Authorgraph interview
Abi Elphinstone
Celebrating Elmer
New illustrator focus

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Guest Editorial 236

Little Rebels, Big Change says Patrice Lawrence

I would love to say that I was a rebellious child. I would love to claim that I was a critical reader, questioning the social structures depicted in the books that filled my world. I would love you to believe that I questioned The Famous Five’s Anne’s enthusiastic domesticity or the original Doctor Dolittle’s blatant racism. Actually, even the conservative eight-year-old me raised an eyebrow at that one. Generally, though I took what I was reading as – well – read. In books, the hierarchies of class and ‘race’, the stereotypes of gendered behaviour, the unarguable truth that a straight married couple was the only ‘right’ shape for a family and the fact that – Mowgli apart – you could only be the star of your adventure if you were white – simply reinforced my belief that this was the unjust, but unalterable nature of the world.

As the first in my family to be born in the UK, way down the hierarchy in skin colour, sex and class, who was I to say otherwise?

We often praise books for widening our horizons and showing us new worlds. But as organisations such as Let Books Be Books argue, they can so easily narrow down our worlds as well. That’s why the Little Rebels Award is so important. It draws on children’s and young people’s empathy, but also offers the power to reflect on and challenge injustice.

Do I need to spell out here why this feels so important right now? Far right movements across Europe seem to be gaining strength. People are questioning the social structures depicted in the books that filled my world. I would love to claim that I was a critical reader, but reading these books reminds me that even my middle-aged self can be part of change for the good.

Patrice Lawrence won the Waterstone’s Book Prize for Older Readers and the YA Book Prize with her debut novel, Orangeboy, and her second novel, Indigo Donut, won the Crime Fest Best Crime Fiction for Young Adults and was shortlisted for the YA Book Prize. Her new novel, Rose, Interrupted, will publish in July.

The Little Rebels Award recognises fiction for ages 0-12 which promotes or celebrates social justice and equality. It is run by Housmans Bookshop and Letterbox Library and is awarded by the Alliance of Radical Booksellers (ARB). The 2019 winner will be announced on 10th July.
Until very recently, the story of art told in the western world has been focused almost exclusively on the lives and work of male artists. The curators at Tate have been making a big effort to increase the number of women artists in the collection and on display in their galleries, in all their diversity. The Bigger Picture, a new book by Sophia Bennett aims to play a small part in helping reach that goal, by inspiring, informing and supporting the next generation of fearless female artists and their allies. It looks at the many roles played by women in the art world, from curators and conservators working behind the scenes, and tells the stories of some great women artists from the past, and those working today. Sophia Bennett tells the story of the book.

Much in the spirit of Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls, The Bigger Picture tells the true stories of over 30 inspirational female artists, in a language and style accessible to young people. Exactly how young was a tricky issue, and one of the reasons I came on board. In the end, we pitched the writing at 10 to 14 year-olds, but the exclusive interviews with many of the artists themselves, and detailed illustrations from Manjit Thapp, mean the book can be enjoyed by younger children who want to use it as a springboard for discovering more about the story of women in art. I find it quite hard to describe, but I love to see the fascination on people's faces – of all ages – as they flick from Yayoi Kusama's dots to Bridget Riley's stripes and Frida Kahlo's unsettling self-portraits.

The book is my first foray into non-fiction. I wrote it working closely with Manjit and Holly Tonks, the editorial mastermind. The idea came from Holly, then a commissioning editor at Tate Publishing. I was pitching her a picture book idea about Matisse. We got chatting about other projects she was working on, and she mentioned the idea of creating a book for teens to shine a light on the female artists in the Tate’s collection. Instantly, I knew I wanted to write it. Holly already had a strong sense of what she wanted: a book that was contemporary, that covered artists from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds around the world, and that would inspire young people. This was everything I love: fine art, feminism, education, inspiration, and talking to a teenage audience. I'm sure how many highly illustrated non-fiction books there are out there for teens, but I'd love to see more of them. In my writing I've always reached out to young people who think visually – designers, artists, photographers – many of whom will go on to power our economy, and it's good to make something that appeals to that side of their imagination.

Manjit, came on board before I did. I checked out her illustrations on Instagram (where she has a large following) and was instantly won over. I love her bold, colourful, fashion-oriented style. She's based in Birmingham so we only actually met after the book was published, but as drafts went back and forth it was a joy to see a research detail, carefully crafted into half a sentence, suddenly appear as a drawing that really brought the artist’s world to life.

My academic background is in French and Italian literature, and I write for readers who, like me, are not experts in the field of fine art but are keen to learn. Having said that, I researched like crazy, trawling books, film, video, newspapers and galleries for interviews and nuggets of information that would resonate with a teenage reader. Focus groups with friendly Year 8s told me they wanted to know what the artists were like at their age, so I made a point of including this where I could. It certainly gives the book a new perspective.

Curators at the Tate helped with choosing the images of the artists’ work, and contacted them for permissions and interviews. Knowing that the artist herself, or her estate, would get to read and approve my text certainly piled on the pressure! I give school talks about building girls' confidence and more than anything teenage girls need role models: women who have challenged the status quo, but also survived the issues that teen girls face: mental health problems, anxiety, a sense of seeing the world in a different way and not fitting in. Girls need them and I think many boys need them too. A history of women in art has them in abundance.

Take Yayoi Kusama, for example. Based in Tokyo, and just turned 90, she is a constant innovator who has accepted her lifelong mental illness and worked through it to become one of the most popular artists in the world. She says, 'I fight pain, anxiety and fear every day, and the only method I have found that relieves my illness is to keep creating art.' To our readers she says, 'Tell your truth. Enjoy the process. Make art for always.'

Judy Chicago is another trailblazer. She was brought up by her communist father to believe in her abilities, and was shocked when the US art world of the 1970s refused to take her seriously. She invested her own money and several years of her life to create The Dinner Party – an installation that is a tribute to nearly a thousand great women in history. Locked away for decades, it’s now on permanent display in Brooklyn.

The Bigger Picture doesn’t only talk about artists. It also recognises some of the female historians, critics, collectors and curators who have been changing art history to include all talents, regardless of ethnicity or gender. Today, a talent such as Lynette Yiadom-Boakye can make art in a world where it is possible to be an experimental black female artist and to feature at the Tate. She uses the most traditional of genres, oil portraiture, and her imagination, to create extraordinary paintings of people who don’t exist. She is exactly the sort of role model I’d like the readers of this book to be inspired by. ‘Look what she can make! So can I…’

The Bigger Picture: Women Who Changed the Art Worldby Sophia Bennet, illustrated by Manjit Thapp is published by Tate, 978-1849766210, £14.99
30 years of Elmer, the indispensable elephant

Carey Fluker Hunt reviews his impact.

The first book about Elmer actually appeared way back in 1968, but was republished with new artwork in 1989 by Klaus Flugge at Andersen Press, where it was soon followed by many more. There are currently 39 books in the collection and the fortieth, Elmer’s Birthday, will join them in September. But how did the idea for the first story come about?

McKee admits that aspects of Elmer are manifestations of his own personality and has talked about the family members who inspired other characters, including a ventriloquist uncle who bequeathed his skills to Elmer’s cousin Wilbur. Significantly, though, the impulse to create a multicoloured hero with mixed feelings about fitting in with the herd came in response to a racist slur hurled at his daughter in a Devon street, and although these books were not constructed as vehicles for debating ethics and morality, a story born from that encounter was always going to have an edge to it. The Elmer books are full of fun, friendship and colourful goings-on, but running through them are fundamental questions about the needs of individuals, how people should behave to one another and what kind of society we want to live in. Emotional literacy and a values-driven framework lie at the heart of these books, with themes including self-esteem and wellbeing, individuality, diversity and belonging explored throughout. As a character, Elmer demonstrates some really effective attributes and skills. Whether mediating between groups wanting to use the same river, putting two and two together about a ‘terrifying’ monster or managing the behaviour of a bunch of overexcited (and competitive) youngsters, Elmer’s calm optimism, together with an ability to think for himself, ask the right questions, listen carefully and bring everyone on board, makes him an exemplary problem-solver. Even when the difficulties seem intractable (the hunters are closing in, he’s fallen down a cliff, the rainbow’s lost its colours) Elmer never panics, and his capacity for grappling kindly, creatively and effectively with the big issues of the day make him indispensable.

‘What would Elmer do?’

The Guardian named Elmer an LGBTQ hero in 2014 for notching up a quarter-century of ‘opening people’s minds to accepting difference and being themselves’, an achievement he well deserves. But Elmer’s patchwork colours don’t just stand for individuality and diversity, they’re the mark of the jungle’s most effective leader, too. ‘What do you want us to do now?’ chorus the other elephants when one of the herd is stuck in a flood, and ‘What would Elmer do?’ is a question we should all ask when facing our next challenge. Elmer himself would be perplexed at his approach being held up as some kind of road map for living a better life – and one suspects David McKee might feel similarly. But however diffident he might be about Elmer as a role model, McKee admits that he likes his books to start something – ‘What I like doing is provoking discussion’ – and must be quietly satisfied to see a lifetime’s work doing just that.
Carey Fluker Hunt is a writer and children’s book consultant.

Born in Devon in 1935, David McKee studied at Plymouth College of Art and began his career as an illustrator by sending cartoons to newspapers. His third and fourth books, Mr Benn, Red Knight (1967) and Elmer, The Story of a Patchwork Elephant (1968) made a significant impact on children’s publishing and in 1978 he founded King Rollo Films which brought many animations to the TV screen. With well over a hundred books to his sole credit, including Not Now, Bernard and Tusk Tusk, McKee is one of the UK’s foremost illustrators. He’s also a fine artist and painting has always been an important aspect of his life; something that’s apparent in the intricate technique he employs for his Elmer artwork, where liquid acrylic and gouache are worked into with coloured crayons and pencils to create a layered, painterly effect. McKee's non-naturalist approach to colour together with an interest in shape, contrast and pattern are evident throughout the Elmer books, and we don’t need to have read many of them before we feel at home in the jungle setting and begin to recognize landmarks. From the darkness of the monkey forest and the chalky whiteness of the cliffs to the tumbling waterfall and grandeur of Red Rock Pass, Elmer and friends inhabit a place possessing its own internal truth and logic, with colour as an intrinsic element. McKee has spoken of his admiration for the Fauves who used contrasting non-naturalist colours in their paintings, and there are echoes of Paul Klee’s rectangular building blocks in Elmer’s patchwork. ‘Colour has taken possession of me,’ Klee said, returning from a life-changing visit to the Mediterranean. ‘Colour and I are one.’ Elmer would definitely agree with that sentiment, and given the way his friends decorate themselves for Elmer’s Special Day would probably enjoy Miro and Matisse’s patterns, too. But then Elmer's entire storyworld is shaped and patterned with a decorative eye. The unusual vegetation is a particular delight for those with a taste for the surreal, who may feel an urge to collect and identify these alien species, as well as admire them. It comes as no surprise to discover that one London school loved McKee’s trees so much, they asked him to paint them on the pillars of the Westway flyover. McKee deplores the way that picture books are labelled as something for the very young and likes to work for all-age audiences. The Elmer stories are fun to read and enable even the youngest children to get involved, yet taken as a body of work they have a depth and integrity that appeals to older readers, too. The values Elmer represents shine clearly and cohesively throughout these books, which have a rare power – that of embedding themselves in hearts and minds, and helping people grow. And there’s nothing remotely juvenile about that. Elmer’s 30th birthday celebrations include an exhibition, Elmer and Friends: The Colourful World of David McKee, currently showing at Seven Stories, the UK’s national centre for children’s books, and public sculpture trails featuring parades of decorated Elmers in Tyne and Wear, Suffolk and Devon organized by Wild in Art.

www.elmer.co.uk
Ten of the Best Books about Witches

Imogen Russell Williams chooses

Witches recur perennially in the pages of children’s literature, whether as fairy-tale villains, or, more recently, as aspirational figures, especially in junior fantasy. The conception of witches as malevolent females, seeking to devour or destroy children by the use of evil magic, is increasingly balanced by the idea of witch as an appealing career option – many children dream of developing and honing supernatural powers, or of attending a magical school. (Most of the fictional witches I have chosen are benign, or at least ambiguous, oscillating back and forth over the line dividing good from evil – there is one old-school baddie, however, in Lewis’ White Witch.)

The Little Broomstick
Mary Stewart, Hodder Children’s Books, 978-1444940190, £6.99 pbk
Best known for romantic mystery novels and the Merlin trilogy, Mary Stewart is also the author of three superb books for children, of which The Little Broomstick (recently adapted into an animated film, Mary and the Witch’s Flower) is the best. Plain, lonely Mary Smith, doomed to a dreary autumnal sojourn with Great Aunt Charlotte, discovers her inherent power when a small black cat leads her, via a magic flower and the titular broomstick, to Endor College, a witches’ school where Mary poses as a pupil. But formidable headmistress Madam Mumblechook, and the sinister transformations she oversees, present grave peril…Stewart’s assured writing is atmospheric and cracking with menace, emphasised by chapter-head line-drawings from the inimitable Shirley Hughes.

The Worst Witch, and sequels
Jill Murphy, Puffin, various, £5.99 pbk
This amazingly long-lived series has only just reached its culmination – the final book, First Prize for the Worst Witch, came out in 2018, forty-four years after Mildred Hubble’s first appearance at Miss Cackle’s Academy for Witches. Helpless, clumsy, well-intentioned Mildred, perpetual target of Miss Hardbroom’s sarcasm and star pupil Ethel’s ire, will surely be making the wrong potion, waking up frog-shaped, and defending her misfit tabby cat to the delight of generations to come. Murphy’s own illustrations perfectly evoke a sense of chilly stone, itchy uniform and perpetually untied bootlaces.

Witch Week
In a rogue alternate splinter of reality, witchcraft is illegal. At Larwood House, a school intended to suppress magic rather than to train it, many pupils have had parents burned as witches. The students are constantly scrutinised for manifestations of prohibited power – so it’s a serious matter when Mr Crossley receives an ominous note, reading ‘Someone in this class is a witch’… An impression of drab, pervasive danger, acutely observed boarding-school dynamics, and an appearance by the dashing Chrestomanci, nine-lifed enchanter and arbiter of the multiverse’s magic, make for a witch story elegantly balanced between real and imagined worlds.

Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone, and sequels
J.K. Rowling, Bloomsbury, various editions
While Rowling may be indebted to those who first built magical schools in fiction, none of her predecessors did so on quite such a comprehensive scale, or offered so vivid and detailed a fantastical refuge. Imagining life as a young witch or wizard at Hogwarts – choosing which wand, which broom, which subjects, which Quidditch position, and, most of all, which House – continues to enthrall new readers, eagerly awaiting the arrival of an owl with their Hogwarts admission letter. There are many ways to be a witch in Rowling’s world – clever (Hermione Granger), eccentric (Luna Lovegood), or even old-school screeching evil hag (Bellatrix Lestrange). In the huge illustrated editions, Jim Kay’s gorgeous painterly work transports the reader still deeper into the world of the school (his green-clad oil painting of a severe Minerva McGonagall suggests a witch of piercing acumen, and in full control of her considerable power.)
Hansel and Gretel
Bethan Woollvin, Two Hoots, 978-1509842698, £11.99 hbk
Woollvin's picture-books are invariably subversive, and this one is no exception, featuring Willow, an (almost) endlessly patient witch who struggles to contain the depredations of two greedy and ill-mannered children. Because Willow is a good witch, she remains calm as Hansel and Gretel eat her house and damage her possessions – until she can maintain her composure no longer. The dismayed faces of the two children – turned, at last, into cookies for their crimes – and the killer last line (“Because Willow was not always a good witch”) play delectably with the idea of what it might take to push even the best of witches into using their powers for evil.

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe
C.S. Lewis, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0007323128, £5.99 pbk
The White Witch is an outright supervillain, a 'wicked tyrant' who keeps an entire magical realm perpetually bound in ice, and murders its true ruler. Her fatal charm and formidable gift for reading character, playing on Edmund's isolation and jealousy to tempt him into betraying his siblings, give the book much of its unforgettable frigid peril; without the paranoid fear she imparts ('Even some of the trees are on Her side”), the idea of a fantasy land at the back of a wardrobe would be nothing more than a charming whimsy. (She has also caused countless children to believe Turkish Delight more delicious than it actually is, and subsequently to be disappointed.)

Witch Child
Celia Rees, Bloomsbury, 978-1408800263, £7.99 pbk
When Mary Newbury's grandmother is hanged as a witch, she narrowly avoids the same fate, escaping to the New World only to find the same dangerous suspicions rising around her. Is a woman with the power to heal doomed to be forever persecuted? In this compelling story, told through a seventeenth-century diary discovered in the present day, Rees examines misogyny, mistrust, and the ways in which communities police their women's knowledge, bodies and freedom.

The Changeover
Margaret Mahy, Orion Children's Books, 978-1510105058, £7.99 pbk
This terrifying, romantic coming-of-age story, set in suburban New Zealand, features Laura, a teenage girl contending with an ancient, devouring force that seeks to drain her little brother's life. To save Jacko, Laura must allow her own nature to be changed – from 'sensitive' to full-blown witch – by the mysterious Carlisle women, and their still more mysterious son Sorry, by whom Laura has been fascinated for months. The Changeover won the Carnegie Medal in 1984, but its complex, thrilling themes of power, identity and choice are still deeply resonant today.

The Wee Free Men
Terry Pratchett, illus Laura Ellen Anderson, Corgi Children's Books, 978-0552576307, £7.99 pbk
The dauntless shepherd-witch Tiffany Aching is one of the late Terry Pratchett's sparkiest and most satisfying characters, and the Discworld stories in which she stars are the perfect entry point to his wider oeuvre for young fantasy lovers. During Tiffany's first outing she discovers, aged 9, that her ability to see things differently may mean she is her people's witch; makes an alliance with the boisterous Nac Mac Feegle, small but unstoppable blue Scots pictsies; and saves her little brother from the monstrous Queen of the Fairies. Gutsy, clear-sighted, sometimes pig-headed, Tiffany is a courageous, intelligent and commonsensical witch, and a compelling heroine.

The Girl Who Drank the Moon
Kelly Barnhill, Piccadilly Press, 978-1848126473, £6.99 pbk
The people of the Protectorate leave a baby as yearly tribute for the forest witch, a sacrifice which they hope will preserve them from her depredations. But Xan the witch, a kindly creature who lives with a poetic swamp monster and a tiny dragon, merely takes the babies to adoptive families on the other side of the forest, feeding them starlight on the way. When she inadvertently nourishes one baby with moonlight, though, she fills her up with magic; and this child, Luna, Xan decides to keep, locking her magic inside her until she is thirteen. But as Luna's powers begin to emerge, a young man from the Protectorate sets out, determined to free his people by killing the witch...Barnhill's gorgeous, poetic, humorous Newbery-winner focuses on perception distorted by fear, and on growing into and accepting one's changing self.
I am a writer because the Scottish wilderness made me one. As readers we have to be very grateful that Abi Elphinstone’s parents moved from Leicestershire to live at the foot of a glen in Angus. Living close to it myself, I can vouch for Market Harborough, where she was born, having much less scope for wild adventures. But, unlike many authors, her childhood was not actually filled with dreams of being a writer, nor was she the ‘classic bookworm’ and her dyslexia may have been responsible for that. Yet Abi played out the stories filling her head, for real, with her playmates, siblings and animals and when she came to writing her debut Dreamsnatcher she didn’t have to invent Moll’s outdoor world, she had grown up in it. She did not set out deliberately to write a strong, adventurous girl either; that was just ‘what was normal and natural in my world’.

That is not to say that Dreamsnatcher had an easy journey into print. Four previous attempts at novels had garnered 96 rejections between them and Abi says that what she tries to tell young people in the creative writing workshops that she loves, is that to be creative requires ‘graft’: hard work and perseverance and to not be afraid of failure, which can teach you so much. After studying English at Bristol and a soul-destroying couple of London years in marketing and PR, a one-way ticket to Africa and advice from her family of teachers found her teaching in Tanzania and finding the time to start writing. Teaching continued on her return to the UK but a full time job and marking left her too tired to write. Moving to part time tutoring (of dyslexic children) gave her the space to commit to writing. An agent and the two book deal with Simon & Schuster followed and her differently abled sister-in-law and she is adamant that fantasy adventures can have layers of seriousness too.

Her writing process always begins with drawing maps: ‘If you can believe it and you can see it, then the reader will.’ Making sure the structure is sound allows her characters and the story to develop organically. ‘The plan gives me the confidence to veer off-piste as long as the scaffolding is there’ The very structure of adventures requires ‘graft’: hard work and perseverance and to not be afraid of failure, which can teach you so much. After studying English at Bristol and a soul-destroying couple of London years in marketing and PR, a one-way ticket to Africa and advice from her family of teachers found her teaching in Tanzania and finding the time to start writing. Teaching continued on her return to the UK but a full time job and marking left her too tired to write. Moving to part time tutoring (of dyslexic children) gave her the space to commit to writing. An agent and the two book deal with Simon & Schuster followed and in fact the adventures of Moll Pecksmith and her wildcat Gryff broke into a centuries-old male-dominated tradition inspired the heroine of Sky Song, Eska, who learns to hunt with a golden eagle after breaking free from the Ice Queen’s clutches. The warm welcome Abi received from the Sami Reindeer Herders and the Kazakh Eagle Hunters also sharpened her focus on belonging at a time when refugees were not being welcomed in our world. She saw that her fictional kingdom torn apart by an evil Ice Queen, where tribes turn inwards and are prejudiced against outsiders, could have something to say about acceptance, open mindedness and compassion. A point gently reinforced through the character of Blu. We are never told that she has Down’s Syndrome, yet we know she is different. But, at the same time, see that she has just the qualities Flint and Eska need at key points in the story. An inclusive message inspired by how much Abi has learnt from her differently abled sister-in-law and she is adamant that fantasy adventures can have layers of seriousness too.

I wondered if the arrival of her son and the emotional upheaval of motherhood had affected her writing? Inevitably the adventuring has been curtailed and research become more desk based, with the
The wonder of seeing the world anew through baby eyes has certainly made Abi more angry and passionate about its fragility. The author and critic Amanda Craig told her: ‘your writing will be slowed but not stopped’ and she thinks her stories have benefitted from more time to breathe even as she has far less time to write. She has also found the bravery to tackle a portal novel, like those that were her childhood favourites and to create a totally imaginary world. The new Unmapped Chronicles are built on the ‘what if’ rather than experiences and specifically in the gaps in scientific knowledge that imagination can fill. What if our climate was actually created magically in another world linked to ours? Rumblestar is the first of a planned series of four books, each set in a different Unmapped Kingdom, and which are all very different, beautifully wild places. She is currently researching rainforests for the next book set in Juggedrop. Each book will stand alone, but will link to the others as the World Book Day prequel novella Ever Dark does to the story of Rumblestar and each will continue the battle against the evil harpy Morg to save both the Kingdoms and the future of our own world, known there as the Faraway.

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Victoria Turnbull won the 2013 Association of Illustrators New Talent Award, Children’s Book category, and her first book The Sea Tiger was nominated for the Kate Greenaway Medal and shortlisted for the Waterstones Children’s Book Prize. She has since written and illustrated Kings of the Castle and Pandora, and illustrated Is It Really Nearly Christmas? by Joyce Dunbar. Here she describes the technique used creating the ‘deeply personal’ Cloud Forest.

The opening scene is one of my favourite illustrations from Cloud Forest. The characters are standing under a fruit tree, looking up at a bird that has interrupted their reading. It’s an important moment in the book because it’s where you are introduced to the narrator and their Umpa for the very first time. I wanted the reader to be curious and captivated enough to turn the page. So prior to this, I’d spent a lot of time drawing and getting to know my characters.

Gorillas are such beautiful, intelligent creatures they are easily anthropomorphised. As well as thinking of my own grandfather, I considered Umpa to be a primate version of Charles Darwin or Edward Lear.

When I originally roughed out this spread, Umpa and his grandchild were in the background, with the garden taking centre stage. They soon asserted their authority, however, and pushed themselves to the fore.

I drew the artwork in pencil on tracing paper. Starting with the most important element, the characters, I built the scene around them – this involved some cutting and pasting to resolve the layout. I had a list of things I wanted to include in the garden but as I started to draw, as is often the case, I became less concerned with mistakes that reveal a lack of research and more concerned with mistakes that may break the narrative spell.

The geography of the cloud forest helped me to create the story, but it was my memories that brought it to life. The text on this spread says ‘it was my favourite place’ and I wanted the reader to feel that there is nowhere those characters would rather be. My own grandparents lived in a bungalow on a nondescript housing estate. Two giant plum trees grew from the tiny front lawn and served as a gateway to the imagination. Upon entering, my sister and I could become anything we wanted to be, in a world of our choosing. The only limit was our imaginations. I wanted this spread to capture my memories of those perfect summer days.

I combined my pencil drawings in Photoshop and printed them out onto watercolour paper. I used washes of pigment and linseed oil to build up colour before adding more detail in coloured pencil. I wanted...
this illustration to have a warm colour palette. My own childhood memories have a yellow colour cast like an old photograph. Yellow is the colour of summer; the colour of my grandfather’s favourite flowers; the colour of hope.

Books and the legacy of shared stories are central to this piece of work. As the story evolved, I included references to creators of images that I remember from childhood or those that influence my work today such as E.H. Shepard, Maurice Sendak and Walt Disney. **Cloud Forest** is a deeply personal book; I hope others can join their life and their imagination to what I have to share.

**Cloud Forest** is published by Lincoln Children’s Books, 978-1786031778, £12.99 hbk

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**D-DAY**

By Michael Noble
Illustrated by Alexander Mostov

On the 75th anniversary of D-Day, experience the dramatic events of one of the turning points of World War II through 20 incredible eyewitness accounts inspired by real life people.

Written and researched by expert author with unique access to original materials and documentation.

*D-Day* authentically explores the diverse experiences of D-Day, from ordinary combat soldiers to support personnel to civilians.

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Picturebook talent: the 2019 Klaus Flugge Prize shortlist

The shortlist for the 2019 Klaus Flugge Prize was unveiled at a special event at Foyles, Charing Cross Road on 15th May. Six debut picturebook illustrators are in contention for the award, which recognises the most promising new talent in this field. The winner will be announced in September, meanwhile Martin Salisbury, Professor of Illustration at Cambridge School of Art, assesses the shortlisted books, and the state of picturebook illustration in the UK.

At such an exciting time in the evolution of the picturebook-maker's art, this annual award is particularly significant, rewarding as it does the most striking new work in the field. Coming with a prize of £5,000 for best debut picturebook the award is a welcome boost for the chosen talented newcomer, providing precious support in building a career in the field. Created in celebration of the immeasurable contribution of the venerable Mr Flugge to this particular area of publishing, this is this the fourth year of the award.

This year's exceptionally strong shortlist reflects the rich variety of work that is currently appearing in our bookshops, both in terms of content and stylistic approach. English language picturebook publishing has become increasingly 'open' in the last few years as a greater proportion of sophisticated overseas artists and influences are making a long-overdue impact on aesthetics in what had become for a while a lamentably insular section of the industry. Much of this is thanks to the growth of the smaller, independent publishers who have raised the bar in terms of content, design and production as the unique physical qualities of the beautiful, tactile book reassert themselves and make a welcome comeback in response to the rise of the screen. Another factor is the presence in our art schools of the many overseas students who come here to study illustration and who graduate with a strong ambition to be published within the English language market. Happily, an increasing number of these are featuring in publishing awards. Speaking of students, here I must 'fess-up' with a disclaimer: four of the six shortlisted this year are former students of mine from the MA Children's Book Illustration course at Cambridge School of Art. But I am not involved in the judging process this year and wouldn't dream of revealing which ones they are!

The contemporary picturebook has increasingly become a vehicle for strong messages and themes in relation to issues of our time. The best of such books avoid didacticism or crudely explicit polemic, leaving much unsaid and approaching their subject obliquely and poetically, leaving the young reader with food for thought whilst inspiring and entertaining. This year's shortlist is full of such themes - social, environmental and political. But each of the books deals with its subject with lightness of touch and an element of humour. The list also reflects the increasingly specialised and integrated nature of picturebook-making as a visual, sequential artform that fuses authorship, draughtsmanship and design – each of the books listed is created by a single ‘maker’.

What follows is a short overview of the list, in no particular order.

Sam Boughton's *The Extraordinary Gardener* deals with imagination and ambition in the context of ‘greening’ the urban landscape. A ‘yes we can’ dynamic reminds us that a little bit of creative thinking can allow anyone to contribute to the process of making the world that we inhabit a better place. The finale gives us an uplifting, spectacular fold-out explosion of colour. Boughton’s artwork deftly combines watercolour washes with wax crayon, monoprint and photocollage to create a vibrant, freewheeling journey from dark to light. This is a celebratory book about planting seeds, both literally and metaphorically.

