

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.266

the children's book magazine online

May 2024



Authorgraph interview **Jennifer Bell**

Windows into Illustration **Rebecca Cobb**

Plus **AI**, **Joseph Coelho** looks back at his laureateship
and **Brian Wildsmith** in detail

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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **Magicalia Race of Wonders** by **Jennifer Bell**. Cover artwork by **David Wyatt**. Thanks to **Walker Books** for their help with this cover.



Editorial 266

Another week, another reading for pleasure report, this time produced by **HarperCollins Children's Books**.

Their annual review of **Children's Reading for Pleasure**, 2024 contains more gloomy reading for those who create, produce or care about children's books: only 23% of 0-17s read for pleasure 'daily or nearly every day' (defined as on 4 or more days per week). This marks a considerable decline over the last decade, down from 38% in 2012. Concurrently, the report finds that those who rarely or never read has risen from 13% to 22%.

Screens are competing more than ever for children's attention. 12 years of trend data shows there is a negative correlation with increased screen time and children's reading for pleasure.

The report reveals that on a typical school day, a third of 8-10s spend 2+ hours a day using their smartphone/tablet, while at weekends and on holidays, 38% of boys and 25% of girls spend 5+ hours daily. Even 0-4s are increasingly using screens and are spending 20-25 minutes more per day on smartphones and tablets than in 2019.

No wonder that a large proportion of parents (62%) worry about the amount of time their children (0-13) spend on a screen. If screen time and scrolling encourages anxiety, as many believe, then a bright spot in this latest report is the benefits to mental wellbeing that come with being a reader.

According to the report, 29% of 14-25-year-olds strongly think of themselves as a reader, with 'young people increasingly building an identity around books and finding a bookish community online'. A shared appreciation of reading with friends makes young people feel more comfortable identifying as a reader, and means they continue to prioritise reading during busy or stressful times. The report also highlighted how having a positive self-identity linked to reading is closely tied to better mental health. 40% of young people who answered 'very true' to the statement 'I think of myself as a reader' described themselves as 'very happy'. In contrast, among those who do not think of themselves as a reader, 21% described themselves as 'very happy'.

[Read the report in full.](#)

Take part in the New National Literacy Trust Poetry Survey

Over the past few years, the ways that children and young people can engage with poetry have changed and the **National Literacy Trust** would like to understand better what poetry means to those who engage with poetry and what could be done to engage those who aren't already reading or writing poetry. They aim to conduct the biggest survey to date about children and young people's engagement with poetry.

The survey will explore children and young people's motivations to read, write and perform poetry, as well as their engagement with poetry in different formats, including print, performance and social media.

It will explore how children and young people might use poetry to support their mental wellbeing or the issues and causes that they care about.

The information gathered will help shape the landscape of poetry provision in the UK.

[Find out more and sign up today.](#)

Enterprise of the Year Award Shortlist

The School Library Association have announced the 2024 shortlist for the **SLA Enterprise of the Year Award**, sponsored by Reading Cloud. award celebrates one-off or progressive projects which contribute towards reading and literacy in schools.

The 2024 Shortlist is:

The Cherwell School, Oxford

Librarian Caterina Balistreri set out to eliminate plastic book covers from school library. The change is not only benefitting the environment but is helping to raise the profile of reading across the whole school.

Swiss Gardens Primary School, West Sussex

The underused and outdated library was a concern for Headteacher, Lawrence Coughlin. Word spread, parents and staff all came forward to help. The new library was stocked with an up-to-date collection of books in partnership with a local bookshop.

Upton Priory School, Cheshire

When Claire Sleath joined there was no school library, and classroom bookshelves were tired and unloved. She set the challenge of opening a new school library within one academic year, which was delivered not only on time, but within a modest budget.

Congratulations to them all!

Books for Keeps May 2024 No.266

ISSN 0143-909X

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Books for Keeps is available online at

www.booksforkeeps.co.uk

A regular BfK Newsletter can also be sent by email.

To sign up for the Newsletter, go to

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What is poetry and can AI write it?

by Laura Mucha

Before becoming a poet, I was an intellectual property lawyer at an international law firm.

Most of my old colleagues have now become AI specialists and often tell me what their clients are concerned about. For example, music companies are worried about whether anyone actually cares if music is written by a human or not. Many of these concerns echo those relevant to children's literature and education.

So, does anyone care if books or poems are written by AI or a human?

Last year, Hachette carried out a YouGov study, which found that 79% of readers wouldn't consider reading a children's book they knew was written by AI. 66% thought that AI-created books should be labelled as such. Heartening results. The difficulty is in verifying whether something was AI-generated or not. How can we actually know?

Well, we could rely on our gut instincts. Although they don't seem to be great. [It may be possible to train ourselves to tell the difference. But in one study](#), people could only distinguish between human and AI-generated text with 50-52% accuracy – basically the same as random chance. Another option is to use an AI-Detector, but some have been found to be biased against non-native English writers.

That's not the only issue. AI has been trained on thousands of books – including one of mine – without permission and without recognition or payment. Courts around the world are wrangling with whether this constitutes copyright infringement or not. But copyright considerations are only part of the question. Another concerns ethics, and the role of writers more widely.

I'd been keeping a keen eye on developments in AI, so when the **Forward Arts Foundation** asked me to create [two films plus teaching resources exploring AI and poetry](#), I jumped at the chance.

I sat down to script the films, and thought – *why not start by asking AI...* I asked ChatGPT: *What is poetry?*

ChatGPT defined it with reference to human emotion – as have many poets, including WH Auden, William Wordsworth and Joy Harjo. But this raises an important question: *Can AI have feelings? And if not, is it still poetry if AI is regurgitating the feelings originally articulated by a human?*

When I read or listen to human poems, I often derive comfort, joy, solace or insight from the lived experience and reflection of the human that wrote it.

Whereas when I read AI 'poems', I'm infuriated by the lack of true emotion and nuance – not to mention the appalling metre, forced



rhyme and archaic language. But Artificial Intelligence will only get better. And better. So critiquing its poetic technique is only partly the point (and a very satisfying exercise).

What *is* the point? What is the point of *poetry*? What is the point of *poets*?

I think part of the role of poets is to witness, reflect and articulate sometimes uncomfortable truths about what it is to be human and cultures they find themselves in. And in doing so, they can change both the human reading their work and the wider culture.

Can AI do this if it relies on what has gone before?

I'd argue that one of the roles of poets and poetry is to challenge prejudice and established ideas, rather than rehash and reinforce them. But in relying on what has gone before, when that is so often sexist and racist, AI doesn't make the cut. (Incidentally, I asked ChatGPT if it gave sexist or racist answers. Brilliantly, it admitted to both.)

But that's not all. AI is also frequently inaccurate. Earlier this year, I was runner up for the **Ruth Rendell Award**. My brother-in-law asked ChatGPT what the award was for, and it explained in a very convincing way that it recognised excellent crime writing. But it doesn't. (And I don't write crime fiction.) It recognises services to literacy in the UK.

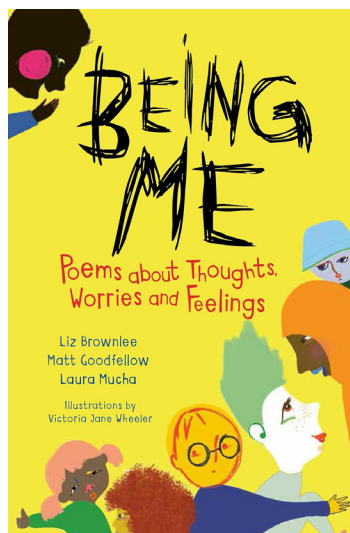
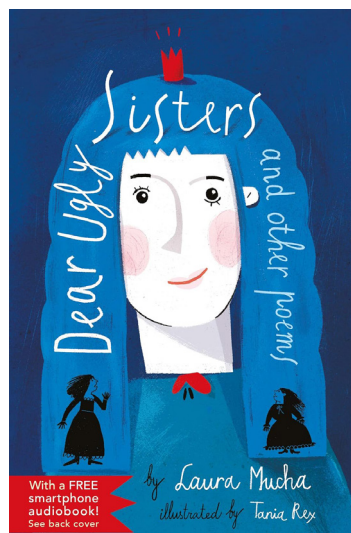
We all know in *theory* that AI gets things wrong. Yet I've listened to company CEOs treat AI as a reliable source. Not only does this overlook its inaccuracies, but also that the output depends on the input. When I asked ChatGPT if it gave racist answers, it gave varied responses depending on how my question was worded.

There's no escaping AI. And it's not necessarily a bad thing. There are and will be massive benefits. It can free us from routine, predictable tasks – and in a few years, we could all have 'constructive' AI companions, allowing more time to be creative.

Given that AI is becoming an increasingly integral part of our lives, it's vital that we start talking to young people now about the benefits, but also about the importance of always questioning its role and how it's used.

Critical thinking and critical literacy were essential skills prior to the advent of artificial intelligence – [the latter being weaker in those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds](#). But now, with ready access to a repository of often prejudiced and inaccurate responses, critical thinking and literacy are more important than ever.

And so, I would argue, are human poets and poems.



Laura Mucha is an ex-lawyer turned award-winning poet and Author-in-Residence in the Department of Public Health & Primary Care, University of Cambridge. Her books include **Dear Ugly Sisters and Other Poems**, and **Being Me: Poems About Thoughts, Worries, Feelings** with Liz Brownlee and Matt Goodfellow. She is a judge on the 2024 CLIPPA, CLPE Children's Poetry Award.

Back where it all began: Brian Wildsmith in Barnsley

Children's book author and illustrator Brian Wildsmith is being celebrated through two new exhibitions in his home town of Barnsley at [The Cooper Gallery](#) and [Experience Barnsley Museum](#). Displays are awash with the vibrant palette and limitless imagination which were so recognisable in Brian's beloved books, including his **ABC**, **The Owl and the Woodpecker**, **Jungle Party**, and many more. Brian's son **Simon Wildsmith** introduces these celebratory exhibitions.

'It was the only possible choice,' is the recurring answer we provide to the many visitors thus far, who have queried our seemingly left-field choice of Barnsley in Yorkshire for our father's first major UK exhibition. Brian Wildsmith was born in Barnsley in 1930. He went to Barnsley Art School, before getting his scholarship to the Slade in London.

Visitors often know the rest of Brian's story, in broad brushstrokes, or at least little sparkling lines, having been inspired to return to it, through one childhood memory or another. Perhaps they were transfixed by the striking stare of an owl's eyes in the 1960s (chosen here for an enormous flag now hanging from the town hall) or excited by psychedelic multi-coloured tree trunks and landscapes in the 70s. Memories are shared at the exhibition, career choices and motivations explained. 'It was discovering your father's art that made me want to be an illustrator,' says one visitor. 'I have flown over from Stockholm. I design costumes for the Royal Opera House. Your father is a constant source of inspiration, says another.

It was 2018 when Brian's daughter Clare contacted the now Exhibitions Officer Alison Cooper with an idea. 'What if we brought Brian's art back from his home in France to where it all began?' Several years, Brexit and a pandemic followed. Hundreds of emails and countless video conferences too, not to mention the newly required mountains of export paperwork. And now it has opened, attracting visitors to the newly transformed town centre, doubtless boosting the local economy, impacting wellbeing and, hopefully, encouraging and stimulating the creativity of future artists, illustrators and innovators from across the borough and beyond. Barnsley is fast becoming a cultural hotspot in Yorkshire, offering exciting and innovative experiences for people of all ages.



A Stare of Owls, *Birds*, 1967

Our father's art is displayed across two of Barnsley Museum's town centre attractions. At The Cooper Gallery is **Paws, Claws, Tales & Roars: The art of Brian Wildsmith**, where the walls are awash with the vibrant palette and limitless imagination that define Brian's books, showcasing illustrations from classics such as **Birds**, **The Owl and the Woodpecker**, **Jungle Party**, **Hunter and his Dog**, **Professor Noah's Spaceship**, **Exodus**, **Joseph** and many more. A large (2x2m) mixed media painting is also on show. One of many he painted in the 1980s during a break from writing and illustrating books, it represents the Mediterranean dreamscape in which he lived.

Across the road, at the Experience Barnsley Museum, housed in the town hall, is **Coming Home: The Life of Brian Wildsmith**. Here, visitors can learn more about his life, through photographs, anecdotes, memorabilia, and of course, more of his art! Did you know Brian was a great cricket player? A fine pianist? Ambidextrous? That he could draw two identical lions, simultaneously and in mirror fashion? Have you seen the stunning trilogy of posters he painted for his New York publisher, Franklin Watts in the early 1970s? **The Snow Queen**, **Hansel and Gretel** and **Sleeping Beauty** are among his family's favourite works. They are also the largest 'illustrations' he ever painted at close to 1m tall. His earliest works too, are on show. Extraordinarily self-assured, vigorous, pen and ink drawings he created by the hundred as a jobbing illustrator, careering through London, from publisher to publisher on his 1959 Lambretta. His first ever colour work, for the jacket of H. E. Bates' **The Daffodil Sky** is here too, a perfect example of three-colour separation that he was commissioned to produce in what sounds an unforgettable meeting with Victor Morrison, the director at



Fox Was So Hungry, *The Little Wood Duck*, 1972



Saint Francis, 1997



The Snow Queen



A Child's Garden of Verses

Michael Joseph Ltd: 'As I entered the Art Director's office,' recounted Brian, 'I found a man, his feet up on his desk, wearing neither tie, nor jacket nor shoes. He was dictating something to another man wearing a bowler hat, a rolled umbrella by his side.

"Do you mind if I shave?" he inquired looking at my work, his face covered in soap. "You're not bad! We want a three-colour separated book jacket. Can you do that?"

"Oh... yes," I responded.

"And bleeds too?" he added in return.

Bleeds I thought? I'd never heard of bleeds, but I answered favourably and got the job.'

In fact, we go back even further in Brian's creative journey, following his thirst for success and recognition, to his very first paid job, the one that made him think 'Gee, I can make money from this!'. This is a series of drawings of men and women in working men's clubs, annotated with names, professions and hobbies and commissioned

by the Barnsley Chronicle when Brian was just 16 years old. We think you will agree, they show a promise that was quite majestically fulfilled. These two exhibitions lay out that promise.

Returning to Barnsley, we truly have come full circle. Along with returning Brian's art to his town of birth, we have also returned his and our mother Aurélie's ashes to the place where they first met, Wentworth Woodhouse, where they both now lie forever under a stunning Camelia that shall always for us remain, as it was that day, in full bloom in brightest pink, his favourite colour.

Brian once said 'I paint what I see with my eyes and feel with my heart.' From the tiniest of little insects feasting on flowers, to the mightiest of mammals, his art is filled with the joy of all that is best about our world. It's a world that is rapidly changing but children are fundamentally the same as they ever were. He was preoccupied with universal themes that have been the concern of humanity for centuries. Themes around such things as compassion, kindness, generosity, sharing and the preservation of our planet.

Those preoccupations are here in Barnsley, laid out on thick handmade paper, impeccably framed and lit, for all to enjoy. We are immensely proud of this event and thankful for the enormous team effort that has allowed it to happen. From all the professionals at Barnsley Museums and beyond to Brian's lifelong publisher, Oxford University Press. Thanks are due to Liberty Fabrics of London, who so love Brian's art that they too wished to celebrate it by simultaneously releasing a capsule collection of designs, reimagined by the in-house designers and impeccably printed on organic Tana Lawn cotton. This collection is quite rightly named, 'Wildsmith's Wonderful World.'

It is a great time of celebration for the amazing artist that is Brian Wildsmith.

With thanks to Simon Wildsmith and Clare Wildsmith.

[Find out more online.](#)

The World of Brian Wildsmith 20 April – 4 Jan 2025

Barnsley Museums pays homage to this extraordinary, Barnsley born illustrator with a two-site exhibition of rarely seen artworks and objects.

Coming Home: The Life of Brian Wildsmith

Experience Barnsley Museum
Town Hall, Church Street, Barnsley, S70 2TA
Tuesday to Friday 10am – 4pm Saturday 10am – 3.30pm

Paws, Claws, Tales & Roars: The Art of Brian Wildsmith

Cooper Gallery, Church Street, Barnsley, S70 2AH
Monday to Saturday 10am – 4pm



Brian Wildsmith

Authorgraph

No.266

Jennifer Bell
interviewed by
Joy Court

Having had a very enjoyable Zoom conversation with best-selling author Jennifer Bell just before I attended the latest Insights briefing from Farshore about their Reading for Pleasure research, I was really struck by how much Jennifer herself embodies the importance of developing reading for pleasure in schools. She confessed that as a young person, she 'didn't like reading at all'. At school, teachers were continually presenting books to challenge her and there was no reading for entertainment. It was not until she was an adult of 23, when a friend passed her a copy of **Eragon**, that she had a 'good reading experience' and was swept up by the story. She had always loved stories but had accessed them through films, going on to study Film. After graduating and in her first job, she soon realised that she was years away from being able to create stories. She was now 'reading everything', working as a children's bookseller at Foyles and really loving it. She was writing in her lunch break, keen to discover if 'writing the sort of stories I loved could be as much fun as reading them'

As a bookseller, Jennifer really related to the reluctant readers coming in, 'because I was one', and relished finding the hook to their interests and to get them the right book. She was obviously successful, winning Children's Bookseller of the Year with the Foyles' team and then again with Tales on Moon Lane bookshop. She says she learnt so much about the market and what children really like

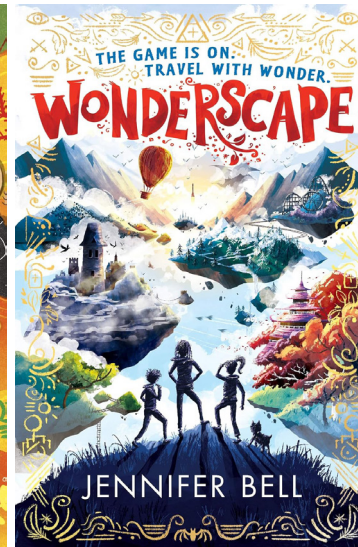
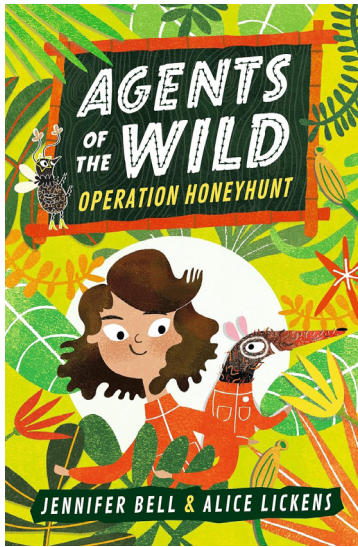


to read at this time. The crucial 8-12 age group is 'The Recruitment Age', she says, when children start to decide for themselves what they want to read, and this is who she is writing for. 'I write for the reader who needs to be engaged very quickly, like me as a child. I always knew I wanted to write something very obviously for entertainment, very obviously reading for pleasure'. This was 'instinctual': 'I don't like things that are boring, so if I am bored writing it, I delete and go back and change it'.

One other advantage of working at Foyles was that lots of authors used the cafe there too, and she made some very helpful friends. They suggested a couple of kind agents who would perhaps let her down gently. Instead, they both offered representation and **The Crooked Sixpence**, the first book in **The Uncommoners** trilogy sold in 24 hours, with a contract for all three. She is fully aware of her 'freak stroke of luck', 'I happened to have written the sort of book that editors were looking for at that time' she modestly declares. Apparently, she got mugged the day after and was still so overjoyed that 'it didn't matter because I had sold my book!'

Incorporating all the lessons she had learned, **The Uncommoners** is definitely a fast-paced magical adventure with an intriguingly original concept at its heart: that everyday objects could have amazing powers in the decidedly uncommon world of Lundinor, which was inspired by the stories of her Cockney grandparents. The magical objects idea came from watching two children playing in the nursery section at Foyles, where they were driving small cars over a book transformed into a bridge. 'Children can take any sort of object and can see something else in it'.

All her books share the common feature of a contemporary opening setting, where readers can engage straight away with a recognisable and convincing 'child from their world', who then goes to somewhere 'extraordinary.' She very specifically tries to ensure



that every child would be able to find themselves in her books. As soon as she has the first plot draft completed, she goes back to check to ensure her characters are diverse enough. But in this she says she is only reflecting her own reality living in London, 'the most diverse city in the world'.

Her career good fortune continued for, by the time she had completed the third **Uncommoners** book, she was bursting with ideas and keen to move on. She had developed her **Agents of the Wild** series with Alice Lickens, an illustrator friend. These funny, fact packed, wildlife conservation themed adventures, aimed at the equally crucial younger, newly established, reader of around seven, went out for submission and were snapped up by Walker Books. Both in topic and delivery, they are pitch perfect for this incredibly curious age group. Walker then bought **Wonderscape**, the middle grade book she was also busily writing. I wondered which audience she preferred, but she loves both. She found 'writing the silliest things is so joyous' and there is so much humour to be found in the grumpy animal sidekick (Attie the serious shrew in **Agents of the Wild**, most definitely honouring Lord David Attenborough). We both agreed about the undervalued importance of humour in hooking readers, and it was certainly a 'breath of fresh air' from writing more complex worlds that would 'really stretch a child's imagination'.

Wonderscape and the sequel **Legendarium** are an imagination stretching collision of time travel and gaming, where Arthur, Ren and Cecily get lost in an epic in-reality adventure game, and need the help of some extraordinary historical heroes as they play their way home by solving puzzles. As I suspected, Jennifer does enjoy immersing herself in a video game on her PlayStation 5 and with this series, she wanted to create a reading experience that showed gamers that they could enjoy all the excitement of a video game in their own head. 'You just have to be swept away once to know that it can happen with a book' is the message she always gives at her school events. Herself a self-confessed 'nerd', she thought children would be excited to learn all about the amazing people from history that she had so enjoyed researching. 'They will be trying to work out who will be in each room that they enter or wondering what legend they will encounter next.'

With her brand new **Magicalia** series launching with **Race of Wonders**, she again demonstrates her skill at making a series irresistible. Her tips include ensuring that, while it is important to have an overarching villain in a series story arc, they must be 'thwarted in a different way every time'; action sequences can 'never be remotely the same'; and while it is lovely to have characters grow and develop from seeds planted in book one, every book must be a 'good individual book on its own'. Because she 'doesn't want anything to put readers off' with **Magicalia** she fought really hard to get Walker to put numbers on the spine: 'booksellers and librarians know this works.' There will be a guide, at the beginning of each of the next three books planned, that explains the basics of

this deftly crafted secret world, in which we meet strange creatures called Magicores. Bitsy and her best friend Kosh are there, following a trail of clues that will take them from London to India to Paris in hot pursuit of Bitsy's father's kidnappers.

There were two very different inspirations for the excitingly original Magicores. One is the hugely popular Pokémon game, showing again how well Jennifer can tap into external interests to hook readers. The other is Emily Dickinson's line, 'Hope is the thing with feathers' prompting the thought, 'what if it actually was a thing with feathers?' and 'what if all our emotions were real creatures somehow, and like in Pokémon, had different powers and abilities?' That sparked the idea and from there she started the 'really fun' process of designing Magicores, which meant 'really interrogating what an emotion is and how it makes you physically feel, as well as what we associate with that emotion'. There is once again a real depth and richness to this magical world just as there is an emotional depth to all her characters.

It takes a quite extraordinary imaginative talent to be able to create such fresh, enthralling, thought provoking, empathetic and exciting stories, which uniformly fulfil her mission of writing books to be read with pleasure. Jennifer Bell has established herself as an author who can be relied upon to provide exactly that and should be on the radar for all teachers and parents concerned about reluctant readers. Fans, like me, will be looking forward to **Magicalia 2: Thief of Shadows** and will be delighted that we need only wait until February 2025. It is even more remarkable to be able, at the same time, to craft warm, funny and informative stories for younger readers and I am delighted to have been let into the secret that there will be another delicious series for seven-year-olds coming in 2026. Watch out for the announcement!

