# BOOKS FOR KEEPS

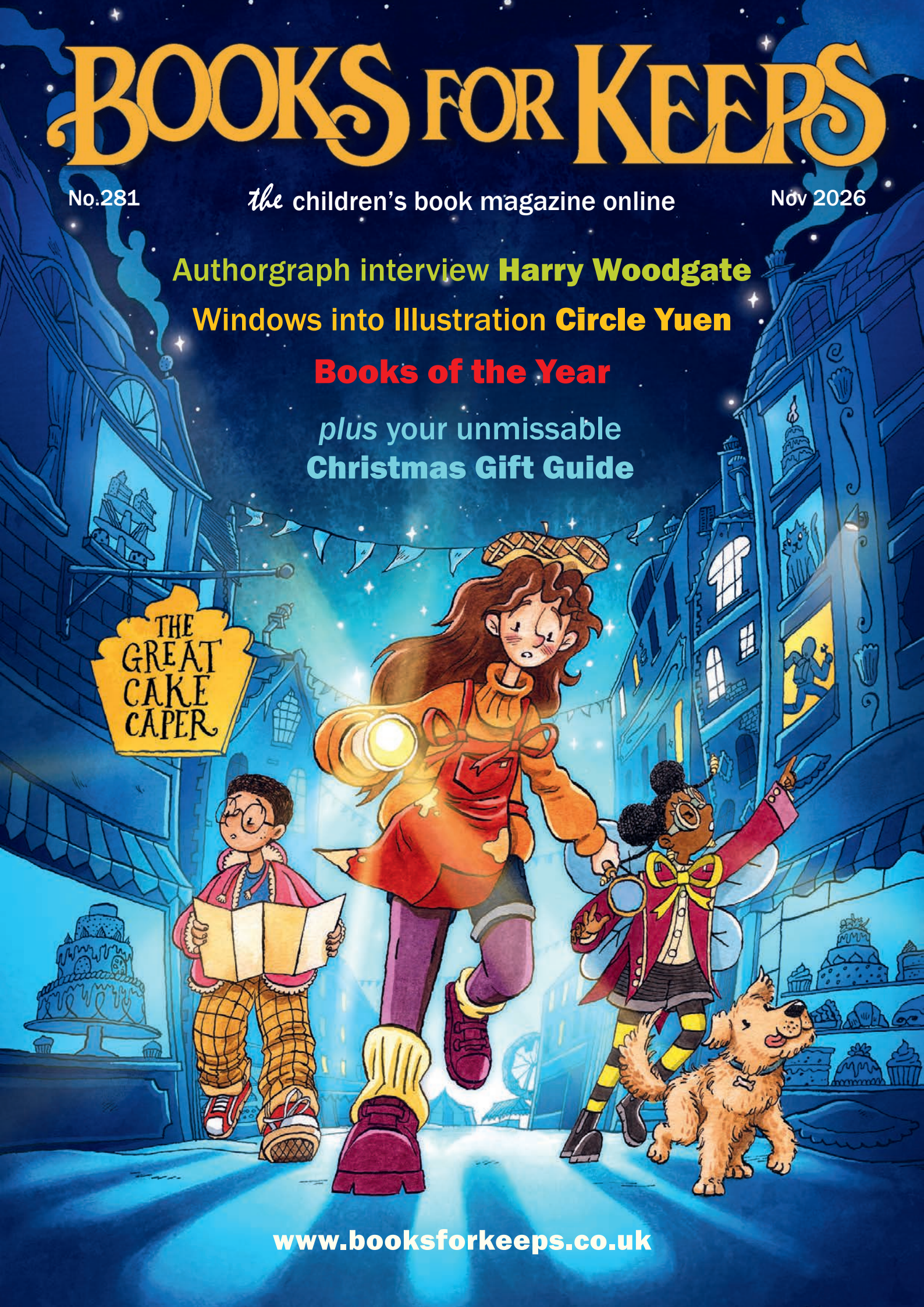
No.281 the children's book magazine online Nov 2026

Authorgraph interview **Harry Woodgate**

Windows into Illustration **Circle Yuen**

**Books of the Year**

*plus* your unmissable
**Christmas Gift Guide**




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### COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **Cinnamon Crumb, Baking Detective: The Great Cake Caper** written and illustrated by **Harry Woodgate**. Thanks to **Usborne** for their help with this cover.
Text and Illustrations
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# Editorial 281

It's November, and suddenly the end of 2026, aka **The National Year of Reading,** is looming into view. It seems no time since we were announcing the launch and plans to get everyone to *Go All In*. Recent **National Literacy Trust** research has identified a small increase in both reading enjoyment and daily reading amongst young people. More than 1 in 3 (36.1%) children and young people said they enjoyed reading in their free time, up from 32.7% in 2025. A small change but this is the first increase in reading enjoyment since 2021.

Daily reading increased too. In 2026, 1 in 5 (20.3%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said they read daily in their free time, up from 18.7% in 2025. This marks the first increase in daily reading since 2023, although levels remain below earlier years.

Both small changes but hopefully signs that things are turning round, though the report also highlights the differences of age, gender and socio-economic background.

This year saw Frank Cottrell Boyce end his tenure as Waterstones Children's Laureate, handing over to Patrice Lawrence, another excellent choice. Much of his term focussed on the benefits of reading for happiness, health, understanding and community wellbeing, and the huge importance of Early Years in particular. How disappointing therefore that **Inclusive Books for Children (IBC)** has paused its Baby and Toddler (ages 1–3) book category for the **IBC Awards** 2027, citing the low number of eligible submissions. **Fabia Turner**, head of content at **IBC**, hope this acts as a wake-up call to publishers: 'A handful of suitable board books is not enough to serve the UK's diverse early years audience.' Find out more about the decision and the books that made the 2026 shortlist in our news story.

This issue of **BfK** is coming out just before publication of this year's **Reflecting Realities** report, one of the most important pieces of research into UK children's books. Last year's survey showed a dramatic decrease in the number of picture books featuring racially minoritised characters though the report authors praised the rich breadth of realities encountered through this text type. We will bring you the report as soon as it is published.

Other highlights to look forward to later this month include the announcement of the shortlist for the first **Children's Booker Prize**, revealed on 24 November along with the names of the children who have been chosen to join judges Frank Cottrell-Boyce, Lolly Adefope and Sanchita Basu De Sarkar to choose the winner.

### Please Look After This Bear




Thursday 3rd December 2026 will see a special event at **CLPE**, Webber Street, London SE1 8QW. **BfK** readers are invited to join Professor Melanie Ramdarshan Bold and guests for a conversation about Paddington, Migration, Britishness and Children's Literature at a celebration of the publication of **Please Look After This Bear: How Paddington Became British** by Melanie Ramdarshan Bold and Aishwarya Subramanian (OUP, 2026) and to build a conversation about its themes.

Special guests include **Children's Laureate Patrice Lawrence** and **Farrah Serroukh** Director of Research and Strategic Development at **CLPE**, and **Dr Darren Chetty** will chair.

This event is free to all and all are welcome. Book here.




**On sale now: Tony Ross 'fun time' notelets**
2026 was the final year of the **Friends' Calendar,** produced by Peter Sheldon on behalf of **BookTrust.** This year, Peter has teamed up with **Tony Ross,** to provide some beautiful quality notelets which are on sale now.


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# Books of the Year 2026

## This year's stand out new books, recommended by a panel of experts including **Books for Keeps** reviewers and writers.

**Jon Biddle**, primary school teacher, English lead, and national advocate for **Reading for Pleasure.**

Jessica Mary Ellis's verse novel debut, **When the Birds Wake Up**, is a beautiful book. On one level, it tells the story of Pear, a girl who is being bullied at school, but it goes far beyond that. It explores how family relationships evolve, the importance of self-esteem, the need to find a place where we can feel accepted, as well as the unconditional love that pets can provide. The writing is gentle, with a strong focus on emotional detail, and Pear is a protagonist young readers will really empathise with. Sophie Burrows' illustrations work beautifully alongside the text, bringing Pear's world to life and adding to the emotional impact of the story. I've been recommending it to my Year 6 pupils since it was published, and it offers plenty to inspire classroom discussion. It might be too early to call it a future classic, but it genuinely feels like one

**Dr Rebecca Butler** writes, lectures and tutors on children's literature and is a regular reviewer for **Books for Keeps.**

I have chosen two outstanding books for 2026. The first is **Then We'll be Happy** by Alan Carrigan which is about Sam, a seventeen-year-old with cerebral palsy and the fights he has to undertake to get his voice heard. For anyone with a disability, this is laugh out loud funny as well as painful.

My second choice is **We Wait for the Stars** by Bridget Hamilton. This is a searing exploration of the many facets of grief and the scene with the Cambridge don is etched in my head. These two debuts deserve your attention.

**Professor Teresa Cremin, Open University,** Co-director, **Literacy and Social Justice Centre**

Personally, I love novels that pack an emotional punch. They draw me in, triggering angst and space for reflection and connection, remaining with me far longer than other kinds of texts. Two affectively engaging examples I highly recommend are Fidan Meikle's **My Name is Zayn** and Steve Cole's **The Wild Ones**. The former, a companion to the award-winning **My name is Samim**, is a raw roller- coaster of a novel which documents Zayn's dark experiences as a refugee in England whilst at the same time offering vignettes of care, compassion and brotherhood. The latter, tracks the journey of a small band of domestic pets in a post-apocalyptic world. As they seek a new home, their painful innocence, and a deep sense of trepidation travels with them into the eerie unknown. In both texts, the emotional depth reached is frankly remarkable – these are powerful empathetic reads.

**Pam Dix** is Chair of **IBBY UK** and a regular contributor to **Books for Keeps.**

Much of my reading this year has focused on children's books from and about Palestine as IBBY UK is leading on a project for IBBY internationally, and I have chosen two of these books. These are coincidentally by the same author. Hooda Shawa is a British Palestinian living in Kuwait where she is a professor of English at the University. She has written numerous children's books and won many awards.

The first is a YA book, **The Necklace of Seven Souls**, translated by Nour Jaljuli and Sawad Hussain, originally published by the Tamer Institute for Community Education in Arabic. The English edition is from an interesting publisher, Restless Books. Farida and Mazen are two 19 year-old third-generation Palestinian refugees who meet by chance in Paris and discover that their family histories are intertwined through displacement to Aleppo following the Nakba in 1948. Their family stories are told through memories, diaries and artefacts from their grandmothers, allowing an exploration of Palestinian identity in the diaspora and intergenerational memory. A second theme is about art and forgery, including a powerful critique of Orientalist views (of Matisse and others) who in seeking the 'colours of the east' often represent the male gaze. The book is short and fully illustrated throughout, handling these complex themes very lightly and making it an excellent historical novel.

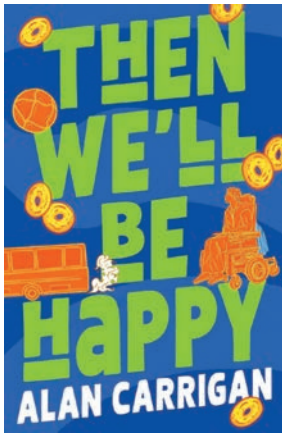
Hooda Al Shawa's **Handala's Odyssey** is a picturebook illustrated by Shereed Said, published in Singapore by Cinammon Art Publishing, 2026. Handala is a refugee boy who sets sail on his 'odyssey' to a home that he has never seen but has always known. He is a child full of stories and hope, imagination and resilience, all beautifully and colourfully illustrated as his ship crosses restless seas. His journey ends with him linking with the Freedom Flotilla, and the final section of the book provides facts about this social activism. The character of Handala is an iconic symbol of Palestinian identity and defiance, created in 1948 by the cartoonist Naji al-Ali, and indeed one of the ships used in the July 2025 Gaza Freedom Flotilla was named after it.

You can see the full list of IBBY books here.

**Daniel Hahn,** writer, editor, translator.

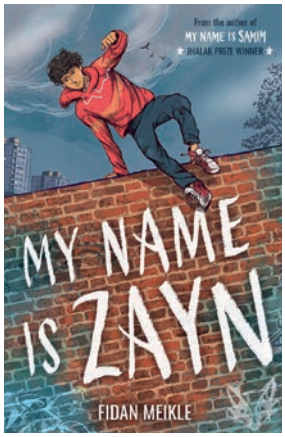
I was instantly drawn into the uneasy darkness of **Monsters**, the atmospheric pictures-and-text novel by Nicolas Zouliamis and Stéphane Servant. It's the creepy world where we meet the Circus of Dreams, which is quite like many circuses you've encountered before, but with one crucial difference… Zouliamis's pictures aren't



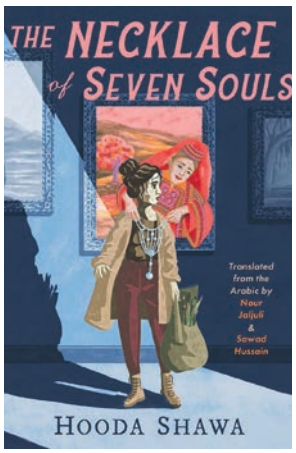



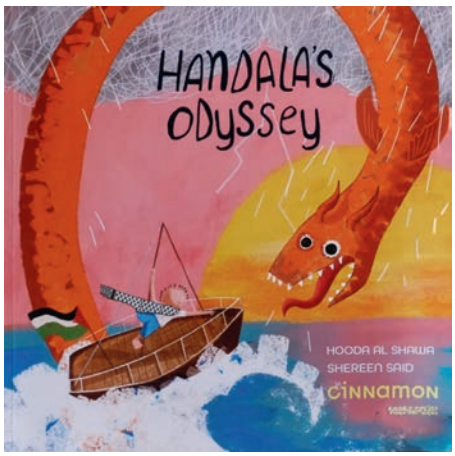


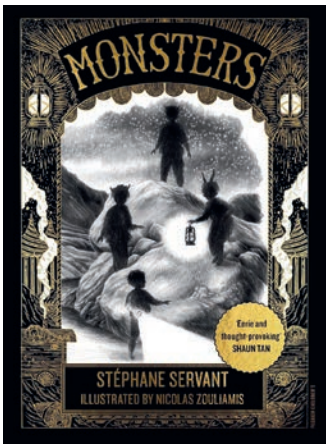


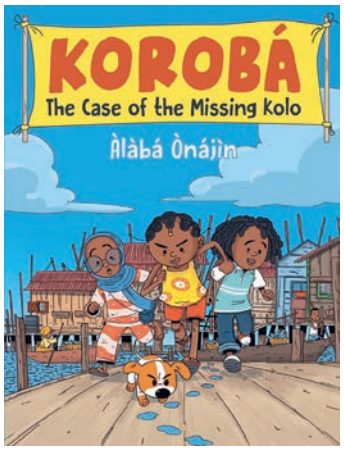





only gorgeous but also ingenious (what are they hiding?); and Servant's gripping story, which is complex and rich (and translated by Sarah Ardizzone, the very best) brings revelations that will encourage any reader to ask some very big questions. A tense and fearsome monster story – about tolerance, difference, kindness, and friendship against the odds

**Jake Hope**, reading development and children's book consultant, chair of the working party for the **Carnegie Medals**

Culture, community and character combine in this colourful, immediate and immersive graphic novel mystery. **Korobá: The Case of the Missing Kolo** by Àlàbá Ònájìn introduces the titular Koroba, her friends, and Popi the spirited dog. A wave of excitement spreads across the group on the approach of the Makoko festival. Things go awry when one of their special festival Kolo boxes goes missing. Will Korobá be able to solve the mystery of where the box has gone? There's wonderful energy both in the storytelling and in the vibrant illustrations and the vivid setting. This is a terrific graphic novel introduction to the mystery genre offering plenty of clues to piece together and moments of tension – unmissable!

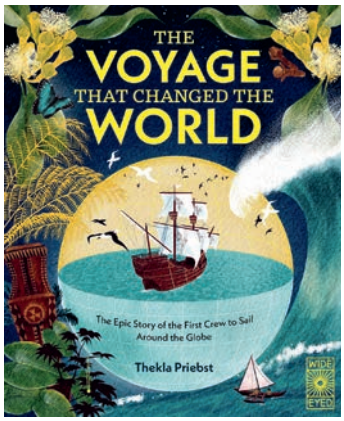
The connection between childhood and nature is vividly brought to life in Park Jihee's extraordinary wordless picture book, **The Polar Bear Day**. There's a textural quality to the illustrations which evoke playfulness, poignancy and have been drawn on old cardboard. Touches of wonder, warmth and wildness pervade a rich visual narrative that inspires and engages.

**Ferelith Hordon**, editorial advisor to **Books for Keeps**

Books take the reader on journeys. And three books this year have done just that for me. Patrick Ness in **Piper at the Gates of Dusk** took me on a reading experience that gripped me from the start. Once more we are in the world of **Chaos Walking**. Time has moved on but the tensions remain. Taut writing, real relationships and very real dilemmas; Max and Ben stepped off the page and I cannot wait to meet them again. Taking me on a real journey **The Voyage that Changed the World** by Thekla Priebst introduced me to that circumnavigation of the globe by Magellan and his crew. Her meticulous approach and even more her luminous illustrations brought this adventure, the success, the failures – and the legacies to vivid life. Then a journey for the emotions – Leo Timmers' picture book **Kiki and Me**. Text and images perfectly matched to create the special bond between a little girl and a horse. Timmers is a picture book creator of imagination, humour and integrity. This was a journey of the heart.

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

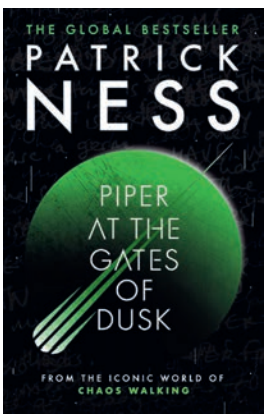
My book of 2026 is **Ode to Joy**, an extraordinary graphic novel by poet and artist Sophie Herxheimer. Written with Sarah Gavron, it's the story of Gavron's father-in-law Ib Katznelson and how, as a very young child, he was imprisoned in the Nazi prison camp Theresienstadt. We meet Ib and his family as they try to flee their home in Denmark in 1943, are betrayed and captured, sent first to Ravensbrück, then to Theresienstadt. The brutal conditions of the camp are made clear but so too are the ways the inmates, including writers, artists, musicians and filmmakers, kept art alive. Amongst those who feature are Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, who taught art to the children in the camp, much of it saved by Raja Englanderova, a teenage inmate. Seeing the children's drawings inspired Herxheimer as did the chance discovery of a discarded box of old Czech books, published between 1922 and 1948. Pages from these as well as sheet music by Bach, Dvorák and Beethoven are recycled to create images of the people in the story, together with papercut, collage, and ink drawings. The effect is stunning, each page unique and so rich; Ib's history could not have been better told. Much of it is seen the eyes of Ib's young grandchildren and though this is not published on a children's list, it is suitable, indeed necessary reading for anyone aged 10 and above.

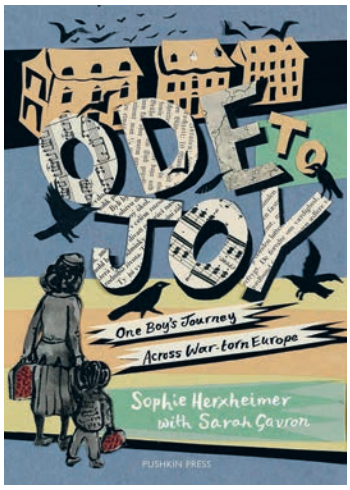






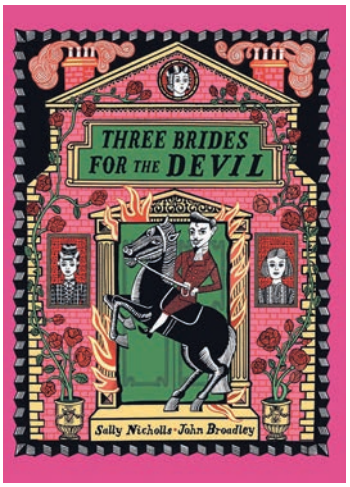










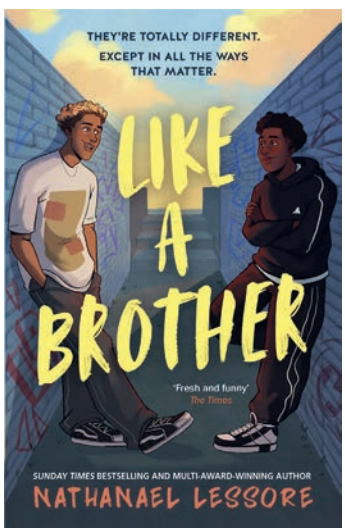


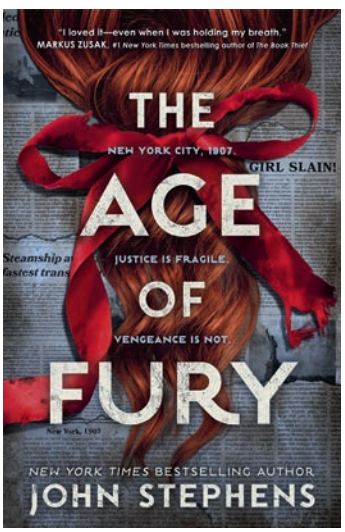


**Martin Salisbury**, Professor of Illustration, **Cambridge School of Art**

For those who share Mac Barnett's view that children deserve to be served good art **The Moon Shine Bright in the Sky at Night** by Emma Carlisle is a picturebook whose deeply lyrical visual tone draws on traditions of visionary romanticism in the arts that go back to William Blake and Samuel Palmer, and on through the postwar Neo-romantics such as Piper and Craxton. Emma Carlisle shares their sense of awe and mystery in connection with the landscape and its nocturnal inhabitants, bringing the night world to life for young readers in an entirely accessible form, delivering visual and verbal poetry whilst also explaining pictorially the cycles of the moon and stars. It's a much-overused word, but this book is genuinely 'magical'.

'There are fairy tales where a man marries a proud or shrewish woman and turns her into an obedient wife. … This story is a little different.' So begins **Three Brides for the Devil** by Sally Nicholls and John Broadley, an inspired coupling of writer and artist which somehow feels as if they were made for each other. John Broadley's graphic work goes from strength to strength, as, consequently does his standing and reputation, across books, editorial work, printmaking, murals and more, all in a very English, almost medieval tradition, with a hint of wry humour. Nicholls's text flows beautifully, respectful of cautionary fairy tale tradition but never descending into pastiche. How good it is to see a book that refuses to conform to easy categorisation of age group – part picturebook, part illustrated book, advertised as suitable for 7–12-year-olds but surely appealing to an even wider range. The book is beautifully designed and produced and is a delight to behold.




**Sarah Smith,** Stock and Reader Development Manager **Brent Libraries**

**The Danger of Small Things** by Caryl Lewis is a haunting novel set in a dystopian future where the green environment no longer exists. Pollination of plants by busy bees is no more. They have died out. The world has become a place absent of art, books and culture. It has evolved into a patriarchal environment and famine is rife. The story is told through the voice of Jess, one of the many girls taken from home and sent to pollinate crops by brush and be married off soon after menstruation. But Jess who is an artist is determined to light the fires for a revolution. The novel is atmospheric, full of quiet determination and bravery. There are hints of Margaret Atwood's **The Handmaid's Tale** in the misogyny, hypocrisy and cruelty portrayed by those in power. A thought-provoking novel that has a rightful place in green fiction and indeed the rights of women and more.

**Like a Brother** is another funny, engaging and moving family novel with some poignancy from Nathanael Lessore. One liners fly off the lips of fourteen year old protagonist Owais who lives with his parents and younger sister in a warm and supportive environment. Popular at school, Owais is contented and happy. Into this mix comes a cousin of similar age, Abs, who has never known the family security that Owais enjoys. He is still grieving his mother's death and is harshly disciplined by his insensitive father, plus he has a petty crime record. Abs is on a journey, as is Owais who learns that perhaps he has got a little too complacent in academic performance at school. This is a story about family and support. It's lovely to read a focus on a Black family that doesn't steer away from racism and stereotypes, LGBTQ+ rights but has a light touch.

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

Set in 1907 New York, **The Age of Fury** by John Stephens starts at a high pace and never lets up. Its experienced American author has researched its background so effectively that what could well seem an outsize melodrama still comes over as convincing in detail. It tells how beautiful, razor-tongued Caitlin arrives from Ireland in search of her twin sister Mary, only to find she has been murdered. Determined to get to the truth she teams up with William Fury, originally from Ireland himself but now a young but ruthless enforcer for a local gangster out to control the docks. Caitlin, although deeply sceptical, still manages to offer William a way back to decency which he eventually takes. Helping her survive one tight situation after another means that he also receives many hits along the way. So much, so compulsively page-turning. It also poses questions about whether the boundary between some YA novels and succeeding adult fiction is now almost invisible. But for whatever age, this present story, richly entertaining and so well written, is greatly recommended.

All the books mentioned are listed on our Books for Keeps Christmas Gift Guide 2026

# Authorgraph No.281

# Harry Woodgate

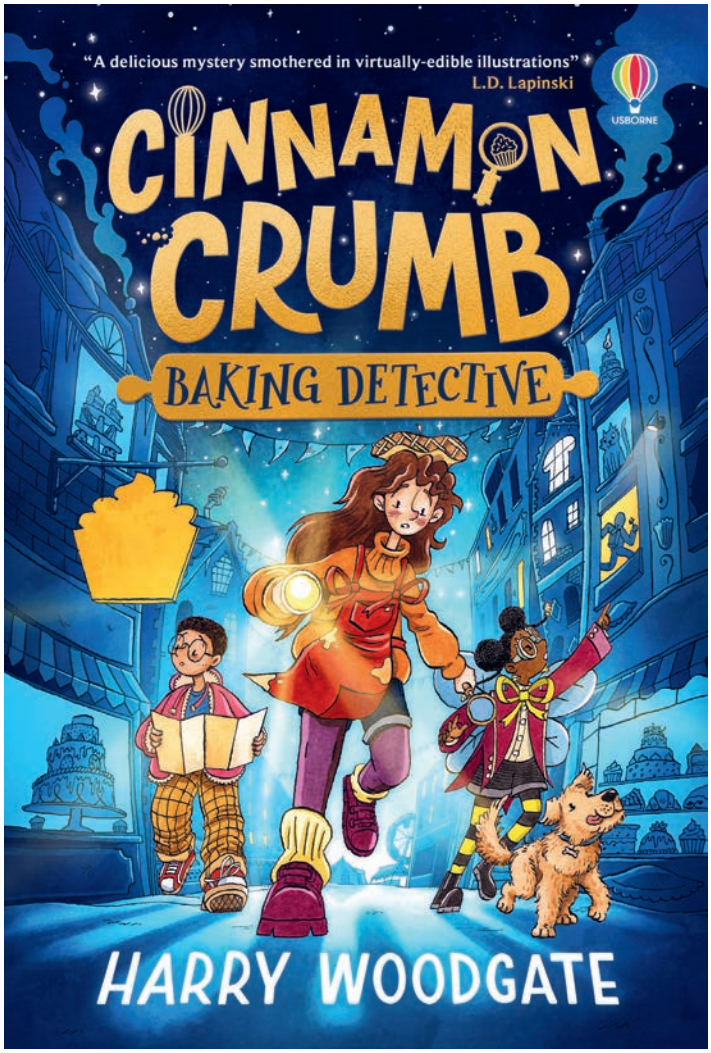
interviewed by

**Fen Coles**

The algorithms on Harry Woodgate's Instagram feed are working overtime. Searches such as 'thermal shock precision needed for making madeleines' have spun out a stream of baking reels. Their research for their new middle grade series has been scrupulous. But, they have also brought to it their own lifelong passion, stirred at an early age by baking with their mum and Nan. Sprinkle in Harry's love for Golden Age Detective Fiction and we have **Cinnamon Crumb Baking Detective**, a 4-book series, published by Usborne, with the first, **The Great Cake Caper** out now.

At my request for summary of the new series, Harry suggests, '*Bake-Off* Meets **The Swifts**', a title which aptly describes this middle grade crime series: cake-infused, distinctly cosy (the only 'violence' is executed through baguettes and strawberry laces), populated by unique and diverse characters - with a side order of queer references.

I'm curious at what feels like a radical change of tack for Harry. We know them for their warm, confetti-palette picture books. What prompted this leap into longer form storytelling and monochromatic illustrations? Harry explains that while they enjoy a picture book's 'contained little format', they have relished the stretch of chapter books: 'It's been really fun to go in to the whole detail of all the worlds, the different characters, their backgrounds, their motivations, how they're going to develop over a period of time.' They say they first imagined Cinnamon's Crumb's world in colour but then translated this in to black and white- and did so with relative ease.

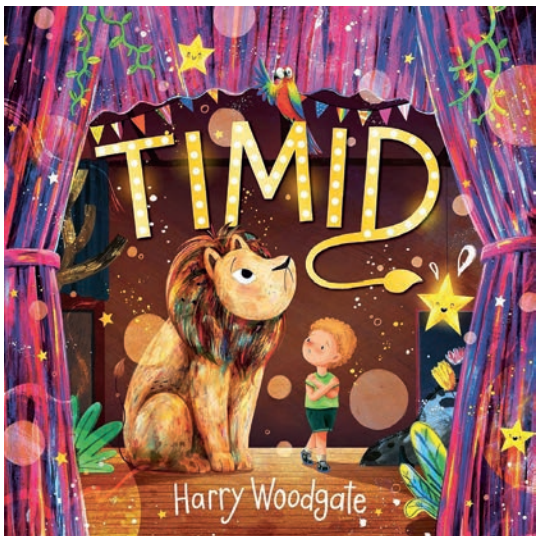


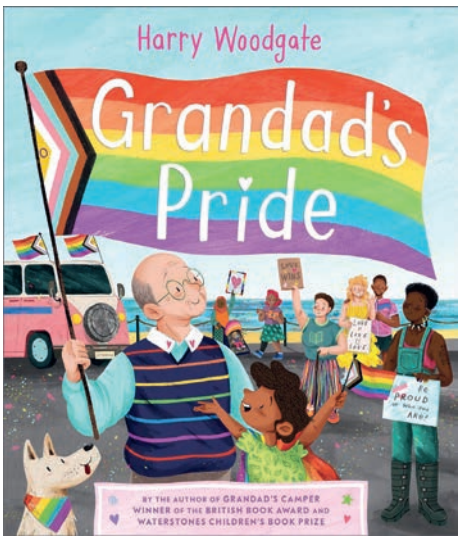



Harry clarifies: black pen and ink was their very first and preferred medium. They share memories of drawing as a young child with a 1990s Megasketcher, a magnetic greyscale drawing board and enthuse, 'I'm coming back to something I loved when I was younger… to be honest the whole book feels to me like coming back to the stuff I loved when I was younger'- the monochromes, the baking and, now, they add their early enthusiasm for intense world-building books.

Which brings us to **Cinnamon Crumb's** extraordinary landscape: the town of Marzipan. The book's opening pictorial street map introduces us to Florentine Fields and Marshmallow Mountains, the serpentine River Chai, Lebkuchen Lane and Biscuit Boulevard. Harry tells me one street is even named in honour of an untitled recipe of his Nan's. Bordering Choux Street is the centre of the action, Cinnamon's family home, Crumb House, squished between rival bakers, Victoria Sponge's Tea Emporium and Madeleine Macaron's Mouthwatering Delight. This trio, says Harry, formed the topography's nexus: 'Crumb House was the icing in this building-shaped cake and then the rest of the town started growing outwards from that.' They included a map of Marzipan on submission, a draft which become multidimensional as the narrative developed, 'to the point that now I can walk down any street in Marzipan and look up and know what a building looks like from that angle…I turn around the corner and know what I'm going to see.'

Marzipan feels deliciously tactile, almost sniffable! The tones may be monochrome, but this is a lavishly illustrated series. The artwork wraps around the text, sometimes framing, other times flowing across the pages. Chapter headers are elaborately decorated. Page folios are occasionally baked in to pastries. There are even comic-style panels. As Harry says, 'Some of the jokes are particularly suited to that sequential visual narrative.' Did I mention how funny the book is (another departure…)? The sharpest moments of humour are captured in bracketed and footnoted asides from Cinnamon, whose loquacious voice drives the narrative: 'This case is getting more tangled than a pecan plait!' Despite this multimodal formatting




across text and artwork, the novel never feels too crowded, something, Harry says, they and their editor were concerned about. Text and illustrations are kneaded together, immersing you in Cinnamon Crumb's sugar coated world.

The novel's wider context is deliberately uncertain. Clothes and hairstyles reference a hotchpotch of decades. Buildings are inspired by ancient European roofscapes and Parisian boulangeries. Tech is entirely absent: screens are banished; Aunt Tatin owns the only landline; Madeleine Macaron's analogue 'cake-o-matic' retro-references Wallace and Gromit. Harry expands: 'There is something quite appealing about this old world place which hasn't been introduced to mobile phones, that constant barrage of mass media and TV and all that noise that comes in and potentially causes a disruption to a narrative. It's like something that's secret and preserved and is there for kids to discover and explore on their own terms.' Harry wanted to evoke an other-worldliness. But they remained alert to the concomitant 'risks' of nostalgia. It's a delicate balance. 'There is a point,' they say, 'where it [nostalgia] tips over in to being not helpful or not relevant to kids' lives today or actively harmful in terms of not representing how things are now…Marzipan is not contemporary present day Britain, it's somewhere else [but] I'd like it to be as diverse as society and communities are today.'

Marzipan's 'modernity' is its inclusivity- which all comes very naturally to Harry. We dwell a little on their non-binary portrayals since we proactively seek these out at **Letterbox Library**. While we have encountered illustrated book characters whose gender is ambiguous or unspecified, Harry remains one of the only UK creatives we know to have welcomed non-binary identities in to picture books, including the protagonist of **Timid** and Temi (a baker, by the way!) in **Grandad's Pride. And, now with Cinnamon Crumb, we are introduced to Roman w**ho uses they/them pronouns. While Ro's identity is by the by, they are also the character who delivers a thoughtful little speech to Cinnamon about not allowing herself to be labelled by others. As they conclude, 'Boxes are for cakes, not for humans.'

From Paratha Palace in the South to Matcha Meadows in the North, Marzipan's community is diverse in every sense. Cinnamon's friend, Amber, is Black and has two dads, while bestie Rafi comes from a single parent Turkish family (the Ekmekçir food stand, with its vegan mezze picky bits, offers perhaps the town's healthiest food options). There are a range of body shapes and sizes, alongside disabled folk. Our rival bakers, Madeleine and Victoria, are coded as queer- subtly, but unequivocally. Indeed, Harry expertly delivers a model of what Letterbox Library would term 'deliberate incidental inclusion'; a sort of casual diversity in plain sight. And, they do so effortlessly: 'Being queer, being non-binary, being neurodivergent myself, I want to see all of that. It's the perspective I'm writing from anyway. I think I'd find it very difficult to write something that was about straight cis-gendered neurotypical kids having a very nice little tea party.'

A more emphatic inclusive representation comes in the form of Amber who has Tourette's. This characterisation feels like an especially generous gesture from Harry, who was diagnosed with Tourette's aged 10. Growing up, where they saw any depictions of this syndrome at all, these took the form of society's favoured interpretation: co-prolalia, which results in involuntary inappropriate or obscene outbursts. It's a condition which affects just 10% of people with Tourette's but which is over-represented in popular culture, providing ample opportunities for mockery and dramatic exploitation. Compelled by this, Harry has moulded the wonderfully empowered Amber who, in her own time and on her own terms, explains her tics and the prejudice she has experienced to her new friends, who then simply, empathetically, tune into this new knowledge as they pursue their adventures together. Amber can articulate and manage her symptoms with a level of 'self-assurance [which] would have been really valuable for me at that age and which I hope will be for kids today.'

