Authorgraph interview: Brian Conaghan

The CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medal shortlists

A starting eleven for the World Cup

Lauren St John
Harnessing the power of stories to build empathy

By Miranda McKeary, EmpathyLab

Our children are growing up in a society with a worrying, and growing, empathy deficit, marked by a rise in hate crimes, cyberbullying and an increasingly divisive public discourse. Our pressurised education system emphasises individual success, not the common good.

How can we break through this to a better future? EmpathyLab believes that the rising generation is our greatest hope, and that helping every single child develop empathy skills would be a powerful long term antidote to hatred and division.

Books and empathy

Excitingly, neuroscientists are discovering that reading is a potent empathy-building tool. As we read, our brains are tricked into thinking we’re genuinely part of the story, and the empathic emotions we feel for characters in books develops our sensitivity towards real people.

EmpathyLab provides tools and training for adults living and working with children. These help them harness the power of stories to build children’s empathy and literacy skills and their social activism.

Empathy Day, 12 June

EmpathyLab has experimented with a range of interventions, including a national Empathy Day. This was piloted very successfully in 2017 and is now an annual event. The Day focuses on using books to build understanding and connections between us all, and on inspiring a new national conversation about empathy’s importance. The calls to action are:

• READ – because reading in itself can make us more empathetic
• SHARE – because sharing books on Empathy Day can connect us in new ways
• DO – put empathy into action and make a difference in your community

Everyone is being encouraged to use the hashtag #ReadForEmpathy. If you want to mount your own activities, take a look at the toolkits and resources at www.empathylab.uk. There are lots of ideas for big or small things, for instance:

- Swap Your Reading Life – find someone very different to you to swap a book with, and then talk about it on Empathy Day, using the occasion to connect to someone at a deeper level.
- Empathy Walls: schools, libraries and workplaces can create visual display areas, Empathy Walls, as a focal point to gather people together to talk about the books that have really helped them understand someone else.
- Empathy glasses: children can download and make their own Empathy Glasses, used to really concentrate on the feelings of book characters
- Put empathy into action: make an Empathy Promise, and put empathy into action in homes, workplaces and communities.

How to join in

Absolutely everyone can join in Empathy Day by sharing ideas on social media, using #ReadForEmpathy. If you want to mount your own activities, take a look at the toolkits and resources at www.empathylab.uk. There are lots of ideas for big or small things, for instance:

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Across the country, communities are celebrating Empathy Day in different ways:

- 4 library services (Devon, Essex, St Helens and Sheffield) are piloting a special project which involves local people in identifying which issues in their community would be helped by more empathy. Authors including Sita Bramachari, Bali Rai, Gillian Cross and Helen Moss will lead special Empathy Day activities on the communities’ chosen issues of loneliness and inter-generational connections*
- Children at EmpathyLab’s 14 pioneer schools are making Empathy Awards to book characters which have shown, or elicited, exceptional empathy. Visiting authors including Robin Stevens and Joseph Coelho will announce the winners and lead empathy-focused workshops.
- 37 library services are running activities including empathy-focused book recommendation displays, rhyme times, reading groups, author events and discussion forums. Some are piloting activities such as Swap Your Reading Life and Empathy Pledges.

*Email addresses will be used by Books for Keeps only for the purpose of emailing the Newsletter and will not be disclosed to third parties.
Rebels with a Cause:

**Fen Coles** on The Little Rebels Award for Radical Children’s Fiction

The Little Rebels Award for Radical Children’s Fiction is now in its 6th year. Run by Letterbox Library and Housmans Bookshop on behalf of the Alliance of Radical Booksellers, the award celebrates children’s fiction committed to highlighting issues of social justice. The winner will be announced on June 2nd at the London Radical Book Fair (Goldsmiths College). Meantime, the 2018, eight-strong shortlist for this year’s award has just been announced:

**928 Miles from Home** Kim Slater (Macmillan Children’s Books)

**Clive is a Nurse** by Jessica Spanyol (Child’s Play)

**Malala’s Magic Pencil** by Malala Yousafzai (Penguin Random House Children’s)

**Mr Bunny’s Chocolate Factory** by Elys Dolan (OUP)

**The Muslims** by Zanib Mian (Sweet Apple Publishers and Muslim Children’s Books)

**Sky Dancer** by Gill Lewis (OUP)

**Tender Earth** by Sita Brahmachari (Macmillan Children’s Books)

**Welcome to Nowhere** by Elizabeth Laird (Macmillan Children’s Books)

As always, the Little Rebels shortlist is a rich and exciting mix of titles appealing to children across the award’s age remit of birth right through to 12. This award is passionate in its belief that weighty political ideas can be just as easily siphoned into and spread across a handful of board book pages as they can be unpicked and explored over the full length of a novel. And so, a book like Clive is a Nurse, in which a group of toddlers leap and trample over gender stereotypes in their joyful, free role play, sits comfortably alongside the 400-page Tender Earth which slowly gathers up a wide range of social justice issues, folding them into an almost epic coming-of-age novel.

The shortlist is also, as ever, a clear demonstration of the faith many of us adults have that the youngest of minds can be woken up to the big social justice challenges of our times. A faith wonderfully expressed by a previous winner of the award, Viviane Schwarz, when she said, ‘Picture books are not just for putting tiny children to sleep peacefully, they are for waking them up as well.’ And so, these eight books explore our most peculiar and wholly oppressive English class system (Sky Dancer and 928 Miles); they describe the journeys faced by refugees fleeing conflicts (Welcome to Nowhere, Tender Earth); cuddly characters are cast as factory workers demanding fairer conditions and pay from a fat cat (or, rather, Mr Bunny); Islamophobic next door neighbours and bullying classmates are squashed with kindness and irrepressible humour (The Muslims); the biographies of real-life human rights icons who have endured incredible sacrifice are translated into age-appropriate language and visionary artwork (Malala’s Magic Pen).

This shortlist continues the eclectic and diverse traditions of previous Little Rebels Award shortlists. Past shortlisted titles have included fictionalised biographies (Real Lives: Harriet Tubman), graphic books (Azzi In Between) and near-wordless picture books (Shh! We Have A Plan); they’ve starred a boy who likes to knit rainbow-coloured scarves (Made By Raffi), a child who is ostracised for quite literally-defying gravity (The Terrible Thing That happened to Barnaby Brocket) and cat burglars who defy gender ‘norms’ (Hans and Matilda); they have unreservedly taken on animal welfare, sexism, racism, mental health challenges, war & conflict and even the confines and nonsense of a (barely disguised) Gove-style educational agenda (Uncle Gobb and the Dread Shed). Past winning titles have offered up powerful refugee narratives – Azzi In Between and After Tomorrow; they have critiqued the care system – Scarlet Ibis; celebrated girls’ achievements in fields which have traditionally excluded them – Ada Twist, Scientist; and introduced vast existentialist questions on the meaning of life itself…all via a tiny birdie, I Am Henry Finch.

Of course, authors and illustrators are almost universally polite and appreciative in their award acceptances. But there is something quite special about the strength of feeling and pride Little Rebels provokes in shortlisted authors. As they accept the award, you can almost hear the winners sigh with relief that their work is (perhaps, at last) being recognised as, not simply great storytelling, but a vehicle for real change in the world. Last year’s winners, Andrea Beaty and David Roberts enthused, ‘To see [Ada Twist, Scientist] be recognized as a messenger to children for hope and justice in the world is beyond imaginable’.

In their acceptance speech, Beaty and Roberts went on to describe an almost political agenda, certainly a political imperative, for children’s books: ‘We live in confusing and worrying times for kids… Kids might not fully understand what is going on politically, but they know that it affects them and the people and planet they love… We owe it to them to provide the tools they need so they might find their own bravery to tackle the tasks before them. We must help them become critical thinkers and doers… Is there any better way to do this than through stories? Is there any better way to empower them to prepare for their role in this era or any era than through books?’

If there is a common thematic thread to the books on the current Little Rebels shortlist, it is that nearly all place young people or children centre stage as they find their voices and pick up banners; both literally and metaphorically, these young protagonists take to the streets, calling the adults in their worlds to account, calling us all to account and passing on batons of protest to all their readers. In foregrounding young people’s voices in this way, the shortlist is an announcement of something happening more widely. Beaty and Roberts talk about giving children the tools to equip them for change. By creating a new crop of fictional young activists, authors are both making young people the bearers of the change they want to see in the world and simply reflecting the real young people who are spearheading, agitating and often leading mass movements within our new climate of awareness, activism and hunger for social justice.

As knowledge of the Little Rebels Award has spread, so, of course, have the publisher submissions. But this year has seen by far the biggest leap in submissions – up by 62%, with a total of 38 publishers putting their books forward. The 8-strong shortlist is an indicator of the challenge of choosing a shortlist – double the size of the shortlist in the award’s inaugural year. All of this testifies to a publishing industry which is responding to what we already knew of the shortlist in the award’s inaugural year. All of this testifies to a publishing industry which is responding to what we already knew was a demand, but one recently amplified by the wider political mood. Last year, Catherine Barter, from Housmans Bookshop (also YA author of the appropriately named Troublemakers) said, ‘We’ve never experienced a greater demand for children's books that tackle the social and environmental injustices of our time.’ And the same is true at Letterbox Library: our biographies of BAME and women activists are more popular than ever with schools but, perhaps more noticeably, people want to see newly empowered and confident young protagonists in books, inspiring us, stirring us into action, riding waves of protest with optimism. Two years ago, in an issue of Culture Matters, former Little Rebels judge, Kim Reynolds, said: ‘Radical writing has been around as long as children’s books have been published. Radical writers recognise that the way the world is currently organised is not inevitable, and that even the youngest members can help to change it.’ How true. Except that now, what the news and social media are showing us, what recent children’s books are reflecting back, what the Little Rebels Award is shouting very loudly and proudly, is that the youngest people are changing it.

Fen Coles is Co-Director of Letterbox Library. A Children’s Booksellers Celebrating Equality and Diversity.
Imagine if aliens wandered into a bookshop to understand humans – what would they think? Author Chitra Soundar asks if we are representing family life today accurately.

As a child I grew up reading British books. I also read some Indian fiction, a lot of Indian comics and oral folklore and epic tales. Therefore when I started writing books, I either retold folklore (which I still like to do and is one of my favourite things to do) or wrote stories with western protagonists. What did I know of a western household, which wasn’t derived from those books I read? Until recently, until I came to live in Britain and belong here, I knew very little.

As an author who visits schools across the world, I worry that fair representation of families – be it about race or culture or ability or gender or sexual orientation or families that are unconventional – is rare. Books that are in children’s early lives do matter – these are the books they take with them into adult life and shape their perspectives about our world. And this world is more colourful and joyful than the one predominantly represented in books.

Buchoff writes in The Reading Teacher about family stories: ‘When incorporated into the elementary curriculum, family stories are effective tools for encouraging students to learn more about their heritage, to acquire and refine literary skills and to develop greater respect for the multicultural differences that make them unique.’

It is critical for children from all backgrounds to see their own family and cultural setting in these stories. It is important for them to recognize familiar family structures in these stories – living in a joint family, having different or hybrid bedtime rituals, celebrations and festivals that are more specific to them. All of that adds to their overall understanding of their own world – as the learning always begins with the known and proceeds to the unknown.

At this point the usual argument would be that these minority groups don’t buy enough books to justify profitability. And I would like to humbly disagree for two reasons.

First of all, the discoverability of these books is dependent on traditional distribution systems that don’t reach gatekeepers beyond the usual channels. An informal Twitter poll taken in Mar 2017 indicated that 56% of the booksellers discover inclusive books via word of mouth and only 25% from publishers’ marketing campaigns. A repeat of this survey in May 2017 showed a marked difference. Only 19% of diverse books are being discovered via publishers’ own sales reps and over 43% are discovered via word of mouth. And so even when books are being published, getting them into the hands of booksellers, librarians and parents also requires a less traditional approach.

Secondly, we often assume that a story about a non-traditional family, or protagonist will not be interesting to people who normally buy books. I go into schools a lot and I can happily confirm that parents, teachers and children are more than open to new stories from different families and new. Also, often from the questions on social media, I know there are librarians, teachers and parents who are looking for great inclusive books and do not always find them easily or know where to look.

In today’s world of divisive politics and extreme ideologies, it’s important that we bring up a new generation of citizens who know more about the world than perhaps their parents or grandparents did. Today’s children are tomorrow’s presidents (with twitter accounts), prime ministers, industrialists and artists. And tomorrow’s world is shrinking even more quickly than today; if we do not show our children to be generous and open-minded about this wide world, to see differences as something to be celebrated rather than scared of or frowned upon, then we have failed as parents, teachers, artists and lawmakers.

But it is not all bad news. There are some wonderful
independent publishers and amazing independent booksellers and sometimes even chains, bringing unique stories from around the world to us. These books are getting published. The trouble is often they are either considered ‘exotic’ or that there simply aren’t enough of these stories to create a body of work that complements, contradicts and surprises the stereotype.

Chimanda Ngozi Adichie says in her TED Talk *The danger of a single story*: ‘...the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.’

Books serve as mirrors and doors and in many cases as doorways into discovering more about friends, neighbours and the diversity of our modern societies. As a child, books were my friends. They gave me wings.

And I wish every child, irrespective of their circumstance or background to have the chance to try on new wings.

As Bishop puts it, first literature can show how we are connected to one another through our emotions, our needs, our desires – experiences common to all.... Second... books can help us understand, appreciate, and celebrate the differences among us – those things that make each cultural group special and enrich the larger society.... Thirdly, literature can be used to develop an understanding of the effects of social issues and forces on the lives of the ordinary individuals.”

Allow me to give an example – my nephew turned five last year and I wanted to show him a story where an Indian (or mixed-race child) was having a birthday that is celebrated not with cake and candles, but also in an Indian way. Much to my disappointment, not only did I not find that book, I found out that there hasn’t been a birthday book for young children that doesn’t portray an animal or a traditional family in decades in the UK. At the end of that research I decided to write a story myself. I might one day even manage to get it published but there are many more children out there, whose aunts are not writers, whose parents have tried and failed at finding books that reflect their lives and children who will never believe they can be part of stories, adventures and escapades.

So I'm going to conclude the same way I started: what if aliens wandered into a bookshop to understand about humans – what would they think? Are we representing family life on earth accurately? What would the definition read for CHILDREN'S BOOKS in the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy? If I asked Deep Thought about what % of children's books should represent the myriad of children in Britain today, would the answer be 42? I'll take 42%. It's bigger than the number we have now.

References


Many people assume that When Mr Dog Bites, published in January 2014, was Scottish author Brian Conaghan’s debut novel, such was the attention it received. But I am proud to say that I was an early fan of his distinctive style of writing with its gritty realism, humour and heart, since I had purchased for my Schools Library Service, The Boy Who Made It Rain, back in 2011. I suspect I should actually give the credit to Peters Booksellers who procured the stock for our approvals collection in the first place. I was intrigued by the gap and how he moved from a tiny publisher straight to critical and commercial acclaim on the Carnegie Medal shortlist.