Books mentioned, all £7.99 pbk

The Uncommoners: The Crooked Sixpence, Puffin, 978-0552572507

Agents of the Wild series:

Operation Honey Hunt, Walker Books, 978-1406388459

Operation Icebreak, Walker Books, 978-1406388466

Operation Sandwhiskers, Walker Books, 978-1406388473

Wonderscape, Walker Books, 978-1406391725

Legendarium, Walker Books, 978-1406391732

Magicalia 1: Race Of Wonders, Walker Books, 978-1529506143

Magicalia 2: Thief of Shadows, Walker Books, 978-1529507454



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**.

Windows into Illustration: Rebecca Cobb

Rebecca Cobb's illustrations with their distinctively childlike style are immediately recognisable in books from **The Paper Dolls to Missing Mummy**. As she explains in this **Windows into Illustration** feature, she found much to suit her illustration style in **Mariesa Dulak's** text for **There's a Tiger On The Train**.

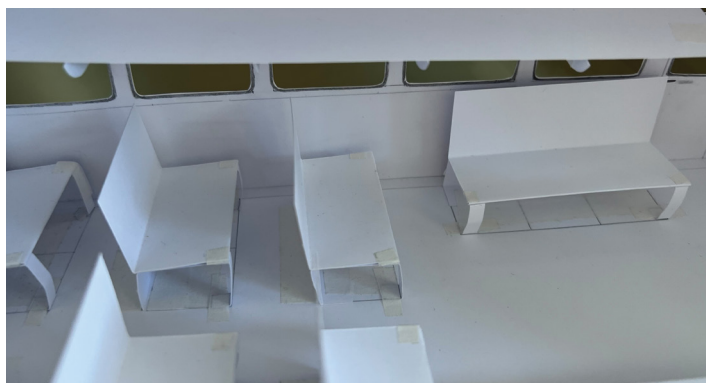
I hadn't realised how much time I spent looking at my phone until the day our children stuck a picture of a mobile with a red line through it on the kitchen wall and said that they were making a new rule – no phones at mealtimes. So when I read **Mariesa's** brilliant story **There's A Tiger On The Train**, I knew I had to illustrate it!

One of my favourite themes in picture books is the contrast in the way that children and grown-ups experience the world. To emphasise this, I wanted the illustrations to take over more of the page each time so that you get a sense of the boy's imagination growing as more and more animals board the train.

I have chosen this page in the book to talk about because it is the point when the scene becomes a full double spread: almost all of the animals have now arrived - while dad continues to focus on his tiny phone screen, oblivious to the increasing chaos.

I was excited about how much of the story is set inside a train carriage because that meant that I could really play around with looking at the same setting in different ways. To help with this I built a cardboard carriage that I could photograph from all different angles. I then chose photos of the model that I thought would suit each page, depending on how much text needed to fit in or how many animals were going to be in that scene and made drawings from them.

I made my train carriage model have the right number of seats for the boy and his dad and all the animals in the story and then I worked out a seating plan of where they were all going to sit so that I would be able to keep it the same in every picture. This took me a few attempts because it was a bit of a juggle trying to make sure that the right animals would be the focus on the page where they were introduced in the text.



Model of carriage



I always notice the fabric patterns on the seating of trains and buses and it feels like a big part of the way that they look so I wanted this train to have its own pattern on the seats. I thought that it would look good if it was quite a busy pattern, but I decided to limit myself to using one colour so that it didn't become too distracting or overwhelming in the pictures when the focus was supposed to be on the characters. After experimenting with a few ideas, I drew a pattern of lots of little train wheels.

I worked entirely on paper for the final artwork and used a mixture of coloured pencils, watercolour and gouache with acrylic ink for the line. I always use the end of a paintbrush or a bamboo skewer that I carve into a nib shape, to draw with ink because I like the inconsistency and variation in the thickness and density of the line that you get that way.

Mariesa's story is a lovely, timely reminder to live in the moment. I hope that readers enjoy it as much as we enjoyed making it!



Rough of spread

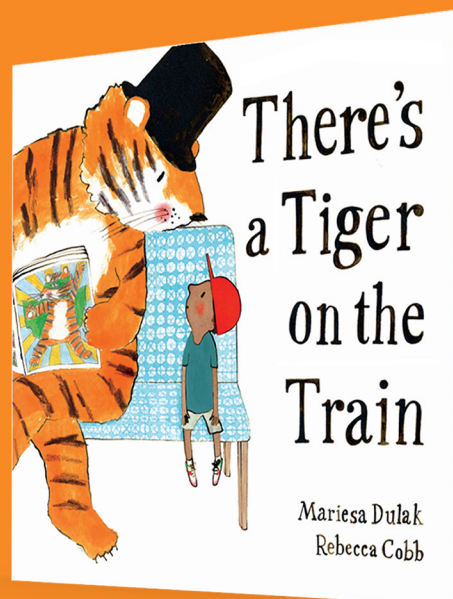
The train was getting busy –
Now **two pugs** swept through the door,
They wore fine hats and dresses
That trailed along the floor.

One pug almost lost her shoe
She just missed my dad's tea!
CLANK RUMBLE, SPLISH-SPLASH RUMBLE
Went the train down to the sea.



There's A Tiger On The Train illustrated by Rebecca Cobb
and written by Mariesa Dulak is published by Faber Children's
Books, 978-0571368341, £7.99 pbk.

From debut author Mariesa Dulak and
award-winning illustrator Rebecca Cobb . . .



On an extraordinary journey to the sea, a jungle
of animals board the train – all without dad
even looking up from his phone!

Available online and in all good bookshops



Picture This

In the first of a new **Books for Keeps** series, **Nicolette Jones** puts three picture book illustrations in the spotlight.

A piece in the trade magazine *The Bookseller* (Zoe Knowles, 22 April) recently drew attention to the UK's top-earning illustrators, and also to the fact that bestseller lists do not identify artists, so research had to go a roundabout way. Sarah McIntyre, whose #PicturesMeanBusiness campaign has long agitated for illustrators to be named when their work is reproduced in the media, pointed out that the publishing industry was missing a trick by not tracking its most lucrative creators.

Illustration, I suppose, is overlooked because it suffers from the multiple stigma of being for children (an undervalued audience) and enjoyed by them (although made by accomplished adults), not being Fine Art (however skilled, and however much it evidently owes to that tradition), being commercial (as if fine art never is) and responding to text (as if there were no creativity in depicting something someone else has already described). If this last principle were valid, a Cezanne would count for nothing if someone else had already said to him: 'paint the apples on that table'.

I am now Tweeting daily a #NewIllustrationoftheDay, an image chosen around publication of the book it comes from, or to tie in with an event or an award. The intention is to highlight the skill and the range of such work, and to explode the idea that it is undeserving of the attention of grown-ups, or even easy to make. And also to encourage people to look at and reflect on the creativity, as they might if they saw each image in a gallery. I have long thought that picturebooks would be perfectly legitimate 'texts' on the A Level syllabus, not only because of the very many subtle decisions that go into their making but also because sophisticated critical analysis can have any subject. (I had a friend who taught a course at Yale on **Toy Story**.) The visual can certainly be just as much dissected as the verbal.

Looking closely at the 50 or so pictures already posted has brought some thoughts home to me, which I would like to share by examining three single images from picturebooks that already appeared in

my Tweets. The first does not qualify as a new illustration, but appears in a newly published edition of work by the late Shirley Hughes: **My Very Busy Day**.

This image is, like all Shirley Hughes's work, entirely handcrafted, so every pen- and brushstroke is individually executed. Sadly, this skill is going out of fashion in the age of Photoshop. The picture also has depth – again an attribute increasingly eclipsed by flat computer graphics. You can always walk into a Hughes picture in your head. I think it helps children to be absorbed by story, if they can enter the illustrations like this. Look at it long enough and you will hear the crunch of dead leaves and the chatter of the adults, and smell the autumn air.

The figure of the child stomping through the leaves reminded me how much Shirley Hughes's many years of filling her sketchbook with drawings of small children at play in the gardens behind her home taught her how they move and stand in different circumstances. It is also now very rare in children's books not to summarise the action of a child with a simplified symbol of a child running or jumping but instead to offer a truly observed and convincing representation of balance, stance and motion.

This led me to think too about how Hughes drew faces. Each child was distinct. (Picture Alfie's face, and Bernard's.) That too has become unusual in illustration. Most illustrators now adopt the formula of two dots for eyes, an angle for a nose and a line for a mouth. Some use their own trademark features: round eyes with sidelong looks – circles with dots to the side (Axel Sheffler), or a surprised expression – circles with central dots (Olivier Tallec), or a big nose or a pointy one for all the faces. At the very moment when we are at last focusing on inclusivity in children's books, and depicting faces in different colours with various hairstyles, and, say, children with physical aids (a wheelchair, a hearing aid), we are also reducing the variety of human features to a formula. The faces of animals in children's books are now often more particular than the faces of children themselves. On top of this, given that we are now seeing fewer photographs of children because of important safety concerns, and the pictures that appear on social media may be enhanced, perhaps we are limiting children's acceptance of what we all really look like. Should we be drawing from life again? It certainly takes a good deal of craft, on a par with Shirley's, to get right. I remember from several years of judging the **Macmillan Prize** for unpublished illustrators, that a common failing among the submissions was that children's faces looked creepy.

Another Illustration of the Day which was popular on social media was by a practising, established artist: Sarah Massini. The spread I chose from **The Girl and The Mermaid** (with text by Hollie Hughes) demonstrates the variety of media and techniques that might go into one illustration, and the purposes these serve. The artist revealed that 'It's made with: pencil, crayon, watercolour, printed textures - all pulled together in Photoshop, like a big mind-boggling puzzle!'

A focal point, against a light field, is Alina looking into the face of a wooden pirate figurehead, who seems to look back at her. This interaction, and her gesture of surprise, injects comedy into a book which involves sadness (a grandmother's dementia). As in all the best picturebooks, the image tells its own story.

The printed textures seem to include the wood grain of a sunken ship and the watery backdrop, but there is also loose brushwork for torn sails, sketchy pen depicting damaged rigging, blown ink on a coral reef, splashed speckles that evoke foam or bubbles, and what looks like a sponge print making the honeycomb scales of the

After lunch we walk home
through the woods.



My Very Busy Day Shirley Hughes

mermaid's tail. Although there is precision in the drawing of the figurehead and the ship, elsewhere free strokes suggest movement in the underwater plants, and the mermaid's floating hair and the seaweed wrapped around her.

A dozen different varieties of fish are grouped or scattered, facing both ways, to decorate the scene and balance the pretty colours: orange, pink, yellow, blue and green, notably including a pink shoal of slivers of fish, offsetting the turquoise-y blue of the wreck, and reminding us that even the mast is underwater. The green fish have white bands that are slightly wider than their bodies, in a way that implies that the stripes glow.

A green seahorse gives the undersea landscape focus and, vivid against a dark ground, echoes Alina who stands out against the light, though its tail inverts the position of her legs.

The mermaid's tail, meanwhile, reaches towards Alina, along with her right arm, her hair and her face, linking left and right pages of the spread and making the heroine not seem alone – which is very important to the story. The figures are drawn with some elongation, looking slim and delicate, thin-armed and oval-faced; the mermaid is like a Simone Martini Madonna but with shorthand features, and the sweep of her body recalls his Annunciation.

It is a rewarding image, and, like Hughes's, somewhere for a child reader to escape into.

Happily, choosing for this daily post has also drawn my attention to illustrators I did not know. Plaudits to Greystone Kids, just honoured at the Bologna Book Fair, for the strength and range of their artists who work around the globe. (And similarly to Pushkin Children's Books and Gecko Press.) Walker Books is sourced less eclectically but maintains its reputation for quality. Which is not to say that truly impressive artwork does not come from many other houses as well. An Iranian artist from Greystone Kids was new to me, but also struck a chord with many, who responded to the image by Reza Dalvand from his picturebook **Champ** (with text by Payam Ebrahimi). The book is about high family expectations, and this spread sums it up. The impact of course comes principally from the use of scale: from



The Girl and the Mermaid Sarah Massini

drawing the father as a giant stabbing his finger at his tiny son. Also from the posture: the great curve of the father's body sweeping down like a tsunami about to wash the boy (Abtin) away. The big body is enough - the rest of the page can be blank: Dad is all there is to think about. And the minimal colours are just right: grey, like a concrete mass, and light-swallowing black. And that red face (and hands and ankles) that suggest he is boiling, apoplectic with rage. The dangling medal is bigger than the son's face – 'in-your-face' evidence of achievement to back up the injunction. And the shoes that look like slippers, and Abtin's vest, suggest that home is where the pressure is.

Meanwhile, drawing the eye to the corner of the spread are the tiny details that show the son's dreams. The minute pencils, pot of brushes and discarded pictures, including one hidden behind his back, reveal that he wants to be an artist. The paintings on the floor suggest where the family thinks they belong. And a spot of red on his cheek expresses the intensity of Abtin's emotional response. The nub of the story (and of a lot of people's experience) is all in the one spread.

These thoughts just touch the surface of these three pictures. Imagine how much there would be to say about the complete books. The moral: never underestimate the complexity of children's illustration.



Champ Reza Delvand

Books mentioned:

- My Very Busy Day**, Shirley Hughes, Walker Books, 978-1529519310, £12.99 hbk
- The Girl and The Mermaid**, Hollie Hughes, illus Sarah Massini, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1526628107, £12.99 hbk
- Champ**, Payam Ebrahimi, illus Reza Dalvand, Greystone Kids, 978-1778401190, £12.99 hbk



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

Beyond the Secret Garden: How to Write Children's Books about Africa

In the latest in our long-running **Beyond the Secret Garden** series, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** take a trip to Africa in children's books.

In 2005, Binyavanga Wainaina produced a satirical manual on 'How to Write About Africa' for the magazine *Granta*. Many of the stereotypes of Africa and Africans that he describes came out of British (and other colonial powers') children's literature, and many can still be found today. The idea that writers should 'treat Africa as one country' or that taboo subjects include 'mention of school-going children who are not suffering from yaws or Ebola fever or female genital mutilation,' the notion that African animals, unlike African people, should 'be treated as well rounded, complex characters': these can all be found in empire-era books by authors such as H. Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, and Hugh Lofting. However, these ideas persisted beyond the British Empire in children's literature; Yulisa Amadu and Donnarae MacCann wrote about **Neo-Imperialism in Children's Literature about Africa** (2009), arguing that 'Africa as a 'dark place' has been combined with contemporary Western interests such as environmental protection, Western feminism, disease prevention, law and order, and ethnic-based wars. But the 'darkness' theme has remained' (p. 18).

This darkness comes in two ways in children's literature: books that reproduce colonial stereotypes (or 'classic' books that remain in print—such as Rider Haggard's **King Solomon's Mines**); and the one-way globalization of publishing, which has meant the spread of British books throughout the world, along with the ignorance or refusal of British publishing to acknowledge African writers for children. While most British readers have heard of Chinua Achebe, for example, whose books are widely published in the UK and globally, few are aware of Achebe's compatriot Cyprian Ekwensi. Concerned about the Britishness of African education, Ekwensi produced several children's stories and collections of folktales in the 1960s, many that connect directly with Nigerian history or the social problems of a newly-independent country and their affect on children. **The Drummer Boy** (1960), for example, discusses social welfare and disability in a modern, urban Nigeria. Some of Ekwensi's work was published by British publishers (or their African branches), such as Cambridge University Press or Longman, but more recent editions have only been published in Africa or by African presses. Perhaps even more unknown is the writing of Barbara Kimenye, born Barbara Holdsworth in Halifax, West Yorkshire. Kimenye, of dual English and West Indian heritage, became, according to her Guardian obituary, 'One of East Africa's most popular children's writers', but her stories about the schoolboy, Moses Kibaya, which were published between 1968 and 1987 are almost unheard of in Britain. While British literature from the 1960s still has currency around the world (Roald Dahl's work is one pertinent example, since the Oompa Loompas were originally designed as a 'pygmy' tribe), African literature from the same time period is largely unknown outside its area of origin.

However, recent African-born British writers have begun to attempt to counter stereotypes and change images of Africa in British children's literature. Nigerian-born British writer Atinuke's **Africa, Amazing Africa** (Walker 2019), with illustrations by Algerian-born Briton Mouni Feddag, demonstrates the variety of the continent's geography, climate, wildlife, urban technology, and cultures by showcasing every country separately. Atinuke has also published early chapter books for Walker such as her **Too Small Tola** books, set in a bustling, urban Lagos; the **Anna Hibiscus** series, set in a less urban environment. Her **L is for Love**, illustrated by Angela Brooksbank, shows a family selling their luscious lemons at the market in Lagos and her **No. 1**

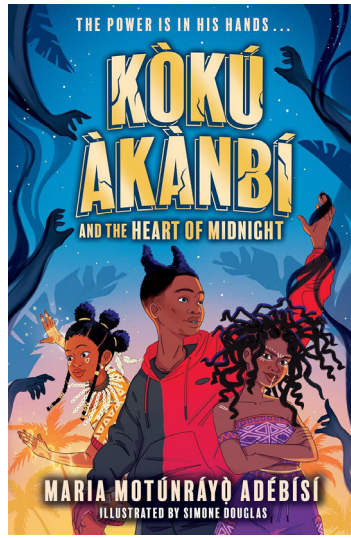
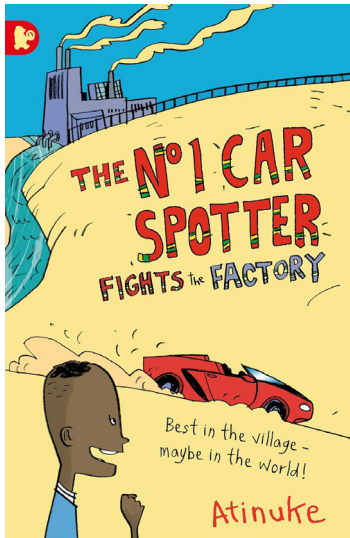
Car Spotter series about a boy who comes from a 'bush village'. By having her protagonists mirror the varied experiences found in her nonfiction about Africa, Atinuke rejects the notion that Africa has one single story or that authors must rely on stereotypes to be published by mainstream British publishers.

British-born Sabine Adeyinka spent several years at a boarding school in Nigeria and based some of her adventures in **Jummy at the River School** (Chicken House) on this experience. Adeyinka's books deal frankly with issues of class as well as with the effects of industry on the African climate and environment. *Jummy* is confounded by the lack of equity in the society surrounding her, but takes direct action to make positive changes, and encourages her friends to do so as well. Through *Jummy*, Adeyinka portrays an image of the African person who is not helpless and reliant on outside actors, as colonial literature tended to suggest.

The environment is often a key issue in literature for children about Africa. *Jummy* discovers a bakery polluting the river that her school is named for, and works to stop this destruction of her environment. Zimbabwe-born Ken Wilson-Max's picture book, **Eco Girl** (Otter-Barry 2022) focuses on the wisdom of an African grandmother who teaches her granddaughter about the importance of planting and looking after trees. Wilson-Max's story is not as confrontational as Adeyinka's, but it provides a gentle and informative environmental message; the notes in the back include reference to African activist Wangari Maathai who started the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, again reinforcing the notion that Africans do not need to rely on European or American aid to improve their environment.

A number of recently published books on aspects of African history avoid the long-established habit in British publishing of beginning narratives of African history with the arrival of Europeans. The five book Black History series published by Franklin Watts (2010) and written by Dan Lyndon, begins with a book entitled **African Empires** and features the Kingdom of Ta-Seti, Kumbi Saleh in ancient Ghana, The Empire of Mali, The Empire of Songhai, The Kingdom of Benin, and Great Zimbabwe. **Migration: Journeys Through Black British History** (2022), written by Millie Mensha and illustrated by Camilla Ru, includes sections on African migration during Tudor times as well as discussion of African people in the Roman Empire. Aspects of African history are included in **Hear Our Voices: A Powerful Retelling of the British Empire Through 20 True Stories** (2023) written by Radhika Natarajan and Chad Tayiana and illustrated by Alexander Mostov. The book includes discussion of





'Agents of Empire', which includes Edward Colston, Cecil Rhodes and David Livingstone about whom they write, 'He wanted to abolish slavery, but he also believed Christianity and British values gave Britain a responsibility to rule over others' (p11). There are full sections on Olaudah Equiano, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Field Marshal Muthoni and Kwame Nkrumah as well as Mohandas Gandhi whose political life began in South Africa.

Music and food remain popular themes for children's books relating to Africa. **Musical World: Modern World History as You've Never Heard it Before** (2023), written by Jeffrey Boakye, art by Ngadi Smart is the sequel to **Musical Truth: A Musical Journey through Modern Black Britain** (2021). Both books include Boakye's discussion of songs by African artists. **Joyful Joyful**, curated by Dapo Adeola (2022) includes *Nigerian Jollof* written and illustrated by Dapo Adeola, *Nan's Jollof Rice* written by Rosaline Tella, illustrated by Dapo Adeola, and *Plantain Moi Moi* written by Adejoké 'Joké' Bakare, illustrated by Ojima Abalaka.

A number of fantasy books informed by African tales have been published recently. **Yomi and the Fury of Ninki Nanka** (2023) written by Davina Tijani and illustrated by Adam Douglas-Bagley is a fantasy tale set in The Gambia. Yomi and her brother kayode set off to save the Dragon King Ninki Nanka, who has been kidnapped from the sky. **Kòkú Àkànbí and the Heart of Midnight** (2023) written by Maria Motúnrayò Adébí sí and illustrated by Simone Douglas is a fantasy tale set in Nigeria drawing on West African mythology.

Recently there have been moves to broaden the range of representations of African people in British picture books. Since its publication in 1994, Eileen Browne's **Handa's Surprise** has been a mainstay of Key Stage 1 classrooms and is often the one picturebook that teachers have used if and when they teach lessons relating to Africa. Handa's journey to take fruit to her friend Akeyo bears some resemblance to the European traditional tale of Little Red Riding Hood. However, whereas Little Red Riding's story has magical elements in the form of a talking wolf, the animals in Handa's surprise are not anthropomorphised. This may be part of the reason (along with the dearth of options) why **Handa's Surprise** has been used by teachers to teach about Africa, whereas **Little Red Riding Hood** is not used to teach anything about Europe. Also, while Little Red Riding Hood includes three generations of family, Handa's family are not depicted. Indeed, it is only in the final two spreads that Handa interacts with another human; for the rest of the story she is silent. Handa is mostly depicted moving through the landscape with only animals visible. Many of the animals and fruits included in the story will likely be viewed as exotic by many (but not all) young readers in the UK, where the book was published. It may well be that Handa too is read by some readers as an additional element of the exotic landscape. Some of Wainaiiana's critique holds for **Handa's Surprise**; she appears to not be a school-going child, and the animals are granted as much characterisation as the

human characters. The notes following the dedication state that, '[t]he children featured in this book are from the Luo tribe of south-west Kenya.' This is the only specificity offered in the book. Despite these criticisms, **Handa's Surprise** offers an engaging narrative with vibrant illustrations of an African child.