‘Charm’ is a word that is perhaps overused in the context of children’s literature but Eve Coy’s *Looking After Daddy* has it in bucket loads. A playful disparity between word and image is at the heart of the storytelling structure here, the word-reading giving us a child’s version of events while the picture-reading presents an altogether different reality. But it is Coy’s superb artwork that makes the book exceptional. Her secure draughtsmanship and use of colour perfectly capture character, movement and gesture in the English narrative, anecdotal tradition that is exemplified by the likes of the great Edward Ardizzone, but which is firmly rooted in observation of twenty-first century lifestyles.

Emily Haworth-Booth’s *The King Who Banned the Dark* is a book for our times. This is a brilliant, thought-provoking exploration of the idea behind that old
adage, ‘be careful what you wish for’. Although the political and philosophical undertones are clear to the adult reader, the visual and verbal tone of the storytelling never preaches but delivers its message in a friendly, playful and mischievous manner. That message is all the more resonant for arriving inside this comedic ‘Trojan Horse’. You can’t have light without dark – and the people of the city soon realise this. The King is never portrayed as a ‘baddie’ but as vulnerable and misguided. The storytelling is perfectly structured in classic fairy tale style and exploits a simple two-colour palette to maximum effect to convey the relentlessness of a world without dark.

There may be plenty of picturebooks themed around the metaphor of ‘reaching for the stars’ and learning to value what we already have but Fifi Kuo’s I Can’t Can Fly stands out from the crowd for its empathy, economy and once again, pure charm. Little Penguin’s urge to fly is described through simple blue and black coloured pencil drawings – no stylistic tricks or techniques, digital effects or complex combinations of media. It is the author’s absolute understanding of emotions expressed through body language, gesture and movement that makes the character so compelling and engages us so fully with his hopes, fears, disappointments and ultimate joy. Kuo is a major talent to arrive on the picturebook-making scene.

In recent years there have been countless variations on the Little Red Riding Hood theme in the world of the contemporary picturebook. The origins of the story can be traced back to 10th century Europe before being reinvented along the way by, among others, Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm. The story’s archetypal, timeless nature allows it to be adapted and reinterpreted in endlessly inventive ways, appropriate to time and place. In Red and the City, Marie Voigt replaces the deep, dark forest with the dull grime and occasional bright lights of the modern urban jungle, with its distracting temptations of toys and sweets, guaranteed to lure Red away from the straight and narrow path of hearts that her mother had instructed her to follow. With Woody the dog playing a supporting, but important role in the visual narrative, this is an extremely well designed and produced picturebook. Voigt’s digital artwork employs red and half-tone black to striking narrative effect.

The Extraordinary Gardener by Sam Boughton, Tate, 978-1849765664, £9.99 hbk
Looking After Daddy, Eve Coy, Andersen Press, 978-1783447107, £6.99 pbk
The King Who Banned the Dark, Emily Haworth-Booth, Pavilion Children’s Books, 978-1843653974, £6.99 pbk
I Can’t Can Fly, Fifi Kuo, Boxer Books, 978-1910716434, £11.99 hbk
Julian Is a Mermaid, Jessica Love, Walker Books, 978-1406386424, £6.99 pbk
Red and the City, Marie Voigt, Oxford, 978-0192767745, £11.99 hbk

Martin Salisbury is Professor of Illustration at Cambridge School of Art, where he founded the MA in Children’s Book Illustration.
Flights of Imagination: the Migrations exhibition

In an article for *Books for Keeps* in September 2017, Pam Dix described a special exhibition launched by the team at the International Centre for the Picture Book in Society at Worcester University. Illustrators were asked to contribute a postcard with an image of a bird and a message for refugees on the back and she recorded that over 300 arrived from all over the world.

The *Migrations* exhibition was an ambitious project from the outset but it has achieved a reach and impact far greater than ever anticipated. A beautiful book of the exhibition has just been published by Otter-Barry Books and is a fitting testimony to this ambition and the quality of the project. Pam Dix interviewed Piet Grobler and Tobias Hickey from Worcester University last month to find out how their ideas took flight.

The genesis of the Migrations project was an offer to the Worcester Illustration team to curate an exhibition in the Bibiana Children’s Art House, Bratislava, to coincide with the 2017 Biennale. In 2015, the tragic image of the refugee Syrian child Alan Kurdi, dead on a Mediterranean beach at three years old, was in everyone’s mind and led the team to discuss ideas of displacement, crossing borders and refugees. From this, as one, they came to the idea of using the metaphor of birds, flight and migration. An open call was sent to children’s illustrators around the world via networks, social media and personal contacts, asking for an image of a bird and a message to be sent on a postcard to become part of an exhibition. A very early response from Shaun Tan gave Piet and Tobias confidence in the project and their ideas and gave the exhibition, and subsequently the book, an endorsement and an authenticity.

The postcard is a contained and yet universally known format and one that is often used by art students and colleges. The concept fits particularly well with the theme of migration. Postcards, as objects, cross borders; they are fragile; they are processed and stamped. Political elements in countries where there is distrust of the postal system meant that some postcards were packaged for sending. Some of the contributing artists used envelopes to avoid any risk of detention or damage, though where that happened the envelope and stamps/franking have been retained as part of the exhibition and the book. As objects, postcards are not without challenges, for an exhibition and for a book, but in both cases each postcard has been showcased as an artefact, giving an authenticity to its message and its journey.

Each postcard has been on a journey and it is wonderful to imagine them flying to Worcester from around the world. The first postcard received was from the Norwegian artist, Stian Hole, and its illustration and message of beauty in migration and of hope, was used for the exhibition poster:

*It's that dream that we carry with us that something wonderful will happen…*

An extract from *Det er den Draumen* by Olav H Hauge, translated by Robert Bly

That early arrival from Shaun Tan (his postcard incorporates stamps as part of his illustration) has a similar message:

*Where there is change there is hope.*

*Where there is hope there is life.*
Tan's The Arrival is the most perfect and universal of the many refugee narratives that have been produced in recent years, so he was asked to write the forward for the exhibition, reproduced as the introduction to the book. Writing with modesty and eloquence, Tan sums up the project: "All migration is an act of imagination, a flight of imagination. Can small gestures – a picture, a friendly message – make a difference? By creating, looking, asking questions, confronting despair, we invest back into an economy far greater than any stock exchange, far nobler than any political system. We help sustain the will to imagine a better world, for adults and especially children, for whom the positive inspiration of art and story can never be overestimated."

Many of the contributors themselves are migrants. Maja Stanic from Bosnia & Herzegovina, now based in the UK, describes arriving as refugee from war in 1993 and writes: 'In my suitcase I had eleven paintbrushes. I thought they would help me survive in my new life'. Axel Scheffler from the UK makes a more contemporary comment: 'Borders – not what they used to be.'

The book is full of so many individual items of beauty, of beauty in words and images, that it is impossible to single out favourites. It is organized into four sections: Departures, Long Journeys, Arrivals, Hope for the Future. Each is an exploration that provokes an emotional response. Only a selection of just over 50 postcards, from the over 300 received to date for the exhibition, is included. Each postcard is reproduced with the illustration on the right side of a double page and its message with the back of the postcard, including address, stamps and franking, on the left. There is a brief biography of each illustrator at the end of the book.

For the first Migrations exhibition in Bratislava, the postcards were contained in see-through sleeves and hung on a network of wires crisscrossing the exhibition space, so that they could be seen from both sides and the visitor could walk through them. Each grated floor tile was painted with the name of a country, and many of the visitors could be seen kneeling down to read the names.

For Piet, for Tobias, for the whole Worcester Team, the exhibition has had a powerful emotional resonance, due to the idea of postcards / illustrations taking flight and making their way to them from all over the world. They are proud of the variety of postcards received and the range of responses. One of the remits of the ICPBS is to showcase the work of illustrators from outside the Anglophone community, and by having artists such as Isol and Roger Mello in the book (both of them recipients of global prizes but not published in the UK) the work has gone some way to achieving that. The Migrations book is a source of pride, beautiful to hold and a showcase for the work of illustrators. As Piet says, each entry reflects the way illustrators think and see the world and demonstrates that illustration is not passive. Illustrators are passionate and dynamic, have political and economic responses to contemporary situations and can play a role in telling the world about the plight of people in need.
The series book has long been denigrated by multiple sectors involved with children's books: literary scholars, librarians, educators, and often, even parents. As Rod McGillis wrote in his discussion of series books, 'A book so popular as to demand a sequel and then sequels must be suspect from a literary point of view' (“Series Books” 162). But popularity has not precluded a certain kind of series book from winning prizes. The Carnegie medal had as its inaugural (1936) winner Arthur Ransome’s *Pigeon Post*, sixth in his *Swallows and Amazons* series; and in the 1950s recognized C. S. Lewis’s final book in the *Narnia* series, *The Last Battle* and Rosemary Sutcliff’s concluding Roman trilogy novel, *The Lantern Bearers*. But these have been exceptions, and more recent British series, including Malorie Blackman’s *Noughts and Crosses* sequence, have been passed over by the Carnegie.

The initial book in Blackman’s series did win awards in its debut year, but these were all judged by young people (*Noughts and Crosses* won the Lancashire, the Sheffield, and the Red House Children’s Book Awards), suggesting that children were seeing something in the book that adult judges were not. Noughts and Crosses highlighted a group of children that rarely appear as main characters in any British children’s literature, and particularly in series fiction: BAME children. Blackman, who has throughout her career attempted to alter stereotypes about Black children and reading, has series for younger readers as well, including the *Betsey Biggalow* and *Girl Wonder* series. These both feature young Black children as protagonists.

Blackman’s books are not the norm in the world of British children’s literature. In most series books, if Black characters appeared at all, it was traditionally as sidekicks, foils, or opponents of the main white, middle-class British child. Nineteenth and early twentieth century Empire-based series, for example, by authors such as G. A. Henty and Bessie Marchant, used secondary characters to indicate the difference between good (obedient and subservient to white characters) BAME characters and bad (rebellious, sneaky) ones. C. S. Lewis’s *The Last Battle* shows the white Narnians fighting ‘the dark-skinned Calormenes . . . who bear a clear affinity to the fearful Saracens’ according to Alison Searle (*Fantastical Fact, Home or Other* 11). These series were aimed at middle-class readers, and were written by authors who felt that readers needed to learn about Britain’s values and accomplishments in the books they read. Whether historical or fantastic series, they valorized white characters and the British landscape over BAME characters or foreign landscape.

More recently, books in Alex Wheatle’s *Crongton* series, and Zanib Mian’s *Planet Omar* series (originally published as *The Muslims*) have both been award-winners. More formulaic series (such as mystery series, for example) tend to flatten out characters to a limited number of characteristics. This is especially true for secondary characters. Thus any BAME presence in such books has often been reduced to stereotypes. Enid Blyton’s various series, including the *Famous Five*, the *Secret Seven*, and the *Noddy* books, were and still are popular; yet, as Sheila Ray points out, they ‘have continued to be attacked for their racism’ (*The Blyton Phenomenon* 104). However, using a formulaic template (the mystery, the school story) does not preclude positive depictions of BAME characters. Robin Stevens’ *Murder Most Unladylike* series concerns a detective agency run by two girls at a boarding school, Daisy Wells and Hazel Wong, set in the 1930s. Both English Daisy and Hong Kong-born Hazel who narrates the stories see Daisy as the lead detective; Daisy in fact refers to Hazel as ‘Watson’ from time to time, referencing Sherlock Holmes’ sidekick. But Hazel’s methodical nature is crucial to the success of the detective agency, and she therefore functions as more than a sidekick in the narrative, despite the seeming leadership of Daisy.

Sharna Jackson’s *High Rise Mystery* is the first in a new middle-grade detective series about two sisters, Nik and Norva Alexander who live on a South London housing estate. Events stay very local – the Tri Estate – and a sense of place emerges mostly through the language used by the characters. The book’s cover depicts two Black children, but in the story itself their ethnicity is only implied. Jackson has been quoted as saying, ‘My thinking was that if a character is black it doesn’t occur to them that they are. That is just the default.’
The topic of murder is often viewed as a controversial topic for the intended age group. It may be all the more controversial when setting a story on the housing estate and featuring two Black protagonists. However Jackson appears very much aware of the complexities in this regard. A YouTube video of the news report of the murder has ‘The black man did it!’ at the top of the comments, a realistic example of online racism.

Elsewhere the theme of gentrification emerges: ‘buying flowers from Whitford Market was clearly out of our budget. The World’s Most Expensive Cheese Sandwich had made that crystal clear.’ (168)

Narrator Nik and her sister Norva are initially broadly sketched as logical and emotionally attuned respectively – ‘According to her, she’s the Gut and I’m the Nut’ – (2). However their existence as Black detectives in British children’s fiction is momentous. This becomes all the more apparent when we notice the list of TV detective shows that Norva enjoys watching. The Bill, Midsomer Murders and The Inspector Lynley Mysteries are not shows renowned for their ethnic diversity. Indeed in 2011 then-producer of Midsomer Murders, Brian Tue-May was quoted by the BBC as saying, ‘We just don’t have ethnic minorities involved. Because it wouldn’t be the English village with them.’ Lack of representation is not an issue confined to children’s literature; fans of detective stories not yet old enough to watch the post-watershed Luther starring Idris Elba are highly unlikely to encounter Black British detectives. Until now, Jackson emphasizes the problem-solving aspect of the genre, commenting ‘Murder mystery is basically a game that can be played and written in new ways.’

Thematic series Voices is a new historical fiction series by Scholastic. The series consultant, Tony Bradman, commissioned writers to write stories featuring central characters from under-represented groups with a focus on periods which feature in the Key Stage 2 National History Curriculum. The series kicks off with Bali Rai’s Now or Never – A Dunkirk Story telling the story of Private Fazal Khan who travels from his home in India to the battlefields of the Second World War. Fazal experiences moments of solidarity from some of the English soldiers he encounters, (not least Captain John Ashdown, father of politician the late Paddy Ashdown) but he is struck by the discrimination he faces from those fighting on the same side; ‘For the first time, I had learned of my place in the pecking order of British India. I was one place above my unfortunate mules.’ (p190)

Patrice Lawrence’s Diver’s Daughter – A Tudor Story explores the life of a young East African girl, Eve, living with her mother in the Southwark slums of Elizabethan London. When they hear from a Mary Rose survivor, George Symon, that one of the African free-divers who was sent to salvage its treasures is alive and well and living in Southampton, mother and daughter agree to try and find him and attempt to dive the wreck of another ship, rumoured to be rich with treasures. Lawrence’s tale stresses the everyday humanity of her characters and brings to life the challenges faced by African descendants in Britain in the sixteenth century. This series is seen as a long-overdue addition to books such as H.E Marshall’s Our Island Story, described by its author as ‘not a history lesson, but a story book’ (Marshall, 2005 [1905]: xxi –xxii) and by then-Prime Minister David Cameron as ‘my favourite book’. Patrice Lawrence comments ‘The UK’s history is shaped by people with roots across the world’. The Voices series is a step toward fully acknowledging the humanity of those with roots beyond this island.

