

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.239

November 2019

the children's book magazine online

Authorgraph **Rob Biddulph**

Jon Agee

**All you want to read for Christmas
in the BfK Christmas Gift Guide**

ThAt's
SNOW BUSiNesS!



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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **Bad Nana: That's Snow Business** written and illustrated by **Sophy Henn**. Thanks to **HarperCollins Children's Books** for their help with this November cover.



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 Tantalus, 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 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.

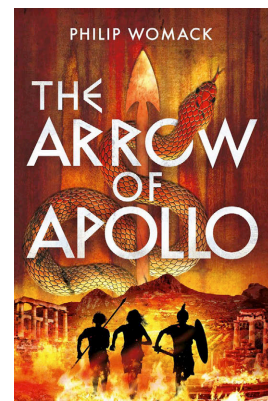
Or so I thought. After the heavy lifting of the funding, then came the usual heavy lifting of preparing a manuscript for publication.

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/>



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Being Human

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 maybe, the suspension of disbelief. . .

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 to enjoy them.'

On several counts, this little narrative illustrates why folk tales speak so directly and deeply to children (and to many adults too).

The narrative is straightforward. It's true that the storyteller allows the girl to reflect that she keeps 'dreaming impossible things', but otherwise the action is direct. It's forthright.

Secondly, the tale's clothing – it's so simple. But that doesn't mean it lacks colour or movement. In this respect, it's of a piece with the centuries of family and communal retelling by everyday folk, for the most part illiterate, who used everyday sturdy language that spoke to everyone.

And then, what about the doe? Is she real or imaginary? Or both? Is she a metaphor? Whatever she is, the storyteller resists wrapping things up too neatly, and leaves it to you and me to decide for ourselves.

During the nineteenth century, aware that the Industrial Revolution was leading to the decline of rural communities throughout Europe as people made their way to towns and cities in search of better paid jobs, social historians and the first folklorists began to travel



from village to village, and to write down the tales they heard. The historian and folklorist Joseph Jacobs estimated that in the British Isles alone, no fewer than ten thousand, yes ten thousand, different tales had been collected before the end of the century.

Heaven knows how many folk-tales have now been written down, worldwide. And taken together, they comprise the most wonderful source and inheritance – *a huge fund of vivid, short tales that human beings have told each other to illustrate what being human means.*

It's easier, maybe, to say what folk-tales are not than what they are. They don't concern themselves much with religious belief – that's the business of myths. When saints or devils do make an appearance, it's often to explain how some place got its name, or to 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?

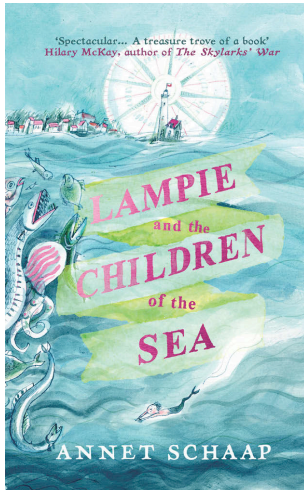
One caveat: a fair few tales are not in the least PC, and are racially bigoted, while a handful are downright cruel. For that, after all, is how humans are. And another caveat: there's often a decided (and lamentable) want of feminism in the original versions of folk-tales, reflecting the society and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

Books of the Year 2019

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.



Daniel Hahn is a writer, editor and translator.

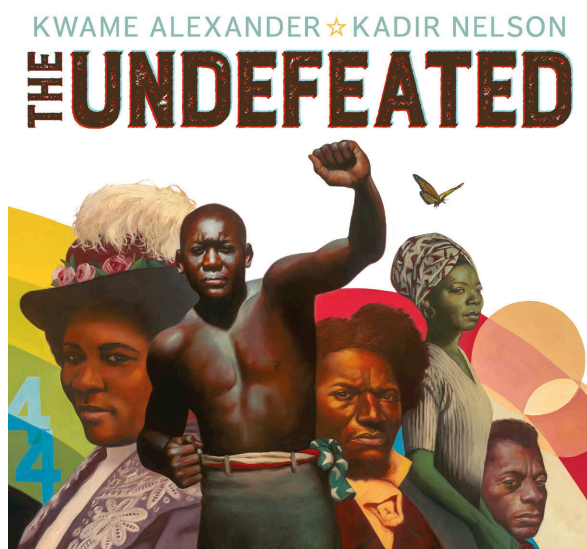
In Chris Naylor-Ballesteros's beautifully simple **The Suitcase**, a creature arrives from far away, after a hard journey – but it takes a little while for the other animals to learn to be kind to him. This new picture-book is a much-needed lesson in compassion, subtly taught through a story of lovely, 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)

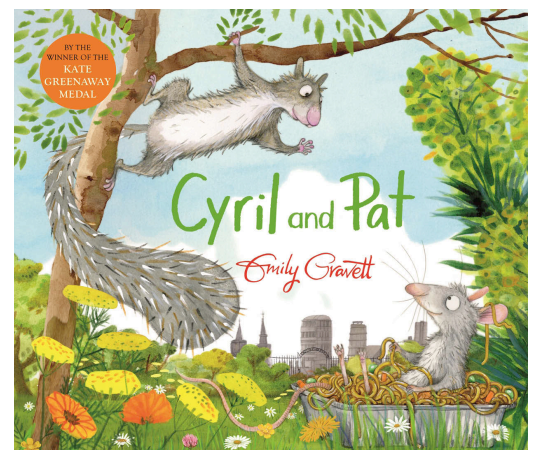
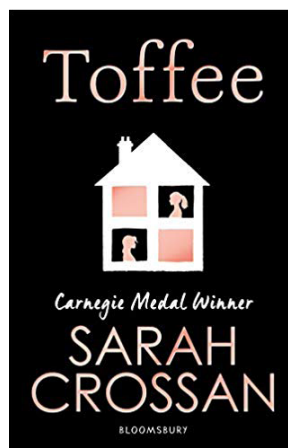
The text of picture book **The Undeclared** is a poem by Kwame Alexander highlighting the important contributions of a wide range of African Americans through history. The elegance of the language and the rhythm of the words are so well suited to a picture-book format and when married with Kadir Nelson's 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.

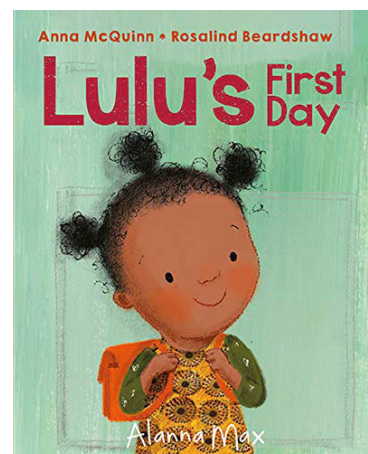
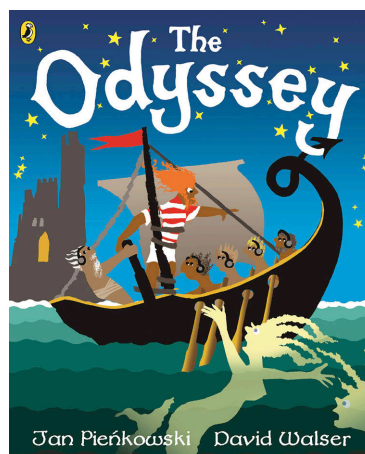
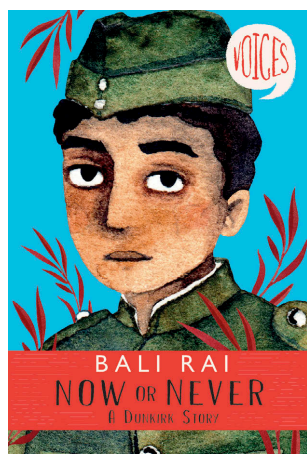
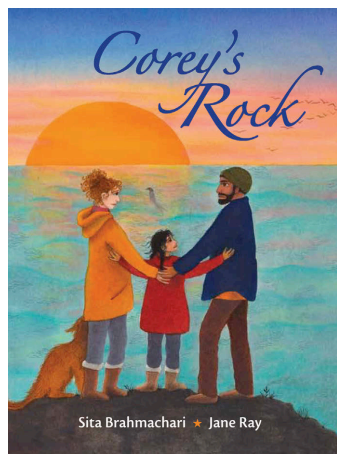
Darren Chetty is a teacher, doctoral researcher and writer with research interests in education, philosophy, racism, children's literature and hip hop culture.

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 Mafardidik 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 McKearney 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.





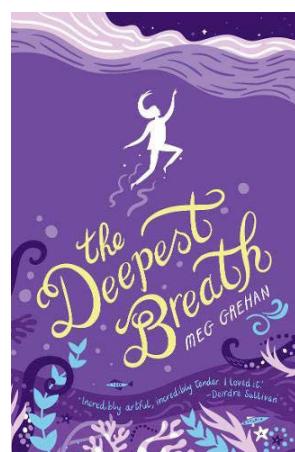
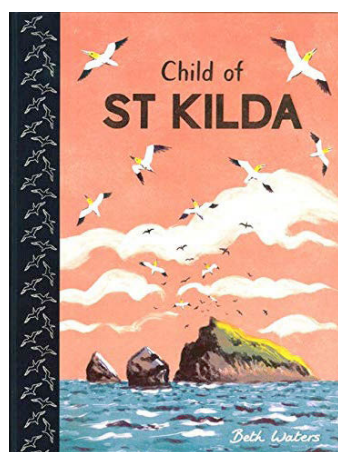
Pam Dix is a former librarian and chair of Ibby UK

Corey's Rock by Sita Brahmachari and Jane Ray is 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 introduced 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.



Caroline Fielding is a school librarian and chair of CILIP YLG London

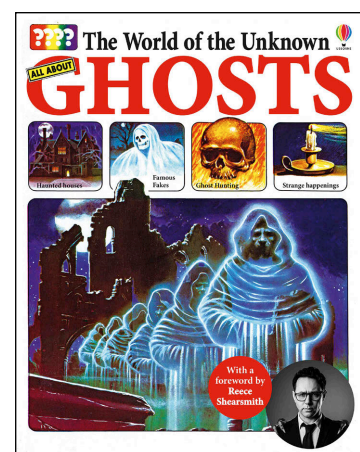
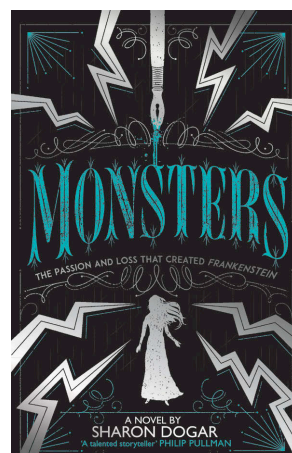
Choosing my book of this year is as hard as choosing **Carnegie Kate Greenaway** nominations, but also an opportunity to mention an absolute fave: **The Deepest Breath** by Meg Grehan is a verse novel about eleven-year-old Stevie, questioning her feelings for a girl, and includes a wonderful librarian. Bali Rai's **Now or Never: a Dunkirk Story** is my favourite historical novel this year. **Kick the Moon** by Muhammad Khan is my top YA, it has such great characters and touches on so many relevant issues. Finally, because my daughter Bea started school this term, my number one picturebook has to be **Lulu's First Day**!

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

I've chosen **The Odyssey**, text by David Walser and illustrations by the one and only Jan Pienkowski. The best stories ever brought to life by a long-serving duo themselves of rare excellence. More outsize characters but this time all too human in Sharon Dogar's **Monsters**, the story of how Mary Godwin, later Shelley, came to write Frankenstein while coping with an unrelentingly roller-coaster private life And of course Hilary McKay's **The Time of Green Magic**, more evidence that she is the best contemporary children's writer we currently have.

Dawn Finch is a children's author and librarian. She is Trustee of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and Chair of the Society of Authors' Children's Writers and Illustrators Group committee (CWIG).

I must confess to a serious bias when choosing this book because I first had a copy back in 1977. When Usborne said they were going to republish their classic **Ghosts** from the **World of the Unknown** series I was beyond excited. This book was a defining one for me as a child and I can vividly recall the delicious prickly fear of the unknown and the possibilities of *The Things That Go Bump In The Night*. This book had profound effect on me, and I'm delighted to share that with a whole new audience. Republished in Oct 2019, it is every bit as thrilling as it was when I was ten.

