

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.242

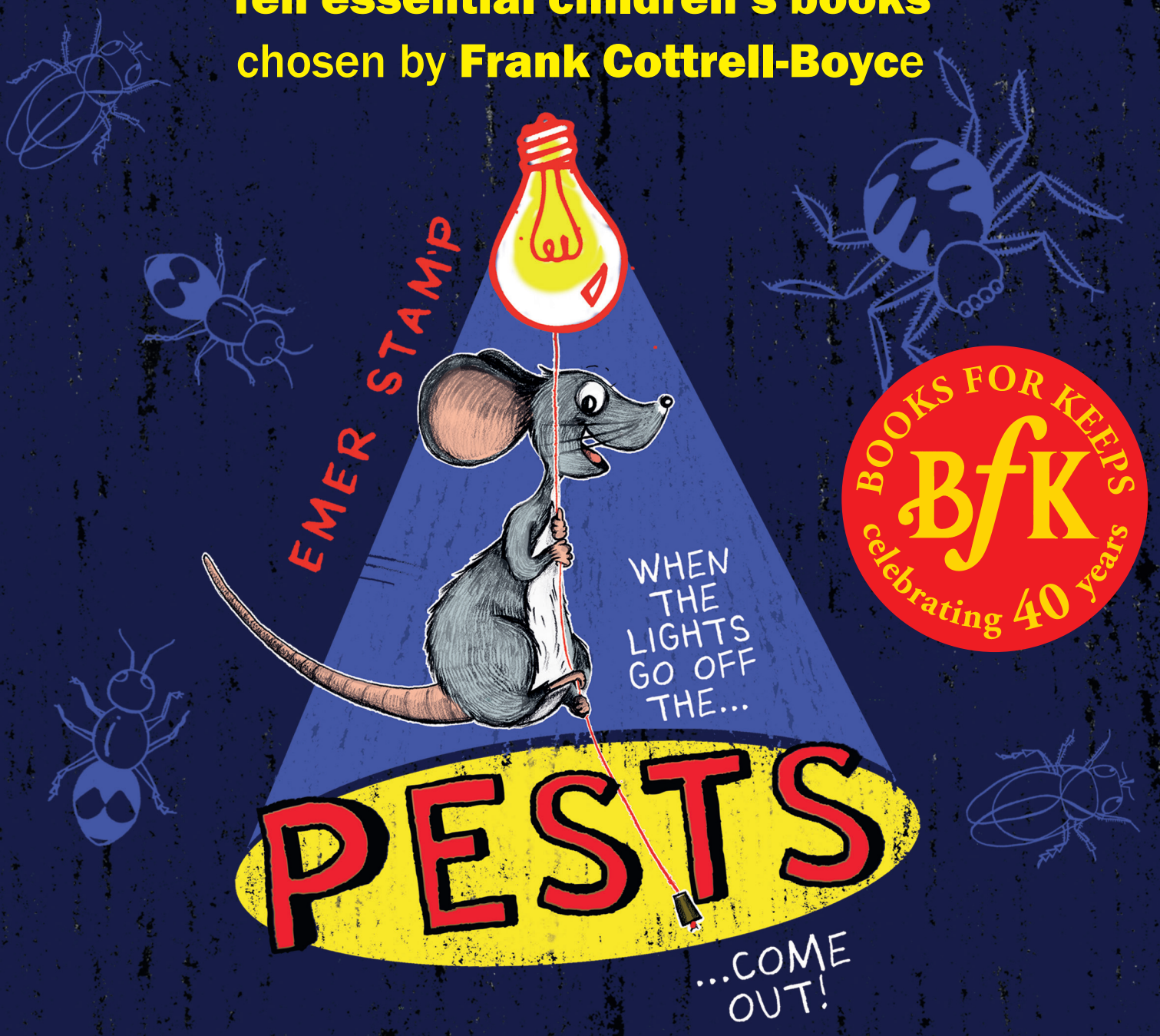
the children's book magazine online

May 2020

Authorgraph **Elizabeth Acevedo**

Mini Grey on **Pippi Longstocking**

Ten essential children's books
chosen by **Frank Cottrell-Boyce**



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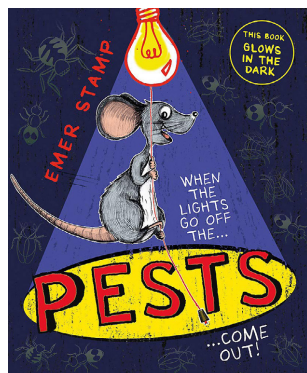
CONTENTS

MAY 2020

- 2 Editorial**
- 3 Writing under Lockdown: Matt Brown**
struggles
- 4 Ten essential books for young readers**
chosen by Frank Cottrell-Boyce
- 6 Windows into Illustration:**
Mini Grey
- 8 Authorgraph:**
Elizabeth Acevedo interviewed
by Nicolette Jones
- 10 Marvellous Medicine:**
how to get through the
Coronavirus epidemic with
children's books
- 12 Celebrating with Bob Hartman:** the 25th
anniversary of the **Lion
Storyteller Bible**
- 14 Illustrating Pippi:**
reimagining Pippi
Longstocking
- 16 Beyond the Secret Garden:** Hoorah for health
workers
- 18 Obituary:** Margaret Meek
Spencer
- 20 I Wish:**
Beverley Birch chooses
- 21 Reviewers and reviews**
List of reviewers
Under 5s (Pre-School/Nursery/
Infant) + New Talent
5-8 (Infant/Junior)
8-10 (Junior/Middle)
+ Ed's Choice
10-14 (Middle/Secondary)
14+ (Secondary/Adult)
- 32 Classics in Short No. 141**
Seven Little Australians

COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **Pests** written and illustrated by **Emer Stamp**. Thanks to **Hodder Children's Books** for their help with this May cover.



Editorial May 2020

Our March editorial was provided by Gill Lewis who, in a typically thoughtful and interesting piece, advocated the special importance of play for children. Two months on, our world has changed out of all recognition, so many things that we took for granted, including the ability of children to play freely outside or with friends in the playground, are now rationed or simply impossible. Children's books meanwhile, as a means of providing escape, a sense of hope, an idea of normality, are now more important than ever. Yet those who write, publish and sell them are facing enormous difficulties.

In a [report into authors' earnings](#) published last year, ALCS raised serious questions about the sustainability of the writing profession, as it revealed that typical earnings are less than £10,500 a year. Many children's authors rely on fees from school visits to boost their income; many more choose to sell books direct at such events to further supplement their earnings. With schools closed and festivals cancelled, none of that is now possible, and it is impossible to predict what form school visits will take in the future, and whether literary festivals will ever recover from Coronavirus. Many authors are doing great things online for children – see our round up on pages p12-13 – but it's concerning that they are being asked to provide what they would have been paid for, entirely for free. Congratulations to the organisers of [The Big Book Weekend](#), who paid all participating authors a fee.

Publishers too are under extraordinary pressure with staff working from home or furloughed, and publication schedules emptying as books are moved to Autumn or into 2021, with likely knock on effects down the line. Small publishers are affected the most and last week, independent



publishers **Knights Of** and **Jacaranda Books** partnered with **Spread The Word** writer development agency to create a fundraising campaign to support independent, diverse publishing with a target of £100,000. You can find out more – and donate – at [Inclusive Indies](#).

Meanwhile, bookshops too are shut to the general public and who knows what high streets will look like in the months or years ahead. Many are doing sterling work, selling online and hand delivering locally. Though Amazon provides **Books for Keeps** with some much-needed income, we strongly recommend that you choose to buy your books from a local independent or bricks and mortar bookshop to support them now and ensure they will still be there in the future.

We wish you all the very best and look forward to sharing more positive news in our July issue.

We need your support to equip Books for Keeps for the future. To ensure that the magazine can continue to examine, discuss and champion children's books and authors, simply make a donation via the [PayPal button](#) we have embedded on our website.



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Managing Editor: Andrea Reece
Editorial advisor: Ferylith Hordon
Assistant Editor: Eloise Delamere
Editorial assistant: Alexia Counsell
Design: Louise Millar

Editorial correspondence should be sent to Books for Keeps,
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Is Lockdown the Perfect Time to Write?

It's not even close,
says author **Matt Brown**

Things I've learned during lockdown:

1. Tea without milk is surprisingly good.
2. I give little-to-no tosses for the ten albums that have influenced my friends' lives.
3. Being creative, right now, is really, really hard.

To give you some idea of how hard I'm finding it, I started writing this article two hours ago and I've managed sixty-four words.

Wanders away to make tea for everyone

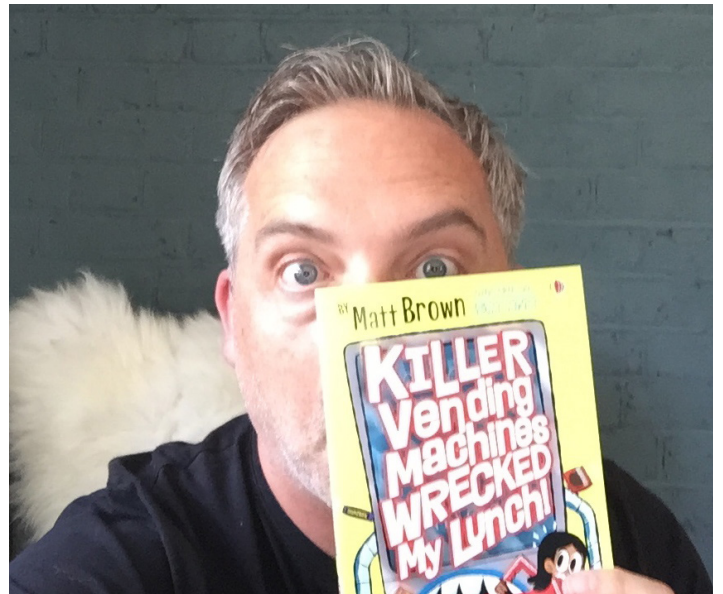
It's sometimes difficult to remember how long this lockdown has been. As I'm writing these words, in my pyjamas at three o'clock in the afternoon, it has been over six weeks since the lockdown started in the UK. That's a whole school summer holiday and still no end in sight. Or, to put it another way, this lockdown has been so long that chats with friends about how annoying Joe Wicks is and the fate of Carol Baskin's ex-husband seem like a long-forgotten dream.

Shuffles off to sort out home-schooling issue

Since the beginning of the lockdown, non-writing friends have all been saying the same thing to me. They joke about how this is pretty much what my normal life is like and how many books I'll have written by the time we emerge from our homes. But it hasn't felt like that at all. For the most of the last six weeks, writing has felt almost impossible, and the near-impossibility of it was really hard to understand, or even talk about. In fact, it wasn't until about week three of lockdown, during a chat with the author, Danny Wallace, that I was first able to admit how unproductive I was being. And that was only after Danny had revealed how unproductive he had been during the lockdown. It felt good to laugh about how little we were writing and how that was maybe, just maybe, okay. Danny wondered if it was because writing felt very small and insignificant alongside the sacrifices we were seeing being made on a daily basis by nurses and doctors and supermarket workers and delivery drivers. He might just have a point. For me, it's the constant interruptions. They really are the nails in creativity's coffin. One thing Danny did admit to doing though that I had to share, is that when he twists the stalk out of a pear, he imagines that he is taking a pin out of a grenade. I can now vouch that this is incredibly satisfying and works well with apples too.

Accepts pub-quiz Zoom meeting

A few days ago, Jo Nadin, the brilliant author and lecturer in creative writing, posted a diagram on Twitter of [Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#). If you don't know this, it's a theory that states that your basic needs must be met before you will be motivated to achieve your higher needs. In other words, we're all so busy being anxious about making sure we have enough food in the cupboards and staying safe with a new killer virus on the rampage, that we aren't in a state to think about being creative. In fact, Jo told me that her low point was when she stopped teaching for the Easter break. 'I felt that if I didn't write, I would worry that I would never write again. I don't believe in writer's block but for the first time in my life, sitting down at a computer with a blank page suddenly felt insurmountable.'



Jo is one of the best planners I know, the way she plots her books is legendary. So, like a montage in a Rocky movie, Jo used her ability to plan and structure to ease her into writing. 'I wanted to write the beginning of a novel, so ten thousand words in two weeks. But I had everything planned. So, the first day of writing I wrote the first line, which I already had, and typed up the notes that I'd already got, and by the end of the first day I had two hundred and fifty words. It was tiny but it was a first step and it made it easier to sit down at the computer the next day.'

Tries to convince teenager to stop shouting at a videogame and come for a dog-walk. Goes for a dog-walk without teenager

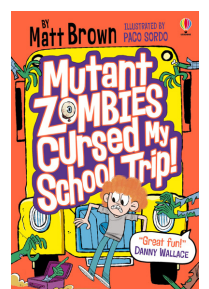
So, pity the author on a deadline. Tamsin Winter is an award-winning author who is in lockdown with her four-year-old son. 'One week in lockdown is like five years in normal time,' she told me on Skype yesterday, whilst her son added up every number he could think of. 'I've totally thrown out my daily routine. I have zero childcare and so have no time in the day to write. So, after I put my son to bed, I have a shower and a coffee and write from 9pm to 3am. Then I'm up again at 7.30am. It sounds hideous but I'm about four days away from finishing the draft.'

So, I can tell you that right now is definitely not a great time to finish your novel. It's not even close to being a great time to finish your novel. But it is a good time to do some stuff. Like drinking at lunchtime. Or yelling at jigsaws. Or reading, which is what Jo Nadin has found. 'Reading is part of writing. Reading is breathing in and writing is breathing out. I can't read anything literary at the moment because I can't concentrate on the language. I've just read crime novels back to back because I want to know what happens next.'

In a world of uncertainty and anxiety
it is good to know what happens next.

And breathe.

Matt Brown's latest book **Mutant Zombies Cursed My School Trip** (978-1474960236) is published by Usborne.

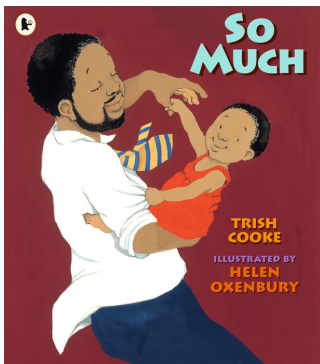




Ten Essential Children's Books

As part of the celebrations for our 40th anniversary, we are revising the long-running **Ten of the Best** feature, and asking six authors to choose the children's books they consider *essential* reading. Our thanks to **Frank Cottrell-Boyce** for this selection.

This is the hardest page I've ever written. Books were part of the architecture that sheltered me in school, and delighted me at home. Their doors opened into the past, the future and the secret gardens of the present. I always loved being read to and reading aloud so this is a list of books that I enjoyed reading aloud to my own children.

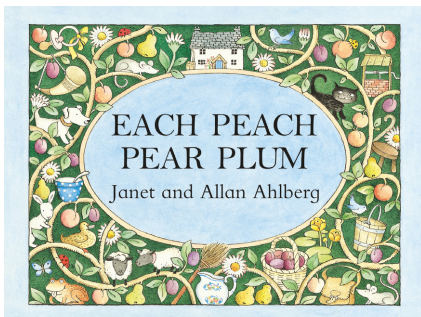


So Much

Trish Cooke, illustrated by Helen Oxenbury, Walker Books, 978-1406390728, £7.99 pbk

This book is a wonder. A book about love, and family that swings back and forth between noise and quiet so that you barely notice that it is building up to a brilliantly noisy twist ending. One of the few children's books that finds a place for boredom. A masterpiece

of storytelling beautifully illustrated by Helen Oxenbury. In all the tortured discussions I've had with myself about which books to chose, this is the one book that I knew had to be on the list no matter what.

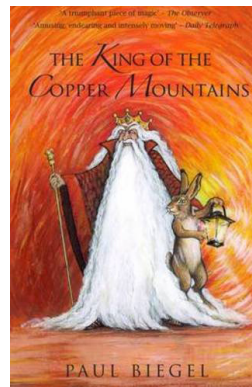


Each Peach Pear Plum

Allan and Janet Ahlberg, Puffin, 978-0141502526, £3.99 pbk

I feel privileged to have had my children during the Ahlberg era. Everything they did was rich and beautiful. I've

gone for this because of the way it encourages the child-listener to join in the poem and the way it weaves together all the riches of our heritage of fairy stories. Each page anticipates the next through some tiny detail in the picture so the child is invited to look really closely at the page and enjoy all the details. A real box of delights.

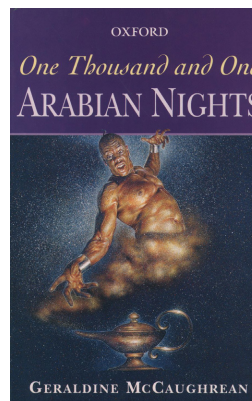


King of the Copper Mountains

Paul Biegel, O/P

The thousand-year old king Mansolain is dying. A kindly doctor goes in search of the herbs that might save him. As the doctor goes on his journey, he meets various animals - from a horse with golden hooves, to a beetle and a dragon - and sends them back to the king to tell their stories. He's hoping that the stories will be exciting enough to keep the king's heart going. The stories all do - in their

different ways - make your heart beat faster while the overarching story of the king's fate begins to bring all the tales together in an intricate web.



One Thousand and One Arabian Nights

retold by Geraldine McCaughrean, OUP, 978-0192750136, £8.99pbk

The Thousand and One Nights is a window - or a thousand and one windows - into the golden age of Islam, the era that gave us Averros, Al-Biruni, and Ibn Khaldun. These stories are an essential part of our patrimony. But every child should have a chance to meet them in something like their context - Shaharazad's great life or death

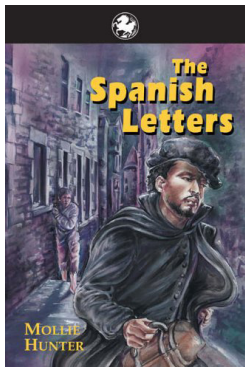
experiment with suspense. Simple folk tales from India and the Middle East are woven into a gorgeous, sophisticated filigree, playing hide and seek with their own endings. I would highly recommend Geraldine McCaughrean's retelling for Oxford Story Collections. In fact I'd highly recommend every sentence Geraldine McCaughrean ever wrote.

10

This Bowl of Earth

Jan Mark, O/P

This is inexplicably out of print. It's a deceptively simple picture book in which the narrator takes you through a year in which she tries to grow various different seeds and cuttings in a bowl of earth parked near her drain. It captures both the wonder and the disappointment of growing things from seed, and is the perfect way to introduce a child to this essential life skill and deep pleasure. A really substantial, enriching book.

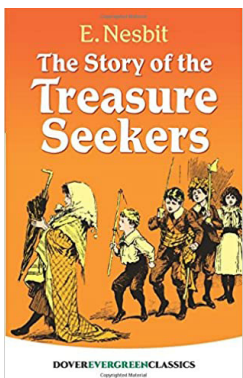


The Spanish Letters

Mollie Hunter, Kelpies, 978-0863154126, £3.99 pbk

I always loved historical thrillers, and so did my children. We gobbled up Rosemary Sutcliffe and Leon Garfield for the way they plunge the reader into that foreign country – the past. I asked them to choose one book from this category for the list and they went for this – Mollie Hunter's brilliantly plotted spy story set in sixteenth century Edinburgh against the background of a

second potential Armada. The characters are terrific – endearing, complex and valiant. The book is so detailed that reading it becomes an immersive experience.



The Story of The Treasure Seekers

E. Nesbit, Dover Editions, 978-0486815237, £4.99

I would be betraying myself if I didn't have an Edith Nesbit on the list. I think in the end she is our greatest children's novelist. She is funnier than almost anyone but she can shatter your heart with a single phrase – for instance 'Oh! My Daddy, my Daddy!'. **The Treasure Seekers** is both one of her funniest and her most emotional books. It

tells the story of the Bastable children's attempts to restore their lost fortunes by for instance, attempting to kidnap a cabinet minister and getting involved in some kind of alcoholic pyramid selling scheme (when the vicar tells them that alcohol is a source of great woe in the land they reply 'but not if you put sugar in it'). It's also a great piece of technical virtuosity in that she has this very smart and funny riff about who is really the narrator. Time has made her language difficult to follow. This doesn't matter at all if a grown-up is reading it out loud.



The Adventures of Tintin

Hergé, Egmont, various, £7.99 pbk

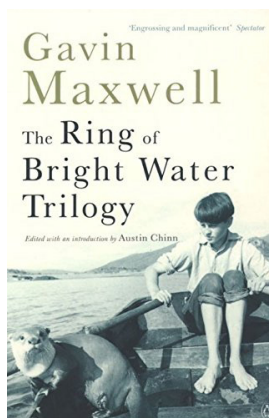
Do I need to explain this? Amazing storytelling. Terrific world-straddling adventures. A brilliantly dysfunctional alcoholic sidekick in Captain Haddock. Some of the most beautiful colour-work in the history of illustration. Comics and graphic novels like **Tintin** and **Asterix** are an essential part of learning to love reading. We are starved of great comics here, the honourable exception being **The Phoenix**.