Like all perfectly executed mystery series, Book 1 of **Cinnamon Crumb** whisks up provocative plot holes, teasers and plants, foreshadowing future outings. This includes the mystery of Cinnamon's absent parents. They are, we hear, abroad sourcing ingredients, while Cinnamon is only barely monitored by the distant, not-an-aunt, Aunt Tatin. As such, she joins a long tradition of orphaned (literal/metaphorical) children in 'classic' literature. This detail, Harry insists, began as 'entirely unconscious' but is one which they have since reflected on at length. Their conclusions will now likely be stretched across the series to the extent that they will 'maybe try to interrogate why is it that we're constantly putting children in the position of not having guardians who are there for them.' There are also the social justice themes which are causally, tantalisingly, dropped in: grumbles about labour conditions at *Victoria Sponge's Tea Emporium*; a hint of corruption being enjoyed at the highest tiers… Harry responds by worsening my itch: 'Book 2 is going to hit people around the face with that social justice. It's going to annoy a lot of bigots, I think, and a lot of conservatives.' Hurrah.

I am giving away none of the spoilers I managed to extract, but expect: a fresh, custard-cream-based case for the newly opened Crumb Detective Agency; dastardly goings on at The Royal Profiterole Palace; a wild list of suspects including a protest group and a nefarious politician; new characters, fit for the town's baking lexicon, including a certain Richard Tea. And, of course, our smart cookie, Cinnamon, will propel the investigation with her delightful wit, folding in puns with a deftness which would be the envy of *GBBO*'s Mel and Sue. Simply follow the crumb trails…

*Books mentioned*

**Cinnamon Crumb Baking Detective: The Great Cake Caper,** Usborne, 978-1805075660, £8.99 pbk

**Timid**, Little Tiger, 978-1838915117, £7.99 pbk

**Grandad's Pride**, Andersen Press, 978-1839132674, £7.99 pbk

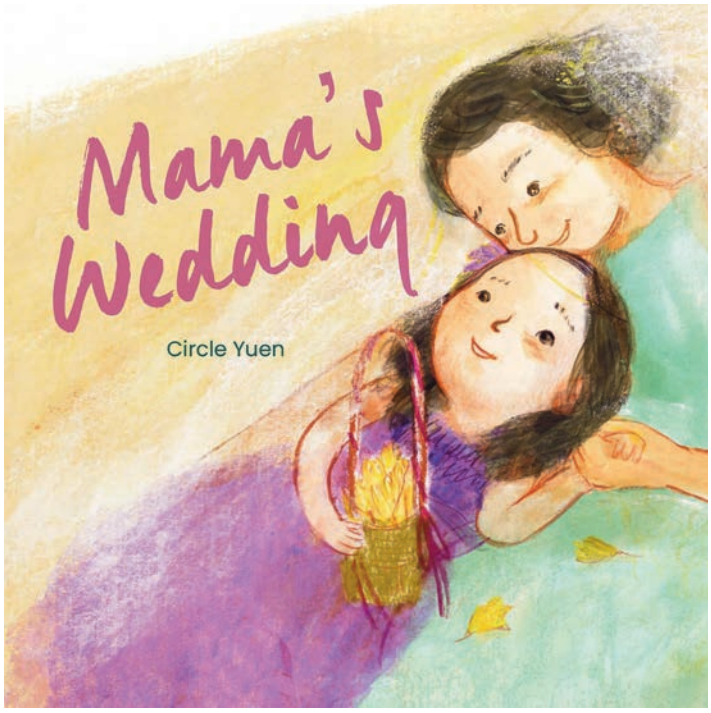


**Fen Coles** is co-director of Letterbox Library

# Windows into Illustration: Circle Yuen

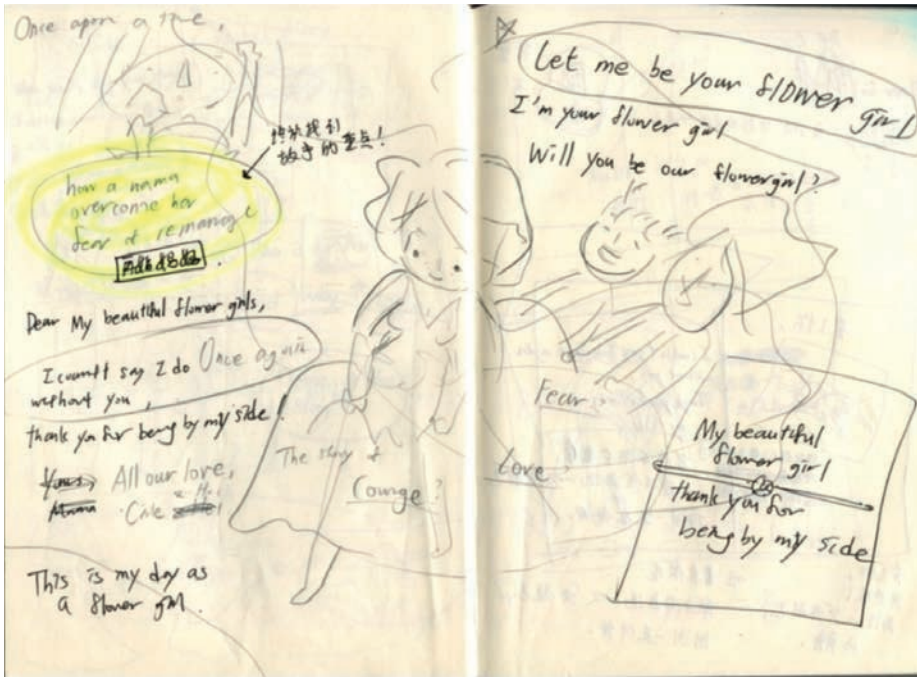
**Circle Yuen** was shortlisted for the **Klaus Flugge Prize** for most exciting and promising newcomer to picture book illustration with **Our Dance** (Graffeg). Her new book, **Mama's Wedding**, is another sensitively observed family story, deep emotions perfectly expressed through the illustrations. Circle explains her approach and technique here






**Mama's Wedding** began with a question I didn't have the words for. Making a picture book from lived experience feels like free-diving into the memory of the sea. Six years ago in Hong Kong, as I sat with my sketchbook in the months before my own wedding, my early drawings were heavy with adult uncertainty. My daughter looked at my sketches and asked: 'Can this story be about the future, rather than what happened before?'

Her question became a small light in the deep water. During my studies at the Cambridge School of Art and through the editorial process with my publishers, I came to understand that picture books should not ask children to carry the weight of adult feelings. Where earlier drafts followed my own perspective, later drafts allowed the girls to lead, moving away from a mother's fear of beginning again and towards children actively discovering their place within a changing family.




This shift influenced every part of the visual language. In one spread, as the text reads 'One step, Two steps, Three steps,' the girls do not simply follow behind. They move across the page with energy and confidence, their dresses flowing among falling petals. This was one of the hardest spreads for me to draw, and the one I revisited most.

The falling yellow petals carry a small quiet answer to the questions Ruby has been asking: love does not disappear when families change; it blooms in new ways. The rhythm of the composition transforms a moment of family change into a movement towards connection and hope.

My working method is fairly physical. I bind the roughs into a dummy book so I can hold the sequence in my hands and see how each




page leads into the next. I then redraw each spread directly onto watercolour paper rather than tracing, which keeps the drawing alive and leaves room to adjust. I begin with coloured pencils, build up the colour in gouache, then draw back into the image with coloured pastel pencils, finishing with light digital refinement at the end.

I come to picture books through my earlier work supporting families through separation and change. What I learned in those years is that children rarely need us to explain. They need us to stay close. Picture books, at their best, can do that too. They can be a small quiet presence in a child's hands, saying: your feelings make sense, and you are not alone.

When I make an illustration, I am trying to hold something at just the right distance. Close enough to feel true. Far enough that a child can safely step inside.

**Mama's Wedding** (978-1836290476) is published by Lantana Publishing, £12.99 hardback.

Lantana

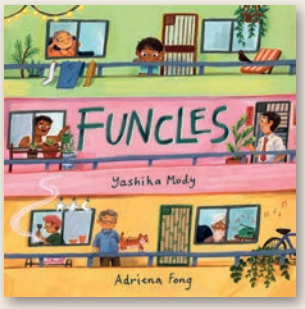
*Because all children deserve to see themselves in the books they read.*



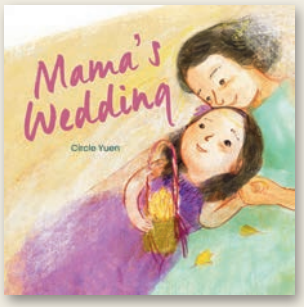
## New Books for Autumn 2026




Ages: 2-5
ISBN: 9781836290339




Ages: 2-5
ISBN: 9781836290506




Ages: 2-5
ISBN: 9781836290476




Ages: 9-12
ISBN: 9781836290360




Ages: 9-12
ISBN: 9781836290292

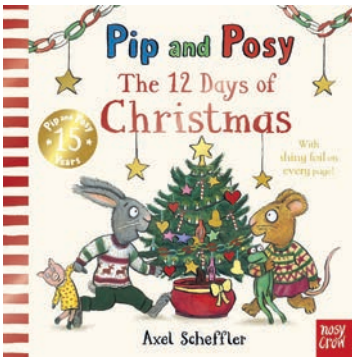
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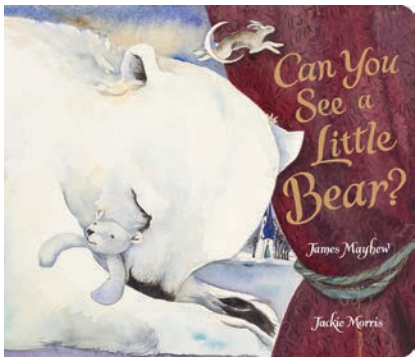
Mama's Wedding Illustrations © Circle Yuen, 2026

# Something for everyone: The **Books for Keeps Gift Guide 2026**

**Like a Christmas stocking or a mince pie, our November issue is stuffed with recommendations for the best books to give as presents. With this year's emphasis on reading for pleasure, the pressure to select books most likely to please their recipients felt stronger than ever. As always to try and narrow down the range, we've chosen books that particularly reference the season – snow, Santa, seasonal cheer. Here goes!**










## Books for the very youngest

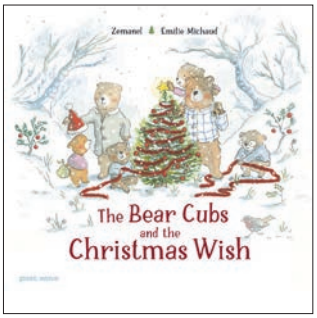
For babies and toddlers, we've chosen three books by authors whose illustrations will become very familiar to them as they get older. **My First Elmer Gift Book** (Andersen Press) is a (shaped) board book adaptation of **Elmer and the Gift** in which Elmer's aunt can't remember what his grandpa had asked her to give her nephew. It's his love, of course it is. David McKee's Fauve-influenced illustrations will capture babies' attention and the conclusion will warm all readers. Axel Scheffler's illustrations are also immediately identifiable and, with elements picked out in gold foil, create a jolly, new version of **The 12 Days of Christmas** (Nosy Crow) starring Pip and Posy. Otter-Barry Books have reissued **Can You See a Little Bear,** words by James Mayhew, illustrations by Jackie Morris, as a board book. It brings parrots, elephants, lions, walruses and more to Christmas in carnival spreads. Each one challenges readers to find the little bear, but there's so much else to look at too. For a different kind of wow factor, **The Christmas Treasure Hunt** by Ag Jatkowska (Campbell) has flaps on every page and a spectacular pop-up Christmas tree at the end.











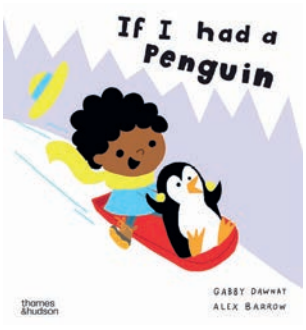


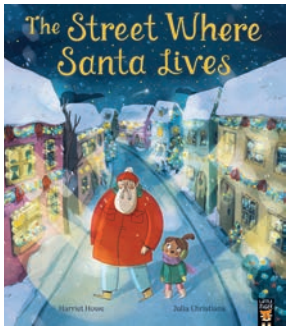
## Picturebooks for the season

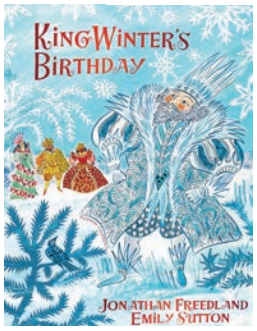
We'll start with our cover star: **Grandad's Christmas** (Andersen Press) is the latest in Harry Woodgate's picturebook series. Milly is spending Christmas at her grandad's as is his friend, Viv. Viv's bookshop, *Over the Rainbow*, has flooded but Milly suggests turning Grandad's campervan into a temporary shop. The community rally round and the shop is saved. As always, this story includes everyone and brims with love for humanity. A community is brought together too in **The Captain's Christmas** (Barefoot Books) by Mathilde Tourbillon and Beatrice Cerocchi, when a determinedly gruff captain throws a party to cheer up little Matilda, whose father is at sea. Snowy, starry, his seaside town shines in Cerocchi's illustrations. Father Christmas himself pops up in Nicholas Allan's **Father Christmas goes to the Nativity** (Andersen Press) along with three angels doing their best to rein him in. Baby Jesus is laughing by the end, readers will be too. Finally, **One Little Lamp** (Andersen Press) by Rashmi Sirdeshpande and Navya Raju follows little Jai through the excitement of Diwali and concludes with a wonderful party. The pictures are full of colour and movement, and you can practically hear the chatter of the characters in Navya Raju's illustrations.

No people, just animals in this selection. **In The Bear Cubs and the Christmas Wish** (Postwave) by Zemanel and Emilie Michaud, translated from the French, four little bear cubs scour the woods and hills to find the perfect gift for their parents learning much about the true meaning of Christmas along the way and sharing a lesson in the beauty and wonder of the natural world. **Christmas A Big Hedgehog and Little Hedgehog Adventure** (Prestel) by Britta Teckentrup also takes us deep into nature as Big Hedgehog and Little Hedgehog set out to find the perfect tree. They are joined by their friends as they begin to decorate it, everyone sharing their different Christmas traditions. The story opens our eyes to those, and Teckentrup's layered, textured illustrations take us through wintery landscapes to final scenes that glow with warmth.







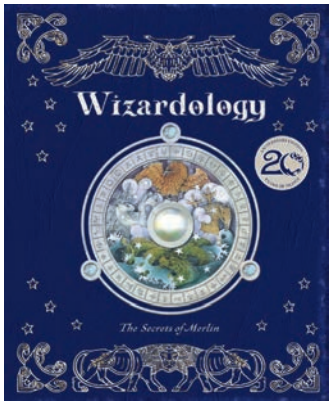
There are people in Fay Evans and Jono Ganz's **And a Partridge in a Pear Tree** (Flying Eye) but they're pretty well overwhelmed by birds in a delightfully chaotic version of the traditional rhyme. Watch those calling birds in particular! Surprisingly, there were very few penguin books this year, but the comic **If I had a Penguin** (Thames and Hudson) by Gabby Dawnay and Alex Barrow makes up for it. A little girl wishes for a penguin, then ends up with a whole penguin colony; worth the cover price for the spread of the penguins in the bath alone.




Look out too for paperbacks of other BfK seasonal choices: **The Street Where Santa Lives** (Little Tiger) by Harriet Howe and Julia Christians; **King Winter's Birthday** (Pushkin) by Jonathan Freedland and Emily Sutton; **The Christmas Pine** by Julia Donaldson and Victoria Sandøy; and Oliver Jeffers' haunting, brilliant **There's a Ghost in this House**.

## Novelty stand-outs

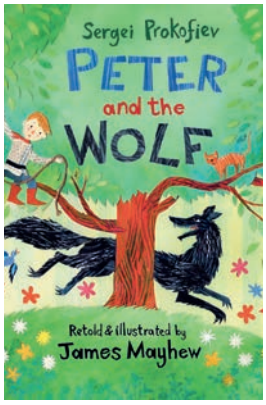
20 years after it ushered in a range of extraordinary and extravagant **Ology** titles, Templar Books have reissued **Wizardology**. For the cover price, you get not just a book that is visually stunning, but magical moving illustrations, a scrap of a fairy flag, a phoenix feather, divination cards and the gemstone of a true wizard's staff. It's as breathtaking now as when first published. (For a very different but equally memorable approach to wizarding, look out for Keith Negley's quirky, playful paperback, **The Beginner's Guide to Being a Wizard** (Puffin); no extras, but a lot of wit). Frances Lincoln's series of books that play music always hit the right note and on offer this year is **Alice's Adventures in Wonderland**, illustrated by Jessica Courtney-Tickle and with musical extracts from Joey Talbot's ballet score. A glossary introduces terms such as ostinato and portamento. (For a musical without actual music, James Mayhew's folk-art inspired retelling of **Peter and the Wolf** (Otter-Barry Books) is gorgeous to look at and includes a QR link to an exclusive recording of the story and Prokofiev's music.).





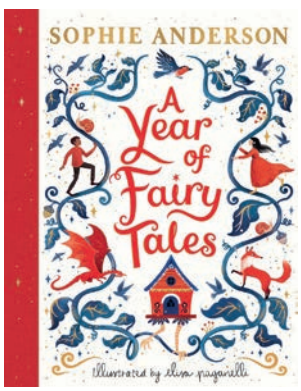





## Fairy Tales and story collections

Tis the season for storytelling and first out of Santa's sack has to be **A Year of Fairy Tales** (Usborne) by Sophie Anderson, illustrated by Elisa Paganelli. You could eke this out with a story a month, but it's likely to be read much faster than that, each inventive, perfectly-told story (*Jack and the Beanstalk, Rapunzel, The Twelve Wild Ducks*) leaving us eager for another. A book to treasure. Not a story book but a wonderful, witty tribute to fairy tales is Emily Gravett's **Don't Feed the Troll** (Two Hoots). Like the best fairy tales, it delivers a useful life-lesson too as does **The Paper Girl** (Frances Lincoln), a memorable new story by award-winner Caryl Lewis with the most delicate papercut illustrations by Kanako Abe. **It's Christmas Time** (Magic Cat) by Birgitta Sif sees Little Bear and Mum having small but lovely adventures together as they prepare for Christmas. It features recipes, craft activities and even a 'Togetherness Advent Calendar', and Sif's rosy-hued drawings of snowy outings and cosy indoor scenes make this very special.





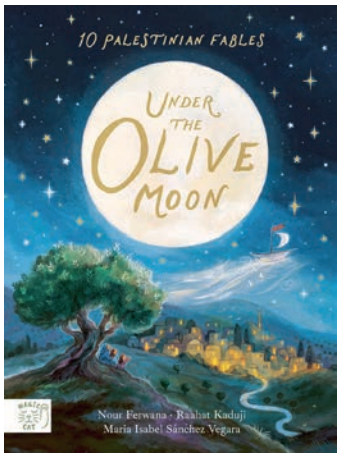


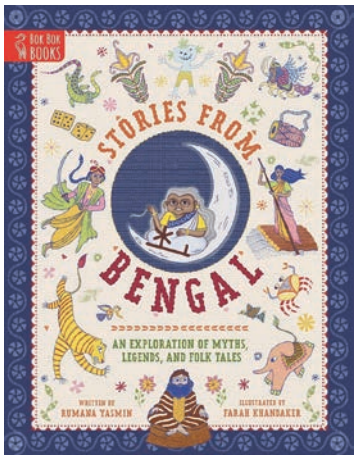

















For collections that take us outside Europe, **Under the Olive Moon** (Magic Cat) by Nour Ferwana and Maria Isabel Sánchez Vegara, illustrated by Raahat Kaduji and **Stories from Bengal** (Bok Bok Books) by Rumana Yasmin, illustrated by Farah Khandaker are recommended, both proving that stories transcend borders

## Fiction for Christmas

We'll start with **How Winston Delivered a Christmas Wish** (Macmillan), written and illustrated by Alex T Smith. This is Winston the mouse's third Christmas adventure and he's becoming something of a fixture for this time of year. This instalment takes him to New York to deliver a very important letter. The story sparkles like the sequins on Horatio the racoon's Christmas ball costume and it brims with the festive spirit. It's designed to be read one chapter a day from 1st December until Christmas Eve and there's a different festive activity for each day too. Another fabulously illustrated story packed with invention and humour and with real friendship at its heart, **The Rambler's Curse** (HarperCollins Children's Books) by Mikey Please features Rene and Glumfoot of **The Café at the End of the Woods**. When humans arrive in the Woods, including – the horror – a food critic, the two set out to find out why and how to stop them.

Animal lovers are certainly well catered for this year. Steve Cole's **The Wild Ones** (Scholastic) stars a band of pets forced to fend for themselves after an apocalyptic event. It's a thrilling survival quest adventure that will have readers of ten and up gripped, its animal heroes unforgettable characters. **Goodnight Silver** (Simon and Schuster) by Abi Elphinstone and **Lumi and the Wolf** (Starboard) by Lottie Saakho both set young girls on extraordinary adventures, in which they each form a special bond with a wild animal. On a trip to Mongolia with her parents, Emmy gets lost, befriends a snow leopard cub and takes it to safety in a magical world; while visiting her grandparents in Lapland, Lumi meets a wild white wolf and undertakes an equally dangerous journey to ensure it can live without fear of hunters. The girls' total acceptance by wild animals might strain adult credulity but for young animal lovers these will be particularly satisfying stories. Both girls are dealing with real life challenges too; Lumi is autistic and her story shows the adverse impact on her life while it also turns into an advantage at a critical moment. For older readers (13+), and we're back in fairyland, Bex Hogan's **Rowan** (Zephyr) is a beautifully atmospheric, haunting folk-lore-rich romantic fantasy, perfect for winter nights.

## Books to set you shivering

Christmas is a time for ghost stories and there are rich pickings this year. Jack Mackay's **The Haunting of Old Splinter** (Rock the Boat) and Darren Simpson's **Lykewise** (Pushkin Children's Books) are both recommended by our reviewers, while Dan Smith adds two extremely scary tales to his **The Night House Files** series (Barrington Stoke): **The Ghosts of Grey Towers** and **The House of Horrors** are chilling, keep-the-lights on reads. What to say about **The Worst Thing that Could Possibly Happen** (Little Tiger) by Guy Bass and David Roberts? This story collection is dark, funny too, but thoroughly creepy and unsettling, David Roberts' illustrations – black and white and colour – make you want to gaze at them and check over your shoulder simultaneously. Equally unusual and intriguing is Jon Klassen's **The Skull** (Walker Books), now available in paperback.

What of the classic seasonal ghost story, **A Christmas Carol**? It's available from Oxford in their Children's Classic series with bonus material for readers including write your own story prompts, and in an elegant and accessible retelling by Tanya Landman for Barrington Stoke, while for younger readers, Faber have an abridged version illustrated in full colour by Chris Mould. Mould, who more than knows his way round a ghost story, captures all the drama and melodrama of Dickens' original, his lanky, long-fingered characters stalking, scrambling or floating across the pages in beautifully composed and atmospheric scenes.











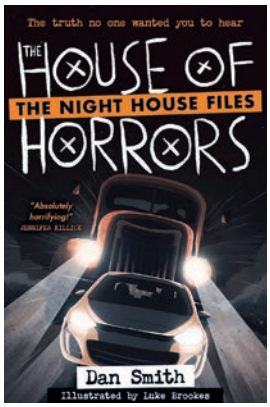












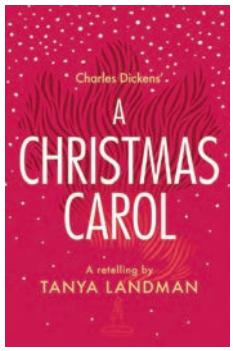
















## A book made for stockings

New this year, **The Christmas Book** (Faber) by Katherine Woodfine and Lizzy Stewart, already has the feel of a classic. Inspired by the Icelandic tradition of Jólabókaflód, where people give and receive books on Christmas Eve, it's the story of a young boy determined to fill the hole left by his grandfather, likely lost at sea. He doesn't have much money for presents but manages to find the perfect gift. It's a story that shows the importance of shared stories, hope, family and love, is beautifully told and perfectly illustrated. This neat little hardback is also just the right size for a stocking, or pocket.







## A treat for yourself

And finally, **Hometown** (Walker Studio) is another beautiful allegorical tale by the peerless Shaun Tan. Set on a planet filled with the most extraordinary creatures and landscapes, the story is told by a young human girl whose hometown this is. When a spaceship crash-lands, the young man she rescues invites her to return with him to where she belongs. But should she really leave her family behind? Surreal, touching, with flashes of humour and real tension too, this shows us so much about what forms identity and home. Tan's illustrations, full-page scenes cartoon strips and wordless panels, are astounding. Buy yourself a copy.

***Happy Christmas reading, one and all.***

All the books mentioned are listed on our Books for Keeps Christmas Gift Guide 2026

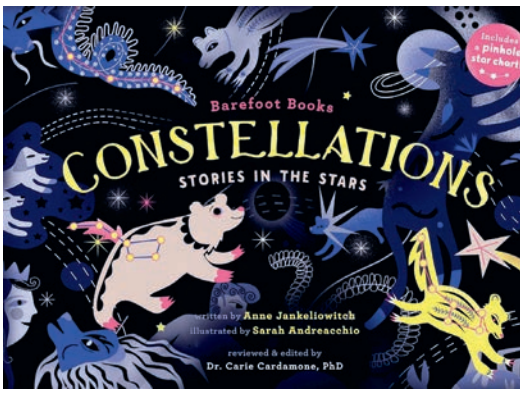
*Books mentioned*

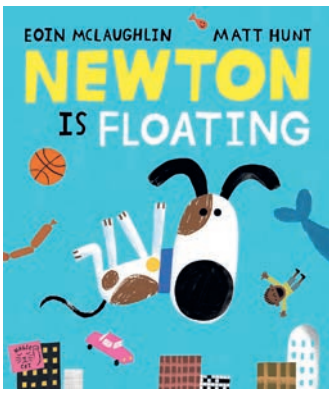
**My First Elmer Gift Book**, 978-1783446773, Andersen Press, £7.99 board bk
**Pip and Posy: The 12 Days of Christmas**, Axel Scheffler, 978-1807080228, Nosy Crow, £7.99 board bk
**Can You See a Little Bear?**, James Mayhew, illus Jackie Morris, 978-1917865005, Otter-Barry Books, £9.99 board bk
**The Christmas Treasure Hunt**, Ag Jatkowska, 978-1037412448, Campbell Books, £12.99 hbk
**Grandad's Christmas**, Harry Woodgate, 978-1839136405, Andersen Press, £12.99 hbk
**The Captain's Christmas**, Mathilde Tourbillon, illus Beatrice Cerocchi, 979-8898591625, Barefoot Books, £12.99 hbk
**Father Christmas Goes to the Nativity**, Nicholas Allan, 978-1839136870, Andersen Press, £12.99 hbk
**One Little Lamp**, Rashmi Sirdeshpande, illus Navya Raju, 978-1839135750, Andersen Press, £12.99 hbk
**The Bear Cubs and the Christmas Wish**, Zemanel, illus Emilie Michaud, 978-1836271925, Postwave, £12.99 hbk
**Christmas A Big Hedgehog and Little Hedgehog Adventure**, Britta Teckentrup, 978-3791376837, Prestel, £11.99 hbk
**And a Partridge in a Pear Tree**, Fay Evans, illus Jono Ganz, Flying Eye, 978-1838749927, £12.99 hbk
**If I had a Penguin**, Gabby Dawnay, illus Alex Barrow, 978-0500653999, Thames & Hudson, £11.99 hbk
**The Street Where Santa Lives**, Harriet Howe, illus Julia Christians, 978-1838918576, Little Tiger, £12.99 hbk
**King Winter's Birthday**, Jonathan Freedland, illus Emily Sutton, 978-1782694670, Pushkin, £12.99 hbk
**The Christmas Pine**, Julia Donaldson, illus Victoria Sandøy, 978-0702349898, Alison Green Books, £7.99 pbk
**There's a Ghost in this House**, Oliver Jeffers, Harper Collins Children's Books, £20 hbk
**Wizardology**, Dugald Steer, 978-1835879092, Templar Books, £25.00 hbk
**The Beginner's Guide to Being a Wizard**, Keith Negley, 978-0241829981, Puffin, £8.99 pbk
**The Story Orchestra: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland**, illus Jessica Courtney-Tickle, 978-1805701798, Frances Lincoln
**Peter and the Wolf**, Sergei Prokofiev, illus James Mayhew, 978-1917865166, Otter-Barry Books, £14.99 hbk
**A Year of Fairy Tales**, Sophie Anderson, illus. Elisa Paganelli, 978-1836044048, Usborne, £25.00 hbk
**Don't Feed the Troll**, Emily Gravett, 978-1035074440, Two Hoots, £14.99 hbk
**The Paper Girl**, Caryl Lewis , illus Kanako Abe, 978-1805701828, Frances Lincoln, £14.99 hbk
**It's Christmas Time**, Birgitta Sif , 978-1917044493, Magic Cat, £16.99 hbk
**Under the Olive Moon**, Nour Ferwana and Maria Isabel Sánchez Vegara, illus Raahat Kaduji, 978-1911766315, Magic Cat, £16.99 hdbk
**Stories from Bengal**, Rumana Yasmin, illus Farah Khandaker, 978-1739261443, Bok Bok Books, £12.99 hbk
**How Winston Delivered a Christmas Wish**, Alex T Smith, 978-1035070541, Macmillan, £20.00 hbk
**The Rambler's Curse**, Mikey Please, 978-0008830205, HarperCollins Children's Books, £14.99 hbk
**The Wild Ones**, Steve Cole, 978-0702349157, Scholastic, £7.99 pbk
**Goodnight Silver**, Abi Elphinstone, 978-1398538016, Simon & Schuster, £8.99 pbk
**Lumi and the Wolf**, Lottie Saakho, 978-1510102071, Starboard, £14.99 hbk
**Rowan**, Bex Hogan , 978-1035925346, Zephyr, £16.99 hbk
**The Haunting of Old Splinter**, Jack Mackay, 978-1836432319, Rock the Boat, £8.99 pbk
**Lykewise**, Darren Simpson, 978-1782696209, Pushkin Children's Books, £8.99 pbk
**The Ghosts of Grey Towers**, Dan Smith, 978-0008790912, Barrington Stoke, £7.99 pbk
**The House of Horrors**, Dan Smith, 978-0008790905, Barrington Stoke, £7.99 pbk
**The Worst Thing that Could Possibly Happen**, Guy Bass, illus David Roberts, 978-1788954198, Little Tiger. £16.99
**The Skull**, Jon Klassen, 978-1529531053, Walker Books, £7.99 pbk
**A Christmas Carol and Other Stories**, Charles Dickens, 978-0192789044, OUP, £7.99 pbk
**A Christmas Carol**, Tanya Landman, 978-0008797188, Barrington Stoke, £7.99 pbk
**A Christmas Carol**, Chris Mould, 978-0571397976, Faber, £14.99 hbk
**The Christmas Book**, Katherine Woodfine, 978-0571391516, illus Lizzy Stewart, Faber, £10.99 hbk
**Hometown**, Shaun Tan, 978-1529536393, Walker Studio, £25.00 hbk

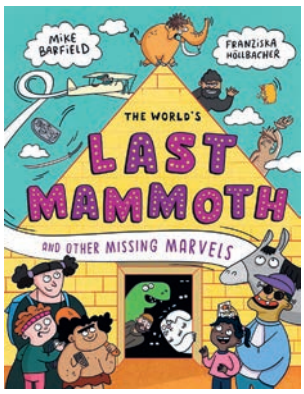
# So Many Things to Read About:
# your Christmas non-fiction gift guide

**Non-fiction and information books thoroughly deserve their place under the tree or in a stocking and there are lots of wonderful books on offer this year. To help you find the perfect gift, Sue McGonigle has selected a top ten.**




**So Many Things** (Under 5)
Maya Hanisch, Barefoot Books, 979-8898591649, £14.99

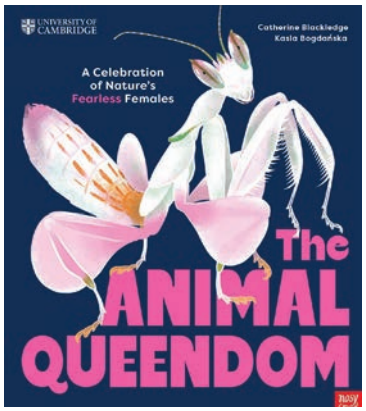
**So Many Things** is a catalogue book jam packed with illustrations on a range of topics familiar to young children including mealtime, school time, at the beach and in the city. The illustrations are colourful, textured and very striking. The diversity of children's experience is acknowledged, for example the mealtime spread includes sushi and dim sum as well as pizza and hamburgers. Each topic has a question prompt designed to start a conversation encouraging children to make links with their own experiences and add their own ideas.

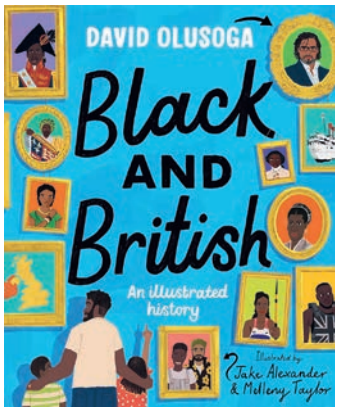
**Constellations – Stories in the Stars** (8-12)
Anne Jankeliowitch, ill. Sarah Andreacchio, Barefoot Books, 979-8898591632, £14.99 hbk

This book is a great choice for young readers interested in the night sky or in space more broadly. With a stunning design of white text on black pages, fifteen constellations form the focus of the book. There is information about what to look for in the night sky, with supporting diagrams and artwork. Related stories from Greek mythology are included, demonstrating human fascination with the wonders of the sky for thousands of years. Additional information includes what else can be spotted in the sky at night from bats and birds to meteors and the International Space Station.

**Newton is Floating** (5-8)
Eoin McLaughlin, ill. Matt Hunt, Magic Cat, 978-1911766391, £12.99 hbk

An amusing story about waking up to find everything including your dog Newton floating is followed with a clear explainer introducing gravity as a force and its importance. Significant scientists who have added to our understanding of gravity are introduced most importantly Sir Isaac Newton and his famous discovery. A question for readers about ways paper aeroplane's defy gravity might prompt young readers to experiment themselves. Entertaining as well as informative; this is the first of a planned series of science themed stories from the same team.




**The Animal Queendom** (10-12)
Catherine Blackledge, ill. Kasia Bodanska, Nosy Crow, 978-1805135456, £19.66 hbk

Intended as a celebration of some of Nature's 'fearless females' this attractive book focuses on some of the most powerful creatures on earth. Unsurprisingly lionesses and the black widow spider feature, but lesser-known females are introduced too, including the deadly orchid mantis and the alpha meerkat who rules her mob with a rod of iron. Easy to navigate with an uncluttered design, creatures leap out of the pages in the attractive illustrations.

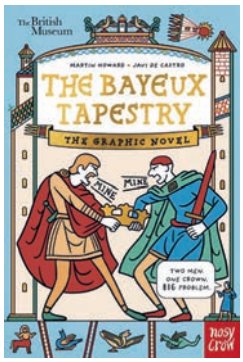
**The World's Last Mammoth and other Missing Marvels** (8-10) Mike Barfield, ill. Franziska Höllbacker, Templar Books, 978-1783425259, £10.99 pbk

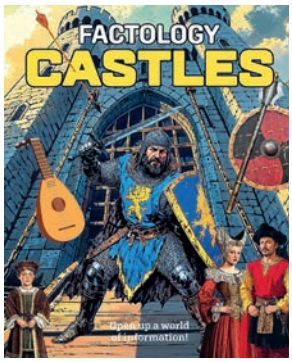
This book delves into history to find missing people, extinct animals, locations and buildings which have long since disappeared. It includes the seven wonders of the ancient world as well as well-known myths such as the Loch Ness Monster.