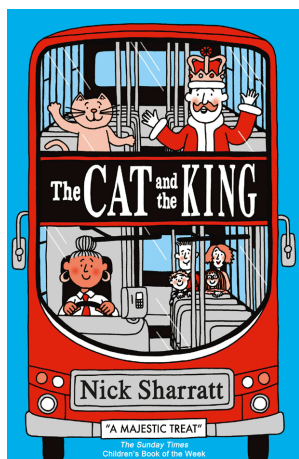


In one list, all the books we recommend for giving 2019:

<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

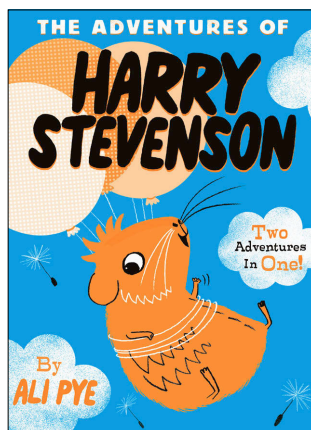


King Coo

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-Robinsonesque 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

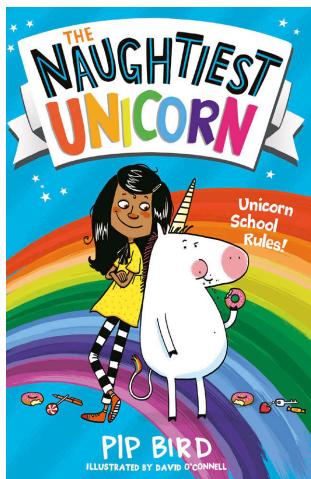


The Adventures of Harry Stevenson

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



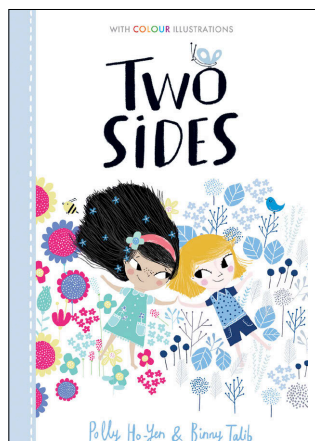
The Naughtiest Unicorn

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

Ten of the Best

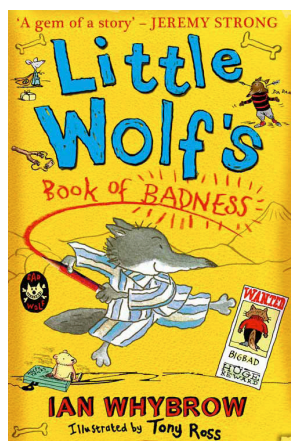


Two Sides

Polly Ho-Yen, Stripes Publishing, illustrated by Binny Talib, 978-1788950626, £7.99 pbk

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. One likes cats, the other prefers dogs. 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

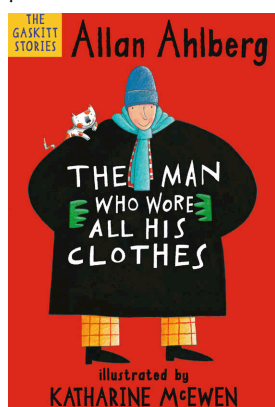


Little Wolf's Book of Badness

Ian Whybrow, illustrated by Tony Ross, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0007458547, £5.99 pbk

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, Walker Books, 978-1406381641, £5.99 pbk

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, Scholastic, 978-1407196343, £6.99pbk

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

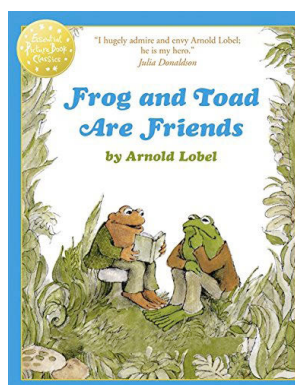


The Legend of Kevin

Philip Reeve and Sarah McIntyre, Oxford, 978-0192766090, £6.99pbk

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, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0007512928, £7.99pbk

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.



Authorgraph

No.238

Rob Biddulph

Interviewed by

Louise Johns-Shepherd

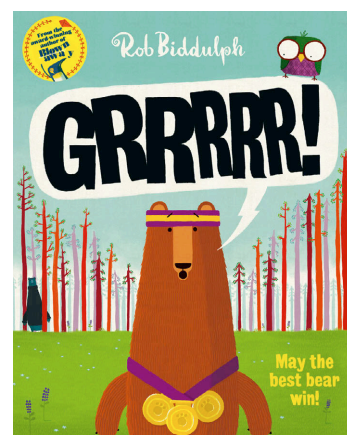
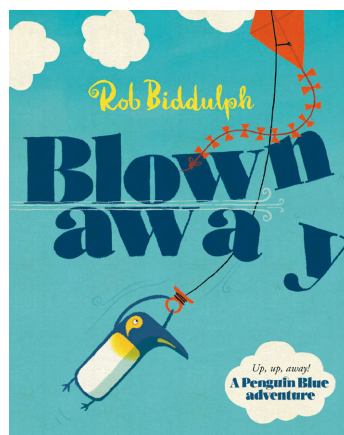
In 2015 Rob Biddulph's debut picture book, **Blown Away** won the **Waterstones Children's Book Prize**, one of only two picture books to ever win this prestigious award. Over the next five years he produced a total of nine picture books including his latest, the brilliantly bonkers **Show and Tell**. 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:

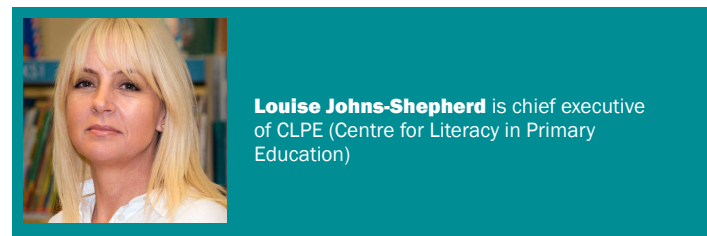
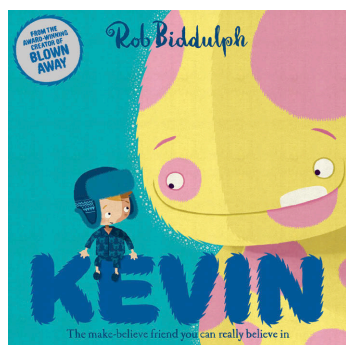
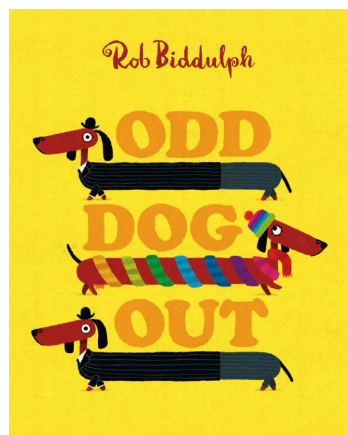
Blown Away, 978-0007593828, £6.99 pbk

GRRRRR!, 978-0007594139, £6.99 pbk

Kevin, 978-0008207427, £6.99 pbk

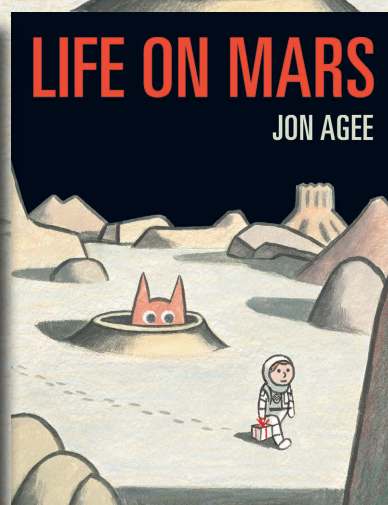
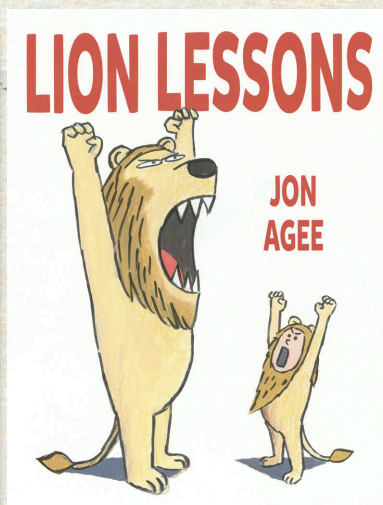
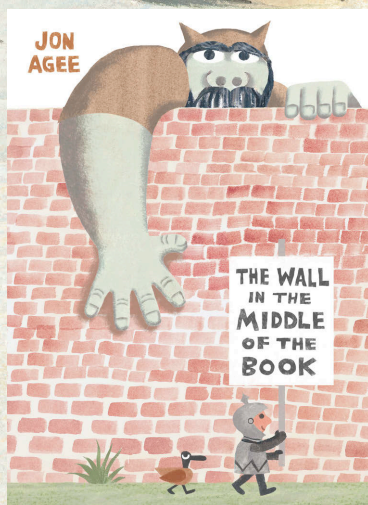
Odd Dog Out, 978-0008184780, £6.99 pbk

Show and Tell, 978-0008317911, £12.99 hbk



Windows into illustration: Jon Agee

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 named 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.

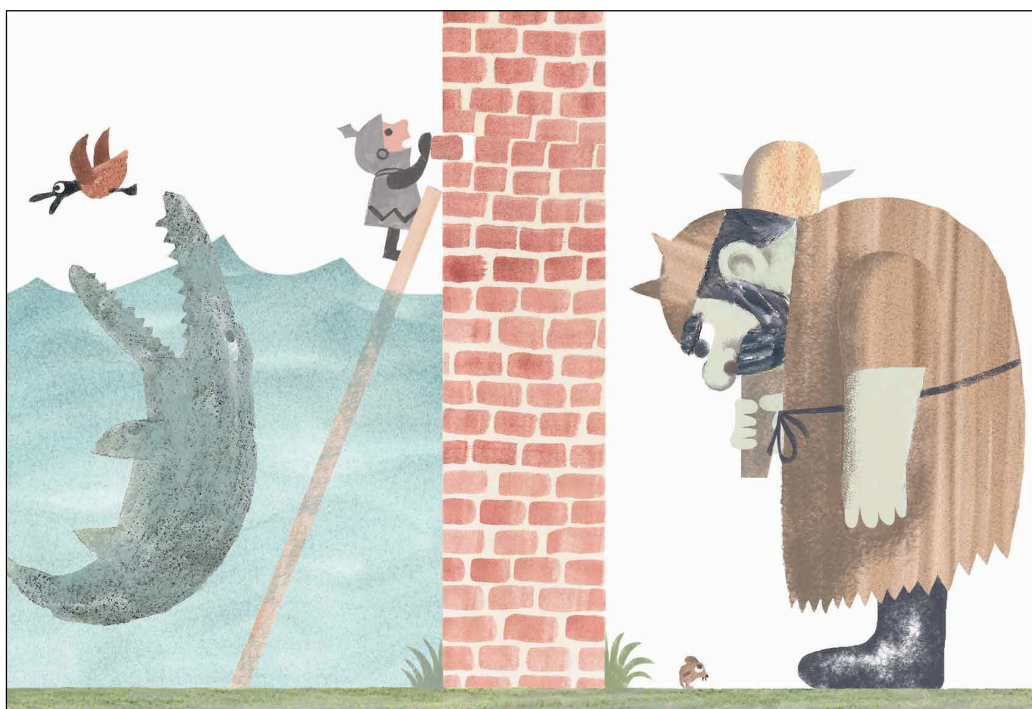


Three hilarious and thought-provoking picture books from the award-winning Jon Agee



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 book's 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.

Books for Giving 2020

What is Christmas for? A time for families, a break from work, for fun, sparkle, old acquaintances new friends, a time to explore, a time to reflect – and yes, of course, a time for presents. What to choose – which books will capture a bit of Christmas and keep it?

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

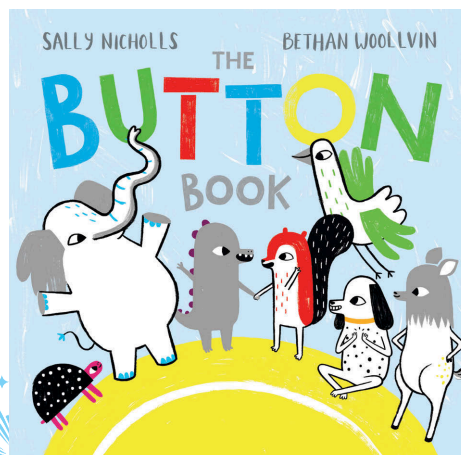
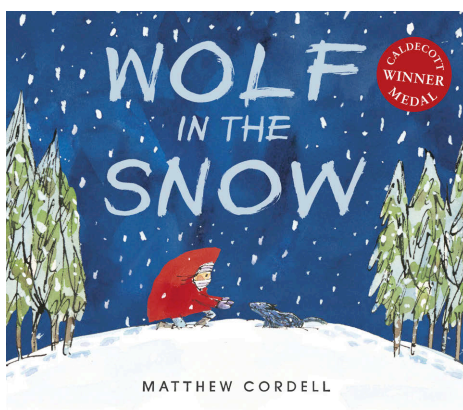
Picture books to delight the eye, stories to engage a young listener (or even an old one), these are real treats to find under the tree. **The Best Kind of Bear** by Greg Gormley and David Barrow is one; a gentle story, on the face of it simple but cleverly blurring the real world and the imaginative 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 lost -they meet. Here the images provide the ingredients for the story inviting not just the child to be the creator but also presenting an opportunity for the parent or an older sibling to be part of this adventure. In **The Button Book** by Sally Nicholls and Bethan Woollvin everyone has to join in as coloured buttons are pressed on each page. No, there are no technological gadgets – the invitation is to the imagination and to action; an invitation presented through words, lively design and bold, childlike illustrations. Be careful when you press the Purple Button though - it's the tickle button!