The Phoenix Comic

www.thephoenixcomic.co.uk

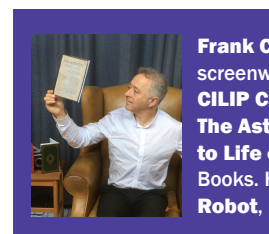
The first thing I had published was in **Beano's** sister paper **The Sparky** and I still love a good comic. **The Phoenix** is a great comic. I love its lavish layouts and inventive strips. Particular favourites of mine are **Bunny versus Monkey** and **Evil Emperor Penguin**. But **Corpse Talk** – in which great figures of the past are summoned from the grave to talk about their lives, like an especially maggotty moment from **Bill and Ted** has a special place in my heart.



The Ring of Bright Water

Gavin Maxwell, Penguin, 978-0140290493, £14.99pbk

I think this was the first book I read that might have been an adult book. I had travelled in Narnia, Middle Earth and Moominland but this book drew enchantment out of the real rock pools, beaches and islands. A magic land that you could drive to. We live in a great age of nature writing and I could have chosen something by Robert Macfarlane for this category but I wanted to say thank you to Gavin Maxwell for being the first to show me what would become my own ambition – to strike the fire of magic from the ordinary flint.



Frank Cottrell-Boyce is an award-winning author and screenwriter. His books include **Millions**, winner of the **CILIP Carnegie Medal** as well as **Cosmic, Framed, The Astounding Broccoli Boy** and **Sputnik's Guide to Life on Earth** all published by Macmillan Children's Books. His latest book for children, **The Runaway Robot**, is available now in paperback.

Windows into illustration: Mini Grey

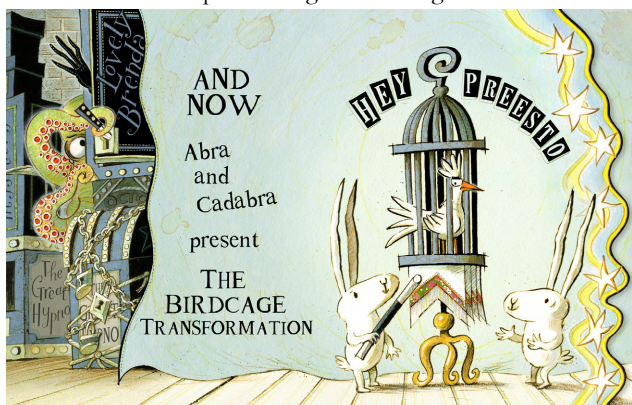
Mini Grey is an award-winning writer and illustrator, well known for books such as **Traction Man**, **Toys in Space** and **Kate Greenaway Medal** winner **The Adventures of the Dish and the Spoon**. She is a judge for this year's **Klaus Flugge Prize**. Her books are characterised by their invention, humour and sense of play. Here she describes her approach to creating **The Bad Bunnies' Magic Show**.

Every reading of a picture book is like putting on a new performance. When I made **The Bad Bunnies' Magic Show** I wanted to make a book that was like a theatrical entertainment, and I wanted the reader to be the audience.

In the story the bad bunnies, Abra and Cadabra, have padlocked their magician the Great Hypno in one of his own trunks. Then they put on their own rather haphazard magic show, culminating in a dastardly scheme to hypnotise the audience and steal their valuables.

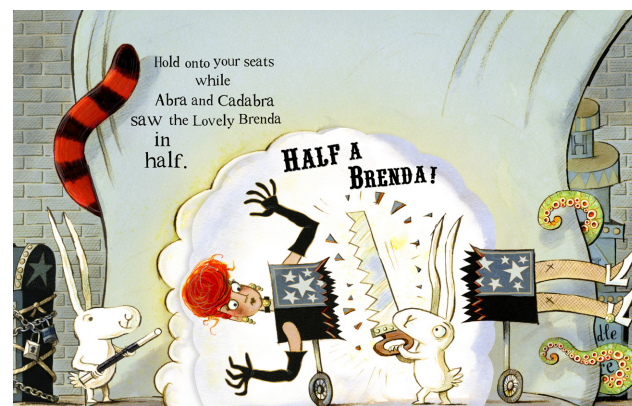
At first I wanted the bunnies' magic tricks to be proper pop-up paper-engineering, because playing around with pop-ups is such a lot of fun. But I realised this would make the book impossibly expensive for a publisher to produce.

So as often happens, I found that less is more, and just cutting into the page edge with a magical sort of shape could be all the magic I needed. When you turn the page you make the magic happen. As in real magic, it's your imagination that is really doing the trick. Here are Abra and Cadabra performing the Birdcage Transformation.



The page I want to tell you about is the one where the Lovely Brenda is sawn in half in front of your eyes. I'd tried various ways of pulling the two halves of Brenda apart but they were too complicated, I had to do it with the turning of just one piece of paper.

I worked out that with a puff of smoke that was a flap it should be possible. Jane Buckley and Lara Hancock at Simon & Schuster were incredibly helpful. We had to do several test-prints and fiddlings around to get a reliable working flap. With pop-up, as with magic – distraction is everything, and if you get your audience's attention where you want it, they won't see a glaring glitch in front of their eyes.



I made the pieces but then when I watched it happen I realised I needed more focus on where I wanted the reader to look – at Brenda's face – not at the crease where the flap was – so I added a pop of yellow – hypnotic lines round Brenda's head before, and a yellow explosion after – making you look at where Brenda's been sawn.

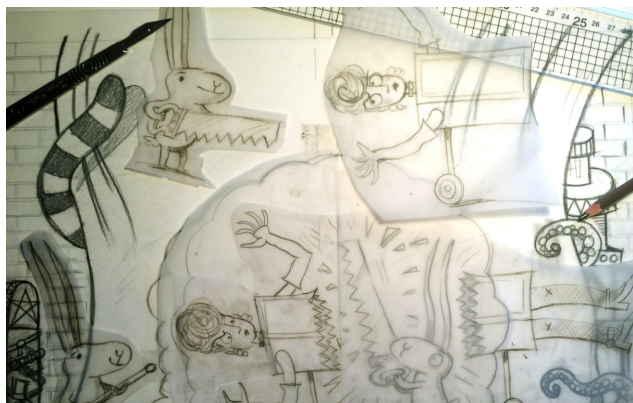


Just getting a flap to be shut when the page opens is trickier than you might think.

Nearly every spread in the Bad Bunnies' Magic Show happens onstage. To work out the picture space I made a quick cardboard Bunny Theatre so I definitely knew what was where backstage.



Theatres are very multi-layered. I absolutely love the Pollocks Toy Theatres where you can build up layers of scenery like a fabulous peepshow. To make my pictures, first I'd have to work out what on earth was going on in each scene, and tracing paper was brilliant for working out all my props and scenery and moving characters about.



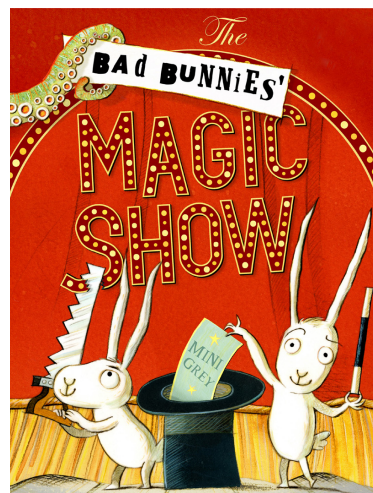
Then I would draw and paint my different layers separately: the back wall, boxes and cabinets, unleashed creatures like octopuses and tigers, the curtain, the bunnies and their props, – and then sometimes the front curtains and even the audience too. Then I'd scan all these layers and put them all together floating on top of each other in Photoshop. I tried to keep the colours quite minimal so the drawing was doing most of the work – mostly just black, white, aqua and splashes of red.

Of course, when Brenda gets sawn in half there is no blood. She's a magician's assistant, she knows how to do these things. Her sawn up box-middle is empty. Don't ask me how. The amazing thing about picture books is we can all accept the most impossible of happenings in them.

I did quite a lot of research into how magic really happens, and I did find out a few ways of sawing ladies in half. Of course I can't give away any secrets, but with magic the answer to how it's done is often either wildly more complicated or simple than you'd ever imagine.



After the sawing, the two halves of Brenda go wandering about and eventually the top half manages to free the Great Hypno. I made sure I showed Brenda fitting herself back together again, so the reader is sure that no Brendas were hurt in the making of this book.



The Bad Bunnies Magic Show is published by Simon and Schuster, 978-1471157608, £6.99 pbk.

Authorgraph

No.242

Elizabeth Acevedo

interviewed by
Nicolette Jones

Elizabeth Acevedo, winner of last year's **CILIP Carnegie Medal** for her debut novel in verse, **Poet X**, should have been in the UK this month for the Hay Festival, promoting her next-but-one book, **Clap When You Land**. Instead she and her husband are in their apartment in Washington DC (where she teaches classes that are all now online), venturing out daily for half-hour walks, and grateful that they have 'space, an exercise bike, and plenty of food'. We meet on Skype. She smiles a lot, laughs easily, has a warm voice, and expresses herself clearly and powerfully.



Clap When You Land tells the story, in two voices, of teenage half-sisters who discover each other's existence after their father dies in a plane crash. They are chess prodigy Yahaira, living with her parents in New York and motherless Camino brought up by her aunt in the Dominican Republic. An inspiration was American Airlines Flight 587 bound for the Dominican Republic (where Acevedo's parents were from) which came down in Queens two months after 9/11. All 260 people aboard died, but the press quickly lost interest when it emerged that terrorism was not the cause.

Acevedo researched the crash, and found there were passengers leading double lives, as the father in her book does. Others who died had dreams that were not fulfilled; some she used. The story is deliberately set now, however, so that history is not echoed too closely. It is particularly about grief, of which Acevedo says fortunately she has little experience, though 'I had an aunt pass when I was 11'. But she has seen the different ways other people mourn, used her imagination and her own difficult moments and relied 'on other folks' – her editor who had lost her parents, and another writer she met in a Facebook group whose father was on that flight, and who saw a draft. 'The way the media was captured, and the grief was captured, felt true to her.'

The book is ambitious, too, about other subjects. 'I am trying to talk about rape culture, sex tourism, child prostitution, as well as the media, and race and privilege and gentrification. I wanted to see how much verse could hold'. This book, like **Poet X**, is told in blank verse. 'I am interested in the level of interiority, the inner thoughts of young people. It is not so action-driven. There is rumination. You just have to sit with that for a few pages. We're not racing anywhere.' The creative process involves 'gunning through' a first draft, though not in a planned order, and many sharpening drafts, 'until you stop when they rip it from your hand'. Her second novel, **With the Fire on High**, the story of a teenage mother with a magic touch as a chef, is, by



Photo by Stephanie Ifendu

contrast, in prose because 'there are too many characters, too much dialogue and the setting changes half way through'.

Running through Camino's story is the threat of a sexual predator. 'As I was writing it I kept thinking about this guy who was kind of stalking me in high school and I was too afraid to tell my parents because I thought it was my fault'. She used the idea that 'sometimes teenagers don't realise this might be a moment you have to ask for help' and also that 'often we don't consider that a community has the answers'.

Acevedo, who identifies as Afro-Latinx, herself first went to the Dominican Republic when she was about eight. Her mother, who grew up there, was one of 15 children, so Acevedo met 60 first cousins, and 'all of these aunts'. 'I would get shuffled from house to house and it was incredible'. Like Camino's father, she spent her summers in DR every year. Now, she says, the family has to hire a hall to have Christmas parties. 'We're 200 people'. 'I think what the Dominican Republic called up in me was wonder. With all that word carries, including the big identity question mark: "can you claim a place that doesn't claim you?" I am still working through that.' Her novels, she says, revisit themes and are 'conversations with each other'.

Acevedo's mother left DR for Puerto Rico in the 1970s, and officially moved to the US in 1979, rejoining her family in New York. Acevedo's father, who had been an accountant in the Dominican Republic, lived in the house opposite. Theirs was a very formal courtship, as he sat with the family, listening to music. 'It was adorable'.

Acevedo grew up with both parents, and two elder brothers, always in the same apartment in Manhattan. Her parents 'are still there, 40 years on'. Her mother worked first in a button factory and then, when Elizabeth was five, became a childcare provider. Her father worked at an envelope factory. 'It was very blue collar all my life.'

Her experience with her parents, she says, 'most closely reflects **The Poet X**': 'This father who is there, but maybe doesn't always know how to be involved.' Her mother, though, would tell stories of growing up in the countryside in the Dominican Republic. 'She's an incredible storyteller. It's so rich, the things she remembers. I



developed such a tenderness for my Mom's younger self – this child who would steal her father's horse and race and then fall off. It was a fantastical world to me, growing up in Manhattan – stories of chopping mangoes and climbing trees and her father driving oxen. And later, after they moved to the city, selling lottery tickets in his smart slacks and hat from among the oranges in the back of a fruit cart. And that's where the impulse came from: I want to chronicle too. As a child I just loved it, and also my grandfather's riddles and stories, which he would tell me every day.'

Her mother was ambitious for her. 'She wanted me to be famous, and would enrol me for acting and modelling'. Acevedo trained as an actor, which was 'almost always a vehicle for me to perform my own work'. In order to ensure that she 'knew how to craft the stories I wanted to craft' she took sociology and anthropology courses in her degree, from George Washington University, and has an MA in creative writing from the University of Maryland. Interested in hip-hop, she performed poetry and then, through a creative writing workshop, found a connection which led to publication of her first poem in 2013. Poems and stories were published, and then her first novel, **Poet X**, won awards in the US as well as the UK and became a New York Times bestseller. She has now read her own books on audio and is working on an adult novel, and on a screenplay for **With the Fire on High**, which has been optioned for film.

Acevedo spoke in her **Carnegie** acceptance speech about writing for readers in her classes who felt their stories were not being told. Asked about her audience, she said that one of her first readers is her best friend: 'not someone I would consider a voracious reader so if I hook her I have something'. But mostly her audience is her main character: 'That's the person I am imagining reading the book. It requires me to be really gentle. If my reader is a teen parent, or has lost a parent, or has complicated sibling relationships, am I approaching this with the integrity and honesty it deserves, in such a way that it will honour that experience?'

Her current experience, though, is unlikely to inspire a book. 'Corona,' she says, 'is not a muse'.

Books mentioned:

Clap When You Land, Hot Key Books, 978-1471409127, £7.99 pbk

With the Fire on High, Hot Key Books, 978-1471409004, £7.99 pbk

Poet X, Electric Monkey, 978-1405291460, £7.99 pbk



Nicolette Jones, writer, literary critic and broadcaster, has been the children's books reviewer of the **Sunday Times** for more than two decades.

Marvellous Medicine:

how to get through the Coronavirus epidemic with children's books



It's more than six weeks now since schools closed and teachers and parents were handed the challenge of home-schooling all (or nearly all) under 18s in the UK. It's enough to drive us all to drink.

Fortunately, help is at hand, supplied by children's publishers, authors and children's book charities who have created a cornucopia of activity packs, work sheets, free books and the chance to hear authors reading their books. Here's a round up of some of what's going on. If we've missed you out, let us know on Twitter (@BooksforKeeps) or [Facebook](#)



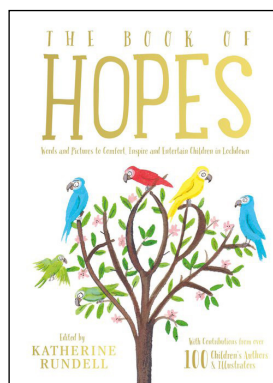
Free books

Andersen Press has released a free ebook, created by Sally Nicholls and illustrator Viviane Schwarz. [Staying Home](#) is available to everyone to download. The book follows a family of energetic raccoons through a day in lockdown, and explaining to the youngest members of the family how they're doing their part to save lives just by staying at home.

Hats off to **Nosy Crow** and Axel Scheffler for creating a digital book about the coronavirus for primary school

age children and the measures taken to control it. Written by staff within the company, the book also had input from Professor Graham Medley of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, as well as advice from two head teachers and a child psychologist. **Nosy Crow** want to make sure that this book is accessible to every child and family and so the book is offered totally free of charge to anyone who wants to read it. However, they have suggested, at the back of the book, that families might make a donation to help our health service if they find the book useful: www.nhscharitiestogether.co.uk.

Hope is needed as never before so three cheers too for Katherine Rundell and the children's authors and artists who contributed to her anthology **The Book of Hopes**. This free-to-read collection contains over 100 entries, all intended to turn its young audience into 'possibilityists' – a phrase Rundell defines as being open to the world's infinite opportunities for transformation. Poetry is perfect for delivering short, sharp moments of joy, insight or laughter, and



many contributors have chosen to write poems: Catherine Johnson has a playful tribute to an Axolotl; David Almond a tender, funny father-son adventure; David Solomons an ode to a washing machine keen to lift off into space (one small step for domestic appliance...). Geraldine McCaughrean's contribution *Sunflower* is typically brilliant, and there are stories too by Kevin Crossley-Holland, Sally Nicholls, Hilary McKay and Jessica Townsend, and a positive insertion of non-fiction from Isabel Thomas, *The Hungriest Caterpillar*. The

collection could inspire creative endeavours in children too.

The Book of Hopes is now live to read in full for free on the National Literacy Trust site – literacytrust.org.uk/bookofhopes.

Activities, writing challenges and fun things to do

The **British Library's Discovering Children's Books** is a free online resource for children, teachers and book-lovers of all ages. There's a gallery of activities to spark children's creativity and inspire their own stories, poems, illustrations and more and the site also includes films showing illustrators at work in their studios, including Axel Scheffler's masterclass on how to draw a Gruffalo. Plus you'll find interviews with authors and illustrators such as Quentin Blake, Julia Donaldson, Michael Rosen, Lauren Child, Andy Stanton, Zaniib Mian, Joseph Coelho, Jacqueline Wilson, Viviane Schwarz and SF Said, who reveal their creative processes, memories of childhood reading and tips for budding writers and artists.

ON THE LOOKOUT FOR READING IDEAS?



The National Shelf Service is a new daily YouTube broadcast featuring book recommendations from professional librarians. Launched by CILIP and the Youth Libraries Group and supported by Nielsen Book, OverDrive, RB Digital, Bolinda and Libraries Connected. Its videos help children and families discover new, diverse reading experiences. The broadcasts run Monday to Friday at 11.00am each day at www.cilip.org.uk/nationalshefshervice with selected titles available to borrow as e-books from most local libraries via their websites.

Authorfy works with year-round to make reading and writing interactive, accessible, engaging and fun and is hosting free creative writing challenges created by favourite children's authors including Children's Laureate Cressida Cowell. The challenges aim to inspire children, introduce them to new books and demonstrate new storytelling techniques. Good news – the challenges are only 10 minutes each, with a new challenge every day for three months from authors.

The annual **Henrietta Branford Writing Competition** encourages young people to get writing and the deadline for this year's competition has been extended to 30th May. Young people under the age of 19 are challenged to finish a story started by **2019 Branford Boase Award** winner Muhammad Khan.

Lovereading4Kids is one of the centres recommended by the Department of Education and their Kids Zone is packed with activity downloads, videos, polls and competitions, with content regularly updated. Their blog offers regularly updated reading recommendations. www.lovereading4kids.co.uk

BookTrust have risen to the challenge too launching BookTrust HomeTime. Children and parents will find free online books and videos, games to play, competitions, book-themed quizzes, and how to draw films and tips created by favourite illustrators. www.booktrust.org.uk/books-and-reading/have-some-fun/

The Phoenix comic has launched Q Club, a free 'quarantine club' which features comics, tutorials, videos and boardgames. Drawing and writing guides as well as videos by contributors such as Jamie Smart, Neill Cameron and the Etherington Brothers aim to show and inspire children how to create their own comics and characters.

Over at the **Harry Potter Wizarding World** website, you'll find **Harry Potter At Home**, designed to help children, parents, carers and teachers 'add a touch of Harry Potter magic to our new daily lives'. It features special activity kits, magical craft videos (teach your friends how to draw a Niffler!) fun articles, quizzes, puzzles and more.

Authors going above and beyond ...

Frank Cottrell-Boyce is running writing workshops followed up with live Q&As and – with the help of some actor friends – sharing his books on his Instagram account. Well worth checking in: www.instagram.com/frank_cottrell_boyce/



Konnie Huq is sharing content for young children on a regular basis on her YouTube channel including STEM learning and experiments, arts & crafts, as well as reading and storytelling. Educational and entertaining too.

Rob Biddulph is sharing [#DrawWithRob](https://www.instagram.com/drawwithrob) videos twice a week on social media to encourage children to draw and keep themselves entertained.

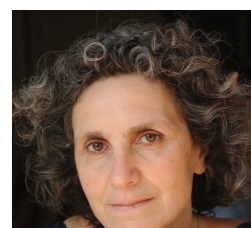
Oliver Jeffers is producing a **#StayAtHomeStorytime** where he will read one of his books every Monday, Wednesday and Friday and talk about how they were made. This happens at 6pm on his [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/oliverjeffers) and is then uploaded to his [website](http://www.oliverjeffers.com).



Matt Brown does a live chapter read every day at 4pm on his Facebook page (Matt Brown Writer). All the chapters so far can be found here www.facebook.com/MattBrownWriter/live

He's also created a Word Monkeys podcast where he chats to other writers. It can be found on most podcast platform and Spotify too. Or here thewordmonkeys.podomatic.com

Poet **Cheryl Moskowitz** has spent the weeks of lockdown finding ways to talk directly to children about what life is like for them in this age of Covid-19, and to reflect their perspectives through poetry written for and about them. Asking children to suppose they woke up tomorrow in a coronavirus-free world she has turned their answers to the questions *Where would you go, what would you do? What new rules, if any, might you put in place for a safer, happier world?* into poems that will serve as a record of the time and create the possibility for continued conversation well after the current crisis is over. **Pop Up Projects**, the pioneering children's literary organisation, has taken on the publication of Cheryl's pamphlet, planning to turn it around in record time, and to distribute free copies to each child in Years 3-7 in the schools **Pop Up** serves across the UK.