Although the magic answer, as you might expect, turned out to be acquiring an agent, it was not that easy. Born in Coatbridge, just outside Glasgow in 1971, Brian claims that he was a school failure, with no interest in reading or books at all and ‘did not read a novel till I was 17’. This despite having a father who was a teacher and who took him to the library every Saturday. He left school with no qualifications and became a painter and decorator. He decided quite quickly that he did want to educate and improve himself, which for a time included reading with a thesaurus by his side, and he started to really immerse himself in books: ‘playing catch up’. He studied Theatre at Glasgow University and got his first taste of creative writing, producing scenes and dialogue and both would become a strong feature of his novels. He significantly also became a big fan of poetry at this time, and his first published works were actually two poems in the now defunct Cutting Teeth magazine.

But he really wanted to try a longer form of writing and produced an adult novel, which failed to find a publisher, as did another novel and a book of short stories. Getting published became his goal and writing absorbed all the spare time left from teaching teenagers in Italy, then Scotland, where he also studied part time for a Creative Writing Masters and then in Dublin, where he still lives, but now as a full time writer. New writers are always advised to ‘Find your voice and write what you know’ which he ‘never really understood’ in his own context, until he tried writing for young people and stopped what he called ‘imitating other writers’. His sense of himself at that age was very strong and he ‘worked with teens every day, had an idea of what they liked and what they needed’ and their voices really resonated with him. Perhaps it was the cast of voices telling the story of The Boy Who Made It Rain, from all their different perspectives, that attracted his first publisher, but that success then enabled Brian to get an agent, by which time he had already written, but not sold, When Mr Dog Bites and developed the idea for his Costa Award-winning The Bombs that Brought Us Together.

He was able to utilise some very personal experience to create the unforgettable Tourettes-suffering Dylan Mint. Although much milder and not diagnosed till Brian was an adult; Dylan’s struggles to control Mr Dog (as he calls his condition) were heartfelt. Dylan was one of the 15% of sufferers with coprolalia and his uncontrollable swearing, while undoubtedly hilarious, created an issue that many publishers backed away from, though not Bloomsbury and not publisher Rebecca McNally who, in February 2014, brilliantly defended ‘Why the swearing had to stay ’ in an article in the Telegraph. But I cannot deny that a book suffused with swearing appearing on the Carnegie Medal shortlist also initially attracted quite a lot of criticism for the librarian judges!

But Brian absolutely did not set out to write a Tourette’s book and ‘shies away’ from that sort ‘issues-based grandstanding’ as he told the Irish Times. Similarly, although there is no doubt that The Bombs That Brought Us Together was inspired by the political
June sees the publication of Brian’s latest novel, **The Weight of a Thousand Feathers**, which has another unforgettable male protagonist and once again has love at its heart. Just how far would you go for someone you love? In Bobby’s case that someone is his Mum and she is in incurable pain. Raw, angry and powerfully affecting, yet ultimately life-affirming, it also features the most beautiful sibling relationship; this is Conaghan at his best. Yet he admits the first draft was almost completely different, with Before and After sections and a dual narrative. Once again he says the process of collaborative discussion helped him make it the best book that it could be, describing how a good editor can curb his tendency (often with his humour) to go off the rails. He jokes about writing a book that is simply funny one day, but with two YA novels in the pipeline for 2019 and 2020, that won’t be any time soon. He still has much to say about young people, friendship, family and the realities of life. Also, although, like the true adolescent male he brings to life so well, he does not often say this aloud, he has a lot to say about love. Emotional literacy for young men is crucial in the climate of #MeToo, and we need Brian to carry on helping these young readers understand themselves.


**When Mr Dog Bites**, Bloomsbury, 978-1408843017, £7.99

**The Bombs That Brought Us Together**, Bloomsbury, 978-1408855768, £7.99

**We Come Apart** (with Sarah Crossan), Bloomsbury, 978-1408878880, £7.99

**The Weight of a Thousand Feathers**, Bloomsbury, 978-1408871539, £12.99

...turmoil of 2014, including the Scottish Independence Referendum, he deliberately left the setting ambiguous. He did not want to tell young people what to think about a particular issue, but to get them thinking about the world they inhabit. It was also ‘futile’ to try to do that without authentic themes and characters and of course some of his trademark humour because ‘when I read I like to laugh’. So the book hangs on the friendship and banter of Charlie Law and Pavel Duda, thrown together by the bombs, on their journey of self-discovery and survival.

It is the need to capture these authentic voices that dictates his method of working. He writes very quickly: ‘an explosion of words’ like ‘throwing paint at a canvas’ that produces a very unstructured first draft, but one where his characters have come to life. The next stage for him is the most exciting, but difficult. He describes ‘always fighting with myself’ and likens it to the creative collaborations in music and theatre and film. The to and fro of discussions with agent and editor challenging him to do better is essential to him. He is most certainly not ‘precious’ about his writing: ‘I have a really thick skin’! He is enormously self-critical and believes his craft improves with each novel. He tries not to re-read his novels, once published, because all he can see is the flaws. He would love to be able to write them again and perhaps some of that itch can be scratched by re-working in another medium. The film rights to **When Mr Dog Bites** have been sold to Film4 and he will, soon we hope, get to write the screenplay.

This collaborative approach (and his love of poetry) is certainly reflected in **We Come Apart**, the verse novel he co-authored with Sarah Crossan. Currently shortlisted for the 2018 UKLA Book Awards this novel grew out of their meeting at a Bloomsbury dinner celebrating their both being on the shortlist for the 2015 Carnegie medal. They hit it off immediately and being both driven writers, who were thematically similarly inclined to write about life and what matters to young people, this deeply poignant story about two troubled teenagers meeting on community service, told in the two voices of Nicu and Jess, came together remarkably quickly. More frustratingly for readers is the news that they have loads of ideas and would love to work together again, indeed they have almost a quarter of a new novel written, but their own stories are keeping them apart.

Formerly Learning Resources Manager at Coventry Schools Library Service, Joy Court is a consultant on reading and libraries, Chair of the CILIP Carnegie & Kate Greenway Medals, and reviews editor of the School Librarian.
Windows into illustration: Kate Hindley

Kate Hindley illustrates in both colour and black and white. Favourite characters include the Royal Rabbits of London, The Knight Who Said No and Oliver and Patch and she has illustrated texts by authors including Alexander McCall Smith, Miranda Hart and Claire Freedman. Her work is characterised by her lively, humorous, child’s-eye-view sensibilities and personality-filled creations. Here she explains her approach to Oliver and Patch.

The Oliver and Patch stories are very different to the comedic texts I normally find myself working on. Claire Freedman conveys beautiful stories about the complicated aspects of friendship in a gentle and sensitive way. I love how the texts distil many emotions into something so deceptively simple, and when I came to start drafting the illustrations felt both very inspired and rather intimidated!

Claire cleverly uses colour to reflect Oliver’s feelings throughout the book. The city is cold, grey and blue, whereas Patch’s bright red collar adds a flash of hope. My first artworks unfortunately got this all wrong, and felt far too heavy and oppressive. Luckily I had Book Designer wizard Nia Roberts to hand. She helped me immensely, and with a lot of unpicking we managed to lighten up the whole city with lighter pastel tones which incidentally gave the city a Parisian feel. I love it when a bit of experimentation leads to a happy accident!

For both books I was lucky to have full colour end papers, which gave me the perfect opportunity to go to town on a big scene-establishing double page spread.

A couple of years after the publication of the first Oliver and Patch story, I was kindly invited to Paris by one of my lovely French Publishers Little Urban. Whilst staying there I visited the amazing Jardin des Plantes and completely fell in love with the wrought iron enclosures and greenhouses. I hastily made an incredibly rough (and therefore incredibly private) sketchbook and was resolved to one day use the setting in a picture book. A few months later the text for The Lost Penguin rather serendipitously landed in my inbox and I pounced on the opportunity!

The project was a real treat to work on. It had all of the charming tone of Claire’s first story, but as we had already established the characters and colour palette I had plenty of time to explore the zoo setting and all its animal inhabitants.

The most daunting part of the project was probably having to go back through all my old drawings, and seeing all the little details I wished I could have done differently. Rightly or wrongly when I’ve completed a book project I rarely come back to it. Too much
reflection might just lead to awkwardly listing all the things I wished I had done differently, which is energy arguably better spent throwing yourself into the next project. Conversely as I warily poured through my old sketchbooks I realised that this project gave me the excuse to revisit and include some ideas which didn’t make it into the first. It was hugely satisfying to have this second opportunity, and I hope Oliver and Patch might in the future meet another new character and give me a third.

The Oliver and Patch books are published by Simon and Schuster, paperback £6.99.
Eleven of the Best football reads for children

With the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia fast approaching, there’s no better time to tap into the excitement around the beautiful game to help boost children’s love of reading. Jim Sells, Sport and Literacy Programme Manager at the National Literacy Trust, shares his favourite football books for children of all ages.

I’ve got over 20 years’ experience at the National Literacy Trust, using football to improve children’s and young people’s literacy. I know the power that football has to grab children’s attention and get them into reading because I’ve seen it first-hand! Our Premier League Reading Stars programme has turned kids who would refuse to even consider picking up a book into avid readers who’ll devour any reading material about football they can get their hands on.

There are so many amazing books about football out there, it was very hard to narrow it down – but I’ve chosen my starting 11 for this year’s World Cup:

**The Match**
Russell Ayto, Bloomsbury Publishing, 9781408893456, £7.99, 5-7 years

This is a beautifully illustrated comic book which lays out the ritual of every fan who follows a team: dealing with the highs of victory and the lows of defeat – but this time it’s alongside your best friend who happens to be a dog! This book has lots of discussion opportunities for parent and a child, which is what I really love about it.

**Willy the Wizard**
Anthony Browne, Penguin Books, 9780552549356, £6.99, 5-7 years

A heart-warming picture book about a young chimp finding his footballing confidence. It has great themes of resilience, standing up for yourself and growth. The illustrations are amazing and this book is made to be shared. You’ll find something new to talk about in each reading. Look out for Willy in other Anthony Browne books too!

**Gus the Famous Football Cat**
Tom Palmer, Egmont, 9781405290944, £4.99, 5-8 years

Remember Paul the game-predicting octopus? This is a take on that story for emerging readers, following a young refugee and her mysterious cat who seems to always know the score. It’s a terrific little story which shows - rather than tells - this girl and her dad fitting into their community through a love of football. Great stuff.

**Football School: Where Football Explains the World**
Alex Bellos & Ben Lyttleton, illus Spike Gerrell, Walker Books, 9781406367249, £8.99, 7-11

Imagine a school where everything is taught and explained through football examples. This book (and its sequel) is funny, compelling and informative. A touch of the Horrible Histories humour doesn’t hurt - you’ll learn about footballers’ poo in biology, blowing up a pig’s bladder to use as a football in history... it’s loads of fun, making school hardly feel like learning at all!
2018 FIFA World Cup Russia: Kids’ Handbook
Kevin Pettman, Carlton Kids, 9781783123384, £6.99, 8-12 years
I couldn’t write a list of books for the World Cup without including at least one handbook, and this is an excellent choice. It’s got all the facts, figures and stickers that you could wish for relating to this year’s tournament – and it’s even got a chart for noting down the scores as they come in.

Ultimate Football Heroes: Ronaldo
Matt and Tom Oldfield, Dino Books, 9781786064059, £5.99, 9-13
This is a gripping life story of the boy who rose from the streets of Madeira to become one of the greatest football players the world has ever known. Matt and Tom Oldfield have written a brilliant series taking on some of the world’s more established players (Ronaldo, Gerrard) and many more precocious talents (Messi, Pogba). I’ve been aching for a series of biographies about footballers aimed at children and these titles do it brilliantly. Get hold of all of them.

Girls FC 1: Do Goalkeepers Wear Tiaras?
Helena Pielichaty, Walker Books, 9781406383324, £5.99, 9+
Another ‘thank goodness’ - I’m thrilled that Walker have republished this series, because I think the world needs to encourage girls who love football much more. As a father of daughters, I hear about boys not letting them through on goal, or even to play - we need to champion the game for everyone like never before. Don’t be put off by the titles as these do it brilliantly. Get hold of all of them.

Kick
Mitch Johnson, Usborne Children’s, 9781474928151, £6.99, 11+
Quite a humbling story, this one. Budi is a boy from the streets of Jakarta whose family does everything they can to just survive. I love that it makes you think about the gulf that exists between a boy like Budi and a high earning professional from the world of sport. You might think twice about ‘needing’ the latest boots every season once you have read this, as well as what you really need to make you happy. I’d also like to shout out to other great football authors here like Dan Freedman and Jonny Zucker. They would be on this list (and should be read) but I’m trying out a younger squad this time (while keeping a couple of experienced players)!

Booked
An energetic novel told in verse, which captures all the thrills, setbacks, action and emotion of a World Cup match through the eyes of a teenage boy. It looks brilliantly and amusingly at family life and the relationships therein - strained, tense and joyous too. Be warned - it contains the odd word you wouldn’t read out in a primary school!

The Silent Striker
Pete Kalu, Hope Road, 9781908446411, £6.99, 13+
A story about football, friendship and family, and how teenage Marcus, who has just found out he is deaf, deals with disability and his love of football. You can really empathise with the awkwardness of being a teenager, and the insight into Marcus’s world of losing his hearing is brilliantly told. This is a young adult novel which deftly tackles important themes including racism, disability and mental health. Like Booked, there are a few swearwords sprinkled among the text.

And last but not least…
All the reading that isn’t in a book! Use magazines like Match of the Day, Four Four Two and Kickaround, news articles, club websites and any other sources you can get your hands on to find out all you need to know about the world’s greatest game. Reading doesn’t always have to mean books!
Ever since Inigo Impey itched for an Indian image in Peter Piper’s Practical Principles of Plain and Perfect Pronunciation (1819), British children’s literature has expressed a fascination (sometimes a horrified one) with the people of South Asia. Writers such as G. A. Henty described the picturesque villages of the ‘Mohammedans’ with their mosques and the ‘Hindoos’ with their temples, even as the white, Christian Briton carefully remained separated from them (see, for example, In Times of Peril: A Tale of India, first published in 1900). Sara Crewe, in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s A Little Princess (1905), saw the Indian servant Ram Dass as a kind of good magician, but this was an exception; most non-Christian people of colour in British children’s fiction were depicted at best as inscrutable, and at worst a threat to the white Briton’s life and way of life. This depiction continued even after World War II, when many Hindus and Muslims from India, Pakistan and the Caribbean came to Britain to find work. Perhaps the most egregious portrayal of non-Christians from this time is in C. S. Lewis’s Narnia stories, where the dark-skinned Calormenes worship an idol-god called Tash (a very common way for white Europeans in the 19th century to depict Hindus was to show them as superstitious idol-worshippers), about whom the Calormenes always declare, ‘May he live forever!’ Several critics, including Muslim critics like Imran Ahmad, have noted that the Calormenes declaration recalls the Muslim response to the use of the prophet Mohammed’s name, ‘Peace be upon him!’ The final book in Lewis’s series, The Last Battle (1956), has the ‘good’ Narnians, white-skinned and following a Christian-like religion, fighting the dark-skinned Calormenes because they reject the religion of Aslan.

