

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No. 280

the children's book magazine online

Sept 2026

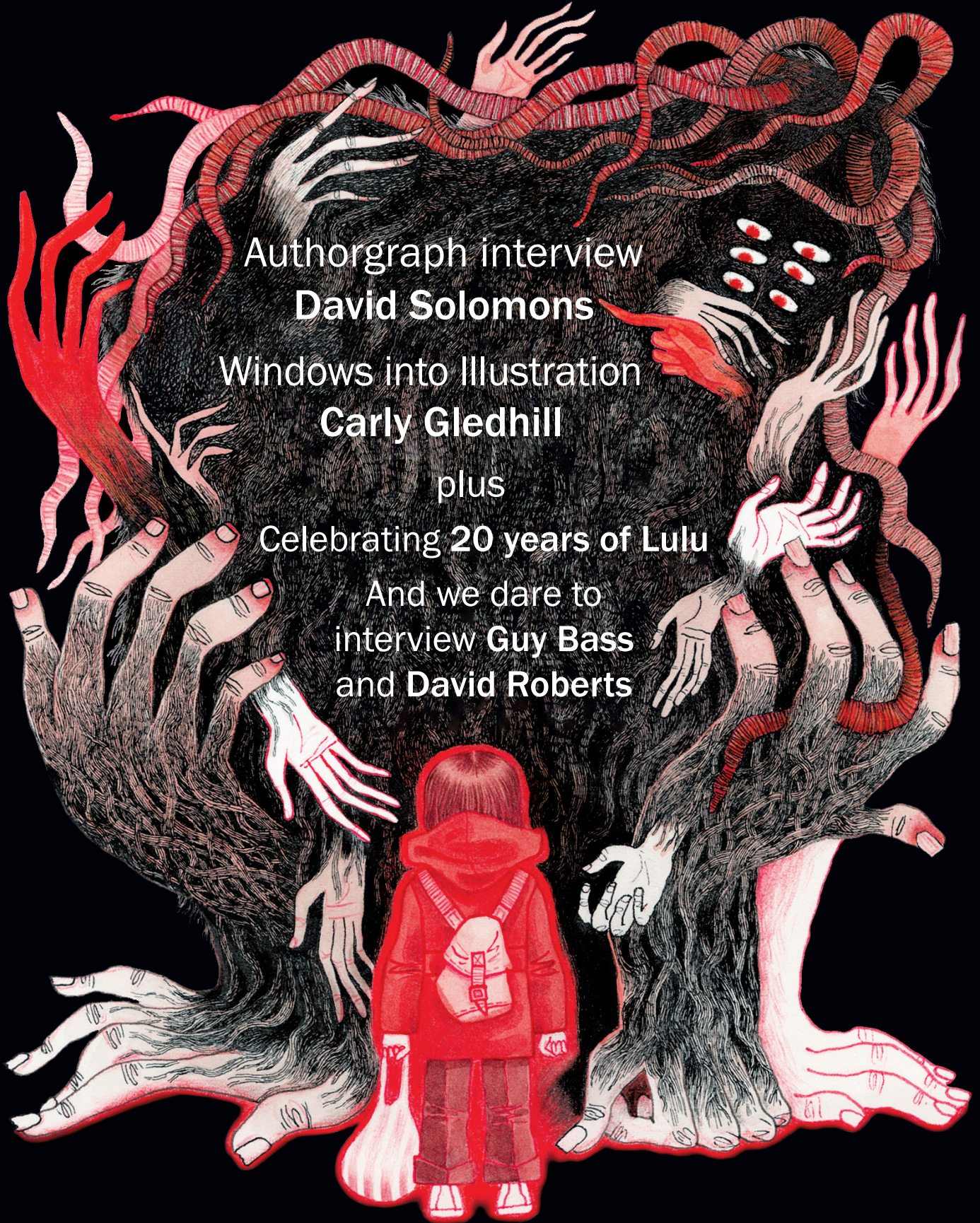
Authorgraph interview
David Solomons

Windows into Illustration
Carly Gledhill

plus

Celebrating 20 years of Lulu

And we dare to
interview **Guy Bass**
and **David Roberts**



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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **The Worst Thing That Could Possibly Happen**, written by **Guy Bass**, illustrated by **David Roberts**. Thanks to **Little Tiger** for their help with this cover.

Editorial 280

How are children's books reflecting disability



Reflecting Disability has announced the results of its study into the representation of disabled people in children's books. In research funded by **Arts Council England** and using analysis carried out by **The Reading Agency**, the study shows that 10% of children's books feature

disabled people in some way. This is the first project of its kind to offer a comprehensive exploration of the extent and quality of disabled characters in picture books, fiction and non-fiction across a full year (2024) of UK children's publishing for 3-11 year olds.

With 90% of children's books not yet featuring disabled people in any way, the findings highlight opportunities for publishers and creators to build on the promising initial picture. The study also found that books rarely reflected the specific conditions, impairments and differences that children most commonly experience (social/behavioural, learning and mental health). Books depicted characters with mobility conditions (for example, wheelchair users), deaf characters and those with vision impairments more often but usually placed them in the background. Many representations of disabled people and the equipment they use also lacked accuracy and/or consistency – something often highlighted in reviews by our disability specialist, Rebecca Butler.

Beth Cox, Creative Editorial Inclusion Consultant and Reflecting Disability Co-Facilitator says, 'For true inclusion we need to go beyond representation. The stories that were truly nuanced, where the disabled characters came across as fully rounded people, were a joy to read. But there were a frustrating number of books where a small tweak, or just asking the right questions at the development stage, could have completely transformed the representation and made it more authentic. I would urge publishers and creators to consider the whole context of a disabled person's life and convey that through nuance rather than didacticism. To show rather than tell.'

The study also analysed potential barriers to reading, including inaccessible design and layout, hard to read text and language that makes the book unnecessarily hard to understand and 67% of books reviewed had at least one barrier to reading.

Reflecting Disability will launch a toolkit later this year which will provide in-depth analysis of

the quantitative and qualitative data and, most importantly, practical guidance to support publishers and creators. While it is encouraging to see many positive representations, the findings also highlight significant opportunities for publishers, authors, and illustrators to ensure that more children can see themselves, their families and their communities reflected in the stories they read; the toolkit could make a measurable difference.

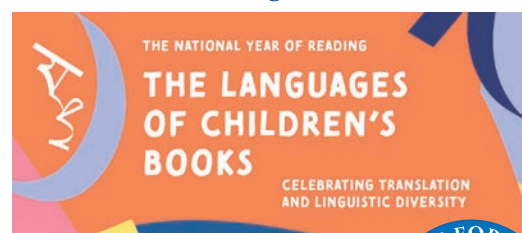
Time to talk about multilingualism

Young people in the UK are increasingly multilingual. More than 20% of school pupils are recorded as using more than one language according to the [schools census](#), while over 300 languages are spoken across the population. Yet this is rarely reflected in the books they read. Only a small percentage of the approximately 10,000 children's books published in the UK each year are translations according to Outside in World.

At the same time, languages education in the UK is in critical decline. Major universities are cutting degree programmes and [regional 'cold spots' for languages education](#) are emerging. If professionals are not trained to use and understand how languages work, what creative potential are we losing to children's books and publishing industry in the UK? What readers are we not serving?

On 17 September, a new, hybrid festival and conference, **Languages of Children's Books: Celebrating Translation and Linguistic Diversity**, will bring together publishers, translators, librarians, researchers and literacy advocates to discuss these intersecting issues. Participants will explore how translation and multilingual storytelling can open up reading for young people, as part of the UK's National Year of Reading.

The festival is free to attend online, [with registration available until 16 September](#) (so be quick). After the festival, recordings of panel sessions and further information about exhibitors, associated organisations, and how readers can get involved will be available from the [Centre for Book Cultures and Publishing](#).



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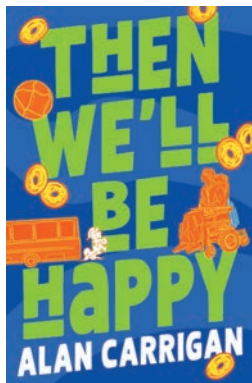
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Then We'll Be Happy:

A conversation with Alan Carrigan

Then We'll Be Happy is Alan Carrigan's debut novel. It tells the story of seventeen-year-old Sam and his determination to win control in his own life. Like Sam, Alan, has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair. **BfK's** disability expert **Rebecca Butler** has reviewed the book and spoke to Alan.



Can you tell us what inspired you to write this book?

When I was growing up, a lot of the disability representation I saw was either of a disabled person being really inspirational, defying the odds, or really depressed because of their disability. Neither of which was particularly helpful to me when I was a teenager. So, I decided to write the type of book I needed but rarely saw growing up.

Was there anything you wanted to include in it but didn't?

In the first few outlines, I wanted to include as much nuanced disability representation as possible. I really tried to get a chapter about flying/travel in there. Which would've fit if I'd replaced the bus with an international school trip, but in doing so I would've had to lose so many of the elements that make the book what it is. Ultimately, I had to do what was best for the story and for the characters.

What did you find the hardest thing to write about and why?

The emotional scenes. Especially when it's Sam and another person with very little set dressing, so, if you pardon the pun, the dialogue has to do a lot of the talking. It's challenging because the book is written in first person, which means any description has to be filtered through how Sam is perceiving it. But as the writer, I need to find little ways of framing things so the reader can get a sense of how the other person is feeling during a moment, even if Sam doesn't recognise it himself.

What was your favourite scene?

Sam's birthday, when his friends from power chair football take him to a bar. I have never personally been out drinking, so it was fun to imagine what that looks like and specifically how caregiving in friendship can coexist. That scene also had to be a major turning point for many characters, so it was fun to see it evolve as my understanding of how to build tension into a story also evolved.

Can you tell us about your writing process and, given your disability, what kind of aids did you use and how satisfactory or frustrating were they?

Yes, the book was almost entirely written with voice recognition. Coincidentally, about a year in, I switched computers, and I'm now a Mac user. Even though the software is the same, the dictation settings are very different. I wouldn't say that one particular method is better than any other, but the interesting thing about dictation in general is that it only picks up a small amount of what I say, enough to get a mismatched first go at a chapter so that the next morning I could go in and manually try to decipher what Alan from yesterday meant. My editor always remarks that I'm exceptionally quick at getting the edits back to her, and I think that is because for every

draft that I do, I'm essentially doing two drafts. The draft that the computer thinks I said, and the draft where I actually make it read like sentences.

Why did you not make any of Sam's assistants less than perfect?

It's not something I did intentionally, but I didn't want the people helping Sam to be the story. This is, in my eyes, a story of a young man trying to find his place in the world. If I twisted Jim into being something devious for example, that would be a whole other story. It would be interesting though.

How did you decide which procedures needed more explanation for the non-disabled reader? Was this something you and your editor worked on together?

It's a mix of my wonderful editor, Rachel Leyshon, and people in various writing courses. Admittedly, it was a difficult balance to strike. In early drafts, I would tend to overexplain. But the number one note I got eventually was less is more, which sounds like a cliché, but in the case of this book, is something I found to be true.

Who inspired Amiee, and how difficult was it for you to write a female voice?

[Amiee is Sam's friend, who although she's the same age, and with a similar condition, lives in an old people's home. Sam meets her on the bus he takes to school.]

One day, the radio happened to be on in the car when fellow Irish disabled author, Geraldine Lavelle, was being interviewed. Geraldine spent most of her 20s in institutionalised care. So, when I needed a reason for another young disabled person to be on the bus, I turned to Geraldine's books as a jumping off point for my research. As for how difficult it was to write a female character, her voice just came to me like any other character in the book. She just happened to be female. Hopefully, I've written her well, but I think that's for the readers to decide.

What was your reason for deciding that Aimee would be cared for in the residential care home, Blooming Oaks? The inflexible schedule will resonate with many readers.

Truthfully, I knew that for the plot to work, Sam's mam, Kathleen, could not have a car, so I was trying to think of another way for Sam to get to school. The Blooming Oaks bus just came to me, along with Aimee, and once I started dictating in her voice, I knew she was too fun to be a one-off character, so I developed her backstory through lots of interviews and back-and-forth with people in similar situations to Aimee, as well as inviting Geraldine to do a sensitivity read, and this is what I landed on.

How long have you been working on the book?

I have taken this book through many iterations throughout the years, but the earliest version was started in July 2022, and I finished the writing part of the book in March 2026. So, I've been writing most days for the better part of three years.

Are there any others in the pipeline?

I have a few things drafted and ready to pitch, nothing officially under contract as of yet. But fingers crossed!

Then We'll Be Happy by Alan Carrigan is published by Chicken House, 978-1917171212, £8.99 pbk.

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

Journeys into Reading

Nikki Gamble on the positives of focussing on ‘readers’ rather than ‘reading.’



It's Friday afternoon in Chestnut class. I've been invited into the school to award a reading prize to Year 6, who are settling down to watch a movie with biscuits and juice, their reward for being Reading Class of the Week for the sixth successive time this term. 'Well done, Chestnut class', you may be thinking. But chatting with some of the children it becomes apparent that they have learned how to play and win the game. One girl confides that she always records more pages than she has actually read, and others agree, letting me into their secret.

In another school, I'm shown around to see how they have embedded 'reading for pleasure' across the school. A group of learning support assistants are working through the Reading Record Books for the entire school. They are systematically recording how many times each child has read at home during the week. Class results are imported into a pie chart, which is displayed in the Reading Assembly. Everyone can see the winners and the losers. The winners are cheered and applauded.

I'm using these examples not to shame schools, but to reflect on how the practices we put in place with the best of intentions can have consequences that may not be what we intended. Parents and children may feel 'policed'; children who read fewer times, pages or words may feel less valued than their avid reading peers. Children may feel that the point of reading is the extrinsic reward received at the end. Take away the reward, and the incentive to read drops immediately, as research has shown. This is not conducive to developing a culture in which readers read because they want to.

Both schools want to do the best for the children and had put things in place to try and build a reading culture. They both had relatively new library spaces with a good range of up-to-date books, comfortable seating and a welcoming atmosphere. Books were visible throughout the school, in reception areas and classrooms. It's sad to think these efforts are undermined by some of the practices around independent reading.

We understand how this happens. Headlines about decline in reading can lead to knee-jerk reactions. Responses may follow this line of thinking: children aren't reading. We must make sure they are doing more. They must read more at home, as this has been shown to be beneficial, so we had better document it to make sure it's happening. Let's set a minimum expectation and reward the children who achieve it with points or prizes. Or worse, censure them when they fail to meet the standard we expect.

The reasons for the decline in reading are multiple and complex, from issues around social disadvantage, the absence of a conducive space for reading, the demands on family time, the closure of public libraries, the allure of attractive forms of entertainment that take up the time and physical space that may at one time have been available for books and reading. Even our definition of what constitutes real reading plays into this debate. Does an audiobook count? What about the football results? Is reading **Where's Wally?** as good as reading **Skellig**? There's so much anxiety around children's reading – and anxiety is catching. If adults are anxious, children will pick it up.

There is no one simple solution, but we must strive to find ways to genuinely engage with readers. And the starting point is to focus on 'readers'; the noun, rather than 'reading' the verb.

The imperative for us to do something about it is well documented. Children who read for pleasure are more likely to achieve academic success, experience greater well-being, and develop a honed sense of empathy.

And there is plenty of evidence pointing to the essential factors that will help us nurture future readers. Top of the list is agency – the freedom to choose what you want to read and when to read.

There are many excellent organisations and researchers leading work with parents, and this is an important part of the tapestry. However, my own focus has been on the practice in school and how we can build on what we know works. Most children are educated in school and therefore we know that if we get it right in school, we can have a significant impact. We have reason to be optimistic because good teaching DOES make a difference. I have witnessed it many times over.

Amongst the schools that I have visited over the past 12 months, I have seen excellent practice where children's reading is valued – regardless of whether it matches the teacher's tastes or not, where time has been allocated in the timetable for meaningful book talk (timetabling is an essential element alongside those powerful incidental discussions), where book, magazine and comic collections match the children's interests, where parents are invited to be part of the conversation without feeling coerced or that they are failing their children. Critically, in these schools, senior leaders are fully involved in children's reading and in most cases are readers themselves.

A year ago, I relaunched **The Reading Journey** an app that designed to support children's independent reading and help build





reading identities. It is intended to be used in a school setting where a reading for pleasure pedagogy is embedded.

Using the app, children build their reading bookshelves and record in real time what they are actually reading. They have the option to comment on their reading in a journal or by voice note. They can add books to their wishlists and recommend books (or other reading material) to their classmates. They can highlight their favourites and indicate what they haven't enjoyed.

From interviews and group conversations with children about **The Reading Journey**, I have observed notable shifts in reading. Firstly, the visual of a personal bookshelf allows them to present themselves as readers in the way they want to be seen. Nowhere is this more evident than with the series or completist reader. I've seen many bookshelves populated with the entire **Bunny Vs Monkey** series.

I have been delighted by conversations where children have shown an awareness that reading does not follow a linear trajectory. One Year 5 girl shared her love for popular diary reading, and yet sitting on her bookshelf was a copy of Jon Bond's **Mini Rabbit Lost**, a book that one might expect to be read by a much younger child. She talked animatedly about how periodically revisiting this book reminded her of her reception class days – it was, for her, a place of comfort.

Children have demonstrated many times over that they are discerning readers; they will explain to me how **Lottie Brooks**, **Dork Diaries** and **Nina Peanut** are as distinct as they are similar. They will present a diverse array of motivations for reading, indicating that there is more to their choice than simply following the crowd.

It is in the unique differences, rather than the big 'what children are reading' headlines, that we uncover the stories that lead us to connect with readers. They will reveal their 'hidden' reading. The reading done at home that they didn't think counted. I've seen more religious texts of all faiths than I had expected. I've seen children uploading books that are from their parents' childhood collection – a rich seam for further investigation. They talk about their passions and hobbies and how these feed in to their reading choices.

It has been heartening to hear from teachers how less avid or lower attaining readers have particularly like the bookshelf. With books that are shorter and often finished more quickly than their peers, they see their bookshelves growing rapidly and this corresponds with growth in their reading self-image.

However, to make the most of this rich evidence of children's reading, we need to be making connections. I've already suggested that time needs to be built into the school day. A minimum of two half hour sessions a week, allows time for teachers to catch up with what children are reading and to organise book talk sessions. **The Reading Journey** has a school and class dashboard that facilitates



pupil to teacher messaging and provides a quick overview of what the class are reading.

The class presentation view is one of the most powerful tools for enhancing book talk sessions. Using the whiteboard, children can view each other's reading material and can make peer-to-peer recommendations, which can be added to wishlists. Teachers can also recommend books. It is important to note that children can be hidden from this view for sensitivity reasons or at their request.

A typical booktalk session might look like this: the teacher shares the presentation view. This might prompt a conversation about the most popular book of the week or focus on one or two children who could present their books to the class. The teacher shares their own bookshelf. A quick book recommendation session with books added to wishlists. After this, the teacher sits and discusses books with a small group. In one session I observed, the teacher gathered a group of **Vi Spy** fans while the other half of the group had never read one of these books. The children led the discussion and were asked questions by their classmates. The rest of the class read independently or shared books with friends and completed reading journal entries.

At another school, the teacher started the conversation by discussing adventurous reading (one of the reading behaviours encouraged within **The Reading Journey**). They shared an example of their own about the exciting discovery of reading outside their comfort zone. Several children talked about their own adventurous reading. The class then moved into small groups with a set of discussion prompts to aid book sharing.

There have been many other offshoots from this work. One school inspired us with their approach to inviting parents and carers to share in their children's reading journeys.

From a research perspective, the thousands of books uploaded to **The Reading Journey** every day give us interesting insights into what children are choosing to read, with scope for many more studies into the finer details of children's reading.

Special days and celebrations, book vending machines and booknics can spark interest in reading, but it is the simple, everyday practices that sustain it. If you would like to know more about **The Reading Journey**, visit thereadingjourney.co.uk. We are offering schools a free trial for half a term to try out with a group or class of children.



Nikki Gamble is the Director of **Just Imagine**, she is a former teacher, university lecturer and author of **Exploring Children's Literature** (Sage, 2019) and co-author of **Guiding Readers: Layers of Meaning** (UCL, 2016).

Authorgraph

No.280

David Solomons
interviewed by
Joanne Owen

'We are story monsters and we want to read a great story.' One of several striking lines David Solomons delivers when we meet to discuss his work, this also reveals why his novels have struck such a chord since the publication of **My Brother is a Superhero** in 2015. That is to say, he's unwaveringly devoted to writing wildly entertaining fiction of the kind kids can't help but devour. As it happens, David's journey as a children's writer began when he was struck by a single line that contained the hallmarks of his novels to this day: *'My brother is a superhero, and I could have been one too, except that I needed to go for a wee.'*

Pitch-perfect for his 9+-year-old readership, and propelled by witty humour (described by David as 'damp Scottish self-deprecating humour, kind of Jewish nebbish'), David's instinct for character-driven comedy, exquisite pace, and pleasing pay-offs that reflect his screenwriting background are at the heart of his writing arsenal, even when writing older and darker (more on that later). His signature scenarios also typically blend iconic character types (superheroes, aliens, spies, and galactic princesses) with everyday dynamics and experiences. Think sibling rivalry and the fear of missing out. Think having to crush your cosmic enemies while having to hand in your homework. Impactfully visual ('Rows of glinting caravans sat baking in the heat, like giant toasters ready to pop out sunburned holidaymakers' is a memorable line from **Spyglass: Mastermind of Mayhem**), his writing is the real deal. While there might be outlandish action and gadgets galore, there are never gimmicks.

Another stand-out Davidism is trusting and understanding his readers. Speaking of the five-strong **Superhero** series, he notes that 'a lot of kids relate to this notion of missing out. This notion of being the one standing there and the lightning bolt hitting the person next to you. It's that feeling that we're all living kind-of humdrum lives and somebody else gets the big break. Luke, the main character, feels that when the superpowers are bestowed, he doesn't get them. He's standing next to the chosen one.' Reflecting on the success of the series, and whether his approach changed while writing it, David notes an irony: 'The ridiculous thing was that the whole premise is about the one who missed out, the one who didn't get the powers, the one who didn't make it. And of course, that first book won all the prizes and I was suddenly the one who *did* make it. That was fantastic, but I remember making a joke about it: "well hang on. I'm not the outsider anymore".' In another irony, on the last page of the **Superhero** series, 'Luke actually realises that he didn't miss out, and



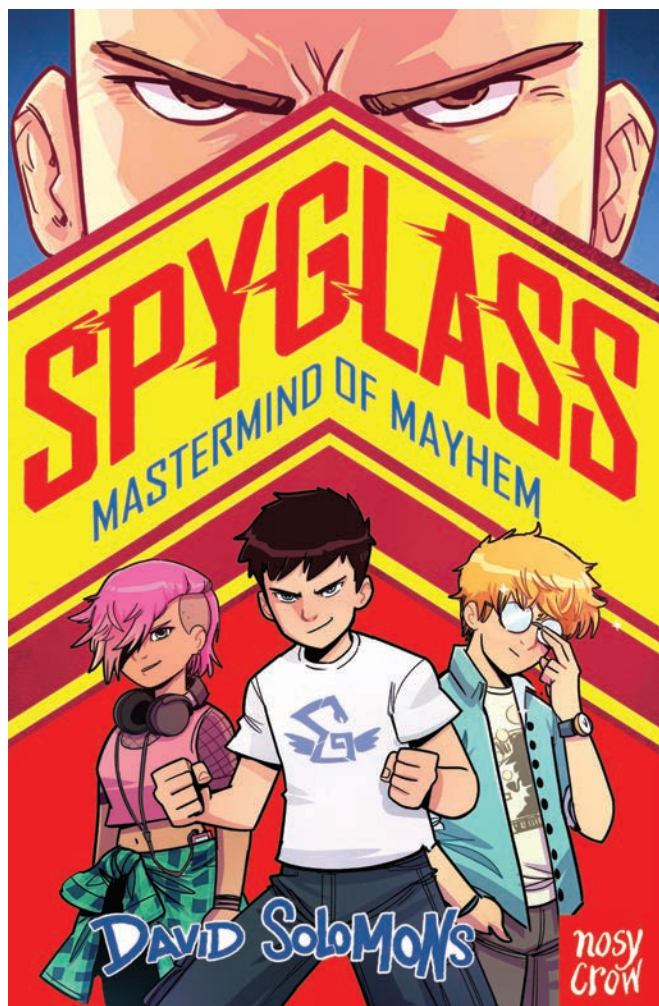
that's the big thing. One can go through life thinking it's all going to other people, but actually Luke's journey, and I hope the journey of readers who enjoyed the series, is realising you haven't missed out.'

Considering David's obvious fondness for his characters, I wonder whether leaving the Superhero story world was hard: 'It was a huge wrench, so much so I put myself into the final book as a visiting author to the characters' school and he gets to, and I get to, say goodbye to my characters on the page. Without going onto the therapy couch, I think there was an element of those five books saying "Let me poke at some stuff in my own life". On so many levels, the books are associated with my children being born. So, for me, there are certain paragraphs, and certain characters and sections, that I know are there because of something in the real world.'

After **Superhero** came **A Beginner's Guide to Ruling the Galaxy** (Nosy Crow, 2022), David's homage to **The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy**, which sees him flip the everyday context of divorcing parents into a fight to save the world through making said parents the extra-terrestrial leaders of opposing sides of a galactic conflict. Described by David as 'the collision between the cosmic and the suburban, when the suburban setting is suddenly invaded by cosmic danger and challenges', this once again reveals his knack for transforming relatable everyday situations and experiences into outlandish, comic contexts that remain emotionally resonant.

Given the slickly entertaining nature of David's writing, I wonder how he approaches integrating themes into his story-development process. 'I don't know there's necessarily a conscious thread of, "right, these are the themes that I'm interested in. How do I get them in?"' Rather, David touches on themes 'in a way that I'm comfortable with, and maybe as a by-product, which means readers can look at these things in a way that's safe. There's humour, with underlying deep emotion.' What's more, 'the cosmic works when it's utterly grounded.'





Talking of themes leads us onto **The Ministry of Manners** (Piccadilly Press, 2026). Though something of a departure for David in that it unpacks propaganda, censorship, surveillance and subversion through a shift to the realm of Orwellian dystopian fiction, the novel remains true to his trademark talents: it's an entertaining, reader-oriented adventure, albeit for a slightly older readership. On that subject, David shares that while **My Brother is a Superhero** was 'almost written as a response to becoming a dad for the first time,' **The Ministry of Manners** is 'on one level a response to so much uncertainty in the world, and the fact that I'm a father sending my children out into that world.' At the same time, he's clear that while **The Ministry of Manners** is underpinned by a 'serious impulse,' his job is 'to write, first and foremost, books that a child would put down his or her phone to read. That's the big thing. It has to be compelling. I love action thrillers. I love fast-moving movies. My background is screen writing. I love cliff-hangers at the end of every chapter, so my craft and instinct is to write a really compelling, fun, exciting book.'

David's latest series, **Spyglass (Mastermind of Mayhem**, Nosy Crow, April 2026, and **Coldfinger**, Nosy Crow, October 2026) certainly showcases that instinct. Described by David as 'a mash-up of the **Famous Five** and **James Bond**' and 'that feeling of the endless summer and ice cream and beaches mixed up with an absurdly dangerous high-stakes spy caper,' the **Spyglass** novels also showcase his longstanding talent for crafting amusingly arresting opening lines. 'Nobody knew it yet, but the fate of the world would be decided on a sizzling Tuesday afternoon,' begins **Mastermind of Mayhem**. The series also sees him take two very different distinctly British elements — the glamour of a Bond-style secret agent story, and the less glamorous context of GoldenCliff Holiday Park — to create a uniquely David Solomons-esque story world.

While some things change (for example, in the publishing world, David notes that these days 'books have to be shorter and more illustrated', which he attributes in part to 'the post-pandemic reading slump in kids and the attention deficit that seems to have accrued'), the appeal of his books and his writing process remain the same some eleven years on from the launch of **Superhero**: 'The thing I think greets every writer is that the next book is a blank page. And you're like, "Here we go! How do I do this? How on earth did I do it? Did I do it? How do I do it again? So, that's always the same".' David's response to me asking what he's most proud of through his writing journey also chimes with that sense of continuity: 'I'm proud that I'm still doing it. I'm still here. I'm still writing my books. I'm still coming up with, I hope, really cracking stories and getting them out there. So, I think I'm proud in an Elton John way that I'm still standing, and proud that kids want to tell me my books inspired him or her. That's pretty special.' Much like David's fiction, which remains of the wildly entertaining kind story-mad monsters can't help but munch through.

Books mentioned:

Superhero series, published by Nosy Crow, £7.99 pbk

My Brother is a Superhero, 978-1805138082

My Gym Teacher is an Alien Overlord, 978-0857637338

My Evil Twin is a Supervillain, 978-1805139614

My Arch-Enemy is a Brain in a Jar, 978-0857639912

My Cousin Is a Time Traveller, 978-0857639929

A Beginner's Guide to Ruling the Galaxy, Nosy Crow, 978-0857639936, £7.99 pbk

The Ministry of Manners, Piccadilly Press, 978-1835873175, £7.99 pbk

Spyglass series, published by Nosy Crow:

Spyglass: Mastermind of Mayhem, 978-1805132363, £7.99 pbk

Spyglass: Coldfinger, 978-1805132370, £7.99 pbk



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

Windows into Illustration:

Carly Gledhill

Carly Gledhill channels her love of colour, character design and hand-drawn lettering into everything she creates, from children's books to surface pattern designs. She has written and illustrated picture books, novelty books and board books, with humour a key element. In this Windows into Illustration feature, she describes the composition of a spread that fascinates her readers.

