

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.279

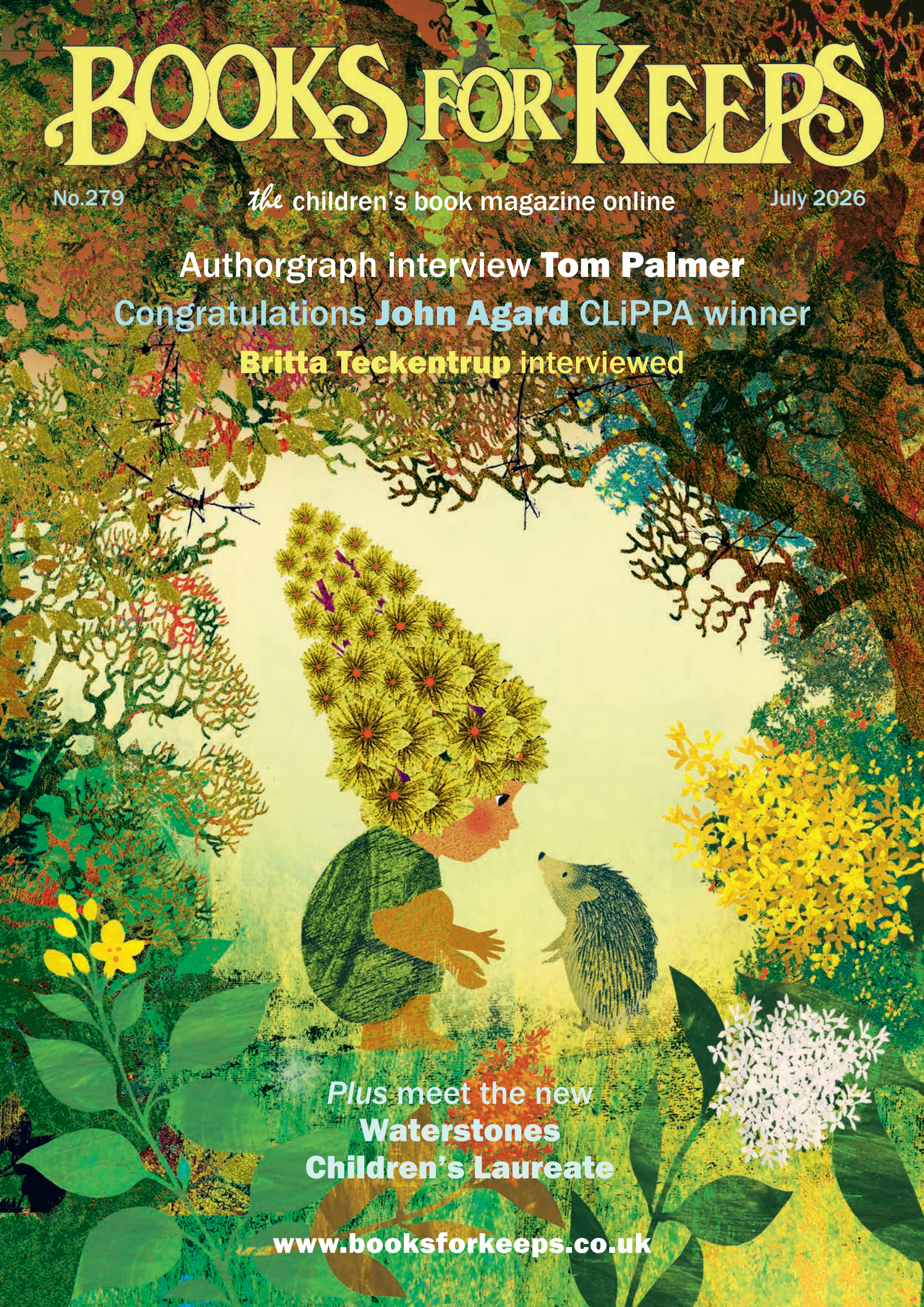
the children's book magazine online

July 2026

Authorgraph interview **Tom Palmer**
Congratulations **John Agard** CLiPPA winner
Britta Teckentrup interviewed

Plus meet the new
Waterstones
Children's Laureate

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- 2 Editorial:** news and comment from the children's book world
- 3 Welcome to the new Waterstones Children's Laureate:** Patrice Lawrence interviewed
- 4 Creating Lifelong Readers** by Mat Tobin.
- 6 Authorgraph interview:** Tom Palmer interviewed by Damien Kelleher
- 8 Queer as Comics** curator Paul Gravett takes us through the new exhibition.
- 10 The Magic of Words:** an interview with CLIPPA 2026 winner John Agard.
- 12 Exploring under the Earth:** in their column looking at illustration in information books, **Ruth Thomson** and **Pam Dix** go back to the beginning.
- 15 Continuing the story;** summer with the GLL Literary Foundation.
- 16 Beyond the Secret Garden:** Reading Gender by **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor**.
- 18 Layers of Light and Hope:** **Nicolette Jones** interviews **Britta Teckentrup**.
- 20 Letterbox Library Recommends:** We Are Family.
- 21 Local Gods, Universal Truths:** **Melinda Salisbury** interviewed by **Joanne Owen**.
- 22 'You Did Us Proud':** **Nicholas Tucker** remembers **Children's Hour**.
- 23 I Wish I'd Written:** **Mitch Johnson** chooses a book that transported him to a different kingdom.
- 24 Obituary: Geoff Fox** 20th April 1938 - 14th June 2026
- 25 Reviews**
Under 5s (Pre-School/Nursery/Infant)
5-8 (Infant/Junior)
8-10 (Junior/Middle)
10-14 (Middle/Secondary)
+ New Talent + Ed's Choice
14+ (Secondary/Adult)
- 40 Valediction Number 28:** **Brian Alderson** wraps up another precious book

COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **The Green Child**, written by **Hollie Hughes**, illustration by **Britta Teckentrup**. Thanks to **Post Wave Children's Books** for their help with this cover.

Editorial 279

Sharing the benefits of reading



It has been a particularly busy time in the world of children's books. This month, **Patrice Lawrence** was announced as the new **Waterstones Children's Laureate**, taking over from **Frank Cottrell-Boyce**. She promises to 'champion the power of books to make us feel like we belong and stories as a tool for bringing people together.' We are delighted to have an interview with Patrice in this issue and look forward to covering her work in the role over the next two years.

Meanwhile, **Frank Cottrell-Boyce** will remain as an Ambassador for **BookTrust**, as his **Reading Rights** campaign continues. His valedictory Laureate Lecture, given at the Royal Institution, London, focused as his campaign has, on Early Years. He talked about the proven benefits that come from shared reading with young children, referring to the work of a GP in his local-ish borough of Knowsley in Merseyside, to the Meadows Nursery in Shirecliff, Sheffield and health worker Anita Mason in the Dearne Valley, among others, all of whom use the sharing of stories as 'a golden thread' (Anita's words) to pull services together and make a difference for young families and children. As he pointed out, none of this work was particularly expensive; in Barnsley for example, the chair of health found the money to pay for some extra hours so that someone could liaise between the different branches of the council - libraries, health etc. - and weave that golden thread across the borough. What it needs is for us all to make sure that reading shows up in policy, to share the evidence and make that golden thread visible. **Patrice Lawrence** has already stated that gathering evidence to prove the benefits of reading is one of her aims, and every reader of Books for Keeps is surrounded by qualitative evidence.

Book Awards

June saw the announcement of the winners of the **Carnegie Medals** for Reading and Writing which went to debut author **Beth O'Brien** and **Kate Rolfe** respectively. We have interviews with both, which you can find on the website. In July meanwhile, came the announcement of the winners of the **Branford Boase Award**, for author and editor of the year's outstanding debut novel for young people, and the **CLIPPA, CLPE Poetry Award** and the UK's sole award exclusively for published



poetry for children. The **Branford Boase Award** was won by **Asli Jensen** and her editor **Shalini Vallepur** for **Love on Sight** (Chicken House, a contemporary romance exploring the relationship between two young people caught between cultures and coping with demanding family responsibilities while trying to live their lives as they want. Meanwhile, for a record third time, the **CLIPPA** was awarded to **John Agard** for **The Poetry World of John Agard** illustrated by **Shirley Hottier** (Otter-Barry Books).

Both of these were extremely popular results, but at a time when *The Bookseller* reports that sales of books by Black authors slipped backwards in the first half of the year. Across the first 24 weeks of 2026, *The Bookseller* reports, there are just 14 Black authors within the top 1,000; combined, they have earned £2.8m, just 0.9% of the total money taken by all authors in that top 1,000, down from 1.6% in 2025. Celebrating new authors like **Asli Jensen** and established stars like **John Agard** seems even more important.

IBBY Honour List

Finally, a congratulations to all the authors and the illustrators on the **2026 IBBY Honour List**. Originally known as the **Hans Christian Andersen Honour List** and featuring only fifteen entries from twelve countries, the programme has grown into the largest selection in its seventy-year history. Today, it stands as a testament to global bibliodiversity, honoring writers, illustrators, and translators who foster international understanding through literature. Discover the full list on the [IBBY website](https://www.ibby.org/) and particular congratulations to UK representatives **Mel Darbon**, **Daf James** and **Petr Horáček**.

Books for Keeps

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Welcome to the new Waterstones Children's Laureate Patrice Lawrence

Patrice Lawrence was announced as the new **Waterstones Children's Laureate** at the Barbican in London on 7 July, taking over from outgoing incumbent, **Frank Cottrell-Boyce**. **Andrea Reece** interviewed Patrice about her aims for the role.



Photo by David Bebbler

Two years ago, when I interviewed Frank Cottrell-Boyce at the start of his tenure as Children's Laureate, I asked what made him take on the role: 'Anger,' he replied. When I ask Patrice Lawrence the same question, her reply is just as quick: 'Fury! Whenever I do events for children and young people and they ask what inspires me, it's mostly fury.'

Prior to becoming a full-time author, she worked for 20 years in the charity sector for organisations that promote social justice, meeting lots of people, adults and children, facing all sorts of challenges, and on top of that a lack of understanding or representation. She is determined to use her time in the role to make a difference: 'Some people just feel undervalued and this is a real opportunity for me to try to change that, through championing books and stories.' First asked if she would be interested in the role in 2020, she felt that the time wasn't right, now, with a lot more books written and a broader grounding in the world of children's books generally, she feels it definitely is; that and 'also knowing all the things that I want to change in the world.'

Top of her list is to champion the benefits of shared reading and sociable reading experiences, and she is putting the final touches of her strategy into place with **BookTrust**, using her former work experience and the links they have with the organisations she wants to target. '**BookTrust** do a lot of work with kinship care organisations, with families and children in need, and with children in the care system so that will be a starting point.

She was herself privately fostered and that is another area she will include: 'I think we'll be looking at all those groups that are left out of the conversation, those who might not go to book awards or sit in a classroom and read a book or even have access to a library; children who really do feel that nobody notices them.'

She's worked previously with families of prisoners to give them a voice in policy – her book *Rat* partly grew out of that – and wants to apply that experience too. 'I want to look at some of the work that's been done in prisons. Working with them to build up their confidence in telling stories, reading books, can help them strengthen relationships with their children on the outside.'

Patrice is Laureate number 14, has there been advice from any of her predecessors? She's friends with Malorie Blackman and Joseph Coelho and followed both their laureateships closely to see how it was for

them. 'I think there's a clear message about creating boundaries, that it can be intense and all consuming. It's about being clear what I can do physically, mentally and emotionally in those two years. For me, returning to my voluntary sector background, that means building a very clear strategy with activities and making myself stick with that. The other advice is don't even think about trying to write a new book!'

She will be building on the work of her predecessor, Frank Cottrell-Boyce too, the issue of poverty and its impact something that drives both. While he was campaigning at a national level of government, with the [recent select committee](#) for example, she sees her strength being at grassroots level. She's aware too that this is a long game and wants to guard against any frustration that comes from the slow pace of change. 'Thinking again about my voluntary sector experiences, when we look at strategy, it's important to build in quick wins.'

She's also keen to build an evidence base throughout the two years. 'Often you hear reading is great, and it brings people together. How do we know? One thing I want to have by the end is a really clear evidence base that we can use, science you can quote. Maybe a literature review will be part of that, something that we can use to say this works.'

The weeks before the ceremony, she'd been on a typically hectic programme of school visits: 'Last week I was mostly in Cumbria doing events in Barrow in Furness, then a week before that I was in Bedford, then Hull, and two weeks before that I was in Geneva at an international school.' It sounds exhausting but meeting young people is where she gets her energy, and her optimism for the future. 'The young people I meet, they're just amazing. They have really sophisticated conversations about equality, the value of different people. I tell them about some of the horrible books I read, that were around when I was a child, and they gasp. The fact that they don't see that as normalized, it just gives me such hope, that and their care for each other.'

She knows the effect learning of her own lived experiences can have. 'Because I share certain experiences with some of the people that we meet, hopefully they can feel a little bit inspired by me by saying, actually, I know exactly how it feels because I've been there. There are so many times I talk about my books and the things that influence them, about being privately fostered for example, or **Your Mama** about growing up in families where you all look different. People come up and talk to me about parental bereavement, parental imprisonment, all of those things, and I think people feel they don't have to do all the explaining because somebody already gets it. I think that is incredibly important.'

I check if there's anything she wants to talk about that we haven't covered. 'I suppose the other thing to say about being Laureate is not only is it a privilege, but for me, it's a testimony to all the people in my life from my foster mum, my mum, friends, teachers who plied me with books at a really young age and just gave me that gift of being able to escape in a story, to feel reassured by a story. And obviously all those reading experiences is what fuelled my ability to write as well. And what I hope is that somebody like me, coming from unmarried parents, Black working class as well, and into this position, that I can give that gift on to the children and young people that I meet.'

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

‘Tell Me About It’: How Conversation and Companionship Create Lifelong Readers

Inspired by **Aidan Chambers**, **Mathew Tobin** shares a vital roadmap for nurturing lifelong readers, beginning with two tales. progress in schools has a detrimental effect on reading for pleasure.

The First Tale:

Some years ago, as English Lead in my primary school, I was on a learning walk when I paused at the back of a Year 5 classroom during silent reading. A pupil I had taught in Year 2 had turned the final page of her novel.

She looked up, scanning the room, and caught my eye. She smiled – the quiet, knowing smile of someone who has finished a journey and is already thinking about the next one. Book in hand, she walked over to her teacher, who was marking the morning’s work.

‘Well done,’ her teacher smiled. ‘Find a new one from the reading corner.’

Something in me sank.

The Second Tale:

A different moment. A different setting. A different reader of a similar age, some years later.

I was browsing in Blackwell’s in Oxford when I overheard a father tell his daughter she could choose any book she liked. She took her time, moving between shelves, scanning covers and peering inside before pulling out **Hilda and the Troll** by Luke Pearson. Book in hand, she walked over to her father.

He glanced at the cover, flicked through the comic-like pages, and gently shook his head.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I mean a real book.’

Something in me sank.

* * *

Two moments. Two adults. Both well-intentioned. And yet, something did not quite happen.

I knew immediately why those moments unsettled me. Years earlier, two books had shaped how I understood reading: Aidan Chambers’ **Tell Me** and Margaret Meek’s **How Texts Teach What Readers Learn**. I encountered them as a B.Ed. student specialising in English at Westminster College, Oxford, where children’s literature was not an optional extra but the beating heart of our training.

Under the guidance of lecturers such as Mary Sutcliffe, Aidan Chambers, Philip Pullman and others, we were told that if we were to stand beside young readers with integrity, we needed to read children’s books widely ourselves. Picturebooks, poetry, short stories, novels, information texts, traditional tales. A hundred books a year. Four years. Four hundred before graduation. It was daunting, yet transformative.

In my first term, Natalie Babbitt’s **Tuck Everlasting** knocked me sideways with its philosophical depth. Mildred D. Taylor’s **Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry** revealed the moral intelligence of children’s fiction. Text after text showed me that stories written for children could hold tenderness, complexity and universality in equal measure. I’d had no idea. But the reading itself was only part of it.

We kept journals – not just to prove we had read, but to reflect on how we had read. Chambers’ ‘Three Sharings’ shaped those reflections: What did you enjoy? What puzzled you? What patterns or connections did you notice? Reading was treated not as an extraction, but as an encounter. Personal, yes – but also social. Meaning deepened when it was spoken aloud, listened to, questioned, extended.

And so I recognised immediately what had unsettled me in those two earlier moments. Reading had been acknowledged. It had not been shared.

Aidan Chambers described the adult here as ‘the enabling adult’ – not a gatekeeper or assessor, but a wayfinder: an informed reader who knows the landscape of children’s literature and helps the child find their own path through it. In his Reading Circle, selection, reading and response are interdependent; each relies on the others. A child chooses a book. A child reads. A child responds. That response shapes the next choice. Remove the response, or rush past it, and the circle falters.

Margaret Meek described reading as a series of ‘private lessons’ – not lessons delivered by teachers, but lessons readers give themselves through involvement. As children become absorbed in a story, they are learning far more than how to decode words. They are learning how stories work, how voices sound, how meaning is shaped. They rehearse being both teller and told – inhabiting a narrative while also making sense of it. These lessons are not easily measured because they arise from engagement. They happen in what Meek calls the ordinary acts of reading: the rereading, the retelling, the reshaping, the deep play.

Chambers shows us the structure that sustains reading; Meek reminds us what unfolds within it.

And yet children’s books pass through many adult filters before they reach young hands. Publishers shape lists; reviewers confer prestige; teachers curate spines; parents, often with the best of intentions, steer choices. As Peter Hunt reminds us, what counts as ‘literary’ often reflects adult cultural hierarchies more than children’s lived reading experiences. When we dismiss a graphic novel as ‘not a real book’, we may think we are guarding standards. In reality, we narrow the routes into readerly identities and send powerful messages about what counts.

In both of my tales, adults stood at the threshold of a child’s reading life. In both moments, reading was acknowledged – even encouraged – but not quite entered into. There was no invitation to respond, no space for the private lesson to surface, no shared delight in what had been felt, discovered or imagined.

In this National Year of Reading, we are rightly asking how we might inspire the current generation of young readers. We talk about declining reading for pleasure, about children who no longer see themselves as readers, about curriculum pressures and digital distractions. All of this matters. But beneath the strategies and frameworks sits a quieter truth: if we want reading to flourish, we must begin by listening – not only to research and policy, but to children themselves.



Becoming a reader is not simply about finishing books or selecting the 'right' ones; it is about being seen in the act of reading. It is about agency, about adults who resist the urge to control, correct or categorise, and instead choose to enter the conversation. It is, vitally, about children seeing that the adults in their lives read, too, and take pleasure in it.

If we are serious about nurturing readers, not just children who can read but children who choose to read, we might begin by looking carefully at the adults who stand beside them.

Much of our current discourse about reading quite rightly emphasises mechanics: word recognition, fluency, automaticity. These are vital. Without them, the engine will not start.

When I speak to teachers and trainees, I sometimes ask them to imagine reading as learning to drive. The gears and pedals – the unseen mechanics – are like word recognition. The mirrors help us scan the road ahead, anticipate meaning and connect what we encounter to what we already carry within us. But knowing how to operate a vehicle does not tell us where to go; it does not give us a reason to set out. On its own, it risks making reading feel procedural rather than purposeful.

The joy of driving lies not in mastering the vehicle, but in the destinations it makes possible. In the early days, if we are lucky, someone else drives. They take us somewhere. They show us that the world is larger than we imagined.

In the same way, many children begin their reading journeys with adults at the wheel. We might visit the playful rhythms of the Ahlbergs' **Each Peach Pear Plum**, wander through the deep dark woods of Donaldson and Scheffler's **The Gruffalo**. Later, we might travel further afield to Sophie Anderson's **The House with Chicken Legs**, Sita Brahmachari and Jane Ray's **Corey's Rock**, S.F. Said's **Varjak Paw**, or Robin Robinson's graphic novel **No One Returns from the Enchanted Forest**.

Each destination reveals something different. Each journey shows that reading can be expansive, surprising, comforting or challenging. Over time, the map widens, and there comes a moment when the steering wheel is passed to them.

This is where the enabling adult matters most. Not in controlling the route, but in modelling how wide the map can be. We sit beside them, no longer steering, but attentive to the road ahead.

And so we return to those two moments.

The First Tale:

She looks up, smiling – that same quiet pride. She walks to her teacher.

'Well done,' the teacher says, and then pauses. 'Did you enjoy it? What moment stayed with you?' A brief exchange follows. Thoughts shared. A question returned. They walk to the reading corner together. 'Shall we see what you might choose next?' the teacher says. 'If you'd like, I can share a couple that stayed with me.'

The Second Tale:

The girl in Blackwell's holds up **Hilda and the Troll**, eyes bright.

'Oh, can I take a look?' her father says. She passes him the book and he kneels beside her, turning the pages slowly. 'What made you choose this one?' She points to something on the page. He listens. 'Oh, I can see why,' he says. He notices something at the back of the book. 'There are others in the series, too. How exciting!' He hands the book back. 'Can I read it after you? Or perhaps we can look at it together?'

We may invest in initiatives, frameworks and strategies, and rightly so. But perhaps the most powerful shift lies in something quieter: in the pause before we move a child on, in the question before we judge a choice, in the willingness to read alongside rather than above.

The mechanics of reading matter. We must teach children how to steer. But if we want them to keep reading long after we are no longer beside them, we must also show them that the journey is worth taking, and that the map is wide.

Reading is learned in company before it becomes independent. It is private and personal, yes, but it flourishes in conversation.

The difference between a reader who reads because they must and a reader who reads because they choose to lies in something as small as a question:

'Tell me about it.'

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Mathew Tobin is a Senior Lecturer in Primary English and Children's Literature. His co-authored book, **Teaching and Understanding Primary English**, is published by Sage Publishing, 978-1529684582, £24.99.

Authorgraph

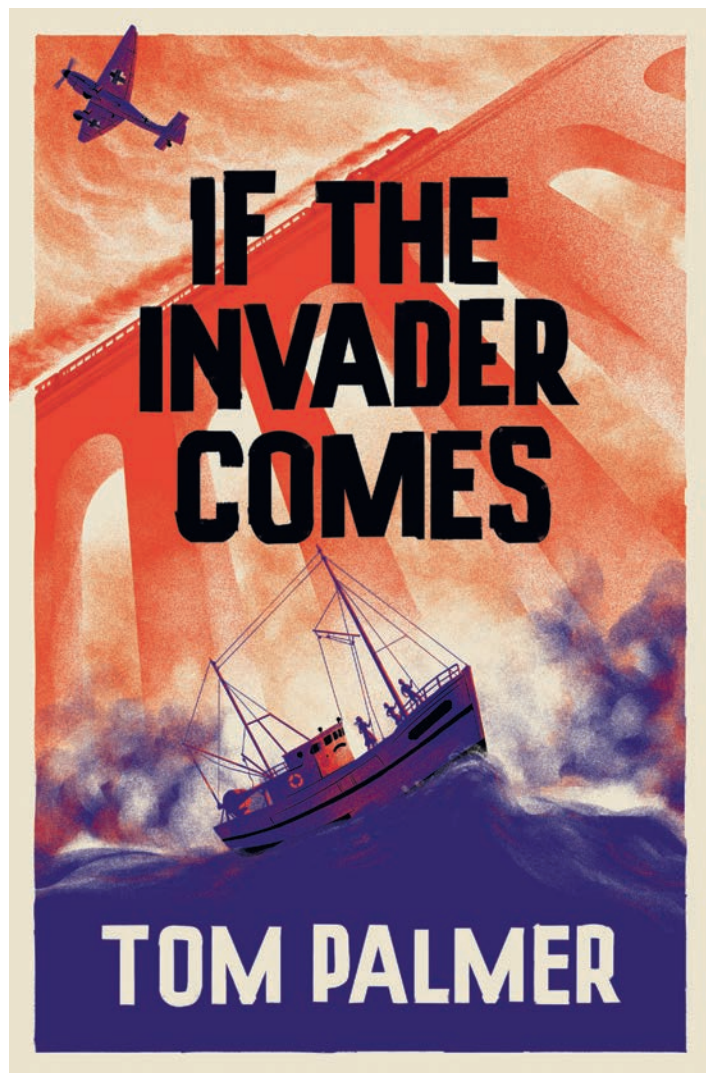
No.279

Tom Palmer
interviewed by
Damian Kelleher

It's been quite a week. On Monday the Prime Minister resigns, on Tuesday England cling on in the World Cup, and a heatwave kicks in to test the nation's mettle (which is already starting to buckle). It's only Wednesday, and I'm talking to award-winning children's author Tom Palmer.

Tom is taking it all in his stride. Yorkshire born, he can turn his talent to sport or historical fiction ('I like, alternating') but we're holding off from football for the minute to talk about his latest novel **If the Invader Comes**. Set in Cornwall in June 1940, war, it's the first in a new **Allies** trilogy for publisher **Barrington Stoke** and marks a new departure for Tom. He and his family have moved from West Yorkshire to Cornwall, and he's been working with Mylor Bridge Community Primary School in writing this book.

'We made the move down to Cornwall five months ago,' Tom explains. 'I've been in West Yorkshire all my life so it's quite a change, but in a good way. We have been coming to Cornwall for years and we wanted to move here, and part of that was that need to work in schools in Cornwall. We love it here; we love the history, the scenery. I wanted to write a trilogy set in Cornwall and I have to say a huge thanks to **Barrington Stoke** for letting me do it. Without that, we couldn't have moved.'



Palmer's career in publishing began in the 1990s and he reflects on changes in children's books over recent decades.

'There was a really strong vibe about publishers nurturing authors and caring for them. I sense, from talking to a lot of people in publishing and other authors, that that is no longer the case, but I really do get that love from **Barrington Stoke** and I love them back.'

'The other factor in all this is my editor Ailsa Bathgate. She's extraordinary and she makes me work really hard on these history books. One of the reasons why they work is because she pushes me and pushes me. I always tell kids that being edited is like working with a football coach; you have natural talent but you need to be guided and trained, and over about fifteen, twenty books she has really taught me and challenged me in so many ways.'

With Palmer's historical fiction, an integral part of the writing process is his contact with local schools for comments on plot, characters and more. 'The input and feedback from those interactions is invaluable', he says. **If the Invader Comes** focuses on three children, Bobble, Cilla and Cadan, whose parents are involved in top secret war work. During the course of the story the children – the Allies of the title – find themselves playing their own vital parts in the fight against the enemy forces. These roles emphasise to readers how different life was at a time when 'Careless Talk Costs Lives'.

'It's hard to imagine,' says Tom. 'Even now with the world swept up with war, most of us haven't got a clue what it was like. But you talk to people in their 90s who were there and who lived it and you realise it was very temporary – they didn't know what was coming. Life wasn't easy. If people couldn't say what they were doing, people bitched and gossiped about them. What a horrible situation to be in.'

The book's title is a direct reference to a Ministry of Information leaflet circulated in 1940 that informed the British population of what to do in the event of a German occupation.

'There's a line that says if the invader comes, stay in your homes because if you run away you will be machine gunned from the air as were the citizens from Holland and Belgium.'

Books two and three in the trilogy will reflect the titles of government information posters designed to help the war effort.

One of the advantages of working so closely with schools when writing historical fiction is that Tom has his own 'sensitivity readers' on hand to ensure the material is suitable for a younger audience. Telling Second World War stories requires authenticity and honesty but where do you draw the line when it comes to actual descriptions of the horrors and injuries that inevitably take place during wartime? One scene that Tom describes in the book is Cilla discovering a German airman trapped in a burning Messerschmitt.

'Scenes like that are based on real events: there was a girl who was cycling along who actually witnessed that. But I work with schools a lot – when I was writing **Angel of Grasmere**, it was Grasmere School in Cumbria and for **If the Invader Comes** it was Mylor Bridge Community Primary School in Cornwall – and with the teachers and the kids, we work out how far to go. But the children want to know – they want to learn stuff and they don't want to be talked down to. They don't want stuff hidden from them, but they don't want to be traumatised either. With the teachers' help, we worked closely together on that scene to make sure it's honest but it wouldn't freak kids out too much. You're always treading a fine line.'

It's a line that also needs to be carefully negotiated during Tom's numerous school and library visits. He's worked with all the leading literacy charities – **Book Trust**, the **Reading Agency**, the **National Literacy Trust** – to support reading for pleasure and campaigns to encourage readers of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. And to remind his audience that authors are real people – real 'live' people!

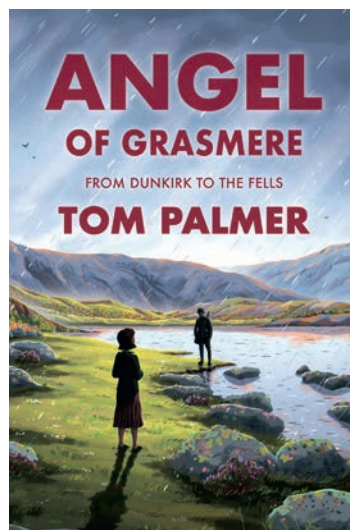
'I never had an author coming to me when I was at school,' says Tom. 'Some kids have even told me, "I thought you were dead!" But I hope that when we authors go into schools, we open people's eyes and help them realise it's not just this elite posh thing, it's through all of us, reading and writing.'

