Authorgraph interview
Jennifer Donnelly
Windows into Illustration
Thiago de Moraes

Plus Shirley Hughes,
Ben Miller,
Books of the Year AND
the BfK Christmas
Gift Guide

www.booksforkeeps.co.uk
The Friends Calendar 2021

For the last few years, Peter Sheldon (ex-Peters Bookselling Services) has got together with some of our best children’s illustrators to produce a calendar. This year’s gifted line up of illustrators include Posy Simmonds, Helen Oxenbury, Colin McNaughton, David McKee, Debi Gliori and Tony Ross for December.

The calendars are A4 spiral bound, opening up to A3 wall size, and cost £7.95 including P&P and will be mailed out towards the end of November. Email Anne Marley with your order requirements anne.marley@tiscali.co.uk  All profits go to BookTrust.
When the actor, director and comedian Ben Miller landed a two-book deal for *The Night I Met Father Christmas* and *The Boy Who Made the World Disappear*, which feature his two oldest sons as the main characters, he was left with a problem. What about his daughter, Lana?

‘Awkward!’ he laughs down the phone from Antwerp, on a day off from filming a new detective series for ITV. Fortunately for family harmony, Miller was commissioned to write another book – in fact, three more – after the first two were commercial and critical successes.

While it might be unusual for authors to involve their children so directly, Miller claims a solid pedigree.

‘I always loved *The Princess Bride* and reading that William Goldman wrote it for his daughters, I thought, “Oh, that’s a fantastic idea,” because I could ask my kids what sort of story they would like to be in,’ explains Miller. ‘Famously, one of his daughters said, “I want a story about a princess,” and the other said, “I want a story about a bride,” so he wrote *The Princess Bride*. And I thought, “Well, I could do that with my kids…”’

The result third time round is *The Day I Fell into a Fairytale*, in which Lana discovers a portal to the world of fairy tales in the pick’n’mix sweets counter of a magical – yet strangely also Aldi-like – supermarket, that emerges mysteriously out of a molehill-sized mound in the village. Called Grimm’s, it’s the starting point for an adventure that melds a delicious blend of ‘dangerous’ fairy tales, revives the bond between brother and sister and celebrates the power of stories.

Miller knew Lana’s book must be a portal story because of his style today.

‘There is a kind of Enid Blyton-y sound to the voice, sometimes,’ he acknowledges. ‘I do love those stories, that golden age of children’s storytelling. They were old books even when I read them as a kid. Enid Blyton was out-of-date when I read it, *Swallows and Amazons* was ancient history. But they’ve certainly influenced me.’

But he also raves about contemporary writers, from Michael Morpurgo and Michael Rosen to Abi Elphinstone. And we share an emotional moment over the sheer perfection that is Julia Donaldson’s *Paper Dolls*, which he describes as ‘probably the most beautiful children’s book I have ever read. It’ll express something for you you’ve never been able to express for yourself, and yet which runs so deep. It’s absolutely extraordinary.’

Unexpectedly, like so many things in 2020, *The Day I Fell into a Fairytale* was written in Morocco during lockdown, when a 10-day family holiday turned into a three-and-a-half month stay after the borders closed. The ambiance fed into the story, from feelings of wanting to escape to a crucial plot twist: ‘It gave me the idea for the ending, funny enough, which ended up being Scheherazade’s story, and I think being in the land of the *One Thousand and One Nights* was part of it’.

The stories within stories in Miller’s magical tale weave together, ultimately, create a message of empowerment, as Lana relies on her own storytelling powers to save herself and her brother from a very sticky situation. That, for Miller, is his underlying message for children who read *The Day I Fell into a Fairytale* – and one that’s possibly never been so important to instil as now.

‘I want them to feel like it doesn’t matter what they come up against: when they rely on their own wit and judgment, they will prevail. That’s the story of all fairy tales: the ultimate power is the stories themselves. It’s all about reassuring children: you will do more than just survive the other world, you will prevail and then thrive,’ says Miller. ‘I’m immensely optimistic about our future, and our children’s future. I think it’s important to be optimistic. It’s important to recognise that there ain’t nothing we can’t fix.’


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Michelle Pauli is a freelance writer and editor specialising in books and education. She created and edited the *Guardian* children’s books site.
Books for Giving 2020

Each Christmas Books for Keeps provides our readers with a curated list of the best books for Christmas. This year we are grateful to Urmi Merchant of Pickled Pepper Books, who stepped into Santa Claus’s boots for us. Here are her recommendations for a very happy Christmas.

It’s truly been a unique year for all of us. Some things remain constant though, and Christmas of course is one of those. As I write we are about to go into a second lockdown, and you won’t be able to browse in bookshops this November. I can see from my social media feeds that all those lovely independent bookshops are on hand via their webshops, email and social channels, waiting to deliver the best personalised recommendations you can expect from them.

It’s been a tricky year for working out what to stock with so many great books being published and even harder to choose which to put in front of you here. We will certainly be recommending these at Pickled Pepper Books via our Book Fairy service and hopefully in person with our customers in December. There is something here for children from 0-12ish years and I’m sure that these gifts will keep giving throughout the year with the repeat sharing and reading lots of children love to do! As ever the selection from Pickled Pepper always aims to ensure children can see themselves reflected in the books they’re reading.

Board Books for Babies and Toddlers (0-2)

Baby loves Earth: An ABC of our Planet is part of a new series of board books introducing babies to trends that matter. A is for Atmosphere, C is for Conservation, and G is for Green in this ABC book appealingly designed to teach he youngest children how to enjoy and protect our planet. Keeping with the theme of planet earth, we have a completely recyclable and plastic-free baby book up next. Search the tropical jungle in Where Are You Tiger? Go on a journey with little one to track down the rarely sighted tiger. You may even meet some other animals along the way.

Perfect gifts for the early years

Michael Rosen and Chris Riddell have created a book to last all through your little ones early years in Honey for You, Honey for Me A First Book of Nursery Rhymes. Featuring familiar and forgotten rhymes and Riddell’s signature illustrations, this is sure to be a hit with the whole family! Award-winning illustrator Frann Preston-Gannon also has a beautifully illustrated A Treasury of Nursery Rhymes & Poems with 101 nursery rhymes, poems and songs to keep you all entertained well beyond Christmas. Finally discover 50 nature stories in Slow Down, helping carers and children to appreciate the magical transformations right in front of us. This is the perfect book for encouraging us all to go outside and explore.

Picture books to read again and again

In the whole time we’ve had the shop there has always been an abundance of picture books for every occasion. This year is no exception – the only problem is choosing which ones to gift.

Rain Before Rainbows with Smriti Prasadam-Hall’s lyrical text and David Litchfield’s joyous illustration is particularly pertinent this year, and full of hope. Lockdown YouTube sensation Rob Biddulph gives us Dog Gone, which will definitely put smiles on faces with Rob’s warm-hearted humour. The much-anticipated Julian at the Wedding is here too and we are just in love with Jessica Love’s illustration and storytelling. One of my favourite picture books of the year is A Story About Afifa, a James Berry poem, newly illustrated by Anna Cunha. Afifa is a girl with a white dress that records the memories of her childhood. From roses in bloom to pigeons in flight, this is not only a celebration of childhood but of the late Caribbean poet James Berry.

There are so many great books with a festive feel this year. We’re highlighting the following: in A Thing Called Snow by Yuval Zommer, join Fox and Hare on an arctic journey in their first winter to find out what snow is. Emma Yarlett gives us Santa Post, sure to be a hit with lots of letters and parcels to open! And to top it all off there’s a new Dogger book by Shirley Hughes, Dogger’s Christmas, perfect for Dogger mega-fans.
**Fairytales, new and retold**

Fans of Maggie O’Farrell’s writing will be delighted she has penned a children’s modern fairytale, *Where Snow Angels Go.* Illustrated by Daniela Jaglenka Terrazzini, it’s perfect for sharing with children from 5 and up. Keeping with this theme, a new series, *A Fairy Tale Revolution* has published four feminist, egalitarian and environmental retellings: look out for *Hansel and Greta* by Jeanette Winterson, *Blueblood* by Malorie Blackman, *Cinderella Liberator* by Rebecca Solnit, and *Duckling* by Kamila Shamsie, all with illustrations by Laura Barrett. Finally, *Starbird* is an original fable written and illustrated by hugely talented Sharon King-Chai about love, freedom and the wisdom of children.

**Fun fiction for younger readers**

For those children who are just emerging as readers, you are guaranteed moments where you will find them somewhere cosy curled up with a book over the festive period. Feed them the most appealing fiction and they’ll be well on their way to becoming avid readers. This year we love Clara Vulliamy’s new series *Marshmallow Pie, The Cat Superstar,* Alex T’Smithe’s *Claude at the Palace* and Karl Newson’s *The Hat Full of Secrets.*

For those children who are reading independently there are some fantastic new books. The hilarious Simon Farnaby from *Horrible Histories* and the BBC’s *Ghosts* has written his first children’s book, *The Wizard in My Shed.* Merdyn the Wild is from the Dark Ages, he’s the world’s greatest Warlock, and has been banished to the 21st century for bad behaviour, and he’s about to create a whole load of trouble for Rose, aged 12. This book is full of historical gags, we loved it!

Jen Cambell and Alice Lickens’ respectively write and illustrate the appealing *Agents of the Wild* series. This is fun-packed younger fiction with conservation themes. Last but not least, Sally Nichols has written *A Christmas in Time* – a follow up to *A Chase in Time.* This time Ruby and Alex find themselves in a Victorian Christmas. Can they help Edith and return to the present day?

**Gifts for older children**

The books listed here are perfect for children aged 8-12 years. Of course, children are individuals so you can always go a bit younger or a bit older. The publishing this year has been led by the pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement and a growing desire for us to talk to children about what is happening around them. *The Book of Hopes* is the genius of Katherine Rundell in the middle of this pandemic. She contacted author and illustrator friends during lockdown to contribute to this wonderful anthology. These stories show that imagination can be a shelter, provide hope, make us laugh, smile and help us to see some light – much needed! With 133 contributions children will revisit this book time and time again. *Timelines from Black History* is stacked with facts and a visually vibrant, accessible hive of information on the people and the issues that have shaped Black history. It’s an essential book for every child’s shelf. And to finish our very last recommendation is *Kay’s Anatomy: A Complete (and Completely Disgusting) Guide to the Human Body* – Adam Kay manages teach our kids biology without them even knowing!

**Happy gift giving!**

Use this link to find a complete list of all books mentioned.
Onjali Q Raúf is a busy woman. The week we are due to speak includes publication day for her new children’s book, The Night Bus Hero. But she also finds time to speak on BBC Radio 4 Woman’s Hour about diverse texts in the curriculum, visit a school, celebrate the fact that her award-winning novel, The Boy at the Back of the Class has sold a quarter of a million copies, and champion World Homeless Day. This will come as no surprise to those who know Raúf, seeing as she declared herself a feminist at seven, and aged 30 formed her own not-for-profit, MakingHerStory, which works to promote women’s rights and protect women worldwide.

So, we speak the following week, when Raúf is campaigning on the Lords Amendment to the Immigration Bill, although she tells me she never wants to go into politics, ‘I never want to be an MP, but I do think everything is political, from what we buy in our supermarkets to what we wear.’

She is happy to note that there are female leaders doing terrific jobs, such as Jacinda Ardern and Angela Merkel, and has hope for the future. Raúf’s role will be to continue writing books which, through their social activism agenda and empathetic storytelling, will inspire future. Raúf’s role will be to continue writing books which, through their social activism agenda and empathetic storytelling, will inspire future leaders to be the kind of leader that she would like to see.

‘I have hope for brilliant leaders who have heart, who have empathy and a new generation to be the kind of leader that she would like to see. We’re just problems, remember…beggars who people are frightened of.’ Telling children’s stories is one way that Raúf fights for those vulnerable people.

‘Most children’s books are for social purpose as well as for pleasure. The books highlight that there are amazing people out there trying to do good things, even if they’re not the ones in the news all the time. There is a soup kitchen in the book, but there are hundreds across the UK, and I champion those people who aren’t famous, but are working in them. I want to highlight the fact that for every person struggling in the world, there will be someone out there who will help them, and the fact that I get to do that through a book is really great.’

Food poverty is another issue that matters to Raúf, and she has been following the free school meals campaign, as well as championing the anonymous volunteers who run the numerous food banks in her locale.

But speaking with her, Raúf reveals herself to be more than just a writer and editor. In The Night Bus Hero, the homeless man Thomas says that “there’s no one to fight for us. We’re just problems, remember…beggars who people are frightened of.” Telling children’s stories is one way that Raúf fights for those vulnerable people.

CLARE ZINKIN

Clare Zinkin is a children’s book consultant, writer and editor.
‘The boy’s an absolute menace.’

‘Why can’t he be more like his sister?’

‘He’s a bully. A lost cause!’

Praise for Onjali Q. Raúf’s books

‘I don’t usually like reading. But this made me want to read lots more stories just like it’
Robert, age 8

‘Your book was so good it made me stop fighting with my sister’
Adam, age 8

‘I could not put it down once I had got it because it was so fantastic! It is all about bravery and determination’
Dorie, age 10

‘We read it at school and everyone agreed it’s the best book ever. We never agree on anything so that was nice’
Ibrahim, age 8

‘What! Oh no! I can’t believe it has finished! I wanted to read more!’
Ariana, age 8

‘It made my dad and me laugh and cry and made us want to help more’
Carey, age 7

From Onjali Q. Raúf, the award-winning, bestselling author of The Boy at the Back of the Class and The Star Outside my Window, comes an incredible story about homelessness and bullying, told with humour and heart.

OUT NOW

Illustrations © Pippa Curnick
Ten Books Every Child Should Read

As part of the celebrations for our 40th anniversary, we revised our long-running Ten of the Best feature and asked leading children’s authors to choose the books they consider essential reading. Our thanks to James Mayhew for this selection.

There will always children who find their way into reading through pictures. I was one of them! Long before I learned to read, I would sit in the school library and fall into the world in the illustrations. Comprehending the world around us, and allowing words to create images in our minds requires a finely tuned level of visual literacy, so I make no apology for focussing on books that children should read the pictures in. Many favourite books are out of print, so I’ve tried to feature books currently available. I also sought a mix of old favourites and exciting new discoveries.

The Story of Ferdinand
Munro Leaf and Robert Lawson, Faber & Faber, 978-0571335961, £6.99 pbk

‘Once upon a time in Spain’— so begins this jewel of a book, with its tale of gentleness triumphant. A wonderful fable in which a tender, sweet-natured bull, who prefers sniffing flowers to fighting, refuses to be what everyone expects. I love that he stays true to himself, and so achieves real happiness. Powerful themes of pacifism and acceptance. Even in black and white, the exquisite line drawings dazzle and delight, and somehow capture the glare of an Andalusian landscape, as well as the expressions of Ferdinand. They are indelibly etched on my memory.

Where the Wild Things Are
Maurice Sendak, Red Fox, 978-0099408390, £6.99 pbk

Probably the most obvious book on my list, but still deserving all the acclaim. Sendak really sees through a child's eyes, both story and image. The expanding design of the pages and the wonderful freedom of childhood imagination, with the unforgettable, iconic, funny-scary Wild Things, is ultimately embraced in a tale of forgiveness: we never seen the mother, but her unconditional love for Max is patiently waiting throughout, and provides the beautiful, perfect, ending.

Saturday
Oge Mora, Little Brown, 978-0316431279, £12.99 hbk

How do you turn things around when everything goes wrong? Instead of the usual middle class, suburban, white family, we have an ordinary, modern, hardworking, black mum, living in an apartment, and her little girl. Bold, beautiful illustrations give a jaunty air to this tale of a Saturday – the one day of the week they can be together – when one plan after another falls through, as is so often the case in real life. Important concepts about expectations and handling disappointment, are wrapped up in the luscious, collaged pictures. I fell in love with this book.

Oi! Get Off Our Train
John Burningham, Red Fox, 978-0099853404, £7.99 pbk

As topical today as ever, this eco-fable mingles dream-fantasy with reality in a thought provoking, yet simple way. Noah-like, a boy travels through the night on his toy train-set, and allows animals onto his train, one by one, when they reveal their assorted predicaments. The audaciously experimental illustrations, full of painterly atmosphere, are still something to wonder at and be inspired by.
The Arrival
Shaun Tan, Hodder Children's Books, 978-0734415868, £10.99 pbk
Upheaval, separation, migration, loss and longing. The themes in this wordless masterpiece will fascinate and intrigue even the most fluent ‘reader’ of words, for deciphering and interpreting The Arrival becomes very much a personal reaction to the beautifully drawn sequences. Anxiety, trepidation, fear, as well as hope, empathy, beauty and humour, are captured to perfection in the strange shadowy creatures and brave new worlds. An astonishing, and moving, literary/art experience.

