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Guest Editorial 234
Stories Matter, Class Matters
by Natasha Carthew

When I was growing up in the eighties I was a fierce reader, but I was often left feeling unfulfilled when I finished reading a book, because where were the stories that featured kids that like me who lived in a council house with a single parent? Where were the stories which were on free school meals and had to do the walk of shame past the rest of the school every lunch time? I like to think about my own background when writing; no money, no transport, no visible prospects, in order to inspire others to believe we can change our own narrative. As an adult I still find it hard to find many working class characters in fiction that are truly typical of my childhood or the lower socio-economic world that children and teens have to negotiate in Britain today. I suppose it was why I take writing so seriously, especially when writing for young adults.

So why is class still the forgotten corner of diversity? For starters there are not enough working class writers being published in this country and I really think we in the publishing world need to change that by talking about it and encouraging the support of low income writers by institutions and arts bodies in a more consistent, sustainable way. It’s so important that working class writers are encouraged to write to ensure that our stories are told and the characters we create come from a place of truth and are neither stereotyped or clichéd. There is no better place for children to start writing about their experiences than in school in order to build confidence and self-esteem. Social class should always matter when we read and think about contemporary realistic fiction and we need to provide the young adult reader with a sense of belonging by writing stories that empower instead of isolate.

In my career as a writer for both YA and adult fiction, I have found that there is not only a shortage of working class writers being published, there’s a shortage of working class folk working in publishing and the result is a tiny circle of influence; the stories that get published, that are told, come from higher up in society. It’s a distorted reflection of the country we live in. Source material isn’t beyond reach; it’s within every working class writer.

Literature that addresses socio-economic issues is important on a personal and political level. Children and young adults feel respected and validated and their self-esteem is enhanced when they see themselves and their wider communities reflected in books. It illuminates the complexity and human dimensions of social deprivation, and it’s important because it’s often concerned with the basic subject matter of development. Storytelling is one of humanity’s oldest methods of possessing information and representing reality and is incredibly important in telling stories of poverty, especially from a working class perspective in order to reflect and celebrate this forgotten corner of diversity.

In my new book Only the Ocean, Kel Crow is a voice that comes from the margins of society, socially isolated and literally isolated through her rural location, but she’s a fighter and she’s tenacious and that determination is what motivates her and drives her forward. These kinds of voices are rarely heard, and when they are, we hear them written by people who might not have experienced any kind of marginalisation themselves.

Without authenticity, readers are not getting a true account of what it’s like to be poor or socially isolated. It is about making culture belong to all of us. Inclusivity is beneficial to everyone in society in the long term. Ultimately that’s why it’s important. Telling stories about lived experience can trigger a different way of thinking about poverty and increase support for better policies.

We as writers, educators, school librarians and publishing professionals need to work together to change the story people hear, so they can think in a new way about poverty. The beauty of literature is that it provides a way for readers to explore new possibilities, to learn about themselves and the world around them. We need more compelling and believable stories with true representations of different economic backgrounds that can also provide some kind of hope, because our stories matter, class matters.

Natasha Carthew is a working-class writer from Cornwall where she lives with her girlfriend. She has written all her books outside, either in the fields and woodland that surrounds her home or in the cabin that she built from scrap wood. She has written two books of poetry as well as three YA books, including Winter Damage, The Light That Gets Lost and her latest Only The Ocean all for Bloomsbury. Her first book for adults All Rivers Run Free is published by Riverun/Quercus. She’s currently writing her second literary novel for adults and a new collection of rural poetry.

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Welcome to a new year! What do we have to look forward to in 2019? We asked leading children’s books editors to tell us about the books they are most excited to be published (in 100 words only). Here’s the list:

Maggie Lehrman, executive editor, Amulet Books and Abrams Books for Young Readers: Actor and writer Thomas Lennon has delved into his Irish ancestry to create a hilarious world of law-breaking leprechauns, sly faerie folk, and other magical perils in the exciting new middle grade novel, Ronan Boyle and the Bridge of Riddles. Ronan may be the youngest and lowliest recruit of the secret garda (the Irish police force that handles the misdeeds of numerous magical creatures), but he’ll do anything to save his parents and prove they were unjustly imprisoned—even venture into the most dangerous parks of Tir Na Nog.

Charlie Sheppard, Publishing Director, Andersen Press: I didn’t come into this business to make people cry, but some books just can’t help affecting people. When Sadness Comes to Call is one such book. It seems to have touched and moved everyone who has worked on it. It is never too soon to start talking to children about emotions and mental health. It is never too soon to give children the tools they need to help them understand those around them and express their own feelings. I wish I had had this book to offer my children when they needed it. I’m glad it will be out there for others.

Sam Hutchinson, b small publishing: We’ve been working with confidence coach, Natalie Costa, to create a new series of books to encourage confidence and build self-esteem. The series is called Level Headers and one of the first titles, Stretch Your Confidence, is out in August 2019.

Neil Coombe, Manager of Black Library Publishing: 2019 will see us publish our first ever children’s books, so we have a massive year ahead of us. I am hugely excited about Attack of the Necron, book one (of six) in our Warhammer Adventures: Warped Galaxies series, written by the well-known children’s author Cavan Scott. The book includes illustrations and is a perfect introduction for younger readers (age 8+) to the science fiction-based Warhammer 40,000 universe. The story is full of danger, heroism, aliens, thrills and spills as we follow our three child protagonists setting out on their action-packed adventures.

Polly Whybrow, Editor (Picture Books), Bloomsbury Children’s Books: The Girl and the Dinosaur by Hollie Hughes and Sarah Massini is one of those very rare and special books where the words and pictures take you on a magical journey far beyond the page. Marianne doesn’t have friends her own age, instead she hunts for fossils to build a very special sort of companion. And then one night, the wishing stars burn bright and a her dinosaur friend might just be waking . . . . Truly breathtaking illustrations accompany a timeless story to create the perfect picture book.

Sharon Hutton, Publishing Director (Non Fiction), Bloomsbury Children’s Books: In May we publish a breathtaking story about two unlikely heroes and their most amazing adventure. Everest: The Remarkable Story of Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay is captivatingly written by Alexandra Stewart and beautifully illustrated by the award-winning, Joe Todd-Stanton. This narrative tells how two men battled frost-biting temperatures, tumbling ice rocks, powerful winds and death-defying ridges to be the first to triumphantly reach the top of the world’s highest mountain. With a brilliant introduction by the greatest living explorer of our time, Sir Ranulph Fiennes, it’s a story not to be missed.

Hannah Sandford, Commissioning Editor (Fiction), Bloomsbury Children’s Books: The Monster Who Wasn’t is the first in a deeply magical trilogy from Australian debut TC Shelley, whose warm, witty way with words will enchant fans of Sophie Anderson and Jessica Townsend. It tells the story of a creature who is strange and unique. When he hatches down in the vast lair where monsters dwell, he looks like a human boy – much to everyone’s disgust. Even the gargoyles who adopt him and nickname him ‘Imp’ only want him to steal chocolate. But little does Imp know that Thunderguts, king of the ogres, has a great destiny in mind for him…

Zoe Griffiths, Senior Commissioning Editor (YA Fiction), Bloomsbury Children’s Books: A new book from Sarah Crossan is always cause for celebration! Sarah is completely incomparable and May 2019 sees the publication of Toffee, her outstanding next verse novel which explores mental health. It focuses on the friendship between Marla, a woman with dementia struggling to remember, and Allison, a runaway desperate to forget her past. The incredible bond that they develop helps each of them discover who they truly are. Sarah’s books always fill me with such light. This is bold, brave and beautiful.

Hannah Rolls, Commissioning Editor, Bloomsbury Education: Next year more or less everyone I know will be getting a copy of Midnight Feasts, a wonderful anthology by A.F. Harrold, for Christmas. Beautifully illustrated in full colour by rising star Kat Riddell (daughter of former Children’s Laureate, Chris Riddell), this delicious anthology brings together work from a broad range of poets – from A.E. Houseman to Sabrina Mahfouz. Whether you’re in the mood for jelly baby or a jelabi, these poems will satisfy any craving!

Janet Phillips, Editor, Bodleian Library Publishing: I’ve chosen The Princess Who Hid in a Tree by Jackie Holderness, illustrated by Alan Marks. This highly unusual book is a saint’s life, beautifully retold by Jackie as a fast-paced adventure story. The saint in question – or rather feisty young heroine – is a princess named Frideswide. As soon as I saw Alan’s first roughs for the book, showing Frideswide half-way up a tree, hair streaming out in the wind, with the river Thames below, I knew we had something special in our hands. I couldn’t be happier with how the book has turned out, a lovely balance of exquisite illustration and fine storytelling.

Emma Matthewson, Publishing Director, Bonnier Zaffre: One of the many books we are excited to be publishing is Yasmin Rahman’s All The Things We Never Said. With Mehrreen, Olivia and Cara, Yasmin has created three unforgettable teenage girls who...
all have something to say about the very real pressures that teens have to face today. Yasmin ensures the reader cares about each character and when you realise that part of the novel is written in narrative verse it is even harder to believe this is a debut. Yasmin powerfully explores the demons that mental health issues can bring and in this ultimately hopeful novel illuminates how the power of friendship can literally be life-saving.

Felicity Alexander, Senior Commissioning Editor, Bonnier Zaffre: The Time Travel Diaries by Caroline Lawrence is brilliant new series. It follows the adventures of 12-year-old Alex Papas, who goes back in time – first to Roman London and then to Ancient Athens. It was inspired by the temple of Mithras near Bank station, which Alex uses as a portal, and also by the amphitheatre beneath Guildhall – and the story is made even more believable by the fact that local readers can see these sites for themselves. The tone is fresh, funny and surprising – and like everything Caroline writes, makes history feel incredibly real.

David Bennett, Boxer Books: Fif Kuo is a Taiwanese artist, who trained at the Cambridge School of Art. Since graduation she has won the Macmillan Prize (Bronze), been shortlisted for the AOI World Illustration Awards and won merit in the Ijungle Illustration Awards. She is brimming with ideas and enthusiasm and keen for her picture books to convey a meaningful message. The Perfect Sofa is a tribute to the perfect things we already have – we don’t need to spend time searching for them elsewhere. The characters are brilliant, the humour underscored and the message real and relevant for today.

Barry Cunningham, Publisher, Chicken House: Fourteen foreign rights sales, several in ‘blind’ auctions and bids before the proof went out (at midnight naturally) – that’s how the buzz around Benjamin Read and Laura Trinder’s The Midnight Hour series began! I loved this story of a mysterious midnight world, with its outspoken heroine Emily and her hedgehog companion, from the first moment I saw its graphic novel beginnings in the office of Altitude Films – a film adaptation is currently in the works too. I love the humour, compassion and sheer excitement – one of our most exciting debuts ever!

Neil Burden, Child’s Play (International) Ltd: This year we are extremely excited to be publishing the first picture book from author/illustrator Beth Waters. Child of St Kilda tells the story of one boy’s childhood experience of living in this remote and isolated community, shortly before the St Kildans were evacuated to the British mainland in 1930. Stunningly illustrated in monoprint, the book celebrates the unique culture that developed over thousands of years, and explains in simple terms the reasons for its failure. A sketchbook appendix in simple terms the reasons for its failure. A sketchbook appendix makes history feel incredibly real.

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Peter Gill, MD Graffeg: We are particularly excited to be republishing Joyce Dunbar and James Mayhew’s classic *Mouse and Mole* series in May in a larger hardback format to really show off James’s gorgeous illustrations. Joyce’s funny and moving texts about the furry friends are timeless and we couldn’t believe these lovely books had been out of print for such a long time. We’re delighted to have the opportunity to bring these wonderful stories back to life.

Katherine Agar, Editorial Director at Hodder Children’s Books: I’m over the moon to have brought Zanib Mian to our list. Her debut middle grade, *The Muslims*, was the winner of the Little Rebels Award in 2018 (and also longlisted for the UKLA Award, and nominated for the CLILP Carnegie Medal). Planet Omar: *Accidental Trouble Magnet* is the story of Omar, an ordinary British Asian Muslim boy with a huge imagination – and a brimming with warm humour. Zanib has expanded the story with hilarious new scenes and we’ve re-illustrated it with artwork by Nasryya Mafaridik, ready to launch the series to a broader audience.

Rosemarie Hudson, Publisher Hope Road: The chronicles of Will Rhyde and Awa Maryam Al-Jameel is the first in a thrilling historical trilogy by Rehan Khan, called *A Tudor Turk*. The action is set in Istanbul in 1591 during the reign of the all-powerful Sultan Murad III. When the Staff of Moses is stolen from his palace, a small group of undercover warriors is assembled to track down the thieves. Fast-paced and furious, the story is a Mission Impossible of its time, with a rich and authentic multicultural cast of characters.

Hannah Ray, Editorial Director Picture Books and Gift Books: Macmillan Children’s Books: *The Go-Away Bird* was inspired by a real African bird whose call sounds as if it’s shouting, ‘Go away!’ And in the book, the eponymous bird lives up to her name and is aloof and rude - giving short shrift to other birds that approach her tree. The story in the book, the eponymous bird lives up to her name and is aloof and rude - giving short shrift to other birds that approach her tree. The story is written in Julia Donaldson’s inimitable, pitch-perfect rhyming style, *Migrations: Open Hearts, Open Borders*, edited by the International Centre for the Picture Book in Society. This unique collection of words and pictures by illustrators from 28 countries, on the theme of migration, is based on the exhibition at the Biennia of Illustration, Bratislava, in 2017. Over 50 illustrators from around the world created beautiful and moving postcards depicting birds, each sending a powerful message about human migration. With an introduction by Shaun Tan, and contributions from PJ Lynch, Jon Klassen, Isol, Roger Mello, Chris Riddell, Jackie Morris, Marie-Louise Gay, Jane Ray and Axel Scheffler, among many other renowned artists, our book shows that cultures, ideas and imagination will flow despite borders, barriers and bans.

Liz Cross, Children’s Publisher, OUP: If I must choose just one book – so difficult! – then I think it must be *The Closest Thing to Flying* by Gill Lewis. Gill has an incredible knack of tackling thought-provoking issues in a way that feels at the same time global and intensely personal. This new book shines a light on women’s rights, refugees’ rights, and personal freedoms of all kinds – and for the first time in Gill’s novels, has a historical strand alongside the modern-day. With two amazing heroines who are totally different and yet have a surprising amount in common, it’s a story that will inspire and uplift its readers.