By the 1970s, British writers could no longer keep South Asian Muslims and Hindus (not to mention Sikhs) at a distance; due to ever-increasing migration, these groups were now a part of Britain too. But how they were viewed in children’s literature depended on who was doing the writing. White writers often highlighted the separation of British Asians from everyone else. Jan Needle’s My Mate Shofiq (1978) detailed the awkward friendship of a working-class white British boy, Bernard, with a British Pakistani, Shofiq – but throughout the novel, Shofiq is isolated and racially abused, and even Bernard talks about Shofiq and his home having ‘the curry shop smell’ (35). Tony Drake’s Playing it Right (1979) centers on a multiracial cricket team, but the only Asian (a Sikh) on the team is constantly singled out; the white boys want to fight him and the ‘West Indian’ boys try to get him off the team. Isolation of the British Asian character and misunderstanding about his culture or family mark both these books. However, Farrukh Dhondy’s short story collections, East End at Your Feet (1976) and Come to Mecca (1978) demonstrate a unity between people of colour; in the short story ‘KBW’ from his first collection, graffiti advocating Keeping Britain White was aimed at a Bangladeshi family. Dhondy, who was a member of the British Black Panthers, embraced the concept of political blackness that unified Black British and British Asian people against white racism. Dhondy’s stories, unlike the stories by white writers, do not just mention religious affiliation; they discuss specific aspects of Islam and Hinduism. Dhondy’s British Asian characters are not mysterious entities for white Britons to fetishize or reject without ever learning anything about them, but central characters in their own right.

Although Dhondy and other writers in the 1970s and 1980s allied Black Britons with British Asians, children’s literature throughout the 1990s continued to mark the British Asian as different and isolated, especially from white British counterparts. White characters continue to claim ‘normal’ and ‘British’ for themselves, and British Asian characters are ‘strange’ and ‘foreign.’ Jamila Gavin’s characters Kamla and Kate (1997) are best friends, but that doesn’t stop white British Kate from telling British Asian Kamla that her house ‘smells funny’ (4) and refusing to eat anything but chocolate biscuits at Kamla’s house. And while Gavin uses Kate’s initial reluctance as a way to show how learning about another culture can help friendships to grow, Kamla still must do most of the work of explaining herself to Kate – she cannot just exist in her difference.
Yet, in children’s literature, an explanation of British Asian characters and their ‘difference’ is seen to be crucial, because lack of understanding leads to racist incidents. Robert Swindells’ Smash! (1997) begins with Stephen Crowley and Ashraf Khan as friends, but soon racism drives them apart. And while the British Asians never call white people names directly in Swindells’ novel (even when they are shouted at with racial slurs), Stephen can still assume that Ashraf and the other ‘Asian lads have suddenly decided to get stroppy. It makes you wonder whether they’ve been got at by those whatsis – fundamentalists’ (36). British Asians are no longer just mysterious, but they have the potential to be threatening. Following the 9/11 attacks in America and the 7/7 attacks in London, ‘fundamentalist’ would become ‘terrorist’ with increasing frequency.

The 2017 Bookseller Children’s Conference included a number of presentations that indicate that publishers are becoming more receptive to the idea that they should make greater efforts to include stories by authors from the communities they depict – or what is often termed ‘own voices’ literature. Yet the pervasive British media narrative of South Asians, and particularly South Asian men, as threatening provides a particular challenge for South Asian writers. How to acknowledge this narrative without bolstering it?

Zanib Mian’s The Muslims (2017) is a first-person middle-grade book with a handwriting font, illustrations and typographic experimentation reminiscent of Diary of a Wimpy Kid. Narrator Omar and his family are rounded characters, with their individual eccentricities and a warmth that even manages to win over Mrs Rogers, their neighbour whom they hear talking about ‘The Muslims’ next door. Mian skilfully offers a depiction of a Muslim family who are aware of the suspicion and hostility that they are often subjected to but are not defined by it. There is assuredness in the narrative that ‘The Muslims’ belong here, and a lightness of touch that is perhaps most likely to be found in own voices writing. For example, when Omar is told by Daniel, a classmate, to go back home he quizzes his cousin Reza about life in Pakistan, ‘Well, the pizza is yuck and you can hardly understand what people are saying.’ For attempting to fast during Ramadan, Omar hopes to be rewarded by Allah with a Ferrari Italia.

Muhammed Khan’s I Am Thunder (2018) is a YA novel told from the perspective of Muzna Saleem, who is thirteen at the beginning of the book. Many reviews of the book have focused on Muzna’s encounter with Islamic extremism, and indeed Khan comments in a note at the front of the book that he himself has lost a relative to religious extremism. At the beginning of the story, Muzna is aware of the potential tensions of being Muslim in Britain, but takes them in good humour ‘Four years ago the academy had been funded by the National Lottery to be renovated and updated. I was going to a school that gambling had paid for. Maybe they’d have extra classes to teach me how to be a croupier.’ (61)

Khan portrays a girl who openly discusses her own identity and has both struggles and insights throughout the story. Muzna’s parents appear to see themselves as primarily Pakistani. Muzna sees Pakistan as a place she’ll be sent to if she misbehaves. Yet the hostility she experiences for being brown and Muslim alienates her from feeling fully British. In interview Khan commented, ‘There was a time when I sought refuge in Islam as an escape from both Pakistani and British cultures.’ And in the book, Khan appears to emphasise the power of narrative in the process of young people making sense of their relationship to the world. Muzna is more desi than Disney in a society where, as her friend Salma puts it, nobody wants to read, ‘Hare Krishna and the Prisoner of Afghanistan’ p4 Muzna is aware of negative media coverage of Muslims and has ambitions to write ‘books about people like me...Representation is incredibly important’. Whilst this might sound like the author’s voice coming through, any accusation that Khan is portraying radicalisation as an inevitable consequence of racism, Islamophobia and marginalisation would be very misplaced. When Muzna is told by Jameel who intends to involve her in terrorism that ‘Writers of fiction are among the worst of people’ (208) we become acutely aware that we are reading a work of fiction. We look forward to future work from Mian and Khan and hope that the burden of representation that often befalls Muslim and South Asian writers is soon shared with many others.

The Muslims, Zanib Mian, Sweet Apple Publishers, 978-0993564420, £8.99 pbk
I Am Thunder, Muhammad Khan, Macmillan Children’s Books, 978-1509874057, £7.99 pbk

Hidden is written in the voice of fourteen year old Alix, who lives near the beach on Hayling Island. Hayling Island is off the south coast of England, opposite the Isle of Wight, a quiet backwater, far removed from world events such as war, terror and refugees. Alix however has problems of her own: her Dad has a new life which doesn't include her, while her Mum is helpless and needy.

Then one day on the beach Alix and her school friend, Samir, pull a drowning man out of the sea. He is an illegal immigrant, desperate not to be deported. Faced with the most difficult decision of her life, what will Alix do and who can she trust? Hidden deals with prejudice, judgement, courage and the difficulty of sorting right from wrong in a complex world.

In the past few years, with horrendous pictures of drowning refugees on TV, there has been a rising interest in books to help young people understand the issues. Hidden took on a whole new lease of life and was often recommended on book lists. The book was published in America, (Holiday House, 2016) and American teens, in the Trump era, emailed me about how the novel inspired them: “I hope in the future our world will have more tolerance and acceptance to other people around them,” wrote one Muslim student.

As interest in my book rose I met Stuart Mullins, Director/Producer, who has many years of experience making theatre for young audiences. Stuart’s work focuses on telling important stories about young people via contemporary theatre. Stuart had read Hidden and told me, ‘You’ve got a hot piece of property there, Miriam.’

Stuart proposed adapting Hidden for three professional actors to tour schools, community centres and small theatres, challenging perceived notions about asylum seekers in the UK today. ‘This is not a commercial proposal,’ he said, ‘This is an educational project.’ Rebecca Hayes Laughton, producer, joined the team and playwright Vickie Donoghue (Mudlarks) was commissioned to write the script. It was an exciting time but at the same time, full of anxiety for me. An exciting time began for me as I joined Stuart running workshops with young people at the only secondary school on Hayling Island. As they explored the themes in the book of justice and immigration, one twelve year old declared, ‘I want to make my own mind up. I don’t want anyone telling me what to think.’ Stuart and the team have also run workshops in Essex where one Y8 student commented, ‘It is an important subject that some people don’t want to talk about but I think this play shows what could happen, and different people’s opinions. It was amazing!"

All my worries and fears have disappeared and now I can’t wait to see the finished play, complete with props and sound effects. I was particularly pleased that Stuart has cast Samir and the asylum seeker, Muhammed, with Arabic speaking actors and that they speak Arabic on the stage, as they do in my book. It adds a dimension and a level of diversity to the play which is very inspiring.

The play in tours from Autumn 2018. There will be opportunities to book different packages which could include a day in school with workshops, a performance and Q & A afterwards with the cast and producer. Contact Stuart Mullins: stuart@hiddenproject.co.uk, www.hiddenproject.co.uk

This is going to be a very exciting year as both a new edition of my book (Troika Books) and this wonderful stage adaptation appear. I am hoping to see as many productions as possible! www.miriamhalahmy.com

Hidden is published by Troika Books, 978-1-909991-62-0, £6.99 pbk
Mixing the unsettling with the saccharine, the informative with the empowering, the Kate Greenaway Medal shortlisted books bring a breadth of visual approaches, depicting animals (of course), nasty bullies and a troll from another world, with stories emphasising how the lives of children - and adults - can be filled with uncertainty but also wonder. Filled with light and shade, Town Is By The Sea focuses on traditions and the rhythm of days. Living in a coal-tar coal mining town, a young boy narrates how his days go – from the early morning sounds waking him up, to visiting his grandfather's grave by the sea to the family's meal at the end of the day. The sea is a constant throughout, exquisitely realised by Sydney Smith, whose paintings of the ocean in many moods effectively capture the dazzle of sunlight off the water or the soft wash of waves on the shore. However a mantra emerges through the book – 'And deep down under that sea, my father is digging for coal', with the image revealing miners in a narrow coal face with rapid strokes evoking the oppressive drenches of the rock which bears down on them. An ominous sensation builds which undercuts any element of nostalgia in the tale – is father safe down there? Is he going to come home? A touchingly tender illustration of the family smuggled on their balcony bench in the evening contrasts with Joanne Schwartz's text reminding us that father will continue to dig for coal beneath the sea they look out over. As the book draws to a close, the boy anticipates an already written future as a coal miner, while the adult reader with their knowledge of a dying industry, feels a simultaneous loss.

Two lives intertwine in Thornhill – one in words and one in monochrome pictures. Pam Smy lures the reader in with the dark image of an abandoned building overlooked by Ella, a recently motherless girl, unpacking in her new home. Family connections are absent here. Diary entry texts from the early Eighties reveal the struggles facing an orphan dealing with the soul crushing behaviour of a gang-leading bully. Images repetitively zoom in as the pages turn, heightening emotions as both Mary, in the past, and Ella in the present try to change their futures – Mary by constructing her ideal adoptive family with puppets and Ella by changing the past to help the ghostly Mary whom she glimpses in the overgrown Thornhill garden. The book is predominantly made up of illustrations, but both the visual and written stories reveal tension raising clues, with the soft grey and black tones of the images turning to solid blues the reader hesitating over the next page turn. Good stories don't always give threats from another world. Pale textural marks cross the edges of the main text spreads binding the pages of the book in one whole. Pinfold's monochrome illustrations are beautifully composed, perfectly mirroring the atmosphere of the written story. Sound is difficult to convey in an image, but Pinfold does this very effectively, brush stroke shapes swirling across the picture representing the alien music.

The variety of techniques Petr Horáček brings to his illustrations for A First Book of Animals are a contrast to the flat Charley Harper influenced graphic approach which many non-fiction books are embracing. Pencil, pastel, watercolour and collaged elements all feature. Those spreads packed with creatures jump out: rows of many coloured beetles and a flock of arctic turns darting across the pages engage the eye. Other pages feel more muted and don't appear to capture the essence of the depicted creature, although some fantastically rich colours lift the artwork. An orang-utan dazzles in a green canopy, and a deep blue night sky sets the scene for Nicola Davies' text contrasting the singing of a nightingale with that of a humpback whale.

Laura Carlin's soft tones and textural marks are perfect to introduce a story of a young Italian boy relocated to a smoky, rainy mining town in the UK (like Town Is By The Sea, set in a mid-century past). The undefined edges of the images in King of the Sky give an impressionistic vision of the grey town, which leaps to a golden yellow as the boy recalls his sunny native country. Befriending an old man who races pigeons, the boy is given a bird and names him King of the Sky. As the man's health deteriorates the boy takes over the pigeon duties. Carlin creates expressive body language in her depictions of the boy as his emotions shift, and with his mother and baby sister often glimpsed in the illustrations she conveys his background life. The subtlety here is a pleasure. I wouldn't have chosen all of these books for the shortlist, but several of them communicate one of the best things about illustration – the power to move – with mood impressively conveyed through black and white tone illustrations bringing a focus and power to composition, and expressive palettes of colour feasting the eyes.

There are no such burdens in Under the Same Sky, whose delicately coloured textural artwork doesn’t do enough to elevate Britta Teckentrup’s message of togetherness. Little children may be puzzled by the book’s conclusion that ‘we all share the same dream’ when that dream is unspecified. Although attractive, there’s not enough going on in the images to give the book enough weight. In contrast The Song from Somewhere Else has a riveting story by A.F. Harrold combined with wonderful, disquieting illustrations by Levi Pinfold. The image placement is exemplary here, illustrations spread across double pages, full pages or vignettes creating a parallel tension as the emphasis shifts from text to image without ever interrupting the flow. Trees twist out the darkness and shadows hint at threats from another world. Pale textural marks cross the edges of the main text spreads binding the pages of the book in one whole. Pinfold's monochrome illustrations are beautifully composed, perfectly mirroring the atmosphere of the written story. Sound is difficult to convey in an image, but Pinfold does this very effectively, brush stroke shapes swirling across the picture representing the alien music.

The CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal Shortlist 2018

Derek Brazzell finds light and shade on this year’s shortlist.
Nicholas Tucker appraises the eight books shortlisted for the year's most prestigious children's book award.