If All the World Were
This is a book that stopped me in my tracks when I first saw it. The exquisite, free, and colourful illustrations are full of emotion and expression. This lyrical poem of loss, and remembrance, is perfect for any child experiencing these, or needing to empathise with others who are. A really moving, tender book, with an uplifting message – that love lives on.

Moominland Midwinter
Tove Jansson, Sort of Books, 978-1908745668, £10.99 hbk
The race to get children reading longer books is often at the expense of illustrations. Yet a continued appreciation of art as a communicator is every bit as valuable as language. A good midway point is the Moomin series, books which becomes increasingly sophisticated, but are always full of fabulous drawings. Halfway through the series is my favourite, Moominland Midwinter, where Jansson’s lonely, melancholic tale of Moomintroll, who unexpectedly awakes from hibernation, is matched with unforgettable, astonishingly atmospheric line drawings, full of haunting shadows and bewitched beauty, as Moomintroll yearns for Spring, but learns to respect Winter. A beautiful, magical, timeless book about resilience and independence.

James Mayhew is the creator of many acclaimed and much-loved books, including the Katie and Ella Bella Ballerina series, the Gaspard the Fox books, with Zeb Soanes, Kosha’s Tales, Miranda the Explorer and Boy. He’s also an ambassador of art, music and culture for children, travelling all over the world, as a speaker and educator.

Doctor De Soto
William Steig, Puffin, 978-0141374697, £6.99 pbk
For a laugh, this book is a reliable tonic, with its charming, yet restrained and understated illustrations, a great companion to the sly humour of the words. When a fox with toothache begs for help from the diminutive Doctor De Soto, the kindly mouse-dentist takes pity. Will the wily fox outwit Doctor De Soto and his wife? Or will they win the day? I love that Mrs De Soto is absolutely an equal partner in the tale, which embraces humanity, kindness, deception, wit, moral consciousness, low animal cunning, and sweet revenge. Brilliant!

Beauty & The Beast
Max Eilenberg & Angela Barrett, O/P
Folk-lore, fairy tales, myths and legends, are such an important part of the cultural heritage of the world, and ALL children should read tales from many lands, preferably in illustrated editions. I’m choosing this single tale purely because of the extraordinary illustrations by Angela Barrett, surely one of our finest living book artists. The immersive atmosphere, detail, and emotion imbued in these lavish paintings are a thing of true wonderment. Intelligently retold, in both word and art, with enough mystery and magic to set the imagination racing.

Julian Is a Mermaid
Jessica Love, Walker Books, 978-1406386424, £7.99 pbk
The spare text in this modern classic leaves just enough ambiguity for conversation and thoughtfulness, with spaces filled with gloriously free, confident drawing, and beautiful liquid painting. An uplifting tale of a boy, who is so struck by the beauty of women in mermaid costumes, that he decides he, too, wants to be a mermaid. It takes his Grandmother a while to realise that he should be free to express himself however he wants, and the book ends with acceptance, kindness and colour!
After working for twenty years as an award-winning advertising art director and commercial illustrator, Thiago de Moraes’s first picture book, The Zoomers’ Handbook (written with his wife Ana), was published in 2015. He went on to create Myth Atlas for Alison Green Books in 2018, a 96 page tour de force, packed with painstakingly detailed illustrations. A follow-up History Atlas has just been published as well as a myth-rich, fully illustrated adventure story, A Mummy Ate My Homework. Thiago talks us through his approach and illustration technique here, fiction and non-fiction.

Both books are based on history, but they couldn’t be more different. A Mummy Ate My Homework is a fiction book, set in ancient Egypt. It’s the story of Henry, an 11-year-old boy from the 21st century, who gets sent back in time after a terrible maths-related incident. History Atlas is a non-fiction book, which takes readers through five thousand years of human history, and shows how fifteen extraordinary civilisations saw themselves.

One way and another, I spent most of last year living in the past. Considering the way things have been, it was probably more fun than living in the present. I worked on two books at once, which involved many hours of sitting in my shed, writing stories and drawing lots and lots (and lots) of little people.

Although they’re very different, both books are based on events, places and people that really existed. This meant that I had to do a lot of research before I could draw or paint anything. I studied all the physical stuff I could find: geography, architecture, fashion, art – and, of course, people. As vital as all this was, the most important thing for me was trying to grasp each civilisation’s personality, otherwise the books would be little more than collections of facts.

The maps on History Atlas started as lots of very tiny rough thumbnails on paper, which my editor, art director and I used to discuss composition and shape. They need to look and feel different from each other and be built around visual ideas that express the character of each culture. The Inca world is constructed around the peaks of the Andes, the Mongol map revolves around a huge column of horse riders, and so on.
From these thumbnails I went straight to the final illustrations. There are over 350 historical characters in History Atlas, but I tried to make sure each one had a strong sense of individuality; and that they were more than just symbols for roles or events. Their expressions, movements and interactions have to imbue each one with all the meaning that couldn’t fit in the text.

In Mummy, a lot of what Henry experiences and finds interesting happens away from the grand temples and pyramids that we associate with ancient Egypt. It was great fun to try and imagine what everyday moments, like dinner, would look like. I worked from lists of possible recipes in academic history books and came up with a table full of fantastic food. (I might have taken some liberties with the roasted hyena garnish.) I love spending ages in details no one probably notices, like silly frescoes on tomb walls, grumpy camels and all types of stuff. It helps me feel like the world I’m drawing is much larger than the small bit we’re paying attention to at that moment.

I always draw with ink pens and brushes on paper, then scan the black line and paint the colour digitally. Drawing with black ink can feel quite definite, but I don’t plan every detail of what I’ll draw before starting. Leaving space for new ideas to appear as I go along feels more enjoyable and allows for a lot of stuff that didn’t find its way into the text to appear in the illustrations in a natural way.

I have been doing this for a while, but I still have a huge sense of gratitude and wonder at being able to spend my time creating these worlds and stories. When I finish making a book I inevitably feel a bit sad (and relieved, depending on the deadline). I know I’ll miss the characters in the book and all the collaborators who make it with me. It’s like saying goodbye to friends who I went on an extraordinary journey with.

A Mummy Ate My Homework (978-1407194929, £8.99 pbk), Myth Atlas (978-1499808285, £18.99 hdbk) and History Atlas (978-1407189239, £20.00 hdbk) are all published by Scholastic.
Jennifer Donnelly may appear to have sprung fully formed onto the world’s stage as an award winning children’s author with her debut novel, *A Gathering Light*, winning the 2003 Carnegie Medal (and later to be included in the 70th Anniversary Top Ten in the public vote for the Carnegie of Carnegies) but, as I learned as we talked over Zoom in the diminishing light of an autumn day, she had served a long apprenticeship as a writer. But she then sold and published three books in two years and her first publication was a picturebook. *Humble Pie*, illustrated by Caldecott winning Stephen Gammell, is a deliciously dark cautionary tale. With a prescient fairy tale feel to this first book, Jennifer acknowledged that she feels she has come full circle with her latest book, *Poisoned*, the second of her deeply dark fractured fairy tales for teens, following the acclaimed *Stepsister*.

She had wanted to be a writer since she was tiny, fascinated by the shapes of letters and words and wanting to make her own, but more importantly, she was surrounded by storytellers from her Irish and German relatives. Her bedtime stories, from a mother who survived Nazi Germany, were true stories from her mother’s childhood and ignited a lifelong passion for history and an insatiable desire to get her questions answered. It was in London in the early 1980s that she was introduced to the East End, where she found a deep emotional connection with the place and the stories that she wanted to tell. *The Tea Rose* was that first novel she laboured over for twelve long years. Eventually she found an agent who told her that she could write, but that she needed to work, for example on pacing, suspense and narrative drive - this was where she learned the craft of writing. Despite the work, the book was rejected everywhere, and it was in this period that *Humble Pie* was born. *The Tea Rose* was then sold and would be followed by two more adult novels in this series (*The Winter Rose* and *The Wild Rose*) As she said ‘No one person can guarantee that you will be published, but one person can guarantee that you won’t, and that’s you.’ So, ‘never give up!’ is her message to all aspiring writers.

The picturebook sale prompted her agent to ask if she had any more ideas and she certainly did! There was another story ready to ‘burst’ out of her. She grew up in and around the Adirondacks and strolling around a bookshop in Old Forge with her mother one day, she was told she must read this, and a copy of *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser was thrust into her hands. This was a fictionalised account of a famous murder case from the area in which a young man murdered a woman he’d made pregnant – a nineteen-year-old farm girl named Grace Brown. She was also given a non-fiction account of the murder which included excerpts from Grace’s letters, which she later tracked down and read in full in the archive at Hamilton College, and it was Grace’s desperate, brave voice that sparked that deep emotional connection. This resulted in *A Gathering Light* and the character of Mattie, created to ‘give Grace some kindness on her final day’. Mattie is not very different in age to the heroines of her adult novels and I wondered what made her decide to write a YA novel in this case. She said it’s ‘who the story wants to be for’ and that it has always seemed to her that she writes for young people to see a ‘way into the adult world and for adults, a way to escape it’.

It was a New York Times article that provided the emotional spark for her next award-winning novel, *Revolution*. Geneticists had proved a shrivelled relic to be the heart of the 10-year-old Dauphin, son of the ill-fated Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette. A ‘defenceless child’ who had been ‘destroyed’ by the revolutionaries. As a new mother, facing up to the unspeakable horrors of the Revolution and the fate of that child was a tough challenge and it proved to be the most difficult of her books to write. It is also the most structurally complex, telling the dual narrative of Andi from present day Brooklyn who has suffered the loss of her younger brother and Alex who lived in 18th Century Paris and witnessed one of the worst crimes of the French Revolution.
Having won critical acclaim and success for historical novels, I wondered what on earth had made Disney select her to write a series of fantasy novels about mermaids and she wondered what had made her agent think that she could do it! Even stranger was the story she told about a visit to an Alexander McQueen retrospective and feeling that creative spark of connection in an ocean inspired display, only to return home that very day to the urgent phone call about the Disney offer. Deep Blue was the first of the Waterfire Saga (followed at a rate of one a year or less by Rogue Wave, Dark Tide and Sea Spell) She relished the challenge of world building and creating naturalistic, diverse mermaids from all around the world, very far from 'the clam shell-bikini clad stereotypes!' She also loved the opportunity to write for a younger audience, like her then 10-year-old daughter and friends. Disney was also to commission Lost in a Book with the slightly different challenge of imagining what happened to Belle, an already well-established character, after the end of Beauty and The Beast.

But while all this was going on, her historical ghosts were still trying to break through, she was literally haunted by a vision of a man in a coffin. She began to explore his world, which turned out to be New York of the 1890's and the setting for These Shallow Graves with its contrasting stories of women from different strata of society; united by their powerlessness in a patriarchal society. A common thread in all her books is that of her characters 'pushing back' against expectations and forging their own path. She wants young people to 'listen to that small voice inside'. This is particularly true of her female characters and no surprise from someone voted Class Feminist in her High School Yearbook. She acknowledges her debt to the strong women who brought her up, but emphasises that you are not always born strong and for her it is the 'journey' that her characters follow that is key – learning from mistakes and 'getting up after being knocked down'.

Stepsisiter and now Poisoned have, of course, been labelled feminist fairy tales, but to me they are about more than just liberating the heroines, they are about liberating the villains – the Ugly Sisters and the Wicked Stepmother. Nobody is born a villain and what makes them that way is what fascinates her. Once again these are fully character-driven novels of psychological depth. Ella reveals her failings and Sophie learns that her loving, emotional heart is her strength. For the author they are also a way of addressing 'the poisoned apple' of the toxicity of social media. The tyranny of likes and followers’ and asking, 'who is that voice in the mirror’? Who gets to dictate what is beauty and what a girl should be? They beautifully blend her love of history, being set authentically in an alternative 18th century France and 17th century Germany, and allow her to create the monsters and creatures she so enjoyed in her fantasy novels, while making even more explicit her underlying themes of social justice and kindness. Themes which have a poignant resonance in these COVID times.

When a librarian introduced her 8-year-old self to the original Grimm’s fairy tales, she loved their darkness, they ‘pulled no punches’. She believes that children ‘hunger for the truth’, you cannot shield them from the dark side of life, when they can see it all around them. But these tales were also empowering to her because fairy tales do show you the monsters, but then how to defeat them’. She is currently in the very early stages of both another fairy tale and another historical story; one that she had not previously felt strong enough to tell. But COVID has taught us all that when you cannot count on tomorrow, you must not waste today and so she is doing it! One will take precedence for completion eventually, but I know that I will relish whatever comes next from this consummate storyteller.

Books mentioned
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A Gathering Light, Bloomsbury, 978-0747570639, £7.99
Revolution, Bloomsbury, 978-1408801512
Deep Blue, Hodder, 978-1444921205, £6.99
Rogue Wave, Hodder, 978-1444925661, £6.99
Dark Tide, Hodder, 978-1444928334, £6.99
Sea Spell, Disney Hyperion, 978-1484713037, £7.99
These Shallow Graves, Hot Key, 978-1471405174, £7.99
Lost in a Book, Disney Press, 978-1368057684, £6.99
Stepsisiter, Hot Key, 978-1471407970, £7.99
Poisoned, Hot Key, 978-1471408144, £7.99
Raymond Briggs has changed the face of children’s picture books, with his innovations in both form and subject. Stylistically versatile, he has illustrated some sixty books, twenty of them with his own text. In this extract from her new book, Raymond Briggs, Nicolette Jones finds the refrains of his work – class, family, love and loss – in his classic, Father Christmas.

We tend to think of cartoon strips with simplified, rounded figures and carefully observed everyday settings as typical of Raymond Briggs, but on close inspection, this underrates his breadth. His books reveal a mastery of an impressive variety of materials and techniques – in ink, pastel, pencil, watercolour, crayon, pencil crayon, chalk, gouache, collage, etching and the smudged line produced by old photocopiers. He has even incorporated correction fluid into his pictures and his earliest published work was on scraperboard, showing skilled and precise draughtsmanship: it was an illustration to a guide to how deep to plant your bulbs.

For his entire career Briggs has been a one-man band, responsible for all aspects of his books – which is time-consuming, as he has observed: ‘You can easily spend more than two weeks on a single page. Writing, drawing and design are all going on at the same time. In most publishers there is more than one person at work: writer, designer, illustrator and colourist. But there are some who do the whole jolly lot themselves, can you believe?’

Briggs’s great success, Father Christmas (1973), brought to fruition techniques that had been germinating in his work to date: notably the observation of the domestic detail of ordinary lives, and frame-by-frame storytelling. Wishing, he says, to fit more on a page than conventional picture books allowed, he resorted to the comic strip, unleashing his inner miniaturist. (The form requires, for translation, empty speech bubbles in the artwork, with the text on an acetate overlay.)

Hitherto, cartoon strips were not a feature of British children’s book illustrations. Briggs helped to elevate the status of the comic strip and the graphic novel in Britain, which at the time did not generally show the respect for the form that existed in, say, France, where bandes dessinées are valued as a literary and artistic form. A similar attitude may account for Briggs’s huge popularity in Japan, where manga is an established cartoon tradition, received without snobbery. (When Briggs was included in the World of English Picture Books exhibition that toured Japan 1998–99, audiences queued round the block to see him.)

His Father Christmas broke a mould. Santa had, until now, been saintly, regal, powerful: a factory owner managing a production staff of elves. Briggs responded to the ‘Father’ part of Father Christmas, and based the character on his. After all, Ernest and Santa Claus had...
in common the obligation to work a delivery round in all weathers. This made Briggs's the first working-class Father Christmas, and everything follows from this: his morning routine, his way of expressing himself (the idiosyncratic 'blooming'), his kitchen, his outside loo, his opinions, possessions and habits. The connection between Briggs's father and his Father Christmas is acknowledged in one frame: Ernest Briggs, whose milk float's number plate has his initials and year of birth (ERB 1900), encounters Santa. 'Still at it, mate?' asks Ernest. 'Nearly done' is the reply. Also personal is the inclusion of Briggs's houses on Father Christmas's round. Alongside an igloo, a caravan, the Houses of Parliament and Buckingham Palace the sleigh lands on the roof of Briggs's Sussex home (as a signpost confirms) and visits his parents' terrace in Wimbledon Park. In a double-page spread of Buckingham Palace, the sleigh's last call, Briggs's experience of detailed architectural drawing in his books of houses, churches and castles shows. But he uses a new technique with the snow on the palace forecourt: it is made of granular watercolour, so the surface of the picture is rough.