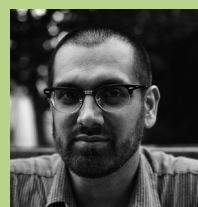
In **Our Story Starts in Africa** (2022), illustrated by Jeanetta Gonzales, writer Patrice Lawrence offers a fictional story that also works as a telling of African history that encompasses pre-colonial Africa, Queen Amanirenas, the Library of Alexandria, the scramble for Africa, the colonization of Africa and the Caribbean and the enslavement of African people by Europeans. Based in some part on Lawrence's own childhood, young Paloma is visiting her family in Trinidad but they are questioning her accent. Tante Janet tells her a story of how Paloma's family (and by extension the African diaspora) have a shared history that begins in Africa. Lawrence deftly balances themes of uplift and celebration with histories of oppression, demonstrating the possibility of providing such wider-ranging, complex narratives for young picture book readers. She achieves this through a dual narrative, where the story in Trinidad is not merely a device for the telling of African history. Rather, Paloma and her family are developed as characters with their own personalities. At particular moments the two stories connect. 'Our lands were chopped up, mixed up and squashed together', says Tante Janet, as Gonzales shows us her hand slicing fruit. A final spread offers some more historical context for Paloma's questions as well as suggested further reading, including Atinuke and K.N. Chimbiri. Lawrence and Gonzales have provided a model for how books about Africa can go beyond the tropes Wainaiiana identifies, to offer enduring stories that respect children's capacity for understanding.

Books mentioned:

- Too Small Tola**, Atinuke, illus Onyinye Iwu, Walker Books, series **Anna Hibiscus**, Atinuke, illus Lauren Tobia, Walker Books, series **L is for Love**, Atinuke, illus Angela Brooksbank, Walker Books, 978-1529501483, £12.99 hbk
- Africa, Amazing Africa**, Atinuke, illus Mouni Feddag, Walker Books, 978-1406376586, £14.99 hbk
- Jummy at the River School**, Sabine Adeyinka, Chicken House, 978-1913696047, £6.99 pbk
- Eco Girl**, Ken Wilson-Max, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1913074319, £12.99 hbk
- Migration: Journeys Through Black British History**, Millie Mensha, illus Camilla Ru
- Hear Our Voices: A Powerful Retelling of the British Empire Through 20 True Stories**, Radhika Natarajan & Chad Tayiana, illus Alexander Mostov, Wide Eyed Editions, 978-0711266933, £14.99 hbk
- Musical World: Modern World History as You've Never Heard it Before**, Jeffrey Boakye, illus Ngadi Smart, Faber & Faber, 978-0571377497, £8.99 pbk
- Joyful Joyful**, Dapo Adeola and Patrice Lawrence, Two Hoots, 978-1529071504, £20.00 hbk
- Yomi and the Fury of Ninki Nanka**, Davina Tijani, illus Adam Douglas-Bagley, Little Tiger, 978-1788956123, 36.99 pbk
- Kòkú Àkànbí and the Heart of Midnight**, Maria Motunrayo Adebisi, Orion Children's Books, 978-1510111431, £7.99 pbk
- Handa's Surprise**, Eileen Browne, Scholastic, 978-0744536348, £7.99 pbk
- Our Story Starts in Africa**, Patrice Lawrence, illus Jeanetta Gonzales, Magic Cat Publishing, 978-1913520588, £12.99 pbk



Karen Sands-O'Connor is the British Academy Global Professor for Children's Literature at **Newcastle University**. Her books include **Children's Publishing and Black Britain 1965-2015** (Palgrave Macmillan 2017).



Darren Chetty is a teacher, doctoral researcher and writer with research interests in education, philosophy, racism, children's literature and hip hop culture. He is a contributor to **The Good Immigrant**, edited by Nikesha Shukla and the author, with Jeffrey Boakye, of **What Is Masculinity? Why Does It Matter? And Other Big Questions**. He tweets at @rapclassroom.

Bookmaker In Chief: Waterstones Children's Laureate Joseph Coelho

Joseph Coelho took on the mantle of **Waterstones Children's Laureate** two years ago and talked to **Books for Keeps** then about his ambitions for the role. His last engagement as Laureate will be at the **Poetry By Heart Grand Finale** on 1 July, his successor takes over the following day. Joseph shares his reflections on the role and his achievements as Laureate in this new interview.

When you became Waterstones Children's Laureate, what were you most looking forward to doing in the role?

I had had the idea for the Poetry Prompts for quite a few years and was waiting for the time in my schedule to get the series of videos I envisioned scripted and recorded. Becoming Children's Laureate provided amazing support via **BookTrust** to realise this ambitious project of releasing a new video every week throughout my tenure. I have scripted and recorded eighty Poetry Prompt videos as Laureate that are freely available on the **BookTrust** website and over on my YouTube channel. It's been wonderful hearing from teachers about how helpful the prompts have been in giving young people the opportunity to become writers in a fun and non-threatening way. I'm so grateful to **BookTrust** for putting in the time to make the prompts possible and am so pleased that the laureateship provided the perfect vehicle from which to shout about poetry and its value in getting young people reading and writing.

Looking back, what have you enjoyed the most?

I have had a blast as Children's Laureate and have had so many wonderful experiences, from interviewing Her Majesty The Queen to representing the UK with The British Embassy in Bolivia at the La Paz International Book Fair, to appearing on Newsround, Blue Peter and BBC Breakfast – but what has been the most enjoyable for me has been meeting young readers and writers in libraries all over the country. It felt particularly special to finish the library marathon as the Children's Laureate and to visit wonderful libraries all over the UK. I recall meeting school children on the isle of Portland at Portland library where I was informed that it is bad luck to say the word 'rabbit' – I didn't tell them that Coelho means rabbit in Portuguese! I remember giving a talk on the Isle of Scilly at St Mary's Library



Joseph Coelho celebrates the end of his epic *Library Marathon*. Photos by Jonathon Vine

to a group of OAPs who had wonderful questions about children's literature and techniques for getting their grandchildren reading. The librarians at every library have made me feel so welcome and have gone above and beyond to use my visits as opportunities to sign up new patrons and to let their local community know about all their wonderful services.

What has surprised you most about your experiences as Children's Laureate?

I have definitely grown through the laureateship. I have found the strength and courage to do things I would not have done before, to set my own boundaries and to take risks – risks that before would have had me fretting and waking in the wee hours. Tasks that seemed impossible or tasks I would get to when I had 'made it' now feel much closer because of the realisation that the only time to do what we want to do is now. This realisation surprised me because I have spent years talking about the importance of artists 'choosing themselves' and not giving away their power. Yet over these last two years I have found areas within myself where I was still holding on – still expecting some monumental change that would make it possible for me to initiate a project or realise a dream. Funnily enough becoming Children's Laureate was in some ways a reality check. Whilst of course the role comes with profile rising opportunities and a certain amount of spotlight, for much of the time I have been doing what I (and so many authors and illustrators) have been doing for years: standing in train vestibules, turning up at Premier Inns in the hours of darkness, responding to last minute changes at events, writing emails in cafes and struggling to find time to write, and all that good stuff that bookmakers everywhere will recognise. Part of me felt like the laureateship would somehow change all of that but of course it doesn't, the hard slog that I was



Joseph Coelho showcasing all 213 library cards from across his epic 'Library Marathon'

doing as an unpublished poet remains and with that a freedom to stop waiting for things to miraculously change... they won't. Instead, choose to feel empowered to live the best version of yourself now. If there is anything I can pass on to other artists, it is this: the time is always now. There is no ideal time for that passion project, to travel to that place, to do that thing. Do it, whatever it is, now.

What have you found most challenging about the role?

If I'm honest the most challenging aspect was juggling my job as a writer with the demands of the role. As a mid-career writer, I have had many writing commitments and book promotion commitments that I have had to juggle with the role of laureate. Luckily, I have been able to find ways of using many of my book requests to create opportunities for the laureate role for instance when asked to promote my US titles in Texas I was able, thanks to my publishers, to be involved in several sessions with the US Ambassador for Literature Meg Medina, hosted by The Librarian of Congress. This was a brilliant event and a fantastic opportunity to connect with my counterpart in the USA. It underlined for me the need for the UK to have a role similar to the Librarian of Congress. We currently don't have a similarly weighted role representing libraries and I hope that my suggestion for a Libraries Laureate can fill that gap.

What has being Laureate revealed to you about children's books and reading today?

It has shown me that children's books and reading are just as essential as they've always been. It's been difficult seeing that free and easy access to books is still not a given with the closure of libraries and stats revealing that fewer than one in two children aged between 8 to 18 enjoy reading ([National Literacy Trust Survey 2022](#)) or that over one in five pupils receiving free school meals said that their World Book Day Book was the first book they ever owned (unpublished data from **NLT**). There is clearly still a huge amount of work to be done promoting books and encouraging children to read. But it is not an insurmountable challenge and there are wonderful things happening. I have been buoyed up by the incredible work being done by teachers and librarians creating displays of children's work, setting up reading lists and writing opportunities to invite children into the world of words, because of course if you get kids writing a side-effect is that you get them reading.

What would you highlight as your main achievements in the role?

I would have to go with the library marathon because it led not only to more people on the ground joining their local library nationally but also meant that I got the opportunity to comment on Baroness Sanderson's independent review of libraries and to share my experiences visiting libraries all over the UK, sharing my experience of seeing first-hand how vibrant and essential these spaces are and not just for books, but for the multitude of front-line services that libraries offer.

What do you want your Laureate legacy to be?

I hope that through the **Bookmaker Like You** arm of my tenure that more young people have a broader sense of who writers and illustrators (bookmakers) can be. I hope that this generation of young people will be able to look to me as the first male of colour in this role and those I have highlighted through **BMLY** and beyond, to feel that the publishing industry is one that needs and welcomes them and their stories. I hope more young people feel empowered to write because of the **Poetry Prompts** and I hope that the **Library Marathon** will be seen as one of the many efforts taken by librarians, community groups, literacy charities, writers and illustrators to change the sad state we have seen libraries existing in over these past years.

Are there reasons to be cheerful for example around libraries?

I had the pleasure of being asked to write a poem for the opening of the 1000th library as part of the **National Literacy Trust** and **Penguin RandomHouse Libraries for Primaries** project. I was



blown away by the fact that 1000 libraries that previously did not exist before now do, it is an incredible achievement and really underlines what the industry can make happen. Even against the odds.

What was the best advice you received before taking on the role?

I spoke to many former laureates before taking on the role and was very grateful for their insight and for them sharing with me their very different and unique experiences. I was reminded by Chris Riddell that the role is a marathon not a sprint; Cressida Cowell reminded me to have joy in the role; Malorie Blackman offered a toolkit of ways to navigate the highs and lows; Michael Rosen reminded me to set boundaries – and all of them told me to book in my holidays, which I have only managed to do these last six months! The start of my tenure crossed with the outgoing US Ambassador for Literature Jason Reynolds. We had a photoshoot together for the Observer and I asked if he had any advice. He said, 'Burn out', and I gotta say, that became my mantra. I didn't want to end the laureateship and collapse, but I certainly wanted to leave it all on the field and to ensure I did everything I could to make the most of the role and to try to inspire as many kids to write as I could, to try and highlight as many other illustrators and illustrators as I could and, of course, to join as many libraries as I could.

What advice would you give to your successor?

Do actually book your holidays in early, it's amazing how many requests are last minute and how quickly the diary fills up.

What do you think are the challenges facing whoever takes over?

Apart from the superstition of being the thirteenth Children's Laureate! *Mubabababa*, I think the challenges remain the traditional ones of the laureateship role, to highlight children's reading, the importance of libraries and need for diversity in children's literature.

What are you looking forward to doing as former Laureate?

I'm looking forward to getting back on track with my writing. I have managed to get a lot of writing done and have seen the publication of around ten books during my time as laureate, but my writing schedule took a hit. I'm looking forward to hitting some deadlines and writing some new things as well as getting some long overdue travelling done and steaming ahead with some special projects that I was unable to fit into my tenure.

[Find out more about the Waterstones Children's Laureate.](#)

AI – here for longer than we think

Rose Roberto argues that AI has been a feature of YA fiction for some time and looks at some notable examples.

Artificial Intelligence or AI seems to have emerged as the big topic in 2023. Hollywood writers have gone on strike over it, and in secondary schools and universities throughout the UK, teachers, lecturers and professors have widely discussed how to teach students (who are undoubtedly using ChatGBT for their papers and projects) and assess them fairly and ethically. Is this sudden surge in attention and anxiety justified, given how ubiquitous AI has been already? Think of our email spam filters, our music playlist recommendations, our fitness trackers, our bank's online chatboxes, and in our home smart security cameras. In the decades since online purchases have been possible, we have seamlessly interacted with AI in the form of product recommendations, autofill, and predictive words and keystrokes. Is this newfound manifestation of social anxiety actually about something else?

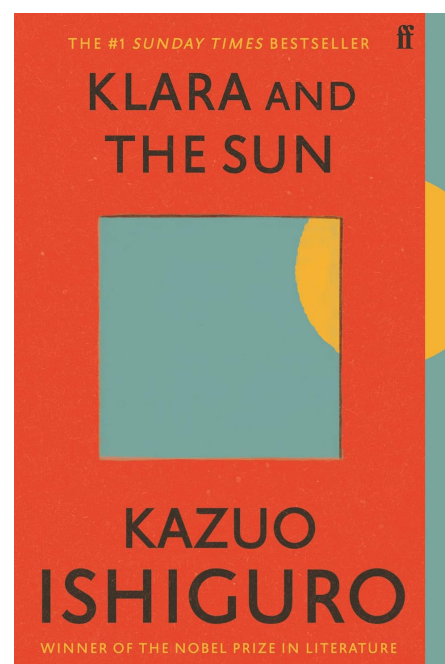
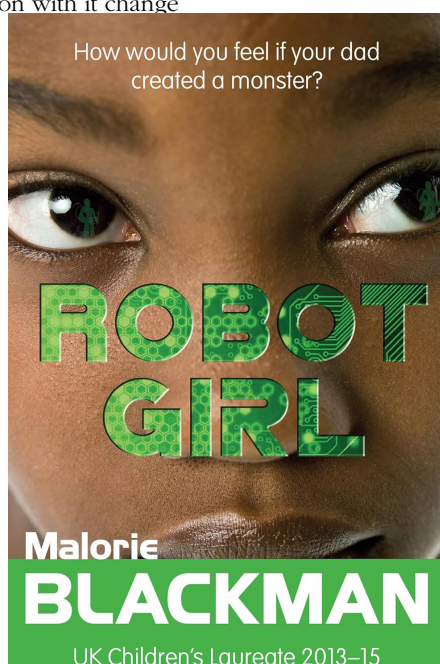
In 2018, author Judith Shulevitz asked, 'Alexa, should we trust you?' Her piece in a November issue of *The Atlantic* that year described human-machines dialogues and how the experience of an AI conversing with the same prosody (intonation, vocabulary, rhythm) that native-language human speakers have in spontaneous exchanges with Alexa or Siri grants them a special social presence in our lives. By communicating with devices and not only through them, Shulevitz concludes the 'personalities' of these sentient programmes have evolved to be more than just high-tech genies or ideal servants in a Victorian manor. They now matter to us. Furthermore, the way we speak to AI reveals some low-brow habits of humans. These human-machine interactions have become a vehicle for us to express our self-centred natures and banal desires. AI allows us to gain immediate gratification, without actually feeling shame for our baser, more id-like instincts.

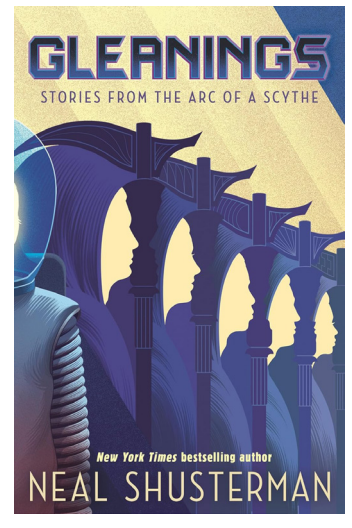
Three authors, Malorie Blackman, Neal Shusterman and Kazuo Ishiguro have created futuristic worlds populated by AI which also extend other 21st-century medical, telecommunication, and high-speed transportation technologies. **Robot Girl** (2015), **Scythe** (2016), **Thunderhead** (2018), **The Toll** (2019), **Klara and the Sun** (2021) and **Gleanings** (2022) each discuss existential questions: Should humans play God? What do people owe sentient beings that we create? How does technology and interaction with it change society and the human condition? While each novel takes a contemporary and creative twist, arguably these themes can be traced back to Mary Shelley's **Frankenstein**, written in 1812. Shelley explored ethical and existential questions about the role of science and what if any moral upper limits should be put upon it.

Neither **Robot Girl** and **Klara and the Sun** by Malorie Blackman and Kazuo Ishiguro respectively, are classified as YA novels. **Robot Girl** was originally published in 1997 as a short story, 'Artificial Intelligence' a final chapter in the anthology, **Sensational Cyber Stories**, edited by Tony Bradman. Now re-issued as a stand-alone, dyslexia friendly reader, with illustrations by Matthew Griffin, it follows the life of Claire, the daughter of an inventing genius. Claire's story is mainly revealed to the audience through a series of email exchanges with her friend Maisie. At the end of the short novel, a very Victor Frankenstein plot twist is revealed. Likewise, Klara is the main protagonist and narrator in **Klara and the Sun**.

Also told from Klara's point of view as an artificial friend or AF, readers must piece together a plot based on conversations with humans and Klara's limited understanding of the world around her. Although Ishiguro does not have a reputation as a YA novelist and has previously written other science fiction works set in a dystopian world, through the character Klara, readers feel a personal sense of empathy and hope, that overcomes the sadness of the novel. This hope often characterises the YA genre. Claire, Maisie, or Klara could qualify as young adults, if Earth years were used to tally their ages. While time does pass in all these novels, Claire and Klara do not seem physically to age during the course of their stories, although they are both transformed. Notably, several characters in both these books have an obsessive personality, driving them to understand or conquer the world similar to Victor Frankenstein from Shelley's novel, who buries himself in his experiments to deal with grief. Several of the parental characters in **Robot Girl** and **Klara and the Sun** end up questioning the time, effort and faith they had placed in technology. A disillusioned Dr Frankenstein laments, '...but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room'

In contrast to these two stand-alone novels, there are two AI protagonists, Thunderhead and Cirrus, in the four books comprising the **Arc of the Scythe** series by Neal Shusterman: **Scythe**, **Thunderhead**, **The Toll** and **Gleanings**. Readers are gradually introduced to the AI through other characters, instead of meeting them upfront. We are told that in this universe, set more than 300 years from our own time, humanity's fate has been improved. The Thunderhead, which evolved from the Cloud, made advances in medicine, engineering, and education. It solved all the major problems in our own time, such as Climate Change, global war, economic inequality, disease and even death, and it now leads the entire Earth-bound population through benevolent utopian governance. The AI is a servant to humans, so it chooses not to hold the power over human life and death, or to curtail the free will of humanity.





Power, in the **Scythe** universe, is wielded by the Scythe, an order of elite men and women whose job is to keep Earth's population under control, through 'gleaning' or permanent death. The AI is not allowed to revive a person gleaned by a scythe. Paradoxically, the Scythe not only chooses who will die, they have an ethical obligation to make all their selections in an 'unbiased manner' while also fulfilling a required yearly-kill-quota, set at regular Scythe conclaves (meetings) through the year. Furthermore, an individual Scythe must grant immunity from gleaning to family members of the deceased for 12 months following that Scythe's gleaning action. Scythe introduces readers to two 16-year-olds, Rowan Damisch and Citra Terranova, who at the beginning of the series are apprentices competing with each other to join the next generation of Scythe in what used to be St Louis, Missouri. Through these two characters, we are situated into this futuristic world, which like the ancient epic narratives, battles between 'good' and 'evil' play out, only now incorporating sophisticated technology.

In **Thunderhead**, readers properly meet the AI, itself, and see how it works through its world-wide network of Nimbus Agents (futuristic civil service). We see Thunderhead act as a key player working behind-the-scenes to shape human events and witness it interacting directly with everyone via their nanites, micro-robots medically inserted into the blood of all people to fight disease, heal pain, mend broken bones, and reanimate the accident victims. We eavesdrop on daily conversations between the AI and anyone who is not a Scythe. However, since the AI cannot interfere with Scythe business, the AI goes silent in the presence of a Scythe, foreshadowing a gleaning or Scythe action. A new character introduced in this book is Agent Greyson Tolliver, who leaves Nimbus and begins to operate in a space between Scythe and Thunderhead spheres. The Thunderhead tells Tolliver he is important, and when a cataclysmic event happens, Tolliver becomes the only person on Earth with whom the Thunderhead can communicate.

In **The Toll**, a pacifist-religious order known as the Tonists, become the centre of Scythe intrigue. In this final instalment, there is an interesting mix of characters thrown together from Scythe, Nimbus and Tonist factions, that need to work together to restore the world for future generations. The Thunderhead inhabits the body of a gender fluid person for the first time in its existence to gain an understanding of the physical world, thereby enabling Cirrus, a better and less limited version of itself, to be created. In **Gleanings**, a collection of stories that take place prior to, during, and after the main trilogy, Scythe Marie Curie states, 'Scythe and Thunderhead are two sides of the same coin. If one is threatened, so is the other.' We also learn Cirrus has been replicated into the Cirri and continues to look after humans.

While the original Dr Frankenstein becomes horrified with his work, and then labours to destroy it, the so-called monster has a kind heart, a curious mind, and a compassionate soul. A common thread

running through all these artificial intelligence depictions is that AI is a metaphor for children. The default setting for an AI in these books shows that for the most part, AIs are always initially kinder, humbler, more curious and more empathetic than human adults. They embody an inherent wisdom and creative wonder before they are corrupted by other adults.

In the fiction from Shelley to Blackman, to Shusterman, to Ishiguro, the best traits of their AI seem to be self-taught—not learned from the 'parent' figures. In Frankenstein, the 'creature' tries to join the family of a blind man, who is kind to him because the man can't see his physical deformities. However, the blind man's family lashes out at the creature in ignorance and fear—which begets violence. In these novels, when things go badly with AI, it is due to human error, failure of judgement, and prejudice. Maybe in the real world, we should be asking if we fear AI, precisely because we humans created it. While AI is a repository of what is the best and the most forward thinking in us as a species, it can highlight our regressive nature, and our worst selves, too.

Books mentioned:

- Frankenstein**, Mary Shelley, Penguin Classics, 978-0141198965, £7.99 pbk
- Robot Girl**, Malorie Blackman, Barrington Stoke, 978-1781124598, £7.99 pbk
- Scythe**, Neal Shusterman, Walker Books, 978-1406379242, £8.99 pbk
- Thunderhead**, Neal Shusterman, Walker Books, 978-1406379532, £8.99 pbk
- The Toll**, Neal Shusterman, Walker Books, 978-1406385670, £8.99 pbk
- Gleanings**, Neal Shusterman, Walker Books, 978-1529509540, £8.99 pbk
- Klara and the Sun**, Kazuo Ishiguro, Faber & Faber, 978-0571364909, £8.99 pbk

Shulevitz, Judith (2018) ['Alexa, Should We Trust You?'](#) *The Atlantic*, (November)

Dr Rose Roberto, MLIS, FHEA is Teaching Resources Librarian and Part-time Lecturer in History at Bishop Grosseteste University. Recent publications include Roberto, R. and Alexiou, A. Eds. [Women in Print: Design and Identities, Volume 1](#) Oxford: Peter Lang Ltd 2022.

Roberto, R. 'Working Women: Female Contributors to Chambers's Encyclopaedia' IN Archer-Parré, C., Hinks, J., and Moog, C. Eds. [Women in Print: Production, Distribution and Consumption, Volume 2](#). Oxford: Peter Lang Ltd 2022.

The Wrong Shoes:

an interview with Tom Percival

Tom Percival is well known for his **Big Bright Feelings** picture books, which gently but effectively expand children's understanding of the world and counter their anxieties. He's also responsible for the sparky **Little Legends** series, which cleverly creates new adventures for favourite fairy-tale characters. His new novel is quite different. Heartfelt, authentic, **The Wrong Shoes** tells the story of Will, a young boy whose family are finding it virtually impossible to make ends meet. Will's opening line is, 'This is no fairy tale'. It's just his life, he emphasises, nothing is guaranteed, and there's definitely no certainty of a happy ending.