NOTES
High Rise Mystery, Sharna Jackson, Knights Of, 978-1999642518, £6.99 pbk
Now or Never – A Dunkirk Story, Bali Rai, Scholastic, 978-1407191362, £6.99 pbk
Diver’s Daughter – A Tudor Story, Patrice Lawrence, Scholastic, 978-1407191409, £6.99 pbk

Karen Sands-O’Connor is professor of English at SUNY Buffalo State in New York. She has, as Leverhulme Visiting Professor at Newcastle University, worked with Seven Stories, the National Centre for the Children’s Book, and has recently published Children’s Publishing and Black Britain 1965-2015 (Palgrave Macmillan 2017).

Darren Chetty is a teacher, doctoral researcher and writer with research interests in education, philosophy, racism, children’s literature and hip hop culture. He is a contributor to The Good Immigrant, edited by Nikesh Shukla and published by Unbound, and tweets at @rapclassroom
Bringing Beowulf to Britain

Tony Bradman on the enduring appeal of the story of Beowulf, which has enthralled him nearly all of his life.

I was probably about 12 when I first encountered the story of Beowulf. I had only recently discovered the joys of books – a wonderful teacher called Mr Smith had read The Hobbit to my fourth-year class (this was in the mid-1960s, so Year 6 these days) at Malcolm Junior School in Penge, south London. It took him most of the year, and the story got me hooked on tales of quests and adventure and dragons and battles.

I joined my local library, where I soon discovered The Lord of the Rings and many other books by great writers. One of these was, of course, Rosemary Sutcliff. I started with The Eagle of the Ninth, her gripping tale of a young Roman’s quest for the truth about his father’s lost legion, and read everything of hers I could lay my hands on. Like Tolkien, she created entire worlds in which I could happily lose myself. So you can imagine my delight when I came across a book by her called Beowulf: Dragonslayer on the shelves of my local W.H. Smiths. It was a slim volume with amazing, swirling black and white illustrations by Charles Keeping that promised a dark, magical story set in a distant past. I wasn’t disappointed. The story is brilliantly re-told in Sutcliff’s trademark lyrical, supple prose and left me utterly enchanted.

It also became part of my growing interest in the period after the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, a chaotic time of barbarian invasions and turmoil. ‘Britannia’ was part of that Empire, but during the ‘Dark Ages’ - a term used because there is so little written evidence for what actually happened - tribes of Angles and Saxons arrived from Northern Europe and fought with the Britons for control of these islands.

Over the years I’ve read a lot about the period, and any fiction I could find that was set in the Dark Ages (there isn’t much, either for adults or for children). I also read other versions of Beowulf, those aimed at adults as well as adaptations for children. My favourite among the former is the translation by Seamus Heaney (Faber). His knotty, muscular style and emotional intensity is perfect for Anglo-Saxon poetry.

Another favourite of mine is the translation by Kevin Crossley-Holland (Beowulf, Oxford University Press), who is a poet himself and steeped in Anglo-Saxon culture, all of which gives his version great depth and power. The illustrations were provided by Charles Keeping, who clearly liked the story enough to want to re-visit it in a larger format. His pictures brilliantly capture the sheer weirdness of the tale.

I also like a recently re-issued re-telling by John Harris, The Geat: The Story of Beowulf and Grendel (notreallybooks). In his introduction professional storyteller John Harris says he thinks of Beowulf as the original horror story, and his version was forged in many live re-tellings. It certainly has pace, power, humour and the kind of gore kids love, and it’s very well illustrated by the excellent Tom Morgan-Jones. John Harris’s title refers to the fact that in the poem Beowulf is described as a ‘Geat’, a member of a tribe from southern Sweden. The action of the poem takes place in Denmark, so it seems likely the Angles and Saxons knew the story before they left their northern European homelands and brought it with them to Britannia. That idea always intrigued me, and last year I decided to write a story about it.

I came up with a character called Oslaf, a young boy living in the homeland of the Angles. His parents die, and he is given sanctuary by a chief who is about to lead his people to the eastern part of Britain that eventually became East Anglia. Oslaf’s father was a great storyteller, and passed on to his son a story that Oslaf knew as the Tale of the Monster from the Lake, as well as some of his storytelling talent. The book is called Winter of the Wolves, and at one point when I was writing it – as often happens – I got stuck. So I read some more Anglo-Saxon poetry for inspiration. I came across a poem about a seventh-century poet called Widsith (it opens brilliantly with Widsith ‘unlocking his word-hoard’), who turned out to be vain and boastful, and I knew that I had to put him in my story as Oslaf’s mentor and friend.

It really helped – the story immediately came to life with Widsith in it, and I have to say it was great fun to write. Kids these days have to learn about the Anglo-Saxons as part of the Key Stage Two History Curriculum, and that often involves taking a look at the story of Beowulf too. Nobody really knows how it came to these shores, but I hope my version is plausible – and a gripping story for children to read.

Beowulf: DragonSlayer, Rosemary Sutcliff, Puffin, 978-0141368696, £6.99 pbk
Beowulf, Seamus Heaney, Faber, 978-0571203765, £10.99
Monster Slayer, Brian Patten,illus Chris Riddell, Barrington Stoke, 978-1781125489, £6.99 pbk
Beowulf, Michael Morpurgo, illus Michael Foreman, Walker Books, 978-1406348873, £6.99 pbk
Beowulf, Kevin Crossley-Holland, illus Charles Keeping, Oxford University Press, 978-0192794444, £8.99 pbk
The Geat: The Story of Beowulf and Grendel, John Harris, notreallybooks, 978-0955212925, £6.99pbk
Good Reads

Matilda
Roald Dahl, Puffin, 978-0141365466, £6.99 pbk
Matilda is a book written by Roald Dahl. It was published in 1988 and is beautifully illustrated by Quentin Blake. It is one of my favorite books written by Roald Dahl. This book is a beautiful creation of Roald Dahl, in which the story revolves around a girl named Matilda who reads books as one would breathe air to live. Books were her friend but she never got love from her parents. When she joined school, her teacher couldn’t believe her eyes that how a girl of such a small age is filled with knowledge. This is a magical story, where Matilda has power and her teacher helps her to use it properly. My favorite character is Miss Honey as she guides Matilda and is there to help her at any point of time. My favorite parts of the story is when Matilda helps Miss Honey to get back her house. This book is recommended to be read by kids and who love magical stories. Deep

Sapiens, A Brief History Of Humankind
Yuval Noah Harari, Vintage, 978-0099590088, £10.99 hbk
Sapiens is a very thrilling, breathing and interesting book. It tells us about how our ancestors succeeded. How did they come together to form new kingdoms and empires? How did people start believing in Gods? The starting of the book is the pre-historic period’s information and the people of that era separated in different groups on the basis of the different places they lived in. Soon the evolution started and people got into the agricultural revolution. People even started having powerful rulers, building pyramids for the rulers and then beginning of injustice in the society was observed. Then comes the third part The Unification of Humankind. In this part due to the revolution of money, imperial vision was changed and the laws in religion was also established. This becomes the most successful story of human establishment. The final part talks about the scientific revolution. It mostly consists of Medieval and modern period. This part also gives idea about the new inventions, change in human behavior and industrial growth. This is a must read book for those who like to peep into the history of humankind. Sumedha

Odin’s Ravens
K.L. Armstrong and M.A. Marr, Little Brown, 978-1907411311, £6.99 pbk
Odin’s Ravens was the second book of The Blackwell Pages series. The book is kind of like the Percy Jackson series, but with Norse mythology. The theme revolves around Matt Thorsen (the descendant of Thor), Laurie and Fen Brekke (the descendants of Loki), trying to stop Ragnarok (the Norse version of the Apocalypse). To do so, they first had to save their friend Baldwin (descendant of Balder) after he was murdered. As it is said if the road to Hell is paved with fire giants, four headed dogs and not-so-dead zombie Vikings. What Rick Riordan has done with Greek and Egyptian mythology, Armstrong and Marr have done with Norse mythology. This is a wonderful read for those who believes in fantasy. This series is appropriate for teenagers and young adults! Khushi

The Sleepover Club
I am very fond of reading books and the last book I read was The Sleepover Club. The protagonist is a clever girl who does not believe in superstitions. The book is about a gang of girls who have sleepovers regularly. The girls - Frankie, Kenny, Lyndz, Fliss and Rosie - have an amazing time whenever they are together. While having a sleepover at Frankie’s house the girls were star gazing and testing Frankie’s new telescope. Fliss spots some green lights flashing in the sky. The girls become curious and all believe that there are aliens, but Rosie is not convinced and believes that there is a simple explanation. The girls try and solve the mystery. With each page, the plot becomes more intense and intriguing. The author has described the story in such a manner that as a reader one feels that one is part of the action. By the time the mystery was solved I was a little disappointed as I had expected the mystery to be solved completely but the author chose to leave a little suspense to the imagination of the reader. I would have preferred the author to have given a more definite end to the mystery. Overall the book was amazing and I am sure it has become one of my favourites. Oshin

I wish I’d written...

Susan Martineau chooses.

One of my favourite books was, and still is, The Eagle of the Ninth by Rosemary Sutcliff. In fact, I still love reading anything by Sutcliff, who always manages to bring the ancient world vividly to life whilst crafting a brilliant adventure story.

The Eagle of the Ninth is set in Roman Britain and centres on a mystery involving the disappearance of the entire Ninth Legion of the Roman army into the mists of northern Britain. The marvellously named Marcus Flavius Aquila is the son of one of the vanished soldiers. He is desperate to find the lost bronze eagle standard of his father’s legion and to restore their honour. (As a nerdy child, of course I quickly realised that ‘aquila’ was Latin for ‘eagle!’)

As a kid I was not only reading historical adventure stories, but also digging around in the garden in the hope of finding ancient artefacts. If I found anything the least bit intriguing I used to take it to my local museum to ask one of their long-suffering experts to look at it. I was rattling around in the Roman section of the place one day when I saw a bronze Roman eagle sitting in a display case. It felt as if the book had spun some kind of magic to lead me there. I don’t think the fantastic feeling I had that day has ever really left me. The books we read as a child are more powerful than we can imagine!

Our Good Reads are chosen by pupils at Manav Rachna International School, India. The school librarian, Dr Chhavi Jain is only the third librarian ever from outside the British Isles to have made it onto the Honour List for School Librarian of the Year. Dr. Jain supports 1,100 children aged from 6 to 17 and over 200 staff at the school.
A stunning extra on the front cover. He notes in a Foreword his admiration for Doyle (whose line drawings were variably successful in the 1851 edition) but offers instead glowing colour throughout. The pictures are shaped to knit into the drama of the story, displaying anything from a tiny vignette of the King on his first adventure to mountainscapes crossing the gutter between pages and full-page dramas of weather as the heavens display their anger at Gluck’s two errant brothers. Scenes, characters, gesture all match the pace of events and the eucatastrophe of the restoration of prosperity to the Golden Valley is matched by one of those joyous scenes of happiness of which Blake is a master.

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The King of the Golden River

John Ruskin, illus Quentin Blake, Thames and Hudson, £14.99, 978-0500651858, A14.95

I wrote about this classic tale a couple of years ago (BfK 225), praising it as an early example of an English fantasy story, good for reading aloud. I didn’t mention a number of illustrative treatments that it had received after the notable ones in the first edition by Dicky Doyle but the only one that measured up to the demands of the story was a class set of drawings by Charles Stewart, published as long ago as 1958. Now it has attracted the attention of Sir Quentin Blake who has illuminated the text with some thirty-two colour drawings, including a frontispiece of the King of the Golden Valley.

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Ed’s Choice

Tad

Benji Davies, HarperCollins, 32pp, 9780008212797, £12.99 hbk

Tad is the smallest tadpole in the pond and struggles to keep up with his many siblings who taunt her with the threat of Big Blub. Then Tad notices her brothers and sisters are disappearing – where have they gone? What will happen to her – she has caught the attention of Big Blub. Tad needs to do something she has never done before. Benji Davies’ artwork is vibrant, saturated colours capturing Tad’s watery world. The tadpoles wiggles across the pages, their movement conveyed through strong expressive lines. Every page is used to the full. Some take up a double spread emphasising Tad’s size in relation to the pond; while vignettes pick up details from the text. This is presented in a clear font that is both accessible and attractive to read. There are words to play with swoosh, wiggle, even the name Big Blub and a bit of counting. The storyline is fun including as it does a sense of jeopardy; what does happen to all those tadpoles. Ah, that is the surprise. This is picture book to enjoy from an artist-author who is making a name as one of the most consistent creators of the genre. Recommended for parents, librarians and teachers to share.

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The Flute


This is the flute. It sounds like yellow. Easy and mellow.’ This book is a celebration of blowing… all over the world. The second in the series from Tiny Owl’s Children, Music, Life, it follows The Drum, nominated for the Kate Greenaway Medal 2019. With its vibrant, glowing colours and bouncy, rhythmic text, it is just right for sharing with very small people. The youngest of children respond to music, and this book will encourage children to read and explore different instruments with the very small. The brilliant colours depicting such a wide variety of plants and small beasts will intrigue and delight. A flute of some description appears on every page, blown by multi-cultural children, ‘…bright like the sun, it whispers sweet secrets. Floating like a butterfly…’ The penultimate page reads The flute is poetry,’ and is covered in brilliantly coloured creatures and plants to hunt and name. Then comes the final page: Play your flute! Inspiration can start with the very young.

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Circle


This is the sixth collaboration between this well-matched author and illustrator, and the third of their shape trilogy: Square, Triangle, and, now, Circle. In this wry fable, Circle goes in search of Triangle, who, against express instruction, has gone into the dark behind the waterfall. Circle’s initial exasperation and anxiety is tempered by an acknowledgement of the love s/he feels for the errant shape. But, once they find one another, the two shapes realise that theirs are not the only pair of eyes scanning the dark. Barnett asks a simple but searching question about how our preconceptions may determine and restrict our experience of the world. Once more, Klassen displays his mastery of the minimal, as, in the darkness behind the waterfall, his smudgily substantial characters with their stumpy legs are reduced to the almond whites and ball black pupils of their improbable, but oh-so expressive, eyes.