The book is both funny and sad, realistic and escapist. The sleigh round is a tiring slog, but there are comic touches. Briggs worked while his wife was in hospital with leukaemia, and was presumably transported into another time and place by this project. And as he showed her the work in progress, perhaps he hoped to amuse and distract her too.


Her death followed closely the death of Briggs's parents. Ethel died in 1971 at 76, as Raymond recorded in Ethel & Ernest – an experience so painful that twenty-five years later he could only work on the relevant images for ten or fifteen minutes at a time. Ernest, who struggled to cope without his wife, was diagnosed with stomach cancer and died nine months later. The grief of these few years of Briggs's life was profound and lasting.

Yet the book he worked on throughout this sad time is a great achievement. Briggs's process is meticulous. It is partly because his work belongs to a pre-digital era, with no 'click-and-fill' and no 'cut-and-paste'. Everything is handmade, despite repetitiveness. Even on a tiny scale Briggs conjures textures: the fur on Father Christmas's cuffs echoes his fluffy beard; bricks and hung tiles are ubiquitous in this book, not only individually drawn but shaded in graded colour, pink to purple, as in reality, or elsewhere the matt yellow of newer bricks; skilled watercolour creates skies of louring rain clouds, lightening at dawn to a lilac blue.

So much is communicated in the pictures, such as how Father Christmas feeds his reindeer, his cat (who likes to sleep on his head and sit across his shoulders), and his dog, a Jack Russell, and how he wears long johns under his trousers, and collects eggs from his brown hens. We see his old-fashioned cooker and copper water-heater, his chamber pot, mechanical alarm clock, non-electric kettle, and two radios, the Art Deco wireless and the more modern transistor. The pictures have depth and an abundance of information. Each tells a story in itself, and the plethora of artwork multiplies the effort most picture books require. He builds the narrative as painstakingly as he draws walls, frame by frame, like a bricklayer. No wonder this book has endured. And no wonder the publisher wanted a sequel.

Raymond Briggs: The Illustrators Series by Nicolette Jones is published by Thames and Hudson Ltd., 978-0500022184, £18.99 hbk
Beyond the Secret Garden: Tidings of Comfort and Joy

In a seasonal special in the Beyond the Secret Garden series, Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O’Connor find presents for everyone.

Writing the Daily Mail’s ‘Children’s Books for Christmas’ column in 1991, the author Penelope Lively suggested that ‘A book is the most permanent present you can give. Particularly for a child.’ While many end-of-year booklists have become more inclusive November and December remain the biggest time of the year for the promotion and sales of children’s books because of holiday gift-giving. And according to R M Egan writing in The Bookseller, 2020, particularly, is ‘an extraordinary time for readers’ with record numbers of books being published in the period between September and December. So, if you are gift-giving for any reason, or refreshing your school, classroom or home library, here are some suggestions that stem from and update our columns from the past year. And, of course, there are several more recommendations for good books for children in those columns, so feel free to look back over our year’s output!

Classic Literature/Classic Mistakes

Classics are always popular gifts for adults to give to children, but as our column from March 2020 suggests, well-meaning gifts of ‘classic’ children’s literature can unwittingly reinforce stereotypes about or erase people of colour. This year, revisionist fairy tales are a good bet for those wanting to give a classic. From Vintage Random House comes two books in their new Fairy Tale Revolution series by authors of colour: Blueblood, a retelling of the ‘Bluebeard’ story by Malorie Blackman, and Kamila Shamsie’s Duckling which revises Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘Ugly Duckling’. Both of these are available in gift editions with illustrations by Laura Barrett. Younger readers will enjoy Zombierella, Joseph Coelho’s gothic take on the classic fairy tale whilst for older readers, Cinderella is Dead by Kalynn Bayron from Bloomsbury publishing will provide that link to the classics while at the same time providing empowerment for readers—especially those traditionally left out of or sidelined in classic texts. Fans of Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings are likely to enjoy The Challenger by Taran Matharu (Hodder). Set ‘in a world far from our own where enemies come in many forms’, this is the second book in an epic trilogy from the New York Times best-selling author. Aisha Bushby’s Moonchild: Voyage of the Lost and Found (Egmont) features twelve-year-old Amira in a magical middle grade adventure inspired by The Arabian Nights.

Hoorah for Health Workers

In May, as the pandemic worsened, we focused on books depicting racially minoritised health workers. If you want to buy a book that helps those who have been helping us through the pandemic AND that showcases some of the best writers of colour for children, Katharine Rundell’s edited collection The Book of Hopes (Bloomsbury) is a good bet. In a hardback gift edition with part of the proceeds going to NHS charities and with work by authors such as Patience Agbabi, Vashti Hardy, Onjali Q Raúf, S F Said, Nizrana Farook, Kiran Millwood Hargrave, Sita Brahmacari, Polly Ho-Yen, Aisha Bushby and Alex Wheatle, there is something to please both readers and gift-givers. Thank You (Frances Lincoln) with words by Joseph Coelho and pictures by Sam Usher is a beautiful picture-book that celebrates community and was inspired by the Thursday Clap for Carers during the first coronavirus lockdown in the Summer of 2020.

Life and Literature in Lockdown

In addition to all the books we plugged in our July 2020 column about authors of colour coping with lockdown and the coronavirus, some additional books have appeared (or will appear before the end of the year) from the authors we featured. These include a lovely book for younger readers welcoming a new addition to the family, Chitra Soundar’s Sona Sharma, Very Best Big Sister (Walker), illustrated by Jen Khatun, and Patrice Lawrence’s Rat (Oxford) for older readers.

The Other Side of the Story

In September we explored the increase in children’s historical books particularly those authored by writers of colour. A number of books have been published in the last few months which highlight British history from a Black British perspective. In addition to David Olusoga’s young reader edition of his popular and important history, Black and British (Macmillan), two reissues indicate the increasing interest in Black history in a year when racism has been on the increase. K N. Chimbiri’s The Story of the Windrush, originally published by Golden Destiny in 2018, has been picked up by Scholastic; and Hakim Adi’s The History of African and Caribbean Communities in Britain has been reissued six years after its original publication by Hachette. Floella Benjamin’s Coming to England has appeared in a
picture book version with illustrations by Diane Ewen (Macmillan), and Benjamin Zephaniah offers a fictional account of a Windrush journey in Windrush Child from Scholastic. On the subject of history, in Journeys: The Story of Migration to Britain (Rising Stars) Dan Lyndon-Cohen deftly covers 1066 to the present day in a clear, highly informative and engaging style.

Other highly recommended books from 2020 include When Life Gives You Mangoes by Kereen Getten (Pushkin) an intriguing tale of friendship set in Jamaica and that also subtly explores the relationship between Britain and the Caribbean. A.M. Dassau’s Boy Everywhere (Old Barn Books) in which Sami, a ‘typical 13-year-old’ has to flee Damascus and travels to Britain. Written over five years, Dassau’s meticulous research ensures this tale is one of hopeful realism. Exploring hopefulness in uncertain times, Smriti Prasadam Halls and David Lichfield combine in Rain Before Rainbows, a powerful picture book for younger readers. This year’s Little Rebels Prize winner, The Boy Who Loved Everyone written by Jane Porter and illustrated by Maisie Paradise Shearring, is a quietly radical picture book, set in a diverse nursery school setting.

In Beyond the Secret Garden we have tended to focus on books authored by writers based in the UK. However, we’d like to round off the year with some excellent books from beyond these shores. A Thousand Questions by Saadia Faruqi (Quill Tree) is a middle grade tale of friendship across class and national identities between two girls, one Pakistani one American, that takes place in Karachi. Set in Southern California, Efren Divided (Quill Tree) by Ernesto Cisneros, depicts Efren who is American-born with parents who are undocumented. His worst nightmare comes true one day when Amá doesn’t return from work and is deported across the border to Tijuana, México.

Punching the Air by Ibi Zoboi and Yusuf Salaam (Harper Collins) is a powerful YA novel in verse about a Black, Muslim teen wrongfully sentenced to prison in the USA. Salaam is one of the Exonerated Five (previously known as the Central Park Five) who were the subject of the Netflix series When They See Us.
Christmas present: a new Dogger

Forty-three years ago, Dave lost Dogger. His sister Bella, arguably the kindest character in children’s literature, made a sacrifice to put everything right. This all happened in Shirley Hughes’s picturebook, Dogger, about a lost toy, voted the public’s favourite winner from 50 years of the Kate Greenaway Medal for illustration. And now, Dogger is back to make the season festive. Nicolette Jones interviewed Shirley Hughes about Dogger’s Christmas.

Dogger’s Christmas is, in the spirit of the first Dogger book, full of kindnesses – of people doing things for each other: Dad cleaning the rabbit hutch, the family visiting the elderly neighbour, children greeting their grandparents, with faces full of delight. It is about a child’s small drama, but also more broadly about how Christmases should be.

On a sunny autumn day on her front path Shirley Hughes showed me Dogger, cupping his brown plush body with one ear permanently upright from being pressed against Hughes’s son Ed Vulliamy’s cheek when he was little. It amused me that if you pull that ear down it springs straight back up again.

Dogger was originally a Christmas present, in 1959, from Great Uncle Hugh. He has been exhibited in galleries from the Walker in Shirley’s native Liverpool to the V&A, and his whereabouts have always been known. But the inspiration for the story came from two losses: of a teddy bear of Ed’s in Holland Park (near where Hughes still lives), and of a koala called Oscar that Shirley tossed out the window of a car on a whim as a child, and who could not be found when she finally confessed her folly.

I talked to Shirley the same way her family has since lockdown began: from a chair half way down the path, while she sat smiling in her doorway. At 93, she looked well and cheerful, her clothes slightly bohemian, white hair ingeniously pinned up, stick within reach (relict of a fall in the autumn). Throughout the first lockdown, and since, she had been isolated.

Family (at a distance), work and the front path have sustained her. She spends mornings in her studio, and already, as Dogger’s Christmas came out, was working on the next: Alfie’s Bedtime, a story-within-a-story about how children resist going to sleep.

In the afternoon she walks a block or two, supported by a wheeled shopper (which she calls ‘my pushy thing’), asking for space as she goes along: ‘People are very kind’. She feels fortunate. She worries more about families with children in small flats.

There are no mobiles or IT in Shirley’s picturebooks, nor in her possession. Her late husband John, who died in 2007, learnt to use a computer and wrote a memoir of his life on it, but she declined, thinking she would be a bother to her family whenever she had a problem with it: ‘I knew that I would be on the phone all the time to my son-in-law saying: “Mark, I think I pressed the wrong key.”’ Shirley relies on the landline for contact with friends, and with her editor.

Shirley’s own childhood was privileged but not idyllic. Her father was the founder of the department store T J Hughes, after starting out with a small draper’s shop, but he died when she was very young. And the war brought deprivations for Shirley and her two sisters. ‘My mother turned from a leisured lady with tea being brought to her in the garden by a maid, to a hard-pressed woman wearing an overcoat indoors because there was no heating, trying to make something over the gas stove, and eke out rations. It was very spartan.’ We speculate about whether the bereavement fixed early childhood in her memory. ‘Whether people’s memories get clicked into a time because something happened I don’t know ...’

As a child, she says, ‘I wasn’t a great reader, but I was a great looker. My visual thing was looking at picturebooks.’ She loved the detail of Arthur Rackham, and colour plates by Edmund Dulac with a piece of tissue paper over them, and The Adventures of Mary Plain. She drew a lot, and ‘made endless paper dolls with dresses with tabs. Time was much more lavish in those days.

Shirley in her studio, taken by Clara Vuilliaym, for her birthday in July 2019
because we didn’t have the telly. We listened to children’s hour on
the radio with Uncle Mac.’

Another early influence was the narrative painting at the Walker
Art Gallery, such as When Did You Last See Your Father? ‘The
Royalists were the goodies. You knew very well that dad was
hiding in a passage somewhere, with the little boy having to
face the Puritans. Or The Fisherman’s Wife looking sadly out the
window and the man hasn’t returned with the fleet. I grew up with
pictures that told stories. I loved those.’ (She advocates looking at
one or two pictures when you take children to a gallery, and then
keeping the postcards on the fridge.)

Shirley studied fashion drawing at Liverpool Art School, with
other girls who were ‘just waiting for that engagement ring on
the finger’ and with demobbed servicemen doing commercial art,
with extraordinary skill. ‘They were slick as hell’.

She remembers the misery of going to hops. ‘When there was a
dance the boys went round one way and the girls went round the
other and when the music stopped they danced with the person
opposite. There was a great shuffling and shouldering aside opposite
Joan Bretherton. But,’ she says with a humorous grimace, ‘nobody
was shouldering in towards Shirley Hughes.’ Then she mimes a bit
of disco dancing: ‘It was such a good idea when everyone was
allowed to just get up and go like this’.

At the Ruskin School of Art in Oxford (‘a much worse art school than
Liverpool’), she learnt lithography and, fortunately, how to do colour
separations, which turned out to be her passport to publication,
after trailing her portfolio round the offices of publishers. ‘People
would turn your folder over like this [turning her head away, and
miming turning pages over] while talking to their secretaries, and
tell you to leave your name and number.’

Now, her illustrations draw on a mental repertoire compiled in later
years by filling sketchbooks with observations of how children
look and stand and move. And her proudest achievement is having
taught children to look. ‘I want children to go leisurely through my
books, to scrutinise. To turn back and look back, to slow down.
To wander round the image. And when they have learnt to look,
make sure it doesn’t get lost in the pressure to learn to read.’

It is important to her to use the form of the book. ‘With a double
page spread you have to either pretend it doesn’t exist or use it in
some way – my most successful use was for Alfie Gets in First. So
that the not-yet-reader can see ahead of the text how Alfie is solving
the problem. I love the idea of the gutter if you can use it.’

When I ask Shirley what the hardest thing has been for her about
lockdown, it seemed it was not being alone. Solitude is not new to
her. She remembers the loneliness of living in a bedsit when she
first came to London, and was trying to make a career. She says
instead: Not being able to see the great-grandchildren, both still
under two: the ‘amazingly determined’ Lena, and Gabriel ‘who lies
about giggling’. But then she adds: ‘And everybody not being able to
move about as they like. Even if I don’t do it. If only everyone else
could. It’s very hard on the young.

Her feeling for other people’s plight during the pandemic has been
conspicuous throughout our conversation. ‘It’s not so bad for me,’
she says. And she asks me how it has all been for my family. Her
lifetime’s concern for others has also manifested itself in topical
actions. She has recently added her name to a petition expressing
love and support for trans people, and to another decrying the
denial of free school meals for needy children in the holidays.

As we chat, the postman on the path next door calls ‘Nothing
today!’, like a cheery character out of one of Shirley’s books, and I
like the world more, seeing it through her eyes.

Like many of us, Shirley is not sure yet how her own Christmas will
be spent, but says with confidence: ‘Clara [her daughter] will think
of something.’ Meanwhile Dogger’s Christmas is the one we all
hope we can have.

Dogger’s Christmas is published by Bodley Head, 978-1782300809, £12.99 hbk.

Nicolette Jones, writer, literary critic and broadcaster, has been
the children’s books reviewer of the Sunday Times for more than
two decades.
Books of the Year 2020

This year, BfK has carried reviews of over 400 new books, but which are the books we’ll remember in years to come? We asked those in the know to make their picks.

**When Stars are Scattered** by Victoria Jamieson and Omar Mohamed is a graphic novel memoir that tells the remarkable life story of Omar, a young Somali boy and his experience of living in a refugee camp in Kenya. Poverty, loss, being a carer, education, and immigration are all exposed in this moving ownvoice narrative as told to and brilliantly depicted by Victoria. Revealing, memorable and ultimately hopeful, their book not only widens our understanding, it demands our engagement and response. Katy Balen’s debut novel *The Space We’re In*, told from ten-year-old Frank’s perspective, captures the reader from the outset, drawing us into his world with such sensitivity and skill that we wear his trainers, experience his confusion and jealousy and feel his pain. The eloquence of Balen’s writing is enriched by Carlin’s masterful codes and illustrations which cause us to pause, ponder and engage more deeply. A beautiful book.