Sarah Odedina, Editor at Large, Pushkin Children’s Books: *Bearmouth* by Liz Hyder is a unique novel about the abuse of power and the power of friendship. Told in the first person from the point of view of the main protagonist this original novel stands alongside *Maggot Moon* and * Ridley Walker*. Newt is a teenager working in a mine, accepting of the status quo until Devlin arrives and starts to upset the established order. Liz researched child labour in mines to write this novel which skillfully looks at social injustice and the belief that helps people make positive change.

Sarah Lambert, Editorial Director at Quercus Children’s Books: *I’m absolutely dying to publish bestselling crime writer Elly Griffith’s spine-tingling first foray into children’s fiction – A Girl Called Justice stars super-smart super-sleuth Justice Jones in a truly page-turning school murder mystery that will keep readers hooked till the edge-of-your seat finale…* 

Janice Thomson, Scallywag Press: Hat Tricks by Satoshi Kitamura is trademark Kitamura – imaginative, amusing and an absolute treat to share with a child. Hattie is a very small rabbit with a huge talent. Along with her hat and the magic words ‘Abracadabra’ knowledge might save the future. Forty years after school readings from Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* awoke my own ecological awareness, Bren’s compelling writing makes food security and environmental management personal at a crucial time for a new generation. Can’t wait to see what it unleashes!
Samantha Smith, Publisher Fiction and Picture Books, Scholastic: We are thrilled to be publishing *The Smeds and the Smoos*, the next future classic from the incomparable duo of Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler.

Miriam Rosenbloom, Publisher, Scribble: The book I am most excited to be publishing in 2019 is *All The Ways To Be Smart*, a celebration of all the different talents and attributes that children have, beyond straightforward academic ability. The book has just come out in Australia where it has been a big success, selling out its first and second editions instantly. We’ve been overwhelmed by the response to the book from kids, teachers, librarians and parents – the book’s affirmative message is more important than ever today as so many children are entering into an education environment where they are being over-tested.

John Stachiewicz, Publishing Director, Tate: We are delighted and most excited to be publishing in time for International Women’s Day in March, an important and beautifully put together title, *The Bigger Picture: Women Who Changed the Art World* written by Sophia Bennett and illustrated by Manjit Thapp. As well as biographies of over 30 women artists, we have conducted original interviews with 16 of the featured living artists – Rachel Whiteread, Lubaina Himid and Yayoi Kusama amongst others. This book offers a glimpse into the struggles and successes of these artists whilst helping to demystify the art world, build confidence and inspire a new generation. We really hope that younger readers will be motivated to pursue their creativity with this book!

Lisa Edwards Executive Publisher Templar Publishing: Paper World: *Planet Earth* is perhaps the most ‘Templar’ book we’ve created in recent times. We pride ourselves on being innovative and with surprising die-cuts, cut-throughs and flaps, but the artwork itself is made from cut paper by the artists at Bomboland. This book has been three years in the making and it is worth the wait. We publish *Planet Earth* in February 2019 and *Space* will follow in 2020.

Anna Ridley, Commissioning & Managing Editor, Children’s Publishing Thames & Hudson: We have so many books to be excited about in 2019, it’s impossible to choose, but the one I’m giving a special shout-out to is *Tony T-Rex’s Family Album* by Mike Benton, illustrated by Rob Hodgson. It brings the latest scholarship from Professor Mike Benton to life through a series of quirky tales and chewable facts told from the perspective of Tony T-Rex. Casting his memory back to the beginning of the Jurassic, Tony gives readers the inside scoop on what his dinosaur relatives were really like – from their proudest moments to previously unpublished family secrets. Rob Hodgson’s illustrations are so contemporary in style and full of personality, it seems like only yesterday Tony and his crew were dominating the earth.

Delaram Ghanimifard, Co-Founder and Publisher Tiny Owl: We have eight exciting new titles coming out in 2019, from which we think *The Phoenix of Persia* is our biggest project of the year. This 1000 year old story from *Shahnameh* is retold by Sally Pomme Price with stunning full-colour illustrations by award-winning illustrator Sophie Weston.

Rebecca Hill, Usborne Fiction Director: Usborne Fiction’s 2019 titles showcases contemporary YA to get readers talking, epic and immersive fantasies, enchanting, spine-tingling adventures and a lot of laughter. However, I am thrilled to be introducing a very special new character and series for 7+ children. Anisha Mistry lea...
Intriguing question to self: why on earth start yet another children’s book company when there are already so many good ones out there, and so many good books which already struggle in this age of budget cuts, austerity and digital innovation?

Simple answer: the pleasure it gives to watch artists turn good ideas into books, and then to watch readers enjoying. It’s a rewarding challenge getting books into print and then sold, and I enjoy every aspect of the process, though am lucky to have Janice Thomson editing, and wonderful freelance designers.

Moreover, it’s a wonderful thing when books stand the test of time and are kept or handed down. I am fortunate still to own some books I had as a child, and re-reading them now, I realise how they are part of the adult I became; how they helped me to read confidently, learn about other cultures, appreciate different art styles and even learn some useful ideas. I remember enjoying them with my parents, and which ones they or I preferred and why. I’d like every child to have the same opportunity as I did to enjoy and remember good books, and I’d like to pass on and add to the very best available.

Next question is how to find books to publish? One huge pleasure has been the chance to bring back into print in the UK one of my childhood favourites, The Happy Lion by Roger Duvoisin. Whoever read it as a child will remember the over-riding feeling of good will and happiness, all shining through the comic drama of a lion escaping his enclosure and unwittingly causing havoc in a small French town. It’s a masterclass in picture book creation and deserves its new life as a proud, beautifully printed and bound hardback. I really hope The Happy Lion will appeal to a new generation of children as well as to nostalgic oldies like me. We will also bring back Duvoisin’s 1950s version of The Night Before Christmas.

Then there’s a rich vein of wonderful books which for some reason have never been published in the UK. Hardly anything by Jon Agee is available so we’ll publish several starting with The Wall In the Middle Of the Book, one of the cleverest and funniest books I’ve seen for a while. We plan to translate books from other languages too.

However, the aim of Scallywag Press is to publish new and established artists, so how did we find new ones? Largely through friends. In the beginning was the logo, and this was created by Jonathan Farr. Jonathan introduced me to Rose, and on viewing her portfolio in the upper room of a London hostelry I was immediately taken with Me and My Sister, which is a touching and funny book about the highs and lows of autistic siblings. It was the real thing. A surreal conversation followed where I asked if I could publish it, at the same time warning Rose that it might not be in her best interests as I didn’t have any other books or even a company. If Rose had said no, I might not be writing this now, so I must thank Rose particularly, but all the Scallywag authors and artists, for their faith and generosity in handing over their beloved work to a stranger with an embryo enterprise.

Rose then introduced me to the next two contributors: Rob Ramsden, whose drawing is exquisite, and whose first books for Scallywag are going to be a collection of boldly and brightly illustrated books intended to encourage young children to appreciate the natural world, starting with I Saw a Bee. Rob’s ideas for the books came from having brought up his own son to enjoy gardening and the outdoors and to notice nature. Secondly, Elena Arevalo Melville, whose wonderfully quirky story and free flowing and captivating drawing has produced a magical and unique picture book called Umbrella. Elena is originally from Guatemala, and her original style adds another dimension to the Scallywag list.

A very thrilling and unexpected gift, and decisive factor in enabling the list to get off the ground, has been Hat Tricks from Satoshi Kitamura, rightly considered to be one of our best children’s book creators of recent decades. I can’t believe my luck in being able to publish someone whose work I have admired for so long, and indeed whose books I’ve been selling in translation for so long at Andersen Press under the guidance of the best children’s book publisher, Klaus Flugge, who has taught me all I know about publishing.

Scallywag Press has been hugely lucky to secure the books signed up so far. They are all so different in style and subject matter and all have so much to say, and are created from the heart. I know that books like this will find their audience despite a difficult market, and we’ve sold rights for 15 foreign editions to date. Now we need more of everything, especially time!

Hat Tricks by Satoshi Kitamura and The Wall in the Middle of the Book by Jon Agee are published in February, at £11.99 and £12.99 respectively. Find out more www.scallywagpress.com
Time for some book blether

In a special feature, Teresa Cremin, Professor of Education (Literacy), The Open University advises on ways to develop knowledge of children’s literature and other texts

Some teachers are avid readers of literature and other texts for the young; the readers of this magazine probably devour books for breakfast. However the OU/UK Literacy Association research suggests that many practitioners are less hooked, less knowledgeable and rather over-reliant on celebrity authors and their childhood favourites. Whilst this Teachers as Readers survey of practitioners’ subject knowledge of children’s texts was undertaken in 2008 (in 11 local authorities), the percentages remain shocking. For example 54% of the 1200 teachers couldn’t name six children’s authors, 24% were unable to name one picture fiction creator and 22% couldn’t name a single poet. Carol Ann Duffy received only one mention, in contrast to Roald Dahl who was in a league of his own. In 2015, the National Literacy Trust survey of 2300 teachers asked the same question, with reference just to authors. This revealed that the profession remains Dahl dependent; he was the most frequently named ‘good’ children’s author in both surveys (good referred to writers whose work teachers valued and found successful in class). This was despite the fact that the OU/UKLA survey was completed by primary teachers and the NLT one by predominantly secondary practitioners.

Professionally this lack of subject knowledge raises cause for concern. It led to a research project Teachers as Readers Phase II which showed that developing teachers’ knowledge of potent literature can make a marked difference to practice, serving to enrich reading for pleasure pedagogy and support the creation of reciprocal and interactive communities of readers. Nonetheless it remains a genuine challenge for classroom teachers to find the time and energy to expand their repertoires. The culture of accountability in England largely conceives of reading as a matter of proficiency, an individual activity which can be taught and tested, and the prime focus for many schools remains decoding and comprehension. This can and often does sideline children’s pleasure in reading, and despite the policy rhetoric and its inclusion in the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013), there is no requirement for teachers to develop this essential aspect of their subject knowledge in teacher training or through continuing professional development (CPD).

Pleasure Award in collaboration with the OU and UKLA. In essence, we are trying to help teachers find and share pleasure in reading and build new communities of readers, on and offline.

Such communities are needed since developing a broad and deep knowledge of children’s literature and other texts is no mean feat. To keep it updated requires passion, perseverance and very considerable commitment. This is being shown by the Reading Group leaders and members, who are not only teachers but librarians, teaching assistants, student teachers, early years practitioners, reading volunteers and even parents. Groups meet six times a year to enrich their knowledge, understanding and practice in order to nurture children’s desire to read. Group members seek to use their enriched repertoires to create social reading environments, tailor their reader recommendations, make wise choices for reading aloud, and engage in book blether, a highly significant and somewhat underrated aspect of being a reader.

In these and other CPD contexts right across the country, teachers are exploring ways to establish staff knowledge of authors in order to create a baseline of strengths and areas for development. Many staff teams use the original Teachers as Readers survey, others create an Alphabet of Authors (both available on the OU website1). In the latter, through allocating particular letters of the alphabet to small groups, the collective knowledge of all can be shared. It’s a fun way of highlighting knowledge gaps, maybe in world literature, poetry or texts reflecting realities? Analysing their results, one school found an over-reliance on popular authors, so the literacy lead checked the list of books that had been read aloud to children across the previous two terms. To her consternation every single text had been published before the turn of the century! There is nothing wrong with ‘old but gold’, but children deserve to meet a wide range of writers. Building on the baseline, literacy leads, working where possible with librarians, seek ways to widen their own and other staff members’ repertoires. These might include: setting personal reading goals linked...
to gaps, e.g. reading a poem a day, focusing on graphic novels, picture fiction, non-fiction, comics or magazines; reading around a theme or topic (e.g. refugees, empathy, Egyptians); reading Award Winners (e.g. the UKLA/Carnegie/Kate Greenaway, Blue Peter Awards); following finders on Twitter (e.g. Mat Tobin @Mat_at_Brookes and Simon Smith @smithsmrm who recommend picturebooks); reading Books for Keeps; taking the 52 book challenge; inviting children to set the staff reading homework; running a staff book club and reading to your knee or thigh in books!

This is likely to result in the need to buy new books and persuading the leadership team that, as the OECD (2002) state, the will influences the skill (and vice versa), and that in any case books are worth reading for their own sake, not just to raise reading scores or widen children's vocabulary! Schools are also building in time for teachers to share texts, seizing five minutes at the start of each staff meeting, creating book assemblies, staff book blankets, speed dating with books, showcasing practitioners' current reading and establishing teachers' mini-libraries of known and loved texts. If a child or adult wants to borrow one of these books, the teacher's views can be shared, leading perhaps to a reciprocal book swap and another informal blether, reader to reader. Most of these ideas are described more fully on the OU website – do visit, explore and share. The monthly newsletter too may be of interest; it'll keep you up to date with reading for pleasure research, resources, events and innovative practice.

Developing one's knowledge of children's literature and other texts is not an optional extra for teachers; nor can it be assumed. It is surely a professional prerequisite and a moral and social responsibility.

Follow Teresa Cremin on Twitter@TeresaCremin

NOTES
5 https://researchrichpedagogies.org/research/theme/teachers-knowledge-of-childrens-literature-and-other-texts
Since winning the CLiPPA in 2015 with his debut collection, *Werewolf Club Rules*, everything Joseph Coelho touches seemingly turns to gold. His latest collection, *Overheard in a Tower Block*, was longlisted for the 2018 CLILP Carnegie Medal, shortlisted for the 2018 CLiPPA and longlisted for the 2019 UKLA book award. His first two picturebooks, *If All the World Were...* and *Luna Loves Library Day*, illustrated by Allison Colpoys and Fiona Lumbers respectively, have been nominated for the 2019 Kate Greenaway Award.

A constant drive and incredible work ethic has got Coelho to where he is. The road to publishing success hasn't been an easy journey: 'At school, I was writing poems, in 6th Form and definitely before, but it never felt like an option. It's something that didn't occur to me, to be honest. Even after university, it just didn't occur to me that poetry could be a job.'