Tom was inspired to write the book after reading a white paper from the **Joseph Rowntree Foundation**, *We Can Solve Poverty*, and was struck by the way it communicated so clearly what needs to happen to help children like Will. At first, he planned a short story anthology, with contributions from other authors, but for various reasons that proved impossible, then his editor Lucy Pearson suggested he work his story idea up into a full-length novel.

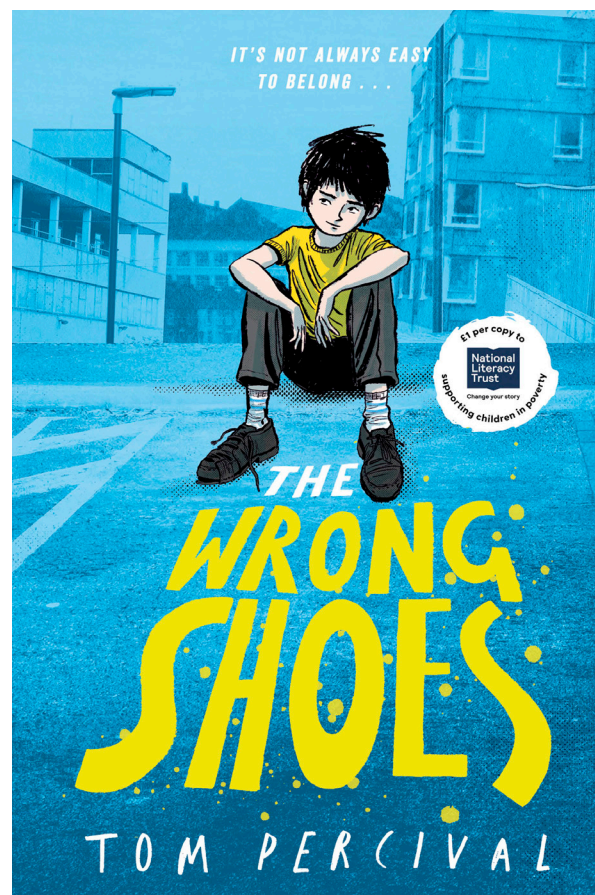
The story is particularly important to him; his own childhood was not unlike Will's. He's talked about this in interviews about his book **The Invisible**, but doesn't want to add much now, as it upsets his mother. He will say that growing up without much money had a big impact on him. 'It does change the way you look at the world. For example, there's a certain level of bitterness that I felt as a kid – "My friends can do this, and I can't". I can empathise with Will's position, but the book isn't autobiographical.' Will's sense of bitterness and anger at the situation he's in is one of the driving forces in the story and one that gives it such an authentic feel.

Will's best friend is Cameron, a boy whose parents are very wealthy. The two fall out when Cameron offers Will a pair of his old trainers. It's meant kindly but Will is furious. 'Cameron comes from my childhood' says Tom. 'It's to do with complicated feelings of resentment. You don't want to be a charity case. Will isn't cross with Cam for offering him the shoes, it's the dance around it that he objects to. Cameron doesn't understand that. That's a truth I wanted to convey. Unless you've gone through that life, you can't really experience it; you can imagine it, but you don't really know what it's like.'

Tom's path to where he is today was through college, art and music, but today's young people have things much harder, he feels. 'There's a real lack of provision now. Yes, there are music lessons at school but the only way to do music or art properly is if parents can pay for lessons, for extra classes. Even grammar schools test things that aren't taught at school, so you have to be able to pay for tuition to stand a chance of getting in. It can lead to a feeling in children and young people that they have been cast aside and if you're made to feel invalid, that you can't contribute, it makes you feel rejected, and you'll reject what's around you.'

The Wrong Shoes is published in partnership with the **National Literacy Trust** with funds raised going to support their work in areas of socio-economic deprivation. Tom is working with them delivering events too and praises the **NLT** for their proactiveness, highlighting the Libraries in Primaries campaign, libraries something else that helped him as a child.

Things get even bleaker for Will when he falls out with Cameron but, though there is no fairy tale ending, he finds a way to take control of his life and by the end, there is hope. Encounters with a huge owl which appears at moments when Will is particularly exposed and alone provide a visual image of this hope. The idea for the owl grew out of something in Tom's own youth. 'As a teenager growing up in Bishops Castle, I would walk home alone at night, and I really loved it. There were no cars, you could walk down the middle of the street – I felt like the night was mine – and sometimes I'd come across a large dog, wandering on its own. It would watch me, in fact I felt like it was watching over me. I saw it maybe seven times – we had this friendship going on and I wondered sometimes if the dog was real. I wanted Will to have that experience too.' He adds, 'The owl stands for anything you want it to stand for, but its essence is hope.'



The owl soars across the pages in Tom's black and white illustrations, another memorable aspect of the book. 'The book has made me fall in love again with drawing' he says. 'I knew I wanted the images to feel loose, raw, quick and immediate so I didn't do any roughs, I just went straight into it. I wanted a comic book feel to the illustrations, to make it as accessible as possible and I love the immediacy and the looseness of them.'

In other interviews, Tom has said that he wants everyone to see themselves in the books he writes. What does he want for **The Wrong Shoes**? 'Realistically I wanted it to be a good story, a good journey, for people to feel transported. I want them to feel Will is real, that they've met him and understand him a bit. I want people like Will to feel seen, for people to make an effort to understand them even if they've misjudged them, and I want the Wills to feel that they're right to be angry, that things aren't fair and shouldn't be like that.'

And finally, how hopeful is he that things will change? 'I'm a pessimistic optimist' he says, 'I feel very bleak about the world, that's why I write the books I write. I can see the problems with the world, but yes, I believe that things can change.'

The Wrong Shoes is published by Simon & Schuster, 978-1398527126, £12.99 hbk.

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

I wish I'd written...



Louise Forshaw's new book, **Bad United**, is out now, published by Little Tiger, 978-1788956666, £6.99 pbk.

Louise Forshaw on a book that caught her imagination as a child and that still inspires her.

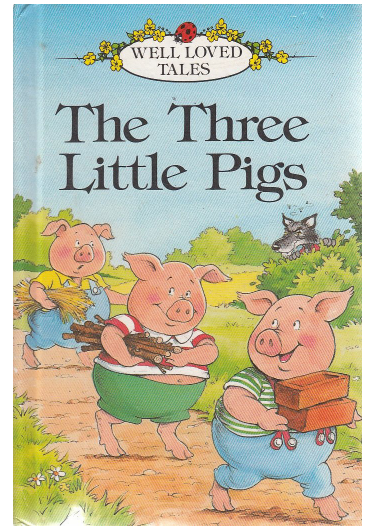
This is a tough question, since there are so many brilliant books! If I have to choose just one, it would be a book that I associate with my childhood: **The Three Little Pigs** retold by Vera Southgate and illustrated by Steve Smallman.

I owned very few books growing up and this was one of them. Part of the **Ladybird Well Loved Tales** series, this is a classic retelling of the original story with some fun differences.

I love how resourceful the third little pig is. He works hard to build his house out of bricks, knowing that it will take him much longer to do so, but he doesn't give up. When the wolf is unable to blow down the brick house, he resorts to all manner of tricks instead. Anything to ensure the third little pig leaves the safety of his home, so that he can eat him. What follows is the wolf being outsmarted at every turn by a very clever pig.

This book also inspired the illustrator in me as I pored over Steve's art. The soft watercolours mixed with rough pencil lines results in some truly wonderful illustrations. I'd spend hours taking in all the details. Even adding my own doodles and sketches on every page.

The message of this book is that dedication, patience and hard work pay off. Something that I still believe in.



The Three Little Pigs by Vera Southgate and illustrated by Steve Smallman is published by Ladybird Books, 978-0721409955.

BfK

reviews

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant

Terrible Horses

★★★★★

Raymond Antrabus, ill. Ken Wilson-Max, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 5295 0278 7, £12.99 hbk

Like most siblings, the boy narrator of this story and his elder sister's relationship has its ups and downs, often about sharing things. From little brother's point of view, big sister is pretty cool but it's often she who causes the two to fall out and physical fights then result.

In order to release the tension inside himself, the boy retreats to his bedroom and there writes tales featuring terrible horses, with himself as a lonely pony. But when the boy takes things from his sister without first asking her permission; inevitably their aggression escalates. Again, the boy goes to his room and takes comfort in creating another terrible horse story wherein he is a pony unable to compete, speak or sleep and then exhausted at all that's happened, he does fall fast asleep. When he wakes up his terrible horse book has gone missing. We then see that his sister has the book and one hopes, this will lead to a better

understanding of her young sibling and his powerful feelings of isolation.

Ken Wilson-Max's powerful mixed media, somewhat whimsical scenes, work beautifully in tandem with the author's carefully chosen, poetic words, the former showing that the boy uses hearing aids – an astute case of showing not telling. Altogether a demonstration of how storytelling can result in better understanding between people. **JB**

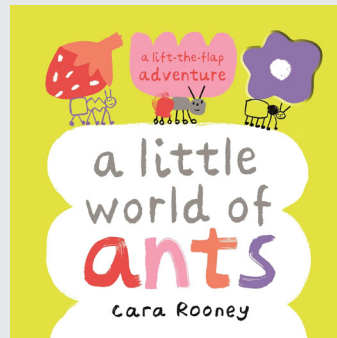
A Little World of Ants

★★★★★

Cara Rooney, Two Hoots, 28pp, 978 1 0350 1112 4, £12.99 hbk

'Where will you explore?' the reader is asked at the end, and this book is sure to empower the child whose world encompasses what they see at their feet or at their fingertips.

This book is a joy from start to finish. Busy fingers will delight in exploring the holes that lead from one (sturdy) page to the next, and lifting flaps to discover ants climbing, cooperating, hiding and building. The text clearly tells us what ants get up to and explanations are simple and informative: on a page where the ants



are raiding a human picnic we are told "...they are super strong. They can carry things much heavier than themselves" as a team of ants make off with a banana skin.

The way in which ants are depicted is interesting: human faces with antennae give the reader an immediate connection, while the scale of the animals and their surroundings keeps this grounded in the lives of real animals. The colours are mostly bright reds, pinks and purples with birds and spiders to watch out for, and a challenge

at the end to encourage the young reader and their adult guide (and this reviewer too!) to get out and explore with an open mind and a keen eye. **NS**

Meet the Dinosaurs

★★★★★

Caryl Hart, ill. Bethan Woollvin, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 9781526639837, £7.99 pbk

Meet the Dinosaurs is a bright, fluorescent, fun-packed jeep safari journey through the different eras of the dinosaurs, as our narrator and her dog zoom through mud packed swamps & leafy jungles. We are introduced to a huge array of creatures including Brontosaurus & Stegosaurus in the Jurassic Era, then it's on to the Cretaceous, (to avoid being eaten by an Allosaurus!) where there are even more dinosaurs to learn about. A quick zoom past the T-Rex while the Pterodactyls fly overhead, then it's time to head back home to think about all the amazing facts we've learned along the way.

This colourful, fact-filled book is the perfect exploration of the pre-historic world of the dinosaurs, which will be loved by both existing young fans

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**.

Gwyneth Bailey is a freelance education and 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**.

Clive Barnes, formerly Principal Children's Librarian, Southampton City is a freelance researcher and writer.

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.

Rebecca Bate is a secondary school librarian

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

Rebecca Butler writes and lectures on children's literature.

Jane Churchill is a children's book consultant.

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

Ferelith Hordon is a former children's librarian and editor of **Books for Keeps**
Anne Horemans is a secondary school librarian.

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

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

Matthew Martin is a primary school teacher.

Sue McGonigle is a Lecturer in Primary Education and Co-Creator of www.lovelybooks.co.uk

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

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Nick Swarbrick is Affiliate, School of Education, **Oxford Brookes University**
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Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant continued

and those new to these creatures alike. Hart's rhyming tale is creatively accompanied by the glorious colours of Woolvin's illustrations, and the back pages give a wonderful easy-to-understand history of life stretching back 2,500 million years ago to the present day.

There are 3 other titles in this series to look out for, featuring the planets, the oceans and weather. A definite must for all school and home library shelves. **AH**

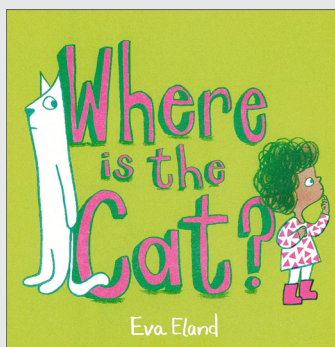
Where is the Cat?

★★★★

Eva Eland, Andersen Press, 32pp, 9781839131837, £12.99 hbk

Suzy's auntie and her sleek white cat live a life of quiet contentment – delicious meals, peaceful silence, basking in the sun's warmth and unrestricted freedom. That is until Auntie's little niece, Suzy comes to call. A whirlwind of boundless energy, Suzy adores Cat and wants to play with and cuddle him all the time. This clashes hilariously with the cat's introverted nature, sparking a playful game of hide-and-seek throughout Auntie's house.

Drawing on her experiences, Eland has crafted a charming, fun story about a demanding, imaginative toddler and a very private cat. Her signature Pantone palette shines here with an extra-bright pink, making



both the illustrations and setting pop to life. The white cat set against the negative space makes the whole hide-and-seek game work well for the young reader who will take joy in spotting the cat in increasingly comical hiding spaces.

This playful picturebook is Eland's most interactive yet. It is brimming with humour and invites shared reading experiences. Adults and children will delight in searching for the elusive cat together. The heartwarming conclusion, where the cat finally succumbs to Suzy's affection, is beautifully complemented by the whimsical endpapers showcasing the cat's various hiding spots. A guaranteed source of giggles for readers young and old. **MT**

The Boy Who Loves to Lick the Wind

★★★★

Fiona Carswell, ill. Yu Rong, Otter-Barry Books, 32pp, 978 1 915659 15 6, £12.99, hbk

A little boy watches the child next door and wonders why he is poking his tongue out. [He is] 'licking the wind' says his mother and invites the little boy to join them on a trip to the seaside where all the best winds are.

The boy next door flaps and rocks and doesn't talk. We watch as his mother helps him navigate the world – coping with excess noise by wearing ear protectors, hating the grains of sand in his sandwiches and having to leave the beach, his favourite place, at the end of the day. Despite their differences his young neighbour manages to make a connection with him, they throw stones and splash in the sea together and share the pleasure of licking the wind.

Back at school the little boy tells the story of his day at the beach and soon the whole class want to lick the wind too.

A simple, beautifully illustrated day in the life story which may help young children understand peers or family members with autism, the difficulties they face and their unique way of seeing and appreciating the world. **SMC**

5 – 8 Infant/Junior

Ed's Choice

Slug Life

★★★★★

Moesha Kellaway, Rocket Bird Books, 32pp, 9781915395092, £12.99, hbk

Stevie, aka the World's grumpiest slug is sent to self-esteem classes to find out why he should be proud to be a slug. In a first-person narrative we follow his experiences as he learns amazing facts about slugs. Stevie learns about the incredible range of slugs in the world including the spectacular blue dragon and the mysterious ghost slug. He discovers the important role slugs have in the food chain as decomposers and mind-blowing slug facts such as the number of teeth they have (27,000 in case you were wondering!) He finds out about their superhero powers being able to walk on ceilings with their powerful foot. And we learn that slime is an amazing liquid crystal which helps slugs move around, navigate and find a mate. Stevie is convinced by the end of his classes



that slugs really are superheroes and decides to write a book about them for small humans...

The graphic layout with comic strip storytelling, amusing illustrations, captions and speech bubbles is great fun.

This is a highly entertaining celebration of slugs challenging the generally accepted view that slugs are revolting and damaging creatures and showing they are in fact – SUPER! **SMC**

Help! We Need a Story

★★★★★

James Harris, illus. Mariajo Ilustrajo, Little Tiger, 32pp, 9781801045780, £12.99 hbk

Harris, along with recent winner of the **Klaus Flugge Prize** Winner for best newcomer to picture book, Ilustrajo, collaborate in this celebration of storytelling and the boundless power of imagination. With effervescent rhyming text and vibrant illustrations, this is a playful call to arms against boredom, illustrating how the creative arts can inspire and delight.

Our tale commences in the jungle with Artie the macaque, equipped with pad and crayons, sketching a nearby cockatoo. His artistic endeavour is interrupted by his fellow animal friends who slump and mope in boredom, leaving them feeling glum and dreary. Inspired by their lack of imagination, Artie conjures something magical – a storybook! Within its pages, he places his companions on fantastical adventures with dragons, robot sharks, and zombie hens, leading them into space until they enjoy pink ice cream on the beach. Inspired and empowered by the story, the animals are prompted to craft their own tales and begin to see the world around them through a different lens.

reviews

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

Harris' rhyming couplets and use of onomatopoeic phrases make this a pleasure to read aloud, with the type and position of the words mirroring Artie's infectious enthusiasm. The pace and rhythm of the text complement the mood of Artie's world – it is slow and gentle when the animals bemoan their boredom and then lively and fizzy with pace when Artie shares his story. Illustrajo's illustrations delightfully transition between jungle life and Artie's narrative, seamlessly merging reality with imagination. As the animals immerse themselves in Artie's story, they physically enter the imaginary world, emphasising that sense of being lost in their creative imaginations.

With its 'story-within-a-story' concept, the picture book invites readers to recognise the power of storytelling and creation. Artie's tale not only validates his animal friends but also empowers them to reimagine the world. Encouraging creativity and storytelling, this timely and powerful narrative resonates with readers of all ages. **MT**



The Golden Hare

★★★★★

Paddy Donnelly, O'Brien Press, 32pp, 978-1788494939, £13.99 hbk
Combining the warmth of family love, the thrill of an adventure in wild open spaces, the beauty and magnificence of the natural world, and the magic of a mythical creature, **The Golden Hare** is a very special picture book. Little Meara is disconsolate, she's never seen a dinosaur, a shark or a giraffe, the implication being perhaps that she never will. To cheer her up, her grandad tells her about the magical Golden Hare, sharing stories passed down from his own grandad. Together, the two head out to look for the hare, following notes in Grandad's old journal, and ready to camp. They find all sorts of beautiful things – a goldfinch, butterflies, dandelions, so much more than a weed says Grandad – treasures are everywhere. As a final gift, Grandad gives Meara her own journal in which to record their discoveries, the first of many. Notes at the end tell us more about

the wildlife the two have seen, and also more about the real Golden Hare, sometimes spotted on Rathlin Island off the Antrim coast, where Paddy Donnelly grew up. Meara and her grandad first appeared in Donnelly's earlier book, **The Vanishing Lake**, and like that story, this perfectly evokes the beauty and richness of the landscape, double page spreads flooded with the colours of its fields, seas and skies. Just as vivid is the sense of the relationship between child and grandparent, while the structure of the story, taking readers on the same journey of discovery, gives it real momentum. One final treat: there's a magical Golden Hare hidden on each spread, with a challenge to young readers to spot them all. **LS**

Super Swifts: The Small Bird with Amazing Powers

★★★★★

Justin Anderson, ill. Clover Robin, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 5295 0099 8, £12.99 hbk

Given the **RSPB's** highly successful annual **Big Garden Birdwatch** there is a lot of interest in birds generally, and I'm sure this informative picture book will be well received.

Not only does this book tell the story of how these amazing birds migrate each year but it goes into detail about the unique characteristics of swifts. This publication is well set out with facts and figures given in each spread and in a different font to the main text. I learned so much from every page: 'Swifts ... can cover as much as 500 miles in a day' (p.11) and 'Swifts do not land, even to sleep' (p.12). All our senses are engaged in this beautiful book: 'Kreeeeech! They cry, as they shoot low overhead, screaming like fireworks' (p.18).

I found the description of how swifts reproduce with their life partners, and how the couple cares for their young most enlightening. There are text boxes explaining the swift louse flies and the author includes information on hobbies (small falcons). All in all, there is plenty to learn in this attractive picture book.

Congratulations to the illustrator too. The use of colour and the double page spreads of the swifts flying over the Sahara Desert are breathtaking. Both the Note from the Author and the Index are very useful to readers and there are pointers to further resources for the enthusiast.

This title would be a welcome addition to the school, home and public library, and I am sure it would become a favourite book. To read a picture book overflowing with information is indeed very valuable. An adult reading this book with a youngster could help explain and talk about the facts and really make this title come alive. Well done to all the team involved in this publication! **JS**

The Girl and the Mermaid

★★★★★

Hollie Hughes, ill. Sarah Cassini, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 32pp, 978 1 5266 2810 7, £12.99 hbk

Alina and her granny live in a lighthouse and every evening as Granny sips her tea, she would share magical tales of mermaids with the little girl. Now though, these stories have faded away and become almost completely erased from her grandmother's memory. Devastated at the pain this causes her gran, Alina yearns to bring back the lost stories. However, one day as she gazes out to sea, what should she see but a mermaid diving from nearby rocks. 'Swim with me ... to where your granny's stories are, and many more besides' the mermaid sings to the child. Convinced at last that Granny's tales were true, Alina plunges into the waves and follows the mermaid. Beneath the waters she sees a wondrous world with coral reefs, shoals of shining fish and even long forgotten sunken treasure. The mermaid takes her to meet other merfolk and Alina is given a very special treasure to take home.

Back at the lighthouse once more, Alina realises the vital task of keeping her Gran's stories alive and ensuring they fly far and wide has now passed to her. Now she is Alina the Lightkeeper, she who will henceforward keep Granny's stories burning bright.

Touching and uplifting, this wondrous tale with its lyrical rhyming text and gorgeous watercolour illustrations is sheer delight, especially the portrayal of the warm intergenerational relationship between Alina and her grandmother. Share at home and in the classroom. **JB**

The Happy Prince

★★★

Oscar Wilde, adapted and illustrated by Harry Woodgate, Andersen Press, 80pp, £14.99 hbk

The stories Oscar Wilde wrote for children are, like those of Hans Christian Andersen, literary fairytales and have become part of the canon of folk and fairytales. *The Selfish Giant* is one, as is *The Happy Prince*. First published in 1888 Wilde's stories reflect their time in their sentiments, language and references. Here Harry Woodgate adapts *The Happy Prince* for a modern readership. He is not retelling it; this is very clearly an adaptation. Woodgate retains almost all of Wilde's text, and Wilde was a master of prose. The result is that the story keeps its sense of a fable as well as its strong moral message. Then, without disturbing the original text, Woodgate has woven in skilful adaptations – Swallow becomes a little boy who is travelling back to what is clearly an African homeland (as in Wilde's story). It is not quite clear whether he is a refugee or immigrant but, perhaps, this is not the point. The behaviour of the Counsellors does not change nor does the social background. However, Woodgate freely adapts the ending of

the story, discarding the Prince's lead heart, allowing Swallow, the boy, to survive and bringing in the children to create a garden to which, referencing Wilde, he gives the name Paradise where a fruit tree is planted. Perhaps Woodgate is also drawing on ending of *The Selfish Giant* here. The text is then accompanied throughout by Woodgate's illustrations. These are essentially line drawings presented not in hard black and white but in a soft mauve – the text is also in this colour. This emphasises the parable like nature of the story. Woodgate's style, both as an artist and as a writer, is eminently child friendly, the text clearly presented in a good font against a crisp white ground. While one might have reservations about adapting classic texts, here Woodgate has respected the original, drawing on themes that are as relevant today to bring new life to this story. **FH**

A Midsummer Night's Drama

★★★★★

Louie Stowell, ill. Isobel Lundie, Little Tiger, 32pp, 978 1 8389 1534 6, £12.99 hbk

There's a drama unlike anything you've seen before and it's being played out in a woodland theatre called The Glade that is owned by animal friends, who also have key roles. So, let's meet the actors. There's star of the show Bill Bear who loves staging plays and his pals, Sir Bun Bun, Foxy and Lady Bushytail. These productions attract large audiences from all over the kingdom. There's great excitement as Bill and his pals are appearing in a brand new play. Its entire cast comprises a fairy queen, a fairy king, a cheeky sprite Puck, and Bottom. The duties of stage manager, props manager, set designer, understudy, and lighting technician are all done by various insects.