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Lubna and Pebble


On the title page we see a boat laden with people, and then the story starts with Lubna’s huge eyes looking at a pebble. She had found it when she and her father arrived on a beach in the night, and she takes it with her into the World of Tents, feeling that Daddy’s salty arms and the pebble will keep her safe. With a felt-tip left in the tent, she draws a face on the pebble, and Pebble now smiles at her. She tells it everything about the war, her home, and her brothers, but we are left to imagine what happened. Daddy tries to keep her warm as winter arrives, but Lubna, red-nosed with cold, is worried that Pebble might catch cold, so Daddy finds a shoebox and a tea-towel to keep it warm. A little boy appears, with no words at first: he just blinks and stares, but Pebble’s smile makes him smile, and he introduces himself as Amir. They become friends, and play together, though Lubna tells Pebble, “You are still my best friend”. One day Daddy tells Lubna that they are leaving for a new home, and she is happy, but sad for Amir. That night she thinks about what she must do, and next day she gives Pebble, the shoebox and the pen to Amir, so that he can draw the smile back on, and tell Pebble when he misses her. Again we see two huge eyes, shining tears, but this time they are Amir’s eyes.

This is a beautiful book, all rich colour and unusual angles, with some clever touches. When Amir first appears, he is standing on a representative tree with very dark green leaves, but when he is given Pebble in the shoebox, his tree is full of red blossom, showing that he himself has blossomed. It is to be hoped that this book will enable younger readers to empathise with displaced people, and to understand that children caught up in the ongoing refugee crisis are just children, but it also a lovely book to share and to think about what friendship means.

DB

This Love

Isabel Otter, ill. Harriet Lymas, Caterpillar Books, 32pp, 978 1 84587 801 2 £11.99 hbk

Coes this appear to be one of these lovely picture book – the colour of people, of places, of lives, of seasons – and most of all, the colour of love. Love is such a difficult subject for young children, but the illustrations here show us how people interact with each other no matter who or where they are and the text is cut-out on the cover and on each page as the book progresses, becomes smaller and smaller and always shows us something about the place where we are. Whether in the West, or the East, or the Middle East, north in snow or south in heat, whether in a single-parent family, two girls with two dads, a traditional mixed race family, or with a grandparent, we know who we are loved, and the colour around us helps to prove that love. This is a truly colourful book in every way which will give children the sense of wonder and magic that is so important in learning that people are people and are to be loved no matter what they look like or where they live. The rhyming text will appeal too, and this story will be read over and over and enjoyed for its detail and vibrancy.

ES

Little Bear’s Spring

Ellie Woolard, ill. Briony May Smith, Macmillan, 32pp, 978-1-4050-9018-1 £9.99 pbk

Little Bear wakes up after his long hibernation to find snow still on the ground, and no-one in sight, though he does find a little round stone which looks rather sad, so he picks it up and tucks into his fur, and goes ‘lippetty-loppeyt’ off down the track. He is looking for someone to play with, but the birds are too busy, as spring’s on its way. He asks ‘What is spring?’ and they reply: ‘The sun shimmers on its way. He asks ‘What is spring?’ and they reply: ‘The sun shimmers on its way. He asks ‘What is spring?’ and they reply: ‘The sun shimmers on its way. He asks ‘What is spring?’ and they reply: ‘The sun shimmers on its way. He asks ‘What is spring?’ and they reply: ‘The sun shimmers on its way.

Ellie Woollard’s rhyming language, especially in the descriptions of the spring, is pleasant and beautiful, but not outstanding.

DB

The Go-Away Bird

Julia Donaldson illus Catherine Rayner, Macmillan, 32pp, 9781509984589 £11.99 hbk

The Go-Away Bird lives up to his name. Whenever he is approached by the other birds keen to be friends, to talk and play, he tells them to go away. So they do. But everyone needs friends. What will happen when the Go-Away Bird is faced with a situation that will not go away?

Here Julia Donaldson is on the top of her form, delivering a crisp rhyming text with the satisfying chorus of ‘Go away, go away, go away’ where the audience can join in. And there is plenty of repetition to make the presenter to enjoy. It is presented in a bold clear font that is a pleasure to read, beautifully placed on the page against an uncluttered, unobtrusive ground. However, the text is only one element. Bringing an added dimension and life to the narrative are the illustrations by Catherine Rayner. Her spiky outlines capture the difficult character that is the Go-Away Bird, his expression one of disapproval and annoyance. Her palette is cool and colourful – never dull or muddy; her characters fill the page (look at the looming presence of the eagle). From the moment we, the reader opens the book, we find ourselves in the leafy world of the birds, both end covers decorated with the featherly fronds of the tree that is the home of the Go-Away Bird. This is a perfect marriage of word and illustration, author and illustrator and should become another triumph for both. An outstanding addition to any library whether home, school or public.

FH

Tiny T. Rex and The Impossible Hug


Cuddly dinosaurs - this will be outstanding addition to any library whether home, school or public.

FH

Cloud Forest

Victoria Turnbull, Frances Lincoln, 52pp, 978-1-84780-357-8, £12.99 hbk

Umpra’s garden was filled with flowers and fruit trees. With Umpra the child learns about how to grow something, about the power of stories, of words and the sharing they bring. What happens when one day Umpra is no longer there?

Victoria Turnbull’s pastel palette and delicate line capture the gentle message of the story – the death of a loved ‘Umpra’ and how to help a child cope with loss. The text and the illustrations emphasise the connection between the old and the very young; a connection through stories that take them on imaginative shared journeys against the backdrop of nature and growth of the seeds that have been planted. I do have slight reservations in the portrayal of the characters – what are they? Are we final spread which the literal child might find confusing in its message. These are quibbles – beautifully packaged, and presented this should find a place among other titles that deal with this situation, making a valuable contribution that is both attractive and accessible.

FH
Paper Planes

Jim Helmore, ill. Richard Jones, Simon and Schuster, 32pp, 978 1 771 7367 5, £6.99 pbk

Mia and Ben are best friends. They do everything together, but what they like most is making paper planes. They race them against birds, hoping one day to build a plane that will fly across the lake.

Then comes the devastating news that Ben is moving to the city. Exchanging model planes, the children vow to remain friends. But winter is hard for both of them, and Mia ends up smashing Ben’s gift. That night she dreams the plane is whole again and she’s flying it high in the sky among the geese. Ben’s there, too, piloting the plane she gave him. Next morning a parcel arrives from Ben. It’s a model plane, but it lacks wings and he needs her help to finish it.

Using what she learned observing the geese, Mia designs wings for Ben’s plane. It soars across the lake - and so their model-making friendship is renewed.

Ben and Mia’s story is well-judged, with enough depth and detail to engage its audience. There’s a sense of honesty and direct-talking here that children will warm to - difficult emotions are acknowledged and there are no grand promises. Progress is made through imaginative thoughtfulness, commitment and care, and although there’s a hint of magic about the dream, it’s also a lovely example of the way creative insights come about. Mia’s talent for designing and building planes is integral to the plot, but it’s refreshingly downplayed. Helmore doesn’t labour the ‘STEM girl’ angle and Mia’s character is nicely rounded. Some readers may find the switch from paper planes to actual models a little disorienting but it’s a minor point from paper planes to actual models if you’re bookish.

Five More Minutes

Marta Alcés, Macmillan, 32pp, 978 1 5098 6602 1, £12.99 hbk

‘Time is a funny thing. Dad talks about it a lot. But I think I know more about it than he does.’

So begins this unusual picture book narrated by a thoughtful little fox who then sets about proving the veracity of the statement that applies to most adults, Dad in particular. Frequently on his lips are such comments as ‘five more minutes’ when the little foxes are bouncing on his bed, trying to get him up in the mornings, but ‘we have no time!’ when he’s trying desperately to get his offspring ready for nursery.

Little Fox’s interpretation of Dad’s ‘no time’ translates into time for puddle jumping; making new friends, juggling, bird watching and more. Never mind if they miss the bus.

Not only is Dad wrong about time, he has no idea about how it actually works, getting confused, stressing that an hour is a long time when in reality it’s a very short period. Other times though he states that time goes very fast when it goes very, very slowly indeed. Flexibility is what’s required and that’s what Fox is eager to make Dad understand.

There is however one part of the day that despite his superior knowledge and understanding about time, little Fox is more than happy for them all to pool their knowledge on and that is a shared storytime (and sometimes sleeping time too.)

With its superbly expressive illustrations, parents, carers and teachers of young children especially, will relate to this adorable tale of how adults and children experience the same thing in completely contrasting ways. JB

The Great Big Book of Life

Mary Hoffman, ill. Ros Asquith, Scholastic, 32pp, 9781786031908, £12.99, hbk

Tackling a huge topic, this book offers a whistle stop tour of life’s main stages with a particular focus on babies. Seven of its double page spreads look at what babies can do, how they communicate, why they wake at night, what they eat, potty training and how they are protected from illness. The reader is invited to make connections with babies they know.

Childhood, teenage years and adulthood are dealt with very briefly, but some important ideas are included, for example that in old age some people may become forgetful and more in need of support while others on the other hand may continue with an active life working or pursuing their interests. There is an effort to demonstrate there is no one ‘right’ way to live; for example, indicating not everyone has a partner or gets married. These insights may serve to reassure children some of whom may make connections with people they know. The book introduces children to other information too, such as the fact that some children in the world don’t go to school and some adults can’t find a job.

The illustrations bring the text to life and add to the text, for example two children communicating with sign language adds another dimension to the pages focused on language. Illustrations such as the teenager’s bedroom will chime with many adult readers and add humour. A caption on the title page invites eagle eyed readers to spot the cat on every page.

This book is 8th in a highly acclaimed series which includes The Great Big Book of Feelings and The Great Big Book of Families from the same writer/illustrator team. This addition celebrates life and how amazing humans are. It leaves readers with the valuable message that we all have a life worth living and we should make the most of every day. SMc

I saw a Bee

Rob Ramsden, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978 1 9109328415, £12.99 hbk

Unsurprisingly said bee buzzes right at the scared lad, who, swatter in hand, chases the insect away, then climbs inside the box to build the bee, leaving the field clear for other minibeasts. Sometime later, the boy emerges to start a game of hide and seek, but of the bee there is no sign, let alone a buzz. Then the boy starts to miss his Api’s acquaintance until he hears a welcome sound, follows it and a joyfully buzzy reunion takes place.

This effectively simple book is beautifully illustrated with stylish, patterned graphics showing bee and boy who share our precious natural environment. The first of a proposed series of books aiming to ‘encourage young children to enjoy and appreciate the natural world’ it’s perfect for sharing with young listeners and equally, with its short rhythmic rhyming text, an ideal book for beginning readers. Either way, it conveys its crucial environmental message without a hint of preachiness. I look forward to seeing the next title, We Found a Seed. JB

Grooblechops

Elizabeth Laird, ill. Jenny Lucander, Tiny Owl, 32pp, 978191010328415, £12.99 hbk

Here’s a clever variation on the theme of the fear of monsters in the night. Dad’s first idea of reassurance is to pledge armed family back-up in the case of monster attack. He’ll be there with a frying pan if the monster isn’t deterred by Amir’s scariest face. However, far-sighted Amir worries that this may be a self-defeating strategy, with the monster’s parents being drawn into the fray as well as his own. Dad can see the logic of that and re-thinks, adding some subtle parental and child psychology which brings big and little humas together with their monster counterparts. Elizabeth Laird’s story is realised in Jenny Lucander’s vibrant illustrations in which the bedroom lits and threats to empty its contents as the combat builds up, only to be brought onto an even keel when the adults sit down, chat over a coffee and human child and monster child settle down to play on the rug. The story is based on a tale by Rumi, the thirteenth century
Persian poet and Islamic scholar, whose work is gradually becoming better known in Western Europe, sometimes through reworking and updating like this for children. DB

Here and There

Tamarra Ellis Smith, illus Evelyn Daviddi, Barefoot Books, 32pp, 978 1 78285 742 6, £6.99 pbk

Ivan is an active boy who loves singing to the birds while perched in the pear tree at his mum’s house, and his songs are always like the songs the birds sing to him. He calls his mum’s house ‘here’, while his dad’s new house is called ‘there’. He isn’t as happy ‘there’ as he is ‘here’, and he would rather stay ‘here’. In fact, he would rather

that dad was ‘here’ too. When he goes to his dad’s house, he is quiet and withdrawn, and dad wonders where his active, happy son has gone. It is only when dad plays his guitar and sings a new song he has written that Ivan finds his dancing feet and hands and voice, and he begins to sing the songs the birds have taught him to dad’s tune. He begins to understand what ‘here’ and ‘there’ are different, he can be himself in whichever place he happens to be. The illustrations, in acrylic, pencil and collage, are bright and cheerful and full of life and colour; they also indicate and ‘there’ are different, he can be himself in whichever place he happens to be. The illustrations, in acrylic, pencil and collage, are bright and cheerful and full of life and colour; they also indicate

This is an exuberant picturebook providing lots for adults and children to talk about together. SMc

Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain

Verna Aardema, ill. Beatriz Vidal, Macmillan, 32pp, 978 1 5290 0754 1, £6.99 pbk

‘This is the grass, / all brown and dead, / That needed the rain/from the cloud overhead – /The big, black cloud/all heavy with rain, That shadowed the ground/on Kapiti Plain...’ An anthropologist discovered this tale many years ago and then Verna Aardema wrote this rhythmic version with its cumulative refrains bringing it closer to the English This is the house that Jack built rhyme and in so doing, extends children’s imaginative experience beyond the familiar to the Kenyan landscape.

We see and hear how a young herd boy brings water to his sheep, and how the little sheep are able to get water from the big black cloud and let loose the much needed rain at last. And for his trouble, Ki-Pat is richly rewarded with a wife and later, a baby.

Beatriz Vidal whose debut picture book this was, wonderfully evokes the rural African landscape with her cut-out style illustrations that look as familiar to the Kenyan landscape.

When Mina was growing up in Iran, her beloved Grandma lived with her and they were close. Grandma doesn’t just bake cookies and cooked chadors, and sewed chadors, and listened to Mina chattering about her games, who knitted blankets, and let loose the much needed rain at last. And for his trouble, Ki-Pat is richly rewarded with a wife and later, a baby. Grandma’s sphere was domestic and her routine regulated by religious beliefs and family commitments, but her openness to other ways of thinking and living are one of the key features of this book. Javaherbin has selected her anecdotes with care and the character she portrays is fully-rounded. She is the nature of love and freedom, whether every cloud really has a silver lining and whether there can be such a thing as the nature of love and freedom, whether every cloud really has a silver lining and whether there can be such a thing

This story is the first from esteemed Hungarian author Ervin Lázár to be translated into English. It is a very attractive volume with striking full page colour illustrations in folk art style. A very enjoyable read. SMc
The Longest Night of Charlie Moon

Christopher Edge, Nosy Crow, 192pp, 978788004947, £6.99 pbk
Is there a monster in the woods? Johnny Baines says there is – but Johnny is a bully and a tormenter. Dizzy thinks it might be a spy – he has seen signs. Maybe it is time to find out. But what is time? Then? Now? Sometime? The little gang of three venture into the unknown to discover that time may not be as it seems. As Old Crony says: ‘There is no single now...You see the world from the place you are standing, but when you move, time and space change too...’

