#### Birdlands

★★★★

Anthony McGowan, illus. Keith Robinson, Rock the Boat, pp194, 978181836432807, £7.99 pbk

Anthony McGowan is a constantly developing writer, and this story takes him into yet new territory. It describes how a crow, a jackdaw and a pigeon,

all badly wounded in different ways, decide to make a last joint journey to Dump. Reputably populated by angels, this is a fabled haven where exhausted birds can finally live without fear or hunger until their end. But the way there is fraught with danger, from daily starvation to predators out for an easy, even enjoyable kill faced by such poor opposition. But somehow the trio still almost makes it, with the jackdaw alone surviving after being taken in as a pet.

The birds talk and occasionally quarrel like humans as they stick together through thick and mostly thin. As in Russel Hoban's haunting *The Mouse and his Child*, another story about an apparently hopeless quest, there is time for some philosophy too. Faced by his likely death the next moment, the jackdaw still has time to muse on 'the unfathomable darkness of the soul.' There is more sadness elsewhere as each bird retells their past history. Pages are brought further to life by Keith Robinson's superb black and white drawings. The author, himself a keen birdwatcher, mixes accurate detail about the day to day struggles faced by birds in the natural world along with the demands of a good story.

So far, so memorable, with plenty of salty dialogue on hand along the way. But there are also moments when a prevailing sense of melancholy slows the narrative down perhaps a little too much for readers looking for something more lively. For those that stay the course though, this three bird's eye view of the human world that cares so little for them has much to offer. **NT**

#### Entangled

★★★★

Emma Rea, Firefly Press, 256pp., 9781917718189, £8.99 pbk

When Thomas' sister Tia wins an art prize of a trip to Venice it's obvious that Thomas should go with her to help her navigate the city following her recent sight loss. Nevertheless he is anxious about the trip because he has become increasingly clumsy of late - knocking things flying seemingly at random. They get to Venice safely, though as usual, despite his best efforts, Thomas manages to knock over a stand of tourist leaflets as soon as they arrive. The children settle in to a smart hotel with their chaperone and two other prize winners - Karam and Candy. Tia chooses to go off sight-seeing with new friend Candy and is mysteriously abducted. Thomas takes on the hunt for her as the adults seem clueless as to what to do about her and another girl - Affie - who has also vanished. Thus begins an enjoyable chase across Venice on the trail of Tia and Affie with Thomas putting his photographic memory to good use. Who are the mysterious criminals

behind the abductions, what are their motives and can Thomas rescue the girls before it is too late? In a world of shady canals and dark alleyways, who can he trust?

This is a sophisticated read for young teens - the story's main protagonists Tia and Thomas and Affie are believable characters with warm yet realistic relationships. It is also good to see what might be considered disabilities - Tia's blindness and Thomas' likely neurodivergence portrayed in a positive light. The description of Venice - its sights, its smells and history is faultless but where I felt the book fell down was the rationale behind the abductions, which was a little disappointing. This was a pity as the set up to the big reveal was fantastic and well-paced with plenty of tension. Still this is a minor quibble - you have to admire Emma Rea's audacity as a storyteller to successfully combine quantum physics, Leonardo Da Vinci, Dylan Thomas and flood barriers - all within a lively mystery story based in Venice and its famous Carnevale. It's bound to encourage young readers to want to explore Venice and retrace Tia, Thomas and Affie's steps and adventures for themselves. **EB**



#### How to do Paris with One Leg

★★★★

Ella Dove illus. Jennifer Jamieson, Puffin, 256pp, 978140837873, £7.99 pbk

Maya Bright is in Year 8 and is now relatively comfortable with being an amputee. She can do most of the things her peers can do thanks to her sparkly, prosthetic leg. Her French teacher announces a week-long exchange to Paris and Maya, unlike some disabled people, desperately wants to go especially as her best friends, Vita and Myles, are going. Her parents are more cautious, which is very realistic. Much communication occurs between them and the school, prior to allowing Maya to go.

# reviews

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When the exchange partners are announced, all the other children are matched with their partners, based on mutual interests. Maya, however, is matched on disability. This again is hugely realistic but something Maya resents violently. Dove allows Maya to rant about why it is so often presumed that disabled people will automatically get on with other disabled people.

Levi, her French exchange partner, is a wheelchair user and is initially very sullen and uncommunicative. Can Maya, who wants to be a social media influencer, and is therefore documenting her whole trip and only showing the positive parts, win him over? And what will Maya learn about herself and the true meaning of friendship?

In this brilliant book, Dove talks about the double-edged sword of using social media as a disabled person. You want to present yourself positively, but you should also be truthful and sometimes that can be problematic.

There is a memorable scene that takes place in Disneyland Paris which many young people would dream of. This book will be enjoyed by Dove's fans old and new. **RB**



### Heroes of Light and Shadow

★★★★

Conor Forrest, O'Brien Press, 978-1788495912, 288pp, £8.99 pbk  
Stories in which ordinary kids turn out to be anything but are endlessly satisfying, and Oisín Ryan's adventures, steeped in magic and Irish myth, are particularly enjoyable. They all begin on a school trip to the museum in Dublin, where he overhears three suspicious looking characters planning a burglary that night. The museum staff won't believe him, so Oisín returns alone at midnight – the first sign he might have more to him than people expect – at which point the men transform into terrifying horned monsters. In the resulting fray, Oisín is despatched with an axe, only to wake up in his

coffin. In most circumstances, that would be the end of the story, but Oisín is a) not mortal and b) rescued from his grave by a man claiming to be his uncle. Fionn MacCool, for that's who this is, is delightfully relaxed about allowing his young nephew to accompany him and his allies as they try to work out what the monsters (Fomorians) were after, and how to stop them. It means he has a ringside seat as they race to decode ancient messages, track down clues and confront even more terrifying creatures including – memorably – the Morrigan. If it sometimes feels Oisín is too much of an observer, that all changes in the final scenes, and anyway, who wouldn't want to be that close to his Uncle Fionn, wonderfully insouciant, and always ready with a wry comment or witticism, even as he's knocking out the bad guys, a kind of magic James Bond if you like. This is a clever use of Irish legends and as stories of magical young heroes go, definitely amongst the best. If you don't know much about Irish myth, that won't be a problem, though you'll likely be inspired to find out more. The ending sets the stage perfectly for more adventures, and they won't come soon enough for readers. **DG**



### The Street Art Mystery

★★★★

Sharna Jackson, Penguin, 298pp, 9780523636, £8.99 pbk  
In this follow-up to *High-Rise Mystery*, Margot, Wesley and Josephine, known as the Copseys, are just about to start high school in Luton, but in this story they have gone to stay with Margot's glamorous Mum in London. Mum has a new boyfriend, Teddy, who runs an art gallery, and they all have to go to the grand opening of a new exhibition on Street Art. Real street art, strange unsettling work, catches their eye, and the children really don't like Teddy, but it's a shock when the lights go out in the gallery, and he is found dead.