Going into schools to meet younger audiences and talk about historical fiction reminds authors like Tom that it's not just about reading books – the ability to read a room is also key.

'They get the echoes with what's going on with the world today – Ukraine, they get that. They are interested in it.'

'It's so hard to imagine in this country being bombed or being made to live hundreds of miles from where you're from, or having family members on the other side of the world – possibly dead – and all the other hardships that come with it, evacuation and so on. I had a child from Ukraine in my class in Launceston a couple of weeks ago, and the kids there know that she's been through stuff. I was asking who likes history and who doesn't like history and she put up her hand and said "I don't like history." And when I asked why she said, "Because we're supposed to learn from it, and we never do." That was right at the beginning of my event. And the whole thing was about war! So I really toned it down and spoke about the process of writing instead because it's like, Christ, what has she been through?'

'There was another event I did in Liverpool a few years back. I was talking to them about my book **Resist** and Audrey Hepburn being bombed in the town that she lived in. And I said, 'bombed' and one boy in the front row sort of twitched and he put his head down. I didn't know where he was from. Then the second time I said 'bomb' he put his arms around his head. So I completely stopped and changed tack. It transpired he'd come from Syria – and there's me glibly talking about bombing. But I do believe books help kids understand what their classmates have been through. It's all about empathy.'



'When did the fascination with history first kick in? Was it back in school?' I ask. Tom shakes his head.

'I didn't like reading until I was about 17 and I really struggled with it at school. I wasn't allowed to do English literature, French or History throughout secondary school. But my mum and dad used to take me to castles and museums and they got me into history. Unfortunately they both died when I was in my early 20s. Maybe it's just me trying to make sense of the past but I think they instilled that love of history in me. And once they weren't here, I went to seek it out.'

'Growing up, I thought writers were nothing like me. I thought they were fabulously wealthy, highly intelligent, usually from London! I had this idea in my head that someone from Leeds couldn't be an author and then Tony Harrison, the poet appeared. I thought, "Oh my God. There's someone from Leeds who writes about Leeds!"'

For Tom, the next books to hit the shelves will be sporting titles.

'I'm doing some sports fiction for Barrington Stoke's **Underdogs** series, but I'm also doing some of the **Ultimate Football Heroes** books, **England**, **Real Madrid** and **Liverpool**. It's nice mixing it up. These emotional stories are so heavy that you want something a bit lighter. It's a break from the 'meat' and you still earn money.'

While England are still keeping their World Cup dream alive, I ask Tom what he thinks of their chances the morning after the disappointing draw with Ghana.

'It makes me feel we're less likely to win it,' he admits reluctantly, reflecting on England's performance. So, if not England, who will lift the trophy?

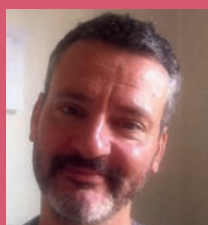
'I've got a strong feeling about France; I've been impressed by them. Didier Deschamps' (France's manager) mum has died and he's gone back to France but he'll be back. Things like that really galvanise teams. They'll be really hard to get past.'

Books mentioned, all by Tom Palmer.

If the Invader Comes, Barrington Stoke, 978-0008802226, £7.99 pbk

Angel of Grasmere, Barrington Stoke, 978-1800902169, £7.99 pbk

The Fear: (Book 1 The Underdogs), illus. by Robin Boyden, Barrington Stoke, 978-0008695705, £7.99 pbk



Damian Kelleher is a writer and journalist specialising in children's books.

Queer as Comics: a guide to the new exhibition

The new **Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration** opened in Islington, North London earlier this summer, the **world's largest space dedicated to illustration**. It has three opening exhibitions, among them **Queer as Comics**, the first major exhibition on queer comic-making in the UK, spanning 1940s to the current day. Curator and comics expert **Paul Gravett** takes us through the exhibition.



Moomin episode 5, strip 29, Tove Jansson (1954) from London Evening News

Queer as Comics presents a chronological survey from 1946 to today, so 80 years, of comics made by over 60 different LGBTQIA+ creators. While there's one aspect exploring the diversity of makers based in the UK and North America, there are also artists from elsewhere around the world, ranging from Finland, where two significant pioneers emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, namely Tom of Finland and Tove Jansson, to more recent and current creators, for example from France, The Netherlands, Lebanon, Cameroun and the Asian diaspora. This exhibition also invites visitors to discover the inclusivity of queer comics by artists of colour and from across the wide rainbow of identities and communities.

Underlying this exhibition are the many striking parallels between the history of queer people and the history of comics. Both have had to endure misunderstanding, prejudice, criminalisation and more for decades. But both have also gradually achieved great progress, liberation, respect and acclaim since the late 1960s. For the comics medium, the first and biggest advances could not happen within the constraints of the mainstream system of publishing and distribution. So more individual self-expression had to emerge first elsewhere.



Boldfinger (1969), Dave Richards Jeremy, No 1 Vol 1

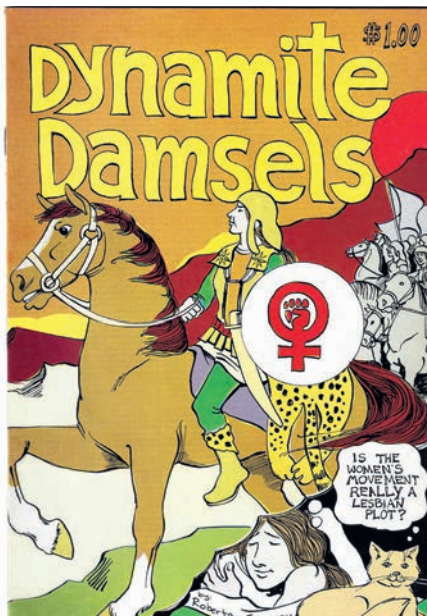
Self-published magazines became platforms for this in the 1950s and 1960s, sold direct to readers through the mail. Out of America's counterculture and call for gay and lesbian liberation and civil rights developed in the mid-Sixties, grew an entirely different network of creators, publishers and retailers devoted to comics not solely for children but for adults. They were called 'underground comix' – to distinguish them from regular mainstream fare available on the high street. Through these 'comix', young adult creators could finally talk to their own generation and age-group from their shared perspectives.

This progress continued internationally and led to comics being made and sold in a book format, or graphic novel, which has become one dominant trend into the 21st century, joined of course by digital comics, made and read online and via smartphones.

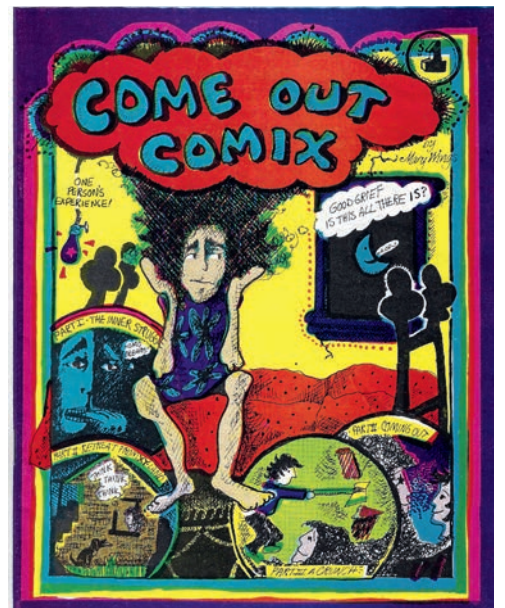
Putting this exhibition together has been a very personal experience but every reading of a comic is different and very personal. So comics that may not have been intentionally LGBTQI+ can be interpreted individually. A formative example of this for me was reading *The Rise and Fall of the Trigan Empire*, a British fantasy



Untitled 1 (from Initiation into the Brotherhood)
TOM OF FINLAND (1946)



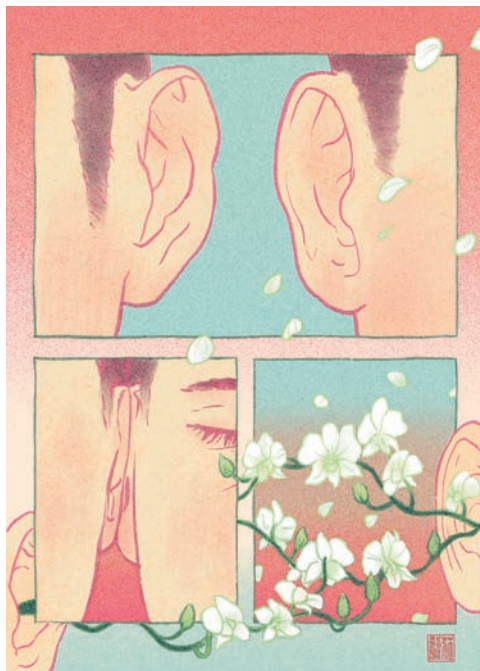
Dynamite Damsels (1976) © Roberta Gregory



Come Out Comix, 1979 © Mary Wings



Heartstopper Volume 2 © Alice Oseman, courtesy of Hachette Children's Group



I Put My Ear Against Yours © Jason Chuang



De droommaker (The Dream-Maker), 2022 © Tobias Tak

comic set in a sort of ancient Rome but with space rockets and aliens. It was gloriously illustrated in painted colour every week by Don Lawrence for educational magazine **Look and Learn**. It was certainly a formative awakening for me. One of the first definitely gay comics I discovered in 1978 was **Lycaons** by Alex Barbier in the French anthology magazine **Charlie Mensuel**. It was immediately striking for its dreamlike, fully painted colour artwork, as if Francis Bacon made comics, and its story's feverish atmosphere, which I later realised was strongly influenced by William Burroughs. So I was delighted to include a page of Barbier's original artwork from this series in **Queer as Comics**.

Among many other essentials to include were British pioneers Oliver Frey and Bill Ward, whose archives are held by the **Bishopsgate Institute** in London. I also wanted to bring into the spotlight pioneering queer comics creators who can often be overlooked. Rand Holmes from Canada is not always given the due credit for being the first comics artist to come out in public bravely in his comics in 1971, unmistakably and in all but name, because his character Harold Hedd was his unmistakable alter ego and look-alike, and whom he showed in one single-page strip in an intimate scene with another man. Another priority to me while putting the exhibition together was to spotlight under-recognised, if not forgotten, utterly brilliant British cartoonists like Lucy Byatt and Jeremy Dennis.

I think there's a lot the exhibition tells visitors about queer comic-makers. For example, that there's a genuine courage in being individual, being yourself, in your work and in your life. I'd say that autobiography is a strong approach within queer comics, but it does not always have to be entirely real and first-person. Autobiography can also inform or inspire many other kinds of comics, even what may appear to be the wildest of fantasy.

As to why comics are such a good vehicle for queer themes, I think again there's a number of reasons. Comics can be a one-person medium, fluid and flexible, letting a singular writer-artist express themselves personally and powerfully through varied mixes of words and fixed images. As neither 'pure' text or 'fine' art, comics are non-binary and fluid in how these combine, contrast, counterpoint, even contradict. And such a supportive, inclusive, ever-expanding community of creators and readers of comics has blossomed over recent years, through festivals, online forums, locally, nationally, globally.

I'm really pleased that this exhibition is one of the opening ones at the new Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration and it's a demonstration of

QBCI's commitment and fearlessness to celebrate illustration in all its variety and dynamism. And especially in the current climate where certain battles, that we thought had been won, have to be fought and won again, from gay and lesbian rights to marriage equality and now trans rights. In these threatening times, progress faces prejudice and pushback, but tolerance, acceptance and intelligence will prevail, as they have done before. Who you are and who you love are fundamental to our being human and alive.

I'm going to finish by highlighting some comic creators that readers of **Books for Keeps** should look out for and recommend to young readers. Alice Oseman's **Heartstopper** is a tender portrayal of more than one queer love story – there's a reason it's touched so many. Also British, Shazleen Khan's webtoon **Buuza** pulls you into a richly imagined fantasy world with a captivating, multi-ethnic cast, and now it's getting big mass-market book compilations. And Bex Glendining's **On Starlit Shores** is another endearing fantasy-tinged generational story building connections between a granddaughter and her grandmother. There's such a vibrant range of other affirming graphic novels to explore, among them Damian Alexander's **Other Boys**, Raina Tegelmeier's **Drama**, Niki Smith's **The Golden Hour** and Tillie Walden's **Spinning**.

I also hope readers will be able to visit the exhibition on a trip to the Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration.

Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration.

1 Myddelton Passage, EC1R 1AG Weds–Sun, 10am – 5pm.

Queer as Comics, 5 June 2026 – 4 October 2026

Tickets include entry to all exhibitions on the day of your visit:

£16.50 adult / £6.60 child including donation.

Free for members. Annual membership from £45.



Paul Gravett is a London-based writer, historian, curator and lecturer specialising in international comics art. He has written, co-written, edited or contributed to over twenty books about this field, as well as curating or co-curating numerous exhibitions, from The British Library, London and National Comics Centre in Angoulême, France to The Centre Pompidou, Paris and the first exhibition of Asian Comics for The Barbican Centre, currently touring museums in the USA. For more details visit www.paulgravett.com.



The magic of words: the poetry world of John Agard

Earlier this month John Agard was announced as winner of the **CLIPPA, CLPE Poetry Award**. It's his third win, a unique achievement, and for **The Poetry World of John Agard**, a book which highlights both his skill and importance as children's poet. John talked to **Books for Keeps** about the book.

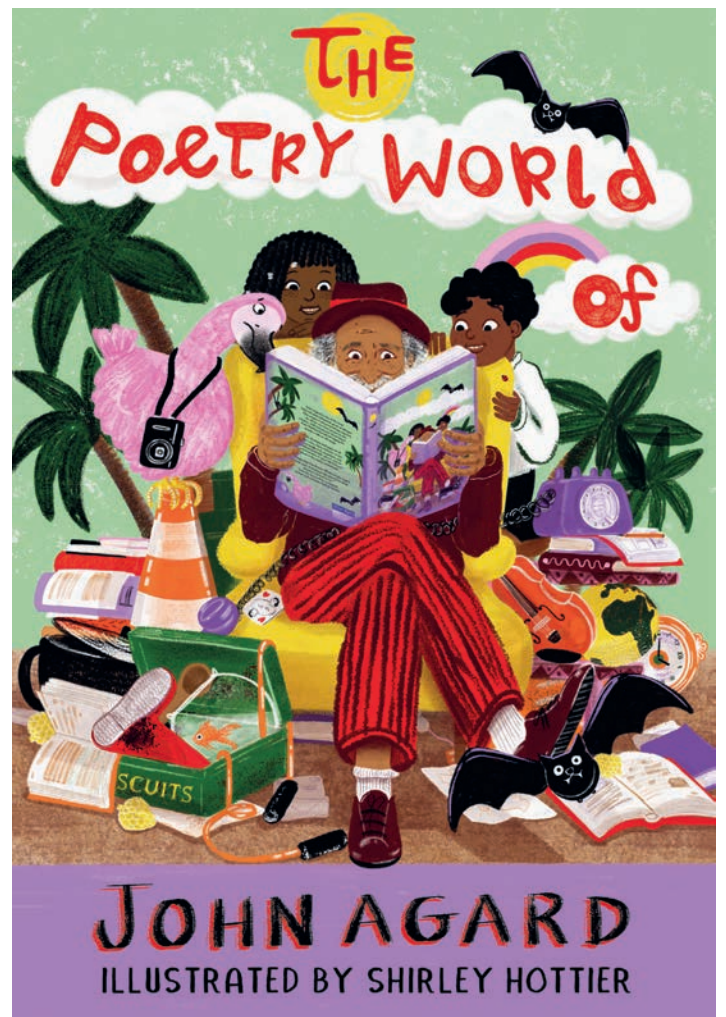
John Agard begins with a warm laugh, the kind that signals both humility and delight. Reflecting on the publication of **The Poetry World of John Agard**, he admits, 'I'd be lying if I said I'm unexcited,' a confession delivered with characteristic modesty. For him, seeing eighty poems gathered from the 1970s onwards is akin to 'a painter having a retrospective,' a chance for readers to witness the sweep of his creative life. The book, he says, offers 'an overview of my work,' a panoramic view of decades of language, rhythm, humour, and cultural memory.

He speaks with gratitude about the collaborative process behind the collection. The project, he explains, was shaped not only by his poems but by the careful eyes and instincts of those who helped bring them together. 'With Charlotte Hacking, as a keen-eyed editor, keeping me on my toes... and with Janetta Otter-Barry as publisher, I think we ended up with a beautiful book.' Even the illustrator was a surprise. 'People are fascinated when I say to them, "Oh, I had no idea who the artist was." You see, I never met her through the process.' He recalls meeting Shirley Hottier only at the book's launch, long after her illustrations had already breathed new life into his words.

Looking back at the poems themselves, Agard describes a sense of discovery. 'The way they came together... there was a sense of movement, or trajectory,' he says. Themes echo across time, sometimes consciously, often instinctively. 'Certain themes are echoed from early poems to later poems.' He points to *Laughter's an Egg*, with its 'trickster element of that tricky egg,' and notes how that playful spirit resurfaces years later in *Professor Peekaboo*, an eccentric, multilingual character whose name alone delighted him.. When he began writing that book, he had no idea what poems would emerge; he simply followed the impulse of imagination. 'I like the idea of Professor Peekaboo,' he says, laughing.

His reflections on illustrators reveal how deeply he values artistic partnership. When he first saw Shirley Hottier's work, he felt an immediate connection. 'There was no question that Shirley had connected to the spirit of my poetry,' he says. He praises her ability to capture the tone and personality of his poems. 'She did a beautiful job,' he says simply. Even without the book in front of him, he remembers vividly how her illustrations made an impact. 'She has many, many illustrations that strike you. I think even the cover,' which he recalls and describes with heartfelt affection: 'She very cleverly used a kind of caricature of my face... almost like a grandfatherly, fourth-generation type Caribbean persona relating something to grandchildren. It invites the reader in and keeps in touch with the storytelling tradition.'

He admired her restraint and imagination. 'She didn't say too much... she left a lot to the imagination.' Her black-and-white work, he notes, 'worked beautifully with the text.' For Agard, her illustrations did not merely accompany the poems, they expanded them, offering new ways for readers to enter the world he had created.



Agard's relationship with poetry stretches back to childhood, though he insists he never approached it academically. 'I never intellectualised it,' he says. 'All my growing-up passions... I look back and they were linked a bit to language.' His first dream was to become a lawyer, inspired by courtroom drama. 'I love the expression "Objection, Your Honour... overruled".' As a child, he would stand before the mirror, performing imaginary trials with the same enthusiasm that young people today might bring to rapping.

Acting soon followed. At fourteen, he joined a junior amateur theatre company in Georgetown, Guyana, where he grew up and attended a Jesuit college. He remembers his teachers fondly. 'They were very, very good teachers. My favourite teacher, Father Maxwell, was Scottish. He turned me on to language.' Another teacher, Michael Jeune, was a playwright, poet, and actor; 'Very inspiring,' Agard says. These mentors shaped his early love of performance and storytelling. He recalls playing Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*, the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*, Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and a witness in *Witness for the Prosecution*. He imagined himself walking the red carpet, dreaming of an actor's life. But as he continued writing poetry, something shifted. 'I realised that there was something exciting about the magic of words.'

He speaks reverently of language, describing it as a force that swept him away. Poetry, for him, is a continuation of that lineage, a place where language is charged with meaning, rhythm, and imagination. His reflections broaden into a meditation on poetry's place in the



photo by Ellie Kurtt



John Agard with Anastasia and Shirley Hottier photo by Ellie Kurtt

world. He describes children today as 'surrounded by an ocean of jaded language... hurried text... double-speaking slogans.' Poetry, he believes, offers something different. 'Poetry can take them to a space where language is charged... where language gives them the vibration of something beyond the everyday.' He sees poetry as nourishment, a 'healthy injection into the psychic anatomy of this generation'.

When he speaks about the impact his work has had on children, his voice softens. 'Oh, it's exciting! It's touching.' He shares a story of an adult who approached him after a reading, holding a long out of print copy of *I Din' Do Nuttin*. The man had bought it as a young teacher in the early 1980s and used it throughout his career. Agard remembers the teacher's insecurity about reading Caribbean-inflected poems without a Caribbean accent. Agard reassured him: 'Read it in your own voice... go for it. Embrace the spirit.' Moments like this move him deeply. 'Those things... you don't think about that, but then it gives you a very exciting buzz.' Writing, he explains, is solitary, so when someone says his work has touched them, it means a great deal. 'If someone, maybe a stranger, says, "I never really liked poetry at school," and then responds to your poem... it means a lot.' He reflects on the power of language to resonate across generations. His poem *Half-Caste*, he notes, 'has touched many generations'. His secret is that he always remains playfully serious about language and the power it can wield. He describes himself as standing 'in the shade of ambivalence', carrying a 'parasol of ambivalence' wherever he goes. Ultimately, what matters most to him is that children find joy, freedom, and possibility in poetry. 'How wonderful for children to enter a space... where language resonates.' His impact on young readers is not something he takes for granted – it is something he cherishes.

As he reflects on decades of writing, performing, collaborating, and inspiring, Agard's voice carries the same warmth and mischief that animate his poems. His retrospective is not merely a collection of work: it is a celebration of language, imagination, and the countless readers, teachers, artists, and children who have joined him on the journey.

The Poetry World of John Agard is published by Otter-Barry Books, 978-1915659477, £12.99 hbk.

Exploring under the Earth

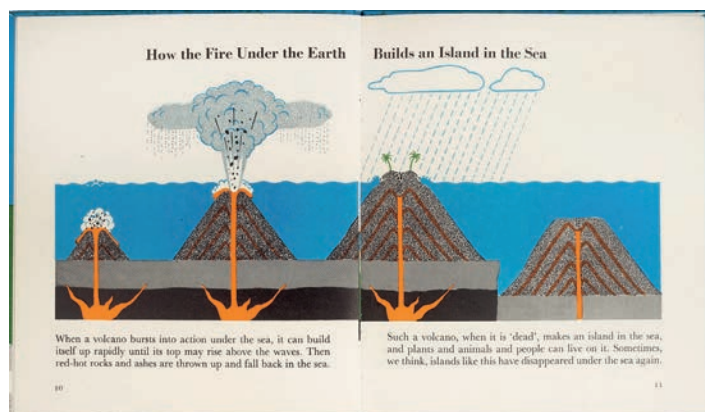
In the latest in the series by **Ruth Thomson** and **Pam Dix** on their research on illustration in children's information books, **Ruth Thomson** considers books that delve underground.

Continuing our interest in depictions of what is normally hidden from view (see **Inside the Body** BfK No.272, May 2025), this article considers some effective approaches and techniques that illustrators have used to show the myriad different elements and layers of the Earth, making them both digestible and readily accessible for children.

Diagrams and sequential images

In the mid 1930s, Otto Neurath developed a simplified pictorial language, which he called Isotype. When his wife, Marie, created a series of science books for children in the 1950s and after, she followed with and further developed stringent, consistent Isotype visual conventions. Images were flat and crisp, mainly in solid colours, usually devoid of perspective and often cut-out against white backgrounds. Colours were chosen to 'add clarity and enhance meaning', and were often the same shade from title to title. Red or orange denoted heat and saturated blue denoted water or sky. Neurath believed that sequential images were often the best way to explain a process and this sequence from **Wonder World of Land and Water** is a prime example both of her thinking and of Isotype conventions.

Wonder World of Land and Water, Marie Neurath, Max Parrish, 1956



These four diagrams show how a volcanic island is created. The unchanging sea and the earth are in solid colours – red for the heat of molten magma and blue for the sea. Changing elements, such as rocks, ash, steam, smoke and rain are shown as dots, dashes or curves. The sea level remains constant, although the depiction of its surface changes subtly above each volcano.



Ladybird books, the ubiquitous information books in the late 1950s through to the 1970s, followed a strict design convention, with text on every left-hand page and full-page colour images on every right-hand page. Although noted principally for their highly realistic illustrations, the books sometimes provided simplified explanatory diagrams for complex processes, such as this one which shows drilling for oil and petrol in **The Story of Our Rocks and Minerals**.

The Story of Our Rocks and Minerals, Allen White, illustrated by Robert Ayton, Wills & Hepworth, 1966
Numbered and coloured-coded diagrams offer simplified visual explanations showing how drilling a borehole works and where gas, oil and water can be found underground.

Visual narratives

A more engaging approach through different layers of the Earth is to envisage an imaginary downwards journey. **The Magic School Bus** series offers a novel conceptual, as well as visual, way of exploring real places – but ones where it would be impossible for children to go. It presents serious scientific facts alongside humorous stories about imaginary school field trips. The 'magic' of the bus is its ability to transform into other vehicles. In **The Magic School Bus Inside the Earth** the bus turns into a steam shovel and then a boring drill, transporting children, led by their eccentric teacher, to the centre of the Earth. Magical things also happen to the children; they don hard hats and boiler suits and take part in activities normally too dangerous, difficult or unsuitable for young children. The text is multi-layered – with facts distinctly separated from fiction. Written in the first person voice of an anonymous child, the story is the only printed text. Self-contained factual information, on ruled or coloured paper, is set on the side of the main image.

The Magic School Bus Inside the Earth,

Joanna Coles, illustrated by Bruce Degen, Scholastic, 1989

Degen's intricate, busy scenes are often drawn from dramatic and unusual angles, full of busy children. These include visual jokes (an extra for observant readers) and labelled objects offering supplementary facts



What's Under the Bed? is a title in the **Wonderwise** series for very young readers. The book opens with a familiar, relatable scene in the bedroom of two children who look under the floorboards to discover what lies beneath. With every page turn, the children (along with their cat) explore further and deeper underground. Repetitive, cumulative questions, written in the style of **The House that Jack Built**, help build up the sequential underground layers, before introducing each new discovery.



What's Under the Bed?, Mick Manning and Brita Granström, Franklin Watts, 1997

The landscape format gave the artists space to include not only a large central main image in their signature warm and colourful style, but also several vignettes of related pictures with hand-written captions offering additional information.



Cross sections and cutaways

Both cross-sections (showing what you could see if an imaginary line was sliced through an object) and cutaways (where some external parts of an object, place or building are removed – cut away – to reveal its interior) are useful devices for showing what lies underground. In the past, several illustrators specialised in these techniques, but their ambitions and styles were distinctly different, as can be seen by comparing these three illustrations which show the design and workings of London's underground transport system.

Railways Under London by Marie Neurath is illustrated with pictograms – simplified, standardised, flat, crisp pictures of people and objects. The book includes many cross-sections, which Neurath described as 'the magic knife'. She said, 'The great advantage of [these] pictures [...] is that they are more rapidly grasped than words, that they cannot be so easily misunderstood, that they stick better in the memory, and that they awake and leave a clear impression.' Neurath saw her role as a 'transformer' – collecting and analysing complex information and transforming it into engaging graphic images, closely integrated with concise, child-appropriate text. To realise the illustrations for this book, she worked from London Transport's engineering drawings.

Railways Under London, Marie Neurath, Max Parrish, 1948



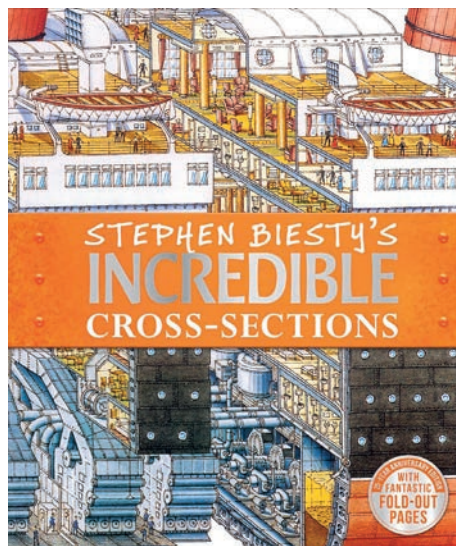
This cross-section visually explains how passengers flow into and out of a tube station. Arrivals are shown as red silhouettes, whilst those leaving are depicted in blue, making it easy to differentiate their routes. Stationary passengers face front, their legs together, whereas those walking are in profile, with their front leg forward.

By comparison, L. Ashwell Wood's illustrative approach was underpinned by his training as a technical draughtsman. His highly detailed, annotated and full-colour cutaways of vehicles and machines were a popular, regular feature of **Eagle** comic from 1950 onwards. In his cutaway of **Camden Road Underground Station**, the complexity of several tube lines flying over one another, going northwards or southwards, is the main focus of the image.



