Hello and welcome to the first issue of *Books for Keeps* in 2021. It's become something of a custom for us to open the January issue with a feature in which we ask leading figures to suggest what will be the talking points for the year ahead. We haven't done that this time. After the year we've just had, making predictions of any kind seems a mug's game. Instead, we've made a list of positives, things we can be thankful for and celebrate both now and in the months ahead.

So here are the *BFK Reasons to Be Cheerful* 2021:

1. **Children reading more and enjoyed reading more during lockdown**

According to a survey by the National Literacy Trust, children's enjoyment of reading increased during lockdown (from 47.6% pre-lockdown to 55.9% post-lockdown), having reached a 15-year low before lockdown.

More than a quarter (27.6%) of children and young people said they were enjoying reading more during lockdown and a third (34.5%) of children and young people said they were reading more during lockdown.

2. **Value of reading recognised**

It was recognised that reading provided a refuge in this difficult time, supporting children's mental wellbeing.

3 in 5 (59.3%) children and young people told the NLT during lockdown that reading made them feel better with 3 in 10 (31.6%) saying that reading helps them when they feel sad because they cannot see their family and friends.

3. **CLPE’s Reflecting Realities report**

Data collected over the last three years in report shows a steady year on year increase in the number for children's books featuring ethnic minority characters. 10% of the children’s books published in 2019 featured ethnic minority characters, compared to 7% in 2018 and 4% in 2017.

It is important to remember that these figures still illustrate the significant extent of under-representation of ethnic minority characters in children's literature - in the whole of the last three years only 7% of the entire industry output featured ethnic minority characters while 33.5% of children in our schools are from a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic background – but at least it's an upward trend and 2021 is promising more good news of this kind.

The *BookTrust Interim Report*, published on the same day as the CLPE report notes insights into the makeup of children's literature creators and comments on trends of contributions from UK authors of colour to the publishing landscape. We have a wealth of tremendous UK talent from icons like Malorie Blackman, Sita Brahmachari, Jamila Gavin, Catherine Johnson, Patrice Lawrence, Alex Wheatle, Verna Wilkins, Ken Wilson-Max and Benjamin Zephaniah to the stars of recent times Dapo Adeola, Sufiya Ahmed, Joseph Coelho, Sharna Jackson, Savita Kalhan, Irfan Masters, Zanib Main, Poonam Mistry, Onjali Q Rauf, SF Said, Holly Sterling, Chitra Soundar and many more.

4. **Independent bookshops thriving**

More than three-quarters of independent booksellers responding to The Bookseller's 2020 Christmas trading survey saw a rise in business year-on-year for the festive period. Meanwhile, a separate survey conducted by the Booksellers Association found 57.7% of booksellers it polled reported that trading was up compared with Christmas 2019—that survey also found participating bookshops earned an average fee of £1,404 per Christmas 2020.

5. **Books for Keeps – still here!**

Our 40th anniversary year didn’t go quite the way we'd planned, but we are still here and almost ready to launch our new website. We managed to publish our regular six issues plus a Poetry Special and are excited for the year ahead. Thank you to everyone who has contributed to our fundraising to date – we are still looking for another £4,000 and if you can’t make a donation, please help spread the word. https://www.givey.com/booksforkeeps

Happy new year to all our readers and thank you for your support.
Super accessible, simply super-readable fiction: **Katie Lowe** introduces the new series of accessible reads, developed by **OUP** and **Barrington Stoke**.

One of the best parts about working in our schools’ publishing team at **Oxford University Press** is being able to talk to teachers, hearing what would help to make a difference to their teaching and learning, and then working out ways in which we can support them with that. Over the past few years, we have heard more and more requests for books to help less-confident readers in secondary schools; books with age-appropriate topics and ideas but that are more accessible; books that will inspire children who might not enjoy reading, or who might have a low reading age, to grow to love reading.

And we’ve also heard from recent research that teachers are worried about the word gap. The Oxford Language Report: *Why Closing the Word Gap Matters* (2018) looked at the impact of a widening word gap and found that, on average, secondary school teachers who took part in the survey reported that 43% of Year 7 pupils have a limited vocabulary to the extent that it affects their learning, whilst 95% of secondary school teachers believe a lack of time spent reading for pleasure is a root cause of the word gap. More recently, the follow up report, *Bridging the Word Gap at Transition* (2020), found that 92% of teachers surveyed think recent school closures have contributed to a widening of the word gap, and 87% agree that increasing academic requirements as pupils move from primary to secondary education highlight pupils’ struggles with vocabulary. In addition, they feel that pupils may have read less widely for pleasure during lockdown.

Knowing all of this meant that we were absolutely delighted when the opportunity came along to partner with **Barrington Stoke**, the experts in commissioning and editing accessible fiction, to create a brand new range for less-confident 11-14 year old readers: **Super-Readable Rollercoasters**. We and we were even more thrilled to attract some of the very best children’s authors, each of whom is hugely passionate about writing accessible fiction and about opening up the world of books and reading to as many children as possible. So **Super-Readable Rollercoasters** brings together Anthony McGowan, Patrice Lawrence, Phil Earle and Michael Wagg, Sally Nicholls, Marcus Sedgwick and Tanya Landman.

We are confident that each title in this exciting new range is perfect for teachers to use in the classroom, or for children to read independently. We’ve carefully selected stories that we know will grab readers’ attention, will link with other areas of the curriculum, and will help them to start making connections with other books they may have read. So the titles range from powerful historical tales of friendship and loyalty, to gripping contemporary stories of bullying, loneliness and growing up; and each focuses on relevant themes and issues that will resonate with 11+ readers. And we’ve made sure that the books are rich in plot, setting, language and structure so that they justify their inclusion for classroom study.

On top of that, each title has been edited to remove any barriers to comprehension and then carefully laid out in **Barrington Stoke’s** dyslexia-friendly font to make it as accessible as possible. We also know that reading stamina can be an issue for some less-confident readers, and that finishing a whole book can be hugely motivating. Each **Super-Readable Rollercoaster** title is shorter in length than you perhaps might expect from a book for this age group, which enables readers to build their confidence while engaging in a gripping, well-told story that will guarantee an enjoyable reading experience.

A teacher resource pack is available for schools to download for free to support the teaching of these titles within the classroom. Plus, to help readers get even more from each title insights, including information about the author, the context and book group questions, are provided at the back of each book.

**Super-Readable Rollercoasters** are an exciting way to help close the word gap and support young people in developing a love of reading with titles that have been specifically written to help build confidence, make reading enjoyable, and enthuse 11+ readers.

More information about **Super-Readable Rollercoasters** can be found at **www.oxfordssecondary.com/superreadable**

To find out more about the **Oxford Language Report** go to **oxford.ly/wordgap**

**Super-Readable Rollercoasters** launch books, **£7.99 pbk**:

- **I Am The Minotaur**, 978-0198494874, by Anthony McGowan, the latest title from Anthony McGowan following his 2020 Carnegie Medal win, showcases his trademark empathy for the underdog, in this gritty yet touching story of a lonely teenage carer’s struggles with growing up and trying to fit in.

- **Edgar & Adolf**, 978-0198494911, by Phil Earle and Michael Wagg is a story with friendship at its core. This fictional tale of two real-life footballing heroes has been written by real-life friends who offer a new perspective on the Second World War from both the German and British point of view.

- **Rat**, 978-0198494935, by Patrice Lawrence begins with Al’s quest for revenge following his mum’s return to prison but unfolds into a moving story of community and loneliness, and is a reminder that you never quite know what is going on in someone else’s life.

**Jump into Super-Readable Rollercoasters**

**Oxford University Press**

**Katie Lowe** is Publisher for Secondary English at **Oxford University Press**.

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2021: reasons to be cheerful

Whatever 2021 holds in store, there are lots of excellent books in the pipeline. As we do at this time of year, we asked leading editors to tell us about the book (one only) they are most excited to be publishing in the year ahead.

**Abrams**
Combining the talents of Newbery Honor winner Shannon Hale and Caldecott Honor winner LeUyen Pham, *Itty-Bitty Kitty-Corn* invites the very youngest of readers to celebrate the magic of friendship, of being exactly who you want to be and of seeing one another for who we truly are. Kitty and Unicorn are wonderful role models for confidence and kindness, and a magical duo that is impossible to resist. Bursting with adorable illustrations, humour, charm, emotional depth and a childlike spirit, this is a book that instantly captured our hearts—and we know it will capture yours from the very first page! – Emma Ledbetter, Editorial Director of Picture Books

**Alanna Max**
This year we are thrilled to publish *Zeki Loves Daddy*, from Anna McQuinn’s inclusive *Zeki Books* series. It is perfect for very young ones to enjoy with their grown-ups. Zeki and Daddy fill their days with tickles, pancakes, dancing, playing and reading – it’s always nice to see caring dads in picture books. This sweet companion to *Zeki Loves Mummy* is a perfect celebration of daddy love for every day, as well as for special days like Father’s Day.

**Allen and Unwin**
*Iceberg* (October) is a stunning, lyrical story for our times, from renowned picture book creators Claire Saxby and Jess Racklyeft. In this sumptuous narrative nonfiction book, we follow the life cycle of an iceberg as it is born into spring and travels through the seasons before dying in a new spring. Saxby’s poetic and evocative prose is balanced by Racklyeft’s lustrous detailed watercolours in an expert merging of knowledge with grace. This is a hopeful tale of renewal, wonder and appreciation of Antarctica – an environment worth fighting for in a time of climate emergency. Nicola Santilli, Editor

**Amulet Books**
A moving YA debut novel from non-binary author Ray Stoeve, *Between Perfect and Real* (April) follows a trans boy finding his voice – and himself. As a former high school theatre nerd, I was hooked by Ray’s book, which captures that awkward, exciting, sometimes painful time so perfectly. There are so many ways to be queer and trans, and I want publish books that speak to all different types of experiences. You’ll fall in love with Dean, just as I did, as he explores how we find and become our fullest selves. – Maggie Lehman, Editorial Director of Fiction

**Andersen Press**
*Dreams for Our Daughters* by Ruth Doyle, illustrated by Ashling Lindsay (February) is the book I’ve always wanted to give my daughter. It speaks of the world as we want it, where girls can be fearless, be who they want to be, where they are leaders and fulfil their potential. As I read Ruth’s exquisitely-chosen inspirational words for the first time they had the most profound, powerful effect on me which has never diminished. Paired with Ashling’s illustrations it is one of the most outstandingly beautiful books I’ve ever worked on. Forget fairy tale endings, this book is about making hopes and dreams reality. A timeless, keepsake book that every daughter should have.

**Barrington Stoke**
Onjali Q. Raúf is one of the most exciting authors at work in children’s publishing today, able to address pressing social issues in a way that makes them accessible to younger readers and encourages discussion. We are therefore thrilled to be publishing *The Great (Food) Bank Heist* (July), in which she gives a heartrending child’s-eye view of the growing problem of food poverty. As with all Onjali’s stories, she provides relief through her unique ability to combine empathy with humour in this madcap adventure that sees a group of enterprising friends using their ingenuity to expose a shameful heist targeting their local foodbank.

**Big Picture Press (Bonnier)**
My pick for 2021 is the impassioned *Art of Protest by De Nichols and featuring art from multiple artists including illustrations from Diana Dagadita and Olivia Twist* (September). Part educational, part narrative non-fiction, this book takes a look at some of the most memorable and striking protest artwork from across the world and throughout history. Author De Nichols was inspired to become an ‘artivist’ after an unarmed teenager was shot by police in her hometown, sparking the 2014 Ferguson Uprising. She tells her own story through the text, alongside a collective of five international illustrators. We hope this book will guide readers through this important time in our history and can be used to spark positive change.

**Bloomsbury Children’s Books**
Written by Melissa Cummings-Quarry and Natalie A. Carter, best friends and co-founders of the Black Girls’ Book Club, and illustrated by Dorcas Magbadelo, *GROWN: The Black Girls’ Guide to Growing Up and Showing Out* (September) is the ultimate guide to navigating the beautiful and complex reality of Black British girlhood. It’s packed with stories, wisdom and practical advice relevant to all the intersecting parts of female identity, from how to lay the perfect edges or dealing with microaggressions to consent, financial literacy and career ambitions. It’s also peppered with contributions from inspirational Black women, including some very special guest writers. Inspirational, life-affirming and full of Black Magic, *GROWN* will ensure young Black women everywhere feel seen. Commissioning Editor Non-Fiction Isobel Doster

**Commissioning Editor Fiction Ellen Holgate**
Ben Bailey Smith’s *Something I Said* (June) is my standout novel for 2021. Car Taylor is a kid who always sees the funny side of life – which makes him popular with his fellow students, less so with his teachers and parents. When his impromptu stand-up routine at the school talent show goes viral, a once in a lifetime opportunity to find fame and fortune beckons. But if you alienate everyone who loves you, who can you rely on when life gets less funny? Car is a magnetic personality – brilliantly drawn and instantly relatable. I roared with laughter on his journey of self-discovery, but ultimately this exceptional middle grade debut is all about the love.

**Emma Ledbetter, Editorial Director of Picture Books**

**Joanna McInerney, Publishing Head Bloomsbury Children’s Books**

**Onjali Q. Raúf, Commissioning Editor Non-Fiction Isobel Doster**

**Charli Sheppard, Editorial Director Fiction**

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Rossynne McQuinn’s inclusive *Zeki Books* series. It is perfect for very young ones to enjoy with their grown-ups. Zeki and Daddy fill their days with tickles, pancakes, dancing, playing and reading – it’s always nice to see caring dads in picture books. This sweet companion to *Zeki Loves Mummy* is a perfect celebration of daddy love for every day, as well as for special days like Father’s Day.

**Ken Wilson-Max, Publisher**

**Sue Buswell, Editorial Director Picture Books**

**Andrew Wernick, Commissioning Editor Non-Fiction Isobel Doster**

**Commissioning Editor Fiction Ellen Holgate**

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**4 Books for Keeps No.246 January 2021**
Boxer Books
The book I’m most excited about publishing next year is The Magic Hug by Fifi Kuo. This is an outstanding story about the emotion of anger. When the little dragon gets angry and sees red, he doesn’t always know why. He ends up hurting the people he loves and sometimes he even hurts himself. Luckily his mother knows just what to do about it – something special and something magic – a big hug. Fifi Kuo is a master at emotional storytelling and creating empathy. This is a truly special book where the illustrations work perfectly with the text. Leilani Sparrow Managing Editor

BSmall
This year we published to great acclaim a critical literacy skills book called Question Everything! In 2021, we’ll publish the second title in this series, How to Question Everything in Science. Written and illustrated by Blue Peter Award-winning team, Susan Martineau and Vicky Barker (for Real-life Mysteries) this book will be essential for kids (and adults!) to understand the science that is communicated to us in everyday life. What does that graph mean? Why have they done the study in that way? Scientific literacy is a crucial skill and we can’t wait to share this one with you! Sam Hutchinson BSmall

Cameron Kids Books
I found and fell in love with Shirin Bridge’s first manuscript, the award-winning Ruby’s Wish, illustrated by Sophie Blackall, when I was an editor for Chronicle Books. I wanted to publish her on our list at Cameron, too. Shirin comes from a really interesting family and has a beautiful way of writing about history – especially stories of powerful women – that brings it to life. In addition to being an author, Shirin is something of a history buff, and she’s wickedly funny. And that’s what we love about Get Up, Elizabeth! (February): it combines history and humour in a beautifully simple way. Amy Novesky, Children’s Book Editorial Director at Cameron Kids

Chicken House
If I can cheekily add two books rather than one… I am very excited about acclaimed novelist and nature-writer Melissa Harrison’s first book for children. By Ash, Oak and Thorn (May). A story of tiny hidden folk, guardians of nature, it is both magical and inspiring. And also publishing in May, is Efua Traore’s Children of The Quicksands, winner of our Times/Chicken House Fiction Competition. Set in rural and urban Nigeria, this is a stunning debut of family and myth, and for Efua the beginning of a brilliant career. Rachel Leyshon, Editorial Director

Child’s Play
This year we are delighted to publish I See the Sea, a new book by Julia Groves. With beautiful illustrations and simple, thought-provoking text. I See the Sea offers the reader a chance to consider the life of creatures that are rarely seen, yet are an intrinsic part of the ecological balance of our planet. Non-fiction information about each creature complements the mindful text, and discussion about the impact of humans on our oceans will help each of us to think about how we can change our behaviour and help preserve this unique environment. Sue Baker, Editor, Child’s Play

Chronicle Books
It’s So Quiet (March) by Sherri Duskey Rinker, illustrated by Tony Fucile is a rollicking bedtime book from the bestselling author of Goodnight, Goodnight, Construction Site that will engage even the most rambunctious readers. Sherri Duskey Rinker’s rhymes are as delightful and silly as ever and will have parents and children squealing, croaking and laughing along – before settling themselves down for a quiet night’s sleep. This book reminds me of Sesame Street and the Muppets—the musicality and momentum of those skits, as well as their wonderful, innocent hilarity. I was sure that it would be tremendous fun for families to read aloud – full of humour and warmth. Melissa Manlove, Senior Editor at Chronicle Books

Egmont Fiction
It’s an incredibly exciting year of blockbuster titles and it’s impossible to choose between them! Focusing on debuts and new series, I must start with Amari and the Night Brothers by B.B. Alston. Publishing this month, it’s a thrilling MG fantasy adventure that fans of Nevermoor will adore. Monster for Hunting for Beginners by Ian Marks is a joyous spin on traditional fairy tales and will have readers in stitches. And Rainbow Grey by Laura Ellen Anderson, for slightly younger readers, introduces a fantastical world of weather magic that will enchant fans of Amelia Fang and new readers alike! Lindsey Heaven, Fiction Publishing Director

Egmont Picture Books
Favourite fairy tales get a uniquely silly and rebellious twist in a brand-new series for fearless little readers! First to demonstrate her derring-do is Rabunzel the Rabbit, whose exceedingly long ears cause her worried mother to lock her in a high tower, safe from hungry predators. But when Flash Harry the Hare rushes to the rescue, calling “Rabunzel, Rabunzel, let down your ears!”, he is surprised to discover that Rabunzel does NOT need rescuing. Laugh-out-loud storytelling, and strong messages of resilience, courage and being true to yourself – along with fabulously foiled covers – will delight readers of all ages! Melissa Fairley, Picture Books Publishing Director

Electric Monkey (Egmont)
We have some devastatingly brilliant titles launching on our YA imprint, Electric Monkey. But for the sheer fact it showcases not one, not two, but SIX incredible talents, I have to highlight Blackout which is set to be the YA blockbuster of summer 2021. Celebrating Black teen love stories, this incredible collection of interlinked stories – set during a blackout in New York city enduring an intense heatwave – is written by six of the biggest, award-winning voices on the YA scene: Dhonielle Clayton, Tiffany D Jackson, Nic Stone, Angie Thomas, Ashley Woodfolk and Nicola Yoon. We’re so excited about this launch. Liz Bankes, Fiction Editorial Director

Faber Children’s Books
2021 is set to be a huge year for Faber Children’s with incredible new books from Emma Carroll, Kieran Larwood, Jason Reynolds and Francesca Simon, to name just a few. I feel particularly privileged and excited to be publishing Jeffrey Boakye’s Musical Truth: A Musical History of Modern Black Britain in 27 songs. Black British history is wondrously under-represented in the mainstream curriculum and Musical Truth has the intelligence and power to change this. Jeffrey Boakye is a phenomenal talent we feel very lucky to publish. We’ve paired him with illustrator Ngadi Smart – her electric colour palette and dynamic line work is a brilliant match for this extraordinary retelling of Black British history that will dazzle readers of all ages. Leah Thaxter, Faber Children’s Publisher

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Guppy Books

The first new title Guppy Books is publishing in February 2021 is an extraordinary middle-grade novel, Maggie Blue and the Dark World – a dark, funny, gripping tale of Maggie and talking cat Hoagy, who find themselves entering a parallel world where happiness is being used as a commodity. Thrilling, thought-provoking and incredibly timely, this novel is an astonishing debut which explores the concepts of identity and mental health from a unique perspective.

