the children’s book magazine online

Authorgraph Rob Biddulph
Jon Agee

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Guest Editorial 239

Loosing The Arrow of Apollo. Author Philip Womack on his experience of crowdfunding

I’ve always been interested in classical myth, but whilst researching my 2016 novel, The Double Axe, I rediscovered a spark that had been dormant for a decade or so. With an avidity I hadn’t felt for years, I gobbled down the ancient texts, re-reading the ones I knew, savouring the ones I didn’t, delighting in finding connections and comparisons between them. Once more, I was hooked.

The mythology is vast. The source texts don’t always agree on details, but you swiftly garner a general sense of the way that most of the myths operate. I became fascinated by the edges of things. The cycle of Agamemnon’s story, the House of Atreus, begins with the terrible crimes of his ancestor Talantas, who tried to serve up his own son as lunch to the gods, and finishes with his son Orestes, absolved at last from matricide, returning home. But how did Orestes live with the knowledge of tragedy in his own family? What of the children of Orestes? Did they grow up knowing their father was a murderer? These were the questions that consumed me.

And so were sown the seeds of what was to become The Arrow of Apollo. I imagined a world in which the gods were growing tired of mortals. One by one, they departed, leaving behind only Apollo, who loved mankind too much, and Hermes, who liked to be at the centre of the action. The plot all fell into place, into a nice, neat structure, much more easily than any other novel I’ve ever written.

I have not crowdfunded a book before, having published six children’s novels with traditional publishing houses. But, after much thought and many discussions, I decided to publish with Unbound. Firstly, as they produce exceptionally beautiful books, and I knew that I would be able to guarantee maps and even illustrations if I could raise the funding for it, and that I would have some say in the process as well. And secondly, I had faith in Greek myth as a draw for young readers.

To say that crowdfunding is not easy is an understatement. I had the idea for the book in about 2015. I finished the first draft in December 2016. It went to Unbound as a second draft in October 2017, and we launched the campaign to fund it. The sum went to Unbound as a second draft in October 2017, and we launched the campaign to fund it. The sum of money we would have to raise seemed to me as impossible as one of Hercules’s labours. And I’m not very much like Hercules.

It’s a wonderful thing, to give money on trust for something that does not yet exist, and I will be grateful for ever to the supporters of The Arrow of Apollo, who have surprised me, delighted me, and enchanted me.

There was an initial rush of pledges. We zoomed up to 40% of the funding target pretty quickly. This would be easy, I thought. Alas, I was wrong. The doldrums followed. There were a lot of doldrums. Every day, before work, I would send out ten emails (that was the limit, we were told). And every day I would wait, and every day there would be nothing.

The fund hovered around the 60% mark for a month, two months. Then, with no apparent cause, there would be another rush, and the percentage would shoot up; only to plateau again.

There was relief. As the planners at Unbound had predicted, once the target reach the late 80s, and readers could see that the book was certain to be published, the pledges began piling in. I was pushed into 100 % by a late night text in February 2019. And that was that. I could now retire with a large glass of wine and some chocolate.

Or so I thought. After the heavy lifting of the funding, then came the usual heavy lifting of preparing a manuscript for publication.

First was the structural edit. I was exceptionally lucky with my editor, who delivered her thoughts with sensitivity and clarity. I spent weekend after weekend huddled over my computer whilst everybody else enjoyed the sunshine, early morning after early morning making sure everything was right. Then the second pass, tidying up any loose ends; the copyedit; and then, finally, the stage I am at as I write, which is the read through of the typeset pages. I never get over the glorious rush of seeing the text looking just like an actual book.

Equally exciting was the cover process, and I am immensely proud of the dynamic, enticing cover, which demonstrates beautifully (I hope) the drama and the matter of the book. I am also very lucky to have Emily Faccini illustrating the maps.

One of the major reasons I wrote the book was to further the spread of classics in children’s reading. I wanted to bring some of my passion into my fiction, and to show readers that myth is not a difficult place, but one that is full of excitement and wonders. And to have it all encased in a beautiful hardback copy is a dream come true. Will I be doing it again? We’ll have to wait and see.

Find out more about Unbound and The Arrow of Apollo https://unbound.com/books/the-arrow-of-apollo/
Folk-tales are necessary to our understanding says Kevin Crossley-Holland.

Puck was right. Right when he tells Dan and Una at the beginning of Puck of Pook’s Hill that ‘there’s no good beating about the bush: it’s true. The People of the Hills have all left. I saw them come into Old England and I saw them go. Giants, trolls, kelpies, brownies, goblins, imps; wood, tree, mound, and water-spirits; heath-people, pishogues, leprechauns, night-riders, pixies, nixies, gnomes, and the rest – gone. All gone!’

But if it’s true that our lifelong and largely unquestioning belief in these creatures has gone, it’s certainly alive and flourishing amongst children, and a crucial part, a magical part, of their imaginative worlds. When my father sat by my sister’s and my bunk bed, cradling his Welsh harp, and said-and-sang fairy tales to us, our nursery became a crossing-place. Can you remember what this was like, and how it felt? I think Edith Nesbit was right. ‘You cannot hope to understand children by imagination, by love itself,’ she said. ‘There is only one way: to remember what you thought and felt and liked and hated when you yourself were a child.’

One important way of doing this is through listening to or reading folktales... Here’s a morsel about seeing, imagining, dreaming when you yourself were a child.

In the last of the light, the unruly long grasses at the bottom of the garden swayed and shimmered and, beyond them, the power station belched black smoke.

Out of the grass, stepped a young doe. She picked her way across the little garden and sampled the purple lupins. Then she nuzzled an apple tree sapling. But all the while she was watchful and fretful. And after no more than a minute, she stepped back into the shelter of the long grass.

It began to grow dark and still the girl watched. She pressed her nose to the kitchen window.

Then a shawl of clouds covered the smudge-moon, and she could no longer see the doe.

As soon as the girl woke up, she remembered the doe, and how lovely and dainty she was.

A doe, she thought. In this waste land! How likely is that? I keep dreaming such impossible things.

On the kitchen table stood a vase with seven purple lupins in it.

‘They’d been knocked flat,’ her mother told her, shaking her head and frowning. ‘Their stems were broken. So I thought it was best describe how some idiot came to a bad end, as did Wullie who sold his soul to the devil for a few coins, and was found soon after lying on his bed ‘like a piece of scorched bread. His family buried him, but a child could have carried the coffin. There was nothing there but some black ashes.’

Likewise, folk-tales are never “true stories” in any strict historical sense, but always include an element of imagination. Those that are based on some historical event or figure, such as Robin Hood or Dick Whittington, are what we call legends.

Otherwise, pretty much anything goes! Belief in ghosts and in witches, stories about fabulous beasts of all kinds, fables and animal tales, stories of giants and strong men, and wonder tales (Tom Thumb, for instance, and The King of the Cats): they’re all grist to the mill.

As you’d expect, the length of these tales may be anything from snippets to quite meaty narratives; the manner of telling ranges from plainspeaking to the highly colloquial, and the tone from hilarious to tragic.

What a pity it is that anthologists and publishers trot out old favourites time and time again when there’s such a hoard waiting to be uncovered. Isn’t there a good folk tale somewhere about how foolish it is blindly to follow one’s leader, and market trends?

One caveat: a fair few tales are not in the least PC, and are racially or gender bigoted, while a handful are downright cruel. For that, after all, is how humans are. And another caveat: there’s often a decided (and lamentable) want of feminism in the original versions of folk-tales, reflecting the society and time when they were first written down.

But... but overall, folk-tales are our shared secular inheritance. To begin with, we could use them better to understand and enjoy the mix of your Roman-Saxon-Danish-Norman English, as Kipling called them, and the Celts surrounding them, but also the many more recent immigrants to our islands. Each time I immerse myself in folktales, I come away thinking how various we humans are, but essentially how alike we are, not least in our deep, confirming need for story.

Kevin Crossley-Holland’s collection Between Worlds: Folktales of Britain & Ireland is now available from Walker Books in paperback, 978-1406383096, £8.99.
This year, our reviewers have read and reviewed over 300 books for Books for Keeps, but that’s still just a fraction of the publishing output. Which are the books we’ll still be reading in 2020 and beyond? We asked those in the know to choose their books of the year.

### Books of the Year 2019

**Daniel Hahn** is a writer, editor and translator. In Chris Naylor-Ballesteros’s beautifully simple *The Suitcase*, a creature arrives from far away, after a hard journey – but it takes a little while for the other animals to learn to be kind to him. This new picture-book is a much-needed lesson in compassion, subtly taught through a story of lovely, uncomplicated hospitality. And as it happens, so is Oili Tanninen’s *Button & Popper*, newly translated from the Finnish by Emily Jeremiah: this describes how the eponymous twins and the rest of their big pixie family find themselves a winter home. It was first published more than 50 years ago, and it shows its age – the gorgeously stylish three-colour geometric illustration, the striking design and the roundabout story – but it’s all the better for that.

Finally, *Lampie and the Children of the Sea*, a novel by Annet Schaap, translated by Laura Watkinson, introduces us to Lampie (the nickname comes from her former lighthouse home), who makes a new friend. But because he is a ‘monster’, Lampie must fight for his rights and his freedom. It’s a gripping and magical adventure, rich in fairy-tale elements, not all of them immediately apparent…

**Teresa Cremin** is Professor of Literacy, Open University

My two front runners this year are *Toffee* by Sarah Crossan and *The Runaways* by Ulf Stark, illustrated by Kitty Crowther. Both explore relationships between their young protagonists and an older character – one of whom is a frail stranger with Alzheimer’s and the other a hospitalised grandfather. Both involve running away and both hurt. However, the sensitivity with which they are written, the moments of light relief and the tangible connections between the characters help to reduce the pain. Crossan’s spare verses draw you in, as do Crowther’s childlike illustrations. These are books to keep, they echo in the mind and deserve re-reading.

**Louise Johns-Shepherd** is Chief Executive, Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE)

The text of picture book *The Undefeated* is a poem by Kwame Alexander highlighting the important contributions of a wide range of African Americans through history. The elegance of the language and the rhythm of the words are so well suited to a picture-book format and when married with Kadir Nelson’s heart-stoppingly beautiful illustrations the outcome is an absolutely breathtaking picture book. Every word, brushstroke and blank space is wonderfully placed and you are carried through the book on an emotional rollercoaster to the joyous last page. I defy anyone not to be moved by this book, its words, its pictures and its important and undeniable message.

**Darren Chetty** is a teacher, doctoral researcher and writer with research interests in education, philosophy, racism, children’s literature and hip hop culture.

Zanib Mian’s debut *Planet Omar Accidental Trouble Magnet* is a fast-paced and hilarious tale of Omar, his family, his classmates and his neighbour Mrs Rogers – ‘John, The Muslims are frying smelly onions again’. Omar loves bike-racing and biryani and is the kind of frenetic, curious child to whom all children can relate. Mian’s story, illustrated by Nasaya Mafardik is a masterclass in telling a story of a young Muslim child who survives and thrives in a world where anti-Muslim racism exists. I can’t wait to see what Omar gets up to next! (An earlier version of the book, self-published as *The Muslims* won The Little Rebels Award 2018.)

**Miranda McKeeney** is the founder of EmpathyLab

At EmpathyLab, we look at books through an empathy lens, thinking they can be used more consciously to build children’s perspective taking, and understanding of others. It’s easy for an empathy collection to get rather dark, so Emily Gravett’s *Cyril and Pat* immediately struck a chord. It hilariously exposes our absurd tribal tendency to see the ‘other’ as threatening, something which desperately needs challenging, in today’s divided world. Cyril is a lonely squirrel, until he meets Pat (a rat). All the park creatures disapprove of their friendship, because ‘Pat is not like you and SQUIRRELS CAN’T BE FRIENDS WITH RATS’. The book has Gravett’s hallmark exquisite balance of words and pictures and the pace is brilliant. I especially love the last, harmonious page where the re-united friends are together on a branch against a lemony sky, surrounded by poppies.
Pam Dix is a former librarian and chair of Ibby UK

Corey’s Rock by Sita Brahmachari and Jane Ray is a very special book, a collaboration between two children’s book creators at the height of their powers. Its format is unusual but very pleasing, one that it would be lovely to see more frequently. More text than a normal picture book, more images than a novel of this length, but how well the two work together to tell the story so poetically. It is simple in the telling but deals with complex emotions: bereavement, sadness, displacement, legend. 10-year-old Isla relocates to Orkney with her Scottish mother and African-origin father after the death of her brother and their loss becomes entangled with the local selkie legend. The sense of a life lived at the edge of the land and of the healing power of the sea is what really endeared the book to me. This is beautifully captured in the delicate watercolour illustrations, the wonderful cover and the endpapers.

I would briefly like to mention Bright Sparks – Amazing Discoveries, Inventions and Designs by Women by Owen O’Doherty too. This has introducing me to a host of wonderful amazing women who I had never heard about before and who designed things I have never really thought about – Monopoly, windscreen wipers. It’s an endlessly delightful list. And I am thrilled that Knights of are publishing more books by Jason Reynolds whose Long Way Down was my book of the year 2018.

Fen Coles, Letterbox Library

The Letterbox Library book of the year is Child of St Kilda by Beth Waters and it deserves to be far, far better known. Inspired by the life of John Gillies, the last child ever to be born on the barren archipelago in the outermost Outer Hebrides, this nonfiction narrative layers up and sweeps over much more expansive thoughts, taking in the environment, precious conservation, vanishing ways of life, kinship, community and resilience. An ambitious presentation of a fragile island ecosystem, executed through extraordinary illustrations of mono prints and digital edits, bound into a book which feels lush and luxurious in its care and detail.

In one list, all the books we recommend for giving 2019:
http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/238/childrens-books/articles/the-books-for-keeps-christmas-books-gift-list-2019
Ten of the Best Books for Beginner Readers

Books for children aged 6-8 are so important: this is where readers for life are made. Children need exciting, entertaining, funny, unusual and (crucially) beautifully illustrated books which will make them fall in love with reading forever. Booksellers Tony West and Margaret Wallace-Jones think it’s so vital that last year they launched The Alligator’s Mouth Award for illustrated early fiction to celebrate the wonderfully imaginative books available for this age group. Below are ten of their favourites.

The Cat and the King
Nick Sharratt, Alison Green Books, 978-1407135090, £6.99 pbk
After an unfortunate dragon-related incident, the King and his cat are exiled from their castle. They flee to a suburban bungalow and meet their new neighbours, the Cromwells. What could possibly go wrong? Charming adventures ensue as the delightful duo visit the supermarket, queue for the bus, go to car boot sales and try to be normal. The king is not of a practical turn of mind, but fortunately his cat is - this feline polymath can do everything (apart from talk - that would be silly). Picture book legend Nick Sharratt's first venture into longer fiction is warm and witty, brilliantly illuminated by the detail in his engaging illustrations. Don't miss the sequel, Nice Work for the Cat and the King which won the 2019 Alligator's Mouth Award. MW-J

King Coo
Adam Stower, David Fickling Books, 978-1910989418, £6.99 pbk
While on the run from Monty Grabbe, the world's worst bully, Ben Pole falls into an extraordinary hidden kingdom, ruled by the irrepressible King Coo. Coo is not intimidated by bullies (or by anything) and soon a wildly inventive plan is hatched to thwart Monty and his ghastly sidekicks. Adam Stower demonstrates an impressive talent for elaborate Heath-Robinson-esque dens, traps and contraptions, and his joyous illustrations work perfectly with the hugely entertaining story. The revelation of King Coo's true identity made me gasp and giggle aloud on public transport. Fun from first page to last. MW-J

The Adventures of Harry Stevenson
Ali Pye, Simon and Schuster, 978-1471170232, £5.99 pbk
There just aren't enough novels about Guinea pigs. This lovely book addresses this with two thrilling tales about Harry, who prefers a quiet life but is destined for greatness. Harry fears the Outside, but when accidentally left behind by his family he embarks on an epic journey via bicycle, reluctant dog and pizza van until at last they are reunited. It's The Incredible Journey for guinea pigs. This furry, football-loving fan of leafy greens is a timeless hero – we can all relate to Harry's tendency to catastrophise and make poor decisions when peckish. Pye has invested Harry with irresistible charm, and her illustrations are a delight. As Harry himself would say: 'Wheeeek!' MW-J

The Incredible Journey

The Naughtiest Unicorn
Pip Bird and David O’Connell, Egmont, 978-1405294782, £5.99
Mira can't wait to arrive at Unicorn School where she will be given her very own unicorn and embark on a life of glitter and excitement. Unfortunately she is allocated the flatulent, truculent and disobedient Dave, who is mostly interested in eating doughnuts and earning dreaded Havoc Points. Despite these challenges, Mira makes friends with risk-averse Raheem and fearless Darcy, and finds Dave has surprising talents. There's fun and adventure on every page, the characters are pleasingly diverse and the pictures lead the reader happily through the story. Plenty more to come in this excellent recent series. MW-J

The Naughtiest Unicorn

6 Books for Keeps No.239 November 2019
Ten of the Best

Two Sides
Polly Ho-Yen, illustrated by Binny Talib
Lula and Lenka have been best friends forever. They are so different - Lula is messy, Lenka is tidy. Lenka is organised, Lula is always late. None of this matters, until one day Lula’s forgetfulness triggers a terrible argument. Can the girls work it out, or are they too different after all? This book is written with a warm understanding of the importance of friendship, and the beautiful, light-filled illustrations lend a sunny atmosphere to this celebration of loving someone who is not like you. MW-J