There are some excellent but very diverse titles on the Carnegie shortlist this year, so some sympathy for the judges having to choose between eight books going so many different ways. Children's literature on this showing still remains very much alive and well, and medal-winners from the past in no way over-shadow these contemporary writers. But times are changing. Most of these stories are now set in different times and countries, so British young readers will not find a reflection of their own world as they know it. And the traditional family novel, where parents preside over children gradually coming to terms with themselves and their society as they grow older, seems virtually dead. Today's fictional children and young adults tend to be individualistic and act largely on their own, with parents – if they still have them – often as much a hindrance as a support.

Four of these novels are set in the USA. Lauren Wolk's Beyond the Bright Sea takes place in 1925 on an island off the Massachusetts coast. An unaccompanied baby arrives one day secured in the well of an old fishing boat. Rescued and then looked after by two island dwellers, she decides aged twelve to discover more about her past. This is a beautiful novel rich in marine description. To read it is to feel one is living on the same island oneself.

No such comfort in Will Hill's explosive After the Fire, where eighteen-year-old Moonbeam is rescued from a cult based on the Branch Davidian religious sect involved in the murderous Waco siege in 1993. But while Moonbeam is now physically safe she remains imprisoned in the cult's paranoid teachings. Gradually and gently she is brought round by a psychiatrist and a sympathetic FBI agent both working to return her to sanity. This is powerful stuff, expertly told.

Even stronger, Angie Thomas's The Hate U Give is one of those stories no reader is ever likely to forget. Within it sixteen-year-old Starr, living in a poor and intermittently lawless American urban ghetto, is one of two black pupils at a respectable school in an adjoining, prosperous neighbourhood. While her family stay supportive along with her white boyfriend she still has to cope with dope-sellers, gun fights and an at times equally threatening police force. A former teenage rapper, Thomas writes in prose that burns with anger at the way the black community is so often treated. With excellent support from_* The Hate U Give* is set in a small town in the state of Washington, also in our own times. It describes the up and down emotional journey taken by seventeen-year-old Adam when he decides to come out as gay. Even though his father is an evangelical preacher who does not approve, Adam still manages to provide a good humoured account of a life-changing time in one boy's adolescence. As in Judy Blume's famous coming of age story _Forever_, mentioned by Ness as one of his inspirations, sex here is described chiefly as fun and life-affirming, with 'full penetration' one particularly valued milestone. But an accompanying, mystical tale, flickering in and out of the main narrative involving the soul of a murdered girl, is less successful.

Still abroad, Marcus Sedgwick's *Saint Death* is another unforgettable story, this time set along the US/Mexican border where life for the poorest can fairly be described as Hell on earth. Young Arturo, long abandoned by his no-good father, tries to raise a thousand dollars to save his friend from a terrible death. His efforts make riveting if painful reading, with Sedgwick adding his own comments in one-page essays on the dreadful realities of life in this region. This superb novel is not an easy read, but then, how could it be?

There are tough moments too in Geraldine McCaughrean's _Where the World Ends_. Once again this genius writer has added another masterpiece to her already outstanding list. Set in 1727, it tells how the annual trip from the Scottish island of St Kilda to a nearby Sea Stac to harvest gannets and puffins goes horribly wrong. Marooned on bare rock with no rescue ship turning up, the community of young men is threatened by the presence of an older, messianic preacher capitalising on their growing despair. Wonderful stuff; how does she keep on doing it?

But hats off too to Anthony McGowan, whose novel _Rook_, is so good it practically reads itself. Written in easily accessible language, it opens on a compelling note and never lets up after that. Problems caused by bullying at school, Dad's new lady friend, epilepsy, young love and brother Kenny's learning difficulties all form the backdrop to a story whose optimistic ending is entirely appropriate as well as highly welcome. The third novel from McGowan involving the same characters, this is high-octane writing.

And then there is Lissa Evans's _Wed Wabbit_, the only story in the short-list that is funny as well as brilliant. Aimed at a younger audience, this ingenious fantasy involves an alternative world peopled by toys and figures drawn from the imagination of four-year-old Minnie. Her older sister Fidge has to explore this new universe in order to bring Minnie back to full health after a road accident. She is accompanied by her cousin Graham, for many years deeply into therapy and always fearful of losing one of his 'transitional objects.' Only a children's book could come up with this combination of fantasy and humour running alongside a story with an ultimately serious intent.

So who should win? For me, _After the Fire_ and _Release_ are both good stories that might have won in a less contested field. _Saint Death_ is a hugely impressive and fearlessly confronting, but perhaps almost too honest for its own ultimate good. So this leaves me with _Where the World Ends_ as the best piece of writing, _The Hate U Give_ as addressing the most urgent contemporary problem, _Beyond the Bright Sea_ as the most beautiful, _Rook_ as the most instantly readable and _Wed Wabbit_ as the most fun. Judges – over to you!

_Wed Wabbit_ by Lissa Evans, David Fickling Books, 978-1910989449, £6.99
_After the Fire_ by Will Hill, Usborne, 978-1474924153, £8.99
_Where the World Ends_ by Geraldine McCaughrean, Usborne, 978-1474943437, £6.99
_Rook_ by Anthony McGowan, Barrington Stoke, 978-1781127230, £7.99
_Saint Death_ by Marcus Sedgwick, Orion, 978-1444011258, £7.99
_The Hate U Give_ by Angie Thomas, Walker Books, 978-1406372151, £7.99
_Beyond the Bright Sea_ by Lauren Wolk, Corgi, 978-0552574303, £6.99
Two Children Tell Filling in the Gaps

Virginia Lowe describes how children learn to fill in the gaps writers leave in their stories, based on her experience watching her own children respond to books.

Picture books include pictures and words, and, for the pre-reader, oral performance as well. So there is usually also a double audience: the looking, listening child and the reading mediator. As with any work of fiction, there is also the world of the story and its relationship to the external world. An important part is the filling of what Wolfgang Iser calls ‘telling gaps.’ Adults are often not even aware of these voids or openings, filling them without thinking about them consciously, but the young child often discusses the process, foregrounding it.

One of the first gaps encountered is characters or objects partly hidden in the pictures. Two child-characters in/on bed, demonstrate this clearly.

Listening to Bemelmans’ Madeline, Nick at age three and a half (3y6m) showed his understanding of this concept by playing with it. He was as eager to see Madeline’s appendix scar as her school mates were. Yet they have a privileged view, standing on the far side of her bed, so we can see only Madeline’s back. Nick’s suggestion was, ‘Why weren’t they all around here?’ – indicating the end of the bed. If they had been there, Madeline would be turned so that the book’s audience could see her scar as well as they could.

Peter Rabbit’s head and ears appear above the blankets towards the end of his story (Potter). Both children filled the visual gap:

Nick (3y10m): He’s hiding.
Virginia: Where is he hiding?
Nick: He’s hiding in bed. Why?
Rebecca (7y1m): He’s hiding because he doesn’t want to take the medicine.

‘Hiding’ is not mentioned in the text.

A matching example in the same story is Peter hiding in the watering can (except for his ears). Various other children are reported as being puzzled here, asking ‘where is the rest of him?’ At 2y3m Nick volunteered “Dere y’is!” pointing to the ears showing above the can, during the second reading in one day. At the same age, in a similar Potter scene of a character hiding – Tom Kitten in the bed canopy – Rebecca pointed to the red bulge and volunteered ‘That’s the kitten’s bottom’ (Tom Kitten).

Another type of gap is that between the picture and what the words state. Rebecca pointed it out himself, remarking ‘splash.’ Then he thought for a moment: ‘He thinks he isn’t [spilling] but he is.’ Only then did I realise that this was exactly right. Slightly tipsy, Felix is unaware of his spills. Rather than it being a mistake, the gap could be seen as a witty comment on Felix’s personality and state of inebriation.

Another type of gap is that where one has to disbelieve the words to understand the story. The listener has to go against the imperative of the text. At 2y4m, Nick with Rebecca (5y7m) listened to The Bears on Hemlock Mountain (Dalgleish and Sewell). At the end we recited together: ‘There are no bears on Hemlock Mountain / No bears at all…’ As we finished, wide-eyed and serious, Nick assured me: ‘Were bears on Hemlock Mountain? Despite the compulsion of the chant, he was able to state that the reverse was true.

During the same reading of Peter Rabbit mentioned above, Rebecca demonstrated the filling of another gap:

Nick: What’s their father and mother’s names?
Virginia: I don’t think they’ve got a daddy.
Nick: Why?
Virginia: [absent minded] Maybe he died.
Rebecca: He was put in a pie.
Virginia: Oh yes, by Mr McGregor!
Rebecca: Mrs McGregor!

Death is the gap here. Mrs Rabbit’s warning – ‘Your father had an accident there; he was put in a pie by Mrs McGregor’– sounds almost cheerful unless you really stop and think about it. There is a temptation on the part of the mediator to fill these gaps for the child. Author Katherine Paterson, instructed writers not to tell children everything, but to ‘ensure them the great open spaces they need to set their own imaginations soaring’.

Madeline Ludwig Bemelmans, Scholastic, 978-1-4071-10530, £6.99

Sarah Govett chooses the book that introduced her to the possibilities of dystopian fiction.

The book I most wish I’d written is *The Chrysalids* by John Wyndham. It was my first introduction to dystopia and the genre’s potential not only to provide thrilling stories, but also to act as a vehicle for social commentary. *The Chrysalids* is a powerful and unsettling coming of age story set in a post-nuclear community where intolerance and religious conservatism reign. Difference, in the form of genetic mutation, is seen as deviation from God’s creation, and hounded and stamped out. It is a brilliant, brilliant study of bigotry and humanity. Two words – Sophie’s foot. I’ve read it aged 14, 16 and 26 and I cry every time.

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**Good Reads**

**The Tunnel**


This is a brilliant story about a brother and sister called Rose and Jack. At the beginning the two children just don’t get along as they like completely different things but at the end they become friends. Rose overcomes her fears by following Jack into a strange tunnel and she finds herself in a mysterious world where her brother has been frozen into rock. Rose’s warmth and love for her brother brings him back to life. She becomes a hero in Jack’s eyes. I love this book because of all the illustrations especially the ones in the wood because there are lots of hidden creatures in the bark of the trees and you can see something new each time you look at it. My favourite part was when Rose went into the tunnel because I really wanted to know what was on the other side and what had happened to Jack. I would recommend this fantastic book to all ages and especially children who like imaginative and mysterious illustrations.

*Louis, aged 8, the Spinney School.*

**A Library of Lemons**

Jo Cotterill, Piccadilly Press, 978-1848125117, £5.99

*A Library of Lemons* is a thoroughly recommendable empathy book. The book revolves around a girl and her father who have both been affected by the father’s wife’s death. The girl, called Calypso, is very heartbroken and can’t be cheered up in any way. The book is very emotional and made me cry. The dad in the book is going mad until Calypso helps her father to get into the right mind. I have empathy for Calypso and her father because they feel like they have nothing to live for but really their lives are precious. This book kept me reading right until the end. This book shows how delicate a human’s feelings are. I recommend this book to everyone and I rate it 9/10.

*By John, Year 5, the Spinney School.*

**Time Travelling with a Hamster**


Al (Albert Einstein Hawking Chaudhury) lives with his mother, stepdad Steve, half-sister Carly and talented Grandpa Byron, who can remember anything and everything. Al’s dad was a clever scientist and inventor who studied the theory of time travel, though he died when Al was 8. This book is very empathetic since Al’s stepsister Carly plainly dislikes him and resents his presence, though she ends up liking him a lot more as the story progresses. He also has to deal with bullying at school on top of that, so adjusting to a new life without his dad is very hard. It was engaging and intriguing, as well as being funny, emotional and empathetic. The end was moving, and it made me feel happy for Al and his family. Overall this is a brilliant story that kept me pondering over time travel.

*Gautam, Year 5, Bewick Bridge Community School.*

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**The Chrysalids** by John Wyndham (978-0141032979) is published by Penguin, £8.99

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**Bewick Bridge Community School** and the **Spinney School** in Cherry Hinton, Cambridge are amongst a group of pioneer schools working with **EmpathyLab** and doing exciting things in the run up to, and on, **Empathy Day** 12 June 2018. Thanks to teachers Helen Mulligan of Bewick Bridge and Emily Garrill from the Spinney School and to the pupils for providing these special empathy book recommendations.

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Teachers wanting to join in with **Empathy Day**

[12th June can register here to receive a free toolkit.](http://www.empathylab.uk/empathy-day-resources)
The timing of Lauren St John’s latest book is uncanny discovers Michelle Pauli as she interviews Lauren about Kat Wolfe Investigates.

The book exemplifies Lauren St John’s assertion that, although ideas for books may appear suddenly, as if from nowhere, they are often born from an accumulation of years of different experiences. It was St John’s background in journalism, working on the Sunday Times magazine investigations team, that fed into Kat Wolfe Investigates extraordinary plot.

She explains that there is a category of spies known as ‘illegals’ who work under deep cover as sleeper agents, taking on new identities and living, working and raising families in their adopted country for many years, ready to be activated in an emergency – such as if an assassination is required.

‘It’s something that’s been a huge issue over the last few years and becoming more so,’ says St John. ‘I did a big investigation into illegal spies more than a decade ago when I was working for the Sunday Times and I interviewed one of the highest ranking spies ever to defect to the US. He said a really chilling thing to me: that Russia was and is the only country to run illegals and they are Russia’s most secret weapon of the future. When I was writing Kat Wolfe I looked up that old interview and it has much more resonance now; it’s quite eerie how things have panned out.’ The Salisbury attack on Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia is, she adds, ‘awful, heartbreaking’.

While the Russian spy plotline is, perhaps, the most prescient example of St John drawing on her life experiences, she also makes use of her memories of training as a veterinary nurse when she was 17. Kat Wolfe’s mum is a vet and, as you’d expect from any Lauren St John tale, eccentric and lovable animals large and small are key characters in the story, from the near-wild Savannah cat that Kat adopts in her new home to her friend Harper’s ‘Pocket Rocket’ racehorse and an Amazonian parrot that is her first petsitting assignment – and kicks off her adventure.

St John grew up on a farm and a game reserve in Zimbabwe, with a pet giraffe – the inspiration for her first children’s book, White Giraffe – and her books tend to roam far and wide. However, the Kat Wolfe series is set in the fictitious Bluebell Bay on the Dorset Jurassic coast and, unusually, there it will stay, says St John.

‘The Jurassic coast is such a rich place and there is so much to draw on with it – the amazing history, the army base, the dinosaurs, the tourists, all the different people who come in. And the beauty of petsitting as a device is that it allows Kat and Harper to go into all these different homes and meet all of these different people.’

The different people, the setting, the animals all come together in an exhilarating, freewheeling plot that veers off in all kinds of unexpected directions but is deftly brought together by St John’s immense storytelling skill.

