Guest Editorial: Let Them Play
Piers Torday

I write this the day before the schools are due to reopen after what is hopefully be our final lockdown, and the talk from government is already - sadly and predictably - full of longer school days, shorter holidays and intensive academic catch up classes for children.

Of course, even with the phenomenal efforts of so many teaching staff and parents at home, some children will need to catch up on some missed academic learning. Reports of online fatigue, fading morale and low engagement as we near the end of lockdown are widespread. There is also another cohort of children, who have not been able to benefit from home learning because of lack of access to reading materials, screens and wi-fi, amidst other deprivations. These children will need all the extra support they can get, both now and in the future.

But for many, learning has not ‘stopped’, and the gaps in attainment will be assessed and dealt with accordingly over the coming year. What is far more serious, and affects every single child, has been the pause in emotional and creative development, through the absence of play.

They face a looming mental health crisis, after months isolated from friends, deprived of crucial social engagement at a critical point in their emotional lives, not to mention physical exercise, and participation in group activities such as drama and music. Referrals to mental health services for young people have skyrocketed, and research from Great Ormond St Hospital suggests record levels of ‘play deprivation’.

As many school leaders recognise, what children most urgently need now is not academic catch up, but a chance to play with each other and learn how to be children again.

The irony is that when home schooling was in its pandemic infancy, as teachers and parents scrambled to rearrange their lives, a lot of children in this country found time to read and write. They wrote for pleasure, at their own pace, and weren’t tested for comprehension. They learned at the same time.

Talking down a ‘doomed generation’ because of a pandemic, we must resist the temptation to timetable, coach and measure children into some perfectible version of themselves that can never exist. We should give them as much time and space to reconnect with each other as they need, alongside opportunities to express themselves through writing, performance, music and art, and chances to excel physically on the games pitch as well as mentally in the classroom.

The intuition, confidence and creative skills gained from these activities is the catch up these play deprived children need.

There’s a pandemic, and there’s a pandemic that will never be. It’s the latter that we must not let them play deprived need.


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Inclusive Storytelling

Elle McNicoll introduces the Own Voices movement and explains why it’s so important.

There are so many wonderful things about being an author. Most of them are to do with the incredible people who become your readers. It is the privilege of my life that people share their stories with me, after reading my debut. A Kind of Spark has become this bridge between me and so many people like me.

I’m neurodivergent. I have a brain that is wired differently. It made school and childhood challenging and difficult for me a lot of the time, especially as I was bullied a lot for being different.

Now, I use my personal lens and my experience to write the books that I so desperately needed as a lonely kid in the library who was hiding from sneers and jeers and bullying. I tell my truth and I write ND heroines with tons of heart, brains, guts and spine.

And the response has been life-changing. People reaching out with their own stories, kids sleeping with the book because they love it so much. Students writing me long letters. Teachers who say they finally feel able to have conversations about neurodiversity. It has been intense.

The book has been nominated for a bunch of awards, and won Blackwell’s Book of the Year and the 2021 Blue Peter Best Story Book Award, but the real prize is undoubtedly the connection I now have with readers.

This is the positive side of being an Own Voices author. However, there are negatives as well. For those unaware, Own Voices is a movement in the book world that was created in order to lift up and support authors who are underrepresented in the industry. It’s a beautiful thing. I’ve loved my Own Voices community, as a disabled author.

But there are people who don’t understand. And those who want to see Own Voices authors continually excluded from the book world. As a disabled person, most books about people like me are not written by other disabled people. They are not edited by disabled people. They are not published by disabled people. They are not reviewed by disabled people. This creates problems in multiple ways. Misinformation can go unnoticed and harmful stereotypes can be printed over and over again.

By shutting certain voices out of the room in publishing, the varied and diverse work of storytellers is not able to flourish.

Own Voices is the antidote to this. By uplifting marginalised creators, and encouraging them to write about whatever they want and in whatever genre, the stories that are often excluded from the mainstream suddenly have a place to thrive. Organic diversity. Inclusive storytelling.

I am proudly Neurodivergent and I write proud neurodivergent books. I happily introduce myself as an Own Voices author so that ND readers can identify me as a member of the community that I write about. That is it. Fiz. It’s that simple.

You would be astonished at how much grief I get for it. There are your regular trolls. The ones that call me slurs and tell me that I should never be proud of what I am. They bother me the least. I think it’s safe to say there is something deeply wrong in a person’s life if they have to hurl abuse at people they don’t even know. Besides, the whole point of A Kind of Spark is that the heroine learns to drown out the hatred and prejudice of others. She taught me a great deal while I was writing.

Then there are the bad faith actors. The ones who pretend that by uplifting underrepresented writers and calling out harmful stereotypes, you’re being censorsious. And look, if I say ‘ableism is bad’ and you feel attacked? That may just be a problem you should handle and not me. Envy, bitterness and good old-fashioned ‘we don’t want people like you in our club’. I’ve had it thrown my way. I’ve been called a token by someone who has never read my work.

If I cared about all of this, I would never write. And I write every single day. I ask that the industry do better. Selecting one marginalised author a year is not good enough. The Own Voices movement requires publishers to not only seek out diverse writers, but also hire more inclusively. Make those rooms full of people who are all different and can all bring their own unique perspective to the table.

I really don’t think ‘hire more inclusively and support diverse authors’ is that controversial, but my mentions prove me wrong.

Here are the usual boring gripes people like to send my way, unasked for may I say:

‘You can’t speak for everyone’. Never claimed to. No Own Voices author has. If you knew the movement, you would know that.

‘Why can’t I write what I want?’ You can. I’m supporting marginalised authors. That shouldn’t make you defensive.

‘Own Voices authors can still get things wrong.’ Yes. Let’s then afford them the same grace majority authors have been given since the beginning. They’ve been allowed to get messy, to make mistakes. They still are. It is not the job of an Own Voices author to tell the story of their entire community. Merely their own. Because you see… the book industry can sometimes be a little like that playground I once ran from. There are bullies. There are mean girls. There are cliques.

Only this time it’s different. This time, I’m not alone. I have an incredible community. The people who care about inclusive books, as well as the authors who write them. The brilliant disabled writers and editors I now call my friends, many of whom worked on my two books before they were published. So that I could incorporate other neurodivergent viewpoints.

They are the force field keeping out the prejudice, the sneering, the disdain and other people’s insecurities.

My new book, Show Us Who You Are, is a futuristic novel about a mysterious corporation that makes digital holograms of real people. Two ND kids, Cora and Adrien, are going to throw a spanner in their works. Some people were surprised that my second book was a) Science-Fiction and b) had more neurodivergent leads. But why not? There are so many ways to be neurodivergent. So many ways to be the hero of a story. I could never let A Kind of Spark be the only ND story I told.

Own Voices authors are diverse, multi-faceted and ready to change the industry for the better. No more single stories.

A Kind of Spark and Show Us Who You Are are published by Knights Of, £6.99 pbk.
Inventing new worlds, exploring new experiences, probing new ideas - creative writing is unrivalled in its capacity to engage and entertain children, all the while honing vital skills of empathy and imaginative thinking. And right now, given that there’s scant opportunity to explore the world outside, the intrinsic value of the imagination - and the joy to be had from imaginative writing - is more pertinent than ever. Few feelings beat the satisfaction and fun to be had from creating your own worlds and characters, and the lock-down experience presents a perfect opportunity to foster that sense of satisfaction and fun – there’s no better time to unlock a lifelong love of creative writing. Joanne Owen suggests ways to do just that through activities to spark story ideas, and projects that offer young writers the opportunity to write with real purpose.

Sparking inspiration
Fear of the blank page can be a big obstacle, but there are plenty of effective ways to banish blank-page-blues, not least when you give activities a collective framework and move from off-the-page discussion to on-the-page creativity.

Every object tells a story
Objects are excellent for sparking story ideas, and in workshops I usually contextualise this activity by saying that writers are a bit like explorers and archaeologists, digging up stories and ideas through objects. Ask budding writers to pick an interesting object to use as a springboard for digging up a story idea. Any object will do (which is one of the beauties of this exercise), but old photos, postcards, maps and ornaments work well. Next, pose a series of questions about the object:

- What is it?
- Does it have any special value or powers?
- Where is it? Where did it come from? (the story setting)
- Who does it belong to? Is it theirs, or did they find it, or take it from someone else?
- Does someone else want it? Why do they want it? (this could set-up the story conflict, the action, the what-happens-next)

Once a story has suggested itself through the answers and been partially created aloud, ask young writers to put pen to paper to write-up their story.

Flash fiction
This five-minute burst of activity is excellent for warming-up the imagination, plus few things beat the sense of urgency that comes from a ticking clock. Ask young writers to transform three words into a short story in five minutes. The more absurd the better – how about a pineapple, a policeman and a parrot? Alternatively, ask writers to note down the last thing they ate, what they want to be when they grow up, and an item of clothing they would never wear. So, you could end up with a story about, for example, a tutu-wearing footballer who loses a cup final because he scoffed too much chocolate before the match. Once writers have their three words, set the timer for five minutes.

Starting out and weaving back
Story-starters are a perennially effective tool for sparking story ideas – simply provide a selection of opening lines or titles and, as with the ‘every object’ activity, encourage young writers to ask questions about scenarios suggested by the line. As before, the bones of a story will form from the answers. Providing the last lines of stories works well too. Again, encourage questions, this time working to unravel the story backwards. How about this for a last line? ‘Remind me to never, EVER, wear Grandad’s wig ever again!’ What on earth happened when they wore it? Why did it happen? Was it Granddad’s fault? Who wore it? And so on, until hey presto! – stories emerge for writers to develop on the page.

Fiction from Fact
Finding out fascinating facts from the fields of sport, science and nature can provide a fruitful foundation for writing stories, especially for children who are less comfortable letting their imaginations run wild. What’s more, asking individuals to use their favourite hobby
or interest as a springboard gives them a deeper sense of agency, which in turn is a powerful motivator - more powerful than being told what to write. Having said that, it’s useful to provide a few examples to get their research going – hummingbirds are the only birds that fly backwards; Venus and Uranus rotate backwards facts not involving retrograde movement are also available). Fact selected, it’s time to transform it into a story.

‘Pass the Person’ Prompter

After contextualising characters as being like people in our real lives (i.e. they’re what make life interesting), gather an assortment of costume accessories in a box. Seat your young writers in a circle and play music as they pass the box, as you would to play pass the parcel. When the music stops, the person holding the box picks an item from it to prompt ideas for a character – what kind of person would wear a hat/scarf/cape/helmet like this? To accompany this activity, create a character profile worksheet with space to fill out things like character name, age, occupation, likes and dislikes. Completed worksheets can be used as the basis for individuals’ short stories. To deliver this remotely, pick an item yourself and ask individuals to come up with a character based on the item.

Writing with purpose

Discovering the pleasure of writing goes hand in hand with writing for purpose i.e. having a reason to write is hugely motivational, and often intrinsic to unlocking a lasting love of writing. Here are a few ideas to do just that:

Make a magazine or newspaper

Budding writers could take on expert roles as, for example, news reporters, sports correspondents, book reviewers and comic strip creators to make their own magazine. The sense of ownership prompts enthusiasm and a strong sense of purpose, especially if the finished work will have an audience.

Arrange a Festival of Words

Easily adaptable for a school or home context, holding a Festival of Words is a fun way to celebrate and showcase creativity. Task individuals to create work to perform at a live event (in person or online). Short stories and plays; poems and comedy sketches – think of it as a talent show of the written word.

Write for reward

Entering writing competitions is a great motivator, offering the thrilling possibility of winning a prize alongside a sense of being part of something bigger. Highlights include the Henrietta Branford Writing Competition 2021 that’s run in conjunction with the prestigious Branford Boase Award and open to anyone aged 19 and under with an entry deadline of 23rd May 2021. Alternatively, the Radio 2 500 Words short story competition is open to children of 13 and under.

Writing resources

How-to creative writing books

How to Write Your Best Story Ever by Christopher Edge
The Usborne Creative Writing Book by Louise Stowell
How to Write a Story by Simon Cheshire
You Can Write Awesome Stories by Joanne Owen

Recommended online resources

www.worldbookday.com has a brilliant “stay at home” activity hub and information about online events and workshops hosted by authors and illustrators. Similarly, authority.com offers a daily “10-minute challenge” set by talents from the children’s book arena.

The National Literacy Trust is a treasure trove of fun book-themed resources, especially the Words for Life site. Booktrust’s Home Time offering includes activities and competitions, while the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education has a host of free resources covering story-writing, poetry and developing imaginative skills.
Jon Agee arrives for our interview buzzing with energy and enthusiasm after an early morning tennis match. Born in 1959, he didn’t have the internet, iPhones or any digital distractions as a child. Jon’s mother, who was herself an artist, gave him and his sister a pad of paper and drawing was their entertainment.

The earliest children’s book writers and illustrators that Jon was attracted to were British. He was captivated by the nonsense poems of Edward Lear, ‘It was fun as a child to see grown-ups being silly because my parents were not so silly. They were very proper and grown up.’ Winnie the Pooh by A.A. Milne and E.H. Shepherd was another favourite ‘there’s a gentle droll humour and I didn’t realise at the time just how wise the stories are.’ Jon found Alice in Wonderland fantastical, mysterious, dangerous and scary but, ‘Edward Lear more than any of the others stuck with me. There was something about the stories and poems for children but they were often for adults, they were odd and silly and it just appealed to me. When I began writing and illustrating books myself, a lot of my early books were for grown-ups. I suspect Edward Lear had something to do with that.’

Another influence from a young age was the New Yorker magazine which Jon still gets to this day ‘My parents had these old albums which were just the cartoons. As a kid I would flick through these cartoons which were really meant for grown-ups. Some of them I understood, some went over my head. Edward Lear and the New Yorker dovetailed and had a sensibility I shared.’

Jon went on to study at Cooper Union School of Art where despite enjoying painting static images, he became particularly interested in film-making and animation. ‘I wanted to tell stories, that was where film and animation came into it.’ Towards the end of his time at Cooper, he began to produce cartoons and comic strips, which he shared with friends but never showed to his teachers or professors. ‘They were very personal. Much more personal than anything I created for school. Some were just one image, some were stories.’

When he left college, a publisher suggested Jon tried writing a picturebook for children. ‘They looked at my portfolio and said there were a lot of pictures which had little stories and they felt maybe one could be the basis for a book.’ He fell into publishing almost by accident. In 1981 he was living in New York City ‘It was a very quiet time in publishing. In those days you could make an appointment with a publisher and possibly meet with an editor. Jon had a meeting with Random House, when he got back to his apartment there was a message on his answering machine ‘the editor had raced back to ring me after the publication had been agreed’. Jon’s first book was If Snow Falls. ‘It is a very small book It only has two sentences. I was just learning how to do picturebooks at the time.’ Jon feels much of the book is very much like a movie with a camera that zooms in on a house. ‘I really learned by just getting into it and finding that a picturebook is normally 30-40 pages and a handful of sentences and then there are all these other elements like the page turns, it’s not simply enjoying one single image, it’s how these images relate to one another.’

Jon’s artistic process begins with filling notebooks with loose drawings. ‘I try to draw situations which are unusual or where I’ve turned things on their head.’ There have been times when he’s gone through notebooks and picked through the thread of ideas. One was Little Santa about Santa Claus as a very young child. His family are grumpy as they hate living in the North Pole and want to move to Florida. ‘Santa loves the snow and ice and is crazy about it, I knew they were wanting to leave but at that point I got stuck. I loved the premise and the idea that Santa didn’t fit in but didn’t know where to go from there. I put it aside for a couple of months and when I pulled the notebook off the shelves a couple of months later it gradually just unfolded. They were all ready to go to Florida and there was a blizzard. As Santa was the littlest one, they sent him down a chimney to go and ask for help, he met a reindeer and some elves and the story came together.’