Anna Goodall is a hugely talented new voice in children’s fiction and the friendship between irascible Hoagy and fiercely courageous Maggie is a joy to read. Bella Pearson, Publisher

Levine Querido

Willow the rabbit is SO shy that she’d rather not leave the abandoned mailbox she calls home. But then a little boy drops a letter into the box, addressed to the moon. Willow is faced with a dilemma; should she try to deliver the letter, even though she’s scared? Which is stronger – her very real fears, or her powerful empathy for another? Shy Willow (February) is the debut of Cat Min, a writer and artist with the incredible visual talent to match her storytelling ability. Cat Min’s lush, expressive watercolours create a welcoming world for all, no matter how shy they are. Arthur Levine, Founder and Editor-in-Chief

Hot Key (Bonnier)

The House of Hollow (April) by the incredibly talented Krystal Sutherland, is one of the most extraordinary YA horror novels I have read in years. The Hollow sisters are as glamorous as they are seductive, and they are more dangerous than even they themselves know. The darkly twisting narrative literally grips you from the first page and doesn’t let go until you are thrown out, gasping at the other end. We have received advance praise already from Louise O’Neill and Kiran Millwood Hargrave and I cannot wait to share this deliciously serpentine novel more widely. Emma Matthewson, Associate Publisher

Macmillan Fiction

Peanut Jones and the Illustrated City is an award-winning, record-breaker Rob Biddulph’s first middle-grade novel and, oh boy, it’s a stunner! It is one of those dream books – fresh and funny, exciting and tender. It’s packed with exceptional integrated illustrations throughout and offers perfect escapism for readers of 8+ – don’t we all need a bit of that at the moment. The first in a three-book series, Peanut Jones has creativity in all its forms (art, science, mystery solving) at its heart in this story about a girl who is determined to find her missing dad and bring him home. Sarah Hughes, Associate Publisher

Lantana

After a year like 2020, we all need a bit of cheering up. SuperJoe Does NOT Do Cuddles (September) by Michael Catchpole and Emma Proctor follows SuperJoe – superhero in the making – who is convinced he doesn’t need cuddles from his mum. He flies around the neighbourhood rescuing people from escaped tigers, runaway trains and raging rivers, all while battling his nemesis the Grey Shadow. Naturally, he refuses all cuddles. Until one night, when he can’t sleep… Michael and Emma’s brilliantly funny SuperJoe is bound to get children smiling again, while adding some much-needed diversity to the superhero pantheon. Alice Curry, Publisher

Macmillan Poetry

Wild Child is multi-award winner Dara McAnulty’s first book for children and is illustrated in full colour by Barry Falls. Dara is one of the most exciting nature writers of the moment and in this astonishingly beautiful book he guides us on a multi-sensory walk showing us just how extraordinary and precious the natural world is. It begins in Dara’s own back garden and he takes us on to hills, woods and ponds – pointing out his favourite animals, birds and plants – and all the while explaining migration, life cycles and giving us projects to make at home. Bliss! Gaby Morgan, Editorial Director, Non-fiction and Poetry

Little Island Books

When we are considering a manuscript at Little Island, we ask ourselves: is there a chance that a child who reads this book will, in 20 or 30 years, want to buy it for their own child? Few books clear that bar, but Wolfstongue (May) by Sam Thompson feels like a future classic. It has everything we look for in a book like this: absolutely superb writing, thoughtful ideas interwoven with gripping storytelling, and a sensitive treatment of a child protagonist with depth. We can’t wait for the world to read this brilliant, beautiful book. Matthew Parkinson-Bennett, Publisher

Macmillan Preschool

If there’s a book on my desk to distract me from doing my job, it has to be Ben Newman’s brilliant Snap Snap. Helping to launch Macmillan’s exciting new Preschool list, the story begins with a crocodile and a nasty nip on the tail. Crab is the culprit – loveable for his naughtiness – and chaos soon ensues, brought to life by transforming die-cut pages and non-stop noisy wordplay. But amid all the slapstick humour, true relationships are slowly forming. Ben juggles all of this, yet creates a book that delights in simplicity. I keep coming back for more, and don’t doubt that a host of preschoolers will too. Barry Timms, Publishing Director of Preschool

Knights Of

I’m excited to be kicking off 2021 with the second middle-grade novel from Elle McNicoll, author of A Kind of Spark. Set in the near future, Show Us Who You Are is beautifully written and so absorbing, with twists and turns that will keep readers gripped. The themes of grief, resilience and true friendship will definitely pull on everyone’s heartstrings. Elle is so committed to accurately representing Neurodivergent characters in her books; once again she’s written a captivating story – this time about a mysterious company that’s creating holograms with AI technology – that all children can see themselves in. Eishar Brar, Editorial Director

Shy Willow
Macmillan Picture Books
I can’t wait for young readers to enjoy award-winning Gemma Merino’s The Dragon Who Didn’t Like Fire. We all know that dragons love breathing fire and flying, but hate water. So what’s a young dragon to do when she finds she can swim like a fish, and it feels … amazing? I love this story about difference and acceptance, being true to yourself, and family love. It’s also very funny, and full of gorgeous, witty details to discover. Who wouldn’t fall in love with a small dragon in a crash helmet? It is a big-hearted joy from start to finish. Hannah Ray, Publishing Director, Picture Books

Macmillan Non-Fiction
Of all the exciting new voices to arise in 2020, none could be more impactful than that of Marcus Rashford – England International footballer, child food poverty advocate and real-life superhero – who is committed to inspiring real and positive change in children. And Marcus’s debut does just that. You Are a Champion is an empowering guide for tweens on mental resilience, grit and positive mindset, showing children everywhere how to be their own champion, and crucially champion others as well. Written with journalist Carl Anka and filled with infographics and illustration, this is the positive, uplifting manual for life that all kids need. Cate Augustin, Editor, Fiction and Non-Fiction

Michael O’Mara
We’re so excited to be publishing the hilarious Does a Bear Poo in the Woods? by debut picture book author Jonny Leighton and bestselling illustrator Mike Byrne. This is the story of Barry the shy bear – all he wants is a private place to poo, but he just can’t find a spot to get away from the prying eyes of the other woodland animals. A laugh-out-loud, rhyming tale filled with side-splitting illustrations and a surprise ending, children and parents alike will love reading about this universally popular topic. Susannah Bailey, Publisher

Nosy Crow
Published in collaboration with the British Museum, A History of the World in 25 Cities by Tracey Turner and Andrew Donkin, illustrated by Libby VanderPloeg, is a gorgeously illustrated big book of maps that explores how people have shaped cities and how cities have shaped history. From Jericho over 10,000 years ago to the modern-day metropolises of Tokyo and San Francisco, travel the world and city-hop through pivotal moments in history. Featuring vibrant artwork and 25 unique and carefully researched maps, discover what life was like for the people that lived there. Stunningly original, child-friendly and full of intriguing information, this is an absolute treasure trove of facts and illustration that will inform and delight readers of all ages. Rachel Kellehar, Head of Non-Fiction

Old Barn
Something different from us this year: Paul Jennings’ gentle, humorous, autobiography, Untwisted (June), weaves together the characters and events that formed the author of Round the Twist and our recent Different trio of novellas. From dyslexic child immigrant and high school dropout to award-winning teacher and Concorde-travelling author, Paul looks back and unpicks both his life and his writing, reflecting on moments of hubris as he confronts his glass-fronted collection of classic cars and his marriage failure. Raw and revealing, in Untwisted Jennings has crafted both a quirky, compelling, narrative and a how-to for students of creative writing and of life. Ruth Huddleston, Old Barn

Orion Children’s Books
From the New York Times bestselling author Jewell Parker Rhodes we have Black Brother, Black Brother (May), an incredibly powerful coming-of-age story about two brothers – one who presents as white, the other as Black – and the ways they are forced to navigate a world that doesn’t treat them equally. Jewell’s storytelling is poignant and gripping, and tackles the complexities of race and racism in today’s world with heart and empathy. Kate Agar, Editorial Director

Otter-Barry Books
YOU CAN! by Alexandra Strick and Steve Antony (October) is a ground-breaking picture book that will inspire children everywhere to believe in themselves. Exceptionally diverse and inclusive, it follows 14 children from birth to young adulthood as they reach out to the future and take charge of their lives. We see the children learning new skills, exploring new worlds, talking about feelings, being kind, being brave and standing up for their own and others’ rights, and most important of all, being themselves. Author Alexandra Strick, co-founder of Inclusive Minds, was inspired by conversations with real children from many different backgrounds and experiences, sharing messages of empathy, reassurance and hope. The astonishing visual narrative is by internationally acclaimed illustrator Steve Antony. Janetta Otter-Barry, Publisher

Penguin Random House Non-Fiction
A Different Sort of Normal (July) by Abigail Balfé is an eye-opening true story of one girl’s journey growing up autistic. Through Abigail’s vibrant words and illustrations, we are told about the highs and lows of her childhood as she navigates the ‘normal’ world around her. There are funny stories that include her fear of toilets, and an incident involving her dad and a tub of ice cream at the supermarket. And more serious stories: a very difficult experience at a swimming pool, coping with bullies, and dealing with the overwhelming stimuli of a crowded train. Along the way, Abigail also shares crucial information about autism. Working with an exciting new talent such as Abigail would be an incredible thing in any case, but her very personal blueprint for how to understand and accept yourself – all delivered with her wonderful warmth and humour – is so very important. Tom Rawlinson, Commissioning Editor, Puffin

Puffin Middle Grade
It’s rare to read the opening lines of a book and realise instantly that you have in front of you something really special, but this was the case with The Hatmakers by Tamzin Merchant (February), illus Paola Escobar. This book has completely enchanted me; I haven’t felt as immersed in a magical setting since stepping into Ollivanders. It’s warm-hearted and wise, funny and adventurous, and beautifully written’ Natalie Doherty, Puffin Editorial Director

Penguin YA
The Upper World (August) is YA fiction at its absolute best – smart, bold, hilarious and addictive. Debut author Femi Fadugba has skilfully wove together the story of two young teenagers separated by time and fate with his expert knowledge of the physics of literal time-travel. Its ambition and scope is unlike anything else out there: simply put, it’s a triumph. Emma Jones, Acquiring Editor

Piccadilly Press (Bonnier)
The Elephant in the Room, from much-loved Counting by 7s author, Holly Goldberg Sloan, is a heart-warming, empathetic story
about Sila, a young Turkish girl living in America, whose mother has had to return to Turkey to renew her immigration papers. Luckily her dad takes Sila’s mind off things by bringing her with him to work, which is how they meet Gio, an elderly man living on his own in a huge house. And which is also how they meet a circus elephant and decide to reunite the elephant with her mother! Wonderfully engaging with important messages about family and friendship.

Emma Matthewson, Executive Publisher

Prestel

I Saw A Beautiful Woodpecker is the authentic 80-year-old diary of an eight-year-old boy – Michal Skibinski – who wrote one sentence into his notebook every day during one summer. A long series of laconic sentences tell of peaceful days in the countryside, surrounded by nature … However, this was the summer of 1939, and school didn’t start again in September, instead the Second World War broke out. An extraordinary and touching book with wonderful illustrations that reflect the mood of this special summer – after which nothing would ever be the same again.

Doris Kutschbach, Prestel

Quercus Children’s Books

Piers Torday’s The Last Wild trilogy won The Guardian Children’s Fiction Prize and is now much-loved modern classic. In September comes the prequel, The Wild Before (September), which is a beautiful, captivating animal adventure. One frosty winter’s night, a pure white calf is born by the light of a silver moon. This is the legendary Mooncalf: according to a dream passed down from animal to animal, if the calf dies, a great terribleness will come - rising seas, a plague, skies raining down fire, the end of all things… Little Hare vows to persuade all the animals to protect Mooncalf, whatever the cost… Sarah Lambert, Publishing Director

Red Shed (Egmont)

Packed full of super silly pranks, My Very Very Very Very Very Very Silly Book of Pranks is the hilarious follow-up to Matt Lucas’s My Very Very Very Very Very Very Silly Book of Jokes and the ultimate boredom-busting book for 7+ readers! Join Matt as he introduces silly, safe and brilliantly inventive pranks to play on family and friends. Meet the greatest pranksters of all time, discover the world’s most mind-blowing hoaxes, giggle at epic prank fails… and much, much more. Hours of family-friendly fun, laughter and creativity, perfect for brightening up the home-school day or livening up a dull staycation! Melissa Fairley, Picture Books Publishing Director

Rock the Boat

What am I most excited to be publishing in 2021? That’s a tough one, but I’m going to have to go for Firekeeper’s Daughter, the ground-breaking YA thriller by debut author Angelina Boullley. The story centres around Native American teen Daunis. After witnessing a shocking murder in her community, Daunis finds herself going undercover for the FBI. Her journey as she unearths the truth – and learns what it means to be a strong Anishinaabe kwe (Ojibwe woman) – will keep you reading well into the early hours… Katie Jennings, Senior Commissioning Editor

Scallywag Press

In 1988, as children’s editor at Faber, I met (in New York) and published (in the UK) a brand-new kid on the block. The new kid was Jon Agee, the book The Incredible Painting of Felix Clousseau. Now, 33 years later, it is being reissued here by Scallywag Press. In a larger format, and with a masterful cover change, this wonderful book is a triumphant celebration of ‘comic absurdity’. And it has an ending so sublimely illustrative of the brilliance of word-and-picture play that, for me, it is a benchmark of picture book genius. Go, Felix, go – enchant a whole new generation of children, and their grown-ups!

Janice Thomson, Editor

Scholastic

The NightSilver Promise by Annaliese Avery (November) is an epic, beautifully written debut fantasy adventure acquired in a break-neck pre-empt by our Commissioning Editor Yasmin Morrissey. It has future children’s classic written all over it: we’re in a world where everyone’s destiny is pre-determined by a track of stars on their wrist. 13-year-old Paisley discovers that her fate is to die before her fourteenth year is out, and when her mother goes missing and is presumed dead, so begins a breath-taking adventure through an alternative London of Floating Boroughs and a vault guarded by Dragon Walkers. It is full of thrills and bravery and has family at its heart: glorious storytelling and a must-read.

Lauren Fortune, Editorial Director

The School of Life

I am delighted we are continuing to expand our children’s list in 2021, with books designed to encourage emotional literacy for all ages. Nature and Me; what we can learn from the world around us (June), complete with gorgeous illustrations, explores the wonders of the natural world from a different perspective. While asking children how nature makes them feel and helping them to engage with it; this book aims to positively influence their emotional wellbeing, which seems so relevant. Ranging from the wonders of a starry night, to an encounter with a very hungry hedgehog; children are encouraged to explore various emotions as they relate to the natural world.

Toby Marshall, Head of Publishing

Scribe

From the author of the Doodle Cat series, Kat Patrick and illustrated by Evie Barrow, Howl! (February) is Where the Wild Things Are for girls – highlighting the importance of letting out big feelings, particularly as a young girl, and underscoring the unique bond between mother and daughter. It tells the story of a young girl, Maggie, who has had a very bad day – the sun was the wrong shape, her spaghetti was too long and her shoes wouldn’t go on properly. When she starts to have wolfish thoughts, she heads out into the moonlit garden with her mother to engage in some wolfish behaviour … Sarah Braybrooke, Managing Director

Studio Press (Bonnier)

How to Mend a Friend publishes in June 2021. This heartfelt picture book is all about sadness and empathy, and it shows children how they can support each other through life’s more difficult moments. It’s written in a lyrical rhyming style by Karl Newson, and illustrated by the incredibly talented Clara Anganuzzi. Readers will follow a child and a polar bear as they navigate life’s twists and turns, and learn how to help their friends when things aren’t going so well. From a magnificent lion to riotously colourful parrots, there’s something to fall in love with on every page.

Stephanie Milton, Publishing Head
Sunbird Books

Using creativity to conquer boredom makes for a timeless children’s tale, but it has never been as timely as right now. In Stuck Inside, gorgeously written and illustrated by Sally Anne Garland (May), Tilly is stuck inside until a storm passes, and her pup Toby is stuck inside until his paw heals. There is absolutely nothing fun to do… until a hopeful Toby brings something to Tilly, and Tilly gets an idea! This sweet, encouraging story of seeing old things in a new light will spark the imagination of any child who feels cooped up by the pandemic, or anything else. Susie Brooke, Editorial Director

Templar

I am over this moon that Templar are publishing A Shelter for Sadness (January). This lyrical picture book has a moving text from Anne Booth and is given wondrous colour and feeling by the illustrations of David Litchfield. The shelter in the book is the comfortable, safe place a child builds to house his sadness. Therein lies this story’s vital message – that sadness is okay and that if you make space for it and accept it, the sun will shine more brightly in other parts of your life. I think it is an important, timely story.

Katie Haworth, Publishing Head

Tiny Owl

In uncertain times, we all need hope. To be published in March, exactly one year after England’s national lockdown, Unlocked! Stories of Hope from Tiny Owl Artists in Lockdown is a gorgeous collection of words and pictures which capture a moment in history. Inside you will find contributions from 15 fantastic Tiny Owl artists hailing from all around the world. Reflecting on their experiences during lockdown and how they coped, each illustrator showcases their distinctive styles. Themes of resilience, creativity, and positivity weave their way into every spread, for children and adults to treasure in months and years to come. Delaram Ghanimifard, Co-Founder and Publisher

Troika

In June we will publish When Poems Fall from the Sky a stunning new collaboration by Zaro Weil and Junli Song, the writer and illustrator of CLIPPA-winning Cherry Moon. Published in association with the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, the poems, story-poems, raps, rhymes, haiku and little plays inside this fantastical anthology about nature are a riot of imagination, humour and joy. In exquisitely illustrated full colour pages trees, birds, animals, rivers, flowers, mountains and insects each share their own magical stories. And the stories they tell, the ‘poems’ that fall from the sky, subtly and powerfully illuminate our hope and collective role as guardians of our earth. Martin West, Publisher

Two Hoots (Macmillan)

I’ve chosen A Song of Gladness by Michael Morpurgo and illustrated by Emily Gravett. The alchemy of two people creating a picture book is a magical thing, and especially when it involves such towering talents as Michael Morpurgo and Emily Gravett. Inspired by a blackbird in Michael’s garden, A Song of Gladness is a story of hope and inspiration for us all, encouraging us to come together with nature, and with each other, to save our planet. This joyful masterpiece – Michael’s lyrical, moving text and Emily’s extraordinarily beautiful illustrations – could not be more timely, and is one of my proudest publishing moments.