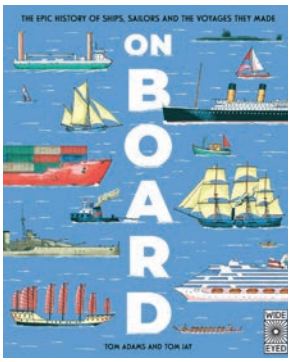
Packed with a fascinating array of facts, the graphic format, with colourful comic strip illustrations are engaging and there is lots of humour throughout. A quiz is included at the back of the book and there is space for children to record their own favourite wonders, people, places and pastimes.

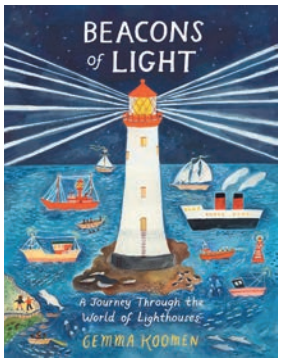
**Black and British An illustrated History** (10-12)
David Olusoga, ill. Jake Alexander, Melleny Taylor, Two Hoots, 978-1529052947, £12.99 pbk

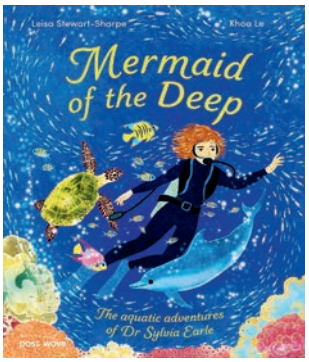
A new edition of this beautifully illustrated introduction to Black British history by acclaimed historian Olusoga. Looking at the theme chronologically, the author seeks to refute the view that black Britons only feature in recent British history. Key themes include the slave trade, colonisation and the Windrush generation. Significant individuals are highlighted from Olaudah Equiniano, the first former slave to publish his own life story to present day campaigner Baroness Doreen Lawrence.












**The Bayeux Tapestry** (8-10)
Martin Howard, ill. Javi de Castro, Nosy Crow, 978-1807080136, £9.99 pbk

Celebrating the current much publicised arrival of the Bayeux Tapestry at the British Museum, this book depicts the story very appropriately in the form of an A5 graphic novel. The knowledge of the book's creators about the embroidery and the sequence of events it depicts is clear in the detail included. The story is brought to life with a great deal of fun and humour. More information is included at the back of the book as well as a who's who in the story.

**Factology – Castles** (8-10)
Button Books, 978-1787081901, £12.99 hbk

With a lively layout, intriguing nuggets of information, photographs, artwork and diagrams, castles are portrayed as 'hothouses of history' in this engaging book. After looking at the earliest fortresses we learn about life in a medieval castle from feasts in the Great Hall to dungeons and defence. Castles in legend and literature are also included from Merlin to Dracula.

**On Board** (10-12)
Tom Adams, ill. Tom Jay, Wide Eyed Editions, 978-1836004691, £20.00 hbk

**On Board** covers the history of ships and sailors, from the earliest times to the present day. We discover famous ships including *The Titanic*, learn about naval battles, classic voyages, pirates, shipwrecks and the slave trade. With topical resonance the importance of shipping lanes such as the Strait of Hormuz is also covered. Find out about life on board and key inventions which have aided navigation including the importance of lighthouses.

**Beacons of Light: A Journey through the World of Lighthouses** (8-10) Gemma Koomen, Post Wave Publishing, 978-1836270799, £14.99 hbk

For an in depth look at lighthouses see this beautifully illustrated and written narrative non-fiction picture book. Their role in guiding ships to safety throughout history and throughout the world is explored from the first beacons on hilltops to the present-day where their role includes protecting sea life. A varied layout and carefully selected examples make this an engaging read.

**Mermaid of the Deep: The Aquatic Adventures of Dr Sylvia Earle** (5-8) Leisa Stewart Sharpe, ill. Khoa Le, Post Wave Publishing, 978-1836270553, £12.99 hbk

Simply told and beautifully illustrated this biographical picture book tells the story of Dr Sylvia Earle, marine biologist and aquanaut. Fascinated from childhood with the ocean and its creatures she led a mission studying sea life in a seabed research station, became the first human to walk on the ocean floor and has drawn attention to the damage human pollution is doing to marine life.

**Young Adventurer's Survival Handbook** (12-14)
Naomi and Dan Walmsley, ill. Joshua Rice, Button Books, 978-1787081864, £12.99pbk

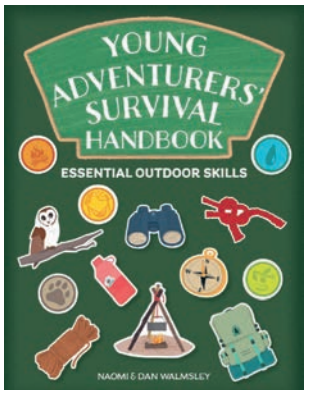
For young people in search of adventure this handbook, written by experienced bush craft teachers, provides tips and tricks for survival and making the most of outdoor explorations. Topics include what to pack, basic skills such as making a shelter and finding water, tying knots and map reading. Readers will learn how to forage and prepare food, not only dandelions but even ants and grubs! Not for the faint-hearted!

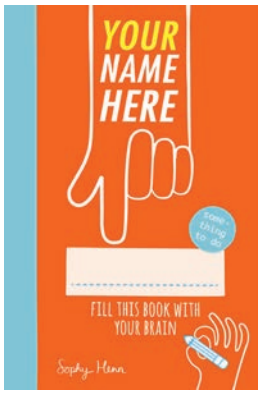
**Your Name Here** (8+)
Sophy Henn, New Modern Arcade, 978-1918820027, £9.99 pbk

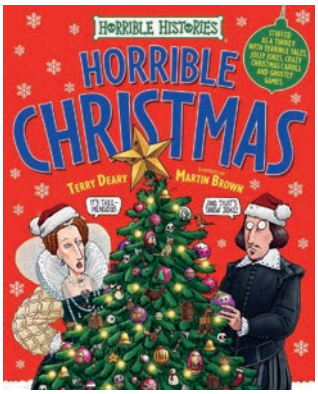
An ideal stocking filler, this interactive book provides space to be creative and build something personal without using the Internet. It is full of prompts to stimulate thought, for example which laws would you make if you were Prime Minister, what are the best and worse things you've ever eaten and what is your biggest worry? Lots of space is provided for children's thoughts, ideas and doodles.

**Horrible Christmas** (8-10)
Terry Deary, ill. Martin Brown, Scholastic, 978-0702349256, £10.99 pbk

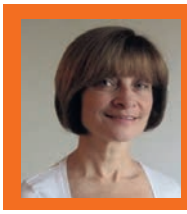
First published in 2020, the creators of the Horrible History franchise tackle Christmas in this humorous and attractive book. Expect your assumptions, for example about the nativity story, to be challenged and learn oodles of Christmas related trivia as well from cards and crackers to pudding and pantomimes. 'Horrible' and amusing facts are interspersed with stories, quizzes, jokes and even a Christmas board game.








All the books mentioned are listed on our Books for Keeps Christmas Gift Guide 2026

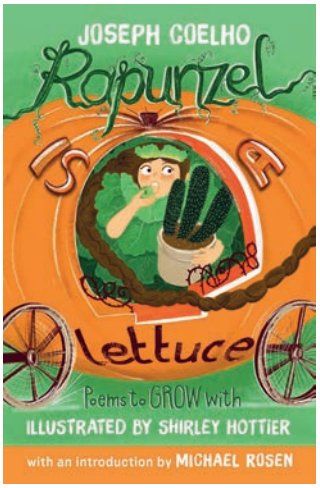


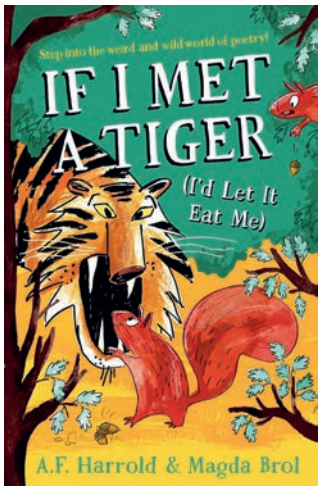
**Sue McGonigle** is an independent consultant and Co-creator of Lovemybooks

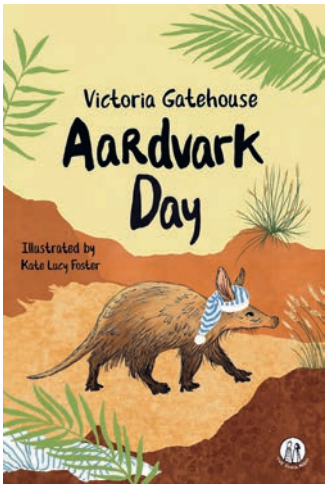
# Poetry Picks for Christmas 2026

## Chosen by **Clive Barnes**




Tis the BfK before Christmas, and in comes I, old Father Christmas, welcome as ever, with a bulging bag of this year's poetry.

At the top of the sack is **A Christmas Full of Poetry** by our former Children's Laureate, Joseph Coelho, a bringer of joy at any time of the year. It includes everything that might be expected: for instance, writing a letter to Santa; and how to choose your tree and decorate it. Certainly, it wouldn't be Christmas without snowmen and snowball fights. But what if the weather doesn't live up to expectations, how do you build a snowman without snow? Joseph is a poet who stirs up tradition with present day reality and presents the result with warmth and humour. This is a big hug of a book decorated by a posse of perfect illustrators and given a generous production by its publisher Wide Eyed Editions.

Joseph's **Rapunzel is Lettuce: Poems to Grow With** is his latest unseasonal collection, which finds him ranging exuberantly in subjects and moods, switching between the imagined and the everyday. There are clever, original, thoughtful and thought-provoking poems and an obvious delight in language, even testing his skills on the tightropes of traditional rhyming patterns. Illustrator Shirley Hottier is his able partner.

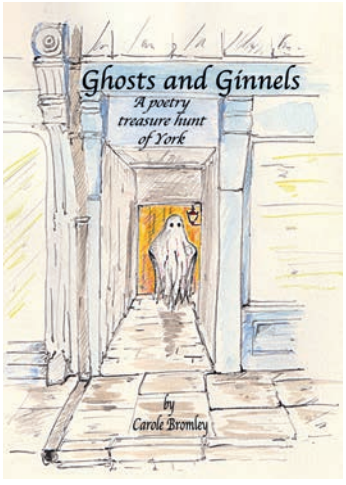
A love of the music of poetry begins with rhymes for the youngest. So here, I'll pluck out of the sack **Big Red Dragon, Play Rhymes Through the Year** by Jane Newberry with pictures by Carolina Rabei. There are fifteen new rhymes to break up story time, get toddlers joining in and on the move, and make a welcome change from an elephant going like this and like that.

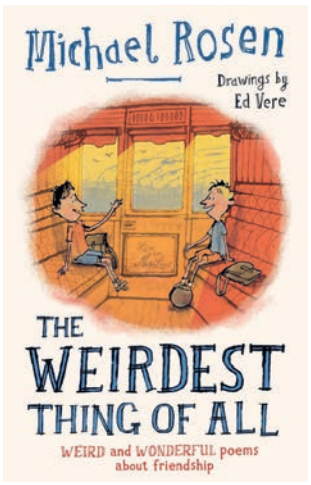
It seems not a Christmas goes by without A.F Harrold charming his way in from the cold with his mix of the silly and the serious. **If I Met a Tiger**, illustrated by Magda Brol, delivers winks and wisdom in equally small and tasty portions. I can't resist his advice on H*ow to Save the World*, perhaps a riposte to a famously miserable poem by Philip Larkin: *Be better than your mum or dad. / That's all. / Just promise you'll not be as bad. /Don't fall /into the habits they had.*

Did you know Wales has a children's laureate? Of course you did. At the moment, it's poet Alex Wharton, and he has a new collection, **Red Sky in the Morning, Poets' Warning**. Some poems do deliver some scary warnings, topically about the unforgiving nature of fire, for instance, or the perennial ability of fleas to find their way into places they find comfortable and then make life uncomfortable for us. Others are more meditative and tranquil, and many with a sense of Wales, whether in landscape or heritage.

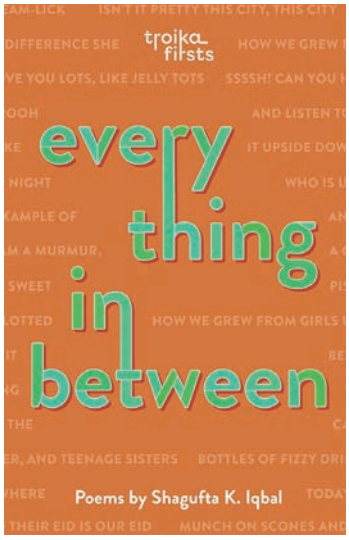
While we are back on the subject of laureates, Michael Rosen is crowned this year with the highest international accolade of the Hans Christian Andersen Award. Nearly half a century ago, he brought a new voice to poetry for children, with performance-driven poems based on his memories of family and friendship and he returns there with **The Weirdest Thing of All**. This latest collection has a more precise autobiographical location in nineteen fifties working class London, and comes in a properly hefty hardback with evocative black and white drawings by Ed Vere. If the retrospection might make it a book most suitable for young adults (and their parents and grandparents), there is much to intrigue curious children and for



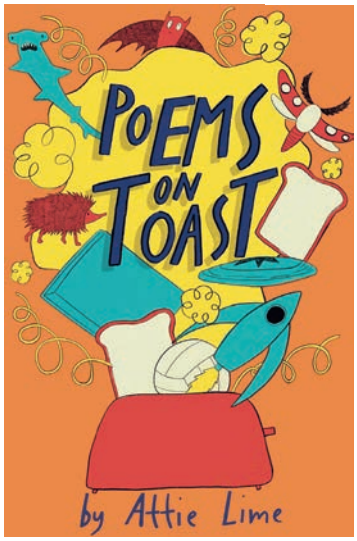













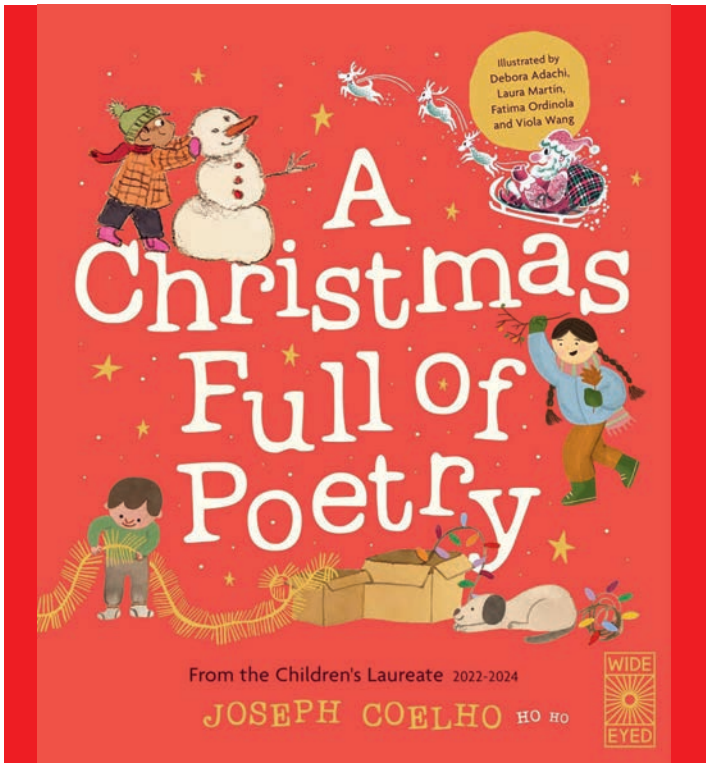


them to recognise in this portrayal of the mysteries, adventures, and companionship that make up childhood in any age.

Now, to follow such a well-established poet, here are three poets with their first collections for children. The title of Carole Bromley's **Ghost and Ginnels: A Poetry Treasure Hunt of York**, might lead you to think this is not for you, if you don't live in York or aren't planning to visit. Far from it, this is a collection whose local focus and the poet's humanity and wit brings the world of past and legend sharply into the present and will grip child readers wherever they are. Perhaps the spirit of Charles Causley has wandered north from his native Cornwall.

Shagufta K. Iqbal's **Everything In-Between**, sometimes as prosaic as sports day, sometimes as magical as a picnic by the M32, and sometimes as comforting as a house full of unwanted sisters, is a celebration of the joyous multifariousness of people and places from a unique voice.

Attie Lime's **Poems on Toast** offers short elegant poems that look at the idiosyncrasies and drama of family and school life, with an occasional wry meditation: ***Feathers***, *Sometimes/I think about feathers. / the left-behindness of them, / the special joy of/ finding one. / Try to imagine/ what losing a feather is like, / or how it feels/to float away/ on the wind.*




This has been a great year for children's poetry and I have deliberately left out any collections that I have already reviewed for **BfK**. If you were to press me for my favourites among these, then I would go for: Victoria Gatehouse's debut collection, **Aardvark Day**; Sarah Ziman's **Bison Rule, OK!**; Kate Wakeling's **The Flying Machine of Dreams**, with wonderful illustrations by Viviane Schwarz for younger lovers of the word; and Valerie Bloom's latest collection **They Sent a Cat to Saturn**, so good I gave it six stars..

*Books mentioned*

**A Christmas Full of Poetry**, Joseph Coelho, Wide Eyed Editions, 978-1836002345, £12.99 hbk

**Rapunzel is Lettuce: Poems to Grow With** Joseph Coelho, illus Shirley Hottier, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1915659262, £9.99 pbk

**Big Red Dragon, Play Rhymes Through the Year**, Jane Newberry, illus Carolina Rabei, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1915659965, £8.99 pbk

**If I Met a Tiger**, A.F Harrold, illus Magda Brol, Fox & Ink Books, 978-1917894197, £7.99pbk

**Red Sky in the Morning**, Alex Wharton, Firefly Press, 978-1915444806, £7.99pbk

**The Weirdest Thing of All**, Michael Rosen, illus Ed Vere, Walker Books, 978-0008517182, £12.99 hbk

**Ghost and Ginnels: A Poetry Treasure Hunt of York**, Carole Bromley, Ings Press, 978-1738528868,

**Everything In-Between**, Shagufta K. Iqbal, Troika Books, 978-1912745456, £8.99 pbk

**Poems on Toast**, Attie Lime, Troika Books, 978-1912745524, £8.99 pbk

**Aardvark Day**, Victoria Gatehouse, illus Kate Lucy Foster, Emma Press, 978-1915628572, £9.99 pbk

**Bison Rule, OK!**, Sarah Ziman, illus Nia Havilliard, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1917865036, £8.99 pbk

**The Flying Machine of Dreams**, illus Viviane Schwarz, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1915659989, Kate Wakeling, £12.99 hbk

**They Sent a Cat to Saturn**, Valerie Bloom, illus Ken Wilson-Max, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1915659590, £8.99 pbk

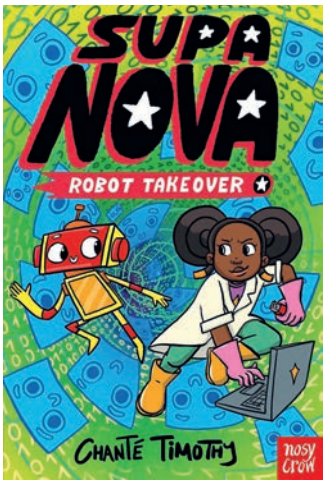
All the books mentioned are listed on our Books for Keeps Christmas Gift Guide 2026



**Clive Barnes** was Principal Children's Librarian, Southampton City and is a long time reviewer for **BfK**.

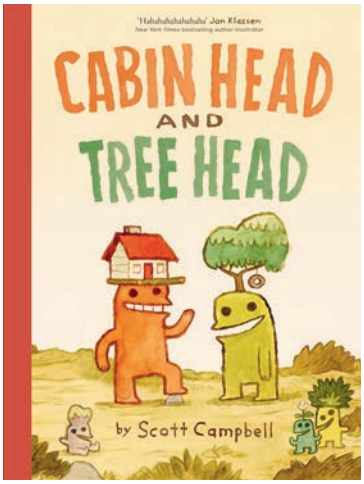
# Comics for Christmas

**There's no denying that children's comics are booming. With so many new graphic novels released each month, the choice is incredible but it can also be overwhelming, making it harder to find just the right thing for young readers. If you are feeling swamped by the sheer volume on offer this festive season, here are some high-quality picks that are worth a further look, all chosen by expert Lucy Starbuck Braidley**













When looking for quality in children's comics I'm after strong storylines, interesting illustrative styles and pages that use the comic form in creative ways to tell the story. This selection all offer something a little different to entice young comics fans.

At the top of my list is Chanté Timothy's follow up to her award winning debut, **Supa Nova**. Perfect for readers from 7 up, Supa **Nova Robot Takeover** (Nosy Crow), follows Nova, a feisty scientific prodigy, who designs a robot to help her with her chores. Things soon start to go awry when the robot oversteps and begins meddling in Nova's precious science lab. Bright bold illustrations, fun spreads and a delightfully zealous protagonist make this one to check out.

Sticking to the younger end of middle grade, there's so much to enjoy in Claude TC's energetic sci-fi illustrations for **Rex Power - Invasion of the Fear Bugs** (Rebellion). Clever use of colour and layout guide the reader through action packed sequences as alien Rex and his human vessel Korey work together to save Catford - and the world. This well written tale by Ramzee draws on many classic comic influences while remaining fresh, modern and a whole lot of fun.

The whimsical story universe and goodhearted exploration of friendship puts **Cabin Head and Tree Head** by Scott Campbell (DK) high on my list for younger readers. It's sweet, it's silly and it's ever so slightly absurd. This beautifully accessible book is a great pick for readers who like to linger on illustrations and find all the characters and subplots hidden in the background too.

For something completely different, check out **The Grand Bug Hotel** by Ollie Silvester (Cicada Books). From the green foil and delightful retro illustrations on the cover, you know this book is going to offer something a little unusual. The stylish three colour palette (green, purple and black), takes us on a witty journey inside the chaotic Grand Bug Hotel, where best friend Bo and Vex are attempting to have a relaxing getaway. Packed with great character cameos from your favourite bugs and amusing one liners, for readers 7 up.























For older readers, Pedro Martín returns with the second instalment of his memoir with **Mexikid Dreams** (Guppy Books). Martín has such a talent for capturing hilarious sibling banter and fanciful childhood dreams and balancing it with the loving but sometimes harsh realities of his Mexican immigrant family trying to make ends meet in America in the 1970s. Another funny and touching story which could offer comics fans a completely new reading experience, from age 10 up.

**Marionetta** (Webtoon) is dark fantasy mystery from Míriam Bonastre Tur, creator of the popular Hooky series. Set in a magical gothic circus, Bonastre Tur's manga-inspired imagery is perfect for pre-teens with a taste for the macabre. After following her friend to a travelling circus, hapless Julia Lazzaret is recruited to the troop and becomes entangled in a morbid quest to kill its ringmaster. A well told tale with a strong cast of characters and rich imagery.

I hesitate to recommend the fourth book in a series, but if you don't have the first three titles of Tim Probert's **Lightfall** series, you really should get hold of those too, quite urgently. In book four, **A Place Between** Probert's fantasy landscapes and use of light and colour continue to provide a stunning backdrop to duo Cad and Bea's adventures. Although separated, Bea and Cad's continued quest to restore light to the world takes them both to a mysterious in-between realm that is home to an ancient and shocking secret. Perfect for fantasy loving readers age 8 and up.

For a sporty and (literally) strong female protagonist, look no further than **Raise the Bar** by Chilean author Fernanda Frick H. (Guppy Books). A classic coming of age tale told against the backdrop of competitive powerlifting in South America, **Raise the Bar** follows Sam Sanchez's bumpy journey to the top. Sam is determined, resilient and driven to do whatever it takes to achieve her dreams, but in doing so she pulls away from her family and friends. A powerful exploration of found family, friendship and rivalry for age 10 plus.







Christmas publishing typically comes with some more gifty offerings, Jamie Smart's **The World of Bunny vs Monkey** (David Fickling) is perfect for fans of the **Bunny versus Monkey** series. This companion text offers a fun mix of facts, stats, quizzes and comic strips and comes in a glorious neon pink hardback that makes it feel that little bit more special.

So often young readers of comics also enjoy creating them, Neill Cameron's refreshed and re-released **How to Make Awesome Comics** (David Fickling Books) is a perfect gift for children, age 7 plus who like to tell their own stories with pictures. Organised into 21 lessons, Neill's vast experience running comics workshops with children shines through with a perfectly pitched range of activities which guide the reader from idea generation, drawing skills and character creation.

*Books recommended*

**Supa Nova Robot Takeover**, Chanté Timothy, Nosy Crow, 978-1805132592, £8.99pbk

**Rex Power - Invasion of the Fear Bugs**, Ramzee, illus Claude, 2000 AD, 978-1837865222, £9.99pbk.

**Cabin Head and Tree Head**, Scott Campbell, DK, 978-0241774090, £12.99 pbk.

**The Grand Bug Hotel**, Ollie Silvester, Cicada Books, 978-1800660687, £14.99pbk

**Mexikid Dreams**, Pedro Martín, Guppy Books, 978-1916558755, £14.99 pbk

**Marionett**a, Miriam Bonastre Tur, Rock the Boat, 978-1836433224, £12.99 pbk

**Lightfall: A Place Between**, Tim Probert, HarperAlley, 978-0063080935, £11.99 pbk

**Raise the Ba**r, Fernanda Frick H. Guppy Books, 978-1916558786, £14.99 pbk

**The World of Bunny vs Monkey**, Jamie Smart, DFB Phoenix, 978-1788453677, £16.99 hbk

**How to Make Awesome Comics**, Neill Cameron, DFB Phoenix, 978-1788451475, £10.99 pbk

All the books mentioned are listed on our Books for Keeps Christmas Gift Guide 2026



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

# It's Great to Create

## **Sophy Henn** explains why she felt the need to take direct steps to encourage self-discover, creativity and self-expression

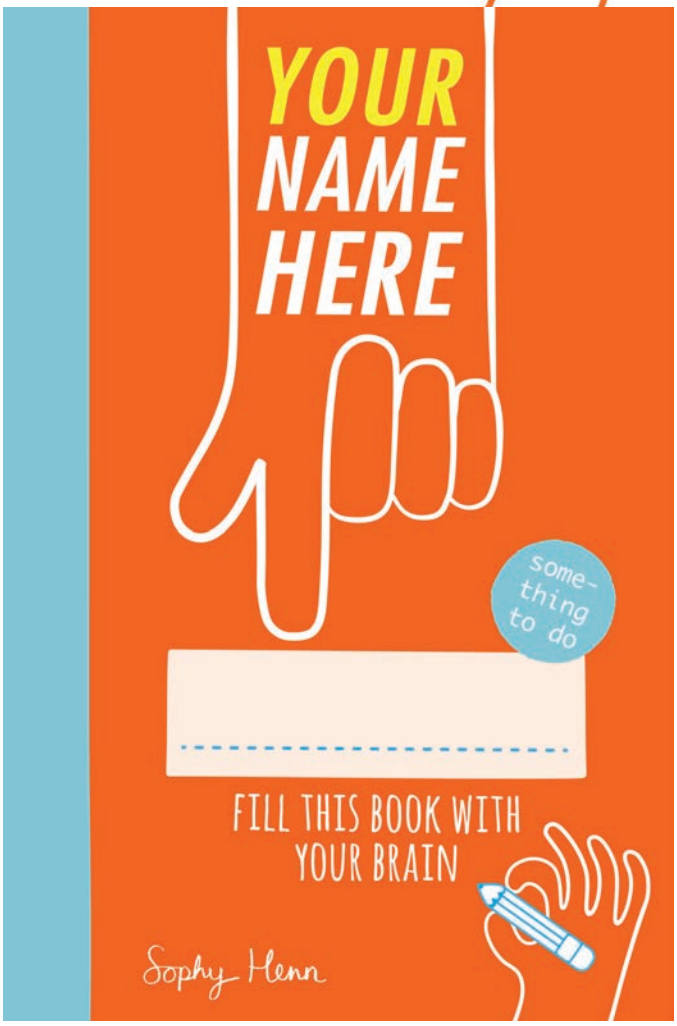
The social media ban for under 16's, though not perfect, is something most of us can get behind, even the under 16s themselves judging by the reactions I've received when I bring it up during school visits. Many of us, whatever our age, feel a low ache of guilt about spending far too much time on our devices, even when we are well aware of the resulting ill effects.

So hooray for the ban, a small but sure step in the right direction, but it won't be easy. We have given our children something designed to draw their attention then keep them hooked, and now we're asking them to go cold turkey. As poor Isabella (age 11) explained to a BBC reporter, without social media she would have to just 'stare at the wall' for the nine weekend hours she would have spent scrolling. It was upon hearing this that I realised something was needed to fill the void left by the ban, something that could provide an environment which encouraged some of the upsides of social media such as self-discovery, creativity and self-expression. And while it is sadly beyond my means to create a nationwide network of youth clubs, I decided the environment I would create would be book shaped.

**Your Name Here** came about quickly and instinctively. I wanted all the energy and fun I had creating these challenges, activities and questions to be present on the page, then infuse the user's experience. It's a book that, ultimately, is all about the reader. Each page is an invitation to the reader to consider something about themselves. The book is full of prompts, both specific and vague, each acting as a gentle nudge to get involved. The responses can be silly or serious, long or short, shallow or deep, each page is designed to allow the reader to respond as they choose. Quite simply there are no wrong answers, and I have been thrilled by the variety of those that have already been reported back to me.

I wanted to create something that served as a jumping off point into whatever kind of creative experience the user chose. If we are serious about getting our kids off phones/tablets and back into analogue activities then we need to make sure that choice is at the heart of that. We know that autonomy is key in reading for pleasure, so it stands to reason that it would be the same with creating for pleasure. If we offer kids the space to choose their own experience and then allow them to create with no wrong outcomes, I am certain that analogue creative engagement would increase. I am creative for a living and recently found the act of painting for no specific purpose whatsoever to be completely invigorating. Knowing that there was no required result made it genuinely playful and fun. Just creating for the sheer joy of it.

Creativity, in its many, many forms, is genuinely good for us. When we are being creative lots of lovely chemicals are released in our brains, one of those being dopamine, the same one that social media and many apps/games are designed to release in quick shots to keep us scrolling and playing. But unlike the digital hits, creative activities lower our cortisol too, reducing stress not raising it. Many motor skills are required while you're creating, multiple of areas of the brain light up and new neural pathways are built. And then there's empathy, connection and whole host of other benefits. So when it comes to our children's creativity, surely it makes sense not to focus on the result but instead just celebrate the benefits of the journey.




Often misunderstood as frivolous or unimportant, creativity is such an important skill to nurture, not just for children but for everyone. Taking the time to stop and invent, exploring the world and yourself in the process, making sense of it all in our own way. We know that screens, apps and social media are robbing us of that all-important time and space to ponder, maybe even become bored, which is heartbreaking because that's where the magic happens. Your imagination comes to the fore and your creativity kicks in, and who knows where that could take you! Yet we have become so reliant on our screens to fill every second of our downtime that many of us, young and old, find ourselves intimidated by a blank page or an empty afternoon, when really they are both brimming with creative potential. So it is my hope that **Your Name Here** can help us make the leap off our screens, pick up a pen and reclaim a fun and rewarding creative space for ourselves and our kids.

**Your Name Here** is published by New Modern Arcade, 978-1918820027, £9.99 pbk.



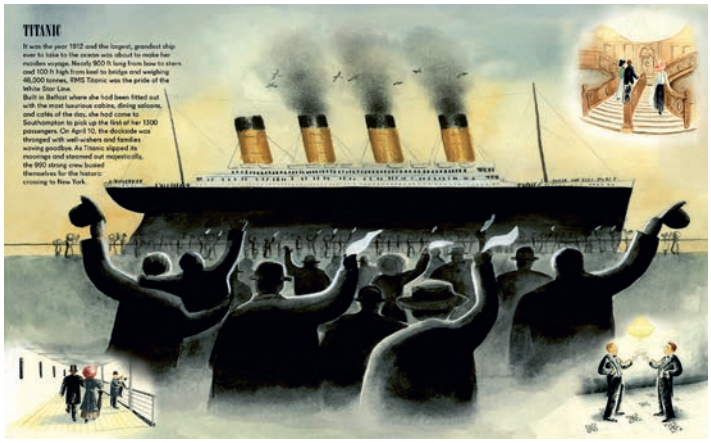
**Sophy Henn** is an award-winning picture book author and illustrator with fans across the world. She is the creator of the **Bad Nana** series, the **Pom Pom** series, the **Ted** board book series and has recently created the non-fiction titles **Lifesize** and **Lifesize Dinosaurs**. Sophy was the World Book Day Illustrator in 2015 and 2016.

# We are Sailing: ships and ports in illustrated non-fiction

## Following their feature on water in our last issue, **Ruth Thomson** and **Pam Dix** turn their attention to representations of ships, sailing and ports in illustrated non-fiction, old and new.

Books about ships, ports and sailing are an interesting follow on to the last article about water. Of all forms of transport, sea travel probably is the one with the most dramatic moments and it is a subject is of perennial interest, always featuring in children's publishers' lists. It is a topic that often requires a technical approach in terms of ship construction and sailing, at the same time as strong visual narratives to show the drama, whether of the construction of massive ships or of adventures at sea. This excitement is well captured in the illustrated non-fiction explored here.

The disastrous sinking of the *Titanic* is one of the most widely known sea accidents and has been retold many times. Irish illustrator Flora Delargy's **Rescuing Titanic: a true story of quiet bravery in the North Atlantic**, Wide Eyed Editions, 2021 is a really accomplished account, told by an author / illustrator who has a family connection to the Titanic. It focuses on the rescue by the *Carpathia*, one of the only ships near enough to help, as well as looking at *Titanic* herself. The book was shortlisted for the **Klaus Flugge Prize** in 2022, a rare example of illustrated non-fiction on this shortlist. Many of the features that are covered in this article – the drama of good visual storytelling, the attention to detail, the sense of movement and changing perspectives, the powerful use of colour – can be seen in this book and every page could be deconstructed




*Titanic* is shown setting off on her voyage in an image made even more dramatic by its darkness. The rear view of black figures in the foreground waving, the black of the boat brightened by the gold of the funnels hinting at the glamour on board, the small glamorous vignettes in each corner – all create a sense of excitement.



Multiple images on the same double page spread create a pacey visual narrative. On the left hand page the ship is sailing towards the iceberg, on the right the image switches viewpoint as the ship sails towards the viewer with the iceberg in front, shown above and below the water creating two powerfully chilling images, emphasised by this change in perspective. The small images at the bottom of the page show moments of the onboard reaction of the sailors. The colour palette of blacks and very dark blues with patches of white add powerfully to the nighttime drama

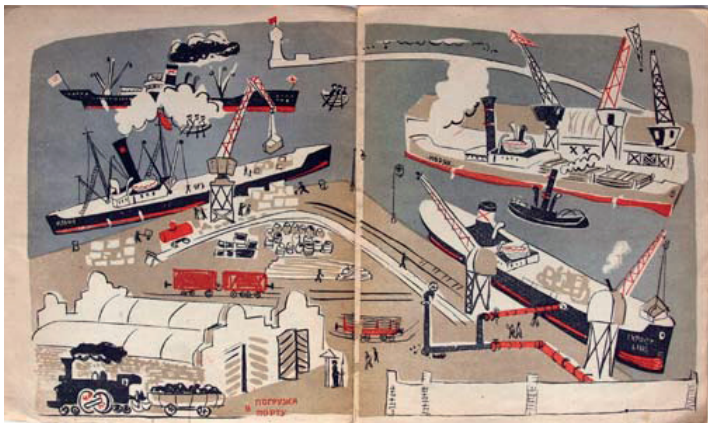


The book includes the human element throughout, both of passengers and crew in wonderfully evocative images, that make full use of the diagonal in images, reminiscent of the Soviet illustrators.