It’s very much a consequence of her writing method, which rejects detailed planning in favour of spontaneity. ‘I start off with a general idea of what’s going to happen and a rough beginning, middle and end, and then along the way – and this particularly happened with Kat Wolfe – I think, oh, wouldn’t it be fun if this great thing happened, wouldn’t it be fun if that happened,’ explains St John. ‘I never feel that I am my characters but I always feel that I’m with them and so I love the thing when you’re writing that if you don’t really plan things you can experience events with your characters.’

However, she adds, ‘it does get a bit nerve wracking when there’s lots of different plot strands billowing out and you’re not quite sure how everything is going to come together...’

St John’s writing range is extensive – she has tackled non-fiction, YA and an adult novel – it is clear that middle grade is where her heart lies.

‘If people put down your dreams or make you feel like you can’t do anything, you can stop into the pages of a book and live your dreams and be brave through the characters. It’s such an amazing feeling; I don’t think you ever lose that,’ she comments.

On the flip side, she also feels that she gains a huge amount from spending time with and hearing from her young readers. ‘It’s wonderful to see how they connect and care about things. They are still so open to ideas and compassionate and they want very much to make the world a better place,’ she says.

It’s a motivation that resonates with St John. She talks passionately about the loss of libraries (and in Kat Wolfe she honours them with a wonderful character, retired librarian Edith) and the need to speak out and campaign against their destruction.

‘Libraries are not just about books. You can’t complain about rising crime levels or social division or people being left behind if you’re taking away a critical part of that equation. It’s wicked and it is criminal to take that resource away. Libraries are a community, a place where people come together to bond, to share, to learn,’ she urges.

The environment is another passion. She is a Born Free Foundation ambassador and has also just launched a new campaign, Authors 4 Oceans, bringing together 50 children’s authors, including Michael Morpurgo, Jacqueline Wilson and Quentin Blake, to push booksellers, publishers, literary festivals and young readers to find eco alternatives to the bags, straws and bottles polluting the seas.

The idea that we can all do something to make the world a better place is a message St John is keen to share with her readers. Asked what she hopes they will feel at the end of reading Kat Wolfe she replies, simply, ‘braver. That anything is possible. That it’s within their power to make a difference within their own communities.’

Kat Wolfe Investigates is published by Macmillan Children’s Books, 978-1509871223, £6.99 pbk

Michelle Pauli is a freelance writer and editor specialising in books and education. She created and edited the Guardian children’s books site.
**BOOKS ABOUT CHILDREN’S BOOKS**

**Bookworm. A Memoir of Childhood Reading**
Lucy Mangan, Square Peg, £22.99, £14.99 hbk

Three years ago Lucy Mangan penned an indifferent study in praise of children's books. She now returns to the genre by writing an account of her own childhood reading that is both wise and witty. Books about children’s literature can sometimes be seen on the worthy side, over-stressing the pedagogical at the expense of the personal. But Mangan openly adores all the authors she discusses and also writes with wry affection about her former responses. The amount of books she read as a child is so enormous her discussion of them now reads like a history of children’s literature over the last two centuries. She quickly developed a habit of literary honesty, telling herself and any of her family who would listen what she really felt about her reading. Upset by the ending of Charlotte’s Web, she rejects her father’s typically kind suggestion that the spider’s death is an inevitable part of the great scheme of things. ‘I know people die in real life,’ I shrieked. ‘But why do they have to die in books?’ What an interesting comment! Here are the rest of us critics solemnly abstaining over the years to the value of books that introduce the idea of death to children, faced by the experience of a real child who knew it all anyway and simply wanted a safe fictional place in which to escape.

Mangan takes her story up to adolescence, a time when ‘my classmates were discovering real boys. I thought I was doing quite well to have discovered them in books.’ She writes about well-known authors but also some forgotten ones for whom she still has an abiding love. If there is now something of a revival for Gwen Grant, Sybil Burr and Antonia Forest, it will surely be due to her advocacy. She doesn’t get everything right; George Macdonald would not have been able to share a beer with C.S Lewis at Oxford’s famous Eagle pub because he died in 1905. But she has interesting things to say about other celebrated names from the past like Joyce Lankester Brisley, whose own home life as a child was in such marked contrast to that enjoyed by her immortal fictional character Molly-Molly-Mandy.

And all the time Mangan has the ability to be ceaselessly and apparently effortlessly funny, as all who read her television reviews in The Guardian will confirm. Her footnotes are a particular delight, still waging family battles but now conducted in high good humour. The actual text is also a joy. When she describes the joys of going to her local school or public library and finding lovely old books on the shelves as bright as new ones today. These young Lucy would still be able to visit her beloved Torridon Road Library in Catford, South London. But where in so many libraries and suburbs now might her modern equivalent go to find such past and present treasures of the mind?

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

**Sophie Johnson: Unicorn Expert**


Sophie Johnson, Unicorn Expert is a beautifully conceived and executed picture book, and a thoroughly joyful reading experience. Little Sophie Johnson is a unicorn expert, proudly announcing that she lives with 17 unicorns. A look at the pictures reveals that most things – your toys, dog, little brother – can be transformed into unicorns by the addition of a cardboard horn, or toothbrush if you’ve run out of cardboard. Sophie takes her responsibilities for looking after her unicorns very seriously, and has a lot to do. Teaching them everything they need to know, she starts with magic, and is so busy that she doesn’t notice when a real unicorn joins the party. Indeed, as Sophie plays happily all day, she never notices the little unicorn quietly participating in the action, though her baby brother and dog both do.

Morag Hood’s gorgeous illustrations perfectly capture the bustle and liveliness of a nursery age child’s life, and the little unicorn – small, round, white but sparkling with magic – provides a small patch of unmissable quiet in the proceedings. At the end of the day, while Sophie is enjoying her tea, head buried in an unicorn book, the little unicorn trots out of the door, leaving slightly more possibility of return than that other magical visitor, the tiger who came to tea. The story is told through a particularly skilful combination of text and illustration, each supporting the other while still leaving gaps for the reader to fill in. It’s a delightful representation of ordinary life, but with the perfect emphasis on children’s awareness of the ever-present possibility of magic.

**The Story of Tantrum O’Furrly**

***Cressida Cowell, ill. Mark Nicholas* Hodder, 36pp, 978 1 444 93380 2, £12.99, hbk

Here is a simple, poetic fable, which plays a new variation on the old picture book theme of the comforts of safe domesticity and the allure of the dangerous outside world of adventure. Tantrum O’Furrly (what a lovely name) sings a tale to her three kittens as they dance their hungry stray cat way across the roof tops under the moon. It is a tale of kitten Smallpaw, who had a comfy bed and a kind owner, but was bored and longed for the world beyond that cat flap and to hear a good story. Just outside the back door is a fox ready to please her. If only Smallpaw would come close enough to hear his seductive tale. This is a good story, but, at the crucial moment, in flies a scrappy ginger stray and sees off the fox. And, from then on, Smallpaw goes out every evening to dance with the stray cats under the moon, and is careful about foxes. This tale of a story within a story is perfectly told, with an especially satisfying ending, and two good morals to take away: ‘A cat with courage makes her own story’; and ‘You CAN be a stray cat and a good cat as well.’ Cressida Cowell’s well-chosen words are matched by some outstanding illustrations from Mark Nicholas, who uses minimal pictorial resources, mainly in black and white with ginger and red touches. His windblown silhouette houses and elongated cats suggest Tim Burton for toddlers.

**Colour My Days**

***Ross Collins*, Barrington Stoke Picture Squirrels, 32pp, 978-1-78112-693-3, £6.99 pbk

At first, this looks like a colouring book, as the first pages are in outline when we meet Emmy and Jeff, and

**REVIEWS 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.

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

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

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

Jon Biddle is English Coordinator/Reading Champion at Moorlands Primary Academy in Norfolk, and co-founder of the *Patron of Reading* scheme.

Rebecca Butler writes and lectures on children’s literature.

Jane Churchill is a children’s book consultant.

Stuart Dyer is an Assistant Head Teacher in a Bristol primary school.

Anne Faundez is a freelance education and children’s book consultant.

Janet Fisher is a children’s literature consultant.

Geoff Fox is former Co-Editor (UK) of *Children’s Literature in Education*, but continues to work on the board and as an occasional teller of traditional tales.

Sarah Gallagher is a headteacher and director of Storyshack.org.

Christine Hammill teaches in a college of further education and is also an author.

Ferelith Hordon is Managing Editor of *Books for Keeps*.

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

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

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

**Books for Keeps** No.230 May 2018 21
**Under 5s Pre-School/Nursery/Infant continued**

Is it a Mermaid?
Candy Gourlay, ill. Francesca Chessa, Otter-Barry, 28pp, 978 1 91095 912 1, £11.99 hbk

Benji and Bel are playing on the beach when they spot an unusual sea creature. Benji immediately identifies the sea creature as a dugong. The creature replies that she is in fact a beautiful mermaid. Bel is not so sure but Benji is cross - he knows she is right. While the sea creature tries to prove to a sceptical Benji that she is a mermaid he points out all the features which indicate she is a dugong. When he finally refers to her as a sea cow the dugong can stand it no longer, breaks down and cries. Bel is distraught and Benji realises he has gone too far. He apologises for having hurt her feelings. The dugong promises to be friends with both Benji and Bel spending the rest of the day playing happily with the dugong until it is time to go home.

This is a sensitive story about considering the feelings of others. As well as exploring the power of imaginative play it also touches lightly on the right of the individual to assert their own identity. The illustrations are just gorgeous and add detail to the story, is that a mermaid disappearing appearing from the shadows and there, is a little black and white cat? A dog, or a frog on a log? ... An invisible man, or a door to Japan? (It has a little flag on the lock plate).... It could be the moon, or a yellow balloon. Is it a hat, or (next page) a black and white cat? A dog, or a frog on a log? The pages continue with images for their child with balance for example ‘May your ears listen and your eyes the singing...and the silence’ or ‘and when tears flow may peace follow’. The words are simply put but say much of what is needed.

**Baby Bird**

This is one of the first titles in First Editions a new sub-imprint solely devoted to picture books. Born with one misshapen wing that doesn’t develop fully, Baby Bird is from the outset, different. When the time comes for the hatchlings to leave the safety of their nest, Baby watches with the rest of the brood take to the air. ‘Birds are born to fly’ thinks the little creature but Baby’s attempts to get airborne, follow them and join in the fun all end disastrously.

Baby Bird isn’t one to give up easily however and suddenly a huge face appears from the shadows and there, is not the monster Baby anticipated, but a large black bird calling itself Cooter.

Initially Cooter upsets the fledgling but then offers to become a supportive buddy together they spend the afternoon trying to get Baby flying: fun though it might be for Cooter, for his friend, it most certainly is not.

But Baby Bird is determined to achieve his heart’s desire? Seemingly not for after due consideration and repeated failures Cooter concludes, ‘I don’t think you are going to fly with that little wing.’ His comment precipitates a fall, considerable flapping, a rescue and a revelation on Cooter’s part that changes the atmosphere completely and with it Baby Bird’s outlook on life and flight.

This beautifully illustrated story really is something of a tear-jerker but essentially it’s one of hope and its uplifting ending will surely make your spirits soar. Self-acceptance and the power of friendship win through.

**The Lost Penguin**
Clare Freedman and Kate Hindley, Simon and Schuster, 32pp, 978-1471117345, £16.99 pbk

This is a sweet little story featuring, for the second time, the endearing characters of Oliver and Patch. Oliver is a little boy who has friend called Ruby, and she has a dog called Patch. In this story they visit a zoo. The zoo contains all sorts of different animals but the one enclosure that really catches their eye is the penguin area where they spy a little penguin who isn’t mixing with any of the other penguins. The zoo keeper explains that the small penguin is called Peep and is from a rescue centre so hasn’t really settled in yet. Oliver, Ruby, and Patch decide to leave the zoo to come back the next day but on their return they discover that the little penguin is missing.

This story would be a really good discussion starter if anybody was feeling left out and it’s a really good way of showing the effects of loneliness, in a gentle way, using animals and people too. The illustrations are very appealing indeed. Obviously the zoo gives scope for some very entertaining animals – meerkats included and I loved the way the penguins have a good old wash under their flippers! A very enjoyable adventure for Oliver and Patch and I hope they will have many more to come. SG

**Held in Love**

Held in Love would make a wonderful gift for new parents. It’s a beautiful blessing for any child – no matter how far you travel away you are ‘held in love’.

The book starts in the widest form by looking at the universe then the child. Actually, danke, then a home with a mother reading to her baby.

The pages then continue with images for their child with balance for example ‘May your ears listen and your eyes the singing...and the silence’ or ‘and when tears flow may peace follow’. The words are simply put but say much of what is needed.

Those illustrations have been created by Oamul Lu for his first picture book and complement its message with muted tones, lots of space and simple shapes. SG

**Looking After William**
Eve Coy, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978 1 78344 514 7, £11.99 hbk

Wonderfully warm and wacky, this picture book is a role reversal story. It is the little girl who claims to be the mummy and to be looking after her daddy, and he is (she says) the dad. Actually, daddy seems to be the main carer for the little girl, though there is a mum in evidence too – and a wonderful cat on every page, who also features on the front endpapers. ‘William likes to get up early,’ the little girl says, but the pictures tell a different story. Dad and mum are sound asleep when their daughter jumps on the parental bed, and things get little better for poor, beleaguered daddy as the day goes on. He needs lots of stripes, the little girl tells us, so it is daddy on the bicycle puffing up the hill pulling a cart with her in it. And at the supermarket when he needs so much attention’, daddy is doing all the work while the little girl falls asleep sitting in the cart. Life is very busy for the little girl when she looks after her dad, but she also understands that he needs love, and we certainly see a very loving father who is willing to jump through hoops for his darling daughter. She knows he could be all sorts of things when he grows up, but most of all, he wants to be ‘my dad’. The tender and realistic illustrations are huge fun, and I look forward to seeing what the talented Ms Coy does next. ES
The Last Wolf


Little Red puts on her hunting hat and boots, picks up her popgun and her lunch box and sets off to catch a wolf. But wolves are hard to find in today’s woods until she stumbles across a door; a door that leads into a warm, cozy tree-cave. This is the home of the Last Wolf, the Last Bear and the Last Lynx who gaze at her with huge hungry eyes. Is Little Red facing real danger?

This gentle story with its strong ecological message aimed at the youngest audience is a delight to read. Full of the fun details that are such an element of Mini Grey’s work, the presentation has been suitably and effectively pared down. The font is bold and clear and well placed on each spread allowing the eye to move easily across the text. The language has the attractive rhythm of a bedtime story introducing enough jealousy to create a friction, but with a reassuringly and positive end. The suggestion that one might plant a tree – even if it might require time to grow – is engaging. The artist’s distinctive style has also been simplified to great advantage. Her bold lines and colourful palette bring the story to life as much as the design in which the careful use of split pages adds to the drama. This is a book to share with a class or with the family. Highly recommended. FH

The Rhythm of the Rain

Grahame Baker-Smith, Templar, 32pp, 9781787410145, £12.99 hbk

“Dark brown is the river...” Stevenson’s poem reflects on the path of the river as it flows “away down the valley” connecting children as they play. This is the theme that Grahame Baker-Smith brings to life in his lyrical picture book. We meet Isaac as he plays by a mountain pool; the rain falls and the water flows out of the pool to become a stream then a river, Isaac adds to the flow with his jar of water. The river joins the sea. Isaac watches and wonders where his water will go. But we do not stop; following the currents as they run deep under the ocean we reach distant shores. The sun draws the seawater up to become rain which falls on Cassi’s village filling their pool. The water runs out to become a life giving stream and river and so back to the sea – and eventually to Isaac.