Pass the Parcel is a book I wrote when I was really quiet at work, sat twiddling my thumbs and feeling pretty glum. After 10 minutes of that, I decided to do something about it and make a picture book to cheer myself up. I wrote a book called 'How to post a parcel (to really far away)' and fully illustrated it too. A silly tale about a parcel, whose journey we follow once he'd been posted at the Post Office. By the time the book was finished with, I had some more actual work to do and got back on with life as normal. When tasked with picking my favourite illustration I had two in mind, firstly the spread that features the queue of people in the Post Office when Parcel arrives, which is very relatable to all adults. I went full silly-billy illustrating this one, there's a lemon in the queue posting a box for goodness sake.



But the one I actually picked is the spread that most of the little people who read the book seem to be amazed by. To set the scene; we've gone through the Post Office queue stage, Parcel has had his stamp applied, is ready to head off on his journey and then is actually unceremoniously chucked into the back of the Post Office onto a big pile of post.

Then we turn the page to this spread. It features lots of conveyor belts, carrying assorted post and parcels heading off in different directions, there's a block of cheese, a huge banana, wrapped in brown paper AND a post Octopus, who better to grab all those parcels and set them on the right track? It's all very exciting.



My illustrative style depends heavily on the age-old skill of drawing shapes and moving them around until I like it. I'm not a huge fan of sketching ideas first, I'm always very keen to get onto Photoshop and start playing with the form and colour of the spread.

I used actual parcel paper and cardboard as part of the collage style, scanned in and cut out, this is how the character of Parcel was made too. Other elements like the conveyor belt are drawn straight into Photoshop, with colour and texture added on later, once the structure is in place. There's an earlier iteration of this spread on a grey background, where you will notice that the characters are less developed, but the structure of the conveyor belts is already in place. It got spruced up and developed further, complete with a Post Office crocodile and a lovely pink background.

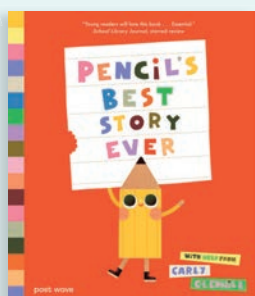




It's a really fun and joyful book and I think these pages show the excitement of the start of Parcel's journey. I hope you enjoy it too!

Pass the Parcel by (9781836270416, £12.99 hbk) and **Pencil's Best Story Ever** (9781836270485, £7.99 pbk) by Carly Gledhill are published by Post Wave Children's Books.

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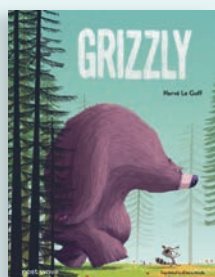
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Pencil's Best Story Ever illustrations © Carly Gledhill, 2025



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READ • DREAM • DISCOVER



20 Years of Book-Loving Lulu

In 2006, a pint-sized, book aficionado with puff balls bounced on to the children's literature landscape. 20 years later, Lulu is still with us – a little older, perhaps, but still just this side of five years old.

Fen Coles celebrates this important little girl.



Lulu punches well above her weight. Created by Anna McQuinn and Rosalind Beardshaw, published by Alanna Max, the **Lulu** series has run to: 11 picture books; co-publishers in Brazil, The Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and the US.

Anna describes Lulu's longevity as 'kind of unbelievable.' Here, at **Letterbox Library**, we well remember her arrival, even though this was, in many ways, ever so quiet: a trip to the local library with mum,

told through an upbeat, sparse text, accompanied by soft washes of colour. But, in 2006, a Black girl protagonist in a high-quality format picture book with such contemporary illustrations within such a universal setting - well, that was, if not unprecedented, still remarkable. Her presence felt, already, 'mainstream'. She landed with an undeniable confidence, quickly developing into a series character.

With the sequel, **Lulu Loves Stories**, Lulu was the cover star for Letterbox Library's 25th Anniversary catalogue (2009). In this second outing, Lulu's dad appears as primary carer and their shared reading leads to our little hero imagining herself switching effortlessly between a fairy, farmer and DIY expert. Fittingly, this catalogue edition's special focus was Girls & Boys: Same Difference. Fitting because when I ask Anna about her journey into children's publishing, she replies, 'It began at the infamous Letterbox Library conference! That's when I decided I needed to be in children's publishing.' She's referring to the 1991 conference: *We've Gotta Have It!: Feminism and Children's Books*. This is also where she met children's publisher, Verna Wilkins, who was then **Chair of The Working Group Against Racism in Children's Resources**®. By the end of the day, Anna had both joined the working group and signed up as a **Letterbox Library** member.

Given the impact of this feminist-themed conference, it's perhaps not such a surprise that when I ask Anna to reflect on Lulu's impact as a protagonist of colour at the time of publication, she replies, 'Weirdly, I was more focused on her being female.' (More on this later).

Anna's launch into all things children's publishing took her to **Child's Play International**, **Tamarind Books**, **Reader's Digest**, **Frances Lincoln**, **DeAgostini** and **Little Tiger**. In 1998, alongside Andrew MacMillan, she set up her first children's publishing house, **Zero to Ten**. The industry felt like her natural home: 'It brought together my politics and teacher training and an interest in child development.'

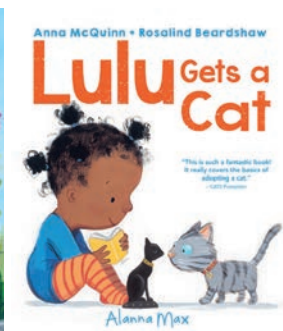
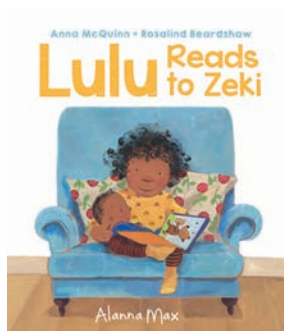
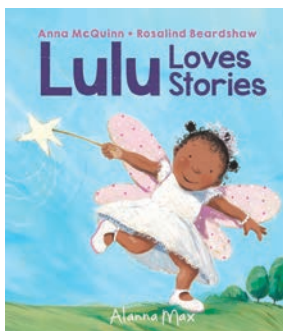
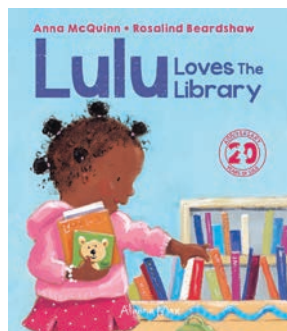
I wonder which of those houses impacted on her later commitment to publishing inclusively. **Child's Play**, she says, 'was very progressive', plus, at the time, they were distributing Wilkins' **Tamarind** list. **Frances Lincoln** were also 'at the sharp end of inclusion.'

Anna's publishing trajectory was followed by a very different, but equally influential, role: a 2-year contract with **Acton Sure Start**; she ended up staying for 14 years. **Sure Start** was a 1998 Labour initiative designed to support families with children under 5. Anna was tasked with running Acton's literacy programmes. 'I spent from 9 to 4, four days a week, just in the company of lots of different small children.' The families attending spoke a multitude of languages and came from a wide range of cultures. This is the environment in which Anna wrote her first Lulu. She secured American publisher, Charlesbridge, in 2004 but, unable to attract a UK publisher, she resolutely established her own publishing house.

Anna's **Sure Start** background undeniably helped establish the Lulu series as one finely calibrated to an early years' audience. You sense how keenly attuned she is to the dimensions of children's attention, how they scan their world: 'They notice all the small things.' Rosalind Beardshaw's illustrations pan and tilt, tracking a toddler's point of view, zooming in on the teeniest details. This lends an intimacy to the work, often commented on by reviewers. The cosy correlation of text and artwork is also striking, something Anna attributes to the deliberate absence of an art director role: 'There's just us as a pair.'

Lulu's 'ordinariness' is also a perfect early years' pitch: she becomes a big sister, starts school, gets her first pet, moves home. It would be disingenuous to ignore the fact that in the mid 2000s, a protagonist of colour within 'casual' and universal narratives, rather than issues or identity-based ones, was still unusual. Early on in our interview, Anna insists on Lulu's feminist origins; she says she wanted to correct a largely default male setting in picture books' lead characters. However, when Beardshaw presented her first drafts, Anna wondered, 'Gosh! She could be a great Black little girl.' So, she concludes, the decision 'was very early but I think it wasn't immediate...I guess I hadn't thought of her race at all.' Author and artist came to converge on a shared idea of incidental inclusion, a model which later extended to also embrace disabled and queer representations as well as social economic differences.

Anna recognises **Tamarind Books** as 'probably the biggest influence in terms of incidental stuff... the sort of 'everydayness'. One of the reasons she feels the Lulu books sit ever so comfortably on the Alanna Max list is that they too value this 'everydayness'. In fact **Alanna Max**'s mission reads, 'We create *naturally inclusive* picture books for children from all backgrounds that reflect the world they live in.'





Anna says, 'People think you need to kind of go out with an intent to change the world and do representation. I more thought, there's no reason for Lulu not to be [black].' Interestingly, the 'politics' of Lulu's presence on the children's literature landscape surfaced with her marketing. 'The more I was presenting to people,' Anna explains with palpable frustration, 'the more I'm...I'm constantly asked but why is she black?' This flip to the present tense speaks volumes. She elaborates, 'For all that we've moved forward...I really believe that... in many areas of publishing... and bookselling... we still think of the audience as white... So, if we're doing a 'diverse' book it's often to teach a white child something.'

Likewise she feels that too often 'inclusive literature is done in silos.' So, for example, 'you do the eco book and then you do the inclusive book' and never the twain shall meet. It was only when **Lulu Loves Flowers** featured in [Sands O'Connor/Chetty's Beyond the Secret Garden column, England's White and Pleasant Land \(Books for Keeps, March 2018\)](#), that she understood how rare it was to imagine a Black child in a garden (in this case, an allotment, adding an economic dynamic). 'That shouldn't be revolutionary!'

So, while Anna says, 'I've always parked the politics and written the story,' she also describes Lulu's influence as – unavoidably – *political*:

'That's the legacy...that the widest range of children will see themselves in the story.' And, when I suggest she and Beardshaw are using a wonderfully executed incidental model of inclusion to do something radical almost by stealth, she accelerates this: 'Natural inclusion IS still radical... Lulu is a three year old Black child who stars in the story for no reason. And it's the 'no reason' that is quite hard to explain. It seems like it's not radical.....but it feels more and more radical that you don't need any reason.'

(As a side note, it may interest and surprise readers to learn that Lulu has faced book bans in the US*). In the end, at **Letterbox Library**, we have every confidence that Lulu's status as surely one of the most endearing, irrepressible – let's say it, CUTEST – picture book protagonists will be her biggest legacy.

Lulu's Perfect Hideout publishes this October.

*set up in 1983 by the Inner London Education Authority

*<https://www.annamcquinn.com/blog/banned-books-an-explanation>

Fen Coles is co-director of **Letterbox Library**.

Alanna Max

www.alannamax.com

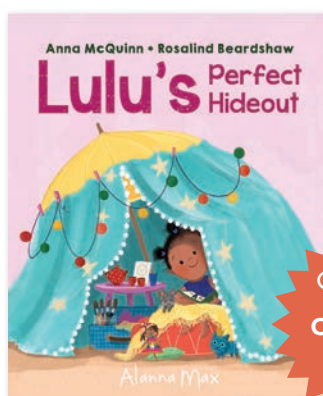
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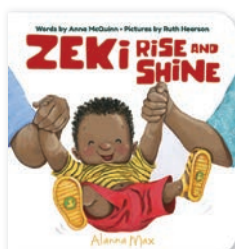
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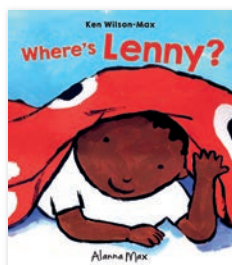
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In the latest in this series exploring illustration in children's information books **Pam Dix** looks at water.

Water, even when you try to fool me, I know you.

You blast and huff.

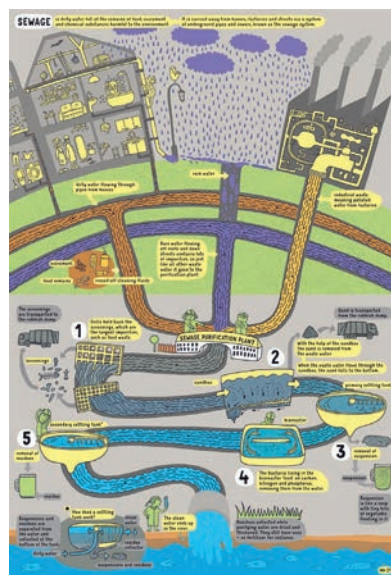
You whistle and puff.

steam

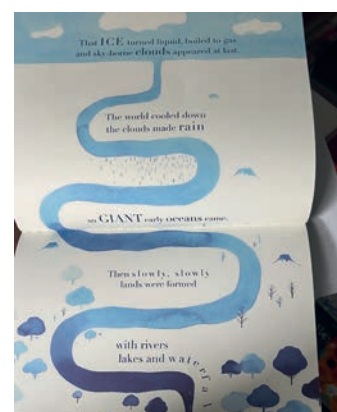
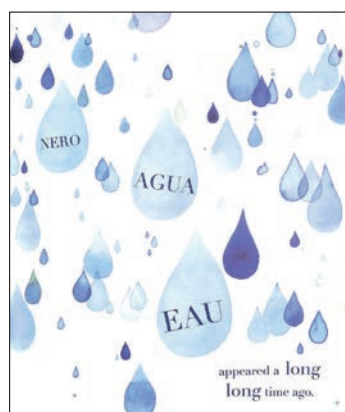
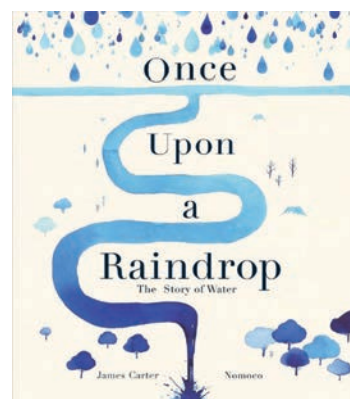
You hide in the air and drift.

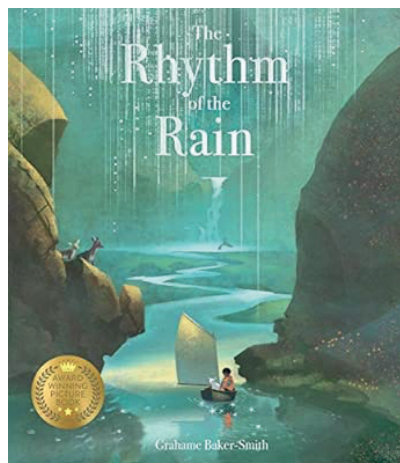
cloud

Aujourd'hui est un jour
comme un autre.
Une goutte sort du robinet.
Tout d'abord, elle s'étire,
puis se gonfle comme un
petit ballon.



James Carter **Once upon a Raindrop: the Story of Water**, illustrated by Nomoco, Caterpillar (Little Tiger), London, 2018, is an overview of the history of water and why the earth is wet unlike the moon which is dry. Nomoco, a Japanese illustrator based in London, uses delicate blue inks to explore a text which is both factual and poetic, mirroring in the illustrations the sense of the words. The limited colour palette of shades of blue with occasional bursts of colour is both calming and gives a sense of great integrity. The waves on the title page are repeated as endpapers for the book and it is fun to spot the tiny swimmers in their coloured bathing hats. The book is a summary of the journey from ice to water, darker as the water becomes more polluted by mountains and trees. This like the last object in itself.



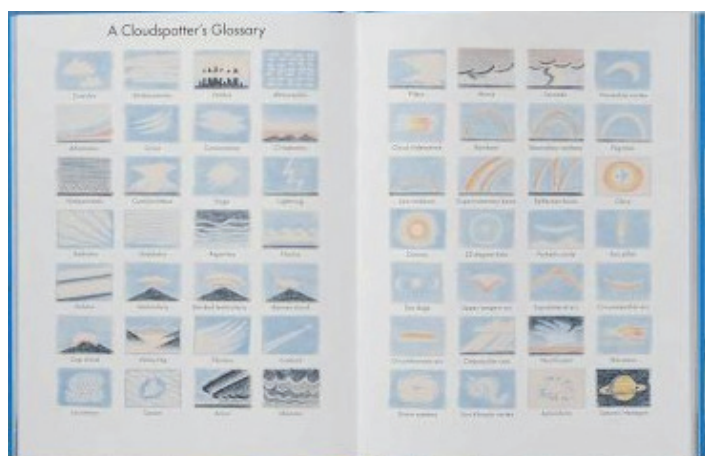
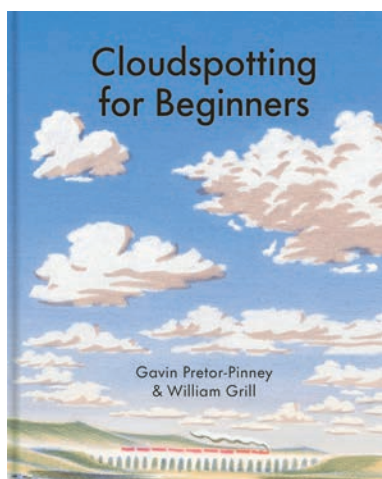


Grahame Baker-Smith **The Rhythm of the Rain**, Templar, London 2018 looks at the water cycle from a global perspective, through a series of striking bold images. Isaac on one side of the world is playing in the rain by his river imagining what will happen to the water in his river as it moves along. Cassie on the other side of the world is waiting for the rain. The middle of the book shows the water in rivers and oceans on its journey. The cover illustration has the rain embossed in raised silver threads as lines and spots covering the title, a very effective technique. Each image

is beautifully realised: Cassie's African village is dwarfed both by the rocks and the black rain cloud pouring black stripes of rain to the celebration of the villagers. Black clouds are usually threatening but not here.



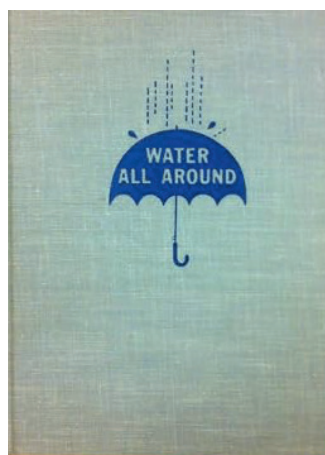
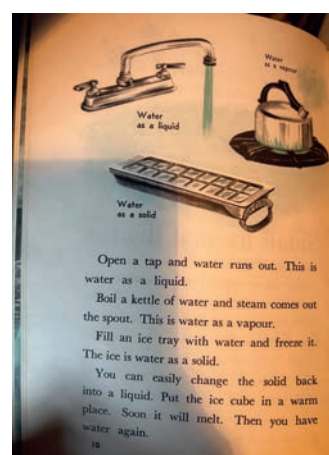
A very specific look at clouds and cloud formations can be seen in Gavin Pretor-Pinney's **Cloudspotting for Beginners**, illustrated by William Grill, Particular Books (Penguin Random House), 2024. Clouds have many shapes and formats but are in all cases huge bodies of water. Full page illustrations celebrate each cloud formation with immense skies filling the double page. At the end we find one of Grill's 'trademark' sets of small images, boxed lists, which serves as a reminder of the clouds explored in the book.



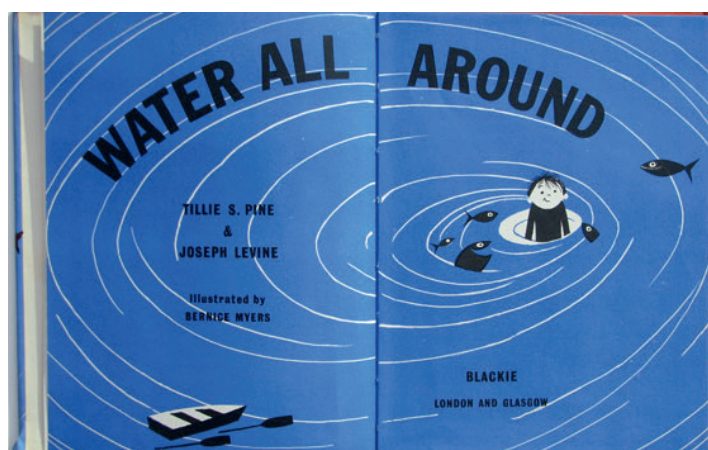
Britta Teckentrup **Look at Weather**, Owlkids Books, Canada, 2018 translated by Shelley Tanaka (originally published in German as **Alle Wetter**, 2015). This is a 152-page celebration of weather in single and double page spreads with comparatively little text. Teckentrup acknowledges the artists and landscape painters, who have been inspired by the weather and its connections to human emotions and who have inspired her work. Sections on Sun, Rain, Ice and Snow, Extreme Weather look in detail at different weathers in very painterly images. Human interactions with the weather are shown very delicately. These images are very subtle, often working through delicate sources of light peeping

through clouds and rain, so they are hard to reproduce here. Rain, the different kinds of rain, are indicated by subtly changing lines, both vertical and diagonal, light or dark, thin or thick. In this image, there is a clear feel of misty rain, with the small patterns of curving white lines moving diagonally across a blue background with some sense of wind in the trees, the patterns on the ground giving a depth to the landscape.

These subtle and sophisticated approaches show the change over time in children's information books. Patricia Lauber **Junior Science Book of Icebergs and Glaciers**, illustrated by Evelyn Urbanowich, Frederick Muller, London 1963 is a good example of the traditional orthodox diagrammatic approach to explaining water, though it does include some dramatic images of icebergs and the *Titanic*.

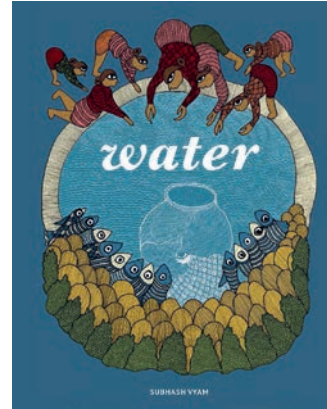


The mid-century American information book series were rather more lively, showing children doing experiments and having fun. Tillie S Pine & Joseph Levine **Water All Around**, illustrated by Bernice Myers, McGraw Hill, Ohio, 1959 (part of the **All Around** series, many of which Myers illustrated). Bernice Myers was a mid-century modern artist with a very distinctive graphic style, very suited to explaining complex scientific concepts through accessible visual ways. The cover with its simple umbrella is a masterpiece of design and the title page of the boy being sucked into a vortex surrounded by rather fierce fish is an example of her quirky sense of humour, and the blue is striking.





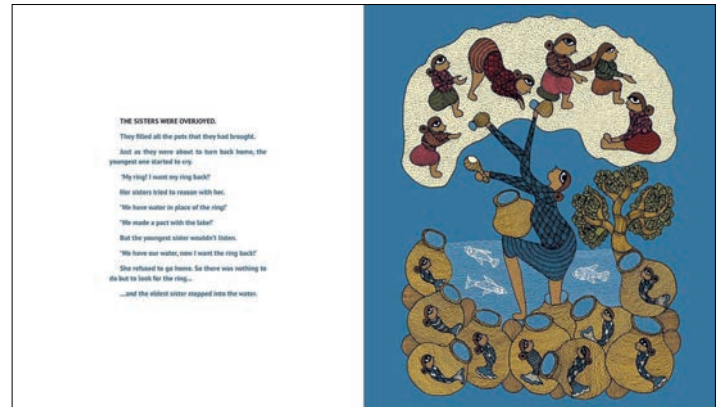
Franklyn Mansfield Branley **Rain and hail**, illustrated by Helen Borten, **Let's Read and Find Out Science Book series**, Crowell, New York, 1963. Helen Borten is another of the mid-century artists who made an extraordinary contribution to children's book illustration and whose work repays close looking. Her style is minimalist and very clear focusing on the key qualities of what she is describing. Here, in an illustration that is surprisingly in black and white, we see a young child, clearly from an indigenous group as indicated by her clothing and her facial features, both very minimalist, looking closely at two large pieces of hail / ice. There a shower of hail behind her in a diagonal line of assorted size and shapes, with some bouncing off each other. There is an immediacy to the image, as if she has just picked up the hailstone.



Subhash Vyam **Water**, Tara Books, Chennai, 2017 is a more political look at water, told quietly, partly through a traditional story and partly through the narrative of increasing urbanisation. The illustrator is a Gond artist using traditional images to explore his message. The reader sees his love of the village and its life, the coming of the first well and the first pump, and the threat of a dam building project, the traditional story providing a metaphor, a question about whether humans take too much from nature. In this image, he cleverly emphasises that the collecting of water is the work of women and girls.



Moving back to 21st century influences, in Alvaro F Villa **Flood**, Curious Fox, London, 2014, the influence of cinematic techniques can be seen in this powerful wordless picture book about one family's evacuation and the destruction of their home through flooding. The intense colours used in images that fill the whole page reflect the intensity of the experience. Both the rather rickety house and the family are characters in this narrative. Normal life is quickly subsumed by the oncoming threat of the storm, enormous clouds approach and the interior images break into smaller sections as the family make their plans. In one powerful image of the evacuation, the reader is still inside the house with father in close-up looking in through the window. This storm is shown moving across the landscape in the form of enormous black clouds slowly filling the pages. These two images show the immense quantity of water with views of the destruction both inside and outside. These multiple perspectives are characteristic of the cinematic influences. Although a visually quite scary book, it ends with a note of hope as the house is rebuilt and life and nature recover and resume.



And I want to end with Suzy Lee **Estate**, Corraini Edizioni, Italy, 2022 (originally published as Summer, in **Korean** by BIR Publishing Co) This is Lee's meditation on Vivaldi's Four Seasons, and it includes the most exuberant interpretations of summer, of summer rain and water play. This image is one a series of playing with water in the garden and shows how Lee is able to capture the essence of water and its impact. It is in a large format with beautiful thick white pages and bold colours, with the beautiful blue sprays of water engulfing everyone. Not a book about water or weather, but the most joyful celebration of both



Pam Dix worked in London in the school library sector and as a university lecturer in children's literature. She has been the chair of **IBBY UK** since 2014 and is involved in many international projects to support this work. She is also the chair of the **Akill Trust**, a small charity that has been working in Kenya since 2008, and is a trustee for **Book Aid International**. She was the advisory editor of *Children's Literature in a Multiliterate World*, published by UCL Institute of Education Press.

Bridging Communities and Books: the GLL Literary Foundation story continues

By Jenny Hawke, Vice Chair and Foundation supported author **Siren Knight**

What a whirlwind of a year it has been! As the **GLL Literary Foundation** reaches its midpoint, we are absolutely thrilled to see how this vibrant initiative is gaining support for emerging children's and YA authors. Founded just last year by charitable social enterprise and library operator **GLL**—the team behind the **Better** libraries across Bromley, Greenwich, Wandsworth, Dudley, and Lincolnshire, the Foundation is already championing two incredible cohorts, providing bursary placements for up to 40 talented writers.

At the very heart of the Foundation's mission is collaboration: pairing each author with a dedicated local librarian 'champion.' These champions have been diligently introducing our writers to local booksellers, publishers, literary festivals, and schools.

This past summer has been exciting, particularly as we teamed up for the annual **Summer Reading Challenge**. A few highlights include celebrating the **National Year of Reading**, when Wandsworth Foundation authors Shireen Laji, Nadine Wild Palmer, and Ramzee took to the stage at the **Riverside Radio Roadshow** in Springfield Park. Teaming up with Riverside Radio and **Book Clubs in Schools**, they brought interactive literary fun to local families out in the sunshine. In Bromley, football author Venessa Taylor hosted a fantastic public event at Orpington Library, in partnership with the local business community at **Orpington 1st**. The children really enjoyed drawing posters to save the football club inspired by Venessa's amazing book, **Baller Boys and the Bulldozers**. It was wonderful to be involved in some of the events over the summer and see how excited and inspired the children were when they met the authors.

It was also great to organise and host a number a schedule of webinars and virtual sessions, connecting our authors with more than 2,500 children to encourage reading for pleasure.

We are continuing to organise online 'literary lunches' and in July publicist Nina Douglas shared insider tips on navigating the media and putting on unforgettable book events.

In addition to the public, school and online events the authors have been busy out and about with Foundation champions. In early July it was lovely to be part of a very excited group of authors and librarian champions when we headed to London's National Theatre for the **CLIPPA** Poetry Awards. Treated to amazing performances from shortlisted poets and enthusiastic school groups, we cheered loudly as **The Poetry World of John Agard**, written by John Agard and illustrated by Shirley Hottier (Otter-Barry Books) won the award!



We also gathered at the **Centre for Literacy and Primary Education** for the prestigious **Branford Boase Award** ceremony, congratulating winning debut author Asli Jensen and editor Shalini Vallepur for their fantastic book **Love on Sight** (Chicken House).