The real street art provides clues as the children investigate. There are more murders, and the trail takes them through skate parks, canal boats and tower blocks, and in all sorts of directions, before the culprit is revealed. The final scene happens at the Notting Hill Carnival, which was partly why the friends wanted to be in London that weekend in the first place, and at the end they are able to relax, dress up and take part.

The question of whether Street Art belongs in an Art Gallery is indeed discussed!

Sharna Jackson has now written several books, mostly involving murder and detection by children, but also books on Black and Minority artists, and she is keen that children of all backgrounds should know that art is for everyone. She weaves art of a few kinds into this very exciting story, and the three children have very definite skills and personalities, making it a fun read. **DB**



### The House with Chicken Legs Runs Away

★★★★

Sophie Anderson, Usborne, 978-1803704364, 330pp, £8.99 pbk  
The very many readers, young and not so young, who love *The House with Chicken Legs*, will be delighted to see Marinka and House return in a magical new adventure. It is everything they could have hoped it would be. The story takes up where the last finished. Marinka is still mourning the loss of Baba Yaga but, with the support of her friends Benjamin and Baba Tatyana, has taken on the responsibility of guiding souls of the dead through The Gate in the House to the stars. But something seems wrong with House and when Marinka tries to fix it, the situation worsens. The Gate grows bigger, soon swallowing up items in the house and then becoming a threat to everything in it and the world beyond. When House responds by running – where to, Marinka has no idea – all she can do is cling on (Benjamin and Jack her beloved jackdaw too) and try to work out

what is happening. House does know what it is doing and its headlong race brings Marinka to family she never knew she had, and opportunities for both her and Benjamin to see things about themselves that help them understand the people they are. Fans will know that House is sentient, that it loves Marinka unconditionally, and always has. Now she needs to take care of it and even, finally, allow it to say goodbye. Written with almost poetic simplicity, the story brims with magic but more than that, like all the best folk stories and fairy tales, it conveys a great deal about what it is to be human. Watch out too for references to other Sophie Anderson stories and for new characters, including Valiant, a mortar that can fly, and – irresistible – baby Houses with chicken legs. **LS**

[Read our Q&A with Sophie Anderson.](#)

### The Seeker and the Shade

★★★★

Ellen Osborne, Guppy Books, 391pp, 9781916558724, £8.99 pbk  
The winner of the *Guppy Open Submission* competition, this first novel is an excellent choice. The author writes well, avoiding any first time nervous proliferation of adjectives or stale clichés in a narrative that remains taught throughout. Her story mixes dystopian fantasy with the normal tensions of adolescents living together for the first time. They have all been selected to beat back the deadly Shade, an amorphous evil spirit dedicated to destroying all remaining human life. Teenager Connie the main character, suffers from low esteem but is still up there when it really counts. Handsome blue-eyed Jasper, her initial adversary with whom she is paired against her will, slowly learns to appreciate her. Watch this space!

Generally beleaguered, relying solely on the semi-magical oath lanterns whose light keeps vengeful spectres at a distance, the teenagers just get by when they can genuinely trust each other. This is because the lanterns only cast light when the duo in charge of them, one a Seeker, the other a Caster, truly believe in the mutual vows they have to keep repeating. But just as Connie and Jasper look like bonding everything goes awry. Fortunately the subsequent mass invading spectres despite their numbers never quite manage to defeat the young defenders, who despite receiving multiple wounds are still always up for more action the following day.

This increasingly murderous scenario eventually becomes tedious but is just saved by the clarity and verve of the author's prose. While it is not always clear exactly what is happening and whose body is occasionally separated into two existing parts, her story remains obstinately readable, exciting and strongly imagined. At the end there is a hint that another novel may develop from this one. Bring it on! **NT**

**Paws Hazel has her hands full**

★★★★

Nathan Fairbairn, illus Michele Assarasakorn, Puffin, 176pp, 978-0241759769, £9.99 pbk

This is a full colour graphic novel which is part of a series. Twelve-year-old Hazel Miller is a manual wheelchair user as a result of spinal muscular atrophy, a condition which gradually weakens all a person's muscles. There are two types and the type which Hazel has is not stated.

Hazel and her friends, all of whom are non-disabled, live in Vancouver in Canada. They have a dog-walking business called Paws. Hazel's mum is happy for Hazel to be part of the Paws team so long as she never cares for animals on her own.

The Paws team are asked to cat sit two cats for two weeks at a fellow wheelchair user's house. The problem is that all the other members of the Paws team are away on holiday during the cat sitting period, so Hazel decides she will care for both cats on her own. She also decides not to tell her mum because she thinks her mum will say no. What will happen when her mum finds out? And can Hazel care for the cats on her own?

The premise of this book is admirable: to show disabled young people as capable and fully rounded characters, despite the barriers faced. However, a person with SMA would probably need a more heavily adapted wheelchair than the attractive fuchsia pink model shown. Also, the physical skills needed to care for animals such as opening cupboards and packets to get food and emptying litter trays would be next to impossible for a twelve-year-old wheelchair user to do alone.

A huge positive of this book is that it gives disabled pre-teens the equal ability to be part of a group doing something productive together. There is also a very relatable scene when Hazel is having physio and detests doing her required hamstring stretches. Anyone with a physical disability will know the pain of that particular exercise. **RB**

**Feather Vane**

★★★★

Beth O'Brien, HarperCollins Children's Books, 336pp, 9780008642044, £7.99 pbk

Morfran and his twin sister, Creirwy, are twelve years old. On their thirteenth birthday, they will each be given a mission by the Consort of Paracelsus, to become a sorcerer. Before their birthday, they travel with their mother, an enchantress of great renown, to the village of Greeth-Under-Edge where their mother has been tasked with removing four types of magical creatures who have been causing havoc in the village. In this world, it is usual for an enchanter to have to remove one or possibly two types of magical miscreants, but not



four. That number has never been eradicated successfully before.

Morfran has feathers on his arms. This is an allegory for disability and leaves him excluded by many people particularly non-magical people called Nulluses. Morfran is bullied by a Nullus boy. This makes his mother so angry that she breaks the magical code which forbids magic to be used on a living being. This is the third time that Morfran's mother has lost her temper in this way and she is called to account by the Counsel which means that the twins must complete their mother's mission alone. They must do this in seven days or risk their mother being banished forever.