Suzanne Carnell, Publisher

Uclan Publishing

For someone with an overactive imagination I knew The Weather Weaver (March) by debut author Tamsin Mori was something special as soon as it landed in my inbox. Full of magic, myths and legends, Tamsin has woven a fantastical story that is so rooted in reality the reader will find it completely plausible that they too might have the power to conjure up their own cloud. Yes, this is a book about magic, but it’s also about grief and a girl who yearns to feel at home, finding her independence and own inner strength. I completely love this story, and I’m sure you will too. Hazel Holmes, Publisher

Usborne

A sense of wonder, whimsy and fascinating science is what makes The Book of the Brain (March) one of the titles I’m proudest to have worked on this year. Created in collaboration with a practising neuroscientist who is also an accomplished artist, the result is an enchanting blend of picture-book, almost comic book, storytelling with non-fiction content. Brain science is one of the great new frontiers in science today. It’s been an exciting challenge to create accurate visual analogies of the workings of the brain, enabling us to bring the joy and magic of the subject to very young children.

Jane Chisholm, Editorial Director

Walker Books

Jonathan Stroud, bestselling author of Lockwood & Co and the Bartimaeus trilogy, was once an editor at Walker Books, so it is particularly exciting to see him storm onto the Walker list with Outlaws Scarlett and Browne, the first in a brilliant new teen fantasy series. In this ‘rip-roaring, bullets-flying, hooves-stomping gallop through dystopian Britain’ (Eoin Colfer), England has been struck by a series of catastrophes, destroying cities and forcing the population into fortified towns while strange beasts prowl the wilderness. Anyone who falls foul of the strict new rules faces being killed or driven out into the wilds. Only a few fight back – among them Scarlett McCain and Albert Browne whose sheer audacity and charisma promises to make them the new anti-hero legends in teen fiction.

Jane Winterbotham, Publisher

Walker Studio

Award-winning documentary artist George Butler has travelled the world capturing the stories of migration – whether it be leaving home to seek a better life, to escape war or to flee disaster. In Drawn Across Borders his powerful portraits bring to life individual human stories of the people behind the headlines, in their struggle to seek a better life. His powerful visual storytelling will reach out to young readers as a reminder of the humanity we share, and the universal right to safety. This stunning book brings a striking new approach to one of the most pressing issues of our time.

Jane Winterbotham, Publisher

Wren & Rook

The nation’s favourite paediatrician, Dr Ranj, has been a vital source of trustworthy information for parents during the pandemic, so we couldn’t be prouder to be publishing his puberty guide for boys, How to Grow Up and Feel Amazing!: The No-Worries Guide for Boys (February). Filled with easy-to-understand explanations and down-to-earth advice, this growing-up handbook is fit for the 21st century: it covers mental health, social media, friendships and relationships in addition to the all-important physical changes.

Liza Wilde, Managing Editor

ZunTold

I’m absolutely delighted to be bringing Anna Bowles’ wonderful book Rapids to market this year. With some really important themes, we chose a publication date during Mental Health Awareness Week in May to help highlight this as the newest title in our Fiction as Therapy stable. Author Anna lives with bipolar herself, and so her voice is really authentic, and her protagonist Yan is an unforgettable one. But beyond this, the book is no ‘issue novel’ – it’s a slice of real teen life, by turns serious and hilarious I really think that this will be a huge hit amongst teens and adults alike.

Elaine Bousfield, CEO
‘Stories that make you feel seen’ – that’s how award-winning YA author Lisa Williamson describes the ethos that underpins her novels. ‘It’s something I instinctively do,’ she explains, and this instinct is brilliantly borne out by all her work, from Leo and David’s transgenderism in her 2016 debut The Art of Being Normal, to Jojo’s struggles with the tangled aftermath of becoming a teenage mum in the recently published First Day of My Life.

Alongside rendering invisible lives visible, Lisa’s characters and their authentically-portrayed lives and predicaments are remarkably relatable - her novels explore very specific situations while radiating universal resonance. Perhaps enhanced by skills honed during her acting career, Lisa’s work is also outstanding in its capacity to get under her characters’ skins, and the way their stories exude and stimulate empathy. She observes that ‘there’s a few actors turned novelists and I do think it’s a transition that works very well. For me it’s that experience of putting yourself in someone else’s shoes.’

‘The best feedback I could get is enjoyment. Entertainment comes first.’

After writing ‘a bit of a rom-com about an out of work actor’ Lisa realised ‘that the thing I should be writing about was what I was doing every single day – communicating with young people and their families’ (she worked for the Gender Identity Development Service at the Tavistock Centre). Desperate to finish the novel she’d started on a course run by the Curtis Brown agency, Lisa discovered the Golden Egg Academy and here met her future editor Bella Pearson (now of Guppy Books, then of David Fickling Books), who, says, ‘waved her magic wand and unlocked the rest of my book’. Alongside voice and instinct, in-depth research plays a big part in Lisa’s writing. ‘I like to feel that I know what I’m talking about’, she explains, though in the case of The Art of Being Normal, ‘I’d done research by osmosis because of my job. I’d been researching for two years without even knowing it, and I wrote that book quite instinctively.’

While she finds research really enriching, Lisa’s favourite scenes to write are those that have big emotions – ‘I find them quite easy to get on the page initially’ – and her approach to writing isn’t driven by detailed planning. ‘I normally start with a character and a set-up and that’s it. I often start writing and see what happens.’ Interestingly Lisa’s latest novel, First Day of My Life is ‘the book I’ve done the least research for’. This poignant page-turner about friendship, betrayal and surviving secrets follows Jojo, a teenage mother who’s driven to kidnap her own baby. Though gripping and moving, Lisa explains that ‘its genesis is a bit silly. I was away doing...’
Joanne Owen is a writer, reviewer and workshop presenter. Recent books include the Martha Mayhem series, published by Piccadilly Press, and You Can Write Awesome Stories, a how-to book for children, published by HarperCollins.

School events with Juno Dawson and we were having dinner one night and just kind of batting ideas around. We were talking about what the mum character in Paper Avalanche could hoard and Juno just said “Babies!” This spurred the question, “what if a teenager stole a baby?” And then I just kept coming back to that idea. Lots of ‘what ifs?’ later led Lisa to the novel’s ingenious set-up of Jojo going on the run with her own baby.

Without spoiling the experience for those who’ve yet to read it, First Day of My Life is shot-through with Jojo and Frankie’s all-consuming, soul-searing friendship – a theme that runs through all Lisa’s work. In The Art of Being Normal, we see it between David, Felix and Essie, and later between David and Leo. We see it when Mia’s friends forgive her and welcome her back into their fold in All About Mia. We see it between Ro and Tanvi in Paper Avalanche. And, linked to the theme of friendship, Lisa is also outstanding at conveying its abject opposite − loneliness − with heartrending honesty, such as when David in The Art of Being Normal says, ‘I’m so lonely it physically hurts.’ It’s this sense of isolation and loneliness that drives Mia to career out of control in All About Mia.

‘Not enough people stand up for the underdog,’
Alicia, The Art of Being Normal

Another strong theme threaded through Lisa’s work is that of fairness and giving voice to the underdog. Recalling her own experiences, Lisa notes that ‘as a teenager you’re not a kid anymore and you’re not an adult, and there can be a lot of mixed messages. It felt dramatically unfair, and I want to explore that. I want to provide readers with a journey that’s satisfying but also realistic.’

Related to this, Lisa is also passionate about representing a range of backgrounds. ‘I grew up in an area where there was a lot of disparity between kids. I come from a working-class background, and generally I try and represent my school experience. I want to show that not everybody is rolling in it, and to show that there’s a spectrum of working-class experience.’

‘I try to let readers know that it’s OK to not have a clue’

Similarly, through her novels and school events, Lisa strives to show young people that everyone is different, that there’s no right way to grow up, that it’s fine to not know what your calling is, to paraphrase Mia, who’s under constant pressure to decide what she wants to do with her life (‘If I had a calling, wouldn’t I know what it was by now?’). In her events, Lisa tries to ‘drive home that you may have several careers in your life. I try to let readers know that it’s OK not to have a clue. I do feel in YA fiction the characters are quite driven and determined and have a passion, and that’s brilliant, but I always felt that there wasn’t much space for kids who don’t have a clue and have pressures on them that are slightly different. I feel like I’ve read the story about the really academic, really talented people, but what about the people who have pressure on them and don’t “have a thing?”’

This gets to the heart of what makes Lisa’s novels so relatable – her characters and set-ups transcend well-worn YA tropes, typically centring the underdog to truly represent lived experiences. This approach extends to her adult characters too. Alongside inspiring mentor characters (‘I love a wise older person!’), she never shirks from showing that life can be confusing no matter what your age. ‘I think it’s really important to be reminded that adults don’t always have the answer even though they might pretend that they do. I think it’s important to show adults messing up and making mistakes acknowledging them.’

That’s certainly true of the adults in First Day of My Life, whose journey to enlightenment is smartly entwined with that of the teenage characters at its heart – three unforgettable young adults who are pummelled by turmoil, but emerge wiser, stronger and elementally altered. What’s more, this exceptional novel more than delivers Lisa’s overriding desire to write authentic, entertaining novels. It’s a punch-packing page-turner of the highest order.

Books mentioned, all by Lisa Williamson and published by David Fickling Books
First Day of My Life, 978-1788451536, £12.99 hbk
All About Mia, 978-1788451321, £7.99 pbk
Paper Avalanche, 978-1910989975, £7.99 pbk
The Art of Being Normal, 978-1788451338, £7.99 pbk

Joanne Owen is a writer, reviewer and workshop presenter. Recent books include the Martha Mayhem series, published by Piccadilly Press, and You Can Write Awesome Stories, a how-to book for children, published by HarperCollins.
Ten of the Best Picture Books
to reassure and boost young children
at the beginning of the year

Books aren’t medicine, but in these days of separation, bewilderment and loss, they can feel like it. Whether you’re looking for a tonic to fortify or a balm to heal, the right books can work wonders. Carey Fluker Hunt has selected ten of the best.

One of the best ways to boost children’s wellbeing is to share books they choose for themselves and really love. But if you’d like to extend their experience, here are ten picturebooks with special powers for you to explore. They are enticing, accessible and great fun to share – ‘reading for pleasure’ books in every sense – but all of them do much more than simply entertain.

**Toys in Space**
Mini Grey, Red Fox, 978-1849415613, £7.99 pbk
Seven toys have been abandoned on the grass. Night falls, and for the first time they see the starry sky in all its terrifying glory. A tale might keep their spirits up, but Wonderdoll’s story is about a drooling alien who kidnaps toys, which doesn’t really help...

Bursting with inventive details and great fun to read, this story-within-a-story brings the creative process centre-stage and shows how powerful imagination can be.

When children’s lives are physically confined and exploring new places isn’t possible, books can help them to escape. And if they hone their storytelling skills, like Wonderdoll, they’ll have endless worlds at their command.

**Mr Brown’s Bad Day**
Lou Peacock and Alison Friend, Nosy Crow, 978-1788003988, £6.99 pbk
Mr Brown is a Very Important Businessman who carries a Very Important Briefcase. When the latter is inadvertently stolen by a baby elephant, a high-energy chase through town ensues. By the time Mr Brown – now in his shirtsleeves – goes upstairs to bed, we can’t wait to discover exactly what he has inside that case...

Suffused with summer sunshine, endearingly silly and bursting with kindness and good cheer, this is a book to lift the spirits on days when everything seems grey. Mr Brown’s devotion to the business of a snuggly bedtime will send little ones to sleep with warm hearts - and adults, too, will feel the glow.

**Little Wolf’s First Howling**
Laura McGee Kvasnosky and Kate Harvey McGee, Walker, 978-1406376708, £11.99 hbk
Little Wolf is out with Dad for his very first Howl, and he’s anxious to show good howling form. But however hard Little Wolf tries, his voice sounds different. How can he join the pack when he makes that kind of noise?

This dramatically-illustrated picturebook is immensely engaging and tackles some important themes. Big Wolf has high expectations, but loving insight enables him to recognize and value Little Wolf’s individuality. This is an empowering message for families to share: one that leads to emotional wellbeing and growth. And there’s nothing quite like toe-tapping rhythms or a good long howl to deliver a boost!

**On a Magical Do-Nothing Day**
Beatrice Alemagna, Thames and Hudson, 978-0500651797, £6.99 pbk
The boy in this book would rather play onscreen than go outside. His cautious misery when faced with mud and rain may strike a chord: this is a child who hasn’t discovered the secrets of the Great Outdoors. But as the storm reaches its peak, things change - and when the boy gets home, he’s almost bursting with the wonders that he’s seen.

This is a story of slow happenings and subtle shifts, but Alemagna’s artwork raises it to epic status. Observing the natural magic in this book is a joy, and will inspire mood-boosting explorations of your own.
Looking After Daddy
Eve Coy, Andersen Press, 978-1783447107, £6.99 pbk
William is always getting himself into scrapes. The supermarket makes him very tired, and he really does create a lot of work…. how lucky he is to have a little girl to look after him!

Books can’t replace social interactions, but they can help us understand how other people think and feel. Characters like Birt and Shu and Etho are real enough to matter, and that’s the key.

On Sudden Hill
Linda Sarah and Benji Davies, Simon and Schuster, 978-1471119293, £6.99 pbk
Birt and Etho spend all their time playing together on Sudden Hill. When a new boy arrives, Birt feels left out. How Shu and Etho respond to Birt’s withdrawal shows imaginative play at its most powerful, and in making a feature of the ‘nuts and bolts’ of friendship, this wise and warm-hearted picturebook is doing something even more important.

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Baby Bird
Andrew Gibbs and Zosienka, Frances Lincoln First Editions, 978-1786035929, £6.99 pbk
One of Baby’s wings is bigger than the other. He’s desperate to fly, so the irrepressibly cheerful Cooter tries to help by putting him through a rigorous training programme. But as Baby discovers, sometimes you really can’t have what you want – and sometimes what you’ve got right now is better, anyway.

This lively and beautifully-illustrated story delivers a profound message with kindness, humour and insight. We want children to feel they can do anything, and it can be tough accepting limitations. Discovering the silver lining is empowering, though, as Baby demonstrates.

Clean Up!
Nathan Bryon and Dapo Adeola, Puffin, 978-0241345894, £6.99 pbk
On a family holiday in Jamaica, Rocket discovers piles of plastic littering the beach. She’s upset, but responds by mobilising a ‘clean-up crew’ and the plastic is recycled into useful things. As her Grumpy observes, one day Rocket is going to change the world!

Worrying can make us all feel powerless, and there’s a lot going on at the moment to cause anxiety. Watching Rocket take action is a real mood-booster: we can all be agents for change, and even the toughest of tasks begins with the first step.

Little Bear’s Treasures
Stella Dreis, Greystone Kids, 978-1771646536, £7.99 hbk
Little Bear is a finder of treasures, a collector of objects and experiences. What could be better than a shiny button, a handy clothespin or a piece of fluff? Sadly, the other animals are unmoved by what they see as junk – until Little Bird turns up. Together, Bear and Bird create something that neither could have discovered independently, and it’s worth the wait.

This gentle story has much to say about joy in small things, and being true to who we are. It may not happen now, but if we keep our enthusiasm alight, and nurture our inner selves, we’ll have something special to bring to a friendship, when it comes.

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Mister Magnolia
Quentin Blake, Red Fox, 978-1862308077, £6.99 pbk
Mister Magnolia has only one boot. It doesn’t matter how many rooty-tooting trumpets, hooting owls or other rhyming delights present themselves, a pair of boots eludes him – until a marvellous parcel arrives. Could it possibly be… another boot?

The expressive eccentricity of Blake’s illustrations and the sheer joy of a text that bowls along at such a pace and in such style has made Mr Magnolia a favourite for many years. When you find a book like this - one that children beg to hear again and again – you’ll know you’ve found something worth treasuring and keeping close.

Carey Fluker Hunt is a writer, teacher and founder of Cast of Thousands, where she blogs about illustrated books for children and shares creative learning activities inspired by those books. Find her at castofthousands.co.uk and on instagram @_castofthousands_.
Windows into illustration: Harriet Muncaster

Harriet Muncaster’s fairy characters are loved by young readers everywhere: her Isadora Moon series has sold over one million copies worldwide and has been translated into over 30 languages. In this special Windows into Illustration feature, she describes creating Victoria Stitch in miniature for the cover of her new series and the mix of techniques she used.

Victoria Stitch is a book very close to my heart. It features a magical, glittering world where miniature, fairy-like characters (called Wisklings) live in a beautiful, idyllic wood. The protagonist of the story, Victoria Stitch, is unhappy. Born from a diamond, she should be next in line for the throne but due to an impurity in her birth crystal she has been denied her royal birth right. In stark contrast to the rest of Wiskling Wood, Victoria Stitch cuts a dark, gothic, brooding figure. She is stars and darkness, frost and glitter. Mischief in a teacup. I wanted to be able to convey all these things on the cover of my book, Victoria Stitch: Bad and Glittering. I wanted it to look magical, pretty and whimsical but with a streak of darkness running through it, just like the world and characters in the story.

After MANY sketches, experimentation and back and forth with my publisher we finally settled on a rough design for the cover of the book. I was excited that my publisher was enthusiastic to include a photographed 3D element on the cover as one of my passions is miniatures. I used to create a lot of my illustrations in 3D out of paper, card and fabric and then photograph them. I love the tactile look of images that have been created using real objects. I also spend a lot of time just creating tiny characters, clothes and accessories anyway – it’s a hobby of mine. So it was nice to be able to include a hint of that on the cover of Victoria Stitch.

I started by drawing my character and then cutting her out very carefully, just like a paper doll! Then I set about making her a big puffy glamorous skirt out of netting and some iridescent fabric and covered it in glitter and sequins. I got a large piece of paper and used chalk pastels to colour a graded background in purple and green (witchy colours I always think) and then set up my paper doll (Victoria Stitch!) on the large piece of paper with it curving up behind her. Then I took a photo. The 3D image of Victoria Stitch went down well with my publisher and the rest of the cover was actually designed around that.

Creating the rest of the image is less interesting as I just fine-tuned things on Photoshop, added Victoria Stitch’s little pet draglet, Stardust, and various other bits and bobs including lots of sparkle. I actually ended up changing Victoria Stitch’s hairstyle in Photoshop as we decided that she would look more mysterious (and less like my other character Isadora Moon) with a hooded cape on. Originally she was wearing a 3D metal crown which began as a crown charm on my necklace, but the publisher and I both agreed it was too overpowering.
Overall, the cover image for Victoria Stitch: Bad and Glittering is a real mixture of techniques. It has photographed 3D elements, hand drawn elements and some Photoshop to pull it all together. I am really pleased with the result (especially the 3D skirt!) and I hope it conveys a mixture of magic, whimsy, glamour and darkness. I hope I managed to carry this vibe through the book with the internal illustrations too.