One compelling narrative that would encourage thought and discussion. Baker-Smith’s prose does not pretend to be poetry, but takes on some of the structure and rhythm of the water. As the narrative describes the path of the river, the moods of the sea, we are made aware that water is not an ornament - it has uses, it is the home of many creatures, it is an element that brings life. The text may be slight; the illustrations are not. Expansive double page spreads overflowing with rich saturated colours draw the reader into the landscape. The palette is dark and lush, the water gleams against its background. It is water that subtly dominates every spread, lucent, translucent, in perpetual movement, still. From the moment we encounter the book, the rain falling down the covers, through the end papers with rain drops splashing into a pool to a stream tumbling downhill we are aware of water and the way it links us. It is Baker-Smith’s skill that is the key to creating this world.

Thoughtful and visually rewarding this should be on every library shelf. FH

The Extraordinary Gardener

Sam Boughton, Tate Publishing, 32pp, 978 1 8497 6566 4, £9.99 hbk

Young Joe lives in a dreary grey world of high-rise flats and office blocks so it’s fortunate that he has a fertile imagination that allows him to mind travel to a world of gigantic plants and extraordinary animals, a world he would love to be real.

One night his bedtime reading sows the seed of an idea in the boy’s mind, an idea that next morning, sends him out searching for the tiny thing - a real seed - that will give life to his idea.

Having finally found one, Joe plants it, water it, puts the pot on his balcony and waits; but nothing seems to happen, so he forgets all about it and returns to his daydreams.

All the while though, unobserved, that little seed is growing and one day Joe is thrilled to discover a beautiful little tree has grown up. That’s the start of a story garden where long everyone in his neighbourhood has become involved in project transformation. The world Joe and his garden show us is not one of grey, humdrum; instead thanks to one boy’s imagination and infectious enthusiasm it is transformed into a glowing city of plants and flowers, trees and flowers, with one finger), super-fast and brave, categorised as the very best of what overcoming barriers to a dream can achieve. Throughout, the illustrations extend and enhance the narrative. Little details easy to miss provide depth – from the opening spread where Humpty sits on his wall in sunshine, to the empty wall with a lone bird perched on it and on through the pages as Humpty’s garden is transformed into a life giveing supermarket again glowing with colour and light, and the reader is drawn into the story as much by the images as by the words. Winner of the Calderco Medals 2017, it is a book to be shared widely. FH

After the Fall, How Humpty Dumpty got back up again

Dan Sanitat, Andersen Press, 9781787844655, £6.99 pbk

Humpty Dumpty tells his story. We all know about his accident, but what happens next? It seems the king’s men were able to put him together again – well mostly. It is certainly possible to mend the physical hurts but not so easy to heal the psychological. And Humpty now suffers from a fear of heights, which means he can no longer do things he did – in particular his love of watching birds fly. Will he always live with this fear? Can his life be transformed?

On one level this is a book that tells the story of a Nursery Rhyme character with humour and wit; a another level it deals with fear, anxiety, determination, perseverance and finally the success that leads to transformation, here in the case of Humpty Dumpty as a whole rather than just a very logical engagement is total – and the joyous surprise at the end an affirmation of what overcoming barriers to a dream can achieve. Throughout, the illustrations extend and enhance the narrative. Little details easy to miss provide depth – from the opening spread where Humpty sits on his wall in sunshine, to the empty wall with a lone bird perched on it and on through the pages as Humpty’s garden is transformed into a life giveing supermarket again glowing with colour and light, and the reader is drawn into the story as much by the images as by the words. Winner of the Calderco Medals 2017, it is a book to be shared widely. FH

Juniper Jupiter

Lizzy Stewart, Lincoln Children’s, 32pp, 978-1-8603-023-8, £11.99 hbk

There’s lots to talk about, lots to get children thinking, and it makes the idea of drawing to convey information or to map out your experiences really appealing. MMa

The Garden

There’s A Tiger In

Lizzy Stewart’s review

32pp,978-1-8603-023-8, £11.99 hbk

Lizzy Stewart’s There’s A Tiger In The Garden wins the 2017 Waterstones Children’s Book Prize for 2017, and this is another story about the power of a child’s imagination. Will it be another prize-winner?

Juniper Jupiter is a young superhero, complete with cloak, and she bravely saves cats from being stuck up trees, is super-strong (lifts Dad with one finger), super-fast and super-smart (sits on a pile of books, including There’s A Tiger In The Garden, in a Matilda-like pose) , and she can fly, but “it’s no big deal”. She loves being a superhero, but sometimes it’s a lonely job - she realises that she needs a sidekick. Her home-made posters, made with Dad’s help, state that the sidekick must be brave, strong, smart, love ice-cream, be good at dancing, and funny... and an awful lot of people, in all sorts of costumes, queue outside her house – this double-page spread is well worth poring over. For various reasons, none of them is quite right, and she is almost given up, when she realises that she should have looked closer to home - th the top shelf of all the necessary qualities, including a taste for ice-cream. (Does Dad look

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Books for Keeps

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Everything You Need for a Treehouse

Carter Higgins, ill. Emily Hughes, Chronicle Books, 32pp, £11.99 hbk

‘Everything you need for a treehouse starts with time and looking up and imagining a home of timber and rafters in wrangled, gnarled bark.’

Who can resist the lure of childhood enchantment and playing outdoors revelling in the natural world embodied in this unusual offering from Higgins and Hughes. The text is a lyrical telling of where said treehouse might be situated: will it stand alone or be located somewhere in a forest? Other vital elements are timber, tools, ropes, boxes and crucially, imagination.

Emily Hughes illustrations are full of whimsy and an absolute delight. You’ll need time to spend poring over every spread. I particularly love this notion of bookshelves built into the construction.

Every one of the magical spaces created in this book is a celebration of creativity and collaboration, while the final spread brings readers right back down to earth again with a view of small children in a backyard with what looks for all the world as the author said at the outset, ‘Everything you need – starts with time.’

From endpaper to endpaper, a dream of a book that will surely bring out the wild child in all of us.

Forever or a Day

Sarah Jacoby, Chronicle Books, 32pp, 978 1 4521 6465 2, £12.99 hbk

Sarah Jacoby’s meditation on time is beautiful. Watched over the opening lines of one of my favourite poets, T.S. Eliot’s Burnt Norton, ‘Time present and time past/ Are both perhaps present in time future,’ life with its changes in tempo before mother, father and child with cases finally packed join the commuters – a night train back to the city with its softly glowing lights and a final ‘I love the time I have with you.’ said back in the family car.

Simply asked, the author poses profound questions and much of this is done through her beautiful watercolour and pastel scenes. One such question, prompted by the final illustration of parents and child beside a tent, with a toy train and to what might the family actually go anywhere?

This is most definitely a book to savour, to ponder over and to discuss. Such a lovely text that shows just how important it is to be IN the moment. I’ve read it several times each with new questions and new meanings emerging.

Cake

Sue Hendra and Paul Linnet , Macmillan, 24pp, 978-1509827435, £11.99 hbk

This book really made me laugh. It has a kind of ‘in your face front cover’ with a jubilant cake on the front and simply titled Cake you really want to read it.

It’s a multi layered book - everyone in the family will enjoy it - from little ones with the bold pictures to grown-ups probably making some predictions before it’s even started to see what might happen.

Cake has been invited to a party and isn’t sure what adornment to wrap around himself. After lovely page illustrating deliberations he plumps for the simple Birthday Cake ‘look’. He is very excited when he gets there but things begin to look a little bit more sinister for Cake as Cake realises that his future might not be very secure at the end of the party. Luckily Cake has some kind and heroic ‘foodie friends’ who set up a Cake escape.

The pictures are bold, colourful and humorous with a simple font making the short sentences easy to read. It would be a grand book for sharing and a lovely book for a Foodie topic with small children.

What a crazily silly book. It’s a great culture and family life, and Ms Greenfield has been winning awards in the US for her children’s books for many years. In the UK, when Jace takes Thinker to school for pet day, he is a bit nervous that Thinker might talk, but when he does – because he can’t keep the poem inside himself any longer – the whole class and all the pets in it erupt with laughter and pleasure. We, too, will erupt with pleasure when reading this delightful book!

Grandmas from Mars

Michelle Robinson, ill. Fred Blunt, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 9781408888766, £6.99 pbk

What a crazily silly book. It’s a great idea and all grandmas and grannies should read it pre-prepared - children too just in case their grandmums and grandads are behaving strangely! The illustrations are a treat for anyone who enjoys aliens who behave like this. In this unusual picture book, we meet Thinker, a small black and white dog who belongs to Jace. Both are members of a black family consisting of mum, dad and sister Kimmy, but what makes this book of poems so unusual is that Thinker can talk, but his talking only consists of reciting his own poems. Jace is a poet too, and together they write all sorts of happy poems about the family, about school, about Jace’s sister Kimmy, and some that are philosophical too, about life in general and why things are as they are. The rhyming is unusual - some free verse, but with lots of internal rhymes, and they dance with rhythm and meaning. One is a haiku, and another is a rap. The book is a joyful story, and the highly engaging and funny poemتد on the back cover.

Thinker My Puppy Poet and Me

Eloise Greenfield, ill. Ehsan Abdollahi, Tiny Owl, 32pp, 978 1 910328 33 0, £9.99 hbk

In this unusual picture book, we meet Thinker, a small black and white dog who belongs to Jace. Both are members of a black family consisting of mum, dad and sister Kimmy, but what makes this book of poems so unusual is that Thinker can talk, but his talking only consists of reciting his own poems. Jace is a poet too, and together they write all sorts of happy poems about the family, about school, about Jace’s sister Kimmy, and some that are philosophical too, about life in general and why things are as they are. The rhyming is unusual - some free verse, but with lots of internal rhymes, and they dance with rhythm and meaning. One is a haiku, and another is a rap. The book is a joyful story, and the highly engaging and funny poem
How to Train the Perfect Parents

Rebecca Ashdown, Templar, 30pp.
978 1 78570 833 8, £6.99 hbk

In this absolute hoot of a picture book, we meet Mimi Lee, who is convinced that she has the failsafe three-step plan to make her parents do anything she wants them to. They just have to be trained. Her utmost desire in life is to have a puppy, and she goes about training her parents that this is a necessity by step 1 – Communicating. This entails constantly walking past the pet shop and shouting ‘puppy’, refusing any clothes except those with pictures of dogs on them, and practicing facial expressions as the mirror shows her likes and dislikes. Step 2 is Trust. This means showing how responsible you are by making the parents breakfast in bed and leaving chaos in the process. Well-trained parents will ‘ignore any accidents’! Routine is the third step, and this is provided by wanting to read a book about dogs after time after time… until the parents are heartily sick of it. Then there is the ‘big push’ when Mimi can talk of nothing but puppies and finally gets her wish. She is ecstatic, of course, but then the real truth hits. Puppies are NOT easy to train, and her three-step plan does no good at all. She is soon realising that she needs help – help provided by her loving but often bemused parents. The illustrations are wonderful. Full of humour and fun, they pop and sparkle with loads of detail. Children and parents both will love them and enjoy the story together – hopefully not quite so many times as in step 3!

5 - 8 Infant/Junior continued

Kat Wolfe Investigates

Lauren St John, illus Beidi Guo, Macmillan Children’s Books, 352pp, 9781509871223, £6.99pbk

Kat is excited when her mother finds a new job as the vet in a country practice. She loves animals herself and hopes that their new life will bring her the opportunities that city life lacks. Her hopes are not dashed; not only are there animals ranging from Tiny, the almost-wild cat, to a very talkative cockatoo and a difficult horse but she makes a friend as well. But it is not all idyllic. There is a mystery to solve and Kat needs all her wits to help her escape real danger.

Non-stop action, nasty villains, helpful (if not always effective) adults and animals ensure that this is a lively adventure story and one to satisfy Lauren St John’s many fans while attracting new readers. Kat is an attractive, neatly presented protagonist with whom many young readers will identify. With her friend Harper and the support of the local policeman, Sergeant Singh, she is able to ouwit a potential act of terrorism. The plot moves briskly, neat coincidences allow events to flow satisfactorily. Young readers will quickly find themselves drawn into the story facing danger with Kat and Harper or galling across the night landscape to fetch help, arriving at the satisfactory conclusion – and looking forward to the next adventure.

8 - 10 Junior/Middle

The Great Big Book of Friends

Mary Hoffman, ill Ros Asquith, Frances Lincoln, 40pp.
978 1 78605 054 2, £12.99 hbk

Another great book in the series by these two authors! Friendship has its joy and its sorrow, and all of the possibilities are covered in this jolly production. There are different kinds of friends – best friends, group friends, family friends, pet friends, friends with lots in common, and those with whom we seemingly have nothing in common. Friends fall and sometimes permanently and sometimes for only a short time. Perhaps a friend can be far away, someone you write to but whom you haven’t met. Sometimes friends have to leave our lives if they move away or go to a different school, but some friends will remain friends for life. Things can be friends too – stuffed toys, or a book – and pets can be special friends indeed. Some people don’t need friends, and that is okay too. The humour in the book is all in the comic-style pictures by a master cartoonist and in the layout of the pages. Every page has decorations round the edges. For instance, on the double spread about making friends, we have speech bubbles with ideas about how to start a friendship. What’s your name? Do you like dogs? How do you do that? The decorations can be words or picture, but they are always highly effective. And the detail is marvellous. The resident cat is a super addition too! This is a book for everyone, and it will prove a useful tool for group discussion at school and for reading at home.

The Secret of the Night Train

Sylvia Bishop, illus Marco Guadalupi, Scholastic, 9781407184401, 304pp, £6.99pbk

Max is on her way to stay with her great-aunt Elodie in Istanbul; a great – aunt she has never met but whom her mother describes as “a very difficult woman”. Of course Max cannot travel by herself – enter Sister Marguerite, a very unusual sort of nun. This is the start of a very unusual adventure in which Max (with Sister Marguerite) must pit their wits against a master-thief as they travel from Paris to Istanbul via Munich, Budapest and Bucharest. But which of the other travellers on the train could it be? Sylvia Bishop is fast making her name as a creator of lively, quirky adventures, and The Secret of the Night Train will only help to confirm this. Setting her story on a train that will travel across a number of countries allows her to populate a varied and even exotic cast; there is more than a little nod to the grande dame of the detective story, Agatha Christie but appropriately fashioned in the Blyton mould. There are mistaken identities, suspicious characters, a stolen diamond, even an unpleasant old lady (surely a villain?). The plot twists and turns pleasurably held together by the determination of Max and the jeopardy is neatly balanced by a strong vein of humour. The prose is rich, deliciously readable and is delightfully enhanced by Marco Guadalupi’s illustrations which capture the flavour of the narrative to perfection.