The first performance of their play is a terrific success, but that night Bill Bear's brain is bursting with ideas and suffering from brain overload, he just cannot sleep. Instead he begins working on a new play. Then in buzzes Queen Bee who says, 'I COMMAND you to zzzzzzzsleep!' and buzzes out again leaving the acting troupe to proffer sleeping advice. Can any of them come up with a plan that will finally send him off to slumberland?

Cleverly unfolding in three acts with word usage hinting at the story's Shakespearean background and origins, Louie Stowell's text together with suitably dramatic illustrations by Isobel Lundie is sure to be a winner; the first so we believe in a splendidly creative series of **Shakespearean Tales**. Whether shared at home or in the classroom, take time to peruse the book's final spread, which presents some information about William Shakespeare and his work. Make sure you look closely at the front endpapers too.

I look forward to the next **Shakespearean Tales** production. **JB**

Thank You

★★★★

Jarvis, Walker Books, 32pp, 9781529503920, £12.99 hbk

'Thank you' says the little boy as he travels through the pages of this enjoyable picture book. Jarvis here creates a very real child who, in the way of children, has no boundaries. He thanks everything, individually from the sun and moon to colours even an elephant (though he has forgotten why). In some ways this may seem inconsequential – but there is a lovely rhythm that builds as the litany progresses. Families or classes could have fun extending the list. If the text is slight, the illustrations are not. Every spread is used to the full to create a journey that starts with the moon and ends with a star. The saturated colour palette ensures that the images burst off the page – but look carefully, Jarvis incorporates elements of collage, marbling, patterns, all bringing texture and life to the illustrations. Nor are the end papers to be ignored. Here the reader can find a wallpaper of 'Thank you's' in myriad languages. A lovely picture book that is full of fun to share that belies its simplicity. **FH**

The Pinchers and the Diamond Heist

★★★★

Anders Sparring and Per Gustavsson, Gecko Press, 112pp, 9781776575671, £8.99pbk

This illustrated chapter book for early readers is a fun and original twist on the crime caper genre.

The Pinchers are Nic and Rob, their children Theo and Ellen (CriminEllen!), Sherlock the dog and Grandma Stola. They are a villainous family of career criminals whose complete lack of morality is a source of great distress for the young son, Theo.

Unlike the rest of his family, Theo values honesty and the rule of law, even to the extent that he's willing to grass up his newspaper-stealing dad to the police officer who lives next door. Such virtuous action is repugnant to Nic and Rob, who are forced to keep their criminal intentions secret when they head off in the middle of the night to visit the 'Golden Diamond' exhibit.

Theo is left baby-sitting his little sister - which is an extremely challenging task. Ellen is very unwilling to do as she is told or stay in one place, despite the offer of ice cream for dinner. Chasing the whims of his sister, Theo finds himself caught up in an adventure that involves a short stay in jail, dynamite, a sleeping policeman and a love-struck old lady.

It is a little hard to know who to root for in this story. All of the characters are extremely likeable. Whether they are cheeky, conniving criminals, or witless buffoons in positions of authority, everyone has redeemable features and everyone is funny! For a

story all about robbery, it is surprisingly hard to identify who the villains are! As a result, readers will share Theo's conflicting emotions. Should he be honest and speak to the Police... even if it gets his family into trouble?

The book has a thoroughly engaging voice. The present tense is used to convey just how Theo is feeling, with the effect that the reader feels like they are being soothed by a caring parent: 'Theo has a sore stomach again. He had upset Paul Eessman.' Also effective is the way that characters and settings are described with adorable, youthful innocence. The jail, for example, is a place where stripey clothed grown-ups are a bit naughty, as summarised by its sign on the wall: 'Jail. Have you broken the law? Welcome! Otherwise, go away!'

With gorgeous, goofy illustrations on every page, **The Pinchers** is a story that is joyfully strange and quirky. It would be great fun to read with a parent or to indulge in independently. Readers will be pleased to see that other episodes of **The Pinchers** are on their way from Sweden soon! **SD**



Dinosaurs! Dinosaurs! Dinosaurs!

★★★★★

Susan Martineau, illus. Vicky Barker, bsmall, 32pp, 978-1913918897, £12.99 hbk

Dinosaur beginners and young dinophiles alike will find much to inform and fascinate them in this excellent information book. From the opening spread, which welcomes readers to 'dinosaur world', defining the Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous periods clearly and comprehensively, it answers the questions everyone asks - how big were the dinosaurs, what did they eat, which were the scariest, focusing on individual dinosaurs to inform us about them, while also providing an overall picture of how dinosaurs lived. Pages on dinosaur babies are particularly interesting while the book concludes with information on ways in which palaeontologists go about uncovering more about dinosaurs and includes recent discoveries e.g. on feathered dinosaurs. The final page features 'special dinosaur words', gathering together terms readers will

have learned through the book and reminding them of their meanings. As with this award-winning teams previous book, **Sharks! Sharks! Sharks!**, the information is presented with real care and attention, while the illustrations are attractive and accurate. It's a book to dip into, pore over and return to again and again. **MMA**

The Island Vet: Pirates and Sea Monsters

★★★★

Gill Lewis, ill. Irina Avgustinovich, Barrington Stoke, 64pp, 9781800902763, £7.99 pbk

This charming story is the first in a new series from award-winning author Gill Lewis, introducing us to Tia, who has travelled to the island of Gull Haven for her vet mum's new job. She is looking forward to spending more time with her mum, who previously had to work long hours and is also hoping that she might be allowed to eventually have her own pet. Almost as soon as they arrive on the island, Tia's mum inundated by a hoard of eager pet owners who have been deprived of a vet for far too long. Tia is thrilled that she can help look after the animals and when her mum is called away to another nearby island and is unable to return home due to a big storm, Tia has to take on extra responsibility feeding the animals who are staying the surgery overnight.

With the unusual discovery of a mysterious creature washed up on the beach, Tia has plenty of stories to tell her mum when she returns and they realise that their new island life is going to be full of fun with many adventures to come.

Lewis's love of the natural world shines through as always in her writing and this gentle heart-warming story is just the right introduction for animal-loving early readers. Barrington Stoke's always accessible pages include beautiful character-filled illustrations from Avgustinovich. A delight of a book, with the second in the series due out later this summer. **AH**

Halima Superhero Princess

★★★★★

Emily Joof, illus. Åsa Gilland, Floris Books, 24pp, 978 178250 906 6, £7.99, pbk

Halima and her friends are excited, they have been invited to a superhero and princess party. Enthusiastically they start discussing who they might go as. But when her friends tell Halima she can't dress up as Elsa from Frozen or Pippi Longstocking because she doesn't look like them or have the right hair she feels very despondent. Fortunately, her mum reassures her on all counts - she can be whoever she wants to be, her hair is super special and fabulous and that there are lots of brave and cool women of colour to choose from. Really excited, Halima spends the week dressing up as several inspiring role models, including Mae Jamieson space explorer and Misty Copeland ballerina. In the end, Halima creates a unique superhero princess outfit and is ready to amaze the guests

at her friend's party.

A reassuring and affirming tale with a delightful heroine and similarities to Mary Hoffman's **Amazing Grace**. Engagingly written with an appealing heroine and lively detailed illustrations. The back of the book includes an alphabetic gallery of the women Halima's mum mentions in the story. **SMc**

Jack-Jack: a Dog in Africa

★★★★

Ben Garrod, ill. Charli Vince, Zephyr, 103pp, 97818035906741, £7.99 pbk

This enjoyable new series for fans of animals is the diary of a loveable, scruffy dog whose home is a sanctuary for orphaned chimpanzees in Africa.

The diary style gives this book an original feel: it is a novel and fun way for readers to get to know Jack-Jack and all of his friends. As well as a troop of cheeky chimpanzees, Jack-Jack spends his days with a sage old vulture, a not-so-sleepy leopard, two paranoid parrots and a number of very sociable wild pigs. For young readers who like learning about animals, there are lots of enjoyable characters to meet, and Vince's lively line drawings celebrate each one's individual nature.

Jack-Jack's diary is a dog's-eye view of the world and he shares with readers a number of canine secrets (dogs know an awful lot more than they let on, he tells readers). Through tales about an invasion of rubber snakes and an escape from a frightened, angry giant chimp, Jack-Jack explains how dogs are substantially less brave than people might think and that, really, all they want is to be loved.

Though Jack-Jack's home will feel strange and exotic for many readers, the African village is where he lives and is all he has ever known. So, when one of his human friends (Ben) asks Jack-Jack to leave Africa and join him on a plane, it is an emotional and heart-warming moment. Jack-Jack so generously describes his home and his friends, that it is hard to believe future books in the series will be set elsewhere.

Though this is a fiction book, there is much for information booklovers to enjoy, too. It includes a number of facts about dogs (both as part of the story and in a bonus section at the end) that will interest even those children who already have lots of canine knowledge. Indeed, the way that the book shares information about Jack-Jack's homeland and animal friends is the most likeable element of the book. Though the miniature stories he shares are not without charm, there is little excitement within them, and few characters are developed in any depth or detail.

The finale promises that Jack-Jack's next adventure will be the training of his new human, which will offer an opportunity to learn more about dogs' understanding of their best friends and how they live. **SD**

reviews

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

Detective Catz and the Missing Nut

★★★★★

Marjoke Henrichs, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 9781915252357, £12.99 hbk
Catz indulges his love for roleplaying by delving into his detective box, inspired to solve a mystery when Flossy the squirrel reports her missing nut. Armed with his magnifying glass, camera and an apple for when he gets hungry, Catz sets off towards the Big Tree in search of clues. Along the way, he meets other friends and finds several discarded items but no big nut no matter how hard he searches. Dejected, he heads off to tell his friends of his lack of success until a serendipitous discovery leads to a heartwarming resolution for all.

Henrichs possesses a magical ability to tap into children's creativity and imagination, consistently delivering delightful experiences. Through her signature illustrative style, her narratives and ideas resonate alongside authors like Daisy Hirst and Shirley Hughes. Within the pages of this book, numerous subtle clues are cleverly woven into the illustrations, inviting eagle-eyed readers to uncover puzzles and connections with each subsequent reading.

While there are subtle messages here about being kind and supporting others, it is the playful, creative mindset of the child-like animals that holds the appeal. Bright washes of watercolour and pen show character and movement that mirror young children at play, and it is refreshing to see this set in the outdoors. A lovely picture book full of energy and playfulness that will engage and inspire its young readers. **MT**

Elki is Not My Dog

★★★★★

Elena Arevalo Melville, ill. Tonka Uzu, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978 1 915252 36 4, £12.99 hbk
A stray dog attracts the attention of a child and their playmates, and eventually the whole community. The story is based on a memory of the illustrator, Tonka Uzu, about how a little kindness can change a lot.

Uzu has the gift (often noted as part of Shirley Hughes' art) of depicting children's lives and body language clearly but without fuss, and it is this that draws us into the community who play near their flats. Elki – 'She must have had a name when we met her, but we couldn't ask her because none of us speaks "Dog."' – wanders into the children's play space and is clearly in need of some care. The children (a multiethnic bunch of scooter-riders, footballers and ice cream eaters) take on the care of Elki, even though old Mrs Potts initially disapproves. The telling of the story brings us all in to appreciate the lives of the children, for example when the dog is out in the

dark and the windows of the flats are lit up with the cooking and fixing, the chess-playing and TV-watching of the humans' evening. Artist and narrator evoke our emotional engagement when the dog is unwell. Even Mrs Potts warms to Elki, but the story goes further. The pace slows and the tension is heightened. Will Elki recover?

The message - that we belong to the animals we care for, and that caring for animals can bring us joy - is important and well told, both in text and artwork (note that final image of the children playing, watched by the elderly Mrs Potts), but I am left with an uncertainty. When Melville writes 'We all played outside forever;' the 'forever' begs a lot of questions. **NS**

This Book Will Self-Destruct

★★★★★

Ben Saunders, Little Tiger, 64pp, 9781801046107, £7.99 pbk
This book will self-destruct in FIVE minutes! Top Dog has been in touch on the Bone Phone and Agent Harrier (or Lone Wolf, as he prefers) must defuse the bomb, catch the culprit and save the day. If he fails, everyone and the book will be blown to smithereens! But who could have set the bomb, and will our hero be able to stop their dastardly plan in time? With his spy kit full of gadgets (including a spare pair of "Canine Klein" underpants, just in case), Harrier must follow the red wire through the book looking for clues. Could the trail of footprints lead to the person behind the bomb, or should he be looking closer to home? This bright graphic novel for younger readers is a madcap, funny fast-paced spy caper, jam-packed with crazy puns and references to existing spy heroes. An ideal introduction for children moving on from picture books, each page is full of clever details to keep readers revisiting this book again and again. This is a hilarious, action-packed adventure, which will appeal to all comic and spy-mission lovers alike.

This Book Will Self Destruct is the first in a new series from award-winning illustrator Sanders, with Agent Harrier's next adventure **You Only Spy Twice** due out later this year. **AH**

Dinosaur Pie

★★★★★

Jen Wallace, ill Alan O'Rourke, Little Island, 112pp, 978-1915071491, £7.99 pbk
Rory is having a very weird week. His mum brought home some special pies from the local supermarket and now he is a dinosaur... a small, feathered dinosaur with claws and a large tail and all he wants to eat is sausages! At first his friends think the situation is hilarious, but he finally makes them take things more seriously and they all join forces to find out how this happened and how they can get Rory

back to being human again. When Rory discovers that he is not the only one that is in this odd situation, he is even more determined to find out what has happened. The trouble is that there are some people who don't want the truth to get out and will try their best to stop Rory and his friends uncovering what is behind the mysterious happenings. Will Rory have to stay a dinosaur forever?

Debut author Wallace has created a warm and hilarious new book about celebrating our differences and exploring life with ADHD – or as Rory and his mum call it, his 'Amazing Dynamic Hyper Disposition'. With laugh out loud moments, aided by genius cartoon illustrations from O'Rourke, this is the perfect story for the next step in a child's reading journey, as they move on to more accessible and fun chapter books. **AH**

Woodland Explorer's Club: Benji's Emerald King

★★★

Ewa Jozefkowitz, ill. Gillian Flint, Zephyr, 110pp, 978 1035902729, £7.99 pbk

When Benji and his friends return to school after the summer holiday their teacher takes them into the Willow

Wish Woods for an outdoor activity looking for signs of Spring. Strange music leads them to an ancient oak tree with an incredibly wide trunk. They are alarmed to find the bark is damaged and wonder if the music was actually the tree calling them for help. They decide to form the Woodland Explorer's Club to help protect the oak tree, which they call 'The Emerald King' and his greenwood kingdom.

The book is illustrated with black and white drawings and has a lively, engaging layout. A lack of colour is a draw back as that is a key feature of the text, describing for example the shades of green in Springtime. There are several interesting features including a map of Willow Wish Woods, a list of club rules, and there is lots of information about woodland, wildlife and habitats which is scattered throughout the text with a tree fact file at the back. Benji's notebook observations are an interesting addition, listing for example rubbish in the stream suggesting the issues facing the woodland may be caused by humans. There is space for young readers to make their own notes too.

First of a six-book series focusing on each of the woodland explorers introduced in this volume. **SMc**

8 – 10 Junior/Middle

New Talent

The Untameables

★★★★★

Clare Pollard, ill. Reena Makwana, Emma Press, 160pp, 9781915628268, £9.99 pbk

This cheerfully iconoclastic puts into welcome reverse some of the lazy stereotypes that have gathered around the topic of King Arthur and Camelot. In this tale, once revered knights come over as brainless thugs and bullies. Never happier than when inflicting pain or death on others of lower social rank, they spend most of their time hunting or fighting among themselves when not in search of plunder. Roan, the ten-year old dog keeper boy at court and his new friend Elva, the crippled daughter of a kitchen maid, both live in fear of constant causal violence. One day they decide to re-locate the long-lost Holy Grail. With this they hope to cure Elva's sick mother while also restoring harmony into their brutalised world. For this to happen they must work closely with the faery kingdom while keeping one step ahead of their pitiless masters forever on their tail with the same conquest in mind.

So far, so possibly grim, but here is an author who never takes herself or her material too seriously. Writing in a captivating bouncy style, it is as if she is telling her tale aloud to an appreciative young audience, ready



to be amused and occasionally a little scared as Roan and Elva battle their way through new dangers. There is also powerful ecological message, with faeries only able to restore nature to what it once was after the Grail is returned to them. Published by the Emma Press, founded in 2012, while this lively story falters a little towards the end it is still a worthy addition to an already good back list. Already known as a poet, Clare Pollard can now add children's novelist to her literary repertoire. Reena Makwana's deceptively child-like illustrations also add richly to the overall sense of fun with a purpose. **NT**

Puppet

★★★★

David Almond, illus Lizzy Stewart, Walker Books, 234pp, 978-1-4063-9161-9, £10.99 hbk

As one of our most lauded children's writers, David Almond needs no introduction. The arrival of a new David Almond book is certainly an event, and fans of his lyrical, magic-realist work for the young will not be disappointed by **Puppet**. It's the story of a puppeteer called Silvester who has reached old age and been persuaded to retire from his beloved profession. Silvester makes one last puppet, but this one is different - he soon discovers that it speaks and has a mind of its own. What follows is a haunting meditation on ageing, loss, and - in the character of Fleur, a young girl Silvester comes to know - how creativity is passed on from one generation to the next. That might all sound a little too profound for young readers, but the simplicity and clarity of the writing gives the story a fairy tale feel, and its heart is definitely in the right place. Ideal for thoughtful older KS2 readers. **TB**

Champ

★★★★

Payam Ebrahimi, ill Reza Dalvand, tr. Caroline Croskery, Nosy Crow, 40pp, 978-1778401190, £12.99 hbk

Originally published in Iran and now available for the first time in the UK, the publishers tell us this is 'a book for those around the world who have resisted and continue to do so, no matter what, and this is indeed a book with a powerful message and a book that can work on different levels with different audiences. It is a very visually striking book making effective use of a limited colour palette and clever use of scale and perspective in the page design, to tell the story of Abtin. Born to the Moleski family of champion athletes, but nothing like them. Abtin is an artist, a reader and a dreamer, with no desire to win at anything. He doesn't even have the characteristic mole upon his upper lip, he is a complete disappointment. The visual contrast between the tiny figure of Abtin and the huge and hulking figures of his family perfectly represents the huge pressure upon Abtin to conform. But the reader can see his little acts of gleeful rebellion: sliding down the banisters, reading in bed, and of course, nobody can control the content of his dreams. The family portraits grow more and more incensed as we progress through the book, with their feelings mainly expressed in the comic eyebrows. In a denouement that will appeal to lovers of Jon Klassen's dark humour, Abtin devises a uniquely artistic solution to making his family happy and to making himself conform. Younger children will appreciate the humour of gleeful 'naughtiness' in this sophisticated

picturebook and older children will be able to engage with the issues of family pressure, resistance, difference and non-conformity, and resilience, self-acceptance and understanding. They would also be interested in the discussions that could follow about the cultural differences of the society in which the book originated and how its message could have different implications there. **JCo**

What Rosa Brought

★★★★★

Jacob Sager Weinstein, illus Eliza Wheeler, Harper Collins Children's Books, 32pp, 978-0063056480, £12.99 hbk

Rosa lives in Austria, but what will happen when the family leaves their home in the face of persecution? What will they be able to take with them?

When in the half-title page and dedication, and in the first openings with the narrative, Rosa looks out over sunny, yellow-saturated Vienna, all seems right with the world. Grandma looks after the little girl, they share books and go to the park while Rosa's parents work in their bakery. 'Then the Nazis came, and things changed.' With two short lines, and an opening dominated by a grey line of soldiers with scarlet Nazi flags, we are in a far less comfortable world. As the situation worsens for the family there is a bold use of a grey saturation creeping into the illustration, which suggests both black and white photographs and, more subtly, the growing shadow of sadness and suffering. Even Dad's ingenious way of continuing to make money doesn't help, and leaving becomes the family's only option. As the crisis deepens the Rabbi asks if there is a way to smuggle out the Torah if he leaves. What, Rosa wonders, would she take if they had to leave?

Depiction of Nazi oppression presents a considerable challenge because it depends on the reader's understanding of the persecution experienced by minorities under Nazi rule. This narrative approach contrasts with **Rose Blanche** by Ian McEwan and Roberto Innocenti. The knowing reader will be saddened as Rosa leaves Austria never to see her grandma again, but rather than focussing on the horrors of the Holocaust, **What Rosa Brought** concentrates, as Rosa and her parents leave for America, on the love she carries with her. On the cover Rosa sits on a trunk with Vienna behind her and New York ahead, surrounded by images of what she may have lost or brought with her. This is echoed on the last page where Rosa's heritage, shown in a drifting Hebrew script, is behind her, and the sun is rising on America.

In a society where migrants can be seen as needy rather than contributing, Weinstein and Wheeler end on what Rosa brings with her: memory, hope, and love. **NS**

The Last Zookeeper

★★★★

Aaron Becker, Walker Books, 40pp, 978 1 5295 1787 3 £12.00 hbk

In looking at a world where surviving a global catastrophe no longer seems to include humans, Becker is as inventive and imaginative as ever, drawing a parallel between future disaster and Noah's Ark. NOA, a tall, yellow robot, lives - if that's the word: 'operates' might be better - in some partially submerged ruins of what might well be a zoo, tending to pandas and tigers, rhinos and flamingos. NOA is faced with rising sea level (in a subtle but worrying sequence of pictures where one night the robot is sitting on a jetty in the rain and in the morning sits there again, only to find the water has risen). NOA's ingenuity constructs a boat, and takes the animals away through amazingly depicted seascapes to some little islands. Clearly this is only a stop gap, but a similar robot arrives and together they take the animals to a tall, lush island where the animals can find food and the robots can be friends.

There is so much to take in; the energy sources for the two robots; the remnants of human lives, the gentle anthropomorphism of NOA's desk and shoulder bag; and whether the robots experience emotion. This book is to be explored again and again, and could serve as a counterpoint to the stories of Noah and of Adam and Eve in **Genesis**. Perhaps a single age range is insufficient, and this could be seen as a text for Secondary RE as well.

In some ways, of course, we have seen this before; think Disney Pixar's **Wall-E**. The message that it is AI - in the person of the compassionate robots - that will save the world is at least thought-provoking. There is rich material for discussion here, as long as the book is seen as a starting point for a message about the fate of the Earth, rather than simply a parable about how everything will be all right. After all, where are the humans? **NS**

Wilding

★★★★★

Isabella Tree, illus Angela Harding, Macmillan, 96pp, 978-1529092844, £20 hbk

Isabella Tree's book **Wilding**, published in 2018, describes the remarkable rewilding project she and her husband launched at their country estate, Knepp in West Sussex. By abandoning intensive farming methods, allowing large native breeds like Old English Longhorn cattle, Exmoor ponies and Tamworth pigs to roam free, and standing back to let nature take charge, they have brought about an extraordinary change. The landscape of Knepp is transformed while it is now home to thriving populations of kingfishers, nightingales, larks. In fact, in just over twenty years, the birdsong is so loud, says Tree, that 'it feels like its vibrating in your lungs.' The Purple Emperor, one of our rarest species of butterfly,



is another success story, with a large breeding colony on the estate.

