Authorgraph Joshua Seigal

Ten essential children’s books
chosen by Carnegie Medal winner Anthony McGowan

How to make your library anti-racist

Plus Catherine Rayner, Shaun Tan
and Alice in Wonderland
Books for Keeps urgently needs help to ensure its future. We are asking for your donations to enable us to develop the website and preserve the unique Books for Keeps archive. If 100 people each contribute £100, the future of Books for Keeps will be assured.

Books for Keeps – taking children’s books seriously for 40 years

Books for Keeps is celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2020. It was first published in March 1980 and since then has reviewed thousands of children's books, interviewed hundreds of authors and illustrators, and reported on children's book issues and the interface between children and their reading.

Our editorial policy is based on the premise that young readers deserve the very best reading material. Consequently, we believe that reviews of children’s books and issues relevant to children's literature in general should be handled by writers with specialist knowledge, experience and expertise. We have built up a contributors' list that includes some of the world's leading scholars in the field of children's literature.

The archive is one of the most significant children's book resources on the World Wide Web, an enormously valuable research tool for students, academics, authors, illustrators and the media amongst others and it is our intention to improve the ability to search by genre, theme and age breakdown. Since its inception, Books for Keeps has been a stand-alone operation financially. A grant from Arts Council in 2009 enabled us to create the website, which has served very well until now. The magazine moved online in 2010 and subscription fees were dropped making it free to read. Each year, it has generated between an 8% and 10% additional revenue. However, the website was designed on a version of Drupal that is now outdated and urgently needs a refresh. The amount of development work required to bring the exiting website up to date is not feasible.

The advantages of the planned new website are:

- Fully searchable across all news items and pages
- Fully responsive to viewing size of users’ screens
- More appealing and contemporary appearance
- Simpler for editors to manage

The Books for Keeps archive, that unrivalled children's book resource of over 13,500 articles spanning 40 years, will be converted into a fully accessible, searchable HTML site.

Books for Keeps

We can commission the professional redesign of the website to cover both aesthetics and functionality for £10,000. We can match contributions with £5,000 from the magazine’s own resources.

Benefits of a new website

A revised, easier to use website will enable the magazine to become a more sustainable arts organisation in the medium to long term. It will help ensure that Books for Keeps maximises its potential in this important area of literature by reaching new readers while enhancing its offer to current readers.

It will ensure that Books for Keeps remains at the forefront of contemporary thinking about children’s literature while at the same time providing an unrivalled archival resource on children's books.

A fully developed, modern website will generate new traffic and interest at a time when review space for children's books is under constant threat. Preserving the archive will help teachers, student teachers and students researching in children's literature (those following taught MA courses and doctoral programmes) in the following ways:

Books for Keeps is the most accessible and widely read UK children's literature resource and already actively encourages more people to discover and enjoy children’s books. It is successfully reaching a substantial and diverse audience. The funding we are appealing for here will enable us to broaden that reach even more.

To donate now, go to the Books for Keeps Givey page. Thank you for your support.

www.givey.com/booksforkeeps

If you have questions or suggestions, contact Managing Editor Andrea Reece, andrea.reece@zen.co.uk

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How to be an anti-racist librarian

Zoey Dixon suggests ways to make your library anti-racist.
Her advice will be useful for everyone, whatever your role.

The recent Black Lives Matter protests have shown how many people recognise that systemic racism, and particularly anti-black racism, is rife in everyday life. People are not just angry at the killing of George Floyd, but at the lack of action from industries and organisations that, often unintentionally, uphold and perpetuate the oppression of Black people.

In the library profession, 97% of library workers identify as white (2015 ARA/CILIP Workforce Mapping). We must acknowledge that we are not immune from prejudice – we all have implicit biases, and only by recognising these can we choose to counteract them.

As children's librarians, supporting Black people and being anti-racist goes beyond just listening and educating yourself; that is the first step, but it is not enough. You can bring a pro-active, anti-racist approach to delivering a library service, which will have an impact beyond your own attitudes and behaviours.

Here are some actions you could take, focussing on supporting Black people to create a diverse and inclusive book collection, work environment and community space:

1. Look at your stock collection. Update your stock policy and state the need for diverse stock. Set a target percentage of how much of your overall collection will be books by Black writers and illustrators. If you have a community which is 50% Black, it would be reasonable to have an equally representative book collection. Your yearly stock plans should reinforce your stock policy and commitment to reach that target. If you use supplier selection, your specification needs to state this target, be clear about the kinds of books you want, and regularly check the stock that is supplied.

Quality control is particularly important, as you want to have a range of genres and subjects – not just social issues, but fantasy, comedy and even text books. This doesn't mean that you should not purchase any books that discuss racism - this is an important topic and you should have books that both deal with racism and talk about how to be anti-racist. Sadly, Black children are never too young to experience racism, therefore children are never too young to need these resources. If you work in a secondary school library there are very good adult books that discuss these issues in an accessible way.

2. It is very easy to only promote books by Black writers and illustrators when it aligns with a certain month (Black History Month) or day (Windrush Day). Of course, these books should be highlighted during this time, but they should be also be amplified throughout the year. Black writing falls into many genres and covers numerous pertinent topics and should be promoted because of its quality, the same for your author visits: invite them throughout the year.

Make sure you are reading books by Black writers and encourage your colleagues to do the same. You could set a reading challenge encouraging people to diversify the authors they read. List challenges are a fun way to show just how much (or little) has been read from your collection, and competition can be a great incentive to read a wider range of books outside your usual tastes.

Whether it is an under 5s session or a class visit, make sure you are choosing books to read by Black writers and illustrators that show Black people. Make sure these books don’t reinforce stereotypes, e.g: stories from Africa that are only set in villages.

Some libraries host police led story-time sessions as a way to foster positive community relations. However Black communities don’t always have a positive relationship with the police and in fact their presence can deter people from visiting your libraries. When we talk about libraries as safe spaces we need to consider how our library users relate to those people we invite to use our spaces.

3. It is very likely that the majority of your staff will identify as white. If you’re in charge of recruitment or can help influence policy, think how you encourage Black people to apply for vacancies. If you don’t have any influence on this process, voice your concerns, and suggest ideas. Consider the wording of the recruitment advertisement; where you are placing the job adverts; and even if it is really necessary to hold a library degree.

In Lambeth, where I work, more than 50% of staff are Black or Asian. This is due to a concerted effort made in the 80s to have a workforce that reflected the community. Library managers stopped taking graduates as they were usually white, and didn’t have the “skills to relate to the inner city London children.” Furthermore, staff can be trained and encouraged to gain a degree or pursue an apprenticeship at a later date. If your place of work is in a position to do so, they could even fund their further education.

Make sure that you also have Black volunteers, work experience placements and student librarians. These experiences can encourage people into the profession, raising awareness of librarianship as a career and provide role models for future Black librarians.

4. Identify and challenge racist behaviour. Part of educating yourself is being aware of racist behaviours that can be overt or more insidious, for example: microaggressions. Learn what they are and be aware of them from yourself, colleagues and other staff or library users. If you see Black children being treated unfairly by other staff or teachers or hear them say racist things, confront and report it. Examples include not treating a group of Black teens entering the library with more suspicion than a group of white teens.

Unfortunately Black and Asian people aren’t immune from perpetuating these racist behaviours. There is anti-black racism within Asian communities and we live in a world where there is a negative view of Black people. We can internalise these messages and unconsciously enforce those same harmful views and prejudices. If you find yourself doing so, stop and think why? It takes work to change behaviour but it can be done.

I have taken these actions in Lambeth, and I hope by sharing them I can help all children’s librarians be better at what they do.

Zoey Dixon has worked for Lambeth Libraries since she was 16. After completing her first degree she got a role as Children’s and Young People’s Librarian, working in four of the town centre libraries. While she is now a library manager for four community hub libraries, Zoey continues to deliver frontline services to children and teens. She is currently on the judging panel for CILIP’s Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Book Awards and Vice-Chair of YLG (Youth Libraries Group) London.

She has created an anti-racist reading list.
https://www.listchallenges.com/an-anti-racist-reading-list
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 Anthony McGowan for these recommendations, and our congratulations on his Carnegie Medal win.

It’s almost impossible, of course, to choose 10 ‘essential’ books. Apart from anything else, whatever we book fanatics occasionally claim, books are not essential, as food and water are essential. We can live without them. We just don’t want to. So I have picked books which I have loved and wouldn’t want to live without. On another day, I could easily have chosen 10 completely different titles. And perhaps not all of the ones I have plumped for will work for all young readers. But they are all part of the furniture of my head, and I wouldn’t be me without them being there. I’ve noticed that most of the books are decades old, and it’s heart-breaking to exclude brilliant recent historical novels by Tanya Landman and Catherine Johnson, the emotionally gripping YA by Phil Earle, the tense and exciting work of Alex Wheatle… So the list is a little long in the tooth – but then so am I!

A Kestrel for a Knave
Barry Hines, Penguin, 978-0141184982, £8.99 pbk
This book changed me. I read it as a class reader in Year 9, in a tough school in Leeds. Most of the kids there weren’t big into books, to say the least. But soon we were all gripped, not only by the narrative, about the struggles of young Billy Caspar and his beautiful kestrel, but also by the world – that gritty, hard-scrabble, working-class Northern world so brilliantly depicted; and also by the language: the perfect precision of the descriptions, and the total realism of the speech.

Red Shift
Alan Garner is one of the all-time greats of children’s writing. He’s perhaps best known for his fantasy works (or rather books that weave fantasy and realism together), such as The Weirdstone of Brisingamen, but this is my personal favourite. It’s a difficult, demanding book, that entwines together three different timelines, and the reader has to work hard to keep up with the lightning flashes of the language. But its power, once it grips you, is immense. You finish it shattered and broken. But in a good way….

Doing It
Melvin Burgess, Andersen Press, 978-1783440634, £7.99 pbk
Melvin Burgess was the first writer to portray adolescent boys as they truly are: funny, filthy, vulnerable, tender, violent. Doing It is a little less well known than his equally fine novel about addiction, Junk, but it adds an extra dose of humour. It can be an uncomfortable read – the truth is often uncomfortable – but that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t stare it in the face. And that’s precisely what Burgess does.

The Lord of the Rings
Until I was 8 or 9 years old, my main reading obsessions were the natural world and war. There wasn’t a tank, an aircraft or a bird that I couldn’t identify. But then a teacher, more or less out of the blue, gave me a copy of The Lord of the Rings. It was the first novel I ever read and it took me a couple of years to work my way through it. But by the end I was a different person – a novel reader, and one day a novelist. Tolkien may now seem a little dated (it’s hard to avoid the conclusion that he really wasn’t very interested in women) but his world-building, the beauty and power of his language, and the engrossing plot, make this surely the greatest fantasy work ever written.
The Eagle of the Ninth Chronicles
Rosemary Sutcliff, OUP, 978-0192789983, £12.99 pbk

Rosemary Sutcliff was one of the few children’s writers I loved when I was younger. Although her plots are wonderfully exciting and action-packed, she can be a challenging writer. Her language is intricate and relatively complex, and the reader is never spoon-fed. All of her many books are brilliant (her retellings of the Iliad, Black Ships before Troy was by children’s favourite bedtime reading) but I think her masterpiece is the three linked novels about the Romans in Britain, The Eagle of the Ninth, The Silver Branch, and The Lantern Bearers – which are available as a single volume. They combine great learning and epic storytelling.

Orange Boy
Patrice Lawrence, Hodder Children’s Books, 978-1444927207, £7.99 pbk

I read Orange Boy a couple of years ago, and was immediately seized by the style and the story. Although it has a powerful message about racism and inequality, it is in no sense a simple ‘message’ book: it’s an exciting thriller, one of those books where you can hardly turn the pages quickly enough. Patrice Lawrence is simply one of the finest writers for young adults working today.

The Call of the Wild
Jack London, OUP, 978-0192743626, £5.99 pbk

The Call of the Wild is perhaps the greatest of wilderness adventure stories. Its depiction of the lives of both people and dogs (and wolves) in the wilds of Canada is often brutal: these animals (and men) hunt and fight and kill. We’re a long way from Disney: the animals are never anthropomorphised, never do anything inauthentic. And yet we come to care desperately for the fate of Buck, a huge and pampered pet, who is stolen and used a sled-dog. After many adventures, Buck answers the call of the wild, and joins the wolves, entering into the legend of the native Americans. He still haunts my imagination.

You’re a Bad Man Mr Gum
Andy Stanton, Egmont, 978-1405293693, £6.99 pbk

The Mr Gum series are simply the funniest children’s books ever written. My wife and I used to fight over who got to read them at bedtime to our children. Although young and old both find them hysterical, it isn’t quite true to say that there are two different levels of humour – one for the kids and one for the adults. It’s more that almost every page has such a dazzle of brilliant comic ideas, sophisticated and silly, that you feel like you’re in the middle of a comedy blitz, with every part of your funny-bone rubbed raw. But there’s also heart in there, amid the intellectual fizz, and you come to care for characters, whether a dancing bear or a schoolteacher made of gingerbread.

A Wizard of Earthsea
Ursula K Le Guin, Puffin, 978-0141354910, £7.99 pbk

I said earlier on that The Lord of the Rings was the greatest fantasy work ever written, but the Earthsea series runs it a close second. Tolkien gives us a brilliantly realised world, a rich and poetic language, and an exciting plot; Le Guin does all that, but adds characters with a little more complexity and nuance, and also sprinkles ideas that stretch the mind, and challenge expectations. It’s a cliche to say of a book that ‘It makes you think’, but Earthsea does just that. And it’s ultimately the reader that has to answer those questions.

Tom’s Midnight Garden
Philippa Pearce, OUP, 978-0192734501, £6.99 pbk

Tom’s Midnight Garden has, I think, the greatest plot of any children’s novel. Pearce gives us characters not instantly lovable, and her writing can be a little stiff and formal (I seem to recall a page with eight semi-colons!), but that story, involving the eponymous hero slipping back through time, but then also losing what he’d found, is so gripping and engrossing that no one who’s started the book has failed to finish it. As I closed the book for the last time, I remember the darkened room resonating around me, like the silence as a piece of music you’ve loved comes to an end.

Anthony McGowan is one of the most widely acclaimed young adult authors in the UK and his novel Lark won the 2020 CILIP Carnegie Medal.
Windows into illustration: Catherine Rayner

A childhood immersed in books and pictures and attentive observations of pets and wildlife led Catherine Rayner to art schools in Leeds and then Edinburgh, where she specialised in printmaking and illustration. Since then she has become one of our most admired and successful illustrators with a string of favourite books and awards to her name, including the Kate Greenaway Medal. Here she describes how she created the sleep-deprived star of her new book, Arlo the Lion Who Couldn’t Sleep.