Talking about Life On Mars, Jon describes how one of the ‘unique elements to picturebooks is how one thing can be said in the text yet something quite different or more elaborate can be
happening in the pictures.’ For him, this is one of the joys of creating picturebooks. In *Life on Mars*, ‘there is something happening where the narrator is clearly not seeing what is following him and the humour comes from that. There’s all this incongruity which can happen between text and pictures which is very dynamic. I love that!’

For the joys the form has, it also has challenges. ‘If you have pictures that go across the gutters because of the way the binding works, you lose them and it can be a bit of a headache. If someone does a painting, they don’t have to worry that they need to leave room for words and for the gutter.’ Jon describes *The Wall in the Middle of the Book* as his revenge on the gutter. ‘I was able to put a physical wall in the middle of the book and the pictures couldn’t get across. It was liberating to treat the gutter as though it was an impenetrable barrier.’ Jon was looking for a way to turn this concept into a story. ‘I’m always looking for ways to tell an interesting story. It also happened that this made an interesting comment on judging people without getting to know them.’ The book was endorsed by Amnesty International, something that Jon never considered would happen with a book of his, but which is described, with characteristic modesty, as a really pleasant surprise.

Jon’s picturebooks are enjoying renewed attention in the UK thanks to *Scallywag Press*. Sarah Pakenham was introduced to Jon’s work at the *Taipei Book Expo* in Taiwan. The relationship was a special joy for Jon as it meant being reunited with his former editor Janice Thompson who published *The Incredible Painting of Felix Clousseau* at Faber & Faber in 1988. The chance to revisit the work has been welcomed by Jon. ‘I always felt it needed to be larger. Most picturebooks these days are a bit bigger. The new book is a bigger format and is 40 pages.’ This has enabled the metafictional ending to be emphasised with the picture and accompanying line of text where Felix ‘returned to his painting’ to have their own individual pages. ‘Everyone acknowledges when they finish a book there is always at least one picture where you wish you could redo that picture. With new paintings and revised layout, this version is the director’s cut!’

Alongside his picturebooks, Jon has created numerous much loved collections of wordplay including tongue twisters, anagrams, palindromes and oxymorons. ‘The ones I’m most known for is palindromes. In 1991 I published a book called *Go Hang a Salami!* I’m a Lasagna Hog! At the time there was only one cartoon book of palindromes, I didn’t know much about them but started creating them myself. They are funny sounding, magical and off-beat but absolutely need a picture. Children love them when I visit schools and it turns out I’m pretty good at them.’ Jon has a forthcoming book this autumn, *Otto* where all the dialogue will be in palindromes.

Many of Jon’s books have been lauded with accolades and critical acclaim, asked what his proudest achievement has been, he comments ‘the fact the books are still in print and that people are reading them and find them relevant. I’d love to think the books are changing people in a good way, expanding their imaginations and helping them to feel more creative.’

*Books mentioned*
- *Little Santa*, Dial Books, 9780803739062 hbk
- *The Wall in the Middle of the Book*, Scallywag Press, 9781912650057, £7.99 pbk
- *The Incredible Painting of Felix Clousseau*, Scallywag Press, 9781912650576, £12.99 hbk
- *Go Hang a Salami! I’m a Lasagna Hog!*, 9780440830450, pbk

Ten of the Best Books Connecting Children with Nature

There’s no substitute for observing the natural world around us at first hand, whether we live in an urban or a rural environment. Books can develop this interest, delving more deeply and widely, and help us to expand our ideas about what constitutes a wild place. **Ann Lazim** chooses ten that help children to do that and provide the groundwork for going beyond appreciating nature to protecting the environment.

**A First Book of Nature**
Nicola Davies and Mark Hearld, Walker, 978-1406349160, £12.99 pbk
No contemporary children’s author has done more to connect children with nature than Nicola Davies and it’s hard to choose just one book from her prolific output. Here seasonal sections range over many aspects of the natural world visible at a child’s level. Mixed media illustrations which make particularly effective use of collage complement a text which includes verse and prose, conveying information in a variety of ways. A book that will repay many revisits as the year rolls by, encouraging exploration of nature and inspiring children’s own artwork.

**Wildlife in Your Garden**
Mike Dilger and Sarah Horne, Bloomsbury, 978-1472913432, £12.99 pbk
Exceptionally clear photographs make this a useful guide to the variety of animals, birds and insects that may be found in British gardens. However, this is much more than an identification guide. Each section of the book is devoted to an area such as trees, shrubs and hedges; ponds; wild areas, compost heaps and log piles, and culminates in suggestions for attracting wildlife to that area. The layout is enticing with information set out like jottings from a notebook. Humorous illustrations are incorporated into the design of each spread.

**RSPB Children’s Guide to Nature Watching**
Mark Boyd, Bloomsbury, 978-1408187579, £9.99 pbk
The RSPB’s remit goes beyond protecting birds and is concerned with conservation and education about wildlife in general. This guide for young naturalists, while being too large for most pockets, could comfortably be slipped into a backpack for expeditions. A wildlife key with helpful questions sets readers on the right track to identification of different varieties of wildlife. There’s lots of practical information about when and where to look and about the different habitats that exist to explore.

**The Lost Words**
Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris, Hamish Hamilton, 978-0241253588, £20 hbk
Jackie Morris’s stunningly beautiful and closely observed paintings encourage children to revisit them again and again to explore the details and to seek out what she depicts for themselves, whether it's a shiny conker, a starling, a feather or a moorland landscape where the heather grows. This collaboration with nature writer Robert Macfarlane who wrote the poems accompanying the pictures is indeed spellbinding. The act of naming which provoked creation of this book is so significant for our appreciation of nature – helping us to make connections between living things as well as with them.

Ann Lazim is Literature and Library Development Manager at the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education in London.
I Ate Sunshine for Breakfast
Michael Holland and Philip Giordano, Flying Eye, 978-1911171188, £14.99 hbk
This botanical feast is subtitled ‘A Celebration of Plants Around the World’ and is a cornucopia of information about plants and how integral they are to all life on Earth. The text includes a range of activities and experiments that will enable children to find out more about plants for themselves. Included is the Shelf Life Project, an idea developed by the author who is a former Head of Education at Chelsea Physic Garden. In the cheerful collage illustrations bright colours and geometric shapes are used to give form to the world of plants.

How to Help a Hedgehog & Protect a Polar Bear
Jess French and Angela Keoghan, Nosy Crow 978-1788002578, £12.99 hbk
The initial pages are devoted to different habitats, focusing first on those common to the UK – gardens, hedgerows, wetlands, woodlands and coastlines – and moving out to terrains elsewhere in the world such as jungles and savannahs. General information is given about the threats specific to that environment, followed by fact files about species native to that habitat and positive suggestions about what children can do to help.

Old Enough to Save the Planet
Loll Kirby and Adelina Lirius, Magic Cat Publishing, 978-1913520175, £6.99 pbk
This book draws attention to children around the world who are engaged in environmental activism in a variety of ways. In Indonesia, Adeline formed a community group to reintroduce native plant species to help prevent flooding. In Kenya, Eunita is educating local people about the preservation of bees and pollination while, in France, Vincent promotes small scale organic gardening as a means of food production. At the end of the book there are lists of political actions that can be taken to try and effect change as well as those that are more individual everyday commitments. book like this - one that children beg to hear again and again – you’ll know you’ve found something worth treasuring and keeping close.

Wild Child: A Journey through Nature
Dara McAnulty and Barry Falls, Macmillan 978-1529045321, £14.99 hbk
Who better to take children on a journey of discovery than the author of Diary of a Young Naturalist? Dara speaks very directly to child readers, taking them on a personal journey, introducing them to facts and phenomena that fascinate him and encouraging exploration. His love of lore and language as well as his respect for nature shine through in the poetic text which is carefully integrated with the illustrations. The steps on the journey alternate with practical projects but the emotional connection is always present, with Dara concluding I have merely shown you a microcosm of what there is to know about nature, a key to a door.

Busy Spring, Nature Wakes Up
Sean Taylor, Alex Morss and Cinyee Chiu, words & pictures 978-0711255371, £12.99 hbk
A companion volume to Winter Sleep, bringing together again an author of many successful picture books, an independent ecologist and an illustrator whose inspiration comes mostly from nature. As the narrator and her excitable little sister explore their garden with their father at the beginning of spring they discover many things about the wildlife that inhabits it. A number of modern picture books have appendices with factual information supplementing that included in the story and this is a good example, with explanations about what happens to plants and animals in spring and a recognition that climate change is affecting the seasons they

When We Went Wild
Isabella Tree and Allira Tee, Ivy Kids, 978-0711262850, £7.99 pbk
Drawing on the author’s own experience, described in the bestselling Wilding, this picture book tells the story of how a couple go about rewilding the land on their farm, returning it to a more natural environment without chemicals and milking machines. Their neighbours are not happy until they discover the benefits for themselves. From an imprint focusing on sustainability in its publishing and production.
Beyond the Secret Garden:
East Asian Characters in British Children’s Fiction

On the 31 January, the UK government started a new visa programme specifically for Hong Kong residents with a British National Overseas passport or their dependents. The Home Office expect up to 300,000 people to move to Britain over the next five years and seek citizenship in what some are calling the ‘Hong Kong Windrush’. Unlike the Black and Asian immigrants who came to Britain after 1948, however, the new Hong Kong British will be able to see at least some positive representations of people that look like them in British children’s books.

It was not always the case that East Asian people were represented positively—if they were represented at all. The best that one 1907 geography, Thomas Nelson’s *The World and its People*, could say was that the people of Hong Kong were fairly contented under their British rulers (197). East Asian people were rarely represented as existing in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century, and indeed, most British children would have received ideas about East Asian people from pantomimes such as *Aladdin*, versions of which included characters such as Chin Chop (1903 Theatre Royal Nottingham) or Wishee Washee, who first appeared in versions in the 1960s and is still part of some versions of the pantomime today. When a book had a character from Hong Kong or Singapore, as in Bessie Marchant’s boarding school story *Two New Girls* (1927), that character was usually white and British, the daughter of a merchant or soldier in the Empire. This is one reason why Robin Stevens’ character in her *Murder Most Unladylike* series (2014–present), Hazel Wong, drew such attention; for many who had been brought up on the all-white world of boarding school stories, a Hong Kong Chinese character was a revelation. The success of the series perhaps opened the way for other re-visions of the boarding school story written by Black and Asian writers, such as the 2019 *New Class at Malory Towers*, which includes stories by Patrice Lawrence and Narinder Dhami.

Some pre-21st century representations of East Asian characters written by people from East Asian background are linked to the Windrush generation. Meiling Jin, a British Guyanese author who grew up in London and suffered racist abuse in school, published her only children’s book, *The Thieving Summer*, in 1993; the main characters are from Trinidad but their ethnic origins are left vague. Poppie, the main child character, is friends with other people of colour in London; they band together to find a white thief after they are accused of his crimes. The idea of different groups of people of colour being depicted as one community accords with the notion of political blackness, wherein racially minoritised people in Britain were often all labelled ‘black’ by white Britons, and in response banded together as one community to fight such racism. Another text, Grace Nichols’ poetry collection *Poetry Jump-Up: A Collection of Black Poetry* (1988), includes many Asian poets as well as Afro-Caribbean, Indo-Caribbean and African American poets. The collection includes a Vietnamese poet as well – albeit one from the early 16th century, Nguyen Binh Khiem.

However, beginning in the 21st century, British children’s books were increasingly likely to depict East Asian characters whose own or whose family’s origins were more directly linked to East Asian countries. Authors and illustrators/photographers were also more likely to have East Asian origins. Hyechong Chung, author of *K is for Korea* (2008) was born in South Korea. Perhaps as an immigrant looking back to her country of origin, it is unsurprising that her alphabet focuses on mostly traditional aspects of Korean culture rather than the ‘dynamic and vibrant’ modern country that she mentions in her introduction. Anna McQuinn’s *My Friend Amy* has photographic illustration by Irvin Cheung; although set in Britain, the contrast is subtly made between modern, urban Britain and a rural version of Hong Kong. Amy’s grandmother comes from Hong Kong where a farmer’s life is ‘very hard’ but they come to England and ‘started a restaurant and had to work really, really hard’. Both lives are hard, but the prospect of achieving success is only available in Britain.

The interest in books about East Asia goes beyond representation for East Asian British communities, however. Several books on the Kate Greenaway nomination list for 2021 were written by people of East Asian origin, including author of *Starbird*, Sharon King-Chai (born in Australia of Chinese-Malaysian parents and now living in London); Soojin Kwak, author of *A Hat for Mr Mountain* who describes herself as ‘based in Seoul and London’; Chinese illustrator Zhu Cheng-Liang who illustrated Mary Murphy’s *What I Like Most*; and Japanese-born author-illustrator of *Dandelion’s Dream*, Yoko Tanaka. These picture books cover a wide range of genres and moods, but are all searches of one kind or another. From the Starbird’s search for home and safety and the dreamlike search of a lion finding where he belongs to the humorous search for a hat big enough to cover a mountain to the search of a Chinese-British girl for what she likes most, these books do not pin the East Asian (or British East Asian) experience down to a single story. Similarly, but for older readers, Katie and Kevin Tsang’s *Dragon Mountain* depicts two very different Chinese characters – the quiet peacemaker, Ling-Fei, and the brash surfer, Billy Chan. Ling-Fei is from China and Billy, whose father is from Hong Kong, is American. The two must work together with a white Irish boy and a white American girl (who is a jiujitsu champion and a pageant queen) to defeat the Dragon of Death. The Tsangs use Western stereotypes of East Asian people (such as the wise old sage) to provide plot twists, as Billy, Ling-Fei and their friends find out that stereotypes cannot be relied upon when trying to defeat evil; individuals must be appreciated (or avoided) for their own characteristics.

Sue Cheung’s *Chinglish* (2019) and Maisie Chan’s *Danny Chung Does Not Do Maths* (forthcoming) are deserving of closer examination. There are obvious similarities. Both books depict...
extended British Chinese families who run Chinese takeaways in the Midlands. Both are illustrated – Cheung's by herself, Chan's by Anh Cao – and about characters who themselves have artistic ambitions. Both feature South Asian best friends. Both are first person narratives, where the narrator struggles with not having a common language to speak with some family members, and where resulting questions of identity are explored through the narrative.

But the books are also very different. Chinglish is written as the diary of Jo Kwan, beginning in 1984 when Jo is 13 years old and ending in 1987. Kwan's tone is often sardonic – on discovering the name of their new take-away 'Happy Gathering', she writes, 'I will look up the Trade Descriptions Act. I think we may be breaching it' (p16). Kwan's attitude to her parents is in contrast with common Chinese ideas of showing respect to one's elders. But this is contextualized in the story; it emerges that she and her old brother have both been subjected to violence at the hands of their father. Cheung offers a raw, honest account of domestic violence and whilst a number of relevant charities are listed at the end of the book, it may surprise some readers that a content warning is not offered at the start of the book, particularly as the illustrative style is one that we might associate with more light-hearted material. It is important to add that it is stated that Chinglish is based on Cheung's life material. It is a story she has every right to tell, and one that might, as she hopes, help other young people living through similar ordeals.

Chinglish does not conform to model minority myths of British Chinese people. Equally, it is not the positive portrayal of British Chinese family life that is so needed in Britain. However, this is an issue for British children's publishing. Neither Cheung nor any individual writer should have to shoulder the burden of representation of a whole community.

The depictions of racism in the 1980s feel accurate. Currently, interesting questions are being asked amongst YA readers and scholars about how to depict racism without reinforcing it. Does the use of racial slurs in a narrative have a negative impact on readers, irrespective of who is expressing them and how they are responded to? Certainly, it is becoming less common to see racist language used in books where the author takes an antiracist perspective.