Little Wolf’s Book of Badness
Ian Whybrow, illustrated by Tony Ross
When we first meet Little Wolf he has just started out on a long and perilous journey to Cunning College, deep in the woods, where he will learn how to be a big bad wolf. The trouble is he doesn’t really want to be big and bad, such is his disposition, as he gets along with the hoomins and likes the little creechurs of the Forest. His letters home imploring his parents to let him return reveal as much about himself as with his escapades and the friends he makes along the way. He is not unlike Nigel Molesworth but with 9 extra rules of badness. TW

The Man Who Wore All His Clothes
Allan Ahlberg, illustrated by Katherine McEwan
This is the first of four stories about the Gaskitt family liberally sprinkled with Ahlberg touches that make it extra quirky. We meet each of the happy-families-style Gaskitts plus their cat and their communicative fridge and a bank robber which in Ahlberg world means car chases and prison will be involved but why would someone go to work wearing all their clothes? It’s not very English, surely? Lovely colourful illustrations on every page by McEwan at her best. TW

Mac B Kid Spy Undercover
Mac Barnett, illustrated by Mike Lowery
When Mac Barnett was a child in the 80s he was recruited by the Queen no less on a top secret mission to find the Crown Jewels. For one so young this was an awesome responsibility which, in this faithful retelling of the facts (she was only missing a spoon it quickly becomes apparent) brings this little understood historical period to life. How fortunate that Mike Lowery was on hand to capture this young sleuth’s globetrotting adventure. TW

The Legend of Kevin
Philip Reeve and Sarah McIntyre
Any of the books by Reeve and McIntyre are worthy of inclusion on this list but I particularly like the roly-poly flying pony for its perfectly cute but wildly imaginative scenario. After a storm blows him into town from the Outermost West Kevin alights on the building where Max lives. There are some mermaids and sea monkeys, a roof-top rescue and some meditations on biscuits, but not in that order. The pictures enhance the words and every turn of the page McIntyre’s bold, humorous illustrations lead the reader on. TW

Frog and Toad series
Arnold Lobel
These are not found as readily as they were in the eighties and nineties (we import ours from America) and though these are an easier level of reading than other titles reviewed here I believe they are the most perfect books for a child to discover deeper meanings in the pages of a book. Wise Frog and his bewildered and naive friend Toad teach us nuggets of zen wisdom in each of the four* books – memorable for me are The List, The Lost Button, The Letter – I could go on. Every story is a gem. Full of kindness and unwavering friendship these are the books I wish I had written so my debt to humanity is paid. Grasshopper on the Road is as deft a portrait of a freethinker in a world of headless numpties and narrow-minded zealotry as you could hope to find. TW *with five stories each

Five years ago, Tony West (TW) and Margaret Wallace-Jones (MW-J) opened The Alligator’s Mouth Children’s Bookshop in Richmond – a bookshop at the heart of the community. Tony has a background in teaching and over 20 years in the book trade. Margaret studied children’s literature at Roehampton University and bookselling is the best job she has ever had.

Books for Keeps No.239 November 2019
In 2015 Rob Biddulph’s debut picture book, *Blown Away* won the Waterstones Children’s Book Prize, one of only two picture books to ever win this prestigious award. Over the next five years he produced a total of nine picture books including his latest, the brilliantly bonkers *Show and Tell*. As well as writing and illustrating his own books he illustrates for other authors, has been nominated for and won a string of awards, is the official World Book Day illustrator, has work scheduled until 2024, is branching out into longer middle grade fiction and negotiating some pretty exciting new developments. So was this a meteoric rise to fame and easily won? Not at all. Rob’s career as a children’s author and illustrator was, he says, a long time coming.

After Art College and studying graphic design, Rob had a long and very successful career as a magazine art director working on many national titles. He didn’t really think about writing a picture book until he had children of his own. Reading to his three girls regularly and listening to them talk and play inspired him to make up his own stories and characters and from there he started to work these ideas up into books. He continued to work as the Observer Magazine’s Art Director whilst he spent many years talking to agents and publishers about his work, using everything in his arsenal to try and get a book into production. He’d almost given up when he met Jodie Hodges at United Agents. She persuaded him to put together a portfolio, sketches and characters as well as his main ideas – and it was the penguins from this portfolio that captured the attention of HarperCollins. Rob had a story about some children who were carried away whilst flying a kite and the penguins (who can’t fly) fitted better into the story than the children: *Blown Away* was born.

*Blown Away* helped Rob define his style as a picture book author, a style which is at once familiar yet distinctive and accessible. The book, like all that have followed, is written in rhyme, a conscious and deliberate decision. Rob likes writing rhyme because he likes reading it, particularly out loud to children. The idea that even very young children can tune in to the patterns and rhythms of the words so that they can almost ‘sing along’ with a story fits his intention to have children really involved when they are being read to. And having books that encourage reading aloud and that shared reading experience is what inspired Rob to become a writer in the first place. Four of Rob’s books have been chosen to be read aloud on CBeebies as bedtime stories, testament surely to the way in which those rhymes add to the story arc and support that shared reading and listening experience.

So the rhyme is really important to him and he adds: ‘For me the part of the process that is most rewarding is getting the rhyme to work and the story to flow within those constraints. It is the best feeling when it all falls into place’. The visual is also key to Rob’s process and he starts a story with a picture in his head. Then he plans out a rough and simple story arc and once he has this, spends time working on one or two set pieces or key events that he has visualised. He works these up almost to the standard they appear in the book. Having these pictures helps him with the writing because he has a concrete representation of the characters, the events and the colour palette. Then he does the writing in one block, making sure that the rhyming text is really moving the story forward.
Unusually, and because of his experience as an Art Director, Rob also likes to put the text onto the page, to design the layout. In magazines you are always laying things out to try to persuade people to read the article and it’s exactly the same with the book, laying out the pages so that they pull you in and then taking you on the journey, slowing you down or speeding you up with your reading.’ He has a great relationship with his Art Department and is always wary of treading on other people’s toes but he spent twenty years laying out pages so the thinking about this is an integral part of his process.

In all Rob’s books there are the main stories and then many background details some of which tell parallel stories (the monkey in Blown Away or the rabbit love story in GRRRRR!) some of which are entirely irrelevant (the number 72 – the year of Rob’s birth – appears in every book) and some which provide us with jokes, colour or interest (the hidden alphabet in Show and Tell, the reverse world bedrooms in Kevin). Again, the motivation for adding these is to provide a story time experience that grows with each reading of the book. Like any parent, Rob is familiar with the phase children go through of wanting a favourite book read over and over. Children love the familiarity of books they know and love to look for details: ‘I wanted to put in levels of details that you might not spot until the sixth or seventh time of reading it.’ These details add different layers of meaning which make them interesting for older children or adults (particularly those adults who have to read them over and over again).

There are themes of friendship and hope throughout all Rob’s books but he thinks this is because these are really universal themes which are very relevant to young children’s lives. He really doesn’t set out to ‘preach’ or write stories with a moral but these kinds of themes seem to emerge. When he was creating Odd Dog Out he had an idea for a world entirely populated by sausage dogs but it was his daughter returning from school worried that she didn’t have the same lunchbox as her friends that made him think about a story where you didn’t need to be exactly like everyone else to fit in. This, like all the best stories, evolved into something more nuanced and Rob talks movingly about speaking with adults in Russia who felt that the rainbow scarf dog was an important and meaningful symbol in a country where children are taught not to be open about their sexuality or identity.

Kevin was his first book which didn’t have a cast of animal characters. Based on his daughter’s actual imaginary friend, to whom the book is dedicated, this book was actually one of his earliest ideas. And now in Show and Tell he has created a cast of children – the very eccentric and rather wonderful Class 2L. Here, he has also carefully constructed a class of children which really reflects their differences and includes children with a range of backgrounds, as you would find in any inner-city classroom. He says: ‘I was reflecting my own children’s class at school. I love that my own children’s classes are very accepting of difference and diversity – and there are all these children in that class – so this is a reflection of what my life, and their life is like. It is very important for everybody to be able to see themselves somewhere in a children’s book.’ He has taken a similar view of his work as the World Book Day official illustrator and as part of this role was instrumental in creating the Share a Story bookmarks where he was determined that there would be at least one bookmark from the range that would speak to every reader, whatever their tastes and interests.

Always busy, Rob is currently working on his next picture book, The Day I Lost My Human, as well as writing a new (yet to be announced) middle-grade fiction series and continuing with his famous #PackedLunchPostIts, at least until his youngest daughter leaves Year 6. He believes his is the best job in the world and obviously revels in the creativity of it all. Does he wonder why he didn’t do this earlier? ‘I don’t think I could have done it before I had children. I know now what they like, and how to talk to them’. It is this love of reading a story that shapes his work: ‘Sharing a story with someone is a truly magical moment’.

Books mentioned, all by Rob Biddulph, all published by HarperCollins Children’s Books:
Blown Away, 978-0007593828, £6.99 pbk
GRRRRR!, 978-0007594139, £6.99 pbk
Kevin, 978-0008207427, £6.99 pbk
Odd Dog Out, 978-0008184780, £6.99 pbk
Show and Tell, 978-0008317911, £12.99 hbk
Jon Agee is the author/illustrator of many books for children and is hugely well-known in America where he has won numerous awards: Terrific and Milo’s Hat Trick between them have been name New York Times Ten Best Illustrated Books, ALA Notable Book, Horn Book Fanfare, PW Best Books of the Year, Book Sense Top Ten Pick and LA Times Best Children’s Picture Books. New publisher Scallywag Press are now bringing his books to the UK, including The Wall in the Middle of the Book, topical, witty and full of deadpan humour. Jon describes how he created the book.

Three hilarious and thought-provoking picture books from the award-winning Jon Agee

Scallywag Press www.scallywagpress.com
The compositions for The Wall in the Middle of the Book were sketched out in pencil. The individual elements – ogre, knight, tiger, rhino, gorilla, fish, water, etc. – were hand-painted on various textured papers, using watercolour, gouache and crayon. There was another layer of simple digital effects: shading, trimming, highlights, etc. Like going to the beauty salon.

The most important effect was repeating the image of a wall – the same, exact wall – in the middle of every spread. This was purely conceptual – treating the books gutter as if it was a barrier – but it also created a two-dimensional, “ant-farm” perspective, where all the action moved to the front of the stage (or page), which explains why the imagery is large and bold.

Because each composition uses up a double-page spread, and a lot is happening, an earlier version of the book was over 60 pages long. My editor saw that shortening the book – to 48 pages – would be an improvement, by condensing the tension/action. For example, in the earlier version, the rhino, tiger and gorilla, one by one, climb on top of each other (in an attempt to get over the wall) before a mouse enters and scares them off. In the published book, the mouse enters as the unsuspecting animals are in the process of climbing. The overlapping action makes the scene more dynamic.

There are a lot of moving parts in the book. Things are moving in different spaces – water, land, air – and at different paces. When the ogre wanders in, his first movements are slow, subtle, aloof. When the alligator appears, it pauses before suddenly swooping to the surface in an attempt to devour a duck. Meanwhile, the water flows in discreetly, before rising smoothly and quickly. All of these elements were designed – or choreographed – to enhance the drama of the story, move the narrative forward, and to make a book that is visually compelling.

My influences are many (1960 Eastern European posters, Saul Steinberg, Art Deco, Jan Lenica, Milton Glaser, John Burningham), but Leo Lionni comes to mind first, for his use of bold, cut-out paper shapes against the white page.

The Wall in the Middle of the Book by Jon Agee is published by Scallywag Press, 978-1912650057, £7.99 pbk.
Christmas is for... the very youngest

Babies love books. Not just very simple books with one word and one picture, but bright jolly board books with lively illustrations and a text that even tired parents can enjoy. Mary had a Little Lamb by Jarvis is a perfect example of this. Follow Mary as she dances across the sturdy pages, basket in hand followed by an ever-growing cavalcade of brightly coloured animals ranging from purple mice to a lovely green crocodile. A simpler text but no less welcome is That’s Not My Polar Bear... Here even the very youngest can have the pleasure of touch – so important for engagement – as they feel the shiny nose, the rough tongue and finally the lovely soft tummy of the polar bear; the simplest of pictures, a repetitious text and hours of enjoyment. Books for babies must attract their attention. What better way than through sound and light? Winter Wonderland sound book with its cheerful snowy scenes filled with action and colour brings the noises of the winterscape into the room at the touch of the little buttons on each page, there for little fingers to discover. No noises in The Twinkly, twinkly bedtime book – a gentle storyline and stars that light up every page. Just what might be needed at the end of that exciting day.

Christmas is for ... pictures and stories and joining in

Picture books to delight the eye, stories to engage a young listener (or even an old one), these are real treats to find under the tree. The Best Kind of Bear by Greg Gormley and David Barrow is one; a gentle story, on the face of it simple but cleverly blurring the real world and the imaginative as Bear visits the library to find out what sort of bear he is. Luckily Nellie (and the young reader) has the answer. This is picture book that will bear frequent rereading as it becomes a loved favourite. Wolf in the Snow by Matthew Cordell picks up this theme of being lost and then found. This almost wordless picture book follows a little girl as she struggles home through the snow. A wolf cub is also struggling alone and almost wordless picture book follows a little girl as she struggles with the answer. This is picture book that will bear frequent rereading as it becomes a loved favourite.

Christmas is for... sharing

There is nothing more Christmassy than a shared family story time. Koshka’s Tales Stories from Russia retold and lavishly illustrated by James Mayhew will enchant, carrying each and everyone to meet among others Tsar Saltan, Baba Yaga and Vassilissa the Fair. These are traditional tales to be savoured, widening horizons beyond the more familiar fairytales. For a slightly younger audience Georgie Adams’ Storytime is perfect. Contemporary language that is a joy to read, a mix of imaginative nonsense and everyday situations packaged with fantastical illustrations by Magda Brol, this collection is a treasure trove and it’s a treat to follow Doogle, Cabbage and Buttons as they search for Humbly-Bumbly bees, meet pirates, magicians and dragons and more. Sometimes though it is good to meet real people: Epic Tales of Triumph and Adventure contains stories that cross the world and cross time. Here we meet familiar faces as well as many that will be unfamiliar. Attractive illustrations accompany a concise text that is informative and easy to understand without being condescending.

Christmas is for ... the imagination

It’s The Night Before Christmas and Santa’s reindeer have landed on the roof in Roger Duvoisin’s joyous evocation of this well known poem. Imagination soars to the stars in How the Stars Came to Be by Pooma Mistry, each page filled with starlight patterns for that time between picture book and the chapter book. The power of the imagination is at the heart of Angel on the Roof. What happens when a lonely boy meets an angel? It is a story that has Christmas at its heart – warming, delightful, satisfying with a recognisable setting and with exquisite line drawings by Shirley Hughes. Chris Riddell whirls older readers into a different world in The Guardians of Magic, where Zam, Phoebe and Bathsheba must use their talents and courage to defeat The Clockmaker and protect the Forever Tree. Here again the illustrations work with the lively narrative to make this an enchanting gift. It is a much colder world in Frostheart but there is plenty of action and humour to keep any young reader glued to the page following Ash, as he searches for his lost parents and struggles to use his special gift. Crossing several landscapes Natasha Farrant’s Eight Princesses and a Mirror consider what it is to be a princess. The storytelling will hold readers’ attention and the illustrations by Lydia Corry will ensure a delighted reception. Hey, Sherlock is the latest novel to feature the teenage sleuth Garvie Smith. Though Garvie may be a genius he is also a very real
anti-hero; someone the reader can imagine as a friend. If Garvie is a teenager for today, so is Jo as she imagines a life for herself that will not be bound by a Chinese takeaway. *Chinglish* is fresh, contemporary, funny and full of life – just what a Christmas present should be.

**Christmas is for... familiar faces**

And who could be more familiar than Harry Potter? In *The Goblet of Fire* Jim Kay’s artwork bursts off the page, a gift to give on giving. An older favourite, but as welcome, is *Black Beauty* gorgeously illustrated with great realism by Christian Birmingham. *Around the World in Eighty Days* gets a new treatment too at the hands of Antonis Papatheodoulou: reimagined and full of riddles, it instantly engages, and the result is a neat picture book that does not sacrifice the storytelling.

**Christmas is for... enquiring minds**

For young readers thirsty for information there is plenty to look out for. Dinosaurs are a sure-fire choice and *The Truth about Dinosaurs* by Guido Van Genechten is an engaging introduction for the youngest, grounded in facts but with a quirky approach. More serious but engrossing and lavishly illustrated is *Life. The First Four Billion Years*. Here this almost unimaginable past is put into perspective intelligently and accessibly. We don’t use the sense of smell very much; animals do and *Nose Knows. Wild Ways Animals smell the World* introduces the subject with plenty of interactive flaps to reveal added facts or expand the text; guaranteed to fascinate curious young minds. The world outside the window as described in *What’s that – Garden Birds* will get young birdwatchers twitching as they pocket the identification wheel which allows them to leave this handsome production safe at home.

**Christmas is for... poetry**

Wonderfully in keeping with the Christmas spirit is *Midnight Feasts*, compiled by A.F. Harrold and illustrated by Katy Riddell. This brings together an eclectic and wide-ranging selection of poems about food, a mouth-watering collection. Just as beautifully presented is *Poems from a Green and Blue Planet*, edited by Sabrina Mahfouz. Again, the selection features contemporary poets as well as those from past and from around the world. This is a gift to excite. Finally, Shakespeare – following her previous anthologies, Allie Esiri has created *Shakespeare for Every Day of the Year*. This is a gift for the family to share, and everyone will want to find the sonnet, soliloquy or speech matched with their birthday. Beautifully presented and with inspiring introductions to each piece of verse, this will sit happily on everyone’s Christmas list.