Arlo feels as though he’s been in my head as a character for ever. It’s a funny feeling when you start to draw a character you’ve known for a while – it’s like an old friend coming to visit and makes you feel calm and happy. It certainly doesn’t happen often so it’s a really lovely treat when occasionally it does!

The idea for Arlo happened a little while before I realised exactly what his story would be. I always knew I wanted to make a book about sleep and mindfulness for children, and I wanted to be able to incorporate sleeping lions somehow, but I just hadn’t figured out a way to make it work.

I have two children; both sometimes struggle to get to sleep and I make up little poems for them at bedtime to help them nod off and calm their minds after a busy day. When I was working on the book I started researching relaxation techniques, mindfulness and meditation for children. There was a lot of connection and I went about simplifying what I knew as a parent and had learned so I could draw on something that would hopefully become a helpful part of the bedtime ritual for parents and children alike. There is a rhyme in the story, which is memorable, and my boys now say it to themselves before lights off time (I also now often use it when I can’t get to sleep). I very much hope other children will learn it and find it helpful too. I really wanted to make a book that is primarily an enjoyable read and a visual treat but which also has gentle messages in the story that will be absorbed at a deep level.

There are two key drawings in the book for me; the first being the page where we realise that Arlo REALLY needs to get some sleep. “Everybody knows that lions need a lot of sleep, and Arlo was EXHAUSTED.” Drawing a dog tired lion makes you feel pretty weary yourself. When I’m working on a character who is showing a strong emotion, I always find that I start to feel the same! I know I have to in order to understand the body language I need to create on the page.

Even though Arlo is obviously a lion and I am a human; Arlo drops his shoulders and his head in a way that I would. His eyes look small and sunken and he has a very sad expression. Even the textures in his coat, made up of ink blobs, bubbles and scribbles are down.
A special thing about drawing animals is that you have other body parts to show emotions too. Tails are brilliant, for example and you’ll notice Arlo’s indicates his mood throughout the book. On this page it’s hanging limply - even his tail is tired. Whiskers and ears are also excellent for helping to depict a mood.

I feel that the most wonderful thing about creatures in books, is that every child or adult in the world can relate to them on a level that is sometimes not possible with an illustration of a human. This is partly why I’ve always preferred to have lead animal characters exploring human emotions in my picture books (although I do draw people sometimes too). My artwork travels all over the world and an emotional connection with the characters is what brings them to life.

The second ‘key’ drawing is simply a whole page of happy, sleeping and dreaming Arlo. With huge paws and an even bigger smile, the relief of sleep was even a dream to paint. You’ll notice that his tail is loose and relaxed, and the mark-making in his body also reflects his mood. I always illustrate my books in the correct page order so I’m travelling at the right pace of the story with my character(s). By this point in creating the artwork, I too was desperate for Arlo to get some sleep! I think you can feel my relief for my poor tired lion on this page! At this point he is ready to help you fall asleep too...

**Arlo the Lion Who Couldn’t Sleep** by Catherine Rayner is published by Macmillan Children’s Books on 20th August 2020 in hardback, RRP £12.99

Explore more colourful adventures from award-winning Catherine Rayner
As an award-winning children’s poet, Joshua Seigal uses poetry to inspire confidence and creativity in schools, so he is an enthusiastic supporter of poetry on the curriculum: ‘I think poetry’s hugely important for the development of children’s literacy – it gives them freedom to explore a whole toolbox of writing techniques and it’s instrumental in exploring identity and self-expression, which helps foster confidence in all aspects of communication.

I see it being used in numerous ways, and frequently embedded across the curriculum. Children love poetry as it allows them to be creative with language and to explore issues that are relevant to them. In my experience, they also love the humour, the wordplay, and the interaction of performance poetry with a real, live poet. After I’ve gone, schools will often continue to develop the skills that pupils explore during my sessions. They’ll send their edited poems to me to put on my blog, which gives them a real sense of achievement.

His journey into children’s poetry as an educator contains some impressive adventurousness. He says he started writing: ‘really quite rubbish teenage poetry’ after studying Philip Larkin at A Level. Whilst reading philosophy at UCL, and later whilst doing a postgrad at Oxford, he carried on writing and then performing his poems at the Poetry Café in Covent Garden: ‘I really got the performance bug, just the feeding off the audience. For a while I was going there every week.’

After graduating, and six months drifting in and out of voluntary jobs, Joshua came back to writing, and performing at the Poetry Café again: ‘People were telling me that children would probably really like the kind of stuff I was doing. My sister was a primary school teacher at the time, and she invited me in to come and share some work with her class.’ The performance bug bit harder this time: ‘maybe somewhat hastily, I decided to take a one-man poetry show to the Edinburgh Fringe in 2012. This was after only about six months of taking poetry seriously at all!’

Back home, Joshua started performing at schools, using his self-published book My Grandpa’s Beard, before applying to do a pioneering MA on a spoken word educators programme, which was combined with creative writing: ‘It was started by an American poet called Peter Kahn, who works with high school students running spoken word poetry workshops. A lot of the schools had students who were very disengaged with the learning process. So he pioneered this programme which aims to kind of engage students through spoken word poetry.’

As part of the course he was placed in a secondary school in Newham: ‘who decided to keep me on for 3 three years. And then the Funding ran out in 2017, round about the time when my first book with Bloomsbury came out. So I went straight from being a spoken word educator, or at Goldsmiths, to being a published poet with Bloomsbury!’

That first book with Bloomsbury was I Don’t Like Poetry – I asked if the book was the result of a perceived antipathy to poetry by some young people: ‘Um, yeah, I think so. Part of my aim was that as a primary school kid I had no particular love for poetry. So I wanted to produce a collection of poems for children who might not ordinarily think they like poetry. The advice I give when I run workshops is to try and write about something you personally find interesting and that’s really what fuelled that book. And the poem I Don’t Like Poetry is intended to introduce children to techniques like metaphor, simile, alliteration, onomatopoeia and repetition, in a humorous way, really.'
Liz Brownlee is an award-winning poet who has poems in over seventy anthologies, including Reaching the Stars – Poems about Extraordinary Women and Girls. She is a National Poetry Day ambassador and regularly visits schools, bookshops and festivals to perform her poetry and give workshops.

I like to think of it as a mini lesson plan in a poem. I don’t talk about rhyming. So part of my aim in that particular poem is to introduce children to the fact that there’s a whole toolbox of techniques that a poet can use, other than purely rhyming. I Don’t Like Poetry is probably still my favourite book – it contains lots of ‘performance pieces’ which I use regularly in schools, and also because it contains my favourite poem, which is also ‘I Don’t Like Poetry’. And of course many children love it, and even those that initially thought they don’t soon come round to liking it.

Little Lemur Laughing was Joshua’s second book for Bloomsbury – all his poetry books are based in laughter, he even edited an anthology called I Bet I Can Make You Laugh as his third book with Bloomsbury. I asked Joshua, knowing he has spoken about having OCD, whether humour is his way of helping himself cope, or is it just how his poetry expresses itself: ‘It started, I think, as a way of helping me cope during my undergraduate degree, and during my first postgraduate degree. I found I put a lot a lot of pressure on myself, academically, to do very well. Basically my sense of identity was my academic performance. And I think I used poetry and comedy as a way of maybe distracting myself or comforting myself, just for fun. I think a lot of my poetry even though it is funny, does come from a place of sadness. I do think having OCD is, is a big hindrance to my writing. It stops me writing rather than makes me write and when I’m anxious, I find it very hard to be creative. So, yeah, I think initially I wrote as a way of escaping my pain, and I tend to write better when I’m in a better place mentally, but often the writing that I produce is informed by being in that bad place. Having OCD does have its upsides, as weird as that sounds. I really obsess over every word, and every comma and every line break and maybe I’m a better writer because of it, I don’t know. I think I would swap that for not having it if I’m honest. But humour can be a good way of exploring children’s conflicts within the classroom.’

I wondered how Joshua came up with the ideas for his books – inspiration, a desire to write on a subject, a need? ‘With the exception of I Bet I Can Make You Laugh, which I was asked to edit by my editor off the back of my first Lollies nomination in 2017, my books have all been compendiums of different themes. And basically what happens is, I write a poem about bananas. The next week I’ll write one about football. Maybe a couple of weeks later, I’ll write one about my dad. And then maybe two years down the line, I’ve got 50 poems, and then there’s some decision-making about how to structure them and how to order them. Often this is purely intuitive. In my most recent book, Welcome To My Crazy Life, there is no specific theme, but lots of the poems centre around wordplay, and playing with language generally.’

Yapping Away, due out in March 2021, is another KS1 book, following on from Little Lemur Laughing. Joshua writes well for KS1, and I wondered how he gets his head into that place of wonder and ridiculousness. ‘It’s a really challenging to come up with something with artistic merit and not to become too facile. I really try and maintain the quality of the wordplay. Regardless of the age that I’m writing for, that’s what I try to do.’

Joshua has boundless energy and enthusiasm for using humour, poetry and performance to engage children with learning all across the curriculum. He believes: ‘children and poetry are a natural fit.’ His future aspirations? ‘To continue doing my work, interacting with poets, audiences and pupils both in real-life and online, maybe publishing the odd book, and making a living doing what I love.’

Books mentioned

My Grandpa’s Beard, Yabby Books, 978-1472930033, £5.99 pbk
I Don’t Like Poetry, Bloomsbury, 978-1472930040, £5.99 pbk
Little Lemur Laughing, Bloomsbury, 978-1472955487, £5.99 pbk
I Bet I Can Make You Laugh, Bloomsbury, 978-1472972729, £5.99 pbk
Welcome To My Crazy Life, Bloomsbury, 978-1472972729, £5.99 pbk

Books for Keeps No.243 July 2020
Light and Shade: the books on the shortlist for the 2020 Klaus Flugge Prize

Now in its fifth year, the Klaus Flugge Prize is awarded to the most promising and exciting newcomer to children’s picture book illustration. Derek Brazell of the Association of Illustrators takes a close look at this year’s shortlist.

Picture books are endlessly intriguing. They bring stories old and new, delivered to the reader's mind by endlessly varied images and text working in tandem to form a special paper-bound connection: paper being the perfect medium to appreciate a picture book.

And the materials used to create the illustrations in the 2020 Klaus Flugge Prize shortlist demonstrate great variety on the page. Although digital tools will have been deployed there is a strong sense of actual pencils and paint moving upon paper surfaces, scissors and scalpels snipping away at (more) paper, alongside the tablet or desktop computer.

So, what does this shortlist of five hold?

Bored on holiday with her grandparents, Maisie sees a light descend in the dark wood and encourages her sister to investigate in a story that captures the thrill of exploration. Helen Kellock employs a superb use of light and shade in her artwork for The Star in the Forest, with colour emphasising the intensity of light in contrast to the spooky darkness surrounding the trees as the girls search for the light.

The reader is at one with the creatures looking down from the night forest on to the girls making their way through the tangled growth, with Kellock capturing some impressively vertiginous angles. As Maisie’s torch sweeps around, a double page spread where a set of owls on a branch stare down wide-eyed is simultaneously surprising and really amusing.

Washes of paint and speedily expressed pencil marks which leave some pictorial elements apparently incomplete (in a not-required kind of way), mean the reader dwells on the illustrations, seeking out further narrative.

The sisters arrive back home with no threat from the dark forest, but the same can’t be said for the roosting chickens in One Fox: A Counting Thriller Book by Kate Read. As the pages turn it counts upwards to a tense finale, pitting the hungry titular character against a flock of plump hens in their coop as night falls.

The crisp lines of the cut collages formed from painterly and mono-type textures keep the eye dancing over the artwork from texture to texture. With the beautifully composed and well-paced images finishing with a satisfyingly turn-the-tables end spread that should ensure children aren’t left distraught at the hens’ fate.

An almost meditative book, When Sadness Comes to Call by Eva Eland is more likely to be deployed by parents or carers concerned over a child’s emotional state seeking a way to explore hard to express feelings. I loved the way the story starts immediately,
The gentle pace is reflected and sustained by the simplicity for the illustrations, with little background required – a sofa, a tree – to contextualise the story of a young child being guided by the story to come to terms with a visit from Sadness. Using tones of single colour, the character of Sadness is conveyed by Eland as a not-quite-there presence, contrasting with the solid, crayon style line of the other elements of each image.

The non-fiction shortlisted title is *On the Origin of Species* by Sabina Radeva, which retells Darwin's famous text originally published in 1859. Radeva’s scientific background led her to the subject and there’s much to cover here; an adult may be required to explain parts of the information on evolution. Quotes from Darwin’s text in its original style of language are placed throughout the book, and these will be an intriguing challenge for the younger reader to interpret.

The text reveals the changes on Earth over millions of years, from tiny organisms living their lives, to the fight for survival and development of creatures adapting to their habitats. Text and image are not always clearly connected across the spreads – the ‘why’ of certain situations is not clear – although the varieties within certain species are well indicated, sections where the illustration comes more into its own. Radeva is not striving for total accuracy in her depictions of many of the animals, and there is a naïve painting approach to some of the illustrations, which give them a charm that the flat, graphic style heavily employed in much current non-fiction lacks.

Although it offers a lesser explored angle on the natural world, I feel this would be a book to read alongside someone who has some understanding of the subject area who can possible answer some of the questions that could be thrown up.

Many kids will be familiar with the urgent query, *Where is Your Sister?*, the title of Puck Koper’s book, and a shopping trip is the perfect time to set a search for a potentially ‘lost’ child. The young narrator knows her sister is fine, just distracted by all the happenings in the department store they are visiting, but nevertheless the action careers ahead as mum dashes around the store spreading amusing mayhem as displays collapse and other shoppers get tangled up in the search for the seemingly missing child.

Other characters are threaded throughout the busy story who may become more noticeable on re-readings, and the limited palette of black, red and blue flattens the images, adding to the challenge of spotting the characters in each busy scene. The spontaneous line Koper uses adds to the fluidity of the illustrations, with blocks of colour bringing an almost print-like feel to the artwork.

Much of the story’s shopping-based humour is more likely to be caught by the adult reader than the young child, with much of it focused on the female shoppers’ reactions to clothes that are impossible for their body shape.

The *Klaus Flugge Prize* shortlist reflects the broadening out of subject matter in UK children’s publishing, making room for stories embracing the mental health of children as well as continuing to focus on traditional linear narratives. This reflects a broad shift in the publishing world which is understandably being heavily encouraged by outside influences to include wider perspectives. It’s worth noting that within these shortlisted titles there are missed opportunities to include more diversity across the characters, even when many people are depicted (not that tokenism is being encouraged).

In a busy publishing market place a first picture book has a substantial amount of competition for media and public attention, and not every illustrated book reaches the required creative heights to achieve notable sales. It’s hard enough for the stand out titles to gain recognition. Which is where a competition such as the *Klaus Flugge Prize* brings a positive service to those publishing their very first picture book. Being selected for the long and short lists is a personal milestone which will bolster the confidence of all those author illustrators whether they are awarded the top prize or not. And for those creators and their publishers it is a fantastic award to hang effective marketing for the book on.

