

# BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.238

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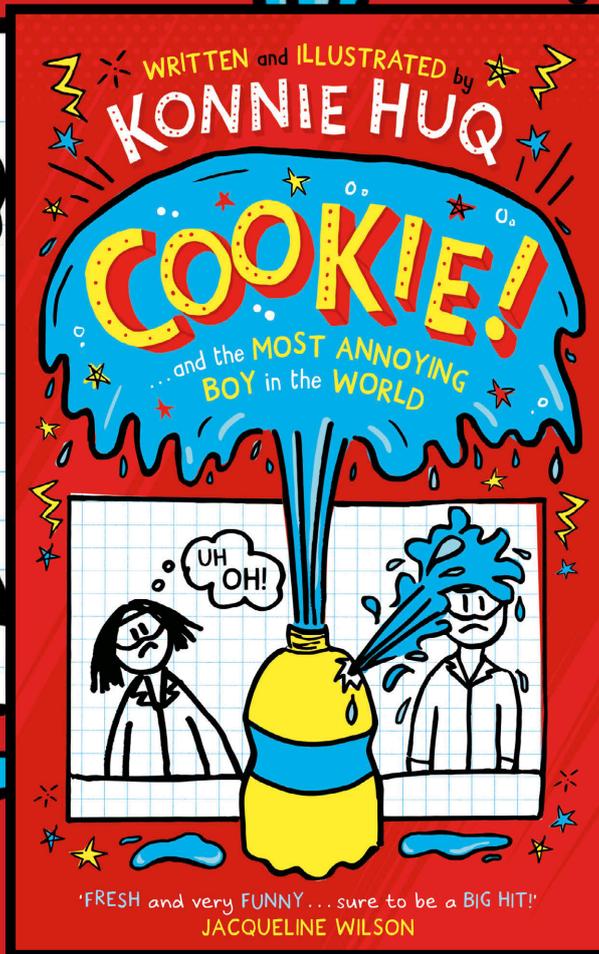
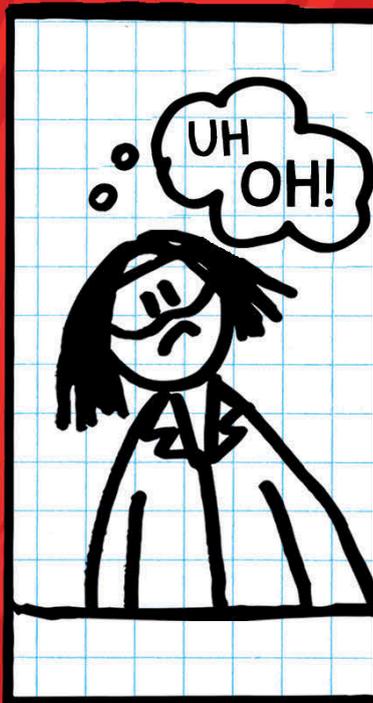
Sep 2019

the children's book magazine online

Authorgraph  
**Robert Muchamore**

**Grahame Baker-Smith**  
Windows into Illustration

Plus **Sally Nicholls, Kate Clanchy**  
and **Fierce Bad Rabbits**



'FRESH and very FUNNY... sure to be a BIG HIT!'  
JACQUELINE WILSON

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### COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **Cookie and the Most Annoying Boy in the World** written and illustrated by **Konnie Huq**. Thanks to **Piccadilly Press** for their help with this September cover.



# Guest Editorial 238

## Children need and deserve to see themselves reflected in the pages of books says BookTrust Director, Jill Coleman



Earlier this year the **BookTrust** team, alongside five of the UK's most talented children's writers and illustrators visited school children in Leeds. Nine schools to be exact, where our team of authors read to, talked to and inspired over 400 primary school pupils.

The visits were part of **BookTrust Represents**, our project to support authors and illustrators of colour, to get them in front of children to encourage young minds to read, to write and to one day see both as potential careers and to improve the diversity of voices in children's books. It sounds like a lot but, with the support of the industry, the excitement of authors and illustrators and the dedication of our partner organisations who are keen to get on board, shout about the project and launch other initiatives to help raise the profile, we feel confident it is achievable.

In order to make effective change, we needed to start with an accurate picture of the creators of children's books in the UK. Our recent research in association with University College London found that in 2017 fewer than 6% of authors and/or illustrators of children's books published in the UK were people of colour and only 2% were British people of colour. This is at a time when 32% of school aged children are from a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic group.

We want to change this figure to make sure that the books published reflect the current diverse society we live in. **BookTrust's** aim is to double the number of published authors and illustrators from less than 6% in 2017 to over 10% by 2022. As part of the longer-term project we're also putting authors and illustrators directly in front of school children, so they can see that there are people in the industry who look like them, so they can be inspired and have positive role models. Children need and deserve to see themselves in books, and to have access to a rich and diverse range of voices. If they do, it can be life changing.

On a sunny day in June we took Onjali Q Rauf to Shakespeare primary school in Leeds to read her award-winning **The Boy at the Back of the Class**. Jacqui Fox, a Year 6 teacher explained to me how engaged the children had been when reading the text. Many of the children could relate to Ahmet's struggles in the story and felt a connection with Onjali. She was like them. She looked like them and spoke like them.

'I've never felt like this about a book before' said Veena Nazim, a year 6 pupil at Shakespeare Primary School who was waiting in line to have Onjali sign her book. Ordinarily quiet, shy and reserved, earlier

that morning Veena handed Jacqui a picture she had drawn for Onjali. A perfectly sketched Pomegranate (you have to read the book to understand). Veena and Onjali chatted whilst Onjali signed her book, talking about whether the gift of a lemon sherbet (integral to the plot) was Halal. The joy on this child's face knowing that she and Onjali were both Muslims is difficult to describe. Onjali inspired the Muslim girls, but she also inspired the rest of the class and the teachers too.

On discussing Onjali's visit, Jacqui said: 'Books affect us, but a real person can affect us deeply, I will never forget the profound effect Onjali had on us all that day.' Seeing firsthand what a difference a book like Onjali's can make to these children affirms why we launched the project in the first place. This reaction is exactly why these author visits are so incredibly important and why we all need to be doing more. Much more. In November, hot on the heels of our Leeds visits, **BookTrust Represents** is in Birmingham with a whole host of new author events in secondary schools. We're also hosting a series of **FREE** training events in Bradford and London in September (with London already sold out). The sessions are for aspiring creators of colour and led by industry experts, from the award-winning Patrice Lawrence talking about the ins and outs of the publishing industry to the incredible Joy Francis from Words of Colour discussing how creatives can build confidence. Best of all, they're completely free! **To register for the Bradford event click [here](#).**

For more information on BookTrust Represents visit [booktrust.org.uk/represents](http://booktrust.org.uk/represents)

**BookTrust** is dedicated to getting children reading because we know that children who read are happier, healthier, more empathetic and more creative. Their early language development is supported and they also do better at school.

We work with a variety of partners to get children excited about books, rhymes and stories, because if reading is fun, children will want to do it. Our books are delivered via health, library, schools and early years practitioners, and are supported with guidance, advice and resources to encourage the reading habit.

[booktrust.org.uk](http://booktrust.org.uk)

**Jill Coleman** is Director of Children's Books at **BookTrust**.

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# The Unsung Art of Reading Aloud

In her book **Fierce Bad Rabbits**, Clare Pollard celebrates the geniuses behind picture books, as well as the adults who read them aloud.

As a poet, I've always loved the way in which, long ago, ordinary people would sit around a fire in the evening, singing ballads; passing them on. Rather than being passive participants in that culture, they were actively creative. As the scholar Matthew Hodgart has said: 'No two versions of a ballad are ever exactly alike; and every singer is both a transmitter of tradition and an original composer.' When I became a mother, I realised that reading picture books to small children is a similarly creative process. The adult reading often has to become a performer, poet, singer, editor and hypnotist. It requires fluency, comic timing, funny voices, exposition, the orchestration of audience participation. No two readings of **Room on the Broom** are the same. Yet, like many artforms relating to women, children, care and the domestic sphere, reading to children is undervalued. In my recent book **Fierce Bad Rabbits: The Tales Behind Children's Picture Books** I focused particularly on those books read to us as we sit on someone's knee. And I wanted not only to celebrate the great, unsung geniuses behind picture books, but also the parent who pours so much love into that early-evening time of milk and stories; the nursery teacher whose inventiveness inspires us to fall in love with books.

A reading given to children is a private thing, often done for an audience of one or two and then lost forever. Once I began my research, I found myself intrigued by how other adults read classic stories. What did they do when they came to a song, for instance, like those sung by the little badger Frances in Russell and Lillian Hoban's **Bread and Jam for Frances**?

*Jam for snacks and jam for meals,  
I know how a jam jar feels –  
FULL . . . OF . . . JAM!*

Did they simply read it aloud? Did they make up a tune, or use a well-known one and try and make it fit? I have always put words to the same kind of repetitive, lilting, semi-flat tune I must have made up off the top of my head long ago for just this purpose, without really putting enough commitment into it, with the results being fairly disappointing.

And what about voices? Many parents use bedtime stories as the chance to roll out all their very crudest accents: shrill mothers, stern fathers, gruff Welsh farmers, Noo-Yawkers. I'm fairly proud of my word-perfect **Green Eggs and Ham**, but shudder to think of anyone listening in when a story requires more than three voices (my **I'm Not Scared** features a Brummie badger, and for some reason my butterfly in **Monkey Puzzle** is voiced by Caroline Ahern's Mrs Merton). Perhaps the greatest challenge is Lynley Dodd's **Caterwaul Caper**, which requires the grownup reading to maintain six very loud and utterly distinct barks.

If sound effects can create a conundrum, silence can too. Do we only read the words on the page? Do we supplement them? What about in a book like Pat Hutchins' **Rosie's Walk**, where the drama lies completely in the contrast between the calm text – 'Rosie the Hen went for a walk' – and image of the fox in pursuit? I'm always very intrigued by how other parents handle the wild rumpus in Maurice Sendak's **Where the Wild Things Are**. There are three whole wordless spreads, which boldly allow the child to supply their own rumpus, although as an adult reader I always find the silence uncomfortable, chicken out, and choose to fill it with whoopings that fall dolefully flat. One adult told me they put down the book and the whole family dances a wild rumpus around the bedroom; another that she would point things out and ask children questions about what they think is happening.

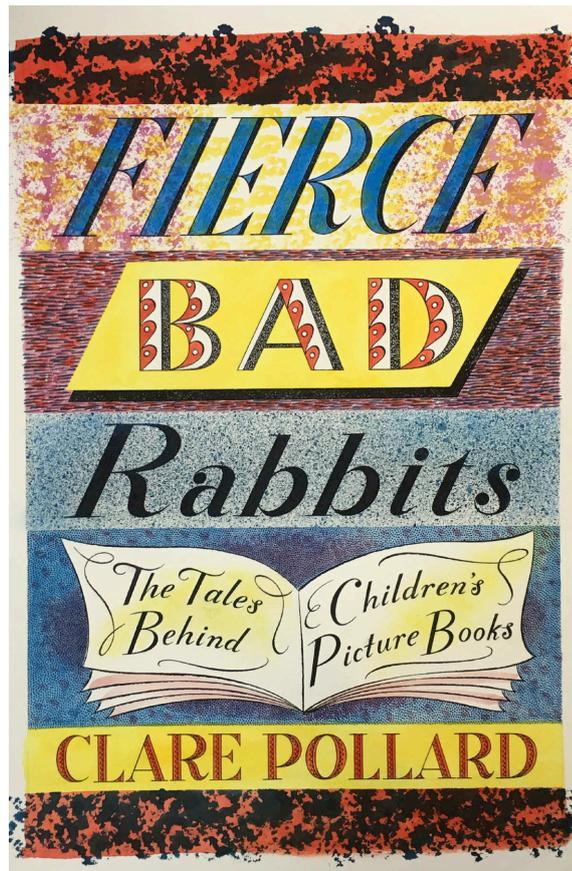
Some writers and illustrators seem to have a care for the adult reader, turning them instantly into good storytellers. Julia Donaldson's poetic

metre trips off the tongue; Dr Seuss' comic timing is built into the poems; Roger Hargreaves always wrote **Mr Men** stories that would take less than five minutes to read, calling them 'bedtime stories for weary daddies', and often ends with a question, a tickle or a good joke, easing children pleasantly back into reality. The difference between a two-year-old and a five-year-old listener is immense though, and even the best stories have to be adapted by parents to match their children's age. **Winnie-the-Pooh** always seems text-heavy for a nursery book, requiring a spot of brisk, spontaneous cutting, whilst when my children were small I would always trim a few refrains from our board book of Rosen and Oxenberry's **We're Going on a Bear Hunt**, as their little fingers were too eager to turn pages over. I'm not the only parent to have begun Babar a few spreads in. And then there are changes made to update the politics. Too many books (even **The Gruffalo!**) only have male characters, and swapping up the odd 'he' for a 'she' is one way of improving the situation.

But these skills are nothing compared to the art of not crying. The greatest unsung performer of all is, of course, that heroic parent who can read Shirley Hughes' **Dogger** without their voice cracking as they read:

'Then Bella did something *very* kind.'

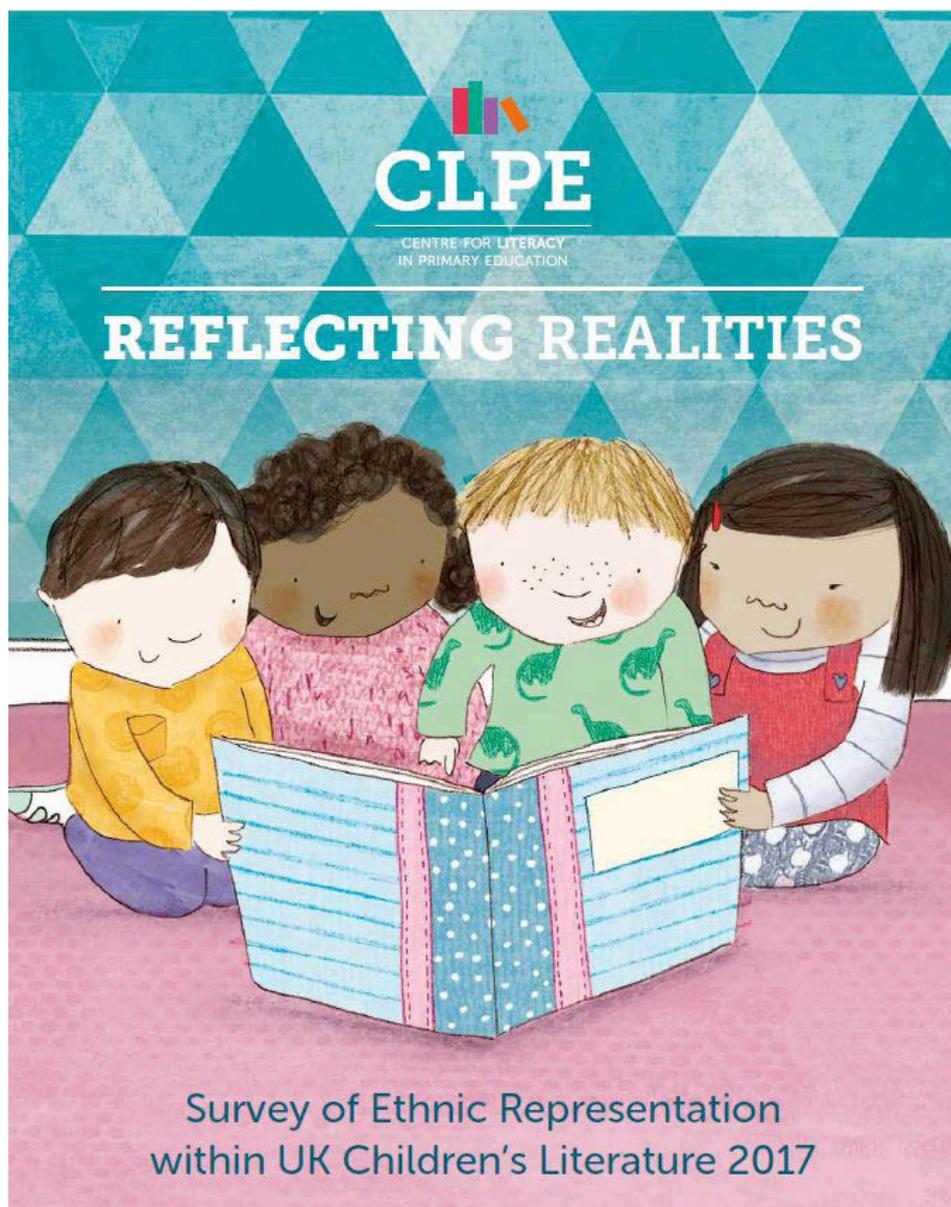
**Fierce Bad Rabbits: The Tales Behind Children's Picture Books** is published by Fig Tree, 978-0241354780, £14.99 hbk.



Clare Pollard is an award-winning poet and playwright based in London. She is the author of five poetry collections and the Editor of the **Modern Poetry in Translation** magazine.

# Reflecting Realities – one year on

**Louise Johns-Shepherd**, Chief Executive, CLPE



On September 19th **CLPE** will publish the second survey of representation in children's literature. Funded by **Arts Council England**, and with the support of 46 publishing houses, the survey will report the number of books for children from 3-11 published in 2018 that featured characters from an identified ethnic minority category.

Before the publication of the first **CLPE** report in July 2018 the term 'Reflecting Realities' was not widely used. In the last twelve months it has become a commonly-used phrase to explain the importance of ensuring the world of books is accurately portraying the real life experiences of readers. The first survey generated a great deal of interest and activity and before we share the outcomes of the second survey we have been reflecting on this last year and all that has happened.

At **CLPE** we work face to face with around three thousand primary school teachers each year – and thousands more use our online resources. The purpose of our charity is to help schools to teach literacy in the best possible way and to support them to put children's literature at the very heart of learning. Our team is made up of teachers and librarians and

we are always looking at the latest research into reading and writing and, of course, we read thousands and thousands of children's books each year. We are passionate about the vital and transformative power of books and we know that one of the most important things we can do is to give children a love of reading – and to do that we need to find books that really speak to children. We need to source books for our work with schools that have characters and contexts that resonate with the children, books that help shape them as readers and broaden their world view.

We embarked on the **Reflecting Realities** work because we knew that we often had to look to specialist booksellers and order titles from abroad to secure a breadth and range of inclusive titles for our work. There has been a long-standing debate about the degree of ethnic representation in the content of UK children's publishing output and tireless advocacy from grassroots organisations, independent publishers, booksellers, writers and academics. However, unlike the US, we have never had the extent of the issue quantified. A lack of statistical data in this area meant that often we were relying on our gut to determine the size of the imbalance. We were keen that the **Reflecting Realities** initiative would provide a benchmark to help inform all stakeholders about where we actually are and provide guidance to help us move forward.

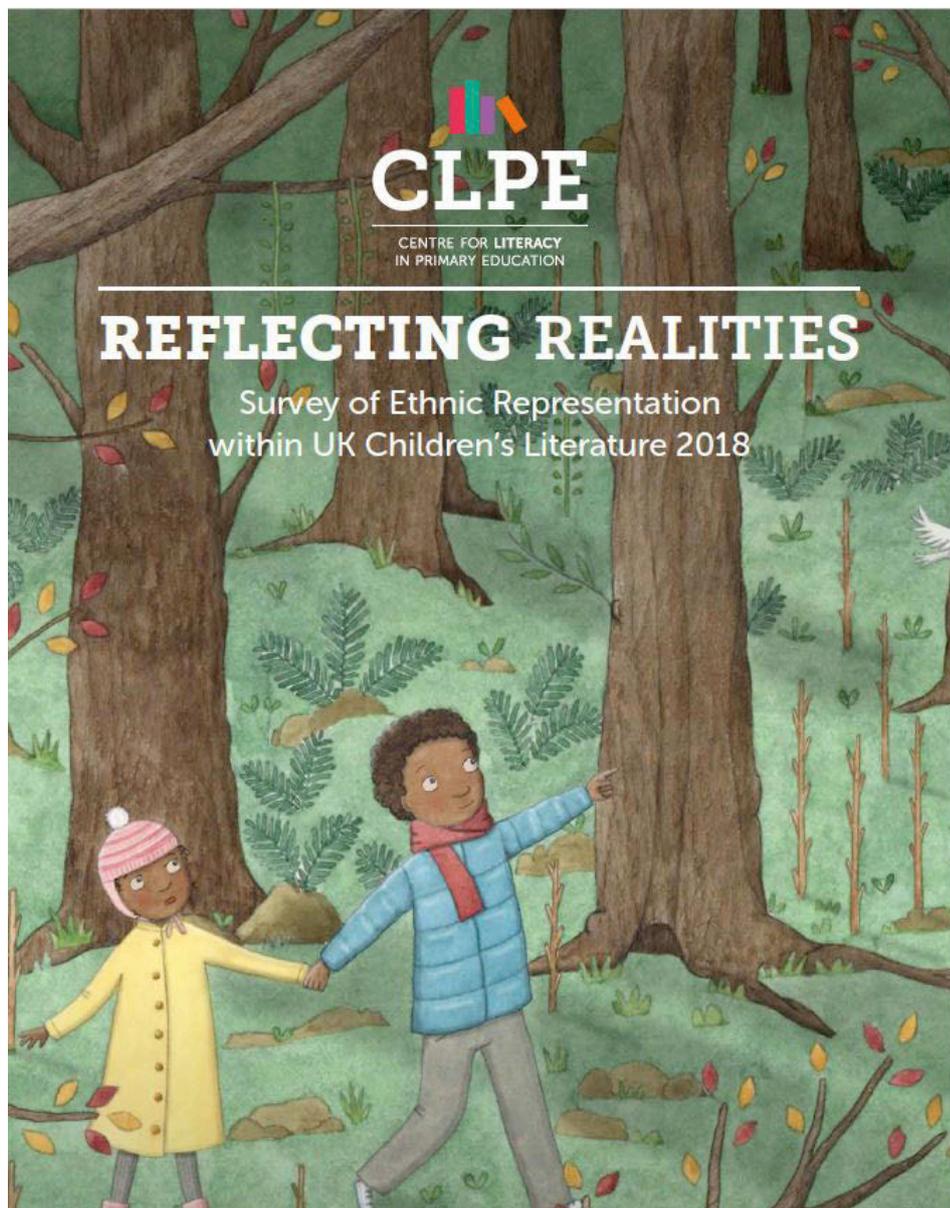
As a team that is working with children's literature every day we have a good sense of what the publishing market offers. The original statistics were not particularly surprising to us but what we didn't expect or anticipate was the overwhelming interest from outside the world of children's literature or indeed the outpouring of support for the rationale that underpins this work and the chord that the findings struck with people within and beyond the industry.

It has become clear that there is an appetite for hard data because this helps us have a clear idea of what needs to be done and provides a benchmark against which to measure our efforts. The publication of the survey inspired long-standing advocates in the field as well as emerging champions. **Letterbox Library** has developed a **Reflecting Realities** book pack and new publisher **Knights Of** set up an inclusive permanent book shop in Brixton, both

direct responses to the survey findings. We have had countless people and organisations reach out to us to share the amazing work they are doing to redress the imbalance. Alongside our work, colleagues at **BookTrust**, **CILIP**, **Pop Up** and many more have developed initiatives that will help to redress the balance, promoting opportunities for authors, illustrators and creators of children's literature that will move us all forward as an industry. Publishers and promoters of children's literature were already working to improve and develop things in this area and we have been heartened to see the enormous range of projects supporting efforts to increase representation. Things will only improve through collective efforts and the survey has galvanised many to move forward together.

This year, and in years to come, we hope to contribute to an ongoing conversation that supports the producers of literature to be critically reflective and considered about the choices that are made in the book making process. The core purpose of **CLPE's** work is not solely to redress the imbalance and encourage an increase in the volume of books featuring BAME characters, we also want to encourage quality portrayals and presence. Quantity alone will not suffice, particularly if the quality is poor or, worse still, problematic. The value of reflecting realities, individuals, identities, cultures and communities is rooted in the importance of elevating all lived experiences and recognising them as worthy of note and exploration. To understand and be understood is at the heart of the human experience. The call for more inclusive books is as much about quality as it is about volume. Better representation means just that, better in all regards, because all young readers deserve the best that the literary world has to offer.