**Christmas is for... fun**

*How to Hide a Lion at Christmas* by Helen Stephens is a thoroughly enjoyable picture book and reveals all as Lion follows Iris to join the Christmas gathering. The answer is ingenious if not quite expected, and Santa gets a brief look in too. Santa is certainly present in *Mouse’s Night Before Christmas* by Tracey Corderoy and Sarah Massini, and its rhyming text and comforting images make this a cosy Christmas story to enjoy. In *The Crayon’s Christmas* there are Christmas cards, notes and activities to explore on every page as Duncan and his crayons get ready for the great day. Elsewhere, Emily Gravett’s *Meerkats* are also getting ready for Christmas. Sonny sets off to find a perfect Christmas, his travels charted by his cards home until the final surprise.

**Christmas is for ... reflection**

The world turns moving through the year; this is beautifully depicted in *The Hare and the Moon A Calendar of Paintings* in which Catherine Hyde marries her art with the traditions, the wildlife, the names associated with each month – a calendar to treasure. Illustrators from across the world are represented in *Migrations: Open Hearts Open Borders* and their postcards invite the reader to reflect on what this means today. Which brings us to the Christmas story. *Leah’s Story* by Margaret Bateson-Hill and Karin Littlewood is a retelling of the traditional Nativity set in contemporary Palestine and made accessible to a diverse audience; a Christmas present.
Beyond the Secret Garden: Books for Everyone

Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O’Connor find a way to include everyone on your holiday gift list.

The holiday season is an important time for children’s books. With that in mind, we thought we would offer a list of children’s books that suit a variety of reading tastes and needs. We would especially like to stress that the books we list below are for ALL children, and not just children from similar backgrounds to the main characters in these books.

2019 has been a great year for books by and about BAME people and there is a sense that some of the initiatives of the past few years are just beginning to impact UK children’s publishing. By way of example, two authors who were first featured in 2017’s A Change Is Gonna Come (Stripes) had superb debuts – Aisha Bushby’s magical middle-grade A Pocketful of Stars (Egmont), and Yasmin Rahman’s YA tale of friendship and survival All The Things We Never Said (Hot Key).

We’ve organised the list by genre, and tried to highlight books that have appeared or won awards in the last year or so, and some books you might have missed. We encourage you to seek out your local independent children’s bookshop, if you’re lucky enough to have one, or independent online services such as Letterbox Library, as they can offer further suggestions and great books to suit your child.

Picture Books

Fifty years after the first moonwalk, Ken Wilson-Max’s Astro Girl (Otter-Barry 2019) gives young children a chance to read and dream about their own experience in space. Look Up! (Penguin) by Nathan Bryan and Dapo Adeola is a beautifully illustrated story featuring Rocket, who is fascinated by the stars and is eager to convince her big brother Jamal that there is a whole universe to discover beyond his phone. My Hair (Faber & Faber), written by Hannah Lee and illustrated by Allen Fatimahar, combines the excitement of a forthcoming birthday party with a celebration of the wealth of Black hairstyles for women and men. Breanna J. McDaniel’s Hands Up! (Dial) reimagines a potentially frightening phrase through the activities of a young girl experiencing an ordinary day—and a protest march. For the very youngest booklovers, and those learning their letters, Atinuke’s B is for Baby (Walker) delights with its pictures of an adorable toddler falling into a basket of bananas that become breakfast. Nadia Shireen’s follow up to Billy and the Beast, is the hilarious Billy and the Dragon (Jonathan Cape).

Folk and Traditional Tales

Poonam Mistry, whose beautiful and complex illustrations for Chitra Soundar’s You’re Safe with Me gained a Kate Greenaway nomination last year, has created a remarkable visual experience with How the Stars Came to Be (Tate). Soundar and Mistry have combined again for You’re Snug with Me (Lantana). Amin Hassanzadeh Sharif’s graffiti illustrations are the ideal complement to Sally Pomme Clayton’s retelling of The Phoenix of Persia (Tiny Owl).

Leah’s Star – A Nativity Story (Alanna Max) written by Margaret Bateson-Hill and beautifully illustrated by Karin Littlewood tells the nativity story through the eyes of the innkeeper’s daughter. Under the Great Plum Tree (Tiny Owl), written by Sufiya Ahmed and illustrated by Reza Dalvand draws upon the Ancient India text The Panchatantra.

Historical Fiction

Catherine Johnson’s Freedom (Scholastic) won the Little Rebels Award this year, and for good reason; it intertwines one boy’s experience as a Black Briton with the fate of the Zong Case in the 18th century; keeping readers involved in historical events.
by letting them witness it through Nat’s, the main character’s, eyes. Scholastic has also published three books in the Voices series, looking at historical periods through child characters of colour. The most recent of these to appear is E. L. Norry’s Son of the Circus, A Victorian Story about the 19th century circus owner, Pablo Fanqué. Patrice Lawrence’s Diver’s Daughter, A Tudor Story and Bali Rai’s Now Or Never, A Dunkirk Story also published in 2019 were featuring in an earlier Beyond the Secret Garden column.

**Middle-Grade Fiction**

Sharna Jackson’s High Rise Mystery (Knights Of) reinvigorates the ‘detective duo’ trope in children’s literature by placing the action in an urban tower block, where two Black British sisters solve the crime. Toad Attack by Patrice Lawrence and illustrated by Becka Moor (Barrington Stoke) is great fun and written in very accessible language. Planet Omar – Accidental Trouble Magnet written by Zanib Mian and illustrated by Nasaya Mafandik (Hachette) should be read by anyone who enjoys the Diary of a Wimpy Kid and Tom Gates series. In a similar vein, Cookie and the Most Annoying Boy in the World is the first children’s book from former Blue Peter presenter Konnie Huq (Piccadilly). Little Badman and the Invasion Of The Killer Aunties written by Humza Arshad and Henry White and illustrated by Alesksei Btiskoff (Penguin) features Humza Khan, an ambitious eleven year old rapper.

**Nonfiction**

Combining poetry and science, James Carter and Nomoco’s Once Upon a Raindrop (Caterpillar) will please readers who respond to words, the workings of nature, and stylish illustration. Jeffrey Boakye, of What Is Masculinity? Why Does It Matter? And Other Big Questions (Palgrave Macmillan 2017). is a teacher, doctoral researcher and writer with research interests in education, philosophy, racism, children’s literature and hip hop culture. He is a contributor to The Good Immigrant, edited by Nikesh Shukla and the author, with Jeffrey Boakye, of What Is Masculinity? Why Does It Matter? And Other Big Questions. He tweets at @rapclassroom.

**Poetry**

In this year of heightened concern over the environment, Joseph Coelho’s A Year of Nature Poems (Wide Eyed Editions) gives young poets and naturalists beautiful images of the nature around them. For an older audience, Sophia Thakur has been a rising star of young poets and naturalists. Her moving anthology, The Million Pieces of Neena Gill (Penguin) is Emma Smith Barton’s first novel for young adults and is a tense and moving look at teenage mental health. Kick The Moon by Muhammed Khan (Macmillan) confirms Khan as an important voice in contemporary YA. Oh My Gods by Alexandra Sheppard (Scholastic) is a smart reworking of Ancient Greek mythology, telling the story of half-mortal London teenager Helen. Becoming Dinah by Kit De Waal (Bellatrix) is a road-trip coming of age YA debut from the author of My Name is Leon. Yasmin Rahman’s YA debut All the Things We Never Said (Hot Key) is a moving tale of friendship told from multiple viewpoints.

**Science Fiction and Fantasy**

Where the River Runs Gold by Sita Brahmachari (Orion) is not only a beautifully written adventure of two children trying to find their way home through a dystopian world, it carries a timely environmental message as well. Jasbinder Bilan’s debut novel, Asha and the Spirit Bird (Chicken House) is also a journey adventure with a sense of mysticism pervading it. The Tunnels Below (Pushkin) is as a gripping fantasy debut novel from Nadine Wild-Palmer.

**Young Adult**

YA readers are spoiled for choice this year. Alex Wheatle’s Home Girl (Atom), Elizabeth Acevedo’s With The Fire on High (Hot Key), and Patrice Lawrence’s Rose, Interrupted (Hachette) all focus on teenage girls trying to navigate their worlds. Dean Atta’s The Black Flamingo (Hodder) beautifully details the story of a gay Black teen as a novel-in-verse. Malorie Blackman’s Crossfire (PRH) continues the story of a racially divided world she first created in Noughts and Crosses. Both Nikesh Shukla’s The Boxer (Hodder) and Savita Kalhan’s That Asian Kid (Troika) have teenage boys deciding how to confront racism and find acceptance. For readers who appreciate surrealism in both story and illustration, Shaun Tan’s short story collection, Tales from the Inner City (Walker Studio) is sure to satisfy. The Million Pieces of Neena Gill (Penguin) is Emma Smith Barton’s first novel for young adults and is a tense and moving look at teenage mental health. Kick The Moon by Muhammed Khan (Macmillan) confirms Khan as an important voice in contemporary YA. Oh My Gods by Alexandra Sheppard (Scholastic) is a smart reworking of Ancient Greek mythology, telling the story of half-mortal London teenager Helen. Becoming Dinah by Kit De Waal (Bellatrix) is a road-trip coming of age YA debut from the author of My Name is Leon. Yasmin Rahman’s YA debut All the Things We Never Said (Hot Key) is a moving tale of friendship told from multiple viewpoints.

In one list, all the books we recommend for giving 2019: http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/238/childrens-books/articles/the-books-for-keeps-christmas-books-gift-list-2019
Fill your stockings!

This issue of Books for Keeps is packed with gift recommendations but there should always be room for one or two more books, something to pop into a stocking or under the tree. With that in mind, here are some extra suggestions and, taking into account the amount of space you’ll have, we’ve organised them by size: large to (very) small.

Board Games to Create and Play is unlike anything we’ve seen before: creators Kevan Davis and Viviane Schwarz have designed a book that gives families everything they need to make up their own boardgames. It contains a stack of blank boards and a set of different rules to try out, the rest is up to you: ‘Some of the games you make will be great and some of them will be terrible’, they say, ‘but there’s still a lot of strategy and fun to be had in trying to win a terrible game that you, your friends and family have just made’. Indeed. Paddington is the perfect house guest, and Paddington’s Post is a fun novelty storybook containing six envelopes for children to open. There’s a map of Notting Hill, special offers from some of Paddington’s favourite shops, but the best has to be a card from Aunt Lucy in Peru, complete with an easy-to-follow marmalade cake recipe.

With appealing watercolour illustrations by Falmouth graduate Katie Hendra, Christmas is Coming! provides a countdown to the 25th December, with 24 festive activities – carols to sing, stories to read, things to make, games to play. The cover is an actual advent calendar, with 24 doors to open. Sea Lights by Ruth Symons is also beautifully illustrated. Caroline Rabie’s rich, painterly artwork is perfectly suited to this night-time adventure starring a little girl and her fisherman father. Flaps and peepholes mean the lights of the town and its fireworks seem actually to be twinkling.

There should always be space for a bit of silliness in the holidays and Sue Hendra and Paul Linnet have a bull with Oh Christmas Tree!, the story of a tree that refuses to behave as it should. The rhyming text is as fleet as the baubles chasing the tree round the house, and it’s a treat to read aloud. Joke books are of course 100% necessary to your Christmas is Coming! collection. The Football School Joke Book will have fans of all teams in stitches, while the contents list of The Treehouse Joke Book by Andy Griffiths and Terry Denton gives an idea of its tone, with sheep jokes, sleep jokes and tree jokes amongst the categories. Best of all though is The Bolds’ Christmas Cracker, a delightful mix of very funny jokes and entertaining activities starring everyone’s favourite family of hyenas and illustrated with typical panache by David Roberts.

Not a joke book, but full of humour nonetheless, Cookie and the Most Annoying Boy in the World by Konnie Huq will hold the attention no matter what is going on around. Cookie is an irresistible narrator who tells her story – of school, school rivalries, misunderstandings and competing in a TV junior quiz show – at breakneck speed, veering happily off at tangents and always saying exactly what she thinks. With Huq’s own black and white illustrations, it’s fresh and inspiring, and there are more Cookie stories to come. Slightly younger than Cookie at 7½ but just as good company is Jeanie, the star of Sophy Henn’s glorious Bad Nana books. There are now three in the series, with That’s Snow Business particularly fun for this time of year. Calling Jeanie irrepressible doesn’t come close, and her energetic, direct-to-reader narratives pull everyone into the story. Bad Nana, her grandma and partner in crime, is just as appealing – who could resist someone who always has a whoopee cushion in her handbag? Henn’s illustrations, in various day-glo colours, are as bright and engaging as the text.

This time of year calls for ghosts stories too, and Zippel The Little Keyhole Ghost by Alex Rühle will be a favourite. It’s a warm-hearted story starring a boy called Paul and the cheeky ghost he discovers living in the keyhole of his front door. Together they have some excellent adventures, Zippel getting up to all sorts of tricks in an old castle and taking ingenious revenge on a couple of bullies who’ve been tormenting Paul. Full colour illustrations by Axel Scheffler perfectly capture the droll humour of the stories. Scheffler’s illustrations are on show too in Nosy Crow’s Flip Flap interactive board book series. Brand new is Frozen, which features twelve different animals, all to be found in chilly locations, and presents the opportunity to create over 100 new creatures by flipping the page to mix and match tops and bottoms. The resulting combinations will have children giggling and the mixed-up names and rhymes are just as funny as the pictures.

Very little children will also have fun with The Twelve Days of Christmas, a small-scale novelty board book version of the old favourite by Britta Teckentrup. There’s a peep-through hole in the very centre of the book and each page turn reveals more of those twelve gifts as the cut out gets bigger and more elaborate. Lots of fun and Teckentrup’s artwork is always delightful.

The Lonely Christmas Tree by another Books for Keeps favourite Chris Naylor-Ballesteros is another dainty delight, and this time a reworking of the classic ‘Twas the Night Before Christmas. The story of a left-behind Christmas tree finding a welcome at the last minute at the centre of the celebrations, it’s an uplifting story about friendship and love.

And finally, wafer-small but bursting with information, ideas and inspiration is The Arty Fact Book by Gary Panton for Tate Publishing. Only 9cm x 9cm, this tiny book nonetheless manages to tell you lots about art, artists and the creative process. Great fun to dip into, it’s likely to lead to all sorts of discoveries and more research.

Happy reading, happy giving!

In one list, all the books we recommend for giving 2019:

http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/238/childrens-books/articles/the-books-for-keeps-christmas-books-gift-list-2019
It’s Wicked! Celebrating ten years of The Wicked Young Writer Awards

Over the years, there have been some incredible judges including Ed Balls, Cressida Cowell, Laura Dockrill, Inua Ellams, Caleb Femi, poet Hussain Manawer, Nicky Cox from First News newspaper and Jonathan Douglas, CEO of NLT. Jonathan Douglas says, ‘Over the past 10 years, young writers from across the UK have been capturing our imaginations, moving us to tears and making us laugh out loud through the Wicked Young Writer Awards. Writing can inspire children and young people’s creativity and give them the freedom to explore their thoughts and feelings. Not only that, children and young people who enjoy writing tend to go on to do better at school and lead happier lives. I can’t wait to read the entries from this year’s young writers as we celebrate 10 years of this incredible award.’

Since they were set up, the Awards have attracted entries from over 50,000 children and young people across the UK, with several former winners going on to be published poets and writers. Another unique facet of the Awards is the presentation ceremony at the Apollo Victoria, London home of Wicked the Musical. All 120 finalists and their families and teachers are invited. The ceremony features live performances and readings of the winning entries by the Wicked cast. For many of the young people, it is an incredible moment when they hear one of the stars of the show reading their piece of writing.

The judges for the 2020 Awards will be: Cressida Cowell, the new Waterstones Children’s Laureate, returning as Head Judge for a fifth consecutive year. Cressida will be joined again by long-standing judges Jonathan Douglas, Chief Executive of the National Literacy Trust; Nicky Cox MBE, Editor-in-Chief of the award-winning children’s newspaper First News; Michael McCabe, Executive Producer (UK) of Wicked and the internationally renowned poet and mental health ambassador Hussain Manawer, who returns for a second year. Joining them for the 10th anniversary year will be the BAFTA award-winning writer, comedian and actor Charlie Higson and author, illustrator and performance poet Laura Dockrill.

Wicked has an Ambassador in Dan Freedman, author of the Jamie Johnson football book series and most recently, Unstoppable, who has visited schools across the country to raise awareness of the Awards.

The Awards will be presented in June this year, as in previous years, entrants can enter one of five different age categories: 5-7, 8-10, 11-14, 15-17, 18-25. In addition, the 2020 Awards see the fifth year of the FOR GOOD Award for Non-Fiction, encouraging 11-25-year olds to write essays or articles that recognise the positive impact that people can have on each other, their communities and the world we live in. Pieces of original writing can be submitted, either individually or as part of a school group, until 2 March 2020.

The overall winners from each category will win a VIP family experience to the West End production of Wicked, including an exclusive backstage tour and cast meet-and-greet, £50 book/eBook tokens, plus £100 worth of books for the 5-14-year old winner’s school library, donated by Hachette Children’s Books. All finalists’ entries get printed in the Wicked Young Writer Awards 2020 anthology.

There will also be prizes for the school and teacher who submit the most entries. Details of other prizes in each age category are highlighted on www.WickedYoungWriterAwards.com. The Awards are pleased to announce as returning media partner for 2020, First News. First News will also sponsor the Award prize for the FOR GOOD category which is judged by the by Editor-in-Chief Nicky Cox MBE.

The deadline for entries is 2 March 2020.