At times Jo Kwan appears supremely confident, such as when she writes a letter to the BBC complaining that they have rejected all of her submissions for the Take Hart gallery. At other moments she expresses anxieties about friendships, her future and her appearance. It is the last of these that will likely cause the most concern for some readers. Whilst worries about how one looks are common teenage experience, they can take on an extra dimension for racially minoritised people in racist societies if their features are perceived to be connected to their ancestry. Towards the end of the story, Kwan notes that her eyes 'look pretty too these days' (p341). Two pages later, she expresses concerns that 'Nobody gets me, cos nobody is like me' (p343) but the story ends with her fulfilling her dream by leaving home for fashion college in London. We have a sense that things will work out for Jo Kwan and that her resilience to brutality inside and outside the home has helped her through a tough period in her life.

Maisie Chan's Danny Chung is a younger character and the book reads as if primarily intended for pre-teen readers. As the story begins, we learn that Danny loves art. He loves drawing and creating comics and it is these drawings that illustrate the book throughout. Early in the narrative Danny's father delivers one of his 'Chinese Way' lectures, 'The Chinese Way is hard work. It is about listening and respecting our elders. It is about family and helping each other gain success. We have to work doubly hard in this country.' Shortly after Danny learns that he must share his bedroom with his newly arrived grandmother. His relationship with his Nai Nai forms a core part of story and his perspective shifts; she begins as a 'little old lady from China who looked like my dad'. As Danny becomes more frustrated and embarrassed by her behaviour and the expectation that he helps her to settle in, she becomes 'Ant Gran, Supervillain' in his comic book work.

This eventually changes when Maths becomes their common language. Danny's entry into the school maths competition involves the Fibonacci sequence and the Golden Ratio, combining maths, art, and nature in the form of the Romanesque cauliflowers his grandmother buys at the local grocer. This resolution offers a way of integrating Danny's own desires with external expectations. Chan is clearly interested in the stereotype of Chinese students concerning maths. A class-mate tells Danny 'My mum said all Chinese people are good at maths'. But such stereotypes, can also be internalized; his father also informs him that 'Maths is in our blood remember'. At the close of the book we learn that this is not the whole story; Danny's grandfather had been an artist but had not made enough money from it to send his son to university. Significantly, it is Nai Nai, who supports Danny's artistic ambitions.

As in Chinglish, there are references to racism in the book, but they are more subtle; 'Typical foreigners, coming here taking our bingo seats' says one person when Danny takes Nai Nai to bingo. What are readers to make of these differences in approach? They may be explained by the near forty-year gap in when these two stories take place. Or in the age of the target audience. Or possibly Chan is reluctant to repeat racial slurs used against Chinese people in her story out of concern for the impact on readers. It is our hope that readers encounter both these books at an appropriate age, along with a far broader range of books focusing on British East Asian characters than is currently available.

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K is for Korea, Hyechong Chung, illus Prodeepta Das, Frances Lincoln Books, 978-1847801333, £6.99 pbk
Starbird, Sharon King-Chai, Two Hoots, 978-1509899562, £12.99 hbk
A Hat for Mr Mountain, Soojin Kwak, Two Hoots, 978-1529012873, £6.99 pbk
What I Like Most, Mary Murphy, illus Zhu Cheng-Liang, Walker Books, 978-1406369045, £12.99 hbk
Dandelion’s Dream, Yoko Tanaka, Walker Books, 978-1406388770, £12.99 hbk
My Friend Amy, Anna McQuinn, Alanna Books, 978-0955199837, £11.99 hbk

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).

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 Bookye, of What Is Masculinity? Why Does It Matter? And Other Big Questions. He tweets at @rapclassroom.
**Drawn Across Borders**

**George Butler** is a journalist and artist specialising in current affairs and travel. Between 2011 and 2018, he travelled to a dozen locations where people have been forced by circumstances beyond their control to leave their homes, documenting in words and pictures the individuals and environments he encountered. The result is a moving collection of histories illustrated with his own pen-and-ink and watercolor images, *Drawn Across Borders*. He answers our questions on the creation of the book.

**Can you describe the role of a reportage illustrator? How would you describe your own approach in particular?**

Reportage – photographic or illustrative tells a story, it should communicate an idea, empathise and relate the viewer to the audience. My approach is to spend time in a place, often returning multiple times, sometimes a year apart. I try to use drawing as a ‘handshake’ as the artist Paul Hogarth once said. Then I have an excuse for being there, and as I draw, I’m learning about what I am seeing. In a way you are seeing my notes from class. I’m trying to show, not just tell the audience what is happening. Habits, characters and scenes; it’s the stories of the people and places that come from this process that I try and do justice to.

**What media do you use when working on location? How do you choose your locations and what is it like working under pressure?**

I use pen, ink and watercolour. It’s immediate, it’s fast and it appears on the page like a magic trick and that is a powerful tool when you don’t speak the language of the place you are in. My theory is that if you can sit down and make a drawing for forty-five minutes, then you should be in a place that is safe. Of course it doesn’t always work out like that and getting to that place can be dangerous and difficult. To be accurate quickly I have to have practiced enough that I don’t feel intimidated by a big white sheet of paper. However, being brave, not using pencil and not rubbing anything out can cut those corners too. Speaking to people makes me commit to making the drawing good, the pressure of having to do right by them really focuses my mind. I once sat with a group of men supporting the uprising on the Syrian/Turkish border, they thought I was a spy and asked me to draw one of them to prove I wasn’t! Which I did – very badly. In a way these drawings are a reaction to immediate things that happen.
What was the hardest thing to draw in Drawn Across Borders?

At a field hospital inside Syria near the border with Turkey I drew a little boy on a children’s ward, called Bassam. He was ten and had lost his right leg, his mother and his brother a couple of days before in an air strike. When I met him he was lying in hospital with his father Abid crying at his feet. He said to me ‘Art cannot change anything,’ and in this moment I believed him. My instinct was to leave without finishing the drawing, but another man in the corner said passionately, ‘These are the scenes that the world should see. They are important to show the people what is going on here.’ War photographers often talk about hiding behind their cameras. I did the same behind my drawing board that day. The process of drawing became a way of hiding from the scene, and at the same time a prism for my brain to comprehend it, to make it safe on a page so I can remember the moment without being horrified.

Do you think illustration can be more truthful than a photograph?

We live in an increasingly interconnected world but run the risk of having a far shallower understanding of it. If you agree that the way in which we receive our news is now flawed, or ‘fake’, perhaps headlines are written for effect, perhaps paid content is disguised as news, or photographs manipulated to shock then it’s not a stretch to suggest that a drawing, done from life, on location with the permission of those in the image can be an equally accurate description of that time and a place.

How do you think illustrators can contribute to the discussion surrounding the refugee crisis and other issues?

By highlighting the personal, the vulnerable, the human and the ordinary with a language that we all speak. But I don’t think an illustrator’s contribution is specific to this crisis. I think illustration as an industry, (and I don’t mean the individuals, but as a body), has forgotten its ability to communicate to people of all ages. And should be striving to do so outside of the more obvious avenues children’s books, cards and place mats. There is an opportunity here to use the tried and tested, ancient and evolved formula of putting pen to page to communicate in a way that transcends language. What could be more powerful?

Can you describe walking across the border into Syria in August 2012 and drawing in the town of Azaz in Northern Syria and what you saw there?

In August 2012 I walked across the border from Turkey to Syria on my own expecting to find an exodus of people trying to get away but the border was empty. I was picked up by the Free Syrian Army and driven past bullet-ridden buildings, olive groves damaged by tanks and a petrol station caught in crossfire. When we arrived in Azaz, my translator and an English student from Aleppo University explained how thousands of people had fled this small town when the fighting broke out to villages in the countryside expecting to be able to return to their homes. I drew children playing on a burnt-out government tank, one of them wearing a New Look top. The fighting had finished here 10 days earlier and would soon start again, but in meantime the few residents left were trying to fathom what had ripped through their homes. Were there shops still available? Had their cars been damaged? I found a scanner in the nearest Turkish town a day later and sent the image of children playing on the tank back to the Guardian G2.

What do you hope people will take away from Drawn Across Borders?

People move around the world for many reasons. Some migration is voluntary; most is not. People move for love, work, security, war, food and family. They have done for hundreds of thousands of years and still do. It runs deep in the human condition, but it’s an intricate and difficult subject for anyone to comprehend. I hope this book can offer a glimpse into some of the reasons people have for leaving behind places they once called home, places they still call home. What is clear to me as we begin a new decade – as the population increases, resources remain limited and climate pressure mounts – is that migration will vastly alter the future of the world and our species. Only by understanding individual cases better can we properly respond to migration as a whole. I hope these drawings are human straightforward and unthreatening, that they connect the viewer to that subject through a sensitive and handmade line; an imagined connection that can relate one person to another who otherwise would never have crossed paths. I hope I’ve done justice to the people I met who sat for long enough for me to draw them and told me their personal stories. I hope the images do the honesty of their words justice.

Drawn Across Borders is published by Walker Studio, 978-1406392166, £15.00 hbk.
Em Norry chooses an intensely poetic, lyrical, vivid novel by David Almond

What a difficult question! But, if I had to choose one book that altered how I thought about children’s fiction, then I choose the first David Almond book I read: A Song for Ella Grey. David’s writing is always exquisite, but this is intensely poetic, lyrical, vivid, mysterious, and slightly confusing – exactly how it felt being a teenager. It’s beautifully romantic without being sentimental too. It’s a modern retelling of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. A story which hooked me as a child, even though I didn’t quite ‘get it’. A bereaved musician travels to the underworld to revive his dead wife but loses her again – I remember literally yelling out loud, ‘Don’t look back!’ It’s about the importance of trust, a vital theme. I can’t articulate how gorgeous this book is without quoting. ‘You’ve got all these weird forces in you, but you feel unsatisfied, empty, unfinished. You feel like everything that matters is a million miles and a million years away, and yes it might come to you but no it bliddy mightn’t. It’ll be like an unreachable constellation of the stars. And nothing will happen, ever. And you’ll never be anything, ever.’ Magic, right?

The Sun is also a Star

This book is perfect for people who love coincidence and fate. As a quick summary of the book (without too many spoilers) it is about a girl called Natasha, who is about to be deported to Jamaica that day and a boy called Daniel, who is sick of living up to his parents’ expectations. They meet on a New York street; they instantly forget about their lives and fall in love, the only difficulty is that Natasha may be leaving that evening! I would give this book a five out five heart rating because I loved it so much. It is a classic cliché romance. Hannah, year 10

Throne of Glass
Sarah J. Maas, Bloomsbury, 78-1408532332, £8.99 pbk.

Throne of Glass is a fantasy story about the renowned assassin Céleanna Sardothien who is given the chance to regain her freedom from a slave camp but to do so she must work to overcome her past. This book is the first in a series of eight. I would recommend reading all the books in the series because then you learn more about the characters and story. However, the books are 300+ pages long so probably more for the avid reader. I love the way the author has written the book and as the books go on through the series more of the characters are introduced. Throughout the plot there are lots of twists and turns that make it the perfect amount of thrill and excitement but not too complicated. Overall, I think that they are a great read for young adults and teenagers who enjoy plenty of action with a touch of romance. Neve, year 9

Hunger Games: Mockingjay
Suzanne Collins, Scholastic, 978-1407132105, £7.99 pbk.

This is the book that I had to force myself to take breaks from as the intensity and story completely captured me. There’s a new vulnerability exposed for every character in this book, while we’re directed through a very real account of what life in a war like this would entail. After the spark in Catching Fire, there comes the full-blown fire which we see many people are unprepared for or were unaware of the horrors they would have to face. With lots of unexpected moments it brings a magnificent ending to the trilogy. Grace, year 11

Jemima Small Versus the Universe
Tamsin Winter, Usborne, 978-1474927284, £7.99 pbk.

Jemima Small Versus the Universe is a truly inspirational book about a girl who is bullied for her size which makes her feel conscious about her appearance. This book encourages you to follow your dreams and not let other people tell you who you are or what you can do. I really like this book because it is relatable and the positive message is great for motivation. Overall, it is a great read for people of all ages from year 6 upwards but also for people that love adventure and motivational stories. Hannah, year 10
Telling the Story of Chernobyl

In her graphic novel *The Lost Child of Chernobyl*, Helen Bate invents a child brought up by wolves in the woods. But it tells the real story of the global environmental disaster at Chernobyl in April 1986. Helen explains the inspiration for the book and how she approached the subject.

The events of April 1986 changed the world for ever. When the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl in Ukraine exploded, national boundaries were no protection from the resulting radioactive cloud. The winds blew it north and west, over many European countries including Belarus, Austria, Hungary and Germany. It travelled as far as Sweden and the UK, causing problems in some areas that will last for hundreds of years. Even in parts of the UK, farmers lived with restrictions on the movement of livestock until 2012.

I was a young mother in 1986. My sister lived in Austria with her two young boys. The explosion at Chernobyl affected them immediately, with sandpits being emptied in public playparks and children not being allowed to play outside for weeks. Many governments had real concerns about the long-term impact of the fallout across Europe and people were frightened.

Twenty years later I had some involvement with a local children’s charity bringing children who had serious health problems from Belarus to the UK for recuperative holidays. My daughter travelled to Minsk with the charity to make a fundraising film that highlighted the on-going health problems the children in Belarus face as a result of the contamination. It was Belarus and Ukraine that suffered the worst of the contamination, and the stories of the disaster and its aftermath have been a lesson to the world. But today, many children are unaware of Chernobyl and what happened there.

As a children’s writer and illustrator, I try to provide children with an understanding of important events from modern history, and difficult social issues that have relevance to their life today. I believe it allows them to see their world in more context. Seeing that many people have overcome terrible adversity, that life continues and is appropriate.

The traumatic history of the Ukraine was another aspect of history that I felt important to suggest in the story. The reason many women refused to leave the forbidden zone was their past experiences of famine and war. In their eyes no invisible radiation could be as bad as that and I wanted Anna and Klara to be survivors. Anyone reading the histories of Ukrainian children in the 1932-3 Holodomor famine or during World War Two, wouldn’t fail to understand why these old women were unafraid of the radiation, preferring to stay where they had a home, land and water, however polluted. Although these traumatic stories aren’t age appropriate for primary age children, the suggestion of something terrible in Klara and Anna’s past contributes to understanding their sense of acceptance of life in the ‘forbidden zone’.

The lasting message of the book, aims to be that we all need to change our attitude to the natural world. Despite the events at Chernobyl making the land unfit for human habitation, the natural world still evolves and recovers. Although there have been changes in the flora and fauna in the most heavily contaminated areas, the natural world will always adapt and survive. The survival of the human population however, depends on changing the way we live and this is the one most important lesson that I hope comes through in the book, and that we all need to learn.

In *The Lost Child of Chernobyl*, I wanted to write a story based heavily in fact. Since watching a wonderful documentary *The Babushkas of Chernobyl* by Holly Morris and Anne Bogart I’ve been fascinated by the stories of the older women who continued to live (and die) in the forbidden zone. Basing my story around the experiences of Klara and Anna, two fictional sisters who stay behind, allowed me to portray the actual events that took place from their perspective. The book *Voices from Chernobyl* written in 1997 by the 2015 Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich, was another fantastic resource with many first-hand stories of what took place after the explosion and crucially, how people felt about their situation.

But how to bring a child into the story? There was no child lost in the forest that night, (as far as I’m aware), but there are many families who have lost children to thyroid cancer as a direct result of the fallout. However, I strongly believe that these stories of personal loss belong only to those children and their surviving families.

I felt that the child in my story should be a mythical child, one that would represent all the children that live in our damaged planet today. For inspiration I looked to the true stories of feral children that have lived with wolves and dogs. The fact that the child in my story never really develops language, and retains a sense of ‘otherness’ is something that’s taken from these true stories. Because the child is also never identified as male or female, it hopefully adds to this sense that they represent childhood itself. This gender-neutral writing was tricky, but a very interesting challenge to undertake.

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*The Lost Child of Chernobyl*, written and illustrated by Helen Bate is published by Otter-Barry Books, £12.99 hbk.
Libraries in Lockdown

Secondary school librarian Kristabelle Williams describes how she’s kept her library open to staff and students throughout the last year, and demonstrates the positive impact of a well-funded and professionally staffed school library on students’ achievement.