With a whole host of Foundation authors celebrating brand-new book launches over the summer, our local libraries have showcased these titles with eye-catching displays. The autumn term looks incredibly busy and exciting with more in-person visits, digital events, and marvellous moments connecting young readers with the authors they love!

Author **Siren Knight** reflects on her path to publication for her debut YA novel, **Princess (Apparently)**.

Princess (Apparently) is a fun and yet emotional novel that centres around Della and her journey to finding her place in this world. Full of scandal, first crushes and the teenage experience, mixed-race Della has to navigate life as she moves between worlds from her posh London school to rubbing elbows with royalty on a Caribbean island. Much inspiration is drawn from the idea of what a Black monarchy would look like, based on a real-life portrait of two Black Haitian princesses. **Storymix**, the fiction development company, and I felt that the portrait represented the stately homes most UK students visit on school trips and the lack of diversity in the artwork displayed there.

Being mixed race myself, Della's heritage represents the complexities of navigating two worlds without being subjected to the 'half' narrative that is often bestowed upon us. Instead, she is eager to express and accept her **WHOLE** self without having to feel like her identity is at odds with itself. I particularly enjoyed writing the very unique teen experience of realising that having a crush may not be as hopeless as it once may have seemed as she steps into her own uniqueness and confidence. Della, Ollie and Jaden are a great reminder to adults that teenagers are very much concerned about important issues that impact their futures and I feel that, although **Princess (Apparently)** is a teen novel, it contains complex themes surrounding family, identity and love that appeal to all age groups. It's a funny, adventurous, cosy, romantic and heartwarming story that deserves its place on the shelves so you can imagine how pleased I was to be accepted onto the **GLL Literary Foundation** for the 2026 cohort in recognition of my debut novel.

As a **GCSE** tutor and English lead, I'm extremely keen to get young people reading and at its heart, that's what the **GLL Literary Foundation** is all about. They work closely with libraries to make sure that young people are as supported as possible in their reading goals. Kingswinford Library has taken me under their wing as part of the Foundation, and I have received support from them in promoting **Princess (Apparently)**. I've been invited to inspirational events which has led me to meeting accomplished writers. The **GLL** also offers a bursary to help their members to navigate their publishing and marketing journey. Jenny and Rebecca check in on me personally and support marketing via social media. I am extremely honoured to be on the cohort and have them support me as **Princess (Apparently)** hits the shelves.

Instagram: [@Sirenknight](#) TikTok: [Sirenkn1ght](#)



Beyond the Secret Garden

Patrice Lawrence, UK Children's Laureate

In their latest column, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** celebrate the appointment of **Patrice Lawrence** as the new **Waterstones Children's Laureate**.

In July, **BookTrust** and **Waterstones** announced **Patrice Lawrence** as the fourteenth UK Children's Laureate. Lawrence is the perfect choice for a role that requires someone to be both a highly accomplished author and a talented communicator on subjects such as reading, literature, education, families and childhood.

While she had already published other shorter works, **Orangeboy** was marketed as Lawrence's debut. Lawrence has said that she initially thought she was writing a book for adults. The book won the **YA Prize**. Set in Hackney, it featured a multicultural cast and, though the plot was driven by an element of mystery, the story examined the consequences of crime on a family – a theme Lawrence would explore in subsequent colour-themed titles. Lawrence demonstrated an ability to work within established genres while also remaining alert to their limitations. Of **Eight Pieces of Silva**, **Fen Coles** wrote in **Books for Keeps** '...most refreshingly of all, the classic male detective voiceover has been shunted off, giving way to the confident tones of a 16-year-old, working class, lesbian of colour...'

Subsequent titles have shown Lawrence engaging with many of the questions we have considered in these columns. As she writes in the introduction to our book based on these columns, Lawrence read many of the classics that are still available for children—Enid Blyton, **Doctor Dolittle**, **Little House on the Prairie**, and **The Secret Garden** among them. She notes how these books taught her about who belonged in the book world, and maybe in the real world as well. She loved books, but didn't expect to see herself in them—so much so that it affected her own writing. 'I was a story-writer from childhood but I'd absorbed damaging stereotypes so thoroughly that every character I created was white.' (**Patrice Lawrence: The Books That Made the New Children's Laureate** | [Waterstones.com Blog](https://www.waterstones.com/blog)).

Lawrence has shown an interest in critically and creatively engaging with the classics. She contributed to **Return to Wonderland**, the 2019 anthology of stories inspired by Lewis Carroll. More recently she wrote a version of **Jane Eyre**. She also contributed to a new collection of Blyton's **Malory Towers** adventures. Her story **A Bob and a Weave** (**New Class at Malory Towers** 2019), not only made a place for Black girls at the fictional school, but also provided an opportunity for white readers to learn about the experience of being Black and female. Enid Blyton's school stories connected young Patrice to Blyton's world famously comprised of midnight hamper feasts, lacrosse, and pranks on teachers. But Blyton also connected Patrice to her peers, most of whom read and enjoyed Blyton's stories

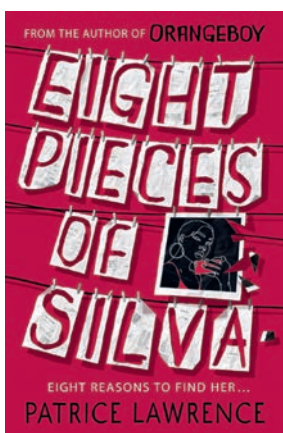
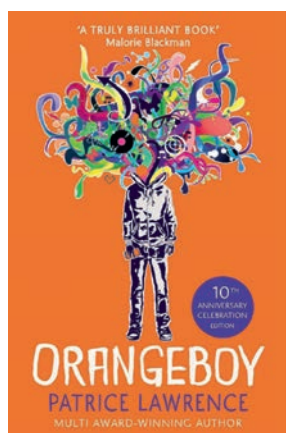


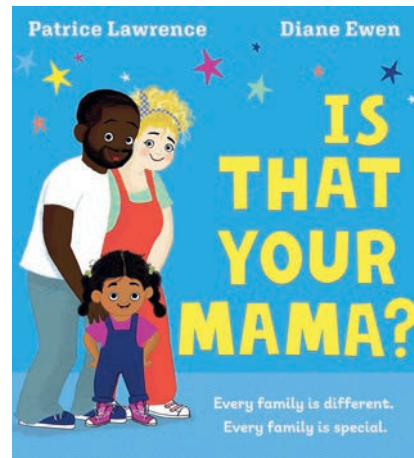
through the local library with its surfeit of Blyton books. In her Laureate acceptance speech, she said, 'I believe that we, as humans, are changed by stories. They connect us to different worlds, and they connect us to each other. People who feel this connection – who feel heard and believe in each other's humanity – are the foundation of stronger, safer and more inclusive communities.'

As well as this engagement with classics of children's literature, Lawrence has written books that centre Black characters in British history. **Diver's Daughter** (Scholastic 2019) allows all readers to see Black families as part of an English Tudor past which had traditionally been depicted as an all-white space in children's books. **The Elemental Detectives** trilogy is historical fantasy centring Black children.

Families, Care Experienced

In her laureateship acceptance, Lawrence said, 'I have written for children and young people of all ages, and I know that stories help children – particularly vulnerable children – feel seen, understood and, most importantly, valued. Stories help readers explore unfamiliar subjects safely with space to pause and reflect on complex emotions. And, just as importantly, reading helps us understand each other's stories.'





Her books help readers understand what happens when a character feels that they don't belong. This is especially true of her award-winning novella, **Needle** (Barrington Stoke 2022), which has a main character, Charlene, who is not always likeable. Patrice wanted the reader to understand Charlene's 'difficult' personality: 'She is angry and makes questionable judgements – but she is also a child trying to survive in a challenging world where decisions are made about her that she can't control' ([Patrice Lawrence: The Books That Made the New Children's Laureate](#) | [Waterstones.com Blog](#)). 'Negative' behaviour does not negate a person's value, and by understanding this we stop trying to save people and start trying to connect with them. **Needle** is for readers who are like Charlene, and for readers who have never tried to understand someone like Charlene.

The final part of Patrice's laureate acceptance speech confirms her vision of reading's value for young people: 'During my tenure as **Waterstones Children's Laureate**, I will champion the power of books to make us feel like we belong, and shared stories as a tool for bringing people together. We are living in a divided world where many people feel isolated, we need this now, more than ever.' But Patrice will not *begin* to do this during her tenure: she has been doing this all along, and for all ages of readers. This is exemplified by **Granny Came Here on the Empire Windrush** (2022), which is not just one story, but stories within stories, all of which highlight connecting communities in a divided and isolated world. Ava has to dress up as her hero in school, so she asks her grandmother for help. Ava's grandmother connects her to the Black diaspora through suggestions of Winifred Atwell, Mary Seacole, and Rosa Parks. These suggestions remind Ava she is connected to women who have stood up for their right to be part of a society that didn't always want them. Lawrence carefully parallels their stories with the story of ordinary Black women like Ava's grandmother, who may not have been famous but who were heroic nonetheless, surviving being divided from their families and isolated within society. It is inevitable that Ava, having learned both lessons, stands up for her everyday hero, her grandmother, by dressing up and sharing her story at school.

In **Is That Your Mama?**, illustrated by Diane Ewen, Lawrence offers a narrative where children no longer need to explain themselves and their diverse families to curious adults. And in **Our Story Starts in Africa**, illustrated by Jeanetta Gonzales, we encounter a text that is both literary and educational and raises our expectations of what a picture book can be. As we write in **Beyond the Secret Garden: Racially Minoritised People in British Children's Books**, 'Lawrence deftly balances uplifting and celebratory themes with histories of oppression, showing that it is possible to write (and illustrate) wider-ranging, complex narratives for young picture book readers.' (p169)

In standard picture book format Lawrence beautifully combines her interests in families, diaspora, education and childhood. Like so much of Lawrence's work it deserves the close attention of young readers and her writing peers.

Books mentioned, all by Patrice Lawrence unless stated:

Orangeboy, Tempest, 978-1444927207, £9.99 pbk

Eight Pieces of Silva, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444954746, £9.99 pbk

Return to Wonderland, various authors, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1529006858, £6.99 pbk

New Class at Malory Towers, various authors, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444951004, £7.99 pbk

Diver's Daughter, Scholastic, 978-1407191409, £6.99 pbk

The Elemental Detectives, Scholastic, 978-0702315626, £7.99 pbk

Needle, Barrington Stoke, 978-1800901018, £7.99 pbk

Granny Came Here on the Empire Windrush, illus Camilla Sucre, Nosy Crow, 978-1839942310, £7.99 pbk

Is That Your Mama?, illus Diane Ewen, Scholastic, 978-0702314971, £7.99 pbk

Our Story Starts in Africa, illus Jeanetta Gonzales, Magic Cat Publishing, 978-1915569097, £7.99pbk



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 Nikesha 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.

Through the Sideways Door:

an interview with Guy Bass and David Roberts

By Damian Kelleher

One of the hottest days of a sweltering summer seems an odd time to sit down to discuss a book that will send the coldest of shivers down young spines this autumn. But I'm meeting Guy Bass and David Roberts on London's South Bank to talk about their new collaboration, **The Worst Thing That Could Possibly Happen**. It's a deliciously unsettling collection from the pen of award-winning **Stitch Head** author Guy Bass that includes stories, poems, comic strips and adverts – yes, adverts – that will spark fear and fun in equal measure among curious readers of all ages. Illustrator David Roberts, of **The Dunderheads** and **Tinder** fame, ramps up the spookiness with a range of illustration styles to complement the creepy subject matter.

You've been friends for a long time, but this is the first book you've worked on together, isn't it?

GB: We had been talking for years and years – a decade plus – about working together but we just couldn't find the right thing.

DR: Back in the day we were out together on the road doing a Little Tiger tour [their publisher]. I am shameless about asking authors to write stories for me! I don't know where it comes from because I'm not a confident person at all – I'm very timid about things like that – but if I'm with an author I'm like 'Give me a story!'. So I kept nagging Guy, 'write me something'. And I assumed it would be a picture book...

GB: At that point, I associated David with picture books. But when I saw **Tinder** [written by Sally Gardner] it all started to make sense. I'd never seen him work in that way before.



The book feels like you had been working on it for a long time, Guy?

GB: I think it was a slow burn. I had written a load of short stories and they weren't really connected. I thought, what am I going to do with these? And then I realised, if I give this an overarching theme, I can pull all these together into something cohesive.

The idea behind it is taking all the stuff I really loved as a kid – comics, watching TV, playing with my friends, all of that – and imagining, what if that were infiltrated by some sort of evil force? The TV would flicker and the book would invite you to do terrible things and it made it all sound quite fun, but ultimately it would take you to a dark place.

There used to be lots of scary books for children but there seems to be much less published now.

GB: I think that's true, especially for younger readers. A part of that was taking children away from potential harm.

DR: If you go back, I have got books by Charles Keeping which are properly terrifying! Those illustrations were a big influence on me when I started work as an illustrator. I was looking at these and thinking, "Oh so you can go here, you can go into this darkness, and it can still be okay". But I don't think you would get illustrations like those now in children's books – people would push back on them.

GB: The thing about scary books is that the reader is in control. If kids want to stop reading, they can. Whereas if you're watching something scary with your mates, you have to run out of the room to escape!

Illustrating horror stories is tricky because so much of what makes the story work is in the reader's imagination, isn't it?

DR: A few years ago, I worked on Chris Priestley's **Uncle Montague's Tales of Terror**. They were very dark and sinister. And I learned from that – there was one note Chris gave me – don't show anything. Just hold back as much as you can. In doing that I learned to try and create an atmosphere more than an explicit image. With this, I was always thinking about what to show and what to hold back from, what to imply and what to have coming in off the side of the page. That's why the stories finish with all these kids pointing – to nothing. They're pointing to the thing that's coming next – but we don't know what that is.





GB: The pointing image is always at the end of each story. So if you are a little bit freaked out, then you have a moment to ask yourself, 'am I going to turn the page?' The stories do get darker as the book goes on.

You have a lot of fun with the format too – there are stories, poems, comic strips, ads. Let's talk about the Giggly tibs, a pastiche of children's TV characters...

GB: They were based on Teletubbies which are terrifying anyway...

DR: In one of our earliest meetings, we talked about coming to the project with different illustration styles. Guy saw the Giggly tibs on a television screen, but I thought that's not going to translate well, I wouldn't be able to get across the crackly lines and stuff. Then I thought about the **Mr Men** style, where the characters are drawn flat on, just staring out at you. And I thought, that's going to be quiet and creepy...

GB: It's definitely scarier as a result because you see them turn on the parents as well.

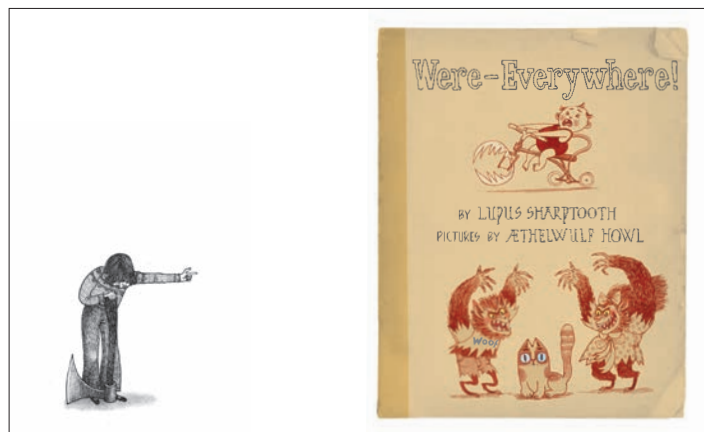
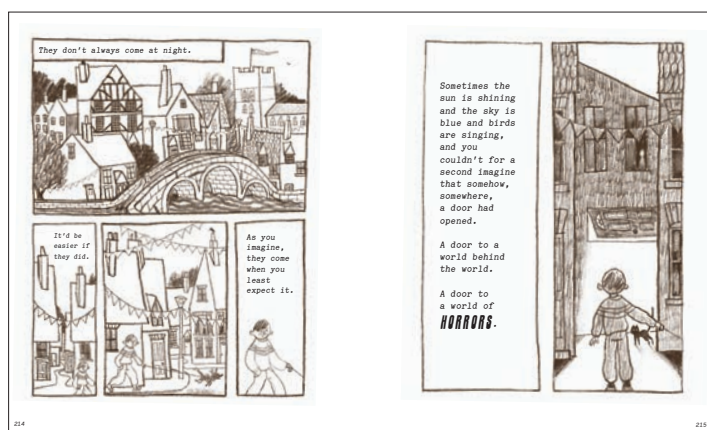
And what about the 'book within a book', Were Everywhere?

GB: Dave, you came up with that idea.

DR: I thought it was so brilliant, I just loved it. The first book I ever bought was **A Hole Is to Dig** by Ruth Krauss and Maurice Sendak – it's my favourite book of all time. Because I'm dyslexic, as a child when I looked at a whole page with words, I just switched off. But **A Hole Is to Dig** was just a sentence with a picture on each page and I thought we could do the same here, Except that whereas theirs is super sweet and lovely and heartfelt, ours would be terrifying!

Kids will enjoy spotting the recurring motifs from *The World Behind the World* – like the sideways door.

GB: Really early on in my career, a teacher asked me for some titles for stories to inspire kids, and one that I came up with was *The Sideways Door*. I liked it so much I didn't give it to them – I kept it! I had it in my head for years and I kept thinking, I've got to do something with this. And so it became a portal into *The World Behind the World*, all these things leaking out through these sideways doors.



The retro styling you use throughout the book is also part of its charm.

DR: I said to Guy 'Do you want it to look quite 80s?' and he said, 'Go further back, let's go into the 70s'. This is basically my childhood! It's like looking at photographs of what me and my friends looked like – the hair, the jumpers and the dresses that my sister used to wear. I looked a lot at these little pamphlets of black and white photography from a council estate in 1979 and referred to a lot of photos of kids and they're all jumping around. I used that to get the style of what they were wearing – the parka one girl is wearing, the turn ups on the trousers, all the hairstyles. It all holds it in time, although there's something off kilter about it. You don't know when that time is exactly. There are mobile phones but everyone's dressed from a different era. But are they really from a different time or not?

Tell me about the fantastic cover. Did it take a while to design?

DR: The cover took ages. The only time I've ever done more cover roughs is for **Tinder**. The question was, what image do you choose? How do you draw readers in without showing too much.

GB: There has to be a suggestion of evil but not much more than that. The only thing I didn't want the cover to answer was the question, 'What's the worst thing that could possibly happen?' because that's what the book has to do.

DR: The glow is really important around the central figure – I wanted her to have that **Ready-Brek** look! I like the idea of drawing people from behind because you're really with that person, and I didn't want to show the child's face because then you are suggesting the book is all about that child. The child is anonymous and what we see is this thing – and what is it? The image has to pose a question as well as the title.

*It feels the sort of book that has to be read at bedtime. It's apt that the final story **Nothing to Worry About** ends with a child in bed.*

GB: I realised I had to end it with someone in bed listening to the sound of the pipes. That's a sound I always used to listen to when I was a kid, this rhythmic tempo, and I'd be thinking, it's probably fine...

DR: When I first read that ending, 'But I can still hear breathing', well...that's truly scary.

The Worst Thing That Could Possibly Happen

by Guy Bass and David Roberts, Little Tiger
978-1788954198, £16.99 hbk.



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

Comics in the Classroom:

Meet Rochdale's Graphic Novel Reading Ambassadors

In their new book **Comics in the Classroom**, **Helen Jones** and **Lucy Starbuck Braidley** explain the different ways in which comic can be used in the classroom to transform learning experiences and enhance engagement, with a focus too on reading for pleasure. In this extract, they spotlight work happening across a range of schools in Rochdale and the impact reading comics is having there.

In her previous role as an advisory teacher for Rochdale Local authority, **Claire McGreevy** was a long-time advocate for reading for pleasure in schools. Throughout her practice she noticed groups of children who were disengaged from reading. When she left the classroom to become an advisory teacher, she had a particular remit to boost reading for children with a social worker. As she explains, I took on this role specifically to support schools strategically, with improving educational outcomes because, historically, children with social workers face so many challenges, but developing that reading habit is absolutely essential. And they can go on to achieve even better than their peers with the right support.

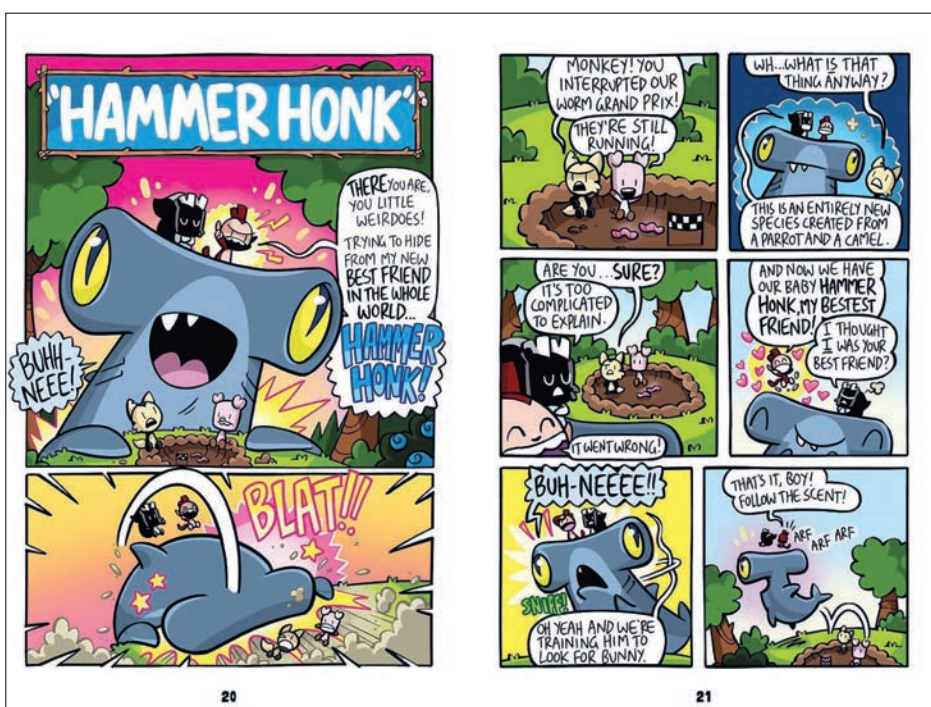
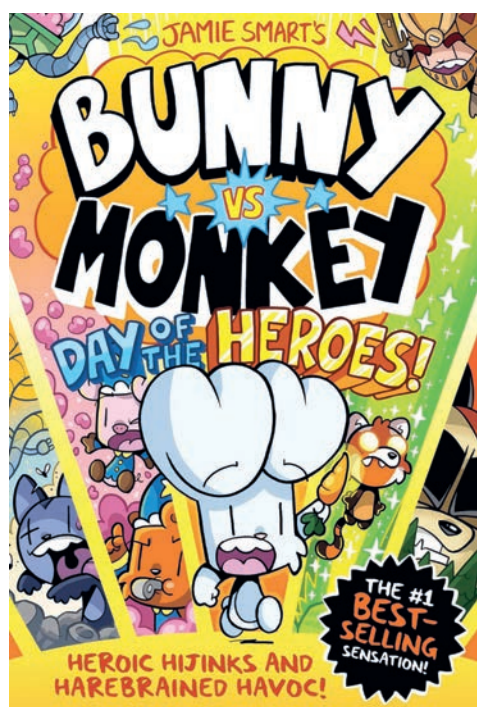
In order to improve attitudes towards reading, Claire designed a now award-winning graphic novel project that would see care experienced children, and children with a social worker, take on the role of classroom reading advocate, with a particular focus on graphic novels.

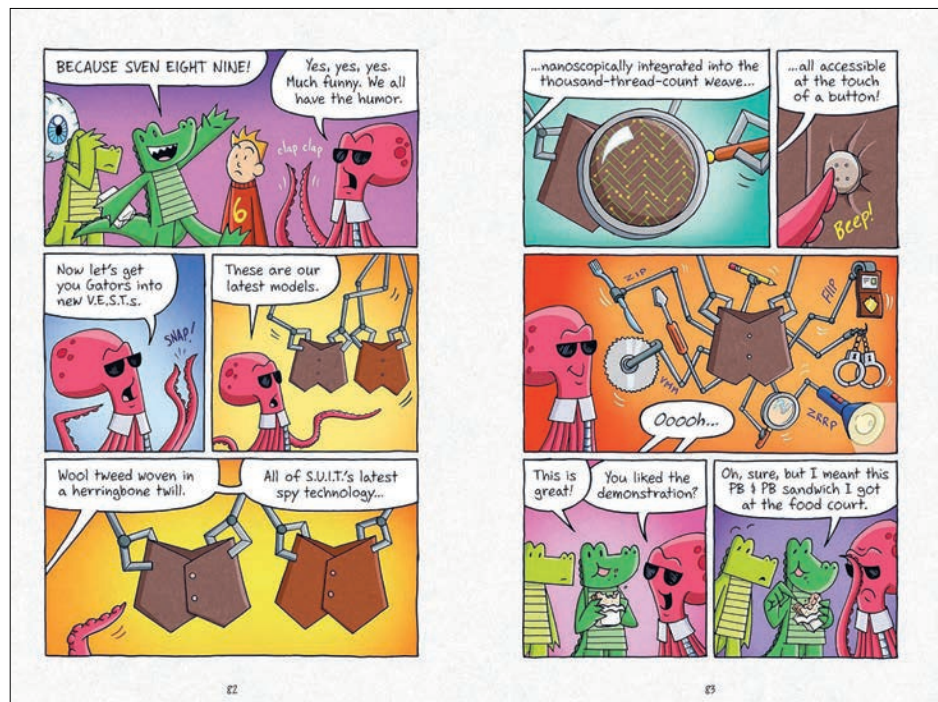
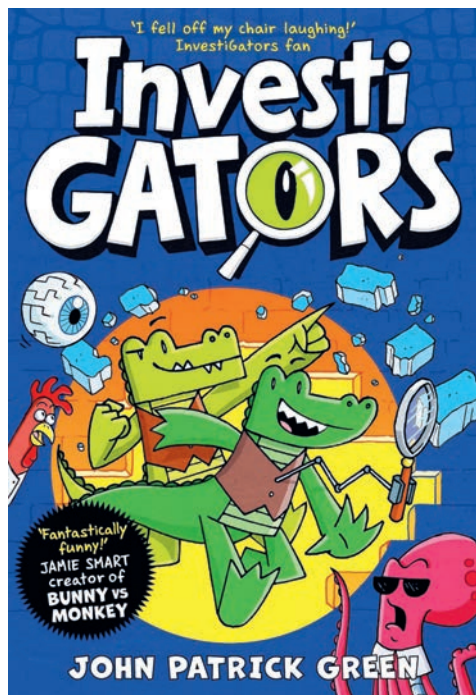
The ten primary schools involved in the pilot received professional development for staff on comics and graphic novels and collections of graphic novels for their classrooms. Gail Reed from Harwood Park school in Rochdale was one of the participating teachers. The training sessions provided in the project were key to getting staff on board and changing perceptions towards illustrated texts. Prior to the project the school had picturebooks and a small range of comics in the library, but largely viewed them as starting points that children should move on from as their reading journey progressed. This perception shifted when the impact that access to graphic novels had was observed throughout the project, one participating

“The children know more now they’ve taken it on board. They know which ones they like, which ones they’ve chosen and they’re like, ‘Oh, I want that one’, ‘Oh, can we get this one?’, ‘Can we order this one?’... they’ve then got ownership as well. They have the ownership of loaning the books out and they’ve taken that responsibility... I’ve never had one that’s gone home and got wet or got eaten by a dog and not come back. The pride that they’re taking looking after them as well and comments from parents of ‘He won’t read’... ‘He didn’t read in the whole of last year, yet he’s been in your class and he’s read this book, this book and this book.’”

teacher noted ‘As a school, and as a teacher I had to re-evaluate and think well, why am I not using the picturebooks? Why am I not using these and putting them in our book area?’

As well as the main library, comics-rich reading corners were set up in each class, which were overseen by the reading ambassadors. Child empowerment was central to the implementation and ultimate success of the programme, the children played an active role in the selection of the books they had in their classroom and as a result, the graphic novel collections were incredibly popular.





As well as advising on the book stock, the reading ambassadors are charged with keeping track of borrowing records in their class, with noting down requests for new titles and with tidying reading areas, something they take great pride in. Alongside the reading ambassadors, Gail has also become an important reading role model in the school, engaging with graphic novels as a reader and positioning herself as an equal in their reading community: 'I've got really involved in reading them myself as well and sharing that knowledge with the children... I've borrowed them off the children, and the children have borrowed ones I've got.' This mutual exchange and interactions around text have been a key part of building the reading culture in the school: 'the fact that I had read the books as well, that blew their minds.'