Last year, CLPE’s *Reflecting Realities* report highlighted the importance of normalising and making mainstream the breadth and range of realities that exist within our classrooms and society, in order for all children to feel valued and entitled to occupy the literary space. Coelho reflects on this as part of the reason writing didn’t seem a credible option for him at first. 'I never saw myself in writing, never saw anyone like me who was a writer, until I saw Jean Binta Breeze. She came to my school in 6th form; I think that planted the seed of poetry. Then I came across the performance poetry community, and saw lots of people like me: young, working class writers from every kind of ethnic background. Then it felt like I could do this, but it took so long to get into publishing because I never saw that as a place to go.'

A taste of the joy of publication came when Pie Corbett saw him perform at the London Lynk Reach poetry slam and selected *If all the world were paper* for the anthology *The Works 6*. Joe recalls, 'I still remember going into Borders when the book came out, searching for it and getting really excited to find my poem and my name.'

Joe’s decision to visit the London Book Fair was pivotal to his success: ‘I never heard about opportunities to submit to the big publishers until I took the initiative to go to the London Book Fair, moving outside of my immediate working circles. I was going with poems and picturebook manuscripts, meeting editors who were giving me their time. I’d been going for years when I saw Janetta Otter-Barry giving a talk about children’s poetry and how there needed to be more of it. I grabbed her afterwards and said “I write children’s poetry, I can’t believe you actually publish it, this is amazing!” Then two years later, *Werewolf Club Rules* came out.’

The success of the book was life changing, giving him not only an award-winning publication to build on, but more time to write: ‘There was a year I’d barely done any writing because I was doing back-to-back workshops in schools in places like Luton, Essex and Worthing; so to have the poems out there, in a book that could be appreciated was a dream come true. It was the best feeling. I was overwhelmed when I got shortlisted, let alone winning; it was one of the highlights of my life.’

His second collection, *Overheard in a Tower Block* holds a special place in his heart. ‘It is quite a personal collection in that it is semi-autobiographical, dealing with themes that I’m really familiar with. A lot bled through. It was really interesting to explore a poetry collection that tells a story, with an emphasis on theme and emotion. I was keen to share that threading of themes throughout; the red trainers, the bird imagery - there’s something about the fragility of birds that I wanted to get across for this child, Prometheus coming up several times, that idea of masculinity and men wanting to do well and that follows the stuff around fathers and grandfathers.’

Joe doesn’t shy away from addressing issues that are real and personal to his readers, ‘I was keen not to be fearful of sharing themes involved in my upbringing; broken homes and separation. Kids don’t always get to see that in stories. Then you get kids who feel like their story is a source of shame, which it was for me growing up, because it’s not the situation of their peers and it’s not the situation reflected to them on TV or in books or films. I think it’s so important that we allow that safe space to say, “Look, this is ok. There are other people in your situation.”’

I was interested to learn he was pitching ideas for picturebooks as well as poetry at the start of his career, and wondered if this had been a natural transition for him; ‘There was a huge learning curve. None of the manuscripts I took to London Book Fair have become picturebooks! I think I was coming to them with a poet’s mind, being more ethereal. I’ve learnt that quite quickly there needs to be that narrative hook. My first drafts tend to be more poetic and I have to step back and think “no – where’s the story?” There’s got to be that narrative hook. My first drafts tend to be more poetic and I have to step back and think “no – where’s the story?” There’s got to be that arc, you’ve got to think about that middle spread, what’s going to be the turnaround moment? It’s about empowering young people by giving them knowledge or showing them themselves reflected in a positive light.’

He has been paired with incredible illustrators to bring his work to life. Both Lumbers and Colpoys have been nominated for the Greenaway medal, and Kate Milner was 2018’s recipient of the Klaus Flugge Prize. ‘I think the illustrators brought a magic. There’s
something wonderful about getting those first pencil drafts; seeing that an illustrator has really read, connected and found depth within your words. Allison understands the gentleness of family, there's such a sensitivity there that I could never have imagined visually because it was all felt for me through the words. Fiona captured that playfulness of the library and different ways of bringing that world to life. I would never have imagined the idea of things escaping from the books and entering into the library space, I thought that was so wonderful. Kate and I hadn't met beforehand, but it felt like I'd walked her through the reasons behind the poems, almost like she'd glimpsed into my soul. They've all been such fantastic collaborations. I think the best picturebooks are a team effort; that's where you get works of art.'

His latest work is the sumptuously illustrated, A Year of Nature Poems. "Since I was a kid, nature has been so important to me. Even though I grew up on a council estate in Roehampton, it's a hugely green area, Richmond Park was on our doorstep. I spent a lot of time playing out, exploring, climbing trees, I've always had a real wonder with nature. I had a box of dead things under my bed (which I'd found, not killed!); I was fascinated. I'd get BBC Wildlife magazine sometimes; there was a thing where you sent off to get owl pellets and they'd show you how to dissect them and you'd send your findings; I'd do things like that when I was about 10. This collection was an opportunity to think back to that connection with nature, which was more vibrant as a kid. The summer holidays seemed to last forever. We didn't go away on holiday so I was just running about wild, exploring things, collecting frogspawn. The poems share the emotion caught up in these experiences, and give a greater depth to the beautiful imagery involved.

I'm delighted to find out that there are a number of works on the horizon, 'I'm doing another single poet collection with Otter-Barry. It's another narrative-based collection, but going to a whole other level, I'm having a lot of fun with it. There's also another couple of picturebooks with Fiona Lumbers; one is another Luna.' Central to Joe's success is the truth that comes through all his work. Writing is to him about 'Communication and connection. Trying to strip away falsehood and connect with what really matters. The things that matter to one person will matter to 100,000 when we get to the root of it. A lot of our decisions are made on fear or joy and it's all the same fears and the same joys and the same reasoning. I think writing can cut through all of that, you can increase empathy by showing different worlds and show that we are all the same inside.' If there's a kind of writing we need right now, it's exactly this.

A Year of Nature Poems, illus by Kelly Louise Judd, Wide Eyed Editions, 978-1786035820, £11.99 hbk
If All the World Were ..., illus by Allison Colpoys, Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1786030597, £12.99 hbk
Werewolf Club Rules, Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1847804525, £7.99 pbk
Overheard in a Tower Block, illus by Kate Milner, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1910959589, £6.99 pbk
Luna Loves Library Day, illus by Fiona Lumbers, Andersen Press, 978-1783445950, £6.99 pbk

Charlotte Hacking is Learning Programme Manager at the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, a charity working to improve literacy in primary schools.
Ten of the Best
starring children from BAME backgrounds

Farrah Serroukh  CLPE Regional Learning Programme Leader

At Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) we are in the unique position of offering a bridge from the classroom to the publishing house. We work throughout the year to curate what for many time-deprived teachers is an overwhelming volume of books and showcase the best that the industry has to offer through our online platforms, professional development programme and extensive reference library. Sourcing books with characters and contexts that resonate with children is paramount to shaping them as readers and broadening their worldview. In 2018 we published the first ever comprehensive study into ethnic representation in UK children’s literature as part of our Reflecting Realities initiative. The findings revealed a stark underrepresentation of ethnic minority characters in books published in 2017. For the full findings and recommendations download the report here: https://clpe.org.uk/library-and-resources/research/reflecting-realities-survey-ethnic-representation-within-uk-children

Whilst the survey showed us that there is a shortage of quality literature featuring meaningful ethnic minority presence, the books that do it and do it well are true gems that should be treasured by children and adult readers alike. Here are ten of the titles that for me, embody this for primary age children – of course any list will only scratch the surface of the full range of titles.

So Much
Trish Cooke, illus by Helen Oxenbury, Walker Books, 978-1406306651, £7.99 pbk
Every page of this beautiful, beautiful classic exudes warmth, love and heart. It is a playful and joyous celebration of the powerful and unbreakable bonds of familial relationships and community. It’s impossible for your smile not to widen at the sight of each family member that greets baby at the turn of every page.

Home in the Rain
The power of this book is rooted in the way in which Graham captures the very ordinary everyday subject matter with extraordinary tenderness, thoughtfulness and authenticity. Waiting for the torrential rain to pass in the car with her pregnant mother leaves time for young Francie to ponder the exciting changes that the arrival of her new sibling will bring.

Zeki can Swim
Anna McQuinn, illus Ruth Hearson, AlannaMax, 978-1907825132, £7.99 pbk
Like his sister Lulu, Zeki’s everyday exploits are tremendously important because they provide a platform for both Zeki and Lulu to get busy with living the life of babies and toddlers. Zeki drives the narrative and takes the reader along for a trip to the local swimming pool. The illustrations capture special, heart-warming moments between parents and their children as well as the playful energy of Zeki’s friends in the pool.

Ruby’s Worry
Tom Percival, Bloomsbury Children’s Books, 978-1408892152, £6.99 pbk
Like many children, Ruby is happily living life until one day she is visited by a worry that grows over time. She learns that sharing our worries can help ease them and that ultimately we all carry worries of varying sizes at any given point in time. Percival has a lovely, distinctive illustrative style. A reassuring and thoughtful book that offers an optimistic but realistic resolution.
If All the World Were
Joseph Coelho, illus Allison Colpoys, Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1786036513, £6.99 pbk
Coelho masterfully manages to strike the delicate balance between mourning the passing of a loved one and celebrating the gift of the life they lived and its legacy with moving sensitivity and care. Colpoys’s illustrations enrich and deepen our connection with the weight of sadness and height of celebration. An important title to support readers coming to terms with the loss of an elderly relative.

Ada Twist Scientist
Andrea Beaty, illus David Roberts, Abrams Books, 978-1419721373, £13.99 hbk
Ada is an inquisitive scientist driven by a thirst for knowledge and problem solving. Inspiring yet relatable she offers a fantastic role model for readers. The playful rhythm of the text works in total harmony with the witty charm of the illustrations. A real treat of a book.

Splash, Anna Hibiscus!
Atinuke, illus Lauren Tobia, Walker Books, 978-1406554683, £7.99 pbk
Anna is a curious, kind and thoughtful child with a loving extended family full of well-drawn and relatable characters. Through her visits to family in Nigeria we are offered an important glimpse into everyday family life and community that is far more nuanced than the gross generalisations and portrayals of countries from the continent that have traditionally featured in children’s literature and other forms of media.

Little Dreamers: Visionary Women Around the World
Vashti Harrison, Puffin Books, 978-0241346877, £12.99 hbk
The trend of titles focusing on the theme of pioneering female figures has been phenomenal over the last couple of years. Harrison’s latest addition profiles a wide range of inspirational figures from around the world. Due consideration is given to highlighting a broad and varied selection of individuals expanding upon more commonly documented women. Harrison’s unique, ethereal illustrative style complements the magical celebratory tone of the book.

Corey’s Rock
Sita Brahmachari, illus Jane Ray, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1910953107, £10.99 hbk
A touching and sensitive exploration of the challenges of a family coming to terms with the upheaval caused by the loss of the youngest child told through the perspective of the sibling. The words and illustrations weave seamlessly and beautifully together to bring the world of this family to life connecting the reader to the pain of their present and the hopes for their future. There is a real magical quality to this book stemming from the synergy between Brahmachari and Ray. I hope that we see more collaboration between these two talents in the future.

Blackberry Blue
Jamila Gavin, illus Richard Collingridge, Tamarind, 978-1848531079, £6.99 pbk
A magical selection of fairy tales that draw inspiration from the European cannon but have a very distinctive quality of their own. Gavin firmly places characters from a range of backgrounds centre stage, each leading the narrative in their own clever, brave and beautiful ways. The descriptions are so vivid you can almost taste the words in your mouth and the delicate illustrations beautifully complement and frame each story.

An experienced teacher and senior leader, Farrah Serroukh has always been a passionate advocate of every child’s right to access high quality literature and experience the best education possible. She coordinates CLPE’s partnership and regional work and is the author of CLPE’s Reflecting Realities Survey of Ethnic Representation within UK Children’s Literature 2017, which is the first of its kind in the history of UK children’s publishing.
Windows into illustration: Katie Cleminson

Katie Cleminson is a multi award-winning author and illustrator whose books include Otto the Book Bear, selected as one of The Sunday Times’ 100 modern children’s classics in 2014. In this article she describes the challenge of illustrating a teddy as it is - literally - loved to bits.

Loved to Bits was written by the excellent Teresa Heapy, and the first text I’d been sent to illustrate that truly spoke to me.

I had already written and illustrated four picture books of my own, so illustrating for another author was a voyage of discovery. I read the text for the first time just before I went to visit my mother. I took it with me, her first reaction when reading ‘How will you illustrate him all fallen apart?’ Yes, how do you illustrate a dismembered teddy bear in a charming, non-scary way? By the end he has ‘No arms and legs - just hanging threads. Stripes loved off, all brown instead. Battered, worn-out ball and head.’ I had to get the balance of just enough of the Ted we knew, his face shape the same, and still with a smile for us, so he was still recognisable.

Also, the beginning of the book is full of swash-buckling, colourful Indiana-Jones style adventuring, and we have to switch tone completely when Ted’s last leg comes off. We managed this by slowing down the text, switching from busy backgrounds to white backgrounds, and zooming in on just our two characters, to show the importance. The incredible duo of art director Ness Wood, and super editor Alice Corrie, helped me find the delicate line of getting all the tones right, with this moving story.

One of the key drawings is when the boy is deciding bear’s fate, and I chose to have him with his back to us. This was definitely inspired by the great illustrator, EH Shepherd. That gorgeous illustration of playing Pooh sticks on the bridge, came to mind. The characters have their backs to us, inviting us to go over and look, as though we have stumbled across them in the woods. If you look at all those illustrations, the characters don’t often ‘look directly to camera’ and it creates the sense that they are in their own world, in private moments, rather than on stage for us. I wanted that quiet, intimate feel in this book. It took a lot of pencil and charcoal roughs, and a couple of mini dummy book to get the right compositions. For final artwork, I would then draw the ink line with a pipette, followed by willow charcoal, watercolour or coloured pencil.

I used photo reference of old Steiff bears to get the shapes for Ted. I wanted a classic timelessness to him, and I wanted his arms and legs to look jointed and flexible. I also hoped other generations might identify with Stripy Ted, I think we all had a toy that got rather tatty during our childhood. Did we all have them completely mended, or thrown out? Certainly not. My mother still has her faded pink teddy, it’s sixty years old, with one eye and a missing ear. Just like Stripy Ted, he’s loved to bits, and perfect just the way he is.