Teachers and support staff have been working hard in schools to deliver education and care for students whether onsite or remotely throughout the pandemic, and school librarians have continued to run, innovate and adapt services alongside this in what have been challenging circumstances.

When our school moved to partial opening in March 2020, I commenced working from home, due to being 'at-risk'. Consultant Sarah Pavey circulated a list of things to do if your library is closed which was helpful for many librarians whether making a case for working from home or against redeployment, or needing some anchoring guidance in the early days of the crisis.

I immediately set up an e-resources database, divided by curriculum subject, to support staff and students with remote planning, teaching and learning. We already subscribed to several, but many were opening up to free temporary access during the lockdown. I took out trials with online library providers to give our students e-book and audiobook access. Our local library provided temporary online account registration so their e-resources could be used without having to visit a library to collect a card. I promoted this to staff, students, parents and carers and created Padlets of reading lists with direct links.

Microsoft’s presentation app Sway was a great way to share this kind of information along with library news and communications; I created a weekly digital magazine with embedded author videos, book lists, links to articles, extracts and book awards, and free e-books and audiobooks. We promoted everything from the webcast of the stage show of Alex Wheatle’s _Crongton Knights_ to Premier League football quizzes, from online book festivals such as Everywhere Book Fest to challenges such as the 100 Great Black Britons schools’ competition. It was important that most of what was promoted to students was free to access; a comics special issue was the most popular, with links to free webcomics and graphic novels in Spanish, Shakespeare adaptations, superhero comics from Nigeria (check out Comic Republic), stories about refugee and migrant experiences, and character drawing guides.

My weekly library lessons with Key Stage 3 classes moved online; through Show My Homework I set reading activities, news articles, quizzes and _Accelerated Reader_ challenges. It also provided a way to communicate with students in all year groups to encourage and support them with remote learning and reading.

Copyright relaxations and exemptions from children’s books publishers allowed me to record and share short stories, and I started a ‘Book At Breaktime’ series of audio read-alouds for students to listen to. I also kept teachers informed of copyright issues, extensions and digital textbook access from the Copyright Licensing Agency.

When schools moved to wider reopening in September, I used the Covid-19 Guidance for School Libraries from the CILIP SLG and the SLA along with evidence from the REALM project to plan a ‘Click and Collect’ style library book delivery service in school. After working with my highly supportive management team to risk assess the process we designed a system that enables students to borrow physical library books whilst staying in their ‘bubbles’ and for myself to work safely on site using PPE where needed.

Students use the online library catalogue to browse the collection, then use Microsoft Forms, email or in person requests via form or class to reserve books. As the orders come in, books are labelled with a name and form on a bookmark then added to the form’s basket which is set up in the library. These baskets are then delivered to form rooms every week before school. This has enabled many teachers to engage more with students’ reading. Book return boxes are placed around the school which contain internal plastic boxes which can be lidded when collected at the end of the week, quarantined for the following week, and then finally opened and shelved again.

Our library is vital for access to books, but book ownership is equally important for our students. Whether young people read or not is often due to cost, access and content, and cannot be understood in isolation from structural inequalities such as socioeconomic deprivation and racism, the past decade of real terms cuts to school funding and national literacy programmes, and the closure of nearly 1/5th of local libraries. In a pandemic where the public faces further unemployment and child poverty crises, book gifting has, is and will continue to be an important part of what our school does.

We included books in our food and care packages which our staff were delivering to families during lockdown and I ran the book gifting programme _Bookbuzz_ to Year 7s & 8s in the Autumn Term by tuning remotely into reading classes I co-ran with teachers to ‘Book Talk’ the titles, share videos and extracts. The Free Books Campaign is also helping fight these inequalities; in November I contacted founder Sofia Akel, who selected and packed boxes of...
beautiful brand, new books by authors of colour for us to collect. We then set up an online ‘free bookshop’ where students were able to read about and pick which title they would like to be gifted. I am planning to turn our ‘free bookshop’ into a permanent service for our students.

My experience with Teams classes meant that when we moved into partial closure again in January, I was ready to deliver weekly live lessons remotely. In these I discuss books, share ‘virtual’ classrooms made with Canva, promote our library apps, show author videos, run Accelerated Reader, and run sessions on dealing with ‘Fake News’ using Mike Caulfield’s SIFT method. I’ve used MS Stream to record video readalouds and ‘How To’ videos to promote titles and English GCSE texts; and run Manga Club and Book Clubs online on Teams using Nearpod, Kahoot and Microsoft Forms for quizzes, surveys and polls. Having a segment on our school’s ‘Lockdown Laughter’ podcast to talk about new book releases has been fun too.

Zoom meetings and CPD have also been important. Lewisham school librarians continued to meet online to shortlist books for our Lewisham Book Awards but also offer mutual support; the SLA and NEU Librarians Network have run webinars on new ways of working during Coronavirus. Some of the key texts I’ve read and recommend during this period have been Zoey Dixon’s article in Books for Keeps ‘How to be an anti-racist librarian’ along with Phil Beadle’s book What is Cultural Capital? and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas’s book The Dark Fantastic.

Now that we’re return to wider opening, our click and collect service will resume and I will continue to co-run Teams classes and clubs. I feel confident that many of the things I have implemented during the pandemic can, post crisis, be continued and built upon.

My experience is not necessarily the same as other school librarians; some have been running services as close to usual, or supervising students on site during partial opening; others have been redeployed into different roles; some have been furloughed; and some worryingly have had roles downgraded or been made redundant. The positive impact of a well-funded and professionally staffed school library on students’ achievement, reading for pleasure, information literacy, access to knowledge and self-esteem is evidenced; if we are serious about supporting children’s education and wellbeing after the pandemic, then they must be valued and prioritised.

Kristabelle Williams is a secondary school Librarian at Addey and Stanhope School in Deptford, in the London Borough of Lewisham, where she is also an NEU Health & Safety rep. She has worked in school libraries for seven years and previously worked in public libraries. Kristabelle is currently an Honour Listee for the SLA’s School Librarian of the Year Award. You can follow her on twitter @ LibThroughThis and the library @addeyslibrary.

### Obituary: Victor Ambrus

**19 August 1935 – 10 February 2021**

Nicholas Tucker pays tribute to Victor Ambrus, who has died aged 85.

László Győző (‘Victor’) Ambrus survived a perilous time in his youth before becoming a prolific and hugely successful illustrator. Born in Hungary in 1935, during his third year at the Budapest Academy of Fine Arts he and some fellow students were part of the resistance during the 1956 uprising. Under returning fire from Russian soldiers, eight of them were shot after enabling others to escape. Wading through heavy snow to the Austrian border, he finally decided to come to England. Speaking no English, he arrived at Crookham Army camp just before Christmas. He then enrolled at Farnham Art School, later transferring to the Royal College of Art where he studied engraving and lithography. There he met his future wife Glenys Chapman, also to become a noted illustrator. The couple had two sons.

Already familiar with classic British illustrators, Ambrus followed on in a tradition combining a fine line with strongly atmospheric detail. Early on he illustrated stories by Hester Burton and K.M. Peyton, both published by Oxford University Press with whom went on to have a lifetime association. A fine horseman, winning two rosettes for show-jumping, he once rode a lively steed around a field, slashing with a sword taken from his own growing collection of weaponry. This was in order to get a better idea about what charging into battle was like.

In 1965 he won the Kate Greenaway Medal for Three Poor Tailors. Based on a Hungarian folk tale, Ambrus was now supplying his own texts and alternating between black and white line drawings and full colour. He won the Medal again in 1975 for two books, Mishka, about a boy who runs away to the circus and becomes an expert violinist, and Horses in Battle. This last title drew on childhood memories of the wild horses he used to see driven out each morning during his summer holidays in the Hungarian countryside. Based on true stories about cavalry horses and their close links with the men riding them, this was history brought thrillingly to new life.

He also appeared for over twenty years on Channel 4’s Archaeology series Time Team. Here he would visualise and then draw how the various sites being excavated might have looked in their prime along with pictures of those who may also have been around at the time. Equally at home with primitive man or British nobles, his ability to create instant personalities on the page was extraordinary. Lecturing at Farnham, Guildford and Epsom Colleges of Art for over twenty years, he was an outstanding teacher. There were also six stamps designed for the Royal Mail, celebrating the 200th anniversary of the birth of Hans Andersen.

Neatly dressed, courteous, unfailingly benign and with a quiet but mischievous sense of humour, Ambrose was universally popular with everyone he worked with. Speaking with barely a trace of accent and eloquent both in writing as well as in his wonderfully vivid use of watercolour, his contribution to illustration over the years was immense.
Ed’s Choice

No! Said Rabbit

Marjoke Henricks, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 9781912650248, £12.99 hbk
Rabbit has an answer to all Mum’s suggestions from time to get up until bath time – ‘No!’ But even a little rabbit can sometimes say ‘Yes’ when the prize is as special as a cuddle from Mum.

Pitching a picture book at the very youngest is not easy; getting language and the visual impact all have to be right. They do not have to be simplistic nor necessarily brightly coloured. In this her debut picture book, Marjoke Henricks strikes all the right notes. The situation is one that both the very young and the parent will recognise. That moment when the child begins to exert independence, unwilling to do what others want, determined to take action on their own account – the default answer to any suggestion, demand or question “No”. However, there is always the possibility of a ‘yes’ without losing face. Marjoke Henricks’ success lies in the way she really does address the child rather than the adult. The text is minimal and repetitious, a dialogue that will be recognisable in real life, the activities everyday, as are the responses. His images are uncluttered and bold making full use of the whole page. Clear outlines and textured crayon ensure the visual language is interesting and immediate without being overwhelming. Rabbit, while clearly a rabbit, is also that child reading the book. His chunky body neatly dressed in his favourite top and trousers with pockets dominates the pages, the centre of attention. His activities are just what one would expect and a child can understand – whether getting dressed (a bit of a struggle) to splashing in puddles, kicking a ball and finally enjoying that bath he didn’t want to have. This is a picture book that really does work.

 Slug in Love

Rachel Bright, illus Nadia Shireen, Simon and Schuster, 32pp, 978-1471188619, £12.99 hbk
Meet Doug. Doug is a slug, who needs a hug. We can all identify with that right now. Emerging from a discarded ice-cream carton, stickily and a little mucky around the chops, but with an endearing smile, Doug is surely irresistible. Apparently not. No-one wants to give him a hug, not the ant, caterpillar, worm or spider. On plods Doug along. And then he meets Gail, a snail, also icky, mucky, yucky and sticky. Surely they’ll make a perfect couple. But that’s not how love works – there’s no magic potion of course. What Doug really wants is a cuddle from Mum.

Meet Gail, also a snail. “I’m different. I’m just like you. I have a mucky, yucky bottom.” So things change as a result.

Rosa’s puts a friendly face to an important issue. The book skilfully explains one of the major problems facing the world in a way that young children can understand, while offering hope and a positive message about joint action. Helen Shoesmith’s illustrations are very appealing and readers will enjoy spotting all the birds, animals and minibeasts they contain. A final page of text contains suggestions for things children can do right now to improve their own local environment for wildlife.
**Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant continued**

**Just like you**

Jo Loring-Fisher, Otter-Barry Books, 32pp, 9781913074814, £12.99 hbk

In this charming picture book, a girl points at her two eyes, her nose, and we follow the pages through, all the way down to one bottom, two knees and two feet – and then she says that, ‘My feet can take me a long, long way’ next to her mother who has her head covered, and that her feet can run very fast. Sometimes she’s happy, sometimes she’s sad; she loves cuddles with Mum and her baby brother or sister, and feeling safe and warm – and then we see where she sleeps, living out of a suitcase with cooking pots and bowls on the floor. The final double-page spread shows that she lives in a temporary shelter in a child’s mood – bouncing long in rhyming text by Jacky Davis captures the girl is a very solid creation who will textured look, covering whole pages printing techniques to create a softly of watercolours have been married to picture book perfectly. A pastel palette capture the moods in this gentle way’ next to her mother who has her head covered, and that her feet can run very fast. Sometimes she’s happy, sometimes she’s sad; she loves cuddles with Mum and her baby brother or sister, and feeling safe and warm – and then we see where she sleeps, living out of a suitcase with cooking pots and bowls on the floor. The final double-page spread shows that she lives in a temporary shelter in a child’s mood – bouncing long in rhyming text by Jacky Davis captures the girl is a very solid creation who will textured look, covering whole pages printing techniques to create a softly of watercolours have been married to picture book perfectly. A pastel palette capture the moods in this gentle

**Grandpa’s Gift**

Fiona Lumbers, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 978 1 4711 6565 5, 24pp, £12.99, hbk

A little boy has recently arrived in the city. Although his grandpa’s unexpected visit, the move are not explained, it is clear he misses the space and freedom of the home he has left behind. His grandpa takes him for a walk to a dusty old junk shop full of unwanted objects. They find interesting things to show each other; the boy a telescope and grandpa what appears an interesting grey stone, his grandson is not impressed. But when opened, something beautiful and magical is revealed. Changed by this experience the young boy becomes more aware of beauty in the world around him – a flower poking through the paving slab, a bird around his feet. He imagines what might lie under the ground. Eventually his journey of discovery leads him to a wonderful playground and a new friend. After initial doubts, he begins to feel there may be lots to look forward to in life in his new home after all.

**Sunny-side Up**

Jacky Davis. Illustrated by Fiona Woodcock, Greenwillow Books, 40pp, 9780062573070, £12.99 hbk

What can you do when the weather is grey and the rain is falling – especially if you are a lively child who wants to be outside? Well you might find a nest on the sofa – build a great tower of blocks – create a hidey hole where you can draw or imaginatively cook ... all of these are brilliant suggestions filling in the hours until Mum comes home and yes, the clouds clear; time to go out.

Fiona Woodcock’s illustrations capture the moods in this gentle picture book perfectly. A paucity palette of watercolours have been married to printing techniques to create a soft textured look, covering whole pages with tones that exactly mirror the emotions of the moment. However these are not impressionist images. Clear pencil outlines ensure the little girl is a very solid creation who will engage the young reader in these very recognisable activities. The gently rhyming text by Jacky Davis captures the young boy with longing in anticipation of the beginning of the day, dripping with the rain and spiky with disappointment before settling into enthusiastic play. Excellent design adds to the visual appeal of the whole book. The moods are consistent throughout and the rich, vivid imagery is suffused full of textured surfaces. Grandpa’s Gift is a perfect read-aloud book to read with young children. There are a number of children’s books on the theme of loss of a loved one, but this is the only one to date that has included a new partner in the family.

**Wolf Girl**

Written and ill. Jo Loring-Fisher, Frances Lincoln Children’s (First Editions) 32pp, 978-0-7112-4956-1, £12.99 hbk

A little girl often finds a refuge in imaginative worlds, and time spent in those faraway places may help them when they come back home.

So it is with Sophy, School is a place of isolation and anxiety, but in her city flat she has made a wolf den. Beneath a blanket, by lamplight, Sophy wears her wolf suit and imagines that she is fierce and fast and strong.

One morning, Sophy wears her suit for school. Surely everyone will like it and want to be her friend? But Sophy still can’t find the courage to talk to anyone, and the other children laugh at her. Back home, she hides in her den and cries - and as she does so, something extraordinary happens.

Her den becomes the “silent, snowy den”, Sophy imagines what might lie under the ground. Eventually her journey of discovery leads him to a wonderful playground and a new friend. After initial doubts, he begins to feel there may be lots to look forward to in life in his new home after all.