Publisher and bookseller sites to check out



The Alligator's Mouth bookshop might be closed, but their YouTube channel has a mixture of live stream and pre-recorded videos and there are downloadable worksheets on their website created as part of their special **Comics Club**. Send your comics to them and they'll share encouraging feedback and feature the best on their new website **Comics Club Gallery**.

Walker Books has created a [Youtube playlist](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7K8K8K8K8) of Stay Home resources such as author readings, Q&As and book trailers.

HarperCollins Children's Books has announced new initiatives to help children and families stuck at home via [Fun and Learning with HarperCollins Children's Books](https://www.harpercollins.co.uk/fun-and-learning-with-harpercollins-childrens-books), an online interactive hub where readers can find book recommendations for young readers, as well as free activities.

New STEM publisher **QuestFriendz** has launched a range of downloadable STEM activity sheets based on its new series **The Adventures of Lillicorn**. www.questfriendz.com/meet-lillicorn

Scholastic has been hosting Julia Donaldson's weekly broadcasts, [Julia Donaldson and Friends](https://www.scholastic.co.uk/julia-donaldson-and-friends), and has launched [Chapter One](https://www.scholastic.co.uk/chapter-one) with readings from authors of their own books and related resources such as discussion guides.

Happy reading, viewing, listening and creating!

Celebrating **Bob Hartman** and the 25th Anniversary of **The Lion Storyteller Bible**

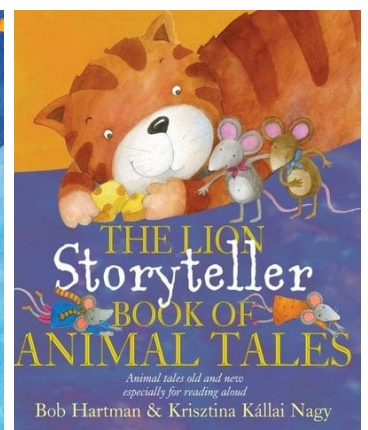
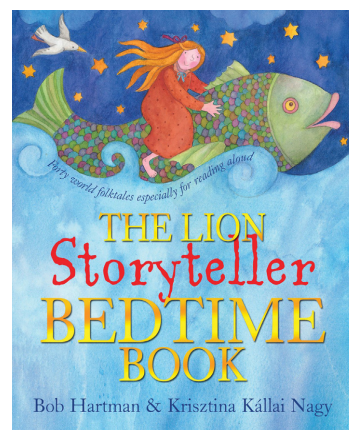
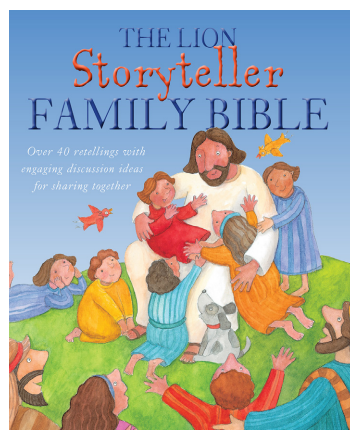
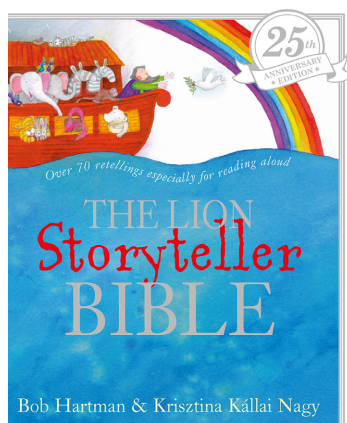
When first published twenty-five years ago, **The Lion Storyteller Bible** with its lively retelling of the stories that make up both the Old and the New Testament and cheerful illustration was both accessible and exciting. All those years on, it is still popular, and as part of the celebration for the 25th anniversary, publishers Lion Children's Books are reissuing it with additional stories. Not only that, there will be a new **Lion Storyteller Family Bible**. Behind both these publications is Bob Hartman. What was the inspiration and where did the idea for presenting these stories in this lively way come from? **Ferelith Hordon** spoke to Bob to find out.

Though Bob has lived in the UK for 40 Years, he was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His background was that of a church going family and he made his commitment to Jesus when he was a teenager. After being ordained a pastor he was invited over to England to a little church in Leicestershire and has been here ever since. He has always been a storyteller, frequently using Lion materials. This led him to contact Lion Hudson the publisher, and the **Lion Storyteller Bible** was born. However for some time he had been thinking that it would be good to have a new resource for parents to share with their children. He explains: 'The stories from the **Storyteller Bible** were already there and I thought that if we could expand them from one spread to two and pull out the faces of the different characters from the story and let those characters ask the questions of parents and children together, that might be a fun way to do it.' It is certainly that.

Like many churches he has experienced a change in the way the week works when now children are often engaged in sport or other activities on a Sunday. Does he feel it important that the Christian stories should be told? Can they only be used within a Christian background? 'It helps to be raised in a Christian family' he says, 'It does not mean that children will necessarily take that path, but if they get exposed to Bible stories at an early age in a positive way it does make a difference'. Certainly the **Storyteller Bible** is a Christian resource and Bob was very much looking to support

and help Christian parents to pass on and explain their faith. He became aware that many parents did not feel they knew enough or were not confident in approaching the questions that might be raised. As a result the design of the **Storyteller Family Bible** aims to address this. The activity suggestions, such a feature of the other **Storyteller Bibles** which can be found at the back of the book, have become attractive panels at the end of each story asking questions, suggesting ideas – encouraging engagement from both the adult and the child. 'We really wanted to provide something that was easy to use, attractive and bright'.

Is he happy to use within a Christian context stories from other cultures that often reflect the values that can be seen in the Bible? Indeed he is and there has been both **The Lion Storyteller Bedtime Book** and **The Lion Storyteller Book of Animal Stories** that do just this. There is now a plan to create an anthology of world stories reflecting values to stand beside the stories from the Bible. However, he wants to make it clear that there is a difference between these and many other stories. As he says: 'Sometimes if we are not careful we can turn these stories into fables like those of Aesop, we have to make clear the realities of these stories'. He emphasises that both the Old and the New Testaments reflect history and are about real people with recognisable attitudes facing real situations. He gives an example: 'I tell the story of Jonah because I want people to understand it. The point of the story is



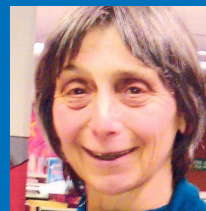


not that Jonah was disobedient but that he hated the people of Nineveh.' It is reflecting on this that is important and interesting and drawing out these aspects is very much integral to his approach: 'They make the stories more open ended They give parents and children the opportunity to consider the ramifications of the story'.

Though Bob has an evangelical background, the stories have appeal right across the denominational divides and looking at the **Storyteller Bibles** it is clear that they can be used in a much wider context. He has never felt that they should be exclusive – indeed, through the organisation **Open the Book** he has taken his storytelling programme into schools of all types including Muslim schools just adapting his storytelling techniques to be sensitive to that tradition. They now reach over 3,000 schools around the country. 'There is an assumption that people know these stories and they are old hat' he says, but in fact he has discovered people do not know them and if they are well told children welcome them.

They are of course woven not just into faith but also into our culture and knowing them cannot but widen appreciation and understanding. Bob Hartman's storytelling is an ideal introduction.

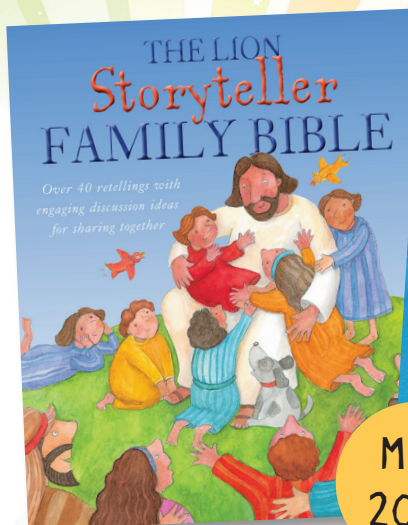
The Lion Storyteller Family Bible by Bob Hartman with illustrations by Krisztina Kallai Nagy is published by Lion Children's Books, 978-0745978420, £12.99 hbk.



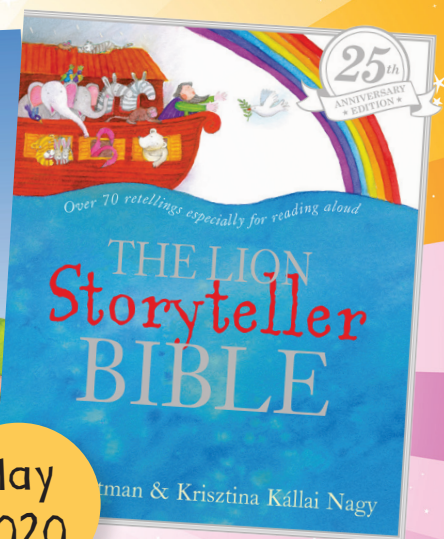
Ferelith Hordon is editor of **Books for Keeps**.

Coming Soon from Storyteller Extraordinaire Bob Hartman

Sep
2020



May
2020



When Bob Hartman tells a story, he gives it all he's got!

TIMES EDUCATIONAL SUPPLEMENT

Illustrating Pippi

By **Holly Fulbrook**, Head of Design,
Oxford University Press and
illustrator **Mini Grey**.

When I heard about the anniversary of Pippi a couple of years ago I knew there would be exciting opportunities ahead in the OUP design studio. Pippi had long been a favourite of mine and like Mini, I was introduced to her by Lauren Child 's sumptuous gift edition. I was also a fan of the well-known and hugely popular Tony Ross illustrated versions too, so I knew it was going to be hard to find somebody to equal the humour and energy he brought to the series.

We spent a lot of time in the studio debating. We wanted somebody feisty, somebody who understood what Astrid Lindgren stood for and had built into Pippi's character, somebody that would bring something fresh and perhaps unexpected to a familiar character. After much exhaustive discussion I happened to be reading Mini's picture book **The Last Wolf** and had a eureka moment. I hadn't seen much of Mini's black and white work, was mostly familiar with her beautiful picture books but there was something in that Little Red character that made me think she'd be the perfect fit.

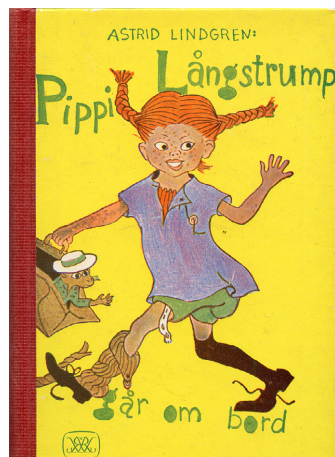
Once we met up to discuss, that was it! She arrived at the Oxford office clutching an original version with Ingrid Vang Nyman's illustrations and a host of sketches before we'd even discussed what was involved. We couldn't have made a better choice – we practically had to stop her from drawing Mr Nilsson for every chapter head (which she did regardless, and for which I couldn't be happier).

Mini Grey, illustrator

When I was a child I didn't meet Pippi Longstocking. She just didn't cross my path, which was generally wandering in the direction of the Moomins. My first Pippi encounter was acquiring a copy of the beautifully illustrated Lauren Child edition, in around 2009 I think.

Later I read it to my young son Herbie, but we weren't entirely sure about it – a bit too much horse-lifting for us. Pippi seemed impossibly strong, in a world that was otherwise fairly realistic.

But then last year I was invited by Oxford University Press to illustrate new versions of Astrid Lindgren's books for the 2020 75th anniversary editions. My friend Niki who lives down the road is Swedish, and when I mentioned the Astrid Lindgren commission she immediately brought over her entire Astrid Collection (and it is quite a huge collection) to properly show me just how important an institution Astrid Lindgren is in Sweden, and what an honour illustrating Pippi was. (Incidentally, Niki also makes very fine cinnamon buns and gingerbread, so I love it when these pop up in the Pippi books.)



In the original editions, Pippi is intrinsically linked with the illustrations of Ingrid Vang Nyman. Here's Niki's own copy of **Pippi Goes Aboard**.

To the modern (and un-Swedish) eye, Pippi looks pretty strange. I saw weird slightly alien eyes, anti-gravity hair, anatomically puzzling legs, possibly suspenders. And was she all of nine years old?

In Sweden, these images are an inseparable part of Pippi Longstocking. I started to see how strange and gutsy they were, and appreciate the pared-back lines,



and limited colours that have become so emblematic of Pippi now that she has her own set of pantones.

There could be a Japanese influence to Vang Nyman's pictures, with their lack of shadows, flat colour, and unusual diagrammatic perspectives. She made everything really clear, and worked out all the details.

Pippi Longstocking came out in 1945 and was the first work of acclaim for both author and illustrator. Is it important that the irrepressible character of Pippi emerges from five years of wartime lockdown, like a spring bursting out of a box?

So I thought I'd better properly meet Pippi.

Meet Pippi Longstocking

When we first meet Pippi, her appearance is very definitely described:

Pippi is also tremendously strong, the strongest girl in the world.

I still had problems with the impossibility and with the horse-lifting; and the excessiveness; smashing things up, being a bit too violent to a bull and breaking its horns off. There was also a view of the world that was of its time, especially the South Sea islanders.



More Meetings with Pippi

OK, she's the strongest girl in the world, and is indestructible with the constitution of an ox (she eats poisonous mushrooms and she drinks random mixtures of medicines).

But as I met Pippi properly I found out how much about her I'd missed in that first brief reading aloud. I made discoveries: Pippi's kindness and her fairness. Pippi knows what's going on, even though it seems she doesn't. You can be safe with Pippi. When Astrid Lindgren's characters get really upset there's usually a big unfairness going on.

There's also Nature, lovingly described, especially Pippi's wild garden, and also food, which Pippi enthusiastically creates.

To Pippi, everything's an opportunity.

Pippi is funny.

'Who tells you when it's time to go to bed?' Tommy asks. 'I do that myself,' said Pippi. 'First I tell myself once, very nicely, and if I don't obey I tell myself again, quite crossly, and if I still don't obey, well, then there's trouble, I can tell you.'



Pippi has a way of turning the world upside down, upending convention, and using words however she likes. She is a master of the bizarre and surreal monologue. She is a Teller of Tall Tales. She is wild and unpredictable, with the destructive potential of an unexploded bomb.

She is able to take care of herself and other people: to cook, to clean, to camp, to feed everybody, and to organise. Pippi is generous in every way. She has independent means of finance – an endless bag of gold coins. Pippi is not scared of ANYONE, no

matter how important they think they are. Pippi gently perplexes those who are trying to educate her or make her do things like 'multikipperation,' by possibly deliberately misunderstanding things.

Pippi is an uncontrollable force: when she tries going to school, Pippi's drawing of a horse refuses to be restricted to a piece of paper and is happening on the floor: she explains: *'I'm in the middle of doing the front legs now, but when I get to the tail most likely I'll have to go out into the corridor.'*

There's joy in language: looking through a telescope Pippi says: *'I can practically see the fleas in South America with this.'*



Under it all there is understated heart from Astrid Lindgren. In **Pippi Goes Aboard** the threat of Pippi going away looms. Here's when Pippi is just about to leave and board her father's ship:

She turned to Tommy and Annika and looked at them.

What a strange look, thought Tommy. It was exactly the same look Tommy's mum had on her face once when he was very, very ill.

And what is that look?

Astrid Lindgren leaves you to work that one out for yourself.

And lastly, here's my favourite character, Mr Nilsson. I did love drawing all those Mr Nilssons.



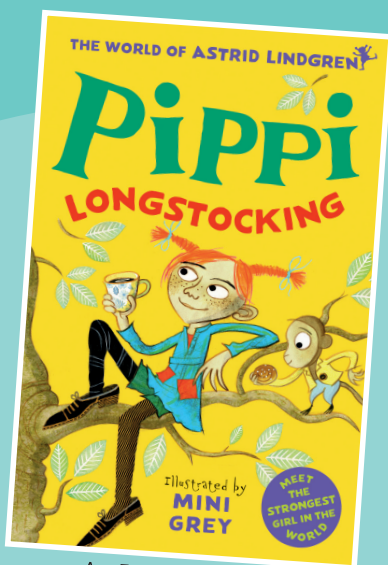
OUP's new editions of Astrid Lindgren's **Pippi Longstocking** books with Mini Grey's illustrations are available now, £5.99 pbk.

Oxford
Children's
Books

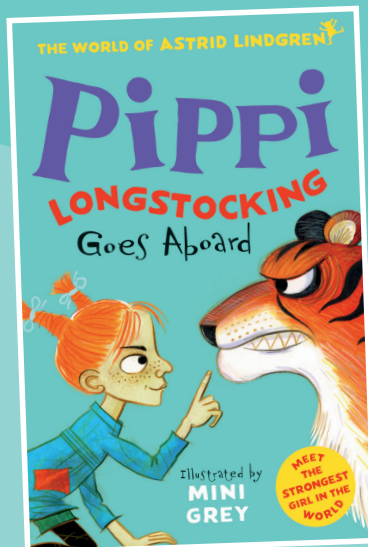
2020: THE YEAR OF Pippi LONGSTOCKING

CELEBRATING
75 YEARS
OF THE STRONGEST
GIRL IN THE
WORLD

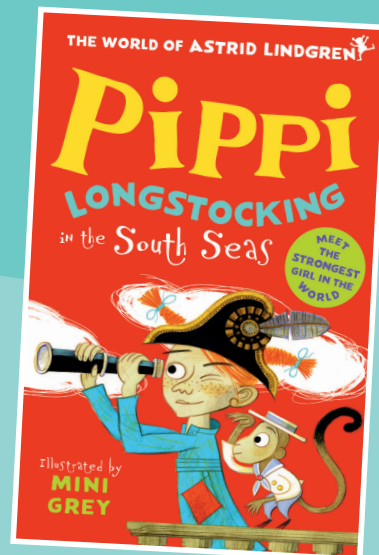
These new editions of the classic Pippi stories by Astrid Lindgren, containing brand new black and white artwork by award-winning illustrator Mini Grey, will introduce her adventurous spirit to a whole new generation of readers.



Age 7+ • 144 pages • PB
978-0-19-277631-0 • £5.99



Age 7+ • 144 pages • PB
978-0-19-277632-7 • £5.99



Age 7+ • 144 pages • PB
978-0-19-277633-4 • £5.99

OUT IN
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www.oxfordowl.co.uk/pippi

Email pippi75@oup.com for your
FREE Pippi party pack with activities and decorations.

OXFORD

Hoorah for Health Workers!

In the latest in their **Beyond the Secret Garden** series examining how BAME voices have been represented in children's literature in Britain, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** raise a cheer for some fictional doctors and nurses.

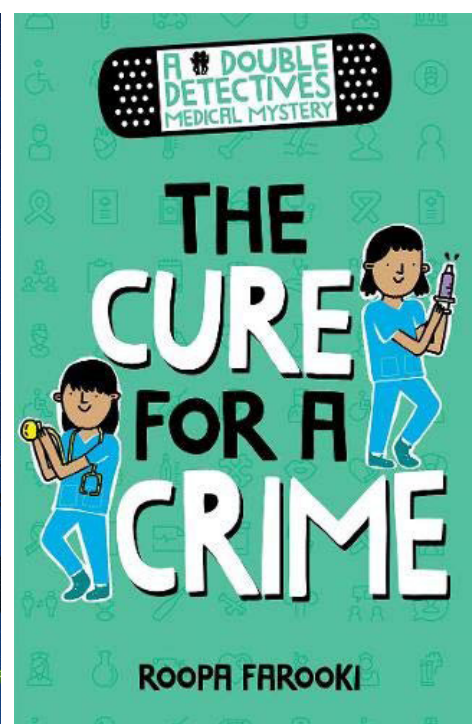
Discussing the postwar migration of health care workers from the Caribbean to Britain in a 2016 BBC documentary, Professor Laura Serrant commented, 'There's no doubt in my mind that those of us who migrated into England and the National Health Service saved it' (**Black Nurses: The Women who Saved the NHS**). Amidst recent news that the first ten doctors to die from COVID-19 were all from the Black, Asian and minority ethnic community, and that 35% of patients hospitalized with the virus were from BAME communities (about twice their representation in the general population), we wanted to highlight some of the portrayals of health care workers in British children's books from BAME backgrounds. British children's literature has often quietly honoured the contributions made by BAME health carers, and now more than ever we need to make sure British child readers are aware of the historical and current roles that BAME Britons have played in keeping the nation safe.