Schools, writing groups or individuals can enter for the 10th year of the Wicked Young Writers Awards at www.WickedYoungWriterAwards.com where they will also find writing tips and resources from the Award judges.
This issues Good Reads are chosen by pupils at Herne Bay High School, Kent. Thanks to their learning resource centre manager Chantal Kelleher, one of two librarians on the 2019 SLA School Librarian of the Year Honour List. Chantal is dedicated to developing a whole school approach to reading and information literacy, ensuring the LRC is a vibrant and colourful hub. From filming staff reciting poems to creating book-filled goody bags for transition students, via the LGBT pupil group she supports and her innovative use of the library to support different departments in the school, Chantal promotes the LRC with creativity and flair.

**Percy Jackson and the Last Olympian**
Rick Riordan, Puffin, 978-0141346885, £6.99 pbk
I have read this book many times, it is by far one of my favourites. It makes you think that there might be something else in the world, something we cannot see. It makes you realise you can make friends in strange places. It lets you see the true light or darkness inside someone. The characters are one of my favourite aspects because they are both funny and serious. The way the book is structured is amazing, it has so much action but also includes breaks for comedy. I started reading the series because I had seen the film but I definitely prefer the book. I thought the conclusion of the series was completely unexpected but really satisfying.

*Alex, age 14*

**Big Game**
Dan Smith, Chicken House, 978-1909489943
Big Game fulfills all the requirements of a book that I would read and love. It combines fast moving action with the bonding of two completely different people with little in common. The teenager Oskari is sent into the wild as a test of manhood but instead of the usual task of surviving on his own wits he discovers the president of the United States whose plane has been shot down. The dynamics and friendship between the unlikely duo make the story compelling reading. Overall it is a great book because it includes thrilling cliff hangers that put you on edge plus moments that you will never forget. The ending is a brilliant conclusion where justice is served and all the wrongs put right.

*Luke, age 13*

**River of Ink**
Helen Dennis, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444920437, £6.99 pbk
River of Ink is a fantastic experience. It's literally the book that got me into reading. The amazing storyline and characters kept me invested throughout the book, chapter after chapter. This book constantly keeps the characters in danger, creating a great deal of excitement and an atmosphere of danger. However, it does lend itself to a typical flow of passing from event to event without giving the side characters much reason to trust or forgive our protagonist. All of this in mind though, I still love this book.

*Jack, age 15*

**The Land of Neverendings**
Kate Saunders, Faber & Faber, 978-0571336562, £6.99 pbk
I absolutely loved The Land of Neverendings because it is full of mixed feelings (happiness, sadness) I read it this year and it was my favourite out of all the books shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal. It brings back memories of being younger and hoping that my toys would come to life on a day when I was around, though it never happened. The themes of changing friendships and the loss of a child are very relatable. The thrilling storyline, both in the real world and the Smockeroom, with the mixing of magic and reality made this book a page turner. I would recommend this book to anyone who has a good imagination.

*Katie, age 14*

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**THE 100 BEST CHILDREN’S BOOKS**
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The 100 Best Children’s Books


When I reviewed the Grolier Club’s One Hundred Books Famous in Children’s Literature for the Newsletter of the Children’s Books History Society, I remarked that quibbling over inclusions or exclusions was pointless, as ‘every member of this Society could compile his or her own list of a hundred books, and each of these lists would be different and equally valid.’ Brian Alderson, the founder of the CBHS and also a contributor to the Grolier volume, has taken me at my word, and after a lifetime of devotion to the study of children’s literature has produced his own ‘100 Best’ selection.

Alderson has restricted himself to works of fiction (though allowing enough leeway for The Tale of Gloucester and Quentin Blake’s wordless Clown), whereas the Grolier selection admitted poetry and non-fiction books. Nevertheless, there is a significant overlap in the two choices – 26 titles, by my count. Both books close with Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone - not perhaps one of the “best” in terms of originality or language, but certainly a hugely important milestone in the history of children’s reading.

The feeling that each chosen book forms such a milestone has been a strong factor in determining Alderson’s intriguing selection, so that ‘the bestness of my authors of choice may not always lie in their absolute literary accomplishment but in their importance, as waypoints, in the development of a literature.’ So there are books here whose importance is primarily a matter of historical value rather than everlasting freshness. Alderson starts with The Pilgrim’s Progress in 1678, and 34 of his 100 were published before the twentieth century. This may disappoint some who are looking for recommendations for today’s children, but it means his commentary on every book right up to Harry Potter is rooted in a sound understanding of the history of the children’s story as a distinct genre, or ‘multiplicity of genres.’

Alderson writes, that ‘I have been looking for in the authors that I have chosen is a distinctiveness in their writing which brings it close to that of the told story.’

So alongside such obvious choices as Black Beauty, Bevis: The Story of a Boy, The Wind in the Willows, The Hobbit, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, and The Borrowers, Brian Alderson finds room for a number of relatively unsung treasures. Here we find Christopher Pears, Crunch’s fantasy The Last of the Huggermuggers, Hestia, the story of a street waif Jessica’s First Prayer, J. Meade Falkner’s adventure story Moonfleet, K. M. Briggs’s folklore-drenched Hobberdy Dick, and Janini Howier’s historical novel of the borders Martin Farrell.

There are some surprises, too. Who would have imagined finding W. E. Johns’ Biggles stories The Camels Are Coming in a list of the 100 best children’s books? Yet Alderson writes very interestingly about this and indeed all the books. He is a very genial companion as he walks us through his selection, becoming especially animated when he arrives at a particular favourite, such as Masefield’s The Midnight Folk or de la Mare’s The Three Mulla-Mulgars.

One might cavil at some of the choices from within an oeuvre. I would have chosen The Box of Delights rather than The Midnight Folk because of its breathtaking narrative momentum, its delight in language, and its influence on authors such as Alan Garner and Susan Cooper via the radio adaptation by Keir. But Alderson closes with two books by Philippa Pearce – her own The Battle of Bubble and Squeak, and her brilliantly deft rewriting of Brinton Fairfax-Lucy’s The Children of the House – it seems odd to prefer these to her three bona fide masterpieces, Minnow on the Say, A Dog So Small, and Tom’s Midnight Garden.

But this is Brian Alderson’s choice, not mine. His knowledge in this area is both wide and deep, and he has made that choice with taste and discretion. Some of what he writes will be familiar to readers of Books for Keeps, because he draws on the articles he has written for this journal over the years on classic children’s books. The one really controversial choice is the decision to include A Swarm in May by William Mayne. No one can deny this is a really fine book. But it is blighted forever by Mayne’s conviction in 2004 for ‘having abused young girls some thirty years previously’. The problem of William Mayne is one that will haunt children’s literature scholarship for many decades to come. How can it be that the uniquely-voiced author of A Swarm in May, and so many other unparalleled books – No More School, A Year and a Day, Ravensgill, Earthfasts, The Jersey Shore – was also a child abuser? In his books he treats his child protagonists with such empathy and understanding. But those books, brilliant as they are, ‘are all out of print’. Can we value the work despite the man? It’s a conundrum with no easy answer.

Oh – and really no room for Horrid the Spy?

Neil Philip

Fierce Bad Rabbits: The Tales Behind Children’s Books

Clare Pollard, Fig Tree, 304pp, 978-0241354780, £14.99 hbk

Among the many things to recommend Fierce Bad Rabbits among the countless picture-book studies already existing is that only Clare Pollard could have written it. Pollard is a poet, a mother to small children and herself a former small child, and each of these informs what interests her and how she reads. The book coheres as a survey, but is also inevitably and delightfully partial – not so much a history of children’s picture books (though this is there, too), as a thoughtful, personal reading of them.

The starting-point is one that BFK readers will take for granted: that children’s picture books merit attention, because they and their effects can be complex and profound – they can be diversions but they need not be only that. I would not put money on this assumption being shared by the general public, however, even the general reading public, and Pollard’s often detailed analysis helps make a convincing case.

The analysis of each book Pollard examines is fine-scalped, but it’s the sort of surgical care that keeps its subjects’ animating spirit intact, not killing it. Many of her favourite books are my favourite books, and her attention made me want to return to them to look again (detailcd criticism does not always have this effect); a few are books I did not know, and have since ordered. (My new copy of Clever Bill – how lovely to be reminded of that! – and a biography of Margaret Wise Brown should be arriving next week. Be warned: Fierce Bad Rabbits will make you shop.)

Pollard balances the personal (her childhood memories) with her introduction to feminism through Best Friends for Frances – or her experiences reading with her own...
Review feature: The Book of Dust

Nicholas Tucker enters The Secret Commonwealth, the second volume in The Book of Dust by Philip Pullman

So here it is – all 687 pages of the eagerly anticipated next step in Philip Pullman’s second trilogy. Rather than following on from La Belle Sauvage, the first book in the new sequence, it jumps twenty years forwards. Lyra, the young heroine of His Dark Materials, is now aged 21. She and Will, her unattainable love from a different universe, had promised each other to throw themselves hereafter into living their individual lives to the full. This she now does as a university student, but her enthusiasm for rational argument as the only way towards discovering the truth is not working out. She has an increasingly fractious relationship with her daemon Pantalaimon, the animal spirit who is her intimate other half. He has never got over Lyra’s previous act of cutting him away in order to save a life. In Pullman’s world, this is the equivalent of rejecting one’s very soul, an experience so painful it can never be entirely forgiven.

But Pan also hates the way Lyra now ignores imagination and feeling as other ways of coming to an eventual understanding. So one day he takes advantage of his newly separate status to quit her altogether. His absence from Lyra when everyone else still possesses their own highly visible personal daemon makes her the target of suspicion and hatred. Her subsequent efforts to find him take up the rest of the narrative. Plenty of excitements and near-misses ensue, each described so convincingly it is almost to be there oneself. Even so, this extended search ultimately lacks the urgency of Lyra’s exploits in His Dark Materials. As a virtually re-incarnated Eve she once helped save the whole world from tyranny. The grandeur of this achievement is missing in favour of her more personal objective this time round.

Pullman is now looking increasingly to William Blake, in particular his conviction that ‘Everything possible to be believ’d is an image of truth.’ Or as a character in the book puts it, ‘Nothing is only itself.’ There is less discussion here of the vital existence and huge significance of Dust, so integral to all the books so far. But Lyra has one vision incorporating it when looking down from her window at a contented village scene below. Everyone she saw for that moment seemed sustained and enriched by a certain quality of spirit that gave her the ‘quiet conviction, underlying every circumstance, that all was well and that the world was her true home, as if there were great secret powers that would see her safe.’ Just as Milton is the key to the first trilogy, Blake rules in this story, subject as he was to similarly mystical visions of his own.

The rationalists in this story who turn out to be false friends to Lyra cannot really compare with her old theocratic enemy the Magisterium, set in Geneva and still aiming for thought control and world domination. Its crusading zeal and contempt for any other beliefs brings to mind Islamic fundamentalism as well as narrow historical Calvinism at its worst. But while they are still a mortal and ruthless threat this only comes really apparent in a vicious plot twist just before the end.

A sprinkling of four-letter swearing and a graphic near gang rape pushes this story well into the Young Adult bracket. Its blend of magical realism coupled with references to current events also has plenty for older readers too. Boat People appear plus new villains drawn from international capitalism. There is though an absence of those former outsize fun characters once coming to Lyra’s aid just when she needed them or else standing as formidable obstacles in their own right. Instead this story concentrates almost entirely upon her state of mind, and it is not a happy one. She ends up in pain, alone and nowhere near ending her quest. She may indeed now be wiser but sadder as well.

The title refers to what one character describes as ‘The world of hidden things and hidden relationships.’ For Lyra, it includes ‘Ghosts, fairies, gods and goddesses, nymphs, night-ghasts, devils, jacky lanterns and other such entities ... inaccessible to science and baffling to reason.’ Pullman incorporates such things into his own fiction with all his usual brilliance. But it seems unfair to penalise Lyra for avoiding that particular route when engaged on academic research. Pullman writes elsewhere ‘She had exalted reason over every other faculty. The result had been – was now – the deepest unhappiness she had ever felt.’ Does reason as a goal always have to have such dire personal consequences?

My recent book Darkness Visible; Philip Pullman and His Dark Materials ends with an interview he and I had at his home outside Oxford. In it he describes how ‘I once put this to Richard Dawkins: if you had a little girl who was terribly ill and knew she was soon going to die, do you tell her the stark facts of her oncoming death? Of course you don’t! You tell her a fairy tale about going to heaven. What else can you possibly do?’ Dawkins disagreed at the time, but Pullman follows up this line of argument throughout this present novel. Rationalism, he insists, may indeed not always be enough, but he also acknowledges that turning against rationalism has its dangers too. It will be fascinating to see how if at all he resolves this conundrum in the final instalment of this epic work.

He is occasionally encumbered in this present novel by having to slip in too many explanations at the appearance of formerly well-loved characters that new readers will know nothing about. Otherwise he remains a master of memorable detail, expert in creating atmosphere while raising important questions at the same time. The world Lyra inhabits, as before, is the same intriguing mixture of the recognisable and the strange. This allows her author to enjoy exercising his ever-fertile imagination without necessarily reaching out to any higher purpose. But it is its underlying moral seriousness that gives this book its particular distinction. Writing of this depth and quality does not always find a ready audience. Pullman as before proves that it can and does.

Philip Pullman, 978-0241373330, David Fickling Books, £20.00 hbk
Books About Children’s Books continued

Under 5s Pre–School/Nursery/Infant

Lulu’s First Day

Anna McQuinn, ill Rosalind Beardshaw, Alanna Max, 40pp, 978-1-007825-217, £11.99 hbk

This delightful, heart-warming picture book follows book lover Lulu on her first day at pre-school. A wonderful book for parents preparing their child for nursery or school, with a couple of nods to the emotional journey parents are going through too. It’s an upbeat but Lulu is ready, she has packed Dinah her special cuddly cat and chosen her outfit, ‘pink, jumping legsings and her sunny, yellow top’ – although she did want to wear her party dress, but Mummy says maybe not. She poses for her ‘first day’ photograph and then they are off. It is practiced by her teacher and shown where to put her things. Mum stays for a little while until Lulu gets acclimatized, when Mummy leaves Dinah gets a quick hug and all is well, especially as it’s snack time! Lulu spends her day making friends, sharing books, building castles, singing songs and being as super-hero, and, before you know it Mum is there waiting to take Lulu home. It’s been a long and exciting day, but exhausting too, and Lulu is soon fast asleep snuggling up to Mummy on the sofa.

Lulu is an engaging and vibrant character and McQuinn manages to imbue a real sense of Lulu’s feisty loveliness in this short story. Rosalind Beardshaw’s wonderfully bright and colourful illustrations perfectly capture the upbeat mood of the book.

The Lulu books are a great series following Lulu through all the major experiences of being a small child: getting a pet, visiting the library, going swimming, as well as other early years’ milestones. This gentle story is a perfect addition to Lulu’s adventures, and I can’t wait for the next instalment.

Somewhere out There, Right Now

Gemma Wells, Ragged Bears, 32pp, 9781858714776 £7.99 pbk

A dreamlike picture book introducing – in the form of a story – the concept of mindfulness and empathy to the very young.

This unusual, and engaging book takes the child on a journey through the physical world and back again, to the gentle rhythms of their own bodies, inducing a sense of calm and peace, for both read to and reader: ‘Somewhere out there, right now… A monkey is sheltering from the pitter-patter of the heavy rain. Somewhere out there right now… a litter of soft kittens is cuddling their mother’. We continue through this world and are introduced to a flock of birds coming in to roost, a fox slipping through a dark city street, plankton gently floating in the ocean plus a myriad of other natural scenes, before returning to the child’s own internal world: ‘In your mind, right now… there are lots of questions. In your body, right now… from the tips of your toes to the top of your head, you feel peaceful’. The language and repetition within the story reinforce the sense of calm and peacefulness, as well as instilling a sense of our connection with the natural world. Wells’ warm illustrations perfectly catch the mood of the book and give a child plenty to engage with and explore.

A perfect book for sharing at bedtime but also for calming a potentially anxious or fretful child. Although I have categorized this as a book for children under five, it could easily be shared with older children in a variety of settings.

The Girl and the Dinosaur

Hollie Hughes, ill. Sarah Massini, Bloomsbury Children’s Books, 32pp, 978 1 408880524, £10.99 hbk

Young Mariannne, resident of a seaside town, spends her time digging on the beach in the hope of finding a dinosaur, while the fisherfolk worry about her lack of young friends. Her determination and hard work pay off and eventually she’s able to assemble a dinosaur skeleton (shades of Mary Anning perhaps)! This is where all her daydreaming comes true. She decides is her best friend, and aptly names it Bony. Back home in bed that night Marianne makes a special wish. With all my heart I wish a story that will come true, for story book reads come to life / and find me when they do.

Seemingly her wish is granted for beneath the stars her dinosaur (now fully formed) awaits to transport her on a dreamtime adventure. An adventure wherein girl and bony friend swim in the sea, flash through the forest accompanied by fairies, past unicorns and giants to a magical moonlit island filled with frolicking children and their dream dinosaurs – a land of infinite possibilities. But children keep secrets, so the magic of the night will remain just that – a wonderful magical nocturnal secret. Tell in rhyme that reads well aloud and accompanied by atmospheric scenes of the red-haired protagonist and her nocturnal foray, this is a beautiful adventure with a difference to delight dreamers and dinosaur enthusiasts especially.

Polly and the New Baby

Rachel Quarry, OUP, 26pp, 978 0 19 276904 6, £6.99, pbk

Polly has an imaginary friend called Bunny. She likes to push him around in her old pushchair and they spend many happy hours together. The only problem is that Mum and Dad will need the pushchair back soon as a new baby is on the way. They try all sorts of alternatives, but nothing is quite right; the doll’s pram is too small, the swing too high. As the days pass Mum and Dad are getting quite worried. However, when Polly’s new baby sister is born Polly comes up with a very inventive plan to solve the problem.