The red thread of reading for pleasure: Reading Teachers

In the second of a trio of articles, Professor Teresa Cremin untangles the read thread of Reading for Pleasure.

What is it to be a Reading Teacher? (capital R, capital T) Is it a teacher who reads? Who reads what you might ask? And do they share their pleasure with the children? Is that it?

Personally, I think it's far more complex and exciting than that, although sharing one’s pleasure in the latest Anthony McGowan is important, being a fully-fledged Reading Teacher involves much more. For me it critically encompasses four strands: Read, Reflect, Act and Notice (RRAN). It means becoming a highly reflective reader who not only reads, but regularly considers the nature of this social practice and the possible ramifications for classroom practice, then takes actions to offer newly aligned opportunities. Finally, a RT notices the impact of these opportunities on the children as readers and adjusts accordingly – it's not a case of 'do as I do!' In this my second article on the red thread of reading for pleasure, I want to explore the potential of teaching from the dual perspectives of teacher and reader; of being a Reading Teacher and Reading. Reflecting, Acting and Noticing. But first let me offer you some context and recognise the challenges involved.

Reading Teachers Research

The term Reading Teachers: teachers who read and readers who teach was initially coined in 2003 by Michelle Commeyras and her American colleagues. They interviewed practitioners about their understanding of reading and what it might mean for classroom practice. In the Teachers as Readers project, we built on this work by case studying teachers, interviewing and observing them in action over a year. At the end of the project a continuum of practice existed: some teachers simply shared their pleasure in reading, whilst at the other end, teachers held up a mirror to their own reading practices and re-shaped their pedagogy in response (Cremin et al., 2014).

Several practitioners expressed reservations about taking time from teaching to share their reading lives, and remained unconvinced that adopting a personal stance as a reader would influence children's attitudes or attainment, noting for example, My work is to develop children as readers, not share my reading life. Many found the open-endedness of engaging as a Reading Teacher challenging, for example. I'm not used to working without specific objectives. They felt the stance was at odds with the prescribed culture of teaching and wanted re-assurance that this would result in raised standards. Significantly however, the teachers who developed most fully as Reading Teachers positively influenced children's attitudes towards reading and the frequency of their reading at home and school. In addition, these teachers developed stronger teacher-child reader relationships which impacted upon the children's knowledge and perception of their teachers as readers (Cremin et al., 2014).

Reading became a more shared, sociable, relaxed experience in their classrooms as the teacher-readers participated in informal book talk and reader to reader recommendations with children.

Teachers who regularly reflect on their reading stretch their own understanding of reading through the process of reading, reflecting, and acting and they notice the consequences of their adapted pedagogy on children as readers (Cremin, Williams and Denby, 2019). These RTs are not only motivated and enthusiastic fellow readers, but are thoughtful, interactive, reading role models. Some of my recent reflections on reading may illuminate this personal stance.

Re-reading

Recently, I went to bed early to finish Being Miss Nobody (Tasmin Winter). As I went to pick it up, my eye happened upon Jackie Morris’ The Unwinding and other Dreamings and I found myself seeking solace in the trio of short stories – Dreams of the White Bear, individually entitled ‘Shape’, ‘Moon’ and ‘Peace’. The prescient affinity between the woman and the bear in these lyrical narratives speak to me, and I feel drawn back to them time and again. I must have re-read them at least ten times over the last month and almost know the last one – ‘Peace’ – word for word. The visual evocations of the characters’ relationship and the woman’s search to better understand the geography of my heart; how it fits with the pattern of yours speaks to me of the closest of relationships, of being in tune, of love and loss. As I re-read them I remember my mother – her love of nature, of birds and wildflowers.

Pausing to reflect on this practice, I recognise my need to re-read this now, just as I have re-read Felix after the Rain (Dunjar Jogan) and Some Days (Maria Wernicke) over and over since September. There are of course myriad reasons for re-reading, currently mine is to better understand and handle my grief. We might also re-read for the sheer delight of it, or to get our heads around the text, revisit its construction, or experience it again after an interval.

So, I ask myself, have I ever shared with children that I regularly re-read? Have I discussed re-reading with them? Have I facilitated it by borrowing books from yesteryear, so that they can be revisited and experienced anew? Have we made a display of the books we’ve re-read? Have we discussed re-reading passages just to remind ourselves as we read onwards? In taking action in some way, I'd seek to pay attention to the children's responses, listen hard to their comments and explore the value of re-reading for them. I'd want to help the young understand that re-reading is permissible, purposeful, potentially pleasurable and a choice. A reader's choice − their choice, not an expectation.

Reading anything

On Christmas Eve I started following a stuffing recipe from an old copy of Good Housekeeping. The page, well decorated with flecks of ingredients, also has a handwritten note. While the onions sweated, I flicked through other copies (I have a set from 1985 onwards), found another recipe I liked and went online to explore more. Then I remembered the copies of Woman’s Companion and...
I’d inherited decades ago from an aunt, and after locating them, delighted in reading 1929 adverts for treating ringworm; Brown and Poulson’s cornflour; Snowfire cream; a belted corselette; a fat reducing soap and iron jelloids – to mention but a few! The onions overcooked, causing a break in the proceedings and I saw the other texts strewn across the kitchen – magazines, newspapers, travel books, Christmas cards and letters – all sources of pleasure. Whilst I’m aware that recreational reading involves far more than narrative fiction, this abundance and diversity suddenly struck home.

I stopped to reflect. In what ways can teachers help children recognise text diversity and widen what counts as reading in their eyes? Thompson (2019) highlights the ‘living contradictions’ between what teachers consider to be reading for pleasure for themselves and the messages they give children, which she found were predominantly related to attainment and reading for progress. Creating Reading Rivers or 24-hour Reads can help to document everyday reading, though I worry that too often this remains an ‘activity’ not a genuine learning opportunity. More recently, the OU team developed an online Reading Treasure Hunt to encourage teachers, parents and children to become Reading Detectives, hunting out advertising, messages, comics, reading that makes them laugh, is precious, hidden and much more.

Reading Teachers may want to explore these and other opportunities to share everyday reading, and consider the children’s, individually and collectively, helping them recognise their engagement with any text as reading. This might lead to widening the range of texts allowed in reading time and alert teachers to noticing what the young choose to read, their transient or affirmed preferences, their practices and identities as readers.

**In sum**

Re-reading and reading what you choose are just two aspects of my recent experience of reading, but if you pause to reflect on your reading you’ll surely register more. Do you for example: stop and start, pause to problem solve and skip descriptive passages, skim ahead, read across different screens, have several texts on the go, read the end of a novel before you arrive there, fall into reveries, discuss what you read, stick notes/write in texts, not finish some books? I wonder too, to do your reading habits and behaviours vary according to text and context?

Your reflections may mirror some of Daniel Pennac’s Rights of a Reader and these can be a useful, but your own reflections will be hallmarked by authenticity. They represent your own red thread of reading for pleasure and reveal something personal about you. If you want to develop as a Reading Teacher and support the children as readers, then I’d encourage you to hold a mirror up to your own experience and practices, and to read, reflect, act and notice the consequences of your altered pedagogy and the ways your classroom conversations about being a reader expand.

For practical ideas to support you, see: Reading Teacher

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**The Open University**

**Reading for pleasure**

If you want support to nurture readers, then visit the Open University’s research-informed practitioner website. It’s packed with ideas, resources, audits, videos and PowerPoints! FREE!

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www.researchrichpedagogies.org/research/reading-for-pleasure# @OpenUni_RFP
In 1936, following the lead of the American Library Association, the British Library Association created its first prize for children’s books, the Carnegie Medal. It was nearly twenty years before they added a medal specifically for illustration, named after one of the great Victorian illustrators, Kate Greenaway. The award was announced in 1955 and was offered for ‘distinguished illustration in a book for children’ (CILIP Carnegie Greenaway website); however, no book that year was considered suitable and thus the first Kate Greenaway winner, Edward Ardizzone, came in 1956. Like its counterpart the Carnegie Medal, the Kate Greenaway Medal has yet to be awarded to a book by a Black British author/illustrator, and only once (in 1967) went to a book with a contemporary Black British main character’ (Sands-O’Connor, Children’s Publishing and Black Britain, 159); the 1967 winner was Charles Keeping for Charley, Charlotte, and the Golden Canary. In 1973, the judges gave ‘honourable mention’ to Black British illustrator Errol Lloyd for his collaboration with Petronella Breinburg on My Brother Sean, but the winner that year was Raymond Briggs for Father Christmas.

Taking the Kate Greenaway Medal winners as a group, they have continued to be almost exclusively white authors (not all of them British) writing about white (or animal) characters. However, as with the Carnegie Medal, the Kate Greenaway Medal judging criteria have undergone a revision in order to include consideration of ‘diversity’ (broadly defined to include protected characteristics in the Equality Act of 2010). The new criteria encourage judges to consider ‘silencing’ and the possibility that picture books might contribute to or reinforce existing societal inequality or discrimination. They inform judges that, ‘while there is no single correct way to achieve representation, there are ways that can be outmoded, problematic or tokenistic.’ With that in mind, we thought we would highlight some of the books that have been nominated for the 2021 Kate Greenaway Medal that depict racially minoritised characters.

Several of the books on the nominations list this year are influenced by Middle Eastern or South Asian art styles. Because these books are produced by illustrators from or with family connections to those cultures, they certainly are ‘appropriate, well-researched, respectful visual representation’ (Kate Greenaway Medal Criteria), but they also do something more. Poonam Mistry, who has been nominated for the last two years for her collaborations with Chitra Soundar (You’re Safe with Me, 2019, and You’re Snug with Me, 2020) and whose art is influenced by Madhubani paintings and Kalamkari textiles from India, has written and illustrated this year’s nomination, How the Stars Came to Be (Tate Publishing). Using her trademark stylised depictions of animals and nature, this book includes an Indian girl and her father as characters, and tells a folktale that is both familiar in characteristics (as folktales should be) but also different enough ‘so that the story feels fresh or reimagined’ (Medal Criteria). Iranian-born Ehsan Abdollahi’s illustrations for Jackie Morris’s retelling of The Twelve Dancing Princesses, The Secret of the Tattered Shoes (Tiny Owl), include multiracial princesses who are portrayed in shades of grey during night-time scenes. The colour palette works ‘to establish mood and convey emotion’ (Medal Criteria) by depicting the time of day, but also the darkness of the princesses who are unconcerned about the deaths that result from their secret. Reza Dalvand’s illustrations for Sufiya Ahmed’s Under the Great Plum Tree, a story from the Panchatantra, use similarly stylized and graphic elements ‘inspired by Indo-Persian traditions’ (Under the Great Plum Tree)—but his colour palette is brighter and he makes more use of white space than Mistry. Sharon King-Chai, who began her career as a designer, uses silver foil in her
nominated book, **Starbird** (Two Hoots Books), to ‘contribute to the subject or theme of the book’ (Medal Criteria), which is about the need for all creatures to be free. All these illustrators have elements of visual representation that includes consideration of diversity, but they also critically use artistic and graphic techniques to create a unique reading experience.

In **The Garden Of Inside-Outside** (Book Island) French artist Régis Lejone illustrates Chiara Mezzalama’s autobiographical tale based on her experience of living in Tehran in 1981 as the young daughter of Italy’s ambassador to Iran. This is the time of the Islamic Revolution, the hostage crisis and war with Iraq. The book has been a huge success in France, winning several prizes. The story, translated into English by Sarah Ardizzone, focuses on the young daughter of Italy’s ambassador to Iran. This is the time of the Islamic Revolution, the hostage crisis and war with Iraq. The book has been a huge success in France, winning several prizes. The story, translated into English by Sarah Ardizzone, focuses on the nature of the tale, and it being written largely from the perspective and childhood autobiography written for children. The Good Immigrant

But given the social context in which the book is published, such unambiguously affirming imagery will hopefully be recognised as a significant strength of the book. That said, there is little question for us that the illustrations ‘individually and cumulatively make a lasting impression on the reader’ (Medal Criteria). Indeed, social media demonstrates that Adéola’s characters, with their larger-than-life heads, bold colours and clean lines, appear to be inspired by cartoons but are naturalistic enough for him to add texture and detail to the text through characterisation. With regards to the judging criteria, the illustrations mostly support and reinforce Bryon’s text; the illustrations might not be judged to ‘help to give the book layers of meaning for different readers and/or allow different meanings to be inferred across multiple readings’. But given the social context in which the book is produced, such unambiguously affirming imagery will hopefully be recognised as a significant strength of the book. That said, there is little question for us that the illustrations ‘individually and cumulatively make a lasting impression on the reader’ (Medal Criteria). Indeed, social media demonstrates that Adéola’s characters, with their larger-than-life heads, bold colours and clean lines, appear to be inspired by cartoons but are naturalistic enough for him to add texture and detail to the text through characterisation. With regards to the judging criteria, the illustrations mostly support and reinforce Bryon’s text; the illustrations might not be judged to ‘help to give the book layers of meaning for different readers and/or allow different meanings to be inferred across multiple readings’. But given the social context in which the book is produced, such unambiguously affirming imagery will hopefully be recognised as a significant strength of the book. That said, there is little question for us that the illustrations ‘individually and cumulatively make a lasting impression on the reader’ (Medal Criteria). Indeed, social media demonstrates that Adéola’s characters, with their larger-than-life heads, bold colours and clean lines, appear to be inspired by cartoons but are naturalistic enough for him to add texture and detail to the text through characterisation. With regards to the judging criteria, the illustrations mostly support and reinforce Bryon’s text; the illustrations might not be judged to ‘help to give the book layers of meaning for different readers and/or allow different meanings to be inferred across multiple readings’. But given the social context in which the book is produced, such unambiguously affirming imagery will hopefully be recognised as a significant strength of the book. That said, there is little question for us that the illustrations ‘individually and cumulatively make a lasting impression on the reader’ (Medal Criteria). Indeed, social media demonstrates that Adéola’s characters, with their larger-than-life heads, bold colours and clean lines, appear to be inspired by cartoons but are naturalistic enough for him to add texture and detail to the text through characterisation. With regards to the judging criteria, the illustrations mostly support and reinforce Bryon’s text; the illustrations might not be judged to ‘help to give the book layers of meaning for different readers and/or allow different meanings to be inferred across multiple readings’.

**Books mentioned**

**You're Safe with Me**, illus Poonam Mistry, written by Chitra Soundar, Lantana Publishing, 978-1911373922, £11.99 hbk

**You're Snug with Me** illus Poonam Mistry, written by Chitra Soundar, Lantana Publishing, 978-1911373476, £11.99 hbk

**How the Stars Came to Be**, Poonam Mistry, Tate Publishing, 978-1849766630, £12.99 hbk

**The Secret of the Tattered Shoes**, illus Ehsan Abdollahi, written by Jackie Morris, Tiny Owl, 978-1910328378, £12.99 hbk

**Under the Great Plum Tree**, illus Reza Dalvand, written by Sufiya Ahmad, Tiny Owl, 978-1910328460, £12.99 hbk

**Starbird**, Sharon King-Chai, Two Hoots, 978-1509899562, £12.99 hbk

**The Garden Of Inside–Outside**, illus Régis Léjonc, written by Chiara Mezzalama, trans by Sarah Ardizzone, Book Island, 978-1911496168, £12.99 hbk

**Clean Up!**, illus Dapo Adeola, written by Nathan Bryon, Puffin, 978-0241345849, £6.99 pbk

**Look Up!**, illus Dapo Adeola, written by Nathan Bryon, Puffin, 978-0241345849, £6.99 pbk

Karen Sands-O’Connor is the British Academy Global Professor for Children’s Literature at Newcastle University. Her books include Children’s Publishing and Black Britain 1965-2015 (Palgrave Macmillan 2017). [Karen Sands-O’Connor](https://www.newcastle.ac.uk/)

Darren Chetty is a teacher, doctoral researcher and writer with research interests in education, philosophy, racism, children’s literature and hip hop culture. He is a contributor to The Good Immigrant, edited by Nikesh Shukla and the author, with Jeffrey Boakye, of What Is Masculinity? Why Does It Matter? And Other Big Questions. He tweets at @rapclassroom.
The NHS junior doctor topping the bestseller lists

Roopa Farooki interviewed by Michelle Pauli.

What do doctors, detectives and writers have in common? Quite a lot, says Roopa Farooki. She should know – the award-winning author of adult literary fiction is also an NHS junior doctor and has just published the second in her Double Detectives Medical Mystery series for middle grade readers, Diagnosis Danger.

‘Detectives and writers and doctors are all really interested in people and we want to know what makes them tick, what motivates them,’ she explains. ‘In different ways we’re trying to help. As writers our job is to open a window into another person’s world so you can see in, and also create a mirror, so you can truly look at yourself. As doctors, it’s what we try to do as well.’

All the strands come together in Diagnosis Danger, where brave, savvy twins Ali and Tulip, first introduced in The Cure for a Crime, are once again at the centre of a madcap medical mystery – this time involving vicious attacks on friends and family and a very peculiar cattery / care home filled with wonderfully eccentric old people. Fans of the first book will be delighted to know that the twins’ fabulous grandmother Nan-Nan reappears in a starring role and the book is, again, infused with age-appropriate medical knowhow and tips.

Ali and Tulip use the medical knowledge picked up from their mother’s job as a brain surgeon, and the hours they spend lurking around the hospital she works in, to help solve the mysteries in both books, aided by their ‘frenemy’ twins, Zac and Jay. Fittingly, it was Farooki’s twin daughters who helped her solve her own mystery – in this case a literary one.

She had decided to write a children’s book soon after starting medical school, following a successful career as a writer of adult literary fiction. Reluctant to abandon writing altogether – ‘medical school is pretty full-time, but I’ve been used to being a full-time energy gran and elderly female impersonators to nurses from south east Asia, appear without fanfare.

‘When I look around the hospital and I look around schools these days, there are literally people from every single walk of life and what is interesting about them isn’t their social demographic ‘category’ but the quality of the character and how they’re living their life, the choices they make and how they care about people,’ says Farooki.

When Farooki started medical school, she wondered where she was going to put her ‘writing energy’. She needn’t have worried. In addition to the two Medical Mysteries books (with a third on the way – to be written), she also has a memoir about mortality and grief, motherhood and medicine, written during the pandemic and due out with Bloomsbury this year, has a book for teens with another competent children’s writer wouldn’t have been able to write that story because it was very much my lived reality and my children’s lived reality. I knew that only I could write this story.’

She drafted The Cure for a Crime in a two-week break from medical school and swiftly had interest from OUP. By the time she was editing the second book in between hospital shifts, the world had got darker. Farooki herself contracted Covid very early on from a patient she was treating. And yet, with its themes of young people trying to protect those around them and stop the manipulation of the vulnerable and elderly, ‘editing that book actually felt like a kind of a window back into a better time and a window forward into a slightly better time.’