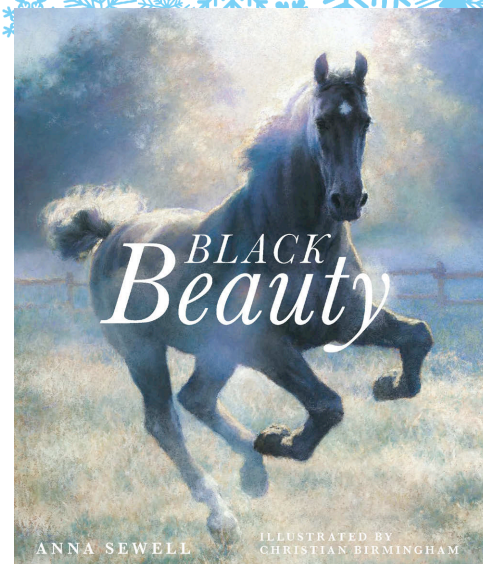
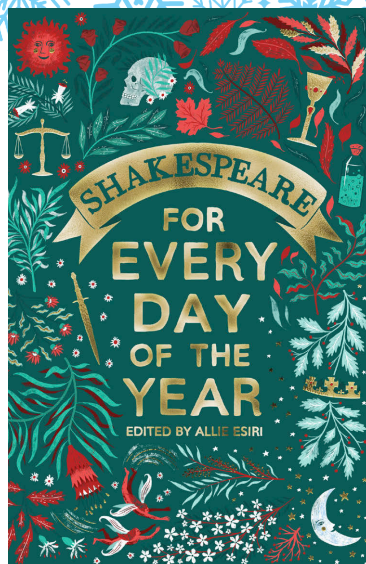
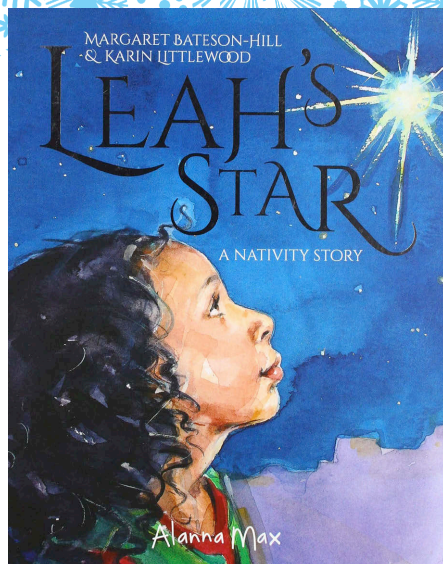
Christmas is for... sharing

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 Vassilisa 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 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 Poonam 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





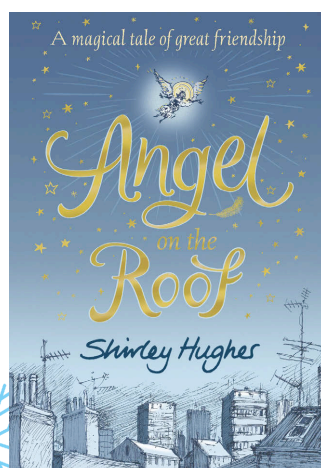
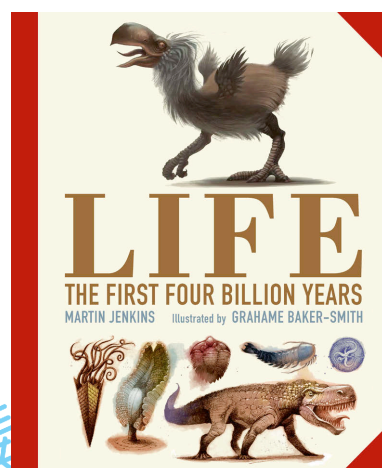
anti-hero; someone the reader can imagine as a friend. If Garvie is a teenager for today, so is Jo as she imagines a life for herself that will not be bound by a Chinese takeaway. **Chinglish** is fresh, contemporary, funny and full of life – just what a Christmas present should be.

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

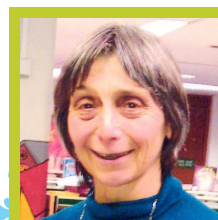
Wonderfully in keeping with the Christmas spirit is **Midnight Feasts**, compiled by A.F. Harrold and illustrated by Katy Riddell. This brings together an eclectic and wide-ranging selection of poems about food, a mouth-watering collection. Just as beautifully presented is **Poems from a Green and Blue 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.



Ferelith Hordon is editor of **Books for Keeps**

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>

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 Fatimaharan, combines the excitement

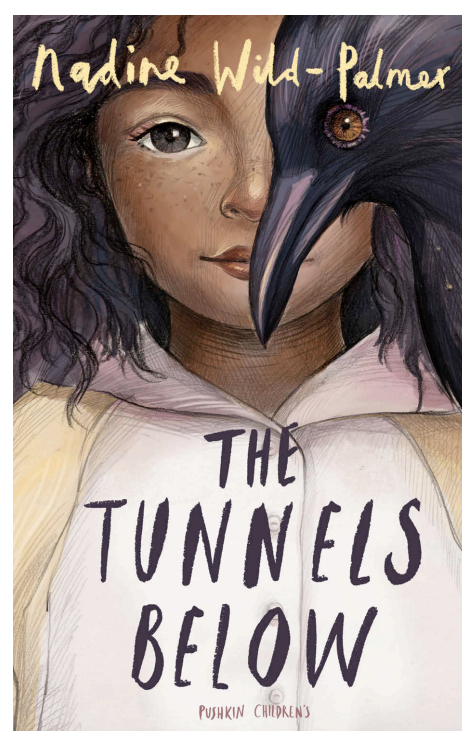
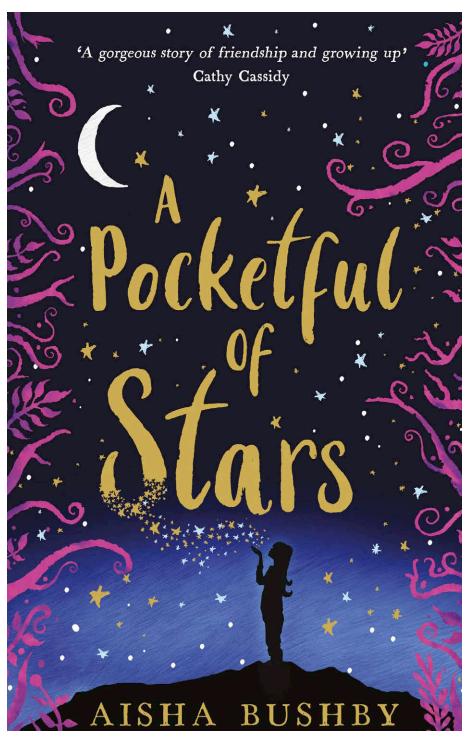
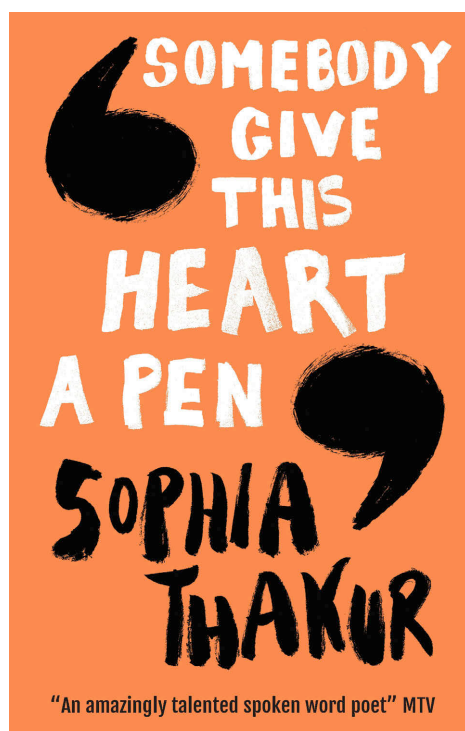
of a forthcoming birthday party with a celebration of the wealth of Black hairstyles for women and men. Breanna J. McDaniel's **Hands Up!** (Dial) reimagines a potentially frightening phrase through the activities of a young girl experiencing an ordinary day—and a protest march. For the very youngest 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).

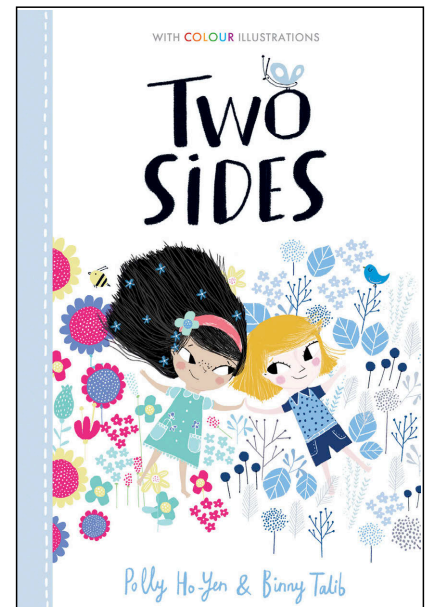
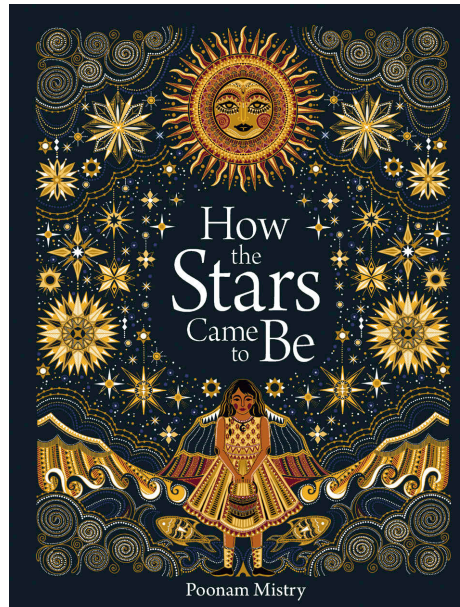
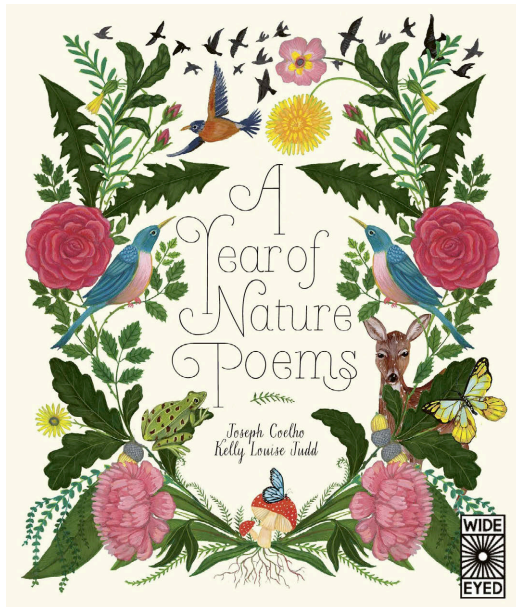
Folk and Traditional Tales

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 Mafaridik (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 Bitskoff (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 and Darren Chetty's **What Is Masculinity? Why Does It Matter? And Other Big Questions** (Wayland) is a timely exploration for children between the ages of 9 and 14.

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 the spoken word scene for some time now. **Somebody Give This Heart A Pen** (Walker) is her debut collection and explores issues of identity, difference, perseverance, relationships, fear, loss and joy.

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 teenaged 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>



Karen Sands-O'Connor is professor of English at **SUNY Buffalo State in New York**. She has, as Leverhulme Visiting Professor at Newcastle University, worked with **Seven Stories, the National Centre for the Children's Book**, and has recently published **Children's Publishing and Black Britain 1965-2015** (Palgrave Macmillan 2017).



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

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 Hickey, **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 Rabei'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 ball 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 seasonal celebrations, and there are some crackers this year. **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 7¾ 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



It was ten years ago this year that **The Wicked Young Writer Awards** were founded, the original idea of Michael McCabe, Executive Producer of **Wicked the Musical**. **Wicked**, the musical phenomenon, opened on Broadway in 2003 and has been running in the West End for 13 years. **Wicked** had started a successful education programme and wanted to add a writing element to this. They initially felt that they would like to focus on the genre of **Wicked** – a prequel or re-imagining of a familiar story, drawing inspiration from the original book of the musical, **Wicked** by Gregory Maguire.

But Michael Morpurgo persuaded the team at **Wicked** that it would be better to have a broader theme, allowing young people to write about what really excited them – whether poetry or prose – free to find inspiration and an original voice.

Morpurgo it was too who decided that it would be wonderful to have the award in different age-categories right up to 25. It was an ambitious format, but the idea took hold. He also suggested that the shortlisted and finalist writing be published in a special anthology each year. He drew inspiration from the WH Smith Book Award, founded by his friend Ted Hughes, which had encouraged young writers, many of whom went on to become professional authors, actors, playwrights and poets. The annual anthology is one of the highlights of the Awards, always a race to proof in time, but a true celebration of young people's writing. The Awards have always encouraged original voice and thought, the judges looking for these qualities rather than perfect grammar and spelling. As Michael Morpurgo says, 'I was delighted to get involved all those years ago because I felt there was a great need for a writing award for all ages. One that wasn't prescriptive but would allow young people to write about what they felt, to find their voice with the encouragement of their parents and teachers.'