Having an individual voice, a consistency of characters and a strong, potentially meaningful and illuminating story is what the publishing world continually seeks. In this shortlist they found much of what they look for.

Derek Brazell is a writer, illustrator, and AOI Project Manager and has been involved in the illustration world for many years.
I'm a West Australian boy, and it's hard to grow up in that state without a strong sensory experience of nature, whether the forested southwest or the arid north, the vast inland desert, the endless beaches. Our family spent a lot of time fishing, crabbing, prawning, basically killing a whole lot of edible creatures – and there's a remorseful story about that in the book. But that same foraging also nurtured a sensitivity to the landscape, its texture and connections and its seasonal changes. Also a fearful respect, of the sea, of fires, of storms and the sheer scale of things, both in space and time, how old things were. I spent a lot of time as a teenager painting the coast (often while my family was fishing), becoming more and more aware of how tiny and transplanted I was as a well-clothed, well-fed human. A lot of those early paintings show huge granite outcrops tumbling into the sea, with human beachcombers so small they are a dot of paint, a little interloper, you'd miss them if you blinked. I was also reading plenty of science fiction under those same outcrops, and the stories I now write are possible a fusion of these mismatched experiences. Or not so mismatched.

Tales from the Inner City features stencilled graffiti art of different animal characters, Shaun talks about his inspiration for these and about his brother's interest in palaeontology and the awareness behind his work.

The thing about stencil graffiti is that it has such a wonderful ghostly presence. It puts me to mind of the human shadow etched in stone, found after the Hiroshima bombing, but also less violently of fossils, the leaves of a fern or an ancient fish that you might find in split shale. My one older brother grew up absolutely obsessed with palaeontology – he turned his bedroom into a museum with this amazing backlit wall display – and his obsessions have always had a strong influence on me. I once asked him about the fascination with fossils and rocks, and he replied simply that they were older than anyone could imagine, and yet you could hold them in your hand. He was not interested in dinosaurs, much to my junior disappointment, because they weren’t old enough! He preferred fish and molluscs from around 500 million years ago. More recently I’ve been thinking how everything is old. How our bodies are old, are actually related to those early fossils, how all animals are just really, really, ancient. The endurance of their evolving forms in time and space is just remarkable. And yet here they are, going extinct one by one, in a rapid decline, after all those ages of survival. I wanted my silhouettes to have some resonance of that, of contemporary fossils, of something that might one day be little more than a memory, a tag on a wall, perhaps uncovered in the rubble by some future archaeologist. Animal shadow etched in stone.

This is fascinating, you have a wonderful line in Tales from the Inner City about ‘the crazy fluke of existence’. That sense of awe, wonder and the uncertain permeates much of your work.

Going back to my brother’s fossils, he was very interested in the accidents of evolution too, the gamble of it, and how we humans are one thread of many possible living outcomes. Then how amazing to have the consciousness to look upon ourselves and recognise this crazy fluke, that we are improbable, that everything around us is highly improbable, and basically miraculous. It’s funny, because it’s not an idea you can hold in your head very long, everything soon reverts back to the normal, everyday problems, of common things and quotidian experiences. But I love any art, science or simple conversation that triggers again that latent realisation, that everything is actually bizarre and unusual, that we are only tricked into thinking that it isn’t, lulled into a fog, hypnotised by provisional realities. I suppose the question is: how do we get to those moments of wonderful awareness? That’s also a question I’m constantly asking myself.
Is your artwork one means through which you’re able to achieve this?

Drawing in a sketchbook is certainly one way, such as the sharp observation of an object in real life, a landscape, a person’s face, a simple glass of water. The more you study things in stillness, the weirder they become. The more you appreciate their uniqueness as phenomena, rather than just recognisable or useful things of preconceived value. They become special. The other kind of drawing that works is random doodling, a bit like finding shapes in clouds. The fact that lines do funny things, create odd illusions on the page, means they open up a kind of conversation with reality, and then again you tune into the special qualities of that reality, a reality of memory. Words and writing of course do the same.

Interestingly, a new way of looking at things also happens with accidents of perception. Things like misheard phrases or contextual errors. The story in Tales about horses, for instance, came from a comment our two-year-old daughter made during a night drive. She called out ‘elephants running!’ and I could see her looking up at passing electrical wires. To me it immediately conjured the image of animals running alongside us, or ghosts of animals on wires. She was actually commenting on the music in the car, which perhaps was Henry Mancini’s Baby Elephant Walk, but the error of interpretation was enough to make me think about the history of animals in urban spaces, especially animals used for transport, and so I began researching that, and the story and painting about horses resulted. I believe it takes a little derailing from ordinary thinking to develop any new insight, a little stone on the tracks of our neural networks. Otherwise it’s quite hard to break with programming.

How far do you feel visual storytelling represents a way of breaking with that programming and seeing things in a different way?

I’m basically very interested in the experience of seeing something for the first time and not knowing at all what it is. I’m fascinated by first contact stories between civilisations, by how toddlers or any other young animals engage with new sights, sounds and experiences, and how they must do so without language. I also like to see what a reader will make of things, such as in the ‘Dog’ story in Tales from the Inner City, when you remove much of the narrative and just show the same landscape changing over aeons. It’s probably what also attracts me to children’s literature as a genre that I find myself in, that it’s all about elemental experiences, pretty raw, undescribed experiences that have yet to be processed and named. Sometimes they can’t be named, but you can still draw and paint them very precisely. Anything from migrant stories to the inner worlds of animals.

Tales from the Inner City is published by Walker Books, 978-1406383843, £25.00 hbk.

Jake Hope is chair of the working party for Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals. He is a children’s book and reading development consultant and is currently working on Seeing Sense, a book about visual literacy.
What MORE is there to say about ‘Alice’?

Lewis Carroll’s ‘Alice’ Books have had a remarkable fascination for readers the world over; not only have there been over 9,000 editions in 174 languages, but there are countless books about them. Peter Hunt reflects on writing yet another.

What interests people about famous children’s books can be bewildering. Was Enid Blyton a bad mother? Was Dumbledore gay? In the case of the most famous children’s books of all, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass this kind of interest generally seems to involve a trial in absentia of Charles Dodgson over his relationship with Alice Liddell and other little girls (with a great deal about missing and mutilated diary entries and Dodgson’s photographic habits).

Which is a pity because the ‘Alice’ books are the complex product of a complex mind, and can tell us a great deal about Victorian culture, and the intricacies of writing for children. Dodgson, beginning with a personal story for a little girl, then developed and layered it and its sequel with local jokes, political satire, personal preoccupations, and mathematical oddities – indeed, both books are extended games, which may now, increasingly, be more interesting for adults to play than for children.

And so my new book about these books is about things that most people don’t know about the books – as opposed to what they know, or think they know, about the private lives involved.

For example: take Friday, 4th July, 1862, a ‘golden afternoon’ so well known that it is still celebrated as Alice Day in Oxford. Two junior academics, Charles Dodgson and his friend Robinson Duckworth rowed the three young daughters of Dean Liddell of Christ Church (the Oxford college known as ‘the house’) up, or possibly down, the river. Dodgson made up a story, and Alice, number two daughter, asked him to write it down. Of course, as many people know, this is at least partly a myth: it was actually raining that day; and Dodgson added the reference to the story in his diary as an afterthought, and later admitted that it was ‘made up almost wholly of bits and scraps’ from stories, ‘like summer midges’, told on several such trips.

But probably very few people know that such excursions were commonplace in Oxford: junior staff frequently took the children of their superiors for excursions (probably for politic reasons); or that Duckworth became Chaplain-in-Ordinary to Queen Victoria, officiated at Charles Darwin’s funeral, and was so distinguished that he was buried in Westminster Abbey. That boat was almost a microcosm of a deeply intertwined set of cultural contacts.
These are fascinating ‘bits and scraps’, and I begin with the detritus of books already in Dodgson’s mind when he began to write. His cheerful parodies of Isaac Watts (‘How doth the little crocodile’), or Jane Taylor (‘Twinkle, Twinkle, little bat’) are familiar enough, but there are also traces in the ‘Alice’ books of cautionary tales, of Punch and Judy, and of pantomimes. Dodgson saw the pantomime Harlequin King Chess or Tom the Piper’s Son and See-Saw Marjery Daw at the Surrey Theatre in 1865, with its final act of a game of chess with live players, just as he was beginning to assemble Through the Looking Glass.

He was not above working out his own little vendettas: he had fallen out with Tennyson, author of ‘Maud,’ a poem that features a garden of talking flowers:

The larkspur listens, ’I hear, I hear’ …  
She is coming, my own, my sweet;  
Were it ever so airy a tread …

In Through the Looking-Glass Alice and the flowers are listening for the Red Queen: “She’s coming!” cried the Larkspur: “I hear her footstep, thump, thump, along the gravel walk.”

The extent of Dodgson’s magpie mind is brilliantly demonstrated by the resemblance of the Red Queen’s garden to La Bataille des Cartes (1844) by the French satirical cartoonist J.J. Grandville (1803–1847) who worked for the Parisian magazine Le Charivari (and influenced John Tenniel).

With all this floating around in his head, Dodgson began by packing his story with personalised nonsense for the Liddell sisters. When Alice falls down the rabbit hole, she reflects “Why, I wouldn’t say anything about it, even if I fell off the top of the house!” (Which was most likely true.) And to a Christ Church girl, there was really only one ‘house’. She and her sisters would have recognised the croquet games, the caricature of John Ruskin as the ‘drawling master’, the treacle well at Binsey, and much else.

As the book developed, Dodgson layered in his satirical targets. Look at Tenniel’s drawing of the mad tea party: the Hatter is probably Dean Liddell; the Dormouse is Thomas John Prout, the rector of Binsey, well known for dozing off in meetings; and the March Hare, is one of Dodgson’s intellectual enemies, the broad church socialist Julius Charles Hare, Archdeacon of Lewes.

Which brings us to debates philosophical. On 30 June 1860, Dodgson bought a two-guinea ticket to a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science at the new Oxford Museum. This turned into a famous confrontation between Thomas Huxley (who Dodgson later photographed) and Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford (who ordained Dodgson) over Charles Darwin’s newly published theories of natural selection. Dodgson was caught between religious orthodoxy and interest in new ideas, so it is not surprising that the over-enthusiastic puppy that Alice encounters (possibly a beagle) bears a curious resemblance to Darwin. And can it be chance that Alice hides behind ‘a great thistle’, while one of Dodgson’s colleagues was Sir William Turner Thiselton-Dyer (1843–1928), who ended his career as Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, became a friend of Charles Darwin, and married Thomas Huxley’s daughter, Harriet?

So, what went on in Dodgson’s head was, to say the least, convoluted – and never more so than in his fascination with numbers. The classic example is his fixation with the number 42: Alice has 42 illustrations; the oldest rule in the King’s book is 42; Alice’s age in Looking Glass is seven years and six months (7x6=42). And if you think that this is mere coincidence, consider the White Queen’s age. ‘I am,’ she tells Alice, ‘just one hundred and one, five months and a day.’ That remarkable Alice scholar, Edward Wakeling, has worked out that if you count the days that the White Queen has been alive, up to 4 November 1859 (the date when the book is set) – not forgetting leap years – the total is 37,044: doubling that (there are two Queens, and as they are in the same set, they must be the same age) makes 74,088 – and 74,088 just happens (?) to be 42 x 42 x 42.

Dodgson was not the first (or last) author to discover that a lot can be hidden in a children’s book, and, ironist that he was, it did not much matter to him if anyone understood any of it. And so, once we are down the rabbit-hole we can only follow passages, open doors, chase rabbits: in effect, join in Charles Dodgson’s games – and, after all, playing games is what children’s books are about.
Beyond the Secret Garden:
Life and Literature in Lockdown
by Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O’Connor

What does it mean to be a writer of colour during a pandemic and a global movement protesting systemic racism? For this issue’s Beyond the Secret Garden column, we asked Black British and British Asian authors about their experiences over the past few months. Several generously took the time to send us responses to questions about their work, their publications, and the effect of the events of the last few months. What emerges from these responses is a story of struggle and frustration in many cases, but also a generosity of spirit – particularly toward young readers who may have lost access to books during this period. We invite you to attend to their experiences, and then check out the list of books that either have already been published during lockdown, or will appear very soon, so that you can buy them for your home, school or public library collections.

Online Life:
One of the responses that came up again and again when we asked what projects authors and illustrators have been pursuing during lockdown is various forms of online production. Jasbinder Bilan, Zanib Mian and Rashmi Sirdeshpande have their own YouTube channels on which they have been doing readings and Q&A sessions for schools. Other writers, including Chitra Soundar and Sita Brahmachari have also produced YouTube videos, and the illustrator Dapo Adeola has run a fascinating series on Instagram Live where he converses with peers about the publishing industry and its pitfalls for those Black writers and artists. Savita Kalhan has been working with her teen reading group remotely. Catherine Johnson and Patrice Lawrence both read stories for Empathy Lab (empathylab.co.uk), and Patrice, who was scheduled to headline the Hay Festival, had a short film of her story, Day Zero and Chips made which is available online. Her daughter is the narrator; Patrice told us that she bribed her to do it ‘with a homemade cottage pie. I am so proud of this. (The film and the cottage pie.) Rashmi Sirdeshpande has also been filming, including a virtual event for the Puffin Festival of Dreams. Irfan Master told us that ‘As writer-in-residence for First Story, and to supplement my income and because I enjoy it, I’ve been working with a local social enterprise in Islington on a mentoring programme for young people.’ Many have done workshops for adults as well, including Savita Kalhan, Zanib Mian, and Patrice Lawrence. Sita Brahmachari has blogged for Amnesty International in her role as Amnesty Ambassador. Jasbinder Bilan, Catherine Johnson, and Sita Brahmachari – along with several other fantastic authors of colour – contributed stories to The Book of Hopes, published online by the National Literacy Trust, to entertain and comfort children during lockdown. If you are one of those readers who has approached us (or anyone else) saying you would like a list of authors of colour you should read, this would be an excellent place to start.