Even the pace of the book – which is seriously frenetic – is linked to the hospital environment. ‘This is very much what life is like in a hospital. If I get 10 minutes for lunch across the 12-hour shift, I think, oh, that’s quite generous. I can toast a whole sandwich in that time. I was trying to capture that kind of pace and activity,’ she says.

It makes for an intentionally breathless read.

Aside from the fascinating medical insights and tips – don’t miss Tulip’s Mini-Medix blog in the back of the book – Farooki’s Medical Mysteries books are also notable for their normalising of difference and diversity. A wide spectrum of society, from gay teachers to high energy gran and elderly female impersonators to nurses from south east Asia, appear without fanfare.

The breakthrough came when Farooki’s daughters were helping her prepare for her fourth year medical exams. As they tested her on lung, abdominal and eye exams they were discovering these little signs that we doctors just see, it’s a bit like a hidden superpower, where someone mentions something quite casual about themselves and you immediately know lots of things about their life and their background. It’s about building up the clues and then making the case and then proving your diagnosis.’

Farooki realised that, for the first time in her children’s fiction journey, she had a story that ‘no one else could tell’.

‘If I said, write about being a young girl who knows all about medicine and the inner workings of what goes on within a hospital, because her mum works in one, and who is going to save the day, another competent children’s writer wouldn’t have been able to write that story because it was very much my lived reality and my children’s lived reality. I knew that only I could write this story.’

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The Double Detectives Medical Mystery books, The Cure for a Crime and Diagnosis Danger are published by OUP, £6.99 pbk.
In all the set texts I read during my education, I can only remember engaging and relating to one black character: Jim, the escaped slave in Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. I so wanted to kick Huckleberry Finn off that raft navigating the Mississippi and use it to save more slaves! I suppose I first wished I could write something like that book; a tale of adventure and daring.

Later *Moss Side Massive* by Karline Smith was a book that inspired me – I thought I could write that kind of story but from my own perspective. Of more recent titles I would have loved to have written *Scavengers* by Darren Simpson – what a first novel!

Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* is published by Penguin Classics, 978-0143107323, £7.99 pbk.


**Alex Wheatle chooses a tale of adventure and daring.**


**Alex Wheatle’s latest book, The Humiliations of Welton Blake.**

*The most important periodical in children’s books.*

PHILIP PULLMAN
Sam Copeland’s debut Charlie Changes into a Chicken is about a boy who spontaneously – and without much in the way of warning – changes into animals (a pigeon, a flea, a rhinoceros…). It’s very silly and very funny, Charlie’s animal habits landing him in some ridiculous situations, though Copeland also uses the adventures to sensitively explore issues of Charlie’s anxiety. Charlie proved so popular that one book became three.

So how do you follow that? Well, with a novel about a young girl, Uma Gnuersson, who discovers an amazing gadget, a headphone complete with AI called Athena, who has the answer to everything, and the personality to match. Other characters in Uma and the Answer to Absolutely Everything include Uma’s best friend, the wonderfully named Alan Alan Carrington, and a herd of llamas with a taste for cider. While the action is driven by Uma and Alan’s efforts to stop Athena’s wicked inventor from taking over their town – in which Athena and the llamas play their part – it also touches on deeper issues: Uma’s dad’s depression, growing since Uma’s mum died, and her own loss too. It’s totally different to Charlie Changes into a Chicken, though just as funny. Sam Copeland talked to us about his books and the joy of writing funny.

“When writing, I am constantly surprised about what falls out of my brain” remarks Sam Copeland as we chat over Zoom, and it strikes me as a perfect summary of his books, which are full of the unexpected. Mind you, becoming a writer came as a surprise to Sam, despite him being a book-addict since an early age and working as a bookseller before becoming a very successful literary agent. ‘I never planned to write. Not because I never wanted to, I just didn’t think I was capable. It was a bit like “Well, I’ll never play at Wembley!” That was my mindset. It was only when I grew older that I realised what I was capable of. And what I was capable of was writing funny. I realised I had no interest writing adult books though. I couldn’t think of anything more tedious!’

‘Writing funny’ is of course a very serious business and Sam is rightly proud of his ability, and the hard work that goes into his books. ‘I never write a joke that only 8-year olds would find funny. That’s just patronising. The jokes have to land with 8- and 43-year olds, they have to make me laugh first. If a joke doesn’t do that, it’s pointless. It’s a constant rant of mine that funny books are simply not treated as other children’s books. Frankly, it’s a nonsense. Creating a funny book which is genuinely funny is more difficult than writing a really wordy book with no jokes.’ He confesses that this makes him a ‘nightmare’ to edit. ‘My editor will ask me to cut a section and I’m like – “Do you know how long it took me to come up with that joke?”’

The books aren’t just funny though. Sam takes on some very deep issues too. Was that something he’d always planned? ‘I had no intention to do that when I started out, but the mind is an interesting thing. Slowly it started inserting my own childhood into the book. My own childhood was peppered with quite a lot of challenging events. It wasn’t exactly the same, but much of what Charlie and Uma face, I went through as a kid. It was only when I went to therapy and the therapist asked, “If that 8-year-old Sam came in now, what would you say to him?” that I realised the whole point of the book is writing to that 8-year-old boy. And, basically, taking him and giving him a hug, telling him everything will be alright in the end. It was a ground-breaking moment for me.’

There’s one particularly moving moment in his new book when Uma ‘meets’ her dead mother again, or an AI version anyway. How did Sam handle that? ‘That scene is really important to me, though my editor wanted me to cut that. But then we talked, and we got it to work together. What was challenging about that was we needed to make sure that at no point did Uma really think this was her mother. I do think in future this is something we will face, and actually Kanye West for Kim’s birthday arranged a hologram of her dead father. But, back to Uma’s story – the heart is really important too. What else is there in life apart from humour and the heart?’

That seems a good place to finish, though we talk briefly about Sam’s next book – having become an author he admits he now can’t stop writing – which is about ghosts: ‘I’ve realised that I have absolutely no control over what I write’, he admits cheerfully. ‘Yes, when I start writing I have no idea about character/story. I just have a general theme. For this new book, I just sat down and thought I really want to write about a kid and a ghost. I watched a lot of horror movies in preparation and for research – basically it’s a mixture of Rent-a-Ghost and The Exorcist…’

Whatever the subject, it is certain to be strong on humour and heart.

Books mentioned - all published by Puffin:
Charlie Changes Into a Chicken 978-0241346211, £6.99 pbk
Charlie Turns Into a T-Rex 978-0241346228, £6.99 pbk
Charlie Morphs Into a Mammoth 978-0241346235, £6.99 pbk
Uma and the Answer to Absolutely Everything 978-0241392210, £6.99 pbk

Andrea Reece is managing editor of Books for Keeps.
The Age Between. Personal Reflections on Youth Fiction

Aidan Chambers, Fincham Press, 187pp, 9781916121409, £16.00 pbk

Aidan Chambers is a distinguished and successful writer of Young Adult books. He is also a leading theorist on what goes on in the act of reading and the multifarious ways authors engage with their stories and how readers might respond. Now, aged 85, he has brought together his final thoughts on such matters into a slim volume packed with quotations ranging from Lewis Carroll to Tolstoy and Wittgenstein.

What follows is always admirably lucid, thankfully avoiding the high theorising and currently fashionable jargon increasingly creeping into modern academic discussion of children’s literature. He often refers to his own novels, some of which are now out of print although often ground-breaking at the time. All youth writers face an uphill struggle trying to remain contemporary when actual events and practices on the ground are changing so fast. But when it comes to the eternal issues of adolescence and young adulthood, Chambers later novels still remain ever-accessible, with one of them, Dance on My Grave, recently filmed.

When discussing Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, Chambers makes no mention of the racist language. Huck as a boy of his times often turns to. This in some quarters has now given this classic story a bad name, but it is good to be reminded that it is still a supremely wise as well as witty work which deserves to be defended, as Chambers does so well. He is less impressed by J.D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye, seeing it as more a celebration of immaturity rather than as a serious comment upon it. But this is perhaps to under-rate the enduring appeal of Salinger’s style of writing for young adult readers and the message this conveys in itself whatever else is in the text. There is a lot more to think about here and elsewhere in this admirable book which ends with a long and illuminating dialogue with Deborah Thatcher, herself an expert in youth literature. Read on! 

Under 5s  Pre – School/Nursery/Infant

Cheeky Monkey

Zehra Hicks

Zehra Hicks, Hodder Children’s Books, 32pp, 978 1 444 95001 4, £12.99 hbk

Lively and funny, this delightful picture book will prove to ‘cheeky monkeys’ everywhere that there is more to friendship than playing tricks on ‘ones’ friends. The little monkey (painted bright red in this story) is very ready to play with his animal friends, but when he cheerfully paints the zebra’s tail green, nicks the giraffe’s button, a handy clothespin or a piece of fluff? A handful of blueberries on a banana, and jumps the queue to slide down the tree-bark boat, a mysterious fog…’ A little bird finds him, and he shares the news to keep them from harm, and together they dance through shadows discovering the glittering fish there swims a shark.

Luckily for Bear and Bird, enthusiasm and imaginative joint-de-vivre are enough to keep them from harm, and together they dance through shadows discovering delights at every turn. A lesser book might have left us with an emotional edge to their world that grounds us – softly rounded pastel forms encourage and protect, but shadows gather in murky corners and amongst the glittering fish there swims a shark. A little bear is sitting on Bear’s head, and he’s interested in treasures. In fact, he really seems to understand. ‘Oooh!’ he cries. ‘A magic stick…..!’ And the two of them set off to discover things that are bigger and better than ever before: a log for trumpeting, a tree-barb boat, a mysterious fog…

Bear’s world changes when he finds someone with whom to share his enthusiasms and experiences. Together, Bear and Bird create something that neither could have discovered independently, and it’s worth the wait. There’s a message here about friendship, but it’s delivered gently and in a way that enables us to observe and learn. The possibility of a special friend out there for everyone feels very real.

Stella Dreis’s characters are charmingly expressive, but there’s an emotional edge to their world that grounds us – softly rounded pastel forms encourage and protect, but shadows gather in murky corners and amongst the glittering fish there swims a shark. Luckily for Bear and Bird, enthusiasm and imaginative joint-de-vivre are enough to keep them from harm, and together they dance through shadows discovering delights at every turn. A lesser book might have left us with a standard observation about the value of a friend, but in allowing Bear and Bird’s experience of the night sky to play out – ‘true bear-bird treasure!’ – Dreis delivers a heartwarmingly memorable finale with real punch.
Ed’s Choice

What We’ll Build

Four and Fab


In a series of dreamscapes of possibility and ambition, a father and daughter set out to create the world in which they wish to live. Each brings something special to the task: what can be constructed is almost limitless, from cherished memories to a wall excluding enemies (plus a gate to admit them later, when apologies are due...). The father guides his daughter, and she guides him, and together they forge a path that enables both of them to grow.

Blazing with colour and optimism, Jeffers’ striking artwork delivers visual surprises, humour and emotional sincerity throughout. From images that are easily read (“We’ll build a house to be our home...”) to those that are open to many interpretations (“What We’ll Build”), the book has a watch to keep our time...” This book gets right to the heart of parental hopes, and signposts a path for imagining and dreaming.

A lyrical, rhyming text guides and suggests in a way that feels relaxed. There’s no hint of ‘ought’ in Jeffers’ kind and constructive commentary – imaginative camaraderie prevails, and if his poetry doesn’t always get it exactly right, the strength of the invisible bonds of any loving relationship. It is all about the pure potential of what will come, both good and bad, and how, ultimately, people need each other. Our world has always had its challenges, but after the last year, it has become – in Jeffers’ words – ‘a radically different place’, one in which ‘feels even more important to plan for an uncertain future, realizing there will be dark days ahead, that we don’t get anywhere alone, and where we go, we should go with love.’

Every day, in every corner of the world, children and their parents are creating ‘together futures’, and this is a book that empowers those partnerships. What We’ll Build is a timely and very special picturebook for families to treasure over many years, and one that will continue to deliver something new each time it’s shared.

It Isn’t RUDE to be NUDE

Szeinnmann’s translation of Dreis’s affectionate and gently poetic text is a pleasure to read, and seems to capture something important about its heart and soul. Little Bear’s Treasures will inspire seeking and its heart and soul. Little Bear’s Treasures will inspire seeking and its heart and soul. Little Bear’s Treasures will inspire seeking and its heart and soul. Little Bear’s Treasures will inspire seeking and its heart and soul. Little Bear’s Treasures will inspire seeking and its heart and soul. Little Bear’s Treasures will inspire seeking and its heart and soul. Little Bear’s Treasures will inspire seeking and its heart and soul. Little Bear’s Treasures will inspire seeking and its heart and soul. Little Bear’s Treasures will inspire seeking and its heart and soul. Little Bear’s Treasures will inspire seeking and its heart and soul. Little Bear’s Treasures will inspire seeking and its heart and soul. Little Bear’s Treasures will inspire seeking and its heart and soul. 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There Are Fish Everywhere

Katie Haworth, ill. Britta Teckentrup, Big Picture Books, 32pp., 978-1-78741-775-5, £7.99 phk

With its colourful palette and eye-catching design, this non-fiction picturebook really does grab attention. The embossed cover creates an enticing 3-D effect, and with every brightly-painted fish gazing to our right, it’s hard to resist their cue to browse this book.

Once inside, there’s plenty to discover and enjoy. Telling the story of fish on our planet from the armoured, jawless creatures that first appeared 500 million years ago, the challenges faced by their descendants today from ocean plastics and industrial trawling, There Are Fish Everywhere introduces readers to the diversity of habitats and fishy life to be found in every corner of our seas and rivers.

Multi-award-winning illustrator Britta Teckentrup creates a photo-realistic artwork using printed, painted and textured papers which she develops and collages via manual and digital techniques. ‘Can You Find …’ challenges are included to spark close looking, and varied layouts keep things fresh – the diagram featuring the effect of the Anthropocene is visually and factually interesting, for example, and cross-sections of the ocean allows readers to compare life at different depths. The artwork and the immensely readable text are entirely believable. Young readers will enjoy the subtle dig into the future and the world. Their locations, climate and habitats are distinctively and photo-realistic handbook, but fish and habitats are distinctly and accurately presented, and will help children identify species.

And it isn’t just the artwork that stands out. Care has been paid to the musicality of the text, as well as its clarity. Reading this book feels like listening to a knowledgeable friend, and it will be enjoyed by children who aren’t usually drawn to non-fiction, as well as those who are looking for answers. There is nothing to fear from each other. Communities that the generations together, and when they discover that there is nothing to fear from each other, the news is soon spread to both communities that the generations of fearing and loathing have been without reason. Soon they are intermingling and enjoying each other as has never before been possible before. The full joy of this book, though, is that it can be read from either end – one end having the Spots’ side of the story. And, of course, they then meet in the middle. The illustrations are a joy too: lots of Dots and Spots bouncing along, with Nigella looking like they are in the minds as spiky, dangerous creatures. The rhymes in the text add to the fun, and children will enjoy the humour, and will learn the moral of the story. A real tour de force and great for school discussions. ES

Nina’s Amazing Gift

Maja Lunde, ill. Hans Jørgen Sandnes, Wacky Bee, 40pp., 978-8232-9396-7, £20 phk

Nina has a lot of fun with her best friend, Choco, and is sad when he moves to the other side of the world (from her finger on the globe, it’s one of the countries south of Mexico). She’s not much good at writing letters, so she is pleased to receive an envelope from him, but it only contains 5 brown beans. She carries them around with her and thinks about how much she misses him. (There is an evil looking cat with her, scavenging and trying to catch a mouse, so it is a relief to hear the arrival of chefs Raymond and Nigella (looking nothing like the people that adult readers might be thinking of) to appear at a children’s event, and to watch their progress as they aim to make something new. Asked to make something big and round, they come up with what turns out to be a ‘pancake’ and a ‘pizza’. For something long and thin, they make ‘chips’, and ‘spaghetti’, but the judges are finding it very difficult to decide on the best food. Up in a tree watching all this, Nina crumbles her beans into powder and tastes the result - delicious! She rushes home and concocts something to present to the judges. Although Nigella says it looks like poo, they taste it, and feel like children again - Nina is the winner. What does she call it? A judge suggests Ninalate, but Nina says it should be named after her friend who sent her the beans - ChocoBeans.

Hans Jørgen Sandnes originally painted the illustrations with diluted cloudberry juice, which he took on a trip to Arctic Russia to tell us that these are very carefully stored in a secret location. They go on to explain the real story of chocolate, where the beans are stored in a secret location. They then explain the recipe for Chocolate Brownies. The illustrations naturally are mostly in shades of brown, with some red and green, and they work very well in this
amusing story. They are cartoons with a lot of fun in facial expressions (including the evil cat!) and lots of details. Designed for children who have just learned to read, the pictures help with deciphering the words, and the letters are formed without any ornamentation. It's a good story, and this will be fun to read and look at. DB

I'm Not a Mouse!

Evgenia Golubeva, Child’s Play, 32pp, 978 1 78628 463 1, £6.99 pbk
This laugh-out-loud picture book is a brilliant take on the use of pet names for children and the difficulties kids have with these. Olivia is called ‘Mouse’ by her mother, and every time she does so, Olivia turns into a mouse! This can have unusual ramifications, particularly when Mum calls ‘Mouse’ while Olivia is stroking their cat! The answer turns out to be: Olivia simply refuses to answer until her Mum uses her real name. Fine for her, but she soon realises that all her friends are called by pet names too, and they all turn into whatever that name is: Little Pumpkin, Sweetpea, Superstar, Treasure – whatever. This gives Olivia the chance to take her sister Maddie’s idea: she takes Olivia and her Mum to the cinema and Granddad calls Mum his Little Chicken with the obvious result. A super wheezy this, and the pictures are huge fun too. One of the nicest touches is on the endpapers. The one at the front is of a little mouse nocking about on a hand, and the one at the back shows all sorts of creatures who have turned into their pet names, some of them in other languages. The motif of this story is for the parents to be careful when and where you call your children by their pet names! ES

Peter and the Tree Children

Peter Wohlleben’s book for adults, The Hidden Life Of Trees, in which he explained the interconnectedness and sensitivity of trees, was a bestseller, and in this picture book he puts forward a simpler version for children. He becomes Peter the forester, and meets a squirrel, coincidentally called Piet, who is upset because he has no family. Peter leads Piet, (though sometimes the squirrel goes too fast for him) through the forest to find tree children. They find places where young trees cannot grow because it is too hot, or flattened by machinery, but Dana and her horse towing the trees they have felled are kinder to the soil, and they have a chat. Peter is angry when he hears Dana says trees have been cut down, but there are people planting saplings to replace them. These are not what Peter is looking for, though, and he explains to Piet that the young trees communicate their unhappiness at their lack of shelter from large trees, by sending out a particular smell. Finally, he shows Piet a bee tree where seeds are fluttering down like butterflies, and young beechn saplings are growing underneath sheltered by the branches above them: these are tree children who are happy. As a conclusion, Piet offers to be family for Piet, and they go back to his house together.