A gentle, beautifully illustrated picturebook with an uplifting story about not jumping to conclusions and helping young audiences connect, and children who find ambiguity challenging will be pleased by the way Jo Loring-Fisher handles the dream element. Others may find this aspect disappointing, and feel that the text doesn’t quite match the lyrical charm of her artwork. And it’s Loring-Fisher’s artwork that elevates this story and transforms it. Landscape and mood are evoked with such skill and sensitivity that we can feel the chill of this new forest and the warmth of Sophie’s interactions with the animals. Grey city playgrounds, caves filled with leaf-litter and luminous可能有误

**The Lipstick**

Laura Dockrill, ill. Maria Karipidou, Walker Books, 40pp, 978 1 4063 8955 5, £12.99 hbk

Experimental mark making is an important part of young children’s development. They’re never a good idea to leave such things as your bright pink lipstick lying around at home like the mother of the small character in this story. Not content with trying it out on his lips, he decides to take the lipstick ‘for a little walk’. Something of a euphemism as it turns out, for it isn’t long before the odd daub has become an entire graffiti covered house, both upstairs and down, as the little boy has his best ever day. ‘I let the lipstick take charge,’ he tells readers.

Oddly, said child has been left completely unsupervised (apart from the parent reading the book) and thus his doodles multiply in parallel with his mounting enthusiasm as all the other family members are busily engaged in various parts of the house.

But all good things … and eventually did wear out, not just the lipstick but pink lipsticked. Definitely a case of artistic expression that’s got just a tad out of hand and it’s brilliantly done both verbally and visually. Maria Karipidou’s illustrations are an absolute hoot showing the young narrator getting into flow state - this is how we celebrate.

**Uncle Bobby’s Wedding**

Written by Sarah S. Brannen, ill. Lucia Soto, Hodder, 32pp, 978-1-444-96093-8, £12.99 hbk

Chloe has a very special relationship with her Uncle Bobby. He takes her rowing, teaches her the names of the birds, and makes her feel like she’s having a blast. When Bobby announces his engagement to Jamie at a family picnic, Chloe feels left out. Everyone else is celebrating, but Bobby is his special uncle, and Chloe doesn’t want their relationship to change.

‘Why is Uncle Bobby getting married?’ she asks her mum. ‘When grown-up people love each other that much, sometimes they get married’, Mum replies, and suggests that Chloe can still have fun with Bobby and Jamie. Chloe discovers that time spent with both of them is even better than time alone with Bobby, ‘I wish both of you were my uncles,’ she says, and of course, her wish comes true. Chloe is a flower girl at the ‘best wedding ever’, and teaches the family and the celebrations begin.

Packed with action and emotion, Lucia Soto’s brightly-coloured artwork brings a contemporary buzz to an LGBTQ+ classic first published in the USA in 2008 with illustrations by the author, and subsequently reworked for this completely new edition. Instead of the anthropomorphised guineapigs of the original, Soto gives us an exuberant and expressive cast of visibly diverse characters who draw us to the heart of their story about love and family, and how we celebrate. Chloe’s uncertainty about her uncle’s wedding will strike a chord with children worried by change, and it’s her fear that she will lose a favourite uncle to another relationship that drives this story, not the nature of that relationship. As Sarah Brannen says on mombian.com, “the whole point of the book is that the wedding of Bobby and his boyfriend Jamie is just part of the fabric of a family. Except for a couple of pronouns, the story would be identical if Bobby was married to a woman.”

This beautiful, heartwarming and important celebration of love and family reassures children that change is possible, and it’s OK to feel things to say, and it says them kindly, in a way that will resonate with children who are dealing with shyness and need to work out how to live with it. As with Sophy, change may be necessary, but this doesn’t mean we do not love each other or our families. Bobby’s wedding allows us to explore new versions of ourselves, and books like this support and illuminate such journeys.

It’s the beautifully drawn double-page spreads continue the visual story of Sophie’s friendship with the “owlish little boy”, and there’s a special bonus in the back of the book; a case of pink lipsticked revealing a gorgeous snowscape glowing in the sunshine - just like the pattern on Sophie’s (magic?) lamphshade.

CFH
Milo Imagines the World

Matt de la Pena, Christian Robinson, Two Hoots, 32pp, 978-1-529066319, £12.99 hbk

What begins as a slow, distant grow grows and grows/ into a tamed train that clatters down the tracks.

Milo and his big sister board the train and their journey begins. Milo, small, bespectacled, feet dangling in mid-air, is a ‘shock-up sod’, as he usually is on these monthly Sunday train rides and his sister is the same, ‘Excitement stacked on top of worry/ on top of confusion/ on top of love.’

To stay calm, Milo observes his fellow passengers, imagining their lives and drawing scenes in his sketchbook. The whiskered man next to him he depicts going home to a flat empty but for ‘mewing cats and burrowing rats’, sipping ‘trepid soup’ on his own. When a young boy in spotless white Nikes gets on with his father, Milo imagines him in a castle with a butler and maids to serve him lunch.

When they get their stop, Milo is surprised to see the boy in the Nikes getting off too; they’re both going to the same place. As they go through the metal detector at the women’s prison, Milo realises you can’t really know anyone just by looking at their face and imagines the pictures he’s drawn, giving the people happier faces. At the end of the book, everyone will want to go back, look at them again and imagine for themselves the lives they could be living.

Milo’s story too will open up another world of wonder and understanding and the experiences of a child with a parent in prison are depicted with huge skill and insight.

Milo’s story too will open up another world of wonder and understanding and the experiences of a child with a parent in prison are depicted with huge skill and insight. Matt de la Pena’s text is concise but lyrical and Christian Robinson’s illustrations detailed, immediate but full of space for readers to infill. An exceptional picture book.

What Did the Tree See?

Charlotte Guillan, ill. Sam Usher, Welbeck Children’s, 32pp, 978-191351-901-8, £12.99 hbk

10p from each sale of this book goes to the National Forest, which is right in the heart of this country, embracing 200 miles of former industrial areas in the Midlands, covering Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Staffordshire, and aiming to link the two ancient forests in the Midlands, covering Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Staffordshire, and aiming to link the two ancient forests of Charnwood and Needwood. (www.nationalforest.org). The organization aims to link the two ancient forests in the Midlands, covering Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Staffordshire, and aiming to link the two ancient forests of Charnwood and Needwood.

What is something tiny trying to get Sophia’s attention, a something so small that it takes quite a lot of looking to find him. He’s been on her desk all along, waiting for an opportunity to give his side of the story: ‘I know that I’m small and I haven’t got style. I can’t do magic or give a dazzling smile. But I try to be brave and try to be bold. Doesn’t my story deserve to be told?’ And so Sophia begins to write. The rhythm couplets as well as the brilliantly psychedellic procession of animals will appeal, and the thought that the most interesting ideas come in small packages is an unusual one for children’s books – as is a feast ES

My Sneeze Are Perfect


The main interest in this collection is that it is written jointly by an adult, Rashkana Rizwan, and her six-year-old son, Yusuf Samee. The poems, all in Yusuf’s voice, are in free verse, so rely on the concept of their language and their imaginations to describe rather than the more obvious characteristics of wordplay, rhyme or rhythm. In one sense they are a record of Yusuf’s world and his perceptions, how he views the world, and his concerns. In another sense they describe something of his emotional biography as mediated by the adult poet, but they are also, inevitably, an unacknowledged record of how she perceives Yusuf’s life and interests. There is a range of preoccupations here: from Yusuf’s distaste of bananas to the singular ‘discovery’ of a brass ‘ink pen’; from Yusuf’s desire to be a ‘brave’ footballer to how he perceives his family. Perhaps no other children’s book has as much to say about Yusuf and how he sees the world; a further problem being that the hairdresser brings a rather
noisy baby! Chaos reigns supreme! Poor, cross Billy can’t stand all the noise and leaves his house on the hill to find another hill where he can be alone. He begins to think about all that has happened and decides to go home again, and when he gets there, chaos continues; but there is an answer for each of the problems, and soon everyone is able to leave. Billy is relieved and still loves to live on the hill. He is basically a happy loner, but has also learned that people and animals can be fun too – in carefully controlled circumstances! The rhymes and the clever and funny illustrations are wonderful entertainment, and the whole is an excellent romp. ES

Howl

Kat Patrick, illus by Evie Barrow, Scribble, 32pp, 9781912854905, £11.99 hbk

Have you ever had one of those days when nothing is right – even the sun is too bright, your spaghetti too long and the pyjamas are wrong? That is the day Maggie has had. And then her two front teeth fall out – it is too much. Maggie thinks wofilsh thoughts, but how can she really release those feelings? It is Mum who shows her – because even Mums need to howl sometimes. As wolves Maggie and Mum are able to let go – until it is time to go back to bed as Maggie.

In this picture book Kat Patrick, shortlisted for the CLA award where she tried to lay her egg. She gets annoyed, as she likes to challenge him every morning by ‘who she likes best’ and Dolly gets very excited. The little boy ‘who she likes best’ and Dolly also gives the cub ‘a pair of plastic wings. She is also told by her teacher that she too asks that same question after school, Dad takes him to an ‘au-dio-ol-o-gist’. For the lucky little cub, she too asks that same question as she carries out a number of tests. What the audiogram shows is that the little bear has hearing loss. A while later, after further tests, the audiologist prescribes hearing therapy and lip-reading classes. She also gives the cub ‘a pair of plastic wings. The characters have, past expressions and they are great fun. This is a lovely one for the return to school as it would definitely contribute to well being and self confidence in these strange times. SG

Chicken Come Home

Polly Faber, illus by Briony Smith, Pavilion Books, 32pp, 9781846558472, £6.99 pbk

This is a particular favourite of mine because I own 2 chickens and the chicken in this story is just like both of them! Dolly is a very brave and feisty little bird who likes to roam free range in her owner’s garden. Her owner is a little boy ‘who she likes best’ and Dolly likes to challenge him every day by laying her eggs in different places.

One day Dolly goes for another explore but inadvertently gets swept up in the basket of a hot air balloon where she tried to lay her egg. She gets carried all the way to another different country which I’m not going to spoil for you but suffice to say it is a good one and illustrates the vital point for everybody that we all have different skills and talents and they shouldn’t be blocked because they go against a stereotype.

The text is bold and well spaced out with enough space to challenge but support new readers. Paula Bowles’ illustrations are joyous and colourful. The characters have, past expressions and they are great fun. This is a lovely one for the return to school as it would definitely contribute to well being and self confidence in these strange times. SG

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

One spring morning, Cam listens to the warbling voice of a tiny trickly rivelut among the pine trees. “Come with me, I will take you to the sea.” Cam takes up the offer, following the trickly to see where it leads as it runs downs the mountainside and joins a stream. A stream with leopard, becketing trout, that grows into a river flowing through farms and then past wharves and then onto sandunes and there, ‘wild and beautiful’ and going on forever is the sea welcoming him with the most exciting sound ever.

Joy’s writing is irresistible as that water, ever changing voice carries the reader along but so too are Kimberly Andrews’ visual compositions. Her watery, ever changing voice carries the story, wears hearing aids.

We’ve Got Talent

Hannah Whitty, illus Patricia Bowles, Simon and Schuster, 32pp, 9781471711512, £6.99 pbk

This is a brightly coloured cartoon illustrated book about a school play. It’s a great opportunity to support the message about being ourselves and that it matters not what gender you are-you can still follow your own hopes and dreams, indeed should be able to.

The setting will be recognisable to children as it is a school but the characters are many and varied. Olivia is a white bunny and Sam is a rhino. They both go to Big City Primary and are very excited because they are going to audition for their school play about a princess and a knight.

Olivia and Sam are both going for the main parts and so they practice lots and when the big day comes one of them dances for the part of the princess and the other acts for the part of the knight. When the roles are announced Olivia and Sam find they have got the main parts but not the main parts that they wanted. The text is bold and well spaced out with enough space to challenge but support new readers. Paula Bowles’ illustrations are joyous and colourful. The characters have, past expressions and they are great fun. This is a lovely one for the return to school as it would definitely contribute to well being and self confidence in these strange times. SG
5 - 8 Infant/Junior continued

some clucks of course but also shorter sentences which make for easy reading. The illustrations are endearing-naturalistic with some beautiful pictures of other animals and some of their homes. Some of the pictures are double pages which work well to give a lovely pictures of the nature scenes she finds herself in. A lovely one for learning about well known animals, especially if you are a chicken owner! GB

Lionel the Lonely Monster

Fred Blunt, OUP, 32pp, 978 0 19 277569 2, £6.99, pbk

Here is Lionel, not much like a lion, but oh so sad, with his croopy horns, his spiky tail and his woebegone mouth. Carrying a placard with FREE HUGS he cannot find anyone to befriend. Children run, scared, and grownups are too busy to notice him. One day, by appearance, he then encounters a yappy dog who gives the monster a “concerned prod and a lick”. Their friendship begins, but when they reach the playground, again all the children scream and run away. Only when Monster realises the dog is looking sad does he see the LOSS poster. Finally, they are all three playing together, with the little girl promising he would be her BF. A gentle tale with a few twists, across the story from Crow to Angel, with lots of small details, ladybirds, snails and fly agarics to draw the eye from the main action. This gentle colouring is made wonderful with a black capital of MONSTER! scream off the double spread, near the end. A warm story to show the power of kindness and how one should not judge others by appearances, it will appeal to all small children with a sense of fun. GB

The King with Dirty Feet

Sally Pomme Clayton, ill. Rhiannon Sanderson, Otter-Barry, 40pp, 978 1 91307 498 2, £7.99 pbk

This new version of an old and delightful tale from India and Bangladesh has been created by the acclaimed story teller, Sally Pomme Clayton, and like all her writing, reads aloud very well. In a beautiful palace in India lives a king, his kingdom filled with trees, flowers, animals and a flowing river. He has everything he wants and he is very happy. But the king he hates is bathtime. That King has not washed for a week; a month; he has not washed for a whole year! And he himself

tires of his stink and decides it must be time for a bath. The news spreads fast, and crowds come to the river, side to side with the King washing and scrubbing his body. However, when he emerges from the water and dries himself he realises his feet are still dirty. With renewed efforts to scrub them clean, the King is frustrated by his still dirty feet, and demands his servants rid the land of the dirt. The sweeping and flooding of the land has no effect, and finally the people alight upon the idea of covering up the land. And so the people create a monster cloth, from the school to the well, from the temple to the palace, and all the way to the river. It takes the wise words of an old, old man to tell the king that now they would have nowhere to grow flowers and grass for the animals, no fruit or vegetables for the people to eat. SNIP, SNIP, SNIP, goes the old, old, man, and from the wondrous cloth he creates the first pair of shoes! The illustrator captures the emotions of all the characters in bold, striking colours, and readers can feel the delight on the faces of the newly shod people at the end of the book. A great book for dramatisation and for oral story telling. GB

Brookie and her Lamb

M.B. Goffstein, New York Review of Books Children’s Collection, 201pp, 978-1-68137-545-6

The quality of these two modest books lives in their absolute daring. They were perhaps all too quiet for the many busy children’s books writers in London when they were first published in New York in the sixties and seventies but they were timeless-defying and it is good to find them now. In the first of them, Brookie adopts a lamb whom she loves very much. That is presumably reciprocated for they go around together with the lamb patiently allowing itself to be humanised although all it can say is Baa baa baa. In the second, a respectively independent grandmother gets up in the morning, has breakfast, spends the day fishing and the comes home and cooks the catch for supper. The leanness of the narrative is matched by the simplicity of the protagonists’ portrayals – unembellished outline drawings of the non-stories related by the words. You must watch and listen with a heightened sensitivity to catch the moments brought to life by Goffstein’s observant personality.