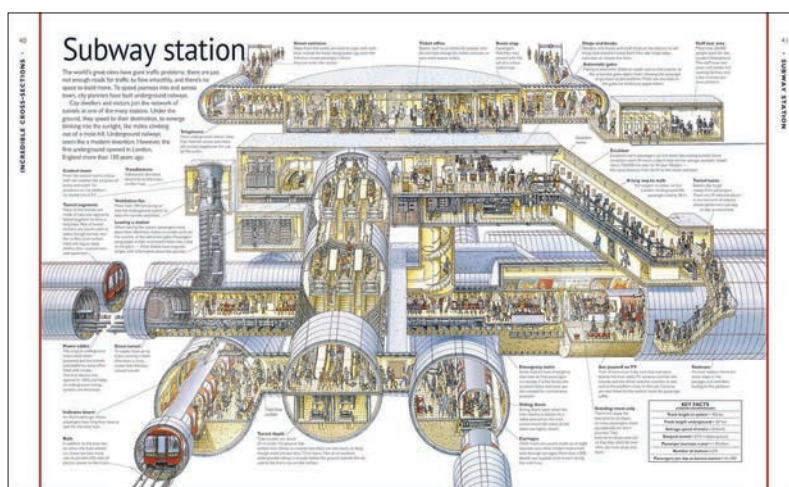
Camden Road Underground Station, Ashwell Wood, Eagle comic, Vol. 1, No. 27, 16 October, 1950).

The illustration is animated by the inclusion of the busy street above ground, giving the cutaway below a real-life context. The tunnels are cut away at significant points to show either junctions, platforms, tunnels or trains travelling in both directions.



Stephen Biesty acknowledged his debt of inspiration to Ashwell Wood, as well as to Hogarth and Bosch, when he started creating his complex cross-sections, describing them as 'atmospheric cutaways'. In Biesty's first title, **Incredible Cross-Sections**, his extraordinarily detailed, lively line and wash artwork was designed to pore over more than once.

Incredible Cross-Sections, Richard Platt, illustrated by Stephen Biesty, DK, 1992



Figures are individualised and animated. Alongside the public areas where teeming passengers hurry along or wait for their trains, the staff and working areas are also depicted, including the control room, offices and even rest areas and toilets (a particular feature in many of Biesty's illustrations).



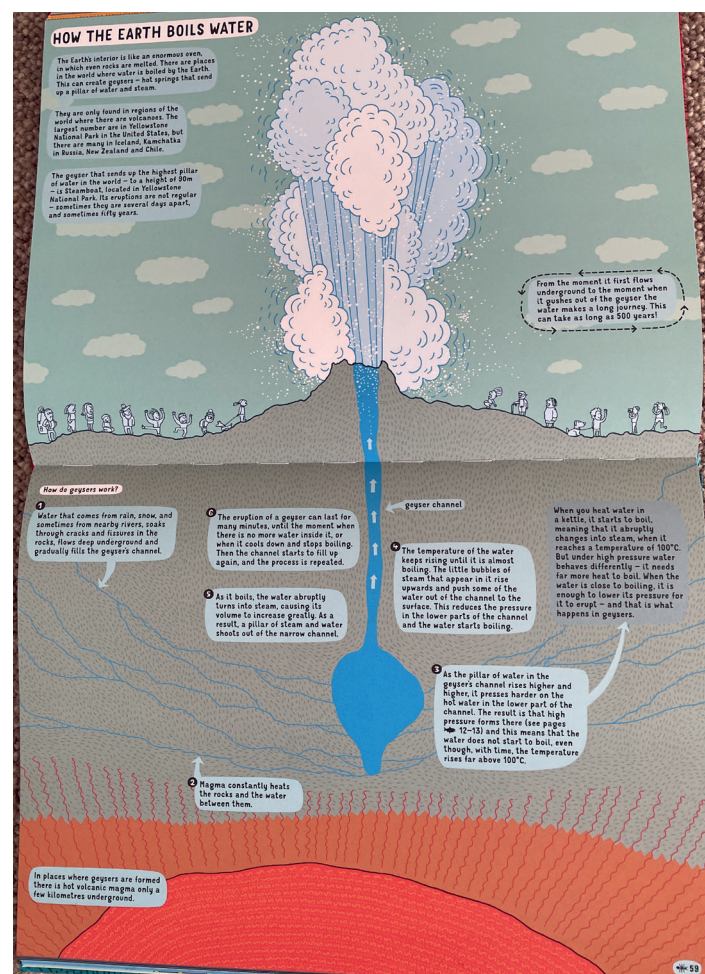
Ruth Thomson is an award-winning educational author and editor, who specialises in writing books on art and history. She has an MA in Museum and Gallery Learning and has written children's publications for major British museums and art galleries.

Novel formats

Under Earth, Under Water is an unusual, contemporary large-format book designed in two separate halves – readers can choose to start from either end. The reader must turn the book sideways to read the spreads vertically, allowing the illustrators generous space to depict what happens at different depths. **Under Earth** begins with the natural world just under the surface and continues with human interventions: household systems with water, gas, electricity and sewage pipes; tunnels, underground transport and mining. The journey continues downwards via caves, volcanoes and geysers, eventually reaching the Earth's molten core.

The densely illustrated spreads combine labelled, often busy, cartoon-style scenes of specific things or cross-sectioned places, with text broken into discrete bubbles, outlining essential facts and processes in descriptive text. The enormous format allows breathing space for many dramatic, immersive images. Their apparent graphic simplicity belies their sophistication, with dashes, dots, crosses and lines providing texture to solid blocks of colour.

Under Earth, Under Water, Aleksandra Mizielińska and Daniel Mizieliński, Big Picture Press, 2016. Originally published as **Pod Ziemią**, Pod Woda, Warsaw: Dwie Siostry, 2015



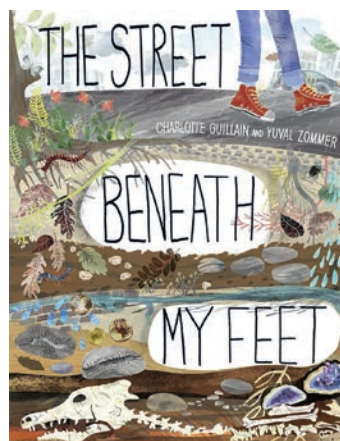
Dashes provide texture to the rock. Wavy red lines radiate outwards from the red magma into the rock and blue underground water becomes paler when it spurts into the air. Repeating blue curves and white spots around overlapping clouds of steam suggest the powerful outwards force of the geyser.

The Street Beneath my Feet is an equally oversized book with ten landscape panels on each side. These open, concertina fashion, to form two continuous vertical panoramas, 2.5 metres long. One side takes the reader on a journey deep beneath a city pavement, passing sewers, underground railways, caves, and coal mines, eventually reaching the earth's crust, mantle and core. The other side reveals what happens underground naturally, showing burrowing animals, rotting vegetation, underground rivers, rocks and fossils.

An artist at the forefront of the 21st century information book renaissance, Yuval Zommer won acclaim for his distinctive, intricately textured artwork in his natural history series: **The Big Book of...**, which he both wrote and illustrated.

The Street Beneath my Feet was the first book which Zommer did not write himself, but he could not resist the challenge of its unusual format.

The book epitomises the sea change from the 1960s of the often merely physical interpretation of what's under the Earth, focusing on human extraction of rocks and minerals and geological events, such as volcanoes and earthquakes, to a more holistic and interconnected approach incorporating the natural world alongside geology and suggesting the sometimes damaging effects of human interventions.



The Street Beneath my Feet, Charlotte Guillain, illustrated by Yuval Zommer, Words & Pictures, 2017

Each panel can be enjoyed on its own as a self-contained section but also links to the next one. When the book is unfolded in its entirety, two epic journeys are revealed. Zommer wanted readers to enjoy the physical experience of unfolding the pages – becoming active participants in an uninterrupted journey right down to the Earth's core and back up to the surface again



Continuing the Story: A Summer with the GLL Literary Foundation

Rebecca Gediking Library Services Director GLL keeps us up to date on the work of the GLL Literary Foundation.



It's been a busy and inspiring few months for **GLL Literary Foundation** authors. Since our last **Books for Keeps** update, they have been visiting libraries and schools, delivering events, attending literary festivals, awards ceremonies and industry gatherings, and meeting fellow authors, publishers, booksellers and librarians from across the children's book community. So far in 2026, **Foundation** authors have reached more than 2,000 children, introducing them to new stories and inspiring a love of reading.

The **Foundation** has continued to grow too. A new webinar series is helping schools connect with **Foundation** authors wherever they are, while our popular Literary Lunches bring authors together online with editors, agents, publicists, booksellers and other industry professionals to share practical advice, experiences and insights into building a career in children's publishing.



GLL first anniversary celebration at the House of Lords

June was a particularly memorable month. The highlight was the **GLL Literary Foundation's** first anniversary celebration at the House of Lords, hosted by Baroness Floella Benjamin. Bringing together **Foundation** authors and **Literary Foundation Champions** with representatives from Parliament, local government, libraries, publishing and cultural organisations, the reception reflected **GLL's** commitment to building stronger partnerships and stronger communities. It was a chance to celebrate the **Foundation's** first year and, more importantly, to look ahead to what we can achieve together.

Foundation authors also attended the **Carnegie Medals**, the **Branford Boase Award** and the **CLiPPA**, celebrating excellence in children's literature while gaining valuable insight into the wider publishing world. Behind-the-scenes access to judges and organisers, conversations with shortlisted creators and winners, and the chance to meet authors and illustrators at every stage of their careers all helped to build new connections and fresh ideas.

For us, though, the real highlight is always the children. Whether at a library event, a school visit, a literary festival or a national awards ceremony, it's impossible not to be inspired by their smiles, their curiosity and the brilliant questions they ask. Seeing a child discover a new favourite author, laugh at a story or leave excited to read more reminds us exactly why bringing authors, libraries and communities together matters.

In this issue, **Chapter Two** author **Iqbal Hussein** reflects on what becoming part of the **GLL Literary Foundation** has meant to him.

Being Part of Chapter Two

By Iqbal Hussein

What's the collective noun for a gathering of writers? A quill? A draft? An edit? Whatever it is, I now regularly find myself in the wonderful company of other children's writers, all thanks to a place on this year's **GLL Literary Foundation**. As part of the Wandsworth cohort, I follow in the dauntingly big footsteps of last year's group, whose members, including Jack Meggitt-Phillips and Olivia Wakeford, have already begun making their mark.

The **Foundation** team have been brilliant, as has my **Literary Foundation Champion**, the fabulous October Jones (and with a name like that, she really should be writing a book). Although we are only in the early stages of the **Foundation**, I've already gained valuable insights into the life of an established writer through the Online Literary Lunches. Rashmi Sirdeshpande's 'Ask Me Anything' session was particularly brilliant. As a writer still finding my way, opportunities like these make the journey feel less solitary.

Recently, I joined writers from both cohorts to celebrate the first anniversary of the **GLL Literary Foundation**. That was reason enough to celebrate, but the occasion came with an extra thrill: a lunch and networking event at the House of Lords, hosted by Baroness Floella Benjamin.

Everything about the day was memorable: the glorious sunshine, the backdrop of Parliament and the Thames, and a room full of people passionate about libraries, books and reading. But the day belonged to Baroness Benjamin. She gave an inspiring speech, which even included a song. In an instant, I was transported back to being six years old, watching *Play School* and rediscovering the joy of stories.

I had the opportunity to thank her personally, encouraged by fellow **GLL** writer Luan Goldie when I became uncharacteristically shy. Baroness Benjamin was generous with her time, greeting everyone warmly, posing for photographs and making each conversation feel personal. When she spoke about her '*Play School* babies', there was such pride and affection in her voice. I'm not embarrassed to admit that my own voice cracked as I told her what she had meant to so many of us, and how she filled a gap for children whose parents didn't always have the time or opportunity to read with them.

The **GLL Literary Foundation** is already helping me grow as a writer, build new connections and become part of a wonderfully supportive community. Here's to many more celebrations, many more voices being heard and every child discovering that their stories matter too.

If you'd like to get involved, whether through partnership, collaboration or simply by finding out more about the **GLL Literary Foundation**, they'd love to hear from you. Get in touch at literary.foundation@gll.org



GLL at Royal Society of Literature

Beyond the Secret Garden

Reading Gender

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

Gender and reading have long been tied together. John Newbery's **A Little Pretty Pocket-Book** (1744) offered all readers a toy with book purchase – but boys got a ball and girls got a pincushion. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the **Boys' Own Paper** and the **Girls' Own Paper** modelled appropriate behaviour for their respective audiences – however, the 'Letters' section of each publication indicates that readers did not always stick to their assigned publication. Interestingly, according to Chen and Moruzi (2019), girl readers were welcomed by the **Boys' Own** editors, but boys were redirected away from reading **Girls' Own** publications. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, publishers and librarians published separate lists of 'books for boys' and 'books for girls'. As late as the mid-1970s, for example, **Penguin Peacock** editor **Kaye Webb** was recommending 'Peacocks Especially for Girls' that included **Good Wives** by Louisa May Alcott, **Fifteen** by Beverly Cleary, and Betty Falk's **The Peacock Cookery Book**. Webb's other list, interestingly, was labelled not 'books especially for boys' but 'general reading', cementing the idea that girls are welcome to read boys' books but boys were either not interested in reading or not encouraged to read books with girl main characters. Her general list included reprints of Empire fiction and nonfiction by authors such as John Buchan (**The Three Hostages**) or J. H. Williams (**Elephant Bill**), science fiction (Heinlein's **Citizen of the Galaxy**) and sports books (Eamon Dunphy and Peter Ball's **Only a Game**).

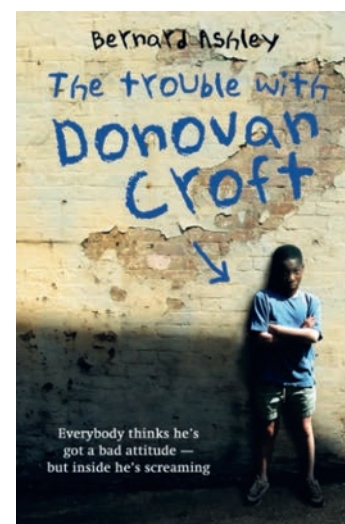
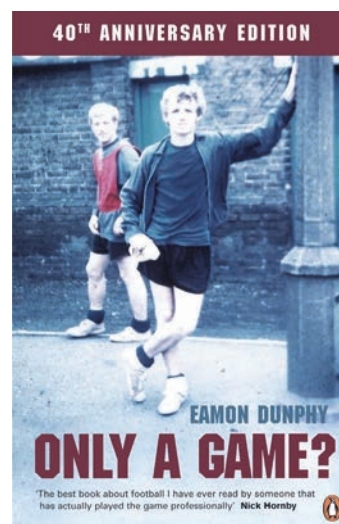
Few of these early stories and books had main characters from racially minoritised backgrounds; those that did often focused on the specific problems, rather than the joys, of being a minoritised boy or girl. **William Rainey's** story, **The Mystery of an Ancient Papyrus**, printed serially in the magazine **Chatterbox** in 1916, contains no female characters at all and contrasts white British boy Dick with a young Arab boy, Selim who acts as guide to Dick and his cousin in Egypt. Dick initially comments that Selim 'absolutely doesn't know the difference between right and wrong. He says it can't be helped, it's due to his bringing up'. Dick adds that Selim's mother was a Black African woman and his father a Muslim, and this accounted for his amorality. Yet Selim's and Dick's actions parallel each other. While on board a ship, Selim steals oranges which he shares with Dick and another boy. Dick also steals food to give to 'the dervish', a stowaway on the ship that he has discovered in the hold. When Selim is caught and punished for his theft, he tries to point out Dick's complicity in eating the oranges and Dick's own theft. But Dick tells Selim that Selim's theft is 'downright wicked' and that 'It wasn't quite right what you said about me – pocketing the slice of meat at dinner-time. That was different; the food was mine' even if he had taken it 'to give to someone else. So you see it was quite different'. While Selim is punished for his theft, Dick is rewarded for his, as 'the dervish' later saves Dick's life. The same act is seen as generous in a white British boy and as wicked in an Arab boy.

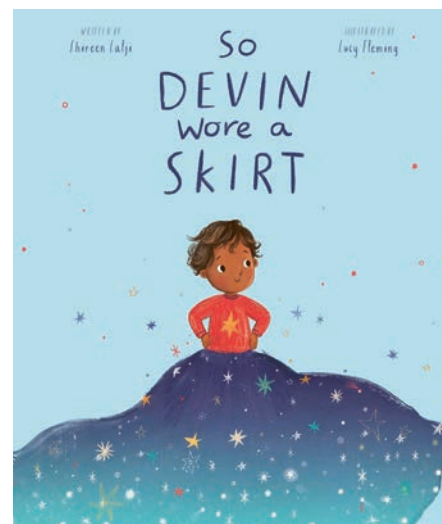
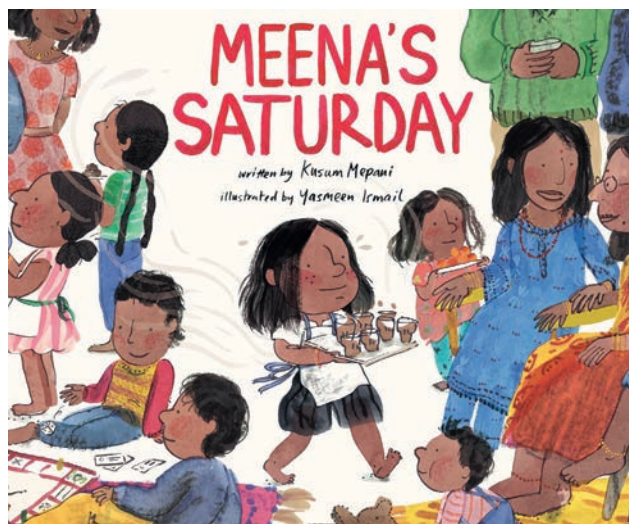
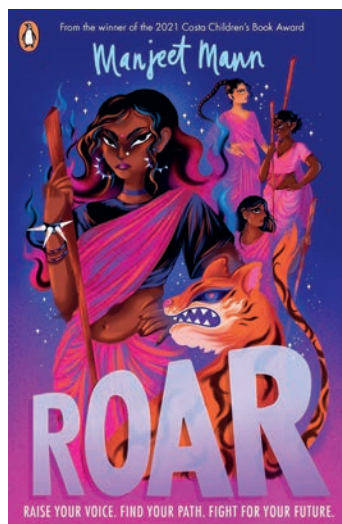
Fifty years later, being racialised still defined how gender was performed in books for young people. Joan Tate's **Jenny** (1964) and **Mrs Jenny** (1966) might be similar in some ways to careers novels or **Kaye Webb's** 'girls' books. Jenny is sixteen at the start of the first book, and has to navigate work, family, and romance. However, Jenny's world is one in which 'Many of the coloured people in Wanchester had only one room for whole families'; she is chased by white boys on her way back from work; she is called a 'black

tart' for dancing with a white boy at a dance. Girlhood experiences such as a first job or a first dance turn sour for Jenny because she is racialised by white people.

Tate's **Jenny** books are unusual in depicting a Black girl as the main character navigating life. Black girls are rarely depicted in Windrush-era mainstream fiction for young people as having traditional feminine qualities or experiences, instead being shown as something 'other' and outside girlhood – and indeed, humanness. Jean MacGibbon's **Hal** (1974) is imagined by white boy Barry as being part of a jungle, despite them both living in London; the narration describes her as having 'a spine that flexed like an animal's'. Gillian Cross's Clipper, in the four-book series beginning with **Save Our School** (1982) is known for her athletics, and is friends with boys rather than girls. So-called 'Tomboys' abound in children's books, and are often seen as feminist characters (in as much as they resist gender norms), but Clipper is frequently depicted as (potentially) violent and even animal-like. At one point her friend Barney comments, 'That's the trouble with you, Clipper. You always rush in like a mad gorilla'. Boys from racially minoritised backgrounds in books written during this time period are often silenced. Ray Pope's **Is it Always Like This?** (1970) includes a British Pakistani boy, Tormon, who is constantly removing himself from situations when his racialised maleness is criticised; for example, when another character says that white children shouldn't be left 'with a coloured boy', Tormon responds that he will go, agreeing that a Pakistani boy being left in charge of white children 'isn't nice'. Bernard Ashley's title character in **The Trouble With Donovan Croft** is a problem for the white boy because Donovan is Black; Ashley does not let Donovan speak for himself until the end of the book and even then, it is the white boy who is the main character and whose problems matter. Eamon Dunphy's 'diary' of his time as a professional footballer at Millwall, **Only a Game?**, never mentions the Black players who suffered from Millwall's 'football hooliganism' that involved banana missiles and monkey noises at Millwall matches.

Recently we have noticed a growth in books that examine gender and patriarchy within minoritised communities. Manjeet Mann's **Roar** (2025), for example, discusses the way that patriarchy and the





caste system doubly oppresses girls and women in India. Yet this is challenging territory. **Susan Okin's** 1999 paper 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?' argued that patriarchal gender roles are often justified with reference to cultural tradition. Respondents, such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty highlighted how women within minority communities developed critiques and activism that diverge from (white) liberal feminism. In this context, situating a critique of patriarchy within a minoritised community runs the risk of readers associating that community alone with patriarchy. We have yet to encounter a children's book that explores the global violence and chaos caused by the actions of successive prime ministers educated in elite single sex schools – we doubt we ever will.

Meena's Saturday is written by Kusum Mepani and illustrated by Yasmeen Ismail (2024). Meena's Saturday starts early and involves helping her mother with shopping, cooking and preparing chai. Her brother, however, can stay in bed and read. Meena narrates that 'ijn my family, boys get special treatments because they're boys.' But the text suggests this isn't an issue confined to Meena's family. 'Mum says that when she grew up in Gujarat, India, that's just the way it worked.' Observing that 'the men always eat first', Meena decides that today is the day to interrupt that tradition. The picture book is relatively rare in opening up consideration of gender roles and the invocation of 'tradition' and 'back home' as ways of maintaining patriarchal gender roles in Indian families. At the same time Indian women are not depicted as oppressed victims; we see warmth and camaraderie among the women in the kitchen. Meena dreams of a robot that could do their tasks and of a table that would allow everyone to eat together. Direct criticism of the men who uphold this tradition is avoided.

So Devin Wore a Skirt written by Shireen Lalji and illustrated by Lucy Fleming (2025) opens up consideration of gender presentation. Young Devin wishes to wear a skirt at a family function. The family are worried what his grandfather will think about this. However his grandfather is very welcoming of the decision and dances with Devin. While Lalji appears to focus on gender presentation, the text does less to question gender roles in extended South Asian families (the actual community is kept vague). Mum serves samosas while Dad looks after the barbecue. Characters wear traditional South Asian clothes. Grandfather's approval is sought – and on this occasion given. The story shows Devin happy to be himself while also celebrating a sense of tradition. Books such as these, and other children's books on gender in racially minoritised communities, demonstrate the complexities not just of being gender, but of *doing* gender on the page for young readers.

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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.

Layers of Light and Hope: An interview with Britta Teckentrup

Britta Teckentrup was born in Hamburg in Germany, and grew up in Wuppertal, near Cologne, a city known for its museum (the Von der Heydt, with works by impressionists and Dutch masters) and its sculpture garden (the Waldfrieden, with large modern works). At 18, in 1988, she came to the UK to study, first at Harrow College of Higher Education. With a new book, **The Green Child** out now, she talked to **Nicolette Jones** for **Books for Keeps**.

‘I always thought I wanted to study fine art, but when I was 18, I didn’t have the confidence. I thought I didn’t have enough to say. German universities were very intellectual and I wasn’t that intellectual. I worked in a different way. That’s when I first thought I’d come to England and do a foundation course with a bit of everything, a bit of painting, a bit of sculpture, a bit of illustration. Then I realized that I really liked illustration. So I went on to study illustration at St Martin’s School of Art.’

‘But the idea that I wanted to do fine art never left me.’ Her next course was Fine Art Printmaking at the Royal College, where her favourite teacher was **Helen Chadwick**. On the way, she also spent three months on an exchange in Dublin.

After her master’s degree she worked in fine art and illustration separately. ‘At some point, they came together. I was doing books for some publishers that were more arty, and that was fine.’ In all, she spent seventeen years in London and Surrey, before moving back with her family in 2005 to Berlin, where her Scottish husband had always dreamed of living. She was in her Berlin flat, lined with face-out books, when I spoke to her on Zoom.

She attributes her publishing debut to ‘pure luck’ at the degree show at St Martins. **Sue Tarsky**, children’s publisher, who had an eye for talent (she also discovered **Sara Fanelli**, and published **Helen Craig’s Angelina Ballerina** books) and commissioned **Teckentrup’s** first book in 1992.



After her second, **Tarsky** asked ‘Can you write as well?’ ‘And I said, “No, I can’t.” But then she said, “Try”, and that’s when the writing started. So I’m very thankful to her. That was my way in.’

Teckentrup has now published some 70 books, of which the latest, her first for **Post Wave**, is **The Green Child**, whose rhyming text by **Hollie Hughes** features a fairy-like green child with a message to mankind about climate change, and the hope that children can make a difference. **Teckentrup’s** images turn this alarm call into a celebration of nature through the seasons.

The text tells us that the planet is overheating and needs help, but the illustrations are not scary. They bypass the blasted landscapes and the bushfires. ‘I really wanted to avoid an image of the earth with factories and planes and cars everywhere and all of that. I wanted to stick to the seasons and show what we want to save. Animals and nature and the beauty of it. To instil an awe of nature in children and the parents who read it, so they love the planet and the woods and the green child so much that they feel that’s worth preserving.’

Getting **The Green Child** right to begin with was ‘almost half the process’. There were about ten different versions, beginning with **Teckentrup’s** characteristic autumnal palette. ‘My first approach was very **Grimms’** fairy tale-like, in dark woods, and the green child was really simple with just a leaf emerging and looked really alien. But they thought, I think, that it was a bit too scary and dark. And they said, can you make it a bit brighter and a bit flowery? Then I tried more flowery things and something that looks a bit gender neutral. At first the face was green, but that changed too and I played around with making it a bit friendlier and a bit warmer and more approachable.’

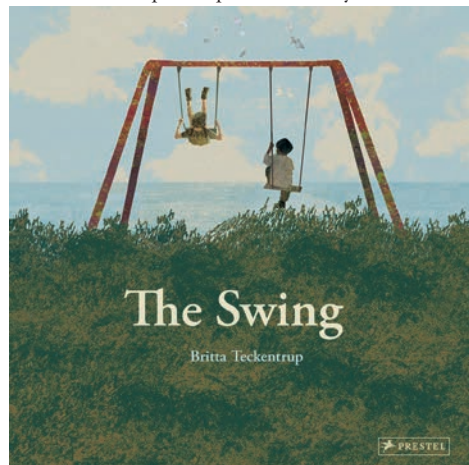


The finished character has a tall hat covered in blooms on a pointy head, and is reminiscent of a **Flower Fairy** with rather different proportions. 'I quite like the fact that the head is so huge. But then I thought nature is more important than the child. And if the child represents nature, I guess that's why I made it so big.'

In an early version, there was a possibility that the hat would also go through the seasons, turning from buds to flowers that wilt. But there was 'too much happening in the image' and 'it didn't work out'.

I suggest to **Teckentrup** that the child whose hat is always flowery is a symbol of the spring always being there. The child becomes a symbol of hope because it is wearing a spring-like hat. 'Yes', she says, 'that's exactly the reason why it works like that'.

Teckentrup is happy to accommodate changes. She enjoys working with publishers to arrive at what they want. She was astonished, she says, to discover that German publishers don't have art directors. They have editors, whose comments tend to be less about the visual aspects of picturebooks. She was apprehensive about how that would work without the expert input. But today she works with a couple of German editors she trusts. Now and then, she admits, she enjoys the greater freedom they give her.



Her favourite book, **The Swing**, published by **Prestel**, a beautiful and epic work about time passing and nature and community, was an example of exercising this freedom.

Although her many books have ranged in style from the

brighter and more minimal to the darker and more detailed, her characteristic technique is this. 'Every couple of months I've got mad texture-making days where I mainly use oil paint and newsprint, because I like the way the oil paint seeps through. The back is sometimes more interesting than the front side, and you get lots of lucky mistakes. Then I pile up those textures and scan them in. In my first books, before computers, I cut out all the textures and used collage. Now I put textured papers in different Photoshop layers on top of each other. Sometimes a Photoshop file can be two or three hundred different layers. The way the textures interact with each other sometimes makes me see things. When I start a spread I don't know what I'm going to do. Publishers sometimes despair that I can't give them roughs because things develop while I play around with those textures and see what works.'

We wonder where her interest in textures originates. She often takes photos of textures in nature, not to use in her books, but just because she likes them. Then she remembers that 'When I was a kid, I had this horrible 70s wallpaper made from cork. The ugliest you can imagine. It was a black background and then there were cork patterns on top. I remember lying in bed and just seeing things in those patterns like faces and figures. I do wonder if that made me be so fascinated by textures. I think it might have. Saying that now, it's still very much the way I work with my textures in my picturebooks.'