The Longest Night of Charlie Moon sets the tone for the book and the ability to travel through portals to discover new planets. However the main focus is on trying to find the way back to our own world, after Alfie had accidentally destroyed the one they had originally travelled through.

This is a brilliantly funny story about a boy who is a little out of it in the world. We are only too happy don’t really exist. Alfie is a quick and intelligent young boy who is able to talk his way out of most situations, mainly ones that the Professor has got him in to. There is the sense of a quest in that the two explorers keep adding to their company along the way. I love the way that Alfie can make even the most terrible, dirty and unhygienic place into somewhere that will appear in a travel brochure. It is very much a story about not giving in to tyrants, including large developers and about the importance of friendship and helping one another. Chris Mould has once again produced a series of highly amusing illustrations in his very recognizable style; he really brings Alfie alive, so that the reader is instantly on his side. It is a rip roaring tale of adventure and perhaps saving worlds, but above all it is a fantastically funny tale that middle graders will enjoy. It is an adventure that kids can look forward to for further adventures.

The Cosmic Atlas of Alfie Fleet

Martin Howard, illus. Chris Mould, OUP, 320pp, 9780192767509, £6.99 pbk
Alfie Fleet lives with his mother in a small flat and they are extremely poor.

His mother works at the local fish market, so they tend to eat a lot of fish soup. Now Alfie wants to buy his poor mum a foot spa as a birthday present and has been playing the stock market (using the library computers) to make the money, but he is still a bit short of cash. When he sees a job advert that will provide just what he needs Alfie applies for the job. What he did not expect was the totally eccentric Professor Bowell-Mouvement (this sets the tone for the book) and the ability to travel through portals to discover new planets. However the main focus is on trying to find the way back to our own world, after Alfie had accidentally destroyed the one they had originally travelled through.

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Break a record, make a thing, scream important. ‘So paint a picture, climb a tree. Pretend to be a bumblebee. Break a record, make a thing, scream and shout and dance and sing. Do all of this or none at all. It’s up to you! Kid, it’s your call.’ This is a most important book which deserves to be in every home, and certainly in every classroom and library. Go, find it! Once read, and shared, study the cover, and see atop the tall tree, the father figure of inhabitants and helps them in different ways; fixing a nest, digging a burrow. Meanwhile his puffin parents are a little concerned and so ask who has seen the puffin. Eventually the little puffling gets reunited with her puffin parents. The language is great for young readers with a repeat phrase asking about the puffing’s whereabouts - a good one for joining in with.

Gerry Daly’s illustrations are detailed enough to bring all the wildlife to life in a characterful way. It is great to see them as characters and learn about their habitats through the story. There is also a handy key at the back of the book entitled Life on the Skellig Islands which gives you more information and a longer list of birds. There is no doubt that the book will be read again, immediately the final page is reached...do it! The rhythmic, rhyming text is bouncy, reminiscent of that of Dr Seuss’, and the illustrations have a great vibrancy, exploding from each page with colour and characterisation. In lesson number one, adults from around the world are seen exploring their environment, each with a small child, leading them on in an adventure like none other. ‘The world is full of life. Like cats and birds and that sing’. Each beauty list is illustrated in pages packed with detail. ‘As for you, my bouncing ball, well, you can truly have it all. Yes, you can set the world alight, my child-so-small, your future’s bright. With hard work and application you can rise to any station. President or CEO, there’s nowhere that you cannot go.’ But that is not the whole picture. Having learnt what a wonderful world it is to inhabit, here comes the down side. Lesson number two shows very clearly that many wonders in nature are not smooth. The pages become grey and forbidding, whilst there follow warnings of hazards and pitfalls to expect. Big people telling small people what to do, think, learn. Then comes an amazing light bulb moment. After such busy pages, there is a startlingly white spread, with 4 simple lines of text. With an adult holding a child’s hand as he thinks: ‘Wait a second, is it true? Is that what I am doing too?’ Do I believe, because I’m tall, my little one, I know it all? And so the final summing up is amazing. Best scenario? Go in your own direction, your life is yours, discover who you are and why you are here. Just remember, love is all important. ‘So paint a picture, climb a tree. Pretend to be a bumblebee. Break a record, make a thing, scream and shout and dance and sing. Do all of this or none at all. It’s up to you! Kid, it’s your call.’ This is a most wonderful book which deserves to be in every home, and certainly in every classroom and library. Go, find it! Once read, and shared, study the cover, and see atop the tall tree, the father figure and his small child who introduce the book and also close it; see a myriad of miniature vignettes of characters, ideas and the natural world, all included within the book itself. Enjoy, and be enriched.

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The Tunnels Below

Nadine Wild-Palmer
Pushkin Press, 256pp, 978-1782692232, £7.99 pbk

A brilliantly imagined other-world adventure that pitches a young girl into a very strange place, and up against a dangerous tyrant, The Tunnels Below is an impressive debut.

Cecilia Hudson-Gray is out celebrating her twelfth birthday with her family on a day trip to London - so far, so ordinary, though there's clearly something unusual about the marble her little sister gives her as a present. When it rolls onto the tube train she's just got off, Cecilia steps back to retrieve it, only for the doors to shut. Separated from her family, the train whisks her away into the darkness. Emerging from 'the black of beyond', she finds a whole new world, very different to the one she knows. The first friend she makes for example, is Kufli, tall, friendly, human looking except for the fact that he has the face of a fox. The more she discovers in the tunnels below, the stranger it all is - the place where music has a taste, and where things are often deliciously literal (you can actually live in the lime-light, ie. a district lit by neon lime-green light). Ruling it all through, through a mixture of intimidation and brutality, is the Corvus Community, under the leadership of the brutal Jacques d'Or. As in the best fantasy adventures, Cecilia's challenge is to save her new friends from the enemy and, as we suspected, that marble might just have a part to play.

It's hugely imaginative, and Wild-Palmer manages to keep the plot moving alongside intriguing descriptions of bizarre, quirky characters and customs. A message about the importance of standing up to oppression is delivered with a light touch and this is a fresh, original and enjoyable addition to the canon of hidden-world adventures.

Read our Q&A interview with Nadine Wild-Palmer.

Cloud Boy

Marcia Williams, Walker, 203pp, 9781406388991, £6.99 pbk

Marcia Williams is known for the witty illustrations accompanying her collection of class stories. Now she has written her first novel for children. Narrated as if by nine-year-old Angie Moon, it takes the form of a year’s diary kept while her lifetime friend of the same age, Harry next door, contracts a serious illness. Interleaved are old letters from her grandmother, now staying with the family, written but never delivered when she herself was a child interred in the notorious Changi jail in 1942 by the Japanese forces over-running Singapore.

There are elements of repetition as Angie records her growing anger at what she construed as friend Harry’s obstinate refusal to get better. After which the pair can get back to the favourite games in a shared tree-house. But her grandmother’s letters, based on the real-life experience of one Oiga Morris, remain riveting reading. She too was a child incarcerated in Changi jail at the same time where families lived in dreadful conditions ruled over by heartless guards. Encouraged by Elizabeth Ennis, a former nurse in the Indian army, a group of eight children became one of the most unusual Girl Guide groups ever to have existed. Their mission was to complete a quilt from bits and scraps around them. Their example was followed by older women, who found ways of inserting messages into their work to be read by the men’s camp next door.

This inspiring story is told bit by bit to Angie and Harry throughout this fine, sensitive novel. It is a little too long and towards the end loses some momentum. Even so, here is a deeply well worth telling, with a historical note at the end adding historical perspective to such an otherwise bleak passage of life for those going through it at the time.

The Bluest of Blues

Fiona Robinson, Abrams Books for Young Readers, 40pp, 978 1 4197 2551 7, £12.99 pbk

This absolutely beautiful picture book biography looks at the life of British botanist Anna Atkins who is acknowledged as one of the first women in the world to take a photograph as well as one of the very first people to publish a book of photographic images. The author-illustrator Fiona Robinson uses a time-line to tell Anna’s amazing story, featuring key moments in the scientist’s life.

Anna’s interest in the natural world and in particular plants, was fostered by her widowed father, scientist and
entomologist John Children, who took it upon himself to give his much-loved daughter the best education possible at a time when few girls were schooled at all. He taught her chemistry, physics, zoology and botany, as well as Latin and she became his partner in research, studying specimens together.

Anna’s marriage to John Pelly Atkins in London sees her continuing dedicating herself to creating a herbarium and becoming ever more eager to share her work with a wide audience; if only there was a way to make an accurate copy of her drawings. She marries a wealthy man who moves with her husband and now retired father to Kent, Anna’s father gives her an exciting present – one of the very first cameras ever made.

Fatherine and daughter together explore their shared interests and meet astronomer, scientist and entomologist John Children, who introduces them to cyanotope’s blue scientist is both inspiring and distinctive what she wants to use cyanotopes for: meet astronomer, scientist and explore their shared interests and the very first cameras ever made. Pippa discovers that she has been chosen as one of the riders in Zeus’ winged horse race. Each rider has been selected by a god, Pippa’s sponsor is Aphrodite, the winning horse will become Zeus’ new steed and the winning rider will gain immortality. Pippa and her skittish young horse Zeph are soon inseparable and set off to explore this unfamiliar world, making new friends, contacting enemies, meeting the Fates and trying to work out how to win and stay together forever.

The task of winning seems impossible when dealing with cheating gods and scheming, desperate fellow competitors. Satisfyingly, however, love, kindness, friendship, growing confidence and the magical, fast-moving adventure story with its mythological background and appealing central character. This enjoyable tale, complete with flying horses and ancient gods and goddesses, should appeal to young readers who have some knowledge of Greek myths and who enjoy fantasy adventure stories. SR

**The Golden Butterfly**

Sharon Goslung, Stripes books. 160pp, 9781788050529, £6.99 pbk

Luciana loves magic and as the granddaughter of the ‘Magi-centrific Marko’, once the most famous stage magician, she has been lucky enough to have been taught by her grandmother. When her grandmother dies, her grandmother is visited by Thursday, the leader of the Grand Society of Magicians who wants to find the secret of the greatest trick – the Golden Butterfly. Luciana and her best friend Charley decide to visit London in an attempt to find out the secret of this trick. They uncover a number of mysteries, not least being the identity of another magician Adolphus Merritt and find out about the many parts of the theatre seem to trigger memories for Luciana.

Will this be a wonderful example of the crime thriller tales that have been made popular over the last few years. This one is set at the end of the Victorian period and focuses on many of the social issues that were prevalent in that period; in fact some of them are still issues today, especially the role of women and social inequality. However this is also a story about family in its many forms, and also about friendship that doesn’t follow the rules of society. The author has created a very atmospheric world, but particularly that of the variety theatre and the audiences that visited them. The villain is truly obnoxious, mainly because of his views about women, but also because he seeks to steal someone else’s work. I truly enjoyed the descriptions of the area around the Strand and anyone who knows that part of London will have no problem in following the route that these would have investigated. It is definitely a book for those who love Robin Stevens and Katherine Woodfine and anyone who loves reading about the Victorian period. I would also say that it is for boys and girls as both are fascinated by magic tricks and great adventures. MP

**Swimming Against The Storm**

Jess Butterworth, Orion Books, 9781510106444, £6.99, pbk

In common with Jess Butterworth’s - so far - setting of Scotland, Swimming Against The Storm is beautifully described, richly detailed and contributes significantly to the plot. Swimming Against The Storm takes place during the First World War when the swans and have grown up with a deep affection for their home. They seem destined to follow in their parents’ footsteps as ‘shrimpers’, until they learn that water levels are rising to dangerously high levels around the village. Their only option is to fight to save the land they care about and, along with two of their closest friends, they head off in search of the mythical loup-garou, a creature that is rumoured to live deep in the swamps. If, somehow, they can find and capture one, then the government will be forced to intervene and help the local community protect their land from the impending catastrophe.

Although the book begins as a relatively low-key adventure, the story builds to a crescendo when children realise the demanding nature of the task ahead of them. Tension levels increase rapidly as they travel through the swamp, moving further and further away from the safety of their village. Relationships are tested as challenges are faced and overcome, but the strong feeling of genuine love that exists between the sisters is absolutely central to the story. The importance of protecting the natural environment resonates strongly throughout and will be thoroughly rewarding. In addition, the political aspect of the story is subtly done and adds extra depth when reading. As I progressed through the novel, I was immersed in the world created by the author and, after finishing, enjoyed spending time learning more about life in the Louisiana swamps.

**Swimming Against The Storm** is the kind of gripping adventure that will appeal to fans of Lauren St John. It is perfect for Years 5 and 6, and I recommend it highly. Jess Butterworth is building a strong back catalogue of children’s books and it is thrilling to see her fulfilling her enormous potential as a writer. JB

**Check Mates**

Stewart Foster, Simon & Schuster, 544pp, 9781471195366, £6.99

Stewart Foster’s new against-the-odds story is an emotionally affecting tale of a complicated young boy and his kooky old grandfather, who find common ground on the chess board. Like Foster’s previous successes (The Bubble Boy; All The Things That Could Go Wrong), the main character in this story is a London teenager who makes his life difficult. Felix struggles to concentrate at school due to his ADHD and, as a result, often gets into trouble. His grandfather helped him a lot, but since she’s died, it’s pretty much impossible for him to succeed in his daily life. Felix is somehow cajoled into losing himself in imaginary game in his tree house with his friend, Jake.

Felix’s grandfather, though, is not going to let him take things easy. Growing up in wartime Germany, Grandad keeps some very intriguing secrets, including how to master the game. At first Felix is wary of Grandad, who finds in any way, but Grandad is crafty and, through various bizarre tactics, Felix is somehow cajoled into learning the game. In fact, he learns it very well indeed.

As he gets to grips with the intricacies of the ancient game, Felix unlocks potential he didn’t know he had. It’s not cool to like chess, though, and the book illustrates brilliantly the challenge for school children to succeed with something, while simultaneously pretending they’re too cool to care about it. Yet care about it Felix does, and readers will care about too. There is absolutely no need to like (or know anything at all about) chess in order to sympathise with Felix’s journey from novice to chess master.