Loved to Bits is published by David Fickling Books, 978-1910989333, £6.99 pbk.
I liked him better.

He fitted right, just here.

We tickled monsters, fled on rafts, we searched, explored, escaped...
and laughed.

But in the end . . .

and

Stripy Ted fell to the floor.

the last stitch tore
One of the most highly anticipated books of 2019 must surely be Angie Thomas’ follow-up to the New York Times Bestseller and multi award-winning *The Hate U Give* (2017). *On the Come Up* is the tale of sixteen-year-old Bri who has ambitions to be one of the greatest rappers of all time whilst dealing with the loss of her father, racist security staff at school and the threat of gang violence. Thomas describes the story as a ‘love letter to those black girls who are often made to feel as if they are somehow both too much and not enough’ as well as ‘a love letter to hip-hop’. She continues, ‘When I couldn’t find myself in books, I found myself in the rhymes written by MCs who looked like me and shared my experiences. These unconventional poets were my heroes, and are the heroes for millions of young people.’

As a former MC herself, Thomas is part of a generation of writers who are dismantling a wall they encountered in their own childhoods - that between the books they encountered that so often failed to reflect their realities and the hip-hop music that showcased the creativity of black writers. Over the past decade or so, a number of hip-hop influenced children’s and young adult books have been published, mostly by a generation of writers who, like Thomas, grew up on hip-hop music.


Just as hip-hop music developed out of mixing records from different genres, the anthology *Hip Hop Speaks to Children: A Celebration of Poetry with a Beat*, edited by poet and activist Nikki Giovanni situates hip-hop’s words in the form of rap within an African-American oral and written tradition. Here rappers Mos Def, Common and Queen Latifah can be read as writers who are part of a tradition that includes Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou and W.E.B. Du Bois.

Like Kool Herc, Benjamin Zephaniah was born in Jamaica and grew up listening to reggae. In *Gangsta Rap* (2004), tells the story of three boys in east London who find success as controversial multiracial rap group Positive Negatives. Zephaniah does not shy away from the tensions and contradictions sometimes found in hip hop, including a passage that depicts a tense scene where a journalist interviews the band about the relative merits of Bob Marley and Tupac Shakur. When they are excluded from their school, they find an alternative sense of belonging in hip hop. Prem rejects his Indian mother's disdain for black music, instead embracing the band's motto; ‘Let wordy great minds think alike, sweet Hip-Hop be our guiding light.’ (226)

Whilst Zephaniah’s current band *Revolutionary Minds* includes rapper Amy True, he himself first made his name as a dub poet in the reggae tradition. It was in the 1970s that a new generation of Black British writers begin to speak up against racism and police brutality that children’s books in Britain began referencing music by people of colour in an overtly political way. Farrukh Dhondy’s short story, ‘Go Play Butterfly’, in the collection *Come to Mecca* (Collins 1978) contrasts the cheerful music and costumes of the Notting Hill carnival of 1976 with the surveillance and brutality
of white police officers. Esther, the main character, is happy in her butterfly costume, thinking to herself that 'she was a beauty and she could float and she felt high' (118) while dancing to the music; it is just at this moment that the band's leader comments, 'It's a fucking police Carnival' (118). Dhondy was writing in an era when many young poets, including Linton Kwesi Johnson, Accabre Huntley, and Valerie Bloom were first performing and publishing their poems, often with reference to reggae or even—in the case of Linton Kwesi Johnson—with a reggae beat supporting their lyrics. Therefore, Accabre Huntley can write in 'Blackman Brotherman' (At School Today, Bogle L’Ouverture 1976), that the 'dread' boys in rasta-striped hats 'want Peace' (31), using the language of reggae in poems that claim a space for Black Britons.

Another of 2018's book prize winners uses the language of hip-hop for his debut book. Karl Nova is a known on the London hip-hop scene and has been giving workshops in schools for a number of years. In the CLiPPA award-winning Rhythm and Poetry, Nova chooses, in his own words, 'to reflect on childhood through the lens of Hip Hop...viewing rap as the poetry of today'.

"You will find me on rhythm and poetry street where lyricism, poetic lines and the spoken word meet the lines are blurry here it’s hard to trace but for me it is home a familiar street" Nova (10)

In ‘My Address’, Nova puns on ‘address’ and opens up a connection between his speech and his sense of belonging. These are themes taken up by Breis (pronounced ‘Breeze’) in his book Brilliant Rappers Educate Intelligent Students (2011). The poem ‘Wahala’ is offered in ‘pidgin English’ with ‘Interpretation’ on the opposite page.

"Plan one thing, na another thing sele, You never plan for that one télè, télè Kilô sele? The stress, palaver Everyone I know has to deal with wahalà"

"Plan one thing, and another thing happens You never planned for that before What’s the matter? The stress, palaver Everyone I know has to deal with trouble" (22-23)

Both Karl Nova and Breis lived in London and Nigeria during their childhood and explore in their writing how both places shaped them. Far from being imitative of hip-hop from the USA, their writing demonstrates a personal engagement with the spirit of hip-hop in drawing from diverse sources in order to create something original; by way of example, Breis writes of learning from Lauryn Hill, Roald Dahl and Ben Okri.

Two of the most highly rated rappers in Britain have provided words for picture books aimed at younger readers by illustrator Sav Akyüz. Akala’s rhymes feature in Hip and Hop: You Can Do Anything (2017) and Ben Bailey Smith (also known as Doc Brown) provides words for I Am Bear (2016). The latter has a link to a music video on the cover. Brilliant Rappers Educate Intelligent Students is also available as an audiobook and Hip Hop Speaks to Children comes with a CD with performances of most of the poems and songs. This is a neat reversal of thirty years ago - when hip hop albums often included lyric sheets - and suggests that publishers are starting to recognise the value of words penned by MCs.

I wish I’d written...

Ross Welford struggles to choose just one book he wishes he’d written.

There was a time, about ten years ago, when I could have recited by heart the whole of Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler’s *Room on the Broom*. I know *The Gruffalo* is their stand-out hit, but for me, *Room on the Broom* has a clearer plot and just the right level of daftness. I’d love to write a rhyming story one day, and if I do, Donaldson’s perfect ear for rhythm and rhyme will be my inspiration.

Magical fantasy was never my go-to genre, but there is one that I like more than any and that is Astrid Lindgren’s often-overlooked *The Brothers Lionheart* from 1973. Lindgren is best-known, of course, for the madcap *Pippi Longstocking* books. *The Brothers Lionheart* is a much darker affair, however – a kind of Scandi-noir for kids, with death, revenge and even suicide as themes. I’m not sure I’d ever have dared to write it, which makes me wish I had.

Finally, and purely for vanity, I wish I had written *Treasure Island* – or indeed any book that is still being read by children nearly 150 years after publication! These days, sadly, the archaic language makes it a tough read for kids: perhaps I’ll propose a re-write?

Good Reads

Our Good Reads were chosen by young people at Charlton Park Academy in south east London. Thanks to the pupils and to school librarian Caroline Fielding.

**Aliens Love Underpants**
Claire Freedman, illus Ben Cort, Simon & Schuster, 978-1416917052, £6.99
I like it because it makes me laugh. The rhymes are brilliant. *Hitcham*

**Horrid Henry Joke book**
Francesca Simon, illus Tony Ross, Orion Children’s Books, 978-1407214368, £6.99
I like it because it is very funny. If you like Horrid Henry you will like these jokes. *Taylor*

**Kill Swap**
James Lovegrove, Barrington Stoke, 978-1842994474
I like this book because of the suspense. If you like murder thrillers you should read it. *Tyreek*

**Gremlin**
Chris Powling, Barrington Stoke, 978-1842994764
I like it because it is thrilling and ghostly. It was a fun book to read. *Ben*

**Mog and the V.E.T.**
I like it because it is silly. You should read it to find out what happens to Mog’s paw. *Roxanna*
Two Children Tell
‘Book, book!’: Nicholas talks about books

In the latest in her series Two Children Tell, Virginia Lowe describes her son’s special relationship with books.

N: This is a small house. A small house but a good one. [Nick was almost four (3y11m) and was bouncing boisterously from room to room on an orange ball with handles.]
V: You like it, do you?
N: Yes, it’s got lots of books and stuff.

One week (and many readings) later he was still thinking about the books which, even forty years ago, covered almost every available wall of the house.

N: How do your own books get into your house?
V: Someone buys them and gives them to you. What did you think?
N: I thought when the builder builded the house he made them too! This didn’t seem to be a flight of fantasy, because some weeks later he asked again
N: How did books come, which are our own books?
V: We bought them or brought them from the old house.
N: [patiently as to an idiot]: No, the ones we had forever. I mean the ones in the house when we came here.

It seemed that nothing could convince this four-year-old that our house was once without books. They seemed as much a part of the house as doors and windows (4y1m).

This is the same child who had the demand ‘Book, book’ among his earliest words at eighteen months, just as his sister had had ‘Wead wead’ among hers – used in the same situation, chasing after an adult with a book held out appealingly.

Why this fascination with books?

Of course there was the fact that the house was full of them, as he had pointed out, and they were very important to the adults, who read to themselves and to the children, every available moment.

Books were the repository of stories, and stories were of vital import to these two children. One can of course tell stories from the pictures, just as one may also use the pictures for vocabulary building (labelling), but we parents chose to read the words, even to babies. This led to an enjoyment of literary language – a different type from everyday conversation – and to extensive quotation in babies. This led to an enjoyment of literary language – a different type from everyday conversation – and to extensive quotation in babies.

The Story of the Pied Piper was one of those stories. His father explained that most people wanted the goodies to win. He and Rebecca had been playing goodies and baddies with the baddies winning, of late. Wondering if the frightening Groke (Jansson) was always awake, he went off chanting ‘We don’t know and we don’t know’ cause we’ve never seen one and there’s nothing real about them at 4y2m.

There were characters of course to identify with. He often chose a character to be his ‘little friend’, and to ‘save’. To the Little Half Chick, stranded on the weather vane, he declared ‘If I saw that bird up there, I’d get a big enormous ladder and climb up, and get him down.’ and in the Pied Piper he was clearly moved by the plight of the little lame boy left behind. ‘I’d build a little pretty house, and I’d marry him’. He went on to become a paramedic, ‘saving’ people in need.

Nick would also identify with characters. He particularly loved irascible, indomitable Little My, in Jansson’s Moomintroll stories. ‘Little My is always cross. Little people are often cross. I’m quite irascible, indomitable Little My, in Jansson’s Moomintroll stories. ‘Little My is always cross. Little people are often cross. I’m quite cross sometimes’ – which was true and showed an unexpected self-awareness at 4y4m.

Children’s books mentioned
The Wizard of Oz L. F. Baum
Fairy Tale Treasury Virginia Haviland and R. Briggs
The Story of the Pied Piper (retelling Browning’s) Barbara Ireson and G Rose,
Finn Family Moomintroll Tove Jansson

Dr Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, Australia, and is a literature adjunct associate at Monash University. She is the proprietor of Create a Kids’ Book assessment agency. Her book Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two Children Tell (Routledge 2007) is based on the records of reading to her children. Lines Between John and Virginia Lowe a poetry chapbook has just been published.
Anthea Bell
10 May 1936 – 18 October 2018

Daniel Hahn remembers translator Anthea Bell

When Anthea Bell died in October 2018, her death was reported on the BBC news. Various papers ran lengthy obituaries. Twitter buzzed with grateful memories from fans, many of them referencing her work on children’s books. Now, given the general assumption that translators are supposed to be anonymous, invisible – in service to somebody else’s books and talents, rather than conspicuously flaunting their own – this very visible outpouring of appreciation was more than a little unusual. But Anthea, as we translators have long known, was different.

At the time of her death, Anthea Bell had a 57-year career behind her, a career that began in her early twenties when publisher Klaus Flugge commissioned her (via her husband) to take on a translation of Otfrid Preussler’s The Little Water Sprite. (That debut piece of work, first published in 1960, is back in print today.) It would be a career of both dizzying variety and extraordinary consistency – she could do so many different things, but always in an exemplary fashion. She translated Kafka and contemporary crime, Holocaust stories and Sigmund Freud and Stefan Zweig; she did fiction and non-fiction; and some of the finest German-language novelists of our own day: not only (perhaps most famously) W.G. Sebald, but also Saša Stanišić, Julia Franck, Rafik Schami and so many more. And then, of course, come the children’s books.

I can say with some confidence that no translator has ever been responsible for bringing more great international writing to the UK’s children than Anthea Bell. There are others who over the decades have made very substantial contributions to this area, translators such as Sarah Ardizzone and Patricia Crampton – making a trio who for years formed our basic A-B-C of translating for children – but even in that company, I’d argue, Anthea’s contributions were quite unparalleled.

The most successful contemporary children’s fiction writer in English translation must surely be Cornelia Funke – we have Anthea Bell to thank for The Dragon Rider and the Inkheart trilogy. The recent rediscovery of Erich Kästner – also Anthea. (She was sorry not to have had the opportunity to translate Emil and the Detectives, but made up for this by doing several others.) The much-loved Kai Meyer? Anthea. The stunning Bambert’s Book of Missing Stories? Also Anthea. As well as countless French books, new and old, including even that perennial favourite series of charming schoolboy delights, Gosciny and Sempé’s Petit Nicolas – yes, if you read that in English, you also have her to thank for that. Plus some Grimm, some E.T.A. Hoffman, and a lot more Preussler, some Perrault . . . Oh, and did I mention she also translated a few books from Danish among all these, too?

Anthea Bell won the Marsh Award a record three times (out of only eleven times it was awarded overall) – for Meyer’s The Flowing Queen, for Christine Nöstlinger’s A Dog’s Life, and for Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s Where Were You, Robert? – in addition to several shortlistings. She won the U.S. equivalent, the Mildred L. Batchelder Award, a similarly record-breaking four times. In addition to various other prizes for her grown-up translations, and for her career as a whole (just imagine, an invisible translator getting an O.B.E.), in her final year she was selected by the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art for a ‘Carle Honor’ award, granted annually to a few individuals around the world ‘for their contributions to the field of children’s literature’.

And then, of course, there was Asterix – and really, I’ve saved the best for last. By the time the 36th album, Asterix and the Missing Scroll, was published in 2015, Anthea had become the only person in the world to have worked on every volume to date. René Goscinny was long dead, Albert Uderzo had retired, and all the other original translators had moved on (one way or another) decades earlier. But Anthea published her first Asterix book in 1969 (this year will be the 50th anniversary), and she would stick with them for the rest of her long career.