This view of the port is also reminscent of many Russian illustrations, with its high viewpoint looking down on the action. The diminutive figures emphasise the size and drama of the ships in the port.

The Soviet Russians celebrated their navy and the key role that ports played in the development of the economy of the modern Russia, and there are many books that explore this.

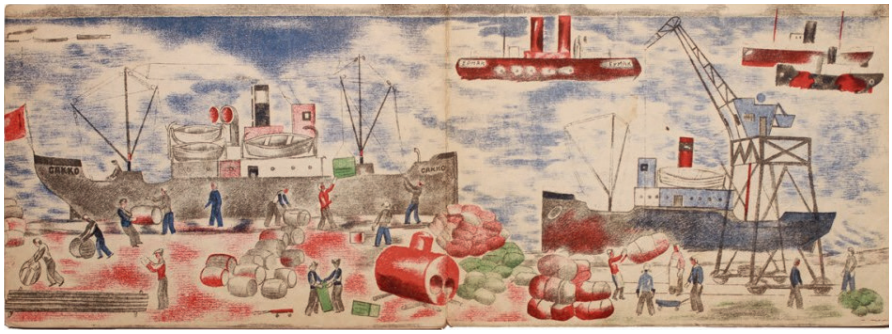


**At Anchor**, Valerii Alfeevskii, illustrated by Tatiana Lebedeva (aka Mavrina). Molodaia Gvardiia, 1931

This image of a port is also shown from a high vantage point so that, in this flattened perspective, everything is of equal importance and size. To emphasise the scale and size of the ships and machinery, workers are reduced to minute silhouettes. In these port images, Lebedava made full use of the double spread, an unusual feature in books of the time

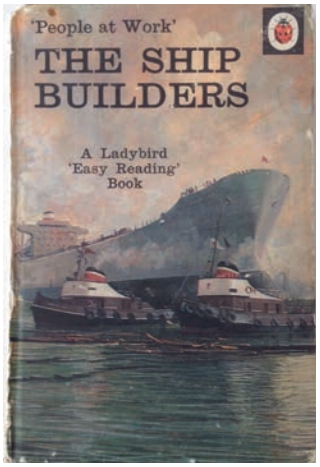



This is a dramatic close up of the final cleaning preparations and then steps backwards to show passengers and baggage arriving for embarkation. It is interesting that Lebedeva's palette is beige, grey and black, with the spots of red, in the flags etc guiding the viewer around the scene. No blue anywhere despite the watery subject. Also known as Tatiana Mavrina, her artistic name, she won the **Hans Christian Andersen** award in 1976



**Port**, Nikolaev, A., State Publishing House, 1930

**Port** is a double-sided frieze that opens fold-by- fold, allowing the reader to 'stroll' through the images of the busy quayside observing the intense activities. Boxes, dock workers, cranes, warehouses and railway lines are shown alongside the ships in the port. The other side of the frieze focuses on the navy, with vessels out at sea and sailors on shore. The naval side is illustrated in blues and grey, whereas the quayside has many accents of red highlighting particular features



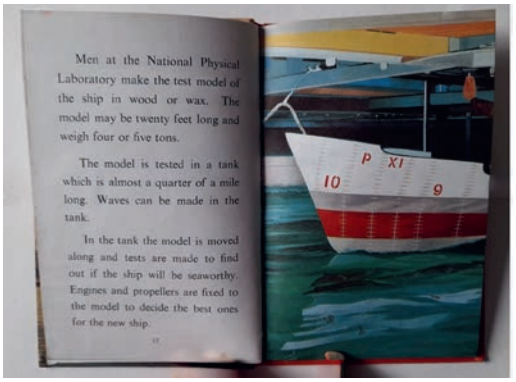

**The Shipbuilders**, Havenhand, I. & J., illustrated by John Berry, Wills & Hepworth, 1969

This cover shows the same dramatic use of perspective, with the enormous bulk of the ship and the small tugs around it.



**Water**, Evgeni Rachev, publisher not known, 1930

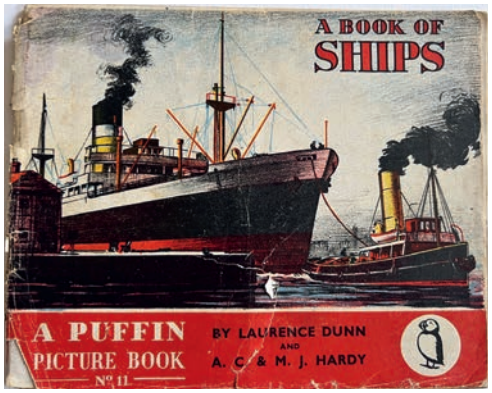
Rachev included all sorts of modern boats, giving a sense of the thrill and danger of being at sea by showing many of the boats tilted at exaggerated angles, backwards or forwards, in rolling waves. The boats are surrounded with a white glow to give them a dramatic presence against saturated blue skies and seas.




Many of these features can be seen in later works on ships and ports: the side-on viewpoint (almost a precursor of the cutaway) to show what is happening inside the vessel. The images put the viewer in a convincing but unrealistic position of being able to see everything at once; the intensity and 'busy-ness' of the activities; the use of the strong diagonals to show movement; and othe use of perspective to give unusual views of the ship to show size and to create a sense of drama. Early **Picture Puffins** and **Ladybird** books about ships are imbued with this drama and show some evidence of Russian influences.











The front and back covers of Laurence Dunn's **A Book of Ships**, illustrated by A.C. & M.J. Hardy, Penguin 1942 are bold and full of colour and action. Inside black and white images alternate with colour, all showing action and movement, as well as technical details about construction.

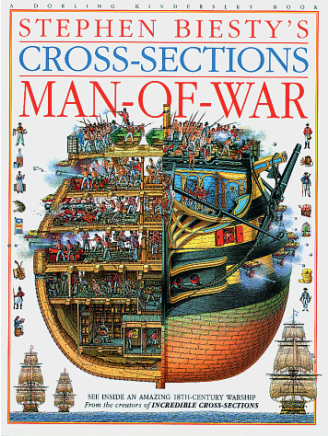
In this and in R. Bowood's **The Story of Ships**, illustrated by Robert Ayton, Wills & Hepworth, 1961, both illustrators make extraordinary use of colour. Ayton and Berry are widely known illustrators working in these and other series. They are skilled illustrators who always bring ife and drama into their illustrations. Here Berry's QE2 cruises towards the viewer on a deep green sea with an orange sky above and a trail of white water; Ayton's *Golden Hind* sails on a purple sea with a red sky above, caught in a moment of high drama.






Clarke Hutton's **A Picture History of Great Discoveries**, OUP, 1954 explores many famous voyaages in history. Hutton is a key mid-century illustrator, extremely well-known and a teacher of auto-lithography at the Central School of Art and Design. Sadly, many of the images are of their time with viewpoints of 'discovery' that are no longer acceptable. That is not, however, the case in these images of polar exploration again making extraordinary use of colours,in particular greens, to create dramatic visual images.

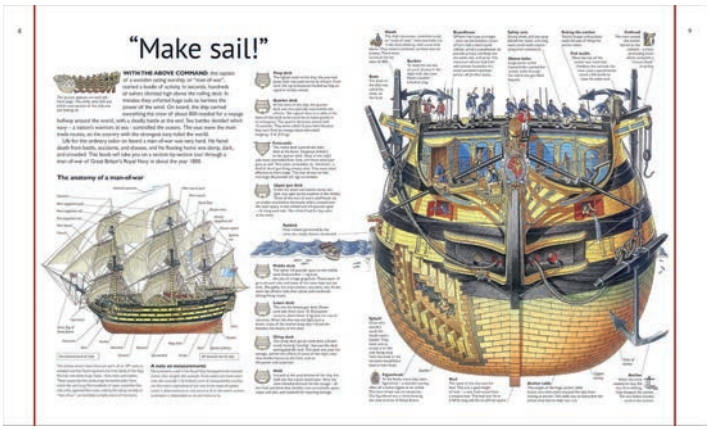
Many of these books include details of construction and also of life on board ship. British illustrator Stephen Biesty is world-renowned for his cross section books looking at interiors of all sorts of buildings and, in this case, a famous 18th century warship.





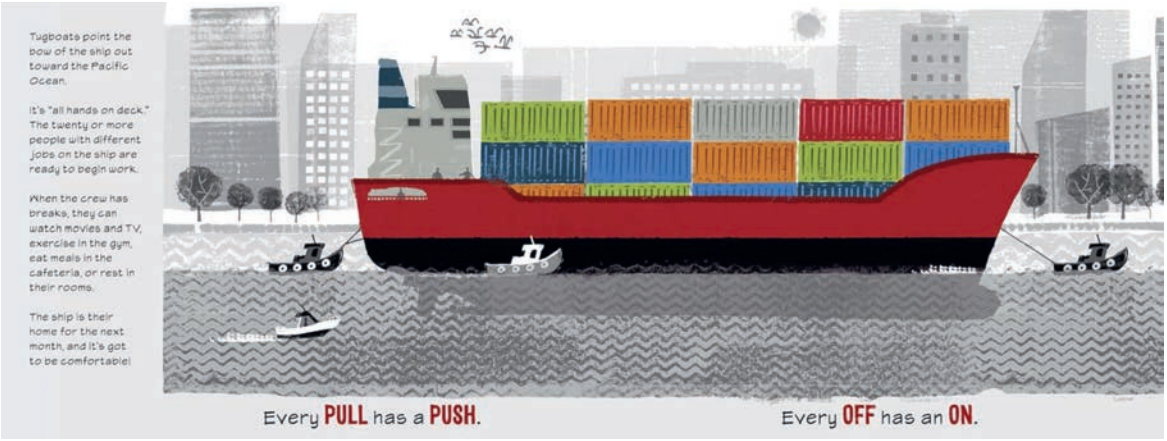

**Cross Sections: Man of War**, Richard Platt, illustrated by Stephen Biesty, Dorllng Kindersley, 1993

From minute details of life onboard to navigational techniques, Biesty's illustrations and incredible drawings are packed with gory details and fascinating facts. In this illustration there is a small image of this 18th century warship in full sail alongside a head-on look at internal decks and structures.




Wars, transport of people, transport of goods, these are all featiures of sea transport. In contemporary times, enormous ships are used to carry huge numbers of containers, moving all kinds of goods around the world.

This is a story simply told in Margo Linn's **Every Here Has a There: Moving Cargo by Container Ship**, illustrated by Brian Fitzgerald, Charlesbridge Publishing 2024




The red and black hull of the ship stands out against white or grey backgrounds, piled up with multi-coloured containers, sailing with a shipment of books from Hong Kong to New York. There is a dual format to the text, the simple narrative of the story provides the background to a parallel text that looks at opposites like PULL and PUSH or OFF and ON. The sense of forward movement, the colour palette and the graphic simplicity of the images are reminiscent of Donald Crews transport books of the late 1970s/80s.

The negative side of container transport is the inevitable pollution of the seas which is caused by accidents and spills. This environmental concern is shown in Yukiko Noritake's **De L'autre Côté de la Mer**, Actes Sud Junior, 2022.




This is an oversize book which can be read two ways. One way is told by Leo, who lives in a town by the sea; the other by Phara, who lives on a small island where the fishing economy is damaged by pollution. The viewpoint in all the illustrations is from above and the colour range is very bold, though different for each environment as can be seen in the two covers. A container ship sets out from Leo's world, from the town to travel across the ocean; the small boats set out from the island; in the middle the two worlds collide. There is an accident and the containers spill from the ship, explaining the reason for the pollution of the seas around the island. Noritake is a Japanese illustrator who has studied in France and Japan, and there is a Japanese finish in her illustrations which have great clarity and definition.



**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 **Akili 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.

# Exploring **Whetherwhy:** an interview with **Anna James**

**Michelle Pauli** interviews bestselling author **Anna James** about her fantasy series, **The Chronicles of Whetherwhy**.

'It's inevitable we write to the times we live in,' says Anna James. And, with the 'blue tsunami' of the American midterms still fresh, she's feeling hopeful, despite being laid up in bed recovering from knee surgery and a flu bug.

It's a sense of hope and resistance – 'the power we can have in finding like-minded people and working together to stand against injustice' – that pervades the third book in her middle grade fantasy **Chronicles of Whetherwhy** series, **The Violet Rebellion**, which takes place in a heightened political environment as the characters battle ever-stronger forces of darkness.

'It's interesting it is coming out just after the midterms in America where things have shifted,' says James. 'I was thinking very much about periods in history of resistance and community organising… and communities of different ages all coming together to stand up for what's right. Whetherwhy is a world where even when things get darker or scarier, there will always be friends and community as well.'






And, of course, magic, which in **Whetherwhy** is rooted in the seasons. All inhabitants of the island of Whetherwhy have light magical powers related to the season they are allied with – which they discover when they are 13 – while a very few are 'enchanters' with access to the magical power of all four seasons.

'I've always found the changing of the seasons very magical,' James says, remembering being a fan of the cosy seasonal world of **Brambly Hedge** and the **Flower Fairies** as a child. Add her lifelong love of **Lord of the Rings** and **Earthsea** – 'I'm a big fantasy nerd' – and the **Whetherwhy** world immediately took shape as 'a love letter to those kinds of worlds that I grew up on' when she started thinking about cracking the crowded middle grade fantasy market following her massive success with the **Pages & Co** series.

**The Violet Rebellion** follows twelve-year-old Rory Green, a farm girl who discovers she can see through powerful enchantments. Rory is drawn into a rebellion against the queen – who is not an enchanter and is jealous of their power – and her army of inspectors who are tightening their grip on the island.

Rory is the latest in a line of **Whetherwhy** child heroes as each book leaps forward thirteen years with a fresh protagonist. Earlier characters also remain in the story – a structure that grew from James's years as a school librarian. 'I was often working with children who were reading a series out of order based on what we had in stock,' she explains. 'I wanted to write something that, while it functioned as a series, could also work as a standalone adventure.'










There was also Narnia. 'I loved seeing characters crop up at different ages,' she recalls. 'You see Prince Caspian as a boy and then an old king, and reading **The Magician's Nephew** for the first time blew my mind.' And then there were the letters from readers of her **Pages & Co** series, who kept asking whether Tilly and Oskar got married. With the characters grown up, she can show who they became and who they married without the romance in the foreground. However, keeping a world consistent across decades, she adds ruefully, is something she was 'very naive about.'

'I am not a natural planner. This series made me plan more than I usually would because of the time jumps. But as I write the last one, I've got a big list of plots where I'm trying, even if it's just a little nod or a little line, to make sure that everything's resolved, including all the smaller plots that have spun off. I have a big document of magic rules and characters, and I'm always desperately checking that to make sure, if I do something differently, it tracks within what I've already established.'

The multi-generational span of the community, with its found family of supportive adults, also causes her plot headaches: 'One of the notes I always get on my first drafts is you need to get the adults more out of the way.' The children need to lead the plot but James is also keen to offer reassurance that there are adults in the world who will behave well and take care of people – 'it constantly causes me plot problems!'

The world this found family inhabits is diverse in a beautifully normalised way – various characters are gay or non-binary or ethnically diverse without comment. James is matter of fact about why. 'It's really as simple as just the world is diverse, isn't it?' she says. 'I think especially with fantasy adventures, you want children of all identities to feel like they are at home.' Whetherwhy has no sexism, racism, homophobia or transphobia; the tension comes instead from class, which stems from wealth as well as magical power. 'It's a fantasy adventure first and foremost,' James stresses, 'but those themes are there for readers who want to think about them.'

Lighter pleasures also abound. Her descriptions of food are mouth-watering – and, readers might notice, vegetarian, which she says suits a world tied to land and seasons. She combs Nigel Slater's seasonal recipe books for inspiration. 'I'm so disappointed when I read a book and they say, 'Oh, we had dinner,' and don't tell you what they ate!' Her editor, she laughs, regularly notes that there is 'too much food'.

Then there are the interludes in which we become aware that the story is being told by a grandfather to his grandchildren: a homage to **The Princess Bride**, but also a librarian's trick for prompting readers to talk about the book. 'It's a fun sort of meta way to be able to articulate questions that children might have and give them pause to talk about the book with their friends or a grown-up or a school librarian,' says James.

For James, being a school librarian was a huge influence on her career as a writer – 'working day to day with young people and just seeing the power of the right book in the right hands at the right time.' She always knew she wanted to work with books and writing and, after being a librarian in a school in Birmingham and starting a master's degree in librarian studies, she became **The Bookseller's** news editor after her book blog did well on Tumblr. Her breakout success, **Pages & Co**, began as an idea for an article about what she'd ask Anne from **Anne of Green Gables** if she could meet her, until a friend, the writer Katherine Rundell, encouraged her to try it as a story instead. She still writes journalism, hosts a podcast – **Bookwandering** – and interviews authors. 'Different kinds of writing,' she says, 'only make you a better writer.'

And she's certainly been doing lots of different writing. Next year will be busy with the publication of an adult romcom, **Read Me Like a Book**; a second **Wonderland** novel; a picture book; and the fourth **Whetherwhy** story, which takes another thirteen-year leap and concludes the series.

Visiting schools, she finds children acutely aware of climate change and injustice. 'I don't ever want my books to have answers,' she says, 'but I do want them to help young readers articulate questions' – to ask, 'What would I do in this situation?' With **The Violet Rebellion**, she says that whatever they find in it is valid. But her own hope is 'a feeling that they have agency in their world, that there are always like-minded people to find, and that they have the power to make positive change.'

**The Chronicles of Whetherwhy: The Violet Rebellion**
by Anna James, 978-0008611637, is published by HarperCollins Children's Books, £14.99 hbk.



**Michelle Pauli** is a freelance writer and editor specialising in books and education. She created and edited the **Guardian** children's books site.

# Beyond the Secret Garden

## Partition in Children's Books

**In their latest column in this long-running series, Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O'Connor consider a topic that initially proved difficult for authors to write about.**

For decades after the Partition of India in 1947, there was a silence in children's books about the topic. A brutal, seemingly random line was drawn across a country by a man, Cyril Radcliffe, who had never been to India before the British government sent him to decide on the Partition. Radcliffe used out-of-date maps and focused on trade routes (railways and rivers) rather than people, religions, or communities to make his decision. Over fifteen million people moved from one part of the country to another, and up to two million were killed during the sectarian violence that followed Partition. Many people who experienced the worst travesties of Partition did not want to remember or talk about what happened to other adults, let alone write about it in books for young people.

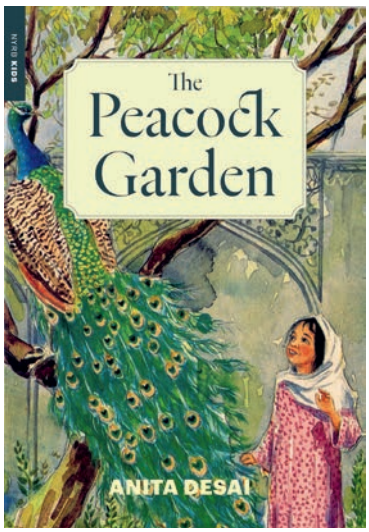
One of the earliest UK published children's books to deal with Partition is **The Peacock Garden** by Anita Desai. Originally published in 1979, with illustrations from Mei-Yim Low added in 1991 (Mammoth), it tells the story of Zuni, a young Muslim girl. Her father does not wish to leave the village for Pakistan and so her family seek refuge in the local mosque in Punjab. There is a sense of the turmoil taking place 'out there' and of the anxiety it provokes in the family. The cover and the final scenes feature a peacock, both the national bird of India and a symbol of renewal.

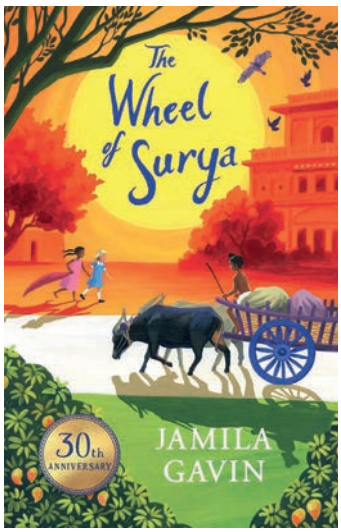
In 1992, Jamila Gavin was born in India in 1941 to an English mother and an Indian father and brought to England by her mother after she heard reports of massacres after the 1947 Partition – wrote **The Wheel of Surya**, one of the first British novels for children to address Partition. In the novel, two Sikh children, Marvinder and Jaspal, become separated from their mother during the mass movement of people between India and Pakistan. Gavin doesn't pull any punches – the children witness violence that destroys their village and results in the death of their uncle and are nearly part of one of the 'massacre trains' in which one religious group would kill the trainful of people trying to escape to the other country. They survive only because they got off the train when it stopped, and are later rescued by soldiers and taken to a refugee camp. Eventually, the children appeal to missionaries, who bring the children to England, but not before they witness extensive violence that will go on to affect their lives forever, especially Jaspal's. Gavin's trilogy of books (**The Wheel of Surya**, **The Eye of the Horse**, and **The Track of the Wind**) were all shortlisted for the Guardian Children's fiction prize.

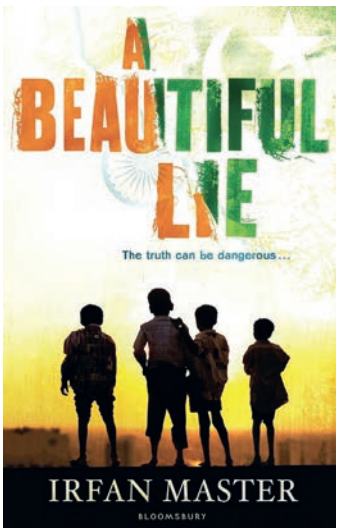
Irfan Master's critically acclaimed **A Beautiful Lie** (Bloomsbury 2011) explores how the personal is political. Bilal's father is in his final days and Bilal works to keep the realities of partition from him for fear it will break his heart, The story shows how large political events impact human lives and raises interesting questions about truth, information, silence and denial.

Since the 75th anniversary of Partition in 2022, there has been an upsurge in books for young people, mostly authored by children and grandchildren of people who experienced the separation of India and Pakistan. The fact that the authors and illustrators come from all over the global Indian diaspora demonstrates the effect that Partition had beyond India. Two picture books about Partition demonstrate the way that the movement of people due to Partition extended well beyond its borders. Author Namita Moolani Mehra was born in Nigeria, and currently lives in Singapore; illustrator Beena Mistry is based in Toronto, Canada. Together they produced **Veena and the Red Roti: A story of hope during Partition** (Kids Can Press 2024). British-Indian Swapna Haddow has lived in both the UK and New Zealand, and she wrote **The Line** (Scholastic 2026) as part of her Creative New Zealand Children's Writer-in-residency. The book was illustrated by British-Pakistani illustrator Farah Shah. All the creators of both books thank parents or grandparents for inspiration and support in writing about their heritage countries. Both **Veena and the Red Roti** and **The Line** are hopeful stories, and focus mostly on the separation rather than the violence of Partition. Both also showcase children who take imaginative action against the sadness that Partition causes: Veena, to stop her mother from crying, goes to the kitchen in the refugee camp to offer to make roti out of the hard red ragi (also known as finger millet). The child in **The Line** is inspired by her mother's singing of familiar songs as they walk an endless line to their new home. She imagines drawing a different kind of line than the one that separated the nation, a line that would bring people together rather than separate them, and a line that would turn into alphabets so that stories could be written.

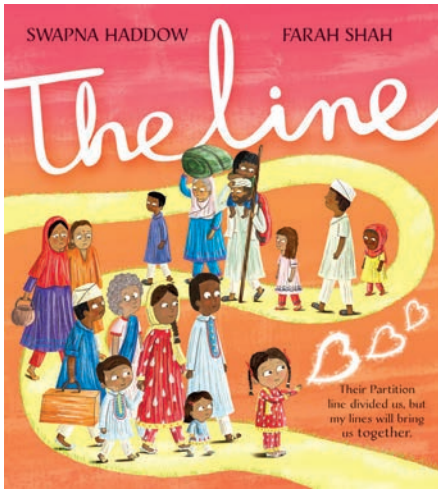
**The Line** followed Swapna Haddow's more harrowing version of Partition for older readers, **Torn Apart: The Partition of India** (Scholastic 2021). Like Jamila Gavin's novel, **Torn Apart** does not shy away from the massacre trains, the religious divisions and the violence. But Haddow was keen to write a story that demonstrated



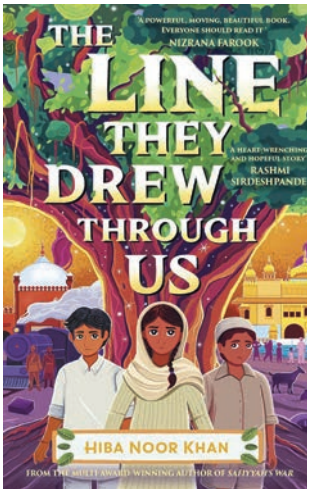















the similarities between the two protagonists, wealthy Muslim Ibrahim and Hindu street child Amar. Both boys love the cinema, both have lost loved ones due to the violence. They need each other to survive. And although (or perhaps because) Haddow's research suggested that many people, including children, did not survive, she leaves the ending of the novel open: the two boys have separated, and Amar says that he never hears from Ibrahim again – but he does see him a couple of times, and wonders if Ibrahim eventually made it across the border. Despite Haddow ending the novel with Amar hearing news of another massacre train, she leaves it to the reader to decide whether or not Ibrahim was on it.

Janeen Hayat's **Evie and Maryam's Family Tree** (Guppy 2025) focuses on another kind of friendship, not between Muslim and Hindu but between Indian and English girls Safia and Kathy. Theirs is a lopsided friendship – Kathy does not think about how her rule-breaking weighs more heavily on Safia than on her, and Safia recognizes that Kathy is selfish. They disagree about the fate of India (Kathy tells Safia it is her 'Father's job to try to keep people from breaking the law' when Safia protests that Gandhi is not a criminal for protesting the salt tax). And yet, the friendship lasts, not only when Kathy leaves for England, but down the generations when modern-day schoolgirls Evie and Maryam uncover their shared history through their grandmothers. Friendship, in both Hayat's and Haddow's books, transcends politics.

In T**he Line They Drew Through Us** (Andersen Press, 2025), Hiba Noor Khan, who describes herself as a second-generation British Pakistani, offers a child-centred story that shows the violence associated with partition. Her opening chapter, *Kismat*, introduces us to three children born on the same day in 1935. There are clear similarities with Salman Rushdie's Booker Prize winning **Midnight's Children**. Here though, the children reach the age of twelve at the time of Indian independence and the establishment of Pakistan. There is a greater breadth of scope in this book than in many others centred around partition. We learn of the Bengal famine, the Amritsar massacre and Indian indentureship in the Caribbean for example. Whereas some children's books portray partition as a consequence of almost a lack of interest on the part of the British, Khan explores how British interests drove the project just as they had driven events in India for many decades before.




Most recently, Iqbal Hussain's **The Night I Borrowed Time** (2026) employs a magical time-travel element where Zubair moves between contemporary life in Lancashire and 1947 India. There is a rich contemporary story – Zubair is desperate to save his parent's marriage – while at the same time we come to understand Partition not merely as an event in the past but as something that continues to reverberate in the lives of people today.

*Books mentioned:*

**The Peacock Garden**, Anita Desai, NYRB Kids Books, 979-8896230601, £11.99 pbk

**The Wheel of Surya**, Jamila Gavin, Farshore, 9781405291743, £7.99 pbk

**A Beautiful Lie**, Irfan Master, Bloomsbury, 978-1408805756, £8.99 pbk

**Veena and the Red Roti: A story of hope during Partition**, Namita Moolani Mehra, illus Beena Mistry, Kids Can Press, 978-1525307355

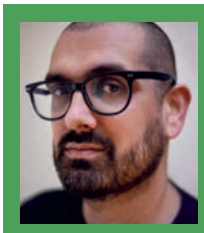
**The Line,** Swapna Haddow, Farah Shah, Scholastic, 978-0702328848, £7.99 pbk

**Torn Apart: The Partition of India**, Swapna Haddow, Scholastic, 978-0702300417, £4.99 pbk

**Evie and Maryam's Family Tree**, Janeen Hayat, Guppy Books, 978-1916558410, £7.99pbk

**The Line They Drew Through Us**, Hiba Noor Khan, Andersen Press, 978-1839134722, £7.99 pbk

**The Night I Borrowed Time,** Iqbal Hussin, Puffin, 978-0241742624, £8.99 pbk

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



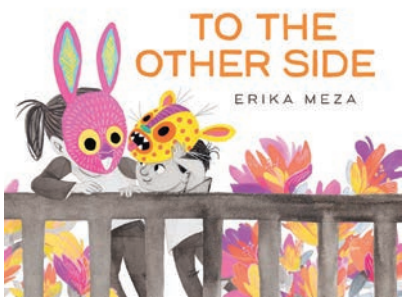
**Professor Karen Sands-O'Connor** is a Visiting Professor of Education at the University of Sheffield. Her book **British Activist Authors Addressing Children of Colour** (Bloomsbury 2022) won the 2024 Children's Literature Association Honor Book Award.

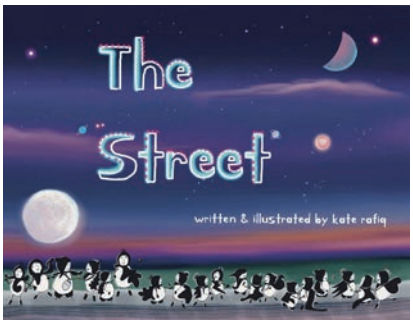
Darren and Karen's book **Beyond the Secret Garden: Racially Minoritised People in British Children's Books** is out now, published by English Media Centre.

# Letterbox Library Recommends:

# Bridges & Barriers

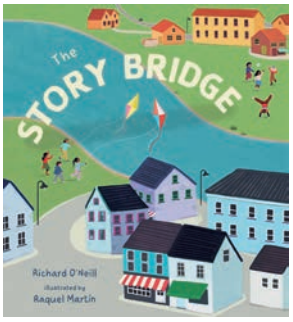
## In their latest set of themed recommendations, the **Letterbox Library** team highlight books that cross bridges and barriers.










We were recently told of an article by Loaay Wattad, *When a Wall Enters a Children's Story* (Literature Review September 26). Appropriately enough we were directed there by ***BfK*** contributor Darren Chetty, co-author with Karen Sands O'Connor of **Beyond the Secret Garden**, a book which takes its cue from an enclosure, 'the secret garden' of UK Children's Literature and how this space circumscribes the representation of and excludes racially minoritised people.

Wattad's focus is specifically on the appearance of walls in children's literature and the very different functions they serve. As he says, 'Walls seemed to be everywhere, but they did not all do the same narrative work.' Walls can be physical or metaphorical, protect or contain, include or exclude.

When we looked at our own book collections, we too discovered walls of some sort in a great many places but, just as often, we discovered bridges. Perhaps most interesting to us were those titles provoked by and directly referencing contentious and volatile contemporary issues.

**To The Other Side** by Ezra Meza, is surely a school library staple. Here we witness two Mexican children embark on a perilous journey in order to reach sanctuary. The older child shields her sibling by disguising their flight as a game with masks, monsters to avoid and a 'finish line'. That line, when it appears, is an infinite boundary of metal railings. In order to cross it there are questions, scans and checks and yet, as the protagonist says, 'once we did [cross]…it didn't feel like we had won'. Which monsters is this wall keeping out and which is it keeping in?

Likely unknown to schools is Kate Rafiq's **The Street** in which a small community must each day navigate a checkpoint at the end of their road. That blockade - a boom barrier guarded by fearsome steel creatures - operates as just one of many acts of containment and surveillance. The residents are ultimately expelled from their street altogether, their houses seized. Once outside of that zone of interest, however, the people insist on their survival through rituals and traditions, recreating a homeland in exile, defying the demarcations drawn and patrolled by their bullies.

While both Meza's and Rafiq's texts serve as rich allegories, they also cue contemporary events. Meza's author note references the numbers of child refugees worldwide and the inhumane 2018 US separation policy enacted at the Mexican border. Rafiq's website calls **The Street** an introduction to 'colonisation', while its depiction of ravages such as scorched crops and a power cut to a maternity ward will resonate as genocidal tools being wielded in Palestine. Extraordinarily, given these wider social contexts, both books have been applauded for sparing their young readers trauma, instead facilitating an exploration of social justice crises at a child's own pace and rhythm.

Also taking inspiration from contemporary political events is Smriti Prasadam-Halls' (a.k.a. Smriti Halls) and Robert Starling's **The Little Island**. A farm operates as a mutually supportive democracy until the geese suddenly decide that their 'little island' habitat risks being overrun by visits from other farm animals. They command the ducks to raise the footbridge on their 'once green and pleasant land'. This isolationism rapidly leads to vulnerability, a shortage of labour and a depreciation in the quality of life, prompting the geese to rebuild the bridge. Published in April 2020, just 3 months after the UK formally left the EU, both Prasadam-Halls and Starling raised Brexit in interviews. On being shortlisted for the **Little Rebels Award**, Prasadam-Halls talked about publishing into such a 'tense, fraught and volatile situation' and 'the cost' to her, especially as a woman of colour.

Another bridge is (re)built in **The Story Bridge** by British Romani storyteller, Richard O'Neill. Two fictional towns, Ambria and Ursa, face each other across a river, having stayed resolutely apart following a disagreement which no one can quite remember. Both communities are beset by unspecified resentments and inherited suspicions. But the annual arrival of Travelling craftspeople, the Kovel folki, sparks a fresh appreciation of their commonality. Soon, the towns' children are sharing tales from opposite riversides, their words forming 'a beautiful story bridge' depicted as a rainbow arch of Romani and English words, including 'respect, forgiveness, trust, harmony'.

There is another, quietly revolutionary, bridge extended here to the reader. Traveller communities are overwhelmingly stereotyped in culture as isolationist, tribalist and hostile to 'mainstream' culture. In this picture book, it is only through the Kovel Folki, their empathy and their careful mediation, that a bridge is built, restoring understanding and humanity.

With their variously in/direct allusions to external events and geopolitics, all these picture books chime perfectly with Wattad's account of children's texts in which 'The Wall [or bridge] Refuses to Become a Metaphor.'

Books mentioned all, available from Letterbox Library

**The Stree**t, Kate Rafiq (Dune Books 2025)
**To The Other Side**, Erika Meza (Hodder Children's Books (2023)
**Beyond the Fence**, Marcia Gulemetova (Child's Play 2017)
**The Little Island**, Smriti Prasadam-Hall & Robert Starling (Andersen Press 2020)
**The Story Bridge**, Richard O'Neill & Raquel Martín (Child's Play 2026)

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**.

# I wish **I'd** written...



**Cosmic Cadets and the Wormhole Witch** by Ryan Crawford, illustrated by Rochelle Falconer, 978-1382054386, Oxford Children's Books, is out now £7.99 pbk.

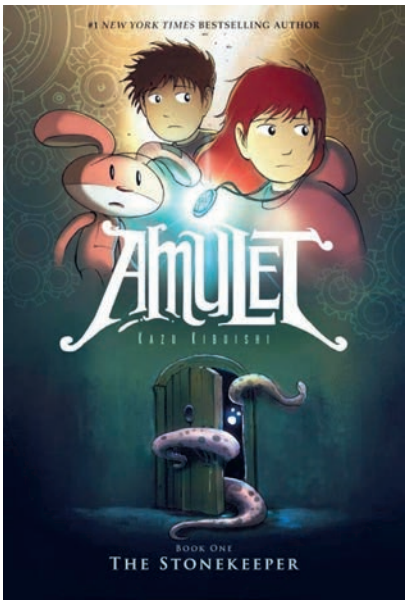
Author and game-designer **Ryan Crawford** chooses a book that epitomises show don't tell.

