Authorgraph interview
Catherine Johnson

Windows into illustration
Fran Preston-Gannon

Ten essential books
chosen by Patrice Lawrence

Plus Hans Christian Andersen by Neil Philip
Editorial

Last week was World Book Day, that enormous celebration of children’s books and reading. No-one, even those with little interest in the world of children’s literature, could fail to notice this national event which sparks huge amounts of coverage across the media and inspires children the length and breadth of the country to show off their love for their favourite fictional character by dressing up. For children’s authors, the week of World Book Day has become the busiest of the year by far, diaries packed with school and event bookings. Meanwhile, the range of £1 World Book Day books dominate the bestseller lists. Good news all round.

And yet … behind the PR and celebrations comes more sobering news: new research from the National Literacy Trust, published on World Book Day, shows that fewer children and young people are reading daily and that fewer are enjoying reading than they did in the past. Findings from the NLT’s Annual Literacy Survey reveals that only 25.8% of children said they read daily in their free time. This is the lowest level the National Literacy Trust recorded since it first surveyed children in 2005.

Some of the key findings of the report include:

**Reading enjoyment**
53% of children and young people said they enjoy reading in 2019

Children and young people’s levels of reading enjoyment continue to decrease: children’s reading enjoyment decreased between 2016 and 2017/18 – the first decrease in six years. This decline continued in 2019 and we are now back at a level last evidenced in 2013

Children and young people’s levels of reading enjoyment are at their lowest since 2013: 53% of children say they enjoy reading in 2019 vs 53.3% in 2013

**Daily reading frequency**
25.8% of children and young people said they read daily in 2019

Children and young people’s daily reading levels are the lowest ever recorded: just 25.8% of children say they read daily in their free time in 2019; this is the lowest level we have recorded since we first surveyed children in 2005

Reading attitudes

Attitudes towards reading have remained stable over the past couple of years

52.3% of children and young people would be happy to get a book as a present

40.7% of children and young people think reading is cool

34% of children and young people cannot find things to read that interest them

The decline in reading frequency and enjoyment is a concern, particularly among certain groups, as highlighted by the NLT report: reading enjoyment has particularly decreased for boys, children aged 9 to 11, and those who don’t receive free school meals. Daily reading levels have fallen for young people aged 16 to 18 and those who don’t receive free school meals.

What to do? Campaigns such as World Book Day, the work of the NLT around the country to boost reading enjoyment, the activity of the OU and UKLA with the Reading for Pleasure programme are more crucial than ever. And we can all help too, as the World Book Day campaign advised, by sharing books, and making every story count. (You could start by having a look at Rebecca Butler’s article on running a book group).

The NLT report: Children and young people’s reading in 2019 can be found on their website.
https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/

---

**Books for Keeps**

*March 2020 No.241*

**ISSN 0143-900X**

© Books for Keeps CIC 2016

Managing Editor: Andrea Reece

Editorial advisor: Ferelith Hordon

Assistant Editor: Eloise Delamere

Editorial assistant: Alexa Counsell

Design: Louise Millar

Editorial correspondence should be sent to Books for Keeps, 30 Winton Avenue London N11 2AT.

Books for Keeps is available online at www.booksforkeeps.co.uk

A regular BfK Newsletter can also be sent by email. To sign up for the Newsletter, go to www.booksforkeeps.co.uk and follow the Newsletter link.

If any difficulty is experienced, email addresses can also be sent to enquiries@booksforkeeps.co.uk*

**Email: enquiries@booksforkeeps.co.uk**

**Website: www.booksforkeeps.co.uk**

*Email addresses will be used by Books for Keeps only for the purpose of emailing the Newsletter and will not be disclosed to third parties.

---

**COVER STORY**

This issue’s cover illustration is from Sequin and Stitch written by Laura Dockrill and illustrated by Sara Ogilvie. Thanks to Barrington Stoke for their help with this March cover.
The Importance of Play

Gill Lewis remembers exploring the land of make-believe.

When I was a child I had a wonderful horse called Clarence. He was an iron grey stallion with a proud arching neck, and a flowing white mane. In reality he was a broom handle with a horse's head made from an old grey towel and a mane from a mop, but the moment I held onto the shoelace reins, we galloped together across daisy pastures, the wind blowing in our faces. We picnicked beneath the apple tree and I loved the cloppety sound (of his broom handle body) he made when we trotted down the road. The imagined world blurred effortlessly with the real world. They were one and the same. When I went to play with my friends in the scruffy patch of council-owned land that we called The Woods, it became our Jurassic Park filled with child-eating dinosaurs at every turn. It was our jungle full of tigers and tribes that wanted to capture us and eat us. It was a place full of wonder and curiosity. It was a place where the physical world stretched and time itself seemed to occupy another dimension.

I remember it well.

I can also remember the moment I realised I could not play imaginatively anymore. I was eleven years old, and at a friend's house where we tried to play one of the games we had always played as children. We knew we were pretending. We could not slide effortlessly into that Land of Make-Believe. It eluded us. I was at the cusps of growing up, where part of me wanted to fast-forward into exciting unchartered territory, and another part sought the safety of childhood. I remember a sadness, a sort of grief that comes with self-awareness, knowing that I was unable to return to this part of my life, that I would never enter that Land of Make-Believe again, and that we possess this unique ability for a finite time.

Writing and reading books comes close to that immersive experience in being part of an imagined world, but it is not quite the same. It never will be.

Play is important for many species. Lots of young animals play. It's a time to test physical and social boundaries. It's a time to experiment how to survive in the world of adulthood. It's a time to safely get things wrong. Humans are an extraordinary species with the ability to imagine and to empathise. If imaginative play is key to our survival as a species, then surely it is because it allows us to explore and test our relationships with others. It's a time to minutely observe and notice the world around us. It can be done in isolation, or with friends. Both have their benefits. To play alone is important for independence and to be comfortable in one's own skin, to have time to think and simply be. Imaginative play in a group allows children to share ideas, to collaborate and communicate. Imaginative play, unlike structured play, is open ended. There is no set purpose.

Structured play has a place and there are many useful games developing different skills. But structured play has a fixed end-point and fixed rules and is often supervised by adults. Structured play has a goal to achieve. Having a goal immediately sets up play where children compare themselves with others.

Children's lives are being increasingly tested and evaluated. They are comparing themselves to others in school work and in social media. Constant comparison has the potential to undermine confidence, to lower self-esteem. It can be divisive and damaging.

Open-ended imaginative play does not compare. It has no fixed rules. The rules are constantly changing and created by the children themselves. It is collaborative. It allows freedom of thought and creativity. It allows infinite journeys to be taken and retaken, and multiple outcomes to be explored. It also allows children to engage in non-competitive exercise and explore social and physical boundaries.

Yet, imaginative play requires certain conditions that modern life is constraining. To find that Land of Make-Believe, children have to have physical and mental space to think and dream. Sometimes boredom is the greatest precursor of this. But boredom can be alleviated too readily at the flick of a switch and increased screen time. The so-called luxury of constant entertainment may come at the expense of creativity. Some virtual reality games afford children an imaginary world, but it is not one of their making. It is decided for them. They are the recipients of another person's creativity, not the creators. Although children can engage in imaginative play indoors, many have restricted access to outdoor space where imaginary worlds can merge with the natural world, the greatest inspiration for curiosity and wonder. Children today have less time and space to play.

Because imaginative play cannot be evaluated, it is often seen as time-wasting and purposeless. Testing a narrow set of skills is an infectious and damaging dogma that has spread through the education system and our society, and it is virtually impossible to avoid. Anxiety is becoming an increasing problem in young people and it is little wonder when their lives are constantly tested from a very young age. They are being set up to fail.

Maybe imaginative play is essential for survival in our modern world to ensure children can be happy in their own company and also enjoy the company of others, without relying on purpose and fixed agenda. Imaginative play also builds empathy and gives children insight into what it is to be another person. Imaginative play does not test. It does not compare. It is one of the few times where children can simply be children.

Whilst I might not ride Clarence, my iron grey stallion anymore, I still am happy in my own company. I love to walk alone and think and dream. I still retain that wonder and curiosity of the world most of the time. But it is friendships that sustain me through the ups and downs of life. My happiest memories are of times with friends and family, with no fixed purpose other than to enjoy each other's company, to be accepted as who we are, with all faults and foibles.

If there is one gift we can give children in childhood, then I think it is to give them time to play, time to imagine and explore the Land of Make-Believe to ensure the world of adulthood can be just as magical.

Gill Lewis is the best-selling author of books such as Sky Hawk and Gorilla Dawn. She has won the UKLA Children's Book of the Year, the Leeds Book Award, the Little Rebels Book Award, and many others. Her latest book, Willow Wildthing and the Swamp Monster, illustrated by Rebecca Bagley, is published by OUP.
thoughts are loud. It is normal. But where have all the women gone? And what happens if once they are found, the women's thoughts are secret and silent? It is utterly compelling.

**Planet Omar: Trouble Magnet**

Zanib Mian, illus Nasaya Mafaridik,
Hodder Children's Books,
978-1444951226, £6.99 pbk

I saw this in its first incarnation, *The Muslims*. The author is a Londoner who set up her own publishing company because the only books she could find about Muslim children were usually about Islam. Oddly enough, her own children already knew about that…Where were the Tom Gates and Wimpy Kids with Muslim characters? Zanib wrote them. Omar is endearing, empathetic and hilarious, navigating dragons, bullies, annoying siblings, Regents Park Outer Circle and a racist neighbour. A wonderful book that also challenges stereotypes.

**You Against Me**

Jenny Downham, Definitions,
978-1909531123, £7.99 pbk

I love all of Jenny's books, but this is the one I can't stop thinking about. Mikey lives with his alcoholic mother and two sisters. He is the glue that holds the family together but he can barely raise enough money to buy a pint of milk. Ellie's family are well off, recent arrivals. Mikey's older sister, Karyn believes that Ellie's brother, Tom, raped her. Mikey plans revenge but what happens when he and Ellie fall for each other? It's thought-provoking and tender asking questions about class, power, consent and so much more.

**The Graveyard Book**

Neil Gaiman, illus Chris Riddell, Bloomsbury, 978-0747594802, £7.99 pbk

I read this to my daughter, long before I was a published author. The beginning, well… I had no idea that books marketed for children could be so, well, full on! It's a repurposing of The Jungle Book.
inspired by an old Victorian graveyard. As a baby, Bod Owens escapes a murderer by crawling into a cemetery where he is adopted by ghosts, gradually growing up and pushing the boundaries of his existence. It feels so real and I still step back whenever I meet someone called Jack.

I Will Not Be Erased

The gal-dem collective is only five years old. It’s an online magazine written by women and non-binary writers of colour. It is also so much more, a movement that explores a multiplicity of voices and experiences. Fourteen writers give advice to their younger selves. It’s a rope hurled towards the young people who are struggling now, offering strength and safety until times are less turbulent. This is the book I would have loved when I was growing up believing that everything about me was wrong. I was the first in my family to be born in the UK. I thought I was English, but society had many ways of telling me I was not. I would have longed for a book that made me feel less alone and given me hope for the future.

Freedom
Catherine Johnson, Scholastic, 978-1407185484, £4.99 pbk

It was hard to choose a favourite of Catherine’s books. Catherine uses fiction to challenge deeply embedded ideas about English history, especially colonialism and slavery. She literally places people of colour into history and gives them agency. Nat, an enslaved young man on a Jamaican plantation is forced to accompany the English slave owners back to London. The book challenges the ‘white saviour’ abolitionist narrative and explores England’s complicity with the brutality of slavery.

Running on Empty
S E Durrant, Nosy Crow, 978-0857637406, £6.99 pbk

AJ wants to be a runner. He’d been in the stadium when Usain Bolt triumphed during the 2020 Olympics. But when AJ’s grandpa dies, life becomes complicated. AJ’s grandpa not only supported AJ, but helped AJ’s parents, who have learning disabilities, keep on top of life’s challenges. Suddenly, he is trying to take his grandpa’s place while starting secondary school and fearing that he will be taken into care if his circumstances are discovered. And, then of course, how do you run if you can’t afford trainers? This is a story about grief, dreams, empathy, warmth and family love.

I am Thunder
Muhammad Khan, Macmillan Children’s Books, 978-1509874057, £7.99 pbk

Even as I write, debates about ‘cultural appropriation’ and ‘writer censorship’ rumble on. I certainly don’t believe that writers should stick within their own experiences. I would be a hypocrite if I did. However, sometimes so-called own voices writers can provide a depth and insight that outsiders can’t. In 2015, Muhammad was a teacher in a south London secondary school when three fifteen-year-old girls, Amira Abase, Shamima Begum and Kadiza Sultana left east London to join the Islamic State. We know now that it is a tale with a tragic ending. The Muslim students in Muhammad’s school wanted to try and make sense of what happened. This book is the response, unpicking how a modern young Londoner can become radicalised. It is also a book about trying to carve out an identity that is our own.

Pig Heart Boy
Malorie Blackman, Corgi, 978-0552555616, £6.99 pbk

I found out about this book – and Malorie – via the BBC adaptation in 1999. I was shocked to see a series about a black family that wasn’t The Fresh Prince of Bel Air or about crime. Cameron is dying of a heart condition. His only chance of survival is a transplanted pig’s heart. Whatever he decides, there will be consequences. Last year, I mentioned this book at a school event in Hong Kong. A wave of excitement went round the room – they were reading it in class. It has universal appeal and can provoke so much debate. It’s about friendship, families and life-or-death decisions. As I said earlier, as children and young people we are often faced with challenges in our lives. Books can help us find ourselves.
Windows into illustration: Frann Preston-Gannon

Frann Preston-Gannon is an award-winning author/illustrator whose books have been published around the world. They include *The Journey Home*, *In The Swamp By The Light Of The Moon* and *I Am The Seed That Grew The Tree*, which won Waterstone’s Children’s Gift Book of the Year 2018. Frann was the UK’s first recipient of a Sendak Fellowship in 2011 that saw her living with the master of illustration, Maurice Sendak, for a month at his residence in Connecticut. Here she describes her illustration approach and technique.

Like most illustrators my books start their life as tiny pencil thumbs to aid in mapping out how the story arc will work. These are then transformed into more detailed pencil roughs, which go back and forth between the publisher and myself until we are confident enough to begin colour images. This is when I start to build my illustrations through a process of collaging hand-made textures on Photoshop. I make these textures in general with a mix of paint, inks, pencils and pastels. I also draw a lot of separate elements by hand before combining everything on Photoshop with a Wacom pen and screen. People often seem surprised that I make my images digitally but I enjoy how playful and experimental the process can be - editing, deleting, moving and reducing elements as I go along and I still feel I can retain a lot of the hand drawn quality.

When starting *The Bad Day* I knew I wanted this book to be packed with humour and so getting the characters right was key. I think through big eyes and expressive face young children can really connect with the drama and mild peril that the animals experience.

Someone described the book as ‘Laurel and Hardy meets Brambly Hedge’ and I think that means I succeeded!