Will they complete this seemingly impossible mission and win over the people of Greeth-Under-Edge?

This is a narrative with a very complex plot. It is refreshing and quite rare to see a character with a visible disability in a lead role in a fantasy. **RB**

**Wide Eye**

★★★★

Jennifer Liss, Pushkin Press, 192pp., 9781782695400, £8.99 pbk  
Wide Eye is a creature who may or may not inhabit Wide Eye Lake, a forest summer tourist resort somewhere in the United States – something like the Loch Ness Monster but on a much smaller scale, perhaps a less disturbing cousin of the ghostly Tailypo of the woods of Appalachia. Ten-year-old Meridian is a believer in Wide Eye. She visits the lake each summer to help her grandfather Frank, who runs a ramshackle museum dedicated to the maybe, maybe not monster. Meridian looks forward to her time with her grandfather but she gradually realises that this summer will be different. As she sets off with her mother for the long car trip, she overhears an argument between her parents about whether she was now old enough to be told something important. And,

once settled in at the museum, she is visited by her least favourite two boys from school, who also happen to be spending the summer at the lake. It's a time for her own eyes to be opened, perhaps to the reality of the monster, to its connection to a mystery within her own family, and certainly to what might lie behind the brainless bravado of at least one of those teenage boys. Meridian is an attractive character, the levels of holiday mystery are appealing, and Jennifer Liss tells her story with clarity, humour and empathy. **CB**

**Always Angel**

★★★★

Kimberley Whittam, Usborne, 230pp., 9781803708072, 7.99 pbk

Angel is in care, as her Mum has mental health issues and her Uncle Tyrese has moved to Scotland, and, going in to Year 8 after a break when she couldn't handle it, she still gets more detentions than anyone else, storms out of classes, and generally finds it impossible to fit in. She wants to be good, and do well, and enjoy learning; it just doesn't seem to happen. Her form teacher and the Head both try hard to help, and her third lot of foster carers are really nice and encouraging, but it's only when she hears about a baking competition that Angel starts to concentrate on something positive. She and her Mum used to bake together, so baking is something she loves to do, and she produces delicious results. She hopes that winning the competition will prove that she can go home and look after her Mum, but as she goes through the rounds, judged every Wednesday by the owner of a local bakery, she also comes to realise that some of her classmates, particularly Soraya and Ethan, have their own problems, and she is able to express sympathy with what they're going through. She is pleased to be befriended by Tiana, but this relationship gets her into more trouble, and there has to be a reckoning, but the bake-off competition gives her the focus she needs, that and acting in *Romeo and Juliet*, and she finally comes to realise that she can't solve all her problems by herself, and accepts the help and support she needs.

Kimberly Whittam has a Master's degree in Inclusive Education and Special Education Needs and Disabilities, and this novel and her previous book, *Quiet Storm*, show her empathy with those who find it difficult to fit in. The cover of *Always Angel* is really attractive, and this is another good story. **DB**

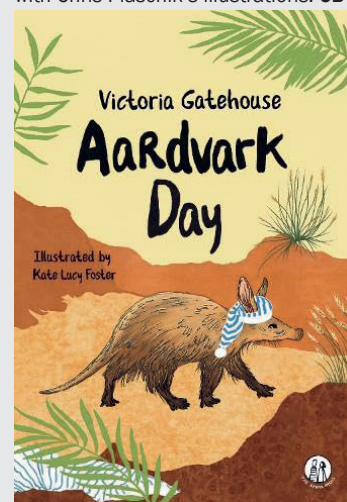
**I Tell Myself I'm Awesome**

★★★★

Joshua Seigal, illus. Chris Piaschik, Bloomsbury, 112pp., 9781801997904, £7.99 pbk

Joshua Seigal is a prolific poet. I think this is sixth collection from Bloomsbury Education, not counting another two jointly authored with Neal Zetter, and an award-winning

anthology that he has edited. In this collection there are sixty more poems, on subjects as various as pets, family life, animals, the delightful vagaries of words, human moods and emotions, the process of writing and much more, peppered with jokes and wordplay and driven along, for much of the time in rhythm and rhyme (it can be catching!) Perhaps the number of poems and the variety of topics is the strength of the collection. There is enough here for any reader to find something to their taste. For myself, it's largely mischievous wordplay and tongue twisting that have the most appeal. *Making a Name for Myself* begins 'My moniker is Monica. From Monaco I come.' And goes on in the same vein for three verses. I am also taken with the pick up on the double meaning of *Going Viral*, in which an 'influenza influencer' broadcasts their symptoms online. If your inclination is to the more thoughtful and comforting, then try *The Kiss*, in which a child remembers grandma's admonition not to wipe away the gift of a kiss, and how he carried it with him wherever he went. But 'now I have nothing left to lug but my tears...I leave it be – like the kisses, the tears/are all a part of me.' It's a pity Bloomsbury have been so sparing with Chris Piaschik's illustrations. **CB**

**Aardvark Day**

★★★★★

Victoria Gatehouse, ill. Kate Lucy Foster, Emma Press, 80pp, 9781915628572, £9.99 pbk

There is so much to enjoy in this debut collection of poems about the natural world and our relation to it. There is a restless curiosity and wonder that takes in the quiet joy of a pebble found on the pavement, what may spring to life in the footprints of elephants, and the numerous superpowers of frogs. There is a lightly-worn but inspiring span of knowledge from what we know of the Atolla jellyfish that live in the 'ocean's midnight zone' to the colour halos that 'gleam beyond our frequency' to attract bees to particular flowers. Here, the natural world is never just a spectacle but something that we are closely

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engaged with, whether we are aware of it or not. The poems constantly shift viewpoints as we seek to understand nature in our own terms and then to use what we observe of nature to understand ourselves. It's all poetically choreographed with grace, verve, wit and quiet skill. This a stunning debut collection for children whose simplicity is freighted enough to delight and surprise even this jaded old adult reader. It's given appealing illustration by Kate Lucy Foster and a splendid production by Emma Press. **CB**



**The story of art without men: an illustrated guide to amazing women artists**

★★★★

Katy Hessel, ill. Ping Zhu, Puffin, 176pp, 9780241738191, £20.00, hbk  
This book is a fascinating look at art history that focuses entirely on female artists from the 1500s to the present day. It was born from the realisation that the author, an art historian, couldn't name ten female artists. This then spawned social media accounts highlighting women in art and eventually the original adult version of **The Story of Art Without Men** which came out in 2022 and the new version for younger readers.