Teckentrup is also fascinated by the effects of light, and moonlight and shafts of brightness are often a striking element of her work despite her predilection for darkness. 'I think darkness carries more emotion. There is something inside of me that relates to the darker image and you can play with light more when it's dark. Light is really, really important to me, and it quite often comes last. Once I've added that light aspect towards the end, then the emotions come. When I do that layer more than anything in an illustration it shows what I feel inside. Then it's not so much about the technique or if the child or the room looks right. Then it's purely about depth and being real and it's almost the most vulnerable and honest part of creating the picture, the light. It's quite intuitive, so I probably can't explain it in a better way.'

The ideal way to work, for **Teckentrup**, is on several books at once. With her two German publishers and her array of English ones she often has the opportunity. She has current and forthcoming projects with **Prestel**, **Nosy Crow**, **Big Picture Press** and **Walker**, among others, ranging from books for the very young to projects for older children that will enable her to exercise her love of darkness. We look forward, as she does, to seeing how they turn out in the uncertain process of creation.

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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**.

Letterbox Library Recommends: We Are Family: Beyond Queer Parents

In our new column, **Letterbox Library** recommends books that celebrate equality, diversity and inclusion. Their theme here, the representation of LGBTQ+ family members, who aren't the parents.



The earliest representations of any minoritised group often conform to a single type, whether as a result of creatives presuming what will best stand a chance of getting published, or publishers prescribing the boundaries of representations.

UK LGBTQ+ picture book representations have tended to favour a two dads/two mums trope. This makes sense. After all, many children's first knowing encounter with LGBTQ+ people will be their own or their peer's parents and it remains urgent that these family units are recognised and affirmed.

The difficulty comes only with the limitations of this model. Picture books are rich with extended family members but these portrayals have a heterosexual resolve. Some will argue that their sexuality isn't asserted but this belies the fact that adult characters in children's books very often make heterosexual declarations whether through linked arms/handholds with the opposite sex, wedding ceremonies, a background couple portrait, a text's 'Mr&Mrs'. Endemic cultural heterosexism also ensures that, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, characters simply are heterosexual. Which means that to figure as queer in picture books you must not just be visible, you need to double down in order to be seen at all.

Because heterosexuality is so culturally conspicuous, two recent picture books which do represent beyond the LGBTQ+-as-parents mould, but do so through indirect referencing, end up struggling to represent it at all. How many readers of **Great-Aunt Margot and Me** will guess at Margot's identity when the two portraits of her with another woman are smuggled into the endpapers, the only other clue being a rainbow flag and badge on the side of a background display case? Likewise, will a reader attribute anything to Grandma's rainbow bead necklace in **Finn's Little Fibs**, thinly supported by a single sitting room portrait of Grandma framed with another woman?

Gay uncles flourish in **Our Big Day** and **Confetti** – interestingly, both through the prism of a wedding ceremony, an out and out proud celebration of romantic love. Also of note is **Uncle Bobby's Wedding** which recasts its original 2008 gay male guinea pigs as humans. [As a side note, all of these couples, like their LGBTQ+ parents counterparts, are interracial white/PoC]. Meantime, picture

book series character Lulu's family has grown to include top babysitting couple, Auntie Zari and Auntie Jina [both Black women] in **Lulu's Sleepover**.

Perhaps most joyfully of all, picture books have just introduced our very first queer elders in the form of grandparents [again, in white/PoC couples] – publishers, please take your cue! This arrival has felt revolutionary on several counts. Firstly, ageism associates our elders with conventionality and, while of course it shouldn't, this presumes 'traditional' heterosexual relationships. Secondly it counters popular culture's overwhelming preference for ageing LGBTQ+ people as a 20-something population. Finally, it refutes the idea that publicly declared or 'out' queer identities are a singularly modern phenomenon.

The domestic comfiness of the couple in **The Glamorous Grandmas** suggests two women who have been together for the longest time. Grandchild Archie says of his handholding Grandma and Nana, 'When they walked through town, he'd catch people staring or whispering.' However, in Jodie Lancet-Grant's trademark upending of where nonconformity resides across her picture books, the grandmas' subversion isn't their public 'outness' but rather their ultra flamboyant dress sense and, later, their criminal activity when they break in to a drab gallery space in order to flood it with modern works of art. These loudly-dressed nanas take up and interrupt public spaces.

Meantime, Harry Woodgate, inspired by his MA dissertation subject, has an especially strong commitment to portraying LGBTQ+ elders. 2023 Nibbies and Waterstones' winner, **Grandad's Camper** stars a beloved Grandad whose grief at the loss of his long-term partner is relieved by sharing precious memories with his grandchild of his camper van adventures with Gramps. The book's scatterings of queer iconography and its panels which flash back to tender scenes of Grandpa and Gramps together are all lit up by Woodgate's confetti-bright, light-soaked palette. **Grandad's Pride** extends this overtness thematically and, here, Woodgate uses the character of Grandad to reflect back on a long history of LGBTQ+ activism and protest illustrated as flamboyant panoramas of Pride parades and marches. Queer visibility has rarely been so bold – nor so gorgeous on the eye.

All books mentioned available from [Letterbox Library](#)

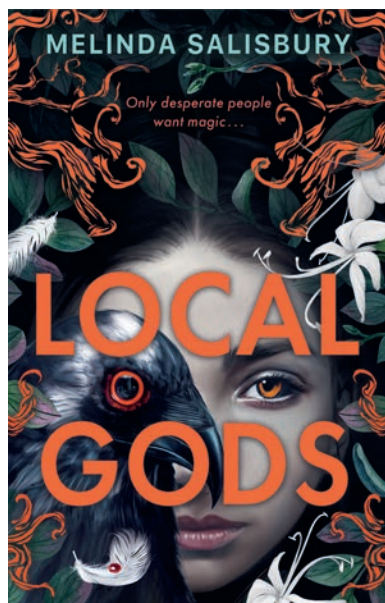


Letterbox Library

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**.

Local Gods, Universal Truths: an interview with Melinda Salisbury

By Joanne Owen



'The whole town is a tinder box; it could go up at any moment, and for all the townsfolks' talk of wanting it to recover, to survive and heal, they just don't care, don't seem to understand their actions and their behaviour might have consequences. A spark is all it needs.' Such is the folk horror context of Melinda Salisbury's **Local Gods**, an exquisitely crafted YA novel that fulfils the author's desire to 'tell the most truth that I can' through her fiction. Think **The Wicker Man** meets **Carrie**, with a liminal teenage girl at its heart, and themes of scapegoating, persecution, and othering coursing through its veins.

Written in a lucid style, and laced with foreboding, **Local Gods** tells the powerful story of seventeen-year-old Sylvie. Once the privileged sweetheart of her town, Sylvie has fallen from grace as a result of her father, formerly the 'goddamned prince of Pine Ridge Hollow', committing crimes against the folks who live in their isolated community. Blamed for her father's misdemeanours and the town's demise, Sylvie lives alone as an outsider in the West Woods, a realm of uncanny white animals located on the edge of town. While counting down to the time she can leave Pine Ridge Hollow for good, a dying god appears to Sylvie in the form of a horned being named Illican, to whom Sylvie is drawn in an elemental fashion, and from whom she learns about the magic of the West Woods, which might just save Pine Ridge Hollow.

As is usually the way with Melinda's process, **Local Gods** was sparked by an image. In this case, 'the image of a horned being slumped in front of a tree'. Less usually, **Local Gods** took Melinda 'a really long time to figure out. I had the feeling of it, and I was carrying it, and I knew thematically what it was, and what I was trying to do with it, but I couldn't quite find the plotline'. In time, the story sprang from the coming together of what Melinda calls the 'four pillars' of the novel, **Carrie**, **The Crucible**, the recent revival of **Oklahoma!** and **The Wicker Man**: 'When I had these four pillars, I found the story I wanted to tell. I have a teenage girl who accidentally comes across magic and realises she can use it. I have a community that is willing to enact horrors to support itself. I have the folk horror setting of a town that's refusing modernity. And then the development of the story came very quickly.'

While Melinda points out that **Local Gods** 'wasn't directly meant to be a commentary about how we are treating people who are "othered"', she acknowledges that 'that must have fed into it. Everyone wants someone to blame, and perceived outsiders are very easy targets, which is exactly what happens to Sylvie'. Indeed, belonging versus otherness cuts to the core of **Local Gods**. As Melinda expresses it, humans have a 'fundamental desire to want to belong. We are a social species as a rule. We've organised our lives in a way that structures us around societies. And I think in **Local Gods**, while it's partially about belonging and wanting to be part of society, it's also about not wanting to be where Sylvie is. So, you go along with

the horror', which is exactly what comes to pass in **Local Gods**, in chillingly unexpected ways that really do conjure **The Wicker Man**. Discussing the folkloric elements of **Local Gods**, it's fascinating to hear how the central elements of Melinda's West Woods world came from real life: 'The reason the animals are white is because I literally saw a white deer in the woods and I was entranced by it. White animals shouldn't exist because it makes them highly visible, it makes them very vulnerable, it makes them outsiders. The crow came about from real life, too. I was on my way to a meeting with my editor and ended up walking through one of the London parks, and there was the crow.' As for the West Woods' owls, 'lots of folklore has owls being liminal creatures, not truly occupying either world'.

The liminality of owls chimes with another facet of **Local Gods** in that the story is centred on a teenage girl who occupies a liminal space, as are all Melinda's novels: 'The nature of being a teenager is that you're on the literal threshold of adulthood. I think being a teenager can't be anything other than liminal'. Thinking of Sylvie, alongside having the 'innate liminality of being a teenager', Melinda adds that 'she's also living in this in-between place, in woods, which are not part of the town. She's living in an in-between period. She doesn't know what's going to happen next in her life. She's in this holding place, waiting. And then, of course, she finds magic, and magic is pretty liminal in and of itself'.

On talking about the magic of **Local Gods**, Melinda shares her belief that magic is 'about people wanting power. I think to women, particularly, one of the large draws of magic is finding power in a world that would deny it to you'. For Sylvie, her life used to be 'organised in a way that meant she never needed it, and now she's on the outside. Now she has no power, resources or allies. Magic is the only avenue left for her to kind of try to pursue some agency in her life'.

Melinda's conjuration of Sylvie's character showcases her writing's depth. Having previously spoken of her dislike of the 'Western storytelling rule which means that, by and large, a protagonist has to be a different person by the end of a book' and 'declared "likeable" by the last page', in the case of **Local Gods**, Sylvie's story journey is very much on Melinda's terms. While Sylvie 'very definitely ends up changed, she doesn't necessarily become a hero. She does what's right for her, and she does what is right for the woods'. Melinda also notes how the Hero's Journey 'feels disingenuous to the human experience, which I think storytelling is supposed to speak to in a really fundamental way'. This belief marries with Melinda's reason for writing: 'All I want as a writer is to tell the most truth I can, and to make it as direct and as honest and as pure as I can,' a desire that's certainly accomplished in **Local Gods**. Though its focus is on a local community, this novel unearths universal truths through a story that's pure, honest and haunting.

Books mentioned

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Carrie, Stephen King, Hodder, 9781444720693, 272pp, £10.99 pbk.

The Crucible, Arthur Miller, Penguin, 9781444720693, 176pp, £12.55 pbk.



Joanne Owen is a writer, reviewer and workshop presenter. 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**.

‘You Did Us Proud’: Children’s Hour Remembered

Nicholas Tucker looks back on the golden age of a national institution for **Books for Keeps**



The **BBC’s** once famous radio programme **Children’s Hour**, founded in 1924, was particularly good at putting on weekly serials. Thanks to the skill of radio actors plus their back-up teams and in particular the sound-effects department, children listening at home had few problems visualising what was going on, with their own imaginations on hand to complete the picture. A few snuffy critics had warned against the possibly corrupting effect of mass radio on children lulled into listening rather than learning to fend for themselves. They were soon won over, given the programme’s strong and evident belief that only the best was good enough for young listeners. Sometimes employing live musicians and on special occasions even symphony orchestras and a chorus to provide background music, **Children’s Hour** aimed high and regularly got away with it. Leading authors and editors worked on scripts acted by performers at the top of their game. Children’s parts were mostly taken by mature female actors expert in sounding like ten-year-olds. Hardy professionals, such as **Denise Bryer**, would appear in the **Radio Times** listings with a bare ‘D’ standing for her Christian name, so as not to give the game away. But such devices were not needed for **Billie Whitelaw**, a gifted child actor whose name was conveniently in tune with the boy characters she often played.

With its ever-friendly hosts there to provide continuity, initially introduced as honorary ‘Uncles and Aunts’, **Children’s Hour** aimed at a warm family atmosphere. Its regular actors often became favourites in themselves, with young listeners happy to greet yet another radio appearance by **Geoffrey Wincott**, **Wilfred Babbage**, **Vivienne Chatterton**, **Patricia Hayes** and many others. At the head, the peerless **Norman Shelley** took on **Pooh Bear**, **Toad of Toad Hall** and was the definitive **Dr Watson** to **Carleton Hobbs’** inspired **Sherlock Holmes**. Classic stories increasingly unreadable by modern standards were sympathetically turned into drama serials made up of half-an-hour chunks. Memorable scenes taken from **John Bunyan**, **Walter Scott**, **Mrs Molesworth**, **Charles Kingsley** and other literary giants from the past captivated children unlikely to have read the originals.

Who could resist **David Balfour’s** nightmare ascent up a shaky staircase in the serialisation of Robert Louis Stevenson’s **Kidnapped**? Sounds of lashing rain and a howling wind

accompanied his footsteps to the intended doom engineered by his wicked Uncle Ebenezer. Here was immediacy even the original text could not hope to rival.

Modern authors were also well represented. The dramatisation of Rosemary Sutcliff’s **Eagle of the Ninth**, set in Roman Britain and one of the finest of the post-war productions, unforgettably featured warriors fighting pitch battles to a frantic background of neighing horses and clashing swords. Other favourites just as convincing concentrated on humour or gentle domestic adventure. **The Swish of the Curtain**, adapted from Pamela Brown’s novel started when she was aged fourteen, re-visited the ever-popular daydream whereby children put on their own play. Noel Streatfeild’s serial **The Bell Family**, written for **Children’s Hour**, was another great favourite.

Richmal Crompton’s **William** stories were also there along with W.E Johns’ best-selling **Biggles** adventures. But there was no room for a resentful **Enid Blyton**, whose submitted short stories in 1936 were considered ‘small beer’, and a play written four years later derided as ‘stilted and long winded’. In 1941 Erich’s Kästner’s classic story set in Berlin, **Emil and the Detectives**, was turned into another popular series; a brave choice in the middle of a world war. In **Toytown** going out at the same time, Dennis the Dachshund was allowed to continue with his German expressions (‘Nicht wahr?’) and mangled sentence structures: ‘The furniture too large was into the house to go.’ Mischievous but good-hearted, he first appeared in 1928 when the **Toytown** stories were first published. Only a few objected to his continued presence years later on the airwaves.



Norman Shelley as Dr Watson with Carleton Hobbs as Sherlock Holmes

Cinema, theatre and future television adaptations have also played an important part in boosting children's literature but none quite as successfully over so many years as **BBC** radio. Particular triumphs like its versions of **The Wind in the Willows** and **Alice's Adventures in Wonderland** were reissued as long-playing records. Frequently repeated with the same cast, it was not just children who enjoyed such treats. There was plenty of variety too, with choices from the largely forgotten, such as Hugh Stowell Scott's **Barlasch of the Guard**, to ever-popular serials involving **Richmal Crompton's** great character William. **Anthony Buckeridge's** schoolboy duo, Jennings and Darbishire, also had many fans. Increased book sales regularly followed these and other hit broadcasts.

Acquainting the nation's youth with the best that was written for them both currently and in the past was always the aim at a time when there were almost no dedicated children's libraries and cheap paperbacks had yet to arrive. Generations of children provided with such riches were to benefit richly as a result. For after the demise of **Children's Hour** the **BBC** did little more to advance the cause of children's literature. Future radio adaptations were sporadic and largely ineffective, and literary serials directed at children on television dwindled over the years.

But at the time, the **BBC** was outstandingly supportive of both children and their books, with **Children's Hour** remaining just that – a warm-hearted programme on every day, totally dedicated to the young, packed with good features and put over by welcoming and affectionate broadcasters. Evacuated children fortunate to have access to a radio could still feel at home again by tuning in to the truncated version running in wartime. Listening to a good story expertly brought to life along with legions of other children also switching on was also a pleasure in itself. Chatting to others in the family after a programme or to friends the next day at school, recalling best moments or speculating what might happen next was also part of the fun. I have yet to meet anyone from those times who did not truly enjoy **Children's Hour**. **BBC Radio**, you did us proud!

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Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll, Penguin Random House, 978-0241725108, 160pp, £14.99 hbk.

Barlasch of the Guard, Hugh Stowell Scott, CreateSpace, 978-1530332854.

Jennings and Darbishire, Anthony Buckeridge, House of Stratus, 978-0755101535, 210pp, £7.99 pbk



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

I wish I'd written...

Winner of the **2018 Branford Boase Award** with **Kick**, **Mitch Johnson** chooses a book that transported him to another kingdom.

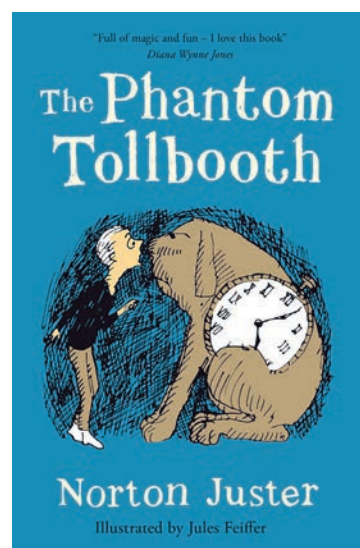


Strike, Mitch Johnson's new book, is out now, Usborne, 978-1474928151, £7.99 pbk.

If there is one book that I could honestly describe as life-changing, it would be **The Phantom Tollbooth** by Norton Juster. I was twelve years old when I borrowed it from my school library, and it blew my mind. I loved it so much that the librarian let me keep the copy I'd borrowed, and to this day that battered little paperback is one of my most prized possessions.

The Phantom Tollbooth is about a seriously bored boy called Milo, who comes home to find a mysterious package waiting for him. Inside is a portal to the Kingdom of Wisdom – a land of words and numbers – and Milo sets out on an adventure that is full of eccentric characters, fantastical landscapes and baffling conundrums. The novel seamlessly weaves humour, imagination, curiosity and nonsense into a tale that is impossible to predict. In an episode that typifies the story, Milo finds a staircase that leads to infinity, and he discovers – after climbing for hours and getting no closer to the top – just how vast infinity really is. It's a very wise book that makes its readers feel wise as well, and the scratchy illustrations by Jules Feiffer are a perfect accompaniment: strange, nightmarish and wonderful. The whole thing is like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, but weirder.

But the thing I love the most about **The Phantom Tollbooth** is that Milo is totally unready for his adventure, but adventure chooses him anyway. It made me believe that maybe, next time, it might choose me.



The Phantom Tollbooth by Norton Juster, illus. Jules Feiffer, is published by HarperCollins 978-0007263486, £7.99 pbk

Obituary: Geoff Fox

20th April 1938 - 14th June 2026

By **Darren Chetty**



We are saddened to hear of the passing of Dr Geoff Fox at the age of eighty-eight. Geoff was a long-time contributor to **Books for Keeps**. He wrote a number of articles and over 300 reviews for the magazine each demonstrating the careful, attentive approach to reading that he advocated in his writing and teaching. From 1970–2000 he taught at St Lukes, the School of Education at Exeter University. I was one of the many students whom he taught there.

Geoff's contribution to children's literature was immense. He was part of the founding editorial board of the journal **Children's Literature in Education** and edited the journal from 1970 to 2008. The journal helped establish children's literature as a serious academic field – one that combines literary theory and criticism with education and pedagogy. In so doing, it gave space for scholarly consideration of children as readers, and teachers as mediators, of literature shared in educational contexts.

Two books emerged out of the journal. In 1976 he edited **Writers, Critics, and Children: Articles from Children's Literature in Education** (Agathon Press) which included contributions from Nina Bawden, Joan Aiken and Ted Hughes. In 1995 he edited **Celebrating Children's Literature in Education** (Teachers College) a retrospective that included contributions from Phillippa Pearce, Margaret Meek, Aidan Chambers, Virginia Hamilton, Robert Leeson, Margaret Mackey, Robert Westall and many others.

Along with his editing and teaching roles, Geoff found time to publish a number of books including **Starting Points** (1967), **Teaching literature 9–14** co-authored with Mike Benton (1985), **Children at War** co-authored with Kate Agnew (2001) and **Dear Mr Morpingo: Inside the World of Michael Morpurgo** (2004).

After his National Service in the Royal Air Force he went to Oxford University before becoming a secondary teacher at Manchester Grammar, the school he had attended as a child. He spent some time teaching in the USA in the late 60s and spoke of how this was an important grounding in his educational philosophy; he retained a sense of optimism that things could be otherwise along with a keen analysis of the political forces that came to bear on classrooms. Writing in 1995, he noted that '[t]he most lunatic pronouncements on literature in England...have not come from the fringes, but from government. Prescribed, or even exemplary, lists of authors in the National Curriculum (mostly dead, mostly male, mostly beyond the reach of young readers, and almost all white) take no account of how readers read, and how children grow up to be readers.'

The breadth of Geoff's interests can be seen in the title of his PhD dissertation: 'Criticism, Pedagogy, Practice and Facilitation in Children's Literature, Drama and Oral Storytelling.' Geoff's approach to literature, education and scholarship was always inclusive. The tributes in the final issue of the journal 'An Editor takes his leave' repeatedly refer to his encouraging, attentive editorial approach particularly with regards to emerging writers. But they also noted his rigour. He wouldn't stand for lazy thinking – I know this as a former student. His feedback on my essays was almost conversational but always precise and insightful. In taking my ideas seriously, he communicated also that I should make sure to think seriously. He was the first person to show me that children's literature was a subject worthy of close attention. We kept in touch via email, his messages were always warm, humorous and encouraging, little pieces of storytelling relaying incidents from the recent or distant past.

Through his writing, teaching, and editing Geoff impacted thousands of people in the UK and far beyond. The field of children's literature owes much to his tireless work. His ability to transform the atmosphere in a classroom for the better had to be seen to be believed. He credited this to stories, writing that: 'Nothing, in many teachers' experience, welds a group of children or students into a good-humoured, learning community so effectively as the sharing of literature in all its forms.'



Dr Darren Chetty is a writer and a lecturer at UCL with research interests in education, philosophy, racism, children's literature and hip-hop culture. He is a contributor to **The Good Immigrant**, edited by Nikeshe Shukla, and has since published five books as co-author and co-editor. He is the co-author with Karen Sands-O'Connor of the **Books for Keeps Beyond the Secret Garden** columns.

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

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.

Clare Pollard is a poet and writer and author of the book **Fierce Bad Rabbits: The Tales Behind Children's Picture Books**

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.

Books About Children's Books



Make Believe: On Telling Stories to Children

★★★★

Mac Barnett, Bonnier Leap, 112pp, 978-1806173143, £14.99 hbk

'Why do adults accept – and expect – mediocrity from children's literature?' Mac Barnett asks in **Make Believe: On Telling Stories to Children**, contending that children deserve better writing. It's an essay reminiscent of Katherine Rundell's **Why You Should Read Children's Books, Even Though You Are So Old and Wise** – but if that sometimes felt like a breathless puff-piece for children's books, Barnett is on the attack. Whilst Rundell plays the angel, asserting that children's books 'speak of hope', Barnett is the devil's advocate, excoriating an industry that sometimes perceives itself as beyond critique.

To a point this is great fun. It's hard not to agree that there is a lack

of rigorous reviewing of kids' books and that 'if we want to ensure that our children have good things to read, it behooves us to think deeply about their literature'. When he digs into politics, Barnett is witty and invigorating: 'I know this may seem like an overblown way to characterise a book about an anthropomorphic banana who learns to share. But I'm serious: to understand the distorting effects of adults' power over children's books, it might be useful to think about the literature produced under a totalitarian regime.' His idea of kids' literature as 'propaganda for adulthood' is an intriguing provocation, though when Barnett continues to argue that 'they're prosocial messages masquerading as stories, designed to promote good behaviour, glorify grown-ups, and get kids to sleep on time', you do start to feel like he's mainly talking about picture books, and doesn't seem to realise he's living through a golden age for middle-grade.

Still, there's lots to enjoy in his ire. Children's books are bad, according to Barnett, in 'so many different ways' – treacly, preachy, bland, badly rhymed, by celebrities, starring the snowman from Disney's *Frozen*. He compares the way books fail to the 'three aunts you get seated next to when you are a kid'. The first aunt becomes a completely different person – her voice gets loud, her eyes widen, she says 'oopsie woopsie' and is 'painfully zippy'. She is like the books with 'wacky fonts' and 'stuff kids like' such as unicorns, poop and football (I was reminded of my own pet peeve: novels that put every eighth word in SHOUTY CAPITALS). The second aunt is sermonizing and self-important. Good books are like the third 'cool aunt' who 'treats you like a person'. But who are Barnett's 'cool aunts'? Certainly they include

Margaret Wise Brown and Maurice Sendak, whose experimental works he considers 'the equivalent of *Ulysses* and *The Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson*' – his dissection of *Goodnight Moon* is one of the highlights of the book.

His contemporaries are more easily dismissed though. At one point, in reference to sci-fi writer Theodore Sturgeon's law that '90% of everything is crud', Barnett suggests that '94.7 percent of kids' books are crud'. Unsurprisingly, this increase on Sturgeon's already snobby and overinflated figure has not gone down well on social media. When it is incredibly hard to get published, advances are at record lows, and booksellers and librarians are trying to encourage reading for pleasure and a diversity of voices – not to mention fighting book bans – it seems unjust to assert that the vast majority of children's books are rubbish, and, indeed, worse than adult books, on the basis of snark and vibes. No wonder so many in the industry felt personally insulted. In the aftermath of this quote circulating, it was saddening to see how many authors assumed that Barnett was talking about them – though perhaps he was. He asserts, brutally, that 'every aunt thinks she is the cool aunt'.

Barnett has since apologised, admitting his assertion was 'hyperbolic and glib'. Ultimately, like many of the best polemicists, it feels like he was having too much fun to admit the complicated reality of the children's book world, which lies somewhere between Sturgeons' assessment and Rundell's – at about, I'd guesstimate, half crud and half hope. But then, as Barnett's dedication reminds us, the feelings of grown-ups were never his primary concern: this impassioned argument is 'for the kids'. **CP**

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant

Broken

★★★★★

X. Fang, Pushkin Children's Books, 48pp, 978-1782695714, £14.99 hbk Children have a remarkable talent for transforming small mistakes into looming catastrophes. This picturebook captures that emotional logic with extraordinary warmth, humour and understanding. When Mei Mei accidentally breaks her Ama's favourite cup whilst attempting to frighten Mimi, the family cat, she is convinced that catastrophe is inevitable. What if Ama gets angry? What if she yells? What if she is so disappointed that she sends Mei Mei away?

Rather than confess, Mei Mei remains silent, only to discover that guilt has a way of making itself impossible to ignore. When Ama assumes Mimi is responsible, the cat's seemingly unblinking stare transforms into the embodiment of Mei Mei's guilty conscience, following her from cake plate to hiding place with increasingly comic intensity.

Fang captures this emotional spiral with extraordinary sensitivity. The story understands that for a child, a small mistake can feel world-ending. Time stretches and distorts. A few minutes in a coat cupboard becomes an imagined exile lasting years. Anxiety magnifies every possibility until the broken cup



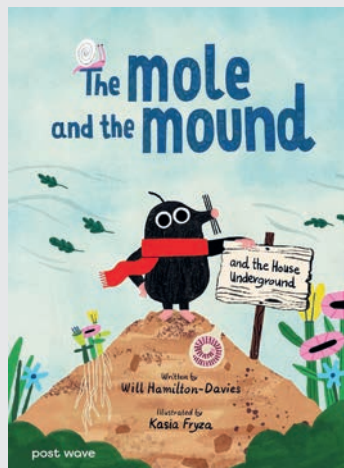
Under 5s **Pre – School/Nursery/Infant** continued

looms far larger than the accident itself. Yet the book never becomes heavy-handed. The humour remains wonderfully present throughout, particularly in the escalating visual exchanges between Mei Mei and the gloriously indifferent Mimi.

The illustrations are exceptional. Rendered in coloured pencil and rich with visible mark-making, every line feels purposeful. In a world dominated by muted greens, greys and blues, colour appears where emotion gathers: Mimi's blazing ginger fur, the warm ochres of the treasured cup, the swirl of an untouched slice of cake. Fang's full-face close-ups are especially striking. Mei Mei's panic, Mimi's inscrutable gaze and Ama's quiet tenderness are communicated with remarkable clarity and warmth. There is nothing generic here; every expression feels deeply observed.