I'm a huge Japanese manga nerd, so from just one look at the cover of **Amulet** by Kazu Kibuishi and I knew this was something special. It has that Studio Ghibli-esque vibe that feels like a crossover between a Hayao Miyazaki movie and a funky sci-fi/space comic.

You get to follow siblings Emily and Navin, as they chase after their mother. There are walking robot houses, a chatty rabbit-robot, and an elven prince all entangled in their quest. All the same kinds of weird ideas that I find floating around in my head!

And the amulet is almost a mysterious character itself. Creepy, whispery voice – check; dangerous magical power – check; sometimes friend, sometimes foe - check!

One of my favourite things about **Amulet** is the way it shows us writers how to do a lot with a little. There are so many pages that don't have a single line of text. But we still know exactly how a character is feeling from just their facial expression and the beautiful artwork. It really embodies the 'show, don't tell' rule. So all I need to do is figure out how to draw something better than stick people, and I'll be able to create a masterpiece like this.




**The Stonekeeper**, book one in Kazu Kibuishi's **Amulet** series, is published by Scholastic, 978-1407103891, £10.99 pbk

# Good Reads: Oxford High School for Girls

This issue's **Good Reads** feature takes a different approach. Instead of choosing their favourite reads, pupils of **Oxford High School for Girls** explain how their school librarian, **Matilda McMorrow**, supports reading enjoyment and critical thinking across their whole school community. Matilda is on the shortlist for the 2026 **Secondary School Librarian of the Year,** sponsored by Bloomsbury. Thanks to the **SLA** for their help with this special Good Reads.

When the shortlist was first shared, pupils from Oxford High School got in touch with the SLA to express how grateful they are to have Matilda McMorrow as their school librarian.

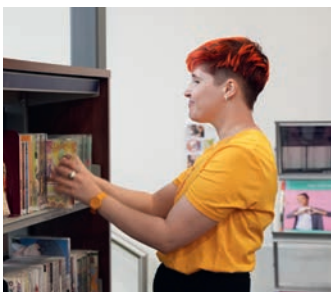
These quotes are a powerful example of the positive impact a school librarian can bring to the school community and offer real-life evidence of how to build enthusiastic readers.

**Ottilie** says, 'We went on a school trip to Amsterdam, and Ms McMorrow not only came with us, she made us all booklets with the coolest information and histories of the places we visited, as well as games and stories for the bus. It really made the trip so much cooler, and made everywhere we visited more meaningful. She also had so much extra information that we learned along the way. At the end of the trip, she organised prizes and awards and made the long bus ride feel so much more fun. I was talking to her about my Duke of Edinburgh volunteering, and how I didn't know what to do for it. She suggested volunteering at the Story Museum and told me about it. I did it, and it is seriously one of my favourite things to do ever. I never would've done it if she hadn't told me about it.'

**Freya** says, 'I delivered an assembly about my beliefs to my year group, and Ms. McMorrow came, and afterwards, ordered books about paganism and witchcraft for the library so that everyone could read. She knows exactly what everyone likes to read, by some miracle. I can always ask her for book recommendations, and she gives me the best ones. She recommended my favourite book to me: **Chinese Cinderella** (Adeline Yen Mah, Puffin, 978-0141359410, £8.99 pbk). She always lets us take out so many books for the holidays and makes reading challenges for holidays and half terms. When we're really into a book, she always extends our loans for as long as we need.'

**Lindsey** says, 'She makes **World Book Day** so fun! She always wears the best costumes, and arranges writer visits, activities and extra library events all week. She also has a book cafe every term with a different theme, where students, staff and visitors can come and talk about books, drink tea and eat cookies. She makes the library such a great place to work. It is such a nice place to do homework in because there is always lined and squared paper and pens if you've forgotten anything. At the end of term, I had nothing in my pencil case and she gave me a pen with a koala on top to keep.'

**Merry** says, 'She's always in the library to help out if I want to borrow a book or need some suggestions. She also helped me set up my club in school – she found websites and researched lots of stuff about it in her spare time and always dropped by to see how it was doing!'





The Secondary School Librarian of the Year will be announced at a ceremony in Oxford on 18 November, where the **School Library Association** will also celebrate the **Peter Usborne Primary School Library of the Year Award** and the **Barrington Stoke Reader of the Year Award.** Nominations for the 2027 awards will open on 19 November.

BfK

## 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.lovemybooks.co.uk

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

**Clare Pollard** s 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.

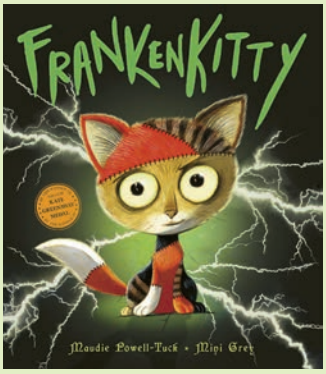
# Under 5s **Pre – School/Nursery/Infant**

## Ed's Choice

### Frankenkitty

★★★★★

Maudie Powell-Tuck, ill. Mini Grey, Little Tiger, 32pp, 9781801048613, £12.99 hbk




This is a very playful, inventive Halloween read for under-5s, steeped in classic horror imagery whilst also managing to be adorable. Like a ghost story read aloud at a spooky sleepover, the narrator builds the suspense by promising a 'tale to chill the blood' and nods to both the oral tradition and Ahlberg's **Funnybones** by beginning 'in a dark, dark forest, in a darketty dark castle'. As in **Funnybones**, there is also lots of sly humour – the castle walls are grey as 'old knickers' and the child is told: 'You want to turn the page? Be warned! It's terrifying, petrifying, it's hideous. It's.... FRANKENKITTY!' only to be confronted with a really cute, big-eyed kitten saying 'mew'.

But bad things start happening at the castle: menacing moths, slimy socks, brown bananas (shudder). Is Frankenkitty behind this curse? Illustrator Mini Grey has incredible fun with this set up, approaching the scenes from unexpected and cinematic angles as Frankenkitty is observed by a skull, a brain in a jar, and a foot (which rather touchingly, puts on a sock when it follows Frankenkitty into the snow). There are mad-scientist tropes – the inventor cries 'IT'S ALIVE!' from a lightning struck tower, whilst we see shelves packed with reanimators, alchemy equipment, phrenology heads and galvanoscopes. Every room is packed with haunting details – taxidermy heads that change their expression; a sarcophagus; a maid with the hair from the 1935 film Bride of Frankenstein; Uncle Peter's ashes spilling from a jar... It's the perfect introduction to the gothic for small children, giving them plenty to talk about with their adult (including a delightful ambiguous payoff, that allows them to decide for themselves whether Frankenkitty is a malign actor). Ending as it does with the kitten curled up by a fire, it's a cosy read for dark nights. **CP**

### Gruffalo Granny

★★★★★

Julia Donaldson, Axel Scheffler, Macmillan, 9781035065516, 40pp, £14.99 hbk

Gruffalo Granny is coming to stay – and she likes her food. In fact her appetite is enormous. What to give her? The Gruffalo and the Gruffalo Child set out to collect the ingredients. The plan is to catch fox, owl and snake but attention is diverted to that tricksy mouse. Oh dear, is mouse destined to be stew for Granny? However, the mouse has not lost his trickiness. Taking a leaf out of the Arabian Nights, he delays the moment he will be put in the pot and escapes. But what about Granny? Now there is only a stew of carrots and greens....

Once again Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler join forces to demonstrate what a true picture book partnership can achieve. The jaunty rhyming text is perfectly married to the bold quirky illustrations so full of colour and humour, a humour that is reflected in the words and the story arc. There are the characters – the Gruffalo, fearsome in appearance but possible to trick (and now a little bit cuddly, perhaps), the clever little mouse – but will he have met his match this time? The expressions on the faces are immediate. Then the stories; young readers will delight in recognising them drawn as they are from the Donaldson-Scheffler canon. No new ground is broken here. Rather author and illustrator bring that reassuring familiarity so important for its audience – adult and child. Donaldson's facility with her rhyming text makes the storyline easy to follow and share, Scheffler's vivid illustrations make use of each spread allowing moments of drama as well as spotlighting details to catch the attention. And with a new character joining the family it is worthy conclusion to the Gruffalo trilogy. **FH**

### My Best Friend is a Monster

★★★

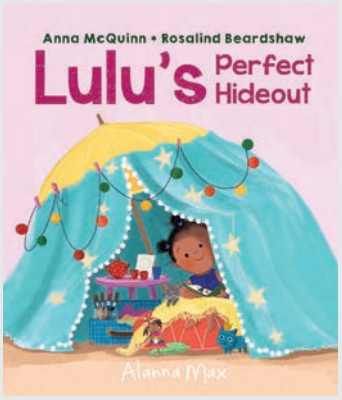
Sian Owen, ill. Germana Musco, HarperCollins Children's Books, 32pp, 9780008752378, £7.99 pbk

This rhyming story is narrated by a young boy who starts school with his friend and unsurprisingly both of them are nervous. However, one of the two - the monster - soon discovers that fitting in with school life is far from easy. That's on account of such things as his massive feet that get in the way when he joins in with outdoor games, but things get more difficult in the classroom. Before long the furniture is shaking and one of the chairs is broken and come lunch time when the monster is very hungry he overfills his tray, his clumsy paws causing the food to go flying through the air. The result is scattered mashed potatoes and peas rolling every which way.

Outside play is tricky: it's impossible for Monster to be the hider in a game of hide and seek, his girth results in him being stuck halfway down the slide and his bulging rear end is far too large to sit properly in a swing; indeed very soon there's one with the seat snapped in half.

His human friend is supportive and encouraging telling Monster that they're not about to give up: fun awaits them both. Then comes sports day and everybody is to race around the track. Could this be the time when something amazing happens on account of the size of one competitor's feet?

This empowering, gently humorous book with Germana Musco's bright, lively, mixed media illustrations is a celebration of difference. Self-acceptance and kindness are key and nobody should be afraid to be themselves. **JB**




### Lulu's Perfect Hideout

★★★★

Anna McQuinn, ill. Rosalind Beardshaw, Alanna Max, 32pp, 978 19078 2566 8, £12.99 hbk

This book is a lovely addition to the **Lulu** collection of stories. Lulu has a new baby sister whom she loves very much. She loves to read stories to her, as well as playing baby games and singing songs along with her little brother Zeki. However, as much as Lulu adores playing with her new sibling, there are times when she wants to be all by herself. On one such she collects everything she needs and starts to work using a blanket and a parasol. She then adorns the construction with stars and pompoms, puts all her precious items inside and in she crawls. The perfect hideout.

Daddy helps his daughter make a sign to hang outside that reads 'Big Girls only No babies No brothers'.

The following day Lulu's Auntie Zari and her daughter Hani come visiting:

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

like Lulu, Hani is a 'big girl' and she too is allowed to enter the tent. The two of them have great fun playing with favourite toys, making cousin-bracelets, and creating gorgeous decorations to adorn the inside of their tent. What a super 'big girl' day they have - the best ever. Come Saturday Lulu spends the entire day playing in her hideout, she eats her meals there and only Makeda the cat is allowed in; she even prepares beds so they can sleep there. Before that though, in comes Mummy to read them a bedtime story; Daddy tucks Lulu in and Zeki and the baby come for goodnight kisses.

Next morning Lulu is ready to have breakfast with everybody, especially as it's pancakes. She also asks Daddy to assist in the making of a new sign and what it says enables her to ask all the family in for afternoon tea.

It's a joy to watch Lulu growing up, becoming more independent and learning new life skills; in this case, becoming accustomed to having a new sibling in her house, supported by her parents who allow her to create her own space to better enable her to deal with one of the big feelings many youngsters have to cope with.

Rosalind Beardshaw's bold, bright scenes of the events are simply adorable and sure to bring a big smile to the faces of both young listeners and adults who share the book with them. It's one to add to preschool collections and family bookshelves where there's a new baby, or soon to be one. **JB**




### Aggie Witchfinder

★★★★

Sarah Hannah Walsh, O'Brien Press, 32pp, 978-178849613, £9.99 pbk

Sarah Hannah Walsh's debut picturebook is a comic adventure that celebrates the love between father and daughter. It's a special day for little Aggie. For the first time ever she's accompanying Daddy Witchfinder as he sets out to find a witch. No witch has been found for a very, very long time, could this be the day that changes? It is, and it happens in the most surprising way. Aggie's daddy might be tall, imposing and wearing a proper witchfinder general hat, but he's anything but threatening and the depiction of their loving relationship is one of the many pleasures of the book, Aggie all excitement and enthusiasm, her daddy also excited to have his daughter with him and keen to make sure she has the best time. Junior witchophiles will find lots of little details in the illustrations they'll love and will enjoy the outing as much as Aggie and her daddy. Sarah Hannah Walsh's characters, picked out in blue and purple, walk through woods glowing with autumn colours. She has fun with perspectives too and her comic timing is impeccable. **LS**

### Don't Feed the Troll

★★★★

Emily Gravett, Two Hoots, 40pp, 9781035074440, £14.99 hbk

Some picturebook creators understand that words and pictures can tell different parts of a story. Gravett goes further: she understands that words themselves can become pictures, occupying space, changing scale and even pushing characters around the page. In this brilliantly mischievous fairy-tale mash-up, that understanding becomes central to a surprisingly astute exploration of what gives hurtful words their power.

Everyone in a land far, far away is heading to a picnic. Goldilocks, Cinderella, Jack, Puss in Boots, three pigs, several bears, witches, dragons and an entire storybook population set off together, but reaching the celebrations means crossing a bridge. Beneath it waits a very small troll with a very large capacity for insults.

Gravett's rhyming text makes the encounters enormous fun to read aloud, but her typography increasingly takes control of the storytelling. The troll ridicules clothes, food, appearances and familiar fairy-tale characteristics; each response feeds him and he grows. So do his words. Insults become larger and louder until, in a magnificent confrontation with a giant, the lettering sprawls across the spread, almost pushing its inhabitants from the page. Gravett turns the picturebook itself into a measure of power: the more attention the troll receives, the more space he is allowed to occupy.

The traditional troll beneath the bridge consequently begins to resemble his thoroughly modern online namesake. Yet Gravett's response to trolling is much more interesting than simply instructing children to ignore unkindness. Her characters have been hurt, and she allows that hurt to matter. At his largest, the troll becomes so enormous that the page can no longer contain him, while the skies behind the anxious fairy-tale community turn grey.

Then something wonderful happens. Rather than expend their energy defeating the troll, the characters turn towards one another. Old storybook divisions dissolve. Bears comfort Goldilocks; wolves and pigs discover common ground; characters whose traditional narratives make them adversaries begin repairing the damage through reassurance, generosity and affection. The troll's insults have isolated individuals by attacking the things that make them distinctive. The community responds by reminding each other that those differences can be valued. Don't Feed theTrol

And Gravett makes the reversal visual. With every kind word, the troll shrinks. His once overwhelming presence diminishes across the page until the voice that dominated everybody else becomes almost comically small.

There is tremendous pleasure throughout: familiar stories collide, visual jokes abound and Gravett's expressive typography demands performance. Yet beneath all the anarchic fairy-tale play is something beautifully judged. Cruel words can hurt regardless of who speaks them, but a community need not allow its attention to remain with the person shouting loudest.

Don't feed the troll, certainly.

Feed the community instead. **MT**




### Ghost, Ghoul and Little Mouse

★★★★

Graham Howie, Oxford Children's Books, 32pp, 978-1382064040, £7.99 pbk

Little Mouse is the undoubted star of this creaky old house story which is full of delightful treats for young children. Little Mouse lives a comfortable but lonely life in the dark, creaky house at the top of the hill and no-one ever joins him for dinner or on games night. So when Ghost and Ghoul drift by, both looking for a house to haunt, Little Mouse is excited, baking a cake for them and making friendly welcome signs. Sadly, his two visitors are completely oblivious, more concerned with their 'who's the scariest' competition. When his cake attracts a passing bear, they try their terrifying tricks out on him, to no effect whatsoever. In a twist that will please the small ones amongst us enormously, Little Mouse succeeds where they failed, the crash he makes as he drops his welcome sign into the bin and, most satisfying of all, the sight of his long shadow through an open doorway sending Bear shrieking into the night. At last, Little Mouse has the attention and respect of his guests. The pink and purple colour palette is perfect for this nighttime tale, while the hats perched on top of Ghost and Ghoul keep them the friendly side of haunting, and Little Mouse is resolutely upbeat throughout. Three cheers for stories that remind children that all voices are important and that the smallest amongst us can still make their presence felt. This will be ideal for sharing at home, in the classroom, and all year round. **AR**

### The Wonderful Pocket Family

★★★

Kazuko Matt, do re mi books, 40pp, 978 191793322, £12.99 hbk

A family of dogs all use pockets to help them with their interests. They gather and dance to the delight of the people around them. The book is stronger on characterisation than on plot but might well appeal to the very youngest children as they explore the book. They might, for example, take a real delight at Little Pocket's collection which includes a flashlight, some chalk and a 'mysterious key;' the money their audience gives them fills Grandpa's pocket and they all go out to dinner to celebrate.

On the back, the book is endorsed as 'quirky' by Chris Haughton, the master of quirky, and the story is certainly odd - but I have to take issue with the way the things that the Pocket family collect in their pockets are divided by gender: the daddy likes eating and carries food and utensils; the mummy likes gardening and her pockets are full of things to sow and tools; Grandma likes to look fancy... it could be argued that this is reflecting children's realities, but I am still unsure of the impact. **NS**

### The Cricket and the Violin

★★★

Anna Haifisch, trans. David Colmer, Do Re Mi Books, 32pp, 9781917933186, £13.99 hbk

Somebody accidentally leaves a violin in the forest. A cricket finds the instrument and makes her home in it. She discovers her legs are just the right size to pluck its strings. The whole forest enjoys her music. But then, in the cold winter, the forest animals are freezing and do a terrible thing: they burn the violin. Come spring, they miss the cricket's playing and deeply regret what they have done. Fortunately, happiness is restored when the cricket finds another way to make music.

German author-illustrator Anna Haifisch creates a very quirky forest world, populated by insects and small mammals who engage in everyday human activities. Our cricket, for example, spends her time making noodles, while the moths hang out in the Pumpkin Club. The surreal quality is further heightened by Haifisch's illustrations. She uses black line filled with very strong, sometimes almost dayglo, flat colour and embeds a lot of curious details into the images.

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

This is a modern fable which celebrates the gift of music. It resonates (I assume intentionally) with Aesop's The Ant and the Grasshopper but turns its moral upside down in that it is the music-making cricket whose creativity is given real value – something I certainly applaud. Overall, the book has considerable charm and clever humour. It is quite a sophisticated package and I think a lot of young readers' reaction to it will depend on how they respond to its very colourful artwork style. **RC**

### Follow Me Moon

★★★★

Colleen Larmour, Nosy Crow, 32pp, 9781805134220, £12.99 hbk

Nosy Crow is marketing this as having the 'nostalgic feel of a bedtime classic', a phrase that made me instantly suspicious. What makes a book feel like a classic when it isn't one? When it reminds you of a classic? Rehashes a classic? Given the title – directly addressing the moon – is suspiciously close to Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd's superlative **Goodnight Moon**, I wondered if this new iteration of the moon-focused bedtime book was strictly necessary. We have AI now, after all, to reheat and pass off the work of those who have come before.

Having said that though, **Follow Me Moon** a perfectly charming addition to the tradition of the lullabook, with its comforting repetitions, and the 'happy ending' of the child snuggled down in bed to sleep. Although the small number of rhymes with 'moon' in English mean we still end up with the tension between 'moon' and 'room' and an inevitable 'balloon', Larmour does add the innovation of showing the passing of seasons, so that a 'pink blossoms moon', a 'pumpkin soup, spoon', a witch's 'broom' and a 'cosy coat cocoon' are depicted. There is something almost haiku-like about the way these small moments in a child's life are always set against the backdrop of nature's cycles, and like many fellow parents I am sentimental about such annual rituals. I particularly like how Christmas is represented not by piles of presents, but a Christmas tree strapped to the roof of a car.

It's also worth noting that, unlike Margaret Wise Brown, Larmour is both poet and illustrator, and her woodcut-inspired illustrations are undeniably lovely. Many of the book's best moments are visual – the moon in hiding in the bunch of balloons, or in place of a snowman's head, or reflected in a 'lagoon' beneath a paper boat. (I thought of the haiku-writer Li Bai, who is supposed to have drowned trying to embrace the moon's beauty). The smudged, smiling face in the moon at the end is perfect: just subtle enough for a child to feel they have spotted something magical all by themselves. **CP**

### Chi Chi the Panda

★★★★

Maisie Chan, ill. Jo Lindley, Hodder Children's Books, 32pp, 978 1 4449 7858 2, £12.99 hbk

In this real life tale we meet Chi Chi the panda whose story starts in China in a place called Baoxing, on a lush green hillside with bamboo aplenty. From there she was taken to a zoo in Peking (Beijing) and thereafter to zoos in various other parts of the world as a symbol of peace and friendship between nations. She was sent to Russia to Moscow Zoo, to Brookfield Zoo in the USA and then received an invitation to visit London Zoo where she was became a permanent resident.

As luck would have it one of her keepers was Dr Desmond Morris who took great care of Chi Chi, ensuring she was fed specially grown bamboo and before long the panda was the country's most loved animal.

When Chi Chi was nine years old Dr Morris decided that it was time for her to try to breed and so he flew to Moscow in search of a male panda. Though he was thought by Russian spies to be after information, fortunately he managed to return safely to London. He'd arranged for Chi Chi to return to Moscow to meet a male panda but attempts to get the two to mate came to nothing. Nonetheless Chi Chi remained the most famous panda in the whole world.

The story is told from Chi Chi's viewpoint, which works well and there's further information about both pandas and conservation at the end of the book. **JB**

### Red Snake, Blue Snake

★★★★

Olivier Tallec, Gecko Press, 32pp, 9798348051358 £12.00 hbk

Red Snake and Blue Snake are friends, but will their friendship help them on 'a big outing and a long day'? The story begins simply enough, with the two snakes spending time together, and the reader gets to see how differences – even fights – don't mean that their friendship is in peril. After morning yoga (the adult or older child reader will see the humour in snakes' yoga) they debate the shape of clouds, the colour of the sky, the use of discarded binoculars...until they see a human playing a flute. 'That's a snake charmer,' Blue Snake warns, and all of a sudden their differences of opinion are leading them into trouble...

This is a sweet story about how friends listen to each other, but has real danger to deal with, and the illustration of the charmer's collection of hypnotized snakes shows it: Blue Snake overrides Red Snake and as they make their escape, more differences of opinion arise but do not ruin their friendship.

Charming and understated, with lovely details (Blue Snake's straw hat, for instance, and what the pair can see from the top of the power pole) adding gentle humour to the narrative, this is a book I can see having a real place in the Foundation Stage or older classroom, or at home, Adult reading is an important factor here as in so many texts, and I wouldn't want to see appreciation of this spoiled by an adult didacticism, but this book has a lot to recommend it, and a humorous tone that many children will find attractive. **NS**

### Night Night, Otto

★★★★★

Lo Cole, Rocket Bird Books, 32pp, 978191535399, £12.99 hbk

Otto, the owl chick loves stories, and loves staying awake to listen to Mama and Papa bird reading. His desire for more and more stories means that 'Ping!' he is awake and wanting more – more cuddles, lullabies, drinks – until in the morning the other chicks and the two adult birds are awake and Otto is fast asleep. How are the exhausted diurnal birds going to cope with the owlet's nighttime needs?

When Mama and Papa owl come to find Otto the solution is clear, and, in a beautifully warm ending, Otto finds his own nest but still goes over to the day birds for night-time stories: 'Otto can't resist a good book,' as his parents point out.

Otto perches in a long tradition of bedtime stories but is a valuable addition to all those other 'sleepy-time' books. The endpapers are utterly gorgeous, with blue shadowy feathers floating all over them, and Otto's eyes taking up a full two-page spread as 'Ping' he wakes up are a delight, and the use of so much black is reminiscent of glorious books such as Eve Rice's **Good Night Good Night** or Jean Jullien's illustrations for **Hoot Owl, Master of Disguise**. The subtlety of Otto being welcomed by day birds and ultimately cared for by his own parents without losing the joy of storytime with the bird family is well worth considering, and the almost subliminal message about how good it is to share books at bedtime make this a book to treasure.**NS**

## 5 – 8 **Infant/Junior**

### Grown-ups Are Hard Work!

★★★★★

Erik Wennstam, illus. Julia Hansson.Floris Books, 32pp, 978 183575 003 2, £12.99 hbk

The story starts with Sidney and his dad at the breakfast table. It is clear that dad, frazzled hair, eyes shut and still in his dressing gown, is in no mood to hurry up and get ready. But this is no simple reversal of roles: Sidney's exhortations are uncomfortably like the kind of things many parents will say to their children, while Sidney's dad complains of a tummy ache, worries he has left his important folder at home. The simple story of getting to work is turned on its head by dad's reluctance and his gradually softening attitude, with dad greeting his friend Julia and the baker giving him a cookie. The reader has to approach this carefully, as children take on the caring role, and the adults behave like children. It is thus a satirical look at school and work as well as a way of inviting the reader to recognise some of their own misgivings about school. Does it also challenge the adult reader? Do we sometimes drag our heels, or find our attitude to work softened by the arrival of our friend? And who gets a go with the bright coloured pens?

While this is funny and charming, carefully drawn in soft colours, with subtle clues as to how the dad's mood is altering, there is much more to see: many parents are dressed like their children; Sidney greets dad at the end of the day not with a painting but with a document titled 'Strategy Analysis'; dad's 'important task' was to test the swivel chairs (and if you read the book, do note how much it has made his hair fluff up!). How important are our daily tasks? **NS**




### The Amazing Jam

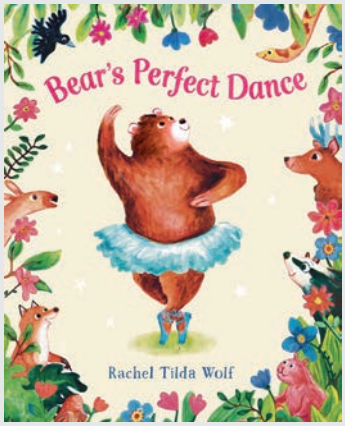
★★★★★

Shona Shirley Macdonald, O'Brien Press, 32pp, 978-1788496346, £14.99 hbk

Following her very well-received debut **The Pooka Party**, Shona Shirley Macdonald's latest picture book is a surreal, exuberant celebration of creativity, music and embracing the unexpected. It stars Grub, a cat who is also a musician. Grub likes jamming with his band and travels to concerts by flying fish. The first spread is mostly given to an illustration of Grub travelling in style on the fish, a spectacular image which immediately takes us deep into the world Macdonald has

## 5 – 8 **Infant/Junior** continued

created. Taking a break from his music, Grub sees a flyer for a jam making competition and decides to enter at which point the story takes off in an unexpected direction. Singing as he makes his jam, *'Grumbleberry, bumbleberry, fart and spice,'* and using an elaborate Heath-Robinson-type contraption for the cooking, Grub is amazed when his jams come to life, dancing in his kitchen. Despite his confidence, they don't win the competition, but who cares? These jams can jam and that is how this fantastical tale ends, the jams, Grub and his flying fish all playing music together around midnight from the look of the sky. It's a heady but supremely successful mix of extraordinary machines, food, animals and magic, each page a carefully composed explosion of colour and detail. Throughout it all, Grub remains a very stable presence, his pleasure in his creativity clear to see. Readers will relish their trip into Grub's world, and this richly imagined story will leave a real impact. **MMa**




### Bear's Perfect Dance

★★★★

Rachel Tilda Wolf, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 9781836300403, £12.99 hbk

'I'll never find the perfect dance partner, I'll never dance the perfect dance,' says Bear sadly. The lonely male protagonist of this story thinks dancing is wonderful, but 'some dances are better with two. Bear's search for a dance partner leads him to put on his favourite blue tutu and advertise auditions throughout the forest but at the end of the day his checklist for a perfect dance partner lies ripped into pieces on his sitting room floor. None of the woodland creatures are good enough - and then there is a knock at the door.

The first message is that boys can enjoy dancing too, but there is another point being made about dance here: Bear sees the animals who come to audition too critically ('Beaver's Boogie has no Woogie…' 'There was no fandango in Fox's Flamenco…') and it is when he concentrates on the joy of dancing 'to the music in their hearts' that everyone can join in. The language play of the different animals dancing is genuinely comic, the artwork gives the young reader lots to appreciate,

When programmes such as *Strictly Come Dancing* might be seen as judgemental, or at least competitive, there is a really valuable lesson here; 'messy, muddlesome, jubilant and joyful' dance is something to treasure. **NS**

### When I Grow Up I'd like to be...

★★★★★

Rob Biddulph, HarperCollins Children's Books, 32pp, 9780008627744, £7.99 pbk

In this affirming picture book, a young boy thinks about all the jobs he could have as an adult. Admittedly, the first job he thinks about is as a sailor facing pirates on the open sea so not all his career choices are realistic, something which will amuse both child and adult readers. Each possible career option comes with positive, simple rhyming text highlighting an aspect of a profession.

Helpfully, there is no gender bias in Biddulph's depiction of career roles. There is also a young boy in a wheelchair included in a couple of the scenes along with a range of characters who wear hearing aids, spectacles and one who is a cane user. Biddulph's message of physical diversity shows us that all children have dreams and ambitions they want to fulfill. **RB**

### Newton is Floating

★★★★

Eoin McLaughlin, ill. Matt Hunt, Magic Cat, 32pp, 9781911766391, £12.99, hbk

What if one morning you wake up to find everything is different -you can't pour a glass of milk for breakfast and everything, even your aptly named dog Newton, is floating? Find out in in this engaging picture book which explores what might happen if Earth's gravity is switched off.

There are amusing scenarios at the playground in the park and at the supermarket. Going on holiday would become super quick with no need to book a flight and just imagine actually seeing an elephant fly!

As you may expect though, in no time at all, the lack of gravity becomes a problem – not only for life on earth but the whole solar system. Luckily a clever cat is on hand to switch gravity back on again. A quick look back at the title page will reveal however that the same cat may well have been the cause of the problem in the first place…

Following this amusing story the back pages of the book are devoted to information with a clear introduction to gravity and the importance of this invisible force for life on Earth and for the Solar System as a whole. We hear about Sir Isaac Newton and the story of his famous discovery as well as other scientists who have added to our understanding of gravity. There is a question for readers about ways humans have tried to defy gravity with a paper aeroplane providing a useful example.

This is an entertaining and informative picture book; the first of a planned series of science themed stories from the same team. **SMc**

### Worm's Big Dig

★★★★

Tom Tinn-Disbury, Andersen Press, 32pp, 9781839134999 , £7.99 pbk

This is a title set to appeal to all those children who spend every available opportunity digging away with whatever they can find and covered in mud. Sadly, this is so often not the case for many growing up these days, so perhaps **Worm's Big Dig** serves also as a reminder to allow children the space and time to explore the earth around them.

We follow Worm as he has a frightening near miss with a spade! In order to save himself he digs - further and further, discovering all kinds of things along the way. Initially he meets the expected: a sleeping fox, a hungry mole - but soon he is digging further and finding relics from the past. A Viking longboat, the bones of a cheetah…until, eventually he reaches the earth's core. Worm digs on, eventually reaching the other side of the world and, possibly safety, though the jaws of a waiting bird suggest there might be just as many dangers here as there were at home!

The illustrations and the text are bold and bright and seem to mirror the fast-paced sense of panic the main character is experiencing. Yet the digging does rather encourage young readers to also slow down and consider just what is lurking beneath their back gardens. At the back of the book is a non-fiction section explaining all the ways in which worms are amazing! It is easy to see young readers quoting these facts for days after reading **Worm's Big Dig** and this is a good marriage between a fictional and humorous story and the real-life experiences occurring beneath our soil. **ARu**

### Mama's Wedding

★★★★★

Circle Yuen, Lantana Publishing, 32pp, 9781836290476, £12.99 hbk

Some family stories are difficult not because children cannot understand them, but because adults are tempted to make them simpler than they really are. Yuen has already demonstrated an unusual willingness to resist that temptation. Here, she turns her attention to divorce, remarriage and the formation of a new family, creating a tender picturebook in which new love is allowed to grow without requiring old love to disappear.

It is Mama's wedding day and Ruby and Cindy have been asked to be flower girls. Cindy embraces the excitement, while Ruby's whispered 'yes' hints at something more complicated. Mama is marrying Cindy's daddy, Alex, and although Ruby likes him, her own father remains very much part of her life. As preparations gather around her, Ruby must discover what this changing family might mean for all of them.

The materiality of Yuen's artwork is immediately recognisable. Pastel and chalk-like sweeps remain visible on the page; colours overlap, edges dissolve and figures sometimes appear to emerge from pools of light and colour. In a market where illustrative surfaces can so easily become polished into sameness, Yuen's hand remains wonderfully present. Her images have the quality of partially captured memories: intimate, fragmentary and emotionally precise. Even the endpapers participate, changing between beginning and end as though acknowledging that neither Ruby nor her family can simply return to where they started.

Most impressive is Yuen's respect for the limits of a child's perception. Ruby is never granted an omniscient view of divorce, remarriage and the formation of a new family. Instead, she receives fragments and must gradually discover where she belongs amongst them. One beautiful spread places her amid wedding preparations glimpsed through legs, chair edges, clothes and cropped bodies. The adult world exists around Ruby, but the illustration refuses to step outside her experience merely to explain it to us.

Colour and light carry much of this emotional work. Warm yellows bloom around moments of connection while cooler blues and greens create spaces for uncertainty and reflection, often coexisting rather than settling into any simple symbolism. This becomes especially moving when Mama explains her tears: some are happy 'from long ago', while others are for 'today and tomorrow'. Past and present are permitted to occupy the same emotional space.

A wonderfully spacious 'One step. Two steps. Three steps' sequence allows Ruby, Cindy and Alex simply to travel together. There is no grand announcement that they have become a family; instead, family is shown as something gradually becoming. Ruby's father completes that generosity when he explains that the love he and Mama shared has not vanished but 'now takes a different form'.

That might be the idea at the heart of this beautiful book. Love changes form: between former partners, between parent and child, between new sisters and across a family still learning what it is becoming. Yuen refuses to tidy away that complexity. Instead, through images full of fragments, light and space, she shows that making room for new love need never mean surrendering what mattered before. **MT**




## Princes don't Practise

★★★★

Kathryn Simmonds, ill. Becky Colvin, Macmillan Children's Books, 32pp, 9781035082476, £7.99 pbk

There is something peculiarly difficult about being a beginner. To become good at something, we must first tolerate being rather bad at it, and Prince Lupin has somehow reached childhood without encountering this inconvenient truth. Princes, he is quite certain, simply know how to do things.

Bored after a day of jousting and feasting, Lupin decides to make himself useful. Unfortunately, his confidence considerably exceeds his competence. A gardener's carefully tended hedge is enthusiastically destroyed; an attempt to help the palace cook produces culinary catastrophe; and when Lupin commandeers a musical performance, convinced that he can play without rehearsing, public humiliation finally sends him fleeing into the forest. Simmonds carries these disasters along in buoyant AABB rhyme, allowing Lupin's pomposity to make him ridiculous without making him unlikeable.

Waiting beyond the familiar fairy-tale darkness is a lovely reversal. The isolated cottage does indeed belong to a witch, but this retired practitioner of magic is interested in something altogether more ordinary: pottery. When Lupin announces that he can make a pot too, she introduces him to a different kind of magic. Practice.