The book itself is divided in movements which are introduced general and then in terms of women's history and women's art. You learn about the styles and features typical of each movement, alongside notable works of art and their stories. Occasionally there are sections called 'spotlights' on a particular form of art such as needlepoint, or an artist such as Frida Kahlo.

Despite not featuring as many familiar (male) names as a dual-gender art history book, it still provides a thorough journey through art history that is ideal for those studying the subject or interest in it for their own pleasure. It's truly a book to pour over and devour page by page.

Alongside the art history there are also sections on social history too - the suffragette movement, the civil rights movement and the feminist movement of the 1970s for examples, and how they are reflected in art. It's

a must-have for art lovers and those interested in the study of women's history too, whether at home, in the library or at school. **CH**



**Runaway Road**

★★★★★

Sue Divin, First Ink, 292pp, 978-0350-8717-4, £9.99 pbk

This is a startlingly good book. Set in Derry and Donegal in 2023 its focus is not the Troubles, but the aftermath, those left behind in society as so much detritus - no future, no way forward, no second chance. Ezra is sixteen, his sister Evie is nine and diagnosed with autism and they are devoted to each other. They were removed from a chaotic and violent home seven years ago and placed in the care system, a misnomer as it has come nowhere near to meeting their needs. The final straw for Ezra is when he is coerced by his paramilitary dealers into taking Lewis, the privileged son of a prestigious local lawyer, along to a burglary so that he can be skilled up to clear his drug debts without his family knowing about his habit. Lewis, high and loud, botches the burglary and attacks the elderly woman householder, leaving her for dead and threatening to kill Evie if Ezra turns him in. After calling an ambulance Ezra flees, convinced that the woman will die and he will be caught and imprisoned.

He decides he must leave and somehow make his way across the border into Northern Ireland where he will be unknown - but he cannot take Evie on such a long and dangerous journey which has no clear outcome. However, Evie is determined not be separated from him and they set out together with lamentably little provision for the task ahead. They become three when Alannah, Ezra's former close friend, decides to help out by joining them.

Divin's character creation is impeccable. Ezra, badly damaged by the most brutal childhood traumas, is convinced of his worthlessness and yet his deep love for Evie drives him

on in the hope of finding safety for her future, regardless of his own. There is no sentimental indulgence here on Divin's part: she gives him humour, ingenuity and, through Alannah and Evie, makes the reader aware that he has honesty and integrity which he has been forced to hide in order to make a pathway through the failing care system for himself and his sister. Evie is a charismatic, intelligent and entertaining child, and her record of events and feelings on her precious I Pad is interleaved with the chapters where Ezra narrates.

At journey's end, having finally crossed the border into the north, Ezra is caught and placed in the prison system awaiting trial for the burglary and attempted manslaughter which he has confessed to in order to save Evie from Lewis' threats. Ironically, whilst he in the youth detention centre awaiting trial he is guided by an empathetic member of staff towards a point when he can finally speak about the dreadful treatment his father subjected him to and begin to see a way forward to a positive future for himself and Evie and a new beginning for his relationship with Alannah. And when, during the trial for the burglary, Lewis becomes over-confident and unthinkingly implicates himself the way is clear for Ezra to make his last and most important move - the life he could only previously imagine with his sister, a secure home and a solid relationship with Alannah. It would be a hard-hearted reader indeed who is dry-eyed at the conclusion of this powerful and ambitious novel. **VR**

**Pearl Beach**

★★★★

Beth Steiner, Pushkin Press, 272pp., 9781782695585, £8.99 pbk

Billie spends her summers with her great aunt near the Australian resort of Pearl Beach in a house called Yatchzka. The name is significant, although it takes Bille and the reader much of the book to discover why. Billie is fourteen and things are changing. Her body is changing. She has started her periods. And her friends are changing. Andy, her holiday best friend at Pearl Beach is now more interested in fashion and boys than the simpler seaside pleasures that brought her and Billie together in the past. Billie is not coping too well, but gradually a closer relationship develops with her aunt Edith, who offers her own teenage journal to Billie, with the promise, 'I think you may find you are not as alone as you think.' Billie has always known that Edith is a Holocaust survivor, and the journal records Edith's journey aboard ship in 1948 from a displaced persons camp in Germany to Australia, a journey haunted by memories of the past, good and bad. Eventually, Edith herself takes over the account from the journal and tells of the loss of her family: 'It is both an easy and difficult thing to see beauty in the world/when you know/the very worst that humans do.' This is an ambitious debut verse novel that deftly bridges the experience of young women growing up in vastly different circumstances

with sensitivity and perceptiveness. There is perhaps a little too much going on here, including a dramatic rescue involving Billie and Andy that brings about their reconciliation. But at its heart is a story of the healing power of family, friendship and memory, perhaps encapsulated in the almost last chapter when Edith, Billie, her mum, and endearingly capable little brother Sammy cook lokshen kugel together. **CB**

**Looking for Aurora**

★★★

Zainab Boladale, Andersen Press, 9781788495738, 240pp £10.99, pbk

Aurora Kutti has the life that countless teenagers scroll past and quietly covet. A successful influencer with a flood of followers, invitations to glamorous events and a steady stream of freebies, she seems, from the outside, to have it all. She lives in Ireland with her gamer brother and her parents, her mum doubling as her manager and the architect of her carefully curated public image. But behind the filters, Aurora is struggling. Some scary online deception has gone unaddressed (she feels), she has no real friends to speak of, and she has lost any clear sense of who she actually is. When her mum announces that their family life is about to become even more public, it proves to be one step too far.

The territory Zainab Boladale is exploring here is genuinely important. The gap between an influencer's polished online presence and the lonelier, messier reality behind it is something many young readers will recognise, and the novel deserves credit for taking it seriously. Aurora's predicament, trapped in a persona constructed by those around her, is a timely one, and the emotional core of the book, a teenager searching for authenticity in a world that rewards performance, is sympathetic and relevant.

The novel is highly accessible, and Boladale has a good feel for the texture of teenage life online and off. Readers who enjoy detailed descriptions of clothes, make-up and the social rituals of teen influencer culture will find plenty to enjoy here, and the Irish setting gives the story a distinctive flavour that is welcome.

Where the book is less successful is in the depth of its execution. The characters, Aurora included, do not always develop beyond their initial outlines, and the plot moves through its beats a little predictably, rarely pausing long enough to let the more interesting emotional questions breathe. The resolution arrives without fully earning the weight it is asked to carry.