It’s often said that the two truly emblematic cases of texts whose literary quality is surpassed by their English translations are Asterix and The King James Bible. I can’t vouch for the latter, but I know this to be true for Asterix. These translations – many of them produced jointly with Derek Hockridge – are probably most widely praised for the character names, which are indeed brilliant (a tenacious dog called Dogmatix, a peddler of magical drugs called Getafix, a fishmonger called Unhygienix . . .), but there’s so much besides them. There’s an incredible energy to the English text, which manages somehow never to be bogged down by the cultural and historical allusions so densely packed into it. There’s all kinds of wordplay and other clever jokes, but their erudition never feels excluding – it’s both accessible to child readers and the source of surprising rewards for those of us (re-)reading them at a later age.

As a translator, I don’t think I’ve ever given a talk about translation that hasn’t at some point referenced Anthea’s work – as an example of what makes the job interesting, creative, rewarding, challenging. I talk constantly about the significance of her contribution to the translator’s profession. But my relationship to Asterix is different. Asterix is how I came to discover Anthea not as a colleague or friend but as a reader, when I was perhaps eight or nine years old. From the moment I first read Asterix, Anthea was one of my favourite writers, though I couldn’t have told you her name at the time. I’m glad we’ve learned to appreciate her properly, at last.
John Burningham, who died aged 82 on 4 January of pneumonia, was one of the giants of picture book creation. The creator of over forty books which have sold more than four million copies worldwide, he was a master of storytelling and illustration. He created prize-winning classics loved by generations of children and parents and restlessly explored what kind of stories might be told to children through the interaction of text and pictures.

John was born in Farnham, Surrey in 1936. He was brought up in an unconventional family and was sent to a succession of progressive co-educational boarding schools, which he later recalled as a time of constant personal displacement. He eventually arrived at the most famous of these: A. S. Neill’s Summerhill. Here students could choose how they spent their time, and John spent all his in the art room. He then studied at the Central School of Art, where he met his future wife, and future fellow children’s illustrator, Helen Oxenbury; and in 1960 he had a break-through commission to design posters for London Transport. At the same time, in a small ring-back notebook, he was writing an illustrated story for children, Borka: The Adventures of A Goose with No Feathers. This was published by Jonathan Cape in 1963 to instant acclaim, winning the Library Association’s Kate Greenaway Award for illustration.

Following the success of Borka, John worked for more than half a century on creating picture books that he both wrote and illustrated. He began his career when he and his contemporaries were able to take advantage both of advances in the technology of colour lithography and a growing market for their work both nationally and internationally. Borka and the four other animal tales that followed it between 1963 and 1969 demonstrate some of the qualities which were to characterise John’s career: the ability to combine character portrayal with sweeping painterly landscape; the holding together of surreal events with dramatic timing and emotional truth; and a deep sympathy for outsiders. But it was in 1971 that Mr Gumpy’s Outing initiated possibly the most innovative and productive phase of his career.

Mr Gumpy’s Outing, which won John’s second Greenaway medal and a clutch of other awards, has been credited by some critics as opening up the possibilities of the picture book, perhaps even inventing the modern form. Rather than using a conventional narrative structure, it employs a series of repeated encounters as two children and a number of animals board Mr Gumpy’s boat, each time being warned by Mr Gumpy to behave themselves. Once they are all aboard, they inevitably do all the things they were told not to, and the boat tips them and Mr Gumpy into the river in a glorious double-page soaking. Apart from its innovation in form, and its sunny evocation of a day on the river, the book is also a subtle and subversive examination of the relationship between adults and children: a theme that John was to return to repeatedly in the books that followed.

John took a long time over every book and wanted to do something different each time. With Come Away from the Water, Shirley (1977), he pushed at the boundaries of picture book storytelling again. Shirley presents the reader with two stories running in parallel across its double pages, on one side a portrayal of a rather dull visit to the seaside with two caricature adults dozing in their deck chairs, on the other the technicolour adventures imagined by the little girl whose interior and garden he had transformed through an eclectic personal collection of old furniture, miscellaneous fittings and architectural fragments which reflected his respect for the craft of their anonymous makers. He was able to indulge his interest in architecture when the West Japan Railway Company invited him to design three railway carriages and two earthquake-proof station buildings for Expo 90. He illustrated two children’s books by other authors, one was Wind in the Willows (1983); the other was Ian Fleming’s Chitty, Chitty Bang, Bang (1964), for which John provided the original illustrations and, in model form, the first version of the car itself. He also published books of illustrations for adults. While he and Helen each enjoyed huge success, they collaborated on only one title, There’s Going to be a Baby (2010), for which John supplied the text and Helen the illustrations. In 2018, they were jointly honoured with a BookTrust Lifetime Achievement Award.

John was a quiet man who was working until the end. Modest and not given to self-analysis, he was exacting and ambitious in his work, and was content to let it speak for itself. For many of my generation, who shared his books with children at work and at home, and whose children have gone on to share them with their children, his loss is not just of a remarkable author but of someone who had made himself, although we might never have met, in some way a part of the family.
A new year often prompts us to think about what we really want from life. Award-winning author Andrew Norriss remembers the very special moment he realised he wanted to be a writer – and how it inspired his new book, Mike.

About twenty years ago, I was listening to a programme on Radio 4 about Tim Henman. In case you don’t remember, Tim Henman was the first male Brit with a credible shot at winning Wimbledon that this country had seen in several decades (sadly, he didn’t) and the fans, many of them young women, went wild for him. They called it Henmania.

The programme interviewed a lot of people who knew him, including - and this was the bit that caught my ear - a man called Gavin, who had frequently played against Tim when they were both teenagers. ‘And was he good, even then?’ the interviewer asked. ‘Quite good,’ was the answer, ‘but when I played him I usually won.’

Gavin did not say this boastfully, but you could hear the slight puzzlement in his voice. Tim Henman was now rich, successful and famous, and the guy who had, six years before, regularly beaten him on the tennis court… wasn’t. He said he could remember how various coaches had urged him to take up tennis professionally but… he just hadn’t been interested.

It stuck in my mind because it tied in with something that had happened to me some years before. The question of ‘what I wanted to do with my life’ was something that baffled me until I was in my thirties. When I came home from university, and eventually got a job serving on the cheese counter in Woolworths, it baffled my parents too. In exasperation, my mother found an advert in The Lady for a tutoring job and badgered me into applying. Which led to my becoming a teacher.

I taught for ten years. It’s an honourable profession and I had - and still have - the deepest admiration for those that can do it the way we know it should be done. But for me there was always something missing - a nagging feeling that there was something else I should be doing, though for the life of me I could not think what it was.

It was a trip to a hypnotist to give up smoking that changed that. At one of the sessions, Dr Watson asked me what it was that I really wanted to do, and I heard myself say that I wanted to be a writer. I say ‘heard myself’ because that’s how it felt. The voice came from way, way down and had such an obvious authority that I could not deny its truth. However unlikely, apparently that really was what I wanted to do.

So I went home and started writing. Six months later I had sold a pilot sitcom to ITV (it ran for three series and starred Simon Callow and Brenda Blethyn) and I have been earning my living as a writer for the forty years since.

It wasn’t quite as simple as that of course. Knowing what you want to do in life is, unfortunately, no guarantee that you will succeed, and freelance writing when you have a wife, small children and a mortgage can be a hairy business. I was, frequently, terrified. But I never again had that ‘lost’ feeling of not knowing where my life was going. The awful fear that I wasn’t doing what I should be doing was gone and the relief was more wonderful than I can say.

Hearing that voice - and acting on it - was a watershed moment for me. Understandably, I thought a good deal about it afterwards. How could something ‘inside’ know what I should be doing and then tell me? It was odd, but I quickly discovered I wasn’t the first person this had happened to. Asking around, more and more people would tell me about this ‘knowing’ they had had of the direction and the career they should follow.

I have since discovered that the ‘voice’ is in fact such a common phenomenon that people have written books about it. A lot of people. A great many books. They have wildly varied theories about what the voice is, and where it comes from, and how best to listen to it, but most of them agree that it can do more than just tell you what career to take up. It can talk to you about anything. And any time you’re feeling lost and uncertain, they say, if you stop, get quiet, and listen to the voice, it will have an answer… And if you think I’m getting a bit woo-woo here, you’re right. But the bit that matters is that, as far as I’m concerned, it works.

A part of me has often wanted to contact the tennis player who regularly beat Tim Henman and find out what happened to him. What did he do, once he’d decided not to follow a sporting career, and how did it turn out? But of course I don’t know who he is, or where he lives. I’m not even sure that’s his name’s Gavin.

So I wrote Mike instead. It’s the story of a fifteen year old who is really good at tennis but then hears a voice - he’s not sure where it comes from at first - which says, with an authority he cannot deny, This isn’t the way for you. You need to be going in that direction instead.

I wonder if anything like that was what happened to the guy I heard on the radio.

If it is, I think he’ll be okay.

Mike is published by David Fickling Books, 978-1788450102, £7.99 pbk
Ed’s Choice

Grandma Bird

Benji Davies, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 9781471171802, £6.99 pbk

Benji Davies is fast becoming one of the most talented and most loved illustrators for the very young. Here he returns to the landscape he first created in The Storm Whale with Noi, the small lost migrant bird and builds a relationship with his grandmother. Davies illustrations make bold use of the double spreads to create the atmosphere of the seaside world inhabited by Noi and Grandma. His palette ranges from the bright clear colours of a sunny day to the dark drama of the storm against which the red sails of Grandma’s boat shine like a beacon. Not and Grandma, deceptively simple images, nevertheless are full of character and life, completely individual and recognisable. ‘I think he likes you’ says Noi to his Grandma; there will be no doubt the readers of this attractive and effective picture book will like her too. This must be highly recommended for both the classroom and the home. FH

The Drum


On a tropical beach a series of different drummers are playing and everyone is dancing to the beat. The simple text is memorable, with rhyme and a rhythm reflecting the drum beats. Instructions are given for moving to the beat, shaking hips and stomping feet tempting readers to join in and dance along with the enthusiastic crowd. Links are made to our own bodies and life itself with the heart a drum beating inside us. The illustrations are vibrant, cleverly conveying a sense of rhythmic drumming and contributing to the key messages of the book. Life, rhythm and diversity is celebrated in the range of creatures emerging in the penultimate spread and in the diversity of individuals enjoying dancing to the beat and playing the drums.

The Drum is the first of a new series from publisher Tiny Owl entitled Children, Music, Life. This is a wonderful book in small hardback format perfect for small hands which children and adults will enjoy sharing again and again, who will be able to resist dancing to the beat? SMc

I’ll love you…


It’s one of those sayings ‘… till the cows come home’, which, to a farmer, probably means the end of the day. It can also mean ‘for a long time’, or even ‘forever’. Here former children’s book editor Kathryn Cristaldi plays with that idea, and also the idea of other animals having various adventures, all playfully illustrated by Krystyna Litten. Both women are experienced producers of children’s books, with Krystyna’s output beginning in 2012 with Chickens can’t see in the dark, and now numbers some 35 titles, including Blue and Bertie and Norton and Alpha, with some showing the influence of her parents’ Eastern European heritage. Kathryn has written 24 books so far, including Baseball Ballerina, Samantha the Snob, Even Steven and Odd Todd, but this looks like a new partnership between an author in New Jersey and an illustrator in Yorkshire.

We start with ‘I’ll love you till the cows come home’, but where have the cows been? ‘From a trip to Mars through skies unknown in a rocket ship made of glass and stone’, and there are the cows in their rocket. On the next two spread it’s ‘I will love you till the yaks come back, from a jaunt to town for a grassy snack, in a fire truck, or a Cadillac…’. The author’s American point of view is clear, but the rhymes are fun, and the Cadillac is a very distinctive car! It goes on: I will love you till the sheep set sail, then till the wolves return, then till the frogs ride past (these two watery double-spreads are terrific, with sea-creatures on all sorts of wheels) and so on. It’s great use of language, and the illustrations are suitably whacky. The publishers are pushing this as a companion to Guess how much I love you, but that’s not necessary — this is funnier, and will set a child at bedtime with a smile. DB

Shhh!

Barroux, words & pictures, 32pp, 978 1 910 7778 2, £11.99 hbk

If you’re looking for an enchanting bedtime story, then look no further; this highly interactive and involving book will keep children (and adults) still. Barroux has created the ideal snuggle under the duvet book for parents and carers to share with their little ones.

Beautifully restful, we share a small child’s bedtime routine where, inspired by his toys, his flights of fancy take him to a beautiful sequence of dreamscapes. GB

Simple, lyrical and captivatingly illustrated, this bedtime tale from Barroux will likely become a part of the pre-sleep routine and a beautifully calming way to bid goodnight to preschoolers, even the more reluctant among them. JB

Only One of Me: a Love Letter from Dad

Lisa Wells, Michelle Robinson, ill. Tim Barroux, Graff, 40pp, 978 1 91265 463 5, £12.99 hbk

Talking to young children about the terminal illness of a loved one must be the hardest thing that any parent can undertake. Lisa Wells, a young mum of two with a terminal diagnosis, has produced this book with her friend Michelle Robinson to give consolation to her daughters. The same book has been produced for dads, and this is the one we have here. Using rhyme, Dad explains to his young son that he wants so much to be with him always: ‘There’s only one dad quite like me. I wish that there were two. I’d have more time to spend and I would spend it all with you.’ Because he knows he won’t be around, he has recruited his son’s family and friends to be with him for this and to do all the things he would do if he were able. And he also believes that he will be in the background, cheering on the little
Boy. He explains that it will be okay for his son to cry and get angry and even to laugh because ‘There’s more than one way to feel sad.’ He also hopes his boy will be a little like him and will remember the wonderful times they have shared. The illustrations for this picture book are strikingly sensitive and beautiful, reflecting the love between father and son – happy times as well as sad. And there is a place for a photo at the back of the book, as well as space to write about memories of the loved parent. People often write books about their experiences of cancer, both for a mum for her own children, and for their friends who have been told by their mum whilst playing happily in the park, to go over and ‘say hello’ to another boy playing on his own: ‘I hate, hate, HATE saying hello to little boys in sandpits.’ Besides, his mum has always told him not to talk to strangers; he will make friends when he wants to, he thinks. Imagination takes over, and he plots a long, involved story – which includes the sandpit boy turning out to be a monster, who drags him down into his sandpit lair along with lots of other children who must be his slaves. Further adventures include an invention of a mass escape, a black panther who eats only monsters, and crows are appealing characters, the most idiosyncratic spelling in some of their names, and in desperate need of a hug. The whole tone of the story is quite sophisticated, as are the illustrations. Full of detail and lots of humour, they evoke a world unknown to anyone but the imagination of a small child. Some wise words of encouragement.