The book's emotional heart arrives with Ama's response. Rather than focusing on blame, she offers a lesson in repair. Every patch and every fix, she explains, tells a story. It is a beautiful idea, transforming the narrative from one about mistakes into one about resilience, care and the relationships that endure despite our imperfections.

Warm, wise and visually stunning, this is a picturebook that understands something profound: being forgiven is not about pretending that the break never happened. It is about discovering that what is damaged can still be cherished, mended and loved. **MT**

**The Mole and the Mound**

★★★★

Will Hamilton-Davies, ill. Kasia Fryza, Post Wave, 32pp, 978-1836271215, £7.99 pbk

Animal houses provide ample opportunity for picture book adventures but **The Mole and the Mound** has lots to recommend it. Mole is industriously building a shelter underground, lovely cross sections allowing young readers to see just how comfortable and extensive it is. It doesn't impress his neighbours however; Bird, Beaver and Bee boast that their homes are the

best, competing with one another to heap praise on their constructions. But when a storm arrives, and the wind and rain wreak destruction, the three are delighted to accept Mole's kind invitation to shelter with him, and properly impressed at just what luxury lies beneath the mound. It's a funny and very satisfying story – we're definitely on Mole's side from the start – with a gentle message about kindness and not judging by appearances. Will Hamilton-Davies is a poet and this rhyming text is particularly pleasing to read aloud, with lots of opportunities for young readers to join in. The illustrations too are very appealing, lively depictions of both the natural world and Mole's cosy home. **LS**

King School

★★★★★

Alexis Deacon, Otter-Barry Books, 40pp, 978-1915659712, £12.99 pbk Deacon has long possessed a rare ability to create picturebooks that operate simultaneously as adventure, fable and philosophical enquiry. His stories often appear deceptively simple on the surface, yet beneath their playful energy lie questions about power, belonging, identity and what it means to live well alongside others. In this welcome outing, he turns his attention towards childhood, learning and leadership, creating a picturebook that feels less like a conventional story and more like a quietly radical manifesto for curiosity.

When a young king is deemed old enough to begin his education, the adults around him set about preparing him for the future. A vast school is built. Experts are gathered. Rules are established. Surrounded by towering walls and generations of accumulated knowledge, the king is expected to learn how to become the ruler everyone imagines he should be. Yet despite the good intentions surrounding him, something feels wrong. The school has been designed for a king, but nobody has stopped to listen to the child.

What follows is both wonderfully playful and unexpectedly profound. With a single emphatic 'No!', the young king abandons the carefully ordered, claustrophobic world prepared for him and races beyond its boundaries. What begins as an escape soon becomes something closer to a wild rumpus of discovery. Chased by the adults, as ordered, the king instead invites them forwards. As fields replace walls and woodlands replace classrooms, pursuit gives way to participation. Along the way, the king asks a deceptively simple question: 'Can I show some important things about myself?' It is the question at the heart of the entire book. The adults have worked tirelessly to teach him what a king should be, yet nobody has paused to discover who he already is. As the chase unfolds,

learning becomes something shared rather than delivered. Discovery replaces instruction, curiosity replaces certainty, and the world itself becomes the classroom.

Deacon's illustrations are extraordinary. His loose, expressive linework carries an energy that feels simultaneously childlike and masterful. Architecture looms and constrains; landscapes breathe and expand. Scale is used brilliantly throughout, with page turns delivering moments of genuine surprise and delight. Every spread invites exploration, rewarding readers who linger over details and visual clues.

What prevents the book from becoming didactic is its generosity. The adults are not villains. They genuinely wish to help. Their mistake lies not in caring too much, but in assuming they already know what the king needs. The resulting tension gives the story its emotional depth and elevates it far beyond a simple celebration of freedom or play.

By its conclusion, **King School** suggests that education is not about producing a particular kind of person but about creating opportunities for growth, encounter and wonder. Wise, playful and deeply humane, this is a picturebook that trusts children with big ideas and leaves readers of all ages with important questions to carry into the world beyond its pages. **MT**

Daddy Doesn't Believe In Dragons

★★★★

Sarah Tagholm, ill. Alice Courtley, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978-1839133664, £12.99 hbk

Dad has spent SO long working from home and has finished at last, so his daughter is excitedly taking Dad on an adventure. Soon they come to a 'rickety, rickety bridge' over which they go, 'tripetty, trappetty, tripetty, trapetty' and out springs a troll from beneath said bridge. Dad, busy checking his phone, is completely oblivious of this and so his daughter thinks he doesn't believe in trolls. Nor does he believe in the mischievous pixies that make their homes in the Dingley Dell (Dad's now sending an email) and as you might expect doesn't believe in the tiny folk. The same is true of the very large yeti that stalks them as Dad discusses profit margins on his mobile, the giant is a no-no too. Eventually the two reach the Enchanted Shore and still Dad is on his phone. But enough is enough: his daughter shouts at him insisting that he leaves his phone and listens to her...

Finally there's something that Daddy does believe in and he even tells his boss so. In fact he has changed his mind about all the other things that appeared too.

There's a terrific final twist in this fantastic tale of the walk undertaken by the work and phone-obsessed dad and his young daughter: the final wordless illustration will reveal all, to the delight of the young listeners around the age of the small protagonist.

Immediately engaging words and equally engaging illustrations that extend the text make for a cautionary that should be heeded by fanatical phone users. **JB**

When I Grow Up I Want to be a Chair

★★★★

Ryan Rae Harback, ill. Barry Lee, Barefoot Books Ltd, 32pp, 979-888599471, £7.99 pbk

A young wheelchair user called Vo decides that when she grows up she wants to be a chair. In this brightly illustrated picture book, she goes on to explain all the reasons why she has made this very unusual choice. Chairs are soft and they give you freedom which you don't often have when your body refuses to cooperate.

While, as a wheelchair user, the message that a wheelchair gives you freedom has veracity and should be applauded, the delivery of Harback's message is more than a little confusing. Why should we encourage readers to want to give up their humanity to become an inanimate object?

This book risks feeling like a vehicle for promoting therapeutic messages. In the process, it loses narrative interest. As much as I wanted to like this book because of its attempt at positive messaging, the delivery fell flat. **RB**

**The Tiger Child**

★★★★★

Michelle Beech, Post Wave, 978-1836270980, 24pp plus gatefolds, £12.99 hbk

A tiger's tail, glimpsed through the first of a number of carefully and cleverly placed peek-through details, sends the little girl in this story on an adventure that gets progressively wilder. She is called to leave the safety of her cosy little indoor tent by 'the call of the wild,' the tiger's whisper, following its footprints across the garden. As she continues, the garden transforms into a jungle, and she discovers her own tiger qualities, learning to roar, and even saying, 'For the first time, I do not feel small. I do not feel afraid.' Little ones, particularly those who are shy or sensitive, will be inspired to find their own inner tiger and Michelle Beech's illustrations convey this as perfectly as the text. With the cut out pages, gatefolds and a glorious pop-up, it's a

reviews

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

properly immersive reading experience and there's a lovely impetus to the story, something new to enjoy and realise with every turn of the page. This is Michelle Beech's debut and she is a talent to watch. **LS**

The Family Quiz

★★★★

Robert Tregoning, ill. Yasmeen Ismail, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 978-1526627940, £7.99 pbk

As described in the tag line, this book is intended as a celebration of every kind of family. Each page poses questions to the reader about their own family; how it is made up, whether it is big or small, acknowledging implicitly that some children may be brought up by single parents, grandparents, have two homes or two mums. The emphasis is on the fact that families are not the same, not only in terms of their make-up but also that they may like doing different things, for example they may enjoy doing sports together or making music.

The writer acknowledges that families will have their ups and downs. The text aims to be comforting to young readers, reassuring them that although families may fall out at times they will make up again and will be there when you need them, whether on a practical level to help lace your boots, or for hugs when you are feeling upset. The important thing is that families love one another.

The text is warm and engaging, and although the rhyme feels a little laboured at times it is a lively and rhythmic read. Exuberant and colourful illustrations from an award-winning illustrator bring the simple text and its underlying message to life. **SM**

Home is a Hug

★★★★

Cindy Wume, Post Wave Children's Books, 40pp, 978-1836271000, £12.99 hbk

This is a reflective picture book exploring what is packed into that word 'home'. Of course it can be bricks and mortar as we see when we open the book to find the builders are there but home is so much more. It can be a shell for a snail, a toadstool shelter, it can be big – or small, it can spell comfort, warmth – it can be a physical place, a construction or the feeling around that.

Cindy Wume uses her art to play with all these ideas. The result is pleasingly surreal as snails with multi-patterned house shaped shells crawl across stylised leaves or cats emerge from books (are they books or shelves?) and an enormous apple houses a veritable palace for worms. The images are teasing and full of humour with little cut outs to surprise the eye – including the cover to welcome the reader in. Flaps encourage curious fingers to explore. The final touch – flaps to close in a house hug. Her style is bold, direct, simple but never simplistic with a warm child-friendly feel. Double

page spreads burst with colour but are punctuated by pages where the white background allows specific images to be the focus of attention. Wume is an interesting artist and we must look forward to future work.

However, could there be a danger that by moving away from story, books like this could just become the excuse for illustration? The idea and the art need to work together in a meaningful way. **FH**



The Blanket

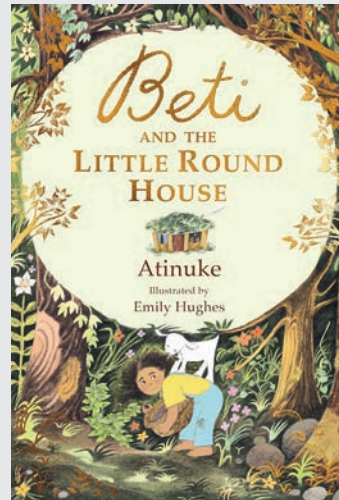
★★★★★

Marie Dorleans, Floris Books, 36pp, 978-1782509790, £12.99 hbk
The soft and enveloping feeling of a comfort blanket is central to this story, and author and artist Marie Dorleans does extremely well in her depiction of the red woolly blanket Tommy wraps himself up in to feel safe. It protects him in a storm, gives him the courage to try new things at school, and helps him to play with his siblings. Is this going to be enough, however? Tommy finds out as his blanket catches on a bush and unravels while he plays...

There is a lot to ponder in Marie Dorleans' story here: what are the causes of the protagonist's anxieties? What was his anxious little life like before he got it? The double page spread that has Tommy perched on an armchair on bare boards with strange shapes on the carpet (shades of the girl in Anthony Browne's *Gorilla*) is heart-wrenching, and the atmospheric room of lightning and shadows that follows is genuinely frightening: where is Tommy? Why is no one comforting him? The answer is on the next page, as he emerges wrapped in the blanket that will be instrumental in the changes he faces.

With text and artwork so well integrated, *The Blanket* has many elements of a classic picture book, and is a welcome return to that way of telling stories with detail and textual progression. Witness, for example, the largely unspoken issue of how cumbersome and difficult the blanket is for Tommy, the subtle *Red Riding Hood* quotations, and the questions raised by what Grandmas is wearing in the comforting, joyful conclusion. This will work with young children and their anxieties, but would also be a text for older children to pore over. **NS**

5 – 8 **Infant/Junior**



Beti and the Little Round House

★★★★★

Atinuke, ill. Emily Hughes, Walker Books, 128pp, 978-1406382433, £8.99 pbk

This is a unique and charming little tale which young readers embarking on their first adventures into chapter books might well enjoy with a little support. Beti lives alongside her brother Jac, her Mum and Tad in the 'little round house' the title centres on. Indeed, this house is actually central to the author too, having built such a house themselves on arrival in Wales. Little details like these, and the absorbing illustrations throughout help to draw the reader fully into the world of *Beti and the Little Round House*.

Though very simple in concept, this is actually where much of the charm in this story lies. This gentle tale tells of the family from the 'round house' as they experience every day adventures in their woodland setting. There is much excitement and laughter generated by the addition of Naughty the goat and lots of references to the beauty of the landscape – whether this is the rushing waterfall or berries forming on the hawthorn.

In amongst this almost magical land, time passes – perhaps at a different pace than for some of us, and perhaps this is another reason for the title's appeal. Yet for young readers, this sense that time is passing is immediately relatable – the seasons change for them too, and they can compare Beti's experiences of each season as the chapters of the book progress, perhaps thinking about how they spend time in each season.

Very quietly, this book also speaks powerfully of community, of inclusivity, and of the values we might hope young readers of such books are starting to consider. Beti needs bravery in Winter and patience in Spring, and indeed, many more values along the way. Such a quiet

and gentle text could be just the right spotlight through which to begin important conversations with children – either at home or at school, and at every turn such significant concepts are supported by immersive and escape-offering illustrations. **ARU**

Edith: The Girl who was 100 Years Old

★★★★★

Catharina Valckx, trans. Anthony Shugaar, Gecko Press, 124pp, 9798348029685, £8.99 pbk

What an unusual title and indeed this is a story which is just as unusual to try and explain! The eponymous character begins life in a fairly ordinary manner. However, her father desperately wishes to give her a gift beyond the ordinary. Before we know it, Edith has not one, but two extraordinary gifts! She is able to animate objects – quickly learning that this is as much a troublesome skill as it is useful; she also is granted eternal childhood. Again, although a seemingly powerful presence, perhaps even from the outset this skill seems especially ominous.

As the tale progresses, we indeed find Edith transformed from a seemingly carefree child, to one full of the concerns of a much older individual: how to find friends, how to fit in, what to do with all this time?

So, with only her loyal canine companion Bolster, and a lemon that she animated herself – Squirt, Edith sets out on an adventure for answers. At first, seemingly, she seeks only to reverse the spell on her 100th birthday and find a way to not live forever! However, as is often the case with journeys, the path encompasses many more questions than it initially offers answers. Though maybe this is one of the central themes for young readers – that life itself is just as complex and that the search for an answer may only lead to another question.

This is a deeply philosophical, quirky and original translation with equally evocative, charismatic and unusual illustrations. Its short chapters and simple form may suggest that it belongs with readers just embarking on short chapter texts, but here this may be open to interpretation just like the deeper questions in the story! It would be just as well suited as a book talk text for older KS2, or even KS3 groups and may, in this setting, be much more at home, as it is sure to spark book chatter and remind us that this talk is just as important as any text itself. **ARU**

I Can't Sleep

★★★★★

Emma Farrarons, Rocket Bird Books, 32pp, 978-1915395375, £12.99 hbk
Taking the classic bedtime tale of a child who can't sleep, readers meet Magnus. His big brother, Kasper,

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

agrees to let him sleep in his bed – and so begins the adventure! The inevitable questions and talking, despite warnings, begin and the boys consider all manners of possible beds and the potential benefits or otherwise of these unlikely places to lie down. Indeed, it may well be that just thinking of their own ‘alternative beds’ will be enough to ensure some small readers are already lulled safely back off to sleep. Not in Magnus’s case! He continues to ask his brother question after question until, eventually, it is his brother left asking the questions and Magnus has finally questioned himself to sleep!

This is a lovely, gentle tale of brotherly love and of finding friendship and safety when something unsettles you in the night. A common theme for so many families, there will always be space for one more title on this theme – though undeniably it does share many parallels with previous texts on the topic.

What does assist this text in standing apart from the others, is the lovely watercolour illustrations which accompany each idea the brothers dream up. With a fluid and immersive style, the illustrations very much reflect the feeling of sleep or entering the world of dreams: soft, smudged at the edges and using a simple and limited colour palette. The illustrations alone will be set to stay in the mind of young readers long after they have, hopefully, fallen asleep! **ARU**

The Ice Cream Crocodile

★★★★

Mariesa Dulak, ill. Rebecca Cobb, Faber, 32pp, 9780571368389 £7.99 pbk

Elvis the crocodile loves everything about circus life: the cheering crowds, the dazzling performers, the thrill of the spotlight and, perhaps most importantly, the ice cream. There is just one problem. Sidney the Ringmaster only allows animals who are ‘fluffy, furry and feathery’ to perform. Crocodiles, it seems, need not apply.

Dulak’s rhyming text takes this simple premise and builds it into a joyful story about friendship, perseverance and belonging. Elvis dreams of performing alongside his best friend, Flossie, and spends hours practising circus tricks in the hope that Sidney might finally recognise his talent. Yet no matter how high he leaps or how hard he works, Sidney sees only scales. What follows is a gentle but effective exploration of prejudice, inspired by Dulak’s own family connections to the Windrush Generation, and a reminder that exclusion often says more about those drawing the boundaries than those kept outside of them.

The story’s greatest strength lies in the way Elvis succeeds. He does not abandon who he is in order to fit in. Instead, he combines his love

of performance with his assigned role as the circus ice cream seller, transforming both into something entirely new. The resulting spectacle is wonderfully absurd: acrobatic ice cream deliveries, airborne cones and delighted audiences. In Elvis’s hands, difference becomes innovation.

Cobb’s illustrations radiate warmth, movement and humour. The circus ring glows with candy-striped pinks, creams and reds, while Elvis’s vibrant green form ensures he remains impossible to overlook. Cobb populates every spread with characters who feel as though they have stories of their own. Swans, rabbits, hedgehogs and flamingos reward repeated readings, while attentive readers may even spot a familiar tiger in a top hat tucked amongst the crowds. As ever, Cobb understands that picture books are built as much in the margins as in the centre. Every page offers new details to discover.

What makes this picture book particularly satisfying is its refusal to suggest that belonging comes from becoming someone else. Elvis remains a crocodile from beginning to end. The change occurs not within him, but within the circus itself. Filled with humour, heart and a generous belief in the value of every individual, this is a vibrant celebration of finding a place where your particular gifts are recognised and allowed to shine. **MT**

Unexpected Guests

★★★★

Mariajo Ilustrajo, Frances Lincoln Children’s Books, 48pp, 978-1805701057, £12.99 hbk

Ilustrajo has a remarkable gift for helping readers see familiar worlds from unfamiliar perspectives. Whether exploring loneliness, belonging or the transformative power of books, her stories invite us to look again at what we think we know. In her latest picturebook, presented in a welcome large-format portrait design, she performs perhaps her most playful reversal yet, turning a familiar household tale inside out and asking readers to view an ordinary family home through the eyes of the mice already living beneath its floorboards.

For the mouse family, life beneath the house is comfortable, predictable and entirely their own. Then a pair of humans arrive. At first, they are treated with understandable suspicion, especially since Uncle Rupert’s Human Manual contains several alarming facts about them. But curiosity soon begins to outweigh caution. As the mice investigate strange objects, an electric toothbrush that doubles as a back-scratcher and an iPod that provides music for an impromptu dance hall, Ilustrajo gently transforms what might have been a story about fear into one about observation, discovery and exploration.

That spirit of curiosity extends

beyond the narrative itself and into the physical design of the book. Before a page has even been turned, mouse-sized die-cut holes puncture the front and back covers, inviting readers to peer into hidden spaces and imagine what lies beyond. Inside, a beautiful gatefold spread reveals an entire mouse-populated world concealed beneath layers of floorboard. These are not decorative flourishes but meaningful storytelling devices. Children become investigators alongside the mice, discovering that picture books can be playful objects as well as carriers of stories.

Ilustrajo’s illustrations reward this close attention. Every spread feels alive with tiny details and visual subplots. Background characters matter. Objects tell stories. Expressions communicate entire conversations; there are even playful nods to Ilustrajo’s previous work waiting to be spotted. Yet despite the wealth of detail, the artwork remains remarkably clear, guiding readers between the messy human world above and the secret mouse community below.

Perhaps most striking is the book’s refusal to settle for a tidy ending. After the mice learn that humans may not be so frightening after all, the final pages introduce an entirely new challenge: a cat. It is a wonderfully mischievous conclusion. Rather than closing the story, it opens another door, reminding readers that understanding is never complete and that every ending contains the possibility of a new beginning.

Warm, inventive and brimming with visual delight, this is a celebration of curiosity, empathy and the joy of looking twice. It reminds us that the most interesting stories often begin when we dare to see the world from somebody else’s point of view. **MT**

Luna and the Night

★★★★

Maylis Daufresne, ill. Ian de Haes, Floris Books, 28pp, 9781782509783, £12.99 hbk

Like many young children, Luna is really frightened of the dark, so much so that as night invades her bedroom, she hides herself under the bed covers.

One wintry night at bath time, Luna is unable to contain her fear any more. Instead she tells her mum how she feels. Rather than trying to push aside Luna’s fear, or somehow explain it, Mum merely gives her a hug and says, ‘Why don’t you talk to the night. You might feel better if you tell her how you feel. I’ve heard that night is a good listener.’ So, still snuggled under her covers, Luna starts to talk very quietly to the night. As their conversation develops, the night is transformed from something terrifying into something gentle, playful and eager to get to know Luna.

Night tells the girl to close her eyes, imagine a massive blank canvas and paint on it, first with colours, and then to imagine a big puddle that she wants to jump into. Luna leaps in, sprinkling

sparkling droplets of Night all over her bedroom. Thereafter, at Night’s behest, the darkness becomes the sail of a ship to transport her to Dreamland, then a gorgeous dress that takes her to dance among the stars. By this time, Luna is starting to yawn and her next question receives the response that as she’s no longer afraid and has become friends with Night, she can do anything she wants.

The child thinks about other things that scare her, things that not every child would own up to, and she decides to become better acquainted with these too. Finally Night and Luna bid one another ‘Goodnight’ and Luna drifts off into slumberland.

This gentle, thoughtful story with its luminous illustrations is ideal for sharing with youngsters who, like Luna, feel ill-ease as dark descends. This would be a good book to start conversations with your own children or those in your class, who may be anxious about something. **JB**

Rafi and Rita

★★★★

Jarvis, ill. Chris Judge, Walker Books, 9781406397550, £12.99 hbk

Rafi and Rita are twin giraffes: they like the same things and do the same things. They are exactly the same in every way, or are they? Rafi suddenly claims that he is the tallest, but immediately after, Rita makes a similar claim about herself. Readers meanwhile will have noticed a difference in their markings: Rafi’s are circles, while his twin’s are pentagons.

Both twins support their claim with boasts: ‘I’m so tall those animals down there look like bugs,’ Rafi says. ‘They are bugs,’ Rita responds. After this the boasts become increasingly ridiculous. ‘I’m so tall that when an artist tried to do a portrait of me, they ran out of paint,’ Rafi claims. Rita counters this with, ‘I’m so tall that when my hat fell off, it took three hours to hit the ground.’

‘I wear clouds as hats,...’ Rafi says, immediately followed by Rita’s, ‘I’m so tall I wear a rainbow as a scarf.’ This bragging contest continues all day right up until nightfall when it’s finally interrupted by Mama Giraffe coming to put them to bed. Her ‘Rafi! Rita! Little ones!’ is not appreciated by the twins, who immediately deny her comment. Mama giraffe’s next words are, one expects, highly likely to start yet another session of sibling rivalry, albeit under cover of darkness this time.

Having heard the story, with its hilarious verbal wrangling, and enjoyed Chris Judge’s splendidly expressive scenes, young listeners could have lots of fun in pairs, inventing their own Rafi vs. Rita claims. **JB**

Princess Pete

★★★★

Zoey Allen, ill. Frenci Sanna, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781529517576, £7.99 pbk

Pete is the book’s narrator; sometimes Pete is a prince, at other times a princess. Pete loves to play

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

with the boys and sometimes with the girls. Pete is yet to have a best friend but has a fair few friends. On some days Pete's choice of clothes is 'pink shorts, yellow tops and blue wellies'. On other days Pete chooses to wear 'green jumpers, flowery trousers and butterfly sandals'. Playing beauty salon with Mum is something Pete enjoys, but so too is getting mucky. There are times when Pete likes to play alone, bringing imaginary worlds and dreams to life: a favourite is having beautiful pegasus flying around as hedgehogs sing.

Some people are confused by Pete's behaviour and way of being, asking if Pete is a boy; others ask if the child is a girl. At times Pete finds it hard to know how to respond but Mum and dad tell such people that Pete is Pete. 'Princess Pete!' our narrator tells readers.

'I may have been born a boy, but I don't always feel like the boys. Sometimes I feel more like the girls. Sometimes I feel somewhere in between.' Non-binary or gender fluid children who have yet to be familiar with these terms may well use language like that and it's a great way to help them explain how they feel in an age-appropriate manner, particularly if, as we see in one of Frenci's illustrations, there are people finger pointing at the protagonist. This is an affirming story for all young children. **JB**



True Blue

★★★★

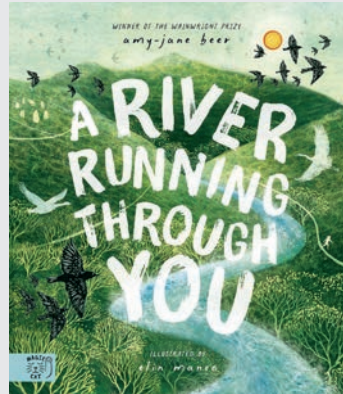
Bao Dongni, ill. Huang Jie, trans. Yun Xiao and Jake Hope, Fox and Ink books, 40pp, 9781917894296, £8.99 pbk

This picture book celebrates the traditions and skills of the ancient Miao people in China who are renowned for their beautiful batik fabrics dyed with indigo.

The text creates a magical atmosphere as readers travel to an indigo workshop within a village hidden deep within a valley. Focusing on one particular family, we see how skills are passed on from one generation to the next. We follow the whole process from collecting the indigo plants to the final products. The family are seen spinning and weaving the cloth, creating designs with wax, dying the fabric, removing the wax and transforming the fabric into a range of products from curtains to toys.

Storytelling is used effectively to

provide an interesting insight into an interesting aspect of Chinese culture and artistry. The illustrations richly evoke the variety of patterning within the stunning batik fabrics, the activity within the workshop and the beauty of the landscape. **SMC**



A River Running Through You

★★★★

Amy-Jane Beer, ill. Elin Manon, Magic Cat Publishing, 32pp, 9781917366915, £12.99, hbk

'Water's chance to dance under the sun' is how a river is described in **A River Running Through You**. It is a celebration and lyrical imagining of rivers and what they would say if they could tell stories about their history and their journeys. Storytelling is central to the text, specifically mythology around rivers and their importance throughout human history.

Within the poetic text there is an abundance of information too; for example, we learn about the water cycle and how rivers renew themselves, form glaciers, or pool in marshes and lakes, helping create different habitats and supporting life. There is surprising information about rivers hidden under the ground and even under the sea where they form highways for marine creatures. We are taken back in time to learn about early life forms which lived in water. Environmental concerns are addressed, with an acknowledgement about the precarious future of rivers and the need to fight for them and protect them.

The illustrations reflect the lyrical and slightly mystical mood the text creates. Look closely and you will spot the spirit of the girl on the first double page spread appearing in ghost-like form as the river journeys through time and place, joined by other ethereal figures from both the past and present.

A beautiful book reflecting the writer and illustrator's passion for the subject. **SMC**

A Poem in the Sky

★★★★

Benjamin Zephaniah, ill. Nila Aye, Hachette Children's Group, 32pp, 978-1408368183, £7.99 pbk

A celebration by Benjamin Zephaniah as he finds poetry everywhere. The

illustrations by Nila Aye pick up the joy that runs through every spread. Her images are child-friendly and relatable, her colour-saturated pages create an immersive atmosphere and her characters are full of bouncy humour. The whole production is stylish – the end papers taking the imagination into space populated by colourful constellations from the moment the covers open to the moment they close; there are poems everywhere. This is a joyous book.

Creating picture books using poems by established poets (as opposed to rhyming texts by authors) is becoming much more familiar – and a great way to bring poetry into the limelight for a young age in a way that can also be enjoyed by adults who will be sharing the book. Surely it can only help build confidence. However, the choice of the poem, the poet – and the illustrator are all important. When everything works, it is unforgettable – and fun. At present we see these books are designed for the very young. This is not new – Milne, Lear, Rossetti – even T. S. Eliot all wrote for this audience and their creations are often remembered for the brilliant pairing with an artist able to capture the spirit, life and character of the words. This stylish production clearly does this and its impact could encourage teachers and parents to look further – perhaps a way in for an older audience. **FH**

The Truth About Books

★★★★

Elina Ellis, Two Hoots, 32pp, 978-1037408502, £8.99 pbk

Why do you like reading? This is the question our young protagonist asks. For him – and so many of the young audience for this book will agree with him – books are static and by implication boring. Asking the various members of his family he is offered many different answers. So where can our hero find the book for him? He has the answer...