Colvin's illustrations are magnificent throughout. Warm, rounded linework fills extraordinarily rich compositions in which almost nothing feels incidental. Borders grow from the environments themselves: foliage and hedges surround garden scenes, architecture encloses interiors, curtains frame the stage. Her shifts between expansive spreads, sequential panels and smaller vignettes give the book an almost comic-strip energy while providing young readers with an abundance of secondary details to discover. The witch's cottage is particularly glorious, crowded with pots, tools and accumulated belongings and illuminated through jewel-like stained glass. It is a room filled with evidence that expertise is made.

That matters because Lupin has previously noticed only finished accomplishments. Gardeners garden, cooks cook and musicians play; he has never considered the time required to become capable. Pottery forces him to become a beginner. Colvin makes his frustration wonderfully visible as unsuccessful pots accumulate and, at his lowest point, seem almost to break free from the vignette containing him. When the witch consoles him, warmth and visual order return. She cannot make him proficient, but she can teach him how to remain with failure long enough to improve.

There is another lesson too. Lupin learns manners, recognises the expertise of those he previously dismissed and returns home bearing gifts and apologies. Yet the loveliest moment comes after his transformation. A quiet, wordless image shows Lupin returning to share tea with the witch. The teacher has not simply performed her narrative function and disappeared; a friendship remains.

Funny, generous and visually sumptuous, this is a joyful celebration of practice, patience and the courage required to be imperfect at something new. Simmonds gives Lupin a lesson worth learning, but Colvin's pictures make the book sing: the world becomes richer when Lupin stops assuming he already knows everything. **MT**

## Penny & Luck – The Shadows of Rosehall

★★★

Claire Karwowski, ill. Siân Roberts, DK flip, 224pp, 978 0 2417 6980 5, £9.99 pbk

Penny is a nine-year-old inventor and Luck, a corgi, is her best friend. Curious and very determined, Penny is always on the lookout for adventure. She and Luck find plenty of it when they pass through a magic portal to another world. She meets a warrior princess, a flying bike, giant tigers – and the Shadows of Rosehall, strange, ghostly beings, who need her help. Penny has to use all her powers of invention to save the day and find a way home.

Penny and Luck first appeared in a STEM podcast, created by Karwowski, a writer and journalist who contributes towards various well-regarded children's magazines. Still aiming to inspire young scientists, there is gentle STEM learning embedded in this action-packed adventure. Karwowski introduces scientific terms and famous scientists throughout the narrative, along with explaining some scientific principles, particularly through Penny's ingenious inventions. This learning is backed up by factual information (presented as Penny's notebook) at the back of the book.

The science element may add to the appeal of this book for some readers but any child enthusiast for magical adventures will enjoy the story. Penny is a strong character and readers will warm to her enthusiasm and friendly positivity. Her cries of 'Whoa!' and 'Booyah!' may well be copied. The book is quite long but made manageable by the author's chatty style, the use of chapters, lively typography and Siân Roberts's fun illustrations. Younger readers may struggle with some of the language but will enjoy sharing the book with an adult. More confident readers will race through this entertaining page turner. **RC**

## Oops! I just ate you

★★★★

Ævar Þór Benediktsson, illus. Joaquin Camp, Barefoot Books, 32pp, 979 6 88859 665 4, hbk

A greedy, flesh-eating zombie is in need of friends, 'constantly hungry' and aware of the dilemma that his hunger presents. I have to start by saying that this is a tremendous book: funny, action packed, with a neat rhyme scheme and really inventive design. From the cut-out on the cover, which makes an opening that reveals the title, to the swelling belly of monster-narrator, there are some real joys here to be savoured by adult and child readers, and the a b c b rhyme scheme carries the caper along really well, as potential friends become meals. When the villagers come to protest, the mixture of adult and child concepts provides a verse that made me laugh out loud:

The night had devoured
A beautiful day.
I saw them all coming:
A WALKING BUFFET.

And the ending - where rhyme scheme breaks down and the conventions of design are stretched as the monster approaches - is a masterpiece of child-centred horror.

My only real issue is with the use of 60s and 70s Horror films: zombies and Dracula-like figures open up concepts that might need explaining. 'Being un-dead is GREAT' is a fun line – think of Raymond Brigg's astounding **Fungus the Bogeyman**, or Maurice Sendak's creepy Mummy - but brings up a lot of possibly difficult topics as well as some real laughs. **NS**

## Funcles

★★★★

Yashika Moody, ill Adriena Fong, Lantana 32pp., 978-1-83629-050-6 £12.99 hbk

Your reviewer has relatives in Singapore, and is familiar with the concept of respectfully calling taxi drivers and other helpful people 'Uncle', so it's easy to understand how it might be confusing to a young child!

The child, probably a boy, is tasked by the teacher with making a Family Tree, and says more than one sheet will be needed, as he happily reports that he has 'loads of aunties and a gazillion uncles.' He rides with Bus Uncle, who always waits for him, waves to Greengrocer Uncle, and helps Supermarket Uncle to bag their groceries. He's good at packing, and reckons it must be a family skill. Other Uncles drive taxis, sell food, cut his hair – so many!

His Family Tree homework needs a lot of paper, and his parents are amazed. Neither of them has any brothers, and they explain the respectful way of addressing people in their culture. The boy is astonished; they're 'fake uncles? Funcles?' He puts an F in front of the heading 'Uncles', and starts to take them all off, but then Dad points out that the other word in there is Fun- they are Funcles! He remembers how they are Fun; Barber Shop Uncle drapes the towel round him like a superhero cape; Fried Rice Uncle puts a smiley face on top of his rice, and Taxi Uncle likes to sing with him. They are, as his Mum, says a community family, all taking care of him. At school, the teacher now understands about the gazillion uncles, and everyone else has Funcles, too, though they might not have realised it- and wait until he starts on his 'Aunties'...

Yashika Mody, in a spread at the back of the book, explains that her own son enjoys this confusion, and points out that other cultures have similar respectful terms: e.g. in Latin America they are Tio and Tia for Uncle and Aunt. She hopes it will remind us how we can create our own community family.

This is a delightfully positive story about a boy starting to understand the culture in which he lives, and the illustrations by Adriena Fong of multi-cultural people going about their daily lives are colourful and lively – a very enjoyable picture book! **DB**

## We're Moving to the Moon!

★★★★

Catherine Cawthorne, ill. Harry Woodgate, Bloomsbury, 40pp, 9781526677211 £7.99 pbk

A beautifully illustrated title with Harry Woodgate's characteristically rich, colourful and empathic depictions filling every corner of every page - this would be a perfect Christmas treat for any young space enthusiasts; especially as the narrative ends with the family reuniting at Christmas.

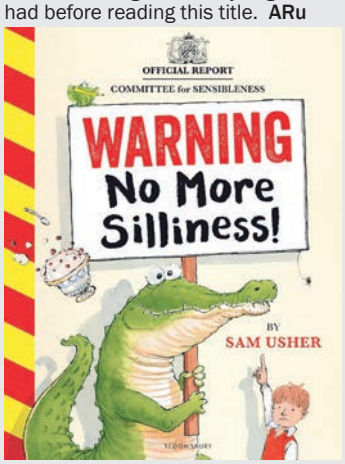
The text itself is densely packed and every bit as much as non-fiction as it is fiction. The story tells of a wildly adventurous family who have been on expeditions all over the world and their next trip takes them into space. We ride alongside the main narrator, Kit - we experience her trepidation before leaving earth: thoughts of those left behind and what to take, we empathise with her encounters as she learns to manage the basics such as the length of the journey or going to the toilet in a totally new environment. Alongside

## 5 – 8 **Infant/Junior** continued

each encounter the family take, at least half of the double page spread is devoted to factual explanations of their situation. We have the details of how the Moon Base was constructed, what is available to eat and the practicalities of trying to sleep on the moon with constant daylight and limited gravity.

All of these snippets of information make life on the moon tangible to the very young, which is certainly welcome. Though often a popular topic with children, it is equally full of concepts they find hard to comprehend and this is a gentle and inviting introduction. The pages are densely packed with text however, and some young readers may find this a little overwhelming. Perhaps a personal taste, but I also found the repeated sibling rivalry and smelly brother jokes a little tired.

Despite these aspects, there is no doubt that this is a text that will inspire many more little moon enthusiasts to want to take their own journey off into outer space - and they can plot this adventure armed with considerably more knowledge than they might have had before reading this title. **ARu**




### Warning: no more silliness!

★★★★★

Sam Usher, Bloomsbury 32pp., 978-1-5266-9020-3 £12.99 hbk

This 'Official Report from the Committee for Sensibleness' gives its verdict: You have been very silly, and must now follow the rules, or there will be Consequences. Double-page spreads then illustrate various unwise things not to do, like not picking your nose (and it's a pompous king surrounded by his courtiers who is shown doing that!), not diving into a paddling pool of alligators, not disturbing that pirate while he's reading his book, and so on. The book then moves on to wordplay : do not knot a knot, do not knit a gnat a nut net (big muscly man shown knitting on the steps of a colourful traditional circus caravan)- and definitely on no account must you ever, Ever, EVER press the Red Button. Of course, a girl does exactly that, but no spoilers, you'll have to find out, but it's Very Silly!

This is glorious anarchic fun, and hugely enjoyable: more than a touch of Monty Pythonesque humour for children!

Sam Usher writes on his website about his love and respect for Quentin Blake as an illustrator, and how Quentin's books made Sam decide to turn from animation to illustration at his college, and his style is very like that of his hero: not quite as scratchy, but the faces are similar, and there is that same sense of glee with ridiculous situations. The artistic skill is, of course, abundant - this book is thoroughly recommended. **DB**

### The Tale that Time Sews

★★★★★

Sita Bramachari, Jane Ray, Templar 9781800789654, 32pp £12.99 hbk

The book opens – the end papers a glorious patchwork quilt. But not just a quilt of abstract shapes. Here there are images – vignettes from lives, memories, moments – a cat, a house, feathers stars, spectacles, scissors cutting a thread. Turn the page and follow the thread spooling off the cotton reel. 'This is the thread that travels the Earth, that Time sews.' Time can be seen in many ways and is frequently described as a river to capture its inexorable flow. But this image suggests constant change. Here author and illustrator use the metaphor of a thread that creates images – moments in life, pinning them down in the memory, the memories that recreate a past but allow for the future. Bramachari's simple lyrical text moves across each double spread following the trail of the thread which starts with the grandmother creating a quilt for her granddaughter as the family wait for a new arrival. The verses – for this is indeed a poem that flows – pick up moments in the life of the family – the familiarity, friendship and relationships of the present, the threats and journeys experienced in the past. Stories, the thread, bind families together, and the repetition of the words 'This is the thread that Time sews' carries this image on. Jane Ray's luminous illustrations are the perfect accompaniment providing a visual experience picking up the moments, drawing them together, crossing the boundaries of time, creating the memories that will provide the things Granny will use. Readers drawn in by the words will find themselves looking for the details that will eventually be sewn in. A subtle book – the thread is there but it is also the metaphor, one that is captured in the words and the illustrations, for a life bound together by memory, story, relationships moving from the past, on through the present and then to the future. This is a picture book that will reward reading and re-reading to allow the words and the pictures to resonate in the mind. **FH**

## 8 – 10 **Junior/Middle**

# New Talent

### The Messenger

★★★★★

Lyndsay Roberts Rayne, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1526682475, £9.99 pbk




Some stories about war begin with battles. This one begins with a friendship. Before the title page, however, Lyndsay Robert Rayne quietly grounds what follows in history: illustrated portraits of different dogs accompany the extraordinary fact that some sixteen million animals served during the First World War. From that almost unimaginable multitude, Rayne then asks us to care about one small, unnamed dog.

At home, the dog belongs to Nell, whose father is already away at war. Their relationship is established largely without words. One masterful four-panel sequence carries Nell and her companion through the seasons, changing colour, light and landscape until the appearance of an aeroplane quietly signals another world approaching theirs. Then a letter arrives from Nell's father. Realising that her beloved friend could help him, Nell makes the painful decision to send the dog away to serve alongside him. The emotional cost requires little explanation.

This trust in visual storytelling defines the book. Across its generous 64 pages, Rayne borrows the sequential language of the graphic novel, moving between small panels, repeated compositions and expansive double-page spreads. Words appear sparingly, often providing historical knowledge that pictures alone cannot easily supply. Training, transportation to Ypres and the geography of the trenches are anchored sufficiently for young readers, but the experience belongs overwhelmingly to the images. A trench map briefly turns war into routes, positions and objectives; for the dog who must cross it, those abstractions become mud, wire, darkness and danger.

Colour carries its own narrative. The greens, golds and seasonal light of home gradually surrender to bruised purples and blacks, interrupted by fierce orange washes that seem to consume the battlefield. Darkness eventually sinks so low into the trenches that human and animal figures appear almost swallowed by it. Against this, the dog's small pale body becomes extraordinarily vulnerable.

Yet Rayne has prepared us for what follows through quieter moments. Again and again, the dog chooses proximity over expectation: staying close, finding her own route, refusing separation. When Nell's father eventually risks carrying a vital message himself rather than send the animal he has come to love into terrible danger, he is wounded. The dog finds him. Her greatest act is therefore not simply one of trained obedience, but attachment: she will not leave him behind.

After the infernal darkness of the Front, winter brings an exquisite reversal. Snow makes the warmth of home visible: firelight, human touch and reunion glow against the cold. Even the page participates, moving from separated panels towards an expansive image in which the characters can finally occupy the same visual space again. Only afterwards does Rayne provide the historical material about messenger dogs and the British War Dog School, wisely allowing us to experience this story emotionally before returning us to the lives that inspired it.

This is an almost wordless book about carrying messages, and therein lies its quiet brilliance. The dog cannot read the words she carries, yet across these remarkable pages she communicates loyalty, fear, courage and love without needing language at all.

One of millions. Unnamed.

And impossible to forget. **MT**

### If The Invader Comes

★★★★★

Tom Palmer, ill.Paul Blow, Barrington Stoke, 208pp, 978 0 00 88022 6, £7.99 pbk

Tom Palmer has proved to be an absolute godsend to teachers in Key Stage 2 and beyond, who want to engage children with the history of World War 2. Although he has now written about this several times, with award winning books like **Resist**, **Armistice Runner** and **D Day Dog**, he has managed, each time, to deliver something fresh and new and often with readers learning about a completely different aspect of the war. Certainly, this is the case with his latest novel, which focuses on the reality of life on the Home Front in coastal and rural communities

and specifically in Cornwall. This is to be the first of a trilogy featuring The Allies – the group of three children who become close friends in this book. They are from very different backgrounds, Bobble is the daughter of gardeners on Lord Trescatho's estate, Caden the son of a fisherman, and Cilla the daughter of Lord Trescatho, but they find themselves united by issues related to their parents and this is where this novel has a real strength and relatability to very current issues. Set in June 1940 in the aftermath of the shocking defeat at Dunkirk, the community is terrified of Nazi invasion and ready to suspect anyone of treachery if not deemed 'patriotic' enough. Although Bobble's father is a WW1 hero who suffers from shell shock and now works in a reserved occupation as a gardener, he is gossiped about and labelled a coward. There are also rumours about Caden's dad even though he regularly patrols the coastline in his boat. The story cleverly highlights how people are quick to judge and how false opinions can be spread, making it perfect for initiating discussions about something which is as dangerous and pernicious today, with the misinformation spread about refugees and immigrants, as it was then. When the three children discover that the frequent absences of their parents are because they are engaged in top-secret war work, they soon find themselves covering for them and consequently find themselves in danger. Their courage and determination whether in the face of bullying classmates or life-threatening situations is inspiring and completely gripping. This is an author who is not afraid to include the real horror of war in his story, with deaths of local people and enemy forces included, but it is sensitively done with a real respect for the humanity on each side and for his readers. This is a truly compelling read that, once again demonstrates how effectively Tom Plamer can create well rounded characters and vivid settings, which really bring history to life for his readers. **JCo**

## If I Met a Tiger

★★★★

A.F. Harrold, illus. Magda Brol, Fox and Ink Books, 9781917894197, 160pp, £8.99, pbk

Many readers will know A.F. Harrold from his comic stories, including **Greta Zargo** and **Fizzlebert Stump**, his lyrical novels **The Imaginary** and **The Song From Somewhere Else**, and his collections of children's poetry. **If I Met a Tiger**, his latest collection, turns its attention to nature and the environment, and it is a joy.

The poems are gathered into four sections that gently widen the reader's view, stepping from the immediate to the wider world: Home and Garden, Beyond the Garden, Around the Year and Despite Mankind. The range within them is impressive. Some poems are delightfully absurd, as in *Zebra Crossing*. Others are lyrical and quietly observant, such as *River Morning Walk*. The enchanting *The Missed Door*, inspired by H.G. Wells' short story, shows how comfortably Harrold moves between playfulness and wonder. Connections between the poems reward readers who turn back and forward through the book, spotting echoes they missed the first time.

Each section opens with a short introduction from the poet. These guide without over-explaining, helping readers dip a toe into the next part before wading in, which makes the book welcoming even to children who are wary of poetry.

Magda Brol's comic and engaging illustrations run throughout and work in happy partnership with the words. They add humour and interest to every spread, extending the poems rather than simply decorating them, and they make the book a pleasure to browse as well as to read.

The themes are serious, but the tone is never preachy. Harrold invites children to look closely at the world around them, from garden to riverbank, and to notice what is there and what might be lost. The poems work well for reading aloud, for sharing in the classroom, or for dipping into at random. This is a collection that can be enjoyed on many levels, but above all it is simply to be enjoyed. **LJS**

## Rapunzel is a Lettuce. Poems to grow with

★★★★★

Joseph Coelho, illus Shirley Hottier, Otter-Barry Books, 9781915659262, 128pp, £9.99 pbk

Here Joseph Coelho presents a wide-ranging selection of poems designed to follow the school journey from the beginning of the primary years to the final year. It is not that the poems become more complicated, rather the themes move from the concrete subjects young readers will easily recognise – Food, Families, School itself, to the wider imagination – Challenges, Other Worlds. The poems themselves are direct. Coelho eschews 'poetic' language, rather capturing the poetry and rhythms of the language children – and adults – will use in their conversations; they are recognisable, comfortable. In this he demonstrates his belief that poetry emerges from the everyday. It is not esoteric rather it is a way of capturing the world around, the emotions, the snapshot moments. Here we find thoughts – a first memory (that candle on the cake), a pet, running a race, arriving in the future. Even the everyday words can be exciting – look at the descriptions in the poem Food for Thought, the vocabulary conjuring up a battle on the plate; everyday descriptions that are vivid and varied. Equally varied are the forms Coelho uses for his poems. There are the familiar quatrains some using different rhyming patterns, others blank verse relying on the rhythm of the voice – poems should be read aloud as well as enjoyed quietly. Then there are interesting forms, a sistina, haikus , a tanka (five lines, thirty-one syllables), a triolet – and a couple of kennings, the list poems of the Anglo Saxons. Ambitious? Coelho is not afraid to give children the opportunity to discover the rules of poetry. The result is a collection that has a variety that captures the attention and interest. Working with the words and the poet are the illustrations by Shirley Hottier. The black and white images full of character, energy and humour capture small moments, little details inspired by the words. They can be found decorating the margins or corners of the page. Or maybe taking a page or even covering a double spread to anchor a scene creating a visual moment against which the words can flow. Each section is heralded by an illustration that evokes the mood or subject of the poems. This is a masterly partnership. All poetry works best when revisited. This collection is no exception and rereading the poems will add depth, new directions of thought and imagination and an ever-growing delight in words, rhythms, rhymes and forms sparking fresh ideas and pictures in the mind. **FH**




## Rewild

★★★★★

Benjamin Zephaniah, ill. Emily Sutton, Magic Cat, 28pp, 978 1 91776863 4, £12.99, hbk

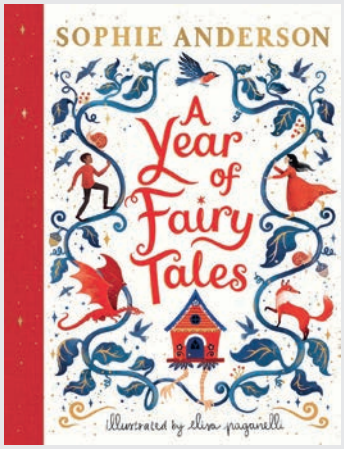
**Rewild** explores the story of humankind and its impact on the natural world. Our achievements are celebrated; including farming, creating fire, building communities and developing language. We have become artists, poets, musicians and scientists, building our knowledge and cultures and enriching our experience.

However, there is a caveat; readers learn that the impact of humans on our world has not all been positive. The text explores what went wrong from the industrial revolution with the plundering of the earth's resources, and resulting air pollution to corruption and warfare. Some people were not content with their lot 'mistaking wealth for happiness.'

After the devastating picture of the damaged world we have inherited, the book ends with a message of hope for young readers. Speaking directly to young readers, they are told that they hold the key to a different future, and they have the passion to build a cleaner, greener world.

The poet's passion for the environment is clear. Big ideas are explored here with spare but powerful language giving lots for young readers to think about. Emily Sutton's detailed Illustrations beautifully enhance the text providing layers of meaning to pore over.

The late Benjamin Zephaniah's poem was first written for the **WWF Future Visions Project** 2020. It has continued relevance and it is wonderful to see it foregrounded for a young audience in this beautiful picture book. **SMc**




## A Year of Fairy Tales

★★★★★

Sophie Anderson, ill. Elisa Paganelli, Usborne, 288pp, 978-1836044048, £25.00, hbk

Sophie Anderson has the magic touch for reworking fairy tales and this collection of twelve stories – one for each month of the year – brims with everything that makes her writing so strong: an understanding of the lasting appeal of the stories; an ability to bring the characters and their worlds to life on the pages, human and other; inventive, vigorous storytelling. The stories are inspired by European folktales that have been passed down for generations. Some will be more familiar to readers in the UK than others, there's a version of *Jack and the Beanstalk* for example, *Tam Lin*, and *Rapunzel*, but Anderson mixes elements from different tales and gives them all a spin for today's readers. These young girls and boys are distinguished by their bravery and determination but most often what saves them is their love for others, human or from magical realms, and their rewards are not wealth or power but community, self-knowledge and happiness. The fairytale form allows full exploration of the natural world and as we read through the stories from January

## 8 – 10 **Junior/Middle** continued

to December, descriptions of the weather, scenery and settings move us through the seasons. There are of course lessons to be learned, tolerance, kindness and friendship working their magic, and if the morals seem about to veer into the heavy-handed, the protagonists almost too good to be true, Anderson finishes with *The Swan Sister*, inspired by a German fairy tale *The Seven Ravens* and a Norwegian fairy tale *The Twelve Wild Ducks*, which brings us siblings Oona and Eric who bicker and argue, before Eric's anger dooms his sister to life as a swan if he can't reverse the spell he mistakenly cast. This December story neatly references all the previous months' tales too with mentions of all slipped into descriptions of a very festive Christmas fair. Sophie Anderson's fans will be delighted with the November story which features Baba Yaga (based on a Russian fairy tale *Vasilisa the Beautiful*), but the collection will delight readers old and new. It looks beautiful too, a handsome hardback with gorgeous colour illustrations by Elisa Paganelli throughout and it's a book to treasure. **AR**

### The Dragon Mountain

★★★★

Mathieu Pierloot, François Maumont, trans Charis Ainslie, Postwave, 120pp, 9781836271239 £12.99 hbk

Medusa and Lilith are little witches. They are also sisters (Medusa is the elder). Their characters are very different and like most siblings they disagree and squabble much of the time. Indeed it is right in the middle of one of their sister fights that Julius arrives with Custard (a duck, naturally) – and a strange black egg in his satchel. It is a dragon's egg and now must be returned in all haste to its mother. Who will be taking on this task? Yes, Medusa and Lilith - of course Julius and Custard will join them. But will these two fiery girls succeed?

From the pen of Belgian author, Mathieu Pierloot comes this lively quest story. There are real dangers to face for these are two characterful sisters. Their quarrels, their relationship spiky and funny adds an element of humour contributing to a plot that moves smartly along. The story may follow traditional lines but the writing ensures it feels fresh and young readers will enjoy the underlying familiarity while relishing the dangers Medusa, Lilith, Julius and Custard must face. In this they will also enjoy the quirky illustrations by Francois Maumont which capture the characteristics of the little witches bringing life to the monsters and creating a wonderfully spiky dragon. Nor are the end papers forgotten. Readers will delight in the map that opens the book and luxuriate with the endpapers watching Medusa, Lilith, Julius and Custard as they enjoy their happy ending. This is all managed by the seamless translation by Charis Ainslie from the moment to adventure starts to Custard's Diary at the end – including a brief appearance by author and illustrator. A delicious read – let us hope for more. **FH**




### The Christmas Book

★★★★★

Katherine Woodfine, illustrated by Lizzy Stewart, Faber, 64pp, 9780571391516, £10.00 hbk

If you're lucky enough as a reviewer of children's books, every so often you stumble across a new title that seems to arrive perfectly formed in every respect, like that longed-for Christmas present you always wanted but probably didn't get. Well, I'm pleased to tell you that's exactly the way I feel about **The Christmas Book**, a quietly powerful story that explores family, grief and memory, and manages to pack more into its sixty pages than any number of hefty novels. It also explains the origins of the Christmas 'Book Flood' in Iceland – the Jólabókaflóð – their wonderful custom of giving books to all and sundry on Christmas Eve. The main character is Tómas, a boy whose much-loved Grandfather has died, drowned when his fishing trawler was sunk by a German submarine. Grandfather had always been full of wisdom and love, a 'teller of tales' and a giver of just the right gifts, the centre of the family. Christmas is coming, but now they're in deep mourning. How can they even think of celebrating when Grandfather's favourite chair will be empty? Tómas decides it's his job to raise the family's morale by at least making sure everyone gets a present, but discovers that it's not so easy in a war-time Iceland with strict rationing in place. Most of the shops are almost empty, and he is about to give up his quest when he finds one full of the only item not in short supply - books. No spoilers, but let's just say this lovely story has a perfect ending - I was certainly wiping away a tear or two when I finished it. Katherine Woodfine makes it all look easy, but packing so much into such a short space only goes to show what a talented writer she is. Lizzy Stewart's illustrations are a lovely complement to the story, and the excellent design makes the whole thing a perfect Christmas package. I hope it's in as many stockings as possible this year. **TB**

### Mari: The Unwonderful Witch

★★★

Asako Yuzuki, translated by Ecre Karadag, cover illus. Yuuki Jia, interior illus. Yukako Sakaguchi Puffin, 9780241831014, £14.99 hbk

Asako Yuzuki is the highly acclaimed author of the adult bestsellers **Butter** and **Hooked**. This is her debut series for children, and its first book arrives in English for the first time in a translation by Ecre Karadag.

The story is set in a world where witches and magic are an accepted part of everyday life. Mari lives with her two mothers and spends her time with her fabulous friends, experimenting with her look and enjoying delicious food. She is also a very talented witch, but there is a problem: she is not especially 'wonderful.' In this society, witches are accepted by humans because they are wonderful. They help others, never use magic purely for themselves, look neat and acceptable, and are never grumpy or in need of time alone. These norms keep the peace between witches and humans, and everyone is expected to follow them.

Mari simply does not see why she should be bound by such rules, and she genuinely does not care what other people think of her. That makes her a refreshing heroine, funny and independent, and a gentle challenge to the idea that being good means being endlessly pleasing. When disaster strikes the town, the other witches begin to realise that they too need to break free of expectations. It turns out that a little unwonderfulness can do wonders.

The story meanders a little in places, but this is easily forgiven. Yuzuki has created a brilliant and luscious world, full of vivid food, fashion and friendship, and it is a pleasure to spend time in it. Yukako Sakaguchi's interior illustrations add charm and personality throughout, and the whole package, with its cover by Yuuki Jia, is attractively produced as a hardback.

Beneath the sweetness lies a thoughtful message about conformity, kindness and the freedom to be yourself, offered lightly enough that young readers will absorb it without feeling lectured. Fans of enchanted adventure stories such as **The Worst Witch** will find much to enjoy here, and many will be eager for Mari's next adventure. **LJS**

### Cinderlad and the Sea Dragon. A Scottish Folk Tale

★★★

Gillian McClure, Plaister Press, 97819194725, 32pp, £7.99 pbk

Long ago in a faraway land there were seven brothers.... a traditional opening for any traditional tale. It continues – we only meet six of the brothers in the opening spread as we see them setting off to work. Of course, the seventh, Cinderlad, is at home scrubbing the floors, managing the fire – and dreaming; dreaming of heroic deeds, dragons and princesses. Then disaster strikes that faraway kingdom – a sea dragon arrives. Who will defeat the monster?

Gillian McClure is taking a traditional tale from the Orkneys, and her story follows the traditional path – but not quite. She brings this old tale into the today – especially in the ending which may be 'happy ever after' but with a very contemporary twist. It is a lively retelling combining the picture book with the graphic novel. Moments of text present us with a setting and allow the story to move on; characterisation and action are very much conveyed through the dialogue (speech bubbles pepper the images) as the cast interact with each other. Indeed the reader could easily imagine seeing the story on stage or as a video. The author's style is individual, reminiscent of illustrations found on medieval manuscripts reflecting the storytelling voice. Does it work as a picture book? I am not sure not least because the almost monochrome pastel palette creates a tension that is at odds with the exciting tale of Cinderlad. However, it is not to be dismissed – the intriguing illustrations, the movement created by the graphic novel techniques adopted by the author and above all the story will attract readers who might be wary of longer texts while providing inspiration for a storyteller looking to add to their repertoire. **FH**

### Spindlewood

★★★★

Freddie Kolsch, Puffin Press, 368pp, 9780241753873, £8.99 pbk

A delicious, gothic and darkly comic magical boarding school adventure that delightfully turns the genre on its head. 12-year-old Lilac Black is the very opposite of the Chosen One trope. She is an absolute sceptic and completely lacks any magical or "seeing" powers yet is descended from a long line of Seers and is sent to a top-secret school for Seers after a misunderstanding at one of her Uncle Bell's seances. She is extremely curious about this whole hidden world and doesn't want to let down her family, who have raised her since the death of her mother and the disappearance of her father, both of whom went to Spindlewood. Can she, by using her extremely logical and methodical powers of deduction and a lot of misdirection, manage to fool everyone and find out more about her family in the process? Also

## 8 – 10 **Junior/Middle** continued

there seems to be something wrong at Spindlewood, something ancient and sinister underneath the very library where a mysterious journal literally lands at her feet and seems to hold clues to what's happening on campus. This is a lot to deal with on top of her facing the very convincing trials and tribulations of being a new girl and new to boarding school life with its cliques and insecurity, and just the difficult work of growing up and developing feelings. There is a fabulous cast of diverse and inclusive characters threaded quite naturally into the storytelling. Their differences are not the story! Just one of the delights of this clever and entertaining series starter is the omniscient narrator, whose identity will no doubt become apparent in further episodes, with their witty fourth wall breaking asides explaining the definition of some difficult words, which means we can all benefit from the wonderfully rich vocabulary. Highly atmospheric with engaging, realistic characters and nail-biting tension this is a perfect supernatural read aloud for this time of year. **JCo**

### Ghost and Toast: Slice to Meet You

★★★★

Phil Corbett, Piccadilly Press, 180pp, 9781835875322, £8.99, pbk

This new comedy double act takes wackiness to totally new levels. It stars two utterly simplistic characters: Ghost and Toast (one's dead, and one's bread). Plainly drawn with only eyes, mouths and the occasional eyebrow to demonstrate expressions, Ghost and Toast somehow deliver crypts-full of spooky laughter.

At the beginning of the book, Ghost arrives in a spooky haunted mansion and is greeted by a chirpy Toast, who introduces him to all the usual haunted mansion things (like magic portals full of talking pastries and crocodiles wearing fireproof suits and swimming around fire pits). Ghost expresses a strong desire to find out why he has arrived at a haunted house and what his purpose is. For a few pages it seems that this quest for understanding will be the main theme of the book, but then we are introduced to the vampiric Mr Borloff (the house owner) and his crazy shelf of curiosities, and a whole host of other things that are very random indeed!

Indeed, there is no real story or narrative to follow in this graphic novel. It is more of a collection of elongated comic-book vignettes, like watching a sketch show from a famous comedy duo. Ghost is the long-suffering straight guy, who puts up with Toast's relentless enthusiasm and silliness. He remains deadpan throughout all sorts of preposterous, whimsical imaginings, like a massive creature who is half chicken and half washing machine, or a delicious custard cream in place of a train ticket.

The book is arranged, roughly, into three sketches with an introduction and also a zany outro to finish. While the first story focuses on Ghost's arrival, the second is longer and takes place entirely on a train. Despite the presence of dozens of spooky spectral beings in the other carriages, as well as a giant green ticket inspector with an actual frog in his throat, Ghost and Toast hog all the attention (and comedy) with a good-old-fashioned funny conversation.

Corbett's artwork is punchy and smart, though not markedly dissimilar from other current popular comic series. Though the main characters are almost emoji-level in terms of simplicity, other characters are gorgeously detailed and often explode onto the page in joyful, surprising moments. The book indulges in a great deal of metafiction - some of which may go over young readers' heads - and the removal of boring traditional plot devices (such as the fourth wall) mean that there is literally no end to where Ghost and Toast's next adventure could be. **SD**




### Olivia Shivers Spooky Special Agent

★★★★

Derek Keilty, ill. Louis Ghibault, Scallywag Press, 200pp, 978-1836300663, £8.99 pbk

Derek Keilty's new series is a delicious mix of ghost story and secret agent adventure. Olivia Shivers has no idea that her grandad is a member of S.C.A.R.E. (Spook Capture and Rehabilitation Enterprises), or that it even exists, until an author visit to her school sets off a train of eye-opening spooky events. Olivia can tell there's something odd about 'spooktacular' author Nik Gould, but the revelation that he's half ghost, real name Quill, is surprising to say the least. What's more, Quill is determined to get his own back on her grandfather, one of those responsible for dispatching him to S.C.A.R.E.'s sanctuaries, a place where spooks can exist away from the living world. When Quill kidnaps her grandpa, Olivia, ably assisted by her best friend Roop, sets off to the rescue. This takes them to S.C.A.R.E. HQ, hidden beneath the town's library, and all sorts of supernatural experiences, including befriending ghost girl Alice and riding ghostly horses through the woods. With a full 'spectrological emergency' underway, they get to wield some of S.C.A.R.E.'s newest gadgets, including bubble gum ghost traps and finally win their own places in the organization. It's a thoroughly enjoyable, fast-moving story, the action ably captured in Louis Ghibault's black and white illustrations. The S.C.A.R.E. gadgets are a treat for devotees of spy stories and the relationship between Olivia and Roop a pleasure for those after stories of human interactions. Hooray for S.C.A.R.E. too, motto: Protect People. Help Ghosts. Find Peace – an ambition we can all embrace. There are more **Olivia Shivers** adventures to come, which is good news. **LS**

### The Detention Diaries Worse Than Jail

★★★★

Sam Copeland, illus Dominic Trevett, Bloomsbury, 9781037202230, 272pp, £8.99 pbk

Arthur Guppy has good reason to avoid detentions. His dad has promised him a virtual reality headset, the VR3000, if he doesn't get any detentions for a year. Arthur is certain he will get the headset, the reader wills this to be true but, given the title of the book, it seems unlikely.

Arthur has many narrow escapes in avoiding detention, the most notable of which is when the head teacher is about to give him one, but she discovers he has just called his class teacher mum, by accident. She deems this punishment enough.

Then Arthur is accused of stealing the school's two axolotl. He hasn't stolen them and he must find the culprit or risk multiple detentions. He also feels a great sense of injustice at being accused.