The children's book knowledge has improved alongside the staff and they have pride in their collections:

The projects' original aim of encouraging disengaged readers was certainly met, something Gail attributes to the overall accessibility of the form: 'We have a lot of mobile children or children with EAL, so it's helped them as a kind of a gateway into the reading'. As well as the frequency of interactions around books occurring in school, children's reading behaviours outside of school also started to shift, with children who would have previously spent much of the evening playing online, coming in to proudly discuss the book they've been reading instead. It wasn't just the disengaged readers accessing the form and finding value in it; higher-attaining children in the cohort also enjoyed exploring a new reading format. The universality of appeal of the graphic novel collections has increased social interaction around books outside of the classroom too, with lower-attaining children being able to access the same books as their peers:

They can still read those books.... they're reading something their friend is reading. They can join in a discussion with their friends at playtime about **Bunny vs Monkey** or **The Investigators**... They're not excluded from that conversation in any way.

The project was originally run with children in Year 5, but as they moved into a new academic year, Gail began to notice a ripple effect across the school. The buzz around reading graphic novels has spread across year groups, with younger children overhearing conversations on the playground or from siblings at home, and beginning to seek out the reading material for themselves too. Now, on World Book, more children are coming dressed as characters from graphic novels and the passion for comics has taken root across the school.

A collaboration with the local library enables children to access a wider collection of graphic novels that can sustain them outside of school, including during the school holidays, when reading frequency typically drops. Children are taken to the public library on a regular basis during the school day to build their confidence and skills in library usership and staff have made sure there is a growing collection of graphic novels to support their reading preferences.

The validity of comics as a reading form has been further solidified at Harwood Park by their inclusion in the school curriculum, as a way to improve access to the complex Victorian text, **The Hound of the Baskervilles**, 'In our English lesson, we pulled out the graphic novel and use a section of the original text with the section of the graphic novel and the children have been so engaged...so it supports our overall curriculum' and children particularly enjoy the non-fiction comic series **I Survived**, with the Second World War edition complementing their curriculum learning in history. As well as curriculum coverage, comics are also promoted as a creative activity, Gail's weekly comics club provides opportunity for children to both read and create comics for pleasure - something that will be explored in more detail in later chapters of this book.

The graphic novel project instigated by Clare McGreevy in Rochdale has already extended beyond the initial scope of the project and become embedded in the school's approach to reading for pleasure. Gail is optimistic about their future place in the school's reading culture, 'I think it will only grow because it started off with a small section in the library and within a year that's doubled'. It provides a fantastic example of the impact that providing access to quality comics and graphic novels, and empowering children to make their own reading choices can have on all learners, including the most disengaged or disadvantaged amongst our cohorts.

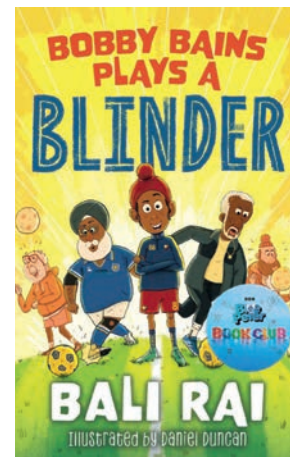
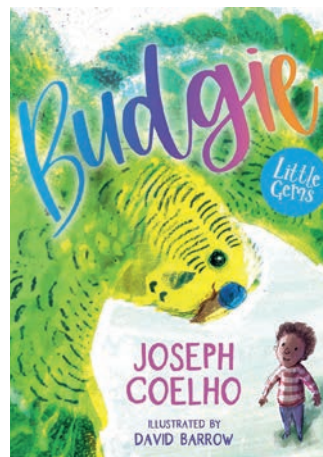
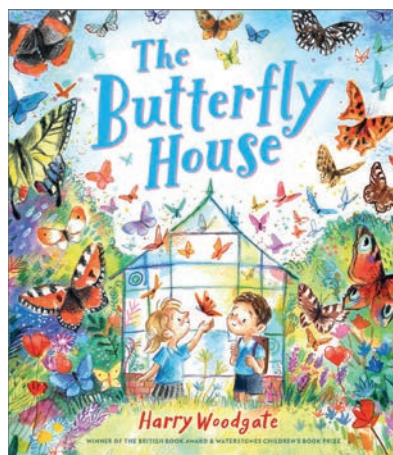
Comics in the Classroom

by Helen Jones and Lucy Starbuck Braidley is published by Routledge, 978-1041036180, £23.99 pbk.



Letterbox Library Recommends: Books on Social Isolation and Loneliness

In the latest column highlighting books by theme, the Letterbox Library team look at the particular ways social isolation and loneliness are represented in inclusive children's books



Where once social isolation seemed largely addressed in children's literature through stories about new arrivals or bullying, it now feels as if a more expansive understanding has arrived. Loneliness is more regularly narrated as a result of grief or as a progression, often alongside increasing age or illness, with a character's isolation resulting from a casual rather than intended neglect by the wider community. It is typically a young protagonist who first notices and brings attention to the lonely person. Interestingly, some of the most nuanced explorations of loneliness have occurred within specifically *inclusive* children's books, almost as if a diverse landscape lends itself to the theme.

Picture book, **The Butterfly House**, skilfully navigates poor mental health as both a cause and effect of loneliness. A young girl, Holly, is fascinated by her neighbour's house, a ramshackle oddity shrouded in vegetation. The inhabitant is the reclusive Miss Brown, an elderly (white) woman with spiky hair, who tells Holly, 'my brain was ill for a long time', leading to her own internalised 'thorny branches' and an externalised wilderness home. A determined Holly reaches out to her neighbours and, one Saturday, the entire street - a very diverse bunch - gathers to resurrect Miss Brown's garden. It's a gift which Miss Brown relishes, easing her loneliness, and then also extends by opening up her garden to the public for people to 'just have somewhere quiet to feel better.'

In **Christmas Lights on Mistletoe Street**, another alert (hearing impaired) child, also named Holly, once again summons up her street to help heal an elderly (white) woman's loneliness. Despite this being Holly and her mum's very first Christmas on Mistletoe Street, they are fully involved in the cheerful exchanges and bustle of their very diverse (including multifaith) neighbourhood. This same cohesive community has, however, 'casually' failed to notice Ivy who lives all alone. Ivy's own description of her isolation is subtly done, inviting questions. There is no mention of family or a partner. Instead, Ivy details a busy social life which has declined with time and restricted mobility; 'life got busier for everyone, so the [Christmas] parties stopped and I've found it harder to go out'. A series of vignettes neatly illustrate this progression. And so, Holly resolves that very same Christmas Eve to bring the party to Ivy's doorstep. Mistletoe Street's residents respond by bringing all the festive requisites, from tea to cake to carols. As with **Butterfly House** a child's social concern results in a legacy. Going forward, the neighbourhood commits to a new tradition of celebrating at Ivy's front door.

Curiously, both of these picture books figure single parent/mum families, a structure repeated with two Barrington Stoke chapter books. **Bobby Bains Plays a Blinder** and **Budgie** share other similarities:

they are contextualised, although very differently, by poverty; boy characters lead on empathy, a welcome antidote to girls (and women) in books, as so often in life, bearing the larger share of social care.

Bobby Bains repeats the Christmas setting, a rather obvious one for stirring up 'charitable' thoughts, but, in a neat little twist, Bobby and his family are practising Sikhs. While helping Mum deliver food parcels, Bobby meets Trevor (a Black man) who tells him that since he was widowed 'there's nothing worth going out for.' Bobby is determined to lure this 'cool old dude, like Nana-ji' back out into the world and succeeds by establishing a local walking football group. Trevor's social isolation coincides with food poverty, a topic also made explicit by Mum's food bank job and Bobby's classroom's discussion about hunger. Arguably, given its explanations of Sikh tenets of 'selfless service', the narrative works through a prism of faith rather than one of community activism but the book's final act of empathy – the Bains family invite Trevor to a vegetarian Christmas dinner – does suggest a new social cohesion, beyond one-off charitable acts.

Poverty is the backdrop to, but not an issue explored within, **Budgie**. Loneliness is also a clear undercurrent to the narrative, but one which only gradually creeps up. Here an elderly (white) man behaves like the opposite of a recluse, patrolling the estate solo, brandishing his walking stick at children who dare to climb trees. This includes Miles who lives with his mum and sibling (a family of colour) on the block's 3rd floor and who refers to Mr Buxton through ever extending hyphenated compounds: 'Mr-Spoiler-Of-Fun, Mr-Thinks-He-Owns-The-Trees Mr Buxton.' An unexpected, shared experience of grief brings the unlikely pair together in an emotional, but never sentimental, scene in Miles' flat. While extending a sympathetic ear to Miles, we discover that Mr Buxton is grieving the loss of his husband. Preconceptions are confounded, words of comfort exchanged and tears shed, giving way to shared giggles and chuckles. Mum even brings out the 'posh biscuits.' Mr Buxton's social isolation comes to be understood and, we suspect, with those closing scenes, upended forever in the warm hug of Miles' family. .

All books mentioned available from [Letterbox Library](https://letterboxlibrary.org/)

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**.

Obituary: Alec Williams

19 November 1947 – 2 June 2026

By **Steve Hird**



I first met Alec in 1982 at a training day organised by the Yorkshire and Humberside branch of the **Youth Libraries Group** of the **Library Association** (the forerunner of **CILIP**). The theme was library activities for children and Alec was a speaker and demonstrator. I had recently moved within the library profession into the field of children's and schools' library work. Alec was already by the 1980's well known and respected in this field – I was there to learn.

This was for me the start of a close working collaboration and, just as importantly, the beginnings of what was to become a close friendship too. In the world of work, Alec was instrumental in developing a growing network of senior professionals in children's and schools' librarianship across Yorkshire and Humberside in the mid 1980's. We grandly called ourselves **Yorkshire Libraries for Children**. In the days when you could still do these things, we began to hold training days and encouraged our staff to go. We shared ideas and good practice, we economised on costs by collectively booking authors and entertainers, and we produced handy practical guides to, for example, simplified Dewey, and lists and contact details of recommended authors, speakers and entertainers, based on our collective experiences.

Sometime in the early 1990's four of us, including Alec, cooked up the idea of a networking group for heads of children's and schools' library services across all metropolitan districts in England. And so was born **AMDECL**, The Association of Metropolitan District Education and Children's Librarians. Soon we were organising weekend conferences with notable speakers, and working with organisations in the fields of literacy, reading for pleasure, curriculum development, and so forth, hoping that our collective voice might be heard in influential circles.

It was not long, again with Alec in the vanguard, before we began to realise that any influence we might be able to make could only be enhanced by becoming truly national, and after meetings with representatives of **SOCCEL** and **YELL**, (great acronyms by the way!), the county council and London borough equivalents of **AMDECL**, their members voted overwhelmingly in favour of us all merging, and in 1995 **ASCEL**, the **Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians**, was established. Alec and I sat on its committee from the outset, working with committed and expert colleagues from across the country. Our work and **ASCEL**'s reputation continued to grow, and eventually new committee members took on the role. **ASCEL** is now a registered charity rebranded as **Libraries Rising**, and goes from strength to strength, just one of Alec's many legacies.

In 2003 Alec joined the Executive Committee of the **School Library Association** and soon became its Chair. It was during his chairmanship that the late Aidan Chambers became President of the **SLA** and had his Big Idea – the **School Librarian of the Year Award**, which is still going strong in its 21st year. Alec was one of its original judging panel members.

By this time Alec had left local authority public library service and become a freelance speaker, trainer and storyteller. His flair for telling children's stories and poetry to audiences from pre-school upwards ensured that he was much in demand in schools and libraries throughout the UK. He also began working for the **British Council** on library development projects in countries far and wide, often well off the beaten track, and quite rightly took great pride in this important role.

Alec was always up for starting something new. Super-organised as he was, he had kept contact details for numerous people from former times, and it was he who invited a small group of former **AMDECL/ASCEL** committee colleagues to a pub lunch high on the Pennines, with the idea that it might be good to meet up from time to time going forward. We readily agreed, and over time this small group grew a bit, and 15 years later we still meet two or three times a year, now with partners too, and visit somewhere interesting then have a lovely meal. We hardly ever talk about libraries!

Alec and I met socially from time to time for many years, relaxing in each others' company and enjoying long walks in the Peak District and West and South Yorkshire. Particular memories include Alec offering to share a sandwich with a sheep on the summit of Kinder Scout in Derbyshire, and trying in vain to shelter from an almighty deluge, eating bananas, at Top Withens (aka Wuthering Heights).

In all that Alec did, his passion and enthusiasm shone through, along with his great wit and sense of humour. Always optimistic, he bore his last illness with positivity and stoicism. And to the end, he kept on suggesting things – it was his idea and wish that our enduring group of former **AMDECL/ASCEL** colleagues should all meet again, with our partners. And so we did. Just a few weeks before he died Alec and Charlotte met us all at RHS Bridgewater in Salford - it was a beautiful day, in every sense.

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*.

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.

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*.

Stephen Dilley is Head of English at Kendrick School, Reading. He is part of the UKLA Book Awards team and a frequent contributor to the English and Media Centre's *Emagazine*

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 now CEO of *The Kids Network*.

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/>

Clare Pollard is a writer (poet, novelist and playwright), literary translator and critic.

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

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

Anna Rushall is a primary school teacher and English lead.

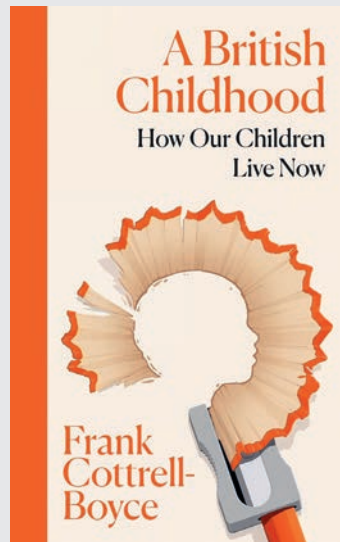
Lucy Staines was a primary school teacher, now retired.

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

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

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

Books About Children's Books



A British Childhood. How Our Children Live Now

★★★★★

Frank Cottrell-Boyce, Picador, 193pp, 978-1035080755, £14.99 hbk
Don't be put off by its grandiose title; this is a fire-cracker of a book. Writing with an engaging informality the author covers a huge amount of ground. It has been said that the young in the West are over-protected in the real world and under-protected online. But for many British children

still living in acute poverty, this book suggests no real protection is in fact on offer either way.

Visiting prisons, where in 2024 some children taken into custody have stayed there for nine months, talking to over-worked health visitors and the problems they face, chatting to infant teachers expected to do social work and primary care as well as provide lessons, Frank Cottrell-Boyce never lets up on the continuing crisis faced by too many young people. But his account is by no means all gloom; he writes movingly about his own childhood and there are also numbers of delightful asides, some celebrating other children's authors past and present. E. Nesbit and Roald Dahl come off well, but not so much Frank Baum. His chilling newspaper editorial appearing in a South Dakota newspaper in 1891 advocated genocide for the few remaining native 'Indians' not already massacred at the battle of Wounded Knee Creek. This was written nine years before the publication of *The Wizard of Oz*.

A section on children's television focuses on *CoComelon*, the second most viewed channel on the second biggest website in the world (*YouTube*). The author bets - correctly in my case - that most adult readers will not even have heard of it. Daily streaming videos made with 3-D animation software, it has been described as cloying, simplistic and

repetitive. It also goes on, and on, and on, with some infants watching it for hours at a stretch. The old have always lamented the passing of particular favourite pleasures and activities from the past. In time such complaints often come to seem quaint, but not always. In these pages, for example, the author makes a compelling case for the excellence once found in many children's television programmes once but sadly no more.

Frank Cottrell Boyce is an extraordinary man possessed with extraordinary energies. A brilliant and successful children's writer, he is also heavily engaged in school and other visits while still finding time for the research that has gone into this truly impressive book. His lightness of touch and ever-present sense of humour goes hand in hand with anger about the way too many children are let down by a state too often preferring not to know what is really going on. Reading this book is an education in itself, describing among other social blights furniture, bed and hygiene poverty with the distressing detail they deserve. It would be good if every MP could receive a copy, ideally with an added index. Better still, the government should create a new post for him, with the express purpose of getting urgent change where it is most needed. If only! **NT**

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant

Pudding Now Please

★★★★★

Lauren Child, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 9781398546387, £12.99 hbk
This is the first in a new series featuring the favourite characters Lotta and Lola.

Here, Lola's elder brother, Charlie acts as narrator presenting to readers/listeners a dialogue between the two friends about 'kindness and how to have goodish manners.' It takes place on Charlie's return from school when they ignoring him rather than saying hello certainly would not pass the politeness test.

We join the girls as they chat about when to say 'thank you', which includes times when you aren't really thankful at all; I love the way they navigate the tricky situation with the lunch time egg and then immediately after, asking - politely of course - for pudding.

This imaginative exploration will surely have young listeners and adult readers aloud laughing out loud. Its large size, with vibrant, humorous illustrations makes this a really fun way to explore with children the subject of manners, which are a vital part of communication. Lauren assuredly

has listened carefully to a lot of young children chatting before creating this distinctive start to her latest series.

It's a must have book for Foundation stage settings: I'd love to be able to listen in to young children's responses after a sharing session. **JB**

I Want

★★★★★

Ziggy Hanaor, ill. Charlotte Ager, Cicada Books, 40pp.
9781800660670, £12.99 hbk

The set up in this picture book is simple and brilliant. A mother offers her child a rice cracker in an ordinary, messy house, strewn with toys and laundry. The only unusual thing is that the mother is a witch and when the child wails 'I WANT COOKIEEE!!!' she is able to transform the rice cake with her wand. A brilliant psychological reading could surely be made of this witch-mother, with her magical ability to fulfil her baby's desires. But things get out of hand once the child grabs the wand themselves - with their impulses no longer mediated through the adult, chaos soon ensues. The mother is turned into a clown; a tiger appears; a dinosaur, castle and pirate

ship pile up precariously in their garden; there is some business with jelly - and then the baby decides he wants to fly...

It's a really interesting exploration of the power dynamics between parent and child, and how getting what you want is rarely satisfying. What I particularly enjoyed was a pivot in the plot near the end where the witch-mother grabs her wand back and starts thinking about what she wants for a change: her own clothes, a clean house, a cuddle. I was reminded of Jill Murphy's sublime *Five Minutes Peace* - the story does that rare thing of making the child appreciate that mothers also have their own desires and needs.

Charlotte Ager's pictures ping with energy, as well as the kind of detail that will reveal itself gradually to a child over several reads. I particularly enjoyed the way the wonderful rubs up against the very mundane details of crusts and keys on the table, and pizza boxes on the bed. It ends with the witch-mother declaring 'I want sleep', and I'm sure many parents reading this aloud will feel recognised. Highly recommended. **CP**

reviews

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

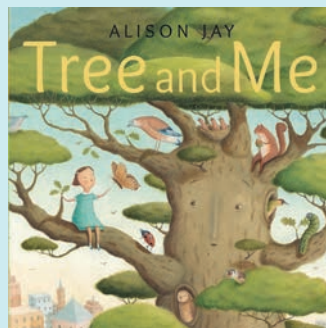
Ed's Choice

Tree and Me

★★★★★

Alison Jay, Old Barn Books, 32pp, 978-1910646915, £9.99 board book

Tree and Me is the sequel to Alison Jay's gorgeous eco-adventure, **Bee and Me**, first published in 2016 and newly available in matching format to this story, i.e. large, sturdy and very appealing board book. Here, friends Daisy and Pedro take a bus from the city into the countryside to walk in the woods. Beneath the watchful eyes of squirrels, beetles and jays, they find a baby acorn 'looking for a place to grow.' They take it back to the city and Daisy researches what to do (using books not Al you'll be glad to note). We see her planting the sleeping little acorn in a pot, carefully watering it and, as the seasons pass, a sapling growing. It grows quickly up from Daisy's sill, past Pedro's window above and to the sky. The children replant Tree in the ground and it grows magically into a huge oak, providing a dream adventure playground for their friends and neighbours, and a home for many, many creatures. As autumn approaches, Tree's leaves fall



and with them more little acorns. Riding on the backs of jays, the two children fly across the city, planting them to grow into similar spreading trees providing shade, greenery and homes for many creatures. Alison Jay's delicate oil paintings create a dreamy feel and there's a magic to the speed at which Tree grows as well as the children's journey by jays, but the book is full of natural history too with the different woodland animals painted stylishly but realistically. Each spread is full of delightful detail, including witty visual jokes, and it's a book that will invite multiple readings, revealing more each time. A final page explains how to grow your own oak tree in a pot on a windowsill and hopefully lots of readers will **AR**

The Dog Who Was (Almost) Perfect

★★★

Jack Kurland, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 40pp, 9781836007746, £7.99 pbk

Some children carry the exhausting suspicion that being good means getting everything right. Doris, our wonderfully eager canine protagonist in Kurland's latest picturebook, appears to have perfected the art. She can fetch, swim, skateboard, wake Bill at precisely the right moment and even retrieve his slippers. Doris is, by almost every measure available to her, the perfect dog.

Until one morning, she discovers a hole in Bill's favourite slipper.

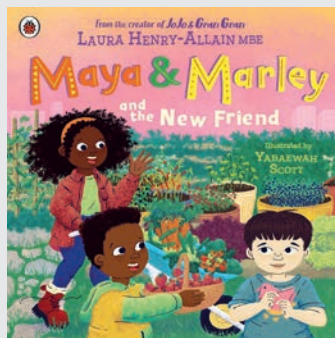
What follows captures something recognisable about childhood catastrophising. Doris does not simply imagine that Bill might be cross; one mistake seems capable of overturning everything she understands about herself. She hides the evidence and runs away. Kurland's sequential vignettes and dynamic motion are particularly effective here, giving Doris's escalating panic an immediacy that feels funny and genuinely tender.

It is away from home that the story finds its most interesting idea. Doris encounters other dogs and gradually discovers that imperfection might actually be something they share.

One has buried slippers, another stolen sausages; misdemeanours escalate with gleeful absurdity until Doris's supposedly terrible act seems almost reassuringly ordinary. Perfection has made Doris exceptional, but imperfection brings her into a community.

When she eventually returns, Bill offers the reassurance she has been unable to give herself: mistakes happen, perfection was never required and love has not disappeared because something has gone wrong. It is a warm and important message, although the final visual joke complicates it deliciously. Doris cannot remember chewing the slipper because, as observant readers discover, perhaps she never did. For prior Kurland readers, a familiar-looking cat has been quietly conducting another story altogether.

That twist will undoubtedly delight children, even if it slightly softens the more interesting emotional possibility the story has opened: Doris learning to live with having genuinely got something wrong. Nevertheless, Kurland creates a funny and affectionate exploration of the pressure to be good, reminding young readers that belonging need not depend upon flawless performance. **MT**



Maya and Marley and the New Friend

★★★★

Laura Henry-Allain, illus Yabaewah Scott, Ladybird, 32pp, 9780241624067, £7.99pbk

This is the second book about Maya and Marley and follows **Maya and Marley and the Great Big Tidy Up**. In this new story, the two are excited to be attending the Grove Adventure Playground community lunch. It's their job to welcome guests to the event and they quickly spot one young arrival who looks pretty unhappy. Kazuki is shy and quiet, what can Maya and Marley do to make their new friend feel at home? The story is full of scenes that young children will recognise and be keen to talk about, and contains reassuring messages about shyness and making friends, plus just working things out. These messages will be recognisable to little children and they will find them useful in their everyday lives. A set of notes at the back contain tips for adults on ways to support children welcoming new people. The busy scenes at the adventure playground are very appealing too and there's a sense of community in the words and pictures that will make this a firm favourite. **LS**

Maudie and Chip: The Perfect Day Out

★★★★

Rosalind Beardshaw, Farshore, 32pp, 9780008684952, £7.99 pbk

Maudie is super excited; so too is her dog Chip as they anticipate their trip to the beach and what they might eat and do once they arrive to make sure it's the perfect outing. Candyfloss, sun, sea, sandcastles and sunsets are on the agenda. Best friends the two might be, but they don't always see eye to eye, especially when things don't go as they expect. Chip is fine with spontaneity - well mostly, but as for Maudie, she is upset by the unexpected wind and rain as well as the squawking, hungry seagulls that swoop down after their chips. Then as they consume their candyfloss, Maudie remembers about the boat trip they'd planned and the sunset. Off they go in a swan pedalo and find themselves stranded: it looks like a disaster day but will that be how it ends? Is it possible that thanks in no small part to Chip, there's a silver lining?

Rosalind Bearshaw has created a sweet, heartwarming story of friendship, kindness, adventure and

difference with striking, slightly retro style illustrations. It will make a lovely read aloud at story time and both young listeners and adult sharers will be pleased to hear that more books featuring the delightful duo are planned. **JB**



Come to the Park

★★★★

Margaret Bateson-Hill, ill. Suhayla Ibrahim, Alanna Max, 32pp, 9781907825637, £12.99, hbk

The title and first line are an invitation to visit the park. As the pages unfold, we find out why; there is just so much to do and see there - parks offer free local fun for everyone.

Lots of examples are given. You can ride a bike, climb a tree or fly a kite, visit the playground, play hide and seek or simply chill on a bench. Readers are encouraged to take time to spot wildlife in the trees, flower beds or the pond. While there, listen to the sounds, for example honking and quacking. Visit in different seasons and you will be able to smell the flowers in summer and crunch through dry leaves in the autumn.

With rhyme and a pleasing rhythm, the author's poetic skills are very clear, making this a great book to read aloud. The illustrations are bold, lively and colourful. They emphasise diversity, presenting the park as a place for everyone, whether young or old, able bodied or disabled and whatever your ethnicity, religion or the type of family you may belong to.

This is a celebration of local parks, likely to encourage families to drop everything, visit and appreciate their own local parks. **SMC**

Cass and the Beast

★★★★

Claire Mabey, ill. Jill Calder, Gecko Press, 32pp, 9798348030377, £12.99 hbk

This has a very strange little plot that I will lay out in full, so excuse the spoilers. The townsfolk are afraid of a beast in the woods which they say could 'munch you whole', but Cass doesn't believe them. She is only afraid of people. When she creeps out into the wood at night with a slice of bread, it takes her in its jaw, puts her on its back, and runs far away. At last it stops in a meadow where it scoops up hares 'five at a time' and



crunches their bones (a moment that may upset some small children). Then she sleeps against the beast's furry tummy. On her return the townsfolk see her kiss the beast and give her the new nickname her 'Night Sneak'. She tells them the beast is not called beast but 'Bear'.

There is a lot to enjoy here. There are echoes of Red Riding Hood venturing into the woods in Cass' thin red coat. There is something of *The Snowman* in their supernatural voyage across the world – they seem to pass pyramids and volcanos. There is certainly something of *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* in Cass' embrace of the 'beast' who might represent her feral, violent self. Claire Mabey can really write, and there is some gorgeous description. The beast has: 'a damp scent like a cat after the rain'; houses are 'crouched in the dark'. The pictures by Jill Calder are also absolutely gorgeous – I loved the depiction of the gossipy crowd of townsfolk, that makes you feel why Cass wants to escape; the strange twilight shades of the colour palette; the way the beast's entirety is only hinted at until the end through partial glimpses.

But the ending was totally baffling to me. Why would Cass 'quite like' being called 'Night Sneak'? What are her adults doing in all this? More importantly, the revelation that the beast is actually a bear doesn't work at all. Bears are incredibly dangerous, and the idea that a child should try and hand-feed one in the woods and that it might cuddle her is absolute madness. I'm surely not the only grownup who has seen Werner Herzog's documentary *Grizzly Man*, where the impulse to anthropomorphise bears led to Timothy Treadwell's horrific death. As Werner Herzog noted: 'What haunts me, is that in all the faces of all the bears that Treadwell ever filmed, I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy. I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature'.

This is being pitched as a book about 'bravery' but 'choosing not to be afraid' of a bear is not a useful lesson. The book only really works when the 'beast' is an uncanny nightmare – 'fathomless as a pond at night'. A metaphorical beast rather than a real flesh-and-blood creature. **CP**

The O'Hare Family Leaving the House

★★★★★

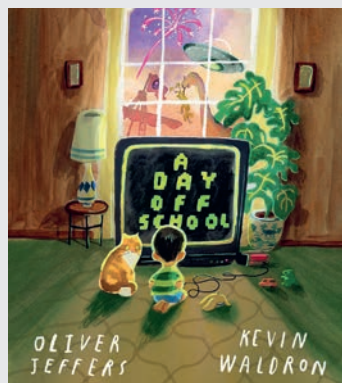
Sally Nicholls, illus. Ellie Snowdon, Andersen Press, 32pp, 9781839133701, £12.99, hbk

The O'Hare's are very busy, especially in the mornings. Trying to get everyone ready to leave the house for work or school while the clock is ticking is a daily challenge. Jackson and Harley prefer to play superheroes than be super quick in the mornings. The children are hurried through breakfast, washing and dressing by their harassed parents who have to contend with spillages, missing shoes, complaints and endless questions ranging from 'Where's my school jumper?' to 'Is everything made of atoms?'

There is a well-rehearsed routine at play here with the suggestion Mummy uses the same familiar phrases every day 'I can't do four things at once, I'm not an octopus.' And 'Who's getting a Mummy hug for being first?'

The morning routine moves at a lively pace with gentle humour and appealing language. Although the children are challenging and time is pressured their parents are good humoured and patient. Mummy finds the missing shoes and the children are eventually ready by the door. There is humour at the end of the book when it is dad, and not the children, who keeps everyone waiting.