So as we move towards the publication of the latest survey we are feeling hopeful. The first year of this work set a benchmark. The American equivalent produced by the **Co-operative Children's Book Center** at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has been established for over 35 years and during that time there has been a steady positive trajectory. Whilst the imbalance hasn't been totally redressed and there is still much work to be done, this model of an annual cycle means that the importance of representation in children's literature is kept in the public



consciousness rather than being reduced to a conversational trend that arises once every few years. This we hope will, over time, amount to meaningful and long-standing change.

We are heartened by the overwhelming commitment and support of this work across all stakeholders and we look forward to a continued investment in making the highest quality inclusive and representative literature for the benefit of all young readers.

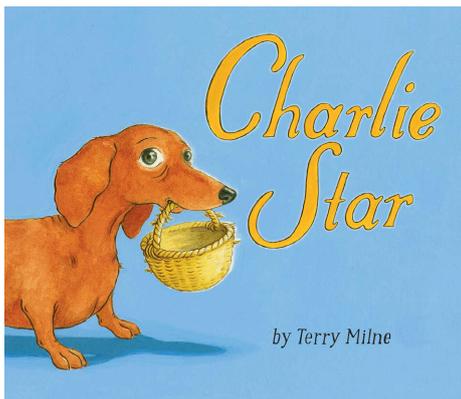
The latest report will be published on the 19th September 2019 and available from [www.clpe.org.uk](http://www.clpe.org.uk)



**Louise Johns-Shepherd** is CEO, **Centre for Literacy in Primary Education**.

# Ten of the Best Books for Coping with Anxiety

All of this talk of anxiety is making us anxious! How about you? **Beth Cox** and **Natalie Costa** have put together a list of books that adults can read with children, or in some cases children can read on their own, to help everyone involved manage their emotions. As the co-authors of the **Level Headers** series, activity books about confidence and self-esteem, they argue it's important to start talking about feelings and emotions at a young age. Being open about feelings and learning useful techniques from experts are the best ways to cope with anxiety.

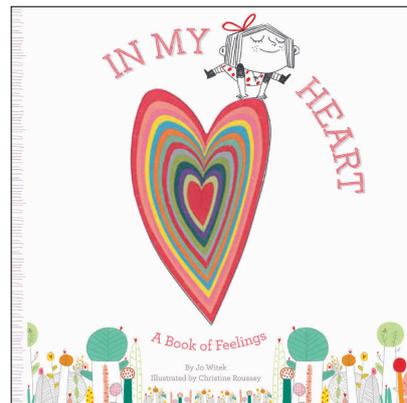


## Charlie Star

Terry Milne,  
Old Barn Books,  
978-1-910646-38-0,  
£10.99 hbk

Charlie is a dog who likes structure and worries that something bad might happen if he doesn't stick to his routine. But one day he misses out certain things as he goes to rescue his

friend. And everything turns out okay. What is great about this story is that Charlie still continues with his usual routine after this, but occasionally tries something different. It's useful to learn that things don't always have to be exactly the same and you can try something new or different without having to change who you are completely.

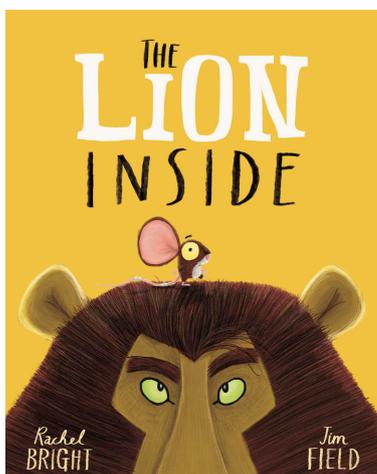


## In My Heart: A Book of Feelings

written by Jo Witek,  
illustrated by Christine  
Roussey, Abrams Books,  
978-1-419713-10-1,  
£11.99 hbk

A delightful book that explores all of the feelings that are in our hearts. There is a focus on how feelings feel in our body, which helps children connect with their emotions. The

little girl in the story sometimes feels sad or angry but the feelings don't last. This approach is great for opening up conversations about feelings and how to manage them.

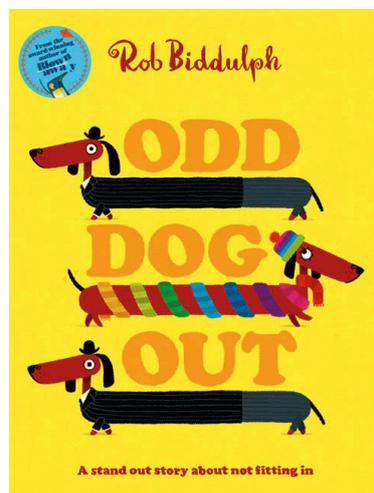


## The Lion Inside

written by Rachel Bright,  
illustrated by Jim Field,  
Orchard Books,  
978-1-408331-60-6,  
£6.99 pbk

This is a beautifully illustrated story about a shy mouse who finally finds the courage to speak up. The mouse discovers that appearances can be deceiving - not only is the big lion not that brave after all, the lion is in fact scared of mice! The message is a really empowering way to build confidence and

encourage empathy: you can do things that other people think you can't, and other people can do things you think they can't.



## Odd Dog Out

Rob Biddulph,  
HarperCollins Children's  
Books, 978-1-000759-15-3,  
£6.99 pbk

A wonderful story about being yourself. Odd Dog Out feels like she doesn't fit in, so she goes somewhere where everyone is like her. Then she spots another dog standing out from the crowd! This dog teaches her the importance of being yourself. When she returns home, Odd Dog Out discovers just how much her friends and neighbours have

missed her. They love and value her for who she is. A fantastic book for teaching children the importance of being true to who you are.

# 10

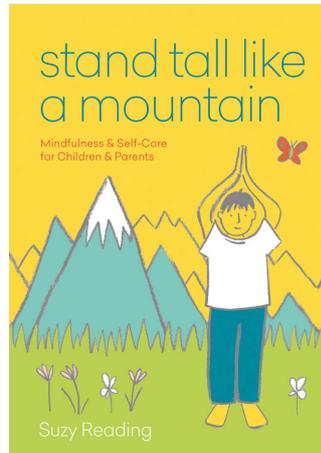


## HappySelf Journal

HappySelf Ltd. £19.90

A cleverly designed, practical daily journal for children aged 6 to 12, based on proven methods that promote happiness, develop healthy habits for life and nurture enquiring minds. With just a few minutes' focus each day,

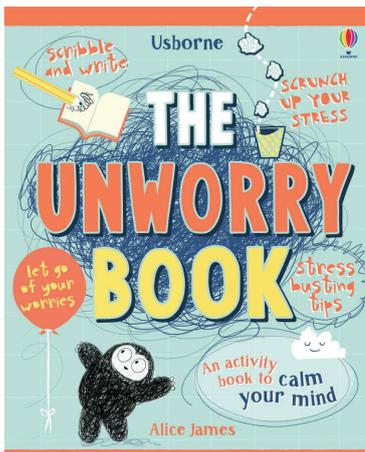
children really benefit from this encouragement to express gratitude, reflect on their emotions and think about their actions.



## Stand Tall Like a Mountain

Suzy Reading, Aster, 978-1-912023-95-0, £12.99 pbk

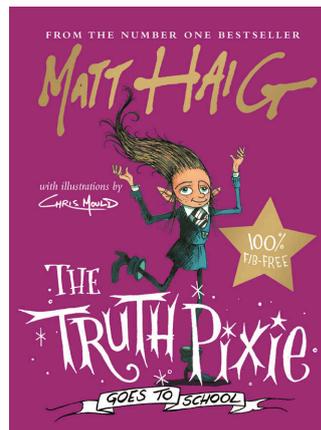
Unique on this list as it's a journey the parent/adult and child can take together as a family/team. Interspersed with activities and yoga poses, the focus includes micro moments of self-care that only take a few minutes. An excellent approach that supports parents/adults as they help children reduce their anxiety.



## The Unworry Book

written by Alice James, illustrated by Stephen Moncrieff, Usborne Publishing, 978-1-474950-77-0, £8.99 hbk

For children 9 years and up, this book allows children to acknowledge their concerns and teaches them ways to deal with their worries. There are scientific explanations that help more enquiring children understand exactly what makes them feel certain ways.

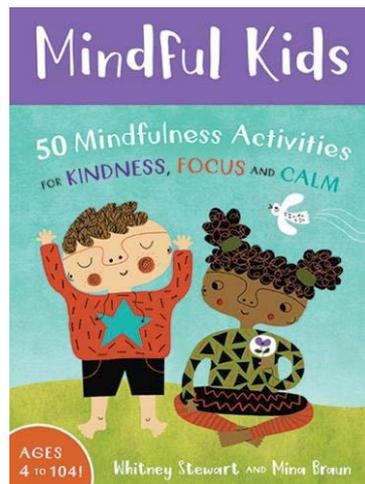


## The Truth Pixie

written by Matt Haig, illustrated by Chris Mould, Canongate Books, 978-1-786894-32-8, £9.99 hbk

What starts as a comical story about a pixie who can only tell the truth, even when it's often what people don't want to hear, turns into a powerful message about life. When the Truth Pixie meets a girl who is worried about things, she has to be honest and tell her that some of these bad things will happen... but then she also goes on to tell her the truth about how her life will be full of good things too. We particularly

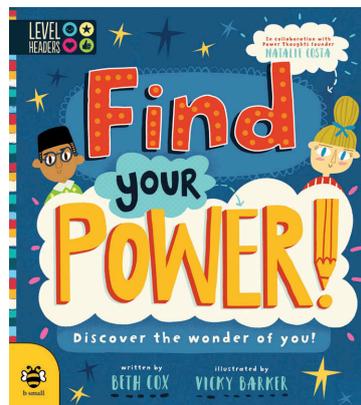
like the message that what you make of your life is your choice: 'you can live life as a mumble, or sing it clear'.



## Mindful Kids (cards)

written by Whitney Stewart, illustrated by Mina Braun, Barefoot Books, 978-1-782853-27-5, £10.99 box

A wonderfully inclusive selection of mindful activities to suit every mood and need. There are 10 cards in each of these five key areas: starting the day, calm, focus, kindness and relaxation. The activities, some quick and some long, can be easily adapted for all children.



## Find Your Power

written by Beth Cox in collaboration with Natalie Costa, illustrated by Vicky Barker, b small publishing, 978-1-911509-97-4. £7.99 pbk

Talking about feelings and worries in a positive framework with no shame or blame, this book is one of a series and it's full of real-life techniques used by confidence coach Natalie Costa designed to help children find their inner power. This one

is ours so we're biased but we think it's a great way to help children manage their emotions.



**Beth Cox** is an inclusion expert and children's book author/editor.



**Natalie Costa** is a qualified teacher and the founder of **PowerThoughts**, a teaching, coaching and mindfulness based service aimed at empowering children.

# Authorgraph

## No.238

**Robert Muchamore**

Interviewed by  
**Damian Kelleheri**

Best known for his fast-moving, high octane thrillers, there are some seriously strong themes in **Robert Muchamore's** new YA novel **Arctic Zoo**, as **Damian Kelleher** discovered when he interviewed him for our Authorgraph.

**R**obert Muchamore's latest YA novel has an unusual beginning. It takes the form of a direct letter from the author to his readers, and talks about an attempted suicide back in 2012 – his own.

'I wound up spending three months in a psychiatric hospital,' writes Muchamore. 'I met my characters Georgia and Julius there, or at least troubled teenagers who were very much like them...When I left hospital I wanted to write about my experience and the people I'd met, but it took me five years to figure out how to find a way.'

The result is his latest novel, **Arctic Zoo**. The split narrative follows the story of two teenagers, thousands of miles apart, who live very

different lives. Georgia lives in Leighton Buzzard, a straight A student with a love for Japanese stationery and a seriously talented drone pilot since she was seven. Julius goes to St Gilda's High School in Akure, Nigeria, and comes from a privileged family – his uncle is state governor but it's his high-flying, power-obsessed mother who's pulling all the strings. As his world becomes more hostile, Julius finds refuge in an abandoned zoo where he strikes up a friendship with Duke, a skater kid with a talent for breaking rules. The sexual attraction between them is instant. Eventually, through very different routes, both Julius and Georgia will form a close bond in the Walter J Freeman Adolescent Heath Unit in Sussex.

'It was quite an interesting book because after I wrote it, I wasn't sure if I'd overdone it,' explains Robert. 'I thought maybe it was about too much that it was too complicated. But the most interesting thing is what has happened since I wrote it. It's really weird.'

In Muchamore's story, through a series of serendipitous events – including the suicide of her sister, a junior doctor – Georgia becomes the pin-up girl for a direct-action protest group; comparisons with Greta Thunberg have already been made.

'A lot of the book is about the protest movement and the school protests and I was writing that two and a half years ago,' says Muchamore. 'I was doing all this research and when my editors were reading it, they said you need to explain it. They said there hadn't been any school protests since the Iraq war, that kids would think it was completely incredible, they won't believe this could be happening. I wasn't deliberately trying to predict things.'

But why a protest movement? Had he sensed that something was building among teenagers?

'I guess it comes from a sense of frustration. I definitely sensed that more and more young people I was talking to were frustrated so it had to come to something.'

In **Arctic Zoo** there are echoes of the mental health issues that Muchamore writes about in his opening letter. At the time of his illness in 2012, Robert was topping the bestsellers' list with his **Cherub** series, enjoying massive success and all the trappings that go with it. But suddenly he found himself in the grip of depression so all-consuming that he ended up suicidal. How did it all happen?

'I think that's one of the things at the heart of depression,' he explains, shaking his head. 'There's no rationality to it. The most horrible thing can happen to someone – their child dies, for instance – and they won't become depressed. And then another person will become depressed, a bit like I did, because two or three smallish things happen, and you don't really feel good about yourself and you get a bit anxious. There is a level at which you're not in control of your own emotions. It's not just that you're sad about something; you are sad, but your body is responding to it in a completely abnormal way.'

Robert's honesty and candour about his illness back then was brave and unprecedented. For many writers, working on their own, his

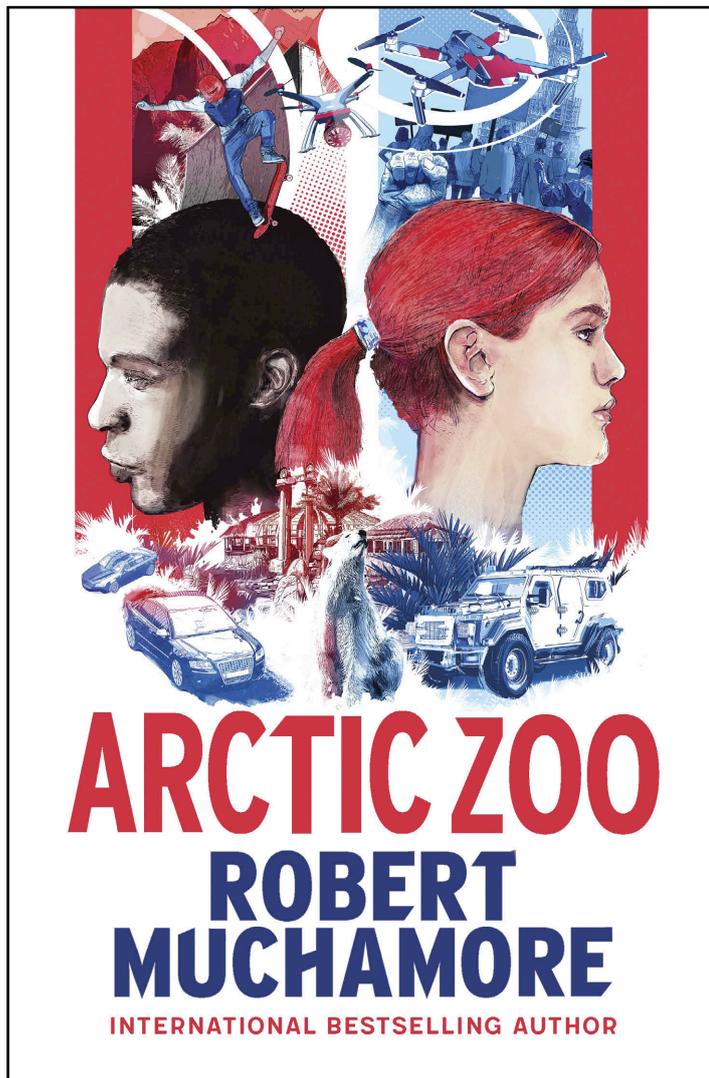




Photo by Ed Miller

openness about his mental health issues struck a chord. ‘People who were really close to me – I won’t name names – admitted “Oh I’ve suffered [with depression] for years.” The number of people who said, “Oh yeah, I’ve been taking that drug as well.” It was very often the drugs that was the trigger; people who are taking medication for depression often compare their pills and they’d tell me, “Oh yeah, I’ve taken that one”, and it became clear that it was quite serious and they’d been suffering for years. It was often relayed in this indirect way; people wouldn’t say “I’ve been depressed for a long time and I’ve been seeing my doctor regularly”, they’d just say “Oh I suffer from a bit of depression, too.”

Not everyone responded in the same way to his brutally honest Facebook post that read, ‘For the past year I’ve been suffering from depression...I have checked into a psychiatric hospital. I’ve posted this because I’m sick of lying about it.’ So, what kind of response did he get?

‘There are two ways people react,’ says Robert. ‘There were the sort of people who were quite helpful and then other people who didn’t really know how to cope with it and were quite standoffish. I don’t actually hold anything against those people because when I think about what my reaction would have been if I’d been at the other end, I’d probably have been the person who was a bit socially awkward and didn’t quite know what to say. It is not an easy conversation to have.’

For so many authors now, writing books and updating social media posts is all part of the same endeavour. To build a readership, you need to build an audience, but as many YA readers have discovered, Twitter users and Facebook friends can turn against you when provoked, and teenage readers can be hugely sensitive to the issues surrounding the books they read. Robert has always been a strident voice on social media; is he more careful about the messages he tweets nowadays.

‘I must admit that with the toxic YA thing that has been attracting so much attention recently, I think I am less off the cuff now, and that comes down to who I write for. I’m writing for youngish teenage boys and my books contain ‘rude’ words – the thing that I find quite difficult is I have never adopted the persona of ambassador for children’s books. Those roles are fine but when you’re writing for the audience I’m writing for, the last thing they want is for a grey-haired adult to tell them to sit and read books in the cosy library. I’ve always been a bit irreverent, a bit rude and a bit sarcastic, but the pressure on social media now means that a joke that I could have made 10 years ago that everyone would have laughed at, now people would say “Oh that’s outrageous”, “that’s insensitive”. There’s been a bizarre cultural shift – it’s so puritanical that some of it is almost Victorian. There’s a great literary novel waiting to be written by someone more intelligent than me on that!’

Rather like his historical series **Henderson’s Boys, Arctic Zoo** clearly involves a lot of in-depth research. Getting the detail and atmosphere right for the Nigerian scenes is always going to be a challenge. Was Robert tempted to spend some time in Akure to make sure he was painting an accurate picture?

‘The idea of me going to Africa and not speaking the local language, not having any personal connections – it makes it impossible,’ he insists. ‘The reason I picked Nigeria is that it’s a large English-speaking country so there are an enormous amount of cultural resources I could draw on. My starting point was ordering about 10 books about Nigeria and I picked Akure because I read a lot about it and then started wandering around on Google street view – I found some quite dodgy looking places that I wouldn’t have gone near as a tourist! And then there’s the language – I didn’t want to do it with an over-the-top hammy accent, but I did want to get a taste of how the locals speak. Funnily enough, there are two Nigerian news channels on Sky and they’re in English so you can see how people are interviewed in the street, you hear how they talk, and pick up how they dress. And of course, we had a cultural reader who picks up the nuances. Funnily enough, where I’d gone wrong was with stuff like combinations of food. The reader said: “No they wouldn’t eat that and that together!”. So yes, it was a challenge but one I really enjoyed.’

There’s no doubt there’s a growing awareness of mental health issues in the media right now, especially among a YA audience. It’s about time today’s teens had books that addressed the serious mental health issues such as anxiety and depression that they all face, right?

‘I think the important thing is not just to have books about it, but to have books where it doesn’t have to be the focus. So, we’d see children’s books featuring kids who just happen to have mental health issues and it’s not a big deal. Yes, they have a horrible time, but they deal with it and they lead normal lives. It’s just progress.’

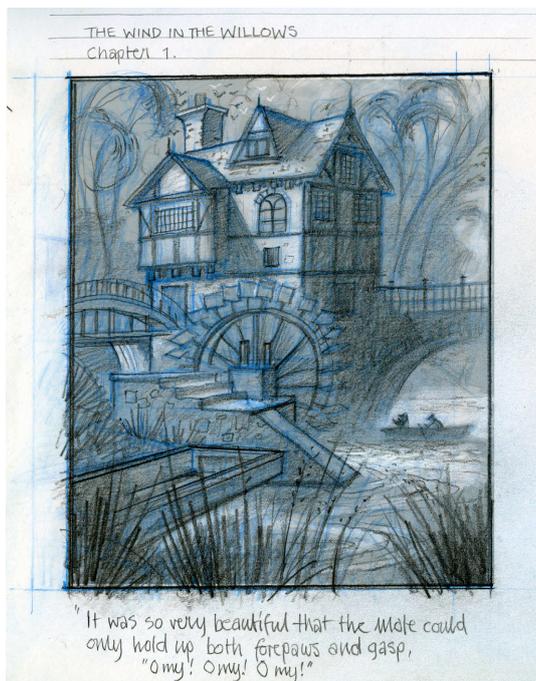
**Arctic Zoo** is published by Hot Key Books, 978-1471407642, £12.99 hbk



**Damian Kelleher** is a writer and journalist specialising in children’s books.

# Windows into illustration: Grahame Baker-Smith

In 2011, **Books for Keeps** highlighted rising stars in the world of picture book illustration. One of those was **Grahame Baker-Smith**, whose disturbing, edgily sophisticated illustrations impressed very much. Since then Grahame has won the **Kate Greenaway Medal** with **Farther** and developed his hauntingly evocative style. Now he has turned his attention to **Wind in the Willows** and here describes his approach and technique.



For me everything begins with drawing. It is how I make sense of everything - or at least try to. It underpins every illustration and is something I practice incessantly, in coffee shops, on the train, in the evening after work (actually, as an illustrator, there is no such thing as 'after work!') I used to do very loose, vague sketches but now they have become the place where I work out and try to, at least partly solve, some of the problems that every image will present. Composition and balance, light, shade, perspective, point of view, the focus of interest etc. It is a hugely enjoyable part of the process. I sometimes think it would be great to just make a book of nothing but drawings, to tell a story in that very basic and direct way.



Having worked out my drawing and scanned it into Photoshop, this is more or less the first 'lay in' of the colour. I keep it loose at this stage, pushing the colour around, looking for the main areas, the big shapes but not defining anything too much.

This stage is called 'seeing what happens' I try to let my hand move instinctively and not think too much or become precious about any mark. I also scan bits of abstract acrylic painted texture into the composition, placing them randomly and switching the layer modes on and off.



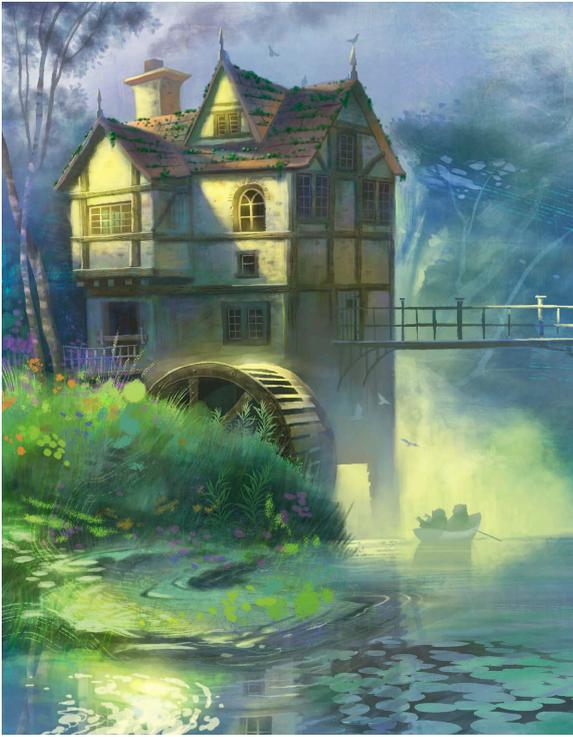
After a time, one has to begin to commit to some shapes. I'm also playing with the textures and edges, making some of them harder and letting others drop away. A lot of time is spent just looking and seeing how I feel about what is happening.