One of the key relationships in this book is between Arthur and his best friend Carlos Chickens and, yes, that is his name! The antics of these two boys will amuse any reader. Some of their pranks are extremely inventive. Will Arthur avoid detention? Will he get his VR system?

Trevett's illustrations add much to Copeland's already hilarious text. Whilst not a graphic novel, it is highly illustrated and will also appeal to those who like Manga. **RB**

### Monster Doctor

★★★

Aaron Blecha, Hachette Children's Group, 9781444982428, PB, £9.99

This funny and fast-paced adventure introduces readers to a rather unusual doctor, whose patients include some of the most weird and wonderful monsters imaginable.

Walter Weirdbeard is a nearly ten-year-old boy who loves animals and dreams of becoming a vet. When his trusty hamster, Herm, suddenly starts to talk, Walter discovers a rather surprising family secret. Herm tells him about a zany great uncle who was a real-life monster hunter and, armed with an old diary, Walter sets off to take up the mantle.

His first mission is to find his missing uncle, Dr Weirdbeard, who has mysteriously disappeared from Castle Frankenstein. However, Walter soon discovers that the world of monsters is not quite what he expected. Despite their fearsome appearances, many of these creatures are in desperate need of medical attention, and Walter must complete three missions in order to become a proper monster doctor apprentice.

There are plenty of bizarre encounters along the way, including a gigantic swamp troll, an evil shop assistant and brains in jars. Walter also meets Count Dracula, who seems to have some kind of bureaucratic administrative role over the other monsters. The action whizzes along at a fair pace, with plenty of jokes, ridiculous situations and imaginative creatures to entertain young readers.

Blecha's cartoon-style illustrations are packed with amusing details, while the inclusion of fun brainteasers, including mazes and picture searches, allows readers to help Walter on his adventures. These activities feel a little gimmicky and occasionally interrupt the pace, but add to the book's playful and accessible feel.

This is a lively and entertaining adventure, which makes good use of familiar monster characters and turns their frightening reputations into a source of comedy. There are lots of visual gags, silly one-liners and a few puns, most of which deliver on laughs, though some jokes are rather predictable. One zany character or event quickly follows another, with the author's own colourful illustrations appearing throughout. Amidst all the gruesomeness, it's quite an original book, though the chaos is not sufficiently organised to make it work as well as it might. Nevertheless, Walter's boundless enthusiasm and unquenchable curiosity make him an appealing hero, and the combination of silly humour, colourful illustrations and short bursts of action should prove particularly attractive to younger or less confident readers. **SD**

### What's in a Name?
The Extraordinary Stories Behind Scientific Names

★★★★★

Alex Nogués, ill. Guido Ferro, translated from Catalan by Olivia Segal, Prestel, 64pp, 978 3 7913 7681 3, £18.99, hbk

This beautiful hardback is the perfect blend of science and culture and will satisfy both the curious young person and the reluctant reader alike. I love the stunning cobalt blue

## 8 – 10 **Junior/Middle** continued

pages of the endpapers as well as the initial and final text pages. They comprise an introduction to the topic being covered, the Bibliographical References and Epilogue. It is in the Epilogue that the author explains his aim in creating this work, 'Protecting biodiversity is the greatest, most urgent challenge our species faces. I hope my book helps you think about all this' (p.56).

At the outset Nogués considers, 'What's a scientific name?' (p.2) and explains how names are 'the building blocks of taxonomy' (p.4). He looks at the central role taken by Linnaeus in this subject, and indeed he crops up throughout the book, alongside his students. Much of the volume is given over to 25 scientific names and the stories behind them. Each of these living things has a spread devoted to it and the information on each spread is attractively laid out. Through comic style presentation alongside text boxes, illustrations and diagrams showing the taxonomy in each case, this is a harmonious publication.

The stories behind the nomenclature are all very fascinating, intriguing, addictive and original with lot of connections being made along the way. One of my favourite flowers is the Bougainvillea spectabilis and I was fascinated to learn about how Louis-Antoine de Bougainville in 1766-1769 sailed around the world with botanist Philibert Commerson and Jeanne Baret.

Similarly, one of my favourite pieces of music, Mozart's 'Requiem' makes an appearance in the naming of *Mycena luxaeterna*, the bioluminescent mushroom (pp.28-29), and the tale behind *Psephophorous terryprachetti* (turtle fossil) pp. 26-27 is magical.

Congratulations to all the team behind this superlative publication. Evidently an immense amount of research has gone into its production. Do try and buy or borrow it! **JS**

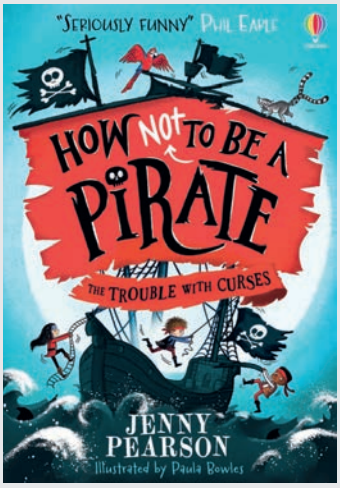
### How Not to be a Pirate: The Trouble with Curses

★★★

Jenny Pearson, ill. Paula Bowles, Usborne, 298pp, 9781835400968, £8.99, pbk

This swashbuckling adventure story for children tells the tale of a young pirate who is desperate to live up to his family's fearsome reputation... despite being hopeless at almost everything to do with piracy.

Wilbur is destined to be a pirate. His father is a celebrated captain, his family owns a magnificent ship called the Dark Whisper, and Wilbur is about to take his first pirate exams. Unfortunately, he is utterly hopeless at spitting, firing cannon, climbing rigging or even talking like a pirate. To make matters worse, his cruel and obnoxious parrot, Troubadour, constantly reminds




him how terrible he is by squawking insults into his ear. However, Wilbur's greatest problem is a terrible curse which makes life at sea particularly difficult: sea sickness!

Wilbur would much rather have been a cook than a pirate, but destiny insists that he must live a pirate's life. His father is determined that Wilbur follow in his footsteps, and is willing to go to extraordinary lengths to cure his son's affliction. Wilbur, though, is beginning to wonder whether a life of piracy is really for him.

Initially it appears that the book will focus on whether Wilbur, and several other colourful characters, will be able to pass their pirate exams. However, when Wilbur discovers something surprising about his departed mother, a new and perilous quest to find the mythical Hag Stone begins.

Wilbur is bossed about on his quest by Ellie, a mysterious girl who is desperate to become a pirate herself, and whose own motivations are not always clear. She is desperate to make her pirate life a success and has an appetite for adventure and a relentlessly aggressive attitude that constantly clashes with Wilbur's nervous demeanour.

Their success depends upon teamwork with each other and also with Gilbert (another hapless, reluctant apprentice), as well as with their animal companions, including a mischievous lemur and the perpetually obnoxious parrot!

Lots of the characters have secrets and hidden depths, which gradually emerge as the adventure unfolds. Wilbur's own uncertainty about his future is particularly engaging, and the story has an important message about finding the courage to choose your own path, rather than simply accepting the expectations of others.

This is a generous, colourful publication, with pages flooded with a striking palette of red, white and black. Bowles' illustrations are playful and fun and add plenty of character to the pirates and their unusual animal companions. The story delivers a good deal of adventure and excitement, alongside some amusing moments, and Wilbur's hapless efforts to become a fearsome pirate make him an endearing hero for young readers. **SD**

### Nature's Heroes: Great Conservation Campaigners

★★★★★

Mick Manning, ill. Brita Granström, Otter-Barry Books, 48pp, 9781915659842, £14.99, hbk

Here is an eye-catching hardback which displays all the hallmarks of quality, award-winning publisher Otter-Barry Books. As a lover of non-fiction and biographical texts this book ticked all the boxes for me.

The first 20 biographies have a spread devoted to each person, followed by 17 other heroes mentioned either within those initial pages or described in the final spread. This work is chronologically arranged and wide in scope – both historically and geographically. The author mixes well-known figures with lesser-known ones, and connections are made between the heroes, which I found helpful. Firstly, the reader is informed about Queen Hatshepsut and then Aristotle before continuing with Pliny the Elder and Shin Saimdang. The latter was a Confucian artist living in Korea 1504-1551. She was known for her paintings of flowers, landscapes, insects etc. and unusually her husband encouraged her talent after marriage and eight children. I was fascinated to learn how the Confucian religion 'venerates nature. We believe nature is a united force in complete harmony and that people must treat it with care and respect' (p.13).

The publication is aimed at 7-year-olds upwards, and the text is pitched perfectly. There is one main paragraph about each of the first 20 heroes with one or two text boxes plus a speech bubble comprising additional material. The information is narrated using the first person which works well. This aids accessibility and gives the book an immediacy which youngsters will appreciate. The United Kingdom is represented in the book by people such as Thomas Bewick (Newcastle wood engraver 1753-1828) and Beatrix Potter (author-illustrator 1866-1943) with Sir David Attenborough (naturalist, conservationist born 1926) being given the fitting epithet 'nature legend.' (p.44.)

A glossary on the final page is very useful, and I thoroughly enjoyed seeing the coloured finches appear on the end papers. They are also in an illustration on p.21 which looks at the bird-artist and naturalist couple Elizabeth Gould and John Gould (who worked with Charles Darwin).

All in all, this is a fabulous book which schools, libraries and homes are encouraged to acquire. **JS**

### Girl with a Sabretooth Tiger

★★★★★

Jasbinder Bilan, ill. Sonia Albert, Chicken House, 192pp, 9781917171700 , £7.99 pbk

Here is a tale of two sisters – one tiny, and fighting for her life; one only 'eleven summers old' and yet already wise, and brave, and determined. Although the story of Swallow and her sick baby sister Bear is set in prehistoric England, in fact much of the reflections on relationships and on the times the community are living through could be just as true today. This is one of the many strengths of this new title from Jasbinder Bilan, which is set to be as sure a success as **Asha and the Spirit Bird**.

We learn early on that Swallow has recently lost her grandmother and was left a tooth from a sabretooth tiger to guide her, drawing parallels with Bilan's first book. Yet Swallow is facing further tragedy when we first meet her - having lost many siblings before, her baby sister Bear is now also declining and in fear, desperation and resolve Swallow realises she has to act.

Despite the dangers, Swallow sets out on an epic journey through a beautifully depicted and expansive landscape in search of a sacred stone which can restore her sister's health. The descriptions of our protagonist's tribulations as she makes her way towards the mountains, and her quest for a source from far away, seem reminiscent of Lila's treacherous adventure in Pullman's tale of a courageous young firework-maker many years ago and to have another fiery and full-hearted female lead is very welcome. Given both texts are of similar length, both contain supporting illustrations and have many overlapping themes, there would be scope here for classes to study both texts and compare them. Unlike Lila who has a faithful friend following in her wake, Swallow is accompanied by Ishi - another child from the village who bears the brunt of her many frustrations initially. In time though, Swallow learns that you never know who you might need to rely on or where help might be found and this becomes a key theme of the title.

The pre-historic period is often one which poses difficulties for teachers trying to find quality fiction texts to link in with this topic, so on this count alone there will be many happy teachers (and children!) nationwide. More importantly, there will be many fans of Bilan waiting too for this next instalment and they certainly won't be disappointed. Told as ever in a lyrical and heartfelt tone, this is a most enjoyable and well-timed title, perfect for the change in seasons. **ARu**

## 8 – 10 **Junior**/**Middle** continued




### Henry Tudor: The Incredible Diaries of Me!

★★★★

Danny Wallace, ill. Tor Freeman, Simon & Schuster, 215pp, 9781398554412, £7.99 pbk

Whilst we are all rightly annoyed with the number of celebrities writing children's books, its less galling when a comedy writer gets involved. Children love jokes, and Wallace had me laughing from the third page, where 8-and-a-half-year-old Henry VIII says: 'They tell me that on the day I was born, the wind stopped blowing and the sun doubled in size. One rainbow gave birth to another rainbow in the sky'. The prince's boastful voice is immediately memorable and vivid. History is ripe territory for comedy, being as it is full of dung and dramatic irony, and given how much schools like to teach the Tudors, this is very fun way into the era.

However, I do have some caveats. One is that it is very hard to write an antihero for children. Horrid Henry, when he sneered at Perfect Peter, always left a slightly sour taste in my mouth. Wallace's Prince Henry is a comic monster who bullies the boy who turns the spit ('spit boy'), fires his guards and makes jokes about having servants' heads cut off. But despite a narrative ostensibly about schooling him in kindness and humility, it soon becomes clear he will end the book having learnt precisely nothing. How can there be character development, when the joke is that he will grow up to be a monster who bullies, fires his guards, and cuts peoples' heads off?

Watching this privileged and egotistical young man fail upwards is a rather unpleasant lesson for younger readers, and it also means the diary entries in his voice can feel a little one-note. At its best, Henry Tudor reminded me of the brilliant historical sitcom Blackadder, but you would not have wanted the whole of series two to be about Queenie. I couldn't help wonder if Wallace might have written a better book from the perspective of Emily, the cook's daughter. Having said that though, this is still an effortless, witty read full of historical detail, that will teach children about effigies, vizards, the Battle of Bosworth and bathing in vinegar. **CP**

### An Elephant for the Emperor

★★★★

Saviour Pirotta, Bloomsbury, 9781801999007, 192pp, £7.99, pbk

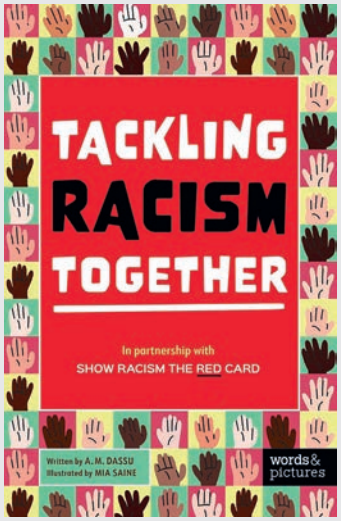
This is a title which would work well as topic support in UKS2 for classes embarking on studying the period. It can be an ambitious and difficult topic to engage pupils with and so, having young protagonists to relate to and an exciting adventure to fall into are certain to offer support.

We meet Farouk, the older of the two boys and by far the wealthier, at a time when his fortunes have suddenly run dry. He has lost a highly prized bird and will pay an equally high price. His father determines he must join the travellers heading to Germany, working alongside his fellow travellers and learning how to be responsible - both for himself and for those around him. Though he struggles with this decree and struggles equally with the reality of his new life, a life without the lavish riches he has grown accustomed to, he slowly does begin to take more responsibility. Initially this interest focuses almost exclusively on an Asian elephant the caravan has been entrusted with safely delivering. Slowly, he begins to extend this appreciation further and Farouk learns more about our second teen lead, Hudayn.

Hudayn's fate was in stark contrast to Farouk's long before the caravan embarked on this expansive quest and as such, he takes more willingly to the cards he has been dealt. But, as both the reader and Farouk will find out, this is as much to do with circumstance as it is to do with character. This becomes an important theme and throughout the reader is encouraged to draw parallels between the two boys, their experiences, and their ability to manage their circumstances effectively. This offers meaningful room for book talk, encouraging the pre-teen audience to consider their own lives, the challenges they face and possible strategies they could employ moving forwards.

Aside from topic support and scope for book talk, this title is also simply a superb and riotous journey across the world, with almost every possible attempt to derail their expedition. Both the boys and their wider travelling companions must learn to overcome their differences – if any of them are to experience success. **ARu**

## 10 – 14 **Middle**/Secondary




### Tackling Racism Together

★★★★

A.M. Dassu, illustrated by Mia Saine, Words and Pictures, 9781836008101, £10.99, pbk

Created in partnership with **Show Racism the Red Card**, this handbook for children and young people explores what racism is and what it looks like in everyday life. It helps readers understand the impact racism has on individuals and communities, and it equips them to make choices that challenge unfair behaviour safely and confidently.

The book is designed as a workbook, so it can be used by working through each chapter in turn. The journey begins with Looking Inwards, where readers consider how their own views are formed and what influences them. From there it moves on to defining racism and recognising its many forms, before arriving at what it means to be a good ally: someone who stands in support of people who are being treated unjustly. This progression feels natural and carefully considered, taking children from self-reflection to practical action without overwhelming them.

A.M. Dassu is a well-respected voice in children's writing, and she has produced a well-written, clearly structured information book. The language is accessible and never patronising, trusting young readers to engage with difficult ideas. Real-life examples bring the issues to life, including some drawn from the author's own experience, which adds honesty and credibility. Children will recognise situations from their own lives in school, in the playground and online, and this recognition makes the advice feel relevant rather than abstract.

Mia Saine's engaging illustrations and the lively design give the book a friendly, inviting feel. They break up the text, draw the reader in at key points and keep the pages approachable for a wide range of confidence levels. The structure also means the book works well beyond a straight read-through. It can be dipped into as a reference, whether to check a fact or to find a strategy for responding to a particular situation, which makes it a valuable resource for the classroom, the library shelf and the home.

Above all, the book is empowering. It does not leave children feeling helpless in the face of a large and painful subject. Instead it builds knowledge and confidence, and encourages readers to become active allies who can create positive change in their own communities. An essential purchase for primary and lower secondary schools, and for any family wanting to open honest conversations.**LJS**

### A Werewolf Ate my Homework

★★★★

Emily Snape, Firefly, 204pp., 978-1-917718-41-7, £8.99 pbk

The press release for this book states that it is ' perfect for reluctant readers' and the diary style and copious whacky illustrations would certainly help to encourage such readers to have a go. 11-year-old Asher lives with his Mum, but when he set fire to the bathroom, her rescue by a handsome firefighter led to a new relationship and a forthcoming wedding. The downside from Asher's point of view is that nice Hugh moves in with his own son, 11-year-old Luca, one month older than him, and decidedly weird, tall, and very hairy. They have to share a bedroom, in bunk beds, and as the story starts, Asher has already played some nasty tricks on Luca. Curious to see what happens when Luca discovers that his toothpaste has been replaced by a tube of cat food, Asher peeps through the bathroom keyhole, and is appalled to see that Luca has turned into a werewolf. Mum doesn't believe him, of course, and Luca looked normal when he emerged, so he needs to find a way to prove it, and teams up with his former friend next-door, Helga. She is fascinated by werewolves, though she had fallen out with him after some rash behaviour.

Asher continues to make stupid decisions, but gradually realises that his actions haven't helped the situation, and although his homework does turn up in his bag chewed and soggy, as in the title of this book, a well-written version of the essay he was due to hand in is also in his bag: Luca is trying to help. Your reviewer hopes it is not a spoiler to reveal that Luca does turn out to be trying to accept his new life as a lycanthrope, as Helga calls him, and the trio have become good friends by the end of the book.

## 10 – 14 **Middle/Secondary** continued

Adapting to a new home situation, and accepting a person's differences, are lightly covered, but this is mostly a very funny story with great illustrations by the author! **DB**

### The Lost Name Society

★★★★

SR Krish, Fox and Ink Books, 9781917894242, 256pp, £8.99 pbk

Andy has dreamed of Merrybourne all his life. A place at this elite Cotswolds boarding school is the reward for years of hard work, and he arrives determined to belong. On his first night, a thrilling competition is announced: the Pentangle Prize Championship. Anyone who wants to take part must sign their name in an ancient book. Andy is the first to volunteer. He begins to write his full name, Aniruddha, then changes his mind and settles on the shortened, anglicised Andy. He tears out the page before anyone notices, but the book mends itself, and a chain of strange, magical and increasingly dangerous events begins.

SR Krish blends the classic school story with gothic horror to gripping effect. Each challenge Andy and his friends face is more terrifying than the last, and the pace barely lets up. Merrybourne gradually reveals itself as something far darker than a school. It hides twisted secrets behind a polished surface and is ruled by a mind-controlling headteacher. Why do Andy and his friends seem able to resist her influence? What binds them together? And can they all escape, together and alive? These questions drive the reader onwards to a horrifying and exciting final challenge.

Puzzles are woven throughout, inviting readers to solve them alongside the characters. The main goal is survival, though, and the stakes feel real. The atmosphere is scary and eerie, with enough terror, magic and mystery to keep readers turning pages.

Beneath the thrills sits a thoughtful message about identity. Andy's small act of self-erasure, made in order to fit in, turns out to carry enormous weight. The novel handles the importance of names, and of claiming your own, and recognising its power in an often unforgiving society where children feel they need to shorten, soften or swallow part of themselves to feel accepted.

This is a racing, terrifying, spooky read for fans of gothic horror and magical mysteries, and for anyone who enjoys a boarding school setting with a sinister twist. Readers of 12 and over who like to be kept guessing and scared will find plenty to enjoy. **LJS**

### The Trouble With Magic

★★★

Amy Wilson, ill. Eric Deschamps, Nosy Crow, 275pp, 9781805135647, £7.99 pbk

You know how it goes: a boy whose parents have vanished or died in mysterious circumstances acquires an enchanted object that reveals he's special. He's thrown out of his home, so has to go on a journey and try to reclaim his powers whilst shadowy enemies work against him. There are portals, magic cloak shops, sparkles, and a lot of expositional dialogue ('Things are not as they were. We desperately need to fix the tower and return Hexton to its full magical strength before the Alliance makes its final move' etc). Here the boy is called Fray, and his object is a croxometer – a little like Lyra's alethiometer.

And it's...fine. The language is serviceable, if humming with gift shop cliches ('Magic is the tiny seed deep inside everyone', the first page tells us. 'If we're truly listening, we'll find our way'.) Wilson plunges the reader into a reasonably taut plot, in which Fray has to save the 'old ways' whilst always hyper-aware of his own physicality – whether there's 'a lump in [his] throat', something twisting 'deep in [his] belly', fire in his chest, or a 'curling feeling' in his stomach, Fray is always catching his breath, getting goosebumps, feeling his hands shake, flushing, shuddering... at one point his mouth even waters with excitement.

But ultimately, whilst a nine-or ten-year old who hasn't read any of **Harry Potter**, **Percy Jackson**, **His Dark Materials** or **Howl's Moving Castle** might find their heart beating faster, many readers of this will find themselves wearily checking off the middle-grade fantasy bingo-card. **CP**




### Gracie

★★★★★

Judi Curtin, O'Brien Press, 304pp, 978-1788496353, £9.85 pbk

Irish author Judi Curtin writes warm, living and breathing characters, easy for young readers to identify with, and Gracie is an archetypal Curtin creation. It's 1930 and Gracie lives in a small village in Ireland with her family. With five brothers and sisters and a new baby on the way, money is tight and there's never quite enough food to fill everyone up at dinner time. Gracie struggles with her reading at school but is a keen and talented needlewoman and this turns out to be important in all sorts of ways. When an uncle dies, Gracie's mum decides her daughter will leave the family home and move in with Auntie Peg. Gracie is lonely, missing her family and the subject of extremely cold treatment by her cousin's family, who suspect (rightly) that her mother has her eyes on the field that was Uncle Patrick's. Her aunt is a quiet, kind woman, very like Gracie in fact, and the two bond over a shared love of needlework. It's the arrival of a company of Players that gives Gracie the chance to find friends however and to make even more of her skill with needle and thread. The story provides a strong sense of the times, of the lives lived by families like Gracie's, and highlights the lack of choice there was for many young men and especially young women. It's gentle but absorbing and rewarding reading, its central character one young people will love. **LS**




### A Scrap of Moss and Magick

★★★★

Helen Parry, David Fickling Books, 224pp, 978-1788454131, £7.99 pbk

There's more than a scrap of magick in Helen Parry's hugely enjoyable novel, it positively ripples through the book and animates its lead character, the redoubtable Thirza. Moss, and leaves, twigs and dried rosehips all play a vital role too, and for Thirza in particular. The setting is Ruthyn Hall, the grand home of Lord Wulfric, former Lord High Magician, and Thirza is the most junior of his servants, taken in as a baby when her family abandoned her. Or so she believes. As the story unfolds however, with the arrival at the hall of Lord Wulfric's niece Cecily, much of what we have understood turns out not to be true at all. Thirza not only has magick, she is magickal, while the apparently benevolent Lord Wulfric, who has taught Thirza to read and enjoys playing Cribbage with her, is cruel and ruthless, scheming to renew his own magickal powers by whatever means necessary, even murder. In the tradition of this kind of story, it's up to Thirza and Cecily to stop him, with the eventual help of the other servants and some of the hall's more unusual inhabitants. It's Cecily and Thirza though, and especially the latter, who are in the most danger. There's much that makes the story stand out as a particularly interesting and original example of the genre: Thirza, our narrator, discovers the unusual and frankly shocking truth about herself at the same time that readers do, and the story is much darker and genuinely Gothic than many. It's also well plotted for the main part, building to a very exciting and satisfying climax (good defeating evil of course) with a wide variety of pleasing scenes along the way. The friendship between Cecily and Thirza is nicely done and the descriptions of Ruthyn Hall and the nearby village, plagued by imps in the opening chapter are equally well drawn. This is a book that will cast its spell over readers, an impressive first novel. **AR**

### Fright Club: Ready, set, ghoul!

★★★★

Sibéal Pounder, ill. George Ermos, Puffin, 242pp., £8.99 pbk

The members of the Fright Club are hoping to solve another supernatural mystery in the town of Grim after their first success in **Fright Club: Let's Boo this!** but both stories stand alone. Joe Bones, 'Deadisent' of the Club, is human, and his Mum is a forensic pathologist, so he can get access to some inside information (as long as his Mum doesn't find out). Hal Skelly is a skeleton wearing a meatsuit to blend in, and Rose Underwood is a vampire. Debbie Grimes is allegedly human, like Joe, but it turns out that she is not what she seems, and all is revealed a little way into the story.

The club go to Phantom's Fairground, which is eerily deserted, and they are on the ghost train, laughing at the apparitions, when the ride suddenly stops: the owner, Mr Phantom, has met with what looks like a nasty accident, but of course it was no such thing - it was murder. The investigation takes them from the murky witch village, Little Cackle, to the heights of the ski resort Blood Peaks, and they also find that Mr Phantom has looked the same for a very long time indeed. There are various factions in the Graveworlds: goblins, ghosts, witches – all to be handled carefully, and they spend some time as ghosts having taken a magic potion, but of course they find out what happened in the end.

This well-crafted book is sure to be popular. Illustrations by George Ermos suit the story very well, and break up the text.

The reader can either read the whole story through, as your reviewer did, or follow just one character in *Choose Your Own Adventure* style, and this book is recommended for reluctant readers who might prefer to do that. **DB**

## The Stranger's Gift

★★★★★

Tanya Landman, ill. Cinthya Álvarez, Barrington Stoke, 32pp, 9780008773038, £6.99 pbk

## Shelter

★★★★★

Steve Cole, ill. Leo Trinidad, Barrington Stoke, 32pp, 9780008764913, £6.99 pbk

Barrington Stoke continues its highly respected and important work in creating high-interest, low-ability books with a new collection of shorter titles aimed at seriously struggling teenage readers. Underpinned by the same rigorous testing and editing as all their books, these 32-page illustrated books are aimed at readers with a reading age of 6, as well as EAL learners. They thus serve a slightly different purpose from many of Barrington Stoke's previous award-winning novels such as Anthony McGowan's **Lark** and Patrice Lawrence's **Needle**, books which are designed to appeal to reluctant and confident readers alike. This new series is more likely to be used as part of targeted interventions to support struggling readers, meeting a clear need. However, it maintains the same commitment to high-quality storytelling from some of the most talented writers for young people. Each author only has a few hundred words at their disposal and a relatively restricted vocabulary so it is fascinating to see how they work creatively within these constraints: younger (and older) writers could therefore learn a lot from these books.

Tanya Landman's **The Stranger's Gift** is a fable-like tale about a hungry man seeking food from a group of villagers, with only a stone and his wits to help him. Perhaps fittingly, this turns out to be a story about narrative resourcefulness, as the stranger uses his words to trick the villagers into helping him. As readers, we don't immediately realise what he is up to, but soon we are in on the joke while the villagers remain oblivious, something that is nicely emphasised by the stranger's wink to the reader in Cinthya Álvarez's final illustration. I love the way that Landman enables her readers to feel that they are smarter than the villagers – readers who may often have been made to feel the opposite.

**Shelter** by Steve Cole takes a different but equally successful approach, offering an immersive first-person account of a Ukrainian boy facing missile attacks on his family's farm. Danylo's voice is stark, but often poetic; he describes 'flashes of light in the sky, like God is taking pictures', before asking 'who wants to take pictures of us?' He uses single-word sentences to describe a night spent in a ditch: 'Cold. Wet. Scared'. And he ends by telling the reader, 'You can try to be ready for war [...] And still the ground explodes under your feet.' Coupled with Leo Trinidad's vivid and sometimes harrowing illustrations, Cole conveys the reality of living in a war zone, and particularly what it is like to be a civilian with no control over what happens to you. It has become a cliché to say of a Barrington Stoke book that not a word is wasted, but it is undoubtedly true in this case: the economy of the writing is key to its ability to elicit empathy from the reader. Like **The Stranger's Gift**, this is a great story in its own right, and both books will be an invaluable resource to secondary schools.**SDi**

## Lykewise

★★★★

Darren Simpson, Pushkin Children's, 238pp, 9781782696209, £8.99 pbk

Mirrors have often had a creepy fascination for novelists and filmmakers and no less so than here in this wonderfully atmospheric and truly sinister story.

When a travelling salesman arrives in the remote fenland village of Harrowmere, it is such a rare occurrence that everyone turns out to see his wares which are a beautiful array of looking glasses. The whole village is entranced as they see themselves reflected in ways they have never seen before as they had only ever seen their reflections in lakes or rivers.

Dunn and his friends Hetty and Beah are eager to take a look for themselves and Beah overhears the alderman saying to his reflection, 'Are you looking at the mirror? Or does the mirror look at you?'

Later that evening the three friends meet the salesman outside the tavern and regale each other with ghostly stories and tales of seeing strange lights in the fens. The salesman tells the children that if they recite a certain rhyme standing between two mirrors it will show them their truth. Temptation prevails and the three friends find two recently purchased mirrors to see if it works. Dunn and Beah get cold feet and leave Hetty who fervently wants to try the rhyme she has remembered but the next day she has disappeared and the prettiest girl in the village has been attacked and disfigured.

The next day there are stars reflected in the local lake but oddly the sky is covered in cloud. Frederic Pyke, the alderman claims it is a trick of the light and a good omen, but another villager disagrees. No-one realises quite how dark things will get as the attacks and disappearances get worse and everyone becomes suspicious of each other. It is up to Dunn to break the curse before it is too late.

The story is taut and beautifully written, building the tension to a nail-biting degree. It cleverly blends tropes from local folklore and superstitions into a chilling thriller that is compelling, vivid and very filmic. The characters are genuine and realistic, and Dunn is especially well-realised as he grows and develops into a brave and resourceful young person. Fans of unsettling mysteries will adore it. **JC**

## The Animal Queendom

★★★★

Catherine Blackledge, ill. Kasia Bogdanska, Nosy Crow, 80pp, 9781805135456, £16.99, hbk

This is another beautifully produced hardback from the successful collaboration between **Nosy Crow** and the **University of Cambridge**. It will appeal to nature lovers, curious young people and inquisitive scientists. This book takes an interesting perspective on the animal kingdom by looking at the females. It strives to celebrate some of their amazing characteristics through consideration of 34 varied species.

The animals chosen for this publication are grouped into seven sections according to different attributes of the animals. For example, the first section entitled 'Daring and Dangerous' comprises six spreads, one for each species: Reticulated python, Meerkat, Black widow spider, Spotted hyena, Great white shark and Peregrine falcon. The female Peregrine falcon described and illustrated on pp.16-17 is, 'The fastest bird in the world and the fastest animal on the planet' (p.17). Since the females are roughly one third larger than the males they can kill and carry much larger prey. The illustrations of this bird are stunning and clearly capture its characteristics. By using a vertical spread the illustrator can show the beautiful falcon diving.

Throughout the volume the text is bursting with interesting information regarding the females of various species. With colourful illustrations on high-quality paper these work very well with the text to produce an appealing hardback. The vivid pink mantises on the front cover ensure this book will stand out on the shelf and be noticed! On page 25 these orchids are perfectly described as, 'Mistresses of disguise throughout their lives' as they attract bees via their looks and chemical output!

Towards the final pages of the book there is an engaging spread devoted to 'Female champions of the animal queendom' (pp.76-77). Here a dozen female scientists throughout history are celebrated in chronological order. The book ends with a helpful and detailed Glossary plus Index.

This eye-catching publication is unlikely to be read by many boys in my opinion and is targeted at those aged 9 upwards. **JS**

## Sky Dancers

★★★

Chris Vick, Zephyr, 272pp, 978 1837 933204, £8.99 pbk

Evocatively set on the wild and rugged coastline of Cornwall, this is an intriguing blend of fantasy, magic, mystery and contemporary realism. It opens 'three generations ago' with an apocalyptic storm and Isla, a fourteen-year-old girl who seems convinced she is to blame. She is leaving her lighthouse home with her father, never to return to Cornwall, but they leave behind a boy and girl, Ari and Caleb, mysterious spirit guardians of a dark force that has been buried beneath the lighthouse. In the present day, in the same village, we meet Lorcan, something of a loner and science geek who is assigned the strangely acrobatic new girl, Hilly, to be his school project partner and she keeps going off and leaving him to do the work. Previously home schooled Hilly and her family are already objects of distrust and suspicion in the village, they are incomers, felt to be taking homes from locals who need them. Hilly's mum's work has brought them to Cornwall despite the letter her absent Gran left behind, which warned them never to go there– and now strange things are happening around Hilly. She has weird 'dreams 'of flying, there is an old lighthouse that only she can see and she has disturbing encounters with Ari and Caleb, who reveal that her elemental powers are awakening the dark force and storms are coming. Hilly and Lorcan uncover tales of strange sightings and unnerving events in the past and eventually clues lead her to an eccentric old woman living in a remote cottage and the deadly magic of Hilly's family secret is revealed. Can the logical and down to earth Lorcan help save them all? With its fascinating nods to Shakespeare's The Tempest and wonderfully descriptive language revelling in nature's awesome power and a found family friendship that captures the genuine awkwardness and strength of early-teen relationships, this is an enthralling read. The multiple voices and switch of perspective may confuse some readers at first, but they will be swept along by the need to find out if Hilly and Lorcan will survive. **JCo**

## Cleopatra's Amulet

★★★★

Lindsay Galvin, Chicken House, 272pp, 9781917171021, £7.99, pbk

In this action-packed historical adventure, a young Cleopatra becomes embroiled in a deadly Roman conspiracy from which she can only extricate herself with the help of an enchanted board game that can bring some of ancient Egypt's animal gods to life.

Twelve-year-old Cleopatra enjoys a carefree existence as the Pharaoh's daughter and so-called 'Princess of Cats', playing with her pet cat Bastet and basking in the adoration of the Egyptian people. But during the celebrations for the Festival of Cats, her father is kidnapped and she and her older sister Berenike are secretly whisked aboard a barge on the Nile under the watchful eye of Senator Rabirius.

Berenike claims that this is for their own protection, but as the barge travels along the Nile towards

## 10 – 14 **Middle/Secondary** continued

the Great Pyramid of Giza, Cleopatra starts to suspect that her sister is not telling her the whole truth. Together with Fabius, an enslaved Roman scribe, Cleopatra starts to investigate what is going on, and draws on two gifts from her father to help her: an amulet and a game of senet – a board game with animal pieces in the shape of different Egyptian gods which seem to take on terrifying special powers.

This magical mystery story is likely to prove a popular read with older primary and younger secondary pupils. The plot is fast-paced and characters are well-drawn – the growing rift between Cleopatra and Berenike is skilfully presented, and I particularly enjoyed Cleopatra's fabulously flamboyant father, who relishes the glamour of his role.