That said, for readers who are drawn to stories about identity, online life and the cost of living publicly, Looking for Aurora offers an engaging and comfortable read. Boladale is clearly a writer with something to say, and there is enough warmth and accessibility here to make this a perfectly solid addition to a school or library shelf. **LJS**



### The Summer After The Night Before

★★★★★

Lisa Williamson, David Fickling Books, 352pp, 978-1-78845-187-1, £8.99 pbk

Four close friends – Molly, Rhiannon, Liv and Theo – are about to take their final school exams and before the move to Sixth Form they plan a summer of parties, get-togethers and celebrations. But the final pre-exam party changes the emotional landscape and casts a persistent shadow over the longed-for extended summer break. Molly steadily becomes very drunk and Rhiannon's brother Ben – who has always carried a torch for her – takes her home to look after her, putting her in his bed and sleeping on the floor beside her. Yet in the morning Molly has hazy memories of Ben in the bed with her and suspicions that they may have had sex, which Ben strenuously denies.

This is the spectre which haunts the feast of the summer, and Molly's mental health begins to deteriorate, fracturing her deep friendship with Rhiannon and making her desperately uncomfortable in the kind of social situations the friends were determined to seek out and enjoy. Williamson is extremely adept at group dynamics, making each character live on the page, nuanced and interacting credibly with the others, running the gamut of emotions. The shifts and swerves in friendship patterns are so finely tuned that the reader feels them as much as the protagonists and becomes aware of small fault lines, their effect on the emotional landscape, the corrosive lies which they can generate.

When Ben, in an effort to displace Molly from his thoughts, begins a relationship with Georgie, who is besotted by him, the irony completely escapes him, and the reader feels less sure of his emotional honesty.

Molly's friend and sister advise her to talk to a counsellor about the fact that Ben may have had non-consensual sex with her and, at her lowest ebb, she agrees. This gives her the strength to begin moving slowly forward. Rhiannon, too, changes when Ben confesses to her that he lied: he did have sex with Molly. She cannot forgive her brother and when she makes him believe that Molly now knows he pleads a case with her which gives her the truth and enables her to end their friendship and her self-doubt.

Williamson raises issues of great relevance to young people – most importantly opening up the subject of rape and sexual exploitation. This is an entertaining novel, a 'can't put down' read but it also raises awareness in young women and girls of where they might find help in similar situations. VR

### Oh Brother – A graphic memoir

★★★★★

Georgina Chadderton, Puffin, 288pp, 9780241725412, £9.99 pbk

This lively graphic memoir focuses on a critical time of its author Georgina Chadderton's life – her first year at secondary school. A difficult time for anyone, it is further complicated for Georgina by moving house, getting her first period, her shyness and her anxiety. She is not good at change. Fitting in and making friends are real challenges for her.

Chadderton's book tells how she deals with these challenges in the context of one other aspect: her brother, Rob. He is, in her words, autistic and has an intellectual disability, with high support needs. As Chadderton explains in her introduction, the book was inspired by her desire to share her experiences of this as an adolescent. Despite loving, supportive parents and her own love for her brother, she felt often felt lonely, with no one to talk to. She wanted others going through a similar situation to know they are not alone.

In this honest, affectionate and often very funny memoir, she has succeeded in her aim and not just for those who find themselves in a similar situation. This book gives a real insight into what life is like for a family where one of its members has high support needs. The graphic approach makes it very accessible and could certainly be read by a slightly younger age range than I have given here. It also enables Chadderton to move seamlessly between her narrative and clear factual information about her brother's condition. She highlights the changing language and attitudes surrounding these but writes from her context of early 2000s Australia.

As a memoir, the narrative is often episodic and does not always make for a page-turner. Visually, I

occasionally got a bit confused about who was who – mainly because of the flat-colour approach. However, the underlying characterisation is strong and one ends up with a real affection for the narrator, her new friend, Callie, and all her family, including Rob. An interesting twist (only mentioned at the end, so easily missed) is that Chadderton herself is autistic (late diagnosed) and this too is sensitively handled in her characterisation of her younger self. She does not mention this in the story as, at the time, it was not something she knew. I would strongly recommend this book for anyone wishing to learn more about neurodiversity or simply appreciate that they are not alone in finding growing up complicated. RC



### Gone For Good

★★★★★

Sarah Crossan, Simon & Schuster, 416pp, 9781398549029, £9.99 pbk

One has come to expect the very best when picking up a new novel from the Carnegie medal winning Sarah Crossan, and despite moving into a very different genre, *Gone for Good* certainly lives up to expectations. She has proved herself an absolute master of the verse novel, but it was a surprise to see this writing style employed for a twisty and tense YA thriller. Yet it may well attract new readers to this format, since the title, premise and cover will ensure that it is picked up by fans of the 'missing girl' thriller as typified by authors like Holly Jackson, Kathleen Glasgow et al, and they will find the way the verse propels you immediately into the action, quite simply breathtaking, and the novel very hard to put down. There are two narrative voices telling this tale and we hear from Belle first, in a very sinister poem, which does not give us much hope for her future. We then jump to Connie, and her first-person narrative enables the reader to mainline the experience

of a brutal kidnapping in the middle of the night. We share her fear and confusion about what is happening to her as she is conveyed to Silver Lake, a high-security facility for 'troubled' teens, where a brutal regime aims to improve their behaviour. Since losing her mother, Connie has indeed been troubled and unable to process her anger and grief, but she cannot believe that her family chose this regime for her. When she learns she's been given the bed of a missing girl named Belle, she soon realises that something is very badly wrong at Silver Lake. While we only have Connie's view of the other young people, their stories add to a shocking glimpse into the darker side of the sort of teen behaviour management therapy camps which seem to be flourishing in America. As readers we can empathise with her determination not just to survive and get out, but to uncover all the secrets and lies. The interspersed sections from Belle, revealing a little more each time, really ramp up the tension. It would not be a successful high stakes thriller without a lot of expertly timed twists and turns and red herrings, which certainly make for compulsive reading. But while the mystery is inherently satisfying to the readers, it is the deep emotional impact of the characterisation, facilitated by the verse structure, and the nuanced portrayal of grief and how different people cope with adversity, that make this another unforgettable Sarah Crossan triumph. JCo

### The Last Death Poet

★★★★★

Stephen Daly, Rock the Boat, 304pp, 9781836431350, £8.99, pbk Ancient mythological forces stir to challenge the repressed trauma of troubled Belfast in this theatrical, symbolic, atmospheric and nuanced tour de force of a YA debut novel. It takes a rare talent to view conflicted history through the lens of dark Irish mythology framing a realistic coming out narrative where a teen struggles with expressing their identity in a world where everyone is hiding a secret and lies mask truths. Fuelled by support from his writing mentor Melinda Salisbury of the *Write Mentor* scheme, Belfast born actor, photographer and producer Stephen Daly was inspired during Lockdown to craft an urban fantasy storscape that beguiles the reader from the start.