This is a warm story about imaginative play, coping with change and compromise. The illustrations are

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soft and attractive with extra details to spot in each double page spread. Using a simple outline drawing to depict Polly’s imaginary friend is very effective. Although not one to choose if seeking diversity and representation this is a very appealing picturebook. SMcG

**Oh, Christmas Tree!**

Sue Hendra and Paul Linnet, Macmillan Children’s Books, 32pp, 0781 5 0087 2705 3, £6.99, pbk

Magic in the air! This warm and festive story stars brilliant characters and is written in hilarious rhyming text. All along the street windows display decorated Christmas trees, except at number 34. There, a desperate looking bare tree is being chased by Belle, Bauble and the Tinsel Snake. Tree is explaining that in no way is he going to stand in the corner in a pot, with a star on his head. Oh no; he wants to skate, or sometimes watch TV and spend his days, baking, riding a bike, sometimes watching TV or playing football, or sometimes watching TV for a bit. It takes much ingenuity for the decorations to work out a plan to trick the tree into becoming decorated. The ending should bring lots of smiles to readers, as the pictures tell us just how their plan is achieved. Bright throughout, with a full colour palette and details to absorb on second and subsequent readings. The cover depicts a very smiley tree, set in a hologram of brightly coloured stars, Belle, Bauble and Tinsel Snake whizzing around him. Eye catching, with a different slant on seasonal stories! GB

**Nuts!**

Lou Peacock, ill. Yasmeen Ismail, Nosy Crow, 32pp, 978 1 78800 401 5, £6.99, pbk

This is a wonderfully funny book about two red squirrels and their inability to share the nuts they find, and it will engage with David following his determination and encouraging himself to share the nuts he finds. The story is told with a poet’s sensitivity to understanding of what it can be like to be outside and to be with others. Perhaps if he can learn to share the nuts he finds, and it will bring both these elements, words and pictures, to vivid life. Here is a book to share as it touches on change and determination and encouraging empathy, bringing both an understanding of what it can feel like to be outside and to be disappointed, but also subtly, to a group, to respond. It is an enjoyable story told with a richness of language and illustration that combine to make a truly satisfying whole. FH

**Angel on the Roof**

Shirley Hughes (author and illustrator), Walker, 64pp, 9781406759225, £12.99, hbk

When an angel lands on the roof of 32 Paradise Street, (attracted by the name), a golden feather floats downwards, past several people living in the various flats, until it is found by Lewis Brown, who lives in the basement. Lewis has one leg that doesn’t work as well as the other, and doesn’t go out much, but he sees that the feather is not from Mr Grantly’s pigeons and goes up to the roof, slowly, to investigate. Lewis tells the angel his troubles - how he wishes he could make friends, how Dan Sharpies turns up the music on his headphones and doesn’t speak to him, how his Mum keeps badgering him to go out. The angel and Lewis become great friends, though the angel doesn’t ever speak, and Lewis enjoys being on top of the roof with him, gazing at the sky and seeing life going on around them. Lewis borrows an old coat belonging to his Dad and puts it on the angel, so that they can go out, and that pleases his Mum. People in the flats start being kinder and more helpful to each other, and Dan actually stops on the stairs and talks to Lewis. Eventually, Lewis asks the angel for a miracle to make him strong, which is not possible, but the angel takes Lewis on a night flight all the way to the sea, a truly memorable night before the angel has to leave. As the book ends, the angel asks Lewis and others to stop on the streets and more co-operate with each other, and Lewis and Dan often go swimming together, Lewis, who enjoyed looking out of the window, grows up, can be a successful artist, and is said to ‘paint like an angel’.

This delightful story is illustrated by Shirley Hughes in her familiar style, but in navy blue ink, with no other colour, just gentle swirls of gold around the angel, edging his wings and obscurring his face. The simplicity of the drawings is moving and effective. The publisher offers this as a perfect story for Christmas, but there is no mention of Christmas. Any point, and its message of kindness that spreads kindness is surely for any time. This book will suit newly confident readers, and is lovely for an adult to read aloud. BD

**Ed’s Choice**

**Kites**

Simon Mole ill. Oamul Lu Frances Lincoln, 32pp, 9781786055561 £11.99 hbk

David has just moved house; new surroundings without the support of familiar people. Perhaps if he can make a kite and join the children on the hill he will find friends. But does he have the right materials? Well, as his grandfather has always told him “Let’s see what we have already got…”

This is a beautiful picture book. The production values are outstanding - the text is achieved. Bright throughout, with a full colour palette and details to absorb on second and subsequent readings. The two squirrels refuse to cooperate even when their friends try to convince them that the nuts can be shared – there are plenty for all! No way! It is only when they are sitting, each clutching his/her own nut, that they begin to feel silly and decide to say, ‘Our nuts’. It’s plain sailing from there, and they even manage to share the apples they find too. Brilliantly done, with lots of lovely animals to enjoy. ES

**Merrylegs**

Pam Smy David Fickling Books, 32pp, 9780719250577 £11.99 hbk

Merrylegs was not the fastest, most beautiful or the most glamorous. He was clumsy and dumpy; the safe little horse to help us all learn to ride – and they love him. But Merrylegs wants more and his longing becomes even stronger after finding a glorious fairground carousel. Could his wishes come true? Here Pam Smy turns her talents to the picture book with its very specific demands. The result is a charming and engaging story about dreams, wishes and that sprinkle of magic. As one would expect from this publisher the production values are outstanding - the font is perfectly placed on each page accessible and inviting. This is the frame for Smy’s artwork. Her style with its subtle retro references brings a real solidarity to her characters. Merrylegs is a flesh-and-blood horse, while the magic carousel horse is clearly made of wood. The palette is cleverly limited, strong aquamarines, luminous creams set against the clear, uncluttered white pages. The horses move across the pages flowing from one spread to another, galloping, flying, following the dream. The storytelling is assured, gently rhythmical, uncluttered, a pleasure to read through for the illustrations. As in the best picture books here the two elements work seamlessly together. The result is a beautiful and thoroughly lovely story to share and discuss at home or in the classroom. FH

**Jazz Dog**

Marie Voigt, Oxford University Press, 32pp, 9780192766885, £11.99

Dog lives in a divided world of cats and dogs where dogs must play only dog music, cats only cat music. So what about the one dog that, having heard the beautiful cat music through an open window, wants to buck the system, follow his heart and be a player of cat music? Find out how to play like the Jazz Cats – no easy feat as the felines refuse to help. There’s only one way: he must teach himself. Dog borrows books and instruments and sets about the task until the self taught music feels just right.

Then Dog sees a sign outside the theatre announcing a jazz contest but participating would mean jamming with the cats. Dare he do so, especially to a packed theatre of hissing felines and growling canines? The tension is almost overwhelming.

After a brief crisis of confidence, overcome thanks to an encouraging cat, Jazz Dog plays and what follows is almost unbelievable.

Great entertainment and thought provoking too, Marie Voigt’s uplifting story, with her splendidly expressive illustrations of musical moments both upbeat and down, demonstrates that being allowed to follow one’s heart is crucial if one is to feel fulfilled. Everyone can try their best to stand up not only for themselves but for others too.

A tale of inclusion and togetherness to share and discuss at home or in school, JB
978-1471145247, £6.99 pbk and Schuster, 32pp, where there is plenty of space for the children bouncing on a trampoline. This is a large book to pore over and enjoy, with glossy pages and very accessible history. DB

Izzy Gizmo and the Invention Convention

Pip Jones, illus Sara Ogilvie, Simon and Schuster, 32pp, 978-1471152469 pbk, £6.99 pbk. It’s a big day in junior inventor Izzy Gizmo’s house: a letter has arrived with an invitation to an Invention Convention. At first, Izzy is uncharacteristically unsure, pointing out that her machines don’t always work. Following a wonderfully robust response to her grandpa - “Cobblers!” he shouts – they pack up their tools and set off for Technoff Isle in an extraordinarily wonderful, amphibious vehicle, designed by Izzy. The plot moves forward as energetically as Izzy’s contraption, with the young inventor’s inspiration or resilient than young Izzy, but she’s thoroughly human too, not above getting frustrated or bad-tempered and often in need of encouragement from Grandpa and her friend Fixer the crow. The story is a joyful celebration of inventions and inventiveness with an excellent message for young readers. Pip Jones’ rhythmic text and Sara Ogilvie’s action-packed illustrations match each other for wit and energy. This is a story guaranteed to fire the imagination, and let’s face it, the world needs more Izzy Gizmos. This is the second story about Izzy and Fixer. The series began with Izzy Gizmo AR.

Tibble and Grandpa

Wendy Meddour, ill. Daniel Egneus, OUP, 9780192771957, £11.99 hbk. This is a completely beautiful picture book, both gentle and powerful in its touching and emotionally resonant depiction of loss, grief and love. Tibble loves talking to Grandpa, but Grandpa has stopped listening, locked in his own world of grief since Granny died. But Tibble perseveres and his cheerful games of ‘Top Three’, ‘what are your top three sandcastles?’, ‘top three jellyfish’, ‘top three days out’, eventually break through. It is very moving to see Tibble and Grandad begin to talk and engage again as Grandad’s grief is unlocked by the strong relationship between grandparent and grandchild. Be prepared to cry at the end when the trio return to their old spots and talk honestly about death, loss and memories.

This is a reassuring book for children who have lost a beloved adult, giving them the chance to talk about feelings and memories. It deals with death in an open way and shows that people lost in grief can be found and drawn back through love, patience, understanding and kindness. The book is full of humour as well as sadness and this is reflected in the beautiful, atmospheric art and illustrations. This is an excellent book for discussing bereavement and emotional literacy with children, with a perfect role model in Tibble, who never stops trying to communicate and engage. Highly recommended. SR

The Mist Monster

Written and ill. by Kirsti McCabe, Alison Green Books, 32pp, 978-1-407188-81-4 pbk. Penny isn’t sure about her new house. Dad suggests investigating the garden, but the dog has stolen Mum’s old hat and Penny can’t explore without it. Penny chases Peanut outside, only to find herself marooned in a strange, white world. Then she hears a rumbling voice and spots two yellow eyes peering at her through the mist. It’s a ‘sort-of monster’ who doesn’t have a name - so Penny calls him Beautyman. Beautyman’s clever plan is set off in hot pursuit of dog and hat. “It was my mum’s... she was a brilliant explorer,” explains Penny, and Morris gives her the kind of look friends give when they know they’ve heard something significant. But as the days progress, having fun together becomes more important than finding the hat. “See you tomorrow!” says Penny when it’s time to go. Observant readers will notice Morris’s expression and imagine they can spot a tear or two. But it doesn’t occur to Penny that mist doesn’t last, and when she wakens to find the sun shining and no trace of Morris, she’s devastated. Outside, Penny allows the tears to fall. “Who am I going to explore with now?” she asks. And in a page-turn that changes everything, there’s a face and a hand reaching for Archie, who lives next door and is looking for a friend...

Gently constructed around the theme of sadness and change, The Mist Monster’s optimistic story weaves links between imaginative worlds and the here-and-now of daily reality. With their sophisticated palette and low-key charm, Beautyman’s illustrations are a delight and will please younger and older audiences alike. Morris the Mist Monster’s expressions add emotional impact as well as humour, allowing the pictures to take the story somewhere really quite profound, and Beautyman’s treatment of the shifting insubstantiality of mist and dreams is particularly effective. It takes time for feelings of sadness and loss to pass, but opening ourselves to new experiences and enabling new connections will help friendships blossom when we least expect it. While the story is easy to follow, this magical, misty book, and its beautifully rendered page spread of different musical instruments, all making different sounds. We see how notes can be written down on staves, drawn as parallel wires, and how music can be very different in form, and in other countries, coming up to date with afro beats, jazz and hip hop. There’s space for everyone to be a musician... Valerie Vivaldi people of all colours and races, and some are silhouettes, so they could be anyone, playing music with enthusiasm. This will be fun to pore over and share, or to read aloud.

Under the Great Plum Tree

Written by Sufiya Ahmad, ill. Reza Dalvand, Tiny Owl, 32pp, 978-1-910328-46-0, £12.99 hbk. James Carter has written a lot of poems for primary children about all kinds of popular topics: space and aliens, beatles, dinosaurs, teachers etc, and he does a lot of school visits, with his guitar. A companion book to this one is Tom Bridgeman that he illustrated by Mar Hernandez, was well received, and your reviewer also enjoyed and reviewed Once Upon A Raindrop, illustrated by Kasuko Nomoto. It seems that there is now a Once Upon a..., series, and this will be a useful addition to the school library for the music curriculum, or just for fun. It starts with the rhythm of your feet as you walk, the rhythm of your heart, and mentions the rhythm of the seasons and the rhythm of Life. Music probably started with drums, and singing, and this is illustrated with energy and colour as some people beat out a rhythm with their feet, some playing something someone telling stories through song, and children learning to sing back, then the reader has to turn the page to find out more.

Deep in the heart of the forest, two little monkeys are playing. One is Izzy’s contraption, with the young inventor’s inspiration or resilient than young Izzy, but she’s thoroughly human too, not above getting frustrated or bad-tempered and often in need of encouragement from Grandpa and her friend Fixer the crow. The story is a joyful celebration of inventions and inventiveness with an excellent message for young readers. Pip Jones’ rhythmic text and Sara Ogilvie’s action-packed illustrations match each other for wit and energy. This is a story guaranteed to fire the imagination, and let’s face it, the world needs more Izzy Gizmos. This is the second story about Izzy and Fixer. The series began with Izzy Gizmo AR.

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This is a reassuring book for children who have lost a beloved adult, giving them the chance to talk about feelings and memories. It deals with death in an open way and shows that people lost in grief can be found and drawn back through love, patience, understanding and kindness. The book is full of humour as well as sadness and this is reflected in the beautiful, atmospheric art and illustrations. This is an excellent book for discussing bereavement and emotional literacy with children, with a perfect role model in Tibble, who never stops trying to communicate and engage. Highly recommended. SR
soon as she’s safely home again, the wily monkey tells the old crocodile that she’s no longer willing to be his guest, and Mr Magarmach is forced to confront a very angry Crocodile King. The story could end here, but happily it doesn’t. Old Magarmach isn’t the villain he appears to be and when pushed, finds the courage to stand up for Miss Bandari – even though it results in his expulsion from the swamp.

Fausto does get his just reward, but middle-aged men are not a common sight in picturebooks and some children may need an adult to champion the book before they connect. For those who do engage, The Fate of Fausto has much to offer, including opportunities for debate and creative exploration, particularly around ‘P4C’-style questions about land ownership and how we treat the natural world. CFH


The Fate of Fausto

written and ill. by Pawel Pawlak, trans. by Antonia Lloyd-Jones, Lantana Publishing, 40pp, 978-11157297-7, 8.63, hbk

Oscar Seeks a Friend


Oscar Seeks a Friend

postcard is carefully placed to command attention without intruding on the lithographs. Sentences are often spread across several pages, creating a sense of anticipation and space. Artistic and environmentally-aware adults will appreciate Fausto’s message and design quality, but the book is more complex than it first appears and responses amongst younger audiences will reflect this. Fausto returns the borrowed tooth with the words ‘I think I’d found what I was looking for’ – and we are left to assume the best for both of them. Even when differences seem profound, shared experiences create special bonds.

The Fate of Fausto

written and ill. by Pawel Pawlak, Lantana Publishing, 40pp, 978-11157297-7, 8.63, hbk

Oscar Seeks a Friend

This beautifully designed book features a series of traditional lithographs – a first for Jeffers, who hasn’t worked with these techniques before. Initially depicted in tones of sepia highlighted with salmon pink, the palette changes as Fausto makes his dangerous waters as he claims dominion over the natural world. At first, Fausto doesn’t encounter much resistance – flowers and trees are easily picked off in Panchatantra, an ancient Indian story-collection dating to 300 B.C.E.

versions of this fable are known from Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, China, Japan and the Caribbean and this book is part of the One Story, Many Voices series from Tiny Owl, highlighting global story connections. CFH

written and ill. Paweł Pawlak, Lantana Publishing, 40pp, 978-11157297-7, 8.63, hbk

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The Fate of Fausto
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another ingenious home for them. The book will appeal to a wide range of readers as the story is sweet and simple but the pictures provide pathways in to more towns and more homes older children might like to create in their own miniature worlds.

The illustrations make it visually bright and cheery too. SG

Molly and the Whale

Malachy Doyle, ill. Andrew Whitson, Graffeg. 978 1913 154044, £12.99, hbk

This is an amazing tale about working together to help make something wonderful happen. It is a sequel to Molly and the Stormy Sea, and, pleasingly, there are more adventures with Molly in the planning. Molly and Dylan run down to the shore the morning after a storm, hoping to find cowrie shells, or anything little that might have been washed up in the night. But what they find is a whale. A enormous whale. Their father tells them to gather buckets and spades, explaining to the children that they must try to cool the whale. It is low tide, and they wait hours before the incoming tide might carry her out to sea. Whilst adults dig a trench around the whale to catch the water, a crowd of children fill buckets from the sea and pour them over the whale, in attempts to keep her cool. Molly suggests just pushing her back into the sea, but her father says she is too heavy, and anyway, they might hurt her. As the morning progresses, great tarpaulins are erected high over her tail. The three watch joyfully, as slowly the whale breaks, Molly spots movement. The children dig a channel from the tide line to the whale, to speed the water's advance. Once her tummy is from the rising of the moon. The father asks Rabbit. 