Although the protagonists are portrayed as a family of rabbits, the situation will resonate for (human!) adults as well as children. The attractive artwork brings the chaos of the morning routine in this family to life with lots to spot in the detailed illustrations. **SMC**



A Day Off School

★★★★★

Oliver Jeffers, ill. Kevin Waldron, Harper Collins Children's Books, 40pp, 978-0008761295, £14.99 hbk

There is a particular thrill to being told that 'yes, you are poorly enough to have a day off school'. For Herbie, waking 'with a snuffle' *cough* presents an irresistible opportunity: an entire day stretching ahead with no lessons, no timetable and nobody else deciding what happens next.

Yet beneath this wonderfully simple premise, Jeffers and Waldron create something far more interesting. This is a book about what happens in the gap between experience and possibility.

Herbie begins magnificently. There are forts to build, computer games to play, cars to race, pictures to paint, yo-yo tricks to practise and cartoons to watch. Waldron fills these early domestic scenes with gorgeous warm washes of purple and playful detail. But there is a problem. Herbie completes his carefully prepared list before lunch. Suddenly, freedom contains an unexpected emptiness.

And nothing to do creates imaginative space.

Herbie begins wondering what everyone else might be doing at school. At first, his possibilities remain almost plausible: perhaps there is a dog loose in the corridors or somebody has brought birthday cake. Soon, however, imagination takes flight. Fireworks erupt, pirates invade and monsters burst spectacularly across the gutter. Aliens arrive in typography that recalls Herbie's computer game, while objects and images encountered earlier begin finding new lives within his imagined world. Waldron brilliantly escalates the visual language alongside Herbie's thoughts, allowing colour, scale and composition to carry much of the storytelling.

Yet imagination is not presented simply as an antidote to boredom. The same faculty that liberates Herbie also troubles him. The more extraordinary school becomes in his mind, the more conscious he is that everybody else is there without him. Beneath the glorious absurdity lies something emotionally recognisable: sometimes what we miss when we are alone is not the activity, but the community.

Jeffers' restrained text and characteristic lettering are beautifully matched by Waldron's visual storytelling, with the artwork jointly created by both artists. Words frequently leave space for pictures to complicate what we think we know. A muted, almost sepia classroom contrasts with Herbie's increasingly colourful imagined possibilities. Later, one tiny visual detail accompanying his sister's return quietly destabilises our confidence about where imagination ends and reality begins. By the final, wordless spread, the book leaves that boundary deliciously unresolved.

The opening Seneca quotation tells us that 'we suffer more often in imagination than in reality', but this playful, perceptive book ultimately makes imagination far more complicated than that. It can create anxiety and longing, certainly, but also play, creativity, wonder and possibility. Warm, funny and visually sophisticated, this is a picturebook that trusts readers enough not to explain its mysteries.

After all, even the most ordinary day might contain something extraordinary. **MT**



The Flying Machine of Dreams

★★★★★

Kate Wakeling ill. Viviane Schwarz, Otter Barry Books, 32pp., 9781915659989, £12.99, hbk

A poetry collection by Kate Wakeling is always a treat and this one is especially welcome because it comes in picture book format wrapped up in brilliant colour illustrations by Viviane Schwarz. Kate and Viviane are completely in step here. There's quiet and wistful as a boy contemplates the morning moon from his bed or the poet imagines herself a bubble. There's the rumbustious rhyming of the magnificent – and crazy – race of the animals, with its insistent and inviting refrain of 'See them sprint and see them scurry. Come on creatures: hurry, hurry.' The rhino's on a bicycle. The sheep is in a jeep. The sloth had put its trainers on-but then it fell asleep.' Or maybe it's time to make body shapes: 'How about a human pencil? Reach up straight and high. Or become an eagle, stretching wings out to the sky.' And then, quietening back down, the *Song of the Slow*, accompanied by a magnificent blue snail with a multi-coloured shell. 'Slow is quiet as clouds. Whisper a shhhhhhh. (Slow's not often loud).' These are poems and pictures to invite and delight the youngest, full of the sights, sounds and tastes of a world to be discovered (*Six Ways of Looking at a Leaf*) and enjoyed (*Word Food*, Juicy, squashy, fizzy, frothy, crispy, crumbly on your tongue...) and imagined ('what if that button on your tummy...could actually do some magic stuff?') but never taken for granted. What are your softest things? A lullaby, a rabbit's fur, the fuzz of a peach, a kitchen's purr? I could go on. But it wouldn't be the same, even if I repeated every one of Kate's words. You can't see Viviane's pictures here. Buy or borrow this lovely book. Satisfaction guaranteed. **CB**

Pricklepaper's Letter Magic

★★★★★

Tom Read Wilson, Ill. Rebecca Bagley, Words & Pictures, 32pp, 9781836009726, £7.99, pbk

Pricklepaper the Hedgehog lives in Regent's Park in London and every night when the park is closed, he ventures out to collect the paper bits left beyond by the daily visitors. Theatre tickets, wrappers and other

reviews

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant continued

scraps of paper are all pricked onto his spines as he proudly tidies away the rubbish and he especially loves it when these scraps spell out a word that makes him feel warm and snugly. As he heads home for the night, he meets a few of his friends with a variety of problems, each of whom he is able to help by sharing some of the letters collected that night. When he finally reaches his home, he realises that he can no longer spell the special word that he was hoping for and the letters left don't seem to make sense. However, all is not lost as he discovers that he can still spell out one very special word that is even better than the original and actually sums up his actions that day, which were all done out of... L.O.V.E.

This is a unique, warm and clever picturebook, with a delightful rhyming story that begs to be read aloud. I think it might appeal more to a slightly older audience, due to the clever word-play in force, but all children will enjoy the tale of the litter-picking hedgehog and his park friends, with its gentle message of friendship and kindness. This is author Read Wilson's first venture into the world of children's picture books, although he is well known for being a wordsmith, which is evidenced throughout the book. Bagley's beautiful illustrations bring the park inhabitants to life in a wonderfully vibrant yet cosy way, with many fun extra bits to spot on each re-reading – watch out for Pricklepaper's snail friend's antics on each page! **AH**

Dinosaur Trap

★★★★

Josh Lacey, ill. Momoko Abe, Andersen Press, 32pp, 9781839134630, £12.99, hbk

Felix was very keen to catch a dinosaur and built a trap in his garden. He tried sausages as bait but only managed to catch a cat. When he tried chocolate cake he caught his next-door neighbour Izzy. Finally, in the middle of the night, using cheese as bait he was successful. He had caught an enormous dinosaur in his trap, much to his surprise. After initial consternation from Felix's parents the dinosaur quickly became a local attraction with people travelling from far and wide to visit. However, one day Felix looked into the dinosaur's eyes and realised just how sad he was. What should he do?

This is a short and engaging story from a very experienced children's writer. The premise presents an imaginative take on the perennially fascinating subject of dinosaurs. With the theme of animal welfare at its core the book considers the issue of keeping wild creatures in captivity, whether extinct, endangered or fantastical.

The illustrations complement the text beautifully and are particularly

effective in bringing Felix's ingenious trap to life and showing the excitement the trapped dinosaur caused in the neighbourhood. **SMc**

Willa's Monster Muddle

★★★★

Fabi Santiago, Rocket Bird Books, 32pp, 9781915395238, £7.99 pbk

Willa is excited. She has been invited to a fancy-dress party – and Mum has been invited as well. What should they wear? The wicked witch costume is perfect and Mum looks good in it as well. All her friends are going to the party as well and Willa waves to them as they pass – then oops! She bumps into another little witch. They must be going to the same place. Or are they? There is certainly a party going on – but is this the party on Willa's invitation? And where is Mum?

This enjoyable picture book by Fabi Santiago will delight its young audience. Willa is an engaging character and her audience will quickly realise what is going on as Willa moves from floor to floor in this spooky house encountering strange guests in every room – clearly none of them Willa's friends. However, Santiago lands Willa safely back where she should be. The bold illustrations full of saturated colour and action – the page involving skeletons dancing a particular delight – bring Willa's search for Mum to vivid life. There are clever visual jokes as Santiago moves from full page spreads to comic strip, another technique that keeps the pages turning. While the setting is suitably macabre and spooky, the humour within the illustrations keeps fear at bay and there is a happy ending – with cake. An ideal story for those Halloween events – but one that can be read with a pleasurable frisson at any time. **FH**

Ziggy the Caterpillar's Zigzag Adventure

★★★★

Beatrice Simpkins, Big Picture Press, 40pp, 9781835873700, £12.99 hbk

In a plant-filled garden lived a group of caterpillars that loved to munch on the juicy leaves: you could hear them if you paused and listened intently. The majority of the caterpillars moved slowly from leaf to leaf making patterns as they went. Not so Ziggy: Ziggy was different; she liked to zig and zag. Her friends would tell her to slow down but Ziggy was too busy zigging and zagging.

Then one day Ziggy's friends began moving very slowly and started to tuck themselves in until each was encased in a shiny shell. Within each shell something amazing was taking place. Ziggy watched and waited. After some time, out flew her friends, one by one. On soft, butterfly wings they fluttered on their first flight. As they soared, they called to Ziggy and she

at last understood the meaning of becoming a butterfly. From the top of a tree, knowing that she was too busy and too fast, she wondered when she might be able to fly and see the world differently.

Along came Sari the spider talking about learning to slow down, rather like starting a yoga session, with the words 'Stretch, reach out, let it go. Feel the rhythm of your body – and just let it flow.' Ziggy tried breathing deeply, stretching and curling and as she moved she started to feel calmer. Several other minibeasts she encountered also gave sage advice, the last being Greta glow-worm, especially her comment, 'You are special, Ziggy.' That worked wonders and in the evening Ziggy ceased her zigging zagging, tucked herself in and for the first time ever, felt peaceful. You can imagine what happened then ...

Vividly illustrated, with its endearing main character's journey of discovery wherein we see how she learns to embrace her wiggly ways, occasionally breaking into rhyme, this book introduces children to the idea of embracing their individual traits and understanding their own path to transformation. The author/illustrator, Beatrice Simpkins is herself neurodivergent and her ADHD inspired her to create this story, a fair bit of which would be great to help all children slow down regularly. Indeed the final spread, 'Ziggy's 5-4-3-2-1 Calm Down Trick' is an excellent starting point for any teacher who wants their class to unwind at particular times of the session, or for parents to use at bedtime. **JB**

Big Tiger

★★★★

Marta Altes, Macmillan, 32pp, 9781529020922, £8.99 pbk

'I am a BIG tiger' declares the tiger cub protagonist in this engaging picture book. 'I am far too busy being brave and bold and really grown up'. But is this really so? What parent has not been faced with such declarations as skills are demonstrated and boundaries tested. However, as this tiger cub reveals, you may be oh so grown up but you are not yet too old to be carried – or for bedtime – and most important, you are never too old for a hug.

Marta Altes is already well established as a picture book creature. Her bold colourful illustrations are always a delight bursting off the pages bringing her direct storytelling to life. While the hero of this story is a tiger cub, young readers will easily identify with recognisable situations. Indeed, there will come the subtle realisation that this cub is no longer the only cub in the family; that grown-up identity needs to be confirmed and recognised. Altes' text is direct, immediate – we don't need any extra explanation. Her images are as direct making good use of every page ranging from child-centred vignettes to the drama of a double page spread as the young cub encounters a situation that really does need Mum. This would be a reassuring, enjoyable family read with plenty to explore and talk about; a journey through the pages ending with that all-important hug. **FH**

5 – 8 Infant/Junior



The Kingdom of Tigers

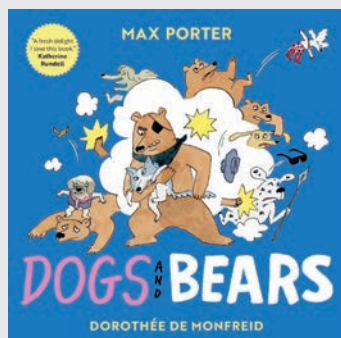
★★★★

Felicity Yeoh, ill Megan Snyder, HarperCollins, 32pp, 9780008768539, £7.99, pbk

Hari the tiger cub lives in the jungle with his mother and loves cuddling up with her to listen to the story of 'The Kingdom of Tigers' where their ancestors once lived in freedom, but the jungle today is not a safe place to be and each day sees them running

for their lives to keep one step ahead of the machines destroying the habitat around them. One day, as the machines catch up with them, Hari finds himself separated from his mother and lost in the jungle. Although sad and alone, he is determined to find his way to the Kingdom of Tigers on his own but soon meets a crowd of other animals in a similar situation, who want to join him to find safety in the kingdom too. Will Hari find his mother and the safety that he is searching for?

This beautiful rhyming picture book tells a poignant tale of hope and survival, perfectly accompanied by glorious, full colour illustrations from Megan Snyder. With an afterword from Michelle Yeoh in her role as United Nations Goodwill Ambassador, author Felicity Yeoh has highlighted the biodiversity crisis facing the world and the importance of protecting our forests, jungles and the creatures that inhabit them, particularly the Malaysian harimau tigers, wrapped up in heartwarming story of family, friendship and hope, ideal for introducing these crucial messages to younger readers. **AH**



Dogs and Bears

★★★★★

Max Porter, ill. Dorothée de Monfreid, Faber, 32pp, 978-0571391424, £7.99 pbk

One of the great pleasures of childhood reading is discovering that some books are willing to misbehave. From its opening pages, this gloriously unruly picture book establishes a playful relationship with its reader, introducing a narrator who appears to be in control of proceedings but increasingly proves to be anything but. What follows involves dogs, bears, arguments about clothing, several increasingly spectacular brawls and, eventually, an entirely unexplained storm of squid. It is absurd, anarchic and very, very funny.

Beneath the chaos, however, something rather clever is happening. The bears decide that the dogs are doing things they shouldn't. There are rules about what can be worn and how one ought to look, and difference becomes sufficient reason for conflict. The dogs are hardly innocent themselves and, before long, nobody seems entirely certain why everybody is fighting. Porter allows ideas about conformity, prejudice and tribalism to flicker beneath the surface without ever pinning them down into a lesson. These are possibilities the story makes available rather than meanings it insists upon.

Then the squid arrive.

The escalating absurdity is matched perfectly by de Monfreid's wonderfully loose, expressive linework. Her fluid ink contours give every creature immediate personality and allow bodies to tumble, squash, chase and collide with tremendous comic energy (I have a particular fondness for the poodle and her pink boots). As the brawls grow, so does their occupation of the page, until dogs and bears spill together across the gutter. Yet de Monfreid rewards quieter looking too. A seemingly innocuous picture of a wave hanging behind the narrator at the beginning anticipates the later diagram explaining the squid storm: one of those delicious details that reveals itself only to an observant reader or upon rereading.

Perhaps the book's greatest joke, though, is its narrator. It interrupts, apologises for interrupting,

announces the moral of the story and then discovers that the story stubbornly refuses to behave accordingly. Even the suggestion that fighting has somehow brought everyone clarity arrives with an almost audible narrative cough. When peace finally appears to have prevailed, our narrator consults the very book we are reading and discovers that this is not, in fact, the end.

There is another brawl.

And therein lies the joy. Porter and de Monfreid understand that a children's book can think deeply without becoming solemn. Adults may recognise questions about arbitrary rules, othering, conflict and our desire to impose coherent morals upon complicated behaviour. Children are equally entitled simply to delight in bears, dogs, spectacular fights and squid falling from the sky. Neither reading is privileged over the other.

Wildly inventive, visually exuberant and magnificently silly, this is a picture book clever enough to contain big ideas and wise enough not to explain them. It trusts its readers to make meaning for themselves.

And then, just in case things are becoming too sensible, drops another squid on their heads. **MT**



Scaredy Cat

★★★★★

Alex Falase-Koya, ill. Ken Wilson-Max, Oxford Children's Books, 28pp, 9781382062954, £7.99 pbk

Gabe is very shy especially at school where he struggles to speak up. So, when his teacher tells him that next week it will be his turn to talk to his classmates about a book he has enjoyed he's really worried. When he gets home however, his mum introduces Art, a cat they've adopted from the rescue shelter. Art is even shyer than Gabe and hides from the noise in all manner of different places including underneath Dad's hat. The other family members endeavour to lure the moggy out but Gabe understands and knows just how he feels so he makes a plan. First he sits quietly in the living room reading his favourite comic book. Day by day, little by little Art emerges from wherever he's hidden himself

and comes closer to Gabe, until after a week, there to Mum's joy are her son and Art sharing the book, the latter sitting on Gabe's knee: a bond has formed between the two.

Come Monday morning, the day for Gabe's book report, he's completely forgotten about it, but it's evident as he stands up before his classmates that the time he's spent talking with Art has really made a difference and despite still feeling a bit like hiding, it's boosted his self-confidence so much that he is able to tell them about his comic book, gradually getting braver until suddenly he hears clapping and receives congratulations from his teacher.

This is a reassuring story where we see that everyone gains confidence in their own time; quiet talking is the way to go. Ken Wilson-Max's illustrations are full of warmth and a great complement to Alex Falase-Koya's text. Ideal for sharing in the classroom especially as children could be navigating feelings of shyness just like the book's protagonist. **JB**



My Dad Can

★★★★★

Stephen Lightbown, illus. Claire Sahara Lemp, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 40pp, 9781836008835, £7.99 pbk

A little girl's father is a manual wheelchair user. She loves when he reads stories, when they make pancakes together, when he takes her swimming, although for this activity, the illustration looks like he needs no mobility aids at all, and she especially loves when he tows her to the park on her roller skates while walking the dog.

When they get to the park, things change because a small boy who is unknown to them says 'Your dad can't do anything.' The little girl questions her dad about this and refreshingly, instead of replying with excessive positivity, he says he can't do everything but that's not because of his wheelchair, it's because he's a human. He says he can't do some stuff as well as her mum, but he can do all the things that allow him to be her dad.

This message is beautifully positive and affirming without resorting to toxic positivity which can be a pitfall for picture books tackling physical disability. **RB**



Believe

★★★★★

Catherine Doyle ill. Freya Hartas, Magic Cat Publishing Ltd., 64pp., 978-1-91556-998-1 £16.99 hbk

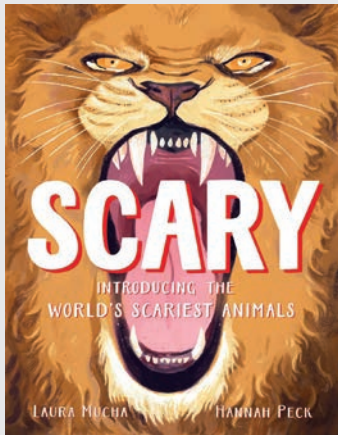
This beautiful picture book is a new direction by Catherine Doyle, who is already an established and award-winning author of junior fiction and YA novels, but it is likely to be classed in libraries as a picture book for older readers, as the poems and information on each lavish double-page spread are quite long.

An introductory poem imagines a time when magic called to every child, until doubting adults forgot to believe, and made the magical creatures decide to leave. Our guide is Sage Brightwing, a fairy, and she knows the places where magic still hides, as long as we believe that these wonders are real. Twelve kinds of mythical creatures are depicted here, including dragons, fairies, trolls, merfolk and goblins. Unicorns are included, of course, in the Magical Horse section... There are creatures from Irish folk tales, of course, as Catherine Doyle has written a number of magical books set in her native Ireland, but also from Scandinavian, Hawaiian and Australian stories. Mythical beings from classical literature are here: Pegasus the flying horse, the enormous squid Charybdis from the *Odyssey*, but also more familiar creatures like the Tooth Fairy and the Loch Ness Monster. The Yokai, spirits of Japan, get a whole section to themselves - this is a very thorough examination of all sorts of magical and mythical creatures, and all are beautifully illustrated by Freya Hartas, in such a way that none of them look too scary.

This is indeed a very beautiful book, and one that many children will pore over with wonder. **DB**

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle



Scary: Introducing the World's Scariest Animals

★★★★★

Laura Mucha, ill. Hannah Peck, Hodder, 64pp, 978 1 526 36532 3, £16.99, hbk

With a startling illustration of an African lion on the front cover, this beautifully presented hardback will make the young reader sit up and take note! The book aims to educate young people about their fears and anxieties regarding animals, and to alleviate these feelings as they read through the volume and discover that some of the animals actually keep us safe.

Bite-sized paragraphs mean that the youngster can take in lots of information without becoming too overwhelmed. When I compose book reviews I always start by making notes about interesting features and parts of the book I would like to emphasize. In this case my notes are bursting with discoveries I made as I read! I learned about the southern cassowary which has 'a long, dagger-like toenail on each foot that can be up to 10 centimetres (cm) long!' and has in fact only killed one human and that was when a human was trying to kill it (p.12).

Each time I discovered a new fact this propelled me to keep reading. I never knew that the goosebumps we sometimes get when we are scared were what made our ancestors' fur stand on end to make them look larger than they were (p.25). The scope of this book is very wide as it covers how these animals are helping the planet by their actions. In the case of the death stalker scorpion, it possesses an amazing ingredient in its venom which 'only attaches to cancer cells' (p.39) and is thus helping the medical world.

On each spread devoted to an animal there is a poem about it, and these verses have been co-written by students at the schools mentioned on the final page. Well done to all involved as this adds another interesting dimension to the book. The illustrations throughout are

striking and beautifully executed. In particular I loved the gossamer worm with its yellow glow (pp.10-11) and the edible pink, brown and red headless chicken monster (pp.28-29).

I highly recommend this fascinating book which will keep the reader engrossed, and curious to learn more. It is definitely worth five stars! **JS**

Monsieur Mustard: The Disappearance of Fabio Fangtooth

★★★★★

Charley Rabbit, Andersen Press, 227pp, 9781839134715, £9.99, pbk

This illustrated detective novel for children is lavishly published in vibrant shades of mustard yellow and inky black - like the palette of a classic film noir...with a side of cheese! The story is a fun and playful introduction to the mystery genre and is the curtain-raiser for a new, diminutive detective hero.

In a world where all characters are animals, Monsieur Mustard is merely a mouse but, what he lacks in stature, he makes up for in style. Like all famous detectives, he has a singular, trademark look: a mustard and brown check blazer and matching bowtie topped off by a golden monocle and jet-black umbrella. It is an appearance that has adorned the front page of many a Paris newspaper, thanks to the countless crimes he has solved, and now he has made the move to Bath, England, where all the animals are excited to have such a celebrity move into town.

Moments after Mustard's arrival in Bath, there is a juicy and frightful mystery to be solved. When restaurateur Fabio Fangtooth goes missing under very curious circumstances, it marks the beginning of a string of disappearances that has the City Police (a hilarious flock of cake-obsessed pigeons, ably abetted by big, friendly bulls) befuddled, and desperate for help from a world-famous rodent.

Monsieur Mustard quickly sets about going through his usual steps to crack the case but, in this unfamiliar city, he does not get everything his own way. As more animals go missing, Mustard is frustrated by clues that lead down dead ends and cul-de-sacs, and he is forced to contend with incompetent officials and distracting, flutulent sycophants desperate to become his sidekick. If that wasn't hard enough, whoever the villain is obviously has a specific vendetta against the famous mouse and is taking every opportunity to publicise Mustard's failures.

The story's action moves along swiftly, with intriguing, new clues arriving with enough frequency to maintain interest and keep readers guessing. It is an innovative narrative.

Though most of the story is told in prose on brightly illustrated pages, there are occasional thematic shifts into a more classic comic book style, and an immersive feel is created through constantly describing sound effects in little bold calligrams.

There is intrigue and drama and - overall - an endearing, whimsical tone with lots of humorous moments. An effort to appeal to juvenile readers is apparent through far too many fart jokes that are quite unnecessary and undermine what is otherwise a charming and delightful group of characters. **SD**



Tales of the Cobb Street Commandos

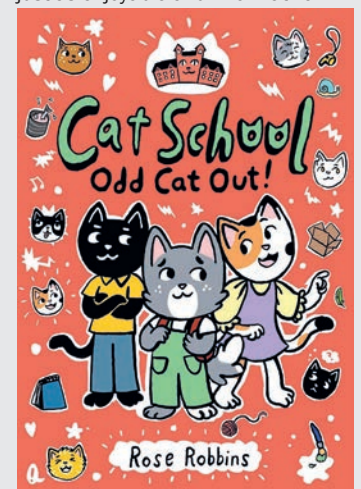
★★★★★

Tony Bradman, ill. Aleksei Bitskoff, Faber, 160pp, 978-0571388127, £7.99 pbk

[In a recent Books for Keeps interview](#)

Tony Bradman shared his top tip for writing an exciting book: 'You just write a good story, and don't put any boring bits in.' He's certainly applied that rule to his new series, **Tales of the Cobb Street Commandos**. Set in London during World War II and specifically the Blitz, it introduces schoolboy Jimmy who along with his mates Bill and Stanley, is desperate to do his bit for the war effort. The action proceeds at pace as the boys determine how to raise money for new planes during Spitfire Week and, particularly enjoyable, inveigle their way into a training session for the local Home Guard, helping them get one over regular soldiers in the process. It even ends with Jimmy meeting 'Old Winnie' himself, the Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Along with the action, there's a real sense of the boys' camaraderie which extends too to Jimmy's East End neighbours as they endure the horror of the bombing raids. Throughout the action and boys' own adventure, Tony Bradman slips in a great deal

of information about the war and how it affected those at home. As he revealed in that same BfK interview and mentions in his author's note, Tony Bradman's parents both lived through the war and the stories they told him make their way into this particularly lively bit of historical fiction, giving it a real and fresh sense of a period that is the subject of very many children's books. There will be more tales of the Cobb Street Commandos to come and likely to be just as enjoyable and informative. **AR**



Cat School Odd Cat Out

★★★★★

Rose Robbins, Scallywag Press, 978-1836300397, 144pp, £8.99 pbk

Books for Keeps readers will know Rose Robbins for her picture books, including **Loud** and **Me and My Sister**, humorous, engaging stories which also explore neurodiversity. Her first graphic novel is another funny story with a gentle emphasis on young children's emotions and on understanding others. Tangle and Eno previously attended Kitten School but these young cats are now ready to move up to Cat School. They know each other well enough to admit how nervous and apprehensive they are about that, something young readers starting a new school will all understand. Cat School is certainly a welcoming place, their classroom kitted out with scratch boards, wall seating and scent vents. Their classmates are friendly too, there's Syd who likes to chase things, Cookie who likes to jump really high, and Colette who likes to sunbathe. There's also Pelly, who admits to liking pinecones. The other cats think that's a bit odd, but Tangle likes those who are a bit different and hopes they can be friends. Pelly finds school difficult for all sorts of reason and if Tangle and Eno are going to be her friends, they'll have to learn to understand them and make allowances. All ends well, with the three kittens looking forward to the

next term and everything they'll get up to together. The lively illustrations and the graphic novel format make this very accessible – cat lovers in particular will be delighted with the quirky setting – and in a gentle, understated way the story prompts inclusivity and empathy. **LS**

Bone Head: Guardian of the Underworld

★★★★

Jamie Gregory, (author and ill.)
Scholastic, 256pp., 9780703458822,
£7.99, pbk

Bone Head's name is actually Demise, and he is one of the skeletons charged with guarding the gates of Hades, so really they are all 'Boneheads', but his supervisor, Mort, has a much lower opinion of Demise's capability than he himself has, and, in this boastful account written by Bone Head, Mort adds his contradictory version, printed in green, and makes fun of Bone Head's delight in his superhero cape.

An important visitor is expected, and the gates must be thoroughly cleaned, but Bone Head wants to do something more interesting, and to impress Hades, (who doesn't know he exists), so, when a little blue frog-like creature appears, he shoots it. Mort is appalled that he hasn't done his homework and read his Bestiary, which states that Bloggs should not be provoked, and he shouts a warning, but too late: it swells up, and fires hot molten goo from its triple acid stomachs, creating holes absolutely everywhere. Moaning that some sort of training manual should have been provided (Mort: 'It's called a Bestiary! You have one!'), Bone Head is summoned to the throne of Hades, who is furious, with his fortress peppered with holes just as he is expecting his mother to visit. Bone Head and Mort are demoted as guards and ordered to look after the three-headed dog, Cerberus, who is very fierce and likes chewing bones, so his keepers don't tend to last long. Unexpectedly, Bone Head tickles Cerberus under one of his chins and develops a rapport that Mort can only observe from a safe distance.

More mayhem ensues when Bone Head lets Cerberus go missing, but order is finally restored, and Bone Head and Mort, still definitely at odds, return to their task of guarding the gates. Your reviewer rather enjoyed the Golems, enormous stone creatures who guard Hades, and speak in monosyllables printed in bold, no longer than 3 words at a time e.g. **FROG. GO. BOOM.**

Illustrator and book designer Jamie Gregory has turned his hand to fiction, and this is his debut novel. He certainly has fun with his anarchic fantasy world, using Greek mythology. He devised a special font for this book, so it really does look like a handwritten Diary, with Mort's

additional comments, but it's very easy to read and pages can be turned quickly, so it will appeal to reluctant readers. **DB**



When I Was A Wolf

★★★★

Liz Flanagan, illus. Nikola Aronova,
Barrington Stoke, 64pp,
9780008800772, £7.99 pbk

Jasmine's mum is ill. The reader is not told the name of the illness but, by the symptoms which are described as lethargy and apathy, it could be depression.

Jasmine's gran moves in to look after Jasmine and arranges for her to go to an art club. Jasmine initially doesn't want to go and would rather stay with her grandmother and mum. But she does go and, over several weeks, makes a wolf skeleton puppet for the town's annual winter parade. Through the creative process, Jasmine, who has been feeling down because of her home situation, starts to feel better.