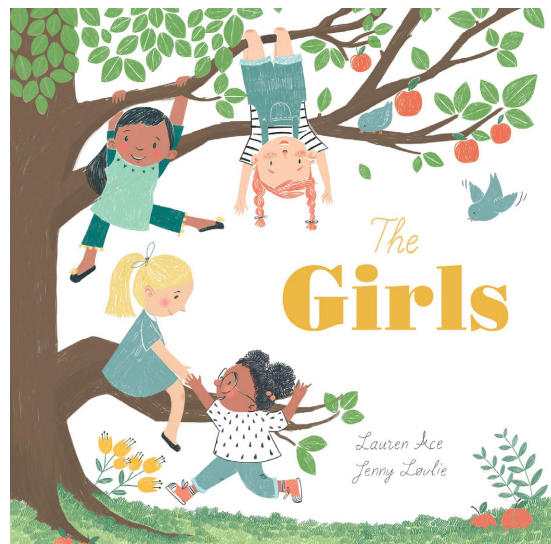
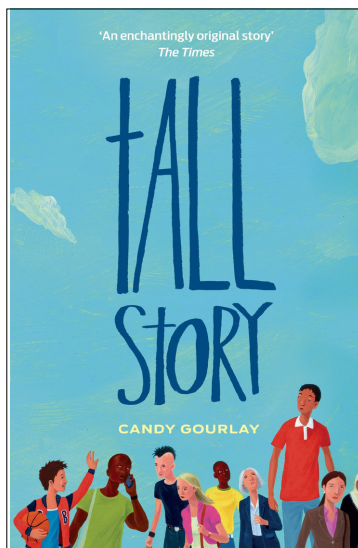
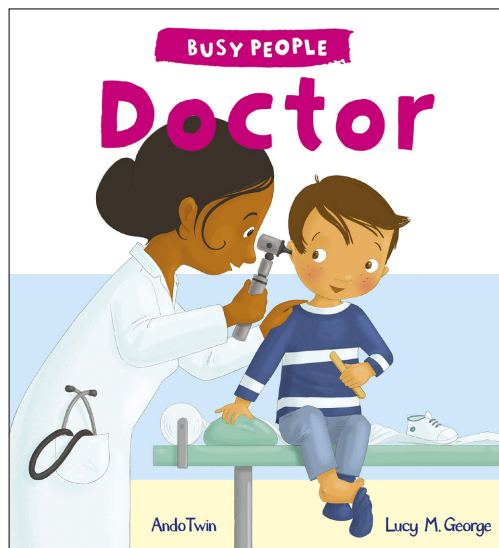
Historically, African-Caribbean women came to Britain as nurses – not just after World War II, but during the Victorian period as well. Mary Seacole, the Jamaican 'doctress' who set up the British Hotel for soldiers on the front lines in the Crimean War, told her own story in 1857, but the first retelling for children came in 1909 in Henry Charles Moore's **Noble Deeds of the World's Heroines**. Moore's account was an anomaly, however, and Seacole did not reappear until the 1980s, when Brent librarians Audrey Dewjee and Ziggi Alexander discarded biographies of racist Britons and replaced them with biographies that better represented their reading population, including one they wrote themselves about Mary Seacole (1982). Since then there have been several depictions of Seacole for children, including by BAME British authors Trish Cooke (**Hoorah for Mary Seacole** 2008) and, most recently, Naida Redgrave's **The Extraordinary Life of Mary Seacole** (2019); it is the biographies

by BAME authors that are most likely to directly address the racism Seacole faced.

Many young readers in Britain, whether BAME or white British, have been cared for by one of the many nurses who came to Britain in the Windrush generation. African-Caribbean nurses were even represented in Ladybird books, whose 1963 **People at Work: The Nurse** included a Black nurse. White authors have often included Black female nurses in British children's literature since, including in the 2001 Ladybird **Nurse Nancy**, where the eponymous nurse 'is always neat and tidy and she works very hard looking after the patients at Story Town Hospital' (n.p.) – all of whom are white. The informational book about doctor or hospital visits is a common introduction for child readers to the role played by BAME communities in the NHS. Lucy Cuthew and AndoTwin's **Busy People: The Doctor** (2015) shows a British Asian GP who, despite her 'busy day' (n.p.) still manages to be gentle and take time with her patients.

Picture books also depict BAME health care workers in positive ways, often with child characters emulating them. One of the earliest picture book series to feature Black British children from a mainstream publisher was Petronella Breinburg and Errol Lloyd's **Sean** series; the 1975 **Doctor Sean** depicts a 'hospital' run entirely by Sean and his sister. Tony Bradman and Eileen Browne's **Through My Window** (1986) has the main character, Jo, waiting for her mother to return from work with a surprise. Jo's mother, a nurse, brings Jo a doctor's uniform for dressing up. Hena Khan's **Under My Hijab** (2019) also features a mother who is a health care worker – a doctor, whose 'bright pink hijab looks so cheerful tucked into her tidy white coat' (n.p.). And Sasha, in Lauren Ace and Jenny Løvlie's beautiful decades-spanning picture book **The Girls**, (2018) grows up to become a doctor.





The depiction of health care workers in books for older readers is, perhaps unsurprisingly, more nuanced than that for younger readers; in books written by BAME authors, the strenuous and often financially-unrewarded nature of health care jobs is depicted more often. Trish Cooke's **The Diary of a Young West Indian Immigrant: Gloria Charles, Britain 1965** might suggest a return to the Ladybird stereotype of Afro-Caribbean nurses, but Gloria's mother is 'working part-time in the hospital. She cleans there from four o'clock to eight o'clock' (32) while Gloria's dad works long hours in a factory and Gloria watches her younger brother after school, trying to squeeze in homework. Cleaners, porters, and other necessary NHS jobs are often overlooked as low-skilled and unimportant, but Cooke's story shows how vital this work was for a family—and for the NHS. Catherine Johnson's **Sawbones** (2013), though set in the 18th century, nonetheless demonstrates the extra burden of being Black in the medical profession; Ezra MacAdam is treated as less than capable by many white Britons, and regularly faces casual racism in his everyday work. **Sawbones** is an adventure story, but like **The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole**, Johnson's tale cannot be an adventure purely innocent of British racism.

In the past decade, books aimed at middle grade / Key Stage 2 readers have often included BAME parents who are health workers. Candy Gourlay's **Tall Story**, (2010) includes Bernardo and Andi's Filipino mother an Accident and Emergency nurse who is 'always working. Night shifts and twelve-hour shifts and this shift and that shift.' (p 27). Hilary McKay's **The Time of Green Magic**, (2019) has Abi's British Jamaican father Theo, also an A & E nurse.

One of the most recent to be published, Roopa Farooki's **The Cure for a Crime** (2020) deserves special mention in this particular column. Farooki had already achieved critical appraisal and success as a writer of 6 novels for adults before she decided to train as a doctor and has recently been working on a Covid-19 ward. Her children's debut, the first in the **Double Detectives Medical Mystery** series is as fast-paced as they come. Twins Ali and Tulip investigate the apparent ill-health of their mum, a doctor. Any concerns that a story featuring a medical South Asian character may conform to a popular trope are off-set by the inclusion of the twins' double-amputee Grandmother, a

spy with hi-tec equipment and an impressive array of skills. Perhaps unusually for contemporary children's fiction, Farooki manages to keep the children centre-stage without diminishing the importance of the multi-generational family. Terms rarely seen in books for this age group – medical and non-medical – are used and explained; 'Munchausen by proxy' is introduced, and Brian Sturgeon the Brain Surgeon is fully aware of the existence of 'nominative determinism'. Chapters are occasionally interspersed with summaries of medical blog posts written by the twins and included in an appendix. This includes a Bristol Stool Chart – no doubt fascinating to many young readers – and rather presciently, an illustrated guide of how to wash one's hands thoroughly. A BAME doctor penning a children's book where order is restored through courage and the application of medical knowledge could not have happened at a more appropriate time.

Books mentioned:

Hoorah for Mary Seacole, Trish Cooke, illus Anni Axworthy, Franklin Watts, 978-0749674137, £4.99pbk

The Extraordinary Life of Mary Seacole, Naida Redgrave, illus Alleanna Harris, Puffin, 978-0241372777, £6.99 pbk

Busy People: The Doctor, Lucy M. George, illus AndoTwin, QED, 978-1784931520, £6.99 pbk

Through My Window, Tony Bradman, illus Eileen Browne, Francis Lincoln Children's Books

Under My Hijab, Hena Khan, illus Aaliya Jaleel, Lee and Low Books, 978-1620147924, £12.52pbk

The Girls, Lauren Ace, illus Jenny Lovlie, Caterpillar Books, 978-1848578432, £6.99pbk

Sawbones, Catherine Johnson, Walker Books, 978-1406340570, £4.99 pbk

Tall Story, Candy Gourlay, Tamarind, 978-1848531376, £6.99 pbk

The Time of Green Magic, Hilary McKay, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1529019230, £12.99 hbk

The Cure for a Crime, Roopa Farooki, OUP, 978-0192773593, £6.99 pbk



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



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.

Margaret Meek Spencer

1925 – 4 May 2020

Clive Barnes remembers Margaret Meek Spencer

To be asked to write an obituary for Margaret Meek Spencer brings on inevitable feelings of inadequacy, particularly as, to my shame, I do not possess a copy of her slim but oh so influential title, **How Texts Teach What Readers Learn** (1988). But plucking any books of criticism published in the closing decades of the last century from even my shameful shelves, her presence is inescapable. If it isn't in a contribution of her own, written in typical enthusiastic style peppered with questions that she challenged us to answer, then in the index, revealing her influence on anyone and everyone writing about the interaction of children and books at this time. When Chris Powling, as the then editor, published a best of **Books for Keeps** in 1994, it was Margaret Meek who provided the foreword.

Alongside Aidan and Nancy Chambers (Thimble Press, of course, published **How Texts Teach**) and Geoff Fox of **Children's Literature in Education**, Margaret Meek was of a generation of critics who were also, or had been, teachers and were as interested in the children as the books. They sought to discover and promote the best in children's literature, and also to understand through careful observation of children's interaction with books – and, groundbreakingly, other forms of the written word – how young readers responded to texts. Underpinned by a range of shifting theoretical approaches, this was an explorative and creative project in which those who sought to teach children to read, or encourage an appreciation of literature in young people, set out to determine how and why literature was essential to a child's development by listening to children themselves.

In a busy professional life, Meek taught student teachers at the **University of London School of Education** for over twenty years, remaining as Emeritus Reader in Education after her retirement from that role in 1980. She was the reviews editor of **The School Librarian** for many years and an early recipient of the **Eleanor Farjeon Award** for services to children's literature in 1971, when it might be said she had barely got into her stride. As one of the three editors of **The Cool Web** (1977) she kick-started a discussion about the relationship of literacy with literature: how the teaching of reading might relate to the child's experience of the world through reading. And this was a question whose ramifications preoccupied her for the rest of her career. With an international reputation, she was a frequent presence at literature and literacy conferences where children's writers and illustrators came together with teachers, librarians and other figures in the children's book world and was often called on for a keynote speech or, being quick on her feet, a summing up.

Her particular, but hardly exclusive, interest was in picture books and the acquisition of early literacy and, apart from **How Texts Teach** she wrote a number of other works whose titles reflect this, among them **On Being Literate** (1971), **Learning to Read** (1982) and **Language and Literacy** (1988). She also made many contributions to collections edited by others. She was an early advocate of the 'real books' approach to reading, her entire work predicated on the belief that learning to read was not merely a mechanical process: it was an entry into a relationship within the text with important psychological, social and cultural dimensions in which a reader, even a very young one, both drew on and grew in experience. Her interest was not confined to fiction. She examined information texts,



too, and, more than twenty years ago, wondered what the growth of information gathering from CD Roms might mean 'when we know that books might be better for thinking than screens'. What did she think of the present dominance of the internet in schools and home?

She was understandably convinced of the distinctive contribution of the book and protective of it, but recognised and celebrated that the book should take its place in a child's total world of experience. An internationalist, it is significant that one of her later contributions was the editing of **Children's Literature and National Identity** (2001), which she saw as a contribution to reducing ethnocentrism and breaking down the isolation of national cultures. Above all, in her work, I sense the legacy of Richard Hoggart's **The Uses of Literacy** (1957), a guiding democratic, inclusive, forward looking and activist spirit, which occasionally blazes out. Her contribution to the **Books for Keeps** collection mentioned above was an explanation of why she didn't like Kenneth Grahame's **Wind in the Willows**, which developed into a heartfelt denunciation of what she called this 'men's club' of a book: 'I knew what boys did in corners. They formed exclusive clubs, discussed girls whom they looked at sideways without turning round, and taught each other how to exploit the superiority they recognised as theirs by right.' She hated the book's 'excluding and exclusive' nostalgia. Nailing her colours firmly to the mast, she wrote, for children 'the excitement of reading is a dialogue with their future... But this [Grahame's] arcadian world is neither brave nor new; it has too few people in it.' You don't have to entirely agree with her about **Wind in the Willows** to, nevertheless, stand up and cheer.

Clive Barnes has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian and is now a freelance researcher and writer.

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I wish I'd written...

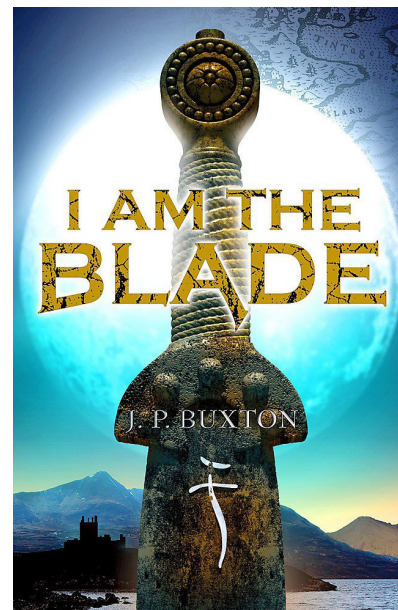


Critically acclaimed and translated into more than a dozen languages, **Beverley Birch** is the author of novels, picture books, narrative non-fiction and retellings of folk-tales and classic works. Her new novel, **Song Beneath the Tides**, is published by Guppy Books, 978-1913101077, £12.99 hbk.

Beverley Birch chooses a book that embodies the power of the imagination.

I admire so many books, but one that I feel 'oh, I wish I could write like this, I wish I'd written this', is J.P. Buxton's **I Am the Blade**. He ensnares you in his world. Places live and breathe as characters. It's breakneck adventure, terrifying, often wryly humorous. I travel every step with Tog – hearing, smelling, sensing from the opening: he and his woodcutter guardian in their hut, that fear when the stranger knocks at the door. Such speed in launching us into the story, such vivid characters! I'm propelled with Tog into the freezing landscape, running for his life, because there's a man with a knife behind him, always behind him, and he doesn't know why.

Buxton transforms the Arthurian myth to an urgent whisper in a teenage boy's life. In shock, in a freezing landscape, surviving by wits and fighting skills (learned, but never tested), with the odd companions he gathers. Slaves on the run, Roman merchants (can they be trusted – who is really as they seem, who his friend, who is foe?) The quest, or destiny, ahead only dimly perceived, fed by the dying words of his woodcutter guardian, STONE, ORCHARD, MOON. Depth, insight, mystery, riveting adventure, powerful fight scenes, all threaded in that bitter, brutal landscape. Wonderful!



I Am the Blade by J.P. Buxton was published by Hodder Children's Books, and is now only available in eBook.



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REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tony Bradman is an author, editor and reviewer of children's books.

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

Rebecca Butler writes and lectures on children's literature.

Jane Churchill is a children's book consultant.

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

Kathleen Faloon is a primary school teacher and leads an *OU/UKLA Teachers' Reading Group*

Janet Fisher is a children's literature consultant.

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

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

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

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

Keranjit Kaur is a primary school teacher and leads an *OU/UKLA Teachers' Reading Group*

Helen Kelsey is a primary school teacher and leads an *OU/UKLA Teachers' Reading Group*

Matthew Martin is a primary school teacher.

Sue McGonigle is a Lecturer in Primary Education and Co-Creator of www.lovemybooks.co.uk

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

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

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

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

Sue Roe is a children's librarian.

Elizabeth Schlenther is the compiler of www.healthbooks.org.uk

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

Clare Zinkin is a children's book consultant, writer and editor.

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant

New talent

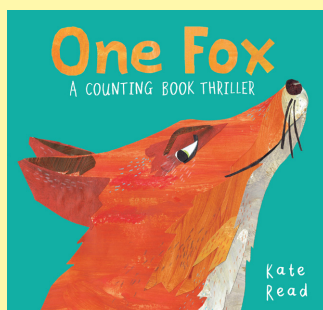
One Fox. A counting Book Thriller

★★★★★

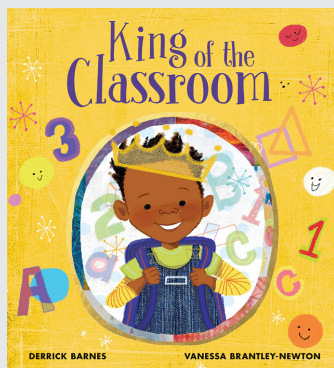
Kate Read, 32pp, Two Hoots, 9781529010893, £7.99 pbk

One fox... three plump hens... oh dear. Silently, stealthily the fox creeps towards his prey... we see his sharp teeth (ten of them) but then an explosion of feathers as a hundred angry hens burst across the double spread.

This is an exciting debut. Kate Read's artwork is vigorous and refreshing, her vibrant colours and textured images drawing on her background as a textile artist, while the drama of her illustrations in which a single figure or detail takes centre stage surely derives from her work as a theatre designer. For this is indeed a picture book that is full of drama – but just like an illustrious predecessor, Rosie's Walk – the tension is created through the simplest of means, rises to a



crescendo then to a conclusion that is completely satisfying. The text is minimal. Here the vocabulary has been chosen with care drawing on apposite adjectives and alliteration to add to the suspense of the ascending numbers. These are matched to appropriate objects that in themselves create tension – this is a counting book thriller, indeed. What an exciting introduction to counting. This is likely to become a favourite not because of its educational value but because of the engaging story. Highly recommended; an artist to watch. **FH**



King of the Classroom

★★★★★

Derrick Barnes, ill. Vanessa Brantley-Newton, Scallywag Press, 32pp, £12.99, hbk

It is a special morning, the first day of nursery school for one little boy. Encouraged by his mother to feel proud and confident he is told today he will be 'King of the Classroom.' This theme continues throughout the book from the moment the child rises with sunlight creating a golden crown around his head, he has a 'golden' brush to clean his teeth and a carriage to take him to nursery. He enters the classroom majestically and sails through the challenges of school with a strong sense of self-worth and support. Fortunately, his confidence is matched with kindness, for example he notices another child has less lunch than him and so shares with him. After a successful day he cannot wait to tell his parents about his new friends and experiences.

The story focuses on a landmark in a young child's life, seeking to smooth the transition on starting nursery school and preempt any anxiety, undoubtedly on the part of the parent as much as the child! The theme is informed by the epigraph which contains the words of Benjamin Moys, thinker behind the civil rights movement on the importance of a child feeling protected, loved and developing self-belief. This is a picture book which reflects diverse classroom contexts and promotes aspiration and achievement for all. The illustrations are gorgeous, vibrant and full of warmth, smiles and colour perfectly matching the sentiment of the story. **SMc**

Perdu

★★★★★

Richard Jones, Simon and Schuster, 32pp, 9781471181269, £6.99 pbk

Perdu is a little dog with a red scarf round his neck. He is lost. Searching for someone to befriend him he journeys from the country into the city, only to meet with hostility, anger and rejection. He even loses his scarf. Lost and alone, what will happen to him?

This is a gentle, lyrical story which captures the sense of loneliness for someone without a home, emphasising subtly the importance of belonging, of a relationship. Richard Jones' narrative is straightforward, taking the reader with Perdu as he travels across the double page spreads moving from one environment to another. The images also take us on a journey, a visual journey from the bleak darkness of the opening spread, through the city streets to the

final scene where we see Perdu found at last and looking forward to the dawn. Throughout there are recurring images – the lone leaf that is also on a journey; the little girl whose red pompom hat echoes the red scarf Perdu wears. These are clues that extend and enrich. Jones uses a soft textured palette to combine with satisfying solid shapes that effectively convey emotion and atmosphere set within a spacious design. My only reservation – the use of a blue font against the stormy background of the opening spread – but this is picture book to recommend. **FH**

Meet the Planets

★★★★★

Caryl Hart, ill. Bethan Woollvin, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 32pp, 978 1 4088 9298 5, £6.99 pbk
Meet the planets is assuredly what youngsters will do when, along with the small child narrator and accompanying dog, they blast off into space aboard the space rocket that awaits them one moonlit night.

Through Caryl Hart's rhyming narrative we listen to introductions voiced by in turn, the Sun, Mercury, Venus, Earth and the Moon, the red planet Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Pluto with 'buddy' Charon. In chatty mode, each one tells readers of its key features: the Sun warns 'I'm friendly but don't get too close now or I'll frizzle you up to a fry!' while Mars talks of its 'rust-coloured dust that those pesky winds blow round my head.' Uranus informs 'golly, I'm f-freezing! / I'm a great swirling windy ice ball' and lonely Neptune reveals its 'Ice-Giant' other name.