Her Royal Highness, The Duchess of Cornwall has been the Patron of the Awards since they were founded. The awards are partnered with the **National Literacy Trust** and fundraise for **NLT**. The Duchess is a passionate promoter of Literacy in the UK and internationally, with a particular focus on encouraging a love of reading and writing from an early age and is also Patron of several organisations which promote and support literacy, including **Book Trust**, **First Story** and **Beanstalk**. There was a memorable moment when the Duchess was leaving the Apollo Victoria after the Awards were presented, coincidentally the same day as the announcement of the engagement of Prince William and Kate Middleton. When she was asked by the press on the steps of the theatre for her thoughts on the engagement, she replied, 'It's Wicked!'

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.

Good Reads

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 dark 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

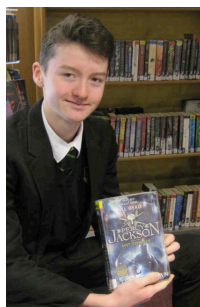
Big Game

Dan Smith, Chicken House, 978-1909489943

Big Game fulfils 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

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.



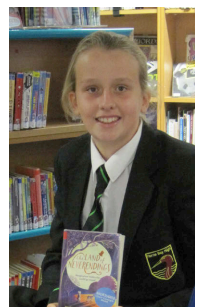
Alex



Luke



Jack



Katie

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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REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

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

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

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

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

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

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

Annie Brierley has worked in libraries and the related sector all her working life and is currently Library Supervisor in North Devon.

Rebecca Butler writes and lectures on children's literature.

Jane Churchill is a children's book consultant.

Stuart Dyer is an Head Teacher of a primary school in East Devon.

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

Janet Fisher is a children's literature consultant.

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

Sarah Gallagher is a headteacher and director of **Storyshack.org**

www.storyshack.org

Daniel Hahn is a writer, editor and translator.

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

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

Matthew Martin is a primary school teacher.

Sue McGonigle is a Lecturer in Primary Education and Co-Creator of

www.lovemybooks.co.uk

Margaret Pemberton is a school library consultant and blogs at margaretpemberton.edublogs.org.

Neil Philip is an author, poet, mythographer and folklorist.

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

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

Sue Roe is a children's librarian.

Elizabeth Schlenker is the compiler of www.healthybooks.org.uk

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

Books about Children's Books

The 100 Best Children's Books

★★★★★

Brian Alderson, Galileo Publishers, 256pp, 978-1-903385-98-2, £14.99 hbk

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 Tailor of Gloucester* and *Quentin Blake's wordless Clown*), whereas the Grolier selection admitted poetry and picture 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 waymarks 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, 'What 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 Pearse

Cranch's fantasy **The Last of the Huggermuggers**, Hesba Stretton's 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 Janni Howker'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**.

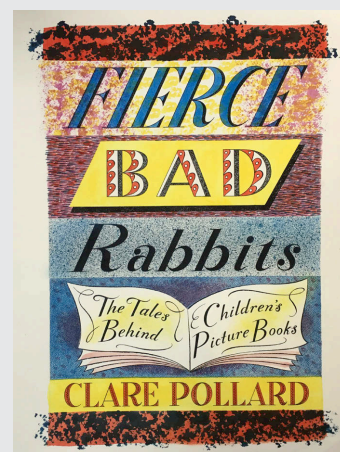
One might cavil at some of the choices from within an oeuvre. I would have chosen **The Box of Delights** rather than **The Midnight Folk** because of its breathtaking narrative momentum, its delight in language, and its influence on authors such as Alan Garner and Susan Cooper via the 1943 radio adaptation by John Keir Cross. And while there are two books by Philippa Pearce—her own **The Battle of Bubble and Squeak**, and her brilliantly deft editing/rewriting of Brian 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 is it 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 **Harriet 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-scalpelled, 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 (detailed 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 – her introduction to feminism through *Best Friends* for Frances – or her experiences reading with her own

Review feature: **The Book of Dust**

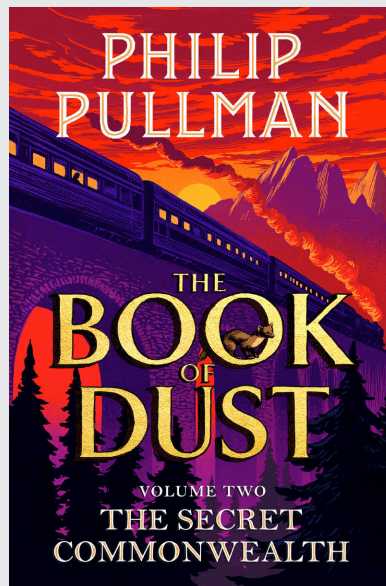
Nicholas Tucker enters **The Secret Commonwealth**, the second volume in **The Book of Dust** by Philip Pullman

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-ghosts, 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.

The Book of Dust Volume 2, The Secret Commonwealth,
Philip Pullman, 978-0241373330, David Fickling Books, £20.00 hbk

reviews

Books About Children's Books continued

children – a beautifully evocative reminder of why **Dogger** makes us cry) with the analytical, the detailed with the big-picture. And she extrapolates convincing general thoughts from her few examples, so her book has original pleasures of observation and insight for experts but also coherence for those new to the subject. And her appreciation is contagious. We accompany her discovery of Dr Seuss, as a poet and

poetry-reader and poetry-translator in rapt admiration of his brilliance under such constraints. The four pages on **Green Eggs and Ham** pander to my own familiarity with it, and love for it, but there are revelations, too.

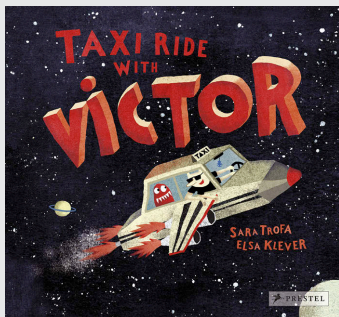
There's an awful lot here. Pollard's reading of **Burglar Bill** includes brief references to his stock-character clothing, to class, to children's sensitivity to injustice, to perceptions of adulthood, there's a suggestion about how the first draft differed from the

final version, a long quote from Allan Ahlberg, and a brief but meaningful link to crime and punishment in today's society. For my money, it's these many detailed individual book-by-book readings like these that make **Fierce Bad Rabbits** a volume I'll keep coming back to, but because Pollard's structure is partly thematic, the connections and comparisons are every bit as interesting. **Where the Wild Things Are** and **Not Now, Bernard** are both portraits of 'the monstrous self'; compare the clothes in Beatrix Potter and **Babar**, or the consequences of overeating in **The**

Very Hungry Caterpillar and **The Tiger Who Came to Tea** (while on the subject of eating, see also **Death**); consider her shift from comedy (because we know that 'most picture books tend towards comedy') to **The Lorax** in its terrible minor key.

One of my own favourite sequences sees Pollard linking Christmas, Ezra Jack Keats, **The Snowman**, silence, snow, and – briefly, poignantly – the death of her own father. It's a reading of the visual as well as the words and silences; it's a reading that has wonder, beauty, emotion, depth. As befitting its subject. **DH**

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant



Taxi Ride with Victor

★★★★

Sara Trofa, illus Elsa Klever, Prestel, 40pp, 978-3791374062, £10.99 hbk

Jump into Victor's taxi for a fun-filled dash round the galaxy, packed with surprises. Victor has always dreamed of being a taxi driver, indeed he wants to be the very best he can be – friendly, alert, wise to every shortcut. He's certainly friendly, and his rocket-powered cab looks clean and comfortable but there's one major problem: Victor is hopeless at finding the way. We watch as passenger after passenger is dropped off at completely the wrong destination. The grey-haired lady is left at the fun fair instead of the hairdresser; the young boy who wants to go to the funfair ends up at the library, and the librarian who wants to go to work is delivered to the dentist. Fortunately, no-one seems annoyed at Victor's mistakes, and indeed, these turn out to be very happy accidents, his passengers' lives improved by his wrong turns. For children worrying about the importance of getting things right, it's a warm and comforting message, and for the rest of us it demonstrates how going along with the unplanned can bring unexpected happiness. Elsa Klever's bold, busy mixed media illustrations are a delight too. She fills the spreads with details not in the text, including all sorts of flamboyant, multi-limbed aliens (Victor himself has four arms), and the out-of-this-world setting adds energy and excitement to Victor's errors, and their unanticipated outcomes. **AR**

Lulu's First Day

★★★★

Anna McQuinn, ill Rosalind Beardshaw, Alanna Max, 24pp, 978-1-907825-217, £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 early start but Lulu is ready, she has packed Dinah her special cuddly cat and chosen her outfit, 'pink, jumping leggings 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.

Lulu is greeted 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 dressing up as a 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 simple 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. **AB**

Somewhere out There, Right Now

★★★★

Gemma Wells, Ragged Bears, 32pp, 9781857144765 £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 peacefulness of the natural 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 quite thoughts. 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. **AB**

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 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 make a wish, / and dream it will come true, / for stony bones to 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.

Told in rhyme that reads well aloud and accompanied by atmospheric scenes of the red-haired protagonist and her nocturnal foray, this is a seaside adventure with a difference to delight dreamers and dinosaur enthusiasts especially. **JB**

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 baby sling too tight. As time passes Mum and Dad are getting quite worried. However, when Polly's new baby sister is born Polly comes up with her own very inventive plan to solve the problem.

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

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

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, 978 1 5098 2750 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 spend his days, baking, riding a bike, skating, 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 sparkly 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 prove to the youngest of children how important it is to learn to be unselfish. The text is minimal 'my', 'your', 'no',

'their', 'whose' and, of course, 'nuts', but the meanings are crystal clear through the marvellous illustrations. 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 9781788450577 £11.99 hdbk Merrylegs was not the fastest, most beautiful or the most glamorous. He was clumpy and dumpy; the safe little horse to help the children learn to ride – and they love him. But Merrylegs wants more and his longing becomes even stronger after he sees the glorious horses on the 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 solidity 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 enhancing the strength and density of the images. However, this does not mean that they are static. 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, the ideal partner for the illustrations. As in the best picture books here the two elements work seamlessly together. The result is a lovely story to share whether as a cosy shared moment or at a Storytime. **FH**

5 – 8 Infant/**Junior****Ed's Choice****Kites**

★★★★

Simon Mole Ill. Oamul Lu Frances Lincoln 40pp 9781786035561 £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, from the cover design across which the kites swoop and swirl, to the text, carefully placed on each spread, interacting with but never detracting from the images presented in a clear uncluttered font. The theme may be familiar, but it does not feel stale as the reader engages with David following his effort to make a kite, hoping it will work – but aware it may not; the design does not look right. The story is told with a poet's sensitivity to

words and rhythms – Simon Mole is indeed a poet. There are some lovely images – David's toy "cars have forgotten how to drive", he has to "scoop up his sadness" when his home-made kite falls to the ground. These word images play across Oamul Lu's illustrations which tell the same story but visually using colour and shape and the space created by each spread. Sometimes this takes the image across two pages as the kites fly over the street or w climb the hill with David, sometimes the image is confined to one page reflecting a particular moment or maybe a small vignette, a detail. The colours, bold, textured, 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 how, as 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**

troubles - how he wishes he could make friends, how Dan Sharples 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 up on 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 people are continuing to be nicer and more co-operative with each other, and Lewis and Dan often go swimming together. Lewis, who enjoyed looking out at the world, grows up to 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 obscuring 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 at 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. **DB**

Jazz Dog

★★★★

Marie Voigt, Oxford University Press, 32pp, 978 0 1927 6688 5, £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 drifting through an open window, wants to buck the system, follow his heart and be a player of cat music?

First he has to learn 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**

Angel on the Roof

★★★★

Shirley Hughes (author and illustrator), Walker, 64pp, 9781406379648 £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 Gantry's pigeons and goes up to the roof, slowly, to investigate. Lewis tells the angel his

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

Step Inside: Homes through History

★★★★

Goldie Hawk, illus. Sarah Gibb. Nosy Crow (with the National Trust) 40pp., 9781788004091 £14.99 hdbk

Since this lavishly produced book is published in conjunction with the **National Trust**, it reaches a certain high standard, and is evidently going to be sold in NT shops as well as bookshops. It invites children to look at the houses and clothes of people in seven eras: Late Middle Ages, Tudor, Georgian, Victorian, 1920s, 1960s and present day. Laser-cut windows enable to the reader to look backwards and forwards through the holes, as double-page spreads show all the rooms in the houses, and what they are used for, and there is even a 'door' in the cover. There are items to spot which are used in more than one house, and there is information about how people lived and their families. The people in a family are named, with a little snippet about each to help children to relate to them e.g. Jack has just learnt to walk, and Lucy has a lovely little puppy. Mostly, the houses are large and evidently lived in by relatively rich people: generally there is little evidence of the working class except in the Late Middle Ages, where some (very clean) peasants are working in the fields, but the exception is the 60s, where various people are shown living in contemporary flats and the clothing becomes more everyday, though hippies are in there, too. Much had been made of the comfort, or otherwise, of the clothes people in previous periods of history had worn, until the Twenties, when clothing became more practical. We return to affluence in the Present Day house, an interestingly designed modern house with a large garden where there is plenty of space for the children bouncing on a trampoline.