Above all, the novel is jam-packed with fascinating cultural and historical details which are bound to appeal to any budding young Egyptologists - from pharaohs and papyrus to pyramids and mummies, as well as Egypt's increasingly tense relationship with the Roman Empire. Galvin also provides helpful historical notes at the end providing further explanatory context. It would therefore make an excellent companion read for Key Stage Two pupils to read alongside studying Ancient Egypt, either as a class or independently. **SDi**

### Mexikid Dreams

★★★★★

Pedro Martin, Guppy Books, 318p
9781916558755, £14.99, pbk

Pedro Martin's **Mexikid** was a triumph claiming the ALA's **Newbery Honor, Pura Belpre**, **Eisner** and **Tomas Rivera** awards. This lively debut graphic novel celebrated the energetic dynamic of his Mexican-American family, the impact of his grandfather's history and the importance of their heritage while also managing to inject his narrative with raucous humour. Equally animated and comical, Martin's stupendous sequel does not disappoint. Reflective of the social conscience of John Steinbeck, it's not just a highly entertaining memoir. Mexikid Dreams is a hymn to the migrant worker and a reminder to always follow your own true path.

With a vibrant palette and a gamut of eye-catching facial expressions, Martin's narrative opens with introducing his family through the lens of a strawberry fight. He charts the hardships his six brothers, two sisters and parents faced following a catastrophic earthquake which led them to move to Watsonville and become a sharecropping family. From play fighting to day dreaming, 7-year-old narrator Pedro explores his options wishing he could just watch cartoons instead of enduring strawberry fields forever. As his family's lives change irrevocably, the years pass and his siblings make important choices about their future, he discovers more about his father's journey and the challenges and prejudices he faced. Pedro also observes the quiet fortitude of his abuelito.

The book is packed with references to popular culture of the 1970s, a love of music from Elvis to mariachi bands, fashion, food and comic book characters juxtaposed with gut wrenchingly hilarious scatological sequences as the siblings brave the stench of casa del Diablo. Pedro dabbles with playing the trombone and joins the Penny Club Band whilst also designing posters. During a visit to a prison his eyes are opened. Meanwhile migrant workers struggle with the threat of violence, the danger of losing their livelihoods and being exploited.

From scary home remedies to the pitfalls of irrigation to connecting by dancing to the radio among the strawberries to addressing important social issues and the universal question of what do I want to be when I grow up, this book is a love letter to Pedro's family celebrating their individuality, talents and ambitions. It is empathetic, insightful and a joy to read. **Mexikid Dreams** will appeal to a wide audience including fans of funny visual narratives, historical snapshots and thought-provoking stories. Pedro includes a fun Q & A and family photographs at the back which will engage readers further. **TJ**




### The Other Boy – The true story of one refugee family's journey to find home

★★★★

Hamed Amiri, ill. Sonia Albert, Wren & Rook, 192pp,
978 1 5263 6813 3, £10.99 pbk

Hamed Amiri's first book, **The Boy with the Two Hearts**, received wide acclaim and was adapted into a successful play. It was published for adults, now **The Other Boy** tells the same story for children. The autobiographical narrative follows Amiri and his family as they escape Afghanistan, travel across Europe and eventually settle in Cardiff, Wales. But the story does not stop there. As Amiri describes, there are many challenges in making a new country 'a home'.

You know the basics of the plot from the outset, but Amiri tells his tale at a fast pace, which keeps you turning the page, with plenty of shocks and surprises on the journey. You feel his terror when a trafficker robs the family at gunpoint and sense the extreme discomfort (on top of the fear) of being in hidden in the back of a lorry for two days, particularly when your brother has been violently sick. But Amiri and his family have each other. They are determined to the get the UK as there Hussein, Amiri's older brother, will be able to get the life-saving treatment he needs for a heart condition.

About halfway through the book, once the family are 'settled' in Cardiff, the narrative drive changes. It focuses on the emotional turmoil that Amiri faces as he grows up. Struggling to find a sense of identity or self-worth, he becomes a troublemaker and a bully at school. He is unable to communicate his anger and isolation, even to his family. It makes for painful reading.

Amiri does eventually find a way forward and this gives the book an inspirational conclusion. His overall message is hopeful but it is born of deep trauma. As his brother Hussein puts it, 'You have to love life, even if life don't love you'. Amiri's simple language and direct style makes this book accessible to a wide readership but its content could, and indeed should, upset readers. That said, it should also lead them to an understanding of what it means to be a refugee and feel an outcast. It should build readers' appreciation of how being positive and accepting help from others can enable you to work out who you are and find your own sense of home. **RC**

### Operation Doodlebug

★★★★

Tia Fisher, Piccadilly Press,
9781835872383, 288pp, £7.99 pbk

Acclaimed YA author Tia Fisher follows up her 2026 Carnegie Medal- shortlisted verse novel, **Not Going to Plan**, with a middle grade historical adventure novel. **Operation Doodlebug** begins in Croydon in 1944 and will appeal to all young readers who enjoy the writing of Judith Eagle, Emma Carroll, Phil Earle and Tom Palmer.

Young Stan's father has just joined up and is headed off to training camp. Stan is torn between pride that his dad will eventually be joining the troops in Europe and fear of the unknown. He clings to the promise made when they part: that his dad will come back. Life in Croydon has already been disrupted by the Blitz, but when the German air force begins dropping V1 buzz bombs (or doodlebugs) as vengeance weapons, Stan's mother decides he should be evacuated to the Norfolk coast, along




with his close neighbourhood friends, Billy-the-Moon and Nellie.

Before they leave, Stan finds a mysterious metal cylinder, dropped during a bombing raid, and a telegram arrives that indicates his father mas been reported missing, believed killed in action during D-Day. Stan refuses to believe that his father would break his promise, despite the bleak news. The remainder of the novel focuses on Stan's attempts to discover what has really happened to his dad and the mystery behind the cylinder marked 'V1.POW.Post'. Could the two somehow be linked?

**Operation Doodlebug** is meticulously researched and the friendship between Stan, Billy and Nellie is believable and full of warmth. The trio have a nose for investigation and a strong sense of justice, which often leads to danger. Fisher deals thoughtfully with complex issues of bullying, illiteracy, anxiety and grief. The children are all bullied as evacuees and are therefore seen as outsiders: Billy is treated cruelly because of his dwarfism; Nellie struggles to read and Stan is constantly on high alert due to fear for his father's safety.

Fisher's Historical Note at the end of the novel details some of her research and several interesting facts (i.e. the number of road deaths in England during the Second World War due to blackouts and the lack of street signs; what life was like before the NHS was set up in 1948).

A worthy class read and essential to any primary school library collection. **AB**

# 14+ **Secondary**/Adult

## The Age of Fury

★★★★★

John Stephens, Hot Keys Books, 487pp, 9781471421907, £9.99 pbk

This novel, set in 1907 New York, starts at a high pace and never lets up. Its experienced American author has researched its background so effectively that what could well seem an outsize melodrama still comes over as convincing in detail. It tells how beautiful, razor-tongued Caitlin arrives from Ireland in search of her twin sister Mary, only to find she has been murdered. Determined to get to the truth she teams up with William Fury, originally from Ireland himself but now a young but ruthless enforcer for a local gangster out to control the docks. Caitlin, although deeply sceptical, still manages to offer William a way back to decency which he eventually takes. Helping her survive one tight situation after another means that he also receives many hits along the way.

So much, so compulsively page-turning. It also poses questions about whether the boundary between some YA novels and succeeding adult fiction is now almost invisible. This story, for example, has numbers of scenes set in a brothel, characters swear fruitily and there is extreme violence. On the other hand, there is a growing sense of unreality as the young heroes win out time and again against enormous odds. Sexual activity, although hinted at, also lacks detail. Tidying up at the end when even one of America's richest men is still no match for Caitlin and William could also seem unlikely to more seasoned readers. Yet Lee Child's **Jack Reacher** stories offer the same sort of thing and no-one has ever described him as YA author. Both its American and British publishers have placed this novel in their Young Readers category. But for whatever age, this present story, richly entertaining and so well written, is greatly recommended. **NT**

## The Raven's Gift

★★★★★

Kiran Millwood Hargrave illus. Tom de Freston, Starboard, 224pp, 9781510113244, £14.99 hbk

Harry is fourteen. Very recently, his older sister, Frankie, who was in the sixth form, died from cancer. This novel chronicles Harry's journey through grief and tells the reader about his relationship with Frankie. The author focuses on how nature and animals, and specifically having to nurture a young orphan bird, slowly lessens Harry's grief.

The power in this work rests in how achingly slowly Harry heals from grief, but if you think this story is consumed by sadness, you would be wrong. Harry and Frankie's relationship, as it is slowly revealed, is both teasing and loving and although Frankie never




physically appears in the narrative, her presence is very much felt by her brother and all the characters.

Lovers of Edgar Allan Poe's writing will find many intertextual messages and it is through the power of Poe's work that Harry starts to reconnect with Frankie following her death. Animal lovers will be smitten by the relationship between Harry and his many raven birds. The author posits the interesting question whether animals are less emotionally demanding than humans during grief. Anyone who has lost someone close will find solace and catharsis in this, at times heartbreaking, book. Tom de Freston's illustrations capture the characters of the ravens perfectly. **RB**

## Neverlast

★★★

Sue H. Cunningham, Scholastic, p346. 9780702348372, £8.99, pbk

Sue Cunningham was a **SCBWI Undiscovered Voices** winner in 2022 and has gained much acclaim for her magical and humorous writing. Her third book is a high-stakes romantasy which is a slow burner while the characters are introduced and the plot forms. Inspired by the 80's supernatural series The Highlander and pulse pounding extreme sports like parkour and rock climbing it revolves around a group of immortal teens known as Perpetuals. Following a fall, their fearless leader Gracie discovers a truth about herself. This impacts on her relationship with her boyfriend Arty leading to dangerous complications and a crusade to uncover family secrets.

**Neverlast** has elements of the movies *Unbreakable* and *Ocean's Eleven* boasting nail-biting action sequences and exploring moral dilemmas. The reader is introduced to a diverse cast of characters, some more well-rounded than others. Froya, Raph, Hiro, Bruno, Jude, Arty, Liv, Luz and Madi all live life to the max thinking nothing of leaping off tall buildings in a single bound so what happens when that dynamic changes? What relationship complications will ensue and how will they cope with an outside threat?

Interwoven throughout is a love of cosplay and festivals as characters visit Comicon and La Tomatina. Norwegian heritage, the psychological effects of torture, computer hacking, blood transfusion **Horrible Histories** style and death-defying art theft also feature as Gracie navigates her emotions and makes her plans to overcome obstacles with supportive friends and family. But will she let her heart rule her head? The Pet crew must face life and death decisions as they risk everything to regain control.

**Neverlast** has an interesting premise leading to questions of existentialism. It will appeal to teens looking for queer representation in fantasy narratives and readers who enjoy heist movies and James Bond style travelogues switching from one perilous situation to another in different locations. Cunningham also makes an effort to highlight the Parisian eco-conscious collective who utilise their parkour skills to reduce light pollution and energy consumption at night. **TJ**

## The Velvet Knife

★★★★

Maureen Johnson, Harper360, 400pp, 978 0 06 325601 9, £14.99 hbk

A return to the world of Truly Devious and bestselling author Maureen Johnson's quirky detective heroine Stevie Bell. Although the sixth novel in this series, this is another stand-alone novel, which does not require any previous knowledge and will completely enthral mystery fans with its expert level sleuthing and the complex relationships of its engaging characters. Using a familiar structure for this author, of weaving flashbacks into the contemporary story, as the mystery gradually unravels, we have a dual narrative that alternates between 1976 and the present day. In the 1976 narrative, we follow a young woman named Blue who finds herself in an increasingly terrifying Manson-like patriarchal cult of self-proclaimed Robin Hoods that meet a tragic end. In the present, Stevie is nursing a broken heart following her recent split from boyfriend David. Being increasingly estranged from her parents, with their lack of understanding and support for her 'creepy' interest in murders, she announces that she's not coming home for Christmas and jumps at the chance to accompany her close friend Nate to New York City, where she meets a group of eccentric, argumentative residents of their Manhattan apartment building. But when Helen, the elderly woman next door, dies of apparent heart failure, closely followed by the death of the outrageously alternative Benny, Stevie is compelled to investigate and eventually this quest connects back to the very cult we've been reading about all the time. Readers will be kept guessing until the final pages about how the intertwining storylines fit together. What makes the whole thing so enjoyable is the portrayal of how Stevie and her relationships develop and how she copes with her ongoing anxiety disorder. The dialogue is so witty and memorable and there is such real warmth and heart to the depiction of this well-rounded friendship group and the people they meet along the way, that it really lifts this novel way beyond its genre appeal. One can assuredly see why this series has such enduring appeal and this is another fabulous addition to the collection. **JCo**

## Give Me 'Til Midnight

★★★★★

Oran Doyle, Everything With Words, 289pp, 978-1-911427-53-7, £8.99 pbk

Oran Doyle had me in the palm of his hand from start to finish of this excellent novel. Harmony has dropped out of school and is going nowhere. The tedium of her repetitive days, working in her mother's shabby café, dreaming of what might have been and watching the lives of passers-by is driving her into despair. When she spots Liam she notices that he is able to anticipate events, as though he has encountered them before and realises that this self-styled King of Dublin is stuck in a time loop which she resolves to release him from. She has until midnight until the loop resets-will it reset for her, too? There's even a helping of physics to further illuminate the problem delivered by one of Liam's gifted friends, suggesting reasons for his plight-and it's accessible to lesser mortals!

There follows an introduction to the third character-the city of Dublin. Liam takes Harmony on a whistle-stop tour of both familiar and less well-known areas, trying to impress her with extravagant experiences in expensive restaurants and exclusive venues, but she will have none of it, feeling it too exploitative and shallow. There is only one thing which she wishes to do and she doesn't yet feel ready to share that with Liam.

However, despite their differences-of class, of life experience, of family dynamics, they begin to trust each other and Harmony realises that for all the gaiety which Liam assumes the loop has rendered him profoundly lonely-unable to develop his long-standing friendships, his academic achievements or his ties with his family. He lets her in to the young man locked into a depressing cycle of empty repetition and the longing to escape from this trap. She, too, lets down her guard and their relationship begins to deepen. Doyle's skill in managing this transition is his

## 14+ **Secondary**/Adult continued

avoidance of sentimentality and cliché. He makes an over-used trope fresh and honest and so creates an entirely believable scenario from ingredients which might usually drag it down. **VR**

### Are You Still Watching?

★★★

Kelechi Okafor, Scholastic, 400pp, 9780702329388, £9.99, pbk

Kelechi Okafor's YA debut interweaves science fiction, political dystopia and Yoruba mythology to pose an intriguing question: what would you do if you discovered that your life was being live-streamed as a reality show being broadcast on a far-off planet – and was in danger of being cancelled because it is so boring? This is what happens to 17-year-old Dorcas, who lives in the quiet town of Cowrie Hills.

This is more than just an intergalactic version of *The Truman Show*, however. Okafor uses this premise to explore a number of strands. The novel has a slightly futuristic setting which allows for the introduction of some of the novel's more dystopian elements. Nobody is allowed to leave Cowrie Hills without a permit, but all permit applications seem to be rejected, so Dorcas is anxiously waiting to find out if her application to attend Roan University will be accepted – or whether, as her mum tells her, 'adulthood is choosing the design of your cage, that's all.' There is also the creeping influence of surveillance capitalism through the corporation of P8CP who seem to control all aspects of life in Cowrie Hills.

Linked to this is Okafor's presentation of racial justice. The killing of Sandra Taylor by a robot patrol (inspired by the real-life killings of Sandra Bland and Breonna Taylor) is used to show how human biases can also affect emerging technologies. Sandra's death sends shockwaves through Cowrie Hills, inspiring Dorcas's own activism which becomes part of a larger awakening. Additionally, the novel examines the corrosive effect of influencer culture and reality TV, as well as featuring a budding romance.

I admired the conceptual ambition of this novel, and the way that it offers diverse representation within genre fiction, where such representation is still often lacking. At times I felt that it was trying to juggle too many ideas, meaning some were less fully fleshed out. In particular, I would have liked to learn more about the audience who are watching Dorcas's life. While some of these were highly topical, Cowrie Hills didn't feel entirely plausible as depiction of what an English town might be like six years from now. Nonetheless, this is a clever and innovative novel which is likely to engage teenage readers and provoke some great discussions. **SDi**

### We Wait for the Stars

★★★★★

Bridget Hamilton, Little Tiger, 9781788958493, 368pp, £9.99 pbk

Celeste's father, a renowned astrophysicist and astronomer, died from cancer two years ago. Celeste and her non-binary sibling Rae and their little sister who is known as 'Little Dipper' after the constellation, are all grieving their father in different ways.

Aged seventeen, Celeste adored him. She knew however he would be massively disappointed that despite her talent for astronomy and his aspirations for her to go to Cambridge, she wants instead to go to Art school. Can all three siblings learn to live with their grief and will Celeste manage to follow her own dreams and not the ones her father had for her?

This debut verse novel is heartbreakingly honest and thoroughly immersive. Hamilton has managed to capture the messiness of grief and the power of unexpressed anger, particularly Rae's. Any person who has lost someone close and has then worried that they are not living up to the version of themselves they know their loved one wanted, will find solace in this narrative. Likewise, any person struggling with their gender identity will feel supported by Rae's experiences. The fact that this is a debut novel is even more impressive. Bridget Hamilton is one to watch. **RB**

### Filthy

★★★★

Lucy Cuthew, Fox & Ink Books, 422pp. 9781917894265, £9.99, pbk

First glance at the provocative cover and title would indicate that **Filthy** means to shock but a read of this thought provoking and frank verse novel reveals a different story. Cuthew has a reputation for tackling thorny reality topics evidenced by her YA debut **Blood Moon** which took a scalpel to period shaming.

In writing **Filthy**, Cuthew has created a safe space for discussing teen attitudes to sex, sex education that lacks the information teens need, dangerous learned behaviours and misconceptions around pornography. Without being gratuitous her text is explicit as curious 16-year-old Joss who is a keen nature fan, investigates her feelings, compares herself to her friends and worries whether she is 'filthy' for seeking out online visual representations of sex in an effort not to be 'vanilla.'

The novel's accessible format, experimentation with the shape of the font and relevant section headings result in a fast-paced journey through three sections where the reader meets an entertaining cavalcade of characters. Joss's protective parents, prickly older sister, her irrepressible gran who is a naturalist, and loyal friends provide moments of humour, awkwardness and insight as she has run ins with disrespectful peers who make her feel uncomfortable. Her experiences shape her confusion and her desire to couple up like her confident friends fuel her attempts to hook up with friendly boy Griff who she has met while gardening for a neighbour. As they embark on an environmental project together she wonders how she can impress him with provocative clothes and enticing behaviour, forgetting to be herself in the process. But what is it that he really wants?

Informed by up-to-date sources including the Byron et al [2021] paper on 'Reading for realness: Porn literacies, digital media and young people', *Sex Education*, 21 [4] the novel aims to provide a balanced view of how young men and women think about sexual attraction and how they respond to peer pressure. Cuthew draws on anecdotal accounts interrogating how young girls in secondary school are forced to walk a tightrope between the labels 'slut' and 'prude' and how young boys are exposed to violent digital representations of the sexual act.

Joss's path through love, lust and bad research relying on nature documentaries and online pornography is a precarious one. Cuthew counteracts it by highlighting the importance of considerate conversations and common interests being factors that encourage intimacy. This is magnified by the referencing of pleasurable sex scenes between consenting adults in the movies *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Thelma and Louise*. Talking to friends about sensitive matters, getting advice on the art of communication and learning the importance of respect and protection are all prevalent as preferable to forced, disconnected, uncomfortable encounters that are bereft of pleasure.

**Filthy** is sensitively written. It is educational without being didactic and it includes queer representation. The book shines a spotlight on the difficulties young people can face in attempting to navigate the landscape of relationships. It is an important read for teens and provides opportunities for further discussion. **TJ**

### A Darker Act

★★★

Amy Goldsmith, Pub: Ink Road, 361pp, ISBN 978-1-8530-889-5, £9.99 pbk

The unremarkable scenario of an extra school credit camping trip introduces the five main protagonists in this densely woven gothic horror story. Hazel, Head Girl-clever, organised, respected, reliable, is the lynch-pin of the expedition, map-reading, sorting out minor problems and set-backs, just as in school, where she was relied on to maintain her position and to support the school and its pupils at all times. The unrelenting level of responsibility had taken its toll and she had decided to break into something new, where she could truly be herself. Her solution to the problem was to join the small, elite theatre group, The Edgemoor Players, who were now her companions on this venture.

Beset by bad weather closing in, the loss of the map and Callum spraining his ankle they take refuge in an ancient and semi-derelict church until someone from school can penetrate the blizzards and get them back to safety. However, this is where their real problems begin as, unbeknown to them, the church is at the centre of a brutal local legend about the murderous Huntsman Nathaneal De Winter and malevolent energies have gathered to destroy the group. There follows a descent into horror, with all the full-blown tropes a reader might expect, one following closely after another.

The supernatural ire inflicted on the group was stirred into life as a result of their performance of a play about the Huntsman, written by Roman, its self-styled leader and a descendant of the evil figure, which was beset by mysterious accidents. Most chillingly of all, Nathaneal began to take possession of Roman's mind and personality, putting the rest of the cast at risk, particularly Hazel taking the part of DeWinter's great love who he was tricked into killing. As her relationship with Roman develops the danger increases incrementally.

There is plenty of good, suspenseful writing in **A Darker Act**, the main protagonists are credible and the premise of the story is original. However, the bombardment of one dreadful event and revelation after another wears rather thin by the end of the book and the descriptions of Hazel and Roman's feelings for each other begin to tip over into pastiche, somewhat diluting the narrative. **VR**

### Niflheim

★★★★

A.A. Wilson, DK FLIP, 341pp, 978-0-2417-6677-4, £9.99 pbk

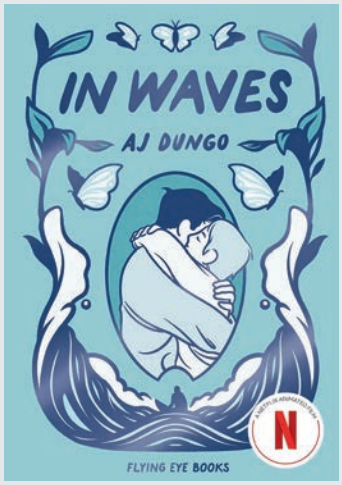
Following the death of his beloved mother, 16-year-old Eben is sent by his autocratic father to Niflheim, a dark and dismal island in the Arctic North, to be cared for by his grandfather, the powerful Woden Torson. At first sight, Eben is ill-equipped for life on the island, with only his lightweight formal clothes to keep out the arctic cold both outside in the wild weather and inside the basic hovel with the gaping roof in which his grandfather lives. His attitude and demeanour are also the antithesis of island life-he is arrogantly determined to be the aristocratic gentleman his father insists he should become and considers the islanders beneath him, especially when he is bullied and robbed repeatedly by three of them.

However, Wilson has placed him on an island notable in Norse cosmology -an underworld of eternal cold and darkness where the dead are ruled by Hel, a creature half-living and half-dead and, unbeknown to Eben, he has special powers which place him

firmly on her radar. His grandfather is the island's guardian and insists that Eben adopts his surname to keep him safe. He stubbornly refuses until a series of terrifying supernatural events-the dead reanimating, a werewolf attack, vampiric entities pursuing him-convinces him that his grandfather's concerns are entirely valid.

Then into the mix comes Freya, the young washerwoman and seamstress, and Eben falls in love. She also provides him with an ally and together they embark on investigations from which they barely escape with their lives, resulting in Freya's parents banning her from seeing him, an edict which she eventually disobeys. Meanwhile, Eben has struck up a friendship with Klemens Hobbes, an archivist and herbalist, who shows Eben the work he has been doing on the aura and allows him to read the ancient books which begin to develop his supernatural powers.

The narrative is full of smoke and mirrors-dark secrets buried in innocent souls, horrific transformations of what appear to be human forms into mythical beasts. The final section of the book brings this ancient malevolence to a dynamic and shattering climax during which Eben comes into full possession of his powers as Garmr-the guardian of Hel's gate- appears through the long-threatened breach in the universe and Eben and his grandfather must defeat him if they are to go on to cleanse the world of its evil manifestations. **VR**




## In Waves

★★★★★

AJ. Dungo, Flying Eye Books, p.376. 9781838742515, £14.99, pbk

**In Waves** is a deeply personal, elegiac graphic novel which is a rare blend of historical facts and poignant memoir. It immerses the reader's senses suffusing them in waves of turquoise and teal as the story of Kristen and the author-narrator AJ plays like a symphony. Their shared love of surfing has brought them together and the sport acts as solace in times of strife. It's a panacea to loneliness, a place to soothe the worries of the subconscious and an opportunity to witness the force and majesty of nature.

AJ juxtaposes his tender recollections with sections in sepia cruising through the spiritual origins of surfing for naked Polynesians in Hawaii in the 1900s to colonisation, and westernisation threatening extinction, the emergence of tourism and 'beach boys', and the rise of surfing greats like Olympian Duke Kahanamoku and Tom Blake. Both promoters and innovators of surfboard design they bonded over the cultural impact of surfing seeing it as a means of blissful escape and cathartic release.

Throughout 15 chapters, the novel celebrates surfing as an art, a religion and a philosophy exploring what it means to different people and its impact on their lives. AJ accompanies this with his lyrical tale of love, illness and heartbreak starting in Bolsa Chica, California and told in flashbacks spanning 2005 to 2017. He reflects the awkwardness and shyness of a first meeting at a dance, wryly admitting that his recollections are different from Kristen's. Gradually a picture emerges of what Kristen meant to her lover, her brother Jeff, her cousin Eon and her mother.

There is a powerful synchronisation of text and storyboarding as hues of blue collide and the protagonist sweeps out into the ocean on a surfboard trying to cope with grief in the aftermath of the loss of a loved one which comes in waves. The reading experience is sensory and metaphorical charting the immensity of love and the agony of loss. Dungo deftly equates the act of riding waves on a surfboard with dealing with difficult feelings.

The panels flow with strong representations of water whether it be spears of rain, deepening puddles or vast expanses of sea. They also demonstrate how stoic Kristen experienced cycles of remission and relapse using the evocative metaphor of rocks.

Changing perspectives, eye-catching close ups, enduring motifs of butterflies, the use of blank space and strips of light contribute to the power of In Waves. An endless aching need throughout the novel pounds the reader's emotions like breaking surf as the interconnected narratives leave the impression that surfing can bring both joy to some and comfort to those who are broken. Breathtakingly emotive, it fulfils Kristen's final wish expressed to AJ, 'When I'm gone I want to live on through your art.' It will appeal to fans of true stories of courage and those who are interested in the history of surfing. This novel may also provide bibliotherapy to readers dealing with the pain of bereavement. **TJ**

## The Pools

★★★★

E. Lockhart, Hot Key Books, 384pp, 9781471422201, £9.99, pbk

Readers of Lockhart's phenomenally successful **Liars** series will come to **The Pools** expecting another suspenseful read full of unexpected twists. **The Pools** does indeed deliver this but in quite a different way. Firstly, this teenage love story set in a New England spa town makes more prominent use of poetic forms than her previous books. Secondly, after about 100 pages, one particular twist takes us from a fairly realistic plot into supernatural terrain in a way that I had not even slightly anticipated – although there are a few hints about the pools' magical properties which subtly foreshadow this moment. The blurb does an admirable job of keeping this twist a secret, and I found the element of surprise so effective that I will likewise avoid giving details of what happens.

The two teenage protagonists, Lexie and Chester, are both wounded by past experiences. Lexie has come to live with her aunt in Covington, along with her younger sister and her sick and grieving mother. She carries the scars of three years trying to make it as a teenage singer in order to pay her mother's medical bills. Chester has lived in Covington all his life and comes from a more privileged background, but is recovering from depression, including time as an in-patient at a psychiatric hospital. The two of them feel an instant connection, but a shocking transformation will change their relationship dramatically.

Once the novel's magical realist elements are introduced, it becomes even more compelling. There are horrifying moments in which characters must adjust to frightening new realities, as well as some astute social commentary on how communities react to any form of difference or perceived threat. One of the strengths of this novel is its mythic, fairytale quality – the novel's events suggest a number of possible interpretations but Lockhart never insists on a single meaning, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions about what exactly this story is about. This is relatively rare in young adult fiction and something that teenage readers are likely to appreciate. I read much of this novel as a study of grief and letting go of those we love, but the novel's ending made me consider other ideas too.

Something else I found effective was the use of verse form. The author's note offers an illuminating discussion of different forms she has incorporated, including found poetry and terza rima, but none of this detracts from the novel's accessibility. Lockhart's writing is both lyrical and economical, with short lines mirroring the ordinary rhythms of speech and lots of white space on each page quickly drawing us into this strange and captivating story.

Although not overly graphic, discussion of sex and themes including depression, self-harm and suicide make this novel more suitable for older secondary readers, with whom this is likely to be a popular and thought-provoking read. **SDi**




## Anger is Only a Shadow

★★★★★

Elizabeth Acevado, Hot Key Books, 312pp, 9781471409448, £8.99, pbk

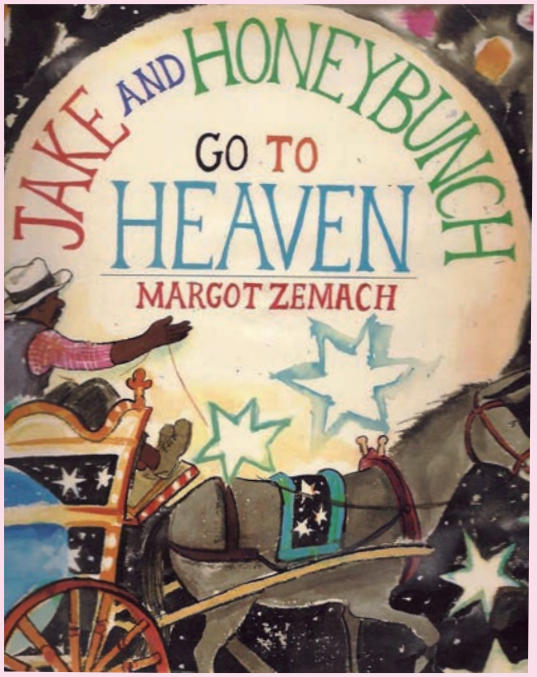
This passionate story leaps from the page and takes readers by the throat. It is narrated as if by seventeen-year-old Lil, living in Washington D.C. and of Dominican descent. She is in deep trouble with the law, currently wearing an ankle monitor and facing a final day in court with the threat of incarceration if she misbehaves once more. Which she does. Fortunately for her, the more erratic her judgements the more patient her saintly parents plus her new boyfriend Yonas.

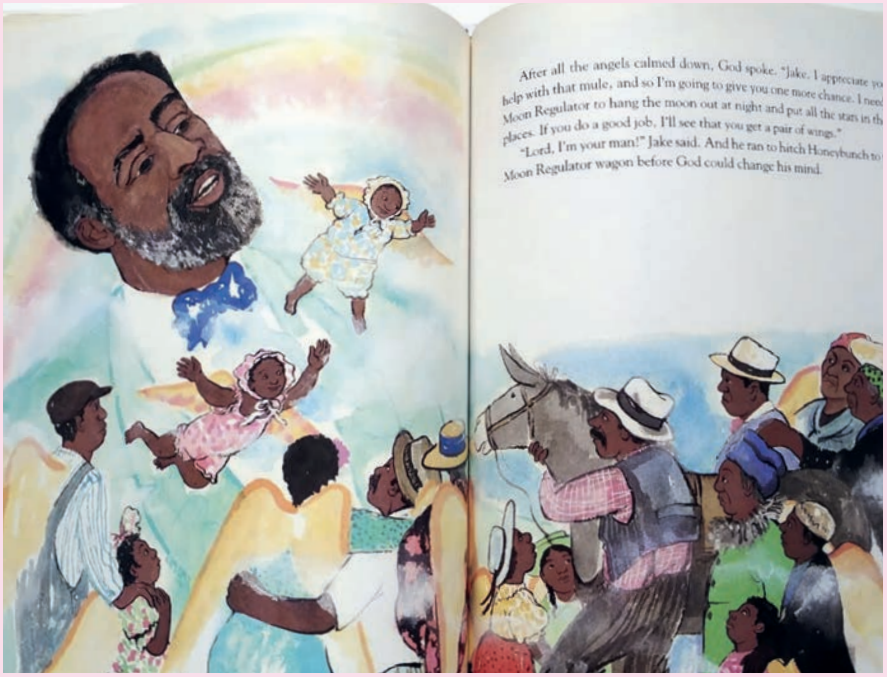
Such high emotion does not lend itself to orderly prose, with Lil often breaking out into broken verse on one page followed by more orthodox writing on the next. She occasionally harks back to the ancient island spirits once described to her in Spanish by a grandmother now suffering from dementia. To complete the bad news, her beloved older brother Aldwin is away at college but turning psychotic. Lil realises what is happening but cannot get her parents to face this new reality. Breaking every probation rule she travels out to find him. A happy ending would have been inappropriate, but there are still some positives as Lil manages to regain friends previously inclined to give her a wide berth.

The author is a previous **Carnegie Medal** winner, and at the end of this story she tells readers how some of its matter arose from what she learned teaching at a Youth Detention Centre. She also alludes to her own experience with a loved one struggling with schizophrenia. Such first-hand knowledge of how other young people either cope or are brought down by the problems facing them lends this story extra authenticity. Lil is often maddening, and this is a tough read. But she and this furious novel both deserve attention. **NT**

# Valediction: **No.30** Jake and Honeybunch

**Brian Alderson** is presenting his unique collection of children's books to **Seven Stories** and **Newcastle University**, including this book he once reviewed very positively in the ***New York Times***.




I don't know much about contemporary children's books but I don't think that anyone would countenance, these days, Margot Zemach's picture book **Jake and Honeybunch Go To Heaven**. In fact, it has never been published in Great Britain and was ostracised by several American children's libraries, but I wouldn't mind betting that Patrick Hardy would have published it for he was a great fan of Margot Zemach, but he died before his own publishing company was fully under way.

Jake works in the town of Hard Times touring the streets with his mule Honeybunch, who he is inclined to call a 'misbegotten mule' for she takes her own time on the job, as a result of which the two of them are run over by the local freight train. They make their way to heaven where Jake is able to sneak through the pearly gates and don a pair of angel's wings. Unfortunately they are both left wings and he causes a bit of trouble by flying the wrong way. So God gets Peter to throw him out. While he's waiting outside the pearly gates, Honeybunch turns up and gets a glimpse of the green fields of Heaven. She is off after them straight away, causing a lot of trouble and God has to bring Jake back to control her (they are having a party at the time and God is presiding, a black man with a nice line in purple bow ties).

The matter is resolved when God gives Jake the job of Moon Regulator and, along with Honeybunch, he is responsible for making sure that the moon and stars are in proper order every night.

This was almost the last book that Margot wrote and illustrated herself, her very notable early books being illustrated alongside her husband, Harve, who had proved to be a notable re-teller of folk tales. They had won the **Newbery Medal** with their version of **Duffy and the Devil**, which proved to be based on a Cornish folk tale, which itself owed a lot to the story of Rumpelstiltskin by the Brothers Grimm. It had been written in Britain, when the Zemachs had been living in a cottage on Greenwich Common, where Harve told the great story of **The Judge**, published here by Judy Taylor at the Bodley Head. It was in London where Harve had committed suicide by throwing himself off a bridge across the Archway Road





Margot Zemach

Margot Zemach **Jake and Honeybunch Go to Heaven**. 265 x 235. 40 pp. Illustrated throughout by Margot Zemach in colour lithographs. Binding Blue cloth over boards with star pattern in gilt to front. Plain end papers back and front. Full colour wrap round DJ.



**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.