I have a (nearly) 4 year old so she is the perfect guinea pig to test out the effectiveness of my picture books. Of all the spreads it is the sneeze page that attracts her most. She squeals with delight at the slobbery mouse and flecks of saliva and together we perform the over the top sneeze as loud as possible. I live for these sort of interactive moments when I read books to her, so I am so glad this had the desired effect with her.

As with any book, there was a lot of back and forth with my wonderful editor, Katie Haworth, and I particularly enjoyed combing through all of her thoughtful and sensible suggestions such as the one below regarding a fly.

It took a while to get the cyclical feel of this book right. But there was something very satisfying about deciding to end the book with the final small moment of the squirrel, through the help of his friends, finally getting his paws on the juicy nut.

I can only hope that children have as much reading this book as I did making it!


6 Books for Keeps No.241 March 2020

 templar  templarco.co.uk
The last couple of years have been very good for Catherine Johnson: she won the 2019 Little Rebels Award with her novel Freedom, was elected to the elite band of writers in the Royal Society of Literature, and then to cap it all, IBBY UK selected Freedom for its three-strong nominations for the IBBY Honour List (outstanding books that encourage international understanding through literature). Joking, Catherine says that conditioned by years writing for TV soap operas, she’s now waiting for something to go wrong: ‘Just when everything is going really well, that’s always when the car goes over the cliff...’.

Chatting to Catherine in her bright, airy flat in Hastings made for a very enjoyable afternoon. She’s funny, smart, full of astute observations about writing and the current writing scene. There’s a lot to discuss: Catherine has been writing for 25 years and as well as her vivid, intelligent, pacy novels for young people, has also written for film, TV and even a computer game. Yet the word that Catherine uses most to describe her career is ‘lucky’, claiming she just happened to be in the right place at the right time. Anyone who has read any of her skilfully written novels will know that there’s a lot more to her success than luck. I was unable to convince Catherine of this, perhaps this summary by Fen Coles of supporters Letterbox Library will change her mind: ‘For us at Letterbox Library, where so much of the middle grade fiction we see is dominated by scatologically-tinged comedy or adorable animal series (and I have enjoyed both in my time), Johnson’s work is a welcome diversion delivering: quickstep, intricate plots; authentic dialogue; complex historical events (the first North Pole expeditions, the French Revolution, the 1781 Zong massacre) distilled into lightning-flash narratives; with period characters who nevertheless feel as familiar as marmalade on toast. Notably, Catherine respects her young readers. She doesn’t confine her more ‘mature’ material to a YA readership, believing instead that a younger audience is more than capable of reading about the devastating cruelties of enslavement and more than ready to handle- with relish and a grimace- some of the more gruesome realities of life in 18th century England. And she achieves all of this because, we believe, she is truly one of our greatest middle fiction storytellers, giving us, time and time again, adventures and mysteries which will not date nor be set aside by market trends. This is how classics are made.’ Coles adds: ‘Stella was the first children’s novel I read when I joined Letterbox Library and it has never left me. Yes, it chimed with many of my own reading-for-pleasure criteria (part-gothic/part-historical mystery, a defiant female lead, trickery and skulduggery in spadefuls) but I’m sure it also settled in my heart as the first slice of children’s historical fiction I’d ever read which starred a protagonist who wasn’t white. Catherine’s passion for portraying UK history accurately – a history populated by a rich diversity of people across ethnicity and class and gender – is felt across her body of work. She is, quite simply, putting people of
colour where they always were, right at the beating heart of our UK heritage and ancestry. Always a truth teller, she is also one of our most gifted, contemporary storytellers.

Catherine’s writing career started at St Martin’s College where she studied film, thanks to a brilliant art teacher who encouraged her through secondary school (an otherwise deeply unhappy experience). When she finished, she ‘had babies’ and bored at home, pitched an idea for a film. It got taken up, and ‘I thought maybe I could do this’. She devised an idea for a TV show, a pony story starring a teenager with a Welsh mother and Guyanese father (strong similarities here to Catherine’s own life, not least a passion for ponies, of which more later). A friend knew an editor at a publishing company looking for stories like this and sent it off. The publisher took it on and, says Catherine, guided her through the writing process: ‘They really helped me, sent me on a writing course at Ty Newydd with Jan Mark and Catherine Fisher, I had a masterclass with Bernice Rubens.’ More book deals followed with the Women’s Press and Oxford, and then she was invited to write a screenplay for a film. Reluctant at first – the subject was a crime drama with black boys and girls: ‘Really? Are there no different stories?’ – she took it on (A friend said, ‘If you don’t do it, someone else will’) and it became Bullet Boy. More work followed both for screen and page, including Holby City, and the children’s novels that grew her reputation, Sawbones and its sequel Blade and Bone, and The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo plus her first book for Barrington Stoke, Arctic Hero. She thinks there’s a great deal of synergy between writing for the screen and writing for young people: ‘If you’re writing for children you’re telling stories through drama, people don’t walk about saying how they feel, everything has to be shown – if you’re writing for screen, that’s the same.’ She’s very aware of the influence television has had on her writing: ‘I grew up with telly – often if I read something it was because I’d seen it on the telly. I’m of that generation where TV was their list, she’d love to write a pony series: someone sign it up!

As she walks me back down the hill to the station, chatting about her love for ponies (she rides one called Flicka) and pony books like Free Rein, Catherine is still insisting her career is down to luck rather than that they’ll need even more luck to succeed. She highlights lower advances, the unequal distribution of promotional support and an unwillingness amongst publishers to take time to develop authors for the future.

Catherine’s own future however is pretty secure: she has a new book with Bloomsbury about her hero Alexandre Dumas, out later this year, a new book coming from Barrington Stoke and a novel for Pushkin too, as well as a top secret project she’s not allowed to talk about yet. And the computer game. A note for any publishers who’d like her on a new book coming from Barrington Stoke and a novel for Pushkin too, as well as a top secret project she’s not allowed to talk about yet. And the computer game. A note for any publishers who’d like her on their list, she’d love to write a pony series: someone sign it up!

In a world where there’s far too little diversity amongst the heroes of our novels, she’s often asked to write these missing stories. When Scholastic asked her to write a book about the slave trade rather than setting the story around abolition acts as suggested, she chose instead to write about the massacre on board the slave ship the Zong and the subsequent court case, all seen through the eyes of slaves and former slaves themselves: ‘the start of a long change’. Of her historical fiction she says: ‘Part of my writing is about belonging, because if you’re someone like me – born here, not white, you do not “belong”. My books say you know what, yes you do, this is your country, this is my country. I’m a Londoner but I go around saying “look, I’m English (it’s painful for my Welsh mother!) – this is what English looks like”.’ White writers don’t have to deal with that.

She’s disappointed in the slow change around diversity, highlighting upcoming children’s conferences with almost all-white line-ups of speakers, but another major concern for her is that the environment for young writers is so much harder than when she started out, that they’ll need even more luck to succeed. She highlights lower advances, the unequal distribution of promotional support and an unwillingness amongst publishers to take time to develop authors for the future.

Books mentioned
Freedom, Scholastic, 978-1407185484, £5.99 pbk
Race to the Frozen North, Barrington Stoke, 978-1781128404, £6.99 pbk
Sawbones, Walker Books, 978-1406340570, £6.99 pbk
Blade and Bone, Walker Books, 978-1406341874, £6.99 pbk

Andrea Reece is managing editor of Books for Keeps
Bringing Stories to Life

We all know there’s something very powerful that takes place when you lose yourself in a good book. You surrender yourself to the imaginary world between the pages, immersing yourself in the characters and their narrative – often returning to the ‘real world’ with an uncomfortable jolt. For many of us that experience started once we’d become confident independent readers, and we could list for you the stories that hold a special place in our hearts because they entered our lives at this transition point when the whole world of literature opened its secrets to our hungry imaginations. And we also know that in order to stand a chance of achieving the joys of surrendering to a good book, we need to ensure that younger children have built the necessary vocabulary and confidence with books from their very earliest years.

The Story Museum in Oxford, reopening this April after a £6 million redevelopment, seeks to get right to the heart of these all-important early story experiences. Starting out as an outreach project in schools, using storytelling to help children build vocabulary, confidence and communication skills, the Museum has always had a clear ambition to also exist as a physical entity, celebrating stories in all forms. And where better than Oxford, a city with so many rich connections to story from Lewis Carroll to Philip Pullman and where the streets buzz with languages and peoples from across the globe.

In 2014 The Story Museum opened as a ‘part-made’ Museum, using the rough spaces in its city centre buildings to try out a range of temporary story exhibitions. We learnt so much during those four years of public opening! Some discoveries were quite surprising, others less so - and all have informed our current redevelopment. In no particular order, here are some our findings.

1. If you have a wardrobe full of fur coats and you let people step through it into Narnia some of them will cry because they’ve finally realised a life time’s ambition, but if they’re under 5 then they’ll be very happy imagining that they’re in Frozen!
2. Don’t underestimate the power of a comfy sofa and a selection of books. When we provided a room of places to sit and read because we didn’t have the budget to fill the space with a new exhibition, it proved to be one of the most popular rooms in the Museum.
3. People love to share stories. One of the most striking things about The Story Museum has been the way that groups of all ages interact with each other as they explore our spaces. We’ve particularly enjoyed seeing children who’ve visited with their schools, rushing...
into the Museum with their families at the weekend and towing their accompanying adults at top speed to show them their favourite place in the Museum. Similarly there’s something very powerful about watching a grandparent introduce their grandchild to a story that they loved as a child and conversely watching a child explain to their parents what they love about a story that they’ve read but their parent hasn’t.

4. If you build an installation for the under 5s then you also need to let your teenage visitors enjoy it. We built a giant bed with a patchwork quilt under a blanket fort to celebrate bedtime stories and our teen visitors consistently rated it as one of their favourite places!

5. Live storytelling is mesmerising. As a Museum that celebrates story in all forms, we run a full programme of live events alongside our Museum exhibitions. In 2014 I produced The Story Museum’s first Christmas show – one performer, a very simple set and a retelling of three traditional Christmas stories. Our audiences were entranced. Parents couldn’t believe how still their children sat and how absorbed they were in the language. We’ve repeated this winning formula for five years now and can’t wait to mount our Christmas 2020 show in our new purpose-built theatre.

6. Curiosity is a superpower. The Museum is designed for people to explore in their own way. There’s lots to see and do, lots to touch and feel, lots to crawl into, dress up in and engage with. There are fun touches lurking in unexpected places for visitors to find and enjoy. This sense of exploration and the delight in finding the unexpected was one of the resounding pieces of feedback that we got from our visitors, so we’ve done our best to preserve it in the new Museum from our bespoke Fire Exit signs to our travel posters to fictional lands.

So what’s in store for visitors to the reopened Museum? Quite simply, ‘a surprise around every corner’. We’ve taken the learnings and the feedback from our visitors on what they liked about the part-made Museum and what stories they’d like to see featured and we’ve wrapped it all up into a Museum like no other. We’ve got a Whispering Wood full of trees that celebrate the roots of story – oral storytelling across cultures, we’ve got an Enchanted Library where you can step into stories from classics such as Alice and Winnie-the-Pooh to relative newcomers like Horrid Henry and Noughts and Crosses. We’ve also got a whole ground floor gallery celebrating picture books – and yes, the giant bed is back with its patchwork quilt and space for several people to curl up and enjoy being read to.

And if all that’s not enough we have a wonderful new theatre space – The Woodshed - lined floor to ceiling with upcycled doors, with a great programme of events including visits from authors Julia Donaldson, Malorie Blackman, Francesca Simon, Lisa Williamson and Chris Riddell. There’s a new learning studio for our school groups and holiday courses inspired by Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. We have created a new film experience – City of Stories – offering visitors a 30 minute ‘flight’ over Oxford’s literary history. And when you come down to land you can enjoy our revamped shop and café and soak up the transformed courtyard with its beautiful skylight and dramatic spiral staircase. We’ve made a host of practical improvements including full wheelchair access, more accessible toilets, insulation, better drainage and lots and lots of buggy parking.

In a time of political change and ever-growing concerns about the world our children are growing up in, surely now more than ever there’s a need for places like The Story Museum. Places that inspire wonder and curiosity, imagination and fun – and that remind us all that stories lie at the very heart of what it means to be human, nourishing our creativity, helping us make sense of the world around us and feeding our imagination so that we can visualise alternative futures. I can’t wait to hear the sounds of excited voices ringing round the Museum’s courtyard and corridors again and watching as new generations discover how it feels to lose yourself in a good story. Older generations too. Certainly – after the herculean task of bringing this wonder into being – many of us here can’t wait to join those curled up on the Big Bed to listen to a bedtime story …and maybe even have a little snooze!

Tish Francis is Co-Director of the Story Museum

Find out more about The Story Museum’s programme of events at www.storymuseum.org.uk.
The conventional view that all fairy tales end ‘happily ever after’ doesn’t hold true even for traditional tales – there are, for instance, Cinderella stories with unhappy endings. In the case of the Danish master of the literary fairy tale, Hans Christian Andersen, many of his tales end bleakly and the last line of his last tale Auntie Toothache is, ‘Everything ends up in the rubbish.’

Where do Andersen’s persistent themes of grief, shame, and disillusion come from? Neil Philip makes some suggestions.

To say that H. C. Andersen was not happy in his skin understates the extent of his inner misery, which is shown throughout his diaries, but sanitised in his self-serving autobiography, ‘The Fairy Tale of My Life’. It is in his fairy tales that Andersen tells the true story of his inner life.

If Andersen had read A Divine Looking-Glass by the Muggletonian prophet John Reeve, he would have had great fellow-feeling with the exclamation, ‘O that I had never been born, or that I had been a toad, or any other created being, but a man.’ Andersen had imagined himself as a toad, a duckling, and every kind of inanimate object from a darning needle to a teapot. And almost all these self-incarnations are infused with melancholy—like the Steadfast Tin Soldier, whose paint is worn away, ‘whether from the hardships of his journey or the bitterness of his grief, no one could tell.’

Anyone who has stood in the tiny one-room apartment where he lived with his parents, which was also his father’s cobbler’s workshop, understands the extreme and desperate poverty of Andersen’s upbringing. Images of his pauper childhood flicker through the opening scenes of his jagged masterpiece The Snow Queen. The horror of his washerwoman mother’s alcoholism sears through the little-known story She Was No Good, in which he depicts her standing knee-deep in the freezing river for hours, sustained only by swigs from her bottle. ‘It’s the washerwoman,’ the mayor says. ‘Drunk again! She’s no good. It’s a shame for that lad of hers. I feel sorry for him—his mother is no good.’

Andersen certainly felt that ‘shame’ keenly. He was also bitterly ashamed of his half-sister Karen Marie, who worked as a Copenhagen prostitute, distancing himself from her by calling her ‘my mother’s daughter’. He took his revenge in his most merciless story, The Red Shoes, in which a girl named Karen is punished for her sinful delight in her new shoes by being made to dance till she begs for her feet to be cut off.

Andersen was merciless to himself too, to his vanity, his ridiculous hyper-sensitivity. In the story where he imagines himself as a snail, the snail says, ‘I spit at the world. It’s no good!’ And the last paragraph is simply, ‘Shall we read this story all over again? It’ll never be different.’