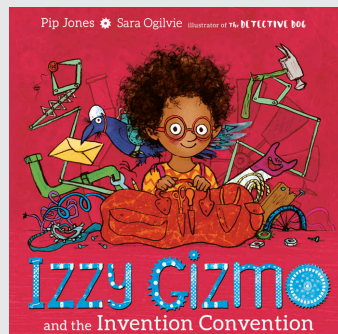
Sarah Gibb has included a lot of detail in her illustrations, and it is fun to look out for the items used more than once. This is a large book to pore over and enjoy, with glossy pages and very accessible history. **DB**

Izzy Gizmo and the Invention Convention

★★★★

Pip Jones, illus Sara Ogilvie, Simon and Schuster, 32pp, 978-1471145247, £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 that from her Grandpa – "Cobblers!" he shouts – they pack up her 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 inventors challenged to an invention competition. Izzy seems to be in trouble when one of her competitors selfishly hoards all the materials available for herself, but there's very little that Izzy can't tackle with her limitless ingenuity and creativity.

Picture book stars don't come much more inspirational 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' rhyming 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 Threes', 'what are your top three sandwiches', 'top three jellyfish', 'top three days out', eventually break through. It is very moving to see Tibble and Grandpa begin to talk and engage again as Grandpa's grief is unlocked by the strong relationship between grandparent and grandchild. Be prepared to cry at the end when the pair play 'top three grannies' 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 and expressive 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 Beautyman, Alison Green Books, 32pp, 978-1-407188-88-1, £6.99 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 Morris, and the two of them 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 day progresses, 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 wakes to find the sun shining and no trace of Morris, she's devastated. Outside, she allows the tears to fall. 'Who am I going to explore with now?' she asks. And in a page-turn that changes everything, Penny finds herself face to face with Archie, who lives next door and is looking for a friend...

Gently constructed around themes of loss and change, this 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. There's a hint of **The Snowman** about this magical, misty book, and like Briggs' classic, it will find a place in many hearts. **CFH**

Once upon a Rhythm

★★★★

James Carter, illus., Valerio Vidali, Caterpillar Books, 32pp, 978-1-85857-844-9, £11.99 hbk

A prolific poet, compiler of poetry books and the author of books on creative writing and its use in schools, James Carter has written a lot of poems for primary children about all kinds of popular topics: space and aliens, beasties, dinosaurs, teachers etc, and he does a lot of school visits, with his guitar. A companion book to this one, **Once Upon A Star**, 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 while others dance. We see someone telling stories through song, and children learning them to sing back, then the reader has to turn the book sideways to see a double page spread of different musical instruments, all making different sounds. We see how notes can be written down, illustrated by birds on parallel wires, and how music can be very different in form, and in other countries, coming up to date with afro beat and festivals. Finally, you can be a musician...Valerio 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. **DB**

Under the Great Plum Tree

★★★★

Written by Sufiya Ahmad, ill. Reza Dvaland, Tiny Owl, 32pp, 978-1-910328-46-0, £12.99 hbk

Deep in the Indian jungle live Miss Bandari and Mr Magarmach, a golden-hearted monkey and a crocodile. Mr Magarmach is too old and slow to catch his own food any more so kind Miss Bandari throws him some fruit from her tree. One plum leads to another and soon the unlikely pair are the best of friends. Mr Magarmach is a great storyteller and Miss Bandari enjoys hearing about the past, when he was strong enough to battle pythons, lions and human hunters.

One day Mr Magarmach suggests repaying Miss Bandari's kindness with an outing, so she jumps onto his back and off they go. Along the way Dame Hati the elephant warns Miss Bandari about King Crocodile who lives in the swamp. 'He will eat you!' she trumpets, but Old Magarmach tells everyone not to be silly. King Crocodile simply wishes to see Miss Bandari's golden heart!

Does that sound *likely*? Miss Bandari thinks quickly and tells Old Magarmach that she's forgotten her golden heart and they'll have to return to her tree to fetch it. But as

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 and a life of misery. Or does it? When Miss Bandari spots him looking cold and lonely, she takes pity on him and their friendship is rekindled.

This engaging fable is attractively illustrated by Iranian artist Reza Dalvand using intricate and delicately patterned images inspired by traditional Gujarati designs. In writing the story, Sufiya Ahmed drew on her mother's tales about the Indian jungle – which were, in turn, based on fables from the 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

The Fate of Fausto

★★★★

Written and ill. Oliver Jeffers, HarperCollins, 96pp
978-0-00-835791-7, £16.99 hbk

"There was once a man who believed he owned everything and set out to survey what was his..."

So begins Jeffers' *painted fable* about Fausto, a man whose greed and sense of entitlement leads him into dangerous waters as he claims dominion over the natural world. At first, Fausto doesn't encounter much resistance – flowers and trees are easy pickings, after all. But he has to show who's boss before the lake submits, and the mountain isn't at all impressed by his posturing. "I am my own", it says, stubbornly, and Fausto must throw a tantrum to make it bow its head. Readers will be waiting for Fausto to get his come-uppance, but it takes an ocean to vanquish him. Faced with its quiet indifference, Fausto's histrionics are irrelevant, and all we can do is watch and wonder as he makes his final step.

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 fatal decision to confront the sea. Plain white backgrounds and clever page layouts allow his business suit and expressive postures to dominate the spreads, even when all that's visible is a pointed finger or departing foot. The carefully-crafted text is minimal, with a large typeface that evokes mid-century styling and

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 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



Oscar Seeks a Friend

★★★★

Written and ill. by Pawel Pawlak, trans. by Antonia Lloyd-Jones, Lantana Publishing 40pp,
978-1-911373-79-7, £8.63, hbk

Oscar the skeleton has lost a tooth. Maybe you think something like that wouldn't matter – but as Oscar observes with disarming honesty, *'it's hard for a small, ugly skeleton to make friends'* and when he spots a girl burying her tooth, he asks for it. Burying a tooth will make your dreams come true, or so we're told, and the girl really wants a new friend. But when she sees Oscar's gappy smile, she decides to give him the tooth as long as he helps her find a friend. Oscar agrees, so she shows him all the things she plans to share with her new friend: the scent of wet grass in a meadow, a mystery story about islands, the colours of a rainbow....

They have a lovely time together, and then it's Oscar's turn to act as host. At this point, what has been an enjoyable but somewhat unremarkable story shifts gear. Reaching across the central gutter of the book, Oscar takes the girl's hand and guides her onto the left-hand page, and as he shares the delights of his skeleton world – skating in the

park, an enormous library, butterflies sleeping on a flowering tree – we realise the significance of his dark backgrounds. Each world is beautiful, each is necessary. Both children have something important to give and receive in equal partnership.

The story ends on a fittingly optimistic note for such an upbeat exploration of 'otherness' – Oscar 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.

There's lots to notice in Pawel Pawlak's pictures, which demand attention and repay close looking. With their robust design and lively animation, Oscar and his skeletal companions evoke the Ahlbergs' **Funnybones** or Mexican Day of the Dead images and children will warm to them. Pawlak used spatial collage to create his artwork, layering thin paper over cardboard shapes to produce a raised and textured effect, and there's a theatrical feel to his layouts, particularly the wordless spreads, which reflects his set-design experience for puppet shows.

The translated text, while functional, isn't the strongest aspect of this book. But the artwork is really worth exploring and will inspire children's own storymaking and other creative responses. CFH

Beast Feast

★★★★★

Emma Yarlett, Walker Books, 32pp,
978 1 4063 8663 9, £10.99 hbk

Beast by name but perhaps not entirely so by nature, for when he catches something tasty for dinner he decides to share the feast – a little boy whom he names Dinner – with his friends. He writes letters to them inviting them to a feast.

Dinner however has no desire to be consumed and resolves to try and get Beast to change his menu.

Beast's friends too want changes made to the meal for each includes instructions for cooking Dinner along with their acceptance of his invitation. One desires a salty meal so Dinner talks Beast into going for a swim in the ocean; another wants slimy food so Dinner's suggestion is a swamp visit. Over several days Dinner's playful notions have an effect on Beast: he's actually enjoying the company of the crafty Dinner but has the lad sufficiently beguiled the cook to save himself from the pot?

With vibrant illustrations full of delicious details, a page turner of a tale (with touches of Scheherazade) that includes five letters, recipes yummy and yucky and lots of tasty wordplay Emma Yarlett has herself cooked up a delectable picture book offering that will most certainly have listeners demanding 'more please' whenever you share it. JB

Cornelia and the Jungle Machine

★★★★

Nora Brech, Gecko Press, 32pp,
978 1 7765 7259 5, £11.99

Having just moved into a gloomy house full of clutter and having nobody to play with, young Cornelia wearing a blue cape, goes outside to explore its forest environs with her dog. Among the tall trees a ladder descends.

Up go girl and dog high into the treetops where there's an exciting-looking treehouse, outside which, lounging in a hammock, is a boy who introduces himself as Fredrik.

He invites Cornelia to see his numerous inventions within – hanging beds, platforms aplenty and all kinds of plants. Best of all, says her host is his jungle machine, and after some button pushing and wheel turning, tropical plants appear. These grow into a fully-fledged jungle with vines to swing on and wild animals roaming. Suddenly there alights a huge red-feathered bird and upon this they fly to a river where a boat awaits.

After a river trip, it's time for Cornelia to go home, but Fredrik's invitation to come every day is one likely to be accepted by the departing girl as she returns to her parents, obviously feeling more upbeat about her new situation.

All this unfolds through fantastic Gorey-like gothic spreads (several of which are wordless) detailing their adventure, together with a mere hundred or so words of dialogue which leave plenty of space for allow readers their own flights of fancy thanks to this immersive tale. JB

Tiny and Teeny

★★★★

Chris Judge, Walker Books, 32pp,
9781406370928, £12.99 hbk

This picture book would surely inspire the writing of many more books about small people living in small items familiar to children. It also has an intriguing pair of holes in the front cover which definitely make you want to peek inside. You have to look really closely and carefully at the book as there are lots of lovely details in there: mini libraries within books and a hotel made out of a tall coffee pot are just some of the unusual buildings in the book's town, Glengadget.

Teeny and Tiny live in an apple house and the author immediately encourages the reader to look at it carefully. Involving the reader in the world is a great way of starting the book. The characters spend their time helping others in their town – each page offering more detail about what it is like in the tiny town. One day a calamity occurs – the apple house is crushed. Teeny and Tiny have to move into the 'Grand Hotel' (the one made out of a coffee pot) but they are really unhappy as this isn't their home. Luckily the townsfolk help them out and take them on treats to help them recover. Meanwhile they have been working on a new home for the miniature pair and the end of the book is truly a happy resolution with

reviews

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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 illustrations provide pathways in to more towns and more homes older children might like to create in their own miniature world. The print is bold and clear to read with a simple layout; the use of primary colours make it visually bright and cheery too. **SG**

Molly and the Whale

★★★★★

Malachy Doyle, ill. Andrew Whitson, Graffeg, 978 1913 134044, £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. An **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 must 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 explains she is too heavy, and anyway, they might hurt her. As the morning progresses, great tarpaulins are erected high over her head, as sun shades; Molly sings to her to keep her calm, with the whale's beady eye clearly watching all this activity. But Molly senses the massive creature is becoming more and more uncomfortable, more and more unhappy, as the heat of the day increases. At last the tide turns, and the children dig a channel from the tide line to the whale, to speed the water's advance. Once her tummy is resting in the cool, clear water, the whale does a big blubbery shake, as if to say thank you. Hours pass by. The people retreat to the sand dunes to watch. No further movement, apart from the rising of the moon. The father entreats everyone to go home, and says he will keep watch. It is to be full moon that night, so the tide should be at its highest. Molly and Dylan stay with their father all night. As dawn breaks, Molly spots movement. The whale is testing the water's depth with her tail. The three watch joyfully, in awe and wonder, as slowly the whale turns and heads out to deeper, safer water. They are entranced, watching the whale as she slaps her fluke on the surface of the sea, and sends water spouts high into the air. I have had the amazing experience of whale watching, seeing their enormous size

and mastery of the sea, so this story really touched my heart. Malachy Doyle has handled the telling so well, never a word too much, and 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**

Let's All Creep through Crocodile Creek!