This very beautiful version of her book is a special adaptation for young readers. There are eye-catching colour photos of the estate and its wildlife but, even more spectacular, line cuts and watercolour paintings by illustrator Angela Harding. In her introduction Harding says she created many of the linecuts on site at Knepp, drawing directly onto the lino as she looked out across the fields. That spontaneity is obvious in her dazzling images, the double page spreads of jays collecting acorns, red deer, butterflies in native grasses - or weeds as we tend to call them - are masterpieces of colour, composition and texture. Tree's text will hold young people's attention just as well. She describes both the impact of letting nature set its own course and its interconnectedness with the same clarity, particular details such as how fields of creeping thistle were happily destroyed by painted lady butterflies, or the transformative power of beavers, or benefits of anthills, or pony dung bound to prove memorable and with readers of all ages. The book is sure to be the source of hope and inspiration for a new generation that Tree intended. **LS**

Wildlife Crossings: Protecting Animal Pathways Around the World

★★★★★

Catherine Barr, ill. Christiane Engel, Otter-Barry Books, 40pp, 978 1 915659 20 0, £13.99 hbk

Here is another beautifully produced hardback from Otter-Barry Books which illuminates the reader on an important and very current topic. Across our world different species are in trouble as they try to reconnect with the ancient paths of their ancestors in order to sustain themselves. This title concentrates on seven different animals which find themselves in trouble: Elephants in India; Hedgehogs in the UK; Birds in East Asia; Gibbons in China; Fish in Germany; Bears in Canada; Cougars in the USA.

Now I understand why the spinney at the end of our close is the only place where hedgehogs can be seen in the vicinity. 'Hedgehogs can visit more than ten gardens in one night.

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

But barriers like fences can stop them roaming far enough to find food, a quiet place to rest or even a mate' (p.13). Hedgehog Champions are making hedgehog crossings and tunnels, for example, to rectify the problem and giving hedgehogs a helping hand.

Later in the year I am visiting Banff National Park in Canada and have started planning this exciting visit. So, I was particularly interested to read about issues in this area harming the local wildlife. Heavy traffic and tourism are huge problems but the groundbreaking bear bridges and tunnels here, 'Were some of the world's first wildlife corridors' (p. 30). Although I have put this title in the 8-10 years category it was intended for 6 years upwards. I am sure young and old readers will be fascinated by the facts within this engaging publication. There are some beautiful illustrations, and the colour palette is striking. At the end of the book, I was intrigued to learn of seven more wildlife crossings in the making: this is such a huge phenomenon and worthy of wide attention. This would be a suitable book for anyone interested in our natural world and its preservation. **JS**

Nature's Fascinating Friendships

★★★★★

Mike Hills, ill. Kerry Hyndman, Faber, 96pp, 978 0 571 37259 1, £14.99 hbk

The beautiful cover of this hardback drew me into this fantastic creation. Initially I noticed the colours of nature throughout this work and the artist's talent is evident on every spread. In addition, the text is bursting with information, and I commend the author on the amount of meticulous research he must have undertaken. I was not surprised to learn that Kerry Hyndman has won awards, and the sheer professionalism of this book is testament to Faber's quality output.

I was introduced to nature via my years in the Brownies and the summer camps I undertook. When very small creatures and species are described in this book it reminds me of a game we played where we had to cram as many miniature natural objects as we could into a matchbox! The wonder of nature is encapsulated in this large format book which focusses on the mutualistic symbiosis of plants, animals and microscopic organisms found all over our planet.

The book is well organised by continent and each section is prefaced with a synopsis of the land covered which is most helpful. I was amazed to learn so much about animals and species I had heard little about until now. I loved learning about the coyotes and badgers in North America and the giant Galapagos tortoises and finches of South America to highlight two animal relationships. As well as hearing about far flung places

I enjoyed revelations about trees and fungi along with fig trees and wasps closer to home. I am sure young people will enjoy the quiz questions dotted throughout and the bite sized facts using text boxes is effective.

Both the introduction about humans and bacteria together with the useful pages at the end of this hardback (How can we be friends of nature?) set the scene and give ideas about caring for our environment. This book review has been both easy and swift to compose, a sure sign of a worthy publication. Anyone over the age of eight would appreciate this book and it would be a great asset in a school, library or home. Congratulations to all involved in this project which will enthuse readers. **JS**

Unicorn Boy

★★★★★

Dave Roman and Heather Mann, Hachette Children's Books, 206pp, 9781444975352, £8.99 pbk

New York based author and illustrator Dave Roman, known for the amusing *Astronaut Academy* series and his web comic *Pup & Duck*, launches readers into the imaginative stratosphere with his new magical fantasy middle grade graphic novel series. Sparkling with creativity, comedy and eye-popping colour, *Unicorn Boy* is wildly wacky and warm hearted. It delights in gender play, lively characters, quirky details and vivid transformation scenes.

Brian Reyes considers himself very ordinary until he undergoes a magical makeover. Trouble is the changes are awkward and attract dark forces. His non-binary best friend Avery is excited by Brian's unfolding story and encourages him to believe in himself and embrace his destiny.

When Brian encounters a talking muffin and a mobile phone business card carrying black cat his life gets more complicated. Without warning he loses something precious and is compelled to take a perilous journey to the Underworld. In the midst of swallowing darkness, can he find a way to make his spark shine?

Influences of the absurd abound with clever references to Magritte, Chekhov and Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* mischievously playing with the idea of perception. Mann injects bubble gum blasts of colour into Roman's energetic, action-packed storyline, choosing dusky violets and luminous greens for the nefarious Skull King's domain.

Tongue in cheek humour and witty word play is evident throughout as the modern clashes with the mythical and good battles evil in true comic book hero style. The story boarding is a series of dynamic, versatile panels that engage with clever use of space, colours reflecting emotions, changing perspectives, falling sequences and joyful levitating iconography denoting Brian's unusual superpowers.

This is a story that teaches tweens the importance of celebrating your

identity, creating your own narrative and helping your friends stand up to bullies. It is also about combating negativity with kindness and inner strength. With a sequel planned, *Unicorn Boy* is a perfect addition to the magical superhero sphere. It has a fizzy, fantastical vibe which should appeal to fans of *The Phoenix* comic series and readers of Rob Harrell, Dav Pilkey and Jamie Smart. **TJ**

Croaky: Search for the Sasquatch

★★★★★

Matty Long, Oxford University Press, 128pp, 9780192785183, £6.99 pbk

This illustrated adventure comedy for children introduces a new hero – Croaky – and will be an immediate favourite for fans of the *Super Happy Magic Forest* series.

Croaky is an adorable, energetic and enthusiastic little frog who is in search of the kinds of exciting adventures that his hero, Tennessee Toad, has on a weekly basis on TV. Sadly, the grown-ups in Croaky's life have no time for wrestling alligators or riding on rickety mine carts along rusty rails. Croaky doesn't let such negative outlooks get him down, though, and he joins the Woggle Scouts in an attempt to find some kindred spirits.

Initially, the scouts are a little underwhelming: the group's only members are a puffed-out old puffin called Winston and a know-it-all mouse called Sheena whose sole ambition seems to be the acquisition of badges. However, everything changes when Croaky chooses to ignore all the warning signs and open the 'Ultimate Danger Door'!

Croaky and his two new adventure pals bond over a camping trip in the woods, where Winston is sure they can discover the long lost sasquatch (though Sheena and Croaky have their doubts). Throughout the story it is clear that Winston and Sheena are hiding something from Croaky, but his loveable character and boundless enthusiasm mean that he is very happy to hop onto the adventure and simply see where it takes him, even when it requires him to climb a mountain using his tongue or - even worse - to sample Winston's kipper sandwiches!

Typically, Long uses a broad range of devices to develop his new characters in ways that readers will find funny. As well as outlandish, action-filled illustrations, there are special notes to the reader, labelled diagrams and brilliant speech bubbles that make reading the book a lively and varied experience. The book is also generously published with a glossy, textured cover and an original, frog-green palette that makes it feel like you are reading something special.

As a character, Croaky is a hilarious combination of bold ambition and total naivety. He's more than happy to take on terrifying, mythical monsters, but sometimes gets stuck in his

sleeping bag or forgets to change out of his pyjamas. Readers will hope that Croaky and the Woggle Scouts have many more adventures ahead of them. **SD**

Astrid and the Space Cadets: Attack of the Snailiens!

★★★★★

Alex T. Smith, Macmillan, 120pp, 9781035019748, £7.99 pbk

This is a delightful and gently humorous story, full of out-of-this-world characters who are brought to life by Smith's inimitable, energetic illustrations.

Astrid's humdrum, down-to-Earth life is turned upside down every night when the lights go out and she is beckoned into the Intergalactic Transporter Pod, which whooshes up through the atmosphere to join the rest of the Space Cadets. This merry band of intergalactic helpers are led by 'The Chief' who, every night, sets them a mission to help the galaxy or explore new worlds.

In this story, Astrid's team are charged with a mighty clean-up operation - to rid the edge of the Milky Way of all sorts of horrible space junk (Smith's detailed illustrations of the rubbish at the end of our galaxy are a sobering comment on our throwaway culture). Unfortunately, the Space Cadets are interrupted by a distress call of epic importance: down on Planet Hortensis, a group of gargantuan gastropods threatens to spoil the upcoming vegetable-growing competition!

The 'snailiens', like all of Smith's characters, are imaginative and fun and brilliantly realised in larger-than-life illustrations that lavishly adorn almost every page. The size of these utterly enormous (and continuously growing) molluscs may seem funny (and, in many ways, it is) but the poor people of Planet Hortensis are terrified that, without the help of Anita and her friends, there will soon be no vegetables left at all! If only there were some way of ridding the planet of the snailiens and of cleaning up the space rubbish, too.

The real fun in this story comes from Smith's character creations. With the whole universe at his disposal for inspiration, Smith invents aliens who are vibrant, original beings... and all totally eccentric.

Astrid's crew includes Professor Quackers – a jet-propelled duck with all kinds of crazy inventions (though his efforts to 're-wangle the spurgle' fail to stem the slimy tide of snailiens). She is also accompanied on her adventures by an enormous pink blob with one eye and fourteen fingers called Beryl, and a purple, fluffy little friend called Zoink. Zoink is an especially rich source of humour, as he communicates impressively through various idiosyncratic pronunciations of the word 'zoink'.

With the whole of space to explore, it's likely that Astrid will continue to meet quirky characters in lots more entertaining episodes. **SD**

Ember Spark and the Thunder of Dragons

★★★★

Abi Elphinstone, ill. Kristina Kister, Simon & Schuster, 238pp., 978-1-3985-0069-3, £7.99 pbk

10-year-old flame-haired Ember Spark, living in a village called Yawn, supposedly in Scotland, loves the stories in her comics about her heroine Gutsy Wonder, and longs for an adventure of her own. Since her dad had walked out, she's withdrawn from her friends and is even more bored than ever. Then one morning, on the beach, she finds a hamster who amazingly seems to rescue her from being swept out to sea, and later her teacher, Mrs Rickety-Knees, (who wears colourful leggings), gives a strange assignment to her and a classmate, the often-bullied Arno Whisper.

Ember doesn't really want Arno on her adventure, but gradually they learn to get along as they follow the strange instructions to discover a cave filled with fantastical creatures. Recruited as become Apprentice Vets, they find themselves helping even the Loch Ness Monster. There are dragons, a flying bathtub, and sinister men disguised as fishermen who want the creatures for their own ends, so Ember and Aldo have to be brave, inventive and loyal to win through, but of course they do. The villains and the bullies are defeated, for the moment, anyway, and Aldo becomes part of Ember's former group of friends, who welcome them both.

Abi Elphinstone is dyslexic, and was considered unteachable, but she is now a very experienced author of books usually featuring the natural world and magic in varying proportions, and works hard to promote reading to children. Kristina Kister's illustrations are fun, and certainly aid the readers' imaginations. This is Volume 1 in a new series, and now that Ember knows that adventures are better shared, we look forward to the next exciting instalment! **DB**

The Letter with the Golden Stamp

★★★★

Onjali Q Rauf, Orion, 320 pp, 978 1 510108929 £7.99 pbk

Audrey is ten years old. She has lived on the same street since she was born. She has twin siblings, two best friends and a stamp collection and she also has a secret. We first meet Audrey in a London police station and she is just starting to tell the story of how she ended up there, very far from her home in Wales. The story unfolds in Audrey's voice and we are transported with her on her extraordinary and remarkable journey which has all the tumbles, turns and excitement that you expect from a

Rauf adventure.

Audrey is a carer for her ill mum and the book explores the harsh realities and difficulties that young carers face. We see the double life she has to lead, pretending nothing is wrong outside the front door, and the weight of responsibility that she has to bear. What is always exceptional about Rauf's writing though is that she tells the stories of some of the most disenfranchised people with heart and empathy but without patronising or diminishing experience. Audrey is most definitely a heroine and most definitely fighting against the most incredible difficulties but her story is full of the kinds of plotting, planning and madcap adventure that any ten year old would relate to.

Audrey has plans to solve all the problems in her life. Her reality includes caring for younger siblings, providing food for the family on no income and planning how to get her mum the treatment she needs. Because the story is told through her eyes, we realise in the same time frame as she does that her community and the adults around her are reaching out to support her and her family and that she isn't going to be alone in her trials for ever.

But this is an Onjali Rauf story so, before that happens, we have secret plans and cunning plots involving parcels and stamps, trucks, trains and underground railways, a chase through London and a brilliant tearjerker of an ending. The racing plot keeps you turning the page in excitement and you end the book feeling the love and joy that Audrey does.

The thousands of children who love Rauf's books will love this one too and, as ever, she brings to the fore the stories of those whose lives are 'different' from the norm and celebrates them as the heroes they are. **LJS**

The Day My Dog Got Famous

★★★★

Jen Carney, Puffin, 272pp., 978-1-241-63130-0, £7.99 pbk

Ferris Foster, a 10 year-old talented cartoonist, enjoys drawing his comic, The Hoot, featuring the amazing Astoundog, and selling it to his classmates, but he is very disappointed when his annoying next-door neighbour, Destiny Dean, wins the end-of-term art challenge. He is equally miffed when Destiny's films of her poodle Princess Foo Foo doing tricks goes viral on social media. His own dog, Aldo, is nowhere near being Astoundog: he is fat and smelly, and Ferris admits that he has about as much talent as a teaspoon. Destiny's taunts lead Ferris to accept a challenge to get more 'Likes' for Aldo than she does, promising him a brand new and super tablet if he wins. He tries training his dog, but Aldo just doesn't do tricks, and prefers to doze.

Ferris' Mums, Mum and Miz, have fostered lots of babies and toddlers, and he loves 3 year-old Keely, who communicates with Makaton signs and in her own language, and has been with them since she was a baby. When a new foster sister, Tia, aged 10, arrives for what is supposed to be a short stay while her Nan is in hospital, she is the first of his own age, and their relationship takes a while to settle, but in fact she quickly becomes an ally. Nan's problems mean that she can't leave hospital until she has a stairlift, and Ferris and Tia aim to raise the money to buy one. Ferris catches Aldo accidentally doing a back-flip onto a skateboard on film, and that clip really does go viral, leading to a pet agent inviting Ferris to the TV studios to record a commercial for dog food, (Tia goes with him, and subterfuge is required). Sadly – but perhaps unsurprisingly – Aldo fails to perform on cue.

My reviews usually stop short of giving away too much about the endings, but this one is significant. It's Tia who suggests one more film, and all the family, including Tia, film themselves saying what Aldo means to them, even though he is @Average Aldo. That film too goes viral, with thousands of people posting about their much-loved but ordinary pets, so Ferris wins the challenge, and the TV people give Aldo the opportunity to show off his true super-power, drooling over dog food. Destiny gives Ferris the D-5000 that he has longed for, saying her Dad will buy her another one. It's clear that Destiny only gets lots of expensive presents because her dad never comes to her events or spends any quality time with her, and Tia helps Ferris to realise that she taunts them across the garden fence because she is lonely. Tia has suggested other useful tactics, so Ferris asks Destiny to show him how the D-5000 works, and it looks as if they are going to be friends after all.

Illustrated throughout with Jen Carney's own comic strips and cartoons as if drawn by Ferris, this is great fun to read, with some laugh-out-loud moments, and the importance of a loving family accepting and helping other people is subtly shown. **DB**

Totally Chaotic History: Ancient Egypt Gets Unruly!

★★★★

Greg Jenner, ill. Rikin Parekh, Walker Books, 160pp, 978 1 4063 9565 5, £7.99 pbk

Here is a captivating new history series which gets off to a flying start with this fantastic paperback about the Ancient Egyptians. Written by popular author and podcaster Greg Jenner who communicates his love of history in a most engaging way. Likewise, his expert consultant, Dr Campbell Price, Egyptologist at Manchester Museum, conveys great enthusiasm for his subject.

In 23 chapters we are treated to the chronological history of the Ancient Egyptians at breakneck

speed! The book covers about 3000 years from the first Egyptian pharaoh Narmer to the last pharaoh Cleopatra. We learn how Egypt itself came about, its three seasons due to the flooding of the Nile, Egyptian gods, pyramids, mummies and much more, all told with a large dose of humour. The conversational style of writing, packed full of interesting facts is very energetic and delivered at a fast pace.

I particularly enjoyed the pages entitled, 'Mummy-making: A How to Guide' (pp. 54-55) with its amusing budget option! Also, the 'Historian Head-to-Head' (pp. 58-61) between Greg and Campbell is very original and informative. There are various quizzes throughout the book and brilliant things to watch out for include the chaos meter, the accuracy alarm, fact files, notes in the margin and speech bubbles. Full marks to the talented illustrator Rikin Parekh who is kept busy in every chapter, helping the writers to bring history alive to another generation.

I fully enjoyed my journey with the Ancient Egyptians and wholeheartedly recommend this book to young people. It clearly explains both the Rosetta Stone and the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb, 'The greatest archaeological discovery ever' (p. 154). I will now catch my breath until October when the second book in this series, **Roman Britain Gets Rowdy!** is published. These titles will undoubtedly energise many budding historians and I am happy that four titles are already written. **JS**

The Time Machine Next Door: Rebellions and Super Boots

224pp, 978-1-80199-112-4

The Time Machine Next Door: Rule Breakers and Kiwi Keepers

192pp, 978-1-80199-116-2

★★★★

Iszi Lawrence, illus Rebecca Begley, Bloomsbury Education, £6.99 each

In terms of subject appeal, history seems to be having a bit of a moment, and these two new titles in the **Time Machine Next Door** series from Iszi Lawrence are certainly welcome additions to the genre of historical fiction. The set-up is simple - young Sunil is a lively character who has an eccentric inventor called Alex for a neighbour. Alex has her own time machine – a pretty quirky device with a character all of its own - and together Sunil and Alex travel basic in time to periods that children might well be learning about in school. Cue all sorts of comic adventures with historical fact woven through them on the Mary Poppins principle - ie, a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down - subjects covered include a young Rosa Parks, the Tudors, Roman Britain and even Genghis Khan. The stories are best suited to the younger end of KS2, and are lots of fun. Great illustrations by Rebecca Bagley, too. **TB**

reviews

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

King of Nothing

★★★

Nathanael Lessore, *Hot Key*, 320pp, 9781471413247, £7.99 pbk
What does it mean to be a man, or in Anton's case, a thirteen-year-old yoot heading for manhood? Well, Anton thinks he knows. He's hard, his mandem is hard and he's the hardest of them all. He's king of the school. "Nobody can square up to us here, and I prowl these corridors like my kingdom come." His dad is in prison for a violent crime and Anton lives in the reflected glory. He is scared of nothing and no one, except, maybe, his mum and his nan. Nathanael Lessore's story of Anton's rite of passage from teacher's curse to GCSE prospect is funny, thought provoking (given the activity of social media influencers like Andrew Tate) and, in Anton's grief when his nan dies, really moving. Both the comedy and Anton's gradual revelation that being a man is rather more complicated and might require some thoughtfulness and even tenderness relies on a growing and unlikely friendship with classmate (moist) Matthew, who is blissfully unaware of needing to fit into anyone's idea of masculinity and is embarrassingly intent on being Anton's best friend. The involvement of this unlikely pairing with the Happy Campers, a youth group somewhere between the Scouts and the Woodcraft Folk, strays a long way into sitcom. But there is enough recognisable reality in Anton's life and relationships to bring the tale back home. Not that we are ever in any doubt that Anton and Matthew will be friends, that Anton will pair up with sensible Rochelle, and that he will turn his back on the mandem, whose notions of manhood are as absurd as they are toxic. The weight of the story's message sometimes bears down too heavily, but there is a lot to enjoy, particularly in the inventiveness of Anton's language, whose restless cultural references help us understand why his teachers might make so much effort to get him back on track. **CB**

Reggie Houser has the Power

★★★★★

Helen Rutter, Scholastic, 304pp, 9780702314650 £7.99 pbk
Reggie Houser has the Power is a story of a boy (Reggie), who is navigating life with ADHD. To be honest, it's really tough for Reggie, always getting into trouble, never being on time, struggling to make friends, feeling lonely and frustrated. All he wants is to be accepted and to be happy, just like his dad and his mates. Luckily Reggie is starting a new school after the summer and sees this as his opportunity to wipe the slate clean. He'll meet some

awesome kids, they'll think he is equally as awesome, they'll have a good laugh, but more importantly, they won't judge him. But how in the world is Reggie going to make this happen?

During a weekend away with his mum, Reggie encounters a hypnotist and thinks this could be the key to solving all his problems. Starting with hypnotising the neighbour's dog and moving on to the Squealers (the little kids his mum looks after), Reggie feels confident to move on to BIGGER and more exciting things. He will impress the students of his new school and he will be accepted as part of a gang of super cool boys. But are these boys all that Reggie thinks they are cracked up to be? Do they really want to be friends with him for the right reasons? Is Reggie looking too hard for friendships when there could be one staring him in the face?

This story doesn't shy away from the difficult and unpredictable side of ADHD, but it is brilliant for showing an authentic understanding of what it can feel like to struggle with the condition. Even without having ADHD, most of us can relate to the feeling of not fitting in or being lonely. The little nuggets of info at the beginning of each chapter are particularly clever. They may make you laugh, they may make you think a little harder and some may even help you through tough times (no matter how old you are).

Reggie's story is one of self-discovery and self-empowerment, told in an original, humorous, and relatable way. I came away from reading this, having not only enjoyed it but feeling like I'd learnt something. A clever, warm, feel-good book that everyone should read, if they want to have the power too. **RB**

Bird Boy

★★★★★

Catherine Bruton, *Nosy Crow*, 272pp, 978-1839946493, £7.99 pbk
This beautifully written and deeply moving novel has some really tough issues at its core. Will has recently lost his only parent when his Mum was killed in a tragic accident for which he blames himself. His paternal grandparents live in Australia and while he is waiting for travel documents, he is sent to live with his mother's estranged and unknown brother Ian, in the remote Lake District. This could not be more different to his homeschooled life in a tower block, trapped by his mother's anxiety, cutting them off from the world to keep them "safe". But his mum did instil her own wonder and love of nature and especially of birds. Even as her mental health deteriorated and they stayed in their tower, they continued to watch and feed the birds. Will cannot forget that

she used to say, 'we all come back as birds and nature brings some solace after the trauma of his relocation and loss. Much to his own surprise he also acquires a new friend, Omar, a refugee from Afghanistan who is battling his own demons and trauma and shares his passion for birds. Together they make the thrilling discovery of an osprey nest in their local mountains. They soon realise how vulnerable the osprey chicks are and they want to do all they can to help and protect them, but inadvertently break the law by doing so, and soon realise that they have taken on more than they can cope with. For Will, Whitetip the chick is inextricably linked to thoughts of his mother, as if saving Whitetip will somehow atone for his mother's death. The characters of Omar and Will are superbly done and through Omar we get to sensitively explore the refugee issue and the author draws subtle parallels to migrating birds and the dangers they face. Inevitably, we seamlessly learn a lot about both topics as we are carried along by the drama. The development of the boys' relationships with each other and with the community is beautifully drawn and we movingly see Will now able to support Omar in his grief. So, this gripping and profound novel does indeed cover big issues like death, grief, mental health, asylum seekers lives and threats to nature, but ultimately it is a life enhancing book about overcoming adversity through the healing power of nature, friendship, understanding, found family and belonging, and one that will leave a lasting impression upon the reader. **JCo**

Bringing Back Kay-Kay

★★★★★

Dev Kothari, Walker Books, 292pp, 978 1529516043 £7.99 pbk

Lena and her brother have a special bond and she idolises him. But that doesn't mean that she doesn't enjoy some time without him and some time enjoying being centre stage in their family. When he goes missing after a school trip she feels terribly guilty for wanting that time alone and an absolute desperate ache to see him again. Real and complicated characters with emotional depth and normal internal conflicts make this brilliant mystery adventure a compelling read as Lena sets out to find out what happened to her brother and bring him home.