Clementine Beauvais, ill. Maisie Paradise Shearring, Thames & Hudson, 32pp, 978 0 500 65170 4, £10.95 hbk

Remarkably imaginative and funny, this tale of mayhem and murder has been translated from the French and is about as wonderfully weird as one can imagine. The little boy has been told by his mum whilst playing happily in the park, to go over and ‘say hello’ to another boy playing on his own: ‘I hate, hate, HATE saying hello to little boys in sandpits.’ Besides, his mum has always told him not to talk to strangers; he will make friends when he wants to, he thinks. Imagination takes over, and he plots a long, involved story – which includes the sandpit boy turning out to be a monster, who drags him down into his sandpit lair along with lots of other children who must be his slaves. Further adventures include an invention of a mass escape, a black panther who eats only monsters, and crows are appealing characters, the most idiosyncratic spelling in some of their names, and in desperate need of a hug. The whole tone of the story is quite sophisticated, as are the illustrations. Full of detail and lots of humour, they evoke a world unknown to anyone but the imagination of a small child. Some wise words of encouragement.

Anahita Teymorian, ill. Tiny Owl, 978-1-010328-361 32pp £12.99 hbk

This is a funny book, the protagonist wonders that there was room for him to grow in his mother’s tummy, there was room for all of them in their little house, including all his toys, room for all the stars in the sky, room for all the birds in the garden, all the books in the library, room for all the fish in the sea and the animals in the world-so, as he becomes a whiskery sailor and explores the world around him, he wonders why people light over small spaces (train seats), and big spaces (countries at war?) He shares a secret with us; if we are kinder, and love one another then, in this beautiful world, there is room for everyone.

Anahita Teymorian is from Tehran, and feels very strongly about this theme. Her strange illustrations include very elongated parents, and a rather odd-looking whale, with some idiosyncratic spelling in some of the books: How keep babies? Frankenstein? But the colour is marvellous and the illustrations are fun. DB

Similarly, Tortoise is rebuffed by Badger, Rabbit and Frog; but once again Owl endeavours to help with an explanation and encouragement, ‘But don’t worry, there’s someone for everyone’ they tell him both. He plots a long, involved story – which includes the sandpit boy turning out to be a monster, who drags him down into his sandpit lair along with lots of other children who must be his slaves. Further adventures include an invention of a mass escape, a black panther who eats only monsters, and crows are appealing characters, the most idiosyncratic spelling in some of their names, and in desperate need of a hug. The whole tone of the story is quite sophisticated, as are the illustrations. Full of detail and lots of humour, they evoke a world unknown to anyone but the imagination of a small child. Some wise words of encouragement.

Eoin McLaughlin, Polly Dunbar

The Hug

Eoin McLaughlin, ill. Polly Dunbar, Faber & Faber, 56pp, 977 0 671 4600 9, £6.99 pbk

Here’s a cleverly conceived book that can be read from either end. If you’re feeling a bit sad, there’s someone for everyone: ‘But don’t worry, there’s someone for everyone’ they tell him both. He plots a long, involved story – which includes the sandpit boy turning out to be a monster, who drags him down into his sandpit lair along with lots of other children who must be his slaves. Further adventures include an invention of a mass escape, a black panther who eats only monsters, and crows are appealing characters, the most idiosyncratic spelling in some of their names, and in desperate need of a hug. The whole tone of the story is quite sophisticated, as are the illustrations. Full of detail and lots of humour, they evoke a world unknown to anyone but the imagination of a small child. Some wise words of encouragement.

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Sonam and the Silence

The Queen’s Lift-Off

music she has learned from an old
her from the frightening sounds of the
different places and emphasises
special power of music. It will connect
Inspired by the true story of a little

32pp, £11.99 hbk
Allen and Unwin, 978-1760634872,
un-missable addition to this series.

acoutrements, has the final word. An
amazing tricks with a tea tray and its
additional visual stories to discover.

Armstrong's first moon landing into
references to Star Trek and Neil

garden where afternoon tea awaits.

Is it her fate to be trapped forever
beyond; an enjoyable excursion for
a ghost will be a friend for life and
the end where you are reminded that
your ghost to work’ day) – right up to
is gently humorous (it is suggested
accompanied by a minimal palette
illustration, labelled), what ghosts
be able to make friends with a ghost.

The Queen is seven years old and
I love the way Steve has dropped

To me, the most remarkable story is one of hope, resilience and the special power of music. It will connect children with others who live in very different places and emphasises what we all have in common.

Sonam is a young animal who dreams of exploring the world beyond her home. When her father finds the injured pet rubab, the Queen decides to name her Sonam and teach her how to play the instrument. Under the guidance of a wise old sage, Sonam learns to play the rubab, a lute-like instrument much-loved by Afghans. As she learns, her life gets even more frightening as war rages around Sonam and foreign soldiers arrive. Visiting her friend's garden again, Sonam finds that her rubab is hidden for her by her brother, and takes pomegranate seeds to grow her own trees. In the quiet of the garden, the music returns and Sonam realises it is in her heart. We know that as the seeds grow, the music will return too.

Ronak Taher's illustrations are striking, match for the text. He uses colour and starting compositions to create mood and a sense of the unfolding story: quiet browns and lace green - a world under threat.

This is a book to produce gasps and awe - and to send little shivers down the spine all at the same time, a delicious inside view of fairy tales that captures all of the magic, unfazed by the Perrin's illustrations are similarly humorous and dark, full of detail and added treats for readers. AR

How to Make Friends with a Ghost

Rebecca Green Andersen Press, 40pp, 97817875464805, £6.99, phb

Are you scared of ghosts? Are your parents scared of ghosts? This is the book for you. Here Rebecca Green (with the help of Dr Phantoomous Spookle) will make sure that you will be able to make friends with a ghost.

A light-hearted text presented in a clear and attractive sans-serif font against a clean white ground takes the reader through such mysteries as how to identify a ghost (a helpful illustration, labelled), what ghosts might like to eat (mouldy toast, monster-mashed potato, spiderweb sushii), and generally how to care for a ghost from dawn to dusk, from the beginning to the end. There are no great surprises but plenty to cause a shiver down your spine all at the same time, a delicious inside view of fairy tales that captures all of the magic, unfazed by the Perrin's illustrations are similarly humorous and dark, full of detail and added treats for readers. AR

The Antlered Ship

Dashka Slater illustrated by The Fan Brothers, Lincoln Children's Books, 48pp, 9781787650151, £12.99 hbk

Marco the Fox has questions; questions like ‘Why do some songs make you happy and others make you sad?’ The other foxes are not interested, so when the Antlered Ships sail into harbour, Marco joins their crew; his quest to find the answers. It will be a journey fraught with danger – and at the end will Marco find what he is looking for? Or will he discover that it is in fact better to be surprised.

Dashka Slater takes the reader out of the real world into that of imagination as her main vehicle for this a fox, a deer and a group of pigeons sail across turbulent seas in search of a island with tall grass and sweet trees – and foxes to befriend Marco. The questions that trouble Marco are just the sort that children will ask – ‘Why is water wet?’ ‘But as Marco figures out, it is not the answer but the exploration that brings satisfaction and companionship.

The fantasy of the storyline is grounded by the realism of the illustrations by the Fan Brothers. Marco is a real fox depicted with precision and detail and in the softness of his coat. However, there is no dislocation between reality and fantasy since the animals sport pirate) tricorne hats while the ship with its antlers is the perfect vehicle to bridge the divide. Vering on the motley crew's appearance combines with the lush images to create a satisfying experience to stimulate the young imagination.

Tiger Walk


Before a visit to an art gallery Tom is mesmerised by a painting of a tiger which seems to be watching him. When he gets home he is inspired to draw his own picture of the tiger. That night he imagines or dreams the tiger steps out of picture and into his bedroom. The tiger invites Tom to go for a walk. Tom is reluctant, he is scouring of the dark but the tiger reassures him and there follows a night time adventure in which Tom travels through jungles, underwater, to icy caves and above the world meeting a range of creatures along the way. All the while Tom is hesitant about these unfamiliar and scary situations but with the tiger's encouragement he enjoys the experience. So much so that by the end of the book he feels as brave as - a tiger! Perhaps he actually is a tiger! Instead of a unknown painting ‘Surprised’ or ‘Tiger in a Tropical Storm’ this is an appealing story about overcoming fears. The illustrator's style is bold and striking – mixed media collages that are beautiful and stunning, conveying a sense of adventure and the strength and beauty of the tiger brilliantly. The language is beautiful (‘a spritely telling of the story of The Seven Little Goats (the translation is by Daniel Hahn) and then, best of all, a full page figure of these pages are huge don't forget) which opens up to allow us to see right inside his brain - all those clever thoughts and tricks in his stomach, - all those little children and pigs. Paper engineering opens his mouth to reveal those famous big teeth and eyes, and finally heTea to send little shrivers down the spine all at the same time, a delicious inside view of fairy tales that captures all of the magic, unfazed by the Perrin's illustrations are similarly humorous and dark, full of detail and added treats for readers. AR

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The Queen's Lift-Off

Sonam and the Silence

How to Make Friends with a Ghost

The Antlered Ship

Tiger Walk

Books for Keeps No.234 January 2019 25
What Does the Crocodile Say?★★★★★

Eva Montanari, Book Island, 978 1 911496 11 3, £10.99 hbk

This book, in English translation, is published by the small, independent publishing house, Book Island, a company specializing in children’s books, based in Bristol. Older Nursery children will just love it as well as school age children, and will be swept along with the emotions of the one small crocodile in the title. From the drizzly dingril of the alarm clock, through breakfast, lunch, the little Croc is being prepared for nursery school. Mother and young croc sit in the car (vroom vroom), both looking glum. Little croc gets more and more clingy as separation from Mum becomes nearer and nearer, even when greeted cheerily by Elephant teacher, ‘Peekaboo!’ Lots of reader anticipation is called for as parent croc and child enter the room full of different creatures, all engrossed happily in play. ‘WWWAAHH!’ screams young croc, as Mum prepares to leave, one large tear slipping down Mum’s cheek. Elephant and story-time come to the rescue. The book goes once upon a time…reassuring and diverting little croc and drawing in all the other creatures to listen. Mum returns at pick-up time, and the book does younger croc say, ‘Goodnight Mwah Mwah!’ Mum still has a tear to shed. The book closes with cheery goodbyes, and ‘See you tomorrow!’ It is cleverly told in a repeated format of object and its sound, e.g. The door goes wumpth. The text is deceptively simple and the author/illustrator gives lots of opportunities for readers to join in all the sounds, and to talk more about the story elaborated in her splendid pictures. Each object/croc is outlined in soft black crayon, and then carefully coloured in, all the pencil strokes clearly showing. The text, entirely in upper case coloured in, all the pencil strokes clearly showing. The text, entirely in upper case letters, will soon be learnt by small children, as they read the pictures and provide the text themselves on further reads. Lots of fun. GB

The Eel Question

Nicola Davies, illus Beth Holland, Graffeg, 40pp, 9781910862520, £6.99, hbk

The Eel Question is a delightfully dark short story from the prolific Nicola Davies. It tells the story of Nant, a young girl, and Dith, her cruel and violent teacher, ‘Peekaboo!’ Lots of reader anticipation is called for as parent croc and child enter the room full of different creatures, all engrossed happily in play. ‘WWWAAHH!’ screams young croc, as Mum prepares to leave, one large tear slipping down Mum’s cheek. Elephant and story-time come to the rescue. The book goes once upon a time…reassuring and diverting little croc and drawing in all the other creatures to listen. Mum returns at pick-up time, and the book does younger croc say, ‘Goodnight Mwah Mwah!’ Mum still has a tear to shed. The book closes with cheery goodbyes, and ‘See you tomorrow!’ It is cleverly told in a repeated format of object and its sound, e.g. The door goes wumpth. The text is deceptively simple and the author/illustrator gives lots of opportunities for readers to join in all the sounds, and to talk more about the story elaborated in her splendid pictures. Each object/croc is outlined in soft black crayon, and then carefully coloured in, all the pencil strokes clearly showing. The text, entirely in upper case coloured in, all the pencil strokes clearly showing. The text, entirely in upper case letters, will soon be learnt by small children, as they read the pictures and provide the text themselves on further reads. Lots of fun. GB

The Mud Monster

Jonnie Wild, ill. Brita Granström, Otter-Barry, 978 1 91095 986 2, £6.99, hbk

Looking much like a muddy Loch Ness monster, the image on the cover will intrigue the reader. It appeals the monster, clinging to a vine! Everyone in the forest knows the Monster lives amongst them, but no-one has ever seen it. One day when there’s a gurgling in the water-hole, the monsters scream for HELP! But the scary creature screeches back, ‘We are NOT the muddy Monster! We are 5 flamingos. We are MUDDY AS MUDDY CAN BE.’ They ask the out and would you then be as nice to a bath. They all meet Warthog who is horrified by this doubled vision until he is informed the mental monster consisted of flamingos and four monkeys! So, a galumphing something across the plain meets the rhinoceros who roars, ‘Please don’t eat me!’ How could this accumulative tale end? A huge and horrible Monster gurgles and burbles into view, as 5 elephants laughingly insist ALL of the creatures just need a bath. The author has had a lifetime of experience of forest conservation and tree planting projects, mainly in Tanzania. His close affinity with the landscape and its creatures is apparent in the text. The award winning illustrator worked as an illustrator with a flying doctor in Africa, so her illustrations give great authenticity to the colourful life of this continent. Look for the three monkeys – See no, hear no, speak no evil – in one of her many creative pictures. This delightful, humorous story is about helping each other and overcoming imaginary fears. As the second in the Five Flamingos series, it shows us that wild animals need places and spaces to live their lives. The author’s royalties will be donated to support the wildlife habitat conservation projects in Africa. The author and illustrator have worked together to produce a brilliant book. It is well worth seeking out. GB