Will Jasmine's mum recover and will the parade go off without a hitch? Flanagan's short novel deals with two main themes: the power of using the creative process in whatever form to deal with negative emotions, and to show readers that anger can flare at any time, but it can be controlled.

Although this plot line could benefit from a longer novel with more detailed and nuanced discussion of each theme, Flanagan has managed to include a great deal in an accessible form for all readers and should be commended. **RB**

How to Train your Dragon School - Flight of the Flamestrike

★★★★

Cressida Cowell, Starboard, 240pp,
978 1 444 98195 7, £7.99, pbk

This book is the second in a new spin off series of **How to Train your Dragon** books following on from **How to train your Dragon school - Doom of the Darkwing**.

With many of the same characters as the original series and a zany adventure story, this accessible illustrated novel is likely to be very popular with fans of the franchise and new recruits too. There is no need for prior knowledge before reading this book; the opening introduces the fully imagined story world and characters.

Hiccup, the hero of the book will be well known to many young readers. As the story opens, we find him at the Viking and dragon training school along with 30 other warriors. Hiccup is a bit of a misfit; unlike his classmates he likes to think his way out of a problem rather than fight. In this story the arrival of his long-lost aunt leads to a problem for Hiccup and his friends. Their quest to find a solution takes them into inevitable danger, in particular from 'Flamestrike,' a very scary and deadly dragon.

The book is engagingly written in a lively style with a varied layout and amusing line drawings throughout. There is lots of humour in the text too, with insults designed to delight such as: 'You miserable pieces of tadpole vomit!' and fabulous similes, for example one character is described as having 'a beard like an angry porcupine!'

With maps, illustrated character lists, dragon profiles, equipment logs and a dictionary for readers who fancy learning basic 'dragonese,' be prepared for lots of fun. **SMc**

StarBreakers: Zeke Zero vs The Galaxy

★★★★★

Ed Caruana, ill. Chris Hazeldine,
Puffin, 236pp, 9780241744826,
£10.99, pbk

What a rush! StarBreakers claims to be *Guardians of the Galaxy* meets Indiana Jones in graphic novel form and, despite this lofty claim, it does not disappoint.

On the planet of Grimlax 17b, crime is the only profession that pays. It is a hopeless planet populated by the galaxy's fiercest villains, where the only way to stay alive is to steal what you need...run...and hide. Zeke is an expert in all three of these things, having honed his skills over the last thirteen years since his dad traded him for a spare battery and then abandoned him.

To keep out of the grasp of the countless intergalactic baddies, Zeke only talks to Elara - his hologram operating system - and always keeps a few flash bangs and his Speed Bar 2000 close at hand. He scrapes an existence by making opportunistic robberies, but when he inadvertently robs from a StarBreaker (a hunter of ancient, dead 'tomb worlds' and the prehistoric artefacts they hide) he finds himself in real trouble.

As the accidental new possessor of a treasure map belonging to a universe from eons ago, Zeke finds himself fleeing from various vengeful hoodlums, including the legendarily evil teenager: Grizelda Grim. Reluctantly, Zeke teams up with a hapless old StarBreaker and

a strange, quirky alien called Astrid, in an effort to follow the map and escape his countless pursuers. But, after years or surviving on his own, can Zeke learn to be part of a team?

The drama is relentless in this book, with massive action set-pieces coming one after the other, featuring daring escapes and deadly gunfights. Zeke and his new crew dodge various frightful space monsters (like the moon-eating triloborg) and bloodthirsty bounty hunters... and that's before the zombies arrive! The breathless pace is tempered by Zeke's comedic swagger: he's never short of a cutting one-liner despite the ever-present danger.

The sci-fi story will make children feel rather grown-up. The author-illustrator duo push young readers to endure very high levels of jeopardy and tension, coupled with mature themes like parental abandonment and loss. If they survive the myriad dangerous scenes and reach the end of the novel, readers will be eager to find out more about Zeke and Astrid, both of whom have mysterious and curious pasts. While they wait for the inevitable sequel, readers can entertain themselves by repeating the adventure and looking more closely at the generously detailed illustrations that explode from every page. **SD**

The Library of Lost Stories

★★★★★

Eloise Williams, Firefly Press,
232pp, 9781917718349, £8.9 9pbk

Noni and her dad are in trouble; trouble that Noni is making every effort to hide from neighbours and authority. Her dad seems to be unable to work, sunk in grief and depression. Noni is his unofficial carer – aged eleven. They are now living under the threat of the bailiffs. How can Noni – also grieving the death of her mother – help him? She discovers that in the past the library van was important to her parents. But the library van no longer runs – in fact it rests mouldering on Mrs. William's driveway. Perhaps Noni could restore it? An ambitious plan and there is an added problem, Mrs. Williams is definitely a witch...

Though set in the 1970's, ten years after the Aberfan disaster, the themes within this novel are still very relevant, adding depth to the narrative. The setting is a small village in Wales that has been profoundly affected by the disaster as has Noni's father. However the author does not overwhelm the reader with an atmosphere of gloom. Noni (or to give her full name Rhiannon) is a character to reckon with. She springs off the page, opinionated, angry, determined, scared – and a true storyteller whose stories may not always adhere to a boring truth. She has real agency despite her age. She is entirely believable. This is one of the strengths of Eloise Williams – her ability to bring her cast of characters to life. Much of this is through her depiction of their community clearly

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

drawn from familiarity but also through the writing. Williams herself is a storyteller – the first **Children's Laureate for Wales**. Her language is direct, accessible with the added musicality of the Welsh vocabulary that floats through the text bringing local colour and interest to the reading. There is sadness running through the narrative but plenty of humour. This is above all a story of hope, friendship and new beginnings. It is also a story about stories and their importance in creating meaning and identity, history and memory both for individuals and a community. Bringing these together is the powerful symbol of the library, the repository for the stories, and a place for people. These themes add depth but above all as a true storyteller Williams brings to her readers the pleasure of a story well told – a story of tribulation and challenge, a redoubtable character and a satisfying ending; a truly happy book that engages both through its message and the writing. **FH**

Jekyll vs Hyde: The Potion of Doom

★★★★

Jack Meggitt-Phillips, illus. Holly Swain, Farshore, 9780008776947, £7.99 pbk

Robert Louis Stevenson's **Jekyll and Hyde** is not an obvious starting point for a madcap children's comedy, but Jack Meggitt-Phillips has never been an obvious kind of writer, and the collision of gothic source material with gleeful slapstick turns out to be inspired.

Henrik Jekyll is terrible. Comprehensively, spectacularly terrible, the product of two warring, self-absorbed and thoroughly ridiculous parents who have between them produced a child of towering selfishness. When the family discovers that Henrik is the heir to a crumbling mansion in the village of Gothville, left to him by his ancestor Dr Jekyll, it descends on it immediately. Gothville, it becomes clear, is not quite like other places, and the mansion least of all. When Henrik stumbles upon Dr Jekyll's laboratory and, inevitably, starts experimenting with what he finds there, he manages to unleash Eddie Hyde: a chaotic, reckless and deeply alarming alter ego who makes the original Henrik look almost reasonable by comparison.

Into this mayhem steps Gabby, local resident, irrepressible optimist and, in her frequently absent father's place, the town's acting solicitor. Where Henrik and his family bring chaos and destruction, Gabby brings an unshakeable belief in hope and goodness and the conviction that things can be made better. Whether she can save Henrik from himself, and whether their unlikely friendship can save Gothville in the process, drives the story to its chaotic conclusion.

Meggitt-Phillips writes with enormous comic energy and a gift for the kind of dark, subversive, slapstick humour that children love and adults find themselves laughing at despite themselves. The pacing is relentless, the jokes land consistently and the characters spring off the page. Holly Swain's illustrations add to the anarchic atmosphere throughout.

This is the kind of book that finds its way into the hands of a reluctant reader and stays there. Fast moving, irreverent and genuinely funny, **Jekyll vs Hyde: The Potion of Doom** feels like the beginning of a series destined to become a firm favourite. Sequels, one assumes, are already in the works, and readers who meet Henrik and Gabby here will not want to wait long for more. **LJS**

Arthur and the Wild Griffin

★★★★

Luke Marchant, illus Mark Beech, Everything with Words, 172pp, 9781911427520, £8.99 pbk

Have you ever heard of the Fantasy Zoo? No? Neither had Arthur – but Arthur is a bit of a dreamer so it should not surprise the reader when Arthur finds himself mistaken for an elf and in charge of tending a menagerie of fantastical creatures ranging from hungry trolls and angry flying horses to a wild griffin. Surprisingly Arthur turns out to be brilliant – but there is a problem, Arthur is a human boy and no humans are allowed in the zoo! Any discovered will be punished. However, the zoo also has a problem and human Arthur may be the solution. How will it all turn out?

This is a lively, engaging and humorous adventure designed to capture the attention of KS2 readers who are looking for a mix of the funny and the fantastic. Arthur is an engaging protagonist. While real life may see him as a daydreamer, frequently attracting the critical attention of teachers – and bullies – here in the Fantasy Zoo skills picked up at school serve him well. While the choice of a Zoo may cause some thought, the author is careful to ensure survival and real care are paramount, a subtle undercurrent. The text moves along briskly, dialogue helping move the action along while interspersed there are interesting – if idiosyncratic – panels introducing the creatures. The characters are recognisable, their actions consistent and believable with the context of the narrative – Morgana a particularly effective villain. The vignettes from the pen of Mark Birch add to the drama and enjoyment of the whole. Young readers will look forward to further adventures with Arthur and the elf Cordelia. A very enjoyable and accessible read to be promoted. **FH**

Cecily Sawyer: how to crack a code

★★★★

Iona Rangeley, ill. David Tazzyman, Harper Collins Children's Books, 240pp., 978-0-00-864448-2 £7.99 pbk

In this the second Cecily Sawyer book, following on from **How to be a Spy**, Cecily refers to the first adventure, in which she saved the City from a horde of brainwashed mice, but this story does stand alone. Cecily lives surrounded by spies: her parents run the Intelligent Institute, most of the staff in the hotel where she lives with her parents are spies, and her godparents, also spies, seem to have been kidnapped. When one of her godparents is shown on TV apparently attempting to assassinate the Head Councillor, their history teacher, Miss Virgil, encourages Cecily and her classmates Felix and Katie to look at the history of the City, and to investigate the mysterious Leader who has disappeared, but is still evidently working behind the scenes.

Working together and using Cecily's collection of useful books: 'Espionage for school-aged children', 'Code-breaking for Beginners', 'The Little Girl's Guide to Tailing a Target' and 'to Extracting Information', they start their research. Cecily has to recover from a bad case of what her Dad calls 'Not-Going-To-School-Today-itis', but school life is crucial to their friendship and the investigation, as Miss Virgil is a great help. It all gets very exciting before a final resolution, but baddies are still at large, and it's not all over yet...

Iona Rangeley is also the author of the **Einstein the Penguin** trilogy and evidently has a lot of fun with her writing: this is hugely enjoyable. The code-breaking is real, the reader encouraged to break necessary codes for the plot, with a Tabula Recta to help at the back of the book, and more codes to break at the end just for fun. This reviewer is eager to find out what happens next! **DB**

Atlas and Skye

★★★★

Emma Smith-Barton, ill. Chita Eravanic, Puffin, 336pp, 978 0 241 37035 3, £8.99 pbk

The titular characters in this gentle and affecting tale are ten-year-olds who meet for the first time at school, when Atlas joins Skye's class. He has moved to live with his grandfather, who needs extra care from his family now that he has begun to suffer from Alzheimer's. Atlas' anxieties about his grandfather losing his memories create a bond with Skye, who has recently lost her beloved grandmother and fears she is losing her own memories of her. Effectively told in alternating verse and prose chapters, which effectively emphasises their distinct voices and further helped by the detailed and characterful illustrations, which are actually a nice link to the grandfather's career as an illustrator, we are given a real insight into their anxiety and confusion.

We presume they have also both lost a father figure at some point, because neither apparently has one around and Skye is deeply upset by her beloved elder sister moving out to university. A further similarity is that Atlas has always struggled to make friends and Skye's best friend has seemed to abandon her. Skye takes charge of their quest to find a way to reawaken his grandfather's memories by following clues that Atlas has found in his grandfather's studio. Skye's plans are reckless in the extreme, but Atlas feels he needs to prove he can be brave. They only succeed in frightening themselves and all those around them, but the resulting powerful discussions with their respective families bring them to understand that things do change and some things cannot be fixed, but with love, resilience and friendship, they can face the future together. Despite stretching an adult reader's credulity a bit on their quest and with Skye's very unlikely school hiding places, this is a comforting, heartwarming story for youngsters experiencing loss or the deteriorating health of a loved-one. The depiction of the grandfather's condition is particularly sensitively and authentically handled. As a class reader for children of 8 and above it will stimulate some valuable discussions about coping with loss and change and about what makes a good friend. **JCO**

Mighty Mega Pets: Freaky Food Fiasco

★★★★

Gary Northfield, Walker, 222pp, 9781529526486, £8.99, pbk

Mighty Mega Pets is a funny, energetic graphic story that will have readers giggling, whether they like pets or not.

Daisy the dog and her animal chums (one cat, one tortoise, one goldfish) live in Rumford and are rather surprised one morning to find that they have all miraculously developed superpowers (apart from Arthur the tortoise – who is very grumpy about missing out!) The group are extremely excited to suddenly have dozens of legs, telekinesis, or the ability to shoot electricity. They are called upon to use their powers almost immediately, due to the presence in the garden of a giant, spaghetti-armed rabbit and a cat shooting lasers at them from her eyes!

It is clear to the pets that something has gone wrong with their food (apart from Arthur's). To solve the mystery of who has been tampering with the town's pet food, they grab themselves new superhero costumes from the dressing-up box and give themselves the name 'Mighty Mega Pets.'

The team's enthusiasm is somewhat dampened when, upon tracking down the super-sized bunny, they learn that they are not the only group of super-heroes in town! The 'Ruffians' have even fiercer powers and are in no mood to team up with the Mighty Mega Pets. Cue a number of action-filled fight scenes,

with countless explosions blasting out from the pages, and rather a lot of animals being squashed by the bottoms of bigger animals.

As the mega pets uncover more and more secrets about the pet food, menacing new villains emerge and their motivation (total domination over the town, naturally) is revealed. Can Daisy and her team defeat the Ruffians in time to stop the super-modified pet food spreading throughout the town and causing utter chaos... and are they willing to give up their own exciting new powers to do so?

Generously published in bright, vibrant colours, the comic-style book is stunning to look at and, on closer inspection of each page, readers will spot oodles of hilarious visual gags. The script is funny, too. Characters have a chemistry that delivers lots of laughs as they encourage one another and argue about their plans. Even funnier are the animals' occasional asides to the reader, which offer an insight into what pets really think about things and how much they are just like humans, really.

The marketplace is currently rather crowded by illustrated series about animals going on adventures and doing silly things, and readers might be somewhat less than excited by the funny but unsurprising first few pages. **Mighty Mega Pets** is worth sticking with, though. Gary Northfield is an expert at bringing chaos together on the page to create humour, and the visual set pieces he draws are genuinely dramatic. The extent to which the characters have sufficient personality to justify future episodes is debatable, but there is certainly enough humour and excitement in this series-opener to grab the attention of young readers. **SD**

Bison Rule OK

★★★★★

Sarah Ziman, illus Nia Havilliard, Otter-Barry Books, 96pp, 978-1-917865-03-6, £8.99, pbk
Wow! Here's a second poetry collection from Sarah Ziman to follow the outstanding **Why Did My Brain Make Me Say It**. Yes, some of the themes are familiar: life at school and at home, the strange behaviour of friends, siblings and teachers. But here they are treated with such energy, irresistible rhyme and bounce, empathy, perceptive close observation, humour and occasional pathos that everything comes up shiny and new, with surprises at each page turn. Sarah has a gift for coming at things slightly sideways. I wonder, is she the inventor of the rhyming list? See *Reasons my Big Sister Got Annoyed This Week* 'Not allowed to stay out later – In DIRE need of extra data...' or *School Summer Fair Checklist* 'Buy back all the cakes we made ✓ Drink six cans of lemonade ✓.' And then there's the title poem

of the collection, in which a Bison moans about all the more popular creatures and wants his place in the celebrity show 'Let's have some bison merchandise/like bison shirts and hats/ Buy some bison duvet covers – bison towels and bison mats.' In *Chipmunks! Chipmunks! Chipmunks!* they've somehow got onto the school dinner menu 'Chunky deep-fried chipmunks. Chipmunks cooked three ways. Salty Belgian chipmunks, served up with mayonnaise.' There's quite a bit to make you laugh out loud, but equally moments that stop you in your tracks. *Things I learned from Nana Jean* is a list of the often-quirky wisdom we may all have learned from our nans: 'There's really no need to brush ALL of your teeth. (Only the ones that you'd quite like to keep.)' With the last lessons: 'How to Play Rummy and Patience and Whist.' And, finally, 'Just how someone who's gone can be missed.' And Nan turns up again as one of the five haiku-like *Small Sadnesses*: 'Nan's house. The new owners have scaffolding up. Where the old cherry tree was, two cars.' A lament for lost love and lost time. This is a brilliantly versatile collection. Brilliant for the quiet single reader and brilliant to be read aloud to a class. **CB**

When Skeletons Rise

★★★★★

Coral Rumble, illus Twink Addison, Troika Books, 184pp, £9.99 pbk
Arlo's father disappeared during a storm – and storms now feature in Arlo's nightmares. Their move to Cornwall doesn't help his sense of being unsettled, alone. Trust is difficult. Gradually however, he does begin to find friendship in his new school. When the skeleton of a sailor is unearthed Arlo is fascinated. Could this be a pirate? He has a new project to research, a long-lost shipwreck just off the coast. But delving into the secrets of the past brings Arlo into contact with a secret in his present – something that he fears could destroy the new life he is now enjoying.

Set firmly in a contemporary world where action is rooted in the everyday – school, shopping, family, – young readers will find an engaging familiarity as they follow Arlo through his story. Here there is no magic, no dramatic catastrophe. Rather we meet a friendly neighbourhood, a sympathetic – if strict teacher – an interesting project; who does not like pirates? But there is the secret. Coral Rumble understands the fear a secret kept by parents from their children can inspire. Of course it might be being kept for the best of reasons, a wish to protect. This is the case here. Arlo's father is in prison. For Arlo this is devastating as he imagines his new friends will immediately abandon him. Rumble deals sensitively with the ideas, assumptions, the fears that young people can feel when

faced with what will be seen as the stigma of such a situation. Her young characters are very real in their reactions. Her audience will easily empathise with Arlo and his friends. There may be some for whom it will be very real. Adult characters are drawn with equal conviction. There are no great extremes. This is a real community providing realistic background to a narrative that is immediate and extremely readable. Rumble is a poet and well able to handle words. The text is both accessible and contemporary without being simplistic, dialogue retains interest while any description is concise and provides a vivid sense of place. **FH**



They Sent a Cat to Saturn

★★★★★(★)

Valerie Bloom ill. Ken Wilson Max, Otter Barry Books, 96pp, 9781915659590, £8.99, pbk
Valerie Bloom is one of our best-loved poets for children and young people, whose career now astonishingly stretches back more than a quarter of a century. This new collection shows all her considerable strengths. She sets out her stall with the five stanza verse *A Poem Can...*, which suggests the forms a poem can take – 'Be recited, read or sung' – but concentrates on the effects that it might have on the reader, among them, 'Take you where you've never been, Show you scenes you've never seen,' and 'Be an ally, be a friend.' Many of the poems that follow do exactly that. A few invite you in as a participant in something unlikely, experimenting on how to make an octopus laugh, for instance. Or sitting next to a vulture at the barbers. Or vainly waiting to hear from the cat in the title poem who 'stopped for some refreshment/along the milky way.' Others like *The Mountains of the Sky*, *No Entry*, and *Revenge* offer us new perspectives on things we experience everyday: clouds, rain or the cutting of an onion. And, as in *Epidemic* there are extraordinary events in our own lives that provide a new perspective. Many poems, like *Refuge* invite us to stand in other people's shoes or perhaps, as

in *Look for me* the poet stands in ours or next to us and gives us a reassuring hug. And Valerie reminds us always of who she is: her love of words that seems to grow equally from her reading and from the speech of her childhood: *Papa Cookin'* and *A Likkle Brawta* gloriously celebrate Jamaican culture and family, while *Return and Rumbled* ruminate with some humour and some sadness on living between worlds. This is a characteristically varied collection and what strikes me this time is the stripped back directness of many of the poems, achieving a maximum impact with exactly the right words, but also how the poet is irresistibly drawn to the jokes and laughter to be found in language. There is a section in the collection called *A Little Light Relief* that is just brilliantly silly: one example, 'Should he ask to be baked or fried, Or shredded on the grater? The potato just could not decide, For he was a hesi-tater.' Can I give six stars? **CB**

Forces of the Day

★★★★★

Samantha Lewis, ill. Hao Hao, Red Shed, 48pp, 9780008712655, £12.99, hbk

Find out all about the forces that surround us every day in this enjoyable hardback looking at the physics we encounter from when we start the day to fall asleep! I liked the way the book is organized in an original way. There is a spread for each section of time, so it starts off with *Wakey Wakey* (pp.8-9) and goes all the way through the day until *Story Time* (pp.40-41).

The author breaks down the information for the reader into paragraphs which clearly explain the scientific principles behind each phenomenon. I enjoyed learning how William Herschel used a glass prism to 'split white light into the rainbow colours and measured their temperatures' (p.11). Historical details of the discoveries made by scientists are included in the text and the modern illustrations and diagrams clarify the facts throughout the book.

One of my favourite parts of the publication is how *Catch-up Ketchup* is explained on page 32. I never knew that 'it's a sauce with a sneaky secret!' The reader learns that it is a non-Newtonian liquid regarding its runniness! To improve its flow the user needs to give the bottle a good shake with the lid on so that the sauce runs more easily onto the plate. This is just one example of the kind of information found in this science book.

I am sure young people will enjoy getting engrossed in this amazing handbook, and it may even encourage some of them to take up science as a career. Although aimed at age seven years upwards I am sure readers at secondary school will also find the book appealing. It will make a great addition to a home, school or local library, and would make a fabulous Christmas present for a youngster you know. Well done to the team behind this colourful hardback which has lots of original features. **JS**

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued



This Book Will Make You A Scientist

★★★★★

Sheila Kanani, ill. Ellen Surrey, Nosy Crow, 64pp, 9781805132547, £14.99, hbk

Here is a perfect blend of interesting biographies of 25 scientists with the same number of practical experiments for readers to try at home. Such a mixture will surely inspire young people to aim high like these well-known and lesser-known scientists. Then they can put some science into action and try their hand (with some grown-up help) at some clever and original STEM activities.

I am a huge fan of these publications resulting from the exceptional partnership between experts from the University of Cambridge and the award-winning publisher Nosy Crow. The introductory pages are well laid out and are brimful of good advice. My favourite sentence is 'You will need to have the patience, confidence and determination to believe in yourself and try, try and try again!' (p.11.)

Each spread is devoted to one scientist and an accompanying experiment. Due to my recent visit to the fantastic cultural hub of Bath, and a trip to see the Herschel Museum there, I was delighted to learn more about Caroline Herschel, a German astronomer who assisted her more famous brother, William in the same field. (See pp.22-23.) The experiment alongside the biography of Caroline Herschel encourages youngsters to get dressed in their warm clothes and go outside at night to do a spot of stargazing and mapping.

Between the covers of this beautiful hardback not only will the young reader learn about famous figures such as Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking, but they will also discover lesser-known scientists e.g. how to 'Make invisible ink like James Jay,' (p. 25) and 'Watch a volcano erupt like Katia Krafft' (pp. 52-53). Excellence runs through this publication so there are wonderful little touches such as the clearly drawn and labelled equipment needed for each experiment, and all these experiments are printed on square graph paper!

Congratulations to all the team behind this creation! I loved finding out more about these scientists and their seismic work. Even as an arts student myself, I am certain **This Book Will Make You A Scientist! JS**

Greek Goddess Diaries

★★★★

Honor Cargill-Martin, ill. Camelia Pham, Magic Cat, 9781917044899, £7.99 pbk

There has been a huge trend for so-called 'feminist retellings' of classical myth in recent years, with bookstore shelves groaning under piles of novels in the voices of characters like Medusa, Circe and Helen, despite the fact that they always got to tell their side of the story – from being the central protagonists in Ancient Greek dramas like *Antigone* and *Medea*, to featuring in the Roman poet Ovid's *Heroides*, a series of dramatic monologues written as letters from Penelope, Phaedra, Ariadne and others around 20BC.

Sat bang in the middle of a Venn diagram with two other contemporary children's publishing trends – non-fiction about the lives of 'rebel girls' and middle-grade fiction written in diary form – the **Greek Goddess Diaries** feels slightly like publishing-by-numbers, and the whole thing doesn't quite live up to its billing. Few of the six speakers are actually goddesses for a start – I'd have been much more interested to hear Athena, Hera or Aphrodite speak about their lives on Mount Olympus than Medusa or Ariadne retell their over familiar stories. And despite being billed as 'Dork Diaries meets Greek myths' they are barely diaries. The bulk of the stories are recounted in a single present-tense entries beginning with the heroine's birth, which isn't how diaries work at all. The six women all speak in the same 'feisty heroine' tone too, which leads to some weird dissonances. 'I murdered all our children' Medea confesses, before adding that since then 'I married the Athenian king and we had a son so, maybe, just maybe, my future diary entries will be less bloodstained...' !! LOL!

I'm being a bit harsh, perhaps. I'm sure these short retellings would be fun to share in a classroom, and the list of Primary sources – from Euripides to Hesiod to Homer – show Honor Cargill-Martin is a serious classicist who knows her stuff, whilst Camelia Pham's stylish illustrations are particularly great at bringing to life lesser-known stories like that of Atalanta and Penthesilea. But shoe-horning these complex female figures into some feisty 'ancient sisterhood' erases a lot of the strangeness and moral complexity that makes these myths endure. **CP**

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

New Talent

When the Birds Wake Up

★★★★

Jessica Mary Ellis, illus Sophie Burrows, David Fickling Books, 240pp, 978-1788454100, £7.99 pbk
Jessica Mary Ellis won the **David Fickling Books' Search for a Storyteller** competition 2026 with **When the Birds Wake Up**. The story has themes of love, loss, family, friendship and self-discovery and is written as a verse novel. Ellis uses the format very well and it suits the narrative perfectly. Shy and already very self-conscious about her ears, which she thinks stick out, Pear must also cope with moving house and starting a new school when the family go to live with her much-loved grandma, who shows signs of developing Alzheimer's. It would be a lot for anyone to deal with, but things feel worse when she is picked on at school. The adoption of Piglet, a former farm dog with a history that has left him scarred and odd-looking too provides Pear with the friend she needs, and she begins to regain some confidence, making a new friend at school. Music is a refuge for her as are the stories her grandma has been sharing with her since she was a baby; how will Pear use one and preserve the latter? There's clearly a lot happening in the book with additional dramas added e.g. Pear's grandma getting lost,



Piglet running away, but Jessica Mary Ellis does well to keep the different threads and themes controlled. The verse comes into its own here, delivering sharp bursts of powerful emotion, allowing the narrative to switch quickly from one scene or storyline to another, and occasionally to add humour. Pear emerges as a believable character as do the others in the book and Ellis succeeds in conveying the importance of family and shared memories in shaping who we are. Sophie Burrow's illustrations are a comforting addition and also frame some of the poems beautifully. It's an impressive debut. **AR**

The Ministry of Manners

★★★★★

David Solomons, ill. Hazem Asif, Piccadilly Press, 250pp, 978-1-83587-317-5, £7.99 pbk

As a bookish children's writer, I'm always keen to read middle-grade novels that engage with canonical literary texts, and it feels like there have been many smart approaches to such material lately, from Nat Harrison's **The Girl Who Raced the World** – a feminist version of *Around the World in Eighty Days* – to Maz Evans' **The Last Bard** and Anna James' **Alice with a Why**.

This rewriting of George Orwell's **1984** for middle grade by David Solomons is in many ways a riskier concept, necessarily touching as it does with some extremely hot political issues about phones, surveillance, AI and book bans. But I'm pleased to say Solomons manages to pull it off, making this into a tense thriller that never lectures but raises some very serious questions about the world our children might want to live in.

It focuses on Alfie and Margot Hawthorne, who are growing up under the eye of the Ministry of Manners,

and constantly watching their stock of 'Courtesy coins' go up and down. School is a place where everyone is either brainwashed or pretending to be – a dystopia in the tradition of *Black Mirror*, *The Stepford Wives*, and Gillian Cross' excellent series **The Demon Headmaster**. But when Margot is taken to a rehabilitation camp and Alfie discovers his father is doing important work for the Ministry they must both fight for family and freedom.