★★★★★

Jenny Lambert, Little Tiger Press, 32pp, 978 1 78881 398 3, £11.99, hbk

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 not crocodiles in the creepy, crooked creek, whereas Rabbit expresses doubts. Tortoise, unfamiliar with the idea of crocodile, listens as Mouse begins to describe a croc's features... a knobbly, gnarly 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 swifty, 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. Ending? "Easy Peasy," says Mouse; "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 created. 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, gnarly backed crocodiles lurking. A great read. **GB**

The Inner Child

★★★

Henry Blackshaw, Cicada Books, 32pp, 978 1 908714 68 8, £6.95 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, ghostly 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 dance, or being afraid or nasty to others, or talking in baby voices when they're in love. The integrated text, done in pen and ink, adds to the charm, and there is real awareness of relationships in the whole – humour too. This is an original idea, imagined in an original way, and it will appeal to both children and parents. **ES**

The Little Island

★★★★★

Smriti Prasad-Halls and Robert Starling, Andersen Press, 32pp, 9781783449095, £12.99, hdbk

Once upon a time there was a little farm 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 draw up the bridge. They do not need 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 adding character and life. Robert Starling's illustrations highlight these characteristics, neatly matching and extending the story. Bold colours, strong designs draw the 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 the issues the author is keen to introduce – fear of others, exclusiveness, the building of barriers, looking back to an imagined past – while also highlighting the importance of sharing, of cooperation, of friendships and hope. 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 times. Excellent. **FH**

Castle of Books

★★★

Written and illustrated by Alessandro Sanna, Tate, 48pp 978-1-84976-668-5, £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 and verbal clues.

Two girls are contemplating an array of books. Are we here to observe...? A chunky volume falls off the shelf and lands with a *thunk!* on one girl's head. Why did it fall? And what will the girls discover when they open it?

Blah, blah, blah... The answer is left to our imagination and the girls start quarrelling. *Rrrriip....!* 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 we just need to *be amazed*. Whatever happens, we're sure to find answers of some kind. After all, as the final spread assures us – mischievously? – "Now I understand!"

Set against plain backgrounds and largely unconfined by boundaries, Sanna's spare and stylish artwork allows itself the visual and imaginative space it needs to thrive. Spines and covers are suggested by comb-like sweeps of coloured ink with pages drawn in fine black pen, and similar treatment is given to the girls' clothing and hair. Scribbled text erupts from an open book in the form of a shark that, once loosed, becomes a wordy ocean, and origami-like creatures suggest themselves and are constructed, only to become gigantic birds that carry both girls away.

This isn't a standard picturebook for younger readers. It may well appeal to them, particularly when introduced and moderated by a supportive adult, but its apparently simple premise quickly becomes a sophisticated visual exploration and **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, or use it as a springboard for creative activities and responses – it will offer its own rewards. **CFH**

Dracula Spectacular

★★★★★

Lucy Rowland, ill. Ben Mantle, Macmillan, 32pp, 9781509845989 £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 little boy is born to a glum and 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 them. 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 nod to one of my favourite all time books **The Owl Who Is Afraid of the Dark** here). But he has to leave before he sees the sun rise.

When he returns home he is upset and becomes sadder and sadder but his 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.

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

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, Graffeg, 32pp, 97812654673, £12.99, hbk

A beautifully illustrated picture book for older children, featuring Gaspard 'the handsomest fox in London' who we previously met in Soanes' and Mayhew's first collaboration **Gaspard the Fox**.

Trouble and mischief are never far away when this inquisitive and endearing little fox is about, and teamed up with his friend Peter – a somewhat smug, but very intelligent cat – adventure is just around the corner. Gaspard is determined that Peter is introduced to his new friend Finty 'a little dog with curly brown

hair', but first the pair must find Finty. Peter is initially reluctant, he thinks dogs are rather vulgar. '...forever sniffing unmentionable parts of each other's anatomies', but, concerned for Gaspard's safety – foxes should not be 'out in broad daylight' – agrees, on the condition that he acts as Gaspard's guard cat. The pair set off on their quest, Gaspard following his nose and Finty's scent. The friends eventually find themselves at the local village fete where inevitably there is a fancy dress dog show. Needless to say mayhem and hilarity ensue, culminating in Gaspard, accidentally dressed as a musketeer, bursting the bouncy castle with a toy sword. Despite the chaos all ends well for Gaspard as he is reunited with Finty and makes friends with her owner Honey – based on Soanes neighbour actress Cleo Sylvestre. Even Peter is happy as he ends up snaffling fresh cream eclairs.

James Mayhew's beautiful illustrations give a wonderful vibrancy to Gaspard and his friends and the streets and greens of London are magically brought 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

★★★★

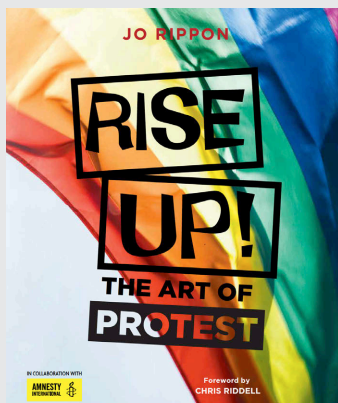
Jess Hitchman, ill. Lili La Bateine, Little Tiger Press, 24pp, 9781788814065, £11.99 hbk

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 demonstrates how little, everyday things are really quite special and in fact should be treasured. It's not about adventures or exciting places, it's about people being important.

The idea is a rather lovely one. The narrator (a little girl) takes us through her house which, from the street, looks like any other house. But inside they are not just rooms, there is a recurring theme with the words 'but we never just...'. For example, '...we never just play... we clear up the mess at end of the day. We learn to say sorry and wipe tears away.'

Each double page has a sketchy yet bright bold illustration to share what happens in each room. The descriptions take us through the whole house and lead up to a grand finale of pages opening out into a peek inside rooms inside the whole street. The houses are in a beautiful French style with fancy shapes and details that catch the eye. There are big bold pictures and then much smaller details which add to the overall journey of the book – from the outside of the street to the detail inside the room. All in all it's a charming read and helps us appreciate the simple things in life. **SG**

8 – 10 Junior/Middle



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.

Seren Rhys has settled happily into her godfather's household at Plas-y-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 governess arrives, and Captain Jones can't quite remember arranging for that to happen, but 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 mystical music that Seren recognizes as fairy music, the enchanting tunes of the Tylwyth Teg, and sure enough, Tomos starts to ignore Seren and to wander about at night, looking for the fairy door through which he disappeared before. The figures on it, the Juggler, the Soldier, the Dancer, and, most deadly of all, the Velvet Fox,

come to life-size and hide in the house, and Seren is accused of taking them and breaking the toy out of jealousy. Incidents caused by the figures and their magic are blamed on Seren, 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 breather before the next instalment.

Catherine Fisher was the first Wales Young People's Laureate, and **The Clockwork Crow** won the Tir na N'og 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, 9781782692362, £7.99 pbk

Edwin is suffering a severe case of sibling jealousy, coping with a new house, school and baby sister, when he answers a strange pen pal advert from an old piece of paper found in his new bedroom. When his new penfriend, Lanthorne Ghules, a mysterious, small, grey-skinned boy with a skeletal look, appears through the back of his wardrobe, Edwin's life takes a disturbing new direction. Drawn into Lanthorne's 'Dead World' 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 despised 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 gruesome details in a blend that should capture the imaginations of young readers with strong stomachs who will relish the brilliantly created atmosphere of doom, menace, secrecy and rottenness in the dead world. Edwin is an excellent character, full of fear, anger, defiance and courage, often all at once, and with a humorous and sharply irreverent turn of phrase. Kind, gentle thoughtful Lanthorne acts as the perfect foil as Edwin learns the value of friendship, trust and family love throughout his determined quest to rescue his baby sister. This would be a perfect Halloween read for children who enjoy a mix of fun, scares, creepiness, grisly details and exciting adventure. **SR**

The Night's Realm

★★★★

Nick Ward, author and illustrator, David Fickling Books, 285pp, 9781788450430, £6.99 pbk.

Nick Ward's skilful, lively and atmospheric illustrations add hugely to the attraction of this fantasy story about a boy who conquers his fears. From the eye-catching, foil-blocked cover through starry borders and motifs to the detailed, cross-hatched black and white full page illustrations, the reader

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

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. **SR**

Plastic Sucks!

★★★★

Dougie Poynter, Macmillan Children's Books, 184pp, 9781529019377, £9.99 pbk

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 the world's plastic problem. The author, musician and environmental activist Dougie Poynter, is a member of the band McFly, co-author of *The Dinosaur 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, whilst always maintaining a focus on the important issues. There is a lot of information here, but it is broken up by bright info graphics with panels, tables, graphs, 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. **SR**

Dr Maggie's Grand Tour of the Solar System

★★★★

Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock, Ill. Chelen Ėcija, Buster Books, 120pp, 978 1 78055 575 1, £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 information 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 beyond 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 double 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 reference to the role of women and including people of colour.

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

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 she can help her become a really excellent princess. The enchantress consults her servants but their standard responses, about beauty and kindness do not satisfy her. Her magic mirror is particularly unhelpful. The enchantress decides to take action and transforms her magic mirror into a pocket-sized version sending it on a mission to be her eyes 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 lands 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 what these princesses have in common is that they are brave, fierce and loyal with big dreams and big hearts.

The stories are beautifully written in traditional 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 full-page illustration and decorative title page to introduce each new princess and their story.

A book which would make a lovely gift, particularly 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. **SMcG**

I Cosmo

★★★★

Carlie Sorosiak, ill. Ben Mantle, Nosy Crow, 263pp, 9781788003872, £6.99 pbk

This story follows a year or so in the life of Cosmo and his family, but especially Max who is Cosmo's best friend. Unfortunately this is a year when there are growing frictions within the family and Cosmo feels he has to try and keep everything together. However Cosmo is 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 issues of ageing that he finds creeping up on him. The whole behaviour of the dog will resonate with anyone whose pet has rolled in something, dug up the garden or destroyed part of the home; but of course Cosmo does not see

that he is doing anything wrong, it is just part of his nature. The other part of the story, which follows the falling apart of a marriage and the effect that has on the children will have a tremendous impact on many readers. Even young children will know people in their class, family or friendship group where things are going badly wrong and hopefully this will help the young people understand that it is not their fault and that their parents still care for them, even though the adults' relationship has changed. I absolutely loved this book and particularly Cosmo, who is a real hero. **MP**

Nevertell

★★★★

Katherine Orton, ill. Rovina Cai and Sandra Dieckmann, Walker, 376pp, £7.99 pbk

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 mother Katya and finding her grandmother in Moscow. Just before her twelfth birthday her 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 Svetlana and her pack of 'Ghost Wolves'. We begin to see the beginnings of something magical, but whether it is good or bad is difficult to judge and Lina does not know who she is able to trust. There are ups and downs for the main characters and a few surprises before there is a resolution to the tale. You will have to read the story to understand the very poignant title of the book and why 'never tell' is so vital to the plot.

This book was a truly delightful surprise. The initial setting in a Stalinist prison camp was a very 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 even children were persuaded to 'tell' 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,

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, 9781786540997, £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 about 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 Snow women) start walking around the streets. To top it all there are people wearing crow masks who say they are from the Institute of Unreality and they want to destroy Sebastian as he should not exist. The question is whether Oleg and Emma can save their new friend and if they can stop all of these weird events and also save their Christmas celebrations?

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 in 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 can have a 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, What on Earth Books, 978 1 912920 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 us 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 who inhabit this planet alongside us. It opens eyes to so many detailed similarities, demonstrating many reasons to empathise with other living things. 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 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 particularly 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 drink known as honeydew. Canada geese and other migrating birds do just as cyclists/runners in a race do; one bird/cyclist/marathon runner 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 chapter, as does Grief. There is a recount of an orca whale being surrounded by several female orcas on the day her calf died. It was observed that after this, she carried her calf for 17 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

★★★★

Jon Roberts, ill. Hannah Rounding, Graffeg, 32pp, 978 1912 654802, £7.99 pbk

This is the second in a series of books about the author's autistic daughter, Kya; her best friend Martha,

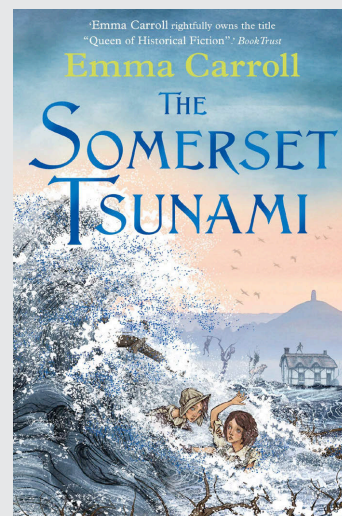
also autistic, is in this story too. We meet them doing all sorts of things together, and we understand their differences as well as the ways they are alike. They both love school, but while Martha talks a lot and asks questions, Kya is quieter and prefers listening to stories. We learn about Kya's support teacher, who helps her understand things during lessons 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 treat, full 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 as a school project, 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 and that they are of different races, they find it difficult to begin. Charles, who loves poetry, decides they will start with 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 necessarily mean differences in people. The book is American, and there are a few words that may need explaining, but this is all to the good as phrases like 'Trayvon' and 'Ferguson, Mississippi' can be looked up and learned about. A superb book in a quality production, it will add greatly to the general understanding of kids of all ages. **ES**



The Somerset Tsunami

★★★★

Emma Carroll, Faber and Faber, 194p, 9780571332816, £6.99, 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 – scapegoats 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 encounter 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 style 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 granny. 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....