By posing a question, Ellis is able to create a 'story' as we move through the many possible answers to that question; answers that highlight the way books invite individual responses. There is no one answer. Her illustrations pick up the responses to create a visual experience of the text. Her art bounces off the page, energetic lines creating character, movement, moments of excitement. In every illustration there will be a book somewhere offering imagination, illumination, instruction, ideas all escaping from the pages; books as liberators, perhaps. The images fill each double page spread to great effect ranging from white backgrounds to full colour. The text is clearly presented in interesting placements that avoid any gimmicks, the font is immediately attractive and accessible. With its emphasis on the individual and the reassuring possibility that choice is the key, this book could spark conversation

encouraging its audience to embark on their own journey. A lively, positive addition to any Kinderbox or shelf. **FH**

Wands Away: Spell Class

★★★★

Emma Farrarons, Simon & Schuster, 128pp, 978-1398543751, £7.99 pbk
Ramona is so excited. Her second term at the Wands Away School of Magic is about to start – and she can't wait to find out what they will be learning. She is also looking forward to meeting her friends Cleo and Enrique. Arriving at the school gates is great. There are her friends – then a new arrival, a boy called Cosmo with a very smart broom. Oh dear – Cosmo seems very stuck up and disinclined to follow instructions. After a near accident involving a forest fire, Ramona and her friends discover Cosmo is not an enemy – he just wants to be a friend. Spell Class becomes even more enjoyable.

This is a really cosy story for young readers who are developing reading stamina. The prose does not underestimate their skills – no talking under – and there is a wide variety of vocabulary, plenty of contemporary dialogue and just enough description to colour the prose. This is an Early Years setting, just in a Magic School – and readers will instantly relate to the young protagonists. Adding atmosphere and movement to the narrative are the lively illustrations and extensive page decorations by Emma Farrarons. The design is cheerful, the font accessible even on the spreads which have a coloured background (purple). Some may wonder if this works – but white letters stand out well and another layer of fun is brought to the text. **FH**

I am Ray's Imaginary Friend

★★★★

Brian Moses, ill. Bethan Welby, Scallywag Press, 216pp, 978-1836300342, £8.99, pbk

I think this may be a new departure for one of the stalwarts of children's poetry. This is a verse novel for the under tens, largely uncharted territory, unless you count some picture books which, although short, can have the resonance of poetry. This is over two hundred pages in novel format, about the life of eight-year-old Ray, told by his imaginary friend. This is such a clever idea to insinuate the author into the story that I can't believe this is its first use. Perhaps it is the equivalent of the ghosts that sometimes drift about in adult books. Jacob doesn't have a name when he is first imagined by Ray and, for a while, he appears to be only Ray's imaginary friend, but we gradually realise that he is one of a band of comforters, rather like Clarence, the angel in *It's a Wonderful Life*, and he has been friend to other children before and will be to other children after Ray. Ray is in need of a friend. He loves Pratt's Bottom, the village where he

lives, but his parents have decided to move to the city and Ray is having a hard time adjusting. Jacob has both a rare insight into Ray's feelings and offers the kind of sensible calm support that can only have been developed in several imaginary lifetimes. Moving is certainly one of the most stressful events in a child's life and, through Ray and Jacob, Brian Moses gives us an account that is honest, perceptive and sympathetic, sad and funny at turns, and, above all, reassuring. A fine production from Scallywag Press, with warm, well observed illustrations from Bethan Welby. **CB**

Max and the Haircut

★★★★

Samareh Azadi, Otter-Barry Books 32pp, 978-1915659798, £12.99 hbk Max is 'not sure' about having his hair cut, but Wendy, the sympathetic hairdresser, changes her approach, and Max comes out happy. This is a story of how a child's need to control their situation can turn out well for all concerned with a little inclusion and patience.

Two difficulties arise in the way this story is told: a child whose experience of having their haircut is not like Max's might feel bewildered or even somehow in the wrong if their own hairdresser or barber does not feel able to accommodate the child's wishes; there is an issue with the tenses on the text which could leave the reader confused by whether Max always feels like this (and is always supported). There are some good, child-like insights, for example the salon is 'too bright and noisy...full of sharp spiky objects,' but does it always make Max feel scared? Does Wendy always have to stop when Max has had enough?

On the other hand, Wendy is able (after a struggle) to work with Max, and the text and illustrations work well together to tell the story; when the apron is too tight, there seems to be a snake round Max's neck, and the spray to dampen Max's hair is matched by a thundercloud and lightning bolt above Max, so that Wendy saying 'Be a good boy and let me do my job' sounds at once a typical thing for a hairdresser to say and also a clear dismissal of the boy's emotions. His confrontation with the dragon is thus a brilliant depiction of the anger and discomfort Max is feeling.

And while we concentrate on Max, Wendy's change of practice is worth noting: having his hair cut while he is upside down on a bean bag is a bold change of plan on Wendy's part but her change of approach pays off; she has learned an important lesson about inclusion that 'we are all different'. **NS**



Airport Adventure

★★★★

Mohammad Taher, ill. Michael Parkin, Dorling Kindersley, 48pp, 978-0241682234, £12.99 hbk

Many airports are now huge and very busy places with the result that lots of us find them quite overwhelming. Let me introduce you to Mo T, the Airport Guy who is the UK's Aviation Ambassador and author of this very helpful hardback. Mo is an award-winning educational influencer and succeeds in this book at explaining to young people how airports work. The narrative follows a family of four: Layla, Adam and their Mum and Dad as they prepare for going on holiday by aeroplane.

The Contents Page clearly lays out the format of this handbook from sections about 'Getting ready' and 'Checking in' to 'Arrivals' and 'On holiday' plus every stage in between. Also we meet Dino, Adam's soft toy who gets lost somewhere in the baggage process! The author manages to present myriad pieces of information in manageable chunks. There are lots of details between the covers of this story, such as how e-gates work (p. 15), what to do at the Gate (p. 20) and how the pilot prepares for Take-off! (p.35). Although I have worn glasses most of my life, I usually need a reminder to remove them as I go through e-gates. I was delighted to see that on page 14 there is a female passenger who remarks that she needs to take her glasses off for the camera! This is a small but important piece of information, and this publication is full of handy hints.

Near the back of the book is a double spread devoted to various airport jobs which I am certain will inspire some youngsters into considering possible careers. The inclusion of both a clear Glossary and Index complete the professional look of this book.

Well done to the illustrator here as the brightly coloured drawings are plentiful and clear to match the text. Whilst this book is highly recommended for 5-year-olds up to grown-ups I think it would work best when shared with an adult for those at the lower end of the age range. **JS**



Youngest Faircrest and the Search for a Sorcerer

★★★★

Ollie George Clark, ill. Tom Knight, DK Flip, 352pp, 978-0241756355, £8.99 pbk

Youngest Faircrest and the Search for a Sorcerer is Ollie George Clark's debut and introduces an author with a talent for writing fast-moving, funny, super-readable fantasy adventures. Youngest Faircrest lives in the permanently stinky Bogsmarsh with his mum and five older siblings. The book opens on the eve of the Deciding, when the town's children are allocated their destined career and its matching cloak. Youngest is desperate to become a guardian, like his capable mother, but instead, his worst fears are realised. Amiable, well-meaning, but with no discernible abilities, Youngest is assigned dearth. There's only ever been one Dearth before, a scarecrow named Steve. This is too much, even for someone as long-suffering as our hero, and he sets off – full of reck – into the wilds beyond Bogsmarsh to steal back the magic Dragonstone from the sorcerer Neffaria. He's accompanied on this reckless journey by Satchel, his pet piglet, and – which is what really gives this story its spark – his best friend Agnes, Decided Chronicler. Agnes is our narrator, describing the action in a thoroughly no-nonsense manner, though still allowing her affection for her best friend to creep in. She might be impatient with Youngest sometimes, and irritated by his lack of planning, but she is well aware of what makes him special, and so readers are too. Her asides, caustic comments and useful explanations, sometimes as 'a mini-chapter in a main chapter', keep pages turning at a rapid rate, and give the narrative its distinctive feel. The story itself is very good with lots of moments of tension and some real surprises. It's liberally illustrated throughout by Tom Knight,

who does as good a job as Agnes in conveying moments of drama, friendship and humour. A sequel is promised, which will be eagerly awaited by readers. **MMA**

Read our Q&A interview with Ollie George Clark.

Murder on a Midsummer Night

★★★★

Lucy Strange, ill. Hannah Peck, Barrington Stoke, 120pp, 978-0008712792, £7.99 pbk

The first in a very welcome new series from an author who has really established herself as a master of the spooky mystery story. In true Barrington Stoke style it is short, fast paced, accessible and very readable indeed. It is the perfect introduction to the popular genre of detective fiction and would be just right for engaging a reluctant reader audience and would also be the optimum length for a class read aloud.

Without a wasted word Strange has created an atmospheric setting, a cast of quirky and engaging characters and a really entertaining whodunit. Brother and sister Eliza and Bram are our main characters. Their parents work for Sir Percy at Mulberry Hall where he is hosting a glamorous fancy dress party on Midsummer Night and they are helping out, joined by Sir Percy's nephew Krish, who is videoing the occasion.

Mulberry Hall is famous for its maze and local legend says that the mysterious Crow King will appear in the centre of the maze at the stroke of midnight and Bram is determined to film him. But the evening takes a darker turn when the grumpy guest, who has managed to offend a lot of people, is found poisoned.

The classic bumbling village policeman is baffled, and it is down to Eliza to explain how to work out motive, means and opportunity to find the killer, providing a lovely lesson for the reader on how detectives work, as clues are found and suspects are interviewed and eliminated until the crime is solved and we find out if a demon really did appear in the maze and what secrets the cellar holds.

Hannah Peck's lively illustrations really help bring these somewhat eccentric characters to life and I have no doubt readers will eagerly pick up the next and subsequent episodes to meet them again. **JCO**

Buck & Ears: Pirate Detectives

★★★★

Jennifer Bell, ill. Sarah Horne, Walker Books, 978-1529519518, 224pp, £7.99 pbk

This new, illustrated adventure series for children is a playful introduction to the whodunnit genre, set in a world where talking animals and human beings live alongside each other...and virtually everyone is a pirate!

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

Buck is a child-pirate captain who has recently suffered a mutiny by his crew of miserable adults who did not appreciate being bossed about by someone so young. Strapped to a barrel and left for shark bait, he is a washed-up, penniless pirate with no crew, no ship and no treasure. Mercifully, his first-mate is strapped to the barrel with him. Ears is a very resourceful and resilient rabbit and, together, the pair set about finding their fortune in nearby Scuttleflint Bay.

The story quickly becomes a mystery when Buck and Ears overhear the fearsome Captain Bloodfang boo-hooing about her missing mermaid friend. The pair are challenged with solving the mystery of the missing mermaid in return for the very tempting reward of not being hacked up and turned into a stew!

Fortunately, Buck is a big fan of celebrated detective story author, Agatha Fishty, and is enthusiastic to put some of his clue-finding skills to the test. Indeed, Agatha Fishty has a role to play for the reader, too. She challenges readers to solve the mystery before Buck does, and occasionally pops up in the corner of the page to indicate that an important clue is present.

Buck and Ears must find themselves a suitable vessel, as well as a new crew for it, and crack the case before Bloodfang's patience runs out. They strike it lucky when they meet a friendly and open-minded group of animals who are not put off by Buck's disastrous history as captain of a mutinous crew. An intellectual giraffe, a clever-spined porcupine and an impulsive pigeon complete the crew, strengthening Buck's and Ears's detective efforts and adding a little extra humour into the story, too.

As the crew investigate, other mysteries emerge, such as missing ships in the harbour and an intriguing smell of peppermint. With a few visual clues provided by Horne's characterful illustrations, too, there are plenty of details for young readers to pour over as they try to compete Fishty's challenge. The book's characters are fairly endearing, and the familiar pirate setting is fun (albeit rather unoriginal) but – now that readers have had a chance to practise the art of detection – they will hope for a little more action and adventure alongside the crime-solving and clue-spotting in future episodes. **SD**

Really Rubie: A Diary

★★★★★

Maddie Frost, Walker Books, 978-1529534061, 240pp, £7.99 pbk
This illustrated diary of an eleven-year-old girl has the look of countless other doodle-filled diaries that chart the hilarious mishaps of a middle-school-aged child navigating the pitfalls of growing up. However, it is far more original and heartfelt than its cover suggests.

Rubie gets on okay at school, just about, thanks to her more confident and outgoing best bud forever – Riley – and her zumba-instructor, motivational mum. With their reassurance, Rubie feels able to attend – for the first time ever – the month-long summer camp at Camp Pinebutt. Plans take a catastrophic turn, though, when, moments before departure time, Riley drops the bombshell that she has broken her ankle and won't be able to go!

It takes all of her emotional reserves for Rubie to get in mum's car and head off to the camp without her BFF, bolstered by the knowledge that she can call home twice a week, and by the note in her pocket from Riley addressed to Owen from school, who will be attending the boys camp next door, and on whom Riley has a big, juicy crush.

Camp Pinebutt has all the classic ingredients of an all-American summer camp: campfires, archery, 'horseback-riding', makeovers, cute counsellors and nervous crushes. Riley feels the pull of all of them, yearning to make the types of memories that the other girls seem to be enjoying, but she is held back by her 'Tuce Truce' with Riley: a pledge not to experience certain things without Riley there. She is also conflicted by her feelings for Owen and the not-entirely-out-of-the-question possibility that he could just be her first kiss!

Riley is extremely relatable. Her diary entries brilliantly capture the enormity of feelings that eleven-year-olds experience, without ever being condescending. Trivial seeming matters like how long to leave it before calling your friend or how many layers of lip gloss to apply can feel momentous to eleven-year-olds and Ruby's diary illustrates this while also celebrating the innocent, youthful love of a good bum joke.

Frost's charming line drawings add to the comedy, too – despite their simplicity. It is amazing how much expression can be shown by a simple line drawing of a face with no eyebrows!

Any 'tween' age reader of any gender will recognise the constant tightrope walk of Rubie's relationships, and – as long as they are brave enough to handle the occasional emotional moment (including the odd smooch!) – they will be eager to hear what Really Rubie gets up to next. **SDRB**

Captain Sunshine

★★★

Alex Milway, Piccadilly Press, 978-1835871577, 192pp, £7.99 pbk
This illustrated novel for young readers is the first in a new four-book series set aboard the good ship Sunshine.

The Sunshine is the most celebrated cruise ship in the bay, famous for its luxury and entertainment. Young Bella is delighted when – all of a sudden – she is called up to take on the captaincy of the cruiser only hours



before she is due to set sail. It appears that some sort of problem has left the ship short-staffed, but Bella is brave enough not to let that put her off.

Readers will love diving straight into the action alongside Bella as she helms such a lucrative vessel, but there is no time to explain, as Bella has to swiftly embark on a whirlwind tour and meet her new crew.

Bella's credentials as a high-class captain soon become clear, as she takes a no-nonsense approach to tackling problems and leads her new team with a perpetual positivity. Most impressive is how she always puts passengers first, attending to their needs personally and showing them that nothing is too much trouble.

Things are not all plain-sailing, though, and Bella soon learns that the mystery behind the sudden departure of the previous Captain and half the crew has implications for their current journey. The reputation of the Sunshine is on the line! Bella must draw upon all of her resources, including all of her friends, to overcome the threats to the Sunshine's voyage, and the story's third act becomes a thrilling tale of teamwork in the face of adversity.

As a series opener, **Captain Sunshine** richly develops a wonderful world, introducing readers to a delightful ensemble of characters; everything from singing capybaras to grumpy raccoons and cheerful beetles. Children will enjoy meeting all of the animals – all of whom are beautifully captured by Milway's expressive illustrations – giving young readers plenty of time to get to know and love this charming crew.

While it swaps frantic action for a beautifully paced, heartwarming voyage, **Captain Sunshine** serves as a wonderfully tranquil, gentle cruise companion that readers will thoroughly enjoy. **SD**

The World's Last Mammoth and other Missing Marvels

★★★★★

Mike Barfield, ill. Franziska Höllbacher, Templar Books, 96pp, 9781783425259, £10.99 pbk
This book delves into history looking at people, animals, locations and

structures which have long since disappeared, so called 'missing marvels'. It also finds modern day equivalents, opening young eyes to the wonders of the world around them. Organised into chapters with intriguing titles such as 'Lost Leaders', the book opens with the Magnificent Seven, i.e. the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World (think Hanging Gardens of Babylon), then proceeds to go much further, identifying overlooked wonders absent from the top seven such as Stonehenge and modern day wonders such as The Sagrada Familia in Spain and the Statue of Liberty in New York.

Another big focus throughout the book is on missing people, some of whom may be well-known to young readers such as Cleopatra, whose burial site is unknown. Others, less so, such as Amelia Earhart, the airwoman who disappeared on an attempt at being the first woman to fly around the world. When it comes to extinct animals, we are not only introduced to the obvious suspects i.e. dinosaurs, but also lesser-known creatures; the Solitaire, a flightless bird which lived on an adjacent island to its much better-known neighbour the Dodo.

Well known mysteries, legends and myths such as King Arthur, the Loch Ness Monster and Big Foot are explored. Technological wonders including the Concorde and the doomed ship Titanic feature, as well as missing buildings such as The Crystal Palace, and on a bigger scale, missing cities including Herculaneum, which is still partly buried.

The book contains a fascinating array of facts which young readers will enjoy discovering. The back of the book includes a quiz to test what they remember and a page with space to record their own favourite wonders, people, places and pastimes.

This is a very successful book with an attractive and accessible graphic format. The colourful comic strip illustrations are engaging and there is lots of humour throughout. **SM**

The Unfamous Diaries of Daisy Brewster: The Drama Queens

★★★★★

Jenny Valentine, ill. Hannah McCaffery, Simon & Schuster, 208pp, 978-13985 45656, £7.99 pbk
This is the second book in the **Daisy Brewster** series and it is just as good as the first one. The diary format works well here and helps move the story on, interspersed with witty remarks, funny drawings and doodles along the way.

It is the start of a new term and Daisy is particularly happy to be back at her drama club where she does not have to put up with her annoying superstar cousin Maxxy, who seems to be ruling the roost at home and is a bit of a diva. Maxxy has been deposited in the family from the US as she has a new starring role in a TV show. Daisy now shares a room with her plus her smelly emotional-support

dog and has to listen to constant complaints from the weather to the small size of their house.

Daisy has a starring role in Bugsy Malone which will be the club's new production for its 10th Anniversary and is determined to give her best performance. Of course, there are hiccups along the way. The cast are more interested in Maxxy than practising their roles, although Daisy's two best friends remain loyal and do not constantly ask her questions about her cousin. But there is also her co-star, Olivier who helps her with her script but seems to send Daisy all of a flutter whenever he is around.

Along the way Daisy learns that Maxxy is not quite all she seems on the surface and might have difficulties of her own to deal with. Maxxy even gives Daisy helpful acting tips and helps her learn her lines. Maxxy also miraculously saves the show at the end and Daisy is forced to revise her opinions of her cousin.

This light and refreshing story says more about family relationships and the ups and down of friendships than performing and is told with all of Jenny Valentine's trademark wry humour and wit. **JC**

No Tune Ned

★★★★

Oliver Lendon, *Everything With Words*, 304pp, 978-1911427490, £8.99 pbk

In the kingdom of Draveloch, music holds real power, and the greatest bards are heroes who can shape the world through song. Ned wants nothing more than to be one of them. Unfortunately, however hard he tries, his music is truly, spectacularly terrible. After a disastrous concert and the abrupt disappearance of his teacher, Sir Ballantree, Ned sets off to find him, accompanied by a talking, sarcastic goat he picks up along the way. They are soon joined by Yara, a Snarlseeker (the local term for a monster hunter), and the three head off into the wider world of Draveloch, hitting plenty of scrapes and difficulties as they go. Gradually, Ned begins to realise that his terrible music has a power all its own, made stronger precisely because it is so discordant and awful, and his confidence grows along with it. The story builds to a climax in the caves of the singing stones, where Ned discovers he has been summoned by the Crooner Below, a monstrous being who wants to control sound itself and needs Ned's gift for discord to win his freedom. An epic battle follows, in which Ned's heartfelt, imperfect music triumphs over polished perfection, which is more or less the moral of the whole tale.

There is plenty to enjoy here. Clove the goat provides some of the book's best dialogue and comic timing, and Oliver Lendon has clearly put real thought into building the world of

Draveloch, with its monsters and its central conceit that sound is a controlling force. That idea is an interesting one and gives the story a distinctive flavour among fantasy quest adventures for this age group.

At times, though, the level of world building detail slows the pace considerably, and younger or less patient readers may find their attention wandering during the more descriptive passages. That said, children who relish immersing themselves in the particulars of an invented world, and who enjoy a quest filled with battles and odd companions, should find plenty here to satisfy them. A likeable, if occasionally overstuffed, fantasy adventure with a good heart and a memorable message about embracing imperfection and finding your own path. **LJS**

Creepy Araminta

★★★★

Anne Fine, ill. Emily Jones, Barrington Stoke, 64pp, 978-0008806323, £7.99 pbk

A dirty mark has been left on the recently painted bedroom wall – and there is no paint left to cover it. What can Jess do? Mum suggests a picture – but where can Jess and Tina find a picture that they can afford? Visiting the local charity shop they see just the thing – a picture that has just been returned – and the measurements are perfect. They have no idea why the previous buyer has returned it. It is such an attractive picture of a smiling red haired girl. However, perhaps appearances can deceive. Soon Jess, Tina – even Mum are having nightmares and all involve red haired Araminta....

Designed for a particular audience, Barrington Stoke novels can be read and enjoyed by a very wide range of young readers. The text, the design – and the narratives are immediately accessible. Here Anne Fine conjures up a neat horror story for those who are looking for just such a frisson, but who might find other texts daunting. It is creepy too – as the title suggests, though the author does not over burden the reader with details or a pre-history. Within a well established genre she provides just enough to create a worrying ending. The picture still exists...Araminta is smiling again....who will be drawn into a nightmare? **FH**

The Children of Wolf Rock

★★★★

Natasha Farrant, ill. David Dean, Faber, 304pp, 978-0571382521, £7.99 pbk

For someone like me who began reading in the 1950s, there is a retro feeling to Natasha Farrant's latest novel. She returns to Stormy Loch Academy, which featured in her *Children of Castle Rock* eight years ago. This is a private boarding school

in Scotland, run on alternative lines (think A. S. Neill's *Summerhill*) by the kindly but stern Major Fortescue. Stranded here with the Major and his assistant Kelly are three children who, for a variety of reasons, can't be with their parents. And here the story diverges from the Blytonesque template and introduces more up-to-date elements. Minna is unhappy and disruptive at her local primary and dreads the move to secondary, so Stormy Loch (there are no storms in the story) is her mother's solution and Minna loves it so much she can't bear to go on holiday with her parents. Kass (full name Ocean Kassana), can't be with his parents because they are explorers making a TV documentary. And Tom's parents have split up and have new partners and neither of them want him to live with them. Thrown together, the children's developing friendship is complicated by Tom's earlier association with a school bullying gang who had made Kass their particular target. And their friendship with Addie, a teenage guitarist playing runaway, hiding away in a nearby valley, who has her own family problems, adds further complications and sets off the main plot. This sees the trio yo-yoing between Scotland and London, aiming to prevent a possible murder. Given that much of this has only a toehold in reality – and the braining of the would-be murderer with a vase takes me right back to my childhood reading – Farrant holds it all together with skill, builds believable relationships between the children, and keeps the tension rising. **CB**

What it was Like in Ancient Benin

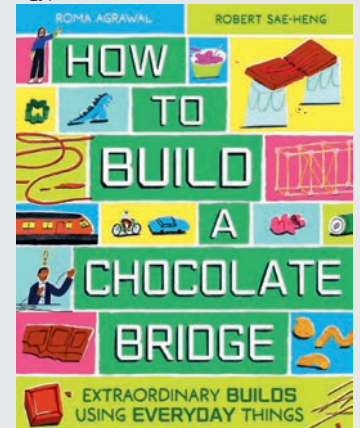
★★★★

David Long, ill. Stefano Tambellini, Barrington Stoke, 96pp, 978-0008745998, £7.99 pbk

Combining the accessibility of a Hi-Lo Barrington Stoke title with a history curriculum topic that is making a comeback, makes this title on Ancient Benin a welcome addition to the 'What was it like to be...' series. With the publisher's trademark yellow pages, simple font, well-spaced lines and pared-down language this title, this series brings history topics to a new audience by making it suitable for a wider range of readers. Despite not having photographs this book features black-and-white illustrations that bring the world of Ancient Benin to life. Unlike most non-fiction books it's the size of the average fiction paperback but this does not mean that any of the quality or impact of the book is diminished.

It's divided into sections like any good non-fiction book but reads more as a fiction title, or faction (fact and fiction) if you will, which is refreshing. The sections cover themes such as introducing the Ancient Edo people who lived in Ancient Benin, daily life in Benin City, religion, food and farming, trade – including the slave trade, the eventual fall of the Benin Empire and the legacy it left behind.

This is a great title for those in need of more accessible texts to support the curriculum and those looking for a different kind of format to broaden their understanding of a new topic. Other history topics covered by this series include the Vikings, Ancient Romans, Ancient Maya, Ancient Egyptians and Ancient Greeks. **CH**



How to Build a Chocolate Bridge

★★★★

Roma Agrawal, ill. Robert Sae-Heng, Lawrence King Publishing, 48pp, 978-1510231580, £14.99 hbk

How to Build a Chocolate Bridge is, despite its title, nothing to do with food or baking. It is instead a refreshing take on materials for key stage two level readers. Written by engineer Roma Agrawal, this book allows the reader to explore ordinary materials and whether they have what it takes to create extraordinary builds, posing questions such as that in the title and others like 'can you make a skyscraper from pasta?' or 'can you make a piano from wool?'. It's both entertaining and interesting and great for those exploring this area of the curriculum, or those with an interest in science in their leisure reads.

Each area of engineering, from bridges to rockets, is explored separately to explain the science required to make it successfully before the fun question is asked and the experiments can begin. Each experiment then answers the question by instructing the reader to follow step-by-step instructions which are clearly explained as they go along, adding plenty of facts and fun to the science at play.

Alongside the two sections outlined above are several additional spreads to add more colour to the learning, such as a spread on ten inventive scientists and engineers who discovered something unexpected, and a spread on unexpected materials and how they were discovered and are now used in everyday life and a great spread on accidental inventions such as the Post-It Note and Play-Doh!

In terms of the format the book is bright and colourful, with short chunks of information and quirky illustrations, making it appealing to the intended audience.

How to Build a Chocolate Bridge

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

is a great follow up from Agrawal's recent and equally entertaining book **Seven Small Inventions that Changed the World**. If you're looking for something different to brighten up your science collection then I would highly recommend this book. **CH**

We Made a Song

★★★★

Doro Globus, ill. Rose Blake, Bloomsbury, 40pp, 978-1526671202, £12.99 hbk

We Made a Song takes you on the journey of how a fictional band, The Beaks, create a song from scratch. Through this journey the reader learns how songs work, what instruments are used and where inspiration comes from - and that's just the start.

Once the song is ready the reader goes with the band to the manager's office, then to the producer's recording studio and sees what the process of creating the finished song is like. We meet several different job roles along the way, from mixing engineers to instrument technicians and session musicians, all of which tell us through a little speech bubble what their role is.

We then follow the band and their new song as it's promoted, the artwork created and promotional events like the tour and TV appearances are organised. The message throughout is of a 'it takes a village' approach to music, showcasing the different elements and roles that need to work together for a song, and its band, to become a success.

The book closes with a top tips on writing your own song, a glossary and a Q&A section with Eric Krasno, a 'two-time Grammy award winning guitarist, musician and producer' who talks about some of the burning questions the reader may have, such as 'do you have to be really good at singing or playing a musical instrument to work in music?' and 'what advice would you give someone who loves music and dreams of working in it one day?'. I really enjoyed that the focus is on teamwork and the wider music industry - not just about those in the band who are the face of a song.

It's a fascinating look at the music industry for anyone who loves music or longs to be a part of the industry themselves. It's vibrant and eye-catching and the picture-book-esque feel makes it a little different from your usual music related book for young people. **CH**

Honey, I Ate the Kids! Weird and Wonderful Animal Families

★★★★★

Mike Hills, ill. Kerry Hyndman, Faber, 96pp, 978-0571372638, £9.99 pbk

The main aim of children's non-fiction books is to inspire curious young people to discover more about a chosen topic. This information book does exactly that, hooking readers into learning more

about the animal world, starting with a striking title! I believe this handy A5 paperback is excellent value for money, and it takes a different approach on the popular subject matter by focusing on animal families.

I think the explanations at the start of the book, which are entitled 'There's no normal in nature' and 'What types of animal family are there?' set out the aims and context of the book well. The author draws parallels with human families and mentions survival in these times of climate change, 'If we take a closer look, maybe we can learn a thing or two from them' (p.9). The logical structure of the book, following each continent in turn, is clearly set out on the Contents pages and the final two pages of text draw everything to a neat conclusion.

There is interesting information on every page which keeps the young reader engrossed. For example, we learn that Komodo dragons eat their offspring (p.28), Velvet spider mothers can, 'Liquefy her own internal organs to create a nutritious fluid that she then feeds to them' [her children] (p.47) and poop-eating capybaras are, 'Often deemed the friendliest animal in the world' (p.75).

Each spread concentrates on one particular animal, and I liked the variation of text length used over the two pages. Thus, for every animal there is a quiz question with multiple choice answers, a text box with a couple of informative sentences plus a longer piece of a few paragraphs. The illustrations are beautiful and work well with the text throughout.