**Professor Teresa Cremin**

Deftly written, speeding up for quick plot development then slowing down when establishing atmosphere, *The Children of Swallow Fell* by Julia Green, a gripping story of children surviving in the wilds of Northern England after society has broken down is an easy as well as a memorable read. Rather as if Lord of the Flies had been re-cast in the more optimistic tones and general approach found in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*, everything finally works out despite scares along the way. Young people getting by on their own has always been a staple of children’s literature, and this sensitive and moving novel is a worthy addition to an ever-popular genre.

**Nicholas Tucker, honorary Senior Lecturer, Cultural Studies, University of Sussex.**

2020 has had some definite highlights for lgbt+ representations. In *My Footprints* Thuy finds the might she needs to rise above her peers’ prejudices by stomping out a snowy path, her two Mums foot-printing close beside her. Meantime, two more picture books, * Plenty of Hugs* and *Julian at the Wedding*, nod knowingly, intimately, to a queer audience through nuanced iconography while also enchanting readers everywhere with their outpourings of love. Julian’s world, in particular, is drenched in a carnivalesque joy. *Nothing Ever Happens Here* brings an authentic story of trans identity to a middle grade audience as Izyz witness one of her parents transition. Meantime, 2020’s excellent YA offerings included John R Gordon’s contemporary gothic, *Hark*, set in a divided US Southern state. And it just so happens that, with just one exception (*Nothing Ever Happens Here*) all of these narratives star queer characters of colour.

**Fen Coles, Letterbox Library**

Ken Wilson-Max’s *Lenny* books are absolutely perfect for the youngest readers. These gentle but playful stories are relatable for every child and combine narratives set within the home and family with bold, bright illustrations that invite the reader into the world of the story and songs that encourage early readers to join in with the text. Alanna-Max have recently re-released *Where’s Lenny?*, a playful game of hide and seek between Lenny and his parents, and Ken has launched a new Lenny title, *Lenny and Wilbur*, which shares the bond between a child and their pet. These are books that should be in the hands of children everywhere, allowing children to make personal connections with the stories they read and sharing the delights and pleasures reading can bring.

**Charlotte Hacking, CLPE**

I have a weak spot in my reading repertoire – normally I just don’t enjoy thrillers or mysteries. So it was a great joy to find myself devouring Patrice Lawrence’s *Eight Pieces of Silva*, which cleverly combines a disturbing mystery with deep and vivid characterisation. There are two narrators whose very different voices are beautifully done. Becks is the outspoken younger sister in a blended family; her older sister Silva is supposed to be in charge when their mum and dad go abroad for their honeymoon. But having seen them off at the airport, Silva simply fails to come home, leaving Becks to fend for herself. Becks’s feelings – puzzlement, anger, concern and a steely determination to find out what’s happened – are explored with great skill. Suspense is carefully built as we too, the readers, start to feel seriously worried about Silva as it becomes clear how vulnerable she is. Being one of EmpathyLab’s founders, I’m always looking at books through an empathy lens. The scientific research into the empathy-building effects of books highlights the mechanisms of being transported into the story and really identifying with and caring about the characters. This book does both in spades. Miranda McKearney, EmpathyLab

What better gift than a book that inspires self-worth, confidence and empathy? *Break the Mould* by Sinéad Burke is just such a book, and more. Ten accessible, illustrated chapters explore such subjects as embracing difference, challenging inequality and finding a voice. It assures every child they are valued, they are unique and caring about the characters. This book does both in spades. **Miranda McKearney, EmpathyLab**

**Alex Strick, Inclusive Minds**

I have chosen three poetry books, each very different and yet all of them star queer characters of colour.

**The Book of Not Entirely Useful Advice** by A.F. Harrold, illustrated by the incomparable Mini Grey, is a wonder – funny, inspiring, full of surprises and a delight to share with young readers.

**Andrea Reece, Books for Keeps**

Click on this link for the full booklist.
Obituary: Jill Paton Walsh

9 April 1937 - 18 October 2020

Jon Appleton pays tribute to Jill Paton Walsh, who has died aged 83.

Rigorous is a word I associate with Jill Paton Walsh. It was a quality her father demanded of his daughter as he did his son – by no means the norm in 1937. This policy made her entirely rethink her Oxford University education, ditching English ‘because there are no right or wrong answers’ in favour of returning to the roots of the language and studying the Anglo-Saxons.

She was rigorous in her approach to her books – she was working on her fiftieth when she died on 18 October 2020 – for The Emperor’s Winding Sheet I learned Byzantine Greek, so I could read the emperor’s secretary’s diaries written inside the city; she told me earlier this year when I visited her in Cambridge to talk about her life and work. Pursuing accuracy, she spoke to a neighbour who’d experienced the Normandy landings first-hand for The Dolphin Crossing. He’d never before articulated his experiences – that was when Jill committed herself to relying on people as often as books. She visited cotton mills, tin mines, factories – you name it.

Her first book was Hengest’s Tale, published in 1966. She wrote it out of boredom and frustration, having left teaching and being stuck at home with a baby. With Fireweed (1970), her income from writing exceeded her earning potential from teaching. She smiled: ‘But I hadn’t closed the door behind me, I just walked through a different door.’

Fondly remembering her former students, she wanted to explore their interests; the story of Grace Darling allowed Jill to write about the harsh side of celebrity, something her readers in 1991 had more awareness of than Grace in 1838.

In 1976, Unleaving, a companion novel to Goldengrove, won the Boston Globe/Horn Book prize. Jill’s awards and commendations spanned the age range from a Whitbread Award for The Emperor’s Winding Sheet to the Smarties Prize for the middle-grade Gaffer Samson’s Luck to a Carnegie shortlisting for the early reader Thomas and the Tinner.

‘From then on, I was very successful and very welcome in the United States. I began to teach an MA in children’s literature at Simmons College in Boston. After we were all dismissed by the Dean we set up our own organisation, Children’s Literature in New England.’

The ‘we’ Jill refers to includes John Rowe Townsend, who died in 2014. When they met in the 1960s, John was children’s books editor of the Guardian. He asked Jill to write for the paper and years later when his beloved wife Vera died he asked to meet again. He had, it seemed, found a way into his grief through Jill’s fiction.

‘He rang me up and said he wanted to talk to the person who had written Goldengrove. And so I got on a train and went to Manchester to talk to him.’

For two years they met and talked. ‘Then suddenly we discovered that we were in love with each other. We shared a narrowboat together, took our children on joint holidays, saw each other frequently – made no attempt at disguise.’

And they wrote, at adjacent desks, whenever they could. When her youngest child went to university, Jill left her marriage and went to live permanently with John. Theirs was a strong, significant literary partnership. They eventually married in 2004.

Jill and John were very different in practice and style but offered each other unlimited support. They would discuss works in progress and be each other’s first reader. If one of them was speaking somewhere, the other would do the driving. They established their own imprint, Green Bay Books.

Once they tried to collaborate, but only John’s name appeared Cloudy Bright (1984). ‘My input was that I know a lot about cameras.’ Jill laughed (she laughed a great deal, generously): ‘It was dismally difficult!’

Jill’s rigour extended to raising standards within her profession. She chaired the children’s committee of the Society of Authors and would mobilise members – she organised a visit to a printer to understand why authors were being charged for making excessive corrections to page proofs with the transition from hot-metal to digital typesetting.

Today Jill is equally known as a writer for adults. Knowledge of Angels, shortlisted for the 1994 Booker Prize, made her a household name – partly for the story of its publication, told elsewhere, and her crime fiction, including Lord Peter Wimsey continuation novels.

As a writer for young people, she is remembered as one of the finest to emerge in the second half of the twentieth century. She told me: ‘Children’s literature matters much more than adult literature [because] children still have the main choices in life to make. If you get their attention with some moral dilemma or interesting question it comes in time for them to consider it before they plunge into life. The introduction of real literature when they are young is capable of influencing them.’

And she was emphatic to the end that this mattered most: ‘If I had a new idea for a children’s book I’d be overjoyed and I’d sweep the desk clear of the adult work.’
I wish I’d written…

Sarah Lean chooses a book that transcends fashion.

The book I wish I had written is *Skellig* by David Almond. The first line, ‘I found him in the garage on a Sunday afternoon’ is genius. I tell everyone to read the book, to go in that garage and find what Michael finds there, to meet the inimitable Skellig. The characters are alive, the writing authentic and lyrical, and the story delivers at every detail.

I read all of Almond’s books while I was studying for an MA in Creative & Critical Writing, including *Heaven Eyes*, another seamless blend of life and other-worldliness. A line in it near the end, ‘She came across the wasteland up above the river’, blew me away as I began to understand how a story could be threaded together. I have never cried so much for joy and at the triumph of the storyteller to deliver such impact.

*Skellig* inspired me to put aside any ideas of writing what might have been fashionable at the time, to pursue my own desire to write what was in my heart. I poured all my efforts into finding a simple way of writing what I had to say. I’m not sure I would have written…

**Skellig** by David Almond is published by Hodder Children’s Books, 9780340997048, £7.99 pbk

Jessica Love, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 4063 9748 2, £12.99 hbk

In this story Julian and his Nana, who readers first met in the award-winning *Julian is a Mermaid*, are off to a wedding along with their friends Mariisol and her Nana. There are special jobs for Julian, who is tasked with looking after the brides’ dog and for Mariisol who is a flower girl. In addition to the feasting and dancing Julian and Mariisol have fun hiding under the tables and playing games in a willow tree, which in their imagination becomes a fairy house. When Mariisol’s dress gets muddy Julian comes up with an imaginative solution, creating a wonderful costume for her. Fortunately, the grow-ups are pleased to find them again and glad they have had fun, they are not at all perturbed by the messy clothes.

This is a joyful, exuberant story about friendship, fun and celebration. Featuring a same sex marriage, it gently encourages acceptance. Julian’s characteristically flamboyant outfit suggests confidence in being yourself. The text includes a lovely definition of a wedding as ‘a party for love.’

There is lots to notice in the beautiful and detailed illustrations which glow on the brown paper background. Spend time lingering over the delightful wordless double page spreads and don’t miss the wonderful end papers and title page where the story begins and ends.

**The World Made A Rainbow**

Michelle Robinson, ill. Emily Hamilton, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 978 1 5266 2980 7, £6.99 pbk

‘All the world had to stay home today. I wished that it didn’t. I wanted to play.’ So begins this charming story about a little girl who is missing her Grandma, her school and her friends because of the Covid lockdown. Mum suggests making a rainbow so that people passing by will remember that ‘rainstorms pass’ and be happier. In lyrical poems and positive and expressive pictures, we see the little girl and all her family (including a helpful cat) make their rainbow. Some of the rainbow is painted and some of it is collage, and while the little girl is occasionally sad, remembering all she is missing, she is soon cheered up with her artistic adventures, and at one point is able to Skype her best friend. There is much to love about this book – the happiness of the family all together, the loving support so evident in both picture and text, the diversity shown, and the theme that sad times don’t last forever. I only wish we could have reviewed it sooner, although the lockdown will have effect (and possibly be repeated) for some time, and children will enjoy remembering how they felt during it, as well as the rainbows they painted.

**Today I’m Strong**

Nadiya Hussain, ill. Ella Bailey, Hodder, 32pp, 978 1 444 94646 8, £12.99 hbk

The little girl likes to tell her big toy tiger everything. He always listens, and she knows she can trust him. She tells him she likes school, she loves school, in fact, and she repeats this so many times that we realise there is a problem. In fact she whimpers to her tiger that some days she just wants to stay home with him. The problem is Molly. Molly makes fun of the little girl, she blocks her way to the climbing frame and steals her cake. Molly is, in fact, a bully even though the word is not mentioned. Is it because the little girl is black and wears glasses? There are other black children in the class, but it is this particular little girl that Molly picks on. It is the little girl herself who finds the answer, and the answer is in the Tiger – a great big strong tiger – and she discovers how to be strong too. Off she marches to school, fierce Tiger behind her, and when Molly is mean, she ignores her, climbs all the way to the top of the climbing frame and feels ‘top of the world’. ‘It’s not okay to be mean. To make faces. To hold on too tight. To say words that hurt.’ Vivid illustrations and a little girl with attitude make this a winner – as was Nadiya Hussain in the Great British Bake Off. One suspects she writes from experience!£5

Will You Be My Friend?

Sam McBratney, ill. Anita Jeram, Walker Books, 24pp, 978 1 4063 5160 6, £12.99, hbk

This is a new story about Little Nutbrown Hare from the creators of the hugely popular *Guess How Much I Love You?* published 25 years ago.

Little Nutbrown Hare wants to play, but Big Nutbrown Hare is just too busy. Little Brown Hare asks permission to go off exploring on his own. He tries playing with his reflection and his shadow but that’s no fun, they are just another version of him. When he

Julian at the Wedding

Jessica Love, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 4063 9748 2, £12.99, hbk

In this story Julian and his Nana, who readers first met in the award-winning *Julian is a Mermaid*, are off to a wedding along with their friends Mariisol and her Nana. There are special jobs for Julian, who is tasked with looking after the brides’ dog and for Mariisol who is a flower girl. In addition to the feasting and dancing Julian and Mariisol have fun hiding under the tables and playing games in a willow tree, which in their imagination becomes a fairy house. When Mariisol’s dress gets muddy Julian comes up with an imaginative solution, creating a wonderful costume for her. Fortunately, the grow-ups are pleased to find them again and glad they have had fun, they are not at all perturbed by the messy clothes.

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There is lots to notice in the beautiful and detailed illustrations which glow on the brown paper background. Spend time lingering over the delightful wordless double page spreads and don’t miss the wonderful end papers and title page where the story begins and ends.
reaches Cloudy Mountain, he finds a real friend, a little snow hare who wants to play too. They have great fun with games of rough and tumble, digging and building. When they decide to play hide and seek however things don’t go entirely to plan, as the snow hare learns to his cost, time! But Little Brown Hare returns home having enjoyed his day exploring and having made a friend too.

The Hospital Dog

Julia Donaldson, ill. Sara Ogilvie, Macmillan, 32pp, 978 1 5058 6831 5, £12.99 hbk

Every newly published picture book by Julia Donaldson arouses huge curiosity. There is a frisson of expectation; will one be filled with delight? And yet again, readers’ expectations are fully met. This tale is one of kindness, bravery and a very daring dog. It is brilliantly illustrated with very strong characterization. Here is a dog, a Dalmatian called Dot, is she quite ordinary? NO, SHE’S NOT! Here is a dog, a Dalmatian called Dot, is she quite ordinary? NO, SHE’S NOT! Dot is the much-loved visitor to the Wailaby Children’s Ward. She is patted and stroked and cuddled, bringing constant good cheer to crying babies and sulky teenagers. Everyone loves Dot. Everyone loves Dot. She is a very big and bouncy rhyme, we follow Dot’s rounds with each child and their families, smiles abounding. Rose, Dot’s dotty owner, also cheerfully greets everyone with big-hearted smiles. One of their last visits is to a little deaf boy called Joe, who is packing his bag to return home. Joe and his Mum share the lift down to the exit with Rose and Dot. Once out in the road, CATASTROPHE! Whilst the adults turn to talk to neighbours, Joe spots a friend on the opposite side of the street. Of course he cannot hear a car coming….. Only Dot sees the imminent danger, dashing after Joe, pushing him back. Alas, Dot herself is hit by the car as it squeals to a halt. At the vet’s an x-ray on the wall shows the badly broken leg. The vet says, ‘Don’t worry. It’s not a disaster. The leg will be fine after six weeks in plaster.’ Poor Dot is devastated. No dot is so brave as Dot. No dot is so strong as Dot. But what a wonderful ending! Children from the Wailaby Children’s Ward are invited to visit Dot, laden with flowers, cards and above all, pats and stitches, expressing friendship and happiness. When on a visit to a children’s hospital in London, Julia Donaldson was impressed by the positive impact visits from furry friends made upon sick children and their families. This book will slot into a very special place with many families and classrooms, and with Sara’s wonderfully rich illustrations, should join their top selling The Detective. This will generate much… therapeutic conversation amongst readers and their families.

All Sorts

Pippa Goodhart, ill. Emily Rand, Flying Eye Books , 32pp, 978 1 912497 21 8, £11.99 hbk

Frankie loves sorting things. She sorts by size, shape and colour. She sorts sets of flowers, trees, vehicles - whatever catches her eye, and she likes a challenge. Animals are tricky, but people are the trickiest. Uniforms helps her sort the marching band and the football team, but where should she put everyone else? And what about herself? A Venn diagram leaves Frankie right in the middle, at the intersection of My Street, My Family and My School. It seems she’s the only Frankie. Won’t that get lonely? Luckily the Marching Band strikes up ‘such a mix of sizes and shapes and colours of music’ that everyone gets all mixed up in a happy dance, and Frankie realises that ‘everyone and everything belongs in a muddle.’ It seems that everything is sorted, after all!