I was particularly taken by the complicity of their father and mother in this nightmare of surveillance – my generation, after all, have been the first parents to track their children. I also loved the quiet heroism of the librarian, Mrs Finch, who is finally taken away in a van after slipping a forbidden copy of **Charlie in the Chocolate Factory** to a pupil. And Hazem Asif's stylised propaganda posters throughout are absolutely superb – both he and Solomons have huge fun with the slogans like: **UNIFORMITY BEGINS WITH YOU!** And: **YOUR VOICE MATTERS WHEN IT AGREES**. A bracing reminder that obedience is not a virtue. **CP**



Raise the Bar

★★★★★

Fernanda Frick H, Guppy Books, 352pp, 978-1916558786, £14.99 pbk

Samanta Sánchez has one ambition: to become a weightlifting gold medalist for Chile. The story of her path to high level competition is the subject of Fernanda Frick H's outstanding graphic novel. Samanta is strong and determined, but has had no proper training, watching YouTube videos by a US star of the same age for tips. Her parents can't understand why she wants to do it at all and actively discourage her. When the opportunity arises to train at the elite High Performance Centre in Brazil, and under her hero, Eva Dos Santos, the first Latin American weightlifter to win Olympic gold, she is determined to go for it. Sam does win a place, Eva recognising the same drive and raw talent that she had herself, but that's just the start of a tough time for Sam. The girl whose videos she watched is her roommate and main rival, and she is constantly battling self-doubt, represented as shadowy figures whispering her own fears at key moments. Then, she receives a serious injury attempting to lift too heavy a weight. She does make friends amongst the other young athletes however, a diverse bunch who bring non-sport interest, fun and comedy into the story. Sam even finds love. It all comes together in success and along the way we even learn why her parents were so against it – not what you'd expect, and a scene which adds even more depth to this story. Achieving your dreams in sport, it says, takes super-human effort, while it also emphasises the importance of staying human, finding time for friends and recognising that head and heart matter as much as muscles. Sam's journey, the cast of characters, the love stories and of course the drama make for enthralling reading and even the least sporty reader will be intrigued and inspired by her passion for her weightlifting, which comes across as really appealing. The graphic novel format shows off the

sport perfectly, the effort involved and the athleticism, and it also catches the emotional side to the story too, bright, vibrant colour panels for the upbeat scenes contrasting with chaotic, scribbled illustrations as those shadowy doubts surround Sam. Full of genuine emotion, humour, love and action, this raises the storytelling bar about as high as it can go. **MMA**



The Sign of the Raven

★★★★★

Pippa Dunn, DK Flip, 352pp, 978-0241768471, £14.99 hbk

Pippa Dunn impresses with her debut, **The Sign of the Raven**, an intricate and well-structured fantasy novel mixing other-world Victorian London with time-shifting dream scenes. Teenager Ashlyn Threadneedle lives in a version of nineteenth century London in which she works as a courier delivering urgent messages for the government by bicycle and scenes in Hampton Court, Spitalfields and of course the Houses of Parliament are vivid and well described. Following the assassination of Queen Victoria some years earlier, Britain is a republic under the leadership of one President Whittaker. With elections approaching however, those in power are cracking down on anything deemed 'subversive' and increasing numbers of citizens are being arrested and imprisoned. Meanwhile, Ashlyn, who has always experienced particularly vivid dreams, discovers that she is one of a band of similarly gifted dreamers, called the Corvi Signum. As the government begins to use the dream world to repress and influence the population, for example, seeding the belief that 'treason needs no trial', Ashlyn and her friend, handsome young trainee journalist Dmitri realise the importance of stopping them. For Ashlyn, this becomes urgent when her friends are imprisoned but also because tied up in their efforts is a chance to find and free her mother who has

been trapped in the dream world for a decade, and dead in the real world. Dunn manages the complexities of the plot well, including those of the dream world in which time isn't an arrow but 'more like a tapestry, so tightly woven that we can't see the stitches, just the pictures that they make.' Ashlyn, Dmitri and other characters including the flamboyant Vesta of the dream world (based on Vesta Tilley), are strong enough to support the plot and hold readers' attention. The book opens with a quote from the notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the occasional poetry of the text is an additional reward for readers. Its socialist themes and the gentle romance feel refreshing too amongst much contemporary fantasy. **AR**

The Teller of Tall Tales

★★★★★

Liz Hyder, illus Tom de Freston, Pushkin Press, 288pp, 9781782695790, £14.99 pbk

Liz Hyder returns with an immersive folklore-inspired novel for young readers and deftly explores themes of family estrangement, friendship and bereavement through the developing relationship between a teenager and the grandmother they haven't seen since babyhood.

Oma lives alone in her cottage with Tig the cat, her memories and an almost overwhelming sense of guilt and loss. And now her quiet life is interrupted by visits from a grandchild on the cusp of adulthood: a grandchild with questions about why they have been kept apart for so long, one who wants answers (and not just about the mysterious scar on their wrist). Each monthly visit they share reveals more about the family's long-held secrets and how the line between lies and the truth can so often be blurred.

The novel is also infused with Oma's love of the land, built on the lives of previous generations who have lived near the forest. Each month she weaves a tale for her grandchild that is steeped in folklore, magic and truths both harsh and fantastical. The interpolated tales are added depth and richness by Tom de Freston's superb black-and-white illustrations. From the revenge-tinged darkness of *The Day of the Stag* to the tenderness and homecoming Oma and Tomas share in *The Wanderer of Worlds*, each superb spread and vignette enhances the beauty and insight of Liz Hyder's storytelling.

The pain of separation and adolescent confusion are written compellingly and with great sensitivity, and the second-person narrative immediately draws the reader into an absorbing, otherworldly experience. Liz Hyder also addresses the issues of grief and depression in a way that is thoughtful, reflective and non-judgemental.

The Teller of Tall Tales is a must for school library shelves and one that would also engage book groups. **AB**

Song of the Saltings

★★★★★

Rachael King, Guppy Books, 978 191 6558762, £8.99, pbk

Curiously, this is the second book I have reviewed in the last year that involves child sacrifice. Such is the world of children's fantasy. Thankfully, in Rachael King's dark tale, the people of the isolated island of Brack have recently stopped strapping their offspring to a stone on the shoreline as food for the watery Glimm. This mysterious monster, as is often the case, demands its regular tribute in exchange for the necessities won from the soil and the sea. However, a while ago, the Glimm turned its nose up at the tethered child and took her pony instead and so now, equally disturbing for many readers, it lives on an entirely equine diet. Lotta was the Glimm's rejected meal and now she tends the horses at the manor house, sensibly refusing to become attached to them since they may not last long. The sacrifice is chosen by lot amid rituals presided over by the Council, a sinister male cabal. The villagers are entirely in their power, but an outcast group, known as the hidelings, who have always refused to give up their children, scrape a living on the margins. It is the developing friendship between Lotta and Moss, a hidelings youth, initially bonding over the rescue of Moss's horse from the marsh, that begins to prise open the cracks in this cruel regime, leads to revelations of the island's past, and brings its people at last face to face with the Glimm. A little long for me at nearly four hundred pages, this is an atmospheric and incident crammed novel, rooted in working lives wrested from an inhospitable environment, and the beliefs and attitudes that grow and are tested there: people who can be sometimes suspicious, selfish and cruel, but also generous, loyal and brave. **CB**

Evie and Maryam's Little Lies

★★★★★

Janeen Hayat, Guppy Books, 336pp, 978-1916558847, £7.99, pbk

In this absorbing sequel to the award-winning **Evie and Maryam's Family Tree**, Janeen Hayat once again takes her heroines – now firm friends – out of their comfort zone by placing them in new situations. Maryam has won a scholarship for 'disadvantaged young people' to a prestigious boarding school but is nervous about how she will fit in with her more privileged peers. Meanwhile, Evie is excited that Our Family Tree, the play she and Maryam wrote about their great-grandmothers, has been selected for the Bill Jeffrey Youth Fellowship, with the chance for it to be performed in the West End. But she faces tough competition, and when she exaggerates her chances of success to her parents, things rapidly spiral out of control.

Maryam and Evie are two of the most believable twelve-year-old characters I've encountered in a long time.

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

Their anxieties about navigating unfamiliar social situations – or even conversations with their own parents – feel totally real. Hayat makes them both deeply likeable, whilst showing how they can end up making unwise decisions with unfortunate repercussions. As the title suggests, this novel is all about how small lies told in the heat of the moment can snowball, and the characters' worries about this feel all-consuming in a way that young readers are likely to recognise.

Hayat also explores a range of other themes, particularly related to social justice, showing how well-meaning initiatives are not always enough to overcome barriers to inclusion. And, as in her first novel, she weaves in a backstory involving a boy called Bilal who travels to England from Karachi in 1956. But this time, the twist connecting Bilal's story to Evie and Maryam's is a genuine surprise for the reader, and is rather moving in its exploration of assimilation and what might be lost as a result. The novel avoids an overly neat resolution but does leave us cautiously hopeful that Maryam and Evie will make the best of whatever new situations they face. If there is one key message for young readers to take away from this heart-warming book, it is perhaps Maryam's eventual realisation that 'awkwardness won't kill you'. **SDi**



Into Thin Air

★★★★

S.E. Durrant, Nosy Crow, 256pp, 978 1 83994 081 1, £7.99 pbk

Into Thin Air is a compelling and thought-provoking family drama from an author who once again demonstrates her talent for tackling difficult issues without talking down to her young readers and creating memorable and convincing characters. It is also an authentic portrayal of young lives affected by poverty and insecurity. The family here had already been struggling

after the parents lost their business, The Centre of the Universe Café, and we see how Luna, our 11-year-old narrator, has had to take responsibility beyond her years. She and her sister Jade are latchkey children and Luna has to ensure they get to school on time, scrapes together lunches from bare cupboards and finds ways to earn extra money. It is heartwarming to see the school they attend quietly taking action to ensure children do not go hungry, which is sadly a reflection of reality for many communities at the moment. It is also apparent that Luna is neurodivergent and something of a maths genius and she uses numbers to calm her anxieties. She dreams of being an astronaut and has a close relationship with her dad, who encourages and supports her ambitions. Together they track the International Space Station, and each chapter is fronted by a report from Mimi her favourite astronaut. This is also a brilliant way of reminding the reader of how much time is passing since Luna saw her dad leave one Wednesday night. Mum says he's visiting Nan but when Nan's nursing home call, it becomes clear that Dad is not there. Then Dad's boss and other frightening people start to call at the house to ask for him, and Mum says the girls must not answer the door. With no explanation forthcoming, Luna's anxiety spirals. Luna is very different to her bubbly and confident younger sister Jade, but they start to work together, collecting clues and evidence to track him down, with the invaluable help of Luna's friend Casey. A particular strength of this moving and increasingly tense story is the spot on depiction of the sibling relationship. Their differences can irritate each other, but Luna discovering that Jade (like most of us) has her own coping mechanisms, brings them closer together. Luna also becomes a better friend through these experiences, learning more about Casey and other classmates and developing more empathy and understanding. The children together show great courage, determination and resourcefulness in their search for the truth and, as we move towards the dramatic conclusion, when we all discover the eventual reasons for their father's disappearance, there is plenty to think about and discuss, particularly about the importance of standing up for what you believe in and what you think is right. A beautifully crafted story with diverse characters and underlying themes of friendship, family, resilience, kindness and environmental awareness, this would make an excellent and highly recommended read aloud for children of 9 years upwards. It will be perfect for readers who prefer a slice of real life rather than fantasy and enjoy writers like Lisa Thompson, Matt Goodfellow and Cath Howe. **JCo**

Esme Pepper

★★★★

Jacqueline Wilson illus. Rachael Dean, Puffin, 336pp, 9780241684078, £14.99 hbk

Esme Pepper is a troubled upper primary school girl. Her mum has been imprisoned because she was caught shop lifting for the twentieth time, to get Esme a California Dreams Dolls House.

Esme is put into foster care with Moira and Peter Hawes, an older couple who have ostensibly given up fostering. Of course, they take Esme as an emergency which turns into a much longer stay.

The main themes of the book are Esme's adjustment to her new life. This is discussed in a more deeply nuanced way than Wilson sometimes writes and it is very enjoyable. Can Esme learn that you don't have to be bad to get attention? And will she learn to love Peter's garden gnomes as much as he does? It seems that Wilson had great fun creating 'Gnomeland'.

It transpires that Peter or 'Pops' as he is known, has been diagnosed with mild dementia. Wilson makes this condition understandable but not the major focus of the story.

Readers may see overtones of **Anne of Green Gables**. Esme is far less easily mollified than Anne, but the comparison remains valid. Wilson should also be commended for having a prison-visiting scene which may be hugely comforting to children who have experienced similar situations.

This is arguably one of Wilson's best works. Esme and the Hawes will live long in the memory. **RB**

The Summer my Wishes Came True

★★★★

Radhika Sanghani, Usborne, 256pp, 9781805318293, £8.99 pbk
Radhika Sanghani is mining a very enjoyable seam of real-life stories with a magical twist, following **The Girl Who Couldn't Lie** and **How to get Magically Popular**. Once again, she successfully uses this trope to get her characters to learn some thoughtful life lessons, the magic creating lovely moments of humour and pathos along the way. She also focuses very successfully on the tween age group, and this would make a lovely transition read towards the end of Year 6 or in Year 7, when children face the prospect of lots of new classmates and are quite likely to experience some of the issues Ayesha has to deal with. Ayesha has been desperate to go to summer camp with her best friend Nikki, who has been on holiday with her family for two weeks and worryingly has been strangely silent. When Nikki does arrive, she looks completely different and has also acquired a boyfriend. Nikki fits right in with the two cool girls in their cabin and Ayesha feels increasingly left out, particularly when they are all focusing on developing their 'talents' in the camp musical, which

is the highly appropriate **Mean Girls**, and Ayesha's 'talent' is identified as a mere support manager for the production. Then she accidentally overhears Nikki saying some very mean things about her to these new friends and, completely distraught, she heads to the lake shore as a full super moon rises. She wishes her life could be different and awakes an incredible power. She can make any wish come true, which often means being able to avoid unpleasant things like an early morning run or a cold shower or achieving things without effort like being able to sing and learn lines. Camp life becomes everything she had dreamed of, although her relationship with Nikki is still not quite what it was. What more can she do?

This story is a wonderful demonstration of the old adage, 'Be careful what you wish for', because Ayesha gradually sees the wider impact that her wishes can have upon other people and has to consider if that is right. She also begins to see another side to Nikki, as well as learning a lot about herself. Her gradual realisation that they are no longer suited to each other and that perhaps the messiness of life is better than fake perfection is very well done. This is an insightful and very relatable story about the challenges of friendship and self-discovery and about anxiety and striving to fit in and will make us all take a good look at how we treat others and how they in turn treat us. **JCo**

Thorn

★★★★

A.F. Harrold, illustrated by Milly Chapple, Fox and Ink Books, 9781917894159, £9.99, pbk

A.F. Harrold's first prose novel in four years arrives with all the strangeness and tenderness that readers of **The Imaginary** or **The Song from Somewhere Else** will immediately recognise. Thorn is a singular piece of work: surreal, quietly beautiful and unlike almost anything else being published for young adults at the moment.

The premise is arresting from the first page. Thorn wakes up outside her own body. She can observe her life and the lives of those around her, present but not present, watching rather than inhabiting. What follows is part mystery, part metaphysics, part coming of age story told from an angle that makes the familiar feel entirely new. Through her observations, and through a series of carefully handled time slips between her present, her past and her future, Thorn is faced with the question at the centre of everything: who is she, and what made her?

Harrold brings a poet's instinct to his prose, and it shows on every page. The writing has a rhythm and precision that is never showy but consistently beautiful, and his feel for the surreal is matched by a deep empathy for his characters. A guiding cat appears, naturally, because this is A.F. Harrold,

and somehow the presence of that cat feels both completely unexpected and entirely inevitable.

The novel speaks directly to the questions many teenagers are navigating right now: disconnection, the search for identity, the difficulty of knowing yourself when the world keeps shifting around you. But Harrold resists the didactic. These themes emerge through the texture of the story rather than being stated, and the result is something that feels genuinely illuminating rather than instructive.

Milly Chapple's illustrations are a vital part of what makes this book work. Image and text are in constant conversation, with Chapple's pictures extending and deepening the atmosphere that Harrold's words create rather than simply accompanying them. Together they produce something that feels closer to an illustrated poem than a conventional novel, which is precisely what makes it so memorable.

Surreal and sweet, mysterious and deeply empathetic, *Thorn* is a remarkable and quietly daring piece of storytelling. It deserves to find its way into the hands of every young reader who has ever felt slightly outside of their own life. **LJS**

The Haunting of Old Splinter

★★★★

Jack Mackay, *Rock the Boat*, 288pp, 9781836432319, £8.99, pbk
Jack Mackay's follow-up to his **Branford Boase**-shortlisted debut *Gloam* once again delivers a mix of genuinely terrifying horror with real emotional tenderness and wisdom. *The Haunting of Old Splinter* follows half-brothers Peter and Adrian who live in the gardener's cottage of Old Splinter, a derelict mansion owned by their wealthy Uncle Lawrence. The boys hear rumours about an ancient curse connected to a wishing claw buried at Old Splinter. After Peter makes a gruesome discovery, he and Adrian decide to hunt down the claw and use it to solve some of their problems. But they don't realise that every wish comes with a cost, and the greater the wish, the greater the consequences.

Initially I wondered whether Mackay had toned down the horror slightly for his second novel – apart from a spot of ethical taxidermy and one dead body, things feel relatively tame for the first 100 pages or so, and they procure the claw without too much difficulty. However, everything escalates pretty quickly thereafter; I won't give too much away but Mackay is not squeamish about killing off animals or humans, and treats us to a truly revolting revenant. This is proper horror – the sort that will make plenty of adults squirm but younger readers will love. The pacing is excellent and there is real jeopardy throughout.

Alongside this, Mackay shows that

he is an astute observer of family dynamics and the emotional lives of children. *Gloam* featured both a female protagonist and a female antagonist, but here Mackay's focus is very much on boys and men. Mackay really understands the complexities of modern blended families, particularly Peter's uncertain relationships with his birth father Robert and his stepfather George. Peter is not sure whether either truly cares for him and grows used to 'the silence of men who lacked the courage to say what they were thinking or simply had nothing at all to say. The silence of fathers.'

The one constant in Peter's life is his bond with Adrian: 'Bro Promises' are sacrosanct – but even this is jeopardised by all the men who break their promises to Peter. As he reflects, 'if the adults in his life could play so fast and loose with promises, then why shouldn't he?', only realising the destructive consequences of his own broken promises when it is too late. Ultimately, however, this is a redemptive novel which ends with a moving scene of family reconciliation and a long-deferred promise finally being honoured. This is therefore a book which will both frighten and comfort readers, and it deserves to be another popular read with older primary and younger secondary pupils. **SDI**



Beast Mode

★★★★

J.J. Arcanjo, *Starboard*, 320pp, 978-1444984378, £8.99 pbk

From the author of the highly popular and acclaimed *Crookhaven* books, comes the first instalment of an action-packed new series, which introduces us to another remarkable set of characters and with another brilliant premise for a story. Although I know fellow readers will be keenly anticipating a second instalment, it makes a refreshing change that this is a self-contained and satisfying story that does not leave you on a cliff hanger. Caine, Ember and

Blue are three teenagers who found themselves waking up in a forest with no memory of who they are, or of how they got there. They soon discover they have the rather painful ability to transform into animals with enhanced powers in both their forms. Blue can 'flip' into a dog; Caine into a cat; and Ember into a fox. They found themselves already wearing what they call Flip Suits, which rather neatly avoids the issue of what you do with clothes when transforming. For the last year, the three of them have been sleeping rough and stealing to get by, while trying to make sense of their powers and how to master them or indeed to find a cure and find their families. Recently the park, which has been their base, has had reported sightings of what is being called the Night Terror. This huge and fearsome beast finds them and sets off a chain of events that leads them to discover more about, not just themselves, but also about those who would wish to use their talents for their own wicked purposes. The trio find themselves on the run joined by Sal, the daughter of a tech billionaire, on her own search for answers and who, after being injured, discovers that she too, can flip. Can they piece together the truth about what's happened to them, and stay hidden from their dangerous enemies? It is an excellent narrative strategy to have the characters discovering the back story at the same time as the reader and these are a wholly engaging, wisecracking, brave set of young people, who have formed the very best sort of found family. But, with shocking revelations and betrayals ahead, will they survive and will their bond stay strong? A genuine, highly cinematic page turner, this will find fans a plenty. **JCo**

Outlaws

★★★★

E.L.Norry, *Bloomsbury Children's Books*, 316pp, 978-1-5266-8651-0, £7.99 pbk

Robyn, Scarlet and Will meet in detention, given for trivial reasons, and when the supervising teacher dozes off, they are able to chat, and become friends.

All three are struggling in various ways. Robyn, who is on the autism spectrum, lives with her Grandad as her Dad is often away on business: she loves helping him in his bike repair shop, but she is finding it very difficult to make friends at school, as she joined in Year 8, and friendship groups were already settled. Grandad is getting forgetful, though, which is cause for some concern.

Scarlet is really happy with her new foster parents, except for the fact that the daughter, Megan, resents her presence and, although she is all sweetness and light in front of her parents, she bullies Scarlet in private and at school. Scarlet has had bad fostering experiences before and is desperate to make this placement work.

Will's Mum hardly gets out of bed,

and he has to try and feed and look after his 2 younger brothers, trying to earn money by selling essays. All three want to keep their troubles to themselves, but sometimes little snippets slip out, and they gradually come to understand what the others are going through. They are all on special grants or scholarships, and, when each is informed that these are ending, they realise that the Headteacher is targeting them and other vulnerable pupils, and using their funding to build his special projects for the school. Proving it is tricky, and they take some risks before they find a way to expose the Head's fraud and get their funding back.

Robyn is able to tell the kindly Mrs Patel, of the pastoral team, about her Grandad, and he is diagnosed, and helped, especially by Dad's return home. Megan's bullying of Scarlet comes to light, and her parents step in. (Author Emma Norry was brought up in care, and knows only too well about the difficulties this can cause). Will's Dad finally starts contributing financially, and the story ends with drama-loving Will on stage as the Artful Dodger, Scarlet dancing, and Robyn enjoying being in charge of lighting: the friends have not only found each other, but also now feel that they belong. **DB**

Strike

★★★★

Mitch Johnson, *Usborne*, 304pp, 978-1836045670, £8.99, pbk

Many young readers will envy Owen, the narrator of Mitch Johnson's new novel *Strike*, when he is scouted by Harrowfield FC alongside his best friend Teddy. But as he begins training at their academy, he starts to learn more about the dark side of football – particularly after he finds a note in his new pair of football boots from a sweatshop worker in Indonesia.

This is, first and foremost, an excellent football story with plenty of tense and exciting scenes in which victory is snatched from the jaws of defeat (and occasionally defeat from the jaws of victory). From playing for his local club to watching Harrowfield in the European finals, Johnson makes every match Owen experiences matter to readers, even those (like me) who are not football fans. This acts as a hook which enables readers to engage with a range of other themes.

I was particularly impressed by the presentation of family. Owen lives with his dad, whose own footballing dreams were cut short by an injury, so he now coaches the local team alongside working night shifts at a warehouse. Their grief following the death of Owen's mum is sensitively explored, and Johnson offers us a lovely, authentic father-son relationship with lots of affectionate banter alongside moments of genuine intimacy and vulnerability – a valuable corrective to the many examples of toxic masculinity present in football and society more generally.

reviews

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

Like many men, they don't always find it easy to talk about their feelings, but I loved their 'five-minute rule' for discussing football matches and other difficult topics.

Another brilliant male role model is Harrowfield's star player, Budi, who grew up in poverty in Indonesia and has used the challenges he has faced as a haemophiliac to his advantage. Budi inspires Owen in his campaigning against exploitation in the developing world, even when this threatens to cost both Budi and Owen everything they have worked so hard for. The plot ratchets up as they take on the club's unscrupulous owner, and Johnson just about avoids an overly neat resolution while delivering a positive message about social justice.

Strike is a great example of how to appeal to reluctant middle-grade readers, mainly boys, without patronising them. Johnson delivers a compelling story which may also inspire readers to think more about injustice and inequality. **SDI**

Completely Normal (and other lies)

★★★★

Biffy James, Pushkin Press, 9781782696063, £9.99, pbk

Stella Wilde is sixteen, living with her mum since her dad left to start a new family elsewhere, surrounded by friends who do not treat her particularly well and navigating the low-level chaos of a life that feels slightly out of her control. Her mum, well-meaning and worried, wants her in therapy. Stella wants to feel normal. When she falls into a secret relationship with Isaac, the most sought-after boy in school, she gets a glimpse of something that finally feels like happiness.

Then Isaac is killed in a car accident, and everything changes.

Grace, Isaac's girlfriend, the girl everyone knows and sees with him, can grieve openly and publicly. Stella cannot. Her loss is invisible, her grief has no legitimate space, and she has to carry it entirely alone. When, almost by accident, she begins to form a real friendship with Grace, the novel tightens into something genuinely complex: how do you build an honest connection with someone when your very presence in their life is built on a lie?

James handles this central tension with considerable skill. The filmic quality of her writing is vivid and propulsive and the characters feel immediately real and this keeps the pages turning in the way that the best contemporary YA consistently does. The novel will appeal to readers who like fiction that deals with family, mental health, love and friendship, and the messy, overlapping business of working out who you are while all of those things are happening at once.

For young adults who have

ever found themselves building a friendship on uncertain foundations or not sure of their place in their world, **Completely Normal (and other lies)** will feel both compulsive and, in the best way, uncomfortably familiar. A promising first novel from a writer with a clear eye for the particular textures of teenage life. **LJS**

Wild Horse Summer

★★★★

Lauren St John, Faber, 327pp, 9780571376193, £8.99 pbk

The main plot here could easily have fitted into those now defunct text comics for girls, where put-upon young heroines week after week just get by despite enmity from outside and a chronic sense of inadequacy within. But while the reasons for 16-year-old American Morgan Taylor's belief that she has done something terribly wrong remain unconvincing and somewhat under-written, her current state of misery and the way she gradually climbs out of it still makes for gripping reading.

Arriving in Devon to escape her past, Morgan helps out at a good but failing riding school while hiding the fact she is an excellent rider herself. She gradually bonds with a horse that like her has lost all confidence, and their wary courtship is well described. But it is still a tough journey for them both, and the author writes knowledgeably about all matters equine. Wild Exmoor ponies act as a silent yet supportive chorus as Morgan accepts an epic challenge that will save the Centre where she has begun to be happy. The previous unpleasantness in America is finally explained away through the efforts of Cal, a boy friend in the making so pure that where a previous girl was concerned: 'Last year he had almost kissed her at a party. The next day, he'd been relieved he'd caught himself in time.' A narrow escape, indeed.

Lauren St John has written many successful stories for children and adolescents and plot-wise knows what she's doing. She also brings into her fiction a fine understanding of the countryside where horses roam, some wild, others only just tamed. Once started, this is a story difficult to put down, even though it is obvious that everything will eventually work out for the good. Who would wish for anything else? **NT**

14+ Secondary/Adult

Traitors' Nest

★★★★

Frances Hardinge, First Ink, 411pp, 9781037413537, £16.99 hbk

Frances Hardinge is a highly original writer, and this story once again is set in a universe and time of her own. Thankfully eschewing the over-worked picaresque model, she concentrates instead on what might happen when one group of villagers succeed in ousting a heartless and tyrannical castle overlord. Establishing a democracy after that among those used to being bossed about is no easy matter. Spies, traitors and contemporaries continue to confront each other while danger from outside never ceases to threaten.

But there is another game here: castles wherever they are may suddenly transplant elsewhere, to be replaced by others of different shape and complexion. This is because of the machinations of a small group of immortal Players, wedded to maintaining the established social order. They exist in another plane and have the power to switch castles around at a whim as in a game. But unusually they are joined by a villager with different ideas. Hanged by his over-lord, he leaves behind his fifteen-year-old son Burr, who eventually becomes an unwilling but effective local leader.

Various strangely-named officials visit the villagers, all with advice or orders that may or may not be in the public interest. Some of what the Players are planning or thinking of doing meanwhile is portrayed moment to moment in tapestries hanging on castle walls. Burr and his two spritely sisters finally make it, but a full understanding of this intricately plotted story requires very concentrated reading. And that's where the problems start; it really is too long with the narrative sagging midway through. Battles, sieges, betrayals, love interest all help out, and the author's feeling for the arcane provides memorable moments. Nick Hayes accompanying illustrations do ample justice to such a richly imagined text, but easily digested reading it is not. **NT**

Cut Him Out In Little Stars

★★★★

Lucy Strange, Chicken House, 9781915026163, £8.99 pbk

The Kent and Sussex coast in the Second World War: clifftops and airfields, the distant sound of battle across the Channel, and the ordinary lives of people trying to hold themselves together in extraordinary times. It is into this landscape that Lucy Strange drops Juliet, a young woman sent to stay with her sister after the death of her first love, a fighter pilot killed in action. Grieving and disoriented,



Juliet finds the coastline of her childhood both a comfort and an unsettling mirror, full of memories she is not yet ready to face.

Then a body is discovered on the beach near the house, apparently washed up by the tide, and everything shifts. Questions surface alongside memories, a chilling mystery begins to unfold, and Juliet finds herself drawn into a series of events that refuses to let her stay still in her grief.