What is most impressive, and enjoyable, about the book, is how this underdog story is balanced with the other elements and plot-line. Grandad’s health is in doubt, but so is his past, especially when Jake and Felix find a few clues as to his role in the war.
The Last Zoo

Sam Gayton, Andersen Press, 302pp, 9781783447701, £6.99, pbk

The Last Zoo is Sam Gayton’s most ambitious children’s novel to date. In his previous books, Gayton has often celebrated miniature heroes (Herufleas, Lilliput) but this new venture has enormous scope, breathing life into a giant menagerie of imaginary creatures.

The Last Zoo is a series of arks, which host new creatures that have been brought out of ‘the seam’ by people’s imaginations—a phenomenon made possible ever since the detonation of the reality旝gm. Hummingdragons, genies, smellybeasts, and unicorns are all created and cared for on their own ark. Alex, a tailor's daughter, leads the angels, whose majesty and mystery (and miracles) may hold the key to saving the world. And the world needs saving. War is prevalent, resources are dwindling and The Megalolz virus has put pay to the internet.

Unfortunately, Pia is rather accident prone and misplaces the angels. Thus begins a hasty hunt all over the zoo, punctuated by catastrophes and moments of great peril, as Pia and her young friends search dragons’ lairs, spiders’ webs and genies’ beards. Though her celestial charges prove illusive, Pia uncovers many secrets on her quest, some of which have enormous implications for the fate of the zoo, and of the world.

The text uses the old words, and the place of myth and the sense of place, important in an adventure. This novel tells the story of 12-year-old Alexander Papas who is recruited by the wildly eccentric billionaire Solomon Daisy to travel back in time to Roman London via a portal accidentally created by the wealthy man’s ‘tech guys’. Alex’s task is to find the blue-eyed girl with the ivory knife whose skeleton has been excavated in modern London and with whom Solomon Daisy is obsessed. Alex’s knowledge of Latin and Greek make him suited to the role of time traveller and, having been promised a great deal of money, he finds himself hurtling through a portal located in London’s Mithraeum, travelling back 1800 years into the past. Alex has been told the three rules of time travel, ‘Naked you go and naked you must return’, ‘Drink, don’t eat’ and ‘As little interaction as possible’, but these prove hard to follow in Roman Londinium which is confusing, dirty, smelly, unsanitary, unhealthy and much, much more dangerous than Alex ever expected.

This novel is full of fast-paced action and the tension increases as Alex makes friends and enemies, finds the beautiful blue-eyed girl and is propelled from one dangerous situation to another. The chapters are short and draw the reader on, the sense of place and time and the links between past and present are brilliantly conveyed, facts are skilfully blended into the story and Alex’s narrative voice is witty and self-aware. Readers are not spared the grisly, brutal realities of life in Roman London with its squalor, disease and violence; young readers will learn a great deal, maybe even some Latin, whilst enjoying a satisfying, humorous adventure story. They may be inspired to visit the actual site of the Mithraeum and find out more about the girl with ivory knife.

Caroline Lawrence says that ‘our imaginations are the best portals to the past’ and she has certainly used her imagination to good effect to bring the world of Roman London vividly to life for present day readers.

The Time Travel Diaries

Caroline Lawrence, Piccadilly Press, 240pp, 9781472953780, £5.99, pbk

Caroline Lawrence, author of the best-selling Roman Mysteries series, has combined her detailed knowledge of the Roman period with a considerable storytelling ability to create a gripping new historical adventure. This novel tells the story of 12-year-old Alexander Papas who is recruited by the wildly eccentric billionaire Solomon Daisy to travel back in time to Roman London via a portal accidentally created by the wealthy man’s ‘tech guys’. Alex’s task is to find the blue-eyed girl with the ivory knife whose skeleton has been excavated in modern London and with whom Solomon Daisy is obsessed. Alex’s knowledge of Latin and Greek make him suited to the role of time traveller and, having been promised a great deal of money, he finds himself hurtling through a portal located in London’s Mithraeum, travelling back 1800 years into the past. Alex has been told the three rules of time travel, ‘Naked you go and naked you must return’, ‘Drink, don’t eat’ and ‘As little interaction as possible’, but these prove hard to follow in Roman Londinium which is confusing, dirty, smelly, unsanitary, unhealthy and much, much more dangerous than Alex ever expected.

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Pay Attention, Carter Jones

By Gary D. Schmidt, Andersen Press, 224pp, 978-1783448050, £6.99 pbk

There's humour and pathos in this skillfully structured story, and who could resist a book that uses cricket to convey its message of fair play, responsibility, and resilience.

Carter Jones and his family - mother and three younger sisters - are in something of a state when, with Mary Poppins-like good timing and just the slightest sense of, if not magic, then something outside of the ordinary, the Butler arrives in their lives. Mr Bowles-Fitzpatrick was 'gentleman's gentleman' to Carter's grandfather and the old man has left an endowment in his will to support continuing service to the family. The Butler knows him pretty much throughout, brings the kind of order that is so satisfying in fiction, introducing Carter's sisters to ballet and E Nesbit, ensuring their vomiting dashind at school is regularly walked, and teaching Carter both how to drive his car (a purple Bentley) and, even more thrillingly, how to play cricket.

The Butler, as we know him pretty well in the tradition of the Jack London school of tough realism mixed with a compassionate understanding of the animal world. Some notes on wolves and their place in society...
The Unexpected Find

Tony Ibbotson, Scholastic, 387pp, 978 1407 18624 5, 6.99 phb

Judy is living a lie. At school she must pretend that her father is still inhabiting the houseboat they share, when in reality he left for Stockholm over three months ago in search of his friend Rashid who he feared was in danger. William, too, has been abandoned by his feckless mother who finds a trip to Spain with her latest boyfriend more palatable than life with a son who has special needs. When William tries to hide from the school bullies an intriguing key he has found under the roots of an ancient tree, Judy comes to his defence. And when the bullies seek vicious retaliation the following day she flees, finding unexpected sanctuary in the very unusual Andrew Balderson.

From this strange meeting springs a journey to Sweden in Mr Balderson’s ancient van, with William as an initially undiscovered stowaway. When they crash and almost die in the harshest of Swedish winter nights they are found by Stefan and cared for by him and his grandmother and the significance of their journey, the key and, indeed, Mr Balderson himself, is gradually revealed.

This is an accomplished and enthralling book which operates ambitiously on many levels and delivers many surprises. Ibbotson takes the reader with him in exploring the nature of attachments, a tolerance of the unusual, a vivid evocation of wild landscapes and the distinctive rhythms of very different lives. The weave of Norse mythology through the fabric of the novel both enlightens and entertains.

The House of Light

Julia Green, OUP, 226pp, 9780192771568, 4.99 phb

Bonnie lives in a dystopian world where everyone’s life is ruled by an authoritarian regime. Even living in a wild and wind-swept coastal village she and her Granda cannot escape the attentions of the Border Police and one day she hopes to follow her mother, who had left home to find freedom when Bonnie was a small child. Life changes dramatically when Bonnie finds an upturned boat, and later a young boy called Ish; could this mean that she has the opportunity to escape from her grim life? Her attempt to cross the sea puts Bonnie, her Granda and Ish in great danger, but the desire for freedom keeps them going.

Julia Green has given us yet another thought provoking and at times heart wrenching story that bridges the gap between middle grade and younger teens. The story itself flows easily but the themes that are explored require the reader to think about many issues that actually affect us in this day and age. The author has created a world that is bleak and hard, with little or none of the comforts that we are used to; Bonnie has grown up with this but longs to escape to a better life and possibly find her mother as well. The friendship between this young girl and her crusty old grandfather is beautifully shown, together with the less tangible desire for her mother; both elements emphasizing the strong bonds of family despite differences.

The arrival of Ish and then the journey that they all undertake also highlights the difficulties and dangers faced by those who have to flee their homes, whatever the reason. When reading this story you have a real sense of the difference between the world that most of us know and the world that the characters inhabit. The story really resonates with the reader and I think that many young people will find that it relates to the way they think about the way we live. It is a beautiful story.

Mera Tidebreaker

Danielle Paige, Illus Stephen Byrne, DC Ink, 9781401283931, £12.99, pbk

Mera Tidebreaker is a graphic novel which explains the origins of two long-established, but perhaps lesser-known, superheroes of the DC comic universe, Mera and Aquaman.

Princess Mera, of the Xebel penal colony, creates an opportunity to seize control of her own destiny by undertaking a mission to assassinate Arthur Curry, the heir to the kingdom of Atlantis. However, on their first meeting, Arthur ends up rescuing Mera from the ocean and ultimately saving her life. As she recovers from her injuries, Mera realises that she and Arthur have a lot in common, and that two characters growing up began to fall in love. With the underwater armies of Xebel and Atlantis relentlessly battling to impose their superiority over the other, Mera and Arthur find that their situation starts to spiral out of control. The story concludes with the characters being forced to make difficult decisions about their futures, having to choose between their duty to their respective kingdoms and their love for each other.

Though readers never really learn the full reasons behind the complex political situation that exists between the two communities, enough details are provided to help us feel familiar with the world created. Dialogue between the main characters is entertainingly written, with both characters having a stubborn and slightly awkward side to their personality. The captivating plot moves forward rapidly and contains a balanced combination of action and romance, although the ending feels slightly rushed. The book is delightfully illustrated, with the story being told monochromatically. Page after page is coloured completely blue and green, with the sole exception being Arthur’s orange hair. Using this one colour this way is a brave move but, in this case, it pays off completely as the shades used give a constant sense of the predominantly underwater setting.

With the enormous pressure that she’s under from her society, Mera makes many mistakes throughout the story. However, she remains resolute and determined, creating a perfect role model for young readers. The use of a couple of low-level swear words mean that the book needs to be used with some caution in Year 6, but I highly recommend it for graphic novel fans across Key Stage Three.

Voyages in the Underworld of Orpheus Black

Marcus and Julian Sedgwick, ill. Alexis Deacon, Walker, 322pp, 978–1-4063-5792-9, 12.99, hbk

You may remember David Almond’s recent brilliant re-working of the Orpheus/Eurydice myth in A Song for Ella Grey. Now the Sedgwick brothers, aided by Alexis Deacon, take that same descent into the underworld: this time to explore the cruelty and misery of modern warfare. This tale of two brothers, one a conscientious objector and firefighter, the other a soldier, takes place in London in the winter of 1944-5, as the V2 rockets wreak terror and devastation. This is no ordinary tale of the Home Front in the Second World War. Both men are unknowingly caught in the same bomb blast and, separated, linger at the hallucinatory edges of death. Harry escapes from hospital to wander the nightmare streets hunting for Ellis. With him is another hospital escapee, Agatha, a Jewish refugee hoping to be reunited with her parents. They descend further underground, just as Londoners did to flee the bombing, but what they find in the depths is not a temporary sanctuary, but a dark night of the soul. This is an ambitious book: in its conception and authorship, and in its scope. About two brothers, one a poet, the other an illustrator, it is written by Marcus and Julian in alternating prose and poetry. And Alexis Deacon takes on the persona of Harry the illustrator, contributing drawings from Harry’s own notebook intended for his anti-war opus Warriors of the Machine. The three creators take us back convincingly to a particular time and place, they find the portents of a worse time to come, and they take us beyond then and now to seek a more profound understanding of ourselves. They seek to say something about what is best and worst in us. I am reminded of two of my favourite films: Powell and Pressburger’s A Matter of Life and Death (1946) and Del Toro’s Pan’s Labyrinth (2006), both of which, in their different ways, mix fantasy and reality to similar telling effect.

Joe Quinn’s Poltergeist

David Almond, ill. Dave McKean, 84pp, 978 1 4063 6319 7, £10.99, hbk

This is the third collaboration between David and Dave, but the first that could be properly called a graphic novel, a form that Dave has made his own. Any fan of David, and I am one, will recognise the visionary themes he returns to here: the light and darkness in which we all live; in which miracles and hauntings can still be found; and in which desolation and exaltation are never far away. And this story is preceded by a preface in which he acknowledges the story very much as his own, rooted in his past, the Tyneside world he grew up in, and the loss and longing that he recognises in his youthful reading and that have shaped his writing. The haunting this time is a poltergeist, a spirit that has long been associated with the turbulent emotions of adolescence. It is the very opposite of a ghost story, with the7
plates and slices of bread, breaking chairs and screaming, Idly fascinated at first, Davie’s friend Geordie dismisses it. “It’s just Joe bliddy Quinn being Joe bliddy Quinn.” But for Davie, aching and silently raging at the loss of his younger sister, it becomes a compulsion, causing him to seek out the new young priest in the parish, who is himself in the grip of a loss of faith, and leading him back to Joe Quinn’s house, where, beside the potting-stool and Joe, there are chip butties and Joe’s seductive young mam, dancing to underground music from California. It is a wonderful brief tale, in which so much is contained and in which the heights and depths of experience are conveyed by a characteristic delicate balance of reticence and eloquence: the quiet sadness of Davie’s conversation with his mam about his sister; and the roaring, anything is possible, excitement of a wild kick-about: “In dashing through the field and playing with the ball we change ourselves. We change the world. Yeah?” And then there is Dave McKean. This is, once more, a tour de force of illustration, in which the page comes alive. Faces change before our eyes: Davie is sometimes the boy he has been, sometimes the youth he is, and sometimes the young man he will be. The priest’s hair and forehead seem to grow higher and swiftness. Tiger’s father and half-sister are suddenly discovered and the writing is highly charged and deeply felt it is also occasionally frustratingly cyclical.

This extended examination of loss causes a feeling of imbalance in the book as the second part moves on-initially, at least-unnervingswiftly. Tiger’s father and half-sister are suddenly discovered and she is placed in the care of the latter-an alcoholic with a controlling and abusive boyfriend. Tiger is able to return to school but, after an assault on another student, must attend their Grief Counselling group, where they discover the so-called ‘Scalp’, which took place in 1955. It was a savage witch-hunt aimed at any ‘sexual deviant’. This was a campaign fully as dark and cruel as Senator Joe McCarthy’s persecution of the socialist American minority. A whole book could have been made from this largely neglected episode. Perhaps it will be.

How To Make Friends With The Dark

Kathleen Glasgow, Rock The Boat (Candle, Publications Group, 2016, pb, 978 1 78607 564 2, £8.99, pbk)

Tiger and her mother live alone and the loving intensity of the relationship-particularly her mother’s overprotectiveness-sometimes chafes. When her mother dies suddenly and unexpectedly of a brain aneurysm, however, Tiger’s loss and guilt are all-consuming. This novel is a paean to grief, exploring the emotional and practical repercussions of tragedy in an affecting and believable way.

Since Tiger is legally a minor, she is put into the care of the state and the uneven quality of that care is made abundantly clear. Her best friend’s family are legally prevented from caring for her and so she is placed among strangers—other young people with cruel or shattered lives. The first scene of the book deals with a parade of foster homes, with all the accompanying uncertainties and their often institutionalised environments. Tiger’s grief resonates throughout and although the writing is highly charged and deeply felt it is also occasionally frustratingly cyclical.