At the end of the book, Peter Wohlleben explains about the ‘wood wide web’ whereby trees send signals to each other via fungal threads in the forest floor, that some trees can make their leaves bitter so that caterpillars won’t eat them, and other fascinating information. He really does have a squirrel who visits him, and he knows a particular beechn tree near his home: that authenticity shines through. Cale Atkinson is Canadian and he knows a particular beech tree near his home: that authenticity shines through. Cale Atkinson’s illustrations are cartoons, and he also is a fan of trees, so his illustrations are lovingly rendered. DB

Samira’s Wish

Saviour Pirotta, ill. Valeria Szucs, Wacky Bee, 40pp, 978 1 78355 257 2, £9.99 pbk
Samira lives with her parents and brother, and is very good at a lot of things, especially helping people. When Grandma and Grandpa are due to arrive very early one Saturday, Samira plans to make them Grandpa’s favourite breakfast of beans on toast, and gets everything ready. However, when Grandpa and Grandpa arrive it is too late, and she has eaten the beans, so Samira and Grandpa go to the local shop to get some more. These turn out to be given away, so they raise an empty tin, and Grandpa tries it out. A book thumbs onto the table, and Grandpa is scoumful about a wish. Grandpa says ‘you can make a wish free at the library’ (Hooraay!), but then her brother Anish gets a bike. Grandma gets a horse, and she passes the tin back to his house together.

Rain Before Rainbows

Smriti Halls, ill. David Litchfield, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 4063 9235 8, £12.99 hbk
Rain Before Rainbows presents a hopeful message to young readers about lend, care and the wind. Life can be an adventure though there will be challenges, difficulties and hurdles, we may have worries and face difficult decisions but there will be those who can guide us and help us. The text is gentle and poetic with a magical rhythm which would be perfect for reading aloud.

David Litchfield’s trademark magical illustrations bring the text to life, and provides us with an array of wonderful settings, and he knows a particular beech tree near his home: that authenticity shines through. Cale Atkinson’s illustrations are cartoons, and he also is a fan of trees, so his illustrations are lovingly rendered. DB

Wild is the Wind

Graham Baker-Smith, Templar, 36pp, 9781778741785, £12.99 hbk
Cassie cradles the swift in her hands. Already it senses the wind in its feathers and when Cassie sets it free as she floats in her balloon across the sky it joins its fellows as they fly on the wings of the wind towards a distant destination. And it is the wind that is their companion in all its moods – the trade winds driving commerce, cyclones, powerful, destructive, storms whipping up crested waves, sculpting desert sands, eroding rocks into art form caves. The wind carries the passage to another country where a boy welcomes them as harbinger of summer. There they will stay to bring up children. Margaret Wild’s text is neither dull nor dry. Theicycle is a ‘great spiral howling with stormy power’, the wind ‘sculpts echoes in the sand’ – the wind blowing across the world. In Rhythm of the Rain, we followed the path of a raindrop as it travelled across the world, an element connecting two children. Here, we take to the sky – the air that surrounds our world, an element that is far from passive, full of currents and movements. The wind carries a story together through words and image.

The wind is an amazing force – ‘do something right’. Mum therefore ‘do something right’. Mum therefore reads ‘stir the soup, turn the pages of the book, and watch the sky float in her balloon across the shore. Who is she or where she’s come from we know not but as she zooms two children and their parents, so she surmises, and a dog, a cat and a bird, she wonders who lives in the cottage close by, and wishes it was herself going on to talk of what she would do – ‘stir the soup, turn the pages of a book and stove the fire so that all sleep warm and well’.

Using minimal colour, Jane Tanner’s atmospheric illustrations immerse us in a strange, sometimes surreal visual story wherein light and dark play a powerful part as we see ethereal moonlit images from both outside and inside perspectives. That these scenes are full bleed has a truly mesmeric effect and serves to heighten the mystery of the whole literary experience, a mystery that is left unsolved with the reader pondering upon whether perhaps the speaker is a ghost, a sleepwalker or perhaps a wandering soul that is lost or stranded between worlds.

For teachers of older children especially, this enigmatic book is rich in potential. JB

The Kiosk

Anete Melece, Gecko Press, 978 1 7765 7299 1, £11.99, hbk
From time to time most of us start to feel stuck in one way or another and so it is for Olga, the protagonist in this story that originated as a short animation in Latvia. Olga has lived and worked in her kiosk for a very long time. Her stall is a popular one with all kinds of customers wanting her wares – newspapers, magazines, sweets, bottles of water and many have become her friends, stopping just for a chat. After while Olga reads about one of distant seas and beautiful sunsets.

One morning Olga’s entire world is tuned upside down – literally - but do the plucky Olga pep up,
of Mitton’s work, the text reads well aloud, and moves the story along at a pace suitable to the mood of that particular page. The whole palette is cold: icy blues, greens and greys covering each spread, with snow crystals bouncing about the skies as the Snow Ghost settles down in her wake. A book to enjoy around a fire, after an hour or so playing games out in the snow? A study of the endpapers will reveal a stylized depiction of mistletoe, a seasonal plant with mystical, historical significance. The leaves are veined in many different ways, some bearing the ripened berries, covered in hoar frost. All in all, a delight. GB

Tony Mitton, ill. Diana Mayo, Bloomsbury, 32pp, 78 1 4088 7663 3, £12.99 hbk
This is a timely seasonal book. Two small children are depicted on the cover, gazing up at the winter skies as snowflakes gently tumble down upon them. Already as readers we are included in their joy of the moment. As the story unfolds, the landscape is vast...and the text is small, giving even more space for the entry of the Snow Ghost. Mitton’s rhyming prose is just miracle enough to send us in a pause, with his words of simplicity and precision as we enter this wintery world where the Snow Ghost searches for a place to settle and feel at home. Everywhere seems cold and lonely to her, and she feels unwelcome wherever she goes. ‘But how to find rest, where the chilly ghost is, and who will ever murmur BE OFF WITH YOU—GO!’ She flies on till she spies a small country farm, high on the moors, where ‘the children with their spotty dog, turn and wave to the little ghost’. She has found her home. The landscape is not described in the text, allowing the reader to do some of the interpretation.

There’s a QR code inside the book that allows readers to watch the animation. JB

Snow Ghost

Miguel Tanco, Tate Publishing, 48pp, 978 18497 6754 7, £11.99 hbk
The little girl narrator of this story belongs to a passionate family: her father’s passion is painting; her mother is an avid entomologist and her brother is a lover of music. As yet though the girl hasn’t identified a passion of her own so she sets about so doing. School presents many possibilities: there are various sports, music and dance, cooking for instance but none of these fires her enthusiasm.

Then comes a surprise revelation – during an art lesson – no it’s not painting but maths that this girl truly loves. She sees maths and mathematical possibilities everywhere in everyday life be they numerical, or related to shape, patterns, problem solving, sets or trajectory.

Through a series of scenes showing such places as the park, the playground (geometric patterns), the lakeside (concentric circles), block play, the family dining table, a balcony (a paper aeroplane’s trajectory) and an art gallery, Tanco reveals how exciting to the child is this world when viewed through a mathematical lens.

Any new vocabulary is easily understood by the reader when presented in this visual manner – stone skipping across the lake results in the formation of concentric circles which the reader’s surface can appreciate. There is an abundance of fractals especially in nature. This latter observation is revealed in the little girl’s personal maths journal – a kind of visual glossary – at the end of the story wherein she records her findings relating to the various mathematical concepts covered in her narration.

I was anything but a maths enthusiast as a child, but perhaps things might have been different if I’d been exposed to this exciting book at the age of its protagonist. JB

Miguel Tanco, Tate Publishing, 48pp, 978 18497 6754 7, £11.99 hbk

A startlingly cold cover introduces us to two very friendly looking polar bears. There is a deep intelligence – during an art lesson – no it’s not painting but maths that this girl truly loves. She sees maths and mathematical possibilities everywhere in everyday life be they numerical, or related to shape, patterns, problem solving, sets or trajectory.

Through a series of scenes showing such places as the park, the playground (geometric patterns), the lakeside (concentric circles), block play, the family dining table, a balcony (a paper aeroplane’s trajectory) and an art gallery, Tanco reveals how exciting to the child is this world when viewed through a mathematical lens.

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Fox: A Circle of Life Story

Isabel Thomas, ill. Daniel Igneus, Bloomsbury, 48pp, 978 1 5266 0077 6, £12.99, hbk
The book opens with a mother and two young children in a bedroom listening to the signs of life around them. Then our focus switches to a fox, out hunting, we follow her back to her den where three hungry cubs are waiting. We bear witness as the cubs grow bigger and stronger and learn to hunt. One day fox is hit by a car and she dies but we are shown how nature responds to this event, as fox decomposes new plant and animal life emerges from the particles which made her. Although the fate of fox’s three cubs is not described in the text they can reassuringly be spotted in the back of several spreads as they develop independence. Reflecting the cyclical theme, the book ends where it begins with the small family in the forest listening for signs of life.

This is a beautiful picturebook, the illustrations are rich and colourful, the depiction of the playful young cubs is particularly appealing. The text is lyrically written and gentle, some pages invite whispering as we tiptoe into fox’s world and accompany her hunting. The back of the book contains information about the cycle of life illustrating that death, and decomposition are important parts of this.

This book could reassure children who have lost a pet or seen a dead animal and help children understand that death is central to the cycle of life. Although the text is simple the themes and information contained in the book suggest this is a book for older children. Another beautiful picturebook from the creators of the highly successful Moth: A Story of Evolution. SMc

Monster Max and the Bobble Hat of Forgetting

Robin Bennett, ill. Tom Tinn-Dishbury, Firefly, 188pp, 9781913102333, £5.99 pbk
In this action adventure for children, Max has to balance the everyday activities of any normal 9-year-old with the responsibility of being able to turn into a huge, hairy monster every time he burps.

Max has impressive monster heritage. His mother’s family are all from Krit, a tiny magical country where werewolves and monsters are commonplace. He loves being a monster and goes out at night times to secretly exercise his epic strength and

Children’s reviews

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

With the title in deep silver, the whole page is full to the brim with Fuge’s depiction of the playful young cubs: their Ice Age survival instinct, their curiosity, their relationships with each other and with the humans who take care of them. A book to enjoy together, this book strikes such a welcome note. The sharing of books with children can surely never have been of such importance, able as it is to affect the attitudes and emotions and well-beings of the sharers. Happy reading. GB

Count on Me

Miguel Tanco, Tate Publishing, 48pp, 978 18497 6754 7, £11.99 hbk

The little girl narrator of this story belongs to a passionate family: her father’s passion is painting; her mother is an avid entomologist and her brother is a lover of music. As yet though the girl hasn’t identified a passion of her own so she sets about so doing. School presents many possibilities: there are various sports, music and dance, cooking for instance but none of these fires her enthusiasm.

Then comes a surprise revelation – during an art lesson – no it’s not painting but maths that this girl truly loves. She sees maths and mathematical possibilities everywhere in everyday life be they numerical, or related to shape, patterns, problem solving, sets or trajectory.

Through a series of scenes showing such places as the park, the playground (geometric patterns), the lakeside (concentric circles), block play, the family dining table, a balcony (a paper aeroplane’s trajectory) and an art gallery, Tanco reveals how exciting to the child is this world when viewed through a mathematical lens.

Any new vocabulary is easily understood by the reader when presented in this visual manner – stone skipping across the lake results in the formation of concentric circles which the reader’s surface can appreciate. There is an abundance of fractals especially in nature. This latter observation is revealed in the little girl’s personal maths journal – a kind of visual glossary – at the end of the story wherein she records her findings relating to the various mathematical concepts covered in her narration.

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Max has impressive monster heritage. His mother’s family are all from Krit, a tiny magical country where werewolves and monsters are commonplace. He loves being a monster and goes out at night times to secretly exercise his epic strength and
mighty power. Unfortunately, he can’t easily control where or when he turns himself, because he sweats and sometimes results in him being stuck far from home – even when he’s trying to keep away bad guys. However, things aren’t that simple. He’s not the only mysterious creature in town and something else is marauding around causing chaos and destruction. Max’s family are eager for him to avoid the blame.

This is the first book in a new Monster Max series and it does a tidy job of setting things up. Max’s family are a fun mix of humdrum and weirdness (like a much less violent Adams Family) and they have a mysterious past, which includes a heartbroken werewolf and the magical bobble hat of forgetting, both of which are sure to be seen again in upcoming sequels. The book also introduces Peregrine, a nerdy neighbour with an arsenal of monster-busting equipment that quickly becomes Max’s nemesis and a barrier to his plans to protect the community. As well as a fun way of establishing new characters, the story delivers several good belly laughs through its slapstick comedy, and there are lively action scenes that will set readers racing through the pages as if they were being chased by a monster themselves. There’s just enough in this series opener for children to get their monster teeth into.

**Brand New Boy**

David Almond, illus Marta Altés, Walker, 312pp, 9781406358087, £10.99 hbk

This novel starts with a lively description in him being stuck far from home – even when he’s trying to keep away bad guys. He’s not the only mysterious creature in town and something else is marauding around causing chaos and destruction. Max’s family are eager for him to avoid the blame.

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**Space Oddity**

Christopher Edge, illus Ben Mantle, Chicken House, 234pp, 978-1-912626-86-1, £6.99 pbk

Every young boy gets to an age when his father is just an embarrassment, behaving like something from another planet. But what if your father really is from another galaxy? Wouldn’t that be a great excuse for turning green and really showing you up in front of your friends? This entertaining book cleverly combines science with humour to persuade us that there is life out there among the stars.

Unbeknown to Jake, his father Ion landed on Earth by accident, thinking that David Bowie’s song Star Man was a distress call and thus defying the Cosmic Authority who were determined to find and punish him. Jake’s mother, a paramedic, saved his life, they fell in love and married and Ion tried hard to fit in, but Ion’s ambition is to beat the heart-throb of the Solar System – single-minded, heartless

**The Secret Explorers and the Comet Collision**

S J King, DK/Penguin Random House, 128pp, 9780241442258, £5.99 pbk

The Secret Explorers are a team of young adventurers that every child would love to join. After exciting encounters with dinosaurs and with Egypt’s tombs, this episode sees two of the explorers, Roshni and Ollie, jetisoned into outer space to repair a space station near the planet Jupiter. Their team’s mysterious benefactor is the Exploration Station, and it calls all the explorers together before choosing two members to take on an epic challenge. This time, rainforest expert Ollie, and astronaut Roshni are chosen. Roshni knows all there is to know about space and is determined to fix the explorers’ ship. The Beagle - transforms into a rocket and sets off towards Jupiter. The Beagle has unbelievable speed and they are soon at their destination and learn the details of their quest.

The space station near Jupiter is in need of some repair so that it can carry out its important research duties. It is clear that a spacewalk is required. This is a dream come true for Roshni who can’t wait to put on her space suit and get out into the unknown to fix the broken sections. It’s a dangerous and frightening mission, as becoming separate from the ship would leave her floating in space with no way of propelling herself back to safety. As if this wasn’t scary enough, a belt of comets is on the move and hurting towards the explorers at intergalactic speed!

With all funding for themselves millions of miles from home, and completing daring engineering challenges, Roshni and Ollie have a serious problem with getting back home - posed by the comets. Ollie has to call upon all the navigational skills he learned in the rainforests if they are going to return safely. There is a sense of adventure maintained throughout, the Comet Collision chiefly serves as a way of introducing facts and knowledge about space to young readers. Rosina regularly stops what she is doing to explain what Ollie can see and why it is important, and the book also features mission notes, a fact file and a glossary. It is a fun addition to a series that continues to offer children engaging ways of exploring the world through stories.
Daisy and the Unknown Warrior

Tony Bradman, illus Tania Rex, Barrington Stoke, 9781781122960, 72pp, £6.99 pbk

It is 1920, the war has been over for two years, its ending marked by the extravagant celebrations when this was announced on 11 November 1911. But for many, including Daisy and her family it is not a happy time. Dad had died in the final action of the war and his body had never been found. Daisy just wants a chance to say goodbye. When Miss Watkins tells the class that the body of an Unknown British Soldier is being brought back to be buried in Westminster Abbey, Daisy is convinced this will be her father. Is it her chance – but how? She has no ticket and the crowds will be enormous. Can she be brave enough?

As the direct memories around World War fade, so the details become less remembered especially when not concerned with the actual warfare. It may surprise young readers today how important the symbol of the Unknown Soldier was and the reason for the tomb in Westminster Abbey. Tony Bradman brings this moment in history alive. It is not a fast moving adventure; rather Bradman sets his story in the family, in the everyday life of Daisy and her brothers ensuring that his young audience will recognise and engage with Daisy; they will walk in her shoes. In the familiar concise Barrington Stoke format Bradman manages to include background facts that flesh out the period. Thoroughly enjoyable this is a history lesson without the pain.

The Marvellous Land of Snergs

Veronica Cossantelli, based on the original by E. A. Wyke-Smith, illus Melissa Castrillón, Chicken House, 320pp, 9781911490699, 36.99 pbk

Pip and Flora have one thing in common – they are orphans. Lives like beans, the inmates of the Sunny Bay Home for Superfluous and Accidentally Parentless Children. They are also continually getting into trouble and now they are running away from the home, with an irrepressible puppy called Tiger and Gorgo – a Snert with a talent for always doing (or saying) the wrong thing. They are running not so much from Miss Watkins and the home as from a lady dressed in purple. Who is she? Who wants to capture Flora? The answer to these questions lies at the end of an adventure that will include cinnamon bears, wobsters, squezles, Snergs, Kelps and Golithos, an incompetent ogre, among other threats. Will they survive?

This is not the novel written by Wyke-Smith and published in 1927. However, Veronica Cossantelli has taken the central idea, the brimming imagination, an element of the moralling such a feature of books for the young at that time and created a lively hommage that creates the flavour of the original for a contemporary audience. Pip and Flora are enjoyable characters – Pip coming from a circus family, lively, outgoing; silent Flora with a privileged background – both determined and loyal. Then there is Gorgo – a character to enchant with his overblown language and ability to create mayhem: It is this delight in words such as ‘pussilaminous’, ‘proscriptent’, even ‘confronticated’ that truly links Cossantelli’s clever reimagining to its parent. Much is made of its connection to Tolkien who apparently thoroughly enjoyed reading the original with his children. I recommend parents and teachers copy his example and share this story with their children; it demands to be read aloud with its nonstop plot, humour, outrageousness and jeopardy – and final satisfying happy ending.

The Story of the Windrush

K.N. Chimibri, Scholastic, 49pp, 9780720370135, 36.99 hbk

This short information book presents the story of the men, women and children who arrived in London aboard the HMT Empire Windrush from the Caribbean in 1948 in an accessible way for young readers. It was first published in 2018 by Golden Destiny, the author’s own publishing house, and has now been re-published by Scholastic’s Children’s Books. The author celebrates the courage and legacy of the Windrush pioneers and explains the context of the event as marking the beginning of modern Black Britain. Historical facts combine with voices from the Windrush generation to explain colonisation and racism to a younger audience and to depict real people and their struggles and dreams. Throughout the book the text is enhanced by contemporary photographic illustrations of people and maps and a detailed timeline and glossary aid understanding. Historical information is interwoven with stories of individual people’s journeys. The author made the journey, such as Sam King who served in the RAF, worked for the postal service, and eventually became the first Black Mayor of Southwark. Care is taken to stress that the UK requested the help of the people of the Caribbean in re-building the country after WW2.