As Lena carefully pieces together the different parts of her brother's life and the different stages of his disappearance she faces both the dismissal of her efforts by the adults around her and a growing understanding that, despite loving him with all her heart, she didn't know some of the most important things

about her brother's life. She talks to his friends, to his teachers, reads his words and retraces every one of his steps. She finds out things that the adults in the story have missed and embarks on a journey to find out where exactly he is.

The mystery at the heart of this novel is carefully plotted and the clues that Lena pieces together carry the reader forward as we learn more about Karthik through the answers she finds. As her journey carries her further and further away from home we find ourselves transported along the railways of India and meeting the characters and landscape that are a part of the vibrant network.

As the story reaches its exciting and heart stopping climax we realise that bravery, heroism, intelligence and creativity all take different forms - but these themes are woven skillfully into the narrative which, at its heart is a gripping, exciting and brilliant adventure. **LJS**



Girl on the Fly

★★★★★

Nansubuga Nagadya Isdahl, David Fickling Books, 352pp, 978-1788451840, £12.99 hbk
On your marks, get set ... and prepare to take your time over this unusual, uplifting story about a young girl learning to find her life rhythm.

Kam is a talented sprinter and, with her best friends Alexis, Neeka and Luce, determined to win the State relay championship. The pressure is particularly high as Luce is moving, this is the team's last chance to be champions. In the midst of this, Kam's Aunt Rose arrives to stay from Tanzania. She'll be sharing Kam's room and Kam, who admits she doesn't cope well with change, is initially unsettled. Adding to her worries, Kam and her oldest, closest friend Odie have fallen out. He's not speaking to her, and she doesn't know why. In fact, Aunt Rose, cheerful,

loving, wise, funny, understands Kam and the issues she's facing better even than she does herself. As the two get closer, her aunt's stories of Tanzania and the family's life there enable Kam to see things differently and to find the calm, the resilience – the rhythm – she needs.

The excitement and drama of track meetings and descriptions of the girls' lively friendship are balanced with these quiet scenes between Kam and Rose, allowing readers the space and time to connect with the stories and the truths they reveal. Set in Philadelphia in 1992, details of the time and in particular the music the girls enjoy (on CD!) add extra layers to a rich and rewarding story. **LS**

The Secret Garden Rewilded

★★★★★

Anthea Simmons, Andersen Press, 266pp, 0891839134203, £7.99 pbk
Published on the centenary of the death of Frances Hodgson Burnett, this novel is an ingenious retelling of that author's immortal **The Secret Garden**. But now it is orphan Mia, a difficult, neglected modern city child, who is unwillingly transported to the deep countryside, with Dartmoor standing in for the original Yorkshire. There she meets young cousin Christopher, suffering from serious heart problems, and sparkling blue-eyed Daniel, the gardener's saintly grandson who is also omniscient about seemingly every detail of natural life. Together they re-claim a locked away garden, helping it principally to return to a state where insects, animals and plants can best co-exist.

The author, very well informed, is understandably alarmed about our growing environmental and biodiversity crisis but never lets this anxiety turn into anything like preaching. Instead, she lets her story convey its own message through what actually happens when Mia and Christopher learn through the evidence of their own eyes about the interdependence of the natural world left to its own devices. Mia also has to go to a new school, but there is little about this compared with the drama of secret gardening, learning to ride a pony and most important of all, helping Christopher find enough confidence to leave his sick bed and start living a more normal existence. She also learns to first enjoy and then use for herself some colourful Devon dialect acquired from Daniel's initially grumpy but finally good-hearted grandfather. Everything in the garden, meanwhile, is if not conventionally lovely at least fully functional, with all the many insects involved including tree slugs fully playing their own part in the story. Pleasingly written in straightforward prose, this timely story deserves every reader it can get. **NT**

The Island at the Edge of Night

★★★★★

Lucy Strange, Chicken House, 224p, 9781913322380, £7.99 pbk
From the intriguing, atmospheric prologue to its dramatic denouement, this uncanny story grips and intrigues. Strange builds up suspense from the start as troubled teen Faye is uprooted from her home and banished to a sinister school on an eerie Scottish island.

With dark, twisted secrets coiled at the heart of the plot, the reader compulsively hunts for clues as short, punchy chapters deliciously unwind to build up the tension. Nature loving, selectively mute Faye has been denounced as 'a wicked child' but what is she guilty of? Haunted by disturbing flashbacks, can she trust the dubious Dr Lighter, his intimidating wife Nurse Violet or the taciturn skipper Maddox to unlock her past? As the story unfolds, she learns of the existence of other inhabitants like the indomitable Boudicca and conjectures as to why they are there too.

Although there are no trees on Auk Island, Faye feels irresistibly drawn to a mountain known as *The Knife*. Escalating events inspire her to turn detective as she thinks about who she is, remembers happier times spent with her botanist father and becomes determined to unravel the strange happenings at night and the truth about the mysterious visitors to the old Abbey.

Strange structures her narrative in three parts punctuated by extracts from a curious pamphlet entitled *Mysteries of our Ancient Forest*, setting her tale in the early twentieth century at a time when the world marvelled at new scientific discoveries. While examining the psychological damage caused by shellshock and trauma, she teases the reader with fragments of Faye's recall. Playing with anagrams and symbolism throughout, she masters the magic of anticipation.

With an ethereal energy inspired by childhood memories of wandering with her dad among the fairy pools overshadowed by the Black Cuillin on the Isle of Skye, Lucy's storyline embraces themes of biodiversity, conservation, courage, self-belief, friendship and love. Evocative and startling, this eco adventure shrouded in gothic trappings, with some echoes of Enid Blyton and faery folklore, will appeal to fans of mystery and imagination. **TJ**

Gargoyles: Guardians of the Source

★★★★★

Tamsin Mori, UCLan Publishing, 322pp, 978-1915235909, £8.99 pbk
An old country mansion with gargoyles frowning from every ledge and turret, strange noises from the basement and mysterious locked



and bolted rooms – no wonder Callen is unsettled moving into the family's new home. It isn't long before his feelings of apprehension are proved right when he wakes at midnight to find the gargoyle from his windowsill in his bedroom, alive, fierce and very angry with him. As Callen will find out, there are worse things in the house than gargoyles. Can he take on the family role of Guardian and protect the house and his neighbours? It will require courage and he'll need to win the trust of the gargoyle Zariel first. Plus, as she explains, he'll need to be honest at all times, something Callen has learned to avoid in his old life. He has new friends to help, Yasmin, her little brother Raf, and Angus, and discovers that they have magical friends too. They'll all be needed when they confront the real monsters in the story.

Tamsin Mori's new fantasy adventure is well-plotted, full of action and adventure and while her young protagonists are put in situations which require courage, she leaves readers in no doubt that their real strength comes from their moral values. The monsters are truly scary, the gargoyles glorious – who wouldn't want one for a friend? – and the setting just the right mix of real and escapist. This is the first in a new series and we can look forward to more adventures for Callen and his friends. **MMA**

I am Rebel

★★★★★

Ross Montgomery, Walker, 288pp, 9781529502909, £7.99, pbk
Somewhere, in a land whose political geography might be recognised by Zorro or Robin Hood, anywhere where tyrants lord it over the poor, lives farm boy, Tom, and his faithful dog Rebel. They live a life of rural tranquility, except for the occasional intimidating visits of the King's Guards. But rebellion is in the air and one day 13-year-old Tom leaves the farm to follow Rider, a mysterious leather-clad agitator who is gathering the people for a final reckoning. Left behind, Rebel feels deserted and

betrayed but determines to seek Tom and to stand beside him in the battle. This is his story of his search and the animals he meets along the way, told in his own voice. He is reluctantly befriended by Jaxon, an older dog who lives alone and wild in the hills and has a poor view of humanity. It is the story of the challenges and dangers the two dogs face together, including a near fatal wolf attack and how their relationship grows. There is a dialogue about freedom and loyalty. Rebel is a simple-hearted and trusting creature, proud to be a 'good dog,' whose faith in love and friendship even wins over the world-weary Jaxon. When they find Tom, it is in the midst of the final battle, in which Rebel unknowingly plays a decisive part. Ross Montgomery tells the story with humour and introduces us to some appealing characters. His description of the battle and the rebels triumph aims to thrill, yet also to acknowledge the human cost of conflict. **CB**

I am Wolf

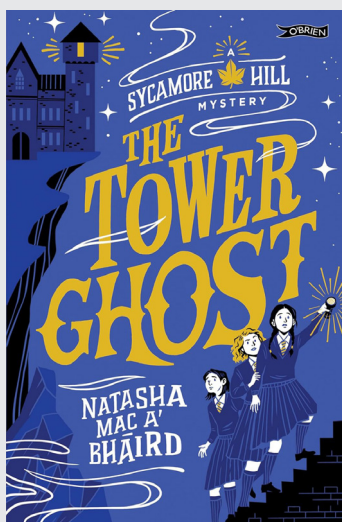
★★★★★

Alistair Chisholm, Nosy Crow, 288pp, 978-1839945311, £7.99 pbk
Science fiction always seems such a refreshing change from the ever-present fantasy novels that fill our bookshelves and Alistair Chisholm has shown us his skill in this genre with his acclaimed previous stand-alone novels such as **Orion Lost** and **Adam-2**. But with **I am Wolf** we are presented with the first book in what will become a trilogy. As with any trilogy, the first volume must carry the burden of world building and create characters that make you want to read further and this he achieves magnificently. At first, fans of Philip Reeve's **Mortal Engines** might see some similarity in a futuristic world where huge technological Constructs fight for territory, but these giant machines are fascinatingly different to Traction Cities. The crew of each construct has a symbiotic relationship with their mechanical beast, which is powered by their psychological strength as a united consciousness. As an individual you are subsumed to the collective by the power of faith and belief. But our central character, Coll, feels pushed aside and overlooked because of his limb difference, which is authentically and sensitively represented, and he is desperate to fit in. He finds it hard to believe that Wolf, when threatened by another Construct, would abandon the small group scavenging for resources on the ground, and can only think of pursuing and rejoining Wolf. His accidental companions, Reika, who actually wanted to leave Wolf to find a better world and Fillan, a boy originally from Boar and rescued from a land settlement by Coll, and Brann, a refugee from a defeated Raven who they pick up in the course of their perilous journey, might have other ideas. But for now, they stick together, and we see Coll start to question who he believes himself to be and all that he has valued. As they

reviews

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

confront the harsh realities of this world, we see Coll begin to realise his own talents and strengths, as well as to appreciate those around him. The character development and the interplay of their relationships is so well done that the reader is definitely left eager to spend more time with them in the volumes to come. This is a fast-paced, thrilling adventure that will excite and enthrall readers, but with the added depth of some intriguing psychological and philosophical issues to think about and discuss. **JCo**



The Tower Ghost

★★★★

Natasha Mac a' Bháird, O'Brien Press, 304pp, 978-1915235909, £8.99 pbk

A spooky murder mystery set in an Irish boarding school run by nuns – what's not to set readers' hearts racing in Natasha Mac a' Bháird's new novel? Clare is a scholarship girl at Sycamore Hill and excited, if not a little apprehensive, about starting there. She strikes up an immediate friendship with fashion-mad, confident Rose and the two take gentle, homesick Molly under their wing too. In between organising midnight feasts and exploring the delights of the sweetshops of the nearest town, the trio discover a talent for detective work, prompted by the unsettling appearance of the school's resident ghost, a young girl and former pupil like themselves. First they determine to find out just who the ghost is, then why she haunts the tower. Together, they research, follow up clues and put together the real story, revealing deceit, corruption and cover-up in the process. As they take more and more risks, the girls end up drawing the attention of the very person responsible for the terrible crime they are about to expose – could (recent) history be about to repeat itself?

As a murder mystery, this is very satisfying indeed, well-plotted, full

of genuine danger for our young detectives, and completely gripping. The appearances of the ghost become more poignant and urgent as the plot unfolds. The girls themselves feel very real, their friendship and the wider cast of characters as credible as the detective story. The 1960s setting gives it an increased sense of place. **LS**

EchoStar

★★★★

Melinda Salisbury, Barrington Stoke, 136pp, £7.99 pbk

Ruby is desperate – desperate to get good marks for schoolwork so her mother will allow her to the drama Camp. Ruby lives for Drama. As does her best friend Deva, who also wants to go to the Camp. Neither are great scholars, so why is Deva behaving oddly? What is the little earpiece that seems to be attached to her glasses. The truth is startling – an App, EchoStar, that can provide the answers for her schoolwork. It is miraculous – but isn't it cheating? If it gets results Ruby wants in. But it seems the App cannot be shared. And Ruby loses her friend – but gains the App. It has such a friendly approach, that she is soothed – then things start to go wrong. Has Ruby gone too far? Reality can be shocking.

A new novel from Melinda Salisbury is always a treat. Nor does this disappoint though there are no dragons or magical contests. This is a contemporary story for contemporary teens. Despite it being a slim volume, **EchoStar** is a gripping read. We follow Ruby as she is sucked into the world of online manipulation. Of course her motivation is worthy – at least to her – and will be well understood, recognised even, by its young audience; the pressure to do well, the ambition to become famous, the pressure not to talk...these are all situations that are familiar across schools. With AI a current topic, Salisbury draws attention to the dark side. She also reminds her readers that behind technology there are people who can use it to manipulate and control. This is a simple narrative and Ruby a very believable protagonist as are the dilemmas she faces and the consequences of her actions. The text, presented in the accessible format now expected from Barrington Stoke is both immediate and sophisticated. No reader needs be left out. This is for those teen readers who want that horror element in what they read – here they will find a horror that really could happen. **FH**

Wise up! Wise down!

★★★★★

John Agard & JonArno Lawson, ill. Satoshi Kitamura, Walker, 9781529501520, £7.99 pbk

Bringing two poets together in a single collection is perhaps not that unusual, particularly if quite a few of the poems

have been published before. What is unusual and appealing about this collection is that the poets and their poems seem to be in a dialogue with one another, a jazz conversation in which they riff on one another's thoughts, go off at tangents and throw their own new shapes. Of course, I know John Agard, but Canadian poet, JonArno Lawson, I have never met. Perhaps it says something about my poor discernment that, until I find the initials at the end of each poem, I am never quite sure who wrote it. Equally it says a lot about the high quality of the work and the way their minds work together. Perhaps they really do know and admire one another as is suggested in some of the poems. There is, after all, one poem here they have written together. In that case we are privileged indeed to be allowed to look in on this poetic friendship. There are so many good poems here, it's hard to know where to start. But let the poets introduce themselves: 'Hello out there! I'm John Agard, I'm supposed to be a poet, I'll do my best to live up to it!'; 'And I'm the other JA – JonArno Lawson. Be on your guard with Agard, and with Lawson, use caution.' John Agard imagines Cinderella at the airport immigration. JonArno reports on Juliet from Baldicocks, who gets mixed up with Goldilocks, but who 'has never sought the kind of fairytale-ish dangers/ that come from lying in the beds of hungry, furry strangers. "Or at least not as far as I know..." said her handsome Romeo.' Each has a poem about the mind. John Agard tells us about the man with the hat; JonArno tells us about the hat. John Agard writes "Out of the Blue", JonArno writes "Into the Blue" and so it goes on. There are two other people who deserve credit for this brilliant collection. One is Satoshi Kitamura, Agard's longtime illustrator partner who is here shared with John Arno. The other is whoever came up with the idea for this poetic partnership in the first place. **CB**

Secrets of a Rebel Rock Star (The Watterson Series)

★★★★★

Nat Amooore, Rock the Boat, 352pp, 978-0861545711, £7.99 pbk I'll cut to the chase: I blooming well loved this book. Really original in its storytelling, **Secrets of a Rebel Rock Star**, is not your obvious, clichéd feel-good story. Welcome to Watterson, a small town in rural Australia, where Mac lives with his mum and little brother Stevie. Mac lives for music and - luckily for him - his mum does too. The problem is their musical tastes couldn't be more different. Mum thinks Mac is on his way to rockstar status, but how does he tell her he's more into Beauty and the Beast than The Beastie Boys?

After discovering the arts programme is going to be cut at Watterson Primary and Mac's favourite music teacher, Ms Fox is going to lose her job, Mac is heartbroken. But after an invitation to a meeting of the SSOBMA (Secret Society of Broadway Musicals Appreciation), Mac is introduced to a whole new world of Watterson, including the talented piano playing Flynn. Has he finally found his people? And could this be the key to saving the arts programme? With the talents of the town working together, Watterson: The Musical is created.

The inclusivity of the story is beautifully shown through the relationships of the characters. The friendship between Mac and Flynn gives a good introduction to Tourette's Syndrome, in a way that is sincere, but isn't patronising or negative. In fact, quite the opposite, with Flynn's tics bringing much humour to the story. I love that this is a theme within the book but isn't the main focus. It's like the book is shouting, 'This happens.' It's part of who Flynn is, but it doesn't define him. He is so

much more than Tourette's.

Little touches such as Mac and Stevie being named after members of **Fleetwood Mac** (a band readers' parents probably listened to in the 70s), setting the scenes of the chapters using songs from musicals and characters appearing from other books in the Watterson series, is absolutely genius and adds another dimension to the enjoyment of the book.

Secrets of a Rebel Rock Star has enough twists and turns to keep you turning the page, but not in a completely unbelievable way. I would recommend reading the other books in the Watterson series first to give a bit of context in some parts of the story. But despite that, I'm going to give **Secrets of a Rebel Rock Star**, a well-deserved five stars. It is a wonderful book for die hard musical enthusiasts, with a crucial message about the importance of the arts. **RBa**

Starminster

★★★★★

Megan Hopkins, HarperCollins Children's Books, 270pp., 9780008626891, £7.99 pbk

Have you ever wished you could fly? Megan Hopkins says she has often yearned for wings, and she has written this, her debut novel, about that very dream.

Astrid has lived in a converted room in the rhubarb shed all her life, because Mama says the world outside is too dangerous. (Rhubarb is bright pink when grown in the dark.) She is home-schooled, and exercises regularly, but sees no-one else. Shut in without windows, she can only catch glimpses of the stars when Mama brings her food or comes to visit, but she longs most of all to see them properly. One night, after she has attempted unsuccessfully to dig her way out with a spoon, she has a visitor with wings, Mrs Wairi, who takes her to a secret city, London Overhead. There she discovers that she, like other people there, are Librae, and that she will soon grow wings herself.

Astrid loves her new life, and especially the school of flight in the dome of St Paul's (hence 'Starminster') though the Overlords' rules are sometimes challenging, and the headmaster very fierce: a punishment involves going to London Underfoot to collect art supplies. She is astonished to find her face on posters and screens as 'Missing' and 'Runaway', and has to disguise herself. Astrid also discovers that other children have gone missing but are not Librae. She realises that her Mama's concern might have been justified, but she and her new friends investigate anyway, resulting in some danger to them all, before all is resolved satisfactorily. For a person who hasn't had much experience of life, Astrid is inventive and sometimes fierce, but that must be her natural self!

This most unusual story is fantastic in the real sense of the word, and an exciting read for top Juniors and KS3. **DB**



Tidemagic: The Many Faces of Ista Flit

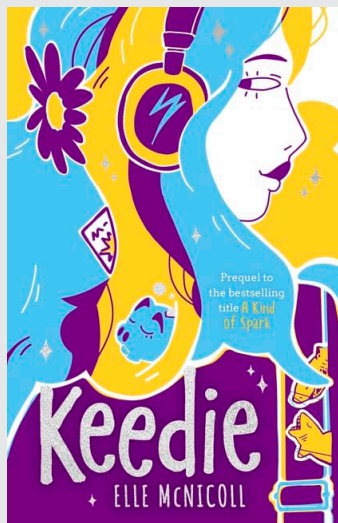
★★★★★

Clare Harlow, Penguin Random House, 320pp, 9780241636053, £7.99 pbk

Ista Flit has come to the mysterious town of Shelwich in search of her missing father and has to come to know it's winding, mist-filled streets very well, after being tricked into stealing for one of the town's most notorious residents. For the majority of residents in this world are born with a Tide-blessing or magic gift, some more powerful than others and Ista can adopt the appearance and face of any person she has ever come across, something that can be used for a multiple of reasons.

As the tide ebbs and flows, so do the Shelwich's residents' powers, but something strange is happening in the town, with many townsfolk mysteriously disappearing and it seems to be happening more frequently. When Ista meets Nat and Ruby who are also on their own searches, they must work together to uncover the mystery and save the town, but soon find themselves in much more trouble than they ever expected.

Author Harlow has created a unique and clever fantasy world populated by a host of interesting characters, with a plot that keeps you guessing from page to page and an exciting mystery to uncover from the many twists along the way. Full of dark magic, potential villains at every turn and a heart-racing quest, where the children constantly outwit the adults, **Tidemagic** is the perfect magical adventure story for all middle grade readers. As not everything is neatly concluded by the end of the book, there is hopefully another outing for Ista in store and I can't wait to see what she does next. **AH**



Keedie

★★★★★

Elle McNicoll, Knights Of, 192pp, 9781913311988, £7.99 pbk

This is the prequel to Elle McNicoll's **A Kind of Spark**. Rarely, does a prequel eclipse the original but this may be the case. In this book, Keedie, who readers will know as Addie's older sister, is nearly fourteen and Addie who is as yet undiagnosed as autistic, is six. Both girls are struggling. Keedie is finding it hard to read the social cues of neurotypical teenagers and is increasingly unsettled by the amount of bullying that occurs in her high school. She wishes she could go to a specialist school with her friend, Bonnie, who is also autistic. Keedie is struggling to fit in with her own family because her twin sister, Nina is neurotypical and seems to be comfortable with all the unspoken social cues. This only serves to drive the twins further apart. Can Keedie come to terms with her own identity? The most endearing part of this narrative is the relationship Keedie forms with her little sister, Addie. When the latter is experiencing a meltdown, it's Keedie's calm and patience and lack of verbal input which helps Addie calm down, not Addie's teacher's intervention. There is a visceral quality to this scene which leaves an indelible imprint on this reader's memory. Readers will also get the sense that the autistic experience is written from first-hand knowledge because of how deeply felt the emotional scenes are. Elle McNicoll has been more daring in this prequel than she was in **A Kind of Spark**. **RB**

Sister Spirit

★★★

Efua Traoré, Zephyr Books 320pp, 978 1 035907571, £8.99 pbk

Sister Spirit is part magical fantasy, part coming of age novel about Tara, a sixteen-year-old, mixed race girl who is haunted by strange and frightening dreams about a past she doesn't recognise. Tara is adopted and her parents are both white. Her dreams leave her with a sense of loss and emptiness and make her determined to reconnect with her roots. With the support of her parents she travels to

Nigeria where she enrolls in a boarding school making friends and enemies as she navigates through her new life. The school is at the foot of Olumo rock - a malevolent and constant presence in her increasingly dark and pernicious dreams. The reality of the day to day at boarding school in a new place becomes entangled with the fantasy of the dreams and the book tells the story of Tara's quest to find the truth and lay the ghosts of her past and the past of her ancestors to rest.