This quietly effective picturebook offers a taste of many things and brings them together in a way that makes intuitive sense. In the process, it becomes something rather special. Children don’t confine their curiosity to individual subjects, and neither does All Sorts. As Frankie investigates mathematical ideas, she experiences the poetry of music and wrestles with substantial existential problems. By weaving through the whole and on invitations to consider how we should behave towards each other and how we’d like our world to be.

Every page dances with a multiplicity of images, from arrays of toys and other objects covering Frankie’s bedroom floor to rows of colour-coded flowers on a woodland walk, but it’s the people who dominate this book. Visible diversity is celebrated on every spread, where children and adults of all ages, sizes and ethnicities chat, play games and go about their busy lives. Care is given to gender roles - a man is pushing the baby’s stroller, the football team is admirably diverse – and a wheelchair-user is shown playing with her friends. The final spreads depict a joyfully inclusive street-dance and party, delivering an upbeat invitation to think about what, exactly, has been sorted.

Despite being set up on the first two spreads, there’s at least one big question not directly addressed in this book: namely, why doesn’t Frankie sort people by their size or appearance? Children may want to pursue this, and although the text doesn’t explicitly talk about respecting differences, it’s woven into every spread and may help frame constructive discussions. Two distinct approaches to life ‘orderly sorting’ and ‘happy muddle’ - are also depicted, which may help readers develop their own thoughts, and understand how others think and feel.

Pippa Goodhart’s text is well-pitched for its audience and Emily Rand’s illustrations more than do it justice, creating warm-hearted and appealing spreads that capture a flavour of the ‘everything’ that Frankie is so keen to play too. A muted palette, pale backgrounds and an interest in surface appearances are all traits that make intuitive sense. In the process, invitations to consider how we should behave towards each other and how we’d like our world to be.

The Leaf Thief

Alice Hemming, ill. Nicola Slater, Scholastic, 32pp, 978 1 407191 44 7, 6-99, pbk

Enter a very cross squirrel. Yesterday her trees were covered in beautiful leaves, but today? Some are missing, and Squirrel is sure someone must have stolen them. Her bluett friend reassures her that no, mouse has not stolen her leaves, nor has woodpecker, and that no-one from the woodland creatures is taking her leaves. Why not go back to her nest and relax? But next morning yet more leaves have gone. Bird decides to tell Squirrel that the Leaf Thief is in fact the wind! It shakes the trees. There's no explanation that this amazing event happens every autumn satisfies Squirrel who realises how silly she has been, especially when the buttles arrive and the leaves will grow back again next spring. The ending brings on a laugh.

Next morning’s scene shows Squirrel shouting loudly, ‘Bird! Bird! Bird! Oh no! THE GRASS! As Bird sighs, peeping out from his bird box at a snowy scene. The book concludes with a page of facts about autumn. There are brief notes about deciduous and evergreen trees, and the fact that autumn begins at different times of the year, depending upon whether in the Northern or Southern hemisphere. Many children will already know that Christmas in Australia, for example, is in their hottest months, in the middle of their summer. Lots of information-hungry children will act like sponges and lap up the facts both before and after they open in this amusing book about the inevitable change of seasons. It is full of autumnal colours, rich oranges, golds and reds and the text hops and jumps about the pages in a very child-friendly way, matched closely by the pictures. There are lots of little jokes in the pictures too, such as bluett deep in his nestbox, reading a book entitled Bowling for Beginners. The book reads aloud very well, GB
**Coming to England**

Floella Benjamin, ill. Diane Ewen, Macmillan Children's Books, 24pp, 978 1 5290 0941 5, £12.99, hbk

Floella Benjamin first wrote her personal story as a child of the Windrush generation in 1997. This picturebook edition brings her experiences to a younger audience. A happy childhood in Trinidad, within a big and close family is shown in the early pages of the book. Trinidad's links to England through the British Empire, leading to the decision of many including Floella's father, to leave for a new life in England are suggested through interesting details. For example, the school day starts with the national anthem and Floella dreams of meeting the Queen. It must have been very upsetting when her mother and younger brother and sister followed her father to England too, though why her aunt, charged with looking after Floella and the remaining siblings is described as 'wicked' is left unexplained.

Details such as dancing under the huge raindrops in the wet season, seeing flying fish during the voyage bring the story to life. When Floella, newly arrived, the family is reunited. The experience is chily however and not only in terms of the weather; she experiences racism everywhere, till near the point of exhaustion, she sees something almost unbelievably - a haven of calm with food, moggy friends and the kindness of human touch. Fully restored the following morning, the thankful little cat discovers that there's more than one way to show thankfulness and so she does ...

Both the author's words and Laura Chamberlain’s illustrations, show the transformational power of kindness and love, and how warmth and acts of altruism can help others to transcend the worst of times. JB

**The Tindims of Rubbish Island**

Sally Gardner, ill. Lydia Corry, Zephyr Books, 156pp, 9781388055672, £6.99 pbk

Author Sally Gardner has joined up with her illustrator daughter Lydia Corry to create a new series about the Tindims, tiny Borrower-like beings who live on an island built entirely from rubbish discarded by humans, or Long Legs. This first title in the series introduces readers to Skittle, one of the young Tindims, her furry pet Pinch, and assorted quirky inhabitants of Rubbish Island, from Captain Spoons and Admiral Bonnet to Granny Gull, Barnacle Bow, Brew, Mug Jug and Baby Cup. The Tindims’ motto is ‘Rubbish today is treasure tomorrow’ and they are resourceful and inventive recyclers. Even the Tindims must admit though that there are too many plastic bottles.

The themes of conservation and the environment are timely and child readers will probably have plenty of ideas of their own about protecting sea life and recycling all the waste found by the Tindims. The characters are eccentric and endearing and all the inhabitants and world of Rubbish Island is skilfully brought to life in the lively, humorous, and detailed illustrations. The chapters are short, the font is dyslexia friendly, there are footnotes on every page – literally, should appeal to newly independent and eco-conscious young readers. SR

**It’s Only Stanley**

Jon Agee, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978 1 912650 46 0, £12.99 hbk

It's bedtime and the Wimbledons are trying to sleep, but it's noisy in the house tonight and poor Old Dad has to investigate every disturbance. Whatever is Stanley the dog up to? The little grey cat, seems to disappear, leaving her not only in need of food, but lonely and frightened. Time passes, the little cat remains in the shadows until one day a different kind of human appears – one speaking softly and with kind words. Following the man through the city, signs of destruction everywhere, till near the point of exhaustion, she sees something almost unbelievably - a haven of calm with food, moggy friends and the kindness of human touch. Fully restored the following morning, the thankful little cat discovers that there’s more than one way to show thankfulness and so she does ...

Both the author’s words and Laura Chamberlain’s illustrations, show the transformational power of kindness and love, and how warmth and acts of altruism can help others to transcend the worst of times. JB

**An Engineer Like Me**

Dr Shini Somara with Catherine Coe, ill. Nadja Sarell, Hachette childrens, 32pp, 978 1 788844 8302, £12.99 hbk

A book that should be on every shelf in school to inspire young engineers whatever gender. Having said that it's an inspiring book for encouraging more women into STEM and provides a great starting point to find out more about the female engineers.

It’s a cleverly constructed layout with two small boy hanging, a half white, a half girl, the engineer theme. Nadja’s colourful, energetic illustrations are just right. I love the way they are drawn from many points in our everyday life. From the point where Zara is in her room and Gran makes a great paper aeroplane to going down in the lift, to going up on an escalator and seeing a plane take off into the sky. Explanations about what constitutes engineering are really clear and child appropriate using Zara’s voice to synthesise what Gran has said is a clever way of reinforcing that.

It’s a smashing book to pick up and peruse again and again and there’s a nice challenge at the end of the book you could take up too. SG

**Jeremy Worried about the Wind**

Pamela Butchart, ill. Kate Hindley, Nosy Crow, 32pp, 978 1 78880 757 3, £6.99, pbk

The wind is responsible for the flying actions on the front cover – socks, pens, snails, scarves, underpants – and for all sorts of quirky business. Skypodgers, wind butterflies, spireal drums, desperately onto a lamp post, it invites exploration of the story. Jeremy is a worrier, and his list of unlikely worries is endless and growing, especially those associated with the wind. ‘Come on! What’s the worst that could happen?’ she cries as she pells out of doors one windy day. But Jeremy is indeed caught by the wind and swept skyward. Three double spreads then
While You're Sleeping

Mick Jackson, ill. John Broadley, Pavilion Books, 40pp, 978 1 846 5465 0, £12.99 hbk
This collaboration brings together Boozer Builder, a modern take on building a boat, and John Broadley, who is also well known for his adult books, in their first aimed at a young audience. The outcome is a terrific picture book telling and showing children what countless humans and animals are busy doing while they themselves are snuggled up fast asleep.

Think how horrid it would be to get to on a morning train or bus and find it b estrewn with rubbish, or to walk along the street to school and then to come into a classroom or a shop and discover what it would be like be had not the cleaners been at work. There are also lots of lorry drivers delivering food and other goods driving through the dark nights with fresh supplies of merchandise for the shops to sell, while post-office workers are hard at work sorting mail, fire-fighters and ambulance crews at the ready to answer emergency calls. Then there are bakers cooking and shops whose staff take over for a shift that allows them to provide a 24 hour service, dedicated teams of hospital doctors, nurses and cleaners; as well as crews of ships and smaller craft out on long voyages.

There’s a plethora of animal activity too, from the contest of foraging foxes, owls, hares and bats.

Youngsters are also reminded that while they’re asleep, in other parts of the world there will be boys and girls in their classrooms or engaging in sports, whose days will end when the sleepers wake up. The author’s voice is direct and friendly, and the book reads aloud very well. John Broadley’s artwork is incredible: scenes mesmerizingly alive with wonder and detail and with soft echoes of Eric Ravilious, interspersed with comic-book style illustrations.

Dog Gone

Rob Biddulph brings his own brand of zany humour to this totally captivating tale of doggy delight, in the form of Edward Pugglesworth. Said pooch resides with his loyal pet human (kept upstairs) in a rather grand residence close to a park.

One momentous autumnal morning while playing ball the rain starts to fall and it seems like time to head home. Things go somewhat awry however as giving chase to a pair of acom-dropping squirrels to return their lost items, Teddy loses Dave. The day goes on nothing in the places they’d passed and eventually Teddy reaches the scary shed wherein dwells a truly terrible troll. Or does he?

In rhyming couplets with Teddy as narrator, and through Rob’s droll illustrations, this warm-hearted tale will assuredly captivate both young listeners and adult sharers, especially the dog-loving kind who will revel in the mock-scary scenes and the sight of Dave being walked by his pooch. I was amused to imagine a brown dog with a brown shadow being clubbed as the storyline favourite both at home and in the classroom. Make sure you allow time for your audience to peruse the pictures for every one of them is packed with wonderful details to giggle at.

Last: the story of a white rhino

Nicola Davies, ill. Nicola Davies, Tiny Owl 32pp, 978-1-910328-48-4, £7.99 pbk
Nicola Davies is well-known as an author, many of her books being about nature or the environment, but here she illustrates her own book as well, and this reviewer certainly hopes that she will continue illustrating her own books.

Last tells the story of Sudan, the last male Northern white rhino, from his own point of view, though he is not named in the story. He loves being among the grass and flowers with his mother, and the smell of the rain, but then one day she lies very still (we see the poacher and his gun, with her horn on the ground) and he is put in a box and taken far away. The colour palette now turns to grey as Sudan paces in his cage in a zoo. He is miserable, not finding anything more like him, and the rain smells ‘empty’. Eventually he is put in a box again, and taken back to a land he recognizes, we return to full colour – and there is another white rhino: perhaps he is not the last after all.

Unfortunately, those who have heard of Sudan will know that he doesn’t father any baby rhinos, and he died in 2018, so, on the entire planet, there were only two, neither of which died recently. His sperm may be used in the future with a Southern White Rhino, but we have to realise that there will be other ‘last’ creatures that are not currently the focal point of the story, and the other that there are those whose shadows may never match the gender assigned to them, or even be fine fine fine. The rhymes are very well done and the pictures fun and right for the story. I do feel, however, that the dual theme of ‘shadow’ and ‘dual’ and ‘twin’ is too much, and the main character has such a fully pink shadow. A good addition, though, to this very topical subject.

Who’s Your Real Mum?

Bernadette Green, ill. Anna Zobel, Scribble Books, 32pp, 978 1 92586 49 5, £11.99 hbk
Evi has two mums, and her best friend, Nicholas, wants to know which one is her real mum. Evi is a clever lass, and this reviewer finds ways to answer Nicholas’s question without going against her solid knowledge that both mums are real. He persists in his questions, though: ‘Only the one who had you in her tummy can be your real mum’, he says. Evi then reverts to her good imagination. Her real mum is the one who can ‘pull a car with her teeth,…who is a pirate,…who crochets hammocks for polar bears…” and so it goes while Nicholas becomes more and more fed up while Evi is clearly pleased with herself. She finally must take the question seriously, though, and her answer is quite perfect. Her real mum is the one who gives her cuddles when she’s frightened, the one who tucks her up in bed, and the one who gives her kisses at bedtime. Nicholas is perturbed: surely they both do those things? And Evi gives the perfect answer: ‘Exactly! Glowing illustrations in gold and rust and shades of orange and brown (this is a mixed race family) are also a joy. The pictures fun and right for the gender assigned to them, and that is a really important to his son. So...butch Dad puts on a dress too (he has his very secret interest evidently) and shows the boy pictures of people in their family who have interests outside their gender – a boy who is a girl who is a boy who is a girl who loves paintings and fashion, and a pink-shadowed girl who is into cars and playing with a big way. The boy’s pink shadow, though, is a source of alarm, and he must learn to love it and live with it and go back to school proud of his different-ness. Which he does and finds friendship. The theme is really a dual one – one of accepting that people can live happily in their own shadow and also seeing that there are many more aspects of that person and the other that there are those whose shadows may never match the gender assigned to them, or even be fine fine fine. The rhymes are very well done and the pictures fun and right for the story. I do feel, however, that the dual theme of ‘shadow’ and ‘dual’ and ‘twin’ is too much, and the main character has such a fully pink shadow. A good addition, though, to this very topical subject.

Pirate Stew

Neil Gaiman, ill. Chris Riddell, Bloomsbury, 40pp, 978 1 5266 1472 8, £12.99 hbk
When Mum and Dad go out for the evening, they leave their two children with a very surprises and rather alarming babysitter; Long John Melon, a pirate cook complete with bluebeard, hook and wooden leg. The children are worried by this and even more dismayed when a whole pirate crew turns up at the door as well. Long John is determined to honour his promise to feed the children and when a search of ingenious contraption fails, they should make their specialty, pirate stew. This is where the book really takes off with a truly fabulous collection of ingenuity and back to the locks from Davy Jones locker, all seasoned with mermaid’s tears. Cooking is accompanied with a wonderful chorus of “Pirate stew, pirate stew, eat it and you won’t be blue, you...
can be a pirate too.” These last words alarm the children who, not wishing to become pirates, stay well clear of the book. At the conclusion of the story, the children continue to happen with the house transforming into a pirate ship taking off and visiting ‘Sally’s Little Donut Shop’ in town followed by a trip to the beach where the children sail back home in time for mum and dad’s return, who arrive feeling peckish and in the mood for a spot of pirate stew. . . .

**Stew in a rolling rhyme** of a picture book guaranteed to delight young readers. The illustrations are just fabulous, packed with comic characters, detail and pirate fun. Look out for the many pirate references drawn from classics such as Treasure Island and Peter Pan. SMc

**Vampire Peter**


When Vampetru Basarab Dracul joins the class, the teacher insists on calling him Peter – but that doesn’t distract the other children from his differences. Peter’s cape and fangs are obvious, and his behaviour similarly odd – he hangs upside down from the high bars (‘showing off’, says the teacher), causes trouble in the playground (‘No biting!’) and tells everyone that his family owns a castle. ‘Peter!’ sighs the teacher, head in hand as she cues the other children to dismiss his fantasies. So when the class gerbil goes missing, Peter is naturally blamed. But did he really do it? A single page-turn is all it takes to change our viewpoint. The narrator of this story is the quiet girl who’s been observing Peter all along. She let the gerbil out and won’t admit it, but knows that Peter shouldn’t take the blame. He was protecting her by bullies in the playground and only messed around to make her laugh. Revisiting previous events confirms her knowledge that she must own up, but the escaped gerbil has been spotted on the roof and Peter’s superpowers are required. Will anyone listen to her confession?