In fact, most of the readings, short films, and even some of the workshops and conversations mentioned here are available for free, online. And this is important, because many of the authors we interviewed mentioned that they had seen an increase in people asking them to do work for free during the lockdown. There was a sense of frustration about this, as recent studies have shown that British authors of colour do not get offered advances as large as white British authors, and many are also expected to do their own marketing and publicity. More than one author who wrote to us questioned whether they could continue working in an industry that does not support them. Most have had school visits and other paid bookings cancelled, and many have had the publication of books pushed back, often as much as a year into the future. While authors and illustrators want very much to reach their audiences, they should not be expected to do this without the support of both the publishing industry and the book-buying public – so please, if you have asked for or used the free online resources produced by these and other generous authors, return the favour and buy one (or all!) of their books. Read them and recommend them. Suggest them and nominate them for prizes (such as the Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals, which will be collecting nominations from its member librarians beginning in September).
Supporting Justice (but at what cost?):

Just by looking at the list of books published or forthcoming from these authors, it is clear to see how their work embodies an understanding of what it means to be a person of colour in a white-dominated society, and how important it is that stories of these experiences are told. Sufiya Ahmed’s forthcoming book about Noor Inayat Khan and Catherine Johnson’s books about Alexandre Dumas and Nanny of the Maroons highlight largely-untold histories. Sita Brahmachari’s work, including her forthcoming novel, describes the experiences of migration (both forced and migration by choice). Rashmi Sirdeshpande, who self-describes as a ‘lawyer-turned-sto­ryteller’ wants her readers to believe that they could change the world. Other authors are writing thrillers, mysteries, humorous books and fantasies, giving readers the opportunity to see protagonists of colour in all different types of books.

But many authors and illustrators have struggled to work during this time. The lack of contact with friends and family members, and increased caring responsibilities are struggles that have affected most people during the lockdown. For the authors and illustrators we surveyed, however, their commitment to a just world for all children everywhere has occasioned additional, and painful, stress and anxiety. Jasbinder Bilan says that ‘there have been times when the scale and gravity of the situation just hits you out of nowhere and when I have heard the stories of deaths it has stayed with me, and upset me a lot. Especially when you consider the inequalities surrounding who gets infected.’ Sita Brahmachari agrees, writing that being ill during this time ‘made me reflect on the debt owed to migrant people working in the NHS and Social Care and Key Workers who have been particularly badly impacted during this pandemic. The treatment of BAME key workers, health and societal inequalities have been much on my mind, and in my heart in real life as in fiction.’ Ifran Master reminds us that ‘being a writer in the world is, particularly now, a political act.’ Some of our respondents have specifically commented on the events surrounding the police murder of George Floyd in Minnesota. Dapo Adeola told us, ‘having to hear about the continued racially motivated killings of Black people at the hands of the police in America was enough to push me to breaking point. During these last three months I’ve gone from crazy highs and lows in energy and lethargy to rage, anger and sadness … to be honest, I’m exhausted.’ One author echoed that exhaustion, writing that the racist incidents in America and the UK ‘has made me question my own writing and the predominantly white industry within which I work.’ We only asked a few writers to respond, but we know that the commitment to community and the concomitant feeling of exhaustion are felt by many British authors of colour. They need our support as much as we need them.

With many thanks, and book plugs to:

Dapo Adeola (Clean Up!, with text by Nathan Bryan, will be published July 2020, Puffin, 978-0241345894, £6.99 pbk)
Sufiya Ahmed (My Story: Noor-un-Nissa Inayat Khan will be published in August 2020, Scholastic, 978-0702300059, £6.99 pbk)
Jasbinder Bilan (Tamarind and the Star of Ishta will be published in September 2020, Chicken House, 978-1913221755, £6.99 pbk)
Sita Brahmachari (When Secrets Set Sail will be published in August 2020, Orion Children’s Books, 978-1510105430, £7.99 pbk)
Catherine Johnson (Queen of Freedom will be published in August 2020, Pushkin Children’s Books, 978-1782692799, £6.99 pbk; and To Liberty! in September 2020, Bloomsbury Education, 978-1472972552, £6.99 pbk)
Savita Kalhan (The Long Weekend was due to be republished this year, but due to Covid-19 the new publication date will be in spring 2021)
Patrice Lawrence (Eight Pieces of Silva will be published in August 2020, Hodder Children’s Books, 978-1444951295, £6.99 pbk)
Irfan Master (Blair Peach 1979 can be found in the anthology Resist: Stories of Uprising edited by Ra Page, Comma Press, 978-1912697076, £14.99 hbk)
Rashmi Sirdeshpande (Never Show a T-Rex a Book, Puffin, 978-0241329266, £6.99 pbk and Dosh: How to Earn it, Save it, Spend it, Grow it and Give it, Wren and Rook, 978-1526362759, £9.99 pbk will appear in August 2020; How to Change the World was due to be published in May but this has been pushed back to January 2021)
I wish I’d written...

Pop-picker Michelle Robinson chooses a book with a ton of fun.

I unashamedly love pop. I’m a sucker for a pure idea, clearly expressed with a ton of fun thrown in. For that reason, I wish I could write like Andy Stanton. Ludicrous, of course – nobody can like the Stanly Man Can. His recent picture book, Going to the Volcano is entirely daft and completely brilliant for it. Read any one of his stories aloud and you’re an instant standup comic.

I also wish I could be seven years old again and discovering The Worst Witch for the first time. I’ve never related to a character quite so much as the tomboyish, clumsy, ne’er-do-well Mildred Hubble. Jill Murphy’s crystal clear words and illustrations are a total treat. It’s all so accessible. Nothing higgibrow about it. Totally immaculate.

Thankfully we don’t have to turn back time to discover a new class of heroes. Contemporary seven-year olds (and the rest) can discover all kinds of wonderful, relatable characters — new, old and increasingly more representative — on the bookshelves. I am proud to be putting Sir Grace on the shelves alongside Mildred and Jammy Grammy Lammy F’Huppa F’Huppa Berlin Stereo Eo Eo Lebb CYepp Nermonica Le Strypek De Grespin De Crespin De Spespin De Vespin De Whoop De Loop De Brunkle Merry Christmas Lenoir.

School Book Clubs Gone Virtual

Having given us the basics for setting up a book club in our May issue, Dr Rebecca Butler explains how you can move it online.

As regular readers of Books for Keeps may know, when schools are functioning normally, I teach two book clubs to year six pupils and one club to year five pupils in Saint Richard Reynolds primary school in Twickenham. Since the beginning of the Covid lockdown and the closure of schools to most pupils of course holding such meetings physically has come to an end.

Transferring this activity to an online service is not a simple matter. It involves agreeing arrangements with the school authorities, the parents, required to provide written consent for their child to participate, the children, the teachers who have responsibility for the classes as well as the teacher who will conduct the online procedure. One example of the criteria that need to be met is concerned with the safeguarding of pupils. The protocol observed at Richard Reynolds is that during any online contact with pupils, at least two responsible adults must take part. If anything unplanned occurs, a second responsible person is on hand to help resolve any issues.

The aim of the team making these arrangements was simple. The pupils should have a learning experience that was as close to normal as was possible in these extraordinary circumstances. That goal had to be kept constantly in mind. Much to the credit of all concerned parties, at Richard Reynolds these complexities were sorted out in just three weeks.

The distribution of books also needs to be planned. With the first book that the clubs addressed, one of the teachers drove round the homes of all the pupils delivering the books. This was too arduous a task to remain a permanent arrangement. Some of the children are now back in school. They can collect their own books. The parents of some pupils who are not yet back in school are requested to visit the school and pick up a book from reception. The copies are wiped. The parents are requested to come gloved or hand sanitised and masked. Sometimes the parents of a child who is in school will hand deliver a copy to the doorstep of the home of a nearby pupil still doing remote learning.

We use Zoom. Inevitably with any remote system that broadcasts from inside private homes, security issues arise. We have addressed these as best we can. The parents of the children help them to log on so that no child participates without the parent being aware. The children must be in a communal area of the house such as a sitting room rather than a child’s bedroom. My experience is that Zoom is a technically reliable system. When difficulties arise they are more likely to arise from the WIFI setup in the pupil’s home. It is a rarity for the provision of service to be interrupted by any technical glitch.

If remote teaching is to be effective the engagement of pupils is essential. If a pupil fails to sign on, someone will send a text reminder. Class teachers have the responsibility to encourage any pupils who miss sessions to rejoin as soon as they can. In my experience this works well.

There is one ingredient which is inevitably missing from remote learning. Children love books, if teachers choose well and they are offered appealing texts. They can be helped to love reading over a virtual connection. But they also love mixing with their friends. The book clubs we have organised provide some connection with their friends and their teachers, as well as with great authors. But is it the same? Of course not. But it is far and away better than simply giving in to adversity.

This report is compiled with sincere gratitude towards and appreciation of the staff of Saint Richard Reynolds Catholic College primary school, its pupils and their parents.
Meg Rosoff’s new novel, The Great Godden, is the story of a family in their beach house for the summer and two brothers who change all the usual dynamics when they are dropped into the mix. When I spoke to Rosoff, she was in her own beach house in East Anglia, lying low with her artist husband Paul Hamlyn, enjoying the peace, busy writing and reading, and loving Hilary Mantel’s The Mirror and the Light.

Rosoff grew up in Boston, one of four daughters of a doctor, born within five years of each other, in a home that was outwardly ordinary but not happy. ‘I had a difficult family. My father lost his money. He was a depressive on a cycle. He was angry. I escaped into books.’ Family life, she says, involved a lot of ‘fighting for your territory’.

One joy of her youth, though, was the summer holiday. Her novel opens with the car journey from home, with four squabbling siblings and exasperated parents. ‘The six people in the car and the father in a foul mood were based on our holidays to Martha’s Vineyard, then a scruffy little island.’ But the destination has a benevolent effect.

‘The summer gave everyone a chance to be apart. A good summer will do that. There was such a sense of freedom and escape. We would just disappear. Nobody knew where we were during the day, from breakfast to dinner.’

This experience was the part of her childhood Rosoff didn’t want to leave behind. ‘I escaped the suburbs, my family, America ... but I wanted that beach back.’ Her house in East Anglia ‘brought that into my life again’.

The setting, though, was not enough to fire her story into life. Usually she begins with ‘the magical moment of knowing where to start the book’. In the case of her novel for adults, Jonathan Unleashed, she dreamt the first sentence (‘Jonathan came home from work one day to find the dogs talking about him.’) But the genesis of The Great Godden was different.

In 2011 at the ‘fab and shambolic’ Voewood Festival, the poet and author Salena Godden won a fund-raising auction to have her name included in a Meg Rosoff novel. ‘So I felt obligated’ says Rosoff. ‘This was the only time I thought “just write the bloody book.”’ It felt dead. ‘I wrote 25,000 words and gave up. It was eight years before I picked it up again.’ She found that it had taken a wrong direction. ‘Three drafts back I found one I could work from’.

This book has been praised for feeling unforced, and it does unfold with perfect ease. But that has no bearing on the process. ‘So much work goes into making it feel so effortless.’

One issue in the writing was resolving the narrative voice. ‘I couldn’t work out if it should be first or third person, or a male or female narrator. Then I realised I didn’t have to solve it as I thought I did.’ The narrator is unnamed, and the sex and gender never specified. It freed up the writing.

It is not the first time Rosoff has avoided a decision to move a book forward. Something similar had happened with the protagonist in her Carnegie-Medal-winning novel Just In Case. She knew she wanted him to go to the airport. ‘But I couldn’t decide where he would fly to, and in the end he just lived at the airport for six months.’ She has also played with the identity of the narrator before, in What I Was.

The ambiguity in The Great Godden leaves room for readers to make their own assumptions. The narrator falls in love with one of the interfering brothers, the handsome and magnetic Kit. Readers over 50, Rosoff finds, tends to refer to the narrator as ‘she’. Young readers don’t.

A conventional love story was not Rosoff’s aim. How I Live Now [her first novel] was sold as a romance between Daisy and Edmund, but it was just as much about Daisy and Piper. There are so many different kinds of love you discover as you are growing up.’

I’m interested in a “stranger comes to town” set up. You drop two boys into a summer all about niceness and childhood and safety. It is, because of the disruption, ‘almost a metaphor for life’.

I suggest that Kit, who is far from being a conventional idealised love interest, is a warning for young readers. ‘He is not exactly a villain or a warning. And it’s not as if no one has ever done a sex story with a bad boy character. My job is to look at situations that might be more complicated.

‘I hate the idea of good guys and bad guys. He is not an evil person, just a narcissist, and damaged.’ Rosoff is taken with this line from Damage, Josephine Hart’s novel. ‘Damaged people are dangerous. They know how to survive.’

‘Evil isn’t really interesting but damaged is. I like to look at things from the troublemaker’s point of view. What could have happened to make them so angry?’

She also wanted to explore charisma. ‘Charm is a dangerous quality. It can be incredibly manipulative. We have seen it in politics. A lot of people thought Boris was charming, but he’s impulsive and self-serving.’

Kit may be the catalyst, but all the members of the eccentric family in The Great Godden (and the dog) are characterised with complexity and sharp observation. Even Mattie, the sister who lives her life to post it on Instagram, turns out to have unexpected qualities. ‘I was touched’, says Rosoff, as if she didn’t make it happen herself, ‘by how Mattie rises at the end.’ She is not two-dimensional just because she is beautiful.

‘I have always been attracted to unconventional English families. It’s why I love Barbara Trapido. When I first moved to London I adopted an unconventional Oxford family. I come to it with a foreigner’s longing. After my suburban upbringing, I was supposed to marry a nice Harvard doctor and settle down, as my mother did. When I first encountered the sort of family with a million people milling around and everyone sleeping with everyone else’s boyfriend, I thought “this anarchy is heaven.”’

The novel is redolent of the feelings and sensations of youth and summer, and also has a certain satirical distance. ‘I write from two perspectives – the strongly remembered adolescence and the adult who has digested it.

Her memories are a rich mine. ‘The last thing you want as a writer is a happy childhood. Writing comes out of life being complicated and dangerous and exhausting. And therapy.’

Books mentioned:
The Great Godden. Bloomsbury YA, 978-1526618511, £12.99 hbk
Just In Case. Penguin, 978-0141318066, £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.
Navigating the Information Jungle

Susan Martineau asks how we can equip our children to recognise ‘fake news’.

Every day we are bombarded with words and images. How can young readers and viewers disentangle the facts they need to know from this overwhelming jungle of information?

In 2018, the National Literacy Trust concluded that ‘only 2% of children and young people in the UK have the critical literacy skills they need to tell whether a news story is real or fake ...’

As a children’s information book writer, I am obsessed with finding out accurate facts. I cannot remember a time when I didn’t love learning about the world around me and then enlightening anyone within earshot about my latest discovery, from how long a baby elephant stays with its mother to why you can’t pee into a normal loo in space.

But when I was a young fact-finder, we did not have the internet in all its complexity. Being able to research online is the most amazing tool, but it requires certain skills to avoid the traps that lie in wait in its undergrowth. It is tricky enough for hardened non-fiction writers to sift fact from tosh, or even downright dangerous misinformation, so how can we expect young readers to manage it?