Nocturnal adventure complete, it's time to head back where a cosy bed awaits for one adventurer to snuggle down in. With her bold colour palette, Bethan Woollvin's alluring illustrations immediately grab the attention, as she personifies each planet in turn, in this exciting whizz around the solar system for aspiring astronomers. Gently educational, but most important, enormous fun, this is also a smashing unconventional bedtime story. **JB**

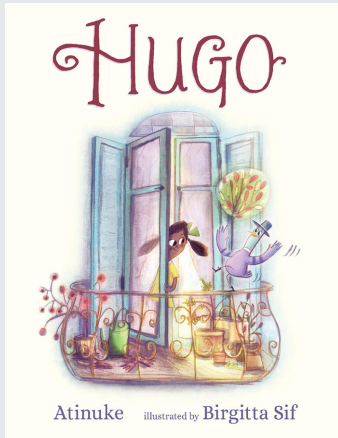
Hugo

★★★★★

Atinuke, ill. Birgitta Sif, Walker Books, 40pp, 978 1 4063 7929 7, £12.99 hbk

Hugo the pigeon has an important job; he's the park keeper. Patrolling the park every day, he takes his job seriously as he keeps Madame Grande company and discusses the news with Monsieur Occupé in springtime; cleans up after messy summer picnicks; and in the autumn, plays with the children to give their mothers a rest.

During the winter he flies off visiting all the apartments that overlook the park, making sure the residents know

Under 5s **Pre-School/Nursery/Infant** continued

Atinuke illustrated by Birgitta Sif

that spring will soon be with them. But, there's one window where the curtains are always closed. There Hugo knocks politely certain there is someone hiding within, until one day the curtains part and he spies a little girl. Hugo greets her shy smile with a welcome spring dance and continues his daily visits, welcomed by the child.

One day however, Hugo is late and the concerned little girl comes right out on the balcony looking for her feathered friend. Hugo arrives and his dance performed with rather gay abandon sets off a chain of events that almost cost his life but end up completely changing for the better, the shy little girl's lonely life.

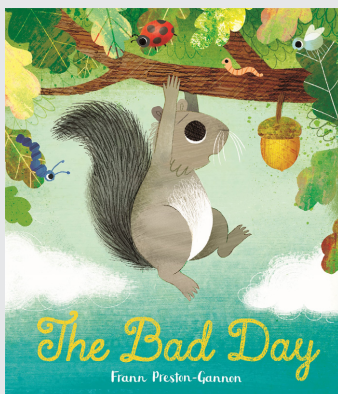
Atinuke's is a thoroughly heartwarming story that highlights and celebrates the power of friendship, beautifully illustrated with gentle humour and lots of gorgeously quirky detail by Birgitta Sif. **JB**

The Bad Day

★★★★★

Frann Preston-Gannon, Templar Books, 978 1 7874 1660 4, £6.99 pbk

Squirrel is convinced he's going to have a wonderful day, for there up in the tree in front of him hanging from a branch, is a large acorn ripe and ready for the taking. That sense of well being quickly dissipates however as the bushy-tailed narrator realises that he's stuck with the desired object tantalisingly just out of his reach.



Squirrel however is not the only animal having a rotten day. Snake has tied itself in knots, Tortoise is flat on its back, Fox has a dreadful stomach ache and as for Mouse, the little creature is in a very dark hole that's scary and smelly. When the other animals realise that Mouse's plight is the worst of all they decide that teamwork of a very clever kind will be required to save their little pal. In so doing they might just succeed in pulling off a tricky rescue and in so doing turn this bad day around.

The author has woven a thoroughly enjoyable rhyming fable-like tale that entertains and gently delivers a lesson in the power of cooperation. Her richly coloured, textured scenes – large and small – enhance the telling. Particularly effective is the four-panel sequence showing Squirrel's rescue after which children will eagerly anticipate the outcome of the fluffy tail flicking on the narrator's part. **JB**

Everyone's Awake

★★★★★

Colin Meloy, ill. Shawn Harris, Chronicle Books, 48pp, 978-1-4521-7805-9, £12.99, hbk

Here's a book for anyone who's ever wondered how they're going to get to sleep – or how they're going to get other people to sleep – and it's a riot.

In a rambling old lighthouse lives a family – parents, teenagers, cat, dog, our narrator and Grandma. They're an eccentric bunch with diverse tastes, and they don't always get on. Especially at midnight, when they ought to be sleeping but they can't.

Tactics employed to while away the time start small – needlework, online shopping – but quickly escalate to plate-juggling, prank-calling and chainsaw topiary. As for Grandma, she's playing whist with Grandpa's ghost, and even the pets are discovering their inner anarchist. Acid yellows, bright blues and shocking pinks leap across the pages, adding bursts of eye-popping colour to the mayhem unfolding indoors, and Shawn Harris's retro-modern styling adds a contemporary vibe.

Written in rhyming verse, the text rattles through an increasingly wild array of nocturnal activities in an exuberant celebration of diversity and individuality. Colin Meloy is lead singer and songwriter with The Decemberists (as well as author of the bestselling *Wildwood* series) and there's a strongly performative element to his text. 'You won't be able to stop yourself from singing this aloud,' says Jon Scieszka, in one of the many tributes from creatives who've enjoyed the book.

Readers will meet unusual words and new ideas – from 'ten-yard bolts of chintz' and Baudelaire, to Pulitzers and a Coup d'Etat – but it's all part of the rollercoaster fun staying awake all

night, and Shawn Harris's exuberant artwork keeps everyone on board with plenty of extra details adding depth and humour to the text. Look out for the frogs, which he 'stayed up late' to hide on every spread!

Younger children will enjoy the 'what's next?' flood of images, while older readers will appreciate the subversive jokes and the confrontations they provoke. Recommended for reluctant readers (and jaded parents who've spent all night trying to settle rowdy kids....). **CFH**

Follow Me, Flo!

★★★★★

Jarvis, Walker, 32pp, 978 1 4063 7643 2, £12.99 hbk

This bright, vibrant picturebook by Jarvis tells the story of Flo who is not like most other little ducks. Unlike her siblings she does not follow the rules and gets up to all kinds of mischief. On a journey to visit Flo's aunt Daddy Duck tried to instil upon Flo the importance of following him carefully but Flo is easily distracted and the prospect of visiting a fun fair is too great to resist. To keep her on the right track Daddy Duck teaches her a song but Flo decides to change the words and go off on her own adventure. Unbeknownst to Flo a fox has been following her and she realises she is in great danger. Thankfully Daddy Duck's song helps her find the way and her escapade teaches her a valuable lesson.

A big appeal for young readers is the interactive nature of the book. Readers are aware of the danger getting closer long before Flo and children will delight in watching the illustrations of the fox grow larger with each turn of the page enhancing the nervous excitement of the chase. Indeed there are lots of additional creatures for children to notice and track throughout the book who's facial expression seem to indicate they too are more aware of the danger than Flo. The 'Follow Me' song being central to the story also increases the interaction, encouraging children to join in and making this a great story read aloud. **KF**

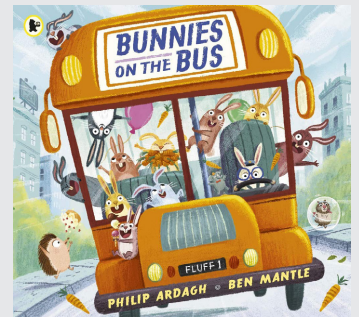
My Mama

★★★★★

Annemarie van Haeringen, Gecko press, 32pp, 978 1 776572 67 0, £11.99 hbk

We are introduced to this charming mother and offspring by the drawing of a happy – and pregnant – elephant! She is dressed in a delightful frock covered in multi-coloured scribbles, and she pats the orange star on her extended 'tummy' contentedly. Then, offspring, dressed in orange starry trousers, shares all sorts of activities with mother, some quite crazy, such as when youngster decides to improve Mum's frock by cutting a deep fringe into it. Little one is the storyteller, and he announces that he is always the one in charge. Watering the plants will amuse young readers;

Mum has the watering can, whilst in the picture we see little one peeing.... Mama is never angry with him, but when she is, she's really angry, and her explanation takes a very long time, he says. The ending is poignant; 'At bedtime, my mama shakes the stars off my pants. I give her a big hug and say; "Goodnight, stars, see you tomorrow!"' A wonderful picture illustrates this happening. The book is bound to generate lots of discussion between reader and listener as they share the story and talk about the relationship between the elephants, and about all their various activities. There are intriguing details to find in the bold pictures, including spotting the starry endpapers... orange of course. **GB**

**Bunnies on the Bus**

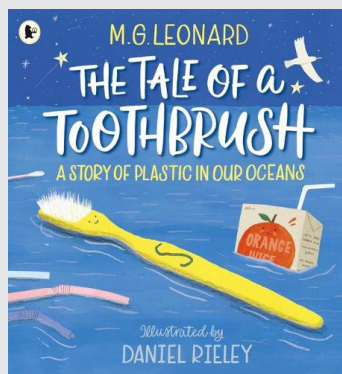
★★★★★

Philip Ardagh, ill. Ben Mantle, Walker, 32pp, 978 1 4063 9401 6, £6.99 pbk

On the front cover, a full dozen crazy, colourful bunnies crowd each other on the bus, as it zooms along the street, scattering all before it. As the story begins, readers should linger over each double spread of illustration as there are sub plots and sub-sub plots to spot! Start with the washing hanging on the line on the first page... there is something UNUSUAL there! And there is a stonking great diamond on the penultimate page! Again, the text mentions no such wonder, but search the illustrations to find that legend. The bus whizzes past bus stops, swerves round corners and knocks shopping bags flying on its non-stop roller coaster adventure. 'There are bunnies on the roof! Bunnies in the aisle! DO sit down, bunnies or you'll end up in a pile!' The chaos they create produces horror from all the other inhabitants of Sunny Town. The rhyming text bounces along, and readers will soon join in with the refrain, 'Bunnies on the bus! Bunnies on the bus! No wonder there's a fuss about the bunnies on the bus!' The illustrator has added many dimensions to Ardagh's hilarious text, and this book is a real treat to read aloud as well as for children to read for themselves. How does it end? Why, off jump all the bunnies from the bus... and they pile onto a train! Ardagh's dedication reads: 'A message to naughty bunnies everywhere: BEHAVE!' Enjoy; it's brilliant! **GB**

reviews

5 – 8 Infant/Junior



The Tale of a Toothbrush

★★★★

M.G. Leonard, illus Daniel Rieley, Walker Books, 978-1406391817, 32pp, £6.99 pbk

On one level, this is a spritely reworking of the favourite tale of a toy – or in this case, a toothbrush – thrown away and its subsequent exploits as it makes its way back home. In this instance though, the toothbrush's adventure also shows readers lots about the impact on the planet of the simple act of throwing something away, especially if it's made of plastic.

Sammy is Sofia's first toothbrush and she proudly draws an S on his tummy but even so, when his bristles are worn down, Mum throws him in the bin. In a cargo of rubbish, Sammy travels across the seas, before finding his way into a river, and from there back into the ocean to start the long journey back to Sofia. Along the way, he meets plastic bottles, plastic straws and plastic bags, all floating in the ocean, before a kindly albatross gives him a lift for the last leg.

Via Sammy's adventure, M.G. Leonard cleverly delivers a message about the harm discarded plastic is doing to our oceans, and shows how it is the responsibility of all of us, even the young, to change things – for a start, the book suggests we all use bamboo toothbrushes in future. Though the message is an important one, the delivery is fun and best of all, hopeful. Daniel Rieley injects Sammy and his plastic friends with a cheerfulness and positivity that we all need, and this is a very good, very entertaining and accessible piece of environmental education. **AR**

There's a Crocodile in the House

★★★★

Paul Cookson, ill. Liz Million, Otter-Barry Books, 96pp, 978 1 91307 400 5, £6.99 pbk

This latest collection from well-known performance poet Paul Cookson is as full of lively humour as regular readers would expect. Aimed at younger children and ideal for classroom use,

the poems range from the laugh-out-loud funny to the slightly scary or completely absurd. Children will meet crocodiles, dinosaurs, robot teachers, pirates, aliens, and a toilet seat with teeth. The poems are ideal for reading aloud with suggestions for group performance and ideas for listener participation given throughout. Liz Million's humorous and lively cartoon-style illustrations match the tone of the poems perfectly. This light-hearted, funny collection is packed with repetition, choruses, kennings, sound effects and actions ensuring an entertaining treat for young readers and listeners. **SR**

Tiny T Rex and the Very Dark Dark

★★★

Jonathan Stutzman, ill. Jay Fleck, Scholastic, 24pp, 9781452170343 £11.99 hbk

Tiny and Pointy are little dinosaurs who would like to camp out in their garden, but they are afraid of the dark. Of course, they are dinosaurs so shouldn't be scared of anything, even though they are little, so this is a sweet tale of gathering courage to overcome your fears.

The limited colour palette and simple shapes bring a charm to this hardback book. The characters themselves spend a long time preparing for their camp out and the pictures add to this build up too. For example, stegosaurus pyjamas have to include material for the scales... There's some really amusing illustrations which I'm sure children will love, especially dinosaur loving ones.

There are plenty of books about children being afraid of the dark but this one is good because the two friends try to work together on combatting their fear before they go outside. They combine their brain power to come up with a plan which is drawn out in the book, including making helmets! They even make a 'super-bright night-light' which looks wonderful against the dark colours on the pages. But then the dark turns out to be a bit bigger and all-consuming than they'd expected.

There's some nice pausing in the page layouts for this with a good use of space. Thankfully Pointy and Tiny have a spectacular surprise awaiting them when they pluck up the courage to come out of their tent. This is sweet book with endearing characters to help children overcome their fears, not just of the dark, because working together, as a team, can help overcome lots of difficulties as these two friends prove. **SG**

The Lost Book

★★★★

Margarita Surnaite, Andersen Press, 32pp, 9781783448814, £6.99 pbk

Henry is not keen on books – unlike everyone else in Rabbit Town; books are everywhere there – boring. Henry would rather have a real life adventure. That is until he finds the Lost Book. It needs to be found and Henry sets off to look for the owner – and finds himself having 'an adventure so exciting it could have been in a book'.

This is artist Margarita Surnaite's debut picture book. Stylishly presented, her clear uncluttered style uses subtle outlines and a cool pastel palette, that perfectly matches the minimal text. Does this mean that the storyline is vague or elliptical? Far from it; with commendable economy, Surnaite presents a narrative that would make sense without the illustration. However, together they create a richly enjoyable experience where the words are mirrored and extended by the images. For here is not just a story in which the animal world and the human meet; rather it is about imagination itself and how story can inhabit reality – and vice versa. With clear font and spacious design this is a pleasure to read and Margarita Surnaite an author-illustrator to watch. **FH**

Bear Shaped

★★★★★

Dawn Coulter-Cruttenden, Oxford, 32pp, 978 0 19 277211 4, £6.99, pbk

Jack loved Bear and took him everywhere with him. Jack often finds trying new things or communicating with other people difficult due to his autism but having Bear makes him feel brave, Bear is his bridge to the world. But then one day at the park Bear disappears, leaving a bear shaped hole in Jack. Local searches yield no results but when the news spreads more widely messages come from all over the world and bears start arriving in the post. The kindness of others creates a change in Jack, he realizes how lucky he has been to have Bear and that many children might appreciate a bear of their own to be friends with, so he begins giving them away.

Inspired by a true story, this is a sensitively told and beautifully illustrated picture book about loving and losing something precious. It conveys one child's experiences of coping with grief and gradually growing in strength with the recognition you are not alone in feeling sad, in a gentle and moving way. This book has resonance for everyone who has lost a toy, loved pet or member of the family and also provides insight into the world of an autistic child. **SMc**

On Wings of Words

★★★★★

Jennifer Berne, ill. Becca Stadtlander, Chronicle Books, 52pp, 978 1 4521 4297 5, £13.99 hbk

In this superb narrative picture book biography author Jennifer Berne weaves together for young readers, the life of poet Emily Dickinson and excerpts from her poetry. Complementing this are Becca Stadtlander's beautiful, detailed gouache and watercolour paintings, first of the child Emily to whom 'every bird, every flower, every bee or breeze or slant of light seemed to speak'; who explored the world around her with her eyes, ears and thoughts, then found 'new words for everything she was discovering'.

We're given glimpses of Emily's childhood with her beloved older brother Austin; with her school friends and as she becomes a mature young woman

with 'The strongest friends of the soul' books that she read in the sanctuary of her own room.

Such are the power of the words and illustrations that it's almost impossible not to share her intensity of feelings towards all these things, as well as to share in her search for answers to the sorrows of life.

Eventually all these feelings poured forth as poems that arose deep within herself, soothing her sadness, giving her strength and the freedom of her imagination. While her inner world grew though, Emily's outer world shrank more and more as she wrote hundreds and hundreds of wonderful poems, that her sister only discovered after Emily's death.

The frequent appearance of butterflies in the illustrations serve as an inspired symbol of how Emily's words, like her spirit, transcend all else in this reverential rendering of a poet whose words continue to touch the hearts and minds of countless poetry lovers the world over. **JB**

Animal Explorers

★★★★★

Sharon Rentta, ill. Sharon Rentta, Scholastic, 24pp, 9781407193656 £6.99 pbk

This is rather charming non-fiction book. Sharon Rentta has both written and illustrated the series and has included the biographies of famous real life plant hunters at the end which was really interesting.

A polar bear in the Amazon jungle is obviously a slightly unusual but this picture book is full of colour and joy with lively illustrations and plenty of other animals to entertain us. The story starts off in Lola, the Polar Bear's usual habitat. Her grandad inspires her to follow her dreams and go on an adventure when they spy a flower growing in the snow when

spring has sprung. Her grandad tells her about the singing orchid and Lola sets off to find it for her grandad.

She is a very spirited bear and with her small rucksack and canoe manages to make it up the Amazon River to explore a new setting. The book is full of foliage like the rainforest but there are also smaller drawings, annotated, like an explorer's diary which adds to the feel of the book. A bit of a calamity befalls Lola but, with her new jungle friends, she is able to survive and complete her adventure.

Rentta uses great vocabulary throughout and the book is great to read out loud. **Animal Explorers** is the first in the series with **Animal Doctors** and **Animal Railways** to come but I'm sure the rest will prove equally popular with lots of different aged children. **SG**

Hello, Crow!

★★★★★

By Candace Savage, ill. Chelsea O'Byrne, Greystone Kids, 32pp, 978-1-77164-444-0, £12.99, hbk

'Franny skipped down the steps and into the bright morning air. Every bug, every petal was shimmering with wonder...'

According to Franny's dad, she's a dreamer – someone who doesn't think about what she's doing and leaves the kitchen in a mess. But Franny does pay attention to things that really matter – things like backyard shadows and birdsong. So when a big, black crow approaches her, pecking at her sandwich crumbs, she watches him.

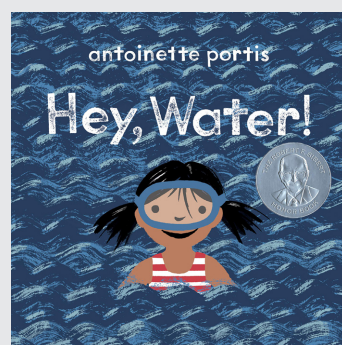
'He's beautiful and shiny!' Franny tells Dad, later that evening. But Dad won't believe she's made friends with a bird. And when the crow brings gifts – a bead, a tiny silver heart – Dad calls her a featherhead and accuses her of inventing silly stories. So Franny takes Dad to meet her new friend. 'I know you want to believe...' Dad says, as they wait by the rock. Then a glossy black bird swoops down out of nowhere and lands on Franny's head, and Dad has to change his mind. 'From that moment on,' says the wise and gentle text, 'Franny's dad did his best to pay attention to what she said' – a well-judged wish-fulfilment outcome which will resonate with many readers.

Candace Savage loves crows, writes non-fiction as well as stories and understands the importance of connecting children with the natural world. When she heard about a girl in Seattle who received gifts from the crows she was feeding, Savage decided to write a book 'infused with crow facts' that would prompt readers to explore their own balconies, gardens and city skies.

Chelsea O'Byrne's artwork captures the open-minded wonder of Savage's text and takes it somewhere even deeper and more resonant. Richly-saturated colours make these

illustrations glow, with crayon details adding form and texture to the timber planking, tiles and backyard greenery. Franny and Crow share the same dark heads, bright eyes and alert interest, which highlights their connection, but Crow is not anthropomorphized. We are not invited to think of him as a pet, but as a fellow creature deserving of our interest and care.

There's a quietly special quality about this book – it's one to treasure and share, and the 'Curious about Crows' facts on the final page are a welcome extra. **CFH**



Hey, Water!

★★★★★

Antoinette Portis, Scallywag Press, 48pp, 978 1 912650 26 2, £12.99 hbk

This strikingly illustrated nonfiction picture book seems simple but works effectively on several levels. With its spare text and conversational style, it depicts a young girl as she explores the world of water, even addressing it directly, 'Hey, Water!'. The book works well as an introduction to a science topic for young children. It also skilfully introduces the concept of one element, water, being found in different forms, stream, river, ocean, lake, pool, in different states, ice, snow, fog, steam, cloud, and from different sources, tap, hose, shower. All these concepts and facts are brilliantly presented in the matt, aqua-coloured illustrations with their tactile, brushstroke effects. The shapes and patterns of the water, the wave effect endpapers and the clear, pastel fonts are all eye-catching. The whole book presents a science topic from a young child's perspective and combines playfulness and learning in an appealing way.

The final pages are aimed at older children, parents and teachers and give more detailed information on water forms, the water cycle, conservation of water and some fun facts and activities. This would be an excellent addition to school, public and family libraries as it combines themes of science and conservation with striking design and use of colour to appeal to a range of ages. **SR**

A Book of Bears: At Home with Bears Around the World

★★★★★

By Katie Viggers, Laurence King, 32pp, 978-1-78627-290-4, £11.99 hbk

Bursting with engaging facts about the world's bear families, from the petite Sun Bears of South East Asia to the rather more substantial Polar Bears of the Arctic, this warm-hearted information book takes a creative approach and will please children who usually prefer stories as well as those who opt for non-fiction.