But there is more to Andersen’s story than poverty and social shame. Something deeply-hidden and corrosive, something that demands to be both expressed and concealed, in a way for which the indirect, allusive symbolism of the fairy tale is perfectly designed.

In 1835 Andersen published an adult novel, The Improvisatore, a thinly-disguised Bildungsroman set in Italy. He said of it, ‘Every single character is taken from real life, each one, not a single one is made up. I know and have known them all.’

This declaration takes a sinister turn when one reads the book, especially the second chapter. In this, the young Antonio is lured by painter Federigo into a dark cave, in which they become lost. Federigo praises him and gives him money and cakes, then threatens to beat him when he is frightened. ‘Then he […] kissed me vehemently, called me his dear little Antonio.’ In the midst of a passionate clasp, Antonio finds the string which will enable the pair to escape from the cave.

The next passage is the key one. ‘I quite forgot all that had happened; but my mother could not forget it, when she had heard it, and would not again consent that Federigo should take me out with him.’

It’s fairly clear that Antonio, and therefore Andersen, was molested as a small child. Alison Prince in her biography Hans Christian Andersen: The Fan Dancer, identifies the culprit as the schoolteacher Fedder Carstens, ‘both for the similarity of the name and for the fact that the affectionate schoolmaster disappeared so abruptly from Odense when Andersen had been in his care for a few months, apparently never to teach again.’

Other biographers completely ignore this troubling episode in The Improvisatore, but I agree with Prince that it is one of the keys to understanding Andersen’s conflicted sexuality and neurotic personality.
Immediately after writing *The Improvisatore*, Andersen wrote his first fairy tales, as if putting this childhood experience down on paper, even in a guarded way, had freed his imagination. He wrote to Henriette Wulff, 'I have also written some fairy tales for children, and Ørsted says that if *The Improvisatore* will make me famous, the fairy tales will make me immortal.'

One of the fairy tales that would come to make Anderson immortal is *The Ugly Duckling*, in which the unhappy title character turns out to have been a majestic swan all along. The moral is, 'It's no wonder you don't feel at home in the farmyard, if you've been hatched from a swan's egg.' The *Bell* concerns a 'king’s son' and a 'poor boy' who separately search for a mystical bell in the forest. Despite their different paths, they achieve transcendence at the same moment.

Both of these tales play with a childhood fantasy of Andersen's. He told his earliest friend, at Fedder Carsten's school, that he was 'a changed child of high birth.'

Two Danish authors, Jens Jørgensen and Rolf Dorset, have argued that in Hans Christian Andersen's case this was literally true, and that he was the illegitimate son of Crown Prince Christian Frederik and Countess Elise Ahlefeldt-Laurvig, whose affair started in 1804. This isn’t quite as barmy as it sounds. Farming out aristocratic by-blows to poor couples was common in Denmark, Elise Ahlefeldt-Laurvig’s father Count Ahlefeldt left 99 illegitimate children in Langeland alone. Hans Christian’s father was a servant on the Ahlefeldt estate; his mother a servant with a family with close links to Broholm Castle, where Elise’s baby was rumoured to have been born.

Throughout his life Andersen benefitted from significant financial and other support from royal funds and noble patrons, at a time when there was very little social mobility. In his earliest unpublished autobiography, *Levnedsbog*, Andersen describes how, when Crown Prince Christian Frederik moved to Odense Castle in 1816, he was often taken by his mother to play with Prince Frits, his putative half-brother. And even stranger than that the misfit child of an alcoholic washerwoman should be chosen as a prince’s playmate, when the vain social-climbing Andersen rewrote his autobiography for publication, he omitted all mention of this. Yet he and Frits were close. When Frits was king, he treated Andersen like an old friend, loving to hear him tell fairy tales, and asking him, ‘How can you think up all these things? How does it all come to you? Have you got it all inside your head?’ When Frits died, Andersen was the only non-family member allowed to visit the king’s body in its coffin.

Andersen was plunged into a year of gloom at the death of Frits’s father King Christian VIII. His closest confidant Henriette Wulff wrote to him, ‘You have discovered that you are that prince’s child we talked about the other day, and you are feeling it too much! But I wish you wouldn’t, because if you were descended from all the world’s kings, I could not be any more fond of you.’

‘You are that prince’s child…’ Could it be true? It seems Hans Christian Andersen himself came to believe it. His diary entry for 3 January 1875, the last year of his life, contains a bone-dry joke. Noting how many letters he has received, he writes, ‘One has my name and address: King Christian the Ninth.’

Neil Philip is a writer and folklorist.
Beyond the Secret Garden: Classic Literature and Classic Mistakes

In the latest in their Beyond the Secret Garden series, Karen Sands-O’Connor and Darren Chetty consider the classics.

The idea that it is necessary to ‘drive engagement’ with the classics is not new, and not exclusive to the publishing industry. In children’s literature scholarship, education and library journals, and even debates in parliament, the concern over what to do about ‘classic’ literature has raged over the last century. It is a debate that often pits form against content, with those in favour of keeping classics in print arguing that a good story should trump a few lapses into racist (or sexist, or homophobic, or ableist) stereotypes, especially because ‘people thought differently back then.’

In the past, one liberal response to this argument has been to try and ‘save’ the story while making changes to the objectionable content. George Nicholson, when he was the vice president of Dell, ‘blue-penciled’ The Adventures of Doctor Dolittle to excise the racist depiction of an African prince who longed to be white. However, he did not entirely agree with the critics who called it racist, saying, ‘The character is obviously a fool . . . But most people lose their sense of humour when they read that chapter’ (Blue pencil erases Doctor Dolittle’s black humour The Times 15 February 1988: 1).

In February 2020 Barnes and Noble and Penguin Random House attempted to repackage classics in ‘Diversity Editions’ to ‘celebrate’ Black History Month in the US, producing new covers for classic texts such as The Wizard of Oz, Frankenstein, Moby Dick, Peter Pan and The Secret Garden. These books were chosen because, according to an Artificial Intelligence programme used by the company, the texts ‘never actually specified the race and ethnicity of the protagonists’ (back cover blurb from the Diverse Editions). The backlash against taking classic texts, many of which are inherently tied to white European and American ideas of colonization, westward expansion and imperialism, and ‘colouring in’ the main characters to sell more books, was instantaneous and angry. Barnes and Noble was forced to cancel their event promoting the books, and acknowledge that ‘The covers are not a substitute for black voices or writers of color, whose work and voices deserve to be heard’ (Barnes and Noble Statement February 5, 2020). However, they continued to insist that ‘The booksellers who championed this initiative did so convinced it would help drive engagement with these classic titles’ (Statement). In 1994, M. T. Ford wrote that a trend toward multiculturalism meant that publishers often looked to backlists for titles that can be repackaged in some kind of multicultural way, because it takes so long to produce new titles and the demand is immediate’ (The cult of multiculturalism Publishers Weekly 241.29: 30-31).

In the past, one liberal response to this argument has been to try and ‘save’ the story while making changes to the objectionable content. George Nicholson, when he was the vice president of Dell, ‘blue-penciled’ The Adventures of Doctor Dolittle to excise the racist depiction of an African prince who longed to be white. However, he did not entirely agree with the critics who called it racist, saying, ‘The character is obviously a fool . . . But most people lose their sense of humour when they read that chapter’ (Blue pencil erases Doctor Dolittle’s black humour The Times 15 February 1988: 1).

In 2018, the Macmillan Collector’s Library edition of The Story of Doctor Dolittle broke with its own policy of publishing complete and unabridged versions. Philip Ardagh explained in a section that follows the story that he chose to ‘have the offending passages . . . rewritten in such a way as to exclude the inappropriate material but
to keep the narrative view’ (140). And so, in this version Doctor Doolittle does not bleach the skin of the African prince who wants to be white. However, whilst Ardagh may have attempted to bleach the story free of the stench of white supremacy, he elected to leave unedited a reference to ‘these Darkies’ (40), and the racist caricature that appears on the title page of book. This does seem to invite questions as to who is determining offensiveness and appropriateness and, indeed, whose interests are being served by these edits.

Increasingly, ‘classic’ books are updated with new forewords by contemporary writers who are regarded as serious children’s writers. In these forewords they explain the books’ importance and significance. These writers perhaps also benefit from being located as part of the tradition of great children’s literature – but in order to do this, they often need to be willing to overlook the racist elements of the book, or at least deemphasise the significance of this. Lauren Child’s illustrations for the centenary edition of The Secret Garden (2011) do not depict the Indian people who attend to Mary Lennox in the book’s opening chapter. At a time when British books featuring South Asian boys on the cover are still hard to locate, Katherine Rundell’s Into The Jungle – Stories For Mowgli (2018) helps to keep Rudyard Kipling, the author of The White Man’s Burden, on the classics table, whilst also signalling that she is writing in the classic tradition. In the opening chapters of The Explorer (2017), her characters, finding themselves lost in the Amazon rainforest discuss the possibility of being consumed by cannibals. Whilst introducing a new generation of readers to a racist trope, the discussion helps us situate the story in the tradition of classic British children’s literature.

An alternate approach is to tell a new story that contains echoes of an earlier ‘classic’, but can be read without prior knowledge of the original. This is the case with Kit de Waal’s Carnegie-nominated Becoming Dinah (2019), which frequently references Herman Melville’s 19th century American novel Moby Dick. Gabrielle Bellot says that ‘Over and over, Melville’s novel makes the point that, under our skin’s complexion, all humans (and whales) are equal. Yet the book also contains many racial tropes about nonwhite “savages” and “dusky” tribesmen, and casually uses bigoted racial tropes even in sections ostensibly unrelated to race’ (The Literal - and Figurative - Whiteness of Moby Dick). De Waal’s Becoming Dinah is ostensibly about reinserting the female into the novel—de Waal writes that it is ‘Moby Dick for now and for all the girls and women who are on a journey to self-discovery’ (Author’s Note 246). She praises Melville’s internationalism (245) and never mentions race at all in her author’s note. But like Melville’s novel, de Waal’s Becoming Dinah is intimately concerned with racial issues. Dinah, whose mother is white English and father is Black and from the Kosi people of Benin, indicates her desire to create a new self at the beginning of the book by cutting off her hair that is ‘thick and heavy as a blanket’ (1) as well as ‘silky . . . like the sleek coat of a cat’ (4). But she cannot throw away her hair, nor can the novel let go of the images of hair, calling it Dinah’s ‘crowning glory, the same as all the Kosi women’ (119). The book’s epilogue has her hair growing back, ‘little prickles of hair, soft and downy, and the cuts have healed and against the odds it looks brilliant’ (241). African-American scholars Wanda M. Brooks and Jonda McNair point out in Combing Through Representations of Black Girls’ Hair that ‘the historical and sociopolitical nature of Black hair’ (303) mean that books that discuss Black girls’ hair ‘can be utilized to challenge racism and white supremacy’ (306). De Waal’s novel, through Dinah’s hair, challenges the idea that race can be invisible in a text—classic or not.

Debates about the place of classic children’s literature are often framed as being about culture and the desire to preserve or erase a rich literary heritage. We acknowledge that this is an issue worthy of serious consideration. We are also mindful also that many so-called classic books are out of copyright and thus there is an economic imperative in play also. Publishers can produce versions of old classics relatively inexpensively and be spared the costs of purchasing copyright and having to market and promote new stories and new writers. Publishing is a business, just like film. The Secret Garden and Dolittle are in cinemas this year.

Karen Sands-O’Connor is the British Academy Global Professor for Children’s Literature at Newcastle University. Her books include Children’s Publishing and Black Britain 1965-2015 (Palgrave Macmillan 2017).

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

Muhammad Khan chooses a book that embodies the power of the imagination.

**Bridge to Terabithia** by Katherine Paterson is one of my favourite books. It's the story of a down-on-his-luck boy called Jess who forms an unlikely relationship with quirky new girl Leslie. At first his prejudices get in the way, but Leslie's upbeat personality and talent soon win him over. She introduces him to a fantasy world she names Terabithia and together they embellish it with their combined skills and imagination, forming a sanctuary from the outside world. One day, Jess is selfish and a terrible tragedy strikes, one he cannot stop blaming himself for.

There is much I can relate to in Jess. I was a compulsive artist, who used this talent to make up for an absence of friends. During the Christmas term in Year 1, it snowed heavily and at break time I met a girl who was full of life and jokes and happiness. There were no formal introductions; we simply played together in the snow and for the first time in my life I knew the joys of friendship. Then one day the snow melted and she vanished. I remember searching for two weeks, asking around if anyone had seen her or knew who or where she was. No one did. I have often wondered whether she joined the school for a single week or whether she had simply been a figment of my imagination. I pined for my friend when she'd gone, wounded by the constant reminder of friendships in the playground. These complex emotions are masterfully explored in **Bridge to Terabithia**. Paterson's writing is never mawkish nor manipulative but brutally real. A child sees the beauty of fantasy worlds with the same eyes they view the hardships of life. The honesty with which Paterson captures this in her writing is what renders the book unforgettable and sublime. Perhaps what makes the story so visceral is that it was Paterson's response to the loss of her own son's childhood friend.

---

**Good Reads**

**Planet Omar (Accidental Trouble Magnet)**
Zanib Mian, Hodder Children's Books,
978-1444951226, £6.99 pbk.

This book is about a boy called Omar, who moves houses and schools and tries to fit in. One thing stops him, and that is the stinking class bully, Daniel.

My favourite character has to be Maryam because she always likes to correct people, just like me. My favourite scene is when Daniel (class bully) and Omar get lost together on a trip, and actually become friends.

This book made me feel like I was in Omar’s shoes. It made me feel kind of lonely since he gets bullied. It was also a very funny book and used humour well to talk about some challenging things.

---

**Owen and The Soldier**
Lisa Thompson, Barrington Stoke,
978-1781128657, £6.99 pbk.

This book is about a boy named Owen, whose mum and himself are struggling as they are the only ones at home. Owen is keeping his worries to himself but one day he discovers a crumbling stone soldier, he feels like he finally has someone to talk to. However, the town can’t see how important the soldier is and they want to remove him. Owen is scared that he’ll be left on his own again, he needs to save the soldier before it’s too late. Owen likes to visit the local memorial garden where he talks to a stone soldier statue after losing his dad and his mum becoming withdrawn and depressed. I feel like this book is sweet, simple and a very touching tale and I would recommend it to KS2 children. I would also recommend this to older readers, young adults, as they might relate to this story. As a reader, it shows how important soldiers are and allows us to walk in their shoes. This book also reminded me of the one-minute silence we have for the soldiers who have died in World Wars and why we need to not forget what they did for us.

---

**Race to the Frozen North**
Catherine Johnson, Barrington Stoke,
978-1781128404, £6.99 pbk.

This book is about an adventurous boy named Matthew Henson who wanted to achieve his dream career at sea but faces many hardships and disadvantages. I love Janey and Captain Child because they motivated Matt when he had nowhere to go. I think without them he would not have achieved what he did.

---

Find out more about EmpathyLab on their website and in this *BFK* article. The 2020 Book Collection of 50 books is listed here.
Friends, Romans, Countrymen...

Tony Bradman adds up what stories about the Romans have done for us.