With short staccato sentences building up tension the plot seeks to intrigue as 17-year-old Michael is plagued by cawing crows and painful, recurring visions on a visit to the city where his parents grew up. There is a real sense of place as events play out against the dramatic backdrop of Black Mountain and the streets of West Belfast. Belfast's tragic past

# reviews

14+ **Secondary**/Adult continued

becomes superimposed over a riotous present creating a surreal effect like a double exposure. Daly writes with sensitivity, vulnerability, humour and heart as Michael is caught up in a complex web of family dynamics and relationships whilst investigating his melancholic photojournalist father's mysterious disappearance. His forthright new friend Meg is keen to help him understand what is happening to him whilst his magnetic grandmother seems reluctant to provide him with answers.

Daly explores the landscape of Belfast's turbulent memories and reflects images of war, death, destruction, fear and loss through the eyes of Michael. The bewildered and frustrated adolescent confronts terrifying therianthrope supernatural forces, who desire him to fulfil his dangerous destiny, whilst also struggling with heartache.

**The Last Death Poet** will appeal to teens looking for exciting and positive queer fantasy. The book has an eerie and edgy vibe suffused with gothic imagery and photographic language. With scenes reminiscent of the 90's movie *The Craft* and Hitchcock's *The Birds* it is a deft blend of horror and humanity. Shining a spotlight on the tumultuous history of a proud city, it is both profound and compelling. A must for fans of Celtic mythology, this multi layered novel holds up a view finder to sexuality, identity, inter-generational conflict and resilience. **TJ**



## Tom Burne Has Left The Chat

Sean Farrelly, Faber, 332pp, 9780571388219, £8.99 pbk

NJamie is seventeen, his father died a few short months ago and his mother, seeking to escape the pain of the memories which saturate their home, has accepted a job in Canada where they will, after Jamie's final exams, live with his grandparents until they have a place of their own. His future is mapped out - but he hasn't chosen

this new landscape and doesn't want to leave. He feels there has already been far too much loss and he can't bear the thought of more: his friends; their familiar stamping grounds and, most of all, his home.

'The memories in our house were like an old blanket. For me they were only comforting.'

As he and his mother argue about the move in a local seaside café, Tom Burne, a 17-year-old micro-influencer, throws himself off nearby cliffs to his death. When Jamie's mother goes to offer help in her capacity as a doctor Jamie finds Tom's clothes, folded neatly with his phone, which he steals. Thus, out of Jamie's loneliness and a longing for a distraction from his grief, begins a long attachment to the phone and a desire to find out what sort of person Tom really was. Jamie describes himself 'picking through the digital carrion' of Tom's phone 'like some sort of virtual vulture.'

Unlike previous generations, this one leaves a comprehensive archive of their lives, often in minute detail - and with the assistance of AI it can be manipulated and distorted at will to present different personas to a variety of audiences. Jamie becomes increasingly obsessive about the information he has gleaned, building up a character whose media posts were witty and original and whose digital presence is still strong. Jamie makes Tom what he needs him to be, constantly exploring every possible facet of his phone life, neglecting friends, exams and everything save the constant pursuit of Tom's social media identity.

This is a cleverly written book with a great deal to say about the world in which so many young people find themselves caught up. The damage to Jamie's mental health caused by his immersion in the life of a dead young man he comes to love is immeasurable and starkly portrayed. Jamie's road back to health lay in the company of his friends, in his relationship with his mother, in his re-entry into the real world. When he finally begins to fight his way through the technological wall he has built around himself he understands he must let Tom go. As he finally feels able to rejoin his closest friends, they celebrate their exam results out in nature and he knows he is finally secure: 'As the shower stopped and the barley swayed and my friends' heartbeats thumped softly in my ears, that was where I wished to be.' **VR**

## Wonderland

Patience Agbabi, Firefly Press, 172pp, 9781917718202, £9.99 pbk

There are novels that tell you about a world, and then there are novels that put you inside one, pulsing with music, smelling of hairspray and sea air, alive with longing and belonging. **Wonderland** is emphatically the latter.

Patience Agbabi's young adult verse novel follows Tamilola, who has moved from London to Colwyn Bay with her mum, trailing anxiety and a feeling of dislocation behind her. The North Wales coast of the 1980s is not an obvious backdrop for self-discovery, but Agbabi makes it sing, quite literally. When Tamilola finds the Wonderland club on Colwyn Bay Pier and the Northern Soul scene it belongs to, she finds something more precious than music: she finds her people. The novel becomes a portrait of a tribe, each member carrying their own identity and backstory, played out across the clubs, record shops and cafés of an era rendered with forensic affection.

What makes this book extraordinary is the verse. Agbabi slips between poetic styles with breathtaking ease, and the form is never decorative; it is structural. The poetry beats like the music Tamilola lives for, propelling the narrative forward while simultaneously giving it texture and depth. Certain poems stop you altogether. 'Rhyll Seafront' and 'Grey' are the kind of set-pieces you want to fold into your pocket and keep, so descriptive and evocative that you find yourself returning to them long after the plot has moved on.

This is also, in many ways, a superb historical novel. Agbabi captures a vanished world: the clothes sewn by hand to be exactly the right style, the subterfuge of changing outfits before a night out, the rivalry with the mods, and the particular pre-internet ache of trying to track down a rare song, knowing your only hope was haunting record shops until you found it. Young readers will recognise the yearning; the specific texture of that yearning will be entirely new to them.

**Wonderland** is joyful and powerful, a love letter to music, to found family, and to the transformative power of a place where you feel you belong and fit. It deserves to be read aloud, danced to, and pressed insistently into the right hands. **LJS**

## A Song I wrote for Charlotte

Caitlin Devlin, Harper Fire books, 275pp, 978008710927, £8.99, pbk

Leaving school and home, in order to go to university is a rite of passage that hundreds of thousands of young people have taken. Connie, the central character in this novel, is just starting an English course, but it's not what she had envisioned for herself. She has always been a winner in her academic life, so she was gutted when she was turned down by the Royal Academy of Music and ended up settling for her second choice. She is also coping with the pressure of having a grandparent and parent who achieved firsts in their academic studies. The story follows her and the other students in her accommodation as they learn to cope with the freedom of being away from home and having to get on with a group of strangers. It is a music student called Charlotte



and gradually over a period of time the two begin a friendship, which links their housemates together. But as the month progresses, the relationship appears to deepen, leaving Connie wondering just what her feelings are.