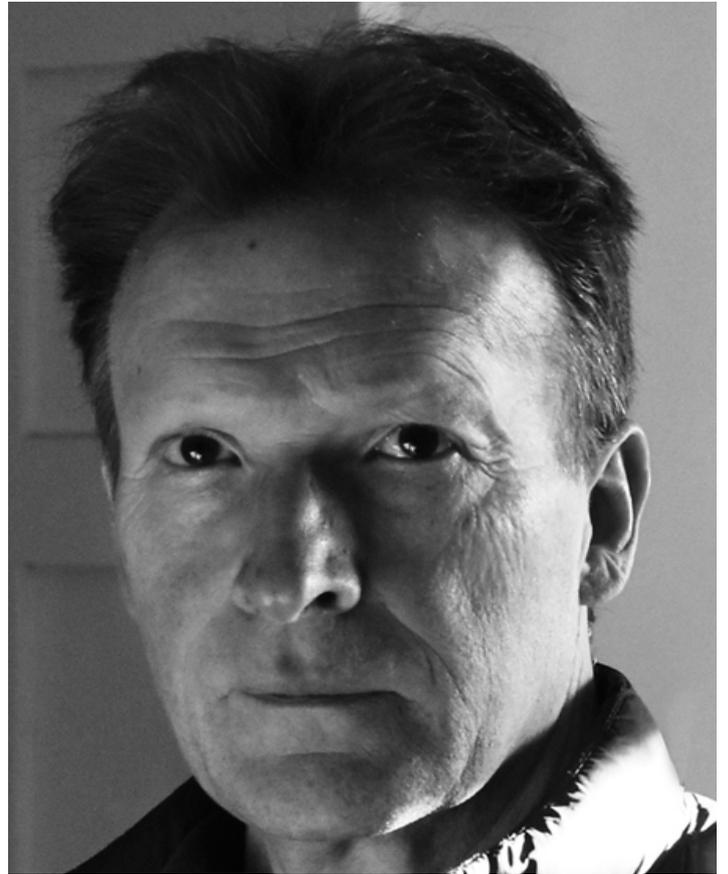
Things are definitely firming up a bit now but the decision-making process is endless! I got rid of the dark shape at the front of the comp. I liked it in the drawing but felt it was too oppressive for the nature of the scene which was ultimately supposed to be summery and light. Now I'm looking for a way to resolve that foreground space.



I'm still trying to get the foreground to work and, having deleted the idea that was in the sketch am basically on my own! There is a perverse joy in the frustration inherent in making pictures and there are times when you just have to keep going, keep working, pushing and pulling, painting-in, painting-out. The only guide is your experience and instinct and trusting in the process to get you there!



Which, thankfully, it eventually does. A picture always gets to the 'turning point'. The stage at which you know it is working and, as long as you keep your nerve and don't mess it up, the final stages are like rolling down a hill with a big smile on your face. It is just a joy to spend the day texturing, splashing bits of colour around, emphasising certain elements, knocking others back a bit and - most thrilling for me - playing with the light.



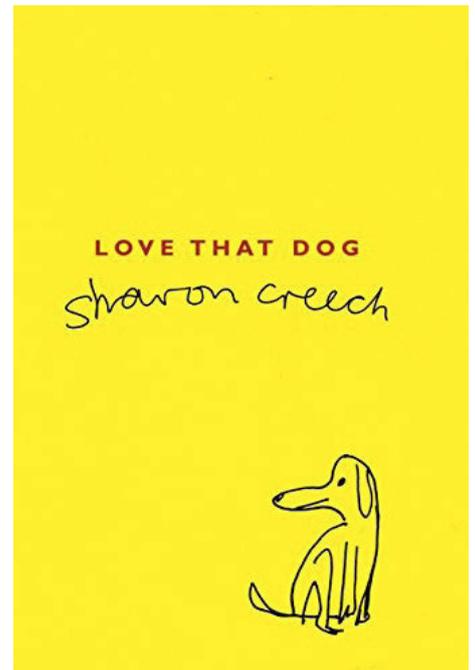
**Wind in the Willows** by Kenneth Grahame, illustrated by Grahame Baker-Smith is published by Templar, 978 1 783708505, £14.99 hbk

*Capture imaginations  
with this timeless classic,  
illustrated by award-winning  
Grahame Baker-Smith*

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books

# Taking lessons from Miss Stretchberry: poetry writing with children

Poet and teacher Kate Clanchy explains why, as the teacher in Sharon Creech's award-winning **Love that Dog** knows, the best way to teach poetry is by letting children create their own responses to grown-up poems.



Kate Clanchy with Mukahang Limbu and Sophie Dunsby, talented young poets from Oxford Spires Academy. Photo by Alicia Clarke

If you are thinking of starting a poetry group with young people you could start by reading **Love that Dog** by Sharon Creech. I'm a great admirer of Miss Stretchberry, its teacher heroine. Miss Stretchberry seems to be a lucky teacher: she only has our protagonist Jack's class once a week. She's also marvellously unbothered by exams or the National Curriculum (she lives in an unnamed place in America, as well as in a book, so I suppose that's why) and just teaches poetry-writing. She has money for special notebooks and a visit from poet Walter Dean Myers, and she has time each week to type up the classes' poems and pin them on the noticeboard, where, as Jack notices, they really look quite good.

But if we can't all have these advantages, we can still share Miss Stretchberry teaching practice and belief in poetry. Each week, she shows Jack's class of 12 year olds a poem – ambitious, grown-up poems by Robert Frost, for example or William Carlos Williams – and has them respond with a poem of their own. She teaches them to use the sounds of words and the white space on the page simply by experimenting. She helps them understand that a version or answer to someone else's poem is not the same as stealing it. She gives Jack a frame to express his feelings, especially about the recent Sad Thing that has happened to his dog, Skye, and steadily, in his own time and under his own control, Jack fills it.

**Poetry writing really is better caught than taught**

**Love that Dog** is a particularly great book for a child or class between the ages of 10 and 15, but the Miss Stretchberry method works for all sorts of groups. Poetry writing really is better caught than taught: if you read a strong poem to a group and let them make a version of it, they will write better poems. They will also very often, paradoxically, be more original and express themselves more personally, because being told to write 'just anything' can be intimidating, whereas being invited to express your feelings in the frame of a poem is more reassuring and so more liberating. For example, being told to write a poem about the end of Primary School in Year 6 will likely end in a pile of clichéd couplets. Being shown Kit Wright's Magic Box poem, on the other hand (so beloved of teachers that it is all over the internet, with pictures and examples attached) and then asked to fill your own Magic Box with specific, concrete memories, will create something to bring down the house at end of year assembly.

Sharon Creech is also spot on in the creation of her poetic narrator, Jack. The best young poets, like Jack, don't necessarily come from the ranks of the super clever, and they don't have to be girls, either. My most gifted poets, in fact – and I have been working in schools, trying to be Miss Stretchberry, for more than 30 years – have often been boys and very often had some sort of difficulty or delay in their education or upbringing. Lots are dyslexic, some have ASD, or are deaf, or have, like Jack, deaf parents, and many have come from

another country before they were ten and been suddenly immersed in English. All of these backgrounds, however difficult, seem to help create poets: perhaps because their experiences have to sit inside the children's heads a little longer than usual before they can be expressed in words, perhaps because they become just a little more emotionally mature.

These sorts of children, though, do often find it extra difficult to make their writing clear and their poems look good – which is why the Miss Stretchberry treatment of typing them up and presenting them back to the writers beautifully, whether pinned on the board, as she does, or on sheet of paper, or on a blog – is so powerful. Best of all is to print up a class or school anthology in a book, and it's surprisingly cheap and easy to do this in the age of the online printer. I've used a combination of Microsoft Publisher and Mixam Print to create many professional looking books from 75p and £2 a copy.

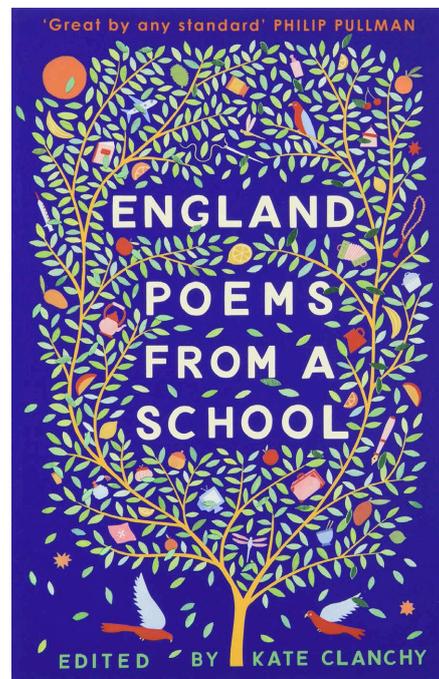
Miss Stretchberry is also right about her choice of poems: she shows the class sometimes challenging, emotional poems by mostly living poets. Direct, contemporary voices are the best way to get a response from young people and there are an amazing array of them available in anthologies and in video form on the internet. Try googling **Button Poetry**, **Chill Pill** or the **Poetry Foundation**, and sit back and enjoy. Browse in your local bookshop or library – you'll find that poetry is having a resurgence. It's important that you personally love any poem you share: the group will catch your enthusiasm, or your apathy, infallibly.

The climax of **Love that Dog** is the visit to Jack's school by Walter Dean Myers. Myers himself has sadly died since **Love that Dog** was published, but we have here in the UK a host of poets just as attractive to young people and with whole programmes of activities to bring to schools and libraries. Pie Corbett, Brian Moses, Joseph Coelho, Rachel Rooney and of course the great Michael Rosen all

regularly visit schools, while **The Poetry Society** and **CLPE** will give you lots of free and excellent advice. And don't forget to check out my anthology, **England Poems from a School** (Picador, £9.99) a whole book of poems by young migrants, most of them written in the school library using the Miss Stretchberry method.

**Love that Dog**, Sharon Creech, Bloomsbury, 978-0747557494, £5.99 pbk

**England, Poems from a School**, edited by Kate Clanchy, Picador, 978-1509886609, £9.99 pbk



**Kate Clanchy** is a poet and creative writing teacher, author of **Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me** and editor of the poetry collection **England, Poems from a School**. In 2018, she received an MBE for services to poetry.



## Share your pupils' poetry on NATIONAL POETRY DAY #MyNPDPoem

The **#MyNPDPoem poetry writing challenge** is now open, after being launched by Forward Arts Foundation in association with CLPE at the CLIPPA ceremony.

The challenge encourages schools everywhere to create poems, performances, displays and special books on a grand scale as part of the 25th anniversary of the UK's biggest celebration of poetry on **National Poetry Day, Thursday October 3rd**.

Once children have written a poem or poems on the theme of truth, schools or teachers can then share the best on National Poetry Day by tagging pictures on Instagram or Twitter with **#MyNPDPoem**. Schools can hold their own poetry show on National Poetry Day by inviting everyone to perform their poems aloud, and sharing extracts as appropriate with the **#MyNPDPoem** hashtag.

Go online at [www.nationalpoetryday.co.uk](http://www.nationalpoetryday.co.uk) to find free resources including a complete **#MyNPDPoem** kit including customisable **#MyNPDPoem** certificates plus video tips from poets Michael Rosen, Rachel Rooney, Joseph Coelho, Victoria Adukwei Bully and Karl Nova.

In poetry, truth.



# Beyond the Secret Garden: Animal Fables and Dehumanization in Children's Books?

September 2019 sees the release of the second **Reflecting Realities** report by the **CLPE (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education)**. Whilst the first report has had a clear impact on conversations in UK children's publishing, there were a number of challenges, of varying thoughtfulness, posed in response. One of those was that many children's picture books depict non-human animal characters and that this is a positive, inclusive way forward for children's literature.

This link between children and animals goes back a very long time in many cultures, with scholars even noting similarities between the Indian ancient classic **Panchatantra** and the ancient Greek **Aesop's Fables**. Animal characters were often used to "provide examples of good and bad behavior" (Talking Animals 73), as Tess Cosslett puts it, for child (and adult) readers in an indirect fashion. It is certainly a common trope, particularly in picture books. Excellent recent examples of fables drawing on Indian traditions include Chitra Sounder and Poonam Mistry's **You're Safe With Me** (2018), and Sufiya Ahmed's **Under the Great Plum Tree** (2019).

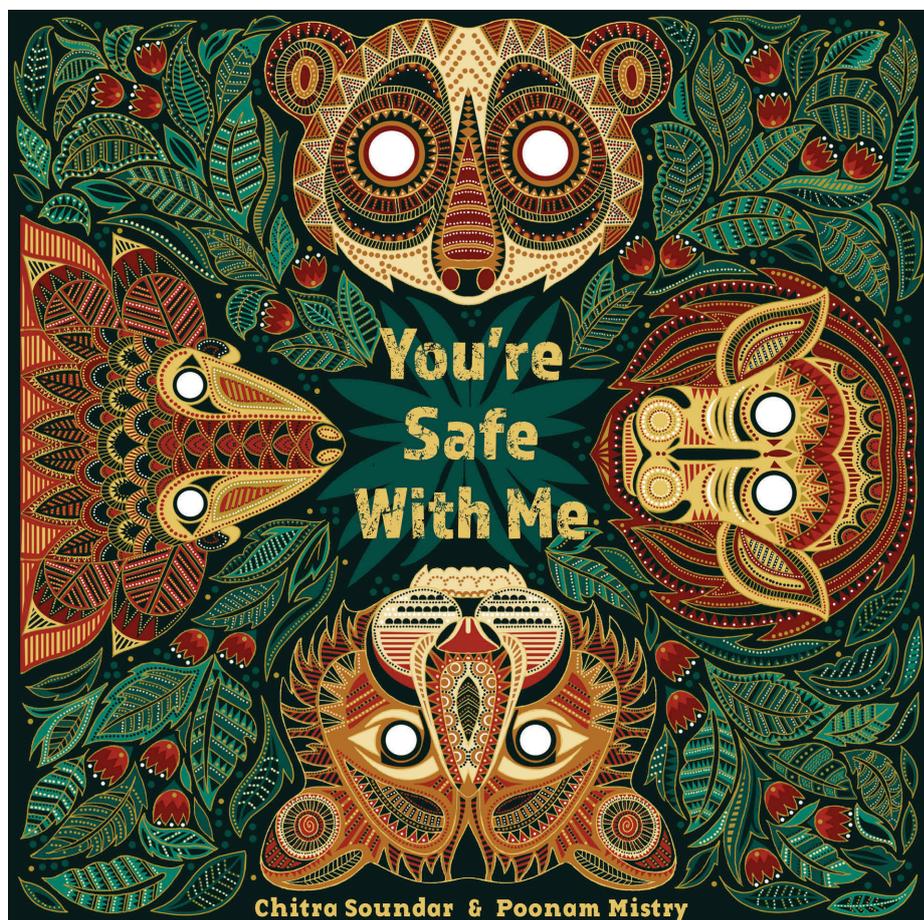
However, the use of animals in children's stories about racial and cultural diversity runs into major problems that do not always seem to have been given due consideration of historical context. "They are not people" – Mary Lennox's words about her Indian servants in **The Secret Garden** – goes some way toward capturing many British writers' attitudes to People of Colour in the Golden Age of children's literature. Beginning with **Robinson Crusoe** (Defoe, 1719), often regarded as the first novel in the English language, those racialised as other than white were deployed as dehumanized counter points to the humanity of white protagonists.

The dehumanisation of non-Europeans by white people has a long history. Many who engaged in it during the 18th century were regarded in Europe as the leading scientists, anthropologists and philosophers of their time - people whose work still impacts their disciplines. In the Age of Enlightenment we see a desire to classify the world along with a desire to justify colonialism and imperialism. An important factor in attempting to square the brutal inequality of slavery and colonialism with the claim that 'all men are created equal' was the deployment of narratives that non-whites were not fully human. This ranged from Thomas Jefferson's reference to 'merciless savage Indians' in the US Declaration of Independence to the development of racial pseudo-science such as Franz Iganx Pruner's claim that African people has similar brains to apes. Whilst the latter is an extreme example, the development of scientific racism and offshoots like phrenology were part of mainstream European scholarship, culminating in the development of eugenics in the early 20th century. After the horrors of the Holocaust, much of this scholarship disappeared from public view. But racist connotations have a way of outliving the 'scholarship' from which they emerged – witness for example, the number of

recent news stories about Black footballers in Europe subjected to racist abuse that includes monkey chants.

Amy Ratelle writes in **Animality and Children's Literature and Film** (2015) that comparing animals and people can "marginalize certain groups as animalistic, atavistic and subhuman" (33) but at the same time "the representation of animals as inherently subordinate to humans buttresses the cultural marginalization of people characterized by nonhegemonic identity traits" (33). While Victorian era publishing, such as the advertising campaign for Anna Sewell's **Black Beauty** (1877), made explicit comparisons between animals and enslaved African people (Sewell's novel was called "**The Uncle Tom's Cabin of the horse**" according to Peter Stonely), later comparisons were both less direct and less focused on engendering sympathy. Take Hugh Lofting's **The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle** (which won the 1922 **Newbery Medal**); in this book, Chee-Chee the monkey delights in escaping from Africa by dressing up in stolen human clothes after he sees an African girl who "looks just as much like a monkey as I look like a girl".

In the USA, librarian and literary activist Edith Campbell has compiled a collection of "books and articles about the racism and hatred expressed when people of African descent are equivocated with monkeys, apes or gorillas" along with "children's books with anthropomorphic monkeys and apes that do nothing to end this racism" (Campbell). In the UK, one of the most prolific creators of books of this kind is the former children's laureate, Anthony

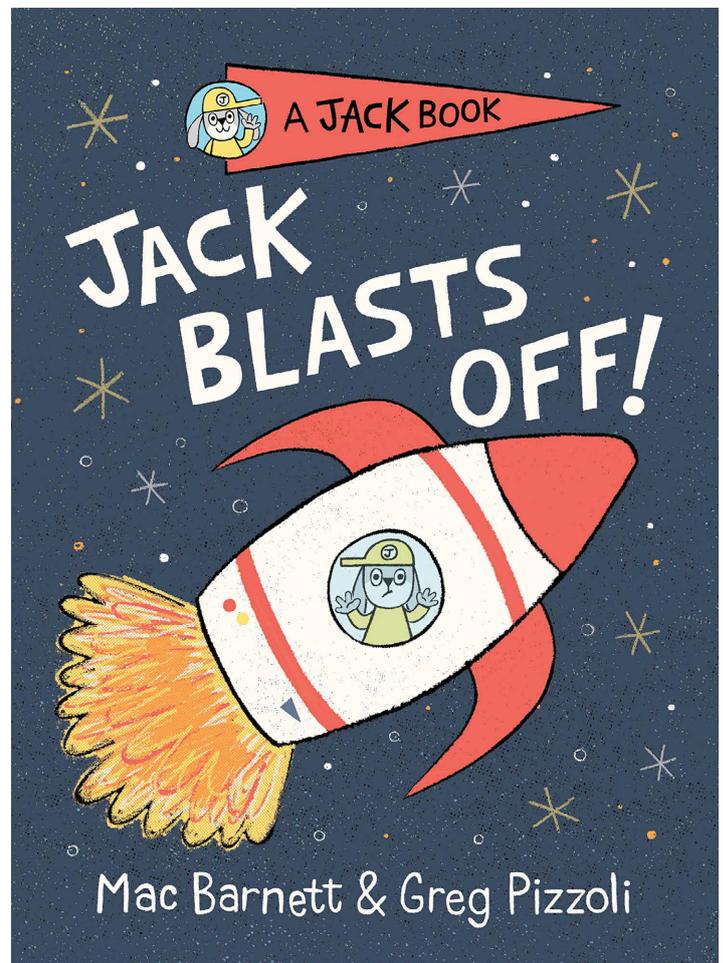


Browne. Writing about his choice to draw so many gorillas in his books, Browne remarks that they are ‘fascinating creatures’, ‘they look so much like people’ and ‘they remind me of my father’. Earlier in the same book, he includes a picture he drew at the age of 14. Entitled ‘That Old Black Magic’, it is of his father playing an ‘unpredictable, dangerous tribesman’, blacked up and in a grass skirt for a performance of **Robinson Crusoe**. Whilst we should be careful not to draw too much from this, it is interesting to note that Browne does not offer any reflections on the racist connotations of **Robinson Crusoe** or of blacking up. Also interesting is that in the discussion of his decision to make a picturebook of King Kong, Browne does not have anything to say about the long-standing racist connotations of anthropomorphic apes and the criticism the original film received.

Things may be improving. In the US, New York Times bestselling author Mac Barnett and Geisel Award-winning illustrator Greg Pizzoli, recently gave an interview with Roger Sutton in which they explained that they changed Jack in **Jack Blasts Off** from a monkey to a rabbit because “We didn’t want anyone to associate the hero of our books with an offensive trope”. Yet in the UK, in as recently as 2016, Hodder and Stoughton published an updated version of Enid Blyton’s **Noddy Goes to School** where the golliwog from the 1949 original – now seemingly acknowledged by the publisher as a racist trope – was replaced by a monkey.

A number of children’s picture books have attempted to use animal characters to address stereotyping and racism in ways that young child readers can understand. These books include Dr. Seuss’s **The Sneetches** (1953), David McKee’s **Tusk, Tusk** (1990) and Rosemary Wells’s **Yoko** (1989). However, neither **The Sneetches** nor **Tusk, Tusk** actually confronts racism in any meaningful sense. Dr. Seuss’s book has characters who discriminate based on outward appearance, but this outward appearance can easily be changed. And while McKee’s elephants do have skin colour-based prejudice, it is apparently random and inherent – there is no depiction of power or any of the motivations witnessed in historical racism; no colonialism, no imperialism, no slavery no exploitation – just murderous, mutual hatred. The best fables reveal through animal narratives something true about human existence. **Tusk Tusk**, we suggest, conceals the history of racism by offering up an alternative creation myth for racism. In many reviews of Wells’s **Yoko**, a book about a kitten who is made fun of for bringing sushi to school, the words “tolerance” and “acceptance” come up; anti-racism is not, however, about tolerance but about inclusion and understanding of other people and their cultures, and it is about examining the privilege that allows some people to have “normal” food (or clothes, or toys, or holidays, or behaviors) and others to be marginalized. Even though **Yoko** has a “happy” ending, the book is aimed at teaching white child readers tolerance; the Asian child reader who might identify with Yoko learns that her culture’s food is “weird” and happy endings can only come with the acceptance of white society. More recently, Sarah McIntyre’s **The New Neighbours** can be read as a fable about new arrivals, perhaps immigrants and how it can be wrong to prejudge. The arrivals are rats – the animals that the Nazis likened Jewish people to in propaganda such as The Eternal Jew. And if these new arrivals are understood as being racialised differently from other groups, then it is unfortunate that the story rests on the old historic comparison between pseudo-scientific races and species. What is gained and lost by attempting to address xenophobia and racism, uniquely human ideas, through non-human animals?

Recently, studies have suggested that using animals to promote prosocial behavior doesn’t necessarily work; Larsen, Lee and Ganea, for example, found that “After hearing the story containing real human characters, young children became more generous. In contrast, after hearing the same story but with anthropomorphized animals or a control story, children became more selfish” (“**Do storybooks with anthropomorphized animal characters promote prosocial behaviors in young children?**” 6).



Notably, all the authors we discuss here are white. Writers from racially minoritized backgrounds tend to tell much different stories, and as a rule do not use animal characters as stand-ins for children from any background. Perhaps the best publishing can do is to open its door to more of such writers?

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**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

# I wish I'd written...



Laura Wood's latest book **Under a Dancing Star** (978-1407192406) is published by Scholastic, £7.99 pbk.

## Laura Wood chooses her favourite comfort read.

The book that I most wish I'd written is **The Secret Countess** by Eva Ibbotson.

It's the story of Anna, who has an idyllic and privileged childhood, growing up in the glittering city of St Petersburg. When revolution tears through Russia, Anna and her family are forced to flee to England, and here a very different life awaits them. Determined to take care of the people she loves, Anna takes a job as a maid at the Earl of Westerholme's crumbling but beautiful mansion where she meets a cast of extraordinary characters and falls for the new Earl. The only problem is he's already engaged, and his fiancée might just be the worst woman in the world...