Latin was a compulsory subject at the state grammar school I went to when I was a boy. So I learned how to chant amo, amas, amat, with my classmates, that Rome was founded by Romulus and Remus who were suckled by a wolf, and that according to Julius Caesar ‘all Gaul is divided into three parts’. I loved the whole thing, mostly because our class had a brilliant teacher (take a bow, Agnes Stickings!), and I didn’t give it up when the time came to decide what ‘O’ Level subjects I should do.

That made me unusual, for this was in the 1960s, a time when The Modern seemed to have finally arrived in the 20th century and everyone was supposed to be more interested in the future than the past. Of course I was reading science-fiction too, and watching Doctor Who and following the progress of the Gemini space programme. So when it came to choosing what to do for my ‘A’ Levels Latin didn’t seem like a good idea. I mean, what good would Latin do me in a world of high technology?

It did seem for a while that there was much less in the Classics, and the numbers of kids learning Latin or Greek fell steeply. But our fascination with the ancient world never really went away, and in recent years has made a comeback. If you’ve got kids at a primary school, or you’re a primary teacher, you’ll know that ‘the Roman Empire and its impact on Britain’ is a recommended area of study in the Key Stage 1 and 2 National Curriculum for History. So all children have to learn about the Romans.

One way of doing that is to use non-fiction books on the subject, and there are plenty to choose from, as even a quick internet search will tell you. There are some great non-fiction titles too, but I think it’s worth supplementing them with top-quality historical fiction. My interest in the Romans was re-kindled when I was at university and discovered I, Claudius by Robert Graves, and its sequel Claudius the God. The brilliant BBC TV adaptation appeared at the same time.

Long before that – indeed, at the same time that I was chanting amo, amas, amat – I had also discovered the work of Rosemary Sutcliff. Those of you who have read anything I’ve written about my reading journey and historical fiction, or who have heard me talking about those things on school visits will know I’m an uber-fan of Rosemary’s work. She is probably best known for her novel The Eagle of the Ninth, the story of young Marcus Aquila’s quest for the truth about his father’s vanished legion.

Sutcliff wrote many more Roman stories, though, most of them following Marcus’s descendants in subsequent centuries. Read as a sequence, they take you through almost the entire history of Roman Britain, from the early years of colonisation to the Saxon invasions of the fifth century and beyond. I’ll admit that for contemporary readers it’s worth supplementing them with top-quality historical fiction. My interest in the Romans was re-kindled when I was at university and discovered I, Claudius by Robert Graves, and its sequel Claudius the God. The brilliant BBC TV adaptation appeared at the same time.

But Sutcliff wrote many more Roman stories, though, most of them following Marcus’s descendants in subsequent centuries. Read as a sequence, they take you through almost the entire history of Roman Britain, from the early years of colonisation to the Saxon invasions of the fifth century and beyond. I’ll admit that for contemporary readers it’s worth supplementing them with top-quality historical fiction. My interest in the Romans was re-kindled when I was at university and discovered I, Claudius by Robert Graves, and its sequel Claudius the God. The brilliant BBC TV adaptation appeared at the same time.

One of the things I loved about Sutcliff’s work is that it never gets in the way of the stories. Caroline has also written the Roman Mystery Scrolls for younger readers, and a couple of brilliant re-tellings from Virgil’s Aeneid for Barrington Stoke, The Night Raid and Queen of the Silver Arrow.

I also enjoyed Carnegie-winner Tanya Landman’s Beyond the Wall, the story of two young people in Roman Britain, British slave-girl Cassia and Roman Marcus. It’s firmly in YA territory – Tanya Landman sees Rome as a patriarchy in which the young and vulnerable often suffered enormous oppression. The research is great, and the characters are very strong. The paths of Cassia and Marcus cross, and they help each other in a plot that is gripping and full of cliffhangers, but completely believable.

It took me a long time, but I did eventually get round to writing some Roman stories myself. The first was Assassin for Barrington Stoke, a story about a young boy in northern Britain who tries to kill the Emperor Hadrian before he can build the famous wall. Then my son Tom and I collaborated on Spartacus: The Story of the Rebellious Thracian Gladiator, a dramatised biography and a passion project for me. I’ve been a fan of the Kirk Douglas movie since I saw it at the tender age of 10.

Next up was the story of Caractacus, the first-century tribal chieftain who led the resistance to the Roman invasion. It’s a famous, almost mythical story, but in my version, Revolt Against the Romans, I took the chance to explore the differences between the indigenous Britons and their invaders. I wanted to give kids a gripping story full of strong characters, but I also wanted to help them understand that the Britons had a rich culture of their own (and spoke a very early form of Welsh).

Of course the name that often comes up when we talk about Roman Britain is Boudica, and last year I finally got round to tackling her story. Boudica is often seen as a heroine who fought the Roman oppressors, but she also destroyed three Roman cities and slaughtered their inhabitants. So in Queen of Darkness, my version of the story, the young central character Rhiannta discovers there was also something very dark about the Queen of the Iceni. I certainly wouldn’t have argued with her.

Last but not least I want to draw your attention to Empire’s End: A Roman Story by Leila Rasheed. This is the fourth title in the Voices series of novels I’m editing for Scholastic, each one a story set in a period mentioned in the National Curriculum, but with a central character from one of the forgotten communities in our history. Leila’s brilliant novel tells the poignant story of a young girl born in North Africa who comes to Britain as part of the entourage of the third-century Emperor Severus, and stays.

There are other titles worth reading, and I apologise to all the great authors that I might have left out. But these are the books that have been an essential part of my engagement with Rome and its impact on Britain. I hope you’ll enjoy them too.
Book Clubs in Schools: Why and How?

Dr Rebecca Butler provides the answers.

I see a book club in a school as an arrangement by which selected groups of pupils meet regularly over some weeks to read and discuss a whole book. Considerable effort is required on the part of school staff and management to set up and operate a book club, so the first question to be asked and answered has to be why bother? What are the advantages will come from running a book club? I’ve found the immediate benefit is an improvement not just in the reading skill of the pupils but in their ability to express their views on the text being read. I’ve been running book clubs in schools for over five years now and have found that they nearly always lead to an improvement in the SATS reading performance scores of the pupils involved.

You do however need to emphasise both to teaching staff and pupils that the club is not just designed to boost SATS results – it has wider purposes. The examination of their own reading experience alongside that of other group members helps pupils deepen their understanding of literature and leads them to ask what an author was seeking to achieve. My own experience has been gained with pupils at the upper age end of the primary system and know how important it is that the pupils see reading not as a task imposed on them by the curriculum but as a source of enjoyment and fulfilment.

So much for why a book club is a good idea.

How to go about forming one?

There are several requirements. The first is a quiet space, which need not be a library. It is essential (as far as possible) to avoid reading being interrupted by unplanned toing and froing of other pupils. The club will need eight or ten copies of a current text. Some schools will have funds to buy some or all of the necessary books; some schools will not. If your school has an active PTA they might help. Otherwise it will be necessary to approach publishers and bookshops. A well-directed email will very often produce an offer of free or discounted books. Publishers are often willing to help, after all, they have a vested interest in encouraging young readers.

In most schools some staff members will argue that the school curriculum is already overloaded without adding a further non-mandated element. I counter this argument in two ways: improved literacy is a core skill; a book club will provide benefits in other subjects such as history and geography. Even in scientific subjects the ability to get to the heart of a text is of undoubted benefit. It is also vital to get the support of senior management of the school for the book club. If the head, the deputy head, the librarian or the head of English backs the project, it will go ahead, even if only on a trial basis. And then the chances are that it will prove its worth. Such senior sponsors will have the power to create space for the book club in the timetable.

How are pupils to be recruited to the book club?

The club leader and the staff members involved need to decide whether the club will benefit most the best qualified readers in their year (what I term the high flyers) or the lower ability readers. A mix of the two will not work for either group. The group should not exceed ten members. The selection of the members should be in the hands of the class teachers, who know which pupils can benefit most and contribute most. They will take into account the degree of support for reading each pupil gets at home. It may be tempting to consider holding book group meetings outside school hours, making it a voluntary extramural activity. I would urge you to resist this temptation. While it solves one problem (pressure on school hours) it risks branding the book club as an activity for which school staff have only tangential responsibility.

Book groups I have established have considered an astonishing range of topics such as gender roles in society, the use of prologues and epilogues and the use of morphine in the First World War and in present society. Our latest book was Hilary McKay’s superb and award-winning The Skylarks’ War, which provide a real favourite.

If you do decide to launch a book club I can promise you one thing: it will be an eventful, surprising and deeply fulfilling experience.

The author expresses her thanks, appreciation and affection to Saint Elizabeth’s Primary School, Richmond and Saint Richard Reynolds College, Twickenham and to Macmillan Children’s Books for providing copies of The Skylarks’ War.
NEW TALENT

The Grizzly Itch

Victoria Cassanell, Macmillan Children's Books, 32pp, 978-1529013573, £6.99 pbk

A bear and a beaver star in Victoria Cassanell's debut picture book, which celebrates teamwork, friendship and the great outdoors. Bear wakes up from his long winter slumber with an unexpected itch, a GRIZZLY itch that's impossible to reach. He heads out to his favourite tree for a good scratch only to find a queue of itchy bears. When it's finally his turn, disaster - the tree crashes to the ground thanks not to the bears, but to the beaver at its foot. Together, Bear and Beaver search for another tree, unsuccessfully and at some cost to Bear - a glorious, surprising and very funny sequence of illustration shows him falling from a tree into the river below with an enormous splash. All ends happily - of course - as the two friends find a lovely way to scratch that itch. This

A Fox Called Herbert

Margaret Sturton, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978 1 78343 4870 8, £12.99 hbk

Herbert rabbit absolutely loves foxes, so much so that he wants to become one. To that end he makes himself a pair of red ears but his mummy calls them un-rabbitly. The following day with the aid of his little sister, he paints himself red and the two play a game of 'find-the-fox'. The mess they create displeases mummy and she asks him to promise to be 'a good rabbit'. A good rabbit - or any other animal - he certainly isn’t when he fashions himself a splendid new foxy tail that is just the thing for a game of tail chasing fun. This time his mummy is very far from pleased.

After a brief respite when Herbert behaves well, he’s let outdoors to play again. Now how is Mummy rabbit going to react when she sees what he has got up to in the park? Perhaps this time to put her right on the rabbit/fox thing once and for all, and just wait and see. This funny celebration of identity and being true to yourself, is Margaret Sturton’s debut picture book. Her nicely detailed illustrations show much more than her words say. She most definitely a talent to watch with interest.

KARATE KID

Holly Sterling, Walker, 32pp, 978 1 4063 8623 3, £12.99

This vivid picture book by Holly Sterling follows Maya, who wants to be a ‘karate kid’, on her regular trip to karate class. We follow her from her donning her karate suit or ‘gi’, to meeting her “sensei” and carrying out a range of moves before ending with the cool down or “mokuso”. Every page of the book introduces the reader to karate terminology and is highly effective in weaving new technical vocabulary and factual information through the simple story of Maya’s day. Maya’s lively and diverse classmates are depicted through the engaging illustrations. The drawings themselves brilliantly express the energy and grace of the karate stances and are sure to capture the attention and imagination of any young child.

The final page of the book takes the form of a note from the author who herself was British Grand Champion and has competed at an international level. This personal note serves as an inspiration to young readers and emphasises the underlying theme of being able to achieve what you want when you put your mind to it. This resonates in Maya’s final words, “I really want to be as good as she is when I grow up...and maybe I will be.” This entertaining and informative little book will appeal to and inspire any child with an interest in the sport.

REVIEWS IN THIS ISSUE

Under 5s Pre School/Nursery/Infant

Birdsong

Written and ill. Julie Fleet, Greystone Kids, 32pp, 978-1-77164-473-0, £12.99 hbk

Simply narrated in a child’s voice and illustrated with luminous, pared-back images that depict her growing friendship with a neighbouring artist, Birdsong addresses some big ideas but feels like a quiet hug from someone you love.

Katharena and her mother are leaving their city home for a new life in the country. A long drive takes the two of them to a cold and creaky hilltop house. ‘I don’t feel like drawing,’ says Katharena, looking at the desk in her new room, ‘My hands are cold.’ But the house is surrounded by snowdrops and Katharena’s sense of dislocation doesn’t last. Against a backdrop of the changing seasons and Fleet’s paintings of the natural world, Katharena and the elderly Agnes develop a touching friendship. They are like-minded: both have a deep connection with nature and enjoy creating art, and age is not an issue until the final pages, as winter sends everyone indoors and Agnes’s health begins to fail. By spring, when Agnes can no longer leave her bed, Katharena papers the bedroom walls with drawings to bring the outside in. ‘Agnes says it’s like a poem for her heart,’ says Katharena, in a phrase that could be used to summarise this book. Older readers will sense the coming sadness, but the story is left open for younger readers to reach their own understanding of what is happening.

Julie Fleet is an award-winning Cree-Metis author, illustrator and artist who lives in Vancouver. Birdsong’s cultural and physical setting may be unfamiliar to UK readers - a small number of Cree words occur naturally, and we see coyotes walking along the road. But care has been taken to provide gentle explanations or a visual context, and readers are unlikely to find these elements distracting.

Fleet’s palette recalls the subtle colours of antique samples, evoking a sense of timelessness, and her beautifully painted and collaged artwork depicts the beauty of the

No.241 March 2020
natural world in all its moods and seasons, from the ‘mucky’ wet city to a peach-pink country sunset.

Birdsong is a warm and deeply sensitive story with the air of something that has been honed and crafted until it shines. As a celebration of the creative force, our connection to nature and the value of true friendship, it helps children see change and loss in a wider context, and feels utterly authentic. CFH

A story about Afiya


This poem by James Berry, written in 1991, has been re-imagined by Anna Cunha, with the approval of James Berry’s partner Myra Barns. Afiya has fine black skin that shows off her white clothes, and big brown eyes that laugh and long limbs that play. Her name in Swahili means ‘health’ and she wears a pure white dress, which she washes every night. Each day, the dress ‘picks on something to collect, strangely’. The dress may have an imprint of sunflowers, red roses, or butterflies, each illustrated on a double page spread. Then Berry explains that every night the imprint stays on her dress when washed, ‘yet, next morning, every day, the dress is cleared and ready, hanging white as new paper’. Her dress takes on the pattern of a flight of pigeons, tigers from the zoo, and fishes from the sea. She walks between round and towered boulders and takes them away, pictured on her’ and the book finishes with her amazement to find herself ‘covered with windswt leaves of October, falling.’

This poem has no rhymes, but the writing is beautiful, and Brazilian illustrator Anna Cunha has produced some equally beautiful pictures in chalky colours. This could be an inspiration for children to illustrate their own experiences on their own clothes, or just to enjoy the idea – a book to treasure. DB

Would You Like a Banana?

Yasmeen Ismail (author and ill.), Walker, 32pp, 978-1 4063 7584 8, £6.99 hbk

This hardback picture book is about Gorilla. He is rather hungry but does not want to eat a banana. When asked to try a teeny taste, he says no! He is asked in lots of ways if he would like a banana and you've guessed it, he is very stubborn and refuses to eat a banana. You will have to read the book to find out if he does eat a banana in the end.