The Chocolate Factory Ghost

David O’Connell illus Clare Powell, Bloomsbury, 0028pp, 978 1 408870866, 5.99 pbk

Lucky underpants, magical creatures, bucket-loads of fudge – just some of the tempting treats on offer in The Chocolate Factory Ghost, book one in a very promising new series by David O’Connell. It opens in great style, with young Archie McBudge learning to his astonishment that Great-Uncle Archibald has left him as sole proprietor to his famous fudge factory and the McBudge Confectionary Company. Before you can say ‘always read the small print’, Archie and his mum are settled into their new home Honeystone Hall, Archie has a new dog, and new friends Fliss and Billy too to fill him on local mythology and legends, something that will prove very useful. Because all is not well at the fudge factory, and if Archie can’t discover his uncle’s secret ingredient before stock runs out, its future is very precarious indeed. Uncle Archibald has left six clues for Archie to solve, but his revolting relatives the McBudge Confectionary Company will only help to confirm this. The more popular you are, the happier you become! – seems a trifle odd. Fortunately Tyler does make friends when she stumbles on the school’s nerds Ashley and Dylan hiding in a darkened library. The three become unlikely super-heroes when the community is struck by a strange affliction that causes one arm to elongate to extraordinary length. It turns out this bizarre problem is the side-effect of constant selfie-taking and the girls tackle it by triple-handedly turning selfies into

Happyville High: Geek Tragedy


If nerds ruled the world, we might all be in a happier place… that’s at least sort of the message of Tom McLaughlin’s typically funny, light-touch satirical new adventure series. Tyler, the narrator, is smart – too smart for school in fact and she’s been taught at home by her dad since kindergarten. Now though he’s decided it’s time she had a normal life, and the two move to Happyville, statistically the happiest place ever. He can write his book, she can go to the local school and, for the first time ever, make friends. Maybe there’s something inherently wrong with any place that happy, certainly Happyville High – motto ‘The more popular you are, the happier you become!’ - seems a trifle odd. Fortunately Tyler does make friends when she stumbles on the school’s nerds Ashley and Dylan hiding in a darkened library. The three become unlikely super-heroes when the community is struck by a strange affliction that causes one arm to elongate to extraordinary length. It turns out this bizarre problem is the side-effect of constant selfie-taking and the girls tackle it by triple-handedly turning selfies into
were part of wider movements for change. Success, measured sometimes in Nobel prizes, was not the ultimate aim. The book also gathers some of this even from these short accounts of their lives. But it is not promoted with the gloss of celebrity. Final semantic quibble: you can say they changed the world; you can say they made history; but, as there are no famous women historians (or time travel, for that matter) you can change the world; you can change the story; and there are no famous women historians (or time travel, for that matter) you can change the world; you can change the story; and there are no famous women historians (or time travel, for that matter) you can change the world; you can change the story; and there are no famous women historians (or time travel, for that matter) you can change the world; you can change the story; and there are no famous women historians (or time travel, for that matter) you can change the world; you can change the story; and there are no famous women historians (or time travel, for that matter) you can change the world; you can change the story; and there are no famous women historians (or time travel, for that matter) you can change the world; you can change the story; and there are no famous women historians (or time travel, for that matter) you can change the world; 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**Charlie and Me: 421 Miles from Home**

Mark Lowery, Piccadilly Press, 261pp, 978 1 84812 622 0, £5.99 pbk

This is a brilliant, emotional story that focuses on the relationship between a young boy and his brother, as they embark upon a huge journey from their family home in Preston all the way to their favourite holiday destination in Cornwall – just to see a dolphin! They are on their own and they have very little in the way of food or money, but they have utterly determined to make it to all the way to St Bernard’s in time for dolphin o’clock.

The story is told by Martin, long-suffering older brother to Charlie, who is, to say the least, eccentric. Seriously ill as a child, Charlie has an endearing and wonderful approach to life, chatting merrily with complete strangers, eating ham-and-jam sandwiches and pretending he has CCTV in his belly button.

On their way to St Bernard’s, the boys have to contend with fastidious ticket attendant, scary teenagers and very hungry tummy. Martin does his best to keep them on track, but Charlie’s tendency for spontaneous acts of stupidity (such as leaving the train when he sees someone he doesn’t like the look of!) make things even harder.

The sibling relationship between the two main characters is thoroughly absorbing. Martin utterly loves his brother but can barely tolerate him...a sensation many readers with siblings will recognise! Mark Lowery describes the closeness between the boys with heart-warming detail, and without unnecessary sentiment.

Though the story has plenty of funny and dramatic moments (two children stuck on a train for hours proves to be a surprisingly rich source of comedy) the overall feeling of the book is one of emotion and drama. This is achieved through Lowery’s wonderful use of first person. Martin shares all his emotions with the reader, whilst keeping key details hidden, and the reader is very much affected. He flashes back to the last family holiday in St Bernard’s, and each chapter begins with one of Martin’s own poems. These offer extra clues about the narrative and about Martin’s character. The poems themselves are varied, lively and engaging, and arrive just as the best breaks on a long heart-warming journey.

In Charlie and Me, Mark Lowery has delivered a very special story. Readers will cry with laughter and sadness in equal measure, as they share in the journey of two children on a mission to rediscover whatever the magic ingredient was that made an old family holiday so special. SD

**How Billy Brown saved the Queen**

Alison Healy, ill. Fintan Taite. Little Island Books, 114pp, 9781014111957, £6.99 pbk

Nine-year-old Billy Brown feels that he is no good at anything: he can’t catch a baseball, and who wants to be brilliant at that? But when the country’s beloved Queen Alicia struggles to understand how Billy can save the world. We know this almost from the very first page, that there is more to Charlie than the pain which has knocked him off his feet like an unexpected move from an opponent; and a lot more than his constant desire for more fashionable trainers to wear, party through the care of his friends and the support of the Bell’s father has died suddenly from a heart attack, and even more shockingly, right in front of twelve year old Charlie. You don’t rebound from that easily. And Charlie feels helpless and angry. He is withdrawn and insecure, arguing with his mom and, for the first time, skipping school. Yet we know, from the very first page, that there is more to Charlie than the pain which has knocked him off his feet like an unexpected move from an opponent; and a lot more than his constant desire for more fashionable trainers to wear, party through the care of his friends and the support of the Bell’s father has died suddenly from a heart attack, and even more shockingly, right in front of twelve year old Charlie. You don’t rebound from that easily. And Charlie feels helpless and angry. He is withdrawn and insecure, arguing with his mom and, for the first time, skipping school. Yet we know, from the very first page, that there is more to Charlie than the pain which has knocked him off his feet like an unexpected move from an opponent; and a lot more than his constant desire for more fashionable trainers to wear, party through the care of his friends and the support of the Bell’s father has died suddenly from a heart attack, and even more shockingly, right in front of twelve year old Charlie. You don’t rebound from that easily. And Charlie feels helpless and angry. He is withdrawn and insecure, arguing with his mom and, for the first time, skipping school. Yet we know, from the very first page, that there is more to Charlie than the pain which has knocked him off his feet like an unexpected move from an opponent; and a lot more than his constant desire for more fashionable trainers to wear, party through the care of his friends and the support of the Bell’s father has died suddenly from a heart attack, and even more shockingly, right in front of twelve year old Charlie. You don’t rebound from that easily. And Charlie feels helpless and angry. He is withdrawn and insecure, arguing with his mom and, for the first time, skipping school. Yet we know, from the very first page, that there is more to Charlie than the pain which has knocked him off his feet like an unexpected move from an opponent; and a lot more than his constant desire for more fashionable trainers to wear, party through the care of his friends and the support of the Bell’s father has died suddenly from a heart attack, and even more shockingly, right in front of twelve year old Charlie. You don’t rebound from that easily. And Charlie feels helpless and angry. He is withdrawn and insecure, arguing with his mom and, for the first time, skipping school. Yet we know, from the very first page, that there is more to Charlie than the pain which has knocked him off his feet like an unexpected move from an opponent; and a lot more than his constant desire for more fashionable trainers to wear, party through the care of his friends and the support of the Bell’s father has died suddenly from a heart attack, and even more shockingly, right in front of twelve year old Charlie. You don’t rebound from that easily.
New Talent

The House with Chicken Legs

Sophie Andersen, ill. Elisa Paganeli, Usborne, 356pp, 978 1 474940665 £6.99 pbk

A beautiful and original take on the Tale of Baba Yaga. Marinka has lived with her grandmother. Baba Yaga all her life, helping her to lead the dead through The Gate to the stars and to enjoy one last wonderful view of the stories of their lives. But Marinka is lonely. Her only other company is Jack the Jackdaw. All she wants is a real family. One not driven more for than a few days as her house on chicken legs is constantly on the move. Marinka is warned not to break the rules, and not to talk with anyone from the house. One day she finds a boy with an abandoned lamb sitting on the other side of the fence. But just as she is about to make friends with him and the boy loins Malinka the lamb to look after the house moves on. Malinka is heartbroken. A few days later she meets a new friend but this time the consequences are devastating and her grandmother disappears. To find her Marinka has to seek the help of the Old Yaga. She also becomes friends with two other girls in the market but is shocked to discover they are not kind-hearted and finally begins to appreciate the special relationship she has with her house, her grandmother and the yaga community.

Malinka has always been told her destiny is to be the new yaga but she is a spirited girl and wants to plough her own furrow. This book is the journey she takes to find out who she is. The writing is gorgeous, almost poetic; the story tender, poignant and full of lovely details. It is a timeless tale of death and grief and the zest for life. The characters are wonderful and I particularly love the sentiment house with chicken legs who is rooting for Marinka all along and has nurtured her from a baby growing her vine swings, making her dens and protecting her from danger. A hugely satisfying read.

The List of Real Things

Sarah Moore Fitzgerald, Orion, 204pp, 978-1-4410-4815-1, £6.99 pbk

This delightful and thought-provoking book explores the line between truth and fantasy as Fitzgerald combines orphans and sisters, Gracie and Bee, living with their Uncle Freddy and their grandfather, Patrick. The girls’ parents died within two days of each other, but their deaths are never mentioned or discussed by Uncle Freddy, who wishes to spare them further upset.

Gracie is firmly rooted in the real world and anxious not to draw attention to herself, whereas Bee, enduring and exasperating by turn, is prone to flights of fancy, archaic speech
Me Mam. Me Dad. Me.  

Danny Croft is aged fourteen. He lives with his single mother and her boyfriend, Callum. Danny’s mother adores Callum. Callum keeps showering Danny with gifts, as a way of winning his affection. But when Callum loses his temper, he loses it completely. He is violent towards Danny’s mother.

Danny is frightened when he reads online about women dying from domestic violence. He makes up his mind that his mother will not become one such victim. Danny asks people at school who would be the best person to avert this danger. They all answer; that person is Danny’s father. So Danny decides to seek out his biological father, whom he has never hitherto met, and ask him for a special favour. Will he please kill Jay’s life at St Montague’s, the North Yorkshire private school she loved, after his business had failed. Jay’s life in the West. Neela and Jay must thwart a suicide attempt. Contrasting values are at work. Sita begins the slow, loving work of restoring Jay’s body, her own insecurities, supports Dylan when an act of bravery in a swimming pool interrupts theCorsie and mine. Dylan and Kayla both have things they wish to hide, but both have passions they long to share. They very much rely on one another to navigate the troubled waters of young romance.

There is a strong coming-of-age feeling to this book, and teenage girls will recognise the cocktail of Adrenalin, desperation and confusion that is served up by teenage love affairs. Dylan and Kayla’s journeys of self-discovery will feel familiar to many readers, and show that beauty exists in all shapes and sizes and that love sometimes comes in disguise. SD

Bank


When Finn comes up with a foolproof way to make some money, Luke is not immediately convinced. But the idea of lending money to their hard up classmates – and demanding interest – is too attractive. This is just the beginning and Finn’s ideas get more and more outrageous such as involving investing in a dating app. But pride comes before a fall or is it a crash? Will the boys survive? This is a refreshing romp told with assurance and conviction. The author captures the dialogue between the boys to bring them off the page and into the reader’s imagination. This is not a tale full of trauma and crime. It is a tale of friendships and mad ideas against the background of a school that young readers will instantly recognise; immediate and authentic.

The storytelling is brisk, the incidents follow swiftly as the drama escalates and even the teachers seem human though drawn with a light touch. FH

Boy Meets Hamster

Birdie Milano, Macmillan, 382pp., 978 150 984 662 5, 6.99 pbk.

This comedy romance for young teens tells the tale of Dylan Kershaw – a fourteen year old boy who is desperate for his first kiss. He hopes that it might arrive on some beautiful dream holiday, somewhere like New York. Sadly, though, Dylan’s mum has booked the family a trip to somewhere rather less cosmopolitan: a cheesy car park in Cornwall.

Even if Dylan was able to find any suitable kissing candidates in a seriously uncool campsite, his search for love is hampered by the fact that he has to spend most nights looking after his younger brother, Jude. Dylan is fiercely protective of Jude, who uses a wheelchair, but chaperoning someone who loves Twinkle the Train and Nibbles the Giant Hamster does nothing for one’s romantic credibility. Dylan’s parents aren’t much help either. His dad spends most of his time in a full (but very old) football strip and his mum buys com in bulk and cuts holiday vouchers out of the newspaper. Only Dylan’s friend, Kayla, understands him. She is the only person who knows he is gay and, despite battling plenty of her own insecurities, supports Dylan throughout as he tries to pull up the godfather. Jayden Lee from the neighbouring caravan how much he fancies him.

In almost every chapter, Dylan butts heads with his ex, Jayden Lee. He uses a wheelchair, but chaperoning someone who loves Twinkle the Train and Nibbles the Giant Hamster does nothing for one’s romantic credibility. Dylan’s parents aren’t much help either. His dad spends most of his time in a full (but very old) football strip and his mum buys com in bulk and cuts holiday vouchers out of the newspaper. Only Dylan’s friend, Kayla, understands him. She is the only person who knows he is gay and, despite battling plenty of her own insecurities, supports Dylan throughout as he tries to pull up the godfather. Jayden Lee from the neighbouring caravan how much he fancies him.