Strange is a careful and confident storyteller, and the historical detail here is both precise and atmospheric. The novel is rooted in the real geography of the south coast, the airfields that still exist today, the rhythms of coastal life reshaped by wartime, and that rootedness gives the story real weight. Particularly pleasing is the novel's treatment of women in wartime, lifeboat crew members, key players in the war effort, women living lives that flatly defy the usual stereotypes of the period. Strange renders these roles without fanfare, presenting them as simply what women did, which is exactly right.

But this is also a novel about love: first love lost, love that arrives when you are least prepared for it and least willing to confront it, and the way that grief and new feeling can exist alongside one another in bewildering proximity. The romance is handled with as much skill as the mystery, and the two strands weave together in a way that keeps the pages turning. There are twists along the way that earn their place, and a storytelling momentum that makes this a genuinely compelling read.

Rich in atmosphere, grounded in real history and animated by a central character whose emotional journey feels entirely authentic, **Cut Him Out In Little Stars** is a layered and accomplished novel that works as romance, mystery and historical fiction all at once. **LJS**

I Can't Believe I don't Have a Boyfriend

★★★★★

Harry Trevaldwy, First Ink, 362pp, 9781035049233, £8.99 pbk
This follow up to **The Romantic Tragedies of a Drama King** is every bit as hilarious and joyous as the first book but with even more drama and misconceptions at every turn.

Patch is eagerly awaiting the return of his would-be boyfriend, Sam who has spent the Christmas holidays in New York with his best friend Peter's family. He is hoping that Sam will announce his feelings for Patch at a New Year's Eve party he is attending with his friends Jean and Tessa. Of course, things do not quite work out as Patch has envisaged but they do share a kiss. Does this mean Patch now has a boyfriend? It is not clear, but when Patch invites Sam out on a date, everything goes pear-shaped as Patch misreads all the cues and takes Sam to three very public events when all Sam wanted was to talk to Patch, without any onlookers! Patch is appalled he had got it so wrong – has he lost Sam already? Does Peter perhaps still have feelings for Patch or is it vice-versa?

Meanwhile, everyone else is having relationship wobbles too. There is a new man in Patches' Mum's life, nick-named Honey Paul. Patch tries to derail a family dinner by trying to prove that Honey Paul is homophobic like all his mum's previous boyfriends. Jean is becoming very evasive about Callum, the class bad boy and Tessa has a date with Flora. Plus Sam is convinced his favourite English teacher fancies the new history teacher. What can possibly go wrong?

The permutations for toe-curling and embarrassing incidents are endless, made all the more hilarious by the lists that Patch writes down on how he thinks every situation will pan out as opposed to what actually happens in reality.

The adolescent awkwardness and loud declarations with no filter is spot on, as is their sweetness and vulnerability. This time there is more feeling and emotion with some more difficult undercurrents involving mental health, coming out, and finding oneself. Patch is still totally self-obsessed but his growing awareness that he is not the only pebble on the beach and his loyalty and kindness to his friends is lovely to see. A life affirming and thoroughly enjoyable read. JC

Darker Water

★★★★★

Emma Read, Faber, 363pp, 978-0-571-39052-6, £8.99 pbk

Darker Water oozes tension from the start. Its metaphorical title and striking dark-hued cover effectively set the scene for what is to come. It

is 2089 and the world is increasingly becoming engulfed by water, thanks to the graphically named Great Climate Ignorance. ProCorp have developed deepwater mining stations 4 kilometres below the sea, where miners, engineers and biologists collect and process ProLEC bacteria which provides an essential energy source for the beleaguered world above the waves.

However, from the first page of the book it is clear that all is not well, as Audley, a brilliantly gifted young scientist, sends an encrypted message to an unknown source about secrets and problems hidden behind the corporate façade. Each chapter begins with an extract from the company's handbook for staff, extolling its virtues and achievements but as the narrative moves on it is clear that devious and self-serving individuals within the organisation are an ever-increasing danger to its safety and stability.

Despite its assurances of equality, Procorp use a rigid class system to delineate its employees. Betty, a young miner, is in the lowest class-which, of course, does all the difficult work of extracting the bacteria from rocks in and around the 7-kilometre abyssal plains. Maia is an engineer, with more privileges and Audley, a scientist, is at the top of the pecking order, with everything at his disposal of the best quality. Despite ProCorp's insistence on setting one echelon against another, the three of them gradually begin to work together secretly to uncover the terrifying secrets which the company elaborately attempts to hide.

Descriptions of the lifestyle and technologies at work deep beneath the sea are detailed and convincing but Read very gradually begins to create an atmosphere of unease which threads through the reassurances which ProCorp glibly provide. Little by little, both inside and outside the station, things begin to falter, both physically and mentally and dramatic changes in the ocean's creatures ring warning bells which continue to get louder. The acceleration of deterioration is cleverly paced to retain credibility and it becomes obvious that things at the highest level of the company are not what they seem.

As the narrative picks up momentum it becomes irresistible- the book is impossible to put down. Betrayals, surprising allies, vivid descriptions of mutating ocean creatures and the vicious destruction of key staff by those at the top of the power tree build a terrifying picture of the greed and completely unprincipled behaviour which caused the world's problems. This is a story full of shocks and horrors but it never loses sight of the fact that loyalty,

friendship and love are threaded through catastrophe and that integrity and courage can pierce the most corrupt scenarios. This is no vacuous sci-fi horror story-it has heart and we cheer on Betty, Maia and Audley with the realisation that even in our deeply troubled world, all is not irrevocably lost. VR

**Queens of the Crypt Vol 1
Oh My Crypt!** Graphic Novel

★★★★★

Dom & Ink. Hot Key Books, 208pp, 9781471421891, £12.99, pbk

Bolton based freelance author of **Free To Be Me** and **Queer Power**, global brand illustrator, official artist for Ru Paul's *Drag Race UK* (Seasons 1-5), and **Narnia** fan, Dominic Evans has created an astonishing creative cornucopia for their first graphic novel. Celebrating queer identity, found family, classic horror movies and iconic characters like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the *Phantom of the Opera*, whilst also exploring serious topics like mental health and self-discovery, **Queens of the Crypt** is an eye-popping monochrome feast for fans of cos play, drag and gothic fiction.

Featuring a non-binary protagonist called Barnaby Jones who discovers a world of emotion in their closet when they come out to their parents, this otherworldly graphic novel invites the reader into the fantastical town of Widow's Creek stalked by the *Faceless Frightener* who is kidnapping conflicted teens for nefarious purposes.

With bewitching visuals from the crypt shaped cover to the map, gothic vignettes of turrets, knocking hands, hypnotic eyes and cobweb-ridden staircases, **Queens of the Crypt** vibrates with a 1950's comic book style as the Queens awaken to assist Barnaby in fighting their fears. Materialising from the pages of gothic novels and 1940's detective noir, emerging from the swamps of 1950's B Movies, lighting the way with operatic flourish and surfacing from nightmares, *The Countess*, *The Phantom*, *Lady Invisible*, *The Creature* and the *Bogeywoman* assemble dazzling the reader with cryptastique action scenes of drama, peril and screaming faces.

Dom and Ink's stunning visuals make it impossible to look away as the plot pelts at a crazy pace and superhero librarian Miss Kwan joins the battle against the forces of darkness. **Queens of the Crypt** is an extraordinary melange of cinematic influences dripping with atmosphere. With creepy lettering by Lor Prescott, it will appeal to fans of web comic author EM Carroll and teens searching for self-expression, nuanced queer representation and novels celebrating divas and misfits. Ending on a chapter entitled *It Came From The Library* promising another plot twist, a sequel is imminent. TJ

**Blood of Gods and Girls**

★★★★★

K.L. Kaine, Penguin, 448pp, 978-0241707739, £18.99 hbk

We're in a fairly familiar fantasy world in K.L. Kaine's YA novel, a small state, its dusty capital city surrounded by mountains where live magical creatures, the territory ruled by an all-powerful king, this one apparently immortal. Our protagonist Nisha is of a familiar if pleasing type too, wily, tough physically and apparently mentally, living by her wits on the streets. What sets it apart, and gives its narrative a fiery propulsive drive, is the author's fury at society's treatment of women and girls, not just in this fictional society either, but all of them. In Nisha's world, women are completely in thrall to men, with no say in who they marry, no control over their money, cast aside on a whim, sometimes into pits where they will starve to death. What's more, they are told every day that they are worthless. This despite the people's worship of a goddess, with young girls chosen to be her mortal representatives. Nisha was one of those, and the only one who managed to escape her gilded cage, faking her own death to avoid recapture. Since she adopted a baby girl, abandoned by her family for the sin of being female, Nisha has even more reason to hide from the king's guards. When she is discovered, she and Ratna, the little girl, are rescued by another young woman, a Golden Eagle Warrior no less, and taken to a community of women living high in the mountains. They believe that as the sole surviving vessel for the great Goddess, Nisha can tempt Shantavi back to help her people and, crucially, remove the gift of immortality she bestowed on her former lover, the king. Gradually, Nisha decides to help, to find the Goddess and to fight against everything she's been told is right from the day she was born. With various challenges to be overcome and a close-knit group of comrades to help, including the boy who became her friend in the temple complex, Nisha's quest is genuinely

reviews

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exciting and the pages turn quickly. The possibility that one of those in her group is a traitor, ups the tension nicely. Her success depends on her ability to stop seeing herself as weak and inferior to men, and 'to believe her own stories' as Garuda the warrior tells her. That message is laid out for readers very clearly, but it's an important and inspiring one, while the author is careful too not to write off all men, and to show that an equal society is better for everyone. This feminist fantasy finds opportunities for humour amongst the polemic and action and offers readers lots to enjoy as well as to think about. **AR**

And Then We Screamed

★★★★★

Holly Bourne, Usborne, 416pp, 9781836040729, £9.99 pbk

Clover Gray is a senior in a small-town American high school. Maple Lakes is the kind of town where nothing happens, everyone knows everyone else and most things are very orderly.

That is until Abigail Maiden, daughter of the local clergyman, star cheerleader and popular girl, starts full-body screaming in the middle of a mid-term exam. Why Abigail and why is she screaming?

Clover Gray and Brody Deacon, a serious journalism candidate, decide to investigate. As more girls – and only girls – begin screaming like Abigail, the crisis deepens. Will they find out the reason for the screaming and how to stop it? And is Maple Lakes as perfect as it seems?

For the first almost three hundred pages of this narrative, readers will fall into two camps. Those who like Gothic literature, horror and psychology will be fascinated. Those who like Bourne for her usual character and emotion-driven narratives will find most of this novel hard and some may even give up before reading the explosive denouement in the last hundred pages. This is where the psychology comes in to play and Bourne's usual page-turning style takes over.

There is a key story line that could have been developed more fully. Clover's mum has had cancer and some more insight into how this affected Clover and her brother, River, would have been welcome. This may have helped readers in a similar situation. **RB**

Then We'll Be Happy

★★★★★

Alan Carrigan, Chicken House, 272pp, 9781917121212, £8.99 pbk
Sam is seventeen. He is obsessed with football but continually frustrated. He has cerebral palsy and is a full-time power wheelchair user. His latest disappointment is that, at the last minute, he is not able to go on a much-anticipated school trip. The school bus still has no wheelchair

access despite it having been promised by the head teacher a year before. The reason: funding. Disability access is not seen as a priority.

Sam is understandably livid. He decides to mount a music concert to raise funds for an accessible bus and to bring awareness to wider disability-related issues. Can he and the team of people he trusts pull a concert off? That is the basic premise of the book but so many wider issues related to disability such as the use of hoists for transfers and the frustration of having to arrange to do everything you want to do only with the help of other people are explored.

One of Carrigan's many achievements is that he includes both the social and medical models of disability in terms that young people both disabled and non-disabled can understand. This is rare in a YA book but is essential to understanding disability issues and their implications. Sam is three dimensional, cheeky and believable. If you know a disabled young person, this is the book for them. There are numerous occasions when they will laugh out loud. **RB**

Sentinel of the Sun

★★★★★

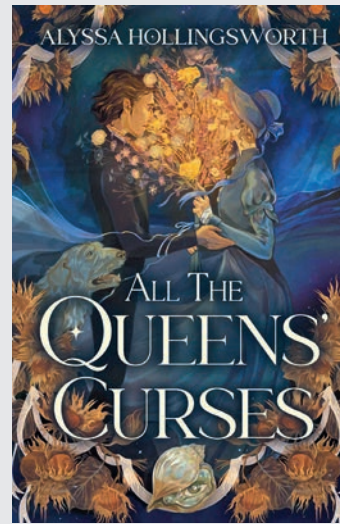
Eira Morgan-Jones, Cando (Graffeg), 432pp, 9781917467506, £9.99 pbk

Eira Morgan-Jones has set her debut novel in a brilliantly realised alternative world, in which most of the people live in distinct communities, and obsessively worship The Source, as instructed by the Luminary, who lives in more luxurious surroundings of the Ziggurat.

Seventeen-year-old Alexis is a strong-minded girl, like her mother Carys, so much so that she is called 'feral' by some members of the community in the Powlen Valley. She is dodging the service in the Temple by climbing the tower when she sees a giant wave approaching the nearby beach, and watches in horror as it sweeps away the temple and all the houses in the village. She and her enemy, Cadi, are washed further down the valley, and she pulls Cadi out of the water, using superhuman strength that makes the strange markings that she has on her arms glow. Cadi is badly injured but realises that she needs to stay with Alexis to enable them both to survive, and their bickering gradually thaws into a sort of friendship. A natural leader, if flawed and impulsive, Alexis becomes responsible for a small group hiding from the guards. One guard, Thuya, has been explicitly ordered to find Alexis and her mother, though he is not allowed to know why, and his story is interspersed with hers, and with that of the Luminary, who is ruling under the spell of Lady Lara, supposedly mouthpiece of the Source.

Eira Morgan-Jones skilfully interweaves the stories in sections

so that we follow each character for a few chapters, then shifts to another, often at an exciting moment. We are certainly kept interested in all the threads, including the boorish guards. There is romance too: Theo joins the group and enables Alexis to understand the meaning of her markings, which leads to new possibilities, and as these stories converge, it is clear that there is more to come, and four books are promised. **DB**



All the Queens' Curses

★★★

Alyssa Hollingsworth, Rock the Boat, 352pp. 9781836432876, £9.99, pbk

Inspired by a blend of Orkney folklorist Tom Muir's version of the strange folk tale *Kate Crackernuts* and influenced by the legends of the selkie wife from the isles of Northern Scotland, this third novel from Alyssa Hollingsworth continues to explore what she addressed in her Ph.D. thesis entitled *Breaking the Curse: Retelling a Folk Fairy Tale to Explore Trauma and Healing in Novels for Young People*. Set in the mystical islands of Skyare, this romantasy features stepsisters, princes and interfering parents. It is about dark secrets and inter-generational trauma wrapped in the cloak of fairy-tale.

Told in the first-person voices of Kit and Idris, the carefully crafted *All the Queens' Curses* weaves the tale of capricious finfolk who demand payment for past crimes. Set to die of exhaustion and wracked by guilt, their desperation to break the cruel curses bestowed upon them by selfish parents, wicked step-parents and callous ancestors builds as the young people undergo transformations and lessons of the heart and mind. As the haar descends, will they make true choices as they consider their options?

Hollingsworth deftly juxtaposes the trickery of the Hidden folk with the dark underbelly of abuse but where the book falters is that the secondary characters of Idris's brother Abram, Kit's sister Catharine and their friend

Jay Berd lack depth. The Puck like character of Speir has a 'What fools, these mortals be' energy about him while the Hidden Queen has pain masked by cold indifference. At the heart of this story of magic and betrayal there is a powerful own voice as Kit, inspired by seventeen-year-old Alyssa's personal experiences, manages her rheumatoid arthritis. Kit's isolation also bleeds into reality reflected in Alyssa's time spent as an immunocompromised person during Covid-19 lockdowns.

This novel will appeal to fans of fairy-tale retellings that feature realistic characters shaped by relatable events. It will connect with teens who have had similar experiences with illnesses and faced difficult decisions. Alyssa's next book will be another retelling featuring talking birds, stolen magic and a princess who waxes and wanes with the moon. **TJ**

Between Ghosts and Gods

★★★★★

Ann Sei Lin, Walker Books, 352pp, 9781529530872, £16.99 hbk

This intriguing and eventful story takes the reader to Ghost City, the under-realm of ancient Chinese mythology, peopled by demons, ghosts and living curses. Katsu has been unfairly condemned to this dark world for three hundred years for selling her soul to buy a jade pendant which her mother insisted would save the life of her dying sister. Her greatest wish is to return to the mortal world and she tries to appease the gods by living according to the many hundreds of Heavenly Principles, hoping that they will notice and relent.

Enter Arun, a beleaguered young prince from the mortal realm, looking for his lost mother, Sunan. Kasu befriends him and helps him in his search by teaching him how to navigate the complexities and horrors of Ghost City as a living person among the desperate ghosts. The hint of an attraction is between them is there from the start. The final protagonist is the teleporting cat, Ruu, a curse-that is, a spirit born from a human heart and with the gift of speech.

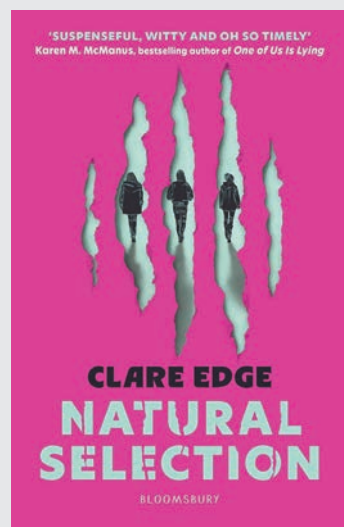
The three unite to help Arun discover what has happened to his mother. Their journey takes the reader through the many terrors of the under-realm; its gruesome practices and rituals, its many tragic ghosts and demons and its hopelessness. This is not merely a physical journey, but also a philosophical one: The narrative is action-packed and full of twists and turns but also brings the protagonists and their many enemies vividly to life. Tension and danger are ever-present and the consequences of making a mistake are repeatedly and graphically emphasised.

When the three friends gain access to the mortal realm by unravelling a sinister plot revolving around one of its gods Kasu's initial reaction is delight-this is where she longs to return to. But little by little, following Sunan's

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trail and discovering the truth behind her disappearance, she realises that the judgements made by the gods who she respected unequivocally are not governed by principle but by a determination to seize power whatever the cost to both their subjects and their contemporaries and their heavenly realm is as rife with corruption as the ghost world which they have condemned her to inhabit. The Heavenly Principles are not instructions to improve oneself but invented by the ruling gods as a means of keeping absolute control.

The developing relationship between Arun and Katsu is skilfully and touchingly handled so that when they return together to the under-realm, knowing that their present lives will end and they will be born again with all knowledge wiped out a brief epilogue confirms that they will meet once more. When Katsu is again a new-born baby there is a mysterious cat by her crib promising 'And when you're grown, let's find the boy and raise hell, shall we?' **VR**



Natural Selection

★★★★

Clare Edge, Bloomsbury, 342pp
9781526693563, £8.99, pbk

From the ragged bear-slashed neon pink cover, revealing three silhouettes of teenage girls with a determined step, to the visceral prose and gory imagery within, this edgy, fierce and uncompromising debut YA feminist thriller has a savage bite. Set in the wild, rocky terrain of Montana in the heart of hunting country, it exposes the toxicity and scars left by a patriarchal system where the teenage girls of Riverside are objectified and preyed upon. **Natural Selection** is a departure for author Clare Edge, known for **Accidental Demons**, her magical Middle grade series about a diabetic witch.

Structured in three sections with pithy, insightful headings, *Grin and Bear It*, *It Was the Bear and Claws Out*,

Edge's narrative catapults the reader into a small-town nightmare where mysterious deaths occur in grisly circumstances and the victimised discover their teeth and claws.

Told in the distinctive voices of three conflicted girls who are damaged by events unfolding over a series of teen gatherings and haunted by the memory of a missing girl, it deals with disturbing issues including degradation, homophobia, prejudice, scape-goating, sexual assault and voyeurism.

Hockey star Outlaw [otherwise known as Megan Lawless], shiny plastic Megan [set to be valedictorian and Prom Queen and dating popular jock Kevin] and Tarot card reading Goth Meghan [known as Bee] are unreliable narrators with memory gaps [reflecting the effects of Rohypnol] who are hiding secrets from themselves and each other. Can they keep their friendships and budding romances on track while confronting past traumas and embracing their inner strength?

Taught from infancy to be 'bear aware', self-confessed witch Edge suffuses her pacy rage-fuelled plot with her local knowledge of Rocky Mountain terrain and a supernatural energy which roars through an eerie, frost-bitten landscape. Featuring scenes redolent of the macabre trappings of a gruesome gothic fairy-tale, her novel will appeal to teens looking for sensitive queer representation, fans of contemporary horror, revenge fantasy and dark academia. While it has elements of the cult, darkly comic 80's movie **Heathers** and Ryan La Sala's sinister **The Honeys**, more importantly it is thought provoking and balanced with Outlaw's brother Aiden being a respectful force for good in a town ruled by guns and men. As Edge explains, her story is based on an emotional truth and is meant to be cathartic.

With a second speculative YA thriller entitled **Cruel Instincts** pitched as *Cruel Intentions* x *The Birds* and her first novel for adults, a Shakespeare-infused, gothic fantasy **Hamlet and Juliet** planned for 2027 Clare Edge is one to watch. **TJ**

Kitty and Mary

★★★★

Juli Gray and Imogen Russell Williams, Andersen Press, 384pp,
9781839138645, £16.99, hbk

This is not the first novel to take up the characters of **Pride and Prejudice** and create new lives for them, but it's the first that I know to be written for a young adult audience. The blessing for an author is that there is much to work with. Even Austen's relatively minor figures are so clearly drawn that the world of any new novel comes ready peopled. The challenge, without doing an injustice to Austen or her social world, is to take her



characters somewhere else, perhaps even to a place that Austen herself would never think of going. Julia Gray and Imogen Russell Williams make the most of the opportunities and adroitly avoid the possible pitfalls. The stories of the younger Bennet sisters, Kitty and Mary, are told through their letters and journals after the events of Austen's novel. I assume from the cover of my proof copy that Julia Gray is writing Kitty's story and Imogen Russell Williams, Mary's; providing each sister with her own voice. Both voices are recognisably Austenian, and what is revealed in the gap between letters and journals offers some sharp insights and sly humour that fans of the original creator should recognise. Love and marriage remain a preoccupation for Kitty and Mary as it was for their sisters, alongside a determination to shape their own identities, a more modern preoccupation which, if anything, is only implicit in Austen's novels. And the two sisters go in different directions. Kitty remains at home in the familiar Austen social world, intent on becoming more conventionally feminine and accomplished to catch the attention of the new tenant of Netherfield Hall, while Mary becomes the companion of a young woman who is on her way to make a new life in India. For myself, Mary's journey, which includes a long sea voyage and the possibilities which are opened up by the people she meets in India, is the more interesting of the two. But a great deal of the humour is on Kitty's side as she tries on a variety of unsuitable personas, eventually to find one that fits perfectly and naturally, courtesy of an unexpected suitor. Young people who know Austen, either through the books themselves, or through the many screen adaptations, will know what to expect and will not be disappointed. They will also find aspects of Regency life that did not find their way into Jane's stories. For other readers, who knows, it might be an introduction to the great works themselves. **CB**

Say What You Think

★★★★★

Rachael Fernandes, Fox and Ink, 316pp, 978-1917894142, £9.99 pbk
Selena's life is changing: she is afraid of this loss of continuity and unsure of her future. Since she has just begun her final year at school she must decide which universities to apply for and which course to choose. To her closest friends Kira and Faye and her English teacher Ms Harkness the choice is obvious: Selena's enormous talent for English and her 'Selena Says' bulletins on the idiosyncrasies of school life mark her out for a career in journalism, but Selena simply can't decide.

A further source of distress is the fact that her neighbours of 17 years are moving to Manchester, splitting up the lifelong friendship between her and Ollie. The beginning of the book presents their friendship with great tenderness, but their shared familiarity is salted with Serena's realisation that she has grown to love Ollie and dare not tell him in case he doesn't feel the same.

The backdrop to this fraught mix is Rose Conrad, a singer who is universally adored, not least by Selena and her close friends. Each chapter begins with a snippet of lyrics from one of Conrad's songs, which suggest tangentially what the content of the chapter might be. The desperate attempts to get tickets for her latest show occupies Selena obsessively and her first inkling that Ollie is drifting away from her in his new life is when he fails to come to her aid.

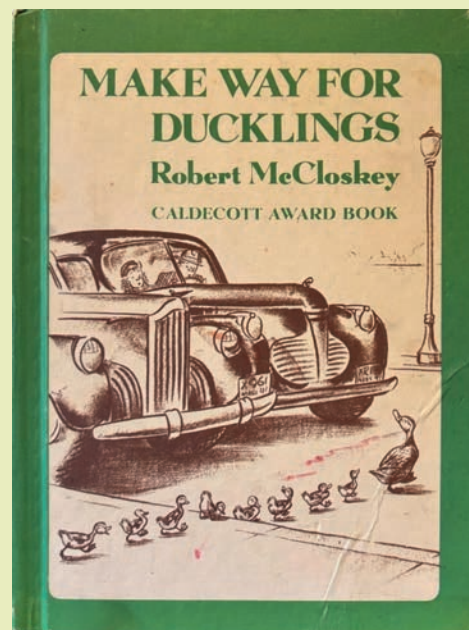
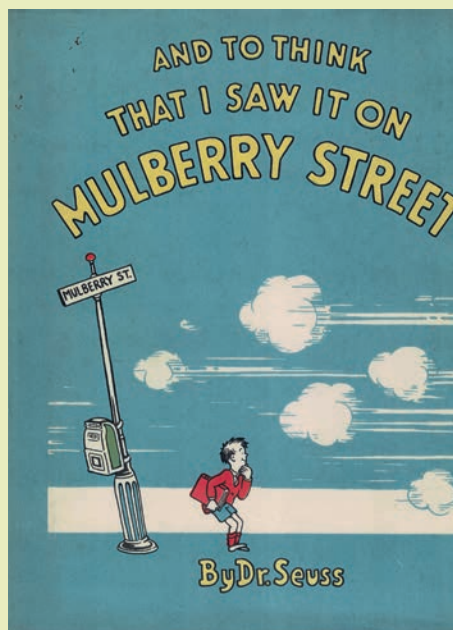
The new neighbour's eldest son, Ty, proves to be devastatingly handsome but also unbearably and persistently acerbic and Selena further mourns the loss of her friend. However, the narrative arc acts like a pair of scales and, gradually, as she gets to know Ty better and meetings with Ollie emphasise how their friendship has a lower profile in his life the balance shifts inexorably towards her new neighbour. This slow shift in perspective is skilfully handled and dialogue is authentic, clever and insightful.

Similarly, the relationship with her friends Kira and Faye is handled flawlessly, through all the troughs and peaks which assail them throughout this last year together in school. The stresses which assault their friendship cause a temporary rift but this is followed by a deeper understanding of each other's needs and an awareness that change is inevitable but not destructive.

Say What You Think is the perfect maxim for the journeys which each of the main characters embark upon and the exploration of emotional intelligence throughout the book creates a meaningful and entirely believable backdrop for the crises and joys which are an inescapable part of stepping into full adulthood. **VR**

Valediction: No.29

Brian Alderson is presenting his unique collection of children's books to **Seven Stories** and **Newcastle University**. Among the books he is passing on, some early American works.



Following the attempt by Puffin Books to ensure that worried parents could protect their children from the works of Roald Dahl it is good to hear that similar measures may occur on the other side of the Atlantic. It is perhaps predictable that a ban may extend to the picture books of Tomi Ungerer and especially his pornography! But the publisher of Theodor Geisel (the famous and much-loved Dr Seuss) has taken a hand of its own and has withdrawn his early book (1937) **And To Think That I saw It On Mulberry Street**, it is believed because of the portrayal of a Chinese character. Five other books were named but I do not know which they were.

It is not generally known that an English edition of **Mulberry Street** was published in 1939 by *Country Life* (not in Younger). In the same year Oxford University Press also published Doctor Seuss's **The Five Hundred Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins** (also not in Younger).

The involvement of the London office of OUP in American Publishing at this time is of interest in that it suggests a development that was interrupted by the declaration of war in 1939. It would seem that Basil Blackwell and his Shakespeare Head Press were also involved for they published a famous American picture book which has never since been published in England:

Doctor Seuss **And To Think That I saw It On Mulberry Street**. New York The Vanguard Press. London. Country Life 1939. Title Page. [page 2] Imprint [Page 3-4] Opening Verses. [Page 5-28] Verses and coloured illustrations. Binding: Illustrated paper over boards front and back. Colour Pictorial endpapers in blue. DJ as binding. Duplicate illustrated endpapers.

Robert McCloskey **Make Way for Ducklings**. Shakespeare Head Press. Oxford 1944. [1] Blank [2] Half Title [3] Announcement of Caldecott Medal [4] Title page as above. [5] Imprint [6] Additional half title [7-61] illustrations in sepia with text. Binding: Green cloth overboards with titling to front; front end papers with ducks hatching. Rear fixed end paper picture of island in park. No DJ.

Doctor Seuss **The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins** Sold



Make Way for Ducklings by Robert McCloskey 1944. It was set in Boston and is famous for its illustration of a policeman holding up the traffic for a family of ducklings to cross the street.



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.