The Greatest Show Penguin

Lucy Freegard, Pavilion, 978-1 84306 461 1, £7.99, pbk

Here is all the awe and wonder of the circus showground, with the Penguin family showing their prowess in all the traditional circus acts. Practising and perfecting their skills is a daily part of life, even meal times involve some acrobatics. Little Poppy performs daily, travelling around the country, but she knows, deep down, that performing is not her passion. She doesn’t like all the loud noises, the bright lights, the crowded places. How can she tell her Mum she doesn’t want to perform any more? Wise, massivly ancient oak tree, some peace and quiet, and it is not long before Poppy begins to realise that in fact there is much she misses from circus life. Light bulb moment…Poppy has a brilliant idea that she could help to run the show, rather than perform. So many new special effects: health and safety, auditions, equipment, costumes. During performances, Poppy feels calm and in control as she peers through the curtains and watches the greatest show on earth. With her parents bursting with pride, she has found her niche. Illustrated in soft pastel watercolours and well-spaced text to balance the acrobatic performers, this tale will cause readers to think about balancing their own life skills and finding their place in life. GB

Fish for Supper


The urgency of saving the Arctic is made wonderfully, magically real in Hannah Gold’s majestic debut. Eleven-year-old April escapes the misery of school and travels with her scientist father to a remote outpost on the equally faraway Bear Island. Under the midnight sun, she meets her father’s research partners. But as April records temperatures and wind speeds, April explores the island and discovers its last polar bear, isolated, wounded and starving. We already know that like the mother she can now scarcely remember, April has a special bond with animals. As she helps and feeds the bear, the two become more than human and animal, more than friends, almost the same creature. Travelling across the island on the polar bear’s back April understands how he came to be there alone, and the desperate need to take him to Svallsbard and the chance of a proper life. There’s no doubt that April’s relationship with the bear is the stuff of fairytales – the thought of him giving her a ‘shimmerly glimmer of excitement, as if someone had sprinkled glitter all over her’ – but through it readers are brought exhilaratingly close to a magnificent wild animal and given an vivid, unforgettable message about the importance of saving them. April may be small and overlooked, but she proves to everyone that she can make a difference. It’s a message readers will take to their hearts. The story features illustrations throughout by Levi Pinfold and, characteristically atmospheric, they make this book even more special. LS

A Girl Called Joy

Jenny Valentine, Simon & Schuster, 201pp, 978-1471196492, £7.99 pbk

This story has a ten-year-old heroine so unreservedly nice and positive it seems inevitable she will eventually have a fall. And so she does when, after her formidable new school mistress quickly becomes and then stays highly imitated with such a free spirit. For Joy, aptly named, had never been to school before, travelling around the world with her scientist father, who also provided loving and fun home schooling. Returning to the UK to stay with a sick grandfather proves another matter. But while her stroppy older sister soon finds she actually enjoys school, once given the chance, Joy never gets the hang of it. Her only refuge there is a marble table, and in the school playground. Finally she makes friends with cheerful fellow pupil Benny and things start to improve.
**The Poet, the Painter, and the Black Boy**

The poetic text, full of imagery is perfectly matched by the warmth of the vibrant, painterly illustrations. Joyful and at times poignant this is an aspirational, motivational and moving celebration of black boyhood.

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**The Hatmakers**

Tanzin Merchant, ill. Paola Escobar, Puffin, 34pp, 9780141265022, £12.99 pbk

Tanzin Merchant has succeeded brilliantly in creating a captivating and magical fantasy world in this debut novel. Readers will find themselves transported to an alternative Georgian London where Maker families weave spells to craft items such as hats, cloaks, boots, gloves, and watches for the Royal Family. Cordelia Hatmaker is the youngest of a long line of magical milliners and when her father’s ship is lost at the end of a voyage in search of exotic hat-making ingredients she determines to find him. But her remaining family have no time to help her as they are tasked with making a Peace Hat just as the King is incapacitated by a malign enchantment. Maker family rivalries are re-surfacing and the threats to the realm. Brave, resourceful Cordelia, with allies Goose, of the Bookmaker family, and streetwise thief Sam combine to rescue King and Princess, unite the Maker families, and foil a villainous plot to start a war. This is an exhilarating read, full of fast-paced action and adventure, sparkling magic, witty word-play and humour. The world building is inventive, and the storytelling accomplished. The idea of making hats as though they were cakes, with cleverly named magical ingredients, is enticing and the descriptions are full of literary and historical allusions which add to the sense of immersion in a well thought out fantasy world. The child characters, especially Cordelia, are appealing and resourceful and teach the adults about the importance of cooperation, courage, and kindness. The beautiful cover and illustrations by Paola Escobar enhance the magical atmosphere of this very welcome addition to the fantasy genre. [SR]

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**A Shelter for Sadness**

Anne Booth, ill. David Litchfield, Templar Books, 40pp, 9781787417212, £12.99 pbk

Beautiful in both text and illustration, this lyrical picture book has much to teach us all about sadness. Sadness has come to live with a little boy, and he builds it a shelter to stop it safe and to give it all that it needs, whether that is quietness or noise, sitting or running about, looking out of the window or pulling things down. The boy is being alone or sharing time with the boy. Sadness is portrayed as a semi-opaque creature with a tiny pink heart inside, egg shaped, but fluid, and he and the little boy have become best friends because they are, essentially, the same being. Sadness is the boy’s way of coping with his loss, whatever that may be. This is never explained, but the reason for the sadness is a serious one. The story was inspired by a quote from a Jewish woman who died during the Holocaust, Etty Hillesum, who wrote that sorrow needs ‘space and shelter’ to fulfill its needs, otherwise it can turn to hate and revenge, which will only bring on more sorrow in the world. The little boy and his sadness are doing their best to find within themselves the peace and comfort they need in whatever way necessary at their time of sorrow, and they have no thoughts of hate – just love and imagination to get them through. Magical pictures are wholly appropriate, full of light and dark, reflecting the text in every way. [Superb ES]

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**How to Be a Hero**

Cat Weldon, illus Katie Kear, Macmillan Children’s Books, 256pp, 978-1529045031, £6.99 pbk

Two outsiders star in this lively, comic Viking saga. Up in Asgard, Lotta is in training to be a Valkyrie and she is struggling with almost every part of the curriculum, from fighting to horse riding to transformation. That’s no fun when your teacher is the hard-as-a-battle-axe Scold, and you have sneaky bullies Fley and Flay as classmates. Meanwhile, down in Midgard, orphan Whetstone is determined to make a name for himself in sagas and stories, and if that’s for being a thief, so be it. The two meet when Lotta gets separated from the Valkyrie party heading to a battlefield to collect dead heroes to transport to Valhalla and picks up an unconscious Whetstone as she can best make her case. His arrival in Asgard sets in train a whole series of events and is not the wild stroke of fortune it first appears: trickster Loki is very interested in Whetstone and the magic cup he’s stolen, and even Odin gets involved. It’s certainly lots of fun and makes excellent use of Norse myths and beliefs, weaving together well known and famous characters into the framework of the adventure. Being a Valkyrie has never seemed so appealing, while Whetstone’s journey to decide the kind of hero he wants to be is also given room. And there’s a fantastic battle with a dragon – what more could you want? This is part one in a two-book series to be enjoyed by youngster getting to grips with the Vikings. [MMa]

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**Too Small Tola and the Three Fine Girls**

Atinuke, Illustrated by Onyinye Iwu, 9781406388923, £6.99 pbk

Tola lives in Lagos, Nigeria, she is the smallest in her family, so she is known as Too Small Tola. But this superhero zooming – whether it is stepping up to help earn some money when Grandmummy is ill, sorting the gravel from their rice so it is ready to cook – or just not making a fuss when her dreams of ruffles on a dress will never be fulfilled.

This is the second collection of stories about Tola and her family in Lagos; it is a delight. Atinuke is a storyteller herself and these are stories that not only the Tola and her family can relate to, they are just the right length, full of atmosphere, built round situations that arise out of Tola’s everyday. While carrying the shopping on your head may not be the norm for some, nevertheless carrying shopping is a universal task- and Tola’s feelings will strike a chord. Older brothers and sisters do not differ wherever they may live; irritating would be Tola’s opinion echoed by many others - and yet they are family. Nor do the stories need to be read in a particular order – Atinuke (good narrator that she is) ensures that just enough background is included in each to introduce Tea, her family and her home; again ideal for that moment when a storyline is in order. The Nigerian background is vivid but real, bringing in another country and city, perhaps opening a door to family stories and showing that people do not differ so much in their core. Onyinye Iwu’s illustrations are a further delight, adding an characterful visual element whether as a full page or as a line within the text. The book’s design is one the reader will remember and recognise. This is a partnership, that I hope, will continue. [FH]

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**Shelter for Sadness**

Whetstone is determined to make a name for himself in sagas and stories, and if that’s for being a thief, so be it. The two meet when Lotta gets separated from the Valkyrie party heading to a battlefield to collect dead heroes to transport to Valhalla and picks up an unconscious Whetstone as she can best make her case. His arrival in Asgard sets in train a whole series of events and is not the wild stroke of fortune it first appears: trickster Loki is very interested in Whetstone and the magic cup he’s stolen, and even Odin gets involved. It’s certainly lots of fun and makes excellent use of Norse myths and beliefs, weaving together well known and famous characters into the framework of the adventure. Being a Valkyrie has never seemed so appealing, while Whetstone’s journey to decide the kind of hero he wants to be is also given room. And there’s a fantastic battle with a dragon – what more could you want? This is part one in a two-book series to be enjoyed by youngster getting to grips with the Vikings. [MMa]
**VI Spy Licence to Chill**

Maz Evans, Chicken House, 327pp, 9781912620892, £6.99 pbk

Maz Evans’ new book is a spyr thriller that delivers thrills and laughs in equal measure. Violet Day is the youngest in a long line of world-saving spies but her mother, Easter Day, has given it all up so that she can keep Vi safe. When Vi’s estranged father suddenly turns up (just in time to ruin Easter’s wedding to Vi’s teacher, Mr Sprout) Vi learns that she is descended not just from an awesome, deadly secret agent, but also from a dangerous and equally deadly supervillain!

Lethal super parents notwithstanding, Vi’s life is very ordinary: all she wants is for the cool kids to notice her, to have a phone and a little independence. So she marries them not to marry her teacher. Sadly, she faces significant challenges on all these fronts and, when she accidentally-on-purpose overhears her parents arguing about a new scary threat to the entire human race, realises that she has a chance to prove herself as a spy and learn to withstand the thrill of danger.

Though there are moments of genuine tension, as Vi navigates her way through the seedy world of supervillainy, this book is unrepentantly funny. Many characters are playfully stereotyped (the secret agency of pensioners – whose members can triangulate the coordinates for enemy locations but can’t fathom how to video-call their grandchildren – is particularly funny) and action scenes are accompanied by slapstick moments.

Vi is a character with whom children will quickly fall in love. She is effortlessly cool and thoroughly believable. She makes mistakes and is selfish sometimes, and worries about her mum and dad in the same way that all children do. Young readers will be glad that she is making it her mission to save the world and will look forward to her next adventure.

**The Day the Screens went Blank**

Danny Wallace, ill. Gemma Correll, 205pp, 9781471196081, £7.99 pbk

This comedy for children is less of a post-apocalyptic dystopia that its title and first few pages suggest, and more of a classic road trip. The sudden and inexplicable shut down of all screens forces the Bobcrofts family to embark upon a trip across the country to check that Grandmama is ok. Their long and eventful journey features petty theft, scary strangers and a great deal of pig poop, and it is all punctuated by Stella – the well-organised and sensible daughter of the family.

Stella begins her story by shining a light on just how dependent upon screens her family are all become. Before her father has even left the house for work, he has already failed to tell the time, check the weather, read his emails and messages and watch the news. An iden black box with such nonsensical or surreal, in fact the fork; beetroot grows between the while a strongman brandishes a up a ladder to a bowl of broccoli and, when she accidentally-on-purpose overhears her parents arguing about a new scary threat to the entire human race, realises that she has a chance to prove herself as a spy and learn to withstand the thrill of danger.

Read within the current context of lockdown and pandemic, the themes of panic, isolation and misinformation are worryingly topical. People try to make sense of what they can and can’t do, where they can and can’t go: the question of whether or not one should stay at home or risk travelling to see loved ones will be familiar for every reader.

The Bobcrofts’ journey is full of laugh-out-loud moments and slapstick comedies, but the most enjoyable aspect of The Day the Screens went Blank is the charming and emotive way that the family, like most during the coronavirus pandemic, re-consider what is really important about their lives, and how easy it is to make magical memories together: no screens required! SD

**Space Detectives**

Mark Powers, ill. Dapo Adeola, Bloomsbury, 172pp, 9781406305180, £6.99 pbk

This zany adventure in the gigantic space station, Starville, includes reports of the day night sky Why Does Cow People from Neptune- are they from Pluto? Lanley Connor knows, and enjoys. Ethan’s second? His gets facts wrong, but is very good at the practical side of things. On Ethan’s hover-scooter, they chase a shoal of cow people. Dapo Adeola try retrieve a handbag for Edwina, daughter of the Supreme Governor, from the Moon. The Governor they fail, and are invited to the Governor’s very swish birthday party, at her house, and that’s when things get interesting. Asked for help with dressing to impress, Ethan’s Uncle Nick, an engineer who has always been a fan of the Governor in favour of robots, gives them smart suits that can become any outfit they like, but they do sometimes make unexpected things happen.

It turns out that nothing Edwina does is ever good enough for her Mum, but before they can find out more, there is an announcement that Starville is headed on a collision course straight for the Moon, so accurately that it must be sabotage! Convinced of this, they set up covert activities, which Ethan has to translate as ‘sneaking’, helps them work out a plan with the help of colleagues, and the compelling story to the controlling computer involves going through the Zoo...it’s all great fun, as the children negotiate several potentially deadly situations, until finally Starville is saved and the culprit is revealed. Dapo Adeola is the illustrator of the picture book Look Up! and draws, in cartoon, noyble, white characters and various aliens with great skill. Another humorous adventure for Space Detectives is imminent... DB

**I Talk Like a River**


The boy narrating this stunningly beautiful picturebook wants to talk about the natural world surrounding him, but finds it difficult to say the words that fill his head. ‘The P in pine tree grows roots inside my mouth and tangles my tongue,’ he tells us, and on a ‘bad speech day’ he can’t find the right sounds to say anything at all. On one level, it would be true to say that I Talk Like a River is about stuttering, but there’s so much more to the lyrical and intensely immersive experience that would imply. Feeling different or left out; expecting to be mocked; living with stomach-churning anxiety - these aren’t things that are limited to children everywhere, and give this personal account its universal edge.

After school on one particularly distressing day, the boy’s father takes him to the riverbank. Quietly they look for colourful rocks and water bugs. And there, watching the rush and churn of the water as it flows across the landscape, the boy’s father says something that shifts his world and makes him see things differently.

‘See how the water moves? ’ he asks. ‘That’s how you speak.’

In a series of visual close-ups, the river tumbles past the boy, and we sense change coming. Turning the page, we find ourselves face-to-face with him. Sunlight streams onto his face, and as the water bubbles and broad lines suggest his brows and they are popping round to tell one another about it. As the magnitude of the event slowly dawns upon everyone, Dad realises that they are going to have to drive the ten-hour journey back to Grandma’s house, as there is no other way of checking she is ok.

Wallace has great fun exploring the question of what happens to grown-ups when you take away their technological safety net. The answer, it seems, is that they will quickly end up lost, stressed, frightened and covered in poo. Without phones and sat-navs, the Bobcrofts are forced to rely on the kindness of strangers to find their way to Grandma’s house. This opens up Vi’s eyes to the rewards that can be found from investing time in other people, rather than in screens. Among the strangers who help the family on an adventure that leads to Uncle Niels Rolls-Royce, Stella learns that little acts of kindness are contagious, and that helping others feels great and often leads to getting something in return.

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Eight - Ten Middle/Upper continued

his son, the writer of this picturebook. Jordan Scott grew up to become a poet, and it was this experience by the riverbank that stopped him trying to ‘overcome’ his stutter and led him towards a better understanding of his own, unique way of communicating. This picture book echoes Valeri’s with a similar idea. The boy returns to the classroom to talk about the visit to his favourite place; the riverbank. And in telling everyone about the river, he talks like the river – with all its stops and starts, its rush and babble and its many moments of calm.

This poetic and deeply memorable picturebook has a quality that stays with you in your tracks and pulls you in. It addresses one child’s experience of stuttering, but categorising it as an ‘issue book’ or expecting it to provide a quick-fix message for children who stutter would misrepresent this book’s intention and appeal. I Talk Like a River is a personal account of discovery: one that takes us to the heart of an experience and shows us what it’s like to live another life. It’s affecting and accessible, and offers different learning opportunities, depending on our needs.