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

Ruth Brown is well known for her beautifully imagined realistic images of cats and the world through which they move. Here we see her in her element as she takes a playful look at some of the world's great masterpieces – and most of them from the past century. These are artists that children are very likely to encounter in school – Van Gogh, Magritte, Kahlo – and some perhaps a little more unfamiliar. Central to each painting, taking pride of place and adopting both the style of the artist and the character is a cat; a cat who leaps off the canvas to follow Tom as he proceeds pied-piper like from image to image. Nor are these “imaginary” cats. They are solid and as the text reveals, real breeds carefully chosen to match their artist. There is humour in watching them interact with each other – and the reading audience. The artwork is bold, immersive, Brown's rich palette bringing each image to vivid life. The design is simple – we are after all in a gallery and we move from exhibit to exhibit naturally, without fuss. The simple text sets up the game describing the essence of the artists and their works. This is a game that could easily be developed and extended by imaginative teachers. What cat would you choose for Michelangelo? What a lovely and memorable way to be introduced to the world of art inside the classroom or out of it. **FH**

Jane Goodall. A Life with Chimps

★★★★★

Anita Ganeri Ill. and design Louisa Uribe, 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 anthologies to individual biographies. **Jane Goodall** by Anita 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.

Anita 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, is the extra information a young reader might require (the difference between the ape and the monkey; apartheid). Just As is the case with the foot-note there is no prescription to read these pages and they are differentiated in font and design from the main text. The neat line illustrations add further life to the words as do the quotes, while the whole

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. My only caveat, the use of white font on a grey ground for some quotations is not easy to read. **FH**

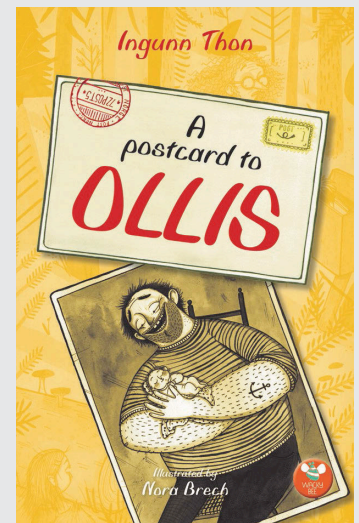
A Postcard to Ollis

★★★★★

Ingunn Thon, illus Nora Brech, trans. Siân Mackie, Wacky Bee, 220pp, 9781999903343, £6.99 pbk

Ollis (the abbreviation of her real name – Oda Lise Louise Ingrid Sonja – the names 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.

Lively characterisation, 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 year 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 to learn that not all stories 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 Borgny in particular – and the freedom enjoyed by the two girls as they race through the Norwegian woods. They 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**

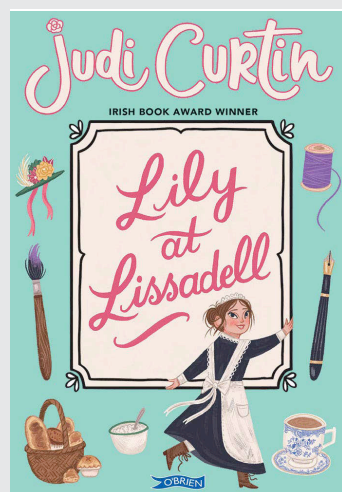
10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

Lily at Lissadell

★★★★★

Judi Curtin, O'Brien Press, 256pp, 978-1788491280, £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 under 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 brothers very much. But, like many Curtin heroines, she's bright, caring, optimistic and, above all, resilient. Lily knows that with her in employment, the financial pressures on the family are eased, and there are advantages to living in the Big House – not least, regular meals. As the story unfolds,



Lily makes friends with Maeve, one of the young ladies of the house – the real-life daughter of Constance Markievicz, who also plays a part in the story – and that leads to breaks in the routine and some exciting

adventures. Just as important, she wins the trust of her grumpy co-worker Nellie, and discovers truths about her life too.

For all its Upstairs, Downstairs setting, the accent is mostly on how much the people in the house have in common, and while Curtin skilfully creates a real sense of history – the arrival of the motorcar, talk of what is happening beyond Lissadell and Lily's two room cottage home – we care most about Lily; the drama, such as it is, comes not from historic events but the sense of her development, and of what she might go on to do. It's clear that Lily is living in an age on the brink of huge change, but the overall atmosphere is one of optimism and hope.

The three main characters – Lily, Maeve and Nellie – are as lively a trio as you could hope to meet, characters that readers will believe in and care about. As we've come to expect from Judi Curtin, the story is full of charm and humour and this is a genuinely heart-warming read. **AR**

Invisible in a Bright Light

★★★★★

Sally Gardner, Zephyr, 272pp, 9781786695222, £10.99, hbk

It begins with a mystery, or 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 undersea cave surrounded by dangling corpses. Such things will become clear; as will the precise nature of the task he is setting the girl before him. 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 coin 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

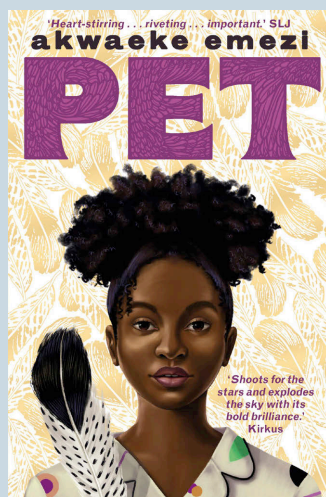
New talent

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.



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 adults. The result is an absorbing, powerful, multilayered read that is not just a lesson but an experience. FH

about and she peoples this story with the facts of everyday theatrical life, the glamorous and the unglamorous, and the figures of its fiction: a prima donna soprano; a long suffering director; and overlooked bit players, including the prima donna's abused daughter, who may yet become a star. But surely even this is not the world as we know it, for here a chandelier can explode and pepper our whoever heroine with shards and she not only survives but is given an extraordinary gift by the apparent catastrophe. It is a story rich in allusion, maybe even to that most wonderful of films of theatre life, *Les Enfants Du Paradis*. There are name games and plot puzzles for the attentive and quick witted reader; and this gradually and compellingly unfolded tale is also rich in Andersen-like colours of light and dark: where the kind and generous, however humble, and the selfish and cruel, however exalted, get their just deserts. CB

Some Places More than Others

★★★★★

Renée Watson illus. Shadra Stickland, Bloomsbury, 214pp
978 15266 13684 £6.99 pbk

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 estrangement 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. Most importantly Amara learns that families are not always perfect and that forgiveness and acceptance are what matters.

This is 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. It is both touching and thought-provoking yet never feels preachy. It packs a powerful punch. The suitcase project is a brilliant idea too and I would suggest every school should own their own copy of this book. JC

Cyborg Cat and the Night Spider

★★★★★

Ade Adepitan, ill. Carl Pearce, 232pp, 9781787414037, £5.99, pbk

This superhero series accounts the adventures of the young Adedoyin 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.

Adedoyin 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 strength to keep up with his friends and to sprint around school between lessons, bumping into ill-prepared bystanders. However, Adedoyin 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 the challenge of making sure Ade misses out on nothing, despite the chair, while standing up to the insults of bullies and uncovering the identity of the evil graffiti artist. A tough task to say the least but, fortunately, the gang always live by their motto ('always stick together') and the Cyborg Cat knows he can count on them to go to the greatest of lengths to support him.

Though the story features extraordinary heroics and depicts vibrant characters fighting for good or evil, its focus is really upon

the everyday challenges faced by Adedoyin, as he adjusts to new mobility challenges. Ade's father refuses 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 fact that he can't do what he has before.

As the story explores these personal issues, it retains throughout an extremely clear and positive message: there is nothing that Adedoyin 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 easily dismiss this approach as a vanity project for another celebrity author, but the truth is that Adepitan'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 everyday problems, to highlight the experiences of children with disabilities and to confront prejudices. Yes, the Cyborg Cat faces extreme challenges, but the defining elements of his growing-up are 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. SD

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

★★★★★

Innosanto Nagara, Seven Stories Press, 96pp, 978-1609809355, £15.99 pbk
Through describing his own experiences and those of his friends 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 anecdotes the principle of solidarity is introduced. Other key concepts such as corruption, nepotism and collusion are explained simply and clearly in relation to events in Indonesia.

Specific instances of injustice linked to corruption by the state are outlined – including the misdirection of government funds for drugs during a medical epidemic and indifference to the fate of the poor when a landslide triggered by a dam building

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project causes many to lose their homes and in some cases their lives.

Examples of the way activism can make a difference is described, for example when direct community action halted plans to build a golf course on paddy fields thereby protecting livelihoods. And hence the book's subtitle.

Written by the same author as the highly successful **A is for Activism** this new book provides a highly readable introduction to the social movement for change and the power of the individual to make a difference. Grounded in his own experience and knowledge, it is written in an accessible style and very apposite at a time when young people are becoming increasingly politically and socially engaged. Nagara is a talented artist and graphic designer and the striking full colour illustrations throughout the book add to the drama and appeal of the book. **SMcG**

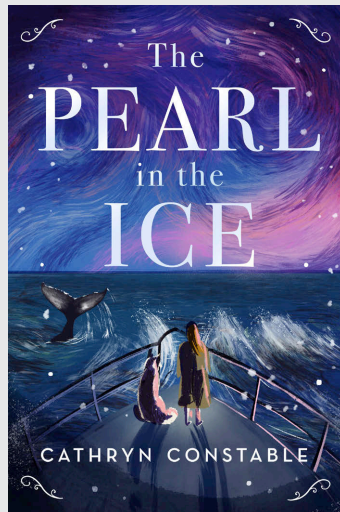
The Pearl in the Ice

★★★★

Cathryn Constable, Chicken House, 304pp, 978-1912626519, £6.99 pbk
If you love mystery and adventure, proper adventure that is, in dangerous, far-away places, adventure tinged with magic and that requires the protagonist to show real courage and integrity, then Cathryn Constable is the author 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** tells the story of twelve-year old Marina, who we first meet dangling 'from the branch of a London plane tree in the garden of her father's house in Hampstead.' Marina's father is a naval commander and about to set off for Cadiz while she – to her horror – is being sent to a Ladies' College where she will be taught things important to young women of her class. Marina's invalid mother left when Marina was so small that she can hardly remember her.

In fact, Marina never makes it to her ladies' college: rather she jumps trains at the station and makes her way to Portsmouth, determined to plead with her father to let her join him in the navy instead. A chance encounter on the train with the dashing Miss Smith, a secretary at the Admiralty, convinces Marina that women can work for the navy and that parents aren't always right, but arriving in Portsmouth there are surprises in store. Her father is not the commander of the *HMS Neptune* at all but the much smaller *Sea Witch*, and their destination is not Cadiz but the far North. Discovered stowing away, Marina is allowed to stay, and plays a part in a story of espionage and heroism, in which all sorts of people turn out to be not what they seem.

As they travel further into the freezing waters, Marina discovers more about herself and about her mother and now the story also



becomes deliciously mysterious, calling on old sea stories of mermaids and undersea creatures. Constable carries this off with bravura, blending the real world and the magical together perfectly, and, after the devastation of the war, leaves Marina with the power and determination to create a new world, using a language she has plucked 'like pearls' from the drowned depths of the ancient sea. It's a story to make young readers believe anything is possible, and all the better for that. **AR**

Resistance

★★★

Brian Gallagher, O'Brien, 259pp., 9781788490801, £7.99 pbk

This story is an interesting example of 'what if' plots, in this case what if the Nazis had conquered Eire, a country which 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.

Roisin is in fact Rachel, child of a Jewish mother which in the eyes of the Nazis is reason to send her to a concentration camp. She has escaped Cork by the skin of her teeth to Dublin, but eventually her real name is discovered and friends Mary and Kevin become involved in her eventual escape by submarine to Iceland, where the Irish Resistance is beginning to plot the end of the occupation. Mary's father has had to leave his family to be a leader of the resistance, but Kevin's father, a local councillor has stayed to work alongside the Germans. Here lies the moral question, what would you do? Then there is Dennis O'Sullivan who has found his own way to act, collaborating for money and spying on his local community who subsequently suffer at the hands of his minder Vogts.

All this makes for a very credible story with considerable depth and

very believable characters. The reader feels for Kevin who has the courage to make a brave stand for his friend Roisin to make her escape, and also for Mary who sees her father only in brief snatches. She helps in a daring attack on a prisoner train, and finds it hard not to let her younger siblings know that their father is still alive, and acknowledges her mother's courage in covering for her husband and bringing the children up alone in this subterfuge.

The children's ages are at the end of primary school, maybe it would have been better if they were slightly older to add credibility to the story, particularly as Mary is used in a prominent way to stop the train, and her father also reveals some serious secrets to her, but these do not get in the way of a good story, which raises some good questions for discussion. **JF**

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.

His life changes rapidly when Dorian, one of the students, comes to demand high-handedly that his broken watch is repaired. Hugo discovers that the quantum energy source which powers the watch is missing and suspects it has been stolen to make a bomb. The story unfolds into a quest to find the thief and prevent any destruction and along the way intriguing characters and scenarios are introduced. An unlikely friendship develops between Hugo and Dorian and, when their search takes them to an abandoned and forgotten city beneath their own they find the answer to the puzzle of the missing quantum energy.