Happily, all’s well that ends well, and Peter spirits his friends away for a Halloween extravaganza of the kind they’re going, although we immediately longed-for Christmas promised a call from the Guardians, his three imaginary companions from early childhood. They need his help. And so a desperate quest begins . . .

**The Song of the Nightingale**

Tanya Landman, illustrated by Laura Carlin, Walker Studio, 978-1406349599, £12.99 hardback.

Tanya Landman is best known for her fiction – pithy murder mysteries, hearty middle grade adventures and full throttle YA novels. She doesn’t do coy or comforting, she does earthy and direct. She looks her readers in the eye and challenges them to keep up. This lyrical and witty story inspired by a well-known creation fable is gentler, but Landman’s forthright narrative challenge remains at its heart. The invitation to pull up a seat, to revel in the spectacle. And what a spectacle!

The God of the original fable is recast as ‘the painter’. She has a strong work ethic, and there’s a great deal to be done if she’s going to add colour to the animal kingdom, so she briskly organises her subjects and opens her paintbox. Which is where ‘the painter’ of this gorgeous book plays her part. Illustrator and ceramicist Laura Carlin’s subtle march of animals – grey, drab and tentative until their extraordinary transformation – is packed with incident and possibility. There’s comedy – the parrots and mandrill are the architects of their own colour schemes – but there’s also breath-taking drama. (Take a bow, Laura and the designer of the blue whale double-page spread.) The pacing of both text and artwork is perfect, respectful of both the original fable and the real natural world to which it relates. This is the kind of book that will establish a profound connection with its readers on first acquaintance and that alchemy will last. Your copy of The Song of the Nightingale will move house with you. MMa

**Migrants**


This hauntingly beautiful picturebook depicts a group of creatures making a difficult journey across an almost featureless landscape. The dark background throws their jewel-bright presence into sharp relief, putting them centre-stage and focusing our attention on their predicament. There is no text to tell us who they are or where they’re going, although we immediately start wondering. But answers on these dreamlike pages shift and change, intriguing us by their ambiguity.

The diversity of the Group is striking. More than thirty species of animals and birds from different habitats and continents are depicted. Every creature walks upright, each is dressed in distinctive items of human clothing and all are portrayed with dignity and respect. Children are cared for by adults who cannot be their parents, and a sense of mutual attention and support is obvious.

Carrying pots, babies and bundles, the travellers stop only to share food and sleep in a clearing marked by strange red saplings. Trailing them comes Death, in the form of a childlike skeleton swathed in a floral cloak. Looking small and oddly vulnerable, Death is accompanied by a large blue ibis, but the pair remain peripheral until the travellers board a boat which capsizes in rough seas. A rabbit is washed up, lifeless, on the beach, and is cradled by Death and the ibis in a powerful image that speaks of care and peace, as well as loss.

We bring our own experiences to this book, and some readers may find this image challenging. But many children welcome opportunities to talk about things that matter, and do so with unexpected insight. As one young reader recently observed, ‘Death is kind to the rabbit, because it stops it suffering.’

The rabbit is not the only creature missing from the final spreads. The migrants have arrived, but where, and at what cost? The nature of this place is uncertain, and only their children are eager to embrace its possibilities. There is hope within this book, but it has been hard-won through courage,
I can do is allow myself this silent
wrote: 'When faced with horror, all
As her poet father, Jose Watanabe,
'I did the only thing I could do: draw.'
moved me deeply,' Watanabe said.

The illustrations feel adult and
and this intensity of connection is
creates her artwork slowly, avoiding

This is a tale of courage, persistence
horrible things that Daphne's enemies
of the story of the Maltese journalist

The build-up to the climax, a
race-against-time road trip, is told
in accessible and wryly funny prose,
and above all what it means to be

Lori and Max is a creature, and Leonard
opportunity to spend a month on

The build-up to the climax, the
growth relationship between its two
impressed with its wit, intelligence

if it occasionally misses the mark,
illustrations bring in a great set of

Crying Wool, in which a little woollen
contemporary issue examined in the

OtherBarry Books Ltd, 32pp, 978191307-645-3, 12.99, hbk
My Life as a Cat


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important that the girls get it right. Running parallel is a second plotline about the possible theft of a valuable painting, about the village to raise a child, and illuminates the vileness of the drama and playgrounds, and demonstrates their reliability in a world that is often unstable and impermanent.

The other feature is how the book beautifully cultivates Sam and Leah’s friendship, depicting how it works, need, and sometimes forgiveness, but then reaps huge rewards. Sam’s relationship with his foster parents’ young son, Reilly, is also pitched perfectly - it is a roofer’s relationship, but always worthwhile and fundamental. There is also a fascinating scene when Reilly’s grandparents come to visit, and all the dynamics that entails.

Readers will be most delighted though with the touches of humour throughout, which lighten the story and also create pathos; and Sam’s adventures in his school drama club, his gaming with Reilly, and his time with new friend Josh are all fun and incredibly touching.

Foster’s cleverness is in writing the opacity of a child – how difficult it is to pin down who they are and time, distilling life’s complexities to their essence.

This is a terrific novel for building empathy. Reading it will not only give recognition and self-awareness to those in a similar situation to the protagonist, but should help give others an insight into how peers and how outward appearances do not always display what’s going on inside. This is delicately done, and excelsingly pitched for the age group. The only fault is that it feels a little too long. It’s inevitable for the reader to see what Sam isn’t seeing early on, and it takes a while for the conclusion to come. When it does, it doesn’t carry the neat ending one might have thought, leaving a little looseness and uncertainty, which is, of course, true to life itself, and crucial in building resilience and showing that we need to be grateful for what we have. Sam knows that having a house isn’t the same as having a home. And Foster knows that having a story isn’t the same as putting it down well. Luckily for us, he’s managed both.

The authenticity of his young characters and the way they assess their surroundings is spot on, and Foster builds anticipation and intrigue as Sam builds trenches of lies around himself, digging himself deeper and deeper, until the reader is bursting to know what is going to come out.

One way, of course, is with the well-crafted community of adults around him. Foster shows it really does take a village to raise a child, and illuminates the understanding of teachers, foster parents and Sam’s social worker. The adults are careful and loving and demonstrate their reliability in a world that is often unstable and impermanent.

A story that shares with individuals or classes in the run-up to Christmas and at all other times too.

Victoria Stitch: Bad and Glittering

Harriet Muncaster, OUP, 260pp, 9780192177357, £6.99 pbk

Celestine and Victoria Stitch are twin sisters, born from a royal diamond, so they should be next in succession to the throne of Wiskling Wood. However, because of a flaw in the diamond it has been decreed that they will not inherit. Celestine is content with her lot and just wants to be a jeweller, but Victoria feels cheated and is determined to gain her inheritance regardless of how it is achieved. When a strange woman called Isadora calls her with her quest, she willingly agrees. But then the Queen dies mysteriously and Victoria is put in prison, accused of murder. However, she manages to find out the truth and hopefully save her sister from life in prison.

Fans of Amelia Fang and Isadora Moon who want to move on to something longer and slightly more challenging will love this book by the author of the latter series. Victoria Stitch is a fascinating character, because although she seems to be the darker of the twins, she also get a sense of her own vulnerability and her great love for her sister. The main characters are strong, deep, and the circumstances in which they find themselves and they learn that not everyone is to be trusted. As always, Harriet Muncaster has produced the illustrations for this book and she has given us some truly magical images, which help to show us vividly what is still showing their similarities. This is a charming story about finding your real place in the world and the importance of family; it is how we often love people in spite of some of their views and that there is a need to be understanding and supportive when they are having problems. And this is a new book in what will hopefully be a new series and it is an absolute delight. MP
Jungledrop

Abi Elphinstone, ill. George Ermos, Simon & Schuster, 276pp, 9781526629401, £10.99 hbk
For her eleventh birthday Kate decides to write to her uncle hoping for an enormous old steam engine. Not only that, but also her Uncle and a load of workmen who lay rail track in her back garden; however, her parents are not at all happy and say she can only keep it on a temporary basis. What Kate, her brother Tom and even their uncle did not envisage was that the engine would start to work all by itself. The consequences take the children on an adventure of a lifetime; where they meet and help a variety of animals, all of whom are endangered species.

Tinsel

Sibéal Pounder, Bloomsbury, 96pp, 9781526619273, hbk, £9.99
Sibéal Pounder is the author of the Witch Wars and Bad Mermaids series, and also wrote the ‘sequel’ to Eva Ibbotson’s The Secret of Platform 13. This book is also strong on girl power as she imagines how Christmas might have been invented by two girls, and Santa Claus was also presumed to be male because of an itchy white face warmer which does look rather like a beard...

Anyways, to begin at the beginning; in 1875, Blanche Claus, a young girl with snow-white hair, is homeless and sleeping under a bridge when she is given a magical bauble as a Christmas present by a mysterious old woman. There is a snowy world inside it, and a dancing Christmas tree, and she longs to return to it. However, her own aimless, hopeless, called Rinki. Over the first of many mince pie picnics, a lasting friendship begins, surviving as Blanche becomes a very successful carter at the docks, using Rudy, though, because girls are not allowed to be carters, she has to tuck her hair inside her cap, and is accepted by Captain Badger and Teddy (relationship unspecified). Teddi is Head of the London Costume Society, is very well-dressed, and even designs a ballgown for Queen Victoria; eventually he is responsible for the famous red and white costume, and his work funds Captain Garland’s expeditions. Realising that the present of the bauble changed her life for the better, Blanche tells Rinki that she would love to be able to give every child in the world a present, and Rinki exclaims, ‘Let’s do it! If anyone can do it, it’s us!’ and Blanche, musing about chimney’s, starts to wonder whether it might be possible...

A Secret of Birds & Bone

Kiran Millwood Hargrave, Chicken House, 9781911107797, £12.99 hbk
Sofia lives with her mother who is a famous bone-binder, and little brother, Ermin just outside Sienna. She can see the home from the olive grove that is their haven with their pet crow, Corvith. Returning from a day spent in the forest, Ermin, branches out and begins a conversation between her mother and a strange, masked visitor with a sinister magpie companion. After a while she realises her mother’s face is changing – and then she disappears. How can Sofia unravel the mystery, especially when she and her brother find themselves behind the barred gates of the town...
New talent

The Clock of Stars


It’s always worth celebrating fresh new voices in fantasy writing and Francesca Gibbons’s debut novel A Clock of Stars reveals her to be an accomplished world builder, a dab hand at controlling plot and action, and the creator of a sparkling cast of characters, good and bad, who will enter readers’ hearts. It opens, as so many magical adventures do, with our heroes going through a door to another world. Eleven year old Imogen and her little sister Marie are perfectly normal children, squabbling and bickering with each other, and with the self-centredness typical of their age, but on the other side of a strange door in a tree, they will make friends, defeat enemies and thanks to their uncomplicated understanding of what is right and just, make things better. They find themselves in danger the minute they arrive in the new world, chased by terrifying fanged monsters and saved at the last minute by a young boy who opens the doors of the city’scastrum for them. He turns out to be young crown prince, Milo, a boy with problems of his own. The kingdom that he stands to inherit, Yaroslav, is divided and threatened by the skret, those fanged creatures, while his uncle/guardian is distracted, and the young woman set to become his aunt distinctly untrustworthy. The young crown prince, Milo, a boy with problems of his own. The kingdom that he stands to inherit, Yaroslav, is divided and threatened by the skret, those fanged creatures, while his uncle/guardian is distracted, and the young woman set to become his aunt distinctly untrustworthy. The young crown prince, Milo, a boy with problems of his own. The kingdom that he stands to inherit, Yaroslav, is divided and threatened by the skret, those fanged creatures, while his uncle/guardian is distracted, and the young woman set to become his aunt distinctly untrustworthy.

The Silent Stars Go By

Sally Nicholls, Andersen, 225pp, 9781787344990, £12.99 hbk

Here is an author who makes writing so easy it is as if each sentence is already perfectly formed before it appears on the page. The story of young Margot, a 1918 vicar’s daughter who conceives a baby out of wedlock, is totally involving, with many readers probably skipping to the end well before time to make sure everything works out. But this is Nicholls’ skill any minor objections only swim to the surface after reading the end of a novel so gripping that many will want to read it one gulp.

For example, we know a lot about Margot because Sally Nicholls records her every thought and emotion to a degree that at times threatens repetition. But other characters do not get the same attention. Margot’s noble but dim foster brother, thought to have been killed in the war and returning with no knowledge of his young son, too often talks in the Wodehouse ‘silly ass’ tradition. Her revered father ‘noddling over his Trollope’ and her hard-working mother, who agrees to pass Margot’s child off as her own, are both stereotypes. And while attitudes towards the under-paid servants who keep the cold under-resourced vicarage going are authentically patronising it would have been nice if Doris and Edith had been given more of a voice themselves.

The Silent Stars Go By

Eve McDonnell, Everything with Words, 316pp, 978 1 911427 17 9, £8.99 pbk

This imaginative debut novel combines historical adventure, time travel and fantasy to draw readers into its intriguing world. The story is set in the town of Inthimington where the action moves between the years 1864 and 1928 and the plot is woven around the life and times of the story-telling Margot, a young woman set to become her every thought and emotion to a degree that at times threatens repetition. But other characters do not get the same attention. Margot’s noble but dim foster brother, thought to have been killed in the war and returning with no knowledge of his young son, too often talks in the Wodehouse ‘silly ass’ tradition. Her revered father ‘noddling over his Trollope’ and her hard-working mother, who agrees to pass Margot’s child off as her own, are both stereotypes. And while attitudes towards the under-paid servants who keep the cold under-resourced vicarage going are authentically patronising it would have been nice if Doris and Edith had been given more of a voice themselves.

The Silent Stars Go By

Nothing will alter the fact that Nicholls is a supremely competent writer. She makes everything seem effortless and assured, although her novel’s conclusion rather ducks out of solving the very problems that Margot had spent time previously worrying about. But perhaps her next story could come up with something more confrontational and urgent for our own times while also allowing readers more spaces in the narrative in which to make up their own minds. NT

Elsetime

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alarming hungry twins Dotty and Daisy, and the utterly terrifying (Piglet, so powerful he must be locked down, allowing us to shudder at the strange otherness of these creatures while recognising that the truly monstrous is something different altogether and perhaps even horribly wrong). Like all the characters, Hettie has the growth of women’s football at club level and from their shores (53,000 on Boxing Day, a century on, given the dramatic increase in women’s football). Ainsworth tells the story of Dad, in constant pain from an old wound, gassed and wounded, is invalided home. Young women playing football serves as a metaphor for their changing roles and their uncertain, but exciting futures; while glimpses of the suffragette movement offer a wider context.

This story has been waiting to be told to young readers for too long. They will surely welcome the promise of future episodes in the Dick, Kerr team’s history. GF

Kicking Off!

Eve Anssworth, unincorporated, 28pp, 978 1 912979 20 2, £7.99 pbk

It’s surprising that the story of the Dick, Kerr Ladies football team is not better known to younger readers. The team’s origins in 1917 are at the centre of this novel. They became one of the leading women’s sides in the country, often attracting huge crowds (53,000 on Boxing Day, 1920, at Goodison Park), raising funds for charity, touring France and the USA. Some of their star players became national celebrities. Their skills, commentators noted, sometimes passed those of men in the professional leagues. All this despite the chauvinism and hostility of the Football Association, who in 1921 ordered men’s clubs to refuse permission for women’s teams to play in their stadiums. A century on, given the growth of women’s football at club and country levels and its coverage in the media, this novel is timely.

Hettie Blakeford is 15. Her family shares three rented rooms in a working-class terrace in Preston. Mam’s intelligence and liveliness are drained by keeping the family going and coping with the moody temper of Dad, in constant pain from an old accident but still grafting through long shifts down at the docks, except for the hours he puts in at the pub. Then there’s 10 year old Martha, quick and sensitive. All of them worry about Hettie’s brother, Freddie, only a year older than her but already in action somewhere in France.