Sydney Smith is known for his ability to play with light, and for the dark line that has characterized his work thus far. Light falling through windows, onto water, and even on his own face through earlobes is still a major feature here, but, eager to capture the essence of Scott’s poetry, Smith has pushed his own boundaries in this book. Gone is the dark line, to be replaced by watercolours that feel less certain, together with a range of approaches that communicate intense emotion – just look at the spread where the clearly-delineated classroom on the left-hand page dissolves into a sea of faces on the right, or the use of grey that follows, dominated by the boy’s enormous iron-eyes and sgraffitoed with lines depicting the crows and pine trees in his mouth.

These images don’t just show us how the boy feels, they make us feel it too, I Talk Like a River is a lyrical and intensely visual exploration of how it feels to struggle to speak out. It has something of universal importance to communicate, and will resonate with readers of all ages. CFH

Stars with Flaming Tails

Valerie Bloom, ill. Ken Wilson-Max, Otter-Barry, 96pp, 978 1 913074 678, £7.99 pbk

Here is another excellent, varied collection of poems, children and adults alike will be able to get into the spirit of this anthology by the poet Alex Whitton. What a delight. The title proclaims ‘Poems to read aloud’ – and this the case. The forms may seem traditional – frequently four line stanzas that while seeming to conform to a traditional metre are subtly edgy and offbeat – like speech. Then there are poems that might even be prose – take the wonderful Spiders – others that are shape poems or respond to the shapes of words on the page. There is no one way to appreciate Alex Whitton’s work. Humour is often seen as the key to helping a young audience engage, there is plenty of humour here but married to a reflective lyrical approach around subjects ranging from the natural world to the homeless man on the corner and the trapper children who worked in the mines. Katy Roskens deft, lively illustrations add to the poetic, picking up on the words, expressions, moments – another dimension to the words. (And a bonus – a final flourish – a couple of winning poems from two young poets), FH

Flyntlock Bones: The Eye of Mogdrod

Derek Keilty, ill. Mark Elvins, Scallywag Press, 170pp, 978 1912630675, £6.99 pbk

It would be understandable to think that Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes has already been re-invented in every conceivable way – but that’s not true! In Keilty’s swashbuckling trilogy for children, the world’s most famous detective is re-imagined as a young pirate called Flyntlock Bones, whose crew-mates sail the seven seas in search of mystery.

This is the second installation of this series. Flyntlock, after leaving the orphanage at Baskervile, has become an established member of the crew on the Black Hound. When Captain Watkins receives a message from chief of the swampy Bog Islands, Fergus McSwaggers, lamenting the loss of a priceless golden chalice, the game is afoot!

Like all good mysteries, Flyntlock’s search for the chalice features political intrigue, stylish-looking suspects and fights with dangerous villains. In the Bog Islands, marauding tribes maintain uneasy alliances through lots of grog-fuelled feasting, but Egfart the Oderous and the chilling Ice Pirates have their own plans that Flyntlock must fathom – a task made all the more challenging by the rather distressing presence of an enormous, monstrous cat with giant fangs!

The contrasting genres of detective story and pirate adventure complement one another, more than one might expect and Keilty does an impressive job of juggling all the necessary tropes. Obligatory stereotypes are all present, from eye-patched parrots to peg-legged boatswains, and parents will enjoy adopting all of the characters’ pirate voices when reading aloud. The story races along at a great rate of knots and Flyntlock’s quick wits mean that readers never have to wait long for the next conundrum to be cracked so that the action can continue.

Young readers will love Elvins’ genetically-detailed illustrations. Lively, monochrome cartoons accompany most pages, and occasional full-page spreads arrive just in time to pull the reader further into the most dramatic scenes. Full of chaotic energy and exaggerated characterisation, the pictures are also wonderful in style to young readers. The use of Chris Riddell, and add enormous value to the overall enjoyment of the book.

Flyntlock Bones is a playful adventure book whose illustrations including a brilliant gallery of characters and two detailed maps, are the most enjoyable element. Though Flyntlock himself is admirably brave and kind, characters are not all memorable – but there is certainly enough high-seas fun to last for one last episode. SD

Saving Hanno


This heart-breaking story is subtitled A refugee boy and his dog and is told by nine-year-old Rudi, a German Jewish boy, who is sent to England for safety in early 1939 via the Kindertransport. The book originally appeared in the US and has now been published for UK readers by Otter-Barry Books. Rudi’s beloved dog Hanno also makes the journey to England, with the help of a sympathetic lorry driver, and, after quarantine, the two are reunited at the home of Mr and Mrs Switherbroom in London. Rudi and Hanno then face the trauma of separation again with the government instruction that pets be evacuated. The coming of the war due to bomb threats and rationing, Rudi manages to join a group of local children who plan to hide certain pets in their homes for the duration of the war.

This book is strongly empathetic as the author confines two aspects of the Kindertransport programme and the “great pet panic”, to focus on the fear, confusion and sense of displacement and loss felt by children in wartime. Rudi’s direct, child-centred narrative voice compellingly portrays the feelings of a child refugee facing the loss of everything familiar. It has a modern resonance for the plight of child refugees all over the world.

The combination of simple text and gentle illustrations in Littlewood make the difficult themes of loss, dislocation, and necessary resilience accessible to younger readers. There is extra background information at the end of the book. There are no easy resolutions to Rudi’s story as he and Hanno still face indefinite separation, but hope, courage, and resourcefulness, as well as loss and fear, play a large part in this moving story. SR

Everyday Magic

Jess Kidd, Canongate, 286pp, 9781785658095, £6.99 pbk

This lively story reads very easily and does not feel as if it took a long time to write. Hogwarts references, conscious or not, abound, with its ancient traditions and its top hero – the brave and resourceful witch Blackstack Avarice, who has come to a bewitching new world of magic. This is after all has been sent here to save the world. She has a powerful ally in Calypso, a circus girl and talented witch. Against her, up against them is an evil Head Witch who is also allowed moments of
Omar, the Bees and Me

Helen Mortimer, ill. Katie Cottle, Owlet Press, 978 1 913339 06 7, £7.99 pbk

In this lively book, the creators feature a small girl called Maisie, who becomes the inspiration for a project in their school. Their neighbourhood is grey, dark and noisy. At show and tell one day, a new boy called Omar brings in some of his mother’s honey cake. He tells that his Grandpa used to keep bees, that there were apricot trees and jasmine bushes in his sunny garden, far, faraway. This leads to the children making a paper floral display outside their classroom, and further discussions about honey and bees. It is not long before the children realise, with the help of their teacher, that they could make a REAL bee corridor, from their school to a garden where they knew there was a beehive. But they needed more help: the help of the whole neighbourhood. How they succeed in creating a bee corridor, and the bee box the beekeeper builds and ends up with spreads of collaged paintings by the children, the bees all grinning ecstatically. Did you know there are more than 20,000 different types of bees? That there are beekeepers in every country in the world? The book reminds readers that every little can help, and by channelling the energies and enthusiasms of the very young, we can change our environments just a little for the better... and form their attitudes for life. GB

Edgar & Adolf

Phil Earle & Michael Wagg, OUP, 140pp, 9780198494911, £7.99 pbk

This moving story of an enduring friendship is a work of fiction but is inspired by the real lives of two footballers, Edgar Kail, who played for Dulwich Hamlet FC, and Adolf Jager, who played for the German club Altona 93, based in Hamburg. The encounters between the two players and their teams take place in the 1920’s and 1930’s and the imagined special bond that unfolds is broken by WW1. The chapters set in the 1920’s and 30’s detail matches, press reports and conversations between the two players. These chapters are interspersed with the framing device of chapters set in Scotland in 1983 as German teenager Adi fulfills the mission set by his late grandfather Adolf to return a football badge to its original owner, Edgar. Adi’s quest becomes an emotional journey of discovery as he learns more about his grandfather’s life through Edgar’s poignant memories.

This is a fascinating and deeply affecting story, mingling fact and fiction neatly with Edgar’s short chapters that is perfect for less-confident readers. This is a Super-Readable Rollercasters title, a series produced by collaboration between OUP and Barrington Stoke and featuring Barrington Stoke’s dyslexia-friendly font and layout. There are illustrations at the end of the book with a “What to read next” list, “What do you think?” questions, a word list, a quiz and background information from the authors. This is an engaging, accessible, and beautifully told story about an intriguing episode from history’s past. SR

Circus Maximus, Race to the Death

Annelise Gray, Zephyr, 352pp, 9781 8002 40575, £12.99, hbk

The marketing claim for this novel, that "Patrick Hur meets National Velvet", led me to believe that we might see a finale in which chariots hurtled over Grand National fences. Disappointingly, this doesn’t happen. But this tale of an expert teenage girl charioteer does drive a coach and horses through the accosted gender roles of ancient Rome. And who’s to say that, given the opportunity, girls couldn’t do as good a job as boys at driving horses? Did you know there are 20,000 different types of bees? That there are beekeepers in every country in the world? In this story she learns more about her grandfather’s emotional journey of discovery as he realises his ambition, to be reunited with Great Aunt Jemima. The end is rather convenient which does let the story down a little, but does not take away the impact of the story of poverty stricken and abandoned children in Victorian England. JF

The Twisted Threads of Polly Freeman

Pippa Goodhart, Catnip, 243pp., 9781910911122, £6.99, pbk

Polly and her Great Aunt sail very close to the wind, living by their wits and sewing, but when they are sent to Workhouse in 1838, and they are separated. Great Aunt Jemima goes to the lunatic ward and Polly is sent to the girls’ ward where she spends her days splitting tar covered rope and things look very bleak indeed. Polly dreams of escaping but luckily for her, this comes with the cart taking children to work in the cotton mills. But when her friend Min dies from an horrific accident while collecting the fluff underneath the machines, Polly decides to make her escape anyway, and be re-united with Great Aunt Jemima. Her plans do not go just as she had hoped but all ends well, setting up for a sequel perhaps?

This utterly light-hearted tale does go quite deeply into the appalling conditions both at the St. Pancras Workhouse and also at the murdered woman’s home, Black Mill. Pippa Goodhart has done her research, and details on which she based the story are at the end of the book. This tray of the conditions under which the children worked, not to mention the age at which they started, and the very real danger pointed out by Min’s death. It is not until almost halfway through the book that Polly’s heritage is mentioned, and the trail to her missing father appears which adds another interesting dimension to the story.

Polly is a resourceful heroine, with the added interest of dressing very good at sewing especially embroidery which gives her the way out to be reunited with Great Aunt Jemima. The tools of sewing, embroidery and the fabric flowers made by the Great Aunt decorate the pages and the cover by Helen Crawford-White. The ending is rather convenient which does let the story down a little, but does not take away the impact of the story of poverty stricken and abandoned children in Victorian England. JF

black humour. A gaggle of old, mean-minded village elders complete the picture, including the vicar’s wife, described here as a ‘sour-faced old grunion.’ The dictionary definition of this word is ‘a small silvery food fish.’ Its slang derivation, according to Dictionary Online, is ‘fish.’ Its slang derivation, according to Dictionary Online, is ‘fish.’ It’s slang derivation, according to Dictionary Online, is ‘fish.’ It’s slang derivation, according to Dictionary Online, is ‘fish.’ It’s slang derivation, according to Dictionary Online, is ‘fish.’ It’s slang derivation, according to Dictionary Online, is ‘fish.’ It’s slang derivation, according to Dictionary Online, is ‘fish.’
The Boy Who Made Everyone Laugh

Helen Rutter, illus. Andrew Bannecker, Scholastic, 300pp., 9781780600851, £6.99 pbk.
Your reviewer manages a stammer, and was pleased to assess this book. Helen Rutter wrote this story because her own son stammers, and she wanted there to be a book he could identify with, plus jokes, for which she held a national competition, judged by Noel Fielding, for children to send in their favourites. Some are old, and others new, but hailing this book as the funniest debut of 2021, as the cover does, may be a bit premature. A joke is the heading for every chapter, as Billy Plimpton loves jokes, and tries out many on his Granny with whom he is more relaxed, and she has always been a quiet girl. As the story begins, he is just starting secondary school, and tries to hide his stammer until he has worked out how to get rid of it. One of his own lists, ‘How to stay hidden’, works for a while, but eventually a teacher asks each member of the class to prepare a speech about something important to them. And, although Billy tries everything he can to get out of it, his Mum and speech therapist insist that he does it, and his interests narrow in a way that makes the class sympathetic to him, except for the class bully, William, whom Billy had identified as trouble from the first day.

Billy tells us about the four ways that adults react to him: the Encouragers, who tell him to relax (which doesn’t help); the Readys who ask him if he has his sentences for him (often inaccurate, and annoying); the Jokers, who stammer back at him (not funny) and the Waiters, who patiently let him finish what he is saying. He has various possible ‘cures’: his speech therapist has given him various coping mechanisms, all totally recognizable, and he finds others on the internet. Of course, nothing works, not even a ‘relaxing’ herbal tea that he finds disgusting. He is naturally funny, his only former classmate from primary school, Skyla, enjoys his jokes, and he does make some good friends. His Form Teacher, Mr Osho, (of Nigerian origin) is very helpful and supportive indeed, writing 10 important things about Billy in his notebook, and also encouraging him to take up drumming. The end-of-term school talent show is promising – should he be a drummer, and with which band? Or a comedian, which is his dearest wish? Helen Rutter is positive, credible characters, and the ending of this enjoyable book is good.

Maggie Blue and the Dark World

Anna Goodall, Guppy Books, 330pp, 978 1 9135101 312, £12.99 hbk.
Maggie Blue Brown’s world in North Middle Secondary is grey and joyless. Her mother is elsewhere, listless and self-absorbed, simmering with fury towards a husband who has abandoned both her and her daughter. Twelve-year-old Maggie has been despatched to share the one-bedroom flat of her elderly aunt Esmé, whom she’s barely met before. But she likes Esmé’s gentle eccentricities; and she also is fascinated by her antique ring formed of the early fantasies of Alan Garner, a plan for revenge that involves his own family and friends, and an alternative universe – the Dark World, where any kind of sustaining joy is in short supply. Maggie Blue Brown confirms that Al is one such victim; once the physical removal of her happiness is complete, Ida will be summarily ‘ended’. Esmé is very helpful and supportive indeed, her therapist has given him various coping strategies to help him finish what he is saying. He has started at Fortlake School where he engages in spirited exchanges with him, often making fun of her name. She retaliates with her fists, earning sharp words from the remote Miss McCrab, a head with little inclination to talk, let alone listen, to individual students. The only person who does show interest is the new Guidance Counsellor, Miss Cane; it’s not long before Maggie discovers that she’s not to be trusted.

Maggie’s loneliness is relieved to some degree by an odd couple of new contacts: Dot, one of Esmé’s even more eccentric friends; and Hoagy, an ageing, street-wise, one-eyed cat who, it turns out, is a natty witty conversationalist. Maggie knows she’s good at reading people, but she is understandably surprised to find that not only can she understand Hoagy, she can also engage in spirited exchanges with him; when Hoagy can be bothered, that is. Readers will surely welcome every opportunity to leap off the page. Very quickly the reader comes to care deeply about the family and their aspiration. Equally significant is the way Yang manages to describe the difficulties endured by the family – ill treatment, racial prejudice, financial exploitation, the family and their aspiration. Equally significant is the way Yang manages to describe the difficulties endured by the family – ill treatment, racial prejudice, financial exploitation, educational difficulty as Mia struggles with an unfamiliar language – all of this while still maintaining the family as three-dimensional, strong and sympathetic characters rather than as mere victims. The story of such strife, all too commonplace in the real world, is rarely narrated for middle grade readers. More people endure such suffering than read about it. RB

The Abbey Mystery

(Jane Austen Investigates series)

Julia Golding, Lion, Fiction, 192pp., 9781782643340, £7.99 pbk.
I was a great fan of Julia Golding’s Cat Royal series and so opened this book with great anticipation, I was not disappointed! Intriguingly the author has taken the early life of Jane Austen, who is 13 in this story and made her into a detective but within suitably Austenish boundaries. Jane is sent in place of her sister Cassandra, to be a companion to Lady Cromwell as preparations are made for the celebrations of her son’s 21st coming of age. Forewarned by her brother Henry about the possible sighting of a ghost, she manages to get to the house Jane sets off determined to find said ghost and win the wager with Henry. But there is a bigger mystery to solve than that of the ghost. Her maid servant, Luke the stable boy and Fitzwilliam, companion to the son and Jane solves the mystery in an exciting way.