This novel is the ultimate comfort read, the type of book that leaves you with an enormous grin on your face and a feeling that you've been well looked after. I love the way that Eva writes with such warmth, the way her characters leap off the page so that even those who don't get much space feel like dear, long-loved friends. I've lost count of how many times I've read **The Secret Countess** (it must be dozens!), and each time I feel like I find something new to love about it. It's not just one thing, it's everything – the people, the gorgeous settings, the clothes, the jewels, the romance. I think it's an absolute dream of a book.



**The Secret Countess** (978-1447280101) is published by Macmillan Children's Books, £7.99 pbk.

## Good Reads

### What If?

Randall Munroe, John Murray, 9781848549562, £9.99 pbk

What if you like books about science with enough humour to make them interesting? What if you want to find the answers to the questions that seem almost too absurd to ask? What if you want to read a book by a real-life rocket scientist? What if you like the occasional amusing cartoon illustration? What if one book was all of the above? *Adam* (Year 9)

### The Land of Neverendings

Kate Saunders, Faber, 978-0571336562, £6.99 pbk

My favourite book is called **The Land of Neverendings**. It's a book about Emily and the people around her when her sister died. Emily, Ruth (the shop owner who lives next door), Martha (her new friend) and Maze (her old friend) are thrown in to Smockeroon, a world of silliness powered by imagination. A broken door, sisters who don't want to part, and some very naughty toys bind this tale into the sort of book you believe is real. The sort of book that you really, really want to be real. Sometimes, in a quiet moment, you do believe this book could be real.

Prepare to laugh and then cry at the sweetest tale ever. *Lily Ella* (Year 8)

### Noughts and Crosses

Malorie Blackman, Penguin, 978-0141378640, £7.99 pbk

This is a dystopian book set in Britain and it addresses racial issues that have been experienced in the past. However in the book the races are called noughts and crosses, hence the title. The book follows the story of Sephy, a cross, and her childhood friend Callum, a nought.

I read this book a few years ago and it has stuck with me ever since. The book really made me stop and think about the world Sephy and Callum live in and the parallels to the world we live in. Overall

This issue's **Good Reads** are chosen by pupils at **The King's School, Chester**. Thanks to their librarian **Ros Harding**, who is the **2019 SLA School Librarian of the Year**. As well as establishing a School Book Award, Ros is an ambassador of research skills and ensures all aspects of the school have a place within the library. The SLA praised her for empowering pupils and giving outstanding support and pastoral care.



Adam



Lily Ella



Jess



Erin



Isabelle

I really enjoyed this book as it is such a clever idea and so well written. I would recommend it to ages about 13 and above as it is still a hard hitting, political book. *Jess* (Year 10)

### On the Come Up

Angie Thomas, Walker Books, 978-1406372168, £7.99 pbk

Where do I start! A beautifully written and powerful story that grabs you from the very beginning. It outlines important issues such as gang violence and racism whilst also making you laugh and sometimes... maybe... cry a little bit. Yes, this book made me cry. The raps are so well written that they could be actual songs and you can just imagine Bri performing them right in front of you whilst you're reading. Overall, one of the best books that I have ever read, close behind **The Hate U Give**, also a book by Angie Thomas. I am so excited to see what she is going to do next. If this book is accessible to you, then you should read it. It will change your life. *Erin* (Year 9)

### Becoming

Michelle Obama, Viking, 978-0241334140, £25.00

I am generally not one to cry in books, I can count on one hand the number of books that have made me cry, and none of these books have ever sparked tears of happiness, but the inspiration and empathy Michelle Obama wove into every line changed that. Her book, **Becoming** had me in tears for all the right reasons. This book should not be dismissed as one about politics or political opinion. Michelle's political experiences are obviously discussed within it, but this first and foremost is a book about a woman's life, albeit an extraordinary woman's life. For me **Becoming** is the story of Michelle's acceptance, that whatever we desire to 'become' will never be satisfied and will always be followed by a desire to 'become' something else. We are constantly becoming and our story shall continue to develop. The belief that there are no 'happy endings', but rather happy beginnings that mark different stages of our lives from which we travel onwards. "Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own." *Isabelle* (Year 11)

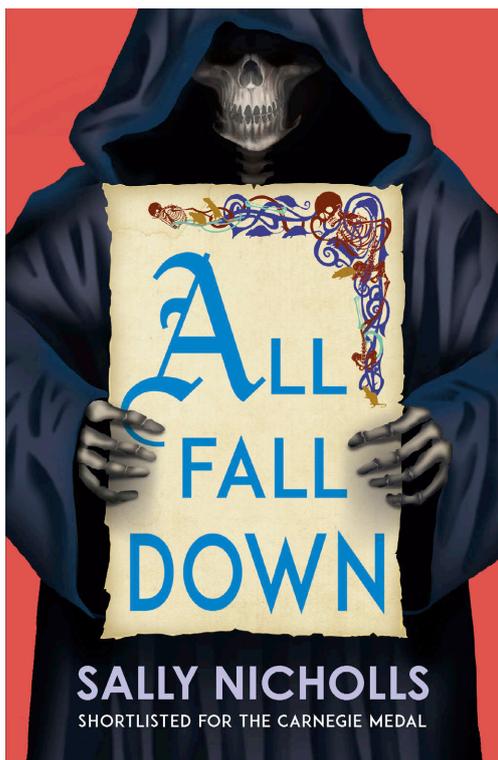
# ... We All Fall Down

On the reissue of her powerful historical novel, **All Fall Down**, Sally Nicholls worries that we've forgotten what plague looks like.

In Medieval Britain, a plague was a disease sent by God. Any other illness was a pestilence; an ordinary piece of bad luck, unfortunate but not divinely significant. A plague implied heavenly intervention – God was pissed off, and he was cursing you and your people. The **Book of Revelations** predicts that God will destroy a third of the population by plague before the end of the world. When this God gets pissed off, he really lets you know about it.

The Black Death of 1348-9 was a plague of Biblical proportions. Historians believe it killed around 45% of the population of Europe – a level of destruction so severe that the US Government used records from the Black Death to predict how society would respond to a nuclear holocaust. People living through it literally believed the apocalypse was coming. The Italian chronicler Agnolo di Tura wrote in 1348, "I ... buried with my own hands five of my children in a single grave. No bells. No tears. This is the end of the world." He was not speaking metaphorically.

People talk a lot about the end of the world. The disciples write of the Second Coming as something they expect to happen in their lifetime. Modern-day Doomsday Cultists and preppers go one further, actually laying in supplies for the Rapture. When I was a child, it seemed likely – or at least plausible – that I would die in a nuclear explosion. Nowadays, the talk is all of climate change, and the Earth's Sixth Mass Extinction event, which many scientists believe to be already underway. It is difficult to know how seriously to take all of this. I recently took part in a research paper which asked me to rate how anxious I felt on a daily basis. I am not, generally, a very anxious person at all, and I felt rather indignant at how often I had to say that yes, actually, I did feel anxious on a daily basis. There's a fault in your paper design, I wanted to say. Yes, I am extremely worried about where the world is headed, because we're headed for catastrophic climate change and no one is doing anything about it! That's not a mental illness! That's a healthy response to an extremely concerning situation!



Ahem.

As humans, we are extremely bad at judging risk. The Black Death originated in Eastern Europe and spread west at around walking pace. Those in Britain could sit and watch it getting closer by the day. Many British people would actually have met refugees fleeing places of infection. They knew what it was and what it was capable of. True, many of the stories surrounding it were exaggerated, and people knew this. But it was common

knowledge even amongst peasants like my heroine Isabel that the Black Death was terrible, and the Black Death was heading towards them.

So people in Britain felt frightened, right? This is plague on a grand scale. This is worse than that predicted in the Book of Revelations! This is the wrath of God! The End of the World! People were a bit worried about this ... right?

Well, yes and no. People enjoyed the drama of it, just as some tabloid newspapers enjoy the drama of microwaves causing cancer and the End of the World

coming in eleven years if we don't act now. (The real situation is somewhat more nuanced than that, though still very serious.) But nobody really took it seriously. At first they were pleased – yes, pleased! – because they thought God was sending a plague to Eastern Europe to smite the infidels. Then, when the pestilence came to France, they were more worried, but also quite pleased because it was killing their habitual enemies, the French. They were sure it would not affect them, because they were protected by the English Channel. This sounds halfway plausible, but even when it reached England and Wales, the Scots were still ... kinda happy. Because it was killing their ancient enemies, the English.

We love the idea of an apocalypse, but we do not really believe that bad things will happen to us. I do not really, honestly, truly, believe that society is going to be destroyed by climate change, despite all the petitions I've signed and letters I've written to MPs. And this lack of understanding of catastrophe can be deadly. It was deadly in 1348, and it is deadly, now.

Today, modern medicine has revolutionised the way we think about illness. We've broadly forgotten, in modern Britain, what deadly disease looks like. In medieval England, around one in thirteen births resulted in maternal death, meaning motherless children like Isabel were commonplace. As late as 1855, around one in five children in Glasgow did not survive their first year of life. We don't understand what that means any more. A diagnosis of childhood cancer is one of the few diseases which can still strike terror into a parent's heart. But in Britain, around 82% of children survive a cancer diagnosis by at least five years. The death rate from smallpox, by comparison, was 30%. It is estimated to have killed around 500 million people worldwide in a hundred year timespan. It's now been eradicated, thanks to a highly successful public vaccination programme.

Last year, Britain lost its measles-free status thanks to vaccine refusal. Many people world-wide still don't think climate change is real. To anyone with even a passing knowledge of social history or science, that's insane. But sadly, it isn't surprising.

We don't understand risk. And we don't really believe in disaster.

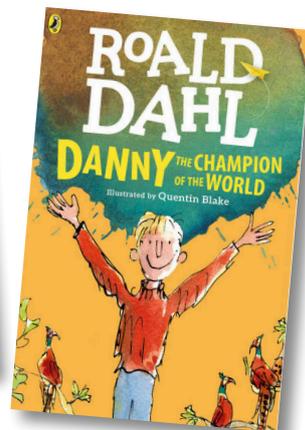
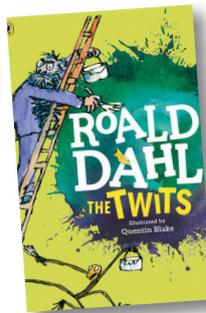
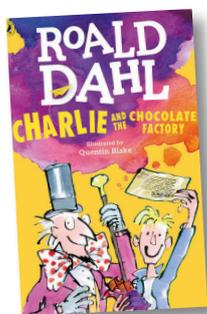
Until it happens to us.

**All Fall Down** is published by Andersen Press, 978-1783449316, £7.99 pbk.



# What I think about when I think about Roald Dahl

As **Roald Dahl Day** approaches, author **Matt Brown** considers what the great man means to him.



I'm trying to write this piece about Mr Dahl and my computer is insisting on autocorrecting the word 'Roald' to 'Ronald'. This is a curious coincidence because the first thing I think about when I think about Roald Dahl is *Ronald* Dahl. It's what I've always called him to myself because it makes me laugh. I'm certain that **Not the Nine O'Clock News** did a **Tales of the Unexpected** parody and called the host, Ronald Dahl. In my memories of life as a boy, **Tales of the Unexpected** holds a sacred place. It was the telly show I watched in absolute silence from the corner of our living room, trying hard not to breathe too loudly so that my mum and dad would forget that it was past my bedtime. My infatuation probably had as much to do with the title sequence as the cunning twists in the tales. Oh, the flames, the tarot cards, the dancing women. It was a heady mix for an eight-year-old country boy like me.

For the record, my favourite Dahl story when I was a kid was **The Magic Finger**. Oh, sure, I loved the Chocolate Factory and the Giant Peach and the Giant, who was Big and Friendly, but there was something about the darkness of the Magic Finger that delighted me. The girl's bottled-up anger and its inevitable, uncontrollable release spoke to the way I operated. Although, now I think about it, I'm afraid that it didn't change the way I think about hunting and eating animals. Perhaps Ronald's own views on that matter were complicated because a decade later he wrote **Danny Champion of the World**, a book that gave you a blueprint on the very best ways to kill and cook pheasant.



I read **Danny Champion of the World** to my son when he was about seven. He loved it as I knew he would. His grandparents live very near Gypsy House and the woods near their house must be where Ronald was thinking about when he wrote the book. However, as an adult I now have very mixed feelings about **Danny Champion of the World** because it was while I was reading it with my son that I failed the Dahl Test of Fatherhood.

You may have noticed that a lot of the dads in Ronald Dahl's books are the sort of dad's any kid would love to have. They love life and let their kids take apart car engines or create underground Utopias when the local farmers try and kill them. They fly kites (that they've made) and spend the afternoon wandering through the woods with their kids naming trees or birds or woodland creatures. I think that Ronald himself was definitely this sort of dad. We have a book at home of Dahl stories and in it is a forward by his daughter, giving us a glimpse of the kind of father he was.

*"He was always open to the possibility of an adventure. Even when he drove us to the school bus in the morning we would take a detour to follow a fire engine with sirens wailing."*

I'll never forget the look of disappointment in my son's eyes when, as we were reading **Danny Champion of the World**, he asked me if we could go poaching together. I don't know about you but my almost pathological fear of outdoor activities means that I'm probably not the sort of dad who will spend his evenings crawling around a wood trying to entice a pheasant to eat drugged raisins. The very best I could do was to buy a pheasant and cook it in the way Danny's dad liked, roasted and with lots of bread sauce. I also made a mental note to try and be a bit more Dahl-y the very next opportunity I got. A few days later, I was with my sons in the car when I saw an ambulance speeding past, sirens a go-go, and set off in hot pursuit, just like Ronald would have done. As I accelerated, a car pulled out in front of me so I braked hard and let off a volley of expletives that contained at least three of the top five worst swear words in the world. The ambulance sped out of sight and both my sons burst into tears. It was a very demoralising ninety seconds.

So, if you do let the heady whiff of Dahl-y adventure fill your nostrils then for heaven's sake be careful. Happy birthday, Ronald.



Matt Brown's latest book **Mutant Zombies Cursed My School Trip** (978-1474960236) is published by Usborne.

# Pictures Mean Business

**Sarah McIntyre** explains why we'll all be better off if illustrators get the credit they deserve.

Children's book illustrators don't always let people know when they're angry. They tend to be gentle folk who don't like to offend, or scared because they worry that speaking up might make publishers overlook them next time a commission comes around. But there's one issue that not only drives illustrators into rages, depressions and even poverty, but actually hurts readers and the book industry overall when they ignore it: that's credit.

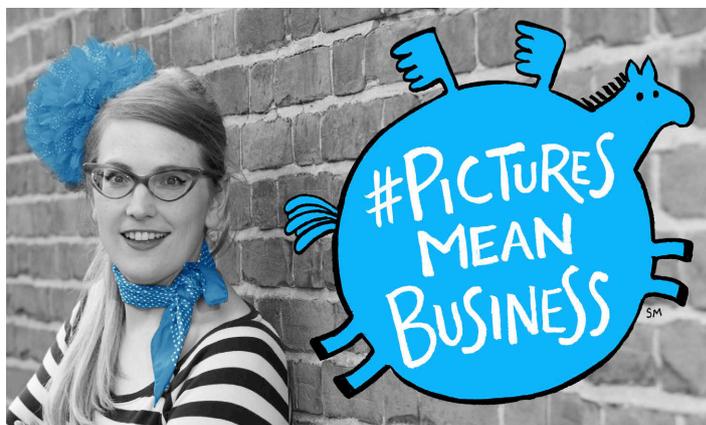
Before James Mayhew and I came up with the #PicturesMeanBusiness name for a campaign, I'd talked with veteran illustrators who shook their heads ruefully, saying that they'd been complaining for decades about the lack of credit for their work, but that nothing ever changed. In a world where branding is more and more important, how can illustrators build a name for themselves in a business that constantly refuses to mention their names and treats their work like a dirty little secret?

And then I realised we might be using the wrong tactic. Complaining about our individual mistreatments and appealing to people's love for illustration wasn't working. I realised that we as illustrators needed to come together with our readers and writers, argue each other's cases, and make people see how **everyone** benefits when they credit illustrators properly for their work.

And fortunately it's a strong case!



For children, teachers and parents: crediting the illustrators of picture books seems the most obvious (the clue's in the name), but many publishers, teachers and reviewers will still talk about picture books as being 'by' writers and leave out illustrators' names, despite the pictures telling so much of the story. But pre-literate children aren't first drawn to books because of the words, they'll reach for a book because they connect with the pictures. Even when children learn how to read, many of them still come to stories through the pictures, but unless they're told, they don't immediately understand that the pictures are created by real people. When they discover this, a light goes on in their heads, they realise they like drawing, too, and that they can make stories by drawing. I've seen many times how children will balk at putting words on a blank sheet of paper, but if they've drawn a character, a story about that character will bubble out of them. When they learn about illustrators, children will develop favourites, and look out for their books by their best-loved illustrators. Help them gain a hero by crediting picture book illustrators by name, and letting publishers know that we expect the names of illustrators to appear on picture book covers if the writer hasn't drawn the pictures themselves.



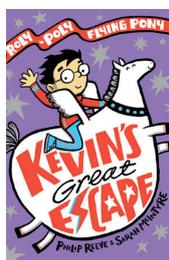
For publishers and writers: by crediting illustrators by name and linking to them on social media, publishers and writers can widen the fan bases for their books. Images drive the Internet for all ages, and many people love to find out about artists and will buy books based on their love for the illustrators' work. Plus, publishers and writers will gain illustrator loyalty; if illustrators have to choose between two jobs that pay the same, we'll jump for the job that will advance our careers. And it costs little or nothing to use our names!

By making a point of entering the illustrators' names into their book data, publishers will make their books more searchable. Imagine an illustrator wins a big award and people search for books they've illustrated to buy; it's in publishers' and writers' interests to have their books appear in these searches!

As a reader: you'll want to be able to get the best books you can. To get wonderfully illustrated books, our top illustrators need to be able to devote themselves full-time to their profession. If they have to waste huge amounts of time simply trying to get professional recognition for their work, their work will suffer and we won't get the best books we could get. It's not about ego: no one would expect a company like **Starbucks** or **McDonald's** to smile humbly as someone covered up their sign or insisted they couldn't have their logos on their coffee cups. If no one knows which artist made an image, no one's going to commission that artist to make another one. Illustrators' styles and faces may change through the years, but their names are their brands. One major way you can help is by crediting artists on social media; if you use their image, tell people who made that image, or you're implying that you created it. Whatever you do, don't crop off artists' signatures. We need more diversity in publishing, so don't give illustrators a completely unnecessary hurdle they need to get over; they'll have enough challenges ahead without having to fight for credit.

As translators and journalists: we're all in the same boat! Most of us work freelance and we're all trying to build our names in the business. So let's help each other out by recognising each other by name when we share each other's work.

James and I have a bigger team now with **Pictures Mean Business**: Woodrow Phoenix represent illustrators on the Society of Authors General Management committee, and Soni Speight built a beautiful new [Pictures Mean Business](http://PicturesMeanBusiness.com) website explaining how everyone benefits from crediting illustrators. We're seeing progress: more designers adding illustrator names to the covers of junior fiction, writers crediting artists when they first reveal their cover art, publishers including illustrators in their metadata, and bloggers adding references to illustrators and their work in reviews. Agents have told me they now use the term 'Pictures Mean Business' as shorthand with publishers so they don't have to go through all the reasons their artists need credited. I've even heard from a school who support the campaign and have named all of their classes after illustrators! So it's happening... find out how you can take part at [PicturesMeanBusiness.com](http://PicturesMeanBusiness.com) and spread the word!



**Kevin's Great Escape: A Roly-Poly-Flying Pony Adventure** by Sarah McIntyre and Philip Reeve, OUP, 978-0-19-276612-0, £8.99 hbk

## REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

**Brian Alderson** is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**.

**Gwynneth Bailey** is a freelance education and children's book consultant.

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

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

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

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

**Rebecca Butler** writes and lectures on children's literature.

**Jane Churchill** is a children's book consultant.

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

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

**Janet Fisher** is a children's literature consultant.

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

**Sarah Gallagher** is a headteacher and director of **Storyshack.org** [www.storyshack.org](http://www.storyshack.org)

**Ferelith Hordon** is a former children's librarian and editor of **Books for Keeps**

**Carey Fluker Hunt** is a writer and children's book consultant.

**Matthew Martin** is a primary school teacher.

**Sue McGonigle** is a Lecturer in Primary Education and Co-Creator of [www.lovelybooks.co.uk](http://www.lovelybooks.co.uk)

**Margaret Pemberton** is a school library consultant and blogs at [margaretpemberton.edublogs.org](http://margaretpemberton.edublogs.org).

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

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

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**Lucy Staines** is a primary school teacher

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

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

### Together We Can

★★★★

Caryl Hart, illus Ali Pye, Scholastic, 32pp, 978-1407177397, £6.99 pbk

This book is a lavishly illustrated work in full colour addressing the issues of friendship across the barriers of age, gender and ethnicity. It also addresses a boundary not often broached in books for this age group – though happily less rarely than in the past – namely the boundary between disabled and non-disabled people.

The text of the book is sparse. It is delivered in rhyme with a recurrent motif of 'Together we can...' It deals with important issues such as how to make friends with people who are in distant places and how to detect if someone is lonely and badly needs a friend.

Often when reviewing books of this kind we comment on the extent to which the illustrations support the text. In this book it's the reverse. The role of the text is to punctuate the dominant illustrations, a virtue in a book for non-readers or early readers.

The inclusion of one character in a wheelchair and another with an eye-patch is a welcome development, save for one illustration. When the children are flying kites, the boy in the wheelchair is depicted with his chair tipping perilously back, the front wheels raised high off the ground. No one is paying the slightest attention to what would be a serious accident in the making.

In another illustration the children are seen tending an open fire without adult supervision. What health and safety officers would make of this scene is left to the reader to determine.

It is heart-warming to see the child in the wheelchair depicted like any other child on the front cover of this book. A minor character, but given welcome prominence. **RB**

### My Friends

★★★★★

Max Low, Otter-Barry Books, 32pp, 978 1 91095 982 4, £11.99 hbk

Influenced by Dick Bruna and Lucy Cousins, this new author/illustrator is one to watch. His simple pictures and original ideas flow together beautifully, and the theme of friendship is topical. Told in the first person, the 'writer' introduces himself with a simple 'hello' and then proceeds to tell us about each of his friends. There is Messy, who is quiet and doesn't talk much; Ezza loves to look at clouds; Olga likes to listen to music; and Lina 'invents things'. There are many, many more friends to meet, and all of them are special because (we are told) our author likes to do the same things they enjoy when he is with them. He also has an

imaginary friend, Klaus: 'it's good to have an imaginary friend because they can be with you whenever you need them.' His friends are all blobby characters, full of colour and fun, and in the very end of the story we find that our author also likes sometimes to be by himself. On the final page, we see a portrait of the author, a lovely dog, who asks us to tell him about our friends.

Lots to look at, lots to talk about, and lots to enjoy. **ES**

### Who's Going to Bed?

★★★★

Written by Abie Longstaff and illustrated by Eve Coy, Puffin, 32pp, 978-0-141-37456-7, £6.99 pbk

*The stars are out, the moon is bright... who's going to bed? Not this little baby.... he's far too busy!*

The pirates have packed away their treasure and are settling in their hammocks. The animals have eaten their greens and are resting quietly. In the castle, the king and queen have taken off their crowns. Everyone is tired and they're heading for their beds - except one cheeky baby who wants to bang his drum and clash his cymbals and wake everybody up! Trailing pirates, royals and bears behind him, the baby makes his way down to the shore where he finds a very sleepy dragon. She's so tired! The baby and the pirates and the bears give her the perfect bedtime, with blankies and stories and lullabies all round. Now the baby's yawning, too - and before he knows what's happening, he's being sailed and swung and marched and carried right back to his own little bed.

With its structured, rhythmic text and stunning artwork that evokes mid-century printing techniques, this book delivers an imaginative and comforting bedtime experience that will entertain and reassure at other times, too. Eve Coy's deliciously muted illustrations conjure twilight on every page, with a soothing blue and brown palette enlivened by the rusty-red of the baby's sleepsuit. There are plenty of details to spot, and Coy's characters are trailed and reappear throughout, giving a sense of quiet order to this gently diverse story.