The last thing anyone wants is for children to be put off questing for facts, because they are anxious about what they might read or view. How sad if their curiosity about the world is squished before it can take off. By learning some essential critical literacy skills, they can become discerning and confident explorers. LOOKING, READING, ASKING QUESTIONS, LISTENING, CHECKING FACTS and THINKING FOR YOURSELF are not superpowers, but they do need to be practised.

I’m sure I’m not alone in feeling just a bit sick of the term ‘fake news’. The trouble with this nastily tidy little phrase is its use as an indiscriminate accusation for anything someone does not agree with. Just shout ‘fake news’ as loudly as you can, encourage others to share it, and fear, anger and confusion spreads. Is this a message we want our children to soak up?

Young readers and viewers can be encouraged to become fake-news spotters, armed with the following questions: who is writing this news? Are they an expert on the subject or were they there when it happened? Why are they writing it? How are they trying to make you feel or act? When was it written? Is it old news made to look new? Using their critical literacy skills young readers will learn to see behind the words on the page or screen.

But critical literacy is not just about fake news, it is also about analysing what you are reading to construct a logical picture of the world around us and the facts that are needed for problem-solving. For example, how can children learn about and discuss the urgent issue of climate change without accurate facts? Non-fiction that really gets readers to engage and think about the facts for themselves is essential.

In books that I’ve written and had published, such as the Real-life series, I’ve told the stories of events such as mysteries or disasters and then created a kind of investigator’s file for each one. This is my way of vividly presenting the facts to the reader for them to think for themselves about what really happened. I always research high and low to find out as much as I can and in my recent book, Question Everything!, I have set out tips on how to find reliable sources of information.

Susan Martineau is a Blue Peter Book Award-winning author for Real-life Mysteries and her latest book, Question Everything!, will be published by b small publishing in August 2020.
In close-up: the Bloomsbury Readers series

Patrice Lawrence, Tony Bradman, Margaret Mahy, Joan Aiken, Andrew Fusek Peters, Michaela Morgan, Geraldine McCaughrean and Narinder Dhami: any list that brings together such a quality line up of authors is going to be welcomed. Congratulations to Bloomsbury therefore who have all of the above and more on their Bloomsbury Readers series.

The Bloomsbury Readers series are aimed squarely at children in Key Stage 2 and designed to support them as they start reading independently and while they continue to gain confidence and understanding. The books cover a wide range of genres, from historical stories to tales of myth and legend, school based adventure and even a retelling of Macbeth (that's Tony Bradman's). They're banded by colour: the lime green band is for those 6 and up; brown is for readers 7+; grey is for those aged 8 and above; dark blue is for 9 year olds and above; and dark red is for those aged 10+.

All the books include black and white illustrations and by talented illustrators too: David Wyatt, Doffy Weir and Peter Bailey amongst others. Further, very useful added extras include end notes to help teachers or indeed parents. These pose questions under various headings such as What Do you Think? and Storytelling Toolkit to tease out understanding of the story, and of the means in which the information was conveyed and received. There are fun Quiz questions too and suggestions for ways to get Creative. The latter range from coming up with ideas for inventions, to writing your own story. Later in the summer, you'll also be able to access more guided reading notes written by the experts at the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education.

Visit the website for further information and a complete list of titles www.bloomsburyguidedreading.com.

While a good number of the books are reissues, there are brand new stories too. Here are some we'd like to highlight.

The Boy in the Jam Jar (6+)

Dunbar very cleverly and sensitively explains what it means to be deaf in a story that is also full of drama, together with some very accurate depictions of everyday school life. Dylan is losing his hearing and doesn't like the way it means he is sometimes left out or treated differently by his friends; but nor does he like the hearing aids that make everything too loud. His problems are resolved in a very unusual and exciting way, but the experiences we’ve lived through with him are what readers will really remember.

My Other Life (7+)
Polly Ho-Yen, ill. Patricia Hu, Bloomsbury Education, 96pp, 978-1472972576, £6.99 pbk

Mae, the central character in Polly Ho-Yen’s thought-provoking and original story, is faced with an enormous decision. Throughout her life she’s suffered badly from asthma, resulting in lots of dashes to hospital and overnight stays. It’s during one of these that she first notices a strange, black hole opening up. Tempted into it, she finds herself living a different version of her life, an asthma-free one. It should be so much better than the life she’s left, but she realises that there are other things in her old life that count for so much more. Another elegantly told story that will give readers lots to think about.

My Friend the Alien (8+)
Zanib Mian, illus Sernur Isik, Bloomsbury Education, 64pp, 978-1472973900, £6.99 pbk

Alien Maxx is sent to Earth from Planet Zerg to research humans and in particular, human feelings. Little does our young alien expect that by the end of the story, not only will he have developed a passion for Milk Chocolate with Hazelnut Pieces Sainsbury’s Taste the Difference, but a raft of feelings of his own too. These come about thanks to Maxx’s friendship with Jibreel, a boy who has also come a long way, and who is taunted as an ‘alien’ by other kids in his class. Zanib Mian has a wonderful narrative, and it’s an absolute treat, funny, acute and full of heart. As with Speech – the story is told through Maxx’s exuberant first person voice, and in particular, human feelings. Little does our young alien expect that by the end of the story, not only will he have developed a passion for Milk Chocolate with Hazelnut Pieces Sainsbury’s Taste the Difference, but a raft of feelings of his own too. These come about thanks to Maxx’s friendship with Jibreel, a boy who has also come a long way, and who is taunted as an ‘alien’ by other kids in his class. Zanib Mian has a wonderful narrative, and it’s an absolute treat, funny, acute and full of heart.

To Liberty! The Adventures of Thomas-Alexandre Dumas
Catherine Johnson, illus. Rachel Sanson, Bloomsbury Education, 96pp, 978-1472972552, £6.99 pbk

Catherine Johnson is one of our best writers of historical fiction, and in To Liberty! recounts the life story of Thomas-Alexandre Dumas, with all the brio and vigour it deserves. Dumas was the son of an enslaved African woman and a French nobleman, father of the novelist Alexandre Dumas and likely to be the inspiration for The Three Musketeers. Whether describing his childhood on Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), or his experiences in the Dragoons, she makes his story vivid, alive with the sense of injustices Dumas faced, and his fierce determination to make things better. It’s riveting, irresistible reading, the kind of true life adventure that inspires readers to find out more, and to rethink their own view of the world. Don’t miss.
Brian Alderson is founder of the Children’s Books History Society and a former Children’s Books Editor for The Times.

Gwyneth Bailey is a freelance education and children’s book consultant. Jill Bennett is the author of Learning to Read with Picture Books and heads up a nursery unit. Fen Coles is co-director at Letterbox Library. Jane Churchill is a children’s book consultant. Stuart Dyer is an Head Teacher of a primary school in East Devon. 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

Foreith Hordon is a former children’s librarian and editor of Books for Keeps. Carey Fluker Hunt is a writer and children’s book consultant. 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.teachthebooks.org.uk. Margaret Pemberton is a children’s librarian and editor of Books for Keeps. Sue Roe is a children’s librarian. Elizabeth Schlienter is the compiler of www.booksaboutchildrensbooks.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. The text is a pleasure to read – the choice of font colour makes the text very difficult to read. This is a shame, rather detracting from what is an outstanding offering. Highly recommended. FH

Arlo, the Lion Who Couldn’t Sleep

Catherine Rayner, Macmillan, 36pp, 9781509802207, £12.99 pbk

How do you get to sleep when you cannot; the conditions are just not right? Arlo would love to know – he is so tired. Luckily Owl has the answer – a little rhyme that sets the mood perfectly – and without any more fuss, Arlo falls asleep. Indeed, the little rhyme is so effective, Arlo is able to help his friends when their sleep is interrupted, whether it is Owl in the early morning mist to the closing darkness, we follow Arlo across the vast expanse of a savannah world. The text is a picture book where words and images work together perfectly. (My only reservation – on the final spread of some didactic children’s books published before Alice mostly cribbed from Harvey Darton’s historical work?) These and other unnecessary passages are the more frustrating in that they obscure a second aspect of the making of the books: their life as physical products. (Hunt omits mention in his “Further Reading” of two crucial books in this respect: Lewis Carroll and the House of Macmillan [1987] and Michael Hancher’s The Tenniel Illustrations to the “Alice” Books [1985].) Tenniel is indeed the main sufferer here for all those predictable aspects are discussed such as the “Wasp in a Wig” incident or the character of the White Knight, there is nothing on either his hunch techniques or his vision throughout the project. Indeed, spurred on initially by Carroll’s own thirty-seven drawings for Under Ground, he is surely himself the Inventor of Wonderland. (Ask yourself: what would have been the fate of Alice’s Adventures if it had been published as a plain text edition?) As it is, the illustrations that adorn the present volume do great credit to its intentions as a popular summary. They appear, often in full colour, on almost every page of the book, sometimes on facing pages as well, and they are not only relevant and entertaining but, thanks mostly to Christ Church and the Bodleian itself, seldom paraded in Caroliniana (the many coloured adaptations of Tenniel are from some facsimile playing cards devised by E Gertrude Thomson in Bodley’s John Johnson Collection). Perrickety to the last though, I must point out that the Struwwelpeter plate should be dated after 1906 rather than 1985 and that the mysterious Humpty Dumpty on page 95 needs a date. BA

Wild

Sam Usher, Templar Publishing, 32pp, 978 1 7874 1685 7, £6.99 pbk

Grandpa and Boy (the narrator) have a busy day ahead – “looking-after-the-cat” or clay. Boy has done his research and doesn’t anticipate any difficulties: all she needs is someone willing to play with her, feed her and cuddle her – what could be simpler than that?
Ed’s Choice
Hello! A Counting Book of Kindnesses


This is a counting book with a difference. The opening pages reveal a family escaping war and danger. We are invited to imagine what this might be like and reassured all will be well – because of the kindness of strangers. The family’s journey is structured in the form of a one to ten of kindesses, from two hands pulling them to safety aboard a boat to ten new homes. It is worth noting that the thoughtful illustrations to do much of the story telling. The eagle-eyed will notice that the text enabling young readers to follow the journey of this refugee family and encouraging them to join in with the counting. Additional details within the illustrations provide further learning opportunities including sequencing number one to ten and the days of the week.

However, this particular moggie is of the recalcitrant kind and is having none of those things. For as we know cats like to walk by themselves, so it makes a leap for freedom, through the kitchen window and off into the great outdoors with Grandpa and Boy in hot pursuit. Following the creature proves pretty challenging; she leads them on a wild chase, testing the borders of fantasy and reality merge. Eventually the two humans find the fast-moving feline when she pauses briefly to call back up and then it’s time to party. What a party it is with cats of all shapes and sizes cavorting to live music with wild abandon.

Then back at home once again, Boy, Grandpa and their charge appear to have become firm friends and Boy, fired with enthusiasm is more than willing to have their visitor return. As with all his Grandpa and Boy stories, Sam Usher keeps his text to a minimum allowing his quirky, energetic watercolour and ink illustrations to do much of the story telling. The eagle-eyed will notice that the transition to the imaginary titular location is indicated by a potted plant growing in Grandad’s garden. JB

Tiny Ant

Claire Freedman, ill. Claire Powell, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 978 1 4711 8148 1, £6.99 pbk

There’s a rumble in the jungle as the jungle version of Britain’s Got Talent rolls in! Everyone is excited and practices their many skills in hopes of making the big time. Tiny Ant also practices, but no one expects him to do anything well, and he gets bullied in a reference to the sad time that Susan Boyle experienced in her first time on the show. The fact that she won (quite rightly) is also referenced in this story, as Tiny Ant sings his tiny heart out, whilst all the rest of the animals come a cropper. The illustrations are an explosion of colour and detail as the lion’s costume splits, monkey’s juggling bananas end up in the audience, and the skunk ‘makes an awful pong’ as he tries to play his trumpet. This reviewer particularly enjoyed the pictures at the beginning and end of the book, with Tiny Ant making his way out of and back to his underground home. Kids are going to love this. It’s laugh-out-loud funny, and the rhyming couplets will appeal too. Great fun if a tad obvious. ES

Big Green Crocodile. Rhymes to say and play

Jane Newberry, illus Carolina Rabei, Otter-Barry Books, 52pp, 9781910959019, £11.99 hbk

‘Stripy tigers, stripy zebras...’ ‘Bibb-ly, bobb-ly, bibb-ly, bobb-ly, Brontosaurus ride...’ ‘Fishy in the ocean, Fishy in the sea...’ these cheerful little rhymes trip off the tongue inviting participation and the enjoyment of sounds and actions as they are meant to do. This is a lively and engaging collection of contemporary action rhymes to be chanted (or just recited) with actions for babies and toddlers; the suggested actions are detailed in neat inserts with each verse, no equipment required, just you and the child – and hands, feet and faces. There is no pretension – Jane Newberry captures the mood of a Rhyme Time that moment between granny and baby (or toddler). Here there is no abstruse vocabulary, no difficult sentiments, this is for today. Accompanying each rhyme are illustrations by Carolina Rabei. They are a perfect match. Her child-friendly images bounce and jump and bump off the pages filling the space with a lively visual experience. The colours are vibrant and textured – in tune with the immediacy of the words. This is a book that fills that gap – what to give for the new arrival in the family or what to use in a Story Time devised for the very, very youngest – something that can find immediate use. So get zooming to the moon or tap, tap, tapping with those wooden spoons – it will be fun. FH

Everyone Has a Body

Jon Burgumma, OUP, 30pp, 078 0 19 276603 8, £6.99 pbk

Lots of brightly coloured blooby creatures inhabit this cheerful picture book all about different kinds of bodies and the fact that each body is good in its own very own way. The rhymes and pictures show us big ones, little ones, wide or thin, weak or strong, happy and sad. The whole text is there all are here, and they are all special. The ‘strong’ one is particularly as fun as it shows us a blooby in a wheelchair riding up an elephant on a skateboard making it clear that strength can be seen in different ways. Humour and chaos and colour make this a true frolic. ‘Being different is nothing new. It makes us special and makes you... you!’ ES

Like the Moon Loves the Sky

Hena Khan, ill. Saffa Khan, Chronicle Books, 32pp, 9781910959999, £12.99 hbk

A Muslim picture book that is both enchanting and expressive of the Quran, this will go some way to helping children understand about the beauty of spiritual texts and also about faith itself. The author explains that the word ‘inshallah’ is something Muslims use constantly in their prayers. It means ‘if God wills it’, and it appears at the beginning of each of the rhyme couplets that occur throughout the book. The story begins with a young couple with their baby: ‘Inshallah you are all that is gentle and good. Inshallah you feel safe, like all children should.’ As the child grows, the mother’s blessings follow – her hopes that the child will be kind and strong, that he or she will plant gardens and have faith; that he will travel to new places, have ‘blessings and graces’. And, finally, Inshallah you find wonder in birds as they fly. Inshallah you will be all that you can be...