Julia Golding has taken great pains to make Jane’s voice quite authentic throughout the story and succeeds and hopefully will lead girls to Jane Austen’s novels. The hierarchy of the big house and the servants emerges very clearly, and also the nuances of the hereditary system on which so much depends. There is the interesting appearance of a steam engine the design of which is explained in detail, and the character of Annette, not a woman in the 18th century mould at all. There is also Jane’s dog, Grandison, who likes to chase the cricket ball – a real hard cricket ball is very hard for a dog to pick up! All this is beautifully written in Jane’s own voice and words it seems, along with her letters to Cassandra, in shortish chapters, and makes for a greatly enjoyable read. Let us hope there are many more to come! It is also printed on lovely paper which makes it even more enjoyable.

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued

Books for Keeps No.247 March 2021 27
community stalwarts Ty and Pete, that other people, even Mr Brayker, have difficult lives too, is very moving.

This edgy, contemporary story is part OUP’s and Barrington Stoke’s Super-Readable Rollercoasters series told in short, accessible chapters and produced with Barrington Stoke’s characteristic dyslexia-friendly font and layout. It is aimed at less-confident readers and the pages at the end include a ‘What do you think?’ section to help readers explore the issues raised in more depth. There is also interesting background information, a ‘who’s who’ of key characters, a short quiz, a book list, and a word guide. Readers will be most engaged though by the absorbing story of an angry, isolated, special boy who discovers the importance of kindness, community, and trust. SR

We Played With Fire

'Catherine Barter, Andersen Press, 336pp 978-1839310069, £7.99 pbk 'Some people were beautiful, some people were intelligent, Maggie and Kate could crack their bones. You had to make the best of what you were given’. Catherine Barter’s second novel draws on the mid-19th century history of two secondary school girls: the Fox Sisters, credited with originating the Spiritualist Movement. Were their ‘parlour games which benefited from séances mere fakery, exploitative and dangerous or a movement of the Ojibwe and white American spirit worlds merging to form a new spiritual practice?’

The novel skips between Hydesville and its nearby town, Rochester, and New York, a speed matched by evocative passages on the period’s ‘rush’ of populations - from the arrival of Irish immigrants to those escaping from the South through the Underground Railroad to the gold seekers heading out to California.

A truly engaging work of historical fiction, We Played With Fire is also a genuinely chilling Gothic read. As with Catherine’s debut, Troublemakers, the narrative is told through the voice of a spirited teenage girl, Maggie Fox, living in the thrilling ‘now’ of her teenage years, coming in to her own, finding her voice and waking the dead along the way... FC

Firekeeper’s Daughter

Angelique Boulley, Rock The Boat, 496pp, 978 0 86154 079 2, £12.99 hbk

Daunis is 18 years old and of mixed heritage-part Ojibwe and part American but committed to her First Nation community. When it is threatened she knows that despite the danger she must step up and try to save what is most dear to her, whatever the risk.

After a single page of prophetic high tension the first nine chapters of the book skilfully paint in the details of the town and of the community and lay the groundwork for characters and their relationships. Bouley doesn’t overwhelm the reader with detail but leads the way through the intricacies and connections - immense, not simplified. The reason why the events glimpse in the first page come as such a shock – they are happening to people we have come to know. Care about Daunis’ best friend Lily is shot and killed in front of her by Travis, Lily’s ex-boyfriend, who is high on crystal meth and who immediately afterwards turns the gun on himself.

The deaths plunge the community into shock, its traditions and behavioural codes violated. Daunis is offered the chance to help to put things right as part of a covert FBI operation to discover who is manufacturing and distributing the drugs which are destroying young lives. After two more of her friends die she agrees to help her cover as a member of a visiting ice hockey team. Her FBI and her knowledge from her aptitude in chemistry and her understanding of Ojibwe traditional medicine.

The plot weaves, ducks and dives, but always convincingly and always a mixture of the beliefs and customs of the Ojibwe and of white American culture. The reader is detective and observer, placed at the heart of Daunis’ moral dilemmas and the dangers she finds herself in. Her family and the closest members of her Ojibwe community-notably strong, fearless and good-hearted women-bring elements of sassy certainty and tribal wisdom. The poignantness of the story is the love which slowly grows between Jamie and Daunis and which can never be fully realised.

When events are brought to their shocking and unexpected conclusion Daunis can again concentrate on her own life and combine her love of chemistry and biology and of traditional Ojibwe medicine and culture. Daunis will also allow her time to study with her Ojibwe community-notably strong, fearless and good-hearted women-bring elements of sassy certainty and tribal wisdom. The poignantness of the story is the love which slowly grows between Jamie and Daunis and which can never be fully realised.

When events are brought to their shocking and unexpected conclusion Daunis can again concentrate on her own life and combine her love of chemistry and biology and of traditional Ojibwe medicine and culture. Daunis will also allow her time to study with her tribe’s healer, to become her apprentice, to fight for ‘all the girls and women pushed into the abyss of expendability and invisibility.' VR

The Girls I’ve Been

Jason Reynolds, ill. Danica Novak, Orchard, Faber, 280pp, 9780571366019, £9.99 pbk

When Nora, her ex-boyfriend Wes and her new love Iris visit the local bank they do not envisage finding themselves hostage to two gunmen, along with various other staff and customers. The story provides an almost minute by minute account of what goes on, how they cope and make plans to try and escape. As the story unfolds, we gradually come to understand that Nora has hidden depths from her past, which will help her and the others in their bid to survive their ordeal. Mixed in with this narrative are the back-stories of Nora and also the other two characters, as all of them share specific traumas in their past. Nora’s mother is a con artist who forced her daughters to take part in her schemes; however, Nora escaped the life after being abused by a step-father and helping her mother to prison. She and her elder sister have been hiding for the past five years and this situation puts them at risk.

The author takes us deep into the past of her central character and it is as if we are gradually peeling back the layers of her life (rather like an onion). As we go back into the past, we learn of all the different names that she has been made to use over the years and also the different characters that her mother forced her to assume. This is a story about manipulation and power and it is horrifying to think that all of the situations with her mother happened by the time Nora was twelve years old. It is difficult for us to imagine that anyone would treat a child in this way, yet it does happen and the story also connects Nora with her two friends as they have also shared abuse at home. This book is being made into a film for young adults to be factored in as they can maintain the chilling atmosphere that pervades the story and keeps us driven to keep reading.

This Can Never Not Be Real

Sera Milano, Electric Monkey, 340pp, 978 0 7555 0035 8, £7.99 pbk

Not much happens in Amberside. Every year, the Amberfe Festival features the same local musicians, with ageing rock star Eric Stone headlining, a torchlight procession and a bonfire in the grounds of historic Hearne House. There’s spicy cider to be drunk and you might as well go since everyone does it and it’s not as if you’re going anywhere else. Most of the older students from Clifton Academy and Sefton College are there, including our four narrators; Jamie, Joe, Ellie and Lily who all know each other by sight, the way you do in large schools; you get an impression of someone from hearsay and glimpses of guarded surfaces.
surrender to Milano’s fundamental concern: ‘ordinary people saving the world’. That way, readers may well become immersed in the reflective streams of the narrators’ thoughts as they revisit the horror of Ambereve even as they record the depth of the new relationships the night has brought.

Future Girl

Asphya, author and illus., Allen & Unwin, 384pp, 978-1911679004, £10.99 pbk

Piper McBride is a sixteen year old girl in a near future Melbourne, Australia. She also happens to be deaf. In this imagined world everyone must eat what is called Recon, a nutritionally balanced chemical mix supposedly tailored to the nutritional needs of the consuming individual. It is possible to grow real food, known as ‘wild’ food. But to do so is considered radical and eccentric. Piper’s mother Irene McBride plays a key role in the regime. She is the chief research scientist at the company that manufactures Recon. In this book Piper grows into her deaf identity and learns to question what she thought she knew about safety.

The most striking feature of this book is that Piper is deaf. Her deafness does indeed have major impact on her life. But it is very far from the only thing the reader learns about Piper and it is far from being the dominant feature of her character in the novel. There are certain aspects of this story of a disabled character which a disabled reviewer recognises as the sign that the author understands the experience of an impairment. The range of emotions Piper feels in relation to her deafness is huge, and all these emotions are convincingly displayed. Two of the other characters in the book are also disabled. One is deaf and the other is a wheelchair user. They both exert a truly positive influence on Piper’s life. She has a boyfriend whose hearing is unimpaired. His mother however is deaf. She is the one who teaches Piper to sign. The relationship between teacher and pupil is truly positive influence on Piper's life. But it is very far from the only thing the reader learns about Piper and it is far from being the dominant feature of her character in the novel. There are certain aspects of this story of a disabled character which a disabled reviewer recognises as the sign that the author understands the experience of an impairment. The range of emotions Piper feels in relation to her deafness is huge, and all these emotions are convincingly displayed. Two of the other characters in the book are also disabled. One is deaf and the other is a wheelchair user. They both exert a truly positive influence on Piper’s life. She has a boyfriend whose hearing is unimpaired. His mother however is deaf. She is the one who teaches Piper to sign. The relationship between teacher and pupil is truly positive influence on Piper’s life.

The publisher shares the experience of an artist from one story to the next although this often hurts too. Tracing characters from one story to the next takes time and attention. It is certainly meaningful that this novel has to be read at least twice before all the connections become clear. But when this front door opens up to the neighbouring terrains and which characters live where helps out. And re-reading is also a pleasure. Despite its darkness, this book is a triumph of story-telling. The only indication that it is written principally for teenage rather than for adult readers is the fact that the book is shorter than the average length of a novel for the age group.

Game Changer

Neal Shusterman, Walker, 396pp, 978 1 4063-9663-2, £7.99 pbk

Ash is an American Football player who revels in the intense physicality of the game. As a lineman he ‘does the dirty work and gets no glory’ but his satisfaction comes from the knowledge that it is precisely these two qualities which underpin the success or failure of the team. His tackles are well known both for their legality and for their fearsomeness and they were the reason for the many life-changing events which unfold in the book.

After one of his legendary tackles Ash experiences a feeling ‘like my blood had been replaced with ice water’ and it is this moment which causes a significant shift in the world around him. At a friend home, he jumps a light—because it is blue, not red as he expects it to be—and narrowly avoids what could have been a fatal collision. Afterwards, on the periphery of his vision, he sees a skateboarder. These are the dual threads which underpin the ensuing storyline.Ash has become the centre of the universe. Each of his tackles bumbs the world into another reality and the skateboarder multiplies everywhere. Their job is to guide Ash through the shifting dimensions until, with luck and their training, a better world will be achieved.

The skateboarders explain the rational with dialogue which is often obtuse, and, as the changes to Ash’s world continue, the story becomes the province of skilled readers. The premise of the story is an interesting one, ripe with possibilities, but the speed of the world shifts the content changes make it an almost whistle-stop tour of society’s problems. In the course of the book Shusterman raises racism, violence to women, disability, homosexuality, drug dependency and gender stereotypes. After one change Ash becomes a girl, after another he is a young man from a wealthy family who is dealing drugs, in another he is gay. This hectic pace of change does not allow a serious examination of any of these problems-instead, an awareness that the narrator is a white, middle-class male makes this cultural toe-dipping seem even more hollow.

Game Changer unfolds around a clever idea but ultimately skims across too many possible concepts and fails to convince.

VR

Robb hits the ground running in this stark, hard-hitting novel. Jamie is just about to turn sixteen-on the cusp of adulthood with a caring girlfriend, a best friend in Adil and a 6 year old sister who adores him. What could be better? For Jamie, the answer to that question is easy: his drug dependency and gender stereotypes. After one change Ash's world becomes a character in its own right. No.247 March 2021

Books for Keeps No.247 March 2021 29
In the summer of 1862
Edward Lear wrote jokingly to his friend, Lady Waldegrave, of the crowds he had seen assembled in the City when he drove there to pay £125 ‘into the funds’ so unusual was it to see an artist banking some money. The cash was in fact the fee that he had finally managed to get from the publishers Routledge, Warne and Routledge for the sale of his copyright for the third edition of A Book of Nonsense. (It was hardly a good deal from his point of view. The lithographic pictures were all converted into woodcuts and the [eventually] two publishers went on issuing reprints till the copyright ran out, Lear of course receiving nothing of the profits. They were also prone to label as ‘new editions’ volumes that were simply dodgily-dated continuances of an existing print-run.)

For about twenty years
Lear’s profession had been that of a landscape painter, working much in Mediterranean lands for his health’s sake and on occasion necessarily residing at hotels. While in Rome on one of these journeys he encountered the vacationing family of an American publisher, James Fields, whose children he entertained with comic verses as was his wont, and the publisher forthwith commissioned for his firm’s magazine anything that Lear might like to offer in the way of amusing verses. So it was that the February 1870 number of Our Young Folks saw the first publication in New York of The Owl and the Pussy Cat with two-line illustrations by an unnamed house artist. (‘Capital’, said Lear.)

Till then,
if Lear were known at all as a writer it would be for the nonsenses of 1846 (see our last BfK and for his accounts of his travels in Italy and elsewhere, illustrated with his own lithographs. But The Owl and the Pussy-Cat and two other ballads that Fields published in later issues of his magazine – The Duck and the Kangaroo and The Daddy Long-Legs and the Fly – would mark the presence of a new voice in English children’s literature. He worked up ideas from manuscripts that he had made for children and friends and for the Christmas of 1870 (but dated 1871) the publisher of his travel books, one R.J. Bush, put out a volume of Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets.

It seems that Messrs Routledge and the now independent Warne had passed up on his ideas and thus deprived themselves of the distinction of publishing one of the most original and accomplished children’s books of the century. The Songs began it, with the three ballads done for Our Young Folks in the lead and these were followed by six others, most notably The Jumblies. The two stories – the only two that Lear wrote – The History of the Four Little Children who Went Round the World and The History of the Seven Families of the Lake Pipple-Popple are barely that, being experimental illustrated comedies, betraying a fondness for utterly absurd situations and the persistent marrying of unrelated and sometimes invented adjectives: ‘sumptuous and sonorous’ ‘melodious and mucilaginous’...

In both Songs and Stories the illustrations enhance what there is of narrative rather in the way of the drawings of the earlier nonsenses. There then follows a miscellany in which drawings tend to predominate. There are a couple of pictorial alphabets (one not illustrated by Lear) which are preceded by a brief comic interlude reserved for some curious culinary recipes taken from the ‘valued and learned’ contributions of Professor Bosh to the Nonsense Gazette (Amblongus Pie, Crumbobblious Cutlets, and Gosky Patties). The Professor also appends nine illustrations with their generic and specific descriptions of plants discovered in the valley of Verrikwier, down Orfeltugg way, along the lines of Manipeeplia Upsidownia:

Original
as are all the textual and illustrative ideas here, the universality of the enjoyment of The Owl and the Pussy-Cat makes for sufficient proof of the genius of the Nonsense Songs themselves. Here is a mastery of the rhythms and vocabulary of poetry put to the service of the seemingly ridiculous. Domestic objects from daily life – a table, a chair, some fire irons, a nutcracker and sugar-tongs – make impossible expeditions. Ducks, kangaroos, sparrows and jumblies (whatever they are, we only know that their heads are green and their hands are blue) have more daring escapades, but they all occur only a short way across the border from reality. And that reality may have implications, as adumbrated by the Daddy-Longlegs and the Fly, that are anything but ridiculous.)


Brian Alderson reflects on one of the most original and accomplished children’s books of the 19th century.