She slaps her fluke on her tail. The three watch joyfully, in awe and wonder, as slowly the whale breaks, Molly spots movement. The children dig a channel from the tide line to the whale, to speed the water's advance. Once her tummy is

Let's All Creep through Crocodile Creek!


Pause (paws?) at the first endpaper, and deliberate. Whose prints are these? Then… as it is starting to get dark, prepare to return home. Best take the shortcut, through the creek. There follows a conversation between Rabbit, Mouse and Tortoise. Mouse claims there are certainly no crocodiles in the creepy, crooked creek, whereas Rabbit expresses doubt, for such familiar with the idea of crocodile, listens as Mouse begins to describe a croc’s features…. a knobbly, garily back… pokey, pointy claws…. and they enter the creepy, crooked creek. By this time in the tale, readers will be searching the illustrations for more clues…. Those swinging, springy vines, do they look much like a croc’s floppy, whippy tail? Mouse is the intrepid one, bouncing and swinging and hopping along, trying to divert his friends from their fears. Uh oh. Of course, encounters ensue. PANIC! Away they ran from the sneaky, snappy crocodiles. Through the ivy, over the Peaey, through “Shortcut through the forest.” “The fearsome, frightful forest? Won’t there be tigers?” asks Rabbit. Shelly the tortoise has the last word. “What’s a tiger?” Then, wonderful end papers, thick orange and black stripes. The detailed pictures are playful and the characters are well drawn. Each conversation between the friends is littered with alliteration, making reading aloud a delight. The illustrations are full of movement, with the three main characters each having their own traits. And of course there is the protagonist Croc for which to search. Children would enjoy play acting in groups of three, with some creepy, knobbly, garily backed crocodiles lurking. A great read. GB

The Inner Child

Henry Blackshaw, Cica Books. 32pp, 978 1 908741 68 8, £16.99 pbk

The author of this unusual picture book claims that it is both for kids and for adults, and so it is. Pictures in colour of adults on white backgrounds with smaller, ghosty, brown background versions of themselves (the inner children) are shown doing all sorts of things that are ‘child-like’, such as pretending they are okay when they’re not, or being silly when they’re dangerous, or being afraid or nasty to others, or talking in baby voices when they’re in the company of someone they admire. The illustrator has highlighted the emotions of the people saving the life of such an incredible creature. What a memorable day and night for those on the beach that day. Brilliant, so well created. Highly recommended. GB

The Little Island


Once upon a time there was a little island where all the animals lived and worked together happily. Then one day, the geese who lived on a rather attractive island enjoyed by everyone, felt there too many crossing the bridge and making themselves at home. They decide this is not acceptable. They try to stop the bridge being used by anyone else. Or do they?

Drawing inspiration from Orwell's Animal Farm, this modern fable is attractively presented for a much younger audience. The text by Smriti Prasad-Halls flows easily with a nice sprinkling of humorous asides throughout. Robert Starling’s illustrations highlight these characteristics, neatly matching and extending the story. Bold colours, strong designs develop an eye bringing solidity and a realism to the whole – just as the maps on the endpapers ensure the farm has a proper location. Though the characters are animals, this makes it easier to identify issues the author is keen to introduce – fear of change, cleverness; the building of barriers, looking back to an imagined past – while also highlighting the importance of sharing, of cooperation, of hope and friendship. This bright, cheerful picture book – an engaging story – will certainly provide a basis for encouraging even very young children to think about the world we live in today as well as becoming a favourite at story time. Excellent. FH

Castle of Books

Written and illustrated by Alessandro Sanna, Tate, 48pp, 978 1 4677 6064 5, £11.99 hbk

This unusual picturebook poses a question – why do we need books? – then invites us to draw our own conclusions by exploring a series of visual parables.

Two girls are contemplating an array of books. Are we here to observe…? A chunky volume falls off the shelf and asks ‘Whom do you think?’ on one of its first pages. Why did it fall? And what will the girls discover when they open it? 

Blah, blah, plaintively – the answer is left to our imagination and the girls start quarrelling. Rrrrrrrrrr…! It’s hard to tear a book in half, but the girls have managed it. What emerges from the loose leaves flying round the room? And are we here to invent, to imagine, to travel or to grow…? Maybe not, or being silly when they dance, or being afraid or nasty to others, or talking in baby voices when they’re in the company of someone they admire.

“Now I understand!”

Set against plain backgrounds and largely unconfined by boundaries, the author introduces and moderated by a supportive adult, but its apparently simple premise quickly becomes complicated by the use of words. Castle of Books is more likely to find an audience amongst older booklovers and those interested in the art of illustration than in a KS1 classroom. But for those children who do engage with it – and for adults willing to take the time to explore it with them – the book offers both a unique creative outlet for writing and pictures, and an opportunity for encouraging even very young children to think about the world we live in today as well as becoming a favourite at story time. Excellent. FH

Dracula Spectacular

Lucy Rowland, ill. Ben Mantle, Macmillan, 32pp, 9781509845089, £6.99 pbk

This book is great fun. Beneath the sparkly cover lies a thoughtful message about learning to love differences and being yourself.

A gloomy vampire home; the parents are overjoyed to have a little vampire boy but then they realise that their baby is not quite the same as the others. They try to teach him how to be scary and to ‘sneak and to creep’, ‘But the Dracula child just giggled with glee, Then asked all his teddies to join him for tea.’ Whatever they try to do he really loves colour and sparkle and doesn’t want to scare people away.

The problem comes to a head when the Dracula child is told to scare a little girl and he finds her hiding under her bed. However, it isn’t the boy she is scared of but dark itself so he is able to show her that dark can be wonderful. (I liked the rod to one of my favourite all time books The Owl Who Is Afraid of the Dark – to tease and to leave before he sees the sun rise.)

When he returns home he is upset and the parents think of a lovely way of cheering him up and everybody changes the way they look at things.

The rhyme in the book makes it great to read aloud the illustrations will encourage reading independently.

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It’s a unique way of celebrating differences, accepting each other and being ourselves and is definitely worth a read. SG

Gaspard Best in Show

Zeb Soanes, Illus James Mayhew

Gaspard is determined that adventure is just around the corner. Gaspard is somewhat smug, but very intelligent – adventure is just around the corner. Gaspard following his nose and Gamp's scent of a fox – adventure is just around the corner. Gaspard following his nose and his friends and the streets and greens of London are magically bought to life by his perfect use of colour. The story is simple and Gaspard and his friends are an engaging team. Soanes use of language is somewhat challenging at times, so definitely a picture book for older or more confident readers. AB

In Every House On Every Street

Jess Hitchman, Ill. Lili Li

Bateine, Little Tiger Press, 24pp, 9781787881406, £11.99 hbk

This is a gorgeous and heart-warming book about a street - as simple as that. The illustrations and language make it just right to be read as a bedtime story or a story to share. It provides a marvellous illustrated resource for parents and teachers, and helps us appreciate the simple things in life. SG

Rise Up: The Art of Protest

Jo Rippon, Palazzo Editions, 64pp, 978-1786750822, £12.99 hbk

These days, we seem to be surrounded by protests and the news is frequently dominated by images of marches and protestors, either in this country or across the world. Many young people will already have taken part in a demonstration, many more are probably considering it. This book provides a marvellous illustrated history of protest, using the banners and posters created by different people over the decades to make their feelings and demands known. It looks at six key areas of protest, including women’s rights – starting with suffragette banners from the UK and Europe – gay rights, environmental protests, the civil rights movement and anti-racism. The accompanying protest banners are often very beautiful, but all are powerful in their ability to make their points even hundreds of years later. It makes for an unusual history book, but more than that it demonstrates people’s ability to bring about change through democracy and the strength of joint activity. The book is supported by Amnesty International and comes with a foreword by Chris Riddell, no stranger to the power of the visual image. A book to prompt discussion and to inspire. AR

The Velvet Fox

Catherine Fisher, Firefly Press, 202pp, 9781913102081, £6.99 pbk

This is a sequel to The Clockwork Crow and, while this story does stand alone with sufficient background explanation included, it is probably helpful to have read that first to get the full flow of the story. It is, of course, to be a trilogy. The happy life that Rhys has settled happily into his godfather’s household at Passy-Fran, especially after she rescued the son of the family, Tomos from the fairies in the Clockwork Crow. Their happy first summer together ends when a new guardian arrives, and Captain Jones can’t quite remember arranging for that to happen. Mrs Honeybourne is charming and elegant and of course it’s all right or is it? The new governess praises Tomos’ work, but gives Seren harder questions and belittles her, and gradually Seren realizes that she is not what she seems. Mrs Honeybourne’s birthday gift to Tomos, a carousel, plays mysterious music that Seren recognizes as fairy music, the enchanting tunes of the Tywyt Teig, and sure enough, Tomos starts to ignore Seren and wander about at night, looking for the fairy door through which he disappeared before. The figures and magic are blamed on Seren and she is accused of breaking the toy out of jealousy. Incidents caused by the figures and magic are blamed on Seren as well as Tomos and, locked in her room in disgrace, she manages to get a message to the clockwork Crow. Together, with Crow’s knowledge of magic and with some help from unexpected people, they defeat the fairies’ plan to abduct Tomos again, and the reader can take a breath before the next installment. Catherine Fisher was the first Wales Young People’s Laureate, and The Clockwork Crow won the Tir na Nog Welsh Children’s Book Award. There is humour as well as excitement in this excellent story of a brave and resourceful heroine who surprises even her mentor, the Crow, and we can look forward to finding out what happens next. DB

The Dead World of Lanthorne Ghules

Gerald Killingworth, Pushkin Children’s Books, 283pp, 9781913102462, £7.99 hbk

Edwin is suffering a severe case of sibling jealousy, coping with a new house, school and baby sister, when drawn into a strange pen pal adventure from an old piece of paper found in his new bedroom. When his new penfriend, Lanthorne Ghules, a mysterious, small, grey-skinned being with a skeletal look, appears through the back of his wardrobe, Edwin’s life takes a disturbing new direction. Twisted into an hourglass shape, Lanthorne is brought to Edwin via a portal in a cupboard. Edwin discovers a strange, colourless land with threatening inhabitants, two-headed monsters, putrid food, creepy houses and the constant threat of being eaten as a “shiner” from another world. Edwin’s resolve never to return, despite Lanthorne’s desperate need for a friend, is broken when his despaired baby sister, Mandoline, is kidnapped by Lanthorne’s wicked Aunt Necra. The two friends set out to rescue her, undertaking a perilous journey through the dead world.

This book cleverly mixes humour, fear and the appeal of the dead into a book that should capture the imaginations of young readers with strong stomachs who will relish the brilliantly creepy and twisted and the pathos of poverty, suffering and the attractiveness of this fantasy story about a boy who conquers his fears. From the eye-catching, foil-blocked cover through stary borders and motifs to the detailed, cross-hatched back and white full-page illustrations, the reader...
is drawn into the world of the Night’s Realm where children are trapped by the spells of the wicked Magician who drains their energy and memory to feed his own power. Billy’s secret fear of the dark is tested to the utmost when he is trapped in the Magician’s sinister world. Here, he finds that, protected by his grandfather’s talisman, he is the only child able to resist the Magician’s spells and he has to fight his fear, step up and save himself and the other children from the clutches of the Magician and the fearsome creatures of the Night’s Realm.

This spooky, magical tale presents a positive message of overcoming fears and should appeal to readers who enjoy a bit of a scare along with the fantasy adventures.

Plastic Sucks!


This book’s subtitle, ‘YOU can make a difference’, highlights the positive tone prevalent throughout this child-friendly, accessible guide to the history, dangers and solutions relating to our world’s plastic problem. The author, musician and environmental activist Dougie Poynter, is a member of the band McFly, co-author of The Dinosaurs That Pooped titles, a massive nature enthusiast and a campaigner against microplastics. All in all, he is well qualified to write this lively, informative ‘Guide For Children Who Want To Make A Difference’.

The author addresses young people directly throughout, in a contemporary, friendly tone, which helps grab their attention and focus on the important issues. There is a lot of information here, but it is broken up by bright info graphics which are engaging, lists, photographs, facts and tips for action, all in bold fonts against striking black or neon green backgrounds. Information on the history, usefulness and danger of plastic is interspersed with interviews with inspirational individuals who are already making a difference and tips for young people on how to act now to cut down on plastic use.

This lively, inspirational guide, with its encouraging, positive tone, is a book for these urgently eco-aware times, focussing on the big environmental issues, always emphasising that no action is too small to make a difference.

Dr Maggie’s Grand Tour of the Solar System

Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock, ill. Chelon Ecija, Buster Books, 120pp, 9781780555751, £12.99, hbk

Dr Maggie is a space scientist with a passion for communicating the wonders of the universe to young people and that enthusiasm really comes through in this excellent book.

Young readers are transported on a virtual tour of our solar system, from earth, our moon and the sun to our closest planetary neighbours and then onwards to the planets of the outer solar system and beyond. Before setting off, time is spent considering our home planet Earth; appreciating its beauty from space and why it is special in supporting life. As well as heading for the planets our route takes us past the international space station, the asteroid belt and even further the furthest planets to the icy zone known as the Oort Cloud. As in a real tour our virtual tour includes highlights such as the red spot on Jupiter and Saturn’s amazing rings (dubbed ‘Lord of the Rings’).

We find out what the solar system is, about gravity, the difficulties of getting into orbit and the growing problem of space junk. Complex ideas, such as how our star the Sun was born, are explained simply supported with diagrams when appropriate, for example when introducing the phases of the Moon.

The layout is stunning with photographic backdrops superimposed with artwork. Each page has lots of interest, in addition to the narrative text there are extra facts and theories.

There is a data base at the back of the book which includes even more stats such as the huge distances involved in space travel. An interesting inclusion here is the double page devoted to lesser known individuals in fields of astronomy, science, mathematics and space travel who have contributed to our knowledge of space with particular regard to the role of women and including people of colour.

This is a very attractive book packed with interesting information and engaging and style which effectively communicates the beauty, mystery and wonder of space. A must for young space enthusiasts.

Eight Princesses and a Magic Mirror

Natasha Farrant, ill. Lydia Corry, Zephyr, 217 pp, 9 781788 541152, £12.99, hbk

When an enchantress becomes godmother to a King and Queen’s baby daughter, she wonders how can she help her become a really excellent princess. To enchantress consults her servants but their standard responses, about beauty and kindness do not satisfy her. Her mother advises in a particularly helpful way. The enchantress decides to take action and transforms her magic mirror into a pocket-sized version which emits advice and ears to find out what really makes an excellent princess.

There follow eight stories about extraordinary princesses the mirror encounters on its travels, through history from ancient civilizations to the present day and across the world from desert to an ancient city in the mountains, fishing villages, a tower block and the high seas. The stories are linked together as the mirror is lost or given away by its owner and awaits a new home in the next chapter.

The mirror did indeed step into the lives of remarkable princesses who challenged stereotypes: whether setting sail to rescue a stranded sailor, standing up for people they care about, or finding ways to save a city memorial garden. The mirror finds out that these princesses have in common that they are brave, fierce and loyal with big dreams and big hearts.

The stories are beautifully written in a fairy tale style with delightful imagery, for example one ‘princess’ who makes clothes from cast offs says wearing them feels like being wrapped in stories. This is a beautifully presented book containing attractive and elegant colour illustrations throughout including a wavy, flowing illustration and a cute title page to introduce each new princess and their story.

A book which would make a lovely gift for anyone for young readers keen to discover that princesses do not need to wait for princes to fight their battles or sweep them off their feet.

Carlie Sorosiak, ill. Ben Mantle, Nosy Crow, 263pp, 9781787880038, £6.99 phk

This story follows a year or so in the life of Cosmo and his family, but title character is Cosmo’s best friend. Unfortunately this is a year where there are growing frictions within the family and Cosmo feels he has lost the support of his friends. This is a Heartwarming story of a child and her family in a thirteen year old golden Retriever, which makes helping out very difficult. As part of Max’s plan to help keep the family together the two start to attend dog/human dance classes in the company of Uncle Reggie, who is an ex-military dog trainer. The idea is that they will win a competition and be given roles in a forthcoming film, so that no one will ever try and part them. How these two carry out their plan and what the end result is will have you reaching for the tissues, but whether that is in a good or bad way you will have to read the book to find out.

This is a truly wonderful story of the bonds that are created between dogs and their humans. Although we cannot know what our dogs are thinking this really does have a sense of truth about it. Having had a dog the same age as Cosmo I can relate to the stages of ageing that he finds creeping up on him. The whole behaviour of the dog will resonate with anyone whose pet has gone through something like this. A heartwarming story that will resonate with anyone whose pet has passed.

Cosmo

Katherine Orton, ill Rovina Cai, Walker, 27pp, £7.99 phk

Eleven year old Lina was born and brought up in a soviet prison camp. She knows no other life, but dreams of escaping from prison, together with her best friend, Max. One day, Lina’s mother arranges for Lina to escape together with three other prisoners; then Lina’s friend Bogdan sneaks out as well, so there are five of them trying to escape in the bitter winter of Siberia. Things get even worse when they are hunted by a strange woman called Swetlana and her pack of ‘Ghost Wolves’.

We begin to see the beginnings of some relationships; the present day and across the world. The stories are linked together as the mirror is lost or given away by its owner and awaits a new home in the next chapter.