I know you are not supposed to judge a book by the cover, by the banana yellow cover is stunning. The illustrations are bold and beautiful, my favourite is one with Gorilla with delicious looking food piled on his head. Some of the images are like real food such as fruit and some of the images just make me laugh.

This book is perfect to read aloud to under 5s who will enjoy the humour of the book, the gorgeous illustrations and the rhyming pattern of the story. Not to mention that you might encourage them to join in with the story. I have shared this with a group of 3 year-olds and they laughed every time I said ‘No I won’t eat a banana’ in my best Gorilla voice! KK

I Have to Start School Today

Simon Phillip, ill. Ged Adamson, Simon and Schuster, 978-1 4771 6465 1, £6.99, pbk

‘I have to start school today. ‘You’ll have such fun!’ my parents say. I know they think I’ll be ok, but what if things don’t go my way?’

Thus begins this picture book on the well-tried theme of the anxiety that begins to feel extremely thin. Grandma says ‘Dear Izy, I’m a Sky Dog now. I live in Dog Heaven, because I died…’

For anyone who feels a little wearied of the allusions and metaphors of some issue-based titles, here’s a picturebook using clear and contemporary language to talk about death. Don’t expect a pragmatic approach, through – this story tends to except crocodile. Full colour pages with individual animals on each one and lots of double-page spreads add to the fun, and little ones will enjoy Pug’s attempts. For lovers of hugs everywhere. ES

Love from Alfie McPoost


Dear Izy, I’m a Sky Dog now. I live in Dog Heaven, because I died…’

For anyone who feels a little wearied of the allusions and metaphors of some issue-based titles, here’s a picturebook using clear and contemporary language to talk about death. Don’t expect a pragmatic approach, through – this story tends to except crocodile. Full colour pages with individual animals on each one and lots of double-page spreads add to the fun, and little ones will enjoy Pug’s attempts. For lovers of hugs everywhere. ES

Pug Hug

Zehra Hicks, Hodder Children’s Books, 32pp, 978-1 444 94997 1, £12.99 hbk

Pug really wants a hug from the little girl who has just left for school, but his attempts are met with excuses. Cat isn’t keen on hugs; hamster runs away; rabbit is too busy; and fish – well you can’t really hug a fish, can you? But when a baboon tries to hug him, except for crocodile, who has ulterior motives! Pug must wait until the little girl comes home, and then there is written as a series of letters and for everyone else – except crocodile. Full colour pages with individual animals on each one and lots of double-page spreads add to the fun, and little ones will enjoy Pug’s attempts. For lovers of hugs everywhere. ES

I am Brown


Through role play scenarios, young readers see that brown people can be presidents, astronauts or writers, they might be skilled crime solvers or rocket ship designers. The range of brown people explored, they may come from all over the world, speaking a wide range of languages. They may differ in appearance, but also in different homes, wear different clothes, enjoy different hobbies and eat different food. They may be your friend, your boss, your teacher or your classmate. They may offer you love, friendship and happiness. The simple repetitive text would be great for repeated readings. The detailed artwork may spark conversations, about different foods for example. Don’t miss the end paper, which is particularly lovely and lively, depicting an apartment block full of happy young brown faces. The warmth of the beautiful illustrations enhances the affirming, insightful message, whatever the colour of a young reader’s skin. SMc

Rhinocorn

Matt Carr, Egmont, 32pp, 9781-4052-99885, £6.99 pbk

Ron does not enjoy life as a Rhino. He does not like the smell of things and he certainly doesn’t want to be grumpy and have no friends. Yet this seems to be the way life is going to be for poor old Ron. Until, that is, he takes matters into his own hands and changes his external appearance to better reflect who he is inside.

The captivating disco feel of the cover illustrations hook you in so much that you can’t help but feel a bit disappointed by the plain grey rhino who lies within. The reader therefore shares Ron (and his meerkat friends) delight when he transforms from a plain old minio into a glorious topercorn.

This is an exciting and engaging story of how being different doesn’t have to make you sad. An original tale on a tale for our times, breaking down taboos and opening our arms to difference. Even the other rhinos, unified by their displeasure at Ron’s new way of life, accidentally make friends and help to rip apart the old rhino rule book. A delightful read to engage young and older readers alike and may even captivate boys more than the pink cover might suggest! HK
The Last Tree
Emily Haworth-Booth, Pavilion, 32pp., 978-1-84365-437-7, £6.99, pbk

If you were looking for a place to call home. This beautiful picture book with positivity and hope.

The Extraordinary Gardener
Sam Boughton, Tate, 32pp., 978-1-84976-697-5, £6.99 pbk

The illustrations cleverly seem childlike, with Joe’s stick-like limbs and bright blue glasses simply drawn, but it is clear e.g. from the way Joe’s stance is depicted. There is an undercurrent - Sam is an accomplished artist, and her work earns an appreciation on the cover from Anthony Browne. She has won a MA in Children’s Book Illustration from the Cambridge School of Art, but has already produced this and Hello Dinosaur, with Hello Bear and Hello Whale to be published soon. Look out for the child, boy or girl, in a stripy T-shirt, which seems to be a favourite outfit! Sam Boughton is certainly an author/illustrator on her way up.

The Extraordinary Gardener

Under 5s Pre-School/Nursery/Infant continued

The King Who Banned the Fairytale
Amanda Addison, illus. Manuela Adranci, Lantana Publishing, 32pp., 978 1 77321 343 9, £11.99 hbk

The Bag Paper Princess
Robert Munsch Art by Michael Martchenko, Annick Press, 40pp, 978-1-77321-344-0, £11.99 hbk

Princess Elizabeth is going to marry Prince Ronald; he looks every inch the perfect prince. Then disaster – a dragon snatches Ronald leaving Elizabeth with nothing but a paper bag to wear – and a fierce determination to rescue Ronald; except things do not quite turn out as you might expect.

It is always good to welcome back a classic – and surely there cannot be a classic more in keeping with the times than this. While it was particularly powerful when it first appeared in 1980, its message of female empowerment and independence is just as important today. Its success is not just the message, but the storytelling which is direct, uncluttered, immediate – the voice of the narrator speaking the words directly to his audience and it is interesting to learn from the afterword by Anna Munsch, that this story started life as one told by Robert to children. Then there is the humour – and the final, thoroughly enjoyable, twist. While the subverted fairytale may now be an accepted
part of children’s literature, this must still rank as one of the best. The focus may be on Elizabeth but the message is not exclusive; everyone has a dragon to face and no one should either make assumptions or be bullied. Michael Martchenko’s illustrations are the ideal match to Munsch’s text, capturing the characters and their emotions - just look at that smug expression on thedragon who doesn’t want to be trusted but extends and enhances the action but further. Pausing for a rest, Felix falls fast asleep under a shady tree. A14 book features three separate stories - each delightful story with its own characters and distinctive rhythm and style to the stories which echo Atinuke’s traditional oral storytelling prowess. A real joy to read, Too Small Tola will appeal to readers of all ages. KF

Too Small Tola

Atinuke, ill. Onyinye Iwu, Walker, 9pp, 1981 4065 8891 6, £5.99 pbk
Tola, the ‘small but mighty’ orange pig, comes to a new school, is rapid chases and near-death experiences abound, enough to keep any year 3 on the edge of their seat. It is a page turning romp of a book. A delightful and exciting tale which will make children see their surrounding countryside with widened eyes and may even provide the inspiration for many a winter walk. HK

Ori’s Stars

Kristina Litten, Simon and Schuster, 978 1 4711 8006 4, £12.99, hbk.
An iridescent cover attracts attention, with what appears to be a large thumbnail of a little being centred within the image. The outer space is a compendium of a multitude of colour stars. Readers learn this is Ori, living in the depths of space, in darkness. We recognise her personality. Amazingly, by chance, when rubbing together her hands, she discovers how to make a star. Delighted, she soon creates hundreds of them, these stars attracting figures from far and wide, lots of friendly little beings to ease her loneliness. They all want to make stars, just like Ori did. She follows fast in the depths of space, created by Ori, Vega, Nova, Bella and Luna. These beings are beautifully crafted in glorious colours, each having their own characteristic faces within their ‘thumbprint’. Each page-turn creates a gasp as colours bounce about in space, the star constellations randomised, scattered about, often in a black background, within explosions of blue, green, pink and purple. Readers can explore the wonders of space. Daring creations made... bicycles, train trucks, a helter-skelter, a big wheel, all giving such pleasure. When all five friends are plunged into outer darkness once again, they realise there might well be
other beings far out there, as lonely as they had all been. Spread the light! The five decide they must split up, whizzing east, whizzing west, zooming north and darting off south until the new stars they make attract beings from deep in space, each making new stars until the sky is filled to brimming with stars. No-one feels lonely again.

Those readers keen on star gazing will be searching the pages for Orion the hunter, Ursa Major and the Big Dipper. A remarkable book showing just how powerful can be the bonds of friendship.

**The Day the Banana Went Bad**

Michelle Robinson, ill. Tom Knight, Scholastic, 32pp, 9781471799320 £6.99 pbk

This is a great book for today’s throwaway society except that the veg doesn’t end up on a compost heap! It’s a great title and looks, from the front cover, as if the banana might be really evil but it’s not quite like that when you carry on reading.

All is quiet on the introductory title page as the fruit and veg are smiling in their containers. But then one banana realises he has been discarded and sent to the reject bin because he is bruised and over ripe. He quickly rallies the rest of the rejected fruit and veg with a rousing cry of: ‘We won’t stay where we should! So what if we’re all wonky? Different isn’t bad – it’s GOOD!’ He works hard at freeing all the veg and they all get up to mischief in the supermarket including a page that children will definitely love as it features the banana baring its ‘bottom’! They are then led to safety to a place that, for them, enables them to be free. The chosen spot will make everybody smile.

The story is in rhyme with plenty of humour. The font is strikking and, at times, bold with plenty of capitals to make the point. I think the book would be great for KS2 too as the drawings are in an appealing cartoon style that I think would particularly appeal to budding cartoon artists who are older - the faces are really expressive and would certainly provide inspiration for drawing more. Added to this are the jokes in the book - all in all, it will appeal to a wide audience including teachers celebrating imperfections and differences too.

**Mustafa’s Jumper**

Coral Rumble, ill Charlotte Cooke, Wacky Bee Books, 40pp, 978-1-9999033-5-0, £6.99 pbk

A timely and touching story of the growing friendship between two children from very different backgrounds.

‘Milo isn’t extra clever, or extra naughty, or extra anything. He tends to stay in the background’, but when Mustafa, a young refugee who speaks no English, joins Milo’s class Milo steps forward to befriend him. The other children in class think making friends with someone who doesn’t speak English will be difficult, but Milo proves them wrong, soon the two boys are in the playground throwing a ball to one another and having great fun.

Gradually the friendship between the two boys grows and both become more confident. Mustafa is quick to learn and soon has the whole class in fits of laughter with his funny stories.

Mustafa gets sad sometimes too and wishes sometimes he could find someone to talk to. But it’s clear that we do need to remember the Holocaust and Michael Rosen’s latest book is an excellent way to do exactly that. His parents came to Britain from Eastern Europe, and as a child young Michael asked them about their extended family, the uncles and aunts who stayed behind and fell under the shadow of Nazi Occupation. They had disappeared, never to be heard of again, and he wondered how that could happen – how could people simply vanish?

That was the stimulus for a life-time of investigation that took him to the USA to talk to other family members, through archives and libraries and digital sources, and this book is the result. He does find out what happened to his family, retrieving in the process their names and something of their history. The stories are, as you can imagine, poignant, tragic, and horrifying, but this act of familial loyalty and remembrance is ultimately uplifting.

Michael has included some extracts from his poems about his missing relatives and the whole thing is perfectly written in a clear, accessible way that will help children to engage with such a difficult subject. This is an exceptionally powerful and moving title that should definitely be in every school and library.

---

**Poems Aloud**


Joseph Coelho’s latest collection, aimed at school children, is all about poems to perform. While his introduction says that you can equally well perform them alone, they nevertheless emphasise the rhythm and rhyme and dramatic characterisation likely to catch and hold an audience’s attention. There’s a challenge, too, to the reader/performer in rising to the demands of a poem’s language, theme and intent. The collection kicks off with tongue twisters and ends with a poem that intends to make a significant statement about climate change. You are challenged to make your audience laugh and cry; to feel; and to think. You must be an actor, a storyteller and an advocate. Coelho provides poems that encourage you to do all of this and which incidentally might give you hints and tips on how to start writing and performing your own poems. The collection is presented in a colourful picturebook format with lively cartoons by Daniel Gray-Barnett; a format that emphasises Coelho’s ‘biggest rule of all’ – that poetry is fun and ultimately there are no rules!

---

**The Missing**

Michael Rosen, Walker Books, 978-1-406386752, £8.99 hbk

There are many books about the holocaust – history, memoirs, essays, novels, poetry, even graphic novels and picture books. Although it seems that as the actual events of the Holocaust recede further into the past, real knowledge of it among young people fades. Perhaps it’s now increasingly thought of as a ‘historical event’, the 20th century’s version of the Black Death or the Great Famine in Ireland, especially as it’s now at the point of being almost beyond living memory.

But it’s clear that we do need to remember the Holocaust and Michael Rosen’s latest book is an excellent way to do exactly that. His parents came to Britain from Eastern Europe, and as a child young Michael asked them about their extended family, the uncles and aunts who stayed behind and fell under the shadow of Nazi Occupation. They had disappeared, never to be heard of again, and he wondered how that could happen – how could people simply vanish?

That was the stimulus for a life-time of investigation that took him to the USA to talk to other family members, through archives and libraries and digital sources, and this book is the result. He does find out what happened to his family, retrieving in the process their names and something of their history. The stories are, as you can imagine, poignant, tragic, and horrifying, but this act of familial loyalty and remembrance is ultimately uplifting.

Michael has included some extracts from his poems about his missing relatives and the whole thing is perfectly written in a clear, accessible way that will help children to engage with such a difficult subject. This is an exceptionally powerful and moving title that should definitely be in every school and library.
The Highland Falcon Thief

M.G. Leonard and Sam Sedgman

The Highland Falcon Thief has them all, but key to the success of this hugely enjoyable adventure story is the Highland Falcon itself, a gloriously described steam locomotive (an A4 Pacific if you want to be really precise, and by the end of the book you definitely will). Young Harrison ‘Hal’ Beck is a reluctant passenger on the Highland Falcon as she makes her last journey ever, from Kings Cross up to Scotland and then back down the west coast before crossing east again to steam into Paddington. He’s a guest of his journalist train-obsessed uncle and their fellow passengers are a wonderful bunch of larger than life characters, from the bullying self-made millionaire to the glamorous actress and, on the home journey, a prince and princess no less. Hal initially deems trains ‘boring’, but his attitude changes, particularly when he meets Marlene (aka Lenny), daughter of the driver and an absolute train buff. Before long the two are working together to solve a crime that has to have been committed by one of the passengers.