Mrs Noah’s Garden

Hena Khan, ill. Saffa Khan, Chronicle Books, 32pp, 9781910959999, £12.99 hbk

A Muslim picture book that is both enchanting and expressive of the Quran, this will go some way to helping children understand about the beauty of spiritual texts and also about faith itself. The author explains that the word ‘inshallah’ is something Muslims use constantly in their prayers. It means ‘if God wills it’, and it appears at the beginning of each of the rhyme couplets that occur throughout the book. The story begins with a young couple with their baby: ‘Inshallah you are all that is gentle and good. Inshallah you feel safe, like all children should.’ As the child grows, the mother’s blessings follow – her hopes that the child will be kind and strong, that he or she will plant gardens and have faith; that he will travel to new places, have ‘blessings and graces’. And, finally, Inshallah you find wonder in birds as they fly. Inshallah you will be all that you can be...
though Mrs Noah’s Garden can be enjoyed by itself, threaded throughout the text and the pictures are references to that first story, adding depth and humour to the narrative. Once again Mrs Noah, loving, caring and quietly creative, is at the centre of the story. Mr Noah, as with the first book, is completely focused on the practical. Not for him any imaginative nonsense – no troublesome unicorns. What he wants are cans for his new home – what he gets is so much more. The simple text by Jackie Morris avoids excess, setting the scene clearly without fuss, easily accessible to a young audience. Bringing the text to glorious life are the illustrations to that first story, adding depth and humour to the narrative. Mr Noah, as in the first story too, has a will of his own. It can feel like a burden, particularly, develop their emotional intelligence. Molly Potter begins by exploring why boys tend to struggle with their emotions, presenting a series of everyday scenarios that all children will recognise, in which boys are encouraged to ‘be tough’. She also created by Harriet Muncaster. Popular little cousin Isadora Moon, appealing to young readers as her very own fairy dad that she’ll keep her witch pride. Molly Potter, illus Sarah Jennings, Featherstone, 32pp, 978-1472942425, £10.99 hbk

Figures for male suicide in the UK are shockingly high, and if we are going to change things then starting young is the way to do it. From the bestselling author of How Are You Feeling Today? comes this new picture book that sets out to help children, and boys in particular, develop their emotional intelligence. Molly Potter begins by exploring why boys tend to struggle with their emotions, presenting a series of everyday scenarios that all children will recognise, in which boys are encouraged to ‘be tough’. She then looks at a series of different emotions, positive and negative, again via illustrated scenes so that young readers can understand when they might experience them. The text accompanying these is very clear and will prompt lots of discussion. Equipped with the ability to articulate to themselves and others exactly how they are feeling and why will enable children to comment on their feelings, their emotions. The illustrations by Sarah Jennings are fun and friendly, and Potter’s approach will prove very helpful for children, parents and teachers alike.

Mirabelle gets up to mischief

Harriet Muncaster, OUP, 120pp, 978-0192776495, £6.99 pbk
Meet Mirabelle, half fairy, half witch, totally lovable and likely to be just as appealing to young readers as her very popular little cousin Isadora Moon, also created by Harriet Muncaster.

Unlike Isadora, Mirabelle just can’t resist getting up to mischief. In this story, Mirabelle is determined to get to the fairy ball and she’s promised her fairy dad that she’ll keep her witch side under control. Even so, when the opportunity arises to mix up some spells, she’s there with her cauldron and it’s only with the help of her witch mum that she avoids ruining the ball for everyone there. She is genuinely sorry though and both

Together they enjoy the flora and fauna by day and by night, harvesting the bounty from their fruit trees and vegetable patch; and sitting warmed by a bonfire’s flames beneath a starry sky. “Bloom with life,” says Nana and so it is: Nana though is showing signs of slowing down. Then as her garden starts to let go with the onset of autumn, so too does the old lady and when winter comes blanketing the garden with snow, all is bare, all is silent. Nana’s chair is empty save for a tiny robin perched on the back ‘neath her favourite crooked tree. It’s time to shed tears for Nana will sit there no more...
parents forgive her; more than that, her father accepts her wholeheartedly. It is that she feels she can just be herself, something that will resonate for all sorts of readers. There’s lots to like and children are endlessly fascinated by characters who struggle with the rules. They’ll appreciated Mirabelle’s lively first-person narrative style too and the cool black and purple illustrations. You can expect Mirabelle to be working her magic for lots of books to come. AR

The Longest Strongest Thread

Inbal Leitner, Scallywag Press, 32pp., 978-1-912650-43-9, £12.99 hbk

This delicate, poignant picture book tells us of the loving relationship between a grandmother and her small granddaughter. The little girl and her parents are moved away to a cold country ‘where the lakes freeze in winter’ and Grandma is staying behind where it is warm. Grandma has a sewing studio where she makes beautiful things, and when the little girl goes to say goodbye, Grandma can be seen making a warm coat of yellow and blue to keep her granddaughter cosy. The story, told from the little girl’s viewpoint, makes clear that she is going to miss her Grandmother very much indeed, and the feeling is mutual. Grandmother is supportive, and it is clear at the end that she will visit the little girl in her new country. In these days when families often are separated by oceans and time zones, the need for such a book as this is apparent, and the gentle, light-touch illustrations, full of the yellow and blue of the splendiferous coat, are a joy. ES

Say Goodbye...Say Hello

Cori Doerrfeld, Scallywag Press, 40pp, 978 1 912650 43 9, £12.99 hbk

When Stella and Charlie meet and make friends, they learn all about the sadness of saying goodbye and the happiness of saying hello to someone or something new. When Stella is sad to leave her mum and climb on the school bus, she is pleased to say hello to Charlie when she gets to the new school. And when the children are playing happily outside, they must come inside and play new games there. After the snowmen melt, there are puddles to splash in, and when the goldfish dies, there is a loving arm to console and give a ‘full heart’. But there is one goodbye that is very difficult. When Charlie’s family sells up and moves away, both children are bereft: ‘goodbye is the last thing we want….goodbye is the last thing…goodbye is the last thing…. It’s tight is hello to letting go’. But even then, there will always be another hello, in this case to a new friend who has moved into Charlie’s house. And we see there will be letters too. This simple, touching picture book with warm and affecting illustrations will help children learn emotional highs and lows, and to cope with all the hellos and goodbyes they will experience in life. A beautiful book, brimming with quality in production, as well as understanding and love. ES

Albert Talbot, Master of Disguise

Written by Ben Manley, ill. Aurelie Guillerey. Two Hoots, 32pp., 978-1-5098-8224-3, £12.99, hbk

Walking to school, presenting his class project, taking a swimming lesson... Albert’s life is one big challenge. Luckily for Albert, he’s a Master of Disguise, with an array of alter-egos ready to step in in emergencies. From Rusty Buffels the mountaineer to Antarctic Submariner Zandrin Delacclair, from Arabean Fakkejacket to Professor Octavius Pickleswick, Albert’s alter-egos are always ready to step in and take the pressure off. In Albert’s case, imagination is definitely the original super-power. It certainly helps him make it through the day to bedtime...

Beyond Albert’s realisation that ‘being himself’ might sometimes be the best of all, there’s little in the way of over-arching plot within this book. But as a joyful and absorbing exploration of a series of set-pieces to holding set-pieces it has much to offer, and Guilery’s engaging illustrations add bags of energy and charm. Additional lettered font includes regular composition. The visually-appealing hand-lettered font includes regular capitalization which can feel a little intrusive (although it may help younger readers to feel the beat) and while some religiously-observant families may have to toe the line and obey the rules but your mind is your own - and imagination is power. CFH

The Perfect Shelter

Clare Welsh Walsh, ill. Ada Gilland, Little Tiger, 32pp., 978 1 78881 778 9, £11.99 hbk

This inter-racial family share idyllic days together while the two little girls learn to live in the woods. ‘We cry as we worked and we worked as we sang...it’s the perfect, perfect shelter.’ But then something goes wrong. The older child isn’t well, and no one knows why. At the same time, the shelter is damaged by wind. When the younger girl, who tells the story, is finally told that her sister is seriously ill and must have an operation, she is very worried indeed. And the shelter needs fixing too. Visiting the hospital and Grandma, she can’t find the courage. Why My sister? And then a storm destroys the shelter – unimportant because it is her sister that is ill and must have an operation. When, better, the younger one tells her all about the destruction of their shelter, and they decide to build a new one there, ‘It’s all well and good out of sheets and blankets: ‘It’s the perfect, perfect shelter’, they sing, and then they make plans to go back and re-build their shelter in the woods ‘to ride out the toughest storms’. But, they also know that today is a perfect day for all the family to be together. The exploration of the theme that the possible disintegration of a happy family are in obvious parallel, and the fact that the shelter can be re-built anywhere becomes the hope that family, in whatever context, will be rebuilt as well. The text is lyrical, and the pictures expressive and full of family love. The illness may be cancer, but this isn’t mentioned, and whatever it is, the implications are that only time will tell the outcome. Moving and delicate, with just the right amount of information, this story should supply hope along with truth. ES

The Wishing Star

Emma Beswetherick, ill. Anna Woodbine, Oneworld Publications, 96pp, 978 1 78607 758 5, £5.99 pbk

This is the first title in the Playdate Adventures series, written by debut author Emma Beswetherick with the aim of providing exciting and inspiring adventures for young children. Readers are invited to think differently and encourages them to explore complex ideas at their own level and pace, prompting reflection, discussion and growth. Death (referred to as ‘the mysterious morning’) is given two full spreads in which some of the most upbeat approaches to the subject in a picturebook, and children’s doubts and anxieties are acknowledged as a natural part of life and placed in a wider context that brims with hope and optimism.

Nuto takes a philosophical rather than a religious approach, but plenty of space is left for wondering about the why and the what next. As the text observes, when you’re ‘heading nowhere at all on a lonesome ball, you can only suppose there’s a purpose,’ and while some religiously-observant families may be uncomfortable with the content, others will welcome the opportunity to talk about their faith in this context.

This is Ager’s debut picturebook and her illustrations are a delight. Spreads are varied in mood and palette, but a sense of playful sincerity is apparent throughout, and there is a confident approach to colour and composition. The visually-appealing hand-lettered font includes regular capitalization which can feel a little intrusive (although it may help younger readers to feel the beat) and while there are moments when Nuto’s verse doesn’t flow as naturally as it might. Overall it’s a winner, though – the poetic approach helps readers to think about deep messages visual and emotional responses.

Child of Galaxies


“You body was made from the STUFF of the STARS, you’re a CHILD of GALAXIES dreaming...”

This beautifully presented picturebook celebrates the wonder and mystery of existence by encouraging us to slow down, attend to what is around us and consider deeper meanings. Nuto’s lyrical verse text introduces some of life’s biggest questions in an appealing and accessible way, and Ager’s bright, bold illustrations encourage joyful immersion as they dance from page to page.

Throughout the book, words and pictures work together to enable readers to explore complex ideas at their own level and pace, prompting reflection, discussion and growth. Death (referred to as ‘the mysterious morning’) is given two full spreads in which some of the most upbeat approaches to the subject in a picturebook, and children’s doubts and anxieties are acknowledged as a natural part of life and placed in a wider context that brims with hope and optimism.
A New Green Day

Antoinette Portis, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978 1 9126 5048 4, £12.99 hbk

If ever there was an invitation to look anew at the natural world, then Antoinette Portis’s sequence of lyrical riddles offers just that.

We follow a little girl from sunrise to nightfall as she responds to morning’s invitation to “Come out and play!”

Once she’s up and outdoors a series of voices belonging to a snail, a leaf, an inchworm, a tadpole a pebble, a cloud, rain, lightning, thunder, mud, shadow and finally night, pose a clever riddle on each page, the text being revealed on the turn of the page. “I’m a map of my own / green home. / Follow my roads / and climb” - A mountain path perhaps? Turning over pages we discover those words were spoken by leaf, a leaf whose shape and veins are almost mirrored by one of the trees standing behind.

Both Portis’ illustrations and verses are beautifully textured: “I’m a sweet sucked smooth / in the river’s mouth.” / Leaf’s将是 / .

Every riddle asks readers and listeners to embrace the great outdoors, to re-experience the familiar with all their senses alert and with a willingness to allow each encounter with nature to reveal unexpected riches.

Rex the Rhinoceros Beetle

M.G.Leonard; ill. Duncan Beecle, Scholastic, 32pp, 978 1 407159 18 9, $6-99, pbk

Two beetles, with their armour plating and huge horns, are17 the interest. Buster finds a banana, and asks Rex to help him carry it back to the beetle tree. Rex is suitably impressed, but curious to hear how Buster found it. Out comes a tall tale, as the beetles begin a journey, carrying, dragging, pulling the banana. “You’re a hero, Buster,” Rex sighs, as Buster recalls the turn of the page. “I’m a map of my own / green home. / Follow my roads / and climb” - A mountain path perhaps?

Meet the Grumblies

John Kelly, ill. Carmen Saldana, Little Tiger, 978 1 78950 574 5

The Grumblies... life for them is easy-peasy, with bread bushes full of rolls, squiddy-fruit hanging on every tree, and their pond is full of fizzy juice. So the Grumblies have lots of time to... argue! We meet all three characters on the first spread, looking particularly carefree, and with virtually individual huts in the background. One is made of mud, one from sticks and the third from rope. Their big argument hinges on which of these three materials is best in life. Grumble-Stick says, “OGG! Stick best!” Grumble-Rope says, “AGG! Rope best!” and “MGG! Mud best!” grunts Grumble-Mud. Whilst arguing, out of the jungle stumps a huge, hungry creature. It is purple, has long flowing hair, a trunk and enormous legs. Heading straight for their bread bushes, it chomps away, whilst Grumble-Stick cries, “OGGI STOP!” and throws sticks at the Gobblestomp, who’s off his thick coat, and then he spots the squiddy-fruit trees. As he demolishes these, Grumble-Rope attempts to stop him by lassoeing a leg. Ignoring the rope, Grumble-Stomp begins to slurrrrrp up all the fizzy juice in the pond. And the final attempt to stop the Grumble-Mud, who’s already eaten the Grumble-Mud, is foiled. At long last, the three agree.

Not stick, not rope, not mud best! For the first time ever they stop arguing and make a plan. How they capture Grumble-Stomp is ingenious, and eventually all four do become friends. This is a great story about teamwork, and learning to live with each other’s differences. It is cleverly illustrated throughout. The three Grumblies have hugely expressive faces, and numerous imaginary birds and beasts are scattered around the scenery. This would be a wonderful book for a class drama (or a family one). The Grumblies will live the primitive language!

A Climate in Chaos

Written and ill. by Neal Layton, Wren and Book, 32pp, 978-1-5263-6230-8, £12.99, hbk

“You’ve probably heard about climate change. At least I hope you have – because it’s REALLY IMPORTANT....