This book was a truly delightful surprise. The initial setting in a Soviet prison camp might be a depressing prospect, although there have been several amazing stories with a very similar concept. However the author has mixed in some magic and Russian folk lore in order to give us a truly beautiful story of love and hope against all the odds. Lina and Bogdan are very sympathetic characters; whilst they are coping with some very adult situations and fighting to become free we do not forget that they are still children and their life experiences mean they are still learning about those around them. We are also shown the difficulties that people faced in Russia after the Second World War. The descriptions bring home how dangerous it was to say anything against Stalin and how this permeated on their parents. There is also a real sense of the fear about what could happen and how this permeated society and made those who helped the needy seem even braver than they were. At the heart of this story we have the love that exists between family and friends; the years apart do not lessen the desire to see parents,

MP

Nevertell

Katherine Orton, ill Rovina Cai and Sandra Dieckmann, Walker, 27pp, £7.99 phk

Eighteen year old Lina was born and brought up in a soviet prison camp. She knows no other life, but dreams of escaping from prison, together with her best friend, Max. One day, Lina’s mother arranges for Lina to escape together with three other prisoners; then Lina’s friend Bogdan sneaks out as well, so there are five of them trying to escape in the bitter winter of Siberia. Things get even worse when they are hunted by a strange woman called Swetlana and her pack of ‘Ghost Wolves’.

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children and siblings and people are willing to take huge risks in order to see their loved ones. I ended up really loving this story and cannot recommend it highly enough. MP

The Impossible Boy

Ben Brooks, ill George Ermos, Quercus, 268pp, £9.78/1856540997, £9.99 hbk

Oleg and Emma have started creating an imaginary friend, after their real friend Sarah had moved away from their area, but what they didn’t expect was for that imaginary person to suddenly appear in their classroom one morning. Oleg had created Sebastian Cole when writing an essay for the class’s supply teacher Mr Clay, so where did the ‘real’ Sebastian come from and why does he not understand basic things such as pizza? Added to this there are other strange things taking place in their town. Firstly, a goat takes to wandering around the school and then a whole troupe of Snowmen (actually Snowwomen) start walking around the streets. Yet people wearing crow masks who say they are from the Institute of Unreality and they want to destroy Sebastian as he should never have been created. Oleg and Emma can save their new friend and if they can stop all of these weird events and also save their Christmas celebration.

This is a lovely story told on several levels. Whilst it has the magical and mysterious group of main events there are also underlying themes centred on the children, their families and even some of their teachers. Oleg’s Polish grandma had been a writer but can no longer finish any of her stories, Oleg’s dad is unemployed and spends most of his time sleeping and Emma’s mum is a dead end job that she really dislikes. The author shows us the importance of family and of friendship and how they can help us overcome many of the problems we find in life. He lets us know that working together can have a tremendous impact and that we have the ability to change our futures if we want to. One of the background stories centres around the animosity between two of the teachers and it is only at the end that we discover the bullying that had taken place by one of them when they had been in school together; a reminder that our behaviour and lasting impact on both the victim and the perpetrator. This is a great read that may well become a standard. MP

HUMANIMAL, Incredible Ways Animals Are Just Like Us!

Christopher Lloyd, ill. Mark Ruffle, We at East Book Co., 32pp, 978 1 591290 00 6, £12.99, hbk

From an author critically acclaimed for the award-winning ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING comes a fascinating book demonstrating the curious connections between humans and many other animals. It is written with great enthusiasm, and will appeal to many children … and adults, with a keen interest in creatures. It will inspire readers to see how similar we are to those animals that inhabit this planet around us. It opens eyes to so many detailed similarities, demonstrating many reasons to empathise with other living creatures. The contents are divided into Community, Feelings, and Intelligence. We read of Jane Goodall’s work, watching chimpanzees over many years in Tanzania, starting in the 1960s. It was unusual for scientists at that time to observe their creatures of interest day and night over long periods, as Goodall did. She made what was until then unknown, the staggering discovery that chimps not only used tools, but actually made them. There are many examples of creatures “aping” our own way of life. Many people will know that bees, on returning to the hive/nest will perform their WAGGLE dance, to communicate a site of particular good nectar or pollen. And maybe we know that ants “farm” aphids; when hungry, the ants stroke the aphids causing them to produce a sugary drop known as honeydew. Canada geese and other migrating birds do just as cyclists/runners in a race do; one bird/lake of water is selected to lead the group, taking the brunt of the wind. When tired, they drop back for an easier flight/ride, whilst another takes the lead. The chapter on LOVE includes stories of many different creatures, from primates to penguins to blue footed boobies. Aggression also gets a thorough going-over. ‘Grief’ is an interesting example of an orca whale being surrounded by several female orcas on the day her calf died. It was observed that after this, the orca would call for her calf for days before finally letting it go. Elephants have often been filmed returning to the site of the death of one of their family, weeks after the event, inspecting the bones. Is that a way of grieving? The glossary explains clearly vocabulary use, e.g. dopamine, a chemical released to make one feel happy; hypothesis… And before the detailed INDEX are 15 photos of ecologists, marine biologists, psychologists, with brief biographies of their work. The illustrator, Mark Ruffle, has provided impressive artwork throughout, and the whole book comes together to inspire readers to think more deeply about our relations with the animal kingdom. Quite amazing, and the author’s enthusiasm for his subject is infectious. Should be in every school library. GB

Through the Eyes of Us


This is the second in a series of books about the author’s autistic daughter. Kya; her best friend Martha also autistic, is in this story too. We meet them doing all sorts of things together, and we understand their differences as well as the ways they are alike. They both love school, but while Martha talks a lot and asks questions, Kya is quieter and prefers listening to stories. We learn about Kya’s support teacher, who helps her understand things during recess and uses picture cards. Both girls like lots of different foods, but Martha has to be watched carefully because she doesn’t ‘know when she is full’. They both love touching things, and Martha likes to touch people’s clothes. Kya even likes touching things like stinging nettles and slugs because she finds them ‘interesting’. Both girls like routines, but Kya doesn’t like going to bed, whereas Martha will take herself to bed when she’s tired. Both girls are individuals – just like all of us – but when we come to know them, we love them for their quirky ways. The pictures are a feast of action and soft watercolour from an illustrator who understands, and the whole is redolent of a loving father and ‘his beautiful daughter’. ES

Can I Touch Your Hair?

A Conversation

Irene Latham & Charles Waters, ill. Sean Qualls & Selina Alko, Rock the Boat, 45pp, 978 1 78607 737 0, £ 7.99 pbk

A very special book of poems, written by two children’s runners in a race, this is a story to treasure, and should be in every classroom. The two children, Irene, who is white, and Charles, who is black, are horrified when they are unexpectedly put together for the project. Knowing nothing of each other, except that Irene is quiet and Charles talks all the time, they initially regard each other as of different races, they find it difficult to begin. Charles, who loves poetry, suggests they write poems about ‘shoes, hair, school, and church’, and so they do. In the process of writing some thirty-three poems on these subjects and many others, they grow to know each, confront their own racial prejudices (and those of classmates as well), and develop a friendship that may well become life-long. The poems are intensely moving, occasionally funny, and often revealing, and Charles and Irene find much more in common with each other than they thought possible. The illustrations are exceptional, very real people doing very real things, pictured on a white background with lots of intermittent touches of collage. The two children’s classmates come to know each other better too, and learn that differences in race don’t need explaining, but this is all to the point. The Somerset Tsunami

Emma Carroll, Faber and Faber, 194pp, 9780571338216, 46.99, pbk

Fortune Sharpe is independent, outspoken – and she longs to go to sea. These are dangerous characteristics at a time when it is better, as a girl, to avoid undue attention. There are witch hunts abroad – and when a freak storm – a tsunami strikes the Somerset coast – sloopboats are looked for....

Emma Carroll has established herself as an author who creates engaging characters and plots that bring the past alive. Centred on real events they involve young people who have agency and step off the page to meet their readers. This is the way to ensure that history is not seen as dead and dusted; it may be the past, but emotions, situations, ideas were as important and pressing as they are today. This, her latest novel, is no exception. Fortune Sharpe is a character who impresses from the moment we meet her. Through her we are engaged in the attitudes and prejudices of the seventeenth century – but also the believable and universal resilience of girls – and boys. We are drawn into domestic crises, the cruelties that were – and still are – inflicted on those who are seen as different and we learn about a little piece of history that will amaze – a real tsunami on the coast of England! Attractively packaged and related in an easy contemporary story that will keep the pages turning this is another novel by this author to recommend and to stock. FH

A Gallery of Cats

Ruth Brown Scallywag Press, 32pp 9781912650170, £12.00 hbk

Tom is visiting an art gallery with his gran. He will be seeing paintings by some great artists – it doesn’t sound too exciting. So when there is an opportunity to explore a small side room, Tom takes it and finds himself in a very different exhibition; an exhibition that comes alive....
Lily at Lissadell

Judi Curtin, O’Brien Press, 256pp, 0787-178691280, £11.99 pbk

Like Jacqueline Wilson, to whom she is frequently compared, Judi Curtin is increasingly drawn to setting her stories in the past, and that is the case in this her latest novel. It’s 1913, and young Lily must leave school – and her dreams of becoming a teacher herself – to go and work as a housemaid at Lissadell House, the family home of the Gore-Booths. Life as the lowliest of the servants is hard: the hours are long, the work is exhausting and her fellow housemaid is distinctly frosty. On top of that, Lily is a long way from home and misses her mother, and little sisters and her real father, her Borgepa, whom she adores, but the arrival of a new ‘dad’. Einer is not her dad. Her real father, her Borgepa, disappeared and her mother will not talk about him at all. Perhaps he is dead? Then Ollis finds a postcard – a postcard from her real father, Borgepa. She does love her and she is determined to find him.

Just as important, she sees her life and her relationship with her mother, Ollis steps off the page, the real Lily is rounded off by an index; it may be a story but it is not fiction. This is biography but truly accessible to a young reader. Part of the Trail Blazers series this and its companions are ones to look for especially for those whose interest might lean towards real life inspiration to feed the imagination. In this way, the use of white font on a grey ground for some quotations is not easy to read. FH

A Postcard to Ollis


Ollis (the abbreviation of her real name – Oda Lise Engd Ingrid Sonja of five inspirational Norwegian women) feels abandoned. No because of the arrival of a little brother whom she adores, but the arrival of a new ‘dad’. Einer is not her dad. Her real father, her Borgepa, disappeared and her mother will not talk about him at all. Perhaps he is dead? Then Ollis finds a postcard – a postcard from Borgepa. He does love her and she is determined to find him.

Livelywaver, lively narrative seamlessly translated come together in this enjoyable narrative from the Norwegian author Ingunn Thon, perfectly visualised by Nora Brech. The theme is very familiar as Ollis searches for answers when faced with a change that will affect the way she sees her life and her relationship with her mother. Ollis steps off the page, a very real ten years old, ready to follow her friend Gro (surely a Norwegian Pippi Longstocking) on exciting adventures as they face down the Billy Goat of Christmas Past. Not all these adventures will be comfortable, and may result in tension. Ollis may have to learn to be independent. She will also have a lot of love and attention, real breeds have a neat ending, that assumptions are dangerous, that relationships can be messy but still loving. Young readers will revel in the eccentricities of the characters – Gro and Borgepina particular – and the freedom enjoyed by the two girls as they race through the Norwegian woods. We will be impressed by Ollis’ inventive abilities (and perhaps, inspired) and by Gro’s confidence and imagination. This is very definitely a book to recommend to lively KS2 readers. A welcome addition to any library.

And the author provides a useful note at the end on the five inspirational women behind Ollis’ name. FH

Invisible in a Bright Light

Sally Gardner, Zephyr. 272pp, 9781798620922, £10.99, hb

It begins with a mystery; more properly several mysteries. We might not expect to know who the man in the emerald green suit is; nor why he is sat in a barnacle encrusted throne in an underwater cave surrounded by dangling corpses. Such things will become clear, as will the precise nature of the task he is setting the girl before her. But the girl, who is she? She has lost her memory. She doesn’t even know if she is Marie or Celeste. Only gradually does Sally Gardner reveal exactly what is going on in this tale. It is once more a tribute to the great Dane, the best known coiner of such tales; and it draws its inspiration from relatively recent myths of disappearing ships and sailors (run the girl’s two possible names together. Most of the story takes place on dry land, in the Royal Opera House in a European port city in the late nineteenth century. Theatre is something that Gardner knows much

8 - 10 Junior/Middle continued

Jane Goodall. A Life with Chimps

Ana Ganeri Ill. and design Louise Urbie, George Ermos, Keiron Ward Stripes Publishing, 176pp, 9781788951579, £6.99 pbk

The recent interest in creating engaging and accessible information literature together with the emphasis both on diversity and empathy in books for young people has seen a revival in telling the stories of famous or important but perhaps unsung, men and women. These can range from biographies to individual biographies. Jane Goodall by Ana Ganeri is one of the latter. It is one in a series which will include not just names from the past but contemporary personages as Jane is herself.

Ana Ganeri is an experienced creator of information texts. This is, as a result, a well crafted engaging story. And it is a story. There are no sound bites. Here is an extended narrative through which we meet Jane Goodall herself from her early childhood to the present day. Interspersed are what in an old fashioned book would be a foot-note, but here are presented fully on the page, the extra information a young reader might require (the difference between the ape and the monkey; apartheid).

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New talent

Pet

Akwaeke Emezi, Faber & Faber, 204pp, 9780571355112, £7.99 pbk

There are no monsters in Lucille; at least not any more after the revolution. Now the angels keep order – angels drawn from the community. But what does a monster look like? And why do the angels found on the pages of old books look so monstrous? What happens when you forget the monsters? These are questions that trouble fifteen year old Jam. Then Pet arrives, drawn from a painting by Jam’s mother. Is Pet an angel – or a monster?

This is a powerful and disturbing narrative told in a voice that is both immediate and reflective as all the best allegories are. Lucille is a community that is inspirational; here a young person can find an identity that is their own – as Jam has. Here there are loving families with a strong sense of wellbeing and togetherness. Lucille is a happy, safe place. Or is it? There is a history, one in which the adults had a part, but which, in a belief that its horrors should not be remembered, is being quietly buried in favour of a golden present. The result is that Jam, alive, intelligent, independent is also naive. What is a monster? And suppose it wears an angel’s face? The greatest danger in any community is complacency. Young people reading this will be drawn in by the characters, by the situation, by the emotions, about and she peoples this story with imaginative images and strong characterisation of both the young protagonists and the angels. The result is an absorbing, powerful, multi-layered read that is not just a lesson but an experience. 

But they will not be presented with a resolution that is black and white; it will be satisfying but uncomfortable. Angels, like Justice, are not there to deal in “fairness”, they are as Pet says “hunters” and as all mystics have known are truly frightening. Humans are not angels – there is an emotional response but even compromise can be uncomfortable. Emezi has shaped a story to encourage thought and reflection – even discussion among young readers. This is a novel that presents powerful messages which are conveyed through lively, language and dialogue, through imaginative images and strong characterisation of both the young protagonists and the angels. The result is an absorbing, powerful, multi-layered read that is not just a lesson but an experience. 

Some Places More than Others


Award-winning author, Renée Watson’s new novel is a masterful and warm-hearted paean to family life and discovering who you are.

Amara lives with her loving parents in Oregon. A long-awaited baby sister is on the way. But Amara wants to broaden her horizons and is desperate to go to New York for her twelfth birthday as she has never met her Grandpa Earl and her cousins, Nina and Ava. At first her parents are totally opposed to the idea until Amara comes home from school with a project to find out about her family origins and her mother realises this might be just the opportunity to mend a long-standing rift between Amara’s father and grandfather. Amara immediately starts planning all the places she would like to see but when she arrives is rather taken aback at the hustle, bustle and noise of New York. Her cousins are not quite as friendly as she thought they would be either and resent having to take their younger cousin sightseeing. And the easiest arrangement between her father and grandfather does not appear to be improving.

But as Amara travels round Harlem her eyes are opened and she begins to realise the much wider significance of where she has come from, her roots and her cultural heritage as she visits museums, statues and local restaurants. But it is in her Grandfather’s home that she makes the most surprising discoveries about her father as a young man and hears first-hand the family stories about her legendary Grandma, Grace. Mardel, Amara’s mother, knows that families are not always perfect and that forgiveness and acceptance are what matters.

In an exceptional story of a young girl’s coming of age, finding out about her roots and her own place in her family, told with economy and grace, and with touching and thought provoking yet never feels preachy. It packs a powerful punch. The suitcase project is a brilliant idea too and I would love to see every school should own their own copy of this book.

Cyborg Cat and the Night Spider

Ade Adepitan, ill. Carl Pearce, 232pp, 9781778741407 £5.99 pbk

This superhero series accounts the adventures of the young Adepoyin and his friends, The Parsons Road Gang. Set in their school in London, the story tells of how the gang have to stand up to bullying and stick together to help their friend as he adapts to the changing nature of his superpowers. Adepoyin wears a calliper on his leg due to the effects of polio as a baby, and it helps him to leap around in goal and to earn the nickname Cyborg Cat. There’s nothing he can’t do: it gives him the confidence to keep up with his friends and to sprint around school between lessons, bunching into ill-prepared bystanders. However, Adepoyin is getting older, and heavier, and his leg won’t be able to keep supporting him, despite the calliper. He finds himself slowing down and soon has to come to terms with the fact that the Cyborg Cat will need to use a wheelchair.

Meanwhile, a local graffiti artist has taken against the Cyborg Cat and threatening artworks appear around town. The Parsons Road Gang are faced with this challenge. Making sure Adepoyin is out on nothing, despite the chair, while standing up to the insults of bullies and uncovering the truth of the evil Spider. A tough task to say the least but, fortunately, the gang always live by their motto (‘always stick together’). The Cyborg Cat knows he can count on them to go to the greatest lengths to support him.