Throughout this charmingly-illustrated book, representatives of the eight families chat about their likes and dislikes, and size comparison charts sit alongside informative panels about the bears' homes and habits. Five themed spreads depicting the bears involved in collaborative activities including swimming and climbing help readers focus on similarities and differences between the families – on the athletics track, for example, Brown Bear is finishing the race before Panda has so much as broken into a trot, and all eight bears are tucking into very different meals around a check-clothed bistro table.

Individual bears also take part in anthropomorphic pursuits, such as fishing with a rod and line, and contribute to the discussion: 'we bears don't all live in one place,' observes the Brown Bear, obligingly. 'We just got together today to help make this book.' Occasionally this blurs the line between fact and fiction (with the potential to confuse younger or more imaginative readers) but overall Viggers' approach is spot-on for maximum engagement. There's much fun to be had with this book, and lots of learning opportunities, too. **CFH**



Another Book about Bears

★★★★★

Laura and Philip Bunting, Scholastic, 32pp, 978-0-702302-35-0, £6.99 pbk £6.99

Have you ever wondered why there are so many bears in children's books? Or what they think about being at a writer's beck and call?

The bears in this book don't like being woken by the bear alarm just as they're having a nice doze. Being forced to jump right up and do

whatever the book says has become a chore, and the biggest bear is keen to get their message across.

'You can't quit!' says the writer.

'We can,' says the bear, 'and we just did.'

So the writer has a go at making the bear participate – in a tutu, on a bicycle. The bear needs to strike a deal, and fast. But his friend the elephant is too big to fit inside a picturebook, and none of the other animals will do. The peacock is too fancy, the marmoset too silly and the dodo too extinct. As for the blobfish... seriously?

Bear is out of options, but that's OK because the writer has a cunning plan – a story upgrade, because it's easy to change things when you're in charge. 'One day the bear fell asleep and hibernated, uninterrupted, for eight long months.' And if that leaves Goldilocks working with a leopard, a monkey and a kangaroo, it's only for a while.

The Buntings live and work in Australia, so readers will meet some exciting animals alongside the usual suspects – think flying fox and echidna, as well as cat and horse – and the gently transgressive interplay between bear and writer will be appreciated by young audiences. The humour in this book is visual as well as verbal, and opens the door to other literary pleasures.

By drawing attention to expectations, story structure and the relationship between creative ideas and finished product, **Another Book about Bears** may give children a taste for playing the impresario. You don't have to be a grown-up to boss a story-character around, and using your creative power can be the best kind of fun. **CFH**

Midge and Mo

★★★★★

Lara Williamson, Becky Cameron ill, Little Tiger, 96pp, 978 1 78895 111 1, £7.99

We first meet Midge, a small pale, frightened boy peering up at the entrance to his new school. It is his first day in his new surroundings and he is struggling to cope with the unfamiliarity of the situation. We learn his parents have recently separated and that it is more than just starting a new school that is causing Midge great sadness. Everything has changed for Midge and he wants everything to go back to the way things were.

'If I was on a bike, I'd make it go backwards not forwards,' he thinks to himself. 'If I could, I'd walk backwards too.'

His new teacher pairs him with Mo, a friendly, positive and animated character to help show him around the school and keep him company. Mo is determined to cheer Midge up but it seems the harder she tries the more distant and sad Midge becomes, as though her attempts to cheer only serve to remind him of happier times. Mo begins to despair

reviews

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

that she cannot help Midge and seeks advice from her teacher and her parents. We discover that Midge and Mo have more in common than it first appears and begins to draw on her own experiences to support her new friend. Mo helps her friend to understand that feeling sad is okay and slowly and patiently, through kindness and understanding, waits for the cloud of sadness to lift.

The wonderful illustrations by Becky Cameron add depth, beautifully reflecting the feelings of the main characters. Williamson has triumphed in capturing the sense of fear, confusion and anxiety that change can cause to children. Most importantly, both author and illustrator have

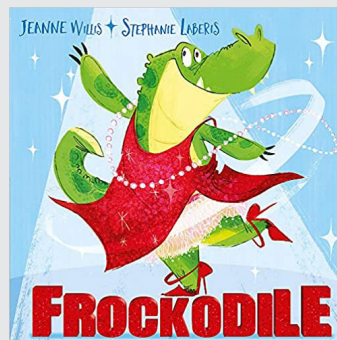
also perfectly portrayed the beauty and healing power of friendship and understanding, thus helping to build empathy in young readers. **KF**

Frockodile

★★★★★

Jeanne Willis, ill. Stephanie Laberis, Hodder Children's Books, 32pp, 978 1 444 90824 4, £6.99, pbk

As always, Jeanne Willis' rhyming text begs to be read aloud. 'By the inky, stinky swamp where no one ever goes, Cliff the little crocodile found a pile of clothes.' Frilly underwear, a slinky red dress, stilettos and a string pearls, no less. Not able to resist, Cliff tries them all on, and, oh, how he loves them!



But the mean hyenas laugh at him and tell him to stop dressing like a girly or they'll go and tell his Dad. Next, we are introduced to Dad; he looks like a baddy with a patch over one eye, leather jacket flying as he roars around on his motor bike; none of the

other animals dares challenge him. But Cliff loves his Dad... would he be ashamed if Dad saw Cliff in a frock? Or sad, and die of shock? Freddy the frog turns out to be a big supporter of Cliff, and the animals unite to devise a show in which Cliff can partake in his new guise. The illustrations show just how much support there is for all the performers.... And despite the rehearsals going badly wrong, on the night of the performance, Dad just loves the show and declares his son Cliff to be star of the night, whispering to his son, 'May I have my pearls back now?' and the final laugh is... we see Dad is wearing fabulous, adorable, scarlet high heels! A book to amuse and ponder upon, and to delight all those little ones who just love to dress up. **GB**

8 – 10 Junior/Middle

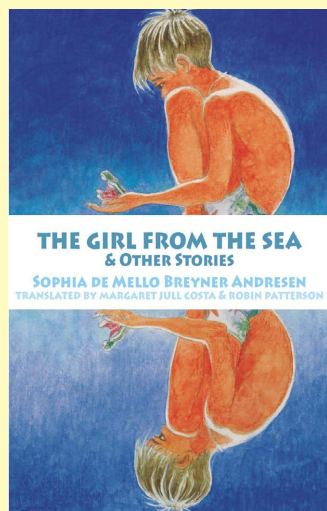
Ed's Choice

The Girl from the Sea and other stories

★★★★★

Sophia De Mello Breyner Andresen translated by Margaret Jull Costa & Robin Patterson, Dedalus, 306pp, 9781912868032, £11.99, pbk

Collections of short stories do not get much attention unless they are fairy tales or by a very familiar author. Novels are seen as more accessible, but this can be a mistake. Certainly, in the case of this volume it would be a shame to pass it over. These stories have come to us from Portugal and this is the first English translation of this Portuguese writer who has classic status in her own country. They are lyrical tales with a message for the reader. Central to all, a recurring theme, is a love for the natural world and our relationship to it and the stories presented here are in tone reflective rather than active. They are very much literary fairy tales that make one think of Hans Christian Andersen and Oscar Wilde. But they are not as cruel in their judgements; rather there is an attractive gentleness. One might expect *The Girl from the Sea* to be comparable to the *Little Mermaid* with a similar moralistic and tragic ending. Rather we are given a story which shows that there can be a different relationship



between the human world and that of the sea – and this relationship is the message throughout the volume. The prose flows easily, the translation attractive and readable. These are stories that could benefit from being read aloud and shared to encourage discussion since most are relatively short and have the pleasing shape of the traditional tale. This is a very welcome addition to the bookshelves, opening eyes and minds to the literature of the wider world and bringing young readers new voices, new cadences, opening new doors and windows for the imagination. **FH**

Johnny Ball: Accidental Football Genius

★★★

Matt Oldfield, Walker Books, 207pp, 9781406396461, £5.99 pbk. Matt Oldfield's previous successes have been biographies of real footballers but, in this new series,

he tells the story of a young football fanatic who lacks the talent to hit the big time as a player, but might just make it as a manager.

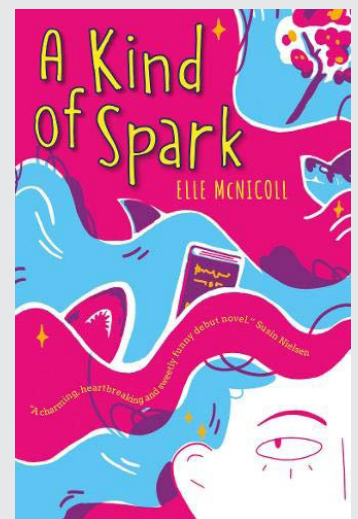
Johnny Ball is a familiar character to many school playgrounds: the kid who loves football more than anybody else – not just playing it but knowing everything there is to know about it

– all the teams, all the players, and all the tactics. Johnny's whole family are obsessives, especially when it comes to the local team, Tisbury Town. Unfortunately, Johnny is not that good at football. His brother is, his best friend is, and his mum is, but he's just not that good. Fortunately, though, he has a few ideas that might help the school team.

Johnny lands himself a role as assistant to the school's clueless football manager. Mr Mann booms clichés like, 'No more schoolboy errors,' and 'That's it, lads, they don't like it up 'em.' He's not a student of the game, like Johnny, and benefits from Johnny's bright ideas. With Johnny's help, the school team embarks upon an exciting cup run. Most of the story follows the same pattern: build up to game, play game, analyse game. It's quite a predictable journey, but there is some authentic matchday drama, which is well described.

As well as the shouty, aggressive coach, the school team also has the big bully captain and the tough-tackling midfielder, but there are some refreshingly original characters, too. The silky skills and goalie saves come from unconventional sources, for example. Johnny has to manage his players' tactics and positioning but also has to work hard off the pitch. Buoyed by the advice of his talented older brother and adorably kooky grandfather, he sets about improving the friendship and camaraderie of the team, which isn't easy when there's a bully on the team.

Johnny's football journey may be accidental, but it's also a determined one. Nothing will stop him from carving a football role for himself and, with managerial vacancies common in the cut-throat world of football, it is very likely that he will be showing off his genius in more books in the future. **SD**



A Kind of Spark

★★★★★

Elle McNicoll, Knights Of, 9781913311056, 192pp, £6.99 pbk. Addie lives with her family in a small village near Edinburgh. She finds school life hard to navigate because she is autistic and even harder when her one friend seems to reject her. Fortunately, her family understand her needs, particularly big sister Keedie who is autistic too and knows exactly what Addie is going through and how to help her. Addie is captivated by learning; the library is a sanctuary and sharks an obsession. When the new class topic on witches is introduced Addie's obsession switches too, she soaks up information about witches and is appalled to discover so many were tried and executed for perceived witchcraft in her village with no acknowledgement or form of memorial. She feels the injustice passionately, her affinity with their cause informed by her own experience

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

and resolves to do something about it.

Narrated from Addie's perspective, we gain an insight into her perceptions of the world and others' reactions to her. Addie has a great deal of understanding of her own needs and how to cope in a neurotypical world which often means masking her responses, where she doesn't understand big sister Keedie, who we find is still struggling herself, is there to explain. Scenes describing Addie's experience of bullying at school bring home the reality of life as an autistic child but also acknowledge the motivation of the chief culprit too.

Addie is an appealing character and readers will be on her side as she fights the blinkered stubbornness of local bureaucracy to achieve her aim of a memorial to village women tried for witchcraft with the help of her family and new best friend Audrey. **SMc**



The House of Hidden Wonders

★★★★★

Sharon Gosling, Ill. Hannah Peck, Little Tiger, 320pp, 97878895906, £6.99 pbk

Victorian Edinburgh in the late Victorian period is a complicated mix of grand houses and wide streets, but it is also the home of ancient hovels that have theoretically been abandoned, but which in fact house the destitute and desperate of society. Zinnie is one of the latter and scrapes a living in order to look after herself and her two 'sisters'; young girls who are parentless and because of their backgrounds are deemed to be not worth helping. Zinnie finds herself helping a young Arthur Conan Doyle (a medical student) retrieve a lost watch and soon finds herself caught up in his investigation of mysterious occurrences. When her youngest 'sister' Nell is taken ill, the girls are brought into the world of Sophia Jex-Blake, the first woman doctor in Scotland and the fictional Lady Sarah Montague. Life becomes ever more complicated and dangerous as they discover murder and some very ruthless criminals. Can the girls solve

the mysteries and will they be able to escape the horrendous conditions that they have had to live in? You will have to read the story to find out.

If you are a fan of well plotted and exciting crime stories then you will absolutely love this book. The author has mixed a superb blend of historical fact with a brilliant thriller. The atmosphere is intense and you really get a sense of the conditions in which the girls lived. The Old Town in Edinburgh still exists and you can visit the maze of alleys and lanes, some of which have legends of ghosts and murders. Whilst this is very much an adventure story, full of danger and intrigues it also has some very serious underlying themes. We have the lack of opportunity for women at all social levels, the horrendous difference between rich and poor and levels of discrimination that are almost unimaginable. Each of the three 'sisters' is looked down on for being poor, being black or being Irish. A character who appears later in the book, Aelfine, faces even worse treatment as she would appear to have Down's Syndrome. However, the author uses these things to highlight the strength and courage that the girls show in overcoming these challenges. This is a fantastic story and one that will find a very willing readership among 'middle grade' readers. **MP**

Freddie's Amazing Bakery: The Cookie Mystery

★★★★

Harriet Whitehorn ill. Alex G Griffiths, Oxford University Press, 128pp, 9780192772022, £5.99 pbk

A lovely sized book for lower key stage readers. This is currently a very popular layout with a slightly squarer shape, a quirky font and lovely rounded shaped illustrations which are very appealing to primary children.

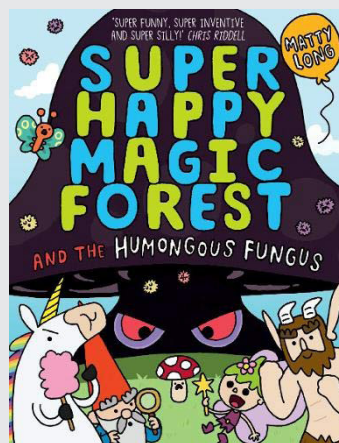
Freddie is a fantastic baker and an all round good chap. He is kind to everybody, he is popular and he makes amazing cakes. Of course he has a rival who doesn't like somebody being better than him AND so he steals Freddie's cakes out of jealousy.

Not only that but a celebrity cat called Cookie also goes missing in the local town along with Freddie's dog (called Flapjack) disappearing intermittently, stealing food whenever he does so.

The characters are great in the story and it has lots of cake references so what's not to like? Freddie remains considerate throughout the book and demonstrates how to treat everybody - even being kind when somebody is unkind to him. The animal characters are particularly fun and cheery - both the drawings and the descriptions. There are mysteries to be solved but in a fun, enjoyable way.

The storylines all meet in a happy ending, with more cake of course and plenty of scope for more stories with the fun characters. Best of all

there is a glossary of cooking terms at the back and a recipe for Freddie's Thumbprint Cookies. I'm off to try them-they sound delicious! **SG**



Super Happy Magic Forest and the Humongous Fungus

★★★★★

Matty Long, ill. Matty Long, Oxford University Press, 192pp, 9780192771490, £6.99 pbk

This is the first chapter book by Matty Long, but it features familiar characters from his very popular *Super Happy Magic Forest* series of picture books, and is generously illustrated in his usual joyous style, albeit in black and white.

Fans of the series will be delighted to see the likes of Hoofius the brave faun, Blossom the greedy unicorn and Trevor the witty mushroom in a feature-length outing, and new readers will be grateful for the hilarious character profiles that open the book, which outline the essential details of each of the Super Happy Heroes (such as Herbert the gnome's unparalleled picnic-packing ability!). There's also a handy, labelled visual guide to the forest - an essential addition to the chronicle of any epic quest.

The heroes' adventure begins when the life-giving Rainbow Dragon is struck down with an illness that no amount of frolicking can cure, and not even The Council of Happiness knows what to do. Only the sage old Gnomedalf has any suggestions, and he sends the Super Heroes off on a mission to collect the magical ingredients needed for the cure.

Thus begins the archetypal quest story - and Matty Long plays brilliantly with the stereotype of the band of brave adventurers making their way through dangerous enchanted territory in order to acquire random, mystical objects and save the day. Every character, from leprechaun to butterfly to talking flower, is carefully crafted for maximum comedy, and every twist and turn of the journey offers the heroes an opportunity to show off their unique and seriously silly talents. There is a deliciously evil super villain in the Humongous Fungus himself, whose henchmen are an army of evil miniature spores who help him spread sickness and toxic evil. He seems utterly undefeatable and provides

genuine menace and threat, which is a welcome balance against the constant presence of comedy.

Though there are well-conceived jokes, the laughs are overwhelmingly provided by Long's cartoons and accompanying captions. It is astounding how much characterisation is created through such simple drawings. Trevor the toadstool's facial expressions are oscar-worthy, and are achieved through nothing more than two dot eyes and a mouth!

This is a super happy magic book, which satirises the current cultural obsession with unicorns and all things enchanted, but in a friendly, frolicking manner and always, always comically. It will have young and older readers giggling all the way through. **SD**



Agents Of The Wild-Operation Honeyhunt

★★★★★

Jennifer Bell, ill. Alice Lickens, Walker Books, 182pp, 978-1-4063-8845-9, £6.99 pbk

This delightful and beautifully presented book, the first in a series, adroitly combines entertainment and education. It features the indomitable Agents Of The Wild who represent the Society for the Protection of Endangered and Awesomely Rare Species, aka SPEARS. Their aim is to recruit Agnes Gamble into their ranks. Agnes is an orphan who lives in an unpalatable high-rise block with her Uncle Douglas after the deaths of her world-famous botanist parents. The SPEARS agents are all animals with the power of speech and gloriously eccentric apparel and behaviours, dedicated to preserving endangered species.

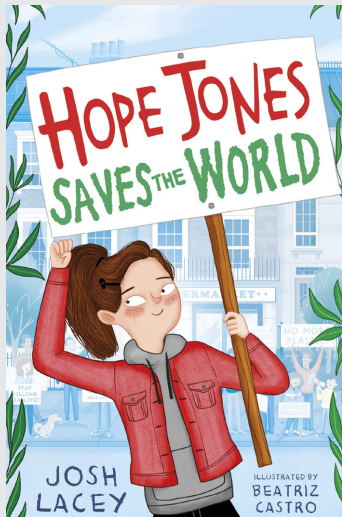
Agnes successfully passes her unusual recruitment tests and sets off to the Atlantic Forest with field agent Attie (an elephant shrew dressed in jungle fatigues) on her first mission-the rescue of a rare bee which has become separated from its colony and is being sought by the unscrupulous Axel Jabheart for his illegal collection. Needless to say, the bee-Elton, the choreographer of the

reviews

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

colony with a predictable penchant for outrageous glasses and disco dancing is successfully rescued and the evil Jabheart is thwarted.

The story is vividly realised, with close attention paid to the smallest detail and brought colourfully to life by the enchanting illustrations. The cover is colourfully embossed, providing a tactile and tempting experience. There is a Top Secret SPEARS file at the back of the book, which describes animals at risk in the Atlantic Forest and invites readers to help in saving them through a variety of activities which are clearly described. This book would work equally well at home or in school – an absolute winner. **VR**



Hope Jones Saves The World

★★★★

Josh Lacey, ill. Beatriz Castro, Andersen Press, 172pp, 978 1 78344 927 9, £6.99 pbk

Along with spiders, ten-year-old Hope Jones's major worry is global warming. Hope is upset by the amount of plastic in the world after watching a video at school showing the pollution of the oceans and how turtles and other animals can ingest plastic and die. So, for her New Year's Resolution, she decides to do something about it and give up plastic. She soon finds this is almost impossible to do but she is determined to do her best. She decides to start with the local supermarket as that is where she notices that vast amounts of plastic are used in almost everything from yoghurt pots to wrapping vegetables.

Hope sets up a blog and makes a huge banner and begins a protest outside the supermarket. She writes to the manager who tries to move her away and claims she is annoying the customers.

Gradually her protest gains momentum. The local café decides to reduce their use of plastic and become more environmentally responsible. The protest outside the supermarket grows as friends and customers join

in. Hope gets her family on board and researches alternatives to cleaning products and other household items they can use instead. But in her enthusiasm Hope is grounded for disobeying her mother and going to the supermarket on her own to protest.

A meeting with the CEO and the marketing team at the supermarket head office is disappointing as they prefer to put profit before the environment. But Hope inspires her school to become greener and is interviewed for a local news website and becomes almost a local celebrity.

Written in the style of blog this story is full of great ideas to cut down on plastic. Hope is a feisty, resourceful and determined child and shows that it is possible to make changes by starting small and being persistent. She grows in confidence throughout the story and is a wonderfully positive role model. The black and white illustrations add warmth and humour. Although the story is perhaps a touch didactic in places it would be an excellent book to inspire children in schools and to show it is possible to make a difference. **JC**

Anisha: Accidental Detective

★★★

Serena Patel, ill. Emma McCann, Usborne, 219pp, 9781474959520, £5.99, pbk

Anisha has an enormous family: countless cousins, grandparents, aunts and uncles all live in the neighbourhood, and each of them is gearing up for the social event of the year...Aunty Bindi's wedding to Uncle Tony.