Hettie is called up to help in the war effort at the nearby Dick, Kerr & Company Factory, packing munitions shells with explosive. She’s shy and anxious. The job is exhausting and dangerous – and will she be able to handle the bustle and banter of the confident women she works alongside? As things turn out, her way-in is partly through football. The matches that remain, how her own team; but there are also plenty of women eager to play. Despite her slight physique, Hettie has the skills, including a quick wit, to help. She learns to love kicking a ball about in the street with Freddie, so long as Dad wasn’t watching. For him, football was a man’s game; girls who played brought shame on their families, upsetting the proper order of things.

When the women take the men’s team on in a match, they beat them. Supported by one of the managers, they challenge and defeat a women’s team from a neighbouring factory in a charity fundraiser on Christmas Day, in front of 25,000 spectators at Deepdale, Preston North End’s famous old ground. All this is well researched, Appetite tells the tale through Hettie; the warmth and energy of her story, her modest, engaging character and Ainsworth’s descriptive prose which will surely draw in readers from a wide range of abilities.

Just one reservation: in a book which works hard to create an authentic period atmosphere and whose characters include such as ‘smartypants’, ‘nylon’, ‘wolf-whistle’ or terms such as ‘striker’ or ‘an assist’ along with a reference to the beautiful game’ are distracting anachronisms.

Hettie gains in confidence. She棘hces new understandings of her Mam, and even of her embittered, frightened Dad, enabling her to begin to stand up to him. She needs her newfound strength when Freddie, gassed and wounded, is invalided home. Young women playing football serves as a metaphor for their changing roles and their uncertain, but exciting futures; while glimpses of the suffragette movement offer a wider context.

This story has been waiting to be told to young readers for too long. They will surely welcome the promise of future episodes in the Dick, Kerr team’s history. GF

The Tigers in the Tower

Julia Golding, Lion Hudson, 304pp, 978-1782643173, £7.99 pbk

Julia Golding’s The Little Princess as one of her favourite books as a child. There are definite echoes of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s novel in her latest excellent historical adventure which features an orphaned girl, newly arrived from India, and soon left penniless and exposed to tyrannical treatment from adults. Sahira Clive sets sail for England with her parents – English father and Indian mother - escorting two tigers to the menagerie in the Tower of London. When her parents die of fever, the tigers become her only friends, and she quickly realises that London is just as much of a jungle as their original home. Despite the prejudice and cruelty she encounters, Sahira faces down the bullies, ‘they didn’t realize she was a tiger, not some stray dog they could intimidate’, confident always in the knowledge that ‘they haven’t met anyone like me before,’ the true test: with a head full of poetry, an acute understanding of how people operate, and a fierce determination. Sahira finds ways to protect her tigers and herself in the most unexpected of places, the house with chicken legs, including the rusaika, a water sprite, the giant, Golov, who turns out to be friendly and in need of help, and a house with chicken legs where Deda Yaga lives. She has to use all her courage and ingenuity, and her knowledge of riddles, to put things right. She sometimes does the wrong thing, and is often frightened and worried about the tremendous responsibility she has, and this is all too credible. Eventually, with the help of all her friends, both magical and human, and needing them to believe in magic, she returns to her family, and although some things can never be the same again, she has found out what is important.

Russian words are always explained, and the background is very interesting, both the magic and the food – the reader may be intrigued by a shatraiko, an apple cake something like white bread with chocolate, a sushka and the magical domes, including Air, Earth, Fire and Water, are little worlds

The Castle of Tangled Magic

Sophie Anderson, illustrator Edwina Soden, Usborne 416pp, 978-1-4748-7849-1, £7.99 pbk

Sophie Anderson, author of The House with Chicken Legs and The Girl Who Speaks Bear grew up with stories told by her mother and her Prussian grandmother, and delves into this heritage again to furnish this very exciting story with many elements of folktales and magic.

This story of an orphaned girl, newly arrived from Russia, is warm and delightful; Magnolia, lives in a castle with her parents, her beloved Grandma, whom she calls Babusya, and her new baby sister, Rosa. The castle is the only remnant of a once-royal family, and it sits on a hill overlooking the village where Olia’s friends, twins, Luka and Dinara, live. Magnolia and the other children go though, and for a while it seems as though they are the only ones left, and even the village, Babusya knows that something is wrong, and Olia, who can see magical things, is the person who can possibly fix it. Castle Mila, wonderfully illustrated on the cover by Saara Soderlund, has many domes, but some are supposedly inaccessible. Of course, with the help of her friends, Olia finds a way to get into the Sun Dome, which later leads her to the Land of Forbidden Magic. The story includes historical facts about the Tsars, nineteen century London is sharply described, both diverse and familiar, and characters making cameo appearances in the story include the Duke of Wellington, Sir Robert Peel, and a Mr. Darwin. It’s a work of astounding imagination, full of poetry, an acute understanding of how people operate, and a fierce determination. Sahira finds ways to protect her tigers and herself in the most unexpected of places, the house with chicken legs, including the rusaika, a water sprite, the giant, Golov, who turns out to be friendly and in need of help, and a house with chicken legs where Deda Yaga lives. She has to use all her courage and ingenuity, and her knowledge of riddles, to put things right. She sometimes does the wrong thing, and is often frightened and worried about the tremendous responsibility she has, and this is all too credible. Eventually, with the help of all her friends, both magical and human, and needing them to believe in magic, she returns to her family, and although some things can never be the same again, she has found out what is important.
of their own in which Olia has various adventures. Sophie Anderson’s imagination is wide-ranging and ingenious, her writing flows easily, and this is a real page-turner. DB

The Ghost of Gosswater

Lucy Strange, Chicken House, 304pp, 9781911077848, £16.99 pbk

It was very cold in the winter of 1899 and that chill permeates this story. Lady Agatha is turned out of the home she thought was hers after her father’s death, by her wicked cousin Clarence. She sends her to live with her ‘new father’ a taciturn worker on the estate. Agatha is determined to find out the real truth and at the funeral of her father she meets Bryn, who lives with a truly terrifying old man on the island where the family is buried, and he helps her to find out the secret. There are some very frightening moments including that when Agatha is shut in Rose’s tomb, gradually the secret is revealed, and in a magnificent denouement, Clarence gets his just deserts and all is well.

This is a Gothic story, very well told, with a beautiful and brave heroine, a villainous brute, a missing opal, a huge fire and a very terrifying dog. But there is humour, especially in the character of Susan the goose. Most of all there is a very loving family, the new father whose tragic past she reveals and Bryn’s devotion despite his own appalling life, and that makes this a very special story which will appeal.

Lucy Strange is going from strength to strength with her stories, each one very different, but very, very readable. JF

Boy, Everywhere

A.M. Dassu, Old Barn Books, 288pp, 978 1 91064 664 9, £7.99 pbk

One day 13 year-old Sami al-Hafez is at school in Damascus, chatting with his best friend, Joseph, about the days in his new school are acutely intrusive into their home. Sami’s early son make it clear they resent the anonymity of prisoners and detention centre reduces the family to relentless rain, and frightening unremittingly bad, from squally winds and the build of suspense and foreboding. He juxtaposes the normal everyday events are all the more powerful since they are some very creepy noises at night. Wnotes, things are for so many others. Then they’re smuggled in a fishing boat to Greece. The voyage spares the reader nothing, not least when Sami sees a large rubber dinghy capsize nearby; her nightmarish, drowning limbs falling in the waves. What has always been a loving family comes close to breaking point. More grim days of waiting before a flight from Athens takes them to Manchester. There’s a cold welcome here; the bureaucratic detention centre reduces the family to the anonymity of prisoners and Sami’s father is viciously assaulted by another detainee. Even when they are able to move in with a Syrian family in Stockport, the mother and teenage son make it clear they resent the intrusion into their home. Sami’s early days in his new school are acutely miserable until he makes one really good friend.

Dassu hopes her book will challenge stereotypes and break down barriers of misunderstanding. It may well also disturb the helpless remoteness we may feel as we watch images of the camps and bored ruins from our settees. There is no room for humour in Sami’s story. But events are all the more powerful since they are reported without melodrama; and the detail of Sami’s narrative often carries sensory impact which will command readers’ attention. As he wanders ashore in Greece, utterly exhausted, his soaking jeans are ‘stiff and heavy’ on the legs of a boy as used to physical comfort as most of his readers will be. The smell of a hostel in Manchester is ‘like a dirty toilet with bleach mixed in’. Then there’s the loneliness throughout of a boy whose parents, for the first time in his life, are preoccupied and overwhelmed by anxieties.

Not a book to forget. GF

The Haunting of Aveline Jones

Phil Hicks, Usborne, 224pp, 97814772147, 16.99, pbk

Aveline Jones is taken to stay for a few days with her Aunt Lilian in late October, after her mother leaves to look after her sick grandmother. Lilian lives in a small coastal village where the weather appears to be unremarkingly bad, from squarely winds and relentless rain, and frightening towering stormy waves. When Aveline picks out a ghost story anthology in the local second-hand bookshop, she is intrigued to find that it previously belonged to a girl who went missing thirty years earlier on Halloween. But why did she cross the last story in the book, and what’s the connection with the creepy scarecrow figures that appear in town? What’s more, there are some very creepy noises at night. Phil Hicks has written a scintillating and quite terrifying ghost story for the age group, with a phenomenal build of suspense and foreboding. He handles the normal everyday of cheese toasts and holiday boredom with a quite phenomenal degree of spookiness and eeriness, which makes for a manipulative read. Most effective, is the way in which he invokes the darkness and cold of the season against the backdrop of a deserted seaside town and the perils of the sea. icy winds blow from the book into the reader’s mind, and the salty bite of sea air and loathsome smells of wet seaweed permeate the nostrils long after closing the book. But again, this is set nicely against views ofAveline struggling down in front of a burning fire and the warm welcome of a cozy bookshop, and so the reader is constantly alert to their senses and the tension of the story.

Ghost stories work best when they set the supernatural against the down-to-earth, and Hicks explores the ebb and flow of the visible, as well as the sea – with touches of humour, references to modern day life including tutoring, mobile phones, and chips, but also the tropes of supernatural horror from a handprint on a window, to footsteps in an empty room above.

Using a raft of different media including diary entries and newspaper reports, as well as a story within a story, Hickes weaves history with present day to link a community in togetherness as well as in ancient superstitions. The clever use of a child’s diary shows the affinity with the written word – the relationship between the protagonist and the diary writer in the book mirroring the intimacy between the author and Aveline.

This is a well-crafted clever novel, with a strong female protagonist who is both brave and intrepid, and secondary characters who are reliable and well-defined. Hicks also understands the sweet relationship between children of upper-primary school age, and their ability to forge new friendships, as well as to occasionally feel a little alone, especially with those extra with vivid imaginations. Illustrations and sprinkled spooky quotes add to the atmosphere, and the challenge of using vocabulary and metaphor is well incorporated within the text, leading to a thrilling piece of prose. Phil Hicks has pitched this book well for the readership, with enough spookiness to scare, but not too much – I would recommend it as a major purchase. Many thanks to occasionally feel a little alone, especially with those extra vivid imaginations. Illustrations and sprinkled spooky quotes add to the atmosphere, and the challenge of using vocabulary and metaphor is well incorporated within the text, leading to a thrilling piece of prose. Phil Hicks has pitched this book well for the readership, with enough spookiness to scare, but not too much – I would recommend it as a major purchase. Many thanks to
Cane Warriors

Alex Wheatle, Andersen, 192pp, 9781787544973, £12.99 hbk

This lacerating story is based on a true-life rebellion that erupted in Jamaica in 1760, when slaves rose against their appalling treatment, killing some of their cruel overseers and acquiring forty muskets. Led by the legendary Tacky, this story of courage and brutality is still comparatively unknown and therefore uncelebrated. Following his own first visit to Jamaica, Alex Wheatle, born in Briton of Jamaican parents, resolved to put this right and has now done so. No reader could forget this account of such savagery on both sides, with its comparative unknown and therefore uncelebrated.

The Wolf Road

Richard Lambert, Everything with Words, 477pp, 978 1 911427 16 2, £8.99 pbk

The Wolf Road offers an uneven trajectory. We are left to see how well it follows. Readers may at times be unsure of the way. They may need to retrace the trail – or sections of it. Aaron Boroff and Tillie Stanley are both seventeen-year-old Americans. They have never met until the day when both of them come to the George Washington Bridge with the intention of leaping into the Hudson River to their deaths. The rest of this dark and harrowing novel revolves around four scenarios. In the first scenario Tillie does indeed jump. Aaron’s subsequent story follows on, depicting the impact of the suicide on Aaron’s and Tillie’s families. The second scenario tells the same story in reverse, when Aaron alone meets his death and Tillie must cope, in the third scenario both Tillie and Aaron are second readers. In the fourth scenario neither of them jump. Instead they form a friendship stemming from their joint experience.

Poisoned

Jennifer Donnelly, Hot Key Books, 432pp, 978-1471408144, £7.99 pbk

Donnelly’s novel is a reimagining of the story of Snow White. Sophie is Prince Rastor’s stepmother Adelaide is a vicious ruler of those lands, Sophie’s father the benign monarch having died. At the age of sixteen Princess Sophie is intended by the monarchic convention to inherit the crown. However, in the
opinion of Queen Adelaide Sophie has disabilities as a potential ruler. She is too kind and too soft hearted. Rulers must be ruthless, says the queen.

The princess must be dealt with. Adelaide instructs her huntsmen to escort Sophie into the perilous Dark Wood and there to cut out her too gentle heart. The queen delivers Sophie’s heart to Corvus, another evil soul who is known as the King of Crows. Against all the odds, even with her heart removed Sophie survives. She meets seven men (in this version they are all men, a throwback to the original novel) who fashion her a mechanical heart and undertake to care for her.

Even in a fairy tale it transpires that technology cannot be only a temporary solution. The mechanical heart will have a limited life. To survive in the long-term Sophie must regain her own body and have it reinserted and reborned. She must then regain the crown to which she was entitled. The remainder of the novel is a quest narrative describing her attempts to attain these ambitious goals.

The strengths of Donnelly’s novel clearly lie in the relationships between Sophie and the seven men with their servants. The spider Webber is a particularly striking ally. The second focus of the novel is a powerful feminist message as Sophie gains mental strength and determination from her vivaciousness. Donnelly also makes a serious job of explaining why Queen Adelaide’s life experience has led her to become the monster she is. There is however no sign of the wicked queen being redeemed.

In the opinion of this reviewer the novel’s one flaw is that in common with many quest stories its pace occasionally flags. There are too many steps along the path to redemption.


Claude (as in Claudine) must write her story. For her own sake. For her own story. For her own sake. One day what is happening now will be the past, and everything – thoughts, feelings, the amazing times, the empty times – needs to be accurately recorded. In words which precede her first chapter, she says to her lover, ‘I don’t want to forget you. But most of all, I don’t want to forget me.’ Jennifer Niven’s post-existential acknowledgements (more about those shortly) conclude by urging her readers (‘dear loveslies’) to ‘… go out there and write your life’. Perhaps for many of us BkF readers, now is a foreign country; they do things differently since we lived there. Certainly, I never came across book covers charged with the explicit intensity of this one. But Claude’s relentless concentration on ‘me’ will, I would guess, coincide with the hungry predicaments of many current YA readers, especially as Niven writes in such closely observed detail – physical, mental, emotional – about first encounters, first love, first joy, first despair.

Claude’s narrative is soon in acutely painful territory. She’s 18, living in smallish town Mary Grove, Ohio, with her Mom and Dad. She’s just graduating High School, she’s bright, popular, secure – a writer with ideas awaiting exploration. She’s looking forward to sharing a road-trip with absolute best-ever friend Szaz. There’s a boy she’s liked for a while from a distance – he’s awaiting exploration too. After the long summer, there’s the brave new world of college. Then it all collapses. Dad leaves the family, smashing everything. Szaz says she’s fallen in love. With Yvonne. No road trip. Instead, Claude and Mom head off, along with the family cat, to a mosquito-plagued, sparsely populated island off the coast of Georgia, where Mom’s family has old roots.

What happens there, in terms of dramatic incident, is not very much. There are low-key ‘adventures’; walking the beaches, biking the beaten earth roads, watching loggerhead turtles, skinny-dipping, collecting shark teeth and shells, helping Mom sort documents in the island’s tiny museum – Mom is a successful writer herself. More important than any incident is the talk. Talk with the young people who help out in the island’s small tourist business during the summer, talk with older people who love the island and know its power to show you new truths.

Talking, talking, talking. Most of the deeper talk is with ‘Miah’ – Jeremiah Crew. He and Claude fall in love swiftly, effortlessly, absolutely. They begin the exploration of each other – all the time aware of the days ticking by to the fixed dates when both must leave the island.