The crime is expertly plotted, suspicion falling on each of the passengers – even Uncle Nat is in the frame for a while – and a desperate rush to identify the true culprit leads to all sorts of adventures for Hal, including a death-defying scramble over the roof of the train as it rumbles through the Somerset countryside. It all makes for first-class reading. Hal and Lenny are thoroughly engaging central characters and authors M.G. Leonard and Sam Sedgman do a great job capturing the romance of steam trains and the amazing feats of engineering they represent; there’s a terrific scene in which the two lucky children get to witness the train take on water from a river for example. Traditional though the setting and plot are, it’s thoroughly modern in tone and approach and should deservedly become a real favourite with readers.

An engaging and tender story about a young boy’s determination to rescue his grandad from the numbing grief he is suffering after the death of his wife and return him to the warm and welcoming life he used to know.

Grandpa Joe used to love butterflies. Every weekend Ben would visit Grandpa Joe and Granny Ruth, helping Granny bake cakes while Grandpa Joe would go off ‘on safari’ in his large flower filled garden searching for new butterflies to snap with his camera. In the evenings Ben would play cards with his grandparents and Joe would make everyone laugh, playing tricks and hiding cards up their sleeves. But since Lenee caught a cold passed away Joe has changed and is no longer interested in anything except staring at his TV screen with the sound turned down. Ben cannot bear the idea that his Grandpa is slipping away and considers what he can do to bring ‘Grandpa Joe back to life’. After considerable thought Ben literally ‘hatches’ a plan – needless to say butterflies are heavily involved.

Ben’s Mum, Stepdad and two little sisters also have important roles to play which both help and hinder the outcome of Ben’s scheme.

Despite the difficult subject matter Nicholas Smart injects such genuine charm into the characters of Ben and his family that the story never becomes maudlin or sentimental. Told with real warmth this is an endearing tale of family relationships.

The last couple of years have seen the arrival of a new generation of comic book fans. The stories are a perfect accompaniment to these new comic readers, drawing the attention of the Golden Spatula League, a pizza delivery detective genre, a pizza delivery boy with an unusually good memory joins a secret network of young investigators.

Colin Kingsley’s family own the local pizza delivery and, tired of cycling people’s dinner all round town, he dreams of something more, and fancies himself as an amateur sleuth. The pizza delivery/private detective crossover caters for a somewhat niche market, but, nevertheless, Colin draws the attention of the Golden Spatula League - the most important crime-fighting agency you’ve never heard of.

Colin is thrilled to learn that not only does there exist a covert collection of secret agents who are all vendors of fast food, but they have a headquarters just round the corner from his house! The League is impressed by the perception and memory skills Colin displayed during the initiation phase, and give him his very own code name (Mark Anchovy), a mentor from the local kebab shop (Princess Skewer) and a mission to stop the fattest gangster on the planet from stealing a priceless painting in Rome. Unbeknownst to Colin, his mission has happened to organise a field trip to Italy just at the right time.

The book is packed with action and thrills in the classic tropes of traditional secret agent stories. Villains are garish and menacing, heroes are brash and confident, and settings are dominated by dark shadowy corners - you can virtually hear the echoing footsteps as the characters chase one another across courtyards and down darkened streets.


The front cover of Max and the Midknights features testimonials by Dave Pilkey and Jeff Kinney, whose enormously successful Captain Underpants and Diary of a Wimpy Kid series and up and down concrete steps. Goldsmith’s illustrations are a perfect accomplishment to these dramatic scenes, drawn in monochrome but brought to life by the clean lines and expressive characterisation found in the comics of the most famous boy-detective of all, Tintin.

The powerful nostalgic effect of Goldsmith’s writing and art might go slightly over the heads of younger readers, but it’s an engrossing tale of carefree childhood engaged by the relentlessly speeding story and by the extent of the danger...and the massive explosions. The fast food context becomes slightly tiresome and is only sustained through large coincidences. It’s somewhat convenient that the gangster’s favourite food is pizza, for example, and the Golden Spatula League has an unbelievably massive budget for an organisation of teenagers in the service industry.

Mark Anchovy is dramatic and exciting with well-crafted set pieces and striking illustrations that will captivate many readers; it’s just a shame it has such a silly premise!
A Year of Nature Poems

Joseph Coelho, ill. Kelly Louise Judd, Wide Eyed, 32pp, 9780711249943, £6.99 pbk

In this illustrated collection of nature poems, each month of the year is given its own special dedication. The twelve poems are all unique but are united by their celebration of the natural world and by the poignancy of the messages and memories they share.

Each poem celebrates an animal, plant, or natural event that is prominent that month. Starlings in January, fruit trees in August and hibernation in November, for example. Though there is a variety of style and metre, a love and admiration of the natural world is shared by them all.

The poems are written in a way that gives children an example of detailed description from the month (a daffodil; falling leaves) and shine a light upon the beauty of it, using metaphors and personification to paint pictures of it in readers’ minds. Most of the poems, though, are narrative, with a hugely personal feel. Stories are written of a frightening encounter with a smack of jellyfish, of scrumping for pears, and travelling over the summer solstice, and all of them are told with such an open heart, and with such generous description, that they must surely be autobiographical. Older readers will not be able to resist reminiscing about their own childhoods, and young readers will ponder which hares are the poet’s memories and which are invented.

Like all Wide Eyed publications, A Year of Nature Poems is beautifully illustrated with calm yet vibrant pictures that are perfectly sympathetic to the poems’ ecological themes. They also add complimentary detail that will help young readers to understand the figurative language, and will make it easy for children to flick through the book and find their favourites to share with their parents.

A Year of Nature Poems is a peaceful and moving anthology that reminds readers how rewarding and absorbing it is to look at the natural world...every month of the year.

SD

Viking Voyagers

Jack Tite, Bonnier Books, 64pp, 9781778741498, £16.99 hbk

A striking design and its square, large format helps this book stand out on the bookshelf. The muted, limited colours are interesting. I know these appeal to adults but I wonder if they appeal to children in the way they were intended? The design has tones of a slightly more grown up appeal as it is styled in the form of many books at the moment – all clearly the same style. However, what is actually drawn is not flowery in any way and when you inspect closely you see Viking symbols and clues to what the book is about.

The book is one that is perfect for picking up and putting down and picking up and dipping in to again. It has multiple ways of working with flap down parts, big pull out sections to keep you on your reading toes.

The author worked very closely with the Norwich Central Library Centre so it is a very well researched book with much to extend thinking about ‘our’ Vikings. It’s not just a timeline of events and plunder and scary figure heads book. It gives the oft missed side that Vikings often settled in England and that they lived in a really interesting culture with their own gods and systems like the other ‘peoples’ primary school children learn about in school.

It would certainly be a great book for any school studying the Vikings and a great history book for keen historians even if they weren’t – a super information book. SG

Empire’s End: A Roman Story

Leila Rasheed, Scholastic, 192pp, 9781407191393, £6.99 pbk

Camilla enjoys a privileged childhood in Leptis Magna, one of the great cities in the Roman province of Libya. Her father is a respected philosopher a boyhood friend of the Emperor Septimius Severus, the first African Emperor of Rome. When summoned to rejoin his friend in Rome he is delighted – Camilla is old enough to contract an advantageous marriage. Camilla is less sure – but their arrival in Rome sees the family faced with a very different future – they must accompany their Emperor to the distant northern province of Britannia. What does the future hold?

This is an addition to the Voices series which aims to bring history alive through the immediate voice of their protagonists. Here Leila Rashid conjures life in the Roman Empire in the 2nd century AD. We are not in the militaristic world of the legions, marching in a line through the conquered nations. Here we see what it was like to be a girl – albeit a girl who has enjoyed education and has been encouraged to think and to question within the social mores. Yes, she does accept slavery, it is the norm – but Rashid also allows her to experience personal doubt – and a level of understanding. We are also introduced to the turbulent background to the Roman world. The world is not as stable as we like to imagine and the provinces – Britain for one – are very far from the centre and vulnerable. Camilla tells her story as memories for her son as Rashid imagines what might be the background to archaeological finds that reveal that even then Britain was a diverse society. The language is neutral – contemporary without jarring; the history introduced subtly through dialogue and personal observation. There are several heroics, just an immersive experience of the past. FH

The House of One Hundred Clocks

A.M. Howell, Usborne, 330pp, 978 1 474959568, pbk, £6.99

In Edwardian Cambridge, Helena, her beloved pet parrot Orbit and her father, recently bereaved after the loss of her - her mother, are looking for a new life in the home of the enigmatic Mr Westcott. They have been charged with looking after the many clocks which crowd Westcott’s townhouse and with which he appears obsessed. Helena is not enthusiastic about this venture and even less so when she discovers the harsh nature of the contract her father has signed. If any of the clocks stop during her father’s stewardship, they will forfeit all their possessions. This Helena discovers was the fate of the previous incumbent.

There are many questions to which Helena seeks answers, including the reason the contract her father had to sign was so harsh, what has happened to the belongings of the previous timekeeper, what the drawings of flying machines keep appearing on the walls and who the mysterious child called ‘boy’ often seated silently in the corner of a room really is.

The need to solve the mysteries in this strange household is intertwined with the compelling urgency to prevent the clocks from stopping. Helena discovers this happening as it will lead to the loss of Orbit, her remaining link to the mother she has lost.

As this absorbing well-crafted narrative unfolds, we discover the grief and fear of further loss which Mr Westcott’s irrational superstitions and the motivation and resentment of his sister, Katherine. Witnessing these revelations leads to greater understanding between Helena and her own father as she begins to come to terms with her mother’s death and learns to look forward rather than dwell on the past.

In addition to the sensitive exploration of grief, depression and obsession, historical themes are threaded throughout the story: the beginning of female emancipation and rights to education, early attempts at flight and the plight of the poor with the ever present spectre of the workhouse.

A compelling and very well-crafted story, highly recommended. SMc

The Pear Affair

Judith Eagle, Faber, 274pp, 978-0-571-34685-1, £7.99 pbk

Nell Mills is very unhappy. Her grotesque parents, Melinda and Gerald, despise her, sending her to a ghastly boarding school to get her out of their way. By the age of twelve her beloved French nanny, Pearl, has been dismissed by them for no apparent reason. When Nell’s parents announce that they are returning to England for a business meeting, they are horrified when Nell insists on accompanying...
them. She is determined to find Pear and to escape with him from her wretched life with her parents. When she runs away from the luxury hotel in which her parents are staying and begins her search for Pear she finds to her horror that Pear has been sacked from his job at a couture house, has vacated her flat and has vanished without trace. Neill is homeless, penniless and in desperate straits until she meets the marvellous network of young people living in Paris’s underground passages and cellars. The characters are beautifully created and the adrenaline level is high. Adventure abounds when Nell discovers a stolen spore sample in Melinda’s designer handbag and discovers a stolen spore sample in her own confectionary empire begins to create spore and thus build their own confectionary empire begins to unfold. This is a rumbustious, rollicking adventure with a generous heart and a happy ending. Those on the side of right are rewarded and the wrongdoers are punished. Caricature is strung out cleverly as the protagonists live and breathe with their own lives and concerns. Eagle explores themes of love, betrayal, friendship and greed, but never preaches. This book will fly off school library shelves! VR

Otto Tattercoats and the Forest of Lost Things

Matilda Woods, ill.Kathrin Honesta, Scholastic, 269pp, 978140718493, £6.99 pbk

Otto and his mother have moved to the frozen town of Hodeldorf, so that she could follow her craft of coat making. Soon after her arrival she mysteriously disappears and Otto is left, with no home and no money. He is then taken to a local factory, where he becomes part of the child labour work force and life looks very bleak. However, high above the rooftops, huddling near the chimney pots to find some warmth are children known as ‘Tattercoats’, many of whom had escaped from the horrors of the factory. The ‘Tattercoats’ of the title are a tightly knit community of children, who live by some strong rules of helping one another. As the plot moves forward a setting is created and the readers are given a sense of the poor and sadness that fills their lives. Their lives are empty, but then suddenly one day, an unexpected visitor arrives and offers to help them and this creates a new spirit in them. Otto and the others are dramatically transformed. They start to live a better life and learn new skills. A new beginning is created and the readers are given a sense of hope. The plot is well planned and the readers are kept engaged throughout the book. This is a thrilling story of survival against the odds and how friendship can help overcome seemingly insurmountable odds. It mixes a sense of fairy tale with a feel of gothic in its greedy and frightening police factory, run by the evil Frau Ferber and her two sons. The author manages to draw us into the story, having created a world that is both physically and emotionally chilling. The story is full of adventure, action and mystery, with just a hint of magic and will pull both boys and girls into it. This is definitely a brilliant new story and one that I think will make quite a stir in the coming year. MP

The Girl Who Stole An Elephant

Nizaran Farook, Nosy Crow, 256pp, 978 1 78895 206 4, £6.99

Set in the lush landscape of the ancient Sri Lankan land of Serendib, Chaya is a Robin Hood of the jungle, stealing from the rich to alleviate the misfortunes of the poor. She is outspoken, and staunch in her beliefs about standing up for what’s right, but goes a step too far by stealing the queen’s jewels. When her friend Neel is arrested as the culprit, Chaya must not only break him out of the King’s prison, but run for her life through the jungle, and hope that she can find them both a happy ending.

Farook does a great job at getting a setting brimming with colour and life. From the elephant Chaya inadvertently uses to escape, through to a jungle with a leopard and the feeling of lichen on the king’s palace and temple, with briefly captured descriptions that work well as the plot forges forwards with pace. It’s a great read accompanied by the girl, serve not only as a reminder of their child status with an authenticity to their banter and bickering, but also remind the reader of the true meaning of friendship - there is wisdom and warmth here.

Having a main character so forthright and adventurous means that readers are not only swept along in her wake, but can also debate the rights and wrongs of her impetuous actions. Frequently coming across danger, Chaya makes immediate decisions, often with severe consequences, and the book succeeds in making the reader empathise with not only Chaya, but her friends too.

The plot and pace is simple and the chapters short and pacy, making it a swift read for the age group, but this pace means that the plot is slightly let down by a simplicity in motivation and a lack of moral nuance. Arguments are easily resolved and forgotten, and despite the good twist, the book feels rather too quickly concluded. CZ

The Magic of Mums

Justin Coe, ill. Steve Wells, Otter-Barry Books, 96pp, 978 1 91005 964 4, £6.99 pbk

Justin Coe’s brand new collection of poems is all about That Magic of Mums and aren’t mums truly amazing? I like the A to Z arrangement of the 46 poems beginning with Action Mum and ending with Zzzz Mother. After all the things mums have to do, I’m not surprised they need some rest!

The different types of poems have been written to be performed and shared. The diverse collection means that young and not so young readers will be able find a poem to match their unique mums. I’m sure there is a poem for every mum out there because Justin Coe has packed the book full of funny poems, heartfelt poems and serious poems as part of this compilation. I wonder which one will be your favourite poem and why?

My personal favourite is called Gentle Mum. It is written as a kenning, ‘trouble-smoother, worry soother’ with all of the things that are really, real life mums do each and every day. I’ve shared it with my mum because it described her so well and she absolutely loved it.