Join the award-winning creator of That Rabbit Belongs to Emily Brown and Mammoth Academy as he tackles the challenging subject of climate change.

Factually authoritative yet conversational in tone and always friendly and accessible, Layton introduces his material with care and insight. The first half of the book introduces key concepts - climate, weather, ecosystems, greenhouse gases - together with the child-character with whom Layton is conversing. Mid-way through the book, following a summary of the global problems facing animals and habitats, is an arresting photo-collage of an ice floe that allows the character to interject: "This isn’t right. I like our planet the way it is. I don’t want climate change to mess it up and harm animals!” Momentum halted, Layton turns our attention to positive changes and the problems and revolutions alongside optimist visions for the future, and plenty of ideas for small-scale achievable action are included.

This book is a campaigning book and takes its material seriously, but Layton’s quirky world-view and irreverent humour is apparent throughout, and it’s the interplay between sincerity and wit that contributes much to its success. Comic panoramas (a Layton speciality) deliver information visually and via entertaining annotations. Cut-aways and diagrams include clearly-written and informative labels, text-boxes are enriched with spot illustrations, and occasional photographs reinforce the fact that this is real, and happening now. Throughout the book, expressive characters interact with each other and comment on the spreads, which keeps things lively and helps young readers feel involved.

As a topic, climate change can be worrying, but readers of this book are more likely to feel empowered than otherwise. Recommended for Key Stage One, but also has much to offer at Lower Key Stage Two - and Layton’s previous eco-themed picturebook, A Planet Full of Plastic, is also available. CFH

Saving Winslow


When Louie’s father brings home a sad little orphaned donkey foal from his uncle’s farm, he accepts the unspoken challenge to care for it, despite his own poor track record in caring for animals. Louie is spurred on by knowledge of his own precarious birth, coaxed to life as a premature baby. Caring for Winslow (his name for the donkey) gives Louie a much-needed boost, distracting him from worrying about his beloved brother Gus, a soldier far away, lonely and in constant danger.

The story follows the ups and downs of Louie’s caring for Winslow and the increasing involvement of his friend Nora, who has experienced loss herself, and the two become too involved and commit her love to such a fragile life. When the donkey
You Can Write Awesome Stories


So, you want to write? You love those amazing books you find can transport you to extraordinary worlds where you meet fascinating characters, and you wonder if you can do that. Joanne Owen guides the young writer to think about all the elements that combine to create that magical thing, a story, from the opening line to its conclusion. She talks about character development, vocabulary, atmosphere, empathy, different genres, even allegory. However, there is nothing worth presenting if you have neither a plot nor a hook. Each topic is introduced by a snappy double page spread with concise definitions or description and easy suggestions on how to follow it up. Refreshingly introduced as people you admire those talented authors. How can you emulate them? Well, here is the book to help you on your way. Joanne Owen guides the young writer to think about all the elements that combine to create that magical thing, a story, from the opening line to its conclusion. She talks about character development, vocabulary, atmosphere, empathy, different genres, even allegory. However, there is nothing worth presenting if you have neither a plot nor a hook.

Once Upon an Atom

Michelle Paver, Zephyr, 246pp, 9781788541701, £12.99 hbk

This is an engaging beautifully written non-fiction book involved in allowing yourself to love and care for another living creature. With echoes of Charlotte’s Web, this is nothing worth warring tale from award winning novelist Sharlot Creekch would make a great book to read aloud at home or at school. SMc

Victor Frankenstein

Stuart Wood, Scholastic, 163pp, 9781838593199, £5.99 pbk

This text-based novel is the first-person narrative of Victor Frankenstein, the monster creator. It is an attempt to create a human given the last name Frankenstein, and deals with some of the real-life implications of his pursuit. The book is a re-telling of the story of Frankenstein, with some added elements. The text is written in a very formal style, with a focus on the development of the character. The book is divided into chapters, each of which focuses on a different aspect of the story. The book is a well-written and engaging piece of literature, and is sure to appeal to fans of the original Frankenstein story.

Once Upon a Star: A poetic invitation to young readers to be curious about the world around them.


This is a beautifully written and illustrated book that celebrates the wonder of the world. The story follows a young girl as she explores the world around her, meeting different creatures and learning about their lives. The text is rhythmic and lyrical, and the illustrations are vibrant and engaging. This book is an excellent way to introduce young children to the beauty and diversity of the natural world.

The Time Traveller and the Tiger

Tania Unsworth, Head of Zeus, 256pp, 9781788541710, £12.99 hbk

Compliant, overlooked Elsie longs for the sort of exciting adventures that Kelsie Corvette, daredevil heroine of Elsie’s own secret stories, gets involved in. But when Elsie is sent to spend the school holidays with her Great Uncle John there seems little chance of such adventure, until a magical flower sends Elsie back in time to 1940s India where she meets her uncle as a twelve-year-old boy about to hunt a tiger. Elsie knows that she must stop John killing the tiger, an act he has spent the rest of his life regretting. Elsie, John and Mandeep, an Indian boy who loves nature and wants to protect animals, find themselves lost in the jungle on a mission to save the tiger from a dangerous hunter.

This is a beautifully written and thought-provoking mix of adventure, time travel and historical story with strong, engaging characters and themes of friendship, rights wrongs, and conservation. Echoes of classic children’s books, such as The Jungle Book, The Secret Garden and Tom’s Midnight Garden, are successfully blended in with contemporary takes on protecting the natural world, social justice, and roles for girls. The narrative is split between Elsie, Mandeep and the tiger itself and the story is full of fast-paced action and atmospheric description of the natural world, keeping readers’ attention throughout. Elsie’s attempts to convince John that she is from the future are very amusing and convey the differences between modern values and those of colonial India in a light-hearted but thoughtful way. The resolutions for all characters, and for the tiger, are very satisfying and make this a title to recommend to readers who will enjoy a mix of adventure, fantasy, and conservation.

So, you want to write? You love those amazing books you find can transport you to extraordinary worlds where you meet fascinating characters, and you wonder if you can do that. Joanne Owen guides the young writer to think about all the elements that combine to create that magical thing, a story, from the opening line to its conclusion. She talks about character development, vocabulary, atmosphere, empathy, different genres, even allegory. However, there is nothing worth presenting if you have neither a plot nor a hook.
brother. Ren flees with Niagrinn but too late realises she has been tricked as Niagrinn needs her mage skills to become fully a Badlander. The problem is that only boys and men can become members of the Guild. By the time we get to this final episode of their adventures Ruby is poised to become a member of the Guild, but it depends on a vote of all members of the High council; unfortunately there is a split vote with exactly 250 votes for each side. It is then suggested that Ruby should try and solve one of the puzzles found in the book of Mysteries; hence she and Jones find themselves heading for the small town of Great Walsingham, a place where Badlanders have gone but with none have returned. The outcome of their investigations will decide both theirfutures and could perhaps change the whole of Badlander history.

I absolutely loved the two previous titles, so I was hopeful that this book would live up to them; I need not have worried, this absolutely surpassed them for excitement and for the way we are drawn into the world that the author has created. One of the central themes of this series is about woman and the role they have in a given society. Ruby is determined to change perceptions and to have a role in the Badlands. She is an orphan and has been moved between foster parents for most of her life, so she just wants to find somewhere where she belongs and can feel at home. Jones also wants to feel that he belongs, but he does have parents who he has just been re-united with after they had been separated by a witch. This is a story about friendship and overcoming trials and tribulations, but it is also about magic and excitement and doing what is right even if it brings fear. The whole series is highly recommended and I look forward to more books from this particular author. **MP**

## A Tale from the Badlands


This is the third and final title in the series **A Tale from the Badlands**. The Badlanders are a part of our world, but hidden from most of us thankfully, as it is where a variety of creatures live that most of us would not want to meet on a dark night, or even a sunny day. The two main characters in the series are Jones, a young boy who has been apprenticed to a Badlander (one who hunts these dangerous creatures), but just who wants to live a normal life and Ruby who is an ordinary girl who has a desire to become a Badlander. The problem is that only boys and men can become members of the Guild. By the time we get to this final episode of their adventures Ruby is poised to become a member of the Guild, but it depends on a vote of all members of the High council; unfortunately there is a split vote with exactly 250 votes for each side. It is then suggested that Ruby should try and solve one of the puzzles found in the book of Mysteries; hence she and Jones find themselves heading for the small town of Great Walsingham, a place where Badlanders have gone but with none have returned. The outcome of their investigations will decide both their futures and could perhaps change the whole of Badlander history.

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### The Book of Mysteries

Jenny Pearson, ill. Rob Biddulph, Usborne, 304pp, 9781474974042, £6.99 pbk

This is the first novel by Jenny Pearson and it is an action comedy that races along at an exciting pace from start to finish, with plenty of laughs and a few tears along the way – accompanied by the typically terrific illustrations of Rob Biddulph.

Why doesn’t Eggs have a father with his rather lazy adopted dad and is bereaved not only of his mum but also of his beloved Grams. When an opportunity to find his father and also to sensibly his two best friends and set off on their own to Wales. It’s a long way to Wales and the journey is chaotic, catastrophic and, occasionally, miraculous.

On their way to meet Freddie’s birth father, the three friends make many new acquaintances, each more wacky than the last, and some more helpful than others. Though, to be fair, if you attend onion-eating competitions and raid abandoned churches, you are bound to meet some strange characters!

The book evokes similar feelings to the kind of road-trip buddy stories that usually feature shameless young men, throwing the characters into a series of unlikely and unfortunate scenarios and testing the bonds of friendship to breaking point. But, for Freddie, his mates are his family and not even the most unlikely of unlikely scenarios will work for

### Time Travel Diaries: Adventures in Athens

Caroline Lawrence, Piccadilly Press, 288pp, 978-1444128477, £6.99 pbk

Caroline Lawrence takes readers on another action-packed excursion into the ancient world, to be precise Athens in the time of Socrates. Her two heroes, Alex and his friend Dinu, have already time travelled back to Roman London on behalf of and thanks to ‘mad bazzillionaire’, Solomon Daisy. Now, Solomon Daisy is offering them £10,000,000 each and, just as important, fame in one of his computer games, to time travel again and discover what Socrates was really like. Of course they accept – what 14 year old wouldn’t? – and before you can say ‘Alay-thay leg-ace, O Soak-rah-tace’, it’s the 380sBC and the two are spluttering in the shallow pool in front of the giant statue of Athena in the Parthenon. To their shock and horror, they are bound to meet some strange characters!

The book evokes similar feelings to the kind of road-trip buddy stories that usually feature shameless young men, throwing the characters into a series of unlikely and unfortunate scenarios and testing the bonds of friendship to breaking point. But, for Freddie, his mates are his family and not even exploding toilets or angry gangsters can keep them apart for long. The tone is light-hearted throughout, it is a sensitive story with powerful moments of tragedy that are well crafted. The facrionl scenes play out brilliantly, with impeccable comic timing and many laugh-out-loud moments. It’s perfectly pitched for older primary pupils and young teens: Pearson seems to revel in describing the boys’ juvenile dialogue, and it saves some of the gross bits... not even the toxic fumes from onion-scented bomb blasts!

Freddie’s journey is certainly super and Pearson has much to offer the children’s comic caper genre. **SD**
Wonderscape

Jennifer Bell, ill. Paddy Donnelly, Walker, 552pp, 9781406913725, £7.99 pbk

When Arthur started on his walk to school the last thing he expected was to encounter a garden of exploding gnomes, but that is what happened to him and two girls from his school, Ren and Cecily. Everything would have been fine if they had not gone into the abandoned house in search of a dog that seemed to be trapped in there. Before they know what is happening they find themselves trapped and then they appear to have been transported onto a sailing ship manned by a crew of robots. Things become even stranger when they encounter the captain of the ship, and he tells them his story. The explanation for all of this is that they have somehow been transported four hundred years into the future and are now in an “in-reality” version of their game. Not only do the trio have to work their way through various levels to find a way back home, but they also have to try and solve the mysterious disappearance of one of the game’s founders. During their travels they find themselves being helped by a variety of heroes from the past and the future; they also discover how to work together and gradually form a strong friendship. All of this helps them face the various challenges in the game and solve the mysteries they find, not least how to get home.

This is a really great story for the older middle grade reader. It is fast paced, full of action and has a group of young people who find themselves on a quest. There is a feel that this is a mix of films such as West World mixed with a variety of gaming worlds, many of which will be familiar to the young readers. The characters themselves are from differing backgrounds and despite attending the same school they do not really know each other. So this experience is also about learning to accept people who are different, being able to work as a team and also being able to share. One of the really important lessons that the young people learn is that they can achieve things if they want to; it gives them a sense of ambition, so that they want to learn and do something worthwhile with their lives. This can be as an eco-warrior, scientist, artist or anything they put their minds to and it is a lesson that we should all take on board. Whilst we are not all natural athletes, or musicians we can all find something that we can succeed at. This is a rollercoaster of a ride for the reader and is fantastic for both boys and girls. MP

Midnight’s Twins

Holly Race, Hot Key Books, 452pp, 9780008295325, £12.99 hbk

Holly Race’s debut novel is a complex, inventive fantasy adventure that builds suspense and holds our attention as much through its examination of its characters’ inner motivation and self-understanding as it does through scenes of action and perilous heroism. Fern King’s mother died when Fern and her twin brother Olly were just babies. Fern’s death was sudden and unexplained, at least in this world; we readers know that she was actually killed in a dream mirror world to our own and by a terrifying monster. Fern too wakes up in this strange world when she turns fifteen, by which point she has been scarred both physically and emotionally by bullies who can sense her otherness. She has also been estranged from Olly who she thinks betrayed her when she needed him most and resents him too for his easy popularity. In Annwn, the dream world, however, she finds that despite her best efforts she’s not an outsider and becomes part of a very special community. Trained to be a knight and to protect dreamers in their vulnerable states, Fern and Olly present themselves as characters that comes with finding both your place and something worthwhile to do.

Unfortunately, Annwn is still in danger from the foe who destroyed Fern’s mother; interestingly, a politician in the real world, with a powerful ability to enthral his fellow humans, even though there is no substance whatsoever to his promises. The world of Annwn will intrigue fans of fantasy and Race does well to create an original setting for her story while also drawing on a range of myths and legends. In Fern, Olly and their friends and rivals too she has created a set of characters whose thoughts and feelings will matter as much to readers as do their magical abilities. This is book one in a trilogy and Race is an author to watch. AR

Storm

Nicola Skinner, ill. Flavia Sorrentino, HarperCollins, 416pp, 978 0 00 829525 2, £12.99 hbk

From the first page of this original novel, when Frances Frida Ripley, aka Frankie, recounts the tale of her dramatic birth, readers will be drawn into a story full of feelings, black humour, and constant, surprising changes of direction. Frankie was born on a beach in the middle of a storm, and according to her parents, has been raging ever since. So when a terrifying natural disaster wipes out Frankie’s whole town, including Frankie and her family, it seems inevitable that Frankie will carry on raging, refuse to follow the accepted death protocols and enter a new existence as a poltergeist, the angriest type of ghost there is.