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On a Scale of One to Ten

Readers may be challenged and have many an experience. Certainly, there is much value in seeing her as a person the story of Tamar’s long and painful journey. Scott’s novel tells the story of a man who is encouraged to remain in Lime Grove. Since she has not been granted the freedom he had sought and is no longer “his” woman, the place of superstition and belief is being turned over. When reason and science are taking over, the place of superstition and belief is being turned over. Mayhew takes a bold step here. She finds that the story is more complex than it seems on the surface. When scientific discoveries and inventions are made, the place of superstition and belief is being turned over. Is it really magic – or is she just a pawn in Fox’s ambition? When smooth talking Mr Fox comes to town, the world they inhabit is turned upside down. The painting the world they inhabit. The result is a rich, dense narrative that is as rich as dense as the setting. It is no surprise to learn that the story was originally conceived as a play. It has such movement and immediacy. Both Mim and Alex are neatly defined and convince with their distinct characters and very particular voices; both are outsiders through their differences and this is a central theme as both can only find status by exploiting these differences. This is an exciting novel.

To conclude, Mayhew provides extensive note on the origins of her tale, fascinating in itself, allowing a young reader to explore further without detracting from the freshness of her storytelling.

FH

but this is no clichéd account. Jay’s struggle to make ends meet. It’s in his car crashes through a bridge, his mother asks Jessa if she will clear out his car. He then discovers that there is still some resistance to the harsh rule of the Kaiser. The question is whether Theodosia will comply with the life she has, or seize the opportunity to take revenge on the people who have destroyed her family and her country?

This is the debut novel of the author, Laura Sebastian and she has made an excellent start to her career. The story itself is a fantasy without magic, dragons or the obvious type of ‘hero’. The central character is a young woman who has been damaged by the traumas that she has suffered in the preceding ten years. The author has increased the number of villains in the story, exploring the issue of friendship, loyalty and knowing who you are and this becomes more obvious as Theodosia comes in contact with her own people. Even those who have also suffered over the years. You could almost say that this is looking at the difference between nature and nurture, although the latter can lose its positive in any way. The other theme that is strikingly obvious is the issue of physical and mental abuse and how this affects the person subjected to this treatment. We are given a heroine who gradually gains mental strength and the determination to improve the lot of her people, but in doing so she creates further enemies that she must combat. This is a great novel for the Young Adult market and will be a favourite for those who love authors such as Sarah Maas, MP

Skylarks

Karen Gregory, Bloomsbury, 978-1-4088-8361-7, £3.99 pbk

After years in which the genre has been dominated by dystopian and fantasy adventures, contemporary stories are sweeping YA, featuring protagonists that readers will immediately recognise, and exploring themes and issues with sensitivity as well as passion. Skylarks is such a book.

Central character Joni lives with her parents and brothers in an ordinary house on an ordinary estate in rural south-west England. The opening scene makes us aware that money is lacking in the family work place – even her own family unit is in trouble. Joni is able to balance a life that is a very different background. The two become friends, then gradually more, but as they close the differences between their lives are brought into sharp focus. Joni’s family faces losing their home when their estate is bought and marked for redevelopment. Joe: joins her brother in organising local protests and quickly learns just how energising the sense of community is, but also just how heavy the world is stacked in favour of those who have wealth and power.

Joni is a convincing and appealing central character who changes and grows throughout the course of the book, while her voice remains direct and distinctive. Joni’s family, friends and neighbours are equally well drawn and if Annabel’s family are less convincing, bordering on stereotype even, they serve their purpose and this works both as a romance and a story of social awakening. There’s a happy resolution which feels a little bit pat but nonetheless this is a true and honest bit of storytelling, about the kind of lives lived by lots of people and which seldom get the fictional scrutiny they deserve.

L5

Fragments of the Lost

Megan Miranda, Penguin Random House, 400pp, 9780241344422, £7.99 pbk

When her ex-boyfriend is lost after his car crashes through a bridge, her mother asks Jessa if she will clear out his room, because there are so many memories of her in there. The process is a traumatic one, but Jessa feels she has to do it. However as she sorts through everything it is like unpeeling layers of an onion; every layer bringing with it memories of when she and Caleb were a couple. It also brings light other aspects of his life; secrets that he has been keeping for years. Gradually Jessa discovers that there are mysteries to be solved and questions answered. The real issue is about how many people are involved in these events and whether they have any relationship to Caleb’s disappearance.

This is a great story for those who like a mystery to solve and particularly when it is a complex and multi-layered plot like this one. Jessa is an ordinary

Ed’s Choice

Julie Mayhew, Hot Key Books, 9781471407048, 270pp, £7.99 pbk

Mim’s life is with Grainger’s Side Show along with a “dwarf”, a learned pig and Alex, a boy who has only one arm. Welcome to the world of Georgian entertainment. But this is also the Age of the Enlightenment when scientific discoveries and experiments are exciting society. When smooth talking Mr Fox joins the fair, Mim finds herself catapulted to fame as the Electrical Venus whose kiss will shock. But is this really magic – or is she just a pawn in Fox’s ambition?

The Electrical Venus

Julie Mayhew, Hot Key Books, 417pp, 9780241344422

Laura Sebastian, Macmillan, 417pp, 9781509855209, £7.99 pbk

At the age of six Theodosia witnessed her mother, the Queen of Flame and Fury, being murdered before her eyes. She is then brought up in the court of the invading monarch, the Kaiser but her life is full of torture, pain and a sense of uselessness. Her title ‘The

Ash Princess’ stems from the crown made of ashes that she is forced to wear by any court function, as the crown disintegrates, she is covered in the ash and shown as a lesser person. Life changes when she is sixteen and is forced to kill a prisoner that she thinks is her true father and then she discovers that there is still some resistance to the harsh rule of the Kaiser. The question is whether Theodosia will comply with the life she has, or seize the opportunity to take revenge on the people who have destroyed her family and her country?

This is the debut novel of the author, Laura Sebastian and she has made an excellent start to her career. The story itself is a fantasy without magic, dragons or the obvious type of ‘hero’. The central character is a young woman who has been damaged by the traumas that she has suffered in the preceding ten years. The author has increased the number of villains in the story, exploring the issue of friendship, loyalty and knowing who you are and this becomes more obvious as Theodosia comes in contact with her own people. Even those who have also suffered over the years. You could almost say that this is looking at the difference between nature and nurture, although the latter can lose its positive in any way. The other theme that is strikingly obvious is the issue of physical and mental abuse and how this affects the person subjected to this treatment. We are given a heroine who gradually gains mental strength and the determination to improve the lot of her people, but in doing so she creates further enemies that she must combat. This is a great novel for the Young Adult market and will be a favourite for those who love authors such as Sarah Maas, MP

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This is a great story for those who like a mystery to solve and particularly when it is a complex and multi-layered plot like this one. Jessa is an ordinary
girl who finds herself gradually being caught up in events and is made to wonder, by Caleb’s mother, whether she has any say in what is happening. As the story develops she begins to add the clues together and she becomes her own family to worry about her health. This is very much a story about family and relationships, as well as the difficulties of being a teenager. It also asks ‘how well do you know the people who are supportive but even they find it difficult to understand what she is going through? This is a really fascinating story that gradually hooks the reader into the lives of the characters; the plot is strong and fast and this leads her own family to worry about her health. This is very much a book that clearly signals a sequel. This will delight lovers of the genre and those who relish a long and sustained read.

RENEGADES

Marissa Meyer, Macmillan, 523pp, £6.99 pbk

This book is squarely aimed at fans of The Hunger Games, the Marvel superheroes and lovers of dystopian future tales and, as such, is very much on trend.

Two factions—the Renegades and the Anarchists—vied for control of society. The Renegades won the war and were burdened with the responsibilities of dispensing of chaos and the restorers of order. Ace Anarchy was believed to have been killed and his niece, Nova Antio, was designated as the heir to the throne. However, some claim that Nova Antio is actually the adoptive son of the two leaders of The Anarchists, and this leads her own family to worry about her health. This is very much a sequel. This will delight lovers of the genre and those who relish a long and sustained read.

SLAY

Kim Curran, Usborne, 288pp, 9781474952318, £6.99 pbk

Milly was finding life tough enough as she and her mother moved around with the latter’s operative career. However, things go from bad to worse when Milly arrives home to find out that her mother has been taken over by a particularly nasty demon. What Milly did expect was that she would be saved by the members of a world famous boy band, appropriately named ‘Slay’. The five members of the group and their manager/mentor Gail lead a double life; playing free gigs whenever they are called to fight demons somewhere and traveling the world as a consequence. Milly finds herself drawn in to this world as the team try to stop her ‘mother’ from bringing ‘back’ the Aztec god of Death and Demons, but they only have a couple of days to do so and time is really running out on them.

This is a really great adventure for those who crave a bit of darkness in their stories. It is not as gory as a lot of other contemporary young adult novels but there is some death and destruction, so perhaps not for the fainthearted. It is a really fast paced, action filled story and Milly’s ability to observe things particularly of the boy band set-up. The heroine is strong willed and a bit of a geek, so not the most popular girl in school. Having lost her father two years previously she does not want to lose her mother, despite their relationship not being obviously close. The story is told from the perspective of Milly and of JD, one of the band members and this provides balance and also an element of friction, as the latter worries that Milly might affect the dynamics of the band. I surprised myself by really enjoying this story and find myself looking forward to the next in the series. Despite its theme it provides a bit of ‘light’ relief and is a very easy read, depending as it does on action and plot rather than character and emotion. This is a great choice for the secondary library.

PARIS WITH YOU

Clementine Beauvais, translated by Sam Taylor, Faber & Faber, 346pp, 978 0 571 3971 6, 8.99 hbk

In Paris with You tells the story of Eugene who bumps into Tatiana on the Paris Metro ten years after they had parted. At that time Eugene, a wandering 14 year-old studentplayer, is trying to spend the summer with his friend Lensky, a poet and hopeless romantic in love with his neighbour Oiga. Through them Eugene meets fourteen year old Tatiana (Oiga’s sister) who is quiet and intelligent. They spend time together discussing literature, films, music and the world in general. And the more time they spend together the more Tatiana falls in love. When she eventually decides to write to Eugene expressing her feelings these are firstly ignored and then brushed aside. The summer ends in tragedy and Eugene and Tatiana part. Years later when we meet again Eugene is the one who is smitten, obsessively jealous of the other men in Tatiana’s life and determined to make her his. However, Eugene is haunted by the brink of great success and change in her professional life. Will she pause to give their relationship the chance by going on holiday to Paris with him for her first love?

This book is based on the celebrated verse novel by the 19th century Russian poet Alexander Pushkin also well known as an opera By Tchaikovsky. The English title is taken from the poem of the same name which contains the French title Songe a la Douceur a line from a poem by Baudelaire.

In Paris with You tells a story of young love, lust, regret and fate. It is a really great adventure for those who enjoy historical fiction and a sequel. This will delight lovers of the genre and those who relish a long and sustained read.
The Little Grey Men, Last of the Little People

’Warwickshire’
claims our anthropologist of a now almost vanished rural England, ‘is one of the last counties where one might hope to meet with a fairy’. The date was 1942 and, deeply versed in his subject, he rightly reprobates the idea of fairies as being ‘miniature men and women with ridiculous tinsel wings doing all sorts of impossible things with flowers and cobwebs’. They are rather hidden tribes – like those that Kipling knew – living a parallel life among the creatures of the wild who are their neighbours.

This history
tells of an adventure of the last family of gnomes known to the author, surviving alongside the Folly stream in Shakespeare’s county. There are three of them (brothers, with lives improbably dating back to Roman times) and they have conceived an expedition up-river to try to find a lost sibling who had set off a year or two back to try to find the Folly’s source.

True to the practicalities
of their kind, they are skilled in woodcraft and in combating the dangers that nature throws at them, while their joyous consumption of fish and other local delicacies is regarded as a painful, life-preserving necessity and does not interfere with their otherwise companionable relations with their neighbours. Their historian’s deep knowledge of the natural world produces a running commentary on the flow of the seasons and their unforeseen complications to whose vagaries the parallel lives, of all the characters are subject.

The travelogue
as a narrative form is infinitely flexible and it is left to the storyteller to devise the snakes-and-ladders progress that is the essence of so many ‘there-and-back-again’ stories. To begin with there is a row when one-legged Dodder, the oldest and wisest of the three, deplores the decision to go adventuring and decides to stay at home. Baldmoney and Sneezewort are determined however, and build a rather handsome timber paddle-boat to row themselves upstream.

Despite their craftsmanship
this boat will suffer two calamities, in between which Doddder has a change of heart and has himself transported to join them by his friend Sir Herne the heron. There is an interim Midsummer Night’s climax when all the Stream Folk are summoned by a Grahamish Pan who brings about the destruction of the Giant Grum (a cruel human landowner) but too great demands are eventually made on the slender resources of the travellers and with winter approaching they give up the search. (In one dramatic episode, marooned on an island, they escape starvation only by the fortuitous appearance of a child’s wonderfully elaborate clockwork toy boat, the Jeanie Deans, and she will carry them back to the final unexpected eucatastrophe.)

B.B.
was a writer devoted to the countryside and its inhabitants (despite which he picked for his pseudonym the designation of a cartridge used in the shooting of geese). He has a friendly and not overdidactic relationship with his readers, most of whom he recognizes will not know the difference between a stoat and a ferret, or the variations of bird-calls: ‘Tit-tee, tit-tee, tit-tee’, the all-clear call of the blue tit; ‘Tic, tic, tic’ and urgent call from a robin. Both the descriptions and drama of the landscapes that he gives us are enhanced by the wonderfully-conceived scraperboard drawings, vignettes and full-pages, by D.J. Watkins-Pitchford who is, of course, B.B. himself, whose prolific graphic work accompanies him in many forms through the many books for children and adults which make up his oeuvre.

Published during the War,
The Little Grey Men touches only momentarily on the contemporary scene, a mention of U-boats, or the portraits of the King and Queen decorating the tiny walls of the Jeanie Deans. It is much more in the tradition of the celebrants of English ruralism – Bevis, The Fairy Caravan, Watership Down – although coloured by his awareness of how vulnerable his chosen Warwickshire was to creeping modernity: intersected by roads and railways, with modern villas and towns everywhere.

His forebodings
about his setting were fulfilled in the story’s successor Down the Bright Stream (1948 – although the occurrence of war-time events point to it as an immediate successor). The story begins with the Stream People fleeing their much-loved Folly Brook as its waters are diverted to a reservoir and it is easy now to see that as a portent of a future land where green belts are disregarded and every village is blessed with its own bungalow suburb or even a pretty business park as local councils work hand in glove with the developers. A revived Jeanie Deans carries the travellers to what seems to be the Warwickshire Avon and after another sequence of perilous episodes its crew made landfall by owl-propelled glider on a green island, ‘wild and wet’ as gnomes desire across the Irish Channel. There is no ‘back again’ to this journey, and, if it is true that our gnomes date from Caesar’s time then they are probably living there still…

The Little Grey Men is published by OUP 978-0192793508, £7.99 pbk

Brian Alderson