Think of an Eel

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

It’s small and compact, but packed full of interesting information and trivia. The first few pages introduce the concept of classification and how reptiles fit into the wider animal kingdom. It then describes how they can be identified and explains their unique characteristics. The main body of the book looks in detail at each of the four reptile groups, which are tuataraes (tortoises and turtles), squamates (snakes and lizards), crocodilians (crocodiles and alligators) and synapsids (turtles, alligators and crocodiles). It has a high-quality contained in the jaws of the saltwater crocodile. It has a high-quality hardback finish, with the strikingly colourful illustrations on each page complementing the accompanying black and white photographs. It is the kind of text that should be dipped into repeatedly, rather than read from cover to cover, and would sit well in the Natural History section of any primary school library. Having already enjoyed the other book in the series, Whales, Dolphins and Other Marine Mammals, I am delighted that this is of an equally high standard. JB

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Jonnie Wild, ill. Brita Granström, Otter-Barry, 978 1 91095 986 2, £6.99, hbk

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Mossbathlon MacFearsome and the Dwarves of Doom

Alex Gardiner, Andersen Press, 223pp, 978 1 78603 111 3, £10.99, hbk

Alex Gardiner’s new fantasy adventure chronicles the heroic exploits of a warty, bearded warrior called Captain Mossbathlon MacFearsome (Moss for short). His sudden arrival in a small town in the Scottish Highlands surprises local lad, Roger, and marks the beginning of an almighty war that could spell the end for the entire human race! Moss is captain of the subterranean race of dwarves who, through carefully maintained alliances with dragons and ogres, help ensure the survival of their unenlightened cousins - the human beings. But the secret alliance is under threat from the vengeful intentions of a Furious, red-eyed dwarf - Leatherhead Barnstormer who is hell-bent on destroying Mossbathlon, whatever it takes. Leatherhead is flanked by an army of ‘gorefiends’; hilariously polite miniature demons made from the expelled gases of corpses. They may chop off your head but will complement your attire first! Amidst all this mystical mayhem is an ordinary schoolboy called Roger who, for all sorts of convoluted reasons, is destined to destroy Leatherhead’s doomsday sword and save humanity. Fingers and Moss hurdle through...
story, constantly escaping trouble then finding more trouble, picking up a number of helpful allies en route, from a magical Witchwatcher to a fumbling delivery driver called Wullie. Certain death is narrowly avoided more than once and there are moments of genuine jeopardy as the mighty Moss is incapacitated by Leatherhead's powerful magic. Though much of this action is quite exciting, tension is repeatedly undermined by frequent comic interjections, ill-timed flatulence, toad-gobbing competitions, and, most of all, hilarious Dwarfish insults ('popnpoddy', 'trundletail', 'mobard' etc) ensure that the story never becomes too serious, even when the world seems certain to end. Younger readers may love the belligerent, barbaric behaviour of the dwarves (as well as the toilet humour) and there is ample action packed into the narrative to ensure engagement all the way to the end of the quest, though the balance of action and comedy is not always perfect. The end of the story is deliberately and unapologetically contrived to guarantee a sequel, so fans of Mossbelle's warmongering and worm-eating will not have to wait long for his return.

SD

Storm Hound

Claire Fayers, Macmillan Children's Books, 247pp, 978 1 5098 9504 5, £6.99, pbk

In this drama for children, a terrifying mythical beast is unleashed upon the human world. Wrenched away from the god Odin's thunderous hunting party, Storm finds himself fallen from the clouds of the Otherworld and sharing pet store kennels with everyday Earth dogs. To make matters worse, he has lost his fearsome, horse-sized stature and has become a small, adorable puppy.

Storm longs to return to The Hunt and to Odin's glorious halls - he misses home and feels lost. His story is mirrored by that of Jessica - a twelve-year-old girl who has recently been forced to leave her mother behind in London and move to her father's house in Abergevenny. When Jessica spots Storm at the pet store, it seems fate that they should be companions.

There is fun to be had as Storm struggles to adjust to his new powerless existence. His booming demands become pathetic whines, and he finds that he is not even a match for a common cat, and can't understand why he feels so desperate to chase them up trees. Claire Fayers gives readers an hilarious glimpse into the lives of cats and dogs (and even sheep!) as they are given their own voice and internal monologues, and the diatribes of mighty Storm of Odin coming from a harmless puppy never stops being funny.

Storm isn't the only one grappling with his new existence. Jessica misses her mother and longs to make new friends, and can't understand why her professors and classmates seem so strange (and so interested in her dog!). Almost every character in the story has hidden, magical depths and there is mystery and intrigue as well as a quest to fathom who Storm and she can trust.

Most of all, Storm Hound is about companionship. Jessica and Storm become that there is much more to 'home' than geography and familiar buildings, and that a powerful sense of belonging can be found when one learns to trust the right people. This heartening message is made loud and clear in an exciting, lightning-powered climax on a stormy Welsh mountain. There is laughter to enjoy in Storm Hound and a warm and fuzzy feeling to be had - not unlike cuddling a puppy!

SD

The Girl with the Shark's Teeth


Cerrie Burnell is a well-known children's author whoaverages her way to 'meaty' and quite long book with multitudinous suggestions about how to make yourself and others happier. If one is in need of such things, this book is both cheerful but can also be inspiring and motivating.

Her heroes are 'baddie' penguin-Count Visbeck. This 'meaty' and quite long book has multitudinous suggestions about how to make yourself and others happier. If one is in need of such things, this book is both cheerful but can also be inspiring and motivating. Most of the book is concerned with how to help make a happier world.

SD

Shiny Pippin and the Broken Forest

Harry Heap ill. Rebecca Bagley, Faber and Faber, 261pp, 9780571332151, £6.99, pbk

You have to be ready for puns galore when you read Shiny Pippin so probably have to be a fairly competent reader. The story is about Pippin who discovers she has a magical gift as does her Gran who she admires. She can 'shine'. This means she can talk to her special animal partner, her pet mouse, Tony - for his Dark Materials fans a little like a Daemon. Pippin is tasked with finding out what is going wrong in the forest - as the water is disappearing and there are strange goings on there which seem to be linked to a sinister laboratory nearby.

Pippin and Tony are chased by a 'baddie' penguin-Count Visbeck. This is fairly unoriginal in a story as normally penguins seem to be the good guys...

This then meets some helpful characters along the way including a very talented frog who everybody could do with as a friend for getting you out of tight spots. She learns how to use her magic super power properly and the mystery of the disappearing animals and dying forests is solved.

As a result of the book you probably need to be a good reader or read this story together with your child to keep up with the plot.

HHHH

Young Heroes


Of course this title includes young female heroes, too, and the range of people covered is amazing. Some people featured are now well known: cricketer Sachin Tendulkar, Formula One driver Max Verstappen, Penny Alexander, Becky Goddard-Hill, ill. Clare Forrest, Collins, 160pp, 978-0-00-830121-7, £9.99 pbk

This 'meaty' and quite long book has multitudinous suggestions about how to make yourself and others happier. If one is in need of such things, this book is both cheerful but can also be inspiring and motivating. Most of the book is concerned with how to help make a happier world.

SD

Create Your Own Happy

HHHH

Readers of the book might also enjoy the related book Happy by the same author.


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cellist Yo-Yo Ma and gymnast Nadia Comaneci were all young for their first achievement. Mark Zuckerberg was 12 when he connected all the computers in his home to ‘ZuckNet’, and in his teens when he invented ‘Synapse’, a program to remember songs. ‘Synapse’ was 12 when he connected all the tech companies, but ‘Synapse’, a program to remember songs, is an achievement. Mark Zuckerberg, cellist Yo-Yo Ma and gymnast Nadia Comaneci were all young for their first achievement. Mark Zuckerberg, cellist Yo-Yo Ma and gymnast Nadia Comaneci were all young for their first achievement. Mark Zuckerberg, cellist Yo-Yo Ma and gymnast Nadia Comaneci were all young for their first achievement.

Others are less familiar: Lily Born was 8 when she noticed her grandfather having difficulty holding a drink with tremors caused by Parkinson’s disease, and she invented a cup with legs, which was eventually produced as the Kangaroo cup and is useful in other ways, e.g. keeping a drink upright on grass or sand. Mikaila Ulmer was only 4 when she started making and selling ‘Me and the Bees’ lemonade, to raise money to help save bees. Artist Kieron Williamson was 6 when he sold his first ‘mini-Monet’ painting of Norfolk countryside, and his art is now in huge demand. One young man with huge potential is Dutch teenager Boyan Slat, who disliked diving in plastic, and began to work on removing plastic from the world’s oceans. By the age of 18 he had a plan which no-one believed would work, but he gave a TED talk which went viral, and offers of help flooded in – now his company, Ocean Clean-Up, aims to reduce the Great Pacific Garbage Patch to half its size within five years, to progress to the other garbage patches, and to keep the oceans clear of plastic.

Much is made of the difference between school and home life, no matter how small it may seem at the beginning. Malala is here, of course, but so is Brandon Green, who at the age of 16, represented Yorkshire and Humber, spoke about improving public transport at the UK Youth Parliament, which is an annual event allowing young people to speak on the issues that affect them. He continues to work with the Barnsley Youth Council. Lula Bridgeport points out that this opportunity is open to anyone, and also on few double-page spreads gives ideas on how young people can make an impact if they have enthusiasm and commitment, but also how to be a hero every day in their local community or school, by being kind and helpful, and getting involved.

The three artists have recognizable different styles, but because of the different areas of coverage, this does work. Some people are featured in single or double pages, and others are put together as part of an overview of a section, e.g. STEM, Sport, Environment, Politics and Activism. Ursula Dubosarsky, Allen & Unwin, 169pp, 978 1 76029 229 4, £6.99 pbk.

Veronica Twitch is indeed a fabulous witch and has some equally fabulous friends with their own quirky characters – and she is a lively story with strong characters and a good storyline.

The story will undoubtedly appeal to readers who like magic, a bit of sparkle, fashion and reading about friendships with a baddie in it for good measure. Veronica, Figgy and Pre work at Twitch magazine and are very excited when they are able to meet a band that they all like for an interview in ‘Witch City’. What I particularly like is the subtle steering of making sure that this isn’t about coming out but about talking to the band about being successful female artists. The band ‘Double-Bubble’ have chosen Twitch magazine rather than their rival magazine ‘Nosy Toad’ because they have more integrity. The author doesn’t use that term but I like that it’s implied! Nosy Toad’s reporter, called Belinda Bullfrog, is then behind the subsequent kidnapping of Double Bubble. The reporters have to rescue the band and secure their interview.

The front cover of the book is rather fun as it has lots of the key colour purple – a recurring colour throughout the book but additionally it is also used in different fonts. The book is more amusing if you already know about medieval times and understand some of the plays on words and modern versus medieval time activities. There’s a handy glossary with explanations of words such as mummers, chivalry, bawdy and privy. It is definitely more enjoyable if you have some understanding of the period of history and can make the link with things like wanting to ‘go and hang out on the battlements’, or meeting friends at the ‘wagon stop’ or ‘Bladderball was the most popular game in the kingdom.’

If there was a castle/knight topic in a classroom the book would be a really funny one to read aloud with a grown up just giving a bit of context too.

The Blue Cat


On the first page, a poem which, the author reveals on the Web, ‘crept into my mind on a long overnight flight home to Sydney from Berlin when, says she, ‘I was in a bad mood’:

I only know / the cat is blue / he sits alone / his needs are few / And, a couple of verses later: / he breathes and stares / and then / he blinks / and nobody / knows what he thinks

The blue cat slips in and out of the pages, leaving a scent of feline mystery perhaps, shaping the plot only insofar as his disappearance causes one of the children to search for him all over Sydney. They don’t find him; though maybe they saw him. Columbus’s neighbour, Miss Hazel, descires, ‘If that cat could speak, imagine the stories he would tell’. We’re none the wiser about those other stories but it is clear we are to be at the novel’s end. The cat is elusive, then much the same might be said of the whole book, though it could hardly be more charming.

Columba is growing up in Sydney in 1942: Air Raid Warning Sirens followed by the All Clear, soldiers everywhere, the fall of Singapore, warships at anchor in the harbour, Darwin bombed by the Japanese with loss of life and property. Columbus is very young, ten years, and as the book opens, she dreams about the band ‘Double-Bubble’ have chosen Twitch magazine rather than their rival magazine ‘Nosy Toad’ because they have more integrity. The author doesn’t use that term but I like that it’s implied! Nosy Toad’s reporter, called Belinda Bullfrog, is then behind the subsequent kidnapping of Double Bubble. The reporters have to rescue the band and secure their interview.

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The layout of the book is appealing to young readers as there will page pictures with text as overlay, smaller illustrations and some letters in different fonts. The book is more amusing if you already know about medieval times and understand some of the plays on words and modern versus medieval time activities. There’s a handy glossary with explanations of words such as mummers, chivalry, bawdy and privy. It is definitely more enjoyable if you have some understanding of the period of history and can make the link with things like wanting to ‘go and hang out on the battlements’, or meeting friends at the ‘wagon stop’ or ‘Bladderball was the most popular game in the kingdom’. If there was a castle/knight topic in a classroom the book would be a really funny one to read aloud with a grown up just giving a bit of context too.
weave a past for Ellery and his family. Imagery lingers in her mind. An old man with a stick, culled from an illustration in Ellery’s favourite German edition of Treasure Island, revisits her mind as an old man hobbling over a bridge with a woman who may be Ellery’s mother along with her husband and Ellery himself. An illustration from an old Latin text shows a different kind of refugee as Aeneas carries Anchises from ruined Troy. Flames, soldiers, the tick, tick, tick of a clock or maybe a watch, the blue cat.

If such images work for readers as they do for Columbus, they will do so by releasing the shifting meanings of poetry; sometimes inconsequential, sometimes charged with menace. The novel seems about to end in the sadness of parting as Ellery and his father have disappeared, maybe taken to an internment camp; but then, on the last couple of pages, another poem, printed in the original German of 1834 alongside a translation, hints that there might one day be another meeting. Maybe.

So certainties remain elusive to the end. One reader might well find the book frustrating, bewildering, even not worth finishing. A different reader might be intrigued by the otherness not worth finishing. A different reader might be another meeting. Maybe.