This story is one that will bring back memories to many of us older readers, who have been through the process of arriving somewhere new and having to make friendships. To the current batch of readers this will give them a hint about the way friendships are built and how the freedom of university can often have a less positive side if you let it. Much of the book seems to be about the general daily life of the students, but it is actually building up a picture of how they are growing and developing in this new environment. An underlying theme, which links to the title of the book, is the way that Connie and Charlotte share different types of music; each of them sharing composers and artists that they love, but whom the other does not know. This becomes a major part of their growing friendship and helps broaden their love of music. This is a book that really grows on you as you read through it, but there are elements that might require a hanky, as heartbreak mixes with warmer emotions. **MP**

## Boy Friends

Kai Spellmeier, Bloomsbury, 320pp, 9781037205484, £8.99 pbk

Simo and Luca have been best friends since the age of seven. They both live in a small seaside town where everyone knows everyone. They are both gay but Simo hasn't come out yet. Four years' ago, Simo lost his older brother who died at the age of thirteen. The family is still grieving.

Luca is openly gay, as is his father. He is also a very good baker and helps out regularly in his father's café. Then his estranged paternal grandparents move to the area and things change.

One day, a notice goes up on the community notice board where town news, big and small, is posted: Simo loves Luca. Who put it there and will it change the boys' special friendship?

14+ Secondary/Adult continued

This book deals very well with the pain that fractured relationships of all kinds can cause. At first glance, Spellmeier's work is a simple boy/boy romance. This description fails to do it justice. It is about the messy, real and complicated relationships between people and about what happens when you are not honest about your feelings. What is really refreshing in this YA novel is that the adults don't always react the way the reader assumes they will, and the reasons for this are explored. Also, anyone who likes a nerdy love interest will love Simo. **RB**

### This Boy I Hardly Know

★★★★

Lisa Heathfield, Andersen Press, 336pp, 9781839137839, £8.99, pbk Award winning YA novelist Lisa Heathfield's body of work captures the plight of young people abused by authority, trapped by rules and yearning to break free and express their individuality. With titles like *Paper Butterflies* voicing vulnerability and heartbreak, her latest novel is no exception. Informed by her experiences as a teacher working with young people with mental health challenges, it's a wonderfully tender and insightful read.

**This Boy I Hardly Know** crackles with energy and vibrancy from the start. Teens Dusty and Cooper run away from adverse circumstances with a sense of purpose and self-determination. Drawn to each other like magnets they embark on an exhilarating quest to find who was taken from them. Their journey across the north of England is fraught with peril and heart stopping moments as they make impulsive, life-threatening choices. It's also a love song to the beauty of landscape, iconic sights like the Angel of the North and shared experiences through the power of art, music, and poetry.

Heathfield assembles a diverse cast of characters, balancing darkness and light. She captures the problems, dangers and heartache encountered by children in care juxtaposed with the frustrations of social workers hampered by an unsympathetic system. Weaving in references to *The Hunger Games* and the haunting poetry of T.S. Eliot, the book is a gritty and compelling portrayal of vulnerable, resilient and spirited young adults. In her author's note Heathfield describes her hope that her words will "make children in care who've survived complex and painful early years feel seen, let them know how valuable they are" and empower them to realise that "they have every right for their light to shine." With all-consuming passion and self-belief burning at its centre, Dusty and Cooper's story will appeal to fans of Mel Darbon. Emotive, empathetic and thought provoking, **This Boy I Hardly Know** will steal readers' hearts just like *Rosie Loves Jack*. **TJ**



### Bad Queer

★★★★

Gayathiri Kamalakanthan, illus. Chi Nwosu Faber, 432pp, 978-0571390663, £9.99, pbk

Talented Tamil writer, producer and poet Gayathiri Kamalakanthan's own voice profound and courageous YA debut verse novel addresses a kaleidoscope of thought-provoking topics. At its heart it's a candid celebration of queerness which is explored through the lens of refugee family dynamics, supportive friendships, complex romantic relationships and inter-generational attitudes.

Told across a year, from October to October, in the voice of non-binary teen Surya who lives with their mother and her gender fluid partner Amma, it is a coming of age journey. Kamalakanthan portrays Surya's quandaries with sensitivity and care as they search for their own story. Along the way they encounter obstacles, experience prejudice, navigate first love with a boy called Blessing, discover the power of dramatic self-expression and embrace their Tamil heritage.

The reader travels through a looking glass reflecting the realities of Surya's world. They learn how important it is for trans teen hood to be seen by others and not to mask and hide away part of oneself. Nigerian dramatists Inua Ellams and Muslim Iman Qureshi, whose plays explore race, gender, identity and sexuality are referenced. The importance of being mirrored in literature is also highlighted as Surya remembers the impact Akwaeke Emezi's *Pet* had on their lives.

Gayathiri challenges the black and white constructs of sex education class using their experience as a sex and relationships educator in UK secondary schools to empower teens to think of their needs and wants, framing the narrative around consent, discovery and boundaries.

Surya voices their concerns about what intimacy means for them, which leads to a positive experience.

Ultimately **Bad Queer** is a narrative of reclamation as Surya learns to question constructs of otherness, explore their identity, celebrate their body and transform their life through the act of self-discovery. Gayathiri runs *Word Benders* where trans and queer poets share their work and their trans Tamil romcom play *Period Parrty* is currently being performed in London. Their life experiences influence the book throughout with an extensive reading list showcasing diverse writers and insightful discussion questions at the back. With evocative illustrations by non-binary Nigerian artist Chi Nwosu, this empathetic novel will appeal to fans of self-expressive, poetic texts like Acevedo's *The Poet X* and Dean Atta's *The Black Flamingo*. It will also attract older teens looking for positive queer narratives. **TJ**

### Kill me Now

★★★★★

Helen Price, Chicken House, 343pp, 9781917171144, £8.99 pbk

School can be a difficult place and that does not stop when you get to the sixth form. The central character in this story is called Guy, but because his father is the local undertaker, he has always had the nickname of 'Reaper.' He has also been the target of some of the other boys, including the 'golden boy' Riley. So, when the latter turns up dead and one of his friends accuses Guy, it is up to Guy to try and prove his innocence. However, things take an even stranger turn when pupils start receiving weird threatening messages accusing them of sinning; events become even darker as others are found dead. The question is whether the killer can be found before any more people become victims.