This is one of my favourite books I have come across recently. I can highly recommend it for homes, schools and libraries, and am sure it will both challenge and grip its young readers. **JS**

Next Stop: The Future! A Journey Through Tomorrow's Science

★★★★

Tom Jackson, ill. Irma Ruggiero, Buster Books, 128pp, 978-1837250929, £12.99 hbk

I have a strong memory as a youngster being helped by my Dad to try out my new Chemistry Set on my birthday. As scientists themselves, my parents were keen to encourage me to follow a STEM career but alas I was not enticed. Maybe if there had been books like this one my path would have been different!

This hardback covers lots of new ideas for future scientific innovations, and is divided into four chapters: Space; Machines; Our World; The Body. Information is presented in bite sized chunks and is clearly illustrated throughout. I learned lots of interesting facts e.g. babies born on Mars would 'grow into much taller adults than if they were born on Earth, thanks to Mars' weak gravity' (p.25). There are amazing



robots being built, such as the robot seal created to help those who are unwell feel more comfortable. They can communicate with their owner who can cuddle and stroke them, as its flippers and head move! (p.47).

Each chapter ends with a spread explaining 10 Bonus Facts on the topic covered by the preceding section. I was intrigued by the Machines bonus fact number 7 which stated that AI might one day enable animals to talk to humans, 'Zoolingua is a project that is trying to decode animal body language and noises so that we can understand and communicate with them, starting with dogs' (p.73).

Curious students aged 9 upwards will be amazed at the science projects described in this accessible book. It is pitched perfectly for this age group, and students will likely prefer to dip into it rather than read it in one sitting. There are some fun illustrations which keep the reader interested, and the added section before the helpful Index explains 'Science Words' the author has used in the text. I am sure this publication will help to steer some young people down the STEM career path! **JS**

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

New Talent

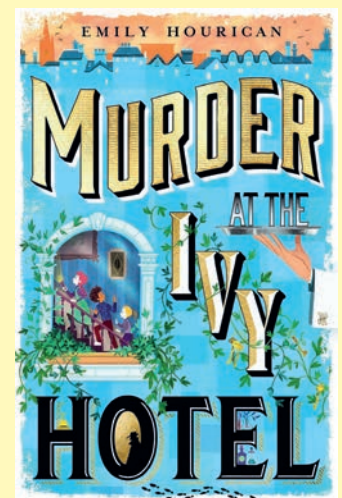
Murder at the Ivy Hotel

★★★★

Emily Hourican, ill. Paola Escobar, Scholastic, 304pp, 978-0702344558 £7.99 pbk

Meredith and her younger sister Macy feel very lucky to be able to live in the Ivy Hotel, where their Mum, Sally, is Manager, and they know all the staff, most of whom are nice, and the secret routes behind the scenes. They are not allowed to use Room Service, but their young friend Jake, training to be a chef, sometimes brings them his creations. They are also friendly with an older American lady, Agatha, who has lived in the hotel for a long time, and they take her little dog, Milo, for walks.

As the story starts, the staff have recently found out that the hotel is soon to be sold and placed under new management. Various possibilities include automatic check-in (no need for a Receptionist) and doors (no friendly doorman), and the installation of vending machines: ideas that go completely against the principles and standards of the famous Ivy Hotel. It is also likely that the girls and their Mum would have to move, and that is just too awful to contemplate. They finally meet the only other child living in the hotel, Colin, whose parents come from Kolkata and are often away. The fact that there are always people around means that he can stay in the hotel on his own, but automation would mean that he, too, would have to leave. Odd things happen, and they wonder if the Events Manager, Celine, the only member of staff who actively dislikes the girls, is trying to sabotage the hotel.



A man checking in late, as Mr Smith, makes the girls think he might be a spy, checking up on the hotel and its staff, but when he is found dead in his room the next day, they realise that things are more complicated, and decide to investigate. Colin and the girls, with occasional help from Jake and doorman Bob, take some risks in finding useful information, but they finally solve the puzzle and unmask the murderer, and of course The Ivy is saved.

The setting is Dublin, in a square rather like St Stephen's Green, so there are opportunities to walk Milo, feed the ducks (with the appropriate food), and chat to Sean, who with his horse Flicker takes tourists for a ride in a carriage, and keeps an eye on the area, which proves very helpful indeed. Emily Hourican writes well, and there is a lot of humour in the characters and the interactions, so this is a very enjoyable story. **DB**

Ed's Choice

Shadow Thieves Island of Skulls

★★★★★

Peter Burns, Farshore, 384pp, 978-0008667849, £7.99 pbk

Mixing elements of *Harry Potter*, *Alex Rider*, *Oliver Twist* and even *Mission Impossible*, the first in Peter Burns' *Shadow Thieves* series established characters, setting and tone in a sophisticated, neatly plotted and ambitious school-for-young-spooks adventure. Book two, *Island of Skulls*, continues in the same vein, offering its readers another well-written story that ensures readers pay proper attention no matter how fast-moving the action. Central character, 13-year-old Tom Morgan is beginning to find his feet at Beaufort's School for Deceptive Arts, though still struggling to catch up with fellow students who have been there longer, and frequently reminded of his lowly origins by some of the less-friendly classmates. With the school under quarantine as a result of the goings-on in book one, Tom and his housemates are headed to a literal treasure island, the home of the notorious Duke of Nimes and tasked to find his loot, including a



weapon rumoured to be so deadly that it terrifies even the school's board. The search tests Tom, his friends and rivals to extraordinary degree, with more than one plot unrolling simultaneously: the search for the treasure, the testing of new friendships and alliances, and a larger conspiracy that targets all at Beaufort's and maybe beyond. It's genuinely gripping: like Tom, we're not sure who we can trust, and Burns respects his readers to keep up with the intrigue at all levels. **AR**

The Time Engine

★★★★★

Lindsay Galvin, ill. Kristina Kister, Barrington Stoke, 111pp, 978-0008801366, £7.99 pbk

Eric Finch is a schoolboy in 1938 Cambridge, England. His parents are both highly intelligent, his father is a professor at the University of Cambridge and his mother is a mathematician who was top of her class when his parents met there. His father is still a professor, while his mother, though fiercely intelligent, is confined to the home because it is thought that she has mental health problems.

With modern eyes, it may have been a purely patriarchal confinement though Galvin never explicitly states this. One morning in March 1938, both Eric's parents receive separate letters. His father is called to war work and initially we are not told the contents of his mother's letter although her husband tells her to burn it in the fireplace. Thankfully, she does not.

When Eric returns home unexpectedly from school, he finds his mother has been in the attic. He heard a strange thump and she will not tell him why. He discovers that she has found the drawings made by a young Ada Lovelace for a prototype time engine and his mum has been building it in secret. He then goes

back to 1828. Will he manage to return and will the fabric of history remain intact?

The key to this short novel to which there needs to be a sequel, is the feminist thread which is embedded and how much women, both Eric's mother and a young Ada Lovelace, have to fight to get their intelligence seen and validated by the society they live in. **RB**

Six Weeks

★★★★★

Matt Goodfellow, ill. Joe Todd-Stanton, Starboard, 304pp, 978-1444982886, £8.99 pbk

Alfie Piper is twelve years old. The reader discovers within the first pages of Goodfellow's beautiful and brutal verse novel that Alfie's mother, Sally Anne Taylor, died from pancreatic cancer almost a year ago. We also discover that Alfie's mum's partner was with her when she died. Alfie was not. What follows is a deeply nuanced exploration of the effects of profound grief and eventual healing on all members of Alfie's family.

One of the major relationships in this book is that between Alfie and his mum's partner. For most of the book, Alfie hates the partner and refuses to use his name. He is jealous of the partner's place in his mum's world. This is a vital relationship to explore in a family that has been touched by grief

and it is something that is rarely done with such sensitivity. If the reader thinks all relationships can be healed from loss like this, they are mistaken. Alfie's maternal grandmother is a case in point. Even in death, she can't forgive her daughter's past mistakes, namely teenage pregnancy.

Any reader who has experienced deep loss will be touched hugely by Goodfellow's text and Todd-Stanton's illustrations. Be warned! It may make you weep. **RB**

Wildheart

★★★★★

Bec Manser, ill. Vika Muse, Puffin, 368pp, 9780241753194, £8.99 pbk

This is a thoroughly engaging, thought provoking and thrilling debut fantasy novel which creates a vividly imagined world and has characters that you can really believe in. The story opens in Twigswick, one of several towns dotted around the enchanted forest of Dryda, home of twelve-year-old Nettle and her older sister Fern. Like all children they have been taught to never enter the forest, which is infested with ghouls, monsters and most deadly of all, the ghostly Hollow Spirits, and indeed their father was killed six years ago when Nettle was lost in the forest. Fern is the opposite of Nervous Nettle, as she is known, and wants nothing more than to join the Wildheart Rangers, dedicated to protecting the towns and keeping the monsters at bay. But shortly after Fern joins up, they hear that she has ditched her role as a Ranger to join the infamous Shadow Stalkers.

Nettle cannot believe that Fern is a traitor, and thinking she might be in trouble, Nettle courageously enters the forest to find some answers. Lying about her age, she is enrolled into the Rangers and we discover alongside her, the mythology of the Rangers and the woodland spirits they work with, as well as uncomfortable truths about Fern.

Nettle comes to slowly realise it's the Hollow Spirits who need her help, and it is her sister who has to be stopped. As Nettle discovers her own special powers, how to handle her fears and appreciates her own worth, she is supported by the first friends she has ever had.

While being entirely age appropriate and completely integrated into the plot and characterisation, there are important diverse and inclusive LGBTQIA+ elements in this story and while the antagonists are certainly vivid and scary, they too are not one dimensional and the way in which they are dispatched is rather moving.

While having some familiar folkloric tropes, this feels like a genuinely original story, absolutely infused with a love of nature in all its elements. It also happens to be beautifully written and a perfect read aloud length, with fast paced action and enough twists and turns to keep your audience desperate for just one more chapter!

We definitely leave the book wanting more from these characters

and I will certainly be looking forward to finding out what will happen to Nettle and Fern in the next instalment of this excellent new series. **JCo**



Secret of the Selkies

★★★★★

Laura Keohane, O'Brien Press, 240pp, 978-1788495677, £8.99 pbk

Lana is looking forward to summer with her grandparents in their cottage on the wild Atlantic coast. It's a chance to escape her family, in particular her annoying little sister Molly and her big brother Eoin, who always seems to be cleverer than her and more confident. An encounter with seals on the beach is a joyful exhilarating experience, but still not enough to shake off her feelings of hurt and exclusion. Then Lana discovers an extraordinary, magical family secret: she is a selkie, and only has to slip into the old coat that belonged to her great grandmother to join a family of seals as they dive through the ocean. Vulnerable because of her insecurities, she accepts a fairy trial to prove she belongs with the selkies, and as we all know, fairies can never be trusted. The trial puts her in danger of losing both her families. The adventure that follows is full of magic, tension and jeopardy, while being founded in a domestic world we will all recognise, where family is still the most important thing, despite how much they irritate you. This is Laura Keohane's debut and she does a fine job, placing a thoroughly credible young girl in a magical world, and showing the contrasting pull of those two different worlds, both tempting her with the same things: love and belonging. Bravo too for the seashore scenes which are full of brine and brio! **LS**

Bim Blake's Hot Takes: My Pencil Case Doesn't Define Me

★★★★★

Tolá Okogwu, ill. Ariyana Taylor, Puffin, 304pp, 9780241761458, £8.99 pbk

Bimbola Blake (also known as Bim) is a wonderfully warm and relatable new friend for all those teens anticipating

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

the move to secondary school. Bim is 11 and she is just about to move up. In preparation she has started to compile her personal and private journal on a fictional app called Inner Thoughts and we share this, plus her texts, daily affirmations and glimpses of her public blog: Bim Blake's Hot Takes.

These different text types and the lively and very amusing illustrations combine to make a highly attractive and very accessible package, ideally suited to fans of the **Dork Diaries** and **Lottie Brookes** et al. Bim has a wonderfully humorous, honest and authentic voice and we can relish her witty and sometimes wise observations of her life at home and at the new school, with all the friendship dramas, peer pressure and a potential first crush that she has to deal with.

You will laugh aloud at farcical mix-ups and cringingly embarrassing situations but then find yourself filled with empathy. While grief is not an overarching theme of the book, Bim is navigating life as a preteen, including the trauma of an overdue first bra fitting, without her mother who died three years ago, and this absence is sensitively and realistically portrayed. But what Bim does have is the support of three older and occasionally infuriating brothers, a chihuahua called Jerry, two very loud and opinionated aunties and a very endearing father, despite his sudden obsession with experimental cookery and TikTok. Altogether a lovely representation of a vibrant, warm, Nigerian heritage family.

This is a book and series which really captures the thrills and frustrations of this age group and one which will encourage readers to reflect on self-confidence, belonging and being comfortable with who they are. **JCo**

Tadpole Summer

★★★★★

Catherine Bruton, Nosy Crow, 272pp, 978-1839946523, £7.99 pbk
This is truly an extraordinary novel, exquisitely written, deeply moving and important. As the author says in her afterword, one in twenty children experience the death of a parent or sibling by the age of sixteen and stories like this can help children prepare for loss and work through and articulate their grief. It is also raising awareness of the dreadful disease Spinal Muscular Atrophy (called SMA-PME for short) which Frog's younger brother Taddeus (Tad) suffers from.

The story is told from the perspective of eleven-year-old Frances (known to all as Frog). She is one of the 'glass children', a sibling of a child with chronic or terminal illness, many of whom the author has encountered during her teaching career, with them showing incredible resilience and compassion, but often isolated and feeling unseen.



Lived experience and careful research lend an unmistakable authenticity to this story, which clearly matters deeply to the author. But what is most remarkable about this story is the sheer life affirming joy and hope to be found within its pages, in the relationships within the family and with the wider community and from the solace that the natural world can bring.

Nature had always been important to Tad and Frog, the 'Wildlife Warriors', aided and abetted by their Grandad, who lives with them. They always collected frogspawn to watch the tadpole transformation, but this was the year that Tad was too ill to join them.

When he was hospitalized, Frog could not bear to sleep in their bedroom without him, and Grandad suggested a tent in the garden. When Tad comes home, he needs medical equipment and so she stays in the tent. In a short time, this simple action becomes something that involves a community and school in fundraising, whilst all the time she is sharing the magic of nature with Tad.

It is so beautifully and delicately done without labouring the point, but we can see that observing the fragility of life, because not all tadpoles will grow into frogs, helps her to come to terms with what is happening to her beloved brother.

As the season moves on, the inevitable ending draws closer, but it comes with a profound sense of peace and of having made every single day count. Most importantly for young readers, at the end we see Frog turning towards the future, having survived the loss, knowing that with each spring she will see the tadpoles and relive their last summer together.

This is a profound and beautifully honest portrayal of a close-knit, loving family facing the worst of circumstances, which has not a shred of sentimentality, but which shows what resilience, love and bravery

the human spirit can muster. Not since **A Monster Calls** has a reading experience affected me as much and this unforgettable novel absolutely deserves a similar status and recognition. **JCo**

A Sister Like You

★★★★★

Sarah Hagger-Holt, Usborne, 384pp, 978-1836046943, £7.99 pbk
Ella is beginning a new life. Bullied in her last school, victimised because she was adopted by her single mum, she has been home-schooled, but is now returning to full-time education. Permanently anxious and lacking self-confidence, the thought of this new beginning terrifies her, particularly as it is at her mother's old school, the prestigious St. Hildegard's School For Girls.

Ari, too, is joining St Hilda's and she, too, is adopted. Her two fathers, Dad and Papa, have a much more freewheeling and openly loving approach to life than Ella's mother, whose rigidly conventional outlook, although well-meaning, often suffocates and controls her daughter.

Ari was often in trouble at her former school – her often misdirected unflinching energy and enthusiasm – and her inability to recognise her mistakes and remediate them resulted in a move to St Hilda's.

Both girls have musical talent and find solace and inspiration in Monsieur Beaumont's choir, Finding Our Voices, where they are told 'music exists to make us complete, to bring us face to face with ourselves, to express emotions which we cannot put into words.' Ella's new friend Freya is also a choir member and Ella feels finally able to accept that she is attracted to her, that she is gay, which she would not have been able to verbalise before the liberating atmosphere of choir.

When Ari and Ella finally learn that they are half-sisters their reactions are polar opposites: Ella is terrified at the thought of dealing with a new responsibility and Ari is awash with enthusiasm. It is also clear that Ella's mother disapproves of Ari's gay dads and a meeting of the two families is strained and awkward.

Worse still, when Ari blurts out at school that they are sisters, Ella denies it and, as a result, Ari decides she can no longer be a member of the choir which she loves so much. Yet the novel arcs up from this depressing low point – and again, it is music which comes to the rescue.

Ella finds the courage of her convictions and her love for her sister when she makes a powerful case to Monsieur Beaumont to ask him to give Ari another chance and The Finding Our Voices end of term concert and the longed-for trip to sing in a French music festival gives the girls and their families both a rich shared experience and the chance for Ellie and Ari to spend some time together without their parents.

When Ella's beloved Grandma becomes seriously ill and is taken to hospital on the day of the music festival concert Ella panics and makes an ill-planned attempt to try to get back to England on her own, it is Ari who works out where she has gone and comes to find her, saving the day and cementing the bond growing between them.

It would be a reader's betrayal if the novel had a hasty and tidily wrapped up happy ending and Sarah Hagger-Holt does not allow herself to fall into that trap. Instead, she indicates the significant emotional changes in the girls, the very gradual drawing-together of their families and the promise of a brighter future. **VR**

The Thing About Giants

★★★★★

Christopher Galvin, Walker, 352pp, 9781529530841, £12.99 hbk

In this debut novel Corman, a young giant, accidentally meets and then becomes close to Jacq, a twelve-year-old human training to become an unwilling giant-hunter. She lives in the walled city of Fathach while he is in a permanent state of hiding underground in the surrounding forests. Not an ideal start for a lasting friendship, but Jacq has never followed the prevailing ideology whereby giants are portrayed as ruthless killers from a violent past who must all be hunted down by armed helicopters.

She and Corman decide to work together for a better future, and after many set-backs and near-misses, finally achieve their goal.

Giants have always existed most powerfully in the imagination through the talents of illustrators and animated film-makers. But trying to keep in mind such enormous differences in height between the two main characters through the medium of prose is a hard ask. Perhaps because of this the author at times strains too hard, trusting that an extra adjective or two here and there will keep up the momentum.

The story's plea for more understanding and tolerance is well made, but some of the detail makes for uncomfortable reading. Fathach itself is encircled by walls built from the bones of dead giants, with its main hall constructed in gleeful detail from a huge skull. Against this unsavoury background, a captured giant, kept shackled in secret captivity, is a depressing reminder of the horrors of cruel imprisonment still happening in real life today.

This is the author's first novel for young readers, having already come out top in a five-way auction. Written over a period of five years it is well constructed and good for readers in search of instant adventure. A sequel is promised, perhaps this time a little less hectic and occasionally disturbing. **NT**

The Monsters at the End of the World

★★★★

Rebecca Orwin, ill. Oriol Vidal, Puffin, 304pp, 978-0241701782, £8.99 pbk

The author of this debut novel is already a good writer. Her sentences snap into place, freshly minted and straight to the point, and she draws on a richly-stocked imagination. Perhaps a little too rich this time though, with an unwieldy plot where young Sunny can only communicate with the so-called monster she teams up with through thought processes alone. This inevitably slows down the action while waiting for the next silent transaction to take place. But the stakes are so high readers will still want to know what is going to happen next.

Sunny lives in a beleaguered coastal town following two centuries of social disaster. The monsters, which look like large dogs with peculiar ears and tails, are in the sea. They are thought responsible for the way the ground is poisoned and getting worse, but Sunny discovers that this is a complete misreading of the current situation. The monsters are as afraid of the humans too, each blaming the other for what is going wrong.

Sunny has the task of bringing these two warring factions into peaceful co-existence, taking on long-held ancient prejudices in the process. Her mother and her best friends offer no support, and her new employer makes things worse.

The savior factor is the realisation that the 'goo', the author's own word, produced by the monsters as an abundant skin bi-product also holds the key to putting everything environmentally right. Not the most pleasing of images, but there is still plenty of excitement as near civil war is averted and Sunny recognised as a courageous peacemaker.

Rebecca Orwin in her turn is a writer to look out for, so too is Oriol Vidal for her striking black and white illustrations. NT

Rusthead

★★★★

Ross MacKenzie, Andersen Press, 320pp, 978-1839136320, £8.99 pbk

Stand by for taut writing punctuated by regular explosions – Ross MacKenzie is back and once again in peak form. This time two fourteen-year-old lads, Kol and Sully, find themselves on a mission to free the galaxy from the oppressive rule of the robotic Reaper Empire. On their side they have Solene, the ice-cold commander of the spaceship Rose, which helpfully also possesses human understanding.

Happy to leave behind their former lives as rustheads – the name given to treasure hunters searching for scrap on their own barren planet – the boys join Solene on a mission to

rid the galaxy of the robotic Reaper Empire now in grim control. With Solene backing away from her former threat to snap the two boys' spines and throw them out of the air lock, the main action then gets under way.

Maintaining perpetual tension is always a challenge, but this author's almost demonic energies are equal to the task. In prose that constantly crackles and pops, the two boys exchange laconic sides after surviving multiple dangers that would surely have eventually slayed lesser mortals.

Written with the aim of supporting busy teachers with truly popular learning resources, it is easy to imagine that many young readers, perhaps more male than female, will fall on this novel, swept away by its all-consuming energy and general absence of anything like reflection.

Fine writing it is not, but continually exciting it certainly is. Saving the Star System, after all, might be considered enough in itself to bother about occasional prose over-kill. Already a multi award-winning author, Ross MacKenzie in this current story keeps up the standards he has achieved in the past while also promising more to come in the same vein in the future. NT

The Common Criminals' Club: Death Before Detention

★★★★

Alison Weatherby, ill. Ellen Porteus, Macmillan Children's Books, 266pp, 978-1035084319, £7.99 pbk

A witty and charming addition to the growing canon of cosy middle grade crime.

The story opens with Mae writing in her logbook about the extraordinary turn of events that unfold one term at her tiny rural boarding school in Ireland. Mae and her three friends Shonda, Aoife and Beck have set up a secret club, the Common Criminals club where they do nothing more daring than watch illicit Netflix movies and eat sweets and biscuits.

The school is run by two eccentric nuns and a motley assortment of teachers in a somewhat laissez faire manner, although there are rules which Mae always seems to break and then receive detentions for. The girls love their school despite the dilapidated state of the building as it feels like a safe haven from some of their tricky family situations. All that is shattered one day when Mae is asked to fetch some butter from the fridge for the biscuits their class are making and a dead body topples out of the fridge on top of her. It transpires that two of her friends also spotted a body the evening before. But how did the body get into the fridge? The Garda are called in but prove incompetent in their investigations and then when the principal nun is found dead the next day, Mae and her club decide they will have to solve the mystery themselves.

The murdered man turns out to be Conor Haddock whose father built the school but he wants to sell the building. The principal is trying to protect the school from closure. Could this be a strong enough motive? As Mae and her friends snoop around uncovering more secrets, they realise that almost everyone could have a motive for murder.

There is plenty of peril and danger but it is dealt with a light touch and plenty of humour. The girls' friendship is tested to the brink as suspicion and lies abound but in the process of finding out whodunnit Mae gains some valuable insights about her friends and herself.

Fans of the **Murder Most Unladylike Mysteries** will enjoy this. JC

Nora Nightsky: Double the Drama

★★★★

Rebecca Lewis-Oakes, ill. Becka Moor, Scholastic 176pp, 978-0702341540, £6.99 pbk

Nora and her family are stars in the constellation Ursa Minor, on which people can wish, and in this second book in the **Nora Nightsky** series, her brother Fergus is celebrating granting his 5,000th wish. Nora and her good friend Leap, from the hare constellation further South, love playing games with Little Bear, as he's not very good, and they always win. Nora is not keen on granting wishes from afar, but would rather go down to Earth and enable people to find their own way to what they have wished for. This apparently caused a lot of trouble in the first book, and of course there will be trouble this time, especially as two wishes seem to have been mixed up: therefore 'Double the drama'.

In the Wish-Post letter, it looked as if Maya wants to make her own comics, but she keeps insisting on wearing the right shoes and going outside. It turns out that her neighbour, Mo, who loves drawing, coincidentally also wished on Nora on the same night, and Nora realises that her older sister Koko mixed up the wishes to get Nora into trouble. Nora has her Dazzle-o-meter, which enables her to do a certain amount of magic, and she needs enough to get back to space, but it does get dangerously low, and it's not very helpful when Leo the Lion and Savannah the Snake constellations come down to check on her, and to warn her to watch her stardust level. Nora finds life on human Earth a bit puzzling, which is fun, and she doesn't have any human money, but she copes, and makes good use of the local library. Sadly, there was a nasty librarian (in glasses and cardigan!), who, once Rhyme Time was over, insisted on silence... Life does get very complicated, but of course she sorts it all out eventually, and the two children make good progress in their hobbies. Will she reveal her sister's treachery? You will have to read it to find out! DB

The Unchosen One

★★★★

Amy Sparkes, ill. Ben Mantle, Walker Books, 240pp, 978-1529525700, £7.99 pbk

Accident-prone Tassie has been leading a sheltered life under the guidance of the Chief Steward inside the Citadel, and even falls out of a tree into the cart driven by the Wisest of the Wise, so she is astonished when she is called in, not to be told off, but to be informed she is the Chosen One who can save the Isles of Peryll from the Shadow, as foretold in a prophecy. The Wisest of the Wise is not trustworthy, though, and she sends Tassie supposedly on her quest, but actually into danger in the Blackthorn Forest, where the trees are mobile, and very threatening. Fortunately, Tassie has her cautious griffin friend, Spin, with her, and help comes from a mysterious elf, Darley.

Tassie is sure that she can't really be The Chosen One, so she diverts to try and find out who the One actually is. Discovering that Darley the elf has his face on a Wanted poster means that she is no longer sure who to trust, and she tries to keep her own quest secret, but then decides to follow her instincts. This is an exciting adventure, a real page-turner, as the odd trio ride on dragons and encounter a family of orcs. Three Wraiths, working for the Shadow, are very funny – they come to realise that failure means a fate worse than being put on the naughty step, and bring welcome comic relief. Of course, almost all is well as this story ends, and celebrations involve eating some new-fangled round bread with tomato sauce and grated cheese, but there is one more thing to sort out, and the trio set off on another adventure.

Your reviewer has enjoyed other books by Amy Sparkes, notably the series that includes **The House at the End of Magic**, and **The Bookshop at the Back of Beyond**, and we can look forward to more excellent stories. DB

Too Many Times

★★★★

Henry White, Harper Collins Children's Books, 288pp, 978-0008762575, £7.99 pbk

If your reviewer were to state that this book is totally bonkers, author Henry White would probably be very pleased, and feel that he had achieved his objective!

Tim has a hard life: his parents expect him to do lots of chores, including dusting their huge collection of snowglobes, he has to get good grades and be in lots of school clubs, and he has to earn money with a paper round and a Saturday job at the barber's as well. When he says he wishes there could be 2 of him to share the load, his clever friend Nora reveals her cloning machine, and they create Tim-Two. That does make his life a little easier, but it becomes difficult to hide the fact that there are two of him at home and at school. They

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

have a hilarious fight with a dinner lady, and, just as the 4,267 snow globes are about to be featured in a magazine, the boys bump into each other when cleaning them, and there is a crash... Dad demands he pays a million pounds to replace the collection, and Tim and Tim-Two realise they need more of them to help.

It all gets totally out of hand, of course, and soon there are too many Tims living in a Timocracy, or is it a Timtatorship? By the time they create Timlandia, there are thousands of Tims: Tall-Tim, Moustache-Tim, Fun-Tim, and so on, but Tim-Three is a bit of a rebel, and causes a lot of trouble. Nora explains that all the Tims have aspects of the original Tim's personality, and Tim-Three is less of a pushover, not necessarily doing whatever his parents and teachers tell him to do...