This collection is a follow up to Justin Coe’s Dictionary of Dads. I think children between the ages of 8 and 10 would appreciate the different styles of poetry and begin to understand more current issues such as those described in Windrush Mum. I think Justin Coe shares his observations with honesty, humour and love. You can tell he is a performance poet from the way the poems are written and you can vividly see yourself finding yourself reading them aloud. The illustrations by Steve Wells are black and white cartoons and are powerful in that they reinforce the ideas of diversity and inclusivity after all we are all different and different shapes should be celebrated. KK

Agent Zaiba Investigates: The Missing Diamonds

Annabelle Sami, ill. Daniela Sosa, Little Tiger Press, 231pp, 978 1 78895 206 4, £6.99

Zaiba has always been fascinated by detective work and indeed sleuthing is in her blood; her Aunt Fouzia runs the Snow Leopard Detective Agency. She is also influenced by her favourite book, Sherlock Lockett’s Detective Handbook.

Zaiba and her family have gathered at the Royal Star Hotel to celebrate Sam’s wedding. Zaiba is part of the preparations for Sam’s forthcoming wedding to Tanvir. Zaiba’s inherent sleuthing skills spring into action early on with the arrival of a mystery celebrity to the hotel, the identity of which Zaiba is determined to uncover.

Before long the plot thickens when the celebrity’s precious pet greyhound goes missing along with a valuable diamond. Zaiba, her brother Ali, and best friend Poppy are determined to solve the mystery and catch the perpetrators… if they’re relations at the Mehdi party don’t get in the way of their investigation!

This is an exciting and fun adventure story reminiscent of the Famous Five stories or the Nancy Drew mysteries which will keep young readers intrigued. The main character’s ingenuity and determination and being British Pakistani is an important and much needed addition to children’s literature. Children will enjoy identifying with the main characters.

Great fun from start to finish. Zaiba will capture the imagination of all young would-be detectives.

Super Cats V Maximus Fang


A new series about superhero cats - a superhero cat crew are fighting crime to keep their cat streets safe. Tag and his best friend Sugar Foot are new recruits, being trained by Topaz Top Cat. The book starts with a training exercise for Tag which doesn’t go so well and makes him feel unconfident about his abilities. There’s some good messages about friendship and teamwork in the book. Indeed the new recruits need these attributes when they have to take on the tough mission of defeating Maximus Fang. The adventure story is great and has plenty of humour and puns too. For example the bad cat guards have a can of dog wee spray called Concentrate. The wee was the vilest, foulest irritant known to cat-kind.

The writing is enhanced by Becka Moor’s illustrations. The front cover is super colourful with a masked cat in a cape and an obvious bad cat peering out on the back cover. There are enough illustrations within the book to support the reader and break up the text BUT there as also well placed full page black and white illustrations too. So the book would be great for, perhaps, a reluctant reader who is in upper key stage and would get the humour and the superhero link too. It would also be a great chapter book for lower key stage two readers who would have plenty of illustrations to break up the text and make it more appealing too.

The characters make up a good crew so therefore children would, I’m sure be really keen to read on and find out more about their adventures in the coming series.
**Ed’s choice**

**The Last Paper Crane. A Tale from Hiroshima**

Kerry Drewery, Illustrated by Natsko Seki, Hot Key Books, 320pp, 978 0 00 837169 2, £7.99, pbk

Ichiro is looking out of the window. His friend Hiro is tiding the mess left by his little sister, Keiko who will now be in her Kindergarten class. Then it happens, the blinding whiteness – and the world changes. This is Hiroshima, 6th August 1945; the first atom bomb has just exploded. Ichiro survived and we learn of his experience as he finally tells his granddaughter, now in the 21st century of the burden he has carried all his life and which we now learn as well.

This is an outstanding and heartfelt book which should find its way into every school and library. We know a great deal about World War II as it affected Europe and the UK. We hear much less of the Japanese experience. Drewery’s novel goes a long way to redress this imbalance. Ichiro’s voice is direct, and immediate – but at the same time very non-judgemental. This is not a story about ‘them’ and ‘us’; rather we see an individual facing the consequences of the actions of others surviving, but at a cost that will affect him throughout his life. We are also shown the kindness of people in extreme situation – and the possibility of hope. It could have been a story of a Kentish suburb in the quiddities of family life set in the middle of the night (No Good Claus); two poor girls – one with red spots, a Greasy Witch... (Nothing to be Afraid of); two poor girls – one of the few families where the father has scarpered – show Maureen how to get rid of a wart (‘Charming!’); eldest and roughest of the Barmy Burtons likes to escape to peaceful contemplation among a family of marrows (Marrow Hill). Oddly, the last tale in this volume, which in any philosophical sense but about what you can expect of other people and of life. For Jolene, Ware lives in the magical fantasy land inside his head and she constantly meets his mind, his imagination. In Three and Fourpence, we are going to a Dance, indicates, she is not above pinching a comic idea, but her heroine insists on escaping the message ‘Miss Middleton wants you to see her tonight before assembly and take a dead frog’ gives rise to sustained comedy at which Mark’s gifts for characterisation and dialogue are pre-eminent. And the same could go for such splendid inventions as Chutzpah where a bolshie ‘new order’ causes mayhem in a school which she has no intention of joining; or Time and the Hour, centering on a sweepstake (forbidden, of course) over administrative time-wasting; or, counter productively, The Choice is Yours where an innocent girl suffers through the sarcastic rigidity and rivalry of two teachers.

Ed’s choice

**The One that Got Away**

Jan Mark, Rooff Court Press. 357pp., 978-0-354-732-4, £2.99, pbk

Aurelia, history consultant to the government of the day, would have approved. Up there in the year 2099 she was producing a programme to show how little had changed over the previous hundreds of years of the country’s social life. The government was worried that people were still getting the wrong idea about what things were like in the past, still taken in by the old people in their care homes afflicted by Kieselguhr’s Syndrome with their distorted memories of the old days. Thus, it would not be good for an Advanced Literate boy in Year Six in 2099 to get hold of the other twenty-nine stories in Jan Mark’s The One that Got Away. Why – it was nothing less than a comprehensive of all Granny’s deluded recollections.

Kieselguhr’s Syndrome is indeed the only story in the thirty of The One that Got Away that takes us outside the qualities of family life set in what is mostly a Kentish suburb in the decades after 1945. Two thirds of the contents concern themselves variably with what children experience, or what they get up to, in the mostly stable, middle-class households of the period. Several are very slight: Mum’s old school friend brings her repressed four-year-old to stay for a night and is appalled when Anthea introduces him to unexpected excitement through a walk in the park – a bad leopard with red spots, a Greasy Witch... (Nothing to be Afraid of); two poor girls – one of the few families where the father has scarpered – show Maureen how to get rid of a wart (‘Charming!’); eldest and roughest of the Barmy Burtons likes to escape to peaceful contemplation among a family of

**Here in the Real World**

Sara Pennypacker, Harper Collins, 320pp, 978 0 00 837169 2, £7.99, pbk

Nothing red spots, a Greasy Witch... (Nothing to be Afraid of); two poor girls – one of the few families where the father has scarpered – show Maureen how to get rid of a wart (‘Charming!’); eldest and roughest of the Barmy Burtons likes to escape to peaceful contemplation among a family of

Sara Pennypacker’s latest book is about this and much more. The title is a reference to the two ways of looking at the world shown by its lonely protagonists. There is Ware, a thoughtful and often anxious boy, who worries that seeing things differently and sometimes enjoying his solitude may mean that he never fits in. And there is Jolene, a girl whose answer to life’s battering is self-reliance and low expectations of the world around her. They come together while spending the summer transforming the vacant lot left by the demolition of a local church. In the course of the novel, their differences prove complementary. Ware’s dreaming is spurred into action by Jolene’s determination to survive; and Ware’s thoughtfulness and enthusiasm supports and encourages Jolene. Yet, until the very end of the novel, they argue about the nature of reality: not in any philosophical sense but about what you can expect of other people and of life. For Jolene, Ware lives in the magical fantasy land inside his head and she constantly meets his mind, his imagination. In Three and Fourpence, we are going to a Dance, indicates, she is not above pinching a comic idea, but her heroine insists on escaping the message ‘Miss Middleton wants you to see her tonight before assembly and take a dead frog’ gives rise to sustained comedy at which Mark’s gifts for characterisation and dialogue are pre-eminent. And the same could go for such splendid inventions as Chutzpah where a bolshie ‘new order’ causes mayhem in a school which she has no intention of joining; or Time and the Hour, centering on a sweepstake (forbidden, of course) over administrative time-wasting; or, counter productively, The Choice is Yours where an innocent girl suffers through the sarcastic rigidity and rivalry of two teachers.

Aurelia would certainly have wished to suppress all evidence of a society that could permit all these deviations from the centrally-controlled life – Jan Mark is like one big Granny with a heart full of deplorable memories of the old days. His novels are light reading, and within the understanding of a four-year-old to stay for a night and is appalled when Anthea introduces him to unexpected excitements through a walk in the park – a bad leopard with red spots, a Greasy Witch... (Nothing to be Afraid of); two poor girls – one of the few families where the father has scarpered – show Maureen how to get rid of a wart (‘Charming!’); eldest and roughest of the Barmy Burtons likes to escape to peaceful contemplation among a family of
**The Unstoppable Letty Pegg**

Iszi Lawrence, Bloomsbury, 978-1-4729-2427-8, £6.99 pbk

The 100th anniversary of the Representation of the People Act in 1918 prompted a number of really good historical novels. Sally Nicholls’s *Things a Bright Girl Can Do* for example, by Sheena Wilkinson, now here’s another one. Letty Pegg’s mother is an active member of the Women’s Social and Political Union, or as Letty prefers to call them, Whizzpoo. Her father, a police officer, is decidedly less enthusiastic, particularly when their activism puts his wife in danger, and Letty’s grandma is violently opposed. Letty finds herself quite literally caught in the middle when she follows her mother to a demonstration, and witnesses the suffragettes suffering beatings and arrests at the hands of the police (not her father). Yanked from the melee, she makes friends with her rescuer who then enrols Letty in special Jiu Jitsu classes for women: yes, some suffragettes learned Ji Jitsu and used it to defend themselves and their leaders against the police. That’s probably the single most fascinating piece of historical information in the book – it was certainly news to me – but readers know from the very first pages of this novel of what life was like for women at the time, both the working variety and insight into what life was like for the real life people she comes across at different times in her adventures. Thoroughly recommended.

**Monstrous Devices**

Damién Love, Rock the Boat, 352pp, 978 1 78607 752 3, £12.99 hbk

What kind of present might a boy expect from a long absent grandfather? Well, in Alex’s case it’s always the same, a toy robot from somewhere abroad; his grandfather feeding Alex with his own obsession with mechanical toys. And this time, the arrival of both the toy and grandfather is the start of an adventure that takes Alex and the enigmatic old man across Europe, pursued by and pursuing a crew of sinister figures, including a girl with piercing eyes, a tall dark man with shadowy features, a squat toyshop owner, and two beefy bald heavyweight gyms. For all of them, the prize is Alex’s birthday gift, a toy robot that has a life of its own and seems to exercise a cruel and seductive power; and which, it turns out, is itself only the means to an even more dreadful end. It’s an ingenious tale, the familiar fight and flight scenario kept interesting by the figure of grandfather, a kind of ageing James Bond, who dirname and gives advice which he knowingly ignores; an array of menacing miniature machines with whirring blades and deadly arrows; a mystery that it takes the whole book to gradually unravel, with quite a bit still unrevealed; and a properly apocalyptic Christmas finale in Prague. The book itself has had its own strange journey. By a Scottish author, it found its first publisher in the United States (it still retains occasional tale-tell American turns of phrase) and returned to these shores only after success over there. Its sequel, *The Shadow Arts*, is simultaneously published this month in the U.S.A. CB

**The Crossover graphic novel**

Kwame Alexander, illus. Dawud Anyabwile, Andersen Press, 224pp, 978 1 7844 959 0, £8.99, pbk

You children’s literature aficionados may know the term ‘crossover’ as it applies to books that have both a comic, historian and radio presenter. As a term, ‘crossover’ must also refer to the teenage years themselves. Josh and his brother are only just starting out. It’s a common theme in this novel, certainly enough in this year to both tax and teach us: ’as coach likes to say, you can get used to things going wrong, but you’re never prepared for things going wrong’. CB

**Lost**

Ele Fountain, Pushkin Children’s Books, 256pp, 978 1 78269 255 3, £7.99 pbk

The first couple of pages are set in Italics. The speaker is a scared child. She, or maybe he, is being chased by a gun wielding a baton, dodging passers-by, hurling luggage on the platform of a railway station. The rolling stock is cream and blue. People yell at the child: ‘Little rat’ or ‘Watch out, rat’. Then, ‘Monsoon clouds burst’, we read. ‘The silent rain falls on his white cotton T-shirt’. Ele Fountain never tells us which city, but everything coincides with a proper apocalyptic Christmas. The weather. The fear of the child in those opening paragraphs is a nightmare which readers might well recognise; and the anonymity of place and child may give us a sense that this story is not limited to the sub-continent.

Lola is 13. She has had a privileged childhood, though she is a victim of the death of her mother in giving birth to her young brother, Amit. She has a loving Dad. She mostly lives in her private school, where her friends have affluent homes, staffed by numerous servants. Those friends are engaged in competitive, fill-the-leisure luxury holidays. Overnight stays featuring makeovers are a favourite weekend pastime. Admittedly, Lola’s family is not wealthy. But those are those of her friends, and her more modest home is some distance from the school and its neighbourhood.

The Saturday, her Dad goes off on a business trip to another city to buy material for his clothing factory. Lola and Amit spend the day together.

**This Book is Anti-Racist**

Tiffany Jewell, ill. Aurelia Durand, Frances Lincoln, 64pp., 9780711245204, pbk, £8.99

Malcolm Duffy has set out to write Aurelia Durand’s brightly coloured illustrations of people of varying shades of colour, and the layout and content of this book with lots of text boxes at varying angles, make this much more fun to read than might have been expected. This makes it an ideal tool for the reader to research his/her own history, to look at the history of prominent people of colour, ‘to wake up and see a different future’. It’s a book that offers a clear and accessible look at what’s possible, helping to explore the history and experiences of people from different cultures, identities, and backgrounds who have contributed to society and shaped the world around us.

She represents a white teacher of her 9-year-old self being racist, not allowing a Latino boy to leave the class, and not appreciating his expertise, or the reader to research his/her own history, to look at the history of prominent people of colour, ‘to wake up and see a different future’. It’s a book that offers a clear and accessible look at what’s possible, helping to explore the history and experiences of people from different cultures, identities, and backgrounds who have contributed to society and shaped the world around us.
This Book will help Cool a school library. Please leave it open for but they have agency - the ability to of colour do not have to assimilate, are being racist'. To pick just two strong 'interrupting when someone is being which include 'baking bread', but also 'my Path', she lists her superpowers, instance, dealing with Ethnicity, Racism can be challenged, and racist rules and practice can be changed.