When Frankie wakes up one hundred years after the tsunami to find her home invaded by tourists by her ghost anger begins to stir and is captured by an unscrupulous and cruel ghost hunter who uses his son to trap Bab at a ball. Sensing the danger, Frankie knows that she has to set her own ghosts and her friend, Scanlon, has been created a set of characters whose thoughts and feelings will matter as well as the other ghosts and their friend, Scanlon, who is also exploited by his manipulative father, free and join her beloved family. This is an original, astonishing, and gripping novel that is hard to categorise. It has an unforgettable and refreshingly real central character in Frankie, and it deals with dark themes of loss, grief, and anger in a blackly humorous way. The cover, inside illustrations and the fact that this is written in the third person forces the reader to express feelings work very well with the text to capture attention. This is not a novel for the faint-hearted, but it is poignant, funny, and unexpected and, importantly, it allows its central character to experience strong emotions and to express them and set them free. All in all, a powerful, thought-provoking, and empowering book for 9+ readers. SR

The Thirteenth Home of Noah Bradley

Amber Lee Dodd, Scholastic, 300pp, 9781407184384, £4.99 pbk

“I was only twelve but I’d already lived in twelve different homes,” Noah tells us. That’s the advice Noah tries to give his Year 6 friend, Billy, who is fresh to the school and has no good mates and even likes one of the teachers. Mum and Dad love the house too, though lately they’ve been arguing a lot and Noah knows why. It’s The Curse of the Bradleys.

The novel starts with the story of the Curse – a four page Prologue telling, in the manner of a traditional tale, an old story of a family whose greed in developing their property, abusing the earlier generosity of others, had led to a magical curse being laid upon them. The family is condemned to be forever rootless, catastrophic falling upon “any place they came to call home.” This is an original, astonishing, and gripping novel that is hard to categorise. It has an unforgettable and refreshingly real central character in Frankie, and it deals with dark themes of loss, grief, and anger in a blackly humorous way. The cover, inside illustrations and the fact that this is written in the third person forces the reader to express feelings work very well with the text to capture attention. This is not a novel for the faint-hearted, but it is poignant, funny, and unexpected and, importantly, it allows its central character to experience strong emotions and to express them and set them free. All in all, a powerful, thought-provoking, and empowering book for 9+ readers. SR

The Short Knife

Elen Caldecott, Andersen Press, 400pp, 9781783497988, £12.99 hbk

Maia knows little of the world beyond their tiny community and the lives they lead with their father, Ted and her older sister, Haf. She is safe – but the world is changing. The Empire which had for so long provided the framework of their lives has gone – now it is the turn of the Saxons. The arrival of three warriors sees the destruction of the farm and forces Maai and her family to flee. Maai must
face a very different world where men have all the power and choices have to be made, loyalties tested, where being true to oneself may be the most difficult choice of all.

Elen Caldecott has been quietly building her reputation as a writer of quirky, enjoyable, fast-paced well-crafted stories for KS2 readers. Here she takes a step forward to create a strong immersive historical novel that explores themes that still resonate – loyalty, belonging, difference, self, family, dispossession – these are things that do not change whether we are in the 21st century or sometime in the past. It is a brave move, though, to take us back to the time when the legions have left and British society has become fragmented, an easy prey to a people looking for new lands, a new home themselves. However, Caldecott recreates this world with confidence, not least through the character of Mai, feisty, opinionated, and infuriating even, a girl who has to learn herself. She steps off the page to take us with her as she faces this terrifying new world. Nor is she the only one to catch the attention. The cast is rich and varied, each a real character. Then there is the language. Here the author manages to create a sense of the world, the gods hover just out of sight and an ancient evil has woken and threatens earth. It is up to the children of heroes to step forward. In Italy, Silvius, son of Aeneas, the prince of Troy and founder of Rome; Elissa, a daughter of Carthage; and in Mykenai, Tisaminos, son of the fabled Orestes, find themselves caught up in the quest to unite the broken Arrow of Apollo but also break the curse laid on Orestes’ family, a curse that has led to an unending round of revenge. However, Silvius is a Trojan, Tisamenos, Achaean – the people who destroyed Troy. Can they be friends and allies? The burden is on these young people to heal the past.

Womack is a classicist so his grasp of the intricacies of Greek mythology is sure. Here he weaves the complexities of family relationships, the dark deeds that arise from jealousy, passion and revenge – and the consequences with assurance. He is not retelling the myths, already well known, he is carrying them forward, creating a group of very believable characters in so doing. The result is an exciting, immersive and engaging story that carries its learning lightly, sweeping the reader across the Mediterranean from Italy to Greece meeting a centaur, nymphs, even a Fury on the way to finally face the Python itself. But as with all good myths, it does not end there – with luck we will meet these intrepid teens again – their quest continues.

Though this is a novel to appeal to KS3 readers Womack’s uncluttered contemporary style – no anachronisms here – make it ideal for confident KS2 readers whether they have met the mythological world of the Greeks and Romans or not. Excellent. FH
**New talent**

**Dangerous Remedy**

Kat Dunn, Zephyr, 430pp, 9781789543643, £12.99 hbk

France, during the revolution is a very dangerous place and fortunes can change in the blink of an eye. A small group of young people, led by a girl named Camille have set themselves the task of rescuing people from the guillotine. They are a mixed bag of ex-aristocrats, deserters and outcasts, who no longer believe in the revolution or in the system that it has replaced. When they were asked to rescue a young girl from the Conciergerie, the same prison that had housed Marie Antoinette, they assumed it would be difficult but possible. What they discovered was a young girl wearing an iron mask and covered from head to toe with fabric or leather. Their achieving their aim of rescuing her they discover the strange secret that she holds. The girl, Olympe, is full of electrical energy which could prove to be a danger to anyone that she comes in to contact with. However some people have realized that she could be used as a weapon and have been experimenting to try and discover whether her powers could be passed to others. Suddenly the family lunch, later to be fortified by glasses of an English Pinot Noir. Reprimands never amounting to much more than gentle advice on when to say ‘whom’ rather than ‘who’.

**Eight Pieces of Silva**

Patrice Lawrence, Hodder Children’s Books, 432pp, 978-1444954746, £12.99 pbk

Patrice Lawrence has been extraordinarily busy over this last year, creating a shelf of compelling coming-of-age books...but I have to admit that this was the one I was most impatient for. From Orangebey (2016) to Indigo Donut (2017) to Rose, Interrupted (2019), it is Lawrence’s YA canon which I keep an especially keen eye on. With each new title, the plots are even more cartographic in their detail and in the overlaying of narratives. Meantime, the key characters’ inner lives tread ever closer to the reader, slowly cutting through and away to the core. It is very hard to shake off these wonderfully drawn, pulsing characters once the last page has been turned.

**The Great Godden**

Meg Rosoff, Bloomsbury, 256pp, 9781526618511, £12.99 hbk

A gift for apparently effortless prose usually betokens an author working long hours perfecting their craft. Meg Rosoff, whose latest novel further cements her place as a truly outstanding popular writer, is one such perfectionist. Already a multiple prize-winner, she has the confidence to write about whatever she pleases, regardless of whether the settings are currently fashionable. In this novel she focuses on the wealthy and amiably self-congratulatory Godden family. There is no nod towards any sort of diversity, because it would not have fitted into the plot. Instead, this story could have been written any time in the last fifty years, where teenagers and affectionate parents plus other adults experience a protracted summer break by the sea. Characters read plays by Edward Albee and set off to the beach to pick up paraphernalia for the family lunch, later to be fortified by glasses of an English Pinot Noir. Relationships are warm, with parental reprimands never amounting to much more than gentle advice on when to say ‘whom’ rather than ‘who’.

Describing families who have it all can risk alienating readers in less happy circumstances, but this is not an issue here. Because it is soon evident that the Goddens are blindly heading towards emotional disaster, all recounted in terse first-person by one of the teenagers of the house, whose actual gender is never made clear. Readers can draw their own conclusions about the relationships where sex divorced from feeling, however urgent it seemed at the time, ultimately proves destructive to all concerned. The villain is a handsome American teenager spending time in Britain – a perfect part for any similarly endowed actor should this fine and engrossing story ever make it to the screen. Ostensibly a Young Adult novel, there is much here for adult readers too. Rumer Godden’s The Greengrass Summer, now over sixty years old, is still one of the best ever descriptions of adolescent first love and eventual betrayal during one hot summer. Rosoff could have been thinking of this when choosing the family name and title for this equally compelling novel. NT

**The Enigma Game**

Elizabeth Wein, Bloomsbury Children’s Books, 432pp, 978-1526601650, £7.99 pbk

Returning to characters readers will already know from her previous wartime novels, The Pearl Thief and Code Name Verity, Elizabeth Wein creates an enthralling new standalone adventure. Told from the viewpoint of three young people, each of them in their different ways an outsider, it’s another tour de force from this author, combining thrilling airborne action scenes with a twisty espionage plotline, and providing a unique insight into wartime life and lives. The protagonists and narrators are flight leader Jamie Beaufort-Stuart, herding a squadron of young pilots through bombing raids and already, at 22, too familiar with death and loss; Ellen McEwan, a driver for the RAF, concealing the fact that she is a Traveller from friends and colleagues; and Louisa Adair, fifteen years old, the daughter of an English mother and Jamaican father, both now dead, facing prejudice from all sides as she tries to find work and support herself. Other characters, equally well drawn, include Jane, an old lady Louisa is employed to look after and who has her own secrets to hide; and Felix Bauer, a young German pilot, who is determined to deliver an Enigma coding machine to the British secret service. The action takes place in a remote Scottish airbase, its isolation adding to the tension, which in turn is balanced by a sense of the wearing banalities of wartime life – five inches of bathwater only, pretend coffee, shillings for the gas meter. These in turn contrast with and highlight the excitement and beauty of night-time flights into Europe, and the terror of dogfights with the Nazis, the Bristol Blenheim’s of Jamie’s squadron no match for the German Messerschmitts. After a slowish start, the drama escalates steadily and the final scenes are extraordinarily gripping and moving. 75 years on since the end of World War II and it’s more important than ever that we understand how it affected the people who lived through it, what it demanded of them, and how they responded. This is a very fine historical novel, with characters as alive as any you could hope to meet in fiction. AR
The upbringing of children
in the deserts of Northern Australia went to a set pattern. First you were in arms, then you were weaned, then you walked with the tribe, learning the features of your land, and then you went walkabout. This was a journey lasting six months or more when you took yourself off alone learning self-sufficiency among the water-holes and the slim provender that it was needful to find if you were ever to return to the tribe to fulfil the demands of manhood.

It was on such a trip
that the bush-boy of our story (he is given no name) encounters two wholly mysterious beings. They have a whiteish skin colour, unlike his own jet black, and parts of them are draped with garments where he is naked. They are engaged in an incompetent plucking of fruit from quandong trees which they are ravenously eating, but once he has assured himself that they are not ghosts or dangerous he leaves them to their strange devices. Only when they chase after him does he recognize that they do not know what they are doing.

They do know some things though.
They know they are Pete (8) and his sister Mary (13) and that they were on the way from their home in Charleston, South Carolina to Adelaide when their plane crashed and was immolated, killing its pilot and navigator. They know too that Adelaide was to the south of their present position and had just decided to try to walk there. But they did not know that it was 1400 miles away across an unforbearing desert.

In the unlikely event
that the bureaucracy of aborigine tribes appoints assessors of its walkabout candidates, the bush-boy who was meant to be travelling alone, ought to have received extra commendation for now suddenly having to shepherd two human encumbrances, ignorant of his world and of his language, on a trail that was demanding enough for him on his own. The boy Peter though is quick to catch on both to a form of communication and to the foraging arts so that progress is slow but steady.

Calamity arrives
through the veneer of Western ‘civilised’ values with which Mary is imbued. From their first meeting, she has been troubled that their companion is naked and, recalling missionary lectures in South Carolina, she makes a vain effort to persuade him to wear her panties. Acceding to this with some puzzlement the boy decides that it must preparation for some kind of jamboree and, abetted by Pete, he engages in some wild and hilarious dancing. The pants cannot help but suffer and when, as the jamboree ends, the boy confronts Mary he suddenly realizes that she is a lubra, a female, while Mary, in her turn, is terrified to recognize that it is a fact he has only just discovered. For the Aborigine however the sight of Mary’s terror can mean only one thing: that she has seen in his face the terror of Death and that the fates have doomed him to die.

Such is the more than millennial strength
of his culture that there can be no escape for him from the knowledge that his Death is travelling with him. The journey continues, but it is a faltering one, riven by the boy taking a cold which almost seems to confirm the inescapability of his doom. Before he dies though he is able to ‘explain’ to Pete the route that they are following and direction to distant hills where will be the-valley-of-waters-under-the-earth.

The turning point of the novella
comes with the death of the bush boy. The children know no better than to give him a Christian burial far from the customs of his tribe. (In his last days he wondered if they would know to build him a burial platform above the reaches of the beasts of the desert.) Then they set off on the track to the distant hills where the boy had promised they would find food and water.

It is a tough walkabout for them
but Pete trusts the boy’s directions to a given line of hills and there they do find almost as golden a valley as Gluck’s in The King of the Golden River. Ever more skilled in looking after themselves – with Mary now herself accomodated to living naked – there would seem no reason why they might not abandon facing whatever terrible journey might lead them from this place to distant Adelaide and continue living in comparatively comfortable. Coincidence though will have its way.

Among their recreations
had been the discovery that there was a pipe clay in their valley that, when moistened, could be used to make drawings on rock surfaces along the lakeside. Peter drew some of the wildlife around them but Mary made pictures from her American past, including a very simple four-square house with a door and a window. Pete rather scorned it, but one day, to their astonishment, an Aborigine family came to the other side of the lake and swam across to greet them. It was as friendly a meeting as it was surprising but the paterfamilias spotted the drawing of the house. Apparently a travelled man, he recognised it for what it was and in the sign conversations at which Peter too was adept he explained to the children how they might travel a route to just such a dwelling.

The story leaves them
setting out to what may be their salvation although one must wonder whether the deserts of the bush might not have more to offer than those of the ‘civilisation’ ahead, pants or no pants.

Walkabout by James Vance Marshall is published by Puffin, 978-0141359427, £6.99 pbk

Note: Walkabout was originally published by Michael Joseph in 1959 as a novel, The Children, by James Vance Marshall who also wrote as Donald G.Payne Its fame spread after the success of a refashioned movie in 1971, where the crux of the story, the boy’s nakedness, was modified. Wouldn’t happen now though, would it.