This short book succeeds in depicting both the wider context of British colonialism and post-war recovery and the personal contribution of individuals to British society and public services.

Selected Children’s Poems

Robert Hull, Salisbury Printing Company, 85pp, pbk

This is a carefully selected collection of poems, written mostly by well-known poets, covering a broad range of themes including the weather, space, school and mythology. An everyday object becomes a topic for a poem in which has its own stories to tell.
Some poems are topical with Recent History Lessons for example, highlighting the plight of refugees referred to as ‘people with nowhere.’ On Television Tonight speaks of images of famine interspersed with materialism and plenty. This mood is lightened with other poems with touches of humour such as Please Don’t Feed the Animals. A number of the poems have a rural setting, about school life appear rather recently published themed collection Fading Presences. Many of these are timeless however some of the poems about school life appear rather dated at times in their portrayal of classroom contexts. There are poems using a range of imagery including similes and personification (Frost for example) and a wide range of structures which might support children’s own poetry writing. Several poems are playful, savouring language including Dictionary and Collections with Rhyming focused on poetry itself.

A Self-published collection of poetry which demonstrates the writer’s skill and experience. SMc

### A Remarkable Ear

Anne Fine, ill. Roxana de Rond, Barrington Stoke, 96pp, 978171129449, £6.99 pbk

Will is so used to everyone pleading with him to stop humming or singing or making so much noise that when music teacher Mr Brand tells him that he has a remarkable ear and a collection box. And then Ronnie goes missing.

The petty small-mindedness of the village is well-drawn with the underlying message of never judging a book by its cover. The kindness and warmth of the Thomas’ is beautifully handled too and the historical details feel realistic and grounded. Children will enjoy noting the differences of home cooked meals versus tinned food in London and the toys they play with. This is a book about the strength of sibling bonds and having the courage to stand up for honesty and truth. With strong characters, a touch of humour and a mystery to solve this is a wonderfully heartfelt and atmospheric story that will stay long in the mind. A satisfying and welcome addition to the canon of WW2 literature for children. JC

A gift for music and that he absolutely must learn to play the violin Will is not convinced. In this delightful, accessible book Anne Fine deploys her characteristic wit and observation to tell the story of a musical boy who learns to play the violin against many odds, little encouragement from his family, nowhere to practice, stage fright and a lack of self-belief. Will does overcome all these obstacles with the help of a wonderful teacher who recognises and develops his ability.

This is a sensitive and positive story of a wonderful tale of success against the odds with important messages about the need for practice, perseverance, and self-confidence.

**SMc**

### Windrush Child

Benjamin Zephaniah, Scholastic, 208pp, 978 0 702342 72, £6.99 pbk

This story focuses on Leonard, who aged 10 travels to England with his mother from Jamaica to join his father and begin a new life. The year is 1958 and Leonard is a Windrush Child. The disappointments of the cramped chily conditions of Leonard’s new home in Manchester in contrast to the warmth, beauty, freedom and happiness of life on his island home are obvious in the opening chapters, in particular, Leonard misses his grandmother who means so much to him. He encounters racism and violence both directed at his father and to himself. We follow his experiences, and the ups and downs of this change and the stresses it places on his parents’ marriage. We witness Leonard growing up and finding happiness which is cruelly shattered when he unsuccessfully applies for a passport so that he can visit his now elderly mother who has returned to Jamaica.

This story is historical fiction highlighting the lived experiences of the Windrush generation from the perspective of a child growing up. Through Leonard’s story readers learn the motivation for migration to England and gain insight into the life of an immigrant. In particular, the story highlights the appalling treatment of many of the Windrush generation as a result of the hostile environment policy. Many individuals were shocked to find their UK citizenship was not recognised after making the UK their home and contributed so much.

Written by acclaimed poet, author and playwright Benjamin Zephaniah this book is endorsed by Amnesty International, and is one of a series from Scholastic entitled Voices reflecting untold stories. SMc

### Reaching the Moon: the autobiography of NASA Mathematician Katherine Johnson

Katherine Johnson, Atheneum Books, 248pp, 9781535440845, £7.99 pbk. The film Hidden Figures told of the story of three African American mathematicians who had a pivotal role at NASA in putting a man into orbit. This amazing autobiography by Katherine Johnson, who died in 2020 aged 102, tells a much more remarkable story of one of those women. Katherine Johnson’s parents were determined their children would go to college and this was instilled in them from an early age, at a considerable personal cost. Katherine showed a remarkable aptitude for Mathematics and with the help of a particular professor determined to become a research mathematician. Despite several setbacks along the way and the considerable difficulties encountered by the fact that she was an African American and a woman, this she achieved, helping to put John Glenn into orbit and also men to the moon.

But this story is so much more than one woman’s remarkable life, as it portrays very starkly, the appalling injustices of the segregation of white and ‘coloured’ Americans in the US as she was growing up, and as her own three daughters grew up too. At that time African Americans were called Coloured or Negroes, not terms used nowadays. Alongside Katherine Johnson’s own career path she tells of the difficulties encountered by both men and women at the time, the fact that they had to be more qualified than white people to teach for example. Schools were segregated with lesser facilities for ‘coloured’ children, but
better teaching. Through it all runs the support of the community, family, church and each other, also of course her love of mathematics. She must have been an inspiring teacher!

Girls of all ages need to read the story of this amazing woman, not just because she fought against all the odds to succeed because of her colour, but because she was a woman, and a woman mathematician to boot!

Just a small point, the paper is horrid to handle and the typeface is very faint, such a pity.

**Break the Mould**

Sinéad Burke, illus Natalie Byrne, 224pp, Wren and Rook, 978-1526363336, £8.99 pbk

Sinéad Burke is an Irish teacher, fashion journalist and writer. She describes herself as ‘a little person’, meaning that she has achondroplasia, or (as she herself states) dwarfism. Her book is a combination of two elements, an autobiography and a manual for those who feel different in their lives. She explains how important it is to have dreams alongside the differences that mark an individual. Unlike some books of a similar nature Burke does not shy away from the fact that she has faced darker times. She also understands that a disabled reader may do likewise.

It is important to emphasise that Burke’s book is intended for the general reader, not just for readers who happen to share the same impairment as the author – which is an attribute too common among such publications. The book is designed to help young people with different physical or intellectual difficulties succeed without minimising the impact of those impairments. Her voice is strong and reassuring. Yet her narrative rings with the truth of her experiences. It is a very moving account of how Burke overcomes the obstacles put in her path.

**Burning Sunlight**

Anthea Simmons, Andersen, 60ppp, 9781895193441, £7.99 pbk

On the face of it this is an unlikely story. Twelve-year old Zaynab, hijab-wearing and fresh from Somaliailand, is now living in Devon with her scientist father following the death of her much-loved activist mother. Haughty, outspoken, and already effortlessly proficient in spoken English, she and her only new school friend quiet, shy but ultimately heroic Lucas, still manage to organise a Climate Change rebellion so successful it ends with the resignation of a dodgy Cabinet Minister. The last pages, where everyone present, adult and child, pool their emotions to put over in simple but effective terms what Zaynab’s fury about the way Climate Change has wrecked her home country, is hard to imagine and written from the heart at the moment as fiery eloquent about the damage being done to parts of our planet, it does not really matter that characters tend to be two-dimensional, there to express opinions rather than personality, although Zaynab’s long-suffering father’s frustration is an exception here as well as commanding.

Because everything that Zaynab has to say rings unfortunately true, put over in simple but effective terms that while forceful never descend into polemic, the book is fiendishly eloquent about the damage being done to parts of our planet. It does not really matter that characters tend to be two-dimensional, there to express opinions rather than personality, although Zaynab’s long-suffering father’s frustration is an exception here as well as commanding.

**Fighting Fantasy: Crystal of Storms**


This latest adventure story from the Fighting Fantasy team is very much expected and full of thrills! A renowned games designer, Prattchett delivers a book that is imaginative and exciting but, most of all, is a fitting tribute to the complex lives that will keep children busy for some time. Readers’ own decisions drive this adventure, right from the very start. Readers choose their own character’s backstory and this determines the journey that will be taken: choosing one home town over another can be the difference between life and death.

Whichever initial path they choose, readers will be thrust straight into the heart of the action. In The Crystal of Storms, one character is quiteHIGHLY RECOMMENDEDTHE REVIEWER’S WIFEis still quiteHIGHLY RECOMMENDEDTHE REVIEWER’S WIFEthe character is still quiteHIGHLY RECOMMENDEDTHE REVIEWER’S WIFEand everyone is at war with someone, so there are very few moments to catch a breath before another conflict.

In Fighting Fantasy stories, readers have to use dice and keep track of their weapons and provisions, in order to take on villains and progress through the book. In Crystal of Storms, though, unlike most Fighting Fantasy adventures, heroes don’t start with any provisions, so there is additional stress before it’s too late! Newcomers may be caught out by this and few will succeed in getting all the way through the book without meeting a sticky end at the hands of goblins, scary cloudskins or simple hunger.

With magic waterfalls, giant crabs and pools of poisonous grapes,卓著and enjoy losing themselves in this new world. However, its characters (heroes and villains) lack some of the originality and memorability of some other books in the series. The outstanding quality of this book is the high level of gaming challenge. Readers are frequently forced into making difficult decisions, including whether or not to let people live and, often, even the seemingly small decisions have enormous consequences!

**Diamonds**

Armin Greder, Allen & Unwin, 36pp, 978-1911631910, £12.99 hbk

‘These are diamonds, aren’t they, Mama?’ Carolina’s innocent question leads to further questions and finally the conclusion of the journey that will be taken: choosing one home town over another can be the difference between life and death. Readers choose their own character’s backstory and this determines the journey that will be taken: choosing one home town over another can be the difference between life and death.

Greder’s reputation as an artist who confronts some of the most challenging and urgent issues of our time is only enhanced as he explores how the desire for conspicuous wealth fuels a market that thrives on inequality and corruption. The opening dialogue – the undramatic but so revealing of adult attitudes – establishes the scene. As he does in The Mediterranean, Greder in Amina’s final answer to her mistress is told through these images – until Amina’s final answer to her mistress ‘Don’t worry, madam. It was only a nightmare that is not a dream but a reality.

The format of this book – as with Greder’s other titles – is that of a picture book. But this is not a picture book for the kinderbox. It is an uncomfortable read, demanding a response and raising issues about which there is deafening silence. This is a book that should be included in the curriculum in Secondary Schools, freedom to read at home: his mother, Amina, comes from Africa – so why doesn’t Amina have diamonds? This question is brushed away, but for Carolina (and the reader), it stays.

Carolina’s dream consciousness takes us on the true journey of these diamonds from the mine in Africa to the necklace worn by her mother.

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Carolina’s dream consciousness takes us on the true journey of these diamonds from the mine in Africa to the necklace worn by her mother.

Greder’s reputation as an artist who confronts some of the most challenging and urgent issues of our time is only enhanced as he explores how the desire for conspicuous wealth fuels a market that thrives on inequality and corruption. The opening dialogue – the undramatic but so revealing of adult attitudes – establishes the scene. As he does in The Mediterranean, Greder in Amina’s final answer to her mistress is told through these images – until Amina’s final answer to her mistress ‘Don’t worry, madam. It was only a nightmare that is not a dream but a reality.

The format of this book – as with Greder’s other titles – is that of a picture book. But this is not a picture book for the kinderbox. It is an uncomfortable read, demanding a response and raising issues about which there is deafening silence. This is a book that should be included in the curriculum in Secondary Schools, freedom to read at home: his mother, Amina, comes from Africa – so why doesn’t Amina have diamonds? This question is brushed away, but for Carolina (and the reader), it stays.
The Forest of Moon and Sword


This is a book about love and loss. The author's admiration for the writing of Dickens perfectly complements this witty and accomplished feminist novel set the tone for a skilfully written adventure story with Dickensian London perfectly. Dangers, threats, and mysteries lurk everywhere, particularly for women and children, and there is no welfare safety net for the poor. Twill is a courageous protagonist with a strong sense of justice, a feisty attitude and plenty of good ideas. The storytelling is masterfully, introducing new familiar characters and folks who gripping and intertwining plot threads through short, fast-paced chapters with dramatic scenes and witty, authentic dialogue.

Catherine Bruton has managed to capture the essence of Dickens and distill it into an accessible and intriguing story. Themes of grief, loss, love, healing, and acceptance. It is one which creates an atmospheric, imaginative, and restoration combine with the themes of strength and fragility, is powerful. Themes of grief, loss, love, healing, and restoration combine with the supernatural fantasy elements to create an atmospheric, imaginative, and intriguing read. 

The Finding Suggests


This dark, magical fantasy novel makes perfect reading for a cold winter’s night, as it tells the story of Nona, orphaned in WW11, and her adopted uncle who travel to the wilds of Dartmoor to restore the chapel. Nona solves his riddles to be granted admission to the local church. In this remote landscape Nona discovers a powerful wild magic, mysterious spirit creatures and a dangerous foe, the sinister Soldier. Nona is both vulnerable and courageous and draws on her own inner strength and newly discovered magical abilities to unmask the evil plan to turn him when he was held captive by Sickly Rattlesticks. This novel has a strong folkloric tone and the striking imagery of glass, with its combination of strength and fragility, is powerful. Themes of grief, loss, love, healing, and restoration combine with the supernatural fantasy elements to create an atmospheric, imaginative, and intriguing read.

The Shank Caller


Blue Wing’s remote island home is all she has ever known, but it is beginning to change. Her parents were killed by the shark Xok and since then she has lived with the island’s shark caller, Siringen. Her freedom and independence, and his deep respect for the old traditions have been subverted by Bigman, the island community’s leader. When Western workers import the island with the intention of killing a shark as a trophy to take home, Siringen is forced by Bigman to take his men on a wild ride to kill one of their kills. Bigman is interested only in bringing money to the island in order to increase his wealth and extend his already huge compound. When Atlas and Maple Hamelin—a father and daughter—come to America and are installed in Blue Wing’s family’s former hut she is furious. She is given the responsibility of looking after Maple and out of mutual antagonism a strong friendship slowly grows. Maple’s mother has recently died, too and this bond proves to be the starting point of their friendship.

Synchronicity is threaded through the narrative, as are the sharp contrasts between the old way of life, respecting nature, taking care of the land, observing centuries-old traditions, and the new. Maple comes to see the island through Blue Wing’s eyes, as does the reader, and there is a distinct sense of loss at the fading of the old ways and the introduction of western commercialisation in their place.

Blue Wing wants to learn how to survive on his own. He must kill a whale and avenge his parents. Atlas Hamelin is searching the ocean for a Japanese plane shot down in the 2nd World War, which he believes contains a document which will show him how to reverse time so that he can bring his wife back from the dead. Both plans fail to come to fruition and Blue Wing realises that Xok has only become a killer because of the cruelty inflicted on him when he was held captive by shark hunters. Atlas Hamelin sees his precious document crumble to dust in the wind. Twill looks to his future and realises that it is the living who matter—his daughter must be his priority now. Blue Wing forgives Xok and swims with him and it is then that the story takes a poignant and unexpected turn.

This is a book about love and loss and how to cope with them, about tradition and respect, about change and acceptance. It is one which should not be missed.
The Witching Stone

Danny Weston, UCLan publishing, 336pp, 9781912979387, £7.99 pbk.

This is a totally bewitching story, in more than one sense. When the summer holidays come around, Alfie finds that he can either stay in Bristol alone, or go with his father to a small town in Lancashire, where his father is doing some IT work for a local estate agent. Having recently split with his girlfriend, Alfie decides that getting away might be a good idea. On his first day in Woodplumpton, he finds himself walking around the local graveyard, where he finds a local girl, Mia, who is making rubbings of gravestones, and he also comes across the memorial to a local ‘witch’ called Meg Skelton. When he asks the local vicar what the term used for the mistress of the Devil is, he also comes across the memorial to a local grave saying ‘I don’t believe in witches’, he does so; however, the result is not what he was expecting. What on earth is Alfie going to do with the spirit of a witch, who is determined to wreak vengeance on those who killed her and also stole her young son? It will take a lot of investigation for Alfie and Mia to find a solution and also give Meg the rest that she wants.

The subplot in this story tells us that Alfie’s ex-girlfriend discovers that she is pregnant, so he needs to think about whether he could be the father, or if it is her new boyfriend. This brings in the question of responsibility and what would be the right thing to do? This storyline links back to Meg’s circumstances, when her baby is kidnapped by the father and he then kills her; however, Alfie has to work out for himself what is right, in his situation. The author has placed the story barely believable, but Weston and close to the scene of the Pendle Witch trials, which took place in 1612, nearly 100 years before Meg was accused. Alfie has chosen a real character in that of Meg Skelton and there are quite a few references to her online, giving the reader a deeper sense of history and making the story more intense. This story is full of magic and mystery, with an edge of darkness that makes you shiver, but which keeps you reading avidly. Whilst Alfie is 16 years old, this story is suitable for the 12+ age group. Danny Weston is the pseudonym of Philip Caveney, so his many fans might like to give this book a try. MP

The Humiliations of Welton Blake


This feisty and entertaining book is a witty joy. Barrington Stoke have never compromised on quality and Wheatle, former winner of the Guardian Children’s Fiction Prize and awarded an MBE for his services to literature brings his skills to bear on a book which is as thought-provoking as it is hilarious.

Welton is completely infatuated with Carmelina McKenzie, the prettiest girl in school. He plucks up the courage to ask her out, exchanges phone numbers with her and then his phone dies first so a series of mishaps which punctuate the high-speed narrative. Wheatle heaps humiliations on Welton but never reduces him to a cipher. There is a finely crafted character here, trying to come to terms with the upheaval of his parents’ fractured marriage and his Mum’s new boyfriend and his spilt soul moving in. Welton’s weapon of choice is his humour and his trade in crafting insults for his friends is an addiction. The conflict on the issue of his identity gives him credibility-and sometimes unexpected trouble.

Welton’s inner dialogue is a display of the careful balance of paradox, preoccupations woven through with references to his beloved Star Wars. His observations of his peers will be instantly recognisable to young adult readers and there is a fine crop of striking similes to enrich the mix. Coral Cipiglleder, an entirely terrifying Goth who has decided that Welton is to be his boyfriend, is a particularly masterly creation.

Poignancy comes in the shape of Welton’s father, living in a seedy flat, alone and desperate to be reunited with his estranged wife. Wheatle gives Welton the adult role in this relationship and it is impossible to ignore the fact that this puts him under even more strain: having to grow up too quickly is both a sorrow and an embarrassment as his father is such a hopeless figure.

Welton needs to regain his cool and counteract the indignities of his life with his ‘artistic’ friends on his way to a local ‘witch’ called Meg Skelton. His early attempts at the game end in a disastrous encounter with a wall but in a key match he saves the day. This will also be a redemption for a receptive who isn’t cheering him on. He wins the match for the team, he wins his girl and he defeats the school bully who has persecuted him for so long.