Images linger in her mind. An old man with a stick, culled from an illustration in Ellery’s favourite German edition of Treasure Island, revisits her mind as an old man hobbling over a bridge with a woman who may be Ellery’s mother along with her husband and Ellery himself. An illustration from an old Latin text shows a different kind of refugee as Aeneas carries Anchises from ruined Troy. Flames, soldiers, the tick, tick, tick of a clock or maybe a watch, the blue cat.

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Eloise Williams, Firefly, 257pp, 978-1-91008081-1, £6.99 pbk

This ghost story, set on the Welsh coast, weaves itself effortlessly around a family drama. Twelve-year-old Lark is enduring dark times. Her younger sister Snow has stopped speaking, their mother is very ill and she and her best friend Gwenni are no longer speaking because Gwenni has abandoned Lark for a boy-friend and a not very intelligent one, either. To make matters even worse, Lark and her family are meeting her mother’s friends and their children at a caravan park for a holiday-expressly requested by Lark’s mother, who Lark believes is dying.

Unfortunately, Lark’s problems are not merely confined to this world but span even the afterworld. When she and Snow find a hidden, ruined house they both encounter the ghostly presence of a young girl who tries to draw Snow away to be her friend in her lost world. Lark, having found this truimverate, with Lark desperately trying to anchor her sister to the present day, Williams injects a credible slice of history around the ghost, both through Mam-gu, the girls’ maternal grandmother and the local archives. This timeslip romance is created beautifully but Williams also demonstrates her mastery of teenage pack mentality, dialogue and pre-occupations. When the clans initially gather on the caravan site there is hostility, grandstanding and a good deal of emotional and mental cruelty. As the story progresses and priorities change the various factions begin to work together to rescue the problem of the ghost and Snow. But it is Mam-gu who provides the key to the mystery and who gives Lark the courage to solve it.

This affecting story rings true on every level and while the ending is ultimately a happy one, it is also one freighted with intense emotion. VC

Stay A Little Longer

Bali Rai, Barrington Stoke, 104pp, 978-1-78112-832-9, £6.99 pbk

Barrington Stoke have long been producing excellent books for young people who find reading challenging. Stay A Little Longer punches way above its 104 page weight, delivering a story which never patronises, has an authentic teenage voice and tackles difficult issues head on.

Aman’s father’s death has hit her hard but she and her mother Jeet are close and trying to support each other through their grief, with the help of Aman’s best friend Lola and Olivia, her grandmother. When Aman is threatened by a group of boys Gurnam, a neighbour, comes to her rescue. He quickly becomes part of the family-generous, warm, kind. But he has his own which lead him to the brink of suicide. He is gay, but he is also a Sikh, a Sikh who has left his wife, daughters and grandchildren. Aman, terrified of losing the man she regards as a grandfather, manages to prevent him taking his own life.

Aman is fast-paced and affecting, exploring a range of sensitive and contemporary issues. Rai creates characters exceptionally well-contrasting, with Aman’s unshakeable belief in the hard-heartedness of all but one of Gurnam’s family. Community and family are at the heart of this thoroughly satisfying read. VC

The Whispers

Greg Howard, Penguin Random witness, 250pp, 97802411376708, £6.99 pbk

Riley’s mother has disappeared. Riley is the chief witness – he believes she has been kidnapped. But no one is taking him seriously, least of all Policeman Frank. It is up to him to solve the mystery and his only hope is to find The Whispers and ask for their help.

The author sets up his story cleverly, using Riley as the narrator, drawing the reader in to accept this version. However, gradually it becomes apparent that all is not as it seems – and Riley is, perhaps, not a reliable narrator though he is not lying. Rather he is suffering from childhood traumatic grief following the death of his adored mother. But Riley has more than one problem to trouble him. Here the author is to be commended for introducing a LGBTQ theme without fuss or fanfare but as a thread that will encourage his readers. Riley’s voice rings true though The Whispers may be a step too far and an unnecessary supernatural intrusion in a narrative that has the central theme of his exclusion. However, the conclusion though rose-tinted, is both positive and satisfying. A gentle, easy read for a reflective reader encouraged by empathy and sympathy – and it is hoped a mirror for the young person who needs one. FH

The Peculiar Peggs of Riddling Woods

Samuel J Halpin, Usborne, 352 pp, 9781474954560, £6.99, pbk

‘Why hasn’t mum visited Gran for so long?’ Poppy wonders, when she goes to stay in the quantly named village of Suds after her mother’s death. And why does Gran have such strange house rules? Washing must be brought in from the line before six p.m., wet or dry; all sugar cubes must be kept under lock and key; the windows are to be closed and locked at night, with the curtains drawn; and ‘NEVER, DON’T YOU EVER, dust the window sills.’ Poppy is already an anxious child but, it slowly dawns on her that there is more to make her downnight terrified. Why do children apparently slowly fade away? What is the old man feeding with cat meat through a door in the floor of his houseboat? And what is the history of the men in Riddling Woods that float, such finely kitted cloth down to the village? Debut novelist Samuel J Halpin builds up the magical atmosphere so carefully, amidst the rather more mundane pains and pleasures of Poppy establishing herself at a new school. A12+ age recommendation. Halpin demonstrates her mastery of teenage pack mentality, dialogue and pre-occupations. When the clans initially gather on the caravan site there is hostility, grandstanding and a good deal of emotional and mental cruelty. As the story progresses and priorities change the various factions begin to work together to solve the problem of the ghost and Snow. But it is Mam-gu who provides the key to the mystery and who gives Lark the courage to solve it.

This affecting story rings true on every level and while the ending is ultimately a happy one, it is also one freighted with intense emotion. VC

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

HHHH

14+ Secondary/Adult

Opposite of Always


This timeslip romance is full of smart, sassy, well-observed dialogue, with a conversational bounce between the four principal characters feels authentic and immediately engages the reader. Jack and Jillian have always been best friends but Jack has begun to feel much more for her. He can do nothing about this, however, as she is dating Jack’s other best friend, Franny, who has both great physical strength and emotional vulnerability.

His father has been in prison several times and never shows his son affection or praises him for his many achievements. Jack, Kate and Franny are inseparable and fiercely loyal and so Jack knows he must say and do nothing about his romantic feelings.

Then events completely change Jack’s life as he meets Kate for the first time. This teen novel, threaded through with strong emotion which makes the rather strained final section rather a disappointment. Nevertheless, I relished reading this book and was sorry when it ended. VC

The Light Between Worlds

Laura Weymouth, Chicken House, 405pp, 9781911149005, £7.99 pbk

This YA novel opens with three children taking refuge in an air raid shelter as bombs fall on London in 1944. The youngest, Evelyn, wishes with all her heart to be ‘anywhere but here’ and the three are transported to another world where the magical realm of Woodland is a place of beauty, power, but benign, stag. After years in this magical realm, living as Woodland queens and warriors, Jamie and Philip, the two eldest, ask to be returned to their own world, taking Evelyn, whose heart belongs to the Woodlands, with them. They return to London, and then need to work out how to live their lives in this world.
The link to the Narnia books is unmistakable as the author poses the intriguing question of what happens to characters who return to the real world after years in a fantasy one. The narrative is split between Evelyn and Philippa, both of whom struggle in different ways. Evelyn, overcome with longing for the Woodlands, cannot cope with life in the real world, and her narrative presents a distressing and emotional portrayal of depression and self-harm. Philippa, overwhelmed with guilt for causing her sister’s despair, seeks to present a confident, flawless exterior and battles to protect Evelyn at great cost to herself. When Evelyn disappears, Philippa is forced to confront the painful truth of her sister’s mental state and to try and discover whether her sister did manage to find a way home or if she drowned herself.

When Caddy and Rosie leave for life as a working adult living in a bedsit. But when Suzanne runs out of clean clothes and it’s a rainy day...and never came back again’. So Peter Lenard Spink abandons his family – his wife, Cynthia Spink, daughter, Lenny and the infant Davey; Davey who had been a perfect baby, born with no hands and no feet and terminal – form of gigantism. We follow the family over eight years through the eyes of Lenny who tells the story of the Builts-at-home Encyclopaedia. She is a clear-eyed narrator and through her we meet a varied cast of characters – not least the subjects that leap from the pages of the Encyclopedia, feeding her mind beautifully realised. The friendship between Suzanne and Dilys is particularly touching and rewarding. Fans of Sara Barnard will fall in love with them all, as does her language. Her skill in revealing the right attributes to become a nurse or a care-worker. Slowly Suzanne picks up the pieces and makes some life-changing decisions. She repeats her narrative flaws diminish the quality of an otherwise excellent book.

**Fierce Fragile Hearts**

Sara Barnard, Macmillan Children’s Books, 360pp, 978 1 5098 5288 8, £7.99 pbk

A companion volume to Beautiful Broken Things, this novel picks up the story two years later but can be read as a stand-alone without previous knowledge of the earlier title. Beautiful, damaged Suzanne has moved back to Brighton to start a new life. Her best friend Caddy and Rosie are there to help her adjust to life as a working adult living in a bedsit. But when Suzanne runs out of clean clothes and it’s a rainy day, she meets a new neighbour who accepts her washing machine in return for tea and company. The two bond over a shared love of music and Suzanne finds it refreshing that Dilys accepts her for who she is without prejudice and admires the old lady’s will to live on her own terms.

When Caddy and Rosie leave for university Suzanne is on her own but Caddy’s boyfriend Kel has instructions to keep an eye on her as does her Aunt Sarah who lives nearby. It isn’t long before disaster strikes, a burst pipe means she needs to work extra shifts in the coffee shop to save money to pay the plumber and then she meets Kel’s best friend Matt and an instant spark of attraction forms between them. But Suzanne’s track record with boys is not good...

Meanwhile her manipulative family are trying to cut her off in her life and Suzanne starts to go into one of her downward spirals, as she rejects everyone around her, fighting with everyone around her, fighting with everyone around her, fighting with everyone around her, fighting with everyone around her, fighting with everyone around her, fighting with everyone around her, fighting with everyone around her, fighting with everyone around her, fighting with everyone around her, fighting with everyone around her, fighting with...
Once again we are among the landed gentry. Here though is not the settled residence where Clarice Clavering met the runaway child or the mansion where the Savages spent their Christmas. Finch Hall comes to Thomas and Maria Chubb fortuitously through the will of a relative of whom they have never heard, a deceased manufacturer of potted lobsters. (Their qualification for the legacy lay in the fact that he had never met them – all his other, nearer relations having found numerous ways to displease him.)

Mr Chubb, ‘a good-natured gentleman’ has an office in the City, and his wife ‘spends most of her time on the sofa, being of a delicate constitution’, which is not surprising since she has had eleven children in fifteen years. These treasures have distributed attributive nicknames among themselves – a useful guide and prompt for this rehearsal of their unlucky activities. The eldest is Dreamy Dorothea followed successively by: Meddlesome Matilda, Careless Charles, Clumsy Caroline, Greedy George, Selfish Cissy, Wilful William, sharp little Emily, Tumbling Teddy, and the twins Jane and Josephus who are but eleven weeks old and whose nicknames are thus not yet decided upon.

Before their surprise inheritance they all lived in a villa near the Crystal Palace and, not being far from Lewisham, one might assume an acquaintance with the Bastable children just down the road. But while that family’s treasure-seeking was carried out with a naïve optimism most sympathetically narrated, the goings-on at Finch Hall are the stuff of unbridled farce.

And At Home gives rise to a succession of neatly-plotted calamities in which, among other things, a baby is dropped in a fountain, a newly-arrived tutor is nearly shot, and a laundry-basket full of freshly ironed and starched shirts is upended in a river by way of rescuing Tumbling Teddy stuck up a tree. Later on, Greedy George will be taking a sympathetic part, during the At Home, in the Admiral (much given – to tipping small boys half-sovereigns) and the Duke and Duchess of Pontypool (the latter taking a shine to Wilful William). This opens the way for some gentle satire elsewhere, not only on the adult characters as well.

With a family of this size and uncontrollable skittishness, however well-meaning, there is a danger of repetitiousness. But the entertainment is bodied out by the enduring foibles of the adult characters as well. Arriving, and taking a sympathetic part, during the At Home, is the Admiral (much given – to his wife’s annoyance – to tipping small boys half-sovereigns) and the Duke and Duchess of Pontypool (the latter taking a shine to Wilful William). This opens the way for some gentle satire elsewhere, not least with Mr Chubb’s butler, Golightly, ‘who was not always as sober as could have been wished’. Unmarried Aunt Eliza, who lives with the Chubbs as a support for her sister is regular fall-guy, while the misfortunes of Mt Higginbottom, the tutor suggest revenge being paid to some luckless hireling in real life.

Half way through the saga the General arrives: General Benjamin Finch, the half-brother of the deceased lobster magnate and a good friend of the Pontypools. He too proves a sympathetic addition to the party (and is clearly taken with Aunt Emily Finch) and it is through his arrival that the Chubbs’ torment of trying to take on the role of squirearchy is brought to an end. Wilful William discovers within an aged sofa a late, but unsigned, will in which Joseph Finch leaves all his property to his half-brother so that, thanks to their newly established bond of friendship, the General takes over the Hall and the unlucky family return to the environs of the Crystal Palace where suburban comfort awaits them and Mr Chubb may return to the safety of his natural bourgeois habitat. It is not recorded if they ever met the Bastables.

The Unlucky Family was first published in 1907 by Messrs Smith, Elder, its author, Mrs Henry de la Pasture, being one of their house team. It was sub-titled ‘a tale for children’ (the lady’s tongue perhaps being in her cheek) and was illustrated by E. Tennyson Reed, whose sprightly wash-drawings lost some of their life by being printed by the dowdy half-tone process. It had a long life, being later published by OUP after Smith, Elder’s demise, but in 1980 it enjoyed a happy revival through the Folio Society with wondrous baroque chapter-titles by John Lawrence. As a bonus there was an Introduction by Auberon Waugh who included an encomium of the book (‘one of the best books that has ever been published ... I heartily enjoyed its every joke’) by his twelve-year-old daughter, Daisy.

By way of conclusion one may add that Mrs de la Pasture’s elder daughter, by a former Children’s Books Editor for The Times. His book The Ladybird Story: Children’s Books for Everyone. The British Library, 978-0712357289, £25.00 hbk, is out now.