There is no question that this is a courageous and powerfully written book which will move readers to tears. Glasgow deals with a range of bleak topics, so this is not for the faint-hearted, but it may well provide insights for those who have travelled down the same paths.

Pulp

Robin Talley, HQ, 978-184857126, 406pp, £7.99 pbk

This book has two parallel protagonists. Abbey Zimet is a high school senior (in her last year) in Washington DC in 2017. Janet Jones (destined to become Janet Smith) occupies the same position in 1955. Both young women are lesbian. Naturally they face different resentments related to their sexual orientation, acceptance in 2017, persecution in 1955.

Both Abbey and Janet are writers. For the school project Abbey writes a story featuring lesbian characters. She is prompted to tell this story by reading Janet’s one and only novel, entitled Women of the Twilight Realm. The book was of course written and published with the signature of a notable plume, Marian Love. Abbey is in a difficult family situation. Her parents are on the point of separating, though this remains unstated. She is also in a tricky relationship with Linh, who was formerly Abbey’s girlfriend. Driven by these difficulties, Abbey becomes obsessed with a quest. She must discover the true identity of Marian Love. The novel now poses two questions. Can Abbey accomplish her quest? And if she does, what will she discover?

Talley has set herself a challenging task, to focus on two very different times, to depict each of them and its moods convincingly and to unite the two into a single narrative. She meets this challenge in a very effective way; by means of her characters. Talley also captures an important truth about the act of literary composition. Writers absorb themselves in the details of the world they create, and use that world as a locus in which they can resolve or at least evade the complexities of real-world life.

Talley’s book holds a great appeal for any young person who feels different from the norm, sexually, psychologically or in any other way. This review is too short to do justice to Talley’s excellent novel, not so much a misgiving as an unfulfilled expectation. She writes of the so-called ‘Scalp’, which took place in 1955. It was a savage witch-hunt aimed at any ‘sexual deviant’. This was a campaign fully as dark and cruel as Senator Joe McCarthy’s persecution of the socialist American minority. A whole book could have been made from this largely neglected episode. Perhaps it will be.

My Secret Lies With You

Faye Bird, Usborne, 256pp, 978 1 474 95824 0, £7.99 pb

Things are pretty miserable for seventeen year old Cait, the principal narrator of Faye Bird’s novel. The death of her Dad, eighteen months ago, is still knife-sharp. He’d been the kind of Dad who could do anything right. Then he was gone – knocked off his bike by a car. Most of the time, she hates her Mum’s new boyfriend, Johnny; she isn’t looking forward to a couple of weeks with the two of them in the holiday cottage. Cait’s quite shy, but Marko, the boy staying next door with his Dad, turns out to be welcoming. He even seems to be a good listener, which Cait likes though at the same time it makes her nervous about the impression she’s making. Marko introduces her to his long-time local friends, Ifan and Hannah. They’re okay, though Ifan seems preoccupied while Hannah
somewhat implies she isn't entirely pleased that Cait’s shown up. It’s clear that something happened the previous summer; involving Marko, Hannah and Ifan. Whatever it was, it had to do with a girl called Alys whose face, Hannah is certain, is on a Missing Poster which has recently appeared all over town. The others aren’t so sure it’s Alys on the poster, especially as the missing girl is called Ceri. Cait feels very much the outsider in the group. During these early chapters, although nothing much happens by way of events and there’s a fair amount of inconsequential chat, readers are getting to know Cait’s character; she’s perceptive, vulnerable, self-critical – yet wanting to reach out to others if she can.

Then Bird switches time and pace as Hannah takes up the story. Her chapter is titled ‘Last Summer’, when Alys had burst into the lives of Marko, Hannah and Ifan, persuading them to join her on a day’s expedition into Snowdonia. At a lake in the mountains, she challenges them to take risks which could easily be life-threatening. The boys can’t resist her dare; reluctantly – and painfully – Hannah follows. That day triggers revelations about themselves and their feelings towards each other which disturb all their lives. From now on, the narrative shifts between past and present and between Cait, Marko, Hannah and Ifan. Now we learn why Ifan initially seemed so preoccupied. He was in order to give children to Nazi couples unable to have their own children. Inge, the only child of a German army officer and his wife lives a happy existence in Munich in 1956. There are still reminders of the war around them, in the form of damaged buildings, and there is a portrait of Hitler in her father’s study. Inge has a secret boyfriend, Wif, who is a Jew, and therefore cannot be introduced to her parents. A Polish woman comes one day to the house and sets in train a series of events that will shake Inge to the core, and shatter her family’s life. The woman is her mother who has come from Poland to find her after she was taken, aged four, to be part of the Lebensborn programme.

This is a heart-rending story and one wonders whether this is based on Vanessa Curtis’ own family history as the book is dedicated in part to the memory of her great-grandfather who was born in the Polish village from which Inge was taken. The reader follows the series of discoveries about her past and that of her parents with growing horror until the final horrifying climax of the story. Inge’s growing realisation that all she had taken from granted was based on lies and that things had been hidden from her, is beautifully unravelled, step by painful step, the saving grace of her new friendship with her boyfriend. Wif, and her father’s final sacrifice. There were a couple of things that perhaps stretched the credibility a little; would a Jewish father and son really have settled back in Munich after the death of Wif’s mother in the concentration camp at Dachau; not too far away? The terrible confrontation at the end somehow seemed a little too far, if horrifying, but these are small criticisms of what is a very good novel, showing a light touch on a perhaps not well known part of the Nazi story. This reviewer could not put this down and I am sure that particularly girls aged 14+ will find the same compulsion to sit and finish it in one sitting, travelling with Inge on her terrible journey of discovery.

The Colour of Shadows

Phyllida Shrimpton, Hot Key Books, 349pp, 9781474195038, £7.99 pbk

It was seven days of revelations, realisations and unexpected events that spun me round, shook me up and spewed me out. seventeen years. When Philip tells us, in the narrative of this maestros of emotions and incidents with Tom, her friend of many years. Saffron has much to learn and Shrimpton has much to teach through what at times becomes a modern morality tale. The author’s ‘Acknowledgements’ pages include a long list of research into how many of us know little about, though they are readily visible on our streets. Saffron’s home is affluent middle-class. Dad’s a chartered surveyor and she and her younger brothers have enjoyed every material comfort. However, ten or so years ago, Mum ‘walked to the shop to get some milk, and had never come back’. Dad told them Mum wasn’t well, that the police had found her, she was too ill to be visited; and, eventually, that she’d died. Step-mother Melanie arrived and a baby had soon followed. Saffron resents both of them. Now, Saffron has stumbled upon the brief-case in the attic; its contents show that Dad’s been lying all along. Somewhere, Mum’s alive and well. Saffron packs a bag and goes on a day’s expedition to the mountains, she challenges them to take risks which could easily be life-threatening. The boys can’t resist her dare; reluctantly – and painfully – Hannah follows. That day triggers revelations about themselves and their feelings towards each other which disturb all their lives. From now on, the narrative shifts between past and present and between Cait, Marko, Hannah and Ifan. Now we learn why Ifan initially seemed so preoccupied. He was in order to give children to Nazi couples unable to have their own children. Inge, the only child of a German army officer and his wife lives a happy existence in Munich in 1956. There are still reminders of the war around them, in the form of damaged buildings, and there is a portrait of Hitler in her father’s study. Inge has a secret boyfriend, Wif, who is a Jew, and therefore cannot be introduced to her parents. A Polish woman comes one day to the house and sets in train a series of events that will shake Inge to the core, and shatter her family’s life. The woman is her mother who has come from Poland to find her after she was taken, aged four, to be part of the Lebensborn programme.

This is a heart-rending story and one wonders whether this is based on Vanessa Curtis’ own family history as the book is dedicated in part to the memory of her great-grandfather who was born in the Polish village from which Inge was taken. The reader follows the series of discoveries about her past and that of her parents with growing horror until the final horrifying climax of the story. Inge’s growing realisation that all she had taken from granted was based on lies and that things had been hidden from her, is beautifully unravelled, step by painful step, the saving grace of her new friendship with her boyfriend. Wif, and her father’s final sacrifice. There were a couple of things that perhaps stretched the credibility a little; would a Jewish father and son really have settled back in Munich after the death of Wif’s mother in the concentration camp at Dachau; not too far away? The terrible confrontation at the end somehow seemed a little too far, if horrifying, but these are small criticisms of what is a very good novel, showing a light touch on a perhaps not well known part of the Nazi story. This reviewer could not put this down and I am sure that particularly girls aged 14+ will find the same compulsion to sit and finish it in one sitting, travelling with Inge on her terrible journey of discovery.

The Hand, the Eye and the Heart

Zoe Marriott, Walker, 448pp, 9781406385456, £7.99 pbk

This story is set in an Imperial China at a time of insurrection and war. Zhilan has been brought up as a girl, the daughter of a famous warrior and has been taught the martial arts that their father was renowned for; they also have a secret talent for illusionary magic. When the Emperor calls for men to join the army Zhilan decides to take the place of their father and dressing as a young man enrols as a foot soldier. Now known as Zhi they have their life altered dramatically as they save the life of their general, who happens to be the Emperor’s nephew. Zhilan is an example of discovery and understanding. The character is well developed and the plot is gripping with a sprinkling of interesting philosophical musings. The story is set in an Imperial China at a time of insurrection and war. Zhilan has been brought up as a girl, the daughter of a famous warrior and has been taught the martial arts that their father was renowned for; they also have a secret talent for illusionary magic. When the Emperor calls for men to join the army Zhilan decides to take the place of their father and dressing as a young man enrols as a foot soldier. Now known as Zhi they have their life altered dramatically as they save the life of their general, who happens to be the Emperor’s nephew. Zhilan is an example of discovery and understanding. The character is well developed and the plot is gripping with a sprinkling of interesting philosophical musings.
High on a hill
in the New England Berkshires Eustace Bright, a young student from Williams College, is exasperating to a giggle/gaggle of children on the surrounding topography: Monument Mountain, the Taconic range, and way over to the west the Catskills. There, he says, was where an idle fellow called Rip Van Winkle ‘had fallen asleep and slept twenty years at a stretch’, but Eustace forbears to tell of his adventure for ‘that had been told once already [as indeed in Bfk, last time round] and better than it ever could be told again’.

For Eustace Bright is cousin
and honorary storyteller to these children and a regular vacation visitor to their home at Lenox, presided over by his uncle, Mr Pringle, a retired classicist. By way of disguising the identities of the audience, whom our interlocutor suggests may actually exist, they are furnished with such fanciful names as Periwinkle, Squash-Blossom, Sweet Fern etc although that is a dangerous ploy in a story as that of his adventure for ‘that had been told once already [as indeed in Bfk, last time round] and better than it ever could be told again’.

Collected together,
the stories and the comings and goings of the child chorus at the Pringle’s house at Tanglewood are relayed to us as A Wonder-Book for Boys and Girls by Eustace’s choice of editor, a neighbour in the Red House down the road, Mr Nathaniel Hawthorne. (The liveliest of the child auditors, ‘saucy Primrose’ may well be based on his seven-year-old daughter.) The book was published in 1851, with a frontispage and six full-page wood engravings by Hammat Billings and within a year had come out (the illustrator unacknowledged) in London. If you don’t count Rip, which initially came out in a collection of essays, it may be accounted the first classic children’s book to come from the United States.

Hawthorne, via Eustace Bright,
was quite clear in his intentions to lay before children six stories taken from Greek mythology as a local entertainment. As with folktales the narratives have no definitive form or text (and indeed, coming as some of them do from a pre-Homeric antiquity, they may have multiple variants). Seemingly told off the cuff with ‘sophomorical erudition’ much refashioning is undertaken, carrying the stories, as may be seen below, a long way from their likely origins. (A hint in the text suggests that young Bright used as his source a classical dictionary edited by one Charles Anton):-

The Gorgon’s Head
which excerptts the central episode from the myth of Perseus and thus omits the prophecy that generates the story and barely touches on his rescue of Andromeda. Hermes/Mercury who comes into later stories too is the only named god to appear but has been anglicised as Quicksilver.

The Golden Touch:
Eustace here prides himself on giving King Midas a daughter, Marygold, to sharpen up the moral force of the legend.

The Paradise of Children,
which is the tangled myth of Pandora, is also subject to large scale re-invention with an Edenic world, populated only by the young and innocent, corrupted by the opening of the Box. (Some interpreters have it that Pandora’s feminine curiosity, like that of Eve, was responsible for releasing calamity upon the world, but Eustace respects the source (also followed by Charles Kingsley in his treatment of the legend in The Water-Babies) that the decision was a joint affair between Pandora and her friend/husband Epimetheus.)

The Three Golden Apples
follows the tale of the eleventh labour of Hercules where he gets Atlas to undertake the mission on his behalf.

The Miraculous Pitcher
also stays fairly close to the less well-known story of Baucis and Philemon (one of the odder introductions by Goethe in the rambling events of the second part of Faus). Quicksilver is much in evidence although his travelling companion – Zeus/Jupiter – is never named and, for a child audience, the wine that they produce by the jugful is changed to milk.

Our joint authors
are much concerned to justify their tweaking of the sources and (so much for Kathleen Lines’ ‘dated...additions’) they supply in their frame for the story of the Golden Apples an argument between Eustace and Mr Pringle as to the former’s unseemly Gothicisation of classic elegance which Eustace stoutly defends on the grounds that ‘an old Greek had no more exclusive right to [the stories] than a modern Yankee has’. One can see Mr Pringle’s point that ‘the idiom of modern fancy and feeling’ does injury to the imaginative tenor of myth and he was to receive unexpected support for his view when Charles Kingsley on the other side of the Atlantic was moved by his dislike of the Yankee debasements, which he found ‘distressingly vulgar’, and, in 1855, created for his own children the classic versions in The Heroes.

After the publication
of A Wonder-Book Hawthorne moved to the rural surroundings of Concord where, he has it, he was paid a friendly visit by Eustace, now a senior at his college. It seems that he had continued storytelling among his cousins and was now entrusting a further six of his versions, including ‘The Minotaur’ and ‘The Argonauts’, to his friend who might act again as editor. There is some by-play in the Introduction in which the student assures Hawthorne that he has been astonished by the readiness with which these old legends ‘brimming over with every thing that is abhorrent to our Christianised moral sense’ render themselves presentable to children, and thus it is that in 1853 a second Wonder-Book was published as Tanglewood Tales.

A Wonder-Book for Boys and Girls
is published by Everyman Library, 978-1857159301 , £12.50 hbk