A colony of abandoned androids is living in the gloomy depths, with no light to recharge their batteries and so the theft of the energy is the only way in which they can survive. They have all been abandoned by their owners for newer models and so cannot get ID passes which allow them to live and work on the surface. This heartless and unthinking exclusion from society offers a parallel to our own attitudes to possessions and to those we feel are inferior to us. Dorian uses his father's wealth and influence to reinstate the androids into society, recognising that the old and battered robots have valuable inter-planetary language skills to offer those who wish to work

and travel in other solar systems.

James makes it clear in this entertaining and thought-provoking story that there are lessons to be learned, but she allows readers to explore the unfolding ideas through the course of the narrative, thus making their impact even more hard-hitting. **VR**

White Eagles

★★★★★

Elizabeth Wein, Barrington Stoke, 136pp., 9781781128961, £7.99, pbk

Published as a teen novel this slight novel is aimed at the top end of the age range 10-14. Elizabeth Wein's previous novel for Barrington Stoke was also about women flying during the Second World War, **Firebird** set in Soviet Russia. **White Eagles** starts as the Germans invade Poland in September 1939, when eighteen year old Kristina is called up just before her twin brother Leopold, to join the White Eagles of the title, the Polish Air Force. But tragedy strikes very quickly when Leopold is killed after a brave attack, witnessed by his twin. In shock Kristina decides to escape in her plane, not knowing she has a passenger. Together with Will, all of eleven, having witnessed the violent death of his parents, the two make their escape in the plane to eventual safety.

The violence and brutality of the German invasion of Poland is not glossed over at all, but neither is the courage of Kristina, flying initially without maps, trying to find safety for herself and Wil. The sheer physical task of flying a plane over unknown territory is well described and also the difficulties even then faced by a young woman. Will emerges as young man of great courage and resilience, even deceiving Kristina into thinking she is learning French when he is teaching her English, which does stretch the imagination somewhat!

This is a short novel, covering a great deal of ground both literally and within the story. It catches 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. **JF**

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, aged ten. Jess and Tracy have moved home to Cooksea, a seaside town bearing an uncanny resemblance to Brighton. Tracy now runs an antique shop called The Dumping Ground, in partnership with a woman named Flo, who at one time was a minor television celebrity. The Beaker mother and daughter team face two main problems. The first

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is the danger than Tracy's former boyfriend Sean Godfrey may re-enter their lives. The second is the need to identify the boy on the beach who steals people's ice creams. What effect may this ice cream thief have on the lives of the Beakers?

The boy on the beach, it transpires, is a fugitive foster-child. This provides an opportunity for Wilson to explore in the most effective way the issues of fostering. Although fostering issues often arise on the periphery of stories for young readers. Including the earlier history of Tracy herself, it is rare for fostering issues to appear (as they do here) at the centre of such narratives. Readers who have followed Tracy's career since her debut in 1991 will have become familiar with her attitude towards teacher and figures of authority

in general – a mix of detestation and fear. They may be relieved to learn that Tracy has now moderated her destructive urges. She now has a grudging respect for those who are trying to help her daughter develop.

Admirers of Dame Jacqueline will be pleased to learn that the full array of memorable characters who have appeared in earlier Beaker books do reappear in this latest offering. **RB**

The Boy Giant

★★★★

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

Omar is a twelve year old Afghan refugee. He and his mother want to get to England but his mother says he is to go ahead alone. She will join him

later. Omar begins his journey in an overloaded yellow dinghy, a journey which nearly costs him his life. When he comes ashore not in England but in Lilliput, his arrival feels like Gulliver's. The reader does not know for certain whether Omar's perception of himself as huge is real or imagined.

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

Opening a Morpurgo book, one expects to find oneself in a strong relationship with the narrative and the characters. That is the reputation the author has built. With this book,

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

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

14+ Secondary/Adult

Pumpkin Heads

★★★★

Rainbow Rowell, illus. Faith Erin Hicks, Macmillan, 228pp, 978 1529008630, £9.99, pbk

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 petting zoo 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-observed 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 gently 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. **CB**

The M Word

★★★★

Brian Conaghan, Bloomsbury, 354pp, 9781408871560, £12.99, hbk

Conaghan takes us to dark places in seventeen year-old Maggie's life. It starts with a bit of teaser 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's cutting herself and there are some scenes that, while they 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 whose 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 quibble to set against the novel's achievement of dealing so approachably with such a difficult subject. **CB**

Scars Like Wings

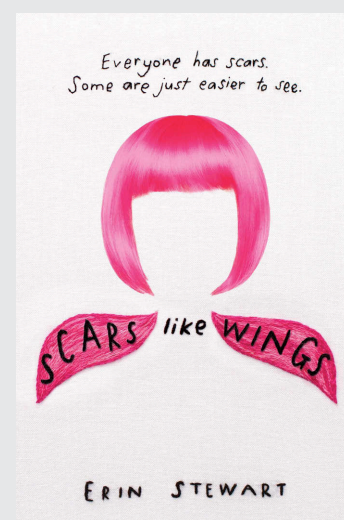
★★★★★

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

Ava Lee is aged sixteen, American. She is a junior at Crossroads 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 Cora and Uncle Glenn.

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-changing 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 often 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. **RB**

Full Disclosure

★★★★★

Camryn Garrett, Penguin Random House, 290pp, 978 0 241 36706 3, £7.99 pbk

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

14+Secondary/Adult continued

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 being 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 friend who betrayed her 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 to be around. He's also a prominent athlete – an outstandingly good Lacrosse player. That's unusual – Men's Lacrosse, even at High School, is largely a white sport. Here, I should abandon the reviewer's conventional pretence of self-effacement; I may well be the only British reviewer of Young Adult fiction who played Men's Lacrosse for over 20 years, including touring the USA and later coached the game in a US High School as an exchange teacher. An opportunity to mention this is unlikely to recur.

The musical is *Rent*, which began a 12 year run on Broadway in 1996. It's loosely based on *La Bohème*, 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 earnest detailed 'notes' are resisted by actors used to starring in previous productions. But then, on an impulse, Simone enables a couple of singers to draw on their own feelings and experience in a key song – and the show takes fire.

The novel is crowded with animated

conversations in the hallways, school clubs or on the way home; it's one of those school stories where classes and actual work don't significantly interrupt Relationships. Boys are not much explored in the story, except for the engaging Miles – they are inevitably seen from the outside by Simone and her friends. Adults, even Simone's two caring, listening Dads (one a black teacher, one a Latino medical doctor), sometimes don't tune in to her wavelength. Eventually, someone discovers Simone's secret and terrifies her through notes threatening to go public, left in her locker and on her phone. Finally, she is exposed as being HIV Positive on social media, releasing a powerful and moving denouement. Garrett's control of a complex plot of almost 300 pages is remarkable. **GF**

The Places I've Cried in Public

★★★★

Holly Bourne, Usborne, 368pp, 978-1474949521, £7.99 pbk

Amelie is aged sixteen and a talented singer song-writer. Her father has found a new job in the south of England so Amelie is forced to leave her home in Sheffield, a move she finds distressing. To make matters worse Amelie has been forced to leave her boyfriend Alfie. She and Alfie have promised each other that they will wait two years: at the end of that separation they plan aged eighteen to be reunited at Manchester University.

Of course matters turn out to be more complicated. Down south Amelie meets the charming and charismatic Reese Davies. Initially Amelie is swept off her feet by Reese's charm as well as his musical talent. He also knows how to flatter Amelie at a time when she lacks self-confidence. But as time goes by their relationship moves into something more dangerous and depressing. Bourne's book traces the impact that change has on Reese, Amelie and the absent Alfie.

As a frontispiece to her novel Bourne has inserted a warning note. The book deals with controlling behaviour and sexual assault. This is appropriate, since these episodes could prove upsetting to young readers. That such oppressive behaviour does happen is incontestable. It is imperative that young people should be equipped to recognise such behaviour when confronted with it. For this reason Bourne's endeavour deserves strong support.

This reviewer however has two minor criticisms. First, the emergence of the exploitative relationship needs to be gradual – and it is. It may be however that the development of this part of the narrative is actually too slow. In real life an outsider (a friend or a counsellor) may spot the development of an abusive relationship before the victim. Bourne casts the reader in the role of the knowledgeable outsider who spots what's going on before Amelie. This

tactic however runs a risk: it makes the reader both a witness to the process and an arms-length observer, an ambivalence which confuses the reader's status. Second, in the light of Bourne's warning, the reader is prepared for sexual assault to be quite explicitly described. Instead at the moment of truth the reader is left in some doubt whether an assault has actually taken place. It is implied rather than stated, though later made clear. Is this a failure of courage on the part of the author? **RB**

The Boy In The Black Suit

★★★★

Jason Reynolds, Faber and Faber, 255pp, 978-0-571-35612-6, £7.99 pbk

Matt's mother has just died and his 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 both to make money and 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 their secrets. Mr Ray has his 'pain vault', a cellar devoted to his dead wife and to his career as an athlete cut short by a serious injury. Lovey-who Matt begins a relationship with- works at a fast-food restaurant, runs a shelter for the homeless but her mother was murdered when she was very young. Matt's best friend Chris is, by contrast, uncomplicated and supportive, relishing food and friendship in equal measure.

The novel is set in Brooklyn 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. The ending of the book is tied up a little too neatly: Matt realises that he and Chris heard Lovey's mother being murdered by her abusive partner when, as children, they both slept at Chris's apartment; at the Christmas dinner for the homeless he meets the man who inflicted the injury which ended Mr. Ray's career.

However, this novel is an unflinching portrayal of guilt on several levels and Reynolds has tackled a difficult subject with energy and conviction. **VR**

India Smythe Stands Up

★★★★

Sarah Govett, Marotte, 237pp, 978-1-9161-5260-1, £7.99 pbk

Matt's mother has just died and his father is seeking solace in the This is a laugh-out-loud story with a thoughtful subtext. India is very used to being at the bottom of the social league at school and no-one could ever accuse her loyal friends Anna and Meena of being well-informed fashion icons. That was left to Lisa and April, the It girls of Year 11-brittle, shallow, image-obsessed and unremittably

cruel to those they considered to be their inferiors. Their boyfriends were cast in the same mould – so it came as a huge shock to India when she was asked out by Ennis, one of these minor gods. Eager to be a part of the highest social echelon, she accepts.

Govett has a real talent for creating excruciatingly funny set-pieces – in school, at home, at parties – and peopling them with instantly recognisable stereotypes. She peppers this with the sort of preoccupations with which most teenage girls are all too familiar and weaves in a slapstick humour. What is most impressive is her ear for dialogue: there is an unerring realism about everything from her grasp of surreally funny family conversations to the awkwardnesses of first date verbal stumblings.

I raised a cheer when India finally rejected the social lure of Ennis' revered but tedious company and opted for the boy she'd liked all along – unaffected and endearing Rich, with the too-high forehead and a passion for the highly unfashionable school orchestra. **VR**

Because of You

★★★★

Eve Ainsworth, Barrington Stoke, 112pp, 978-1781128671, £7.99 pbk

This is a story in part at least about how young people respond to today's flexible partnership arrangements. Poppy is aged fourteen, in year nine at school. Her mother has a new partner, Richie. He is moving in together with his own daughter Kayla, aged sixteen. Poppy detests her mother's new man. She adores her father and resent her mother for kicking him out.

At school Poppy witnesses another girl, Emily, being bullied. Poppy supports Emily in her hour of need and then becomes a target for the same mean girls. They pour a milkshake over Poppy's head, film it and post the video on a school chat room for everyone to see and comment on.

In 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 reaction to flexible partnership arrangements, cyber bullying and the secret flaw of Poppy's father, which underlay his expulsion from the family home. 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. **RB**

Classics in Short **No.138** Tales of Uncle Remus

Brian Alderson celebrates a representation of oral folklore transferred into print.

"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,

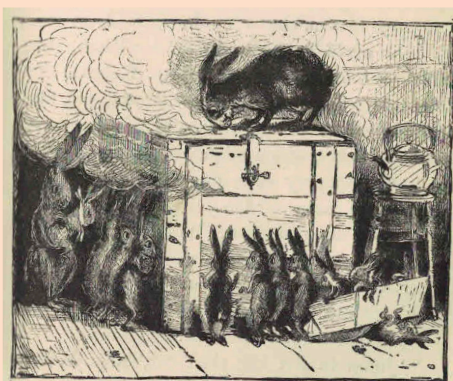
Mr Bright was not the only one to laugh at this surprising and original work. **Uncle Remus and his Legends of the Old Plantation** had been published in New York at Christmas 1880, dated 1881, and an English edition was published by David Bogue as soon as copy could be shipped across the Atlantic so 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 mixed fraternally 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*



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:

*Ef 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 arguments about the writing of Lallans.) 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 briar-patch, Brer Fox – bred en bawn in a briar-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.

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His latest book **The 100 Best Children's Books**, Galileo Publishing, 978-1903385982, £14.99 hbk, is out now.