Eve Coy's debut picturebook, **Looking After Daddy**, was published last year and has been shortlisted for the **Klaus Flugge Prize**. **CFH**

### Red Red Red

★★★★★

Polly Dunbar, Walker, 32pp, 978 1 4063 7696 8, £12.99 hbk

Whilst in our local library this morning, I saw a small moppet rolling round on the floor screaming and thought to myself that his poor mum rather needed this book! The child in the story sees 'red red red' after trying

to reach the biscuits and falling on his or her head. A full-blown temper tantrum follows, and mum, while applying lots of sympathy, looks suitably perturbed. She has the answer, though. She begins to count to ten slowly with her little one, and we then get lots of vignettes of the child. These are immensely charming, and show the small tot going from screaming to smiling - and then having biscuits! Dunbar's always fun rhyming couplets and integrated text, along with the wonderful pictures of both child and mum, are a joy to see, and the red scribbles throughout - as well as on the end pages - give us a true sense of the feel of being angry. A great book for both child and parent on handling the inevitable temper tantrums that occur as babies grow older. **ES**

### Harry in a Hurry

★★★★

Timothy Knapman, ill. Gemma Merino, Macmillan, 32pp, 978-1-5098-8216-8 £11.99 hbk, (978-1-5098-8217-5 £6.99 pbk)

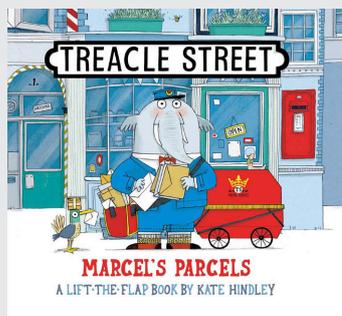
This twist on the Aesop's fable of *The Hare and the Tortoise* has Harry the hare not in an actual race this time, but always in a hurry, and Gemma Merino's illustrations show the world as a blur as he whizzed about on his scooter, knocking over the postman and generally causing mayhem. He talks fast, and eats fast, and was in too much of a hurry to notice the teeny tiny rock that snagged his front wheel and sent him and his scooter flying into a pond. Tom the tortoise, quietly fishing there, rescued him, and asked where he is going. 'I won't know until I get there. And now I'm going to be late!'. Tom didn't understand, but said he will fix the scooter, and that it will take time. Tom slowly got lunch together, and Harry, feeling grumpy, started to notice how cosy the house was, how comfy his chair felt, and how nice the soup smelled. He had hurt his arm, so he had to eat slowly, enjoyed the taste, and didn't get hiccups. They went for a walk, and Harry noticed his surroundings. He sat and had a really good look at it all while Tom mended the scooter. Brushing aside Tom's apology for taking so long, Harry asked how he could thank him, and the answer was a ride on Harry's back on the scooter! The last page shows them in several small pictures as friends, doing some adventurous things and some slow things, but enjoying each other's company.

Timothy Knapman has been writing plays, musicals and children's books for over ten years, with many appearing on CBeebies, and his **Dinosaurs in the Supermarket** was a best seller. Gemma Merino is a prize-winning illustrator known for **The Cow that Climbed a Tree**. Their collaboration works well, and Gemma Merino has

# reviews

## Under 5s/PreSchool/Infant/Nursery continued

added touches outside the story, like the endpaper showing Harry choosing a new pair of running shoes. This will be good to share with under fives and nursery children. **DB**



### Marcel's Parcels

★★★★

Kate Hindley, Simon and Schuster, 12pp, 978-1471173318, £6.99 board book

There's a real feel of Richard Scarry's **Busy Town** to this sturdy board book, though it's totally contemporary, and packs in a satisfying little story too. It's a bright, sunny morning on Treacle Street and Marcel is busy delivering the post. His bright, red trolley is full of parcels – lift a flap and peep inside to see them – and over the next pages we find out who they're for. There are leg warmers for the dance school, eggs and flour for the pie shop, and new wheels for the garage. On each page there's a friendly new character to meet, a flap to lift, and lots and lots of things to spot and count, all illustrated in Kate Hindley's bright, vibrant illustrations. **AR**

### Mr Scruff

★★★★

Simon James (author and illustrator), Walker Books, 32pp., 9781406383850, £12.99, hbk

Full pages of illustration have very few words as Simon James introduces us to a few dogs. 'This is Polly', then we turn the page to discover that she belongs to Molly. So it goes, with Martha belonging to Arthur, and more dogs belonging to rhyming owners and even looking rather like them: Martha is an Old English Sheepdog, and her owner is an equally shaggy saxophonist, busking to the delight of some dancing children. Mr Scruff, a dog in the rescue centre, has no one. We meet some more dogs and their owners, and go back to Mr Scruff, who is looking sad, until a boy turns up – it's Jim (who is mixed race). They get on well, and Jim persuades his parents that no, he doesn't want a little puppy, and a big, older dog, is the right dog for him. We go through all the rhyming dogs again, and "Mr Scruff belongs to Jim. And though it doesn't rhyme, it's all worked out just fine." But then we meet Mr Gruff, who comes to the rescue centre, and chooses a small puppy called – wait

for it – Tim – but it doesn't matter: they suit each other anyway.

The dogs, and their respective and sometimes eccentric owners, are great characters in Simon James' illustrations. He is well known now for critically acclaimed books like **Leon and Bob**, **Dear Greenpeace**, **The Wild Woods** and the **Baby Brains** series, all very different, but in his own scratchy style, and this cheerful story of friendship will be good to read aloud and share. **DB**

### The Pigeon HAS to go to School

★★★★★

Mo Willems, Walker, 40pp, 978 1 4063 8901 2, £6.99, pbk

So the time has come. And pigeon is anxious. She would rather you didn't read out the title. She doesn't want to be reminded. Anyway, there's no need for school, she already knows *everything*. Well, almost everything. There is so much to worry about, including, for those of us who already know her, the difficulty of learning to read when you have only one very big eye. Mo Willems' familiar character blusters, moans, puzzles and protests her way through the book. She shrinks dramatically when she acknowledges how scared she is but mostly she dominates the otherwise blank pages with the force of her personality and the cleverness of Willems' characterisation. How she is eventually convinced that school really might be the place for her is ingeniously achieved; and Willems provides an early clue to the one element of the school experience that pigeon can really look forward to. **CB**

### Pick a Pumpkin

★★★★

Patricia Toht, illus Jarvis, Walker, 40pp 9781406360615 £12.99 hbk

It is almost Halloween; time to create a pumpkin lantern. Choose a nice big one, hollow out its middle, carve out the eyes, nose and mouth – you can decide on the expression – then add the candle. Place your lantern outside the door, light the candle and watch its face come to life in the dark. Yes, it is time to Trick or Treat. It is Halloween

This sumptuous picture book with its gentle rhyming text will be welcomed by librarians and parents looking for a Halloween themed read that does not dwell on the scary side of the season. Rather here we have a celebration around the creation of the Jack o' Lantern which is presented very much as a family activity with an emphasis on fun. The setting is definitely American – though even in the States one suspects the pumpkin will arrive from the supermarket rather than the back garden or even a farm. Creating the atmosphere are the illustrations by Jarvis. From the lovely endpapers setting the scene, each double page spread bursts with smoky autumnal colours – a rich palette of blues, greens, oranges

and red – a feast for the eyes to bring the words to life. There are no surprises here; just a picture book to be enjoyed. **FH**

### The Rabbit Listened

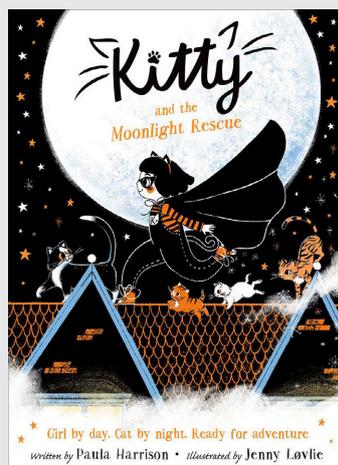
★★★★

Cori Doerrfeld, Scallywag Press, 34pp, 9781912650095, £12.99, hdbk Taylor is so proud. He has built a wonderful construction out of his bricks. Then disaster – it collapses. Well meaning animals rush around offering solutions but Taylor does not want advice. He wants to make up his own mind; he just wants someone to listen while he works through his angry, unhappy, disappointed feelings for himself. Then he can start again.

Soft colour wash combines with a soft textured wax crayon effect created by digital ink effectively emphasising the emotional content of the minimal text. Indeed the illustrations are also

minimalist – we see Taylor himself set against a white ground; our attention is focussed on him, the other characters are all intruders. It is only the rabbit, who unlike them, does not remain separate but cuddles up close, contact bringing wordless comfort. This careful design allows the drama of the double page spread across which black birds swirl against a purple background to have its full impact. There are only five words in the text "But then, out of nowhere...". The image says it all. This is a picture book that without moralising or underlining its message with words, allows a young reader not only to enjoy a familiar situation but to both empathise and, as important, to sympathise with Taylor. And at the end, a disaster is not the end. It is time to move on to create something "amazing". To be recommended for classrooms and libraries. **FH**

## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior



### Kitty and the Moonlight Rescue

★★★★

Paula Harrison illus Jenny Lovlie, Oxford, 128pp, 978-0192771650, £5.99 pbk

Paula Harrison's new series is thoroughly charming. Little Kitty's mum is a superhero, a proper cat woman who goes out at night to help people. Kitty has feline superpowers too but she's only little and not confident enough yet to use them; and she's a bit afraid of the dark too. But an emergency call for help when her mum is away means that Kitty has to put on her superhero cloak for real. It's then that she discovers she's braver than she thinks she is, and that with the help of her new friends – a trio of characterful cats – there's not much she can't do.

Kitty and her friends are hugely appealing characters and this little story is full of useful, important lessons about friendship, bravery, and finding courage within yourself. It is a perfect book for little girls and

boys confidently reading on their own. Jenny Lovlie's illustrations in black and orange make for some lovely, atmospheric moonlight scenes and Kitty's cat friends and kitten Pumpkin are super-cute. There are more books to come about Kitty and this series is going to be very popular with its readers, and deservedly so. **LS**

### Quill Soup

★★★★★

Alan Durant, ill. Dale Blankenaar, Tiny Owl, 30pp, 9 781910 328408, £12.99, hbk

Noko is a tired, hungry porcupine who seeks food from the inhabitants of a small village. However, the villagers seeing him approach are wary – he is a stranger. When Noko knocks on doors, he receives excuse after excuse from the suspicious and unwelcoming villagers. Noko is not fooled by their lies and devises a cunning plan involving making soup from his quills, a dish which he alleges is loved by the king. The villagers, intrigued and very impressed that Noko not only knows the king but also cooks for him, are keen to help and hurry to add the "extra" ingredients he requests. In no time at all there is a satisfying (and edible!) soup for everyone to share.

The pattern of the story with the repetition of Noko's unsuccessful visits to the villagers and the gradually revealed trick he plays on them would make this a very enjoyable story to read aloud to children. Young readers are likely to be fascinated by the array of exotic animals including aardvarks, pangolins and meerkats and also by the illustrations which are intricate and fascinating. Look closely and you can spot clues to the villagers lies in the images; the monkeys hiding a box of spare food and the rabbits with carrots aplenty inside their warren. The use of colour, with the porcupine

in black and white while all other animals are in full colour, emphasises the sense of difference.

Based on the European trickster story 'Stone Soup' this version is set in Africa and is part of publisher Tiny Owl's series **One Story, Many Voices**. This is a story with lots of contemporary resonance, challenging distrust of strangers and emphasising the importance of being welcoming. **SMc**

### Dave and the Tooth Fairy

★★★★

Verna Wilkins, ill. Carl Pearce, Studio Press, 978 1 78741 540 9, £6.99 pbk

This classic picture book was first published in 1993 by Tamarind Press and was greatly welcomed at that time for its diversity as it featured two BAME characters and a contemporary interpretation of the tooth fairy tradition. The story of Dave, who comes up with a resourceful plan to replace his missing tooth, and Afiya, a very modern Tooth Fairy who uses a computer and longs for a new, preferably day-time, job, will be just as appealing 25 years on. The book has been re-illustrated and updated for a new generation of readers. The illustrations, by Welsh illustrator Carl Pearce, reflect the style of an animated film with characters brightly illuminated against blocks of deep background colour. The story has a satisfying outcome for all characters and this reprint of an old favourite is still a title to be recommended and enjoyed all these years later. **SR**

### The Bug Collector

★★★★

Alex. G. Griffiths, Andersen Press, 28pp, 978 1 78344 768 8, £12.99, hbk

George loves Sundays. He shares with his grandad who always takes him to interesting places. One particular Sunday they visit a wildlife museum. Grandad disregards the dinosaurs and heads straight for the mini beast section. George is soon captivated by the incredible creatures and resolves to build his own bug collection. This doesn't prove easy and it takes a while for George to perfect his technique. Once he does, George is on a roll and he fills his tree house with an amazing collection of bugs. Looking closely, George marvels at the colours and shapes of a captured butterfly, but young readers will spot that the butterfly is not looking at all happy. On his journey home George notices everything is much quieter than usual, and there are no bugs to catch. Grandad is very cross when he realises what George has done. He teaches George about bugs, all they do for us and why they should not be trapped in jars. Together they find a way to create a natural environment to encourage and enjoy minibeasts.

George is an appealing character and his relationship with his grandad is very warm. The lively style of the text and the illustrations perfectly match George's enthusiasm. **The Bug Collector** is not only a very enjoyable story, it also incorporates information about mini beasts and their importance in the natural world. Sharing this book might inspire young naturalists to observe bugs in their natural environment and find out more about creating minibeast friendly habitats. **SMc**

### Bear Out There

★★★★

Jacob Grant, Bloomsbury, 978 1 5266 0741 6, £6.99, pbk

A bear and a spider: unlikely best friends. But it seems opposites attract, and whilst Bear would much prefer to stay indoors in his cosy armchair with a cup of tea, Spider loves the outdoors, the breeze, the sunshine. He has just made himself a kite, and is devastated when the wind whips it away from him. His big friend Bear says that he will help him find it, although he dislikes the outdoors, the smells, the bugs, the noises and especially the dark forest. Off they set together, Spider clinging to his big friend. When it begins to rain Bear starts grumbling more than ever, and it is only when he sees Spider's downcast expression that he suggests they could maybe look just a little further. As the rain begins to ease, they both look up at the clouds... and spot the lost kite. A happy ending, Spider not only repairing his kite but making one for Bear too, decorating it with huge bear pawprints. A tale which shows us that friendship means being there for each other, no matter what. And that sometimes this demands stepping out of one's comfort zone. There are lots of extra details added to the story by the author's own illustrations. At the opening, Spider uses buttons to weight the kite's tail, and readers see he also wears one as a hat! The expressions of the two characters tell just what they are feeling, especially when they are both despondent – in the woods, soaking wet from the rain, having failed in their quest, and Bear wanting so much to go home. How does it end? Only the pictures tell us, but a compromised harmony is restored. Maybe some kite flying/making will follow from reading this quirky book! **GB**

### I Really Want to Win

★★★★

Simon Philip, ill. Lucia Gaggiotti, Templar books, 978 1 78741 411 2, £6.99, pbk

Being small and feisty and energetic with an ardent wish to win is just not enough for the little girl in this story. Sports Day arrives, and she is absolutely sure the win is hers, first

in the flat race, then the tug of war. Each time supreme efforts fail to win that coveted first prize. And each race seems to be won by the same rival competitor. Downhearted but not completely defeated, she decides sport is not for her and looks for another area in which she could beat all others. A Spelling Bee? defeated by ventriloquist; a ballet competition? Each first prize is still gained by the same person who beat her in the flat race and tug of war. Time to rethink? But when her chief adversary comes not first but way down the list in a painting competition, at last they become friends, and she is advised by the former winner, "You cannot always be ahead. Enjoy the things you love, instead. You do not HAVE to win."

The resolution of the tale is well handled, and the once coveted first prize comes when most unexpected. The two main characters are accompanied throughout by their pet dogs, who share the narrative only in the illustrations. The Champion has a refined grey poodle, who delights in her mistress' every success, whilst our girlie has a determined hound who tries so hard, but just can't achieve a win for her... but is on hand to pass her tissues as she howls her frustration. Every page is full of details, adding greatly to this rhyming story. The illustrator really lets us know the pain felt by the non-winner, especially on the huge double spread when she shouts "I REALLY want to WIN!" in enormous text. Her dog can hardly bear it, his paws covering his eyes so he can't see her pain. Children will enjoy the humour in the book, identifying with one of the characters or the other voiceless competitors.... or perhaps, one of the dogs? **GB**

### Life on Mars

★★★★

Jon Agee, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978 1 9126 5007 1, £12.99 hbk

"Everybody thinks I'm crazy. Nobody believes there is life on Mars." But there's a little astronaut who does and he's determined to find it as he leaves his rocket, carrying nothing but a box of chocolate cupcakes intended as a gift.

As he wanders the planet's surface searching for signs of life, he notes its cold and dusty dreariness and his optimism begins to wane.

What he fails to notice however is that all the while behind our narrator, following and closely observing him, is a very large pointy-eared Martian.

After what seems like miles of traversing the rocks and dirt, so aptly depicted in shades of grey and brown tinged with pink, the explorer concludes "Everybody was right. There is no life on Mars." He places his gift on the ground and starts to make his way back to his spaceship.

But where is it? The little astronaut suddenly spies something amazing; evidence after all, of life, in the form of a single bright yellow flower. Hurrah! – mission accomplished.

He cannot resist picking the flower to take back as proof. (Not his finest hour in my opinion.)

His box is there too, so with both hands full the astronaut resumes his spaceship search with a spot of mountain climbing (actually the creature's body) and at last, there it is. Once on board it's time to celebrate by breaking open the beribboned box that's come so far ...

It's the mismatch between what we see in Agee's illustrations and the running commentary provided by the little protagonist that makes this such a satisfying read. Out of this world tragic-comedy done to perfection is what is served up here and I can almost hear the cries of 'again!' from listeners who will relish its splendid incongruity. **JB**

### Free

★★★★

Sam Usher, Templar Publishing, 32pp, 978 1 7874 1516 4, £6.99 pbk

As he observes the birds around the feeder through the window one morning, the boy narrator notices that one of their number is injured. He and his Grandad nurse him carefully until he seems ready to go back out into the garden. "He won't want to be cooped up in here," Grandad insists putting it outside; but the bird has other ideas.

Back it comes at breakfast time, lunchtime and teatime, and the boy grows increasingly attached to their visitor, urging Grandad to let the creature stay. Grandad's wisdom prevails: he insists freedom is what it needs and showing the lad a picture of a large tree, tells him they must help the bird find a new home. With rucksacks packed off they go. After a long climb, they find the perfect tree and it's absolutely teeming with Bird's avian friends singing a welcome song and ready to share a fruity feast.

A lovely warm-hearted story to add to Sam Usher's smashing series of **Boy and Grandpa** adventures that mix fantasy with everyday reality so beautifully, portraying the very special relationship that exists between the two. I love the closely observed domestic details of Grandpa's home: capacious bookshelves, over-stuffed fridge and cupboards stacked high with mugs, tins and jars as well as the outdoor fantasy scenes. **JB**

### Small in the City

★★★★

Sydney Smith, Walker Books, 40pp, 978 1 4063 8840 4, £12.99

Warmly wrapped against the winter chills, a small child leaves the tram and begins walking. 'I know what it's like to be small in the city,' says the narrator and goes on to talk of the noisy, bustling, at times scary environment he's entered.

As he continues walking we realise that the child is addressing a special someone. Furthermore, rather than sounding scared, he offers advice on how best to navigate the landscape: 'alleys can be good shortcuts', steer

## 5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

clear of big dogs ... 'the fishmongers down the street are nice. They would probably give you a fish if you asked.'

All the while the snow swirls ever faster around as the child stops several times to put up posters. He enters the park and walks towards a bench, stops again and then we see and we understand ...

"Your bowl is full and your blanket is warm ... you could just come back," he tells the absent feline as he starts making his way back towards home ...

Awesome beautiful, intensely moving and oh so brilliantly done, this remarkable book opens you to the raw emotions of the searcher. There is so much to take in, in Smith's superbly observed city scenes; blurred images viewed through the tram's misted windows, the street scene jumbled into confusion by the mirrored windows of an office block, tall linear buildings towering skywards amid a tangle of cables and street lights, while close ups of the snow covered boughs of street trees and the blizzard of falling snow reminded me somewhat of a Hockney landscape. **JB**

### Swarm of Bees

★★★

Lemony Snicket, Ill. Rilla Alexander, Andersen Press, 40pp,

978 1 78344 912 5, £12.99 hbk

I must confess to being confused about this picture book. It is definitely about anger and the chaos this emotion can cause, but is it the bees who figure throughout who are angry, or is it the little boy who is throwing tomatoes at everyone? Certainly the latter is angry, but why do the swarming bees come into it at all? Supposedly, the bees are angry and may or may not sting the people passing by, and there is a connection of sorts between angry people and angry bees, but surely the little boy's anger should be paramount and becomes so in the end. The swarm of bees is contained in a bag, and the little boy learns that while it can feel good to be angry, 'it can feel better to stop.' The illustrations, digitally produced using rubber stamps, ink and collage, are confusing as well, and this reviewer feels there is too much going on for the book to be enjoyed by children who might well be scratching their heads over the production. **ES**

### Sam Wu is NOT afraid of Spiders

★★★★

Katie & Kevin Tsang, ill. Nathan Reed, Egmont, 190pp, 978 1 4052 9428 7, £5.99 pbk

This is the fourth book in the very funny **Sam Wu** series, featuring a boy who so far has NOT been afraid of ghosts, sharks or the dark and who is now absolutely NOT afraid of spiders ... maybe! So, when Tulip, a

Goliath bird eater tarantula, escapes from the sixth-grade classroom Sam decides that he must step up and protect his fellow pupils by finding her, if only to prove to his nemesis, Ralph Zinkerman, that he is not "Scaredy-Cat Sam". Madcap and hilarious escapades ensue as Sam and his group of loyal friends try to come up with a fool-proof plan, aided by his fearless, spider-loving little sister and involving a jar of honey and a cat wrapped in tinfoil. What could possibly go wrong!

The authors of this appealing series have found a winning formula with a theme of overcoming common fears and a cast of likeable, diverse characters all presented in a humorous and accessible style and brilliantly enhanced by Nathan Reed's wonderfully lively, witty cartoon-like illustrations. Facts, jokes, amusing footnotes and speech bubbles abound and combine with the witty text and eye-catching cover to create an excellent addition to a series that is perfect for reluctant readers and fans of madcap adventure. **SR**

### A Boy's Best Friend

★★★★

Nicola Davies, ill. Cathy Fisher, Graffeg, 35pp, 9 781912 654116, £6.99 pbk

This short story is one of Welsh publisher Graffeg's **Country Tales**, a series of illustrated short stories about young people growing up in the countryside. It describes Clinton's happy life on his Caribbean island home, living with his Gran, fishing with his uncle and roaming the beach with his beloved dog, Rufus. When Clinton must leave to join his mother and her new family in London his life is turned upside down and he feels lost and unable to settle until a school trip leads him to discover the joys of helping on a farm. Here, he is given a puppy, a new "best friend".

This is a beautiful, gentle and moving story about the difficulties of starting a new life with all the feelings of loss and displacement that involves; it has a great deal of resonance in today's unsettled world. The appealing cover and soft, pastel, black and white illustrations enhance the atmosphere of this sensitive story. Although Clinton's tale is short, there are large blocks of text so this warm, poignant depiction of a young boy finding his place in the countryside would best suit confident young readers, or family sharing, and would give all much to think about and enjoy. **SR**

### Clem and Crab

★★★★

Fiona Lumbers (author and illustrator), Andersen Press, 28pp, 978-1-178344-869-2, £12.99 hdbk

The endpapers show a beach strewn with plastic before we meet Clem, who loved the beach, the sand,

the waves, the grass that grows sideways, and the pools that come and go, and we see her peering into one of those pools. On days she had been watching a crab, as it played hide-and seek among the rocks, but it had disappeared when she was ready to go home. In her bucket were shells, pieces of glass, but also some plastic- and Crab, in a plastic bag. Sadly she returned him to the sea as her big sister had told her to, but on the bus home she found that he had hidden in her rolled-up trouser leg. She made him a home in a plastic bowl, and prepared her collection for Show and Tell. The next day, she went, with Crab, to the aquarium, and they found about the underwater world, conservation, and the problem of plastic in the ocean, and what people can do to help. Crab was the star of Show and Tell, though she had to explain why he wasn't back in the sea, and she told her class all about the plastic problem, and how we can all help, though the beach was too big for her to clear. At the weekend, Clem and her sister went back to the beach to return Crab to the sea, and they were amazed and pleased to see her classmates busy clearing it of plastic: "I made a difference! We can all make a difference!" When the beach was clean and Crab back in a pool, Clem promised she would always look after it, for Crab and all the sea creatures.