Tim is appalled at how it's all gone so wrong, but Nora, who loves science and inventing machines, has built in a way to put the Tims back together, complete with the memories of each Tim, and eventually they manage to get back to normal. There is a difference though: Tim realises that he can use other traits of his personality to stand up to his parents and live his own life. It's a terrifically original idea, and the wacky cartoon illustrations by a real Tim, Tim Wesson, make this book a lot of fun to read, not only for people called Tim! **DB**

How to Steal the Future

★★★★

Christopher Edge, illus Pete Lloyd, Macmillan Children's Books, 208pp, 978-1035071821, £7.99 pbk
A machine called Avenir has been developed that can predict the future, but it is locked inside a maze of its own creation. Only children can enter the maze and have a chance of bringing Avenir's secrets into the light of day, and they are being sent in two by two, just as they were in the Greek legend of the imprisoned Minotaur. And, as in the legend, they do not come out alive. Drew's elder sister Evie is one of those victims and now Drew has volunteered to enter the labyrinth to find her. This is the story of his quest and the children he meets on the way. He knows he has only sixty-seven minutes, and the time is running down on the bracelet on his wrist, although he has no idea what might happen to him when it finally runs out. Meanwhile the labyrinth seems to have a malevolent mind of its own, its restless walls aiming to deceive and crush Drew and his companions. Edge deploys the claustrophobia and unpredictability expertly, although I can't help feeling that this aspect would work better in a video game than a novel. However, gradually it becomes apparent that more is going on than the reader has been

led to believe at the beginning, and, at the point where Drew seems to be leaning on a memory of his sister that has something to do with **Alice in Wonderland** and contemporary London, we are gradually introduced to an entirely new understanding of his experience, which reorients everything that has gone before. This is an ingenious novel. The marketing blurb likens it, not unfairly, to Christopher Nolan's **Inception**. But, if it is more ambitious than the science fiction thriller packaging which Macmillan has given it, it works well enough at that level too. **CB**

Ben's Gargoyle

★★★★

Keith Gray, ill. Keith Robinson, Barrington Stoke, 104pp, 978-0008774615, £7.99, pbk
Ben's Gargoyle seems leaner than Keith Gray's previous writing for Barrington Stoke. There is really only a cast of two: Ben and his mean dad. Both of them are suffering from the break-up of Ben's parents' marriage. But Ben is suffering most, since his dad's bitterness and anger is directly mostly at him and he has been relegated to a miserable attic above their down-at-heel flat. Ben is sleeping on the floor because his demoralized and self-absorbed father has been unable even to put Ben's new flatpack bed together. It is from his bedroom that Ben sees the living gargoyle on a neighbouring roof casually devouring a pigeon. Of course, his dad refuses to listen when Ben tries to tell him about the gargoyle and, as the gargoyle comes ever closer, what its appearance means for Ben himself remains unclear. As usual, Gray makes the best use of the restricted Barrington Stoke brief, making every word count. Dad is dreadful and cruel, but still awfully human. Ben himself is both disturbed and confused. As the gargoyle steps into Ben's room, it is hard to know what will happen next. Ben, his dad and the menacing gargoyle are nicely captured in Keith Robinson's illustrations. **CB**

Where the Tide Lines Lead

★★★★

Sophie Cameron, ill. Frances Castle, Little Tiger, 288pp, 978-1788958080, £9.99 pbk
Elio has one ambition for the summer: to enjoy his last few months on his family's resort on a Spanish island before he is sent away to boarding school, doing teenage things and getting on with his painting. But there are other concerns on the island. A spate of mysterious disappearances, all of them teenagers, all without explanation or evidence, has shaken the families involved and threatens the tourist economy the whole community depends on. Then one night Elio hears a strange song and watches a girl from his school walk into the sea, which parts to let her

through before closing over her. No one believes him, except perhaps Sam, a British tourist whose twin sister is among the missing. Together they investigate, and find far more than they bargained for: a whole community living beneath the waves, where the missing teenagers have built a new life that looks, on the surface, idyllic.

This is a novel of two distinct parts, one above the sea and one below, and that split is both its strength and its weakness. The above water sections offer a recognisable coming of age story, with Elio negotiating friendship, family expectation and the economic anxieties rippling through the island as a result of the disappearances. The mystery elements work well here, with clues accumulating steadily to build real intrigue and links with past mysteries. Below the waves, the tone shifts into something closer to ecological fantasy, as the teenagers tend the ocean floor and confront the damage humans have done to it, while also wrestling with what they miss from home and the families they left behind.

There is a great deal going on, arguably too much for one novel to fully resolve, and the ending deliberately resists tidy closure in favour of something more open ended, about making peace with imperfect circumstances and real life. Pacy and inventive, if not entirely cohesive, this is a solid summer read for fans of contemporary fantasy with something on its mind. **LJS**

The Emptying

★★★★

Mimi Thebo & Rachel DelaHaye, Troika Books, 224pp, 978-1912745487, £9.99 pbk
It is a society now governed by technology – emotions, crops, even babies – everything is regulated; the aim to Eradicate Human Error. Dot is a child of the society, a farm girl looking forward to her next regulated step in life. Acker is a city boy – a free wheeler on a skateboard dodging authority. But something has gone wrong with Distro (the World Wide Distribution Centre) that controls all aspects of life from energy supply to distribution of food; a disaster for the farm. In the city there are riots – Acker loses his best friend. But this is not supposed to happen. Dot and Acker, unwilling allies, find themselves on a desperate mission to discover what has gone wrong in their world...

This is a lively futuristic novel, the society the authors have chosen to portray picking up a very contemporary concern – the growth of AI and the technology around it. The two protagonists are well drawn in their different attitudes and strengths. It is easy to relate to them as the narrative alternates between their individual voices and points of view, allowing the authors to present different aspects of this society – the attractive positives, the controlling negatives. Dot is

potentially a leader, technologically minded; Acker is logical, scientific, while balancing these aspects at the heart of their story there is the importance of creativity, the natural world, choice and the individual. The plot moves briskly; the prose style is direct and accessible. An enjoyable, thoughtful addition to the genre that could work well in a classroom – and is worth recommending as a good read. **FH**

Circling the Stars

★★★★★

Laura Sheldon, Firefly Press, 192pp, 978-1917718288, £8.99 pbk
Ani's dad has moved out, and the new shape of her family, just her and her mum now, is something she is still struggling to find her footing in. She spends much of her time at her bedroom window, watching the world outside rather than joining it, until one night she notices a boy from next door, a little older than her, slipping out of his house. Eventually, curiosity gets the better of her and she follows him.

What unfolds from there is something quietly magical. The two children discover an urban fox they name Matty, who later becomes Estrella when they realise she is expecting a litter of pups, and they take it upon themselves to watch over her and her new family. In doing so, both children find an anchor outside their own uncertain lives, something to care for and be curious about together, and almost without noticing it, they begin to heal.

Told in verse, this is a simple and genuinely beautiful story about two children learning to live alongside change they cannot control. Laura Sheldon has a wonderfully light touch: the verse carries the reader gently through the narrative, never straining for effect, and the book's themes, the importance of protecting the natural world, the necessity of accepting change, the unexpected power of friendship, emerge naturally rather than being announced. Both the poetry and the message reveal themselves slowly and tenderly, exactly in step with Ani's own growing understanding.

There is real wisdom in how the novel handles its emotional material. Ani's grief over her parents' separation is never minimised, but neither does it overwhelm the story. Instead, the novel shows, with real delicacy, how children find their way through loss by reaching outward, towards nature, towards each other, towards people who turn out to be more willing to help and support them than they had imagined.

This is a small, perfectly formed book that trusts its young readers to sit with complexity and stillness, and rewards that trust generously. A lovely, moving verse novel that deserves to be read slowly, and more than once. **LJS**



I Am a Royal Rulebreaker: Women Who Shaped History

★★★★★

Fern Riddell, ill. Taylor Dolan,
Dorling Kindersley, 80pp,
9780241789858, £16.99 hbk

To describe this book simply I'd say it is an older readers version of the **Fantastically Great Women** series by Kate Pankhurst. Ideal for secondary school-aged readers, it explores a wide range of female rulers from across the world and how they defied the norm.

The women range from princesses to queens to empresses and either feature on their own with a spread or two to detail their life and why their rebellious nature is worth celebrating, or in section dedicated to a collection of women under a theme such as women who didn't want to marry, women who stole the limelight and women who fought in battles. These sections, along with a couple of introductory ones near the start of the book, help to give more historical context to the time periods or issues being discussed.

Some of the women readers may already be familiar with like Queen Victoria, Queen Elizabeth I and Cleopatra for example, so the book works nicely in terms of the curriculum topics and building on that knowledge. But some of the women may be refreshingly new to them like Cixi a Chinese Empress who started court life as a concubine and rose to be Empress, potentially poisoning a few people along the way, and Queen Salote of Tonga, who escaped death twice and caused intrigue when she attended Queen Elizabeth II's Coronation.

In terms of design it's beautifully illustrated by Taylor Dolan and the pages are colourful and bright without detracting from the text itself which is broken into sections to make it more accessible.

Overall, this would be a great book to pour over and devour page-by-page or dip into to read more about a woman the reader admires. It would be a real asset to any school or public library setting where women in history are celebrated. **CH**



The Silver Kingdom

★★★★★

Radiya Hafiza, Simon and Schuster,
978-1398546257, 416pp, £16.99 pbk

Lovers of romantasy will find lots they'll adore in Radiya Hafiza's debut YA novel **The Silver Kingdom**, but, drawing on Bangladesh history and steeped in South Asian culture, it's a rich, rewarding read for anyone. It tells of two young people, Zayd and Layla, narrative switching between them, both heirs to neighbouring sultanates and both with key roles to play in their countries' struggles for safety and independence, whatever their own desires and wishes. Their first meeting could hardly be less auspicious: Zayd discovers Layla in his rooms – she's a guest at the palace and lost – and holds a sword to her throat. But as they see more of one another, they are increasingly drawn to one another, though both are betrothed to others, their forthcoming marriages designed to strengthen political alliances. Zayd's family are kind and loving, Layla's mother – her father is dead – the complete opposite. The Sultana of Sawan is as cruel to her daughter as she is to her people, a ruthless, ambitious sovereign willing to do anything to maintain her hold and increase her power. It seems unlikely that Zayd and Layla can ever even tell each other how they feel, let alone act on it, and there's an added complication: Zayd has been poisoned and is slowly dying, his only hope to find a mage with the magical power to heal him, and mages now live in hiding following persecution by the kingdoms' rulers. The tale of love versus duty, war, political manoeuvrings and magic plays out in a world of Mughal-inspired palaces and gardens, with food, clothes, weapons, scenery and culture that of the author's Bangladeshi heritage. The setting is an enormous part of the book's appeal, though the back

14+ Secondary/Adult

and forth, will-they-can-they romance between its star-crossed lovers is another pleasure. If the romance feels a little drawn out at times – and surely Layla could occasionally say something nice to Zayd – the political intrigue and sense of impending war heightens the tension, as does the ticking clock of Zayd's illness. This is a clever, well-plotted romance and political thriller with fascinating echoes of the rise and fall of past empires. **LS**

Foes & Cons

★★★★★

Georgia Bowers, Fox & Ink Books, 978-1917894043, 352pp, £8.99 pbk Eliza Gellar has been a fan of Vampire Falls for many years. She knows every script in every episode in every series. Charlie Chamberlain and Eliza used to be friends. About a year ago, they fell out. Now Charlie and Eliza, along with Charlie's eleven-year-old sister, Sadie, and Eliza's best friend, Roxy, are at a fan weekend convention for Vampire Falls.

There is going to be a competition to find the biggest super-fans of the series, the ultimate prize being tickets to the San Francisco Comic-Con and to meet the lead female actor of Vampire Falls.

Who will get chosen to compete and who will win? What will Eliza and Charlie learn about themselves in the process?

This book is a love letter to belonging to a fandom and to the profound ability any fandom has to bring people together. The skill in Bowers' book is the fact that she has created a TV series within the narrative with scripts, lore and fan fiction. The level of plotting required for this is impressive.

As many readers will suspect, there is a rekindling of the past romance between Eliza and Charlie. The scene where Charlie honours Eliza's fan fiction is hugely romantic and will appeal to both romance readers and budding writers.

Eliza learns to value her own interests and preferences over those of her parents who would prefer that she apply to university rather than go straight for a creative career. It is unusual in YA for writers to show that there is an alternative viable path other than university and Bowers is to be commended for this. Bowers chooses to explore Eliza's reasoning for this more thoroughly than most authors. **RB**

How To Lose Yourself Completely

★★★★★

Peter Bognanni, Rock The Boat, 352pp, 978-1836433002, £9.99 pbk Case is 16 years old and at the mercy of anxiety and depression. His elder brother Sean is the only person who

understands the workings of his constantly worrying mind – but Sean is dead, killed jumping a red light on his bike – mown down in front of him. The shock was unbearable and plunged Case into a foment of guilt and loss.

In an attempt to lift Casey's spirits and give him tools with which to deal with his mental health his parents enrol him on an adventure therapy course, out in the wilderness with a guide and 4 other people, a narrative paean to cultural and sexual diversity and an exploration of differing mental health issues.

Bognanni quickly establishes the other characters, each, like Case, with their deep-seated problems, each wishing they were elsewhere and wanting nothing to do with the rest of the group. Then Silas, their guide and counsellor, deserts them after stealing all their medication. When he is found dead of an overdose they must now rely on each other to organise food, water and shelter and find their way to the food drop which will save their lives, all things which are completely beyond their mental and emotional capabilities.

With considerable skill and plausibility Bognanni creates belief in the reader about the family they feel their way into becoming. They begin to change, to confront their fears and face physical and emotional challenges, since the alternative is death. The dry wit which is threaded through the narrative acts as a balance to the extremes of their situation and dialogue feels authentic, drawing the reader into the characters' mentally compromised worlds. The narrative is compelling, full of incident and tension, but occasionally needs an extra helping of suspension of belief from the reader.

The end of the novel is masterful – shot through with a palpable sense of the group as family, with humour which is almost black yet with a sense of better things to come, tentatively approached, understated but most definitely present: 'You can win and still lose. You can't live a life fully under the surface. You have to find a way back even if it's hard.' **VR**

The Beckett Effect

★★★★★

Nashae Jones, Penguin, 336pp,
9780241723722, £9.99 pbk

Wren hates Beckett Lane. They played together when they were growing up but now his reputation for serial dating, disregard for his girlfriends' feelings and arrogance about his father, Sloan, a minor player in the world of film, disgust her. The final straw comes when he publicly rejects the shy advances of Wren's beloved younger sister, leaving her humiliated and distressed.

Wren vows revenge. She and her

reviews

14+ Secondary/Adult continued

closest friend, Chelsie, have one ambition – to make their way into the world of film as directors. Their high school offers a film course with a chance to enter a prestigious festival which will get their work known. This comes hot on the heels of a discussion about the concept of redeemability of the Byronic hero and Wren decides that this will be the ideal opportunity to reveal the truth about the rumours surrounding Beckett's betrayals and cold-hearted manipulation of relationships. Interviews are arranged with the young women at the heart of the rumours and filming begins.

A clever idea – but Wren's character is insufficiently nuanced here and her thoughts and exchanges with Beckett give away rather too much about what is to come. Indeed, 'The lady doth protest too much' perfectly describes the language she uses.

It becomes clear too soon that Wren is, despite herself, attracted to Beckett's stunning good looks, whilst repeatedly abhorring what appears to be his appalling behaviour. When the interviews for the film project begin and it becomes apparent that the rumours about Beckett were just that, Wren devises a clumsy plan of tricking him into a relationship with her so that she can gather first-hand evidence to substantiate her theory. This is where the narrative teeters on the edge of disbelief. Its cause is not helped by the overuse of 'cute' and an improbable number of eye rolls.

Their relationship develops rather too quickly to be wholly believable but their conversations are enlivened by quirky humour and as the truth about Beckett is revealed it becomes more plausible. Disaster strikes and they break up but there is always the intimation that this is not the end. Sure enough, a fairytale ending brings them back together, heals the seemingly insoluble rift between Wren and Kennedy, gives Kennedy a boyfriend and Chelsie and Wren a way into the film industry through Beckett's father. This relentless layering strains reader credibility and weakens a narrative which, although it is not without merit, is stretched to the limit. **VR**

Lies We Told This Summer

★★★★

Emily Barr, Penguin Books, 352pp, 978-0241777206, £9.99 pbk

At first glance, the queen of travelogue thrillers, Emily Barr's ninth YA novel appears to be a generic crime mystery set on the French Riviera. It's reminiscent of Holly Jackson's *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* with curious wannabe podcaster Cat digging up a cold case, and has a title that recalls the tense teen stalker movie *I Know What You Did Last Summer*. Surprisingly it's actually inspired by Barr listening to an audio book of *Northanger Abbey*,

Jane Austen's homage to the Gothic genre, which features a mysterious house with secrets and a young girl with a romantic imagination. Some of Barr's central characters even have the same names.

Cat is a believable protagonist eager for adventure and escape from her babysitting duties in Cornwall while she waits to start university in Belfast. Acting on an invite to Antibes from her exasperated mother's sophisticated school friend Sophie and her urbane husband Owen, she soon finds herself in danger as her impulsive behaviour leads to romantic entanglements and dodgy decisions. Introduced to the glitzy world that she stalked on Instagram, she becomes unsure of who her real friends are.

Structured in three parts, the plot unfolds as Cat becomes involved in the machinations of the Thorpes, Tilneys and Allens. The prologue opens with a locked room which the reader will return to later as suspense builds. A slow burner which is somewhat derivative, predictable and clichéd in places, Barr does endeavour to liven the storyline up with plot twists as Cat experiences a steep learning curve. **Lies We Told This Summer** will appeal to fans of YA crime thriller fiction set in glamorous locales. **TJ**

The Party

★★★★

Ben Tomlinson, Andersen Press, 304p, 978-1839137020, £8.99 pbk

This cautionary teenage tale blends romance and drama but skates over the deeper issues in a bid to be humorous. The brainchild of London-based theatre facilitator Ben Tomlinson, it follows his romance debut *Loverboy*. Changing the title *A Party* to **THE Party**, it addresses the problems teens face in yearning to be popular, the importance of not judging a book by its cover and the expectations of parents.

Self-confessed gaming geek sixteen-year-old Noah has a major crush on the luminescent Saskia who loves to party. The trouble is his parents do not trust him with a free house for his birthday and his mother wants him in Norfolk to help clear out his grandmother's cottage. With the help of his close friends Caitlin, who thinks she likes Michael, and Woody, who has a secret, he begins to scheme. Cue operation leverage. Cue a resentful sister. Cue a vengeful ex. Cue chaos. Cue meltdown.

Intercut with text speak, references to *Macbeth*, incidents of self-discovery, self-esteem issues, questions about perceptions, blurred boundaries and awkward situations, the book is a rollercoaster of teen emotions as drink, drugs, confusing behaviour and sudden surprises amp up the drama factor. After one heady night this group of teens will never be

the same again but how bad will the fallout be? Will a fledgling romance last and have lessons been learnt? With some tenuous plot moments, this will nevertheless appeal to fans of realistic contemporary YA fiction. **TJ**

The Victors

★★★★

Wren James, ill. Beth Fuller, Walker Books, 224pp, 978-1529515978, £12.99 pbk

Carnegie-long-listed author, climate activist, lecturer and queer screenwriter Wren James got their first book deal as 'Lauren James' for **The Next Together** while in their last year of university. A film is now being made of their **The Loneliest Girl in the Universe**, which was short listed for the STEAM Children's Book Prize in 2019. While impressing the publishing world with a myriad of science fiction fantasy, they also took time to found the Climate Fiction Writers' League. **Green Rising**, their intelligent eco fiction YA novel, cleverly interpolated the minutiae of social media into the fantastical fabric of the text while making sharp socio-political observations.

Wren's latest project is equally thought provoking. Influenced by their experiences as a writer for the Netflix series of Alice Oseman's emotive **Heartstopper** and their love of the visual stylings of Bryan Lee O'Malley's **Scott Pilgrim**, Mike Curato's **Flamer**, the fantasy artist Pocketss, the shape shifting of Larson and Mock's **Salt Magic** and the comedy horror TV show *What We Do in the Shadows*, where vampires are roommates, they have collaborated with talented Irish illustrator Beth Fuller to produce **The Victors**.

Fuller's animated gaming cosplay style complements Wren's witty script and pacy plot. The story unfolds in fourteen snappy chapters as the magical realm draws on mythological themes and collides with the mundane reality of university politics. Through downtrodden 2nd year university student, Dirk, and his quirky arch nemesis Medusa, James explodes 'the Chosen One' myth in a mockumentary style comedy. Having defeated the evil Demon King Rarog, when he was just 15, he is now haunted by the past and isolated. Conversely his flamboyant arch nemesis Medusa just wants to shed her demon identity and connect with humans. The trouble is there is a university housing crisis and Dirk's magic has begun to manifest itself again.

James was excited by the visual medium but found the process of panel management a little challenging. They explain in their blog, 'Chapters always have to begin on the right page, and each double page spread has to feel complete. Ideally it ends on a scene ending and the next double page spread takes you to a new location or scene. It's like a big old puzzle.'

The story boarding is expressive, playful and dynamic, intercutting the text with painful flashbacks in vivid close-up flash photo style, role playing game cards, self-referential posters, inside jokes, snippets from social media and origin stories. Themes include anxiety, found family, destiny, hope, identity, betrayal, trust, friendship and the ravages of war. James asks who the victors really are after so much destruction and death. It will appeal to young adult readers looking for nuanced queer representation and fans of super hero comics, mythology and satire. **TJ**

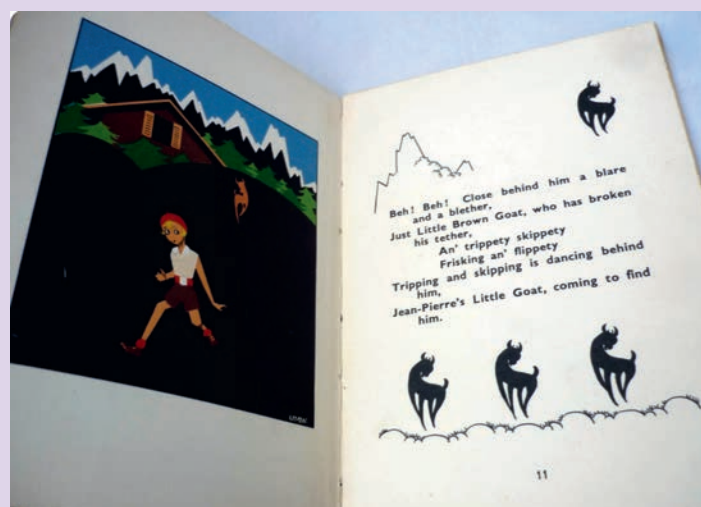
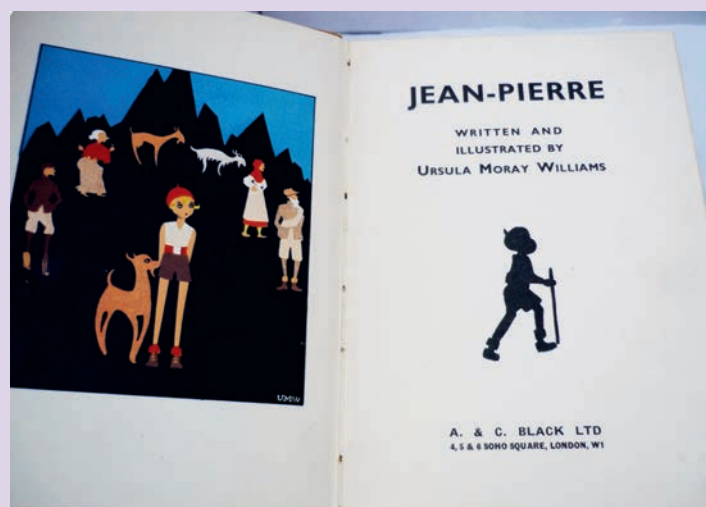
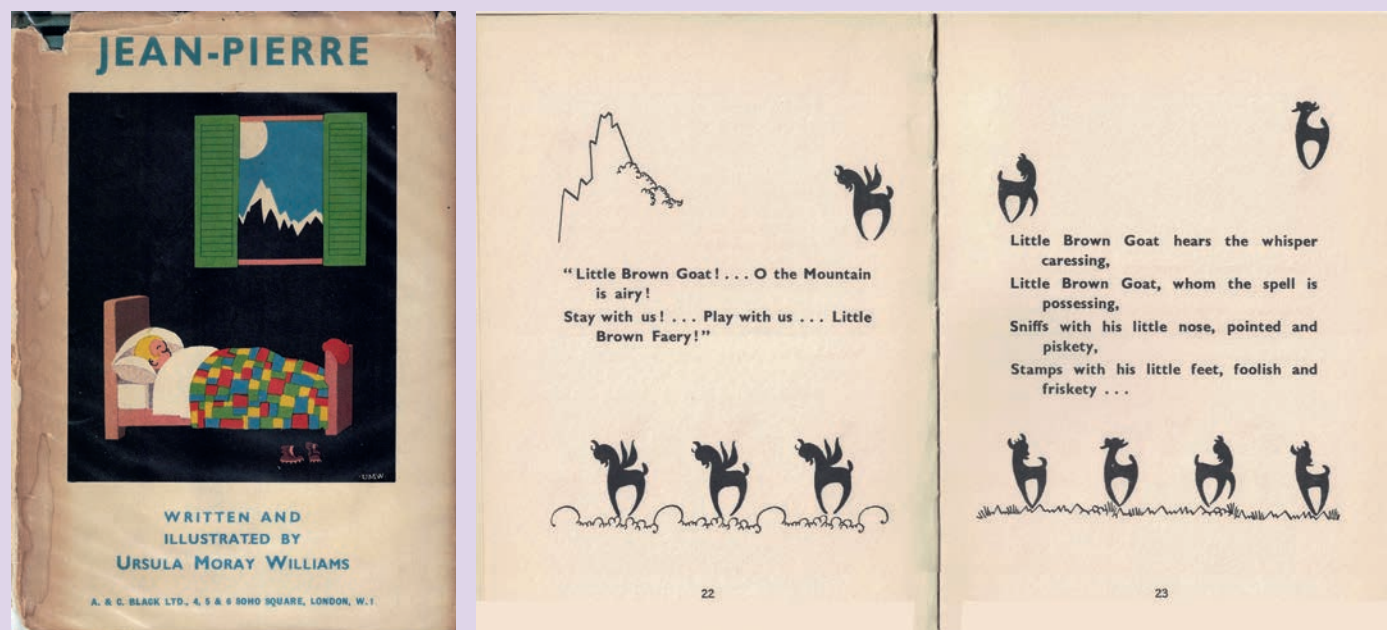
The Heirs

★★★★

Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé, Usborne, 368pp, 978-1835401002, £9.99 pbk
The narrative in bestselling author Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé's new crime thriller is split between five siblings, and the mystery at its heart is the murder of their father, the billionaire founder of a games company. The five have more reason than anyone to have killed him, and should be the prime suspects though – a theme of the book – their immense wealth seems to protect them, as it appears that justice really can be bought. All from different parts of the world, the five Button children were adopted by their father and brought up as the human equivalent of lab rats, experiments in his theory that nurture trumps nature. This is apparently borne out as four of five subjects have become prodigies: the Maestro; Biall the Olympian; Perdita the Artist. Only Romeo is deemed the Failure. The damage the pressures of their hot-house, restrictive childhoods have had on these young people is painfully clear as they gather again for their father's annual Prodigy Ball, the scene of his murder. As the story unfolds through the eyes of the young Buttons, we learn more about those damaged childhoods and some of the particular events that have caused the most harm. Their tragedies make for highly enjoyable reading, and the story builds neatly to the moment we witness the murder and then the arrest of the supposed murderer, then followed by not one but two twists. The setting of unimaginable wealth is one that is always satisfying, especially as it brings no happiness to the beneficiaries, and the different characters of the five siblings add to the entertainment factor as they navigate events, look for love, and rebuild their relationships with one another. If the emotional arcs of the heirs aren't quite developed enough to convince, there's still more than enough here to intrigue and to keep the pages turning. It's a scorching summer read. **MMa**

Valediction: **No.28 Jean-Pierre**

Brian Alderson is presenting his collection of children's books to **Seven Stories** and **Newcastle University**. Among the books he is passing on, is **Jean-Pierre**, Ursula Moray Williams' first book.



Jean-Pierre was the first book of Ursula Moray Williams who was the niece of Sir Stanley Unwin. She was brought up with her twin sister in an ancient house near Southampton and spent much of her life near Bredon. Her twin sister, Barbara, was also an artist but married an Icelandic and illustrated **Icelandic Folk Tales**. Ursula published over seventy books, including several early books for Brownies and Guides, often with silhouette illustrations; one of the most famous being

The Adventures of the Little Wooden Horse which was illustrated by **Joyce Lankaster Brisley** of **Milly-Molly-Mandy** fame.

Williams' archive is housed at **Seven Stories** at Newcastle Upon Tyne.

Ursula Moray Williams. **Jean-Pierre** central silhouette drawing. London A & C Black Ltd. 197 x 138 mm. 32pp + 4 colour plates. [1] Half title [2] Foreign editions [3-4] Blank and colour frontispiece [5] Title page as above [6] Date Autumn 1931 [7] Dedication "To My Twin".

[8] Silhouette of Chamois [9] List of Plates [10] Blank. 9-32 Verses with silhouette drawings and verses by the author + 3 colour plates with blanks. Blue cloth over boards with title and silhouette to front. DJ using 4th plate to front. Publishers advert to rear. Inner flap note and price 2/6d. Inner free end papers blank. The first with a ms inscription.



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.