This would be more than enough for any story, as there is great drama and comedy to be found in Bindi's struggle to juggle all the hair-dying, mehndi-applying, dress-fitting and food-prepping (live lobster curry, anyone?). But Anisha hasn't time to involve herself with any prenuptial excitement, as her Uncle Tony has been kidnapped and Anisha has found the note! Determined not to add to Bindi's stress, Anisha grabs her best friend, Milo, and sets about finding the culprits before it's too late to save the wedding.

Through some smart thinking and plenty of luck, Anisha and Milo soon deduce that the kidnapper must be a member of the family, and, as you might expect from such a big, dramatic family, there are plenty of suspects!

Readers will find Anisha easy company and will enjoy spending time with her. She knows her family are crazy and weird but loves them all. Even when she's accusing her grandma of kidnapping, she does it with warmth and affection! As she makes her way through her list of suspects, she treats readers to an insight into her family's favourite traditions, and even translates a few words in Gujarati and Punjabi. Impressively, Anisha and her family

simultaneously feel totally normal and utterly extraordinary.

As Anisha desperately tries to find Uncle Tony before the wedding starts, she is forced to confront the fact that someone in her perfectly bonkers family has betrayed everyone for their own selfish gain. As someone who holds ambitions to find the world's first cure for meanness, this does not sit well with Anisha. Anisha's kindness is nearly matched by her curiosity and, despite the title, it's clear that she's hooked on detecting and that more Anisha stories will be coming along soon. **SD**

Wilde

★★★★

Eloise Williams, Firefly, 224pp, 978 1913102180, £6.99 pbk

This is a wonderful story of finding one's place and accepting who you are.

Wilde has been expelled from school yet again and arrives in an unprecedented heatwave to stay with her aunt in the village which she has not visited since she was a young child. Her mother and aunt had grown up there and Wilde is hoping to find out more about her mother who had died some years previously. The village has a terrible history of witch trials and local legend has it that a witch called Winter has cursed the village.

Wilde has always felt different and she appears to attract trouble. She joins the local school as her aunt wants her to make friends but when birds start following her, she wonders if she will ever fit in anywhere. And to make matters worse she sometimes finds herself in impossible places such as rooftops and has no idea how she got there.

And then the bullying starts. Jemima and her friends begin a relentless campaign of taunts and snide remarks which escalates throughout the play the class are putting on which happens to be the legend of the Witch, Winter. Disturbing notes are left for each person in the class threatening to curse them. Wilde does make one friend, Dorcus, but when Dorcus betrays her she is devastated. It is up to Wilde to put the record straight and retell the legend as it should be told. In doing so the class comes together in support to lift the curse and Wilde not only learns some family secrets but begins to accept her own destiny.

Intense, brooding, and atmospheric this is a beautifully told story of friendship and betrayal. Wilde's voice is pitch perfect, quirky, determined and a little bit prickly but as she begins to understand why she is like she is she begins to believe in herself and realises she has made friends after all. **JC**

Mermaid School

★★★

Lucy Courtney, ill. Sheena Dempsey, Andersen Press, 120pp, 9781783448302, £6.99 pbk

A super fishy tale with lots of

illustrations to carry the story along the wavy way. This is a story about a magical school under the sea. It's perfect for fans of school stories and it offers something a little different with its watery setting.

The story centres around Marnie Blue, a young mermaid who is about to start secondary mermaid school. She has a famous aunt who, of course is good at singing as presumably all successful mermaids are so she is a little worried about letting people know about her connections on her first day at school. Her Aunt had a bit of a troublesome reputation at the Lady Sealia Foam's Mermaid school so Marnie has to try and swim her way through various tricky situations with teachers and classmates in the story.

There are classic friendship issues in the book and some very interesting teacher characters not least the headmistress herself - Miss Foam. She loves brushing her hair and looking into the mirror. There is some lovely gentle humour and lots of puns and really funny ideas about this underwater world. There's lots of imaginative scenes which will make the reader smile - a pesky goldfish pet, an angry sea-horse who needs mucking out and a clam fish bed which actually sounds really comfortable.

The mixture of inserted pictures and mini images make the book easy to read and add something to this land beneath the sea.

There are some nods to traditional images of mermaids in there too and a proper page turner at the end thanks to a parallel plot involving Marnie's aunt and a lost love. Never fear, there is a second book on the horizon, **Mermaid School: The Clamshell Show. SG**

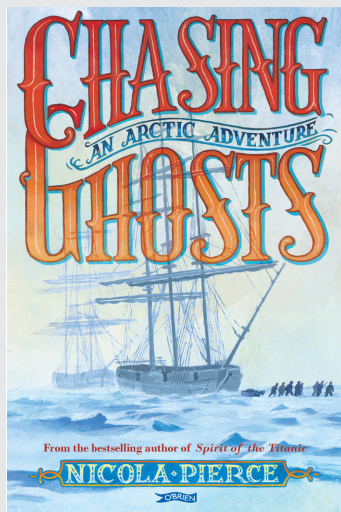
The Story of Inventions

★★★★★

Catherine Barr and Steve Williams, Amy Husband ill, France Lincoln Children's Books, 40pp, 978 1 84780 485 3

This non-fiction picture book is a great source of introductory information about significant inventions for young readers. It covers fifteen different discoveries which have radically changed how we live and is arranged in chronological order starting with the invention of the wheel through to the arrival of the internet. Within each of these fifteen areas, the information has been loosely arranged in its own timeline for example, within the pages detailing the invention of the wheel, the reader learns about their first use in the Bronze age and the format of the page leads the reader through the text and illustration to the Ancient Egyptians using them on chariots, to Romans building roads and adding suspension, to the tyres used on the Mars Rover.

The book will appeal to all young readers due to its nuggets of interesting information and its fun and lively illustrations. There is just enough information both written and visual to spark interest and foster an appetite to find out more. **KF**



Chasing Ghosts

★★★★

Nicola Pierce, O'Brien Press, 978-1788490177, 320pp, £7.99 pbk
There are two stories to Nicola Pierce's **Chasing Ghosts** and at first sight they don't appear to link together very much at all. One describes Sir John Franklin's doomed expedition to the Arctic, the journey mostly seen through the eyes of his second-in-command, Francis Crozier. The second story is also a first person narrative in which young Ann Coppin describes the goings-on in her Derry family home following the death of her little sister Louisa, known to all as Weesy.

Both are ghost stories: readers discover the fate that befell Franklin's expedition, how his two ships were trapped in ice for months until in desperation Crozier led the crew out to find help, only for them all to perish. Crozier's voice is that of a dead man, while thousands of miles away in Derry, Weesy is haunting her family, and sister and brother in particular, mischievous and sometimes malevolent. The two narrative strands are equally vivid and gripping, and Pierce instils both with a matching sense of the totally prosaic (details of daily life) and the truly uncanny (the strangeness of Franklin and his crew recreating the setting of an upper-class Victorian home in the middle of an icy nowhere is constantly shocking; Weesy's appearances genuinely creepy). The despair and physical agony experienced by Crozier chimes too with the tension and grief of the Coppins and Ann's frustration at the limits set by on her by her parents, though readers may still find themselves waiting impatiently for the two stories to come together.

All is finally made clear towards the end of the book. During a séance, set up by her mother, Ann asks Weesy if she knows the whereabouts of Sir

John's two ships, missing now for five years. In a trance, Ann draws what could be a map of their location. End notes by the author explain that the Coppins' story is also true and that Ann's/Weesy's map proved remarkably accurate.

Pierce has a gift for putting young readers at the heart of important moments in history in books including **City of Fate** and **Behind the Walls**. While filled with the same inspiring sense of real life events, this seems also to be asking questions about truth, perception and the stories we want to believe.

FH

Troofriend

★★★★

Kirsty Applebaum, Nosy Crow, 208pp, 9781788003476, £6.99 pbk
Sarah's parents decide that she needs a robot friend to keep her company while they're busy at work, and purchase a TrooFriend 560 Mark IV. After all, it is marketed as the better choice for children – a friend who won't bully, harm, lie, or steal. Sarah names her robot Ivy, after the make number IV on her arm, and after initial reluctance, realises that Ivy will tidy her room for her, play games, and do her hair. But when Ivy starts coveting Sarah's hair grips, and develops a fear of the dark, Sarah and Ivy wonder if the programming is faulty or whether Ivy is partly a sentient being.

Told from Ivy's point of view, this is a gripping, pacey novel that challenges the reader, not by way of its prose, which is lucid and light, but with its pertinent questions about how we live, the role of artificial intelligence, and what it means to be a human.

This future world is well described, with little details that bring it to life – the way Ivy notices hair colour in a robotic way: 'Chestnut 29'; and reports on the weather whenever she is powered on. In the human sense, Kirsty Applebaum notes how stickers, pens and hairgrips are items of importance for children, and how so much of what we say and do isn't literal, but is ambiguous and nuanced.

By looking at artificial intelligence, Applebaum pinpoints our humanity. Sarah is at first devious, using Ivy more as servant than friend. She switches Ivy off, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps of time, as Ivy isn't aware of what's happening while she's powered down. Applebaum manipulates the reader's sympathy too, as Ivy doesn't realise she's being treated as a servant. There is a perceptive play with patterns of speech: Ivy fails to pick up nuances of irony and sarcasm, yet notes an eye roll and scans her database for interpretations of this human behaviour. Ivy's speech is robotic, and sounds as if it comes from a machine manual – which of course it

does. As Ivy grows more 'human', the reader becomes aware of her feelings, and grows more empathetic to both Sarah and Ivy.

The writing is quietly disturbing and powerful. It pinpoints how tricky it is to understand human behaviour and societal expectation, such as why utensils are used to eat fish but not chips, and also the nuances of friendship, including jealousy, feeling isolated, and understanding people's motivations.

Allusions to **Chocky** and **Black Mirror** abound, and although the topics tackled are complex, Applebaum has a gift for applying them to a child's mindset, as she did in her first novel, dystopian **The Middler**. She has a knack for portraying the sometime cruelty, but also sensitivity and thoughtfulness of children of this age.

The book is a delight; with touches of humour, and short chapters that move the plot along in a cumulative way, both in linear time but also in Ivy's development.

By the end the reader is thinking about the dynamics of the core family structure, the isolationism that can occur from extensive use of technology, the benefits of tech, and the complications of human nature. The ending is hard to face – Applebaum has come up with a convincing solution to the problems she raises on a small scale, but leaves the reader wondering how to extrapolate this on a grand scale. Thought-provoking, gripping and ultimately necessary. **CZ**

Robin Hood

★★★★

Robert Muchamore, Hot Key Books, 978-1471408618, 272pp, £6.99 pbk

In these testing times, we could all do with a dose of escapism and wish-fulfilment, and Robert Muchamore delivers magnificently in his new adventure, particularly if you happen to be a ten-year old boy.



Robin is a geeky twelve-year old, not particularly popular at school, not very cool but he has a couple of skills: he's an enthusiastic hacker, and amazing with a bow and arrow. When I tell you his surname is Hood, you'll get a good idea where the story is heading. Muchamore has reimagined the story of the hero of Sherwood Forest, relocating it to modern times where Guy Gisborne runs the Northamptonshire town of Locksley for his own personal profit and through a mix of corruption and out and out thuggery. The (female) Sherriff turns a blind eye, and the disadvantaged and refugees bear the brunt. Opposition comes in the form of bands of rebels, one of which is based in a derelict Designer Outlet deep in the forest, and they take Robin in when he's forced to flee into hiding, having fired an arrow in Gisborne's 'nuts' (ahem).

As we've come to expect from Muchamore the action is pretty well non-stop and liberally sprinkled with humour, but there's also a genuine sense that injustice of the kind represented by Gisborne needs to be tackled. There's lots for girls to enjoy as well as boys – Marion Maid is much more than a sidekick, and I loved the fact that Robin completes his best act of robbing from the rich to give to the poor in the clothes of a ten-year old girl. Muchamore knows just how to keep the pages turning and this is the first in a series that promises quiverfuls of action and entertainment. **Mma**

Robert Muchamore answers our questions about **Robin Hood** here, and was the subject of our [Authorgraph interview](#).

The Vanishing Trick

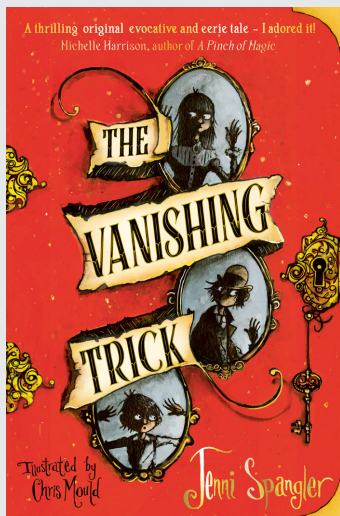
★★★★

Jenni Spangler, Simon & Schuster, 294 pp, 978 1 4711 9037 7, £6.99, pbk

Leander is an orphan, always hungry and without a safe place to live. When he meets a stranger, who offers him food and shelter and the possibility of speaking to his dead mother again, he feels compelled to accept. Unfortunately, Leander soon discovers this help is in exchange for his only treasured possession, his mother's locket. His benefactor is Madame Pinchbeck a medium, fortuneteller and spiritualist. Leander soon finds he has been tricked, when he hands over the locket Pinchbeck captures a part of his soul, enchants the locket and transforms it into a magical cabinet, in effect a prison in which Leander soon finds himself trapped to be summoned at will by his new mistress. Not only that but Leander discovers other children share his fate; a boy called Felix desperate to find his beloved brother and a girl called Charlotte eager to return to her uncle

reviews

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued



who believes her dead.

This historical adventure focuses on the popularity of mediums in Victorian society. The story switches between the three children whose fate is so intertwined with that of their captor. They know she does not have the power to sustain keeping all three prisoners indefinitely – they need to escape. Can they escape her clutches without risking their own lives? This is an exciting story, a page turner with a satisfying ending for all three main characters and a suitable fate for their captor. **DB**

Read our [Q&A interview](#) with Jenni Spangler.

The Sound of Freedom

★★★★

Anne Murtagh, O'Brien Press, 236pp., 9781788491259, £7.99 pbk
The passion for Irish Independence runs through this story of an Irish teenager in 1919 and does rise off the pages to make the reader feel as if they were present. Colm Conneely's father is heavily involved in gunrunning and other illicit activities, and has regular visits from the police. Colm himself is desperate to join the Volunteers but is not quite 14, which is when his father has promised to speak to him about it. In the meantime Colm has a dream of going to America with his fiddle to earn his living. He does become involved in a robbery and also a big illegal meeting where his dream is realised, but a visitor to his home shakes all his belief in his background.

This is a stirring tale, very much told from one side with the British seen to be the enemy much as they were, and still are seen to be in some parts of Ireland. But the feel of a movement is there and the emotion that means. The reader can feel why Colm is desperate to be a Volunteer, as everyone he knows, apart from Mrs. Dobbs in the Post Office is involved. Anne Murtagh paints a picture of rural Ireland, with small farms and villages, peat fires and tea always on the go,

much as it was in many small rural communities, but here the dream of a united Ireland amid the poverty dominates lives. Colm's love for the man he believes is his father and his desire for his approval, is palpable and the reader feels for him when his world is torn apart, but the story ends with hope for his friendship with Alice and the future which awaits him. I was very much reminded of Geoffrey Trease's story about Garibaldi in 1848 *A Thousand for Sicily* which also brings a revolutionary movement vividly to life. **JF**

The List of Things That Will Not Change

★★★

Rebecca Stead, Andersen, 216pp, 9781783449378 £12.99 hbk

Written in the first person, starting with the voice of an eight-year-old girl, it is never clear what level of audience this novel is addressing. The issues and problems it addresses are too old for young readers but too oppressively sweetened for older ones. In so much contemporary junior fiction the more unsuccessful any former marriage might appear to have been the more frequent tend to be the protestations of parental love for those children left behind. This is true of this novel, where expressions of love to and from a variety of quarters rain down so persistently as to risk becoming merely repetitive.

Bea, its cute young heroine, does learn some important lessons from sessions with her therapist Miriam of the type that benefits her and could possibly do the same for some of her readers. Sharing her life between mother and father, she goes to Miriam because of her occasional aggression to other children, particularly so in one past incident which she thinks might have led to terrible consequences. She also suffers from continuous, painful eczema. All this while she has to establish a new relationship with Sonia, the same age-daughter of the man who has now moved in with Bea's coming-out gay restaurant-owning father. Sonia is less keen on possessing a new step-sister than is Bea, and their growing relationship is handled well. All characters are regularly fortified by the wonderful food always present in the house, described in enough succulent detail for readers to wish they could get some of it too. But little else is as memorable in these pages. Rebecca Stead has previously won the **Newbery Medal** and the **Guardian Prize**. Here's hoping for a return to form in any future story. **NT**

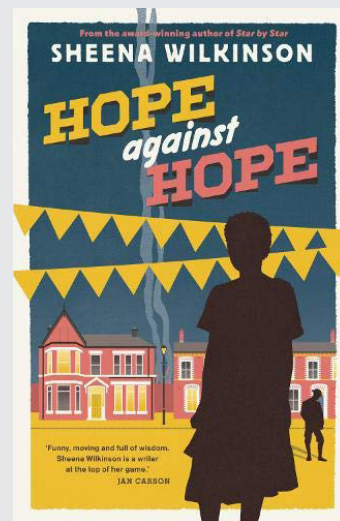
Hope against Hope

★★★★

Sheena Wilkinson, Little Island, 222pp, 9781912417421, £6.99, pbk
The bitterness between the Catholics and the Protestants in Ireland in 1921

is laid bare in this story of Polly who runs away from her home on the border after her brother beats her, to follow her cousin to Helen's Hope in Belfast. Polly finds a community of young women from all backgrounds living together in harmony and trying very hard not to take part in sectarian activities. Belfast is riven with hatred as the elections for the new Northern Ireland Government are taking place. Polly's hot headedness results in an early confrontation and a subsequent encounter leads indirectly to the unfortunate death of a wounded veteran soldier in a fire. This makes Polly confront her relationship with her brother suffering what we would now call PTSD.

Sheena Wilkinson deserves praise for taking on this very difficult subject matter, and through the plot paints a picture of a very divided society, riven with extremism and total inability to see the other side. Polly herself with her wild hair and her devotion to her easily manipulated cousin, is beautifully drawn, and the reader follows her growth into a strong young woman, gradually beginning to understand the actions of Ivy the bully. Her encounter with Patrick a wounded veteran, down on his luck, prompts her to comprehend the actions of her brother. The ending is a little pat and lacks the rawness of the story and does not ring entirely true. The book is very definitely for the upper end of this age range. **JF**



Clean Getaway

★★★

Nic Stone, Knights Of, 214pp, 978-1-9133110-2-5, £6.99, pbk

William 'Scoob' Lamar is in trouble at school. His friend Shenice's younger brother is disabled and Bryce, the school bully targets him relentlessly. When Scoob comes to his defence and fights Bryce he is blamed for the fracas and suspended. His father imposed a lockdown so when his beloved elderly and eccentric Grandmother turned up in a brand-new Winnebago and announced that they were going on a road

trip Scoob jumped at the chance. This was not to be a trip purely for pleasure, however, but a chance for his Grandmother to revisit her past and attempt to educate Scoob in the history of racism. The issue is further highlighted by the fact that Scoob is black and his grandmother white. Reminders of this punctuate the narrative - the hostile looks directed at Scoob wherever they stop to eat or shop - and the Travellers' Green Book which Grandma and her black husband used to tell them where it would be safe to stay when they were travelling. The reader is educated, too, seeing the landscape - political and emotional - through his grandmother's memories.

Mysteries are threaded through the story - the reason for his late Grandfather's prison sentence, his Grandmother's refusal to respond to his father's phone calls, the collection of expensive jewellery which Scoob finds in the Winnebago. There is repetition, too, in situation and response and some difficulties with American colloquialisms and language but the narrative moves along quickly and the action does not let up - a bonus for younger readers. The book ends on a note of high emotion, but also one of positivity - Scoob and his father make a new start in their relationship. The mysteries of the story are solved, too and Scoob's mother, who left when he was a baby, wants to make contact again. This makes the ending feel rather crowded - almost like a race to the finish to tie all ends together. **VR**

The Infinite

★★★★

Patience Agbabi, Canongate, 237pp, 9781786899651, £6.99 pbk
Elle is aged twelve, but also only three since she was born in a Leap Year. A brilliant runner, she also has Special Needs, at school alternating between feeling tongue-tied and other moments when she says too much. Her best friend Ben is even more disturbed, well into the autistic spectrum. They are both ceaselessly mocked by one particularly unpleasant pupil but their teachers are encouraging and sympathetic.

Thus the background to what becomes an increasingly rich brew. Because of her birth Elle has the ability to leap forwards and back again in time. There are other Leapers who can do this too and they all congregate at a Time Squad Centre twenty eight years into the future. But things there are not as they should be. A mysterious teacher calling himself Le Temps is pursuing policies and practices outlawed in a future climate-change aware society. And guess what - he is in fact the bully who once made Elle's life unhappy at school now grown into malevolent middle age. The only way she can stop him is to return to her original time and try to make friends with this one boy who so has it in for her.