Fiona Lumbers' illustrations show plenty of detail on the beach, a wonderful aquarium you can walk through, and sturdy little Clem and her diverse classmates and teacher as full of character. It's a good story, absolutely appropriate for our awareness of responsibility for the planet, and this will go well in the classroom and library. **DB**

### Look Up!

★★★★

Nathan Bryon. Illustrated by Dapa Adeola. Puffin. 32pp. 9780241345849. £6.99 pbk

Rocket is determined; she is going to be an astronaut. But first there is the Phoenix Meteor Shower to view. She wants everyone to join her in the park for the occasion. She makes fliers, she stops shoppers in the supermarket, she even makes an announcement over the speaker system. And people do turn up – sadly nature is not always obliging. Is Rocket going to be disappointed?

Dapa Adeola's lively, bold and colour saturated illustrations capture the energy and self confidence of this small girl for whom the stars truly are the limit. Not like big brother, Jamal, whose eyes are fixed on his phone. The characters speak directly to the reader through their expressions and body language as much as through the text. Indeed, Rocket speaks to us directly telling us her story, Nathan Byrne capturing that confident tone of the very young who know their subject whether it be dinosaurs or the stars and for whom shyness is not an option.

This attractive picture book is one that should find a place in kinder boxes everywhere, a welcome addition that will have young readers looking up to the stars. **FH**

### Everyone Can Draw

★★★★

Written and illustrated by Fifi Kuo, Boxer Books, 32pp, 978-1-910716-88-5, £11.99 hbk

This hardback picturebook is a pleasure to read and share, as well as being an open invitation to 'get drawing'. The text is minimal but carefully considered and introduces basic ideas about the choices we all make when creating art. We can draw characters or scenes, which can be black and white or brightly coloured. We can use scissors to cut collages, our fingers to make prints or a needle and thread for embroidery, and we can make our pictures anywhere. *What will You draw?* asks the final spread.

Brightly-coloured artwork shows children from different ethnic backgrounds playing across each spread, and wondering who these children are and what they could be saying is part of the fun of exploring the book. Child-style drawings jostle for space alongside other artwork including pencil sketches, ink drawings, collage, fingerpainting and embroidery. This diversity helps fuel inspiration and ideas and underlining this, the endpapers feature drawings showcasing different media – felt tips, coloured pencils, Chinese ink, collage and sewing – offering an unspoken invitation for children to match them to the artwork.

There's a straightforward and enjoyable message here, but opportunities to develop it and engage children in something deeper may have been missed and adult readers may feel that this book doesn't quite deliver on its initial promise. But there is always room for titles that send positive messages and encourage children to express themselves creatively, and **Everyone Can Draw** will be a welcome addition to libraries, classrooms and other settings.

Fifi Kuo is a new young author-illustrator whose picturebook, **I Can Fly**, has been shortlisted for this year's **Klaus Flugge Prize**. **CFH**

### The Misadventures of Frederick

★★★★

Ben Manley and Emma Chichester Clark, Two Hoots, 40pp, 9781509851539, £12.99 hdbk

Frederick has everything it seems – except freedom. Emily may not have the toys but she does have the freedom of the countryside but she has no one to play with. Will Frederick ever find the courage to ignore the possibility of something dreadful happening if he does leave his safe home. What will happen if he does?

Chichester Clark's colour saturated illustrations take over each double

page spread alternating between Frederick's claustrophobic room where a dark, sombre palette dominates, while Emily's actions are set against a white ground, the colours brighter and lighter, emphasising her freedom. The contrast is telling and effective, a perfect counterpart to the text. This is presented almost completely in the form of letters – or in the case of Emily, notes. Frederick's efforts are flowery, poetical – here is a child who lives through his imagination. Emily's answers are short – and get shorter

– very much to the point. Manley sets up the expectation that we will have a fairytale ending of escape. However, freedom is not without risk – but this does not mean that it is not worth it. This is a clever, quite subtle narrative that sets out to counter the notion that children should be restricted because something unfortunate might happen. It does this through an engaging storyline cleverly enhanced and extended by the brilliant illustrations that add humour and personality. Unusual and very enjoyable. **FH**

## 8 – 10 Junior/Middle

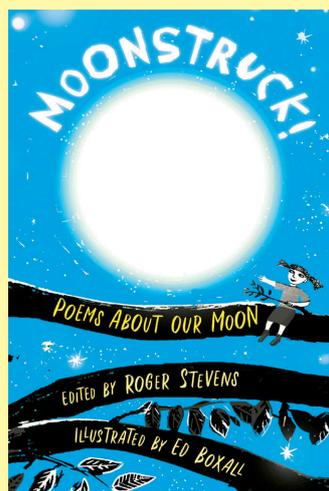
### Ed's Choice

#### Moonstruck. Poems About Our Moon

★★★★

Edited by Roger Stevens.  
Illustrated by Ed Boxall.  
Otter-Barry Books. 96pp.  
9781910959657. £6.99 pbk

It is always a treat to have a new anthology from Roger Stevens. This collection certainly does not disappoint. Taking inspiration from the celebrations around the first moon landing fifty years ago, Roger has gathered together work from a galaxy of poets, sprinkling the contemporary with the past. The result is an eclectic mix of the lyrical, the matter-of-fact, the humorous. Many of the poets are already well known – Roger, himself, Liz Brownlee, Rachel Rooney, Shelley, Yeats. Others may not be so familiar but readers will want to find more from their imaginations after meeting them here. Throughout, Ed Boxall's atmospheric illustrations and page decorations capture the flavour of each poem – magical, mysterious, haunting, funny. Here,



in words combined with images we meet the moon in all guises; a rock in the sky, an inspiration, a piece of cheese. This is an anthology that does stand out and should be visited again and again, allowing young readers to be drawn in by the ideas and images the poets offer. It is an anthology to be explored both in the class together, or privately. **FH**

#### My Family and Other Ghosts

★★

Lou Kuenzler, Scholastic, 275pp,  
9781407186702, £5.99 pbk

In this spooky comedy for young children, readers are invited to stay at Grave Grange hotel, where the only thing stranger than the ghostly noises echoing around the corridors is the bizarre food coming from the kitchen.

Ivy and Ash are 10-year-old twins and they are somewhat surprised when their grandpa arrives and offers them the opportunity to run a hotel on Darkmoor (no, not Dartmoor - it's much scarier than Dartmoor!). This is a surprise because they have no idea how to run a hotel, and is even more

of a surprise because Grandpa has been dead for some time!

Having persuaded their culinarily quirky dad (trifle with curry, anyone?) to take on the kitchen, the young pair set about establishing Grave Grange as Darkmoor's number one hotel. Unfortunately, their plans are seriously hindered by a mischievous poltergeist, a headless lord and a dotty, dead opera singer who won't keep quiet. Despite some moral support from a disembodied hand and a giant spectral hound called Misty, the first reviews are dire and it is clear that only exorcism will save the hotel's reputation.

The humorous ghouls though, are not only the most entertaining

characters, and the chief source of comedy, they are also the heart and soul of the hotel and Ivy and Ash learn that getting rid of them is a grave mistake...the hunt for the hauntings begins and a brave expedition on to the misty moor ensues.

The relationship between Ivy and Ash is typical of many siblings and will be familiar to many readers. There are arguments and impatience but they are, ultimately, an excellent team and their resilience and problem-solving are endearing. Beyond Dad's ridiculous menu ideas, and the ghosts' repetitive jokes, humour is a little sparse. Readers' enjoyment will, instead, come from the story's charming, optimistic tone and endearing themes of family and teamwork. **SD**

#### Counting on Katherine

★★★★

Helaine Becker, ill. Dow Phumiruk, Macmillan, 32pp, 978 1 5290 0559 2, £10.99, hbk

This is the story of Katherine Johnson who, behind the scenes and against the odds, had a crucial role in Project Mercury; the programme designed to put American astronauts into space. She calculated the flight paths which led to the successful moon landings and also, under tremendous pressure, calculated the flight path required for the safe return to earth of the damaged Apollo 13 spaceship. Katherine gradually gained the trust of astronauts and the respect of the white male dominated community at NASA.

The picturebook begins with Katherine's childhood, she was an exceptional learner with a gift for mathematics. It describes the obstacles she overcame as an African American due to discrimination and segregation. Luckily, Katherine had a very supportive family who moved towns so that she could attend a high school for black students. Through determination and hard work, she secured her dream job working as a mathematician or 'computer' at NASA.

This is an authorised biography and based on Interviews with Katherine and her family.

Additional factual information about Katherine's life is included at the back of the book and there are also links to find out more. It is an enjoyable read and the warmth of the full colour illustrations and the clear and accessible layout add to the appeal of this very attractive book.

This book is a great addition to stories telling the role of women, and in particular women of colour, in history. Katherine's story might inspire children, especially young girls to aim high. It also provides insight into how crucial accurate mathematical calculation is to space exploration. The end papers, featuring huge chalkboards covered in sums, problems and formulae are a nice feature indicating the fascination and mystery of mathematical calculations and inviting readers to turn the pages to find out more. **SM**

#### What's That In Dog Years?

★★★★

Ben Davis, ill. Julia Christians, OUP, 296pp, 978-0-19-274921-5, £6.99, pbk

George has one faithful friend who he can rely on absolutely-Gizmo, his beloved dog. They have been together for the whole of George's life but Gizmo is now elderly with not long left to live. George decides to compile a bucket list of Gizmo's favourite things and to do them all with him before Gizmo dies.

However, there are obstacles to this ambition – his parents' divorce, which leaves little money to spare, and the disintegration of his long-term friendship with Matt, who has shifted his allegiance to the two school bullies, in a effort to be seen as cool. George's panic attacks-the result of a bad accident two years earlier-do not help, earning him the derision and cruelty of the bullies.

All seems bleak until the arrival of Lib, also a figure of fun to the boys as a result of her deprived background. She provides George with a lifeline, training Gizmo to win a dog competition which provides the money for the longed-for trip to Golden Beach, Gizmo's final treat.

**What's That In Dog Years?** is a classic tearjerker – I certainly cried when Gizmo died – and because it is partly told by Gizmo it gives his character an extra dimension. Substantial issues are cleverly incorporated into the text; the nature of friendship, the significance of social class, society's outsiders and the tensions of married life. This is a book ripe for discussion – and, in addition, a rattling good read. **VR**

#### The International Yeti Collective

★★★

Paul Mason, ill Katy Riddell, Stripes, 176pp, 978 1 78895 0848, £6.99 pbk

Ella is spending the summer with her Uncle Jack, a TV presenter who is on location in the Himalayas attempting to find the elusive yeti. Ella is not sure she believes they exist but is captivated by her uncle's passion and decides to investigate herself as one of their cameras has caught something unusual. At the same time a young yeti named Tick decides to do a little exploring too as he feels drawn to humans ever since his mother was banished by flouting the yeti rule that they should never approach humans. Tick is caught spying by one of the yeti elders and expelled from the yeti sett but is given a reprieve when he tells them that the humans are on their trail thereby putting the whole yeti collective in danger. And when their precious stones detailing yeti lore and mapping the whereabouts of other yeti setts are found by the humans the yetis are forced to set off on a quest to retrieve the stone tablets before they can be deciphered by humans.

# reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

## New Talent

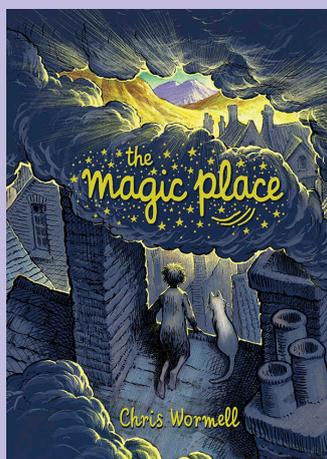
### The Magic Place

★★★★★

Chris Wormell, David Fickling Books, 294pp, 9781788450157 £11.99 hbk

Clementine has never seen the outside world. She is kept shut up inside No 10 Blackstone Street, home to her aunt and uncle. When not locked in her cellar room, she must clean and tidy for them. Her only companion (when he feels like it) is the white cat she calls Gilbert. Her only consolation, to lie looking up her chimney to catch a glimpse of a blue sky – and to dream about a special, a magical place; a place she is determined to find because she knows she must escape. But can she find the courage – and the strength?

Chris Wormell is already well known to be a master of the picture book as the author-illustrator of such classics as *Molly and the Night Monster* and *George and the Dragon*. Now he is turning his talent for storytelling to writing with a longer text. He is to be congratulated. Here is a Cinderella story to delight, perfect for reading aloud – or, if confident, reading oneself and especially for those who have already been introduced to Dahl. The narrative voice is assured and direct, inviting the reader to take part in the storytelling; a collaboration. The characters may be fairytale (no princes or princesses, though) – the orphan, the wicked



Aunt and Uncle – splendidly nasty creations, the animal familiar – but no magic, rather the magic is the power of the imagination and of hope. To accompany the text there are Wormell's own illustrations – spreads that give Clementine's world reality, page decorations to highlight elements of the narrative, complementing the text with little vignettes from the hand of a great draughtsman; black and white until the final glorious revelation. In addition the production values are excellent. From the attractive cover designed by Wormell, the end pages where the neat designs subtly mirror the passage of the story to the excellent choice of font, clear and unfussy, here is a little volume that demands to be picked up and read. This is to be highly recommended. **FH**

### Uki and the Outcasts

★★★★★

Kieran Larwood, ill David Wyatt & Fernando Jaurez, Faber & Faber, 386pp, 9780571342792, £12.99 hbk

We were introduced to the magical world of the Five Realms in the trilogy of *Podkin One-Ear* and we are now introduced to a new hero from another of these realms. Uki is a rabbit, attacked and thrown out by his tribe because of his piebald (black and white) fur and during his flight from danger his mother dies and Uki is left near to death. He is saved when an ancient spirit called Ifrit finds him and joins himself with Uki. This is the beginning of a quest, that will take Uki and several companions that he collects on the way on a long journey to re-capture four evil spirits who had escaped from a hidden prison and were hoping to regain their power.

In simplistic terms this follows the plot structure of a quest and we have the usual sequence where new members join the group. Following the same style as the previous books the story is told from two different perspectives, with a time lapse

Back in New Zealand Ella is becoming increasingly uncomfortable with her uncle's obsession realising that perhaps the yetis do not want to be found and understands that if they are their whole existence could be destroyed.

This is a page-turning eco-adventure drawing on the myths and legends of yetis across the world. The yeti culture and their way of living is well-realised down to the details of the different food they like to eat. Always fascinating to child readers! And we discover that the different yeti setts are responsible to some degree of keeping the eco-systems in place. There is an important message here of the dangers of altering the delicate balance of nature and of working together for greater gain. The key characters are well-drawn and insightful, standing up for what they believe in but although all the elements are there it somehow doesn't quite add up to the sum of its parts. The illustrations were not seen but no doubt they will be delightful judging by Katy Riddell's previous form. **JC**

between them. We have the tale of Uki and his compatriots, but again the story is being told by 'The Bard' who is also on a journey with his apprentice Rue. The plots are interlinked and there appears to be a common theme based around the importance of an old tower. However this is also about the meaning of family and friendship, as the entire group have problems with their families and are looking to find a new life. For Uki there are also issues around his differing fur colour; something that makes him different and not part of the tribe. What we do see is that this discrimination is not because of any real threat that he poses but is part of the fear that Uki's own tribe has for anything different. This is a story full of adventure, thrilling escapades and many challenges that will keep the audience hooked into the story until the end; it is a brilliant read for young, and not so young, readers. **MP**

### Ariki and the Island of Wonders

★★★★★

Nicola Davies, ill. Nicola Kinnear, Walker, 144pp, 978 1 4063 6980 9, £5.99 pbk

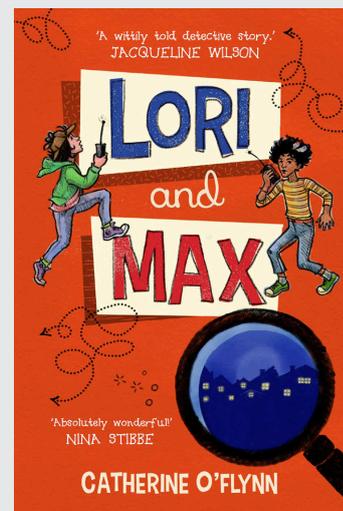
This sequel to *Ariki and the Giant Shark* continues the Pacific Island adventures of the impetuous, courageous girl who can read the stars, navigate the ocean and communicate with sea creatures. When Ariki and her friend Ipo are washed up on an unfamiliar island they meet a fellow castaway and help him to save the wonderful, gigantic blue birds that live there.

This is a magical adventure story with appealing characters and an exotic Pacific setting, all beautifully brought to life in Nicola Davies' descriptive text and Nicola Kinnear's gentle, curving and expression-filled illustrations. Nicola Davies is both zoologist and author, and this shows in her ability to present such eco themes as biodiversity, non-native species threat, seed dispersal and extinction danger whilst telling a fast-paced adventure story and conveying the sheer wonder and beauty of the natural world. These further tales about the intrepid Ariki should appeal to newly confident readers who love animals, adventure and unusual settings. **SR**

### Lori and Max

★★★★★

Catherine O'Flynn, Firefly Press, 202pp, 978 1913102029, £6.99 pbk Lori is an orphan and lives with her trendy gran who has a marvellous line in eccentric hats. She dreams of being a real-life detective following in the footsteps of her favourite gumshoes Jim and Sylvie Clandestino. But the only detecting she seems to do is to find her gran's spectacles on a regular basis. At school there is nothing much to discover either but when a new girl Max arrives Lori is charged with showing her the ropes and interesting things start to happen. Max claims she has been expelled from every



school she has attended but Lori soon realises that this is a front and that her devil may care attitude belies a different story. The girls strike up a tentative friendship as neither quite fits in.

On day Lori notices that the money in the charity box in her classroom has gone missing and everyone assumes Max has stolen it as she has also mysteriously disappeared. But Lori is convinced that Max would not have taken the money and that something has happened to her. The police do not believe Lori either and she realises she will have to solve the mystery herself. Told in alternating chapters between the two girls, this is a beautifully written story and a tender and sensitive portrayal of a blossoming friendship between the girls despite their differences and difficulties. The challenges faced by Max in her dysfunctional family are so delicately handled and startling well-observed. There is real heart-stopping peril at the end too as the story reaches a dramatic conclusion. This is a witty, sharp and intelligent detective story – an absolute gem. **JC**

### Stretch your confidence. Discover what you can do

★★★★★

Beth Cox, illus Vicky Barker, b small, 32pp, 9781911509967, £7.99 pbk

In collaboration with Power Thoughts founder, Natalie Costa, Level Headers.

It can be worrying to be young and lacking confidence. There are so many aspects of life where failure seems to be certain. The news is full of disaster and peopled by characters who appear to be super human in their achievements and presentation. It is all very well being told to be positive – but talking does not go very far. In this slim book, Beth Cox helped by lively illustrations by Vicky Barker, offers practical help and support. Identifying specific areas that can give rise to anxiety and a lack of confidence – popularity, friendships, fear – she presents each simply and directly in easy to understand language

## 8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

that offers possible solutions. She then suggests activities that might help such as listing strengths rather than perceived weakness. She is not prescriptive nor does she offer certain success. However, by describing confidence like a muscle she introduces the notion that it needs practice and training.

Mental health across all ages is now a concern. By helping young people to strengthen their self-belief and to feel confident as they grow future problems can be avoided. This attractive book would be an excellent first step in identifying problems and areas of concern while enabling the reader to take action for themselves. **FH**

## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

### The Tzar's Curious Runaways

★★★★★

Robin Scott-Elliott, *Everything with Books*, 299pp., 9781911427131, £8.99, pbk

Peter the Great of Russia collected in his *Circus of Curiosities*, dwarves, giants and people with deformities whom he used for entertainment, often with a great deal of cruelty. This is the background to this unusual story. Three very different members of this circus find themselves trying to escape after Peter dies and his Tzarina wants them killed. Katinka, a hunchback ballerina, Nikolai the dwarf with the beautiful voice, and Alexei the gentle giant, join together to evade their fate. Helped considerably the map drawn by Johann Daniel, the librarian, they start to make their way to the Ural mountains where Katinka has good memories of her home and parents. Their journey through the forests and then the steppes is beset by both animals and unfriendly people. But when they reach their journey's end, Katinka's memories are shattered.

This is, in essence a journey story, so where is Johann Daniel's map? Not many children will be familiar with the vastness of Russia or the inclement climate with winter coming on, and therefore it does seem to me a map is essential. Having said that this is an exciting story about three very different young people, both in their perceived disabilities but more interestingly in their personalities. Kat and Nikolai often misunderstand each other, and both are prone to anger quickly but Alexei is the calming influence between them, and gradually the two learn to respect each other. The extreme poverty of the people, the harshness of the climate and above all the cruelty of Peter are slowly revealed through the story. The heartrending moment when Kat meets the parents she remembered as having loved her, who then want to hand the three over to the Tzarina's guards, their perilous escape and the somewhat surprising ending, round up a very good and different story, set in a place and period of history with which not many children will be familiar. **JF**

### Top Marks for Murder

★★★★★

Robin Stevens, *Puffin*, 367pp, 978 0 241 34838 3, pbk

This is the eighth book in a much-loved series about Daisy Wells and Hazel Wong, two schoolgirl detectives in 1930s England. In this adventure their beloved school Deepdean is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary with a weekend of festivities to which the girls' parents are invited.

Something nefarious is witnessed in the woods surrounding the school. Daisy, Hazel and their friends must investigate. If they cannot solve the case, Deepdean School will close.

This book is a worthy addition to the series since it introduces two new elements. For the first time in the series the parents of the pupils and the alumnae of the school play a significant part in the narrative. As a consequence the reader learns a great deal about both groups of adults, including their motivations. Most readers of detective novels will be accustomed to strange twists about the identity of the killer. But with her customary gift for the unexpected, Stevens gives us a twist about who dies.

The festival weekend is marked by memorable events. The mother of one pupil has recovered from a potentially terminal illness. Her father has to tell this girl that her mother's illness has returned. One of the school's new pupils is apparently a little Egyptian princess. Conflict arises when the newcomer begins to usurp the limelight in which Daisy Wells is accustomed to bask. Issues such as serious illness and relative status do emerge in the real lives of young readers. They will easily understand what tensions arise in Stevens's pages.

The novel is, as Stevens's admirers will expect, compulsively readable. The reader must make the effort to keep track of a potentially bewildering multitude of characters. But the effort to do so is well worthwhile. **RB**

### The Bad Luck Light House

★★★★★

Nicki Thornton, *Chicken House*, 367pp, 9781912626304, £6.99 pbk. This second episode in the Seth Seppi series is, once again, filled with

magic, murder and mystery. Seth is a hotel kitchen boy who has recently inherited the entire hotel after discovering some rather terrifying truths about his family. His inheritance also included some magical powers, but he struggles to make sense of them, and he is relieved when his old friend Inspector Pewter, a magical policeman, arrives at the hotel, and offers Seth the opportunity to help him crack another case... Seth leaps at the chance.

This adventure takes place in an abandoned lighthouse on a storm-broken island, where Pewter and Seth are charged with finding out the truth behind some ghostly goings on (and the rather grizzly murder of the lighthouse's new owner). A cast of suspects is duly assembled, featuring a cagey lawyer, a jealous sister and a clueless kitchen maid, all of whom play their part perfectly as providers of clues and red herrings. The detectives have their work cut out - and then the shadows begin coming to life and attacking people!

The menacing presence of magic like this is used sparingly for much of the novel, allowing readers to focus instead upon the 'whodunnit'. The story stays true to most murder-mystery tropes, but the careful sprinkle of magic here and there gives the book a broader appeal: young fans of fantasy fiction will find much to enjoy.