Crime thrillers have become a very popular genre for young people, from middle grade to young adult; mix this with a hint of the supernatural and religion, then you have a dark mystery that can put shivers down your spine. The author has given us a town and school where the church is central to lives and where the concept of sin is taken seriously by many. There is a really strong sense of foreboding about what is happening and it even brings together very differing characters as they try to solve the mystery. Against this backdrop we have Guy trying to survive school, whilst also helping out at the funeral parlour and coping with his mother's cancer treatment. **Kill me Now** is a tremendous addition to the genre, with many deaths, lots of twists and turns and a real feel of overwhelming danger, so that we are almost on the edge of a horror plot. It is highly recommended for the 14+ age group, although I am sure that some younger pupils will read it, despite the use of strong language. **MP**



### Storm Bringer

★★★★★

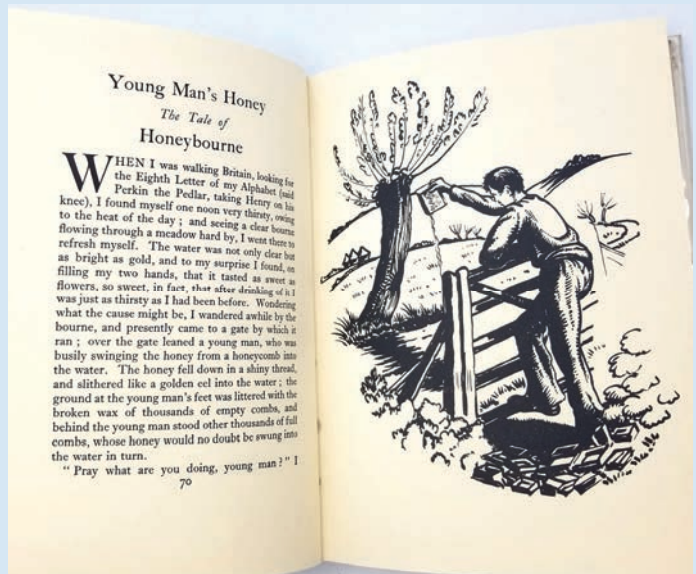
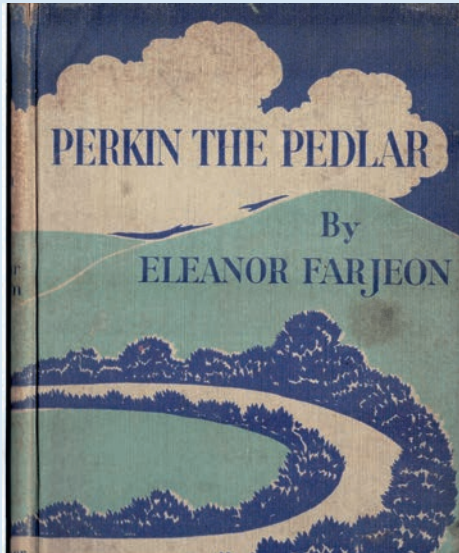
Tig Wallace, Chicken House books, 408pp, 9781915947895, £8.99 pbk

The idea of conflict between magic and science has been a strong theme in literature for a long time. This story is set in a world where the land has been split by tremendous storms and deep chasms, the various territories choosing to follow either science, or the use of magic. The central character, Amelio has been brought up in a science environment, but his parents were originally from a magical background. After a tremendous storm Amelio and his mother find themselves back in the magical world and are drawn into a search for the reason behind a looming danger, as well as the mystery surrounding Tomassi, the historical figure behind the two conflicting beliefs. As he navigates this new and very dangerous world, Amelio does not know who to trust.

The author has created a world which feels almost post-apocalyptic in the way that people are thinking and living their lives. The various states have become almost medieval in their structure, with often autocratic rule keeping the countries functioning; this means that it is difficult to reach a consensus about how to deal with the approaching catastrophe. Not only is Amelio dealing with the situation, but he is also going through the emotional struggles that are part of being a teenager; however, in this case we can see that a romantic triangle is developing, one unlikely to end well. The story itself is full of drama and adventure, but based on a strong environmental message about the world and the way that mankind can affect what happens in nature. Part of this message is the fact that we do not have infinite resources, whether they are magical or scientific, so we should use them effectively and sparingly. This is the first in a series and ends with a cliffhanger that will leave the teen reader eager for the next episode. It is safe to say that the plot was thrown a 'curve ball' at this point, which I can't wait to read about in the future. **MP**

# Valediction: No.27 Perkin the Pedlar

Brian Alderson's presenting his collection of children's books to **Seven Stories** and **Newcastle University**. Amongst them, is a book that he first encountered at kindergarten.



My first schooling took place at Miss Jones's kindergarten in Wellington Road, Enfield, where I first encountered Eleanor Farjeon's **Perkin the Pedlar** in 1933/34. I have always recognised it by its cover design and it must have been an early edition. I am sorry to say that I never learned the alphabet from it nor yet the locations of the places whose titles Eleanor Farjeon used in her text. Nor did her stories or poems have any effect. But I enjoyed Clare Leighton's pictures. This may have been an early example of her work, for she joined the Society of Wood Engravers at about this time, but her pictures were mostly pen and pencil or crayon drawings.

I was only at Miss Jones's for about a year before progressing to a preparatory school in Winchmore Hill. It may be of interest that two other pupils who lived in Wellington Road were Jewish refugees after Hitler's rise to power in Germany. I knew them as Franz and Rudolph and my father, who spoke good German, was friendly with their parents. Their father's name was Spier and he had been a manufacturer of board games. He continued the business in England under the name of Spear and eventually had the rights to market **Scrabble!**

Eleanor Farjeon. **Perkin The Pedlar**. With illustrations by Clare Leighton. London: Faber and Faber.

225x156mm. [Half title, blank]. [1 blank, 2 colour frontis., 3 title-page as above, 4 imprint], 5-6 contents, [7 added half title], 8-10 introduction, [11 black and white portrait, 12 blank], 13 intro. Contd., [14 introduction concluded and half-page black and white illus., 15 "A"], 16-18 story: Appledore, [19 colour illus., 20 twelve line illus. poem], 21-205, continuing series of place names in alphabetical order with various additions of stories, poems and full-page illustrations in black and white or colour, ending with Z for Zeal Monachoram, [206 blank]. Wrap round coloured cloth over boards; blank end papers, front free endpaper with manuscript gift inscription: "To Dear Teddy from Auntie Joan Parren with love on this third Birthday. February 15th, 1937."; lacking dust jacket.

**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.