There is so much plot and counter-plot in this debut novel it is almost impossible to follow every twist and turn in a narrative that takes twisting and turning to a very testing level. But underneath all this activity there is a striking prose style from a writer previously known as a successfully published poet. Born of Nigerian parents but brought up in London, Agbabi is a welcome new voice in junior fiction, well worth savouring. The first instalment in what is going to be **The Leap Cycle** series, this ambitious novel combines respect for the health of the planet with a lively sense of adventure across time. Now for the next! **NT**

Memoirs of a Basque Cow

★★★★

Bernado Atxaga, trans. Margaret Jull Costa, Dedalus, 223pp, 978 1 912868 01 8, £9.99 pbk

Memoirs of a Basque Cow must surely be in the running for Title of the Year, though it's difficult to speculate what expectations it might evoke in young readers' minds. What they would find is a gentle bovine tale, set among the mountains and valleys of the Spanish Basque country, beginning in the late 1930s and then meandering towards the end of the century without much concern for chronology. Not too much happens, though something almost does once or twice. There's a good deal of chat between a couple of cows, a cow and a diminutive nun, and a cow and her Inner Voice, often with a hint of whimsical humour.

Mo, the author of the *Memoirs*, is born 'shortly after the end of the 1936 war', already equipped with an extensive vocabulary; that's the Spanish Civil War, of course, and a group of Republican guerrillas is holding out in the hills above the valley where much of Mo's story plays out. At one point, she is caught up in what is almost, but not quite, a bloody trap set for those resistance fighters by Franco's brutal Nationalists, led by one Green Glasses. Mo can't understand a word he says (though her friend La Vache qui Rit can and duly translates); all of Green Glasses' dialogue is represented by the single word, 'Karral', repeated (and repeated) throughout the text. We never learn what the original means which might be confusing, even irritating, to a reader of any age. As is the name La Vache qui Rit. An adult reader may well know that's the name of the oldest branded French cheese. But the laughing Vache is always red in the ads, while this Vache is proudly black, with not a good word to say for any other cows, especially reds. Many, many times, she repeats, 'There's nothing in this world more stupid than a stupid cow!' As for Mo's friend laughing – rien. She is fiercely intent on denying her essential cowness, preferring to pursue her

inner wild boar, ablaze with violence and adventure. Such subject matter may not make too much sense to a young reader.

Mo herself is fond of cow-related quotations culled from Basque lore; she also loves the stories told by her friend, the tiny nun, Pauline Bernadette, such as the classic tale of 'The Trojan Cow'. Their first meeting was memorable. One night Pauline Bernadette jumped out of the upper window of her home to escape a serenading suitor, landing by chance on the passing Mo's back. Together, cow and girl run away to a convent where they live happily for almost ever after.

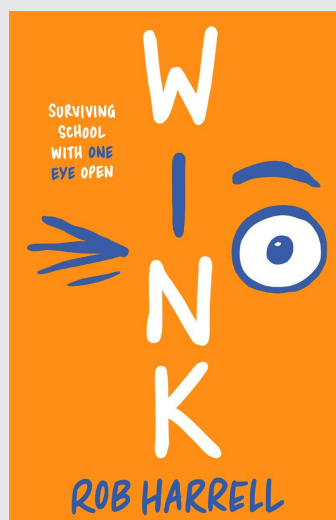
Among the byways of the story (engagingly translated with, I would guess, a sensitivity to the comic spirit of the original), some critics have found philosophical depth. I couldn't find much more than advice which could be summarised as 'Be Yourself' or 'Accept what Nature has given you and Make the Most of It'. Even so, as a second reading confirmed, an adult reader might find a kind of refreshment in the random musings of this likeable narrator in her remote hills; but the lack of action and the absence of a more linear plot could offer a confusing challenge to the 9-13 age group suggested by Dedalus in their Press Release. **GF**

Wink

★★★★

Rob Harrell, (author and illustrator), Hot Key, 316pp., 978-1-471409-14-1, £7.99 pbk

Rob Harrell draws on his own experience of eye cancer as an adult patient, to tell the story of Ross, a seventh grader (year 8 in UK) who finds that he has 'mucoepidermoid carcinoma of the lacrimal gland', and may lose his sight. This devastating diagnosis has a huge impact, not only on him as he starts really noticing the world around him, but on his Dad and step-Mom Linda, his best friends Abby and Isaac, and the other kids in his school. Abby is very supportive, but Isaac just disappears, and that hurts. A partial reprieve comes when a sympathetic consultant finds that eye removal is not necessary and recommends proton radiation. The gruelling 36 sessions, with Ross having to stay absolutely still, are eventually successful, but he has the indignity of having to wear a hat all the time, including in class, to protect his eye from too much light. The story is a little like that in *Wonder*, but a different same situation. Humour helps – Rob Harrell makes Ross like himself, a talented cartoonist, and he draws Batpig in various situations, but music saves him, as it also saved the author. His radiation technician, Frank, encourages him to move away from the music his Dad and step-Mom like, and get into heavy metal, which certainly helps with the inner rage,

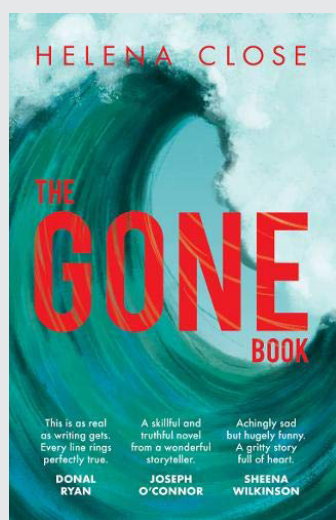


and eventually Ross learns to play the guitar well enough to perform at school. The kids at school also have varying reactions and Ross hates being known as 'the cancer kid'. There is a sub-plot involving some unkind cartoons, or memes, about Ross's situation that circulate among the kids, ping-pong into their phones, and eventually, via an unexpected source, Ross finds out who is responsible, and that person is

punished by the Principal. It is all very American, in language and general attitude to life- Ross has a scar on his forehead like a 'dime slot', as his older fellow patient Jerry, a great character, notices, and that becomes his own nickname for Ross. They get through a huge amount of McDonald's fries and cokes, and the time that Frank is able to spend with Ross is evidently far more than would be possible in our NHS (wonderful though it is), but young readers are quite likely to be acclimatised to American ways by now. There is a rather American happy ending, with hugs all round, but it's not too sentimental, and it is indeed good to be positive about treatment for illness.

Rob Harrell's best friend's daughter was diagnosed with cancer of the femur, and she found it so helpful to talk to Ross, who 'got' the whole cancer situation and could talk about scar care etc., and the fact that sometimes you just want to scream, that he decided to write this book in hopes of helping other children who are trying to cope with life-threatening illness. The cartoon illustrations of Batpig are fun, just as a 12 year-old might draw, and Rob Harrell's storytelling is very engaging. Whether or not the reader has an illness, this should help with understanding for those who have. **DB**

14+ Secondary/Adult



The Gone Book

★★★★

Helena Close, Little Island Books, 300pp, 9781912417445, £7.99 pbk
Matt was ten when his Mam left. That was five years ago and over these years he has been writing to her – letters he has never sent but which he keeps as his *Gone Book*. Now with his family falling apart – his father struggling with alcohol promles, his elder brother turning to drugs, owing money, his younger brother

needing support, Matt decides he must find her. And he does – but the consequences are very different to his expectations. The truth can be very uncomfortable – and the consequences devastating.

Helena Close catapults us into the chaotic, emotional world of the adolescent facing the challenges of life. We see a contemporary environment that is messy, complicated, full of difficulty – even tragic – but there is also humour. Indeed there are moments when the reader might be forgiven for thinking that the scenario is beyond belief – and yet will know that often reality is even more unbelievable. The narrative has an authenticity, and moves at a pace through dialogue and the personal experience of Matt rather than description or reflection seen from the perspective of a third person. Indeed the language is so contemporary and colloquial that adults recommending this book – and it is worth recommending – should be aware that it makes. Young readers will feel its reality and find in Matt someone they can recognise; his world will be one they themselves can imagine, or indeed may be living. This is a debut author well able to join writers such as Brian Conaghan or Alex Wheatle in putting teenage experience onto the page. **FH**

14+Secondary/Adult continued

The Pieces of Ourselves

★★★★

Maggie Harcourt, Usborne, 375pp, 978 1 4749 4069 6, £7.99 pbk

This character-led mix of romance and historical detective story slowly builds in intensity and draws the reader in to Flora's lonely, fearful, painfully honest but ultimately hope-filled world. Flora's life is constricted and defined by the mental health-related "incident" that led to her leaving school right in the middle of sitting her GCSEs. This manic episode led to therapy, medication, a diagnosis of Bipolar 11 and to a hidden away life of work in a country house hotel. When Hal arrives at Hopwood Home to research a missing World War 1 soldier Flora's help is offered by the hotel manager. Flora used to love history before the 'incident' but now the idea of spending time with a stranger is a nightmare. Gradually though, as Flora and Hal begin to piece together the story of World War 1 soldier Albie and his lost love, housemaid Iris, stories, settings and timelines between present and past seem to merge as Flora and Hal too begin to fall in love.

Flora's narrative voice is believable and moving. Her struggles with her mental health are presented in an empathetic way and her descriptions of her thought processes as she desperately tries to work out which are manic responses and which are true give the reader real insight into what having Bipolar entails. Both love stories, historic and contemporary, are gripping and convincing and as the timelines dissolve and stories entwine the reader will be drawn into this emotional, honest, poignant and powerful YA novel with its themes of mental health, self-acceptance and lost and found love. **SR**

Most Likely

★★★★

Sarah Watson, Scholastic, 978-1-407195-49-0, 384pp, £7.99, pbk Ava, CJ, Jordan and Martha have been inseparable since they were five and have come to rely on the close and supportive nature of their relationships to navigate the very different challenges of their lives. However, their high school days are ending and they are only too aware that their career choices will end the proximity with each other which underpins their lives.

Watson is adept at creating characters who come alive on the page but the situations in which she places them are so crowded with issues which need to be resolved that they feel at times more like a tick-list to be worked through than credible dilemmas. The narrative bowls along at a brisk pace-the girls have important decisions to make and there is much to consider in their emotional lives, too, but Watson tends to fall into the

trap of cliché - particularly when high emotion is involved.

The book begins with a cliffhanger as one of the girls is sworn in as the first female President of the United States, but the girl's identity is withheld until the end. Watson weaves expectation into the story's set pieces, giving clues, hints and red herrings and these keep the mystery alive. I like the insistence that women can achieve at the highest levels but, again, this is wrapped up rather too neatly when all the girls get to the highest levels in their chosen careers.

Sarah Watson writes and produces for television and this, her first novel, often feels like a script for a sitcom, with its many emotional scenarios and rather implausible situations. However, in the end, it must be recognised that **Most Likely** will hook in young female readers who may well find answers to some of the problems which they are facing. **VR**

Burn

★★★★

Patrick Ness, Walker, 383pp, 9781406375503, £12.99 hbk

Tolkien restored dragons to their original terrifying presence in the imagination, and Patrick Ness is now going down a similar path. While one of his dragons is sensitive, well-spoken and much given to under-statement, his special enemy is a murderous super-powers with a bitter hatred of the human world, out to bring it to an end by engineering a nuclear wipe-out. The time is 1957 and the Cold War is at its height. It all makes for a properly daunting picture. The rampant racial prejudice in America existing at the time of Eisenhower is also effectively portrayed

So much, so good. But although there is no copyright on imaginative constructs, the fact that this story has a girl hero, a prophecy she thinks she has inherited, an inexorable assassin after her blood and a series of different universes with only a few able to pass from one to another inevitably brings to mind Philip Pullman's **His Dark Materials**. On this admittedly challenging comparison. Burn does not fare so well. While Pullman's epic draws on a rich hinterland involving not just Milton and Blake but many others, Ness's fiction is more reminiscent of an action-packed and occasionally gory video game. Its over-explanatory story-line soon becomes repetitive and the good characters are never as convincing as the really bad one. An exception here can be found in a gay sub-plot put over with real feeling for the two adolescent boys concerned and described in a welcome economy of language.

There are enough loose threads left over by the ending to suggest there may be follow-ups. Ness's last trilogy, **Chaos Walking**, won many plaudits and prizes. This novel is not in the same league; too long and too

confusingly structured. If there are more to come, they will have to do a lot better to win anything like an equivalent reception. **NT**

The Falling in Love Montage

★★★★

Ciara Smyth, Andersen Press, 394pp, 978 1 78344 966 8, £7.99 pbk

The long summer ahead needs a plan, thinks Saoirse. 'That's Seersha, by the way,' murmurs narrator to reader, initiating a convention of such asides as early as page 2. This confiding voice will not only entertain, but also allow Saoirse to provide a running commentary on the action: maybe a single kiss with Ruby, so complex that it requires a lingering page of description; or - by contrast - the devastating sadness of visiting her psychotherapist mother in her care home, lost in the wilderness of dementia at 55. A condition which Saoirse knows can be hereditary.

Saoirse's narrative has many voices. For example, there's the flickering interplay of smart conversation which YA readers expect - exceptionally alive in this novel; or her own tenacious voice reflecting her struggles to understand : her feelings for Ruby; a betrayal by a lifelong friend; the loneliness of Oliver Quinn, a boy she has loathed for years but is now beginning to like; and why her ex just walked away.

At one level, this is a quick-moving rom-com. At another, a knowing, satirical take on a quick-moving rom-com. At another, an untypical rom-com since the lovers are late teen girls. And, for a while, the novel becomes a painful account of the difficulties families face when dominated by illness and its impact on relationships.

The storyline begins simply, if unconventionally. Saoirse's just finished A-levels and left school in her seaside town to the south of Belfast. She's very bright, works hard. Oxford has offered her a conditional place, to the embarrassing delight of her Dad, whose own life hasn't run easily for the last few years as his wife's early onset dementia tightened its grip. They've divorced, but that doesn't mean Dad's love for her has died, as the novel reveals. Even so, to Saoirse's astonished disgust, he's about to marry a business contact, Beth.

Saoirse's had it with schoolwork, she's been dumped by long-love Hannah, she's not sure she wants Oxford. What she wants this summer is - well, she's not sure what. She doesn't want another long-term relationship, with its truth-telling and problem-sharing, especially with family issues like hers. Maybe a summer with someone involving serious kissing, parties, a fair amount of quality vodka, much laughter and no strings. Yes, that's a workable plan. Enter Ruby, an English girl, staying for the summer with the family of her rich-boy cousin, Oliver. Why? She's not saying. So she's keeping secrets too. Ideal.

The immediate magnetism between them is irresistible; not least because neither is inclined to resist. As the days go by and the quickfire dialogues reveal Saoirse's passion for horror movies and Ruby's for rom-coms, they agree on the latter as a kind of template for their summer together. Their analysis of the rom-com 'formula' (wittily handled by Smyth with its list of required elements, illustrated by specific movies), leads to a scheme to live out a 'falling in love montage' (no strings, of course). That's the theory. This plan is not going to work, as any YA reader would know. As they tick off the stages of the montage formula, real life overtakes them. As it would. So we end up reading a different kind of novel from the one we began, bringing deeper questions and satisfactions than readers might have foreseen. **GF**

A Phoenix First Must Burn

★★★★

Patrice Caldwell (Ed.), Hot Key Books, 354pp, 9781471409301, £7.99 pbk

This is a complete cornucopia of short stories featuring black women and 'gender-nonconforming' individuals. The range of themes covered is very wide but perhaps the underlying topics veer towards magic, science fiction and fantasy. They are set in the past, present and future and the thing that connects them is that they reflect the interests and concerns of their BAME authors. We have a collection of sixteen stories written by American writers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including Elizabeth Acevedo (winner of the **Carnegie Medal** in 2019) and several new authors. Many of these authors bring their own history and cultural background to the stories, but others have just wanted to see themselves included in the type of stories that they enjoy.

At a time when many people are finding it difficult to concentrate on a full-length novel these stories provide an opportunity to dip in to whichever tale takes your fancy. Some people will decide to go with a favourite author; some will read from beginning to end, whilst others will just take pot luck. There are stories of hope, resilience, love and perseverance; all featuring characters that range from witches and vampires to time travellers and magicians. Although the book is aimed at the YA market there is nothing overtly offensive in any of the stories and the relationships are dealt with in a very positive way. The characters are strong and find ways to cope with the often difficult situations that they find themselves in; I have also found them to be generally sympathetic and positive. This really is a book that has turned out to be a treasure trove of exciting and often challenging stories. It is something that I will keep dipping in to and I hope it will find a place in many school libraries as well as on personal bookshelves. **MP**

Classics in Short No.141

Some Little Men and Women

Brian Alderson on Ethel Turner's **Seven Little Australians** and how they brought Australia into the world of children's fiction

Up in a garret

down Concord way round about 1863 Jo March was to be found eating apples and crying over **The Heir of Redcliffe**. Such is the persistence of that Victorian classic that, thirty years later, in 1894, Meg Woolcott also has it among her 'simple and wholesome fare' in far distant Sydney – where it shares a shelf with **Little Women**.

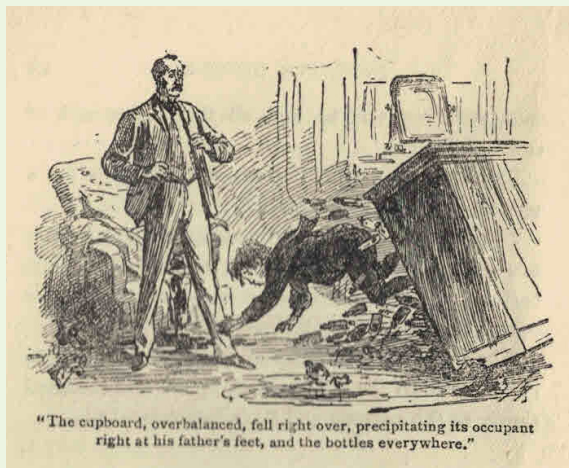
This Meg,

like she of the March girls, may be the eldest of the children of Ethel Turner's story, but here there are seven of them with four girls intermingled with three boys, the youngest of whom at the start of things is a baby, known as the General. That designation was applied to him at first sight by his father, a Captain in the Australian military, and it's almost the only instance of good humour from that gentleman in the whole book. For the Captain is no army chaplain doing good works among the troops, but a remote, controlling presence, given to exercising discipline with strap, or riding-whip, or whatever comes to hand among his misbehaving brood. He seems to have bewildered himself by fathering the first six children of the family (his first wife died in giving birth to the girl known as The Baby) but he has married again and the new stepmother, Esther, only a few years older than Meg, is a countervailing presence of loving kindness.

Not for nothing

is The River House where they all live generally known as Misrule for, far from being in awe of their irritable father, the children possess a wild independence, an 'electric sparkle', very different from their forbearing forebears in Concord. The Baby's older brother, Bunty, is that interesting figure, a dislikeable child, whose lying ways and unwillingness to own up to misdemeanours make him something of an outcast and certainly victim of the more ferocious beatings at his father's hand

('Oh—h—h—h! oh—o—! o—o—h! ah—h—h! 'twasn't my fault; it's all the others. Boo—hoo—hoo!')



Of the four older children

it is thirteen year old Helen, who is singled out as the worst of the lot 'probably because she was the cleverest' – her sister, Nell, and brother, Pip, on each side, having not much more than supporting roles in events. She was generally known as Fizz or Judy (perhaps after Mr Punch's wife, always popping and jerking herself about) and, despite Meg's seniority, she becomes the chief focus in the story. This occurs following a prank when she and Pip have much embarrassed her father by, unbeknownst to him, dumping the General on him at the Barracks. The end result is that she is despatched to a boarding school seventy-seven miles off from which she duly runs away, ending up hiding in one of the outhouses of Misrule in hopes of being looked after in secret by her siblings.

To the connoisseurs

of family and school stories her subsequent discovery and the consumption brought on by her flight from school should presage a death-bed scene, but one that, in that crowd, would hardly be comparable to Beth's quiet passing among the little women. We are saved the moment though in favour of a mass shipment of the children (minus the Captain) on a recuperative visit to their stepmother's family home three hundred miles away in sheep country round Yarrahappini 'on the borders of the never-never Land'. And it is among the hospitable freedoms there that fate catches up with her and the author

has her killed by a falling blue-gum tree from which she has gallantly shielded the baby General.

The exoticism of location

and of life-style lends colour to this first Australian classic just as does the liveliness of its participants. At the same time, as with its American model, there are touches of the adult life that will await childhood's end. At one point Meg is misled by a schoolfriend into a flirtatious connection from which she is saved by a more mature boy and later, up in the sheep country, she encounters Mr Gillet, an English book-keeper struggling with his own demons, who begs a blue ribbon from her but also falls victim to a prim adolescent homily.

Both of these touches

would remain to be found again in the sequel to the story whose success generated an immediate sequel, **The Family at Misrule** (1895). This takes place three years after its predecessor, when a new baby has brought up the numbers to seven again. There is a similar patterning with Bunty on the run after being wrongly accused of stealing money and ending up on the streets of Sydney (although they think he's taken ship to England); and Pip trying to make a foolish liaison with a shopkeeper's daughter. A prolonged scare over the coming of scarlet fever among the family brings the reader to fear more deaths but in the end we have to sacrifice Mr Gillet, a late arrival on the scene, dying in a fire in order to save his treasured blue ribbon.

It may look like a universal convention, but it brought Australia into the world of children's fiction

Editions of **Seven Little Australians** are available from Amazon.

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