As Seth unearths more and more clues, he discovers links between the crimes at the lighthouse and his own previous encounters with evil sorcery. Like the plot of the book itself, Seth's past is full of questions and uncertainty, and readers will long to see him reveal the truth behind his own mysterious family. In the first episode of the series, Seth proved himself as courageous and resilient. In this story, it is his friendship and compassion that shine most brightly and help him develop into a character of genuine depth and quality. It is also clear that Seth has nowhere near reached his potential for sorcery yet, leaving ample opportunity for many more Seth Seppi mysteries.

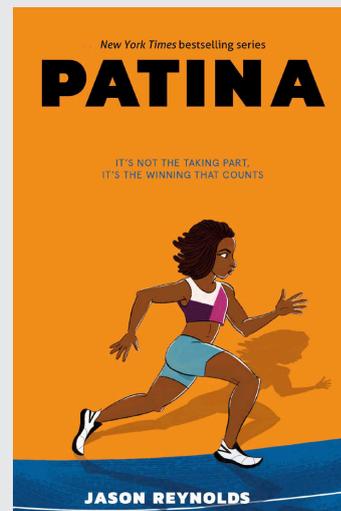
No mystery novel is complete without the big reveal at the end and Thornton succeeds in delivering a thoroughly satisfying finale, which twists and turns all the way to the last page, ready for Seth's next exciting escapade. **SD**

### Patina

★★★★★

Jason Reynolds, *Knights Of*, 272pp, 978 1 9996425 5 6, £6.99, pbk

This is the second of Jason Reynolds' "run club" quartet to be published in the U.K. Already out in the USA, run club (US title "track") follows the lives of four members of a youth running team in an unnamed US city. The first book, *Ghost*, came out in the UK earlier this year. This new one follows the story of Patina, a girl for whom coming second is coming nowhere (she should have met my dad);



and that's only one of the demons she has to deal with. Like Castle Cranshaw, aka Ghost, there's pain in her family life. Her father is dead and her mum has lost her legs through illness. This is the kind of euphemistic phrasing from which Reynolds draws some unlikely humour and pathos as naive little sister Maddy involves Patina in some speculation about the adventures of the disembodied legs. School's not too good either. Patina eats quickly, standing up in the school canteen, because she can't be sure who she might sit next to. Reynolds' skill is to acknowledge the considerable pressures on his characters, to show how they hurt, and how difficult it is to find a way through, but also to acknowledge the resources within and around them that are there to help. They draw strength from themselves, family and friends - and the discipline of the track - all the time making discoveries about other people and themselves. **CB**

### Max Kowalski Didn't Mean It

★★★★★

Susie Day, *Penguin: Random House*, 221pp, 9780241351390, £6.99

Max Kowalski's story describes perfectly the experience of a young person who simply cannot catch a break. Despite always meaning well and having good intentions, his actions never seem to result in anything other than disaster. But Susie Day's most recent family adventure is not a comedy of errors. It is an emotionally charged story about growing up and taking on family responsibility and many readers, old and young, will be spellbound by it.

After the death of his mother, Max knows that he has to step up and help his dad look after his three younger sisters. His dad, Big Pete, is the family hero, arriving late in the evening with pizza for tea and mysteriously acquiring wads of cash for occasional spending sprees at the seaside. His loving but unconventional approach to parenting illustrates the difficulty with which he is adapting to single

# reviews

## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

parenthood, and it's no surprise when he disappears for a few days, leaving behind a suitcase full of dodgy cash and a few whispered instructions to Max to be the man of the house. Max and his sisters are initially excited about this novel adventure, but then Dad doesn't come back.

At school, Max's choices often land him in lots of trouble. He finds it hard to avoid conflict and never finds time for his homework. With Dad gone, Max is the decision maker for the whole family, and his bad luck continues. His attempts to hold the fort, keeping his sisters fed and happy, while keeping his dad's secrets safe, somehow result in him leading the three young girls to Wales, where an abandoned house, a freezing winter and a mystery dragon turn the story from a tense drama to a high-pace adventure.

Each of the children in the family are strong characters in their own right and, though the story's focus is clearly on Max, throughout, it is clear that his sisters are dealing with loss in their own individual ways, too, be it by accumulating as much stationary as possible, or by writing romantic fiction! Day understands the complex forms that grief takes, and even Big Pete's neglect and abandonment are somewhat understandable, given the powerful emotions of loss that are so carefully and accurately drawn.

In the end, it is the kindness and understanding of others - friends and strangers - that offer Max a way through his labyrinth of problems. When he finally begins talking to people and sharing his feelings, things start to slowly get better.

**Max Kowalski Didn't Mean It** is a stirring story about the impact of grief and loss, delivered through a narrative that has tension, excitement and humour. It is a great book to share and discuss with a family member, but its deeply personal themes also make it perfect for independent reading. **SD**

### The Fowl Twins

★★★★

Eoin Colfer, HarperCollins, 426pp, 978 0 00 832481 0, £14.99 hbk

"Because, as his big brother often said, 'Know thine enemy, and assume everyone is your enemy, for it is ever true that the world resents genius.' Words Myles intended to live by, even though they were grandiose and long-winded, like Artemis himself." For some critics, "grandiose and long-winded" might well describe the telling of this novel and its predecessors, but sales for the **Artemis Fowl** series of 25 million reflect how much readers love Colfer's "grandiose and long-winded" comic voice. His American publisher, Disney, clearly share their enthusiasm; an **Artemis Fowl** movie, directed by Ken Branagh and featuring Judi Dench, is due in 2020.

**The Fowl Twins** marks a new

departure with a younger age group in mind and a series to follow. Artemis is away and (almost) out-of-touch on a 5 year mission to Mars, leaving the stage to his younger brothers, eleven-year-old twins Myles and Beckett, along with a new cast (albeit not too unlike that of the earlier series). The story involves an inquisitive troll called Whistle Blower, Lower Elements Police (LEP) Specialist Lazuli Heitz (one of the fairy folk), and the Artemis-designed Nano Artificial Neural Network Intelligence (NANNI) system. Then there's a Baddie (Colfer's word, not mine), Lord Teddy Bleedham-Drye, The Duke of Scilly. There's a slightly less bad Baddie, Sister Jeronima Gonzalez-Ramos de Zarate of Bilbao, expert in knives and nunterrogation and chief of the Amsterdam headquarters of ACRONYM. Sister Jeronima paraphrases her employers' Spanish name, which generates the acronym ACRONYM, as "an international intergovernmental organisation charged with monitoring fairy activity."

At the core of things are the contrasting, non-identical twins, Myles and Beckett. Their relationship has endless comic potential. Myles has an IQ of 170, he's brilliant in Science and Maths, precise in thought and grammar, personally fastidious, obsessively neat, though not strong on emotional intelligence. Beckett is the polar opposite of all that - "free as nature intended", physically agile and fearless, irredeemably messy (the state of his bedroom drove his parents to Mindfulness). Beneath the twins' bickering lie a deep and growing affection and a respect for the other's talents, especially as these turn out to be seamlessly complementary in the many crises the plot throws at them. Easing the story along are countless ingenious technical gadgets and gimmicks. The narrative is driven by themes familiar to readers of the original series coupled with Lord Teddy's search for ways of extending his life as long as possible, no matter what the cost to others or his dwindling finances.

The adventure whirls around the twins' home on an island in Dublin Bay, Lord Teddy's family seat on the Scillies, ACRONYM's HQ in Amsterdam - and back again. Close shave follows close shave - literally and metaphorically, as it happens. Some adult readers may find Colfer's style at times self-conscious and repetitious to the point of indulgence, risking slowing the action and so deterring young readers. Colfer, Disney, HarperCollins and those sales figures clearly know better. **GF**

### Where the River Runs Gold

★★★★★

Sita Brahmachari, Orion, 340pp, 978 1 510 10541 6, £6.99, pbk

In this dystopian eco adventure story readers are transported to Kairos

City where citizens are classified into freedoms, outlanders and paragons. Following a devastating hurricane, the Ark government introduce a system to meet the needs of the wealthy paragons. Children are trained to pollinate plants in the freedom fields; their small fingers replacing bees which have vanished from the city. Meanwhile other citizens rely on meagre rations from food banks while being monitored by the deceptively benign sounding 'Opticare' and policed by Ark security, nicknamed 'Crows.'

The main character is Shifa, fiercely brave and protective of her brother Themba who struggles to adapt to change and whose main source of solace and communication is his artwork. Their father Nabil has nurtured them by sowing seeds of stories in their minds of a former world of natural beauty. In a small act of quiet rebellion Nabil creates a secret garden of plants and a 'story hive', a stash of forbidden books. There is an underground movement of resistance too, artists painting 'Graffitirees', adorning buildings with beautiful paintings of former natural worlds.

When Shifa and Themba receive the call for training and then begin work in the freedom fields it is not long before Shifa realises Themba will not survive the regime and they will have to escape. She desperately seeks a plan however, it is through Themba and his relationship with the aged woman Lona that the key to their escape is found. Their precarious journey away from the dehumanising and unrelenting regime of the freedom fields and back to their father begins. When joined by another escapee Luca, Shifa's initial suspicion gradually disappears as she realises he offers friendship not betrayal. Her escape leads Shifa to discover the lies which have been told and the secrets hidden and triggers the hope that regeneration and true freedom can be found.

There are powerful and highly topical environmental messages in this story as well as social and political issues of wealth distribution, responsibility and fairness. Despite the harsh context of this clearly imagined storyworld, this is a book with real warmth, carefully drawn characters and sensitive relationships. There are strong themes of trust, love and the meaning of family. Shifa's devotion to her brother Themba shines throughout and her growing recognition of the importance to her of the love of Nabil, the man she has called father all her life. A gripping read, highly recommended. **SMC**

### Blast Off To The Moon!

★★★★★

Produced in association with British Interplanetary Society and NASA. Introduction by the first British Astronaut and woman to visit Mir Space Station, Helen Sharman.

Tim Peake is quoted on the front cover as saying, "Packed with fun facts and information, **Blast Off to the Moon** tells the thrilling story of humankind's greatest achievement. It will delight young, and not so young, space enthusiasts alike."

In the introduction, Helen Sharman, our first Briton to travel to space, suggests dipping into this book rather than reading it cover to cover. The book begins with details of the mission to the moon, readers meeting the three selected astronauts, Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins. There is description of their intensive training, the lead up to the launch and then the chapter headed, "**THE WORLD HOLDS ITS BREATH... On the 16th July 1969 at 9-32a.m. the Saturn V launched the three astronauts on their epic journey to the moon.**" The book continues to tell what life was like on board; what they ate, how they slept, how they went to the toilet, what work they had to do..... and so much more. It is based on the original NASA Press Kit and is full of exclusive never before seen content from the BIS archives. Certainly I did as Helen Sharman suggested, turning each page until I reached the end of the book, browsing through the pictures and photographs, and reading some captions. I wanted to know how the three returned to earth safely, despite the prepared announcement of their expected fate, to stay on the moon and rest in peace.

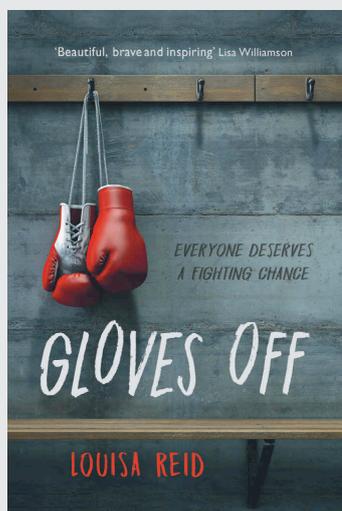
This is an extraordinary book, accessible to all, and should have the widest of ownership. It has been put together in such a way that invites the youngest of readers to become fascinated by the whole idea of space. It is full of reverential but honest and factual information which can only leave readers in awe of these three men in particular, but also of all the enormous number of scientists who worked tirelessly for success towards this incredible achievement. **Blast Off to the Moon** should be in multiple copies in every library, every school and in all homes where families are determined to have a thirst for knowledge both for themselves and their offspring. A book full of awe and wonder. Let us be thrilled! Most highly recommended. **GB**

### Gloves Off

★★★★★

Louisa Reid, Guppy Books, 308pp, 9781913101008, £10.99 hbk

Overweight teenage Lily is having a rough time. Tormented at school she has also to cope with a loving but seriously obese mother who has lost the confidence to leave the house. Her father is supportive but often works away from home. But after one particularly humiliating episode with the classroom bully Lily tells him something of what was going on. Enraged, he gets her to start daily training and also join a female boxing academy. She does both, with startling success. She also



finally makes a new and increasingly intimate female friend.

Told in verse, mostly free but with occasional rhymes, this is strong stuff. Its subject matter is reminiscent of Judy Blume's ground-breaking story *Blubber* written around the same sad subject and published over forty years ago. But has nothing improved since then? Lily has to fight her battles entirely on her own in the face of a male pupil thug and some pathetic girl hangers-on. Her teacher can't cope and the school has no anti-bullying policy. Lily eventually decides, quite literally, to take matters into her own hands, with the implied lesson here that if you don't look after yourself no-one else will.

This is still unfortunately true in some schools, but others surely are doing better now? As it is any young readers who are also overweight could well come away from this dark novel fearing for their own classroom future. It would be a shame if tough-talking stories about bad school experience also had the effect of appearing to normalise such cruelty as an expected everyday occurrence. How nice instead if this talented author came up next time with a story detailing pupil and teacher solidarity against bullying along with the idea that meeting violence with violence is not the only way to solve all of life's problems. **NT**

### The Switching Hour

★★★★

Damaris Young, Scholastic, 277pp, 978140195049, 6.99 pbk

This is a very timely reminder of how connected we are to the land and the climate that surrounds us. Amaya lives with her younger brother Kaleb and Grandma Uma in a land that is suffering from a horrendous drought. At the same time children are mysteriously disappearing and their families begin to suffer from the Sorrow Sickness and seem to forget all about them. The Switching Hour of the title is that twilight time

when an ancient evil is meant to come out and take anyone who is not safely shut in their home and one day Amaya leaves her door open and her brother is taken. Her search to find her brother before the curse makes her forget him takes her in to many dangers, but she meets people who are also suffering and who need help.

This is a wonderful and exciting story that emphasises the importance of family and of friendship. It also reminds up about memory and how so much of our thinking about those around us is linked to the memories that accumulate; about events and activities that we have shared or heard about. In an age where people often feel more connected to celebrities that to their families it is important to keep alive the knowledge of our past and also to maintain the bonds that have held families together. There is also an important message about global warming and the dangers that so many areas face from the treat of drought, flooding and other environmental disasters. Amaya is a frustrating heroine to begin with, but we gradually build up an empathy with her and we watch her grow as an individual. It is a great read for those who like stories with magic, folk tales mixed with some more serious elements about the world we live in. **MP**

### Wolf Light

★★★★

Yaba Badoe, Zephyr, 292pp, 9781786695512, £10.99, hbk

At a time when the world's most famous climate campaigner (excepting Sir David Attenborough) is a sixteen year old girl from Sweden, it shouldn't be a surprise to find a novel in which three teenage girls with special powers and much determination set out to thwart predatory capitalists bent on savaging the natural world. Zula from Mongolia, Linet in Cornwall and Adoma in Ghana draw their power from ancient spiritual beliefs which venerate the natural environment. They convene in a spiritual dimension where they take on the attributes of animal spirit guides; and they support one another in trials which are as much about growing up, assuming responsibility, finding a voice, falling in love and coping with grief, as they are about outwitting the "skin walkers" who see only the possibilities of exploitation in ancient landscapes. Badoe has a relish for language and writes prose which is at times unself-consciously poetic. Her clever integration of girl power, family relationships (particularly with grandparents), climate consciousness and the cultural beliefs of her three heroines makes for a fascinating story. I was sorry when the tale came to an end. So many books these days run on

to over 300 pages or set out to be the beginning of a series without there being enough to sustain their ambition. Here I would have loved to have had more of the same. **CB**

### The Boy Giant

★★★★

Michael Morpurgo, illus Michael Foreman, 288pp, 978-0008347918, £12.99 hbk

Omar is a twelve-year-old Afghan refugee. He and his mother want to get to England but his mother says he is to go ahead alone. She will join him later. Omar begins his journey in an overloaded yellow dinghy, a journey which nearly costs him his life. When he comes ashore not in England but in Lilliput, his arrival feels like Gulliver's. The reader does not know for certain whether Omar's perception of himself as huge is real or imagined.

Omar spends the next four years with the Lilliputians and without his mother. He believes that she has reached England before him. Omar is befriended by two Lilliputians, Zaya and Natoban. They teach him English and escort him round the island, becoming his best friends while he is in Lilliput. The novel now poses the question whether Omar and his two best friends will ever reach England. Will Omar be reunited with his mother?

Opening a Morpurgo book, one expects to find oneself in a strong relationship with the narrative and the characters. With this book, this reviewer did not feel the expected relationship. Morpurgo has attempted to combine two very different genres, the realistic narrative of refugees in flight from danger or poverty and the more imaginative intertext with and retelling of Swift's famous fantasy. If any author could combine these very disparate elements, it would seem that Morpurgo could do so. But in fact the strain of combination seems to be too severe even for him. Once the reader has become reconciled to the dissonance of the two themes, the read is enjoyable. But the dissonance remains.

Some but not all of Foreman's illustrations are included in this pre-publication copy. When complete they will add signally to the appeal of the book.

Two themes dominate the text, namely the need to be kind and welcoming to strangers and the need to eliminate war. But both themes seem to be hammered home in an uncharacteristically blunt and unsubtle manner. The author's many admirers will feel that on this occasion he has not lived up to his past standard. **RB**

### Flember, the Secret Book

★★★★

Jamie Smart, David Fickling, 370pp, 978 1 91098 946 3, 6.99, pbk  
You may well wonder who, or what, Flember is. First, it's the name of the island where the story takes place, and then it's the name of the life

force on which the island depends. However, that's just one of the life forces in the island town of Eden. The other is the boy Dev, an inventor whose ingenuity and ambition are limitless. When we meet him he is jumping off a cliff supported only by chicken feathers and cheese powered boots. Jamie Smart helpfully provides diagrams of some of this young Da Vinci's machines, although there's no danger of readers trying them out at home. It's doubtful whether you can order "stretchable ortingles tubes" or "smellkonics" even online. Oh, and I mustn't forget Dev's other remarkable quality - determination. That is, he doesn't know when to stop, as my mother used to say. Dev's inventions often have unforeseen disastrous consequences. Think the sorcerer's apprentice, and, worse still, think Dr. Frankenstein. Dev, from the very best intentions, and with the help of a long lost secret book, harnesses Flember to create life; and, in this case it's a giant teddy bear with the unrestrained impulses of a hunger driven toddler. That's where all the bother begins, because there's only so much Flember to go round and Dev and Boja the bear (surely nothing to do with Boris Johnson?) have used up nearly all of it. Jamie Smart's self-illustrated story is packed with incident, humour and ideas. There's also a serious message about "the journey of a young boy taking responsibility for his mistakes". Indeed, any story where there's a town called Eden possibly has more going on than appears on the surface, even if the surface has more peaks and troughs than a gale in the Atlantic. **CB**

### The Space We're In

★★★★

Katya Balen, Laura Carlin (illus.), Bloomsbury Children's Books, 292 pp, 978 1 4266 0194 0, £10.99 hbk  
Max is aged five, He has autism. His brother Frank is aged ten and is the narrator of Balen's story. He has no such impairment. The mother of the two boys is the one who best understands Max's needs. The loving father is also present.

Early in the narrative Frank fails to show his brother the respect and understanding that Max needs. He even uses the unacceptable word 'retarded' to describe his sibling. However we should not think of Frank as acting out of ignorance. He knows his language and behaviour are unacceptable. He is acting from anger, frustration and impotence.

At this point a disaster overtakes the family. Balen's novel now explores the question how the different members of the family cope in the aftermath of the disaster. Special attention is paid to the question how Max's needs are met in the new family circumstances. Many novels featuring characters with disabilities portray special schools in a negative light, the needs of the pupils largely unmet. Balen in contrast depicts Max's school in a positive manner. Frank's account reveals how the school enables Max to develop at his own pace and in

## 10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

ways that he finds appropriate. One notable feature as the story unfolds is a brilliant example of intertextuality with Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, which any reader familiar with Sendak will enjoy.

Laura Carlin's monochrome illustrations are, it seems, meant to be drawings created by Frank. They combine artistic skill with a childlike element that complements the text.

This reviewer has certain misgivings about the language used to describe the disabled character. It is of course true that such retrograde language and the attitudes that inspire it are sadly commonplace in the real world. The writer is doing no more than reflecting this reality. To do otherwise would be dishonest. At the same time there is a danger that sensitive readers encountering such evidence of prejudice might stop reading. And that would be a pity. **RB**

### The Wind in the Wall

★★★★

Written by Sally Gardner and illustrated by Rovina Cai, Hot Key Books, 32pp, 978-1-4714-0498-6, £12.99 hbk

*"Wishes are such sweet profanities, they fall so carelessly from the mouth..."*

If you had one wish, how would you use it? You might think you'd be wiser than the narrator of this picturebook for older readers – but under the same pressure, you too might find yourself wishing for something you did not intend.

In the cold climate of Northumberland, an eighteenth-century Duke orders his gardener to grow a pineapple – a feat that is almost impossible to achieve, as this newly-fashionable fruit is 'sun-obsessed' and must be given very special treatment. The gardener does his best, but his pineapples do not thrive. The Duke, anxious for the prestige that such a novelty will bring, employs a Mr Amicus from Brazil who arrives with a mysteriously shrouded birdcage and moves into the hothouses, where he proceeds to grow a perfect specimen.

The ousted gardener suspects that Mr Amicus isn't Brazilian – or indeed the expert that he claims to be. Spying on him, the gardener discovers the magical secret in Mr Amicus's birdcage – a feathered fairy-wife, capable of granting wishes. The gardener wants to help her, but it takes a summer storm to free the fairy-wife. She spends the night with the gardener before granting him a wish that must be used "wisely" if he wants to see her again. But the gardener is attacked by a jealous Mr Amicus and finds himself in a dead-end corner by an enormous wall. He forgets the fairy-wife's advice. "I wish it would hide me," he thinks – and the stones part. The gardener is trapped.

"On good days when the wind doesn't moan down from the moors, I think she will come back to free me," he says. But the gardener is still waiting inside the wall...

*The Wind in the Wall* was written when Sally Gardner was writer in residence at Alnwick Castle, and although some of the site-specific details add depth and context to her story, there's a sense that it doesn't wear its research as lightly as it could. That said, it's always a pleasure to welcome new picturebooks for older audiences and there is much to admire here, from Rovina Cai's atmospheric artwork to the gothic flavour that permeates Gardner's historically-inspired text, evoking classic ghost stories and inviting readers to view their surroundings with new eyes. **CFH**

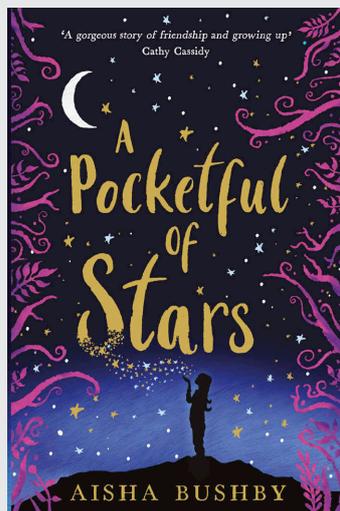
### A Pocketful of Stars

★★★★

Aisha Bushby, Egmont, 272pp, 978-1405293198, £6.99 pbk

This moving beautifully told story introduces us to a distinctive central character with a very particular story to tell. Yet, as with all the best coming-of-age stories, it contains truths for everyone and insights for all readers.

Safiya's parents are divorced. She chose to live with her father and believes that she's a disappointment to her mother, even that her best friend the more worldly and confident Elle is closer to the person her mother wishes her daughter to be. The opening chapter features one of those rows that will probably be recognisable to all mothers and daughters, the sort in which emotions run too high, that end with slammed doors and things said deliberately to hurt. Shockingly, Safiya is denied the chance to apologise when her mum suffers a stroke and falls into a coma. But time alone at her mum's hospital bedside brings dreams that transport Safiya back to her mum's childhood home in Kuwait and a chance to watch her mother as a



teenager. The dreams are linked to Saff's love of gaming and she embarks on a quest to find objects that matter to her mother in the belief that by succeeding she can save her life. In the process she learns much more about her mother, and most importantly, a chance for them both to say how much they love each other.