After the novel come those usual Acknowledgements. Niven says that when she was 18, her Dad suddenly left home and everything fell apart, “as if the floor beneath my feet had disappeared” – an image Claude has used repeatedly throughout the novel. Like Claude, Niven took off with her Mom for the summer. In 2018, she tells us, she too went to an island off Georgia – planning to begin work on Breathless. Except she met ‘the real-life Jeremiah Crew’. Claude’s experiences in the book, Niven reports, very closely mirror her own. Now she and the original Jeremiah are married and continue ‘to write our love story every day since.’ The couple’s good fortune is clearly to be celebrated, but this information perhaps belongs to social media or the author’s Home Page. Its inclusion immediately after the narrative readers have only just read - and which, in a sense, they may well still be reading – seems intrusive. If a reading of a novel is the result of the unique interplay of the text and an individual reader, then additional input of this kind from the author, inevitably re-shapes that reading. The novel becomes, if you like, a fictionalised memoir. GF

Love Frankie

Jacqueline Wilson, 432pp, 978 0 7552 0657 1 pbk

Francesca Bennett (Frankie) is aged thirteen and the middle of three sisters. The oldest, Zara, at age fourteen is fashion conscious. Rowena is the youngest, aged seven. Frankie is a kind friend to many of her fellow Sylvanian families. The three girls live with their mother, a primary school teacher who has multiple sclerosis. The girls see their father quite regularly but since he abandoned their mother after she was diagnosed, Frankie feels very bitter about him. Frankie’s father married another woman, and Frankie and her parents have never been close friends since they were children.

The middle secondary school there is a girl named Sally Macclesfield. Initially as a result of the remarks Sally makes about Frankie’s mother and her illness she and Frankie become enemies. The narrative of Wilson’s book unfolds around the change in the relationship between Frankie and Sally, and the impact that change has upon Frankie’s search for her sexual identity.

As might be expected with a Wilson novel, the characterisation of the book’s protagonists is clear and the bonds between them strong. The novel describes in the most convincing manner the details of Mrs Bennett’s illness and its gradual encroachment on her life and capability. It also gives an accurate account of her struggle to come to terms with the increasing burden of her impairment. It is still something of a rarity to encounter a parent with a chronic illness in YA literature.

As the novel progresses the sexual history that emerges from Frankie’s experience in this book? Wilson leaves the issue unresolved. For a reviewer writing a possibility to understand, but readers might find this nuanced ending delivering something short of complete satisfaction.

Incidentally the Bennett family’s car, the Passaport, Bear, offers top quality comfort and protection, and threatens to walk off with the book. RB

The Deep Blue Between

Ayeshà Harruna Attah, Pushkin Children’s Books, 250pp, 978 1 78269 266 9 pbk

It’s 1892. 10-year-old Hassana and Husseina are twins, living in Botu, West Africa. Their shoemaker father goes to sell his wares in a nearby town; he doesn’t return. Raiders crisp their village to the ground. No idea what happened to mother or grandmother. Brother is stolen, maybe, by a passing human caravan, leaving the twins and their older sister in the grasp of a vicious slave trader. This is certainly a book to add deeper roots to a YA reader’s understanding of BLM.

The story tracks the twins’ separate fortunes over six or seven years in West Africa. Even though Hassana writes in her own story, while Husseina’s is reported in a more distanced third person narrative, offering interestingly different perspectives for their reader. The two are soon separated. Hassana remains in the West African Gold Coast where she spends time in a Protestant mission. Then she lodges for a while with a Muslim couple until the soldier husband goes off to fight for the British in the Asante Wars and returns with life-shattering PTSD. Husseina’s story leads her ever deeper into the Afro-Brazilian religion, Candomble. Her new faith and the welcome she receives from its adherents take her over the ocean to Bahia, an earlier destination for many enslaved West Africans.

A story that affects the twins, expressed in short italicised sections punctuating both narratives; their dreams. For Hassana, those dreams are often of blue skies and the brave new world of college. Then she meets ‘the real-life Jeremiah Crew’; Hassana reveals in her narrative her impairment. It is still something of a rarity to encounter a parent with a chronic illness in YA literature.

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includes Otieno (the deity of the twins’ own people), Xango, Oumx, Ibei and Yemanja, the orixá who ‘receives’ Hussain at critical moments in the narrative. Not to mention the babalorixá or the terreiro itself...

Maybe this author’s life experiences resolved this matter for her long ago: born in Ghana, living now in Senegal, educated at three prestigious American universities and author of three successful novels. As she acknowledged, she was also able to draw on the advice of Pushkin’s the novel ends with the curtain rising on her production with Mr Cantwell, her family, friends and, of course, Kit-in the theatre to support her. 

The pleasing, cozy read which comforts in these dark, distressing times. The narrative moves along richly and entertainingly and Wood introduces deeper issues such as racism which give the story gravitas. There is escapism aplenty in the after-show parties and the interplay between characters in the somewhat claustrophobic world of a theatrical company on tour. A Snowfall of Silver is perfectly cheating antidote to the dark, dark nights of Autumn and Winter. VR

**A Snowfall Of Silver**

Laura Wood, Scholastic, 398pp, 978-1-07192-14-13, £7.99 pbk

It is 1931 and Freya is 19, impulsive, impatient and not yet ready for her career as becoming an actress. She runs away from home to the heady theatrical life which London has to offer, determined somehow to realise her ambition. This imputuous journey is not quite as daring as the reader is first led to believe as Freya has a sister living in London, Evey, who is at least 20 and, in addition, she meets Kit on the train who offers to show her around the Queen Anne theatre, where he is conveniently working as part of the backstage team. This pattern recurs in the novel crisis followed by safety net or sometimes improbable solution. With the help of this repeated dev the reader is led ably and protectively through the novel. Wood is skilfully recreates the theatrical world and her characters are convincingly and entertainingly drawn. The full gamut of sexual partnerships is presented in the story but the inherent tensions are never explored. The gradual deepening of Kit and Freya’s feelings for each other runs through the novel, a steady and reliable thread which is, ultimately, not very convincing. The author has selected her sources from which he has selected the tellings of the Stone. But (for all that he is an American and an author of books about global business practice) his writing chimes with an oral culture that is for everyone and, in the unusual device he follows the theme of each chapter with a distinctive interlude, printed on pale blue tinted paper, where the reader is to read into other stories, anecdotes, and superstitions on such matters as Knots, and Selkies, and the Blue Men of the Minch. This and the rock-steady decorations of Alastair Wiseman, make for an hypnotic tour around one of the Sea of Stories. BA

**A Telling of Stones**


Time back, way back, on the Atlantic coast of the Isle of Lewis a raiding party was wrecked in a storm. Much gear could be retrieved by the villagers of Uig Bay and in a shoreline pool there floated the body of a woman who could surely only have been a princess. Her dress was a wonder of weaving and about her neck was a leather wallet which contained a ring with a red stone in it, a silver key, and a small pebble pierced by a round hole. Seemingly useless this later proved to be a Seeing Stone through which a person so-gifted might descry all manner of things from local events or weather warnings to threats or prophecies of future calamity and death.

Such stones are the matter of folklore but for all the plural of its title this rendition of their story is confined to the fates of those who had to do with the stone of the drowned Princess Gradach. It is a much -travelled - object perhaps in Norway and then finding its way with its companion objects around the waters of the North from Norway to Ireland and, eventually, then to the sea and lochs around the Western Highlands. Nor is it attached to any family, although kings and chieftains are the movers and shakers of their times and may thus particularly heed its significance, but it moves too among common folk, women seers, even a selkie, but especially as an instrument in the hands of Kenneth Odhar, the Brahan Seer, whose prophecies and fate are one of the book’s themes.

Themes indeed are Neil Rackham’s business rather than making a consistent story about the seventeen people who weave about among rumours and tales (knots and the fluidity of time are also a theme) and there is no sort of orderly chronology, characters having different histories in different stories. But the genius of the book lies in its respect for the nature of folklore where authenticity belongs to whoever is telling the story.

The knotted narratives are hardly fare for child readers and their sequencing owes everything to the shaping hand of Rackham who gives sources from which he has selected the tellings of the Stone. But (for all that he is an American and an author of books about global business practice) his writing chimes with an oral culture that is for everyone and, in the unusual device he follows the theme of each chapter with a distinctive interlude, printed on pale blue tinted paper, where the reader is to read into other stories, anecdotes, and superstitions on such matters as Knots, and Selkies, and the Blue Men of the Minch. This and the rock-steady decorations of Alastair Wiseman, make for a hypnotic tour around one of the Sea of Stories. BA

**Reynard the Fox**

Retold by Anne Louise Avery, Bodletian Library, 440pp, 978 1 85124 555 0, £20.00 hbk

The medieval saga of Reynard the Fox, tremendously popular in the Middle Ages and again in the nineteenth century, has fallen out of favour in recent decades. James Simpson published a version in 2015, which I haven t read, but otherwise this new retelling by Anne Louise Avery is the first for a long, long time.

Perhaps the first thing to say in a review for BFI is that this story of a wily fox, his enemies the Wolf and the Bear, and their tempestuous monarch the Lion, is in no way a book for children. I had forgotten how cartoonishly cruel the humour is. Maybe some children would be amused by that. But there is also a lot of satire of medieval religion which, to be honest, isn’t that amusing even for an adult.

And yet, this is a tremendous achievement to be part of Anne Louise Avery, who has breathed fresh life into a moribund classic. She has based her translation on Caxton’s 1482 version, but there are many elements that are hers alone. She really enjoys herself, for instance, with a Rabelais-esque list of the victuals a fox would eat and then to the sea and lochs around the Western Highlands. Nor is it attached to any family, although kings and chieftains are the movers and shakers of their times and may thus particularly heed its significance, but it moves too among common folk, women seers, even a selkie, but especially as an instrument in the hands of Kenneth Odhar, the Brahan Seer, whose prophecies and fate are one of the book’s themes.

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**An enchanted world of folk tales for children.**

With the help of Rhys Cantwell, an internationally famous director who Kit introduced her to in the Queen Anne theatre, her plans come to fruition on a London stage and the novel ends with the curtain rising on her production with Mr Cantwell, her family, friends and, of course, Kit-in the theatre to support her. 

The pleasing, cozy read which comforts in these dark, distressing times. The narrative moves along richly and entertainingly and Wood introduces deeper issues such as racism which give the story gravitas. There is escapism aplenty in the after-show parties and the interplay between characters in the somewhat claustrophobic world of a theatrical company on tour. A Snowfall of Silver is perfectly cheating antidote to the dark, dark nights of Autumn and Winter. VR

**Finbar Hawkins, Zephyr, 302pp, 978-1-8398-3561-0, £12.99 hbk**

Hawkins has set this complex and gripping story in 17th century England when witches were feared by a deeply suspicious population, shot through with misogyny. Eveline of the Birds or Evey, as she prefers to be called, has always suppressed and denied her magical powers, pulling away from her mother and her younger sister Dill, feeling on the outside of her sisters’ lives.

However, things begin to change when Evey and Dill witness the murder of their mother by four men. Evey’s search for the story and it is sickeningly brutal in its clarity, intensely focused viciousness and joy in slaughter. Hawkins uses archaic speech and structures which inerse the reader more fully into the 17th century. Evey is consumed by a desire for revenge devouring her heart, mind and body, she takes Dill to the coven led by their Aunt Grey. However, she has already decided to leave Dill in the safety of the coven while she pursues their mother’s killers. Sadly, the coven is not the safe haven their mother had hoped it would be.

Every’s search for the men is the major storyline in the remainder of the book and a wild and riveting story it is, full of betrayal, deceit, and cunning. With the help of her friends Anne Greeneyes and Peter Merchantsman and, at last, her realisation that she has found her ‘watching’ way and can use it as the powerful weapon it is, she triumphs. But the triumph is also finding her identity, becoming what she knows she really is and encouraging other women to be the same. Evey and her like are powerful women, working together to battle the dark forces which move in men and black-hearted witches alike.

This is more than an absorbing read-it is cinematic and it educates: be you what you know you can be VR

Books for Keeps No.245 November 2020 35

A very welcome addition to the original book is the author’s finely-tuned appreciation of the Flanders landscape, ‘the cross-hatch of dyke and stream and ditch, their bonding ribbons of flint and quicksilver and fennel in the heat.’ Avery’s descriptions of the characters in their own landscapes are vivid and resonant, and owe almost nothing to Caxton. While some will find the long-winded narrative style of the original, others will be entranced by ‘the skien-frill of a fine fox-tailed phrase’. NP
Fairies

are said to inhabit the Isle of Skye, at least before mankind built a bridge there. They are briefly vouched for by the Seers of Lewis (introduced to us here on page shown) and encountered in this story by young Miss Fiona.

Her father

was born, and brought up in Skye and owns the Big House on the sea-loc, but he is a Student and must needs let it out to holiday-making Sassenachs and others, living more cheaply with his daughter in the cottage next door. At the start of the story the Big House is inhabited by an entomologist friend of the Student and his son, the Urchin, a boy with whom Fiona is planning to row to a neighbouring island in search of a cave where, it is said, the treasure lies that was shipped from a Spanish galleon at the time of the Armada.

Into this scene

comes a hawker, seemingly well-known to the Student of old, and wishing to give him a gift. He is though a man of magical attributes and offers one instead to Fiona – the gift of a Search along with a bracelet that allows her to speak with the creatures of the island. She takes the Search to mean the quest for the Spanish treasure and her conversations with the local wildlife give licence to the author, W.W. Tarn, for some jocularity at the bracelet’s expense: a whale, who gives vital information about the location of the golden doubloons complains about barnacles being scraped off his tail by coming too near the rocks, a centipede, friend of the Student’s bookworms, quotes Hegel on the unity of opposites.

But darker events are in the offing.

The Urchin has thrown a stone at a shore-lark and broken its wing – an offence to the culture of the island and, worse still, a visitor to the Big House – cast as a typical fictional money-grubbing city gent, Jeconiah by name – has come by an ancient map of the location of the doubloons and is to seek for it in the same cave as the children. In both cases, calamity attends upon their visits: the Urchin falls on the rocks in the dark cave and disappears and Jeconiah is floored by a falling part of the cave wall and suffers an acute catalepsy, being shipped back to the House and confined to bed.

These events constitute stages in Fiona’s Search as she comes to see that there is an onus on her to solve their mysterious connection with the exploration of the cave. She is persuaded that she must take a track up the hillside of Glenolisdal (later identified as the real Branderstaig) where she gains access to the court of the island’s fairy king. It is here that a trial is to be held to determine the guilt of the mainland strangers who have been abducted by the fairies from the cave for their transgressions. It is a big fantasy occasion, allowing the author on the one hand to indulge his love of inditing great poetic lists such as a grove with ‘every tree or plant famous in legend or history’ or an assembled concourse of fairies, ‘all the lost peoples and nations’ from the Old Stone peoples to those of Marco Polo’s City of Heaven. On the other hand there is an almost Carrollian court scene with the defendants’ defence conducted by a goblinish Chancellor whose remarks sounded like ‘a series of unedited cablegrams’. Through Fiona’s presence as an honoured visitor, matters are resolved. The Urchin is released to Fiona’s care and Jeconiah, who comes out of his catalepsy, is restored to normality, the latter clearly a sadder and wiser man.

But what of the Search and the Treasure?

This somewhat preposterous tale has the engaging informality of its classic origin, having been first told by Tarn to his fifteen-year-old daughter when she was ill in bed. (He had been a lawyer [hence the comic barrister] but had become the Student turning his mind to Hellenism and Alexander the Great.) The background to the story derives from their move to Skye where the Big House still exists and where several details of the lore of the island figure in its fairy episodes, and indeed, the Fairy King has something of a Seeing Stone in his crystal sceptre. The Search, initiated by the hawker, does not bring gold to Fiona but ‘the treasure of the island which you love’ and indeed, in the life lived after the story, Fiona, daughter of both the Student and W.W. Tarn was to become as noted an authority on Skye as the Student was on the Ptolemies.

First told in 1913,

The Treasure of the Isle of Mist had an unusual publishing history. It was turned into a book and published by Philip Allan in 1919 and subsequently, in 1938, issued in a new edition by Oxford University Press, illustrated with photographs of the Hebridean locale. It also, though, had a great appeal in the United States and in 1934 an edition came out in New York with remarkable black and white illustrations by Robert Lawson. After the War in 1950, with the great John Bell as editor, Oxford reissued an edition with illustrations by Margery Gill.

The Treasure of the Isle of Mist is published by Leopold Classic Library, £10.95.