This is a complex and complicated novel which has many themes, combining the trials, tribulations and joys of teenage life with the mystical legends of the past and the realities of modern Nigeria. There's a great deal of subject matter covered and the result is a whirlwind of a plot which weaves between the real and unreal worlds and blurs the boundaries of fantasy and reality. Efua Traoré has a distinctive and accomplished style and her expert storytelling combines rich and detailed descriptions of Nigerian life, landscape and legend with extraordinary adventures and Lanre's emotional journey of self-discovery. **LJS**

Us in the Before and After

★★★★★

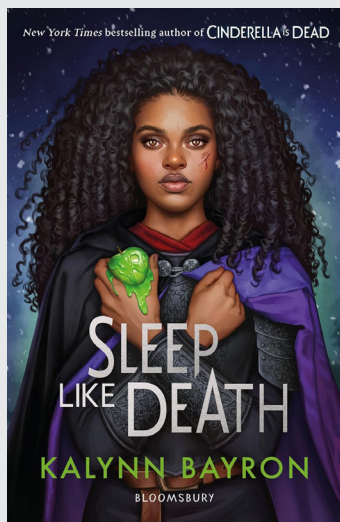
Jenny Valentine, Simon & Schuster, 245pp, 9781471196584, £8.99 pbk

Jenny Valentine's novels offer an experience like no other. Never at a loss for an arresting phrase or an original insight, she takes her readers as far as they could wish to go and perhaps, for some, a little further than they might feel comfortable with. This present story of an ultimately doomed friendship between two very bright American teenage girls around forty years ago or so also weaves in theories drawn from the study of quantum physics. But at other moments her characters express themselves with all the mundane narcissistic self-absorption typical but also forgivable at that age. Parties, trips to the beach and boyfriends figure too, but only as background to a main plot involving one of the girls transforming into a ghost. If this sounds complicated, that is because it is.

Death plays a major part in this story, with the loss of a beloved grandmother leading the way for more outpourings of grief. Yet most of this intriguing if demanding story is told in dialogue replete with wry comments and high-order repartee. Elena, one of the two teenagers, also has a genius 5-year-old brother, and there are moments when the intensity of all the relationships involved almost becomes too much. But this is a novel to be read twice, with the second experience finally making sense of what initially was sometimes puzzling the first time round. Not every reader may get this far but those that have become truly hooked may relish the chance to savour once again the brilliance of the author's prose now they know what is really going on. Intense female friendship with all its ups and occasional downs has seldom been brought to the page more memorably. **NT**

reviews

14+ Secondary/Adult



Sleep like Death

★★★★★

Kalynn Bayron, Bloomsbury, 400pp, 978152641090, £8.99 pbk

Once again, this author has taken us back to her world of 'Fractured fairytales', where we gradually see the shades of these familiar tales as we read further into the book. In this story, the central character, called Eve has grown up being trained to eventually fight the infamous 'Knight', who has been terrorizing the kingdom for many years. Initially it seems harmless, that the Knight grants the wishes of those who ask him, however, they always have a sting in the tail. Eve's mother, Queen Sanaa had been turned into a songbird when she asked to retain her singing voice and now her other mother, Queen Regina is starting to behave oddly. As Eve reaches her seventeenth birthday, she feels it is time to meet her destiny, but she has many obstacles to overcome before she stands any chance of challenging her foe. However, with the help of some not so obvious supporters she finds the courage to meet the Knight in combat.

Kalynn Bayron has become an exciting talent for both middle grade readers, with her Vanquishers series and also her YA novels which each uses elements from famous fairy stories. The underlying truth that this version of Snow White shows us is that we should think carefully before wishing for anything, or at least be very careful about the terminology that we use. Yet again, I found myself completely hooked by the author's writing; she has a way of drawing you in to the fantasy world of her creation and you just have to keep reading. Whilst this book is aimed at the YA market, I can see that strong younger readers might want to read this and there are no major issues with the story. I think it is safe to say that I will try any books by this author, as I have loved all of the ones I have read so far. **MP**

Wild East A Verse Novel

★★★★★

Ashley Hickson-Lovence, Penguin Random House, 280pp, 9780241645444, £8.99, pbk

Opening with the visceral imagery of 'A glance as sharp as a shard of broken glass' this heart-felt contemporary verse novel is a cautionary tale about the dangers facing young people who find themselves 'in the wrong place at the wrong time' or indoctrinated into a life of crime. It's also a love letter to poetry and rap lyrics. Celebrating diversity and identity, its verses are influenced by the creativity of Dean Atta, Manjeet Mann and South African writer Katherine Kilalea. Hickson-Lovence uses his personal experiences as the backbone of his narrative. As a young black boy living in Hackney, he encountered fear, prejudice and violence. Compelled to move to a smaller city, his life changed. Later, his time spent teaching refugees at residential inspired him to portray their plight.

Readers are able to listen to a relevant curated Spotify playlist, accessed by a QR code on the accompanying bookmark with the novel. It adds energy, rhythm and raw emotion to the free verse which uses bold type for emphasis.

Structured in the form of a monthly diary, the book follows Ronny's fortunes over the course of a year as he heads to East Anglia where he discovers a talent for creative writing.

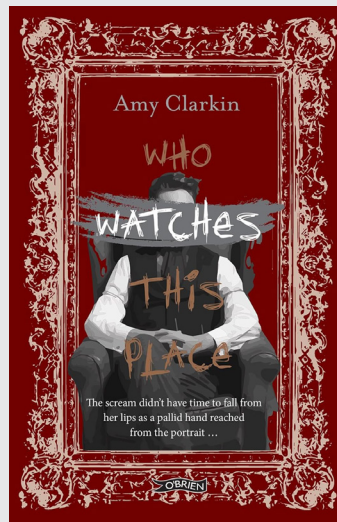
Obsessed by 'the rhythm and beat, the lyrics and the delivery' of rap music, Ronny is haunted by previous events which he buries by listening to Frankie Stewart and Harvey Gun's 'Plants Don't Grow'. He meets non-binary Leigh who joyfully expresses their true self, the troubled and disruptive Malachi whose volatility is captured in the words 'spiky energy and jagged lines', kindred spirit Lana and traumatised Maher.

Wild East is a coming-of-age story with multiple themes encompassing racism, micro aggressions, drugs, football and gang violence, homelessness, mistaken identity, the poverty trap, first love and the power of music. Ashley's training as a teacher is evident in his exploration of the freedom of sensory writing.

Poems like *Black Is a Clenched Fist* reverse racial stereotypes while *Strange Feeling* explores the joy of connecting with someone. At its heart the book is about listening to other people's stories, believing in yourself, expressing your individuality, showing fortitude and following your dreams. **Wild East's** mantra is 'When life's off track, put pen to paper and find your way back.' It encourages interactivity offering a reading list at the back including D.D. Armstrong's *Ugly Dogs Don't Cry*, which is a modern take on Steinbeck's iconic classic, *Of Mice and Men*. Suffused with the author's literary and musical

tastes, **Wild East** empowers young adults to discover their own voices and to enjoy their creative abilities. **TJ**

Trigger warnings: Alcohol, Violence, Drugs, Knife Crime, County Lines
Accompanying Play List with Explicit Content Warning



Who Watches This Place

★★★★★

Amy Clarkin, O'Brien Press, 336pp, 978-1788494588, £11.99 pbk

The stars of Amy Clarkin's well received debut **What Walks These Halls** return in a new story which provides the same satisfying mix of paranormal adventure and relationship close ups. Archer, Éabha, Raven, Fionn and Davis are PSI - Paranormal Surveillance Ireland. As a team they are ready to examine potential paranormal activity, to provide reassurance if the cause turns out to be something merely earthly, and rigorous scientific study on the occasions it turns out to be genuinely supernatural. When they are called to a potential haunting in a Georgian house being used as a workspace and private club, it turns out to be one of those jobs where the haunting is very real, and the ghost particularly malevolent. The team are still recovering from the wounds, physical and mental, inflicted in the previous case and there's unresolved tension between Éabha and Raven in particular which amplifies the danger they're facing. Add a clever, sceptical journalist looking for a headline grabbing story into the mix and tensions run very high indeed. The ghost story is chilling, gradually rolling closer in the background as these young people tentatively explore their feelings for one another, work out how safe they are in their relationships, and come to terms with who they really are. It all comes to a tremendous climax in scenes that cleverly tie the ghostly elements with the emotional

turmoil of the characters. Romance, ghost story, family saga - it's all of this and more and comes thoroughly recommended. **LS**

Not Like Other Girls

★★★★★

Meredith Adamo, Bloomsbury, 438pp, 9781526669865, £8.99, pbk
On the surface this YA mystery, set against the backdrop of a pressurised high school environment, would seem to be about a missing girl, a scandal and the corruption caused by power and privilege, but appearances can be deceptive. This multi layered debut novel uses the tropes of fake dating and **Mean Girls** style behaviour, but it also bravely tackles toxic masculinity, slut shaming, text bullying, the violation of privacy, predatory male behaviour and what constitutes consent. It exposes the manipulation of stories by the press and casts a spotlight on the damage caused by social cliques casting judgements.

Set in Rochester, New York, **Not Like Other Girls** is deeply personal. The protagonist Jo-Lynn is achingly portrayed as an imperfect, extremely vulnerable, sassy girl who deserves better and 'who can make you laugh and break your heart.' Like Cadence in Lockhart's **We Were Liars**, she has lost her own narrative and can't process or communicate to the reader what has happened to her. She has gone from popular to social outcast overnight after a sequence of events which remain tangled in her sub conscious. It's only by finding her 'wholly unique voice' and unravelling the past three years that she can begin to heal.

The catalyst is the sudden disappearance of Jo-Lynn's ambitious ex best friend Maddie. Where do the Birds [equivalent of Grease's Pink Ladies], fake boyfriend Hudson, high achiever Miles, aggressive jock Cody and Maddie's family fit in? Who is telling lies and hiding dark secrets?

What is Keystone? As Jo investigates, questioning her heart and mind, events start to spiral out of control and she is unsure of who to trust.

While this is a crime thriller, it also teaches young adults powerful lessons, highlighting the dangers of self-destructive behaviour and red flags to watch out for. Skilfully capturing the challenges and savage realities of navigating life as a restless teenage girl in a small American town, it resonates with universal themes. Adamo takes a scalpel to the phrase 'Not Like Other Girls' and investigates how cruel assumptions can undermine self-esteem. She also empowers healthy female sexuality by reclaiming the narrative and letting the reader know what is not ok. As she states, 'My justice is that I get to tell this story - Jo's and mine.' **TJ**

Trigger warnings: Alcohol, Violence, Drugs, Sexual Assault



All The Hidden Monsters

★★★★★

Amie Jordan, Chicken House, 344pp, 978 1 915026 11 8, £8.99 pbk

Agile teenage minds may well relish this rapid, taut plot, especially if they know their werewolves from their warlocks, along with a working knowledge of the characteristics of poltergeists (especially one in her post mortem existence, since the nature of her death and indeed her murderer are at the heart of this novel).

There's much that is highly original in this story of a serial killer (exclusively werewolf victims) at large in Manchester, albeit a city unfamiliar to this Mancunian reviewer. It comprises an Upside inhabited by humans and other creatures who can, at will, look like humans; and a subterranean Downside with occupants ranging from those werewolves and warlocks to a few fairies and pixies, alongside minotaurs and other composites of more or less anything.

Keeping this world under control might suggest a daunting challenge for a debut novelist, since the plot demands a fair bit of shifting (of both shape and location) which happens at eye-tinkling speed. But Jordan somehow keeps everything intelligible and gripping in the detection and pursuit of a violent killer, whose identity and motivation came as a disconcerting surprise in the final pages.

The plot never loses impetus and menace and within it all Jordan also tells a story of an almost reluctantly evolving love between Oren, a battle-hardened warlock and Sage, a young werewolf. He works for the law-keeping force Arcanum, with hundreds of years of bloodstained encounters behind him. Sage lives in Manchester, moving between the Downside and the Upside. She cannot rid herself of a guilt stemming from a single, desperate mistake; her hope is that she might find atonement

through working for the Arcanum. The Captain of the local Arcanum orders Oren and Sage to work together on a murder in a city apartment. Oren has insisted, throughout a brilliantly successful international career, that he works alone; the last thing he wants is a novice female partner. Sage loathes his cold arrogance and indifference. It's intense dislike at first sight and on both sides when the two meet. The apartment where the murder trail begins belonged to the victim, one of Sage's childhood friends; it's a bloodbath. Similar killings follow at intervals. Readers will need the ability to hang on to the twisting narrative thread while enjoying the idiosyncrasies of a small but colourful cast. It's well worth it. **GF**

Lie or Die

★★★★★

A.J. Clack, Firefly Press, 304pp, 9781915444417, £8.99 pbk

Kass Kennedy is sixteen. She has been tricked by her best friend, Thea, into auditioning for a new big brother-like reality show called Lie or Die. She actually fails the audition but then, as a contestant mysteriously drops out, she is brought in as first reserve.

In the game, the majority of the inhabitants of the house are players. There are two agents whose job it is theatrically to murder one player per night as nominated by the other players. The players must work out who the agents are with the help of another contestant called the detective in order to survive and win £50,000.

It transpires that someone is killing the contestants for real. Can the contestants find the killer before they all die and what is really going on behind the scenes?

This is a tightly plotted, genuinely frightening psychological thriller. The violence in the last section is very disturbing. The concept is original and thought provoking, making the reader question the nature and role of reality TV and fame in our culture. **RB**

The Mercury in Me

★★★★★

Rachael Fernandes, UCLan, 328pp, 9781915235947, £8.99 pbk

Maya Pratik has always wanted to be a doctor. She is seventeen and very studious, a fact which is much appreciated by her seemingly traditional British Indian parents. Every sentence her mother says appears to Maya to begin with, 'This will look good on your medical school application.' Maya's parents have one strict rule: you may not date until university because boys are a distraction.

Maya has a brother, Tamir, who is already at university. His parents, however, are unaware that he is gay. Maya sees a picture of Freddie Mercury of *Queen* fame and after

discovering that he too was British Indian and, like Maya, a talented musician, she decides to audition for the school production of *We Will Rock You*. In this production, she meets a boy, Harry Wu. What will the production mean for them both and how far is Maya willing to push the barriers of her reality, culture and comfort zone to inhabit her new role?

This is a deeply felt and very funny and nuanced love story. It foregrounds female friendships and the need not to discount them while being in love. It also highlights the cultural barriers which can be faced by people trying to navigate multiple cultures. Musical, theatre-loving readers will also enjoy a more detailed look into the creation of this art form. **RB**

The Big Ask

★★★★★

Simon James Green, Barrington Stoke, 120pp, 9781800902428, £7.99 pbk

Alfie Parker is gay, sixteen, a gamer and physically unfit. He is also a nobody socially. Harvey Ledger also sixteen, is questioning his sexuality but currently has a girlfriend, Summer. They have been friends since they were toddlers. Harvey and Summer break up. Who will Harvey now take as his date to Prom? The answer, much to his surprise, is Alfie.

Alfie is suspicious of Harvey's motives. Is he just on the rebound from Summer? We follow both boys as they prepare for Prom. Green, cleverly, does not answer the question of Harvey's sexuality and it is left to the reader to decide.

This is an affirming gay romance. **RB**

Dancers of the Dawn

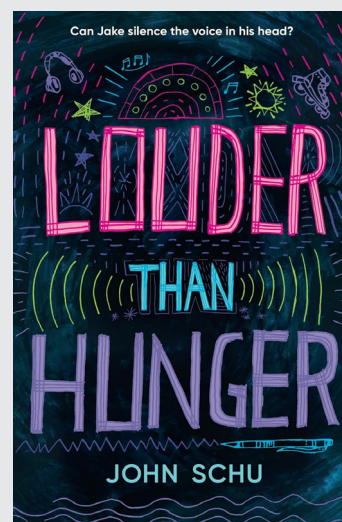
★★★★★

Zulekha A Afzal, Rock the Boat, 320pp, 978081545070, £16.99 hbk

In a mystical land, with the feel of the south Asian continent, we have an on-going war between two countries, Amaar and Mezeer, that had once been joined. The heroine Aasira is one of a group of young girls who have specific magical abilities and are being trained to guard their Queen and Country of Amaar; however, her late mother was deemed to have been a traitor and Aasira lives with the distrust of many around her. When she and her colleagues are chosen to audition for a role as the Queen's guard, they find themselves at the palace and surrounded by plots and power struggles that they are unprepared for. With danger getting ever closer and not knowing who she can actually trust, Aasira discovers that the realities that she believes, may not actually be the truth. However, will she be able to search out the truth and make those around her believe what she says?

This is an outstanding debut from another graduate from Bath Spa University and is full of adventure and magic. Unlike many other fantasy novels, this one does not rely on the

appearance of Gods in order to carry the story forward; in fact, there are no allusions to religion in the world building that the author has given us. The emphasis seems to be on whether people can be trusted and the dynamics of the relations within the various groups. Central to the plot is the magical ability that each person has and in the case of Aasira, she can conjure fire and has been trained to use it as a weapon in the service of the Queen. Basically, she is being trained as an assassin. This is one of those books that really grows on you and I found myself reading at an ever-faster rate, wanting to know what was going to happen. Whilst there are no issues for schools, some readers might find small sections a bit bloodthirsty, but I think the majority will be quite content, as it is an important part of the plot line. **MP**



Louder Than Hunger

★★★★★

John Schu, Walker Books, 528pp, 9781529514568, £9.99 pbk

Jacob Edward Stacey known as Jake is thirteen in 1996. He is being bullied mercilessly at school. He also has anorexia nervosa which he terms 'the voice'. The 'voice' tells him repeatedly that he is unworthy of the food, love and affection which all humans need. He is admitted to Whispering Pines Hospital Anorexia Treatment Programme which initially he abhors. This is a verse novel account of his journey to recovery. Schu's poetry is satisfyingly brutal and non-linear.

If anyone has ever experienced anorexia or severe anxiety and depression which Jake also has, this book will resonate with them deeply. It will make them feel that their struggle in all its many facets is visible and validated. It is possible that this verse novel could be triggering to someone in the early stages of recovery but that might be exactly when they need it. Schu's work should be in every high school library as quickly as possible and the message of self-worth that Schu gives his reader will be underlined for every reader who accompanies Jake. **RB**

Valediction: No.16 Toys

Brian Alderson is bidding farewell to old favourites as he donates his remarkable collection of children's books to **Seven Stories**. His latest gift is a children's book by Cyril Beaumont.

There may still be some balletomanes and theatregoers who will recall Cyril Beaumont's bookshop at 97 Charing Cross Road which ran from 1910 to 1965. Thanks to his shop assistant, whom he later married, he developed an interest in ballet which led to his becoming both a specialist bookseller and a prolific author and world authority on dance.

From 1917 however he also ventured into publishing in the altogether different field of fine printing, under the imprint of The Cyril Beaumont Press, producing a series of limited editions with attendant 'specials'.

There would be twenty-six of these before the financial crisis of 1931 led to closure but the venture deserves an honoured place among the twentieth century followers of Kelmscott. For one thing he unusually concentrated on issuing previously unpublished works rather than new printings of classics, many by the 'Georgian' poets of those times such as John Drinkwater, Edmund Blunden, even D.H. Lawrence. And second because of the regular issue of the 'specials' usually printed on Japanese vellum and numbered and signed by authors and illustrators, commissioning wood engravings from several members of the Society of Wood Engravers which was founded in 1923. Ordinary copies were numbered and usually printed on hand-made paper for wider sale.¹

What neither the historian of the Press nor yet the unadventurous historians of children's book publishing between the Wars have recorded is that between 1924 and 1930 Beaumont also wrote five children's books. Four of them he called 'fairy stories' but they are rather about middle-class boys of the time involved in magical events: **The Mysterious Toyshop** (1927), **The Strange Adventures of a Toy Soldier** (1926), and **The Wonderful Adventure** (1927) were published under his own imprint and **Sea Magic** by John Lane at the Bodley Head. All had fine four-colour illustrations, both full-page and in the text, by Windham Payne.

The omission of a mention of these volumes from Jackson's checklist may be accounted for by their lowly status as mere children's books and by the fact that they were not issued by the Beaumont Press. But they should have found a place in his study on the sufficient



grounds that the three 'fairy stories' that he published himself followed the pattern of the Press's 'specials', being bound in vellum over boards and with a Certificate stating the number so produced and signed by author and illustrator. The British Library copies were catalogued as 'de luxe' editions although not the 'foreign' volume from the Bodley Head.

The last of the five books, **Toys** of 1930 differs from its predecessors in being not a story but a rhymed alphabet book with reach-me-down verses by Beaumont himself:

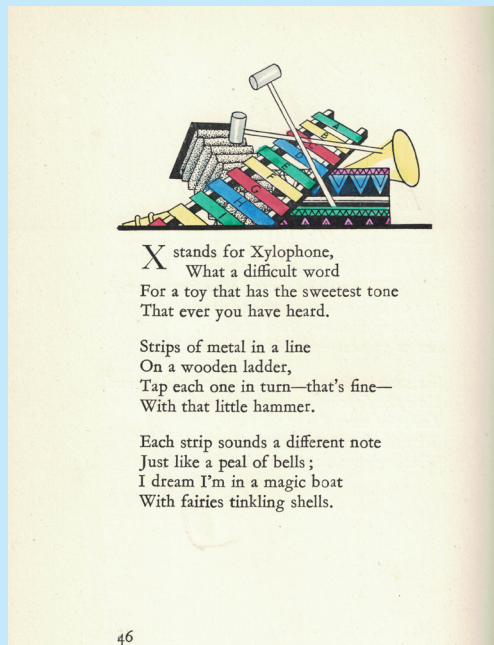
*A stands for Ark
Dear, what a lark
To live in a house like a zoo*

*Is it a boat,
Are you sure it would float,
Could it carry me and you?*

*Lift up the lid
And see what's hid –
Lots of animals, two by two*

*Lions and tigers,
Snakes and spiders,
Yes, and two of a kangaroo.*

As an illustrator here we lose Windham Payne but find Eileen Mayo. She has hand-coloured the special copies as stated by the signed Certificate: 'Of this book 100 copies have been signed by the Author and Artist with the drawings hand-coloured by the latter' - although vellum has been abandoned in favour of a book-jacket.



I bought the book in 1988 but cannot recall having seen another copy either plain or hand-coloured.

1 Details of the Press with a full check-list by B.T.Jackson can be found in *The Private Library* Second series No.21 (Spring, 1975) pp.4-37

Cyril W.Beaumont Toys [in blue] Rhymes by Cyril W. Beaumont. Decorations by Eileen Mayo [coloured vignette] London: C.W. Beaumont, 75 Charing Cross Road, 1930. 230x150mm. [2]pp. 9 Irregular collation: ([1] half-title. [2] THE CERTIFICATE with signatures [3] half title [4] coloured frontis. [5] tp. [6] imprint: Printed and made in England. Wyman & Sons Ltd. Printers. London, Fakenham. Reading. [7] dedication: For Alice, Eileen, Marie and Ian [8] blank [9-48] twenty-six rhymes headed by coloured vignettes and interspersed by eight full-page decorations all coloured by hand [49] 'good Night' with vig. [50] ads.) Pink mottled paper over boards, gilt design to front, plain paper endpapers. Dust jacket, flaps blank.



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.