Tiffany Jewell uses an 'x' for plurals, e.g, Latinx, which is gender neutral, and the reader should get used to it. Other things are clear, for instance, dealing with Ethnicity, Racism as Personal and Institutional, and Prejudice. Later, in 'Choosing not to be race', she asks answers, which include 'baking bread', but also 'interrupting when someone is being racist or not understanding that they are being racist'. To pick just two strong words out of the Glossary, people of colour do not have to assimilate, but they have agency - the ability to make choices, and the power to make effective change. This encourages young people to make a difference, but also states, 'I am leaving the door open for them to make the choice because there are people who might want to join them'.

Clem's brother has been killed. Percy's mother was in the Royal Navy and dies partly for lack of the insulin she needs, Spinner's mother was trapped and died partly for lack of the insulin she needed. The chapter is named 'in the beginning of the story - up of the pressure on these young people'.

Clem takes one of the hidden guns. Of the adults are fighting in their own way, each and every one of them, and the danger they face.

At times, Haslam veers off into the proverbs of good and evil, competing for the reader's attention. This book is about the impact of the war on children, the resilience of the human spirit, and the importance of education. The novel is a powerful reminder of the cost of war and the need for peace.

At the beginning of the story, the reader is introduced to Clem, a young boy who has just lost his brother. He is joined by his friend, Percy, and together they embark on a journey to find the hidden guns. The story is told from the perspective of both children, and their experiences are both humorous and poignant.

The novel is a powerful reminder of the cost of war and the need for peace. It is a story of resilience and hope, and a tribute to the courage of children in the face of adversity. The Threads of Magic is a must-read for anyone interested in the impact of war on children, and for those who want to understand the power of the human spirit.
The children themselves riff on their adventure as if they are aware of being in a story — not splitting up in the dead of night because it’s a classic ‘horror movie fail’ is one such example, bringing a wry smile to the reader, but also completely bearing out the characterisation of the children — they feel distinct and authentic. They are also, refreshingly, risk-takers.

This is a brilliantly gripping novel, pacey, funny and fresh. Haslam may excel at settings, but he’s obviously brought a wry smile to the reader, ‘horror movie fail’ is one such example, and there are food for thought too as the story has parallels with today’s climate change crisis and what could be unleashed if we do not heed the warnings in time. It has a gorgeous cover too.

Lalani of the Distant Sea


A lyrical and richly imagined literary fantasy drawn from Filipino folklore. Lalani lives in a village on the island of Sangalita with her mother, bullying stepfather and stepbrother under the authoritarian rule of the village elder, the menyoro. Her mother is a village mender of nets and clothes, a skilled but dangerous job. Lalani adores listening to the stories told by her best friend, Veyda’s mother — stories about two mountains, one dark and fearful, the other, full of light and goodness. Lalani’s village lies under the shadow of the dark mountain, Mount Kahna and the so-called beast of the mountain. Every year the strongest and most able men in the village sail off to look for Mount Isa to bring back some of its vitality and good fortune but no-one has ever returned.

The village is in the grip of a terrible drought so Lalani goes up the mountain in the hope of appeasing the beast even though it is forbidden to venture there. But she is tricked and when heavy rain and then a mudslide buries part of the village Lalani is blamed. She decides to take matters into her own hands, particularly as her mother is now gravely ill. She realises the only way she can hope to save the village is to set sail and look for Mount Isa. Her journey is one of exploration and discovery, but she faces much peril and danger in her quest.

Lalani is an intrepid and plucky heroine, literally and figuratively promising. Kelly’s writing is much to explore on the theme of kindness and compassion and standing up for what you believe in — especially in a time of darkness. Lalani and Veyda is central to the story and the magical animals and the background stories is a distraction and fractures the story somewhat. This beautiful tale would be more suitable for confident readers.

Hold Back the Tide

Melinda Salisbury, Scholastic, 300pp, 9781407182059, £7.99 pb.

This novel has one of the most striking opening pages I have read in a long time. In 1880s Scotland in a small community overseen by a greedy mill owner this is a searing tale of long-buried secrets, fear and ignorance. Alva is sure that her father murdered her mother although her body has never been found. He is the guardian of the loch and Alva has learned early on to keep out of her father’s way and never to displeasure him. Now she has a chance to escape her claustrophobic life as she is the village scribe and has a job lined up in Thurso. But then everything starts to unravel. On her way home after a village dance Alva sees a strange tall white creature with no eyes standing near her front door and she hears terrible screams coming from the shed. Rescued by her father he forbids her to go out but while looking for a key to escape Alva finds mysterious logbooks hidden under a settle showing images of these strange creatures. So, they must be real, mustn’t they?

It is Alva who realises there must be some connection between the falling levels of water in the Loch to feed the mill and the uncovering of caves that have not seen the light of day for centuries and the appearance of the terrifying creatures. No one believes her tales of these mysterious beings until villagers start disappearing and some are found torn to pieces. By then it is far too late.

Interwoven through this part murder mystery, part horror story is the heart-breaking love story between the ruggedly attractive Ren and the feisty Alva. This is a page-turning and genuinely spooky story. The setting is highly visual and there is plenty of food for thought too as the story has parallels with today’s climate change crisis and what could be unleashed if we do not heed the warnings in time. It has a gorgeous cover too.

And the Stars Were Burning Brightly


We’re in Wythenshawe, the huge post-war council estate to the south of Manchester. Horizons for young people here in 2020 are grey and empty; as though a smothering gloom chokes the light. Maybe this is what it’s like to feel left behind.

Except Al Bryant is different. He’s imaginative, coracoid, a reader, a painter. He finds beauty even in these anonymous streets. He reads and talks and writes about his passion — the stars and their galaxies — with such joy, such energy. That’s why he takes his younger brother Nathan up to the roof of Jimmy Egan’s boxing gym, to gaze at those stars together. Later, he painted the two of them there — maybe his best work so far. Not that Nathan’s that interested. Al’s Art teacher feeds his talent; he’s hungry for more, head off into Manchester to explore the galleries. Al’s seventeen, and there’s talk of a place at Cambridge. He seems strong, modest but confident and generous spirited; everything’s to play for.

Dad quit the family home a while ago. Oldest son Saul doesn’t say a lot, but he does his best to support Mum and the family — she’s barely holding things together and can’t help but reach for the bottle too often. At school, Al doesn’t mix with the crowd much; his haven is the Art Room, where he’s sometimes joined by Megan from his Art Class. Watching and talking with Al as they share this encourages Megan to see that she has her own abilities. She needn’t spend so much time keeping in with her friend Tara and the other girls. Especially now Tara’s hanging out with Nate and his mates. Eli is sick of the tawdry walk in Benchill, their district of Wythenshawe. As Eli sees it, Al is breaking the rules. Eli’s rules. Al’s different, and that means he’s a weirdo and weirdos need sorting.

That’s how things stand. Until, one day, Al calls Nate, says he needs to talk. Nate crosses him down — too busy with stuff. When Nate gets back, the house is silent. Nate checks Al’s room. He’s killed himself. Hung by his school tie.

There’s no way Nate can let it go — it’s his fault. If only he’d listened, just for once, the way Al always listened. But Al’s soon joined by Megan; she too needs to understand. Nothing makes sense. They take turns with the charts, allowing us different understandings of Al, and of each other. Their narrative voices contrast. Megan’s is the more gentle, more perceptive. Jawando finds a rough-edged idiom for Nate, somewhere between the spoken and written word. Often he is angry or confused, but then there are sudden moments of acute self-awareness; he’s growing closer to Al’s ways of thinking. This debut novel is long and much of the plot is carried through dialogue rather than action. It may seem to some readers, impatient for answers, as though the mystery of Al’s death unravels in real time. When the revelations come, they are savage in their violence. YA readers are familiar with the cruel ingenuity of bullying through social media; they may find here a mind-numbing and darkly sinister element.

The relationship between the siblings is so silly and so vibrant that at times it leaps off the page. Haylah is a very likeable protagonist. She makes some excruciating tactical errors, such as the time she intervenes in her single mother’s love life. The contrast between the common sense and decency Haylah demonstrates most of the time and her occasional lapses into genuine cruelty makes for an uneven response on the reader’s part. But the overriding judgment on the novel must be positive. Here is a young person with ambition and drive. Bravo, RB
Queen of Coin and Whispers

Helen Corcoran, O’Brien, 447pp, 9781788491181, £11.99 pbk

The king is dead. Long live the queen. Seventeen-year old Lia is checking the sheep flocks when the news comes. She is queen. Young, idealistic, she sets about trying to redress all the wrongs that had been perpetrated by her uncle. At the same time she wants desperately to make up court life; claustrophobic, dangerous and full of secrets upon which stood out drastically against the glut of rocks’. On page 70 ‘peacocks pale flotilla of clothes’, and ‘a barren landscape, making mistakes, full of secrets. However, the aim is the same – to grow up, to find love – and here we have two girls navigating this perilous landscape, making mistakes, full of ideals, learning that achieving ideals may require difficult choices, that relationships are always complicated. Corcoran is an assured writer. Her style is contemporary and direct; background information is introduced subtly – no long digressions. Both Lia and Xania speak in their own voices – they are recognisably distinct in style. This dual narrative then allows different perspectives and access to separate chronologies which brings a depth and interest to the plot which in itself conforms to the pattern set by this genre. An enjoyable addition to any Fantasy section and an author to watch.

The Pure Heart

Trudi Tweedie, Chicken House, 272pp., 9781912626007, £7.99 pbk

About to be married to the Chieftain’s son, Artair, Iseabail is sent to be the companion to a rich man’s daughter, after the arrival of a man in a boat to her home on St. Kilda. He promised a winter’s worth of supplies for her family and tribe let her go so easily to a complete stranger arriving from over the sea? The reader also has to question why she was able to give her such learning? Her father teaches her to read and write, knowledge of the world. Her father’s knowledge of the world. Her father has taught her to read and write, unusual at that time, and bathed a lot, unusual at that time, and the latter being crucial for a story in this genre, made for an unsatisfactory read.

The Pure Heart

Trudi Tweedie, Chicken House, 272pp., 9781912626007, £7.99 pbk

Set in the latter half of the sixteenth century, this is a story in the Frankenstein tradition. The first thing that strikes the reader is the unusual use of language, for example on page 2 ‘the stranger, dressed in a pale flotilla of clothes’, and ‘a barren glut of rocks’. On page 70 ‘peacocks which stood out drastically against the snow’. Later, on page 206, ‘snuck’ is used and also the priest says ‘Jesus wept’: not a phrase a priest would ever use. The story is set in the latter half of the sixteenth century but there is a lack of period feel. The setting is the borderlands of Scotland but there is little sense of place, and no menace within the house, which is almost a world of its own as the locals will not approach it. Iseabail, although from a remote Scottish island, seems to have a wide knowledge of the world. Her father had taught her to read and write, which is one of the reasons she was chosen for this mission, but surely not been able to give her such learning? This is basically a horror story and the ending is truly nasty, but for this reader there were too many questions raised along the way. These, combined with the strange use of language, and the lack of historical feel and sense of menace in the place, the latter being crucial for a story in this genre, made for an unsatisfactory read.
Connoisseurs

of these back pages (if any) may have noticed that the last few have been devoted to some nineteenth classics from the United States, provided, of course, that their work was known in Britain too. Illustrators did not get much of a look-in although drawings by Cranch and Nast and Denslow have been mentioned and Howard Pyle is yet to come. What though of Peter Newell who lived from 1862 to 1924?

He arrived among the author/illustrators

of children’s books early in his career with a volume deserving of greater historical attention than it has received: Topsys and Turvys, published by The Century Co. in New York. It is said to have been triggered when he observed one of his children looking at a picture book upside down, inspiring him to experiment with pictures that made visual sense twice on the page according to whether you looked at them one way or turned the leaf through 180° and found an alternative. Thus, an elephant is pictured with the words ‘The Elephant leans on a fence and wonders why it is’ and then continues upside down ‘The ostrich has a longer neck and smaller mouth than his’ with the picture appropriately converted.

This trick

has a long history dating back to the sixteenth century with a collection of reversible heads Orgueil et Folie (1558) by the Dutch engraver Theodor de Bry but the demands of composition may well have deterred successors and few examples are traceable later, mostly of ‘changing faces’ and all for an adult clientele. Its earliest manifestation in a picture book for children did not occur until (predictably) it entered the Victorian fashion for toy-book novelties with the picture book devised by Tom Hood the Younger and William McConnell, Upside Down, or Turnover Tales (1868). This too had few successors so that Newell, with the 31 colour lithographs that make up the oblong leaves of Topsys and Turvys (160 x 210mm.) may be accredited the first fully to exploit the potential of the comedy.

The demands of composition

do not need much explanation once you give some thought to the graphic needs of making one set of marks serve a double purpose which will also permit a one-page ‘story’ that will connect the two.

However,

the concluding leaf even tortures the lettering of ‘puzzle’ so that its inversion can be made to read ‘the end’ Several other images also cannot help engage in some distortion but the ingenuity of the designs forgives all.

The success

of Topsys and Turvys led to Newell repeating the performance a year later in Number 2 with a more ambitious display covering 64 pages. The one-sided leaves of the first book are now given facing pages with drawings in sepia half-tone so that the contents are effectually doubled. (It could be that, as Jon Agee found with So Many Dynamos – Newell began simply seeing the reversible potential of a scene almost without thinking.) It would seem that the appeal of the volumes led to the London publisher Fisher Unwin (uncle to Stanley) issuing editions in Britain, presumably imported with a cancel title-page, but there is no record of the first volume and the British Library have No.2 only in the American edition sent by Unwin, not the one with his own imprint.

The Museum did obtain Newell’s next, and most famous, children’s novelty, The Hole Book of 1908. Here young Tom Potts is fooling with a gun which unexpectedly goes off and the bullet’s passage is traced by a hole in the next 23 leaves. It pierces Bridget Quinn’s boiler, snaps a rope on Sister Sue’s swing, and is only stopped when it encounters a cake cooked by Mrs Newlywed:

And this was lucky for Tom Potts, The boy who fired the shot – It might have gone clean round the world And killed him on the spot.

The full-page plates, faced by the rhyming text, are cleverly drawn to exploit the recently perfected half-tone process using just two colours which vary throughout the book and Newell makes great play with his characters’ eyes – animal as well as human – flat circles with expressive black dots.

A similar technique

occurs in his inventive Slant Book of 1910 (reprinted in 2008 by Tara Books) which has a rhomboidal format so that when Bobby’s Go-cart [pram] breaks loose it appears to trundle with increasing velocity down a hill so steep and high that, like Tom Potts’s bullet, it creates chaos in its wake. In 1912 there was a Rocket Book which repeats the dodge of The Hole Book but vertically as a rocket goes up through the twenty-one storeys of an apartment house.

Newell was a genial man,

we are told, and illustrated several works of American fiction, mostly again with half-tone plates. This also led him to become one of the first in America to illustrate the Alice books once they came out of copyright. They were distinctively Newellized and one is only sorry that he only did three plates for The Hunting of the Snark which came out in 1913 in a compendium of verses by Lewis Carroll.

1. I must acknowledge much help in compiling this piece from Ian Alcock, Rosie Temperley, Laura Wasowicz, and Naomi Kennedy (née Alderson). Editions of Topsys and Turvys: No 1 and Topsys and Turvys: No 2 are available from Amazon.