Barrington Stoke have made this a friendly fun read for current and for those with dyslexia, the type face is crisp, clear and large enough to read easily without looking as if it has been printed on an off-white background.

Blended

Sharon M. Draper, Atheneum, 320pp, 978 1 442 9501 2, £7.99 pbk.

Her Dad is Black, her Mom is White; her best friend Imani is Black, her other best friend Heather is White. Her school in Cincinnati has 50% Black students, 50% White. Her Mom calls her Izy, her Dad insists on Isabella. Izy lives at tables at Waffle House; her Dad is a hot shot lawyer. Her problem is, who is she? When she fills in forms at school, does she tick Black, White or ‘Other’? (She settles on Black and is proud to do so.) When her parents split up and after a while make new relationships, her Mom is with a White man who manages Southern Railway and his bowling alley, while her Dad is with a Black interior designer with high-end clients. Izy likes both new partners, but she now has yet more balancing acts to learn, which is tough when you are 11 years old.

Then there are the things people say to her. ‘You’re exotic... you’re unusual... but what are you really?’ And the stereotyping - a boy she thought she liked tells her, ‘Mixed kids are always pretty’. Sometimes, it’s like being caught in the crossfire in Nomansland and it’s never more of a battlefield than on a Sunday afternoon at the Mall for the weekly handover ritual. There’s a row if either side is late - each parent demands the full measure of her time. The infantile squabbles hit new depths when Dad supports Heather’s request to change her name to something non-North American. Then she is given a ‘personal allowance’ to prevent her from asking awkward questions about her school record. ‘I had no idea you were so smart,’ says a security guard, as he ushers them out.

Izy’s anchor throughout the book is her music. She loves that Stevi and she also loves the utter freedom she finds in rehearsing a sonata for performance at the forthcoming Pianopoloza recital under the strict but caring tutelage of George Boyd. GF

Swan Song


Dylan is a boy halfway through year eight at a grammar school. The reader meets Dylan on the day he is permanently excluded from that school, for reasons initially unexplained. Dylan and his lone parent mother decide to move in with his granddad in Wales. Initially Dylan dislikes the idea. But on arrival in Wales he finds that his granddad extends a warm welcome and refrains from asking awkward questions about his school record. His granddad is a fisherman and owns his own fishing boat. A bond develops when the two of them take to the water.

Grandad is also deeply passionate about Whooper swans. There is a local rearing project to save the Whoopers, where the swans nest over the winter. Dylan finds a swan with a fishing yarn twisted round her neck. He rescues her. Granddad and Dylan together discover that a local developer plans to acquire the land at Swan Fields and turn it into a caravan Holiday Park. Then there is the land he wishes to save the land. An unexpected event has the unforeseen consequence of leaving Dylan and his mother in charge of the project. The question is whether the two of them can save Swan Fields.

The first strength of Lewis’s novel is her depiction of the relationship between Dylan and his granddad, described as warm and convincing terms. The book’s second strength lies in its sympathetic and credible depiction of an angry teenager not in fulltime education. This reviewer found just one discordant element in the narrative. In relation to his proposed home schooling, Dylan encounters difficulties with a local authority in his home base will track him down. His mother expresses her confidence that the authority will not bother them. These rings false with the character Lewis has established for her, though it plays a useful part in plot development. Her profession is that of a tax accountant. She is established as a respected of law and order. RB

More frivolous episodes, such as Shopping Expenditions to pick up that pick up from Slime Store or a T-shirt with a whimsical slogan. A UK reader might find the eight a grammar school. The book is printed on an off-white background.
There is so much in this brilliant story, and Angie Thomas succeeds here in weaving together the threads of the three children’s stories to create a tapestry of events and coincidental encounters, drawing their circumstances and responses to individual situations: being forced into a ghetto, working as a guard at a concentration camp, being incarcerated in one, or simply escaping to safer lands and the survivors’ guilt that comes with it. Kessler’s fictional account may seem contrived at times, as she seeks to bring in many of the changes the Nazis made to Jews’ lives before the outbreak of war, and the horror during the war, but the children’s reactions are so heartfelt and authentic, and genuinely devastating, that it is essential reading. The reader is invested in their fates, and yet will be disturbed at the distinct cruelty and evil of the Nazis, at first just discriminating against, but gradually making life unbearable for Jewish people, before carrying out the ‘final solution’ – the extermination of all Jews.

Renée Watson, Bloomsbury, 299pp, 9781526616821, £7.99 pbk

Nala is 17, about to enter senior year, the final school year in the American system, and, because of a dispute with her Mom, has lived with an aunt and uncle and her ‘cousin-sister-friend’, Imani, for four years as the story starts at the beginning of the summer vacation. Imani has chosen to celebrate her birthday by going to a talent show, and there Nala falls for the young MC, Tye. Imani and Tye, and other friends, volunteer for ‘Inspire Harlem’, and are vegetarian, healthy and keen. Nala is persuaded to become a volunteer and becomes more active and changes her eating in public, in spite of her longing for bacon and a movie-night with a tub of ice-cream. As her relationship with Tye deepens, the lies she has to tell become more complicated. For example, her visits to her Grandma in a retirement home and help with a jigsaw are exaggerated into a project whereby she says she runs an activity to complement the succinct programme for the home, but of course the truth emerges, and she feels she should break up with Tye.

This loving family of Jamaican origin comes across strongly, and the story lines are important but hair and how to style it is even more so: braiding or straightening take a long time, with opportunity for thought. There are some beautiful relationships in this book, but none of them seem to get further than kissing, so this is safe reading for young people.

**Love is a Revolution**

This free verse novel that took on urban violence and probe its emotion and complexity. Now released as a graphic novel with illustrator Danica Novgorodoff, this new format of the action gives rise to further thought and draws in a new cohort of readers, reluctant and fluent.

Reynolds’ gift is in the ability to write how children think. Readers relate because the protagonist feels like one of them, in this case, a young boy called Will. When his brother, Shawn, is gunned down in front of him, Will knows the rules. No crying. No snitching. Revenge. He takes his brother’s gun, gets in the elevator and prepares to go take his vengeance. Except, in the sixty seconds and seven floors it takes to get down to the ground floor, Will is joined by people from his past. Dead people. And Will has to question everything he’s ever been taught.

Novgorodoff’s ink and watercolour illustrations lend a softness to the faces, giving an empathetic glow to their expressions, which contrasts bittersweetly with the violence in the text, and the depiction of the darker shadowy side of bullets and guns. Yet also, there is a chaos to the graphics, as they break out from their lines and boxes, bordering occasionally on the abstract, and this serves to complement the succinct yet powerful emotive text from Reynolds. The emotions swerve from surprise to relief, from confusion to love to grief. Sometimes full pages are left with a single image for the reader to contemplate, investing time in the power of the story, and understanding that the plot unfolding in the elevator spreads its message beyond – mirroring Novgorodoff’s breakdown of the constraints of borders. The colour choices are wise too – Will’s stark yellow top against a dark blue/grey exploration of the elevator, and the very real violence of splashes of red when it is used.

**Concrete Rose**

Angie Thomas, Walker, 323pp, 9781016384444, £7.99 pbk

The time is 1998 and his future member, with school a low priority. He is also a gang member, and his mother and also his bright and sometimes rebellious friend, Lisa. But when the young MC, Tye, arrives, he finds out he is going to be a father and Angie Thomas succeeds here in weaving together the threads of the three children’s stories to create a tapestry of events and coincidental encounters, drawing their circumstances and responses to individual situations: being forced into a ghetto, working as a guard at a concentration camp, being incarcerated in one, or simply escape to safer lands and the survivors’ guilt that comes with it. Kessler’s fictional account may seem contrived at times, as she seeks to bring in many of the changes the Nazis made to Jews’ lives before the outbreak of war, and the horror during the war, but the children’s reactions are so heartfelt and authentic, and genuinely devastating, that it is essential reading. The reader is invested in their fates, and yet will be disturbed at the distinct cruelty and evil of the Nazis, at first just discriminating against, but gradually making life unbearable for Jewish people, before carrying out the ‘final solution’ – the extermination of all Jews.

Jason Reynolds, ill. Danica Novgorodoff, Faber, 208pp, 9780571661019, £9.99 pbk

This story is written as if by Maverick ‘Mav’ Carter, a 17-year-old boy living in a black and often deprived area outside New York. His father is locked away for drug-offences and his heroic mother just about keeps the home going, though money is scarce. But Mav has already started his own relatively modest drug-dealing and is anxious to get into the big time. He is also a gang member, with school a low priority.

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**Concrete Rose**

Angie Thomas, Walker, 323pp, 9781016384444, £7.99 pbk

This story is written as if by Maverick ‘Mav’ Carter, a 17-year-old boy living in Gordon Heights, a predominately black and often deprived area outside New York. His father is locked away for drug-offences and his heroic mother just about keeps the home going, though money is scarce. But Mav has already started his own relatively modest drug-dealing and is anxious to get into the big time. He is also a gang member, with school a low priority.
The Gilded Ones

Namina Forna, ill. Johnny Tarajosu, Usborne, 416pp, 9781474959575, £8.99 pbk

Deka has grown up in a highly rigid and patriarchal society, which sees women as being ‘pure’ or ‘impure’. At the age of 16 years, girls are tested by spilling their blood; if their blood runs gold, they are impure and called ‘demons’, meaning they are liable to be killed. Deka is saved by a strange woman, who speaks White Hands and taken to the capital city to become part of an elite group of women fighters; they are almost immortal and the emperor wants them as his advance guard in a forthcoming war. Deka gradually becomes aware that her parents have sent her to St Bernadette’s. She’s all too aware of her place in the family ranking order: “I’m not dyslexic, or blind, or deaf. Unfortunately for everyone, I’m just thick”. Of course, she isn’t; and as the story unfolds, one comes to see that she does indeed own the ‘hidden gifts’ of the title.

When Deka’s being sent out the Chola, a long, deep cupboard in the basement, that she finds the tarot cards. Or, possibly, they find her. She soon discovers, with a little help from a tarot expert on YouTube, that she has an uncanny understanding of what the cards reveal for her classmates. She’s suddenly in demand, treated with respect. Through the cards, she makes a friend in Fiona, herself an outsider, though in case it’s her preoccupation with her Saturday stage school, her friends there, and her ambition to work in theatre which set her apart. That and her family’s Filipino origins. Fiona prompts Deka to set up a profitable lunchtime business; two euros for ten minutes with the cards.

Friendship is a problem for Maeve. Like her brother, Rich, she has been a pupil since primary school and she’s still around in the same year as Maeve at St Bernadette’s. They are sixteen now and sharing rooms attentively in a particular clique. Lily had been an embarrassment. One day, Maeve cruelly dumped Lily, and now when Lily asks for a tarot reading, that episode flares up again in front of everyone. The next day, Lily disappears. Readers are absorbed into Lily and Lily’s older brother Rory (who prefers to be known as Roe) comprise the central cast of the novel. Other adult characters play important, but brief roles, such as the proprietor of a crystal shops dealing in all things magical, or an American guy who leaves an aggressively funny anti-militarist protest group. But it’s the interplay between Maeve, Fiona and Roe (whom Maeve finds increasingly attractive), as they urgently try to track down Lily, that drives the story.

The intensity of O’Donoghue’s writing is relentless, not least in her accounts of the dark, sharp-edged dreams which haunt both Maeve and Rory – at times, they even seem to have access to the other’s dream life. The cards appear and disappear, out of Maeve’s control. Sometimes an extra card (not in the standard pack) turns up, named The Housekeeper, and in Maeve’s senses is the ability to cast spells; and that if she is to bring Lily back, she must use her powers, even though they carry huge responsibility and might well have fatal consequences for herself. All of this is only occasionally relieved by moments of humour within the dialogue; while the feelings of Maeve and Rory for each other are described with tenderness, the course of their love does not run smooth given the supernatural pressures upon them – and, for good measure, the added dimension of Roe’s bisexuality.

The finale does not compromise; no easy endings here. GF

India Smythe in Love?

Sarah Gottlev, Marotte Books, 243pp, 978-1916152649, £7.99 pbk

India Smythe is aged fourteen. She is in year ten in an English school. In the first volume of Govett’s duology India is striving to acquire a boyfriend. In this volume she has succeeded in doing so. Her boyfriend Rich Evans is a musician and a boy of marked sensitivity. Can she maintain the relationship? How enduring will it prove to be?

The novel is a conventional story of teenage relationships. India lurches from one disaster to another. The question is whether she’s dealing with these in an appropriate manner and prepare for the next. Recognition of familiar disastrous scenarios caused this reviewer more than once to laugh out loud. The book scores a notable first. It is the first YA book that has come to this reviewer’s notice which reflects the realities of the Corona virus pandemic. Aesthetically inclined readers will find it interesting to learn how the pandemic affects the lives of these fictional characters. Readers will also relish the opportunity to look through eyes contemporary with the infection, as it recedes into history.

The Game Weavers

Rebecca Zahabi, ZuniTold, 326pp, 9781911620425, £9.99 pbk

This futuristic novel for young adults tells the story of a famous gamer. Seo is training hard to become the youngest ever champion of the world’s smash hit game, but he is battling much more than just his fellow gamers. As his feelings towards a young man called Jack become stronger and stronger, Seo struggles to accept his own sexuality, and faces harmful discrimination from his fans and even his family.

Because of his talent for the game Twine, Seo is adopted as a child by Sir Neil, and moved from his home in Korea to England. His little brother, Minjun, is also adopted, and is Seo’s only link to his familial past. The pair are inseparable, and Seo is very much Minjun’s father figure. It is a result of this dependency that Seo rehires until Minjun inadvertently tells the world about Seo’s relationships with men. At first, Seo’s distress at being excommunicated is understandable; he is very private and reserved character. However, at his next Twine match, the fans in the stadium shower him in abuse, and it becomes clear that this story is set in a world where, despite the futuristic setting, homosexuality is not universally accepted and evokes dangerous reactions from many.

The way that discrimination and vilification are carried out in this novel are often brutal, even from close family members. One scene in particular is graphic, visceral and stark. As well as Seo’s sexuality, gender-based discrimination is rife in the Twine world and close-mindedness is the hallmark of the skills of the current world champion, with whom Seo has much in common, despite their rivalry.

Sir Neil exercises complete control of Seo because of his managerial as well as parental role, and forces him to begin a relationship with a woman and prove his heterosexuality to the world. His fake girlfriend’s name is Penelope and, unlike other characters in the novel, she is rather inauthentic, and written with less agency and less authenticity than other characters. Seo feels trapped and doesn’t want to hurt anyone. In a tense finale, Seo’s only chance to win his freedom and make his own romantic decisions is to win the world championship for himself.

Characters are described in dramatic fashion, as if characters create their own pawns (different animals and creatures) using threads of ‘twine’, which fight one another on an imagined battlefield. Zahabi has envisioned a genuinely exciting, believable, futuristic computer game, which blends the balance of pace and action to a novel that is also full of emotional turmoil.
Brian Alderson turns to some much needed unalloyed entertainment.

Gentle readers will probably know the story of the Sick Man of Tobago who was one of the personages who featured in the Anecdotes and Adventures of Fifteen Gentlemen. He lived long on rice gruel and sago. But at last, to his bliss, his physician said this: "To a roast leg of mutton you may go.

The Anecdotes were probably first published in 1821 by a certain John Marshall in imitation of a History of Sixteen Wonderful Old Women which had come out a year before from a rival up the road, John Harris. So far as is known they were the first collections of verses that took the form of what were later called limericks and they were part of a happy fashion for bringing sweetness and light to the not always merry world of children's literature. There were further imitations, not least a collection of Young Ladies and the very rare Beauties of Shakespeare appeared among Wallis's (optimistically) Improved Sixpenny Books.

Here’s Falstaff, that well-fatted cell; Who made the world all round him laugh; He loved a fat capon Well-larded with bacon And Dame Quickley’s sack he would quaff.

The fashion did not continue but one day in the 1840s a copy of the Anecdotes fell into the hands of the young Edward Lear, an artist at that time notable for his magnificent hand-coloured lithographs of parrots. He had been commissioned by the Earl of Derby to compile an illustrated account of the Earl’s menagerie at Knowsley Hall, near Liverpool, and in the course of his stay there he made friends with some of the children of guests who partook of the Earl’s wide-ranging hospitality. (Lear dined in the servants’ quarters and the children used to creep down to see him after supper because he made for enjoyable company. Before long, he found himself dining with the toffs Upstairs.) Without doubt part of the entertainment that he had to offer lay in the succession of ‘nonsense’ that he invented and illustrated along the lines of the Sick Man of Tobago which he had copied into a notebook as a sort of trial copy.

It was an exercise in which he took great delight and was to become substance for the creation of a new genre of English verse after he assembled the 72 examples in the two volumes of A Book of Nonsense, published in 1846 as An Old Derry-Down-Derry. It was not only notable for its devotion to unalloyed entertainment but also for its composition. Planned as a small oblong picture book (6x8½ inches) it was entirely the work of its author, the text and the pictures being printed from his own drawing on lithographic stones. Thus the neat lettering in capitals which ran through three lines, not five, to suit the books' format while the drawings were printed directly from his own images with no interference from any other reproductive method. (What’s more, the whole lot was drawn backwards in order to get a positive printed result.) Unfortunately the binding employed the method much later known as ‘perfect’ whereby the individual leaves were gathered and pasted into the spine with a rubber solution, the result being highly imperfect since the glue lost its strength and the leaves began to fall out. Today only two or three complete copies match the intentions of the original.

The mere quantity of the verses that were printed could not help but establish the form as highly imitable although it was not till 1896 that Aubrey Beardsley is found using the term Limerick for them and there is no definitive judgment as to where that came from. But uncharitable readers have been prone to criticize the limericks’ quasi-inventor for a failure fully to exploit the potential of the form. Too many examples fail to develop the initial story with a rousing final line, coppping out with a mere repetition of the opening one. (I doubt if anyone needs to be told any of the hundreds of jokes in limerick form which have some sort of punch-line. These are normally divided into the clean and the cheerfully filthy. The best of both varieties can bear successful repetition as Iona Opie found on her regular research visits to the playground at Liss Primary School.)

What the critics ignore however is the coherent world that Lear has created through his drawings. It is one whose people take life seriously in the main and see nothing too unusual if their neighbours have problems with their noses or choose to feed their sons on nothing but buns. You can see that tastes and temperaments are as varied there as here – the globular Person of Hurst cares not that he is obese, the pigs clearly enjoy the music from the Young Lady of Bute, and the dolorous Man of Cape Horn dies of his despair. None of Lear’s followers create such an ambience or do more than offer jokes; he introduces you to a parallel world where rhymes and reasons have a wild life of their own.

1 A masterpiece of literature not to be found, I think, in the British Library.
2 Privately published as Some Limericks by Norman Douglas in 1928.

Brian Alderson’s Lear anthology A Book of Bosh was published by Puffin in 1975 and was dedicated to Kaye Webb.

Edward Lear The Complete Nonsense and Other Verse is published by Galileo Classics, 978-0140424652, £14.99 pbk.