The experience changes Saff's understanding of her mother and their relationship; indeed, she realises that: 'If you cut Mum and me open we'd be filled with the very same fire, glowing red and orange and gold.' Seamlessly woven in is a backstory about changing relationships at school and we watch as Saff gains the strength to form new, better friendships and to stand up for what she knows is right.

Aisha Bushby maintains a delicate balance between the dream world and the everyday one, keeping both equally vivid, credible and compelling. An impressive debut and a skilful examination of grief, love and growing-up. **AR**

### The Time of Green Magic

★★★★

Hilary McKay, Macmillan Children's Books, 214 pp, 978 1 5290 1926 1, £9.99 hdbk

McKay's new book has three protagonists, Max aged fourteen, Abi aged eleven and Louis aged six. They are a mixed family, Abi's father having married Louis's and Max's mother. Abi's mother died when Abi was a baby. As happens in McKay stories, the parents are often absent. The father is a doctor with a busy schedule and the mother is an international aid worker who spends much of her time working abroad. Max and Abi cope well enough with the parents' absence, Abi seeking refuge in books. But the young Louis finds the situation hard to deal with.

Coping with loneliness and neglect, Louis creates a big cat named Iffen. As Louis's sense of isolation deepens, so Iffen becomes more real and more aggressive. The big cat begins to leave physical marks of his presence such as claw indentations on the rug in Louis's bedroom and a big scratch on Louis's ankle. As adults, mother and father of course cannot see the big cat. But Abi and Max can. They embark on a quest, to return Iffen to the world whence he came and thus to restore Louis's mental freedom.

As readers of McKay will have come to expect, this is a book driven by a powerful imagination and a deep sense of what a family means. This novel has an intense focus on the power of literature and literacy as Louis learns to become a reader. The book highlights potent intertextualities with (for example) Narnia and Anne Frank's diary. McKay expertly describes that imaginary space created by works of fiction that enable us the readers to cope with challenges in our day to day real world. The characterisation in the novel is excellent. Louis is

impressively intelligent yet at the same time as endearingly innocent as a six year old should be.

From a strictly story-telling perspective the absence of the parents serves to focus attention on the children and is therefore a necessity. But if this reviewer is obliged to cite one minor flaw in this impressive work it is that the parental figures, being absent so much of the time, lack reality in the narrative. If they are (as we imagine them to be) caring parents, it is hard to reconcile their feelings with their continued absence from the young children. **RB**

### Inchtinn, Island of Shadows

★★★★

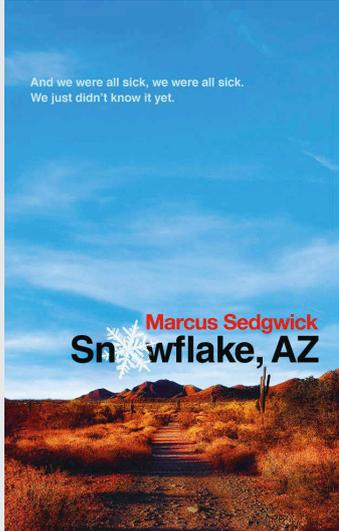
Danny Weston, uclanpublishing, 226pp, 978-1-4063-1037-5, £7.99 pbk  
There are shadows aplenty in this novel; eerie casts of light; troubled minds; unquiet souls. This is the story of Noah and his widowed mother Millicent, famous author of children's books featuring *The Adventurers*, a group of plucky young souls who have dedicated themselves to righting wrongs. However, since her husband's death in the Second World War, Millicent has suffered writer's block and feels the need of a remote location to give her the peace and isolation which she believes will stimulate her creative abilities. There are few locations more remote than the island of Inchtinn, as Noah quickly discovers.

His overwhelming fear of water makes the journey to the island in a small boat almost unbearable and the accommodation is little more than an extremely poorly furnished wooden cabin. Trying desperately to find something to do, Noah begins to explore a cave in the cliffs. Here he meets and forms a friendship with cloaked and hooded young girl who, he discovers later, died 500 years previously in the then notorious leper hospital on the island.

Mysteries accumulate, then begin to unfold, revealing a past full of cruelty and corruption. Millicent refuses to believe Noah's stories about a mysterious figure outside his room, until the presence enters the cabin and injures her so badly that Noah is forced to overcome his terror of water and swim to the shore in a storm in an effort to find help. The ghostly girl appears in selkie form and saves his life and Millicent's, too, as he is able to get help.

This action-packed tale is far more than a simple ghost story: it explores family ties, loss, corruption and courage. The storyline mirrors Millicent's stories in many ways: mysteries to be solved, help from unexpected waters and the triumph of good over evil. **VR**

## 14+ Secondary/Adult



### Snowflake, AZ

★★★★

Marcus Sedgwick, Zephyr, 278pp, 9781788542333, £12.99 hbk

Every novel by Marcus Sedgwick is an adventure in ideas different from anything he has written before. This current novel is no exception, and may well be his most challenging yet. It is told by American teenage Ash in a colloquial style half-way between Huckleberry Finn and Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*. Struck down by a mystery condition that absorbs all his energy Ash finally winds up with a small group of fellow-sufferers living in a community outside Snowflake, a small town in the Arizona desert. These have self-diagnosed themselves as possessing Multiple Chemical Sensitivity, or MCS for short. This condition, they argue, is a compound of severe allergies to all the chemicals and general pollutants increasingly surrounding us in the modern world. Any occasional visitor from outside has first to go through a lengthy body and clothes de-toxifying process before they are allowed indoors.

The story takes place some time in the near future. Wearing a mask whenever he goes into town for fear of catching anything bad in the air, Ash passes a strange late adolescence in the company of a fifty-plus woman who has similar problems. He stays there for six years, mostly lying in bed but occasionally doing the odd minor chore. Money never seems a problem in a community that has turned its back on anything resembling regular work.

In a foreword Sedgwick describes how he himself had previously been struck down by Chronic Fatigue Syndrome for over five years and at one time had stayed with a group of fellow-sufferers living in the desert near the real-life town of Snowflake.

He writes about such characters in the novel with affection and respect, giving them all the best lines including quotations from great figures from the past and their views on the need for respecting the environment. Members of the group call themselves the canaries after the little birds that used to be lowered into coal mines to utter warning cheeps when the atmosphere began turning toxic.

Young people currently involved in the Climate Change Protest and the Extinction Rebellion will find plenty to interest them here. But for others the story could well start to drag. Ash's emotional as well as physical passivity is hard to take over so many pages and the opinions put forward in his supportive group are never challenged by other characters with contrary beliefs. Extreme environmentalists, suspecting a series of government cover-ups that no-one other than themselves have ever spotted, do not generally make for easy company. The same could be said of this brave, angry and resolutely opinionated story. But if Sedgwick does eventually turn out to be right about the way we are progressively poisoning ourselves, God help us all. **NT**

### What Magic is This?

★★★★

Holly Bourne, Barrington Stoke, 167 pp, 978 1 78112 885 5, £7.99 pbk

Sophia, Mia and Alexis are three girls, best friends, in Year Nine. One night the three decide to cast wishing spells in order to solve their various problems. Sophia is the narrator. She is desperate for Aidan Chambers, the best looking boy in her year, to reunite with her. Mia has a more serious problem to resolve. She needs to stop self-harming. Alexis wants to resurrect her recently expired dog Casper. Are the three girls really juvenile witches? Or is there a different kind of magic at work? If so, it might be a kind of magic the girls can't control.

This is a problematic book. Holly Bourne has established herself as a successful writer. But this book may not be quite what her admirers would expect. Her readers have come to expect books of 300 pages or more in length, giving Bourne the opportunity to develop characters and narrative in a measured and effective style. This much shorter book develops its themes in a manner which seems more abrupt and far less satisfying.

A final point. Quite why Bourne chose to give the teenage boy in her story the name of Aidan Chambers, in the real world a well-known writer and the winner of a Carnegie medal, is quite baffling and distracting for anyone who has heard of the real-life Aidan. **RB**

### Heartstream

★★★★

Tom Pollock, Walker Books, 346pp, 9781406378184, £7.99 pbk

We all know that there is a growing trend to open up our lives to others, using social media, but what if you could have an implant on your scalp that would allow your followers to feel all of your emotions in real time, even your most personal and heart wrenching thoughts? This is the premise that we are introduced to at the beginning of this story; when Amy is attending the funeral of her mother, having shared the latter's terminal illness with social media. But just as we think that we know what is going on we are introduced to a parallel story with totally different characters and no sense of how the stories relate in space and time. The only connection is that Cat and her friends, especially Evie, are super fans of a pop group and spend a lot of time tweeting and blogging about them; however Cat has a secret which could tear apart her friendship and spoil the whole fan following for the group.

This was a book that took a while to get in to, especially with the two very distinct stories but it definitely paid off in the end. The author took us on a roller coaster of a ride and provided so many twists and turns that it felt like a ride at a theme park. The gradual realization of how the stories are linked and the relationships that are revealed will have the reader on the edge of their seats. We are asked to question the concepts of loyalty, family, friendship and what impact the advent of social media has on these. It has definitely been a book that has made me think about the way that technology is interfering with and even changing the way we live our lives. It is a really great read for those 14+. **MP**

### Furious Thing

★★★★

Jenny Downham, David Fickling Books, 375 pp, 978 1 78845 098 0, £12.99 hdbk

Nearly sixteen years old, Alexandra Robinson, known as Lexi, lives with her mother, her mother's boyfriend John and her half-sibling Iris aged six. John and Lexi's mother are planning to marry. But John for no apparent reason despises Lexi and the feeling is mutual. John has a son named Kass by his earlier marriage. Kass and Lexi have known each other for years. Lexi has a big crush on Kass. Can this family unite? Or is there something more significant and more dangerous at work?

Despite this reviewer's habitual avoidance of spoilers, it is necessary to explain that domestic violence and coercive control form the substance of this novel. The importance of this novel lies in its rarity value. There are few books in which domestic violence and bullying are candidly depicted, and even fewer in the catalogue of children's literature.



A central feature of this book is Lexi's unreliability as a narrator. Her behaviour is often difficult to defend. At school she throws a chair through a window because she objects to auditioning for Caliban instead of for Miranda in *The Tempest*. There is nothing good that can happen to Lexi that she cannot spoil. Her anger makes it hard for the reader to untangle any dependable elements in her narrative. By the end of the book however the reader has come to grasp, understand and sympathise with the complexity of her world view.

The book poses another problem to which no obvious answer emerges. On two occasions John uses the word 'retard'. This word is no longer part of the permissible vocabulary, if it ever was. Of course it can be argued that John's use of such a term is a valid indicator of his extreme mental and emotional condition. Nevertheless it can also be argued that any use of such prejudicial terms increases the risk of their attaining currency in the vocabularies of young readers. **RB**

### We Hunt the Flame

★★★★

Hafsah Faizal, PanMacmillan, 496pp, 9780374313647, £7.99 pbk

This is the world of Arawiya, five kingdoms each autonomous but ruled from Sultan's Keep. Once they were full of magic, but no more. The kingdoms are dying as the Arz, the Empty Forest that devours those who dare enter it, spreads over the land and the Sultan is no longer the overseer but rather the overlord, taking over the kingdoms one by one. Zafira is the Hunter, a girl disguised as a boy in order to help her people; Nasir, the Prince of Death, a crown prince trained as an assassin – and tasked with killing the Hunter. Their common quest – to find the mysterious Jawarat, an artefact that will restore magic and balance. Can they overcome their distrust of each other to save their world?

Here is a richly imagined world that draws its inspiration from the deserts and legends of ancient Arabia – the author's use of a

# reviews

## 14+Secondary/Adult continued

colourful vocabulary from her own heritage adds strength and depth to the overall atmosphere. The prose is lush – overwhelming, as descriptive phrases, adjectives, adverbs are employed at every moment to heighten emotion and tension. This is romantic fantasy. The style of writing reflects the requirements of the genre – as do the plot, (there are some nice twists offering moments of surprise) and characters; the expectations of its readers will be well satisfied. **FH**

### The Wishing Bones

★★★★★

Michelle Lovric, Orion Children's Books, 377pp, 978-1-444-009997-2, £6.99, pbk

This lengthy, complex and sometimes chilling book is not for the inexperienced or faint-hearted reader, but for those who are able and willing to persevere there is a mighty treat in store.

The story opens in Venice in 1739 with the murder of an innocent tourist in The Hotel Of What You Want, an establishment set up by Arabella Magoghe, one of four evil Sicilian sisters who fled to the city to escape armed conflict in their homeland and who have abandoned all compassion in the face of greed and a desire for revenge against the citizens of the city which refused to help them. Their hearts have become hardened to all but the pursuit of money and the bones of their victims are scrubbed and aged to be sold as holy relics, much prized by Venetians.

Orphaned Sorrowful Lily, cruelly raised in the convent run by another of the sisters, is schooled in the murder of the hotel's guests by Ivo, who has his own tragic secret. Enter Darling Dearlyworthy, niece of one of Arabella's victims: feisty, Irish, with a marvellously poetic vocabulary, eager to find out what has happened to her uncle. Introduce Casanova in his fifteenth year and build an alliance of these unusual young people, united in their desire to strip the Magoghe sisters of their power and return the relic of Saint Lucy's body-stolen by the sisters- to her beloved Venice.

The fabric of the story is not yet fully woven, however. There is a strong thread of magic realism, with a talking statue of the Madonna, a fretful baby Jesus, mermaids who speak like wise but wonderfully entertaining pirates, murderous giant eels and an overwhelming conviction that evil will be routed in the end. The narrative pace is brisk and the reader is taken on an unforgettable physical and emotional roller-coaster ride. This exceptional book repays readers a hundred-fold. **VR**

### I Hold Your Heart

★★★

Karen Gregory, Bloomsbury, 319 pp, 978 1 266 0916 8, £7.99 pbk

Gemma Belfine is aged almost seventeen. She is a promising A Level student (though not expected to hit the top rank) and a talented country singer and songwriter. She lives with her mother and father and her younger brother Michael who is a gifted footballer. The children's father channels a great deal of time and energy into Michael's possible career as a player. Gemma sometimes feels that she is invisible to her father.

Gemma's interest outside the home rotates around a part-time job. She works at a café with her friend Esi, who is Ghanaian and an academically outstanding student. Gemma then meets Aaron Weaver at the sixth form college. Aaron is handsome. He treats Gemma like a princess, buying her expensive gifts and devoting every waking hour to her. But Aaron begins to monopolise Gemma, claiming all her time, texting her at 2 AM, encouraging her to quit college.

Gemma enters for a talent competition and would have had a good chance of making progress were it not for the intervention of Aaron. There is now a contest to exercise control over Gemma, a contest between Aaron on the one hand and her family and friends on the other.

The strength of this book lies in the way the author makes the reader aware, slowly but inexorably, of the coercive control Aaron seeks to exert over Gemma. Gregory also strikes a telling blow in the narrative by inserting brief passages told from the viewpoint of Aaron. These passages remind us that there are two sides to every disagreement, without ever mounting a spurious defence of Aaron's behaviour. Readers should be aware that the book makes reference to sexual assault and pornographic images.

The major flaw in this book is also its greatest strength. In the early stages of Gemma's relationship with Aaron, the depiction of the romance is totally idyllic. The reader recognises how much Gemma stands to lose. Some readers may find these early pages difficult to stomach and may abandon the book. If so they will miss a novel that in every other way merits their attention. **RB**

### Chinglish

★★★★★

Sue Cheung, Andersen, 373pp, 9781783448395, £7.99 pbk

This novel written in diary form starts when its narrator Jo Kwan is 13. It finishes three years later. Jo comes from Hong Kong but now lives in Coventry. She has a tough life, helping out in the family Takeaway run by her unstable, sometimes violent father and her long-suffering mother who

has never learned proper English while Jo has never learned enough Cantonese to talk back to her. Short for her age she is also picked on by bullies at school.

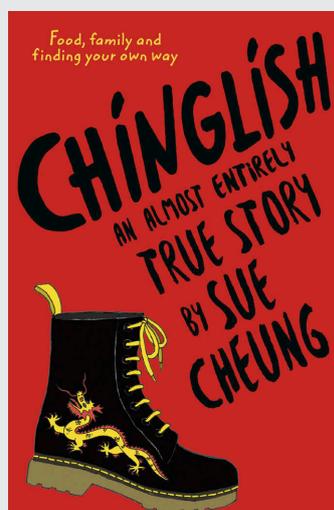
So far so miserable? Not a bit of it. Jo is also wonderfully resilient, seeing off recurrent crises with the acid humour also found in her comic line drawings breaking out on every other page. Largely autobiographical, this story does not spare her uncomprehending and uncaring family whose only interest is to run the business and make as much profit as possible. There are no birthday or Christmas presents for her or her younger sister, nor for the older brother who now lives with his grandparents.



immediately accessible - but those who give it the time and attention it deserves will be rewarded. Mello's sophisticated papercuts and collages take us on a journey deep into unfamiliar territory, a world of scrubland furnaces where children labour to produce charcoal, and his evocative prose - somewhere between a poem, a conversation and a dream - is narrated by a hornet, whose insect's-eye view makes the story even more surreal. But forcing boys to work in such conditions is surreal, and this book raises awareness about child labour in one of the most powerful ways of all - by immersing us in something that communicates more than just the facts.

Events in this book unfold in story-form. A hornet is caring for his larva in its muddy nest. In his search for food to nourish it, the hornet observes a boy and his friend as they tend the charcoal ovens, inadvertently start a bushfire, hide from the inspectors and make an unplanned trip to the steelworks. On his return the boy destroys the hornet's nest - "Are you listening to me, boy? Waste of time, I'm shouting in Hornet, he understands only Boy"- and is duly stung by the insect, who seems more attentive to his young than are the adults who should be caring for the charcoal boys. But around and between these plot points lie other ideas and inferences for readers to notice and interrogate - Mello leaves much unsaid and invites us to fill in the gaps. What is the significance of Albi's key? Is the hornet right to call himself bad? And what happens to the boy after he's been stung? Observant readers will notice the word either, and draw their own conclusions. All does not end well in charcoal-burning territory, and we emerge with our eyes opened, blinking, wondering how and where and why we were transported.

This is a book that deserves to be explored and shared and talked about, but may require adults to champion it to get it off the shelves. It would make a great starting point for investigative and creative activities. Roger Mello is an internationally-acclaimed Brazilian author-illustrator and recipient of the Hans Christian Andersen Award who has published more than a hundred titles for children and young adults. Daniel Hahn is an editor of the Ultimate Book Guide series and a prizewinning translator. Elsewhere Editions is based in New York and the text for this book includes some US vocabulary. **CFH**



But Jo has a real talent for drawing and against the odds finally wins a scholarship to the London College of Fashion - just as the author once did herself. She also has a best friend Tina, who helps her during some of the worst moments. But her real saviour is her determination to come through to her ambitions despite huge family pressure pushing her back into a life she is intent on escaping. She still dwells on ordinary adolescent concerns like clothes, hairstyles and boyfriends while working behind the family counter sometimes up to thirty hours a week on top of school days. Somehow she manages to remain excellent company, with a talent for black humour that makes this exceptional book a real pleasure to read. Misery memoir it is not, although there are sad moments. This is a novel that deserves to be read by anybody from teenage onwards - it is that good. **NT**

### Charcoal Boys

★★★★★

Written and illustrated by Roger Mello, translated from the Portuguese by Daniel Hahn, Elsewhere Editions, 46pp, 978-1939810199, £16.99 hbk

This unusual picturebook for older audiences will surprise readers with its unconventional subject matter and approach and may not appear

# Classics in Short No.137 Uncle Tom's Cabin

Brian Alderson on the origins of **Uncle Tom's Cabin**, by Harriet Beecher Stowe.

## **Not only eyebrows**

but angry voices would be raised if Ms Esmée Mascall were to obtrude her 12 page infant "Vanguard Story Hour" reader (ca.1950) upon the readers of today. Under the title of **Sambo and Topsy** it recounts, with predictable two-colour illustrations, the adventure of "a little black boy" and his friend "a jolly little girl with big black eyes, and a big wide smile, and very white teeth."

## **Ms. Mascall's readers**

may well have recognised her choice of Sambo's name from a much-loved picture book of the time but I doubt if Topsy meant anything in particular and indeed, for many readers today she may be known only as a character from fiction: "displaying a white and brilliant set of teeth [with] woolly hair, braided in sundry little tails". Her irruption thus in the twentieth chapter of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel **Uncle Tom's Cabin** occupies only a small part of that long book but, judging from many a dictionary of quotations, it appears to be the most memorable.

## **Uncle Tom's Cabin**

was first published as a serial in the American magazine *New Era* in 1851-2 and on its subsequent appearance as a two-volume novel it became an instant bestseller, the first work from that country to achieve world renown. The fulcrum of the plot is Mr Shelby's place in northern Kentucky not too far from the Ohio River across which is Cincinnati and the free states where slavery is outlawed.

We meet Mr Shelby, a "man of humanity", who is having to negotiate the sale of Uncle Tom, who, though a slave, is a trusted and much-appreciated servant on the farm, for Mr Shelby is financially embarrassed. The slave-trader demands that, to meet Shelby's desired price, he must throw in to the deal a quick and intelligent young boy, the son of Eliza, Mrs Shelby's maid.

## **A hunt ensues,**

for Eliza will not give up her son and she flees the house with him, hoping to walk to the river where she might find transport to get across to Ohio. It is a brave endeavour, particularly since the trader (cunningly misled by Eliza's fellow slaves) is chasing her, and in one of the most graphic moments in the story she clammers across the waters on the ice-melt. On the northern shore good fortune attends her as she finds herself in a Quaker community which is a starting point for the "underground



railroad" organised to carry escaped slaves to Canada. Although further danger awaits her as bounty hunters seek to capture her (for it is lawful to return escaped slaves to their owners) the railroad serves her well and, we learn later, she and her son (and indeed her slave husband too) find their way to Montreal.

## **This opening episode**

which occupies the first third of the book is interpolated towards its end with Tom's departure with the trader from his friendly plantation cabin on the start of their journey down the Mississippi to New Orleans. Thanks to his absorption in mastering a reading of the Bible the voyage ends well since a fellow passenger, a New Orleans slave-owner (also a "man of humanity"), is persuaded by his young daughter – appropriately named Evangeline – to take on Tom as a servant at his farm. However, a looked-for resolution is frustrated when, first, Evangeline dies (consumption, that great aid to Victorian plot-makers) and then her father is murdered and the slaves on his property are summarily despatched to the New Orleans slave warehouse where you may find "an abundance of husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers and young children to be sold 'separately or in lots to suit the convenience of the purchaser'".



## **With the evil Mr Legree among the latter,**

Tom's fate is sealed. His natural humanity, coupled with his scriptural meekness under suffering, have no place on the Legree plantation and the harrowing scenes there end in Tom's death in a cabin reserved for the victims of merciless beating. Whether the story might have finished then is a moot point but Stowe has contrived an ending that serves a more positive purpose and returns us again to the Shelbys from whom Tom was initially sold away. He had not been forgotten by them and their now grown son George has discovered his whereabouts and arrives at the plantation in time only to make a final farewell to a dear friend. He takes the corpse in order to make a decent burial and as we follow him on his return to Kentucky the narrator is able to bring several strands of the early episodes to a conclusion.

## **The forty-five chapters of the novel**

can hardly be categorised as a story for children, although Stowe hoped for child readers, and, compared with another very long story with sermonizing in it: **The Swiss Family Robinson**, it has much to offer. From the opening discussion between Mr Shelby and the slave-trader there is a command of characterisation and dialogue that convinces throughout the very varied cast. This, coupled with the pace and drama of events, make for an adventure story but heightened by Stowe's insistence on her abolitionist purpose (whose success eight years later is said to have been acknowledged by President Lincoln). The instant fame of the story was notable in Britain for the publishing, in the absence of copyright protection, of multiple London editions, the leading example from Messrs Cassell being garnished with a couple of dozen full-page etchings by George Cruikshank which would have enhanced its appeal to children. Within a year Routledge published the first of dozens of abridgments and adaptations, including polkas and quadrilles. It was **The Juvenile Uncle Tom's Cabin** arranged for young readers by Mrs Catherine Crowe, with plates, but I fancy the little varmints would have preferred unarranged Stowe and masterly George.

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