Though the story features extraordinary heroes and unrestful vibrant characters fighting for good or evil, its focus is really upon the everyday challenges faced by Adepoyin, as he adjusts to new mobility with disabilities and has to face the dilemma of whether to accept his son’s ‘weaknesses’ and locks the wheelchair away, and there are children in Ade’s class happy to use callipers and wheelchairs as ammunition for insults. Most affecting is Ade’s love of sport and the need to come to terms with the fear that he can’t do what he has before.

As the story explores these personal issues, it retains throughout all the themes of friendship and team work and the message: there is nothing that Adepoyin can’t overcome, thanks to his determination and the kindness of his friends.

The story is heavily autobiographical and many of Ade Adepitan’s childhood memories are shared. Sceptics might be interested to look at this work as a vanity project for another celebrity author, but the truth is that Adepoyin’s story is truly inspirational, and his accomplishments are extraordinary. Moreover, the quality of storytelling here is very good. It succeeds in placing superheroism alongside the more challenging elements of growing up – such as the jokes he shares with his friends and the love he shares with his family, and these are also the most enjoyable parts of the book.

M is for Movement (Aka Humans Can’t Eat Golf balls)

Innosanto Nagara, Seven Stories Press, 90pp, 978-1609809355, £11.99 pbk

Through engaging descriptions of his own experiences and those of a friend, Innosanto Nagara indicates not only the story of the movement for social change in Indonesia but also offers something of a blueprint for those seeking social change everywhere.

The book begins with an indication of how the writer was shaped by his upbringing as the child of a dissident. He also sets his own experiences in the wider context of rising activism throughout the world; describing this formative period as ‘a political storm’. Nagara shows how experiences at school were an influence too, relating a story in which a classmate (Sulaiman), recruits the support of neighbourhood friends to help him deal with a bullying incident. Sulaiman finds the same approach proves equally effective when dealing with larger scale bullying as a community leader. Through these stories Nagara introduces other key concepts such as corruption, nepotism and collusion are explained simply and clearly in relation to his own stories.

Specific instances of injustice linked to corruption by the state are outlined – including the direction of loans from the World Bank to fund a medical epidemic and indifference to the fate of the poor when a landslide triggerred by a dam building
The Pearl in the Ice

Cathryn Constable, Chicken House, 304pp, 978-1912626519, £6.99 pbk

If you love mystery and adventure, this is the book for you. Set in an other-world that closely resembles Europe in the tense years before the outbreak of World War One, The Pearl in the Ice is a story of twelve-year-old Marina, who we first meet dangling from the branch of a London plane tree in the garden of her mother's London home. Marina’s father is a naval commander and her mother left when Marina was so small, and about to set off for Cadiz while her father is a naval commander. The story follows Marina as she tries to stop the train, and her father also turns out to be not what they seem.

The Starlight Watchmaker

Lauren James, Barrington Stoke, 119pp, 978-1-78112-895-4, £7.99, pbk

The Starlight Watchmaker is another high-quality offering from the ever-reliable Barrington Stoke. Its eye-catching cover is beautifully designed and hints at the content within, arousing curiosity in a prospective reader. This foray into sci-fi features Hugo, the eponymous watchmaker and an android who needs the starlight of the title to recharge his batteries and ensure his survival. He lives and works in a tiny attic on the campus of an elite academy attended by only the most privileged biological students and is thus wholly isolated from the world around him.

Resistance

Brian Gallaghér, O’Brien, 259pp, 97817878849081, £7.99 pbk

This story is an interesting example of what if plots, in this case what if the Nazis had conquered France. In this country, in real history which was neutral during the Second World War. Credibly there is resistance of course, but also those who collaborated in various ways and some interesting moral points are raised during this very readable novel.

We Are The Beaker Girls

Jacqueline Wilson, illus Nick Sharratt, Doubleday, 328 pp, 978 0 857 53587 0, hbk

This is the second Wilson book narrated by Tracy Beaker’s daughter, Jess. It’s a story of the fear and chaos of war very well, something Elizabeth Wein has demonstrated both in ‘Firebird’ and ‘Code Name Verity’. It is difficult to capture both the historical feeling and the character development in such a short novel and it would be good to see the author write a longer novel again. But this short novel would be good for more reluctant female teenage readers.

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Pumpkin Heads

Rainbow Rowell,illus. Faith Erin Hicks,Macmillan,220pp,£7.99

In this perfectly realised graphic novel, Josiah and Deja are spending their last night as student workers at a Halloween Pumpkin Patch in the Midwest of the USA. For those readers who are as unfamiliar with a Halloween Pumpkin Patch as I am, it seems to be a seasonal family event which takes place on a (pumpkin) farm and features lots of Halloween-type snacks and other attractions like a pumpkin zone and a Halloween ghost train, and is staffed predominantly by high school students. Josiah and Deja have been teamed up for the last three years, usually at the Succotash Hut, where they stir and sell - well - succotash. But next year they will be at college and this night is an opportunity for them to savour Halloween joys for the last time and to take care of some unfinished business. With illustrator Faith Erin Hicks and author Rainbow Rowell, we follow the two friends as dynamic and sociable Deja attempts to shake diffident Josiah out of his cautious and self-conscious ways and to actually talk to the girl on the fudge counter that he has admired from afar. It’s a well-crafted humorous conversation piece in which we get to know them both much better and to realise how their friendship is based on mutual respect and a shared sense of humour. The obvious question that arises, of course, is what kind of relationship this really is. Could it be that, by the end of an evening of unruly child customers, an escaped goat, half-finished snacks and their incompetent replacements who set the succotash on fire, they will find that they are more than just friends? It’s gotty and wittily done with sympathy for its two central characters and their different approaches to life and much affection for this once a year innocent country jamboree.

The M Word

Brian Conaghan, Bloomsbury, 354pp,9781408871500,£12.99

Conaghan takes us to dark places in seventeen-year-old Maggie’s life. It starts with a bit of teasing in the first page or so, when we are invited to wonder what an unknown man is jabbing into Maggie that is not producing the expected ecstasy and which she would rather he gets over with quickly. Actually it’s a tattoo drill but you could be excused for thinking that it is something else that girls are not expected to enjoy on the first time. And this kind of knowing black humour from narrator Maggie turns out to be necessary in a story that gets to grips both with suicide and self-harm. It’s Maggie that is cutting herself and there are some scenes that, while you may make you squirm, will certainly cause you to grieve at the mutilation, even as you understand the temporary relief that it gives her. Maggie herself is grieving for the suicide of her best friend and failing to cope with her mum’s spiralling depression. She is also facing up to a new turn in her life as she starts Art School and has to find her place there, as well as struggling with the usual relationship and sexual anxieties. Conaghan convincingly sets the self-harming in the context of this perfect stress storm and introduces us to a young woman who is certainly a victim but with the vulnerability, guilt and anger we can empathise. She is also someone who, in her wit, self-awareness and creativity, has the growing strength to make her way steadily out of the dark. I was not equally convinced by the turn in the plot that sees Maggie and her boyfriend setting her mum up for a date and it all working out swimmingly. Yet this is a credible attempt to set against the novel’s achievement of dealing so approachably with such a difficult subject.

Scars Like Wings

Erin Stewart, Simon and Schuster, 384pp,978-1471187018,£12.99

Ava Lee is aged sixteen, American. She is a junior at Central High School. A year before the story begins her family house was burned down. Both her parents and her cousin Sara died in the fire. Ava suffered sixty percent burns and permanent disfigurement. After the fire Ava goes to live with the parents of her late cousin, Aunt Coral and Uncle Glen. Stewart sets out to tell the story of Ava’s recovery and self-acceptance, fraught though that story may prove to be. There is a narrative running parallel to that of Ava. Her friend Piper also bears the marks of fire, as a result of a car crash. Piper is now a wheelchair user with spinal injury and quadriplegia. This book is an unusual example of its genre. Most books which tackle the difficult subject of life-limiting impairments fail to allow the characters to witness the full gamut of feelings experienced by those who in real life face such situations. Such books often avoid mentioning the darkest moments that such a destiny involves, or if they mention them they do so fleetingly. Such books also gloss over the endless and debilitating medical treatments that come in the wake of serious injuries. Stewart’s book neglects neither of these themes. The author explores both in detail and she describes how people confronted with such experiences may swing from an optimistic few days to the depths of despair and the darkest of thoughts. Occasionally even Stewart fails to meet a realistic standard. At one point Piper, despite her spinal injuries and quadriplegia, manages to move herself unaided on to Ava’s bed. Nevertheless this is an outstanding book, the most informed account of its subject since the publication of Lois Keith’s A Different Life in 1997.

Full Disclosure


Camryn Garrett was only 13 when she was invited to work as a reporter for TIME for Kids (a supplement to TIME Magazine); she has also written for MTV and The Huffington Post. To
have sold this debut novel before her 18th birthday is some achievement.

Garrett’s language is alive with honesty and energy, reflecting the viewpoint and empathy of someone writing from within the age group of her major characters and her readership. Her narrator, Simone Garcia-Hampton, is in her Junior (penultimate) year of High School. The quickfire, witty conversations between Simone and her friends, Claudia and Lydia, range easily from masturbation and vibrators to the relative merits of differently flavoured condoms; in fact, Claudia knows how to make your own dental dam out of a condom, should you happen to need one. They are equally at ease chatting about being bi, being gay or straight. Some areas are more difficult for Simone, however. She is HIV Positive from birth and at her last school, she shared this with her closest friends and the trust, setting irrational fear and hatred blazing among students and parents. In the end, she quit. She’s been settling in since September at a local school, not far from San Francisco. She longs to spread the Science about viral loads, about the U=U rule (undetectable = untransmittable) and the efficacy of current medication; but understandably, she remains silent, keeping her diagnosis to herself. The only place she can talk, with increasing freedom, is in a therapy group at the hospital with peers who also have HIV. Recently, she’s found Miles, a black guy on the stage crew of the school musical which she is student-directing. He’s disconcertingly nice; he’s a career directing. He’s disconcertingly nice.

The musical is Rent, loosely based on La Boheme, starring in previous productions. But ‘notes’ are resisted by actors used to clearly defined roles (‘Remember people are here to be gradual – and it is. It may be oppressively behaviour does happen is uncontestable. It is imperative that young people be able to identify such behaviour when confronted with it. For this reason Bourne’s endeavour deserves strong support.

The reviewer however has two minor criticisms. First, the emergence of the exploitative relationship needs to be gradual – and it is. It may be that some readers might find difficulty with the vernacular which the younger characters use – though it lends an extra layer of authenticity to the story. The ending of the book is tied up a little too neatly: Matt realises that he and Chris hear Lovey’s mother being abused: this is indeed a huge shock to India when she finds out that her father is seeking solace in the drinking habit he abandoned 20 years ago. He knows he must supplement his studies with a job and when he is offered work at Mr Ray’s funeral parlour he realises that this may be a way to make enough money to try to come to terms with the grief which threatens to overwhelm him. If he can attend funerals and watch families grieving he might be able to understand that others suffer as he does and so he is not alone.

This is a story rich in characters and secrets. Matt, who has a ‘pain vault’, a cellar devoted to his dead wife and to his career as an athlete cut short by a serious injury. When Matt begins his relationship with-works at a fast-food restaurant, runs a shelter for the homeless but feels he is not alone. Matt’s best friend Chris is, by contrast, uncomplicated and supportive, relishing food and friendship in equal measure. Bourne sets in Amelie and some readers might find difficulty with the vernacular which the younger characters use – though it lends an extra layer of authenticity to the story. Bourne’s book traces the impact that change has on Reese, Amelie and the absent Alfie.

As a footnote to her novel Bourne has inserted a warning note. The book deals with controlling behaviour and sexual assault. This is appropriate, however that the development of how to flatter Amelie at a time when she lacks self-confidence. But as time goes by their relationship moves onto something more dangerous and debilitating. Bourne’s book traces the impact that change has on Reese, Amelie and the absent Alfie.

The musical is Rent, which began a 12 year run on Broadway in 1996. It’s loosely based on La Boheme, but now most of the characters are affected by AIDS, in the fatal era before effective meds. Simone dreams of a career directing musicals. The teacher in charge here is interested chiefly in enhancing her own professional reputation; her direction is mechanistic, focussing on outward appearances (“Remember people are looking at you”). The whole thing lacks passion. Simone’s earliest detailed ‘notes’ are posted on a chat room for everyone to see and post the video on a school chat room for everyone to see and comment on. Her hour of need Poppy turns to her absent father. She is not sure how far she can rely on his support, or indeed what secrets might be unveiled as a result of her seeking help.

Despite the brevity of a book under a hundred pages, Ainsworth pulls off a considerable authorial feat. In this short span she presents three complete and separate strands of narrative development namely the revelation of his partner’s abuse and bullying and the secret flaw of Poppy’s father, which underlay his expulsion from the family home so inevitably the reader feels that each of these three narrative themes could have been developed at greater length. The important point however is to appreciate the skill with which the author has addressed this particular target.
“In dem days de beastesses kyar’d marters jes de same ez fokes” or so we are told in the tales of Uncle Remus

Mr Bright, the radical MP, was “very much taken with Uncle Remus. When papa showed it to him he used to read it aloud till the tears ran down with laughing”. Thus Beatrix Potter to her journal on the 16 September, 1884. But whether the laughter was provoked by the stories or the mode of storytelling or both is not vouchsafed.

For sure, Mr Bright was not the only one to laugh at this surprising and original work. Uncle Remus and his Legends of the Old Plantation had been published in New York at Christmas 1880, dated 1881, and an English edition was published by David Bogue as soon as copy could be shipped across the Atlantic so that by 1884 the country was awash with enthusiasm for the stories. (Copyright being of no account, Bogue’s volume, which used the original illustrations by Church and Moser, had been quickly followed by one from the indefatigable Routledge who drew on the rather classier work of A.T Elwes.)

The “legends” themselves had been collected by Joel Chandler Harris, a white journalist working in Atlanta, Georgia, who had mixedaternally with black communities down there and had been deeply impressed with the stories they told among themselves. He also had a fine ear for the vernacular of the storytellers and he cast his little narratives in the voice of an old slave attached to and valued by a plantation family. Rather than string them along though as if he were a Brother Grimm, Harris set them in a frame with Uncle Remus telling them to a little boy of the family. He creeps down to the old man’s cabin after tea rather as the children of the Earl of Derby famously crept down to the servants’ quarters to hear the comic verses of the ‘dirty landscape painter’ Edward Lear.

Harris was a reliable witness. The stories he reproduced were mostly entertaining animal fables of the trickster genre which have been assumed to stem from such African or Jamaican sources as those of Anansi, the trickster spider of West Africa. They were acclimatized to the back roads of the Southern scene and many have been found cognate with similar tales independently conceived elsewhere. (There’s an echo of Ali Baba in The Awful Fate of Mr Wolf; The Moon Entertaining Animal Fables of the Trickster landscape painter’ Edward Lear.

in the Mill-Pond, from a later volume, is a version of the English Gotham story; and there’s a Three Little Pigs with five pigs in it along with the wolf’s famous couplet: ‘If you’ll open de do’en let me in’ ‘I’ll wom my ban’s en go home agi’n.’

The stories number nearly two hundred, spread through some nine volumes between 1880 and 1955. Most centre on the adventures and antagonisms of a community of animals, especially the Anansi figure of Brer Rabbit whose double dispute with Brer Fox over the matter of the Tar-Baby has achieved a universal popularity all on its own. John Goldthwaite, noted below, finds among them tales based on myth, such as The Story of the Deluge, ghost stories and other stories of the supernatural (Brer Rabbit’s visit to Mammy-Bammy Big-Money in Brother Rabbit Submits to a Test has a strange resemblance to Andersen’s little mermaid’s desperate interview with the Sea-Witch.) Unexpected in animal tales though are also the twenty or so tales in which people – “Miz Meadows and the gals” – take part: young ladies who happily entertain and converse with the main animal protagonists in their house down the street, the lads behaving just like town-folk. (Goldthwaite argues plausibly that they may be running a whorehouse.)

There has been some anguish over the presentation of these stories in their dialect form and for many they may be texts only for professional storytellers, and children may well be unable to cope with even a simple sentence: “Fine um war you will en w’en you may, good chilluns allers gits tuck good keer on”. Well, “war you will en w’en you may”, the Legends must nevertheless be accounted both one of the great books of American literature and a great representation of oral folklore transferred into print. (See contemporary contemporaries arguments about the writing of Lallars.) An excuse can even be made for the persistent framing of the tales through the little boy’s visits to the old storyteller because it helps to authenticate a time and place for the record. Worthy attempts to “sanitize” Harris’s narrative skills do injury to their historic importance.

His reputation has suffered over recent decades, not least from the invention of “identity politics”, but a powerful justification of his achievement and its relation to children’s literature is given by Goldthwaite in his much neglected study The Natural History of Make-Believe (OUP, 1996), separately trailed in two numbers of Nancy Chambers’s Signal in 1985. By way of compromise however there appeared in 1987 the first of four volumes (down to 1994) in which Julius Lester incorporated the best tales of the extensive canon into books for children illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. The Tales of Uncle Remus. He paid tribute to Harris – ‘his integrity regarding the tales was exemplary and remarkable’ – and he did not drastically rewrite Harris’s texts but abbreviated and converted them into a retellable modern version that retained something of their flavour. It has restored the old man’s stories to the story-bag but a true authenticity cannot help being lost. Look at this: “I was born and raised in the briar patch, Brer Fox! Born and raised in the briar patch. And he hopped on over the hill and out of sight”. Can such really replace the great original: “Bred en bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox – bred en bawn in a brier-patch! en wid dat he skip out des ez lively as a cricket in de embers.”

Versions of The Tales of Uncle Remus are available from Amazon.